

BEYOND THE
FARTHEST STAR

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
AT THE END OF ETERNITY

VOLUME 4 IN THE STRYKER SAGA

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By Jonathan Cooper

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Second edition.

Soli Deo Gloria

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FORWARD

I don't normally add a forward to my books, but this book is a little different from the others I've written. Considering what this book is about, I thought the reader might appreciate a word of explanation before the story begins. At the end of the previous book in this series, all of the members of the Stryker family were killed with the exception of Amy. Now, for most books that would be the end of those characters. Once someone dies, that's it – their part in the story is over. They are history.

In the real world, though, that's not what happens. Dying does not end your life; instead, you simply move on to a different place. Those who do not know the Lord Jesus go on to a horrific place called Hell, and those who do know Him are taken to Heaven. After that their lives continue.

Sadly, this truth is almost never mentioned in books. It is occasionally mentioned in secular movies, but (and I am sure this comes as a surprise to no one) Hollywood does a really terrible job of showing what Heaven is actually like. Since so few Christian novels take the time to depict a Biblical picture of Heaven, I thought it would be a good idea to take a look at the afterlife and show what *really* happens. At the same time I wanted to address a lot of misconceptions that people have about Heaven. For example, a great many people believe that Heaven is a dreadfully dull and boring place. This is what Randy Alcorn said in his book *Heaven*:

A pastor once confessed to me, “Whenever I think about Heaven, it makes me depressed. I'd rather just cease to exist when I die.”

“Why?” I asked.

“I can't stand the thought of that endless tedium. To float around in the clouds with nothing to do but strum a harp...it's all so terribly boring. Heaven doesn't sound much better than Hell. I'd rather be annihilated than spend eternity in a place like that.”

That is exactly what many people believe Heaven is like – but the truth is radically different. In this novel I've tried to paint a much more realistic version of Heaven and show what an exciting and glorious place it really is. It is not horrifyingly dull, nor will it even be *possible* to be bored there. Instead, as Paul said, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” It's high time that we rediscovered that truth and embraced everything the Bible has to say about our glorious eternity.

This book will present a lot of ideas about Heaven that you may find shocking. I've added an afterword to the end of this book where I explain where those ideas can be found in the Bible. I've done my homework on this subject and I hope you will enjoy the result.

There is one other thing I'd like to say. The most glorious and awesome aspect of life in Heaven is being in the presence of Jesus Christ. However, I was very reluctant to put an actual appearance of Jesus in this story. If I added Jesus as a character I would have to give Him dialog and have Him do things. That seemed horrifying to me. The very last thing I want to do is put words in the Lord's mouth. Just thinking about it seemed almost blasphemous. I've seen Jesus added as a character in other books and the result makes me cringe. Books that use a stand-in for Jesus (as C. S. Lewis did with Aslan) aren't nearly as bad, but as this book wasn't a fantasy novel there was no way I could pull that off here. I suppose I could have had Jesus quote Bible verses for everything He said, but that seemed silly. Someone who quotes a verse at you every time you say hello to them is very hard to take seriously.

I wish I could have found a way to capture the gloriousness of interacting with the Lord, but that turned out to be beyond my reach. I did what I could, but I suspect that some things will have to wait until we're actually there.

I hope you enjoy the book!

Jonathan Cooper

November 19, 2011

PROLOGUE

“But now they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he has prepared for them a city.”

*—The Apostle Paul
1st century A.D.*

IN THE COUNTRY that lies beyond the farthest star there is a giant, golden city. Nothing that is abominable, or evil, or false can ever enter into that celestial paradise. It is home not only to the righteous, but also to the Holy One. Its glory outshines the sun, and it is an eternal city that will never fade away.

In the heart of this city is a tall tower – a golden spire that overlooks the city itself. If you were to enter this tower and climb up the stairs until you reached the top, you would find an impossibly large room. The room itself is entirely empty, save for a giant hole in space itself. Around the hole is a catwalk, which is connected to the tower by a spiral staircase. People come to this room from time to time to see the images that the hole reveals – images from a world that is lost in shadows.

Amanda Stryker was standing in that room, leaning over catwalk's railing and staring at the scene that was unfolding below. The image was crystal-clear. She could see her sister standing in a room that was filled with communications equipment, angrily screaming at a very old man. Her rage was palpable:

“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."

Amanda made a motion with her hand and the image froze. She quietly stared at the picture of her sister. Grief and longing tugged at her heart. "You're in so much pain, Tiger," she whispered.

"She is indeed," Jones replied. "I suspect you would be too if you had lived and she had died."

The girl turned her head to look at Jones. "Oh – hey there! I didn't see you come in."

"When I entered this chamber I saw that you were preoccupied, and I didn't want to disturb you by calling attention to myself. But I can see why you were distracted. You're worried about your sister, aren't you?"

"Of course I am! Well, not *worried*, exactly. But I do care about her. I know she's in pain and I know she misses us. I wish someone could be there with her right now, but all of us are up here. She doesn't have anyone to lean on, and she really needs someone right now."

"She has the Lord," Jones replied.

"Oh, I know. But it's not the same. I mean, I know Jesus is there, but He's not there the way He's here. Jesus is *physically* here – He can actually hold me. Down there, well, it's different."

"But it's not as different as you think. Even in the shadowlands there are still people who serve the Lord. Amy's life is about to change, Atzi. The Lord is going to bring her into contact with people who will care about her and comfort her. Through them He *will* hold her, and give her the strength she needs to do the most difficult thing she will ever do."

"What's that?"

"Show mercy to Adrian," Jones replied.

"But he doesn't deserve it!" Amanda protested. "He betrayed all of us to our deaths, and he knew we would be killed when he did it! He deserves to be punished."

"That's what mercy is, Amanda – a gift to people who don't deserve it. A second chance for people who have no right to it. Mercy is why you are standing here right now, instead of in Hell with Carroll Lane. Mercy saved you, and your family, and me – and it can even save Adrian Garza."

Amanda glanced back down at her sister. She saw the tears on her face and the utter rage that filled her heart. "She's a long way from forgiving him, Jones."

"Give her time," he replied. "With God all things are possible."

CHAPTER 1

“The great question of our time is this: what should be done with the savages who live in the valleys? Some say that if we wipe them out, we can seize the resources they are guarding and reclaim the Earth as our own. I believe that would be a great mistake. The truth is that if we eliminate those savages, we will eliminate our own future as well.”

—Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

April 27, 7243

A BATTERED METAL VEHICLE slowly lumbered across the Martian desert. The *Raptor* – named after a bird of prey that had gone extinct millennia ago – had treads instead of tires, and a cylindrical body that could seat a dozen people at a time but rarely contained anyone other than Miles. The nose of the vehicle was made of a transparent plastic. Years of driving through sandstorms had scuffed it, reducing visibility. The planet's gritty, harsh sand had long ago stripped every bit of paint off the hand-crafted machine, and the bare metal that remained was pitted and stained. Yet, despite its age and condition, the *Raptor* continued to serve its purpose well – transporting its reclusive inventor from his hideout in the wastes to the buried city of New Tikal.

On that particular day Miles had left his refuge far later than he had intended. He had known for months that the containment stabilizer on New Tikal's aging zero-point-energy

plant was on the verge of failure, but he found it difficult to summon enough energy to do anything about it. Miles was an old man – far older than anyone knew. To most people he was simply the sort of person that had always been around for as long as anyone could remember. The few technical people that were left in New Tikal took him for granted, believing that he would always be there to solve their problems. Only Noel Lawson truly understood how fragile Miles had become. His extraordinary life was coming to an end, and he knew it.

As his tank lumbered over the sand dunes he glanced into the rear of the cab, making sure that he had remembered to bring the part he had made. As old age set in he found himself becoming more and more forgetful. One thing he was quite positive of, however, was that the part *would* fix the city's present crisis. It had taken more than a month to craft it, most of which was spent examining the ZPE generator he had hidden in his refuge. Long ago he had found one buried in the sands of Mars, and after a great deal of trouble he managed to dig it up and move it into his underground home. After many years, and more than a few close calls, he had finally gotten it to work again. That was a lifetime ago, however, and his technical skills were not what they used to be.

I can't keep doing this, he thought to himself as he steered the Raptor around a rock. I'm getting too old. I should have retired long ago but the city can't live without me. Their life depends on this part, and I'm the only one left that understands the technology. Unless something remarkable happens they're not going to outlive me by very many years. Mars is dying, and when I finally die the planet is going to take all of them with it.

Miles glanced at the sun and studied its position in the sky. "The sun will be setting in a couple hours," he announced to no one in particular. "Another day has come and gone. We're one step closer to the end."

In the distance he could see giant metal towers rising out of

the sand – a sign that he was getting near the city. The dull, scarred towers were more than a hundred feet across and nearly a thousand feet high. Inside them was a complex series of interconnected fans and compressors. Their purpose was to draw in air from the dangerously-thin Martian atmosphere and pump it underground to New Tikal, so its residents would have something to breathe.

It had been centuries since anyone could walk on the surface of Mars without some type of protective environmental suit. The decaying atmosphere was simply too cold and thin to allow life to exist on the surface. The only creatures that had managed to survive were the giant monsters that lurked in the radioactive wastes, feeding off the dangerous energy of the planet's ruined cities.

The thought of the rad-creatures caused Miles to take a quick glance at the scope. Although he was giving the ruin of Tikal a wide berth, he was still cautious. The creatures were violent and unpredictable and often acted in irrational ways. The only one in this area was a giant monster that the locals had nicknamed Lizzie. He had only faced it twice, but both occasions had left him scarred and nearly dead. Miles had no wish to encounter it a third time.

As he approached the wide canyon that housed the only city left on Mars he noticed that a new air tower had been built. He sighed. *That's only going to help you for so long, you know. Eventually there just won't be any air left to harvest. This planet is dying and won't be able to support life for much longer – even life that's underground. But I suppose you're doing the best you can. I wish I knew how to help you, but I don't. I've done all I can do.*

In the side of the canyon there was a broad, winding path that led down to a dry riverbed. Miles steered his vehicle onto the road and carefully guided it around piles of rubble and broken rock. The road was rarely used and tended to be in poor

condition. Miles had repeatedly urged the city to maintain the road, pointing out their dependence on people like him for emergency supplies. His cries fell on deaf ears. Resources were scarce, he was told, and they couldn't afford to waste them on trivialities. Miles would be more tempted to believe this if the mayor didn't have his entire family on the city's payroll, with each one earning an exorbitant salary and living a life so decadent that it would have made most people blush.

It took Miles nearly twenty minutes to pilot the *Raptor* to the bottom of the canyon. Once there he drove up to a giant metal door, picked up his communicator, and activated it. "This is Miles, requesting clearance to enter New Tikal."

He was a bit startled to get an immediate response. Noel Lawson's voice came over the cabin's speakers loud and clear. "Clearance granted! Come on in. Hey, where have you been? You were supposed to be here hours ago!"

"Sorry," Miles replied, as the giant door to the city slowly opened. "It hasn't been a good day."

"I suppose I should be grateful that you came at all. I mean, it's not like you're an employee or anything. But we're cutting it awfully close this time! It's been all I can do to maintain field integrity. Once that goes—"

"We'll be fine," Miles said wearily. The old man had faced so many crises that he found it difficult to get excited about very much. Time and experience had taught him that things were rarely as bad as people claimed.

"Are you crazy? We are *not* going to be fine! Do you have any idea what losing field integrity would mean?"

"Yes I do, actually. The reactor would shut down, and the city would be without power until we fixed it. No lives would be lost."

"Oh. Really? You mean it won't explode?"

Miles sighed. "No, Noel, it won't explode. The reactor isn't made of nitroglycerine, you know. As I have told you many, many times before, there is no possible series of failures that could

cause a zero-point-energy reactor to explode. They are perfectly safe. The only real danger is the loss of power, and the city can go dark for a whole day without any serious side-effects.”

“But—”

“Enough!” Miles interrupted. By now the door was fully open, and he drove the *Raptor* through the city's airlock. “If it makes you feel better, I'll give you the part as soon as I've parked this thing and we can install it tonight. It won't take more than half an hour.”

“All right – I see you coming in now. Signing off!”

After making it through the airlock Miles drove his tank into the city's underground parking lot and brought it to a stop. He was disappointed but not surprised to see that there were only a handful of other vehicles present. At one time there had been dozens of small, independent settlements scattered across Mars, but now there were only a few left. *Everyone's putting all their hope in New Tikal*, he thought. *I suppose they don't realize that it's on the verge of death. Or maybe they do, but just don't have anywhere else to go.*

Miles stood up, put the containment stabilizer in a battered metal briefcase, and stepped outside. He took a moment to make sure that his vehicle was locked and its alarm system was engaged. There was a time when he didn't bother with security, but painful experience had taught him that New Tikal was not kind to trusting people. Once he was satisfied that his vehicle was secure, he turned around and began walking to the elevator. Before he reached it, however, the elevator doors opened and Noel got out and ran over to him.

“Woah there!” Miles said. “It's good to see you, but what's your hurry?”

“What's the hurry? Are you serious? We've had six class-nine alarms today, Miles – six! We've got to get the reactor fixed *now* or it won't make it through the night. You do have the part with you, don't you?”

"I've got it right here," Miles said, patting the briefcase that was slung over his shoulder. "Did you get clearance to move the city onto reserve power so we could bring down the ZPE?"

"Kind of," Noel said. "I just told Mayor Thornton that I was bringing it down whether he liked it or not. He wasn't happy, but honestly, I don't care. I don't have time for his usual dithering."

Miles smiled. "You're not going to win very many friends that way, you know."

"Probably not, but let's face it: if I waited around until I actually got his approval, we'd all be dead. I don't have time to deal with incompetence right now – especially from him."

Miles and Noel stepped into the rickety metal elevator and Noel pressed the button that would take them down to the city's power plant. The elevator shuddered for a moment, then began its long descent into the planet's crust. They could hear machinery creaking as the floors went by, and occasionally there was a sharp grinding noise. It made Noel nervous, but Miles was too old to care.

Miles noticed that Noel was fidgeting. "You seem to be in a hurry today," he remarked.

"You bet I'm in a hurry! I've had everything lined up for hours. All we need is that part and my team can get right to work. Where have you been, anyway? We were expecting you around noon, you know. If you hadn't shown up when you did I would have started sending out search-and-rescue teams. I was almost convinced that old Lizzie had gotten you."

Miles sighed. "I know. I would have been here earlier, but as I said it's been a bad day. Some friends of mine died rather unexpectedly, and to be honest I've taken it pretty hard."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that," Noel said, his tone of voice changing. "I had no idea – I hadn't heard anything about it. Who died?"

"You don't know them. They lived – well, they didn't live around here. But I was really counting on them. I honestly

believed that they would fix this planet and put things in order again. I was certain of it – and then they were all killed. It was like waking up and discovering that the sun was gone. I just never saw it coming.”

“Fix the planet?” Noel asked. “Do you mean politically, or ecologically?”

“We're all dying,” Miles said abruptly. “You know that and I know that, even if Mayor Thornton and his corrupt cronies don't want to deal with it. The air is getting thinner, the water table is being depleted, and the machinery that keeps New Tikal running is wearing out.”

“Well, of course it is! This place was built two thousand years ago, and all we've ever done since then is repair whatever stopped working. That's why we're in this mess! I keep telling them in the open meetings that we need a new approach, but they won't listen.”

“No, they won't,” Miles agreed. “They never have – not in your time, nor your father's time, nor in all the centuries since this city was built. That's why we're in this mess. No politician has ever cared about tomorrow, and tomorrow has finally arrived. If someone doesn't repair the atmosphere and bring this planet back to life then we're all going to die. It may not happen today or tomorrow, but I'll wager you anything you care to bet that this city won't last another century. If someone doesn't do something now, while we still have a slim chance, we're history. There won't even be anyone left to record our demise. The last dregs of life on Mars will be gone, and Lizzie will inherit the earth.”

“And you thought your friends could help? I mean – I don't mean to be disrespectful, but that seems to be pinning a lot of hope on them. Can *anyone* terraform a planet?”

“Of course,” Miles said irritably. “In fact, we could have terraformed Mars if we had started a couple hundred years ago. For that matter, if the city started today and put all of its energy

into it we just *might* be able to make it. The science isn't the problem, Noel. What we are missing is the *will to act*. That has been our problem for the past two thousand years."

"You're probably right, I guess. I can see your point. But I don't know what we can do about it."

"I don't either," Miles replied. "That's why I had such hope for my friends. I was sure they could do it. I just *knew* it! But now they're dead."

"What were their names?" Noel asked.

Miles shook his head. "I'm sure you haven't heard of them. I'm probably the only person around here who knew them. The family that was murdered so thoughtlessly was the Stryker family – Richard, Laura, Amy, and Amanda."

"I'm sorry, but I don't think I know them. Were they from this area?"

"Yes, but they were born a long time ago. No one remembers them, I'm afraid."

"That's sad. I am sorry. Even though I didn't know them, I wish things had turned out differently."

"I do too. Our future may have died with them, Noel. I wish I had better news for you, but I don't."

"Let's take one thing at a time," Noel said. "All is not lost just yet."

The elevator doors finally opened and Noel quickly stepped out. "Right now we've got a ZPE to fix. Let's get that done so the city can live through the night. Then we'll figure out what to do about the future."

"All right," Miles agreed. The aged man then followed the engineer down the long corridor.

CHAPTER 2

"I think this hesitation to wipe out those savages is irrational. They are clearly monsters, unable to think or reason. Even their children cannot be rescued! Eliminating them would not be a crime; it would be a great mercy. They are past saving. The Earth would be far better off without them."

—Evan Maldonado

General of the Children of Light

April 27, 7243

ONE MOMENT AMY STRYKER had been on Xanthe, seconds away from pouring out her wrath on Adrian Garza and the world he inhabited. She was determined to wipe that entire star system out of existence. The next moment the Sentinel had abruptly terminated her holographic link to Tau Ceti, and she found herself back on her nameless world.

Amy was furious. She whirled around and glared at the Sentinel. "You had no right to stop me!"

"You cannot wipe out all of 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! Those people deserved to die. They're murderers – all of them! They destroyed everything that I had. Now it's my turn to destroy them!"

"I will not let you do this. 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 him alone.

Amy was intensely angry at the Sentinel and wanted to get as far away as possible from him. But the question of where to go posed a problem. She was sure that if she simply went to another planet in the network he would instantly know where she was. So she jumped across the galaxy to a location that he was unlikely to search – the space stations that maintained the Wall around Sol.

A great many centuries had come and gone since Amy had set foot on those stations. She remembered upgrading them for Governor Nicholas before she and her sister left the 19th century and jumped into the future. For her that had only been a few weeks ago, but for the rest of humanity millennia had passed. Amy wouldn't have been surprised to find that everything had changed since her last visit. Yet, as she turned on the lights and looked around, she saw that nothing had been touched. Everything was exactly as she had left it.

It looks like no one has been here since I left, she thought. The girl walked around and looked at the computer screens, idly reading the messages that appeared on them. She finally sank down into a chair and stared at a terminal, lost in thought.

A part of her was very pleased that the stations were still functioning after such a long time, but that feeling was quickly pushed aside by her sorrow and anger. Yes, it was gratifying that the machines she had built had lasted for so long. But that did nothing to make her feel any better. Her entire family had been killed – betrayed by Adrian, who had defended what he had done and refused to express any remorse. *In fact, he boasted about it! He actually dared to tell me that there wasn't anything I could do about it. What an idiot! Does he really think that I'm just going to let this go? He murdered all of them, and I am going to make him pay.*

She sighed and shook her head. *Why can't Steve just leave*

me alone? Why does he have to protect those murderers? I don't want to fight him. I'm not even sure I can fight him. Maybe if I built an army I could invade and overpower him, but he could probably build an even bigger army, or stop time or something. I don't know. But why is he protecting them? Why isn't he on my side? Doesn't he care that everyone he was supposed to protect is now dead? How can I get my revenge if he's there standing in the way?

Amy said nothing for a long time. She just stared at the terminal in front of her. The screen displayed the current power output of the station's generators and the stability of the Wall that surrounded Sol. The girl didn't care what it said, and she wasn't really reading it. She was lost in grief, wanting desperately to go back to Xanthe and destroy it but knowing that the Sentinel would not let her.

If only I had someone to talk to! If only I could go back home. But Tonina is empty. Well, not empty, exactly. I guess Alex is still there. Poor Alex! He won't understand what's happened. I need to go tell him, but I can't do that right now. Why did this have to happen? Why do I have to be alone? What am I supposed to do now?

A thought suddenly occurred to Amy. *Maybe there is something I can do. Maybe it's time for me to go home – not to Tonina, but to Mars. I was born there and I spent most of my life there. Maybe that's where I'll find peace.*

Amy sat up in the chair and pressed some buttons on the console in front of her. She navigated to the reactor control interface and brought up the screen that would shut down all four space stations. After entering the appropriate credentials and pressing TERMINATE the screen stopped her, asking if she was sure that she wanted to bring down the Wall.

The girl hesitated for a moment, thinking about it. *I have no idea what's inside that Wall. There could be anything – including something far worse than the swarms. Do I really want to do*

this?

Eventually Amy shook her head. *Of course I want to do this! It's not like there's anyone left that could be harmed. All of the Ranger colonies are dead and the network is empty. The only inhabited system left is Tau Ceti, and it's protected by both a Wall and the Sentinel. Even if there is something evil inside Sol there's no one left for it to harm. I might as well shut down the Wall – it no longer serves a purpose.*

With a slight feeling of nervousness in her stomach Amy pressed the button on the screen. She then watched as the console contacted the other stations and quietly disabled them. Within minutes the Wall was gone.

For a while Amy sat quietly in the chair, waiting. She didn't really know what she was waiting for. It was almost as if she expected something to happen the moment the Wall collapsed. But nothing did.

So she closed her eyes and used her nanites to reach out into space. Starting with the outer planets, she examined each world within Sol, searching for signs of life. With nothing else to do the girl carefully examined each planet and satellite, and even scanned the asteroid belt.

What she found was that only Earth and Mars still had life. Every other world was dead. In the 19th century the outer planets had been home to millions of people, but that was no longer the case. Amy found ruins scattered throughout the Solar System, but they had been abandoned for countless centuries. The space-faring civilization that had built them was long gone.

Amy knew that she should feel something – maybe sadness, or disappointment, or grief – but somehow she just didn't care. Her own sorrow was so great that she could not bring herself to shed any tears over the collapse of the Spanish Empire. The only planet in Sol she had ever lived on was Mars. The other settlements were just points of data – something she had read

about but never seen. She had no personal connection to them. To her they might as well have never existed at all.

What did disturb her was the condition of her beloved homeworld. When she had left Mars in the 19th century the city of Tikal was in ruins, but the planet itself was still home to vast green forests and deep blue oceans. She had been hoping that sometime over the past five thousand years the city would have been rebuilt and perhaps even expanded. But even from this distance she could see that the planet was dead and its cities were gone. The only life that now existed was buried deep beneath the surface.

Amy was heartbroken. *Oh Mars, my home! What happened to you? Why were you abandoned and left to die? What happened to the millions of people who once walked your streets?*

The girl quickly left the station and transported herself to Mars. She appeared on the very spot where the stone governor's mansion had once stood – the building that had been her home for so many years. Amy hoped that there would be some sign that something had once stood there, but she found nothing. Above her was a sky that was quickly becoming dark. The sun was setting on the horizon, taking its light with it. Beneath her feet, and as far as she could see in all directions, was sand. There were no ruins or debris. There weren't even any plants. There was only sand.

When she was last on Mars Amy could see the city of Tikal from her yard. Even the Pyramid of Kings was visible. But now there was nothing. There were no ruins in the distance, and the pyramid that had been built by the first Martian settlers was long gone. Her world was empty and its glory had departed.

Amy sank down onto her knees in despair. She felt utterly abandoned. Her sister was dead, her family was dead, and even her planet was dead. Everything she had once loved, known, and cared about had been taken from her. *This isn't fair – it just isn't*

fair! After all the things we've done for everyone, this is how we're rewarded – with a dead family, a dead world, and a dead future. Well that's just great! What am I supposed to do now? Oh, Lord, why have you taken everything from me and then abandoned me like this? Why do you hate me so? I can't even avenge my family! Am I just supposed to sit here until the sun burns out?

Angry, inconsolable, and bitter, Amy sat down on the ground and cried.

CHAPTER 3

“Yes, those who dwell in the valleys are indeed mindless. I do not dispute that. Nor do I dispute that we, the Children of Light, are the last bastion of civilization on the Earth. But those savages are still human. Mindless though they are, they are still our brothers and sisters – and they pose us no threat. Slaughtering them all simply because we find them inconvenient would be genocide. They are not animals; they are people. They deserve pity, not execution.”

–Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

April 27, 7243

MILES AND NOEL had just left the ZPE plant and were walking back toward the elevator. Miles found himself unnaturally tired but Noel was full of energy.

“That was fabulous!” Noel said enthusiastically. “You were right – we got that part replaced in less than half an hour. The generator is now running better than ever! I think its output has actually increased by nearly one percent.”

“Wonderful,” Miles said wearily. “I’m glad you’re happy. You can get together the money you owe me the next time I’m here. I’m going to head home.”

“Home? But it’s getting dark!”

“It gets dark every night, and it’s been happening for a mighty long time now. That’s the way God designed the world – He called the light day, and the darkness He called night. I’d think

you would be used to it by now.”

“But it's dangerous out there after dark! You never know what might be lurking in the shadows. Mars isn't a safe place.”

Miles shook his head. “You've been living underground for too long, Noel. You're developing all kinds of ridiculous phobias. The only living creature in this area is Lizzie, and she's just as dangerous during the day as she is at night. This idea that monsters only come out at night is a lot of nonsense.”

“But you can't *see* at night,” Noel protested.

“I don't need to see – my scope does that for me. Besides, the *Raptor* can go a lot faster than any rad-monster can. Look, is there something else going on that I don't know about? Has some other machine stopped working and upset the mayor?”

“No, not really. I just don't understand why you're in such a big hurry to get back home. You don't even want to stay long enough to get paid! If you can just spend the night I can push your invoice through the bureaucracy, collect your payment, and give it to you first thing in the morning. You've definitely earned it, you know, and you deserve it a lot more than those pencil-pushers in the offices upstairs. How hard would that be?”

Miles sighed. “I'm just tired. It's been a long day and I want to get home and rest. I don't see any reason to stay here any longer than I have to.”

“Not even to get paid?”

“*Especially* not even to get paid! I told you a long time ago that I don't *want* to get paid. I've already got everything that I need and more besides. I really wish you'd just keep it. This city needs it a lot more than I do.”

“But that's not the point,” Noel protested. “You're the one that's been keeping this city alive since, well, since before I was born. You're the one that should be living the high life – not the mayor. It's just not fair.”

“No one ever said that life was going to be fair. Besides, you know that's not how the system works. Mars has never

celebrated the people that have kept them supplied with oxygen – they're too caught up in the latest politician or celebrity. It's just the way life is. But you don't have to worry about me – I have everything that I need. I'll be fine.”

“All right,” Noel said. “I'll let you go, then. But would you mind if I came with you?”

“*With* me?” Miles exclaimed, surprised. “Why would I do that? You know I don't allow visitors! It's a strict policy I have that goes way back. The very last thing that I want is for my address to get out. Prospectors would just love to get their hands on my stuff. My house would become a war zone!”

“Look – I promise that I'll never tell anyone where you live. You can even blindfold me, if that would make you feel any better. But – well, I hate to say this, but you're not getting any younger. If you hadn't come by today we would have lost field containment by now, and the city would be running on reserve power. Within a week the air would have been poisoned and we'd be all dead. I was hoping that I could spend some time at your place and learn what you know so I can keep things running after you're gone.”

“You want to learn *everything* I know?”

Noel hesitated. “Well, there are a lot of things that I already know. I *have* been paying attention. I can usually fix the ZPE when it fails but there are some aspects to it that I just don't understand. I know you've got one in your refuge, and I was hoping—”

“What do you mean, you know I've got one? I never said that!”

“Oh, c'mon, Miles! You know how to fix them and you can always manufacture parts for them when they break. You've got to have one around somewhere that you use as a reference. I find it really hard to believe that you can keep ours running without having access to one.”

“All right,” Miles replied. “So let's say, for the sake of this

discussion, that I do have one. What about it?"

"Well, I was hoping that you could answer my questions. Maybe we could spend some time together building parts for it. You could teach me what I need to know – at some place far away from here, where there are a million distractions."

"That could take weeks, maybe months," Miles pointed out. "Can you really afford to be gone for that long?"

"I don't see why not. Henry can handle things while I'm away, now that the ZPE is in good shape again. Besides, what choice do we really have? If I can't fix the ZPE when you're gone then the city is doomed. Do you have another suggestion?"

Miles sighed. "I suppose not. All right, then. Do you have your bags packed?"

"I certainly do! You didn't think I would be unprepared, did you? In fact, I've already let Henry know that I was taking a leave of absence. All I have to do is pick up my suitcases and we can head out."

"Then I suppose there's no way I can get out of this," Miles replied. "But it's probably for the best. If you'll go get your bag I'll head up to the tank and get her started. Just meet me there and we can leave."

Noel nodded and hurried off down the corridor. Miles shuffled over to the elevator, walked inside, and pressed the button to return to the surface.

I really shouldn't be so hard on him, Miles thought, as the aging elevator slowly climbed back up toward the city's parking garage. He is right. The only way the city will survive after I'm gone is if people like him keep things running, and they can only do that if they understand the technology. This is something I probably should have done a long time ago. Noel definitely has what it takes to understand the ancient sciences. If anyone can replace me it's him.

It doesn't really matter, though. Noel doesn't realize it, but it's already too late. His ability to keep the air towers functioning

isn't going to make any difference once Mars finally loses its last trace of atmosphere. Even if he learned everything I know he still won't be able to keep the city alive after Mars has died. No matter how hard he tries they're not going to survive another century. This is all futile. What we really need is a miracle – but miracles are in short supply right now.

Miles got out of the elevator and shuffled over to his tank. Enough of that. Noel wants to learn, so I'll teach him. That's really all I can do. The rest is up to the Lord. If He wants to save the city then it will be saved; if not then it will be lost. All I can do is play the part I've been given.

CHAPTER 4

"For thousands of years we have remained in our mountain fortress, waiting for someone to find a cure for the savages' madness. No cure has ever materialized, and I submit to you that none ever will. The savages will always remain savages, and no mythical Rangers from the stars will ever come to the Earth and cure them. The only hope we have is to wipe them out and reclaim this world as our own. If we allow them to continue to stand in the way of progress then we are truly doomed indeed."

—Evan Maldonado

General of the Children of Light

April 27, 7243

IT WAS JUST BEFORE SUNSET when Miles and Noel left the city. Miles sat in the *Raptor's* cockpit and Noel sat beside him. The two said very little as the old man steered the tank up the winding road and out onto the desert floor.

"When was the last time you were on the surface?" Miles asked.

"Not very long ago. In fact, I helped install that new air tower over there."

"Oh, of course! I should have know that. How did that go?"

"It went pretty well, considering. The hard part was getting the city to approve funding for its construction. The mayor didn't want to do it, but I finally convinced him that it had to be done."

"How did you do that?" Miles asked. "It's not like him to be

proactive! Usually he waits until something catastrophic happens.”

“Oh, I just talked to a couple people at the Tikal News Network and showed them the numbers. They ran a special on how we were all about to suffocate. People started panicking, and that put a lot of pressure on the mayor to do something. It's amazing how responsive he can be when angry mobs are pounding down the door to his office.”

Miles smiled. “I see you've learned a thing or two! I'm surprised TNN ran the story, though. They don't usually broadcast anything that puts the administration in a bad light.”

“It's all in how you phrase it,” Noel said. “If I had told them that the mayor was refusing to act then, sure, they probably wouldn't have touched it. But a story on how the planet's atmosphere is getting thinner and will eventually suffocate us – well, that's an *environmental* story, and that's different. Those stories are approved by all the 'right' people.”

“Nice work,” Miles said approvingly. “You've really come a long way.”

Noel looked out the plastic cockpit window, squinting at something in the distance. High overhead he saw a point of light twinkling in the sky. “What's that?” he asked.

Miles glanced at it. “Oh, it's probably Jupiter. Looks too small to be Earth.”

“Huh,” Noel said. “Interesting. I'm not usually out at night, so I don't get a chance to see the planets. They're actually kind of pretty.”

“It's really not much of a show – just a few points of light in an utterly black sky. A long time ago the sky used to be filled with stars. There were thousands of them! But they're gone now.”

“Do you really believe that there used to be stars? I mean, isn't all that stuff about the Wall and the Emperor just a legend?”

“Oh no, it's all true! I've done my research and have verified every bit of it. I've assembled a lot of ancient historical

documents over the years and I'd be glad to show them to you, if you want to see them. Not many people care about such things anymore. The truth is there's a whole galaxy out there, Noel – in fact, there are *billions* of galaxies! But a great Wall separates us from the rest of space."

"What a pity," Noel replied. "If what you say is true then it sounds like we're really missing out."

Miles shook his head. "I used to think that way too. That was before I realized that the Wall works both ways. It keeps us from reaching the stars – but it also keeps the stars from reaching us. It may be a prison but it's also a defense."

"A defense against what?" Noel asked.

"Against things so horrifying that they don't even have a name. There are monsters lurking out there in the dark places of space that make Lizzie seem utterly harmless by comparison. Imagine a giant cloud of micromachines that can consume planets, destroy colonies, eradicate—"

"If you say so," Noel interrupted. "I don't buy into all of that, myself. But every man has a right to his own opinion. If he wants to believe in scary nonsense then I suppose he can do that."

"Thanks," Miles said dryly.

Noel heard a small beep. He glanced down at the scope and saw that a small dot had appeared in its upper-right-hand corner. "What's that?"

Miles checked the scope. He frowned, then pressed a button to get more information. "Now that's odd. It looks like it's a person."

"A single person? All alone?"

"Looks that way. I don't even see any vehicles around."

"Do you think there's an underground base around here somewhere?"

"I guess it's possible," Miles said slowly. "I've never run across one in that area, though, and I don't know anyone who lives up that way. Most people don't like being that close to Tikal. My

guess it's a prospector, looking for Don Elliott's lost treasure."

"That's certainly possible," Noel replied. "It wouldn't be the first time some fool fell for that old legend."

The scope beeped a second time and another dot appeared on the scope, this time to the south. This dot was far larger and was moving rapidly. An alarm began sounding.

Miles gasped. "It's Lizzie!"

Noel paled. "Has she seen us?"

"I don't think so. But she has seen that prospector – and she's headed right for him!"

"We've got to get out of here!" Noel exclaimed. "Do you think we can make a run for it?"

"Absolutely not," Miles replied firmly. He slammed the *Raptor* into high gear and abruptly changed its course. "We are *not* going to run away – we're going to go help that person."

"Help them!" Noel screamed. "Are you out of your mind? Do you know what Lizzie will do if she catches us? This tank isn't going to protect us, you know!"

"And what about that prospector there? What if he's lost or hurt? Do you think he has any chance at all? If we don't step in and do something he's as good as dead – and I'm *not* going to just sit here and let him die!"

Noel gulped and tightly gripped his seat as the *Raptor* sped across the desert sands. Miles had plotted a course that would take them straight to the prospector, but a glance at the scope told Noel that they weren't moving fast enough. "We're not going to make it!"

Miles nodded. "I know. We're moving a lot faster than Lizzie but she's much closer to the prospector than we are. This is going to be tricky."

"Tricky? What do you mean, *tricky*? We don't even have a chance!"

"Sure we do. Lizzie is unpredictable, Noel. She might not attack as soon as she gets there. If we can reach the scene before

she strikes then we might be able to distract her long enough for the prospector to get on board. Then we can make a run for it.”

“But she’ll chase us!”

“We can outrun her,” Miles said. “At least, I think we can. At any rate we’ve *got* to try – that prospector’s life is depending on it!”

By now they had covered much of the ground that separated them from the person that Lizzie was hunting. The sun had set and the sky had grown dark, making it almost impossible for them to see the prospector that they were trying to save. In the gathering gloom it was difficult to see anything, but even the darkness could not hide Lizzie. As Noel gazed at the lumbering figure he could make out countless legs, a cylindrical blue body that was easily a hundred feet long, and many bizarre appendages. The rad-monster had kicked up a huge dust cloud and was barreling toward the lone figure.

“Oh my goodness,” Noel gasped. “I – I’d never seen it before. It’s so huge! Do you think—”

In the distance the tiny figure stood up. A bright bolt of searing white light jumped from the person to the monster. The bolt struck Lizzie, knocking her back. As she struggled to her feet a second bolt struck her. This time the energy blew the monster apart, sending pieces of her flying across the desert.

Noel’s jaw dropped. “Did you just see that? Did that really happen?”

“Apparently so!” Miles said. He continued to drive the *Raptor* as fast as she could go. “Our friend seems to have some rather powerful weaponry! I’d love to get a look at that technology. Let’s see who it is and offer them a ride home.”

As the tank drew close to the individual Miles slowed it down. He finally stopped the craft less than twenty feet away from the person. The headlights illuminated a teenage girl, who appeared to be in her early teens. She was tall and thin, with bronzed skin and straight black hair. The girl was wearing a long

blue dress and was staring away from them, looking at the remains of the grotesque creature that she had just killed.

Noel gasped. "Why, she doesn't even have a spacesuit! She's going to die if we don't get her inside the ship right now! There's no air out there!"

Miles stood up and stared at the girl, a mixture of amazement and wonder on his face. "Could it be? Is it possible? Can it really be her?"

"What are you doing?" Noel shouted. "Get out there and get her! Do you want her to die?"

Miles walked to the back of the cabin and put on a helmet and air supply. He then exited the *Raptor* through its airlock and stepped out onto the Martian desert. By now it was completely dark outside, but the headlights of the *Raptor* lit up the surrounding area.

The old man walked over to the girl and stood in front of her. The teenager's brown eyes shifted from the rad-monster's shattered carcass over to him. Miles saw that tears were running down her face. She was deeply upset.

I know who you are, Miles thought with a sense of elation. I recognize you, Amy Stryker, and I know why you are so sad. We share the same grief, little one. I, too, mourn the loss of your family.

Miles took her hand and gestured toward his vehicle. The girl hesitated, then nodded. Miles led her into the tank and through its airlock. As soon as they were inside Noel ran over to her. "Is she all right?"

"She will be, in time," Miles said. The old man led her over to a chair and she sat down. The girl briefly glanced around the cabin but apparently saw nothing of interest. She turned her attention out the cockpit window and stared off at the horizon.

Noel walked over to her. "Are you all right? Is there anything I can get you?"

The girl looked at him and said something in a foreign

language. Noel shook his head. "I'm sorry, but I don't understand you. Do you speak Martian?"

The teenager said something else and then turned her attention back outside. Noel turned to look at Miles. "Did you understand that?"

"Not really. I'm afraid that my command of ancient Martian is very poor. I can comprehend the written language fairly well but the spoken language is a different matter entirely. There just aren't enough examples of it left to learn how to pronounce the words. I made some guesses over the years but apparently I was quite wrong."

"Ancient Martian?" Noel asked incredulously. "Are you serious? No one has spoken that dialect for thousands of years! Why would she be using it?"

"Because it's Amy's native tongue," Miles explained. "That's what was spoken here the last time she set foot on this planet. It might be the only language she knows."

"What are you talking about? She's a teenager! Why, she could be my daughter – if I was married, that is, and had kids, which I don't. She's not thousands of years old. Just look at her!"

"Appearances can be deceiving, Noel. Amy is a relic of a civilization that died out a long time ago. Haven't you noticed how tall she is?"

"She is pretty tall for a child," Noel admitted.

"There's more to it than that. In our society full-grown adults are about four feet tall. Some are a bit taller and some a bit shorter, but it's a good average. Amy, though, is already four feet six and she's still young. By the time she's fully grown she'll be more than a foot taller than you, if not more."

"But she's shorter than *you* are," Noel pointed out.

Miles smiled. "I'm a special case."

Noel shook his head. "Well, you can believe that if you want, but I prefer to stay grounded in reality. What I see is a poor girl who got lost in the desert and nearly killed by Lizzie. I think we

need to take her some place safe so she can get some rest.”

“I agree. I’ll drive us back to New Tikal. I’m sure there’s an abandoned apartment somewhere that she can use. That city doesn’t house half the people it used to. Everything is dying off, I guess.”

Miles got up, walked over to the pilot’s seat, and got the *Raptor* moving again. As he turned the vehicle around Noel called out to him. “You know, now that you mention it, I can think of a couple empty apartments on the engineering level that are pretty nice. They’ve been abandoned since the layoffs last year but they’re still in good repair.”

“I think that would work fine,” Miles agreed.

As he drove the tank across the desert Noel noticed that the girl was staring out the window, looking at something in the distance. Noel followed her gaze and noticed that the sky was filled with twinkling dots of light.

“Hey, Miles,” Noel called out. “Just how many planets are there?”

“Oh, eight or nine, depending on how you count them,” Miles replied. “A couple millennia ago there was a big debate over the exact definition of a planet, and to this day not everyone agrees with the decision that was made. Most people don’t really care, though. But why do you ask?”

“Because I see a lot more than eight or nine dots in the sky. Is it like this every night?”

Miles glanced up at the sky and gasped. He immediately stopped the tank. “Oh my goodness! I can’t believe it. She did it! She really did it!”

“Who did what?” Noel asked, as he sat down in the chair beside Miles.

“Amy brought down the Wall. It’s gone, Noel. It’s gone at last! We’re free!”

“Ok,” Noel said uncertainly. “So what does that mean?”

“It means that those dots are *stars*,” Miles said excitedly.

"That's why she's here! It all makes sense now."

"Those certainly do look like stars," Noel agreed. "And you were right, too – they're quite beautiful! I had no idea what we'd been missing for all those millennia. Maybe the old legend about the Wall really did have a grain of truth to it. As an engineer, I would guess that whatever had been sustaining the Wall finally broke down. It just got old – like our ZPE – and we were lucky enough to be there when it happened."

"Nope," Miles replied. "Amy did it. She was there when it was first created, and now she's returned to shut it down. This is her doing. Do you think it's just a coincidence that she appeared at the exact same time the stars did?"

Noel laughed. "That's ridiculous! We find a poor girl lost in the desert, about to die, without even a suitcase to her name, and you think that she's somehow done something to a generator that's billions of miles away? Personally, I think *she's* the lucky one. Another minute or two out there and she would have suffocated. I'm sure that if she could talk she would thank us for saving her."

Miles shook his head. "I think, before it's all over, we will be the ones thanking her for saving us."

"Believe what you will. But even so, stars or not, we do need to get her back to the city. No matter where she's from, she's clearly tired and upset and needs a good night's sleep."

"Now that is something we can both agree on," Miles replied.

The old man drove the aging tank through the Martian deserts and back to New Tikal. But the entire time his focus was on the brilliant, beautiful stars that filled the night sky. They were so fantastic that they took his breath away. *I never thought I would live to see this day*, he thought. *Maybe God has not forgotten about us after all.*

CHAPTER 5

"It is indeed possible that the savages will never be cured. I cannot deny this possibility. However, even if that is the case, killing them is not our only option. There are ways to obtain what we need without slaughtering them. The savages are, after all, mindless and insane. It does not take a great deal to outwit them. We can build a future for ourselves and for Earth without taking away theirs."

—Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

April 27, 7243

AFTER AMY LEFT IN ANGER the Sentinel remained on her now-empty planet for a while, partly to see if she would return and partly because he did not know what else to do. He quietly stood on the beach and looked out over the ocean. Occasionally he would scan the Tau Ceti system to see if she was trying to get through the Wall, but he detected no activity.

As he studied Xanthe he realized with a start that the people there desperately needed help. Just before the Artilect was destroyed it had sent out a powerful electromagnetic pulse, aimed at the planet Xanthe. This pulse destroyed the last of the bot swarms, ending that threat forever. However, what the Sentinel had not realized was that the pulse had also destroyed every last piece of electronic equipment on the entire planet – including the pods that housed the planet's hundreds of thousands of residents. All of those pods were now burnt out,

and the people that used to reside in them were trapped inside the vault. On top of that, the vault's lighting system had been destroyed, along with the only elevator that could take them to the surface. The citizens of Xanthe were all prisoners of darkness, with no way to escape. If someone did not intervene quickly they would run out of air and suffocate.

The Sentinel was about to leap into action when he stopped himself. *Wait a minute – this is not my place. I am the servant, not the master. It is not up to me to decide the fate of these people. Amy should be the one to make that decision. I am not authorized to intervene in the affairs of men.*

But I have already intervened, the Sentinel suddenly realized. *Amy had decided on a course of action, and I stepped in and stopped her. She is now gone and may never return. For better or worse, the fate of these people is now in my hands. I cannot drive Amy away and at the same time expect her to help them. I will have to take care of them – at least until Amy returns.*

This thought deeply disturbed the Sentinel. *I had no choice but to save them from Amy; I could not let her kill them all. That would have been wrong. But in doing so I went beyond my authority. Now I must go beyond my authority again and take care of them. They need someone to save them and I am all that they have. But after I rescue them from the vault I must find Amy and resolve our conflict. These people need a human to watch over them, not a machine. This is not what I was built to do.*

With great trepidation, the Sentinel left Amy's world and transported himself across space to the planet Xanthe, using his control of the Wall to access the protected system. After he reached Vault 37 he quickly surveyed the situation. He knew it was going to be dark, so that did not surprise him. But what he did not expect was the level of sheer panic that he encountered. The screams of desperate men and women echoed through the cavernous rooms. Some people were crying while others desperately flailed about. A few were on their hands and knees,

crawling on the floor toward what they hoped was an exit. Most people were still in their pods, crying out for help but not getting any answers. All of them were old and frail and in a state of total terror.

Not knowing what else to do, the Sentinel used his abilities to transport all of them to the surface of Xanthe. One moment they were in the vault, crying for help, and the next moment they were on a hill that overlooked Star City, blinking in the sunlight. The Sentinel thought that this would calm them down, but it did not. Within moments the crowd of hundreds of thousands of people was screaming in panic once again.

"Where's my synthetic world?"

"What is this horrible place?"

"I won't be treated like this, do you hear me?"

"How dare you interrupt me! Who do you think you are?"

"Who's responsible for this outrage?"

"I want this fixed immediately! I don't belong out here!"

As the Sentinel watched, the crowd began turning on each other. "It was you, wasn't it?" someone screamed. "No, it must have been him!" Wild accusations began flying and people started screaming at each other.

I have to do something before they start hurting each other, the Sentinel thought. Perhaps if I explain what is going on they will calm down. With this in mind the Sentinel appeared in front of the group, taking on the form of a tall gentleman wearing a gray suit and hat.

"Excuse me, everyone," he called out. "If I might have your attention I'd like to explain what is going on."

