

**WORLD
ETERNAL:
PROMISES**



PROLOGUE

Behind the 590-mile diameter of Ceres in the main asteroid belt lurks a flying city. It lies undetected and unseen, for it arrived after the *Dawn* spacecraft and before other satellites sent to explore the belt. The hull twinkles with thousands of lights. Inside, it glows with the luminaries of labs, holds, and living facilities. Outside, beams from hundreds of shuttles find their way through ports. They bring precious metals and minerals from nearby asteroids to its store rooms.

Its myriad inhabitants have worked for six months under a pressing deadline. Each laboratory, every factory, and all replicators are in continual operation to fill mission quotas. When its artisans are not producing, they are being trained. Nothing can go amiss, and no one can slip up.

Two beings sit in a secure room in the hub of the metropolis. They huddle over instruments and read the dials. The caped one clicks on a screen, and a blue-green jewel fills their view. The two stand in awe watching white mists swirl around it, but the clouds only make it more desirable. For a moment, they sit and admire. A precious gem, it is ready for the taking.

The caped one places his seal on the edict in front of him. "It is time," he announces. "Send the orders."

The other rises to carry out his mission. In seconds, the supply ships and shuttles return to bring their last loads through all ports. Dignitaries and officials gather to board the envoy ship. They have never failed before. They will not fail this time, for failure means galactic loss.



CHAPTER 1

STRANGE STARS

Beakon, Texas. Population 1,464. Preacher James Darden passed the sign, then turned his truck off County Road 251 onto East Central Avenue. From there he could see straight through town past the one traffic light to the lone run-down hotel and gas station on the west side and out to the flat emptiness beyond. The two inches of snow that had fallen during the night softened the outlines of wind-swept wooden homes and store fronts, but not enough to diminish the harshness of years of poverty and isolation. Even the old, dried-out tinsel of the Christmas lights at Central and Main refused to move as his truck passed by.

James made a right onto Church Street and pulled into the snow-covered parking lot of the Church of Christ. He had attended there as a child. Those who were his Sunday school teachers were now his elders. A few of his classmates had stayed on family farms and still attended, but most had gone. He, too, had gone away to a preacher training school for two years. Then his parents' health had deteriorated. He came back just for the summer, but a series of events had thrust him into the pulpit of his father's congregation. He would take over just for a few weeks until they could find

someone. They never did, for who would want to come? Thirty years later, he was still here.

A steady tapping on the truck door roused him.

Buddy. A twenty-year-old boy trapped in a man's body, his brain damaged in a car accident.

Buddy pulled open the truck door. "Mr. James, you okay?"

"I'm fine. How are you today?"

"I ain't heard from Jim, you know. Not for a long time. He was my best friend, and now he don't call me or nothing. When is Jim coming home?"

"He's coming home for Christmas."

"Do you think I can talk to him?"

"Of course. Tell you what. How would you like to have dinner with us Saturday?"

A huge smile replaced his frown. "Thanks. I'll be seeing you."

James shook his head as Buddy turned and ran up the street. At the end of the street, he stopped and waved before he turned the corner. James unlocked the church door and went into his office.

Jim was coming home. He'd been gone over three months, his first time away from home, and he and Nell had barely heard from him.

They had wanted Jim to do his master's at Christian Plains University twenty miles away. He could have lived at home like he did his first four years of college. Some of Jim's friends from church were there. He would have chapel and Bible classes every day to strengthen his faith. But Jim was determined to attend the University of Colorado in Boulder. James didn't know much about the church there, but he thought that some students at Boulder held a yearly pot festival. At least that's what he'd heard.

But Jim wanted to major in astrophysics, and they offered the degree he needed. Christian Plains University didn't. That settled it, at least to Jim. James thought about the check he and Nell had written from their savings

to pay for books. He would have gladly given it if Jim were attending Christian Plains. It was the only thing he and Nell had argued about for quite a while. He reluctantly gave in, sure Jim would change his mind after his first semester.

The first semester was over. Jim hadn't come home even for Thanksgiving, saying he had to stay and finish a paper. His roommate, Pat, was also staying, and they would go out to lunch together. He and Nell had prayed for him every night. That's all they could do, pray and trust God to take care of him. Christmas would be in a few days. Jim would have some time off, and they could all be together.

He turned on his computer to finish up next Sunday's sermon.

"Mornin', James." Elder Chris Brown rushed through the office door. "Have you heard the news about Christian Plains University?" "News? What news?"

"Christine called me and Lee this morning. There's a huge star in the snow at the track field. Strange thing, in the middle of the star there's a sparkling blue cross. She said maybe a UFO made it."

