

The Miner's Son

The last rays of the setting star illuminated dust trails through the dingy kitchen, like the clouds of medium left behind by the light propulsion spacecraft that passed through Xintrā. Jakob's boots left prints on the floor as the man slouched into the house. A hacking cough echoed.

"Hey dad," Eli greeted from where he sat by the counter, fiddling with some machinery parts.

Jakob grunted. "Hey boy. How were your classes?"

"They were good. Ms. Gyo talked about historical Xintrā-Capitol relations," Eli said. That was a lie – they'd learned about that weeks ago. Instead, he'd spent the day at the scrapyard, scavenging for parts.

"How was your day?" Eli asked.

His father sighed. "There was another accident in the mines today. We lost Parsons. His group struck into a vein of Flemish gas. That stuff is terrible, you don't even notice you're breathing it in until it's too late."

"That's the second accident this week!"

"The gas veins just keep getting more common as we mine deeper," Jakob said tiredly. "But the governor won't hear our concerns – there's too much pressure from the Capitol to keep fuel prices low."

Xintrā was the largest inhabited world in this part of the Nebula, ensuring that almost every interstellar ship stopped to refuel on Gammalyte here, necessary for powering their lightspeed drives. As a result, the economy of Xintrā was dependent on mining the precious material, and almost all the working age men ended up in mining crews.

“Be careful dad,” Eli said worriedly. “Can’t you try to get assigned to some tunnels closer to the surface?”

“I don’t make the calls, but don’t worry, I’ll be fine,” Jakob said. “Anyways, you said you wanted to show me something?”

“Oh yeah.”

Eli's eyes lingered on the machinery parts in front of him, representing hours of secret endeavors—a project born out of desperation and hope.

“You told me that Flemis gas kills us by binding to Xenon in the air, right?”

“That’s what they told us, yeah. Flemis makes the life gas toxic, killing us when our bodies try to use it.”

Eli picked up a little box he’d been tinkering with and opened it. A lilting tune started playing.

“I found this in the attic,” he said. “I think it was Mom’s.”

Picking up a pot, he covered the box with it. A few more notes were heard from under the pot before suddenly the music halted.

“The harmonator in it runs on Xenon,” Eli said. “I’m still working on it but I think I could make some sort of alarm system so you’d know to get out of a mine if there was Flemis gas.”

Jakob’s face was lined with wrinkles and mine dust, but something shone in his eyes. “You remind me of your mother, you know?” he said softly. “She was always tinkering, always dreaming.”

Eli beamed. “I want to make it safer down there, for you and everyone else.”

His father patted him on the head. “I know. But don’t you forget to go to your classes,” he said sternly. His eyes, which had seen too much of the dark beneath the planet’s surface, were amused but clouded with doubt.

Eli nodded obediently. Yet, both knew his heart wasn't set on the dry textbooks. Instead, his mind was nestled in the screws and gizmos that littered their kitchen counter – pieces of a puzzle he was determined to solve, even if Jakob didn’t believe in him.

Weeks rolled by, and the kitchen became Eli’s makeshift lab. Metal scraps and vials littered the soot dusted floor. School became a distant thought, despite Jakob’s admonishments. It felt like a race against a clock only he seemed to hear ticking, each moment passing like the distant thumps of miners' boots delving deeper into the earth.

Then one morning, Eli woke up with a heavy feeling. Rays of light shone through the crooked blinds, painting Jakob’s empty side of the bed in streaks of colour. His father normally woke him up at the crack of dawn. He must’ve decided to let him sleep in today. Creeping downstairs, he saw Jakob's boots were gone from beside the door, a stark reminder that his father was already toiling beneath the surface. Eli shook his head at the state of the house. It really was a mess. Maybe it was time for a clean – it wasn’t like he’d planned to go to school today, anyways.

Resolutely, he spent the next hour sweeping up the bits scattered all over the floor and the mine soot his father had trudged in. The house wasn’t clean – it hadn’t been truly clean since his mother had passed away – but it felt much brighter. It felt like more of a home. He knew his father would appreciate the effort, a small comfort after a long day's work. That, and his invention was almost working. He’d ask Jakob to bring one of the prototypes down into the mines tomorrow.

Just as he was placing the broom away, he heard a sharp knock at the door. Eli's heart sank. His father never knocked. Cracking the door open, he saw the worn face of MacEvans, who lived a few houses down. The expression on the man's face told him everything he needed to know.

"I'm sorry, boy," MacEvans' voice was barely above a whisper. "There's been an accident... a big vein of gas burst. Your father... he gave his mask to save Parsons' boy. He didn't make it out."

The world tilted, and Eli's legs buckled beneath him. He sank to his knees. It felt like a physical weight was pressing down on him, threatening to suffocate him just as the Flemis gas had done to his father.

He barely felt MacEvans' hand on his shoulder, an attempt at comfort. "I'm so sorry, Eli. Our house is always open if you need a warm meal."

