

PROLOGUE :TYLER'S MOVE.

Light.

It seared into his dreams with the intensity of a high powered laser, strobing in time to a painfully loud shriek that rose and fell. Tyler went from prone to sitting in a single move. He squinted at chipped paint on metal framed beds and bare, shabby, composite walls. Sweat trickled down his face, dripped from the end of his nose. There was a sour smell of body odour. Someone should complain to maintenance, the heat in here... He snapped fully awake as it hit him. The Alarm was sounding.

Movement in the other bunks along with oaths and groans galvanised him to action. Quickly he pushed aside the thin bed cover and reached for his jumpsuit. The outfit fought him, sticking to his damp body. He was still adjusting it as he reached the hatch, well ahead of everyone else, and pulled it open. Riva was already waiting outside. Her luxurious black hair stuck to her skin in small damp ebony curls. She looked hot and tired, jumpsuit creased, dark smudges under her eyes. She looked like she hadn't slept for a month but there wasn't a man on board who wouldn't have stopped work to watch her walk past. Tyler thought she looked more beautiful than the day they married.

'Tyler,' she said. 'Is this...?'

'I hope so. Come on Riva.' He grabbed her elbow and pulled her down the corridor.

Captain Tenaka watched their objective grow through large forward observation windows. Cropped steel grey hair, a face composed of flat planes and sharp angles; he leant forward gripping the back of his command chair. There was nothing to shed light on the enigmatic object so far from the nearest stars. All Tenaka could see was a ragged rectangle slowly morphing into a distorted octagon and back again, dark against the cold luminescence of the Spartica Nebula.

He nodded to his first officer who pressed a contact on a semi-circular control board. The Windfall's forward floodlights, erupting like a new sun, set the object alight and threw a complex, faceted topology into sharp relief. Tenaka tried to make sense of the mass of detail. Black shadows raced over the bright surface as the superstructure rotated through the cone of illumination. A surrounding cloud of tumbling debris added a dizzying motion; chunks the size of small spacecraft all the way down to particles so small they scattered light like smoke.

'Analysis Yuric.'

'It's pretty exotic, Captain,' the first officer replied. 'Carbon allotropes and ceramic alloy combinations I've never seen before. Other materials we can't even hazard a guess at from here.' He grinned. 'We've made our bonus this trip, that's for sure.'

'And...?'

'Trace elements of all kinds, frozen nitrogen, methane; but most of the small particulate is ice.'

Ice! Water and gasses from a life support system perhaps? Teneka's heart pumped faster,

'What's our status?'

The first officer looked up from his instruments, 'Ten minutes until we match velocity. I've got the RT's prepped and ready to go. Boarding crews are suiting up.'

The Captain looked at Yuric and then around the bridge of the Windfall: a no-frills workspace jammed with view screens, read outs and a dozen command crew in low seats. They looked at him expectantly. He nodded, a movement so slight they might have missed it had they not been so focused.

'I want to know the second they're ready', he said, turning back to the observation port.

Tyler and Riva were first into the prep room. They had made the most of the extra space, preparing their spacesuits and equipment before the other teams arrived. Now it was full with jostling, noisy, excited crew.

Looking up from the final checks on Riva's suit Tyler met a hard stare. Dense black eyebrows formed a sharp "V" over a nose that had been hammered into new configurations many times. Baker... no, Broker, the Captain of Recon Four. A thin haggard looking man, Broker's systems engineer, was fussing with his team leader's spacesuit.

'This could be the big one, Broker,' the thin man said, his voice high and excited.

Broker was still staring at Tyler. He was half dressed for EVA. His powerful torso looked small jutting from the large armoured legs of the suit.

'Great,' someone grumbled from the far side of the room. 'Maybe Teneka will finally scrap this piece of garbage and get himself a decent ship.'

'Should have been scrapped years ago,' another agreed.

'Maybe we'll get one with working enviro control.'

'Or room to fit the tugs inside.' There was general laughter at this.

Still focused on Tyler Broker said, 'Tenaka will never get rid of the Windfall, he's way too attached to it.'

'Whatever. Won't matter to me,' the thin engineer continued. 'I'm taking my cut and getting out. Going to get myself a plot on one of the agri habs, get a wife, raise some kids.' He gave a short snorting laugh as he offered up chest armour to his captain.

'Yeah, that's the only way you'll ever get a wife, Stooks. Buy one.' This from a thick set woman with short spiky hair, Broker's third crew member, busy with her own equipment. She looked at Stooks derisively. 'Nothing new then.'

'Funny girl.' He wagged a finger at her. 'You'll be sorry when it happens.'

'Not in this corner of the multiverse, pal.'

'Pity the cut's going to be smaller than it should be,' Broker said, shrugging his arms through the suit's shoulder openings. His gaze was still centred on Tyler. 'Too much useless baggage on this outing if you ask me.'

'Who's asking you, Broker?' Riva snapped.

Broker shifted his attention to Riva's dark eyes, 'Did I touch a nerve there Beautiful?' He allowed his gaze to travel down her body, lingering where her breasts and hips lay under the bulky vacuum armour. 'Tell you what, Riva, when you finally get tired of this immi loser, why don't you give me a call?

Tyler's face reddened, 'What is your problem, Broker?'

Broker looked back to Tyler, 'My problem?' He looked down at the deck, then up again. 'You know, I think it's Tenaka. I mean, don't get me wrong, I like him, he's a good captain, always knows where the best gigs are, but... sometimes I have to question his judgement. Know what I mean?' Silence hung in the room.

'I asked you a question,' Broker snapped.

'And there I was thinking you were being all rhetorical,' said Tyler.