James' eyes traveled up Chris' expensive cowboy boots, jeans, and dress shirt secured with a bolero tie.

Chris laughed. "Sounds like some students pulled a prank."

"Whew! For a minute you had me thinking you believed in UFO's."

Chris shrugged, his face more serious. "Don't know, but it's all over the news."

"Who do they think made it?"

Chris shook his head. "Who knows? Anyway, need to go. Meeting in Dallas." He stood and walked out before James could ask more.

Of all the elders, Chris was the richest. He had invested in TENMAC, the huge oil conglomerate formed from different companies in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California. Chris stayed on top of things. Anxious

to get home to Nell, he made a few phone calls to check on sick church members, then turned off his computer.

Nell met him at the door. "Jim just called. He finished his work early, and he's coming home today. They'll be here in an hour or so."

"They?"

"Pat is with him. His parents flew to Los Angeles to see family, and he didn't want to go. He's coming here for the holidays." She touched his cheek lightly, the way she always did when she wanted something. "I hope you don't mind."

"Of course not." He leaned over and kissed her. "Just that it's such short notice, honey. Christmas is four days away. This Friday."

Nell smiled. "When God said to be hospitable, He didn't say 'When it's convenient.'"

"I invited Buddy to dinner on Saturday."

She tucked a wayward strand of light brown hair behind her ear. "I'll run to the store and buy a few gifts to put under our tree for Pat. Just a few little things. He should have something on Christmas."

"For nearly thirty years I've been saying I married the sweetest, most generous girl in the world. Oh, Nell, what would I do without you?" He took her hand and ran his finger along the raised gold cross inset with a blue sapphire that graced her ring.

"And I married the tallest, most handsome." She held him at arm's length and looked at his lean frame, then ran her hand through his dark wavy hair. Her hands touched the small diamonds on both sides of the cross on his ring. It matched hers. "Come on, let's have some lunch. Lots to do this afternoon to get ready. Jim and Pat are coming. I can't wait."

Jim stood outside his old green Subaru Legacy Outback and stared at Pat's broad back while his friend dug through his bags in the back seat.

“Come on, Pat. I didn’t think stopping for a bite to eat would take us all day.”

“Hold your horses.”

“Just get your laptop. Hurry up.”

“There.” Pat pulled out his laptop and turned. A wide grin covered his freckled face. He grabbed his ten-inch ponytail and pushed it back over his shoulder.

Jim eased his long legs under the steering wheel, then turned on the ignition and backed out. The car coughed and shook, but once he put it in first, it ran smoothly.

“Did I tell you my sister Darla and her husband Joe are moving to Denver?” Pat asked. “He got a promotion. They made him a regional sales manager.”

“That’s great, Pat. Maybe we can go to their house some weekend for a break. Did I mention my sister Janell’s husband Mason is now a major in the Air Force?”

“Wow! He’s climbed the ranks pretty fast.”

“He’s in the Air Force Space Command. They have him working on some new space vehicle. He can’t talk about it, and we don’t ask.”

“I’d like to meet them.”

“You’ll get to. Mom said they’re coming home for Christmas if he can get some time off.”

“What are your parents like, Jim? You’ve told me your dad’s a preacher. What else do they do?”

Jim thought for a moment. “Mom does church stuff. You know, teaching Sunday school and ladies’ class, visiting members with Dad. Guess the main thing I can say is I think they’re over-protective. They didn’t want me going to school at CU. Dad wanted me to be a preacher. If he knew what Dr. Durand told us...”

“About extra-terrestrials?” Pat smiled. “Yeah, to think we got to hear one of France’s leading scientists and UFO researchers. That was so cool. And he’s going to beat CU teaching classes next semester. Wish they were graduate classes, not undergraduate.”

“Me too. But we’re not going to talk about it around Dad and Mom. Remember that. What about your parents?”

Pat looked out his side window for a minute. “They’re not home much. Places to go, things to do.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay. Do you think your friend Christine will be around?”

“I’m sure we’ll see her and her friend Marcy at church. I hope you brought some nicer clothes.”

“Church? We’re going to church?”

“Of course. I grew up going to church every time the doors opened.”

“But you don’t go all the time in Boulder.”

Jim blushed. “I did cut out a couple Sundays when I had to get a paper done. You don’t have to go with us if you don’t want, but Mom and Dad would like it if you came.”

Pat looked down at his worn tennis shoes, green camouflage shorts, and his long-sleeved red tee-shirt with a yellow shirt buttoned over it. “What’s wrong with my clothes? All my good clothes are packed.” He motioned to a duffel bag in the back seat. “I hope your mom will let me use her washing machine. Ran out of time.”

