INTERITUS

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CHRONICLES OF A DYING WORLD

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For Danilo and Andi –

my brothers in spirit,
fellow explorers in distant galaxies of thought and imagination,
navigators between reality and the realm of ideas.
Together we have forged worlds, ignited theories,
and searched for truth within the nebulae of possibility.

You held the course with me when the starship of ideas began to overheat,
turned quanta of madness into inspiration,
and shaped the chaos of wild notions into new constellations.

Your insight, your humour, and your unshakable spirit of discovery
have not only expanded the universes of my books but made them come alive.
Without you, these journeys through time, space, and mind
might long ago have ended in a cosmic dead end.

May the coffee never run dry,
the warp drive of imagination never falter,
and may our next expeditions once again
lead us into the same delightfully mad quadrants of creativity.

INTERITUS *(lat.)*

Noun, masculine – downfall, destruction, decay, annihilation.
From the Latin **interire** – "to perish," "to pass away."

Describes the physical or moral collapse of a world, a culture, or a species.
In a figurative sense: the moment in which insight and downfall become one.

"Interitus is not only the end of a civilization –
but the mirror in which it recognizes its true face."

PROLOGUE

Silence.

Not the peaceful, but the oppressive kind.

The one that pushes itself between you and the world like a slab of glass.

Tamira sat on a smooth bench made of light-colored composite material.

For hours.

Her legs were numb, her back ached, but she didn't dare move—for fear of missing the moment. Above her, the enormous beams of the assembly hall stretched out like the skeleton of an ancient creature. She held her pad like a weapon. Like a talisman that could save the world.

Once again, the calculations.

Once again, the anomaly.

Once again, the certainty that no one would believe her.

The big council meeting was in full swing—access for members only.

For her, a young scientist in the second row, that meant waiting.

Waiting for the improbable.

Waiting for a person: Seren Atavaar.

Finally, the massive doors of the auditorium opened, and the council members stepped out into the foyer. Tamira recognized them by the silver embroidered insignia on their clothing, each indicating their respective disciplines. Quantum physics, astronomy, bioinformatics. Here, surrounded by the elite, she felt smaller than ever before and, at the same time, like the only one who understood how little time they had left. Then she saw her. Seren. Standing tall, alert, surrounded by aides. Tamira rose, stepped out of the shadow of a pillar, took a deep breath, and called out: "Chairwoman Seren! Please, just a moment!"

The woman stopped, turned halfway around, and looked her over with a gaze neither hostile nor friendly, but razor sharp.

"Who do I have the honor of speaking to?"

"I'm Tamira Sorellin. I need to talk to you. It's about my message... about the anomalies in the solar corona."

The words poured out, carried by the urgency of her conviction. Data, diagrams, calculations. She had everything with her. And none of it seemed to interest Seren. The council chair remained polite, but reserved. She spoke of procedures, technical reviews, and the risk of unnecessary panic.

"Follow the proper procedure. Submit your results via your mentor."

Tamira's heart was pounding in her throat. One more try. One more appeal.

"Please, listen to me. I'm sure we only have days left—"

The piercing sound of the council chamber's sirens cut through the conversation like an alarm clock interrupting a peaceful dream world. Red light flickered across the high walls, and a calm, artificial voice spoke from the ceiling:

"Attention, urgent message. The three chairpersons of the Scientific Council are requested to report immediately to the assembly hall of the Planetary Government. Repeating: Chairpersons Atavaar, Drys, and Korr, your immediate presence is required. Reason: confirmed data on unusual solar flares. This is not a drill."

A murmur rippled through the hall. Scientists paused, glancing at their instruments. Tamira saw Seren raise her handheld terminal, and her expression suddenly turn serious. Kaelan Drys and Yunavai Korr hurried over. Words were exchanged, orders given. Tamira stood there, her pulse pounding in her head, while the three council members were already on their way out of the foyer.

Then, unexpectedly, Seren stopped again. "Tamira?"

"Yes?"

The chairwoman looked at her, this time with an expression Tamira had never seen before on a member of this committee. Doubt. "Please come with us."

"Excuse me?"

"You understood the corona better than many others, and if you turn out to be right, we may still need your expertise."

Tamira didn't hesitate for a second. Not because she had been invited, but because she knew in her heart that this was her last and only chance. The doors to the inner hall closed behind her. And somewhere beyond the artificial light, a star had begun to turn against its children.

