

HUMANITY'S OUTREACH

I'm standing by my mother and our guards in a building on the outskirts of Launch Pad 39a, watching the intermingling leaders and emissaries discuss politics and space travel. My mother is talking to the British Prime Minister, and he's hanging onto her every word, which is no surprise- my mother has that effect on people. In her navy pantsuit, American flag pinned to her lapel, and stunning grace, her very presence is commanding. She's six one, taller than I'll ever be. Her brown skin glows beautifully, like my sister's, unlike mine. It also helps that she's the President of the United States.

Across the room, the NASA vidscreen is displaying live coverage of the rocket I see outside the window. It shows a real-time feed inside the capsule- I must investigate.

I leave Mom, pass the guards, and dart through the crowd of diplomats. I nod and smile in acknowledgement whenever someone nods down at me, saying, "Miss Kiera." I respond with their title in recognition. No one tries to stop me, which I suppose is a benefit to being fourteen.

When I reach the vidscreen, I see Sandra, my older sister, in the capsule. A pang goes through me- I miss her already. She and three other astronauts are adjusting their screens, talking to NASA Control. On Sandra's lips is a small smile, and I know she's excited. After all, she'll be one of the first astronauts on Mars.

I make my way to the window. As I look out and picture Sandra inside the rocket, a wave of anguish washes over me. Sandra's going to *Mars*. A whole other planet. I won't see her for years and years! She was never particularly close to me, but I love her more than I think she knows.

And yet... this has always been her dream, and I'm here to see her fulfill it.

So are all these monarchs, presidents, and ministers. This kind of gathering hasn't happened in decades. We're all here because the pull of the stars, the thrill of expanding humanity's outreach is overpowering- my sister being the daughter of the President is just an excuse for everyone to come.

"T-minus thirty seconds," announces the vidscreen, and the diplomats' chatter stops. I hear Sandra over the feed. "Everyone ready for Mars?"

The astronauts respond, "Yes," without hesitation.

Everyone is silent, watching the rocket outside.

NASA control starts counting down, tense. "Fifteen... fourteen... thirteen... twelve..."

I imagine my sister and the others in that shuttle, nervous but filled with anticipation.

"Ten... nine... eight... seven... six..."

My heart soars in hope and drops in anxiety.

"Five... four... three... two... one... ignition... liftoff!"

Beneath the rocket, the fuel ignites, and the spacecraft rises into the air. It shakes our building with sheer force. We watch it rise, all of America, all the world, a flame headed towards a planet that is not our own. Together we watch, united in this moment by hope for the future of humanity.