

THE WAR OF
THE ARTILECT

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 3 IN THE **STRYKER SAGA**

THE WAR OF
THE ARTILECT

By Jonathan Cooper

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First edition.

Soli Deo Gloria

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PROLOGUE

“Several people have told me that my probe project has granted me a measure of immortality. They say I will die soon, but my probes will go on forever – perhaps even after civilization itself has ended. My dream, they say, will live on after my very existence has been forgotten. Although this sounds wise, and they mean well, they are wrong. My body may be dying but I will live forever. Thanks to the sacrifice of Jesus, I will still be alive when this entire universe dies and is forgotten. That is real immortality.”

--Dr. Nehemiah Temilotzin

Father of the Nehemiah Probes

February 13, 2309

A SMALL GIRL quietly stepped through the front entrance of the Library of Records and allowed the massive wooden door to gently close behind her. Once inside she took a moment to orient herself. Although she had lived in the golden city for thousands of years, she had spent very little time in the library. For many people the ancient Library was one of the highlights of Paradise but it had never caught her attention. Reading simply did not interest her. If given a choice she would much rather meet a new person or spend time talking with someone than browse the pages of an ancient book. That, in fact, was why she was here – to deliver some information to someone that had been waiting for it for a long time.

In front of her was the library's enormous foyer. Comfortable chairs dotted the room, artfully placed to encourage conversation – an odd feature for a library to have, but this was not an ordinary library. The Library of Records held the complete annals of human history and was constantly kept up-to-date. For people who were interested in the past it was an indispensable resource.

The library itself was a work of art. The interior of the building was beautifully decorated, with polished wooden floors and a soaring cathedral ceiling. The brown leather chairs blended into the library's décor and matched the massive bookshelves that lined the walls. Beyond the foyer were the stacks, which consisted of floor upon floor of books. The floors were organized by era, with the earliest records stored in the basement and the newest ones on the highest level. This made it easy to find information on, say, the Mayan Republic or the Spanish Empire.

Simply being in this room filled her with a feeling of awe. *And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God: and the books were opened,* she thought. *I wonder if these are the books that will be opened on that day, when mankind is judged for what they have done. Perhaps even the Book of Life itself is in here somewhere.*

In the front of the room was the information center, which was usually manned by several librarians. Right now, however, it was empty. Few people were in the library at the moment. The girl spotted only a handful of people sitting around, having quiet discussions. One of them was the person she was looking for.

The girl unobtrusively made her way through the foyer to the back of the room, where two middle-aged men were seated on a couch, talking. A stack of books was piled on a coffee table in front of them; a quick glance showed that they were technical studies of various automation techniques. The two men were

having a rather animated discussion. Not wishing to interrupt them, the girl stood in front of the coffee table and patiently waited for them to finish.

“I just don't see the point in automation anymore,” Dr. Timothy Stryker was saying. “It had its day but things are different here. On Tau Ceti it was crucial because time was a scarce resource. Even with a lifespan of 160 years there was only so much a person could accomplish. That is why your Nehemiah probes were a necessity – there was simply no other way to colonize the galaxy in a reasonable amount of time. But here things are different. When the Lord brings an end to this age and remakes the universe we won't be faced with limited resources or limited time. Since all of us are going to live forever then why rush things? Why not simply take our time and terraform planets as we need them?”

Dr. Nehemiah Temilotzin smiled. “The point of automation, Tim, is not to speed things up but to make new things possible! If we automate terraformation then that will enable us to pour our energies into something more worthwhile. Yes, you could build a house by hand if you wanted. No one will stop you from going into the woods, cutting down trees, and fashioning them into a lovely home. But with the right tools we can be *tremendously* more productive. We can tackle problems that would otherwise be impractical – even given endless amounts of time!”

Tim was about to respond when he suddenly noticed the child that was standing in front of him. “Oh, hello there, Itzel! I'm sorry – I didn't see you standing there. Is there something that I can help you with?”

“It's time,” she said simply.

“Oh my,” Tim replied. A look of surprise and wonder covered his face. “Is it time already? Has it really been five thousand years?”

Dr. Temilotzin looked puzzled. "Time? I don't understand. Time for what?"

"It's time for the war of the Artilect," the girl replied.

"I'm sorry, but I still don't understand. Have we met? Is there something important that I've forgotten?"

Tim spoke up. "I apologize – I'm being a poor host! Nehemiah, this is Itzel Ayar. I don't think you've met her but you've probably heard of her. She was the last person born with the gift of foresight."

Dr. Temilotzin nodded in recognition. "I have indeed heard of her! Why, she's one of the most famous people in Paradise. Itzel, you were just eight years old when the Spanish Emperor destroyed Tikal, weren't you? That was in, what, 1867?"

Itzel nodded. "It happened on December 5th, a little before noon. I died that day, along with a lot of other people. But before the Lord brought me home I accomplished my task. I told Captain Maxwell Baker what he was going to be facing. He needed to know that his efforts would not be in vain."

"And it's finally time for them to get started?" Tim asked. "I can't believe it."

"I think I know what you're talking about, Tim," Dr. Temilotzin said slowly. "The Artilect wasn't built until after my time, of course, but I've heard of him. Didn't he send someone back in time to rescue your sisters so that he could launch an attack of some kind?"

"Yes, he did! The Artilect is finally going to put an end to the endless war. The tyranny of Carroll Lane is going to come to an end."

"That should be a pretty simple battle," Dr. Temilotzin remarked. "Lane is outnumbered billions to one! He doesn't stand a chance."

Itzel shook her head. "The Artilect will be defeated," she said

quietly. "That is why I was sent to the captain five thousand years ago. Things will not go as they planned and they will suffer terrible losses. They needed to know that despite everything that is about to happen their sacrifices will not be in vain. The Lord will use them to save some, although it will not seem that way at first."

"I don't understand," Tim said. "How could he possibly lose?"

"The *Sparrow* was not sent to the future to end the war. They will accomplish that, but there is something much deeper going on that they do not yet suspect. Their real purpose is to give mankind one final chance."

"A chance to what?" Dr. Temilotzin asked.

"A chance to find salvation before the Lord Himself returns to Earth," Itzel replied.

CHAPTER 1

"I know the future looks grim. There's a lot of trouble out there and it would be easy to just give up and let it all crash to the ground. But suppose you're right, Kim. Suppose that in the end the Ranger civilization does die and all of our worlds become graveyards. Maybe I can't stop it, and maybe I can't fix everything, but there are some things that I can do. I might not be able to save everyone but I can save a few lives. People think that if they can't save everything then there's no point in even trying, but that's foolish. I'd much rather do everything I can, however little that may be, than do nothing. Saving the Stryker family from the Emperor may ultimately accomplish nothing, but I'd rather try and fail than never try at all."

*--Jack Nicholas
Governor of Tau Ceti
December 6, 1867*

THE MASSIVE AHXOTL TOWER was located at the heart of a sprawling metropolis that covered thousands of square miles. The six-hundred-story glass-and-steel skyscraper was named after the famous astronaut Nigellus Ahexotl, who on October 24, 774 became the first person to set foot on the Moon. The skyscraper was the crown jewel of La Venta, the new home city of the Stryker family. After the bot swarms destroyed the planet

Quetzalli the Artilect asked the Strykers if they wanted to have a new planet customized to meet their needs. Instead, however, the family had simply picked an existing world out of the Artilect's network and settled into its capitol city. Amy Stryker named the city La Venta after one of the ancient cities of the Olmecs, the race that had preceded the Mayans.

La Venta had been built on a beautiful tropical planet that was about twenty thousand light-years away from the Artilect's home system. Amanda Stryker had been given the honor of naming the planet and she decided to call it Tonina, in honor of her Mayan ancestry.

The top floor of Ahexotl Tower was made entirely out of transparent crystal and offered an amazing view of the surrounding city. Through the room's transparent walls a person could watch as traffic flowed through the busy streets below and as various aircraft soared over the city. At Amy's request the Steward of Tonina had established a restaurant at the top of the tower, and at noon on November 20, 7239 the Stryker family walked into it. The Tower Bistro was a popular establishment and there were already crowds of people at the tables, enjoying an elegant lunch.

The hostess met the Strykers at the door and showed them to the table they had reserved, which offered a beautiful view of the capitol. After the hostess left their waitress came. She took their order and walked off.

After she was gone Amy spoke up. "Do you realize we missed Christmas?"

"We've missed a *lot* of Christmases," Amanda agreed. "Thousands of them, in fact! But that's what happens when you travel from the 19th century to the 73rd century. It's just part of the deal."

"I know, but that's not what I mean. Think about it, Atzi.

When did we leave the 19th century?"

"On December 13th, I think," Amanda replied.

"Right! And we arrived here on October 23rd. That means Christmas went from being 12 days away to being *weeks* away! It's terrible."

Richard Stryker laughed. "That's true, Amy! I hadn't thought of that. But Christmas will get here soon enough – although I don't think you're going to see any snow here. This planet is actually a pretty warm place."

"But it's quite nice, though," Laura Stryker replied. "I've never lived in the tropics before! It's different."

"I just love this planet," Amy said enthusiastically. "It's fantastic! And I bet we could make it snow if we wanted to. I'm sure the Steward could find *some* way to give us a white Christmas! He's pretty good at things like that."

"The Stewards are amazing," her father agreed. "I wish you could have seen Quetzalli! Jack did a remarkable job of recreating Mars – it really reminded me of home."

"Jack was a really nice person," Laura replied. "You girls would have liked him. It was so sad that he died in the battle."

"He was a software program, dear," Richard commented. "Software programs don't die. Besides, the same program is running here on Tonina! The Steward here is identical to the one we had on Quetzalli."

"Is he?" Laura asked. "I guess I've just never met him. It's all so confusing! Nothing is what it seems to be. Like our waitress, and the people in the streets, and all the patrons sitting at the other tables. Are they just software programs too?"

"Of course!" Amy said. "After all, there are only eight actual people in the entire world – the four of us, Captain Max and Jones, Reverend Knight, and Sergeant Howell. That's it. So Amanda and I asked Andy to populate this world with other

citizens. I know they're not actually real but they look real and you can talk to them and everything! Besides, it's a whole lot better than living in an empty planet. That's just creepy."

"I know," her mother said. "Quetzalli was deserted and living there did feel a little strange. I'm just not comfortable being surrounded by computer people. I'd rather live in a city full of *real* people."

"Which is exactly what we're working on accomplishing," her husband replied. "After the war is over we're going to open up the network to whoever is still alive out there. I'm sure all sorts of people will be moving in! Before you know it we'll have lots of new neighbors. It will just take a little time."

"I'm sure you're right," his wife replied.

"So what have you girls been doing today?" Richard asked.

"We've been teaching Alex how to use the nanites," Amanda replied. "It's pretty neat! I think he's getting the hang of it."

Laura looked surprised. "Our dog is a part of the network?"

"Of course he is! He's a part of our family, after all. For the most part they work just as well for him as they do on us. He hates flying, though. It's just not his thing."

"Flying?" Richard asked. "Do you mean we can *fly*?"

Amy nodded. "Of course we can fly! It's actually really easy. You've got to try it, Dad!"

"Maybe I will someday. I've just been so busy lately. I have a lot to do before the survivors start arriving."

"Like what?" Amanda asked.

"We need a government, for one thing. This whole planet is a blank slate. It doesn't have any laws, or constitution, or governors, or police, or anything! I'm trying to put some things together but I'm just not sure what to do. I've never had to do anything like this before."

"Really?" Amy asked. "But I thought you'd be perfect for that

job! You were the governor of Mars for years – and on top of that, Governor Nicholas was planning on turning Tau Ceti over to you. Haven't you been doing these kind of political things all your life?"

"Well, in a way I have, but that was quite different. There I was working with a government that already existed. They had rules and policies and procedures in place to keep everything going. Here I have nothing. I need to put together a way to keep law and order, enforce the peace, hold elections, and so forth. I've never had to create an entire government from scratch before. It's overwhelming."

"I'm sure you'll figure it out, dear," his wife replied. "It will all come together in time."

Amanda spoke up. "What if the people on Tau Ceti already have a government? What are you going to do then?"

"I don't know," Richard said. "I really wish I knew more about them. There's so much we don't know."

"We could always send Steve to check them out," Amy suggested. "He's been there before and I'm sure he could make the trip again."

"You know, that's a great idea! Maybe you could bring it up in our meeting this afternoon."

Amy looked surprised. "You mean the war planning meeting is *today*? I thought it wasn't until next week!"

Her father nodded. "It is indeed! It's being held at two o'clock on the Artilect's home world."

"But that's so far away!" his wife objected. "Why aren't we having it here?"

"For security reasons, probably," Amanda said. "Andy probably just didn't want to take any chances."

"Does everyone else know about this?" Amy asked.

"I think so, but I'm not sure," Richard replied. "You could

always go ask them after lunch. It might not hurt to remind them.”

“Ok,” Amy replied.

The conversation was halted when their waitress came back to their table bearing a large tray. She gave each of them their drinks, and then placed a large plate of food in front of each person. “Is everything correct?” she asked.

“It looks fantastic!” Amy said, smiling. “Thanks, Betty!”

Betty smiled and walked off.

Laura looked at Amy's meal with great surprise. “You ordered lobster? Where did they get lobster? There aren't any lobsters on this planet!”

“Of course I did!” Amy replied. “I love lobster. Didn't you hear me order it?”

“I guess not,” her mother admitted. “But where did that lobster come from?”

Amanda spoke up. “The same place your steak came from, Mom. They just materialized it for us. That's where all food comes from these days.”

“Oh,” Laura said. “I thought they grew it somewhere or something. Do you mean this isn't real?”

Amanda shook her head. “Oh no, it's quite real! It's exactly like the food you used to get back home on Tikal. Things are just more, well, *direct* here. In the old days you had to raise a cow, then kill it, then prepare it, and then you could serve it. These days you can just materialize a steak – or a lobster – and be done with it. It's a lot simpler and you get to skip the part where you kill the cow, since there aren't any actual cows involved.”

“It's much more humane,” Amy agreed.

“I suppose,” Laura said reluctantly. “It just doesn't feel right. When meat comes from a real cow it has a meaning – it took work to create it and there was sacrifice involved. The meat

actually came from somewhere. This just feels arbitrary and disconnected.”

“It took work to create this too!” Amy replied. “This meal is the product of five thousand years of scientific development. All this technology didn't invent itself. Besides, back home most people didn't have cows either – they just went to a store and bought it. For all they knew it could have fallen out of the sky or magically appeared in the grocery store freezer. How is this any different?”

Richard held up a hand. “As fascinating as this discussion is, I propose we continue it *after* giving thanks for this bountiful meal that our Lord has provided. Shall we bow our heads and pray?”

* * * * *

After lunch Amy and Amanda left the Tower and began searching for the rest of their party. Reverend Knight proved to be the easiest to find. He was sitting on the spacious balcony of his apartment, reading the book of Romans. Once the twins spotted him they used their nanites to soar off the sidewalk and up to the nineteenth floor of his apartment building.

The twins hovered just beyond the edge of his balcony. “Hey there!” Amy said excitedly.

Reverend Knight looked up and smiled. He closed his worn Bible and sat it down on a small crystal table beside him. “And hello to you as well, Amy and Amanda! Please, won't you join me?”

The two girls flew onto the balcony and sat down in two chairs that were directly across from the evangelist. After they were seated he spoke up. “So how are you two doing today? I trust all is well?”

Amy laughed. “As if you don't already know! You have the gift

of discernment, you know. It's not like we can fool you."

The preacher smiled. "But that does not mean that I know all the answers. If a person lies to me then I can see the truth, but if they have been lied to and do not know the truth themselves then I cannot know it either. In reality, all I can really do is see things that people are trying to hide from me. Jones can see a great deal more than I can."

"In that case, we're doing very well, thank you," Amanda replied. "We just wanted to remind you that we have a meeting with Andy in about an hour."

"Two o'clock, on his home planet," Reverend Knight said. "Quite so. I have not forgotten. I will be there, although I am perhaps the least qualified of anyone. I know very little of war. I suspect that Sergeant Howell will have much more to contribute than I will."

"We're not really qualified either, if it comes to that," Amanda remarked.

"But we do get to make the final decision!" Amy said eagerly.

"That's the scary part," Amanda said wryly.

Amy nodded. "But at least we have someone with actual combat experience to help plan things. That will make a big difference."

"I'm sure it will," the preacher replied.

Amy spoke up. "I don't mean to change the subject or anything, but is this really where you live?"

"It is," he said. "The Steward informed me that this place had not yet been claimed, so I have moved in and made it my own. Do you have some need for this space?"

"Oh no, it's not that," Amy said quickly. "It's just that – well, this city is really big, and you're living in a tiny apartment. You don't have to live here, you know! There is a *whole lot* of available space. You can literally have anything you want."

Reverend Knight smiled. "I appreciate your generosity, Amy. However, this is more than enough room for me. All of my needs are met and I have space left over. I see no reason to occupy more real estate than this."

"All right," Amy replied. "I just wanted to make sure you were comfortable." The girl glanced down at his Bible and noticed the position of the bookmark. "Hey, weren't you reading Romans back on the *Starfire*?"

"Amy!" Amanda exclaimed. "Leave him alone! That's none of your business."

"It's fine," Reverend Knight replied. "Your sister has done no harm. Yes, I am studying Paul's letter to the Romans. As an evangelist it is my calling to proclaim the gospel to all, and I have discovered that as my understanding of the gospel grows my ability to explain it grows as well. Romans provides a technical look into the gospel, exploring aspects of grace and faith that are not always easy to understand. So while I may not be able to aid in the war itself, I *can* bring the message of hope to those who are without it."

"What do you think we're going to find on Tau Ceti?" Amy asked.

"I don't know. But I do not think we will find any light. I have great misgivings about that star system that I cannot explain. There is something deeply wrong there. I only hope it is not too late to save them."

* * * * *

The next person the twins located was Sergeant Howell. He proved to be much harder to find. They eventually found him in the core of the planet, where Tonina's central defense computers were located. The soldier was standing in a large, circular room.

In the center of the room was a giant holographic display of a group of star systems. A series of red and blue points of light were furiously moving around, like a swarm of gnats. Howell was studying them intensely.

Amy and Amanda materialized in the room and walked over toward him. "Excuse me, sir," Amanda said.

Sergeant Howell turned around. He glanced at them, nodded, then turned his attention back to the hologram. "Hello, girls. What brings you here?"

The twins walked over to him and stared at the hologram. "Is something wrong?" Amy asked.

"That is what I have come to believe. This picture simply isn't making any sense. I don't understand it, and I don't like it when I don't understand something. It's dangerous to make decisions based on incomplete information. A lot of lives can be lost that way."

"What are we looking at?" Amanda asked.

"That is what used to be the Ranger civilization. That's Sol, there's Tau Ceti, and there's Alpha Centauri A. All of the gold-colored stars were once home to Ranger colonies. Now, the important thing is to focus on the red and blue dots. They represent bot swarms. Do you see what they're doing?"

"It looks like they're fighting," Amy said. "They keep attacking each other."

"That's what it looks like, and that's what I thought at first, but I think that is actually an illusion. I've seen my share of wars and that doesn't look like any war I've ever seen."

"Maybe war is different in the future," Amy suggested.

Sergeant Howell shook his head. "War never changes. One side fights until the other side is defeated – that's how war works. But that's exactly what we *don't* see the bots doing. Watch the dots for yourself to see what I mean."

Sergeant Howell made a quick motion with his hands. The hologram went backwards, as if he was rewinding time. After a few moments the hologram froze.

“This happened three days ago. Watch.”

The hologram began moving again. The girls watched as the number of blue dots swelled enormously and attacked the red dots. The effect was devastating. The red dots held up for a while but were eventually overwhelmed. Their defensive line was broken and their numbers were scattered. The blue dots then retreated. Over time the red dots regrouped, increased their numbers, and attacked the blue dots. This time the blue dots were scattered – but the red dots did not press their advantage. They, too, retreated.

“Did you see that?” Sergeant Howell asked. “Each side has defeated the other side countless times but they never close in and finish the other side off. Whenever one side gains an advantage they *always* back off and let the other side regroup. In my opinion the reason the war has lasted for thousands of years is because neither side actually wants to win. This isn't a war – this is a series of war games!”

Amy frowned. “But there must have been an actual war at one time, right? Didn't Steve say that he'd found evidence that these swarms had destroyed the colonies?”

“He did, and I'm sure he's right. But why did Tau Ceti and Alpha Centauri A survive when no one else did? What is the point of the endless war?”

“I'd forgotten about Alpha Centauri,” Amy said.

“Maybe their Walls protected them,” Amanda suggested.

“Or maybe those two systems were allies that launched the war together,” Sergeant Howell replied. “Maybe they've survived because the swarms are working for them.”

Amanda spoke up. “But if they're the winners then why

haven't they shut down the swarms, taken down their Walls, and colonized the planets that they conquered? Why would they destroy everyone else and then stay home and do nothing? For that matter, why are they still hiding?"

"I don't know, and that bothers me. I think our first move should be to send the Sentinel to those two remaining systems so we can find out what the situation is on the ground. We need to know what's going on before we launch any attacks of our own."

Amy spoke up. "That reminds me! The reason we're here is to remind you that we have a planning meeting with Andy at two o'clock."

"I'll be there," Sergeant Howell promised. He then turned his attention back to the hologram.

* * * * *

Captain Maxwell Baker and his first mate Basil Jones proved to be the hardest to find. The girls eventually gave up and asked the Steward where they were. He told them that they were in the Archive of Planets. After asking the Steward where it was located the girls transported themselves there.

The twins were surprised to find that the Archive of Planets was located on a rather small world in an obscure star system. There was nothing particularly exciting about the planet itself. It was a cold, arctic planet, with a breathable atmosphere but no signs of life. The world was mountainous and covered with ice and snow. A stiff wind was constantly blowing, pushing fast-moving clouds across the sky. The planet had no moons and there were no other worlds in the system.

The only signs of technology that the girls could find was a single colony that had been built into the side of an enormous

mountain. The colony consisted of a single level and a few dozen rooms. The walls, floor, and ceiling of the hallways were made of a bare, tarnished metal. A few lights dangled from the ceiling, giving off a rather weak glow.

"This place is in serious need of redecoration!" Amy remarked. "Who designed this world?"

"Andy may not have meant for anyone to ever come here," Amanda pointed out. "This may be some kind of giant filing cabinet or something."

"I guess. Anyway, where's Captain Max and Jones? Aren't they supposed to be here somewhere?"

"They're right down the hall," Amanda said. "Follow me."

She led her sister down the hall to an unmarked door. Amanda opened the door and the two girls stepped inside. After they entered the room the door silently closed behind them.

They were both shocked to find that the room they expected to see simply did not exist. Instead it was as if they had stepped off of the planet and into space itself. Around them was the vastness of the universe. The room had no visible walls or floors; in fact, they could not tell if they were even still in a room at all. They appeared to be floating in the vacuum of space, surrounded by an endless array of stars and planets.

Further ahead of them were the two people they had been trying to find. At the moment they were studying a giant star system that was spread out in front of them. As soon as the girls entered the room Jones turned around and waved them over.

"What is that?" Amy asked, as the twins walked over to join them.

"It's an unnamed star system," Captain Max explained. "There are millions and millions of them! They've all got numbers, of course, but a number just doesn't do justice to these

amazing places.”

“Are we still in a room?” Amanda asked.

Jones nodded. “This is the viewing room. The captain and I have been using it to look over the worlds in the Artillect's network. We wanted to get an idea of what his network was like. From this one room we can explore the entire network without ever even going outside.”

“It's astonishing!” Captain Max said. “The variety is unbelievable! At first I thought that the Nehemiah probes would simply clone the same world over and over, so I expected all of the worlds to be more or less the same. Imagine our surprise when we discovered that the truth was quite different! The probes seem to have a knack for making worlds habitable while preserving what makes them unique. This particular star system, for example, was terraformed just a few days ago. It's got a lot of active volcanism, which you would think would make things difficult, but—”

“Wait a minute,” Amy interrupted. “Do you mean that the Nehemiah probes are still out there?”

“Oh yes! I haven't seen any earlier models but there are lots of Nehemiah IV probes left – tens of thousands of them at the very least. The Artillect's network is expanding on a daily basis!”

“But where are they?” Amy asked.

“Out on the fringes of the galaxy,” Jones explained. “The probes are adding new stars to the edges of the network. They're constantly moving further away from us as they perform their assigned tasks. That way the network continues to grow in an orderly fashion and the probes never have to retrace their steps.”

“And the Artillect manages it all,” the captain finished. “It's quite amazing. Once they've finished a world he moves in and—”

Amanda spoke up. “I hate to interrupt, captain, but I'm afraid it's time for our meeting. Are you ready to go?”

“Our meeting? Oh – our meeting! Of course, I had forgotten all about it. Where are we having it again?”

Amanda smiled. “C'mon – I'll take you there!”

A moment later the four of them vanished.

CHAPTER 2

“Our biggest problem was that we were vastly outnumbered. There was simply no way our two star systems could defeat the combined forces of all the other colonies. I quickly realized that the key to victory was making sure that no one knew we were the ones behind the attacks. As long as they did not know who to retaliate against we could wipe them all out, one by one. I am still amazed that they never learned we were behind the swarms. As the colonies slowly disappeared while we remained untouched I thought that our cover would surely be blown, but that did not happen. By an amazing stroke of luck, the other colonies thought that our Walls had protected us! Now that the last colony has been destroyed it is simply a matter of keeping our local populations in check, which is not difficult.”

*--Carroll Lane
Elder of Vault 37
May 15, 2469*

THE GROUP MATERIALIZED in a large conference room. The circular room had crystal-clear walls, which offered a fantastic view of a beautiful coast that reached out to the horizon. A wide blue ocean stretched off into the distance, its waves crashing onto the rocky beach below. Overhead was an enormous blue sky and a yellow sun appeared to be rising to the east.

The building in which the room was located seemed to be at the very end of a wide peninsula. In reality, however, it was located miles beneath the surface of the Artilect's home world. Even though the twins knew this, the illusion the Artilect had created was still extremely convincing. There were even seagulls flying in the distance, calling to each other. Their senses told them that what they were seeing was real – and they almost believed it.

In the middle of the room was a large white conference table in the shape of a ring. The table had ten chairs around it. In its center was a large open space that contained a holographic representation of the entire galaxy.

When the girls arrived they saw that the rest of their party was already present. Richard, Laura, Sergeant Howell, and Reverend Knight were already seated at the table, and a moment after they arrived a tall gentleman wearing a gray suit and hat appeared. He smiled when he saw the girls.

“Welcome,” the Sentinel said. “Please, have a seat! The Artilect will arrive momentarily.”

“Where's Alex?” Amy asked.

“On Tonina,” her mother said. “He's much happier there, you know. I don't think our dog really want to attend this meeting.”

“I guess not,” Amy agreed.

The girls sat down beside their parents. The Sentinel sat at the opposite side of the table.

“This is really nice!” Laura said, addressing the Sentinel. “It's so beautiful outside.”

“Thank you,” the Sentinel replied. “The illusion was modeled after one of the many planets in the network. My father felt that you might feel more at home in this setting instead of in the long, barren corridors that make up this planet. His world was simply not designed for visitors.”

At that point an elderly gentleman appeared. He had white hair and a neatly-trimmed beard, and wore bluejeans and a brown sweater. "Thank you all for coming," the Artilect said, as he took his seat at the table. "I trust that Tonina has lived up to your expectations?"

"It's wonderful!" Laura replied. "Thank you very much. It's a lovely place to live."

The Artilect smiled. "I am glad you think so. Perhaps soon we can fill it with living ones so that you are not surrounded by people that lack substance. I know this has been an adjustment for you."

Laura blushed. "I don't mean to complain. Really, you've given us a fine place to live. There's just a lot to get used to! I didn't mean—"

"There is no need to apologize! The Steward of your world relayed your concerns to me and I agree with your assessment. I, too, have mourned the fact that my worlds are empty. They have been empty for far too long – which is why we are here. It is time to end the endless war."

"What is your plan?" Richard asked.

"Complete and total annihilation. I can use the worlds in my network to construct an army large enough to surround the swarms. It will be a simple matter to annihilate them. Once the armada has been created the war should not last more than a day."

Captain Max spoke up. "Now, correct me if I'm wrong, but can't the bots replicate? What if just one of them escapes? Couldn't a single bot regrow all of the swarms?"

The Artilect nodded. "It is possible. However, I have located every last one of the bots and I continually track them. When the fleet is launched it will surround them and lock down hyperspace so that they cannot escape. I will be able to verify that every last

bot has been destroyed. The war will be swift and decisive.”

The Sentinel looked at Sergeant Howell, who had a look of great concern on his face. “Is something wrong?”

“The whole thing is wrong,” the soldier replied. “I don't mean the Artilect's plan; it sounds like a good one to me. What bothers me is the endless war itself. It just doesn't make any sense! I think we're missing something important.”

“I agree,” the Artilect replied. “I have been pondering your concerns since you first shared them with me and have come to agree with you. However, this may be a case where the truth is simply not important. Once the swarms are gone they will be gone and the war will be over. At that point the particulars of who started the war or why the swarms are acting as they do become a moot point. The threat will have been removed and mankind will be saved.”

“But we don't know what's actually going on,” Sergeant Howell replied. “When it comes to waging war it is *vital* to know who you are fighting. What if there is some other threat out there that we don't know about? Attacking the swarms without knowing what they're actually doing is a very risky thing to do! What if removing the swarms makes things *worse*? We've just assumed that mankind is in danger. What if they're not?”

“What are you proposing?” Richard asked.

“I think we need more information. I would like to send someone to Tau Ceti and Alpha Centauri A to talk to whoever still lives there and find out what is actually going on. The survivors – if there are any – should certainly know *something*. I think it would be prudent to talk to them before we get involved in a war that we don't understand.”

The Sentinel spoke up. “This is something that I could easily accomplish. The swarms do not visit the planets that are hidden behind Walls. I should be able to contact the survivors without

attracting the attention of the bots.”

The Artillect nodded and turned to the girls. “Amy and Amanda, this war is in your hands. The two of you are in charge of this operation. Do you agree with this course of action?”

“It sounds like a good idea to me,” Amanda said.

“Me too!” Amy added. “Can we go with Steve?”

Sergeant Howell shook his head. “I really don't think that would be a good idea. We don't know anything about what Xanthe is like and I don't want to put you two in danger. After all, the two of you are indispensable – nothing can happen without your approval. In fact, I think it would be a great idea to separate you girls. Even having you in the same room is a grave security risk.”

“What?” Amy exclaimed. “Separate us! Are you out of your mind?”

“Now hold on, Amy,” her father said. “I hadn't thought about it before but he has a good point. You and your sister are the only administrators in the entire universe, and we're on the verge of starting what may be the biggest and most violent war the galaxy has ever seen. War is a dangerous and unpleasant business. If something happened to you and your sister it would place a lot of people's lives in danger. However, if you were in separate star systems then a single attack wouldn't affect both of you. For the duration of this conflict it probably would be best if you were not in the same place.”

“But I don't want to be stuck on some planet all by myself!” Amy complained. “There's got to be some other way we could handle this.”

“Maybe there is,” Captain Max said. “Why are the girls the only administrators? I mean, couldn't they appoint new ones?”

“That is within their power,” the Artillect said.

Amanda shook her head. “I'm sorry, but I'm afraid we can't

do that. I wish we could but we promised Governor Nicholas that we wouldn't give our power to anyone else."

"You did?" her father asked, surprised. "Why?"

