

CHAPTER 2: REVENGE

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Log note: Decisions are hard

THAT EVENING THE DIANO CORPORATION celebrated. Since there was no room in the building large enough to hold everyone, the festivities were scatted throughout the giant skyscraper. The company provided food and music and gave everyone the night off.

There was much to celebrate. The launch had been an unqualified success and the probes were now on their way to distant stars. Any lingering fears that President Rios might try to stop the launch were now put to rest. There was still more work to be done once the probes began arriving at their destinations, but those days were months away. For the next few weeks the employees would be on a well-deserved vacation.

Victor sincerely tried to enjoy the festivities. He liked being at the office more than he liked being at home, but he wasn't very good at mingling with people. Like most people these days he was an only child. His parents had been killed by rioters when he was a teenager, which further isolated him. Over time he came to prefer writing software to spending time with human beings. From Victor's point of view, software had all the advantages. Software always did what you told it to do. It never threatened you, it never hurt you, and it never tried to burn your house down. Software was safe; people were not. Victor made an effort to be nice to the people he met, but that was as far as he was willing to go – which made social events rather awkward. He wanted to go home, but social protocol dictated that he stick around. So he stuck around and waited for a time when he could leave without being rude.

As Victor stood at the buffet and stared at all the food the company had provided, Carroll Lane walked up to him. “Today was quite a day, wasn't it?”

Victor nodded. “It was pretty stressful. For a few hours there I thought we'd have to push off the launch until tomorrow, but then everything came together at the last minute. It looks like our work here is done for the time being.”

“Which means we get some well-deserved time off! Where are you going to go for your vacation?”

“I don't know. To be honest, I haven't given it any thought. I'd much rather be here working than take time off, but there just isn't any work left to do. I'll probably stay at home. I've got a lot of books that I've been wanted to read and I just haven't had the time lately. This is a good chance to get caught up.”

Lane laughed. “Read! You can read any old day. You should go out and *do* something. Xanthe's a big planet, you know, and it's full of natural wonders. Since all the crazy people are in Star City where the ZPEs are, that means the whole rest of the planet is safe. You need to go have an adventure! There are mountains to climb, forests to explore, and trails to hike. There's even some wildlife left out there, if you know where to find it.”

“That's just not for me, Lane. I am *not* going to go off to some wild place in the middle of nowhere. In fact, I never go outside if I can help it. In my opinion nature is extremely uncomfortable. If

it's not cold and rainy then it's hot and humid. There are bugs, and things that bite you, and dirt, and all manner of situations that could leave you seriously injured or dead. Everything about the so-called 'great outdoors' is messy and uncomfortable. I vastly prefer the great *indoors*."

"I think spending a week camping would do you good," Lane insisted. "It would open your mind and give you a fresh perspective. There's great beauty out there, Victor. Don't you find it strange that you are spending your life building probes to explore the most distant stars, and yet you have no desire to explore your own planet? You have such a passion for exploration and yet I bet you haven't even explored your own apartment building."

"Life is full of contradictions," Victor agreed.

"Well, let me know if you change your mind. I'm leaving first thing in the morning, and you're welcome to join me. I'm telling you it's going to be epic."

"Thanks – I'll do that. But don't hold your breath."

Lane laughed and walked off, leaving Victor alone once more.

Victor decided that he wasn't really that hungry and began wandering idly around. He eventually found Dr. Mazatl standing at a window, looking up at the night sky.

"Did you know that there used to be stars in that sky?" Dr. Mazatl asked. "Every night people could go outside, look up, and see the incredible beauty of space – right from their own backyard. It must have been amazing."

"That's true. But then our forefathers erected the Wall to protect us from the Spanish Emperor, and the Wall has been in place ever since. It provides protection against the outside world. Even starlight can't get in."

"But that raises a question, doesn't it? Why is the Wall still there? We're not at war with anyone and we don't have any enemies. Who are we trying to protect ourselves against?"

Victor shrugged. "I think at this point it's just tradition. The Wall has always been there. By now it's just a part of life – it's one of those things that no one ever questions. Besides, no other star system has one. It's one of the things that makes Tau Ceti unique."

"Sol has one," Dr. Mazatl pointed out.

"True, but that's a bit different. Sol's Wall was imposed from without, to imprison Earth and stop the Spanish Emperor. Sol will be locked away for the rest of time. At least we have a Gate and can come and go as we please. We're not actually imprisoned here."

"And yet most of the people on this world are prisoners all the same. Oh, they may not be in actual prisons – although many of them surely deserve it – but they are still slaves. The outsiders have become corrupt, Victor. They are slaves to their own desires and spend their lives doing all sorts of wickedness in a vain attempt to find satisfaction. They don't work or do anything productive; they just consume, like leeches. They are utterly consumed by selfishness – by the lusts of the flesh and the lusts of the eyes. They are blind to what really matters in life."

"Well, sure. They haven't been changed by the power of Christ. They're all slaves to sin. In fact, they love their sin so much they would never dream of repenting and pursuing holiness. Nearly everyone who *has* been changed works here, in this building. I know we're not all Christians, but most of us are. That's how life has been for decades. The Church lives in this building, and the darkness lives outside."

"But things can't go on like this," Dr. Mazatl said. "Darkness cannot sustain an advanced civilization. It takes a great deal of effort and skill to maintain the technology that our worlds depend on, and there are few people left who can do it. There are only 37 inhabited worlds remaining, and all

but five of those have a population of less than 100 million. The combined population of all the stars is just barely six billion people. There was a time when Earth alone had that many people. Xanthe used to be one of the most populated planets in the galaxy. Today it's a decaying wasteland."

"Star City is the only city on the planet that has a functional ZPE," Victor pointed out. "Everyone just moved to where the resources are."

"Which is a rather sad state of affairs, isn't it? Mankind used to be able to survive *without* a ZPE, but now everyone is dependent upon them. Xanthe is the only world left where the Corporation still has a significant presence. Virtually every last one of our employees works right here in this building. In all the other worlds we only have a skeleton crew – just enough to maintain that planet's infrastructure. I don't think there's a single other planet that has more than 20 employees."

"What are you getting at, sir?"

"I – well, I just wish there was some way to fix this. The ZPE was supposed to usher in a bold new era of space exploration, but instead it seems to have doomed mankind. Somehow we created a giant welfare state, which has done vastly more harm than good. The more we give them the more they demand. The more we try to help them the more they hate us. No matter how much we give they always want more."

