

Prologue - The Burst

Italian Villa, Greater Milan

//Earth

“Gwyn! It’s time to go, what are you doing?” Sloane yelled for the second time across the house. *Nine-year-olds... who knew they’d start being such a handful so young?*

She was watching the news as they discussed the first successful launch to orbit of the rocket named Starship. The blasé attitude of the Italian news anchor belied the importance the vehicle would have on spaceflight—at least according to her. The fact that it would potentially take the first humans to another planet? *That was important. But my opinion of the subject doesn’t matter in the grand scheme of things,* she thought with a chuckle.

Sloane’s focus was more on things within the world than outside of it. That said, she had always enjoyed hearing about the progress of SpaceX and its goal of putting humans on Mars. Sloane wondered what it would be like to step foot on another planet for the first time.

It was just a thought—a passing dream of a woman who had once lived for adventure. She’d had her fun and adventures traveling the world and seeing new things in her early twenties but that life was behind her—now Sloane experienced the feeling within the pages of a good novel.

Still, as her daughter’s footsteps finally pounded down the hall, she considered that maybe the adventure she craved had just taken on a new phase.

Dismissing her reverie, Sloane looked at the time as she waited for her daughter. Her patience had worn thin just as Gwyn rushed into the kitchen—sliding across the hardwood floor in her socks. She was wearing some black pants and her grey jacket. Gwyn looked like she was ready to go hiking. *Well, if she had shoes on that is...* It was only early autumn, the gelato shops hadn’t even closed for the season yet.

“Gwyneth Reinhart, you are taking far too long this morning,” Sloane said, exasperated.

“I’m putting my boots on!” Gwyn protested.

“I told you to get your shoes on ten minutes ago. What were you doing?”

“I had to put my socks on, Mom.”

And there’s the eye roll. This girl. “Well, we need to go if you want to go to the café before school.”

“I know, Mom,” she said while Sloane hurried her daughter out of the house.

“Don’t forget, tonight we have to—”

“I know...” Gwyn interrupted, cutting her off with exasperation before she could finish. Sloane closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

“Gwyneth...” she began but stopped when she opened her eyes and saw her daughter standing there ready, “ugh, fine. Let’s go.”

Sloane collected her things as her daughter hefted her brightly colored backpack - a rainbow checkerboard patterned thing that she had begged and pleaded for - onto her shoulder and together they walked to the door. Sloane looked around one last time before leaving, certain that she was forgetting something.

“Mom, you forgot the watch,” Gwyn reminded her.

“Oh, yeah. Thanks, Gwynnie!”

“Of course, Mom. You’re *welcome*. Let’s go!”

Sloane went and grabbed the case that held one of the prototypes for a revolutionary smartwatch she had a key part in designing. Her team was nearing a crucial point in the last stages of its development and, currently, it was all hands on deck. She and several other engineers had begun wearing them outside of the campus for real-world usability tests. Even though it was not that fashionable yet, she enjoyed it. The usability and software were far more important to her job than the experimental looks of an incomplete product still in development. That wouldn’t be a concern for long because the release candidate model was scheduled to be built soon in preparation for mass production. Life would get much easier for her after the team reached that point.

For the time being, Sloane was just so busy, but it wouldn't be much longer until everything was calm again. She just had to keep at it and not let the stress get to her. Perhaps things weren't as bad as they seemed—Sloane just needed to ensure that the stress didn't affect her relationship with Gwyn.

Sloane took the watch out of its charging case and fastened it onto her wrist. She glanced at her daughter and shut the door. Yes, everything was alright.

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Boding Star System

//Terra Interstellar Union

Aedan sat on the bridge as his ship was sitting in space *running yet another scan*.

“Captain, observation platform LP-052 in the Creith YJ7J system is reporting an anomalous reading.”

“Was there any accompanying data with that alert, Ensign?”

“Negative, Captain, however, it is within the threshold requiring us to investigate.”

“Send it to my station.”

“At once, sir.”

Lieutenant Aedan Solla listened in as Ensign Kalin, the sensor officer, reported to the ship's captain. As the communications officer, he wasn't quite needed yet, so it was mainly out of curiosity. That did not stop him from ensuring he was ready, just in case he was called upon.

