

## CHAPTER 20: REUNION

**Log date:** May 3, 10,000 of the Eternal Era

**Location:** Tonina

**Log note:** In thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures forevermore

TEN THOUSAND YEARS HAD PASSED since the Lord created the new Heaven and Earth. The old Heaven and Earth had passed away, and with them had gone all pain, suffering, sin, and death. The Lord created a new universe – one filled with peace and endless joy.

It's remarkable how quickly ten millennia can pass when your life is filled with joy. One amazing day led to another, and the centuries just flew by. There was always something new to learn and discover. Life just kept getting better, fuller, and deeper every single day.

As the days passed the universe grew enormously. The Diano Corporation sent out probes to the farthest galaxies that prepared the way for civilization. In the old universe the worlds that the probes terraformed were never inhabited, but in the Eternal Era things were different. Dr. Nehemiah Temilotzin saw his dream come true. One by one the empty worlds became colonies that teemed with all sorts of life.

When Tonina was first created in the days of the *Sparrow* it was an empty place. The Artillect constructed the city of La Venta, but only the Stryker family ever lived there. Tonina was a world of great beauty, but only a few ever enjoyed its wonders. In the Eternal Era that changed. The world of Tonina was remade, and after ten thousand years it was packed with all sorts of life. Billions of souls lived there in cities that spanned the globe. The massive Ahexotl Tower, which rose 600 stories above the ground, was filled with the comings and goings of a mighty civilization. It was a pillar of commerce and industry.

At the top of the building was an amazing restaurant – one of the best on the planet. On May 3<sup>rd</sup> it hosted a grand and long-awaited reunion. The Stryker family and their friends were meeting there to see one another again and rejoice in all the great things that the Lord had done for them.

\* \* \* \* \*

Victor Stryker was one of the first to arrive. He was not surprised to see that the restaurant was beautifully decorated. The planet's Steward had done an amazing job of getting everything ready. Everything was of the highest quality – the tablecloths, the fine china, the crystal glasses, even the carpet. It was really quite classy.

He had to admit he wasn't used to that sort of elegance. He spent most of his time out in the field, doing technical work among the new races that were still struggling to reach the stars. The only race that had fully mastered science and technology was mankind; their galaxy alone had reached the pinnacle of success and scientific advancement. Everyone else still had much to learn. It was definitely good to come home.

Victor took his seat by a window, which overlooked the sprawling city below, and relaxed. The programmer noticed that the Artillect and the Sentinel were already here. Of course, in a way the Artillect was everywhere; since he was a computer he was connected to all of his worlds. The Artillect

had turned out so much better than Victor ever dared to hope. He was proud of the role that he had played in his construction. All of those long nights and hard work had paid off in an astonishing way. If the Artilect had never been built the future would have been radically different.

The next person to enter the restaurant was Miles. Victor remembered him; he had been on Mars during mankind's final days and had played an important role helping Amy save both Earth and Mars. He was accompanied by Noel Lawson, the talented engineer who had rebuilt the Martian civilization and led his people to one final revival before the Lord returned and put an end to that chapter of history. Miles and Noel still spent quite a lot of time together. The bond they had formed in their old life continued on in this new era.

Of course, Noel had made a lot of new friends over the years. Victor worked with him pretty closely, and over the centuries he had gotten to know him very well. Noel's engineering expertise meshed nicely with Victor's own talents. The two of them had brought the wonders of galactic civilization to many new worlds.

The next person to appear was an old and dear friend – Professor Grimes. He spotted Victor immediately and came over to sit with him.

“So how goes the adventure?” Grimes asked.

“Quite well!” Victor replied. “I think the Moraynians have immense promise. They're showing remarkable aptitude with the physical sciences and have tremendous curiosity and drive. I think they're going to do well.”

“That is excellent news. Who knows – perhaps they'll make a contribution one day! There is still so much to learn. We don't know half as much as we think we do.”

