

A DISTANT --- **CALLING**



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Chapter 1



Fasten Your Seatbelts

Boarding the bus in Anchorage Alaska, Daniel Weber kept thinking about the beautiful colored ribbons lighting the sky. The trip to the airport seemed to take forever. He wasn't used to flying, but Ms. Aimes, his astronomy teacher, waved everyone onto the plane, regardless. Daniel hoped the flight home would be smoother than the ride to Alaska.

Daniel was grateful for the window seat, it kept him busy. His mind quickly wandered to the possibility of other worlds. Could there be life somewhere besides Earth? The thoughts led him on a journey to other galaxies. Soon he was traveling past massive suns and worlds in the far reaches of space. Before he realized it, the plane was landing. Its powerful engines roared, and the vibration reminded him of the rock in his dad's testing lab at NASA.

Daniel anxiously waited for the "Fasten Your Seatbelt" sign to light up. He quickly fastened his seatbelt and peered out the window as the plane started its descent. The ground cleared as the aircraft escalated its speed. Daniel was pushed back into his seat; the experience was unsettling.

The speed coincided with his grip on the armrest, forcing Daniel to keep his eyes squeezed tight to avoid looking out the window. The plane's jet engines sounded like a volcano erupting, forcing him to grip the armrest tighter. The pressure from squeezing his eyes closed forced them to water, and he could feel the tears tickle the sides of his nose. Just as Daniel thought it would never end, the shaking ceased, and they floated down like riding on a magic carpet. It was so smooth! "Oh," Daniel thought.

However, his anticipation was premature, and the shuddering commenced once again. Daniel hoped it would all be over soon. He tried to focus on space, the thing he loved most, but it was hard to concentrate with all the commotion going on with flying in a plane. Then, the wheels hit the runway, and everything stopped.

"I think we are on the ground," Daniel thought as he slowly opened his eyes.

He could feel his heart pounding; the trip could not end soon enough. As he stood up to leave, Daniel imagined he was on a space shuttle coming back from the moon.

The weather was storming in Florida when they landed and the class hustled to avoid the rain. Daniel was a sophomore at Liton High School.

Daniel's family lived in Kelley Park West, near Cape Canaveral Space Center. His father worked in NASA's Satellite Development Division. The bus arrived somewhat early, and Daniel had to wait for his dad and sister, Jill. But the important thing he was on the ground, safe and sound.

Daniel's father designed and built a Deep Space Satellite named Sweeper that was launched back in 2010. The satellite exited Earth's solar system last summer, and his dad continued to head the team controlling the satellite's journey.

Daniel's passion was outer space. Any chance that there might be another world in a distant galaxy with life fascinated him. He spent hours sketching and drawing other worlds. In his perceptions, of course. The artwork included a multitude of unusual geometric structures and rocky mountain ranges. When he concentrated hard enough a strange world appeared in his mind, almost as if it was trying to communicate. The transmissions were more like an acknowledgment of their existence.

The walls in Daniel's room were filled with drawings; some complete while others awaited fulfillment. His passion to create artwork was a deep-seated hunger. Twenty or more pieces covered the walls. Once the space on his walls vanished, his mother made room in the household library. She was proud of her son's accomplishments.

In their library were three unique pieces: Sunset Wonder, Distant Sunrise, and Red Planet. Each one was ideally placed, even though they were not complete. After the careful preparation of their wall placement, Daniel stood back to eye his masterpieces, when something caught his attention. "What is going on?" he thought to himself.

One small tiny piece of the drawing seemed to move, blurring his vision. Daniel squeezed his eyes once again, as he had on the plane, to clear his sight. But, upon second look, everything appeared normal. The confusion made him uncomfortable, however, he decided to let the incident pass.

Daniel's friend Mark sat next to him in Astronomy Class, but he wasn't interested in astronomy. Although, he enjoyed looking at the planets in the sky.

The next Friday, Ms. Aimes entered the class and walked right past her desk and straight to the window. She pointed, tapping the glass with her long, painted fingernails.

