

CHAPTER 26: RELEASE

Log date: April 16, 2451

Location: Xanthe

Log note: The day of judgment always comes

CARROLL LANE STOOD IN AN EMPTY STREET in the crumbling metropolis of Star City. The skyscrapers that surrounded him were decaying into ruin, but that did not concern him. He hated the physical world and enjoyed seeing it destroyed. His passion was for the virtual world, where anything was possible and there were no limits. The physical world was a dangerous and poisonous place – a place that crushed your dreams and caused endless pain.

Lane was going to end that pain once and for all. He was going to put the physical world out of its misery. By the time he was done only *his* world would remain – a paradise of endless possibilities. Yes, the physical world would struggle. It would defend itself and try to survive. But in the end it would lose. Lane would see to that.

The developer looked down at the small glass vial he was holding in his hand and then glanced up at the night sky. It had taken him two years to perfect the contents of that vial, but now, in 2451, it was time. The sky above him was utterly black; there were no stars. He knew that the stars were out there, though. Beyond the Wall that guarded Tau Ceti there were billions of stars in billions of galaxies. The stars went on and on to the edge of the universe itself.

Most of those stars were of no interest to him. Sure, the Diano Corporation was obsessed with them. They had some crazy dream that one day the entire universe would be inhabited. They had spent centuries sending automated replicating probes out to the farthest reaches of the galaxy. All of that was an utter waste of time. Lane had already built mankind's future, and it was underground – not out among the callous void.

The only stars that Lane cared about were the Ranger worlds that were threatening his perfect future. Lane's microbots were designed to only target the inhabited worlds. Lane cared nothing for all of the empty worlds that would remain uninhabited for the rest of time. All he wanted to do was eliminate those who might one day threaten his kingdom.

Fortunately the Diano Corporation had made it easy for him. Since they had abandoned their silly deep-space project and returned to the Ranger worlds, they were now within his reach. They had even left the Diano Building unlocked and given him access to all their technology. It had actually been fairly easy to take that information and use it to design the perfect weapon – and that is precisely what he held in his hand.

Lane had put a lot of thought into those tiny machines. The Vault project had been the creation of entire teams of people, but the microbots were entirely his work. In a way they were his greatest achievement. The nanobots in the vial were actually seeds. When he released them they would leave the Tau Ceti system and find an uninhabited planet. Once there they would consume its resources and transform themselves into mighty weapons of war. They would replicate until they reached staggering numbers, and then they would find a Ranger world and attack it.

If the first attack failed and some bots were captured it would be impossible to trace the swarm back to him. There was nothing in their code that connected them back to Lane or Xanthe. All

evidence of their origins had been carefully erased.

Lane was tempted to attack all of the Ranger worlds at once but he thought that was too risky. This was his first attempt at designing attack bots, and for all he knew he might have made some critical error. He wanted to test them against one world first and see how that went. If the bots were successful they would consume that world's resources, regroup, and attack again. The Ranger worlds were all well-known and their positions had been programmed into the bots. They knew what their targets were.

Lane had also added a search feature that would scan for ships flying through Ranger space. He didn't want anyone trying to leave inhabited space in order to form a new settlement elsewhere. That programming, though, would activate later.

If the bots failed then he would go back to work and enhance his design. If they succeeded then they would consume all of the Ranger star systems. All Lane had to do was watch and wait.

Lane smiled to himself. Soon the stars above him would be uninhabited. By the time his bots were done the Vaults would be all that was left. Humanity's future would finally be secure.

With a feeling of immense triumph he opened the vial. The nanobots flew out into the air and disappeared. Lane smiled as he watched them go. He then turned around and began the short walk back to his Vault.

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The Ranger star systems were scattered over a fairly small area. Over the past twenty years the Rangers had used the Nehemiah IV technology to enrich their planets, but they had not founded any new colonies. After all, why would anyone want to go into the unfriendly depths of space when they had everything they needed right there at home?

