Skyward

## Chapter New One

Nine years later, at age sixteen, I hung inside the tunnel-like tube of an ancient ventilation shaft, seriously questioning my life decisions.

Not that I minded the experience. I liked a good adventure, even if I was strapped a little too safely into my harness. An enormous fan lay far beneath me, at the bottom of the tunnel. It wasn’t moving at the moment, but wind would periodically blow in from side tunnels and ruffle my shoulder-length hair.

A wall panel hung open to my right, exposing wires, circuits, and other mechanical doo-dads. I knew how important this sort of job was, logically. We lived in caverns beneath the surface--without ventilation like this, we’d all suffocate.

It was just that, fixing ventilation machines didn’t feel like work for a warrior. I was going to be a great pilot, so why did I need to train on reading service diagrams and practice doing mundane repairs?

“Fifteen minutes, Spensa!” Instructor Dagny yelled into the shaft, echoing against the metallic sides.

It’s just another test, Spensa, I thought, dangling from my harness and setting to work Your life is full of tests. Everyone tested the daughter of a coward.

Well, I’d show them. I wielded my screwdriver like the ancient sword Naegling, deftly spearing screws like they were the eye-sockets of my enemies.

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

I worked quickly, repairing the machinery as best I could from my memory of the week’s lessons. I had paid attention to these ones. A pilot had to know how to repair her ship in a pinch, right? In case she was shot down in a distant locale, and her emergency radio transponder broke?

I got the wires screwed back in what I hoped was the right order. But something was missing. I dangled in my harness, fishing in my pocket for the little diagram of the mechanism I’d been given. I held my flashlight in my teeth, holding up the diagram beside the machinery.

There was a part missing, a little flat piece of metal about the size of my palm, something that other wires connected to. Huh. I searched around inside the panel, then turned my flashlight downward.

Yup, there it is, I thought, noting the piece of metal laying near one of the enormous fan blades. Well, this little training exercise was about to get way more interesting. I quickly unstrapped from my harness, dangling from it by one arm as I rolled up the right sleeve of my standard-issue student jumpsuit.

Underneath, always on me but kept carefully out of sight, was my father’s light-line. Everyone assumed it had been destroyed when my father’s ship exploded, and nobody had ever asked me about it. I intended the secret to stay that way, but at the moment, I wasn’t being watched.

So, I carefully activated the device, and the bracelet began to glow with a soft orange-red light. The light-line wasn’t actually the bracelet, though--that was just the housing. The light-line itself was a glowing rope of energy that could be stretched hundreds of feet. It contained its own ancient power source, and was a piece of technology as old as the Apparatus that kept the caverns running.

On the bottom of the bracelet, two ends of light protruded from holes near the palm of my hand. I pulled one of the cords out--it was only a little thicker than the wires in the contraption I’d been fixing earlier--and stuck it to the wall. It stretched from the bracelet easily, and adhered where I put it. From there, it was easy to slip out of my harness and--carefully controlling the release mechanism with two fingers on my left hand--lower myself down toward the fan below.

Easy. Descending into the monster’s den, just like an ancient warrior from my Gramma’s stories. I landed on the fan, then reached across its blades for the piece of metal. In doing so, however, I noticed for the first time that I could see down through the gaps in the large fan.

The entire cavern of Igneous spread before me; I was provided with a stunning view from the very top of the cavern. I could see the many box-like apartments, built together like cubes splitting off one another, that made up neighborhoods.

Towering over them were the housings of the Apparatus--ancient forges and refineries that turned molten rock drawn up from below into usable metal parts. Heat rose through around me; Igneous was a suffocating place, always hot and humid, with all those refineries, factories, and algae vats. It was painted a red-orange, most light provided as a side effect of heated metal and tubes of molten rock.

I was above it all, like I was flying in the cockpit of a fighter, soaring above the cavern city.

“Five minutes, Spensa!” Instructor Dagny called down.

Right. The test. I snatched the part, then engaged my lightline, which retreated into its housing and pulled me back up into the air. I didn’t bother with the harness for the moment, instead scrambling to pull out my screwdriver and get the part back into its slot. I didn’t have time to consult the diagram; I worked by memory, getting it screwed into place.

