

CHAPTER 24: SEARCH

Log date: May 19, 10,000 of the Eternal Era

Location: The Artilect homeworld

Log note: The hidden riches of secret places

ONCE THE SIX ADMINISTRATORS made their decision to use the Artilect to find the race that built the *Vaughn*, the Artilect went to work. He knew that the Nehemiah V probes – which had mapped the entire universe – had somehow missed an entire star system. This could only mean that the star system was well-hidden. With the limited data he had available there was no way to tell if this lost star was hidden naturally or if its inhabitants had cloaked their home system for their own purposes. All he knew was that it *was* hidden and it would not be easy to find.

It took the Artilect less than a second to begin work. First, he took twenty-four trillion star systems offline and dedicated them to the project. These star systems comprised a tiny fraction of his overall network, which spanned the entire universe. No one lived in those star systems so allocating them to design work did not cause anyone a problem. The Artilect knew that he could probably come up with a decent solution to the problem with far fewer resources, but it would take a lot longer. Time was something that he valued immensely – he preferred to accomplish his assigned tasks as quickly as possible so that he would be available for whatever new adventures came along.

The Stewards of those star systems were given the task of designing a new class of microprobes. In the past the Diano Corporation had built enormous probes that were miles long. The Artilect knew that particular approach was not a good fit for this problem. He wanted to make a very small class of probe that was immensely powerful but yet very easy to manufacture. Nothing like that had been built since he created the Sentinel, so there was much experimentation and work to be done. What was the best possible design? What was the smallest workable size that still accomplished the design objectives? How could the components be optimized so that trillions of them could be replicated in a short amount of time? What was the best search pattern to use in order to cover the target area most efficiently, and how many probes would he need in order to execute that search pattern in a reasonable amount of time?

By the time the Administrators left the Artilect and returned to their lives, he was already deep into the problem. The Nehemiah IV probes had been powerful, but they were not looking for anything that was hidden. Each Nehemiah IV probe was also an independent unit. The new microprobes would have to work together – possibly even joining forces to scan for deep anomalies. They would need a complex set of sensors to accomplish this, and those sensors would have to be crammed into a very small package. Yet, their objectives would be limited: all they had to do was find something to investigate. If they detected any variation or unusual activity then the probes would relay that information to the Artilect and he would pass it along to the Administrators. The probes only had to find potential hiding places; it would be someone else's job to access them.

Of course, spotting an anomaly was one thing; being able to exploit it and enter a hidden star system was a far more difficult challenge. However, the Sentinel had done something similar in the past. In the old universe the Tau Ceti system was hidden by the Wall, and the Sentinel had no problem detecting the barrier and finding a way to get inside. If this hidden race was using similar technology

to cloak their own star system then they should be easy to find – but if they had invented something new then things could be far more difficult.

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It took him thirteen days to design, construct, and mass-produce the probes. On May 19th the Artilect contacted each one of the Administrators and let them know that the process had been completed and he was ready to deploy the microprobes into space. As soon as the Administrators heard the news they gathered at the Artilect homeworld.

“Your microprobe design is excellent!” Timothy Stryker told the Artilect. “I’m impressed that you were able to pack so much functionality into such a tiny package. These probes are just a few millimeters in diameter. I would never have guessed you could get them so small.”

“Well, he does have ten thousand years of science at his disposal,” Dr. Mazatl pointed out.

“Fifteen, if you count the years from the time he was activated,” Victor Stryker corrected.

Dr. Mazatl laughed. “Yes, I do suppose that counts. Do you remember the day that you and I turned him on for the first time? And here we are. I think things turned out pretty well, overall.”

“The process was a bit more technical than that,” Victor recalled. “His machinery was already operating; it was just missing a mind. So we uploaded the program we had created and then transferred the wisp. That was when he became the Artilect.”

“I do remember that day,” the Artilect said fondly. “Although I did not realize what I actually was until I went through the Door with Amy. You never told me my true nature – not until then.”

“I know,” Dr. Mazatl replied. “It’s something that I regret. I was just trying to protect you and your homeworld, but it was a cowardly thing to do. I spent my life trying to solve problems by avoiding them and running from them. I always seemed to come up with a reason why I couldn’t do anything. If I could go back I would do a lot of things differently.”

“For the most part, I don’t think the past can be changed,” Victor said. “But today we’re here to change the future. Do you realize that this is the first probe series the Artilect has launched since the Nehemiah V line?”

“This is so exciting!” Amy exclaimed. “I can’t wait to see what we find.”

Victor smiled. “It certainly has been a long journey. I’ve been looking for the source of that signal for a *very* long time. I hope the microprobes do find them – but you know, they might not. Somehow I doubt it will be that easy.”

“Or maybe it *will* be that easy!” Amanda replied. “We have their technology now, and we have a plan to find them. This should work pretty well.”

“We have *some* of their technology,” Dr. Temilotzin pointed out. “It’s entirely possible that they have additional technology that is keeping them hidden in space. We have no idea what that looks like or how it works.”

