

AT THE END
OF ETERNITY

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 5 IN THE STRYKER SAGA

AT THE END OF ETERNITY

By Jonathan Cooper

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Soli Deo Gloria

Table of Contents

Chapter 1.....	7
Chapter 2.....	15
Chapter 3.....	21
Chapter 4.....	27
Chapter 5.....	39
Chapter 6.....	47
Chapter 7.....	53
Chapter 8.....	59
Chapter 9.....	69
Chapter 10.....	77
Chapter 11.....	83
Chapter 12.....	91
Chapter 13.....	97
Chapter 14.....	105
Chapter 15.....	113
Chapter 16.....	121
Chapter 17.....	125
Chapter 18.....	133
Chapter 19.....	145
Chapter 20.....	149
Chapter 21.....	153
Chapter 22.....	159
Chapter 23.....	169
Chapter 24.....	177
Chapter 25.....	183
Chapter 26.....	189
Chapter 27.....	201
Chapter 28.....	207
Chapter 29.....	215
Chapter 30.....	221
Chapter 31.....	225

CHAPTER 1

“Tikal never ceases to amaze me! I knew the ancient Martians were advanced, but I had vastly underestimated their technological capabilities. The decaying city that Miles discovered is perfect in nearly every way – its electrical system, its sewage system, its road network, its manufacturing sector. It will be a fantastic launching point for a new Martian civilization.”

*--Noel Lawson
June 18, 7243*

AMY STRYKER WAS STANDING on a wide, grassy plain on the North American continent on Earth. Her dog Alex was rampaging joyously about in wide circles, jumping and barking and enjoying the glorious morning. Amy smiled as she watched him enjoy himself. He reminded her of all the times she and her sister Amanda had played with him back in ancient Tikal, five thousand years ago. Alex would wake them up at some unearthly hour and then bark at them until they finally climbed out of bed and took him outside. Then the girls would run, and play, and chase him, and be chased in return. *Those were wonderful days*, she thought to herself.

Now things were quite different. The world of the 19th century was long gone, and the future had proven to be a bleak and inhospitable place. When she finally made her way back home she discovered that Mars was a dying world, on the brink of total ruin. That was three years ago. Today her homeworld was showing signs of life and activity, but it would take centuries

before the planet's inhabitants repopulated the world and began reaching for the stars. The cities the Artilect had built would have to continue their eons-long wait. *Mars just might reach those cities, if mankind is given enough time*, she thought. She had been to Mars just yesterday, paying a visit to her friends Miles and Noel. Aside from Alex and the Sentinel, they were the only friends she had left. She missed her family tremendously, but she tried not to think about it. She had a job to do on Earth and she was determined to stay focused. But it wasn't easy.

"I feel old," she said aloud.

The Sentinel looked at her and smiled. "You may have been born five millennia ago, but you are not old just yet. Figuring out your exact age is a bit complex, however, as you have done quite a bit of time traveling. According to my records you were born on July 23, 1853. You jumped into the future on December 15, 1867. You then arrived in the future on October 23, 7239, and lived there until you and I were trapped on Xanthe on April 1, 7240. We escaped yesterday morning. That means you are about two months shy of being 15 years old. You still have a lot of living to do before you become as old as Miles."

"Oh, I know. I just *feel* old. Old and tired. I don't belong here, Steve. I just don't. I'm out of place, and I can't go back home because my home decayed into dust thousands of years ago. There's just no place for me here! I can go anywhere I want, but I don't have anywhere to go to. I just – I don't know. I'm just tired of dealing with all this."

"You feel out of place because you *are* out of place. All true children of light are out of place in this world of darkness and evil. Your home is in the land beyond the farthest star, and you will never feel quite at rest until you get there. But before you make that final journey there is one more thing you must do. The tribes on this world need us. We're their only hope for a cure."

"I know," Amy said. "I know. And that's why I'm here. We do have work to do. How long do you think it's going to take?"

"There is no way to tell," the Sentinel replied. He looked at Alex for a moment, as the dog romped through the tall grass, and then glanced at the granite cliff that loomed behind them. "You know that we are not alone here."

"Well, yes and no," Amy replied. "There are lots of other humans on Earth, but there's no one else like us. On the other side of this plain is a great big forest where the closest tribe lives. The tribe has hundreds of people, but they're all insane, as you know. You really can't sit down and have a conversation with them. Behind us, up that cliff and in the mountains, is the stone fortress Adrasta. About eighty thousand people live there. They call themselves the Children of Light, but if you ask me they ought to call themselves the Children of Darkness. They're a pretty rotten group of people."

"But they are still people," the Sentinel replied. "They may be quite interested in what you intend to do. Have you spoken with any of them?"

"Goodness, no! The only time I've ever seen them was when they sent a hunting expedition into the forest. A group of natives had found a ruined gear in a cave, and the hunters slaughtered them all and stole it from them. There were a thousand other ways the hunters could have obtained that gear, but they just callously killed them for it. They're *monsters*. I say let them rot. As long as they don't get in our way I really don't care what happens to them."

"As you wish," the Sentinel replied. "But, to answer your earlier question, you must realize that we don't even know if it's *possible* to cure the insanity that afflicts the tribes. Given the complex nature of their disease, we may spend centuries looking for a cure without any appreciable results. There is no guarantee that we will be able to help them. Their problem is unlike anything I have seen before. We may not be able to develop an effective antidote."

"Oh, I know. I tried to find a cure on my own back before we

were trapped on Xanthe, but I didn't make any progress. They have some sort of weird genetic mutation thing going on. I just don't know how to reverse it. There must be some way to fix it, though. There's just got to be. There is always an answer."

"Is there?" The Sentinel paused. A light wind blew over the surface of the ground, rippling the grass. Alex barked happily. The sky was a brilliant blue, but clouds were beginning to form. The nanite network that Amy had deployed in her earlier visit told him that a storm was brewing. "What about Xanthe? We both tried as hard as we could, but in the end we were unable to solve their problems. There was simply no way to help them."

Amy sighed. "I know. We did all we could, though. But this isn't a people problem, Steve. It's a technical problem. These tribes have a specific biological anomaly. Biology is essentially chemistry, and chemistry is essentially physics. Physics problems *can* be solved. Why, your father even found a way to go back in time and bring my family and I here to the future! If time travel is possible then *anything's* possible."

"The Artilect's time travel attempt required divine intervention," the Sentinel pointed out. "He was unable to do it on his own."

"Then perhaps the Lord will answer our prayers and intervene here as well. After all, He did save our lives, and He did bring us here. I don't think He would go through all that trouble just because He was bored and didn't have anything else to do. We're here for a reason. Something is going to be accomplished here."

"But that something may not be what we expect."

"What do you mean? Do you know something?"

The Sentinel shook his head. "No, I do not. Jones was a seer, and could tell you what the future held. I am just a machine; I do not have any spiritual gifts. All I know is that things do not always turn out as one would expect. On December 7, 1867 Captain Max piloted the *Sparrow* off of Mars and set a course for the Tau

Ceti system. Your family intended to get there and start a new life on Xanthe, but that is not what happened. We simply do not know what is right around the corner.”

Amy nodded. “I know. But this really looks pretty simple to me. I mean, yes, it's a difficult problem. But ultimately, if you abstract it out, it's a math problem, and we can find the answers to math problems. Or, at least, *you* can. I don't see anything here that might complicate matters. The old Spanish Emperor is gone. Elder Lane is gone. The swarms are gone. Things are going pretty well on Mars. We don't have any enemies left. All we have to do is apply ourselves to this problem, understand the nature of the disease, and find a way to reverse it. I'm sure it will take time but we've got time. After all, for all practical purposes we're both immortals. We can spend a hundred years here doing this, if that's what it takes.”

“Do the savages have that long?” the Sentinel asked.

“Probably. I mean, it's not like I conducted any long-term trials or anything, but from what I could see the disease had stabilized. It wasn't getting any worse, and it didn't look like it was about to kill them. Now, I'm not saying that I *want* it to take a hundred years. I'm just saying that we don't have anything else left to do. This is the only item on our to-do list. In fact, it's the *last* item on our list. After that we're done.”

“And then what?”

“And then we go home,” Amy replied firmly. “That's all there is to it.”

The Sentinel nodded. “So how do you want to go about this?”

Amy closed her eyes and mentally connected to the network of nanites that saturated the Earth's atmosphere. She then used the network to remotely view the tribe that lived in the nearby forest. There were 416 people there, who lived together in a loose community. The group lived in a network of shallow caves that dotted the area, although some of them had built crude

huts that were outside the cave entrances.

Upon seeing this, Amy mentally connected to the Sentinel and made sure that he was seeing the same view that she was. "Do you see those houses? It's something that I noticed the last time I was here. These people may be insane, but they definitely have some kind of civilization. It may be a savage and crude civilization, perhaps, but it's still something. They make shelter, they forage for food, they hunt, and they've even made clothing for themselves. It's really more than I would have expected from someone in their condition."

"They do appear to have attained a level similar to that of ancient Earth tribes," the Sentinel agreed. "They also seem to have some form of language."

Amy watched as a group of six men gibbered excitedly at each other. They hooted, and talked, and gestured wildly – all at the same time.

"Are you sure that's a language?" Amy asked doubtfully. "Are they talking *with* each other, or *at* each other? Is anyone actually deriving anything meaningful from what is being said?"

"They must communicate to some extent. After all, look at that group of children that is working to erect a hut. Group activity requires communication."

"But I don't see any adults working together," Amy pointed out. "Only children and young people. You don't suppose that the children do all the civilized-type work, do you? Maybe this disease gets worse with age. It could be that the children are taking care of the adults."

"That is certainly possible. We will need to monitor the group's behavior over time to see if any patterns emerge. Is that where you would like to begin?"

Amy thought for a moment. "I think so. Let's configure the nanite network to monitor the clan activities of every tribe on Earth. We should be able to get a feel for how they behave and what they're capable of. We probably need to understand how

they act on a macro level before we start analyzing their genetic code.”

“It probably is wise to understand the effects of the disease before probing for a cure,” the Sentinel said. “Although there is no need to confine ourselves to simply one activity. The planetary network that you deployed is fully capable of collecting that data entirely on its own. Meanwhile, we can begin analyzing their damaged genetic structure.”

“I suppose you're right,” Amy agreed. “So let's—”

Amy suddenly lost her connection to the nanite network. She gasped and opened her eyes in surprise. A millisecond later there was an intense burst of bright blue light, and then the sound of thunder rumbled across the landscape. The harsh light was blinding, and it was so bright that it kept her from seeing the source of the noise. The roar of the thunder grew louder, and as the seconds ticked by the noise became deafening. When the light finally dimmed she saw a giant pillar of fire in the distance. As the roar subsided a cloud of smoke began forming around the pillar of fire.

Amy panicked, until she saw that Alex was all right. The dog had run over to her at the first hint of noise and was standing beside her, looking at the cloud. “What's that?” he asked.

“Death,” the Sentinel replied.

The girl then realized that the network was back. When she reconnected she discovered that a brief burst of intense neutron radiation had temporarily blocked her connection to it – a defect that she made a mental note to fix. *But what caused the radiation? The tribes aren't nearly advanced enough to be experimenting with atomic power!*

A horrible thought crossed Amy's mind. *The residents of Adrasta have a functional nuclear reactor. They could – but they wouldn't. Oh no. No, surely not!*

With great reluctance Amy used the nanites to remotely view the forest – or what had once been a forest. The whole area had

simply disappeared. Where there had once been trees there was now only blackened, baked soil. The forest, the trees, and the tribes had all been blasted to atoms by the intense heat of an atomic sun. The clan was gone – wiped out by a single neutron bomb.

CHAPTER 2

"I was quite disappointed to find that the legendary Pyramid of Kings was ruined beyond repair. It's the only building we've found so far that wasn't salvageable. Legend says that the pyramid used to be an energy weapon, and I was hoping that its ruin might provide some insights. Sadly, the legend will have to remain a legend. There is simply not enough of it left to tell what purpose it actually served."

--Noel Lawson

June 18, 7243

AMY WAS IN A STATE of utter shock. The nanites told her that the forest was gone, the tribe was gone, and all life in that area was gone. All that remained was an intense pool of lethal radiation. To her surprise, she saw that the radiation had already begun to decay. A quick calculation revealed that it would only take a few weeks for the radiation to fall to harmless levels. Even after the radiation had dissipated, however, the area would still not be habitable. All life in that area had been vaporized, and there was nothing left but parched rock and fused soil. The damage was so great that life might never return. A thriving ecosystem had been turned into a barren wasteland.

What broke her heart was that the forest-dwellers were gone. Someone had savagely murdered that unique band of people. There were other tribes in the world, but that group was gone forever, and there was nothing Amy could do to bring them back.

Alex looked up at her. "What was that?"

"It was a neutron bomb," Amy told him. "A great big bomb that released a lot of deadly radiation."

"Is it going to hurt us?"

Amy shook her head. "No, honey, it's not. The bomb did contaminate the area, but the nanites inside us protect us. It will take a lot more than that to put us in any danger."

"Where did it come from?" Alex asked.

The Sentinel spoke up. "The bomb undoubtedly came from Adrasta."

Amy nodded. "I agree. They're the only ones that have the technology. Even the Martians can't build neutron bombs. I just – I can't believe they would do something like this. I mean, sure, I've seen them kill people before, but this – this is different."

"How so?"

"Well, before when they killed people they were trying to get that artifact. They had a reason for doing it. It was an appalling reason, but it wasn't killing just out of spite. This is totally different. There was absolutely no reason for nuking that tribe. The people in Adrasta live in the mountains, not in the plains. The tribe wasn't threatening them in any way, and they didn't have anything that the Adrastans might have wanted. Even if the tribe was a threat to them – which it was not – there is no justification for vaporizing every last living thing in the forest and rendering it uninhabitable forever. This was an act of pure hatred. How could anyone be that evil?"

"The people on Xanthe would have been capable of doing this," the Sentinel pointed out.

"I know," Amy sighed. "I was just hoping that we were done dealing with that level of depravity. I mean, I really thought we weren't going to run into any trouble this time. I thought we would just come here, cure the tribes, and move on. Oh, those poor people! How could the Adrastans do this? How could they just bomb them into oblivion?"

"What would you like to do?" the Sentinel asked.

"Well, first things first, I suppose. Can you set up a defensive perimeter around the other tribes? I want to make sure that no one else gets vaporized by nuclear weapons. I don't know what's going on yet, but I am *not* going to let the Adrastans murder everyone else on the planet. No more bombs are going to get dropped, no more raids are going to happen, and no more forest-dwellers are going to get killed. They are under our protection now."

"Understood," the Sentinel replied. "I will take care of the arrangements. But what are you going to do about Adrasta?"

"I'll tell you what I'd *like* to do. I'd like to vaporize the entire city, in the same way that those heartless people vaporized that tribe. I am so intensely angry right now. It's like Adrian Garza all over again. But I'm not going to do that – not yet, anyway. Right now I'm going to go to Adrasta and see what's going on."

"Can I go with you?" Alex asked.

Amy shook her head. "I'm sorry, boy, but the stone city isn't a good place for you. You need to stay here with Steve. Don't worry, though – I'll be back as soon as I know what those godless heathens are doing."

"I believe they are called the Children of Light," the Sentinel commented.

"I am *not* calling them that," Amy said firmly. "They're the children of the devil, if you ask me. No true child of the light would go on a murderous rampage. I strongly suspect that this is going to turn out just like Xanthe did – I bet we're dealing with another group of crazed, murderous lunatics who aren't going to listen to reason. Whatever happened to all of the sane people?"

"Nolan and Miles were quite sane. In fact, Mars has become quite a civilized place! I believe it has a bright future ahead of it."

Amy sighed. "I wish the same thing could be said of Earth. I just – I don't know. I need to find out what is going on before I make any decisions. I mean, we could always move the tribes to

another planet, but this is their home. They belong here.”

“We could always ask a Steward to turn a different planet into an exact replica of Earth,” the Sentinel suggested. “The tribes would never know the difference.”

“Well, the stars would be different. They might notice that. But still, it's not fair. The tribes are not the problem here. The issue is the Adrastans. If anyone needs to leave it's them.”

“So are you just going to remove them?”

Amy shook her head. “Not until I find out what's going on. It may be that the bomb was built by some rogue psycho. The entire city may not be evil. But I'm not holding out a lot of hope. That bomb was a complex piece of technology that surely took some effort to manufacture. Unless things have gotten so bad in Adrasta that everyone has access to their own private nuclear weapons, that bomb means that the city as a whole supported and paid for the attack. That tells me that we're dealing with a corrupt city, not a corrupt individual. But I'll get to the bottom of it.”

The Sentinel nodded. “Very well. While you are doing that I will set up the defensive perimeter and continue looking for the cure. I will keep you posted as developments arise.”

Amy nodded. She looked into the distance, where she saw that smoke was still rising. She sighed. “Why does it always have to be like this, Steve? Why does everything have to be so hard?”

“I suppose that is why you were brought to this time, and not to some other century. You were brought here to solve the hard problems. After all, the perfect place to put a candle is not in a well-lit room but in an impossibly dark chasm. You have been placed where you were needed, and you are very much needed here right now. You are the only one who can protect these people and find a cure for their illness. There simply is no one else.”

“Well, there's you too, you know. I don't know what I would have done without you.”

“It has been an honor to serve you,” the Sentinel replied. “That is, after all, why I was created. I was built for the express purpose of going back in time and rescuing you.”

Amy sighed. “I’m just hoping this will all be over soon. I’m getting tired of all this.”

“Just hold on a little bit longer. It’s not that much further to the end. You’re not alone, you know.”

“I know,” she replied.

CHAPTER 3

"Somewhere in this ancient ruin is a spaceport. We've found some old maps that place it somewhere to the south, although its precise location has been lost to time. I'm sure it's much too soon to be thinking about interstellar travel, but I sincerely hope that when we finally reach that sector we'll find something. Uncovering a starship – especially if it still works – would be astounding!"
--Noel Lawson
June 18, 7243

MONROE ARAIZA WAS IN his living quarters, deep in the ancient stone fortress that was high in the mountains. It was early in the afternoon and he was taking a moment to get caught up on his journal. He had started keeping a diary years ago to chronicle the current events and happenings of Adrasta. At times he wondered why he bothered. Given the serious genetic problems that plagued his people, it was quite likely that the city was in its final days. Millennia of inbreeding had caused extensive damage and rendered people almost entirely infertile. If a cure was not found soon then a century from now they would simply die out. When that happened there would be no one left to read his carefully-kept notes. They would simply sit in a vault until they returned to dust.

His only hope was that perhaps, one day, someone from the stars would find the city and recover his notes before they disintegrated. It was a faint hope, but not an impossible one.

There was the intriguing fact that the stars had reappeared. It was true that three years had gone by and there had been no visitors from the stars, but there was always hope. Perhaps the Rangers had just been busy.

Monroe finished entering the previous day's entry and then set down his pen. His colleagues preferred entering data into their electronic devices, but Monroe refused to join them. Whenever he was chided for his old-fashioned ways he pointed out that a thousand years from now his notes would still be legible, but their computers would be little more than trash. Information stored in a computer has a very short life, but words in a book can outlast entire civilizations. That is why his apartment was crammed floor-to-ceiling with real books, printed on real paper; the information in them would long outlast any computers that the city possessed. As soon as he realized that the end of his race was upon them he began writing down as much information as he possibly could. It was the only way he knew to ensure that the data survived. He just hoped that the Rangers would appreciate his work.

The elderly man placed his journal back into his desk and glanced around the room. His apartment was small, but he liked it that way. There was a tiny kitchen, a small bathroom with a shower, a small bedroom, and a living room, which was where he was now. The walls were covered with bookcases, and the books were stacked two deep. There were several chairs, a few end-tables, and some lamps that lit the room. Books were stacked on every available surface. His apartment was very cluttered, but it was well-organized. He knew right where everything was and everything had a place.

Before Monroe could get up he heard a knock at the door. Monroe glanced at a clock on the wall and realized that it was later than he thought. "Come in," he said aloud. "It isn't locked."

The door opened and a middle-aged man walked into the room. "You really should keep it locked, you know," he replied as

he closed it behind him. "Things are not as safe as they used to be."

Monroe shrugged. "So they say. I daresay that I have very little that others might want. All I really have are my books, and while these books are very valuable to me I suspect that they are of little use to others. I have freely offered this information to Adrasta for decades and have had precious few takers. People simply have different priorities."

Doyle Leblanc nodded. "But there are still some who seek the path of wisdom. Not everyone agrees with Evan Maldonado."

"Perhaps, but there are too few who disagree. The public at large supports him and that gives him the power he needs to carry out his genocidal campaign. But please, have a seat. I suspect his campaign is exactly what you have come to talk about."

Doyle nodded and sat down. "I'm afraid so. I wish I had good news to give you, but I don't. I have heard the reports regarding Evan's neutron weapon. The bomb went off early this morning, and sadly the bomb was completely effective. Every bit of human life, animal life, and plant life in the Mercado forest has been eliminated. Moreover, the radiation is decaying as expected. Evan's weapon has achieved exactly what he intended it to achieve and has operated within expected tolerances."

"So it was everything he wanted," Monroe replied, sighing. "I had hoped that his men had made a calculation error and that the bomb would not work. I knew that was unlikely, but since this was new technology there was always a chance that they had overlooked something. But it looks like Evan has won. He has the bomb, he proved that it works, and he will now press on to get the permission to build the bomb on an industrial scale. The savages do not stand a chance."

"It's terrible," Doyle agreed. "Really terrible. He's actually going to carry out the complete annihilation of the tribal peoples, isn't he? Evan is going to kill every last one of them –

and destroy this planet's ecosystem while he's at it. Does he not realize the complete insanity of a global nuclear war? Does he not understand the devastation that it would cause?"

"Not to mention the loss of life. Tens of millions of people are about to be slaughtered, and all for nothing. Evan's grand dreams of world conquest will never happen. Our genetic code simply doesn't have that much time left. Despite his denials we are a dying people. All he is really accomplishing is making sure that when we finally die off, the rest of the planet will be dead as well."

"There must be something we can do," Doyle replied. "We can't just let this happen. We cannot permit Evan to wipe out the rest of the savages. There must be some action we can take or some strategy we can pursue. We must end this!"

Monroe sighed. "I don't know how much we can actually do. Our numbers are small and we have no public support. But I suppose we can at least stand up and protest. Evan is scheduled to make his formal report to the council this evening and request permission to proceed with his genocidal campaign. The meeting will be an open meeting, so we can attend it and protest. I very much doubt it will change anything, but we can at least try. Perhaps the Lord will bless our efforts with success."

"He has not blessed our efforts so far," Doyle commented. "We tried to prevent the construction of the neutron bomb but we were not successful. Hundreds of people died today because of our failure."

Monroe shook his head. "No, Doyle. Hundreds of people died today because Evan chose to kill them. This was his doing, not ours. We are like the Old Testament prophets, warning society of their evil ways and urging them to repent before it is too late. Israel did not listen to those prophets; instead she chose to ignore them and, in some cases, murder them. With us it is the same. We are warning our people, but ultimately the choice is theirs. Israel refused to repent and went on to judgment at the

hands of the Babylonians. It is my great fear that Adrasta will also refuse to repent and will go on to judgment and doom.”

“Couldn't our genetic problem be considered judgment?” Doyle asked.

“Perhaps,” Monroe replied. “But it is entirely possible that once this city crosses the line into genocide, God Himself will intervene. He may not allow us to live long enough to become infertile. He may decide to step in and help those who cannot help themselves – and if our people will not listen then He may destroy us all. But all of that is pure conjecture. All we can do is take what opportunities we have to protest and do what we can to spread our message. If they do not listen to us – well, their blood will be on their hands, not ours. All we can do them is warn them of the error of their ways.”

“Do you think they will listen?” Doyle asked.

“I hope so,” Monroe replied. “But I do not know. Israel refused to listen to the prophets that God raised up and sent her, and the result was devastating. Will our fate really be any different?”

CHAPTER 4

“The number of people who have flocked into Tikal over the past three years has been astounding! It has been quite a challenge to find housing for everyone who wants to live here. It's very encouraging, of course – I was hoping that people would leave the underground city and move back to the surface – but trying to make room for everyone is definitely putting a strain on our resources. I'm sure that the city is large enough to hold everyone; my only concern is whether we can keep up with the population's fantastic growth.”

--Noel Lawson

June 18, 7243

MONROE ARAIZA AND HIS small band of supporters arrived in the debating chamber thirty minutes before the meeting was scheduled to begin. The cavernous stone room was located in the oldest section of Adrasta. According to legend the Founders had built that room before building any other part of the city. Back in those days the Spanish Emperor still ruled over the planet, and the Founders came to the fortress in secret to discuss the issues of the day. Once they realized that the Empire was doomed they turned their private retreat into a functional city and prepared for the collapse of Earth. When the Wall was erected and chaos broke out they were prepared. Within the confines of their stone fortress they were saved from the destruction that consumed the rest of the planet. The Founders had hoped that one day their children could leave the stone city

and reclaim the Earth, but that day never came.

So for thousands of years their descendents simply endured. The debating chamber became a central icon in the city's politics. In that room the leaders of Adrasta met and debated each other on matters of important public policy. It was the place where all political meetings of any importance were held, and it was where the fate of the city had been decided on more than one occasion. Monroe knew that today would be one of those times.

The giant room was circular in shape and had a lower level and an upper balcony. It could hold sixteen thousand people. The room was discreetly outfitted with modern electronic equipment so that the meetings could be digitally broadcast to the rest of the city. These days the chamber was rarely full, but occasionally something would happen that was important enough to cause every available seat to be taken. Monroe was not surprised to see that today's turnout was quite high. Even though the session was not scheduled to begin for another half hour, many of the seats had already been taken and more people were arriving all the time.

Monroe and his friends found their seats and sat down. Although there was no prescribed seating, in practice certain groups tended to sit in certain sections. As the centuries passed those habits had solidified into traditions, to the point where sitting in a certain area meant that you held certain political views. Monroe's group had chosen seats that were set aside for the opposition party – a section that was conspicuously vacant. Aside from those he had brought with him, the section was almost entirely empty. In fact, the only other person sitting there was a teenage girl.

The girl caught his attention because she was unlike any Adrastan he had ever seen. She was quite tall for her age and had long black hair, brown eyes and brown skin. Her facial features and the structure of her cheekbones was especially striking. He was surprised to see that they bore more resemblance to the

savages in the forests than to anyone who lived in Adrasta. His own kinsmen had interbred for so long that everyone had similar features, but hers were quite different. It was as if she was from an entirely different race.

Monroe leaned over to Doyle. "Do you know that girl over there?"

Doyle looked over to where his friend was indicating and shrugged. "I don't think so. Perhaps someone invited her here. I don't really know."

"Can you ask around and find out for me? I'd like to know who she is. I'm quite certain that I've never seen her before."

"Aren't you a little old for her?" Doyle asked. "After all, —"

"That's not at all what I mean," Monroe replied sharply. "It's her genetic code that puzzles me. She doesn't look like she's from around here. She appears to be an outsider — of a different line entirely. I've never seen anyone else like her. If she is from a different line of human beings then there may be hope for us after all. We desperately need more genetic diversity."

"I think you're seeing things. She's just a young girl, and nothing more. I understand the importance of your genetics research but I think you've been spending far too much time buried in those books of yours. Do you even know what you're going to say to the council tonight?"

"Yes, yes," Monroe replied. "For whatever good it will do. Our strategic position is very poor, you know. We don't have any power, we have very few friends, and we don't have any arguments that might persuade this crowd. We have the truth on our side, but these days the truth just isn't enough. People don't care about the truth anymore. I foresee Evan winning a total victory tonight. The council was not swayed last time; I don't see how things will be any different now, especially since Evan accomplished precisely what he set out to do. But I will still do what I can, for I suppose that's all I can do."

"You're a bit of a pessimist," Doyle commented.

“Four hundred people were killed today, and this room is packed with men who want to see that repeated on a global scale. You tell me where I'm supposed to be seeing hope.”

Monroe sat back in his chair and waited for the meeting to begin. When the Founders had carved out the debate hall thousands of years ago it was made entirely out of granite rock. The ceiling, floor, and walls were made of solid stone, along with all of the room's furnishings. Even the tables and chairs were made of carved stone. According to legend their ancestors had deliberately made the seats uncomfortable in order to force people to make their points more quickly. A long-winded speaker risked losing the support of a restless audience whose backs were hurting. At some point – no one knows when – the stone furnishings were removed and comfortable plush seats were installed. Monroe appreciated the comfort but he wondered if the Adrastans were getting soft. Not just physically soft (although one could make an argument there, given the provable deterioration of their genetic code) but intellectually soft as well. In the olden days great orators had spoken in this room, arguing the finer points of policy in front of an intelligent audience. People carefully weighed the arguments that were made and asked deep, penetrating questions. These days intelligence was hard to come by; a skilled speaker could easily sway the crowd, even if his arguments were flawed or nothing but lies. Discernment was practically a dead art. People had lost their passionate love for the truth.

In the center of the room was the circular stone table, around which the council sat. As far as anyone knew that was the very same table that the Founders had sat around. The table itself was in the shape of a ring, and the council sat along the outside edge of the table. In the area surrounded by the table – an open space roughly forty feet across – was where the orators would stand and present their arguments. Tonight that was where Evan Maldonado would be standing. The council would listen to him

and then make their decision.

Monroe noticed that the council did not show up until right before the meeting started. There were presently six men on the council, led by the esteemed Conrad Forbes. Back when the city's population was far larger than it was today the council had consisted of fifteen members. In modern times, however, six men were deemed enough to run the affairs of the city. Even though the council claimed to be constantly busy, the truth was that there was very little for them to do. Before Evan launched his program to exterminate the tribes the council had been meeting just once a year.

When Forbes called the room to order the debate hall was packed. The only available seats were in the opposition section, which was almost entirely empty. Monroe knew that his group was painfully conspicuous, but he did not care. He had been out of the public's favor for so long that it no longer bothered him.

After going over the initial formalities Forbes got right to the business at hand. "General Maldonado, we meet here today to receive your report regarding the recent bombing campaign that you conducted. In your last meeting you promised this assembly that your neutron weapon would be sufficient to cleanse the planet of the savages and return control of the Earth to us. The council would like to know how your weapon performed in this morning's field test."

"I am pleased to report that it went exactly as planned," Evan Maldonado replied. "The neutron bomb completely eradicated the entire tribe. Not one of them survived. Moreover, the radiation that was released by the bomb is already decaying, and will be reduced to harmless levels within the next two weeks. The operation was a complete success."

Monroe stood up. "Objection!" he called out.

Forbes quickly motioned for him to be silent. "You may present your arguments later in the meeting, after the general has finished. Now is not your turn to speak."

"But there are additional facts that he has omitted," Monroe replied. "According to the rules of the debate hall, the orator may be challenged during his presentation should there—"

Forbes interrupted him. "This is not a debate, Monroe. The general is merely presenting his report to the council. If you have anything to add you may do so at the conclusion of his presentation. You are overruled."

Monroe sat down, frustrated. Forbes turned to the general and motioned for him to continue.

"The success of today's venture is of critical importance to our future," Maldonado announced. "What we have done today is proven that it *is* possible to cleanse this world of the savages who have held it hostage for the past five thousand years. For five millennia we have been forced to live in this stone prison while mindless savages ruled the world. We are all that is left of a once-mighty civilization that was destroyed by the folly of the Spanish Empire. It was the Founders' wish that we reclaim the future that the Emperor stole from us. Instead of rebuilding this world, however, we have stayed huddled behind these stone walls, hoping that somehow the world would magically rebuild itself.

"I am here to tell you that we must set a new course for ourselves. I do not wish to speak ill of the dead, but the generations who came after the Founders utterly failed to live up to their dream. They foolishly chose to live in this prison for five thousand years, keeping the flame of civilized life alive but doing nothing to spread it. If they had simply acted and taken the initiative, we would have colonized the stars millennia ago. By now we might have even reached distant galaxies. They could have repossessed this planet, rebuilt the waste places, restored what the Emperor destroyed, and reclaimed our destiny. Instead they cowered in the corner, like fools.

"Today we proved that we can overcome the mistakes of our past and build a new future. With my neutron bomb we can wipe

out the savages that have dominated our world for far too long. That is exactly what I propose to do. I am here to ask the council to approve the construction of 153 neutron bombs. According to my scientists, these upgraded bombs – vastly more powerful than the one used today – will be enough to wipe out every single savage tribe on the face of the planet, leaving us as its undisputed masters. Once they are gone we can begin reclaiming the world and forging our future.”

One of the council members spoke up. “How long will this process take?”

“I can have the bombs built and ready for deployment in 90 days,” Evan replied. “By the time the fall season arrives the entire planet can be ours. The process is proven and effective, as you have seen.”

Forbes nodded. “You have indeed done exactly as you promised. The nuclear weapon that your men designed was as effective as you claimed, and the lack of unwanted side-effects is most encouraging. Are there any among the council who see reason to oppose this course of action?”

No one on the council said anything. The council leader then sighed. “Are there any among the assembly who can offer a reason why we should not give the general our approval?”

“Yes, there is,” Monroe replied loudly. “I wish to respond to his claims.”

“Very well. You may come forward and speak.”

Monroe got out of his seat, made his way to the council table, and entered the debating ring. He then looked at Evan. “Tell me, general. Why do you think our ancestors chose to stay in this fortress? They were as technically capable as we are. Why did they chose to not wipe out the tribes?”

“Must we debate this again?” Maldonado asked. “We've already gone over this before. I see no benefit in rehashing it.”

Forbes spoke up. “Answer the charge, general. You know the rules.”

Maldonado sighed. "Our ancestors were fools, Monroe. They thought that the savages could be saved and they spent thousands of years trying to help them. But you know what? They failed. The savages *cannot* be saved. They are a lost cause. Even *you* are not proposing that we try to find a cure for them! We cannot cure them, and they are standing in the way of progress. They are nothing but mindless monsters, bent on murder, destruction, and chaos. There is nothing good about them. If anything, cleansing the planet of them is an act of kindness. It will end their suffering and give our children a better, brighter future."

