



PROLOGUE

THE STARSHIP *CNE CARAGANA* slipped down out of a night sky, its gray and scarlet hull illuminated by the pale iridescence of the massive ion storms that beset space for light-years in every direction. Beneath the deep-space vessel, Centurion Station formed a twinkling crescent of light on the dusty rock surface of its never-named planet. Crew and passengers viewed the enclave of habitation with a shared sensation of relief. Even with the hyperdrive powering them along at fifteen light-years an hour, it had taken eighty-three days to reach Centurion Station from the Greater Commonwealth. This was about as far as any human traveled in the mid-thirty-fourth century, certainly on a regular basis.

From his couch in the main lounge, Inigo studied the approaching alien landscape with detached interest. What he was seeing was exactly what the briefing files had projected months earlier: a monotonous plain of ancient lava rippled with shallow gullies that led nowhere. The thin argon atmosphere stirred the sand in short-lived flurries, chasing wispy swirls from one dune to another. It was the station that claimed his real attention.

Now they were only twenty kilometers from the ground, and the lights began to resolve into distinct shapes. Inigo easily could pick out the big garden dome at the center of the human section on the northernmost segment of the inhabited crescent: a lambent emerald circle playing hub to a dozen black transport tubes that ran out to large ac-

commodation blocks that could have been transplanted from any exotic environment resort in the Commonwealth. From there, the tubes carried on across the lava to the cubelike observatory facilities and engineering support modules.

The pocked land to the south belonged to the alien habitats: shapes and structures of various geometries and sizes, most of them illuminated. Next to the humans were the silver bubbles of the hominoid Golant, followed by the enclosed grazing grounds where the Ticoth roamed amid their food herds; then came the mammoth interconnecting tanks of the Suline, an aquatic species. The featureless Ethox tower rose up ten kilometers past the end of the Sulines' metal-encased lakes, dark in the visible spectrum but with a surface temperature of one hundred eighty degrees Centigrade. They were one of the species that did not interact with their fellow observers on any level except for formal exchanges of data concerning the probes that orbited the Void. Equally taciturn were the Forleene, who occupied five big domes of murky crystal that glowed with a mild gentian light. They were positively social compared to the Kandra, who lived in a simple metal cube thirty meters to a side. No Kandra ship had landed there since the humans had joined the observation two hundred eighty years earlier; not even the exceptionally long-lived Jadradesh had seen one of the aliens. The Raiel had invited the boulderlike swamp dwellers to join the project seven thousand years earlier.

A small smile flickered on Inigo's face as he took in the diverse zones. It was impressive to see so many aliens gathered in one place, a collection that served to underline the importance of their mission. However, as his view strayed to the shadows thrown by the station, he had to admit that the living were overshadowed completely by those who had passed before them. Centurion Station's growth and age could be measured loosely in the same way as any humble terrestrial tree. It had developed in rings that had been added to over the centuries as new species joined the project. The broad circle of land along the concave side of the crescent was studded with ruins, crumbling skeletons of habitats abandoned millennia before as their sponsoring civilizations fell, moved on, or evolved away from mere astrophysical concerns. At the very center the ancient structures had

decayed to simple mounds of compacted metal and crystal flakes that were beyond the ability of an archaeologist to decipher. Dating expeditions had established that this ancient heart of the station had been constructed over four hundred thousand years earlier. Of course, as far as the time scale of the Raiel observation was concerned, that was not long ago.

A ring of green light was flashing on the lava field that served as a spaceport for the human section, calling down the *CNE Caragana*. Several starships were sitting on the drab rock beside the active landing zone: two hefty deep-space vessels of the same class as the *Caragana* and some smaller starships used for placing and servicing the remote probes that constantly monitored the Void.

There was a slight judder as the starship settled, and then the internal gravity field switched off. Inigo felt himself rise slightly on the couch's cushioning as the planet's seventy percent gravity took over. It was silent in the lounge as the passengers took stock; then a happy murmur of conversation broke out to celebrate their arrival. The chief steward asked them all to make their way down to the main airlock, where they would suit up and walk over to the station. Inigo waited until his more eager colleagues had left before climbing cautiously to his feet and making his way out of the lounge. Strictly speaking, he did not need a spacesuit; his Higher bionomics could cocoon his body in perfect safety, protecting it from the thin malignant atmosphere and even from the cosmic radiation that sleeted in from the massive stars of the Wall five hundred light-years away. But he'd traveled all this way in part to escape his unwanted heritage; this was not the time to show it off. He started suiting up along with the rest.

