

CHAPTER 30: DEFEAT

Log date: July 4, 2458

Location: Interstellar space

Log note: The long, dark night begins

THE SHIP THAT WAS CARRYING DR. MAZATL continued its journey through interstellar space. As far as the director knew, nothing was wrong. If he had been a bit more paranoid he might have realized that the messages he had been sending to Victor could have put him in danger. After all, if someone traced those messages back to him and discovered his location in space then they might send forces against him. The director should have realized that those messages were going through the Gate at Xanthe in order to reach Victor, which could theoretically give Lane access to them.

But Dr. Mazatl was not a suspicious man. He knew Victor was certain that Lane was behind the swarms, but he simply couldn't bring himself to believe it. There was just no reason for Lane to kill people who weren't a threat to him. It was an unthinkable act. Dr. Mazatl would never do such a thing if he was in Lane's position – and so, therefore, Lane must not be the culprit. The idea that Lane was fundamentally different from him and might come to different conclusions never crossed his mind.

So Dr. Mazatl continued his journey without a single worry or care. He spent all of his time thinking about the war effort and the best way to defeat the swarms. There were many ways to approach the effort, but the problem was always the impossibility of destroying every last one of the bots. If even one bot survived then that was enough to recreate the entire army and start the cycle all over again.

Dr. Mazatl had no way of knowing that Lane had just killed Victor Stryker. Victor's death did not make the news on any planet. In fact, even Lane never found out what happened to Victor. The *Vanguard* was vaporized in a distant galaxy and there were no witnesses or bots around to report it. No one ever found out what happened to him – and neither did Dr. Mazatl. During the last week of his life he thought that Victor was still on Xanthe.

The bots had no trouble finding Dr. Mazatl. His ship did have long-range scanners, but all the reports in the world are of no value if no one evaluates them. When the swarm finally reached the *Valor* he was asleep in bed. The bots attacked his ship with overwhelming force – and in a matter of seconds he was dead and his ship was vaporized. The fight was over before he even realized he was in danger.

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When Victor heard that Dr. Mazatl had been killed he immediately tracked him down. It had been years since the two men had seen each other and they had a lot of catching up to do. Victor eventually found him on the streets of Heaven talking to Ramon Diano, the founder of the Diano Corporation.

“Victor!” Dr. Mazatl exclaimed, surprised. “What are you doing here? I thought you were still on Xanthe. What happened to you?”

“Lane happened to me. When I was on Xanthe he sent a swarm of bots after me, and I ran for

my life. I took the *Vanguard* into space to escape his swarm. Things were going pretty well until I accidentally ran into a planet.”

“You ran into a *planet*?” Dr. Mazatl exclaimed.

“He certainly did!” Ramon Diano replied. “He vaporized himself, the ship, and the planet as well. He created the most fascinating tear in space. It has remarkable properties! I've never seen anything like it.”

“So Lane actually *was* the villain, then,” Dr. Mazatl said thoughtfully.

“Absolutely,” Victor said. “I was right all along. The reason I was never able to find any evidence was because he did all of his design work in his virtual world. There was no physical evidence to be found.”

“So does that mean that Lane wins?” Dr. Mazatl asked.

“Of course not,” Ramon Diano replied firmly. “Evil *never* wins. God may allow it to endure for a time in order to fulfill His purposes, but in the end the Lord will always triumph. Lane may have killed you both but he is the one who has lost. He has killed all the people who were trying to save him and shown him the way of salvation. He is a drowning man who cast away the life preserver that was thrown to him, and he now faces death and destruction. He may live on for a while but he will not prosper. Professor Grimes was right – the way he has chosen leads only to death.”

“But he's going to destroy the Rangers!” Dr. Mazatl pointed out.

“Yes he will,” Ramon Diano replied. “But the Rangers are every bit as corrupt as Lane. They have also been given many opportunities to change their ways and repent, but they have taken none of them. Instead they assassinated Professor Grimes – and they would have eventually killed you as well if you had managed to make it into their territory. Governor Davidson may be aggressive but he is not a reasonable or a sane man. At this time in history there are no good guys. Both sides are evil and corrupt, and both will be destroyed.”

“And what about us?” Dr. Mazatl asked.

Ramon smiled. “As for us, we have a bright future ahead of ourselves! Ahead of us lies an endless eternity of fascinating adventures. In fact, we've already begun work on a number of projects that I think you'll find quite interesting. Your work is not over, director; in fact, it has only just begun. The future is looking quite exciting. What you have done in the past will pale in comparison to what you will do in the ages to come.”

“Oh? Tell me about it.”

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No announcement was made when Dr. Mazatl was killed. His death did not make the news, nor did word of it ever reach the Ranger leadership. The director simply failed to show up. The only person who knew the truth was Lane. His bots had sent him a brief intelligence report of the attack. Lane didn't normally allow his bots to talk to him because he didn't want anyone to find out that he was behind them. In this case he made an exception because he wanted proof that his enemies were dead. Lane was enraged when Victor escaped – but Dr. Mazatl's death soothed him. Even if Victor *had* somehow survived, he would not get very far without the skills and experience of the director.