"Are they human beings?" Monroe asked.

"Only technically," he replied. "They are a tribe of insane lunatics at best, and criminal murderers at worst. In our own society if a person goes on a murderous rampage we bring him to justice and execute him. I fail to see why these people should be held to a different standard."

"How many of us have they tried to kill?" Monroe asked. "Oh, that's right – *zero*. Not one time in all of history have they ever mounted a campaign against us. Nor is it true that all of them are psychotic murderers. That's how you enjoy painting them, but I have research that proves otherwise. Some of them are as you describe, but not all of them.

"Let's be very clear about this, general. You're not proposing the extermination of some pesky crab grass that is causing ecological damage. No, what you're asking us to do is approve the slaughter of more than ten million human beings so that you can take what they have. You are proposing *genocide*, and you want to build an entire civilization on that foundation. The reason our ancestors stayed in this fortress is because they were unwilling to enrich their own future through mass murder."

"The savages are a hopeless cause," the general replied. "You know as well as I do that they can't be cured. You know that they don't have a future. Why not end their suffering? Is five thousand

years of insanity not enough for you? Don't you realize that this is the only way that we can build a future for ourselves? Those savages are never going to rebuild the world! If we don't do it then who will? Should all of our children agree to die out so that your madmen can continue killing each other?"

"We are called to be the children of light," Monroe replied firmly. "That is the name the Founders gave our Order, and that is what's written on the charter they engraved in the Hall of Stone. The whole reason they built Adrasta was so we could be a light to the world. Saving the lost was our very *mission*."

"We *are* bringing the light to the world," the general replied. "Can't you see that? This world has been ensnared in darkness for five thousand years. With my neutron bomb I can remove that darkness and make the land free once more. We have kept the light of civilization bottled up in here for millennia. Once I drive away the darkness we can spread the light once more and rebuild what has been lost."

"You are completely missing the point! Have you even read the Charter? The light that we are to be spreading is *not* cultural advancement or scientific progress. Don't you realize that the very people who destroyed this planet in the first place were part of the mightiest and most advanced civilization this world has ever seen? The light that the city was founded to spread was the *light of the gospel* – the good news of Jesus Christ. We were commanded to be followers of God and to spread His words. That was our very purpose! Every one of the Founders dedicated their lives to that goal."

Maldonado laughed. "The savages aren't capable of understanding anything, much less comprehending religion! But since you're so concerned about their souls, why don't you give it a try? Go out there and tell them about this Jesus of yours. See how far you get. I bet you won't even live through the day."

Forbes interrupted them. "Do not bring religion into this, gentlemen. This is a policy debate. Religion has no place here."

"The Founders did not think so," Monroe replied. "They felt that God belonged in every facet of life."

"The Founders are long dead and returned to dust. Do you have any other arguments to make or are you quite done? Your philosophical arguments are petty and a waste of time. If that is all you have to offer then you may return to your seat."

Monroe shook his head. "No, there is more. General Maldonado painted a very glowing picture of what happened today, but I noticed that his official report failed to include any photographs. Therefore, I would like to add these to the official record. I feel that they will add some clarification to what happened today."

Monroe took a stack of photographs out of his pocket and placed them in front of the head of the council. Forbes picked them up and began going through them. He paled slightly. Each picture showed a scene of utter devastation. The forest had been replaced with an enormous crater. The ground was fused and blackened, and the smoke in the air was thick. There was not a trace of life to be seen.

"Evan, are these pictures accurate?" Forbes asked.

The general nodded. "Yes, they are. As I said, the bomb was quite effective. Every trace of the savage tribe that we targeted has been eliminated."

Monroe spoke up. "And as you can see, the bomb also eliminated every tree, every blade of grass, and every living thing. The forest is entirely gone. Moreover, the bomb fused the soil and destroyed all of the bacteria in it. You took a place that was teeming with life and wiped out every last living thing in it."

"Oh, it will grow back," the general replied. "After all, it did when the Emperor destroyed the world."

"The Spanish Emperor used chemical weapons, not neutron bombs. It is possible that the damage is permanent. If anything does grow back it will be at least a century – possibly more – before life returns to that spot."

"Perhaps. That remains to be seen. Even so, that is a small sacrifice to make. I would rather wait a century than wait forever."

Monroe stared at him, surprised. "General, you want to unleashing your neutron weapons on the entire planet. When you are done the *whole world* will look like those photographs! You aren't saving the world; you're asking for permission to obliterate it! Even the Spanish Emperor didn't obliterate the *entire ecosystem*. You're hoping that after you wipe out every last living thing in the entire world that, somehow, it will all magically grow back, but you have no idea if it will. In fact, you haven't even bothered to ask the question. It's entirely possible that when you're done this planet will become as uninhabitable and dead as the Moon. What you're going to do is far worse than anything the savages have ever done."

Forbes spoke up. "General, is it really necessary to eliminate all of the savages all at once? Couldn't you conduct the bombing campaign in stages and allow the planet time to recover?"

Maldonado shook his head. "The savages are like a cancer. If you have cancer and wish to survive you must eliminate all of it, not just part of it. If you leave behind anything then the cancer will take root again and you will find yourself battling death once more – which is exactly what we're facing here. If we do this at all then we ought to make a clean sweep of it, and eliminate the problem entirely. I do not approve of half-measures."

"Is there any danger to this?" Forbes asked. "I do not want to approve a plan that will cause the Earth to become uninhabitable."

"That will not happen," the general replied firmly. "The Earth will bloom again, as it always has. If it turns out that we must help the process along then we will do so. We can plant seeds, tend fields, and even terraform the planet if that's what it takes. The ancient books within our archives contain the knowledge needed to turn a dead planet into a live one. If those techniques

worked on distant planets then they would assuredly work here as well – but I do not think that will be necessary. These are all very solvable problems.”

The head of the council nodded, and turned to Monroe. “The general has a plan to deal with the fallout from his weapon, Monroe. Do you have any other objections?”

“Do you not see that this will be our doom?” Monroe asked. “We are dying out as a race. If we ever become the only human beings left on this planet then our doom will be sealed. We need some genetic variation—”

“That is enough,” Forbes said firmly. “The council has heard your quackery before and has no patience for it. Since you have presented no substantive arguments against General Maldonado's proposal, I recommend that we accept his plan and give him whatever funding he needs to carry it out. Do any on the council disagree?”

When there were no voices of dissent, Forbes spoke up. “The council has reached its decision. General, you have our full support. This session is now dismissed.”

CHAPTER 5

"I've tried to convince Miles to lend a hand in the reconstruction, but he has turned me down every time I've asked. I'm not too surprised, of course; he is unbelievably old, and he has earned the right to be retired. Still, his knowledge of energy systems would be invaluable. There simply isn't anyone on my team who has even a tenth of the knowledge that he possesses. The power systems in this city are unlike anything I've ever seen before. I would love to get his advice on some of the more tricky problems."

--Noel Lawson

June 18, 7243

AFTER CONRAD FORBES ENDED the meeting the debate hall emptied fairly quickly. Monroe saw no reason to linger, so he rejoined his friends and the left the auditorium. He noticed that the strange black-haired girl was already gone, but he decided not to mention it. After the defeat he had just suffered it didn't seem very important.

The corridors around the auditorium were packed with people who were standing around in small groups, excitedly discussing the city's future. Doyle wanted to stay and chat but Monroe told him it was too loud. "This isn't the place. Come, follow me."

Monroe then led him down several alleyways to a deserted section of the city. When the crowds were finally gone he began to relax.

"Aren't we going the wrong way?" Doyle asked. "This sector doesn't have a subway entrance. I think we need to turn around."

"The subway isn't the only way to get around town. Walking home is an option too, you know. I'm not in any particular hurry and there's nothing waiting on me at home. Besides, this will give us a chance to talk."

Most of Monroe's supporters had already dispersed, but two or three of them had lingered. When they understood that Monroe intended to walk home they bade him goodbye, and Monroe and Doyle were left alone.

"Tonight Evan Maldonado achieved total victory," Monroe announced dejectedly. "The council gave him everything he asked for. He now has the manpower, the funding, and the political support to carry out his genocide against the savages. I see nothing that can stop him."

"There must be something we can do," Doyle replied. "It's not over yet. It's still going to take him three months to assemble the bombs. That gives us a window of opportunity."

"I'm telling you there's nothing we can do! This is over, and we lost. The council and the public both support him. We have only a handful of people on our side and none of them wield any power."

"Well, we'll just have to persuade the public that the general is wrong. If large numbers of people start to put pressure on the council they will respond. That's how things have always worked. Sway the city and you sway the council."

"And how do you propose to do that? The public knows exactly what the savages are like. It's very difficult to create public sympathy for a group that really is composed of actual mindless savages! The people we want them to save are not cute, or heartwarming, or particularly nice. We are asking the public to continue to live in Adrasta and cede the world to mindless savages simply because it is the right thing to do. We are asking them to *not* retake the planet, even though it is within

their power to do so. The general and the council rejected that argument, and the public does as well."

"But there must be something that we can do," Doyle insisted. "We can't just let this happen. We have to stop it somehow."

"I am open to suggestions," Monroe replied. "I have tried arguing our case on multiple occasions but it has not made a bit of difference. If you can think of a concrete step that we can take I would like to hear it."

The two men continued to discuss the situation on the way home, but were unable to come up with any viable ideas. Doyle continued to remain optimistic but Monroe believed it was a lost cause. When they finally reached Monroe's apartment the elderly man turned around and looked at his friend. "We have done all that we can, and we have taken every opportunity we've had to fight against this. At this time there's simply nothing else we can do. Our only course of action is to pray that, perhaps, God will have mercy on us and divert the city away from this path of destruction. Perhaps He will intervene and come to our aid. Otherwise I fear that the savages will be lost."

"There is still hope," Doyle replied. "I know things look bleak but we still have ninety days. Something may turn up, or the situation might change. We will see what tomorrow brings."

Doyle bade his friend goodbye and then walked off. Monroe unlocked the door to his apartment, walked in, and closed the door behind him. He reached up to turn on the lights and saw that the lights were already on. Puzzled, he turned around to see what was going on and saw that there was a stranger in his living room. The shock of seeing someone there made him gasp, and an intense fear shot through him. Then he saw that the stranger in his house was the teenage girl he had seen earlier in the debate hall, and his fear was replaced by scientific curiosity. The girl was seated in his favorite chair, reading one of his books.

The teenager looked up at him. "So there you are! You kinda

took the long way home tonight, didn't you?"

"Well, I wasn't expecting company," Monroe commented, as he sat down in a chair across from her. "Had I known you would be here I might have taken the subway. I've seen you before, you know. You were at the meeting tonight."

She nodded. "Yes, I was. You put up a good fight, by the way. I just wish the council had listened to you. You were right and they were wrong. They've made a really bad move and it's not going to end well for them."

Monroe sighed. "I agree with you, but none of them seem to care what the consequences of this might be. As far as I can tell no one is thinking this through – although, if they are, that makes the situation even more frightening. Maldonado wants a great deal more than simply the extermination of millions, as horrifying as that is all by itself. What he really wants is the establishment of a new Empire. He intends to retake not only this planet, but the stars themselves, and the first act of his new civilization is the murder of millions who stand in their way. Our genetic problems should end our nation before he can get that far, but if I am wrong and he succeeds we will end up with a galactic tyranny that has no respect for life. This is a very dark road. I would rather have no civilization at all than recreate the horrors of the Spanish Empire."

"Well, at least someone here has sense," the girl replied. "When I saw the bomb go off I thought that all of you were psychopaths. I'm glad that's not the case. But you don't have to worry. I'm not going to let the general succeed. He caught me off-guard with his first neutron bomb but he won't be able to do that again. His plan is going to be defeated, and if he insists on clinging to it then he will be defeated as well. I hold him responsible for the 416 people that he murdered this morning. He's going to have to answer for that."

"I quite agree. But – and I do not mean to be rude – how do you propose to do that? The general's support is quite

significant. No one is going to prosecute him for carrying out the will of the council."

"Let me worry about that," the girl replied. "The reason I'm here is because of this book that you wrote. You mentioned your genetic research during the debate and that got my attention. You've done a lot of research on mutations, haven't you?"

Monroe sighed. "I have, and it has all been ignored. People simply do not take my findings seriously, even though I can prove them beyond any reasonable doubt. The truth is that our city is doomed. Five hundred years ago a million people lived in Adrasta, and now there are only eighty thousand. Among those who are left there are extremely few children, and couples find it all-but-impossible to conceive. How can people be so blind? Even without my research it ought to be plain to everyone that there is something seriously wrong with our ability to reproduce! Less than ten percent of the Adrastan population is under the age of fifteen. Of the few children who are born, half of them die in infancy. If things do not change there will be no Adrastans left a century from now. Who does Maldonado think is going to repopulate the planet?"

"Honestly, I don't think he is thinking at all. He's too wrapped up in himself. But tell me something. What work have you done on finding a cure? This book outlines the problem but I don't see a proposed solution."

"That's because there isn't one," Monroe said flatly. "We don't have the technology to reach into our DNA and fix it. What we need to do is increase our genetic diversity by breeding with other groups. The only other available group are the tribes, but we can't breed with them until they're cured and there's no cure for them either."

"Are you completely positive that your genetic code can't be fixed? Has Maldonado tried? Has *anyone* tried?"

"I guess it is more accurate to say that *I* cannot fix it," Monroe admitted. "In fact, I don't even know where to begin. According

to my research no one has ever attempted such a thing before. It may be possible to fix our genetic problems, but despite all my attempts to raise awareness no one is even trying."

"Do you *want* the problem to be fixed?"

"Of course I do!" Monroe replied, irritated. "Do you think I want to see Adrasta die out?"

"I don't know," the girl replied. "You told me earlier that the general was planning on restarting the Spanish Empire and conquering the stars. The last thing I want to do is give him a cure and enable him to carry out his dreams of conquest. Given the choice between a galactic tyranny and the disappearance of this city, wouldn't you rather see the city die out?"

"I do *not* want to see this city die," Monroe said firmly. "What I want is for it to regain its senses and return to the principles of the Founders. I want Adrasta to be a light on a hill, the way it was intended. I want to see us band together and cure the savages, not exterminate them. I want to see us bring light to the galaxy. I don't want anyone to die out. I want to see us changed."

"Good," the girl replied. "That's what I want too. But you have to understand that this is a tricky business. Curing the savages is no easy matter. I'm not sure if it can be done or not, but I'm going to try. Now, that being said, curing your people is a whole lot easier. I'm pretty sure I could do that, but I'm not going to do anything until I know what this city would do if cured. I see no reason to help Adrasta if you're just going to use your power to conquer the stars and rule them tyrannically. If that's what this city wants, and if it cannot be turned from that path no matter what, then you're on your own."

"Just who are you?" Monroe asked. "Why do you think you can do such great things? I don't believe I even know your name."

"My name is Amy," the girl replied. She placed the book back onto the end table and stood up. "You're not the first person to doubt me, Monroe, and I don't blame you for it. Noel doubted

me too, but he doesn't doubt me anymore. Time has a way of proving me right. Just wait a few weeks and then see what you think. The general has an opponent now, and things are about to change."

As she began to walk toward the front door Monroe quickly spoke up. "Are you leaving so soon? Please, there's no need to rush off! I still have plenty of time."

Amy smiled. "I know. You have a whole lot of questions and I haven't answered any of them. But don't worry, I'll be back. Listen to your friend Doyle – there *is* still hope. Oh, and incidentally, I wanted to apologize for scaring you earlier. I'll try to knock next time, or something. Anyway, I hope you have a good evening."

With that, Amy left the apartment and closed the door behind her. Monroe quickly got out of his chair and yanked open the front door, but saw that the hallway was empty. Amy was already gone.

Most curious, he thought, as he closed the door. Could it be that the Rangers have returned at last? She seems a little young to be one of their emissaries, but perhaps her youth is an illusion. Regardless, I look forward to our next meeting, Amy from the stars. May your people succeed in bringing hope to this city.

CHAPTER 6

“The manufacturing sector of Tikal is quite ingenious! I was expecting to find some sort of zero-point-energy plant that could create matter out of energy, like what we had back in the old underground city. Tikal, though, has something a thousand times better. We've discovered warehouses of enormous machines that can transmute one material into another. All you have to do is shovel in large quantities of any material – trash, for example – and tell the machine what pattern you want to apply. It then somehow converts that matter into copies of whatever you chose. You can turn household waste into diamonds, or rocks into copper wiring. It's incredible! So far we've only been able to restore one of these amazing machines. If we can master this technology and repair the rest of them it will open up an entire new era for us!”

--Noel Lawson

June 19, 7243

THE FOLLOWING MORNING Amy Stryker met the Sentinel at the bottom of Falcon Ridge. The morning was warm and humid, and the ground was covered in dew. A low mist hung in the air. Alex thought that the weather was perfect. The dog was rolling around in the grass and had become soaking wet. He barked excitedly at Amy, who smiled at him. *You always did love playing in the water*, she thought to himself. *I'm glad you're happy.*

You're lucky, you know – the cares of this world haven't gotten to you at all. You don't have a single thing to worry about.

Above them was a wide blue sky. The sun was still low on the horizon, but it burned with intensity. Amy knew that it was going to be a warm day. The nanites shielded her from the heat and from the cold, so the weather would not have an effect on her. She merely noted the ambient temperature as an interesting piece of data.

"I see you've been busy," the Sentinel commented. He watched Alex romp around in the grass for a few moments, and then turned and smiled at Amy. "I hope that you did not give Monroe Araiza too much of a shock last night. He is an old man, you know."

"Oh, he's fine," Amy replied. "Sure, I startled him a bit, but he was more curious than frightened. I didn't tell him anything, though. Well, I told him my first name, but that was it. He probably thinks I'm some kind of crazy person."

"I would not be so sure about that. He is a wise man and he excels at thinking rationally. It is possible that he learned more about you than you intended to reveal. He is far more perceptive than most Adrastans."

"I guess. It doesn't really matter, though. It's not like he can stop me or anything. The key point is that the city isn't all bad. While it *is* mostly bad, there are a few people there who care about the tribes and are trying to stop General Maldonado from killing everyone. The big problem is that Monroe and his friends don't have any public support and aren't in positions of power. All they can really do is stand to the side and protest, which isn't doing much good. They mean well but they're completely ineffective."

"So the majority of people in Adrasta wish to see this genocide completed. There is only a small minority that is acting as the city's conscience. What do you intend to do?"

"I'm not sure yet," Amy replied. "I'm definitely going to stop

them from bombing any more tribes. That much I know. But I want to stop the general in an unobtrusive way, so it looks like he's just having a series of accidents or a run of bad luck. I don't want him to know that he has an opponent."

"Why not? What do you gain by doing it that way?"

"Well, the main thing I gain is time. I know you've been working on a cure, but right now we don't know if our efforts are going to pay off or not. I'd like to know how things are going to turn out before I decide what to do with Adrasta. What I'd like to do is stall the bombing campaign long enough for us to find a cure. Then I'd like to give that cure to Monroe, so he can present it to the city and use it to turn the tide of public opinion. If the Adrastans are presented with another option they may rethink what they're about to do. After all, it's one thing to murder a bunch of so-called 'subhuman savages'. It's quite another to murder a group of people who can be cured and returned to their right mind. The existence of a cure might help the city see the tribes as actual human beings. It may give them a bit of perspective. At the very least, it's worth a try."

"I suppose it is possible," the Sentinel agreed. "But I still do not understand why you need to keep yourself hidden."

Amy sighed. "It's because I want to give Adrasta a chance. I mean, look. I want to know what the city will do if they know that the savages can be cured. Will they have a change of heart? Will they renounce the general's plan? I honestly don't know. If they think that the cure came from Adrasta itself then their reaction will be honest, and I'll be able to see who they really are. But if I walk in as this all-powerful person and force them to stop, then I lose the chance to see their heart. At that point dropping the bombing campaign wouldn't mean anything because I forced them to do it."

"I understand," the Sentinel replied. "You want to know if Adrasta is worth saving."

Amy winced. "That sounds kind of harsh, but I guess you're

right. I've got to find out if I should intervene and heal them of their infertility problems, and that means I have to test them somehow. I don't want to heal them if they're just going to use their offspring to kill millions of people. I don't want to be the person who allowed them to dominate the galaxy and enslave billions of planets. The consequences for making the wrong decision here are really, really large. If the Adrastans show a change of heart then that's one thing, but if they don't then I see no compelling reason to rush to their aid."

"There is a lot riding on this, then," the Sentinel commented. "What they decide to do with the savages will determine whether or not their city has a future."

"Yes," Amy agreed. "Speaking of the future, how is the cure attempt going?"

"It is still in its early stages. I have noticed that your observation was right – it is indeed the children who are responsible for the more civilized aspects of their society. The damage is still there in the young but it becomes progressively worse as the child ages, and once the child reaches adulthood the madness has fully set in. I do not know this for certain, but it may be possible to cure the children before the damaged genetic code has caused too much mental disruption. A cure while the damage is still limited is far more feasible than attempting to repair a brain that has succumbed to chaos."

Amy nodded. "I guess we can start there, then. I mean, I'm still hoping to cure everyone, but we have to start somewhere. I guess if we *had* to we could cure the children, then move the cured children to another planet and let the Stewards take care of them. They could then grow up as civilized people. I really don't want to do that, though. Children need their parents. A computer program is a poor substitute for a mother and a father."

"I agree, but it may be all that we can do. It is a last resort, but at least it would end the disease and it would only affect one

generation. As the adults died off the disease would die off as well, and the cured children would have children of their own who were sane and rational. It would mean the loss of the entire adult generation, but subsequent generations would not suffer any ill effects.”

Amy nodded. “True. But at this point we've only been studying this for one day. I'd like to do a *lot* more work before we write off all the adults as a lost cause. Besides, we don't even have a cure for the young yet!”

“Agreed. But we now have a starting point and a potential plan. I will keep you informed as I make progress.”

“Thanks,” Amy replied. “In the meantime I'm going to be babysitting Adrasta. I can think of a lot of other things I'd rather be doing, but someone has got to do it and I'd rather it be me than you. You need to stay focused on the cure.”

“Couldn't you set up a Steward to watch the Adrastans?” the Sentinel asked. “Is it really necessary for you to personally monitor them?”

“Sure I could, but you tried that before and it was a colossal failure. Remember what happened when you used security bots to control Star City?”

“That was indeed an epic failure,” the Sentinel admitted. “I see your point. But perhaps that could be corrected for.”

Amy shook her head. “The last time I let a computer watch over a city, every last person in that city died. There's no way I'm doing that again. This time I'm going to handle things myself. I don't want to lose another planet – or another tribe, for that matter.”

“Very well,” the Sentinel replied. “I see the wisdom of your course. I will return to my work, then. If you need me simply let me know.”

“Thanks,” Amy replied. “I appreciate it. I don't know what I would do without you.”

Alex looked over at Amy and barked. “Does this mean you're

going to go now?"

"I'm afraid so," Amy said. "I've got some work to do. But I'll be back soon, all right?"

"But I don't want you to go," Alex whined. "Can't I come with you? Please?"

Amy sighed, and then smiled. "Oh, all right. I'm going to be monitoring the city from a distance anyway. You and I can find a safe spot in the mountains and camp out. If you promise to be good I'll let you come. How does that sound?"

Alex barked excitedly and ran around in circles. The Sentinel looked at Amy curiously. "I would be more than happy to watch him for you. He is not a bother."

"Oh, don't worry about it! He is my dog, you know, and I haven't had a chance to spend much time with him lately. If I have to run an errand or something I may ask for help, but I'm sure he'll be fine. Just focus on the cure – that's entirely riding on you. I really can't offer much help on that."

"I will do what I can," the Sentinel promised.

Amy nodded. A moment later, all three of them disappeared.

CHAPTER 7

“One discovery that caught me by surprise was the excavation of an observatory. When the Wall was erected people stopped studying astronomy, since they could no longer see the stars. This observatory is changing all that. What amazes me is that the building we found does not use telescopes and lenses to magnify tiny points of light. Instead it somehow has the ability to reach across space and show you how the galaxy looks from any vantage point. You simply stand in a room and select a destination, and the entire room vanishes. It somehow uses holographic technology to make it look like you are really standing on a remote mountaintop or on some distant planet. I once spent an entire weekend there just flying through the galaxy. It is astonishing. It's no wonder it has become one of the most popular places in the city.”

--Noel Lawson

June 19, 7243

MONROE ARAIZA WAS STANDING in one of the great stone towers of Adrasta. Through the crystal window in front of him he could see the mountains, and beyond them a wide grassy plain. He knew that on the far side of that plain was the spot where Evan Maldonado's neutron bomb had vaporized a forest – and the tribe that used to dwell in it. The damage was invisible from the tower but he knew that it was there. It haunted him, even

though he had worked so hard to stop it.

Monroe was standing in the private chambers of the Order of Scribes. The Founders had started the group long ago, in the earliest days of Adrasta. They realized that when the Empire collapsed much knowledge would be lost, unless a group of people was set aside and trained in the care and preservation of documents. Over the past five thousand years men like Monroe had faithfully executed their duties. In the Order's archives they had preserved a vast collection of books, covering technology, history, art, and countless other subjects. The Order was the caretaker of that knowledge. If anyone in Adrasta wished to use that knowledge – as Evan did when he wanted to construct his bomb – they had to go through the Order of Scribes to do so.

Originally Monroe had thought that Evan had developed the neutron technology on his own. That was what Evan told the council, and since Monroe had not seen any information requests from him he assumed that was the truth. By pure accident he discovered that the technology had actually been given to him by a scribe in the Order. Monroe was enraged, and confronted the one who had done it.

“But why did you agree to help him?” Monroe demanded.

“Because he made a lawful and legitimate request,” Elwood Ortiz replied. “He asked for information regarding ancient technology and we provided it for him. That is, after all, our sacred purpose.”

“Do not hide behind requests and procedure!” Monroe said angrily. “You knew very well what Evan intended to do with that knowledge. The genocide he is attempting to carry out goes against every one of our founding principles. The whole reason our Order was established was to ensure that dangerous information was guarded and used wisely, in accordance with the Founders' principles. They would be horrified at what you have done!”

“And what is it that I have done?” Elwood asked. “I merely

copied some manuscripts and handed them to a well-dressed gentleman. There was no harm in that.”

“Do you take me for a fool? You were the one who gave General Maldonado the knowledge he needed to wipe out that tribe! Thanks to you he now has the knowledge he needs to wipe out every last tribe on the entire planet. You are not an innocent bystander! Without your help he never could have carried out that bombing. You are every bit as responsible for their murders as he is.”

Elwood shrugged. “I fail to see what would have been gained by denying his request. If I had not made the copies for him he would simply have asked someone else to do it.”

“That’s just brilliant,” Monroe said bitingly. “By that same logic a murderer could say that since the innocent bystander was going to die someday anyway, there was no harm in going ahead and killing him. Have you lost your senses? Why did you not burn that book instead of handing it over? I would rather see our entire library destroyed than have its knowledge used to enable genocide!”

“Which is exactly why you no longer have any power. Oh, true, you may still be the head of our Order. But you can no longer get people to listen to you, can you? Your reverence for the Founders and their principles has blinded you to the realities of our times. Refusing the will of the council is not going to win you any friends, you know.”

“Friends? This isn’t about winning friends! The whole purpose of our Order – and of the city itself, for that matter – is to spread the light of the truth. We are to be witnesses and ambassadors for Jesus Christ. He was quite unpopular in His day, but He never sold out to win the approval of those who were in power. He stood for what was right and refused to yield.”

“And, as I might point out, he was killed for it,” Elwood replied.

“I would rather die than help Maldonado,” Monroe shouted.

"It is far better to die a victim than be a part of the crime – especially when the crime is the wholesale slaughter of millions of human beings! What are you going to do when you stand before God and must give an account for your life? What will you do when He judges you for your role in the murder of ten million human beings?"

"I am not the least bit worried about that," Elwood replied calmly. "You don't make a compelling case, you know. It's no wonder that you lost so badly at the debate hall last night. You are well past your prime. You should consider retiring, before the council forces you out."

"You had *better* start worrying about it. Only a fool would laugh at the prospect of facing the full wrath of an angry God."

"And that is the difference between us. It is why I am successful and why you are a failure. You're worried about what your imaginary friend in the sky thinks. I'm worried about real things, like the opinion of the council. How you managed to become the head of our Order is something I will never understand."

"Has it really come to that? Are you now so blind that you only care about winning friends, influencing people, and amassing power? Have you become so hardened that you no longer care that your actions are leading to the deaths of *millions of people*?" Monroe sighed. "Then perhaps the Rangers are right. Perhaps Adrasta does deserve to die. If that is who we are then perhaps we don't deserve to be saved. Maybe our genetic problem is simply God's way of ensuring that Evan's terrible dream of galactic tyranny is never realized."

"I see nothing particularly terrible about it," Elwood replied. "After all, it's only natural for the strong to crush the weak and take their place. That is the way of nature – the fittest survive. I think Adrasta has finally come to its senses. For thousands of years this city spent valuable resources trying to help those idiotic savages. We gave them food and shelter, we tried to treat

their diseases, and we offered what protection we could. That was madness! Now, thankfully, wiser heads have prevailed and we have abandoned all that. We will take what is ours and we will ride to triumph and glory! It is time for the weak to give way to the strong.”

“If that is the case then we are doomed,” Monroe replied. “You think that we're the strongest power in the galaxy, but you're wrong. Have you no eyes? Do you not see what has been happening in the heavens? Some power far greater than us has put the stars back in the sky and terraformed Mars in a matter of months. What are you going to do when that civilization comes to Adrasta? Do you think that Evan's neutron weapon can protect us against a race that can imprison entire star systems?”

Elwood laughed. “Peddling conspiracy theories is the last refuge of a moron. The stars reappeared three years ago, and the terraformation of Mars happened three years ago as well. Since that time we haven't had any interstellar visitors. You are seeing things that are not there.”

“Is that so? Then tell me something. Did you not see the young girl with dark skin who sat in the opposition section last night?”

“Yes, I saw her. I assumed she was one of your lackeys. You have always surrounded yourself with weak minds. What of it?”

Monroe shook his head. “Are you blind? Did you not see her? She's clearly not from Adrasta. Her skin color – the bones in her face – they prove beyond doubt that she is from an entirely different genetic background. No one else in the city looks anything like her. Didn't you notice how much she stood out?”

“Come now! You cannot expect me to believe that she is from the stars. Do you seriously think that when the Rangers return they will do so in the form of a helpless little girl? That's madness! Why would they do such a thing?”

“Perhaps they are testing us. Perhaps they went to Mars first and found it worthy of saving. Now their gaze has fallen upon

Earth, and they have sent one of their own to learn about us and see who we are. This may be our time of judgment. If we do not change our ways, she may be the harbinger of our doom.”

“You are out of your mind,” Elwood said. “I have tired of this conversation. Leave me. If you have any more insanity to spout, go spout it somewhere else.”

Monroe shook his head. “I fear for you, my friend. I really do. I fear for us all.”

He sighed, gathered up his books, and left the room.

CHAPTER 8

"One thing that's really puzzled me about Tikal is that we haven't found any personal effects. I'm sure that countless people once lived in this ruin, but they have left behind no traces. There is no clothing in the closets, or books on the shelves, or toys scattered on the floor. The cupboards contain no dishes and the offices contain no computers. It's as if everyone moved out before the collapse happened. Some argue that the city was looted before it was buried, but the problem with that theory is that none of the wiring or machinery was taken. Why would looters take the paintings off the walls and leave all of the priceless ancient technology behind? It just doesn't make sense!"

--Noel Lawson

June 19, 7243

LATER THAT MORNING Monroe Araiza was sitting in his living room, reading a book. On the end table next to him was a pencil and a pad of paper. Every now and then the scribe set the book aside, jotted down a few notes, and then resumed reading. He spent most of the morning engrossed in study and lost all track of time. When he suddenly heard a knock on his front door he looked up, startled. Then he glanced at the clock on the wall and realized what time it was.

"Come in, Doyle," he called out.

As his friend walked into the room Monroe put his book down. "You're running a bit late today," the scribe commented.

"It's almost eleven o'clock! Did you run into trouble?"

"Not exactly," Doyle replied, as he settled into his customary seat. "I just thought you'd be in your office this morning. I searched everywhere for you and couldn't find you. I thought that maybe you were in a meeting or something, until Elwood told me that you had left some time ago. From what I gathered the two of you had some kind of disagreement."

"Yes, you could call it that. I made a trip to the office earlier this morning to gather some research materials. While I was there I ran into Elwood, and we had a rather sharp disagreement. The bottom line is that he supports genocide and I do not. Apparently my defense of innocent life makes me an unpopular man. So I retreated here so that I might study in peace."

"So it's confirmed, then. The Order is fully behind the general?"

"I am afraid so," Monroe sighed. "I already knew that, of course, but it's still depressing to have it confirmed. I had some small hope that I might be able to reason with them and convince them to come to their senses, but that proved to be futile. Maldonado, it seems, has won the day. The general seems to have the unconditional support of everyone."

"I suppose that's true, for the time being. But that may yet change. Something might still turn up."

Monroe laughed. "You always were the optimist! Somehow you have always managed to see a glimmer of hope, even when there was no hope to be had. You are truly the king of wishful thinkers. But in this case you may be right. It's possible that the situation has already changed."

"Oh? Did something happen last night that I missed? I didn't see anything in the news this morning – not that you can trust the news, but still."

"This wasn't on the news. Do you remember that girl I asked you about in the debate hall? Well, she paid me a visit last night. She told me that her name was Amy. She didn't give a last

name.”

“Amy...” Doyle repeated thoughtfully. “I don't think I know an Amy. Not in our circles, anyway. I'm pretty sure that I've never seen her before. She hasn't been to any of our meetings, and she didn't look familiar.”

