

Prologue

In a cold, dark universe, one man's quest to find light will take him inside a black hole. That man will die. This story is not about him.

Part 1 - The Big Bang

Chapter 1 - Dun and Dusted

While most people were content with being disillusioned by life, Lance usually went a step further, and actively disliked being alive. The way people might wrinkle their nose at walking past a slab of rancid cheese was how he felt about existence. But his wrinkle went beyond just his nose; a subtle perpetual scowl, and always breathing like someone had just made a terrible pun within earshot. One would think that every possible pun that could be made must have been made, well before Lance's time. But that they were made at some point seemed enough.

Staring out through his ship's voidscreen, Lance tried to choose which exact aspect of life he was going to be offended by that day. Eventually, he decided it would be the fact that there were no eclipses any more. That might seem arbitrary, but then, your face is arbitrary. So.

"I don't want to have to settle for just syzygies," he grumbled. The bridge console told him that he was approaching his destination: a sun, long dead, spinning gently away. Lance remembered that someone had once called dead suns *duns*. And it had stuck. His scowl deepened. His nose actually wrinkled.

The *dun* he was coming up on was rather small, by cosmic standards. He hated *dun* runs. He hated the phrase *dun* runs. He hated a lot of things, clearly. But he needed the oxygen. His ship, the *Gamma Rider*, was running dangerously low. If there was no oxygen, he wouldn't be able to breathe enough to be displeased with the fact that he was still breathing.

He hadn't yet entered the gravitational influence of the dark star. He tapped a few keys on the console, programming the ship to enter a fast decaying orbit. The remnants of the solar system could theoretically tear his ship apart, and knowing his luck, they were

more likely to than not. But his predictive radar seemed clear. All he needed to do was get clear of the outer debris ring of the system. Lance powered up the shield generator.

He pulled up the console's navigation module, to key in a name for the *dun* star. Cosmic waters, everyone had realised, were pointless to chart in any structured legend. Not only was the work extensive, and the resulting benefit almost non-existent, the cartography became irrelevant so quickly that it was practically impossible to maintain universal starmaps. Spacetime did not allow for future-proof representation of spatial reference.

So what everyone did instead, was make their own map of the worlds and systems they visited, giving everything their own names. These individual maps were utterly useless, of course, resulting in the same black dwarf having names of the likes of something mundane, say, Celestor X-397 and Ginovia Salix, or, at times, something more exotic. Like Pineapple. And so, these navmodules were free. If you wanted to make sense of the charts, however, you could do so, for a small repeating fee. When communicating coordinates, the program would compare charts from the two modules in communication, and orient them accordingly, giving each one¹ coordinates the other can make sense of.

Feeling an uncharacteristic moment of affection, Lance named the *dun* Oxey. The module asked him if he'd like to rate the sun. Grumbling under his breath, he dismissed the screen. Flipping a warning switch, he settled in, bracing for what was to come. The ship started playing *We're Spiralling Into a Star Tonight*, and bathed all corridors leading to the bridge in a welcoming glow. It was Lance's configuration of the orbital decay warning.

He could feel the acceleration starting to press his insides closer together. He turned around, looking into one of the corridors expectantly. Footsteps thudded and Lance's travelling companion rushed into view.

"A little warning, maybe?"

"Do you not hear the song? It's *literally* a warning."

"Oh, thank you. I hadn't realised." She settled into one of the many vacant seats on the bridge.

¹ Startrails™ requires both users to have a valid subscription for the Starmap™ Align™ feature to work completely. To provide the best user experience, all naming information from your personal module is anonymously collected. Startrails does not assume responsibility for any judgemental remarks intended or inadvertent.

“Why are you so surprised? You *knew* we were heading here. We *agreed* to come here.”

“That’s not the point, Lance. A warning is supposed to give someone enough time to prepare themselves for what’s to come. Plus, this song is not a warning. It’s something that lets you imagine you’re living a montage.”

Lance just snorted.

Shaking her head, the woman pulled up the console.

