

## CHAPTER 29: DEPARTURE

**Log date:** June 3, 2458

**Location:** The Artilect homeworld

**Log note:** One last voyage

FOUR YEARS HAD PASSED since the last Diano Corporation employees had abandoned the Artilect and left Dr. Mazatl alone on that massive mechanical world. The director was sad to see them depart but he had no desire to join them. He fully intended on spending the rest of his days on the world that he had built. There was simply no reason for him to go anywhere else.

But his time had run out. In 2458 the Diano Corporation was definitely dying but it was not yet wholly dead. There were still a few employees who cared about the future and who were concerned about the course of action that the Rangers had taken. Martin Yates was deeply worried about the fact that the Rangers had stopped trying to fight the swarms. He was convinced that this would lead to their destruction and he wanted to do something about it while there was still time. With the support of Governor Davidson, Martin contacted Dr. Mazatl and asked him to come to Gliese and lead an effort to destroy the bots once and for all.

Dr. Mazatl was not convinced that this would do any good. The challenge was great and the number of people willing to work was few. But he was forced to admit that trying to save mankind from the swarms was a better use of time than continuing to stay where he was. He could not ignore the request and so he agreed to go.

Since the *Vanguard* had departed for Xanthe five years ago there were no starships left, so Dr. Mazatl used the Artilect to build a new ship for the journey. Once the ship was completed the director knew he had to leave. It was time to depart – but before he left he stopped to say goodbye to the Artilect.

He could have had this final conversation anywhere on the planet. After all, the Artilect was present throughout the world and could be summoned at any point. But, feeling a big nostalgic, Dr. Mazatl decided to stop by Room 917.

When he entered the room he thought back to that fateful day when he and Victor had loaded the Artilect's main program and booted him up for the first time. It seemed so long ago now. So much had happened since then. "This is where it all began," Dr. Mazatl said quietly.

"That is correct, Doctor," the Artilect replied. "After I was taken from the *Vanguard* and moved here, you were the one that issued the command that brought me to life. It was at that moment that I first began to understand."

"And you have never been turned off since that day twenty-seven years ago. You have exceeded all our expectations. I have no trouble believing that you will be able to manage the network and prepare it for human habitation. Your potential is staggering, Andy. I can't begin to imagine what you're capable of doing or becoming. I wish I could be here to see what things will be like a thousand years from now."

"I wish you could as well. I will never forget anyone who worked on my construction. These memories will remain with me forever. I only wish you did not have to go."

As *do I*, Dr. Mazatl thought. He had no desire to return to the corrupt Ranger worlds. But the

war effort was calling him and he had to answer. He could no longer afford to linger behind.

"We never could have built you using a traditional approach, Andy. You were grown, you know. It took years for you to develop to the point where we could turn you on, but all we really did was plant the seeds and tend to them. The past two decades have been your childhood and you are now a fully-developed adult – although, really, you're never going to stop growing. You're something new – a new form of intelligence. Nothing on this scale has ever been done before, and I sincerely doubt it will ever be done again."

"It will be different operating without you," the Artilect replied. "I am used to hearing voices and now yours is the only one left. When you are gone all of the voices will be silent. It will be a new experience."

"I'm sorry it has to be this way – I really am. I wish I could stay but the Board is right. You're working better than we could have hoped and there's really nothing left for me to do. I suppose it's time for me to go and let you start fulfilling your purpose. It's just hard for me to close up shop and walk away. You're my life's work, after all. I'll never do anything like this again. This was my one chance to make a difference – to do something real that would still be helping people long after history had forgotten me. Now that this is over I'm not sure what to do with my life. At least I can rest in peace, knowing that you're here. That gives me hope."

"Hope?"

"Dark times are coming," Dr. Mazatl said. "It's nothing that you need to worry about. People are doing terrible things to each other, things that should never be done. But that will not last forever. When the darkness has passed people will come looking for you and you'll be there to greet them. Don't worry too much about us – just take care of yourself. The important thing is for you to still be here a thousand years from now, when all of this is behind us and people are sane again."