“That's because she's not from Earth,” Monroe replied. “I'm pretty sure she's an emissary from the Rangers. At least, that's my theory. I've spent the entire morning brushing up on my ancient history. The main thing I'm trying to figure out is where she might be from. I'm sure that the Ranger civilization has expanded enormously over the past five millennia, but there was something about her that looked almost familiar. For some reason I feel like I ought to be able to pinpoint her home planet. She had this distinctive look that I know I've seen before, somewhere. The problem is I haven't been able to track it down.”

Doyle thought for a moment. “Have you checked *The History of Martian Dog Breeders* by Judith Aguilar? That book might be able to shed some light on the matter.”

“Dog breeders!” Monroe exclaimed. “How could that possibly help? I'm quite sure that she is *not* a canine, and I do not care if she breeds dogs or not!”

His friend smiled. “You need to start thinking a little more creatively. Amy did seem to have some alien features about her. We haven't had contact with anyone since the Wall was erected, so if she looks familiar she must resemble some race that existed five thousand years ago. The only unique race that was around back then was the Martian race, which developed a set of distinctive genetic traits after the ancient Mayan colonists were stranded on Mars for nearly a thousand years. I only glimpsed Amy briefly, but her features do strike me as being vaguely Martian. The reason that book might help is because it contains photographs of ancient Martian dog breeders, some of whom were descendents of the ancient Maya colonists. All you have to do is browse through the book and see if any of them share

Amy's features."

"Of course!" Monroe exclaimed. "Brilliant! I never would have thought of it. That brings up another question: just where did I put my copy of that book?"

The scribe stood up, thought for a moment, and then walked across the living room to a giant bookshelf. He then removed some of the books off the third shelf and grabbed a book that had been hidden behind them. "Ah, here we go. Let me see. Here's one! This picture was taken at the Tikal Dog Show on October 3, 1853. It shows the first, second, and third-place winners, along with their owners. And just look at those features! Look at the cheekbones, the forehead, the skull shape! Yes, Doyle, you have done it again. This is exactly what we were looking for. Amy is a descendent of the ancient Martians!"

Monroe walked back to his chair and handed the book to his friend, so he could see the evidence as well. The scribe then sat back down and grabbed his notebook. "This is quite exciting – quite exciting! It's all starting to come together now. Three years ago the Rangers brought down the Wall and made a trip to Mars. The journey must have been a favorable one, because while they were there they terraformed the planet and brought it back to life. During that time they must have had extensive contact with the locals, and possibly even hired some of them. Amy must be one of these new hires. The Rangers have taken her from Mars and have sent her here to evaluate this planet."

"So you believe that the Rangers still exist, after all this time?"

"Certainly!" Monroe replied. "Oh, they might not call themselves the Rangers anymore. Five thousand years is a very long time, and there could have been countless political changes. The galaxy may be unified under one government, or it might be a loose federation of countless nations. There's no telling how many distinct political entities there are out there these days. What is quite clear is that they are the descendents of what we

once called the Rangers, and that they have come back. Mars has already rejoined the galactic civilization, and now we are being evaluated for membership as well.”

“Are you sure?” Doyle asked doubtfully. “Amy just seems a bit young to me. Why would the Rangers send us a teenager? Doesn't that strike you as a bit strange?”

“Appearances can be quite deceiving. She may actually be a great deal older than she looks; the appearance of youth might be a clever disguise. As it turns out, we can use simple logic to prove that she was sent here by the Rangers. It all goes back to a single point: why are there now stars in the night sky?”

“Well, because the Wall is gone,” Doyle replied. “It's really kind of obvious.”

“Yes, yes, I know. But *why* is the Wall gone? Who shut it down? We all know it cannot be terminated from within. The public believes that it collapsed due to an equipment failure, but that is preposterous. In 6197 Merlin Hardin wrote a treatise on what would happen if the Wall suddenly became unstable and collapsed. His theories were reviewed extensively by the mathematicians and physicists of his day and they could see no flaw in his argument. If the Wall collapsed on his own, without being shut down in a very careful and controlled fashion, its collapse would utterly destroy everything inside the Wall. Our entire planet – along with everything else in the Solar System – would be annihilated in a microsecond! This was proven beyond a doubt. So then, when the Wall suddenly disappears, what do people do? They say 'Oh, Hardin must have been wrong after all. The Wall is gone and we're still alive! He just didn't know what he was talking about.' Preposterous! Absolutely preposterous.”

“You'll get no argument from me,” Doyle replied. “I quite agree. The public's perception of these things is not terribly well-informed.”

“Of course it's not! They simply don't care. They are far more interested in fashion trends, celebrity gossip, and the outcome of

some utterly meaningless sports contest. It's madness! They ignore things that have a tremendous impact on their future, and consume themselves with things that have no practical importance whatsoever. Their understanding of history is especially appalling. The Order has preserved countless historical documents from the Spanish Empire, but people today can't be bothered to actually read them. If you ask most people why the Wall was built they'll tell you that the Spanish Emperor shot a sparrow out of the sky, and it angered the star-gods so much that they imprisoned mankind as punishment. That is the extent of their knowledge, and they do not care to know more."

"And yet, that mythical account is not too far from the truth," Doyle pointed out. "The archives do agree that the Empire provoked the Rangers for years, until the Rangers finally decided they had had enough and declared war. The war only lasted a couple hours and the Spanish Empire was decisively defeated. The Rangers then put a Wall around Sol. After the Wall appeared, the Empire lasted only a few more weeks before it utterly disintegrated into chaos and anarchy."

"Which is curious in itself," Monroe commented. "What destroyed the Empire was not the Rangers but the Wall. The Empire was apparently intact when the Wall was erected. Apparently the mere effect of being cut off from the Rangers was enough to destroy all civilization around Sol. Personally, I've always wondered why the Rangers handled things that way. If the Empire lost – and they must have, for the Wall was imposed upon them from the outside – then why didn't the Rangers simply take over Sol and rule it for themselves? After all, there are no reports that the Emperor was able to damage so much as a single Ranger colony, and the Rangers apparently defeated them the same day that hostilities broke out. For that matter, one wonders why the Rangers allowed the Empire to taunt them for so long. Given the Ranger's obviously superior strength and technology, I am amazed that the Emperor did not exercise more

discretion.”

“I suppose that is something we will never know,” Doyle replied. “Perhaps the planets around Sol were so poisoned and devastated by the attack that the Rangers believed they were worthless, and they put up the Wall to keep the poison from spreading. They may have believed that there was simply nothing here worth their time – especially when they had a hundred billion other stars to explore.”

“Perhaps. The other mystery, I suppose, is where the popular legend came from. I find it very difficult to believe that the Rangers declared war on the Empire just because the Emperor shot a bird out of the sky. That is hardly grounds for war. Therefore, if it existed at all, this 'sparrow' must be metaphorical. Perhaps the Empire assassinated someone, or something along those lines. That may be something that we'll have to ask Amy. As an agent of the Rangers she should have access to all of their historical documents. If not, perhaps she could put us in touch with someone who does. Assuming Earth passes its test, of course. She seems quite upset with Maldonado at the moment.”

“So she's on our side?” Doyle asked, surprised. “That is certainly welcome news – assuming she is a Ranger, that is, and actually has some power. Do you think she'll be able to stop the genocide?”

“I don't know. She certainly believed that she could. The girl looked harmless enough to me, but her confidence was extraordinary! She really believed that she wielded great power. When she stated that she was going to stop the general she said it as if it was a small matter – like an adult restraining a helpless infant. She was not the least bit concerned about the general's military might. If she is an agent of the Rangers then I can understand why. I'm sure that the armed forces of Adrasta are nothing compared to the armadas of a galactic civilization. We are probably outnumbered trillions to one.”

“Isn't that a bit troubling?” Doyle asked. “I admit that we

could use their help in saving the tribes, but do we really want to be at the mercy of a galactic civilization?"

"It's not as troubling as it seems," Monroe replied. "The fact of the matter is that if the Rangers really are out there – and I think the evidence for that is quite solid – then we *are* at their mercy, whether we wish to be or not. Moreover, the Rangers have had three years to conquer us and they have not done so. All they have done is sent a single non-threatening girl to this planet to see what we are doing, and all she wants to do is save the tribes – and, possibly, save us as well."

"Save us?" Doyle asked. "Save us from what?"

"From our impending genetic doom, of course! Based on what Amy told me last night, the Rangers have a cure for our infertility. The problem is that she doesn't know whether we *should* be cured. She was worried that if she cured us, we would use our future to try to wipe out other races. She doesn't want to cure a race of genocidal monsters."

"I can hardly blame her," Doyle said. "But I do not know if I should be comforted or disturbed. It's a bit frightening realizing that your future rests in the hands of strangers that you can't see. I'm not sure that I want my future to depend on the whims of those who dwell among the stars."

Monroe laughed. "What happened to your unbridled optimism? You're beginning to sound like me!"

"I don't think I'm quite that bad," Doyle replied. "Besides, despite what you might think, my optimism is not blind. I'm just not willing to say that all is lost until all really *is* lost. Until the tribes are actually massacred there is always a chance that something might come up. As long as they are still alive there is still hope that the Lord might hear our prayers and intervene. I simply refuse to give up hope until it is actually over. All I am saying here is that I'm a bit nervous about the true intentions of the Rangers. Historically speaking, powerful civilizations tend to crush and enslave weaker ones. If you want an example just look

at what we're doing to the tribes! I find it hard to believe that this time, the more powerful party has come solve our problems and then vanish, like some kind of fairy godmother. Does that really seem likely to you?"

Monroe thought for a moment. "Look at it this way. Had I not told you about Amy's visit last night, you would not have even know that they were here. The Rangers are operating with a very light touch. So far they have not interfered with anything that we've done, nor have they come in force and taken over. I do not see that they have taken any steps that we can criticize them for. Besides, as far as I can tell the Rangers are our only hope for survival. If they do not cure us then we will assuredly die out. Frankly, we don't have a lot of options."

"I suppose not," Doyle agreed. "It's just troubling. I wish we knew more about them."

"Perhaps, in time, we will," Monroe replied.

CHAPTER 9

"It's raining in Tikal today – absolutely pouring rain. I love it! It's astounding to once again live on a planet that has weather patterns. Not only that, there are seasons as well! I have seen rain, and snow, and fog. I have seen beautiful days and overcast days. The variety is simply delightful! Now if we can only learn to predict the weather. Sadly, that art was lost long ago. After all, who needs to predict the weather when everyone lives underground?"

--Noel Lawson

June 21, 7243

TWO DAYS LATER, Amy and the Sentinel once again met at the base of Falcon Ridge. When the Sentinel arrived he saw that Amy had been there for some time. She was standing there, looking out over the horizon, deep in thought. Alex was curled up at her feet, sound asleep.

"I did not know that you were waiting on me," the Sentinel said. "Had I known I could have come earlier. There was no reason to keep you waiting."

Amy shrugged. "It's not a big deal. I wasn't in a hurry. It's kind of nice to just stand here and take in Earth's beauty. I can see why so many people used to want to live here. This world has got such magnificent diversity – forests, jungles, deserts, mountains, and huge oceans."

"Mars is quite a beautiful place as well," the Sentinel pointed out. "It has undergone dramatic changes since the day you set

foot on it three years ago.”

“Oh, I know. And I do like Mars and everything. It's just – I don't know. Earth just seems kind of sad to me. This planet used to be home to billions of civilized men, and now all that's left are tribes of completely insane people – and Adrasta, which is home to even more insane people. This planet ought to have cities, and people, and art, and culture, and everything, and it doesn't. Why do people waste their future, Steve? I don't understand.”

“People do tend to make poor choices. That has always been the case. I take it that your monitoring of the stone fortress has not gone well.”

“Well, yes and no. I mean, Evan Maldonado is still working on building more neutron bombs, but so far he hasn't been able to kill anyone else. At some point I'm going to have to intervene and slow that project down. I would have done that already but I'm trying to find an opportunity that won't raise his suspicions. What really bothers me is that the Adrastans don't seem to have a conscience. With the exception of Monroe and his friends, everyone there is a psychopath. The people there just don't have a problem with killing other people to get what they want. It doesn't bother them.”

“The people on Xanthe were the same,” the Sentinel pointed out.

“I know, but it just feels like this should be different. Those people had been in pods for five thousand years, so I'm really not surprised that they lost their minds. The pods were designed to fulfill every dark and horrifying desire they had, which only drove them to even darker desires. Besides, the people we found on Mars weren't like this. They were lazy and unmotivated and maybe a bit apathetic, but they weren't murderous lunatics. What makes all this worse is the history of Adrasta. The people there actually call themselves the Children of Light, and the city's founders specifically charged their descendents with the task of spreading the gospel. They started out as a *missions*

organization, Steve! You can read all about it in the Stone Hall. They were supposed to preserve the light of spiritual truth for future generations.”

“Yes, I noticed. The Hall is a remarkable place, and the Founders were clearly wise men. It would seem that Adrasta has strayed from its roots.”

“If by strayed you mean *completely lost it*, then I would agree. I just don't understand, Steve, I really don't. I'm not asking them for very much, you know. My list of demands is pretty short: I just want them to not massacre every other human being on the planet. That's it. We would get along fine if they weren't homicidal maniacs.”

The Sentinel nodded. “You know, Amy, you don't have to deal with them if you don't want to. You could always transport Adrasta to some distant planet. If they were removed from Earth they would no longer be a threat to the tribes, and their genetic problems would ensure that they died out before they could develop interstellar capabilities and threaten anyone else.”

“I know. And you're right – that is a very tempting thought. After what they've done they certainly deserve it. I just – I mean, what you're suggesting is that I condemn an entire city to death. That's a pretty big step, and I'd rather not do that until I absolutely positively have to. Maybe they will change if we can cure the savages. It's possible that when they're faced with the reality of massacring *sane* people they'll realize the horror of their ways and will repent. I don't know. Maybe that's just wishful thinking, but I think it's worth a try.”

“Perhaps you are right. However, there is no guarantee that we will find a cure. I have spent the past two days working on the problem and I am not appreciably closer to a solution. My computational abilities are simply not as great as my father's. Given the complexity of the problem, I do not see how I can arrive at a solution in a reasonable amount of time. At my current rate of progress it could take more than a millennia to

find a cure.”

“Oh my goodness! I had no idea. Wow, that's really bad. Is it really that hard?”

The Sentinel nodded. “Look at it this way. The tribes' genetic code is damaged in some very serious ways, and that damage has caused all sorts of abnormalities – abnormalities that become quite devastating once the individual goes through puberty. Since I do not wish to experiment on live human subjects, the only way I can look for a cure is to build a mathematical model of the human body, in all its staggering complexity, and then attempt changes to it to see what the ramifications are. It is *quite* difficult, and I find that my resources are not up to the task. I could simplify the model but then I risk overlooking serious side-effects of any proposed cures.”

“So why not just build more computers to help you?” Amy asked. “I mean, look, we've got the resources of millions of stars to work with. Why not turn every planet in the network into a giant supercomputer, and then have them run the simulations for you? Wouldn't that be a lot faster?”

The Sentinel looked surprised. “Yes, I imagine it would be. The computing power would be staggering – I could run millions of simulations at once and get results back quite quickly. But are you sure that it is wise to turn the network into a giant computer?”

Amy looked confused. “Um, I don't see why not. Are you afraid that the computer will rise up and attack us, or something?”

“Oh, certainly not! The massively parallel supercomputer you are proposing would not be sentient, nor would it have the capacity for choice, nor could an outside force seize it and use it against us. The reason I am hesitant is because purpose of the network was to transform hostile worlds into habitable paradises so mankind could build colonies on them. Turning those worlds into giant machines seems to be a perversion of that purpose.”

"Couldn't you put the worlds back when you were done? I mean, it's not like this is permanent or anything, and the reason we're doing it is to help cure people so that one day the tribes can actually go to those planets and live there. I don't see how this does any permanent harm."

"Yes, it will be reversible. But this effort will take more than a couple hours. There are some complexities involved with converting hundreds of millions of planets into hundreds of millions of giant, planet-sized computers. Even though each Steward can manage the conversion of their own world, there is still the matter of the computer's design and creating the linkages between them. Given the magnitude of the changes that you are proposing, even converting one planet will take eight or nine days."

"But you can do them all at the same time, right?" Amy asked.

"Yes, I believe so – after I have formalized a design. Once they are built I will need to network them and build some sort of central hub so I can give them commands and receive results."

"So how long will this take?"

The Sentinel thought for a moment. "Twelve days, I think, would be sufficient. It may take longer, but as the Stewards will do most of the work and they will be operating in parallel, I think that is a reasonable guess."

"That's not bad. It's a lot better than you spending thousands of years trying to find a cure by yourself. I say let's do it."

"Then it shall be done. However, I do not believe that we should convert *all* of the worlds. There are two that should be spared."

Amy nodded. "Yeah, I agree. Let's leave Tonina alone. That just makes sense. Alex really likes it there, and I'm kind of fond of it myself. But what was the other one?"

"Jasmine, of course. Your world. I do not wish to see it turned into a giant calculator."

Amy smiled. "All right. We can exempt those two planets – but only those two! All the rest get converted."

"Then we are in agreement. I will begin work the process and will keep you informed."

Alex yawned, then rolled over and looked up at Amy. The dog then got to his feet, stretched, and started walking around, sniffing the grass.

Amy watched him for a moment then looked back at the Sentinel. "Is there anything I can do to help you?"

He shook his head. "I believe I can handle it. This is the sort of task that I was designed to do. It will simply take a lot of effort."

Amy nodded. "I'm sure it will. While you're doing that I will keep watch over the murderous fools who live in Adrasta. It's a terrible job but it's got to be done."

"You know, Amy, the Adrastans are not all imbeciles. Monroe Araiza is, as I said earlier, quite perceptive. He has made some very intelligent guesses about your true identity. They are, unfortunately, not correct, but given what he knows they are reasonable hypotheses."

"Yeah, I noticed. He is pretty sharp. I'm going to have to be careful about what I tell him. At this point I really don't want him to know that the Rangers are gone and I'm the only one that's left. That knowledge seems to really freak people out. But, anyway, I'm glad he's there. At least Adrasta has someone who is passionately fighting for what's right. I just wish he had more people on his side."

The Sentinel nodded. "Perhaps one day he will. Is there anything else that you need?"

"Let me see." Amy looked over at Alex and called to him. "Are you ready to go back to the mountains?"

"No thanks," Alex barked. "They're no fun at all. It's all rocks. There's no grass and nothing to chase. I'd rather stay here."

"Suit yourself," Amy replied. She then looked at the Sentinel,

who nodded. "I will keep an eye on him for you."

"Thanks," she said. "I'll see you later, Alex, ok?"

"Ok!" Alex said joyfully. He then ran off, chasing a butterfly. Amy shook her head. She then said goodbye to the Sentinel, and both of them disappeared, leaving Alex on the plain.

CHAPTER 10

"I know for a fact that Miles has developed a way to launch satellites into orbit. Apparently he's been able to do that for a long time. I don't know how he does it, though, and unfortunately he just laughs when I ask him about it. In fact, he won't even give me access to his satellites. At this point I'd be content if he would just launch satellites for us, but he won't do that either. Every time I bring it up he just tells me that I need to invent that technology myself – which is fair enough, I suppose. If he did hand me his designs it would be all-too-easy to simply copy them without understanding how they worked or why those particular design choices were made."

--Noel Lawson

June 24, 7243

THE FOLLOWING TWO DAYS were relatively quiet. Nothing new or unusual happened in Adrasta, and no one reported seeing a young girl with long black hair and dark skin. Monroe was slightly disappointed at this, as he had hoped that Amy would take some immediate and drastic action, but there was nothing he could do about it. On the bright side, the lack of significant events did give him some extra time. Since there was nothing else going on he spent those two days in his office, studying every book he could find that so much as mentioned the Spanish Empire's war with the Rangers. He was hoping to find some new bit of information that would explain where the Legend of the Sparrow came from.

He knew that no one had ever been able to pin it down, but as far as he knew no one had really studied it either. So while he waited on Amy to do something he read old books and took copious notes.

On the morning of the third day, after hours of reading, he decided that he needed to take a break to clear his mind. Monroe strolled out of his office, wandered through the chambers of the Order, and eventually found himself standing outside on a stone patio. To his surprise Elwood was there. He was standing by the railing, looking out into the distance. When he heard Monroe close the door behind him he turned around and glared. "Monroe! I should have known. You always seem to show up where you're not wanted. And just what do you think you're doing, coming out here?"

"I work here," Monroe replied. "My office is right down the hall, as it has been for the past few decades."

"Just because you somehow still have an office doesn't mean that you're welcome here. As a matter of fact, you are universally despised. Everyone in the Order hates you and can't wait to see you leave. That office isn't going to belong to you for much longer. If you don't drop dead soon I will do my very best to have your status as head scribe taken from you. You're an embarrassment to us all."

"You will fail," Monroe said calmly. "The last head scribe to be forcibly removed from office by the council was Douglas Benson, who attempted to assassinate the council during their annual charity gala. That happened way back in 5320. Since then not a single head scribe has been fired, regardless of the unpopularity of their positions. Even outrageously incompetent scribes have managed to hold onto their jobs. Your continued insults only serve to make you look petty."

"You're just a poor loser," Elwood shot back. "But your days are numbered. Do you see those dots down there?"

Monroe walked over to the railing and glanced down. Below

them he could see the mountainside, and beyond the mountain he could see a vast prairie that stretched out to the horizon. A slender road snaked through the grassland and up the mountainside. In the distance, moving along the road at a good clip, was a line of six small dots.

"Yes, I see them. I hadn't noticed them until you pointed them out. They're still pretty far away. If I had to guess I'd say that they were trucks of some kind."

"That's exactly what they are! That is a fleet of six top-of-the-line, automated, robotic tankers. They left the Y12 mine late last night and are just now arriving at Adrasta. Twenty minutes from now they will have climbed up the mountain pass and will be in the city's unloading bay."

"The Y12 mine?" Monroe asked. "Isn't that the general's lithium mine? Do you mean that those are the lithium trucks?"

"That's exactly what they are," Elwood said proudly. "General Maldonado has obtained the lithium he needs ahead of schedule! Those tankers are carrying it this way as we speak."

"But wait a minute. Did you say they were *tankers*? As in oil takers? Lithium isn't a liquid! What are they doing transporting it in tankers?"

"The general had to use what he had available," Elwood explained. "The only robotic fleet Adrasta has are the oil tankers, so he retrofitted them to carry the crushed lithium powder. It actually wasn't that difficult."

"But I still don't understand why he would bother. Adrasta has lots of other trucks. Why use oil tankers to transport crushed rocks?"

"Well, as I said, the oil tankers are the only fully automated ones in the entire city. They were designed to be driverless so they could make the quarterly run to the Dakota refinery. All of the other trucks require drivers."

"So?"

"Think about it! It's only been a week since the neutron

bomb was dropped. There's still lots of deadly radiation all over that road that would kill any driver. Plus there are all the other toxins that are out there as well. In order to transport anything over that road you have to use automated vehicles. This isn't neurosurgery, Monroe. Use your head."

"I guess that makes sense," Monroe said thoughtfully. "I hadn't considered the radiation. Still, I only see six dots. Was all of the lithium able to fit into those six tankers, or will the general be making multiple runs?"

"No, one run will be sufficient. In fact, it will leave quite a bit left over for future use!"

"What do you mean, for future use? The general is going to destroy the entire planet! What else is there?"

"Well, there's Mars, for one thing. There's obviously some sort of civilization there. We'll need some pretty big weapons to ensure that our rights aren't trampled upon, and to make sure that whoever is out there sees things our way."

"Sees things our way?" Monroe said incredulously. "Are you telling me that Evan wants to conquer Mars?"

"In time I think it's inevitable. We'll need to rebuild Earth first, of course, but at some point this planet will simply not be enough. Possessing the stars is our destiny! Removing the savages is simply the first step. In all likelihood Mars will be the second step. It will be a good day when the men of Earth once again rule over her sister planet."

Monroe watched as the tankers left the grassland and began the winding climb up the mountainside. He felt a chill run down his spine. He desperately hoped that Amy was not listening in on this conversation. *If she overheard that then Elwood just signed our death sentence. She will never let anyone put her homeworld in danger.* "You – you surely can't be serious! Surely you're joking. Don't you realize that *people* live on Mars – and out among the stars as well? Have you learned nothing from history?"

“What has history got to do with it?”

“It has everything to do with it! Have you forgotten that this star system was imprisoned for *five thousand years* because our ancestors went to war against the Rangers? And now you want to go and do it all over again! Only this time you want to do it after the Rangers have had five millennia to advance beyond our wildest dreams. Do you realize that when they find out you intend on bombing their allies on Mars, they may decide to just go ahead and destroy us all now? Why are you trying to make them regret the decision to spare us?”

Elwood laughed. “And you wonder why the council rejects your proposals! You're a senile old man who is long past his prime. You need to retire and let people who know what they're doing run things. Why, if you had your way those tankers wouldn't even be out there right now! We'd still be cowering in the dark, waiting for—”

At that moment the ground began rumbling. A loud *crack* split the air and echoed among the mountains. Monroe gasped as he saw the entire mountainside give way. With a thunderous noise a huge granite slab fell off the side of the mountain and slid down below, stirring up behind it a giant cloud of dust and rocks. The landslide swept away the convoy of trucks and crushed them into the ground. In a matter of moments the entire road was completely obliterated.

As Elwood looked down at the ruins in horror, Monroe saw a movement out of the corner of his eye. At the top of the mountain, just above where the landslide happened, he saw a tiny figure. It appeared to be a young girl with dark skin and long black hair. *Amy, is that you? How long have you been standing there?* Before the scribe could say anything, however, the girl vanished, leaving the two men alone.

CHAPTER 11

"One thing I have realized about Tikal's observatory is that it presents a realtime view of other planets. You can't use it to view Mars – which I find quite odd – but I have been able to virtually set foot on Earth. The planet is quite beautiful, but unfortunately its only inhabitants are primitive forest people. I find it heartbreaking that the once-mighty civilization that ruled Earth has been reduced to hunter-gatherers who live like animals. I wonder if there's some way to help them? Since we have no way to reach other planets right now it's a purely academic question, but it is something to think about. I'm sure that we'll eventually find a way to launch things into space. When we do we'll have to see if there is any way we can help the poor people on Earth."

--Noel Lawson

June 24, 7243

ELWOOD STARED DOWN at the rubble, horrified. "Monroe, you monster! What have you done?"

"What have I done?" Monroe exclaimed, startled. "I haven't done anything! I was just standing here right next to you. You can't possibly blame a landslide on me! I had absolutely nothing to do with it, and you know it."

Elwood sighed. "And what a pity that is! I sincerely wish I could pin this on you, but I suppose you're right. You don't have the guts to do something like sabotage. You and your pathetic

followers are content to write whiny letters to the editor and protest in council meetings. That's why you always lose – you won't do what it takes to win.”

“Winning isn't everything,” Monroe replied. “The way one wins is very important.”

“Is it, now? Then you must be a bigger fool than I thought. By your way of thinking the lives of an entire race are at stake. Yet, despite this, you still insist on playing by the rules and keeping your fingernails clean. Even when the lives of millions are on the line, all you dare to do is file a couple feeble legal protests. You are just pathetic.”

Monroe shook his head. “I am a man under authority. I am constrained by the laws that God has put into place, and those laws forbid me from taking matters into my own hands, no matter how high the stakes are. God does not permit His children to commit horrific acts of evil, no matter how many lives those acts might save. Moreover, you fail to understand that I am trying to stop *others* from committing a grave sin. If they ignore my warnings and commit it anyway then they are the guilty ones, not me. It will not be on my conscience, although I will grieve for the lost lives.”

“I think what you're trying to say is that you people are a bunch of losers. And I guess that's a good thing, because it makes you so much easier to defeat.”

Elwood sighed and looked at the ruined road. “What a disaster! It couldn't have happened at a worst time. The council is not going to be happy about this. It's going to cost a lot of money to fix the road, build more tankers, and obtain more lithium. I have a feeling that their meeting with Maldonado tonight is going to be an unpleasant one. This is a huge setback. Earth suffered a serious blow today.”

“A serious blow?” Monroe asked. “That's not quite how I'd describe it. But at any rate, I'm afraid that we must part ways for now. If there is going to be a meeting tonight I want to make sure

that I don't miss it. Sometimes these meetings have a way of going unreported."

"Oh, grow up," Elwood growled. "The reason they don't tell you about them is because they don't want you to be there. Can't you just take a hint?"

"No, I can't," Monroe shot back. He then left the balcony, leaving Elwood alone.

* * * * *

After Monroe left Elwood he spent the rest of the morning trying to find Conrad Forbes. When he finally found him he forced him to admit that he was going to talk to General Maldonado, and he also managed to coax out of him the meeting time and location. Monroe was disappointed to learn that it wasn't going to be a public meeting, but he did get him to admit that Monroe's position as head scribe gave him a right to be present. Monroe knew that Forbes didn't want him anywhere near that meeting but he was determined to not be excluded. He was going to take every chance he had to oppose the general and shut his project down.

With that in mind, late that evening Monroe entered the private chambers of the council. When he walked into Forbes' office he saw that the only other person who was there, aside from Forbes himself, was the general. "Will no one else be here?" Monroe asked in surprise, as he took a seat. "I was expecting the rest of the council to attend."

"This is quite sufficient," Forbes replied. "General Maldonado will make the report to me. I will then summarize my findings and relay them to the rest of the council. They will go over them at their earliest convenience, and if they have any questions I am sure they will not hesitate to ask."

The general spoke up. "I still don't see why *he* has to be here! This doesn't concern him."

"All of the doings in Adrasta are of concern to my Order," Monroe replied. "It is our duty to record the history of our people. I've spent my entire life doing exactly that."

"You've spent your life being a pain in the neck," Evan shot back.

"Enough!" Forbes interrupted. "Monroe is not the one who is on trial right now, general. I demand to know what happened today. What have you done?"

"What have I done? You should be asking him! I didn't do anything."

"Don't be absurd," Forbes snapped. "You know perfectly well that Monroe had nothing to do with the collapse of the cliff. And don't try to tell me that it was just a freak accident! That cliff gave way just moments after your convoy of tankers started climbing up the mountain road. There *must* be a connection."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Maldonado replied.

Forbes glared at him. "Do not trifle with me, general! You are walking on very thin ice right now. I am very tempted to fire you and replace you with someone who is actually competent. Your first idiotic attempt to wipe out the savages resulted in the poisoning of the entire landscape around this mountain. Thanks to you we are now forced to depend on robots to obtain our supplies! Your second attempt, with that neutron bomb of yours, resulted in the total destruction of the only forest in this area. You aren't saving this planet; you're destroying it! Now your carelessness has demolished the only road that leads out of Adrasta. I have warned you on six separate occasions that the mountain road had fallen into disrepair and needed maintenance. Your own men told you that it could not bear heavy loads and you ignored us. I hold you *entirely* responsible for what just happened."

"There was no way we could have known," the general protested. "It was an accident. These things just happen sometimes."

The councilman's eyes narrowed. "There had better not be any more of these 'accidents', general. Your incompetence is truly staggering. That road is our *lifeline*. Without it we cannot bring supplies into Adrasta, and without supplies this city will die. You are going to fix that road and you are going to fix it *immediately*, do you understand?"

"Yes, but--"

"Enough! You are going to repair that road before you do any more work on making bombs. Let me repeat that: you are to stop the bomb-making project *entirely* until the road is fixed and we can start receiving supplies again. Moreover, once the road has been repaired you will not be allowed to destroy it again. In the future the road will be limited to one vehicle at a time."

"But sir, be reasonable! I can send some of my men to fix the road. That's not a problem. There's no reason to stop the neutron bomb project. Both projects can be going on at the same time."

"My decision is final," Forbes replied.

"Fine," the general grumbled.

Monroe spoke up. "For the record, how long do you expect this to take? Is it going to be another six months before our access to the outside world is restored?"

"No. I'll have the road rebuilt by July 8th. I should be able to have a new shipment of lithium in by the 22nd. This is going to push things back a bit."

"By about a month, it sounds like," Monroe commented.

"I will expect regular progress reports," Forbes said. "I want that road rebuilt, and I want it rebuilt now. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir," the general mumbled.

"Very well. Monroe, do you have anything to add?"

Monroe thought for a moment. "As I understand it, the neutron bomb project is on hold until the road is repaired, correct?"

"Yes, yes, that's what I said," Forbes replied, irritated. "I've already made myself quite clear on that point. Is that all?"

"Yes, that's all," Monroe said, pleased. Knowing that the general had been stopped for now gave him a tremendous sense of relief. He knew that it was not a permanent injunction, but it still gave him hope. There was always the chance that something else would happen, and the general would never be able to continue. At the very least, it was a promising development. *The Rangers are starting to have an effect*, he thought.

"Then this session is adjourned. You are both dismissed."

* * * * *

After the meeting Monroe returned to his apartment. When he reached his home he saw that Doyle was waiting outside the front door. Monroe smiled when he saw him. "Ah, there you are! I was wondering if you might stop by. Please, come on in."

The scribe unlocked the door and the two men went inside. Monroe then closed the door behind them, walked into the living room, and sat down in his favorite chair. Doyle took a seat across from him.

"So how did it go?" Doyle asked.

"Quite well, actually! The general tried to blame the landslide on me, of course, but Forbes told him he was being ridiculous. The councilman was actually quite angry with the general. He blamed the landslide on the general's convoy of lithium tankers and demanded that he fix the road before doing anything else. For the time being the neutron bomb project is officially dead."

"That's great news! I wasn't expecting that. It sounds like the project has been set back quite a bit."

"About a month, to be exact. Today's events have indeed bought us some time. You were right to have hope."

Doyle smiled. "As I said, it's not over until it's over. There is always a chance that something might come up. I just wasn't

expecting an accident that devastating. General Maldonado was extremely unlucky. That one landslide managed to wipe out his entire convoy of tankers *and* his entire supply of lithium.”

