

CHAPTER 19: CONTAGION

Log date: March 3, 2427

Location: Xanthe

Log note: It only takes one bad apple

WHEN CARROLL LANE CLOSED THE DOOR to Vault 37 and sealed it, he fully intended on spending the rest of eternity in his artificial paradise. Lane firmly believed that there was no reason to ever leave his Vault again. After all, the whole planet had taken up residence inside his Vaults and the Diano Corporation was gone. What reason could there be to return to the physical world?

As it turned out, “eternity” ended up being only a few months. On March 3 of the following year Lane received an unexpected message. The Vault 37 security system told him that someone was trying to gain access to the vault – and that someone was *not* Professor Grimes.

Before Lane left the comfort of his private paradise he checked the video feed. To his surprise and dismay there was a person standing outside the vault entrance. Lane had never seen him before, but that didn't really mean anything. Had something gone wrong with one of the other vaults – some sort of failure that wasn't reported on his monitors? Was he some straggler than Lane had somehow missed when he scanned Star City for life before sealing the door? Had the Diano Corporation returned to Xanthe? The only way to find out was to leave his private world and go talk to him.

Lane wished he had built some sort of intercom system into the vault door, but the possibility of getting a visitor had never occurred to him. He began to realize that if he wanted to go for all of eternity without being bothered he would have to come up with a better system of controls. *This simply can't be tolerated. After I deal with this mess I'm going to deputize Adrian and have him take care of these problems. He can handle any 'visitors' that might come our way.*

After begrudgingly leaving his pod he walked to the entrance of the vault. He sighed, took out his security card, and used it to unlock the massive shielded doors that protected them from the outside world. As they slowly creaked open he stood quietly and waited.

Lane was going to go out and talk to the visitor, but that proved to be unnecessary. As soon as the doors parted the man eagerly came to him. He was an enormous, burly man who wore a heavy coat and an enormous hat. The man quickly reached out his hand to Lane. “It's a pleasure to meet you at last! My name is Brown – Lorenzo Brown. I'm sure you've seen all the messages I've sent.”

“Messages?” Lane asked, puzzled. “I haven't received any messages from you at all. Who are you and what do you want?”

“Oh, really? Sorry – I thought you knew I was coming. But no matter. I'm from Alpha Centauri A. I'm here on behalf of the government and have come to ask you to export your vault technology. We think that it's exactly what our world needs.”

“Hold on just a minute. You're from the Ranger colonies? But how did you even get in here? Tau Ceti is protected by a Wall! There's no way you could have circumvented our security system.”

“Security system? What security system? Sure you have a Wall, but your Gate is wide open. Anyone can come and go as they please. I just walked right in. Well, I flew in, actually, on my starship – the *Valdosta*. It's parked just down the road. Star City seems kind of deserted so I just landed in the street. I hope no one minds.”

Lane sighed. *So our front door was wide open. Fantastic. I'm definitely going to fix that.* “No, no one will mind. So you came here all the way from Alpha Centauri A to get a copy of the Vault plans?”

“Yes and no,” Brown replied. “I mean, sure, we want them. We definitely want them. But—”

Lane interrupted him. "Now hold on a minute! This doesn't make sense. I thought Grimes got in touch with all the Ranger worlds and persuaded them to ban my Vault technology. Aren't you guys using Nehemiah IV probes to upgrade your cities?"

"Eh, sure, Vaults have been banned on a few worlds. But there's a lot of different opinions out there. It sounds like you don't really follow the news very closely."

"Of course not. I have absolutely zero concern for what happens outside my own planet. That's why I haven't exported my Vault technology. I literally do not care about you guys. You are on your own. The way I see it, Xanthe is my problem and your worlds are *your* problem."

"Then I guess you haven't heard. Some planets did ban the Vaults and did bring in a Nehemiah IV probe to spruce things up. Other planets, though, just ignored the whole thing. It turns out you can medicate your way to happiness. Why go through all the trouble of rebuilding cities when you can just take a pill and be happy all the time? But a few worlds really, *really* want your Vaults. Like my world, for instance. We think you have paradise in your hands and we want some of it."