Pat stared at his open laptop. After a few minutes, he looked up. “Wow! All the colleges and universities have snow stars on them. A hundred feet in diameter with blue crosses in the middle.” He ran his finger down the screen. “They’re all over the world. Where there isn’t any snow, they’re raised mounds of dirt in the shape of stars. They say it’s not dirt, but a compound like cement.”

“That's odd. Dad thinks crop circles are pranks.”

“He can't say someone on earth made these. They have different symbols in them according to the main religion of each country.”

“We'll be home in a few minutes. Don't mention them.” Jim left the main highway and tuned onto 251. In ten minutes, they pulled in front of the house. His parents were waiting on the front porch as they got out and ran up the front steps.

His mom threw her arms around him. “We've missed you.”

“I've been gone only three months, Mom. Well, maybe a couple weeks more. But I missed you, too.” He gave her a hug, then turned to his dad. “This is Pat. Thanks for letting him spend Christmas with us.”

“We're so glad you're here, Pat,” James said.

“Thanks, Mr. Darden.” Pat shook his hand.

“Dinner won't be for a little while, so you have time to get your things in the house and unpack.”

“Come on, Pat, grab your bags. You'll be in Janell's old room. Mom turned it into a sewing room, but I think it still has a bed.”

They brought in their suitcases, and Jim showed Pat around. In the back yard, they received a tail-thrashing welcome from his golden retriever, King. He showed Pat his old inner sanctum, a tree house he had built in an aged pecan tree. Back inside, he led Pat to a shelf in the family library filled with books about the planets, sun, moon, stars, and the Milky Way Galaxy

“Are these all yours? How many are there?”

“Thirty-four. I've been collecting and reading them ever since my freshman year in high school. Some may be a little out of date, but they're still good books.”

“You're way ahead of me.”

“I couldn't help it. This is what has always interested me.”

“Dinnertime!” Nell said.

After saying grace, James asked, “What are you studying, Pat?”

“Astrophysics, just like Jim. Right now, I’m interested in stars. Our sun, of course. But there’s hot stars, cool stars, and other types of stars. Every year it seems some scientist finds out something new about the stars. I’d like to do that someday.”

“Me, I’m interested in interstellar and intergalactic science,” Jim said. “There are millions of galaxies, you know, and each one contains millions of stars.”

“I told Buddy you’d be here, and I invited him to have dinner with us this Saturday,” James said, changing the subject. “You haven’t forgotten your old friend, have you, Jim?”

“Buddy? Oh yeah, Buddy.” Looking down at his plate, he tried to find the right words. “Dad, I know Buddy and I used to be friends, but...”

“Used to be? Do you forsake your friends just because they have misfortune? Jim, I didn’t rear you to be like that.”

Since Buddy’s accident, he’s a different person. You know, having the brain injury and all, he just can’t remember things.”

“But he’s still your friend, and you’re still like his older brother,” Nell said. “And he still needs you. He asks about you every time we see him at church.”

“I know. I’ve tried, really tried to keep up, but lately, we have nothing in common. I can’t email him or text him about what I’m doing. It’s like I’m talking to a six-year-old. All he can do is ask, ‘What, Jim? What that mean? I don’t understand, Jim.’ I can’t communicate with him anymore.”

“Son, he doesn’t need you to explain things to him. All he needs is your smile, your arm around his shoulder. He needs to feel like you still love him.”

“I know, Dad. I’ll give him some special attention while I’m home.”

“I hope so.”

Jim couldn't get his mind off the stars at universities. *Dad and Mom haven't said anything. Have they heard about them?*

“If you all will excuse me for a minute. I think I'll catch the first five minutes of the news.” James walked into the living room and sank into his chair, and Jim and Pat followed him. Picking up the remote, he clicked on the local channel.

“Good evening, this is Tom Burns of *The Latest News*, where you always get the latest news first. Authorities all over the world are puzzled at the large stars appearing on major university campuses. They are reminiscent of the crop circles found all over the world, but they are made of materials not found on this earth. In nations where there is snow, they appear to be made of snow, but preliminary testing has proven that this material doesn't melt. In the southern hemisphere, they are made of a hard, earth-colored substance. Stranger yet are the religious symbols that appear in the center of each one. The stars at Christian Plains University and other schools in Texas and the United States are inlaid with a shining blue cross. In Muslim countries, a shining blue crescent lies in the middle of each star.”

James turned the television off.

“What do you think, Dad?” Jim stood beside his chair, and Pat and Nell were behind him.

“I don't know. There has to be a natural explanation. Sit down, everyone. We need to talk.”