As the years went by Governor Sellers went to great lengths to make Procyon B the greatest planet the Rangers had ever known. The governor did not rest until everything was perfect. Every last square mile of the planet had been touched by modern technology in some way. The weather was carefully controlled and perfect. Every lawn and garden was immaculately maintained by precision robotic gardeners. Every skyscraper was made out of the finest materials and decorated in the most extravagant way possible. Every citizen was cared for by robots that catered to their every whim.

In the bad old days civilization had to be maintained by a group of dedicated Diano employees. Thanks to the automated maintenance bots that the Corporation had designed decades ago, that was no longer necessary. Everything could now be handled entirely by machines. There was no need for people to do anything other than give the machines their list of demands.

Life was perfect. People spent their days eating and drinking and doing whatever they pleased. There was no concern for tomorrow because everyone always had whatever they wanted. Life was just one big endless party. No one needed to work because the automation technology took care of production and maintenance. It was an easy, careless existence.

It was an existence that was about to come to a brutal end.

The attack bots spent two weeks growing and replicating on a distant, uninhabited world. Once they had assumed their full size and strength they warped across space to the first target on Lane's list: Procyon B. The cloud of bots was truly massive. Each bot had grown to about a foot across, and the swarm cloud itself was more than five hundred miles wide. It was a terrifying sight. It had a single

goal in mind: the complete eradication of a Ranger world.

The giant swarm crossed into the Procyon B star system without being noticed. Governor Sellers had put tremendous time and effort into creating a luxurious life for his people, but he had never given any thought to protecting what he had created. Defense simply wasn't on his list of priorities. The few defense programs that had existed were shut down years ago, and there wasn't a single soldier left anywhere on the planet. After all, who was there to guard against? There was plenty of riches for everyone and there were no hostile groups out among the stars.

As the bot cloud drew closer to the planet, no alarms were triggered. Not a single person took notice of the giant threat that was headed toward them. The automated systems that mankind had put in place did not think the cloud was unusual. It did not fall into the category of events that Seller's robots were designed to care about. Since it wasn't deemed important the robots did not notify anyone that something odd was going on.

The first time the citizens noticed the swarm was when an indistinct black cloud appeared high in the sky. People who were outside saw it approaching from overhead. Since it was strange and new a few people paused to watch it. As they watched, the swarm grew closer and the black cloud grew larger and darker. Soon it blotted out half the sky.

People were still not concerned. They were a bit puzzled, but they didn't find it alarming. Nothing alarming had happened in more than a generation. The cloud was a curiosity, but nothing more. For all they knew it was just Seller's latest project.

And then the bots attacked.

When Lane designed the swarm he taught it how to select strategic targets. It was critical to immediately destroy the planet's ability to fight back. The bots had no good way to defend themselves; they were purely an attacking force. Once the planet was helpless the carnage would begin.

Governor Sellers had arranged for Grimes' Nehemiah IV probe to be parked in a giant field outside the capitol city. Since it had served its purpose it was no longer needed, but Sellers wanted to show it off as his trophy. A few people occasionally stopped by to see it but for the most part no one really cared. People loved the free stuff its technology gave them, but they weren't interested in what was producing all the goods their lives depended upon.

Lane knew that the Nehemiah IV probe was powerful enough to wipe out his entire swarm, so he made sure that it was his first target. As soon as the swarm was in range they attacked the probe with billions of tiny antiparticle beams. The Nehemiah IV probe was instantly cut into shrapnel and exploded with nuclear fury. The explosion was so violent it even damaged the swarm – but it hardly made a dent in a cloud five hundred miles wide.

When the people heard the explosion and felt the ground shake beneath their feet they knew something was wrong. They began to panic – but it was too late. They could run but they would not get far. The bots were simply too fast.

Once the Nehemiah IV probe was destroyed the bots scanned the area for weapons. The only weapons they found were old, decaying, and unmanned, but they still targeted them for destruction. While the Nehemiah IV probe was still exploding the swarm cloud targeted the planet's gun placements. They, too, exploded violently, destroying entire city blocks around them.

The probes then attacked the decaying space fighters that were parked in forgotten hangars in an empty air force base. It took them less than a second to blow every one of them apart.