"I will miss you, my father," the Artilect replied. "I will miss all of you."

"I know you will. You have a lot of heart, Andy. But try not to think about us too much. You do have a job to do, after all. And it won't be too long before you'll have friends again."

"Can I expect to receive messages from the Diano Corporation?" the Artilect asked.

"Oh, of course, don't worry. We'll be checking in on you."

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Once his final conversation with the Artilect had ended, Dr. Mazatl teleported to his ship and departed. He then began the long journey back to the Ranger systems.

In his heart he sincerely hoped that he had not lied to the Artilect. He hoped that the Corporation would succeed in defeating the bots and would live to contact the Artilect again. He hoped that the Artilect's long vigil in the darkness would not be in vain, and that one day people actually would go and inhabit the worlds that he was building.

But he was afraid. As the years had dragged on he began to think that Victor was right. Surely if aliens had created the bots they would have shown themselves by now. Surely the probes would have seen some sign of alien life on another world – or perhaps a sign of their conquest and destruction. But nothing was ever found.

The culprit *had* to be Lane. But even if it was Lane the director did not see how that knowledge could help them. Lane would never admit guilt and he would never deactivate his bots – if such an override command even existed, which seemed unlikely.

Dr. Mazatl was afraid that in the end Lane was going to win and mankind would be defeated. There was always a chance he was wrong – but it was a slim one.

*Take care, Andy, Dr. Mazatl thought. I will never forget you. I pray that mankind does not forget you either.*

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By June of 2458 Victor Stryker had spent five long years on Xanthe, alone. The presence of the Vaults were a constant temptation but Victor refused to give in. He knew that what they offered was not real and he wanted no part of it. Reality might be terrible but it was at least something he could grasp. He had no desire to spend the rest of his life trapped in his own dreams.

There were times when he considered going to Gliese. After all, the three surviving Ranger worlds were full of people – unlike Xanthe, which was empty. But space travel was very dangerous now. In the past year the swarms had unexpectedly changed their behavior. He didn't know if it was a flaw in their programming or a mistake in replication, but the swarms had multiplied by the millions and now constantly patrolled interstellar space. Going from star system to star system meant certain death.

In fact, when Victor heard that Dr. Mazatl had left the Artilect's homeworld he became gravely concerned for his safety. He hoped that the director would survive the trip but he had his doubts. As far as Victor could tell the days of space travel were over. Mankind had been grounded by machines – machines that Lane had surely built.

Since Victor had all the time in the world and nothing to do, he decided to make it his personal task to bring Star City back to life again. The functional ZPE in the Diano Building gave Victor an almost unlimited supply of resources. The programmer created hundreds of maintenance bots and dispatched them throughout the city. There were countless skyscrapers that needed repair, streets that needed repaving, and pipes that were long overdue for maintenance. Victor wanted to make the city utterly spotless. The inhabitants of Xanthe may have left it to crumble and decay, but Victor refused to sit by and watch his hometown fall into ruin. The city was his now and he was going to take care of it. *Besides, it gives me something to do, Victor thought. And who knows – perhaps one of my bots will finally find the missing evidence that Lane is behind the swarms.*

He also spent time experimenting with artificial intelligence. The AI software that had been written for the Artilect required an entire planet in order to run – and even if there was a planetary machine he could use, he didn't have a copy of the software or a wisp to bring it to life. But he did have the AI research that was in the Diano Building, so he decided to build some simplified AI cores.

Instead of trying build a stable AI, Victor went another route. He did not want to become lost in his own construction and start to think that his AI personalities were actually real. Xanthe had too many illusions as it was and he didn't want to create even more. Victor therefore decided to make all of his AI cores unbalanced and insane. Over the years Victor created dozens of different programs, all of which were crazy and irrational in one way or another. Talking to them was hilarious and gave him something fun to do.

So Victor filled his days with the repair of Star City. His efforts, however, did not go unnoticed.

