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First Edition



ALL OF MATHEBOS—and my future—spread out below me as my ship broke through the planet’s atmosphere. Above me, the stars multiplied into a blanket of twinkling lights.

I barely noticed any of it.

Tears stung in my eyes and my hands trembled as I leveled out my borrowed ship. Masse had an old, dinged up ship set aside for people taking the intergalactic pilot license test. It had so many dents beaten into the sides from entrances and exits from Mathebos’s atmosphere and from space debris hitting it, a little more damage wouldn’t matter, so my boss kept it for newbies.

“We have reached altitude,” Leski read off a monitor. “We are free to cruise.” My co-pilot leaned back in her seat and grinned. “So far, so good. At least we’ll get good points for this portion of the test.”

I nodded, not willing to speak lest I break down on the most important day in my life. I'd trained my entire life, day and night, to take the intergalactic pilot's test. Now here I was: finally out of the simulators and flying in space.

"Eriska, you holding up okay?" Leski's voice was soft with concern.

"Yeah," I managed.

She took her hand from the controllers and set it on mine. "Your mom and dad will be so proud of you. You're in space!"

I nodded again. "I just hope they hold out long enough for me to tell them." My father had been the first pilot to fly to Mathebos when the people of Earth started looking for a new home. All my life, I'd wanted to follow in his footsteps. And now that I was, he and mom were being suffocated by the Blue Death which plagued the people of Mathebos and killed dozens every day. Some said the Blue Death was better than getting blown up along with everyone else on earth, but after watching my parents suffer, I wasn't convinced. At least with a bomb, there was less chance of painful suffering before we died.

"They will," Leski assured me. "They've waited so long for this moment. They won't give out now."

"Yeah, you're right."

*"All right, Insolna, you've successfully broken Mathebos's atmosphere. You know what to do from here?"* Masse's voice crackled over the radio. He was watching our progress from the ground on the tracking monitors, and would give us our instructions. The thought of him watching over us made my palms sweat even more. He was a fair enough boss, but tough, and it was

difficult for me to feel like I lived up to his expectations. If I messed this up...

“Yes, sir.” I hoped he would mistake any cracks in my voice for a poor radio signal instead of my grief. “Fly through space for thirty minutes, then reentry.”

“Correct. Good luck.”

The radio went dead, leaving Leski and me wrapped in a blanket of silence. For a moment, we flew through the stars, taking in our dream. Dad always told me how beautiful Mathebos looked from space, standing proud and ringed with stars. Now that I saw it with my own eyes, I had to agree. The sight stole my breath much like the Blue Death stole my parents’.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Leski finally asked, twisting in her seat to look at me.

I sighed, letting my shoulders relax. Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I turned and faced her. “Last night was really tough,” I admitted. “Dad moved to Stage Five. I...” I blinked back tears. “I didn’t get there in time to say goodbye before he slipped into a coma. He...I don’t...”

Leski grabbed my hand as I struggled to find the words.

“I don’t know how much longer I have with him, and instead of being by his side, I’m wasting time on this stupid dream.”

“It’s not stupid. It’s something you and your dad both loved. You’re honoring him by pursuing your dreams.”

I nodded, and tried to smile. “Thanks.”

“You’re...”

*“Insolna!”* Masse’s voice sent my heart racing. *“Is your head up in the stars? There’s a wave of space junk heading right towards you. Don’t you see it?”*

My attention snapped back to the expanse ahead of me. I grabbed the controls, but it was too late. A piece of metal collided with the ship's right wing, sending us jolting. Shrapnel hit the window. Whether it was from the space junk or from the ship, I wasn't sure. I hoped it was just debris, but knew I wasn't that lucky.

"We need to head right," I shouted to Leski. Even if we made the maneuver, it was unlikely we'd get through this wave unscathed. I swiped my clammy hands on my pant leg and gripped the controls again.

I steered to the right and narrowly avoided another piece of junk—this one much larger than the first—but slammed right into a piece of what looked like the wing of another ship. It sent us rolling.

Leski screamed.

The sound made me fully snap out of whatever fog had settled over my mind and I gripped the controls even tighter, pulling us out of the roll and back to a level position, flying straight towards Mathebos.

"Eriska!" Leski pointed at the front window. A crack started to cross the glass.

"Oh no," I whispered.

"I can patch it." Before I could stop her, Leski unbuckled herself and struggled towards the back of the cockpit for the emergency supplies.

