

CENTRAL FIRE BOOK ONE

**THE BOY
THE CUBE
AND
THE ELF**

BRENT GOLEMBIEWSKI



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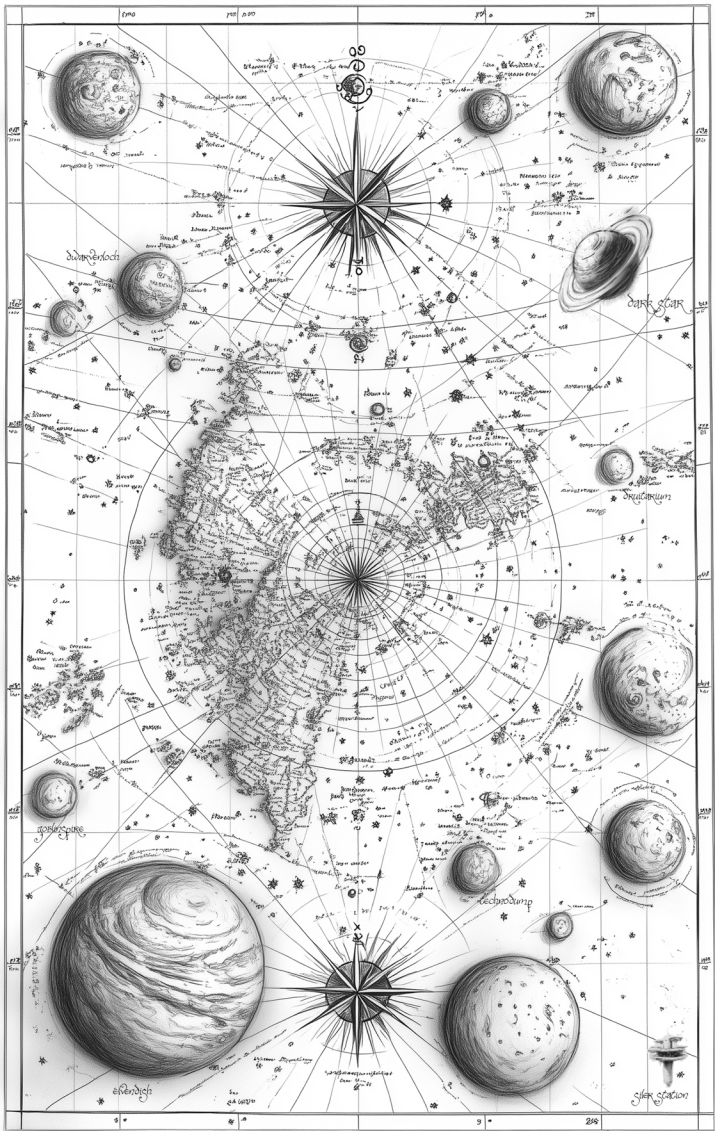
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*To my boys.
Keep dreaming!*

