

CHAPTER 5: THE DERELICT

Log date: July 24, 9991 of the Eternal Era

Location: Azariah Station

Log note: A better country

AS THE BIBLE FORETOLD, there came a day when the Lord Jesus Christ returned and raised the righteous dead back to life. This glorious resurrection was followed by the great and terrible Day of Judgment. On that day there was a great white throne, and the Most High God sat upon it. Mankind stood before Him, and every tongue confessed that Jesus Christ was Lord. The heavenly books were then opened and the race of man was finally judged for its deeds. Those whose sins were covered by the blood of Christ went on to inherit everlasting life, and those who rejected the Lord's mercy were cast into everlasting fire.

But that was not the end. After this judgment the Lord created a new Heaven and Earth. In this new creation there was no sin, or suffering, or pain, or death. The former things were passed away and all things were new. God and man lived together on a new Earth, and Jesus Christ reigned over the universe. His kingdom was an everlasting kingdom and would never be destroyed or fade away.

Mankind prospered greatly on this new Earth. Peace and harmony reigned over the planet. The New Jerusalem – that great golden city which was created by God Himself – became the capitol of the universe. Not only did the meek inherit the world, but they inherited the stars as well. The prophet Isaiah foretold that there would be no end to the increase of His government and peace, and that prophecy came to pass.

As the millennia rolled by, many of mankind's oldest dreams came true. Dr. Nehemiah Temilotzin worked with Dr. Timothy Stryker, Dr. Laurence Mazatl, and Dr. Victor Stryker to launch a final class of replicating probes – the Nehemiah V – and they succeeded in not only preparing the Milky Way galaxy for colonization, but every other galaxy as well. The once-empty planets of the universe became filled with life as the Lord created new races that would never know suffering or pain. Mankind ruled with Christ and became stewards over what He had created. That ancient command of Genesis to have dominion over God's creation finally came to pass.

It was a glorious time to be alive, and each day was better than the next. This time there was no darkness to fight, nor was there even a hint of corruption. There were no false teachers, or liars, or deceivers, or evildoers. Everything was exactly as it should be, and that would never change.

But that did not mean that there were no secrets left to discover. Solomon once said that it was the glory of God to conceal a thing, but the honor of kings to search it out. The universe was filled with treasures. After nearly ten millennia of life in the Eternal Era, a discovery was made that would lead to one of the most well-hidden secrets of all.

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During the first millennia of the Eternal Era, Ramon Diano led the Diano Corporation to perfect the science of space travel. Now, it was true that mankind no longer needed starships to travel between the planets. After all, the resurrected, immortal bodies of men could instantly take them

wherever they desired. You did not need a starship to cross the galaxy any more than you needed a car to drive across your living room – but scientific instruments did not have superpowers. The most efficient way to explore every single star and planet in the universe was to use replicating probes – and that meant finding better ways to travel to the most remote corners of God's massive creation.

By the turn of the 75th century mankind believed that they had mastered science. The technology of energy production, terraformation, and faster-than-light travel was as perfect as the finest minds could make it. The science of exploration was considered settled: it had been taken as far as anyone thought possible. After the Nehemiah V probes finished their work and the Artillect cataloged every world in the universe, men turned their attention to other pursuits. They knew that mankind would never know all there was to know, for only God had all knowledge. There would always be something new to learn about the universe – and all knowledge of God's creation inevitably pointed back to the Creator. Eternity itself would not be long enough to discover all there was to know about the infinite God. Mankind was never in any danger of becoming bored. After all, how could boredom possibly exist when living with the Infinite?

As it turned out there was a great deal that still needed to be done. The universe was filled with young races that God created during the Eternal Era and which were just learning how to build a civilization. Although there were many billions of Redeemed in this new universe, the number of planets in existence was orders of magnitude greater. This meant there were endless opportunities for the Redeemed to serve these new creatures and care for them. In the past parents took care of children and families; now their responsibilities were much larger. It took a great deal of skill and wisdom to guide these new civilizations and help them grow up into the races the Lord wanted them to be.

These new races were not as powerful as mankind. They had not been Redeemed (for they had never known sin) and the Spirit of God did not rest within them. They were not as wise or strong as men. Each race had its own specialty – its talent, which was given to it by God and to be used for His glory – and they were often weak in other areas.

Since few races mastered the difficult technology behind intergalactic travel, Noel Lawson designed a series of Gates that connected the younger civilizations of the universe. With the help of the Artillect these Gates were placed on planets throughout the cosmos and were used to transport all manner of living creatures between the worlds. Although this made interstellar travel easy, the Gates were designed for personal use only; they were not designed to transport large amounts of cargo, which some civilizations began to need.

So, 9991 years into the Eternal Era, Noel Lawson began deploying a second Gate system throughout the universe. These Gates were very large machines that were located in deep space, instead of on the surface of planets. The Gates formed hyperspatial tunnels that could transport goods through predesignated corridors. A terminal on the planet would receive the goods and transport them to the Gate; from there they would automatically be routed through the corridors to the intended destination, much as trains once traveled on tracks.