“Which is why the council thinks that his convoy caused the landslide. But I think they are wrong. I don't think they had anything to do with it – well, not directly, anyway.”

“Really? So, do you think it was the Rangers, then?”

“I think there's a very good chance of that,” Monroe replied thoughtfully. “You have to admit that the landslide was *perfectly* timed, and it only happened when the convoy was on its way home filled with lithium. If you were trying to wipe out the general's lithium supply you really couldn't have picked a better time, or a better accident. But there's more. Right after the landslide occurred I saw a girl standing on top of the cliff right above where the landslide happened. As soon as I saw her she vanished, so I only caught a glimpse of her. But I'm sure that it was Amy.”

“That's fascinating! So you think that Amy triggered the landslide on purpose?”

“I think that's far more likely than the idea that the landslide just happened to occur at exactly the right moment. The road has been in poor repair for a long time, but trucks and tankers traverse it regularly; there's no particular reason why it should collapse now. That cliff has also been there for generations. It seems quite unlikely that it would pick *that exact moment* to utterly collapse – and to collapse in such a spectacular way, too. No, I believe that the Rangers are responsible. Amy did promise that she was going to stop the general.”

“It still seems a bit strange,” Doyle remarked. “Why take that particular approach? The way things have turned out, everyone believes that it was simply an accident. The road will be rebuilt, new tankers will be made, and the general will simply try again. Nothing has been accomplished. If the Rangers are now guarding the tribes then why don't they come out in the open and say so?”

That would put an end to all this foolishness.”

“I wouldn't say that *nothing* was accomplished,” Monroe replied. “She did delay the project. Perhaps that's all she wanted to do for now. What if the Rangers do intend to publicly reveal themselves but are waiting for the right moment?”

“What could they possibly be waiting on?”

“Oh, it's impossible to tell. In 1867 they had a hundred star systems; they must have thousands, perhaps even millions by now. There's no telling what they've become. There could be political dynamics at play that we can't even imagine. But I am sure that they have their reasons. At any rate, it is encouraging. Perhaps the general really is going to be stopped after all. Amy seems to wield more power than I gave her credit for. Her immense confidence is backed by ability.”

“And then what?” Doyle asked. “Will the Rangers simply save the tribes and then go away? Can we honestly expect them to not seize control?”

“I don't know. They haven't seized control yet, and they've certainly had the opportunity. But, as you are so fond of saying, time will tell how all of this will shake out. Let's see what tomorrow brings.”

CHAPTER 12

"One of the first things we realized when we started exploring Tikal was that the entire city was networked. After a year of careful analysis we discovered that all of the wiring led to a secret data center that was buried deep beneath the city. It took us a while to repair the computer and get it operational, and there's still a great deal of damage that we haven't been able to fix. What we have seen, though, is quite impressive. The computer is actually some sort of highly advanced intelligence, and it has immensely aided the city's reconstruction. It can give realtime status information on all buildings that are connected to it and can even pinpoint the exact areas that are in need of repair. It is the best troubleshooting tool that I have ever seen."

--Noel Lawson

June 25, 7243

AS SOON AS AMY LEFT to return to Adrasta, the Sentinel left as well. Since the planet Tonina was not going to become part of the supercomputer the Sentinel decided to use it as his base of operations. From that central world he would design the new supercomputer and manage its construction.

When the Sentinel returned to Tonina he found it quiet and still. The massive cities on the planet were empty, devoid of even synthetic life. There was much wildlife and plant life but no human life. Alex had been the last inhabitant of the planet, and

now that he had rejoined Amy the world was once again deserted. Before the *Sparrow* arrived the world had been vacant for millennia. Now it was vacant once more, and that would probably not change. When Amy finished her task on Earth she would not be coming back to live on Tonina.

The emptiness of the world gave the Sentinel an unsettled feeling. It was not that long ago when hope had burned bright. The Stryker family had taken up residence in La Venta and were eagerly discussing the future of the survivors on Xanthe. They all thought that it was just a matter of time before the city was filled with people going about their lives. Now the Sentinel wondered if anyone would ever live in the cities that his father had built. Even if the tribes were cured it would take centuries – perhaps many centuries – before they traveled this far out into the galaxy. The same could be said for the remnant on Mars. The worlds of the network were thousands of light-years away from where the Ranger colonies had once stood. The last time mankind tried to reach the stars they did not get very far before they destroyed themselves. Would this time be any different?

The Sentinel pushed those thoughts aside. He had a job to do; it was time to do it.

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Over the next few days the Sentinel worked on the plans for the new galactic supercomputer. As a starting point he took Dr. Mazatl's original designs for the Artillect and customized them in order to focus the computer on a single specific task. He hated using a design that old, but by the time he was created the Artillect had already morphed into a giant machine that spanned multiple planets. Attempting to scale that back to one world would simply take too much time. All he really needed was a giant calculator – not a sentient being who could monitor thousands of cubic light-years of space in realtime.

The design he settled on was fairly simple. Each world would represent a separate node in the machine, capable of processing work independently. In order to simplify the design each node would be identical. Since no two worlds in the network were alike, this would force the Stewards to perform a rather drastic overhaul of their planets. Each world would need to have the exact same mass and configuration so that they would all be identical. Since some worlds were closer to the right size than others, that would mean that some worlds would take much longer to convert. The Stewards did have the ability to alter the mass of the planet but it was a difficult process that took a fair amount of time. Still, it had to be done. The Sentinel was glad that all of the worlds could be converted at the same time. Without that it would have taken millennia to complete the construction.

Back when Elder Lane had destroyed the Artilect the Sentinel had built a new central hub so he could search the stars for Amy, who had disappeared. He now took that hub and reconfigured it so that it could send work requests to each of the hundreds of millions of nodes in the supercomputer, and then receive and process the results as they completed their tasks. That hub would be the Sentinel's interface to the supercomputer; he would give it an assignment and the hub would distribute the work across the stars.

The processing power that the supercomputer would have when its construction was completed was truly staggering. The Sentinel himself was taken aback at its massive, unfathomable computational ability. It made the Artilect look like a child's toy. He had no doubt that if there was a way to cure the disease, this galactic machine could find it. He also knew that it would be capable of a great deal more than that. The Artilect, acting alone, had achieved amazing scientific breakthroughs and taken science to new heights. Armed with this much computing power, Amy could go far beyond anything the Artilect ever hoped to

accomplish. Her power, already tremendous, could be increased still more.

The Sentinel wondered if she was really going to throw away all that power once the tribes were cured. As he thought about it, he realized that she probably would. She had no interest in taking science to greater heights, or amassing more power, or establishing a dynasty for herself. She just wanted to finish her job and then go home to her family. The temptations of power, which had corrupted so many others, were simply not interesting to her. Her heart was elsewhere.

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Once the Sentinel finished his design for the nodes and the new central hub, he temporarily shut down the network and disassembled the old hub. He then created a new one, using his new design, and brought everything back online. After making sure that everything was working he uploaded his plans to the new hub and had it distribute the commands to all of the Stewards.

After that was done he settled back and watched. He knew that the Stewards would take the plans and use them to reconfigure the planets that they controlled. They would take their worlds and convert them to programmable matter, and then take the design the Sentinel had given them and apply that to the matter. Some of the worlds could be reconfigured in a day or two, while other worlds – especially the smaller ones – would take a full week, as their mass had to be altered. Reducing the size of a large world was a lot easier than increasing the size of a small one.

The Sentinel was quite pleased as he watched the Stewards begin their work. If all went well the new galactic supercomputer would become fully operational on July 3. How long it would take to create a cure – or to determine whether a cure was even

possible – was something he did not know. But at least they now had a fighting chance.

CHAPTER 13

“One of the biggest changes I've seen since moving to Tikal – aside from the huge difference it makes to live on a planet's surface instead of under it – is the matter of diet. I have gained at least thirty pounds in the past three years and show no signs of stopping. In the old days one ate protein paste, and that was all. The food dispensers in Tikal, however, offer a variety of amazing delights – chicken, bacon, donuts, lobster, pies, bread, juices, and more. I now understand why Amy so detested our cafeteria food. If this is the sort of fare she was accustomed to then I don't blame her at all! I would find it extremely difficult to go back to living on the unappetizing glop we used to eat.”

--Noel Lawson

July 8, 7243

MONROE ARAIZA HAD RETURNED to the balcony that was outside his office in the chambers of his Order. This morning Elwood was nowhere to be seen. His friend Doyle was with him, however. As the sun rose over the horizon the men looked down over the newly-built road.

“General Maldonado made short work of it,” Doyle commented. “I'm amazed he was able to clear all that rubble away so quickly! It must have taken a serious effort.”

Monroe shrugged. “I think it was to be expected. He told the council that he would complete the road by the 8th, and he did

so. Given his intense desire to complete the neutron bomb project I can't say I'm too surprised. You also have to keep in mind that he commands a significant portion of the city's resources. The council has invested heavily in him. What disturbs me is that he did not obey the council. He flagrantly disregarded their very specific instructions."

"What do you mean? The road has been rebuilt – I can see it from here. What did he do?"

"Yes, the road is fine. He did obey that part. But remember, the council ordered him to stop working on the bomb project until he finished the road. He did *not* obey that part. I found out today that the first shipment of lithium arrived last night, and the rest of the shipment is expected to arrive this afternoon."

"But how is that possible? I thought he tapped out the mine he was using earlier! It would have taken him weeks to establish a new mine, obtain the lithium, and truck it here. He would have had to start the replacement process on the same day that the accident happened – perhaps even before he gave the report to the council!"

"Exactly! He did not stop his efforts at all; in fact, he must have redoubled them. When I heard what had happened I immediately went to speak with Forbes, but he dismissed me. Since the road was rebuilt on time and Adrasta can now replenish its oil supply he doesn't really care. The general's disobedience is not important to him."

"You already talked to him?" Doyle asked, surprised. "But the sun rose while we were standing here! Did you get him out of bed?"

"I didn't have to. When I heard about the shipment arriving I went to see it for myself. I just couldn't believe that the news was true, but I was wrong. Down in the truck depot I saw the three lithium tankers myself, with my own eyes. General Maldonado was also there, talking with Forbes. I don't know if they had risen exceptionally early or if they had been up the entire night. But

both of them were there.”

“So he had the blessing of the council, then,” Doyle said. “They must have known what he was doing.”

“I don't know. It's possible that Forbes had no idea that the tankers were coming until after they arrived. He might have hurried to the depot as soon as he found out. I don't know what was said, but the general must have given him an answer that satisfied him because the councilman was not willing to censure Maldonado. Forbes told me that the general had repaired the road, as instructed, and he was satisfied with that. The neutron bomb project still had the blessing of the council and was going to continue as planned.”

Doyle glanced down at the road. Now that the sun had risen he could see it better. The road was wider than it had been before and all of the debris was gone. He had to give the general credit – he had done a good job rebuilding it. He knew how to do quality work and how to get large projects completed in a short amount of time.

“Wait a minute,” Doyle said. “Did you say that the lithium had already arrived?”

“Yes, I did. What about it?”

“Well, what about the Rangers? I thought they were trying to stop the project! Yet the road looks intact, and you tell me that three replacement shipments have already arrived safely. Doesn't that concern you?”

“Not particularly. After all, if the cliff had collapsed a second time I'm sure even the council would be thinking it was sabotage. A thing like that can only be done once without making it plain that it was not an accident. I suspect that the next problem the general will have will be just as decisive but will come from a different source.”

“Are you sure about that?” Doyle asked. “Have you seen Amy recently?”

“No, I haven't. The last time I saw her was when the cliff

collapsed.”

“Then how do you know they're still interested in us? Perhaps they've been distracted by other concerns. It's hard to believe that a civilization that spans the galaxy – as the Rangers must by now – can possibly be that concerned about a single city on a single planet. They must have many other, more pressing matters.”

“Perhaps,” Monroe said. “But I think it's premature to assume that they have abandoned us to our fate. Give them time. Let's see what the rest of the day brings.”

Doyle nodded. “Don't get me wrong – I think there is still hope. There are many things that could still happen that might stop the general. I just do not have as much faith in the Rangers as you do. At any rate, I hate to leave you but I'm afraid I have work to do. My students will be upset with me if I'm late to class.”

Monroe smiled. “I'm sure you are right. You know, I'm surprised that you haven't retired yet – you've been teaching for more than twenty years now. Don't you find it difficult to continue to teach at the University when you face such constant opposition? Our views are hardly popular.”

“Our views haven't been popular since the days of the Founders. I suspect that they were not even popular then, or else the Emperor would not have attacked the Rangers. Teaching is a difficult job, but someone has to tell those young minds the truth. They think that they know everything but the reality is that a lot of what they were taught before they came to the University was nothing but lies. Their heads are full of misconceptions, half-truths, and pure falsehoods. If I don't set them straight then who will? If those who know better abandon the fight because it's hard then Adrasta really is doomed. We *must* wage this battle, and we must continue to wage it as long as we are able. I assure you that if we abandon it no one will take our place.”

Monroe sighed. "Then what are we going to do in the future? My life is coming to its end, and one day yours will as well. You and I will not always be here and new people have not arisen to take our place. The future is looking bleak, friend. If we have a future at all."

"Oh, I think it's a little early to be that depressed. I have some students who might make fine leaders once they become a bit more mature. There is *always* hope. If there was truly no hope then the Lord would have ended our race ages ago and we wouldn't even be here. After all, all of the other cities have been abandoned, one by one, and yet ours is still standing. The day may come when the Lord decides that He has had enough and destroys this place. But that day has not come yet."

Monroe nodded. "Perhaps. I suppose I'd better be going as well. I need to go talk to the general."

"Why? Doyle asked. "Has he asked to speak with you?"

Monroe shook his head. "Oh no! Definitely not. I'm quite sure that he does *not* want to see me. But he must be made to see reason. General Maldonado is the driving force behind this entire project. If I can persuade him to drop it then a great many lives would be saved."

"Do you honestly think that he will listen to you?"

Monroe shook his head. "No, I don't. But I have to try. I've opposed him in public meetings and I have argued against him in front of the council, but I have never talked to him in person, one-on-one. It may be a waste of time, but it is the only option open to me right now."

"Very well. I hope you succeed, my friend. Let me know how it goes."

"I will. And good luck teaching – may your students actually listen to what you have to tell them."

The two men shook hands and then went their separate ways.

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Monroe left the chambers of the Order of Scribes and made his way to the industrial section of Adrasta. Once there he walked down a series of narrow passages until he reached the truck depot. The lithium tankers were still there, although they had been unloaded hours earlier. The general, however, was not present. Monroe asked around and discovered that he had left earlier that morning and gone to the city's airfield.

The scribe left the depot and climbed up long flights of stairs until he reached the surface. Most of Adrasta was located underground, but at the highest point of the stone fortress was a door that led to the peak of the mountain. There, at the summit, was an ancient runway. The Founders had created it thousands of years ago when the city was first established, and it had been maintained ever since. Large hangars were carved into the side of the mountain and held the city's last remaining planes. At one time the hangars had housed more than a hundred aircraft, but today there were only a dozen left. Centuries ago airplanes had been used to visit other colonies, but as they collapsed and went dark there had been less of a need for air transportation. Now robotic trucks were used to reach the remote, automated mines that Adrasta depended upon for supplies. These days it was a rare thing for an aircraft to take to the skies. There was simply no need.

That was why Monroe was so surprised when he arrived at the airport and saw that it was bustling with activity. There were only three planes left in the hangar and they were being warmed up for flights. Three more planes were lined up on the runway, preparing for departure. The city's other six planes were nowhere to be seen.

"Excuse me," Monroe called out to a mechanic who was lounging against a wall. "What's going on here?"

"Oh, the general is all upset," he replied. "He's just fit to be

tied! The aerial surveys that his men have been doing are all messed up, and now he's having to do them again. He is not a happy man."

"Aerial surveys?" Monroe asked. "What surveys?"

"Oh, you know, of the tribes. The newest map that the Order had of the tribe locations was a hundred years old. The tribes move around quite a bit, so he needed to get a new worldwide survey done to see where they all were. His men have spent weeks doing high-altitude surveys and using fancy cameras to pinpoint the tribes. Only today he looked at the data and saw that it was all garbage. Something went wrong with the recorders, or something. Whatever it was he's awfully mad about it."

"I don't understand," Monroe said. "The council didn't approve this use of aircraft! Why, the fuel costs alone must be staggering. Gasoline is quite hard to come by and the city doesn't stock very much of it. In fact, since the road collapsed we haven't been able to get any new shipments in."

"Oh, I know. That's why he's in such a tizzy! He used up most of Adrasta's supply earlier, and now that he has to do it all over again he's in trouble because there isn't enough left. He's got men working around the clock to obtain more, but of course that's going to take time."

Behind him an angry voice called out. "There you are! You're behind this, aren't you? This is all your fault!"

Monroe turned around and saw Evan Maldonado hurrying toward him. The general was quite angry and was shouting at the scribe in rage. "You deliberately destroyed my mapping data, didn't you? How dare you interfere here!"

"How could I have possibly destroyed your recordings? I didn't even know that you were doing aerial surveys until this morning – and I suspect the council doesn't know either. What are you going to do when they find out that you stole the city's oil supply and wasted it?"

“That was your fault!” Maldonado screamed. “It would have been fine if you hadn't sabotaged me. This is all your doing!”

“And just how did I do that?” Monroe asked. “Did I somehow magically alter data recorders that I didn't even know existed, while your planes were illegally flying out there in the sky? That's a preposterous accusation. You know that I don't have the ability or opportunity to alter your data, and you know that I *certainly* couldn't have altered them while your planes were in flight. If the data was already bad when the planes landed then there must be a problem with either the recorders or the cameras, which reflects on *your* men, not on me. But if I were you I'd start worrying about what will happen when the council hears about what you've done. I'm quite sure you weren't authorized to be doing any of this.”

“This is all your fault!” the general screamed. “Somebody did something to those cameras while the planes were in flight. It had to be you – it had to be! Don't give me any of your nonsense. You can hide behind the council all you like, but they won't always be there to protect you, you hear? One day you're going to cross the line and they won't be able to save you. Just mark my words!”

He stormed off, angry. Monroe shrugged, thanked the mechanic, and walked off.

As he was walking off the airfield he saw something out of the corner of his eye. In the back of the hangar, sitting on top of a stack of wooden crates, was a young girl with dark skin and long black hair. She looked at Monroe, smiled, and then vanished.

CHAPTER 14

"Today we uncovered the first medical care facility that we've found. It appears to have been a rather large hospital; it's big enough to serve this entire section of Tikal. Best of all, the machinery in it appears to be largely intact and has not been looted! None of it is in working order right now, but I'm hopeful that the problems can be addressed. Based on the other technology I've seen in this city I strongly suspect that what we've discovered today could revolutionize medical care – and perhaps even significantly increase lifespans."

--Noel Lawson

July 9, 7243

THE NEXT DAY Amy and the Sentinel met again at the base of Falcon Ridge. This time the Sentinel was there well before Amy arrived. Alex was there too, sitting at the Sentinel's feet and letting him scratch him behind his ears. The dog looked quite content.

"Oh, hey there," Amy said. "I didn't know you were going to be early. I've been pretty busy the past few days."

"So it would seem," the Sentinel replied. He stood up and Alex ran off into the distance, chasing nothing in particular. "You have caused quite a stir! General Maldonado's genocidal plans are not going very well."

Amy smiled. "No, they're certainly not. It's a beautiful thing. Scrambling the data on those recorders really hurt him. Plus, now he's in trouble for wasting Adrasta's entire oil supply. The council

was really unhappy and gave him a good dressing-down at last night's meeting. The cost to restock the oil and redo the surveys is enormous, and the general wasn't supposed to be doing them in the first place. This project is getting more and more unpopular all the time."

"You're getting the general into a lot of trouble," the Sentinel commented.

"Well, it's partly his fault. If he had repaired the road before taking his tankers on them, as the council had ordered, he wouldn't have been blamed when the road collapsed. It would have just been seen as an unlucky accident. If he had obtained the council's permission to do the global surveys, instead of just going for it, he wouldn't have been blamed when the first survey failed. The reason he's in hot water is because he keeps going behind people's backs to do things he's not supposed to be doing, and I'm making sure that he gets caught."

"That does have consequences," the Sentinel replied. "The general irrationally blames all of his failures on Monroe Araiza. If you keep doing this Monroe's life is going to become very difficult. Maldonado is not just going to sit there and take it forever."

"Well, I have to do *something*, you know. I can't just let him kill all those people. If I step in with force and stop them then I'll never know if the Adrastans should be saved. I've got to stall them until we have a cure, and that means continuing these accidents. Besides, I'm not too upset over making the general look bad. He *is* trying to kill millions of people, after all, and he has already killed 416 human beings. He's lucky that he hasn't been struck dead."

"Have you actually been considering that?"

"It is pretty tempting. You have to admit that he deserves it. The problem is that while the general is the one guiding the project, the project is only possible because it has the support of the council and the city itself. Most people in Adrasta approve of

the plan. There's something like 80,000 people in that city who actually think it's a good idea to hunt down and murder all of the tribes. The general is just one of them, and getting rid of him isn't going to make anything better. The only reason he can do these things is because he has the support of the people. If I start frying everyone who supports genocide then it would pretty much wipe out the entire city. That's why I want to stall things until I can force the city to make a choice. I'm hoping I can change their minds."

"And what if Adrasta ignores you?" the Sentinel asked. "What if they decide to go ahead with the bombing, despite the existence of a cure?"

"Then I will have to stop them once and for all," Amy said sadly. "If they are bound and determined to murder the tribes, no matter what, then I will not save them. I'll move them to Xanthe, where they can live out the rest of their days until they finally die out."

"Xanthe? Why Xanthe?"

"Well, we've already had one civilization commit suicide there. If these people are bound and determined to make the same choice then they might as well do it there. Xanthe is apparently where civilizations go to die."

"So you're not going to kill the general," the Sentinel said.

Amy shook her head. "No, I'm not. I'll stop him, and I'll make sure that the council discovers every crooked thing he's doing. But I'm not going to be his executioner."

"What are you going to do if there is no cure?"

"No cure?" Amy repeated, startled. "Is that what you've found?"

"I'm afraid that the possibility must be raised. I have done a massive amount of work over the past few days. The galactic supercomputer has not been online for long but its capacity is staggering. It has enabled me to understand the nature of the disease, and has revealed the consequences of the genetic

abnormalities that cause the disease in the first place. As we guessed, the disease is quite mild early in life and only degenerates into outright insanity in the teenage years. It is possible to cure children up to the age of six because at that point the effects have not yet become permanent. The body and the mind can still be healed.

"Now, the cure is a complicated process. The person cannot be cured all at once. Instead, a series of nanites that are tailored specifically to that child has to be administered. These nanites must saturate their body and change it gradually over a period of several days. This gives the mind a chance to adapt and respond to what is going on."

"But there *is* a cure?"

"In theory. I would like to caution that I have been dealing with mathematical simulations only. I have not performed any tests on actual human beings. Given the precision of my models I would imagine that the results I am getting are exact, but as I said the cure has not been tried."

"What about adults? Can they be cured too?"

The Sentinel shook his head. "I simply do not see how it could be done. The problem is that by the time the child turns into an adult, the disease has fully taken root and has unseated the mind itself. The result is utter madness. Even if the body were cured – which is no mean feat in itself – the mind is still broken and is unable to understand the changes. It is like the garbage data that was on the general's data recorders. You simply cannot undo the damage or erase the errors. It is too late. There is no way to coax the mind back to sanity."

"So what if you just have the person start over?" Amy asked. "Maldonado just reformatted the recorders and went out to collect more data. Can't you just reformat people's minds and let them start over again? They'd have a blank slate. The madness would be gone."

"Are you certain that's a good idea?" the Sentinel asked,

surprised. "Erasing a person's mind is a horrifying thing to do! The mind has a person's memories and knowledge. It is a huge part of who they are. Erasing the mind is very close to erasing the person itself. It goes far beyond a violation of privacy. You are taking a person and eradicating it."

"Don't you think you're going a little overboard?" Amy asked. "It's not that bad."

"It most certainly is! Imagine if you were to contract dementia. In the process of the disease you would forget everything you ever knew, everyone you ever knew, and even who you were. The Amy Stryker that I know would cease to exist. You would lose everything about you. It's a horrible fate. Why would you wish to inflict that on these people?"

"People are more than their minds," Amy argued. "You act as if everything that makes up a person is stored in their head. People aren't just machines. They have a spirit too – and that's something you can't just reformat. Each person is an amazing meld of spirit and body – of spiritual and physical. That's how God made us. In the case of these tribes, the spirits are attached to bodies that have insane minds. The mind has a broken picture of reality and that's causing all kinds of problems. What I'm saying is that we should wipe out the madness. If we were to erase the mind and turn it back into a blank, childlike state, the adults could relearn again – they would be growing up, but this time with a fixed mind. We would be giving them a second chance at life. The only thing we would be taking away is an insane perception that is filled with horror and fear. This is the exact *opposite* of dementia."

"So you propose turning the adults back into children?" the Sentinel asked.

"Yes – but mentally, not physically. With the madness gone the Stewards could teach them how to live again, and this time they could understand it. They wouldn't be losing anything valuable or anything that they might want to keep."

"I understand," the Sentinel replied. "If you are sure that this is the course you want to take then I will run simulations and see what is possible. It will not be easy; I have no data on how to erase a mind, and frankly that very idea makes me uncomfortable. But I understand your argument and I do not have any alternatives to offer. However, I must ask you a question. Do you realize that if I learn how to do this you could apply that same technique to the Adrastans?"

"What in the world are you talking about?" Amy asked. "Their genetic problems are totally different! We can easily cure them without doing any mental hocus-pocus."

"That's not what I mean. If you have the ability to wipe the minds of the forest dwellers then you also have the ability to wipe the minds of the people in Adrasta. You could simply retrain them along whatever lines you liked."

"Oh," Amy said, startled. "I see. But – that would be horrible! You can't just take a person and reformat them. Why would you ever even think of such a thing?"

"But isn't that what you're doing to the tribes?"

"That is totally different! We're only doing it to them because they're insane and have massive brain damage that makes it impossible for them to understand reality. The people in Adrasta aren't crazy; they're just amoral. You can't say 'Well, I don't like the choice you made, so I'm going to rewrite your brain so you will make better choices.' That is horrible. Really, really horrible. All I want to do with the tribes is erase the insanity and give them a chance to actually see the world as it really is. We are *not* going to imprint orders on their mind so they will do exactly what I want them to do. I'd like the Stewards to teach them and offer them a choice, but there is no way I'm going to hardwire anybody. That is appalling."

"But you must realize that you will have that power. You are asking me to develop the technology to alter a person's mind. That opens up a great many terrifying possibilities."

"Possibilities that we are *not* going to explore," Amy said firmly. "We are going to cure the tribes and then that will be that. We will then convert your supercomputer back into ordinary planets, and you and I will take that brain-altering technology with us and leave this world. No one else will ever have it."

"Leave this world?" the Sentinel asked.

"Well, leave this universe, I guess. You and I have an appointment in eternity. When this is over we're going to God's country."

"And you expect me to go with you?"

"Of course! What did you think – that I was going to leave you behind? You and Alex are both coming with me."

"But I am not a son of Adam," the Sentinel protested. "I have no right to enter the heavenly city. It was not built for me."

Amy shook her head. "This isn't negotiable, Steve. You are coming with me and that is the end of it. Do I make myself clear?"

The Sentinel sighed. "I understand your intention, but I do not know what will happen when you actually try it. But that is a conversation for another day. To get back to the matter at hand – before we even explore a cure for adults it may be wise to attempt to cure a child first, to see if the technique works. Once we have verified that we can pursue curing adults, with the understanding that the technology will never be used for anything else and the computer will be destroyed after the last one is cured."

"That sounds good to me," Amy said. "How long will this take?"

"A few days. It depends on how old the child is. Older children will take longer."

"Can you try to cure the oldest child that you can? I know it will be harder, but I'd like to take the child to the council and confront them with him. An older child would probably be a lot

more sympathetic than a screaming toddler. As you said, I can't keep stalling the general forever."

"I understand," the Sentinel said. "I will do what I can and will let you know when I have something."

"Thanks," Amy replied.

CHAPTER 15

"Something else that really puzzles me about Tikal is the complete absence of any large repository of information. We have found a library and a university, but neither of them have as much as a single book on their shelves. I suppose it's possible that in the old days books were stored digitally on computers. If that's the case then everything might have been lost forever, because the city's data center doesn't include any books or historical records. Oh, if only they had used printed words instead of digital ones! Then their writings might have been preserved until today. Information stored digitally is easily and quickly lost, but books can last pretty much forever."

--Noel Lawson

June 11, 7243

TWO DAYS LATER, General Maldonado was standing in a high-security laboratory that was in the heart of Adrasta's military sector. He was talking to the head of his nuclear research division, Ken Ochoa.

"Are you quite sure that there was nothing wrong with the lithium?" the general was asking. "You did double-check it, didn't you? It hadn't been poisoned or altered?"

"No, sir, it had not. We ran the quality assurance tests on the entire load three times, just as you ordered. Its purity has not been compromised. We have also posted guards and no one has attempted to breach security. The lithium has been under

constant surveillance 24/7 and there have been no incidents. Everything is proceeding according to plan.”

“That is good to hear. We can't afford to have any more of these accidents. The council is keeping a close eye on this. They're not happy about how much this is costing. How long will it take to replenish Adrasta's oil supply?”

“I don't know, sir. You'll have to talk to Meyers about that. He's in charge of the refinery. From what I've heard it'll be another six days before the next shipment arrives. But that's really not my department. My specialty is nuclear engineering.”

“Fine,” the general grumbled. “But I'm telling you we can't afford any slip-ups! Are you absolutely sure that everything is working?”

“As I said earlier, we have not had any issues. The processing of the lithium is proceeding according to plan. It will take several weeks to process the entire shipment into the fuel for the neutron bombs, but we should have some weapons-grade material available in two days.”

“Several weeks! I can't afford to wait several weeks! That is just not good enough. Isn't there a way you can beef things up so you can process the entire batch at once? Do you really have to do it a little at a time?”

“It's entirely up to you,” the scientist replied. “If you want we can shut down this lab and perform a major upgrade. It is possible to increase the throughput of this laboratory, but it would take at least eight weeks to do that. If you are willing to wait—”

The general interrupted him. “No, I'm *not* willing to wait. Are you out of your mind? I've got to start the bombing campaign as soon as possible! In fact, I'm not even going to wait for all of the bombs to be completed. I want you to start building them as soon as you can – one at a time, if that's all the lithium you've been able to process. As soon as you've finished one I'll go drop it. If I start using them as soon as I have them then the council

will have no choice but to let me finish what I've started. How soon can you get me a functional weapon?"

Ochoa paused for a moment to think. "Hmmm. Well, we've already started preparing the first batch of weapons-grade material, so in two days we should have enough fuel to build four bombs. If I have the bomb-building team start the assembly process now, they can build the outer shell and get it ready for the fuel. It will take some time to add the fuel and complete the assembly, but if all goes well you should have four bombs ready to go in about three days."

"And you *will* make sure that all goes well," the general said firmly. "There is no room for error here! The landslide was bad enough. We don't need a nuclear incident as well. If anything goes wrong I will hold you personally responsible."

"As I said, everything is under control," Ochoa replied. "There is no cause for alarm. If anything comes up you will be the first to know."

"Just make sure that nothing comes up. Oh, and have your men begin the bomb assembly. As soon as those bombs are ready I'm going to hit the nearest targets. I've got to get the public back on board. The longer we wait the more time Monroe has to come up with ways to stop us."

Ochoa nodded, then stepped over to one of his assistants and began talking with him in low tones. Evan walked over to the cluster of lithium processors and eyed their display monitors. He was not a technician, but he had studied the blueprints Elwood had given him and had some idea about what was going on. After all the incidents that had happened he no longer trusted his men. He wanted to *personally* make sure that nothing went wrong.

As he stood there watching the panels he heard a voice call out behind him. He turned around and saw a young girl standing there. She had dark skin and long black hair, and she had a serious expression on her face. "Excuse me," she said. "We need

to talk.”

“What?” the general exclaimed. “Who are you and what are you doing here? Are you one of Ochoa's employees?”

“No, I'm not. I didn't want to interrupt you so soon but you're moving faster than I expected. I thought I would have more time.”

Maldonado looked at her, confused. “Are you from the council? You can tell them—”

“No, I'm not from the council, but I have a message for you and for them. You must stop your bombing project immediately or you will face serious consequences. I will not allow you to massacre the tribes. This has to stop *now*. I am prepared—”

“Guards!” the general shouted. “GUARDS!”

The door flew open and six guards rushed in. The general glared at them. “Are you out of your minds? Why did you let this girl in here?”

The guards looked at her, confused. “She didn't come past us, sir. Is she with you?”

“What do you mean, she didn't go past you? Of course she went past you! Do you think she just magically appeared out of nowhere? I'm not paying you to sleep on the job, you nitwits. If you can't manage to keep your eyes open then I will fire all of you. You are *not* to allow any of Monroe's people into this lab, do you hear me? I don't want to see any more of these infantile protestors in here. Now get her out of my lab!”

“And as for you,” the general said, looking the girl in the eye, “you can tell Monroe that I will kill every last one of the savages if it is the last thing I do.”

The girl quickly glanced around the room and made an almost-unnoticeable motion with her right hand. She then looked back at the general. “We'll see about that,” she said coldly.

The guards grabbed her and ushered her out of the lab. General Maldonado locked the door behind them as they left

and turned his attention back to the monitors.

After leaving the laboratory the guards walked the girl down the hallway and through the military sector. As soon as they turned a corner, however, the girl simply vanished. The guards looked at each other, astonished.

"Where did she go?"

"I don't know – I thought you had her!"

"She was right here!"

"What do we do now?"

"I don't know," one guard said. "But I won't tell if you won't tell."