“Past all that light you see, mankind will be there in the future.” She turned to Daniel, who was afraid to look up. “Daniel Weber?” she said. He slowly raised his head. “Daniel, please, can you go up to the chalkboard and show the class how and why the Aurora Borealis moves and then changes colors?”

On the plane, Daniel had been reading his notes from the Astronomy Center in Anchorage, and he was not paying attention to the current conversation. An overview of the information gave him more confidence; his goal was to get a better grade.

As he walked up to the chalkboard, Daniel started, “The rings of gas change color as they move up and down in the atmosphere. The solar winds are stronger as you get closer to the North Pole. The upper part of our planet is losing its protection over the Earth. There is a large hole in the ozone layer, which is losing the fight to keep us protected from the radiation emitted by the Sun.”

He explained all this with a simple diagram he had drawn on the chalkboard. “We have seen the Aurora Borealis, but what is it really? It is the ozone layer being hit by solar flares.” Daniel turned around from the chalkboard, expecting to see everyone laughing or not paying attention; instead, he saw all eyes were locked on him, all opened wide.

“You must have been paying attention, Mr. Weber,” Ms. Aimes said, taking the chalk from Daniel. She went over to the chalkboard and from Daniel’s diagram, she made a line and wrote the word RADIATION. The line went to one of Daniels's drawings on the board explaining how the gas is formed. Suddenly, Ms. Aimes stopped and said to the class, “I want to see your books open! Is Daniel the only one interested in the universe?”

Mark slowly raised his hand and answered, “I am!” A roar of laughter came from the students. They didn’t believe him.

“I’m serious,” Mark said.

“Then show us,” replied Ms. Aimes. “Here is the chalk, show the class a diagram of Saturn’s rings.”

Mark got up and slowly made his way to the chalkboard. Drawing a round circle on the chalkboard, Mark explained, “This is Saturn. In 1568 the planet was discovered by Galileo, and the three rings are called Galileo C, B, and A, which are made of rock and ice. Ring A is the farthest away from Saturn. They are about 10 Earth in width.”

“What a pleasant surprise, Mark,” said Ms. Aimes.

“I go to Daniel’s house and we study together,” Mark said.

Ms. Aimes looked over at Daniel and he nodded in agreement. Ms. Aimes glanced back toward Mark; he had a big smile on his face. Daniel said, “Mark comes over weekly.” Ms. Aimes couldn’t hide the surprised expression on her face. The bell rang, ending the class for the day.

“Listen. There is a test this Friday on the Sun. I want all of you to do well, so make sure you study hard,” Ms. Aimes said as everyone shuffled out the classroom door.

Chapter 2



DISCOVERY II

Alex, Daniel's dad, was up early, as he needed to leave for work early. But even though he tried to be quiet, the coffee pot was loud and woke Daniel. He lay in bed thinking to himself, "We need a new coffee maker."

His dad kept everything to the bitter end. Daniel heard his mom walking down the stairs. The day was beginning. His mother knew something was wrong for him to be up and leaving this early, "What's wrong?"

"The Sweeper program has picked up something on its cameras focused on our solar system."

"What is it?"

"I'm not sure," his father replied. "I need to go in early and try to find out. Plus, they called and told me there is a problem with the propulsion unit. The right side stopped working. I have to fix the problem so that it will fly straight."

Daniel couldn't get back to sleep; thoughts about his favorite subject, space travel, filled his mind as he rolled out of bed. He was hoping he would do well on Friday's test, but he couldn't get the thought of Mark out of his head.

"Mark hardly ever comes over to study astronomy, he just likes playing the Space Wars video game," he thought as he clenched his teeth. "I have no idea how he knew so much about the rings on Saturn."

Daniel did not want to wake Jill so early on a Saturday morning. She attended Lyons Middle school. He slowly crept down the hallway, passed her room, and headed downstairs. When he peered around the corner, his dad spotted him as he was filling his briefcase with papers.

"Good morning son! I'm going to work today; would you like to come with me?"

Daniel jumped around the corner, puzzled. It had been a long time since his dad asked him to come to NASA, especially on a Saturday.