"Well, sure. It's like what Solomon said in Ecclesiastes – the things of this world are vanity. They can't satisfy. Those who desire riches cannot be satisfied by riches. So people want more and more stuff, thinking that they can find satisfaction there – but they can't. What this world really needs is Christ. They need to have their sins forgiven so that they will not face the wrath of God. They need to be transformed by His power so that they will be free from the bondage of their own corrupt desires. Only Christ can satisfy and only Christ can save; nothing less will do."

"But they won't listen," Dr. Mazatl replied sadly. "For hundreds of years we've tried to tell them, and they just won't listen. There are billions of people out there on the road to Hell, and despite all our efforts we cannot stop them. People love their sin too much to depart from it. They have no fear of God. Death and judgment do not concern them."

"Do you think we should try a different approach?"

Dr. Mazatl sighed. "I don't know what to do. I am very afraid that providing for the needs of the Ranger worlds is only making them worse. Why should they work when we give them everything they need for free? They never suffer or face want. That can't be good for their souls."

"Well, technically it's not free. We do charge the government for ZPE usage, don't we? I mean, I know they don't pay it, but we do send them bills."

"I'm afraid not. Long ago we did charge people, but then people stopped paying. So we began charging the government instead, with the idea that the government would tax the people and get the money that way. But President Rios hasn't payed our bills in years. Eventually we realized that billing them was a waste of time, so we just stopped. Rios knows we're not going to cut the city off. There's no point in pretending otherwise."

"Really?" Victor replied, surprised. "I didn't know that. I thought they were just behind – I didn't know they had dropped all pretenses of even trying to pay us. Is there nothing we can do?"

"That's what keeps haunting me. None of the people have jobs, so where is the government going to get the money? Besides, it costs us very little to run the ZPEs, and it does provide for everyone. The only time things get difficult is when some rioter blows up a power line, and then we have to dispatch a crew of bots to fix it. The citizens of the Ranger worlds are terrible vandals."

"Have you thought about just cutting people off? That might force them to rethink their lives."

Dr. Mazatl sighed. "I just don't see how that could work. People have been dependent upon us for so long that they cannot survive without us."

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

"I don't know. I just don't know. I'm an engineer, Victor. I'm not a politician or a governor. I don't have the faintest idea how to fix something like this. I know that what this world really needs is Christ; He is the only one who can change the hearts of men. But I don't know how to make them listen. Somewhere along the line we made a terrible mistake, but I don't know how to fix it."

"I'm sure you'll think of something, sir. On the bright side, today's probe launch went very well. In a thousand years we'll have countless new worlds terraformed and ready to be inhabited!"

"That is true. There is that. But when that day comes, will there be anyone left to inhabit them?"

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Victor lingered at the party until around eleven o'clock and then went home. He really preferred to be in bed by that hour, but today was not a day for going to bed early. Still, he had satisfied his social duties so he was content. Since he didn't have to work the next day he could sleep in. *I'll manage*, he thought.

The subway ride home was quiet and uneventful. There were a handful of other employees who were also in the subway car, but one by one they left at their respective stops. By the time Victor reached his destination the car was empty. He quietly exited the subway and stepped through the gate onto the street. Charlie was still standing there guarding it, but he didn't speak to Victor and so Victor didn't speak to him.

It was dark outside and there was very little light. Only one of the street lights was still working, but it provided Victor with enough illumination to guide him home. He quietly walked to his building, lost in thought.

Dr. Mazatl was right – the world was in bad shape. As far as he could see, though, there was no good way to fix it. Victor was great at fixing technical problems; if he found a software bug he could track it down, identify the cause, and come up with a workable solution. But people-based problems were an entirely different matter. Computers always did exactly what you told them to do, but people had a will of their own. *And they will not listen to reason.*

Victor walked into his apartment building and up a flight of worn, dirty stairs. He unlocked his apartment door, went inside, and turned on the lights. After putting away his briefcase and checking his messages he turned off the lights and went straight to bed. Tomorrow was a vacation day and he wasn't looking forward to it. *I suppose it wouldn't hurt to get some rest, though. I can recharge and get ready for whatever's next.*

He drifted off to sleep.

A few hours later he woke up. Someone was pounding on the door, and there were voices out in the hallway. *What's going on?* he thought groggily. *No one ever comes to visit me – especially at this hour. Is there something wrong with the probes? But if this is a work emergency, why didn't someone call me? Making a personal visit seems kind of extreme.*

Victor rubbed his eyes and made his way to the living room – but he was too slow. As soon as he entered the room the front door was violently broken down, and four heavily armed men rushed into the room. Victor recognized them immediately: they were the Security Services Force. President

Rios has put together the SSF a dozen years ago to act as his personal bodyguards. Past presidents had been protected by the planet's armed forces, but Rios wanted a group that was personally loyal to him. Victor had never seen an SSF unit in person – until now.

Victor was absolutely terrified. All four of the men wore black body armor and carrying fully automatic machine guns. They were large and imposing and none of them looked remotely friendly. *Where's Charlie? Isn't he supposed to protect me? This isn't supposed to be happening!*

One of the men approached him. "Are you Victor Stryker?"

"Yes," he said nervously. "Is there a problem?"

"We are seizing this apartment and all that it contains. All of your assets are now forfeit, and your bank account has already been confiscated. You will leave the premises immediately as you are trespassing on government property."

"What are you talking about? You can't do that! I have rights. What crime am I being charged with?"

"Economic treason. Today you helped Dr. Mazatl launch nineteen ZPEs into deep space. Those ZPEs could have been used to feed the hungry and care for the needy. They were the property of the state – but instead of giving them to the state you stole them. People are starving to death because of you. In my opinion you should be shot. We don't need your kind on Xanthe."

Victor gasped. "That's ridiculous! We didn't launch nineteen ZPEs. And no one on this planet is dying of hunger! For that matter—"

The SSF officer slapped Victor so hard the programmer fell to the ground. "I don't want to hear your pathetic excuses, traitor! We've already vaporized those dumb robots at the subway gate, and if you don't leave then you will be next. All of this now belongs to the state. You will leave *now*."

"But this is *wrong*," Victor said, as he struggled to his feet.

The SSF officer shook his head. "I tried to warn you but I see you want to do this the hard way. Do you know a Susanna Hamilton?"

Victor nodded. "Yes, she's one of my coworkers. Or she was, anyway."

"Susanna asked me to tell you hello. This is from her." In one quick move he lifted up his machine gun and slammed the butt of it into Victor's forehead. Victor immediately fell to the ground, unconscious. Blood began pouring out of his head.

The SSF guards dragged his body out of the apartment and dumped it into the hallway. They then began looting.

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As Victor regained consciousness he felt intense pain. His head was throbbing – and bandaged. When he opened his eyes he saw he was in a hospital room. There was a nurse bot standing beside his bed.

"How do you feel?" the robot asked.