The TMS Elba Idryss was a reconnaissance frigate assigned to frontier patrol. Their ten-month mission was only in its fourth and absolutely nothing had happened thus far. Any excitement was welcome to not only Aedan but the entire crew.

It didn't matter *what* it was, so long as it was *something*.

Aedan watched the captain while he reviewed the sensor data.

“That's odd. Navigation, how far are we from the platform currently?”

The navigation lieutenant reviewed her screens before turning to the captain.

“Approximately seven-point-three light-years, sir. At cruising speed, we can exit this system's mass in four hours followed by two days in hyperspace.”

“XO, your thoughts?”

Commander Crofte walked to the command station and looked over the captain's shoulder.

“Hmm... Well, the alert does fall within the range of requiring further examination. Plus, it’s not as if we have too much choice per regulations. It’s registering as a Class II Anomaly. To be honest, Captain, we’ve been out here counting stars for four months now. Even if the reading was still showing green, I’d suggest going there.”

“Ha. True enough. Very well then. Navigation, set a course for the platform. Communications, send an alert to Command, notifying them of our new heading and destination. Let them know we are following up and investigating a class II anomaly.”

Even though he was listening, Aedan was still startled even though he thought he was ready. He realized the fact that they actually had something to do other than sit and scan a region of space distracted him. He shook his head quickly and acknowledged the order, “At once, sir!”

* * *

Onyxhallow

//Earth

Alyce Maxwell stepped outside, definitely not to search for her sister, and looked around. A horse-drawn carriage was passing by on the cobbled streets. She was feeling especially anxious. It was the day that she had been waiting for. The day that years of hard work would reach the next crucial stage toward her dream. Alyce’s team had toiled away at building a fully functional airship—*The Wanderlust*—by hand, in a garage!

It just wasn’t done nowadays. You needed an entire construction and support team along with a massive hanger filled to the brim with the machinery needed to maneuver all the parts into position.

Alyce’s team, on the other hand, was a small group consisting of two people—three, if she counted her sister’s husband. Her brother-in-law, Nicklaus, was the one who had supplied all of the parts. It was an important contribution, one that had saved them a not-insignificant amount of money, but Alyce wasn’t entirely sure that it made him part of *the team*. For the longest time, it was just Alyce and Katy. Now, her sister Katy said it counted, but Alyce thought she was a bit biased. Katy was a people person. She met people and organized everything needed for

registration and approval of the Airship. When she wasn't wheeling and dealing, she assisted Alyce in the garage with whatever needed assembling.

She loved her city, she could gaze at the towering skyline filled with the smokestacks of factories, skyscrapers, and steel all day. The sky was filled with balloons and airships of all designs. Sure, there may be a bit of fog, smoke, and pollution. It was maybe a bit damp and dirty, even run down in parts, but Onyxhallow was a bustling town filled with innovation and adventure.

There was something for everyone. *Even if it's a back-alley shiving and a shallow grave.* She chuckled. Yet, at the end of the day, Alyce knew that while she may travel the world soon, this was her home. A place to which she would always return.

Looking up again, seeing past all of the airships and floating balloons, at the moon just hanging in the sky, she wondered if her people could build a ship wonderous enough to reach her. Now *that* would be a worthy achievement, one to be immortalized for all history.

Alyce heard the shrill whistle of one of the steam trams in the distance and considered back to the carriage she had just seen. *When will those be steam-powered and not have to rely on horses? ... Soon. I'd wager my best wrench on it.*

She smiled wistfully at the thought and looked down her stoop to see Katy with a goofy look on her face.

"Daydreaming again, sis?" Katy poked at her.

"Oh, hey, Katy. Wait..." Alyce felt a sudden rush of excitement, "Oh my god, oh my god! Tell me!"

"Tell you what, sis?" She said with a bored look on her face. "Oh, that our application for a flight worthiness inspection and official test flight was approved?"

"Really? Really!?"

Katy had a huge grin on her face as Alyce rushed to her sister, lifted her, and spun her around.

"We did it! This is amazing, Katy!" She exclaimed as she put her sister back down.

“Slow down for a sec’, we still need to deliver.”

“Who are you kidding? Of course, we will. Now, come on, let’s go inside and celebrate! This is huge!”