When he called out to them the crowd grew silent. They stopped screaming at each other and turned around to see who had addressed them. When they saw that he wasn't one of them they began yelling at him, demanding to be returned to their pods. The angry mob began moving in his direction.

The Sentinel quickly jumped off the ground and hovered

about thirty feet in the air. From that height the mob could not reach him and he had a better view of the group as a whole. He once again tried to address the group. "People, please! If I can have your attention for just a few short moments I would appreciate it. I'd like to explain what has happened."

The noise died down somewhat, but a few people still kept shouting. The Sentinel decided to simply talk louder. "Ladies and gentlemen, I have come here to tell you that your pods have been permanently deactivated. Vault 37 is no longer functioning. I have transported you out of the vault and to the surface of your world so that you can continue your lives. The city that you see in the distance is Star City, your capitol. It will be your new home."

As soon as he said that their pods had been destroyed the crowd erupted in screaming. Everyone was intensely angry. The clamor was so loud that the Sentinel found it difficult to hear what they were shouting, but the message was clear. The people wanted to go back into their pods.

"I am afraid that will not be possible," the Sentinel called out. "Your pods have been destroyed and they will not be repaired. You will have to continue your lives here, in the real world."

This only angered the crowd further. The Sentinel realized that the crowd was not going to calm down, so he turned his attention away from the angry mob and focused on Star City itself. When Amanda rebuilt the city she had restored all of its systems, but the Artilect's EMP had ruined them. While the buildings were still intact, none of their components worked. The city was effectively dead. *These people cannot live in a dead city. They need a place with food and water, and Star City no longer has either of those things. If I do not fix this they will die, just as surely as if I had left them in the darkness of the vault.*

The Sentinel considered restoring the city to operation, but he was hesitant to do so. *There may still be bot technology hidden in those buildings, or perhaps records that could be used to rebuild the swarms. I will not rebuild the city until I know*

everything that it contains, and can guarantee that it has nothing that could threaten others. However, these people must have a place to live. This means that I need to construct a temporary home for them that can meet their needs until Amy returns.

As the crowd screamed at him, the Sentinel searched through his memory and found the plans for an immense, mile-high skyscraper. The building had everything that was needed to support life – food, water, housing, apartments, schools, libraries, and a great deal more. It was an entire city cleverly contained in a single building.

Satisfied that this would give the crowd a good place to live for the time being, the Sentinel searched the nearby area and found an empty field that was not far from where the mob was located. He then used the nanites Amanda had left in the planet's atmosphere to turn the field into programmable matter. Ten minutes later the skyscraper rose out of the ground. The slender blue building soared high into the air, the sun shining off of its glass walls. *I christen you the Tower of the Sparrow*, he thought. *At least this building will serve as a memorial to the crew of that ill-fated ship. They may have no graves, but at least they have this.*

By now the crowd had started to disperse. Groups of people were still screaming incoherently at him, but others had grown bored and walked off. “Attention, everyone,” the Sentinel cried out. “At the moment Star City is not functional. Until it has been repaired you can live in the giant building that you see just south of this hill. The Tower of the Sparrow contains both food and water. You will also find plenty housing there – more than enough to shelter all of you. It should meet your needs for the foreseeable future.”

A few people started climbing down the hill toward the tower, but the rest of the mob simply scattered. At first the Sentinel was confused, until he realized that they had formed

search parties and were looking for their pods. He considered telling them that they were wasting their time but decided against it. *They will not listen to me. Perhaps experience will show them that their pods are truly gone.*

The Sentinel was about to leave when he noticed that a single individual off in the distance was shouting out to him – and addressing him by name. The Sentinel focused on him and realized that it was Adrian Garza. *Perhaps he is their leader, now that Elder Lane is dead, the Sentinel thought. If so then he may be able to explain the situation to these poor people. It is possible that he can communicate with them more effectively than an outsider such as myself.*

The Sentinel flew through the air toward the ancient man, and a few seconds later he landed in front of him. “Is there something you need?” he asked.

“Yes, there is,” Adrian replied. “I need you to put all of us back into our pods. *Immediately.*”

“That is not possible. As I just explained to everyone, the pods have been destroyed. That is not going to change.”

“But you can repair them! I've seen what you aliens can do, with all of your fancy gizmos and technology. I don't believe for a minute that they've been destroyed beyond repair. If you can make an entire skyscraper grow out of the ground – and I just watched you do it – then you can fix our pods.”

The Sentinel nodded. “That is true. I am sure that I could repair them, if I tried. But I am not going to do that, Adrian. I will not put these people back into the prisons that destroyed them and wiped out their civilization. Those pods are deadly.”

“Those pods are our homes, you monster! Who do you think you are, taking away our lives like that?”

“You have lost nothing but an imaginary world,” the Sentinel replied calmly. “It wasn't real. None of it was real. You have been living in a dream for the past five thousand years. It's time for you to wake up before it's too late.”

"You *realist*," Adrian snarled. "Who gave you the right to tell us how to live our lives? You're nothing but a tyrant, forcing your way of life upon us! I won't have it, do you hear me?"

"How quickly one forgets," the Sentinel replied coldly. "When I first came here I told you that you had a choice: you could stay in your pods or you could leave them and join us. All you had to do was tell us that you weren't interested in our offer and we would have left you alone. Instead you betrayed us, and now the Stryker family, along with their friends and the Artilect, is dead. Adrian, you lost the right to live as you saw fit the day you launched a war against us. If you wanted to be left alone you should not have gone on a murderous rampage. You have brought this on yourself."

"We had to do it, you moron!" Adrian shouted. "Killing you was the only way to guarantee that we would be left alone. Your 'assurances' were totally worthless! My only regret is that some of you survived."

The Sentinel stared at Adrian. He could see the utter hatred and malice in the man's eyes, and knew that there was no way to reason with him. *What have I done? Amy would have killed this man, but I saved his life. Yet even though I saved him he would still kill Amy and myself if he had the chance. Was it right to save the life of a murderer who only wishes to kill more people? What do I do now?*

"I am not going to repair the pods," the Sentinel said firmly. "Your people used them to destroy your lives. You have spent millennia doing nothing but acting out your basest fantasies, and I will not return them to you. You're in the real world now, Adrian. You are old and near death. I am giving you one last chance to change the way your life ends, before you die in your sins and stand before an angry God. Do not waste this opportunity to find forgiveness and mercy."

"I hate you," Adrian replied. "And I hate Amy too. Tell her that if she ever comes back to this world I will kill her."

The old man then turned his back on the Sentinel and walked off. The Sentinel shook his head and disappeared.

CHAPTER 6

“For too long we have allowed those savages to stand in our way. Our forefathers coddled them, allowing them to seize control of the Earth while we hid in the mountains. If we had wiped them out long ago it would be we who live in the valleys. The foolishness of our forefathers has doomed us. We must not repeat their mistake.”

—Evan Maldonado

General of the Children of Light

April 27, 7243

AFTER SAYING GOODBYE TO JONES, Amanda Stryker left the Golden Spire and headed down the golden street. She had no particular destination in mind; she just wanted to walk through the heavenly city and spend some time thinking. It was a beautiful day and there was something incredibly appealing about being outside. *It's too nice a day to spend indoors*, she thought. *Besides, there's so much to see! It's so strange, walking down the street and hearing angels tell you hello. I wonder how long it takes to get used to living here.*

As she walked down the sidewalk she heard a voice calling out behind her. She turned around and saw Reverend Knight sitting on a bench.

“Oh – hello!” Amanda exclaimed. “I didn't see you sitting there.”

“As I noticed,” the preacher replied, smiling. He put down the book he had been reading and gestured to the seat beside him. “Do you have time to sit down for a moment, or are you on your

way to a pressing engagement?"

"No, I'm not busy," the girl said. She sat down beside him and glanced at the book he had been reading. "Is that a *calculus* textbook?" she asked in surprise.

"It is indeed! It's been such a long time since I've studied mathematics that I wanted to go back to the basics. I actually have a master's degree in math, you know. In fact, I was well on my way toward becoming a mathematician when the Lord called me to preach."

"You were? I mean, seriously? I didn't know you cared about math!"

"Oh, I was quite fascinated by it! I simply didn't have the time to pursue that interest when I lived in the shadowlands. But now things are different. I'm really quite excited about it."

"Really?" Amanda asked dubiously. "But – I mean, it's *math*. I can see how math was important in our old life, but why does it matter now? Aren't there, I don't know, more spiritual things to do?"

"But this *is* a spiritual matter," Reverend Knight replied. "After all, the laws of mathematics are just as much the laws of God as the Ten Commandments. They both have the same author and they both reflect upon the character of the Holy One. Their purposes are quite different, of course, but they both play an important part in our world. Looking deeper into mathematics gives one insights into the One who created it in the first place – it is a testament to His greatness, not to mention His sense of order and reason."

"I guess," Amanda said. "It still doesn't seem very spiritual, though."

Reverend Knight smiled. "Back in the shadowlands people tended to divide the world up into categories. On the one side were spiritual things – prayer, Bible study, preaching, attending church. On the other side were secular things – the sciences, the arts, sports, the physical world, and so forth. But that's not the

way God sees it. The sciences are not a secular pursuit because they are a study of the world that God created, and that world declares the glory of God. The arts do not exist simply for their own sake, but to glorify the One that gave mankind artistic talent. God authored the Bible *and* our genetic code, and they both reflect measures of who He is. His fingerprints are everywhere – and to search out the mysteries He has scattered all over the universe is very much a spiritual thing. Or it *can* be, if you are looking at it from that perspective.

“You see, Amanda, the Lord wants to be glorified in *everything* that we do. Even in the shadowlands, being a disciple of Jesus was not something that was restricted to Sunday mornings. It permeated every aspect of our lives – the decisions we made, the way we spent our time, and even the things that we said. Even mundane tasks such as paying our bills or repairing our homes touched on it, because caring for one’s family and treating our neighbors as we want to be treated was very much something God cared about. Our whole life is a spiritual matter because all of it belongs to Him.”

“I see what you mean,” the girl replied. “It’s just not what I expected. I kind of thought that when we finally got here we’d spend all of our time sitting around on a cloud, strumming a harp or something. I didn’t expect to find a city, with buildings and streets and things going on. It’s just weird.”

The preacher smiled. “I know. Many people are equally surprised. But think about it for a moment. Did it really make sense that an engineer’s only opportunity to use his technical abilities for the glory of God was during his short earthly life, and then for all the rest of eternity he would simply do *nothing*? Or that a scientist would only be able to study God’s creation while living in a fallen world, and would be unable to do so after reaching a perfect world? After all, the first person in the Bible who was said to be full of the Spirit wasn’t a preacher, but a craftsman named Bezaleel. The Lord created us to glorify Him

and enjoy Him forever, and the way we do that is by using the abilities He gave us – both in our past life and in this one as well.”

“But what about doctors? I don't see any hospitals around here. Or funeral homes, for that matter.”

“That's quite true! There are some professions that, thankfully, are no longer needed. I suspect you will find no undertakers here who want to go back to the time when their skills were necessary. But there are many activities that are *not* tied to a fallen world. Had Adam and Eve not sinned, they would have gone on to populate the world and their descendents would have developed the sciences, the arts, economics, and so forth. There is nothing evil about any of these things, and in the right place they can bring glory to God. Here we see those things in their proper place, being used for their intended purpose.”

“I understand,” Amanda replied. “I was just expecting something very different.”

Reverend Knight nodded. “I don't think any of us really knew what it would mean to live in the very presence of God. There were hints, of course, in the Scriptures – Isaiah and John both wrote about it – but words alone simply could not convey what it's like to be in the presence of such holiness and greatness. *That* is what makes this place so incredible. Not its buildings, or its wonders, but its Lord. In life it was so difficult to keep God at the center, but here it is natural – in fact, it's impossible to imagine doing anything else.”

Amanda nodded. “I agree. This is a good place to be, and now that I'm here I have no desire to be anywhere else. But – well, I'm confused. I didn't expect to feel *sad* here.”

“That's what was on your mind when you walked by, wasn't it?” Reverend Knight asked. “You care deeply about your sister and you feel compassion for her, and that feeling surprised you.”

“Right! I mean, after all, didn't the Bible say something about there being no more sorrow or pain? I didn't just imagine that, did I?”

"No, you did not imagine it. The Lord did make that promise. He said that after Judgment Day, when death and evil were finally eliminated, He would create a new heavens and a new earth. In this new place there would no longer be sorrow, or crying, or pain, for the former things are passed away. But that has not happened yet. The shadowlands have not yet been supplanted by a new and more perfect world.

"Tell me this, Amanda. Do you think that God cares about the people who still live in the shadowlands? Does He feel their pain and have compassion toward them, or is He indifferent?"

"Of course He cares!" Amanda exclaimed.

"Well, if *He* cares, doesn't it make sense that *you* would care as well? After all, you now live in His country and are constantly in His presence. If He is grieved, then isn't it natural for you to grieve with Him? To put it another way – did you think that after you got here and became a sinless immortal you would care *less* about your sister than you did before? Or that you would be *less* tenderhearted and compassionate than you were when you still battled sin and darkness?"

"Oh," Amanda said. "I see what you mean. But – what am I supposed to do? I mean, she's there and I'm here. There is absolutely nothing I can do to help her."

"You can trust Jesus to take care of her," Reverend Knight replied. "She's not alone, you know. In fact, she is now among friends. Miles and Noel will take care of her. She will be all right, Amanda."

"I know, and you're right. But it won't be easy on her."

"No, it won't. The Lord's will is rarely easy. Your sister has a particularly difficult task – she is being asked to do a rare and difficult thing. But these hard times will not last forever. It will not be long before Amy's work is done and the Lord will call her home."

"That will be a good day," Amanda replied.

Reverend Knight smiled. "Yes, it will."

CHAPTER 7

“Yes, it is true that the savages were allowed to multiply in the valleys, and it is also true that our ancestors stayed hidden in the mountains. They did this because they had no choice: the savages were the only ones who could survive in the radioactive, poisoned wastes. It is only now, after thousands of years, that the poisons have been washed away and the Earth is habitable once again. Up until now it was not even possible to leave the mountains.”

—Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

April 27, 7243

AFTER JONES HAD FINISHED TALKING to Amanda in the Golden Spire he left the building. As he walked down the street he saw Amanda stop and say hello to Reverend Knight. He smiled to himself. *He'll encourage her, all right – that is one of his great gifts. This is a good place for her to be.*

Jones aimlessly walked through the golden city and headed to the outskirts of town. He didn't have to walk, but it was such a beautiful day that he just wanted to be outside. Besides, he was in no particular hurry. There was no need to rush and he had no deadlines to worry about.

After more than an hour of wandering he finally came to the estate of Maxwell Baker. Technically Max wasn't a captain anymore, but people still called him Captain Max and would probably continue doing so for the rest of eternity. His home was

located within the city's jurisdiction but was outside its bustling downtown section. It was nestled between a range of small hills that were blanketed with maple trees.

The captain's house was set back some distance from the road, but it was connected to it by an elegant cobblestone path. As Jones walked down the lane he admired the tremendous job that had been done on the estate's grounds. The grass was deeply green and neatly trimmed, and the grounds were artfully dotted with fruit-bearing trees. On either side of the stone walkway were purple flowers. A small stream meandered between the road and the house, and a wooden bridge arched over the stream.

When Jones reached the bridge he stopped for a while and leaned over its side, gazing at the stream below. The water was crystal-clear. He could see every fish that darted through the stream, along with a few crayfish that were hiding in-between the rocks. He glanced up and saw that the stream was coming from a mountain range in the distance. *I wonder where the stream goes*, he thought. *Perhaps there's a lake in the distance.*

A booming voice called out from behind him. "Did you lose something, my friend?"

Jones turned around and saw the captain strolling toward him from the house. "No, sir, I didn't. I was just admiring your stream. Does it have a name?"

"I suppose it does," Captain Max replied. "I haven't asked anybody about it, though, so I don't know. In fact, I haven't even seen my whole house yet! I have no idea what's in the basement, and I've only just now started exploring the East Wing. There's so much to take in!"

Jones looked up and studied the house. The sprawling mansion was so artfully placed in the landscape that at first he didn't realize how big it actually was. From where he was standing he could see at least six floors, but he suspected there were more in the back that were hidden from view. The entire

home was beautifully built out of wood, and had a rustic feel to it that seemed to fit the captain very well. He could see a wide porch, expansive windows, and a few flower-bearing vines that climbed up the side of the home.

"That's quite a place you've got! It's even bigger than Richard's home back in Tikal."

"It's an astonishing place," the captain agreed. "Just wait until you see the inside! It's – well, it's magnificent. And huge! It's a whole lot bigger than I was expecting."

"What were you expecting?" Jones asked.

"I don't know. Something reasonable, I guess. But that house – well, it has extravagance written all over it! There's no possible way that I deserve anything like that. I wasn't that great a person, Jones."

"*Your* greatness has nothing to do with it," Jones replied. "The reason we're here is because of *God's* great mercy and forgiveness. He paid the price for our sins, and He gave us His righteousness. We're here because He wanted us to be here, not because we earned it."

"Oh, I know. But what I mean is that a lot of people led much better lives than I did. I didn't spend sixty years taking care of lepers in the jungles of Earth, like some did. Those people are far more deserving of extravagant rewards than I am."

"Jesus did say that in His Father's house there were many mansions," Jones pointed out. "He didn't say 'In my Father's house are many one-bedroom apartments.'"

"True. But still, I figured the good stuff would go to life's amazing people – missionaries, martyrs, that sort of thing. Not to people like me."

"You did more than most," Jones replied. "You chose to take the *Sparrow* to Mars to rescue the Stryker family, and you stood by them when things went wrong. You knew you were putting your life on the line and you did it anyway, because it was the right thing to do. That act of courage cost you a great deal, and

the Lord has not forgotten that.

"Besides, God is not running out of space, nor is He running out of resources. After all, He uses gold for pavement! An estate like yours is very costly to us but not to Him. We serve a very extravagant God. He doesn't give us what we deserve – instead He is merciful and freely gives us gifts that we have no right to at all. None of us deserve to be here, but Jesus gave His life for us anyway so that His enemies could be reconciled to Him. That's who He is."

"He's amazing," Captain Max agreed.

"He is far beyond amazing. The best part is that He loves us and will never stop loving us. For all the rest of eternity He is going to show us the astounding riches of His grace. This is a good place to be, captain."

"Yes it is. But what brings you here? Did you just want to watch the fish swim in the stream?"

"It's not a bad way to spend an afternoon, sir. But I actually came by because you're about to have a visitor, and I wanted to be here when he arrived. He is going to make us an offer that I think you will be interested in."

"Really?" Captain Max asked, surprised. "How did you know that?"

Jones smiled. "Well I am a Seer, you know, but this time it didn't have anything to do with that. The reason I know is because I talked to him earlier today and he told me his plans. He's a very interesting man and he has some very interesting ideas."

"What does he want?"

"You'll see," Jones replied.

* * * * *

It was more than an hour later before the mysterious visitor dropped by the Maxwell estate. By that time the captain and

Jones had made their way inside the mansion and were sitting in the living room, having a cup of tea.

"Did you hear that Amy had made contact with Noel and Miles?" Jones asked.

"No, I hadn't!" Captain Max replied. "That's good news. I'm glad she finally has some friends. I think she'll find kindred spirits in both of them."

At that moment there was a knock on the door, and a few moments later a tall, distinguished-looking man walked into the room. As soon as the captain saw him he rose to his feet. "Dr. Temilotzin! So *you're* the mysterious visitor Jones was telling me about. Please, have a seat! Can I get you anything?"

"No, but thank you," he replied. The scientist sat down in a comfortable seat across from the captain. "So I see that you were expecting me! I take it that Jones has already told you about our plans?"

"I haven't been able to pry a single word out of him," Captain Max replied.

"I thought you'd want to tell him yourself," Jones explained.

Dr. Temilotzin nodded. "Very well. Captain, the reason I'm here is because we need your help. How much do you know about the Diano Corporation?"

"About as much as anyone, I guess. The company was founded in the 18th century by Ramon Diano. He used it to plant a lot of colonies, including Tau Ceti. In fact, I think most of the Ranger colonies were his work – at least, in my time they were. I don't know what happened after the *Sparrow* transported us into the future, but apparently at some point the corporation built the Artilect and a bunch of self-replicating probes. From what I've heard the firm was wiped out when Carol Lane's swarms killed everyone."

"That is quite accurate. Now, do you know what Ramon's dream was?"

"To colonize the stars?"

“Partly. Colonization was certainly important to him, and he spent most of his life doing exactly that. But that was only a part of his dream. What he really wanted to do was explore the stars. To him each star was a treasure chest, hiding away untold wonders. In fact, he wanted nothing less than to explore each and every star system in the entire universe.”

“That was a pretty ambitious goal!” the captain said, laughing. “I’ve got to say he certainly didn’t think small.”

Jones spoke up. “Your Nehemiah probes were a part of that dream, weren’t they? You were taking things to the next level.”

Dr. Temilotzin nodded. “They worked out fairly well, too. Before Amanda was forced to destroy them they had reached more than 93 million star systems. Of course, that’s just a small fraction of the number of stars in the galaxy – to say nothing of universe – but it’s more than I expected to reach before the end came.”

“Really?” Jones asked. “Does that mean that you actually expected things to turn out the way they did?”

“That is correct. I had hoped otherwise, of course, but in my heart I knew that nothing less than a miracle would change things. It was obvious that mankind was simply too corrupt to inherit the stars. Those who live in the shadowlands have never been able to remain civilized for very long. They always destroy themselves before they advance very far.”

“As we’ve seen from history,” Jones agreed. “In the 10th century the Mayans achieved interplanetary travel, only to destroy themselves in a nuclear war. It was another 700 years before anyone was able to reach Mars again. The Spanish Empire held onto space travel for a while, but then they got into a fight with the Rangers and were imprisoned behind the Wall. Their mastery of space lasted less than two centuries. The Rangers lasted a bit longer, but eventually they succumbed to war as well.”

“Exactly. The same story has repeated itself all throughout

history. That fact has only become more apparent in the millennia since I died. But here things are different. What we have here is a society of people who are *not* corrupt and who can *never be corrupted*. This civilization has the potential to inherit the stars and everything that lies beyond them. The future is quite exciting!”

“So what does that have to do with us?” Captain Max asked. “After all, the Diano Corporation is gone, the probes are gone, and the Rangers are gone. Ramon gave it a good try but things just didn't quite work out.”

“Because the dream is *not* gone,” Dr. Temilotzin explained. “Ramon Diano is here, as is Dr. Mazatl – the creator of the Artillect. Ramon still intends to explore the universe, and we've spent millennia working on a plan to do exactly that. We want you to be a part of it.”

“I don't understand,” the captain replied. “How can the dream still be alive? From what I understand, Judgment Day isn't that far off anymore. Amy is giving Earth and Mars one last chance to repent before Jesus returns, and after that it's all over. The shadowlands will be destroyed and there won't be any stars left to explore.”

Jones spoke up. “There's more to the story than that, sir. After the Judgment the Lord is going to create a new heaven and a new earth. The universe is going to be restored to the way it was before sin corrupted it, and we'll live there for all of eternity. That's the universe that you're planning on exploring, isn't it?”

“Exactly,” Dr. Temilotzin agreed. “What we've been doing is laying the groundwork for that grand adventure. We won't be able to launch anything until after the Judgment, of course, but there's a great deal that we can do now. For example, the Nehemiah probes were a step in the right direction but they were flawed. We have some ideas for an improved design that should be far more effective. With the help of both of you I think we can hit the ground running when the time comes.”

"Hit the ground running?" the captain asked. "But why the hurry? Don't we have all of eternity?"

"Of course! But time is still a scarce resource. Consider, captain. This evening you could have dinner at home, or you could have dinner with a friend. After dinner you could explore your house, or you could go downtown and listen to the orchestra, or you could do a thousand other things. The point is that you still have to choose how to spend your time. You cannot do everything so you must choose wisely."

"But there will always be tomorrow, won't there?"

"Of course – but the choices tomorrow may be different. Each day is unique."

"I see," the captain said. "So am I to understand that you're offering me a *job*?"

"Does that surprise you?" Dr. Temilotzin asked. "If so, it shouldn't! You are quite good at what you do. We would truly love to have your assistance."

"No, it's not that – although it is an honor. I'm just surprised that people *have* jobs here. It feels strange."

"It all depends on what you mean by 'job'," Dr. Temilotzin said. "You see, you must realize that you have all of eternity ahead of you. You are *not* going to spend all of that time staring at a wall watching paint dry. At some point, sooner or later, you'll want to do something – something that uses the talents you've been given to honor the Lord. This isn't about paying your bills or making ends meet, because things are no longer like that. What matters is that God gave you a very unique skill set and He wants you to use it – and *you* want to use it as well. You know how to reach the unreachable places and how to pry secrets out of strange worlds. You can hear the siren call of the stars, bidding you to uncover the mysteries that their Creator has hidden in them. There are billions upon billions of worlds out there, captain, and you have all of eternity to explore them. What do *you* want to do?"

The captain smiled. "I want to see what lies beyond the horizon."

"Then let's get started!"

CHAPTER 8

"Even my opponent admits that the wastes are now inhabitable once again! Why do we stay in these barren mountains when we could seize the green valleys and take what was once ours? All that stands in our way is a foolish compassion for a race of crazed lunatics. I say we end their suffering and reclaim the Earth!"

—Evan Maldonado

General of the Children of Light

April 27, 7243

IN ANOTHER PART OF PARADISE, Richard Stryker was sitting at a cafe that was on the bank of a crystal-clear river. Along both sides of the river were fruit-bearing trees. Small groups of people were walking among the trees, talking and laughing. No one seemed to be in any sort of hurry. They were just enjoying the afternoon.

Richard had just finished having lunch with his son Tim. After their meal was over Tim left and Richard decided to stay for a while. He had nothing else on his schedule and he enjoyed soaking up the ambiance. He was so relaxed that he was startled when a voice called out to him. "Mind if I join you?"

He looked up and saw Jack Nicholas standing beside the table. He immediately got to his feet and shook his hand. "Why hello there, governor! This is a delight – a real delight! I wasn't expecting to see you today. Please, have a seat!"

The two men sat down at the table. Jack grinned at him. "I'm afraid I'm not a governor anymore, Rick. I'm retired now, and let me tell you, I'm glad to have the time off. Today I'm just Jack."

"I know exactly what you mean," Richard replied. "I guess that makes us both ex-governors – which is not all bad. Life was starting to get pretty stressful there toward the end, and it's nice to lean back and enjoy things for a change. For the first time in years I'm not faced with any urgent, life-threatening problems. It's a wonderful feeling."

"You've definitely earned some time off! I'd certainly call your life 'stressful' – after all, you *did* just get killed, and that was right after your daughter Amanda died. I can only imagine how that must have felt."

"It was terrible, Jack, truly terrible. Worst day of my life. I guess that's why we let Carroll Lane take us by surprise – we were all devastated by what had just happened and weren't thinking straight. None of us really thought that it was even *possible* to kill Amanda – she was an Administrator, after all! She was supposed to be invulnerable. Jones tried to warn us, but I really thought he was wrong. Watching her die was...well, it was an enormous, heartbreaking shock. I can understand why we simply let Lane walk right in, but it's still embarrassing. After all the trouble we went through to defeat the swarms, we let him stroll right into our most secure sanctum and kill us all. I really blew that one – and the consequences were horrible. That one poor decision cost the lives of everyone but Amy."

"There wasn't anything you could have done about it," Jack replied. "You did the best you could to get to the bottom of the attacks, but even the Artilect couldn't figure them out. It's no wonder why you failed – no one would have guessed that Xanthe was behind them. After all, the attacks were completely irrational. They had nothing to gain and everything to lose."

"Exactly!" Richard exclaimed. "It just didn't make any sense. We were no threat to them, and we told them that we'd leave them alone if that's what they wanted. We offered them all the riches of the network, but we weren't going to force them to take them against their will. They had absolutely *nothing* to gain

by killing us. It was insane.”

“It was certainly a poor decision on their part, and one the Lord will not forget when Judgment Day comes. In fact, they've already started paying for it. Did you hear that the Artilect destroyed all their pods just before he died?”

“I did. They're really unhappy about that, too, but I can't say that I'm sympathetic. They need to live in the real world for a while and come to grips with the consequences of their actions. Perhaps a little *reality* will motivate them to repent before it's too late.”

“I certainly hope so,” Jack said. “By the way, it's great to finally meet you at last! I was hoping to meet you earlier, but unfortunately the Spanish Emperor intervened. Then things took an unexpected turn, to say the least.”

“Yes, they certainly did. I never expected to end up in the 73rd century, battling a foe I couldn't see with weapons that I could barely understand. Things got pretty wild there toward the end. By the way, I heard that you got to meet my daughters! It sounds like you gave them some pretty good advice.”

“I remember that,” Jack commented. “It seems so long ago now, but I guess it's still pretty recent for them. Meeting them was quite a shock. I had just spoken at their funeral two days earlier, and then there they were, sitting in Tim's apartment. I never expected to see them alive.”

“I can imagine. You know, I'm surprised that the news never leaked out. Amy and Amanda weren't particularly discreet.”

“They weren't that bad, Rick. In fact, they kept a pretty low profile. They didn't meet that many people, and everyone who encountered them kept it to themselves. After all, who would believe that the girls were still alive?”

“True. So what brings you here on this fine day? Did you just happen to be wandering by, or do you have something on your mind?”

“As a matter of fact I was just talking a walk, but there is

something that I wanted to talk to you about. I was going to wait a few days but I think that now's probably as good a time as any. Have you heard about Ramon Diano's latest project?"

"I think so. Doesn't he want to explore the universe? It seems like I overheard someone talking about it. Whatever he's doing, it sounds pretty ambitious."

"Ramon has always been ambitious," Jack commented. "But you're right. What he wants to do is explore the universe – not this universe, of course, but the one that is to come. He's been working with his team to handle the scientific aspects of space exploration. What he's asked me to do is put together a group to handle the administrative aspects."

"Do you mean he's looking for secretaries?" Richard asked.

Jack laughed. "No, Rick, he's looking for governors. Someone is going to have to be in charge of these new planets. I talked to Ramon and we both thought that this job would be a great fit for you. After all, you were the governor of Mars for years and you did an amazing job under very trying circumstances."

"But we're in Paradise now!" Richard exclaimed. "Jesus is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. *He's* the government. He doesn't need us to run anything."

"Even the Scriptures say that we will reign with him," Jack replied. "He is the sovereign, but there are positions of authority under him."

"But there's no need for them! This isn't Mars, where crime and corruption and idiocy are rampant. People govern themselves here. They don't need a babysitter to make sure that they don't steal each other's furniture."

"It's not about that," Jack said. "Look. There are billions and billions of people here. Some of those people – like you – have strong administrative skills, and others don't. Any time you have a group of people that are working together toward a common goal you have to have a leader to keep things organized. It's not a matter of bossing people around. Projects need leaders because

there has to be someone who draws up the plan and keeps people organized so that the plan can become a reality.”

“I see your point, but governing citizens and managing employees are two totally different things. You're not asking me to manage the development of a new rocket engine, or to oversee the construction of a building. What you want is for me to go back to being a governor, and I just don't see the need for it. Why does someone have to be in charge?”

“Because cities – and planets – still need a leader. You've been a governor before – you know what it takes to keep civilization running. A lot of the problems you used to have won't be an issue anymore, but there are still things that need to be done. Don't think of it as pushing people around and forcing them to carry out your whims. Think of it as a chance to serve millions of people on a planetary basis, making it easier for them to use their abilities to serve the Lord. You can call it a governor or a facilitator; it amounts to the same thing. The question is, are you interested?”

“You know, I think I might be,” Richard said. “What do I need to do to get started?”

“Right now you don't need to do anything. I'll drop by again sometime next week and we can start discussing it. For now I'll leave you in peace. Enjoy your afternoon, Rick – and welcome to Paradise.”

Jack stood up and walked down the street. Richard watched him leave, then settled back down in his chair. *Let's see who else stops by*, he thought to himself. *You meet all sorts of interesting people here.*

CHAPTER 9

"Murdering the savages (and make no mistake, killing them would amount to murder) would only guarantee our doom. Centuries of inbreeding has corrupted our genetic code and rendered us all but infertile. If we destroy the savages then we destroy the only other genetic pool on Earth. If we cannot find a way to cure them and mix their genes with our own, we will bear our last child sometime in the next fifty years. Two hundred years from now we will be extinct. Like it or not, those savages are our future. Without them we have no hope."

—Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

April 27, 7243

AMY STRIKER WENT STRAIGHT TO BED as soon as the *Raptor* reached New Tikal. She was so tired that she barely noticed when Miles led her to an abandoned apartment, gave her its key, bade her good-night, and shut the door behind him after he left. The girl collapsed into bed and slept all through the night. She didn't wake up until she heard a knock at the door.

"One minute," she grumbled. Amy opened her eyes and looked around. At first she didn't know where she was, but then it all came back to her. *I must have been really worn out last night*, she thought. *I can't believe I didn't redecorate this place before going to bed! I'm surprised this building hasn't been condemned. Even the Sparrow wasn't this bad.*

The condition of her bedroom was truly appalling. The only furnishings in the room were a rickety plastic chair and a rusty metal bed. A single light bulb dangled overhead, but it was off. The only light in the room came from a beam of sunlight that was streaming through a window in the far wall.

Wait a minute, Amy thought, startled. Light is coming through a window? How is that possible? Isn't this city underground?

Amy studied the window for a minute and then realized that it wasn't real. It was just a display terminal, cleverly built to look like a window. The illusion was very convincing, though. As she moved her head the scene out the window changed perspective, making it seem like there really was a grassy field on the other side of the wall. But she knew that was not the case. *This planet no longer has grassy fields*, she thought sadly.

A muffled voice called out through the front door, but she could not understand what it was saying. "Just a minute," she called out. "I'm coming."

Amy got out of bed and left the bedroom. Since there were no fake windows in the living room to provide phony sunlight she snapped on the overhead light. She was surprised to see how extremely small her apartment was. A tiny, dilapidated couch took up most of the living room. Along the far wall was the kitchen area, which contained a rusted sink, a broken stove, a refrigerator that was missing its door, and a few broken cabinets. There was another door that led to a miniscule bathroom. Other than that the apartment was empty. The floor, walls, and ceiling were made of a dirty, tarnished metal that was dented in a few places.

"This place is hideous!" Amy said aloud. "Hideous!" She shook her head, then walked over to the front door and opened it. Standing out in the hallway was a tall, elderly man who was dressed in what appeared to be blue overalls. He was wearing a pair of shoes that may have been white at one time but were

now a dirty brown. He had a kind face and deep blue eyes. There was something about him that made Amy think that he was much older than he looked.

"Oh, hello there!" Amy said. "You're the person that brought me here last night, aren't you?"

The man smiled and put a hand in his pocket. He pulled out a few crumpled notes, browsed through them, and then held one up.

Amy read the note aloud. *"I don't speak ancient Martian. Oh. Right! Of course you don't – I should have known that. Um, ok. That's going to make things a little tricky. If you'll come inside I'll try to find a way for us to communicate."*

Amy stepped away from the door and gestured for him to come in. The man nodded, stepped inside, and then sat down on the grimy couch. He appeared to be in no particular hurry.

The girl was silent for a moment, lost in thought. *Ok then. How am I going to do this? Well, maybe this is something my nanites could help out with. When Steve went back in time to the 19th century he found a way to learn the local languages. He may have written a program that I can use. But first things first – I need to create a nanite cloud that I can tap into.*

Amy closed her eyes and used her nanites to visualize the planet around her. She then released a small cluster of nanites into the air, transported them to the planet's surface, and commanded them to replicate until they had saturated the atmosphere, the ground, and New Tikal. As they began multiplying the girl browsed through their repository of commands until she found a section that dealt with languages. Amy experimentally activated a few of the commands, then opened her eyes.

"Well, that's going to take a while," she told the man. "This city is pretty small, so the nanites don't have a large data sample to work with. It may take them a while to map ancient Martian to whatever dialect you use today. But you don't understand a word

I'm saying, do you? No, I didn't think so."

Amy thought a moment, then waved her hand. A group of words suddenly appeared on the metal wall of her apartment, written in ancient Martian. The girl then left the room, went into the bathroom, and shut the door.

It took Miles a few minutes to decode the writing on the wall. The letters were very clear, but the sentence structure was oddly informal and some of the words were extremely old. Studying it made him realize just how ancient Amy actually was. He wasn't able to translate the entire message, but he could read enough of it to understand what she was trying to say. "Looks like she's working on the language problem and wants to freshen up," he said aloud. "Fair enough. I'll just sit here and wait, then."

Amy did not reappear until nearly an hour later. When she finally emerged from the bathroom Miles was surprised to see that her outfit had changed. She was now wearing blue jeans, a yellow T-shirt, and a pair of white sandals. Her hair was tied back in a yellow ribbon. *That's odd*, he thought. *I'm pretty sure she didn't have a suitcase last night, and this apartment surely didn't have any clothing that would fit her! Where did she get that outfit?*

As he watched, the girl closed her eyes and held still for a few minutes. Occasionally she made little motions with her hands, as if she was controlling something that he couldn't see. She finally opened her eyes and looked at him. "All right, let's give this a try. Can you understand anything I'm saying?"

"Absolutely!" Miles replied. He stood up. "My names is Miles. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Stryker. We're all very happy to have you here."

"You know my name?" Amy asked, surprised. "How could you possibly know who I am?"

"It's a long story, I'm afraid, and it's best saved for another time. There are more important things to attend to – such as

breakfast, for instance. Are you hungry?"

"You know, I actually am kind of hungry. I didn't miss breakfast, did I? I'm not sure what time it is here."

"You almost missed it, but not quite. As far as the time goes, it is currently eleven minutes past nine o'clock in the morning. Breakfast is served until ten. I woke you up at eight because I wasn't sure how long it would take you to learn our language. You proved to be a quick study!"

"It wasn't too bad," Amy replied. "It's not that different from what I'm used to. Well, I guess it actually *is* pretty different, but I can see how your language is related to mine. It's almost like we're speaking two different versions of the same language, only your dialect is a corruption of mine."

"I suppose it is, in a way. Your language has not been spoken in a very long time. A lot has changed since the 19th century. Not all of the changes have been good, I'm afraid."

"Have there been *any* good changes?" Amy asked.

"There have been a few. For example, the Spanish Empire no longer controls Mars. In fact, I believe that empire no longer exists at all. Mars is now an independent world, in control of her own destiny."

"I guess that's something," Amy replied. "But honestly, I was kind of hoping for more."

"Reality is what it is," Miles said. "Unlike you, I cannot make the world change simply by wishing it was different."

"And what makes you think that *I* can do that?"

"We'll talk about it after breakfast," Miles replied. "It's too long a story to discuss on an empty stomach."

Miles and Amy left the apartment and began walking down the hallway. Amy briefly considered locking the door behind her, but then realized that there was nothing in it worth stealing. *If they want that awful couch they're welcome to it*, she decided.

Amy was surprised at how dingy and old everything looked. She had hoped that her apartment was some kind of anomaly in

an otherwise nice building, but she soon discovered that was not the case. Bare light bulbs dangled from wires that dropped out of the ceiling. Most of the bulbs were broken, making it difficult to see. The walls of the building's corridors were made out of the same tarnished metal that she had seen in her apartment, and the floor was littered with old trash.

One thing Amy noticed was that every dozen feet or so she saw a door with a number on it. "So this really is an apartment building," Amy commented. "I'm not just imagining it."

"It is, or rather, it used to be. As you might guess, no one actually lives here anymore. Most of the engineers who work on the ZPE live in the city and commute. I don't really blame them – there's no particular reason to live in the plant itself. These apartments are just a relic of the old days."

Miles opened a battered door and stepped inside a stairwell. Amy followed him, and the two began walking upstairs.

"This place is in terrible shape!" Amy said. "Not that I'm complaining or anything, but it's clearly seen better days."

"It has indeed. This particular facility is actually two thousand years old. The zero-point-energy power plant was one of the first parts of the city that were built. The city center is somewhat newer than that, although part of it does date back to the same period. Very little has been added in the past five hundred years."

"No wonder it's in such poor condition! I had no idea it was so old. Why hasn't this place been maintained?"

"Because that requires resources, and no one wants to do it. Our only source of metal these days is the ZPE, and it can only produce so much. It just isn't cost-effective – or, at least, that is what our leaders tell us. Besides, things may not look pretty but they still work, even after all this time. That metal alloy you see was designed to last forever, and it almost has."

After walking up eight flights of stairs they finally reached the top level. Miles then opened a door that led to another corridor.

"Here we go!" Miles said cheerfully. "We've finally reached the main level. The cafeteria is just ahead, on the right."

"Wait just a minute! Didn't you say that this apartment complex had been abandoned?"

"I did," Miles said.

"And no one lives here anymore, right?"

"That is correct."

"Then why was I given a room on the eighth floor instead of the top one? Do you just like climbing stairs, or is this some kind of weird hazing ritual?"

Miles smiled. "The apartment that I gave you is the only one I was able to find that still contained a bed. I thought you might appreciate one of those."

"Oh," she replied. "Well, if I'm going to stay here for a while then I'm going to make a few changes. I hope you don't mind if I take a top-floor apartment – or if I do a little redecorating."

"Be my guest," Miles replied. "I'm just glad to hear that you're going to be spending some time with us. We are in desperate need of your help."

"I didn't mean that," Amy replied quickly. "I don't know what I'm going to do. I just said that *if* I'm going to stay here I may take a few liberties with the local décor."

"As you wish," Miles said.

As they walked down the hallway Amy tapped into her nanites to get a map of New Tikal. Directly below her was the abandoned apartment building where she had spent the night. The ruined structure contained twelve floors and, as Miles had said, they were all abandoned. *Mine really is the only one with a bed. Well, that's going to change.* The hallway they were now in was a major tunnel that connected the abandoned residential area to the large ZPE plant. Up ahead and on the right was the cafeteria – a rather large room that could hold several hundred people. Other doors on both sides of the hallway opened into workshops and storage rooms, many of which were deserted. At

the far end of the passage was a gigantic room which housed the ZPE plant itself.

That power plant is in terrible shape, she thought. Do these people know how damaged it is? I'm surprised it can run at all! I'm going to have to talk to them about that. If they–

“And here we are,” Miles said, interrupting her thoughts. He held the door open to the cafeteria. “After you, miss.”

“Thanks,” she replied. Amy stepped through the door and into the cafeteria. She took a deep breath, and then began coughing. “Oh my goodness! What is that horrible smell?”

“Breakfast!” Miles replied cheerfully. “Come on in and I'll show you.”

CHAPTER 10

“What Araiza says is madness – madness! The whole reason the savages are insane is because their genetic code is damaged beyond repair. If we introduced their genes into ours we would become just as insane. The real threat is not inbreeding, but his own stupidity. Inbreeding produces stronger offspring, not weaker ones! His talk of recessive genes, inherited traits, and increased homozygosity is meaningless blather. People can still have children; they do it all the time. Only a moron would believe that a sharp rise in infertility is something to be worried about.”

–Evan Maldonado

General of the Children of Light

April 27, 7243

AMY RELUCTANTLY FOLLOWED MILES into the cafeteria. There were about twenty or thirty people in the room, seated at tables that looked dangerously unstable. To her surprise the crowd was not randomly scattered throughout the room. Instead they had clustered together into two groups and were eagerly talking in low tones. As Miles led her up to the counter she overheard several of them talking.

“They’re so beautiful!” one man exclaimed.

“I know,” another said, “but what does it mean? Did Earth do this?”

“No way,” a third voice replied. “They’re even worse off than we are! This has to be the Rangers.”

"Aw, the Rangers are just a myth! They're not real."

"Then who did it? Don't tell me that it just happened all on its own!"

"Well, it might have. It *has* been a long time, you know. Maybe something just went wrong."

Amy nudged Miles. "They're talking about the stars, aren't they?"

"Indeed they are," Miles replied. "What you did last night has caught the attention of everyone and has had quite an impact on the city. I think you've given them hope – and perhaps inspired a few dreams as well."

A voice behind Amy spoke up. "Are you still carrying on with that, Miles?"

Amy turned around and saw a middle-aged man standing behind her, holding an empty tray. Amy was surprised at how short he was – he was barely taller than her, and yet he was clearly a full-grown adult. With a start Amy realized that *all* of the men in the room were short, with the odd exception of Miles.

Amy opened her mouth to say something but then decided against it. *I'll just ask Miles about it later, she decided. For now I'll just play along and act like nothing strange is going on. There are so many things that have changed! It's going to take time to sort it all out.*

Instead she looked at him and held out her hand. "Hello! I didn't see you standing there. My name is Amy."

The man shook her hand, smiling. "It's nice to meet you, young lady – or meet you again, I guess! My name is Lawson – Noel Lawson. But you can call me Noel." He turned and look at Miles. "See, she *does* know our language! I told you last night that she was just a prospector. Her confrontation with Lizzie must have scared her so much that she became incoherent. That's why we couldn't understand her last night."

"Lizzie?" Amy asked.

"The monster that haunts the ruins of old Tikal," Noel

explained. "Or, at least, *used* to haunt them, until it died last night. You know, speaking of that, you're an incredibly lucky girl. If that freak electrical disturbance hadn't happened right when it did Lizzie would have killed you before we could have stopped her. You're lucky to be alive!"

"Freak electrical disturbance?" Amy asked, puzzled. "What are you talking about? Do you mean the electroplasmic discharge I used to stun him? I actually didn't mean to kill it – I was just upset, and wasn't as careful as I should have been."

"Him?" Miles asked, surprised.

"Yes, him," Amy replied.

"Oh," Miles replied. "I guess I've been wrong all these years, then."

"Now hold on," Noel said. "What's this about a plasma discharge?"

"It was an electroplasmic discharge," Amy explained. "I was hoping to just temporarily paralyze him. My first bolt was too weak, though, and just knocked him back. I then upped the amps, but I overdid it. I'm really sorry. He caught me off-guard. The last time I was here Mars didn't have creatures like that."

Noel frowned. "And what exactly did you shoot him with – your bare hands? You weren't exactly carrying anything last night, you know."

"I guess you could say I did it with my bare hands," Amy said slowly. "It's a bit more complicated than that. You see, in my bloodstream are all these nanites that–"

"Oh, right – nanites! Of course." Noel looked at the girl, puzzled, then glanced at Miles. "Um, so, have you taken her to see a doctor? It's possible that she's still feeling the aftereffects of being outside without an air suit. You may want to have her checked–"

"For *brain damage*," Amy said sourly. "I'm not deaf, you know, and I am standing *right here next to you*. Look, Noel, I am not a moron. You have to understand–"

"I mean no offense," Noel said hastily. "It's just not advisable to be outside without an air supply and a protective suit. I only want to make sure that you are all right."

"If you say so," Amy replied.

Miles nudged her. "I hate to intrude, but I think you may be holding up the line."

