

CHAPTER 22: FALLEN

Log date: August 26, 2432

Location: Procyon B

Log note: Finishing the course

ANOTHER LONG YEAR HAD PASSED. Professor Grimes hoped that 2432 would be a better year than the one that came before it, but he was sorely disappointed. With each passing day the Ranger worlds grew more hostile to him and his message. The professor had done a tremendous amount of good for the Rangers. He was the one who had acquired a Nehemiah IV probe for them and who taught them how to use it to upgrade their worlds. He was the one who had warned them of the dangers of the Vaults. His tireless efforts persuaded the Ranger governments to ban them from their worlds. If it had not been for Grimes the Rangers would have all been in Vaults and their worlds would have decayed into ruin. The Vault worlds were on their last generation and their peoples on the verge of extinction, but Grimes gave the Rangers the opportunity to choose a different course.

Thanks to the professor the future of the Rangers looked bright – on the surface. Their cities now used the latest technology and their worlds were spectacular. There was no longer any poverty to be found. Each world was dotted with hundreds of ZPEs that provided more material goods than the Ranger citizens could possibly consume. It was the most prosperous time the galaxy had ever seen.

But beneath that prosperity lurked a dangerous blight. These immense riches had only further corrupted the Ranger citizens, and with each passing day they seemed to become more corrupt and more wicked. Grimes warned each of the Ranger planets that their sins would surely find them out. He pleaded with them to abandon their wicked ways and repent, while there was still time. Grimes was a committed teacher, and he did his best to teach the people that the course they had chosen would only lead to their ruin and death.

Since Grimes spoke against the lavish decadence of the Rangers, he was banned from one planet after another. The only governor who was still willing to have him was Carl Sellers. In 2432 he invited Grimes to come and stay in the Procyon B system. Since this was the only inhabited system that would allow him in, Grimes accepted. The professor hoped that perhaps one star system would come to its senses. Maybe there would be one world that would see the light.

He could try, at least. Grimes would keep on trying as long as there was someone willing to listen.

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On August 26 of that year, the federation of aligned Ranger governments celebrated a holiday throughout all of the non-Vault worlds. This holiday was declared throughout the stars in order to celebrate the tremendous advances that the Nehemiah IV probes had brought to their worlds. The Vault worlds might be dead and decaying, but the Ranger worlds were alive and well.

Each planet had its own way of celebrating the holiday. Most governors gathered together in some beautiful location in their planetary capitol to give long and boring speeches, bragging about how important they were and how they were solely responsible for all the prosperity that had come

to their world. Procyon B was no different. Carl Sellers organized the official state celebration in Sellers Park, right next door to the planet's capitol building. The garden was an immaculately-kept and highly popular area that occupied just over one square mile of the city center. The grass was a beautiful shade of green, the sky overhead was deep blue, and the city buildings around them were gorgeous structures of crystal and steel. There was not a bit of poverty or decay to be seen anywhere.

Governor Sellers was surrounded by the leaders of his administration. Each of them were scheduled to give a self-important speech, but the governor was determined to be the first one to talk.

"Today, my fellow Rangers, marks the start of a new era!" Sellers said triumphantly. "As I predicted, the two Vault worlds have allowed their cities to fall into ruin. There is nothing left now but the corpse of a dead civilization. Their infrastructure is ruined – but more importantly, the spirit of their people is dead as well. All they do is lay in their pods and dream empty, meaningless dreams. Once those people die their worlds will be utterly dead.

"But we have chosen a different road! We have chosen advancement and science. Instead of dreaming ourselves to death, like the fools who have listened to the siren song of Carroll Lane, I have remade your planet with the most up-to-date tools that science has to offer. I have wiped out poverty. I have transformed your crumbling neighborhoods. I have built you new cities. I have led you into the future – and every day I give you something new and exciting. Rangers, we have won!"

The enormous crowd cheered – all except for one man, who slowly made his way through the crowd toward the stage.

Sellers continued his speech. "Look around you! I have given every single person on this planet everything that they could possibly want. Thanks to the technology of the Nehemiah IV probes, there is no longer any reason for anyone to do without. There is plenty on every side! All you need to do is reach out and take what we desire. If you want it then I will personally guarantee that you shall have it. Thanks to my tireless efforts, you have truly reached the pinnacle of life.