"There is something wrong with the Sweeper program and I have to fix it," his dad said.

Daniel loved going to the Space Station. "Yes! I'll get my stuff."

His favorite part was when the astronauts had to go underwater in a big pool that was twice the size of Liton High School's pool. It was cool watching them move around underwater doing different projects; undoing things and putting things together without dropping anything underwater was a challenge, and he admired them. Daniel also liked looking at the big monitor that projected from Sweeper's large camera. The satellite had four large zoom lenses that made the pictures clear and large.

Daniel liked the idea of his father having a designated parking space, and it was even marked with a sign. It meant he was an important person at the company. Daniel was proud of him.

The car's engine shut off and his dad asked, "Ready?"

Daniel nodded without looking up, "Let's go fix it!" Alex repeated what Daniel had said and ruffled his son's hair.

When they hit the top of the stairs his dad's assistant Dave came around the corner, almost tripping them. Panicked, Dave blurted out, "We have to fix Sweeper before it is too late."

"Don't hurt yourself, Dave," said Alex as he caught him from falling forward down the stairs. "Let's just go in and find out what's wrong." Daniel followed close behind as the two talked business.

Mr. Mathews was trying to adjust the screen when they walked into the control room. "Ever since your satellite passed over Saturn's third ring it has not been responding to our commands. The quadrants are still working, except for the zoom camera on the right side, and that's the side we need most."

"Well, boss, let's see if we can figure it out," Alex turned and smiled. "This could take a while, but hopefully it will be a short fix if we are lucky."

"If we don't fix the problem, Alex, we will lose our support from Washington. You know that, right?" Mr. Mathews asked.

"Yes, we have to fix it or look for new careers," Alex stated. "You know I will do my best, sir."

"This is your project, Mr. Weber," blurted Mr. Matthews.

“I am confident it will be up and running very soon, and back on its way to other worlds,” Alex replied. Turning to look at his son he asked, “Daniel will you go down to the testing lab near the pool and pick up the suit stress results? We have to make sure they don’t leak.”

“On my way! Be back soon,” he stated.

Dave went with Daniel as they made their way down a long, large corridor. A massive object forced them to stop when they turned the corner. It was the Explorer. Daniel couldn’t take his eyes off the huge engines. The round cylinder was bigger than his house.

“Look at this, Daniel,” Dave said. He was pointing at the cockpit. “Is this the first time you have seen the Explorer up close?”

“Yes, I’ve only seen it on T.V.,” Daniel responded.

Daniel remembered his dad talking about how the shuttle would change space travel forever. “My dad said that the shuttle will be flying back and forth to Mars one day.”

All at once, Daniel heard his dad’s voice booming over the loud speaker, “Hey! You guys, I need you to go and pick up those reports at the pool testing center, pronto! Mr. Matthews wants you back here now.”

Dave pointed, “Let’s hurry!”

They both headed away from the shuttle bay to the pool testing area. Once they got poolside, Daniel spotted one astronaut conducting experiments at the bottom. When the astronaut saw him looking over the pool’s edge, he looked up and waived. A few seconds later, Daniel heard a big bang! It startled him. He jumped and turned toward the noise to see that a large glass container had broken.

Dave yelled, “Daniel we better leave before Mr. Matthews shows up.” He grabbed the computer printout and handed it to Daniel. “Let’s head back to your dad and not mention anything about the broken container. They will discover it soon enough and clean it up. They need to concentrate on the task at hand, which is very important.”

“I won’t say a word. I also noticed that the astronaut underwater did not react, so I’m assuming he didn’t hear anything.”

“Good, thanks!” Dave replied.