The words didn't process, their meaning disintegrating like dust motes in the heavy air. The sharp scent of mine soot seemed to cling to MacEvans, a cruel reminder of what had been stolen from him.

Eli withdrew from MacEvans' reach, a muffled 'thank you' escaping his lips as he closed the door. His knees gave out, and he found himself on the cold floor, the chill seeping through his clothes, a faint echo of the coldness spreading inside him. He drew in a shuddering breath. The kitchen, which moments before had felt familiar and warm, now felt foreign. His gaze drifted to the little box nearby, so close to being finished. A tool meant to protect, to alert, now stood as a silent monument of failure.

He kicked the prototype away angrily, not caring that its metal casing tore as it crashed into the side of a table. The timing felt like some cruel joke by the universe. If only he'd finished the alarm system yesterday. If only he'd worked a little faster, a little later into the night...

In the hollow silence that followed, filled with the distant thumps of miners returning home, Eli's thoughts spiraled. Memories of his father flickered before his eyes — a smile hidden behind a grimy face, rough hands expertly guiding his own as they worked on some broken machine, the way his eyes crinkled at the corners when he spoke of the stars and the vast unknown they held. It felt like a cruel joke. How was it possible those hands would never again create or repair, that those eyes would never again reflect the light of distant suns?

Days turned into weeks, and the once orderly kitchen became a mausoleum of unfulfilled promises and shattered dreams. Eli's project lay dormant, buried under a film of neglect and grief. The miners' council installed new safety protocols, but for Eli, the measures were a mocking reminder of their failure to protect his father. Classes, the scrapyard, the future — they all shattered into fragments of could-have-beens.

Then, one dreary afternoon, a hesitant knock echoed through the house. Eli trudged to the door, expecting another pitiful glance or a meager attempt at comfort. Instead, he found Parson's son, the boy his father had died to save. The boy was lanky, with brownish-red hair stinking up in unkempt tufts. Despite being barely older than Eli, his eyes bore the weight of decades. Eli supposed that was what the mines did to people.

The young man shuffled awkwardly, his eyes downcast. "Hi, I'm Ben."

"I know, I remember you from school," Eli said. "I'm Eli."

"I know..." Ben said. The silence between them trailed on awkwardly.

"Did you want something?" Eli said, somewhat bluntly.

“Not really. I just felt like I should come talk to you. Sorry I didn't come by earlier... thought you'd be angry,” Ben murmured.

Eli could feel a bitter seed of jealousy sprout within him — this boy had been with his father in his final moments, an honor Eli would never claim. But as he looked into the young man's eyes, Eli saw in him a mirror of his own torment — a son saved at the expense of a father. He'd almost forgotten that Ben had lost his father in the mines too.

“Yeah sure... I appreciate you coming by,” Eli said.

"Sure,” Ben said awkwardly. He looked around, peering behind Eli into the house.

“Looks like the house could use a clean, mate,” the boy said, a tentative offer of camaraderie hanging between them.

Eli chuckled. “Yeah I guess it could.”

Together, they set to work, clearing away the layers of dust and sorrow that had settled. The task was mundane, but it stitched a silent bond between the two, forged in shared loss. The house felt lighter afterwards, like they'd dusted away a lurking ghost.

That night, as he was about to go upstairs for bed, Eli's gaze caught on his mothers' abandoned music box, tucked away. He'd given up on his project weeks ago – it couldn't save his father anymore. But as his lantern cast the kitchen in a soft golden light, his resolve flickered back to life.

Eli returned to his workbench with a renewed vigor. His hands moved with purpose, assembling, testing, refining. He was determined to transform what had first been a symbol of hope into a tribute to his father's sacrifice. Luckily, he hadn't damaged the prototype too badly by kicking it earlier, and he managed to repair it with some work.

A few days later, Eli wiped the grime from his device, his fingers trembling as they clasped around it. The community gathered, skeptical but hopeful, as Eli demonstrated the device. A simulated release of Flemis gas activated the alarm – a keening whistled melody that was a symphony of survival.

The crowd clapped. Eli made eye contact with Ben, standing amongst a small group of miners near the front. Ben was crying silent tears. He knew exactly how the other boy felt: It was too late to turn back time, to see their fathers' faces even one more time. But at least fewer men would walk into the mines under the shadow of fear now, and fewer children would wait for fathers who would never return.

As another day drew to a close and the last light of the star filtered through the kitchen, casting long shadows over the dust-covered floor, the silence was different. Eli felt a sense of bittersweet peace. The device he had created, a legacy of his father's sacrifice, now stood like a beacon of hope. It promised that life would be better for all the fathers and all the sons who would no longer be swallowed by the mines.

In the heart of Xintrā, where the echo of loss was deep and the cost of hope was high, a son's determination and a father's memory had ignited a spark of change.