

CHAPTER 23: VISITORS

Log date: March 1, 2440

Location: The Artilect homeworld

Log note: The right man at the right time

IT TOOK EIGHT LONG YEARS in order to bring the Artilect fully online. Victor Stryker was certain that he would lose his mind long before that day finally came. The endless tedium was more than he could stand. The problem wasn't that things were going poorly; the issue was that everything was going so well. If Victor had been beset with a long stream of urgent issues that needed immediate attention, his life would have been hectic but exciting. His days would have been focused on putting out one fire after another in an urgent but exhilarating dash of energy. Time would have passed quickly and there would have been many glorious moments of triumph. Victor would have been accomplishing things. Big things. Things that *mattered*.

But there were no fires. There were no emergencies. The project was never in any kind of danger. The Artilect had been designed so well that nothing serious ever went wrong. Its long, slow growth happened exactly as the simulations had predicted. This left Victor with nothing to do but monitor a process that almost never deviated from perfection. Occasionally – maybe once every few months – some minor thing happened that gave Victor a chance to act. But usually entire weeks went by without Victor needing to do anything.

That was when Victor learned the truth about happiness. He had spent his entire life wanting to be happy, and he thought that if he could fix all of his problems then happiness would come. But when that day actually arrived he discovered that his life had become incredibly boring. Things had not improved; instead they had become much worse. Happiness was not the absence of challenges. It was actually the joy of tackling a challenge and overcoming it. A life with no challenges was *incredibly* boring and unfulfilling. There was no excitement. There was nothing that mattered. In fact, life itself seemed pointless.

The astounding success of the Artilect was a huge triumph for the project, but it was a big problem for everyone else. Since there wasn't much work to do, people became bored – and since there weren't any other employment opportunities on the planet, people began to leave. Fortunately, getting off the planet was easy. Even though the Artilect was young he still had immense manufacturing abilities. It was easy for him to create small ships that could ferry a dozen or so employees to whatever star system they wanted to reach. Each month another group abandoned their boring, dead-end jobs and left for greener pastures.

One of the first people to leave was Cynthia Glass. In 2434 she stopped by Victor's apartment before getting on a ship to Epsilon Eridani. When she knocked on his apartment door, Victor opened it to find a very happy person standing outside. Cynthia didn't look sad at all; in fact, she looked excited.

"I just wanted to say goodbye before I left," Cynthia explained.

"Well, I can't say that I blame you for leaving," Victor replied. "I'm sure that a lot of other people are going to follow your example. I hope you enjoy your new life."

"Oh, I plan to! I've been doing the same old thing for my entire life, and I'm done with it. I want to do something new and exciting and fresh. It's going to be great to live in a huge city that's filled

with people I don't know! There's going to be all sorts of new opportunities and relationships.”

“Are you sure? I mean, from what I've read the Ranger worlds are—”

“They're fine! You worry too much, Victor. I know you think that Governor Sellers assassinated Professor Grimes, but there's just no evidence to support that. None. Grimes was just an old guy in poor health and he died. It happens. Somehow you always find a way to obsess over tiny things that don't matter and miss the big picture of how awesome life is on the Ranger worlds.”

“I don't think the death of Grimes was a little detail that doesn't matter, Cynthia! Grimes was the only person who was trying to stop the Ranger worlds from destroying themselves. Since his passing they have only become more corrupt.”

Cynthia laughed. “Oh Victor! You try so hard to find problems with everything, don't you? Look. You have two choices. You can either stay here and be bored out of your mind, or you can return to civilization and actually have a life and try to contribute something meaningful. If you want to waste your life by staying here then you do that. But that's not what I'm going to do.”

“It's not a 'waste' to finish what you start, or to see something through to the end. I'm not going to abandon this effort just because it's hard. Someone needs to complete the Artilect and bring it fully online, and if Dr. Mazatl and I are the only people willing to do that then so be it.”