Lane sighed. "And if I don't give it up then people will keep coming here and pestering me. Fine. If it will get you to go away and leave me alone then I'll give you a copy of the plans."

"About that. I mean, yes, we do want the Vaults, but we'd like to see a few changes to them. We think you made some design errors."

"No I didn't," Lane said, irritated. "My vaults have been in place for years. My *entire world* lives inside them, and things are going flawlessly! I have a perfect system. What changes could you possibly want?"

"Well, a couple things. For example, your original plans called for each person to have their own dedicated world, which is dumb. How can people interact with each other if they're in their own parallel universes? No one wants to spend all of eternity alone, you know. It's way better to have one combined world that everyone lives in. Or I guess you could have a couple, if there are server load issues."

"Absolutely not! That is a really *stupid* plan. We *already* have a combined world where everyone lives together. It is known as *reality*. People can't live out their dreams if everyone has to live in the same place, because *people's dreams conflict with each other*. People have *got* to be separated from each other. How hard is this to understand?"

"Hey – you know your market and I know mine. Trust me. What you are doing won't work outside of Xanthe. You need to think about different options."

"No I don't. Listen, Brown. I don't know what you've been told, but the customer is *not* always right. In fact, people rarely know what they actually want. Usually smart people have to *tell* them what they want, because people end up asking for things that only make them even unhappier than they were before. If you want to do well in business then you have to be *smarter* than your customers and give them what they actually need, not what they think they want. And people do *not* want to live with other people. You have a very deficient understanding of human nature. People do *not* get along. *That is why there are riots*. I have been doing this for much longer than you have, and trust me: you're doing it wrong. Your modified Vault design is going to fail catastrophically. You are going to have all the same problems in the Vaults that you have in the real world."

"Not at all! You just haven't understood the scope of my vision."

"Whatever," Lane replied. "I don't really care. If you want to ruin your world with a stupid plan then that's your problem. I'm not going to make changes to my Vaults, but I will give you a copy of the technology. You can do whatever you want with it – as long as you promise to leave this world and never, ever come back."

"Deal!" Brown exclaimed.

Lane walked over to a console and inserted his security card. "Give me just a minute to get all

the files together and beam them to your ship. Then you can be on your way.”

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Lorenzo Brown soon learned that modifying Lane's design was a little more difficult than he expected. It took him more than a year of effort – and a team of dozens of technicians – to build the communal vault that he wanted. However, in spite of the challenges, he did succeed and on April 19, 2428 the Vault on Alpha Centauri A opened to the public.

Brown knew that the entire planet would want to participate in the Vault, so he planned accordingly. When the Vault opened it had enough room for everyone on the planet, with additional capacity to support any off-worlders who might hear about the Vault program and want to join. Since his goal was to unite the entire world in a single shared virtual reality, he didn't bother to built multiple Vault locations. He wanted to have everyone in the same place.

For the first week things went smoothly, but conflict soon arose. Brown was unhappy to discover that Lane was actually correct – all he had done was move problems from the real world into the virtual world. Brown was convinced, though, that this was just a temporary setback. Rather than change his design he decided to give everyone a little more space. This didn't actually help, but Brown refused to admit that he had been wrong.

The effect of the Vault on the planet's economy was drastic. By the end of 2428 the entire planet was a ghost town. People loved the idea of living in a better world, where they could have anything that they wanted. It's true that they still rioted and got into fights, but now they could riot and fight with artificial superpowers. It gave people a feeling of tremendous power, and it fueled their rage.

When the population of Xanthe entered the Vaults, the maintenance bots left behind by the Diano Corporation maintained Star City in their absence. Alpha Centauri A had the same maintenance system but when Dr. Mazatl saw what was going on he shut the bots down. The only reason the director continued to maintain Star City was out of a sentimental attachment to the city's past. He had no such concern for the rest of the Ranger worlds. If they wanted to abandon reality then they were on their own. He was not going to maintain their cities for them if no one lived in them any longer.

