Skyward

## Chapter One

Twelve years later, I hung from the ceiling hundreds of feet above the underground city of Igneous, seriously questioning my life decisions.

Not that I minded dangling there. Who wouldn’t want to get a view of the entire city, which glowed a brilliant orange-red from its lava flows. Thousands of buildings, huddled in clustered neighborhoods, shaped like cubes growing out of one another. Metallic walkways, made from the steel of cooled magma, pounded flat and polished. It couldn’t compete with the sight of the sky up above, but it certainly had its own charm.

But man, I was thirsty. I was two hours into my climb, and I had only just realized that I’d forgotten to refill my water bottle. What I wouldn’t do for something to drink. A some fresh water from the springs, a little JAM from the bottling plant, or--in a pinch--an overturned skull filled to the brim with the tears of my enemies.

Turns out, weird little girls tend to grow up into weird young women.

I wiped my brow, then chalked my hands with the bag I wore at my waist. I dangled by my knees from a large, staple-shaped hook in the ceiling of the large cavern. Those were set into the rock in rows, so workers could get up here to scrub away soot or check ventilation shafts.

They were also useful if one wanted to deliver a very important, very secret, payload to the roof of the city. I hauled myself up by one arm, inspected the next hook, then reached out and grabbed it. I swung over, ignoring my increasingly aching muscles. I was almost in position. Good thing, too. The backpack I was lugging was heavy.

I kept going, pausing occasionally to wipe my brow and re-chalk my hands. Other than the oversized backpack, I wore my standard exploration gear: work pants, a pair of good--if second hand--boots, buttoning shirt, a vest my mother had sewn with a billion pockets in it. Sturdy clothing, workmanlike and functional. Who cared if it had a few patches here and there? The great warriors of the past wouldn’t have worn the newest, stylish trends. And if people laughed at them for looking poor...well, laughter tended to end when you buried a battle-axe in someone’s sternum.

Not that I had a battle-axe. I really needed to look into that.

I swung to the next “staple,” then hit a snag. The next one in this line was missing. I could see the holes in the ceiling, where it had been, but something had happened to it. I glanced down at the people walking silvery walkways along magma veins--which were walled off from touch by thick glass barriers. The temperature in the cavern was a comfortable warm--even hot, though I usually didn’t notice that unless I was just coming back from a trip to the surface.

I liked being up here, higher than everyone else. Why hadn’t I ever thought of this before? Unfortunately, I couldn’t stay forever. I had a mission to complete. Eventually, the wrong people were going to spot the random girl hanging from the ceiling, and ask themselves, “Did I give her a permit for that?”

Permits were, of course, the bane of any reputable warrior’s existence. (Well, that and blisters.)

So, I activated my father’s light-line and attached it to the ceiling here. I gave it maybe ten feet of slack, eyed the distance to the next hook beyond--which was well out of reach--then added another couple of feet of slack. Then I returned to the hook I’d just left, pulled back until the line of glowing light was tense, and pushed off.

I swung in a nice little arc, like a pendulum--though I didn’t smash into the ceiling on the other side, like I’d been expecting. I just barely got close enough to snatch the next handle in the line.

Niiiiice, I thought. Not a bad move. Had those little people below seen that?

I climbed maybe four more hooks before I judged myself to be in position. Right, then. Time to deliver the payload. I used the light-line to stick myself to the ceiling, letting me work with both hands, and dangled there as I pulled off the backpack.

It was almost as big as I was, which--to be honest--wasn’t saying much. I could claim to be five feet tall if I wore my boots, but even that was stretching it by an inch or so. I always told myself that was better for a fighter pilot. Surely the smaller you were, the better you fit into a cockpit.

I kept my hair cut at about shoulder-length, in an A-line--long at the sides, but shorter in back. Like wings. It was getting long enough now that I’d want Mom to cut it. I didn’t want too much hair, because of the inevitable day when I’d get to wear a pilot’s helmet.

I kept it dyed a deep purple, with my natural black showing through in places. I used to tell people that I did it that way because it was the color of bruises, but that always sounded better in my head than when I said it out loud. Truth is, I just like the color.

I pulled a couple of ropes from the backpack and tied one onto the hook above me, then I pushed on my light-line and swung over to the next one, where I hung on long enough to tie the other rope from my backpack.

Payload delivered. Task at long last finished, I swung back, then took a deep breath. Finally, I let the slack out on my light-line, dropping me slowly toward the ground below. As I did, the two ropes inside my backpack pulled out--and the force deployed the long piece of thin cloth I’d stuffed inside.