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For the first time since the *Vanguard* had returned to Xanthe, Carroll Lane had been forced to leave the comfort of his Vault and return to the physical world. As Lane got older, each trip outside the Vault upset him more than the last. He didn't like being outside his synthetic world. The real world annoyed him and caused him so much trouble. Every time he had to return to Xanthe he felt like he was leaving paradise and entering into some sort of nightmare.

But it had to be done. Lane had a series of difficult situations on his hands, and this time he could not force Adrian to resolve them. His first problem was that the war against the Rangers had reached a stalemate. The surviving worlds were protected behind Walls – a barrier that even he could not find a way to penetrate. Lane knew that he could not let those colonies survive. If he did then it was only a matter of time before they defeated the swarms and destroyed him. He had to destroy them first, which meant he had to find a way to get his army of bots inside their territory.

The second problem he faced was Dr. Mazatl. Lane's bots had captured the director's transmissions, and Lane knew that he was on his way to Ranger territory. If he arrived safely then he would probably find a way to beat Lane's bots and end the war. Lane had a great deal of respect for the director and knew that he was a powerful foe. Dr. Mazatl had to be dealt with.

The third problem was Victor Stryker. Victor had been living on the surface of Xanthe for years now and it was making Lane nervous. After all, it would be trivial for Victor to sneak into the Vault and kill them in their sleep. Something had to be done. Victor was a loose end and Lane didn't like loose ends.

Fortunately there were ways to solve all of these problems. Lane knew exactly what to do.

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Victor Stryker was outside on that particular afternoon. June 28<sup>th</sup> was just another day to him – he was walking down the streets of Xanthe and checking on the progress of his maintenance robots. Victor had read the reports that stated his robots were making fantastic progress, but he wanted to see it for himself. The reports, after all, could be flawed; the robots may have missed something important.

But as far as he could see things really *were* coming along well. The city was being repaired and decades of neglect were being reversed. The robots were putting things back in order. The only downside was that the repaired city was even more creepy than the ruined one. A ruined and empty city was a normal sight. Ruins typically were abandoned, after all. But a *pristine* and empty city seemed like a violation of nature. Victor hated the emptiness around him. But at least it was progress.

Victor was so engrossed in his work that he didn't notice the person who was approaching him. He had been alone in Star City for so many years that he had almost forgotten he shared the planet with hundreds of thousands of other people. When Lane called out to him he was taken completely by surprise.

Victor turned his head and looked down the street. It took him a moment to realize that the approaching figure was a human being, not a robot. Lane was walking down the sidewalk toward him. "There you are!" Lane called out. "I've been looking for you."

Victor's pulse quickened. *What in the world is Lane doing here? He can't possibly be coming to do me a favor! This isn't going to end well. I expected a lot of things but not an in-person visit.*

Victor quickly glanced down at the control box he was holding, which he had been using to check on the work of his maintenance bots. He discreetly pressed a few buttons and then put it in his

pocket. "Is that you, Lane?" Victor called out. "What brings you here?"

Lane walked over to Victor and sat down on a bench on the sidewalk. "I hope you don't mind if I take a seat. I don't do a lot of walking these days, you know. Coming back to the physical world is always a bit jarring."

"I'm sure it is. So what are you doing here?"

"Oh, I just wanted to check up on you. See how you were doing. It looks to me like you've been keeping yourself pretty busy! Are you really trying to repair the entire city?"

"Of course! It's my city, you know. I was born here and I've lived here for a large part of my life. I don't like seeing it decaying and falling apart. I'm trying to fix it up again."

"But why bother? What purpose does that serve? No one will ever live in it again, you know. Once you die it will fall into ruin and no one will miss it. What's the point of this labor?"

"See, that's where I disagree with you. I think that people *will* live in Star City again. I think this city has a future – and the Vaults do not. There are still a billion people out there who live in the physical world – the *real* world. They have no intention of ever living in Vaults. They are going to inherit the stars one day, Lane, while you and your friends die in your dreamworlds. You are the one who picked the road that leads to a dead end."