The swarm was utterly relentless. A curtain of fiery particle beams rained down from the sky. Every single one of Sellers' zero-point-energy plants was destroyed. The planet's communication arrays were wiped out. The nuclatomizers were destroyed. The automated repair bots were blown apart. The destruction was brutal, loud, and terrifying. Each attack vaporized a city block. Fires broke out and smoke poured into the air.

But the attack was not over. Once the planet was helpless and its systems were rendered inoperable, the bots opened fire on the city itself. In a ferocious blast of energy the bots tore apart every building, every house, and every street. They spread over the entire surface of the planet and hunted down every settlement, every person, and every living thing. No one managed to escape.

Once the last city was destroyed the swarm *still* did not stop. The bots began blasting away at the very surface of the planet. They wanted to destroy every last trace of life and then irradiate and bake the ground so it could never be inhabited again. Even the planet's atmosphere would be destroyed. The planet would become a corpse.

This process would take a few weeks to complete, but it would be utterly thorough. Once it was over the bots would automatically move on to the next world on their target list.

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When the bot swarm invaded Procyon B, their approach to the planet and their initial attack was captured on video. This video was automatically broadcast to the rest of the Ranger worlds, who watched the attack in horror until the communication arrays were destroyed. The attack came as a complete shock to the Rangers and sent them into an immediate state of utter, blind panic. No one knew what to do or how much time they had before they were targeted. Were the bots going to destroy their world next?

Within hours of the attack the leaders of the surviving Ranger worlds held a virtual conference. Governor Sellers would normally have led a conference like this, but since he was killed in the attack the leadership position was left vacant. Michael Rhodes, the governor of Cygni, was in attendance, as was Ryan Davidson, the governor of Gliese. Greg Ross from the Luyten system also came. Governors Cary, Knapp, and Hartman connected to the meeting, but the leaders of the other Ranger worlds could not be reached for comment.

Davidson began the meeting. "We cannot delay. Whatever we do must be done quickly. What happened to Sellers could happen to us next! Every moment we spend waiting could be our last."

"I agree," Rhodes replied. "It seems that we are utterly defenseless against this threat. I fear we have become too careless. Our wealth and success has blinded us to all potential danger."

Ross spoke up. "But how could this happen? Where did this enemy come from? Who could have built this attack force?"

Davidson glared at him. "Are you insinuating that *I* attacked Procyon B? How *dare* you! I had nothing whatsoever to do with this."

"Of course you didn't," Rhodes replied quickly. "None of us did. Sellers was attacked with alien technology. I don't know what that swarm was but it definitely wasn't Ranger tech. I think we were attacked by some kind of alien race."

"Impossible!" Davidson thundered. "You are fools. If there were alien races out among the stars then we would know about it. You seem to forget that the Diano Corporation has spent *five hundred years* searching the stars for treasures. If there was even a single world out there that was

inhabited we would have found it by now. There are no hidden worlds with alien races. That is impossible."

Ross spoke up. "Then perhaps the enemy is closer to home. I hate to even suggest this, but is it possible that the Diano Corporation is behind the attack? After all, they've spent the past twenty years out in deep space doing who knows what. Could they have built these bots?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" Rhodes replied. "The Corporation builds enormous probes that are miles long. They have never designed micromachines. Everything they've ever done has been on an enormous scale. Besides, when the Corporation finished whatever it was doing they relocated to Ranger space. Many of its former employees were living on Procyon B and were killed in the attack. Do you really think they would have attacked *themselves* and blown up their own homes? Be reasonable. If the Corporation was going to wipe us out they would have done that *before* they returned."

Davidson pounded the table. "It doesn't matter who is responsible! We can figure that out later. Our primary focus should be finding a way to defend ourselves. What are our options?"

Rhodes spoke up. "Well, one option would be to build weapons. It's true that the Nehemiah IV was destroyed in the attack, but we all have ZPEs. I'm sure we could find some weapon blueprints lying around somewhere. It probably wouldn't take us too long to build ourselves a sizable defense force."