The handover party was a long tradition at Centurion Station. Every time a navy ship arrived bringing new observers, there was a short overlap before the previous group departed. It was celebrated in the garden dome as a sunset gala with the best buffet the culinary unit programs could produce. Tables were laid out under ancient oaks that glittered with hundreds of magic lanterns, and the dome overhead wore a halo of gold twilight. A *solido* projection of a string quartet played classical mood music on a little stage surrounded by a brook.

Inigo arrived quite early, still adjusting the sleeves of his ultra-black formal evening suit. He did not really like the jacket's long square-cut tails—they were a bit vogueish for his taste—but had to admit the tailor back on Anagaska had done a superb job. Even today if one wanted quality clothes, one needed a human in the style-and-fitting loop. He knew he looked good in it, in fact, good enough that he didn't feel even remotely self-conscious.

The station's director was greeting all the arrivals personally. Inigo joined the end of the short line and waited his turn. He could see several aliens milling around the tables: the Golant, looking odd in clothes that approximated the ones worn by humans. With their gray-blue skin and tall narrow heads, their polite attempt to blend in only made them appear more out of place. There were a couple of Ticoth curled up together on the grass, both the size of ponies, though there any resemblance ended. These were very obviously predator carnivores, with dark green hide stretched tight over powerful muscle bands. Alarmingly big and sharp teeth appeared every time they growled at one another and the group of humans with whom they were conversing. Inigo instinctively checked his integral force field function, then felt ashamed for having done so. Several Suline were also present, floating about in big hemispherical glass tanks like giant champagne saucers that were held up by small regrav units. Their translators babbled away while they looked out at the humans, their bulbous bodies distorted and magnified by the curving glass.

"Inigo, I presume," the director's overloud voice proclaimed. "Glad to meet you, and you're bright and early for the party; most commendable, laddy."

Inigo smiled with professional deference as he shook the tall man's hand. "Director Eyre," he acknowledged. The briefing file's curriculum vitae had told him very little about the director other than claiming his age was over a thousand years. Inigo suspected corrupted data, although the director's clothing was certainly historical enough: a short jacket and matching kilt with a very loud amethyst and black tartan.

"Oh, please, call me Walker."

"Walker?" Inigo queried.

“Short for LionWalker. Long story. Not to worry, laddy. Won’t bore you with it tonight.”

“Ah. Right.” Inigo held his gaze level. The director had a thick stock of brown hair, but something glittered underneath it, as if his scalp were crawling with gold flecks. For the second time in five minutes Inigo held off using bionics. A field scan would have revealed what kind of technology the director was enriched with; it certainly wasn’t one he recognized. He had to admit that the hair made LionWalker Eyre look youthful, just like the majority of the human race these days, no matter what branch. Higher, Advancer, or Natural, vanity was pretty much uniform. But the thin gray goatee lent him an air of distinction, and that was very deliberate.

LionWalker waved his whiskey tumbler across the darkened parkland, ice cubes chattering at the movement. “So what brings you to our celebrated outpost, then, young Inigo? Thinking of the glory? The riches? Lots of sex? After all, there’s not much else to do here.”

Inigo’s smile tightened slightly as he realized how drunk the director was. “I just wanted to help. I think it’s important.”

“Why?” the question snapped out, accompanied by narrowed eyes.

“Okay. The Void is a mystery that is beyond even ANA to unravel. If we can ever figure it out, we will have advanced our understanding of the universe by a significant factor.”

“Huh. Do yourself a favor, laddy: Forget ANA. Bunch of decadent aristos who’ve been mentally taxidermied. Like they care what happens to physical humans. It’s the Raiel we’re helping, a people who are worth a bit of investment. And even those galumphing masterminds are stumped. You know what the navy engineers found when they were excavating the foundations for this very garden dome?”

“No.”

“More ruins.” LionWalker took a comfortable gulp of whiskey.

“I see.”