It was during the deployment of this system that an unexpected discovery was made. On July 24th of that year Noel was in the communications center of Azariah Station. This station was positioned between the stars in a galaxy 9 billion light-years away from Earth. The Artillect had finished constructing the station just the day before, and Noel was attempting to bring it online.

Noel's assistant in this complicated process was Daniel Warner, a new trainee. Noel was teaching him how to bring the new stations online so he could assist in the Gate rollout. Although

Noel had never met Daniel until quite recently, it turned out that they were actually contemporaries. Daniel was one of the millions of savages that had roamed the Earth during the 73rd century and who had been cured by Amy Stryker. In the years that followed Daniel had become a very competent technician – and now he was working on one of the largest projects ever attempted.

Noel and Daniel were sitting in front of a console, watching a holoscreen intently. The screen bore the image of a red-headed girl. “The remote upgrade should now be complete,” Cynthia was saying. “The deployed nanites are reporting a successful conversion of your power plant. It should now be able to produce 430% of the amount required in the Gate protocol.”

“Thanks for taking care of that,” Noel replied. “We are immensely grateful! I didn't realize that this station had been constructed according to a different set of schematics. It's a lot older than I thought.”

“Not a problem. Is there anything else that you need?”

“Actually, there is. I think we need to check the rest of the stations that are scheduled to administer Gates. I'll send you a list when we get this station online. If you could give it to Victor when he gets back I'd appreciate it.”

“Certainly! He should return home tomorrow. Once he arrives, though, the two of us are going to take some time off. We're going to the Coral Moon in Andromeda, so I don't think he'll be able to help you. But I will make sure that one of his assistants handles it. The upgrade process should be fairly straightforward.”

“Thank you very much! I hope the two of you have a great time. I've never been there but I've heard it's amazing.”

“You should go sometime! I've been once before. It's great.”

“I have no doubt – I've seen the pictures. I've just never really been that interested in the ocean. I'm more of an outer space guy. Say hi to Victor for me, though!”

“I'll do that,” Cynthia promised. She signed off.

Daniel spoke up. “I'm glad Cynthia was able to help us! We almost had quite a problem on our hands. It never even occurred to me to check the power plant output.”

“Same here. I'm sure the Artilect could have taken care of the upgrade, but he's already moved on to other assignments. Since I'm not an Administrator I can't contact him directly and ask for help. But I did happen to know Victor, and he owed me a favor.”

“Cynthia and Victor are pretty close, aren't they?”

“Well, of course. Look how long they've been together! It's hard to imagine now that Victor spent so much of his life in the old world as a recluse. He's changed quite a bit from those days. I didn't know him back then, of course; Victor died about five thousand years before I was born. But I have had a chance to get to know him since. There aren't many people who do the kind of work that we do.”

“So what's next? Is it time to establish a link with the Gate system?”

“Not quite. Before we can do that we need to lock down the area to make sure that no one is in the vicinity. Once the area is cleared we can create the link and begin the corridor tests.”

“Do you really think anyone is out here? This galaxy isn't even inhabited! There's no reason for anyone to be around.”

“You never know,” Noel replied. “The universe is a busy place, after all. Only God knows everything that's going on. For all we know someone could be conducting research out here. Activate the scanner and let's see if we can lock down the route.”

Daniel pressed a few buttons on the console in front of him. A grid appeared on the console, and a moment later a series of lines began inching their way across it. "Looks pretty good," Noel commented.

"It seems a bit slow to me," Daniel replied.

Noel grinned. "We're creating a passageway that spans a hundred thousand light-years. That's going to take a few minutes. Besides, it only has to be done once."

As Noel stared at the screen, something caught his attention. He tapped a portion of the holoscreen and zoomed in. "What's that?"

Daniel looked at it. "I can't really tell. It, um, looks like a machine of some kind. It's fairly large; it could be a ship, I suppose. However, it's well outside the corridor. I don't think it will interfere."

"True," Noel said thoughtfully. "But are *we* going to interfere with *them*? I'd like to know who they are and what they're doing out here. If they're doing something important then we can always change our route or delay things a few days. No one would ever send a machine this far away from the New Jerusalem without a good reason."

Noel minimized the corridor screen and brought up the long-range scanner. He focused the scanner on the anomaly. The high-resolution scanner projected a three-dimensional image of a starship – but it was unlike anything Noel had seen before.

"Woah!" Daniel exclaimed. "That's certainly a unique design. In fact, it looks more like a bird than a starship. I didn't know they made ships like that."

"I didn't either. It definitely wasn't made by the Diano Corporation. Nothing they've ever done is that, well, impractical. Or maybe *ornamental* is a better word. It's just weird."

Noel glanced at the corner of the screen. "It looks like it's thirty thousand light-years away from here, and four hundred light years from the corridor we're making."

Daniel squinted. "Is that writing on the ship's hull?"

Noel touched the screen and zoomed in closer. "Looks like the ship is named the *Vaughn*. That's kind of a peculiar name. Let's see if we can find a reference to it in the Ship Registry."