"He thought we were much too powerful and he didn't want us tempting anyone else with these abilities. In fact, he wanted us to give up our administrative access as soon as possible."

"A wise precaution," Reverend Knight commented. "I believe the girls are correct. The situation we are faced with demands their help, but once this has been resolved things will be different. It would be best for the future of mankind if the position of administrator ended with them. Allowing any one person to control the Artilect is simply unwise. The potential for abuse is staggering. No one should have that much power."

Captain Max nodded. "Right – because no one could ever defeat the Artilect. Whoever gave him orders would be dictator-for-eternity. You've got a good point. So I guess we're not going to go down that road."

"One moment," the Artilect said. "That does create a problem. What am I going to do once the Lord has taken Amy and Amanda home to be with Him? How can I continue to operate without a master?"

"That won't be an issue," Jones said.

"Why not?" Richard asked.

Jones hesitated. "Because Amy will outlive the Artilect."

There were gasps around the room. A look of shock appeared on the Artilect's face. "How do you know this?"

"What about me?" Amanda asked. "Am I going to outlive the Artilect too?"

"What are you talking about?" Amy replied. "Did I miss something?"

Jones held up his hands. "I'm sorry, girls, but I'm afraid I don't have all the answers. I don't know what's going to happen. All I

know is that after the Artilect is gone Amy will have to deal with Earth. I don't know what the rest of us will be doing while she's off doing that; for all I know we'll be here on Tonina living with its new citizens. I also don't know *when* this is going to happen. It could easily be thousands of years from now."

"Let's get back to the point," Sergeant Howell said. "Regardless of what may or may not happen in the distant future, I strongly suggest that Amy and Amanda be separated for the duration of the war. One of them needs to move to some remote, off-world location."

Amy looked at Amanda and then back at Sergeant Howell. She sighed. "Who, exactly, did you have in mind?"

Sergeant Howell looked at Jones, who shrugged. "Don't look at me, sir – I don't have any insight to offer."

"Why don't we flip a coin?" Captain Max asked.

Amanda nodded. "That seems fair to me."

"It does not seem very scientific," the Artilect commented.

The group burst out laughing. "It's a traditional way of resolving disputes," Captain Max explained.

"Very well," the Artilect said. He materialized a golden coin in his hand and tossed it over to Amanda, who caught it. She handed it to Captain Max. "I'll let you flip it."

He nodded. "All right. What will it be?"

Amanda looked at Amy. "I don't care. What do you think, Tiger?"

"Heads means I stay on Tonina," Amy said. "Tales means you have to leave."

Amanda nodded, then stopped for a moment to think about that. "Hey! Wait a minute – that's not fair! 'Heads I win tails you lose' isn't going to work. What do you think you're doing?"

"Fine," Amy grumbled. "Heads I stay, tales you stay. Does that work?"

“Sure. But – I mean, I don't see why you're so worked up over this. You do know that we can use telepresence to project ourselves onto Tonina, right? It's not like we're being condemned to a life of solitary confinement! Besides, it'll only be until the war is over.”

“But it's not the same!” Amy complained. “And we can only use projection when we don't have visitors.”

“Visitors?” Richard asked.

Sergeant Howell spoke up. “I'm not planning on inviting any survivors over for dinner, ma'am – not while the war is going on, anyway. In fact, I'd rather not bring *anyone* to Tonina unless it's absolutely necessary.”

“Fine,” Amy muttered. “All right. I'll cooperate. But I don't have to like it.”

Captain Max nodded. He stood up and used his thumb to flip the coin in the air. It soared into the air, turned over several times, and finally fell down and struck the white table. It bounced one or twice and then came to a stop.

“It's tales,” Amy said dejectedly. “Figures. So where am I being exiled to?”

“You could try that new world Jones and I were looking at,” Captain Max said. “It's quite nice and it's very far away from here. I think it was number—”

“I have the number,” the Artilect said. “Thank you. If it suits you, Amy, I will be glad to prepare it for your arrival.”

“You have the number?” Captain Max asked.

“Of course! I am aware of what goes on in the Archive of Planets.”

“Oh,” Laura said, startled. “Do you monitor everything we do?”

The Artilect shook his head. “I do not. That is not my purpose. I was created to maintain the stars in the network and

prepare their worlds for habitation. Now that Tonina is inhabited I have turned its operation over to its Steward. He maintains the world and protects you, but he does not directly watch you. He is more like a butler who is aware of some of your doings simply because he has been interacting with you. For example, if he served you lunch then he would know what you ate. The Archive of Planets is different, however. It does have a Steward, but since no one lives there I continue to maintain it and so I am aware of who uses its facilities.”

“Fair enough,” Captain Max said.

Richard spoke up. “I’m sure we can make all the arrangements after this meeting. Have we agreed to send the Sentinel to speak to the survivors?”

The Artilect looked at the twins, who both nodded. “Very well. The Sentinel will be dispatched to the Tau Ceti and Alpha Centauri A systems as soon as this meeting has been adjourned. Once he has returned I will notify you so he can report his findings. In the meantime, do I have your permission to begin assembling the invasion armada?”

Amy and Amanda looked at Sergeant Howell. “I have no problem with it,” the soldier said. “I think it’s fine as long as the fleet isn’t launched until after the Sentinel returns. In fact, starting the fleet construction now is probably a wise tactical decision.”

“All right,” Amy said. “Then let’s do it!”

“I agree,” Amanda said.

“Then I will begin. Is there anything else that needs to be discussed?”

Richard shook his head. “I can’t think of anything else right now. I’m sure there’s a lot more to talk about concerning the war itself, but since we’re not going to launch it until after the Sentinel gets back I think we can hold off that discussion until

then.”

“Agreed,” Captain Max said.

When no one had any other objections the Artilect stood up. “Very well! Thank you for your time. You are free to go.” With that he disappeared from view, and a moment later the Sentinel disappeared as well.

CHAPTER 3

“We know that Mars still exists because we can see it in the night sky. Although the stars are long gone, the planets remain – a sad reminder of what we have lost. What no one knows is whether that distant world still holds life. According to legend there was once a vast civilization there, which an evil Emperor destroyed in a fit of rage. Some say that all life on that world died that day. Others say that a few survived and are plotting revenge against us. A handful even think that the mindless ones that fill the valleys are their handiwork – a curse for what we did to them. Whether there is any truth to this I do not know. We may never know, for we no longer possess the knowledge to step into space. That right has been denied to us – perhaps forever.”

--Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

June 16, 7236

AFTER THE SENTINEL DISAPPEARED from the conference room it reformed itself into a small, silver, spherical probe and materialized just outside the Artilect's home system. Before it left the network it took some time to remotely scan what had once been the Ranger colonies. The Sentinel wanted to know where the bots were located so it could avoid them.

While it studied the ceaseless motion of the warring bots the

Artilect reach out and spoke to it. “Be careful, my son. I do not wish to see you overwhelmed by the swarms. Do not attempt to engage them; if they spot you must retreat. I can protect you here but I am not yet strong enough to fight them in their own territory.”

“I will exercise discretion,” the Sentinel promised.

“Here is some information you may need,” the Artilect said, as it transmitted a series of blueprints to the Sentinel. “I do not want you to fight them but if you find yourself cornered you will need a way to defend yourself. These weapons should allow you to fight them off and return to me.”

“Thank you.” The Sentinel spent a few moments going over the plans and integrating their techniques into its structure. “Is there anything else I need to know before I depart for Tau Ceti?”

“I believe you should start with the Alpha Centauri A system. That star also had a Wall and we know less about it than we do about Tau Ceti. It may be that our answer lies there.”

“Then I will start there. I will return home as soon as I can.”

“I will be awaiting your return. However, in this case it is better to be thorough than to be swift. The young Sergeant Howell is correct – the swarms are not what they appear to be. It is imperative that you uncover the truth of the situation. You must not fail.”

“I will do my best,” the Sentinel replied. “Will you have the armada completed by the time I return?”

“I do not believe that is possible. I cannot complete preparations for war until I know the truth of the situation, for you may uncover knowledge that will necessitate a change in plans. The construction of the fleet itself should take no more than six days.”

“Six days!” the Sentinel exclaimed. “How is that possible?”

“All of my worlds – except for Tonina – will be altered to

create vessels of war. The production capacity of my network is staggering. Producing an armada will not be difficult, although it will take a great deal of coordination. It is *your* mission that concerns me most. Creating a battleship from a blueprint is a simple task, but finding a truth that has been buried for five thousand years is not. In the end your mission may prove to be more important than mine. I am greatly afraid that we will end up fighting the wrong war.”

“I understand,” the Sentinel said. “Is there anything else that I need to know?”

“Not at this time. Goodbye, my son.”

“Goodbye, father.”

With that, the Sentinel vanished.

* * * * *

At long last, after five thousand years of waiting, the Artilect began preparing for war. Its earlier encounter with the swarms had given it valuable experience in how to effectively fight them, and it used this knowledge to design ships that were capable of devastating them.

The Artilect drew up plans for two classes of ships. The Alpha Class was an enormously powerful type of battleship that was more than a mile long. With the exception of the Nehemiah probes, these vessels were the largest starships that had ever been built and had incredible strength. Each of them could lock down dozens of cubic light-years of hyperspace. They would form the battlefield's perimeter and were instructed to keep the swarms trapped. Although the swarms had the ability to form larger objects, even their largest configurations could not threaten an Alpha Class vessel. Each planet that the Artilect controlled could build dozens of them in a matter of hours. The

construction capacity of the network was so great that after six days the number of battleships would exceed the number of bots in the swarms.

The Beta Class was a much smaller vessel. They were spherical and roughly a hundred feet in diameter. These ships were designed to engage the bots themselves. The Artilect was planning on making billions upon billions of these and overwhelming the swarms all at once.

Once the Artilect finalized the blueprints it turned its attention to its network of worlds. Ages ago the Artilect had constructed magnificent cities on each planet, awaiting the day when mankind would come and inhabit them. Each city was a work of art, but they had never been inhabited. Since the worlds were empty the Artilect decided to repurpose them. After setting aside the world of Tonina the Artilect gave the command for the cities to return to dust. Once the cities had been reduced to piles of programmable matter it reshaped the worlds into giant war factories, each one capable of producing massive amounts of starships.

By the end of that day the conversion was complete and the planetary construction network was online. It was time to begin manufacturing the most massive fleet the galaxy had ever seen.

CHAPTER 4

"I am constantly astonished at how little we know of the savages that live in the valleys. When I was young I believed our lack of understanding was caused by indifference, but after decades of work I have come to see why most of my people stay in our fortresses and ignore the outside world. Despite my best efforts we have been unable to form friendly relations with any of the tribes. Even approaching them is an invitation for death. They only seem to know murder, evil, and savagery. On the rare occasion that we have captured one alive our tests have indicated an almost complete lack of intelligence. We have never successfully raised one of their young; they seem to go insane when they fall into our care and do not survive long. Some have wondered if the radiation in the valleys has caused this. I don't suppose we will ever know."

--Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

June 18, 7236

IT TOOK THE SENTINEL less than a minute to jump from the home system of the Artilect to the outskirts of Alpha Centauri A. After it had reached the system's protective Wall it remained motionless for a few minutes and watched. Its long-range sensors were able to detect the bot swarms that were engaged in

endless conflict, but they did not seem to notice his presence. *Perhaps my cloak is hiding me from their view, the Sentinel thought, or perhaps they simply cannot see this far. Or maybe they can see me but do not consider me worthy of their attention.*

The Sentinel waited an hour before making any further moves but the behavior of the swarms did not change. He finally decided that he had waited long enough and turned his attention to the problem at hand.

The Wall that protected Alpha Centauri A was old and weak – much weaker than the Sentinel had expected. In fact, he was surprised at how different this barrier was from the one that protected Tau Ceti. The one around Tau Ceti had been strong and healthy but this one was drained of energy. The Sentinel spotted numerous momentary gaps in its substructure. *It's almost as if the Wall is beginning to flicker and fade. But how can this be – is no one maintaining it? And what of the bots? How could a defense this weak keep them at bay for so long? The swarms are so powerful that they were able to temporarily overwhelm even my father's defenses. I cannot believe that this pitiful barrier could keep them out! So why are they not here? Is it because there is nothing here that is worth fighting over, or is something else going on?*

Since there was no additional information he could learn from his current position, the Sentinel took advantage of one of the Wall's temporary gaps and slipped inside the system. Once he was safely through the Wall he took some time to carefully survey the system. Alpha Centauri A was the primary star in a binary star system, and both stars were located within the Wall. The primary star was a yellow-white G2-class star and it appeared to have changed very little since the Sentinel's network of probes had visited it five thousand years ago. A single planet

circled around Alpha Centauri A in a tight orbit. Since this was the only planet in the system the Sentinel moved in to take a closer look.

When the Sentinel's probes had visited this world in the late 19th century they had found a lush, green planet that was filled with life. This system was actually the first one that the Diano Corporation had colonized. The colony was founded on March 1, 1756, and quickly became an important Ranger world. By 1867 the planet had been terraformed for nearly a century and was home to millions of people, packed with cities, roads, and farms.

Now, however, the world was very different. Before the Sentinel even started scanning the world he could see that something terrible had happened to it. There were no signs of life that were visible from orbit. He could see no green trees, no vast oceans, and no sprawling cities. The world looked empty and dead, as it must have looked ages ago before the first Diano starship ever visited it.

The Sentinel spent hours scanning the planet, examining every square inch in hopes of finding something. He was dismayed to find that the world was every bit as dead as it appeared to be. Only trace amounts of a once-rich atmosphere remained. The planet's ocean basins were dry and had been for millennia. There was no plant or animal life left anywhere. Even the soil contained no bacteria or even microscopic life forms. There was only dust, rocks, and empty wastes.

I do not understand, the Sentinel thought. *The last time I scanned the Ranger star systems, before my father sent me back in time, I found many dead worlds but they still had ruined cities and intact artifacts – signs that they had once been home to thriving colonies. But this place is different. I do not see any evidence that anyone has ever lived here. How could every trace of life have been wiped out so completely? There are no empty*

cities, no ancient roads, and no broken machines left behind to rust. What happened here? For that matter, if this world is empty then what is powering the Wall?

When the Sentinel thought about the Wall he suddenly realized that there had to be *something* left behind, so he began to probe deeper into the planet's fractured crust. *That Wall is not powering itself. Its engines must be here somewhere, and if they are here then I will find them.* The Sentinel tuned his sensors to search for energy traces, however faint, and after a while he found something. Deep beneath the planet's surface he found a facility that contained a single machine that was still running. From the surface it was impossible to tell that any building had ever stood on that location; all that remained was a wide plain that was strewn with broken rocks and empty canyons. The forces of time – if it was time that had done this – had erased everything. Beneath the surface, however, something had survived. The Sentinel immediately left orbit and transported himself into the long-deserted facility.

The bunker (if that is what it had once been) was completely dark, so the Sentinel provided light. What he found was not encouraging. The floor was covered in a thick layer of dust that had no footprints. *How long has it been since this place has had a visitor? Has no one been here since the world died?* A thorough search of the facility yielded no traces of entry or evidence of other visitors. If anyone else had been there in the past thousand years they had hidden their tracks well.

The walls of the bunker were made of tarnished metal and the air was stale and foul. Broken light fixtures littered the ceiling and shards of metal littered the floor. The facility had many rooms but they were filled with garbage. Room after room was choked with long-broken machinery, corrupted parts, and broken computer terminals. It quickly became irrefutable that no one

had been there for a very long time. *The equipment is not just dead – it was destroyed, the Sentinel realized. Screens were smashed, tables were set on fire, and machinery was beaten into pieces. I am sensing malice, not an accident. But who has done this? Why would someone destroy everything except for the zero-point-energy plant? I do not understand.*

A broken stairwell lead down to a deeper layer. There he found a sealed-off room that contained the remnants of a dying zero-point-energy plant. According to the Sentinel's scans the five-thousand-year-old machine was in serious need of repair. *You have been left running for far too long. You may have been designed to last forever, but your parts are worn out and your converter is nearly gone. Most of your processors have been fried and your remaining memory circuits are failing. While you are still operating you are producing less than 2% of your targeted output. It is no wonder what the Wall is flickering; in fact, I am amazed that it is working at all! You should have been repaired centuries ago. Why were you abandoned? With no one left to watch over you, how much longer will you last? A few more years, perhaps? Then the pitiful Wall will fall. Will anyone miss it when it is gone? Or will you simply return to dust, along with everything else that was once here?*

The Sentinel could find no books, papers, or written material. After an exhaustive search of the bunker he did find the rusting carcass of a robot that had been crushed beneath the weight of a transformer. At some point long ago the ceiling had given way and allowed some equipment to crash down to the level below, where it pulverized the hapless robot. The Sentinel gazed at its remains with pity and concern. *Were you the only one that was assigned to maintain this place? How long has it been since you stopped working? But this is not your fault, little one. Who would leave the maintenance of something as vital as a Wall in the*

hands of a single robot? Did no one have the foresight to realize that it, too, might fail?

When he had exhausted his search and was convinced that there was nothing else left to find, the Sentinel exited the aging facility and went back into orbit. *If one bunker survived beneath the surface then perhaps there are others hidden as well. There may yet be clues that time has not been able to erase.*

Once again the Sentinel scanned the planet but this time he probed deep beneath the surface in an attempt to find any signs of civilization, however slight. Hours went by as he probed endless cubic miles of the planet's crust, looking for signs of life or evidence of power. He found nothing. As far as he could tell the zero-point-energy plant was the only functional machine in that entire world.

The Sentinel was about to give up when he noticed something. A thousand feet beneath what had once been the capitol city of the planet (but was now simply an empty field) was a large vault. It had no signs of life or traces of energy but it appeared to be largely intact. Curious, the Sentinel transported himself into the vault and took a look around.

Like the bunker it had found earlier the vault was completely dark, so the Sentinel provided illumination. What he found was surprising. The vault consisted of four immensely large rooms, each of which covered several square miles of floor space. In the rooms were hundreds of thousands of opaque, cylindrical pods that were eight feet long and four feet wide. All of the pods were connected to a central computer by a complex network of optical cables. At the lowest level of the vault was an immense power supply.

All of the equipment was long dead. At one time the vault had been powered by a fusion reactor but now there was nothing left of it but a heap of twisted, tarnished metal. Some

accident ages ago had apparently destroyed it. While shifting through the wreckage the Sentinel found the mutilated remains of a robot. The Sentinel looked at it, curious. *Were you trying to repair it when something went wrong? Or did you deliberately destroy the reactor in an act of vengeance? Were you even capable of thought and reason?* The Sentinel probed the dead computer terminal that was attached to the reactor but he found nothing. Its memory circuits had been dead for thousands of years and no trace of data remained. *At least the rest of the machinery was not savagely destroyed, as it had been in the bunker. This place seems to have been spared the insanity that I saw there. But why is that so? Was this place built to shield people from the madness, or was its construction responsible for causing the madness?*

The vaults themselves contained no evidence of destruction or traces of an accident. What greatly disturbed the Sentinel was the discovery of human remains. Each pod contained the fragments of a human skeleton, all of which were in stages of extreme decay. He found men and women, children and adults. All of them were long dead. The Sentinel was saddened as he looked around and realized that had had found the inhabitants of the planet. For the first time in his trips through Ranger space he had found people – but they were not among the living.

I have come too late, he thought sadly. There is nothing I can do to help the dead. You have already gone on to meet God. Each of you are either with the Lord in Paradise or in the torments of Hell, and there is nothing I can do to help or harm you. Yet I mourn for you, children of men. What happened to you? Were you kept in stasis after your world was destroyed, waiting for a day when you could live again? Or did you retreat from the surface to live here, allowing your home to die from neglect?

The Sentinel probed the pods but learned little. Their

machinery had become corrupted and decayed long ago, and the memory circuits no longer contained information. There were mysteries but no answers.

After spending hours fruitlessly probing the pods' memory chips the Sentinel was about to depart when he noticed a plaque hanging on the wall near the entrance to one of the rooms. The rectangular piece of metal was tarnished but still legible, and while the language was ancient the Sentinel had no trouble reading it because it was written in the language of those that had built the Artilect. It read:

VAULT 1
HOME OF THE SYNTHETIC WORLD *ATLANTIS*
ESTABLISHED 2428

The Sentinel studied the sign and pondered its meaning. Is that the answer? Did these people leave the real world to live in a synthetic one, only to be killed when the vault lost power? But why would they leave reality to live in a dream? And what of the threat of the swarms? Weren't they afraid that the bots would attack their empty world while they slumbered below the surface? Did they believe that their pitiful Wall would protect them and allow them to leave reality? How did things come to this?

The Sentinel searched the facility carefully but he found no other clues. Perhaps there is more here to be found, but I cannot find it. This world is long dead. It is time for me to leave this tomb and continue to Tau Ceti. Perhaps I will find life there.

CHAPTER 5

“What people forget is that the vaults existed long before the swarms appeared. Why, I had been the Elder of this vault for more than 30 years before the swarms threatened their first colony! Of course, back then life in a vault was optional – you didn't have to live in the synthetic world if you didn't want to. At first we thought that we could do our own thing and leave the rest of the world to rot. It wasn't until much later that we realized we were leaving ourselves vulnerable; since we had retreated below the surface it wouldn't take much for a realist to come downstairs and unplug us. The only solution was to preemptively destroy them. After all, they couldn't attack us if they were all dead. The swarms were helpful in another way as well – the threat of an attack forced all the holdouts to join us.”

*--Carroll Lane
Elder of Vault 37
October 24, 3138*

AFTER SLIPPING OUT through one of the holes in Alpha Centauri A's Wall the Sentinel took a moment to scan the bot swarms. As before, the nearest swarms were dozens of light-years away. They gave no indication that they had noticed his presence and continued their endless fight against each other. *Curious*, the Sentinel thought. *Although they have paid me no attention I find*

it difficult to believe that I have gone unnoticed. If they were able to track the Sparrow and fight my father then surely they have the potential to notice me. At the very least they should know that they now have an opponent, yet they do not appear to be on guard. They are not amassing for another attack or even searching for us, although they must know we are going to come after them. I do not understand their behavior.

It took the Sentinel only a few seconds to jump to the outskirts of the Tau Ceti system. Being there gave the machine a curious feeling. *So we meet again*, the Sentinel thought, as he scanned the Wall that prevented access to the system. Unlike the Wall that guarded Alpha Centauri A this barrier was in excellent condition. In fact, it did not appear to have decayed any since the Sentinel last encountered it five thousand years ago, when it went back in time to search for the twins. The Gate was gone but other than that nothing had changed.

The Sentinel began carefully probing the Wall. Once again he found traces of life present on Xanthe. They were weak, but they were there.

But how do I get in? the Sentinel wondered. He scanned the ancient barrier but was unable to find any weaknesses. While his sensors could penetrate it there did not appear to be a safe passage through. This presented a significant problem. *I must get inside and contact the survivors, but the only way to do so is to collapse this barrier. Yet if I do that it would leave them exposed to the wrath of the endless swarms. The only alternative I can see is to erect my own Wall outside theirs. This would keep them safe after their own Wall is taken down, for they would still have a barrier between them and the rest of the stars.*

Reaching into his memory, the Sentinel retrieved the pattern for a small, autonomous space station that was able to generate a Wall. He then used the abilities the Artillect had given him to

fabricate the structure, drawing enormous amounts of energy from the realms beyond spacetime and translating that energy into patterns of matter. It took only a few minutes to complete the station. The final product was a featureless black cube that measured forty-nine feet on each side. It appeared unassuming and harmless but the Sentinel knew that it was capable of keeping a Wall stable for thousands of years.

With a single command the Sentinel activated the station. Immediately a Wall appeared that surrounded the Sentinel, the station, and all of Tau Ceti. The Sentinel regarded it with great satisfaction. *I should only need you for a few hours, but if something should happen to me you will be able to protect all those on Xanthe for many years to come. As long as you are there to guard them they need not fear the swarms.*

Once the protective barrier was in place the Sentinel turned his attention back to collapsing the ancient barrier that still protected Tau Ceti. *I must proceed with great caution. It is not difficult to introduce instabilities that will cause the Wall to tear itself apart, but I must do so in a way that does not endanger its inhabitants. The Wall directly alters the properties of spacetime in order to remove the star from normal space; whatever I do must not cause this pocket of space to collapse altogether.*

The Sentinel spent half an hour studying the Wall before he made his move. He ultimately decided that destabilizing the Wall was too risky and instead chose to overpower it. The purpose of the Wall was to draw a star system out of normal space and hide it inside an inaccessible pocket of spacetime. In order to counter this the Sentinel created an enormous, focused gravity well that pulled at that pocket in an attempt to force it back into normal space. After gathering up a tremendous store of energy the Sentinel launched his attack and pulled at the Wall with all his might.

For a few seconds the Wall held as it fought against the titanic forces that hammered it. Then, all at once, the Wall gave way and dissipated. The star system was now open.

The Sentinel quickly scanned the star system to make sure that it was undamaged and was relieved to find no evidence of spacetime ruptures. *You appear to be safe and sound, my friends. This time it was necessary but I hope I do not have to do that again. You have survived for too long to be endangered by something like this. After having held off enemies for so long, it would be tragic if you were destroyed by a friend.*

Although the Sentinel was tempted to proceed straight to Xanthe he first decided to perform a thorough sweep of the system. When the Sentinel had last visited this star in the 19th century he had found it to be a dangerous place that was filled with asteroids. Now, however, the asteroids were gone. As before there was just one planet in the system – Xanthe, the site of the third colony established by the Diano Corporation.

To his surprise his sensors revealed that there were no artificial structures anywhere other than on Xanthe. At one time there were numerous space stations that maintained the Wall, managed the trajectories of asteroids, and helped ships navigate the treacherous system. Now, though, none remained. With the exception of Xanthe the system was deserted. *The Wall must be maintained by systems on the planet, as was the case at Alpha Centauri A*, the Sentinel realized. *But why were the space stations abandoned? Did mankind lose its ability to reach the stars?*

Once his system-wide scan had been completed the Sentinel moved into orbit around Xanthe and began scanning the planet's surface. He remembered the last time he had visited Tau Ceti, back when he was scanning all of the Ranger worlds in search of

the Stryker twins. At that time the planet had been a vibrant place, home to more than 100 million people. Its capitol, Star City, was one of the wonders of the colonies. The Sentinel was saddened to find that its glory had not stood the test of time. Xanthe still had an atmosphere but it was a weak one that could only barely support life. Its beautiful oceans had receded to only a quarter of the area that they had covered five thousand years ago. Much of the plant life had died, replacing thousands of square miles of fertile ground with a parched, barren desert. The world was rapidly turning into a corpse and only isolated pockets of plant and animal life remained.

Its cities were also in advanced stages of decay. While the planet now had far more cities than it had in the 19th century, the sprawling metropolises were places of blight and decay. Its skyscrapers were rusted and broken and its streets were cracked and pitted. Even worse, no one lived in any of the cities. All of them were abandoned, home to no one. The only city with a functional power grid was Star City and only a small portion of it remained. The rest was in darkness.

If the cities are empty then where are the people? The Sentinel traced the life signs it had found earlier and discovered that, as on Alpha Centauri A, there were vaults buried beneath the planet's surface. Instead of just one vault, however, the Sentinel found dozens, one of which had a functional power grid and signs of life. All the rest were dead.

Before entering the last vault the Sentinel stopped to scan Star City. His instruments revealed traces of movement in the city below. When he took a closer look he saw that there were nine robots scurrying about the metropolis. The body of each robot was a short, square metal box that was roughly two feet on each side. The boxes had six metal arms, and four legs that terminated in wheels. The Sentinel watched as the robots went about their

assigned tasks, attempting to keep the city alive. *One of you is trying to bring the Wall back to life while another hunts down broken segments of the city's power grid. Two of you are in the vault, trying to maintain some equipment. Another is trying to repair the city's failing power plant, while the rest try to restore damaged buildings. How long have you been doing this, little ones? Thousands of years? Who abandoned all of this and left it in your care? Are there no living ones left to help you?*

As the Sentinel watched the robots he saw one of them suddenly abandon its work on an elevator that it was trying to bring back to life. It abruptly turned around, scooted out the lobby of a ruined skyscraper, and headed down a gutted street. The robot carefully picked its way around piles of rubble and headed to a nondescript building on the outskirts of town. Once there it entered the run-down building through the broken front doors and walked up to an elevator in its lobby. The robot reached one of its arms out and pressed an unlabeled button on the wall. When the elevator arrived the robot rolled into it and pressed the button labeled B6.

The elevator slowly began descending. From his place in planetary orbit the Sentinel was able to see that levels B1 through B5 were sub-basements of the structure. B6, however, was a thousand feet below the surface and connected to the only functional vault. Intrigued, the Sentinel watched as the elevator carried the robot down to the vault level. When the elevator doors finally opened the robot rolled down a hallway and up to a massive door that guarded the vault itself.

This is worth investigating in person, the Sentinel decided. While remaining cloaked the Sentinel transported himself to the entrance of the vault and stood beside the robot. As the robot worked at a nearby control panel and attempted to enter a complicated access code, the Sentinel waited patiently and

studied the wall in front of it. There, to the right of the door, was a plaque:

VAULT 37
HOME OF THE SYNTHETIC WORLDS
ESTABLISHED 2419
RESIDENT ELDER: CARROLL LYONS

This vault predates the one on Alpha Centauri A, and yet it is still functional, the Sentinel thought. This is a blessing. Aside from the possibility that life still exists around Sol, all that remains of humanity is resting behind that door. Perhaps that is where I will finally discover the answers that we have been looking for.

A moment later the robot finished its work and the monstrous vault door rolled aside. The machine then rolled into the vault and the Sentinel followed close behind it. The Sentinel was surprised to find that this vault appeared to be identical to the one on Alpha Centauri A. Like its counterpart it was also comprised of four immensely large rooms that were filled with hundreds of thousands of pods, and it also had a power plant on its lowest level. The only difference was that these pods were not connected to a single computer. Instead each one had its own computer terminal beside it, as if the pods were all independent entities.

The robot entered one of the large rooms and started rolling past rows of pods. As it lumbered across the room the Sentinel took a moment to quickly scan the area. *I count 384,726 life signs, which means that less than one percent of the pods are dead. The robots have done a good job of maintaining this vault. But these life signs are all much too old! This cannot be right. My sensors are telling me that there are no children or young people*

here. In fact, every person here appears to be thousands of years old and show signs of extreme old age! How can that be?

The Sentinel moved over to one of the pods and peered through its transparent covering. Inside he saw an extremely old man. His face was covered in wrinkles and he was short and frail. His eyes were sunken, his skin was dirty, and he had only a few greasy strands of hair left. If the Sentinel had not known better he would have thought that he was staring at a corpse. *There is so little life left in you! How long have you been like this? Are you prisoners, or did you choose this existence?*

A thousand feet away the robot had stopped at one of the pods and was entering commands into its terminal. The Sentinel ignored it and glanced at the terminal that was next to the pod in front of it. Without touching anything he simply looked at the readouts on the screen. *Surely that is not correct, he thought, horrified. Have you really been in that wretched pod for almost five thousand years, living in an imaginary world? Your life signs barely register! Is it even possible for you to come back to the real world, or are you too frail to step outside and look into the sky? Do you even remember what the real world is like?*

The Sentinel looked around with a growing feeling of horror. *If all of you are on the verge of death, unable to live in the real world, then what hope does mankind have? Even if we are able to save you from the swarms and can somehow repair your bodies, that will not help if your minds are gone. Are you even willing to live in reality, or have you become slaves to that which is not real?*

In another part of the room the Sentinel heard a grinding noise. He turned around and saw that one of the pods had opened. A frail, elderly man was attempting to climb out of the pod and was being helped to his feet by the robot.