"So, on this momentous day, enjoy the world that I have built for you. Enjoy the immense prosperity that your governor has given you. Enjoy your riches and houses. Enjoy all of it. As long as I am your governor I will continue to provide whatever you want and as much as you want. Believe me, citizens, we have only just begun our golden age. Only time will tell what great things the future has in store for us."

The speeches continued on for another hour. Grimes gently worked his way through the massive crowd in order to reach the center stage. He then waited patiently until the speeches were over and the people had been dismissed. The professor then climbed up the stairs to the stage and walked over to Governor Sellers.

The governor was talking to his counsel. When he saw Grimes approach he smiled and reached out his hand. "Hello there, my friend! Don't tell me you're upset that I didn't mention your contributions in my speech. I can't mention everyone, you know."

"Not at all," the professor said. "By all means, take whatever credit you want. The truth is I would rather not have my name involved with all this decadence anyway. However, your speech did concern me. I will admit that you have brought great prosperity to your world, but—"

"I certainly have!" Sellers interrupted. "My people have never been richer. This is truly a great time to be alive!"

"Perhaps. But tell me something. What, exactly, are your people *doing* with all of this

prosperity? How are you using the inheritance that you have been given?"

"Why, we're doing whatever we want! We finally have the power to make all our dreams come true. Nothing is withheld from us. We can fully indulge in our every desire. It's like the Vaults, only better because it's *real*."

"So how are you any different from the people in the Vaults? All they want is to fulfill their dreams. They're just fulfilling them in a slightly different way. It seems to me that you're not actually any different at all. Your goals are the same."

"But their lives are phony! You told me that yourself, and I believe you. All those poor wretches do is *dream* about a better life. They don't actually *have* a better life – in fact, they don't really have a life at all. We, however, have the *real thing*. For them it's just a fantasy, but for us it's a reality. And that makes all the difference in the world."

"And yet you are both after the *same things*," Grimes insisted. "The people in the Vaults never lift a finger to work – and the Rangers don't either. All of the Ranger worlds are beautifully maintained *by robots*. Not a single one of your citizens has an actual job that involves actual work. No one produces anything. No one is studying, or learning, or advancing. No one fears the Lord or tries to serve Him with their life. Instead you just sit in your homes and do nothing of any consequence. You eat, and drink, and make merry, and then the next day you engage in even more debauchery."

"But of course! Isn't that our right as Rangers? Your God is dead, Grimes. We don't need Him anymore. After all, we have finally created the perfect society! We have freed ourselves from the need to work. Why worship a God when we have become gods ourselves? Why work, when we can be served? Why produce, when we have machines that produce for us? Is this not the perfect life? The old ways have come to an end. People like you are the past. We are the future."

Grimes frowned. "You are *very* far from being gods. You seem to have no idea how fragile you truly are. The reason there is a star in your sky is because the Most High God put it there, and He can easily destroy it. The Lord is the one who raises up nations and He can easily take them down. You think you have built a grand future for yourself but you are badly mistaken. Even by your own corrupt standard you have lost your way. Since no one is producing anything new, no advancements will ever be made. Since no one is learning anything, the limited knowledge that you do possess will be lost. Your children and grandchildren – if you bother to have any – will have no idea how the machines around them work. They will not understand the world around them. All they will know is how to indulge their most wicked passions, and how to consume wealth that they did not lift a finger to create. Your society will never advance beyond this point – and the people that make up your society will decay into unbelievable monsters. With each passing generation they will become dumber and more wicked."

Sellers shook his head. "You are clinging to the past, Grimes. You might as well ask our children to cast off all technology and become subsistence farmers, digging in the dirt with their own hands in order to grow a few meager scraps of food. Don't you see? We have *everything*! We are gods now – the masters of the universe. Why would we even *want* to advance any further? What need is there for growth or knowledge? I have liberated my citizens and they are free to do as they please. There can be no greater freedom than that."

"That sort of freedom is *slavery*. Can't you see that? Each of your citizens is a slave to his own desires – to his sins. God has called all of us to repent of our sins and seek forgiveness for them, not to indulge them as often as possible. The Lord has commanded us to *cast away* our desires and turn our lives over to Him, so that we may spend our days seeking what *He* desires instead. Each man will

either be a slave to sin or he will be a slave to righteousness. You have foolishly made a truly terrible choice – and there are grave consequences for that choice. The wickedness of your citizens grows by the hour, and God will not ignore this. Do you know what the Lord does when a society becomes completely depraved? He destroys it. The Lord will not allow the Rangers to continue down this path. If you do not change your ways and learn to abhor depravity then the Ranger worlds will become as desolate as the Vault worlds. The Rangers have chosen the path of death, and it leads only to their grave.”