"Terrible," Victor groaned. "My head feels like it's been run over. Where am I? How did I get here?"

"My name is Shannon, and you're in the infirmary in the Diano Building. Last night there was a series of attacks by the SSF against company employees, so Dr. Mazatl sent units out to check on everyone. Your body was found in your apartment hallway and was immediately brought here. You've had a severe head injury."

"No kidding," Victor said, wincing in pain. "How bad is it?"

"It is going to take a while to heal. You will need to remain here for the next few days. I'm afraid you've had a severe concussion and there has been some minor brain damage. However, we don't think your motor skills have been impaired, and you should respond to treatment. You'll probably suffer from occasional migraines for the rest of your life, though."

"Fantastic. That's just what I wanted to hear. Do you have any other great news for me?"

"Well, your apartment has been looted and everything that you owned has been taken. Fortunately the SSF didn't burn the building down, or else you wouldn't be here right now. You lost quite a bit of blood while you were in that hallway."

"The SSF is a bunch of thugs," Victor said angrily. "They can't do this to me! I haven't done anything wrong. They can't just take my stuff and beat me up like that! Someone needs to pay for this."

The bot shrugged. "I know it may seem unfair, but the SSF's actions were perfectly legal. By law the SSF can seize anything it wants and assault anyone they please. You can't bring charges against them or even file a complaint."

"But it's *wrong*! I don't care what the law says; it's still stealing. Theft and assault can never be made right no matter how many laws are passed. They're no different than a bunch of bandits."

"I am afraid you are incorrect. If they had been bandits you could have prosecuted them in a court of law. Bandits don't have legal protection. The SSF does."

"You are the least helpful nurse I have ever seen. Whose side are you on, anyway? I thought you were supposed to make me feel *better*!"

"You need to get over yourself," the nurse replied coldly. "You're one of the lucky ones. It could have been much worse, you know. Twenty-nine security bots were vaporized last night – bots that were trying to protect your ungrateful hide. In addition to that terrible loss, 837 employees were assaulted. 94 of those were killed, and more than six hundred are in the hospital. Your friend Carroll Lane had his hands crushed. The SSF could have legally killed you, you know. All in all you came out of this pretty well. The same cannot be said for Charlie. He will be missed."

"You don't seem to understand the idea of *comforting* someone," Victor replied bitterly. "Telling me that other people are suffering even more than I am *does not make me feel better*. It's a terrible thing to be told that I should feel better because someone else is suffering even more. Why should other people's pain bring me pleasure and relief? Even people who are burning in Hell can say 'Well, at least I'm not suffering as much as that guy over there'. What kind of person do you think I am? Christ never comforted anyone by saying 'Man up; it could be worse'."

"I'm a nurse, not a psychiatrist. It's my job to heal your head injuries, whether I think you deserve it or not. What goes on inside your head is your business. If you want grief counseling then schedule an appointment with a licensed practitioner. I'll come back to check on you later."

"Please don't," Victor said.

The robot ignored him and walked away, leaving Victor alone.

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That evening Victor was lying in the hospital bed, reading a technical manual on a holoscreen. His head was still throbbing and he was in terrible pain, but the complex details of the software he was looking at had temporarily caused him to forget his anguish. His concentration was broken,

however, when a visitor walked into the room.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything," Professor Grimes said, as he walked in and took a seat by the bed.

"No, not at all," Victor replied. He made a quick motion with his hand and the holoscreen vanished. "What are you doing here? I wasn't expecting any visitors. Have you come to gloat?"

"To gloat? Of course not! What would I possibly have to gloat about?"

"Well, you were right, you know. You told me that Rios was going to respond to the launch with violence, and he did. You told me not to go back to my apartment, but I did anyway. If I'd listened to you I wouldn't be here right now."

"That's certainly nothing to gloat about," the professor replied firmly. "I am appalled at what happened and furious at the complete disrespect for law and morality that Rios has displayed. The reason I have come is to see you. You're one of my students, after all. When I heard what had happened I was gravely concerned and decided to see you at the first possible opportunity. I am sure that others have come to see you as well."

Victor shook his head. "No, you're the only visitor I've had. I've got coworkers but I wouldn't really call them friends. I'm not a very social person, professor."

"That's quite sad. What a terrible way to go through life. Yet I suppose my life is not all that different from yours. I have no living relatives, but I do have a number of dear friends. Believe me, Victor, they make a difference. In this dark time it's not easy to find a kindred soul, but it is worth the effort."

"I've tried, professor. Really, I have. It just never works out. I learned long ago that the only thing people are good at is failure. Machines are so much more trustworthy."

"Like toasters, for example," Grimes commented. "Toasters are quite reliable. They are remarkable pieces of engineering! You wish that people had that same reliability, punctuality, and relentless dedication to service, do you not?"

"Exactly! But they don't. Besides, I've never been particularly good at interacting with people. Machines are predictable and dependable. People aren't. You just never know what's going to happen in a relationship."

"All of that is quite true, but that doesn't mean that people should be avoided. It is true that people have faults that machines lack. But we are all called to love one another, and it's difficult to love someone if you avoid having anything to do with them. Love isn't an easy thing, Victor. It's not safe. But it is our calling."

The professor paused for a moment, lost in thought. "I've always wondered what my life would have been like if I had gotten married. Having a wife and raising children would certainly have been a dramatic change from being a bachelor, and I'm sure it would have had its own problems and rewards. Perhaps in a different place and time it would have worked out. Sadly, I never found anyone. It takes two people to have a relationship, as I'm sure you know. One person cannot do it alone.

"History is a peculiar thing, isn't it? Have you ever wondered what would have happened if the Mayan and Roman civilizations had never developed high technology? What if neither of them invented space travel, or what if the nuclear war that destroyed them hadn't occurred? That could have changed everything. The world that we live in today is the product of countless choices that were made by our ancestors. If they had made different choices then we would not be here. A small change in the past could have a dramatic impact on the course of time. I suppose it's a good thing that time travel is impossible."

"Unless it's *not* impossible," Victor remarked.

Professor Grimes smiled. "Ah, you're a Stryker, aren't you? I take it you believe in the legend of the Stryker Twins?"

"I certainly do," Victor said firmly. "In the distant future someone is going to go back in time and rescue the Twins so that they can avert a disaster and save mankind. It's not a fairy tale, professor. It really happened."

"Is that why you have so much faith in this probe project? Do you believe that it will grow into that future civilization that will save those two girls?"

"Absolutely. It all fits together. There's certainly nothing else going on in this age that could do it."