“You really think so? I thought we mastered the sciences long ago! As the Psalmist said, there is an end to all perfection. Eventually you always reach a point where you've learned all the physical laws and know the best way to apply them to solve problems. Science simply can't go on forever. It's not infinite, you know. At some point you're done.”

Grimes smiled. “You would think so, and yet it turns out there are still new discoveries to be made. Have you heard about the *Vaughn*? The Stryker twins discovered a new form of machinery on it that's unlike anything we've ever seen. In fact, we actually couldn't see this machinery at all until the Artilect invented an entirely new technology. What they've discovered represents a bold new way of doing things. It would seem that there is a race out there that knows some things we do not.”

“I guess I'm behind on the news. That's amazing! I'll have to get a copy of their report and read it for myself. Have they found out who created the ship?”

“Not yet, but I am certain that they will. After all, Amy and Amanda are clever girls – and they are Administrators. They have the immense resources of the Artilect at their disposal – as do you, as I recall! You are also in that rather exclusive club.”

“Sure. But my line of work is a bit different. I don't usually need the resources of a quadrillion stars in order to teach microcircuitry to a new race. Amy and Amanda are the ones who spend their time leveraging that sort of power. It's a lot of responsibility, if you ask me.”

“It certainly is! But they are not the only ones who do so,” Grimes remarked. He nodded toward the three men who had just entered the restaurant – Dr. Mazatl, Dr. Temilotzin, and Dr. Timothy Stryker. The men were in such deep conversation that they were almost oblivious to their surroundings. “Those three administrators are quite good at making use of every last bit of power that the Artilect can wield.”

“What are they up to these days?” Victor asked.

"They're trying to breach the barrier. It appears there is a curious anomaly just outside our universe. They have given it the rather technical and unromantic name 'U-16b'. They're trying to reach it but they can't find a way to get to it. There seems to be some sort of barrier or gap that prevents us from getting there. It's a fascinating problem."

"Is that what you're working on?"

Grimes laughed. "Goodness no! They have the Artilect to help them, Victor. They are not in need of my assistance. No, my life is focused on the university. I have a bright new crop of young minds and it's my job to teach them what they need to know. It is quite rewarding, but it takes up a great deal of my time. Education is really my role, not the furtherance of science. That was even true in the old universe."

"Don't sell yourself short, professor. Back in the bad old days you did more than just educate. As I recall you led the crusade against Lane's Vaults. You convinced the Rangers to ban them."

"For what little good it did. Yes, they banned them, but they never understood the importance of living for the Lord and loving Him with all your heart. The Rangers were quite selfish; they just chose a different road of selfishness than Lane did. In the end the Rangers hated my message so much that they murdered me. I thought that Lane would be the one to do me in, but I was mistaken. It seems that in the end Lane and the Rangers were on the same page."

Victor nodded. "And now they are both reaping the consequences of their error. They are in the Lake of Fire suffering the eternal wrath of an angry God, while you and I sit here and enjoy the peace and mercy of God. We have a breathtaking future to look forward to! Each day is better than the one that came before it."

"Indeed we do! I warned Lane, you know. I told him that he was making a very foolish choice. Lane chose the easy path of sin. It worked out fairly well for him in life, but now in this era he knows only torment and pain. You and I chose the difficult and painful path of righteousness. It was a hard road for us – we were both killed, as I recall – but now we have endless joy. The short-term path of sin had terrible consequences. It was infinitely better to sacrifice our lives and wills for the Lord, so that we might gain everlasting life and joy."

"Which is what the Lord Himself said. Those who will save their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for His sake will save it. Lane's Vaults carried a staggering price."

Professor Grimes paused. "You know, it wasn't the Vaults, really. There's nothing wrong with building virtual environments. We don't really do much of that anymore, but simulations themselves are not evil. The great problem was what people did with them. That was always the problem in the old world. People somehow found ways to take amazing technologies and use them in an evil and wicked manner. Advanced technologies always seemed to lead to advanced evil. Thankfully, those days are over – and they are not missed."