"Well," the other guard said, "she *is* gone, and that's what the boss wanted. I say we go back to our posts."

"Agreed."

* * * * *

Over the next hour General Maldonado continued to monitor the lithium conversion process. Ochoa had finished giving instructions to his assistant, who then left to go tell the assembly team to begin the construction process. The general settled down into a chair and decided to wait. This time he was going to keep a firm hand on things. *That's what these clowns need – someone to keep an eye on them. As long as I'm here they'll watch themselves.*

As he watched the screens he saw a warning light appear on one of the monitors. A moment later one of the panels began beeping, and a line of data started flashing. The general immediately sat up. "What's that?"

Ochoa glanced up at the monitor. A look of concern immediately appeared on his face. "That's not right," he muttered. He sat down at the panel and adjusted some of the equipment settings. He paused, looked up at the screen, and saw

that more numbers had started flashing. A second later the numbers turned red.

"Well, what is it? What's going on?"

"It doesn't make any sense," Ochoa replied, as he furiously worked the panel. "That shouldn't be possible. We have constraints in place for that! How can that be happening? What happened to our filters?"

As other scientists rushed to the panel the general began to get worried. "What's happening? What filters are you talking about? I *demand* that someone tell me what is happening *right now!*"

"It doesn't make sense," Ochoa repeated. "It's as if the laws of physics suddenly stopped working. This reaction should be completely stable! We've done this before and it worked fine."

One of his assistants interrupted him. "Sir, take a look at this." He grabbed a knob and slid it all the way to the right. The numbers on the panel remained unchanged.

Ochoa's eyes grew wide. "So it's the control board! The board isn't responding to our input anymore. It's ignoring our commands and is feeding random instructions to the lithium processors. No wonder it's not working!"

"What does that mean? I demand that someone answer me!"

"It means that we've got to evacuate this lab immediately. We have to abort this! We don't have any control over what's going on."

"Absolutely not!" the general shouted. "Just override the panel. Use the manual override!"

"There is no manual override! Our equipment is all digital. Our only choice is to hit the kill switch. We can't save the equipment but we can at least save the lithium."

"Don't you dare touch that switch! You find a way to fix it. *Now!* I'm not paying you to run away the minute something bad happens."

Ochoa looked at him and then glanced up at the monitors. Now every line of data was blinking red. "Don't you see that? The reaction is becoming unstable! In a few moments radiation levels are going to start increasing. If we kill it now then we can shut it down and repair it. If we don't then—"

"You are not shutting it down," the general screamed. "We are not going to have another incident! I refuse to be dragged in front of the council again. You morons must have pushed the wrong button or something. I demand that you fix it now!"

A warning siren went off. Red lights descended from the ceiling and began flashing. Ochoa paled. "We've got to evacuate. We don't have a choice!"

General Maldonado walked in front of the door and stood squarely in front of it, blocking the way. "No one is allowed to leave this room. You don't have the option of evacuating. I demand that you fix this!"

One of Ochoa's assistants bolted and made a run for the kill switch. The general quickly pulled out his gun and fired its entire clip at the switch, destroying it before the assistant could reach it. The bullets went clean through the switch and sank into the giant steel tank behind it, creating a rupture. Poisonous gasses began seeping out of the rupture and the tank started rumbling.

At that point the entire lab panicked. The scientists in the room jumped Maldonado, knocking him aside. They unlocked the door and ran for it. Ochoa got on the intercom and ordered an immediate evacuation, then dragged the injured general out the door and down the hallway. They had only made it partially down the hallway when there was a giant *BOOOOM*. The ground shook, the windows behind them were blown out, and the lights went dark. As poisonous vapors drifted down the hallway Ochoa struggled to drag the unconscious man to safety.

CHAPTER 16

“Tikal's subway system is proving to be very difficult to repair. It is extensive, of course, but most of it has collapsed and its wiring has been utterly ruined. We've also been unable to find any subway cars and we have no idea how to build our own. There are still vast areas we haven't explored, but if the trains really are gone we may have to gut the system and build our own. We certainly need to find some solution to the city's growing congestion. The streets are becoming more crowded every day.”

--Noel Lawson

July 12, 7243

“YOU HAVE A GREAT DEAL to answer for, Evan Maldonado,” Conrad Forbes said icily.

The general was seated in a chair in the debate hall. In the opposition section he could see Monroe Araiza and his allies. Maldonado himself was seated in the center ring, and the council had just called the session to order.

The destruction of the nuclear lab had occurred the previous day. Maldonado had been hoping that few people would attend a meeting that was called on such short notice, but that had not happened. The hall was completely packed.

Maldonado had been forced to sit down because his left leg was broken in two places. A doctor had set it in a cast but it would take weeks to heal. He felt sore and weak. Mostly, though, he felt angry – intensely angry. He was convinced that Monroe

Araiza was the source of all his problems, and he was determined to make him pay.

The general spoke up. "I see no need for this outrageous treatment. There was a minor accident in one of our labs and my men are working on repairing it. This matter does not merit the council's attention."

"Do not try my patience," Forbes said in steely tones. "The entire incident was caught on camera, and the footage was stored in a secure location and survived the blast. Let us play back the incident and see exactly what you did."

Forbes pressed a button on the stone table in front of him and a giant holographic screen appeared in the air. He pressed another button and the screen began replaying the video footage of the lab incident, starting from the moment the general first noticed the warning on the screen. When it was over the crowd booed.

The head of the council silenced them and turned his attention to Maldonado. "According to your own men, the control board in the nuclear lab malfunctioned. They recommended shutting down the lab and performing a repair. Had they done that, the lab would have been saved, the lithium would have been saved, and no harm would have been done. That was the official technical recommendation of the top nuclear scientist in Adrasta.

"Instead of listening, however, you demanded that he take an action that was physically impossible for him to take. You then compounded the problem by shooting not just the kill switch, but the tank behind it. That was the action that led to the destruction of the lab. You, general, are personally responsible for the worst nuclear accident in the history of Adrasta. Nor is it a 'minor' one, as you claim. The radiation in that lab has reached lethal levels and will not cool down for at least two weeks. It will be months before that lab will be operational again, and the explosion has weakened that entire sector. Major foundational

repair work will be required before it will even be safe to reenter that section of the city. You have single-handedly destroyed this city's nuclear capability."

The general tried to speak up but Forbes silenced him. "And let's not overlook the fact that when your men tried to evacuate the laboratory, you stopped them. In fact, you physically stopped them from trying to leave the scene. If they had not attacked you all of them would be dead right now – and you would be dead as well. You acted in a grossly irresponsible manner and you came very close to killing a great many people. Frankly, you ought to be shot."

At that the general lost it. He started screaming. "This is all Monroe's fault! He did this! He sent an operative of his to sabotage the laboratory. He's the one you should be prosecuting!"

"Oh, do you mean this little girl?" Forbes asked. He tapped some commands onto the stone table and the holographic image changed. The video showed a black-haired girl walking into the lab, talking to the general for a few seconds, and then getting escorted out.

In the opposition section, the video caught the attention of Monroe. He instantly realized that the girl in the video was Amy. He said nothing, however.

Forbes continued to speak. "As you can see, the girl did nothing. She touched no equipment and did not get near any of the controls. She simply talked to you and was then escorted out by your men. Frankly, the mere presence of the girl in your lab is a sign that your security forces are completely incompetent. Why are you allowing civilians into a nuclear work zone? Have you taken leave of your senses?"

"We didn't allow her in," the general began saying.

Forbes raised an eyebrow. "Do you mean to tell me that that little girl was able to bypass your entire security operation? She walked in the front door of your laboratory, Evan. Don't you have

guards outside? For that matter, don't you even bother to keep that door locked?"

The general sputtered. He tried to say something but Forbes silenced him. "The council finds you to be criminally incompetent. We have placed a great trust in you and, frankly, you're doing a terrible job. At every turn your project has been a disaster, and yet somehow you always find a way to make things very much worse.

"Since we believe in the neutron bomb project, and since the project has wide public support, we are not going to cancel it. However, starting at this moment we are going to post observers that will watch everything you do. Every decision you make will be relayed back to us. We will also be posting our own guards in the hallways, since yours are apparently incapable of securing anything.

"Be warned that we have come very close to not only firing you, but imprisoning you as well. If anyone had died today you would find yourself facing a minimum of life imprisonment. If you make any more mistakes like this they will be your last. Have you anything to say?"

The general looked through the crowd. He found Monroe and started at him, glaring at him with all the hatred he could muster. "No, sir," he muttered.

"Then this session is adjourned."

CHAPTER 17

"There really hasn't been much crime in Tikal. We've appointed an efficient police force and they do their job well. One thing that has surprised me, though, is how little monitoring equipment the city has. The old underground city had cameras and listening devices everywhere. Every single move the public made was watched – well, when the cameras worked, that is. But here there's nothing like that. As far as I can see there's no surveillance equipment anywhere! Apparently the ancient government of Mars didn't feel the need to watch every move its citizens made. I find that attitude very refreshing and I intend to see it preserved in the future. We do not need to return to the mistakes of the past."

*--Noel Lawson
July 12, 7243*

THAT AFTERNOON Monroe Araiza was sitting in the living room of his apartment. Beside him was a stack of books on the history of the Spanish Empire. He had one of the volumes in his hands and was lost in its pages when he was interrupted by a knock on the door.

Monroe put the book down. "Come on in," he called out.

The door opened and Doyle walked in. "You know, you really need to start locking that door," his friend commented as he entered. He closed the door behind him and took a seat across from the scribe.

"Haven't we had this conversation before? Anyway, how are you doing today?"

"I'm a bit puzzled, to be honest. I don't quite understand what the Rangers are doing. Did you notice Amy in that video footage?"

"She was rather hard to miss," Monroe said dryly. "Despite what the council ruled I am sure that she caused the malfunction. Now, that being said, she was *not* the one who turned that problem into a nuclear nightmare. The general made that happen all by himself. It was his unbelievable reaction to the problem, and not the problem itself, that destroyed the laboratory."

"I suppose you're right. I still don't understand what the Rangers are trying to achieve, though. They've certainly delayed things for a while but the project will continue. Are they hoping that if they delay it long enough the council will eventually give up?"

"Not exactly," a voice said behind them. The two men turned around and saw Amy standing there.

"How did you get in here?" Doyle asked.

"Magic!" Amy exclaimed. She smiled. "Look, guys, I know I've been making life hard on you, and I'm sorry about that. I've just been trying to stall the project to buy some time. I'd hoped that collapsing the road and stalling the surveys would get me all the time I needed, but then I found out that Maldonado was going to start dropping bombs immediately. That's when I was forced to step in and do something – but I didn't realize he was going to go bonkers and try to kill everyone. That part of it was *not* my fault."

"Why were you trying to buy time?" Monroe asked.

"In order to make this happen," Amy said. She made a motion with her hand, and a six-year-old boy materialized in front of her. The boy looked around the room in wonder and then looked at Monroe. "Hello," he said. "You're old."

Monroe looked at the boy in astonishment. "Red hair! And

look at his skin tone and cheekbones. He's from the clans! There hasn't been a red-headed person in Adrasta for thousand of years. That genetic variation was lost. Does that mean you've found a cure?"

Amy nodded. "Yes, it does. Now, keep in mind that it's only a partial win. We can cure children but so far we can't cure adults. We're working on it and we think we can do it, but we just haven't gotten there yet. Anyway, this bright young man is named Nate, and he is quite inquisitive."

"You have a lot of books," the child said. "Can you teach me how to read?"

Doyle smiled at him. "I think we can work something out. How long are you going to be staying with us?"

"I don't know. Amy hasn't cured my mommie and daddy yet. She said she's working on it."

"I understand," Doyle said. He looked up at Amy. "How does the cure work?"

"It's kind of complicated. Basically, Steve created a series of nanites that we've released into Nate's bloodstream. Over the course of several days they have reversed the damage the mutation caused and corrected his genetic code. The process works well on children but it doesn't work on adults. We're going to have to come up with a different approach for them."

"Who is Steve?" Monroe asked.

Amy hesitated. "That's kind of hard to explain. Let's just say that he's a friend of mine. He's, um, the scientist who came up with the cure. I tried to find a cure on my own but I didn't get very far. Steve succeeded where I failed."

"This is really quite remarkable," Monroe said, as he stared at the child. "It's astonishing! Please thank the Rangers for me. This changes everything."

"The Rangers," Amy said slowly. "Right. Let's not go into that right now. Anyway, I'm certainly hoping that the cure will change everything. The reason—"

Nate walked over to a table and picked up a book. He held it up and pointed to the cover. "Those are letters, aren't they?"

"Yes, they are," Doyle said. "It says *The History of Martian Dog Breeders*."

"Amy is from Mars," Nate said proudly. "She told me that herself. Mars is nice. I like it."

"That's exactly what I thought!" Monroe said triumphantly. He turned to Amy. "The Rangers found you after they took the Wall down, didn't they?"

"Um, no. I'm actually the one who shut down the Wall, but we don't need to get into that right now."

"Really? But that doesn't make sense! How were you able to collapse the Wall from the inside? I thought that was impossible."

Amy sighed. "I didn't – I shut it down from the outside. It's kind of complicated."

Monroe looked puzzled. "I don't understand. You're from Mars but you shut the Wall down from the outside? How is that possible? How did you get outside the Wall?"

"It's a really, really long story. You see, I was on the *Sparrow* that the Spanish Emperor shot out of the sky. Then – well, it's a long story. What makes it so hard to explain is that you've forgotten how the war started. You have everything mixed up and backwards. It's history that is so ancient that you don't even remember it." She sighed. "It just makes you feel old, you know?"

Nate spoke up. "Amy is very old. Miles is older, though. He's *super* old."

"Miles? Who is Miles? I'm afraid I don't understand."

"That's fine. That is totally fine. None of that matters right now anyway. The point is that we now have a cure for the madness that plagues the tribes. Right now it only works on children but we're making progress on the one for adults too. What I need you to do is take Nate to the council and demand

that Maldonado stop his bombing campaign, on the grounds that there is a now cure and you ought be helping these people.”

Nate spoke up. “Amy said you're going to be taking care of me for a while. She said you were nice people.”

“We can certainly arrange that,” Doyle agreed. “I don't think this particular apartment is a suitable place for young people, but you can certainly stay with me. My wife would love to meet you. We've wanted children all our lives but have never been able to have any.”

Monroe nodded. “I'm sure your wife would be delighted. Children are so rare these days; each child is a precious gift. And Amy, I can certainly arrange a meeting with the council. I'm sure they will be very interested in the cure you've found. But I'm still confused. Do you have a last name?”

“It's Stryker. I'm Amy LeAnn Stryker, if you must know. But it doesn't matter. The important thing is to stop the bombing.”

“I understand. Anyway, Amy, the council is going to have many questions about your cure. They'll want to know how it works, how we developed it, how to administer it, and how much of it we currently have on hand. They're also going to find it difficult to believe that the cure exists. After all, no one has been trying to find a cure for centuries.”

Amy reached into her pocket and pulled out a small glass bottle. The bottle was made of semi-transparent blue glass, and inside was an opaque silver liquid. On the front of the bottle was a label with a series of instructions. Amy handed the bottle to Monroe. “Here you go. This bottle contains enough nanomaterial to cure a hundred children. The dosage instructions are printed on the bottle, along with the time it takes, how to care for the patient, and age restrictions. That will get you started. You can tell them that the cure was developed by a friend of yours and you can present Nate as proof that the cure works. I can provide you with all the cure you will need and I can do so at a moment's notice. That bottle will be enough for your presentation to the

council. I'll get in touch with you after you've talked to them."

Monroe nodded. "I appreciate your help – I really can't thank you enough. You have gone beyond my greatest expectations. I thought that just stopping Maldonado was a lost cause, but you have gone far beyond that and found the cure that has eluded us for five thousand years. You have our deepest thanks."

Amy nodded. "You're welcome. It's why I came here, you know."

Monroe hesitated. "I hate to mention this – and I am sure Doyle will think that I am being unduly pessimistic – but what are you going to do if the council rejects the cure and opts to continue the bombing?"

Amy sighed. "I'm really, *really* hoping it doesn't come to that. If it does then I'll just cure the tribes myself. If Adrasta insists on trying to kill them then I'll be forced to stop the city from doing that. Permanently. This will be their last shot. After your presentation there aren't going to be any more secret obstructions. They'll have to face the consequences of what they've done."

"And what are those consequences?" Doyle asked.

"There are two groups of people on this planet – the tribes and the Adrastans. If the Adrastans cannot live in peace with the tribes then they will be forcibly relocated to Xanthe. There they will be allowed to live out the rest of their days. If they can't find a cure for their infertility problems then they will simply die out. They will have what they want – a world of their own – and they will be unable to do anyone any harm."

"And if the bombing *does* stop?"

"If Adrasta has a change of heart and shows that it can get along with everyone else, then I would be willing to cure them as well. But I'm not going to do that if they are determined to be genocidal monsters."

"It sounds like the stakes are quite high."

"For Adrasta, yes. Now, the tribes will be saved regardless."

Their future is secure. But I do not know what will become of this city. Their fate is in their hands." Amy sighed. "Speak to the council as soon as you can. I will be back in a few days."

The child spoke up. "Are you leaving now?"

Amy gave him a hug. "I have to go away for a bit, but I'll be back soon, ok? And I'll be watching over you to make sure that no one hurts you. You be good for Monroe and Doyle, ok?"

"Ok," Nate said. "Goodbye."

Amy said goodbye and disappeared.

CHAPTER 18

"One fact I've found a bit surprising is that the stars seem largely deserted. Our astronomers have been searching the former locations of Ranger colonies and have found only ruins – and there aren't even very many of those left. Miles had warned me that they were all gone, but I was hoping that maybe that wasn't the case. It was just hard to believe that every single colony failed to survive. Sadly, it looks like Mars is the only beacon of civilization left – unless there is some other, alien civilization out there that we haven't discovered yet. Perhaps it's time we turned our attention to more distant areas of the universe."

--Noel Lawson

July 12, 7243

"HEY!" Nate exclaimed. "How did she do that?"

Monroe shook his head. "Only God knows. She is a most curious person."

"Did you understand anything she said?" Doyle asked.

The scribe nodded. "I understand that the bottle I'm holding in my hands has the ability to cure any child six years of age or younger. I understand that with this cure we may be able to stop Maldonado once and for all. I also understand that if we fail to stop him the Rangers will allow us to suffer the consequences of our actions and Adrasta will be dead a century from now. The future of our people depends entirely on what happens next."

"That much I understood. It was her personal history that

didn't make sense. How can she be from Mars and yet have shut down the Wall? What did she mean when she talked about a sparrow? Did that make any sense to you?"

"I'm not sure. I feel like it ought to have made sense, but there are some pieces missing. I will have to look into it."

The child spoke up. "Are we done? I'm hungry."

Monroe smiled. "Yes, young man, we are done. My friend Doyle is going to take you home with him and you can get a good meal. In the meantime I will try to arrange a meeting with the council but I suspect I will not be able to do so until tomorrow. Forbes is a hard man to find when he's not in his office, and I'm getting too old to walk all over Adrasta looking for him."

Doyle stood up. "Do you want me to take the cure home as well?"

Monroe shook his head. "No, I'll keep that for now. I'd like to study it a bit longer. I'll need to know everything I can about it for my presentation to the council."

"That you will. I have to say, this will come as quite a surprise to people! Word of this is going to spread fast. Forbes might hear about it before you're able to track him down."

"I hope he does! That would make setting up a meeting that much easier. By the way, do come back after supper, if you can. If I'm able to find Forbes we'll need to make some arrangements."

"I'll do that," Doyle agreed. He then took Nate by the hand and let him out of the apartment.

* * * * *

Late that night Doyle knocked on the door. "Come on in," Monroe called out.

His friend tried to open the door but it wouldn't move. He struggled with it for a few moments and then knocked on it again. A moment later Monroe opened it. "There, you see? Wasn't that painful? Isn't it more convenient to leave it

unlocked?"

Doyle sighed and took a seat in the living room. His friend shut the door and took a seat across from him. "I don't think you quite understand the concept. You have something in this room that is irreplaceable, and you have a lot of enemies. Why do you not feel the need to keep it safe?"

Monroe shrugged. "If someone wanted to destroy my documents they could have done so a long time ago. The truth is that people simply do not care. Apathy can be a very powerful and potent force."

"I'm talking about the cure, not your books! Don't you realize what a terrible position we'd be in if something happened to it?"

"Nothing is going to happen to it. I'm sure that the Rangers are keeping an eye on this place. We have nothing to worry about."

"I suppose," Doyle said. "By the way, I heard that you were able to set up an appointment with Forbes."

Monroe nodded. "Your earlier guess proved correct – news did travel fast. By the time I was able to track him down he had already heard rumors of the boy. He thinks they're preposterous lies but he's willing to meet him privately and hear me out."

"Do you mean it won't be an open meeting?" Doyle asked, surprised.

"Yes, but I think that's understandable. He wants to understand the situation before holding an open session in the debate hall. The only people who will be there will be myself, him, and Maldonado."

"Maldonado! Are you sure that's wise?"

"I don't see why not. I've been present at his private council meetings, so it seems a bit childish to keep him out of mine. Besides, the general is not popular with the council right now – and this *does* directly affect what he's doing. I think he has a right to be there. You also need to keep in mind that this one meeting is not going to decide the fate of the world. It's just a preliminary

meeting so the council can understand the issues. Forbes assured me that an open meeting would be held later.”

“Well, if you say so. I trust that you're right. It just strikes me as a bit shady. I would be careful if I were you.”

Monroe laughed. “You know, friend, you really are an odd breed. You are so optimistic and hopeful and yet you are a thousand times more suspicious and cautious than I am. It's really quite strange.”

Doyle smiled. “Being an optimist doesn't mean you also have to be stupid, you know. Just because I have hope for the future doesn't mean I'm blind to present dangers. But tell me – I know it's only been a few hours, but have you had any more insights about Amy? Is there a way to verify her story?”

“Now that's an interesting question! When she said her last name was Stryker that rang a bell. I knew I'd seen that name somewhere before. A quick search uncovered something fascinating.”

Monroe reached onto the end table beside him and picked up a copy of *Annals of Martian Legal History*. “One of the many fascinating things this book contains is a list of all of the Martian rulers, from the time the Mayans founded their first Martian colony in 938 to the day Mars elected Richard Stryker as planetary governor in 1836. I have to say it's really quite remarkable that any copies of this book have survived. It was published just two years before the Wall was erected.”

“Did you say Richard Stryker?”

“Yes, exactly! What's even better is that the book includes photographs of all of the leaders. On page 874 there is a picture of Governor Stryker, posing with his wife Laura, his son Tim, and his twin daughters Amanda and Amy. Take a look.”

Monroe handed the book to his friend, who looked at the page in amazement. “But that isn't possible! That girl in the picture looks exactly like the girl who was standing in this very room a few hours ago. But this picture was taken five thousand

years ago! It simply can't be her. It can't be!"

Monroe took the book back and laid it on the end table. "Yet it looks just like her, doesn't it? In fact, it looks so much like her that I believe it *must* be her. There are not exactly an abundance of people out there who look like the twins in that photograph. I find it hard to believe that someone born in this era, after five thousand years of genetic mutations, happens to have the same name and look *exactly* like the girl in that photo. As astonishing as it may seem, it must be her. Apparently the Rangers had found a way to stop the aging process. If Amy is still alive then I suspect everyone else in this picture must be alive as well. The implications are simply staggering."

"But what about the sparrow? I don't see how that fits into all of this."

"Actually, that part is finally beginning to make sense. According to the popular legend the war between the Emperor and the Rangers broke out when the Emperor shot a sparrow out of the sky. Notice, however, that Amy said she was *on* the sparrow when it was shot down. All this time we thought the sparrow was a bird, but I believe it was actually a starship named *Sparrow*. She – and quite possibly, her illustrious father and the rest of her family – must have been on board when the Emperor attempted some kind of assassination. The ship must have been damaged but apparently those on board survived. The attempted assassination of a noted political leader like Richard Stryker must have sparked the war that led to the creation of the Wall. Her family must have escaped the star system before the Wall was erected, which would explain why she could shut it down from the outside. Since then the Stryker family has apparently served as statesmen in the Ranger civilization. If she is still working for them after all this time then it's quite likely that her father is as well. He may still govern one of the planets, or even be their leader."

"But how could she possibly live that long?"

"Well, there's always the possibility that they found the cause of aging and were able to develop some sort of nanomachine to prevent it. Another possibility is that long life was one of the Gifts. According to the ancient documents, in the days before the Wall there were people endowed with supernatural gifts. Some were discerners and could not be lied to. Others were seers and could foretell the future. Perhaps there was another category of people who were gifted with exceptionally long lives. The Stryker family may have been given that gift."

"But I thought those stories were myths!"

"We only think that because the Gifts no longer exist today. The fact is they are well-documented in the ancient manuscripts, and our ancestors treated them as if they were real. We should not let our current situation color our view of the past. It is foolish to say 'Well, they no longer exist so they must never have existed.' You might as well say that since you great-grandfather no longer exists he must never have existed either."

"It's just hard to believe," Doyle said. "So you honestly think that Amy Stryker is the daughter of Richard Stryker, a near-immortal who has lived for five thousand years, and has come here at this point in history on behalf of the Rangers to free the Solar System and cure the tribes?"

"I don't see why not. As unlikely as her story seems, at this point I see no reason to accuse her of lying. We cannot disprove anything she has told us and she has always done exactly what she said she would. I see no reason to doubt her."

Doyle nodded. "You do have a point there. It's just a lot to take in. If her story is true then she was an eyewitness to the events that led to the creation of the Wall! She knows exactly what happened at that fateful moment in history. In fact, she even remembers what life was like before the Wall was created, during the reign of the Spanish Emperor. She is a living piece of ancient history, from an era where very little has survived."

"Exactly!" Monroe exclaimed. "Is it not exciting? And what's

more, there may be millions – perhaps even billions – of other Rangers who are also from that era. Imagine what a civilization of immortals must be like! I sincerely hope that when she returns we will have a chance to interact with more of the Rangers. It's possible that they have preserved a great deal of the history of that era – to say nothing of the countless events that have been going on among the stars. This is an astonishing opportunity!"

"Yes, it is – but don't forget about the cure. You have a very important meeting tomorrow."

"Yes, I suppose I do. You're quite right. It's just so easy to get lost in all the excitement. So much has happened in the past few weeks."

"Yes, it has," Doyle agreed. "I will look forward to hearing how it turns out, but I'm afraid that I have to get home. It's getting late and we both need our sleep."

"By the way, how is the boy doing?" Monroe asked, as he led his friend to the door. "I meant to ask earlier but I'm afraid I got sidetracked."

"He's doing quite well! He's a very sweet and charming child. My wife was thrilled to meet him – she always wanted to be a mother. You know, the difference between Nate and the rest of the uncured savages is just astonishing. I really would not have believed it if I hadn't seen it for myself. That cure really works."

"I am glad to hear it," Monroe replied, pleased.

"Have a good night," Doyle called out.

"Good night to you as well," the scribe replied. He closed the door and, after thinking about it for a moment, locked it behind him.

* * * * *

The next morning Monroe knocked on Conrad Forbes' office door. Nate was standing beside him, holding his hand.

"Come in," a voice called out.

Monroe opened the door and led his young friend into the room. Inside he saw Conrad Forbes sitting behind his desk. General Maldonado was already there. As soon as they entered the room both men stared at Nate in astonishment. Forbes simply sat there, wide-eyed. His mouth opened slightly but he said nothing. The general stood up and stared in amazement. "It can't be," he whispered. "It's got to be a trick of some kind. It's just not possible!"

"It's very real and very possible," Monroe replied. "This young man's name is Nate."

"Hello," Nate said. He looked around and then offered his hand to Forbes. "I'm Nate. Who are you?"

The head of the council looked surprised, then shook the young man's hand. "My name is Conrad Forbes. Please, take a seat."

"It's nice to meet you," Nate replied. He looked at Maldonado and frowned. "I know who you are. Amy told me all about you. You're the bad man who wants to kill us. I don't like you."

"It's not possible," Maldonado repeated. "This can't be real!"

Forbes spoke up. "Monroe, will you please ask Nate to sit down?"

Monroe gestured to one of the empty chairs, and Nate walked over and sat down. The scribe sat down beside him. The general eventually retook his seat, but he kept staring at Nate.

Since no one else was saying anything Monroe spoke up. "I hope it's clear to both of you that Nate is quite real. His red hair alone makes it clear that he is from the tribes, and his facial features and bone structure give additional evidence. You can test him genetically if you wish but I assure you that it is not necessary. He is quite genuine."

"It just can't be," the general protested. "How could you possibly have come up with a cure? Who authorized you to do that?"

"The project to find a cure was authorized thousands of years

ago. In fact, it is engraved in the Hall of Stone. I did not need anyone else's permission to work on it, nor did I use any of the council's scarce resources. This was achieved entirely on our own, and as you can see it is entirely successful."

"And where is this cure?" the general asked suspiciously.

Monroe removed the glass bottle from his pocket and placed it on the councilman's desk. Forbes picked it up and looked at it curiously. "The cure is in that bottle; I present it to you for your examination. How it works is quite technical, and since neither of you are scientists I will not bore you with the details. The point is that it does work and I am prepared to prove it. If the council wishes we can arrange a public demonstration to show beyond a doubt that the cure is real."

Forbes read the label on the bottle and then handed it back to the scribe. "Hmm. It would appear that the cure takes several days to work."

Monroe placed the bottle back into his pocket. "That is correct. The cure is not magic, councilman. It takes time to undo the madness of a lifetime. The point is that it *does* work, and as I said we can prove it. The cure in that bottle is sufficient to heal a hundred people, and we can produce enough of it to cure everyone on the planet. Once it is administered sanity will return to the tribes in a matter of days."

The general clenched his fists. "It's a trick! It's just another dirty trick. That's all this is."

Monroe nodded. "I'm sure that many people will be inclined to agree with you, which is why we would like to propose a public demonstration. We can easily prove that it works, and we can do it in public under the watchful gaze of as many observers as you care to post. We have nothing to hide."

Forbes spoke up. "Why are we only hearing about this cure now? You stood before the council in the debate hall many times, but you never told us that you had made progress on finding a cure. That is very significant information."

"There is a great difference between looking for a cure and finding one. It would have been folly to stand before the public and proclaim that we were trying to find a cure. People have been trying to find a cure for thousands of years! Only now have we developed something that is effective and can be proven publicly."

"Have you told others of this?"

"I am sure that there are rumors, but I have not made any public announcements. I thought that the council should be the first to know."

"That was a wise decision. In the event that your cure is tested and found to be genuine, what is your proposal?"

"Isn't it obvious? I want you to stop the bombing campaign immediately. This city was founded with the express purpose of helping people like the tribes, and after five millennia of trying we finally have a way of doing exactly that. We can finally fulfill our charter. We can fulfill our Founders' dreams. The day they longed for is finally here."

"Administering this will be no small task," Forbes commented. "Curing one person is a very different thing from scouring the planet and administering ten million doses. Doing that would take years – perhaps even decades. Then there is the logistical challenge of what to do with all the cured people. Adrasta is not big enough to house all of them, nor do we have the resources to take care of them. This is going to require a lot of planning."

"You can't possibly be considering this!" Maldonado exclaimed. "The council already agreed to my plan. You can't change course now! We've got to finish what we've started. Now is not the time to turn back!"

"In case you haven't noticed, general, the situation has changed. Rumors are already spreading. We must have a public meeting and discuss this matter. You cannot simply pretend that nothing has happened."

“But—” Maldonado sputtered.

“Enough!” Forbes replied. “We will do this publicly, in the open, and present it to the people. However, the council will need time to prepare. As I said, this is no small matter, and the ramifications and logistics are quite staggering. Monroe, do you have any objections if I schedule the meeting for the afternoon of the 15th?”

Monroe shook his head. “No, I do not. That seems fair.”

“Very well. In the meantime, continue to take care of the child.”

“I will do so. It will be an honor.”

The general spoke up. “This is outrageous! You can't do this to me.”

“You are dismissed,” Forbes replied. “This meeting is over.”

CHAPTER 19

"The old, underground city is not faring well these days. It has lost almost all of its technically-oriented people, its creative people, its motivated people, and its adventurous people. The only people left are politicians and people who are too apathetic to do anything with their lives. I haven't been back in years but I've heard that systems are failing right and left and no one has any idea how to fix them. I expect that sometime over the next five years something critical will fail and they'll finally be forced to evacuate the place. It's only a matter of time."

--Noel Lawson

July 13, 7243

WHEN MONROE AND NATE left the council's private chambers they saw that Doyle was waiting for them. "How did it go?" he asked.

The child spoke up. "I like Conrad. But I don't like Evan. He doesn't like me very much."

"That's certainly one way to put it," Monroe remarked. "But to answer your question, it went very well. I think that the council is beginning to see things our way. Forbes said that they would hold a public meeting in two days."

"In two days? Why two days? Is there some sort of problem?"

"Oh, I don't think it's anything to be alarmed about. The council just needs some time to study the matter. If the city is going to launch an effort to cure ten million people then there's

quite a lot of planning that needs to be done. Administering the cure will be a significant project that will probably have to be done over the course of many years – unless the Rangers help us, of course, but they may have other matters to attend to. We can't expect them to continue to babysit us forever. I'm actually quite pleased that the council wants some time to study the matter. It's a sign that the tide is beginning to turn."

"I suppose you're right. It is a good sign. By the way, how did the general take it?"

"Not well at all! He's quite upset. I believe he sees that the end is coming and he does not like it. But I don't see what he can do to stop it. He was unable to stop Forbes from scheduling the public meeting, and rumors are already spreading fast. He's going to find it quite difficult to defend his plan when Nate is standing right there for all the world to see."

"Yes, he is. So what are your plans for the rest of the day?"

"Why, study history, of course! Now that I know a bit more about the cause of the Ranger-Empire conflict I'd like to reread some of the ancient accounts. It's possible that I might be able to see things in them that I missed before."

