

The Nebula's Shadow

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CHAPTER 1

The Arrival



The Observation Deck of Aerion Prime smelled of recycled ozone and stale coffee, a scent that had permeated Bjorn's clothes, his hair, and seemingly his soul over the last three years.

"Is it big?" Erik asked, his face pressed against the cold, reinforced glass. "Dad? Is it a dreadnought?"

Bjorn smiled, though the expression didn't quite reach his eyes. He tapped the thermal regulator on the wall, which had been flickering all morning. "No, Erik. It's just a freighter. Probably the Heavy Hauler 4. It's big, but it's ugly. Like a flying brick."

"Bricks can fly if you throw them hard enough," Erik said, his breath fogging the pane.

Seven years old. Erik had spent four of those years on Earth and the last three here, in a metal bubble clinging to a rock that God forgot to name. He barely remembered the sky being blue. To him, the universe was gunmetal gray, lit only by the harsh industrial floods of the mining pits below.

Ingrid stood by the railing, her hands tucked into the pockets of her lab coat. She looked tired. The hydroponics bay had been fighting a fungal rot for weeks, and the dark circles under her eyes were bruising deep purple.

"Do you think they brought the letters?" she asked softly, not looking away from the swirling clouds of the atmosphere.

Bjorn moved to her side, lowering his voice so Erik wouldn't hear. "They should have. And the transfer papers."

Ingrid glanced at him, hope warring with skepticism in her gaze. "You really think they approved it? A transfer back to the Core Worlds?"

"I'm the Chief Systems Engineer of a high-yield outpost," Bjorn said, straightening his collar. "And you're the best botanist in the sector. We've done our time, Ingrid. Three years of hazard pay. They owe us."

He wanted to believe it. He needed to believe it. The station was failing—not structurally, but spiritually. The silence out here was heavy; it pressed against your skull. And lately, the systems had been acting up. Ghost signals in the server farm. Temperature fluctuations in the nursery. It felt like the station itself was restless.

"Look!" Erik shouted, pointing upward. "Fire!"

Bjorn turned to the glass.

High above, piercing the eternal storm layer of Aegir, a streak of blue fire tore through the clouds.

Bjorn frowned. He stepped closer to the glass, his engineer's eye dissecting the physics of the entry. Standard supply freighters came in on a shallow glide, burning dirty orange chemical fuel to save credits. They lumbered down like fat geese.

This ship was coming in like a dart. The entry vector was steep—too steep. And the thruster burn was a clean, blinding ionized blue.

"That's fast," Ingrid whispered. "Is it supposed to be that fast?"

"Maybe they upgraded the engines," Bjorn said, but his stomach tightened.

He glanced at the wall monitor. The station's proximity sensors were scrolling data streams so fast they blurred. Velocity: Mach 4. Deceleration: 12 Gs.

That wasn't a freighter. That was a high-performance drive.

"Dad, look at it go!" Erik cheered, bouncing on the heels of his magnetic boots.

The ship broke the cloud ceiling, revealing its hull for the first time. It wasn't the boxy, scarred patchwork of a Heavy Hauler. It was a sleek, predatory wedge of matte-black composite, bristling with sensor arrays and comms spikes. It didn't have cargo pods. It had weapon hardpoints.

The deck vibrated as the ship fired its retro-thrusters, a deep, resonant thrum that rattled Bjorn's teeth. It didn't glide to the docking arm; it slammed down onto the landing pad with a mechanical precision that felt violent.

Dust and steam hissed from the landing struts, obscuring the view for a moment.

"It's not the Heavy Hauler," Erik said, sounding disappointed. "It doesn't have the picture of the cow on the side."

The steam cleared.