Chapter 1

Earth Year 2183, Houston, North Americas

The Houston Olympic Dome enclosed four levels of rotating grandstands. Above the stands, giant holoscreens provided three-dimensional close-ups of the on-field action. Built to withstand the worst inclement weather, the stadium kept the 80,000 spectators filling its seats and the playing field below dry even while an immense tropical storm raged outside—a common occurrence in the gulf region these days.

Usually, people came here to watch tech-enhanced football players go head-to-head, but today an austere stage sat in centerfield, with a dozen chairs set before a podium. This was the Annual Commemoration Ceremony; the first Daniel Walker had ever attended. It had taken fifteen years to get him here, a wait that had fueled the public’s hunger to hear from him to a near frantic state. Every time the camera sent a live image of Daniel to the holoscreens, the crowd grew louder. Hundreds, if not thousands, pointed, whistled or waved at him.

Sitting onstage, Daniel stared at his knees, struggling to breathe under the weight of all that attention. He rubbed his damp palms across his slacks, trying to remember his opening line.

In the seat beside him, his uncle, Dr. McCormack, whispered, “Nervous?”

Daniel shrugged, avoiding eye contact.

As usual, his uncle wore a rumpled plaid jacket with mismatched pants. Daniel remembered asking him years ago if the International Medical Research Center appreciated having their chief of surgery look like he pulled his clothes out of a dumpster. The snarky remark earned him a lecture on the perils of judging others by appearance, and included quotes by Thomas Paine and other philosophers on the subject of superficiality. Daniel learned to curb his tongue after that.

“You’ve drawn quite a crowd,” McCormack said, looking up and around.

Daniel followed his gaze. The holoscreens zoomed in on spectators in the stands and VIP’s on the stage. When he saw his own face displayed again, he grimaced, then forced himself to smile and wave at the crowd. Nearly everyone wore scarlet and gold, the official ceremonial colors. People tooted curled golden horns and waved cold-fire flags alive with harmless red flames. Daniel had chosen a dark suit, white shirt, no tie. The only red and gold on him was the commemorative pin on his lapel.

“Must be billions more watching at home—all dying to hear what ‘little Danny’ is finally going to say.”

“It’s not all about me,” Daniel countered. He looked back down at his knees and blew out a breath to unwind the knot in his stomach.

McCormack snorted. “You just keep telling yourself that.”

“Are you trying to rattle me?”

“Of course not. I’m just trying to understand why you signed up for this.”

“Maybe it’s because I want to put an end to all this ‘poor little Danny’ crap.”

“Okay, but why now after all these years? It’s not like anything’s changed . . . or has it?” McCormack raised an eyebrow, waiting for an answer.

“I need to impress someone.”

McCormack choked back a laugh. “This is about a girl?”

“No,” Daniel snapped. “Don’t be stupid. It’s about an interstellar ship.”

McCormack’s amusement vanished. “A ship! What ship?”

Daniel sighed. “I didn’t want to say anything. Nothing’s for certain yet, but I’m on the short list for ACES’ new director.”

“ACES? *The* ACES—the Allied Coalition for Exploration of Space? Good Lord, Danny. You really think you’re ready for that?”

“Yes. Absolutely.” Daniel felt his ire rise. “And those therapy sessions you keep ordering for me need to stop.”

McCormack glowered and looked away.

Seeing the worry lines in his uncle’s face, Daniel softened his tone. “Look, I know you just want to help, but try to remember that I spent two years in the military, running through battle simulations.”

“Yes, I know but—”

“And earned four advanced degrees in the sciences after that. Think I’ve proven myself.”

McCormack sighed deeply, then covered the back of Daniel’s hand with his weathered one. “You’re right. You’re a grown man. A very successful one. You don’t need me meddling in your life. You’re also right that this day isn’t about you. It’s about them.” He lifted his hand and pointed to the crowd. “What they need to hear.”

Daniel glanced up, feeling more pressure than ever.