"All right," Doyle said. "I'll stop by this evening and see how you're doing. Come along with me, Nate. We're going home."

Monroe said goodbye to the two of them and began a leisurely walk home. He was in no particular hurry and felt happier than he had in years. The terrible stress that had burdened him for so long was gone. At last everything was going to be all right. A cure had been found. The general was going to be stopped. The council was going to listen. The people were going to change. Instead of destroying the tribes they were going to cure them. His people – his world – had a future. It was a deeply satisfying feeling.

The scribe made it back to his apartment and settled into one of his chairs. He took a book off the end-table and was soon lost in its pages.

About an hour later he heard a noise. Monroe looked around but didn't see anyone. "Is anyone there? Is that you, Doyle?"

There was no reply. The old man was almost convinced that he had imagined it when he smelled a faint odor. At first he was puzzled, but then he realized what it was. Panic shot through him, but he was already growing sleepy. He tried to climb out of his chair but his strength was gone. The old man slumped to the floor, unconscious.

A few minutes later a team of three men entered the apartment through its unlocked front door. All three men were wearing gas masks.

"Where's the cure?" one of them asked. "Please tell me that it's here."

His friend went through Monroe's pockets. "Here it is! Huh. I was expecting a fancier bottle, or something. Well, at least he hadn't hidden it. If he had placed it behind a book we might never have found it."

"Lucky for us," the third man commented. "This place is a real rat's nest."

"Be sure that you give Maldonado that bottle," the first man ordered. "He wanted to destroy it himself. Don't you dare let anything happen to it. If you lose that bottle he will have your head."

"All right, all right," his friend grumbled. After putting it in his pocket the three of them grabbed the unconscious Monroe carried him out of his apartment, locking the door behind them.

CHAPTER 20

"We found an old movie theater in Tikal today, but it didn't have any films. We could probably repair the equipment but without any movies to show it would just be a waste of time. I'm going to have its location logged and then seal off the area. We just have too many other things to do right now. Maybe when things have calmed down a bit we can come back and explore further. It makes me wonder, though – what kind of movies did people watch five thousand years ago? I suppose even if the movies had been preserved we wouldn't be able to understand them. Miles taught a few people how to read ancient Martian but even he doesn't know how the words are pronounced. Amy's probably the only person alive who knows, but when I talked to her yesterday she seemed pretty busy. I doubt she has the time to teach a class on ancient languages."

--Noel Lawson

July 13, 7243

MONROE SLOWLY REGAINED consciousness. His head was throbbing, and the pain made it difficult to focus. He felt weak, unsteady, and more than a little nauseated. He struggled to open his eyes and saw that he was in the back of an electrically-powered mining cart. The cart was battered and rusty and looked as if it hadn't been used in ages. When the scribe opened his eyes he saw that his hands and feet were chained together, and the chains were

attached to the side of the cart. In the front of the cart was General Maldonado, who was driving it along a series of tracks. A wooden crutch was lying on the seat next to the general.

As Monroe looked around he saw that he was in a dark tunnel. The only light came from the headlights on the mining cart. On the walls he could see thick seams of black rock.

"This is a coal mine," Monroe commented.

The general said nothing, so Monroe continued. "You know, that's interesting. Adrasta hasn't used coal in more than a thousand years. The city's power plant is fusion-based. That means this mine must be truly ancient. In fact, I'm not even sure where it is – as far as I know there are no ancient mines near the city. All of the nearby mineral deposits were depleted long ago, and even the Founders used more distant sources. This place is really quite a find."

"There are very few who know about it," Maldonado said curtly. "I have records of everything, of course, but I assure you that others do not. Even your Order is unaware of this place. No one will ever think to look for you here."

"You're making a very foolish decision, general. I don't know what you are hoping to gain by this but I assure you that this will not end well. You are making a very foolish decision."

Maldonado laughed. "Don't kid yourself! You know exactly what's going on. There's no way you can win this one. You have just conveniently disappeared right before the public meeting, and all evidence of your so-called cure is gone as well. With you gone, the cure gone, and the boy gone, all of the evidence will be missing and the council will be forced to dismiss the entire thing as a hoax. Everything will go back to normal and I will be able to eradicate the savages, exactly as planned."

Monroe felt in his pocket and noticed that the bottle of cure was gone. Something else bothered him, though. "I don't see the boy here."

"Oh, my men are looking for him. In our little meeting you

neglected to mention where he was being kept, but I assure you he won't be able to hide for long. We'll get him, just as sure as my men got you. It won't even be a challenge."

"This is a very serious thing you're doing," Monroe replied. "You have escalated the situation dramatically. You can no longer claim that your purpose is to provide a merciful end to a race of incurable lunatics. Now you are deliberately trying to exterminate millions of people simply so you can rule this planet and build your empire. Of course, that has been your true purpose all along, hasn't it? You don't care how many millions must die. You are truly a monster."

"Oh, get over yourself," Maldonado barked. "You're too old-fashioned for your own good. Your fabled Stone Hall was created by a bunch of pathetic losers. The Law of Nature dictates that the weak must die and the strong must live. The savages are weak so it's our duty to massacre them all. I'm going to enjoy killing them, Monroe, and you won't be able to stop me. No one will. Then the Earth will be reborn and we will go on to conquer the planets and rule over the galaxy. I will win and your kind will be utterly stamped out."

"I'm afraid that's not going to happen. You are showing a remarkable lack of judgment. Do you really believe that my sudden disappearance will go unnoticed? Do you think that the council will not have any questions? Do you think that people will not realize you are behind this?"

"It doesn't matter what anyone thinks. They will never find you, or your cure, or your boy, so it won't matter. I will win by default."

The general steered the decrepit cart into a side-room. Monroe noticed that the room had a giant steel door and thick metal walls. The room was empty, but Monroe guessed that at one time it had been a vault.

Maldonado stopped the cart. "Well, Monroe, this is it. I hope you have a pleasant eternity. Oh, wait, no I don't. I would kill you

myself but, honestly, I'd rather you just starved to death. It will kill you just as surely as a bullet would but it will take a whole lot longer. Knowing that you are trapped here, slowly starving, will make me a very happy man."

The general got a flashlight out of his pocket, then turned off the lights on the mining cart. The room plunged into darkness, so he turned on his flashlight. With his other hand he removed the key from the cart and slipped it into his pocket. Next, while still holding onto his flashlight, he took his crutch and gingerly walked out of the room. Once he was outside he dragged the giant metal door closed and then locked it. The room went pitch-black.

Monroe heard him turn on the engine of another mining cart. As the general drove away the sound got quieter and quieter, until all was completely still.

CHAPTER 21

"One of our computer scientists just found a server in the data center that is filled with music. Music! I had a chance to listen to some of it, and to be honest it's a bit perplexing. Apparently music has changed a great deal in five millennia. I was hoping that it would be astounding and deeply moving, but in reality it's very much an acquired taste. Still, it does give me hope. If music has been preserved then perhaps – just perhaps – another server, somewhere, has other bits of ancient Martian culture. I have to wonder, though. Are ancient books, films, and art going to seem just as bizarre to us modern Martians? Culture might be a lot more time-sensitive than I thought."

--Noel Lawson

July 13, 7243

AS SOON AS THE NOISE of the mining cart had finally died away, the dark vault was filled with a brilliant white light. Monroe's eyes had become accustomed to the darkness so the bright light momentarily dazzled him. As he blinked his eyes he felt his chains suddenly vanish. At the same time the dizziness left him and his pains disappeared. He heard a gentle female voice call to him. "Here, let me help you out of that cart."

As his eyes adjusted he saw Amy Stryker standing next to the cart, offering him a hand. With her help he climbed out of the cart and looked around. To his amazement, the light in the room was coming from no obvious source. It seemed to be everywhere

at once.

"I'm sorry I'm late," Amy said. "I had to go save Nate. Maldonado has been busy today."

"Thank you very much for rescuing me! I was becoming a bit concerned. I take it you were able to stop the general from killing the boy?"

"Yeah. He had sent a sniper to go look for him. I spotted the sniper and made a minor adjustment to the way his gun was configured. When he pulled the trigger it exploded in a bright flash, injuring him. Doyle spotted the explosion and was able to detain him before he escaped, and he's now in police custody. When the general returns he's going to have some explaining to do."

"You know, he may try again," Monroe warned. "I think he's finally gone insane."

"He went insane a long time ago. Actually, *evil* is a better word for it. He went deep into pure-evil territory the moment he decided that genocide was a good idea. I'm not at all surprised that he tried to kill you. In fact, I'm surprised he waited so long. Why would someone who is trying to kill millions of people hesitate to kill just one or two more? You and Nate are nothing to him."

"I suppose you're right. I guess I should have seen this coming. I just thought that now that we had a cure he might change his mind. I still had some hope for him, I suppose."

Amy shrugged. "Well, now we know. I think he's made his decision."

"What are the Rangers going to do about him?" Monroe asked.

"Look," Amy said, hesitating. "Oh, all right. I guess you had to find out eventually. There aren't any Rangers left. They're all dead. In fact, they died out a very long time ago. Well, except for the ones on Xanthe, who died out recently. But the point is that they're all dead. I'm the only one who's left."

"You're – what?" Monroe gasped. "But that's not possible! You're just a little girl. How could you possibly have come up with a cure all by yourself?"

"It's kind of a sad story, really. Basically, the Rangers built a giant supercomputer to colonize the stars for them, and then they were all killed by Elder Lane's bots. But anyway, that computer kept growing and growing for five thousand years until it controlled millions of star systems. Since I'm the only one left I wield all of its power. I can do pretty much anything. It's a long story, though, and it's kind of depressing. I'll let Miles explain it to you."

"Just how much power are we talking about?"

"Well, like I said, I can do pretty much anything I can imagine. I can terraform planets, and build cities, and materialize just about anything I want. I can build giant armies and create mile-long starships just by thinking about it. I can even stop time."

"Is there anyone in the galaxy more powerful than you?"

"Well, there's God," Amy pointed out. "And I guess there are the angels. But that's about it."

"And there's nobody left out there among the stars? No one at all?"

"Nope. The only humans that are still alive are on Earth and Mars. Everyone else is dead. Now, keep in mind, *I* didn't kill them. They were dead before I got here. I had nothing to do with it."

"So let me see if I understand this," Monroe said. "All of the Rangers are dead and you're the only one that is left. A giant computer gave you an unfathomable amount of power, and you're going around doing whatever it is you want. Is that right?"

"I wish," Amy sighed. "No, I'm not going around doing whatever I want. Instead I'm dealing with psychopaths on Xanthe, apathetic people on Mars, and genocidal maniacs on Earth. If I had my way I wouldn't even be here. I never wanted to come to the 73rd century in the first place and I really hate it

here. The future is not the exciting place that everyone made it out to be. But I'm here now and I can't go back home so I've just got to deal with it."

Amy looked at Monroe and frowned. "You know, you look really unhappy. You do know that I just saved your life, right? You're fine now. Nate is fine. The general will be stopped. The sky isn't falling."

"That's because the sky already fell," Monroe replied. "You just told me that the Rangers are completely dead, mankind is all but extinct, and a teenage girl who isn't accountable to anybody is the most powerful person in the galaxy. I don't see how things could possibly be much worse."

"And there we go, right on schedule," Amy said, shaking her head. "Somehow, no matter what I do, I'm always the problem. That is exactly why I didn't tell you about the Rangers earlier. I just knew that things would get to this. But, whatever. I have work to do. Let's get you out of here."

Monroe looked around. "That is an excellent point. Just how do we get out of here? For that matter, how did you get in? The vault door appears to still be closed."

"Here – I'll show you."

A moment later the room vanished, and Monroe found himself standing in a giant, ultramodern city. Gleaming skyscrapers surrounded him and the city streets teemed with life. There were vehicles driving down the streets and pedestrians walking down the sidewalk. As he got a better look around he realized that he recognized some of the pedestrians.

"Doyle!" he called out, running over to his old friend. "It is so good to see you again."

Doyle shook his hand warmly. "I see that Amy was able to rescue you! Not that I had any doubts, of course. So, what do you think of Mars? It's quite spectacular, isn't it? Tikal makes Adrasta look like a dingy old tomb."

Monroe looked around. He suddenly realized that he felt a

good deal lighter. The sky overhead was a rich blue, which surprised him. "This is Mars?"

Amy nodded. "It's the new city of Tikal. Noel Lawson and his men are working on excavating and restoring it. I can introduce you to him later, if you want to meet him – he's busy right now, but he's a great guy. I'm sure he'd love to meet you."

"I'm afraid I don't understand. Why did you bring me to Mars?"

"To keep you safe from murderous psychopathic generals. All of your friends are here, as is Nate. I assure you that there's no way Maldonado can reach you here. As long as you're on Mars you are completely out of his power. You are safe."

"Well, I would imagine so. But how will we return in time for the meeting?"

"Oh, I'll take care of that. This time I'm going to go with you. You won't be standing before those wolves alone. I will be there to protect you if things get ugly."

"But surely it won't come to that. The general would not dare to attempt physical violence at a public meeting!"

Amy shook her head. "You do you realize that he just tried to kill you, right? That man is eager to wipe out an entire planet. Don't underestimate him. I assure you he is not a good man."

She then noticed that an elderly man was sitting on a nearby bench, patiently waiting. She smiled at him and motioned for the man to join them. "Speaking of good men, there's someone that I would like you to meet. Since both of you are historians I think you will have a lot to talk about over the next few days. Monroe, this is my good friend Miles."

Miles eagerly shook Monroe's hand. "So we meet at last! Amy has told me a great deal about you. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I visited Earth once, you know, about a thousand years ago. I tried to help the tribes but I was simply not able to do so. I'm glad that Amy has found a way to succeed where I failed."

"A thousand years ago?" Monroe asked, surprised. "Forgive me for asking, but just how old are you? Do all of you Martians live to such an extreme age?"

Miles smiled. "I'll be more than happy to explain everything. Tell me, though, friend. Has Amy told you her story?"

"She has told me very little, although what she has told me is quite unsettling. It would appear that she does not like to talk about herself."

Miles shook his head, smiling. "That's Amy, all right. She does have a habit of keeping people in the dark."

"Now wait just a minute," Amy protested. "I didn't hide anything from Noel. He just didn't believe me, as you may recall. He thought I was totally out of my mind."

"And you enjoyed every minute of it," Miles commented. "You've got a devious streak in you, Miss Here-Are-Your-Pink-Shoelaces. You're not half as innocent as you claim."

"That is something you brought on yourself," Amy replied, giggling. "That was so entirely your fault."

"Was it now? Well, at any rate, I will take good care of your friend. Speaking of that, would you have any objections if I accompanied you to the public meeting in Adrasta?"

"That's fine with me. Just don't be surprised if it gets ugly. The people there are pretty corrupt and they have terrible manners. That meeting is not going to go well."

"You never know," Doyle commented, who had been listening to their conversation. "I still have hope."

"As you always do," Monroe replied.

Amy bid them goodbye and disappeared. Miles then turned to Monroe. "Have you eaten?"

"I have not. Maldonado did not give me the courtesy of having a last meal."

"Then come! I know of an excellent restaurant just around the corner – a nice place called *Tom's*. I think you will find Martian cuisine quite delectable!"

CHAPTER 22

“Amy Stryker stopped by my office again. She told me that she was going to be bringing some refugees from Earth to Tikal, and that they'd be staying in the city for a few days. I thought that Earth was only populated by tribesmen, but apparently there's a fortress there that we overlooked, and right now it's got some kind of internal power struggle going on. I told her she was welcome to do as she wished – after all, she and Miles were the ones who discovered Tikal in the first place! I'll help her however I can, especially if it will help those poor tribesmen. I'm glad she was able to find a cure for them.”

--Noel Lawson

July 13, 7243

MONROE ARAIZA WAS SITTING in a diner in the heart of downtown Tikal. Miles was sitting across from him. He had invited Doyle to join them as well, but he had already made plans and left to go help his wife look after Nate. On the table in front of them was a turkey – the first time Monroe had ever seen one. There were also plates of potatoes, corn, and green beans, along with a platter of freshly-baked bread.

“You know, I have to say that this is quite good,” Monroe commented. “According to our history books turkeys were once common on Earth. Sadly, they apparently died out a couple thousand years ago. I'm quite amazed at the variety of plant and animal life that has survived on Mars! I don't believe any of these

ingredients are native to this planet.”

“Oh, they're not,” Miles agreed. “In fact, if you had been here five years ago the only food you would have found is protein paste. Amy is the one who brought all of this back. In fact, she's the one who brought the entire planet back from the brink of death. If it wasn't for her we would have been doomed. She gave us a second shot at having a future.”

“Amy did all of this? She must be a very busy girl! Does she have any assistants?”

“Just the Sentinel.”

“I don't think I've met him,” Miles said thoughtfully. “What does he look like?”

“Well, from what I understand he can appear in many different forms. Whenever I've seen him, though, he's always appeared as a tall, well-dressed gentleman, wearing an old-fashioned gray suit and hat. He's very distinctive and easy to spot in a crowd. He doesn't appear very often, though. He usually only shows up whenever something really big has gone wrong.”

“If that's what he looks like then I'm positive I haven't seen him. 'The Sentinel' is a rather odd name. It sounds more like a title to me. Do you know where it came from?”

“You know, now that you mention it I don't. To be fair, Amy always calls him Steve. That must be her nickname for him. But the Sentinel isn't a person, you know – he's a machine. He was created in 6571 by the Artilect – another machine that doesn't exist anymore. The Artilect built him and sent him back in time to rescue Amy and Amanda. That's how the Stryker family got here.”

“Amy got here through time travel?” Monroe asked, astonished. “Do you mean to tell me that you people have the ability to travel backwards in time?”

“Goodness, no! Only the Artilect could do that, and he only did it once. I certainly can't do it, and I don't think Amy can either. If she could I'm sure she would go back in time and save

her family. What happened to them was a terrible tragedy. The past year has just been horrible.”

“I don't think I'm familiar with her story,” Monroe said, as he helped himself to another piece of bread. “Based on what little she has told me I think she may be the daughter of Richard Stryker, the governor of ancient Mars. But I don't know much beyond that, and I don't understand what happened to the Ranger civilization. Amy said that the stars are empty – which I find difficult to believe.”

“I'm afraid that she is right. The Rangers really are gone. It's a long and complicated story. I'd probably have trouble believing it myself if I hadn't been there for part of it. It all started a long time ago, when Amy's father was still the governor of Mars.”

Over the course of the next hour Miles told Monroe the history of the Stryker family, and what had happened to Amy from the time the Sentinel first found her until the present day. The story took so long to tell that by the time he was finished they had completed their meal, left the restaurant, and made their way to the *Raptor*. As Miles finished his tale the two men climbed into the aging vehicle. Miles sat in the driver's seat and put the machine in gear, and the city was soon far behind them. Monroe sat next to him and watched the green Martian countryside roll by.

“You know, that puts an entirely different light on things,” Monroe commented. “I had no idea that the Wall was protecting us from being annihilated by a horde of bots. I thought that the Rangers had gone on to achieve galactic dominance while Sol was left to rot as a backwater wasteland. I didn't realize that we were all that was left.”

“In a way the Rangers *did* achieve galactic dominance,” Miles replied. “The Artilect built a civilization that spanned 93 million star systems, and today Amy controls it. Everything that she told you about herself is true. She really does have an astonishing amount of power. If she wished she could populate her planets

with machines and create a machine-based civilization that would rule the galaxy until the stars burned out – loyal only to her. She could easily conquer Earth and Mars and make us all her slaves, and we would never have a prayer of overthrowing her. But instead she went out of her way to help Mars, and now she's helping your people as well.

"In my opinion the worst part is that she's received very little in return. It's a wonder that she hasn't gone insane! She was yanked out of her own century, her sister was murdered, her entire family was murdered, and she has faced nothing but problem after problem. Frankly, I'm amazed that she hasn't just walked away and left us to our fates. I'm sure that there are other things she could be doing with her time – after all, she has the power to create anything she can imagine. She doesn't have to be dealing with psychopaths. But that's not the choice she has made."

"Do you mean she hasn't even been *tempted* to walk away?" Monroe asked.

"Well, I did kind of help her along a bit," Miles admitted. "She wasn't too keen on helping anyone after Adrian Garza murdered her family. But she got over it. It just took her some time."

"But why is she doing this? I don't know a single person back on Earth who would have done what she has done. I wouldn't even trust myself with the kind of power that she has. Do you realize that there is no power in existence that can hold her accountable, or that can tell her no?"

"That's not how she sees it. She still sees herself as a young girl, not as a despotic queen. All she wants is to go home and be with her family. She believes that once she finishes helping Earth God will allow her to go home. She hates her life, Monroe. She doesn't want to be here. If she could she would give it all up and go back to being a teenager on ancient Mars. There isn't anything in this life that she cares about, and her only real friend is a machine. All she wants is for the nightmare to end. That's

what this life is to her – a nightmare.”

“At least she fears God,” Monroe commented. “From what you have told me she sees herself as being under His jurisdiction. If she ever lost that fear we would be in a great deal of trouble.”

“True, but I don't think it will ever come to that. I really believe that Amy is approaching the end of her life. God brought her here to do some very specific things, and she is almost finished with her last task. Once the tribes are cured I believe He will take her.”

“I sincerely hope so. I will feel far more comfortable when there are no longer any administrators in the universe.”

Miles smiled. “Are you sure about that? You do realize that if the Artilect hadn't rescued her Mars would be a corpse, the Wall would still exist, the tribes would not be cured, and Adrasta would be dead in another century. She was the only one who could save us all and that's exactly what she has done. You have to give her credit: you would not be here now if it wasn't for her.”

“Quite literally,” Monroe agreed. “I, for one, never expected to set foot on Mars. And perhaps you're right – maybe I am being too harsh on her. Amy has executed her tasks faithfully and has not abused her power. It simply frightens me to know that there's a human being out there who could, if she wished, destroy the sun with a single thought. It frightens me quite a lot.”

Miles sighed. “Amy and I argued about that once. A few years ago I asked her what she was going to do when she was finally done with everything. I was hoping that she would live here, on Mars, with her people. It just seemed so sad that her family was dead and she didn't have anyone. I thought that maybe if she moved to Mars she could have a home, make some friends, and actually live and enjoy life. But she refused. She told me that she could never live on Mars – that wherever she lived people would never trust her, and that they'd eventually come to see her as a threat and would try to kill her. I thought she was being too cynical but I guess she was right. Despite all that she's done for

you and your planet, you still don't trust her and you don't want her around. You don't really care that she's lost everything and is just a 14-year-old orphan. You're not interested in taking care of her. You just want her to solve your problems and go away."

Monroe was silent for a long time. "When you put it that way it does sound terrible. I suppose we are thoughtless cretins, who demand miracles and then order the miracle-worker to go away empty-handed. But there really is no place for her here. Doesn't her power frighten you?"

"So what does she get out of all this?" Miles asked. "She saved the human race from extinction, brought Mars back to life, and is returning sanity to millions on Earth. In order to do those things her family has paid a terribly high price. Mankind has benefited greatly from the sacrifice that the Stryker family made. But tell me – what does Amy get in return? Even your dentist expects to get paid. Is mankind really just going to give her nothing and demand that she leave immediately?"

"I don't see why not. Isn't that the way it has always worked? It may not seem fair, but there has never been anything fair about life. Was not Jesus Himself, the Savior of mankind, hunted down and crucified? Were not His followers, who spread the gospel to a lost and dying world, also hunted down and murdered throughout the centuries? Were not the prophets from the days before Christ similarly persecuted? When has mankind ever rewarded those who have tried to save it? For that matter, what reward have you gotten for your two millennia of service to the old underground city?"

"Not much," Miles said cheerfully. "But I don't regret doing it. Besides, I'm about at the end of my journey. I may outlast Amy, but probably not by much. Mars has been turned over to Noel and the planet is in capable hands. I'm content with how things have turned out. The next life is looking a little bit more appealing every day. I'm ready for a break."

Monroe nodded and started out the window of the *Raptor*.

Outside the sky had grown dark and the stars were coming out. The constellations on Mars were quite different from the ones on Earth, and he was glad to have a minute to take in the Martian night sky. He suspected that one of those dots might be Earth itself, but he wasn't sure. The sight of the stars was somehow comforting. For most of his life he had grown up with a sky that completely lacked any stars at all. Now the night sky was a thing of beauty and wonder, a giant canvas with infinite possibilities. That canvas would have been hidden away forever if it was not for the actions of Amy Stryker.

"I don't think we can ever repay her," Monroe commented. "Not in any meaningful way. It's simply not possible for us to give her the things that she actually wants. Offering her payment in gold or silver would be ridiculous – she could make an entire planet out of solid gold if she wanted. I suppose all we can do is be grateful, and trust that God will reward her for what she has done."

"But you don't trust her," Miles replied.

"I used to trust her, when I thought she was an agent of the Rangers. I even defended her against Doyle. I only became nervous when I realized that her power was, for all practical purposes, unlimited and unchecked. I admire the way that she has used that power but the danger is still quite extreme."

"Is it?" Miles asked. "Suppose that Amy had died long ago and the network was now controlled by the Rangers, who numbered in the quadrillions. Suppose that they had been the ones who brought down the Wall and paid a visit to Earth. Would it really make you feel better if, instead of dealing with a single person who cared deeply about Sol, you instead were forced to deal with a giant, faceless bureaucracy – one that was so large that, to them, this entire star system was as insignificant as a single grain of sand on a beach?"

Monroe paled. "That would be horrifying!"

Miles nodded. "If history had turned out just a tiny bit

differently – if, say, the Diano Corporation had fled the bots and established colonies in the network, instead of retreating when the swarms attacked – then that is exactly what you would be facing today. Instead of dealing with Amy you would be confronted with a bureaucracy so large that it spanned entire star clusters, and with enough red tape to choke the Sun. It could completely obliterate our entire planets without even knowing it had done anything at all.

“You see, if you were actually faced with the Rangers then any thought of opposition would be completely hopeless. Your opponent would be so massive, so enormous, and so widespread that it would be like a wounded ant trying to fight a dinosaur. But in this case that massive power isn't invested in the Rangers; it's invested in one little girl. And to you that girl looks small, and frail, and helpless, and weak, and doesn't have any friends. The reality is that you can't control her any more than you could have controlled the Rangers, but since she's just one person you feel like you *ought* to be able to. So people start thinking of ways to get rid of her, to push her away, and – in the case of Adrian Garza – to kill her. She's a small enough target to make people think that maybe, just maybe, they can get away with it. Sure, she hasn't done anything evil. Sure, she's a force for good. Sure, she's saved millions of lives. But she is stronger than we are and she might get in our way one day, so we've just got to kill her. *That's* what people are really thinking, and it bothers me tremendously.”

“So you think it's pure jealousy?” Miles asked.

“Partly that, and partly a general hatred of people who are strong. No one can stand up and say 'I hate Amy because she's done this and this and this.' She hasn't done anything bad at all, but yet they hate her anyway. It's completely ludicrous to hate people because of something that they might do one day. It is asinine. It would be like walking into your neighbor's kitchen and confiscating all of his knives because, one day, he might snap and

use them to kill you. If you tried that you would get arrested and hauled off. No judge in the world would support you.”

“But Amy is a deeply dangerous person,” Monroe protested. “I would far rather see power invested in a civilization than in a single, unaccountable teenager. How can you not see the danger that she poses?”

“Frankly, I see a far greater danger. Mankind has stolen everything of value from this girl, leaving her empty and friendless, and it now wishes to execute her for a crime that everyone agrees she has not yet committed. Mankind owes her a great debt, and instead of paying it – or even attempting to pay it – they just want her dead. How can *you* not see that mankind is the real danger? They’re the ones that are insistent on hunting down and killing people who have done no harm! Amy has *far* more reason to be suspicious of mankind than mankind has to be suspicious of Amy. If I had to trust one of them I can tell you right now it wouldn’t be mankind.”

“I see your point,” Monroe said. “I’m just not sure that I agree.”

Miles sighed. “I suppose that’s why there are so few heroes – mankind simply can’t stand them. Who would bother to sacrifice so much when their only reward is getting shot in the back by a sniper? Maybe one day God will write on Mankind’s tombstone ‘These fools tried to kill everyone I sent to help them.’ That sums us up pretty well.”

He shook his head. “Anyway, enough of that. I’ve got a lot of history books; you’re welcome to take any of them that you’d like. I don’t really know much about the history of Earth, but there’s probably a lot about Mars that you don’t know.”

“I would be honored,” Monroe replied. “I greatly appreciate it.”

The *Raptor* rumbled up to the side of a cliff. Miles reached up and pushed a button on the console in front of him. The cliff vanished, revealing a hangar hidden within.

“Come on in and make yourself at home! Amy will watch over Adrasta while you're gone. It's in good hands.”

“Thank you,” Monroe replied.

CHAPTER 23

"This morning Miles invited me over to his place for breakfast. I was quite shocked to get the invitation; I thought he would never reveal the secret location of his underground bunker. I was even more surprised when I looked up the location on a map and saw how close it was to the outskirts of Tikal. The city was practically built on his front doorstep! All those times he took an hour to drive home must have been a ruse to fool the unwary. Anyway, while I was there I had a chance to talk with a man from Earth named Monroe Araiza. He was a fascinating person. His account of the current strife in Adrasta was riveting. I sincerely hope that Amy is able to stop Evan Maldonado. Given that she was able to terraform Mars it ought to be child's play for her, but the situation may be more complicated than that. In a way I'm glad that she's the one that's dealing with it instead of me. I'd much rather tackle an engineering problem than a people problem."

--Noel Lawson

July 14, 7243

AMY AND THE SENTINEL were standing at the base of Falcon Ridge. It was a warm and humid day, but the sky was dark and overcast. The air was still. *It's going to rain today*, she thought. *I can feel it. Not that it matters, I guess.*

Alex was busy eating his breakfast – a bowl of dog food. He

had long ago learned how to use the nanites in his bloodstream to materialize food, and every morning he fed himself. When Amy first saw what he was fixing she explained to him that he could have anything he wanted. Alex, though, insisted on eating the exact same food he had eaten back in the 19th century. He was a creature of habit and saw no reason to change. So Amy backed off and let him handle it. The food was perfectly healthy and well-balanced; eating it wasn't going to harm him. She was just surprised that he wasn't using his powers to create something tastier. She didn't know if it was discipline or a simple lack of imagination.

Amy looked to the horizon. Even though the crater that was left behind by the neutron bomb was beyond the line of sight, its effects were not. The radiation that the weapon had released when it was detonated had contaminated the plain, and the grass was starting to die. It was a depressing sight. By now the radiation should have decayed into harmlessness, but the cellular structure of the grass was still decimated. It simply had taken a while for the radiation to kill the grass. Death had claimed it from within long before the damage was visible from the outside.

"One day I'm going to replant the forest that Maldonado destroyed," Amy commented. "I can't stand having that big black crater there. It's ugly."

"That does seem like a good idea," the Sentinel agreed. "However, I would recommend waiting until after you have completed your negotiations with Adrasta. They have proven to be quite hostile."

"Boy, have they ever! What is it with those people? Why are they all homicidal maniacs? When we started all this I really thought that they could be saved. I thought that they would make the right decision and it would all work out. But now – well, now I think that the city is doomed. I just don't see how it can be saved. They are too fond of murder and too eager to kill others for the sake of their own convenience. There's nothing left

in them but hate.”

“All you can do is give them a choice. What they do with that choice is up to them. You are simply here to make the offer.”

“I guess,” Amy said. “Anyway, how are things going with you? Have you found a cure for the adults yet?”

“Indeed I have. In my simulations the cure has proven to be effective 100% of the time. The cure itself is a bit more specific than the cure for the children, however. Each dose that we administer will have to be tailored to that person's specific abnormalities and level of development. While we can cure all of them, it will not be possible to create a single antidote and mass-distribute it.”

“Didn't the cure for the children have the same problem?” Amy asked. “But we were still able to create a single antidote for them.”

“Yes and no. The cure did have to be customized for each child, but the changes were fairly minor. I was able to design the nanites so that they could analyze the child and change their configuration accordingly. Since the cure could change itself to match the disease, a single dose could cure anybody. Adults, though, are significantly more challenging to cure. The amount of variation between them is more than the nanites can handle on their own. They simply don't have the necessary processing power. I'll need to use the network to create a tailored cure for each one of them.”

Amy thought for a moment. “In that case, we should probably just administer the cure ourselves. I was kind of hoping that we could get Adrasta involved, but I think that would just slow things down. Besides, I doubt they'd be willing to help us anyway. Things will go much faster if we handle it. I bet once you've manufactured the cure we can distribute it in a matter of days.”

The Sentinel nodded. “The exact amount of time will vary between persons. In some cases a person may be cured in only

three days, while others may take up to eight. It just depends on their age and on how much damage has been done to them. It should also be noted that when they are cured their minds will be almost entirely blank. They will be like adult toddlers. Someone will have to care for them for a number of years, as they will essentially recapitulate childhood.”

“So, basically, you're saying that when we're done everyone on this planet is going to be a child. Wow. Well, the Stewards can handle it, I think. Can you install one on this planet? Ten million people is a lot, but they were built to serve billions, right? So they should be up to this.”

“There are actually 34,186,972 tribal peoples on this planet,” the Sentinel said. “The council estimated a population of ten million but their figures are quite erroneous. I am surprised you did not count them myself.”

“Sorry,” Amy said. “I just heard the number 'ten million' so many times that I came to believe it myself. You're right, of course. But – wow! And the general wants to kill them all with just 153 bombs?”

“Interestingly, that goal is actually achievable. The general has several factors working in his favor. First of all, the tribes are only located in North and South America. The rest of the world is unpopulated. Second, the tribes are not evenly dispersed across the entire hemisphere; they are located in several tight clusters. A small number of bombs can kill a great many people. The final point to keep in mind is that his bombs are enormously powerful – far more powerful than the test weapon he used to eradicate the forest. Each bomb is capable of devastating nearly a thousand square miles. As a side-note, the oversized bombs that the general is designing are actually not very efficient. A large number of small bombs would actually work far better. The general is aware of this but has chosen to use large weapons because he lacks the resources to create and deploy thousands of small weapons in his allotted time frame.”