Time had run out …

CHAPTER 1

The sound of children's feet trampling on the floor snapped her out of her gloomy thoughts. Shortly afterwards, dozens of children entered the hall, and Tamira was already standing in front of the semicircular seating area. The comfortable seats nestled like shells against the curved back wall of the teaching dome. Her young listeners quickly hurried to their seats. Her gaze swept over the expectant faces of the ten- to twelve-year-old students who had signed up for the astronomy club today.

"Hello, everyone. It's great to have you all here. Today we're going to talk about our solar system. So let's get started." She paused briefly to make sure everyone was listening. She hadn't chosen just any topic for today's lesson, but one currently on her mind.

"You know what planet we live on, right?" she began with a slight smile that appeared on her lips but was not reflected in her eyes. Some children nodded euphorically, while some younger ones looked around questioningly.

"I know, I know! Home!" said a boy of about ten in the back row.

"Exactly," confirmed Tamira. "Home, also known as P3. We astronomers say: We live on P3. There is now only one other planet between us and the sun, namely P2, but that wasn't always the case."

She activated the projection behind her with a hand gesture, without turning away from the children. As she moved her hand palm-up toward the ceiling, the front dome wall, to which she still had her back turned, began to flicker. Shortly thereafter, a vivid, three-dimensional model of their solar system appeared, and Tamira continued her explanation. "Over three thousand years ago, there was another planet between our sun and P3. Planet P1. It was small, but it was there. It existed for billions of years until one day it collided with a swarm of massive asteroids. These came from the inner asteroid belt. The collision did not destroy P1 immediately, but it changed it fundamentally. Above all, it changed its trajectory, its heliocentric orbit. Does anyone know what happened then?"

Tamira paused briefly, then slowly moved around the room with a searching gaze.

"He broke the sun," replied an even younger girl in a sad voice.

"That's right, Natea. But how did that happen? The wounded planet P1 drifted off its course. Over two millennia, it changed its orbit, and eventually became unstable. So unstable that it ended up too close to the much larger sun... and was swallowed up." Tamira clapped her hands together. "We'll talk about the effect of gravity from such large objects in the cosmos another time."

A quiet murmur rippled through the rows. Some children stared spellbound at the projection. It showed how the tiny planet spiraled toward the sun, eventually breaking apart, then tearing apart, until it literally burned up in the glowing giant.

"But that wasn't the end; it was just the start of much bigger problems," Tamira continued, raising her eyebrows. "The asteroid impacts on its surface left deep scars. When the wounded P1 came too close to the sun, it tore a hole in its photosphere—the area below its corona and chromosphere—about a millennium ago—a process that no one could have foreseen. This hole and the intrusive matter caused our sun's magnetic field to become unstable. The hole closed again, but P1's ionized heavy elements remained in the photosphere. Since then, these have caused constant fluctuations—the magnetic field is repeatedly disturbed there and generates minor eruptions. Most of these are harmless, but we are constantly monitoring this weak point because the instability is increasing."

She paused dramatically. The children stared in shock at the flare that suddenly lit up, shooting out of the sun's surface in the projection.

"And one of these flares was enormous. In a gigantic eruption, the sun spewed out an unprecedented amount of its mass. The plasma wave was so large that it hit P3 head-on eight hundred years ago. An entire hemisphere was vaporized within seconds. Part of our home's atmosphere burned up. More than ninety percent of the population died instantly."

Silence. Tamira saw Natea's eyes well up with tears.

"Our ancestors fled underground at that time. Or rather, those who remained. They lived there for around five hundred years—in darkness, in old bunker systems built for entirely different reasons. Over the centuries, these were then further expanded. A lot changed back then, not just our way of life. Incidentally, the bunkers still exist today, and you can even visit them."

Tamira pointed to the star model again.

"The time spent in the protective bunkers was a difficult period for our ancestors. A test, and a time when many things were lost. Science, norms, even entire languages. Among other things, the names of the planets and other celestial bodies, because there was no room for astronomy underground. The old names, handed down over thousands of years, gradually disappeared. Only the most important technical basics were passed on—mostly only orally. When our ancestors returned to the surface, they only had basic knowledge. Not just in astronomy, but in all sciences."

She paused briefly.

"That may seem cold. But it was the expression of a new way of thinking: sober, survival-oriented, rational. Nevertheless, over the centuries, P1 was never removed from the count. It remained as a reminder of the worst event that had ever befallen us. You are probably familiar with the saying: if someone betrays their friends, they are a P1. This saying also derives from P1, which brought disaster to the solar system."

She was met with astonished looks from the audience. The little ones had probably not been aware of this. She played the projection, a detailed solar flare, in fast motion.

"Since then, our sun has been unstable. The scientific community believes it could happen again at any time."