“Time’s up!” They started hauling my harness back up by its ropes. I snatched it and shoved my arm through, and--as I was pulled up to join the class--I got my sleeve back up and covering the light line.

I was soon pulled up through a panel in the floor of an ancient metal room, where the other seven students in my current class were waiting with Instructor Dagny and several men from the Ventilation Repair corps. I let go of the harness as they pulled me through, then grabbed the sides of the hole and hauled myself up.

“Spensa!” Dagny said. “You undid your harness?”

I shrugged, settling down on the floor, only now realizing how much I was sweating. That might not have been true warrior’s work, but I was surprised by how much I’d enjoyed it.

One of the men from the ventilation corps suited up in the harness next, then lowered himself down to inspect my handiwork. Instructor Dagny folded her arms and watched me with a critical eye. She was a severe woman, slender but forceful. She wore a simple worker’s jumpsuit, instead of the more fashionable clothing some of my teachers picked.

I liked her. I could imagine her brandishing a pitchfork in one of Granna’s stories, defending the town while the menfolk were away sailing longboats.

She scowled at me, but I was used to treatment like that, even from the teachers who weren’t as bad as the others. The daughter of Chaser, the Coward of Alta, wasn’t someone you treated with anything but contempt. As was my habit, I met her glare straight on, and lifted my chin.

It would take a few minutes to get a report on how I’d done, so I stood up and walked toward the other students. Behind Instructor Dagny walked over and spoke to the overseer in a hushed tone. I heard the words, “Brash” and “aggressive.”

That was unfair. It had been at least two months since I’d gotten into a fist-fight with one of the other students. Granted, they did kind of shy away from me as I walked over. All except for Rodge, of course. He sat on the floor by the wall, his lanky form hunched over, his nose buried in the instruction manual for ventilation repairs.

“Rodge!” I said. “Rigmarole!”

His nickname--the callsign we’d chosen for him when he became a pilot--made him finally look up. “Hey!” he said. “Done already?” He raised his hand, and 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 do stretches every morning, like I did.

“I’m next, aren’t I?” he asked. “What was it like? Did the harness hurt? What if I get the wires wrong?”

“Eh, don’t stress it,” I said. “This sort of thing doesn’t matter. We’re going to be pilots.”

“And what if this is on the pilot’s tryout test?”

“Ventilation schematics? On the pilot’s test? Don’t be ridiculous.”

“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 test.”

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 Poco Interceptor?”

“Which design?”

“Current interceptor.”

“AG-113-2. Yes, I know that, Spensa--but what if those questions aren’t on the test? What if it’s something we didn’t study?

The contents of the test were different every year, and the questions were kept secret. I was confident nonetheless.

“You got this, Rig!” I said. “We got this. No need to be nervous.”

The other man from the ventilation corps--their overseer--wrote down on his clipboard. “Well, Student,” he said to me. “I have to mark you down for ignoring proper safety protocol. Anyone who applies to be in the ventilation corps needs to understand the importance of following instructions. We provide a vital function for the city.”

The sanitation crews from last week had said much the same thing. And the algae-vat workers from the week before. And the factory workers from the week before that. They all had practically the same speech--something about society being a machine, and each person an essential screw or cog.

“Every job in the cavern is a vital part of the machine that keeps us alive,” he explained, speaking not just to me, but to the other seven students in the room. “But without ventilation, everyone would die of suffocation.”

It’s essential, I thought, anticipating what he was going to say, that you learn your place, and do your job well. Follow the manual. Be precise.

“To join us, you have to be able to follow instructions,” the man said. “You have to be willing to do your part, no matter how small it may seem. We survive the krell attacks through absolute precision and dedication.”

Obedience is defiance.

“Obedience,” he said, “is--”

“Hey, Aulfr!” a voice called up from the shaft below. “Check the connections for me, would you?”

The overseer paused his speech, then went to the wall and checked on some lights there. Readouts for the status of the fans below.

You don’t test well, Spensa. You miss too many classes. We have to find the place you fit. Everyone has a place in the machine.