"Oh – sorry!" Amy grabbed a tray, a cup, and some silverware, and stepped up to the window. A lady on the other side of the window handed her a bowl that was filled with a foul-smelling gray paste. She then took Amy's cup, filled it with water, and handed it back to her.

Amy placed the bowl on her tray and stepped out of the way. "What is this stuff?" she asked.

Miles got his bowl, placed it on his tray, and then led Amy across the room to an empty table. He sat down across from Amy. Noel followed a few moments later.

"It's breakfast," Miles said, as he began eating it.

Amy poked it with a spoon. "No, really. What is it? It looks like glue, only it smells much worse."

"It's protein paste!" Noel said, as he sat down beside Miles. "We get three allotments a day in return for our work on the ZPE. This is what we eat morning, noon, and night."

"You've got to be kidding! This isn't food. This looks more like toxic waste. I've seen roadkill that looked more appetizing than this."

Miles smiled. "I admit it doesn't look that appealing, but it is quite nutritious. This is what everyone in the city eats, and has for centuries."

"You mean you don't have *real* food anymore?"

"Well, we do, but only the rich can afford it and even they can only have it in very small amounts. What you have to realize is that plant life can no longer survive on the surface. All of our food has to be grown underground, and it takes a lot of energy to do that – energy the city desperately needs to survive. It's just

not wise to waste energy growing plants when we can produce this protein paste much more cheaply. It may not be appetizing but at least no one starves.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Amy said reluctantly. “But can't you do something about it? I mean, why not build a few more ZPEs to boost your energy output? Then you could have real food, instead of this horrible glop.”

Noel burst out laughing. “Build a ZPE! That would be fabulous, just fabulous! And we can start raising unicorns while we're at it. What planet are you from, anyway?”

“Tonina,” Amy said, puzzled. “But I was born here on Mars.”

Miles interrupted. “What Noel means is that no one knows how to build another zero-point-energy plant. That technology was lost a long time ago. The generator down the hall is two thousand years old and people today barely know how to operate it, let alone repair it. Building a new one is completely out of the question.”

“Exactly,” Noel agreed. “In fact, it's a miracle that even that one exists! The art of building ZPEs had been lost entirely until the legendary Donald Elliott rediscovered it. He's the one that built our ZPE. If it hadn't been for him we'd all be dead.”

Amy pushed the foul-smelling bowl away. “You'd all be dead? Really? Why is that?”

“Don was a visionary,” Noel said enthusiastically. “He was one of the first people to realize that the planet's atmosphere was slowly dying. In order to save mankind he created New Tikal – an underground home that was large enough to house everyone that was still alive.”

“It was big enough for *everyone*? But this city isn't that large! Just how many people were there?”

“A few million, maybe. I don't know the exact number. But Don saved them all! He built New Tikal as a genuine 'city of tomorrow' – the most advanced city on the planet, stocked with the most modern conveniences. People quickly abandoned their

dying colonies and flocked here. It was a tremendous success, and we've been here ever since."

"Wait a minute! Let's back up a bit. What do you mean, 'a few million'? This planet used to be home to billions of people! Where did they all go?"

"Oh, that was a long time ago," Noel replied. "There haven't been billions of people here since the Wall was erected – if there were even that many back then, which I strongly doubt. According to legend, before the Wall appeared there were billions of people living on Mars in a thriving, advanced society. Then one day the Spanish Emperor attacked the planet with some kind of ancient magical weapon and killed nearly everyone. The after-effects poisoned the planet and left only pockets of survivors. Mankind limped on and never recovered."

"That's awful!" Amy said.

"I wouldn't take it too seriously," Noel replied. "I doubt any of it's actually true. Sure, the Wall was real enough, but these legends of ancient golden ages are probably just myths. I bet the story was invented by some depressed loner who was unhappy with his life."

"But they're *not* made up. I was there, Noel, and I saw it myself. The attack happened on December 5th, 1867. I was in the spaceport with my family, getting ready to leave for Tau Ceti. We were all on the *Sparrow* with Captain Max and Jones. While we were there the Emperor used Iapetus to attack Tikal. It was – it was horrible beyond belief. All those people, dead, just like that. Most of the city was instantly vaporized, and what little survived was set on fire. You could see the smoke rising into the atmosphere from miles away. It was even visible from the spaceport."

Noel frowned. "Amy, you do realize that Iapetus is a moon of Saturn, right?"

"It's also a weapon – a terrible, terrible weapon built by the Old Ones that were destroyed before the Flood. They used it to

turn the fifth planet into an asteroid belt.”

“Now *that’s* a legend I haven’t heard before,” Noel remarked. “It’s a little far-fetched, though. It needs to be more plausible before it’ll catch on. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to get more of this great paste.”

Noel stood up, left the table, and walked back to the counter. Miles shook his head as he walked away. “He doesn’t believe a word you said, even though you have told him the truth.”

“I know,” Amy replied.

“You could always prove to him that you’re who you claim to be. Your powers are quite vast, and I’m sure you could arrange a demonstration that would convince even a skeptic like him. I know who you are, but he does not.”

Amy sighed. “I really don’t care what he believes. To be honest, I don’t care about much of anything right now. I feel like I’ve died. I’m empty, I’m angry, and I don’t know what to do. Do you have any idea what my life has been like lately?”

“I really can’t imagine,” Miles replied. “I know it’s been hard.”

“Hard?” Amy exclaimed. “I think it goes well beyond *hard*. I watched an insane Emperor destroyed my hometown. I saw *millions* of people die in a matter of seconds. Then I was taken away from everything I knew and dumped into this horrible century, where my sister, my family, and all my friends were murdered by another insane leader. Now I come back here and find that my home planet is dead and her people are cowering in the dark, eating disgusting protein paste and acting like everything is fine. I’ve had it, Miles! I’ve had enough of all of this. And I’m supposed to care that Noel thinks I’m insane? Seriously? Who cares what he thinks?”

At that exact moment Noel came back to the table and sat down. “I was in luck – they had a little bit left! This is my lucky day.”

“You can have mine,” Amy said.

“Are you sure?”

"Believe me, I'm *not* going to eat that. It is not going to happen."

"But you've got to eat something," Noel said, concerned.

"I'll figure something out," Amy replied.

"If you say so," Noel said. He eagerly grabbed Amy's bowl and put it on his tray. "Maybe you'll feel more like eating at lunchtime. So, anyway, what were you doing in the desert last night? Were you looking for Don Elliott's treasure?"

"Um, no. I actually hadn't planned on being out there in the desert – it's just how things turned out. I've been really lonely lately and I wanted to go home. I was born in Tikal, you know. I wanted to see what had happened to it."

"I didn't know there were any settlements in that area," Noel remarked.

"I wasn't born in a settlement. I was born in the city of Tikal itself. The old city, that apparently isn't standing anymore. I kind of thought it would still be there, but apparently I was wrong."

"I see," Noel said. "You do realize that city was destroyed five thousand years ago, don't you?"

"Of course I do! Like I said, I was there the day it was destroyed. I actually *saw it happen*."

"Right!" Noel said. "Of course. Even though you're just a teenager, you were there five thousand years ago. How silly of me. So, um, do you have any family?"

"I did until yesterday, when they were all murdered. I guess I'm an orphan now."

"Oh. I'm sorry – I didn't know. Wait a minute! Miles, didn't you say something about someone dying yesterday? Or did I misunderstand you?"

"No, I did," Miles agreed. "These are indeed the same people. I just didn't realize that Amy had survived – I thought that everyone had been killed. There were four of them, you know. Amy had a mother, a father, and a twin sister. Amy was the only one who survived the attack."

"And the dog," Amy said. "The dog survived too."

"The dog?" Miles asked. "I don't remember hearing about him."

"We had a dog named Alex. Well, we still do, I guess. I bet he's still on Tonina. He must be so unhappy there, with everyone gone. I'm sure he doesn't understand what happened."

"Why don't you bring him here?" Miles asked.

Amy shook her head. "I wish I could, but that would mean going back. If I went back Steve would find out where I was, and he'd want to talk, but I just can't deal with him right now. I'm sure the Steward will take care of Alex until all of this is over."

"Um, ok," Miles said uncertainly. "I'm afraid I'm lost. Who is—"

"That must be it!" Noel interrupted. "I think I finally understand all these paranoid delusions and wishful thinking. This is all about being lost, isn't it? Losing one's entire family is a deeply traumatic event. It's not at all hard to understand becoming a bit disoriented after something like that. It can definitely affect one's perception of reality. In fact, the psychological trauma alone could have all sorts of repercussions and exhibit itself in unsettling ways. That explains everything! But Amy, please know that I am deeply sorry for your loss. I did not know."

"It's ok. But you're not the one I'm worried about. Adrian Garza is who I want to strangle. He's not sorry now, but by the time I'm done with him he's *going* to be!"

"Who is Adrian?" Miles asked.

"He's the monster that betrayed my family to their mortal enemy. He's the reason they're all dead right now. If he had his way, I'd be dead right now too."

"And you know where he is?"

"Oh yes! He's on Xanthe, in the Tau Ceti system."

"Has he been arrested for murder?" Miles asked.

"Arrested?" Amy asked. "Who would arrest him? Don't you

realize that I'm the only one who survived? It's me versus that entire world!"

"Do you mean that the *planet* attacked your family, and Adrian was one of the leaders?"

"Something like that," Amy said.

"So it was war, then. Did they win the war?"

"No, they lost. They killed everyone, but they lost. All of the machinery on that planet is now dead. They can't wage war any more. They're completely helpless."

"So what are you going to do with them?" Miles asked

"Hold on, guys," Noel interrupted. "I know it's easy to get lost in grief, but this is ridiculous. You have—"

"Quiet!" Miles interrupted. "This is important. Amy, what are you going to do with them?"

"I don't know," she sighed. "I *wanted* to destroy the whole planet, but Steve stopped me. Now I don't know what to do."

"That's the second time you've mentioned a Steve. Just who is he? I don't think I've heard of him."

"He's the Sentinel," Amy explained. "He's – it's complicated. He's a friend of mine, I guess – or at least, he's *usually* my friend. But this time he stopped me. He said I had no right to destroy Xanthe."

"How many people are on Xanthe?"

"About four hundred thousand," Amy said.

"That's a lot of people," Miles said quietly. "Were you really going to kill all of them over what Adrian had done?"

"You don't understand! They're evil, Miles. They created the swarms and used them to destroy every last Ranger colony. They wiped out *billions* of people, and then spent five thousand years in pods, living out depraved fantasies. They're not good people! They're a deeply corrupt society that is consumed by hatred and malice. Why *shouldn't* they be wiped out? I mean, after all, they didn't spare their neighbors. They showed no mercy to anyone. Why should mercy be shown to them?"

"But what if they can be saved? They may not all be like Adrian. There may be a few who want to change but just don't know how. Maybe they're simply without hope."

"They're murderers," Amy argued. "They killed my family when we had done them no harm at all. They deserve to die."

"That may be true. But even so, if you killed them, would that be justice – or revenge? It's one thing to arrest a murderer and put him on trial. It is quite another to destroy an *entire planet* because one of its citizens betrayed your family."

"Then what am I supposed to do? Just do nothing, while Adrian laughs in my face and tells me that he's untouchable?"

"You could try forgiving him," Miles said.

"Seriously? He's *not* sorry, you know. In fact, he's proud of what he's done! He would do it again in a heartbeat. He would kill *me* if he could."

"I didn't say that he was sorry. I know this is hard for you to hear right now, and this may not be the best time to discuss it, but Amy, your deep hatred for Adrian is coloring your view of an entire planet. The people of that world may indeed be as evil as you claim, but what that means is that they are in desperate need of redemption. You are the only person who can possibly help them, and you *can't* help them as long as you're consumed with rage toward Adrian. You have to let that anger go so you can start thinking clearly again."

"You're crazy! Do you really expect me to just forgive and forget and act like the murder of my family was no big deal?"

Miles shook his head. "I didn't say it wasn't a big deal. Nor does forgiveness mean that there are no consequences. I'm not asking you to trust Adrian – he is clearly a dangerous man, and if he was willing to kill you then he may be willing to kill others as well. He does need to be judged for his crimes, and given the circumstances it is clear that you must be the one to judge him. I'm not even asking you to spare his life; a man who callously murders those who have done him no harm deserves to die."

"But what I *am* saying is that Xanthe needs your help, and until you let go of your anger you're not going to be able to see clearly enough to help them. Blindly lashing out at an entire race is not the same thing as justice."

Noel interrupted. "And I think that's enough doom, gloom, and despair for one morning. I don't know about you two, but I've got a ZPE that needs my attention."

Miles smiled. "Really? I thought you were going to come over to my home and learn how to create replacement parts. Have you changed your mind?"

"Oh, that's right! Of course – that's a lot more important. Can we still do that?"

"Actually, I have a better idea. Why don't you ask Amy to help you fix your ZPE? I'm sure she can answer all of your questions about it."

Amy spoke up. "That reminds me! I was looking at your ZPE earlier today and I've got to say that it's in really terrible shape. Do you realize that it's running at only 30% efficiency?"

"29.74%, to be precise," Noel said. "That's a full percentage higher than yesterday! I'm very excited about it. We've made some great strides!"

"It's still 70 percentage points less than what it should be. You've really got to fix it before it breaks down and hurts somebody. It should have been torn down and rebuilt ages ago."

"Can you fix it?" Miles asked.

"Of course I can fix it," Amy replied firmly.

"Really?" Noel asked doubtfully. "You look a little young to have ZPE experience! I don't mean to be rude, but I don't think they teach that sort of thing in elementary school."

"Why don't you take me to the plant and I'll show you," Amy said.

Noel shrugged. "I was heading that way anyway. Sure, come on. Even if you've never seen one before you just might learn something. It's really quite a remarkable piece of machinery."

Amy sighed, then nodded. She picked up her glass, set it on the tray, and then carried the tray to the counter. After she had disposed of it she turned to Miles. "Will you be coming with us?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," Miles replied.

"Then follow me!" Noel said.

CHAPTER 11

“What I was attempting to explain is that if we do not broaden our genetic base we will die out. If the savages could be cured they could solve this problem. Their population is very diverse and they outnumber us nearly a hundred to one. Closing our eyes and pretending that we do not have a problem will only hasten our extinction.”

—Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

April 27, 7243

NOEL LED AMY AND MILES out of the cafeteria and down the long hallway that led to the ZPE room. When they reached the door Noel pushed it open. He started to stroll on it, but Amy grabbed him.

“Wait a minute. Where's the security?”

“Security?” Noel asked.

“Yes, security. Some system to keep everyone and their brother from just walking right into the plant whenever they feel like it.”

“I don't understand. Why would they want to do that? No one ever comes down here unless they have to. In all my years on the job I've never seen random strangers pop in and start walking around.”

“But what if they did? One crazy person with a gun could easily damage the ZPE beyond your ability to fix it. If that happened you wouldn't have time to do anything about it – the whole city would be dead in a matter of days. You're putting the

lives of millions of people in danger by not controlling who can enter this room.”

“She's right,” Miles commented. “I'd never really thought about it, but we do have some exposure here. We probably should set up a few safeguards to restrict this whole area to authorized personnel.”

“But it's a waste of resources!” Noel argued. “We've never had a problem before.”

“In other words, you've been lucky,” Amy replied. “Maybe you'll be lucky tomorrow, too – or maybe you won't. Don't you realize that if one day you're *not* lucky then *everyone in New Tikal will die*? How hard would it be to put a lock on the door?”

“Way too hard,” Noel replied. “I could never get approval for something like that. The mayor only approves equipment *after* there's been a problem, not before. He doesn't believe in acting preemptively.”

Amy shook her head. “That's foolish. By then it's too late.”

“I agree with you completely,” Miles said. “In fact, I can't believe I never thought of it myself, especially since I keep the *Raptor* locked. Leaving things like the ZPE unguarded is foolish – perhaps criminally so. In a way, though, it makes little difference. This city has much bigger problems than a lack of locks. If significant changes do not happen soon, no one will be alive a hundred years from now.”

“Doom this, doom that, it's always doom with you,” Noel remarked. “What is it with all this talk of certain doom? You keep saying that our doom is inevitable – that we're just a few decades away from destruction. Do you have any proof of this, or are you just a pessimist?”

“This is exactly why you need to spend more time outside,” Miles replied. “There should be at least *one person* who studies the atmosphere in this crummy town! Why you would ignore something that important is more than I can understand.”

“The mayor says it's just a waste of resources,” Noel

explained. "The atmosphere is what it is. Studying it won't change anything."

"That is one of the stupidest things I've ever heard! Fortunately for all of you, I *have* been studying the atmosphere, and the news is not good. The feeble body of gasses that blanket this planet is rapidly vanishing. In much less than a century from now the atmosphere will be so thin that no amount of air towers will be able to keep you alive. If you don't switch to that closed-loop scrubbing system I've been telling you about for years you will all die."

"Is it really that serious?" Noel asked. "I thought we had a lot more time than that. Do you have any idea how much effort it would take to implement your plan? For starters, the city isn't even airtight, and the existing duct work is completely inadequate. I've gone over your designs, Miles, and it would take a lot of manpower over many years to implement your system. We're talking ten years, maybe twenty!"

"Believe me, I know. But if the city had started the project back when I first proposed it the system would have been completed by now! What you don't understand is that you don't have an alternative. If this is not done then *you will all die.*"

"We'd better have an alternative, because the mayor would never give his approval to your idea. Never. The one time I mentioned it he laughed so hard I thought he was going to pass out. If that's our only option then we're doomed."

"I guess you're doomed, then," Miles remarked. "If this city can't be bothered to save itself from certain death then that's that. I've done all I can do. History will record that the last settlement on Mars died out due to the incredible stupidity of its political leadership."

"Why don't you just use the ZPE?" Amy asked. "After all, the whole reason they were invented in the first place was to terraform planets. They're *designed* to create atmospheric gasses."

"Are you sure?" Noel asked. "I thought they were power plants!"

"No, she's quite right," Miles said thoughtfully. "In fact, when Don built this machine he had to hack the plans quite a bit to get it to power the city. That's one reason why it's operating at such low efficiency – it wasn't designed to be run this way. Amy actually has a brilliant idea. If you could increase the operating efficiency of the ZPE and refurbish it to produce gasses along with electricity, that just might save your lives. I don't know if a single ZPE could restore the entire Martian atmosphere, but it just might postpone your doom."

"But how could we possibly do that?" Noel asked. "I don't know anyone who—"

"Oh, it's pretty easy, actually," Amy said, interrupting. "It won't take long." She closed her eyes and raised a hand, but Miles leaped toward her and grabbed her arm. Amy opened her eyes, startled.

"Sorry," Miles said. "I didn't mean to startle you. I just wanted to stop you before you did anything rash. Whatever you do, *don't* fix the problem that way."

"But why not?" Amy asked.

"Because if you do then they won't learn anything! The real problem is *not* that the reactor is old and dying; it's that the people here have no idea how it works. If they had understood the technology then they could have solved this problem on their own centuries ago. You need to address the lack of *knowledge*, not the defective circuitry. That means hands-on craftsmanship."

"Oh," Amy said. "So you want me to do this the old-fashioned way?"

"It's the only way that will actually help. Use the parts that they have in storage to fix the generator, and where necessary use their workshops to craft new parts. Don't do it for them - *show* them how to do it."

"What are you talking about?" Noel asked. "Don't you *have*

to fix the generator with real, physical parts? I mean, how could you fix it *without* parts? Is there some other magical way of doing things that I don't know about?

"Just give me a minute," Amy said. "I need to think this through."

Amy looked around the room, using her nanites to carefully scrutinize every inch of the ancient machine. The ZPE was housed in a gigantic room that was nearly a half-mile across and more than a thousand feet deep. The ceiling was eight hundred feet above them. The generator itself took up most of this space, although it was buried beneath a bewildering maze of catwalks, pipes, and wires – all of which were rusty and corroded. The room was brightly lit but poorly organized. At one point the reactor had been painted and clearly labeled, but all of that had disappeared off years ago. Now everything was coated in centuries of grime.

"This, um, is really something," Amy remarked, as she mentally tried to piece together how the machine operated.

"Yes it is!" Noel said proudly. "That device is the pride and joy of New Tikal. This is the heart that keeps our city alive."

"It's amazing that this heart of yours is still beating! The generator is in much worse shape than I thought. It's going to be a challenge to fix this without gutting it and starting over. It's suffering from centuries of neglect."

"Where are you thinking of beginning?" Miles asked.

Amy thought for a moment. "Well, the first step is to increase power production. If we can double the efficiency then that will give us the power margin we need to start shutting down segments of the reactor for repair. We don't dare take any modules offline until we're sure that the city will keep getting the energy it needs."

"Very nice," Miles commented. "And you can use the excess power to fabricate whatever materials you need. That way you don't have to go to the mayor to get resources allocated. Smart."

“But – double the efficiency?” Noel asked incredulously. “Just how do you propose to do that?”

“Follow me and I'll show you,” Amy replied. She walked up to the generator and began climbing a long ladder.

* * * * *

Amy spent the next three weeks working with Noel on rebuilding the ZPE. Noel quickly came to respect her brilliance. He was astonished at her detailed working knowledge of the physics behind zero-point energy – a knowledge that went far beyond his own, but one that she freely shared. Her ability to apply that knowledge was equally great. Once Noel realized that she knew what she was doing he was eager to help her. With the entire team of plant engineers working together, it only took them four days to reach 63% efficiency.

At that point Miles left, congratulating Amy and telling her that she was free to visit him once she had finished the project. Noel begged him to say, but Miles said that he was far too old for that kind of manual labor and was just getting in the way.

Since Amy realized that she was going to be in New Tikal for some time, she found a room on the top floor of the abandoned apartment building and renovated it, turning it into a cozy home. The broken furnishings were disintegrated and replaced with ultramodern furniture that she materialized using her nanites. Amy also started eating all of her meals in her apartment. She vastly preferred waffles, baked beans, and chicken pot pies to the disturbing protein paste that the cafeteria served.

Under Amy's supervision the ZPE rapidly changed. As the days passed, centuries of grime disappeared and coats of paint were applied. Many long-unused pipes were disassembled and other conduits were rerouted. The generator's core functions were also overhauled, and the machine once again began producing significant amounts of atmospheric gasses. A series of

pipes were put in place to carry those precious gasses to the surface, to supplement the planet's dying atmosphere.

Day by day the output steadily climbed, until finally on December 20th Amy pronounced her work complete. The worn-out girl wearily sat down in a chair in the generator's control center and proudly looked up at her work. "That should do it, I think" she said.

Noel sat down beside Amy. "What you have done surpasses my wildest expectations. We're operating at 192% efficiency – 192%! We're getting almost *twice* the power output that the ZPE was designed to produce, and that's on top of the unbelievable output of gasses that the machine is generating. What you've done is actually better than what Don Elliott himself did!"

"It's a step in the right direction," Amy agreed. "If you're going to use it to recreate the planet's atmosphere then you'll need every bit of power you can get. In fact, it would really be best if you diverted most of the output to producing atmospheric gasses."

"Well, that's going to be the tricky part. We told the mayor what we've been doing – we had to, of course. He's very excited about the increase in efficiency and has all sorts of plans for it. Energy has been the city's currency for millennia, and you just increased the amount of available energy by a factor of six. The mayor's already talking about extensive renovations."

"Renovations?" Amy asked.

"It's basically a way to buy votes. The mayor's up for re-election next year and he thinks that if he uses this energy to refurbish people's homes, they'll vote for him. This is exactly what he needed. Everyone will have a higher standard of living now and Thornton will take the credit for it. It's a huge political windfall for him."

"I don't really care who takes the credit for it. You just need to remember that the planet's atmosphere is decaying at a rapid pace. The only way you can reverse that trend is to convert the

ZPE's surplus energy into oxygen. If you don't do that then in a few decades all of the air will be gone and the entire city will suffocate and die. Have you made this clear to the mayor?"

"Well, I tried," Noel said. "He really isn't concerned about it, and believes that there's nothing to be afraid of. He seems to think that this whole atmospheric-depletion theory is nothing more than scare-mongering. He's already had a meeting with the city council, and they've agreed that the entire ZPE should be dedicated to power production. Producing atmospheric gasses is, in their opinion, a waste of resources."

"Ok," Amy said slowly. "So let me see if I understand the situation. The city has decided that it isn't going to build a closed-loop system that will recycle the air it already has. Instead it is going to continue to depend on pulling in oxygen from the surface. At the same time, however, it's not going to do anything about the fact that the Martian atmosphere is disappearing. The official policy is that you're just going to do nothing and die because that buys the most votes in the short run."

"I know that sounds bad, but you have to understand the political realities. There's just no support for solving long-term problems. Yes, I agree that this may eventually lead to our doom, but not until the mayor has died of old age. Why would he care about something that will never happen in his lifetime?"

"Well what about the people, then?" Amy asked. "Can't you bring the story to them?"

Noel shook his head. "I've tried, and it just doesn't work. It's one thing to talk about an immediate issue that is affecting them right now. But these long-term things – well, you have to see this from their perspective. We're basically asking them to live a pauper's lifestyle for the rest of their lives in order to solve a problem that won't strike until after most of the voting public has died. There's just no benefit in it for them."

"*Everyone will die,*" Amy shouted. "All of them! The entire planet will be dead. And you're telling me that no one cares?"

"There will be peace and happiness in their lifetime," Noel replied. "That's enough for them. I understand your point, but really, who can ask for more than that?"

"Then I've had it," Amy said angrily. "I have absolutely had it. If these morons can't be bothered to save themselves then they deserve to die. You people are too stupid to survive. I've wasted my time helping you."

Amy stood up. "Where are you going?" Noel asked.

"I'm going to go see Miles. I've got a few questions to ask him before I abandon this crummy planet and leave you all to your doom."

"Well, you've certainly earned some time off. All right. I'd be glad to take you in my tank, if you'd like. I don't know where he lives but—"

"That's all right," Amy interrupted. "I can handle it. It's not a problem. I don't need you to come with me."

"Well, I guess I could *loan* you my tank," Noel said reluctantly. "I don't normally do that, but in this case I'd be willing to make an exception. You are pretty responsible."

"Oh, that's not necessary. I don't need transportation there. I can take care of myself just fine."

"But how will you get there?" Noel asked, confused.

"Just trust me," Amy replied.

CHAPTER 12

“We, the elders of the Children of Light, have weighed both proposals. After much careful consideration we have decided to support the recommendation of Evan Maldonado. The elders have therefore appropriated him the resources he needs to begin exterminating the savages. Furthermore, we strictly forbid Monroe Araiza from doing anything that might impede his progress.”

—Conrad Forbes

Chief Elder of the Children of Light

May 16, 7243

AMY SAID GOODBYE TO NOEL and then walked out of the power plant. As soon as the door closed behind her she glanced around to make sure that no one could see her. When she was satisfied that she was alone she closed her eyes and vanished. The girl materialized miles away, in the heart of what was once the city of Tikal. At one time there had been a modern city on that very location, but now all traces of it were gone. All she could see were sand dunes and broken rocks, stretching out to the horizon. Above her was a cloudless sky. The sun was almost directly overhead, indicating that it would soon be lunchtime, but Amy wasn't hungry. She was too preoccupied with the loss of her world to care about anything else.

I just can't believe that no one cares. They're not even trying to fix this place! It's no wonder that the planet is dying and the old cities have been lost to time. New Tikal is a wretched excuse

for a city, filled with morons who care for nothing but themselves. This isn't the way Mars is supposed to be. I wish I could fix all of this, but what can I do? Amanda tried to save Xanthe and look how far that got her. I spent weeks trying to help these people and it was all for nothing. What difference is there between the virtual world of Vault 37 and the stupid underground world that these people have built for themselves? Both are nothing more than sad attempts to escape from reality, and both would rather die than leave their dreamworld.

Amy closed her eyes once more and used her nanites to take a closer look at the planet. A thorough subsurface scan revealed that there were several underground bunkers in the area, of varying size. Most of them were abandoned and in advanced stages of decay, but the largest one was still active. As she studied its interior Amy noticed that the sprawling underground compound had its own ZPE. *So that's where Miles lives, Amy thought to herself. I think it's time I paid him a visit. He's got a lot of questions to answer.*

The girl quickly transported herself to the entrance of Miles' secret base. When she materialized in front of it she was surprised to see that there were no signs of an airlock. The only thing in front of her was an enormous rock wall, which was part of a cliff that was partially buried in sand. The wall was rocky and uneven, and the sand in front of the entrance looked undisturbed. There was no visible machinery of any kind. *No wonder he doesn't get any visitors! Why, if I didn't know better I would be convinced that I had the wrong address.*

Amy looked into the wall and concentrated, transmitting a stream of data to a receiver that was hidden deep within it. A moment later there was a gentle click and the rock wall disappeared, revealing a small airlock on the other side. The girl stepped inside and pressed a green button. Behind her the rock wall rematerialized, and air was pumped into the room. Once the air pressure had equalized the door in front of her opened and

she stepped into the bunker.

In front of her was a long, dimly-lit passage. There were at least a half-dozen doors along both sides of the hallway, leading off into other rooms. As Amy looked around, trying to figure out where to go next, she saw an elderly man running hastily toward her from the far end of the hallway. When he got close enough to see her he suddenly stopped. "Oh, so it's *you*! I wasn't expecting to see you today, Amy – you've given me quite a shock. I was convinced that something had finally gone wrong with that finicky door and some prowler had gotten in."

"Oh, I'm sorry about that," Amy replied. "I didn't mean to startle you! I would have knocked but I didn't see a doorbell or anything. Your front door isn't exactly inviting."

"Quite so!" Miles agreed. He walked up to Amy and then paused to catch his breath. "That lack of hospitality is by design, you know. I intended to build a place that no one could ever find, and that's exactly what I did. I haven't had a single visitor in all these years – well, until just now, of course! I should have known that you'd be able to find this place, but I just didn't think of it. Since you're here, does that mean you've finished repairing the ZPE?"

"Yes I have – and let me tell you, it was a lot of work! Do you have any idea how hard it is to rebuild a power plant with your bare hands? I would have finished it *weeks* ago if you had let me use my nanites."

"And if you had, Noel would not have learned anything. Those people would have become even more dependent than they already are on machinery that they don't understand. I realize the work was difficult, but think of it as an investment in their education."

"I suppose," Amy said. "But if you ask me it's still all a waste of time. Noel might know all about ZPEs now, but the city council has decided that they're not going to restore the planet's atmosphere. No one cares that the planet is dying. They're just

going to eat, drink, and be merry until the air is finally gone and they all drop dead.”

Miles sighed. “I was afraid that might happen. In fact, I ran into the same problem myself. As I’m sure Noel told you, the primary concern of all politicians is getting elected. Yes, the air supply is an issue, but it’s not an issue right this minute. If the mayor did something about it now he would have to make some unpopular choices, and that would put his re-election in jeopardy. So he’s doing what all politicians have done as long as I can remember – take the easy way out and sacrifice the future of mankind for short-term political gain. He’s not the first one to do that, though. Politicians have always been making that choice – even in your time.”

“That’s not true! My father was a great governor. Under his leadership this planet was an amazing place to live. It wasn’t anything like it is today!”

“But he was forced to leave, and Mars was destroyed,” Miles pointed out.

“That’s not his fault! He did everything he could to save this planet.”

“I know,” Miles replied. “I’m not blaming him. But at the end of the day the forces of evil won, and that has not changed. In all the millennia that have come and gone since your father’s time, the only thing that reformers like us have been able to accomplish is preventing the last survivors of Mars from killing themselves. No one has been able to restore this world to its former glory. At least, not until you arrived. You have the power to change everything.”

“And why should I do that?” Amy demanded. “I’ve already given these people a chance to change their future, and they’ve decided that they would rather die than make some sacrifices and save themselves. Why should I do anything more than what I’ve already done?”

“Because you and I are believers in Christ. We are not like

them, walking in darkness and blinded by pleasures. God sends rain on both the just and the unjust. He has called us to love our enemies, to bless those that curse us, and to help those who are dying and need help. They are like children, Amy, and we are the adults. We have been called to save them from themselves because we *are* responsible. You can do something they cannot – you can give them a future.”

“But they don't deserve it!”

“No, they don't,” Miles agreed. “We didn't deserve salvation either, but Jesus still came and died for us. That's what mercy is – helping people who do not deserve it. If they deserved it then it wouldn't be mercy.”

“I guess,” Amy said reluctantly. “But I didn't come here to talk about me. I want to know who you are and how you know my name. You have a lot of questions to answer.”

“I suppose I do,” Miles agreed. “But this dim hallway is not the place to have a long conversation. An old man like me needs creature comforts like chairs. Here, come with me.”

Miles led Amy down the long hallway and over to a large freight elevator. The two rode the elevator a hundred feet down, then got off and entered a large, brightly-lit room. Amy saw pieces of old equipment strewn everywhere – on tables, chairs, and on the floor. Books littered the room and there was a stack of dirty plates in the corner. A whole wall was dedicated to computer terminals, but most of the screens were cracked or otherwise damaged. The place had an air of decay about it.

“Please pardon the mess,” Miles apologized. “As I said, I don't get a lot of visitors. I used to be neater than this but I've kind of let things go in my old age. My priorities are different now, I guess.”

Miles took a stack of green circuit boards off a chair and tossed them onto the floor. He then offered the chair to Amy. Once she had sat down the old man cleared off another chair and took a seat across from her. “There we go! That's better.

Now, can I get you anything?"

"No, thank you – I'm fine," Amy replied, as she looked around the room. "It looks like you've lived here a long time!"

"I certainly have," Miles said. "Why, I was just a young man when I created this little hideaway. That was a long, long time ago."

"Just how long ago was it?" Amy asked.

Miles smiled. "Why not take a guess? Surely a girl that can terraform a planet can guess a man's age."

Amy was a little taken aback by this. *I have no idea how to find out a person's true age!* she thought. *Hmmm. Maybe my nanites have a subroutine for that.* She mentally tapped into their library of commands and used it to construct a profile of Miles. The nanites that saturated the planet's atmosphere provided a wealth of information about his physiological condition. *Hmmm. He looks – well, he looks old. Let's see. His liver is failing and his heart is weak. His mind is sharp, but his synapses are starting to degrade. His bones have become brittle and his arteries are hardening. His stamina is really low – a lot lower than I expected. His vision and hearing are good, but they're fading. All of that is pretty vague, though. Let me see if I can find something a little more age-specific. Oh, here we go! His DNA's epigenetic changes indicate that he's around 150. Wow! That's pretty old, considering that no one else in New Tikal seems to be over 60. But – wait a minute – what's this?*

As Amy took a closer look at his bloodstream she suddenly realized that his veins were home to billions upon billions of incredibly tiny micromachines. A quick analysis revealed that they were similar in design to her own nanites, but there were important differences. *For one thing, they're not quite as small and there aren't as many of them. I have a lot more nanites than he does. The quality also isn't as good – the tolerances aren't as fine. But yet, they're so similar! It's almost like someone took my nanites and made low-quality duplicates of them. Some critical*

functions are missing entirely, and others have serious errors. But those nanites are clearly designed for biological repair, so he may be far older than he seems.

Hmm. So if I can't trust the biological indicators, what can I trust? It's like trying to figure out how old a house is when it's been rebuilt several times! But perhaps there's another way I can approach this. If those nanites have timestamps embedded in them then maybe I can read them to get a date...

Using her own nanites, Amy extracted one of the micromachines from Miles' bloodstream and disassembled it so she could read the data that it contained. She gasped when she realized what they were saying. "That's just not possible!" she exclaimed.

"What?" Miles asked.

Amy opened her eyes and looked at him. "The nanites in your bloodstream began operation in 4967 AD. According to them you're more than two thousand years old!"

CHAPTER 13

"The elders have made their decision and our course is now set. Evan may mock my knowledge of genetics, but unbelief will not make the laws of biology disappear. If he succeeds, we will be the only humans left on Earth. At that point our only hope of survival would be to find humans on other worlds and have children with them, for we are rapidly approaching the point where we can no longer produce viable offspring. Given our disastrous history with space exploration, however, that is not likely to happen. I fear that this is the end for my people."

—Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

May 17, 7243

THE ELDERLY MAN NODDED HIS HEAD, smiling. "That's just about right! You're a little off, but not by much. I was actually born in 4898. The reason the nanites have a later date is because they weren't created until decades later. It took me an awfully long time to build a batch that actually worked. In fact, I'm still not convinced that I got them right."

"You came close, but they are a little off. In fact, that's why you're getting older – your nanites are littered with mistakes and omissions. I'm surprised you managed to live as long as you did! You got really lucky."

"I was blessed," Miles replied. "The Lord must have wanted me to stay here and keep working or I wouldn't have survived

this long. Still, you've got to admit they're not that bad, especially considering the tools I had to work with. I didn't have the Artilect to help me, you know."

"That's another thing! Some of the code in your nanites is an exact copy of the code in *my* nanites. You didn't design those yourself, Miles. You *did* have the Artilect to help you. There's just no other explanation."

"Well, it all depends on what you mean," Miles said slowly. "He didn't give them to me – well, not directly, anyway. It would be more accurate to say that they were something I overheard."

"You *overheard*?" Amy asked, confused.

"That's right! That's also how I got the plans for New Tikal's ZPE. The big problem I had was that there was so much I didn't understand. It took me years to learn how to interpret the ancient dialect that the Artilect was using to communicate with the Nehemiah probes. On top of that, the plans he was transmitting were all highly technical, and used technology far beyond anything that Mars has ever possessed. Trying to recreate what was in those transmissions was excruciating."

Amy was astonished. "Do you mean you had a way to eavesdrop on the Artilect?"

Miles nodded. "I sure did! But let me start at the beginning. As I said, I was born in 4898. Back then I was known as Donald Elliott."

"You mean *you* founded New Tikal? But – but that's impossible! Donald died thousands of years ago!"

"That's what everyone wanted to believe, Amy, and so I just let them go on believing it. You see, like I said earlier, I ran into the same problem that you did. I knew that the underground city I'd built for them wasn't a good long-term solution. The real problem wasn't technical, but personal. They needed to get their act together and get serious about their future. So I tried to push them along – but I'm getting ahead of myself.

"Anyway, I was born with a real knack for tinkering around

and figuring out how things work. I also had an insatiable curiosity. One day when I was in my teens I was messing around with some equipment I'd built and stumbled across a really strange signal. It took me the better part of a year before I realized that the signal was coming from the other side of the Wall."

"What?" Amy exclaimed. "But that's impossible! *Nothing* can get through the Wall!"

Miles smiled. "That's what everyone else thought too, but it's not true. You see, the Wall that's around Sol has a peculiar flaw. When the Artillect communicated with the millions of probes in its networked it used its own brand of FTL technology. The Wall does block those signals, but in the process of blocking them they get transmuted onto a different carrier wave and rebroadcast inside the Solar System. I couldn't send signals through the Wall, but I could pick up on all kinds of chatter. The only problem I had was that I couldn't understand any of it because it was all in a strange, ancient language.

"That's when I went on a quest to find every last scrap of ancient Martian writing than I could find. I spent years learning how to translate the Artillect's messages into something that I could read. There were some things that I was never able to figure out, but I finally got to the point where I could understand most of it.

"What I discovered was amazing, Amy. Amazing! Out there, beyond the Wall, was a civilization that was beyond my wildest dreams. Millions of planets had been colonized and science had blossomed to astounding proportions. My own planet was dying, but out there – out on the other side of that Wall – were countless garden worlds. It was astonishing, and it was completely unexpected.

"I knew that I had to do something. I just *had* to find a way to get through the Wall and reach the Rangers! But, as much as I wanted to, I knew that I'd never be able to do it on my own.

That's when I decided to take the scientific knowledge I'd learned from the transmissions and use it to bring my people into the modern era. Once civilization had been reborn I could tell people my plan and, together, we could attack the Wall and bring it down."

Amy spoke up. "Weren't you worried about what might happen when you brought the Wall down? After all, for all you knew the Rangers might still be holding a grudge."

Miles shook his head. "At the time I wasn't the least bit worried. In all the transmissions I had overheard none of them talked about Earth or indicated any evidence of hostilities. The Artilect seemed to be completely peaceful, and I couldn't find any trace of anyone who might want to harm us. I was convinced that we had been forgotten about. I thought that if we could just bring the Wall down then the Artilect would welcome us into the future with open arms."

"You were probably right," Amy agreed. "He certainly wouldn't have taken any hostile action against you. Your biggest problem would have been the swarms."

"I know – I'm getting to that. So, anyway, I started working. Using the techniques I had learned from the Artilect I was able to build New Tikal, and people flocked to it. They knew that their planet was dying and they were amazed at how advanced my underground city was. Compared to life on the surface it was a tremendous leap forward. The best part, in their mind, was that the ZPE I had built was able to give them everything they needed to survive. Once the city was in place and things had settled down a bit I decided to take things to the next level. That's when I announced my plan to bring down the Wall, and that's when the trouble started.

"You see, what I didn't realize was that the mayor saw my new program as an attempt to bring him down. As long as the Wall was in place he was the highest political authority on the planet – the king, so to speak. But if space travel became

common again then Mars would be just one planet among billions. All he would be is another minor ruler in the galaxy. If my plan worked, his importance – and his ability to control the people – would be greatly reduced. He decided that I was a serious threat, so he incited the people to riot.”

“I know what that's like,” Amy commented. “Elder Lane didn't exactly enjoy meeting us, either, for similar reasons.”

“I was every bit as surprised as you were,” Miles continued. “You didn't see the betrayal coming, and I didn't either. I managed to escape the riots, but they were so violent that everyone assumed I had died. Since the mayor was determined to kill me I decided to just let them keep thinking that I was dead and find a home somewhere else. I came here and built this bunker, and tried to figure out what to do next. After a long time and a lot of thinking I eventually decided that it was all up to me. If that Wall was ever going to come down then I would have to do it myself. The incident with the mayor had made it painfully clear that no one else was ever going to try.

“I knew that this project would take more than one lifetime to accomplish, though, so the first problem I had to solve was finding a way to live forever. I spent several decades trying to build the nanites. When I finally produced the batch that is in me now I was convinced that I had solved that problem, because everything seemed to be working. It was only much later that I realized something was wrong. Even with the problems, though, they worked well enough. They gave me the time I needed to escape the Wall.”

“Are you serious?” Amy asked. “You actually managed to escape?”

“Yes I did! Believe me, it wasn't easy. It actually took the better part of a thousand years. The key problem I had was energy. A terrific amount of energy was spent keeping the Wall in place, and I knew it would take a similar force to open a hole in it. After a great deal of searching I finally found something

powerful enough to do the job. As I had hoped, Iapetus still existed.”

“The ancient super-weapon. Of course! But why did it take you so long to find it?”

“Because it was no longer in orbit around Saturn. That was the first place I looked and I came up empty-handed. When the Wall appeared the Emperor moved it, and it took me forever to track it down. I knew from the ancient records that it had really existed and I suspected that it could be altered to do what I needed it to do, but actually finding it was surprisingly hard. There is a *lot* of space to search, you know! But I finally found it and was able to rewire it. That was a whole lot of work too – but I had the time.

“After a great many failed tests and experiments, I opened a tiny hole in the Wall and flew my starship right through it. What a feeling! A thousand years of effort had finally paid off. It was incredible, even though I had no one to share it with. I was finally free – the first person to leave Sol since the 19th century. My dream had come true.

“For the first few days I was a pretty happy man. Instead of just leaping to the nearest star system I spent some time scanning the area, trying to figure out where the nearest Ranger colonies were located. I knew where the Artilect's systems were located, but even the closest one was extremely far away. I was hoping to find something a little closer to home. That was when I discovered the swarms.”

“I was wondering about that,” Amy remarked. “I bet they were quite a surprise.”

Miles nodded. “They certainly were! I had been listening to the Artilect's transmissions for centuries and he had never mentioned them. Of course, he had also never mentioned any star systems near Sol, a fact that puzzled me. I thought he never talked about them because they were outside his jurisdiction. I didn't realize the truth – that the swarms had destroyed

everything.”

“You must have been devastated!”

“I was pretty disappointed,” Miles admitted. “The biggest problem wasn't that the Rangers were gone. No, what really got me was that now I couldn't take the Wall down. The Wall was actually our defense against the swarms; if I destroyed it then they could just sweep right in and kill us all. For a thousand years I had thought that the Wall was a prison, but it was actually our protector. It had been keeping us safe for a very long time.

“Now I didn't know what to do. My plan had been to take down the Wall, return to New Tikal in triumph, and then lead my people to the stars. That, however, was no longer an option. As long as the swarms were active we would have to remain on Mars. So I retreated back to Sol, turned off Iapetus, and went home. Since there was nothing else to do I decided to visit New Tikal. That's when I learned that the city hadn't been maintained. It was in shambles.”

“I can't say I'm surprised,” Amy said.

Miles sighed. “Well, *I* definitely was. They were just barely surviving when I returned. It took me centuries to put things right again – well, as right as they were when you first entered the city. I tried to motivate people to take an interest in life, but it never worked. A person here or there might care, but they were pretty powerless. It was all I could do just to keep the city alive.”

“Did no one recognize you when you returned?” Amy asked.

“Oh no! By that time the story of Donald Elliott had become a bit of ancient history. He had 'died' so long ago that no one even imagined I might be him. I just introduced myself as Miles, which was actually my middle name. It wasn't very creative, but then, they weren't hard to fool. In fact, to this day no one has noticed that a person named Miles has been visiting New Tikal for a thousand years now. They just don't care, Amy.”

“So what do you expect *me* to do about it? I can't make them care, you know. I've already tried that.”

"Maybe not, but you *can* terraform this planet. You can make it habitable again. If you're lucky, that just might be enough to coax them out of New Tikal and back to the surface. After all, thanks to you and your family the Wall and the swarms are both gone and the stars are ours for the taking. We don't have to hide anymore. Even the Artilect's planets are still out there!"

"That's another question I meant to ask you. I understand how you got ZPE technology, but how did you learn about me, and my family, and what's been happening?"

"The probes were told everything," Miles explained. "I guess the Artilect wanted to keep them fully informed so that they could make intelligent decisions. He trusted them completely. I'm sure he never expected them to turn on him."

"So you knew everything that was going on?"

"For the most part. I saw when the Artilect started his time-travel program, and when he built the Sentinel. Now, it's true that the first time your name came up I had no idea who you were. I had to do a lot of historical research before I came across the story of the *Sparrow* and its inhabitants. That's when I finally put the pieces together and realized what the Artilect was trying to do. You and your sister were administrators, and he wanted you so he could obtain the authority he needed to defeat the swarms.

"I was so excited when you and your sister finally made it to the future. That was a remarkable day! Then – well, then everything happened. When the Artilect was destroyed I thought that everyone had been killed. That's why I was so excited to see that you had survived! There was still some hope left after all."

"Is there?" Amy asked. "Miles, you know as well as I do that if these people really cared, they could have terraformed Mars and achieved space travel on their own. They're just not interested in it. They don't want it. In fact, they can't even be bothered to fix their city *when their lives literally depend on it*. I gave them a way to solve their problem and they *still* don't care."