One girl timidly raised her hand. "And... do you think it will happen soon?"

Tamira hesitated. Then she shook her head.

"No. I don't think it will happen soon. Definitely not."

Secretly, she thought differently.

●●●

The lab was cool, permeated by that sterile coldness that goes hand in hand with neon lighting and smooth surfaces. Tamira stood at one of the analysis terminals. The latest data from the solar probes ran across the translucent screen like a fleeting stream. Ardon Veyran entered with slow, measured steps. His posture was upright, proud, as if he had to constantly remind everyone that he was in charge here. That he had the final say.

"You wanted to talk to me, Tamira," he said without further ado. No greeting.

She turned to him and did the same. "Yes. It's about the readings from our corona probe. Project *Sunwatcher*. The data from my colleagues in the spectral and radio wave range show no abnormalities, but my parameters show increased magnetic activity and unusual peaks in the X-ray range—values that cannot be explained in this form. The old weak spot in the photosphere—where P1 penetrated back then—is showing increasing fluctuations. The heavy elements are destabilizing the magnetic field at this point more and more. Something is not right there. The energy is constantly shifting, the balance is tipping, Ardon."

He didn't bat an eyelid. He stepped closer, glanced at the graphs and endless columns of figures. Then he frowned. "I've seen the data. There's nothing there that isn't within acceptable limits."

"Within acceptable limits?" Tamira took a step toward him. "The fluctuations have doubled in the last six days. In just six days, Ardon. If this continues, we're facing the biggest flare since the collision with P1. The dispersion will be much greater, the intensity stronger. This time it will hit us full force. Please, Ardon. We have to speed up the construction of the arks. What are eighteen ships?"

Ardon crossed his arms. "Tamira, you're seeing things that aren't there. Maybe because you want to see them. Maybe because you think this is your moment in the scientific community."

Tamira's throat tightened. "This has nothing to do with ego. You're not a heliophysicist. You don't understand the depth of these specific processes. Why don't you trust my instincts?"

"I am an astronomer, my dear," he replied sharply. "And I know we must not cause planetary panic because of the speculative fluctuations of a young aspirant. Your theory is neither substantiated nor verified. Follow the official route, Tamira. Submit it for review."

"And until then? That will take weeks. Anything could happen. What if we run out of time?"

"Then it would already be too late."

Silence. Then one last glance from Ardon, half tired, half condescending. "You're a brilliant thinker, Tamira, but you let your emotions get the better of you. And that makes you and your predictions dangerous. Global panic can cause more damage than you can imagine."

She said nothing more. She silently gathered her documents and turned away angrily. As she walked through the door, she heard him mutter after her.

"Emotions and science... rarely go together."

●●●

The sky above the university town was bathed in the soft light of the afternoon sun as Tamira settled down with Thareena, her best friend, on the shaded terrace of a small bar. The air smelled of hot stone and fresh synth tea, brought to their table by a friendly, smiling serving robot. In the background, a spherical composition by Nonto, that newcomer to the music industry so popular at the academy, hummed softly. They had spent the first ten minutes making small talk. After the basics about family and friends had been said, they fell into a brief, shared silence. Then Thareena tilted her head slightly and looked at Tamira searchingly. "You seem tense. Did you have another one of your great conversations with Ardon?" She didn't wait for an answer. "He really is the worst mentor you can imagine."

Tamira nodded and stirred her tea mechanically. "He doesn't take me seriously—he never does. Today I showed him the new data, the anomalies in the photosphere, but he... he doesn't see anything. He's ignorant and accuses me of not being professional enough."

"Or he doesn't want to see anything," replied Thareena with a hint of bitterness. "At least nothing he hasn't discovered himself."

Tamira looked at her. "I have a feeling it's really serious. The latest measurements... they no longer fit the model. If I'm right—and I believe with every fiber of my being that I am—then we only have a little time left. Days. Not weeks. Maybe a week or two, if we're lucky. And nobody wants to hear it, Thareena."

Thareena leaned back, her gaze becoming vacant. She pondered briefly, then became urgent. “Then you must find someone who will listen, and quickly. Even if it is the Science Council itself.”

Tamira shook her head vigorously. “I’m not allowed to speak there. Ardon has expressly forbidden me to do so. And without his consent—his mandate as my mentor—I can’t even get anywhere near the general meeting.”

“Damn it, then go without permission. This is too important, Tamira!”

“How? Just show up and hope someone believes me? That someone will even listen to me?”

Her friend leaned forward with tears in her eyes and took Tamira’s hands.