“Oh, come on, Victor! This is really about the Stryker twins, isn't it? You're still convinced that somehow this machine is going to save them. I can't believe you still buy into that after all this time. You're such a child. When are you going to grow up?”

Victor frowned. “If you want to be a jerk and call me a fool for doing my job then I guess you can do that. Good day, Cynthia. I hope your new life turns out well.” He then closed the door.

Victor did not see her again until after he died.

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On January 19, 2440 the Artilect became fully operational. By the time this day arrived more than half the planet's population had abandoned the world for the Ranger colonies. What surprised Victor was not that people were leaving. Instead he was amazed that anyone had decided to stay. *Perhaps the Ranger life doesn't appeal to everyone*, he thought.

The Artilect was now in full control over the Nehemiah IV probes and the planets they had colonized. Everything had been turned over and was going smoothly. It had been a seamless and very boring transition.

After a day of celebration and rejoicing, Dr. Mazatl retired to the room where they first activated the Artilect. Victor met with him there that evening, after everyone else had gone home. Victor knew he should have been more excited, but instead he was perplexed. It was great that they had accomplished their mission, but what were they supposed to do next? Victor had been working toward this goal for so long that he never really stopped to think about what would happen after he accomplished it.

Dr. Mazatl was the first one to speak. “Andy, you have been an unqualified success. I really could not have asked for more. You have done exceptionally well.”

“Thank you,” the Artilect replied. “I am privileged to be a part of your exploration of the stars. It is fascinating to see the new worlds that are being discovered by the probes you have built! Each new world has so much potential. I look forward to the day when these worlds will be filled with citizens.”

"And I am sure that day will come. In the meantime you are well positioned to maintain these worlds. You're managing their data streams very well, and your growth will allow you to continually stay ahead of their demands. You've developed intelligent ways to manage the worlds and fill them with cities that are ready for colonists to arrive. I see no flaws in your operation."

"Thank you, director. I will continue to work on this project as long as I exist. You have constructed me for a purpose and I will carry out that purpose. The only question I have is when mankind will begin to inhabit the worlds that I am transforming."

Victor spoke up. "That's an excellent question. If you ask me, I think we should go ahead and make the move now. All the people who wanted to go to the Rangers have already left, and the people who are still here are committed to being here. The *Vanguard* can definitely reach the closest probe world, and it's a beautiful place. Why not go ahead and move?"

"It's certainly is a tempting thought," Dr. Mazatl agreed. "But why not just stay here? We have thousands of people on this world who are perfectly happy with life on this planet. True, this world is mostly a giant machine, but people do have lives here, you know. People have homes and have started families. There are even some children who were born here and have known no other world. It seems silly to abandon this perfectly good planet for another one."

"I guess you have a point. Besides, as long as we're here we can watch over the Artilect. It probably wouldn't hurt to stay here a while longer."

The Artilect spoke up. "But there *will* come a day when people will move into your star colonies, correct? Surely my labor is not going to be in vain."

"It is most definitely *not* in vain," Dr. Mazatl said firmly. "That day will come. Now, it may be a while; mankind is struggling with some problems right now. There are good eras and there are difficult eras, and this is not the best of times. But the day will come. Your efforts are not a waste."

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In the weeks that followed a few more people left for the Ranger worlds but most people stayed behind. Dr. Mazatl was right – people *had* developed lives for themselves, and they weren't in a hurry to abandon them. It was true that people didn't really have jobs anymore, but they still found ways to keep themselves occupied. Since their whole lives were no longer dominated by the need to build replicating machinery, people began to explore other interests. Some people became artists. Some became musicians. Some began tinkering with technology and exploring areas that had seen no progress in centuries. Since people had free time they filled it by creating new things.

Victor, though, struggled to find something new to do. He wanted to do something worthwhile but he didn't see any good options. He felt like his work was done. The probes were working, the Artilect was working, and everything was fine. He *could* start something new, but what would be the point? If he had married and had a family he could focus on that, but he was alone.