“I may not say it often, but your parents would be proud of you—as proud as I am.”

Daniel’s throat tightened. “Thanks.” His vocal cords constricted further as he noted the deep lines in his uncle’s face—evidence of old age creeping up on the only living person he still thought of as family. Ironic, since they weren’t related. This generous, kind-hearted man had been his father’s best friend. Daniel knew something more needed to be said, but just then a hand landed on his shoulder.

Senator Nelson Bromberg posed for the floating cameras aimed in their direction.

Daniel wanted to punch him.

“Looking forward to your speech, my boy. Remember, keep it short and sweet.”

Daniel watched Bromberg walk away to take a seat between a stately blonde and a severe-looking man in a gray suit.

“Asshole,” Daniel said under his breath.

“Speaking of . . . do you recognize the one he’s sitting with?” McCormack asked, keeping his voice low.

“Holly LaCroix?” The therapy sessions his uncle sent to him usually included her old news report.

“No, not her—him.”

Daniel stared at the profile of the man conversing with Bromberg—long thin nose, pointed chin—no one he recognized. He shook his head.

“The New York Archbishop for the Unified Church of Earth. Word is he’s in line to replace UCE’s Supreme Father.”

Daniel narrowed his eyes. “What’s he doing here?”

Before McCormack could answer, the holoscreens darkened to black and the crowd hushed. Daniel braced himself for what was coming next—one of the many reasons he avoided these ceremonies. In bright orange letters ‘BREAKING NEWS! zipped across the circled screens, then were replaced by a neatly coiffed blonde, news anchor Holly LaCroix. Some questioned the propriety of playing the original broadcast of the attack at these ceremonies, but those in charge insisted on refreshing people’s memories. Stoking continued fear of an alien invasion had proved the most effective tool ever for distracting the masses from the shenanigans of the governing class.

Aloft, Holly’s multiple images spoke in unison. “We interrupt this program to bring you breaking news. We have just learned that the science team on Enyo may have been attacked while broadcasting their dedication ceremony for the installation of Luna University’s new stationary deep-space telescope. We do not know yet who is responsible but are working to obtain a recording of the live broadcast and will share that with you shortly.”

“The Cannon Long View telescope,” she explained during the interim, “was named after Annie Jump Cannon, a pioneering woman astronomer who—we have it?” Holly glanced to the side. “All right, here is that broadcast now. Keep in mind there is a ten-hour delay. These images were recorded by an automated video robot, which I’m told is still transmitting. Along with you, I will be seeing this video for the first time, but I will offer what commentary I can.”

Daniel didn’t need her commentary. His memory was as real and unforgiving as the cold-steel floor under his feet.

The screen image split, the left side showing Holly, the right, Enyo’s black star-filled sky, where a tall man in a spacesuit stood on a dark rocky surface. Behind him, a gigantic mirrored dish tilted on a reticulated robotic platform that seemed to grow from the bare rock. Off in the distance stood their tall egg-shaped vessel.

“You’re looking at the team’s leader, Dr. Benjamin Walker, standing in front of the Cannon telescope. His team consists of nine other scientists including his wife, Charlotte Walker. I’m told their ten-year-old son, Daniel, also accompanied the team.” Holly gestured at the image. “You can see their transport in the background.”

The camera swiveled to show space-suited people gathered together, all of them rendered anonymous by their helmets, and similar height until a much shorter version squeezed to the front. Wearing an oversized spacesuit, the smaller figure moved awkwardly until another reached out to steady him.

“That must be little Danny there.” Holly smiled.

Hearing his boyhood nickname tightened Daniel’s stomach.

The camera refocused on his father, Dr. Walker, who began to deliver a well-rehearsed speech—stirring words about the value of space exploration for mankind’s future—but then a rumbling sound drowned him out and the recorded image shook violently. Dr. Walker turned aside, and the confused voices of those with him rose in the background. He waved for silence. “Everyone wait here, until I find out what it is.” The camera remained focused on the telescope as Walker strode out of view. Moments later, a man screamed, and the murmuring voices cried out in alarm. The camera jostled and went sideways, showing the legs of fleeing scientists. A pair of over-sized, wedge-shaped boots much too large for any human flashed by in pursuit.