"That's not going to work," Ross replied. "I admit I don't know a lot about weapons, but I'm pretty sure we don't have anything that was designed to attack a swarm of incredibly tiny machines. We've never faced a threat like that before. I really don't think we're going to find anything that might be an effective countermeasure against whatever wiped out Procyon B."

"That's a good point," Rhodes admitted. "In order to design a counterweapon we would need to know more about whatever attacked Sellers. At this point all we can do is guess, and I don't want to risk our future on guesswork. We need more information. If we could capture a swarm bot – and I don't know if that's even possible – then maybe we could study it and find a weakness."

"We are the ones who are full of weakness!" Davidson shouted. "For all we know the next force could be far larger than the one that attacked Procyon B. It could be on its way to our worlds at this very moment! You can speak all you want about 'additional information', but you are not going to get any until another world attacked. We must make a decision based on what we currently know. Anything else is foolishness!"

"Ok," Ross said uncertainly. "So what do we do? Does anyone else have an opinion?"

"Not really," Governor Cary replied indifferently.

"It doesn't make any difference to me either," Governor Knapp replied. "Our government is just going to do whatever everyone else does. We're not even sure we should be worried."

"Are you insane?" Davidson shouted. "Of course you should be worried! What are you thinking?"

"Well, I dunno," Governor Hartman said. "I mean, for all we know Sellers got into a fight with someone. We don't know what he's been doing. Maybe someone had a grudge against him. We don't have any proof that someone is out to get all of us."

"Exactly," Knapp replied.

"So you want *proof*, do you?" Davidson said angrily. "Do you know when you will get that proof? When the black swarm appears in your sky and annihilates all life on your planet. *That* is when you will have proof that the swarms are out to get you! I, for one, am not going to let my world be

destroyed. I am *not* a fool.”

Rhodes spoke up. “Well, given the situation, I think we only have one course of action. All of us need to protect our star systems with a Wall. If we had a Wall in place and shut down all access to the outside, the bots couldn't reach us. Then we would be safe and we could regroup and deal with this threat.”

“That makes sense,” Ross replied. “In fact, that makes a *lot* of sense. I like that idea”

Davidson spoke up. “I do as well. It is a reasonable proposal. But is this something we can achieve? How does one go about building a Wall?”

Ross shrugged. “It can't be that hard. Didn't Alpha Centauri A just build one? I think we've got the pattern lying around somewhere. It should just be a matter of fabricating the equipment and then turning it on. How hard could it be?”

“I guess we'll find out,” Rhodes replied. “So here's what we're going to do. First, we'll immediately start work fabricating Walls to protect all of our star systems. Once that is done we will create some kind of space-based army to protect our planets. That way if the enemy gets through the Wall we'll still have a shot at protecting ourselves. We should also build some kind of alert system so we can see when the swarms are approaching us.”

“Could we use the Nehemiah IV probes to attack the bots?” Ross asked.

“I don't see how,” Rhodes replied. “First of all, the probes are all really far away from us. It would take them years to reach us and I don't think we have that much time. Second, the swarm is composed of really tiny machines and I don't know of *any* weapons that might be effective against them. Third, the probes aren't weaponized. They're not even armed! All they can do is build things, which really wouldn't do us very much good. After all, we can already build things with our ZPEs. I just don't see how the probes could help us. They're not weapons.”

“What about the Diano Corporation? Could they help us out?”

Davidson laughed. “The Corporation is dead! Their employees are scattered and many of them died in the attack. There is no Corporation anymore. We are on our own.”

Ross spoke up. “You know, that reminds me. What about the Vault worlds? Don't we need to warn them?”

“How would we even get in touch with them?” Rhodes asked. “Their entire populations are basically asleep. There's no one to notify. Besides, both Vault systems are protected by Walls already. I think they'll be fine.”

“Enough talk!” Davidson shouted. “I have a Wall to build.” The irate leader disconnected.

“I suppose we all have Walls to build,” Rhodes replied. “It's time for us to get to work.”

