

CHAPTER 27: ABANDONED

Log date: December 14, 2452

Location: Xanthe

Log note: Setting out on the long journey home

AFTER VICTOR STRYKER MADE THE DECISION to return to Xanthe, he immediately began preparations to relocate. He quickly discovered that getting back to Xanthe was not going to be easy. The swarms made interstellar travel very hazardous. No one wanted to risk running into them in deep space and getting destroyed. Life on the Artilect might not be glamorous, but at least they had a Wall to protect them. Out in the void between the stars they had nothing.

For several months Victor wasn't sure what to do. Then, to his great surprise, Dr. Mazatl stepped forward and solved the problem. The director used the technology from the Nehemiah IV probes to create a monitoring system that could scan deep space for the presence of the swarms. He then contacted Governor Davidson and told him about his new invention. The governor immediately deployed it, since it gave his star system an early warning of an approaching attack. In the past he could only see the swarms when they were right on his doorstep, but now he could track them while they were still more than a hundred light-years away.

Once the other Ranger governors installed the technology as well, Dr. Mazatl was able to build a map of the swarm's routes. Over the course of six months he carefully monitored them and discovered that they had a fixed pattern. Once a month they made a complete cycle through all three of the surviving Ranger star systems. The swarms never went anywhere else and they never approached one of the Vault worlds. Their pattern never changed.

Since Dr. Mazatl knew where the swarms were going to be at any given time, he used that knowledge to chart a course that would keep the refugees from the Artilect safe. He also took the precaution of installing the remote detection technology on board the *Vanguard*. The equipment was very large and required a great deal of power, but the *Vanguard* was so massive that it could easily handle the load.

Victor was not the only one who was leaving for Tau Ceti. Once Dr. Mazatl demonstrated that the Vault worlds were not being attacked, everyone else decided to join Victor on his trip. More than two thousand people – nearly the entire population of the planet – were going to come along. Less than a hundred people would remain behind.

There was still one more problem: how were they going to get into the Tau Ceti system? The Gate was locked and had to be opened from the inside. This seems like an insurmountable obstacle, but Dr. Mazatl solved that problem as well. Since it was still possible to connect to the equipment in the Diano Building, he contacted a robot in Star City and had it go to Vault 37 and request access. The bot was able to get the attention of Adrian and told him that a group of refugees from the swarm wanted to come to Xanthe and relocate into a Vault. Adrian was surprised, but he agreed to help them. He would make sure that they had room when they arrived.

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On December 14, 2452, all of the preparations were finally completed. Victor was one of the last people to teleport off of the Artilect and board the *Vanguard*. He knew that this would be the last time he ever saw the Artilect, and the last time he saw Dr. Mazatl in person. Victor had enjoyed working with the company director for many years and valued him as a friend and coworker. He had tried to get Dr. Mazatl to come with them back to Xanthe but he had refused. Victor suspected that the director would remain with the Artilect until he died.

It was now time to begin the six-month journey back to Xanthe. Victor never thought he would go back there, but here he was. He had a mission to accomplish, and he knew Lane wouldn't make it easy for him. Victor would have to be very careful to make sure that Lane never found out what he was actually doing.

As the *Vanguard* spent months traveling through deep space, Victor kept an eye on the news. Although Dr. Mazatl had assured him that the bots never changed their pattern, Victor still felt uneasy. Six months of activity was not a very long time. At any moment the swarms might do something different and unexpected. It was true that the *Vanguard* could see them coming, but Victor doubted the massive ship could outrun them.

The news, though, never changed. The war against the bots had reached a stalemate. The three worlds that had erected Walls were safe, and the bots never changed their pattern. They kept endlessly trying to attack a star system that they could not enter. The swarm never changed their tactics or tried anything different – they just kept doing the same thing over and over again.

Victor was convinced this was more evidence that Lane was behind the bots. A real army would have realized the attack wasn't working and developed a new strategy. The fact that the bots kept repeating the same commands could only mean that no one was watching them. But Victor knew he would have to find proof before Dr. Mazatl would believe him.

For now the Walls were protecting the Rangers. But how long would that last? Lane would eventually realize that three systems had evaded his attack. What would he do then?

He'll try something else – if I can't stop him before then. I just hope the Rangers will be ready.

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During the six-month trip to Xanthe the Rangers only made one attempt to defeat the bot swarm. Governor Davidson had been able to capture a small number of bots when they came by his protected system, and he reprogrammed them to fight the swarm. These reprogrammed bots were then released into deep space. Once they replicated they attacked the main swarm.