Holly gasped. “What was that?”

Amid the screams, Daniel’s young voice called for help.

The automated camera righted itself, then focused on a creature striding away on two backward-bending legs. The thing had a large head, and a pair of overlong arms, one of which carried a suited human less than a third its size. The creature’s head swiveled ninety degrees, revealing a protruding profile that curved out and downward like the beak of a predatory bird.

Holly, shocked into silence now, offered no comment.

The transmission showed more giant beaked creatures moving in the distance, their legs bending in reverse like stalking ostriches.

Wide-eyed Holly turned aside to speak to someone off-camera. “Has—has any of this been verified?” Shaking her head, she looked back and continued her commentary. “It’s hard to see what exactly is going on from this distance, but it appears that these—these creatures are piling things into a net of some sort.”

*Not things . . . people!* Daniel thought angrily.

In the transmission, a boy’s voice called out, “Mom! Dad!”

“That must be poor little Danny,” Holly said.

The transmission zoomed in on the source of the sound, focusing on a small figure caught in the grip of one of the creatures.

“But we didn’t do anything,” the boy yelled, and took a swing at his captor.

As Daniel watched, hate and fury rose in his chest like bile.

More beaked creatures approached. The one holding the boy lifted him high for inspection. He thrashed wildly, fell loose from the creature’s grip and scrambled away. The creature went after him, but the boy threw himself inside one of the science team’s storage tubes and closed the lid. The creature bent over the long tube, spun and rolled it about in an apparent attempt to find an opening.

*Breathe,* Daniel reminded himself. He never thought he would need to use his survival training, not back then in that tube, and certainly not here now, fifteen years later.

The right side of the screens went black.

“It appears we’ve lost the feed.” Holly turned back to her audience. “These are disturbing images, but keep in mind, none of this has been confirmed and it’s quite possible someone is playing an elaborate hoax. You history buffs may recall the first, back in the 1940’s, when a radio show created widespread panic. Pure fiction, and this may be as well.” She paused and smiled. “Giant bird-headed aliens, a child in danger—does seem a bit melodramatic.”

*Idiot!* Daniel shook his head, still annoyed by her old comment.

It turned out the news station cut the feed to spare viewers the worst of it, images of bloody human body parts. Danny had also been spared seeing that part of the carnage, as he was already trapped in a pitch-dark cargo tube. He remembered screaming as he tumbled about. When the movement finally stopped, his helmet light was broken, and he was left in absolute dark and silence to imagine what terrible things the monsters would do once they got the tube open.

The video feed returned, showing an empty alien landscape, the creatures gone from view. Only the closed storage tube remained visible. Daniel stared at it, claustrophobic fear closing in on him. He struggled against it, but when the image shuddered and the stadium sound system rumbled, shaking his heart as it had then, he was back in that tube.

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*It’s that same shaking. Like before, when the monster’s ship landed. They must be launching.*

Emotions rushed through him—first relief—*They’re not going to eat me*—then terror—*They’re leaving me here!*

He pushed hard on the tube’s lid, unable to budge it. He felt for a release, a button, a lever, something, but these things were never meant to be opened from the inside. He knew the combination for the tube’s exterior panel, but that did him little good now. The silence in his helmet turned to an empty roar.

*Wait, maybe my headset’s broken, like the helmet light. That’s why I can’t hear anyone. Dad and the others must be out there, waiting until it’s safe.*

Forgetting for a moment that there was no air for sound to travel through, he pounded on the inner wall inches above his head, his only thought to alert Dad to his plight.

*He’ll come get me and everything will be okay, like before, when we were all together, happy and excited.*

He remembered his father’s proud words, his mother’s big smile; then his mind switched to screams, to her dark hair floating above a crushed helmet and monsters making a pile of limp human bodies, one onto another.