Sellers sighed. “I had such high hopes for you, Grimes, I really did. I thought you understood. But I guess you don't. You are just too set in your ways to change. You had your day but your day is done. You are from the past and we are moving into the future. I'm afraid that your services are no longer necessary.”

The governor then waked off, leaving Grimes standing alone.

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Although the rest of the city spent the day celebrating, Grimes did not. He saw nothing to celebrate in the decadence that surrounded him. The aging professor made his way back to his apartment in the city. It was a beautiful home – spacious, with every luxury that anyone could want. But his heart was not in it. He saw very little value in the wealth that surrounded him. All he could see was a growing tide of evil that was sweeping mankind. The Vault worlds were already lost, and now it looked like the Ranger worlds would be lost as well.

Grimes settled down into his favorite chair. He then took his well-worn Bible off the coffee table and spent the afternoon reading it. In times like this, when he felt helpless and frustrated, that he most enjoyed reading the minor prophets. It was encouraging to read books like Amos, which warned a wealthy Israel that their outward prosperity did not equate to God's blessings. This was not the first time in history that mankind had decided they knew better than God. Grimes knew that the Rangers' path could only lead to destruction – and yet he didn't see a way to stop it. He was grateful that the people were not in Vaults, but he wasn't sure that their current situation was much of an improvement.

As the hours went by, Grimes remembered that the prophets of old had not been heeded either. God warned Israel that destruction was coming but Israel refused to listen. In the end God did exactly what He said He would do and sent judgment. Both Israel and Judah lost the promised land and were forced into exile.

Yet Grimes saw that this was not the end. The Lord tempered His judgment with mercy. There was always a remnant left – a remnant that came back to the land and started over again. The truth was never completely lost. Wickedness was indeed judged and there was great suffering and pain, but better days did come.

Perhaps I've done all I can, Grimes thought. It's my job to warn of the wrath to come, and I have done that. If the Rangers will not listen and change their ways then that is upon their own head – I have done my duty. In the end the Lord will win and the meek will inherit God's creation. All I need to do is be faithful.

As the sun set and the stars came out, Grimes went over to his food dispenser and asked the machine to give him a glass of water. The machine created a beautiful, crystal glass that was filled with clear water – but the water was tainted. After the incident in the park Sellers commanded that a small

change be made to the programming of the professor's food dispenser. The change was made remotely, without anyone having to enter his apartment. Sellers had decided that the professor was a problem, and the governor did not like problems.

Grimes took a sip out of the glass. A few seconds later he was dead on the floor.

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Three days later, Dr. Mazatl called Victor Stryker into his office. It was late at night and the office building was mostly empty. The Artilect project was going so slowly that there was no need for anyone to work through the night. Any issues that came up (which almost never happened) could wait until the next day. Aside from a few stragglers who had no personal lives, Victor only saw maintenance robots in the building.

He was surprised that Dr. Mazatl was working so late. What, exactly, was so important that it had to be handled immediately? Was it really necessary for him to call Victor at this hour? *Then again, it's not like I have anything else going on*, Victor thought. At the very least a late-night meeting was a break from the dull routine.

When Victor entered the director's office he was surprised to see that his desk was littered with scraps of paper. It was clear that Dr. Mazatl had been working late nights for a long time. The director looked old and tired, as if he had been fighting a losing battle for a long time.

"Thanks for coming," Dr. Mazatl said. He gestured to a chair in front of his desk. "I apologize for asking you to come see me so late. Sometimes I lose track of time. There's just so much to do."

"It's not a problem," Victor replied, as he took a seat. "So what's going on? Is something wrong?"

"First, before I answer that, I want to begin by stressing that this room is a safe zone. The Artilect does *not* have access to my office. Any conversations that we have in here are private and completely confidential. I've even started recording certain things on pieces of paper in order to keep them from the Artilect. You don't have to watch what you say. We can be completely candid with each other."

Victor frowned. "That sounds a bit ominous. Has the Artilect started to turn on us? Is he becoming evil?"

Dr. Mazatl shook his head. "No, of course not! But I don't want him to start thinking that his mission is in vain and we've created him to carry out a fool's errand. Andy is still very young. I want him to be optimistic."

"And you want to accomplish that by keeping things from him? Is that really wise? Shouldn't he have all the relevant information in order to make the best decisions?"