The incident startled Daniel, but he knew it was important to get the report to his dad. On their way back to the control room, he noticed some large bay windows and could hear loud humming sounds coming from outside, but it seemed to be far away. As curiosity kicked in, he stopped to get a better look and noticed something very large slowly making its way down what looked like railroad tracks. *Was it the shuttle?*

On the side of the object were large letters, spelling out what he thought said DISCOVERY II. It was the next shuttle being prepared for launch; the mission was headed for the space station to restock supplies. The testing experiments would begin soon. As Daniel observed the happenings it reminded him of he and his dad blowing off miniature rockets in the field behind the elementary school near their house. They were great memories; making and assembling the rockets were Daniel’s favorite part, along with drawing each rocket after they finished making them. Once they had them built, he would decorate each one with bright colors, weird symbols, and letters. He was very proud of his imagination, and the decals and symbols were of his design. While they were building each rocket, his dad would talk about his missions at NASA, which made Daniel happy because they shared so much in common.

Daniel stared out the window, straining to see the rest of the lettering. It was an exhilarating time for him to be at the space center with his dad.

“Isn’t that cool?” Dave asked him. “It will take two days to put the shuttle into position for launch.” He crammed his face in the window next to Daniel. “Your dad told me that you draw. You should draw that shuttle; that would be a cool piece of artwork.”

“I have! I have two drawings of the shuttle,” replied Daniel.

“Really? I will have to come over and see them sometime.”

“Yeah, sounds good,” Daniel said as his attention focused back on the slow-moving Discovery II shuttle. “When is it going to lift off?”

“I think if all systems are working correctly, we could see blast off within a week. Here I will show you.”

Dave walked toward a large door, with a big dark burgundy-colored window. Gazing inside, Daniel noticed flashes of different colored lights.

Opening the heavy door Dave said, “Hurry up! Let me show you what is going on.” Once inside Daniel noticed a lot of screens. “Here, look! You will like this.”

As Daniel walked over to a large screen, Dave reached down and flicked on a bright lever. Within seconds, the Discovery II appeared on the large screen. “Look at that,” Dave said.

A few seconds later a man walked into the room wearing a NASA uniform. “I will take over now,” the man said.

Daniel turned and looked at the man. “You must be Daniel. My name is Mr. Allen, and I know your dad. He talks a lot about you and your interest in outer space. He also mentioned you are an artist, and that you draw a lot of pictures based on your imagination of other worlds.” Daniel nodded, with a smile on his face. He was happy that his dad had good things to say about him and his artwork.

The subject changed quickly since the shuttle was more important at the moment. “The Discovery II is so cool! I feel lucky that my dad works here, and I get to see it firsthand,” Daniel commented.

“Your dad has been here a long time,” Mr. Allen stated. “He designed and built the Sweeper satellite. It was launched over ten years ago, and it is still flying toward Alpha Centauri. It is passing by the far reaches of our solar system as we speak. One of the reasons why your father was called in is to repair the satellite, and since he built it, I’m sure he can fix it.”

Mr. Allen started flipping through screens showing different views of the Discovery II shuttle that was moving into position for launch in a week. “I can say, we don’t have any problems here. Everything is going well.”

Dave looked over at Daniel, “We better get moving, your dad will be wondering where we are at!”

Before Daniel left the room, Mr. Allen asked, “Your dad said you are working on a new piece, what’s it called?”

“Yes!” Daniel said, “It’s called Farr Over, it should be completed very soon.”

“Interesting! I want to see it when it is finished,” replied Mr. Allen.

“You bet! I will bring some pieces in some time for everyone to see if my dad says that is okay,” he replied.

“I am sure it won’t be a problem. See you later, Daniel.”

The two nodded and left the room, “I hope Mr. Matthews is not mad at us for taking so long getting these reports back to them,” said Dave.

As Daniel opened the door, he heard Mr. Matthews say, “The lens is frozen in place, too bad it’s in the closed position. NASA has a lot of investment in this project of yours, Mr. Weber, but I’m sure you can handle it and get it fixed.”

“Don’t worry,” Alex replied confidently. “I will figure it out, sir.”

Observing the clear screen, it was hard to believe the satellite was two billion miles from Earth. After studying different angles and positions, Daniel’s dad noticed that the lens was out of position, it was rotated away from the Sun. The computer program designed to run Sweeper from space was brilliantly created by Daniel’s dad and up to now had worked perfectly.

“Daniel, I believe we have the problem figured out and should have the issue fixed momentarily,” Alex told his son.