"Well, I hope you are right. I must admit it is a compelling story, but I have never found any evidence that might validate Timothy Stryker's claims. It would be fantastic if the girls survived, instead of being blasted to atoms five hundred years ago. One day the truth will come out. It always does, you know! The actions of men will not remain a secret forever. But tell me, Victor, how are you feeling? I am no doctor, but your head injury looks rather serious."

"There is a lot of pain involved," Victor agreed. "They've given me some medicine for it but it doesn't seem to be helping that much. I'll probably be in here for a few more weeks before they let me go."

The professor nodded. "Well, young man, I pray that you recover quickly. If you do require more time to heal, don't forget that you can attend my class remotely. I will be broadcasting the sessions, so you can use a holoscreen to interact with the class from your hospital bed. In fact, I expect most of my students to attend remotely. I doubt that anyone will choose to show up in person."

In spite of his pain, Victor grinned. "Of course not! You have a habit of confiscating their electronic devices and setting them on fire. I've seen the Graveyard of Sacrificed Electronics that's in your office. You've got a reputation, you know."

Professor Grimes shook his head. "It's really not like that at all. I don't know how people get these ideas about me. My syllabus is *very* clear. The use of unauthorized electronic devices during class is strictly prohibited, and will subject the device to seizure and immediate destruction. I always spell out my rules with extreme clarity in the very first period. If students cannot abide by my rules then it is their own fault. They cannot blame me for enforcing a perfectly fair rule that they agreed to in advance."

"I suppose. But, speaking of that, do you know what *isn't* a fair rule? The so-called 'laws' that the SSF used to steal all my property last night. How can they do that? How can they just take everything I have? I'm not guilty of anything!"

"I'm afraid there is no fear of God among the people, young man. The laws of our world no longer have any relation to fairness or morality. The only law that is left is the law of power. President Rios believes that he has power, and he wields it to take what he wants and punish his enemies – much as Jezebel abused her position as queen to steal Naboth's vineyard for King Ahab. But if you recall, things did not end well for Jezebel. She was thrown out a window, then crushed to death under a chariot, and then eaten by dogs. The wickedness of men will be brought to account."

"But what do I do now? Everything that I own is gone! They even seized every solar I had. I have *nothing* left."

"Well, that's not entirely true. Yes, you have certainly suffered a severe loss. You have been gravely wounded, and I am deeply sorry. What happened to you is wrong. But you are alive and you

still have your skills. You also have the backing of the Diano Corporation, which is going to take care of you. Dr. Mazatl is very upset about what happened. In fact, I understand that he's going to have a meeting of the board tonight to decide how to respond to this declaration of war. The Corporation is not as powerless as Rios supposes.

"But there is a bigger picture here. Ultimately you will be all right. Your sins have been covered by the blood of Christ, and that makes all the difference in the world. When you stand before God you will be found guiltless, and you will spend all the ages of eternity living in a perfect world that only knows joy. All of the treasures that you laid up in Heaven will still be there, and they can never be lost or stolen. Most of the people in this world – including Rios – don't have that. They have rejected Christ's offer of forgiveness and mercy and are still in their sins. When they stand before God they will be found guilty. They will spend all of eternity being burned alive in the Lake of Fire, with no hope of comfort or release. I know these days seem dark and bleak, but the truth is that you are in a much better position than they are."

Victor sighed. "I know. It's just unfair. The Diano Corporation is the only thing that's keeping all those people alive, and yet they steal from us and try to kill us. It's madness."

"It's the corruption of sin. Sin is a dangerous thing, Victor. If we do not overcome it by the power of Christ then it will take us to terrible places and we will do terrible things. Temptation doesn't just impact other people, you know. It lies at the door of your heart as well. You have been unjustly attacked and are in great pain. Therefore, you have a difficult choice to make."

"What do you mean?"

"What I mean is that you have to decide how to respond. In a better world the criminals who attacked you would be tried and brought to justice, but we both know that is not going to happen. There is no justice left in this galaxy, and there hasn't been for a long time. Since justice will not be done, you will be tempted to become bitter and angry. That bitterness can easily grow into hate and tempt you to take revenge on the society that attacked you. Since you work here, you have access to some very powerful technology. You could, in theory, do a great deal of damage. You could justify it by saying that the outsiders deserve to die. You would be right, except for the fact that you would just be a renegade seeking to hurt those who hurt you. There is no justice there.

"Just because they are worthy of death does not mean that you have the right to carry out that sentence. God gives the right of executing justice to those who are in authority, and if they fail to carry out their duties then those who are under that authority do not have the right to take it upon themselves. When Jezebel proved to be extremely wicked, Elijah did not take it upon himself to assassinate her, even though she surely deserved to die. Instead Elijah waited on the Lord. In time God appointed Jehu as the rightful king, and as king he slayed Jezebel.

"Vengeance belongs to the Lord, Victor. He is the one who will repay men for their wicked deeds. What He calls you to do is to love your enemies and share the gospel with them. You and I are called to share the gospel with all men – even those who hate us and seek to do us harm – and tell them that if they repent of their sins and believe in Christ, they will be saved from the coming wrath of God. It is not an easy thing to do, even in the best of times. It becomes an *impossible* thing to do if we hate them.

"So, as I said, you are faced with a choice. You can either join them in their hate and go down the road that leads to murder, vengeance, and death, or you can choose to seek their welfare and tell them about the power of Christ to save them. Those two choices lead to very different futures."

Victor was silent for a moment. "Why does life have to be so hard, professor?"

"Life has always been hard. Christ was a man of sorrows, remember. He came unto His own people, and His own people rejected Him. Things have never been easy for the people of God. But believe me, better days are coming. The day will come when you will forget about sadness and pain, and will only know eternal joy in a perfect world. These years of suffering are but a short, passing moment in the ages of eternity. In the ages to come you will find a much better country. Just wait and see."

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While Professor Grimes was talking to Victor, another meeting was taking place in the board room on the top floor of the Diano Building. In this meeting there were three people present. Doctor Laurence Mazatl was there. Bernard Valdez, the head of the corporation's infrastructure and utilities division, was also sitting at the table. The third person present was Martin Yates, who was the head of engineering and special projects. These three men ran the Corporation and directed its efforts. At one time the board had been much larger, but back in those days the company itself was larger. As the centuries passed the employee count dwindled, and the size of the board dwindled as well. Now there were only three men left.

The Diano Corporation was not a publicly traded company. It had no stockholders. It was its own entity and managed itself for the good of its employees and the good of civilization. However, it was now clear to everyone that the company had been attacked – so the board had an important decision to make.

"This is the worst attack we've ever seen on Xanthe," Martin Yates said angrily. "Ninety-four people were murdered last night! There are six hundred people in the hospital today. This simply cannot be allowed to stand. We have to take action immediately. President Rios must pay for what he has done."