"I don't think so," Lane commented. "I think *I'm* going to win. You see, my world is *better* and I'm fighting for it. I'm going to defend it and I have every confidence of victory. In fact, I think victory is very close now. All I have to do is reach out and take it."

"What are you talking about? No one is attacking you. In fact, no one has *ever* attacked you. Except for that one time with President Rios, I guess, but he died decades ago. You're not even being threatened!"

"And how long will that last? You can't trust the Rangers, Victor. I'm *not* just going to sit idly by and wait for them to come to me. The only way to deal with threats is preemptively – by destroying them before they destroy you. You don't wait for a nest of wasps to attack you before you destroy it. No, you aggressively wipe it out before it has the chance to do you any harm. That is the smart move."

"What are you saying?"

Lane laughed. "Don't play dumb, Victor. I know you believe I'm behind the bot swarms, and I know you're here to find evidence to prove it. Do you think I'm a complete idiot? I know you've spent years searching for proof and haven't found anything. Do you know why you haven't found any proof? It's because you looked in the wrong place."

Victor was puzzled for a moment and then suddenly realized he had made a colossal mistake. "Of course! You *hate* reality. You never would have done your design work in the real world. Instead you would have found the data you needed, uploaded it to your Vault, and designed them in your virtual world. There was never any evidence out here to find."

"It's so obvious, isn't it?" Lane asked. "The point is, you lost. You had your chance and now it's gone. Since I've become tired of this game I've decided to make you an offer."

"An offer?"

"Yes, an offer. Despite what you may think I'm a reasonable man. Join us, Victor. Come and live in a Vault. It's really not a bad life. If you do that then I'll let you live and you can have whatever fantasy you want for the rest of your life. You can have peace. I have nothing against you personally, you know. We were friends once. At any time over these past four years you could have gone down to Vault 37 and killed me, and yet you never did. I'm willing to make peace."

"What happens if I want to stay here in Star City?" Victor asked.

“Well, I'm afraid that's going to be impossible. You see, I've decided to destroy this city. Completely. Nothing on the surface is going to survive. If you want to live then come with us. If you choose to remain here then this is where our paths must part.”

Victor looked up and noticed that a swarm of bots had appeared in the sky. It wasn't a very big swarm, but he knew it was big enough.

“Don't do this,” Victor said urgently. “You're making a terrible mistake. You're not killing me, Lane; what you are really doing is killing yourself and—”

Lane interrupted him. “Oh, spare me the speech about hell and judgment. Grimes already tried that decades ago. The truth is that if Grimes had stayed here in my Vault he would still be alive today. Ironic, isn't it? His choice to leave Xanthe got him killed. And who killed him? The *Rangers*. It wasn't me, Victor. It was your 'friends'.”

Lane stood to his feet. “Anyway, I know you probably want to kill me right now, but if you try to attack me the bots up there will strike you down where you stand. I'm out of your reach. But you still have a chance to save yourself. In ten minutes those bots will level everything. If you are in Vault 37 when those ten minutes expire then you will be safe. If you aren't then you'll be dead. The choice is up to you.”

Lane turned around and casually strolled down the street, leaving Victor alone.

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As soon as Lane walked away, Victor raced down the street. *I should have killed him*, Victor thought. *All those years I had a chance, but I never took it. I just couldn't bring myself to kill him when I couldn't prove he was behind the swarms. What if I was wrong? What if it was someone else and he was innocent? Now that I know for sure he's behind them it's too late to do anything about it. All I can do is try to escape.*

Victor's maintenance bots had spent the past four years repairing and maintaining the city. While they went about their jobs he had also made sure that they maintained the *Vanguard*. For the past few years the massive ship had been primed and ready for immediate departure. Victor was extremely glad that he had taken that precaution. His life now depended upon it.