“Which is why I’ve built these probes,” the Artilect said. “We will search the area around the Stryker singularity with a thoroughness that this universe has never seen before, and we will see what we find. I will notify you as soon as I have completed the search.”

“Thanks,” Amy said.

“I will be waiting with *tremendous* anticipation,” Victor added.

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During the development phase of the project, the Artilect spread the construction process across the trillions of star systems he had set aside. As soon as he had the Administrator's permission to launch the microprobes he used the Stewards to transport them across the universe. Trillions upon trillions of small machines jumped into hyperspace and vanished, traveling the immense distance that separated them from the suspected homeworld of the builders of the *Vaughn*.

Once the probes arrived in that distant galaxy they immediately spread out and assumed the positions that the Artilect had spent so much computing power determining. The Artilect had designated a specific set of coordinates for each one of the probes and had a specific task list defined for them as well. After all of the probes were in place the Artilect activated them and began the search process.

The probes linked to each other, creating their own interstellar network, and searched the darkness that was around them. They moved through space in the predetermined search patterns they had been assigned and scanned for anything that was unusual or out of place. After a week they had covered the entire galaxy where the Stryker singularity resided – but they found nothing.

The Artilect, however, was not deterred. He continued to patiently search the vast spaces between the stars. If there was something out there to find then he would find it. It was possible that the anomaly only revealed itself at certain intervals, or could only be detected at certain times. Perhaps there was a random fluctuation that only appeared occasionally. One search did not mean he had failed; it just meant he had more searching to do.

He would continue to watch and wait.

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A month passed, and then another month came and went. When the third month ended and the Artilect had still not found anything, the Stryker twins began to get a little concerned.

"I kind of thought we'd find something by now," Amy remarked.

"Well, negative results are results," Amanda pointed out. "We've learned that if there *is* something out there in that area of space, we can't find it with the technology that we have."

"I suppose you're right. I guess it's still possible that something *might* still turn up, if we keep looking, but it's not very promising. Do you think the Artilect should give up?"

"After just three months? Definitely not. The Artilect has brought the star systems he used back into the network, and the microprobes manage themselves. It's not taking much of his time to let them do their job. He might as well let them run their course on the off-chance they find something. But I *do* think we need a new plan. I mean, sure, we *could* have the Artilect keep probing that area of space for the next ten thousand years, just to see if anything turns up. But for all we know our assumptions could be wrong. Maybe their homeworld *isn't* in that area of space and all the searching in the world will never turn up anything. We might be missing something important."

"So what do you think we should do?" Amy asked. "I mean, we've kind of done everything, haven't we? We've investigated the *Vaughn*, we've learned their technology, we've incorporated it into a new type of probe, and we've searched the area where we think their world is located."

"Hmmm. How sure are we that the planet is in that search sphere?"

"Not very sure at all, I think. Maybe the best way to put it is that we have more reason to believe their planet is within the sphere than anywhere else."

"So in other words, we've done all we know to do and we still can't find it. Maybe what we need is a new perspective. You and I and Miles and Monroe and a bunch of other people have been at this for a while now, and although we've made progress we still haven't found what we're looking for. Maybe we need to bring in a consultant. Someone who can point out whatever it is that we haven't thought of before."

"I guess that couldn't hurt. Who did you have in mind?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Amanda asked.

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In the endless ages of the Eternal Era, Professor Grimes was a very busy man. His university was one of the premier centers of learning in the Milky Way galaxy and there were far more applicants than he could ever accept. It took a lot of work to manage such an enormous campus – and he actually taught courses on top of everything else he had going on. But Grimes still found time to meet with his friends.

It had been several months since the great reunion of May 10,000. Grimes had gone back to the university in Star City in order to prepare for the next semester. While he was working out the details for his upcoming lecture series on ancient mysterious artifacts, an old friend came by to pay him a visit.

"Yes, yes, please come in!" Grimes called out, as he rose from his desk. "It's a pleasure to see you."

Victor Stryker walked into the professor's spacious office. He closed the door behind him and then shook Grimes' hand. "Thanks for taking the time to see me."

"Not at all! You really should stop by more often. You're always welcome here, you know, and there's a job open for you at this school if you're interested."

Victor laughed as he took a seat in front of the professor's enormous desk. "I appreciate the offer, but I don't think I'm cut out to be a professor. I agree that there is tremendous value in teaching people and instilling great truths in them, but I'm more of a builder. I'd rather be out on the frontier, building the great machines of the future and guiding new societies into the modern era. I'm a technician, not a teacher."

"And yet I suspect there is more to you than you know," Grimes replied. "You have so much unique experience! You're one of the few people alive who played a significant role in the construction of the Artillect – in fact, you were one of the leaders of that project. To this day you still go out there from time to time and upgrade his machinery. There aren't many people who have even set foot on one of his worlds, much less *changed* them. You have valuable experience that you could share with others. I suspect your classes would be very well attended. After all, you are an Administrator! There aren't many of those. Even I am not in that elite group."