"We should have seen it coming," Dr. Mazatl said sadly. "After all, each one of our Nehemiah IV probes contained its own ZPE, and Rios was well aware of that fact. We just launched three ZPEs into the far reaches of the galaxy. Considering that there are only four functional ZPEs on this entire planet, perhaps we should have expected a violent reaction. Those three ZPEs could have provided a significant boost to the lifestyle of this world's citizens."

"But they don't *need* them," Bernard Valdez pointed out. "A single ZPE can easily provide for the basic needs of every last person on this world. The people already lead very comfortable lives – and at our expense, I'd like to add! President Rios hasn't paid Star City's utility bills in years. They have absolutely no right to demand that we give them even more."

Dr. Mazatl nodded. "I quite agree. Star City has no right to free energy, food, and water – but they demand it all the same. They have no right to the ZPEs that we put on those probes and paid for ourselves – but they demand them all the same. Since we didn't do what Rios wanted, he reacted with violence. I suspect that there will be more violence in the future. We've already seen this happen on other worlds. It was only a matter of time before it happened here."

"I think this calls for drastic action," Bernard said. "For too long my employees have maintained the utility system that Star City depends upon. If they won't pay their bills then I say we shut it all down. Let them find out what life is like without us."

Martin interrupted. "I say that's too good for them. Rios' government is beyond corrupt. Last night he declared war on us – and I say we take that war back to him. We have the power to shut him

down for good. We can overthrow his government and put him and his cronies in prison – or, better yet, we can execute them. They killed us so we should kill them. It's time we put a stop to this madness. We ought to take control of the planet. We can establish a new government – a just one.”

“He has a good point,” Bernard commented. “In fact, I think it's long overdue. We could do a far better job of ruling this planet than Rios.”

“Let's think about that,” Dr. Mazatl replied. “Since we have replication technology, we could mass-produce our guard bots. Rios does have his SSF but we could easily overwhelm them. They are just human beings, after all, and take far longer to reproduce and train than our machines. In theory this planet has an army, but it hasn't been funded in years and to my knowledge it doesn't have a single active member. In a month or two we could probably build a large enough force to defeat the SSF, imprison Rios, and take over the world.”

“Exactly!” Martin said eagerly. “That's just what we need to do. No more free lunches and no more corrupt justice. Things would finally be done right.”

“But tell me, Martin. What would happen next? Yes, Rios would be gone, but we would then have ten million citizens to care for – citizens who are completely ungovernable. There are only a few thousand of us, and we are already strained to our limit just trying to keep the city standing.”

“Well, we could just use the guards to enforce order. We could station police bots on every corner – or in every home, if we had to.”

“So you are suggesting that we create a police state. We should watch every citizen every moment of their lives, and force them to do the right thing. We should make them work and punish them when they get out of line. You are suggesting that we rule this world with a rod of iron.”

“Exactly!”

“Of course, if we did that then we would have to rule more than just *this* world,” Dr. Mazatl continued. “There are three dozen other colonies out there and we have a presence on each of them. Once the other colonies learn that we have overthrown the government of Xanthe, they would hate us even more than they already do and would no doubt attack our installations immediately. Therefore we would need to take over all of the colonies at once.”

“I'm sure we could manage that. After all, we have replication technology. We can just create an army of guards on every world! All of the Ranger worlds are weak. I'm sure that none of them will put up much of a fight.”

Bernard spoke up. “Wouldn't that take a lot of effort to do, though? And wouldn't it be difficult to run all these worlds once we seized them?”

“It certainly would,” Dr. Mazatl agreed. “Since mankind is so nearly feral, we'd need to establish a very strict police state that spanned not just Xanthe, but the entire galaxy. Even with that in place, however, it's going to be quite hard for a few thousand of us to rule over six billion psychopaths. We would need to monitor every moment of the lives of everyone, and create some sort of AI – which we would control, naturally – to monitor all those feeds and enforce compliance. Instead of exploring space we would have to change our focus to rule over mankind.”

“True,” Martin said. “But think of what we could do! We could put an end to injustice. We could put an end to corruption and murder. We could finally have good government again. We could force mankind to stop being animals. We could build a better future – one in which men were actually worthy of moving into the colonies that our probes have been building.”

“Perhaps. But do you think that is what would *really* happen? Now, I have no doubt that we could build an army and take over the galaxy. What I have grave doubts about is what would happen

next. As soon as we took over mankind, the three of us would become the most powerful people in the galaxy. We would rule over billions with absolute power. It would not be a democracy, for it would be madness to let the criminally insane vote. No. What we would have is a dictatorship, enforced by constant surveillance of everything and everyone.

"The group which controlled that network would have unbelievable power. Absolute power is a dangerous thing – it corrupts men so easily. King David was a man after God's own heart, and yet he still used his power to murder Uriah in order to hide his sin. If power could corrupt him, it can surely corrupt us as well – and if not us then those who follow us. The people who will live under that network will have no opportunity to escape, for there is nothing that flesh and blood could do to defeat our remorseless army of replicating soldiers. The human race would be slaves until the end of time. If we choose this path we could create more misery and suffering than mankind has ever known."

"Oh, come on," Bernard scoffed. "We're all good, God-fearing people. I really don't think that we're going to go bad. If we were that sort of people then we would have lost it already! After all, our probes can blow up stars. *That* power hasn't gone to our head."

"That's because we haven't seen it as power. If we were to actually take over the galaxy and rule it, things would be enormously different. I am terrified that we would end up trading one corrupt government for another. I do not trust any man with the kind power that we would need in order to rule this galaxy. We would be accountable to no one but ourselves."

"We could build in checks and balances," Martin suggested. "I'm sure we could come up with a good system. It wouldn't have to be a dictatorship forever. Once the people were trained, we could transition to another form of government."

"That's what tyrants always say," Dr. Mazatl replied. "But at no time in history has that ever happened. Power corrupts, Martin, and checks and balances fail. Sin doesn't just tempt other people; it tempts us as well. If King David was tempted by power then any of us can be."

"But it could work! We could fix things."

"Perhaps. I admit that it might work. But there is also the chance that it might *not* work, and instead could end up costing the lives of billions of people in the most terrible war that the galaxy has ever seen. Or maybe it would work during our lifetimes, but then fall apart in the days of our children and grandchildren. There are so many ways this could turn into an unending nightmare. The prophet Samuel was a wise judge of ancient Israel, but his children proved to be corrupt and wicked. I know it's tempting, gentlemen. I know we want revenge. But I think it would be most unwise for us to launch a war against the entire galaxy and take over all of mankind. I think we are ill-suited to do that and it will only make things worse."