Noel pressed a button to capture the ship's vital details and then remotely contacted the Ship Registry at the Diano Corporation. He uploaded the information and waited. A few minutes later he had his result.

"Nothing!" Noel exclaimed in surprise. "It doesn't match any known vessel. In fact, there's not even anything similar to it. This is an entirely new ship design."

"Really? That seems incredibly unlikely. Could it be some kind of custom job? Maybe someone built it by hand."

Noel shook his head. "There are only a few hundred races capable of interstellar space travel, and mankind taught all of them how to do it. Every ship in space is based on Diano technology. Sure, some races adapt the tech and add their own style and flair to their ships, but in the end they're all basically the same. No one does their own thing, you know – we've perfected the science and you just can't improve on perfection. That ship, though, is *completely* different. There has never been a ship like it. It doesn't appear to use any Diano technology at all, which is remarkable."

"Maybe it's new," Daniel suggested.

"Perhaps, but if some alien civilization advanced and achieved space travel the Artillect would know about it. After all, it's his job to keep tabs on things like that, and he never misses anything. The Nehemiah V probes established outposts on every planet, and the Artillect monitors all of them. The registry says that the *Vaughn* doesn't exist."

“But it's right there!”

Noel smiled. “Yes it is. It's impossible for that ship to be there, and yet it truly is there. You know, maybe we should just contact the ship and ask them who they are and what they're doing here. Sometimes the best way to solve a problem is also the easiest.”

But that approach was not as successful as they had hoped. Daniel attempted to contact the mysterious ship but received no reply or acknowledgment. “Is it possible they're not receiving our signal?”

“I suppose. There's no telling what kind of communications system they have. Maybe it's something new. It may not be compatible with our technology.” He pressed a different button on the console and performed a deeper scan of the ship. This time, instead of simply scanning the ship's hull, he scanned the interior.

“That's odd,” Noel commented. “There are no life signs. The *Vaughn* is a derelict. There's no one there.”

“So what do we do now?”

Noel thought for a moment. “Let's call in an expert. I think I know someone who can help us.”

“Professor Grimes?”

Noel laughed. “I wish! It's impossible to get on his calendar. No, I have someone a bit different in mind.”

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Nine billion light-years away was the greatest and most famous city in all of existence. The New Jerusalem was the capitol of the universe and the crown jewel of civilization. No other city was more glorious, or more prominent, or saw more activity. The city's twelve gates were guarded by mighty angels and were never closed. The golden city was lit by the glory of God – for the Most High God dwelt there – and the nations of the world walked in His light.

This city was ultimately the hub of all commerce, for everything that was done in the universe was done for the glory of God. The kings of the worlds came to this city to give their treasure to the Lord. The riches of this city were beyond imagination, but even they paled in comparison to the magnificent One who sat on the throne.

The New Jerusalem was also the center of all worship. All of creation came to worship the Lord, to praise Him, and to bless His name. There was perfect unity, for all races and peoples had the same goal: to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

This legendary city of gold was massive. It measured 1500 miles wide, and high, and tall. Within its golden walls were many mansions. These were the homes of the righteous – the dwelling places of those Redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. Many living creatures from all corners of the universe came to visit, but only the saints of God could call that city their home. The smallest home in that city was more valued than the mightiest palace on any other world.

Down one of those golden streets was the home of Captain Maxwell Baker. In the old universe Captain Max had been one of the finest starship captains among the Rangers. He was the one who had piloted the *Starfire* on its ill-fated mission to that Poneri-cursed world. He had also piloted the *Sparrow* to Mars, where he picked up the Stryker family and attempted to bring them to Xanthe in the Tau Ceti system. His goal was to rescue them from the clutches of the Spanish Empire – but things did not go as he had planned.

In this new era men did not need starships to travel across the galaxy, and yet there were more starships in existence now than there ever had been in the old universe. There were countless races that longed to enjoy the beauty of God's creation, and which needed machines to travel from place to place. Captain Max found that his services were in greater demand than they had ever been before – and this time there was no Spanish Emperor to worry about.

But on this fateful day Captain Max was not on some remote planet, teaching new recruits the finer details of space exploration. Instead he was at home, sitting on his porch, looking out over the great golden city. It was a view that he never tired of seeing. There were many fine things in the universe; God's creative ability was infinite and He had made many wonders. But no other world could compare with Earth, and no other city could compare with the New Jerusalem. That was one thing that would never change.

As Max relaxed in his chair, a person suddenly appeared on his front lawn. “Hey there,” the figure called out. “How are things going?”

Max stood up and smiled. “Just fine, Noel, just fine! Nice of you to drop by. Yet if I know you, you're not here for a social call, are you?”

Noel grinned. He walked up to the captain and shook his hand. “I really should come out and see you more often. I've just been wrapped up in the Gate project.”

“I've heard about that! It will be a great thing once it's done. Just don't forget that the big reunion is just nine short years away. It'll be held at the top of the Ahexotl Tower on Tonina. Everyone will be there.”

“I've got it blocked off on my calendar. Believe me, I wouldn't miss it! I'm still kind of in shock, though. Has it really been ten thousand years already? Where does the time go?”