The attack was successful but it was not decisive. Although the attacking force wiped out the swarm, it did not wipe out all of the enemy bots because some of them were in another star system at the time. The surviving bots then replicated and attacked – which failed to completely eliminate the reprogrammed bots. The situation deteriorated into exactly what Dr. Mazatl had predicted: one side attacked the other side, which then regrouped and attacked again. It devolved into an endless war where no one ever won and no progress was ever made. Both sides were equally matched, and neither side ever got the upper hand.

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On June 8th of the following year the *Vanguard* reached the Wall around Tau Ceti. When the ship requested clearance to enter, Adrian opened the Gate and granted them safe passage. Victor was a little surprised that things had gone so smoothly. He was half-expecting Lane to attack them – but apparently he didn't have a problem with people coming to join his Vault. *Maybe this is what he wanted all along*, Victor thought.

The *Vanguard* made its way through the Tau Ceti system and touched down in the abandoned spaceport outside Star City. It was the first time the ship had ever entered a planet's atmosphere and landed. *This is going to be the ship's final resting place*, Victor thought. *It will never go anywhere again. The ship will just sit here on the runway and slowly fall apart until it collapses into ruin.*

Over the course of the next hour the thousands of passengers on board slowly made their way outside. The view that greeted them was jarring. The passengers had spent the last twenty years on the world of the Artillect, which was composed of shiny new machinery that stretched from horizon to horizon. On Xanthe, however, there was nothing but ruins. The runway was cracked, broken, and covered with weeds. The buildings of the spaceport were in serious disrepair. Roofs had collapsed, windows were broken, and trees were growing *inside* the decaying structure. In the distance they could see the skyscrapers of Star City and they did not look any better. The only building that still appeared to be intact was the Diano Building. It towered above the rest of the decaying city – a reminder of the glory that the metropolis had once possessed.

But the passengers were not concerned. After all, none of them were planning on living on the surface. They were going to go into the Vaults and start a new life there. The condition of the surface simply wasn't important.

Victor was the last person off of the ship. He was hoping that by the time he got off, everyone else would be heading for a Vault and he could simply slip away unnoticed. He thought that Adrian would send a robot or something to guide them. After all, why would he bother to leave the comfort of paradise just to pick up some refugees? To his great surprise, though, Adrian was there in person – and Carroll Lane was as well.

Once everyone was off the ship, Adrian spoke up. “Hello, everyone, and welcome to Xanthe! If you will follow me I'll escort you to your Vault. Right this way! Your paradise will begin shortly.”

It was a short message, but it served its purpose. The group formed a very long line behind Adrian and followed him as he began walking down the road.

Victor, however, did not join the group – which Lane noticed immediately. As Victor stood by the *Vanguard* and watched people leave, Lane came over to talk to him.

“I have to say I'm surprised to see you here,” Lane remarked. “I never thought you'd come back. It has been a long time.”

“It certainly has,” Victor agreed. “You've been pretty busy since we left! Your Vaults turned out to be pretty popular.”

“Of course! I told you they would be. You see, I can give people anything that they want. What people want right now is a better world – one without the threat of war, violence, and death. And *they can have it*. I'm not at all surprised to see people coming here seeking refuge. If I was in their place that's exactly what I would be doing too. If more people want to join me in paradise then my doors are wide open. I'm not going to turn anyone away.”

Victor was nervous. He hadn't planned on encountering Lane so soon and he wasn't sure what to do. He needed to get away from him without raising his suspicions. Victor was alone and had no supporters. He needed time to perform his mission.

“So what are you going to do?” Lane asked. “There's room for you in my Vault, you know. My technology has come a long way since I first showed it to you all those years ago. You were one of the very first Vault users, and it would be so appropriate if you were one of the last. I don't know what you've been doing out there among the stars, and to be honest I don't really care. This world doesn't interest me. But I will say this: I can give you whatever you want. I can make every last one of your dreams come true.”

Victor shook his head. “I wish you could, Lane. I really do. The problem is that you and I want different things. I guess I'm one of the few people left who want something that's *real*. Not something that *looks* real or *seems* real or might be real, but something that is *actually real*. I want a better world. I want to see mankind grow and advance and actually do something useful. I want a better tomorrow.”

“Oh, I understand. I think we all want those things. But honestly, Victor, do you really think that any of that is going to happen? You know what reality is like. Do you remember that night when those thugs broke into your apartment and knocked you out? Do you remember the time they crushed my hand? Do you remember how the outsiders took advantage of us and stole from us? This world is a *terrible* place. It always has been and it always will be. People are corrupt and vicious. There's nothing but darkness out there, and that darkness is growing all the time.”