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In May 2451 three Walls were built. Davidson, Ross, and Rhodes built Walls to protect Gliese, Luyten, and Cygni. The process proved to be far more difficult than they expected. It turned out that fabricating the equipment was the easy part. Once it was built it had to be positioned in space and then carefully tuned. Each star system was different and it took a lot of careful, precision work to activate the Wall and configure it to be in tune with that planetary system. The three governors leaned heavily on the expertise of the Diano employees that had settled on their planets. It took weeks of trial and effort, but by the end of May all three Walls had been activated.

Governors Cary, Knapp, and Hartman were not as fortunate. They managed to fabricate the

equipment, but when they discovered it would take a lot of effort to put it into place they decided to wait and see what happened. After all, only one star system had been attacked and the swarm hadn't been seen since. Before they took any further action they wanted to see if the threat was actually real. So the Wall machinery remained on their world, unused.

The other Ranger governors ignored the situation completely. Only one of them returned Rhodes' call. He told Rhodes that the swarm threat was overblown and he wasn't concerned about it. Rhodes thought he was being very foolish, but he couldn't get anyone else to listen.

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When the first week of June came the swarm reappeared. The success it had experienced during the Procyon B attack was so complete that the swarms decided to act immediately against all of the remaining worlds. They spent a month creating a dozen swarms to target every Ranger world on their list. On June 3 they simultaneously attacked all of the surviving Ranger star systems.

All of the worlds that were not protected by Walls were utterly annihilated. Since those planets were defenseless the swarms had no problem wiping them out. The bots didn't even face any opposition. It was a simple matter to take down the power grid, destroy the key buildings, wipe out the people, and then begin the process of purging all life from the planet and rendering it uninhabitable. By the end of the day all the Ranger worlds were destroyed and had begun the process of deep irradiation – except for three of them.

The Walls that Davidson, Ross, and Rhodes had built proved to be effective. The swarms were not able to enter their star systems. Since the Governors had not built a Gate there was no way for the swarms to enter. On top of that, the Corporation's employees had made one small enhancement to the Wall. Since there was no Gate they created a small device that could relay information through the Wall. The governors could see the swarms approaching their star system but the swarms could not get in. The three Rangers could talk to one another but no one could enter and no one could leave.

When the swarms could not find a way to attack those star systems they left – but no one believed they were really gone forever. The three governors were convinced that they were still out there, lurking in the darkness. The Rangers were not going to let their guard down so quickly.

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When the news of the bot attacks reached the homeworld of the Artilect it caused tremendous panic. No one understood who was attacking mankind. Some people thought it was an old series of space probes that somehow corrupted itself and gone insane. Others thought that it was some unknown alien race, and a few thought it might be a disgruntled colony somewhere. The one thing everyone agreed upon was that their only hope of survival was to be in a shielded world – and the Artilect was most definitely *not* shielded.

Dr. Mazatl immediately commissioned the creation of a Wall. Since the Wall would interfere with the Artilect's ability to control the probes, he had it made ready but did not turn it on. Instead he deployed a series of long-range sensors that could detect the approach of the swarm. If the swarm headed their way then the Wall would be activated. If the swarms never came then the Wall would be left alone.

This reassured some people, but not everyone. People still felt exposed. They were far away

from the rest of mankind, living among unknown stars that might actually be hostile to them. They were cut off from the rest of civilization. The remaining employees began talking about moving to one of the Vault worlds. They didn't particularly like the idea of living in a Vault, but if the real world was going to be inhabited by killer robots then a fantasy world might be an improvement.

Late one evening, a month after the attacks wiped out all of the unprotected Ranger worlds, Victor went to Dr. Mazatl's office. "I was wondering if you would come to see me," Dr. Mazatl remarked, as Victor walked in the door. "These are grim times."

"These are *horrifying* times," he replied. Victor took his usual seat in front of the director's desk. "Entire planets have been destroyed. Billions of people are dead. It's a nightmare! Now, I admit I wasn't a fan of the Rangers. They killed so many Diano employees over the years, and they assassinated Grimes. At best they were bloodsucking leeches. But I *still* didn't want this. The complete annihilation of an entire planet is just horrifying. It's such a big catastrophe that I can't even mourn for it properly. Somehow it's easier to mourn for one person than for billions."