“To all sorts of wonderful things, I suspect. The best part is that we'll never run out of time. That's one of the many great things that I like about this place. But tell me – what brings you here?”

“I've got a mystery for you to solve. I've found a strange new starship out on the edge of the universe, and I was wondering if you might have a moment to come out and take a look at it.”

“Have you checked the Ship Registry?”

“I have, and it's not there. This ship is entirely new.”

“It is? Now that's quite remarkable. A new ship! Why, I don't think anything like that has ever happened before. The Diano Corporation's always been involved in every starship that's ever been built. If this is something entirely new then that would be quite a discovery. Where did you find this vessel?”

“I'll take you to her,” Noel said.

The two men vanished, and a moment later they reappeared in the communications center at Azariah Station. “Captain Max, I'd like you to meet Daniel Warner,” Noel said. “He's one of our new recruits. I'm training him today.”

“It's a pleasure to meet you,” Captain Max said, as he shook Daniel's hand.

“Likewise. I've heard a great deal about you! Your work with the *Sparrow* was quite inspiring. The rescue of the Stryker family changed the course of human history. I wouldn't be here today if it hadn't been for you.”

“At the time I certainly didn't think that the mission was a success,” Captain Max replied. “Everything went wrong. I was supposed to take them to Xanthe, you know, and *not* to the distant future – but the Lord had other plans. You would think that all of that would have been forgotten by now. So much has happened since then.”

Noel spoke up. "I don't think that history will ever be forgotten. The righteous deeds of the past will not be lost. The Book of Remembrance will see to that."

"So what have we got here?" Captain Max asked, as he stared at the holoscreen. "The *Vaughn*, eh? Can't say I've ever heard of it. You're right, though: it certainly does have a unique design. Have you tried to contact the ship?"

"Yes, and we got no response," Daniel replied. He pressed a button on the holoscreen to shift the view. "As you can see there are no life signs."

"Interesting. Based on the interior layout it doesn't look like an unmanned ship. At one time I imagine the ship did have a crew, but perhaps they abandoned it for some reason. Or maybe the ship was accidentally launched into space without one. I can't say I've ever heard of that happening, though, but I suppose it is theoretically possible."

"Is there any way to tell how long the ship has been there?" Daniel asked.

"Let me think," Captain Max said. After considering the problem for a moment, he used the nanites in his bloodstream to create a holographic image of that galaxy, and he projected it into the center of the room. "It looks like this galaxy was explored by the Nehemiah V probes – which isn't surprising, since they explored everything. All the nearby stars were prepared for colonization but no life signs were found anywhere. It looks like that happened, oh, about a thousand years ago."

"So the *Vaughn* must have appeared since then," Daniel said.

Max shook his head. "Not necessarily. The probes explored star systems, not empty space. The ship that you found is fairly small and is a dozen light years away from the nearest star system. It would be a very easy thing to miss if you weren't looking for it. That ship could have been there for a very long time."

Max made a motion with his hand, and the holographic image was replaced with a recreation of the ship itself. "Let's see what we've got here. First, it looks like the ship doesn't have any sort of atmosphere. Its interior is a vacuum, which is quite unusual. The ship has six rooms but all of them are empty. It's a bit strange, really. There's just nothing inside."

Max switched the view to the technical details of the ship itself. "As far as the equipment goes—hmmm. Now that's a bit odd. I'm not seeing any wiring or conduits. That big box in the back is clearly generating power, but it's not like any energy plant that I've ever seen. The engines are also a bit weird. It looks like the ship is generating a tiny amount of power in order to remain at a fixed point in space, relative to its surrounding area."

Max zoomed out. "The ship is holding steady at 12 light years away from that star right there. Is there anything special about it?"

Noel spoke up. "Actually, there is. That's actually not a star at all. It's Victor's Singularity."

Max's eyes widened. "You mean we're in *that* galaxy?"

Noel nodded. "That's correct. It may just be a coincidence, or it may not. We actually had to route our corridors around the singularity to make sure we didn't get anywhere near that mess. Fortunately we noticed the problem during the planning stage and routed accordingly."

"I must have missed that," Daniel commented. "Is there something wrong with that system?"

"I suppose it is a bit obscure. It's so far away from everything that it just doesn't come up very often. I guess it was, oh, about fifteen thousand years ago. Do you remember the year Victor created it, Captain?"

Max shook his head. "I'm afraid not. I think it was in the 25th century of the old universe but that's as close as I can remember. Poor Victor! He took one of the most powerful ships that had ever

been built and slammed it into a planet. Not only was the planet completely obliterated, but the star was as well. And not only did he obliterate the star, but he also created a fracture in spacetime. It's one of the strangest places in space."

"Why did he do that?" Daniel asked.

"It was an accident," Max explained. "He wasn't paying attention to where was going. I still kid him about it from time to time. There aren't too many people who caused an accident so great that it destroyed an entire star system. I don't think he'll ever live that down."