“Strap in first, Chevy.”

Glaring daggers at Lance, she did the straps around her shoulders and waist, and pulled the console closer. “*Oxey?* Really?”

“Oh, hush.”

The ship entered the field of debris. Buffeted around by loose rocks, the shield held against the minor impacts. But acceleration would keep raising the magnitudes of collision, all the way down to the centre of the system. Lance was counting on this. The kinetic energy the shield absorbed was what would help the ship come to a dead stop right next to the *dun*.

“Did you prep the canisters?”

“No, Chevy. I came here to harvest oxygen and I *didn’t* prep the canisters.”

“*Gamma.*”

Yes, Chevy?

“Could you tell Lance to stop being an ass?”

Lance, Chevy wants me to tell you: stop being an ass.

“Thanks, *Gamma*. Could you please tell Chevy...”

“Oh come on, Lance. Grow up.”

“*Oh come on, Lance. Grow up.*”

Chevy inhaled sharply.

“Gamma, how long will our oxygen last?”

About forty-two hours, Chevy. That is, if your current expedition yields nothing.

“What are the chances that this *dun* will have a critical mass of oxygen?”

Pretty good.

Chevy?

“Hmm?”

May I act outside protocol?

“What do you want to do?”

I want to ask a question.

“Mm. Go ahead.”

Why do you and Lance insist on retaining organic pulmonary systems? Weren't such legacy systems classified unsustainable?

“Hah!”

Mmmm.

“Gamma, shouldn't you be more worried about the kinetic redistribution?”

I can multitask, Lance.

Lance just grumbled in response.

Commencing G-shell activation.

“Hold off on mine, I'll trigger it myself.”

“Not this again, Lance.”

“What do you mean, *not this again*? I can't even remember when I last did this.”

“Your memory is a terrible metric.”

“Your mother is a terrible metric.”

Dun is .087 zets and closing.

“Great, even my ship calls them *duns*,” Lance muttered.

What would you rather I called them, captain?

“Not *duns*.”

Noted. Point zero zero zero four two zets.

“That’s cutting it a little close, Lance.”

His teeth clenched in concentration as he traced complex gestures on his terminal. The ship shuddered and his hand slipped. The voidscreen threw up angry symbols flashing an urgent blue.

“*Gamma*, what’s going on with the inertial dampeners?”

You didn’t reset the calibration vector after we left Taravet’s atmosphere, Lance.

Lance shot Chevy a quick glance from the corner of his eyes. She was glowering at him.

“Gee, thanks, *Gamma*. Do you think you could reset it now?”

Done.

Lance went back to his wild gestures. The symbols on the voidscreen relented.

“Lance, something’s off.”

“What is it?”

“I’m not quite sure.”

The Gamma Rider continued hurtling down the gravity well. The last time Chevy was unsettled, they had almost sailed into a vac bubble. Lance had learned quickly to heed Chevy’s bouts of discomfort. He made *Gamma* scatter the ship’s kinetic shield, and pulled out of the descent.

That’s...not possible.

“How am I looking at it, then, *Gamma*?”

Had Lance delayed a moment more, there would’ve been nothing to look at. Or rather, they would’ve become nothing, and therefore could not have looked at anything. Lance

was still trying to wrap his head around the sight before him when he heard a vague giggle to his side. He turned to Chevy questioningly.

With barely contained laughter, she said, "A little further, and we'd have been...*dun* for."

Lance stared blankly at her for a moment before speaking. "*Gamma*, please drive this ship into the sun."

Resuming descent.

Lance's lack of amusement seemed only to encourage Chevy's mirth. "No!" she laughed. "Lance was joking. Well, no, *I* was joking. Lance is just a clown. Do *not* resume descent."

Noted.

"And while we're here, can you please find out why this sun is...on?"

Yes, doctor.

"More importantly, how." Lance spoke to his ship, but his eyes were still narrowed at Chevy.

Mmm.

And oddly enough, Oxey had seemingly decided it was done being dead, thanks very much. Oxey was quite *alive*.