"I know what you mean, Victor. I never saw it coming. I suspected that the Ranger worlds were heading for problems but I didn't expect this to happen. The attack came out of nowhere. From what I've seen on the video feeds the bots are well designed, very deadly, and have no apparent weaknesses. Whoever built them really knew what they were doing. I just wish I knew who was behind this."

"Isn't it obvious? Think about it. We both know that there aren't any aliens out there. Well, except for the wisps, I guess, but that's a special case. There are only two groups in the galaxy: the Rangers and the Vaults. The Rangers certainly didn't build these things, so therefore it must have been Lane. Lane used to work for us, you know. He's very good at what he does and he has access to our replication technology. This has his fingerprints all over it."

"But why would he do it?" Dr. Mazatl asked. "What's his motive? All he cares about is his virtual worlds. The physical world has no meaning to him. You've talked to him yourself on many occasions – you know what his priorities are. Lane doesn't care what we're doing out here; he thinks we're all wasting our time. Lane has everything that he wants and no one is bothering him. It would take an immense amount of work for him to design the swarms. Why would he invest all that time and effort? It just doesn't make sense."

"I don't think it's that hard to understand. Lane obviously thinks that we're a threat. He's probably worried that we might attack him one day so he decided to attack us first. I used to work with Lane, you know. He was always very aggressive about solving problems – even potential problems. He didn't want to wait until something broke; he preferred to address issues before they caused damage. If Lane thought that we might one day be a threat to him then I could *absolutely* see him doing something. He must have decided to remove the Rangers before the Rangers could remove him."

"I just can't believe it. I simply can't believe it! Lane is *not* a bad person. He might be misguided but he is not evil. Do you realize that you are accusing him of *genocide*? That is just too much to believe."

"Is it? You do remember that he assassinated President Rios, right? And we have no idea what Lane has been doing in his Vaults. We don't even know what the long-term effects of Vault technology are! Remember, Lane has been in his Vault for *twenty years* doing who knows what. Is it really that hard to believe that giving in to your darkest fantasies for decades might have a negative impact on your soul?"

"I suppose there is some truth in that," Dr. Mazatl said reluctantly. "But you still don't have any proof. I'm not willing to convict someone in the absence of evidence."

"I bet if I went back to Xanthe I could prove it," Victor insisted. "I'm sure there's evidence somewhere in the Diano Tower. That must be where Lane went to get the technology he needed to build the bots."

"If you find compelling evidence then I will have to revise my opinion. Until then, though, I am going to think the best of Lane. Does this mean that you are going to return to Xanthe?"

"I think I have to – but not just because I want to prove that Lane is guilty. We also need to think about protecting the Artilect. The Diano Building has all kinds of documents that discuss what we're doing out here. You might have kept the Artilect's actual location a secret, but you weren't secretive about the purpose of this mission. There are probably all kinds of files in the building that say we came out here to build an artificial sentient machine – or, in other words, a *colony*. If the bots are attacking colonies and find out about this one, they might come here to destroy it."

"Perhaps," Dr. Mazatl replied. "But I find that unlikely. First of all they would have to reach us, and it's quite a long journey. Second, the Artilect does have some defenses. The Wall has protected the three surviving Ranger worlds and the two Vault worlds, and it can protect us as well."

"For the time being, yes. But what if the swarm finds a way to get through our Wall? It would be best for everyone if all traces of this project were removed from the Diano Building."

"Possibly. But that is not really the core issue. What we truly need to do is find a way to defeat the swarm itself. Even if you remove all documents that testify about the Artilect's existence, the swarm might start to explore on its own. It could eventually locate not just the Artilect but the Nehemiah worlds as well. It would be best for everyone if the swarms were defeated."

"Is that even possible? Is there some way we could use the Artilect to attack it?"