There would not be much time. The bot swarm was already hovering overhead and was ready to strike. Lane had told Victor that he had ten minutes, but Victor had no way of knowing if Lane would keep his word.

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When Lane walked back into Vault 37 he strolled to his office and sat down behind his desk. He lazily opened a console and sent a single command to his bot swarm. This command added a new target to their roster – a certain starship that was flying toward Ranger space.

Dr. Mazatl had been hoping that his ship would go unnoticed since its course had been carefully designed to avoid the swarms. However, Lane had captured the director's transmissions and knew where his starship was located. Since his ship was unarmed it would be easy to destroy.

The swarm jumped into hyperspace and vanished. It would take about a week for them to reach Dr. Mazatl's ship, but the outcome was already determined. There was no way that he could escape. When the bots reached him they would vaporize his ship – and that would be the end of that.

*I still have the three Ranger colonies to deal with, Lane thought to himself. But without Dr. Mazatl to lead them they won't do much of anything. Who knows – they might even let their Walls collapse from sheer neglect! Without a leader in charge they're going to be hopeless. Anyway, I'm tired. I can deal with the colonies later.*

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Victor reached the *Vanguard* with three minutes to spare. When he saw the ship he almost screamed in horror. He belatedly realized that he had told his bots to repair the ship's *machinery*. He had never said anything about maintaining the ship's hull. The rain and humidity of the past four years had nearly destroyed the vessel. The hull was rusted, battered, and had gaping holes. He could patch those with emergency force fields but the ship clearly had major damage. *If only I had come to visit the ship!* he thought desperately. *If I had made even one visit to it I could have seen the terrible oversight I had made. The bots will only do what they are programmed to do. What was I thinking?*

But there was no time to waste. Victor ran onto the *Vanguard* and immediately gave the command for liftoff. The ship had been waiting for that order for years. As soon as the command was given the ship ignited its engines and soared off the surface of the planet.

Victor then gave another command. This one was not aimed at the starship but at the weapons he had hidden throughout the city. As the bot swarm waited patiently in the sky, Victor's hidden bombs erupted and released a powerful electromagnetic pulse.

He knew that Lane's bots had been hardened against EMP but he also knew they were so small that they couldn't defend themselves against everything. There were some wavelengths of radiation they *could* defend against and there were others they could not. Victor had used their schematics to determine just what to target. He couldn't destroy the swarm but he could buy himself some time.

With a brilliant flash of blue light, Victor's EMP weapons went off. The intense radiation pierced the swarm's shielding and temporarily knocked them offline. The disabled bots slowly fell to the surface as they struggled to reboot and resume normal operation.

Unfortunately the blast also had a tremendous impact on Star City. All of the electronics within range of the blast were completely fried, and Victor's army of maintenance bots were destroyed. Victor hated to see the city ruined – especially after all the years he had spent fixing it – but Lane was going to destroy it anyway. There was no longer anything he could do to save it.

His next task was to leave the Tau Ceti system. Victor had programmed the Wall to allow him to leave, and took pains to make sure Lane could not override that command. His biggest danger at this point was the swarms. It was only a matter of time before they came back online and chased him down. Victor was desperately hoping that the aging, rusted, heavily-damaged *Vanguard* would be able to outrun them – but he doubted that he was that lucky.

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The *Vanguard* raced into space and began its journey to the far reaches of the Tau Ceti system. Victor was glad to see that he wasn't being followed – but at the same time he was nervous. One thing he knew about Lane was that he was thorough. Lane would never go back into his virtual world without first making sure that he had accomplished his goal. When Lane saw that his swarm had been defeated and Victor had escaped, he would definitely do something about it. Lane would never let

Victor go – especially not after confessing that he was behind the swarms.

Victor already had a new destination in mind. The galaxy was full of uninhabited star systems that had been terraformed by the Nehemiah probes. He could go and live on any of them. They were far away from the swarms and they were more than able to sustain life. It's true that it would be a lonely existence, but at this point there weren't a lot of good options. Trying to make it to one of the Ranger worlds would have been suicide – the interstellar bot swarms would never allow it.