"You're going to get tossed around," I shouted.

"Don't worry about me. Just keep flying. We've got this."

Her words kept me focused. Her self-assured tone made me feel like everything was just fine and that it would be an easy fix, even though my gut said that we'd be more likely to die than anything else. I fixed my gaze on Mathebos, trying not to look over

at the ever-growing crack that threatened to release our oxygen and our safety into the unforgiving space beyond.

“Here.” Leski all but splattered against the window as she stumbled back to the front. Her legs wrapped around the back of her seat for stability as she began to fix the crack as best she could. I watched as she put a temp patch against the window, securing it with industrial tape. Some of the pieces pulled away from the glass and she ripped more tape off of the roll with her teeth.

“Not to rush you,” I said, “but you’ve got seconds, not minutes, to get that fixed and get back in your seat before we break Mathebos’s atmosphere.” I didn’t have to tell her what would happen if she wasn’t buckled in before then. We’d both seen the horrific videos of reentries gone wrong during our training.

“Yep.” Leski strained to reach the furthest point of the crack with her tape. Her foot jabbed in my face, and I had to lean back to see the path ahead of us.

“Hurry,” I muttered through my teeth as my brain ticked down the seconds. Reentry in 5...4...3...2...

“Almost...Got it!” She collapsed back in her seat and worked to buckle herself in.

Leski’s belt clicked just as flames roared around the windshield. My palms grew sweaty as the heat rose. My gaze kept flickering over to the crack, my eyes squinting against the glare, but Leski’s workmanship held. For now.

The few seconds it took to break through Mathebos’s atmosphere felt like ages, but soon the flames died away and we descended towards the Novis City Shippport, where I figured a very angry boss awaited us. The thought of his angry stride coming towards us was almost as frightening as the crack on the window.

“Not to make things worse,” Leski said as she peered out of the right side window, “but the wing is really busted.”

That explained the increased struggle to keep the ship level. It kept tilting to the left and my right arm tightened and strained to keep the ship on course instead of spinning round and round.

“Let’s just land.” I couldn’t help the fury that burned in my throat. My chance to reach my dreams was taking a nose dive into the ground. Literally.

Leski and I managed to get the ornery ship to land less than gracefully onto the takeoff strip. The impact jostled us in our seats, and only our seatbelts kept us from flying straight into the glass. Somehow, I managed to bring the ship to a stop, and then sat back in my chair, flicking the ship’s ignition off. As the engines died down, I heard the sickening sound of the right wing falling off. Great. Masse was going to kill me.

“You head to the hospital,” Leski told me as we unstrapped from our seats. “I’ll take the heat from Masse and try to explain the situation.”

“I can’t let you do that.” After she had saved us from burning up on reentry, I couldn’t have her also face Masse’s anger alone. I’d seen how he got when someone messed up. His shouting voice had the power to send everyone within a half-mile radius running for cover. Most often, an encounter with him when he was angry ended with him assigning some menial task or with the guilty party getting fired. The thought of letting her deal with that by herself felt cruel.

“Yes.” She gave me a shove down the gangplank. “You need to be there with your parents.” With a smirk, she added, “I can handle anything Masse has to throw at me.”

I gave her a grateful smile. “You sure?”

“Of course.” She gave me a hug. “Now hurry up.”

I sprinted away just as Masse stormed towards the wrecked ship. I winced at the sight of the burning, shredded wing lying on the ground. Masse was never going to let that go.



THE SOUND OF monitors beeping, nurses and doctors murmuring amongst themselves, and the looming sound of grief greeted me as I burst through the doors to the floor my parents were on.

One nurse that I recognized as Mariette huddled with several others, talking. She spotted me and peeled herself away from the group to approach me. “Eriska.” She spoke slowly, and I knew.

My knees gave out and I dropped to the ground. A sob ripped out of me.

I wanted so badly to be like my dad. I wanted to be a great pilot, to conquer the stars, but I’d failed and now I couldn’t even get to hear his voice telling me it was okay. That I was still his precious child and that he was still proud of me.

I felt Mariette’s hand on my shoulder, gentle and reassuring. “He passed away about thirty minutes ago.”

My cheeks heated as tears spilled down them. I pressed a hand to my mouth as I cried.

“I’m so sorry.” Mariette pulled me close, and for a moment I wondered how many young people like me she had to comfort after they lost their parents to the Blue Death.



Then I let myself grieve my dad and whatever chance I'd had to carry on his legacy.