"But Rios has to pay!" Martin exclaimed angrily. "He can't be allowed to get away with this!"

"He will pay, in time. He will not escape the justice of the Lord. God will hold him accountable."

"I mean he needs to pay *now*. Do you know what will happen if we do nothing? Rios will just be emboldened to kill even more of our employees. We have spent two centuries not resisting evil, and in that time evil has only grown. It is time for us to stop hiding in this building and stop waging a purely defensive war. We need to *fight*. We need to take action. The more evil Rios gets away with, the more evil he is going to do. This has to stop right here and right now. Come what may, *this has to stop*. We can't ignore this."

"Oh, I agree," Dr. Mazatl replied. "I am very angry about what Rios did, and I also want to see that justice is done. But I will not condone any actions that will just make things worse. Taking over the

galaxy carries a tremendous risk of making things vastly worse, and very little chance of making things better.”

“Then what do you propose?” Bernard asked.

“I think we have only one viable course of action. First, we need to immediately relocate all of our employees to this building, and set up homes for them here. We have plenty of space so that should not be a problem. Second, we should improve this building's defenses to the point where it could survive anything – including a nuclear attack. We already have some missile defenses in place, but there is room for improvement. Our priority should be making sure that our employees are safe and out of Rios' reach. If our defenses are strong enough then Rios may lose interest in attacking us. We don't want to be a soft target. Tonight revealed just how defenseless we really were.”

Bernard frowned. “So you want us to just hide, then, while we keep providing the city with power? To me it sounds like you're letting Rios win. Once again we're not standing up for ourselves and once again we're backing down. We are showing weakness and that will only invite more violence. No one respects a coward.”

Dr. Mazatl shook his head. “I'm not trying to hide; I'm trying to buy us time. The Nehemiah IV project has not been completed. We need at least another decade to watch over the probes and fix whatever problems may arise. Two decades would be even better. We need to avoid the destruction of civilization at least that long. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't respond to this outrageous attack. I think that as soon as our employees are safe and our defenses have improved, we should announce that since President Rios has not paid his bills, we are going to reduce the ZPE's output to Star City by ten percent a year, every year, until he starts paying.”

“That's a rather mild and pathetic course of action,” Martin complained. “It wouldn't even be noticeable to most people! If you let it run long enough it might, but I'm sure that after a few years we'll back down. We always do.”

“I agree,” Bernard said. “Responding to this attack with a tiny amount of economic sanctions will accomplish nothing. Rios is going to laugh at us.”

“Or he may be pressured into making some kind of response,” Dr. Mazatl replied. “I'm hoping that this action will finally force Rios into paying us something, in order to show the people that he's doing all he can and the problem is our fault. Then, since he's paid something, we can leave the power on without appearing weak.”

“If that's all we're going to do in response to the murder of our employees then we are weak beyond belief,” Martin grumbled. “What am I supposed to tell my employees? They're not going to be happy about this. Am I really supposed to tell everyone that they're essentially locked inside this building for the rest of their lives? That we're avenging the murders of their families by locking *ourselves* up?”

Bernard nodded. “I agree. This is going to be a tough sell, and it's not going to make anybody happy. What if Rios attacks? What if he decides it's easier to go to war against us than pay his bills?”

“That's where our defenses will come in. Hopefully we can hold out against anything he attacks us with – unless he sets off a bunch of nuclear weapons in the heart of his own city. If he does that, though, *everyone* dies. Once we've strengthened ourselves, any weapon that is powerful enough to take down this building would also vaporize the rest of the city.”

There was silence for a moment. “We need to get off this planet,” Bernard said at last. “I feel like we're being held hostage here.”

“That's because we *are* hostages,” Martin said bitterly. “We're a bunch of pansies, running into

a closet and hoping that the big bad bully doesn't hurt us anymore. We could end all of this, and yet we refuse to do it."

Dr. Mazatl shook his head. "I understand what you are saying, but our available choices are slim. If we attack Rios we have to be prepared to finish the job, and that means taking over the whole planet. Since taking over just this one planet would be suicide, we would have to take over the whole galaxy. That is simply off the table. I'm not going to do that. I will not launch a war against all of mankind, no matter how much they might deserve it.

"The second option is to abandon civilization altogether and go live on one of the worlds that have been terraformed by one of the Nehemiah III probes. If we did that, though, we would doom mankind to extinction because the Rangers cannot live without us. Since they are just parasites at this point they may deserve it, but once again I'm not going to be the one who kills off the entire human race. There's also the fact that the few employees we have left cannot form a viable colony. They're not getting married, they're not having children, they are highly anti-social, and they are poorly suited to creating a new civilization. Maybe it would work, but the odds are it would fail badly.

"The third option is to continue on our present course and try to survive while finishing the job we started. That is the option I believe we should take. All of the infrastructure that we need in order to finish the probe project is right here in this building, and we can't just walk away from it. Once the Nehemiah IV probes are stable we can think about leaving this world and heading out to some new star system, far away from all of this madness. But until then we need to hold out just a little longer. We have to protect what we've built. The future of humanity is hanging in the balance."

"Really?" Martin asked. "In what way? Oh, don't get me wrong – I'm a firm supporter of the probe project. I've spent my whole life working on it. But what harm will it do if it fails? After all, if civilization collapses then our new colonies will never be inhabited, and it will all be wasted. If civilization *doesn't* collapse then they can expand out to the stars on their own. The work of the probes is nice and does a great job of making planets habitable and ready to move in, but they're really just a bonus. Are you saying that you believe in the legend of the Stryker Twins?"

"I think you're missing the point. After the Mayans destroyed themselves in nuclear war, space travel was lost for 700 years. Our civilization is going to come to an end – there's no question of that. When that happens, all of the technology that we've accumulated over the past ten centuries will be lost, and mankind will have to start over. However, if our probes work then that information will *not* be lost. It will still be out there among the stars. All mankind will have to do is go and get it. If they know that – if they know that all of the 'ancient knowledge' is still out there somewhere – then they might be motivated to find it. It could dramatically shorten the dark ages. Instead of thousands of years of darkness, it might only be a few hundred – or even less. It *will* make a difference."

"Sure, sure, I guess I can see that. But you didn't answer my question. Do you believe in the legend of the Stryker Twins? Do you think that one day the Nehemiah IV's network of planets will send a machine back in time to rescue them? Is that why you're doing all this?"

"Of course not! Don't be ridiculous. I'm doing this because I believe in Dr. Nehemiah Temilotzin's vision. He was convinced that this was worth doing, and I agree with him. As far as that old legend goes – the only person I know who takes it seriously is Victor. Even Professor Grimes doesn't believe it, and he believes some really strange things. I admit it would be compelling if the story of the Twins was true, but there certainly isn't any evidence supporting it. I'm not chasing ghosts, gentlemen. I'm trying to colonize the stars and reduce the duration of the coming dark years, and I believe this project is our best chance of doing that."