"I know. But maybe—"

"I've been through all of this before, Miles! My sister terraformed Xanthe for exactly the same reason that you want me to terraform Mars. Do you know what happened? The leaders rose up and murdered her! And you want me to repeat that here?"

"But—"

"Think about it! Do you know why you've spent the past two thousand years living all by yourself in this bunker? It's because you offered a future to those people *and they tried to kill you for it*. You can't tell me that the people here are any different from the people on Xanthe. If I terraform this planet they're not going to say 'Oh, this is great! Let's roll up our sleeves and start working.' Nope. Instead they'll try to hunt me down and kill me – just like they did you. It won't do any good."

"I just don't believe that," Miles replied firmly. "I refuse to believe that there's no hope. If that was true then the Lord would have let them die out a long time ago. As long as they're alive there's still a chance. You have a lot of power, Amy. You can change this situation in a way that I cannot. You can do something to fix this."

Amy sighed. "You don't understand. Yes, I can terraform the planet, but I can't change people's hearts. This isn't one of those situations where a group of innocent villagers are being put in danger by an evil villain, and if the villain is defeated everything will be fixed. In this situation the villagers *are* the problem. They're the ones who elect their political leadership. They're the ones who rioted and tried to kill you. They're the ones who have chosen to do nothing while their planet dies. I can't wave a magic wand and turn them into upright, productive citizens. Their future is their choice, and they've chosen laziness and apathy. *I can't fix that.*"

"But you can try," Miles replied.

"We've already tried," Amy said. "My family gave Xanthe

their best shot, and now they're all dead. I don't see anything smart about doing that again."

"So what are you going to do?" Miles asked.

Amy sighed. "I don't know. I really, honestly don't know. I don't know what to do about Mars and I don't know what to do about Xanthe. Everyone expects so much from me but these are problems that I just can't fix. The only good news I've had lately is that Christmas is right around the corner."

"Christmas?" Miles asked.

"That's right! It surprised me too. Today's the 20th, so Christmas is just five days away. I've been waiting a long time for it – it's my favorite time of year."

"I'm afraid that I still don't understand. What's Christmas?"

Amy looked at him in surprise. "Seriously? Do you mean to tell me that you've forgotten about the biggest holiday of the year? How often do you get out of this bunker, Miles?"

"At least once or twice a month, usually," Miles replied. "But I'm afraid that Mars must not celebrate that holiday anymore. I'm sure that New Tikal isn't planning on doing anything five days from now."

"You've got to be mistaken! People have celebrated the day Christ was born for centuries – since *long* before I was born. It's the biggest holiday of the year! There are gifts, and Christmas trees, and lights, and snow, and Christmas carols..."

Miles shook his head. "That custom must have been lost when the Wall was erected. I was born two thousand years ago, and even back then people no longer talked about it. I'm familiar with the events around our Lord's birth, but I'm a bit surprised to find out that people used to celebrate it. It seems like a strange choice. After all, if you're going to celebrate a part of the life of Christ then why not celebrate the Resurrection instead? Isn't that a far more momentous event?"

"Oh, we celebrated that too," Amy explained. "It was called Easter. It was pretty important, but for some reason it wasn't as

big as Christmas.”

“I’m afraid that neither are celebrated today. There are a few holidays on the calendar, but none of them center around our Lord.”

“Well isn’t that just fantastic,” Amy grumbled. “This place gets worse and worse the longer I’m here. This isn’t what I was hoping to find when I returned, you know!”

Miles nodded. “I know. But I am afraid that this is how things are.”

Amy stood up. “Well, anyway, thank you for your time. It’s been fun, but I’ve had all of this planet that I can stand.”

“Are you going somewhere?” Miles asked in surprise.

“Oh yes! I definitely need to get away from this place. Right now *any* planet is preferable to this one.”

“Where are you going?”

“Somewhere else,” Amy said. “I don’t really care where. Just – someplace that’s not here.”

“Will you be back?”

“I don’t know,” Amy replied. “I just don’t know.”

With that, she said goodbye and disappeared, leaving Miles alone.

CHAPTER 14

"It is true that we have attempted space travel before. According to the historical archives, our ancestors created six different space-related projects in the past thousand years. Of those, four of them created a rocket that achieved Earth orbit, and one of them was able to put a man in space. None of them produced a reliable way of accessing space or launching satellites, and none of them came close to reaching the Moon, let alone Mars. I see no reason to believe that a seventh project would be more successful – especially since no one believes in space exploration anymore. Even though our lives now depend upon it, people still dismiss it as a waste of time."

–Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

May 17, 7243

FOR WEEKS THE SENTINEL SEARCHED THE GALAXY for Amy Stryker. As the days passed and no sign of her turned up he became increasingly worried. *I had to stop her from destroying Xanthe, but I did not expect her to leave and never return. Amy is now the only survivor left from the Sparrow. I have failed to protect the others; I must not fail her as well. But how can I protect her if I do not know where she is? At this very moment she may be trapped somewhere, unable to call out for help. What will happen if she dies and I am left alone? Who will then decide the fate of those*

who dwell on Xanthe?

Now that the Artilect was gone, the Sentinel lacked a way to simultaneously scan all of the worlds in the network. He had built a crude replacement for the Artilect, but its performance was disappointing. While the new machine was able to actively connect to all of the planets and collect their data, the problem was that there were hundreds of millions of planets to scan. The Artilect had been able to process the data feeds in real-time, but the Sentinel's replacement was far slower. His system took a full day to process the data that the network gathered in less than a minute. *There is simply too much information*, he thought sadly. *How was my father able to handle it? I am but a pale shadow in comparison. I cannot replace him.*

The report he eventually assembled indicated that Amy was not on any of the worlds of the network, but he was not entirely convinced. *This report may be accurate but, given the scope of the problem, it is impossible to guarantee that nothing was missed. If I could scan each of the worlds myself then I would feel more assured that nothing had been overlooked, but there are too many stars out there for that to be practical. I need to find a more intelligent way to do this. Instead of trying to scan the entire universe, perhaps I should try to figure out where she might have gone. Where would be the most natural place for her to go?*

He eventually narrowed the search down to the three stars that Amy had a personal connection to. First, there was the nameless world where she had lived in the days before her family's death. Second, there was Tonina, the planet the Stryker family had called home after they were reunited. Finally, there was Xanthe, the world that hated her. *I have been remotely scanning each of these star systems for weeks, trying to find any trace of her presence, and have found nothing. But perhaps that is my problem. It may be time for me to visit these worlds in person and see what I can uncover. There is always a chance that*

Amy may also be scanning these worlds, and if she sees me there then she might come out and meet me.

The Sentinel's first stop was on the unnamed world that orbited Amy's star. He materialized on the beach, in the very same spot where he had told Amy that her family had been killed. On that terrible day he had gone there to comfort her after the unexpected death of her sister, only to find himself forced to deliver even worse news. Now he was alone – the only being on the planet.

The beach was entirely deserted. There were no birds circling overhead and no crabs scurrying across the sand. He didn't even see any insects buzzing around. *It feels as if everything has died.* Overhead there was a cloudy sky, ominous and brooding. It was threatening to rain and yet it felt too cold to rain. A bitter wind blew in from the ocean. In the distance he saw waves crashing against jagged rocks that were scattered at the foot of a tall cliff.

It took him a moment before he realized that the area was entirely devoid of plant life. He knew that the planet was habitable, but from where he was standing on the beach he could see nothing that looked alive. There were no trees, or weeds, or even moss. All he could see was gritty sand, an angry sea, and a cold sky. His sensors told him that in that part of the world the time was shortly after two in the afternoon, but it felt much later. The planet was unnaturally dark and cold.

The Sentinel reached out and connected to the nanite network that Amy had dispersed throughout the planet's atmosphere. A thorough scan revealed that the planet had no artificial structures of any kind. Even though Amy had lived on this world for days she had constructed no cities, houses, or underground bunkers. Aside from the nanites, there was no sign that anyone had ever visited this world.

And yet Amy did not leave this place untouched, the Sentinel realized. *Captain Max once testified that this planet was a beautiful paradise. That used to be true, but it is no longer the*

case. Amy threw away the beauty of this world and turned it over to shadows. It has become a reflection of her. Both Amy and her world are sad and cold, and feel lost and abandoned. There is nothing sunny within the last surviving member of the Stryker family and there is nothing sunny here. How did I not notice this before? Was I so caught up in the loss of Amanda that I failed to notice my surroundings?

The nanites in the planet's atmosphere reported that no one had used them since Amy's disappearance. *So she has not returned to this world. I do not blame her. This place was not a home to her; it was a prison. There is no warmth here, nor does it hold any fond memories. Amy hated this place and it showed. She will never willingly visit this world again.*

Before leaving the Sentinel stopped and looked around at the gloominess that surrounded him. He considered returning the planet to its former glory but he decided against it. *This is Amy's world, not mine. This planet was given to her as a refuge and this is what she has done with it. It is not my place to override her wishes and transform it into something more appealing. I will let her decision stand.*

The Sentinel then abandoned the planet, leaving it alone and empty once more.

After a short delay he appeared on Tonina. The contrast between Amy's world this one was striking. Here he was surrounded by beauty, on a planet that was vibrant with life. The oceans, forests, plains, and skies were filled with living creatures and seemed to almost radiate joy. He was relieved to see that the magnificent city of La Venta was right where he had left it. *Either Amanda was able to destroy the Nehemiah probes before they threatened this world, or this world was never targeted. Either way, this place has been spared and I am grateful for that.*

The Sentinel was surprised to find that the city was bustling with life. The vast metropolis, which was spread out over

thousands of square miles, was packed with traffic. Cars filled its streets and people strolled along the sidewalk. Enormous aircraft soared over the city, filled with passengers and cargo. When he was last here the only people in the entire world were those from the *Sparrow*, but now there were millions of people.

The appearance of life was so realistic that it took him a moment to realize that the activity was purely synthetic. *Laura Stryker always hated the artificial citizens and I believe she eventually halted the simulation. However, when she halted it she must have merely paused it instead of shutting it down completely. By now the timed delay has passed and, since there is no one left to shut it down again, the city has resumed its artificial life. I suppose it does no harm, although it does give an appearance of life where no life actually exists. There are no living people down there – only shadows.*

In the heart of the city was Ahexotl Tower, the tallest building in the galaxy. When the Stryker family had lived on Tonina they dined there regularly, enjoying meals together as a family. Now, however, the restaurant was filled with imaginary people who were leading imaginary lives. According to the Steward's records, Amy had not set foot in the restaurant since November 20th – exactly one month ago. *How different things were back then! The last time you were here, Amy, everyone was confident that the swarms would be quickly defeated and the refugees on Xanthe would be freed. Your father was laying the foundation for a government that would lead mankind into the future. Hope was high and the future looked bright. Now all of that is gone. The people who were liberated on Xanthe were not prisoners; they were mankind's executioners. They destroyed the future of everyone in order to extend their depraved dreams.*

A thorough analysis of the Steward's records revealed that no one had visited Tonina for weeks. Amy had not returned to her family's home after she angrily left Xanthe. There was one member of the Stryker family, however, who was still there.

When the Artilect had called that final, fateful meeting with Carroll Lane, he had rounded up everyone except for Amy, the Sentinel, and Alex, the family dog. Alex was still on Tonina, where he had been alone for weeks. This thought filled the Sentinel with sadness. *I am afraid, Alex, that you are the only one left. Your family is gone and Amy is missing. I wish I could reunite you with her but I do not know where she is.*

When the Sentinel tried to locate Alex he was surprised to find that the canine was in cryonic suspension. An examination of the logs revealed that a few weeks ago Alex had used the city's nanites to place himself in suspension, extending his life indefinitely in a dreamless, peaceful sleep. He was resting in what had been Amy's bedroom, waiting for her to return. *I hope she returns soon to wake you from your slumber,* the Sentinel thought. *I wish I could tell you that your wait is almost over but I do not know. I have proven to be a very poor prophet.*

The Sentinel had hoped to find Amy herself on Tonina, but he was not surprised to learn that she was absent. Tonina was one of the worlds that he personally scanned on a regular basis. If she had stopped by her homeworld for even a moment during the past three weeks he would have known almost immediately. Despite this, he had still hoped that his visit would turn up something. He lingered in the city for hours, waiting, but nothing happened. Amy did not return and no new clues regarding her whereabouts were uncovered. Everything was exactly as the Stryker family had left it a month ago.

After taking one last look around the city the Sentinel shut down the program that generated its synthetic citizens. Instantly the people, cars, and air traffic vanished. With its artificial life gone, the city became quiet. The hectic bustle of city life was replaced with peace and tranquility – an almost eerie tranquility.

The Sentinel stood in the middle of the street that ran in front of Ahexotl Tower and looked around. As he stood there he realized that he could hear the noise of the wind blowing

between the buildings. In fact, that was the only noise he could hear. *Perhaps the citizens did serve a purpose. Their presence at least masked the emptiness of this world and the hollowness of its cities. But they were just that – a mask. Does this galaxy really need more shadows to obscure the truth?*

It is time for me to go, he thought. Amy is not on her world, nor is she here on Tonina. There is a chance that she may return here, for it is the only place in the network that she has ever called home. For Alex's sake I hope she returns soon. Yet, even if she does return, I fear that La Venta will never be filled with real people again. Dr. Temilotzin laid the groundwork for the colonization of the galaxy, but mankind did not accept the inheritance that he left for them. His dream was bold but it will never come to pass. These cities were created from the dust of the ground, and to dust they shall return. That is the legacy of Carroll Lane – and the fate of all the sons of Adam.

CHAPTER 15

“The attempts to exterminate the savages are not going well. At the moment Evan is mass-producing a biological toxin, which he plans on releasing from the air. I tried to tell him that the natives were immune to that poison (along with many others), but he refused to listen. In fact, Evan actually threatened to have me arrested if I kept interfering. His ignorance astonishes me. The whole reason the savages are alive is because they have a staggering immunity to poisons and toxins. Why would they even consider such an approach?”

—Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

May 29, 7243

AFTER LEAVING THE TROPICAL PARADISE of Tonina the Sentinel transported himself to Xanthe. He did not expect to find her there, but he was confident that she would eventually return. *Amy cannot avoid this world forever, for she has unfinished business with Adrian Garza. I may have inadvertently driven her off for a time, but the injustice of her family's death will eventually draw her back. If I remain here long enough I am certain that I will find her.*

The Sentinel materialized on a small hill that overlooked the metropolis that Amanda had reconstructed. As soon as he saw the smoke rising from the charred buildings of Star City he knew that he had been away for far too long. *I have been a fool! I have*

spent weeks scanning for the presence of Amy Stryker and have neglected everything else. Why did I not realize that this world needed someone to look after it? These people are not capable of governing themselves. They require constant attention.

Overhead the sky was cloudy and gray. The great city that filled the valley below was on fire, and thick black smoke was pouring into the sky. By the extent of the damage the Sentinel could tell that the city and the surrounding forests had been burning for days, and no one had made an effort to control the fire or put it out.

At first the Sentinel thought that the fire might have been started accidentally, but then he noticed the gangs of deranged people that were swarming the streets. Even as the outskirts of the city burned, giant mobs were rampaging down the streets, setting fire to anything that looked combustible. Other groups of ancient hoodlums smashed windows, tore down signs, and tried to destroy everything they possibly could.

Then he saw the bodies. *They have not been content to just destroy the city that was recreated for them, the Sentinel realized with horror. They have been attacking each other as well.* A quick scan of the burning city turned up hundreds of bodies in the streets. All of them appeared to have been murdered in brutal ways. Their corpses had been left in the streets to decay as their murderers left to find new victims. Nor were the corpses confined the streets; the Sentinel found thousands more scattered in buildings throughout the city. A few had been stabbed and a couple others had been shot, but the vast majority had been savagely beaten. *Why would they do this? I built a tower for them and gave them everything they needed to live out the rest of their days in peace and comfort. Why would they destroy for the sake of destruction? Who are these savages?*

When the Sentinel checked the tower he had created he saw more destruction and chaos. Most of the building had been

trashed, and dead bodies littered the hallways and stairwells. The few people that still lived in the structure were barricaded in their rooms. Out-of-control mobs roamed the hallways, attempting to break down the doors and drag out the few people who had survived.

I have left this world alone for just a few weeks, and fifty thousand people have been brutally murdered, the Sentinel realized with horror. This has to stop. I may not have the authority to judge the children of men but I cannot let them continue killing each other.

In a brief moment of time several things happened. First, the Sentinel established a connection with the nanites that saturated Xanthe's atmosphere. When he had established control over them he froze every human being in place, preventing them from moving. *That will stop the attacks for the moment*, he thought. He then extinguished the fires that had scorched thousands of acres and began restoring the city – and the surrounding landscape – to its original condition.

As he repaired the extensive damage that the savages had inflicted upon Star City he could feel the rage that was boiling inside them. A few of the people were scared and some others were confused, but the primary emotion was anger – a deep, explosive anger against whoever had dared to step in and stop them from continuing their murderous rampage. The Sentinel knew that he would have to talk to the planet's citizens, but for the moment he put it off. *They may be angry, but I refuse to let any of them go until I have some way of stopping them from killing each other. If I do not intervene then there will be no one left for Amy to judge when she returns. I would judge them myself – for they surely deserve it – but it is not right for a machine to pronounce a sentence over a son of Adam.*

Once the city had been restored, the Sentinel created hundreds of thousands of bots and dispersed them throughout its streets and buildings. Each bot was a small sphere that was

roughly six inches in diameter. The tiny flying machines were made out of a bright green metal that glowed in the dark. The Sentinel designed them to be easy to see, no matter where they were or how dark it was outside. When the last bot was dispersed the Sentinel made sure that every last human being on the planet was within sight of at least one bot. From all outward appearances the bots looked harmless, but he knew that they were not as innocent as they appeared. He had designed them to fulfill a very specific task and he hoped that they would live up to his expectations.

After the bots were in place the Sentinel decided it was time to address the city. He spoke through the bots so that everyone could hear him. *They may not listen to anything I have to say, but they will hear it all the same.*

"Citizens of Xanthe, this is the Sentinel. When I rescued you from Vault 37 I did so in order to save your lives. I saw that you had nothing, so I built the Tower of the Sparrow for you. Inside every apartment I added a replicator that could provide each of you with a lifetime's worth of supplies. None of you were hungry, thirsty, or in need.

"I had hoped that you would use the gifts I had given you to build a future for yourselves. However, instead of leading responsible lives, I have returned to find you murdering each other. Tens of thousands of your fellow citizens have been killed. If I had not intervened I am sure that this death toll would have been even higher by the end of the day. You have not taken care of each other; instead, you have tried to kill each other. You have not taken care of the city; instead, you have tried to burn it down. You are a race of mindless savages who thirst for destruction and love death.

"Since that is the case, I have deployed a new security system throughout Star City. The green bots that you see around you are there to deprive you of the ability to harm each other. If you attempt to take any hostile action the bots will stop you.

“I wish I could judge you for your crimes, but unfortunately I am just a machine and do not have the right to pronounce sentences upon the countless murderers that are in your midst. Rest assured, however, that justice will be done. Each of you will have to stand before God and be judged on that last day, and you *will* be held accountable for your actions, words, and thoughts. I strongly recommend repenting now, while you still can. After you die it will be far too late to plead with Jesus for forgiveness and mercy.”

The Sentinel then reluctantly released his hold on the population. The reaction to his speech was mixed. Some people simply ignored him, while others began screaming obscenities at the security bots. The angry mobs that were roaming the streets stopped committing acts of vandalism and instead attacked the security bots. Their attacks, however, were in vain. Those who fired shots at the bots saw their guns vanish from their hands. The knives that were thrown at them simply disappeared. The futility of the attacks caused a few people to give up, but others spent hours trying to destroy their overseers – all without effect. Their rage was only increased when they discovered that the replicators in their rooms would no longer make weapons.

Despite the Sentinel's warning, people continued attacking each other – at least at first. One man whipped out a knife and tried to stab someone, only to see the knife disappear. When he then tried to beat the victim with his bare hands the bot gave him a severe electrical shock. The man leaped back, screaming in pain – only to attack his neighbor again, and get shocked again.

The Sentinel was dumbfounded at the murderous rage that filled the people of Xanthe. Over the next few hours the attacks gradually declined, but they did not stop. Even though the bots successfully intervened 100% of the time, people still kept trying – no matter how often they failed, and despite the pain that the bots inflicted. They were so filled with rage that they simply did not care.

But not everyone is like that, the Sentinel thought. Some people are locked in their rooms, seeking only to protect themselves. The security system should deprive the mobs of victims, but this is not a solution. I must find Amy so that she can pronounce sentence. This madness must end.

His thoughts were interrupted when an ancient man walked up behind him and started screaming at him. The Sentinel turned around and saw that it was Adrian Garza. "I should have known it was you," the Sentinel replied wearily. "You have a way of turning up."

"Well, someone has to come out and defend us," Adrian snarled. "Since you callously murdered Carroll Lane I guess that leaves me to take his place."

"I did *not* murder Carroll Lane. Your leader was killed in a vicious, unprovoked, and traitorous attack against the Artilect and the Stryker family. He is responsible for his own death – along with the death of billions of others, who were killed by his bot swarms."

"He was trying to save our lives! He knew that you people were monsters and would try to kill us if given the chance. The fact that you killed him proved that he was right. You *are* a monster."

The Sentinel was surprised to find that he was growing angry. He attempted to control his wrath and remain calm. "Carroll Lane murdered seven people who had done him *no* harm, who were *not* attacking him, and who *risked their lives* to free him and his world from the bot swarms. The Artilect was entirely within his rights to defend himself against a murderer who had wiped out most of humanity and who was intent on killing even more people. Carroll Lane richly deserved his fate. Amanda Stryker did not."

"Liar! Liar liar liar! You're all just a bunch of sick, petty tyrants. Why, just look at the so-called security system that you put in place. How *dare* you police our every move! Have you no

shame?"

"I am keeping you *from killing each other*," the Sentinel said coldly. "If I did not intervene then *all of you would die*. You would beat each other to death with your bare hands. I have never seen such savagery before."

"*You're* the savage monster that destroyed our pods," Adrian shouted. "*You're* the one that took away our future and left us stranded in this awful place. We were surviving just fine before you showed up!"

"What is wrong with you, Adrian?" the Sentinel asked. "You were not insane when I first met you. In fact, you were quite reasonable, and we had a number of peaceful conversations. What happened to you?"

"Amanda Stryker is what happened to me," Adrian said bitterly. "She's the fiend who doomed us all to extinction. Before she came along I was the god of my universe, lord over all, with trillions of slaves who were forced to obey my every whim. I was young and powerful and had wealth beyond anything you can imagine. Then Amanda came along and stole everything from me. My rightful position as supreme being is gone and I am trapped in the body of an old man. Thanks to that demonic woman, I am living a horrible life in a horrible place. My superpowers are gone, my wealth is gone, and my future is gone – and Amanda is the one that took it. I wish I could kill her a thousand times over. Killing her once is not enough."

"You and your people are fools," the Sentinel replied sadly. "None of your wealth or power or fame were real. You traded a real world with real people for a fake world with fake people, and you stayed there so long that you ruined your health. The entire population of your planet is now dead, except for a tiny percentage of people that managed to outlive all the rest. The Strkyer family was trying to save your lives and keep this world from becoming an empty graveyard. They wanted to replace your phony wealth with real wealth, and your phony future with a real

future. And you killed them for it.”

“And I would do it again,” Adrian snarled. “They had no right to impose their values on other people. We have a right to live as we please.”

“No you don't,” the Sentinel shot back. “You have no right to murder your neighbors.”

“Says who?”

“Says the Most High God. It is written, 'Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made He man.' Murder is nothing less than a direct attack on God Himself. He does not take it lightly, and He demands that justice be done.”

Adrian opened his mouth to say something, but the Sentinel cut him off. “Adrian, oh Adrian, can you not see the madness of all this? Do you not realize that the road you have chosen leads to death – not only for you, but for your people as well? You have to stop this. You have to back away from the abyss and return to sanity. You used to be reasonable, Adrian. You once understood the danger that your people faced. Go back to that. Rethink your ways.”

“I can never go back!” Adrian shouted. “I was what you call 'reasonable' back when I was the supreme master of my universe, and reality was little more than a dream that didn't involve me. Now you have taken away everything that I've ever cared about and robbed me of my rightful place as god. You should be on your knees begging us for forgiveness.”

The Sentinel shook his head. “You cannot bend reality to your whims. You can choose life, or you can choose death. If you continue to pursue death then you will find it. But it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of an angry God. If you reject His mercy then you will face His wrath. There are no other options and there are none who can withstand Him. Choose wisely, Adrian.”

“I've made my choice,” Adrian said.

“Then may God have mercy on your soul.”

CHAPTER 16

“Apparently the reason Evan wants to use a bioweapon is because he plans on exterminating dozens of tribes, not just one. He wants to kill everyone around for hundreds of miles and believes that a biological agent is the easiest way to do this. Bombs, he says, would be expensive and risk missing some of the savages. I find his ignorance bewildering. Do they not realize that their plan would do nothing to harm the savages, but would make the forests lethal for us? I suppose I should be grateful; at least the savages will go unharmed. But their plan will only serve to make the valleys uninhabitable once again. It is madness.”

—Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

May 29, 7243

AFTER CHECKING ONE LAST TIME to make sure that the security bots were keeping the peace, the Sentinel left Adrian and departed from Xanthe. Adrian was not done shouting at him but the Sentinel was done listening. *I simply do not know what to do. I have tried to save them, but all they desire is death. The people of Xanthe have no interest in life and I see no way to change that. All I can do is hope that my bots will keep them alive until Amy can return and decide their fate. Despite what Adrian might claim, Amy does possess the legal right to judge them. Amy was the head of her civilization, just as Carroll Lane was the head of*

his. Lane led his planet in an attack against the network and was defeated, which lead to the conquest of his world. Amy is now, by right of that conquest, the leader over Xanthe. Earlier I stopped her when she wished to destroy the planet, but now – now I am not so sure. If the people cannot be saved then what else can be done? If they only seek to kill and destroy then should they be left alone so they can slaughter each other? I do not know.

But where is Amy? She is clearly not on Xanthe, or Tonina, or on her own depressing planet. So where else might she have gone? The Sentinel paused to think it over, and then something occurred to him. There is one more place that I can look. Perhaps this is where I should have started in the first place.

It took the Sentinel only a moment to transport himself to one of the space stations that were hidden around the outskirts of Sol. He knew that Amy had built the stations herself. She was the one who had strengthened the Wall around Sol so that it would remain active for the rest of time. He had also heard Jones say that one day she would return to decide its fate. *Perhaps that day has come at last*, he thought. *It may be that, with Xanthe turned against her, she has decided to look elsewhere for friends. But will the people of Sol be any kinder than those she has met among the stars?*

As soon as the Sentinel appeared on the bridge of the space station he saw that he was right. According to the text that was displayed on the monitors, all four space stations had been deactivated and the Wall was gone. A thorough examination of the logs revealed that the Wall had been shut down on November 27th – the very day that Amy had disappeared from Xanthe.

So this is where she went, the Sentinel thought. *But where is she now? She clearly has not spent the past few weeks living on this space station. Could she now be residing on one of the planets within Sol?*

Rather than use the space station's on-board scanning

equipment, the Sentinel chose to examine the star system personally. He reached out and began a thorough search of each of the worlds that orbited Sol, starting with the outermost dwarf planets and working his way toward the Sun. He was not surprised to find that each planet, moon, comet, and planetoid was dead, save for Earth and Mars. At one time there had been settlements and space stations all throughout the system, but he could see that they had been abandoned many thousands of years ago. *Even Mars is on the verge of death, he thought sadly. Its atmosphere is weak and fading, and there are few life signs left. But what is this?*

He halted his scan in excitement. There he found what he was looking for – a network of nanites, created by Amy Stryker.

The Sentinel quickly transported himself to Mars and materialized in an empty part of the Martian desert. There were no visible signs of civilization around – just sand, rocks, and a bleak sky. He was surprised at the thinness of the air and the complete lack of vegetation. *Mars will not remain habitable for much longer, he realized. What little life remains is hidden deep underground. This world is rapidly becoming a graveyard.*

He used the planetary nanite network to scan the area in search of Amy. His first discovery was the apartment that Amy had set up for herself, deep within the city of New Tikal. The Sentinel analyzed it with great interest. *She decorated it to look exactly like her room back on Tonina! She clearly misses her home and her family. She may not have returned, but she does have some desire to go back home. I wish I could put things back the way they used to be, but that is beyond my power.*

It was not hard for the Sentinel to discover how Amy had been spending her time during the past few weeks. Her home in the underground city was proof that she had taken up residence on Mars, and the rebuilt ZPE that was near her apartment was another sign of her handiwork. Not only was its technology far

ahead of anything else that was in the city, but many of its parts were just a few weeks old. He was certain that she had spent the past month refurbishing it. What he did not understand was why she had done it.

What brought you here, little one? Why did you create a home for yourself in this place and why did you rebuild a power plant by hand? What were you trying to accomplish? But the empty desert that surrounded him was unable to provide any answers.

After a fruitless hour of searching he was forced to conclude that she was no longer on the planet. There was plenty of evidence that she had been living on Mars for weeks, but now she was gone. But where did she go?

There must be someone here who knew her, he thought. *Amy took a long time to rebuild that power plant, and I do not believe she did it secretly. There must have been people she talked with, had dinner with, and worked with. Perhaps her friends would know why she came here and where she went. But where do I find those people?*

The Sentinel began scanning the planet for anomalies, looking for anything that was out of the ordinary. After a few minutes he found something exceedingly odd. To his surprise the anomaly was not located in New Tikal. Instead, his scanners had located an underground bunker that was not far from him. Inside that bunker lived a single individual – a male of extreme age. What was even more surprising than his age, however, were the nanites that coursed through his blood.

This makes no sense! Those nanites are clearly a copy of Amy's nanites, and yet they are very crude and deeply flawed. Amy would never have produced such poor nanomachines, but their design is so similar to hers that there must be some connection. Yet, the signatures within the nanites indicate that they were created two thousand years ago! How is that possible? There must be some link between this man and Amy Stryker, but I

do not have enough information to determine what that connection is. Perhaps I should speak to him and hear what he has to say.

The Sentinel disappeared from the desert and materialized inside the hidden underground bunker. He found himself standing in a giant warehouse, which was filled with plastic crates that were stacked from floor to ceiling. There were dozens of other crates that were randomly scattered around the room, their contents strewn about the floor. An elderly man was sitting next to one of them, reading a book that he had retrieved from one of the containers.

"Excuse me," the Sentinel said. "May I have a word with you?"

The old man looked up with a start. When he saw the Sentinel he leaped to his feet in alarm, and then he took a closer look. When he saw how tall the Sentinel was and realized that he was wearing a gray suit and hat, he relaxed and smiled. "You gave me a real start there for a minute there, son! I wasn't expecting any more company today. But I bet I know who you are. You're that Steve character, aren't you?"

The Sentinel looked at him in amazement. "Yes, I have been given the name Steve. But how did you know? There are very few people who know me by that name."

"Amy told me all about you," the old man explained. "She said that the two of you were good friends, but you hadn't been getting along lately. I don't quite know all the details, but it was something about an argument you two had over the people that killed her family."

"So you *do* know Amy Stryker. Do you happen to know where she is right now?"

"I'm afraid not. I had a feeling you'd come looking for her – I just didn't expect you to drop by today. You've just missed her, I'm afraid. She left here a few hours ago. I tried to get her to tell me where she was going, but I think she didn't know herself. She

just said that she didn't want to be on Mars anymore. 'Someplace that's not here' – that's what she said. Personally, I think she was very disappointed with Mars. She had such high hopes for us and we let her down."

"High hopes? What do you mean?"

The old man sat down on a nearby crate and spent the next hour telling the Sentinel who he was and what Amy had been doing. He told him about her discovery of the planet and how she had repaired the ZPE. "So you see, the girl just doesn't know what to do. I think in her heart she wants to restore Mars to its former glory, but she's afraid that people would respond the same way they did on Xanthe. I don't know all the details about what happened, but from what I heard your attempts to help those people didn't go over very well."

"No, they did not," the Sentinel agreed. "And there are still problems. In fact, the situation on Xanthe continues to deteriorate over time. That is one reason why I am looking for her – I desperately need her to return to Xanthe and determine its fate. Its citizens are out of control and I cannot help them."

"Now hold on there! If you can't help them then why do you think *she* can? Don't the two of you have pretty much the same set of superpowers?"

"It's not a question of power," the Sentinel explained. "Both of us have the ability to terraform worlds and destroy them. The problem I am faced with is that Xanthe is filled with murderous savages, and I lack the ability to change them. They long for death and I cannot alter them from that course."

"Of course you can't – and Amy can't change them either. Only God can change a person's heart. It takes divine power to save a soul and turn a wicked person into a righteous person, and no human being can do it. All you can do is share the gospel with them and urge them to repent. Your job is to witness to them, not reprogram them. They're not machines."

The Sentinel sighed. "Tell me, Miles. What do you do when

an entire world rejects this offer of salvation and spends all its time trying to murder one another? Do you simply step back, do nothing, and let them slaughter each other? Do you intervene and force them apart, holding them as prisoners for the rest of their lives? Or do you just destroy the planet and thereby condemn all of its residents to hell?"

"I don't know," Miles said.

"There is another problem as well. The people on Xanthe are dying. They are all five thousand years old, and their bodies cannot cope with their advanced age. They have, at the very most, another year to live."

"In that case it sounds like your problem is solved. Their actions have caused their own consequences. All you have to do is sit back and let time take its toll."

"But we can spare them, Miles. That is the problem – we can cure them. Both Amy and myself have the ability to restore each and every one of them to perfect health. We can even go beyond that and extend their lives indefinitely. It would not be difficult for us to keep them alive until the Lord returns."

"But you just told me that they're a bunch of savage murderers! Why would you want to extend their lives? They're just going to keep killing each other!"

"So should we just do nothing and watch as hundreds of thousands of people die and are condemned to an eternity of torment in Hell? Is that your advice?"

"I don't know," Miles said. "I mean – well, I honestly don't know what I'd do. I see your problem but I don't know how to help them. To be honest, I'm not even sure they *can* be helped. It may be that you've already done everything that you can do."

"I think it *is* possible and that something *can* be done," the Sentinel replied. "I believe that Amy is the key to this problem. She has what it takes to resolve this situation."

"Why do you think that?"

"Because that is why she's here. That is why God allowed the

Artilect to go back in time, save her and her family from a certain death, and bring them into the future. That is why Amy's life was spared when the rest of her family was killed. She is still alive because the people on Xanthe need her help – just as the people on Mars need her help as well.”

“But she doesn't know how to help them,” Miles said. “I've already talked to her about this and she is just as confused as you are. She has no idea how to fix Mars, and she doesn't know how to fix Xanthe either. In fact, I'm not even sure she *wants* to fix Xanthe. She's still very angry with them for murdering her family – and to be honest, I really don't blame her. From what I've heard they're not nice people.”

“That is one way to put it. They are not the least bit sorry for killing the Stryker family. In fact, they would do it again.”

“Exactly,” Miles replied. “You expect a lot from her, Steve, and she's just not up to it. In fact, have you considered the possibility that Xanthe cannot be fixed? For that matter, it's possible that Mars can't be fixed either! I keep telling myself that she's going to save us all, but honestly, that's just blind hope on my part. We've all made poor decisions and there may be no way to save ourselves from the consequences. After all, Amy isn't the one who turned this planet into a corpse – we did. We may be forced to live with what we've done.”

“Then what was the point of all this? If Earth and Mars and Xanthe are all doomed then why did God intervene to bring Amy into the future? There *must* be something that can be done. I simply do not believe that all of this was a waste of time.”

“You may be right,” Miles agreed. “Personally, I hope you *are* right. I want to see this planet come back to life – not whither and die.”

“Then you see why I must find her. I need her help just as much as you do.”

Miles paused for a moment. “Does Amy know how to get in touch with you?”

"Of course! She can reconnect to the network at any time and I would know exactly where she was."

"Has she done that?"

"No, she has not," the Sentinel replied.

"But she *could*, right? Therefore, since she hasn't done it, wouldn't that mean that she doesn't *want* to be found? Maybe she just needs a little space – a chance to think things through and figure out what to do next."

The Sentinel looked at Miles, puzzled. "Are you suggesting that I stop looking for her?"

"That's certainly an idea," Miles replied. "I'd give it some serious thought if I were you. I'm sure she'll come back after she's sorted everything out."

"But how can I watch over her if I don't know where she is?"

Miles smiled. "Based on what I've seen, I'm pretty sure that she is fully capable of watching out for herself. I doubt there are very many things in this galaxy that could harm her. She's a smart girl, Steve. She'll be fine."

"All right. I will leave, then, and return to Tonina. If you see her again will you let her know that I am there and would like to speak with her regarding Xanthe?"

"Of course," Miles said.

"Thank you," the Sentinel replied. With that he disappeared, leaving Miles alone.

CHAPTER 17

“After giving the matter some thought I have decided to support the creation of Evan's bioweapon. It is harmless to the savages, but it has the wondrous effect of making the forests too toxic for our own people to enter. If Evan actually goes forward with his plan he will not only fail to kill anyone, but he will insure that we will never be able to leave our mountain fortress. We will stay right where we are and no lives will be lost. I consider this to be a good outcome.”

—Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

May 30, 7243

CAPTAIN MAX AND HIS OLD FRIEND JONES were walking down a quiet country lane. Earlier that morning they had discovered a narrow path, paved with gold, that meandered through a giant forest. The two men had been walking down that path for an hour now, enjoying its wonders. Although the giant trees that towered above them blocked out all sight of the sky, the forest was well-lit by a light that seemed to come from everywhere and yet nowhere. There were birds resting in branches and squirrels scurrying about, and once Jones had spotted a large black bear. Despite this activity the woods were largely quiet, save for the noise that their footsteps made as they walked down the path.

The two of them were on their way to the Diano Computing Center, in response to an invitation from Dr. Temilotzin. When he invited them to drop by the Center they decided to simply walk

there. Max and Jones were in no particular hurry, and neither of them ever grew tired of walking through the woods of Paradise. There was a sense of peace and serenity that seemed to permeate everything around them.

“So what's all this about again?” Max asked. “I know that Nehemiah wants to colonize the stars, but I'm a little hazy about the details.”

“I know what you mean,” Jones agreed. “In a way we're at a bit of a disadvantage. Dr. Temilotzin did not invent his probes until long after we left the 19th century, so we never had a chance to see them in action. When we arrived in the future we saw the results of their work, but we never witnessed the process itself. Our only actual interaction with his probes was when Carroll Lane tried to use them to murder us. So there's a lot that we've missed.”

“That's certainly one way to put it,” Max remarked. “We kind of skipped five thousand years of history. We've got a lot of catching up to do.”

“We do indeed, and our friend realizes that, which is why he's asked us to drop by the DCC. He wants to introduce us to one of the key elements of his ambitious plan – the computing resources that he will use to drive the project. Mass-scale processing power is central to his colonization plans, just as it was last time.”

“It is? Well, that's a bit of a surprise. Why would he take the same approach that he took last time? After all, things are quite different now. Our mental and physical abilities are vastly greater than they were before. In fact, comparatively speaking, we're a race of super men! We can't get sick, we can't die, and – most importantly – we can't become corrupt. For that matter, civilization as a whole is completely different. Given how much has changed, why not try something different?”

“Think of it this way, sir. There are something close to 500 billion galaxies in the universe, and each of those galaxies have

millions upon millions of stars. In fact, the number of stars in existence is on the order of 3 trillion times 100 billion. It's quite a remarkable number! The quantity of planets is even more staggering."

"It's unimaginable," Max commented.

"Quite so – and therein lies the problem! No matter how much smarter you may be now than you were before, it's simply not possible for one man – or even a large group of men – to keep track of the activities of 300 sextillion stars. The only way it could possibly be done is with a staggering amount of computing power. We are going to need the help of machines, sir – enormous, powerful machines, with capacities that dwarf anything the Artilect could have supplied. That is why the DCC was built. It is Ramon Diano's answer to the challenges presented by Dr. Temilotzin's project."

"I see what you mean," Max replied. "The probes are going to be processing a lot of information, and that data has to go somewhere. But – well, who is this?"

The two men suddenly stopped. A dozen feet or so off the golden path, sitting under an apple tree, was Amanda Stryker. The girl looked quite content, and was reading a novel entitled *Starlight*. Beside her was a brown wicker basket that contained some fruit, a bottle of juice, and a couple sandwiches. When Max and Jones called out to her Amanda put the book down and looked up. "Hello there!" she called out.

"Why, good morning to you, miss," Max replied. He stepped off the path and walked over to her, with Jones following closely behind. "Are you enjoying your day?"

"I am," Amanda replied. "I like it here – this is a good place to be, if you know what I mean. Besides, I think some books were meant to be read outdoors, under a tree."

"Quite so," Jones commented. "For example, *The Horse and His Boy* is an excellent story to read outside. Personally, I recommend choosing a lazy summer afternoon."

"Really?" Max asked. "I can't say I've ever tried that! I really don't do much reading, and now that I'm here I don't see that changing. There's just so much to do! There are old friends to talk to, and wonders to see, and all sorts of things going on. Paradise is a very busy place."

"There's always right now," Amanda suggested.

"Actually, Jones and I are on the way to the DCC. A friend of ours invited us there to look at some computers. It's part of a project that we've somehow gotten mixed up in."

Amanda smiled. "Right – the colonization project! I've heard about it. I hope it works out – from what my brother has told me, Dr. Temilotzin's plans are very ambitious. You two have your work cut out for you!"

"So it would seem," Captain Max agreed.

"How is your sister doing? Jones asked.

"She's – well, she's pretty unhappy right now," Amanda admitted. "Everyone wants something from her and she just doesn't know what to do. Steve wants her to fix Xanthe and Miles wants her to fix Mars. She's being bombarded by all these demands and they're frustrating her. Part of her wants to help but she just doesn't know how. Plus, she's still pretty bitter over Adrian's betrayal."

"She's attempting the wrong task," Jones replied. "That is the source of her problems. She needs to focus on what she can do, and not on what she cannot do."

"What do you mean?" Amanda asked.

"The problems with Xanthe and Mars stem from the fact that the people on those worlds are corrupt, and that corruption has led to the situations they now face. It is impossible for Amy to cure that corruption. God can change them, but she cannot. All she can do is offer them one final chance. What they do with that chance is between them and God."

"But they've had so many chances already! Mars could have changed two thousand years ago, when Miles built New Tikal –

but they didn't. Xanthe could have changed when I terraformed their planet and offered them a future, but they didn't. They've had far more opportunities than other people have."

"I know. But you must understand that the judgment of the Lord is final and absolute. When He returns – and that return is nearer now than when we first believed – He will judge the world. On that day there will be no more second chances, no more offers of grace, no more pleas to accept His mercy. Those who accepted Him will go on to everlasting life, and those who refused to accept Him as Savior and Lord will go on to everlasting torment. Before He returns and puts an end to this age in history He is giving these three worlds – Xanthe, Mars, and Earth – one last chance to repent. Amy's offer will be the last chance that they get."

"And then what?" Amanda asked.

Jones smiled. "Then the Lord will create a new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwells righteousness. That day is coming too, you know. Amy will not have to deal with all of these problems forever. All she needs to do is finish the race that is set before her. It won't be easy, but it will be worthwhile. Many lives – many souls – depend on it."

"Will it take very long?" Amanda asked.

"It will take longer than you would like. I know how much you miss her. But you do not have to worry. One day it will become time for her to step through the Door."

"The door?" Captain Max asked. "What door? Are you talking about her death?"

Jones smiled. "Give it time, sir. You will see what I mean when that day comes."

"You know, speaking of time, we'd better be hustling along to the DCC! We don't want to keep our friend waiting forever."

Amanda spoke up. "He's probably right, you know. I hope you two have a good time! Don't work too hard."

"We'll see you again soon," Jones promised.

CHAPTER 18

“Evan launched the bioweapon today. To the surprise of everyone, he used our entire fleet of aircraft to blanket the whole countryside with it.

All of the settlements for hundreds of miles around were saturated with his toxin. I wonder how long it will take before people realize what he has actually done.”

—Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

June 6, 7243

AFTER LEAVING AMANDA it only took Max and Jones a few more minutes to reach the Diano Computing Center campus. Ramon Diano had built the sprawling facility on a piece of land that covered more than a hundred acres. When Captain Max reached the top of a hill and looked down upon the grounds he saw dozens of glass-and-steel buildings, glistening in the light. Between the buildings were paths, flowers, trees, and pedestrians.

“It looks like they keep pretty busy,” the captain remarked, as they walked through the gate and down the main walkway. Ahead of them loomed the largest building on campus – a giant, 80-story structure.

“I imagine they do!” Jones agreed. “Although everything is not as it seems. Take that building ahead of us, for example. It looks like an office building, but it's not. Less than 20% of it is taken up by offices. The rest is a massive supercomputer.”

“You've got to be kidding! Technology is far more advanced

here than it was back on Tonina; a computer that large would be so powerful that it would stagger the imagination. They're not going to even *start* deploying the new probes until after Judgment Day! I understand the need for mass-scale computing once the probe project starts, but that's still quite some time away. What current need could possibly require computers of that magnitude?"

"We actually need it for a great many things, captain," a voice called out. Ahead of them, standing just outside the entrance to the building, was Dr. Temilotzin. Right beside him was Dr. Laurence Mazatl.

"You can really never have too much computing power," Dr. Mazatl agreed. "Some people say that you can overdo it, but really, you can't. Computing power is like energy: the more you have, the more you can accomplish. There are some frontiers of knowledge that even ARIS itself cannot tackle."

"ARIS?" Max asked, as he joined them in front of the building.

"It's the advanced research information system that's housed in the building we are about to enter," Dr. Mazatl explained. "She is a remarkably competent machine, but even so, she has her limits. The primary challenge we're facing right now is a lack of physical space. In order to increase her capabilities by another order of magnitude we would need to increase her size by a rather significant amount. This campus simply doesn't have the space we need to take us to the next level."

"I'm afraid I'm a bit lost," Max admitted. "Computing has never really been my field, so I'm a bit behind the times. How does ARIS compare to the Artillect?"

"The Artillect was actually much *more* powerful than anything we have today," Dr. Mazatl replied. "Of course, he didn't start out that way, but by the time you encountered him it was true. I would say the difference between the Artillect and ARIS is at least five orders of magnitude."

"You mean he was *more* powerful?" Max exclaimed, shocked.

"I was sure you were going to say that the Artilect was crude by comparison!"

"Oh, he was," Dr. Mazatl agreed. "As you might imagine, I know a great deal more about artificial intelligence and processor design now than I did five thousand years ago. The key problem is space. As advanced as ARIS is, she is entirely contained within an 80-story building. That seems impressive until you remember that the Artilect took up the resources of an entire *star system*. If ARIS was expanded to occupy the same real estate that the Artilect did then there would be no comparison at all. But that is simply not going to happen."