“Exactly. If you’re convinced a mega-flare is imminent that could destroy everything, then you have no other choice. You have to try, Tamira. If you’re wrong, you can apologize later and eventually iron out this wrinkle in your resume. But if you’re right and you do nothing...”

Tamira remained silent.

“Send them a message. Send it directly to the chairpersons. You have their contact details in the university register. Seren, Kaelan, Yunavai—any one of them. Make it official, without permission. Then get going. Look for them. Try to intercept them.”

Tamira stared alternately at her communicator, which she had placed next to her teacup, and at her best friend, who sat opposite her with a desperate look on her face. Her fingers moved slowly, almost hesitantly, across the surface as she opened the input form.

“And what do I write?”

“The truth, Tamira. Everything you know—and keep it brief so they don’t overlook the most important things.”

Tamira nodded slowly. “All right, I’ll do it.” She looked at her friend, whose moist eyes were filled with a mixture of concern and determination. “Thank you, Thareena.”

“I wish I could do more. Help you with this. But this... is much bigger than the two of us.”

They said goodbye with a hug. Tamira watched her for a long time. Then she reached for her communicator, took a deep breath, and typed into the form.

To: Chair of the Scientific Council - Seren Atavaar, Kaelan Drys, Yunavai Korr
From: Tamira Sorellin, Sunwatchers Research Group
Subject: Urgent notice regarding unstable magnetic field in the sun’s photosphere
Dear Chairwoman,
I am writing to you with the utmost concern. My analyses over the last few days show a significant destabilization of our sun’s magnetic field. The known models can no longer support the current data. I believe we are on the verge of a massive mega-flare that could endanger

all life on our planet. My mentor has ignored my attempts to communicate this internally. I urge you to review the attached data and contact me before it is too late for all of us.

With respect,

Tamira Sorellin

With trembling fingers, she attached her report and clicked "Send."

When she left the restaurant, dusk had already fallen. The main actor in the drama of her world—the star that both gave life and took life—had already set. In its place, the two moons had come to the fore. The larger one, of course, the second, much smaller one artificial. A huge space station. The central shipyard of her world's fleet.

●●●

Three days had passed. Three long, grueling days of waiting. Tamira stood in one of the rear areas of the research lab, her gaze fixed on the terminal. The latest analysis results flashed in warm blue, overlaid with thin diagrams. Curves that trembled like nerve strands. The sun's magnetic field values were no longer just unstable, they had become chaotic. She couldn't bear to look anymore, so much fear did these results instill in her. She had sent the report to the chairpersons three days ago. No response. No sound. No sign that anyone had even read her message. She was being completely ignored.

She looked at the curves one last time, running her hand through her hair, then over her face and her burning eyes. She had hardly slept in the last few nights. The feeling of being alone with a truth that no one wanted to hear weighed on her shoulders like a lead coat. The last sentence of her message echoed in her mind.

"Before it's too late for all of us."

"I think it's already too late," she murmured quietly as a beep from the terminal startled her. New data. It had just arrived. The probe in the solar corona had sent further readings. Tamira scanned them with growing bewilderment and widened her eyes when she saw the peaks.

"No..." she whispered. "That can't be..."

The curves shot skyward. The magnetic field was out of control. The hole in the photosphere enlarged dramatically. Radiation levels rose so high that even the system's threshold protocols could no longer evaluate them. The sun was out of control. She closed her eyes as she rubbed them. If her calculations were correct—and they were—then it was no longer a matter of weeks. It could only be a matter of days. Maybe even less.

And no one heard her. No one believed her.

She took her communicator out of her pocket and dialed the one person who believed her. “Thareena, we need to meet. Urgently.”

A short time later, she met up with her best friend again—as she had done so often in recent weeks. They sat in a small café near the university, somewhere between her faculty and Thareena’s, who was an aspirant in behavioral research. The café windows opened onto the promenade, where people strolled along, unaware of their fate.

“How’s the situation?” Thareena asked as soon as they sat down. “Nothing?”

Tamira shook her head. “Nothing. No response. No questions. Nothing. They had three days to at least look at it.”

“And the current values? Better or worse?”

“Catastrophic. I’m sure the flare is coming. And soon.”

Thareena took a deep breath. Then she reached across the table and took Tamira’s hand, her voice firm. “That’s enough now. You have to go. To the capital. To the Scientific Council. In person, Tamira.”

“I don’t know if I can talk to them, they probably won’t even let me into the building.”

“Then you wait outside. And when they come out, you talk to them. I know it sounds absurd, but what if you’re right? What if this is our only chance?”