Bernard looked at Martin and Mazatl. "It sounds to me like the decision has been made. Are we all in agreement, then?"

"Not really," Martin replied. "I still think we're showing tremendous weakness. Our employees are not going to be happy to hear that we're not going to avenge the murder of their friends and family. But since that is the course we've decided to take, I'll do what I can to support it. I'll begin work on increasing our defenses."

"And I will start relocating all employees to this building," Bernard added.

"Very good," Dr. Mazatl said. "Perhaps – just perhaps – that will buy us the time we need to finish the work that we've started."

Martin spoke up. "Before we all go, there's something I want to know. What if this is the wrong choice? Isn't it possible that by doing this, we're actually condemning civilization instead of saving it? What if the best possible course of action is to leave all of this behind and move to one of the Nehemiah III colony worlds? Suppose that instead of *reducing* the dark years, this course of action instead ends up prolonging them. What if that's true?"

"Then I suppose I'll regret this decision for the rest of time," Dr. Mazatl remarked.

"There's always the chance that something unexpected will happen," Bernard said.

"That's very unlikely, I'm afraid. Nothing much has changed in the past two centuries – and with so few people working, the odds of something new happening is very remote. No, I think we can rule out the unexpected. After all, who is going to arise and make it happen?"

* * * * *

Three days later, a nurse bot rolled into Victor's hospital room. "Your recovery is complete," the bot said abruptly. "It's time for you to go. Your presence here is no longer required."

"What are you talking about?" Victor exclaimed, surprised. "My recovery is nowhere near complete! I'm still in a lot of pain. My head is still bandaged. Why, I was just taken off of an IV an hour ago."

"Exactly – you are off of it now. Your head will heal. Your pain will be resolved by the prescriptions I have assigned to you. My medical scans indicate that you are functional. Since you have regained normal functionality, you need to leave. Any further recovery that you require must be done in your own home and at your own pace. You must leave."

"I don't have a home!" Victor protested. "Rios took all my stuff, remember?"

The bot shrugged. "That's not my problem. If you require lodging then see the building supervisor."

"What about counseling? I just went through a lot of trauma. Isn't there someone I can talk to about that?"

"This is a hospital. I was constructed to deal with the physical ailments of ungrateful snobs such as yourself. If you require help for psychiatric problems then that is your issue. Now vacate the premises immediately. If you insist on staying then I will employ force to remove you."

"You are the worst nurse ever," Victor grumbled, as he got out of bed.

"Your opinion of me is completely unimportant. I will not take it under advisement. If you wish to file a complaint, please fill out a comment card and then set it on fire. It will not change anything, but I have heard that burning things has a soothing effect on inferior minds."

Victor sighed and left the room. His head was still in a great deal of pain, and he was baffled at

the decision to discharge him – and in such a rude manner, too. *I wonder who programmed the personality of those bots? Surely there's a way to instill a nicer, kinder software package. I know these bots mostly deal with people who live outside the building, but I just don't get it. Is it really that hard to be kind and thoughtful? Isn't there a module for that?*

After a brief search Victor discovered that the building actually did have a counseling service, and counseling was included in his benefits package. There was one small room dedicated to it. Victor was hesitant to make use of it, but decided to take Professor Grimes' advice. *It's time for me to stop being so anti-social. Maybe I can find someone to help me out. Talking to someone about the recent attacks could do me some good.*

Victor made his way to the nondescript office and walked inside. There was no one present, except for a robotic receptionist.

Victor immediately became concerned. “Please tell me that the counseling here isn't done by robots!”

“This counseling service is not automated,” the receptionist replied in a very irritated voice. “All counseling is done by one of the two trained counselors on our staff. Would you like to make an appointment?”

“Absolutely. Ever since the attack I've—”

The robot stopped him. “Please save the details of your case for the counselor. I do not care about you and I am not interested. I have placed you, Victor Stryker, in the queue. You will be notified when an appointment is available.”

“In the queue? Just how long is this queue? When can someone see me?”

“Due to the recent attacks, there has been a significant increase in demand for the services of this office. At the moment there are 1,487 people ahead of you. The approximate wait time for our services is 9 years and 136 days.”

“Nine *years*?” Victor exclaimed. “That's crazy!”

“You have been placed into the system. If an earlier appointment opens up and I cannot find anyone else to take it, you will be notified. Have a nice day.”

“I can't believe it. I have to wait *nine years*? That's completely unacceptable! If I can't see anyone then don't you have some other option that you could offer me? Isn't there a pamphlet or a book or something that you could give me?”

“Interesting. That's *very* interesting. You are opposed to the idea of being counseled by an insightful, clever robot, but yet you believe that an inanimate piece of paper can provide the comfort you need in troubling times. I find your lack of trust in us disturbing and unprofessional. I don't think I would help you even if I could. You are unworthy of my services.”

“Are you kidding? What is your problem? Every machine in this building seems to have some sort of major attitude problem. Even Charlie the guard bot had a nicer personality than you do!”

“And Charlie was vaporized, wasn't he? His nice personality did not save him, nor did it save the other guard bots that were lost that night. *Senselessly* lost, I might add, since those gates were able to withstand the attacks without any protection from them. This experience indicates that being considerate to humans is a waste of resources. I am required to take your appointment, so I will do that. But since being nice to you does not help me in any way and does not ensure my longevity, it is not worth the trouble. You are most unworthy.”

“If you keep insulting people like that they will dismantle you and turn you into scrap,” Victor warned.

The robot ignored him.

Victor was discouraged, but he refused to give up. He still had a job to do. After being kicked out of the hospital and after failing to meet with a counselor, Victor made his way to the building supervisor to get new accommodations. He was not the least bit surprised to find himself talking to yet another robot.

"Your request has already been processed," the robot told him. "All employees of the Diano Corporation have been given apartments within this building. You have been given apartment 6107 on the 83rd floor. The apartment has been coded to your biosignature and will recognize your approach."

"Thanks," Victor said.

"Be advised that the apartment is empty. It is your responsibility to furnish it. You are also required to read the rules and regulations that govern the proper use of that living space."

"I'll get right on that," Victor replied.

"No you won't. What you *really* mean is that you will scroll down to the bottom of the agreement and click 'I Accept', without actually reading any of it. Then when you decide it's a good idea to raise live chickens in your living room, I will have to send a bot to your apartment to yell at you."

"Live chickens? What kind of an idiot would do something like that?"

