

PROLOGUE

Salud Afar:

Edward Demere was alone the night it happened. He was sitting in his living room, half-dozing, while the HV ran images from the Sabol asteroid, which was way the hell out in the middle of nowhere.

A dozen people in pressure suits stood around a monument on an airless plain while one of them went on about God and how future generations would always come to this spot, and would be dazzled by this monument, and remember what their obligations were to the Almighty. The speaker was a woman, but he couldn't tell which of the twelve was doing the oration.

"--And maybe, when they come," she said, "they will remember us, too."

Applause doesn't work well in pressure suits. So they all simply raised their fists over their helmets.

Demery looked through his window and saw lightning in the distant sky. Salud Afar was on the edge of the galaxy. Was in fact twenty thousand light-years out from the rim. On a clear night, you could see the glow that marked the frontier of the Milky Way. At the moment, though, the glow was still below the

horizon.

"--I want to thank Vasho Colunis, for his determination to see this project through--"

He gazed out at the only star in the sky. Callistra. Its soft azure light softened the night, inspired poets, illuminated weddings. And it sometimes appealed to those with a religious sensibility. Like the men and women mounting their monument on that distant asteroid.

It was thirty-six light-years out, part of a sea of rocks, drifting through the night, belonging to no particular system. In time, they'd drift back into the galaxy. Tonight, Callistra was performing as a religious symbol. The asteroid on which the Family of God was mounting its monument had been chosen because it lay directly between the world and the great blue star.

The monument consisted of a crystal polyhedron atop a sphere, the whole mounted on a sphere. The polyhedron represented the many faces of mankind; the spherical base, the unflinching support of God.

"--And Jara Capis, who conceived the motif--"

Actually there was a second light in the sky. That was Naramitsu, low on the horizon. But it was easy to overlook.

"--Last but not least, Kira Macara, who designed the monument." One of the figures took a bow. The others raised fists in approval.

Demere lived in a house overlooking the sea. It was a

beautiful spectacle this time of year, with summer lightning in the west, and the single star overhead. The settlers who'd first come to Salud Afar, thousands of years earlier, had undoubtedly possessed a love for the outpost it had been in those days. This was where you came if you liked to be alone. It was a place that was not only remote, but which nightly reminded them how far they'd come from the crowded spaces of the Confederacy.

"--Ask Rev. Garik to give the blessing."

He'd been born under the opulent skies of Rimway. There, inside the galaxy, the stars somehow detracted from each other. When they were, as someone once said, like the campfires of an ancient army, you didn't notice any in particular. They were simply there.

"In this sublime moment, let us bow our heads before the Universal God--" The voice was still feminine, but it was less compelling. It had the ritual sing-song lilt that preachers seemed always to acquire. "--Let us acknowledge--"

He was still looking out at the sea and the sky when the voice stopped. And he became aware that the light from the HV had changed. Had gone out. He turned and saw only a gray flickering luminescence in the center of the room. Then a man appeared, in the business dress of an anchor. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "we seem to have lost the signal at its source. We are trying to reacquire it now, and will finish the broadcast as soon as we are able. Meantime, we will be joining a

concert from the Bayliss Room in Old Marinopolis."

Soft music filled the room. A voice told him he was listening to the "gilded strains" of the Frontrunners. He was looking across a dance floor at five musicians on a stage. They were playing something he remembered from his youth. "My Time with You." Yes, that was it.

He sat down again. The Frontrunners played through, finished, and started something else. The volume went down. Vanished. A voice informed him they were still trying to reestablish contact with the Sabol Monument ceremony. And reassured him it would be back shortly.

Eventually, he shut it down and switched to a book.