"Absolutely not!" Dr. Mazatl said firmly. "There are many things that you don't tell children simply because they're not yet in a position to cope with it. Andy has a great deal of learning to do before we can tell him just how precarious our situation really is."

"What do you mean, 'precarious'? Has something happened? I haven't seen anything in the news."

"*Grimes* is what happened. Do you realize he's been assassinated?"

"Is that what this is about? I saw his obituary a few days ago. It was terrible news – I was shocked. I couldn't believe he was gone. The article said that he died of a heart attack but I find that very difficult to believe. My guess is the Rangers had him killed. To be honest, I'm surprised that

someone didn't assassinate him years ago. He couldn't possibly have had very many friends. I really hate to see him go and I miss him terribly, but it doesn't change anything."

"It changes *everything!*" Dr. Mazatl insisted. "It proves his point. Lately Grimes had claimed that the Ranger worlds were just as bad as the Vault worlds. It turns out he was right. The Rangers have taken our probe technology and used it to bring Vault fantasies to life. They have become completely corrupt. There's no future in the Vaults – and there's no future among the Rangers either."

"But we've known that for a long time, haven't we? Surely no one thought that the Vaults or the Rangers were going to turn out well. I sure didn't. Grimes said that he thought the Corporation was the only good group left. He was hoping that we could succeed after everyone else was gone. We were the only ones who weren't corrupted by either temptation."

"If only that were true. I'm afraid that Grimes didn't know the full situation. The problem is that everyone here is tired. The Artilect project is almost over, Victor. People want to go home. They don't like living here and I don't blame them. Our employees have been around the same group of people for a very long time now, and they want something different. They're tired of working and they're tired of being trapped on this mechanical planet. But I can't take them back to Xanthe because there's nothing there either. What home am I supposed to bring them to? The whole reason we built these probes was so that mankind could one day live in these worlds. But I don't see anyone who wants to claim them. Do you know what would happen if the Artilect found that out? We can't tell him. He must never know. I can't risk introducing that level of instability. He has to believe in his mission."

"What do you mean, no one wants to claim them? We could do it, you know. As you pointed out, there's no reason for us to go back to the Ranger worlds. We could use the *Vanguard* to relocate to one of the Nehemiah IV worlds, and build a new civilization there. Why go back to the past when we can move on to the future? That's what Grimes would have wanted us to do."

"But that's not going to work. Don't you see? How would that be any different from what we already have here? If people don't like life on this planet then they're not going to like life on another empty planet any better – especially if it's even *more* distant from mankind."

"What are you getting at?" Victor asked.

"People are tired. They feel like they've been marooned on an island for their whole lives, and they want to live in a civilization again – one that *isn't* composed entirely of Corporation employees. They've been trapped here for years, and before that they were trapped in the Diano Building. They have worked for their whole lives and they are tired of working. They feel like fools – they invented the technology of the future but they're not getting to benefit from it. Everyone else in the Ranger worlds is getting a free ride and a life free from work, while they are forced to suffer through this Artilect project."

"I guess they have a point. But surely *everyone* doesn't feel that way. I mean, I sure don't."

"Are you sure? Stop and think about your life. Do you realize that you haven't even managed to colonize your apartment? You don't have a wife or children, and many of your co-workers are the same. Did you know that our population has actually *declined* since we've been here?"

"I guess I hadn't really thought about it," Victor admitted.

"I've been obsessing over it for months. The truth is the Corporation is made up almost entirely of antisocial engineers, not potential colonists. I asked the company to do one last project – to build the Artilect – and they've done that. They now want to join the rest of civilization, and I don't have the heart or the right to force them to stay here."

“But if they do that then what's going to happen to the future?”

“Exactly! The Corporation will evaporate the minute its employees are merged into the decadent Ranger society where no one does much of anything. Eventually some disaster will happen that our maintenance bots can't fix, and no one will be around who knows how to fix it. It's entirely possible that there just isn't a future left. We might have lost, Victor. Maybe we built the Artilect for nothing.”

“That seems like a rather grim assessment. If people want to go back to the Ranger worlds then so be it – that's why we built the Artilect in the first place. We knew the Corporation wouldn't last forever. But I refuse to believe that all is lost. There will always be a faithful remnant. There will always be someone left. I just don't believe that all this was done in vain.”

Dr. Mazatl sighed. “I hope you're right, Victor. I sincerely hope you're right.”