So Victor tried to find things to occupy his time. Sometimes he pulled up the mysterious alien signal he had received so many years earlier and tried to analyze it again. Other times he watched the growth of the Artilect. Occasionally he studied the old unstable AI subroutines that had been written years ago to see if he could discover why they had failed so quickly. None of it was particularly rewarding work, but it gave him something to do.

But on March 1 of that year something unexpected happened. On that day Victor was in his apartment, doing nothing in particular. He had activated the Artilect's administration console and was

looking at a scene on the planet's surface. When Dr. Mazatl constructed the Artilect he had added a separate network that could control the Artilect and correct it if it ever went awry. This monitoring system was quite extensive – and the Artilect did not have access to it. The Artilect was built to manage distant star systems, not to spy on the engineers who were building and maintaining its machinery.

There really wasn't much to see on the surface of the world. There was only miles and miles of machinery that stretched off into the distance. But at least the surface world was vast and almost unending. The world underground was tight, cramped, and a little claustrophobic. Victor had no great love for the outdoors, but even he missed seeing the sky now and then.

On that particular day he happened to notice something that he had never seen before. Out of nowhere, two girls suddenly appeared on the surface of the planet. When Victor saw this he immediately sat up and paid attention. It was true that the transporter was still active, but only Dr. Mazatl and Victor had access to it. There were a number of teenagers on the world but none of them should be able to teleport anywhere. Besides, there was no reason for anyone to be on the surface. People rarely went outside the city days. Who were those girls and what were they doing so far from civilization?

Victor zoomed in to get a closer look. He could hear what they were saying.

"That must be the Artilect," the first girl said.

"It looks like a real mess," the second girl replied. "I thought it would be more organized than that. It almost looks like someone planted a seed and it just sprouted at random. It's pure chaos! Who in their right mind would design something that looks like that?"

That got Victor's attention. These two girls clearly knew what the Artilect was, but they were puzzled by its design. It was obvious they had never seen it before. This meant they were from off-world. The Artilect had its first visitors.

But there was something about the girls that was vaguely familiar. They looked like twins. They both had dark skin and long black hair, and were the same age and height. He was sure he'd seen them somewhere before, but that didn't make sense. Where could he have possibly seen these people?

"I'm sure they had their reasons," the other girl said.

"Let's take a closer look. I want to see what's going on down there."

"But what if we're spotted?"

"By who? This planet is practically deserted! Take a look yourself – there's only a couple people among all those miles and miles of machinery. We're in no danger of running into anybody."

Victor frowned. *This world has far more than just a couple people! Although I guess there's no one near their location, so maybe that's just how it looks to them. But why do these girls not want to be spotted? Are they afraid they will be recognized? Are they spies of some kind? Did the Rangers send them here?*

Then Victor suddenly realized who they were. Those weren't just any girls; they were the Stryker twins. He was looking at Amy and Amanda Stryker!

In an instant he realized that all the stories he had been told were *true*. He had been right all along! The footage he had of their visit to Tim Stryker's apartment was real. Amy and Amanda Stryker really were time-travelers. They had journeyed from their own time to his world, and now they had reached the Artilect. They were *here*. But they clearly did not want to be seen.

Wow! Oh man. I sure wish Grimes was still alive. He would have loved this! This is amazing.

Victor kept watching, fascinated.

The girls continued their conversation. "Shouldn't we at least use our cloaks?"

"I don't see what good that would go. Right now the Artilect is pretty primitive and its attention is focused on distant stars, not on what's going on back home. It's not going to notice us. Those people down there aren't going to notice us either. Besides, there's no one alive who even knows who we are! If someone spots us we can just disappear and they'll never know what happened."

"All right," the other girl sighed.

