Prologue

The ship drifted through the blackness, pinpoints of light peppering their only view of the outside world. For 10 weeks this ship, this hulking mess of metal and fuel, had been their home. It was no small wonder many attached more meaning to the stars than science offered, when the only other thing they had to stare at were their shipmates sorry faces.

“Five hours to entry” Came the voice of Farah Cole as she turned to face her crewmates, her nerves clearly showing. This was her first landing as captain of a ship, and as the daughter of Zane Cole, director of Pierce Mining company, she had more to prove than most.

Farah took a deep breath and tasted the thick scent of sweat and freeze dried rations as she pushed the button on the control panel to talk to mission control “Mission control, this is Captain Cole of vehicle reg XP960, miner class B. We are five hours from planet designated code P6250, I repeat 5 hours from entry. Please acknowledge”

She slowly wrung her hands as she awaited the reply. As the signal spread its way across the cold void of space, Farah made more checks of the ships state. Propulsion systems...normal. Emergency weapon systems…ready. Oxygen levels…safe.

In a bunker in California, USA, Zane Cole mirrored Farah’s state of mind. As Technical director of Pierce mining for over 10 years, he knew exactly what could go wrong on a mission like this. Farah had been sent on what was usually routine. Just an exploratory mission to a planet showing high levels of important minerals from remote sensor readouts. Zane however, knew there was no such thing as routine in the complex world of interstellar travel.

So he sat in mission control, trying, and failing to look calm. “Hey, Cole, it’s gonna be fine, you know it will, man” Jat Yarmel, long-time employee of Pierce mining, and even longer term friend of Zane Cole. “I know” he sighed “No…I don’t know, I don’t know at all. Shit, Yarmel, you’ve seen this go wrong almost as many times as me”

Jat looked his friend directly in the eyes, reflecting in the shallow, tired green pebbles. “She knows what she’s doing though, you know *that*.” Cole let one slow breath from his thinning lips, and ran a hand through his even thinner hair. “You look like shit by the way, go get some rest, you really sho-”

“Mission control, this is Captain Cole of vehicle reg XP960, miner class B. We are five hours from planet designated code P6250,I repeat…” The message came over the speaker system, causing the director to slide forward in his seat, expectantly. “See” Jat smiled “she’s doing fine. Now five hours out, go get that sleep. Doctor’s orders!” He waggled one finger toward Cole in mockery, the crooked smile not fading. “You’re not a medical doctor, Yarmel, I don’t need to take your advice” Zane replied half-heartedly, bowing his head in submission, knowing his old friend was right. “But, you will follow my advice. Now get yourself off for a nap.”

As Zane traipsed off past the desks in mission control, all collectively monitoring several missions, Yarmel laughed slightly to himself before pushing the comms button on his console. “XP960, this is mission control, acknowledged, monitoring vital stats for entry. Best of luck to you captain.”

As the message came in from mission control, Farah felt herself relax slightly. “All good on Terra Firma?” Gerrit chirped from his seat to the left of Farah, as he swivelled to face her. She removed the small black headset and placed it on the gleaming white surface of the control panel “Yes, they are monitoring” Gerrit was always upbeat, annoyingly so once you spend more than a day with him. After 10 weeks in a confined space, it was close to unbearable.

“Five hours you say?” This time it was Sandren, the only other member of the small crew. Sandren was what many men (and an awful lot of women) would describe as perfect. One of the very few natural blondes left, and with perfect skin, soft brown eyes, and with a trim but shapely body, she could have been a model. But the reason she wasn’t was the same reason few men were lucky enough to embark on a relationship with her. She was dedicated to her work. She loved to explore, to expand knowledge and joining the exploratory crew was just a step on the career ladder for her. Younger than any member of the other crews, unambitious was definitely not something she could be described as. Farah just nodded in response, words not seeming to come out anymore.

Sandren stood up and brushed some imaginary dust from her thighs. “Permission to retire to my chambers, captain? I would like to check my equipment” The word ‘chambers’ in this context meant a small bunk in the rear of the ship, but it was important to have something to call your own when working so closely with others.“Yes, of course” Cole managed, making a gentle sweeping gesture, and forcing a smile. “Thank you, Captain”

Gerrit turned to watch her leave, then moved to face the nervous captain. “Just you and me now. Are you alright?” No surprise he could tell how she was feeling, but Farah would have preferred if he had not brought it up. She was the Captain now, she was supposed to be strong, to know what she was doing, and to make her father proud. Instead she had spent most of the journey distancing herself from her colleagues and worrying about would could happen. When she was a child, her father often came home, seeming to have aged a decade, dark circles surrounding his eyes. This happened whenever a ship was lost. There were so many ways for it to go wrong, so many things that could break. Of course she was nervous. She grew up learning about the horrors of space travel. She had been a crewmate before, of course, but now it was her responsibility. If something went wrong, it was her the families of the dead would blame.