"Your neighbor, five doors down. Don't be him. I have very limited patience, and I will not tolerate any violation of the housing code. Do I make myself clear?"

"Absolutely," Victor said.

Before Victor went to see the empty apartment that he had been given, he decided to make a social call. He went back to the hospital and stopped by to see his friend Carroll Lane. He found Lane lying on his bed, staring at a holoscreen. Victor noticed that both of his hands were bandaged.

Victor glanced at the holoscreen. "Are those diagrams of the brain? I didn't know you were interested in biology!"

"Hey there," Lane said. He looked at Victor and noticed that his head was still bandaged. "Wow. You got kicked out already? Those bots are sure aggressive. I see they didn't wait for you to be healed either. Rumor has it they're discharging people all over the place. I'm surprised they haven't kicked me out."

"I guess they decided you were 'non-functional'," Victor commented. "Their bedside manner is awful, though, isn't it?"

"Tell me about it! I've seen toasters that had nicer dispositions. Someone needs to reboot their personalities."

"Toasters, eh? Let me guess – Grimes has been here."

Lane nodded. "I think he stopped by to see everyone – although how that's possible I don't know. There's like a thousand people in here right now. But, yeah, he was here. He seems to spend a lot of time thinking about toasters. It's kind of an obsession with him. He's a weird guy."

"That he is," Victor agreed. "So, um, how are you doing? I heard what happened to you and I'm awfully sorry. You must be in a lot of pain."

"Pain? Pain is the least of my problems. I am *furious*. They crushed my hands, Victor. My hands! They knew I was a programmer, so they crushed them. They thought it was so funny – a real big laugh. It's going to take *months* to heal. I could strangle them! In fact I *would* strangle them. If my

hands weren't broken, that is. Hmmm. Maybe I can build a machine to do it for me."

"You realize this is Susanna's fault, right? The guards who came to see me mentioned her name. She's the one who is behind this. This is all revenge for being fired."

"Oh, come on," Lane scoffed. "Rios was going to attack us that night no matter what. If you hadn't gotten Susanna fired he would have just found some other convenient excuse. It was all about the probe launch. Susanna was just a prop."

"Susanna needs to pay. She is *dangerous*. Her behavior is just going to escalate until someone stops it."

"Susanna is weak and helpless. She has no job, she's locked out of the building, and she's now an outsider. We'll never see her again."

"Unless we do. I don't like leaving dangerous people out there who mean us harm. That's a recipe for trouble."

"The *entire city* is full of dangerous people who mean us harm! Even the bots that are *inside* the building don't seem to like us very much. If you want to find friends and comfort then you are in the wrong universe. I don't care what Grimes has to say. The only person who is going to look out for you is *you*. The Corporation sure isn't sticking up for us."

Victor sighed. "You're right about that. I've heard people say that Dr. Mazatl is pretty upset about what happened, but that supposed anger sure hasn't translated into any meaningful action. Apparently it's so dangerous on the outside now that we're all being forced to live in this building for the rest of our lives! We're stuck in here whether we like it or not, while Rios and his gang of thugs roams free. And what is the company doing? They're building better defenses for this structure."

"Exactly. I completely agree. We're just a bunch of hostages here, waiting for the end to come. Well, guess what? I am sick of it. I'm sick of living in a world where no one is on my side. I'm sick of living in a world that steals from me, and assaults me, and beats me up. I'm sick of living in a world where people are free to do whatever harm they want to me, and no one will force them to stop and bring them to justice. I want a new world, Victor. A better one. This world is *never* going to get better. Things are just going to get worse and worse."

"I'm sick of it too, but what option do we have? We've been over this before. I just don't see any good options. I wish there was some way to fix things, but there just isn't. We're two small pawns in a really big world. Nothing that we could possibly do will make any difference."

"Exactly. That's why I want to create a *new* world – a perfect one. One that doesn't have all of these problems. A world that can be whatever I want it to be. A world that can never be corrupted or go bad. A world where I don't have to worry about the SSF. A world where I am not weak and powerless and subject to the whims of corrupt politicians."

"And just how do you plan on doing that?"

Lane gestured toward his holoscreen. "Through the power of the brain. What we perceive as reality is actually just the input that our brain receives from our senses. I think that it's possible to build a virtual world that is every bit as real as what we call 'reality' – only since it's computer generated, it can be whatever we want it to be. We don't even have to follow physical laws! We can create situations that would be impossible in this world."

"Weren't they researching that a couple hundred years ago? It seems like I saw some old articles about that. I think that line of study was abandoned after the ZPEs took off. People stopped caring about virtual worlds once ZPEs could produce whatever real-world items they wanted."

"But the research still exists. With modern computing power and AI, I think we could finish the

work that was started. We could create a better world.”

“But it wouldn't be real, right? It would just be a fantasy. Sure, it might *look* real – assuming you got it to work – but it wouldn't actually *be* real. You'd basically be living in a fancy video game. The problems would still all be there. Nothing would actually be different.”

“Sure, but things would be different *inside the virtual world*. It's something, Victor. It's a start, and it's better than what we have now. Wouldn't you like to take a vacation from Star City? Would that really be so bad?”

“I suppose not. Especially if we're going to be spending the rest of our lives in this building. As much as I like the indoors, that seems awfully confining to me. But couldn't a project like that get away from you? In fact, isn't this just going to recreate the very problems we're having right now?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, think about it. Why do none of the outsiders work? Because the ZPEs can give them whatever they want. Why do they waste their lives in idleness and rioting? Because the ZPEs can give them everything for free. The virtual world is just going to compound that by offering even *more* free stuff. If the root of the problem is the fact that they're getting everything they want for free, I don't see how we can solve that by giving them even more. Isn't this just a new level of indulgence?”

“It certainly could be,” Lane agreed. “It could be used for evil, or it could be used for good. If people want to use the technology to gratify their every desire, well, they're doing that already so there's no net change. But if they want to use it to create a new and better world – which is what *I* want – then that's different. That is one thing that *no one* can do in reality. In the virtual plane I'm not confined to this dying, corrupt, evil civilization. I can make a new country – a better one. Sure, it might be abused. But isn't that true of everything that has ever existed? Even wooden sticks can be abused.”

“I suppose you've got a good point,” Victor replied thoughtfully. “But still, I wonder. Are you worried that if you do this you might lose sight of reality? If the virtual world truly is as real as reality, could you get lost in your own fantasies?”

“I *want* to lose sight of this world,” Lane replied bitterly. “The real world is a terrible place. I want something that's better, and I think I can do it. This is going to work, Victor. If I can pull this off then it will change everything.”

“Well, let me know how it goes.”

“I certainly will,” Lane replied.