"Wow! I guess I really haven't done my homework. I've been spending too much time monitoring the people in Adrasta."

"I would not discount that effort. So far your activities have prevented Maldonado from taking any more lives. That is probably more important than knowing the exact geographical distribution of the tribes."

Amy nodded. "All right. So we have a cure, it will need to be tailored to each person, and the Stewards can take care of all the new children. How soon can you get things started?"

"I can begin the process immediately, but are you sure that you want to go ahead and start curing them? What about Adrasta?"

"I'll deal with them tomorrow. They're going to have a meeting to decide what to do, and I'll show up and give them a choice. They can stop the genocide and help take care of the cured people, or they can continue to be monsters and get booted from Earth. I see no reason to postpone the cure until after the meeting, especially since it will take several days for the cure to work. Oh – and make sure you install the Steward before you start the cure process. He's going to be kept pretty busy."

"All right," the Sentinel agreed. "I will begin the process immediately."

"Great! You know, I will be so glad to have all of this behind me. Do you realize that by this time next month we could be done with all of this? I don't know about you, but I think that will be a good day."

"Yes it will," the Sentinel agreed.

* * * * *

In the city of Adrasta, Evan Maldonado was standing in a busy room. Since it would take months to repair the foundations and rebuild his old nuclear lab, the general had obtained space elsewhere and commissioned a new one. His chief nuclear

scientist, Ken Ochoa, was supervising the construction process.

"So how long is this going to take?" the general demanded.

Ochoa glanced down at his notes. "Well, first of all, the electrical engineers are working on fabricating another control board. It's a pretty big project and they won't have it ready until the middle of next week. Once we get it we'll need to install it and make sure that it's fully operational. A lot of wiring will have to be done, of course, but by the time we get the board we should have the rest of the lab set up. In two weeks we should be able to begin processing lithium again. Fortunately, very little lithium was destroyed, and the amount that remains is more than sufficient to build all of the bombs."

"More delays," Maldonado grumbled. "This is the worst project I've ever been on! It's nothing but delay after delay after delay. At least Monroe won't be around to cause any more 'accidents'. Maybe we can finally get some work done. If we can start processing lithium in two weeks then perhaps we can start the bombing campaign in three. We can finally make some headway."

Ochoa hesitated. "You know, speaking of Monroe, there's been a lot of rumors going around Adrasta lately. A man was caught trying to shoot the red-headed savage. Some people say that he was working for you, and you're trying to cover up a cure."

"That's exactly what I'm trying to do! What other choice do I have? Someone has got to step in and stop this cure thing before the public gets in an uproar. Support for the bombing campaign is dwindling rapidly. The last thing we need is for people to lose faith in what we're doing."

"So you *did* hire the sniper?" Ochoa asked, surprised.

"Of course I did! Do you think he hired himself? It worked, though. The boy is gone, Monroe is gone, and the cure is gone. There won't be anything to talk about in the meeting tomorrow, so all of this will blow over. Then we can get back to work."

"You murdered Monroe!?" Ochoa exclaimed.

"I sure did! Oh, he had it coming. I've been wanting to kill him for years. Let me tell you, it felt good. I would do it again in a heartbeat. Now that that little pipsqueak is gone we can finally have some peace around here."

"Uh, wow. Ok. But, um, aren't you afraid of getting arrested?"

"Of course not! I did what had to be done. Besides, don't you realize that our bombing campaign is going to kill millions upon millions of people? Compared to the total genocide of the savages, killing Monroe Araiza was small potatoes. He's just one person – a drop in the bucket. If you stacked up all the skeletons of everyone that we're going to kill, you wouldn't even notice him. He's nothing."

"Oh," Ochoa said.

"Come on! Put your head together. What did you think we were doing here – baking cookies? The last bomb you built for me was used to kill more than four hundred people. What's the life of one crabby scribe compared to that?"

"I guess I'd never really thought about it," Ochoa said uncertainly. "I was just doing my job."

"Well, you just keep on doing your job. We're way behind schedule. Leave the council to me. I'll make sure that no one tries to stop you from making those weapons of mass destruction."

Ochoa nodded, and the general left the room. The men around him resumed work but he did nothing. He just stood there, staring off into the distance, thinking. *What have I done?* he asked himself, over and over and over.

CHAPTER 24

“Miles has temporarily left Mars. Amy took him and all of the refugees back to Earth for some sort of hearing that's happening today. (I would love to know how she's able to zip between planets so effortlessly, but sadly she won't tell me. It must be an Administrator thing.) She offered to take me with them as well but I had to turn her down – I just have too much to do here. When Miles gets back I'll have to take him out to dinner one night and hear how things went.”

--Noel Lawson

July 15, 7243

THE FOLLOWING DAY the debate hall was packed. Everyone had heard the rumors that were flying about – that a cure had been found, that someone had tried to kill the cured boy, and that something had happened to Monroe. No one really knew what was going on but everyone suspected that history was about to be made. The room was packed. Every seat was taken, and people had flooded into the hall and were standing anywhere they could find an inch of ground. Those who couldn't come were at home watching the live telecast.

The opposition section was packed with people. Monroe's followers had returned to Earth and sat in their seats. Ken Ochoa had not joined them but he did take a seat near their section. He was beginning to realize that he was on the wrong side but he was afraid of Monroe. Privately, he hoped that something would happen in the meeting that would give him a way out. The

knowledge that the test bomb he built had killed hundreds of people – people who could have been cured – weighed heavily on him. He felt guilty and apprehensive.

The council had arrived early and were seated around the table. Conrad Forbes was there, as was Evan Maldonado, who was seated beside him. They were talking to each other in low tones.

Five minutes before the meeting was scheduled to begin a shout went up. General Maldonado whirled around and went pale. There, walking through the front door, was Monroe Araiza. He was holding the hand of Nate, who looked around the room in wonder. Behind him the general saw the black-haired girl who had talked with him in the nuclear lab. He also saw two other people he didn't recognize – a very old man dressed in overalls, and a middle-aged man wearing a gray suit and hat.

Monroe, the boy, and the girl walked into the speaker's area inside the ring of tables. The rest of the party sat down in the opposition section. Monroe glanced at Maldonado and politely nodded at him. The general looked at him, shocked. A horrible feeling gripped him. He glanced over at Forbes, who looked equally shocked. The two had a quiet whispered exchange, which Amy watched closely.

With a mischievous smile on her face the girl made a small motion with her hand. A second later their private exchange boomed over the entire room, silencing everyone.

"What do we do now?" the general asked.

"I thought you killed them!" Forbes said irritably.

"I did! I don't understand it."

"Don't worry. I'll get us through this. Just tell your men to be standing outside the door so we can kill them as they leave. I'll think of something to pacify the crowd."

The crowd was silent for a moment, then stood to their feet. They began booing loudly. Things were instantly in an uproar. Forbes tried to call for silence but the angry mob ignored him.

Monroe quickly stood up and gestured that he would like to speak, and the crowd quieted down. They remained on their feet, however.

"So now the truth comes out," Monroe said. "All along I thought that the general was leading the attempted genocide against the tribes, and the council was merely an unbiased facilitator. But now we see that Forbes was behind it all along! Even when he chastised the general it was merely an act to divert suspicion. Maldonado was just doing his bidding. This whole project was his attempt at setting himself up as the first in a line of Emperors."

"You are entirely mistaken," Forbes said. "I was simply acting in the best interests of this city."

"Were you, now? Let's see. You tried your best to cover up the fact that the tribes can be cured – a fact that the city is quite interested in. You tried to have this little boy killed so that the city would never find out the truth of what was going on. You weren't trying to give them all the facts. You were trying to bury inconvenient facts that were getting in your way. The truth – as everyone here can see – is that it *is* possible to cure the clans. Here we have a young man who has been completely cured."

"Hi," Nate said. He then looked around, embarrassed, and sat down again.

Monroe smiled at him, then resumed speaking. "Moreover, it is possible to cure all of them. All of them! The sacred mission that is carved in the Hall of Stone can finally be completed. We can at last bring light to those who are in darkness. Success is within our grasp!"

Maldonado stood up. "I will never let you cure them, do you hear me? Never! This planet is ours, by right. We are the civilized ones here! It is our destiny to rule over the stars, and for too long we have let these mindless morons stand in our way. I am not going to let you stop us."

"It is over," Monroe replied. "You will not be allowed to harm

one more clan member.”

The general started screaming. “You know nothing! I will kill every last one of those stupid people – starting with that boy right there! I will kill them all if I have to do it with my bare hands.”

Nate started crying. He ran over to Amy and clutched her, screaming hysterically. Amy held him close and looked at the general coldly. “Don’t even think about it. I will kill anyone who tries to lay a hand on him.”

“Guards!” Forbes shouted. Instantly a group of thirty soldiers, heavily armed, ran into the room and positioned themselves at strategic positions. After they were in place Forbes looked around the room. “This discussion is over. Cure or not, I have decreed that the savages will die and they *will* die. Adrasta is now under martial law. Anyone who tries to interfere with the bombing campaign will be shot on sight. Moreover, I order the deaths of Monroe Araiza, his followers, and that screaming child right there. General, kill him. Now.”

The general smiled and drew his gun out of its holster. “It will be a pleasure,” he said, as he aimed the gun at the boy.

Amy looked at Maldonado. An intense rage burned within her as she saw the cold hatred in his eyes. Before he could pull the trigger she made a decision, and gave the nanites that saturated the planet a series of instructions.

As the general began pulling the trigger the boy vanished. A moment later Maldonado died. His body dissolved, leaving only a pile of bones that clattered to the floor. As Forbes looked on, horrified, he died as well, and a moment later all that was left of him was a skeleton.

In that same moment sixty giant black robots appeared throughout the room – two beside each guard that Forbes had posted. The guns dissolved from the guards’ hands, and each robot grabbed one arm of each of the guards. The guards struggled but found it impossible to move.

A second later the ceiling rumbled, then cracked, and then violently torn open. The gash spread to one of the chamber's massive stone walls, which was violently blown outward. The crowd could now see the sky, the mountain, and the plain beyond it. As they watched, a giant spaceship – miles long – appeared in the sky above them. The ship was so large that it blotted out the entire sky. A white light emanated from it, lighting the area.

Finally, in the plain at the bottom of the mountain, a giant rift appeared in spacetime. The rift widened until it was hundreds of feet high and hundreds of feet wide. Beyond it the people could see a magnificent, modern city on a beautiful planet.

Amy eyed the rest of the council, and then spoke. "Citizens of Adrasta, the reign of Emperor Conrad is over. I absolutely will not allow the tribes to be harmed, and they will *not* be harmed. Since the council does not listen to reason I will respond with overwhelming force.

"I offer each of you a choice. Those who wish to help cure the tribes and heal them may leave Adrasta and come with me. I have opened a door to my home on Tonina. Together we can give the poor people on Earth a new life."

One of the remaining council members stood up. He glared at Amy. "I would rather die than join you, you monster."

Amy stared at him coldly. "Then so be it. In 48 hours that giant spaceship out there is going to destroy Adrasta. When it is done there will be nothing left. If you will not change your ways and abandon your hatred then I will forcibly relocate you to a place that you do not want to go. I will take away your city, your comforts, and your future, and you will be left destitute.

"That is your choice, citizens. You can abandon your hatred and come join me on Tonina, and together we can help the tribes. Or you can keep your hatred, stay here, and be forcibly evicted from the Earth. The choice is yours."

"You don't frighten me!" the man screamed. "I am not going

to bow to your whims. I will fight you if it's the last thing that I do!"

Amy shook her head. "You have 48 hours to leave this place. 48 hours! Make your choice. I promise you that if you choose to leave the council will not be able to stop you. I will position my soldiers throughout the city and they will neutralize the council forces. My robots will help you however they can. If you need something – anything at all – just ask them."

She then vanished, along with Monroe, Miles, and the Sentinel.

CHAPTER 25

"Today one of our astronomers rushed into my office with an astonishing bit of news: they have discovered a giant, interstellar computer! In their survey of the galaxy they've discovered six star systems whose planets have been turned into giant computing devices. They don't know how old the computers are, who built them, or why they were built, but they're out there and they are real. This news puzzles me tremendously. I wonder if this is connected to the Artilect that Miles once told me about? I'll have to ask him when he returns to Mars."

--Noel Lawson

July 15, 7243

MONROE, MILES, ALEX, and the Sentinel materialized on the streets of Tonina. Ahead of them, just down the street, was the giant rip in space that Amy had created. Through it they could see the mountains of Earth.

Alex was taken aback at the sudden change in location. The dog looked around, confused. He then saw the Sentinel and hurried over to him. "What happened?"

The Sentinel looked down at him, smiled, and petted him. "It's ok, Alex. Everything is fine. Amy moved you here because the Earth isn't a happy place right now."

"Ok," Alex replied.

Miles looked at the dog in wonder. "So you're Alex! I've heard a lot about you, you know. Amy loves you a great deal."

"I know. She's my person."

Monroe looked at him, astonished. "Is that – is that a dog? A talking dog?"

"Of course I'm a dog! What did you think I was – a rabbit?"

"Um, no, of course not. I meant no offense. I just – that is – dogs have been extinct for quite some time now. I didn't realize they could talk."

"Really?" Miles asked. "Didn't you read *The History of Martian Dog Breeders*? All ancient dogs could talk."

"I thought they made that part up," Monroe admitted. "It just didn't seem plausible."

"Why? Did you think that ancient historians were morons?"

"Goodness, no! It just struck me as a little far-fetched. I thought that perhaps they were speaking metaphorically or something, or perhaps it was some lost cultural reference."

Alex spoke up. "No, I can talk. Bats can talk too, you know. But I haven't seen any bats lately. Where's Amy? Is Amy here?"

"Amy is still on Earth," the Sentinel explained. "She transported all of us to safety but she still has work to do there. The people in Adrasta need her help. She's going to make sure that the council can't stop people from fleeing."

"How long will she be gone?" Alex asked.

"Just for the next 48 hours. After that Adrasta will be judged and she won't have to worry about them anymore."

Monroe looked surprised. "So she's serious? She's really going to destroy the city?"

"Yes, she will. This is something that we discussed long ago. Amy was always going to give the Adrastans a choice. If they were willing to make peace with the tribes then she would allow them to stay, and she would even cure them of their infertility so they would have a future. If, however, they were not willing to live in peace then she would relocate them to another planet and allow them to die off. The moment of choice has finally come."

"But why do it in such a violent and catastrophic way? This is horrible!"

Alex growled at him. The Sentinel stroked the dog's back to calm him down and then turned back to Monroe. "What the city is trying to do is also horrible. At some point a separation had to be made. A line had to be drawn between those who were willing to live in peace and those who were not. Those who wish to live in peace may come here. Those who do not will be forcibly removed to a place where they can no longer oppress the tribes. In either case, Adrasta must be destroyed. The city has become a cesspool of evil and must be removed and replaced with something better."

"But she killed Conrad Forbes and Evan Maldonado!"

"And it was about time, too," Miles remarked. "They were the ringleaders in an attempt to kill tens of millions of people. They had already killed hundreds and were determined to kill more. They even tried to kill you, you know."

"But she didn't have to kill them. There were lots of other things she could have done! I told you that one day she was going to lose her mind."

Alex growled at him again and bared his teeth. The Sentinel pulled him back, and Alex looked up at him. "Just let me bite him, ok? For Amy's sake! I need to bite his leg. Or maybe his arm."

The Sentinel shook his head. Alex whined, then looked back at Monroe and growled. Monroe eyed him warily. "I meant no offense. I just think the situation could have been handled differently."

Miles shook his head. "There comes a time when enough is enough. Those two men were already mass-murderers and they were determined to keep on killing. If she spared them they would have just kept on trying until the day they died. At some point you have to put a stop to it, and that's what she did. I assure you that after that demonstration people will think twice before they try shooting anyone else. The rest of the council had

some nasty things to say but none of them dared to raise a hand against anyone.”

“So this is the end, then,” Monroe said sadly. “Amy is bringing an end to my people.”

“What are you talking about? Amy is just separating the murderous, racist thugs from the people who want to help. The people who want to help will come to Tonina, and after Adrasta is destroyed Amy will build a new city and will send everyone back to Earth. They can then work together to teach the tribes. The only thing that's ending is the genocidal campaign.”

“How do you know all of this?”

“I asked her,” Miles replied. “You should try talking to Amy sometime. She's not as bad as you make her out to be.”

“Oh, I know,” he replied, keeping an eye on Alex. “I have the greatest respect for her. It just seems like there must have been a better way.”

“Really? What did you want Amy to do – tell them 'naughty naughty' and make them go sit in a corner? I think she's shown a great deal of restraint. She's going through a lot of trouble to separate the good from the bad. She could have just moved Adrasta to another planet and let them all die out, and allowed the evil ones to continue to oppress and murder the good. Would you rather have had that?”

“I suppose not,” Monroe sighed. “But you must understand that when Adrasta is destroyed a great deal will be lost. What will become of my books and papers? What about our archives? The Order has protected that information for millennia! Why must it all be lost?”

The Sentinel spoke up. “In the meeting Amy made it clear that if anyone needed help they only had to ask. If you wish for those things to be saved then I will relocate them to Tonina. Nothing needs to be left behind.”

“Thank you,” Monroe said. “I appreciate it.”

* * * * *

Over the next few hours Amy was surprised to see that there was very little chaos. People quietly filed out of the debate hall and returned to their homes. Once at home they began debating the matter amongst themselves. A great many people had no desire to leave. They had lived their entire lives in Adrasta and had accumulated a great many possessions. The city through the portal did look appealing, but they didn't have time to move everything all by themselves. Rather than trying to make some tough decisions (or asking the robots for help) it was easier to just wait it out and see what happened.

Other people supported the surviving council members and were indignant that anyone was standing up for the tribes. The council rallied their armed forces and ordered them to stop anyone who tried to live Adrasta. When the guards tried to carry out those orders, however, they were stopped cold by the giant robots Amy had placed throughout the city. Their every attempt to cause trouble was thwarted – but they were ordered to keep on trying, and so they did.

There were a few people in the city who were glad to see the general's reign of terror end. These were mostly people who had supported Monroe in the past, but there were a few newcomers as well – men such as Ken Ochoa. They quickly packed up a few of their most prized possessions and hurried off to La Venta. All of Monroe's followers were there by nightfall. Once there they were warmly greeted by the Steward and shown to new, luxurious homes. They were awestruck at the splendor of Tonina and could not believe the wealth and magnificence that was on display. One man commented that it was like stepping into a dream.

After they had settled into their homes Amy had the Steward tell them that the moment they set foot in La Venta they were automatically cured of all their genetic problems. Infertility

would no longer be an issue for them.

* * * * *

Over the next two days Amy continued watching over Adrasta. There were a few more stragglers but very few people transitioned from the stone city to the one in the stars. A quick count revealed that less than one person in ten chose to leave Adrasta. The rest remained, and despite the continued presence of the enormous starship that blotted out the sun, they simply went back to their old lives. It was as if nothing had happened at all.

Amy commanded her robot guards to warn everyone that the city was about to be destroyed, but despite the guards' imposing size and power people ignored them. So Amy waited and counted down the last few remaining hours.

CHAPTER 26

"Today one of our computer scientists pointed out that Tikal's data center doesn't contain any history or log information. From the computer's perspective the first time it was ever turned on was when we repaired the unit and activated it.

But how is that possible? I suppose someone might have run a purge routine before shutting it down thousands of years ago, but why would they bother? It doesn't make any sense. This city has no personal belongings, no books, and no historical logs. How can Tikal not have a past? Maybe Miles can shed some light on this."

--Noel Lawson

July 17, 7243

TWO DAYS HAD PASSED since the eventful meeting in the debate hall of Adrasta. Amy slowly counted down the remaining minutes, and when the final minute had passed she materialized in front of Adrasta's massive city gates. A quick scan of the area confirmed that there were no stragglers left who were trying to flee. Despite the constant warning of Amy's guards, people had simply gone back to their old lives. Amy shook her head. *After all they've seen me do, how can they not take me seriously? Do they really think I'm going to just walk away and leave them alone?*

A moment later the Sentinel appeared beside her. He was accompanied by Miles and Monroe.

"Oh, hey there," Amy exclaimed. "I wasn't expecting company. I mean, I knew you would come, but I thought you

would be alone.”

“They wanted to see what was about to happen,” the Sentinel explained. “If you don't want them here then I will send them back.”

“No, that's fine,” Amy said. “You can leave them. I just – I don't know. I just wish things had never come to this. This didn't have to happen, Steve. If they had just left the tribes alone I would never have bothered them, and Maldonado and Forbes would still be alive today. All they had to do was not attempt the total genocide of an entire race. That's all I asked. But apparently that was too much to ask of the 72,196 people who still live behind those gates.”

“Are there still that many people left in the city?” Monroe asked.

Amy nodded, and Monroe looked surprised. “But La Venta is amazing! It surpasses anything I have ever imagined. Even the Spanish Empire itself had nothing like it! Why would anyone want to remain in the stone city when one could move there?”

“Really?” Miles asked. “You do realize that, just two days ago, you were all upset about having to leave Adrasta. You were quite upset at Amy.”

“But that was before I had a chance to see it, and before I knew what was going to happen to all my books. Once I was there—” He stopped. “Oh. I see.”

“Exactly,” Miles replied. “You were so intent on trying to convince me that Amy was evil that you missed—”

“What's that?” Amy interrupted. She turned to Monroe. “You think *I'm* evil? What have I done this time?”

“He didn't think you should have killed the general or the councilman,” Miles explained. “He was pretty upset about it.”

“Are you kidding me?” She looked at Monroe angrily. “Are you telling me that when the general pulled out a gun and tried to kill Nate, you were on *his* side?”

Monroe turned pale. “Oh, no, certainly not! I just thought

that, um, that is to say, that maybe you could have taken a different approach.”

“What is it with you people? I save you from starving to death in that coal mine, and you turn around and whine that I'm a dangerous threat to all mankind. Then when Forbes seizes power and commands your execution, and I save your life *again*, you tell Miles that proves I'm an evil tyrant. Are there no sane people on this planet? Are you all out of your minds?”

The Sentinel placed a hand on Amy's shoulder. “Amy, I understand your frustration, but you have a job to do here. You need to focus. You can always turn Monroe into a frog later today.”

“She – what?” Monroe asked. He looked at Miles. “He's kidding, right? She can't really do that. Can she?”

“It would certainly be interesting to find out,” Miles said thoughtfully. “I don't think I've ever seen her try it. It might be possible.”

Amy looked at Monroe and shook her head. “Oh, whatever. If you want to think I'm a monster then I guess that's what you're going to do. I need to move past all this and move on. I just didn't want things to come to this! I wanted to *help* these people. I wanted to give them a future. But they just weren't interested. They wouldn't have it. They wouldn't change, and they've left me no choice. As much as it pains me to do so, it's time to bring this to an end.”

Amy closed her eyes and connected to the network of nanites that saturated the planet's atmosphere. She then reluctantly closed the gateway that led to Tonina. The way was now locked; the opportunity to go there was over.

Next, she turned her mental gaze to the giant stone city in front of her. With the network she could see every corridor, every room, and every person. Nothing was hidden from her. After locating every person in Adrasta she transported them all to the plain that was at the base of the mountain. There they could see

the city but were a safe distance from it. As soon as the people materialized there was a great commotion, and the mob began getting angry. Amy simply froze them all in place. They could see what was going on, but they could not move or do anything to stop it.

The girl then glanced up at the giant starship that filled the entire sky. She had created it two days earlier from plans that were in the nanites' pattern library. The ship was not an illusion; it was a fully-functional battleship. After moving her friends to the base of Falcon Ridge so they would be well out of harm's way, she issued a command and the starship began bombarding Adrasta. Spheres of bright orange light shot out of the ship and reigned down onto the city, blasting it to pieces. Over the next ten minutes the starship completely obliterated every corner and crevice of Adrasta. Not one stone was left intact. When it was finally over and the thunder of the last explosion had died away, there were not even ruins remaining. The city, and everything it once contained, was entirely gone. With its work done, the spaceship dissolved into nothingness.

Amy then used the network to look across space. Two days ago she had made some changes to the planet Xanthe, to prepare it for an influx of visitors. The Adrastans would have what they needed to survive, but life would not be easy and the life they once knew would be gone. They would have no future, for without a cure for their infertility – a problem that they continued to deny, even now – there would simply be no future generations. The people were being transported to Xanthe to die.

Amy looked over the crowd. She transported herself in front of the giant mass of people, and then floated in the air above them so they could all see her. They were all frozen, but she knew she had their attention.

"Adrastans, your city is no more. I offered you a future and you refused it. I brought you to the border of the promised land

but you refused to cross over and possess it. Now you will inherit the wilderness, and you will die there. You have made your choice. This is the end."

With that, Amy used the network of nanites to transport the entire mob to the planet Xanthe. After making sure that they had all arrived safely and were unfrozen, she opened her eyes and looked around. Adrasta and its people was gone. There was a stillness in the air.

"So I guess that's it," Miles remarked. "It's all over now. You finished what you were sent here to do. Your job here is done."

"Well, almost," Amy said. "The tribes aren't fully cured yet. Steve has administered the cure but it will take another week or so before everyone has been made whole. The process takes time."

"But you aren't involved in that process," Miles pointed out. "The nanites will do the work on their own, without your intervention. Plus, the Steward is in place and is already taking care of the cured children. Everything is well in hand."

"I guess you're right. But how do you know all of this?"

"Oh, I just asked Steve. He's been a great host, by the way! Among other things, he's a whole lot better at giving direct answers to questions than you are – and he has yet to offer me a pair of pink shoelaces."

Amy grinned. "You're never going to let go of that, are you? But there is one more thing I need to do. I need to take everyone on Tonina and bring them back to Earth. Except for you, of course. You need to go back to Mars."

Monroe spoke up. "Why would you do that? Doyle is quite happy on Tonina, as are the others. La Venta is a beautiful city and, quite frankly, we have no desire to leave. I don't think anyone would mind if you left us there."

"But it isn't your home! You belong on Earth. You were born right here on this planet. Besides, this is where the tribes are. How can you possibly help them if you're thousands of light-

years away? And it's not like I'm going to move you back here and then stick you in a mud hut. I can build a city on this plain that is every bit as glorious as La Venta. It will be big enough to house you *and* the tribes."

Monroe nodded. "I suppose that would work. Now that the tribes are cured I would like to help them grow, and I know the others would as well. I have no objection to that plan."

"Then it sounds like I have one more task left," Amy remarked. She turned to Miles and smiled. "Why don't you do the honors? You've built cities before, you know."

"I'd love to, but I'm afraid I didn't pack my pink shoelaces. They're not the sort of thing I tend to wear in public."

"But they go so beautifully with those hideous orange shoes! Well, what a pity. I guess we'll have to do without them. Give me your hand."

Miles looked at her, puzzled, and took her hand. Instantly the world changed. His mind connected to the network of nanites, and his perception was vastly expanded. The memories of designing Tikal on the planet Jasmine flooded back to him.

"Why, you've given me access to your connection! This is amazing. I'd forgotten how much fun this was."

Monroe looked around, puzzled. "I don't see anything. Am I missing something?"

"You might say that," Miles replied, as he studied the planet. He mentally zoomed in to Falcon Ridge. He could see every last detail – the mountainside that had been blasted apart, the scorched prairie, and the crater where the forest had once stood.

"We've really got to fix all that damage," Miles commented. "That is just plain ugly. What would you think if we took care of that first?"

"Sounds good to me," Amy agreed. "Where do you think we should put the city?"

"Well, why not put it at the base of the mountain? We could always flatten that peak to create more space, but it's quite

beautiful and I hate to destroy it. The only change I'd make to it is adding a layer of trees – pine trees, maybe. The plain itself ought to be big enough to meet our needs.”

“I agree. Let's keep the mountain. Now, were you considering a neoclassical city or something more modern?”

“Let's experiment and see what looks good. I want to make sure that it fits the landscape. I'm leaning more toward a postmodern design, with a bit of a twist.”

“Interesting,” Amy remarked. “I'd like to see that. Are you ready to begin?”

Miles smiled. “Absolutely! Let's get started – one last time.”

* * * * *

Amy and Miles spent the rest of the day building the new city. They could have simply chosen a preexisting template from the nanites' library, but instead they took their time. They both knew that this would be the last time they'd ever work together, and they were in no particular hurry. So, as Monroe watched in awe, they took the dust of the ground, turned it into programmable matter, and fashioned the shell of a city. Once the basic structure was in place they customized it endlessly – moving streets, adjusting buildings, adding parks, tweaking architecture. When they were done they had a city that was quite a bit smaller than La Venta but still retained its beauty and amenities. Unlike Adrasta, this city was a splendor of light and crystal, refracting the sun in endless ways. Colors abounded. It was truly magnificent – a beautiful new home for the true Children of Light.

By the time they were finally done the day was over and the sun had set. The stars had come out and glimmered brilliantly in the sky. The city was spread out before them, in all its glory.

“It's beautiful,” Monroe said. “Thank you very much. It is an amazing gift.”

"And thank you for letting me help build it," Miles added. "Construction via programmable matter just never gets old."

"You're welcome," Amy replied, as she disconnected Miles from the network. "I appreciate your help."

"So when are you going to move everyone here?" Miles asked.

"Oh, I think I'll do that while they're sleeping. Probably sometime around midnight. They'll just wake up and find that their homes have moved."

Monroe looked surprised. "You're actually going to move their homes?"

"No, not exactly. I've actually recreated them here on Earth. All I'll have to do is move their stuff and move the people. They'll wake up in what appears to be exactly the same building, but the building will be on Earth instead of on Tonina."

"I imagine they'll be a bit surprised."

"Which is why I'm going to let *you* explain it to them," Amy remarked.

Miles spoke up. "So what happens now?"

"I am afraid this is where we part ways. Steve and I will stay until everyone has been moved, but between now and then we have a few other things to do. It's time for you to return to Mars."

"I had a feeling you were going to say that," Miles said sadly. "I will miss you. You have done more for Mars than I dared to hope. I am sincerely, deeply sorry for the losses you have suffered. I wish there was some way I could help you."

"I know you do, and that means a lot to me. I can honestly say that you've been my only friend. Well, you and Noel. Everyone else just wants me to get out of their life. You'd think I had a contagious disease or something."

Monroe blushed. "I know we have had our differences, but I am also grateful for all that you've done. Without your help all would have been lost."

"And yet you're still overjoyed that I'm leaving, aren't you? Yeah, I know. I've saved the world, I've accomplished your goals, and now it's time for the Big Security Risk to leave. Let me go on record as saying that the 73rd century is a terrible century. People were way nicer in the 19th century. Time has not improved the human race one bit."

"Amy," Steve said warningly.

"Well, it's true! When you grabbed me off of the *Sparrow* things were *not* this bad. Governor Nicholas was genuinely grateful for my help. He was quite kind to my sister and I. Even those crazy people on the *Starfire* were nice. But here – well, fine. It doesn't matter. It is what it is."

Amy turned to Miles. "I'm going to miss you. Please tell Noel goodbye for me, will you? And I'll be looking forward to seeing you again soon. Not that I want you to hurry up and die or anything, but—"

Miles laughed. "I understand. I'll be looking forward to seeing you again too. Give my regards to your family."

Amy gave Miles a hug. "Goodbye," she said.

"Goodbye," Miles replied. He then vanished.

After Amy verified that Miles had arrived safely on Mars, she turned back to Monroe. "Well, I kept my promise. I told you that I would save the tribes and I did. I've given your people a future and I've given you a brand-new city to live in. I even saved all those books of yours. You'll find them in your room; the Steward can give you directions. I'm now going to make your final wish come true and leave."

"Please don't go like that," Monroe pleaded. "I really am grateful – truly, I am. You have saved my life more than once, and this entire planet owes you a great debt. I'm very thankful."

"Oh, I know. And I would probably be a lot more touched if I didn't know how badly you want me to leave this universe. What you don't seem to realize is that I'm not some hypothetical variable in some thought experiment. I'm a real person with real

feelings, and I've had a terrible life, and you have not done one thing to make my life any better. All you've done is tried to convince the one friend I did have that I'm a maniac. I don't hate you, but – well, I've said enough. I did what I came to do. I saved your life and gave you a future. What you do with it is up to you. Choose wisely, because I won't be around to save you again.”

With that, she disappeared.

The Sentinel was about to leave as well, but then he saw the look on Monroe's face. “Was there something else you wanted to say?”

Monroe sighed. “Well, that was just kind of awkward. I really don't know what to say. I feel like I'm going to regret what just happened but I don't know what I should have done differently.”

The Sentinel shook his head sadly. “Since Amy became an administrator she has encountered a great many people, and they have wanted a great many things from her. Among all those she has met there have been a few who have cared for her and tried to help her. You had a chance to be on that short list, but you refused. That chance has now passed you by. It will not come again.

“Instead you put your name on a different list – the list of those who saw Amy as a dangerous threat and wished she would die. When future generations ask what happened today, you can tell them that a hero came, saved your people, and gave them a new life – and you looked at her, said thanks, and asked her to drop dead. That is something you will never be able to undo. You will have to live with it for the rest of your days.”

“I never asked her to drop dead,” Monroe protested.

“Do you want Amy to stay here and live out the rest of her life?”

“Goodness, no!” Monroe said, horrified. “The risk of corruption is far too great. She needs–” and then he stopped.

“Exactly,” the Sentinel replied. “I think I've made my point. Goodbye, Monroe Araiza.”

The Sentinel then disappeared, leaving him alone.