*No one’s coming. They’re dead. They’re all dead.*

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“No!” Daniel said aloud.

McCormack grabbed Daniel’s clenched fist. “You’re okay, Danny.”

Daniel flattened his hand and nodded, hoping no one else had heard him. “Sorry.”

The feed on the screens above were dead silent now, but the image of the closed storage tube remained. The stadium crowd watched in reverent silence as a full eleven seconds ticked off on the display—as per tradition—one to mark each day poor little Danny spent trapped and alone inside that tube.

As the seconds counted down, the silence grew into that same empty roar Daniel experienced in that tube, pulling him into the past. He fought to remain grounded in the present. It didn’t work.

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Panicked, Danny clawed at the tube’s round metal walls, screaming for help until his throat burned and he gasped for breath. Time passed immeasurably in the dark silence as he went in and out of consciousness, each time waking to the same nightmare. The vicious cycle of screaming and fainting continued until finally, in an act of pure self-preservation, his mind tricked him.

“Danny!” his father’s disembodied voice called out.

He stopped crying.

“Come on, use your head.”

He took a long slow breath.

“You know the drill—follow protocol, plan for the worst.”

“Right,” he answered, and took stock of his situation. He already knew what crowded around him—hand-sized canisters of condensed oxygen. He counted and did the math. Twenty-eight days’ worth— *probably longer since I’m small and can’t do anything but lie here.* He made emergency adjustments to his suit controls, moving them to their lowest settings.

“Fully charged, an ECS can recycle fluids and keep you alive for a week, even longer with minimal activity,” he recited from memory, or did his father remind him?

“True, but I shouldn’t need that long. Lunar City, from where we launched, is a ten-day journey, but the Kuiper Belt outposts are only two.”

“You can do two, easy.”

“Sure. Easy.”

Time ticked by achingly slow. The blackness took on a living quality, undulating, thickening, as if alive. His skin itched beyond his reach. Despite knowing it impossible, he pictured bugs crawling inside his suit—

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“Ugh!” Daniel shuddered.

“You okay?” McCormack asked.

Daniel snapped back to the ceremony in progress and nodded. On the holoscreens above, Holly LaCroix talked about messages coming in from concerned viewers.

The locked cargo tube abandoned on the surface of Enyo still remained visible to her right.

*Dammit!*

Daniel closed his eyes against the image but couldn’t stop falling into the past again.

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No one to talk to, nothing to see, nothing to do. During his training, his parents had warned him isolation was the biggest enemy. In the void, people go crazy imagining things—like bugs in your suit.

“Keep yourself mentally occupied. Practice your math, tell yourself stories, make plans, lots of plans,”his Dad’s voice told him.

“Okay,” he replied, lost in the hallucination, and started to think about plans, his and theirs, especially his parents’ search for an Earth twin—his anger growing because they’d never see it, never know if they’d been right.

“It’s not fair!” he yelled into the dark. That’s when it occurred to him that ‘crazy’ might also mean talking to dead people. “No, you can’t be dead. You have to finish what you started.”

“I’m sorry, Danny; we can’t, but you can,” his mother answered. “Picture what an interstellar ship like that would be like. Make it real in your mind.”

The more he visualized an interstellar ship, the more real it became. His tiny prison vanished as he walked through the corridors of a huge multi-leveled vessel. Rooms and equipment surrounded him. He felt the floors under his feet, the walls with his hands, and smelled cool clean air pumping through the vents. He saw powerful fusion reactors, talked to scientists on board, and marched beside soldiers armed with terrifying weapons ready to lay waste to the monsters. He imagined traveling to a new world and taking people there to build settlements. While a part of him knew this imagined future existed only in his mind, the waking dream felt more solid than anything truly happening to him and he became convinced his life depended on making it so.

*And if those bug-eyed, beak-faced monsters get in my way . . .*

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“I’ll kill them all.”

“Pardon?” McCormack inquired beside him.