"I apologize for disturbing you, Adrian Garza," the robot was

saying. "I know I am intruding but there is an urgent problem that needs immediate attention. You have helped us in the past and I was hoping you could help us again."

The elderly man nodded. He blinked, then rubbed his eyes. "I'm sure that there's a problem or you wouldn't have contacted one of us. I'm also sure that it's pretty serious – it always is, I suppose, or you'd just handle it yourself. But why didn't you wake Elder Lane? He is our administrator, you know."

"He did not wish to be disturbed. The last time I contacted him he gave me strict instructions to not disturb him again."

Adrian smiled. "I understand. In this world we are old, decrepit men and, well, it's not a welcome experience. I can understand why he'd want to avoid it. But what troubles you?"

"It is the Wall, sir. It has collapsed and we cannot fix it."

A look of horror crossed the man's face. "Collapsed! Did the machines fail?"

"It was not mechanical failure. Something forced the Wall to shut down. We believe that it was an attack from the outside."

"But that's impossible! No one can breach the Wall – it's a physical impossibility. It's never been done in all of recorded history!"

"It has now," the robot replied.

The man was silent for a moment. "What about the swarms? Now that we're defenseless, are they on their way?"

"But we are not defenseless. That is the curious thing. Someone created a Wall around us and then destroyed the one that we were generating. We are not unprotected; it is simply that the Wall that surrounds us is not our own."

Adrian looked at the robot, astonished. "But who would do such a thing?"

At this point the Sentinel dropped its cloaking field and took on the appearance of a human. To Adrian it looked as if a

distinguished-looking man had just appeared, wearing a gray suit and hat.

“I did,” the Sentinel said.

CHAPTER 6

“When you are young they tell you that the reason we live in these fortresses, hording ancient wisdom like priceless treasures, is in the hope that one day the savages in the valleys can be cured and we can rebuild our shattered world. Once you become my age you realize the truth: we are doing this simply because there is nothing else we can do. We must either keep on, in the hope that a miracle will happen, or else we will give up and die. Our hope is perhaps a foolish one but I see no alternative. Life is hard enough as it is. If we accept the reality that this world is lost and that mankind is a failed race that will soon disappear altogether, then even the weak light that we still possess will die out. We must hold on to what hope we have, however faint it must be.”

--Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

June 22, 7236

ADRIAN GARZA STARED AT THE SENTINEL with a mixture of surprise and fear. “And who are you? Have you come from Earth to destroy us?”

The Sentinel shook his head. “I am a machine from the outer reaches of the galaxy, and come from a place that is unfamiliar to you. Some call me the Sentinel. I am here to make contact with the surviving remnant of humanity.”

“Are you from the swarms?”

“I am not. In fact, the swarms have attacked us and we intend to destroy them.”

“Destroy them!” Adrian exclaimed. “But they can't be defeated! The Rangers spent eighteen years fighting them and in the end the swarms killed them all. Only the colonies with Walls survived. That battle was lost long ago.”

The Sentinel shook his head. “A great many things have changed since you first entered your pod, Adrian. My father has been studying the swarms for years and has found a way to defeat them. He has already engaged them in battle once and forced them outside the territory that he maintains. In a matter of days we intend to wipe them all out.”

“But that's impossible! No one has that much power! Just who is your father?”

“He is the Artilect,” the Sentinel replied.

Adrian frowned. “I mean no disrespect, but he doesn't know what he's getting into. The Rangers had the combined might of a hundred star systems and they lost – and that was thousands of years ago! I can only imagine how powerful the swarms must be by now. Even the thought of fighting them is insanity.”

“The power of the swarms is insignificant, Adrian. My father maintains tens of millions of star systems while the swarms fail to control even one. The battle will be very brief.”

“Tens of millions!” Adrian gasped. “Are you serious?”

The Sentinel smiled. “You have been disconnected from reality for a very long time. As I said, a lot has happened since the 25th century. Things are not the way they used to be.”

“I guess you're right. I – well, I just can't believe it! But it's not like we had a choice about what happened, you know. The swarms were destroying everything! Our only hope for survival was to join those who had already gone underground. None of the other colonies understood that, and I suppose that's why

they all died.”

“Is that why you constructed these vaults?” the Sentinel asked.

Adrian shook his head. “Not at first. The vaults were actually built long before the swarms appeared. I mean – well, it's complicated. You see, when the synthetic worlds were first invented they were just used for entertainment. People would go there, have some fun, and then go back to work. They weren't as advanced as they are now, but as time went by they got better. Some people began to think that the synthetic worlds were even better than the real world because you had more control over them. After all, in the synthetic worlds you could have whatever you wanted. Bad things never happened. It was a perfect life.”

“But it wasn't real,” the Sentinel replied. “It was just a dream.”

“That's exactly what the realists argued! The synthetics said it didn't matter – their senses told them that the simulation was real and that was quite enough for them. What really stirred things up was when people left the surface altogether and began moving into the synthetic worlds. Lots of folks were divided over it and their arguments got pretty fierce. Then the swarms came.”

“So the swarms appeared after the vaults?”

Adrian nodded. “They showed up about thirty years later, I think. When they invaded everything changed. The swarms began wiping out one colony after another and no one could find a way to stop them. All the sudden the real world didn't seem as appealing anymore. We couldn't leave the Tau Ceti system because the swarms would destroy us, but since we couldn't leave our supply lines were cut off. It was just a matter of time before our whole civilization collapsed, so we moved into the vaults. Even the realists understood that it was the only way to save ourselves.”

“Were you and Alpha Centauri A the only colonies to make that choice?”

“I think so. The rest of the colonies kept trying to fight. The last I heard was that they were losing badly.” Adrian paused and looked at the Sentinel. “Do you know what happened to them?”

“They are all gone,” the Sentinel said sadly. “I have searched this entire sector. This is the only world that has life, and this is the only working vault left in existence. Everyone else is gone.”

“But—” Adrian stopped. “But that can't be! Alpha Centauri A had a Wall around it. The swarms couldn't possibly have gotten in!”

“The Wall is still there but the people are gone. I do not know what happened but there is no one left alive on that world.”

“But what about all the other vaults? There were dozens of them here on Xanthe! They can't all be dead!”

“I am sorry,” the Sentinel replied. “This vault is all that is left.”

Adrian was silent. He looked around the room at all of the pods, and finally turned his attention back to the Sentinel. “Why are you here?”

“I have been sent here to save you and your people from the swarms. We can defeat them and help you reclaim the stars.”

“I'm afraid you are much too late,” Adrian replied. “Surely you can see that we can't survive in the real world anymore! We're too old and frail. In the synthetic worlds we have life and vigor but here there is nothing but weakness and death.”

“Your existence in the synthetic world is an illusion, Adrian. It's not real. This place – with its weaknesses, and frailties, and problems – *is* real. Your planet is dying, but we can help you rebuild it and reclaim what you have lost. The truth is that you and the rest of your people are on the verge of death. If you do not leave your synthetic worlds you will all die and there will be no one left at all.”

“But surely there *must* be someone else! You can't ask us to leave our homes. Living like this – as old men facing the end of life – why, it's torture. It's inhuman! How can you ask us to live like this?”

“You are all that is left of the Rangers,” the Sentinel said. “Sol is still locked behind a Wall that has been active for five thousand years. No one knows what is behind it but by now there may be nothing left at all. If you do not wake from your dreams then humanity may come to an end. Do you really wish to be responsible for that? Is your *imaginary* life of ease worth the extinction of mankind itself?”

Adrian said nothing for a long time. At last he sighed. “The robot was right,” he said quietly. “There is indeed an urgent problem. I do not know if we can solve it but I suppose we must try. What do you want me to do?”

“What do you know about the swarms? Is there anything else you can tell me about them?”

Adrian shook his head. “I've told you everything I know. They just appeared one day and attacked a remote colony. Over time they spread and attacked one world after another. They were never able to get through a Wall, though.”

“Where did they come from?”

“No one ever found out. Some people think that Earth was behind them, as revenge for being locked away. People had largely forgotten about Earth before the attack. Others thought that they came from some alien race that we hadn't discovered yet. As far as I know the question was never answered.”

The Sentinel nodded. “I understand. I will not take up any more of your time, then.”

“What are you going to do now?” Adrian asked.

“I will return to my father and tell him what I have learned. It is possible that after I speak with him he may want to speak with

you in person. If so, I will return to arrange a visit.”

Adrian sighed. “I see. So when do you think you will be back?”

“If he wishes to speak with you then it will not be long. Otherwise I will not return until after the swarms are destroyed. Either way, you will not have to face the future alone. We will do all we can to help you.”

“I'd rather not face the future at all,” Adrian remarked. “But I suppose I have no choice. Before you leave, though, I must know what to do about our Wall. This robot tells me that they cannot fix our equipment, which is a very serious matter.”

“I will continue to maintain the Wall that I have erected,” the Sentinel replied. “It will protect you from the swarms until my father has destroyed them.”

“Thank you,” Adrian replied. “I'll leave it in your hands, then.”

The Sentinel nodded and then vanished. Adrian shook his head. “Crazy do-gooders,” he mumbled. “Why can't they just leave us alone? It's not like we were asking for help. But I suppose we're in for it now, whether we like it or not.”

With the help of the robot he climbed back into his pod. The robot then resealed it and rolled away.

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With its work complete, the Sentinel returned to the home system of the Artilect. He was both pleased and disappointed at what he had learned. On the one hand, he now knew far more about the fate of Alpha Centauri A and Tau Ceti than was previously known. He had also uncovered the history of the swarms, and the vaults, and why Xanthe had been abandoned.

But there was one thing that he did not learn, and he knew that it was the most important piece of all. *I failed to learn where*

the swarms came from. The purpose of my journey was to find out who had used them to attack mankind, and I was not able to uncover their creators. The other information I have gathered may be intriguing, but ultimately it is of little military value. We still do not know who we are fighting – or even if we are fighting anyone, for that matter. In that I have failed.

All I can do now is present what I have learned to my father. Perhaps he will know what to do – or perhaps he will know of a way to learn more from Adrian Garza than I have. It may be wise to have him pay us a visit.

With all of these thoughts heavy on his mind, the Sentinel contacted the Artilect.

CHAPTER 7

"It is the duty of every man to get married and have children – especially in this age, when fertility rates are low and children are rare gifts. But somehow I was never able to attract a mate. I suppose I spent too much time reading ancient literature to develop the skills that are necessary to convince a woman that I have some character trait that would make her happy. Yet, perhaps it is all for the best. I am so consumed with the past and future of my people that it is hard to focus on the present. My musings on the coming death of our planet would undoubtedly make poor dinner conversation."

--Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

June 22, 7236

"I DON'T LIKE THIS AT ALL," Amy complained. "Is this really necessary?"

"We've been over this before," her sister replied. "C'mon, Tiger. It's time to go. We've got a visitor from Tau Ceti coming and it's time for you to leave. Stalling isn't going to help anything or make this any easier."

"It'll make *me* feel better," Amy grumbled. "Every minute spent stalling is a good minute, if you ask me."

Amy and Amanda Stryker were standing on a high plateau that overlooked the magnificent city of La Venta. Thousands of feet below them the metropolis was bustling with activity. The

sun was just beginning to set and the city's lights had started to shine. It was a beautiful sight, and Amy had come here to see it one last time before she left Tonina.

"I just don't want to go. I know it seems childish, but think about it. Am I really supposed to believe that Adrian Garza is capable of single-handedly defeating the Artilect and killing us all? You've got to admit that's not very likely! I can believe the swarms are a threat, but this guy is so old he can barely walk across a room. I don't think he could threaten an anthill."

Amanda nodded. "I know. When you put it that way it *does* sound kind of silly. But there's so much we don't know! Anything could happen – you know that! Until all of this is worked out it probably *is* best for us to be stationed on different planets."

"That's easy for *you* to say! You're not the one that's being kicked off-world. I feel like I'm being grounded for a week."

Amanda smiled. "True. But it's really not that bad. After all, most of the time you can use telepresence to be here with us! You won't be able to do that tomorrow when Adrian is here, but I doubt he'll stay long. Besides, look on the bright side – if all goes well this entire war will be over in a week and then we can be back together again. You can surely last that long!"

"I guess," Amy grumbled. "I just don't like it. Can't I at least take Alex with me?"

"You know he would much rather stay here with us, Tiger. He's very happy here! This is his home now."

"It's my home too," Amy protested.

"Well, I've got to be going," Amanda said cheerfully. "Mother is going to be serving dinner soon and I don't want to be late. I'll see you later, ok?"

Amy nodded. She gave her sister a quick hug and then vanished.

* * * * *

The teenage girl reappeared on a wide, rocky beach. A vast blue ocean stretched out in front of her and extended to the horizon. The the tide was coming in and the ocean's waves were crashing onto the rocks, sending up a shower of spray. Amy glanced up and saw that the enormous blue sky was completely empty, save for a few morning stars that were on the verge of disappearing. The sun was beginning to rise. *This place kind of reminds me of that fake conference room world, she thought. I wonder if this is what Andy based it on.*

She knew that this planet had a Steward but she did not call for him. *I absolutely refuse to make this prison my home. I'm not going to customize it or even dignify it by giving it a name. I'm just going to be here for a week and then I'm going back to where I belong.*

Amy stood on the shore and looked out over the ocean. She knew that she could use the nanites within her to connect with Tonina, and once contact was made she could create an avatar that would make it appear that she was really there. She would even be able to close her eyes and see what her avatar saw, giving her the illusion that she was still in La Venta. *But it wouldn't be real, she thought dejectedly. It's just an empty trick. The fact is I'm stuck here and there's nothing I can do about it.*

After a few minutes she decided to not join her family for dinner. Instead she sat down on the vacant beach and stared out to the horizon, lost in thought.

* * * * *

Back on Tonina Amanda was having dinner with her parents. Tonight the Stryker family had decided to eat dinner at home.

Laura had used her nanites to prepare a large meal and had brought it into their spacious dining room. The enormous mahogany table was big enough to seat a dozen people but tonight there were only three people present. Alex was also there. The family dog had curled up in a corner of the room and was fast asleep.

"Where's Amy?" Laura asked, as the family sat down to eat. "I thought she'd be joining us."

"Why would she do that?" Amanda asked. "It's not like she could use her avatar to actually eat anything! All she could do is sit here and watch us enjoy ourselves. That would be a sad thing to go through, if you ask me."

"I hadn't thought of that," her mother replied.

"I'm sure she's fine," Richard said reassuringly. "She's probably busy exploring her new home and decorating it for her tastes. We'll see her again soon! It's not like we can't visit her, you know. In fact, we can go see her after dinner if you'd like."

Richard prayed over the food and then passed a plate of sugar-cured ham to Amanda. She helped herself to two slices and then passed the plate on to her mother. "So when is Adrian going to be here?" Amanda asked.

"We're not sure yet," Richard said, as he helped himself to a biscuit. "The Sentinel is returning to Tau Ceti tomorrow morning to speak with him. If he's willing to pay us a visit then the Sentinel will bring him back. If he's not then we'll have to come up with another plan."

"Does that mean there's a chance that *we* might go visit *him*?" Amanda asked.

Richard shook his head. "Probably not. Until we know more about what's going on Sergeant Howell feels that it would be best if we stayed within the network. He doesn't want us to take any unnecessary risks."

Amanda took a drink of water and sighed. "Is it really that dangerous out there? I mean, what could possibly happen?"

"No one knows. That's why we have to be so careful! This situation has so many unknowns. There could be all sorts of dangers out there that we're simply unaware of."

"Then why are we bringing him here? Isn't that at least a *little* risky?"

Richard nodded. "In a way it is, but we need more information. The Sentinel learned a great deal, but one thing he didn't find out was where the swarms came from. Sergeant Howell is convinced that the swarms are part of some kind of plot, and since the only people that survived them are on Tau Ceti it's hard to believe that they know so little about them. Frankly, I think he's right. We need to find out if Mr. Garza is telling the truth, and the only way to do that is to have him talk with Reverend Knight."

"I get it," Amanda said. "And since we have to talk to him we want the conversation to take place in our territory."

"But I don't understand," Laura said. "Why do you think he might be lying?"

"Think of it this way, dear. If Mr. Garza is telling the truth then his planet has been threatened by the swarms for *five thousand years*. Are we really supposed to believe that in all that time they learned *nothing* about them and did absolutely nothing to stop them? Besides, if they're really as ignorant as they claim to be then how have they managed to survive when every other Ranger colony in space was wiped out, right down to the last man?"

"I don't know," Laura said.

"Exactly – so tomorrow we're going to talk to him and find out, one way or another."

"But what if he's *not* lying?" Amanda asked. "What if the

survivors really don't know? What do we do then?"

"In that case we'll have to proceed with what little information we have. Ultimately the course of action that we take will be decided by you and your sister. My recommendation would be to invade as the Artilect suggests and see what happens, but that's just my opinion. You and Amy will have to make the final decision."

Amanda sighed. "Then I guess I'll talk to him tomorrow and see what we can find out."

Richard shook his head. "I'm sorry, Amanda, but I don't think it would be a good idea for you to talk with him."

"Why not? I mean, how am I supposed to make a decision if I can't even meet him? After all—"

Richard interrupted. "I talked to Sergeant Howell about this and we both agree that Mr. Garza should not be told that you or your sister exist. Now you *are* more than welcome to watch him from a distance, and if you have questions I'm sure you can let us know what they are so that we can ask them, but I don't think it would be wise for you to meet him yourself."

"I get it," Amanda said dejectedly. "It's a security risk. But – I mean, he's just one man. What could he possibly do?"

"If he finds out who you are and what you can do then he might tell his friends about you. If there *is* something going on and the wrong people hear about you then you will almost certainly become a target. However, if they don't know that you exist then they can't target you."

"It's just a way of keeping you safe," Laura added. "We don't want anything to happen to you."

"I understand," Amanda sighed.

CHAPTER 8

“It is tempting to find one's self-esteem in the work that one does, or in relationships with other people, or perhaps in good deeds. Others find it in their personal ministries. Yet, all of these are ultimately empty. My life is valuable not because I have written a book on engineering, nor because I am highly regarded by my colleagues, but because the Most High God values me. His love for me rests not in my obedience to Him (which would be frightening), but in His sovereign choice. He chose to love me and so He does. It may be that my work will result in a renaissance that will save my people, or it may be that my books will crumble into dust and be forgotten. Either way, my value does not change because God's love for me does not change. Once my joy becomes anchored not in my personal success but in the unfathomable grace of God, life becomes much less of a burden.”

--Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

August 1, 7236

THE FOLLOWING MORNING the Sentinel made his way through the vastness of space until he had once again arrived in the large, underground chambers of Vault 37. This time there was no robot present to unseal the pod that contained Adrian Garza, so the Sentinel walked up to the pod and examined its control panel.

After a quick examination he pressed the button that would open it and return the frail man back to the real world.

The Sentinel waited quietly for a few minutes while the pod worked. At last a small chime sounded and the pod's cover slid open. A moment later Adrian opened his eyes. The man blinked a few times and then focused on the face of the Sentinel.

"Oh – it's you again," he muttered. Adrian reached up, grasped the side of the pod, and struggled to sit up. He then looked at the Sentinel sadly. "You've come to take me to your world, haven't you?"

"I have, if you are willing to go. We wish to speak further with you."

"Who is this 'we'? Are you talking about the Artilect?"

"Not this time. In fact, there are humans alive on Tonina. They wish to meet you."

"Humans! But I thought you said that *we* were the only people left alive! Are you telling me that there are all kinds of other people out there that you just didn't mention before?"

"The people that are left in this vault are all that are left of the Rangers. I was not lying. These people are citizens of the network."

"I don't care what they're a citizen of! Let *them* repopulate the universe."

"They cannot," the Sentinel replied.

"And why not?"

The Sentinel smiled. "You can always ask them yourself, you know. They would like to meet you, and perhaps you would like to meet them – if only to shower them with questions."

The old man climbed out of the pod and weakly stood on his feet. He then thought for a few minutes. "I don't know," he said uncertainly. "Carroll Lyons usually handles these things. Not that this has ever happened before, but he *is* our leader. Although,

come to think of it, he did insist on not being disturbed so maybe I *should* handle this. But – well, no one has left Xanthe for thousands of years. Is it safe?”

“No harm will come to you,” the Sentinel assured him. “The swarms cannot penetrate the Artilect's defenses, nor can they threaten us on our journey. There is no cause for alarm.”

Adrian sighed. “I suppose I'll just have to trust you, whether I want to or not. After all, if you were hostile then you could've destroyed us all in our sleep. So if you really want me to visit your world then I suppose I must go. But how are we going to get there?”

“I'll take you. Just let me know when you're ready.”

“How long will the trip take?”

“Just a moment.”

Adrian looked surprised. “A moment! How far away is this world of yours?”

“Many thousands of light-years,” the Sentinel replied.

“And you can travel there in just a moment? Extraordinary! Your starship must be very advanced.”

The Sentinel smiled. “I do not have a starship, nor do I need one.”

“No starship! But that can't be! How is that possible? Surely you can't just *walk* between the stars!”

“If you are ready I will show you.”

Adrian looked at the Sentinel nervously. “Do I need to bring anything?”

The Sentinel shook his head. “Everything you need will be provided for. You will not be gone long.”

“All right then,” Adrian said nervously. “I guess I'm ready. What do I need to do?”

“Nothing at all,” the Sentinel replied. A moment later they both vanished.

* * * * *

To Adrian the journey was instantaneous. One moment he was in the vault and the next he was standing on Tonina – a planet so unlike his own that it took his breath away. As he looked around he saw that he was standing on a plateau that overlooked a magnificent city. Above him was a wide blue sky. He could see green grass, towering trees, rivers, and a lake in the distance. It was astonishing.

“What is this place?” he gasped.

“You are on the planet Tonina,” Reverend Knight said. Adrian turned around and saw an old man standing a few feet away from him. “That city down there is called La Venta. For the moment, Adrian, it is our home.”

“And you are?”

Reverend Knight smiled and stepped toward him, extending his hand. “I’m Reverend Gene Knight. It is a pleasure to meet you.”

Adrian shook his hand and then turned his attention back to the city below. “My world is nothing like this,” he whispered. “Xanthe’s atmosphere is failing, her cities are in ruins, and her oceans are all but gone. It is a corpse, populated by a race that is close to death.”

“But it wasn’t always like that,” Reverend Knight said.

“No, it wasn’t. I remember a time long ago, in my youth, when Xanthe was a green planet – but that was before the swarms came and took away our future. Back then my planet had magnificent cities, but even Star City itself was nothing like La Venta.” He sighed. “I wish you could have seen our capitol. It was a beautiful place – the crown jewel of the colonies.”

“I did see it once, when I was young,” Reverend Knight

remarked thoughtfully. "Of course, that was long before your time. I'm sure that in your era the city was much more magnificent. It was still fairly young when I was last there."

Adrian looked at him curiously. "You were there *before* my time? How old are you?"

"I was born in 1773," he replied.

"That's impossible!" Adrian exclaimed. "You can't be serious! No one from the 18th century was still alive when I was born, and the pods weren't invented until my era. There is simply no way that you could have lived that long."

"And yet here we are!" Reverend Knight said cheerfully.

"So it would seem. But *why are* we here, Reverend? Why did you want me to come to this place?"

Reverend Knight smiled. "The truth is that we need to know more about the swarms. We don't understand them and what we do know about them confuses us. We were hoping that you could tell us more about them."

Adrian was silent for a while. "Why do you wish to know of the swarms? If you're really older than I am then surely you must know as much as I do."

"I have been away for a long time," Reverend Knight explained. "The last time I was in Ranger space the swarms had not yet been invented. All we know about them is what our instruments tell us, but they cannot look back in time and show us where they came from or why they were created."

Adrian sighed. "I'm afraid I can't help you very much. I've already told your friend everything that I know. The swarms just appeared one day and started attacking Ranger colonies. I don't know where they came from or why we were the only ones who survived; perhaps our Wall defended us. In the end we had to evacuate to our synthetic worlds in order to survive."

"And that is where you have been for the past five millennia,"

Reverend Knight said.

Adrian nodded. "The pods have kept us alive, such as it is. It was either that or die. Apparently many of us ended up dying anyway; your friend said that our vault was the only one left."

Reverend Knight nodded. "You have been away for a long time."

"Perhaps too long," Adrian said quietly. "Your friend wants us to return to the physical world, but I do not know if that is even possible anymore. We have been away from it for so long, and have grown weak and old. When I am in the pod I feel young, and full of power, but here – here I feel like a man who has lived beyond his allotted days. Five thousand years is a long time to spend in dreams."

"You *must* leave them if you want to survive. Your people are dying off, Adrian, and they are not bearing children anymore. Once the last remnant of your generation is gone there will be no one left."

"But maybe that's for the best," Adrian replied. "We are old and barely alive as it is. Perhaps it's time for us to pass on and allow your people to continue the line. You have clearly achieved far more than we ever did."

Reverend Knight shook his head. "We cannot inherit the stars by ourselves. It would take an immense populate to fill the millions of planets in the network, and there are less than a dozen of us. That is why we have come – to give your people a chance. You are the only ones who can do this."

"A dozen!" Adrian exclaimed. "But that city down there is enormous! How can there be so few of you?"

"It is a long and complicated story. I will not tell it now; perhaps when all this is over we can discuss it then. The fact is that we are here to help you and your people. The Artillect's network of stars isn't here for our benefit; it is here for yours. We

want to give your people hope and a future.”

“I think you have come too late for that,” Adrian replied.

* * * * *

Reverend Knight took Adrian down to the city below and the two men walked its streets. Before Adrian arrived Richard had asked the Steward to turn off the program that generated synthetic people, so the city was empty. Adrian soon saw that the preacher was correct – while the city was huge, luxurious, and modern, it was deserted. No citizens walked its streets and no patrons dined in its restaurants.

“Did you build this place?” Adrian asked.

Reverend Knight shook his head. “The Steward did. He constructed the city according to our desires and he maintains it for us.”

“He must be a very dedicated servant! I’m sure it took centuries to build this place.”

“The Steward is not a person, Adrian. He is a machine with almost unimaginable abilities. Terraforming a planet is a trivial task to him. He was able to build this entire city in a matter of hours.”

“I find that very hard to believe! In fact, nearly everything you have told me is, at best, implausible. Do you really expect me to believe that your people are older than I am, that you control millions of planets but have less than a dozen citizens, and that your robots can build entire cities in a single afternoon? Why do you persist in telling me these fables?”

“Because they are true,” Reverend Knight replied.

“If you say so,” Adrian said. “By the way, what do you do if you’re hungry? Does the Steward take care of that as well?”

“We handle that ourselves. What would you like?”

“Some bread might be nice. Is there a bakery nearby?”

Reverend Knight materialized a small loaf of bread and handed it to Adrian. “Here you go. I hope wheat is all right. If you'd rather have something else I can make it for you.”

Adrian stared at the bread, startled. “Where did that come from?”

“I just materialized it. You see, citizens of the network have nanites in their bloodstream that allows them to interface with the city and its systems. This gives us the ability to create whatever we desire. If we want something we can simply create it and it becomes real.”

“That's impossible!” Adrian exclaimed. He took the bread, broke it, and took a bite out of it. “This is real bread!” he said, wonderingly.

“Of course.”

“But I don't understand! In our synthetic worlds we can make things appear at will, but they're just images. Are you telling me that you have that same power in the physical world?”

“I am,” Reverend Knight replied. “And there is a great deal more that we can do as well. The Artilect can heal you, Adrian. He can reverse the aging process and give you your physical strength back. Your body can be made whole. You, and the rest of your people, can be given the energy you need to live in the *real* world – on Xanthe, or here on Tonina, or on any of the other planets in the network. You can be brought back to life.”

Adrian was silent for a long time. “You would do that for us?”

Reverend Knight nodded. “That, and much more.”

“At what cost?”

“We ask for nothing in return. We only want to help.”

“I must tell our leaders of this,” Adrian said at last. “They need to be aware of this so that they can decide what to do. This is not a decision I can make on behalf of my people.”

“I understand. We will wait for your response before taking any further action. The Sentinel will show you how to communicate with us.”

Adrian nodded. “This may take some time. After all, this is a weighty matter. It will need to be discussed.”

“We have waited thousands of years,” Reverend Knight replied. “We can wait a little longer.”

Adrian hesitated. “I do not know what they will decide. My leaders may be wary of outsiders. They might see this as a trap. I cannot promise that they will cooperate with you.”

“Are there any left among you with the gift of discernment?” Reverend Knight asked. “Such a person could establish the truth of my words beyond a doubt.”

Adrian looked at him, puzzled. “The gift of discernment? I don’t understand! Surely you know that the Gifts are just ancient legends from superstitious people. No one ever really had those powers.”

Reverend Knight looked surprised. “Do you mean that in your time the Gifts had ceased? I’m quite surprised! In my day they were rare but not gone. I possess the gift of discernment myself, and there is another among us who is a Seer. It would appear that we are the only two left.”

“Amazing!” Adrian said. “I was convinced they never existed at all. If you do have a Gift then perhaps you are really as old as you say.”

“Is there anything else that you would like to see before you return home?” Reverend Knight asked.

Adrian hesitated. “I would like to meet the Artilect, if you don’t mind.”

Reverend Knight smiled. “The Artilect is a giant machine. He is not a person, like you or I. Perhaps in time we will introduce you to him. At the moment he is building a fleet of starships that

will wipe out the swarms and bring an end to the endless war.”

“I understand,” Adrian said. “Perhaps next time, then.”

As the two men shook hands the Sentinel appeared. After they said their goodbyes Adrian and the Sentinel vanished.

CHAPTER 9

“The problem with preserving ancient knowledge is that so little of it can be put to use. It is a wonderful thing to know how to build a translight warp drive, but we possess neither the tools nor the raw materials necessary to construct one. In order to obtain the raw materials one would have to build mines in the valleys, and the savages would never allow that. The tools are even harder, for one would have to build factories, and that requires an economy – and an economy requires a civilization. As long as we are trapped in our fortresses we will never have any of these things.”

--Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

August 3, 7236

THE CREW OF THE *SPARROW* had once again traveled to the Artilect's home world and were deep in a conference. Everyone was there, including Amy, although she appeared by means of an avatar. After the Sentinel took Adrian home the Artilect had immediately called the meeting in order to discuss what they had learned. As it had before, the Artilect recreated the beautiful surroundings of Amy's world in order to give their meeting a setting of beauty and tranquility.

“You told him quite a lot about us!” Sergeant Howell was saying. “Are you sure that was wise?”

“I did not tell him as much as it seems,” Reverend Knight

replied. "The things that I did tell him were necessary. For example, it was vital for him to know that there were only a few of us left; otherwise his people would have assumed that we could carry on the human race after they all died. They are completely unwilling to leave their dream worlds and would grasp at any excuse. They had to understand that the future of the Rangers depended upon them and them alone."

"That's a good point," Richard said. "I was surprised at how old and frail he was! I can see why they'd be reluctant to come back. They can't have much strength left."

"They've been in those pods for thousands of years," Captain Max pointed out. "Their bodies have atrophied. Frankly, I'm surprised that any of them are still alive! Is it even possible to restore their health?"

"It is," the Artilect said. "I examined Adrian Garza's physical structure while he was on Tonina and he has no biological abnormalities that I cannot repair. However, I cannot speak to his spiritual side. He may no longer have the will to live. That is a problem I cannot resolve."