CHAPTER 27

"Miles returned to Mars late last night. I don't have the time right now to record everything he told me, but it sounds like Amy Stryker has brought the Earth back to life. There's a new city there now and the people have been cured of their genetic problems. Sadly, though, Amy is now gone. I wish I could have told her goodbye before she left. In fact, I wish she hadn't left at all – there was plenty of room for her here in Tikal and she would have been among friends. Miles said that it wasn't that simple, although I don't understand why. Sometimes I suspect there are a lot of things he isn't telling me. That's one of the prerogatives of being old, I guess."

--Noel Lawson

July 18, 7243

THE SENTINEL MATERIALIZED on Tonina, in the restaurant at the top of Ahexotl Tower. At this time of night the place was empty. Amy was standing at one of the windows, looking down over the city. She appeared lost in thought. Alex was lying on the middle of the floor, fast asleep. It was long past his bedtime.

"Are you ready to transport everyone to Earth?" the Sentinel asked.

"No, not yet. Let's give it a few more hours. We've got other things to do anyway."

"Have you decided what you are going to do with the galactic supercomputer?"

"What do you mean, have I decided? We talked about that weeks ago, remember? I'm not going to change my mind. Go ahead and give the Stewards the order to turn the computer planets back into normal habitable worlds. Make them just like they were before, back when the Artilect was in charge. I want them to have the same landforms, the same continents, the same cities, everything."

"All right," the Sentinel replied. "Give me a few minutes to send out the commands. I am not as powerful as my father."

"Take your time," Amy said. "There's no hurry."

Amy sat down at a table beside one of the giant glass windows and looked outside. She thought back to the day her family had enjoyed dinner at that very restaurant, before the Artilect launched its war against the swarms. Back then her father had been making plans to form a government, and everyone was excited about the future. None of them knew how close they were to death. By the time another month had passed they were all gone. All except for Amy, who was left alone in a very big and very dark galaxy.

She spoke up. "No one else is ever going to come and live in these cities, are they?"

The Sentinel paused for a moment and then looked over at her. "Probably not. It would take at least four or five hundred years – possibly much longer than that – for the Martian civilization to expand to a point where it would reach the network. It would take a great deal longer than that to expand throughout the network and reach Tonina. I doubt there is that much time left before the end comes."

Amy nodded. "I know. There might be, of course, but it isn't likely."

"You know, then," the Sentinel commented. "I was wondering if you had realized it. But if you know these planets will never be used, why do you want me to put them all back?"

"Oh, just because. Maybe you're right, and no one will ever

set foot on Tonina again. Maybe no one else will ever see La Venta. But it will still be here, regardless. Beauty doesn't stop being beauty just because no one notices it. The offer is still being made, and even if no one accepts it it's still a valid offer. My brother started the replicating probe project a long time ago and this is how it ended. I say let these cities stand. Let Tim's handiwork endure until the end of time. I am not going to wipe it all out just because there's a good chance no one else will ever appreciate it."

"Very well," the Sentinel replied. He went back to his job of contacting the Stewards and relaying the instructions.

Amy looked out through the window and waited for him to finish. Time slowly ticked by, but she did not notice. She was lost in thought. "It wasn't a waste, you know. The probe project, I mean. If those probes hadn't been released I wouldn't be here. None of those people on Earth or Mars would have been saved. This wasn't what Tim and Dr. Temilotzin were trying to do, but their project still achieved something worthwhile. Their work wasn't a complete waste of time."

The Sentinel nodded. "The same is true for the *Sparrow*. When Governor Nicholas sent Captain Max to Mars to rescue you, he was only trying to transport you to Xanthe. He never intended for all of this to happen. But if he had not made the attempt, you would not have gotten shot down in that starship and I would not have been able to rescue you. History would have ended very differently."

"I guess we owe the Spanish Emperor a vote of thanks, then," Amy remarked.

The Sentinel shook his head. "I would not go that far. I would say, however, that what he meant for evil God used for good. It is often like that."

* * * * *

An hour later the Sentinel looked up at her. "It is done. The commands have been given and the Stewards are working to reconvert their planets. It will take several days to execute the command but we do not have to be here while they work."

Amy stood up. "Thank you. I guess there's just one thing left to do, then. It's time to transport these people to their new homes on Earth."

The Sentinel quickly scanned the city. "Not everyone is asleep."

"Oh, I can fix that," Amy said, smiling.

The girl used the planetary network of nanites to cause everyone to fall into a deep sleep. She then reached across space and transported all of them to Earth. Once they were safely in their new homes she moved their possessions as well. When the sun rose the next morning they would wake up in their beds and find themselves on Earth – in a glorious new city, facing a glorious new day.

After checking one last time to make sure that everything had been moved and nothing had been overlooked, Amy looked at the Sentinel. "Are you ready to go?"

"What are you going to do about Tonina?"

"Leave it, just as it is."

"Are you sure you are ready to leave? Have you done everything that you wanted to do? Is there anything left undone?"

Amy shook her head. "Nope. C'mon, let's go."

"You will have to lead me," the Sentinel said. "I am afraid I do not know the way."

Amy nodded. She then walked over to Alex and shook him. "Come on, boy, time to get up."

Alex rolled over groggily. "But it's so late. I'm tired."

"I know, I know. But we have to go. Mom and Dad and Amanda are waiting on us."

"They are?" Alex barked. He got to his feet. "I thought they

were gone! Where are they?"

"I'll take you to them," Amy promised. "Just stick right next to me, ok?"

With Alex following close behind, Amy walked over and took the Sentinel's hand. The three of them vanished.

They reappeared on a beautiful world. Around them was a magnificent, lush garden. A bed of green grass formed a carpet under their feet, and old trees towered above them. It felt like it was late but there was a soft light all around them. The atmosphere was peaceful and serene.

The Sentinel was the first to speak. "This place is remarkable! My father once told me about this place, but this is the first time I have ever seen it. There is something special about it. I feel like I am on the threshold of a very different kind of country."

"That's because you are. Come with me."

Still holding his hand, Amy guided him through the woods to a little clearing. Alex said nothing and trotted behind her. Standing in the middle of the clearing was a large, pearlescent door that gleamed in the twilight. The door was attached to nothing, but it had a pair of hinges and a brilliant gold doorknob.

Amy spoke up. "That door leads to the city that lies beyond the farthest star. This place is a sort of courtyard to Heaven. It's not part of Heaven, but it's connected to it somehow, and part of the ambiance of Heaven has leaked onto this world. That's why it feels so different."

Alex barked. "Is that where Amanda is?"

The girl smiled. "Yes. Yes, it is."

She reached out to the doorknob and turned it. Relief flooded her when she saw that the door was unlocked. Before she pulled it opened she looked over at the Sentinel. "Are you ready?"

"Are you sure that I am allowed to come with you?" the Sentinel asked.

"I have no doubt whatsoever," Amy said firmly.

She then turned the doorknob and opened the door.

As she pulled it open it created a hole in space – a passage leading to another world. Light streamed through the opening. Beyond it she could see a grassy hill, and at the top of the hill was a large group of people who were waving at them. A sense of utter and complete peace came over her. In a single moment the cares and burdens of her life melted away, and she felt wholly at rest. Finally, after so long, all was well.

Alex took one look through the opening and ran into it at full speed. A moment later he was bounding up the hill, racing to greet someone that he knew quite well.

Laughing, Amy grabbed the Sentinel's hand and led him through the door. Once they were both through she closed the door behind them.

CHAPTER 28

"I am the resurrection and the life. He that believes in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever lives and believes in me shall never die."

--Jesus Christ

THE MOMENT AMY STRYKER stepped through the door she felt an overwhelming sensation of joy. She had known joy before, but this – this was far greater than anything she had imagined. The things she had felt in the shadowlands were like shadows and vapors by comparison. The sheer intensity of this place was unimaginable. Even the heavenly ambiance of the gateway planet had not prepared her for it.

Amy immediately realized that, at long last, she was finally *home*. She had never been here before but yet she felt as if she had always been here. Amy had spent a little over six months in the 73rd century. During that time she had always felt out of place – a lost pilgrim, alone and despised, trapped in a dark dream. She had longed for something that she could not quite pin down. She wanted to go home but there was no home to be found. Now she had at last found it. *This* was the place she was made for. This was where she belonged. For the first time in months Amy finally began to relax, and felt a sense of comfort fill her from the inside. She felt very loved and she knew that she was no longer alone.

She could also feel the unmistakable Presence that saturated the air. In her travels across the galaxy she had felt many different things. Tonina was filled with a kind of emptiness and

longing. Xanthe and Earth seemed to have hatred and darkness in the air. Mars was filled with apathy. Jasmine had a kind of sadness. It was only when she reached the gateway planet that she had started to feel a sacred presence in the atmosphere – as if the planet was dominated not by darkness but by the Holy One. Here that feeling was overwhelming. This country contained no trace of darkness and no hint of evil. There were no shadows where foul things lurked. This place was filled with light – an intense, deep, holy light that was unlike even the brightest parts of the shadowlands.

Now she understood. It was His presence that made Heaven a Paradise. He was the light that filled every corner and the joy that saturated the air. He was the center of this place, and its anchor. This world was entirely, completely, and fully centered on Him. The billions who lived here were not clamoring for attention, begging others to praise them and acknowledge their greatness. The focus of everyone was on the glory and majesty of the Most High God. His will and His will alone was done in this place, and that made all the difference. The gateway world, as amazing as it had been, offered only a small taste of the glory she saw here.

All of these thoughts crossed her mind in the seconds it took her to lead the Sentinel through the door and close it behind them. She then took a deep breath, and smiled. “Can you feel that?”

“Yes, I can,” the Sentinel said in surprise. “I am welcome here, but I do not understand why.”

“Is it really that hard to figure out? You are so much more than just a machine! If you were just a glorified calculator it would be impossible for you to commune with God, but yet you can feel Him just as I can. You are *alive*, Steve. You have served your Master well and He has called you here.”

“But I am not a son of Adam. What right do I have to enter this holy place?”

Amy shrugged. "The angels aren't sons of Adam either, but they're still here. The fact is, you *are* welcome here."

The Sentinel looked up toward the top of the hill. Alex had already reached it and was jumping around excitedly, barking and talking like crazy. Even from this distance the Sentinel could recognize the various faces in the crowd. He smiled. "I think there are some people up ahead who would like to see you."

"See *us*, you mean," Amy corrected.

The two of them started walking up the narrow path that led to the crest of the hill. As they got closer Amy saw that on the other side of the hill was a large, golden city. The path transformed into a road that continued on to the heart of the metropolis. On either side of that golden street were tall buildings and wide sidewalks. The sidewalks were utterly packed with people. She suddenly realized that the massive crowd was waiting on *her*.

"Oh my goodness!" she gasped. "Do I even know that many people?"

The Sentinel smiled. "Apparently they know you."

At the front of the crowd was Amanda Stryker. Amanda rushed toward her sister and hugged her. "Oh, Tiger, it's so good to see you again! I've missed you so."

"Not as much as I've missed you," Amy replied, grinning. "It took me way longer to get here than I expected, and boy was it a pain – but it was worth it. I am so, so glad to be here. This is just totally awesome. You've got to catch me up on what everyone's been doing. I've kind of been out of the loop for a while."

"There will be plenty of time for that," Amanda replied. "Believe me, there's all kinds of things going on! But anyway, we can talk about that later. Right now there are about a million other people here who would like to see you."

Amy looked up and saw her mother, her father, and her brother running toward her. As she hugged them she noticed that Reverend Knight, and Jones, and Captain Max, and Sergeant

Howell were not far behind. But what surprised her the most was seeing the Artilect standing there on the sidewalk.

The Sentinel was surprised as well. He ran up to him and embraced him. "Father, is it really you? But I don't understand – I thought you were destroyed! How did you get here?"

The Artilect smiled as he embraced his son. "I was brought here by the Most High God, as you were. Apparently He is not done with us. Son, it is so good to see you again, and I am so proud of you. You have done your job well and you finished the course with great excellence. I have missed you tremendously."

"I have missed you too. I had no hope of seeing you again; I thought you were simply gone. How is this possible?"

The man standing behind the Artilect spoke up. "Well, it's just like Amy said. There is much more to both of you than circuits and metal."

"Dr. Laurence Mazatl!" the Sentinel exclaimed in surprise. "Aren't you the one who created my father?"

"I suppose you could say that. There were a great many others who worked on the project as well, of course, but I was the chief technical engineer, if that's what you mean. It is so good to meet you! You were created long after I died, but I've been watching your progress with great interest. You truly have done well."

"I simply did what I could," he replied.

"There is no need to be so modest," a voice said behind him. "You are every bit as big a hero as Amy."

He turned around and saw a little girl looking up at him. The Sentinel studied her for a moment, puzzled. Then he remembered who she was. "Haven't I seen you before? I do not believe we ever met each other, but weren't you in Tikal the week before the *Sparrow* left? I believe you had a conversation with Captain Max. You told him that he wouldn't be able to save Richard Stryker, but that his efforts were not in vain."

Itzel Ayar nodded. "That is correct. I'm surprised you

remembered every person your nanite network scanned! I guess you do have a machine memory, but still, that's impressive. The point is that Amy is not the only hero here. This massive crowd has turned out to greet *both* of you. You helped defeat the Poneri, who threatened the safety of the entire human race. You rescued the crew of the *Sparrow* and brought them to the future. You developed a cure for the tribes of Earth, freeing millions from the bondage of insanity. Yes, Amy is a hero, but she would have died thousands of years ago if it hadn't been for you. You made it possible for Amy to fulfill her tasks."

"I was just fulfilling my purpose," the Sentinel replied. "I was created to do those things."

"There are many who refuse to fulfill their purpose. You had the ability to choose and you chose well."

"As did Amy," Governor Nicholas commented. He walked up and shook the Sentinel's hand. "It's a pleasure meeting you at last! You and Amy have done a remarkable thing, and it will not be forgotten. Millions of people are in your debt."

The Sentinel glanced around and saw that Amy was deep in conversation with her family and friends. *So she did have friends after all*, he thought to himself. *Maybe not on Xanthe or on Earth, but she definitely has them here. This is a good place for her to be.*

A voice interrupted his thoughts. "There you are! I knew you were around here somewhere. It is a real pleasure to finally meet you face-to-face."

He turned around and saw Dr. Temilotzin walking toward him. "It is a pleasure to meet you as well," the Sentinel replied warmly, as he shook his hand. "I'm very familiar with your work. It was quite brilliant! Your probe project was immensely successful."

Dr. Temilotzin laughed. "Yes, I'd certainly agree that you're familiar with my probes. As I recall they tried to kill you! Fortunately Amanda was able to destroy them first."

"I suspect you know how things turned out, then. Your probes did an outstanding job terraforming worlds, but unfortunately no one ever came to live in them. I just wish your dream had come true! It was a brilliant idea, but mankind proved too corrupt to inherit the stars. In the end ignorance was not the problem; the real barrier was the utter depravity of mankind. That has proven to be a far bigger hurdle than the vast distances that separate the worlds."

"Oh, I wouldn't write off the project just yet. My colleagues and I have continued working on the project since we arrived here. The colonization of the stars has only just begun! One day people will live in cities all throughout the universe – and not just in our galaxy, but beyond."

"How is that possible?"

The scientist smiled. "We'll get you caught up to speed soon. By the way, I'm quite interested in that galactic supercomputer you built to cure the tribes! That was quite brilliant – breathtaking, even. None of us had ever seen anything like it."

"It was an impressive achievement," the Artilect agreed.

"It was actually fairly simple," the Sentinel replied. "Its scale may have been unprecedented but to the best of my knowledge its design contained no significant breakthroughs. In fact, even the computer itself was not my idea. Amy is the one who suggested it."

"Yes she did," Dr. Mazatl agreed. "But you were the one who designed it and built it – and you built it remarkably quickly!"

The Sentinel noticed some movement. He turned and saw that Amy was running down the path toward a shining figure in the distance. He knew instantly who it was.

The Artilect smiled. "It looks like Amy is going to meet her Lord. He would like to meet you too, Son. Are you ready to go see Him?"

"Yes, I am," he replied. "I never thought this moment would come – but I am glad it has."

The Sentinel then rushed after Amy.

CHAPTER 29

"I've had a long and productive life. Mars has been reborn, just as I had hoped. I may be dying but I am dying a happy man, and I am going to a better place. You really can't ask for more than that."

*--Noel Lawson
February 9, 7351*

NOEL LAWSON WAS LYING in bed in the Stryker Memorial Hospital. He was an old, old man, and he felt it. The digital calendar on the wall told him that it was February 9, 7351. He marveled that so much time had passed so quickly. It still seemed to him that only a few days had passed since he and Miles first encountered Amy Stryker in the Martian desert. He remembered that meeting with great clarity, even though it happened more than a century ago.

He never expected to live this long. Back when he lived in the underground city it was common for men to live no more than 60 or 70 years. He had lived far longer than that and he was not sure why. All he knew was that, somehow, living in Tikal extended people's lives. Many people – thought not all – now lived to great ages. Scientists were still trying to understand the mechanism that made this happen. So far it had eluded them, but he knew it would not elude them forever.

The old man glanced out the window of his hospital room. Through the pane of fused crystal he could see the magnificent city of Tikal. The reconstruction effort had finished decades ago, and today the entire metropolis was fully functional. The last area they uncovered was the spaceport, and even it had been

restored. At first they weren't sure if the starship that it contained was repairable, but after years of effort Noel figured out how the ship's stardrive worked and was able to build a new one for it. That turned out to be his last project. Shortly after that he retired, and he had been retired for the past five years. He still helped from time to time but his health no longer allowed him to do very much. He knew that his engineering days were over.

He could still follow current events, however, and sometimes he played a role in planning. His last effort was planning the scouting expedition to the planet Xanthe. Before he died Miles told him that Amy had transported the rest of the Adrastans there. Astronomers had watched that planet over the past century and had seen the local population die off, one by one. It was a race against time to see if they could reach the planet before the last one died, but unfortunately they were not able to repair the starship in time. By the time the expedition finally reached Xanthe there was no one left. The expedition had spent a full year exploring the planet, and while they did find the remains of the Adrastan settlement – along with the ruins of the infamous Vault 37 – they did not find any survivors.

But the expedition was not a complete failure. They had been able to establish a permanent settlement there – the first colony among the stars! Now it was only a matter of time before there were more. Mars had the technology *and* the people to colonize the stars, and they had already taken their first step.

His thoughts were interrupted when his doctor came in to check on him. They had a brief conversation and then he left. Noel was stable for the time being, but they both knew that his condition was terminal. He had another month left, maybe two, before his life would be over. Then he would go on to join his friend Miles, who had died a century ago. After all these years he still missed him. It would be good to see him again.

His doctor was a good man. His grandfather was one of the forest dwellers that Amy had cured back in the 73rd century. The

tribes now lived in cities all over the Earth, although most of them lived either in New Adrasta or in Tikal. Noel was quite pleased at Tikal's continued growth. New buildings were being erected all the time. The city was now home to more than four million people.

The old man relaxed. His death was coming, but he was ready for it. He had lived a long and productive life, and he had accomplished far more than he expected. He knew where he was going when he died and he was looking forward to being there. He was content.

There was a knock on the door. "Come in," he called out in a frail voice.

The door opened and a teenage girl walked into the room. She had dark skin and long black hair, and had a mischievous smile.

"Amy Stryker?" Noel said incredulously. "Is that – is that really you?"

"Yep!" Amy said, giggling. "My sister will be here in a few minutes. I got to come first, though! I'm pretty excited about that."

"But how – why? I don't understand. Am I dead?"

"Oh no! No, you're still alive. The reason I'm here first is because I never actually died. My sister was killed, so she can't come back until she's resurrected."

"But you can't possibly still be a teenage girl," Noel protested. "You must be at least a hundred years old by now! Why, you're not much younger than I am."

Amy laughed. "Time in Heaven isn't as hard on people as time is here. You'll see. Things are different there."

"What are you talking about?" he asked, confused.

Amy held up her hand. "You'll see. Just give it a few minutes."

Noel smiled. "You never were good at giving direct answers, were you? But since you're here, there's something I've been meaning to ask you. This city – you built it, didn't you? Just like

you built New Adrasta on Earth. This isn't really the old city of Tikal, is it?"

Amy turned bright red. "I just knew you were going to ask that! Yes, Miles and I built it. What gave it away?"

"I knew it!" Noel exclaimed happily. "I just knew it. I thought Miles might have been involved but I wasn't sure. Next time you build something and try to pass it off as an old ruin, be sure to give it a history. The total lack of personal effects and cultural relics was a dead giveaway."

"Yeah, I know. I guess I kind of overlooked that. But at least the city served its purpose. You did good, Noel. This place is amazing. Although you did *not* have to name a hospital after me. Or build that statue. I'm pretty sure that I never asked for—"

Noel suddenly heard the distant sound of a trumpet. It had a deep, vibrant call to it, and it gradually increased in intensity. He knew that its source was far away, but somehow the noise seem to come from everywhere. He felt it as much as he heard it. It was more than just a sound, he realized – it was a call, and it was calling him.

He suddenly felt himself change. In an instant of time he lost his tiredness and his aches and pains. The years seemed to simply fall away from him. He felt like a young man again, filled with energy and life and passion. No, it was better than that! He never remembered feeling *this* good. He glanced down at his hands and saw that the wrinkles and age were gone. He had been changed – transformed into something immortal and incorruptible. And what was that feeling of joy in the air?

As he got out of bed he saw that Amanda was now standing beside her sister. Noel looked at them suspiciously. "Are you two responsible for this?"

The girls shook their heads. "Don't you know what this is?" Amy asked.

Noel thought for a moment. "Do you mean – oh. Oh! Are you serious? Is this really—"

Amy nodded. "This is it! Jesus Christ has come back for us. The dead have been raised and the living ones who belong to Him have been changed. Next comes—"

Noel suddenly felt the hospital room disappear. He found himself floating in the sky. But this was not the Martian sky; this was Earth. As he looked around he saw that he was surrounded by a vast host of others. The sky was filled with millions – no, billions – of people. Noel wondered where all these people had come from, and then he remembered Amy's remark that the dead had been raised. He realized that he was seeing the innumerable company of the righteous, raised up by the power of God. And there, in their midst, outshining the sun, was the Lamb of God, Jesus. He had called His children and raised them up. As Noel's heart was filled with joy, he heard Him call again. It was time for them to go home.

CHAPTER 30

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.

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. 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.

And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.

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. And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 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. 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.

And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful. And he said unto me, It is done. I am Alpha and

Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely. He that overcomes shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son. But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.

And there came unto me one of the seven angels which had the seven vials full of the seven last plagues, and talked with me, saying, Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb's wife. 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, Having the glory of God: and her light was like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal; And had a wall great and high, and had twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and names written thereon, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel: On the east three gates; on the north three gates; on the south three gates; and on the west three gates. And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

And he that talked with me had a golden reed to measure the city, and the gates thereof, and the wall thereof. And the city lieth foursquare, and the length is as large as the breadth: and he measured the city with the reed, twelve thousand furlongs. The length and the breadth and the height of it are equal. And he measured the wall thereof, an hundred and forty and four cubits, according to the measure of a man, that is, of the angel. And the building of the wall of it was of jasper: and the city was pure gold, like unto clear glass. And the foundations of the wall of the city were garnished with all manner of precious stones. The first foundation was jasper; the second, sapphire; the third, a chalcedony; the fourth, an emerald; The fifth, sardonyx; the sixth,

sardius; the seventh, chrysolyte; the eighth, beryl; the ninth, a topaz; the tenth, a chrysoprasus; the eleventh, a jacinth; the twelfth, an amethyst. And the twelve gates were twelve pearls: every several gate was of one pearl: and the street of the city was pure gold, as it were transparent glass.

And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it. And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof. 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 honor into it. And the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day: for there shall be no night there. And they shall bring the glory and honor of the nations into it. And there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defiles, neither whatsoever works abomination, or makes a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life.

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. 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.

And there shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and his servants shall serve him: And they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads. And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever.

(Revelation 20:11 – 22:5)

CHAPTER 31

*When we've been there ten thousand years
Bright shining as the sun.
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we've first begun.
--John Newton*

*"Has it really been ten thousand years already?
Where does the time go?"
--Noel Lawson*

ON OCTOBER 24, 1969, Neil Armstrong became the first man to set foot on the Moon. What he found there was what the telescopes of astronomers had already seen – a dead and lifeless world, home only to rocks and the vacuum of space. The wise men of his era confidently announced that mankind was alone in the universe. There were no aliens lurking behind boulders or unknown civilizations orbiting distant stars. Man had nothing to fear, for they were unchallenged. Nothing could prevent them from conquering the universe.

Yet that was not the case. There was indeed another intelligence in the universe, and it had taken notice of the sons of men. Indeed, it had created them and breathed into them the breath of life. The Lord God watched as men proclaimed themselves to be the masters of the universe, and yet were unable to master themselves. He sent His Son Jesus to save them, changing the course of history and offering hope where there had been no hope before.

But still the sons of men would not listen. The Mayan civilization destroyed itself, plunging the world into darkness. Long centuries later the Spanish Empire arose and threatened to do great and terrible things. The Emperor had no fear of being challenged. He was not afraid of the One Who created all things, and Who would judge all things on the last day.

So the Lord God intervened. He answered the prayer of a machine and allowed the Sentinel to go back in time to save a pair of teenage girls. He chose the foolish things to confound the wise, and the weak things to confound the mighty. The fate of men changed once again, and mankind was given one last chance. Some took advantage of that chance, but others did not.

At one time the men of Xanthe had been at the forefront of technology. The Diano Corporation was headquartered there, and pushed back the frontiers of knowledge. Sadly, the day came when they chose to abandon their calling. Instead of exploring reality, they decided to leave it altogether. They ruthlessly murdered everyone who might oppose them and then retreated to their virtual worlds for five long millennia. When rescue came, they were not interested. They murdered those who came to save them, and in an act of blind hatred they blew up the city that the Sentinel had built for them, killing everyone. They violently refused their second chance at life, and chose death instead. Only a few repented and made it to the heavenly city.

Mars had suffered a different fate. After the Spanish Emperor decimated that planet, its inhabitants decided not to rebuild. Instead they retreated underground, where they lived in complete and utter apathy. As their world died around them they did nothing. Yet, when Amy Stryker gave them a second chance, they responded. They rose to the challenge and reclaimed their future. When the end came they were found exploring the stars, as their ancestors had once done. They repented of their lukewarmness and found new life. Many of them made their way to the new universe that God created after the final judgment.

Although they were not able to finish their explorations before the Son returned, they were given all of eternity to explore the breathtaking new worlds that God created. Their new civilization would have no end.

Then there was Earth. When Amy Stryker found the homeworld of mankind she saw that it had suffered greatly. Most of its inhabitants were infected with a disease that robbed them of their sanity. There was one city left that was not affected, but it had begun a savage campaign to wipe out the infected peoples. Amy tried to reason with the Adrastans but they would not listen. In the end most of them chose exile over repentance. Only a few were saved. The tribal peoples, however, were cured, and they made much of their new opportunity. With the help of Mars they rebuilt Earth and started to regain what they had lost. They, too, made it to the New Earth, where they would have all of eternity to rejoice in what God had done for them.

In the end, it was shown that mankind's great problem was not some race of aliens that was hiding in the shadows. Instead, mankind was its own problem. The reason they could not inherit the stars was because of their own corruption. Their future was not taken from them by a villain; it was lost by their own poor choices. Men loved darkness and hated the light because their deeds were evil. Dr. Nehemiah Temilotzin had dreamed of building a true galactic civilization, and his probes spent thousands of years building the network. He had hoped that one day his worlds would be populated, but it was impossible. Mankind was simply too corrupt. They could not remain civilized for very long.

But all was not lost. After the Son returned, the day of judgment came. Men stood before the Most High God and gave an account of themselves. Some, whose names were written in the Lamb's Book of Life, went on to everlasting life. The rest went on to everlasting torment and shame.

After the judgment the Lord created a new heaven and a new

earth. In that place there was no death, or sorrow, or pain. The former things – and the utter depravity and corruption of man – were done away with once and for all. Mankind was no longer doomed to fail, for God had transformed men into incorruptible and immortal beings. This time, history would play out very differently.

The capitol of this new civilization was on Earth, in the gleaming New Jerusalem. There the Lord dwelt among His people, and the kings of the nations brought in their treasures and worshiped Him. This time, when men returned to outer space, there was nothing to hold them back. Mankind soon became the masters of the stars, with far-flung cities in the most distant galaxies. But none of those cities ever came close to the glory of the Lamb's golden city.

Noel Lawson did not have a chance to finish everything he wanted to do before the Son returned. Now, however, he had all of eternity. In the millennia that followed, he helped build a Martian civilization whose glory far exceeded anything he had ever imagined. Dr. Temilotzin found similar success. In the old universe his millions of worlds had remained empty, inhabited only by machines. In this new one, however, he found great success. The cities on Tonina and the countless other planets were finally inhabited, and the boundaries of the network were pushed beyond the galaxy to the farthest reaches of the universe. In the old universe the Artilect and his son the Sentinel had managed empty worlds. Now they managed worlds that were full of life and activity.

There came a day when a meeting was held in one of the cities among the stars. A group of people were gathering together to celebrate...

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The restaurant at the top of Ahexotl Tower was packed. Amy and her sister Amanda were actually the last ones to arrive.

"So what do you think is going on with the *Vaughn*?" Amy asked, as they walked in the entrance.

"I'm just not sure," Amanda replied. "The ship is clearly picking up some kind of signal; I don't deny that. And it's definitely an intelligent signal. But I don't see how that's possible! No one can figure out where the message is coming from or how it's being downloaded into the ship's audio equipment. And why can't anyone else pick up the message?"

"Exactly! The other weird thing is that it's clearly not a *human* message. There is some kind of intelligence behind it but it's not a language I've ever seen. Whoever is sending it out seems to be responding to our attempts to communicate, although they're apparently only picking up parts of our actions."

"So you think it's some kind of new life form, then? You don't think the *Vaughn* is just picking up random broadcasts and relaying them back to us in a garbled way?"

"I don't think so. If you look at the data stream—"

"Amy!" Miles exclaimed. He had been standing at the front of the restaurant, counting off the people who had arrived. When he saw the twins he hurried over to them. "It's so good to see you here. And you brought your sister! I was hoping that both of you could be here."

Amy smiled. "We wouldn't miss it! This has become something of a tradition, you know. We've been coming to this reunion every year for many thousands of years now – well, ever since the Artilect restored Tonina and rebuilt La Venta."

"Yes, you have! And we are delighted to see you. Please come, take your seat! The feast has already begun."

As Miles led them to their table Amy glanced around the room. *Everyone* was here. There was her brother Tim, who was in a deep conversation with Dr. Temilotzin and Dr. Mazatl. Now that their probes had reached the farthest corners of the

universe they had turned their attention elsewhere, and were trying to breach the gap to the U-16b anomaly that lied just outside the universe itself. So far they had not found a way to do it but they hadn't abandoned the attempt. Amy had no doubt that one day they would find an answer.

Not too far away from them was the Artilect and the Sentinel, who were talking to Noel Lawson. Last she had heard they were designing a Gate system for the Salians. They were a brilliant race of artisans but had great trouble grasping engineering and higher physics. The Gates would allow them to move freely throughout the galaxy and visit other races. Trying to efficiently network quadrillions of worlds was a significant engineering challenge, but Noel had done similar things in the past. His passion for engineering was a sight to behold.

Her mother and father were here as well, talking to Jack Nicholas. She wasn't sure what they had been doing lately; she needed to get caught up with them. The last she had heard was that her father had been an adviser to the Greater Ward, but that was some time ago.

Monroe Araiza and Merlin Hardin were also here, deep in conversation. She was glad they were here but she was a bit surprised to see them – normally their research tied them up for decades at a time. The two of them had been trying to track down the civilization that had built the *Vaughn* – the mysterious ship that so many people had spent so much time investigating. Amy decided that she would definitely have to get caught up with Monroe. Perhaps, with a bit of luck, she could convince them that the best way to find the elusive Inventor was to unlock the mysteries of the ship itself.

As she took her seat and began helping herself to the food that was piled up on the table she spotted still more guests. Alex was here, of course, enjoying himself. He was in a conversation with Reverend Knight. Howell, Captain Max, and Jones were also seated at the table. They had just gotten back from an expedition

to the Pruitt Cluster. She couldn't wait to hear their stories.

Once everyone was seated her father stood up. "Please, if I may have your attention," he called out.

Everyone stopped what they were doing and looked up at him. Richard Stryker smiled. "Friends, I'm not going to bore you with a long speech. There is a time and a place for eloquence, but this isn't that time or that place. I just wanted to say how happy I am to see all of you. It is a joy to share your company. I hope you will all linger a while and tell us what you've been doing.

"The truth is that we have been given a gift – an astounding gift that will never end. We are here at the end of eternity, and yet eternity itself has no end. On Resurrection Day our Lord returned, raised us from the dead, and took us home. The Lord judged all wickedness and evil and put a final end to it – but time itself did not end. The story was not over. He created for us a new Heaven and a new Earth, and now He dwells in Zion with mankind. The great golden city is the capitol of the universe, and it will be exactly that for all of the ages of time.

"We have been living in this glorious paradise for more than ten thousand years, and yet our time remaining has not grown any shorter. None of us will ever grow old. All pain, sorrow, and sickness is gone. Instead, every year we find joy, adventure, mysteries, and new wonders. The kingdom of God continues to expand, and of its increase there shall be no end. We have only just begun! Today has been the best day yet – but tomorrow will be even better.

"I guess I just wanted to say that we have a great deal to be thankful for – and that our Lord is most worthy of all our thanks, and praise, and worship, and honor. He has done exactly what He promised: He has shown us the exceeding riches of His grace, and He will continue to do so forever. Thank you, Lord!"

"Amen!" everyone shouted.

Richard sat down. "Please – eat!"

As everyone dug into the food, Amy glanced out the window. The city of La Venta was full of people, and Tonina was packed with people of all races – and even aliens. The cities that the Artilect had built were now full of life, just as he had wanted. Darkness had not triumphed. Light filled the entire universe, and it would never go out.