I rode the light-line all the way down to the ground. It could get long--hundreds of feet long, as evidenced by the fact that I made it down safely. I had to be close to hook it to something, though.

The wide cloth ribbon I’d hooked to the ceiling ran out about a quarter of the way through my descent. I looked up as I, finally, hit the ground on a walkway between several buildings designed like metal boxes sprouting other, smaller boxes. I looked up and grinned--the cloth I’d attached to the ceiling hung down like a banner. It looked a lot smaller from down here than I’d hoped, but I could make out the letters I’d painted on it, after pinching it from the recycling station several nights ago.

(It wasn’t actually stealing because it would just end up back at the recycling station--so it was just extending the use of the cloth before it got reclaimed.)

It read, simply, RATS--and had an arrow pointing right down. I’d gotten the location mostly right, as I was only two streets off from our family food cart which sold real meat.

Rat meat, granted. But anything was better than algae paste. I hurried off to see just how big a crowd my stunt had caused.

## Chapter Two

On my way to our cart, I passed groups of men and women trudging along the walkway, heading home from work. Third shift was done. I could read their jobs on their clothing--vaguely greenish-brown stains for the vat workers, who stirred and maintained the algae. Soot and burn marks for those who worked the forges, turning magma or recycled metal into usable bars. Oil and grease on the jumpsuits of those who worked the factories, assembling munitions or starfighter parts for the war effort.

No pilots, of course. Those lived up in Alta.

Our cart had in a prime position next to the Fallen Ships monument, a big bronze statue in the shape of a multitude of ships taking flight, each one a copy of the others, and interjected artfully by lines and geometric patterns. I looked, eager to see how many people my advertising stunt had drawn to our stand.

None so far. The food cart sat in the shadow of the massive statue, like a spare bolt that had fallen off a wing somewhere and been left on the ground. A tall (but hunched over) young man sat on a stool beside it, his face buried in a large textbook.

I stalked over. “Rigmarole? What are you doing?”

Rigmarole--Rodge McCaffrey--looked up and blinked at me.

“You’re wasting profitable opportunities,” I said, waving at the people walking back and forth past the statue, and therefore the cart. “Commerce is a fight. You’ve got to face it on your feet, with gun in hand! Or...in this case...a ratmeat sandwitch in hand. Whatever.”

I hauled him to his feet, which was hard because he was approximately a hundred feet taller than I was. Why had he grown when I hadn’t? He didn’t even stretch.

“Come on, Rig. Look confident! Sell it, don’t just sit around and wait for it to get sold!” I waved my hand out. “Rats!” I shouted. “Rats for sale! Juicy rats! Come on, you guys know you want a rat!”

Rigmarole just smiled, then looked upward. “Hey! You actually did it?”

“Of course I did,” I said, looking upward, feeling--admittedly--a bit gleeful how surprised he was. The banner had wrapped upon itself a little in the cavern’s ventilation breeze, but you could still mostly make it out.

I grabbed a drink--finally--from a canteen I’d stowed in the cart, then hopped up on Rig’s stool and continued shouting at the crowd. “You know what’s great after a day of stirring stinky algae paste? A Rat! Come get your Rat!”

“You know,” Rig said, “You’re being a little...um...you today, Spensa. Even for you. I mean...” He glanced up again. “You sure you’re not nervous about the tests?”

“Of course I’m not nervous. Why would I be nervous? I got this down.”

“Not sure I do,” Rig said, glancing at his textbook.

“Rigmarole...” I said.

“You should probably just call me Rodge. I mean, we don’t have callsigns yet. Not unless we pass the tests.”

It was still stupid to me that pilots were chosen based on a sit down, pen and paper test. What could you tell about a future warrior from their essay questions?

Still, we had this. “Five basic turn maneuvers?” I asked.

“The Reverse Switchback,” he said immediately, “Alhstrom Loop, the twin shuffle, overwing twist, and the Imban Turn.”

“Average seconds to blackout at five pulls?”

“Fifteen and a half.”

“Engine type on a Pico Interceptor?”

“Which design?”

“Current interceptor.”

“AG-113-2.”

“You got this, Rig!” I said. “We got this. No need to be nervous.” No need to be anxious, or find things to fill your time and distract you while you wait for the tests...

Still like four hours left. Scrud. Maybe I could go hang another banner?

“Rats!” I shouted. “Yes, the banner doesn’t lie! We got rats right here for--”

Customer!

A man in a mechanic’s jumpsuit walked up, looking over the prices posted in requisition chip denominations.