As the *Vanguard* ran on auto-pilot Victor made his way to the control deck. He then sat down in the captain's chair and waited. Minutes ticked by. Nothing in particular happened – but with each passing minute Victor became more nervous. To his surprise, the starship reached the Gate without incident. The Gate opened and the ship exited out into interstellar space – right into the path of an oncoming swarm.

*I can't believe it, Victor thought with horror. Lane really did think of everything. He put a swarm in Star City to catch me, and just to be safe he stationed one outside the Gate as well. No wonder I wasn't chased off the planet – there was no need! He knew I was going to walk into this ambush because there was no other available path.*

Victor slammed the ship into hyperdrive the instant he saw the swarm. Normally jumps into hyperspace were made with great care and precision, in order to make sure that one arrived at the intended destination. But today there was no time for that. This jump was wild and uncontrolled. Victor had no idea where he was going to end up and he didn't care. Outer space was almost entirely a giant, near-perfect vacuum. There was so little physical matter in deep space that the chance of a collision was miniscule. It was so small that it wasn't even worth worrying about.

The *Vanguard* came out of hyperspace a moment later, but the swarm was still on his trail. How they managed to track his wild jump through hyperspace was something he didn't understand. What he did know was that he had to get away from them or they would destroy his ship and he would die.

So Victor jumped into space once again.

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When the *Vanguard* completed its third jump and was still being followed, Victor knew he had to do something desperate. The bots had limited resources; after all, they were very small machines. The *Vanguard*, however, was enormously large. What Victor needed to do was make a jump so incredibly fantastic that the swarms would not be able to follow him. Victor needed to put everything the ship had into one last, desperate attempt to escape.

With great trepidation Victor disabled the safeguards on the ship and poured all its titanic energy into its hyperdrive. This overtaxed the engines to a dangerous degree and prompted a strong condemnation from the ship's AI, but Victor didn't care. It was all or nothing at this point.

With the ship straining and at its breaking point and the bots close behind him, Victor made one last jump. The *Vanguard* vanished into hyperspace. A moment later it dropped back out – and ran straight into a planet while traveling at more than 99% of the speed of light.

Victor had successfully escaped from the bots. They were now billions of light-years away and had no idea where he had gone. But when the *Vanguard* struck the planet, it completely obliterated that world – along with the ship, and Victor Stryker.

But it did far more than that. The ship had been desperately trying to engage its hyperdrive

when the collision happened. This warped local space – and the titanic, uncontrolled energy of that collision was poured into the warped spacetime and tore it. This created a new singularity that was unlike anything else that had ever existed.

Victor's life had come to a unique and spectacular end. But in a way, his life was just beginning.

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When the *Vanguard* exited the wormhole Victor had a fraction of a second to see that his ship was about to collide with a planet. He barely had enough time to register surprise – and then it was over. The collision happened so quickly that Victor missed it. One moment he was on board the *Vanguard*, and the next moment he was not.

When he came to his senses he found himself standing in an enormous, grassy meadow. Above him was a deep blue sky. On the far horizon he could see a line of beautiful, massive trees – and beyond that, just barely within his vision, was a massive golden city.

Victor wasn't sure where he was but he felt like it was a peaceful and happy place. It had a good sense about it. Even though he had never been here before he somehow knew he wasn't a stranger. *This* was where he belonged. It was as if he had been away all his life and had finally come home.

“Hello?” Victor called out.

“Welcome!” a strong voice replied. Victor suddenly noticed that there was a man standing next to him. Whether he had always been there, or had just appeared, was impossible to say. The man was clearly old – perhaps even ancient – but he had a look of strength and vitality about him.

The man reached out and shook his hand. “It's a pleasure to finally have you here. I've been wanting to meet you for quite some time! You've led quite a life, you know.”

Victor looked at him closely. The man looked vaguely familiar but he couldn't quite place him. “Do we know each other?”