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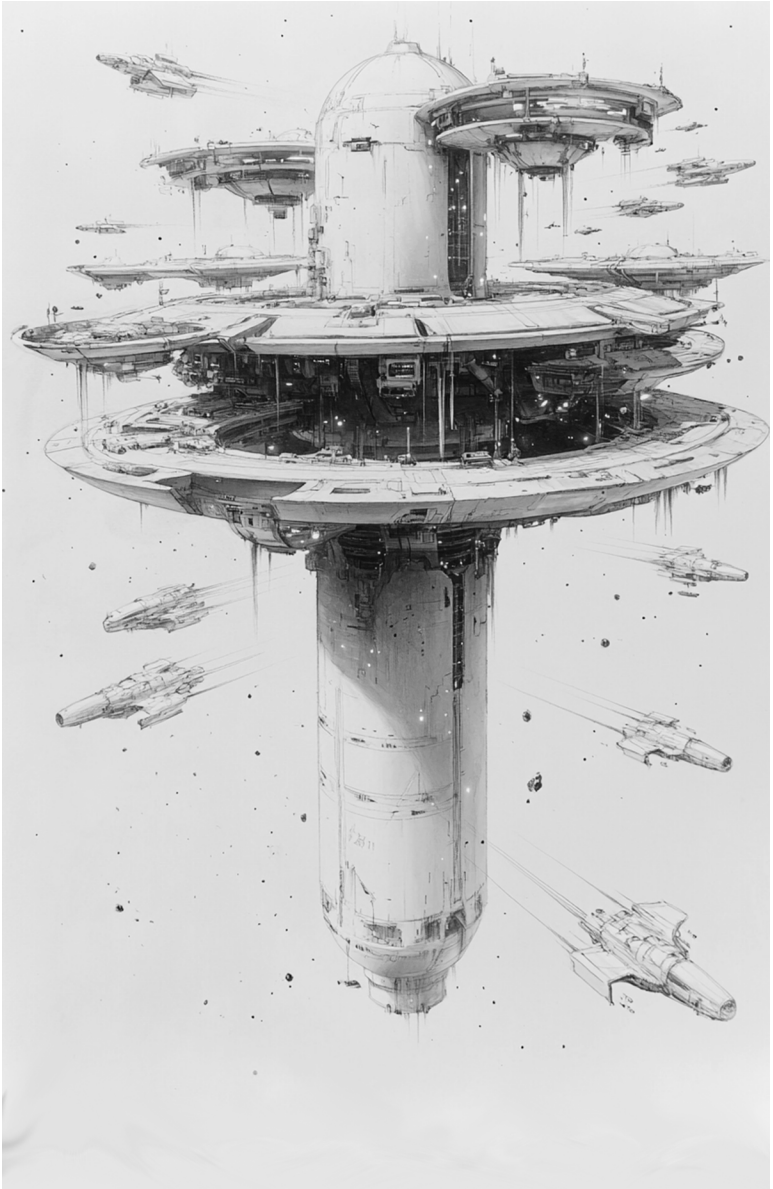
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Planet Jupiter 1713

Planet Saturn 1713

Planet Saturn 1713



CHAPTER 1

SOMETHING'S ODD

In the depths of space, read a sign:

Siler Station Cellular Route E49B
Last stop for 289 light years, Population three.

Nico bolted down the sleek corridor. His rubber boots squeaked on the freshly waxed floor. Sliding to a stop, he faced an automated meal machine.

“Nosh, I’ll have some nuggets today.”

“Nuggets for breakfast? Your parents wouldn’t approve,” a soothing robotic voice replied.

“Fine, some sausage and eggs, I suppose.” He huffed.

He glanced at his watch. It was 9:55 a.m. He bounced on his toes, begging for Nosh to finish his breakfast. He couldn’t be late again. The machine plated his food in a plastic container, which he snatched quicker than a jackrabbit. There was no way he would make it to the far side of the station in one minute, no matter how fast he ran, but he had to try. Nico was blessed that the station now housed only one family, or it would have been impossible to traverse the whole complex in five minutes. He

couldn't imagine sharing his station with over forty-nine other families.

Nico slipped into the classroom—large and with multiple desks, each holding thin virtual reality glasses. A few held tattered leather-bound books, which he had always found fascinating. Pushing a book aside, he slipped on a pair, immersing himself in a new reality. A tall, thin woman stood in front of him. Her nose was long and pointed like an arrow. She glared down at him over small, thin-rimmed glasses.

“Seems you’ve chosen to be late for your lesson. Again.”

Nico began to spit out a rebuttal but stopped. Today was a day he didn't want to be late. Today, he was learning about a tiny, frail planet called “Earth.” And for the next few hours, he learned a myriad of its history, technology, and all other things about the small planet housing life. He daydreamed, thinking of what it would be like living in such an environment. More than once, the teacher had to snap him back to reality. At noon, his wristband alarm buzzed. He bid farewell to his virtual instructor and headed to the maintenance hangar, grabbing a bite to eat on the way. As he stepped in, a blast of blue light nearly blinded him. Squinting, he proceeded forward toward the engine of an enormous ship. A large, muscular hand popped out. He stumbled back.

“Can you hand me the Turbine support wrench over there?”

Nico gathered himself, picking up the requested tool. He handed it to the hand.

“How did you know it was me?”

After a grunt, a muscular man slid into sight, riding a rolling chair. His hair was salt and pepper, and a thick, graying beard covered his face. He grinned ear to ear. It was Nicodemus, his father.

“I can always hear you coming. You walk like you're carrying a Carillion cow. I can't remember—you ever repair a Catalonian power converter before?”

Nico shook his head.

“Well, get over here. Class begins now.”