Daniel spoke up. "Hold on a minute. If the accident happened in the old universe then why does it still exist? Didn't God create a new Heaven and Earth after Judgment Day?"

"He did indeed," Max agreed. "And yet the singularity was preserved. That tells me that it has a purpose – but its purpose has not yet been discovered. Scientists studied it at the dawn of the Eternal Era but couldn't find a use for it. Some thought that it might be a passageway – a corridor from our universe to another one. However, if that's the case the passage seems to be locked. It simply isn't passable."

"Could the ship have come from somewhere else – another realm, maybe?"

"I don't know. I suppose it's possible. But where could that realm possibly be?"

Noel spoke up. "Let me see if I understand this correctly. The ship exists, but it's completely unknown. It is currently empty. It appears to be anchored in space but there's no telling how long it's been there. That really doesn't give us much to go on. What do you think we should do?"

"Board her, of course," the captain replied. "Let's see what we can find."

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Captain Max, Noel Lawson, and Daniel Warner appeared in the interior of the *Vaughn*. Since the ship had no atmosphere, the nanites in their bodies created a bubble of air around them so they could breathe. The process was entirely automatic.

"It's a bit dark here," Daniel comment.

"Then let's create some light!" Captain Max exclaimed. With a single thought Max dispersed a cloud of nanites throughout the ship. He then gave another command and the nanites lit the ship up. "There we go. Much better."

The three men were standing in what could have been the ship's bridge – but as the remote scan had revealed, there was no equipment in sight. The room had no chairs, no consoles, and no screens. The floor, walls, and ceiling of the circular room were a dull gray color.

"The ship looks unfinished," Daniel said. "Could this have been some sort of prototype? Perhaps this is an unfinished project that was left behind or lost."

"I wonder," Max said thoughtfully. Using the nanites in his bloodstream, he looked at the floor and zoomed in to view its molecular structure. What he saw surprised him. He quickly glanced at the walls and ceiling to verify his suspicions. When he was certain he wasn't imagining things, Max created a holographic projection in the air to show the rest of the group what he had found. "I think we may have underestimated this vessel. Do you see that? That's what the walls and ceiling really are. It's not metal – it's something else entirely."

"That certainly doesn't look like paint!" Daniel exclaimed. "That looks like a mesh of machines – very complicated machines."

"Sort of like nanites," Noel commented.

"I think that's exactly what they are," Max agreed. "But they're different from the ones that we're used to. I believe those are polymorphic nanites. If my guess is correct, they can change shape and function in response to commands."

Noel spoke up. "Now that's rather strange. The nanites that we use are fixed – they never change. Their whole purpose is to alter the *environment*, not themselves. Why would anyone want machines that change?"

Daniel thought for a moment. "Maybe this ship has been turned off or put in standby mode. That could be why it's empty. When the ship is on, the crew somehow uses the polymorphs to create whatever equipment they need. Then when they're done the interior goes back to its default state. That way they can produce whatever they want."

"It's certainly an interesting idea," Noel said. "I suppose if you don't have unlimited free energy it's not practical to create matter out of null space. But ZPE technology is extremely old. Why, it existed for thousands of years before I was born, and every technological race in the galaxy possesses it. Who would need polymorph tech?"

Max spoke up. "Perhaps a race that we haven't met."

"Are there really hidden races?" Daniel asked.

"That's what it's looking like to me. No known race uses this sort of technology. Therefore, this is very likely the product of an entirely *unknown* race – one that lives on a planet the Artillect never found."

Noel looked at the holographic image and then stared down at the floor. "Floor, create a chair for me."

But nothing happened.

"All right, let's try something else. *Vaughn*, create a chair. Computer, create a chair. I want a chair. Can someone please give me a chair?"

The ship did not respond.

Noel frowned. "Do you think something has to be turned on first? How do you suppose the interface works?"

Captain Max shrugged. "It could work in a thousand different ways. The only way to find out would be to study the polymorphs and crack their code. I'm just a simple starship captain, Noel; that is far outside my area of expertise. I bet you could do it, though."

"But I don't have the time!" Noel protested. "I've got to finish this Gate rollout. Besides, I've never tried to reverse engineer technology before. It's not really something that anyone ever needs to do! Mankind has the best tech that there is, and everyone else uses our science. What is there to reverse engineer?"

"It sounds like you need a researcher. Someone who is willing to spend years studying something, and pursue the truth doggedly until they finally crack the case. You need a scholar."

"I've got it!" Noel said suddenly. "I know who can help us – if he's not busy, that is."

Max grinned. "Well, let me know how it turns out. I'd love to know who built this ship. From what I can tell they're an intelligent, creative bunch. I think they'd be a joy to meet."

"I'll do that. Thanks for stopping by. I appreciate your help."

"Anytime," Max said. He then vanished, leaving Noel and Daniel alone.

"So what do we do now?" Daniel asked.

"I think it's time we paid a visit to Star City," Noel replied.

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The Star City of the tenth millennium was truly a sight to behold. The original city had been destroyed long ago – a victim of the corruption and wickedness of men. In the 73rd century Amy Stryker gave the people of Xanthe one last chance to repent and change. Instead of repenting, though, Susanna Hamilton used nuclear energy to trap Amy, destroy the city, and kill everyone in it. The city remained in ruins for the remainder of that age.