When Dr. Mazatl failed to arrive on time Governor Davidson eventually came to believe that some sort of accident had happened on the trip. His disappearance was seen as yet more proof that the world outside the Walls was a world that was not worth having. Why bother with space

exploration when mankind had everything they needed right there in their own systems? If they ran out of space on one planet (which was unlikely, given that their population was declining rapidly), there were plenty of other planets around their suns that they could colonize. Within their Walls they were safe, secure, and happy. There was no need to fight the bots.

So the Rangers stopped trying. Why bother? After all, the bots couldn't get in. Their Walls had turned the swarm into an empty threat.

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Lane was deeply surprised at the Ranger's response to Dr. Mazatl's death. He thought that the director's suspicious disappearance would infuriate them and make them redouble their efforts. He never imagined that the Rangers would simply stop caring and ignore the war. Lane had strategically positioned swarms at the edge of every Wall so that they could pour inside the moment they opened the Wall to sent out more armies to fight against him, but the systems never opened. One year went by, and then another, and then another. Nothing ever came out. Lane had no way inside.

He became so frustrated that he tried to find a way to penetrate the Wall, but he got nowhere. Lane was a software developer, not a theoretical physicist. The science of space mechanics was simply beyond him. Even after months of study he couldn't understand how the Walls even worked in the first place. To him they were simply magic. The math that was behind them might as well have been complete gibberish. In his research he came across three different proof papers that claimed the Walls were absolutely invincible and there was no way to get around them. For all Lane knew they were right. If the Rangers stayed in their systems forever then they would always be out of his reach.

Just when Lane was about to give up hope, something unexpected occurred. On May 2, 2465 the Wall around Cygni suddenly disappeared. Lane never found out what happened. Perhaps there was an equipment malfunction; maybe some critical part broke and there were no backup systems to take over. Given the Rangers' careless attitude, Lane suspected that people had just stopped caring and failed to give the Wall the care it needed. Whatever the reason, this gave the swarm the opening it needed to wipe out that entire system. The three surviving Ranger colonies had become two.

The very next day the Wall around Luyten fell. This made Lane think that there must have been some manufacturing defect in the Walls of those two systems. Perhaps they had been made from the same flawed plans. If the Rangers had failed to create backup systems then a simple technical failure could have led to total system collapse. His swarm quickly wiped out that system as well.

Lane was hoping that Gliese would be next, but its Wall stayed firm. Weeks went by, and then the weeks turned into months and the months turned into years. Governor Davidson's Wall never wavered. It was immensely frustrating. Lane could not enjoy his paradise as long as he knew that Davidson – the most irrational and paranoid Ranger governor of them all – was still alive. He was precisely the one who was most likely to attack Lane. He had to be dealt with.

For four years Lane waited for his Wall to collapse on its own, but it never did. Eventually Lane grew tired of waiting and decided to act. He had a plan, but it was risky. If it failed it would reveal that a human foe was behind the bots, but he decided it was a calculated risk. He had to do something to resolve the stalemate. The wait was more than he could bear.

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A battered starship approached the boundary of the Wall around Gliese. The ship was old and had clearly seen battle. When it approached the system's long-range scanners detected its arrival. The ship had picked the right day to make the trip – the swarms had left a week earlier and the space around the Gliese system was clear.

As soon as the ship was detected, the automated systems notified Governor Davidson that something unusual had happened. Not only was a ship approaching, but it was trying to contact them.

The governor examined the scanner's reports before making any decisions. To his surprise the ship was the *Valor* – the starship that was carrying Dr. Mazatl. Everything seemed to check out.

Governor Davidson activated the console in his office and replied to the ship's message. “Dr. Mazatl! I thought you were dead. What is going on? Why are you so late?”

On board the *Valor* was a swarm of bots. Lane had packed as many bots as he could into an exact replica of Dr. Mazatl's old ship. The director, of course, was not there to reply to the governor's message, but it hadn't been difficult to modify the ship's AI to fake a video transmission.

“I ran into problems with the swarms,” the ship replied. To the governor it looked like an aging, tired old man was talking to him. “I had to hide out on empty planets for years. It was terrible. I could only travel in short jumps. It's awful out here. Can you please let me in?”

The governor was convinced. He was expecting Dr. Mazatl to arrive, and there he was. It was true he was late but he had a good reason. His ship checked out and his story made sense.

“Of course,” the governor replied. He reached up and tapped a button on his holoscreen.

An hour later, every last living creature on Gliese was dead. The swarms had finally destroyed the last Ranger world.

When Lane heard the news he shouted for joy. He had won! Thanks to his cleverness and foresight, the Vaults had won and reality had lost. The only inhabited star systems left were Tau Ceti and Alpha Centauri A, which were Vault systems. All of mankind was now in Vaults and their future was secure. He no longer had anything to worry about.

Lane had been in Vaults for so long that he had forgotten about Sol entirely. There were still two inhabited worlds left – Earth and Mars. There was also the massive artificial intellect that Dr. Mazatl had built. It survived the swarms simply because Lane stopped caring about the Corporation's probe project.

Once Gliese fell, Lane was tempted to shut down the swarms but decided against it. Victor was still out there somewhere. He had found a way to escape, which meant that one day he might decide to come back and cause trouble. The smart move was to leave the swarms out there in Ranger space and watch for his return – and so that is what Lane did.

Meanwhile, the Stryker twins were frozen in time in the Artillect. They awaited the day when they would be released and defeat the swarms once and for all...