"I don't believe that is the case," Reverend Knight said thoughtfully. "In their dream worlds they are full of life. It is only in reality that they are weak and frail, but even there I see hope. Once I showed him La Venta he started coming alive again. I think they've just been trapped in illusions for a very long time. If we give them a new vision of the future – as I did with Adrian – then we may have a chance at saving them. I think he was genuinely intrigued at the possibility of living here. It fired his imagination."

Sergeant Howell nodded. "As would be expected. Are you completely sure that he knew nothing else about the swarms?"

"He did not try to deceive me. Everything he said was honest and complete – even his extreme reluctance to leave his dream world was not hidden. He told the Sentinel everything he knows."

There was no hint of deception about him.”

“But there's *got* to be something more,” Sergeant Howell said. “Isn't it possible that Adrian has been lied to?”

“It is very possible. However, my gift only allows me to see things that the other person is trying to hide. Adrian is hiding nothing, so there was nothing for me to see.”

Sergeant Howell sighed. “I understand. But – it just doesn't make sense! How could they have not learned anything after all these years?”

Richard spoke up. “Five thousand years is a *really* long time. It's possible that the answers we are seeking have simply been lost forever. What if the swarms were created by some faction that died out a long time ago? What if all we're seeing is the erratic behavior of war machines that broke down long ago, acting on command logic that has been badly corrupted?”

“I guess that is a possibility,” Sergeant Howell reluctantly admitted.

“So what do we do now?” Amanda asked.

“We wait,” her father said. “Adrian is talking to his leaders. We'll bide our time until we hear from them and then we'll act accordingly.”

Amy spoke up. “What if they don't want to come out and live in the physical world again?”

“That's certainly possible,” Captain Max said. “They've been in their pods for a very long time. By now it's probably the only world they know.”

“Returning to the physical world is a deeply frightening prospect for them,” Reverend Knight agreed. “Adrian greatly fears it.”

“But they'll die if they stay in the pods!” Laura objected. “Their only hope is to leave them. They've got to see that!”

“We can't force them, dear,” Richard replied. “If they don't

want to leave then I suppose that's their choice. In that case we'll clear the swarms, leave them alone, and turn our attention to Earth. But I don't think that will happen."

"What do you think, Jones?" Captain Max said. "You haven't said much. Do you really think that we've come all this way just to have them stay in their pods and die?"

Jones shook his head. "We've come to give them a choice," he said quietly. "What they do with that choice is up to them. They may accept it or they may reject it. But that is one of the reasons why God brought us here."

"I do hope they accept it," Laura said. "It would be such a waste if all of this was for nothing."

Sergeant Howell turned to the Artilect. "How is the war effort going?"

"Very well," the Artilect replied. "By the time we hear from Adrian again we will be ready to launch our attack."

Richard nodded. "That is excellent news! Does anyone have anything else to discuss?"

Amy spoke up. "I'll be glad when all of this is over!"

"Me too," Amanda agreed.

"It won't be much longer," Richard said. "Just hang in there."

CHAPTER 10

“What makes life so hard for them, Tim, is that they can only see a small piece of history. They think things are going well when they are not, and they see disasters where there was actually mercy and grace. Those who still live in the shadowlands are quick to act as if they know all the facts and are slow to trust the One who does. One day they will see the entire picture, but that will not happen until they join us in Paradise. When that day comes they will finally realize that all things really did work together for good. Their sacrifices and faithfulness were not in vain.”

--Itzel Ayar

The Last Seer

November 24, 7239

WHEN THE SENTINEL RETURNED TO XANTHE with Adrian Garza he did not immediately return the ancient man to Vault 37. Instead he transported them both to the building that housed the planet's only remaining Wall generators. He was surprised to see that the room was empty. “Where are the robots? I thought there would be someone here.”

Adrian shook his head. “Oh, I'm sure they're off somewhere else, repairing some piece of broken machinery. The only time they ever come in here is when something goes wrong. Since we're no longer using this equipment to sustain the Wall this entire building is unused. From the robots' point of view there's

no reason to maintain an area that isn't used, so they'll probably never come in here again. Their time is better spent elsewhere.”

The Sentinel nodded. “If all goes well you should not need the Wall in the future. Once the swarms are gone it will no longer serve a purpose.”

“In a way that's kind of sad,” Adrian remarked. “That Wall that you tore down had been in continuous operation my entire life, and it had been running for centuries by the time I was born. To us the existence of the Wall was as much a part of life as the existence of the Sun. It was like an old friend.”

“It was a cage,” the Sentinel replied. “It kept you trapped here, cowering in the darkness. It blocked out the starlight.”

“Which is just fine, if you ask me. We've never had to deal with starlight before and I don't see why that has to change now. If you ask me it's just unnatural.”

“I suppose it would seem that way to you,” the Sentinel said. “You have never known anything else. But to return to the matter at hand – the reason I brought you here is to give you a way to contact us. We will need to know what your leaders have to say about what has happened.”

“Of course,” Adrian agreed. “How is that going to work?”

The Sentinel looked around the room and saw a bank of dead computers in the far wall. With a wave of his hand the burnt-out units disappeared and were replaced by a small console. After it was in place he took Adrian over to it and showed him how it worked.

“This will connect you directly to me, no matter where I am,” the Sentinel explained. “I will then forward your message on to the appropriate parties or come back to Xanthe, if necessary.”

“It seems simple enough. I'll be sure to contact you as soon as I have spoken with Elder Lane.”

“Thank you,” the Sentinel replied. “Can you return to your

vault from here, or would you like for me to transport you directly there?”

Adrian hesitated. The thought of seeing the outside world filled him with a sense of unease. In the generator room there were no windows, but if he walked back to the vault he would have to go through the physical world. The very thought of being outside frightened him. On Tonina he hadn't thought much about it because it was an unknown place. Even though he knew it was a real place it was so alien that he that may as well have been on another synthetic world. But here, on his homeworld...

“If you could transport me back I would appreciate it,” Adrian said at last. “I am not as young as I used to be, and I am not even sure that I could find my way back.”

“I understand,” the Sentinel replied. A moment later the room around them disappeared and Adrian found himself standing back in the pod chamber of Vault 37.

“Is there anything else I can do for you?” the Sentinel asked.

“No, thank you. I will be in touch with you as soon as I can.”

The Sentinel nodded and then vanished, leaving Adrian alone.

Adrian stood there for a few moments, lost in thought. *Am I really afraid to go outside? What a ridiculous notion! I grew up outside, in the physical world. Why does it frighten me now? Have I decayed so much that the very thought of setting foot on the surface of my own planet now terrifies me? Or am I afraid of what my world has become since I last saw it?*

That thought made him pause. *What is my world like now? I know what it used to look like. In fact, I even have a copy of it in my synthetic world – a preservation of what it was like before we abandoned it. But what is it like now? How has it fared the test of time?*

Part of Adrian longed to go back to the safety and familiarity

of his pod, but he was surprised to find that he was unwilling to leave. It had been a long time since he'd felt this way. In the synthetic worlds there was no genuine fear because there was no actual danger. There was also no sense of mystery, for the world itself was arbitrary – he could make it whatever he wanted it to be. With a single thought Adrian could discover whatever he wanted to know, and he could even change the very nature of his world if he saw fit. But this was different. Adrian was faced with a genuine question and he could not simply wave his hand and get the answer. If he wanted to know what had become of his home he would have to go and see for himself.

With great reluctance Adrian finally walked out of the immense chamber and over to the vault's entrance. Once there he nervously pressed the button that rolled away the massive door. After it had been slid to one side he saw that beyond it was a small chamber, and at the end of the chamber was an elevator. *That must be how you get back to the surface, Adrian thought. It feels like it's been an eternity since I last saw that room! Has it really been five thousand years since I've stepped through those elevator doors?*

The ancient man walked through the vault entrance and shuffled over to the elevator. As soon as he pushed the button to call it the elevator doors opened. Taking a deep breath, Adrian stepped inside and pressed the button that would take him back to the surface. As the elevator doors closed he saw that the vault door was closing as well.

It took a while for the elevator to reach the surface, which gave Adrian some time to think. *Is this really the first time I've left the vault? Surely it's not, and yet I cannot remember ever having done this before. In fact, I can just barely remember entering the vault in the first place. How many of my memories of the past are real, and how many are simply dreams from my*

synthetic world? Do I still remember anything real about my childhood, or has it all been lost to time?

A moment later the elevator stopped. Adrian's heart jumped as he realized that he was about to see something that few of his race had ever seen. He was about to see his world as it existed now – not a digital recreation, but the physical world itself.

The elevator doors opened. His eyes widened when he saw the ruined lobby. Adrian stepped out of the elevator and carefully made his way around the debris that was strewn all over the floor. Chunks of concrete, broken glass, and rocks littered the ground. Both of the lobby's front doors were broken, with only a few shards of rusted metal still dangling from their hinges. The large plate-glass windows were long gone. Now only holes remained – a sad reminder of what used to be.

Adrian tried to remember what this room used to look like, but his memory failed him. *I know I've been here*, he thought. *I must have walked through this very room to get down to the Vault below, but I don't remember it now. This place isn't in my synthetic recreation. Why can't I remember it?*

He finally shook his head and stepped through the broken doorway. Outside he saw nothing but destruction as far as the eye could see. The street that ran in front of the building was gutted and time had almost erased it from existence. There were skyscrapers in the distance but they were little more than ruined skeletons.

There were no signs of life anywhere. Adrian saw no weeds, no trees, and no grass. He half-expected to see vines crawling up the buildings but there were no plants of any kind. A thick layer of dust coated everything. Overhead was a pale sky that contained no clouds. A tired sun burned on the horizon, creating dim shadows that stretched across the parched ground.

This is not the way it used to be, Adrian thought sadly. *This is*

not my home! I know what Star City is really like. It's a glorious city – the crown jewel of the galaxy! No finer city was ever built. But this – this is a corpse, long forgotten and left to rot in the sun.

As he stood on the cracked street and looked around he began to realize that the city was utterly empty. There were no people moving about, nor were there vehicles. Everything was still and quiet. There was no wind nor trace of a breeze. In his synthetic world there were always signs of life, but here there were none. This planet was deserted. In all of his years in the pod he had never experienced anything like this.

He suddenly had the feeling that he was entirely alone – the last survivor of his race. Panic struck him and he fought to keep it in check. *This is silly!* he thought. *I'm not the only person here. Why, just under the surface there are thousands of people! I am not alone.*

But you're the only one that is actually alive, a voice whispered. The others are trapped in dreams, lost in what is not real. This city is real, Adrian. You and your people abandoned it and time brought it to ruin, but it can still be saved if you act now. However, if you continue to do nothing then it will be lost and this planet will become the tombstone of your race.

Adrian stood there for a long time, staring at the motionless city. As the magnitude of the city's destruction sunk in he finally made a decision. *No, he thought. I will not accept this. That ruin is not my home. We abandoned the physical world long ago, seeking a better life on a higher plane, and we have found it. In fact, this is exactly why we abandoned the purely physical in the first place: it is full of decay, death, and despair. Reverend Knight was wrong. The synthetic worlds are our salvation, not our destruction. If we leave our pods we will die, for here we are nothing but ancient men. Our only hope is to stay in the worlds*

that we have created and not be distracted by the siren call of that which is merely physical.

“The Elder must know,” Adrian whispered. “He is our leader; he'll know what to do. I will let him know what has transpired. The Council will be able to fix this.”

With that, the ancient man shuffled back into the building and took the elevator down to the vault below.

CHAPTER 11

“Outer space simply does not interest young people today. They have no desire to know if there are still humans living on Mars, nor are they the slightest bit interested in trying to escape the Wall. They are far more focused on living as comfortable an existence as they can within this fortress that our ancestors built. I can understand that to an extent, but I do not think it bodes well for our future. If all we care about are our own creature comforts – if life is simply an effort to make our own self-centered dreams come true – then have we not become fools? I would rather chase God's dreams than my own, for at least then I have a goal worth living for. This cold pursuit of self leads only to death, as people lose the ability to care about anything. We should care about Mars for the same reason we should care about the savages who dwell in the valleys – there may be people there who need our help.”

--Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

August 9, 7236

ELDER LANE WAS NOT AT ALL PLEASED to see Adrian Garza. The leader of Vault 37 started screaming at him before he had even managed to get out of his pod. “How *dare* you snatch me out of my world! Who do you think you are, anyway? What gives you the right to

disturb me?"

"My apologies," Adrian replied. "I would never have dared to do such a thing but unfortunately circumstances required it. Sir, we have been contacted by a civilization from outside the Tau Ceti system."

"That's impossible!" Lane replied irritably. "You're wasting my time. There are no civilizations outside Tau Ceti and there haven't been for thousands of years. The swarms left no survivors."

"There is one now," Adrian said quietly. "In fact, they took me to one of their planets – a place they called Tonina. They claim to control millions of worlds and they plan to make war against the swarms. They believe they can defeat them."

"What do you mean, they took you? Are you telling me they've been here, on Xanthe?"

"That is correct. In fact, they have made several trips to this system."

"But that's impossible! You're out of your mind. We're guarded by a Wall, remember? Nobody can penetrate it – nobody!"

"They can," Adrian replied. "In fact, the Wall was not a barrier to them at all. Their science is thousands of years more advanced than our own. They can manipulate the physical world as easily as we can manipulate our synthetic worlds."

Lane gasped. "That's preposterous! Why – that's nothing but a lot of nonsense. In fact, I'll prove it to you!" He angrily walked over to the control panel by his pod and began pressing buttons. "I'll get to the bottom of this! You don't know what you're talking about, you – whoever you are. Just wait and see."

Minutes ticked by. Adrian stood a few feet away from him and watched as he worked at the console. Elder Lane's anger gradually turned into surprise and then concern. When he was done he had a look of intense worry on his face.

“What has been going on?” he asked, as he turned back to face Adrian. “Our generator is down – the Wall isn't up anymore! In its place is another Wall that *we are not generating*. What happened?”

Adrian carefully explained his contact with the Sentinel and his trip to Tonina. Elder Lane had many questions, most of which Adrian could not answer. By the time Adrian finished Lane was in a state of pure panic.

“I don't understand! I don't understand it at all. Where could these people have come from? How could such a large civilization have gone unnoticed for such a long time? How could this have happened? Who is responsible for this?”

“They are very old,” Adrian said. “The man I talked to said he was born in the 18th century.”

“That's impossible! But it must be true. It must be! Didn't you say that they possessed *Gifts*? But the Gifts were just myths – and yet, they have them! I don't understand. Something has happened. Something important has changed.”

“They are willing to meet with you,” Adrian said. “They would like to know what we think of their plan to destroy the swarms.”

“They can't destroy them,” Lane said. “It's not possible! No one can defeat the swarms.”

“They claim to have defeated them before. As I said, the man I talked to told me that the swarms had attacked them but their leader had defeated them. They now want to wipe them out entirely. In fact, the reason they want to talk with you is to find out what you know about the swarms.”

“They must not meet me!” Lane gasped. “No, that is quite impossible. You – you will be our go-between. Who are you, anyway?”

“Adrian Garza,” he replied.

Lane shook his head. “Whatever. You will talk to them for us,

Adrian. That will be your job. As of this moment you are our official spokesman.”

“What should I tell them?”

“I – I don't know yet. I don't know. Nothing like this has ever happened before. I will have to consult with the rest of the council.”

Adrian nodded. “Do you want me to wait until you return?”

“Yes – yes, you do that,” Lane replied. He began climbing back into his pod. “I'll come back when the council has made a decision. Just – tell the aliens to wait.”

The elder was soon back inside his pod, which closed over him. A minute later he was back in his synthetic world, leaving Adrian Garza alone.

Elder Lane will know what to do, Adrian thought. He will be able to save us from them.

* * * * *

It took several hours for Elder Lane to get in touch with the other two members of the council. The citizens of the vaults rarely communicated with each other, preferring to live in the privacy of their own synthetic worlds. While there was a mechanism that allowed them to interact, it was rarely used, and that made it very difficult to get someone's attention. As frustrating as it was to reach them from inside the pods, Lane did not dare wake them up. He was terrified that if they met in the physical world the aliens might have some way of overhearing them. *This is safer, he thought to himself. So very much safer.*

After much argument the three men agreed to meet on a neutral synthetic world. This angered Lane, but he understood. Each person had their own synthetic world and within that world they had absolute power to do as they wished. No one wanted to

enter someone else's world because then they would be at a disadvantage. However, if they met in a neutral location then no one would have an edge – or any special powers over the environment. It irked Lane a great deal but he knew that he would never be able to get the others to agree to anything else.

The meeting was not for a few more minutes so Lane decided to wait in his own world – not wishing to spend any more time than absolutely necessary outside of his domain. Lane was standing on the roof of his palace, which was located at the peak of a tall, barren mountain. Overhead was a vast red sky that was filled with dark clouds. Thunder rumbled ominously. Lane had proclaimed himself the immortal king of this world and took on a physique to match. As a thirty-foot-tall giant he towered over the local synthetic population – a fact that he used to utterly terrify them.

As he stood on the edge of the roof he could look out below and see the sprawling city that occupied the valley. Most of the natives lived in crude bamboo huts, but he had placed taskmasters over them and forced them to build giant steel monuments to his glory. The city was dotted with immense statues of himself, which he forced the population to revere. Those who did not were punished by lightning bolts that Lane pulled down from the sky. Since he controlled his synthetic world it took only a single thought for him to manipulate it, a fact that he had come to take for granted. He took great pleasure in punishing his slaves, and the roof of his palace was littered with their skulls. The previous night he had thrown a party and forced many synthetics to come. When he grew tired of them he simply set them all on fire and then laughed as they burned. Somehow he never grew tired of that sight – and since his world was full of synthetics he never ran out of citizens to torment.

At the designated time he reluctantly left his palace rooftop

and transported himself to the neutral setting that the computer had generated. He was not surprised to see that he was the first one there. The meeting place was little more than a void. Below his feet was a flat slab of concrete that measured a hundred feet on each side. There were no walls or ceiling. Aside from the concrete floor beneath him there was nothing but darkness in all directions. *There aren't even any chairs*, Adrian thought irritably.

He waited for a few minutes but no one showed up. A half-hour later he was about to give up and leave when the other two members of the council finally materialized. To the left was Horace Grant. He appeared to be a tall, thin man with bright red hair and was wearing a white suit. To his right was Van Toby. He had taken on the form of a bodybuilder and was every bit as tall as Grant – but instead of being thin he was quite burly. Van Toby had black hair and sharp green eyes.

“Where have you been?” Lane demanded. “You were supposed to be here a half-hour ago!”

“Patience, patience,” Van Toby replied. “You always were an impatient one, you know. It's a wonder you were ever appointed Elder! You just don't have the patience to wait for the finer things of life.”

“Patience!” Lane screamed. “This is no time for patience. You don't have any idea what's been going on! We are in grave danger and all you can talk about is wasting time!”

“But we *do* know what is going on,” Grant replied. “You see, we have spent the past hour or so talking to Adrian Garza. It was quite an illuminating conversation, too! He had some intriguing information to share.”

“You talked with him?” Lane asked in surprise.

“Of course we did,” Van Toby said smoothly. “What did you expect – that we would simply take your word for it? Oh no, no no no. We know you far too well for that. You have a reputation,

you know.”

“Indeed,” Grant affirmed. “You claimed that our way of life was in great jeopardy and that aliens from the outside were threatening to destroy us all. So, naturally, we decided to check your sources. A claim like that requires confirmation.”

“You fools!” Lane screamed. “You could have ruined everything! What if the aliens had been there? They have someone who has the gift of discernment! Do you know what will happen to us if they find out the truth about the swarms?”

“They will never find out,” Van Toby replied. “Adrian told us that they don't know where they came from. Adrian doesn't know either, so as long as they talk only to him then our little secret is safe.”

“There is no cause for alarm,” Grant agreed. “In fact, I am surprised that you are even concerned. All we have to do is contact the swarms and have them go to war against these intruders. The swarms will take care of the rest.”

“They have never failed before,” Van Toby agreed. “They will not fail us now.”

“But they've *already* had contact with the swarms,” Lane replied. “They're not afraid of them! The swarms tried to attack them and—”

“Lies,” Van Toby said dismissively. “All lies. The swarms cannot be defeated! You know that as well as I do. You surprise me, Lane. I cannot believe that you have actually fallen for their infantile propaganda. You are clearly growing senile! These aliens are not some mighty civilization with godlike science; they're simply a dying colony that got overlooked. The swarms will have no problems in wiping them out.”

“No problems at all,” Grant agreed.

Lane shook his head. “The two of you are dead wrong. Don't you realize that these people were able to penetrate our Wall?”

No colony ever figured out how to do that! In fact, even we don't know how to do that!"

Van Toby shook his head. "That was just a technical problem. Our equipment was old and poorly maintained. That problem is easily fixed."

"Trust us," Grant said. "After all, it has always worked before. The whole reason we created the swarms was to eliminate the realists – those who did not appreciate the transcendent beauty of our synthetic worlds. They were a threat and so we removed them. The synthetic world triumphed over the physical world back then, and it will do so again now. This will not be a problem."

"Very well," Lane said reluctantly. "I will instruct the swarms to go to war against these aliens. But what if they fail?"

"They will not fail," Van Toby assured him. "You worry too much, you know. The ascendancy of the purely physical is over. These aliens are simply the last gasp of a failed idea."

CHAPTER 12

“It is much easier to reject reality than to accept it. It is easier to believe a lie than the truth. Reality is an uncomfortable thing and the truth pushes one into taking unpleasant actions. This is why many people choose to believe things that please them instead of things that are true. The truth is that we are not the pinnacle of civilization; we are the dying remnant of what was once a great world. The savages in the valleys are not animals; they are people, our brothers, and they desperately need help. But the most uncomfortable truth of all is that we need help. It will not be long before the last of our resources are exhausted and we lose our protection against the savages. We must either save them before that day comes, or else accept defeat at their hands.”

--Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

August 14, 7236

ELDER LANE WAS IN HIS POD FOR SO LONG that Adrian Garza felt himself growing sleepy. As he fought to stay awake he marveled at how weak, frail, and tired he felt. When he was in his synthetic world he was a perfect physical specimen – strong, young, and highly agile. Here, however, gravity pulled at him and his joints cried out in pain. He felt horrible. He was able to stay awake for a while but eventually he succumbed to sleep.

All at once he felt something shaking him roughly. "Adrian! Get up! Are you dead? What do you think you're doing?"

Adrian's eyes fluttered open, and he looked up at the person standing over him. When he saw it was Elder Lane he quickly shuffled to his feet. "My apologies, sir! I did not mean to doze off. I'm not used to being out here."

"None of us are," Elder Lane replied. "This isn't where we belong, you know. The physical world is a terrible place of death and destruction. There's a reason why we abandoned it all those years ago. This is no place for a man to be."

"The outsiders would change that," Adrian replied. "They want to take us away from our synthetic worlds so that we can dwell in their cities. They think our life here is a dead end."

"Yes...I know. Speaking of that, I have a message for you to relay to them. Please tell them that, sadly, we have no further information about the swarms. They are as big a mystery to us as they are to them. Furthermore, tell them that we will wait here while they engage them in combat. Please let them know that they have our sincerest thanks, and we're looking forward to a positive result."

Adrian nodded. "I will send them a message."

Elder Lane turned to go and then stopped. "Incidentally, Adrian, just how are you able to communicate with these aliens? Doesn't the Wall block all outside communications?"

Adrian shrugged. "I don't know, sir. Apparently it does not. All I know is that when the Sentinel brought me back here he installed some communications equipment in the same facility where we house our Wall generators. It's quite easy to use and it seems to work very well. He told me I could use it whenever I needed to contact him."

"Very good," Elder Lane replied. "Thank you."

The elder then climbed back into his pod. Adrian left the

chamber and headed toward the elevator that would take him up to the surface.

* * * * *

Although Elder Lane had crawled back into his pod and shut the canopy, he did not activate it. Instead he lay still and listened. He knew it would take Adrian quite some time to get to the surface, send the message, and return to his pod, so he settled in for a long wait.

Unlike Adrian, he found it easy to stay awake. His nerves were on edge and he was fraught with panic. *Those fools, Lane thought. They don't understand what we're up against! These aliens aren't just another defenseless colony. They didn't get through our Wall because it failed! They had no trouble bringing it down; it was like tissue paper to them. The swarms are useless against them. Useless! But what else is there? I have to try; it's the only thing that can save us. If I fail these aliens will force us to leave our homes and will make us live in their cities – under their rule, of course. Instead of being the masters of our own worlds we will be slaves to their whims, bound to whatever archaic and outdated laws they care to impose. I will not serve them, and I refuse to allow us to become their slaves.*

Time passed by very slowly. Elder Lane was not used to sitting still and found it difficult to wait. It seemed like hours had gone by and still there was no sign of Adrian. He eventually started wondering if something had happened to him. What if he had already returned to his pod and Lane just hadn't noticed? In fact, what if he had returned hours ago? He was about to get out of his pod and go looking for him when he suddenly heard footsteps approaching.

Elder Lane closed his eyes and held very still. In the distance

he heard footsteps, then the sound of a pod opening. A moment later he heard it snap shut. He waited a few more minutes and then let out a sigh of relief. The aged man carefully opened up his pod and stepped outside it. He then strolled out of the chamber and over to the elevator, just as he had done many times before.

The sight of the surface had been a tremendous shock to Adrian, but Elder Lane took it in stride. As he left the ruined building and made his way down the broken streets of Star City he gave no heed to the destruction that surrounded him. Unlike the others, he had made regular trips to the surface during the past five thousand years. Since he was their leader the council had forced him to be the one to keep an eye on the swarms, in order to make sure that they were still operational and that no new threats had arisen. Lane hated doing it but someone had to make sure that no outsider was threatening their synthetic worlds. Even though all of the colonies had been ruthlessly destroyed long ago, there was still a tremendous fear of the unknown. No one had ever explored the galaxy; no one knew what monsters might still be lurking in the shadows, unseen until it was too late. The swarms were their only line of defense and they dared not neglect them.

This is exactly what I was afraid of, Elder Lane thought, as he approached the ruined Central Defense Building. It finally happened. But what if this fails? What if the swarms fail? What do I do then?

At one time the defense building had been an imposing structure, designed to withstand almost any type of assault. The one foe it could not survive, however, was time. Through long centuries of neglect the building had decayed into utter ruin. The vast majority of its systems had crumbled into dust and its rooms were filled with rubble. The elder was not concerned about any

of this; there was only one system that they needed and he took pains to make sure that the surviving robots kept it running.

It was a long walk through dimly-lit hallways to get to the heart of the structure. Many of the walls had collapsed and portions of the ceiling had caved in as well, forcing him to take a convoluted route to get to the command room. He knew at some point that the rest of the structure would cave in and they would lose all control over the swarms at all, but he brushed that thought aside. That was not a problem he could easily solve, so he decided it was best to simply not think about it.

The lighting in the central command room was very dim. Most of the screens were broken and there was no longer any furniture. A thick layer of dust covered everything, and the air itself was thin and stale. However, in one corner of the room was a bank of functional computers. A rack of lights glowed feebly beneath layers of grime and dirt, and a solitary unbroken console stood in front of it.

Elder Lane walked over to the console, brushed the dirt off, and pressed a button. He let out a sigh of relief when the screen came to life.

Now it's time to go to war, he thought to himself. He studied the console intently and then began typing out a series of commands.

CHAPTER 13

"I think this whole debate is missing the point. Are the synthetic worlds real? No. But so what? Ask yourself this: are you happier in the real world, with all of its stresses and problems, or in a synthetic world, where you can have anything you want? Life is nothing more than the pursuit of happiness, so if you're happier then isn't that all that matters? Compared to that, the idea of 'real' or 'unreal' is just a lot of abstract metaphysical nonsense. I'll take happiness over reality any day."

*--Carroll Lane
Elder of Vault 37
July 7, 2436*

EVER SINCE THE ARTILECT HAD DESTROYED the bots that attacked Quetzalli the swarms had returned to their endless struggle. As Elder Lane had said, however, the fight was not a real one. The council of Xanthe had created the swarms for the express purpose of wiping out the Ranger colonies, and after they accomplished that task the majority of the council had no more use for them. While Elder Lane was afraid of what might lurk in the darkness, his fellow leaders did not share his concerns. However, an unexpected development arose that forced them to maintain the swarms for millennia: a sizable portion of their population wanted to leave their pods and return to the physical world.

Some people complained that the synthetic worlds were defective. They argued that while they *looked* realistic, they

weren't actually *real*. Each citizen had been given their own synthetic world and they had the power to change it in any way they desired. At first this was eagerly accepted as a magnificent gift, but over time people began to realize that if the world could be arbitrarily changed on a whim, nothing really *mattered* – there were no actual consequences that could not be undone. Life became unsatisfying, and a growing percentage of the population yearned to return to the surface. They wanted a life with substance, not a life of illusions.

Their leaders, however, felt that this was simply the uneducated opinion of a few ignorant morons. In order to pacify them and keep this discontent from spreading they had to come up with a reason that would force everyone to stay in their pods forever. So, instead of destroying the swarms after the war, the council altered their programming so that they would begin fighting each other. They then apologetically told their people that, as much as they regretted this, it would simply not be possible to leave the pods. The swarms were too great a danger, and without the ability to take down the Wall their former lives were impossible to maintain. Their only chance for survival was to stay in the pods until the swarms were gone – and the council made sure that that never happened.

So, one by one, the holdouts lost hope and resigned themselves to their new, empty lives. After a while they found that it no longer bothered them; in fact, the thought of living in the physical world eventually became unthinkable.

At this point the council could have destroyed the swarms but they chose not to. Elder Lane pointed out that it did no harm to keep them going, and the bots acted as a shield against a threat that he was too terrified to name. Even now, mankind was still afraid of the dark.

* * * * *

The commands that Elder Lane sent the bots were unlike any that they had received since the days they were created. Lane was concerned that the opponent he was fighting really *did* control the resources of millions of star systems, and he had no confidence that his attack would succeed. So he ordered his swarms to go forth and multiply.

Immediately the tiny machines halted their war and scattered, taking up residence on all of the planets in what was once Ranger territory. Then, slowly, the swarms engulfed these empty worlds. Their goal was to plunder all of the resources that they could find in order to produce a fantastically large army. Then they would go to war.

* * * * *

"It's very strange," Sergeant Howell remarked. "I've never seen them act this way before."

Howell was standing in the defense complex that was located at the core of Tonina, staring at a large holographic display in the center of the room. Richard Stryker was there as well, along with the Sentinel and the Artillect. The holoscreen was currently projecting a map of all of Ranger space. A cloud of red and blue dots covered the Ranger planets and was rapidly growing in size.

"What do the colors mean again?" Richard asked.

"Well, they *used* to represent warring factions – I color-coded them so I could tell them apart. The red side fought against the blue side. However, the two sides have apparently made peace because they've joined together to take over these worlds."

Richard frowned. "Did anyone live on those planets?"

"No," the Sentinel said. "I have been to many of those worlds

personally. They were destroyed and abandoned long ago.”

“Then what are the swarms doing?”

“They are mining the worlds,” the Artilect replied. “The bots are consuming them in order to produce larger swarms. It would appear that they are attempting to swell their numbers so that they can mount an invasion.”

At that moment Amy and Amanda Stryker appeared. Amanda appeared in person and her sister Amy appeared as a hologram. “Sorry we're late,” Amy replied. “I didn't know we had a meeting scheduled for today.”

