A Reveni - RETURN

December 23, 2225. International Space Station – Launch Bay #1-A

"Congratulations, you've been hear by promoted to the rank of Second Lieutenant of the ISSAF. With this you'll have access to second tier housing and third tier ration access." I was changing into my re-entry suit while a uniformed woman read off my final rights before departure. "In the case of your death or a status of missing in action, these benefits will be transferred to your next of kin. If you have no next of kin, these benefits will be transferred to a family of your choice." She was monotone, zero emotion, while reading off her mini-tablet to a person she most definitely thought would be dead after leaving the station. "Due to the high importance of your mission, successful completion will award you with a promotion to the rank of Captain of the ISSAF." A two rank jump, something that hasn't happened for over a hundred years. Though, they don't expect me to even survive on the surface for more than a couple of hours and the GPS tracker along with the vitals tracker that have been planted under my skin will make them sure of that event. "You will be launching in two hours, please take that time to have your final meal and goodbyes on the station." With that last statement the uniformed woman left me within the preparation room feeling like an inmate on death-row. This didn't surprise me though, a handful of attempts have been made in the past to study the surface. All five attempts ended in failure within the first 10 hours of operation time. Razgriz 1, referred to as R1, ended with the pod burning up on reentry due to improper calibration in 2154. R2 got a man on the surface but he died due to suit filtration issues in 2156. R3 had somewhat better luck with lasting a whole hour on the surface before the last transmission relayed to the station identified an attacker, nothing else is known but fatal damage was taken, this was in 2160. R4 was a mission forced upon a selected resident due to no volunteers stepping forward, R4 died on impact with the surface when landing in a rocky terrain in 2174. Finally the latest mission attempted in 2204 required my father to launch onto the surface, he lasted longer than any other mission attempt for a total of 8 hours.

His status was changed to MIA when his GPS and vital tracker failed to relay with the station's monitors. Though a final text transmission made it through, "South-West Asian region tech 22-bFRYA29-FR4U3-CMU\R444-PIT412GO_FREEDOM" though not much has been made of this transmission other than some hypotheses. My father was landed in the SW Asian region of what was Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand thus the first part being the automated system tracking. The long string of numbers and letters was the actual transmission my father sent; FRYA is thought to refer to Freyja the AI, FR4U can mean Frau which was a nickname some gave to Freyja, CMU was discerned as Carnegie Mellon University where she was created and held, PIT412 means CMU's location of Pittsburgh and its area code of 412, and GO meaning Go to this place. The message wasn't received until the year 2222 but strangely from CMU's ancient relay tower instead of the relay tower my father set up in SW Asia. With this possibly being a clue to returning to the surface the ISS Committee ordered preparations be made for another surface mission to investigate Pittsburgh and the CMU complex. Though with CMU being a technological powerhouse, the mission evolved into a tech scavenging mission to help the station be maintained while also attempting to build a surface forward operations base and drop point.

I finished my final meal, said goodbye to my mother for what was probably the final time, and proceeded to my drop pod. "We expect a many great things to come from you in the near future with this mission we set you out to complete." A committee member shook my hand in

front of the pod entrance. "May the power of our science be on your side, ever guiding you towards our new future." A scientist patted me on the shoulder while wearing what can be described only as a "shit eating grin" while opening the entrance door. I entered without a word and strapped into the seat awaiting me within the extremely small space. Going through the motions after the door was closed I started setting up the pod for launch, due to the Earth's rotation precise calculations must be made with timing for the launch to go correctly. "Everything is green, you may launch any time Lieutenant." A man on the radio said this in monotone, maybe he's married to that uniformed woman? I cracked a dry joke to myself to ease the nervousness I was feeling in this moment. I decided to launch after five seconds. Five. I wonder if my mother is crying right now. Four. I'm glad I could wear my old jacket under the suit. Three. Great-Grandfather please guide me. Two. I forgot to wipe the information off my drive! One. NO ONE LOOK INTO THAT DRIVE!! Launch.

I was shot out of the station at Mach speeds flying towards a big blue planet. The speed was terrifying and the fact that I could look out to the station getting ever more distant made my stomach drop to my feet. The sound was deafening around me causing strain on my ears more so than a child screaming in the middle of sleeping hours. As I fell through the atmosphere with the red streaks of friction grinding away at my little pod I came to the realization. This was my future, a future away from my lone mother, a future where I will most likely die alone and afraid in an unknown land. This filled my eyes with tears which floated within my helmet, I am afraid of this future. The fear and loneliness consumed me as I fell evermore from the grace of the station. Never would I have a normal life on the station, never would I fall in love and form a family, never would I live on from my Father's sacrifice. Never. Never.

A bang, rattle, and roll threw me out of my pity party. The pod was grinding into what I believe was the floor causing a noise and sensation I have never experienced surround me. Outside the pod reverse window I saw the color blue which was so clear I thought I was looking at a monitor. As the pod was losing speed it started to rotate onto its side giving me a view of brown matter and strange objects that looked like warped support pillars. The pod auto engaged its landing mode causing the speed to diminish much faster to a complete stop and a scanner system began its work. My information panels gave me readouts of the toxins within the air and any possible threats within the pod's area of landing. The scientists were right, the toxin readout was below 10% and any toxin's still left over from human industry had been filtered out over that past hundred years. The reverse hatch door blew off with the surface world greeting me for the first time. With my training and education on the station I was able to quickly identify the things around me. The warped pillars I saw earlier were trees that had lost their leaves, the floor that was damaged from the pod was colored a brown with the unharmed areas being covered in a white film. I checked the temperature with my suit to receive a reading of 37 degrees Fahrenheit but thanks to the suit I didn't feel the harshness of this temperature. I was given an old world weapon, a rifle that utilized a bolt-action to operate was brought on the station during the escape and locked away in the armory soon after. I was thoroughly trained in its use but never given the opportunity to fire it due to gravity limitations on the station. There was enough gravity created on the station to hold people down and objects but you could still float around with enough force.

I loaded the weapon with its standard ammunition of 5.56 caliber rounds, almost all rifles used this caliber in the United States so finding more here on the surface shouldn't be to troublesome. A mini-map loaded up in the corner of my helmet display and pointed me in the direction of CMU. I decided to take out my mini-tablet and look at the GPS mapping for a better idea of where I was. I had landed in an area called Cannonsburg which had been a small community outside the city some twenty miles with CMU being about 25 miles away. I studied the map more on how I would make my way north into the city and came up with only two safe bet routes. The first would be to take what was called Interstate-79 North and then switch to Interstate-376 West (Though I would be moving East on it) which was closer but goes through areas recorded to have high flood risk. The other option was to walk some three or four miles East to reach a long stretch of road called US-19 which I could follow up North until reaching I-376 taking me into the city, this route was going through more communities that were formed outside the city with many of them being more affluent when society was still around. Having a more affluent area meant the possibility of having more structured homes so finding a place to hold out for a night wouldn't be very difficult and with many buildings called Shops, homes that carried different items that were exchanged for currency, being in these areas I could come upon proper supplies even after a hundred years. I decided on the slightly longer route along US-19, after gathering up my supply pack and setting up the pod's remote relay link with the station I left what was familiar behind and forged ahead.