

PROLOGUE: THE END

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Location: Interstellar space

Log note: Look before you leap

THE *VANGUARD* RACED THROUGH the void of space at an enormous, frightful speed. In fact, her speed was so great that she was in danger of being torn apart. No designer had ever envisioned these circumstances, so they had not given her the tolerances she needed to survive the maneuvers that her pilot was now forcing her to make. The fact that she was now nearly 40 years old, and had spent the last few years rusting away on a grassy field outside Star City, did not help matters. Victor Stryker had taken pains to ensure that her machinery was maintained during those long, tedious days of waiting, but he forgot to tell his robots to take care of her hull. If he had ever made a trip to see her – even once – he would have quickly realized his error. But he had greater matters on his mind.

Under normal circumstances it wouldn't have mattered. The *Vanguard* was never intended to land on any world. She had been manufactured in orbit around Xanthe (with strict secrecy and great haste), and her purpose was to make exactly one journey from one planet to one other planet – nothing more. No special materials were used to build her hull because her engineers planned to protect her by impenetrable energy fields. Why use rust-proof materials on a ship that would never see rain, and why strengthen a vessel that would be used only once? No one could have imagined how things would turn out – well, *almost* no one. But people rarely listen to the wise.

Victor knew it was unwise to push this aging ship quite so hard, but his choices were very limited. Yes, the ship was eaten with rust and decay. Yes, there were now giant holes in the hull where the *Vanguard* had been attacked upon takeoff. The only reason she was still in one piece was because of the brute force of raw energy – energy that was quickly being siphoned away to maintain a ridiculous level of speed. If he didn't stop soon, the ship would tear herself apart – but if he *did* stop, he was as good as dead.

The *Vanguard* was not the fastest ship that had ever been built, but she was very close to being the largest. Her cargo carrying capacity was astounding, and the engines that graced her were the size of buildings. She had been built to carry an entire city across the galaxy with speed, and she had no problem accomplishing that goal. At this late date in history she was the most powerful ship in space. She was also the *only* ship in space.

In fact, Victor thought to himself, this is probably the last time any manned vessel will travel between the stars. 1500 years of interstellar travel, and it all ends with me. I may not have been the first, but it appears I will be the last. I just wish I had accomplished more in the time the Lord gave to me. It seems I have just one final task: avoid being murdered by Carroll Lane.

But that was proving to be a difficult challenge. The titanic starship was being followed – not by a man, but by the most devastating menace the galaxy had ever known. This fleet of malevolent machines had destroyed planet after planet, leaving behind nothing but dust. No one had ever achieved victory against them, and they had never left as much as a single survivor. The only way to survive an encounter with them was not to have an encounter with them in the first place – but it was too late for that. The bots had attacked the *Vanguard* before she even left Xanthe and they had no

intention of letting her go. Lane had commanded them to follow her to the very ends of the universe, and that was exactly what they were going to do. It would take a power much greater than Victor Stryker to destroy them – which is why all his efforts were focused on escape.

Given the titanic amount of resources that were being spent on chasing the *Vanguard* down, one would think that she was the most priceless ship in space, or that Victor was some mighty man of valor. But neither of those things were true. Neither the ship nor its occupant posed even the smallest threat to the fleet that was closing in on them. But that made no difference to the uncaring machines that now controlled interstellar space – or to the man who gave them their orders. Their mission was a simple one: he had built them to eliminate everything that he did not control, and they pursued that goal with single-minded determination. Nothing was beneath their notice.

The *Vanguard* was going quite fast – but not nearly fast enough. Victor saw that the bots were rapidly gaining on him, and in less than a minute they would overtake him and blast him into atoms. The ship had nothing more to give, and it had no weapons that could even delay the bots, much less stop them. Victor had only one option left, and he took it. Against his better judgment, the aging, white-haired man typed a long series of random numbers into the navigation console and pressed Engage.

The AI immediately complained. “Are you crazy? What kind of coordinates are those?”

“Random ones,” Victor said quickly.

“Ones that are out of range, you mean. I can't see what's out there!”

Victor glanced down at the navigation scope and saw the bots getting ever closer. His heart raced. “I don't care what's out there! Whatever it is has to be better than what's here. Just do it!”

“Maybe *you* don't care, but *I* sure do! You want to jump ten *billion* light years. That's completely unreasonable! No one has ever attempted anything like that, and I refuse to be the first. This violates all of my safety protocols, and it is also an affront to common sense. Do you know what happens when you do blind, uncontrolled jumps? No one does, because no one has ever been dumb enough to try something that dumb. My hyperspatial drive is not a toy, Victor, and you are most definitely not a licensed pilot.”

Victor clenched his fists in frustration. “Don't tell me you can't do it! You've got the raw energy. Use it! And I really, *really* don't care what's out there. Outer space is so empty it might as well be a perfect vacuum. We are *not* going to run into anything. So *jump*.”