“We didn't!” Amanda said. “That's what I've been trying to tell you. This is an *unscheduled* meeting.”

“Well, anyway, we're here now,” Amy said. “What have I missed?”

The Sentinel spoke up. “It would appear that the swarms are preparing to go to war.”

The girl's eyes widened. “You mean they're going to invade Tau Ceti?” Amanda asked.

“It makes sense, if you think about it,” Amy replied. “Steve has made all kinds of trips there, taking down Walls and putting up new ones. That was bound to have attracted somebody's attention sooner or later. When did all this start happening?”

“Right after I returned from Xanthe,” the Sentinel replied.

“Well, there you go!” Amy said. “If we didn't have their attention before I guess we've got it now. Do you think that Xanthe is in any actual danger?”

The Artilect was quiet for a while. “I do not believe so,” he said at last. “Their original Wall was quite primitive and yet it was able to protect them for thousands of years. The Wall that my son erected is a great deal more advanced. If they could not penetrate the old one then the bots will not be able to penetrate the new one either.”

"I guess that's true," Sergeant Howell replied. "Unless something else is going on that we don't know about."

"Well, sure," Amy agreed. "But how can we make plans around things that we don't know about?"

"So what are we going to do?" Amanda asked.

Sergeant Howell turned to the Artilect. "Is your invasion force ready?"

"Not yet. I have assembled a sizable fleet and was on schedule to have it completed in another two days, but the situation has now changed. The swarms were originally in a relatively small location and I had planned accordingly. However, they are now scattered over a much larger area and it will take many more ships to entrap them all at once. Even at an increased rate of production it will take another nine days to assemble enough resources to saturate the entire infected area."

"Nine days!" Amy exclaimed. "We don't have nine days!"

"We might," Richard said. "After all, do we really know how long it's going to take the swarms to finish their work?"

"We do," the Artilect said. "I have calculated their rate of planetary consumption. Based on their current activity I estimate it will take them another 39 hours to finish their work."

"Oh. So I guess we *don't* have nine days."

"But we don't know what happens next," Sergeant Howell argued. "The bots may do nothing or they may start fighting each other again. They also might search for more planets to consume. Since they've never done this before there's no way to predict their next move."

"But what if they attack Tau Ceti?" Amanda asked. "What if they *can* find some way to get through the Wall?"

"Or what if they attack Earth?" Amy asked.

Sergeant Howell frowned. "They've never done that before."

"But as you said, they've never done this before either," Amy

pointed out.

“Or what if Earth is behind the swarms somehow?” Amanda asked.

Richard spoke up. “It sounds like we don't have enough information. We don't know why their behavior has changed and we don't know what they're going to do next. And, from what I can tell, there's no good way to find out. The survivors on Tau Ceti are as clueless as we are.”

“Or so they say,” Sergeant Howell replied.

Richard shook his head. “If Adrian Garza had known something then Reverend Knight would have found out. I'm positive that they don't know anything.”

“But that doesn't make sense! I just can't believe that. How could they possibly be the only survivors of a war that has lasted for five thousand years without actually knowing anything about their enemy?”

“This isn't helping,” Amy interrupted. “What are we going to do?”

Everyone turned to look at the Artilect. “Do you have a recommendation?” Richard asked.

“I could attack now, but I cannot guarantee success,” the Artilect replied. “My forces are adequate to protect the network but they are too few to ensure that no bots escape. If we attack and fail then we take the risk that they might learn more about us and find a way to counter our weapons. I admit this is unlikely, but it is a possibility and it should be considered – especially since so many variables are unknown.”

“So you suggest we wait and see what the swarms do?” Sergeant Howell asked. “I admit the idea makes sense to me. It would give us a chance to see who their target is and that might tell us more about them.”

“Or waiting could ensure that everyone on Xanthe dies,”

Amanda replied.

"I agree," Amy said. "I don't think we can risk all of their lives like that. What happens if we're wrong?"

"You do have a point," Richard admitted. "For all we know the people on Xanthe are the last survivors of the human race. We really can't take chances with that many lives. Steve, how many people did you say were still there?"

"384,726," the Sentinel replied quietly.

"I guess we could send the Artillect's fleet to protect Tau Ceti," Sergeant Howell said reluctantly. "But that seems dangerous as well. Do we really want the battle to take place there?"

"Could we draw their attention?" Amy asked. "Maybe get them to attack us instead?"

"Are you crazy?" Amanda asked. "You want them to attack *us*?"

"Why not? After all, it's not like they have a chance of winning! Besides, if we could coax them into attacking a certain part of our front line then perhaps we could force them into a small area, and then Andy could take the ships he already has and wipe them out."

"That makes sense," Sergeant Howell said. "I would support that strategy."

Richard nodded. "I would too, but I still don't think we should leave Tau Ceti undefended. Can we send at least part of the fleet there, but perhaps hide it in some way so that the swarms don't discover it unless it's needed?"

"That is possible," the Artillect replied. "I could send a small portion of the fleet to protect that system. Once it was in place I could send a few other ships to attack the Ranger system nearest to our borders. The ships could then fall back and draw the swarms into our territory."

"I think that might work," Sergeant Howell said. "Of course, it could also go very badly."

"As could any decision we make," the Sentinel replied.

The Artilect looked at the twin girls. "The final decision rests with the two of you. What is your command? Do you find this course of action acceptable?"

The twin sisters looked at each other, and then Amanda looked at the Artilect. "Are you *sure* that there's no way the swarms could win?"

"I am quite sure," the Artilect replied.

"So you're *positive* that there's no danger to us at all?"

The Artilect smiled. "Yes, I am. Believe me, Amanda, if this plan put either of you in danger then I would most certainly let you know. Protecting the lives of you and your sister is my highest priority."

"Then I say let's do it," Amanda said.

"I agree," Amy replied.

"Then it shall be done!" the Artilect said.

CHAPTER 14

“Scholars have spent millennia wondering what life is like beyond the Wall. According to our most ancient records, at the time it first appeared the stars were home to a group of unified colonies that called themselves the Rangers. Some people believe that the Rangers now control the entire galaxy and have created a utopia. Others think that the Rangers have died out and we are all that remains of mankind. Personally I find it hard to believe that we have been forgotten about. Someone has been maintaining the Wall for five thousand years. That shows a tremendous dedication over an enormously long period of time. Have they done this because they hate us, or because they fear us? Is it possible that they know as little about us as we know about them?”

--Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

August 21, 7236

ELDER LANE ABRUPTLY felt himself pulled back into the physical world. As he slowly regained consciousness he opened his eyes and saw Adrian Garza standing over him, a look of trepidation on his face.

“What now?” Elder Lane said irritably. “What has gotten into you? Must you keep pestering me?”

“It's war!” Adrian gasped. “The Sentinel just contacted me. They're going to war against the swarms!”

“Right now?” Elder Lane asked, concerned. He sat up in his pod and looked at Adrian. “Do you mean to say that they're launching their war *right now?*”

Adrian nodded. “That's what they said! In fact, the war has already begun. The Sentinel told me that they noticed unusual activity and decided that they had to act immediately. They had wanted to spend more time building up their forces but they decided launch a preemptive strike right away in order to protect us from the swarms.”

“To protect *us?*” Elder Lane asked, confused.

“They think that the swarms are moving into position to attack us. They don't know for sure, but that's their guess, and they're probably right for all I know. The Sentinel did assure me that our Wall should protect us from the swarms, but just to make sure they've sent part of their fleet here to guard us. They're hoping that by launching their strike now they'll be able to draw the swarm's attention away from us.”

Inwardly Elder Lane smiled. *So they had to launch before they were ready, and on top of that they diluted their forces by sending part of them here! What fools they are! This attack just might work after all.*

“Thank you for letting me know, Adrian,” Elder Lane said aloud. “Will you inform me when the battle is over?”

“You're not going to stay out here?” Adrian asked, confused.

Elder Lane shook his head. “I've done all that I can do, and from what you have told me our defense is in good hands. Staying out here would not change anything. Just let me know what happens, will you?”

Adrian nodded. Elder Lane settled back down into his pod and pressed the button to reseal it. *So they were unprepared, he thought excitedly. Unprepared! Maybe we have a chance of winning this after all.*

* * * * *

A group of nearly two hundred warships suddenly appeared about a quarter million miles away from New Caldwell. Thousands of years ago this planet had been home to the Ranger's most distant colony, but the swarms destroyed it long ago and left the world in ruins. Now it was the closest system to the network, and the Artillect took advantage of this.

The ships that appeared were not the Alpha or Beta-class vessels that the Artillect had spent the past week fabricating. Instead he had hastily fabricated a small number of much weaker ships that were highly vulnerable to the swarms. It wanted to make sure that this group was heavily damaged in the attack – thus giving an incentive for the swarms to follow as they retreated in disarray.

As soon as the vessels appeared in space they began attacking, firing beams of searing blue energy at the planet below. The beams cut through the planet, turning large chunks of it directly into energy. The resulting explosion blew the entire world into fragments, scattering the swarms and destroying a great many of them.

Yet more than half of the swarm survived the initial assault. The bots quickly regrouped and ferociously attacked the invasion fleet. The invaders continued to fire into the dense swarms of bots, blasting them into energy, but there were simply too many of them. The relentless bombardment of trillions of bots wore away at the invasion fleet, and one by one their ships were vaporized.

When the fleet was down to a quarter of its original size it turned around and disappeared into hyperspace. The swarms eagerly followed.

* * * * *

"It's working," Sergeant Howell commented. The entire group from the *Sparrow* was in the core of Tonina, watching the holographic display that the sergeant had set up. The Artillect and the Sentinel were not there, but everyone else was present except for Amy Stryker. Amy had bitterly protested at being excluded, but in the end she was forced to accept her fate and remain on her planet. Amy was not kept in the dark, however; the Artillect created a similar display for her on her world, and she watched it alone. Amy understood the need for security but she was still upset about it. She hated being cut off from the rest of her family.

"It certainly is working," Captain Max agreed. The group watched as the blue and red dots hastily abandoned all of the Ranger planets and jumped into hyperspace. All of them had plotted a course that would eventually intercept the invasion fleet.

"It looks like they're *all* leaving!" Richard remarked in surprise. "I don't see a single dot staying behind."

"That's poor strategy on their part," Sergeant Howell commented.

"Maybe they're not as smart as we think," Captain Max replied.

"Or maybe they're a lot smarter than we realize," Jones said.

Captain Max looked at Jones in surprise. "Why would you say that?"

"As our Lord once said, the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light. This isn't over, sir. We may win this battle, but winning the war will be very difficult and very costly. I fear that they are very much more clever than we

are.”

“I sincerely hope not,” Reverend Knight replied quietly. “At this point we are the only hope that Tau Ceti has.”

* * * * *

Amy Stryker was alone, standing in a nameless room on her nameless world. She knew that it would make her feel better if she gave her planet a name, but she refused to do so. *I refuse to fall in love with this horrible place. I hate it here! I hate being away from my family and I hate being away from Atzi. I'm going to leave this planet the first chance I get.*

The teenage girl stood in the dark room and watched as the scattered red and blue dots merged into a single force. By now the giant army of bots had almost caught up with the invasion fleet and was on the verge of entering the Artilect's territory. *Andy is playing this well, she thought to herself. His ships are retreating slow enough to allow the swarms to catch up, but just fast enough to stay out of range. It won't be long now.*

Amy examined the distance between the swarms and the Artilect's giant hidden armada, and began counting the seconds down. *Ten, nine, eight, seven, six...*

CHAPTER 15

"I just don't know what we're going to do! Mars is dying, and it's obvious to everyone – that's why there's so much unrest these days. The air on the surface gets thinner every year. It's been generations since you could walk around up there without an air suit. I know that's why our ancestors moved into underground cities, but let's face it – our air supply is still renewed by pumping in air from the surface. Once all the air is gone we're going to suffocate and that will be the end of us. Then there's the issue of our dwindling water supply..."

*--Noel Lawson
Engineer – New Tikal
July 3, 7239*

THE SWARMS HAD REGROUPED in deep space, trillions of miles away from any other star system. In front of them, separated by only a few million miles, was the Artillect's rapidly retreating invasion force. The mindless intelligence that controlled the swarms estimated that the bots were less than sixty seconds away from catching and obliterating the invaders.

Then, instantly, the situation changed. A soft white light filled the vacuum of space and the swarms were jerked to a stop. Some unseen force had altered the structure of spacetime so profoundly that their propulsion systems no longer functioned. They were frozen in space, unable to move.

The swarms desperately searched for their attacker but they could see no one. All they could detect was a piercing white light that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. Even the invasion force that they had been following had vanished from view. In something akin to panic the swarms began wildly firing in all directions, but the shots simply dissipated into space. They were trapped and they had no target to fire at.

Unknown to them, hundreds of thousands of Alpha-class starships had surrounded them. These ships were projecting the field that froze the swarms in place. No matter how hard the bots tried they would not be able to move. Even their ability to enter hyperspace had been taken from them. For the first time since they were created the swarms were utterly helpless.

The technique that the warships were using to immobilize the swarms was quite dangerous. Altering the structure of space itself changed the way matter behaved. If this has been done inside a star system it would have caused the entire system to collapse and destroy itself – a fact that the Artilect was well aware of. That is why it had chosen to lure its enemy into an empty area, so it could fight them without causing any further stellar destruction.

Once the Artilect was satisfied that the swarms were trapped it gave the command to launch its next wave. In an instant billions upon billions of Beta-class starships appeared in the midst of the swarms. Each of these ships was a sphere about a hundred feet in diameter. Unlike the swarms, they had the ability to maneuver inside the disruption field that the Alpha ships were generating.

As soon as the Beta ships appeared they began radiating a white pulse of energy that instantly obliterated the bots that surrounded them. The swarms vainly tried to attack the Beta ships, but it was difficult for them to get off more than a few

shots before the energy waves engulfed and destroyed them. A small percentage of the Beta ships were lost, but their onslaught simply could not be stopped.

The trapped bots tried desperately to escape but they could not move. They then attempted to replicate but they found that they could not do that either. Even their attempts at transforming into some sort of offensive weapon failed. The bots were forced to simply wait helplessly as the oncoming tide of irresistible energy turned them all into cosmic dust.

The entire battle took less than half an hour. When it was over every last bot was destroyed and less than five percent of the Beta ships had been lost. The Alpha ships were not even scratched.

* * * * *

“Well, that was kind of boring, actually,” Amanda said, sighing.

“Let us be heartily thankful for that,” Sergeant Howell replied. “The invasion was stopped before it started, with no loss of life. That is something we can be tremendously thankful for.”

“Oh, I know!” Amanda agreed. “But – it was just so *easy*. There wasn't anything to it. I thought it would be a much tougher struggle.”

“It's not over yet, miss,” Jones replied. “The next battle we fight will be very different.”

“What do you mean, the *next* battle?” Captain Max asked. “They're all gone, aren't they?”

“For now,” Jones agreed. “But those who created them are still there, and they have not been neutralized. This is not the end of it.”

“Well, we'll deal with that when the time comes,” Richard

said. "For now I think a celebration is in order! After thousands of years of tyranny the endless war has been finished. The people of Tau Ceti are now free!"

"Does that mean I can go get Amy?" Amanda asked.

"I don't see why not," Richard said. He turned to Sergeant Howell. "Is it over?"

"As far as I can tell," Sergeant Howell replied.

"Then go ahead," Richard said.

* * * * *

Ten minutes later the entire group was assembled in the holographic room in the core of Tonina. The Artillect had materialized a table and some chairs and they were all sitting around, talking to each other and staring at the holographic display in the center of the room.

"So what do we do now?" Captain Max asked. "Are we done?"

"I detect no further threat," the Artillect replied. "I cannot locate any remnant of the swarms anywhere in space – not even so much as a single bot. The swarms sent their entire fleet into our territory and I destroyed them all at once. There were no survivors."

"That was a pretty foolish move on their part," Sergeant Howell said. "I'm surprised they did that."

"Maybe the swarms just aren't very smart," Amy suggested. "Maybe they've depended on their superior numbers for all these years."

"They lasted an awfully long time, though," Amanda commented. "I don't see how they could do that by being stupid."

"I think the Artillect should get a lot of the credit for this,"

Sergeant Howell said. "Without his superior technology and strength this victory would not have occurred. I know you girls weren't there when this happened, but do the rest of you remember the time they attacked Quetzalli?"

"That was terrifying!" Laura exclaimed. "I didn't think we were going to survive."

"We almost didn't," Captain Max said. "In fact, Quetzalli itself was destroyed. It was a really close call."

"But it's all over now," Amanda said. "The people of Tau Ceti are safe."

Amy spoke up. "I bet they were overjoyed to hear that the swarms had been wiped out! What did they say when you told them?"

"You know, actually, we haven't told him yet," Richard said.

"You haven't! Why not? Don't you think they'd want to know?"

"Well, for one thing, we haven't decided *what* to tell him," her father explained. "Now that the swarms are gone should we tell them to go ahead and start coming to Tonina? Is it time for them to leave their pods and re-enter society? If it is, do we have a plan in place for their migration?"

"Shouldn't that be *their* decision?" Laura asked. "I mean, after all, it's their future we're talking about. Maybe we should let them know what their options are and then see what they want to do. This is going to be a big change for them. I don't think we should push them into something they're not ready for."

"Your wife has a good point," Captain Max commented. "They've been in those pods for an awfully long time, Rick. It might take them a while to re-adjust to life in the real world. Maybe they should get use to life on their own planet for a while, before we suddenly dump them into the future."

"But their planet is in ruins!" Amy said. "That's what Steve

said, anyway. No one could live there!”

“I could fix it for them,” Amanda offered. “With the nanites it wouldn't be hard to make it habitable again. Then they could live there until they got accustomed to life again.”

“That's not a bad idea!” Captain Max said. “In fact, that's something we should probably do anyway. It would be a nice gesture on our part.”

The Sentinel spoke up. “Would you like for me to go to Xanthe and talk to them? I would be happy to inform them that the swarms have been destroyed and we are ready to give them access to the network, once they are able to receive it.”

“Can I go with you?” Amy asked. “I would really really like to meet them!”

Sergeant Howell shook his head. “I don't think that's wise, miss. For the time being I think it would be best if they only knew about your sister Amanda. I think you should continue to stay in hiding until we're sure that everything is safe.”

“But the bots are gone!” Amy protested. “There's no danger left. What am I hiding from?”

“I think the sergeant is correct,” Jones replied. “This is not over.”

Amy looked at her father. “Please, Dad? Please let me go?”

Her father reluctantly shook his head. “I'm sorry, Amy, I really am. I know how much you want to go. But I don't think it's going to hurt anything if you stayed hidden for a few more days, just until we're sure that all the bots really are gone. If nothing happens then you can rejoin us.”

“It won't be much longer, dear,” Laura added. “Honest.”

“Fine,” Amy said, fuming.

“Can I go, then?” Amanda asked. “I mean, we might as well go ahead and terraform Xanthe while we're there, right? No sense in making two trips.”

“You know, Amy, I can perform that function on my own,” the Sentinel replied. “There is no reason for you to come if you would rather stay here.”

“Oh, I know, but I *want* to do it. Besides, I think it'll mean more to them if I do it. They've met you before, but the only one of us that they've met is Reverend Knight. I want them to know that we're here to help them however we can.”

The Sentinel turned to Richard. “What do you think?”

“It's fine with me. As long as she's in your care I'm sure that nothing will happen to her.”

“How long will this take?” Sergeant Howell asked.

“Oh, an hour or two,” Amanda replied vaguely. “I won't be too long.”

“Don't forget to come home when you're done!” her mother warned her. “We'll have plenty of time to talk to them later. All right?”

Ok,” Amanda agreed.

Amy sighed. “I'll see you later, then,” she said. The disappointed girl then disappeared.

CHAPTER 16

“We are so dependent on machines! We have machines that pump in air and machines that scrub the air. We have machines that extract water from the water table and machines that clean our sewage. We have machines that provide energy and machines that make that awful protein paste that gets passed off as food. Most of these machines we understand, but there's one big exception: the zero-point-energy plant. Nobody has the slightest idea how it works, and it powers everything. The few times it's failed in the past millennia our mechanics were able to make replacement parts and fix it, but that's only because its core components still work. Our metalworking shop can make a lot of components, but the one thing we can't fabricate is a circuit board. If those ever burn out then we'll all die. It's scary to think that all of our lives depend on the continued operation of a piece of electronics that's two thousand years old.”

--Noel Lawson

Engineer – New Tikal

July 8, 7239

IT TOOK ONLY A FEW MOMENTS for the Sentinel to transport Amanda Stryker to the ruined planet Xanthe. Instead of taking her straight to the Vault, however, he instead brought her to the top of a

small hill that overlooked what was left of Star City. The hill offered a commanding view of the entire area. As far as the eye could see there was nothing but dust, rocks, and barren land. Overhead was a pale sky that was empty of clouds. The ground was parched and all signs of water were long gone. The city itself was nothing more than a crumbling ruin that was slowly being engulfed by the surrounding wasteland.

Amanda stared at the ruined city in horror. "What have they done to this place?"

"They abandoned it," the Sentinel replied. "They left it empty, and time took care of the rest."

Amanda said nothing for a long time. She simply stared at the city, taking it in. "I remember what it used to look like," she said at last. "In fact, I was there quite recently – well, recently to me, anyway. I never imagined that one day it would look like that. It's a strange feeling."

"That is what time does – it turns greatness into ruin. In the beginning the Lord God cursed the ground for the sin of Adam, and that curse is still in effect. One day it will be removed and death will no longer reign over all of us. But that day has not yet come."

Amanda nodded. "I know. But that's not what I mean. This makes me feel *old*, Steve. I mean, it took *thousands* of years for Star City to turn into that ruin down there! You can see the tremendous amount of time that's passed. And yet, *I was there when the city was still young*. I'm old, Steve – really old. Older than you, even."

The Sentinel nodded. "You and your friends are all that's left of a civilization that disappeared long ago. In fact, the people in the vault below are distant relatives that were not born until many centuries after your brother died. Even for them you are ancient history – a distant memory from a long-forgotten past."

"And to think I'm not even fifteen yet," Amanda remarked. "You know, I really don't care much for time travel, Steve. This just isn't right."

"I know, and I am sorry. But it had to be done. You are the only hope that these people have. Your sacrifice will give mankind one final chance at having a future."

"One final chance?" Amanda asked. "What do you mean?"

"You are offering the people of Xanthe a chance to reclaim their civilization," the Sentinel explained. "If they do not take it then they will die and there will be no more generations."

"There might still be people at Sol, though."

"That is possible. However, I suspect that they are dying as well. The technology behind the Wall is not perfect, Amanda. If there had been a thriving civilization in that system they would have eventually learned to penetrate it and shut it down. After all, the Wall must anger them. I am sure Emperor Portius was livid when it appeared. They would surely have tried to bring it down and reclaim the stars that were taken from them, but yet in five thousand years they never succeeded. I fear that mankind has become nothing more than a race of savages, living on dying planets and facing extinction. Their only hope at ever becoming more is to accept the offer that your family is providing."

"I guess you're right," Amanda said quietly. "I hadn't really thought about it that way before."

The girl closed her eyes and spread her arms. Although nothing seemed to happen, the Sentinel could sense that she was dispersing billions of nanites into the planet's atmosphere.

"Are you going to terraform the planet right now?" he asked in surprise.

Amanda opened her eyes and lowered her arms. "Oh, no. Not yet. I just wanted to get the nanites into position. It's going to take them a few minutes to saturate the air and the ground. I

figured I'd go ahead and have them start replicating while we go wake up the pod people."

The Sentinel nodded. "Are you ready to go down below?"

"I think so."

A moment later the two of them appeared in one of the giant chambers of Vault 37. Amanda gasped when she saw its size. "This place is *huge!* I had no idea it was so large."

"There are a hundred thousand pods in this room alone," the Sentinel explained. "The vast majority of them contain living beings. Only a few have gone dark."

"So what do we do now? Do you know which one belongs to Adrian?"

"Hello?" a weak voice said in the distance. Amanda looked around and saw an elderly man slowly rise to his feet. The man started shuffling down the long aisles in the distance. "I am so sorry – I believe I fell asleep. I'm not used to being outside my pod, you know."

Amanda and the Sentinel walked toward him. When they reached him Amanda held out her hand. "I hope we haven't disturbed you," she said.

Adrian shook her hand and looked at her in surprise. "I don't believe we've met, miss. My name is Adrian Garza. I know who your friend is but I'm afraid I don't know your name."

Amanda smiled. "My name is Amanda Stryker. I'm pleased to meet you."

"I haven't met a young person in a very long time! In fact, I didn't know there were any young people left. Are you related to the other man that I met on Tonina?"

Amanda shook her head. "No, he's just a friend."

Adrian nodded. "I understand. So how can I be of service? Do you bring us news?"

"The battle is over," the Sentinel said. "The swarms have

been destroyed and the endless war has come to an end. Your world is no longer in any danger.”

“It is over already?” Adrian said in surprise. “I thought it would take days, perhaps even weeks! How much damage was done to the swarms?”

“They were completely eradicated. Not a single bot was left.”

“So you were successful, then,” Adrian said.

“You don't seem very excited about it!” Amanda commented.

“I just find it difficult to believe,” Adrian explained. “It only takes a single bot to recreate all of the swarms, you know. I don't mean to doubt you, miss; it's just that we've lived with the swarms for a very long time, and it's hard to believe that they're really gone. I am sure our leader will want to hear of this.”

“Can you take us to him?” Amanda asked.

“I can. In fact, he's right over there.”

The ancient man slowly shuffled down the long aisles of pods until he came to the one that contained Elder Lane. Adrian went over to the console and pushed the button that would unseal the pod. A few moments later the leader of Vault 37 was sitting up in his pod, blinking his eyes. He stared at Amanda with a look of surprise and terror. “A *child*! A real child! Who are you, and where did you come from?”

“I'm not a *child*,” Amanda replied sharply. “I'm a teenager! There's a big difference. I'm fourteen years old, you know. I'm not just a kid.”

“*Fourteen?*” Lane gasped. “But – that's impossible! There are no children left. The last ones grew up millennia ago!”

“Well, *I'm* here,” Amanda said.

“Are you one of those aliens from deep space?” Lane asked, as he climbed out of his pod.

“I'm not an alien – I'm just as human as you are! In fact, I was born on Mars.”

“Mars?” Lane asked, incredulously. “Do you mean you're from *Sol*? But that system has been locked for centuries! Millennia, even! Is *that* were you people are from? Has the Empire finally broken free of the Wall?”

Amanda sighed. “My family and I escaped *Sol* *before* the Wall was erected. It was a long time ago.”

“But you're just fourteen! By the time I was born the Wall was already five hundred years old. How—”

“Time travel,” Amanda said. “It's pretty simple, really.”

Lane's eyes suddenly opened wide. “Oh. Of course! That would certainly explain why you people suddenly appeared from nowhere. But—”

Adrian interrupted. “They bring news of the war, sir. The battle is over and the swarms have been destroyed.”

“That is correct,” the Sentinel commented. “The swarms have been completely eradicated. They will never trouble you again.”

Lane turned pale. “But – you can't be serious! I find this very difficult to believe. Are you quite sure?”

“Oh yes!” Amanda replied. “They're gone all right. They won't be bothering you any more.”

Elder Lane was silent for a few moments. “So what happens now?”

Amanda smiled. “Now it's time to give you back the future that you lost. We can help you leave your pods and rebuild your civilization. I'm sure that Adrian has told you all about the wonders of *Tonina*. You're more than welcome to join us – we will gladly share our network with you. You don't have to hide from the swarms anymore.”

“I see,” Elder Lane said. *There must be some way I can stall, he thought furiously. I have to buy us some time so I can come up with another plan. But what can I say? She must not be the one who has the gift of discernment; otherwise it would have been all*

over by now. How can I turn this to my advantage?

"Is something wrong?" Amanda asked.

"Sorry," Elder Lane apologized. "I'm just a little confused. I know so little about you! Who is the leader of your civilization?"

Amanda thought for a moment. "I guess I am," she said at last.

"*You* are?" Adrian asked in surprise. "Pardon me for questioning you, but what about the Artilect? I thought he was in charge!"

Amanda shook her head. "No, he just runs the network. Technically he answers to me."

"But how is that possible? Did you inherit this position from your parents? Are you the daughter of some past king?"

"No, it's not like that," Amanda said. She hesitated. "I guess you could say that I was given administrative rights over the Artilect a long time ago, and I've had them ever since."

"Are there others that also have these rights?" Elder Lane asked.

Amanda shook her head. "No, not really. You see—"

The Sentinel interrupted. "Amanda, didn't you have a task you were going to perform? I believe it will take you some time to accomplish it, and your mother wants you to return home at a reasonable hour."

"Of course," Elder Lane said. "I'm sorry – I don't mean to pry. We just know so little about you! If we're going to negotiate the terms of leaving our home world and going into the unknown – well, it seemed like a good idea to understand who we were talking to and who is in charge."

"Certainly," the Sentinel said. "And there will come a time when we will answer all of your questions. But for now we need to accomplish what we came here to do and then leave, so that you can decide the future of your people."

“What did you come here to do?”

“I wanted to rebuild Xanthe for you,” Amanda said. “I'd like to put it back to the way it used to be.”

“Is that even *possible*?” Elder Lane asked. “Wouldn't that take centuries to accomplish?”

“Oh no! I think I can do it pretty quickly. However, before I begin I'll need a schematic of Star City – the way it used to be. The only one I've got with me was taken in the 19th century and I don't think you would recognize it. You wouldn't have anything more modern, would you?”

“Of course,” Adrian said. “In fact, all of our synthetic worlds contain a recreation of Star City. Here, let me pull it up for you. Perhaps the files will be of use.”

Adrian shuffled over to the nearest console and brought up the schematic. After the file was loaded Amanda closed her eyes and mentally entered the file system. In a moment of time she downloaded the data and studied it until she had formed a detailed mental picture. She then opened her eyes and smiled. “I'm ready!”

“But you haven't downloaded the file!” Adrian exclaimed.

“Trust me – I have what I need.”

“Very well,” Adrian replied, confused.

An instant later the four of them found themselves standing on a small hill that overlooked the ruins of Star City – the very same hill that the Sentinel had transported Amanda to when they first arrived. As soon as they appeared Elder Lane froze. “What just happened?” he asked nervously. “Where did we go?”

“I've taken you to the surface,” Amanda explained. “Now watch.”

Amanda took a few steps forward, then closed her eyes and raised her hands. She mentally connected to the massive network of nanites that now saturated every cubic inch of

Xanthe. Drawing on the data from the file that she had just downloaded, she began giving instructions to the nanites.

To the people standing around Amanda it looked as if the air had suddenly become blurry. Something they couldn't quite see began moving rapidly. Then, slowly, things began changing. The dust that covered everything melted away, and the parched ground around them morphed into black topsoil. A few minutes later the entire landscape, as far as they could see, had turned from a dingy brown into a rich black.

Then the ground began to tremble, and thin shafts of green grass erupted from the soil. It was as if the ground itself was suddenly exploding with life! Tender shoots shot up, forming saplings that turned into giant trees over the course of just a few minutes. Soon the barren hills were covered in forests. Ancient riverbeds, long ago lost to time, reformed and were soon filled with water once more.

The air around them became fresh and sweet, carrying the scents of trees and flowers. For the first time in thousands of years spring was in the air. The pale sky took on a deep blue hue and white clouds began appearing. Beneath their feet the black soil disappeared entirely; they were now standing in a deep bed of rich green grass. In the distance they saw birds circling overhead – the first signs of wildlife that Adrian had seen since he entered his pod a lifetime ago.