Alyce turned and started to walk inside, stopping at the door and turning when she realized her sister hadn’t followed her.

She looked down at her sister in confusion, “Katy?”

Katy stood transfixed on something above them and pointed up at the sky, “Alyce, what’s that?”

Alyce looked and saw what looked like an aurora spreading... all across the sky.

“That’s strange. We’re nowhere near the poles. I wonder what—”

She didn’t get to finish before the entire sky flashed bright blue. A huge gust of wind seemed to rush through her, chilling her to the bone. Her head began to spin as everything went black.

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A bit over two days after entering FTL, the Elba entered the Creith System in a burst of ionizing radiation. Aedan was once again on duty with the primary bridge crew. He reviewed his systems, looking for anything out of the ordinary.

Almost immediately, he noticed the post had a data packet queued up for the first naval vessel to enter the system.

He accepted the transfer and loaded it up for the captain.

“Captain, we have a packet ready from the observation post. I am sending it to yours and Science’s stations now.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant. Science, what are we looking at?”

“One moment, Captain.”

Aedan waited as the science officer reviewed the data, and started coordinating with the rest of their team and sensors. Aedan waited anxiously while sitting out of the loop. After what seemed like an hour, but ended up being just several minutes, the captain and science commander started discussing the data.

“Sir, as you can see here, there is an unknown anomaly just over one-six light-years from here in deep space. The readings, frankly, do not make sense. It seems to be a form of radiation burst but it’s coming from an area that has zero readable mass signatures or abnormal gravitational fluctuations.”

“Okay, looks like we’re going on a trip. Navigation, plot us a course to the system’s mass shadow and then skip us in short jumps to the anomaly. We will stop and rescan it after each jump. I want us no closer than one light-hour until we figure out just what it is. Do you concur, Commander Bardwell?”

“Aye, sir. This should allow my team and I to get better readings so we can figure out what exactly we’re seeing.”

“Communications, are you picking up any transmissions?”

Aedan reviewed the automated scanning he had set up upon entering the system.

“No sir, I have scanned all known frequencies and continue searching along natural frequencies but have no results as of yet.”

“Keep at it, Lieutenant, maybe we’ll get lucky.”

“Yes sir.”

“Okay, Navigation. Move us out.”

The ship lurched into motion and headed toward the edge of the system.

Two hours later, Aedan was getting ready to end his shift just as the ship alarm went off.

The sensor operator, Kalin, jolted as he reacted to something on his console. He whipped his head around toward the command station. “Captain! We’re reading a massive burst of ... radiation... coming from the anomaly! It’s spreading quickly!”

The captain snapped his head toward Ensign Kalin. “Radiation? You didn’t sound sure about that ensign.” He turned and called out to Bardwell, “Science? What are we seeing?”

“Sir, I have no idea. That is not any form of radiation I’m aware of, and whatever it is, it’s barely showing up on our sensors. I recommend reversing course to stay ahead of the wave. We have no idea how the ship will handle it.”

“How long until the wave reaches us, Commander?”

“About... wait... Sensors! Max scan, all sensor nodes on that wave. Now!”

Ensign Kalin suddenly looked even more alarmed, “Whatever it is, it’s moving fast! We can’t outrun it while the FTL drive is recharging. Sir! It’s almost on us!”

Aedan took a deep breath, the captain immediately hit the shipwide intercom.

“All hands! This is the captain, anti-radiation procedures! Brace for Impact!”

Aedan rushed to get his helmet, but before he could, the wave was upon them. He looked at the forward viewscreen and saw a massive glittering bubble of light that looked like a nebula rushing toward them. He held his breath right as the ship violently shook, the sparkling membrane passing in the span of a heartbeat, right through their shields, the hull, and the crew. Everything went black.

* * *

Sloane waited outside Gwyn’s school at the end of the day. Today at work went well. She had managed to get a lot of tasks done on the watch’s operating system. The team had originally considered using a popular open-source system when they had initially decided on building a new wearable, but then her team had a breakthrough on their custom chipset.

Their new hardware required a radical redesign of the OS to make full use of the new architecture's increased capabilities. It was a painstaking process that required the hardware team to take a more active role than usual to test and fine-tune the integration.