\* \* \* \* \*

Over the next hour the restaurant rapidly filled up. The legendary Jack Nicholas was there – the former governor of Tau Ceti who sent the *Sparrow* to rescue the Stryker family, back in the days of the Spanish Empire. Richard and Laura Stryker was there. Monroe Araiza and Merlin Hardin arrived as well. Victor knew who they were but he didn't know them personally. Both of them were scholars, and Victor spent his time in technical fields. Grimes was a scholar as well – albeit in his own peculiar way – but Victor knew him from the old universe and their friendship had only gotten stronger in this Era.

Even Alex the dog came. He was enjoying himself, as always. Victor was immensely surprised when Alex came over and said hi to him. Considering that he had only met Alex twice he was amazed that Alex remembered who he was. He was also surprised that the dog could talk. He knew that after ten thousand years he should be used to it, but it still amazed him. There were so many things about life in eternity that were simply glorious.

Reverend Knight came, along with Captain Max – the man who had piloted the *Sparrow* – and his first mate Jones. Other people arrived who Victor did not know. The twins, though, seemed to know everyone. It was easy to see they were far more social than he was. Victor wasn't the recluse that he used to be, but the twins operated on a completely different level. He wondered how they found the time to do everything that they apparently did.

One person who was not there was Cynthia Glass. In the old universe Cynthia had been Victor's neighbor, but despite her best efforts she never became more than that. Victor never really understood why Cynthia was so determined to pursue Victor instead of all the other people who were actually interested in her. Cynthia never succeeded in the old universe, but in the eternal era she had much better success. Victor came to discover that yes, it was true that the covenant of marriage was brought to an end when the old universe was destroyed. Jesus Himself had said that would happen. But Victor soon learned that when the Lord ended one covenant – or one universe – it was so that He might replace it with something vastly better.

This gathering was a reunion of all those who had supported and helped the Stryker twins during the days of their long journey. Everyone here had played some role in helping them achieve the task the Lord had given to them. Monroe Araiza may have missed an opportunity to befriend Amy, but he still worked with her to save the Earth. Cynthia, though, never did anything to help the twins. In fact, she tried her best to shame Victor into abandoning his belief in them. The twins were able to reach the future because Victor ignored Cynthia. Victor didn't blame Cynthia for this; after all, she never saw the security footage of the twins that he showed to Grimes. But this reunion was for the friends of the twins, and that was one thing Cynthia was not.

The twins were the last to arrive. Once they were seated their father Richard stood up and gave a speech. When it was over the festivities began.

\* \* \* \* \*

As the day progressed the Stryker twins came around to greet everyone. It was very important to them to spend time with each person who came. They eventually arrived at the table where Victor and Grimes were seated.

"There you are!" Amy exclaimed. "I've been wanting to talk with you two."

Victor looked surprised. "Really? Well, I'm not sure what I can possibly do to help, but it seems that you've found me. What can I do for you?"

"Well, we really want to talk to *everyone*," Amanda added. "It's so amazing to see everyone in the same place! That hasn't happened in a thousand years. But there is something in particular that we wanted to talk to you about. May we sit down?"

"Of course!" Grimes replied. He quickly stood up and pulled out chairs for the two ladies to use. After they were seated he sat down again. "Is this about the *Vaughn*?"

"That's right," Amanda replied. "Amy and I have been investigating it."

"With the help of Velvet Dawn," Amy added.

"Who?" Victor asked.

"She's a friend of ours," Amanda explained. "Anyway, we've been trying to figure out who created the ship but we haven't had any success. Its technology is so unique that no known race could have built it."

Grimes spoke up. "That is certainly true. What you have discovered is really quite extraordinary! I've never seen the sciences applied in that manner before. I would not have thought that approach was even possible, let alone practical."

"Have you found any clues?" Victor asked.

Amy nodded. "Kind of. There's an odd signal that's connected to the ship. We can't figure out if the ship is broadcasting it or receiving it. It seems to come and go at uneven intervals."