Daniel startled back to the present, fearing he’d spoken the old vow aloud, hoping he hadn’t. “Nothing. Never mind.”

*Maybe crazy is reliving the same thing over and over.*

His uncle’s eyebrows formed a deep ‘V’ above the bridge of his nose.

Daniel looked away and focused on the holoscreens again, where Holly LaCroix stared into the camera, skepticism showing in her forced neutral expression.

“Those of you calling for a rescue mission to Enyo, please keep in mind this attack is as yet unconfirmed. As we all know, images can be edited, even created from whole cloth. Our experts are analyzing the recording and we will bring you updates as they—”

She paused in mid-breath to touch her ear, and her eyes widened.

“We have verification. I—I’m being told all communication has been lost with our manned outposts in the Kuiper Belt including Pluto, Eris and Sedna. UN Armed Forces are launching as we speak.”

She took a deep breath and looked at the camera with a raw new intensity.

“For anyone just tuning in, our Kuiper Belt outposts are under attack. We have experienced first contact, and it was an act of war.”

The playback ended there, and the screens went dark. The stadium remained hushed and expectant. From her seat next to Senator Bromberg, the present-day Holly LaCroix rose and approached the podium. The screens lit up again to show her face. She looked almost the same as she did in her history-making report fifteen years ago, right down to her same signature swept-back hairstyle, heavy gold necklace, and scarlet red dress.

“That was a day none of us will ever forget.” Her voice echoed throughout the stadium. “Nor will we forget the fearful days that followed as we all waited to learn who, if anyone, had survived. It took eleven days to reach Enyo, but oh, what joy we shared when poor little Danny was found alive.” She smiled in Daniel’s direction and clapped, instigating a roar of approval from the crowd. When it died down, she no longer smiled. “Sadly, he was the only one.”

The cameras zeroed in to catch Daniel’s expected emotional breakdown. Instead, he set his jaw tight and nodded as the cameras projected him on the screens above. Whether he liked it or not, ‘Little Danny,’ as everyone thought of him still, remained a symbol of perseverance against the alien threat.

“We named them Garuda after the birdlike Hindu demi-god,” Holly stated.

That fact still infuriated him. *They’re not that big and there’s nothing god-like about them.*

“And concluded little Danny was spared because of his youth, left as a warning to never explore the heavens again,” she continued.

Daniel never bought into that theory, but the world took it to heart, and the search for new planets died of fright. Each commemoration put the attacks a year further back in history, but Earth remained on high alert, its deep-space program frozen in time.

As someone who met the enemy and lived to tell about it, Daniel had the gravitas to sway people. That’s why he was here today. He’d polished his speech until certain it would have the desired effect—if only he could remember his opening line. He blinked in dismay at the blankness in his mind.

Holly LaCroix finished her speech and introduced him all too soon. Static reverberated in Daniel’s head as he took his place at the podium. Looking out at the sea of people waiting for him to speak, he nearly panicked before remembering what his uncle had said.

*It’s not about you. It’s about them, what they need to hear.*

He took a deep breath, smiled, and began.

“A great man once said, ‘We have nothing to fear but fear itself.’ I have looked in the eyes of the enemy and it frightened me far less than what’s coming out of the mouths of our leaders today. The greatest threat to the human race isn’t out there. It’s right here among us, taking over our lives, our government, our future—imprisoning us on a doomed planet.

“Earth’s habitable land is shrinking—miles of coastline gone, forests turned to ash, with what’s left pummeled by raging storms like the one outside this stadium here today—driving us underground, or beneath sealed domes like this one. If people are to have any quality of life, perhaps even survive at all, we must conquer our fears and find a new world. Not just for ourselves, but for our children and grandchildren.

“Sadly, the only ventures beyond our solar system are those of the privately run Extra-Terrestrial Trade Association which continues to raid Nereus for exotic pets. This trade is nothing I applaud but does prove that we can still travel into deep space and return successfully. Yes, some ships fail to return, but it hasn’t stopped the ETTA from going. Why do we allow ships to travel to distant worlds for mere profit, yet deny those who would do so for the betterment of mankind?”

