

# Chapter 1

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One-hundred-and-eighty-Mississippi

Inside a massive almond-shaped rock plummeting towards the surface of a peaceful planet, cold sweat ran down Marnia's temples. She blinked her eyes, hoping they'd adjust, but without a single electronic device working in the ship's crypt-like command deck, the darkness was absolute. It gave new meaning to flying blind.

Marnia imagined her white-knuckled hands gripping the yoke. Thank goodness for the overzealous aerospace engineer who had insisted on miles of wire controls to backup the electronic systems. She jerked up on the yoke desperately as the forces of gravity, friction, and high altitude crosswinds fought to be one who initiated the deadly tumble.

"David!" she yelled into the darkness.

It was eerie to be jerked to and fro like this without any sound. Between the vibrations threatening to loosen her teeth and the side impact of crosswinds that felt like they would snap her neck at any moment, it should have sounded like the inside of a freight train. Instead, the inner hull, buried deep within a 30 feet thick water cocoon, remained silent as the grave.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck! David answer me!" she yelled into the silence.

She had to remain calm. She took a breath as deep as the strangling straps of her multipoint harness allowed. She methodically tensed and untensed her muscles helping her heart with the job of circulating blood evenly throughout her body.

There it was. Even pressed down onto the chair as Marnia was, she felt the shift in direction on the seat of her smart suit. She pressed the pedal in the opposite direction of the slide. Marnia visualized the wires pulling on valves releasing a stream of propellant. Then a mechanical spark would ignite it. She pictured the resulting explosion as hundreds of attitude jets nudged the giant space rock against the side force.

One-hundred-and-twenty-Mississippi

She fought the dizziness. Visualizing the workings of the ship helped center her emotions. Marnia pictured the inferno raging outside the rocky exterior of the spaceship, grateful for the thick liquid insulation between her and the exterior. For Otto's sake she hoped he wasn't in one of the ship's flooded jefferies tubes.

A downdraft threatened to push down the nose of the asteroid sized ship. She pulled hard on the yoke. There was nothing aerodynamic about their flying anvil. Instead a heavy concentration

of aerospike covered over 50 percent of the craft's underbelly. If she allowed the craft to flip it would be game over.

Sweat gathered around the collar of her smart suit. She wanted to pull on it, but was afraid to remove her hands from the yoke long enough to do it. What she'd not give for an extra pair of hands. Why was David not responding! Fuck that!

"Miha, you're a self saving princess. You don't need no man!" She heard David's flamboyant voice in her mind. The corner of her mouth fought the heavy Gs to curve up in a smirk.

She rode the storm one second at a time. One-hundred-Mississippi, pull on the yoke and left rudder pedal. Ninety-nine-Mississippi, a thicker patch of atmosphere slows acceleration then freefall again. Ninety-eight-Mississippi, fight stomach flip and nausea. Ninety-seven-Mississippi, correct swing left. Ninety-six-Mississippi, shit, overcorrected.

Sixteen interminable seconds later and they were out of the strongest high altitude currents.

Eighty-Mississippi

The higher atmospheric turbulence calmed down. At this point they should be traveling around 122 mph give or take 10 mph. 10 mph was the difference between hitting or hitting NOW! Marnia risked taking one hand off the flight yoke to wipe the cold condensation on her forehead. She took the chance to wipe her moist hand on the leg of her smart suit.

Even without the constant buffering of changing wind currents it wasn't easy keeping the craft upright. It was like trying to control a surfboard on top of a giant beach ball, a surfboard made out of wet soap. Her feet constantly pressed on one pedal or another controlling the yaw. It was the tap dance of death. Stop dancing and you'd quickly find yourself rolling out of control.

The sweat immediately reformed on her brow.

"Picture the processes, girl!" she said to herself. The almond shape of the rock meant that the attitude of the ship was pretty stable at these altitudes. Still it required small adjustments from the flight yoke. She pictured the cluster of thrusters near the narrow nose of the craft letting quick spouts of flame from above and below.

It was about time to add some forward force to the equation. She felt with one hand for the sliding thrust levers that manually controlled the three smaller in-system reaction engines. These were nestled in between the four massive ion thrusters in the back of the craft across the widest part of the almond.

Sixty-Mississippi

As soon as she released the safety mechanism on the condition levers they began gently to vibrate under her hand. Even at idle the massive fusion engines power sent shudders down the long control cables that connected the levers to the reaction dampeners.

Still not a word from her copilot. She knew he would be strapped into his crash couch. After all, the lunk of a marine was a stickler for procedure. Otto, on the other hand, probably thought that SOP stood for Sometimes Optional Procedures. Marnia couldn't worry about him now. As far as she was concerned the ship's engineer was on his own.

Thirty-Mississippi

Marnia thanked her lucky stars that the planet they've playfully named Blanc Tattoine had no tall mountains to speak of. She pictured the endless white sand dunes speeding past far below.

She checked her mental chronometer one last time. Marnia pictured the curve graphs in her mind, forward velocity and rate of descent. Time to adjust it.

Fifteen-Mississippi

She pushed forward on the spring loaded thrust levers and immediately was squashed into her pilot seat. She closed her eyes. Were it not for the bony eye socket holding them in place they'd probably have given her a literal pair of eyes at the back of her head.

Thirteen-Mississippi

Marnia tensed her fit torso. The pressure was unbearable.

"Breathe!" She shouted in her mind. "Breathe, through the pain!"

Twelve-Mississippi

"Lamass my ass!"

Eleven-Mississippi

"What the fuck is a Mississippi anyway!"

Ten-Mississippi

Like a rocket propelled sledgehammer rising from the depths of hell she felt the craft's impact through the layers of crash foam. The law of conservation of energy was a bitch. At the same time the base of her skull and her tailbone reached for each other like lovers wanting a comforting embrace before the end. Stars of pain burst behind her closed lids as each

intervening vertebrae attempted to comply with the lovers' last request. The bulging squishy disks in between pressed the spinal cord, which the brain interpreted as pain signals from all parts of the body simultaneously.

Eight-Mississippi

Although no alarms blared, the command deck was no longer quiet. A cacophony of groans and screeches exploded in Marnia's ears as each component of the high-tech craft edged closer to the boundaries of their engineering specs. She fought the temptation to cover her ears. Instead she struggled to keep pulling on the yoke against the sudden deceleration with one arm.

Four-Mississippi

Maria tasted blood at the back of her throat. Only then did she realize she'd been adding her screams to the other ship's other protesting components. In her body a firestorm of pain raged from every nerve ending.

Two-Mississippi

The pain was unbearable! She lost her grasp of both the yoke and the thruster.

One-Mississippi

As the warm darkness of unconsciousness enveloped her she had enough time for one last thought.

"Damn it, I was off by 10 Miss..."