But that was not the end. When the Eternal Era began the city was quickly rebuilt. This time it was modeled after the grandest city in the universe, the New Jerusalem. The new Star City was a massive metropolis filled with towering golden skyscrapers that gleamed in the light of the sun. In the past the light of the stars had been blocked out by the Wall, but in the new universe there was no need for such defenses. All of the wicked were forever trapped in the Lake of Fire, and none of them would ever escape. Susanna Hamilton may have destroyed the first city, but she could never endanger the second one – nor could Carroll Lane ever launch another war. This meant that the night sky on Xanthe would always be filled with a brilliant display of God's shining stars.

In the year 9991 of the Eternal Era more than two hundred million beings lived within the city. The metropolis teemed with life and energy. One thing, though, had *not* changed: the tallest building in the city was still the Diano Building. The giant golden spire was three miles tall and contained more than 900 floors. This enormous building – which was *not* the tallest building in the universe – served as the headquarters for the Diano Corporation. The Corporation was the premiere space exploration and starship company. It had offices in every inhabited galaxy, and employed members of nearly every intelligent species.

Yet the Corporation was not the only company that build starships, nor was the Diano Building the city's only massive structure. Star City was known for space exploration and was filled with tens of millions of living creatures who worked in that industry. Xanthe's spacedocks were so extensive that they formed an orbital ring that stretched all the way around the globe.

In the north of the city was one of the most prestigious universities in the universe: Star City University. Like the old Star City, the original university had been destroyed long ago. When the Eternal Era began the school was rebuilt, and after ten thousand years it had grown into a massive complex that was renown for wisdom and understanding. The university's campus was spread out over 125 square miles, and half a million students attended each semester. The university was home to some of the galaxy's finest teachers and most advanced laboratories. The research that was performed on the campus grounds was second to none, and many of the students went on to work for the Diano Corporation.

Since the school had such a stellar reputation, vastly more beings wanted to enroll than the university could ever accommodate. Only the very finest minds could pass the stringent entrance exams, and even then the school had a waiting list that was 10 years long.

The head of the school was the legendary Professor Grimes. He was the one who rebuilt the campus and who recruited its brilliant teachers, whom he had come to know in the years that followed his death. Over the following ten millennia the school was blessed and grew tremendously. Much of the day-to-day administration was handled by Grimes' exceptionally competent staff. Grimes himself spent his time doing research, but that always came second to the classes that he taught. His courses were some of the most popular ones on campus, and they were always packed – and difficult to get into. You had to be quite talented to be accepted as one of his students. The days of only a

single person showing up to his classes were long gone.

Noel Lawson and Daniel Warren stepped across space and reappeared in the bustling campus. As always, the immaculate campus grounds were packed. Many students were hurrying to their classes, while others stood in small groups and talked to each other. A few were sitting on a bench studying.

“You graduated from this school, didn't you?” Noel asked Daniel.

“I did. I think it was about four thousand years ago. The school was quite a bit smaller back then. It's hard to believe how much it's grown.”

“Well, it *does* have an entire universe to educate. That universe just keeps getting bigger all the time.”

“True, but there are other schools. It's not like this is the only top-notch tech school in the universe.”

“I suppose you're right. But it *is* the best one! After all, this is the only school that has Professor Grimes on the faculty. As much as I would love to talk to him, though, I know he's just not available. But there is someone else here who I think has the time to lend us a hand.”

Noel used the nanites in his bloodstream to scan the campus. “Ah, there he is! I should have known he would be in the library.”

“Who are we looking for?” Daniel asked.

“Monroe Araiza. He is an outstanding scholar. Grimes recruited him a few thousand years ago to perform research. He doesn't teach a lot of classes – in fact, come to think of it, I don't think he does any teaching at all. I'm hoping he'll have some time to look into the *Vaughn*. He always enjoys these kind of challenges.”

“Monroe Araiza! I know him. Why didn't you tell me sooner? He was the one who fought against the wicked Conrad Forbes, who wanted to wipe out my people. Conrad thought that we were just unredeemable, mindless savages; he was going to kill us all. Monroe was one of the few who fought to defend us. Monroe and Amy worked together to cure us and protect us from annihilation.”

“That's him all right. I actually knew him back then. In those days Monroe didn't like Amy. He thought she was a serious security threat. They didn't become friends until the Eternal Era.”

“A security threat? In what way?”

Noel began walking toward the university's massive library, and Daniel walked beside him. “Well, the problem was that Amy single-handedly wielded the entire power of the Artilect's network. Today, of course, she doesn't; that power is shared by the Board of Administrators. But back then she was the only Administrator alive. When you combined the Network with the nanites in her bloodstream, she had the power to do pretty much anything she wanted. She was vastly more powerful than any other human being, and that bothered Monroe tremendously. He was afraid that since she had unlimited power she might use it to conquer mankind or something. He saw her as a dangerous risk that could not be controlled. It was an unfortunate attitude to have, because Amy wasn't actually dangerous. What she truly needed was a friend. Monroe had a chance to be that friend, but instead he saw her as a threat. It was an opportunity that he missed.”

