**Aphelion**

**Ashley Mackinnon**

It never gets any easier.

Seeing their faces as I tell them that I am leaving.

Leaving Sydney, leaving Australia, leaving Earth and leaving the solar system.

Leaving them.

But I had to. Too many lives depended on it.

The world is dying. There is no way near enough resources to sustain the current rate of consumption. It was estimated that 2050 is the year it will all run out. It’s 2046 now. It got put off and put off until it no longer could be. Like a teenager cramming in study for the next day’s exam, desperate not to fail.

We were those teenagers. The seven of us. This isn’t about perspective. I will not say that one thing is more hard and stressful than the other. I chose this job because I wanted to help prevent the end of the world.

So that's how I ended up in a spaceship in the middle of a black hole surrounded by my crew of misfits and adrenaline junkies. I was ordered to write this field report during the journey, I was however, not, ordered to use professional words or what I call NASA Talk. Usually it’s just a bunch of long words used to confuse everyone even more so than they already are. My advice, if you ever find yourself interested in working for NASA, buy a thesaurus.

Our mission is to test black hole travel, using the theory that traveling through a black hole will take us to another part of the galaxy and out of a white hole. It’s more of a case of it’s not possible until it’s done. So we did it.

Then if it was possible (and spoiler alert, it is) do it again and again while mapping it out. Our target was to reach Cygnus X-1, a black hole in the Cygnus constellation.

But right now, I had another black hole to worry about. One that was going to stretch my ship in one direction and compress it in the other, if I wasn't careful. Sure, I like spaghetti, but I never wanted to become it.

For a second after passing the black hole’s event horizon a ‘worm hole’ of sorts opens up in our heads and we are forced to rewatch the slideshow of our lives. Hence, the parental expressions.

I’m not going to share what I saw, that's only my business. Nor am I going to bother writing a description of how a black hole looks. It’s a hole and it’s black. This is a field report not a love letter.

“Aeryn Aphelion, you’re needed on the bridge.”

That's right, my name is Aeryn Aphelion. My last name literally means ‘the point in the orbit of a planet, asteroid, or comet at which it is furthest from the sun’ and in case you are having troubles pronouncing it, it is pronounced *uh-FEE-lee-uhn,* you’re welcome. That was Bit Trinity, by the way, who despite my many protests insists on calling me by my full name every time she sees me, and considering we live on the same ship, it does get annoying.

One hand on the wall for support I follow Bit. Support because in case you have forgotten we’re in the middle of travelling through a black hole and yes, it feels weird. Like the dizziness you feel after getting up too fast except it lasts for a lot longer and ten times worse.

Kitnea Jamenez is waiting for us when we step onto the bridge. She’s in charge of radar, which makes sure that we don't hit anything as well as find the black holes.

“Let me guess,” I say. “We’re about to hit something.”

“Multiple somethings.” Kitnea replies matter of factly.

“Perfect,” I mutter. “Bit get on the comms and ask Jax if we can take a direct hit.”

No, was his reply among other things that for the sake of my job, don’t need to be repeated.

Talin Jonx was at the controls, looking like he was about to run away. This would be his second time at controls. He shouldn’t have been flying through the black hole but I was the pilot and was busy elsewhere. Now I don’t have any choice.

Gently, I push him out of the seat and take over. He whispers thank you as he goes to strap into one of the seats behind me.

My eyes widen as I stare out the window of the ship. It was an asteroid field *inside* of the black hole. Every instinct is telling me to turn the ship around but we have crossed the event horizon, meaning that we physically couldn’t go back.

This just turned into a suicide mission.

I increase thruster power as we’ll need to go fast to avoid some of these rocks. I grab the wheel and start steering around the closest asteroid, barely breathing. One hit and it was all over. We missed the first one and the next and the next. After a while I relax in my seat and let instincts charge through. I don’t overthink it, just steer. It’s so dark that I have to mostly rely on Kitnea’s radar to get through. But we make it.

That is by far the worst black hole I have flown into, it will also be my seventh. We were bouncing between black holes looking for the right one. There was no way of knowing where the black hole would spit us out, hence why we are going through them not a military based officer. NASA and it’s joint governments needed cartographic experts and explorers. People with a sense of curiosity that reaches into the stars.

Once we were safe away from the black hole’s pull I put the ship on autodrive and turn to face the others. Six pairs of eyes stare back at me.

“Great flying, boss.” Jax Vesper says. He does the maintenance and repairs. A job very important when hundreds of light years away from the next auto repair shop.

I nod my thanks then say, “Core, Rith, you’re up.”

If I had thought my name was bad I had nothing on Core Values. Would you believe me if I told you that Core was the most self-aware and biggest believer in a greater power than all of us?

Go team live up to names!

Core and Rith Rush are my cartographic experts. This is where the brains of the brains of the world is needed. Sure, drawing a simple map sounds easy, but in reality they have to find where we are in the galaxy and map it, as well as connect our location to the previous black hole. We are too far to send a message back to Earth as we would have to send it as electromagnetic radiation also known as light waves. We could be hundreds of thousands of light years away from Earth and I don’t know about the others but that was just a little too long to wait.

“Kitnea, any sign of any other black holes on radar?”

“One quite a distance out, not sure how many clicks,” Kitnea says. ”But there seems to be something else showing up.”

I tower over her seat and stare at the map.

There are multiple blips covering the screen, they represent distant stars. They weren’t my concern. The other slightly different blip was.

“We are in the Cygnus constellation, just under six-hundred light years away from Earth.” Rith says, while Core nods in agreement.

*Yeah, glad I didn’t order that message.*

Without another word I plug in the coordinates for the blip. We’re hoping that it is what we think it is. The answer to all this, the reason why we are here.

It took a couple of days but we got there. Nothing to report beyond that I won the poker game and when we get back, Talin owes me twenty dollars. Other than that, it was boring. That’s a word not often used in space exploration but was hard to miss during this time. Next time, I'm bringing a book.

it’s worth it though. To see the vibrant blue and green planet beneath us. We sit just outside of Kepler 22b’s gravity. The planet is over twice the size of Earth.

There have been theories of alien life on the planet but it looks untouched. We might very well be the first to see this planet in person and it’s beautiful.

*Five years later*

The water tickles my feet as I wage further in. Kepler 22b’s oceans are even more gorgeous than Earth’s. I turn around to see my parents sitting on the sand, smiles on both their faces. They were a bit nervous about moving planets, reminding me frequently that it was a lot different than moving houses. They weren’t the only ones who had decided to make the trip across the galaxy. Millions of people had made the trip we had mapped out through the black holes. It was hard to manage at first, but within the five years things have gone as smooth as possible. The population had dramatically thinned back on Earth and the resources were stretched to last longer. A lot of changes are needed to remain on Earth, but I know that we can do it.

Already another team has been sent out in search of more habitable planets. I had my choice of missions but declined all of them. Instead, I walk through the waters of a foreign planet towards my family.

“Aeryn!”

I turn to see my crew coming down the beach in the opposite direction. They met me beside my parents. Seeing them all together with my parents I'm overwhelmed. These are the people who followed me through the darkest parts of the galaxy to find the light at the very end.

“The vote is in, the planet’s name is officially changed,” Bit says with a smile dancing across her face, the brightest I have ever seen.

“Changed to what?” I ask, already smiling.

My crew share a look before Core says, “Aphelion.”

*The End.*