The decay and ruin of Alpha Centauri A soon spread to other star systems. Brown was telling the truth when he said that other planets were interested in Lane's technology. Since Lane blocked off access to Tau Ceti and refused to answer any of his messages, Brown took it upon himself to license the technology to every planet that wanted it. By the end of 2429 there were Vaults in more than a dozen star systems.

This led to a sharp divide in the Ranger worlds. On one side were the star systems that embraced Lane's technology and let their cities fall into ruin. On the other side were systems that had chosen to use the Nehemiah IV probe, provided by Professor Grimes, to create a paradise in reality. While there were some worlds that did not fall into either camp, most planets were on one side or the other.

Both sides were convinced that the other side was making a grave mistake. Brown believed that the “realists” were oppressing their people by not allowing Vault technology on their worlds. He urged the people to flee those oppressive regimes and embrace the paradise that he had to offer. However, those who had banned the technology were equally convinced that Lane's Vaults were a disaster. In fact, they thought they were a serious danger to the future of mankind – one that they did not intend to ignore.

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On January 16, 2430 representatives from fifteen different Ranger worlds met in the star system Epsilon Eridani in order to discuss the threat that the Vaults posed. Although it was technically possible for these individuals to take a starship to this centuries-old colony and have the meeting in person, everyone considered it to be too much trouble. Rather than leave the comfort of their homes they decided to hold a virtual meeting. Each of them would remain behind on their own worlds, but their virtual forms would appear in the same conference room. The representatives would be able to see each other and talk to each other but their presence was just an illusion.

The irony of having a virtual meeting to condemn virtual worlds was not lost on Professor Grimes. He wanted to travel to the Epsilon system to be there in person, but the Ranger governments refused him admittance. They told him that this meeting was a private discussion between governments – and Grimes was not a government representative.

The meeting began an hour late. Everyone eventually showed up and was able to resolve their connection issues. The first forty minutes were spent exchanging vague and self-congratulatory pleasantries. Then, reluctantly, the group got around to talking about the issue at hand.

“I suppose we have been lucky,” Sellers commented. He was the representative from Procyon B. “If you think about it, it’s a bit surprising that this vault technology wasn’t developed centuries ago. Lane hasn’t actually done anything new. He just sort of glued a bunch of existing pieces together. His technology is trivial, really.”

“I don’t find it surprising at all that this was never invented in the past,” Rhodes replied. He was a short, grumpy man from the Cygni system. “Just look at all the decadence around us! No one has done anything meaningful for centuries. The only group that’s made any kind of real scientific progress are the nutcases at the Diano Corporation. And what do they do with their tech? Why, they send it off into deep space! It apparently never occurred to them that other people have needs.”

“They’re a real bunch of losers,” Davidson agreed. The representative from Gliese curled his fists. “Do you realize that we would *still* be living in poverty and misery today if we hadn’t taken it upon ourselves to appropriate a Nehemiah IV probe? The Corporation cares nothing for others! They care only for themselves.”

Sellers frowned. “I thought Professor Grimes got us the probe. In fact, I’m pretty sure he actually contacted us and offered it. Free of charge, too, from what I remember.”

“Do not speak of that professor to me!” Davidson said angrily. “That man is a fool.”

Ross from Luyten spoke up. “What is Dr. Mazatl doing these days, anyway? Didn’t he take his whole company off of Xanthe to go on some crazy deep-space mission?”

Sellers nodded. “I think it has something to do with their space exploration program. They didn’t issue a press release, though, so the exact details are unknown. For the time being they’ve removed themselves from the picture. Since they’re not around to help us we’ll have to face the Vault crisis by ourselves.”

“They wouldn’t have helped us anyway,” Davidson said bitterly. “They care nothing for our problems.”

“Are we sure this is a crisis?” Ross asked. “Now, don’t get me wrong – I think the Vaults are a terrible idea. I do *not* support them. But Alpha Centauri A was a very troubled colony in the past, and now that they have Vault they are happier than ever. Their streets are no longer plagued with violence and unrest. Life is very quiet there now.”

“That is because life is *nonexistent* there now!” Sellers pointed out. “Everyone is living in their own dreamworld. No one is actually *living life*; instead they’re just daydreaming their time away. The whole planet has fallen into ruin. They haven’t achieved a new level of civilization; instead they’ve abandoned civilization altogether! They might as well have all committed suicide. The society that was

on Alpha Centauri A wasn't perfect, but at least there was a society there. Now there's nothing."