"Until recently, when it stopped altogether," Amanda said.

Amy took a small device out of her pocket and handed it to Victor. "These are the messages that we've detected. As you can see, they're all more or less the same. Unfortunately they don't have any information about where they're coming from or who they are intended for. We're not really sure what they're trying to accomplish."

Amanda spoke up. "Victor, we know that you've spent a lot of time out in the universe in distant places. Have you ever come across anything like this?"

Victor took the device and looked over the messages. He immediately burst out laughing. "Are you serious? *These* are the messages? Really?"

Amy looked surprised. "Um, yeah. Why? Is something wrong?"

Victor grinned. "I just can't believe it. Yes, I know these messages! I'd know them anywhere. I've seen these messages before. In fact, they perplexed me for years. I went to great lengths to try to figure out what they meant and what was going on, but eventually I stopped receiving them. It was one baffling mystery that I never solved. At first I thought someone was trying to sabotage our Nehemiah IV probes."

"The Nehemiah IV probes?" Amy echoed. "Do you mean that you detected these messages in the old universe? *Before* you crashed the *Vanguard* into that planet and obliterated it?"

"I'm never going to live that down, am I? At least I can say that the Stryker line went out with a bang. It just happened that piloting starships was not one of my specialties. I assure you I'm much better at it now than I was then."

Grimes spoke up. "So you're quite certain that you encountered these same messages in the 25<sup>th</sup> century?"

"Positive! I'd recognize those messages anywhere."

"Then that settles it. The U-16b anomaly was created as a part of this new universe. It did not exist in the 25<sup>th</sup> century of the old universe. Therefore the messages could not possibly be coming from that anomaly. They have to originate here. There must be some race out there that we have not detected."

"A race that has been around for a long time," Amy added.

"Not necessarily. They may have been created in this age, and perhaps they are sending out some sort of information that is getting reflected into the past. I think the messages are being broadcast from our time *and* our space. When Victor crashed into that planet he created a singularity that still exists today. Perhaps it is transmitting the information into the past."

Victor spoke up. "But the singularity was created at the very end of my life! I detected the messages decades earlier than that."

"I am aware of that. There is much about your singularity that is not well understood. I think we have been looking at this all wrong. It is entirely possible that this alien race actually exists in *our* space and, like us, is trying to reach U-16b. That makes far more sense than hypothesizing that these messages are somehow crossing that impassable barrier. The aliens are not over there; they are here. If that is true and they really *are* here then it should be possible for us to find them. Therefore, the next step is obvious. Now that the Artillect can detect this new form of matter he needs to launch a new search of the universe. Since he knows what to look for he should be able to find the hidden world that is home to this mysterious race."

"That makes sense to me!" Amy exclaimed. "I'll call a meeting of the Administrators."

"Thanks!" Amanda said. "This has been really helpful."

Amy turned to her sister. "Should I go get Velvet Dawn?"

"I think so. After the reunion, of course."

"Right," Amy agreed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Three days later the Administrators met on the home world of the Artillect, in a large conference room in the heart of the Administrative Tower. Every single Administrator was present. Amy and Amanda Stryker was there, accompanied by the wisp Velvet Dawn. Their brother Timothy was there. Dr. Nehemiah Temilotzin was also there, accompanied by Dr. Mazatl. Even Victor Stryker was present.

The Sentinel began the meeting. "Thank you all for coming! It is a pleasure to see all of you here."

"It's an honor," Victor replied.

"It has been a while, hasn't it?" Dr. Mazatl remarked.

Timothy spoke up. "Around 200 years, I think. This sort of thing doesn't come up that often."

The Artillect nodded. "You are quite correct. But an interesting problem has arisen! At the twins' request I have been investigating the *Vaugn*. I have discovered some rather remarkable things about it."

