

## Space Disorder

By Annie Shea

The year is 2030, and the first manned mission is set to launch for Mars.

It's been exactly 2 years and 57 days since satellites obtained a picture of an unidentified astronaut on Mars.

Over 2 years of rampant rumors, endless questions, countless conspiracy theories, headlines growing crazier by the day, and exactly zero answers.

No one knows who he is. At least, that's what the authorities say. But I know they're wrong.

His name is Brennan Walker. He was one of NASA's leading astrophysicists, often teased by his colleagues for his particular interest in Mars. On May 23, 2022, he ran a red light while intoxicated and crashed into a tractor trailer, bringing his life and promising career to an end. Proclaimed dead, he left behind his wife, a fellow NASA employee, and his nine-year-old daughter, Elise.

That man is my dad. My dad was my idol, my entire world. Together, we built science fair experiments, watched the stars, and questioned the mysteries of the universe. My mom and I have never been close. The day my dad died, my world seemed to end. For six years I struggled with overwhelming grief, feeling completely isolated and misunderstood.

But I know he didn't die that day. 2 years and 57 days ago, I turned on the news and I instantly knew my dad was alive. 2 years and 57 days ago, I started planning to see my dad again.

Today is the day I finally put my plan in action.

## Space Disorder

On the bus ride to my NASA internship, I check over my supplies for what must be the hundredth time. I take a deep breath and try to reassure myself that this plan will work. *It has to work.*

I maintain a calm demeanor as I swipe my key card at the door and make my way through security. Stomach roiling, I briskly walk to the launching pad, and I can't help but catch my breath at the vision before me. Looming above me is the Adrestia I, the first ever ship designed to land on Mars. I gaze in awe at its beautiful engines and plating, imagining the complex control system(which I've memorized) inside. It truly is the most remarkable piece of human craftsmanship I could possibly imagine.

I intend to steal it.

"Dr. Kingsley sent me for another pre-launch checkup," I tell the security guards stationed outside. They nod and let me through, as this is only one of many checkups I've performed throughout my internship. Once inside, I act quickly, maneuvering the spacecraft I've been studying for nearly 2 years with ease. I enter the activation sequence, stolen from my professor's computer, which releases the Adrestia from its locks and begins the launch sequence. I'm counting on the program which I installed in NASA's mainframe days ago to block out the technicians in Mission Control so that I can leave Earth's atmosphere. I turn off the communication systems, and strap myself in. Intended to launch the next day, the Adrestia is fully stocked and fueled. I'm ready for liftoff.

"T-minus 60 seconds," I whisper to myself as the on-board computers take over the final launch preparations. I hold my breath while the shuttle's main engines ignite one at a time and enter liftoff position, my bones quaking as the spacecraft shakes and shudders. The solid rocket

## Space Disorder

boosters ignite and the cabin rattles as it blasts off the launch pad. Suddenly there's a massive pile of bricks on my chest, and the deafening roar of the engine fills my ears. I can barely think as the Adrestia climbs higher, but for the image of my dad's smiling face permanently ingrained in my brain. My body becomes nearly immovable as the ship fights to break free of Earth's atmosphere. Then, seemingly moments later, I lurch forward and everything is silent and motionless. *I did it. I really did it. I'm in space.*

Without hesitation, I rush to the window and gaze down at our blue-and-green planet below. I've dreamed of this moment since I was little, and now I'm finally here. Shaking off my childish wonder, I remind myself I have a mission. *I'm going to find my father.* I detach myself from the window and tick off my mental list of flight procedures. I first open the cargo bay doors to cool off the orbiter, then move to the controls to check the life support systems.

"ELISE KATHERINE WALKER!!" a familiar voice booms over the comm system. I curse under my breath. I thought I'd disabled it, but it seems Mission Control found a way to override my program.

"Yes, mother?" I ask dryly. Of course, my least favorite person in the world would have to spoil the greatest day of my life.

"What has gotten into you?!? Do you have any idea how many laws you've broken? How much money you've cost us? You turn that ship around right now and come home young lady!!"

"No way!"

"What are you doing up there? How did you even get on the launch pad? Past security? How did you manage to initiate ignition? I-"

## Space Disorder

“I’m not as stupid as you think, Mother. I’m here to find Dad. You might not believe me, but I know he’s out there. And he actually believes in me.”

“Oh, sweetheart.” I hear her long sigh over the comm system. “This again? Your father is dead, and you need to realize that. It’s been nearly eight years. I thought you were over this by now. Didn’t the therapist help you? He did *not* run away to Mars without anyone noticing eight years ago. He got drunk and killed himself in a car crash. He’s not the ‘hero’ you think he is. Do you have any idea how ridiculous you sound? You’re *delusional*. You’re coming back home, and we’re putting you back in therapy as soon as possible.” I can’t help but wince at her words. Ever since my father died, my mother has called me obsessive, claiming I have an untreatable condition and sending me to one pointless therapy session after the next. She, however, is the one unable to recognize the truth.

“I’m afraid that’s not possible, Mother. I have control over the Adrestia now. I’m never coming back. Thank God I never have to see your face again.” I once again disable the comm system, this time pulling out the wires underneath the control board. I heave a sigh of relief, knowing I will never again hear my mother’s condescending voice.

I resume the routine examination of the Adrestia’s systems, checking oxygen levels, electrical power, and shuttle position. I’m about to inspect my food supplies when a red light and the sound of an alarm fill the cabin. The words “SYSTEM OVERRIDE” cover the control display. *No no no no no*. I slam every button on the control panel, but all are rendered useless. I bang my fists against the panel, the walls, the ceiling, anything to stop this.

The on-board computer commences preparations to return to Earth’s atmosphere. “NOOO!” I scream like a wounded animal. For the past two years, I’ve schemed and studied and

## Space Disorder

trained, all for this moment. I thought through every possibility. It can't be over so soon. *I need to find him. I need to find my dad.*

Fists flailing, I batter every piece of the Adrestia's machinery, looking for some way, any way, to salvage my mission. I refuse to go back to Earth, to my cold, unfeeling mother, to a planet devoid of the only person who ever cared about me.

I make my way to the airlock, placing my hand on the hatch. Just beyond this door lies open space, the stars and planets which filled each of my childhood dreams. Beyond this door is the empty nothingness of space, unforgiving to any life it might encounter. Beyond this door is freedom, from Earth and its inhabitants.

*I'm coming, Dad.*

I open the hatch.