Rhodes frowned. "The so-called 'society' on that world deserved to be destroyed. For that matter, so does the society on most worlds. You do not seem to realize that civilization has been degenerating for a long time now. The decay that is all around us has been coming for a long time. The rise of the Vaults is simply the latest symptom. If civilization was healthier then the Vaults would have very limited appeal. Anyone who is willing to throw their entire life away in order to live in a dream must not value their life very highly. If we truly want to combat the Vaults then we must address the underlying problem."

"Which no one has ever been able to successfully do," Sellers pointed out. "All of the great civilizations are in the past. If there's a solution out there somewhere no one has ever found it."

"That is not entirely true," Rhodes replied. "Some people have overcome the cultural rot. For example, the Diano Corporation has not been affected by the malaise that is all around us. They have continued to produce new versions of their Nehemiah probes. They even launched a major expedition into deep space, which hasn't been done in more than a century. And Professor Grimes has been a staunch opponent of the Vaults since their inception. There are still good men out there and they are doing good work."

"I said do not speak that professor's name!" Davidson screamed. "I hate that man."

Sellers shook his head. "But why? Don't you think you're being unreasonable? Grimes has done absolutely nothing that—"

"Enough!" Davidson shouted. He disconnected from the meeting and vanished.

Sellers sighed. "That was strange. Why does he hate Grimes?"

Rhodes looked surprised. "I think that's the wrong question. Who *doesn't* hate Grimes? That man has been barred from almost all of the Ranger worlds. All he's ever done is spread trouble. He can't even open his mouth without prophesying our doom."

"But we owe him so much! If it wasn't for him we wouldn't have a Nehemiah IV probe. Besides, the things that he is saying make a lot of sense. He's the one who brought the dangers of the Vaults to our attention and persuaded us to ban them."

"Big deal," Ross replied. "Grimes keeps trying to tell everyone what to do. He seems to think that it's his job to judge us and push us around. He needs to learn to mind his own business."

"I think we're drifting off topic," Sellers said. "The question we're *supposed* to be discussing is what we are going to do about the Vaults."

"I say we purge the dead weight among us," Rhodes said firmly. "We should find those who wish to be in a Vault and force them out of our star systems. Then we will take those that remain and build a better civilization."

"Now *there's* a great idea," Ross said sarcastically. "Do you know what would happen if we did that? *Every last one of our citizens would leave!* That's why at Luyten we had to close our borders. Your plan is stupid."

"I disagree," Rhodes replied. "And I find your lack of decorum and respect appalling. Do you not realize that this very strategy has proven to be successful for the Diano Corporation? Look at all they have been able to accomplish! Since they only employ people who are dedicated and focused, the company has done great things. They got rid of the dead weight that was dragging them down and that freed them up to focus on progress. Perhaps that is the approach we should take. Allow the dead and dying to flee to their dreams. We will build a new future with those who are still alive."

"I am *not* going to propose that to my government," Ross said firmly.

"Then we may have to address this issue in our own individual ways," Sellers replied.

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Three days later, Sellers had a secret meeting with Professor Grimes. The meeting was held in deep space, on board Sellers' ship. Grimes had left the Tau Ceti system the day that Lane sealed Vault 37, and ever since then had spent his time traveling between the Ranger worlds. The professor didn't trust Lane and wanted to stay out of his reach.

Although Grimes had been denied access to most colonized Ranger worlds, that did not stop him from spreading his message. Before he left Xanthe he manufactured an enormous starship for himself and equipped it with everything that he might need. Grimes was so well stocked that he could survive in deep space indefinitely.

After Grimes docked his ship with Sellers' vessel, the professor came aboard. Sellers greeted him and led him down the corridor to a private meeting room.

"You're a very strange man," Sellers remarked.

"I live in very strange times. The future is not what the so-called experts predicted. Mankind took an unexpected turn."