“Hey! Welcome!” I said. “What can I get you?” I stirred the sauce, a thick red paste with rat meat cut into it. We would stick a glob onto a bun made from pressed and dried algae paste.

Yes, I’d read about times when people ate better than this. But there’s only so much you can do when living under ground, cultivating crops engineered to need heat--instead of sunlight--to grow. And rat isn’t that bad. They might not eat it up in fancy Alta, but down here, protein was protein.

I looked at the customer hopefully.

“How do I know,” he said, “that it’s real rat.”

“How do you...” I gaped at him.

“I mean, it could be anything in that mush.”

“What are you worried about?” I said. “That we’ve substituted the rat for like beef or something? You’re afraid you will accidentally get meat that is worth ten times as much?”

“I just like to get what I pay for,” he said, but coughed up a few requisition chips and walked away with a sandwich. We did a brisk business, actually, over the next half hour or so--and I’d like to think my banner was the reason, though to be honest, we always sold well during shift changes. There weren’t a lot of stands that sold actual meat. We had a secret weapon.

Me.

By the time mom arrived, we’d actually sold through almost all of our rat. Rig pointed her out to me, which was remarkable, as he’d spent the entire time with his nose in the textbook instead of helping me sell rat. Yes, he threw the occasional question to me to help me prepare, but I’d expected more enthusiasm from him. It wasn’t every day that he got the privilege of being roped into helping his best friend with her family business--even if it was his one day off from his normal job in the precision electronics department.

He nudged me with the book and pointed down the road, to where Mom was limping along on her crutches, a large basket on her back. I cursed softly and ran to help, lifting the basket off of her back. Mom isn’t terribly tall, but the injuries make her seem even smaller.

We’d long since passed the point where we pretended she would walk normally again. I smiled as she thanked me for my help, but inside I seethed, remembering a day some five years ago when I’d been told--while minding the cart--that my mother had been attacked. The officers said it was a random act of violence, but I’d gone to the scene myself, and found the words, Death to Traitors and Cowards scrawled on the wall where they’d found her.

I helped mom over to the stool and took her crutches. She frowned then looked up at the banner. It had twisted more on itself, and now looked like it read PTS. “Marigold told me that she saw someone climbing the ceiling. Someone who had a light-line?”

“It totally worked,” I said.

“It kinda worked,” Rig said from where he sat on the rim of the statue nearby.

“We sold out of rat.”

“Don’t you sell out almost every day?” he added.

I ignored him and showed mother the requisition chips. Together, it was almost half what we’d have made working a regular job at the vats or in a factory--an amount that was, for us, practically a fortune.

Mom smiled.

I loved it when she did that. It seemed so...rare these days. I’d happily wear worn-out clothing, work a job nobody else wanted, and bear the scorn of the others. As long as I could see her smile once in a while.

“Thank you,” she said, holding my hand. “For what you do.”

“I shouldn’t have to do it,” I said. “You shouldn’t have to pay rent when we can barely eat. We--”

“Spensa.”

“--should be taken care of by the pilot’s foundation, like any other widow or widower.”

They wouldn’t pay for the families of a man who had been stripped of rank.

“Spensa,” Mom repeated, but I pulled my hand out of her grip and turned away. Man...what had set me off? Hadn’t I just been smiling?

“Hey,” Rig said from his seat, “Spin? Did we study advanced flight formations? I don’t remember studying advanced flight formations? I think I’m going to fail!”

Dear, oblivious Rodge. “You rattled them off to me yesterday,” I said, turning to him. “In order, alphabetized. Starting with Abrupt-wingout?”

“Oh, oh right.” He took a deep breath.

“Don’t you two have lessons today?” Mom asked. “Shouldn’t you be going?” I didn’t have a regular job, like most of the other students, but I was allowed to sit-in on lessons for educational purposes, so long as I helped sew clothing.

I made it on time at least half the days.

“Lessons are canceled today,” Rodge said, “so we can have a little extra time to study for the tests tonight.”

“Then you should be studying, not covering for me at the cart!” Mom said. She reached into her basket and began getting out plates of algae cubes, which she stir fried and sold most of the time. The rat was a more special kind of deal, when I had managed to hunt a few up on the surface.

“Mom,” I said. “We got it. We’re good.”

“I don’t know if I’ve got it,” Rig noted. “I’m not really even sure what it is...”

I helped mom set out the algae cubes, clean up some rat-paste stains, and change the signs. One more day of this, I thought, and she can move to Alta and live in comfort. One more day, and we’d have a pilot in the family again.