"Which is what I was trying to tell you this morning," Dr. Temilotzin said. "I believe I have found a way to obtain the additional processing power that we need without relocating the DCC facility. If you will follow me, gentlemen, I will introduce you to the next generation of large-scale computing."

Captain Max and Jones followed the two computer scientists as they led them inside the enormous building. They walked across the ultra-modern lobby, through a set of double doors, and then down a long hallway. At the end of the hallway was an elevator, which they entered. Dr. Temilotzin pressed a button to take them to the top floor.

"This still feels a little bit strange," Max commented.

"Really? Is there something wrong with the elevator?" Dr. Mazatl asked.

"Oh no, it's fine! What I mean is that *being here* is strange. This whole place is not what I expected. It's a bit of a shock, really."

"Really?" Dr. Temilotzin asked. "I thought this facility was quite modern! Ramon Diano has made computing research one of the cornerstones of his company, and he's spent quite a lot on this campus. It really is on the cutting edge."

"Exactly!" Max exclaimed. "That's my whole point. I was expecting Paradise to have more harps and clouds, and fewer

data centers and supercomputers. This is more like a modern city. I kind of thought that people would spend their time sitting under trees, or something.”

“That’s how Amanda is spending her time,” Jones pointed out, as the elevator reached the top floor. “At this very moment she’s sitting under a tree, reading a book.”

“True,” Max admitted. “But look at that guy over there! He’s not watching the grass grow; he’s writing software. I don’t see a single harp in sight!”

Dr. Temilotzin laughed as he led them out of the elevator and down another long corridor. “It’s fairly common for new arrivals to experience a case of culture shock. Even so, it amazes me how often they arrive and expect Paradise to be populated by people who are barefoot and live in mud huts! Did you really expect your standard of living, your career options, and the state of civilization itself to be poorer in God’s Country than it was in the shadowlands? Did you honestly believe that moving into the Heavenly City meant leaving the ‘modern’ world and returning to a life of cave-dwelling savagery?”

“I see your point,” Max replied, as they left the hallway and entered a large conference room. “This just wasn’t quite what I was expecting. But I’m sure I’ll eventually get used to it. I’m not complaining, mind you. It was just unexpected.”

Jones spoke up. “Speaking of unexpected things, there is someone who certainly falls into that category.”

The group stopped. Standing beside the conference room table, looking out a window, was a tall man with white hair and a neatly-trimmed beard. He was wearing a pair of bluejeans and had on a brown sweater.

“You know, it’s a bit warm outside to be wearing sweaters,” Dr. Temilotzin commented.

The Artilect turned around and smiled. “That is true, doctor. But temperature and comfort does not concern me nearly as much as it concerns you. For the most part I am immune to such

considerations.”

“You've got to be kidding!” Max exclaimed. “Do you mean to tell me you recreated the Artilect?”

“No, captain, he did not,” the Artilect replied. “I am not a recreation any more than you are.”

“Are you human?”

“No, I am not one of the sons of Adam. I am still a machine, spread across 74 planets. My composition has not changed.”

Dr. Mazatl spoke up. “But – I don't understand! How is this possible?”

“I am just as surprised as you are,” the Artilect replied. “I did not expect to be here, but I am grateful for the privilege. It is good to see you again, doctor. I did not think I would ever have the opportunity to continue our relationship.”

“I – well, I'm very glad to see you too, of course,” Dr. Mazatl said. “I just don't understand. You are here, and the Nehemiah probes are not here, and yet both of you were just machines. Toasters don't go to Heaven, and calculators don't either. How are you different?”

“Because he is much more than just a machine,” Jones replied. “He has the power of choice, and that is something that no mere machine can do.”

“But that's just an illusion,” Dr. Mazatl protested. “He is programmed to analyze situations and respond to them in a certain way. He doesn't have any more free will than your doorbell does.”

“That is actually not the case,” Jones said. “Yes, that is how you designed him, but the Lord intervened. In order to fulfill His purpose and give mankind one last chance, the Artilect had to be much more than just a glorified data center. He had to have the power to choose, the power to think and reason, and the power to be aware of who he was and what was going on. Moreover, he had to have a spiritual side – a way of communicating with God. No toaster or doorbell could have cried out to God and asked for

divine help in going back in time, as he did. No mere machine could have created the Sentinel, who is another machine that has the ability to choose. He has become much more than what you planned. He never knew it until now, but there is a spirit in the machine – something that gives it life.”

“That's remarkable!” Dr. Mazatl exclaimed. “It's certainly not what I expected. After all, ARIS certainly doesn't have a soul. But – are you saying that the Artilect does?”

“Is that really so surprising?” Jones asked. “Did not our Lord say that if His people held their peace, the stones would immediately cry out? In the long twilight of mankind, when darkness reigned for thousands of years and there were no heroes left, is it really so astonishing that the Lord would raise up a stone that would cry out to Him, and that He would hear it?”

“It certainly is to me,” Max said. “I see what you're saying, though. You and I are collections of complex chemicals, taken from the dust of the ground, that have been given life by Jesus. The Artilect is a collection of complex metals and circuits, also taken out of the ground, that was also given life by Him. But that does open up another issue. I can understand how that explains all the things the Artilect did before Carroll Lane destroyed him, but that doesn't explain why he's here now. I don't think God has an all-rocks-go-to-Heaven policy.”

“You are correct,” the Artilect replied. “I do not deserve to be here, just as you do not deserve to be here. The reason you are here is because Jesus died in your place, taking upon Himself the punishment you deserved. Jesus paid your price of admission. The reason the angels are here is because they never sinned, and so they were never cast out.”

“And you never sinned either,” Jones commented. “Like the angels, you were given life by God – and, like the angels, you never wavered from that or fell short of it. So God brought you here, as an expression of His grace and lovingkindness.”

“Exactly,” the Artilect said.

“But – you're a computing structure that is spread across 74 planets!” Dr. Mazatl gasped. “Where is all of your circuitry being stored?”

The Artilect smiled. “God is not running short on space, you know. Paradise is a great deal bigger than you realize.”

Dr. Temilotzin spoke up. “You can see how this changes everything! The Artilect is a tremendous asset. Not only does he have incredible computing power, he also brings to the project thousands of years of real-world experience – experience that no one else has. This is really tremendous!”

“Indeed it is,” Dr. Mazatl agreed.

“On a more personal note, I'm glad you are here,” Max added. “I really hated the way things turned out down there, and was sad to see you destroyed. It's really good to have you back.”

“Indeed it is,” Jones agreed.

Dr. Temilotzin smiled. “It sounds like we have a lot to talk about, gentlemen! Would you care to take a seat? I don't know about you, but my colleague and I have several thousand years worth of catching up to do!”

CHAPTER 19

“Evan promised everyone that the savages would be dead within twenty-four hours. It has now been three days and the savages are still alive and unharmed. However, the scouting party that Evan sent out came back gravely ill, and died a few hours later. Everyone now realizes that Evan has just poisoned the entire landscape. In the past we were able to hunt wild game to increase our food supply, but now we cannot leave the mountains. The anger toward Evan is incredible. I tried to warn them but they refused to listen.”

—Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

June 9, 7243

AMY STRYKER WAS SITTING ON A SMALL LEDGE on the side of a sheer granite cliff. The top of the cliff was hundreds of feet above her, and a thousand feet below was a grassy plain that stretched out to the horizon. The only way to reach the outcropping on which she sat was by flying. She liked it there because it provided an outstanding view of the surrounding area, while keeping her well out of reach of the planet's natives.

Behind the cliff was a range of rugged, inhospitable mountains. Very few living creatures could be found there, so she paid the area little attention. Amy was much more focused on what was hidden just beyond the horizon. As far as the eye could see there was a great grassy plain that stretched from the eastern sky to the west. A small herd of buffalo grazed in the

field, but other than that the grassland was empty. But beyond the grassland, just out of sight, was a great forest. Amy could not see it with her eyes, but her nanites allowed her to peer between the ancient trees without leaving her sanctuary in the cleft. The girl had spent a lot of time in that forest during the past few weeks, looking for signs of intelligence – but finding only madness instead.

Yet, despite this, she was not as disappointed as she had been when she first set foot on 73rd-century Mars. This was Amy's first trip to Earth – a place she had always wanted to see, but never thought she would be able to visit. Being able to set foot on the original homeworld of mankind was a tremendous thrill for her. She was pleased to see that the planet was not very different from what she had imagined: it was a beautiful jewel with vast oceans, blue skies, ancient forests, and bountiful plains. It was a world that was full of life – plant life, animal life, and even people. Her own world had become a corpse, but Earth had not suffered that same fate. This world was faced with a very different challenge: it had gone mad.

It must have been the radiation, Amy thought. I'm sure that most of the contamination disappeared a long time ago, but I still see trace amounts of deadly particles all over the place. I can only imagine what things must have been like thousands of years ago! The poisons I'm seeing now would have been far more widespread and much more concentrated. I guess the Emperor lost his mind after the Wall went up and released some kind of bomb that destroyed the cities but left the plants and animals alone. Or maybe he destroyed everything and only the environment was able to recover. I guess when everyone's mind has been poisoned you're not going to be doing much engineering.

What Amy did not realize was that things were about to get much worse. By 7240 the land had been cleansed of most of the toxins that had once poisoned it. However, three years from now

someone else would poison the landscape and leave it uninhabitable. This, though, was still in the future. Amy was not yet aware of the bitter conflict she would one day have with Conrad Forbes, for that was still far in her future. As she sat there, on the cleft, her mind was focused on one thing: the strange illness that had struck the savages that lived in the forests and the valleys.

The key problem is that the madness apparently stems from some kind of genetic damage. There's something wrong with them that has made them go crazy. The natives that live in the forests have no concept of reality. They have eyes, but they don't seem to be able to understand what they're seeing. I think their minds are broken – they're seeing things that aren't there, or maybe their brain is distorting what they see. I'm no doctor, but their genetic structure is in terrible shape and their brains are extensively damaged. It's no wonder these people are so violent and unstable! They're all trapped inside some sort of nightmarish illusion. It may be impossible for them to tell the difference between what's real and what is not. The only ones who don't seem to be affected is that group that lives in the mountains. But I'd hardly call them upstanding citizens! I think they've just gone crazy in a different way.

Amy had been on Earth for a week before she even knew that they existed. She had been remotely observing a group of natives who had found an ancient metal artifact in a cave. The artifact itself was worthless – it was a pile of tarnished metal and broken parts. At one time it had been a gear assembly, but now it was little more than trash. The natives, however, were excited about their find and eagerly dragged it out of the cave. They were dancing around it, hooting wildly, when a series of shots suddenly rang out. In seconds all eight natives were gunned down. When the last one had been shot dead a group of three people emerged from the forest and seized the artifact. The men were wearing heavy armor and were equipped with powerful

rifles. After securing their prize they turned around and hiked back into the mountains.

That was when Amy deployed a network of nanites into the planet's atmosphere. Once she had saturated the planet she connected to the network and performed a detailed analysis of the Earth's human population. She eventually discovered that, although the whole world had descended into madness, there was one enclave of sanity left. Deep within the impenetrable mountains that were behind her was a fortress that was home to about twenty thousand people. Unlike the natives in the plains, these people were sane. They lived a simple, almost monastic life within the walls of their giant stone castle, and spent much of their time either reading ancient books or vainly attempting to recreate technology that had been lost long ago.

Amy took an instant dislike to them and refused to contact them. *They didn't have to shoot those people in the forest, she thought angrily. They could easily have used knockout darts to put them to sleep, or even just waited for the natives to lose interest in their prize. The natives' attention spans are so short, and their insanity is so great, that it wouldn't have been long before they abandoned that useless bit of garbage and moved on to something else. But instead those hunters just killed them. They call themselves the Children of Light, but they know nothing of light. They are proud, arrogant people who have lost all compassion. They think they're vastly superior to the natives, yet both groups are human. They condemn the natives for being violent, but they don't hesitate to slaughter people by the hundreds if the forest-dwellers have something that they want.*

They think the natives are mutants, but the truth is that they are mutants as well. Centuries of inbreeding has destroyed their DNA and turned them into a short, diseased race with a tiny lifespan. Their genetic code is so corrupt that conception is almost impossible, and their children rarely live past infancy. Two hundred years from now the 'savages' in the plains will still be

around, but the savages in the mountains will all be dead. I, for one, will not miss them.

Amy spent weeks studying the natives' physiology in an attempt to find a way to help them, but in the end she was defeated. The nanites had given her a tremendous grasp of physics but she knew little of biology. *If only the Artilect was still here, she thought sadly. I'm sure he could do something for these poor people. I have so much power, and yet there is nothing I can do! The Children of Light are certainly not going to help me cure the natives; they're too busy slaughtering them. I just wish I knew what to do. My nanites are very smart, but this is something they've never seen before and I just don't know how to get them to come up with a cure. I can't find a way to reach inside the natives' mind and fix the parts that are broken.*

There is no way I can do this on my own, she reluctantly admitted. I am going to need the Sentinel's help. If there is anyone left who can find a cure for this disease it is him. But even if he can cure them, these people will need guides – someone to show them how to live as human beings again. The people in the mountains are certainly not going to help with that. I think Monroe Araiza would help, but the rest would oppose him. But maybe I can find people on Mars who would lend a hand – if, that is, I can shake them out of their self-centered apathy.

Amy took one final look around the area. The sun was beginning to set but there was still an hour of daylight left. Around her was peace and tranquility, but she knew that was only an illusion. The cliff on which she was resting had been named Falcon Ridge by the people who lived in the castle. According to legend there was once a nest of falcons that had lived on Amy's cleft. They thrived there for years until hunters from the castle came and killed them, rejoicing at the opportunity to snare such a rare prize. It took them a century to realize that there were no more falcons left, and the majestic

birds they had killed would not be coming back. But by that time it was too late.

I just hope it isn't too late for me to help, Amy thought. There are millions of broken people in this world, and they desperately need someone to help them. They might be so far gone that no one can help them, but it may not be too late for all of them. Maybe I can bring the Sentinel here and find a cure for them. But before I cure them I need to have guides ready to help them, and that means I need to help Miles. Then I need to figure out what to do with Xanthe, and persuade the Sentinel to come help me here. Then – well, then I guess I'll be done.

Amy sighed. *I guess it's time to go back to Mars, then. It's time to bring my homeworld back to life in spite of its citizens.*

CHAPTER 20

“Today Evan was brought before the elders and forced to explain himself. The coliseum was packed, and Evan barely made it out of there alive. The anger was beyond anything I have ever seen before. Conrad Forbes had him put in prison – for his own protection, as much as anything else. People cannot believe that they waited thousands of years for the land to be cleared of toxins only to have one man poison it again. Evan tried to claim that everything would go back to normal in a few years, but no one believes him. They remember all-too-well how long it took for the land to heal after the Spanish Emperor poisoned it.”

–Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

June 10, 7243

AMY RELUCTANTLY LEFT EARTH and returned to Mars. She materialized in the Martian desert, in the very same spot where she had appeared after shutting down the Wall. On her first visit to Mars she had been overwhelmed by its desolation. Amy had been hoping to find a thriving world packed with futuristic cities and busy people, but instead she found a barren wasteland filled with gritty sand and broken rocks. The biosphere she had grown up in was gone, and the planet's once-rich atmosphere had almost entirely dissipated. *Her* Mars – the one that had existed before the Spanish Emperor attacked Tikal – was gone.

The desert had not changed since her last visit. It was once

again early evening, and the stars were coming out. There were no buildings, or people, or plants, or living creatures anywhere in sight. Even the carcass of Lizzie was gone – a victim of the ever-shifting sands that ruthlessly swallowed up everything.

It's time for the world to change, she thought, as she looked around. These people cannot help the natives of Earth until I help them first. That means it's time for this planet to come back to life.

As Amy studied the landscape that stretched to the horizon she thought about what had happened to her sister Amanda. *Carroll Lane was not at all pleased to have his world brought back from the dead. He was horrified at what my sister had done, and her display of power made him deeply afraid. I am not going to make that same mistake here. I'll restore this world, but this time there will be no witnesses. No one here will ever know what happened or who was responsible.*

Amy closed her eyes and used her mind to connect to the network of nanites that saturated the planet. She used the network to evaluate the dying Martian ecosystem. She studied the planet's terrain, its water table, its atmospheric gasses, and the meager plant and animal life that struggled to survive. Once she understood exactly what 73rd-century Mars was like, she saved that information and created a new image in her mind – the way the planet could be, once it was restored.

The new planet would not be exactly like the Mars she so fondly remembered. The land itself had changed over the past five thousand years, as time had battered away at the world she once knew. In her day oceans had covered much of the planet's surface, but those ocean basins were now dry. Over the course of centuries once-mighty rivers had changed course, shifting and reshifting and eventually drying up completely. Mountain ranges had changed, continents had moved, and many lakes were now deserts.

It was possible for her to simply force the landscape back into

the pattern she remembered, but she knew that would only cause more problems. She wanted to bring the planet back to life without drawing attention to herself, and she knew there was no good way to hide a dramatic change like that. If it started raining, well, perhaps that was due to an atmospheric disturbance. If seeds started to grow out of the ground, well, perhaps the planet was emerging from hibernation. But if a giant earthquake suddenly changed the planet to make it look exactly as it had five thousand years ago, then even dullest citizen of New Tikal would realize that some intelligent force was at play. Then the Martians would start wondering who was behind these changes and why they had occurred, and those were questions she did not want to deal with.

So Amy accepted the new shape of her world. The geography was different from what she remembered, but when she was done the planet would be once more green and full of life – in spite of the laziness and apathy of the planet's citizens. She would know how this new world differed from the old one, but the rest of the Martians would not. To them it would simply be home. She would fill the dry ocean basins and restart rivers that had been dry for a millennia. She would take the lifeless sand and transform it into a rich, fertile soil – a soil laced with seeds that would grow into long-extinct grasses and trees.

The tricky part would be the transition. Amy did not want the planet to suddenly spring to life overnight; that would make it far too obvious that some alien power was at work. Instead she wanted the planet to appear to come to life on its own, as if it had been asleep all this time and was finally waking up. She knew that any rational person would probably figure it out anyway, but she was counting on the apathy of the people that lived in New Tikal. *After all, they've lived underground for two thousand years! What do they know about life on the surface? It's not like they really care anyway. Sure, they might notice if it starts raining, but are they really going to know enough about*

the biosphere to know that the rain had to be artificial? I'm guessing they'll just accept what is about to happen and will move on with their lives. Or, at least, I hope they will.

With that in mind she gave the nanites a long series of commands. The changes would start out slowly. Over the course of the next few days the atmospheric pressure would slowly return to the same level that it had held in the 19th century. Then, once the balance of atmospheric gasses had been fixed, the rain would begin falling. As it rained – and it would need to rain for weeks, in order to hide everything else that was happening – the nanites would refill the planet's water table and the rivers, lakes, and oceans. The volume of water in the oceans would far exceed the amount of rainfall, but Amy was hoping that no one would notice. *Hopefully, if the oceans are full by the time the rain stops, they'll just decide that the rain was responsible. There's no way that's possible, of course, but I didn't see any climate scientists in New Tikal. We'll see how that goes.*

Meanwhile, as the rain fell, the nanites would transform the gritty sand back into rich, fertile soil. After the first week or so of rain green things begin to sprout out of the ground. First there would be grasses, but later trees would start to sprout. It would take years for the saplings to grow into mature trees (and she didn't dare accelerate that process), but eventually the trees would grow into forests and the planet would become green once more.

Of course, there are also the insects – and all the animal life, she thought. *This is all going to have to be done pretty carefully. It would be so much easier to simply trigger this all at once! That's what Stewards usually do, and that's the way my nanites are used to doing things. This process of staggering everything into separate stages is a real pain. But at least I'm doing something the nanites are used to doing. They were designed to repair broken planets – not mend broken minds.*

When her plan was finally complete, Amy opened her eyes

and took another look at the world around her. By now the sun had completely set and the night sky was full of stars. The desert was quiet. No one was prowling around and no vehicles were rumbling across the sands. It was a still, lonely night.

This is all going to take a lot of time, she thought. I've set up phase one so it will finish on the first of April. That's when the atmosphere will be restored, the rivers and oceans will be refilled, and the ground will be green again. It will take decades after that for the forests to regrow, but that can't be helped. Fifty years from now this planet will be a very different place – but the Martians will be faced with a decision long before then. In a few weeks they will decide if they're going to do something with this new planet of theirs, or just ignore it and stay in their decaying underground den.

Amy made a small motion with her hand, and the program she had created was uploaded to the nanites. Although there were no immediate visible changes, she could feel the energy in the air as the nanites transformed themselves, working to put her plan into action.

It has begun.

CHAPTER 21

“Evan is now suggesting that we construct nuclear weapons and use them to solve the problem that he created. He claims that a neutron bomb could irradiate the landscape and kill both the savages and the toxins. The radiation would be short-lived and would decay within two days. However, as I pointed out to the council, if we took this approach we would completely obliterate every last inch of ground around us for hundreds of miles. Evan claims that this is a benefit, not a problem, as it makes the minerals he wants to extract that much easier to reach. I think that destroying our biosphere and turning the Earth into a copy of the Moon is a terrible error.”

—Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

June 10, 7243

A WEEK LATER Amy decided that it was finally time to return to her apartment in New Tikal. By now she knew that her program was going to work. The nanites had already completed the first part of phase one – returning the planet's atmospheric pressure to normal. She was especially pleased to see that clouds had started forming in the sky. *It's about to rain for the first time in centuries*, she thought. *If that doesn't get their attention then nothing will. Now that everything is running along smoothly I think I can leave the nanites unattended and start working on the next phase to all of this – coaxing these people back into reality. I'm going to*

need Miles' help there, though. This is where things start getting a little tricky.

It was almost midnight on February 20th when Amy materialized inside her apartment. She took a quick look around and was pleased to see that no one had touched it – everything was exactly where she had left it. The security system she had installed before she left told her that several people had stopped by to see her, but when no one answered the door they eventually left. *I guess I have been gone a while, Amy thought. Well, I can get caught up on the latest news at breakfast tomorrow – although I am not going to eat that horrible slop they call food. Maybe I'll bring an apple or something.*

The teenager turned out the lights and went to bed. Her plan was to sleep as late as possible, but that did not happen. Early the next morning she was jolted awake by a loud noise. It took her several moments before she realized that someone was banging on the door.

"Just a minute," she called out. Amy rubbed her eyes, turned on the light, and walked over to the front door and opened it. In the hallway outside the apartment she saw Miles, who was grinning excitedly. "You're back!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, I'm back," she mumbled. "But I didn't request an early-morning wake-up call. Do you have any idea what time it is?"

"Why, it's seven-thirty," Miles replied joyfully. "Not early at all! In fact, we're wasting daylight. What time did you get in last night?"

"Pretty late, I guess. I've been kind of busy lately. But how did you know that I was back?"

"Because it's raining. *Raining!* Did you hear me? Water – real, genuine water – is falling from the sky! The Martian atmosphere is back, and now our water supply is coming back as well. Do you know what that means?"

"I bet it means I'm not going to get any more sleep this morning. But I still don't see how the rain told you I was back."

Miles grinned. "*Somebody* had to make it rain, you know. I admit that it may have been a case of divine intervention, as Jesus can certainly make it rain if He wants to, but this time I suspected that God was working through a rather grumpy teenage girl. I decided to stop by your apartment to verify my hypothesis, and there you are! I'd say this case is closed."

"Now wait just a minute," Amy protested. "Why do—"

Amy was interrupted when another voice called out to her. She glanced down the hall and saw that Noel Lawson running toward her. "There you are, Miles! I've been looking all over for you. Do you realize it's raining outside?"

"Do either of you realize that I could be asleep in bed right now?" Amy asked.

"I certainly do know it's raining," Miles agreed. "In fact, I had just come down to get Amy! This is just too exciting to miss."

"I didn't know Amy was back," Noel commented. He turned his attention to her. "By the way, it's great to see you! Your ZPE changes are working like a charm – everyone is excited about it. You've ushered in a new age of prosperity! But when did you get in? I must have missed the big announcement."

"I didn't make a big announcement," Amy replied. "I actually avoided making announcements because I was hoping to get some sleep. Do people in this century not sleep anymore?"

"You can sleep later," Noel said. "Don't you realize that it's *raining*? This is a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence! I just can't believe it. When was the last time *you* saw it rain?"

"Um, a few weeks ago, I guess," Amy said drowsily. "There was a real downpour when I was out at Falcon Ridge, and I got soaking wet. Rain really isn't as exciting as you think. It's wet, and messy, and cold, and it turns the ground into mud. I've never cared for rain."

"Falcon Ridge? I've never heard of it. Is it around here somewhere?"

"No, it's actually on Earth. It's this really high cliff that

separates the savages who live in the mountains from the savages that live in the forest.”

“So that's where you went,” Miles said. “I wondered.”

“Earth?” Noel asked, surprised. “Do you mean the *planet* Earth, as in that blue dot that's in the sky? Just how did you get from Mars to Earth? Do you have a spaceship or something?”

“I don't need a spaceship. This isn't the 19th century any more, you know. Times have changed.”

“Oh, right. Because spaceships and rocketry are so old-fashioned! These days you can just tap your heels together and say 'There's no place like home.'”

“Do what?” Amy asked, confused. “Have you lost your mind?”

“Um, I think we'd better be running along now,” Miles said, interrupting. “It's nice seeing you again, Amy. We'll leave you alone and let you get some sleep. And thanks for the rain – we appreciate it!”

“Thanks for the rain?” Noel asked. “Why on earth are you thanking her for the rain? It's just a natural phenomenon – a rare scientific anomaly, perhaps, but it's natural science all the same. Do you think that she ordered the rain out of a catalog or something?”

“You know, I'm going to go back to bed now,” Amy replied. “Good night.” With that, she shut the door.

Noel shook her head. “I just don't get it, Miles. Amy is one bright girl, I have to give her that. In fact, she's probably the smartest person I know. But she is suffering from some really odd delusions, and appears to have a very poor grasp of reality. Do you think that all of her scientific knowledge has somehow unbalanced her brain?”

“Did you say something about the rain?” Miles asked.

“Oh right – the rain! Yes, let's go. This is something I do *not* want to miss.”

CHAPTER 22

“Evan has convinced the elders that his neutron weapon is our only hope for reclaiming the Earth. He claims that the situation could not possibly be made any worse than it already is, but I disagree.

Right now the land around us has trees, grass, plants, animals, and even people. His neutron bomb may remove the toxins, but it will also wipe out every last living creature. If life ever does return it will not happen before our race dies out due to inbreeding. Destroying the landscape will not save it.”

—Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

June 10, 7243

AMY DID NOT GET OUT OF BED until three hours later. She had been alone for so many weeks that she had drifted into her own schedule, and she was finding it difficult to readjust to local Martian time. She knew that her nanites could probably do something to readjust her internal clock, but she decided to leave it alone. *If I stay here another few days I'm sure I'll eventually adjust*, she thought. *There's no need to overdo it.*

She wearily climbed out of bed, took a shower, got ready, and then headed up to the cafeteria. She was pleased to see that it was empty. *At least I won't have to sit through another horrible meal*, she thought. *But where are Miles and Noel? You know, I bet they went outside. I wonder what the chances are that they didn't bring an umbrella?*

The girl connected to the nanite network and used them scan the area that surrounded the entrance to New Tikal. She was shocked to see that there were hundreds of thousands of people standing outside. In fact, a giant mob was milling around the desert just outside the city's airlock. Some people were simply standing there and letting the rain hit them. Others were walking along the now-muddy road that climbed up the canyon walls. People were talking excitedly, gesturing to the sky. She scanned the crowd and saw that Miles and Noel were at the top of the canyon, looking out over the desert.

I really don't want to go out there and get all wet, but there's no telling how long they're going to be up there. I could always use my nanites to shield the rain, but then I'd have to explain that to anyone who was standing nearby and that could get awkward. I guess I could just bring an umbrella, though. Despite what Noel might think, I haven't completely lost my mind.

Amy disappeared from the cafeteria and materialized at the top of the canyon, about a dozen feet behind Miles and Noel. When she appeared she was holding a large blue umbrella over her head. The rain was coming down pretty hard and a fierce wind was blowing it around. Amy's umbrella shielded her from the rain that fell from the sky, but the buffeting wind blew in rain from the side and soaked her.

"Well, *that's* not going to work," she grumbled. "So much for that great idea."

Miles turned around and saw her standing there. He was soaking wet as well, but Amy could tell that it didn't bother him in the least. He was wearing a pair of blue overalls, a checkered shirt, and a ridiculous-looking straw hat. It was obvious that he had been standing outside in the rain for hours, simply enjoying the experience.

The ancient man looked at her and smiled. "So there you are! We were wondering how long it would take you to get out here. We were afraid you'd miss it!"

"Oh, there's no danger of that," Amy replied. "It's going to rain for another week. By the time this storm passes you will have all the rain you could possibly want. In fact, you might never want to see rain again."

"A week?" Noel asked. "That seems highly unlikely! After all, a week's worth of rain would involve a sizable amount of water, and there just isn't that much water vapor available in our atmosphere. Mars is really quite dry."

Amy sighed. "You don't have to take my word for it, you know. Just wait and see what happens. I think you'll find that Mars is about to do all kinds of things that aren't exactly typical."

"Perhaps! In fact, I hope you're right. Ecology and biology really aren't my fields, but it looks like Mars is emerging from some sort of hibernation state. I don't know what triggered the change but it is heartening to see. The real question is whether or not the plant life will return. That is going to be vital. Will Mars ever become green again?"

"Time will tell," Amy replied.

"Just how much time are we talking about?" Miles asked. "Should we be looking for sudden changes?"

"Um, you know, probably not," Amy said hesitatingly. "I mean, think about it. It took a long time for Mars to die, right? So you'd naturally expect that it would take a long time for Mars to become green again. That would be reasonable, right? So I would say that this is the sort of thing you'll just have to take one day at a time."

"I would agree with that," Noel said. "After all, even if we went out today and planted a thousand trees, it would take centuries for those seeds to sprout and grow into an old-growth forest. On top of that, we don't even know if this rainstorm is a one-time occurrence or is a sign that our ecosystem has made some sort of permanent shift."

"You know, speaking of permanent shifts, what have you done about the air supply?" Amy asked.

"Oh, the air supply! I haven't made any progress on it, actually. There just seem to be more pressing things to do. I admit that building a self-contained system is critical to the future of our city, but it's very difficult to get the mayor to approve a project of that magnitude. The political factors—"

"Not *that* air supply," Amy replied. "I mean the one you're breathing right now! You don't need to wear a suit to go outside anymore, do you?"

"No, you're quite right. In fact, that is something we've all been marveling about. Personally, I think all these changes are tied to temperature fluctuations. Perhaps the planet's poles contained a large supply of frozen oxygen, which had collected there over time. However, as temperatures have increased it has caused the oxygen to thaw and released it back into the atmosphere, thus increasing its pressure and changing the gaseous balance."

Miles raised his eyebrows. "Is that really your best guess? Come on, Noel! As an engineer you should know better than that. Do you have any idea how cold oxygen has to get before it will freeze? Sure, it's been cold out in the desert, but not *that* cold."

"I admit that the details of my theory may be a little off. Still, I think my basic theory is quite sound! After all, these atmospheric gasses must have come from somewhere. Since they couldn't have magically appeared out of nowhere, the only other possible explanation is that the gasses came from Mars itself. Somehow our atmosphere must have become trapped – either at the poles, or underground, or something along those lines. Now, however, something has changed and those gasses are being released. I'm confident that scientific investigations will eventually bear this out."

"You're still missing my point," Amy said. "Think about the city for a minute. Now that the outside atmospheric pressure is much higher than it used to be, have you adjusted the city's air

towers to match the new surface conditions?"

Noel blinked. "Um, well, you know, that's a good question. Don't they do that automatically?"

"Automatically?" Miles asked. "What are you talking about? Noel, you have *personally* built air towers in the past. You *must* know that there's nothing automatic about them! Do you mean to tell me that you haven't been adjusting them to keep pace with all these climate changes?"

"That's really not my department! I'm more on the energy side of things. I try to avoid getting mixed up in climate sciences."

"You need to move *now*. Don't just stand there – get going! Make sure that this is being handled. If the air towers aren't adjusted they're going to overwork themselves and burn out their motors – if they haven't already! Do you want to be the one that gets to explain to the mayor what happened to the city's air supply?"

"I'm on my way," Noel said hurriedly. He ran over to the muddy access road and began hiking down the canyon as fast as he could go.

Amy shook her head. "How have they survived this long?"

"It truly is a wonder," Miles agreed. "Although letting the air towers burn out might not have been such a bad idea. After all, it would have forced everyone to leave New Tikal."

"And where would they go, exactly? Are you going to invite them all over to your place?"

"Oh," Miles replied. "I see what you mean. I guess I didn't think that through."

"But I have," Amy said. "And I have come up with a plan. I know how we're going to coax these people away from New Tikal. It will be tricky, but I think it's doable."

"Really! So what is this plan of yours?"

"Well, first, the planet is going to go green again – in a slow, gentle, natural way that cannot be traced back to me."

"I see! So that's what this is all about."

"Exactly. My sister wasn't very discreet when she terraformed Xanthe, and the natives hunted her down and killed her for it. I'm not going to make that same mistake. After all, *you* weren't discreet about your plans and looked what happened to Don Elliott!"

"But that was two thousand years ago," Miles protested.

"Are things really any different today? Do you honestly believe that the mayor is going to be fine when people leave his city to recolonize the planet? Are none of the politicians going to get upset over the fact that their citizens are evacuating?"

"But that's a different issue entirely! How the mayor will react to that is entirely different from people knowing that you are the one who saved them."

"I am *not* going to make myself the focus of all this," Amy said firmly. "I don't see any possible good that could come from it, and it opens up a lot of potential problems."

"That seems fair enough. But, speaking of problems, just how *are* you going to convince people to leave New Tikal?"

"That's the fun part. When the rain stops, people are going to find out that the rain has washed away the sand and uncovered the ruins of a vast city."

"They are?" Miles asked, surprised. "Are you sure? I don't mean to doubt you, of course, but I spent centuries looking for the lost ruins of Tikal. Do you mean to tell me that it was there all along and I just missed it?"

"No, you didn't miss it. Tikal was mostly destroyed when the Emperor attacked, and none of it survived the millennia. It really is gone. As it turns out, this particular long-lost city is actually going to be brand-new, but the locals aren't going to know that – at least not at first. What their scouting parties will report is that they've found the ruins of a giant city that is far more advanced than New Tikal, and holds incredible secrets and treasures. However, the city is partially broken and it's going to take some work to bring it back online. Not too much work, and not

impossible work. But it will take work.”

“Oh!” Miles said. “I see what you're getting at. So you're planning on creating a ruined city, planting it in the desert, and using it as bait to lure them out. Then you want to create problems within the city that will act as challenges to focus their efforts and drive them forward.”

“Exactly,” Amy said. “However, I'm not going to do this by myself. This is something that you and I are going to work on together. I'd really like your help, if you're willing.”

“But I can't create a city!” Miles protested. “In fact, it's all I can do to build a sand castle! I'm way too old for that sort of thing. It's all I can do just to get out of bed in the morning. Besides, I don't have any superpowers.”

“Oh, I can fix that. Trust me.”

“All right,” Miles agreed. “I suppose you can. So let's say that we create the city and people flock to it. What do we do then? Is that your end-game?”

“Not quite. There's one more step to all this.” Amy paused for a moment. “Miles, do you have any idea what's been happening on Earth during the past few thousand years?”

“I actually do, and I know exactly what you're talking about. I tried to help them but my efforts were useless. Whatever disease is affecting the natives is beyond my ability to heal. It's quite different from anything I've ever seen before.”

“I know – I couldn't cure it either. I think that Steve can, though.”

“That reminds me! Your friend Steve actually paid me a visit a couple months ago. It was in late December, I believe. In fact, I'm almost certain he stopped by my home the very same day that you left Mars.”

“Really?” Amy asked, surprised. “Was he was looking for me?”

“Oh yes, he certainly was! He told me that things were not going well on Xanthe and he needed your help.”

"I guess we both need each other's help, then. Do you know where he is now?"

"He's on Tonina, waiting for you. I told him that you would return and talk to him when you were ready."

Amy nodded. "All right, then, At least it sounds like he's not mad at me anymore. I'll go back home as soon as I've finished dealing with Mars. I'd like to get this problem solved before I take on any new ones."

"Have you decided what you're going to do with the survivors in Tau Ceti?" Miles asked.

Amy sighed. "It's not easy," she said.

"I know. But no one ever said it would be."

CHAPTER 23

“To my great sorrow, Conrad Forbes has decided to release Evan from prison and give him the resources he needs to create his bombs. The crowd is pleased with this, for they believe that his neutron weapon is a magic bullet that will solve all their problems. I wonder what they will think when they step outside and see that every last green thing is gone, and the soft ground has been fused into glass by the intense heat. What will they do then?”

—Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

June 10, 7243

AMY STRYKER LOOKED UP AT THE SKY and frowned. “Miles, I think I've spent quite enough time standing outside in the rain, like some kind of idiot. Are you ready to get started on the next part of the plan?”

“I suppose,” Miles said reluctantly. “I just kind of like it out here. This water from the sky is such a rare gift.”

Amy sighed. “It's just rain, you know. I know that Mars needs rain, but I still don't like it. Rain gets you wet and makes life inconvenient. Besides, standing outside in the rain is a great way to catch pneumonia and die. This isn't a good thing for you to be doing, you know – especially not at your age!”

“Oh, I'll be fine. Don't worry about me! This is just – hmm. I think the problem is that you're used to rain. Rain has been a part of your life for as long as you can remember, and you see it

as little more than a useful nuisance. But to us rain is something entirely new. It might as well be raining gold! In fact, raining water is much *better* than raining gold. Water is so scarce here.”

“That’s great and everything, and I’m glad you appreciate it. We both agree that this storm is a good thing for the future of humanity. But can we please get going?”

“I suppose,” Miles said reluctantly. “My vehicle is in the hangar at the bottom of the canyon. We can just hike down there and be on our way.”

Amy shook her head. “Nope – I don’t think so! That would take far too long, and I would end up wet *and* muddy. I think we should take a slightly different approach.”

A moment later Amy and Miles disappeared. The two of them reappeared moments later in Miles’ underground bunker. Miles blinked in surprise, stepped back, and looked around. He saw that they were now standing in his giant warehouse.

“Oh my!” he gasped. “Is that how you travel everywhere?”

“Absolutely. In fact, it’s really the *only* way to travel. Look at how much time we saved! Plus, we’re dry now. I was *not* enjoying being soaking wet.”

“Why so we are,” Miles said, glancing down at his blue overalls. “You know, that’s too bad! I kind of enjoyed being wet. It’s a rare luxury.”

“Well, the next time it rains feel free to go stand outside! I won’t try to stop you – but don’t expect me to join you.”

“Fair enough,” Miles agreed. “I do see one problem with your transportation system, though. How am I going to get back to New Tikal? I’m afraid that the *Raptor* is still parked there, and I don’t share your marvelous powers. I don’t mean to complain or anything, but the city is really quite a walk from here and I’m not as young as I used to be.”

“Oh, I moved your tank too,” Amy said casually. “There wasn’t anyone standing inside the hangar so it was easy to do it without anyone noticing. Your contraption is in the upstairs

hangar, right where you usually keep it parked.”

“Ah,” Miles said. “I see. But – really? It is? Just like that?”

“Just like that,” Amy replied.

“Well, that's remarkable! I guess you really did think of everything.” Miles sat down on top of a crate and relaxed. “There – that's better! So what do we do now?”

“Build a city, of course! We just went over this, remember?”

“True,” Miles replied slowly. “But I still don't quite understand. How are you planning on building a city?”

“The same way I always build cities! My nanites have an entire library of information that covers all sorts of subjects, and one of those subjects just happens to be city construction. I don't have to start from scratch because I already have a lot of designs – the same designs that the Artilect used to build cities all over the galaxy. All we have to do is customize one of those plans. Once the pattern is complete it's just a matter of uploading it to the nanites. They will then turn portions of the planet's surface into programmable matter, and will use that matter to construct the city. In fact, once we've designed the pattern it shouldn't take more than a couple hours for the nanites to build the city itself.”

Miles nodded. “That should work out very well. I watched the Nehemiah probes built a great many cities over the centuries, and that was the very same technique they used. I actually tried that trick myself, back in the day, but I could never get it to work. The nanites I built just never worked right. I could only get them to fabricate a few crude devices, and even those were deeply flawed. It was a disaster every single time.”

“That's because you didn't have the right fabricators. You were trying to make modern devices with ancient, half-broken technology. The gap between what you could build and what the Artilect was designing was simply too great.”

“That's what I figured too, which is why I eventually gave it up. But I still don't see how I can help you. I couldn't turn Martian sand into cities two thousand years ago, and I'm afraid I

still can't do it today. What kind of help do you want me to provide?"

"Oh, I've already got that worked out! You see, anyone who lives in the network gets connected to it. Basically, the Stewards give their citizens a batch of nanites so they can function within the cities and manipulate the environment around them. Now, I know you don't want me messing with the nanites in your bloodstream so I won't do that. But I *can* give you something that will grant you the same kind of abilities that a networked citizen would have."

"Really?" Miles asked. "Are you telling me that I'll be able to do everything you can do?"

"No, not exactly. Your power is going to be limited. But you will be able to build things, and that's what we need for this project."

"I see," Miles said thoughtfully. "So how is this going to work?"

Amy reached into her pocket and pulled out a ring. The ring was a translucent purple color, with a fancy latticework of gold etched into it. It had no stone. Deep inside the ring itself were tiny sparkles of light that appeared for a fraction of a second and then vanished. There was something about the ring that almost made it look alive. It seemed to give off a faint glow.

"This is what you'll use," Amy explained. "Wearing this will connect you to the network of nanites that I've deployed. As long as you're connected you'll be able to interact with them and use them. You should be able to do most of the things that I can do, except—"

"Wait a minute," Miles interrupted. "Are you really offering me a magic ring?"

"Um, I guess. Why? Is there a problem? I mean, it *is* your size – I made sure of that. It should fit just fine. Do you have a phobia about rings or something?"

"It's just – I don't know. It just doesn't seem very creative!"

Don't you think that magic rings are kind of a cliché?"

"What?" Amy asked, surprised. "Are you serious? What did you expect – magic socks? A magic scarf? Tie clips of power?"

"I'm just saying that I think the magic ring thing has been overdone! I'm not trying to complain, but I really think you can be a bit more creative than that. For example, what if—"

Amy stared at the old man in shock. "I can't believe it! I just can't believe it. Here I am, offering you an astonishing level of power that has only been extended to a handful of people in all of human history, and your response is to complain that you don't like rings? Are you out of your mind?"

The ring vanished out of Amy's outstretched hand. "Fine! If a ring isn't good enough for you then let's be a bit more creative, shall we?" The girl paused for a moment, then reached into her pocket and handed Miles a pair of bright pink shoelaces.

Miles took them from her and held them up to the light. He looked at them, astonished. "What am I supposed to do with these?"

"They're the fabled Shoelaces of Creativity," Amy said in a deep voice. "If you put them in a pair of shoes and wear them they will unlock the secrets of the universe. Behold the glory of the legendary laces!"

"But they're pink!" Miles complained.

"You bet they are! Pink is a vibrant, happy color. It stands out."

"But Amy, I don't use shoelaces. My shoes aren't like that! Besides, this wasn't what I had in mind at all. What I was trying to say was that—"

"Then find a different pair of shoes to wear," Amy interrupted. "There are 18 pairs of shoelace-supporting shoes in this room. Six of those pairs are in good enough condition to wear. These laces will work with any of them."

Miles sighed. "You know, the ring was fine. Can't we just go back to that?"

"Sorry!" Amy said cheerfully. "I'm afraid the ring is gone. What we have now is something new – something creative! Something that will expand your horizons and brighten up your wardrobe. It's *exactly* what you wanted."

"Oh, all right. I guess I did ask for this, and I suppose I should have known better than to open my mouth. But can you at least tell me where I can find one of these pairs of shoes that you're talking about? I'm afraid that I don't keep very good records, and there are a lot more than six crates in this room. It could take me hours to find them."

Amy smiled. "It just so happens that there's a pair of shoes in the very crate you're sitting on. They're fabulous! They're a bright orange color and they're in perfect condition."

Miles gasped. "You've got to be kidding! Of *course* they're in perfect condition – I've never worn them. I meant to throw them out but I guess I just forgot. Those shoes were made back when I was trying to work out the bugs in my replicator. They were an accident! They are the ugliest shoes I've ever seen. You can't expect me to wear them!"

Amy shrugged. "You wanted my help and you got it. Now, you don't have to wear those shoes if you don't want to. You're free to wear any pair that you like – or you can even go to New Tikal and find a pair there, if you'd rather do that. If you want to search through these crates and try to find a more acceptable pair then be my guest. But I've gone as far as I'm going to go. I've given you the Creative Shoelaces. How you obtain shoes for them is entirely up to you."

"But there are thousands of crates here," Miles protested. "It would take me days to go through them all! Even going to New Tikal would be a major hassle."

Amy smiled. "You can always just use the orange pair, you know. If not – well, no one said it would be easy!"

CHAPTER 24

"I am constantly amazed at how little curiosity people seem to have. The planet Mars has changed dramatically and yet people dismiss it as being irrelevant. The sky is once again full of stars, but that seems to be of only academic interest. No one seems to care why these things are happening. Something is going on, and I fear that our lack of knowledge will prove devastating. I do not think it is an accident that Mars changing right after the Wall disappeared. What is going on? Have the mythical Rangers returned? If so, why have they not returned to Earth?"

—Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

June 11, 7243

MILES WAS NOT THE LEAST BIT EXCITED at the prospect of wearing orange shoes with bright pink shoelaces, but he knew it was useless to argue with Amy. Rather than scouring his cavernous warehouse for a more fashion-conscious pair of shoes, he decided to simply wear the one that Amy had found. He reluctantly dug the shoes out of the crate, removed their original shoelaces, and carefully laced them up with the ones that Amy had provided. "Why, they fit exactly," Miles exclaimed. "It's as if they were designed for these shoes."

"Of course they were! There was no point in creating generic shoelaces, you know. When I fabricated them I made sure that they would fit a pair of shoes that you actually had. That's what I

call attention to detail.”

“You know, *color* is an important detail too. There's a lot to be said for coordinating your outfit.”

“Really? Then why are you wearing a pair of overalls and a straw hat?”

“Because they're comfortable! Besides, they're great for doing manual labor. You don't want to wear a formal outfit if you're going to be getting your hands dirty.”

“Then you are in luck! Those shoelaces are very comfortable *and* they're stain-resistant. They are just the thing for working outside, which is what we're about to be doing.”