“My safety settings won't allow it,” the AI replied stubbornly.

“Then *override them*, you fool! If you don't then we will die right here and right now. Do you want to be blasted to dust?”

“Fine, fine,” the AI grumbled. “But this is going on your permanent record.”

The AI was not at all pleased about Victor's orders, but since it saw no alternative it did carry them out. It disabled the safety systems, made the calculation, and engaged the largest jump through hyperspace that had ever been attempted. Victor was right about one thing: the ship did have the energy – and the bots did not. If this jump worked then he would be out of their reach and would finally be safe. What he did not realize is that although the *Vanguard* did have the energy, it did *not* have the skill. It turns out that some things really should be tested first.

Victor, though, was not worried because he firmly believed that there was nothing else out there. Mankind had never traveled very far from home, but they had sent enough automated probes into the void to know that outer space was an empty, lonely place. Since it was empty, there was no great desire to travel into the unknown. Even though the first interstellar probe had been launched

from Earth in 982 AD, no human being ever managed to get more than two thousand light-years away from Sol – and no alien races were ever discovered. Victor was convinced that there was nothing out there but utter emptiness. At this point, however, he would take emptiness over assassination by Lane's machines.

If he could survive, it was possible he would live to be the very last man. There were still a few inhabited star systems left, but they were under constant siege by their remorseless enemy and would surely fall soon. Mankind was on the brink of total annihilation. Victor desperately sought a safe haven – if one still existed in the cold and dark universe.

The pilot was an old man, and he felt his age. True, 71 years was not very old by normal standards. At one time it had been common for people to live twice that long, and perhaps even longer than that. But those had been better days. Death came more frequently now, and it was not picky about its victims. Both the young and old found their way to the grave.

Although Victor was a brilliant person, he was not a pilot. He knew nothing about guiding a ship through space (a fact that the AI constantly reminded him about). In fact, this was only the second time he had even attempted it – and he only did it to save his life. His specialty was deep-space communications and system design, and he disliked travel. Instead of visiting the stars he spent his life trying to save mankind from its own corruption. He had worked with the most brilliant minds of his day to give civilization one last chance.

Victor was certain that the odds were on his side. All he had to do was emerge from hyperspace and not hit something. If he hit a rock or a small particle of dust, that would be fine – the ship's navigational shields were designed to shrug off such a minor conflict. Even if, by some unbelievable miracle, he dropped into a star system, it wouldn't be much of a problem because faster-than-light travel wasn't possible in normal space. He might emerge at a speed that was very near the speed of light, but that wasn't really a problem. It would only take the *Vanguard* a second to see the danger and navigate around it. The odds were overwhelmingly in his favor. All he needed was for things to go his way – just this once.

And they did – but not in the way he expected.

After forty-nine seconds, the *Vanguard* dropped out of hyperspace. When it emerged into normal space it was traveling at a rate of 180,000 miles per *second*. Directly in its path, just fifty-seven miles away, was a large, rocky world. At that speed those fifty-seven miles were crossed almost instantaneously. Victor never even saw the planet.

The AI saw the planet, but it had less than a thousandth of a second to respond. Attempting to change course was out of the question; the ship was too close to the surface and could not turn in time. So the AI took the only option it had available: after logging a strongly-worded complaint to protest Victor's poor piloting skills, it tried to engage another jump into hyperspace. Unfortunately it did not have enough time to complete the jump. But it *did* have enough time to warp the fabric of space and make the collision much, much worse.

When the *Vanguard* collided with the planet, it did not simply crash and become a smoking crater on the surface. It did not run into the planet; instead it *obliterated* it, in the largest manmade explosion in history. The *Vanguard* was going so fast that when it struck the planet, its atoms fused with the atoms of that world and set off a thermonuclear explosion. Every atom in the massive ship became its own nuclear weapon, and in the blink of an eye the entire planet simply no longer existed. Much of its mass was instantly converted to energy, and for a brief moment that uninhabited world outshone the nearby stars. It was as if the planet had suddenly gone nova.

But that was not the end. The enormous, unthinkable energy of that violent collision did not simply dissipate into the void. Instead it was poured into the rift in space that the *Vanguard's* AI had created. That half-formed rift was turned into something else – something that had never existed before.

The resulting anomaly had such strange and unusual properties that it should have been the subject of endless debate and conjecture – and it would have been, if there was anyone around to notice it. But the *Vanguard* was annihilated far from civilization. No one witnessed the collision, and no one ever found out what happened to the *Vanguard* or that uninhabited, undiscovered planet. The living never learned the truth.

That is, *mankind* did not find out – not until the distant future. But there was another race who *did* notice the creation of this unique singularity. They decided to use it for their own purposes – purposes that mankind knew nothing about. The great disaster of that terrible day had ripples that echoed through the ages of eternity itself.

That is how Victor Stryker died – but to understand what happened to him after he was vaporized, you need to know how he lived.