“I still don't understand. Why was he concerned? Today we all have immense power. It's nothing unusual.”

“Well, yes and no. We do all have resurrected, immortal bodies, which are great in power and might. We also have the nanites, which allow us to do amazing things. But the Artilect – the most

powerful machine ever made – is still controlled by the Administrators. It's true that Amy has to share that power, but the Administrators still have a special role that isn't shared by anyone else. I can't just walk up to the Artilect and ask him for a favor, and you can't either. If you want to use the Artilect you have to go through them.

“Besides, you have to remember that in the old universe people tended to use power to enrich themselves and harm others. People were corrupt, you know. In the Eternal Era the Redeemed are incorruptible and the abuse of power is completely unthinkable. Sin just isn't a part of our nature, and it never will be. But it wasn't always like that.”

By now the two men had reached the Library. Most universities had their own libraries, but there were few whose collection could rival the one housed here. The Library was housed in a giant skyscraper. The gleaming crystal spire stretched for two hundred and sixty stories above ground, and fifty-seven stories below ground. In its sub-basement was a server farm that housed digital copies of nearly every book in existence – and recordings of every lecture ever given on campus. The university made this material freely available on the galactic network, opening a huge collection of wisdom to the entire universe. Anyone could freely download them no matter where they were, and learn from the wisdom that mankind had accumulated over the previous ten millennia.

The rest of the library – and the vast bulk of its space – was taken up with physical books. Although ebooks consumed far less real estate, physical books were prized for their permanence. Material science had advanced to the point where a book could last millions of years. Printed books represented fixed points in time – their contents did not change, and they served as a record that would last for a very, very long time. Ebooks were almost like ideas: you could share them freely, easily update them, and distribute them throughout the universe. But the printed originals were a different matter. In the Library you could see and touch the first print edition of many of the digital volumes in its collection. More copies could be printed, but there would never be more originals – and so the first ones were highly prized.

The Library had many fine volumes in its collection, but it did not have the most priceless books in existence. There were a few books that only existed in a single copy and which had a value that far surpassed all others. These books were housed in the New Jerusalem. One of these books was the Book of Life, which listed the names of all of the Redeemed. All those whose names were written in that book escaped the Judgment and went on to inherit eternal life. Those whose names were not found in that book did not inherit eternal life, but were instead condemned to face the eternal wrath of God.

There were other books besides those two. One of them was the Book of Remembrance, which recorded the righteous acts of the saints. There was also the Book of Tears, which recorded the sufferings and trials of the saints. These books would last for all of eternity as a testimony to the Redeemed. Their deeds, and sufferings, and labors for the kingdom of God would never be forgotten.

Since both Noel Lawson and Daniel Warner were university graduates, they were admitted to the Library. “Where's Monroe?” Daniel asked.

“Second floor, toward the back, in study room 2215,” Noel replied.

The two men walked up the stairs and between the shelves that packed the library's second floor. In the back wall there was a row of doors that led to study rooms. Daniel noticed that every one of them was occupied.

Noel walked up to door 2215 and gently knocked on it. “Monroe? Do you have a minute?”

There was a brief pause. "Is that you, Noel?" A moment later the door opened and Monroe Araiza glanced out. "Why it is you! This is an unexpected pleasure. Please, come in!"

The study room was only meant to house one person, so it was a bit cramped. Inside was a chair and a desk. A large stack of books was resting on the desk, and papers were strewn about. A pen was lying on one of the sheets of paper.

"I'm sorry to disturb you!" Noel said quickly. "I see that you're in the middle of something."

Monroe sat down and smiled at them. "Oh, don't worry about it. I'm always in the middle of something, you know. This is just a research project I'm doing for Richard Stryker. He had some questions about the spectral caverns, and I'm coming to discover that our knowledge of them is a bit more sparse than I thought. But enough of that. Noel, I don't think I've met your friend. Who do I have the pleasure of meeting?"

"I'm Daniel Warner," the man replied, as he reached out his hand. "Noel is training me to assist in the Gate rollout."

"I heard about that," Monroe said. He shook Daniel's hand. "It sounds like a very worthy project. But tell me something – I'd like to ask a question, if I may. I know this might sound a bit odd but your skull structure looks very familiar to me. Were you one of the natives on Earth during the end of the Age?"

Daniel nodded. "I was."

"Excellent! What a blessing. I was hoping that was the case. Seeing you here really makes all that effort worthwhile. So how can I help you two gentlemen?"

Noel hesitated. "To be honest, I was hoping you could do us a favor. I've come across a problem that needs some researching, and you are one of the very best. I figured if anyone could get to the bottom of this it would be you."

"Now that is a bit unusual. As you might imagine I am quite busy. There are a great many mysteries in the universe, and there are also many unsolved problems. I have quite a backlog of things to look into. But I don't think you've ever asked me to look into anything in all the millennia we've known each other. This can only mean that you have found something truly remarkable – possibly more remarkable than anything I'm currently working on. What, exactly, is it that you want me to study?"