This is amazing! Victor thought. *They have apparently met a much more advanced version of the Artilect. This can only mean that the Artilect will continue to grow in the centuries to come until it finally reaches a point where it achieves time travel. It will then use that technology to rescue the Stryker twins But is that really possible? Surely not – but there they are! The Artilect project must succeed beyond our wildest dreams. But why does it need these two girls? Is it because they are administrators? Is the Artilect trying to save mankind from some kind of future disaster? And why would the girls come here? If the Artilect could reach into the past to save them then what are they doing at this point in time? Shouldn't they be on their way to the distant future?*

The girls vanished – and Victor immediately panicked. Where did they go? They must have gone somewhere inside the machine. But where?

Victor quickly activated the Artilect's search feature. Normally this was used to locate coworkers. Since people could be anywhere on the planet, people used the employee search function to find other people. It only worked inside the Artilect itself, and not in the residential sections or the city, but Victor was hoping it would still be able to find the twins.

Since he had just seen them on the surface he was able to quickly build a search profile for them. Once the profile was complete the system located them in the depths of the Artilect.

As soon as they were found Victor changed the video stream to point to their new location. He breathed a sigh of relief when the twins came into view. They were already in conversation.

"Well, I'm impressed," one of the twins was saying. "This is definitely the right place."

"I still think this is kind of creepy. It's just – I don't know. I just don't think we're supposed to be wandering around down here. I get the feeling that this place wasn't designed for people. This is a world for machines. I don't think anyone ever expected the Artilect to have visitors."

"I think you're just imagining things," her sister replied.

"So what do we do now? Are you ready to jump into the future?"

Victor gasped. *Jump to the future! So that's what they're doing – they are looking for a safe place to hide while they travel into the distant future. But that raises so many questions. If the Artilect went back in time to get them then why was the Artilect unable to bring them into the future? What is really going on? Are the girls lost or in some kind of trouble?*

Victor watched as one of the girls walked up to a console and activated it. The console scanned her. "Welcome, Amy Stryker," it said in a robotic voice.

Victor nearly shouted. *I knew it! I just knew it. That really is the Stryker twins! Now I know which one is Amy and which one is Amanda. I can't believe they are really here!*

"Amy!" Amanda exclaimed. "What are you doing? Are you out of your mind?"

"Wait just a minute," Amy replied.

As Amy worked at the console, an avalanche of thoughts raced through Victor's mind. *Should I tell Dr. Mazatl about this? This is the biggest news I've ever seen! Not only that, but these girls clearly*

have access to technology from the future. They are able to teleport – without any sort of machinery that I can see – and can apparently jump through time. They must have access to technology from the future, and they clearly know what happens in the future as well. There is so much that they could teach us! But how do I handle this situation? I don't want to get in the way of their mission – whatever it is. If the Artilect went back in time to get them then he must have had a good reason. If I intervene I could cause a major problem. I just don't know enough about what's going on.

After a few minutes Amy spoke up. “All right. I've found a small room 6 miles below us that's not being used for anything. I've blocked it off and reserved it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I've blocked it off from the Artilect's memory – he won't be able to see it anymore. It will be like that room doesn't even exist. We can hide out there and suspend ourselves until it's time to appear and the Artilect won't know anything about it.”

Now that's strange, Victor thought. I guess if the Artilect knows they are here he won't go back in time to save them. Maybe that will mess up the timeline or something. I have no idea how time travel works. Is it possible that the Artilect's powers were enough to save them in the past, but not enough to bring them into the future? Maybe they have to travel to the future by themselves and they are looking for a safe place to do that. Oh, I wish I could talk to them! But they clearly want to remain hidden.

“But what if someone else finds us?” Amanda asked. “This place isn't deserted, you know.”

Amy shrugged. “According to the logs no one's been down on that level for four years. Besides, what are they going to do? All they would find is a stasis field that they can't interact with. They would probably just think it was some strange side-effect of the Artilect's programming and leave it alone. It will be fine.”

“All right,” Amanda agreed. “I guess it's the best we can do.”

So they definitely want to remain hidden, Victor thought. Apparently they are going to alter the flow of time so that they can reach the distant future without aging. All right, then. I can help. You may have blocked the room off, but if you truly want to remain hidden there is more work that needs to be done. I will make sure that you can safely reach the future without being discovered. When we meet in Heaven you can thank me.