A hologram of the alien vessel appeared above the conference table. "This is the ship that Noel Lawson discovered on July 21, 9991 – almost nine years ago. At first we thought it was a derelict, adrift in space. It turns out this is not the case. The ship was fully functional and was placed in that exact location on purpose. As Velvet Dawn discovered, the ship was even manned. However, the physical characteristics of the beings on that ship prevented them from being seen."

"And yet Velvet could still see them!" Dr. Mazatl exclaimed.

"It's just how God made me," Velvet replied.

The Artillect nodded. "Velvet has a very unique way of seeing the world. I have been able to learn the science behind her vision and have incorporated it into my network. This has enabled me to understand the *Vaugn* a bit better, and I have learned some remarkable things about it.

"First of all, I agree with the conclusion that Professor Grimes reached at the reunion. This ship is a creature of our universe. In fact, I believe it was built within the past century. The race that built it lives here with us and yet we cannot see them. Based on the construction of the ship and the obvious care that was put into it I would say that they are remarkably intelligent."

Victor spoke up. "If it was built in the past century then it can't be from the old universe. So

how was I able to detect the signals in the past?”

“Ah yes, the signals. I believe your original conclusion was correct, Victor. I think they are not messages at all but are actually songs. Based on my research I believe the messages are not originating from the ship. Instead the ship is acting as a relay. The *Vaughn* is receiving the signals and redirecting them toward the Stryker singularity in an attempt to use it to reach the U-16b anomaly. The nature of the singularity is causing them to be redirected back in time. It would seem that the race that built the *Vaughn* is trying to breach the barrier. The ship was built to help them probe the barrier and learn more about it.”

“That's amazing!” Timothy exclaimed. “Are you saying that the *Vaughn* is a research ship?”

“That is what I have concluded. The equipment on board was designed to learn more about the very barrier that you and your colleagues have been studying. However, it appears that they have been more successful than your research team. Their equipment, with its unique nature and properties, can actually use those messages to reach out through the singularity and interact with the barrier. This process gleans information that is then relayed back to their homeworld. The alien race is learning a great deal about the barrier's properties – which is something that you have not been able to do.”

“Remarkable!” Dr. Temilotzin said. “That is a very clever approach.”

Victor spoke up. “So *that's* what those messages are for. No wonder I could never find the source! I never stood a chance of solving that riddle.”

Dr. Mazatl smiled. “You did solve it eventually. You just had to wait, oh, fifteen thousand years.”

“Hold on a minute,” Amy said. “Are you saying that you've found their homeworld?”

“Not precisely,” the Artilect replied. “But I do know roughly where it should be, within ten thousand light-years or so. I know the area to search.”

“Then by all means, let the search begin!” Dr. Mazatl exclaimed. “This is fantastic news. We are on the verge of discovering a new world, a new race, and – possibly – penetrating that barrier.”

“Perhaps. However, the fact that the signals have stopped and no more crewmembers have been seen indicates that the *Vaughn's* mission has come to an end. Whether it was successful or not I do not know. But I do believe that we can find the homeworld, with a significant amount of effort.”

“How significant?” Victor asked.

“A sphere with a diameter of ten thousand light years is a fairly large area to search. Thanks to Velvet Dawn I can now detect that new form of matter, but only at short range. There is also the fact that it is highly unlikely their entire star system is made up of this matter. It is far more likely that they are hidden away in some pocket in space, or some other anomaly. Detecting their home is going to require a new network of probes to be designed and deployed. These probes will need to be much more powerful than the Nehemiah V probes that colonized the universe. They will also need to be much smaller, and we will need billions of them. I will need to blanket the area with them and form a network that we can use to probe that which cannot be seen.”

“I say we do it,” Amy said.

“Absolutely,” Amanda agreed.

“Sounds good to me,” Victor said.

“I certainly have no objections,” Dr. Mazatl said.

“Nor do I,” Dr. Temilotzin said.

“I am in agreement as well,” Timothy replied.

“Very well! Then it shall be done. Preparations will begin immediately.”