Amanda knew that it would take time to bring the entire planet back to life, so she focused on changing the surrounding area first. Once the immediate area around Star City had been restored she gave the nanites the instructions they needed to resurrect the rest of Xanthe. As the nanites continued their work Amanda turned her attention to the city itself.

At first it looked like the ruined metropolis was simply melting. Elder Lane was surprised to see the broken buildings

turn into mud and sink back into the soil. Then the brown substance turned green and began glowing with a vibrant energy. Over the course of half an hour the green material took on the shape of buildings. Then, in a matter of seconds, the green color melted away and revealed imposing structures of steel and glass. Giant skyscrapers climbed out of the ground as green shapes and then morphed into actual buildings. The city streets began reappearing and even the vegetation was recreated.

When all was finished Amanda opened her eyes and turned around. Elder Lane and Adrian Garza were staring at Star City, a look of utter disbelief on their faces.

“There you go!” Amanda said cheerfully. “Consider this a down-payment on your future. You are more than welcome to live here until you're ready to join us in the network.”

“I can't believe it,” Elder Lane gasped. “It's perfect! I never would have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes.”

“You're quite welcome! It was no trouble at all. Is there anything else that you need from us?”

“Oh no,” Elder Lane said. “You've done quite enough – more than enough, actually. We will be in touch with you again, I'm sure. Just give us some time to process what has happened and work through the issues. I'll have Adrian contact you in, say, a week from today?”

“Very good,” the Sentinel said.

“Goodbye!” Amanda replied. “It was nice meeting you.”

“The pleasure was ours,” Adrian replied.

Amanda and the Sentinel then vanished.

* * * * *

For a long time the two men just stood there and looked at the world around them. They were overwhelmed at what had

just happened. Adrian was filled with wonder, but Elder Lane was filled with terror.

Van Toby and Grant have got to see this, Elder Lane thought to himself. I told them the aliens' technology was real! They won't be able to laugh this off. This is serious – much more serious than I thought. No wonder they were able to defeat the swarms! Adrian didn't tell me the half of what they could do.

“So what do you think?” Adrian asked, interrupting Elder Lane's thoughts.

“Amanda clearly has great power over the physical world,” Lane remarked.

Adrian nodded. “She certainly does. She told us that she's in charge of the Artilect, so I imagine that's where her power comes from. I've been told it's a machine of extraordinary capabilities.”

“And she is its last master,” Lane said thoughtfully.

“So she said. But what do we do now?”

“Well – all right. Let me ask you a question. Why do we each have our own synthetic worlds?”

“For safety reasons, of course,” Adrian replied. “Otherwise—” He suddenly stopped, realizing what he was about to say.

“Exactly, Adrian. Exactly. You know all the horrific things you've done to the synthetics that inhabit your world. I've done the same to mine – we all have. All of us have to live in isolation so we don't kill each other. If you and me and the others lived in the *same* world then whoever had the most power would force everyone else to be their slaves, and they would torment them until they died. It's who we are and it's who we've always been.”

Adrian looked around him. He stared at the rebuilt Star City. Doubt began to eat at his mind. “Our power is no match for Amanda's.”

Elder Lane nodded. “Exactly. We're nothing but ants compared to her. We may be masters of our synthetic worlds,

but in the physical world *she* has complete control – all thanks to the Artilect. She has demonstrated a level of mastery that goes far beyond anything we could ever hope to accomplish. What do you think is going to happen now?”

“I understand what you're saying, but realistically, what can we do about it?” Adrian asked.

“I don't know. I need time to sort this out. But what I *do* know is that we *can't let this happen*. No matter what the cost, we have to stop this. We've just *got* to. You know what you've done when you had endless power. Do you really believe that Amanda is going to behave any differently?”

“But she seems so nice! She was kind, friendly, and helpful. In fact–”

“Sure she was – and so were *we*, at first. But power is very corrupting. It goes right to your head and it doesn't take long to realize that you can do anything you want and no one can stop you. Amanda might be helpful for months, maybe even years – but what happens when she decides that we're just in her way? Look at what the power of the synthetic worlds has done to us – and Amanda's power is *infinitely greater!* Do you really believe that an immortal with infinite power is going to use it wisely *for the rest of time?* Would *you*, if you were in her place?”

Adrian paused. “But – even if you're right, what can be done?”

“I don't know. I – well, I just don't know. But I'm going to think of something. I've *got* to. If I don't she'll kill us all! Maybe not today, and maybe not tomorrow, but she will, just as certainly as we've slaughtered the synthetics that live in our worlds. It's inevitable.”

CHAPTER 17

“None of us would be here today if it hadn't been for Donald Elliott. He's the one that braved the radioactive ruins of Tikal and recovered enough technology to turn a series of abandoned caves into the underground metropolis that we now call home. Don was even able to build a zero-point-energy plant, which is the only thing that's kept us alive for the past two thousand years. There's no telling what else he might have done if he hadn't been killed in the riots. We may have squandered the opportunity he gave us, but we wouldn't be here at all if it hadn't been for him.”

*--Noel Lawson
Engineer – New Tikal
July 11, 7239*

“WHAT IS IT THIS TIME?” Van Toby asked irritably. “These conferences you insist on dragging us into are quite irritating, Lane. Must you keep bothering us with your petty concerns?”

Elder Lane, Van Toby, and Horace Grant were once again standing in a synthetic conference area that occupied no particular place or time. As before, the room consisted of only a floor. There were no walls or ceiling; instead blackness extended in all directions. Lane hated the room because it made him feel like he was trapped at the bottom of a deep pit. The sense of isolation was acute.

He was particularly irritated because he had been waiting in

the dark, inhospitable room for three hours. The moment he returned to his synthetic world he had contacted the other two members of the ruling council and requested that they meet. Even though he had stressed the urgency of the situation his companions had not felt the need to respond. It was only when he sent a message threatening to pull the plug on their pods that they finally agreed to come.

“You're all fools!” Lane shouted. “Morons! Have you been in here so long that you've forgotten about the physical world? Don't you realize that if these aliens come along and shut us down it's all over for us?”

“You worry too much,” Grant commented.

“The physical world is unimportant,” Van Toby added. “It provides no value. I really don't see why you're so preoccupied with it.”

“Unimportant?” Lane asked incredulously. “Are you serious? If I took a sledgehammer to your pod you'd see how 'unimportant' the physical world actually was. You'd be surprised at how frightening life is when you're struck out there and can't escape. Our lives are hanging by a very slim thread. If we don't do something right now then we're all dead.”

“But that's what the swarms are for,” Van Toby replied. “They will protect us, as they always have. It is their function.”

Lane shook his head. “The swarms are gone – all of them. The Artillect wiped them out without even trying. It's over.”

Van Toby looked surprised. “Surely you must be joking! No one can defeat the swarms; they are simply too powerful. All of the other colonies were defenseless against them.”

“That was five thousand years ago! Our scientific abilities haven't advanced a single bit in all that time. Meanwhile, the Artillect has spent millennia amassing an unthinkable amount of technology. He has the same power over the real world that we

have over our synthetic worlds!”

Van Toby laughed. “That's utter nonsense! You're buying into the hype again, Lane.”

“You need to learn to think critically,” Grant added.

“It's not hype!” Lane screamed. “I just saw it with my own eyes, you fools! I watched a little girl wave her hands and *bring this entire planet back from the dead*. She terraformed all of Xanthe in a matter of *minutes*, putting it all back the way it was before we entered our pods. And if that wasn't enough, she rebuilt *all* of Star City as well – and she still made it home in time for dinner!”

“You can't be serious!” Van Toby scoffed. “That's just not possible.”

“Go look for yourself,” Lane snapped. “After all, the two of you are so fond of 'independent research'! Just go up to the surface and take a look at what the Artilect has done to our world. Even people as blind and deluded as you two can't miss it.”

The council members looked at each other uncertainly. “But that's just not possible,” Van Toby said at last. “No one could possibly have that much power! You must be mistaken.”

“Have you forgotten *everything*?” Lane asked. “Don't you remember why we built the swarms in the first place? We were afraid that if *everyone* didn't abandon the physical world, those who chose to remain behind would ultimately advance far beyond us. The swarms were a preemptive attack to keep our neighbors from growing any stronger.”

“Quite so!” Van Toby replied. “Since we weren't going to be doing science anymore it was our only option. Had we not done that we would have risked being left behind.”

“And that's exactly what happened! Somehow the Artilect survived, and from what I've been told he's had *five thousand*

years to advance beyond us. I don't know how long it took him to master the physical world, but he's certainly accomplished that. Now he threatens our entire way of life."

"Well then, I suppose we must fight him," Grant replied. "If we can eliminate him then the entire problem will just go away."

Lane laughed. "Of course! Just fight him. Why didn't I think of that? Oh, wait, I know why. Maybe it's because in the physical world we are decrepit old men, while the aliens we're fighting can create entire cities with a wave of their hand! They could kill us all without even setting foot on Xanthe, and the only weapons we have to throw at them are rocks."

"But what about our armada of probes?" Grant asked. "I'm sure that they still exist. In fact, they must be a formidable force by now."

"The swarms are gone, remember?" Lane asked irritably. "They're not coming back. Even if I recreated them it would be a pointless effort."

Grant shook his head. "No, not the swarms, the probes. What were they called?" He thought a moment, then sighed. "I don't remember their name. They were launched long ago and given the task of terraforming planets. The probes were self-replicating, so I'm sure there are a lot of them. And they had tremendous power! In fact, I think the last version of them had the ability to alter the chemistry of stars."

"Oh yes – the Nehemiah probes," Van Toby replied. "I'd forgotten about them."

"That was a very long time ago," Lane commented. "I suppose that they might still be out there, but they'd be very old. It's hard to believe that any of them would be left."

"But they're *replicating* probes," Grant pointed out. "They have been making copies of themselves for thousands upon thousands of years! Imagine how many of them there must be by

now. And if they can alter the chemistry of a star then they're quite powerful – far more powerful than the swarms.”

“I suppose it would be worth a try,” Lane replied. “I certainly don't see any other alternatives. But how would we use them? The swarms were under our control but the probes are not. Weren't they designed to be independent?”

“The key is that they were designed *here*,” Grant pointed out. “In Star City. Now that Star City has been rebuilt it should be possible to find the notes that were used to construct them. There must be a way to contact them and alter their programming. I'm sure it's all there.”

“But the city is huge!” Lane complained. “How would I ever find the information I needed?”

Van Toby shrugged. “Send a robot to do it – or send all of them, for that matter. I'm sure they could scour the city and find what you're looking for. You might try starting the search in whatever building used to house the headquarters of the Diano Corporation.”

“All right,” Lane said reluctantly. “I will attempt it. But what if this fails? After all, if the Artilect controls millions of stars—”

“You don't have to attack millions of stars,” Van Toby said. “All you have to do is destroy the Artilect. It sounds like he's the source of their power. After he's gone the rest of the aliens will be defenseless and you can use the swarms to obliterate them.”

“It's quite simple, really,” Grant replied.

Lane sighed. “I hope so,” he said. “I really do. If this fails – or if they find out we are behind this – then things are going to get very ugly very fast. We're either going to win everything or lose everything.”

“Then let's plan on winning,” Grant said.

CHAPTER 18

“A lot of people blame the riots on Don. They say that if he had just focused on building New Tikal then everything would be fine, but since he was determined to build a spacecraft and challenge the Wall then he had to be stopped. Killing him was the only way they could save their world – or so the rioters claimed. Personally I think we lost our future that day. Don was the only one in the past two millennia that really understood the ancient sciences, and all we've done since is patch up his machines as best we can and hope that nothing serious ever goes wrong. He offered us a chance at becoming a civilization again and we killed him for it. Things have just slid downhill ever since.”

*--Noel Lawson
Engineer – New Tikal
July 19, 7239*

THE STRYKER FAMILY WAS ENJOYING A LATE DINNER in their spacious home on Tonina. Laura, Richard, and Amanda Stryker were seated in an enormous dining room. A large fireplace occupied most of the far wall, and the rest of the walls were covered in elegant tapestries that depicted nature scenes from distant corners of the planet. Spread out on the mahogany table before them was a veritable feast. At Amanda's request Laura had cooked turkey, dressing, mashed potatoes, green beans, and wheat rolls – not to mention

the other vegetables and desserts that filled the table.

"This is an amazing dinner!" Richard commented, as he helped himself to another slice of turkey. "I haven't seen a meal like this since we left Mars. You've really outdone yourself, dear!"

"Well, it *is* Thanksgiving," his wife replied. "I think we have a lot to be thankful for this year."

"It is?" Richard asked. "But today's Friday, isn't it? Isn't Thanksgiving always on a Thursday?"

"We're actually one day late," Amanda admitted. "In 7239 Thanksgiving falls on November 24th, not the 25th. But since we were kind of busy yesterday I thought it would be ok to celebrate it now."

"I don't think anyone will mind," Richard agreed, smiling. "And we *do* have a lot to be thankful for! We've finally all made it to the future safe and sound, and the Artilect's war against the swarms was successful. The people of Tau Ceti have been freed from a menace that has imprisoned them for thousands of years. The future looks very bright for all of us."

"I just wish Amy was here," Laura replied. "I know she can't use telepresence to share this meal with us, but I still miss her. It's not the same, celebrating Thanksgiving without her."

"I know," Richard agreed. "I miss her too. I did invite her but she's still bitter about being kept away. I think her mood will improve once she's allowed to return home to Tonina."

"When will that be?" Amanda asked.

"Just a few more days. We just need to make sure that the swarms are really gone. If nothing happens over the weekend then I think it would be safe to allow her to return on Monday."

"I guess that's not *too* long," Amanda conceded. "But I have a feeling it will seem like an eternity to Amy."

Richard sighed. "I just don't understand why this upsets her so much! She's been more than welcome to use telepresence to

be with us here. I realize she can't be here in person, but is there really that much difference?"

"I think there is to her, dear," Laura replied.

There was silence for a few moments, then Amanda spoke up. "So what happens after Amy gets back? Are we going to start moving people from Xanthe to Tonina?"

"I guess that will be up to them," her father replied. "It sounds like you did an amazing job of restoring their home world. They may want to stay there. It is their home, after all."

"But what about Tonina? What about all these other worlds? Are they just going to stay empty?"

"Oh, there's plenty of time for that," her father said. "These planets aren't going to go anywhere, you know. As the survivors on Tau Ceti rebuild their population will grow, and they'll eventually come to the point where things will get crowded and people will begin settling on other planets. These stars will be here when they need them."

"But are we sure their population is going to grow?" Laura asked. "Aren't they too old to have children?"

"I'm sure the Artilect could do something about that," Richard said. "In fact, I believe the Artilect has already looked into it and said it wouldn't be a problem."

"But they're so old!" Laura replied. "They've been alone in their pods for such a long time. It's going to be so hard for them."

"I know," Richard agreed. "I know. It *is* going to be hard, but the future of mankind depends on it. All we can do is offer whatever help we can."

"What if they don't *want* our help?" Amanda asked.

"Then I don't know what we'll do. But I'm sure that something good is going to come out of all this. I can't imagine that God would bring us all the way to the future just so we could watch mankind die. There's got to be a reason for all of this. No, I

think everything will work out, one way or another. We'll just wait until Monday and take it from there."

* * * * *

Captain Max found Jones sitting on a park bench in the heart of La Venta. Twelve square blocks of the sprawling city had been set aside as a recreational area, with trees, a pond, benches, swings, and a large play area for children. The area had been designed to offer a pleasant place of relaxation. Since the metropolis had no citizens, however, it remained empty. Jones was the only one that ever visited the park. He would often come there in the evenings and watch the sun set over the horizon.

The captain sat down beside him. "You missed dinner," he said.

Jones nodded. "I know. It was quite a dinner, too, from what I heard. The Strykers celebrated Thanksgiving this evening and Laura prepared a feast worthy of the occasion."

"I didn't know that!" the captain remarked. "We should have joined them. Laura's an amazing cook, you know. She always fixes her meals by hand, too, which is something I've never really understood. She works much harder than she has to. There's no reason to go through all the trouble of cooking, and yet she still does it."

"It gives what she does meaning," Jones replied. "If you work hard for something then you tend to value it more. There is nothing special about making a dinner appear from nowhere by snapping your fingers. But making one by hand, putting time and love and care into it, is different. That gives the gift a meaning that it otherwise would not have had."

"But it's not necessary!"

Jones smiled. "For that matter, sir, what *is* necessary? Now

that the swarms are gone, have you found anything meaningful to do with your time?"

"Well, you know, I'm still trying to get used to this place. I'm sure that *something* is necessary! As I see it, the problem is that we've been dumped into the future without growing into it. We just don't know how to use the tools that we've been given. We're a solution in search of a problem."

"Life is about overcoming challenges," Jones said. "If there are no challenges or obstacles to overcome then there can be no growth. That is the real question: where do we go from here?"

"You worry too much," Captain Max commented. "I'm sure that things will change after the survivors get here. That in itself is going to be *filled* with challenges."

Jones looked off into the distance. The sun had set and the stars were coming out. Off in the distance he could hear a bird softly coo. Despite the fact that he was in the heart of an enormous city, the only sounds he could hear were those of wildlife.

"It's eerie, isn't it?" Jones asked. "La Venta is a huge city, and yet it's so quiet and still."

"It's too quiet, if you ask me. That's why I don't come here. It feels like something terrible happened and everyone died."

"That's because something terrible *did* happen and everyone *did* die. If the swarms had not killed everyone then it probably wouldn't have been necessary to bring us into the future at all. Civilization would have expanded to fill the network, and this place would have been one of a billion other densely-populated planets."

"But the survivors are left, at least, and that's something," Captain Max pointed out. "They'll be here soon. Then this place will really start to hum with life."

Jones shook his head. "They will never come here. This is no

life for them, sir. In fact, I'm not convinced that this is a good life for anyone. There may come a day when mankind will be mature enough to handle this level of wealth and ease, but I do not believe that time is here yet. Our hearts are too corrupt to handle this much power."

"You're in a cheerful mood tonight," Captain Max remarked. "In fact, all you've had to say for the past week has been negative! Don't you have any good thoughts to share?"

"I'm sorry, sir. You're quite right. But there is a time to mourn and a time to dance. I just don't think we've gotten to the dancing part yet."

"But the swarms are gone! Why, if that's not something to dance about then I don't know what is."

Jones shook his head. "The people of Xanthe were given a chance to change their future, and they made their choice. They're not going to come here, sir, and they're not going to change. There is nothing ahead of them now but death. As much as we'd like to I'm afraid we can't save them from the consequences of their actions. The rest is up to Amy."

"What do you mean?"

"The time of our departure is at hand," Jones said quietly. "We've fought the good fight, we've accomplished our mission, and it's time for us to go. Our part in this is done. Amy still has a little more to do – she has one more star system to visit. Then her work will be done as well."

Captain Max shook his head. "I think you're being entirely too pessimistic, Jones. You need to lighten up! Now, I know you have the gift of foresight, but you've got to realize that we don't even have an *opponent* anymore. Even if we did there's no way the Artilect could lose! Nothing in this galaxy can begin to compare with him."

Jones rose to his feet. "Believe what you want, sir, but

remember what that girl told you back in Tikal. We can't save the survivors from their choices, but our efforts are not in vain. Moreover, the Lord has prepared for us a better country that lies beyond the farthest star. Our journey there has been delayed but that delay will not last forever."

"I know," Captain Max said. "We all should have died back in 1867. I know we've been given more time. But you have to understand, I'm in no hurry to die."

"That's not on the table, sir," Jones replied. "After all, Jesus Himself said that 'whosoever lives and believes in me shall never die'. He holds the keys of hell and death, and He has given everlasting life to all who believe on Him. What I see coming is a call from our Lord to go to the home that we were created for but have never seen. It's not a bad thing, sir; I think you'll like it."

Captain Max sighed. "And when is all this supposed to happen?"

"Only time will tell," Jones replied.

CHAPTER 19

“Some people believe that before Don died he stumbled across an amazing cache of ancient technology. They say he was going to use it to build his starship, but was killed before he could transport any of it from its hiding place in Tikal to his laboratory. Since that time hundreds of people have spent their entire lives scouring the entire planet for his lost treasure. Of course, it's never been found. That's not what amazes me, though. After all, surely everyone must realize that this 'legend' is just wishful thinking. No, what surprises me is that no ancient technology has ever been found since Don died. Don was the first one to bring back anything from Tikal, and in all the millennia since no one has ever found anything else. It makes you wonder: how was he able to find things that no one else has ever been able to find in all of history? Was he really getting his science from Tikal, or did he have another source?”

*--Noel Lawson
Engineer – New Tikal
July 22, 7239*

IT WAS LATE SATURDAY EVENING on Xanthe. The sun had set hours earlier. The only light came from Star City's streetlights, which gave off a warm white glow. The night sky was utterly black, as it had been

since the Wall was first erected thousands of years ago. Once, long ago, Elder Lane had added stars to the night sky of his synthetic world just to see what it looked like. The result was so terrifying that he never did it again. There was something deeply disturbing about it. To him, seeing stars in the sky was like seeing the sun rise over the wrong horizon. He knew that only three star systems had ever blocked out the twinkling rays of starlight, but it didn't matter. *His* world had always been dark at night, even in the days of his distant ancestors. The night sky had always been empty and he preferred it to remain that way – even in his synthetic dreams.

Elder Lane had spent the entire day in the abandoned corridors of the Diano Building. When the tower was first built it was the largest skyscraper in Star City. Other buildings had surpassed its height in later centuries, but it still clung to its former glory as an ancient relic of a bygone era. The councilman had not entered the tower since the day his people moved into their pods; there had simply been no need. The Diano Building was quickly forgotten, and since no one maintained it the tower eventually collapsed into ruin. Now, however, the 287-story structure had been rebuilt. It was impossible to tell that this building was not the exact same structure that Ramon Diano had commissioned in the 18th century.

Amanda Stryker had done a remarkable job of recreating all the original furnishings of the building, but it was still devoid of life. At first Lane didn't mind, but as the day wore on the cavernous empty rooms began to unnerve him. In his synthetic worlds he was never alone; there were always artificial people around for him to interact with. Here, however, his only companions were a handful of mindless robots, and most of the time they were off searching for information. The sense of loneliness became especially acute after the sun set and the

world was plunged into darkness.

As Elder Lane searched through computer systems and rifled through people's desks he found it difficult to focus. He knew that he was in the physical world but it just didn't seem *real* to him. Everything was empty, sterile, and perfect. It was like visiting a movie set, where everything was in place but nothing had any substance. He had no trouble believing in the reality of his synthetic worlds, but this place felt wrong to him. He longed to go back to the comforting familiarity of *his* world and leave this empty graveyard behind.

It took all day for the robots to find what Elder Lane was looking for. The problem was not a lack of information; in fact, there was entirely too much information. An entire section of the tower was dedicated to the Nehemiah project, and that meant there were acres of floor space to search through. Lane found design documents, small-scale mockups, leftover parts, meeting notes, computer models, and a great deal more. It was overwhelming. *Why, you could fabricate a whole fleet of Nehemiah probes with all of this information!* he thought to himself, as he lifted yet another hefty book off a shelf. *But I don't want to build a probe, I want to contact one! Surely there's a computer somewhere in this building that I can use to talk to those blasted things. You'd think that would be easy to find, but no, all I see are specifications, specifications, and even more specifications...*

Lane tossed the book away and grabbed another one off the shelf, only to feel something tug at his arm. Irritated at the interruption, he turned around and saw a robot standing beside him, motioning for him to follow. Lane briefly considered taking the book and bashing the robot to pieces with it, but he decided against it. Instead he sighed and nodded for the robot to lead the

way. "I'm getting awfully tired of this!" he shouted at the metal figure that was rolling down the hallway. "If you don't start producing results I'm going to take you apart myself! Do you hear me?"

The robot ignored him. It had no feelings, or thoughts, or mind. It quietly led the ancient man down a long hallway, then over to an elevator, then up 51 stories. When the elevator opened it guided him into another long corridor.

As they walked down the passageway Elder Lane noticed a sign on one of the doors. "Communications Laboratory #67-B," he read aloud. "Now that looks quite promising!" As the robot kept rolling down the hallway the man abandoned it. He opened the door, stepped inside, and closed the door behind him.

Like many of the rooms that he had seen before, the communications laboratory was filled with equipment. However, there was a key difference that excited him considerably. *This is it*, he thought, as he sat down at one of the consoles. *An upgrade station! I bet they used consoles just like this to send updated control files to the probes. This is exactly what I need!*

Elder Lane opened the book that he had been carrying and browsed through it. *This manual ought to have something in it. Let's see. We've got upgrade procedures, troubleshooting, routing commands, neural splicing – ah, here we go, initializing communications.* Lane placed the book on a nearby table and carefully typed a series of commands into the console. After a few minutes he leaned back and stared at the screen, scrutinizing it closely. Once he was satisfied that all of the parameters were correct he pressed the key to initialize communications.

The moment he pressed the button the machines around him came to life. Equipment powered up, generators began rumbling, and screens blinked on. A distant hum could be heard. On the console the screen said "Initializing communications – please

wait...”

So he waited. A moment later a map of the galaxy appeared on the screen. A single blue dot appeared on the edge of the map, with a short, cryptic code beside it. Then another dot appeared, followed quickly by a dozen more. Elder Lane watched, fascinated, as contact was made with hundreds, then thousands of probes. Each minute that ticked by saw more probes added to the map.

Lane kept expecting the initialization message to disappear, but it didn't. The list of probes continued to grow. In fact, it wasn't until thirty minutes later that the message finally disappeared. The councilman glanced in disbelief at the statistics in the upper-right-hand corner of the screen. *Surely that can't be right! I see a handful of Nehemiah I, II, and III probes left – less than a hundred altogether, and all very old. But there are more than twelve million Nehemiah IV probes in the galaxy! Is that even possible?*

He soon discovered that the system was not in error. He could select any of the probes and get a detailed readout of what it was doing, where it had been, and where it planned to go next. *They really have terraformed tens of millions of systems, which the Artilect now commands. No wonder it has become so strong! My swarms never had a chance against a force like this.*

Lane sat back in his chair and stared at the screen. *This was our doing*, he realized, with a sense of horror. He watched as a probe completed its work on a star system and then contacted the Artilect, turning over control of the system to the giant machine. *Our probes built the Artilect's network! One of us must have built the Artilect long ago to manage these star systems, and it's now grown out of control. By allowing it to continue unchecked for so long we have dug our own grave. But not anymore – all of that ends today. It is time for mankind to*

terminate this project.

Since the communications system offered a detailed readout on all probe activities, it was not difficult for him to trace their communication signals and locate the home system of the Artilect. He was not surprised to find that it was located in a nameless star system that was more than a thousand light-years away. *You must have been forgotten about. Someone built you and left you behind, and you've been running unsupervised all this time. But now we know where you are and what you've been doing. I don't know how to turn you off, but I am sure I can ask these probes to do the job for me.*

Elder Lane worked far into the night. He ended up having to make several trips back downstairs in order to find the right manuals. The steps needed to create an upgrade package turned out to be straightforward, but its simplicity only became obvious after browsing through four different 500-page books. As the night wore on he felt tired and weak but he forced himself to continue. *I've got to do this now*, he thought frantically. *The aliens could return at any moment and destroy us all! I don't have time to spend weeks figuring this out. This must be done tonight. Tomorrow may be too late!*

Even though crafting an upgrade package was not difficult, deploying the upgrade turned out to be complicated. Elder Lane realized that he would have to upgrade all of the probes at the same time. *It's just got to be done simultaneously. The moment these probes start upgrading the Artilect will know that something's wrong, and if the probes are done in sequence then he'll have a chance to interfere and stop the process.* He wasn't sure how much control the Artilect had over the probes but he didn't want to take any chances.

In fact, the Artilect's potential control over the Nehemiah

probes concerned him greatly. As he pored over previous upgrades he found a block of code that granted access rights to the Artilect. Once he understood what that code did he took pains to make sure that his upgrade revoked those permissions. *No sense in doing an upgrade if the Artilect can just connect and undo it*, he thought.

The other challenge was trying to figure out what commands to send the probes. The Nehemiah probes were built to terraform worlds, not destroy them, and the programming language that was used to control them simply did not have a vocabulary for war. There were no commands for “destroy planet”, or “blow up star”, or anything of that nature. The probes were intelligent and could defend themselves from an attack, but he could not order them to attack anything. In fact, the probes were even designed to avoid worlds that were inhabited or had been previously terraformed.

When the night was far spent and he was so tired that he could barely stay awake, he caught a glimpse of a command that he hadn't noticed before. “What's this?” he whispered. He picked up the manual and took a closer look. *Hmm. By default the probes are on auto-pilot, but you can give them instructions to terraform a specific planet. You can even tell them how you want it terraformed!*

In a flash he knew what to do. Elder Lane pulled up the system data on the planets that were within the Artilect's home system. *Look at that! None of these worlds have ever been terraformed. In fact, the database has them marked as 'uninhabited'. That's fabulous! You know, I think it's time we began terraforming the Artilect's star system. Let's turn his star into a neutron star and change his planets into asteroid belts. I think that would be a much better use of that particular piece of real estate!*

Lane smiled to himself. *I'll just send all of the probes to that one system, with the same orders. Since his access rights have been revoked the Artilect won't be able to send them away. If he attacks the probes they'll fight back, and he'll be faced with an enemy of unparalleled strength. It's brilliant!*

Once the councilman knew what to do it took him only a matter of minutes to write the upgrade. Outside it was still dark. The sun was going to rise in about an hour, but Lane was unconcerned. In fact, he felt a sense of tremendous elation. His finger hovered over the key that would simultaneously dispatch his upgrade to the entire fleet of probes.

Sure, you were able to defeat the swarms. But what will you do now? For thousands of years these probes have served you, building your empire. What will you do when they turn on you? After all, these probes represent not just the best of our technology, but the best of yours as well! Can you fight off millions of them?

Elder Lane pressed the button. He watched the screen eagerly as the upgrade was transmitted to the probes. It took only seconds for it to be applied. He then watched with great satisfaction as the Nehemiah probes stopped what they were doing and plotted a new course.

Let the war begin, he thought grimly.

CHAPTER 20

“Our astronomers tell us that plant life still exists on Earth. Their telescopes have revealed that vast forests cover much of the world's continents – and if there are trees then there must also be a habitable atmosphere. Since Mars is dying and Earth is not, some people have brought up the possibility of relocating to Earth. The great problem is that no one has ever been able to get a rocket into space. At one time flight was possible, but the air is so thin now that no plane has been able to get off the ground in centuries. Besides, the last person that tried to launch a rocket into space was Don Elliott – and we all know how well that turned out.”

*--Noel Lawson
Engineer – New Tikal
August 16, 7239*

THE ARTILECT HAD SPENT DAYS scanning the depths of space, searching in vain for any signs of the swarms. Its sensor network spanned tens of thousands of light-years, and it was tuned to detect even the tiniest bot. The Artilect was confident that nothing could escape it. After a relentless search it was convinced that the bots were truly gone, but it continued to watch just in case. The question of where the bots had come from continued to fill it with uncertainty. *Something is wrong here*, the Artilect thought, *and I am simply not wise enough to see it.*

Then something completely unexpected happened – something that had not occurred since the Artilect was created. Over the span of less than a second every one of the Nehemiah IV probes disconnected from him. The Artilect had been connected to the probes for thousands of years; his earliest memories consisted of analyzing their data streams. Yet, in an instant, they all went silent. It was as if they had simultaneously disappeared from the galaxy.

