

Cerulean Ribbon:

Writing by Avery Anderson, a sixth grader at Hopewell Middle School.

Stella still remembered stars. Small dots of light that fought through the inky black night, patient enough to rest beneath the sun's blinding brilliance until it became so late that even the sun knew it was their time to reign. She still remembered lullabies, stories and music woven into a beautiful melody. She still remembered wind, sometimes a gentle gale caressing her face, other times, howling, fiercer than wolves.

"You're awake." A brusque voice said. Not a question, a statement.

Stella sighed, not bothering to open her eyes, "Barely."

"Marie made us all a treat. She said it was called coffee back on Satruity. It's... bitter, but you really should try it for her sake. It also apparently has a chemical called caffeine, which *supposedly* will keep you awake and alert."

With a groan, she mumbled, "Why would I want to stay awake?"

"You're the only one with piloting experience, and the autopilot can't handle navigation once we're fully submerged."

Stella finally opened her eyes, sitting bolt upright despite her protesting muscles, "Submerged?"

Cliff smirked, "Our crew was waved by the Centre last night, we were commissioned to fly back to Cerulean."

Stella's eyes widened, and she had to cough to cover a gasp.

Instead of elation, a cold panic settled over her at the thought. She couldn't go back to Cerulean. She couldn't go back to the *Centre*. Without a plan, or even with one for that matter, Stella would be as good as dead within minutes of her landing.

A migraine erupted in her temples and she groaned.

Bright flames were thrust against the black backdrop of her mind. Despite being years away from the fire, Stella still felt the need to shield her face from the glowing cinders drifting through the smoke-stained sky. Still remembered clinging to the memories of childhood as they dissipated into thin air with the heat waves. Still remembered the shouts as she ran.

Her nose burned and she had to grit her teeth to halt the oncoming tears.

She would not fall prey to emotion.

Stella attempted to push her lips up into a smile as she pulled on her boots and turned her attention back to the conversation, "I should check the radar then, they usually call at least two crews whenever something's needed, and a mid-sky collision would be bad." Stella chuckled nervously.

She was an awful liar.

Cliff nodded, but his eyes were narrowed and skeptical. He wouldn't stop her though, this crew was loyal, and *not* to the Centre.

"If you think that's necessary..." he trailed off, but Stella knew what he was implying and her darkened eyes brightened at his profuse faithfulness.

Stella didn't even bother to change out of her nightgown before she gave an over-exaggerated wave to Cliff and pushed through the steel dormitory doors. If she didn't make this quick, he would come to check on her and everything would spiral out of control. So, Stella shook her head and shuffled through the aircraft's narrow halls, carefully avoiding the cockpit where she heard the faint murmurs of the other crewmates making conversation.

The pilot's cockpit was a light show, the bright neon and shock whites offering a stark contrast to the darkness of space mere inches beyond them. Stella took a deep breath and settled into the worn leather pilot seat. Without hesitating, she flipped the autopilot switch off, simultaneously pulling a plastic wheel forward before spinning it in a full circle. Her ship, unlike many others, barely even vibrated with such a jarring turn.

She rolled her shoulders and shook her head softly. In all honesty, she didn't know if she wanted to scream, laugh, or cry, so instead, she simply sat in silence, staring out into space.

Stella stiffened.

Her eye caught on something in the periphery of her vision. Something that made her heart drop in her chest.

From here Cerulean looked peaceful, a softly rippling pond in the tundra of space, but the calm façade couldn't smother the fear sprouting in her chest.

The ship hadn't turned. Or maybe it *had* turned but was drawn back into the autopilot's route. Stella didn't have even the faintest idea of how that would happen, which only panicked her even more. None of that mattered. If she couldn't turn this ship around and keep it going in the other direction, she was as good as dead, and she would take everyone she cared for down with her.

"Please make a one-hundred and twenty degree turn," she whispered into the audio command receiver.

The cockpit remained silent except for the steady beeping of the ventilation system.

Stella pressed her fingernails into her palms. After a quick sweep of the controls, Stella did a double take.

The program receiver had gone blank with the exception of a small textbox in the center.

Systems have been overridden.

To notify the Centre of an unwanted or malicious override, please proceed to copy the following numbers into MER: 7796-8041

She couldn't say she was *surprised* that the Centre had hacked their systems, they had software that ran at least three times faster than the ship's own and their hackers had programmed practically

every digital element onboard. And yet, somewhere deep inside of herself she had hoped that maybe she had a chance.

Stella clamped her eyes shut and pressed her forehead to her palms. After a few seconds of simple deep breaths that did absolutely nothing to slow the adrenaline pumping through her veins, she peeked through her fingers, surprised to see the ship turning steadily.

She stifled a whimper as she realized what that meant.

The Centre must have inserted their own autopiloting system into the ship's, which also meant that she wouldn't be able to dispatch the separate pods. In other words, the Centre had them trapped.

Stella bit down hard on her lip, wincing at the iron taste of blood.

"Why don't you want to go back?"

Stella spun in her chair, her eyes landing on the fair-haired girl she had known for almost the entirety of her life. That girl –Lea's- arms were crossed over a hastily tied sweater and a crease of concern had formed between her brows.

Stella glanced over Lea's shoulder, unsurprised to see the entirety of the crew behind her. Cliff offered an apologetic smile to which she, in turn, frowned at.

"Why do you *want* to go back?" Stella countered, her voice rising in both volume and pitch as she continued, "If you haven't noticed, the Centre *uses* us. We have been out here working for years now, and have received *nothing* in return. No check to our families, if we even have them anymore. No extra rations or retirement funds. Not even a pat on the back. We have *nothing*."

"We have *each other*."

"Not for long," Stella mumbled.

Lea attempted to step back, but the crowd behind her surged forward, and the compact flight deck was soon only a few inches short of overflowing.

Stella examined the faces of her crew, paled from a lack of sunlight, scarred from injuries attained both recently and in times long passed, overcome with shadows and wrinkles despite their still youthful ages. She couldn't believe she was going to betray their trust.

She covered her face with her hands and whispered, "I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

"Once we arrive on Cerulean, the rest of you will be separated and interrogated for treason and I... I'll be taken into custody," Stella's voice cracked, "I'm sorry."

Marie, who's high-pitched voice had been noticeably absent among the startled gasps and murmurs of alarm, finally spoke up, "You're the third daughter, aren't you? The Analli."

Cliff guffawed, "Are you crazy? Analli Cerys was short and blond, and for that matter, is being held in some dungeon on Cerulean for like, I don't even know, thirty counts of treason right now!"

"No," Stella said, wrapping her arms around her chest as though they would block the horrors streaming into her mind, "Marie is right. I'm the Analli. I am Cerys Alethea."