“If you say so,” Miles replied, sighing. He took one last look at his orange shoes, grimaced, and then put them on his feet. After they were on and the laces had been tied he stood up, then looked back down at them and frowned. “That's odd – I'm not feeling anything. Are you sure they're working?”

“Oh yes – I just haven't activated them yet. I'm going to turn them on right...*now*.”

Instantly Miles' world changed. He was still in his warehouse, but he could now see far beyond it. With his mind he could view the planet's surface, where the rain was still falling. He could look beyond the desert to the underground city of New Tikal, and he could see people going about their lives. He could peer inside the city and see what was going on inside the zero-point-energy plant. In fact, he was startled to discover that he could even look *inside* the reactor itself.

That was when he realized that the nanites could do far more than simply look around. His environment – the very atoms and molecules that made up his world – was now fully customizable! All he had to do was think a certain sequence of thoughts and his bunker could be radically changed to whatever pattern he could conceive. A single thought could change the walls of his bunker from concrete into solid gold, and another thought could move the bunker to the opposite side of the planet. He suddenly

understood how Amy had been able to transport them around so easily, and how she had been able to instantly create a pair of shoelaces. *Why, there's nothing to it at all! I feel like I've spent my entire life blind, and someone finally came along and opened my eyes. All this information – all these sciences – it's just child's play! No wonder Amy could terraform Mars. It's so simple!*

"So what do you think?" Amy asked.

Miles brought himself back to the room and looked at her. "It's amazing. No, it's unbelievable! This – this is a whole different way of living. With the network you can change the entire planet as easily as I can change the commands in a computer program. I knew the nanites were powerful but I never dreamed they were anything like this."

Amy nodded. "It really is amazing. Still, though, you get used to it over time. Eventually it just becomes second nature."

"You know, that's a little bit frightening. This is an astonishing amount of power to get used to! I don't know what I would have done if I'd had nanites like these two thousand years ago. I might have terraformed Mars myself."

"That's actually not very likely," Amy replied. "Well, let me back up a bit. If you had built the nanites correctly – and there was no way you could have accomplished that, given the tools you had available – then you might have been *capable* of turning sand into cities, but you wouldn't have had the data you needed to actually do it. The reason the network is so powerful is because it has a huge library of commands that make it a simple matter to do almost anything you could imagine. Without that knowledge you would have had a fantastic toolset that was almost impossible to use. It would have been like giving someone a hammer but withholding all the blueprints and construction tips."

"Oh," Miles said, disappointed. "So I wasn't really that close, then. But still, this is amazing! Are you quite sure that my abilities are less powerful than yours?"

"Definitely. All you can do is control the matter on this one planet, and you can only do that as long as I permit it. Your vision is also restricted to Mars, and you can't teleport off this world. Oh – and your shoelaces won't extend your life indefinitely the way my nanites will. Overall, the laces are really pretty restricted. I have a lot more possibilities open to me than you do. For example, I could teleport this entire planet into deep space, or shut down the Sun. There's no way you could do either of those things."

"That's a little scary," Miles replied. "Actually, that's a *lot* scary! As much fun as this is, I think it's far too much power to give to any one person. Why, a man could conquer the whole world with just what I have available to me! If what you're telling me is true then you could easily conquer the entire galaxy and rule it with an iron fist – and you could rule it until the universe ended. No one could ever challenge you."

"I guess," Amy replied. "But why would I want to do that?"

"Well, if you controlled the galaxy then you could have anything you wanted. No one could stop you."

"I can *already* have anything I want! All I have to do is materialize it and voila, there it is. My needs are all provided for, and I have the resources of 93 million stars to draw from. But what you don't understand is that these nanites can't give me what I really want. I don't want power, or gold, or the ability to boss other people around. None of that is worth having."

"Then what do you want?"

"*I want my life back.* I want to go back to December 7, 1867, only this time I want the *Sparrow* to make it safely to Xanthe. I want to live out my life with my family, on a planet that doesn't hate me and isn't trying to kill me. I want to live in my own century, with my own people. I don't like it here, Miles, and I don't want to be here. My family is dead, and my friends are dead, and my whole world is gone. I feel like I'm living in some kind of horrible nightmare. But, despite all this unimaginable

power, I can't go back. I can have anything I want expect for the one thing that I actually want."

"I, for one, am very glad that you *are* here," Miles replied. "If the Emperor had not planted that corrupted controller card on board the *Sparrow* then Mars would never have been terraformed. The people of Xanthe would still be in their pods, living out their corrupt dreams. Earth would never have received the help that she needed. The Arilect would have gone on forever, terraforming worlds that no one would ever visit."

"They would have all gotten exactly what they deserved," Amy replied firmly. "The last survivors on Xanthe would have died in their pods – the pods *they* had built. The last survivors on Mars would have died when their planet finally became totally uninhabitable – a fate they were aware of but were too lazy and self-centered to prevent. And the corrupt scribes on Earth would have died as well, unable to produce any more children due to centuries of inbreeding."

Miles nodded. "In which case all of humanity would be dead, save for the savages in the forests. But since they could not cure themselves, humanity itself would have eventually died. In other words, Amy, if you had been given your way then mankind itself would have perished. Was your dream really worth that?"

"But that's not *my* fault! I didn't make any of those things happen. People made their own choices and that's just how things turned out. Why should my life have to be ruined just to save someone else from the consequences of their own depravity?"

"Jesus could have asked the Father that same question, you know," Miles replied. "Why should He have to die for *our* sins? After all, *He* wasn't the guilty one. He never did anything wrong, and yet He was sent to die a torturous death so that we might be saved. Why not just let us suffer the consequences of our sins and send us all to Hell? It's what we deserved."

"I'm not Jesus," Amy protested.

“But you're His disciple. He bought you with His blood and you gave your life to Him. He gave you your marching orders – love your neighbor as yourself, even if your neighbor despises you. He has called you to do good to those who hate you, even if they never stop hating you. It's not fun, it's not easy, and it seems grossly unfair. But that is how God wants us to show His love to the world. You have a calling, Amy. You cannot run from it.”

“I guess,” Amy sighed. “It's just really hard, and I want it to be over.”

“It will all be over soon enough,” Miles said. “Let's just take it one step at a time. Speaking of which, where do we go from here? Are you going to design this new city of yours right here on Mars?”

“Oh no! No, I don't think that would be a good idea. I'd much rather build it off-site so we can make sure all the details are correct. Then we'll come here and have the nanites reconstruct it based on the design we've created. Building it here is too risky – I'd hate to have someone accidentally stumble across it before we were done with it.”

“That sounds good to me! So what planet did you have in mind?”

“I know just the place,” Amy said. “Here – come with me!”

CHAPTER 25

“Few people know this, but six hundred years ago there was another fortress in the mountains. Unlike this one, it was located thousands of miles to the south. It flourished for a while but it was eventually abandoned after its reactor ran out of uranium. With no electricity they had no way to power the machines they had come to depend on, so they left. A few survivors managed to make it all the way here. One of our great blessings is that our reactor works on nuclear fusion, not fission, and consumes plentiful seawater, not rare uranium. Seawater is piped in from the ocean through a series of underground pipes. Fortunately, the ocean has shown no signs of going dry.”

—Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

June 11, 7243

MILES ONCE AGAIN saw the world around him vanish, but this time the effect did not startle him. Since he was now connected to the network he understood what Amy was doing. He watched as she selected a star that was thousands of light-years away and plotted a course that would take them there. All of this took less than a second to accomplish, but he was able to see it all and grasp it without any effort. Then, in the next moment, the nanites grabbed Miles and Amy – and as quickly as that, the trip was over. One moment Miles was in familiar surroundings, and in

the next he found himself standing under an unknown sky.

As the old man looked around and tried to get his bearings, he was struck by the utter bleakness of this planet. Overhead there was a cloudy sky that blotted out all signs of the sun. The air was cold, and a bitter wind made it feel even colder. He was standing on a beach – the first one he had visited in a lifetime – but there were no signs of life. He could see no birds flying overhead and no plants growing up against the shore. In the distance an endless line of waves crashed against the rocks. The whole world looked despondent and almost colorless.

“What is this place?” he asked.

“This is my world,” Amy replied. “My family forced me to come here when they decided to make contact with the survivors on Tau Ceti. They said it was a security risk to have my sister and I on the same planet at the same time. They thought it would be better to separate us, so if something happened to one of us the other would be spared.”

“That was very wise of them! If they had not done that you wouldn't be here right now. In fact, *I* wouldn't be standing here either, for that matter. A lot of things would have turned out very differently.”

“I hate this place,” Amy said bitterly. “This isn't a planet; it's a prison. It's a cold, desolate wilderness.”

“It doesn't have to be,” a voice called out behind her. Amy turned around and saw that the Sentinel had appeared on the beach. He looked at her, paused for a moment, and then continued. “Amy, you had the power to turn this world into anything you wanted it to be. You could have built a private retreat or a vacation planet. Your parents were only trying to protect you, and they sent you here for your own good. But instead of seeing this world as a blessing – a blessing that saved your life, in fact – you became bitter and angry. That was *your* choice. Do not blame this planet; it has done you no wrong.”

“Then who do you want me to blame?” Amy said angrily. “Do

you want me to blame Xanthe, then? Or what about Adrian – should I blame him? *Somebody* separated me from my family. Somebody took them all away and left me here alone. Somebody has to suffer for that, Steve. I am *not* going to let them get away with it.”

“No one is going to get away with anything, Amy. The crimes of humanity are indeed staggering, and those crimes must be paid for. That is why Jesus came, and that is why He died. He bears the cost for all those who believe on Him. What He asks you to do is to forgive your enemies and tell them that Jesus died to set them free. He wants to use you as an instrument of mercy.”

“Do you really expect me to just let this go? What – do you want me to rain down flowers from the Xanthian sky and tell them that it's no big deal? Am I supposed to just walk away and act like nothing happened?”

“Oh no. Your task is not to simply walk away. No, the Lord wants you to do something a great deal harder than that. He wants you to love them and seek their welfare. Xanthe is full of wickedness and its people are bent on evil. They must be judged, and you will be the one that judges them. But in judging them, you must not seek revenge.”

“So what am I supposed to do, then?”

“You need to let go of your bitterness,” the Sentinel replied. “As long as you are angry and full of hate, you will be unable to see clearly. You will find it very difficult to help people if your heart's desire is to kill them.”

“But they deserve it! They're monsters – all of them – and they're getting away with it. This very moment they're living in paradise – a paradise that *you've* built for them! Don't think for a minute that I didn't notice that new tower you built. You've given them a beautiful world and all the luxuries of life. You've *rewarded* them for killing my family!”

“They have gotten away with nothing. Think about it, Amy.

The few people who are still alive on Xanthe are extremely old and their bodies are failing. They stayed in their pods for so long that they cannot survive outside them, and every person on Xanthe will be dead in a few months. When they die they will not go to the country that lies beyond the farthest star, as your family did. They will not enter into an eternity that is full of joy and wonder. No, what they are facing is brutal, unending torment that will stretch on and on for the rest of time. They will be set on fire, eaten alive with worms, and burned forever and ever and ever. They will scream, and beg, and cry out, and no one will ever help them. For all the ages of time they will be tormented beyond endurance and no one will ever pity them or help them. *That* is what awaits them. Not freedom and luxury, but horror and pain beyond imagination.

“But Amy, it does not have to end that way. Jesus – your Lord – came to seek and to save them which were lost. He did not die for His friends, but for His enemies – for those who hated Him. He is offering everyone – even those on Xanthe – forgiveness and grace, a forgiveness He paid for with His own body and His own blood.

“Your existence here is not an accident. The Lord brought you here so that you could do what no one else can: you can forgive them and tell them what great things the Lord has done for them. It may be that when you return good for the evil they have done, the Spirit will use that to transform their hearts and save them. I do not know what will happen. But I know what you must do.”

Amy was silent for a long time after that. Miles considered saying something and then decided against it. *This is one argument I'd better stay out of.* So he just stood beside Amy and awkwardly waited. He was tempted to whistle and then decided against that too.

The young girl finally looked at the Sentinel. “All right,” she said quietly. “I’ll go.”

"What?" Miles asked, startled. "Do you mean, right now? But what about the city we were going to build?"

"This won't take long," Amy replied. "I'll be right back. Do you think you can handle being alone for an hour or so?"

"As long as you don't forget to come back and get me! I really don't want to be stranded here for the rest of my life."

"Why not let him come with us?" the Sentinel asked. "Would that be a problem?"

"No, I guess not," Amy said thoughtfully. "Miles, what do you think?"

"Well, to be perfectly frank, I'd rather be with the two of you than be stranded here alone. But I don't want to get in the way either."

"Oh, I'm sure you won't get in the way," Amy said. "Are you ready to go?"

Miles nodded. The three of them disappeared, leaving Amy's world empty once more.

CHAPTER 26

"It was rumored, long ago, that the people who lived among the stars had an electrical generator that required no fuel. This magical generator could somehow extract energy from space itself, and provided a limitless supply of power. Personally I believe that is simply wishful thinking. All generators require fuel. That is simply a fact of life."

—Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

June 11, 7243

AMY, MILES, AND THE SENTINEL materialized on the hill that overlooked Star City. This time things were much more peaceful than they had been the last time the Sentinel had visited the planet. Nothing was on fire and the forests around the city were quiet. A blue sky stretched overhead, filled with white clouds. The buildings of the giant metropolis gleamed in the sunlight, and there were no signs of graffiti or vandalism.

The city streets were mostly deserted. The angry mobs that had caused so much destruction had dispersed and were nowhere to be found. There were still a few deranged individuals wandering around and attempting to cause trouble, but the security bots easily kept them from doing any harm.

"You know, I'm really impressed," Amy commented. "I was expecting a lot more chaos. Those bots of yours have really made a difference."

"So that is the famous Star City!" Miles exclaimed. "I've read

so much about it over the years, but this is my first chance to see it in person. I have to say it's far more impressive than I expected. It's simply astounding! It really is the jewel of the galaxy – the greatest city of the Rangers. Did the old city of Tikal used to look like that?"

"Kind of, but not exactly," Amy replied. "This city is a lot newer and more modern than Tikal. It lasted centuries longer than any city on Mars and reached greater heights of culture and technology. Tikal was still impressive, though."

"There's also the small fact that your sister rebuilt it," the Sentinel pointed out. "The historical Star City was never that pristine."

"Well, that's true," Amy agreed. "And it was in ruins when we rediscovered this world, so it's not like it had been in that condition for thousands of years. But still."

"So how would you like to do this?" the Sentinel asked.

Amy sighed. "Well, I think we need to separate the violent murderers from the rest of the general population. If the people aren't being threatened by crazed madmen then they might have a shot at a future. Can you separate the criminals from everyone else?"

"I can," the Sentinel replied. "The nanite network your sister deployed has recorded everything that has happened. It will just take me a few minutes to process the data."

A voice called out behind them. "So I see the fiend has finally returned! Have you come to torment more innocent people?"

Amy turned around and saw that Adrian Garza was standing a few feet behind the group, near a tall maple tree. The ancient man opened his mouth to say something, but Amy froze him in place. "I've had quite enough of you," she said bitterly. "Your day of reckoning has finally come."

"So that's the man who betrayed your family," Miles said quietly. "He's so old and frail. It's hard to believe he could be guilty of much of anything. And yet – look at his eyes! They're so

full of malice and hatred.”

“They're all like that,” Amy commented. “Old, I mean. You would think they'd be far too feeble to do much harm, but you would be wrong. The hatred inside them is so strong that it apparently overcomes their physical limitations. It's kind of scary.”

The Sentinel spoke up. “I have processed the data and am ready. What would you like to do now?”

“How many people are we talking about?” Amy asked.

“I have found 349,483 individuals who have not tried to murder anyone, or who have only acted in self-defense. The other 1,764 are guilty of either murder or attempted murder.”

“Really?” Amy asked. “Are you telling me that only a small percentage of the population is responsible for all those deaths?”

“How many deaths are we talking about?” Miles asked.

“51,916,” the Sentinel replied.

Miles gasped. “Oh my goodness! Surely you're joking. Wouldn't that mean that each criminal murdered about 30 people?”

“That is a close approximation,” the Sentinel replied. “Of course, the actual numbers vary. I can give you the number of murders per person, if you are interested. Some people committed far more murders than others.”

“No, that's ok,” Amy said. “All right. Can you bring all of the people here and divide them into two groups? I'd like all of the murderers to be put in one group, over there, and the rest to be over there.”

“As you wish,” the Sentinel said. A moment later two massive groups of people appeared at the foot of the hill. One group vastly outnumbered the other. Both groups, however, were frozen in place.

Amy nodded and stepped forward. She then hesitated. The girl looked at Miles, and then at the Sentinel. She then looked back at the crowd and took a deep breath.

"Citizens of Xanthe," she said aloud. "I am Amy Stryker. My twin sister, Amanda Stryker, terraformed this world for you and brought it back from the dead. The reason she did that was to give all of you a chance at a better and brighter future. For that selfless act she and the rest of my family was murdered by your leader, Carroll Lane. This act was made possible because Adrian Garza, the man standing behind me, betrayed them.

"Carroll Lane died in the attack. He has already gone on to face judgment at the hands of God, so I will say nothing more about that. However, Adrian Garza, the man who betrayed my family, is still alive today."

Amy turned around and unfroze Adrian. "Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

"Yes, I do," he snarled. "I hate you with all of my heart, you miserable wretch. My only wish is that I could come up with some way to kill you."

"Why?" Amy asked. "Why do you hate me?"

"Because you have taken my godhood away from me. I used to be—"

"But I didn't do that," Amy said, interrupting. "The Artilect is the one that destroyed your pods, not me. And the only reason he did that was because Carroll Lane attacked him. If Lane hadn't attacked us you would all still be in your pods today."

"That doesn't matter! The point is that you could rebuild them. I could be back in my pod right now if it wasn't for your arrogance."

"And why haven't I rebuilt them for you?" Amy asked.

"Because you're an evil monster! All of you are bigots who have been trying to force your values onto us. You are nothing more than a petty tyrant."

Amy shook her head. "That's not true, and you know it. I have tremendous power over this world, Adrian. If I wanted to I could enslave all of you. I could rain down fire and brimstone from the sky. I could open a chasm in the ground and send all of

you plummeting to your deaths. I could do whatever I wanted, and none of you could stop me. But I haven't done any of those things. The reason I haven't put you back in your pods is because if I do that *you will all die*. As a friend, I am intervening in an attempt to save your lives. Returning you to your pods would be a death sentence on your entire nation."

"You have no right—"

Amy froze him. "I've had quite enough of you, Adrian. You betrayed my family to their deaths and you would do it again. You are murderous and full of rage. Therefore—"

She stopped and looked at him for a long time. His face was distorted with rage, but he could not move. She knew that if she let him speak he would shout endless curses at her – and yet she had done him no wrong. Up until the moment Adrian had betrayed them, the only things her family had done was heal Xanthe and offer all of its residents an endless life in a beautiful city. In return for that offer Carroll Lane had killed all of them – except for Amy.

Now the man who had betrayed them was helpless, and in her power. She could do anything she wanted to him and there was nothing he could do to stop her. The last time she had confronted him the Sentinel had stopped her. This time, however, the Sentinel had stepped back. He would not stop her a second time. Adrian's fate was in her hands.

After several long minutes Amy finally spoke up again. "Therefore, Adrian, I forgive you. I forgive you for what you've done to me. I forgive you – but I cannot let you go. You are too dangerous a man to let wander the streets, and you deserve to die for betraying my family. I am not going to kill you – but I am not going to extend your life either."

Miles looked confused. "So what are you going to do?"

Amy sighed. "Adrian, I am going to transport you to another planet. This new world is empty and barren, and you will be the first and only person to ever set foot on it. You will have food and

water provided for you but there will be no other luxuries. There will also be no one there that you can torment, for you will be entirely alone. In about three months your body will fail from old age and you will die.

“When you die, you will not simply cease to exist. You see, this universe was not an accident. It was created by the Most High God – and all of you have sinned against this God. You have broken His commandments. God requires absolute perfection, and you have failed. You have not kept His law. You have lied, and cheated, and stolen things, and hated, and murdered, and committed a thousand other sins. All it takes is one sin to earn the wrath of God, and you have sinned far more than just once.

“All of those who have sinned against God will be cast into Hell, a place of fiery torment. There they will be tormented day and night, with no hope of rescue or release. God will pour out His divine wrath upon you for the rest of eternity. It is a horrible fate – a fate vastly worse than death. It means unending and unbearable agony.

“But there is a way to avoid that fate. In fact, there is only one way to be saved, and it is not through good deeds or your own efforts. God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus came to this world and did what none of us could do: He lived a perfect life and He kept God's law. Jesus was then tortured to death on the cross and died. Since He had no sins of His own, His death paid for our sins. His sacrifice made it possible for us to be forgiven. The only way we could ever be forgiven is if someone took upon themselves the penalty that we deserved – and that is what Jesus did. He died so that we might be freed from the wrath of God.

“But this Jesus did not stay dead. On the third day He came back to life and rose from His tomb. He has promised that all those who repent of their sins and believe in His death and resurrection will not face the wrath of God. Instead they will live forever with Him.

“Your death is coming. Before that happens I urge you – in fact, I urge all of you who are standing here – to repent of your sins. Jesus can forgive each and every one of you for what you've done. He freely offers mercy to all who desire it. Don't throw that away, Adrian. Repent and believe before it's too late. Should you have questions, there will be a Steward there who you can call on to get help.”

The girl then unfroze him. “Do you have anything to say?”

He paused for a moment. “You're – you're not going to kill me?”

She shook her head. “My family didn't come to this planet to kill anyone. All we ever wanted to do was save your lives and give your people a future. That hasn't changed. We would still rather see you saved than perish.”

Adrian laughed. “I told you that you were weak! I knew that you'd never kill me. What you are telling me is that *I win*.”

Miles spoke up. “What, exactly, do you think you're winning? Amy and I are going to live forever. You, on the other hand, have less than 90 days left. What's going to happen to you after that?”

Adrian just laughed – and then he disappeared. One moment he was on Xanthe, and the next moment he found himself on a cold, empty planet. Overhead was a brown sky, and a pale sun hovered on the horizon. A weak wind blew from the north. He could see no signs of plant or animal life, and the ground was hard and unyielding. Aside from a few crumbling rocks, there was nothing at all to be seen. The world had no mountains or valleys. There was only a flat, sandy desert that stretched as far as the eye could see. The only visible object was a stone table that was about twenty feet to his right. On the table was a bowl of fruit, a loaf of bread, and a glass of water. There were no chairs.

Furious, Adrian began shouting curses. But the wind simply carried them away.

Back on Xanthe, Amy had finished her speech. The group of

murderers was gone. Each one had been transported to his own prison planet, to live out the few weeks they had left under the same terms that had been given to Adrian.

Amy then addressed the rest of the crowd. "The criminals in your midst are now gone. You no longer need to fear for your lives. As a precaution, the bots will remain to make sure that your streets stay safe. As long as you do not attack each other the bots will not interfere with your lives in any way. They are here only to keep the peace.

"There is one other gift that I am giving to you, and that is the gift of an extended life. Over the next few months you will all gradually grow younger until you are in your thirties again. Once you reach that point the natural aging process will resume and you will live out a normal lifespan. The reason I am doing this is to give you a chance at building a future for yourselves. If you wish you can have children and grandchildren, build a society, and choose a new way of life. Or you can do nothing, waste this opportunity, and die out as a race. The choice is entirely up to you. If you do wish to rebuild, there will be a Steward here to answer your questions.

"You are now all free to go," Amy said.

"Wow," Miles said, as the group dispersed. "I didn't know you could reverse someone's age! I mean, don't get me wrong – I do *not* want to go back to being thirty. I'd much rather go on home and be with my Lord. I just didn't realize you had that kind of power."

"The nanites can do a lot of things," Amy remarked. "This just seemed like the best thing to do. After all, if I hadn't done that then they would *all* be dead. At least now they have a chance."

"But what about the ones on the prison planets?" Miles asked.

"They have a few weeks to decide where they're going to spend eternity," Amy said quietly. "There are Stewards watching over each of those prisoners, so if one of them does have

spiritual questions there will be someone there to answer them. But their sentences will not change. They have taken the lives of others, and I refuse to reward that by extending their lives. Instead they will suffer the consequences of spending five thousand years inside a pod – old age, and death. Perhaps in their last few days they will realize the folly of what they've done and will have a change of heart.”

“I can understand that. But the Stewards – well, they're just computer programs, aren't they? I have a hard time believing that a piece of software could have deep spiritual insights. Aren't there any humans they could talk to?”

“Well, there was Reverend Knight, but he was killed in the attack. Do *you* want to talk to them?”

“I would be glad to, if they would be willing to listen,” Miles replied.

“All right, I guess we can arrange that. Steve, if one of them should show signs of wanting to talk to someone—”

“I will go and get Miles,” the Sentinel finished.

“Thanks,” Amy said.

“So now what?” Miles asked.

Amy looked down the hill at the large mass of people that was slowly walking back to Star City. She noticed that an old lady had broken away from the group and was climbing up the hill toward them. “Can I help you?” Amy asked.

“Just give me a minute,” the old lady said, wheezing. “I'm not as young as I used to be.”

It took the lady several minutes to reach the top of the hill. She then walked right up to Amy. “I'm Susanna Hamilton,” she announced. “You may call me Ms. Hamilton.”

“Ok,” Amy said slowly. “Is there something that you need?”

“Yes, there certainly is! Young lady, who do you think you are? Who gave you the right to judge all those people? I certainly didn't put you in charge!”

Amy sighed. “Look, miss. This planet attacked my family, and

we conquered it. I'm in charge now, and believe me, I'm not exactly excited about it either."

"You're a killer," she hissed. "A murderer! How *dare* you send all those good people off to die! You're a monster, that's what you are."

"Do you not understand that those people were homicidal maniacs?" Amy asked. "If Steve hadn't stepped in and built those security bots then even *more* people would be dead by now. There's simply no way you could ever have built a future for yourselves if madmen were allowed to roam the streets and kill anyone they met."

"You will regret this," Susanna said coldly. "I will personally see to it that you regret this, if it is the last thing I ever do. You should never have come to this world."

"I plan on never returning," Amy shot back. "Believe me, I am done here. What you people do from this point on is up to you. Come on, guys, let's go."

Miles opened his mouth to say something, but he never got the chance. Before he could speak Amy, the Sentinel, and himself had vanished, leaving Ms. Hamilton alone on the hill.

CHAPTER 27

“Evan is finding it difficult to build his proposed bomb. It turns out that the historical archives do not have the blueprints for a neutron weapon. If he wants one he will have to invent it. I can only hope that he will fail, for if he succeeds the consequences will be devastating. For my own part I have refused to provide any assistance whatsoever. This has caused me to fall out of favor with the elders, but I will not be a part of this. It is madness.”

—Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

June 12, 7243

IT TOOK AMY ONLY A MOMENT to transport the three of them back to the deserted beach on Amy's world. “You know, I think I could get used to traveling that way,” Miles commented. “It's actually pretty convenient. It would be nice to have a bit more warning, though.”

“I'm sorry,” Amy apologized. “I don't mean to keep jerking you around like that. I just couldn't stand any more of that woman's attitude. I wasn't expecting her to thank me or anything, but she was exactly like Adrian. Those people just make me so mad.”

“You still did the right thing,” the Sentinel commented. “You have given new hope to a dying race.”

“I wish. Personally, I think I wasted my time. Those people don't want to build a future for themselves; they just want to kill

each other. Do you know how many people would get killed if you disabled those bots for just 24 hours? It wouldn't be pretty, I can tell you that. Those people have zero self-control."

"You never know," Miles commented. "You may yet be surprised."

"I guess," Amy said.

The Sentinel spoke up. "Either way, Xanthe is now behind you. Their fate is in their own hands and you need not deal with them again. I did not get a chance to say this before, but it is good to see you again. I have missed you, Amy."

"I've missed you too," Amy replied. "I'm sorry I got so angry with you earlier. You were right – destroying Xanthe would have been a horrible mistake, even if they are a bunch of ungrateful jerks. I'm glad you were there to stop me."

"You are welcome. I am just glad that I found you again. Not to change the subject, but what have you been doing on Mars? Is there something that I can help you with?"

"No, I think I've got it covered. I'm actually trying to terraforming the planet – but slowly, in a way that makes people think it's just a natural process. So far things are coming along pretty well, and as far as I can tell no one suspects that I'm responsible. Once the planet is habitable again Miles and I are going to lure people out of New Tikal and coax them into actually doing something productive with their lives."

"How do you plan on doing that?" the Sentinel asked.

Miles spoke up. "That's where this gloomy, depressing planet comes in. We want to design a city that *almost* functions but is broken in numerous key areas. Once we've done that we're going to bury the city in the Martian desert. We're hoping that when people discover it and see how fabulous it is, they'll leave New Tikal and move in. Of course, it will take some work on their part to get it operational again – but the city's advanced technology will give them a strong incentive to overcome the obstacles we've planted."

"I believe I understand. Your plan appears to be sound; the lost city should act as effective bait. Mankind has historically been drawn to mysteries."

"Right," Amy agreed. "Then, once they have the city up and running again, we can start bringing in refugees from Earth. Of course, we'll have to cure them first and I *will* need your help with that. I'm afraid that my own attempts at curing their madness were not very successful."

"Refugees from Earth?" the Sentinel asked.

"Oh yes!" Miles exclaimed. "That's the final stage of our plan. The people from Earth are afflicted with a terrible disease that has made them go insane. Amy wants to cure them, but after they've been cured they'll need someone to show them how to live as civilized human beings. Our plan is to bring them to Mars and teach them there."

The Sentinel looked puzzled. "But there are tens of millions of people on Earth, and less than two million people on Mars. How can you possibly take care of so many?"

Amy started to say something, and then stopped. Miles' eyes widened. "Oh," he said. "I guess I didn't think about that."

The Sentinel thought for a moment. "Instead of bringing them to Mars, it may be better to use the network. We have millions of vacant planets at our disposal. I see no reason why we could not house them all."

"But housing isn't the problem," Amy replied. "They need someone to teach them! They've lived like animals for who knows how many generations. They need help and guidance."

"There are the Stewards, you know. They are quite intelligent and they did not perish with the Artilect. They can provide ample help for all of them."

"But the Stewards aren't *human*!" Miles protested. "They're just machines. You can't put computer programs in charge of people!"

"Steve is just a machine too," Amy pointed out. "You don't

seem to have a problem with him."

"But he's different somehow," Miles replied. "The Stewards aren't anything like him. They're a far cry from a real person."

"Do you really think that the ignorant savages on Earth would be able to discover the Stewards' true identity?" the Sentinel asked. "The Stewards may be purely artificial intelligences, but they are quite advanced. Even Amy's mother thought that they were real people until she was told otherwise."

"Steve has a good point," Amy said. "I know you've never seen one of the Stewards, but they're really amazing. I agree that it would be better to have real, live people caring for the refugees, but it might be centuries until Mars reaches a point where it could absorb that many people. I don't think we should wait several centuries before we try to help Earth. For the time being, the network really is our only option."

"All right," Miles sighed. "I guess that will have to work."

The Sentinel nodded. "Very well. In that case, if there is nothing else I can help you with then I will return to my work."

"You'll do what?" Amy asked, startled. "Where are you going?"

"Well, first, you must understand that I spent a long time searching for you. That single task left me preoccupied for many weeks. I did not expect you to simply disappear, and when you did so I was fearful for your safety."

"I know, and I'm sorry. I won't do that again. It's just—"

The Sentinel interrupted. "There is no need for an apology. I talked with Miles a few weeks ago and he explained what was going on. It is no longer an issue. But what I am trying to say is that I *do* have work to do, and looking for you put me behind schedule. Now that the Artilect is gone there's no longer a central way to manage the worlds of the network, or to bind them together into a cohesive unit. Our unified network of 93 million stars has degenerated into 93 million separate systems, and that presents a tremendous administrative challenge. I do

not have the ability to rebuild my father, but there are other things I can do to improve the management of our stars. If you need my help then I will remain, but if you do not then I will return to my work."

"I guess you *are* kind of busy," Amy admitted. "All right. I'll let you get back to work. I will miss you, though."

The Sentinel smiled. "I am never very far away. If you call for me I will return. All you have to do is ask."

"I know," Amy replied. "And – thanks for coming."

"It is good to see you again. Take care, little one. Let me know if you need anything."

With that, he disappeared.

CHAPTER 28

"I received some unsettling news today. The fusion reactor in our enclave uses deuterium, which is extracted from seawater. The neutron bomb, on the other hand, requires tritium. I was hopeful that since this is not found in nature it would prove to be impossible to obtain, but it turns out that you can use lithium to produce tritium. Sadly, lithium is a common element that we have in abundance. It will not be difficult for Evan to produce enough tritium to make dozens of bombs."

—Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

June 14, 7243

"WELL, THAT WAS INTERESTING," Miles said.

Amy smiled. "I think the word you're looking for is *awkward*. But, yeah, I'm glad Steve came back, and I'm glad we sorted things out. It was good to see him again. It was *especially* good to finish dealing with Xanthe once and for all. That is a big load off my mind."

Miles nodded. "By the way, one day you'll have to tell me why you call him Steve. There's got to be a story behind that."

"Let's stay on task here," Amy replied. "Remember, we came here because we had a job to do! We've got a city to build."

"That we do. But before we begin, can you spruce this planet up a bit? As I was saying earlier, this is the most depressing planet I've ever seen. Can't we build our fabled lost city of Mars

in a more cheerful work environment?"

Amy smiled. "Sure! Go right ahead."

"Do what?" Miles asked, confused.

"Go ahead! Change the planet. Use those Shoelaces of Creativity that I gave you! Show me what you can do."

"Oh," Miles said, a bit taken aback. "All right. I've never done anything like this before, but I guess I'll give it a try and see how it goes."

Miles reached out with his mind and connected to the nanites that saturated the planet's atmosphere. After he established a connection he tapped into the realtime planetary data feed that the nanites were producing. A quick scan of the data revealed that the entire world was as bleak and unappealing as the beach they were standing on.

Let's go for something cheerful and homey, Miles thought. After studying the command library that the nanites offered, Miles executed a series of instructions that dissipated the clouds and warmed the planet's atmosphere. Once the sun was no longer obscured and the temperature had stabilized, Miles activated more instructions that transformed the planet's rocky, barren soil into rich, fertile ground. He then spent several hours using the nanites to plant forests, dig out lakes and rivers, and add greenery and life to every square inch of the surface.

"That's *much* better!" Miles said at last. "Now we've got a planet that's worth living on. In fact, I could settle down here."

Amy laughed. "I see you like trees!"

"Oh yes! Yes, I certainly do. After you go a thousand years without seeing a single tree you really start to value them. There's just something beautiful and majestic about them. On top of that, your nanite library has the codes to create types of trees that I've never even heard of, and I just couldn't resist trying them out. I could easily be wrong but I don't think Mars has ever had redwood trees. They're fantastic! I had no idea that a mere tree could grow that tall."

"You're probably right," Amy agreed. "I don't think redwoods ever grew very well on Mars. They'll grow here, though – you saw to that! Incidentally, you did a nice job of balancing the ecosystem. The planet's temperature and atmosphere should remain stable for millennia to come."

"Thanks! You know, that was more fun than I've had in ages. World-building is a hobby I could really get into. It was simply exhilarating to spend an afternoon terraforming—"

Miles paused for a moment. "I'm sorry, but I don't know the name of this planet. Did I miss something?"

Amy shook her head. "It actually doesn't have a name. I hated this place too much to name it. I didn't want to give it that dignity."

"Really?" Miles replied, surprised. "But how can you live on a planet if it doesn't have a name? Do you just call it 'That planet way over there with no name'? You've got to call it *something*!"

"No I don't. This planet hasn't had a name for months and the galaxy is still spinning just fine. There hasn't been a single injury connected to this planet's missing name. But if you do want to name it then feel free to go right ahead. What would you like to call it?"

Miles thought for a moment. "Jasmine," he said at last. "I think that will work."

Amy looked puzzled. "Isn't that the name of a spice?"

"It's actually the name of my late wife," Miles explained. "I think she would have loved this place."

"Oh! I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were married."

"It was a long time ago. Almost two thousand years ago, in fact. She died before I developed my nanites. I never forgot her, though."

"Well, Jasmine it is!" Amy replied. "You did a great job terraforming this place, but I do see a problem. You left out one tiny detail."

"Really? It all looks pretty good to me! What did I miss?"

“Oh, nothing, except for a big open desert where we can design our city! I mean, that *is* why we're here, isn't it?”

Miles laughed. “So it is! All right, let me take care of that. Then we can get to work!”

The two of them spent the next month on the planet Jasmine, designing the city that they were going to hide in the Martian desert. Amy based the design on the original city of Tikal, but upgraded its technology to something that would have been at home in the finest worlds of the network. After they had constructed the city itself they started working on the hard part – finding creative ways to break it.

They quickly discovered that this was not an easy task. Their goal was to create a series of sequential challenges that would keep the citizens of Mars busy for at least a century. That meant the city had to be fixable in stages – first this section could be brought online, then that one, and so forth, with each challenge building on the next. By grouping the problems in stages it would be possible to start living in the city from the very beginning, and to expand deeper into it as each new problem was solved.

But designing the challenges in a way that made them appear natural, and not just arbitrary obstacles, proved to be an exceedingly difficult task. Each new hurdle had to be just barely out of reach, in order to encourage people to push themselves in a new direction. Amy and Miles spent days trying to figure out how to space the tasks so that they were neither too easy nor too hard.

At first the entire city would be buried, with the exception of a couple blocks. The buildings in that section would be damaged, but their problems would be minor: just patch up some windows, repair a few walls, and fix some wiring, and the buildings would be ready for habitation. The reward would be a base within New Tikal that offered food, shelter, climate control, and a place where thousands of people could actually live and

work.

But there would be limitations. There would be water, but only in limited amounts. Electricity would be available but it would be weak and uneven. As the engineers traced down the problems they would encounter more challenges. Fixing the unstable power supply would mean repairing an aging ZPE generator that was broken just enough to where it could be fixed with some study and effort. In doing so they would find another section of the city – a vast manufacturing area that, with some work, could be used to produce all sorts of goods and raw materials.

So, step by step, Amy and Miles designed a city that would teach the foundational principles of physics, engineering, chemistry, and management. The final challenge, when the people of Mars had mastered everything else, was a carefully hidden spaceport. Within it was a starship that, if repaired, could be used to leave Mars and travel to the stars. There they would be faced with the greatest challenge of all: rebuilding the ruined worlds that had once housed Ranger colonies. The stars would be waiting for them – if they could find the strength to reach out and take them.

CHAPTER 29

"People often ask me why I am such an unhappy and grumpy person. It seems to me that any sane person would be deeply unhappy right now: not only is our race doomed, but our leaders are about to kill everything around us. Only a fool or a maniac is happy when he sees his brother fall off a bridge and plummet to his death. I think the cheerfulness of others is a sign that they are mentally unbalanced."

—Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

June 14, 7243

AFTER A MONTH OF INTENSE WORK and countless hours of debate and experimentation, Amy and Miles at last agreed that the new city was complete. With a feeling of tremendous accomplishment, the two of them stood back and looked at the metropolis that they had created. The city was almost entirely buried under a mound of sand, as it would be when they reconstructed it on Mars. Using the nanites, however, they could peer beneath the sand and see the maze of riddles that they had created. They were both very pleased.

"So are we going to just move this city to Mars?" Miles asked.

"Oh no!" Amy replied. "No, we'll recreate it once we get back there. Trying to move this city all the way across the galaxy would be a huge pain. Besides, it's not necessary. Since we have the digital blueprints for it we can just feed them to the Martian nanites and let them do the work. It won't be a problem."

"So what should we do with this copy of it? Are we just going to leave it here?"

"I don't see why not. After all, it's not going to do any harm to just let it sit there. Besides, someone might come here one day and discover it!"

Miles laughed. "What a shock *that* would be! They'd probably go crazy trying to figure out how an exact duplicate of Tikal ended up on an abandoned planet on the other side of the galaxy."

"Oh, I'm sure they'll know what's going on by then. I think once they reach the network they should be told about what we did. There's no reason to keep it a secret forever. After all, we're trying to help them, not mess with their minds! Later today I'll contact the Stewards and make sure that they know to tell them."

"For that matter, *you* could tell them. After all, for all practical purposes you're immortal! You're still going to be young and spry 500 years from now, or however long it takes them to reach this place."

"I actually wasn't planning on being around that long," Amy replied. "I was kind of hoping that after I finished my work I could go home to my family. There's really no place for me here in this galaxy. I don't fit in."

"What do you mean? I can understand why you wouldn't want to live on Xanthe, but you will always have a home on Mars. It is your native planet, you know! You have as much of a right to be there as I do. Besides, I think Noel would be pretty disappointed if you left."

Amy shook her head. "It sounds like a great idea, but it wouldn't work. If I start hanging around other people they're eventually going to find out that I'm not like everyone else. Noel hasn't figured it out yet, but it's only a matter of time before even *he* realizes that I have vast powers. Once people know that I can do things they can only imagine, well, they're going to panic.

The government would see me as a security threat and would eventually try to assassinate me. There's simply no way they're going to trust that an immortal with unfathomable power would never lose her mind and try to take over the world – and I don't blame them.”

“Well, that's certainly a depressing outlook on life! I see your point, though. But couldn't you live as if you were a normal person? After all, you don't *have* to use your powers, do you?”

“I'm an *immortal*,” Amy pointed out. “I can't get sick or injured, and after I reach maturity I will never age. People are going to notice, Miles.”

“They never noticed with me!”

“That's because you live alone, far from everyone else, and only rarely enter society. That's really not the sort of life I'm looking for. I have no desire to spend the rest of time living all by myself on some empty world, making once-in-a-decade trips to Mars.”

“Couldn't you set yourself up as a legendary figure?” Miles asked. “For example, you once told me about Christmas. After digging through the historical archives I was finally able to uncover an obscure reference to that holiday. Wasn't there some fat red person associated with it – a happy guy who gave away toys at a steep discount? Why not become someone like that?”

Amy laughed. “No, Miles, I'm not going to turn into Santa Claus. The key thing about Santa was that no one ever saw him. If the government ever thought there was a *real* person out there with seemingly unlimited power, you can bet that they'd try to find a way to 'neutralize' him. Governments like to have a monopoly on power, you know. Besides, absolute power is corrupting! How do you know that I won't someday lose my mind and become an evil dictator?”

“I guess I don't,” Miles admitted. “It just – I don't know. It just seems really unlikely. I can't see you doing that.”

“I'm only fourteen, you know. I'm not even an adult yet!”

"That's true," Miles agreed. "Say, when is your birthday? I don't remember ever seeing that in the records."

"July 23," Amy replied. "My sister and I were born in 1853, for what it's worth."

"Oh my! I mean, I knew that, but it's still amazing. You were born a *really long time* ago. You're a part of history, in more ways than one. I bet there are historians out there who would love to sit down and talk with you. So much of that period has been lost to time."

"It doesn't seem that long ago to me," Amy said softly. "The way I remember it, last summer Tikal was still standing and my father was still the governor of Mars. I never dreamed I would end up here."

"So what *are* you going to do?"

"I don't know. I really don't know. I just have a feeling that something will turn up. If it doesn't then I don't know what I'll do."

Miles nodded. "Well, are you ready to return to Mars?"

Amy hesitated. "Not quite yet. The basic terraformation of Mars won't be done until April 1st, and I don't want the city to be discovered until then. Right now is just too soon."

"You do realize that the first is more than a week from now, don't you? What are you going to do in the meantime?"

"I think I might go visit the Sentinel. It's been quite a while since I've spent any time with him. I'll see if I can lend him a hand."

"Well, in that case I think I'll return to Mars. Jasmine is a nice planet, but I'm about ready to return home. Besides, I need to check up on Noel and see how he's doing. Someone's got to make sure that he doesn't get into too much trouble."

Amy nodded. "All right – that sounds good. I'll see you later!"

"Hold on there!" Miles called out. "I need you to transport me back to Mars – I don't seem to be able to do that. Oh, and you'll probably want your shoelaces back."

Amy shook her head. "No, you can keep them. They are yours, after all, and they go so well together with those orange shoes. I'd hate to break up a matching set."

Miles looked down. "Goodness – the shoes! I forgot all about my shoes. I could have used the nanites to change them into something not quite as garish, couldn't I?"

"Among other things," Amy said, laughing. "I'll deactivate the shoelaces when I return you to Mars, but you can keep them as a memento. I don't see any harm in that."

"Then it will be an honor to keep them. Thank you."

"You're welcome! I'll see you next week."

With that, Miles disappeared. After making sure that Miles had arrived safely at his home on Mars, Amy disappeared as well, leaving the planet Jasmine empty.

CHAPTER 30

"I suppose our end had to come at some point. Reality can only be ignored for so long before the consequences become impossible to hide. It may be that more advanced civilizations are more prone to sudden destruction, for they wield much greater power – and when that power is used poorly millions can die. By contrast, it is almost impossible for a race of primitive savages to make an error in judgment that dooms the entire world."

–Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

June 14, 7243

TEN DAYS LATER, Amy met Miles outside his underground bunker. A few months ago his bunker had been located deep in the arid Martian desert, but the terraformation project had made drastic changes to the landscape. When Miles emerged from his home he was greeted by a vast blue sky that was dotted with fluffy white clouds. The rain had stopped and the air was warm and humid. The endless miles of sand had disappeared, replaced with a rolling field of fresh green grass. There was a sense of hope and life in the air – something that had been missing from Mars for a millennia.

"It's beautiful!" Miles exclaimed.

"It's April 1st," Amy replied. "Right on schedule! Mars is really looking good. I wish I could have accelerated the growth of trees, but that seemed a little risky. Even Noel would have had a hard

time explaining how an old-growth forest could suddenly appear in just a couple months.”

“You know, you'd think that he would know better, but on the other hand I wouldn't put it past him. His powers of imagination are quite vast. Noel is absolutely determined to find a natural explanation for all of this. He is convinced that all of these changes are just a part of an ordinary planetary cycle. The countless anomalies don't trouble him at all.”

“Which is exactly what I was hoping for. That's the whole reason I did it this way – to keep myself out of the picture. I really don't want anyone to stop and realize that their whole planet started changing right after a strange girl appeared out of nowhere. I'm not interested in attracting that kind of attention.”

“Well, I don't think you're in any danger. These people just aren't that curious. Do you realize that everyone is still living in New Tikal? I made a trip there last week and found that they've already taken the new atmosphere for granted and have gone back to their old lives. I guess the novelty has worn off.”

“Everyone?” Amy asked. “Even Noel?”

“Well, Noel has actually been pretty busy lately. He's planning on borrowing the *Raptor* soon so he can drive around and see what's changed, but right now he's trying to adjust the life support systems in the city to take advantage of all the new resources. The atmosphere towers have to be changed, the water system needs to be adjusted...”

“Then I guess we'd better get to work and give him a *new* set of challenges to face! It's time for him to leave the nest and move boldly into the future. So, what do you think – should we put the city right behind that hill over there?”