One more day, and I would cleared our name. Ace the tests, get into flight school, and people wouldn’t dare speak of Father the way they did now.

I just had to pass the tests.

Scrud, I needed something to do to occupy myself. If I sat around thinking about this, I’d just get more nervous. “Maybe I’ll do a quick run up to the surface and see if I can find us a rat or three to--”

“No you don’t!” Rig said, standing up abruptly. “The testing is in under four hours.”

“I can get up and back by then. No problem.”

“No,” Rig said. “Spin, I know what you’re going to do. You’re going to vanish, and then I’m going to sit there and worry about you until--at the last minute--you burst through the door.”

“So, I’ll make it.”

“And I’ll sit there having a heart attack waiting and worrying! Don’t do this. I think I’d die if you missed it. Wingmates, right?” He held up a fist.

I reluctantly bumped it. “Wingmates.”

“Oh, look!” mother said. “Isn’t that your teacher? Maybe she wants some algae cubes.”

Rig and I turned together, mirrored looks of dread on our faces. Indeed, a small family was walking down the silvery walkway--a woman in a skirt and a mustached man in a brown suit, with a daughter who had golden hair. They looked distinctly out of place compared to the many groups of workers walking home from shifts.

“Mrs. Vamber,” I muttered. Delightful. I had hoped, with class canceled today I wouldn’t have to see her--or more specifically, her daughter, Dia.

My first instinct was to walk off, so I didn’t have to talk to her, but I was no coward. That wasn’t the warrior’s way. So as they approached the stand, I started toward them.

Rig caught my arm. “Spensa,” he whispered, “you do remember what Dia’s father does, right?”

I frowned. Had she talked about that?

“City inspector,” Rig said, then nodded to the man, who was pointing with his fancy cane up toward my improvised banner.

Great.

“Quite an interesting project,” the man said to my mother. He had an overblown voice, like someone who was afraid nobody would pay attention to them, so they made sure to overdo every little word. “Did you get a permit for that advertisement?”

“I...” Mom said. “It was just...” She deflated. Ever since the attack, she just didn’t have the grit she’d once shown.

“I did it,” I said, stepping around the side of the cart. “I just wanted...” I trailed off, pausing. “Is that a cadet’s pin?”

The man lowered his cane and puffed out his chest. Pinned to the lapel of his jacket was a sparkling silvery pin, a blue sphere with a red starship. The pin of someone who had been accepted as a cadet in flight school.

It wasn’t a pilot’s pin, like my father’s--which I kept pinned to the inside of my sleeve. It meant this man had passed the tests and gotten into flight school, though he’d eventually not made it to full pilot. It was still impressive. No wonder he had a cushy job.

“Made it all the way to the last cut!” he said proudly. “Eventually was forced out because of my eyesight, but with full honors! But about that banner, young woman. We have to discuss what you’ve done here!”

“She’s always doing stuff like that, Dad,” Dia said. The blonde girl had walked over to sit beneath the statue, just to the right of our cart. “Best not ask why the Spaz is Spastic. Half the time, she doesn’t even show up for lessons, because she’s off climbing somewhere.”

“Yes, well, that’s not an excuse,” he said. “Half the people in this district showed up at the offices, complaining that some fool was climbing across the ceiling!” He squinted. “What does that even say? ‘Pets?’”

The man’s wife--Mrs. Vamber, who often taught our lessons--was an overdressed woman in floral prints and too much makeup. I didn’t actually mind her, as her voice was nice, and she didn’t chide me too badly when I was late. But she also rarely talked about the important things. If I was going to be a pilot, why did it matter if I knew how to find the area of a parallelogram?

Her husband blustered about my advertisement, and I stood my ground, though I needed a box or something so I could look him straight in the eyes. Mrs. Vamber, however, quieted him and nodded toward my mother.

“Right, right,” the man said. “We were here to talk to the mother, weren’t we? A moment, child. We’ll deal with your infraction in a moment. For now, excuse us.”

A moment? Excuse them? For what? Why would my teacher need to speak with my mom?

Former teacher, I thought pointedly. Lessons are done. Tests are tonight.

I stood my ground until mother quietly asked me to step away. And...well, even though she was quiet, I couldn’t ignore when she spoke to me. So I retreated over to the rim around the statue, near Dia, who was more and more turning into a copy of her mother. Right down to the floral dress.

Mrs. Vamber leaned in and began speaking quietly to my mother. Rodge waved to me and nodded toward his home. We’d meet at the testing.