"Absolutely not!" Dr. Mazatl exclaimed. "The Artilect is *not* a weapon and was *not* designed for war. Just last week Governor Davidson contacted me and asked me that very same thing. I told him that was out of the question. The Artilect is not a weapon; he is an instrument of exploration – and I am going to keep it that way."

"But stop and think about it. The Artilect controls all of the Nehemiah probe worlds, right? Couldn't he have those worlds start making weapons? I mean, if he ramped up the probe's replication schedules he could probably finish colonizing the entire galaxy in a couple years. We could use every planet in the galaxy to mass-produce an unimaginable fighting force and overwhelm the swarms. Even if we lost the first battle we could keep iterating and keep trying. I think we'd be guaranteed to win."

Dr. Mazatl shook his head. "That would be a grave mistake. Activating the uncontrolled replication of the Nehemiah IV probes could have terrible side-effects. We could cause an even bigger disaster than the swarms! But even if it worked, weaponizing the galaxy would create far more problems than the swarms ever could. Do you realize that if the Artilect controlled the entire galaxy, that meant that whoever controlled the Artilect would have absolute power? Why, the leader of the Corporation would be able to rule as dictator for the rest of his life! No one should be allowed to wield that kind of power. The Artilect would be a horrifying weapon of war. It would enable its master to wield a level of power that no one could ever overthrow. He would be an unstoppable force. That must *never* be allowed to happen."

"But the swarms are killing *everything*! Don't we need to do everything possible to defeat them? Isn't wiping out the immediate threat more important than a purely hypothetical danger?"

"The swarms cannot penetrate Walls," Dr. Mazatl pointed out. "It is not a perfect solution but it

does work. The Artilect, though, is a different kind of threat altogether. The swarms are annoying and even deadly but they are not intelligent. The Artilect can *think*. It can reason. If it is turned into a weapon and taught to kill then you would have a *real* problem on your hands. I have no doubt that it could probably defeat the swarms. It could also defeat Walls. In fact, it could even hunt down every last living creature in the galaxy and destroy it. Then for good measure it could use the Nehemiah IV technology to blow up stars! It could wipe out *everything* in the galaxy, down to the last rock."

"But it would never do that! It's not in his character."

"And what if it *did*?" Dr. Mazatl asked. He paused for a moment to think. "You see, Victor, whenever an opportunity presents itself there are two things to think about. Most people only consider the best possible outcome and assume that if they make that choice they will get that outcome. But it is also wise to consider the worst possible outcome. If things go well then that is nice, but what if things go poorly? That is something we must consider. If we turn the Artilect into a weapon then it is quite possible things might *not* go well. How much damage do you think an evil Artilect could do? To me that seems far more dangerous than bots which can be kept at bay by a simple Wall."

"I guess I see your point," Victor replied reluctantly. "As long as the Rangers keep their Wall in place they will be safe. Within our Walls we can continue to study the swarms and eventually find a weapon that can defeat the bots. I've heard some people talk about reprogramming the bots to attack themselves. Perhaps we can fight bots with other bots."

"It will never work," Dr. Mazatl said firmly. "If you take a bot, reprogram it, and launch it, you will have two equal forces fighting against each other. Since they are equal, neither will ever gain the upper hand. All you will get is an endless war. If you truly want to defeat the bots then you need to build a *superior* bot. Then you might have a chance."

"Is that what you're going to do? Are you going to go back to the Rangers and lead the war effort?"

Dr. Mazatl shook his head. "I'm not a weapons expert, Victor. There are plenty of those and I am sure they have already thought about all of this. My place is here. I'm going to stay here as long as I can. What about you?"

"I need to head back to Xanthe. We have secrets there that we need to protect, and I need to find out what Lane's been up to all these years. I know you think the Artilect can defend itself, and maybe you're right, but I would feel better if I cleaned things up."

"You know, it's possible that Lane already has the information that you are trying to hide."

"I don't think so. If he did then we would've been attacked by now. Since we're still alive he must not know where we are."

"Unless he's innocent," Dr. Mazatl pointed out. "That is a possibility."

"We will see," Victor replied.