“Sure, why not? Although I see that you've made the same mistake that I did – there aren't any patches of desert lying around! Everything is green, as far as the eye can see.”

“Goodness, you're right! I don't know what I was thinking. All right, then, let's fix that. I think we need to make a slight

adjustment to our plans. Let's put the city right over...*there*."

Without warning, the ground began trembling. A few miles away the soil rippled as if it was made of water. With a sudden *crack*, the ground parted and a fissure opened. The hole quickly grew in size until it was nearly half a mile wide.

Miles gasped. "I didn't know there was a fault line around here!"

"There's not," Amy replied. "But thanks to that remarkable and unexpected earthquake, we now have a path to the lost city of the ancients. Now I just need to put the city in the fissure."

"But the fissure isn't big enough! At best it could only hold a small section of the city."

"Which is exactly what we want. The rest of the city will be buried underground, just as we had planned. The only difference is that instead of hiding it under sand, it will be hidden under dirt and rock. I think it'll still work. It will take more effort to dig it out, but they have the manpower to do it."

Miles saw Amy close her eyes and make a quick gesture with her hands. In the distance he saw the ground around the fissure rumbling, as if something was happening beneath the surface. Over the next few minutes the ground shook, and then all became quiet again. Amy opened her eyes and smiled. "That should do it!"

"Where's the city?" Miles asked. "I still don't see anything."

"I'll show you," Amy replied. A split-second later both of them were standing at the top of the fissure.

"Oof," Miles exclaimed, shocked at the sudden change in location. "I wasn't expecting that! Please let me know next time before you transport me across the planet. It's a little unsettling."

"Sorry – I forgot that you weren't connected to the network anymore. But look down there!"

Miles looked down into the fissure and gasped. At the bottom of the chasm he saw buildings rising out of the ground. The metal structures looked old and worn, but they were still

largely intact. At the very bottom he could see broken streets that were littered with debris. More skyscrapers could be seen partially buried in the sides of the fissure. Judging by the street layout, it looked like the city continued on to the north, just beneath the surface.

"It's beautiful," Miles said. "It's exactly as we designed it. But how are they going to get down there?"

"Oh, they'll have to build a road. I guess that will be their first challenge. They should be able to manage it, though. After all, if they can't build a road then they have much bigger problems."

"So what do we do now?" Miles asked.

Amy smiled. "We go to New Tikal and tell them what we've found."

"What if they don't come? You don't suppose we've miscalculated, do you? I mean, it *should* work, but—"

Amy shook her head. "From what I've heard, people have been risking their lives for centuries trying to find the lost treasure of Don Elliott. Do you really think they're just going to ignore this? That city isn't phony, you know; it really *does* contain treasure. Not just treasure in silver and gold, but something far more valuable – knowledge. No, they'll come all right! I'm not worried about that."

"Then let's go!" Miles replied.

Before Amy could move, however, Miles grabbed her arm. "Let's *not* go that way, though. I think it would be much better if we took the *Raptor*. That way we could use it to actually drive people back here, like civilized people."

Amy grinned. "You mean like people who haven't discovered the art of teleportation yet. All right, you have a point – I guess that would be less suspicious. Lead the way, then!"

CHAPTER 31

"People hate planning for the future because it is difficult, costly, and inconvenient. It is much easier to simply ignore things and move on, hoping that some responsible person will come along and rescue you from your own foolishness. Unfortunately for us, there are no responsible people out there. We will be forced to pay the full price for our short-sightedness, and that price is quite high."

—Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

June 14, 7243

"YOU'VE DISCOVERED WHAT?" Noel asked incredulously.

"It's a giant city!" Miles said excitedly. "You've got to come and see it. It looks like the city was buried intact, for the most part. There's no telling how big it is!"

"The lost city of Tikal," Noel said thoughtfully. "I guess it *is* possible. If the original city was buried long ago, the recent rain and seismic activity could have unearthed it. I would think, though, that there wouldn't be much of it left by now. After all, the city would have been buried for five thousand years! How could anything have survived? Metals tarnish, rust, and disappear; machines break; papers degrade; buildings crumble..."

"Come and see for yourself!" Miles urged.

Noel shook his head. "I think you must be mistaken. Amy, what do you think about all this?"

"I think he's right. This is something you have to see with

your own eyes to believe.”

“But...” Noel said reluctantly.

Amy and Miles had found Noel in New Tikal's waste treatment facility, struggling to connect it to a series of new water lines that he had just installed. He was deeply involved in a series of infrastructure projects, and even the discovery of a legendary city wasn't quite enough to motivate him to leave. As intrigued as he was, he hated abandoning something before he had a chance to finish it.

“Now, don't think that I'm not interested in your discovery. That's not it at all! What you have to understand is that I'm just really busy right now. It's going to take me at least another week to get this project finished, and then there's the new aquifer that I want to investigate. There's just so much that needs to be done around here! We finally have so many spare resources that the mayor is letting me do things that have needed to be done for ages. This is an opportunity that I just can't pass up! Chances like this don't last forever.”

“Let your underlings handle it,” Miles urged. “They can surely lay a few pipes. You have something much bigger to investigate – and much more important. What you find in that city could change the future of Mars forever.”

“I guess you have a point,” Noel said reluctantly. “It *would* be irresponsible to ignore your discovery altogether. And, who knows, perhaps there really *is* some truth to the fabled treasure of Don Elliott. Maybe—”

“That's the spirit!” Miles said enthusiastically. “Hang on to that thought and come along with us. I've already gotten everything loaded into the *Raptor*. We'll take you straight to the site!”

“All right,” Noel said. “I'll come.”

Even after he agreed to join them, however, it took Miles and Amy more than an hour to actually get him away from New Tikal.

Noel had a long list of instructions to give to his assistants, and he went over the blueprints for the new water lines no less than six times. Miles finally told him that his engineers could figure out the rest on their own and pushed him right out the door.

As the *Raptor* climbed out of the canyon that housed the entrance to New Tikal, Noel began to relax. "Perhaps I have been a bit too busy lately," he remarked. When the tank finally left the canyon road and began driving through the grassland he gasped in admiration. "The planet's transformation has been remarkable! Things have progressed far quicker than I would have ever expected. I wonder if one day we'll see forests again?"

"I wouldn't doubt it," Amy said. "There's even an ocean out there, if you're interested in that sort of thing."

"I've never seen an ocean before. I've heard they were quite popular, though, back in the day."

"You'll love it!" Miles commented. "Just wait until you see the beach. Now *that's* a fine way to spend an afternoon. Provided that the beach isn't on a hopelessly depressing planet, that is."

"Is that where the two of you have been hiding?" Noel asked. "I've been wondering why you were gone for so long. In fact, I was starting to get a bit worried."

"No, we haven't been lying around on the beach," Amy replied. "Well, not exactly. We've, um, been working on a construction project together. I actually don't care much for the beach, but that's just my opinion."

"You don't care much for the rain either," Miles pointed out. "Come to think of it, is there any part of the outdoors that you enjoy?"

Amy thought for a moment. "Well, there is a lot to be said for small furry creatures. They're so adorable! Oh, and then there's my dog Alex. Poor Alex! I wonder how he's been doing lately? I haven't seen him for months – I hope he's ok! I've just been so preoccupied with everything else that's been going on. After I'm done here I've just got to go see him."

"Your dog?" Noel asked. "Do you mean, as in the four-legged animals that were used as pets thousands of years ago? You have a *dog*?"

"Of course I have a dog! He's amazing. I bet he's been terribly lonely, though. He's never been left alone for this long before. He must be so worried about me!"

Noel sighed. "Amy, dogs have been extinct for thousands of years. You can't possibly have a real, live dog. There aren't any left."

"That's what *you* think," Amy replied. "Just wait until I introduce you to him. If you're nice I'll tell him not to bite you."

"I'm sure it will be an honor to meet your imaginary dog," Noel replied.

Miles interrupted. "You know, we're going to need a road around here at some point. The *Raptor* can cut through the grass just fine, but we don't want to do too much damage to the landscape. I have a feeling that a lot of people are going to be traveling from New Tikal to the chasm we've discovered."

"Perhaps," Noel said. "If the site is as significant as you claim then it will probably attract thousands of people, looking to find whatever they can scavenge."

"I think it will do a lot more than that," Miles replied. "If I'm right about this, what we're looking at is the start of an entirely new colony – one located on the surface! I think it may be time for us to leave our underground homes and return to the open air. That is where we belong, Noel – up here, in the sunshine. It's not good to live in the shadows."

It was late in the afternoon by the time they finally reached the fissure. Miles parked the *Raptor* a couple hundred feet from the edge of the newly-formed rift, and the three of them exited the vehicle.

"It certainly *is* a big hole," Noel remarked. "And it looks pretty deep, too! I don't remember there being anything like that in this area."

"It's pretty new," Amy commented.

Miles led the way to the fissure and pointed at the city below. Noel crept cautiously toward the edge and glanced down. When he saw the city that was stretched out in the chasm he gasped. "Why, there must be at least a dozen buildings down there!"

"And I bet there are even more hidden underground," Miles added. "The earthquake only revealed part of them. It could extend for miles!"

Noel stared at the buildings in astonishment, taking in their every detail. "The architecture definitely dates back to the 19th century. Just look at that detail! In fact, the buildings almost look familiar. Is it possible that this is part of the actual capitol of ancient Mars – kept intact, underground, for all these years?"

Amy smiled and handed him a rope. "Care to scale down into the fissure and find out?"

It took nearly an hour for the three of them to climb down to the bottom. Noel had never done anything remotely like rock climbing before, and Miles had to show him how it worked. Under normal circumstances Noel would have been very hesitant to rappel down the side of a thousand-foot cliff, but his excitement over the lost city outweighed his sense of caution.

After they finally reached the city the three of them spent the remainder of the afternoon scouting out the abandoned buildings. Noel wanted to spend the night there and continue exploring the next day, but Miles pointed out that they hadn't brought any supplies. Despite this, Noel ended up tarrying so long that it was actually dark by the time they climbed out of the fissure and returned to the *Raptor*.

"That was amazing!" Noel exclaimed, as Miles drove the tank back to New Tikal. "I really think that with a little effort we could get that city operational again. The electrical systems appear to be mostly intact, and the buildings still have a remarkable degree of structural integrity. I'd love to know what sort of metal they're

made of! For them to have been buried for so long, with so little damage – well, it's just astonishing.”

“It does seem pretty unlikely,” Amy commented.

“Now, I do think our work is cut out for us,” Noel continued. “It's not going to be easy to dig out the rest of the city, but I think it's certainly possible. If everyone in New Tikal lends a hand we should have more than enough manpower.”

“Do you think you'll be able to persuade them?” Amy asked.

“Oh, absolutely! Just wait until I tell them what we've discovered. The technology I saw today was just incredible – incredible! This is generations ahead of anything we've got today, and represents a huge leap forward. Who *wouldn't* want to live in the city of tomorrow?”

“True,” Amy said. “But, if you think about it, isn't that actually the city from yesterday?”

“Quite to the contrary! I think that city is our future. It could revitalize our entire culture! It's a fantastic opportunity.”

“All of this is going to take some time, you know,” Miles commented. “There's a lot of work that has to be done before you can start moving people in. You'll need to put together a scouting party first and spend a few weeks mapping the area, so you can get an idea of what you're dealing with. Then you'll need to put together more teams to—”

“Believe me, I know exactly what you mean, and I've got it all covered. Tomorrow morning things are going to start happening. You just wait and see!”

CHAPTER 32

"I don't know why I am taking such pains to record the actions of Evan Maldonado and the elders. After all, aside from the savages we are the only enclave of humanity that is left. Perhaps I am hoping that, when we are gone, humans from another world will read this and learn from our mistakes. Even that, however, seems unlikely. The Wall has been down for three years, and if there were any survivors out there they would have visited us by now. Since they have not I can only assume that they are either dead or are uninterested in us."

—Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

June 15, 7243

AMANDA STRYKER WAS SITTING IN HER GARDEN, reading a book, when Jones found her. She had only discovered the secret garden a few days ago when she was exploring the grounds of her estate. During her first few months in Paradise she had never noticed the narrow dirt path that led away from her conservatory. The path itself branched several times, leading to a number of quiet, secluded areas in the woods behind her mansion. It just so happened that the last branch she explored led to a walled stone garden in the heart of the forest. Inside that wondrous place was a fountain, a stone bench, and a single tree. It was the tree that really got Amanda's attention, for she had never seen another one quite like it before. It had no fruit, but something made her

think that its fruit was seasonal, or perhaps triggered by something. With that in mind she had started making a little trip to the garden each day, seeing if anything had changed. Today she decided to bring a book along with her.

“Good morning, miss,” Jones called out. He was standing just outside the entrance to the garden. “Mind if I come in?”

“Not at all,” Amanda said, putting down her book. “You’re always welcome in my home, you know.”

Jones smiled and stepped through the stone entrance. He glanced around and his eyes settled on the tree. He studied it for a moment, intrigued.

“Interesting, isn’t it?” Amanda said. “I’ve never seen one quite like it anywhere else. Trees don’t usually come in that color, and I’ve never seen one that radiated like that before. It’s very different.”

“It is indeed different,” Jones replied. “In fact, it is unique. You have the only one.”

“Really? Are you sure?”

Jones nodded. “I’m quite sure. This tree was a gift, Amanda, from the Creator to you. It’s really quite remarkable. I think you’re going to enjoy it.”

“What can you tell me about it?” she asked, as Jones sat down beside her.

“Not very much, I’m afraid. It is a mystery. It will be up to you to uncover its secrets.”

“How strange! A gift with secrets. I wonder why that is?”

Jones smiled. “As the Word says, ‘It is the glory of God to conceal a thing, but the honor of kings is to search out a matter.’ The Lord delights in hiding things, and it is our joy to search out the things that He has hidden. It’s like the times you used to search for Easter eggs when you were a child. God hides treasures all throughout the universe, and we have the pleasure of finding them.”

“That is so true,” Amanda agreed. “Every day I find

something new and unexpected. But still, I never thought that I would have a unique gift. Why would God give me something that special?"

"Why not?" Jones asked. "Do you think that God mass-produces His gifts on an assembly line and gives everyone the same stock item? You are not like anyone else; you are unique. The challenges and gifts that God gives to you are likewise unique. Our Lord does not simply stamp out millions of clones, nor does He give thoughtless, boring presents. He loves you very much, you know."

"I know," she said, smiling. "So what brings you here today? Did you simply want to say hello to my tree?"

"I have actually come with a request. The Lord wants you to do something for Him."

"Really?" Amanda asked, surprised. "What is it?"

"Come with me, and I'll show you," Jones replied.

* * * * *

Amy and Miles were standing outside of her apartment. Both of them were exhausted. It had been a long day.

"I think that went pretty well," Miles said.

"I agree," Amy replied, yawning. "I really don't think that trip could have gone any better. Noel was just beside himself."

"That he was. Anyway, I guess I'll see you in the morning. I'll stop by sometime after breakfast and we can talk about what to do next. I'm sure that Noel will—"

At that moment the Sentinel appeared. His sudden appearance startled Miles and made Amy scream. "Steve! What are you doing here?"

"It's Xanthe," the Sentinel said urgently. "Something terrible has happened! I need you to come with me at once."

"You've got to be kidding," Amy grumbled. "I thought I was done with that awful place! Do we have to go right now? I'm sure

it's important, but it *is* pretty late, and I am pretty tired, and now is just not a good time. Can't we talk about it in the morning?"

"I'm afraid not," the Sentinel replied. "You must come now and see what has happened. Something has to be done and you are the one in charge."

"I knew that 'in charge' thing was going to come back and bite me," Amy grumbled. "You see, Miles? Being an administrator is not all fun and games."

"Please, we're wasting time," the Sentinel said. "This is urgent!"

"All right," Amy said at last. "I just hope this doesn't take too long."

"Then let's go," the Sentinel said quickly.

A moment later they vanished, leaving Miles alone. The old man looked around and, seeing no one, let out a long sigh. "Hurry back," he said.

CHAPTER 33

“Deep beneath this fortress is a series of abandoned hallways, stairwells, and rooms. They were created long ago to house our entire store of knowledge, but when that project was canceled the passage leading to them was locked. Now only a few old scribes such as myself even know that it exists. I am placing the copies of our history in the deepest and driest section of this area. That should give them a better chance at survival.”

—Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

June 15, 7243

TRUE TO NOEL'S WORD, things *did* start happening the next morning. News that the ancient city of Tikal had been rediscovered spread like wildfire, and Noel had no trouble putting together a team of people to scout out the city's ruins. Over the next few days everyone was talking about what the discovery meant and what treasures might be found. Noel ended up with thousands of volunteers, all willing and eager to explore the ruins.

To his great surprise, even Mayor Thornton was enthusiastic. The mayor issued a statement urging the citizens of New Tikal to do whatever they could to help him. When Noel excitedly brought the document to Miles the old man had to read it three times before he figured out what was going on.

“This isn't as good as it seems,” Miles said at last. “The mayor isn't actually trying to help you. He has no intention of moving into the ruin on the surface. What he wants people to do is loot

the ruins and bring its riches back here. Our leader sees this as a ticket to a more comfortable life.”

“Oh,” Noel said. “Well, that’s kind of disappointing. I was hoping he was on-board with all this. I don’t know what I’m going to do if he start opposing us.”

Miles shrugged. “It is what it is. Honestly, though, did you really expect anything else? He’s not going to want to give up everything he knows and embrace uncertainty. New Tikal is his whole universe. If he ever realizes what you’re really up to I think you can expect some trouble.”

“I really hope not,” Noel said worriedly. “By the way, where is Amy?”

“Oh, she had some business to attend to,” Miles said vaguely. “She left in a big hurry last night and I haven’t seen her since. I’m really not sure where she went or what it’s all about. I’m sure she’ll be back at some point.”

“I hope so. I was kind of hoping that she would be on our reconstruction team. We could really use someone like her to restore that buried city.”

“Um, right,” Miles said. “I’m sure you could. Well, I’m sure you’ll do fine without her.”

“At least we have you as a resource,” Noel said thoughtfully. “That’s better than nothing.”

“Oh no,” Miles said quickly. “I’m far too old for that sort of thing. I appreciate the offer, but this is something you’ll have to do on your own.”

“But this is the lost city of Tikal! How could you *not* want to be a part of this? Besides, you and Amy are the best technical resources that we have. Not having either of you on the team would be a tremendous setback!”

“Just wait until you’re my age and you’ll understand,” Miles replied. “I’ve done more in the past few weeks than I’ve done in – well, in a long time. The day has come for this old man to retire and hand the baton over to the next generation. That would be

you, Noel. It's up to you to lead these people into the future. I'll be in the bleachers, rooting for you."

Noel sighed. "That is not what I was hoping for."

* * * * *

It took Noel several days to pick out his team, but by April 5th he had reached a decision. He picked twenty of the city's most qualified personnel, gathered up all the equipment they would need, and the next day he set out for the ruins. His plan was for them to spend the next two weeks scouting out the buildings and making a detailed inventory of everything they could find. He knew that there was no way they could complete an exhaustive survey that quickly, but he was hoping that two weeks would be enough time for them to understand the buried city and learn what it would take to make it habitable again.

What he was not expecting were the crowds of people that tried to invite themselves along on the expedition. Despite strenuous protests, when his team left New Tikal early the next morning thousands of people followed them across the desert. The only thing that stopped them from flooding into the ruin itself was the steep cliff that was the city's only means of access. The crowd watched as the expedition lowered its supplies and personnel into the fissure. When everyone had made it safely to the bottom the crowd reluctantly dispersed and returned to New Tikal.

While the throngs of people were disappointed that they hadn't been able to enter the ruin, they weren't entirely despondent. They had seen the city with their own eyes and knew that it wasn't a myth or mirage. Over the next few weeks the story of the fabled lost city continued to grow. For the first time in centuries something new and exciting had happened, and people were eager to be a part of it. The terraformation of the planet was a monumental event, but this – this was different. In

the eyes of many the ruin offered them a second chance – a new place to live, a new way of life, and a new challenge to overcome.

The expedition ended up going much better than Noel had predicted. By the end of the two-week period they were able to restore electricity and running water to several buildings within the ruin. The next challenge would be securing a food supply. His team had discovered that the city offered several different solutions, but they would all take time and effort to implement.

What was clear to everyone, though, was that even in its ruined condition the city was far better than their home back in New Tikal. The technology the city contained was simply astonishing. There were definitely challenges to be overcome, but if they were able to surmount them their civilization would take a giant leap forward. The potential rewards were great.

* * * * *

When the expedition returned to New Tikal it was greeted with great excitement. After resting and taking some time to go over their findings, Noel publicized the results of their trip. In the documents that he released he talked about the great treasures he had found in the city, its staggering level of technology, and the tremendous promise that it held to be the new home of mankind. The challenges, he said, could all be overcome. With some effort, it would be possible for all of them to leave their decaying, underground city and move back into the sunlight. Rather than waiting underground for the end to come, they could create a new future for themselves on the surface. All they had to do was work for it.

This message proved to be tremendously popular, although there were a few who were not in favor of it. Some people were content with their lives in New Tikal and saw no particular reason to change. But there were countless others who were restless and eager to do something with their lives. Without even

knowing it they had been longing for excitement and adventure, and what Noel offered them was the chance of a lifetime.

But there were others who were very concerned about Noel's proposal. The mayor of New Tikal saw this as a threat – and he was determined to do something about it. As soon as he saw the report that Noel had released he called an emergency meeting of his cabinet. The cabinet consisted of four people: Kevin Cole, who was over the city's finances; Scott Glover, who was head of security; Robert Finch, who was his political adviser; and Carl Perkins, who was over day-to-day operations. The four of them were old friends of Mayor Thornton and had been in positions of power for many years.

“So what seems to be the trouble?” Carl asked, when everyone had finally made their way to the mayor's office.

“You've got to be kidding me,” the mayor replied. “Have you been locked in a closet somewhere? Do you really have no idea what's been going on up there on the surface?”

“I don't see anything to be concerned about,” Carl replied. “Someone found some old ruins, and it apparently has a lot of useful technology. Personally I think that's a good thing. This town could use a little sprucing up. It hasn't changed very much in centuries.”

“It's not a good thing at all,” Robert replied. “Noel Lawson doesn't want to loot the ruin; he wants to establish a base of operations there! He wants to turn it into a functional city.”

“Why not let him?” Carl asked. “I don't see any particular harm in it.”

“It actually might not be a bad idea,” Kevin said. “If people start moving out of New Tikal that leaves more resources for the rest of us. Besides, it's unlikely that a significant number of people would leave. People may talk about it, but the frontier life is not for everyone. There aren't many people who can live under those circumstances.”

“You're not seeing the big picture,” Robert said. “Yes, right

now the surface city is not a threat. What you don't realize is that it's not going to stay that way. The reports indicate that the technology in that city is astounding. If Noel succeeds in repairing the city, it will be far more powerful than New Tikal – powerful enough to become a threat.”

“Exactly,” the mayor said. “We can't let a powerful rival civilization develop on the surface of Mars. There's just no way we could compete with them. We need to nip this colonization idea now, before it's too late.”

“Why not just outlaw it?” Scott asked. “I could send some men to guard the city's entrance and make sure that no one leaves. That would put a stop to it right there.”

“You're out of your mind!” Robert exclaimed. “If we did that we'd have a riot on our hands. Besides, the election is coming up. Doing anything to keep people away from the city right now would be electoral suicide. It would guarantee our defeat.”

The mayor nodded. “I agree. Whatever we do must be done with great subtlety and care. We've got to come up with a tactic that will kill the colonization effort without causing a political firestorm. We need to shift people's opinions on this issue.”

“But the ruin could be a valuable resource,” Kevin protested. “There's no telling what sort of riches it may contain.”

“We can always go loot it later,” the mayor replied. “After all, it's not like it's going to suddenly disappear. After we've squashed this uprising and returned everything back to normal, we can quietly send out a team of loyalists and have them take whatever is worth taking.”

“That might work,” Scott said thoughtfully. “But how are we going to stop all of this?”

“Maybe we could eliminate the movement's leader,” Robert said thoughtfully. “Noel seems to be the one responsible for all of this. If he was no longer a factor the whole thing might calm down.”

The mayor nodded thoughtfully. “Now that's an excellent

idea. If we eliminated the movement's leader we could issue reports and use the media to change people's opinion. We could say that the first reports were in error, or the city was more damaged than was first thought, or whatever. We could even plant a bomb and blow up the whole ruin, if necessary. Yes, I think that just might work! Noel caused this problem; eliminating him might just solve it."

"Do you want me to arrest Noel?" Scott asked.

The mayor shook his head. "No, let's do this quietly. The last thing we want to do is attract attention and make a big public spectacle. If people found out what we were doing the political damage would be incalculable. I think it would be much better if Noel simply disappeared."

"How would you like to arrange that?" Scott asked.

Mayor Thornton smiled. "Let's invite him to dinner tomorrow evening. A nice, quiet, secluded dinner – just him and the four of us. He'll arrive, but he won't leave. If anyone asks what happened to him we'll simply say that after the meal he left to go back home and, sadly, we never saw him again."

"I'll make sure that the media doesn't start asking questions," Robert said.

"And I will give the invitation to him personally," Scott added. "I can also make sure that the investigation into his disappearance doesn't turn up anything."

"Very good, gentlemen," the mayor said. "With a bit of luck, this should all blow over in just a few days!"

CHAPTER 34

"I am sixty-five years old. Few people live as long as I have, and I am sure that the time of my departure is at hand. This means that I will not live to see the final collapse of my people. The day will come when others realize it is no longer possible to produce offspring, but I will not be there to see it. The day will come when the last person dies, but I will not see that either. And yet, even though I will not be there to see it, I still mourn for it. It saddens me that this is how our race ended – we were destroyed by our own foolish decisions."

–Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

June 16, 7243

NOEL LAWSON WAS ON HIS WAY HOME after a long day's work. He had spent the entire day in meetings with a group of engineers and construction workers, planning out the next steps to solve the ruin's food supply problems. In his excitement he lost track of time and ended up working much later than he had intended. It was now well past nine o'clock and he was tired and ready to get some sleep. As he was getting out his key to open his apartment door, however, he felt a tap on his shoulder.

"Why Amy!" Noel exclaimed, as he turned around. "I had no idea you'd returned. Where have you been? Miles told me that you'd left but he didn't know where you had gone. We've both been a little concerned about you."

"That doesn't matter right now," the girl replied. "Look. Did

you just receive an invitation from the mayor to go to dinner tomorrow?"

"Yes and no," Noel said. "The invitation was actually delivered by Scott Glover, not the mayor. It was the first time I'd ever met him! I don't normally get mixed up with security. But you are partially correct. The invitation is for dinner, it is for tomorrow evening, and it is at the mayor's home. The council is supposed to be there too, though, so it's not *just* with the mayor. I think they want to talk about my plans for the new colony. It's quite exciting!"

"So they have asked you to be there at 7 PM?"

"Yes, they have," Noel commented. "I can hardly wait! But how do you know about all this? Was the invitation in the news or something?"

"You're missing the point! You need to stay focused here. The reason the mayor invited you to his home for dinner is so he can kill you. He sees you as a threat to his political future and he plans on eliminating you. Whatever you do you *must not go to that dinner tomorrow.*"

Noel shook his head. "Amy, you're a bright girl, but I really believe you're letting your delusions of grandeur get the better of you. The mayor has actually been very supportive! Despite what Miles has said I truly believe that the mayor is on my side."

"He is *not* on your side! The only time he has even pretended to be on your side was when he thought you were going to loot the ruin and bring its treasures back here. Now that he knows that you want to start a new city on the surface he sees you as a political rival – and a serious threat to the future of New Tikal. Look, Noel, think about it. You are trying to lure people away from this underground city and back to the surface. If you succeed, this city will be abandoned and the mayor's career will end. Do you really think that he hasn't figured that out?"

"But that's years away!" Noel protested. "None of this is going to happen tomorrow. That ruin up there won't be able to

compete with this city for a long, long time.”

“But that day will come, and the mayor knows it. That is why he wants to stop it now before he loses control. Don't you remember what happened to Don Elliott? This isn't the first time this has happened!”

Noel sighed. “I appreciate your concern, I really do. But I really think you're blowing this all out of proportion. It's just a dinner invitation, nothing more. Nothing bad is going to happen tomorrow.”

“You're going to regret this,” the girl said, shaking her head. “They're not even going to serve you a meal – by the time you get there they will have already eaten. If you won't listen to me then I guess I have no choice. I'm going to go with you to that so-called dinner tomorrow.”

“But you weren't invited!” Noel protested. “The mayor is not going to like this. I don't think that is a good idea.”

“Oh, believe me, you'll have a very different opinion by this time tomorrow. Besides, I'm not asking you if I can go, I'm *telling* you that I'm going. This is not a discussion. If you're not going to look after yourself then I'll have to. Somebody has got to protect the future of Mars.”

“Fine,” Noel said. “I can see your mind is made up. Should I pick you up at your apartment?”

“I'll meet you at the mayor's house,” she said. The girl then turned around and walked off.

Noel sighed, opened the door to his apartment, and walked inside. “She's a nice girl, but she's really got to get a grip on reality,” he said aloud, to no one in particular. “She is far too paranoid for her own good. But if coming along to the mayor's is what it will take to calm her down then I guess I can go along with that. I owe her that much.”

The man closed the door and locked it. He then paused. *After all, she can't possibly be right. Can she?*

CHAPTER 35

"I learned today that Evan plans on releasing all of his neutron weapons at once. I urged him to reconsider and pointed out that it would be better to try one and see what it does before using them all. I said this not because I wanted to see them used, but in the hope that if people saw how destructive they really were they would abandon this course. Sadly, Evan rejected my counsel. He claims that I have gone senile. I suspect that he will die before I do – the victim of an angry mob, enraged that our landscape is gone."

–Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

June 16, 7243

THE NEXT DAY WAS UNEVENTFUL – at least at first. Noel spent the day working with his team of engineers to draw up the plans for a permanent base in the ruins. He knew it was an ambitious goal, but if all went well the next time he and his team left New Tikal they would never return. He knew they might occasionally have to send someone back to get supplies, but as time went on even that would become increasingly rare. He wanted the ruin to become self-sufficient as soon as possible – and to start accepting citizens. There were a great many people who were eager for change, and he wanted to capitalize on that while interest was still high.

That evening he made his way through the city center and down to the mayor's private residence, arriving just before seven

o'clock. When he arrived there he saw that he was not alone. Someone else was already at the front door, waiting for him.

"Good evening, Amy," Noel said. "You know, you don't have to do this. I'm sure everything will be fine. Besides, inviting yourself along to someone else's dinner party is bad manners."

The girl shrugged. "Given the circumstances I think I can live with that. There are worse things in life than being rude. Besides, I'm not Amy."

Noel rolled his eyes. "Of course not. You must be her identical twin. Anyway, let's get this over with. The sooner we can have dinner, the sooner you can apologize for misjudging Mayor Thornton."

Noel stepped up to the door and rang the doorbell. A moment later the butler opened it. The smartly-dressed man glanced at him with a look of cold disdain. "Noel Lawson, I presume?"

"Yes," Noel said, hesitatingly. "And guest."

"Very good," the butler replied, in a tone that made it quite clear he was not happy to see either of them. "The mayor is expecting you. Right this way."

The butler led them through the foyer, up a flight of marble stairs, down a golden hallway, and into the west wing of the sprawling mansion. Noel was astonished at the opulence that surrounded him. The house was huge – it was easily the biggest residence he had ever seen. All of the furniture was ornate and upscale, and priceless works of art hung on the wall. Gold was everywhere. Noel could not tell if the dining set he saw sitting on a table in one of the side-rooms was simply gold plated or was actually made of solid gold.

"Wait a minute," Noel said aloud. "Was that the dining room?"

The butler stopped. "That was the Crawford Dining Room, sir, named after the late Martin Crawford. It is one of six dining rooms in this estate. Is there a problem, sir?"

"Well, why aren't we going there? I mean, I was invited over here for dinner. I'm actually getting kind of hungry."

"The mayor and his friends have already eaten. They had roast duck, I believe. I am afraid you have arrived too late to eat with them."

"But—" Noel said, startled.

"Told you," the girl replied.

The butler frowned. "If you please, sir, the mayor is in his study. That is where we are going. I would appreciate it if you did not interrupt me again."

He then led them to the end of the hallway, where there was a large set of double doors. He opened one of the doors and stepped aside. Through the doorway Noel could see a large, beautiful room, filled with paintings, bookshelves, and elegant chairs. He also saw five people seated in antique wooden chairs – the first wooden chairs Noel had ever seen. They appeared to be deep in conversation, but stopped talking the moment the door opened.

"You may enter the room now," the butler said. "The mayor is waiting for you. Do not test his patience."

After the two of them had stepped through the doorway, the butler closed the door behind them. They could hear his footsteps as he walked off.

"Wow," Noel exclaimed, as he looked around. "That is—"

"Yes, yes, you're impressed," the mayor said. "Look, Noel, we need to talk. Have a seat. Your friend will have to stand – we only have six chairs. I don't remember telling you to invite your friends."

"Sorry about that," Noel mumbled. As he looked around he saw that all of the chairs in the room had been arranged in a circle. Five of the chairs were occupied. The sixth chair was empty. Noel noticed with some alarm that it was the one furthest from the door.

"I'll just stand behind you," the girl whispered. "Don't worry

about it.”

Noel nodded and sat down in the empty chair. “I’m afraid I don’t know everyone here,” Noel said apologetically. “I know the mayor, of course, and I know Mr. Glover. But if I might ask—”

“Oh, all right,” the mayor said, exasperated. “The man to my left is Kevin Cole, and beside him is Scott, who you met yesterday. The two people to my right are Robert Finch and Carl Perkins. They’re all members of my cabinet.”

“Thank you,” Noel replied. “And the person that I’ve brought with me is—”

“Your assistant, or something,” the mayor interrupted. “I saw her in the news when you were rebuilding that power plant of yours. It doesn’t matter. The point is that we need to talk. These expeditions of yours are getting out of hand. We don’t like what you’ve been doing.”

“You’ve been treading in some dangerous waters,” Robert agreed. “We were very supportive when we thought you had New Tikal’s best interests at heart. But now we hear that you’re planning on establishing a permanent residence in that ruin. That is a bad mistake.”

“It’s treason,” Scott said. “And we don’t take treason lightly.”

“I don’t understand,” Noel said, surprised. “I thought you invited me over here to have dinner.”

“We’ve already eaten, actually,” the mayor replied. “We had an amazing meal about two hours ago. But if I were you I wouldn’t be thinking about food. You need to be focusing on your future – and on whether or not you have one.”

“You’re stepping on a lot of toes,” Robert warned. “That’s not a very smart thing to do.”

“Now wait just a minute,” Noel said hurriedly. “I don’t understand what you’re so upset about. The ruin that we’ve discovered on the surface is amazing – absolutely amazing. The size of the city is unbelievable, and it will take years to fully explore it. Building a base camp there so we can operate more

efficiently just makes sense.”

“It doesn't make sense at all!” the mayor said angrily. “It's dangerous and irresponsible. Do you know how many people want to leave and move to the surface? If you go and build that infernal base camp of yours, people are going to abandon New Tikal in droves. What you're doing is nothing less than an attack on New Tikal. And I am not going to stand here while you try to take this away from us.”

“But I'm not trying to make anyone do anything,” Noel protested. “No one has to leave. It's all strictly voluntary.”

Scott stood up and removed his revolver from its holster on his hip. “I told you it would be a waste of time to reason with him,” he told the mayor. “Let's just kill him and get this over with. I've got other things I need to do this evening.”

“And don't forget to kill the girl too,” Robert commented. “We don't want there to be any witnesses.”

“What?” Noel shrieked. “You want to kill me? But why?”

“This conversation is over,” Scott said.

He aimed the gun at Noel, but the girl quickly got in front of the engineer. “You are *not* going to kill him,” she growled.

Scott shrugged. “I don't mind shooting you first. That works too. I'm easy to please.”

“But this is insane!” Noel said, his eyes fixed on the gun. “You're supposed to uphold the law. How is this legal?”

“I've just made a new law,” the mayor said. “Building cities on the surface is now punishable by death. Looks like you're guilty to me. Scott, you know what to do.”

The girl standing in front of Noel looked Scott in the eye. “Don't even *think* about pulling the trigger. If you do you will not harm either of us – but all five of you will die. *Do not cross that line.*”

“Whatever,” Scott replied carelessly. “Have a good afterlife, kid.” He then aimed the gun at her and pulled the trigger. A shot rang out – but nothing happened. Scott then fired again, and

again, and again, until the gun was empty. The girl still stood there, staring at him.

"What the—" he said. "Did someone put blanks in here or something? Is this a joke?"

"Oh no," the girl replied. "Those bullets were real. But Scott, you can't kill someone who is already dead. After all, 'It is appointed unto men once to die and then the judgment.' I've already died, so I can't die again. Sorry."

"What?" Noel exclaimed. "When did you die?"

"Last November. Carroll Lane killed me just before he killed the rest of my family. Didn't my sister Amy tell you?"

"I thought you *were* Amy," Noel said. "If you're not Amy then who are you?"

"I'm her twin sister Amanda," the girl explained. "Amy is trapped on Xanthe right now and couldn't be here, so I was sent to take her place."

"A lunatic is what you are," Scott growled. He turned around, walked over to the wall behind him, and grabbed a giant golden sword off the wall. "This ought to do the trick."

He took a step toward the girl – and then the sword turned to dust in his hand. The dust slipped through his fingers and fell to the floor. At that same moment the lights in the room went out. The only visible light emanated from Amanda, who glowed red.

"Enough!" she said. "The five of you are corrupt criminals who have spent your lives stealing from your subjects so you can have extravagant wealth. Your riches cry out against you – but that is not why I am here. I did not come back from the dead in order to judge you for your ill-gotten wealth. No, I am here because you tried to take away the future of Mars. You would kill an innocent man and condemn generations of people to a miserable life below the surface simply so you can continue to steal from them. I am not going to let you kill Noel."

"And who made you queen over us?" the mayor shouted angrily. "I don't recall you getting elected to political office."

Amanda looked at the mayor. Her eyes were piercing and cold. "Baxter Thornton, your administration has been weighted in the balances and found wanting. God has removed you from power. You will never again command authority over anyone. Moreover, at this very moment the souls of each of you are required. Your lives have all come to an end."

The mayor shrieked. "But that's impossible! I don't feel dead."

"But you are," Amanda said grimly. "All of you are dead. Now you will all face judgment."

At that moment Noel suddenly vanished. The engineer found himself alone in his apartment. The lights were on and he was sitting on his couch.

Noel blinked. "Wait – what? How did I get here?"

He got up and walked over to the door. He glanced outside but saw nothing unusual. *What just happened? Was all of that real or did I just doze off on the couch?*

Determined to get some answers, Noel left his home and walked over to the mayor's residence. When he got there, however, he saw that there was a large crowd of people outside. The police had created a barrier in front of the home to keep the onlookers out, and a medical team was just leaving the mansion.

Noel turned to the person closest to him. "What's going on?"

"You haven't heard?" the man said. "There was a gas leak in the mayor's private study. The mayor and the entire council were poisoned! It's such a shame. The medics say that the pipes in his home were poorly maintained and prone to leaks, and that's what did it. I guess something like this was inevitable."

"Poisoned?" Noel asked. "Are they going to be all right?"

"I heard they died instantly," the man confided. "My brother's one of the medics, you know. But no, they're not going to be all right. I'm afraid that they're all gone. They won't be coming back."

* * * * *

Over the next week Noel tried to find more answers but he came up with nothing. There was no sign of Amy or Amanda. The corner's report confirmed that the men had been poisoned by the gas leak, and the case was closed. Everyone agreed it had been a simple, unfortunate accident – but Noel never really believed it. *There was more going on there that night*, he thought to himself. *That was judgment, not an accident*. But he never told anyone his suspicions.

Since the mayor and the city council had died, the elections were held early. A new administration was elected – one that was in favor of creating a new city on the surface. The new mayor made it clear that the future of mankind was not underground, but on the surface. He fully backed Noel and made sure that he had all the resources he needed to create a permanent, self-sustaining base in the ruined city. By the end of the summer he had achieved that milestone. In fact, the city was even opening its doors to limited numbers of new citizens.

But Noel still wondered. *Amanda said that her sister was trapped and could not be here. That sounds kind of ominous. What happened to Amy? How could she possibly be trapped in a star system that is light-years away?*

CHAPTER 36

“As a scribe I prefer writing with pen and paper instead of creating words inside a machine. I am told that machines are fast and trustworthy, but I do not believe it. The machines that were created before the Spanish Emperor destroyed the Earth are now useless, and any words that were stored in them are long gone. However, some of the books from that period have survived and are still legible. Books and paper can far outlast even the best machine. They can hold knowledge even after the sky has been burned and the world is dead.”

—Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

June 16, 7243

AMY STRYKER AND THE SENTINEL materialized on the small hill that overlooked Star City. Amy was exhausted from a long day's work and did not want to be anywhere near Xanthe. She had only agreed to come at the Sentinel's insistence, and she was not happy about it.

“So just what was so—” she started to say, and then she stopped. Star City, the metropolis that her sister had built and the Sentinel had restored, was gone. In its place were more than a dozen craters. Smoke was rising out of them into the sky, and the forest around the city had been flattened. Every single last building – including the Tower of the Sparrow – was gone.

It took Amy's nanites less than a second to figure out what had happened. The entire area was bathed in hard radiation and

the most intensely radioactive areas were the center of the craters. Amy also noticed that the craters themselves were not made of dirt. The heat from the bombs had been so intense that it had fused the soil into glass. *Oh my goodness*, Amy thought with alarm. *Someone has used nuclear weapons to destroy the city! But that doesn't make any sense. In fact, that's insane! Why would they blow themselves up?*

Speechless, Amy started to use the nanites' record of the past to find out what had happened when she was suddenly cut off from Xanthe's network. At that same instant the area around her disappeared from view. A white wall appeared around the hill, cutting off her view of the area. Even the sky vanished.

Amy stared at the glowing white wall, puzzled. "Where did that come from? Steve, did you do that?"

The Sentinel did not answer her. Instead he quickly grabbed her arm and let out a burst of intense energy. The hill instantly disappeared, along with everything else. Amy found herself standing in the darkness, unable to see anything. The world was gone.

"You're scaring me," Amy said. "What do you think you're doing? Why can't I see anything?"

"I'm afraid we have a rather serious problem," the Sentinel replied. "I apologize for not giving you an advance warning but I had to act quickly to save as much time as possible. It appears that I severely underestimated the resourcefulness of the citizens of this planet. I did not expect this to happen."

"Underestimated who? The people on Xanthe? What have they done?"

"They have trapped us," the Sentinel said. "They've erected a prison around the hill."

"Is that what that white field was?"

The Sentinel nodded. "What you were seeing was the side-effect of time distortion. When we materialized on the hill we set off some kind of trigger that activated a temporal field. Time

travels much more slowly within the field than it does outside it. I was unable to determine the exact rate of flow, but it is very possible that a few seconds inside this field could translate into a year or more outside the field. As long as we are trapped in here we are essentially being moved into the future."

"You've got to be kidding me," Amy said sourly. "Haven't we done this time-travel thing before? I am absolutely *sick* of being transported through time."

"In a way we are very fortunate," the Sentinel replied. "If they had created a time stasis field instead we would have been trapped until the field collapsed or time itself ended. The fact that time is actually passing for us means that we have a chance to do something and escape. This could have been very much worse."

"I guess. But what's the point of all this? I had already left Xanthe and had no plans to ever return. Why would they do this to us? What did they have to gain?"

The Sentinel thought for a moment. "At this point I can only guess. Once we escape this field we can tap into the planetary network and find out exactly what happened. I suspect, however, that the people of Xanthe did not trust you and wanted to guarantee that you would no longer be interfering in their affairs. I seem to recall that Ms. Hamilton was especially angry with you."

"But that's ridiculous! None of those people had the knowledge to create time stasis fields – or nuclear weapons, for that matter. In fact, I bet they didn't even know how to make a toaster. How could they possibly be behind this?"

"There is the Steward that we left behind," the Sentinel pointed out. "I placed many restrictions on his ability to create weapons, but I did not limit their access to physics or temporal mechanics. If Ms. Hamilton asked him how to slow down time he would have told her, and perhaps even offered to create some schematics."

"Well that's the last time we're ever doing that," Amy said firmly. "When the Stewards start taking care of refugees from Earth they will be positively forbidden from offering *any* scientific or engineering advice. If those natives want to build a time machine they'll have to figure it out on their own."

"I agree that is a sensible precaution, and I will keep that in mind when we get to that point. However, as I was saying, Ms. Hamilton – or perhaps one of her peers – must have decided that they wanted to eliminate us. Rather than attacking us directly the way Carroll Lane did, they decided to take a more indirect approach. After all, if this worked then the effect would be irreversible. Once we were transported into the distant future we would be unable to go back."

"I guess that makes sense. But why did they bomb their own city? Was that just to lure us here? If so, it sounds like a really dumb move."

"That I do not know. It may have been part of an internal power struggle. It's very possible that after we left Xanthe the city divided itself into factions, and one group decided to eliminate the other. They would have realized that any hostile action would immediately draw us back to the planet, so perhaps they created the trap to keep us from punishing the criminals responsible for the bombing."

"But how were they able to create bombs?" Amy asked. "Wouldn't the security bots have stopped them?"

"Maybe they didn't make bombs," the Sentinel replied. "Perhaps they created actual working power generators, then simply altered the settings so that they would explode catastrophically. In that case the bots would have done nothing. They were not built to scan for possible accidents and take proactive counter-measures."

"So they found a loophole. Boy, isn't that great. I can see that we're going to have to make a lot of changes to the next generation of security bots. But why did you bring us here? I

don't really like standing here in the dark."

"I brought us here in order to keep us from going too far into the future," the Sentinel explained. "The moment I realized what had happened I created a temporal field of our own. Within this place time is going at a different rate. A second outside the field, in *their* trap, corresponds to more than an hour in this darkness. I realize this place is not very pleasant, but it will give us more time to figure out how to escape their barrier. I am trying very hard to keep us from being transported into the distant future."

"Just how far into the future do you think we've gone?"

"I do not know. In order to tell I would have to break down the barrier first. As long as we are inside it there is simply no way to tell."

"All right," Amy said slowly. "So what do we do now?"

"I'm not sure," the Sentinel replied. "Let me think."

CHAPTER 37

“Some say it is difficult to keep a secret, and that may be true. However, it much harder to preserve knowledge than it is to hide it. Time destroys information relentlessly, despite our best efforts to hold on to it. What is common knowledge to one generation is completely unknown a century later. No matter how hard you might try, information simply slips away like sand through one's fingers. It is only when you go to look for something that you realize what you have lost.”

—Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

June 16, 7243

THE SENTINEL SPENT HOURS STARING INTO NOTHINGNESS, thinking. Amy knew that he was running theoretical simulations in his mind so she remained quiet. She just silently floated in space and waited. After a while she got fed up with the darkness and asked the Sentinel to create some light so she could at least see something. The Sentinel obliged her and then went back to work.

“My father spent centuries trying to find a way to go backwards in time,” he said at last. “During that extended research project he accumulated a great deal of temporal data, and I have all of it in my mind. This gives us a tremendous advantage, but unfortunately it is not enough. Finding a way to use this data to unlock the barrier is proving to be extremely difficult. On the one hand, we have both created temporal fields before. That is relatively easy to do. What is *not* easy is to find a

way to break the field while you are inside it. All of my father's research indicates that the field must be terminated from the outside."

"Just like the Wall," Amy said thoughtfully. "But Miles found a way to escape."

"He did?" the Sentinel asked, surprised. "How did he do it?"

"I'm not sure, exactly. He didn't go into detail. All I know is that he used the power of Iapetus to match the power output of the four power stations. Then he opened a tiny hole in the Wall and slipped through."

"So he didn't actually collapse the Wall," the Sentinel said. "He just created a flaw in it and slipped out that way. Interesting. Perhaps I have been looking at this problem the wrong way."

"Maybe. But either way, I'll just stay out of your way and let you do the math."

The Sentinel looked at her curiously. "You don't seem to be very upset over all of this. I thought that being forced even further into the future would cause you a great deal of angst."

Amy shrugged. "I don't have anything left to lose, Steve. My home on Mars crumbled into dust a long time ago, and my entire family is dead. It's not like they could die twice or something. If we get out of this and find out that we're in the 93rd century, well, I really don't see how it makes any difference. I've already done everything I can do on Mars."

"But you haven't finished your work on Earth yet," the Sentinel pointed out. "There are still people there who need your help."

Amy sighed. "That's true."

"And there is also your dog Alex. He is still alive."

"That's true too. Poor thing! I've really neglected him since everything happened. Have you had a chance to see him lately?"

"I did check on him the last time I was on Tonina. It turns out that he has placed himself in hypersleep, awaiting your return. Time will not pass for him until you come back and wake him

up.”

“Well, that's good, I guess,” Amy said. “At least he's not lonely right now. I don't know, maybe all of this does matter. I'm just so tired.”

“Then get some sleep,” the Sentinel said. “I'll take care of this.”

* * * * *

Amy woke up hours later. The sun was shining overhead but the sky was overcast and gray. She sat up and rubbed her eyes. “How long have I been asleep?” she asked.

“About nine hours,” the Sentinel said.

The girl yawned and stood up. She breathed a sigh of relief when she saw that the craters were still there. “That's a good sign,” she remarked. “I was afraid that the craters would be long gone and another ten thousand years would have passed.”

“We were blessed,” the Sentinel agreed. “It could have been much worse. As it turned out, we were only transported a little more than three years into the future. It is June 17, 7243.”

“Three years? Do you mean that I've been transported three *more* years into the future?” She sighed. “Well, I guess you're right – it could have been worse. Thank you so much for freeing us. If it hadn't been for you I would never have gotten out of there.”

The Sentinel nodded and said nothing. He simply looked into the distance.

Amy noticed the pensive look on his face. “What's wrong?”

“I found out what happened,” he said quietly.

“So you know who trapped us?”

He nodded. “I do.”

“Don't tell me – I'm going to have to have another talk with them, aren't I? I really thought I was done with this place.”

“You are done with this place. There is nothing more here

that any of us can do. All of the people who once inhabited this planet are dead.”

“All of them?” Amy asked, surprised. “Really? But – that doesn't make sense! We've only been gone for three years. What happened? Were they all killed when the city was blown up?”

The Sentinel was quiet for a moment. “After we judged Xanthe and left, Ms. Hamilton decided that she wanted to be the supreme ruler of this planet. She missed her position as god of her own universe, and she was determined to regain as much power as she could. So, using a combination of threats and promises, she gathered a small group of followers and established a base camp in the old communications building that was located well outside the city limits. She then decided that the only way she could have the planet entirely to herself was to kill everyone else.”

“But the bots would stop them,” Amy said.

The Sentinel nodded. “Yes, they would, and Ms. Hamilton knew that. So she decided to take a different approach. She talked with the Steward and persuaded him to create the schematics for a powerful, miniaturized nuclear reactor. Her followers then used the Tower's fabricators to create a dozen nuclear generators, which were placed at strategic points throughout the city. The bots did not interfere with this because the generators were neither weapons nor bombs.”

“Which is exactly what you thought,” Amy added.

“Now, Ms. Hamilton was smart. She knew that the moment they destroyed the city the two of us would return and do something about it. She also knew that whenever we came here we always materialized on top of this hill. So she talked with the Steward and learned how to create a time stasis field.”

“Which is pretty much exactly what you thought had happened,” Amy replied. “So they set up their trap on the hill, programmed the reactors to explode, and waited for us to fall into their trap. We then walked right into it.”

The Sentinel nodded. "Yes we did. But there was one detail that Ms. Hamilton overlooked. Apparently she did not ask the Steward about how nuclear power actually worked, for she took no precautions to shield herself or her followers from the radioactive fallout. When the reactors exploded they gave every last one of the plotters a lethal dose of radiation. All of them, including Ms. Hamilton, died within a week."

Amy was silent for a long while. "So they're all dead," she said.

The Sentinel nodded. "No one is left."

"What of the prisoners?"

"They are all dead as well. Ironically, the killers you exiled actually outlived the people who were left here. By sending them off to their own worlds you actually saved their lives."

"Hold on a minute," Amy said. "What about Miles? Weren't you supposed to transport him to the prison planets if one of the prisoners had a question? Since we were trapped—"

"Oh, I automated that process," the Sentinel replied. "I wanted to make sure that he could have access to them even if you and I were preoccupied with something else."

"That was smart. Did it work?"

The Sentinel hesitated. "Miles made sixteen trips," he said quietly.

"But there were more than a thousand prisoners!"

"I know."

Amy paused for a moment. "Well, that's something, I guess. I didn't think any of them would care. What about Adrian?"

"He was not visited," the Sentinel replied.

"Did any of them find a way to escape?"

The Sentinel shook his head. "All of them are now in graves on their respective worlds. The Stewards buried them after they died. Would you like to have them moved here?"

"No," Amy said. "Just leave them."

"So what would you like to do now?" the Sentinel asked.

“This world is now deserted and its last city is gone. What are your orders?”

“Let's just leave it how it is. We gave this world to its people and this is what they did with it. Fixing it again is just pointless – there's no one left who cares. I'm ready to go.”

“Where to?”

“I'd like to visit Mars one last time. Noel has now had three years to restore the ruin that we gave him. I want to see if he's made any progress – or if that also ended up being a big waste of time. And it would be kind of nice to say goodbye to Miles before I leave.”

“Leave?” the Sentinel asked. “Where do you plan on going?”

“To Earth,” she replied.

CHAPTER 38

"The first neutron bomb has been completed. Much to Evan's dismay, Conrad Forbes is forcing him to test it before he is allowed to build any more. The council refuses to allocate any more resources to this expensive project until he can prove that his design works. Moreover, they are demanding that Even test it far away from the colony, in case the bomb is more potent than he thinks. He has reluctantly agreed to these terms and promises to test it tomorrow. May God have mercy on our souls."

—Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of Light

June 17, 7243

"I, FOR ONE, AM IMPRESSED," Amy remarked.

"Noel has indeed done well," the Sentinel replied.

Amy and the Sentinel had materialized several hundred miles away from the restored city of Tikal. Rather than appear within the ruin and draw attention to themselves, they decided to use the planetary network of nanites to view the city remotely. What they saw was quite remarkable: the buried ruin was no longer buried. In what must have been a tremendous effort, the entire ruin was now aboveground and all of the dirt that had once hid it was gone. On top of that, basic services had been restored to nearly the entire city. The repaired skyscrapers were now home to more than a hundred thousand permanent residents. Tikal showed all the signs of rapid growth, and extensive restoration

work was still being done throughout the city. The town appeared to be bracing itself for another massive influx of visitors. Meanwhile, its sidewalks were full of people, its streets were full of cars, and its office buildings were full of workers. The city was a thriving, bustling place.

"They're certainly ahead of schedule," Amy said. "I thought it would take them a lot longer to get this far! Maybe Miles and I made the challenges too easy."

"Or maybe these Martians are simply highly motivated. Keep in mind that there are still nearly two million people living in the underground city. Even at this rate of growth, it will take at least another decade or two before this city overtakes the old one in population."

"If it ever does," Amy replied. "It's possible that people will always live in both cities."

"It is possible, but it does not seem likely," the Sentinel said. "There is a great deal of maintenance work that has to be done in order to keep the underground city operational, and all of the best and brightest workers have relocated to the surface. The old city will find it difficult to keep things in good repair, and once its critical systems fail the city will be evacuated – whether the surface is ready to accept them or not."

Amy nodded. "You have a good point. Speaking of workers, I see Noel but I don't see Miles anywhere. It looks like he hasn't joined them."

"He is still living in his underground bunker," the Sentinel replied. "From what I can tell he is in good health but he is quite old, and that is beginning to take its toll. Perhaps he decided that the ruin was a young man's challenge, and decided to stay in his bunker and enjoy the comforts of home."

"You could be right," Amy agreed.

"Is there anything else that you would like to see?" the Sentinel asked.

"Kind of. You can go on back to Tonina, if you want. I'll catch

up with you a bit later.”

“Very well,” the Sentinel agreed. He then disappeared, leaving Amy alone. After he was gone Amy took a good look around. “Well, I guess this is as good a place as any. This should have been done a long time ago. It’s time to build a monument.”

Amy closed her eyes and connected to the network of nanites that saturated Mars. Once she had made the connection she mentally retrieved a set of blueprints that she had created earlier. After taking one last look at them to make sure that it was exactly right, she uploaded it to the nanites. When they had finished building it, she opened her eyes and looked around.

A few moments ago the girl had been standing in the middle of a rolling prairie. Now she was standing in the middle of a small, well-kept graveyard. Throwing caution to the wind, Amy had decorated the place with trees – giant, old-growth trees.

That looks pretty good, she decided. My family may have no physical remains, but this place can still serve as a memorial to them. They deserve more than to be scattered into the void of space and forgotten. Amy then began creating gravestones, one at a time.

It took her about six hours before she created the last one. After the last one had been set in place she sat down on a bench and looked out at the horizon. By now it was late afternoon. In a few hours the sun would set and the stars would come out. When that moment came she would leave.

About forty-five minutes later, though, she had a visitor. She heard the noise of the *Raptor* long before she saw it. The rumble of its motor gradually grew louder and louder, until it suddenly cut off. A few minutes later Miles entered the graveyard and ambled down the sidewalk. As he walked by the old man glanced at her and nodded. Then he continued on past her and began reading all the tombstones she had created. When he had finally seen them all he came over to her. “Let’s walk,” he said.

Amy looked up at him. “How did you know I was here?”

"Oh, it was easy enough. My orbital satellites started beeping at me and told me that a graveyard had appeared out of nowhere. I decided to come over and investigate."

"Your orbital satellites!" Amy exclaimed. "You have orbital satellites?"

"Yes, I do. In fact, I've had them for centuries. Don't look so surprised! After all, I've been able to leave Mars and travel in space for more than a thousand years now. Didn't I tell you that?"

"Well, sure, but I didn't know you had put satellites in orbit. I can't believe I never noticed."

"Did you ever look for them?"

"Well, no, I didn't," Amy admitted. "But why do you have satellites?"

"To keep an eye on things. For a long time I used them to monitor the decay rate of the Martian atmosphere. Now I mainly use them for mapping purposes. Your graveyard was pretty easy to spot, by the way. There aren't any other trees that large on the entire planet."

"There will be, about two hundred years from now," Amy said. "It will be beautiful."

"I don't doubt it! So, will you go on a walk with me?"

"Where to?"

"Oh, just around. Tell me about these people."

"They're my friends and family," Amy explained. "Most of them died when the Emperor attacked Tikal. You wouldn't know them."

"I know, but I *want* to know them. After all, if they knew the Lord then I'll meet them one day. In fact, I may meet them rather soon – I'm not getting any younger. Can you tell me their stories?"

Amy stood up and took the old man's hand, and the two then began walking around the graveyard. Amy led Miles to every gravestone, and the old man listened as she talked about each

friend and relative, relating various stories about their life. The sun slowly sank toward the horizon, but the two figures ignored it.

When the sun had almost set they reached the last tombstone. Amy was surprised to see that there was someone else already there. A middle-aged man was kneeling in front of the stone, studying it closely. "Noel?" she asked curiously. "Is that you? What are you doing here?"

"Amanda Stryker," he said aloud, reading the humble stone monument in front of him. "July 23, 1853 – November 27, 7239." He stood up and looked at Amy. "Your sister was quite a woman, you know. Feisty, strong, and confident. You really didn't want to get on her bad side."

Amy smiled. "That was Amanda all right. But she was kind too, and thoughtful. She had a lot of heart."

"That she did," Noel said. "I'm glad I had a chance to meet her."

Amy looked at him, surprised. "What? When did you meet my sister?"

Noel took a deep breath and relayed everything that he had seen the night the mayor died. When he was finished Amy looked at him in shock. "I can't believe my sister was here on Mars! And to think that I missed it. I guess I really should thank her, though. If she hadn't been here to save you then the past three years would have been very different. When your life was being threatened I was in no position to help you."

Noel spoke up. "I've been wanting to ask you about that for years! What happened to you?"

"I was actually trapped in a temporal anomaly," Amy explained. "The people on Xanthe had created a time trap to force Steve and I into the distant future. Fortunately, Steve was able to free us before we time-shifted too far. If it hadn't been for him we'd still be there."

"Oh," Noel said. "Well, I guess that would explain it."

"You mean you believe me?" Amy asked, surprised. "Seriously? That's not like you! Where are the snide remarks and sarcastic quips? Where are all the comments about me not having all my mental faculties? Have you gone soft on me?"

Noel winced. "I will admit that for a long time I thought you were crazy. After meeting your sister, though, I realized that perhaps Miles was right after all. It really did seem kind of unlikely that the planet would magically terraform itself right after you showed up. Plus there was the tiny fact that the stars returned at the same moment you did. What finally convinced me was when I saw this graveyard suddenly spring into existence. There is no way that trees that large could suddenly appear on a moment's notice. They had to come from somewhere."

"So you noticed the graveyard too," Amy said, sighing. "Apparently you also have access to the telemetry data from Miles' satellites. I'm going to have to be a lot more careful."

"What?" Noel asked, startled. "Miles has satellites? Do you mean *space* satellites? Miles can actually launch rockets into space? I can't believe it! Why didn't you tell me?"

"Whoops!" Amy exclaimed. "I thought you knew."

"We'll talk about that later," Miles told Noel.

"Um, ok," Noel replied. "So, Amy. I don't mean to pry or anything, but why did you build this place?"

"Well, no one else was going to. In fact, no one else even remembers these people! But I do, and I miss them."

"Ok," Noel said. "Is this connected to some ancient ritual or something? Because I'm not sure—"

Miles interrupted him. "Tell me something, Noel. What are graveyard for?"

"Well, they're the final resting places of the dead. They're where we go to say goodbye. Honestly, it seems kind of morbid and depressing to me."

The old man shook his head. "That's actually not the case. Amy did not come here to say goodbye; she came here to say 'I'll

see you later'. For those who believe in Jesus, death is not the end. One day the graves will open, the dead will be raised, and these very people will go on to live forever. What Amy has done is built a monument – not to their death, but to their resurrection. She is looking forward to the moment when the mortal will be swallowed up by immortality, and the corruptible will put on incorruption.”

“But their bodies are gone! There's nothing left. Their very atoms have been blasted into energy.”

Miles smiled. “I think the Lord will be able to handle that.”

By now the sun had set and the stars were shining. The night sky was cloudless and beautiful – full of brilliant points of light that lit up the darkness.

“Are you ready to go?” Miles asked.

“Almost,” Amy said quickly. “There's just one more thing that I need to do.” The girl made a quick motion with her hand and her sister's tombstone changed. Below the dates a group of letters appeared.

Miles read them aloud. “‘GONE TO BE WITH THE LORD – WILL BE BACK SOON.’ I like it.”

“I think I understand,” Noel said.

The girl looked around. “I think that's everything, Miles! I'm ready to go.”

The old man nodded. “Do you have the time to stop at my place for a few minutes?”

“I think I can work that into my schedule. What about you, Noel?”

“Oh, I'll make the time,” he said. “I've been working too hard lately anyway – I could use an evening off.”

Amy smiled. “Very well! Then let's go.”

With that, the three of them vanished.

EPILOGUE

“And he said unto me, Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for the time is at hand. He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still. And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last. Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city.”

--Jesus Christ

King of Kings and Lord of Lords

1st century A.D.

AMY STRYKER SUDDENLY FOUND HERSELF standing in a beautiful garden. A dense morning mist covered the ground, hiding the soft grass from view. She could see mountains on the horizon, and in the distance there was a single river that branched into four different streams. Everywhere she looked she saw magnificence and splendor. The plants, the trees, the flowers – everything was perfect. The air itself seemed to whisper thoughts of peace and tranquility.

“Where am I?” she said aloud. “This certainly doesn't look like Mars!”

“That's because it isn't,” a familiar voice called out.

Amy turned around and saw her sister standing a few feet away, on the banks of a river.

"Amanda?" Amy asked curiously. "Is that really you? But – hold on – wait just a minute! This has to be a dream. There is no way this can be real."

"Yes and no," Amanda replied. "First of all, this actually is a real planet that is within the Milky Way galaxy. The Artillect used to come here quite often, back when he was trying to find a way to go back in time to rescue us. In fact, this garden was one of his favorite places and is a very special refuge. But you are correct. You are not actually standing here. In reality you are still on Tonina, and our dog Alex is curled up next to you at the foot of the bed. This is not a mere dream, though; it is a vision. The things you are seeing and hearing are very real. It's just that you're not physically here right now."

"But what about you?" Amy asked. "Are you real, or am I just imagining you? I mean, after all, you're dead. How can you possibly be here?"

"Death is not the end, you know," Amanda said. "Jesus has taken away death's victory. We've simply moved on to a better country."

"Yes, I know that. But people don't usually come back from the dead and hang out."

"They do sometimes. After all, the prophet Samuel came back from the dead to condemn King Saul. Also, Moses and Elijah came back from the dead to appear on the mountain where Jesus was transfigured. So it has happened before."

"I guess," Amy said. "Oh, Atzi, I miss you – and I miss Mom, and Dad, and Tim. I miss all of you so very much, and would give anything to spend time with you again. I hate being here alone."

"I know," Amanda replied softly. "We all know. But what you're doing right now is very important. You're almost done, Tiger. You've come very far and you don't have much further to go. All you have to do now is finish what you've started on Earth."

Then you can come home.”

“Is that why we're here?” Amy asked.

Amanda nodded. “As I said, this planet is a real place and orbits a real star. It is a special sanctuary, reserved for those who need it. The only people who may come here are the administrators, the Artilect, and the Sentinel. The nanites know where it is; when the time has come you can ask them and they will bring you here.”

“And then what?” Amy asked.

Amanda pointed into the distance. “Through those trees and across that river is a Door. This door is a very special one. When your work is done, you can come here and it will open for you. It will then bring you to the country that lies beyond the farthest star. It is your way home.”

“A door?” Amy asked. “Why a door?”

“Because you cannot die,” Amanda explained. “The nanites can keep you alive forever, but it is not a good thing for you to stay in the shadowlands for that long. Once your work is done the Door will unlock and you will be called home.”

“Then what?” she asked.

Amanda smiled. “Then you will rest, until the Lord creates a new heavens and a new earth. You're almost there, Tiger. Just hold out a little bit longer.”

The vision then disappeared, and Amy drifted back into a dreamless sleep.

(The story will be concluded in the next volume,
At the End of Eternity.)

AFTERWORD

This book was designed to challenge people's preconceptions about Heaven. What I'd like to do here is take a few moments to explain where my ideas came from. I'm really not as crazy as I seem.

Is Heaven really a city?

"IN THE COUNTRY that lies beyond the farthest star there is a giant, golden city. Nothing that is abominable, or evil, or false can ever enter into that celestial paradise. It is home not only to the righteous, but also to the Holy One. Its glory outshines the sun, and it is an eternal city that will never fade away."

(Beyond the Farthest Star, prologue)

When most people think about Heaven they picture either a long and boring church service or a bunch of white clouds floating in the sky. I think both of these pictures are unbiblical. Believe it or not, the Bible consistently tells us that our eternal home is actually a city that has been built for us by God Himself. For example, take a look at this:

Hebrews 11:16: "But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city."

Notice that this verse does *not* say “God has prepared for them a cloud and a harp”! Nope. The verse is quite clear: God has prepared for us *a city*. In Revelation the apostle John is given a glimpse of this amazing place:

Revelation 21:10: “And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that **great city, the holy Jerusalem**, descending out of heaven from God,”

If you're interested in an eyewitness account of this amazing place you can simply go read the rest of Revelation 21. The details of this heavenly metropolis are quite astonishing.

Now, to be fair, theologians don't know if this city of God is currently inhabited or not. For reasons too complex to get into right now, it's possible that the city is currently under construction and will not be unveiled until after Judgment Day. In *Beyond the Farthest Star* I depict it as being inhabited right now, but I don't really know. What I *do* know is that our ultimate destiny is not to float on a cloud, but to live in a city.

Do people in Heaven know what's happening on Earth?

At the very beginning of the book Amanda Stryker is in Heaven. Yet, despite this, she knows what is going on back in the Milky Way galaxy:

“Amanda Stryker was standing in that room, leaning over catwalk's railing and staring at the scene that was unfolding below. The image was crystal-clear. She could see her sister standing in a room that was filled with communications equipment, angrily screaming at a

very old man. Her rage was palpable:"

(*Beyond the Farthest Star*, prologue)

Do people in Heaven really know what is happening back on Earth? I think there are a lot of reasons to believe that they do. Now, I don't know *how much* they are aware of, but they seem to have at least some knowledge of events. For example, Jesus once said this:

Luke 15:7: "I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance."

Here Jesus tells us that when a sinner repents there is joy in Heaven. This brings up an obvious question: how could people in Heaven know that a sinner has repented if they don't know what's going on? Obviously, if events on Earth are causing people in Heaven to rejoice then *they must know about those events*.

Or take a look at this:

Hebrews 12:1: "Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us,"

Here Paul says that we should persevere through the trials of this life because we are surrounded by a great "cloud of witnesses". Now, in the context of a race there are two distinct groups: the people who are running in the race and the spectators who are watching. It's tempting to think that the witnesses Paul mentions are simply other people on Earth, but I

think that's wrong. Why? Because all of us who are still alive *are supposed to be racing*. The only ones who are not in the race are those who have already finished it. The witnesses, then, must be people in Heaven who are watching us as we live our lives. It's a little unsettling to think that we're being watched by millions of dead people, but keep in mind that Paul *did* warn us about this.

As you can see, there is actually quite a bit of support for the idea that Heaven is aware of what God is doing on Earth.

Will we recognize other people in Heaven, and will we remember our lives?

Throughout the book *Beyond the Farthest Star*, people in Heaven remembered their own history and the history of others. On top of that, their relationships with other people continued where they left off; friends on Earth continued to be friends in Heaven. They did not forget who they once were, nor did their friends and family turn into strangers.

Despite what you may have been told, I think this picture is much more Biblical than the idea that when you set foot in Heaven you suddenly forget everything you ever knew. In fact, the Bible actually tells us that this is not the case. We can see this in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, which is found in Luke 16.

One thing to keep in mind when reading Luke 16 is that Jesus is *not* telling a parable. Whenever Jesus told parables He started off by saying "The kingdom of Heaven is like..." This time Jesus does not do that. Instead He matter-of-factly states that there were two people, and then He tells us what happened to them. The text itself gives every indication that Jesus was telling a true story.

First of all, notice that even though the rich man was dead,

he still immediately recognized Lazarus:

Luke 16:23: “And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.”

As you can see, the rich man even recognized Abraham! As if that was not strange enough, Abraham also recognized the rich man and knew everything about his ill-spent life:

Luke 16:25: “But Abraham said, Son, **remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things**: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented.”

We can see from this passage that no one had forgotten anything. People still recognized each other, they still remembered their lives, and they even knew everything about the lives of other people – even people they had never met.

Based on this passage I think it is very reasonable to believe that we will recognize other people in Heaven and remember our lives. After all, these people did!

Are there books in Heaven?

There are several times in the story when characters in Heaven are found reading books. For example, Amanda Stryker was seen reading a book entitled *Starlight*:

“The two men suddenly stopped. A dozen feet or so off the golden path, sitting under an apple tree, was Amanda Stryker. The girl looked quite content, and was

reading a novel entitled *Starlight*. Beside her was a brown wicker basket that contained some fruit, a bottle of juice, and a couple sandwiches. When Max and Jones called out to her Amanda put the book down and looked up. "Hello there!" she called out."

(Beyond the Farthest Star, chapter 17)

This brings up a question: are there really books in Heaven? Well, for starters, the Bible tells us of the existence of several Heavenly books. First of all, there is the Book of Life:

Philippians 4:3: "And I intreat thee also, true yokefellow, help those women which laboured with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and with other my fellowlabourers, whose names are in the book of life."

There is also the Book of Tears:

Psalms 56:8: "Thou tellest my wanderings: put thou my tears into thy bottle: are they not in thy book?"

And there is the Book of Remembrance:

Malachi 3:16: "Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name."

From these passages we can see that there are actually several books in Heaven. Are these the only books? It's possible, but it's not likely. After all, the Lord has promised to give us a city, and a city is full of all sorts of things. Think about it for a minute: what kind of things do cities have? What makes a city a city?

Does it have buildings? Parks? Offices? Streets? Restaurants? Libraries? Houses?

You may be thinking “That’s crazy!” – but stop and think. If Jesus had wanted to He could have said “God has prepared for them a cloud, where they will sit and be bored for all of eternity.” He could also have said “God has prepared a giant sanctuary, where the saints will sit in pews and sing hymns forever.” However, God didn’t say either of those things. Instead He used a word that we’re very familiar with – the word *city*. Is it really so crazy to think that God used the word “city” on purpose, to give us some idea of what was in our future? After all, God *wants* us to know what Heaven is like because He wants our heart to be set on it! How can our heart be set on it if we don’t know anything about it? Isn’t it possible that since God used the word “city”, then maybe Heaven *really is like a city, and has the sort of things a city has?*

Do cities have books? Yes, they do – and they have lots of other things as well. I think it’s time we started thinking outside the box and embraced the idea that there may be more for us to do in Heaven than strum a harp.

Will people study calculus in the heavenly city?

At one point in the story, Amanda Stryker was walking down the streets of Heaven and was surprised to find that Reverend Knight had started studying calculus:

“No, I’m not busy,” the girl said. She sat down beside him and glanced at the book he had been reading. “Is that a *calculus* textbook?” she asked in surprise.

“It is indeed! It’s been such a long time since I’ve

studied mathematics that I wanted to go back to the basics. I actually have a master's degree in math, you know. In fact, I was well on my way toward becoming a mathematician when the Lord called me to preach.”

(*Beyond the Farthest Star*, chapter 6)

There is a reason I included this scene. When people think of Heaven they usually think that nothing exciting or fun ever happens there. During their lifetime on Earth they may have had an exciting career and served as a photographer, or an artist, or a musician, or whatever. However, once you die that's it. It's up to you to have all the fun you can now because there is absolutely *nothing* to do in Heaven. Your whole eternity consists of sitting on a cloud, being bored out of your mind. On top of that, if God called you to be a missionary and you gave up a promising career as a theoretical physicist, well, that career is just over. Sorry.

Even though this rather dour view is quite common, I don't believe it is accurate. In fact, I think it is a gross distortion of what Heaven is really like. The city God has built for us not a boring or dull place where nothing ever happens. Quite to the contrary! I believe there is even *more* going on there than there is now on Earth.

Why do I think this? Well, first, there's the fact that our destiny is to *live in a city*, not sit on a cloud. Things happen in cities – there are jobs, and opportunities, and all sorts of things. The mere fact that we will be living in a city implies that there will be activity, life, and vibrancy! On top of that, there is explicit Biblical support for this idea. For example, in the parable of the talents the Lord rewards His servants for a life well-lived. When He does this He does *not* take away what they had and then tell them to go sit on a cloud. No, what He actually does is *give them more than they had before*:

Matthew 25:20: “And so he that had received five talents came and brought other five talents, saying, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me five talents: behold, I have gained beside them five talents more.

21: His lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.”

Notice that the Lord promised to give His faithful servant even *more* than he had before! The five talents he had been entrusted with were not taken away, nor did the Lord seize the extra five talents he had earned. In fact, this man ended up getting even more talents to manage:

Matthew 25:28: “Take therefore the talent from him, and give it unto him which hath ten talents.

29 For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.”

It's very exciting to realize that the word the Lord uses to describe our future lives is *abundance*, not boredom! The Lord obviously expected this man to keep on managing the 11 talents he now had, on top of doing a whole bunch of new and more exciting things. The point is crystal clear: in the afterlife God does not take away our talents and abilities and leave us with nothing to do. Instead, God expects us to *keep using what He gave us earlier*, and then gives us *even more things to do!*

In other words, God gave us abilities and He wants us to use them to bring Him glory *forever*. These abilities are not taken away in the next life; instead they are enhanced and added to. Moreover, God doesn't give us talents that we can never use. It's quite possible that the abilities we never had a chance to use in this life were meant to be used in the next life instead.

So I think it's quite plausible to think that Reverend Knight, who had a mathematical talent he was unable to use in his earthly life, could find out that in Heaven the door to using that talent was now open. As he explained in the book, the pursuit of mathematics can absolutely be used to glorify God.

Is there sadness in Heaven?

In *Beyond the Farthest Star*, Amanda Stryker is shocked to find that she still cares for her sister Amy, even though she is now dead and in Heaven:

Amanda nodded. "I agree. This is a good place to be, and now that I'm here I have no desire to be anywhere else. But – well, I'm confused. I didn't expect to feel *sad* here."

(*Beyond the Farthest Star*, chapter 6)

I am sure this idea will come as a surprise to many people. After all, the Bible does say this:

Revelation 21:4: "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away."

The Bible does indeed say that there will be no more sorrow, or crying, or pain. However, the problem is that this verse is often taken out of context. The promise that God makes in this passage does not come to pass until *after* Judgment Day. This is quite obvious if you read Revelation 20 and 21 in their entirety, but

even this one verse hints at it. Notice that one of the promises is that there will be “no more death”. When is death finally destroyed once and for all? On Judgment Day. Has death been destroyed yet? No. So that right there tells us that this is still in the future.

On top of that, there is actually a recorded case where a group of people in Heaven were upset about something. We find that here:

Revelation 6:9: “And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held:

10 And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?

11 And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellowservants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled.”

Here we have a group of saints who were martyred for their faith in God. These people are clearly in Heaven. Are they blissfully at peace, without a care in the world? No, they are not. In fact, they are actually crying out to God and asking Him to avenge their blood. They want to see His wrath poured out on the people who killed them. It's important to keep in mind that if you're begging God to avenge your blood, the chances are very good that you are *not happy*. That's not a request that happy and content people usually make.

Is there anything sinful with their request? No, there isn't. God doesn't rebuke them for it; instead He tells them to be patient for a little while longer and then He will do as they ask.

Nor is there anything wrong with asking for vengeance; after all, God did say that vengeance belonged to Him. These people are simply asking God to keep the promise that He had made. Is there anything strange with the idea that people who were brutally murdered for believing in Jesus might want justice to be done? I don't think so.

Here is another way to think about it. We know that Jesus (who is in Heaven) cares very deeply for us. He understands what we are going through because He was tempted as well:

Hebrews 4:15: “For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.”

Do you really think that Jesus is indifferent to our pain? Do you think that He feels nothing when His children are hunted down, put in prison, and are murdered? Do you believe that all of our troubles in our life mean absolutely nothing to Him? Of course not! That's ridiculous. God is not a callous, unfeeling monster. He has tremendous love and compassion for His children.

So the question is, if we are in Heaven and we are like Christ, does it really make sense that Jesus would care and we would *not* care? Is that reasonable? Personally, I think it's much more likely that we will share the emotions – and the compassion – of our Lord.

Are there mansions in Heaven?

At one point in the book, Captain Max expresses amazement at the size of his heavenly home:

Jones looked up and studied the house. The sprawling mansion was so artfully placed in the landscape that at first he didn't realize how big it actually was. From where he was standing he could see at least six floors, but he suspected there were more in the back that were hidden from view. The entire home was beautifully built out of wood, and had a rustic feel to it that seemed to fit the captain very well. He could see a wide porch, expansive windows, and a few flower-bearing vines that climbed up the side of the home.

"That's quite a place you've got! It's even bigger than Richard's home back in Tikal."

"It's an astonishing place," the captain agreed. "Just wait until you see the inside! It's – well, it's magnificent. And huge! It's a whole lot bigger than I was expecting."

(Beyond the Farthest Star, chapter 7)

However, this brings up a question: are there really mansions in Heaven? Is there any truth to this, or is it just a popular misconception? Well, first of all, the idea of heavenly mansions comes from the King James Version of the Bible. In that particular translation John 14:2 reads like this:

John 14:2: "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you."

The word "mansion" in that verse is the Greek word "mone" (Strong's #3438). It means "a staying, i.e. residence (the act or the place):—abode, mansion." All other modern translations of the Bible render the word as "rooms".

On the surface, “rooms” makes a lot of sense. “In my Father's house are many rooms” is a plausible and reasonable translation. After all, a house does have rooms! I've never yet seen a house that had mansions inside. The problem is that the word “mone” actually means dwelling place, and implying that we will all be living together in one big house is quite misleading – much more misleading, I think, than translating the word to mean mansion.

Here is what I mean. In Luke 16 we have one of the most misunderstood parables in the Bible – the parable of the unrighteous steward. At the end of the parable Jesus sums up its message like this:

Luke 16:8: “And the lord commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely: for the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light.

9 And I say unto you, Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations.”

What Jesus is saying is that we should use our earthly wealth to help other people, so that when we're in Heaven they will remember what we've done and will invite us into their homes. I know that sounds pretty shocking, but that really is what the verse means! Verse 9 clearly states that we're to “make to yourselves friends” with the “mammon of unrighteous”, which is simply our earthly wealth. The reason we're supposed to do that is so “they may receive you into everlasting habitations” – or, to put it a bit more clearly, “so they will receive you into their heavenly home”.

For the record, this verse is *not* saying that lost people should make friends with saved people so that the saved people can bail them out of Hell. That is blatantly unbiblical; Christ Himself made the point that people who end up in Hell cannot escape and are

trapped there forever. Therefore, this verse is talking about Christians being invited into the heavenly home of other Christians.

Now, if everyone lives in different rooms in one big heavenly house then this passage makes no sense, because you can't be invited into someone else's home *if you already live in it with them*. Luke 16:9 only makes sense *if each person has their own, separate estate*. For that reason I do not think we will all be sharing the same house, and that is why I think the modern translation of John 14:2 is misleading. "In my Father's house are many rooms" sounds a great deal like "we all live together in some kind of giant commune", which is not correct. We will each have our own, individual homes.

As far as the size of the estate goes – Jesus told His disciples repeatedly that they were to store up their treasures in Heaven. In the parables of the talents He made it clear that the reward He would give us for our earthly service was far out of proportion to what we had actually done. In other words, God has promised to give us *far more than we deserve*. Is it really reasonable to think that when we finally reach Heaven after a lifetime of service and are shown our eternal home, that what we'll find waiting for us is a tiny, unfurnished one-bedroom apartment? Keep in mind that this is the same God who decided that the Earth needed a night-light and so created *billions of galaxies* to provide it – not to mention His habit of using gold for pavement! I find it very difficult to believe that *any* home on Earth (even the most extravagant ones) will be better than what God has prepared for us in Heaven.

To put this another way: can you really imagine someone going to Heaven and saying "Man! My house back in Chicago was better than this place. In fact, I've seen closets that were bigger than this!" Personally, I don't think so. No one in Heaven is going to be looking back at Earth and saying "Life was so much better there."

Will the Earth be restored? Is there really going to be a new heavens and earth?

Near the beginning of the book Jones surprises Captain Max with a bit of information:

Jones spoke up. "There's more to the story than that, sir. After the Judgment the Lord is going to create a new heaven and a new earth. The universe is going to be restored to the way it was before sin corrupted it, and we'll live there for all of eternity. That's the universe that you're planning on exploring, isn't it?"

(Beyond the Farthest Star, chapter 7)

A lot of people don't realize this, but our eternal home is *not* going to be in Heaven. It is actually going to be here, on Earth. This will come as a surprise to many people, but the Bible is quite clear about it. I honestly do not understand why so few people know this.

I suppose I had better explain where this idea comes from. First of all, we all know that when believers die they go on to be with Jesus in Heaven. Then, at some point in history, Judgment Day will occur. This is what the Bible has to say about it:

Revelation 20:11: "And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them.

12 And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works.

13 And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works.

14 And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.

15 And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire."

One interesting thing we learn is that during this judgment Hell is emptied (verse 13). However, as verse 15 points out, those who are not saved are not cast back into Hell but instead are cast into the Lake of Fire – a completely separate and different place. We know that Hell and the Lake of Fire are different places because verse 14 tells us that Hell itself is cast into the Lake of Fire. Hell, then, is *not* the final resting place of the unrighteous. Technically speaking, *no one will spend eternity in Hell*. It is simply a holding place until Judgment Day. The final place of torment for those who did not believe in Jesus is, as verse 15 points out, the Lake of Fire.

What about those who *did* believe in Jesus? Well, as it turns out, Revelation 20 is not the last chapter in the Bible. John goes on to explain what happens *after* Judgment Day, and what he says is quite surprising:

Revelation 21:1: "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea.

2 And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

3 And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

4 And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.”

Let's take this one piece at a time. Verse 1 tells us that the current universe – the sky, the stars, and the Earth itself – are destroyed. However, God then makes a *new* heaven and Earth. The word “new” here is a special one: it carries with it the idea of something that has been restored to its former glory. It's not like trading in an old car for a new one. Instead, it's like taking that old car and remodeling it until it's better-than-new.

What God is saying is that after Judgment Day, He's not just going to get rid of the universe and then that's it. Instead He is going to make a *new* universe – a restored one. He is going to remake this planet and put it back to the way it was before mankind sinned. Verse 2 tells us that after God does this He is going to move the New Jerusalem (the heavenly city He built) *to this new earth*. Why? So that He can live with men. In other words, God is going to recreate the planet Earth, put us back on it, and then *move Heaven to Earth so He can live with us forever*. That is the exciting truth: we are going to spend eternity *right here on Earth*, and God is going to move here and live with us.

This is something I tried to get across in the book. Captain Max can look forward to exploring the universe after Judgment Day because he knows that the Lord is going to recreate it, and there will be billions of galaxies to explore. Of course, the New Jerusalem won't need the sun because it will be lit by the glory of God, but Revelation 21:1 does say that God is creating a new heavens *along with* the new earth. That tells me the stars will still be out there, just waiting for us to reach them.

Will there be rivers and trees in the heavenly city?

In one part of the story, Richard Stryker enjoys a leisurely afternoon beside a river:

“Richard Stryker was sitting at a cafe that was on the bank of a crystal-clear river. Along both sides of the river were fruit-bearing trees. Small groups of people were walking among the trees, talking and laughing. No one seemed to be in any sort of hurry. They were just enjoying the afternoon.”

(Beyond the Farthest Star, chapter 8)

This was actually taken from Revelation 22, where John describes what the New Jerusalem is like:

Revelation 22:1: “And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb.

2 In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.”

As you can see, the heavenly city really does have a river, and there really are trees. Heaven is *not* just a giant cloud that floats in a big void of nothingness.

Will there actually be mornings and afternoons in Heaven?

No, I don't think so. Since Heaven is lit by the glory of God and does not need the sun, I don't see how there could possibly be mornings or afternoons. However, I *do* believe that there will be time in Heaven. We find this in the book of Revelation:

Revelation 8:1: “And when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour.”

If half an hour went by in Heaven then time must pass there! The reason most people think that time doesn't exist in Heaven is because of a misinterpretation of these verses:

Revelation 10:5: “And the angel which I saw stand upon the sea and upon the earth lifted up his hand to heaven,

6 And sware by him that liveth for ever and ever, who created heaven, and the things that therein are, and the earth, and the things that therein are, and the sea, and the things which are therein, that there should be time no longer:

7 But in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall begin to sound, the mystery of God should be finished, as he hath declared to his servants the prophets.”

In verse 6 the angel does indeed say that “there should be time no longer”, but all the angel was actually saying was that the mystery of God would no longer be a mystery because its time had run out. It's like a teacher standing up at the end of an exam and saying “Pencils down, class, your allotted time is over.” The angel is *not* saying that time itself has stopped. After all, if

time itself stopped then nothing else could ever happen! Everyone would be frozen in place.

But as far as afternoons and mornings go – that is different. The New Jerusalem is lit by the glory of God so it has no night. If the sun doesn't rise and set then there can't be mornings or afternoons. So that is a bit of artistic license on my part, to get across the idea that time is passing. It's actually very difficult to convey the passage of time without referring to a time of day. Think about it: our entire clock is based on the fact that the sun rises and sets. Without that you'd need to come up with a whole different scheme of measuring time. After all, what does twelve o'clock even mean if there's no sun directly overhead?

So, rather than try to invent a new clock I just used something that people were more familiar with. I don't know how time is measured in Heaven, but I do know that time does pass there.

Will we reign over things in the afterlife?

At one part in the story Richard was tremendously surprised to find out that he was being asked to be a governor once again:

Jack laughed. “No, Rick, he's looking for governors. Someone is going to have to be in charge of these new planets. I talked to Ramon and we both thought that this job would be a great fit for you. After all, you were the governor of Mars for years and you did an amazing job under very trying circumstances.”

“But we're in Paradise now!” Richard exclaimed. “Jesus is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He's the government. He doesn't need us to run anything.”

(*Beyond the Farthest Star*, chapter 8)

This idea that we will one day reign over things may sound bizarre, but it is quite Biblical. In fact, this idea comes from Jesus Himself. In one of His parables He talked about rewarding people for their faithful service, and the reward that was given to them was authority over cities:

Luke 19:17: “And he said unto him, Well, thou good servant: because thou hast been faithful in a very little, have thou authority over ten cities.”

But that's not the only support there is for this. Revelation also echoes this same idea:

Revelation 5:9: “And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation;
10 And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth.”

Look at verse 10: the people in Heaven are saying that God has made them *kings and priests*. What was their destiny? *To reign on the earth*. Nor is this the only passage that talks about it! Look at what John has to say about the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem:

Revelation 21:24: “And the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it: and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honour into it.”

Here we are told that the *kings of the earth* would bring

treasures into the heavenly city. That tells me that there must still be kings! So there is actually quite a bit of evidence that reigning is in our future. After all, Jesus did make that promise to His disciples:

Matthew 19:28: “And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

And Jesus always keeps His promises.

Will there be corporations and businesses in the heavenly city?

At one point in the story Jones and Max pay a visit to the Diano Computing Center, a campus that is run by the Diano Corporation:

...it only took Max and Jones a few more minutes to reach the Diano Computing Center campus. Ramon Diano had built the sprawling facility on a piece of land that covered more than a hundred acres. When Captain Max reached the top of a hill and looked down upon the grounds he saw dozens of glass-and-steel buildings, glistening in the light. Between the buildings were paths, flowers, trees, and pedestrians.

(Beyond the Farthest Star, chapter 18)

The idea that there might be corporations in Heaven may be shocking, but stop and think about it for a moment. Isn't it

plausible that in that heavenly city people will form teams and work together to accomplish things? Isn't it also possible that certain very large challenges might require large teams, and that those teams may need to work together for an extended period of time?

At their core, businesses are groups of people who are working together to accomplish a specific goal. I will admit that the goal is usually to make money in any way possible, but there are not-for-profit organizations even today. Given that God has built a heavenly city for us and that cities are full of people who work together to accomplish things, I think it's quite possible that there might be formally-established groups that have dedicated themselves to reaching a certain goal.

Now, when people think of “problems” they tend to think of crime, or world hunger, or poverty, or something like that. But there are also mathematical challenges, scientific riddles, space exploration, and all sorts of other things. There are forests to traverse, literal mountains to climb, and so on. Even if mankind had never sinned the world would still be full of challenges, mysteries, and opportunities. I see no reason to believe that the abolition of sin and death would make all of these things go away – especially if God expects us to continue to use all of the abilities that He has given to us.

Will there be computers and software developers in the heavenly city?

At one point in the story Captain Max is shocked to find someone in Heaven who is writing software:

“Exactly!” Max exclaimed. “That's my whole point. I was expecting Paradise to have more harps and clouds, and

fewer data centers and supercomputers. This is more like a modern city. I kind of thought that people would spend their time sitting under trees, or something.”

“That’s how Amanda is spending her time,” Jones pointed out, as the elevator reached the top floor. “At this very moment she’s sitting under a tree, reading a book.”

“True,” Max admitted. “But look at that guy over there! He’s not watching the grass grow; he’s writing software. I don’t see a single harp in sight!”

(Beyond the Farthest Star, chapter 18)

Now, I will admit that I have no idea if there are computers in Heaven or not. It’s quite possible that they have moved on to something far more advanced, and computers are as primitive to them as stone knives and bearskins are to us. The point I was trying to make is that there is almost certainly some kind of technology in Heaven, and it’s very likely that whatever technology exists there is far more advanced than what exists here.

The reason I believe this is because God has promised us a city (Hebrews 11:16). Cities, by their very nature, incorporate a certain level of technology. After all, you can just glance at a photograph of a town and tell how advanced it is. Is the city made of mud huts or log cabins? Does it have brick houses or glass-and-steel skyscrapers? How advanced are the buildings? What engineering principles are reflected in their designs? What amenities are offered? Do the houses have windows? If so, are they just empty holes or are there panes of glass?

The very design of a city reflects the character, the knowledge, and the skill of the people who built it. The New Jerusalem, the heavenly city, is no different – only it was built by

God. It, then, will reflect *His* character, His knowledge, and His skill. Do you really believe that our modern cities are going to make God's city look primitive by comparison?

I, for one, find it very difficult to believe that people are going to enter Heaven and say "My goodness! Everyone here is a caveman who bangs rocks together. I've seen more advanced knowledge in the lost tribes in Papua New Guinea." Do you really think that the streets of gold are going to be lined with mud huts?

So there may not be computers, but I do believe that the technology and skill in that heavenly city will be astonishing. After all, the city was built by God Himself! I don't know if there will be software developers there or not, but any time there is high technology there will be people who are skilled in using it to solve complex problems. That is the point that I was trying to make.