Victor smiled. "Well, I have to say it wasn't very elite back in the day. I had administrative access so I could do my job and help Dr. Mazatl do *his* job. It wasn't a big honor; it was just a lot of tedious work."

"But there was so much more to it than that! The reason Dr. Mazatl made you his assistant was because he trusted you. He trusted you with the secret of the wisp. He used your technical skills to perfect the Artillect's mind. You earned that position, Victor, and you used it well. You were a key person at a very important junction in history."

"I suppose you could make a case for that," Victor agreed. "Honestly, I'm sure Dr. Mazatl could have found someone else to help him who would have worked out just as well. I'm grateful the Lord allowed me to play a role in everything."

"That's quite true. God does not need our assistance; He is quite capable of handling things on His own. And yet He delights in working through His creatures. It's absolutely remarkable. But my point is that you really should consider teaching. I'm sure from time to time you need a break from your regular tasks. Why not teach a semester or two? It might be a good change of pace for you."

"I'll give it some thought. Perhaps you're right."

"I appreciate it! So tell me, Victor. What brings you into my office today?"

"Well, I had a visit from the Stryker twins. They've been trying to locate the civilization that built the *Vaughn*, but they haven't had any luck."

"Really? But I thought they had enlisted the help of the Artilect to locate it! Do you mean to tell me that the Artilect's search *failed*?"

"That's right. We were all surprised. Since the Artilect was able to understand how wisps could see things that were otherwise invisible, we thought his microprobes would be able to leverage that technology to find the hidden homeworld. But that's not what happened. The truth is none of us really know where to go from here. We're out of ideas, and we're hoping to enlist your help."

"Really? Well, I'm honored, to be sure. After all, the Administrators have access to more resources than anyone else. The idea that I could contribute something of significance to this search is quite a compliment. But if the twins wish for my aid then why did they not simply come and ask? They are certainly welcome here! I may not have known them in the old days, but I do hold them in high esteem."

"Well, it has to do with the history of all this. You see, the alien signal first appeared in our time, back in the 25th century. I was the one who found it and studied it – in fact, I think I even talked to you about it on at least one occasion. The twins were hoping that since we had prior history with it, maybe we could work on it together and figure something out. They weren't around when the signal first appeared."

"Well, yes and no. As I recall they did appear a few years after the signal stopped repeating itself. In fact, you actually helped conceal them on the Artilect's homeworld after they suspended themselves in time – and you never divulged their secret. That must have been a very difficult thing for you to do."

"Not really. I mean, it's just what had to be done, and so I did it. Back then I had no idea what they were up to but I could tell they wanted some privacy and so I arranged it for them. Besides, it's not like I had a lot of friends I could tell. The only person I really got along with was Dr. Mazatl and I knew not to tell him. If he ever found out then the Artilect would have as well, and that would have changed everything. I did what had to be done."

"You know, you led a very significant life, if you think about it," Grimes commented. "Not only did you make sure that the twins were Administrators on both the Nehemiah IV probes and the Artilect, but you were also instrumental in constructing the Artilect himself – and you granted safe passage into the future for Amy and Amanda. Those acts had a radical impact on the future. If it had not been for you then 73rd century Mars would never have been revived and the people of Earth would not have been saved."

"It was all the Lord's doing," Victor said. "Like I said earlier, He worked through me to accomplish His will. Things could have worked out very differently, you know. God put me at the right

place at the right time and gave me what I needed. My life *definitely* didn't seem very exciting or useful at the time, but it turned out to be significant in the end. I just wish I hadn't crashed the *Vanguard* into that planet and obliterated it. That was kind of embarrassing. Of all the ways to die, that *really* wasn't the one I was hoping for."

"And yet even that act was significant. From what I understand, that accident created a unique anomaly in spacetime. That very anomaly captured the alien signals and refracted them into the past back to you. There is something special about that point in space. The fact that it still exists indicates that it may have a purpose we have not uncovered. So even that act may yet have significance."

"You know, it's odd how many things we did in the old days that have echoed into eternity! Back in the 25th century everything seemed so bleak. There wasn't a lot of hope. The Vaults took over everything, you were murdered, Lane used the swarms to destroy the Ranger worlds, and everyone died. It seemed like everything was lost."

"And yet it wasn't," Grimes commented. "Look at us now! Countless worlds are full of life and new ones are being settled every day. The galaxy isn't dead at all; it's alive and full of endless wonder. Xanthe is alive, you and I are alive, and this university has more applicants than we can possibly accept. In the end Lane and the forces of evil lost everything. The Lord won and the future is bright indeed. The evil days will never return and we have goodness and grace to look forward to in all the ages to come. These are good times, Victor, and they will only get better."

"I couldn't agree more. So, I know that you're busy, but do you think you could help us in our search? You do have a knack for everything that's odd, unusual, and strange."

"I think the word you are looking for is *paranormal*," Grimes remarked. "And what you say is quite true. Yes, I will help you, for the answer to this riddle is very easy – in fact, it's almost trivial. Gather a meeting of the Administrators. When they are ready, let me know and I will explain what to do next."