Victor used his console to erase any evidence that the girls had ever set foot on that planet, and to make sure that the room the girls had blocked off would never be found or used. This included making sure that the live video stream he was watching was not recorded. He hated not having proof that the Stryker twins had visited, but if that proof existed there was a chance the Artilect could discover it – and Victor could not risk that. He would have to let it go.

As Victor worked, the girls vanished and reappeared in the room that Amy had reserved. Once they teleported there Victor switched the monitoring system over so he could watch them while he continued his work.

“This is a little odd,” Amanda remarked. “I wonder what this room was supposed to be used for?”

“I have no idea,” Amy said. “The Artilect's not hurting for space, though. He's got lots of other rooms. Are you ready?”

Amanda nodded. “October 10, 7239, right?”

“Right,” Amy said.

Victor gasped. *7239! They are going five thousand years into the future? Why, that's*

astonishing! What could possibly be going on in five millennia that would require the help of two teenage girls from the distant past? This doesn't make any sense at all. And why October 10th? At least the Artilect is still functional in the far future – and is apparently stronger than ever. I guess we did a good job on it after all. All those boring years paid off.

"What time?" Amanda asked.

Amy suddenly froze. "I don't know. Come to think of it, Steve never said."

Who is Steve? Victor wondered. The Artilect is called Andy, not Steve. Is he some person from the future? Did the Artilect send a person back through time to save them? Is it possible something happened to this Steve person, and that's why the girls are on their own?

"So what do we do?" Amanda asked.

"I don't know," Amy said. "I never thought about it. What do you think?"

Amanda thought for a moment. "It might be safest to transport ourselves to the end of that day. That way we won't risk entering the future before Steve left to go get us."

That must be it, Victor thought. Steve must be the person the Artilect sent back in time. I wonder how time travel works? Oh, I wish I could talk to the twins. I have so many questions.

"But won't our parents be worried?"

"Not for very long. Well, I guess they might worry a little, but it's better than appearing in the future before anyone went to the past to get us! That could mess up all kinds of things."

"I guess they'll forgive us," Amy replied. "We can explain what happened after we get there."

Their parents? Victor thought, confused. Are their parents already in the future? Did the whole crew of the Sparrow go as well, including Richard and Laura Stryker? This is so strange! If the Sparrow made it safely then why were the Stryker twins not on board? There is a lot going on that I wish I understood.

Amy took a deep breath, then reached over and grabbed her sister's hand. "I'm ready," she said. "Let's go."

"All right," Amanda replied. "Here goes." She closed her eyes and suspended both of them in time.

The time stasis field made the room turn black. It was as if there was nothing there at all – there was just an anomaly that nothing could penetrate. Victor shut off the video feed and erased the last evidence that the Stryker twins were ever there.

He knew that he could not tell anyone about this – not even Dr. Mazatl. This had to remain a secret. The girls wanted to go into the future undetected and Victor would make sure that they did exactly that. He wasn't sure that he could prevent their time travel even if he wanted to; a time stasis field was an entirely new thing. But he *did* know that if word got out that the Stryker twins were there then that could alter the course of the future. He didn't know what was going on but he did know that he didn't want to break anything. So he would keep their secret – and he would keep an eye out for them and make sure that no one got near their hiding place.

Because the Stryker twins had an appointment to keep in the world of tomorrow.

In an odd way, the whole thing gave him a feeling of hope. The Artilect project would succeed. It would grow tremendously in the years to come and accomplish its goal. In the distant future, when mankind faced danger, it would actually go back in time to help the human race out and save the day. Things may be bleak now but better days would come. No matter what happened there would be better days.

And then there were the ages of eternity to look forward to as well. There was no telling what

adventures laid in store for Victor then.

I'll get to talk to the Stryker twins one day, Victor thought. Maybe not for a while, obviously. But in the ages to come we will have all the time in the world.