Tamira nodded silently. She felt fear in her stomach—fear of the sun and of the council—but in her heart she felt determination.

She knew she had to get through it.

A few minutes later, Tamira was sitting in the suspension railway. Almost all the seats were empty; only an elderly couple and a few students were on their way to the metropolis. To the heart of their civilization, or what was left of it. The lights shining through the train windows flickered across their faces as they raced through the countryside. She held a simple pad with the latest solar activity data in her lap. Her fingers clutched it like a talisman.

Outside the window, the vast, gently glowing fields of the outer suburbs passed by. Then came the capital’s glass towers. And in the distance, on the horizon, the shimmering complex of the central government—like a crown of light on the head of the metropolis.

She briefly closed her eyes. Breathe in. Breathe out.

“If I’m right and they’re not listening to me...” she whispered.

She didn’t finish the sentence. The train accelerated one last time as they glided into the heart of the world.

●●●

She had arrived at the capital's central terminal during the Council's afternoon session. Now Tamira had been sitting on the hard bench made of white composite material in the large assembly hall's foyer for over two hours. The imitation wood beams that adorned the ceiling stretched above her like the ribs of a gigantic creature. They were interspersed with narrow windows that simulated the daily cycle, like veins of light. Each of the beams ended on both sides in floor-to-ceiling columns. Everything seemed calm, almost reverent. As if this were not the same world that was perhaps only days away from its demise. The meeting had been going on since noon. Of course, only authorized council members were allowed to attend. Tamira had come here on a whim—no access, no invitation, no hope. Just the simple name of an aspirant with a goal that was anything but easy to achieve, and that goal was a person named Seren Atavaar. One of the Scientific Council's three chairpersons. One of those she had addressed directly in her message. And now she waited again. For a miracle.

Finally, the inner hall's massive doors opened, and a stream of scientists poured into the wide, open foyer. Voices mingled with the echo of their footsteps. And there she was. Seren. Elegant as a living statue, surrounded by several aides, she walked briskly through the crowd. Tamira rose, stepped out of the shadow of one of the columns and walked straight up to her. "Chairwoman Seren! Please, just a moment!" she called out louder than she intended.

Seren paused, turned halfway around, and looked at her coolly. "To whom do I have the honor?"

"I'm Tamira Sorellin. I need to talk to you. It's about my message. About an anomaly in the solar corona. I... I'm sure we're on the verge of a mega-flare. The situation is more critical than assumed. Please, listen to me."

Seren's face remained impassive. Her voice was calm, almost polite, but clearly dismissive. "I know you tried to speak to the Council. Your mentor, Ardon Veyran, told us about it, but he is not convinced of the urgency. Furthermore, your data has not yet been sufficiently verified. The risk of false panic..."

Tamira took a step toward her. "But the data is clear. I have brand new evaluations with me. I'm sure we only have days left..."

"Please, Tamira." Seren raised a hand, interrupting her gently but firmly. "Follow the proper procedure. Submit your findings via your mentor. If your analysis is deemed relevant by the expert committees, we will reevaluate it. Trust the system. At the moment, it does not appear to us to be... priority."

Tamira swallowed hard. Her heart pounded in her throat with despair.

A piercing, mechanical sound cut through the silence. Soft at first, then growing louder. The council building's sirens. Red warning lights flashed throughout the building, accompanied by a voice from the internal communication system.

"Attention, urgent message. The three chairpersons of the Scientific Council are requested to report immediately to the assembly hall of the Planetary Government. Repeating: Chairpersons Atavaar, Drys, and Korr, your immediate presence is required. Reason: confirmed data on unusual solar flares. This is not a drill."

Those present in the hall froze. Then there was movement, a thunderous sound of footsteps, as if someone had shaken the foundations of the world. Seren had already raised her handheld device. The real-time data that the communication system's artificial intelligence had mentioned flashed on the display. Her eyes widened ever so slightly.

"The corona..." she whispered almost inaudibly.

Kaelan Drys and Yunavai Korr hurried over to them, having also been notified. The three exchanged a few brief words Tamira couldn't hear, then they turned to leave, and marched purposefully toward the exit without further delay.

Tamira was still standing there, her hands cold, her thoughts confused. She had told them.

Then, unexpectedly, Seren stopped. Turned to her. "Tamira?"

"Yes?"

Seren took a step toward her. Her gaze was serious, focused, and free of the professional coolness she had displayed earlier. "Please come with us."

"What?"

"You understood the corona better than many others. And if you are right, we will need your expertise."

Tamira blinked in disbelief, then nodded. As they left the large auditorium, the doors closed behind them.