Drumming her fingers against the polished surface of the console, Farah tried to put on a brave face when she replied. “Impatient.” Was all she could manage. Partly because of the fear enveloping her, and partly because Gerrit was such an insufferable man. A smile spread across his skinny, stubbly face as he nodded and turned to view some readouts on the screen. Farah did the same, and the two of them sat in silence, with only the noise of the ship cutting through.

The next 4 hours passed uneventfully. Gerrit fell half asleep a few times and claimed he was “resting his eyes”, and Farah continued to worry. Her hands were now sticky with sweat, and her stomach was churning as the time to land came nearer.

Zane drifted across the floor like a wounded soldier as he headed back toward the console where Jat worked “Just in time, we just got a message from her ship requesting final approval for entry manoeuvres. Zane didn’t say anything, nothing needed to be said. “XP960, Captain Cole, this is mission control” He drawled over the microphone “Approval granted, please proceed” Zane sloped into a seat next to Jat, but what he really wanted to do was shout over the speaker, tell his child to come back, be safe, out of harm’s way.

“All crew, return to the bridge. Ready for landing manoeuvres” Sandren scuttled back in, her long hair flopping gently in the ponytail behind her. “All ready Cap’n!” Gerrit sang as he pressed a few nondescript buttons. Farah turned her attention to the console in front of her. This was all the same to Gerrit and Sandren. Another planet, another day, same damn landing checks. The director’s daughter drew up a screen on the display in front of her. Numbers flashed up in a table, some amber, most green. Farah pressed a button to turn off the autopilot, and the ship was all hers. She manouvered the great chunk across the void of space, toward the planet designated P6250. Numbers trickled into red, leaving Sandren and Gerrit to make the small alterations that would keep equipment from overheating, and a multitude of other problems that few knew about and even fewer understood.

“Nearing planet atmosphere, initiation manouver B32, acceleration –“ She was cut off by a violent jolt to the ship, shaking the tired bodies of the crew, sound reverberating over the inside walls and echoing to an almost deafening noise. “Holy shit, what wa-“ Another. From the other side. “Diverting all non essential power to emergency shields!” All miners were equipped with standard shields, enough to withstand the radiation from a star, or multiple impacts from space debris, but they could not stop what was hitting them for long. Diverting power to the emergency shields could buy them some more time, but how much? They did not even know what was impacting them. “Oh man, is the planet occupied? Shit, why didn’t their fucking scanners pick that up? Fucking rich company like that and they can’t get working-” Gerrit was cut off by Farah “Get a grip! We can get out of this. Near overheat in core 2, switch to level 3 and increase level in core 4”

Farah punched at the controls, her hands skipping over and almost missing some in her panic. Her wide brown eyes darted about the console, her brain running calculations, situations and probability like it were instinct. She tried to turn the ship, thrusters blazing at maximum, shields rippling as they deflected more and more hits. She was pushing the lumbering machine to its limits. Sandren was silently working, concentrating hard “I don’t understand, our on board sensors are not picking up anything. It can’t tell what’s hitting us. Some type of missile we can’t detect!” Farah just concentrated on getting away from whatever it was. There was a hiss as all doors within the ship closed air tight. If any area was broken through, someone could survive in another without being exposed to the horrific vaccum of space. This was automated. And it meant the shields were down.

Nobody said anything. It was silently aknowleged between them, but they kept on concentrating at their escape. There was still a chance. There was a huge clang, and the readouts showed the ship jumping across to one side from the impact of another missile direct to the hull. “Breach in sector 3” Sandren breathed, almost in a whisped, fear now showing in her voice.

“Oh no” Zane starred at the screen readouts back in California “No, no NO! Fucking do something!” He was screaming at Jat, knowing he was powerless to help his daughter “I…I…she could…it” Jat stammered, not able to look Zane in the eye, not able to look at the readouts. Zane paced wildly, terror evident on his face. The man loved his daughter. He was so proud of her. She could not die, she couldn’t. That wasn’t how it was supposed to go. Other people died, not her, not Farah. Zane continued to scream, his voice cracking as he held back tears burning in his eyes. He punched the table, smashed a mug. The situation looked impossible. He was going to lose her. He was going to lose the thing he cared about most in the world, and nothing else mattered.

2 years after the loss XP960 and its crew, 10 other ships had been lost around the planet designated P6250. It had come to be known as “No Return” across much of human occupied space.