“So, Dia,” I said, sitting stiffly next to the perfumed young woman. “Not cramming in some last minute studying?”

“I’ve gotten a job as an inspector,” she said primly. “Assistant to my father.”

“Jobs aren’t given out until after the tests,” I said.

Dia rolled her eyes.

“You should still try,” I said. “You should see how you place. What if you get in. What if you could become a pilot?”

“You really don’t know, do you?” Dia asked. “You really haven’t guessed, after all these years?”

I frowned. “Guessed what?”

“The tests are fake, they don’t determine anything,” Dia said. “The people who are going to be made pilots have already been chosen. It’s all a game to make us feel better.”

I laughed. Like, laughed out loud, because the concept was so ridiculous I was sure she was joking. Unfortunately, Dia wasn’t exactly the joking type. She just rolled her eyes--again--and dug some lipstick from her purse.

“Whatever,” she said. “I’m just glad that I have something secure lined up. You do realize they’ll never let the daughter of a coward fly, right? Even if the tests meant something, you wouldn’t be allowed to pass.”

I stood up abruptly, and she jumped. Good. She feared me.

I pointed at her, finger fraction of an inch from her nose. “Don’t,” I said. “Don’t taunt me.”

“What are you going to do? Punch me? Honestly, Spaz, that might be for the best. Hit me. Get tossed into the detention, miss the tests. That would be better for you than embarrassing yourself by showing up tonight.”

I felt the heat rise inside of me. My face going cold, like it did--strangely--when I got angry. I felt my fingers pulling into a fist, and I swear, I almost did punch her. That face of hers could use a good clock, right across the cheek.

Bah!

I turned away. Wasn’t worth it. I’d probably get makeup all over my hand.

“Spensa?” Mother called. “Spensa, your teacher would like to talk to you.”

Still simmering, I turned back toward the food cart. Dia’s parents didn’t seem to have noticed our little exchange. Her father was going off on some tangent, telling Mother about the actual battle with the krell he flew in. Mrs. Vamber walked over, and gestured for me to join her.

I did so reluctantly. She wasn’t so bad. Too bad her spawn was a creature of utter darkness, worthy only of being slain so her corpse could be used to make potions.

“Spensa, child,” Mrs. Vamber. “I wanted you to know that I’ve been working on something for you. A little present. I just cleared it with your mother.”

“All right...” I said, walking alongside her away from the cart. What kind of present would a teacher give to me?

“I’ve spoken with Jane Hallop. Foreman for the seventh unit vats? She normally doesn’t take workers who haven’t gone through an official program, but I explained to her that you’ve attended classes with us. I promised her that you’re an eager and energetic worker, and she said--”

“Wait,” I said, freezing in place. “The vats? The algae vats? You got me a job?”

“I know it’s been hard for you, dear, after...the unfortunate events with your father. It’s completely unfair that your mother has been forbidden work in one of the factories. You deserve better, and so I have been working with them. I think they’ll accept you.”

“Accept me...as an algae farmer?” I gaped at her. “I’m going to be a pilot.”

“Er, yes, dear,” Mrs. Vamber said. “This is...of course, if you don’t pass the tests...”

“Don’t pass? I’m the best! You’ve said that. Half the students don’t know their afterburner from their acks, but I could list for you blackout times at every g-force interval. I...”

Mrs. Vamber looked away.

“It’s true,” I whispered. “The tests don’t mean anything? The pilots have already been chosen?”

“It would be best,” Mrs. Vamber said, “if you thought about the vats a little more. It’s silly that everyone fixates so much on the piloting test. I mean, out of tens of thousands of us, only a handful get to fly! But everyone needs to eat, Spensa. It’s important work in the vats. You--”

“I can’t believe this,” I said. “I can’t believe this.” Heat rose in my core, while my face went cold with anger. “It’s a lie? Is it a lie?”

“Maybe...you shouldn’t...show up at the tests...” Mrs. Vamber said. She glanced up at the banner. “We wouldn’t want you to make a scene, right?”

I backed away from her, betrayed, horrified, furious.

No.

NO.

I looked back at Dia, who smiled at me in an insufferable way. I looked at Mrs. Vamber, who wouldn’t meet my eyes. I looked toward my mom, who met my gaze. She looked heartbroken. But she should have been mad.

How could this... How could it...

I pushed away from Mrs. Vamber and stalked to the cart. “I’m going hunting,” I snarled at mother, then pulled my improvised speargun from where I’d stowed it in back of the cart. “Don’t wait up for me.”