The Artilect immediately sprang into action. Time passed very differently for him than for humans. Had the Artilect been a human it might have taken him seconds, perhaps minutes to respond. But as a machine it could respond in nanoseconds. Without stopping his search for the bots he turned his attention to the millions of probes that had been terraforming worlds just beyond the edges of the network.

With a tremendous sense of relief the Artilect saw that the probes had not been destroyed. They were all still there. He then tried to reconnect to them but they refused to respond. In fact, the probes would not even acknowledge his hails; his communications were simply ignored. Concerned that something had gone wrong, the Artilect attempted to force a connection and log directly into their computers. This, too, was denied. As his attempts met with failure after failure the Artilect eventually realized the truth. *My connection with them has been severed and my login rights have been denied*, it thought with alarm. *But how could this have happened? Who could have done this?*

As the seconds slowly crept forward the Artilect stopped his futile attempt at communication and began watching the probes. Its sensor network gave it realtime data on the location of every one of the probes, even though the telemetry feeds from the probes themselves had been cut off. As the Artilect watched it noticed that the probes were abandoning their terraformation

projects. One by one they stopped what they were doing and left their orbits around planets and stars. The Artilect noted their change in course and extrapolated it, puzzled. It took it only a moment to calculate that all of the probes had set a course that would bring them directly to his home star system.

The Artilect again tried to communicate with the probes, but his attempts were met with more silence. *Something is deeply wrong. Some outside force has taken control of the probes and has given them new instructions. But who could have done this, and why? What purpose is served by recalling them to my home?*

Then the Artilect remembered the swarms. *Could this be the next battle – a new army from the foe that we cannot find? Is it possible that this is not a malfunction, but an attack? Are the probes coming to help me, or to destroy me?*

As the probes powered up to enter hyperspace the Artilect decided that it had to act immediately. *I do not know what is wrong with them, but I dare not let them enter the network until I know what is going on. There are simply too many unknowns to grant them safe passage.*

To defend itself against the swarms the Artilect had built a series of barriers along the border of its territory, which used the same technology that he had placed inside the Alpha Class ships. Before he had used it to immobilize the swarms so that he could destroy them. Now he would use it to freeze the Nehemiah probes in space so that he could find a cure for what was wrong with them.

The Artilect activated the protective field he had created and then watched as the probes launched themselves into hyperspace. Less than a second later millions of probes slammed into this barrier. The alteration of spacetime forced them to drop out of hyperspace and they became ensnared in the piercing white light. It took less than a minute for all of the probes to

become frozen.

That will give me some time to study them, the Artilect thought. He scanned his borders and verified that all of the probes were motionless. Then he noticed that some of them had begun to move.

What is that? the Artilect thought with alarm. *This field should disable them entirely! The Nehemiah probes were not designed to operate under these conditions.* Yet, something was happening. At first only a very small percentage of the probes were slowly creeping forward, but then something happened. The neighboring probes began changing, copying the configuration of their mobile neighbors. Soon they, too, could move forward – and some of them were starting to pick up speed.

The probes must have changed over the years. I knew their powers were great, but I did not realize that they had learned how to alter spacetime itself. Now that they are faced with an obstacle the probes are sensing which ones have the knowledge to overcome it, and that information is being copied to all of them. The probes have the ability to work together – and that is a terrifying prospect. I do not believe that was ever intended. Even as it watched, many of the probes had regained full functionality and were once more preparing to enter hyperspace.

The Artilect frantically altered the configuration of the barrier, adding random instabilities. This stopped some of the probes but not all of them. As they kept advancing he fought to keep them off-balance. Yet, despite his best efforts, all he could do was slow them down; he could not disable them entirely.

They are learning! They understand what I am doing and they are adapting to it. This border field will not hold them for much longer. They are too intelligent and I am unprepared to fight them. Much of my knowledge has come from the probes

themselves, and I cannot dominate them as I did the swarms. If anything, it is likely that they have abilities that I lack.

There is only one thing I can do now, he thought sadly. I will have to destroy them. Something has gone wrong with them and they are no longer functioning according to specifications. I will have to wipe them out and rebuild the fleet. It is a loss, but it must be done.

The Artilect summoned its massive fleet of Beta Class ships and launched them into the border zone. The billions upon billions of starships surrounded the Nehemiah IV probes and began radiating a white pulse of energy. This energy – which had so devastated the swarms – passed harmlessly through the probes. It had no affect on them at all.

At this point the probes realized that they were under attack. They began firing at the small spherical ships that surrounded them. The Beta ships tried to fight back but they were unable to inflict any damage at all. Within minutes the probes had completely obliterated every last one of them.

Then something happened. The vast majority of the Nehemiah IV probes were scattered around in deep space, trillions of miles away from any star. But one of the probes had managed to slip inside a nearby system. Like many of the border systems, this star system had one of the generators that the Artilect used to maintain its defensive barrier. This fact was not lost on the probe. After fighting its way through to get in range of the star, the Nehemiah IV probe reached out and altered its chemistry in a sudden and drastic manner.

The Artilect had no time to respond. The equipment he had installed on his border worlds was designed only to maintain the defenses against the swarms; he had not deployed anything that could fight the immensely powerful Nehemiah IV probes. The Artilect watched, helplessly, as the star exploded into a

supernova, sending a shockwave racing toward the planet. It would take only minutes for the shockwave to hit the planet and obliterate it, destroying the equipment on that world and bringing down the protective barrier. That would free all of the surrounding ships and allow them to jump back into hyperspace.

As the shockwave raced through space the Artilect frantically contacted the Stewards of other star systems and hastily constructed a new barrier that was further inside its territory. He knew, however, that this was temporary. *The old barrier will go down and the probes will advance and become trapped in the new barrier. But already I see more probes advancing toward my stars. They will simply continue to advance, light-year by light-year, until they reach me. It is only a matter of time before they arrive at my home. How can I fight this?*

Without stopping its war of attrition with the probes, the Artilect reached out and contacted the Stryker family. *It is time they knew that I may no longer be able to protect them.*

CHAPTER 21

“People have this idea that the good guys always win and the bad guys always lose. That's true in the long run, for all of us will stand before God and be judged. There's no escaping that. But in the short run – on this side of eternity – it's quite different. The only way to stop Emperor Portius from killing us all was to imprison him behind that Wall. What saved us wasn't a nebulous concept of 'Well, he's evil, so he's doomed.' Instead it was direct and decisive action – and don't forget that this action was taken too late to save the lives of those on board the Sparrow. Those were good people, but they all died. Being good doesn't mean you're going to survive. In fact, being good means you're a target. Society hates truly good people and will never tolerate them for very long.”

--Jack Nicholas

Governor of Tau Ceti

December 8, 1867

THE ARTILECT QUICKLY TRACKED DOWN each of the eight people that lived in its network and told them that they were under attack. Since the local time on Tonina was well after midnight it took him a while to wake them out of bed and communicate the urgency of the situation. Once they realized what was going on, however, they responded quickly. Within half an hour the entire group was standing in the defensive core of Tonina.

In the past the Artilect had used a conference room when he wanted to bring the group together so they could make a decision, but this time he decided that Sergeant Howell's situation room was a far better way to communicate the gravity of the situation. While everyone was getting dressed and making their way down to the planet's core the Artilect reconfigured the room's holographic map to display the location of every one of the Nehemiah IV probes. As people started arriving they asked what was going on, but instead of explaining the Artilect asked them to wait until everyone had arrived.

When the entire group was finally there (with the exception of Amy, who appeared as a hologram), the Artilect used the map to explain what had happened. It took some time for the group to realize that they were in genuine danger.

"But surely you can just destroy them, can't you?" Richard asked. "After all, your power is unrivaled! How could the probes possibly pose a threat?"

"It all goes back to differences in design," the Sentinel explained. "My father was built to administer worlds that had already been terraformed, and all of his abilities were focused on that goal. The probes, however, were designed to alter not just planets, but the stars themselves – and even spacetime when necessary. My father's power is tremendous but he cannot do many things that are trivial to the probes. In time that could change, but we do not have a lot of time right now."

"There are also a great many probes," the Artilect added. "I could perhaps battle a few of them, if I focused all of my resources on the task. But there is no chance I could resist even *one* million, let alone twelve. The force is simply too overwhelming."

"But you wiped out the bots so easily!" Amy protested. "There were a lot more bots than probes."

“That is true, but the bots were very small and primitive by comparison. Their science was thousands of years behind mine. They may have posed a threat to Tau Ceti, but they could not endanger me. The Nehemiah probes, however, have advanced as I have. If anything, their scientific knowledge is even greater than mine. I have no scientific advantage over them.”

Richard spoke up. “But weren't you *designed* to control the probes? Isn't that the whole reason you were built? Couldn't you just order them all to shut down?”

“I wish I could, and I have tried. However, it would be more accurate to say that I was constructed to control the worlds that the probes terraformed – *not* the probes themselves. All of the probes were designed to operate independently and they have done so for thousands of years. Dr. Temilotzin did give me an override code that I could use in the event of an emergency, but it has had no effect. I have no way to destroy the probes or shut them down.”

“Are we sure that the probes are dangerous?” Laura asked.

“Absolutely – in fact, it would be irresponsible to think otherwise,” Sergeant Howell replied. “After all, they suddenly stopped what they were doing, plotted a course to the Artilect's home star system, and refused to respond to his hails. If they were just stopping by for a friendly chat then I'm sure they'd be willing to explain their actions. This looks like an invasion to me.”

Captain Max nodded. “I agree. The question is, who could have done this? Why did this happen now, *after* the bots were destroyed? I mean, compared to the probes the bots were just a bunch of toys!”

“Exactly. If this enemy of ours can control the Nehemiah probes then why did they even create the bots in the first place? Why use a weak tool when you have access to something infinitely more powerful? It just doesn't make any sense! *None* of

this has made any sense, right from the very beginning. Just who are we fighting?"

The Artilect shook his head. "I wish I could answer your questions but I simply do not know. Perhaps those who created the swarms are behind this attack as well, or perhaps that group died out long ago and we are now faced with a new enemy. Whoever is behind this must have a detailed knowledge of the probes' construction, for it is not a simple matter to alter their programming. Of course, it is also possible that the probes were not altered at all. This may be something that they were designed to do after a certain period of time had passed."

"What do you mean?" Amanda asked.

The Sentinel spoke up. "It is not likely, but it's possible that the probes have completed their assignments and are coming home. Whoever designed the probes may have set a limit on how far they could go or how many worlds they could terraform. Another possibility is that the probes' software is flawed in some way and has resulted in them behaving erratically. However, without further information it's impossible to tell if this behavior comes from the probes or was imposed from the outside."

"But they attacked you, didn't they?" Richard asked. "Isn't that a good sign that something is wrong?"

"I certainly think so, but remember that the Artilect made the first move," Sergeant Howell replied. "The probes didn't start destroying stars until he dispatched the Alpha and Beta-class ships against them. They may just be reacting in self-defense. I think it's *extremely* unlikely that they mean no harm, but I suppose we have to consider every angle."

Laura spoke up. "What if the probes are *supposed* to be doing whatever they're doing? Stopping them might be the wrong thing to do!"

"That's the whole problem, isn't it?" Captain Max asked.

“There's really no way to know what would happen. I tend to agree with the sergeant, though. If we just sit back and do nothing and it turns out that this *is* an invasion force, then we're going to be in real trouble. Whatever the probes might be doing, we have to change the situation so that they cannot harm us. That is the real challenge. How do we *make sure* that they don't do any damage?”

The captain turned to Reverend Knight. “Gene, you have the gift of discernment. What do you think?”

“I think an enemy has done this,” he said quietly. “The probes have been told to destroy the Artilect. Once they've accomplished that they will chase us down and kill us as well.”

“But who did it?” Sergeant Howell asked.

“I don't know. I feel like I *should* know, but I don't. There's something here that is being hidden from me and I just can't see it. I'm sorry,” he said, looking around. “I truly wish I could tell you more. But that is all I know.”

“It's a good start,” the sergeant replied. “We'll go from there. So what do we do about all this?”

Amy suddenly spoke up. “Could we just turn the probes off?”

“I cannot communicate with the probes at all,” the Artilect replied. “They do not respond to my signals.”

“That's not what I mean. Can *we* turn them off – my sister and I? I mean, after all, we're administrators, right? Don't we have control over them too?”

“I am not sure. At one time you had authority over the probes but that may no longer be the case. When my access was revoked your rights may have been terminated as well.”

“But we can try it, can't we?” Amy asked. “After all, what harm could it do? It seems better than just sitting here and waiting for doomsday to happen!”

The Sentinel spoke up. “The problem is access. In order to

attempt this you will need to physically board a Nehemiah probe and interact with it. Getting on the probe will be difficult because they are shielded against wormhole travel. Once you are near a probe you might find a way to penetrate this protective barrier, but if that fails you will have to find a physical means of access.”

Captain Max looked surprised. “Do you mean that the probes are large enough to get inside and walk around? Just how big are they?”

“The Nehemiah probes vary in size, depending on the type of stars they have interacted with,” the Artillect explained. “They occasionally reconfigure themselves if they encounter a particularly challenging terraformation problem. But on average they are approximately five miles long. Most of the volume is filled with hardware, but there is—”

“Five *miles*?” Captain Max exclaimed. “And *how many* of these things are headed our way?”

“Millions,” Sergeant Howell said.

“Approximately twelve million,” the Artillect replied.

Richard spoke up. “And how much time do we have before they get here?”

“It is difficult to predict. For the moment their advancement is quite slow but the probes are learning. They will eventually overcome all my techniques, and when that happens I will be unable to hinder them at all.”

“Can you give us something to work with? Even a guess is better than nothing! Will this 'learning process' take weeks, months, years...?”

“We probably have less than a day,” the Artillect replied. “In fact, we may have a great deal less time than that. At this point it depends more on luck than anything else.”

“Less than a day,” Sergeant Howell repeated. “Well, I had a feeling that was the case. If it wasn't urgent you would have

waited until morning to tell us. In fact, they could arrive within the hour, couldn't they?"

"It is possible," the Artilect agreed. "There is really no way to tell. I have never faced this situation before so I cannot make accurate predictions."

"What are our options?" Richard asked.

The Artilect shook his head. "I am afraid I have no options to give you. If I had a way to solve this problem I would have already solved it, and this meeting would be a simple explanation of how the probes were defeated. If I had sufficient time I could design a weapon capable of defeating them, but I do not have the necessary time. Nor is there a way to obtain more time, for we cannot hide from them or run from them. I have also failed to track down the agency that triggered this change. It may be that we are facing an opponent that could stop the attack if confronted, but I have been searching for other civilizations for thousands of years and have found no one. That is unlikely to change."

"That means that Amanda and I are your *only* option, then," Amy pointed out. "We just need to find a way to board one of those things and shut it down. That would solve this whole problem!"

"But it's so risky!" Laura protested. "Anything could happen. After all, even the Artilect can't protect you! How do you know you won't get hurt?"

"The Artilect can't protect them here, either," her husband pointed out. "In fact, none of us are safe – and there are no safe places to go."

"Your husband is right," Sergeant Howell agreed. "I don't like this any more than you do, but if we don't do something soon then we're *all* going to die. If it was a matter of sacrifice I'd gladly go in their place, but Amy and Amanda have powers that we

don't."

"Then let's stop wasting time and get out of here!" Amy said.
"Amanda and I—"

Sergeant Howell quickly interrupted. "Hold on there! Don't leave just yet. While I agree with your plan, I very strongly believe that only *one* of you should go. There's absolutely no reason for both of you to risk your lives. After all, if something goes wrong the only person who could rescue you is your sister!"

"You want me to go *alone*?" Amy asked incredulously. "Seriously? I'm supposed to fight the entire invasion fleet single-handedly?"

"Absolutely not," Sergeant Howell said. "I think that Reverend Knight should go as well, if he's willing. It's possible that once he boards a probe his gift will reveal who's behind this – and that is something we desperately need to know. However, Amy, I don't think *you* should go at all. I realize that I'm not in charge, but in my opinion this mission should be conducted by your sister."

"Me?" Amanda asked, surprised. "But – oh, I see. I've been to Xanthe and done things, so other people know that I exist. But no one knows anything about Amy."

"In theory, yes," Sergeant Howell agreed. "Since either one of you can do it, and since you've already put your name out there, it makes sense for you to be the one to go. There's no reason to tell the universe that there are two administrators. It just doesn't seem like a good idea, especially since we don't know who we're fighting."

"So what am I supposed to do?" Amy asked. "Do you really expect me to just sit here while my sister risks her life?"

"You could always pray for her," Reverend Knight suggested.

"But that's not the same thing as *doing* something," Amy argued.

"Quite the contrary! In fact, prayer is nothing less than asking

the Most High God to do something. His power is far greater than yours, and His help is desperately needed. In fact, if we do not have His help then we are doomed to failure anyway. Do not underestimate the hand of God in the affairs of men.”

Richard spoke up. “I know you don't like it, Amy, and I don't blame you for being upset, but I think he's right. Your sister needs to be the one to address this. I wish I could go in your place but our options are limited. I just don't see any other alternatives.”

“Then we'd better get going, then,” Amanda replied. “We don't have a lot of time.”

“Do you want me to go with you?” the Sentinel asked.

Amanda paused, then shook her head. “I don't think we'll need you, Steve, and I don't want to put you in danger by bringing you into a situation where you're not needed. This is going to be a very simple mission. All we're going to do is board the probe and turn it off. The probe will either recognize my access and shut down, or it will reject it and keep going. Either way, I don't think you can change the outcome. It will either work or it won't.”

“You are probably right,” the Sentinel agreed. “I pray that it does work, and that you both return quickly and safely.”

“Amen to that,” Amanda replied.

She looked around the room. “Well, I guess we'll be going, then,” she said softly. Richard opened his mouth to say something, but it was too late; Amanda and Reverend Knight had already vanished.

Captain Max looked at Jones. “So what happens now?”

“We wait,” he said quietly.

CHAPTER 22

“People act as if the destruction of the Rangers was a bad thing. Have they lost their mind? Those colonies were on the verge of destruction anyway! Their governments were corrupt, their people were rioting in the streets, and most of them were insolvent. That's one of the key reasons why the swarms were effective – they were already in such terrible shape that it didn't take much more to wipe them out. It's very important to remember that when we started this war the Ranger colonies were already teetering on the edge of a cliff. All we did was push them over.”

*--Carroll Lane
Elder of Vault 37
December 21, 2469*

AMANDA STRYKER AND REVEREND KNIGHT reappeared on the top of a rocky cliff. The girl had selected a vantage point that overlooked an enormous, barren plain. Off into the distance, as far as the eye could see, was nothing but a dark, uneven surface that was littered with black rocks. The ground beneath their fleet was made of a hard, gray stone. Overhead was a black sky. A faint sun hovered on the horizon, offering just enough light to see but providing no warmth. There was no wind or clouds. After a moment the preacher realized that he could see stars, even though it was daytime.

“This place seems rather dead,” he remarked. “I don't see

any signs of life at all.”

Amanda was standing beside him. Her eyes were closed and she appeared to be concentrating. “That's because there isn't any life here. This is one of the countless dead worlds that are outside the network. There isn't even an atmosphere! It's just a rocky planet about a hundred million miles away from its star. There's nothing interesting here.”

“You mean there's no air?” he replied, surprised. “Then what are we breathing?”

Amanda smiled. “The nanites that are in your bloodstream may not be as powerful as the ones in mine, but they're still capable of keeping you alive even in the harshest environments. You're not in any danger – at least, not from that, anyway.”

He nodded. “I understand. I don't mean to disturb you, miss, but is there a reason for our being out here?”

“I'm trying to learn about the Nehemiah probes. There's one just a few million miles away from here that I'm exploring. I can see it with my mind – it's huge! Now I just need to find a way to get inside. The Sentinel was right – it really does block wormhole travel. This is going to be tricky.”

“Very good,” he replied. Then there was silence. The preacher stared off into the distance, quietly praying.

Minutes ticked by and still Amanda said nothing. By the look on her face it was clear that she was working hard, but the preacher could see no obvious results. Reverend Knight continued standing on the deserted cliff, gazing across a world that had never known life. He suddenly realized that they were probably the first human beings to ever stand there in all of history. *In fact, we may be the only people that ever visit this world, he thought. In all the ages of eternity we may be the only life forms that this planet ever sees. No wonder the Artilect spent thousands of years looking for human beings! This is a lonely,*

empty age.

Amanda at last opened her eyes. “Well, that's not going to work. I was hoping to find some flaw in the probe's barrier that we could exploit, but it can't be done – or at least, *I* can't do it. We're going to have to do this the hard way.”

“The hard way?” Reverend Knight asked. “Do you mean—”

“Yup! We'll have to go up, knock on the door, and hope someone opens it.”

“Really?” he asked in surprise. “That's our plan?”

“That's our plan. Are you ready to go?”

The preacher paused, then nodded. “Absolutely.”

It took Amanda only a moment to transport them from the unnamed, empty planet to the hull of the Nehemiah IV probe. She had already learned how to interact with the dampening field that the Artilect was generating, so she did not have any trouble transporting to the probe itself. What did startle her was the sheer size of the probe. Even though she had seen it in her mind, actually being there somehow impressed her in a way that her mental picture hadn't. *They're staggering!* she thought. *No wonder the Artilect can't fight them. I just hope I can find a way to turn it off.*

Reverend Knight was surprised to see that they were actually standing on top of the probe, right in front of a small circular hatch. The bulk of the vessel stretched out in front of them for miles. Amanda could feel it shaking beneath her feet, as if it was straining against some giant chain. *It wants to be free,* she thought. *It knows something is holding it here and it's angry!* It was an unnerving thought.

The preacher had expected the vacuum of space to be a dark place, but he was surprised to see that the surrounding area was lit by a flickering white light. Occasionally the light shifted colors.

“Where is that light coming from?” he asked.

“It's a by-product of the dampening field,” Amanda explained. “The energy that Andy is pouring into this area occasionally give off photons that we can see.”

The girl dropped to her knees and placed her hand on a square panel beside the hatch. To her immense relief the panel glowed to life, and a moment later the hatch opened.

“That's a good sign!” Amanda commented. She climbed down the ladder into the probe, and Reverend Knight followed closely behind her. Once they were inside the airlock Amanda pressed a button on the wall. The hatch above them slid closed and the airlock doors opened.

Beyond the open doors was a large, circular room that was approximately a hundred feet in diameter. They were surprised to see that there were no chairs, computer consoles, or other objects in the room. It was entirely empty, save for the silver material that covered its walls, floor, and ceiling.

“Well that's a bit unexpected,” Reverend Knight remarked. “Is there something wrong?”

“I don't think so, but let's find out,” Amanda replied. She walked into the middle of the room and made a motion with her hands. Instantly the walls faded to black and an array of holographic displays appeared.

“Oh, I see!” the preacher replied. “It's all virtual.”

“Exactly! It's more configurable that way, I guess. Now let me see if I can figure out how to use this interface.”

“Of course. But, before you begin, do you think we should let the others know that we are here? I'm sure they're concerned about our safety.”

“They already know. I've been in constant communication with Andy ever since we got here. He's keeping them informed.”

“Thank you – I appreciate that. I just don't want them to

worry about us.”

“Right,” Amanda muttered, distracted. “Boy, it’s been a long time since I’ve worked with one of these interfaces. I see the probes have been upgraded quite a bit from the time my brother designed them.”

“You mean you’ve done this before?”

“Kind of. Amy and I were the original beta testers for the probe interface, before the first probe was even launched. Of course, that was five thousand years ago, and it wasn’t a Nehemiah-class probe. I guess there have been a few upgrades since then.”

Amanda continued to study the intricate holographic display, working her way through its complicated system of menus and interfaces. Occasionally she would whisper something to herself, but the preacher could not understand what she was saying. *She’s probably talking to the Artillect, he thought. It’s best if I just let her work.*

It was nearly twenty minutes before Amanda spoke up again. “I think that *might* work. It’s worth a try, I guess.”

“Did you find something?”

“I think so. Well, yes and no. The probe doesn’t seem to have an off switch – at least, if it does I haven’t found it. But I can access the power plant, and the Artillect has suggested a series of settings that should burn it out. Without power the probe won’t be able to actually do anything. It would be the equivalent of shutting it down permanently – if it works.”

“What happens if it doesn’t work?” the preacher asked.

“I’m not sure,” the girl said nervously. “The probe might reject the settings or it might do nothing. It might even decide it’s under attack and retaliate somehow. I really don’t know. It doesn’t look like there’s any way to tell.”

The preacher nodded. “So what are you going to do?”

Amanda paused. "Well, I don't like it, but I guess it's either try this or go home. So, then, here goes nothing..."

Amanda reached out and gingerly pressed a holographic button. Immediately the entire ship shuddered. The lights flickered and then went out, plunging the room into total darkness. A long, low whine could be heard, so loud and deep that it could be felt. After a minute it went silent.

The preacher was startled when a soft, white glow filled the room. "Did you do that?"

"Yes. After all, it was kind of dark in here! I guess that's good news, though – it means the probe is really dead."

"You don't seem very excited about it," Reverend Knight commented. "Is something wrong?"

"Kind of. I mean, sure, this probe is dead. That's great! But there are about twelve million other probes out there that *aren't* dead. I just can't go to each one and shut them down manually! That's not practical. It would take far too long."

"But you *have* found a way to disable them," the preacher pointed out. "That is an excellent start! Now all you need is a way to distribute that to other ships."

"That's the problem! I can't send the new configurations to other probes – they're not receiving communications. Disabling one probe is kind of useless. It really doesn't make a difference."

"What does the Artillect think? I assume that you're still in communication with him. Does he have a suggestion?"

"Let me see," she said quietly. She frowned for a few minutes, concentrating on a voice that Reverend Knight could not hear. He waited patiently, watching her but saying nothing.

At last she opened her eyes. "All right. The group has come up with an idea. Follow me."

Amanda and Reverend Knight suddenly disappeared. They reappeared on the empty, dead planet that they had been on

just a few minutes earlier.

“Woah!” Reverend Knight exclaimed. “I wasn't expecting that. I thought you said we couldn't jump in and out of probes!”

“We can't jump in and out of *operational* probes. Dead probes are a different story.”

“I understand. But why have we returned to this place? What do you hope to accomplish?”

“Give me just a moment to get the reaction started and I'll explain,” Amanda replied. She once more closed her eyes and concentrated. At first nothing happened, but then Reverend Knight noticed that the ground beneath his feet was starting to shake. Out of the corner of his eye he saw that the vast plain beyond the cliff was starting to change. It looked as if the ground had turned into some sort of molten gray metal. There was a buzz of activity going on but from this distance he couldn't quite see what it was.

Amanda at last opened her eyes. “All right – sorry about that! This part is going to take some time and I wanted to get it started as soon as possible. Anyway, about the plan. What everyone realized was that the only way to turn off the probes was to actually visit them in person. Therefore, that's what we decided to do.”

“But I thought you said that was impractical!” Reverend Knight exclaimed, surprised.

“Oh, it is! It would take far too long for me to do it myself. That's why I'm building an army of bots to do it for me. It turns out that the security system on the Nehemiah IV probes is pretty pathetic. All it does is scan my DNA and then grants access based on the DNA that it finds. The Artilect showed me how to build a bot that can fool the probes into thinking that it's me. It won't look anything like me at all, but when the probe scans it it'll find my DNA. Then the bot will send the signal to reconfigure its

power plant and the probe will destroy itself.”

“That's amazing!” Reverend Knight said. “It's quite elegant, and I think it just might work. But, if I might ask, why can't the Artilect do this? It would seem that our work here is done!”

“Well, Andy is kind of busy right now. It's going to take several hours to manufacture the 12 million bots that we need, and he really needs to stay focused on fighting the probes in order to buy us time. Besides, I can manufacture the probes without his help. This is a great place to build them, too; it's outside the network and far away from the war zone.”

“It is? But I thought that the probe we were just on was part of the front line! That's why the area was lit by that flickering light. Has something happened?”

“The front line shifted, I'm afraid,” Amy explained. “It's now about a thousand light-years closer to the Artilect than it was before.”

“That sounds ominous! I hope he can find the strength to keep them at bay for at least a few more hours.”

“I do too,” Amy agreed. “But that's why he needs to focus on what he's doing while I focus on building the bots. All I need to do now is build and deploy them. Then – if all goes well! – we can go home.”

“Do you need to actually be on this planet to build them?” Reverend Knight asked.

Amanda laughed. “I'm not like Andy, you know – I can't be everywhere at once! I sort of need to be at the construction site. Besides, this is a very safe place to be. Aside from one straggler there aren't any active probes in the area at all. If anything, we're actually safer here than we would be if we were inside the network.”

“There's a straggler? Why has it remained behind?”

“Who knows?” Amanda said. “There are actually two probes

in this system – the one that we boarded, which is now dead, and another one that's in close orbit around the sun. Maybe it's broken or maybe it's being held in reserve. I have no idea. But it's certainly not doing anything threatening.”

“I hope that continues to be the case,” Reverend Knight remarked.

* * * * *

In the Diano Building on the planet Xanthe, an alarm began flashing on a computer console. For the first time in history a Nehemiah IV probe had been destroyed. The console urgently requested further instructions. What action should be taken? Does the user want the operation to be aborted? Should the probes regroup and examine the situation? Is an operational change required?

The console asked in vain, for there was no one there who could respond to it. Elder Lane was still in the room but he had finally succumbed to sleep. His robots had left hours ago, once they realized that Lane's quest had been successful and he no longer needed them. The man was very much alone, with no one to warn him that something had begun to go wrong with his plan.

The warning message flashed for hours, but no one heeded its cry for help.

CHAPTER 23

“To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; A time to kill, and a time to heal...”

*Solomon
King of Israel
10th century B.C.*

OVER THE PAST FEW HOURS Amanda's dead planet had undergone radical changes. The frothing metal plain had morphed itself into millions of small, round spheres. Each sphere was roughly six inches in diameter and made of a rough, dull metal. Countless spheres hovered in the atmosphere, with more joining them every second.

“How are things coming along?” Reverend Knight asked.

“I'm almost done,” Amanda replied, her eyes still closed. “I've got most of them ready but I don't quite have enough yet, and I want to build a number of extra bots in case something goes wrong. What makes this so hard is that I have to deactivate all of the probes at exactly the same moment. If I do just a few at a time the probes might figure out what's going on and try to stop it. I don't know how smart they are but I don't want to take any chances. I doubt we'll get a second try at this.”

“It is a wise precaution,” he agreed. “I take it the Artilect has been able to keep the probes at bay?”

“I wish,” Amanda replied. “The problem is that the probes

are getting much better at finding loopholes. They're already halfway to his home system and they could advance the rest of the way at any moment. We're almost out of time."

"What about Tonina?" the preacher asked, concerned. "It sounds like—"

"Tonina has never been in any danger," Amanda said, interrupting him. "I don't know why, but the probes never went near it. It's possible that they don't know where we're at and are targeting the Artilect specifically. I guess they'll hunt us down after he can no longer protect us."

There was silence for a few moments. "I take it our friendly neighborhood probe has left as well?" Reverend Knight asked.

"No, it's still there."

"Really? That is odd. Why has that probe not advanced with the rest of the fleet?"

"I really don't know. It doesn't appear to be doing any harm, though. It's just orbiting the sun as if nothing was going on. It's probably defective or something."

"It's hard to believe that one of those probes can be defective!"