"It's this," Noel said. He used the nanites in his bloodstream to create a holographic projection of the *Vaughn*, which he made appear over Monroe's desk. "Daniel and I found this ship earlier today. The design is completely unknown. It's not a Diano ship and it doesn't appear in the Ship Registry. I asked Captain Max to come and take a look at it, and that's when things got really interesting. He thinks it may have been built by an unknown race."

Monroe looked at the ship with interest. "That certainly is a striking design! I've never run across anything quite like it. It looks a lot like a bird. Why does the good Captain think it may have an unknown origin?"

Noel shifted the image and showed a close-up of the tiny machines that the Captain had discovered. He told Monroe what Captain Max had said about the polymorphs.

"There is one more thing," Daniel added. "The ship is located about twelve light-years from Victor's Singularity. It seems to be holding its position relative to it."

"Now that is curious. Do you think that the *Vaughn* used that fracture in spacetime to reach our universe from some place outside it?"

"Is that even possible?" Noel asked.

“That's a good question. The U-16b anomaly was discovered about a thousand years ago. It's located well outside our universe, and as far as anyone can tell there's no way to reach it. If that anomaly is inhabited, perhaps someone found a way to use the breach that Victor created in order to enter our universe.”

“But if that happened then where is the ship's crew?”

“A mystery indeed,” Monroe replied. He thought for a moment. “It's true that I have a long backlog, and I intend to keep the promises that I've made. However, I'm not doing anything that compares to the magnitude of what you've found. This has the potential to be the greatest discovery of the past thousand years. An unknown ship, a lost crew, a spacetime anomaly, and an unreachable universe – yes, this is quite the mystery! I would be delighted to begin my investigation. But tell me, Noel. Why not bring this to Professor Grimes? The paranormal is his specialty, you know. His *Paranormal Studies* course continues to be exceptionally popular.”

Noel laughed. “I'd love to, but Grimes is far too busy. There's no chance I could ever get on his schedule. I bet it's easier to get ahold of the Stryker Twins than him. Isn't he teaching classes for the next 10 years?”

“I believe he is. I think he has four classes this semester. One of them is something you'd enjoy – Applied Temporal Mechanics. He's taught it before and it's always proven to be quite fascinating.”

“Is that time travel?” Daniel asked.

“It is indeed. Grimes believes it is possible to have a civilization that can access its own past and future. His course delves into a theoretical model that he created. What would happen if time travel was both possible and simple? How would that affect a society's growth and development?”

Noel spoke up. “Wouldn't that cause a feedback loop? I mean, I know that time travel is possible – our own history is proof of that. But the Sentinel made one trip, one time. If you could keep going back then I would think you would run into all sorts of problem with causality.”

“That was my thought as well. But Grimes has gone a bit deeper. His argument, based on what I've heard, seems to be twofold. First, men are wiser now than they were in the old universe, and the men of the future will be wiser still. Those future explorers who might choose to travel through time would certainly do so with the knowledge of its possible impact, and would use the technology with caution and great care. The technology would not be used by fools, but by men of great wisdom. His second point is that the course of history is fixed. God, after all, planned the Cross and the Resurrection before He created the world. He is sovereign over all things and He guides history on its course. We live in a universe where the only things that happen are those things that God wills to happen. Therefore, if time travel existed it would be a part of the plan, and so by definition it cannot break the plan. It would just be a part of what was supposed to happen – which is something that we've already seen with the Sentinel.”

“It sounds like a fascinating course. I wish I could enroll in it, but I'm going to guess that class filled up ten years ago. I'll just have to watch the lectures after they're uploaded.”

“It's all a bit theoretical for me,” Daniel commented. “After all, it's impossible to travel backwards in time. If you travel into the future it's a one-way trip – there's no way to come back.”

“Well, *you* can't travel through time,” Monroe agreed. “But there is one being who did make that journey, and he is going to make a guest appearance this year. Normally the Sentinel spends his time with the Twins, so this is quite a special occasion.”

Noel spoke up. “As fascinating as this is, I think we've gotten a bit off-topic. Will you be able to research the *Vaughn*?”

“Most definitely! In fact, I can hardly wait to begin – but I think I'm going to need some help. I'll see if Merlin is available. I've worked with him before, you know. He's quite intelligent and has a lot of technical knowledge.”

“Who?” Daniel asked.

“Merlin Hardin. He lived on Earth long before you were born. He was famous for predicting that if the Wall collapsed it would destroy everything within the Solar System. I think his help will be invaluable.”

Noel nodded. “That sounds great. I wish I could stay around and get you started, but I need to return and finish the Gate rollout. Daniel, do you think you can help Monroe and Merlin begin their investigation? You can rejoin me once you've answered their questions. I do want to finish your training, after all.”

“Absolutely.”

“Thank you so much!” Noel said to Monroe.

“No, thank you! This is one of the most fascinating mysteries I've ever seen. I look forward to finding the answer.”