The two of them dug into the converter. His father had a way with electronics. The station had been a stop on the Cellular highway, frequented by thousands of star freighters shipping precious metals to distant planets. Nicodemus was an exceptional mechanic, able to work on the most challenging ships. But a new route formed, and the ships stopped coming. His father was content fixing the few stray starships that docked on their way to better places, but the other families moved on. Nicodemus constantly muttered to himself, and there were plenty of times Nico believed he saw lights emerge where there shouldn't have been. Nico also seemed to have the gift and a mechanical mind. He once built a miniature spaceship out of spare parts, though he lost it outside the hangar door, where a stray meteorite obliterated it. Soon, the converter was fixed, and the two made their way to their living quarters.

There, Nico's mother prepared a grand meal for the three of them. Afterward, he was tucked into bed, where she sang a beautiful song about kings, queens, grand palaces, close friends, and epic adventures. Each night was new and different. Nico gazed out his bedroom window. A purple and blue galaxy floated motionless outside. Stars littered the sky, and the edge of a large planet peeked over the bottom rim of the window. He gazed up at his mother. She was beautiful, and seeing her warmed his insides.

"Mom, where do your songs come from?"

His mother gently pushed his blond hair from his forehead, giving him a kiss.

"From the old country, my dear."

She turned to leave.

"But are they true?"

"To some," she said. "Now get some sleep. You need it for your studies."

Nico rolled over, snuggling up against a pillow. He smiled at his day, a day like any other.

The following day, Nico finished his academics as usual and headed back toward his living quarters. Along the way, he stopped at one of the automated kitchens for a snack.

“Hello, Nosh. I’d like chicken strips and fries, please.” He stared at the window where he had ordered the same thing many times before, but nothing happened. Perplexed, he asked again. “Nosh, chicken strips and fries, please.”

Still nothing. *Strange. I always get chicken strips and fries here. Maybe my parents figured out my secret stash.* He leaned forward, glaring at the screen displaying his favorite items. *No, that can’t be it.* His finger touched the screen, hoping maybe the physical contact would wake the device from its slumber. Still nothing.

Shrugging his shoulders, he walked to their living quarters. *Must be a glitch in the system, or maybe they’re out of chicken.* Shaking his head, he came up with other possibilities as he made his way through the tubular tunnels. Colorful galaxies peeked in through the multitude of windows. He loved his home and the wonders outside. Though he wished he could leave it a bit more. His father occasionally took him on trips for parts or supplies, but that was a rare occurrence.

Nico stepped into his quarters and froze. The door to his living room was open. That never happened. Doors were programmed by the station to always remain closed, keeping the warm air in. He felt a cool breeze on his face. He stepped in, commanding the door to shut, and waited a second for the familiar hiss of the sliding door.

Nothing moved.

“Mom,” he called. “You home?”

At this time of the day, she was usually reading or working on some project around the quarters. His mother’s loving voice would always answer, “Yes, dear?”

A shiver engulfed his body as nothing but silence answered him.

He walked into the kitchen, finding it too empty.

“Dad?”

Again nothing. *Maybe they're at the hangar working on a ship.* He remembered times his mother had helped his father with projects. That must be the answer. Making his way down to the hangar, his stomach growled. Another automated meal maker greeted him along the way. He tried another order, resulting in the same sad outcome. No food.

Giving up, he proceeded down the corridor.

“Dad must be doing maintenance on the automated systems. That’s got to be what’s going on. And Mom’s helping him.”

This thought reassured him and brought a smile to his face. In no time, he stepped into the hangar. The black abyss of space greeted him from the far wall of the five-sided room. Though there was no glass, it looked like a large window and always gave him the feeling of floating.

“Mom? Dad?”

He made his way around the scattered ships. A small recon fighter his father was rebuilding for a customer in the Ceres system sat off to the side, a larger cargo cruiser from the Lexion system near the middle, and an escape pod off a Star Glimmer toward the back of the hangar. Stopping, he placed a hand on the pod and gazed at the beautiful stars flickering outside. He still didn’t understand how space was kept at bay, but that didn’t matter. He was mesmerized by the sight and, for a moment, forgot what he was doing and just stared. Faster than a static shock, a ship appeared just outside the hangar, causing him to jump as if stray voltage had coursed through the pod. The ship was headed directly toward him.