“What’s wrong, Dad?”

“Sweeper’s lens is pointed away from the Sun and has frozen from the cold. Once I have it redirected, we should be ready to get some photos again.”

“Wait... Alex, did you say the problem is fixed?” Mr. Mathews asked.

“Yes, the lens is frozen and now that it’s facing the Sun it should warm up soon.”

“Great! I hope it works,” said Mr. Matthews.

“It will take several hours to make the connection, but we’ll know soon enough.” He took a sip of his coffee and finished the statement. “We

will just have to wait. Daniel we will have to stay here for a while longer.” Daniel nodded in agreement. *Good! I like it here.*

The clock seemed to stop, waiting for the signal to connect with Sweeper. “Once we have a connection the screen should light up.” Everyone sat in suspense watching the screen.

“Daniel, did you know these chairs are from the last shuttle?” Mr. Matthews asked.

“Cool!” Daniel said. “Can I sit in your chair, Dad?”

“Sure,” he grinned.

As Daniel sat down, he turned to face the screen, and it made him feel like an astronaut. “Do you want me to do anything?”

Alex bent over and whispered in Daniel’s ear, “Not in front of Mr. Matthews.”

Daniel whispered back, “Roger that.”

“Well, nothing else to do here right now. I am going to take a lunch break,” said Dave.

“I will join you,” said Mr. Matthews. “Let’s go!”

The door shut behind them. Daniel looked at his dad and asked, “Is Mr. Matthews mad at you?”

“Oh, no... not at all. He knows I am going to get it working again. We have to reach Alpha Centauri and accomplish our goal.”

“Hey, Dad look!” The dark green screen was starting to show some images.

“I think you are right, let me sit down.”

Daniel jumped out of the big chair and before Alex sat down there was another flash. “I think we might be getting a picture. Let’s try to focus the view.” The screen started flashing. “I hope that the ice is melted and there’s nothing wrong with the lens.” The door swung open, and in walked Mr. Matthews. “You must have ESP.”

Mr. Mathews smiled. "Is that what I think it is?" he said as he walked slowly to the screen.

"I hope so... it looks clear," Alex replied.

"See if you can turn on the camera's farthest lens. I hope there isn't any ice built up around the revolving lens tower. Let's see if it is ready to take a photo," said Mr. Matthews.

"Let me get it into position. It looks like it's moving" said Alex.

"Good, put it into position and shoot the picture," said Mr. Matthews.

Alex slowly turned the small knob. The picture started to get larger. "Let's see if I can add some color. Color will identify the different types of gases around the satellite."

"There it is, perfect timing," said Mr. Matthews as he bent towards the screen. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Yep!" Alex replied. "Pluto never looked so good."

"Did you take the photos?"

"Yes! Time will tell. It will be a few hours, but I will stay until they come through."

Mr. Matthews said to Daniel, "You have a pretty smart father. We are lucky we have him on our team."

Daniel agreed. "He's the best!"

"What time do you think the first images will arrive?" asked Mr. Matthews.

"I'd say around 4:00 p.m."

"Ok, I will be back then," Mr. Matthews replied. "Daniel... are you going to enter NASA's art show this year? I hear that your artwork is very interesting!"

"Really?" Daniel asked, surprised.

"I'm very proud of you, Daniel," said his father.

"Ok, I will try my best and enter the art show," he said proudly.

Turning his attention back to the screen, Daniel sat back down in the “cool” chair and watched his father work. “Daniel, just be careful with all the buttons and knobs. Please don’t touch anything.”

“I won’t touch anything,” he reassured his dad, but added, “I bet this is just like sitting in the cockpit of the shuttle.”

Daniel’s dad chuckled as he started explaining all about the screens and monitors in front of them. A half an hour went by when the door opened and Dave peeked in. “They have pizza in the cafeteria, want to go down and grab a piece or two, Daniel?”

“Good idea,” said Alex. “And while you are out, call Mom and check-in. Let her know we will be home after we have confirmed the satellite is fixed.” He handed Daniel money for lunch, and Daniel followed Dave out the door.

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