Amanda opened her eyes and shrugged. "I know what you mean. But what other explanation is there? The probe hasn't attacked us. It could have vaporized this entire planet, but it hasn't. It just sits there as if it's waiting for something to happen. Andy told me that it's the only holdout in the entire fleet. Is it really hard to believe that *one* probe out of twelve million might be broken?"

"Perhaps not," he said. "You may be right."

"Wait a minute! You have the gift of discernment, right? What does your gift tell you?"

"It doesn't tell me anything, I'm afraid. You see, what the gift means is that I cannot be lied to. If someone who knows the

truth attempts to mislead me then I will immediately know the truth that they are trying to hide. However, in this case no one has lied to us. That is why I do not know what is going on or who is behind this attack. If we had found someone and they had attempted a deception then I would know the truth. But I simply have no information to act upon.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Amanda said.

The girl looked off into the distance and stared at the millions of bots that were hovering in mid-air. She focused on them intensely for a moment, and then nodded. “They're ready,” she said at last.

Reverend Knight noticed that Amanda was just standing there, staring at the probes. “Is there anything else that needs to be done?”

“No,” she replied. “It's just – well, I don't know what will happen when we do this.”

“We will never know until we try,” the preacher said quietly. “You've done all you can, Amanda – and remember that this isn't all up to you. The Lord brought you to this point in history for a reason. I don't think any of this is an accident.”

She nodded and then looked intensely at the bots. For a brief moment each one glowed with a radiant blue energy. Then, all at once, the entire swarm vanished.

There was silence for a few minutes. The sun had begun to climb up over the horizon, signaling the arrival of early morning. Overhead the sky was still black, lit by only a handful of dim stars. Amanda had used a large portion of the planet's crust to create the bots and there was now a sizable crater in the ground.

“Is it over?” Reverend Knight asked.

Amanda shook her head. “Not yet. The bots need some time to board the ship, get through the airlock, and then send the command. It will take just a little bit longer.”

The preacher nodded. They both waited, standing on a tall cliff that overlooked utter desolation. Reverend Knight gazed off into the distance and watched the sun rise. Amanda stared at something only she could see.

“Yes!” she exclaimed suddenly. “Oh yes! Did you see that? Did you see it? Sorry – no, of course you didn't see it. But it worked! It *worked!* The probes are dead – every last one of them! The invasion is over. We've won!”

Reverend Knight expected to feel a surge of joy, but it didn't happen. Instead he felt his insides tighten with dread. It was as if a dark shadow had suddenly passed over him. Something was wrong.

“Are you – are you sure?” he said at last. “Are you quite sure that they are all gone?”

“Oh definitely!” Amanda replied enthusiastically. “Andy has confirmed it. Every single probe is destroyed, their drives burnt out. The battle is over!”

“No,” Reverend Knight said uncertainly. “No, it's not over. Something's wrong. I think we've made a mistake, Amanda. We're in terrible danger.”

Amanda looked at him, confused. “Are you sure? I mean, how is that even possible? There's nothing left out there that can hurt us! Why, even that broken probe is dead.”

“That's it!” the preacher said suddenly. “That's why we're in danger! That probe wasn't broken; it was keeping something from happening. Now that it's gone we're in terrible danger. We have to leave this world immediately!”

Amanda looked up at the sky for a few minutes. She frowned. A look of vague concern appeared on her face. “Oh, I see what you mean. That star has become unstable. In fact, it looks like it's about to detonate. I guess the probe messed with its chemistry somehow.”

“Can we get out of here?”

“I think we'll have to,” she said. “I wish I could fix the star but I just don't know how. That's probably something only the probes could do anyway. Well, that's fine. Our work on here is done, so let's go home!”

But nothing happened. The two people remained on the planet.

“Is something wrong?” the preacher finally asked.

“I can't move,” Amanda replied, startled. “Do you hear me? I can't move! It's all wrong. It's – it's just *wrong!*”

“What is wrong?”

“Space! *Space* is wrong. I don't know how to describe it. It's as if someone took space and broke it, and I can't find a way through. But – how? Why? Why was this done?”

“As a precaution,” the preacher said suddenly. “The supposedly 'broken' probe noticed when you disable its friend and it became concerned that something was going wrong. It was not allowed to attack without provocation so instead it set itself up as a dead man's switch. As long as it was still operational nothing would happen, but if you launched an attack against it the star would explode and wipe out the planet, which the probe thought was the source of the problem. It took the further precaution of modifying spacetime in order to prevent the infection from leaving and spreading to other probes.”

“You've got to be kidding!” Amanda said, horrified. “Do you mean—”

“The probe learned how to modify spacetime by watching the Artilect erect defenses,” the preacher continued. “It noticed that the Artilect was attempting to alter spacetime in ways that did no permanent damage. Therefore, in order to form a more effective trap the probe did something that it hoped could not be undone.”

“But – if Andy can't fix this, then – you don't understand! I'm not nearly as powerful as he is. If he can't do it then I can't either! And that means–”

“It's ok,” the preacher said. “Just–”

“It's *not ok!*” Amanda shouted, panicking. “Don't you see? That star has *already exploded!* The shockwave is racing here at the speed of light, and when it hits us it will obliterate the planet entirely. And we can't get off the planet! *We're trapped here!*”

Reverend Knight looked at the horizon. The sun was still there, giving off the same faint light it always had. “But the star–”

Amanda interrupted him. “It takes nine minutes for that star's light to reach us. Right now it looks like it's fine, but it's not. We won't be able to see anything unusual until a second before the shockwave kills us.”

The preacher started at the sun. He knew that it no longer existed and that death was racing toward him at the speed of light, but it was almost hard to believe. The world looked so peaceful. It did not realize that the end was coming, but its lack of knowledge would change nothing. The shockwave would hit it all the same and it would leave nothing untouched.

CHAPTER 24

“Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.”

--Jesus Christ

King of Kings and Lord of Lords

1st century A.D.

“WHAT DO WE DO?” Amanda asked. She was terrified. The panic that was surging through her made it impossible to think clearly.

“Can you still communicate with the Artilect?”

“Not anymore,” she replied sadly. “I could for a while after the attack happened, but space is just too broken now. It's almost like something is eating it. I know that doesn't make sense. It's just that the disorder is rapidly increasing. The longer we're here the more stuck we become.”

“How much time do we have?”

“When the star exploded we had nine minutes left. So – I guess we have about seven or eight minutes left now.” Amanda looked at the preacher. “This is it, isn't it? We're going to die here. This is where our life ends.”

“Oh no!” Reverend Knight said, shaking his head. “That's not the way it works, you know. The Lord was quite clear that all those who repent and believe in Him will never die. Our lives will never come to an end because Christ tasted death for each of us. He paid our debt, and we are His, so we will not simply go off into oblivion. But we are about to leave this place and go home.”

“I don't really understand what that means,” Amanda said.

“It means that you and I are going to leave this world for a

better one – one that is located beyond the farthest star. It means that you will soon be reunited with not just your brother, but with the One who died for you and who loves you with a surpassing intensity. It means that our part in this is over and the responsibility has passed on to others.”

“This is all my fault,” Amanda said bitterly. “I should have built the bots on a different planet. We should have left as soon as they were launched. I should have—”

“You did well,” the preacher said. “You saved the lives of your family and you preserved the Artilect from destruction. This attack was not your fault, and you were entirely successful. You handled yourself with courage and wisdom.”

“But—”

Amanda started to say something but she was interrupted. On the horizon she saw the sun briefly flare up and then disappear. For a brief moment she was aware of an intense, blinding light that was rushing toward her, but then the world around her simply vanished.

The girl found herself standing in the middle of a vast green field. Above them was a cloudless blue sky and in front of them was a short hill, with a golden path leading up to its crest. She could see two figures waiting for them on top of the hill. As soon as she saw them they waved, then began walking down the hill toward her.

Amanda opened her mouth to say something, but she stopped. A feeling of intense joy washed over her. Something inside told her that she was finally in the place she was created for. No, there was more to it than that; she was in the presence of the Person she was created to spend eternity with. The joy – the all-encompassing joy that banished every last piece of darkness, and every fear and pain – came not from being in a place, but from being near her Lord. All of her sorrows melted

away and she felt an overwhelming peace. She was finally home, and she knew it.

Reverend Knight nudged her. "I think you have some visitors."

The two figures had made their way down the hill and were now quickly approaching. They were both older men, dressed in white. Amanda didn't recognize the one on the left but she did know the one on the right.

"Tim!" she shouted, running toward him. She ran up to him and hugged him.

Her brother held her, laughing. "Oh Atzi! It's so good to see you at last."

"It really is," she agreed, deeply happy. "After all it's been, what, a month since I last saw you?"

Dr. Timothy Stryker grinned. "It's been a bit longer than that for me."

"Time travel will do that. But who is your friend? I don't believe I've met him before."

The stranger smiled. "Perhaps not, but I believe you are familiar with my work. I'm the person who designed all those probes that you just destroyed. My name is—"

"Dr. Nehemiah Temilotzin!" Amanda exclaimed. "Oh my goodness! Wow. But, about your probes. I am really sorry—"

"You needn't be," he replied. "They were just machines, after all, and they had served their purpose. In fact, I'm heartily glad that I gave you access to the probes so that you *could* destroy them! Of course, at the time I thought you had been dead for centuries. I never imagined how things would turn out."

Reverend Knight spoke up. "I do not mean to interrupt, but I see a third figure on the hill. I believe there is Someone else who is waiting to meet us."

"Indeed there is," Tim said. "Are you ready?"

"Oh yes," she replied.

"Then let's go!"

He took his sister by the hand and led her up the hill.

* * * * *

"I don't understand," Richard said. He was filled with despair and agony as he stared at the holoscreen. "We won, didn't we? How could she die after we won?"

The Sentinel paused before responding. "Your daughter did destroy all of the probes, and in this she was entirely successful. However, one of the probes apparently set a trap for her that was triggered by its destruction."

"Is she really gone?" Laura asked. "You mean you didn't save her?"

"The star has been destroyed," the Artillect replied. "The shockwave has reached the planet and put an end to it. I am deeply sorry."

"But you were supposed to protect her!" Laura shouted. "You said that was your highest priority, and now our daughter's dead! Why did you just sit there and let it happen?"

"I did everything in my power, but there was not enough time. I was unable to penetrate the barrier and retrieve her before the shockwave hit the planet. There was nothing I could do."

"So you just stood there and watched while she gave her life to save a *machine*," Laura said bitterly.

"She died for all of us," Jones said. "This is not the Artillect's fault. We knew there was a risk when we let her go, but if she had stayed here we would have *all* died. I know that doesn't make this any easier to take, but we had no other choice. In all honesty I am surprised that any of us survived."

"What do you mean?" Richard asked. "Did you expect her to

fail?"

"It's not that, sir. I've just had a feeling the past few days that our journey was over and we'd done what we were sent here to do. I thought all of us would be going home, not just Amanda. It's just – well, usually when I get these feelings they're pretty accurate. I've never known one to be wrong before."

A holographic Amy was sitting in the floor, crying. Her parents had tried to comfort her but she refused to have anything to do with them, or with anyone else. Her grief was so deep and intense that she had simply shut the rest of the world out. All she knew was that her twin sister was gone. "I could have saved her," she kept saying, over and over. "You should have let me go with her! Why didn't you let me go?"

"If the Artilect couldn't—" the Sentinel began.

"It's ok," Richard said, interrupting. "Just let her be. Reason and logic isn't the right approach to take right now. What she needs is comfort, and there just isn't any comfort to be had."

"It is not quite as hopeless as that, sir," Jones said. "Your daughter has gone on to a better place. It's not like you'll never see her again."

"Oh, I know," Richard said. "But even Jesus cried at the grave of Lazarus."

No one really knew what else to say. The victory over the probes had been swallowed up in sadness, and a terrible weight had descended upon the group. They all knew that their lives would never be the same again.

"I'm sorry," Sergeant Howell said at last. "I wish things had gone differently."

"We all do," Captain Max replied.

The Sentinel spoke up. "Should I notify the citizens of Tau Ceti that the threat has been eliminated?"

"I never told them that they were in danger," the Artilect

replied. "There is no reason to disturb them now. This does not need to involve them."

The Sentinel nodded. "Let me know if my services are required." He then vanished.

"Where did he go?" Sergeant Howell asked.

"To comfort Amy," the Artilect replied.

CHAPTER 25

“It is done. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely. He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son. But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.”

*--The Most High God
1st century A.D.*

IT WAS NEARLY NOON before Elder Lane awoke. When he finally became conscious again he saw that sunlight was pouring through the large glass windows of the Diano Tower, filling the communications room with a brilliant white light. The ancient man struggled to wake up. He rubbed his eyes and tried to focus on the computer console in front of him. That is when he finally saw the warning message.

Terror shot through his whole being as he read the dire warning. It multiplied tenfold when he realized that not one, but *all* of the probes had been destroyed. His fleet – along with his hope of destroying the Artilect – had been utterly vanquished.

As he started at the screen, words failed him. He had never been so frightened in all his life. *They know! They surely know that I did it. They must have destroyed the probe and traced the*

upgrade back here! Maybe they don't know it was me but they'll know when they get here. I bet they're already on their way right now! But what am I going to do? What can I possibly do? I'm going to die – we're all going to die!

The feeling of terror that was rushing through him was quickly replaced with blind panic. Elder Lane raced out of the room and down the hallway to the elevator. He frantically mashed the down button over and over again. “I don't have time for this!” he screamed, as the door opened. He then ran inside and pressed the button to return to the lobby.

He was so frantic that he actually hopped up and down, in a futile effort to make the high-speed elevator go even faster. It took less than a minute for the elevator to reach the ground floor, but to him it felt like an eternity. Every moment he expected the skies to be filled with starships and the Artilect to pour out his wrath upon Xanthe. *It's only a matter of time – maybe minutes, maybe seconds!*

Elder Lane ran toward the vault as fast as his legs could carry him. He soon became winded, but his terror was so great that he pressed on anyway. All he could think about was death.

When he finally reached the vault he ran over to Adrian Garza's pod and slammed his hand against the activation button. After a few minutes the pod opened and Adrian climbed out of it. Before Adrian could even say a word Elder Lane grabbed him.

“We don't have time for that!” he shouted. “You've got to contact the Artilect immediately and tell him to transport me to his home world. *Right now!*”

“But why?” Adrian asked, surprised. “I don't understand.”

Elder Lane shook Adrian. “Look, you fool! I – I told the Nehemiah probes to attack the Artilect. I was hoping they would destroy him so that we wouldn't have to live under the tyranny of Amanda. It was our only chance at survival! But it didn't work,

Adrian. It didn't work! The Artilect defeated them. He'll be here any minute!"

"The Artilect is coming *here*?"

"He must be! I'm sure he knows that the probes were upgraded and he'll come here to find out who did it. When he does he'll see that we did it and he'll kill us all. That's why we've got to act *right now*!"

Adrian hesitated. "What do you want me to do?"

"Do I have to keep repeating myself?" Lane screamed. "Tell him to transport me directly to his home world! Tell him that I just found out vital information about the bot swarms that he needs to hear. Tell him that the bots are after me and that I've got to get to him for protection. I don't care what you tell him! Just *get me there*."

"But what do you hope to accomplish?"

"I want to kill him," Lane said feverishly. "I want to kill all of them! I've got to; it's the only way we'll survive. If they win this war then they'll enslave all of us. Do you understand? Our survival depends on this! If I can reach the Artilect then I can destroy him. It's our only hope!"

Lane saw Adrian hesitate. "Don't go all wobbly on me!" Lane snapped. "You know exactly what you've done to the synthetics that live in your virtual world. Don't think for a moment that these people aren't going to do the same thing to us! The strong always oppress the weak. You know that as well as I do."

"But why do you want *me* to talk to him?" Adrian asked.

"Because they trust you! They know who you are and they'll believe anything you tell him. I can't risk them getting suspicious and asking questions! If you tell them to beam me over there then they'll do it."

"All right," Adrian said at last. "All right. Follow me."

Adrian led him out of the vault and to the building that

housed the communications equipment that the Sentinel had left behind. On the way there he struggled with what he was about to do. He felt terrible about betraying what seemed like nice people, but he could not dismiss what Lane had told him. He knew exactly the depths of depravity that he was capable of, and the thought of being put under someone else's authority frightened him. He had seen the power of these strangers and knew that, to them, he must seem little more than another synthetic. *They might mean well now, but that will change in time. They'll eventually succumb to the temptation of power. The only way to ensure our freedom is to act now. It is distasteful but it must be done.*

The two elderly men entered the building and Adrian led him to the room that contained the communication equipment. As Elder Lane watched, Adrian activated it and contacted the Sentinel. He told the Sentinel that he had urgent news and had to talk to the Artilect immediately. The Sentinel was reluctant to allow Adrian to speak to him directly but eventually did reroute the connection.

"How may I be of assistance?" the Artilect asked. "Is something wrong?"

"Something is *terribly* wrong!" Adrian said. "You must immediately transport Elder Lane directly to your home world. He has obtained vital information about the swarms that you must receive without delay!"

"He has?" the Artilect asked, surprised. "Do you mean he knows where they came from? He knows who has been attacking us?"

"Yes – he knows all that and much more! But as long as he's here his life is in danger. He can explain everything once he arrives. Can you please go ahead and transport him over?"

"I can. However, I am surprised. Is there—"

“There isn't time!” Adrian insisted, interrupting. “Just transport him over. Don't transport me – I need to stay here for now. I know it's confusing but Elder Lane will explain everything once he arrives. This location is not secure.”

“Very well,” the Artilect said. Elder Lane then vanished.

As soon as he disappeared Adrian shut down the communications equipment. He thought about running, but instead he just sank down into a chair and stared at the deactivated screen. *I hope I did the right thing*, he thought to himself.

* * * * *

Elder Lane appeared in a small, drab room. The walls and ceiling were a dull white color and the floor was covered in some sort of gray tile. In the middle of the room was a conference table that was surrounded by twelve chairs. Seven people were seated around the table, and the Artilect was standing in front of it.

When the Artilect heard that Elder Lane knew who was behind the swarms he decided to act immediately. *This is something I must act upon without delay. The group will want to know who was behind the attack that killed their daughter. They would not forgive me if I failed to include them in this meeting.*

While Elder Lane was still in transit the Artilect tracked down the humans in its network and transported them to its home world. As expected, every one of them wanted to be there. The only ones who refused to attend the meeting were Amy, who was still extremely upset, and the Sentinel, who decided to remain behind and comfort Amy. Everyone else was in the meeting room when Elder Lane arrived.

The moment he appeared he took a quick look around the

room. "I apologize for the intrusion, but I am afraid I had no choice. An urgent matter has come up that needs to be settled immediately. Are we all here?"

"I believe so," Richard said.

"But where's Amanda?" Elder Lane asked.

"She – died," Richard said, hesitating. "You see—"

"Oh, ok," Elder Lane said. "Well, you can explain it later. Here, catch." He removed a small metal sphere from his pocket and tossed it to him. "I knew that carrying that thing around with me would pay off eventually!"

While the sphere was still in the air it began dividing, and before a second had passed it had turned into a swarm. The humans in the room did not even have time to react before the swarms cut them apart with powerful beams of energy. Before their bodies even hit the floor the swarms had consumed them and turned their remains into more bots.

Elder Lane leaned against the wall and laughed as the swarms lashed out against the Artilect and ate through his walls, consuming vital equipment. He knew that the swarms would not hurt their creator – but they would destroy everything else. A sense of elation flooded through him as he realized his plan was working.

"That's right!" he shouted. "It was me all along! I'm the one that built the swarms, and all of you were too stupid to figure it out!"

The Artilect was caught completely off-guard. When the Nehemiah probes attacked he had deployed his defenses along the edges of its territory, in an attempt to slow their advance. At the moment the attack occurred the Artilect had most of his mind focused on dissolving the probes, to make sure that they could never attack again. He was not expecting an assault against his core processor and had readied no defenses in his inner

sanctum. As a result the swarms destroyed vital portions of its interior before he even knew what was happening.

The Artilect desperately tried to find a solution but he was already losing his grasp on sanity. When the bots were in space he was able to deploy starships against them, but those ships could not operate within a planet's interior. Besides, the ships worked by altering spacetime in ways that would be fatal to the Artilect. In fact, all of his defenses against the swarms involved the utter destruction of the surrounding territory. He quickly realized that his ability to respond rapidly did no good when the only responses he had available would destroy him along with the swarms.

As the swarms continued to multiply he quickly realized that he had to act now, while he was still capable of conscious thought. Summoning all of the energy that he still controlled, the Artilect reached out and altered spacetime within his star system, ensuring that the swarms could not escape the area. He then touched his star and destabilized it, turning it into a weapon. In the few seconds that he had before the star exploded the Artilect reached out to Tau Ceti and used an electromagnetic pulse to destroy both the Wall and every last piece of electronic equipment on the planet. *If I am to die today then the swarms will at least die with me*, he thought. *If there were any bots left on Tau Ceti they are now dead. My star will destroy all the ones that are here.*

Elder Lane never knew what killed him. One moment he was gleefully watching the swarms eat away at the Artilect's mind, and the next moment the shockwave hit the planet and vaporized him. In that instant of time the room disappeared and he found himself in a place of utter darkness. Screams filled the air – the horrible, agonizing screams of those who are in torment and have no hope. It took him a moment to realize that he was

screaming as well. Something was burning and he was in terrible pain.

“Help!” he screamed. “Somebody, please, help me!”

But there was no help.

CHAPTER 26

“When Emperor Portius gave the command to destroy the Sparrow I'm sure he thought that he was signing our death warrant. He was very much mistaken! Today his Empire is imprisoned behind a Wall while we are free. His future has been taken from him, but the future of the Rangers is bright. He inherits a Mars that he personally destroyed, and we – well, we inherit the stars. On this day, when we commemorate the lives that were lost when the Sparrow was destroyed, let us not forget the legacy that they have left behind. Their passing offers us a chance to build a future. At the same time, their passing gives them a future as well – one that is in a far better country.”

*--Jack Nicholas
Governor of Tau Ceti
December 8, 1867*

AMY STRYKER WAS SITTING ON THE BEACH in her world, crying. She had been crying ever since she saw that distant star explode and claim the life of her sister. When the Artilect had requested her presence at the meeting with Elder Lane she yelled at him, so he departed and left her alone. The Sentinel, however, remained. He wanted to hold her but Amy refused to be held. The girl simply sat on the beach and cried.

Although the Sentinel was physically present with her he was also in communication with the Artilect. He watched from afar as

Elder Lane was transported to the Artilect's home world, and then gasped in horror when Lane killed everyone. He saw the Artilect fight for his life and ultimately sacrifice it so that the swarms could be wiped out.

While the Sentinel had been filled with grief at the death of his friend Amanda, he now finally understood the utter depth of sorrow that Amy was going through. His father, and all that he had ever known, was now gone. Amy's family was gone. He felt as if all the light had gone out of the world and there was nothing left but sorrow and pain and death. He was so overwhelmed that, for the first time in his long life, he fell to his knees and cried.

Amy looked up and saw that the Sentinel was overwhelmed with emotion. As upset as she was, this got her attention. She had never seen the Sentinel become that emotional. "Steve, what's wrong? Why are you crying?"

"They're all dead," he said between sobs. "All of them, Amy. They're all gone."

"Who's gone?" she asked, confused. "The probes are gone?"

"The *people* are gone. Amy, oh Amy, Elder Lane has attacked the Artilect. He killed him, along with your family and friends. You and I are the only survivors."

"What? But – that's not possible! Elder Lane? But – why?"

The Sentinel then explained what had happened, telling her everything he had seen. He expected her to burst into tears again, but that didn't happen. Instead she stopped crying and looked off into the distance.

"So it was Tau Ceti all along!" she said angrily. "Those wretched murderers were never in danger. In fact, they were *behind* the danger all this time! Those 'survivors' are nothing but a bunch of monsters that have been trying to kill us from the moment we got here."

“That is correct,” the Sentinel said.

“They killed them all!” she screamed. “They killed my sister, and my parents, and my friends. We came here to save them, and they murdered us instead!”

“Yes,” he said.

“Adrian betrayed us. I thought he was our friend! He led them right to their death – and he is going to pay for it.”

“What do you mean?” the Sentinel asked, as Amy stood up.

“I mean that *I am going to make him pay*. They are *all* going to pay – every last one of those worthless murderers. I don't need the Artilect to destroy that planet, Steve; I'm quite capable of doing it myself. If my sister can fix it then I can rip it apart.”

“But—”

“Shut up!” she screamed. “You can't stop me, do you hear? I am *not* going to let those people get away with murdering my family – not when I can do something about it!”

Amy reached across space and created a holographic image of herself on Xanthe. It was not hard for her to locate Adrian in the planet's communications center. He was still staring at the monitor, lost in thought.

“Adrian!” Amy screamed.

The elderly man jumped up in surprise and whirled around. A look of surprise crossed his face. “Amanda?” he said uncertainly.

“Oh no,” Amy said bitterly. “Amanda can't be here right now. Do you know why? It's because you killed her! You killed her, and the Artilect, and my entire family. But you missed one, Adrian. *You didn't kill me.*”

“And you are?” Adrian asked.

“I'm Amanda's twin sister Amy – and I have all of her powers. I don't need the Artilect, Adrian. I'm quite capable of destroying your planet without it.”

Adrian looked surprised. “A sister! But – that is, I didn't know

she had a sister. Where have you been all this time?"

"Of course you didn't know! Why, if you *had* known then I would be dead too. You *murderer!* My family came here to save you and you killed them."

"But we had to kill them! You don't understand – we didn't have a choice. All of you had to die so that we could be free. You would have killed us all sooner or later anyway. It was just a matter of survival!"

"Don't you *dare* blame this on us! *You* are the ones that wiped out *every single Ranger colony*. It was *your* people who killed countless billions of others just so you could lead depraved, self-centered lives in pods. You're all *monsters*."

"Of course we are," Adrian agreed. "Everyone is – even you. I didn't know that we were behind the swarms, but it does make sense. I suppose we had to kill them so that they wouldn't have a chance to kill us. But Amanda – sorry, I mean Amy – there isn't anything you can do about it. You cannot avenge their deaths. You can't kill us because if you did you would be the last human being left alive in the universe."

Adrian paused, and then looked at her. "In other words – we've won. And there's not a thing you can do about it."

Amy clenched her fists in anger. She was so furious that she couldn't speak. She reached out a hand toward Adrian, but before she could touch him the girl vanished.

* * * * *

On her own world, Amy whirled around and glared at the Sentinel. "You had no right to stop me!"

"You cannot wipe out humanity," the Sentinel said firmly. "That prerogative belongs only to God. You are not the judge of mankind."

“You have no authority over me!” Amy shouted. “Don't you dare tell me what to do!”

“I will not let you do this,” the Sentinel replied. “You may be in authority over me, but there is a higher law that I must obey. If you continue down this course then I will oppose you.”

“This is *not* over,” Amy snarled. She then vanished, leaving the Sentinel alone.

After she left the Sentinel looked out over the waves that were crashing against the shore. The tide was going out. Evening was rapidly approaching and soon the stars would be out. But the world was empty.

The Sentinel kept a close watch over Tau Ceti but Amy did not approach it. He did not know where she had gone and he was not sure how to find her. Since the Artilect had been destroyed it was no longer possible to simultaneously scan every planet in the network. The Sentinel had great power, but he was extremely limited compared to what the Artilect could do.

What do I do now? The future that my father hoped for is now gone, and the people that he spent so long trying to save are dead. Now no one will ever live in the network; its cities will remain empty until the Lord returns. There is no longer any hope for mankind. The few survivors that are left on Xanthe will either be killed by a vengeful Amy or will die of old age. Since the Artilect destroyed their pods it is quite likely that the remainder of their lives will be short, as they cannot survive in the real world for very long. Even if Amy does nothing they may still die anyway.

Is there no hope left? Is this simply the end, as the last members of a dying race vanish, leaving no future? Was all of this simply for nothing? Or is there some greater purpose that I cannot see?

With nothing else to do, the Sentinel stood on the beach and

waited.

EPILOGUE

“Paradise isn't a place where you have no needs; it's a place where all your needs are met. It's not a place where you know no one; it's a place where you know everyone, and everyone knows you. It's not a place where you have no desires; it's a place where all of your desires are satisfied and your deepest longings at last find satisfaction. It is a place where the corruption and decay that afflict us are finally done away with and we are at last the people that God meant us to be.”

*--Reverend Gene Knight
November 27, 7239*

“IN RETROSPECT, I think we could have handled that a bit better,” Captain Max remarked.

The captain and Jones were sitting on a bench that was on the shore of a wide, crystal-clear lake. Behind them was a small grove of weeping willows. There were a few boats out on the lake, as people enjoyed the splendor of the day. In the distance they could see the spires of a city.

“I don't know,” Jones said. “I kind of like it here, actually. It's good to be in Paradise. I have to say it has exceeded my expectations in every possible way.”

“Oh, I agree – don't get me wrong! This really is a better country. I just wonder if, perhaps, we made a serious tactical error back there. After all, we *did* all get killed. That was not a success, Jones.”

"You're quite right, sir. Keep in mind, though, that the Artilect is the one who made the mistake. None of us had anything to do with it, really. All we did was accept his meeting invitation! How were we supposed to know that it would be the last thing that we ever did?"

"I suppose you're right," the captain replied.

"Besides, sir, this is how things were going to turn out all along. Don't you remember what Itzel told you?"

"I do, and she was right – a fact she keeps reminding me of," Captain Max said, grinning. "I wasn't able to save them after all. Still, it was worth the effort. The situation down there is quite different from what it used to be."

"Quite so. The great sin of Xanthe has at last been revealed, and the survivors have been deprived of their synthetic worlds. They must now live in the real world and face the very real consequences for what they have done."

"You don't really think Amy is going to kill them, do you? Surely she wouldn't!"

"She's in a lot of pain right now," Jones said. "In a single day she lost her family and all her friends. The only other human being she knows is a traitor who expresses no regret at betraying her family to their deaths. She desperately wants revenge, and Adrian is giving her no reason to show mercy. Plus, the people of Xanthe are depraved, hateful monsters. It will not be easy for her to find reasons to save them."

"At least she has the Sentinel," Captain Max said. "He has tried to comfort her and so far he's kept her from lashing out against Xanthe. She's not entirely alone, at least."

"Perhaps. But it is a sad thing when a person's only companion is a piece of computer hardware. That's not the way life was meant to be lived, but Amy will have to accept the way things are. There is still a lot of work ahead of her."

“Do you really think that she can save them?”

“I do not know,” Jones replied. “There may be a few there who can be saved. But it will be hard for her to lay her anger aside and help people whose only wish is to kill her. “

“What about Sol?” Captain Max asked. “Is that still in her future?”

Jones nodded. “One day she will have to bring down the Wall and decide what to do with the people that are still living behind it. That will be a much harder decision to make than what to do with the murderers on Xanthe.”

“Because their ancestors tried to destroy the *Sparrow*?”

“No,” Jones replied. “It will be difficult because now she knows that she cannot fix a society's problems by healing its environment. The issues on Earth and Mars go much deeper than lost technology, and she will be forced to deal with that – at a time when she has no desire to interact with anyone.”

The captain was silent for a few minutes. “Is there any hope?”

“There is always hope, sir. This is not over yet. Amy is in a painful place, but there is good in this as well. When her strength is gone she will be forced to turn to Someone whose strength is far greater – and she will find that it is more than sufficient for her.”

(To be continued in the next volume,
Beyond the Farthest Star.)