Lane sighed. “Look. I know you mean well. We used to work together, remember? I have a lot of respect for you. You've done your best, but what good did it do? When the Ranger worlds got their hands on a Nehemiah IV probe they used it to fulfill their own fantasies. They didn't do anything useful or productive with them. For all intents and purposes they might as well have gone into a Vault and lived out their fantasies there. I know you're looking for hope but there just isn't any to be had. It's over, Victor. It's done. There's nothing left. Don't hold on to a false hope. Come and join me in my Vault. I can give you something that's *much* better than all of this ruin.”

You have some good points, Victor admitted to himself. But I know that all is not lost. I saw the Stryker Twins. The Artilect from the future went back in time to save them, so there must be a future ahead that doesn't involve a Vault. I don't know what that future looks like but I'm going to protect it. Once I do that my job will be done. You can have your fantasy – I want something real.

“Things do look pretty grim,” Victor said aloud. “And maybe you're right. Maybe the Vaults are all that's left. I'm just not ready to join them yet. This is the first time I've set foot here in years and I'd like to take a look around. You know – see my old home, visit the office, relive some memories. To be honest I never thought I'd set foot here again.”

Lane laughed. “Take all the time you want, my friend, but there's not much to see here. All that's left is ruins and decay. Once you get tired of being alone, let me know and I'll connect you. I'm sure it won't be long.”

Lane then bid Victor goodbye and walked off, leaving Victor alone.

Once he was out of sight Victor began walking toward the Diano Building. He knew what he had to do and he was going to make sure it was done.

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The Diano Building was much larger than Victor remembered. He quickly realized that it would take him a lifetime to physically go through every floor and office. There had to be a better way to process the building and clear it of evidence. Victor was sure that Lane's patience would eventually

run out. He had to be done before Lane came for him. This meant he had to find a better solution – and that meant automation.

Victor found a deactivated maintenance bot and spent a month reprogramming it to find and remove all traces of the Artillect project. Once he was confident it was working, he uploaded the program into all the other working bots he could find. It took him a week to find them and reconfigure them, but he eventually had 97 bots scrubbing the building.

Fortunately the building itself was in good condition. It had been built to last forever and the machinery inside was largely intact. Even the physical structure of the building had decayed very little. From what Victor could tell the building hadn't been attacked in any way. It was just left empty. Victor could find no evidence that anyone had disturbed it.

At first Victor was tempted to simply destroy the entire building and everything it contained. That would have been the surest way to wipe all traces of the project, but he decided against it. If he took that drastic action that then Lane would *definitely* notice and would come after him immediately. But what if Lane hadn't built the bots inside the Diano Building? What if he had done his work in a different location? Victor needed time to search the entire city, and that meant he couldn't do anything that would draw attention to himself. If he just erased the Artillect's information it was unlikely that anyone would ever notice. That data would simply be gone – and who would notice a single leaf missing from a giant forest?

While the bots continued their task Victor decided to take up residence in the building itself. He had to live somewhere and it was the only intact building left. His old apartment outside of Star City was in ruins. The walls had caved in, the ceiling was gone, and the place looked like it had been bombed. On top of that, the subway system that had offered easy transit to and from that neighborhood had fallen into disrepair. Living inside the building just made sense. The apartments were still functional and the ZPE power plant gave him all the materials he needed to survive.

In fact, as far as he could tell, he could live in the building forever. But it was not going to be a particularly rewarding life. There was no one else on the surface of the planet to talk to. He was completely alone.

It took the maintenance bots two months to finished purging the building. One job was done – but there was still one more to do. To Victor's great disappointment they had not found any files relating to the swarms. That meant that either Lane was innocent or he had done his design work elsewhere.

Victor reprogrammed the bots to search the entire city for any traces of anything that might relate to swarms. The machines could cover the city in a matter of months and would do a far more thorough job than Victor ever could. In the meantime all he could do was wait – wait and try to figure out what to do with all the time he had on his hands. As far as he could see he didn't have a lot of good options.

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In order to stay sane Victor made it a habit to call Dr. Mazatl once a week. The conversation was usually the highlight of his week, since it was the only time that he had someone else to talk to.

“It would seem that I am now in the same situation that you are,” Dr. Mazatl remarked one day. “Another starship has left this world, bringing with it the last inhabitants of the planet. I am now the only person who remains.”

"You didn't go with them?" Victor asked, surprised.

Dr. Mazatl shook his head. "Why would I go with them? My work is here. On this world I have something to do – a purpose. If I accompanied them to one of the Vault worlds I would be aimless. I want to *do* something with my life, Victor. I want to achieve something."

"You *have* achieved something! You built the Nehemiah IV probes and the Artilect. The Artilect has been fully functional for years now. I'm really not sure what else there is to be done."

"That is all true. To be honest, he's advanced so far now that I really have nothing else to contribute. But it is fascinating to watch him grow. His mind is remarkably stable. I have great hopes for this project."