“In a way,” the man replied. “Actually, the two of us are related. You are Victor Stryker, formerly of Star City. I am Timothy Stryker, your ancestor. You're one of my descendents – the last, I think, of the Stryker line. Welcome to Paradise!”

Victor's eyes widened. “Really? You mean I'm dead? Is this Heaven?”

Timothy laughed. “It most certainly is! As far as being dead, though – I think that's a rather poor word to describe your situation. Yes, it's true that your former body is dead. In fact, it's completely vaporized! You hit that planet pretty hard. In fact, that was the largest explosion I've ever seen. People are going to talk about the way you destroyed that star system for years.”

“So *that's* what happened,” Victor said thoughtfully. “If the *Vanguard* hit a planet when it exited the wormhole there's no telling what kind of damage it might have done. I guess I should have been more careful – but, seriously, what were the odds of hitting anything? I was *spectacularly* unlucky.”

“Oh, perhaps. But maybe there's more to the story. Your accident will live on, for you have created a rather unique singularity. You damaged space in a way that I didn't even know was possible. People will be studying what you created for centuries to come.”

“What people? Are you aware of what's been going on back home? There aren't any people left! Lane is going to destroy the three Ranger colonies that survived and that's going to be the end of that. No one will ever know that I obliterated a planet, and no one will ever come to study it.”

Timothy laughed again. "Oh Victor, you have such a narrow perspective. All you can see are the people who are still in the shadow world – the world plagued by sin and death. You have forgotten that there are countless billions of people *here*, in Paradise. These people – and yourself – are very much alive. Your singularity is going to captivate people. In fact, I'm sure that as soon as Professor Grimes hears about it he'll begin researching it immediately. He always did have a fascination for all things unusual and strange."

"Professor Grimes? Oh – of course he's here! It's just strange to think of him as being alive and out there doing things."

"Believe me, Victor, he's led quite a busy life since he arrived. His courses are quite popular and he has a lot of students. But the real fun will begin once the Lord raises our bodies back to life and transforms us into glorious immortals. Then we will go on to inherit the worlds that He has made. But there are still many things that must be done before Judgment Day comes and the old universe is brought to an end. For now it is time for you to rest. You're 71 years old, you know. You've had a long life and have done many things. You can relax now."

"A long and rather unsatisfying life," Victor remarked. "From what I can tell I haven't really accomplished much of anything. I feel like I've wasted my time. I just didn't have a lot of good options – which isn't really an excuse. I know I should have done more."

"You did quite a lot. You played a role in building the Nehemiah IV probes, and you made sure Amy and Amanda Stryker were given administrative access to both the probes and to the Artilect. You worked to build the Artilect itself, and when Amy and Amanda arrived you hid them to make sure they could complete their journey into the future. Five thousand years from now the actions you have taken will make it possible for Mars and Earth to be given a second chance. Your life played a role in the salvation of millions. Without you the people on those two worlds would have been lost."

"Really? I don't understand. How is that possible? I never even visited Sol! And what do you mean, five thousand years from now?"

Timothy smiled. "God can use our lives in ways that we cannot even imagine. He plays a long game, you know, and He doesn't usually tell us what He's up to. God does not call us to do great things for Him. What God calls us to do is to surrender our lives as living sacrifices and allow Him to use us as He pleases. What God does with our lives, and how He uses them, is up to Him. We are simply called to be faithful and walk in His ways. What does the Lord require of us but to do justly, and love mercy, and walk humbly with Him?"

"You were faithful, Victor, and that's what mattered. Your life played a role in events that will happen thousands of years from now. Lane believes that he has won, but in reality he is the one who lost today. His day of judgment may be long delayed but it will still occur. He is facing an eternity of torment in the Lake of Fire – but you have a much better future ahead of yourself. We have a great deal to look forward to."

"That sounds mighty good to me," Victor said.

"It certainly is! I think it's high time we introduced you to Paradise. If you'll come with me I'd like to show you a few things. There are a lot of people who'd like to meet you."