Before the redesign, it had been years since she last dealt with any system coding, but they were still on track for release the following year. They just needed to work out how to mass-produce the new chip design with the manufacturer they contracted. It would require some improvements in their nanometer lithography process, but the factory had assured them that it could be done.

She looked up at the school as she heard the unmistakable sound of a hundred kids streaming out, chatting and laughing, and excited to be free from their classrooms. She walked toward the gated entrance as she saw her daughter walking across the courtyard, and waved once Gwyn noticed her.

"Hey, Gwynnie! You ready to go?"

"Yup! Gelato?"

"You know what? Sure, let's get some."

Looking over Gwyn's outfit, she asked, "So, why'd you end up getting all dressed up today? I didn't see anything about your class going on a hike."

"I knew we'd be out and about today. Wanted to make sure I'd be okay walking."

"So, you just *knew* we'd be walking to get ice cream?"

"Yup!"

With a laugh, Sloane took her daughter's backpack and put it in the car before heading towards the local gelateria, a little more than a block away.

Gwyn reached over and grabbed Sloane's hand as they started to walk.

Sloane smiled down at her and with a squeeze of her hand, she asked, "So, how was your day?"

“It was okay. I got hurt again, and Ms. Alberta asked why I’m always getting hurt so much. I told her that it’s just my life.”

Sloane laughed, “She really put you on blast, didn’t she?”

“Yeah, it was my knee this time. I fell kicking the soccer ball away from the boys. They were being mean.”

“I’m sorry, sweetie. You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. I just played with my friends after.”

They continued to talk about Gwyn’s day as they walked and crossed the bridge over the canal that surrounded the town’s center. Sloane glanced up and gasped as she did a double-take at what she saw. Gwyn immediately looked up as well.

Gwyn squealed lightly and brought her other hand to her chest. She started tugging at Sloane. “Mom! That’s so pretty! What is it?”

“That looks like an aurora, sweetie. It’s really weird, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, but it’s cool! Look. Everyone’s looking at it.”

Sloane looked around and noticed crowds of people also staring and pointing up at the sky. She grabbed Gwyn’s hand and pulled her close. A loud burst of noise resounded everywhere, almost as if a jet had broken the sound barrier above them.

Sloane became concerned, there were some screams as people were startled by the seeming sonic boom. She gripped her daughter’s hand tighter. “Gwyn, stay close.”

“What’s wrong, Mom?”

Sloane tensed, looking around trying to figure out what was going on. She saw panicked looks on everyone around them. She instantly felt a need to protect her child. “I don’t know, sweetie. Just stay close to me.”

Gwyn quickly shoved closer to her just as the sky suddenly flashed blue.

“Mom!”

“Gwyneth! St—”

Sloane was blinded by the flash and was hit by a huge gust of wind. She felt Gwyn jerk her hand away in fear as she screamed. Sloane reached where she thought her daughter was, but then suddenly, felt as if she were falling. Her last thought was of Gwyneth as everything turned black.

* * *

West Ikios

//Eona

“Boss, how much longer until we reach Larton?” Asked the sun elf guard in Onas’ employ.

The guard had a hint of a smirk on his face as if he knew exactly what he was doing. There was a rugged look about him, one that hinted that this was a person who was used to a fight. Which he undoubtedly was. He had close braided dark brown hair and his dark skin, which was common amongst the sun elves, was contrasted by his bright yellow-orange eyes.

He was a recent addition to his merchant company, but the ability to switch between humor and calm professionalism when required was well worth the additional expense. The presence of additional guards also helped deter any would-be bandits.

Onas’ head guard, on the other hand, looked unamused, “Raafe, do you insist upon asking so many times? You know it’s a week. Same as five hours ago when you asked. You should pay more attention to your surroundings. We’ll be reaching Hilshen village soon, where we’ll be staying for the night. Watch for any bandits.”

Taenya Shavyre had been working for Onas for eight years now and at twenty-nine, was well used to the route the merchant traveled upon, and its dangers. The telv sat atop her horse with a steely set to her violet eyes, constantly scanning the distance for any threats. Her blonde hair that normally fell to her shoulder blades was pulled up into a bun that complemented her face. Her race looked similar to Onas’, the high elves, and the only differences were the much shorter points on their ears and softer jawlines. The telv were native to the continent, unlike the Loreni which consisted of the high, sun, and moon elves.