"Sure, sure, but I'm talking about your ship. I'm sure it's a fine vessel – although it seems far too large for just one person – but it has the strangest name. Do you not realize how important appearances are?"

"*Appearances?*" Grimes asked incredulously. "Every Ranger government in the galaxy knows who I am! Do you expect me to believe that if I had given my ship a more respectable name, they would reconsider their positions and listen to me? Are you suggesting that the whole reason people dislike me is because I did not choose to name my ship after a horse or a cow?"

"Of course not. But Grimes, you named your ship after a *toaster*. That's ludicrous! It doesn't help your case."

"So you believe that the truth of my arguments rests on the name of my starship? Is that really your point? Do you even hear yourself talking? Has anyone taught you how logic works?"

Sellers opened the door to the conference room and the two men stepped inside. The men were alone. "But why do it, Grimes? Why provoke people?"

"Toasters do *not* provoke people," Grimes said firmly. "As I have said many times, there is much a person can learn from a toaster. Toasters do their job day in and day out, without complaining or whining or rioting. My toaster has never attacked me, or tried to kill me, or tried to burn my house down. My toaster never criticizes my choice of bread or the hours that I keep. It simply does its job and it does it well. That is a claim that the vast majority of humanity cannot make. If people were more like toasters then we would not be facing this threat."

Sellers took a chair and sighed. "Please, Grimes, take a seat. You know, when your friend Tony Morton introduced me to you I wasn't sure what to do with you. To be honest, I still don't. I'm not sure if you're wise or are a complete fool. You certainly don't make things easy. In fact, for that matter this whole Vault situation isn't easy. All I see are problems, as far as the eye can see. We seem to be trapped with no good options."

"Really? I'm afraid I don't see the complications. You are, after all, on the winning side. As long as you stay the course then you cannot lose. It's really quite simple! The Vaults are taking all of the degenerates out of society and putting them into small underground storage facilities. It used to take a lot of work and expense to put those people in prison and keep them there, but now people do it on their own accord. In the past those people were a serious drain on civilization, but those days are behind us. All of the people who are lazy and shiftless are disappearing. Do you know what that does? It leaves behind the people who *are* productive. It frees them up from the burden of supporting millions of violent psychopaths. It is really quite a gift."

"But I thought you hated the Vaults!"

“Oh, I do. I believe they are a *terrible* invention! They encourage laziness and depravity. The very last thing we need is to tell men to live out their most wicked fantasies and teach them that there are no consequences for doing so. The Vaults are essentially a one-way ticket to Hell. They are destroying the souls of men and they ought to be banned. The Rangers were quite right to ban them from their worlds; that was a wise move that will protect your people. But at the same time, Lane is dividing the productive people from the psychopaths.”

“But so many people have gone to the Vaults!” Sellers protested. “Just look at what happened to Alpha Centauri A. That system is all but abandoned now.”

“And yet that hasn't happened in the worlds that banned the Vaults, has it?” Grimes asked. “Yes, it's true that some people have left. But your worlds are still filled with millions of people who value reality more than fantasy. Even better, those people want to build a new future. They *want* to advance and they are no longer burdened the way they were before. This means that, ultimately, Lane is finished.”

“Do you really think so?”

“Of course! Lane and his followers have locked themselves underground and are going to essentially sleep themselves to death. It's only a matter of time before they are all dead. When that happens we will still be alive to inherit the future. Unless something drastic changes or the Rangers do something unbelievably foolish, the stars will be ours.”

“*If* we can use the Nehemiah IV technology wisely,” Sellers added.

“Exactly. It all comes down to perspective. If you believe that your life is your own and your only purpose is to have as much happiness as you can find, then you are doomed. The Vaults will become an overwhelming temptation since they are everything you want in life, and you will be led down to sin and death. However, if you believe that your life belongs to God and you exist to bring Him glory and to tell others about the sacrifice of Christ, then the Vaults will mean nothing to you. In that case the Vaults do not offer you anything that they want. If the Rangers maintain that focus then they will reach amazing heights. If they do not then they will be utterly destroyed. This is the hour of temptation; this is the moment of decision. There will either be victory or death. The status quo is over. A choice will be made, one way or the other.”