“The answer, of course, is money and politics. The trade is profitable. Exploration is expensive. And by continually reminding us about the existence of an extra-terrestrial threat, our government has cemented its rule. Some of it is good—border disputes have ceased, and national pride’s gone out of fashion. There hasn’t been an organized war on Earth since, but peace at home has come at a high price—fear. That fear has fueled the belief that space exploration is a dangerous evil. This is perilous thinking, people, and it is being exploited by a pseudo-religion. Its leaders would take us on a path to annihilation.

“The time has come to stop listening to cowards who preach surrender!”

He paused for dramatic effect, then went on to condemn the fear mongers, naming names, including Bromberg’s and leaders of the Unified Church of Earth. When Daniel exclaimed that it was time to stand up for humanity, the crowd jumped to its feet and roared in approval.

The ceremony’s organizers expected him to introduce Bromberg as his good friend and the next speaker. He did neither, leaving the podium amidst thunderous applause. The Senator glared and clenched his hands as if he wanted to strangle Daniel.

Daniel strode past Bromberg, jostling the Senator’s shoulder. His uncle stood to join him and together they exited the stage. Daniel waved to the crowd still on its feet and kept moving. McCormack trotted his far shorter legs to keep up. Once they entered the tunnels beneath the stadium, the noise lessened.

“Holy crap, Danny,” his uncle said. “You insulted the wrong people just now.”

“I’m only worried about impressing the right ones,” Daniel replied.

“The wrong ones in positions of power can make your life miserable. Senator Bromberg is not a forgiving man.”

Daniel glanced at him without slowing. “What he can’t forgive is that I didn’t die in that cargo tube.”

“I’m sure that’s not true. Even so, why antagonize him?”

“Because he’s an unrepentant asshole. He denies exploration of space, but takes money from ETTA, and passes laws protecting them. Some say he even keeps Nereids himself.”

“Seems unlikely. He’s a card-carrying member of the UCE. I’ve heard him denounce the Nereid pet trade on numerous occasions.”

“It’s what he does behind closed doors I worry about.”

A message alert vibrated on Daniel’s wrist. He stopped to see what his strict privacy settings allowed through.

“Terrific speech.” The message was from Cedric Peterson, Chairman Overseer of the Allied Coalition for Exploration of Space.

Daniel punched a fist in the air. “Yes!” He showed his uncle the message. “Said I wanted to impress the right people—looks like I just did.”

McCormack frowned at him. “You don’t really intend to do this … to go to Tau Medea?”

“Augh!” Daniel threw his hands into the air. “How can you even ask me that? I’ve only been talking about it … forever. I don’t know why no one takes me seriously—especially you.”

“I do, of course, I do, but—” McCormack ran a hand over the top of his gray head and let out a breath. “I just didn’t see it ever happening.”

“It will if I can get support. ACES is a big step in the right direction, but the main thing is to swing public opinion. To do that, I need people with influence, people like you, Uncle Charlie.”

McCormack let out an incredulous laugh. “You’re talking about a major campaign—speeches, press conferences, media interviews.”

“I understand that.”

“Do you?” McCormack held his hands out palms up in a pleading gesture. “Do you really? You’ll have to come out of your scientific cocoon, get down in the mud with the very people you despise. Play politics.”

“I’ll do whatever it takes. I just need back up.”

For a moment, Daniel thought he was in for another lecture.

Instead, McCormack nodded. “Fine. I’ll twist arms and empty the wallets of everyone I know. But only on one condition. If you pull this off, you take me with you. I want to be your chief of medicine.”

Daniel stared in mute surprise.

“I’m one hell of a doctor, you know.” McCormack glared at him.

“Yeah, I know. Just never thought you’d consider it—but the answer is yes, hell yes.” Daniel stuck out his hand to shake his uncle’s. “You got yourself a deal.”