"I do too, but aren't the swarms an issue? I mean, no one is even going to consider colonizing any of the probe worlds as long as the swarms are out there. Isn't that a serious problem?"

"The Artilect is aware of the matter. If he sees the bots start to move toward him or his worlds then he will take action against them. The Artilect, though, is purely defensive. He is not going to attack them. He is not a weapon of war and I am not going to turn him into one."

"But something needs to be done about the swarms. They have turned all of us into prisoners and trapped us on our worlds. This situation can't be allowed to continue."

"Do you still think that Lane is responsible for creating them?" Dr. Mazatl asked.

"Of course I do. No one else had the motivation. The problem is I can't prove it. A big project like that would surely have taken significant time, effort, and resources, which means there ought to be evidence. If he created them then he would have left signs of it somewhere. There should be notes, research material, prototypes, and so forth. But I just can't find any evidence. I'm beginning to think that the construction was done on another world – Alpha Centauri A, maybe. I don't see anything in Star City that proves it was done here."

"Then perhaps he is innocent. This may be the work of some unknown enemy."

"Then where is this enemy? The Nehemiah probes are continuing to go from star to star, pushing back the boundaries of our knowledge. In all the centuries we've had space travel we've never found life on another planet. *Never*. If there was some other civilization out there then we would have run into them by now. We haven't exactly made our presence a secret! No, it *has* to be Lane. It's the only explanation that makes sense."

"Perhaps. But whether it's Lane or someone else, the bots continue to have the upper hand. The reprogrammed bots that were launched by the Rangers have not turned the tide of the war. I told Governor Davidson that if he intend to win he needed to find a different approach, but they have ignored my advice. It seems they are content to live within the confines of their Walls. Since they are no longer being directly threatened they see no need to fight at all. They believe they are safe."

"Which they might be – for now," Victor said. "But what if the situation changes? What if the bots learn to overcome their defenses? They're assuming that the threat won't get worse – but that may be a terrible assumption. They should be using this time of peace to put together some kind of counterattack."

"Oh, I quite agree. I have proposed several different possibilities in the past few months but they have all been ignored. I think the Ranger worlds have decided to opt out of this war."

"Is there anything that we can do?"

"Just the two of us?" Dr. Mazatl asked. "Not really. The bots are very sophisticated. I've obtained access to their data schematics, which were created based on the few bots that Governor Davidson managed to capture, and they are truly state-of-the-art. There are some interesting

advances in them that I hadn't considered before. The only way to beat them is to build a bot that is significantly better. The Nehemiah IV probes are vastly more powerful but they would be overwhelmed by the swarm's sheer numbers. In order to build a better bot, though, you'd need a significant leap in technology. That would require an entire team of dedicated people – probably thousands of them. You and I, working alone, aren't going to be able to invent a tracking technology that is so vastly better it can identify a single tiny bot no matter where it is in the galaxy. The best I could do was build something that could track the swarms, which is nice but not that helpful. Remember, it only takes *one* bot to reproduce the entire swarm. You have to eliminate every single last one of them, no matter where they are – and that's just not going to happen.

“No, I'm afraid that if this threat is going to be defeated the Rangers will have to do it themselves. They will have to actually *work* for a change. Since they're not willing to do that, the outcome is obvious – the bots are not going to be defeated. Our only hope now is that the bots will go away on their own. If they don't then it's only a matter of time before the Ranger worlds are crushed. One day something will happen and the Wall defenses will come down, and that will be the end of that.”

“There's a depressing thought! Do you really think there's no hope for humanity?”

“Oh, there is always hope,” Dr. Mazatl replied. “I don't think all is lost. I *do* think there is going to be a tomorrow – otherwise I would never have bothered to build the Artillect in the first place. But our choices have consequences. The Rangers have made some poor choices and I fear those choices will come back to haunt them.”

“So what do we do now?”

“Well, I'm going to stay here and learn what I can. You're welcome to do whatever you want. You have the entire Diano Building to yourself, with all of its power and technology. If you wanted to build something, or research something, or study something, this would be the time to do it. You have all the resources you could ever want. Or you could go into one of the Vaults, I suppose.”

“I definitely do *not* want to do that,” Victor said firmly. “The last thing I want to do is lose track of what's real and what's fake. In the Vaults I would be every bit as alone as I am here, because nothing in them is real. But I would forget that I was alone. I would forget that I was just lying there, dreaming empty dreams and not actually doing anything. I would lose sight of what mattered and I'm not willing to do that. I want to stay awake. I don't want to fall asleep and dream my life away.”

“Then you'll need to find something to do to occupy your time. Otherwise you are going to go mad.”