“No, you don’t. They were practically fossilized, nothing more than dust strata, over three quarters of a million years old. And from what I’ve picked up, looking at the early records the Raiel deign to

make available, the observation has been going on a lot longer than that. A million years pecking away at a problem. Now, that's dedication for you. We'd not be able to manage that, far too petty."

"Speak for yourself."

"Ah, I might have known; a believer."

"In what?"

"Humanity."

"That must be common among the staff here, surely." Inigo was wondering how to disengage himself. The director was starting to irritate him.

"Damn right, laddy. One of the few things that keeps me all cheered up out here all by my wee lonesome. Och . . . here we go." LionWalker tipped his head back and stared out across the dome, where the low layer of hazy light faded away. Overhead the crystal was completely transparent, revealing the vast antagonistic nebulae that washed across the sky. Hundreds of stars shone through the glowing veil, spikes of light so intense that they burned toward violet and into indigo. They multiplied toward the horizon as the planet spun slowly to face the Wall, the vast barrier of massive stars that formed the outermost skin of the galactic core.

"We can't see the Void from here, can we?" Inigo asked. He knew it was a stupid question; the Void was obscured on the other side of the Wall, right at the very heart of the galaxy. Centuries earlier, before anyone had ventured out of Earth's solar system, human astronomers had thought it was a massive black hole. They'd even detected X-ray emissions from the vast loop of superheated particles spinning around the event horizon, which helped confirm their theories. It was not until Wilson Kime had captained the Commonwealth Navy ship *Endeavor* in the first successful human circumnavigation of the galaxy in 2560 that the truth was discovered. There was indeed an impenetrable event horizon at the core, but it did not surround anything as natural and mundane as a superdense mass of dead stars. The Void was an artificial boundary guarding a legacy billions of years old. The Raiel claimed there was an entire universe inside, one that had been fashioned by a race that had lived during the dawn of the galaxy, and that they had retreated into it to consummate their

journey to the absolute pinnacle of evolution. In the wake of their departure, the Void was now slowly consuming the remaining stars in the galaxy. In that it was no different from the natural black holes found anchoring the center of many galaxies, but while they employed gravity and entropy to pull in mass, the Void actively devoured stars. It was a process that was accelerating slowly yet inexorably. Unless it was stopped, the galaxy would die young, maybe three or four billion years before its allotted time, far enough in the future that Sol would be a cold ember and the human race not even a memory. But the Raiel cared. This was the galaxy they had been born in, and they believed it should be given the chance to live its full life.

LionWalker gave a little snort of amusement. “No, of course you can’t see it. Don’t panic, laddy; there’s no visible nightmare in our skies. DF7 is rising, that’s all.” He pointed.

Inigo waited, and after a minute an azure crescent drifted up over the horizon. It was half the size of Earth’s moon, with a strangely regular black mottling. He let out a soft breath of admiration.

There were fifteen of the planet-size machines orbiting within the Centurion Station star system: nests of concentric lattice spheres, each one possessing a different mass property and quantum field intersection, with the outer shell roughly the same diameter as Saturn. They were a Raiel-built “defense system” in case a Void devourment phase broke through the Wall. No one had ever seen them in action, not even the Jadradesh.

“Okay. That is impressive,” Inigo said. The DFs were in the files, of course, but a machine on that scale and head-on real was awesome.

“You’ll fit in,” LionWalker declared happily. He slapped a hand on Inigo’s shoulder. “Go find yourself a drink. I made sure we had the very best culinary programs for alcohol synthesis. You can take that as a challenge.” He moved on to the next arrival.

Keeping one eye on DF7, Inigo made his way to the bar. LionWalker had not been kidding; the drinks were top quality, even the vodka that fountained up through the mermaid ice sculpture.

Inigo stayed at the party longer than he had expected to. There was something about being thrown together with a bunch of like-minded devoted people that instinctively triggered his normally dormant social traits. By the time he finally got back to his apartment, his bionics had been deflecting alcohol infiltration of his neurons for several hours. Even so, he permitted some to percolate through his artificial defenses, enough to generate a mild inebriation and all the associated merits. He was going to have to live with these people for another year. No advantage in appearing aloof.

As he crawled into bed, he ordered a complete desaturation. That was one superb benefit of bionics: no hangover.

And so Inigo dreamed his first dream at Centurion Station. It wasn't his.