“Oh, come on boss, give him a break. You know he’s always been a bit bad with math. We've all seen him need to use his fingers to add. Actually, come to think of it, that might go for you too, boss. Obviously, it’s not quite a week if five hours have passed.” Keston interjected from the wagon’s driving bench, clearly not thinking very hard for his weak attempt at getting a jab in on her as well.

Onas looked at his guards and smiled as they continued bickering. His route passed through six villages, three towns, and his home city of Strathmore. The town of Larton would be the last stop before returning home. He couldn’t wait to get back and be with his family. His wife and children were managing the storefront they maintained to both stock and sell any surplus he made from his travels.

The trip this time had been quite lucrative so far, and he was interested in reinvesting some of the profits in upgrades to his company’s caravans.

He sold various odds and ends, basically anything of sufficient resale value. Sometimes, he simply sold anything in need by the people on the route. It always paid to make positive connections, even if the profit margins were smaller in trades meant to build relations. Right now, he had various goods from the previous towns and villages he thought would sell well in Strathmore. He was also delivering a shipment of swords ordered for Larton. They were growing their town guard and needed to supplement the meager stock that their one blacksmith was capable of producing. It seemed they were wary of the recent actions of the nearby Duchy of Edimiss. Which he thought was a bit of a knee-jerk reaction that might even further encourage the Duchy. However, it didn't really affect him directly, and he wasn't going to argue against making good money.

He started thinking about what he would do when he got home as they followed the road towards Larton at a steady pace.

He looked up and noticed the sky was filled with what looked like the Sky Lights seen around the coastal regions. They weren’t common this time of year, or during the day...or in this region. It was a beautiful sight though, especially the way they hung in front of the sister moons and he considered it a boon. Perhaps he would be able to use this to his advantage in Hilshen.

He turned to say something to Keston when he was pulled from his thoughts by Taenya as she called for a halt of the caravan.

“Mr. Fenren, look at the sky. Perhaps we should stop here for a bit? I have a bad feeling about this, boss.” Taenya spoke with a hint of concern in her tone.

“It’s just some sky lights, Taenya,” Onas said, however, as he looked up again, he noticed the sky was starting to turn an unnatural shade of blue as the lights grew in size. Obscuring the Sister Moons that shared the sky with their Father, who should have been lovingly gazing down at the Mother from their celestial home.

“Actually, Taenya, you may be right. Let’s take a second and rest. Maybe—” There was a bright blue flash in the sky, and Onas, in surprise, almost toppled from his seat. He opened his mouth to speak just as everything turned black.

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Onas awoke to Taenya gently shaking him and calling his name. He slowly opened his eyes. He took note of how Taenya was reacting, it would tell him how he should feel. She was clearly nervous and he saw her constantly glancing around at their surroundings. Onas looked around and wondered if he was the only one to pass out.

Wearily, he turned to his trusted head guard and friend, “Taenya? What happened?”

“I’m not sure, Onas. Everyone passed out but it doesn’t seem like we’ve taken ill. I was waiting for you to wake up, but I’d like to take Raafe and scout ahead to see if we see anything”

“Yes, yes. Of course. Go.”

“Thank you, sir.” She turned to look at Keston. “Keston, take five minutes, then start to come toward us. Be on the lookout for anything suspicious. Keep your eyes on the tree line.”

“Understood.” Keston tilted his head toward Onas next to him. “Don’t worry sir. Everything’s going to be fine.”

Keston and Onas waited the five minutes a bit anxiously, or at least Onas did. As they started to move ahead in the wagon, Onas knew it was times like these that he should avoid

talking. Taenya had shut him down after the first few times he had tried to talk too much during a tense situation.

About fifteen minutes later, Onas heard the sound of a horse galloping toward them. He saw Raafe rushing around a bend and forced his horse to make a sliding stop.

“Boss, there’s something you need to see just up ahead. Taenya is there.” Raafe informed him, and before Onas could respond, he turned around and sped off back toward Taenya.

“Alright. Keston, let’s go see what’s got them in a huff.”

Onas could only hope it wasn’t something that would delay his return home.