'Ooh! Rhetorical. Nice word; good use of language there buddy, shows us how smart you are. That probably explains it. I mean, it's not as if there aren't enough decent, hard-working Claimers that could use a break, right? Why else would a Captain like Tenaka bring a useless, immi deadbeat along?'

Riva put herself between the two, 'Leave it, Tyler,' she said, her voice low and steady. 'He's not worth the effort.'

'Good advice, boy,' Broker looked at the woman. 'Maybe young Riva here is the answer,' he said. 'Is that it? Been offering the captain compensation for the dead weight?' He licked his lips suggestively.

'Enough, Broker!' Tyler pushed against Riva's attempt to restrain him.

'Enough of what, immi. What you going to do?' When Tyler didn't respond he added, '... you deaf as well as stupid, or did you think I was just being "rhetorical"?''

'Screw you, Broker, you don't scare me.'

Stook's eyes widened in alarm as Broker shook the engineer's restraining hand from his shoulder then brushed Riva aside. The spiky haired woman dropped her gear and moved closer.

Broker jutted his head forward, his disfigured nose almost touching Tyler's, 'Go on then, you immi piece of shit, take a shot.' Spittle sprayed Tyler's face.

A small wiry man came pushing his way through the ragged ring the tug crews had formed around the group. 'I'm sure watching you two beat your brains out would be very entertaining and probably little loss to either of you, only...' he pointed towards the looming inner airlock doors to emphasise his point, '...you might want to leave it 'till later.'

Broker relaxed, 'Hey, Falian, how you doing man? Just in time to save your boy.'

The newcomer's dark hair had been reduced to a mere dusting. His flat face was clearly from the same gene pool as everyone else's in the room – everyone other than Tyler, whose fair features were set above a rangy frame nearly a head taller.

Falian locked eyes with the bigger man, 'Focus on getting ready, Broker, you don't want to get left behind.'

Broker waved a hand dismissively and turned to his crew, while Tyler continued to glare at the man's thick neck and broad back. 'Look me up later, Broker,' he said.

Broker glanced over his shoulder, 'Count on it. We'll see how you manage without your bodyguard.'

Riva sighed, 'Why don't you both save your energy, you'll need it soon enough.'

It took Tyler a second to register Riva's words. He relaxed, shook his head and turned his attention back to her suit.

'You guys ready?' Falian asked.

'Almost, Tyler said.

Falian took Tyler's arm and pulled him closer, away from Riva. 'There a problem, Tyler?'

'Broker – ' began Tyler.

Falian jerked Tyler closer still. 'I don't give a shit,' he hissed. 'Broker's a dick. Deal with it. I pulled a big favour from Tenaka to get you on this trip, I risked my standing here. How about trying not to screw things up – for a change?'

Tyler stepped back, yanking his arm free. 'OK, Falian, you've made your point.'

'Good. Get your suit check done, you've got ten minutes.' He turned and walked back through the tug crews.

Tyler returned his attention to Riva's suit.

'What was that about?' she asked.

He pulled her around so he had access to the Suit Manoeuvring Unit, a circular cluster of jets situated in the small of her back, and checked the repair he had made to the propellant intermix valve three days ago. He had checked it many times already.

She twisted around to look at him, 'He's just looking out for us, Tyler.'

Tyler twisted her back into position. 'Hold still, if this repair fails you'll take off like an unguided missile,' he snapped. He probed the repair, running his hand over the mechanism.

'Looks good,' he muttered, turning his attention to the life support module set above the SMU.

'This is what you wanted. You could do worse than show a bit of gratitude.' Riva turned her head, keeping her body still, talking over her shoulder,

He completed the safety check. 'Of course, let's all be grateful to Falian.' He was a little surprised at his bitterness.

Riva shook her head, 'That's not fair.'

He turned, giving Riva access to his own suit.

'What is!' he muttered. 'Let's hope this is what we've been waiting for. Maybe we can start to turn things around.'

Falian was making his way back; his gaze lingering on Riva, just a little too long. He flushed when his eyes met Tyler's but his voice was steady when he reached them.

'OK, stay calm, do exactly what's asked and you'll be fine. Watch yourself as you cross to the tugs, stay clipped onto the safety cable.'

'We've done EVA's before, Falian, we'll be OK,' said Riva.

'Good. Final check then.'

They locked their helmets in place with a twist and checked each other's seals: each gave a thumbs up.

Everyone shuffled into line facing the inner airlock doors. A klaxon sounded as they opened and a warning light flashed. They crammed between the inner and outer doors; the inner doors closed; external noise faded as the atmosphere evacuated. Tyler was left with only the sound of his own breathing and the electronic and mechanical sounds of his suit. He felt the suit stiffen.

'Free fall in ...3 ...2 ...1,' his helmet com said. He grabbed at a support rail as the gravity was cut locally and his feet floated free of the deck. Then the outer airlock doors split apart silently, allowing soft blue nebula light to spill in.

The first crew in line were already clipping onto the safety cable and pulling themselves out of the door. The more experienced, ignoring strict EVA regulations, didn't bother with the safety cable at all. When it was Falian's turn he looked back at Tyler and Riva, indicating upwards with his thumb before disappearing from view.

Tyler pulled himself to the opening. A large framework of interlocking girders, the port outrigger, stretched away to his right, black against the Spartica's blue glow. There was one outrigger on either side of the ship, each supporting two tug berths. Their tug was on the starboard side. They would have to make their way across the Windfall's hull to reach it.

Beyond the ship, in every direction, lay the nebula. He had expected more; a rich, dense, multi-hued cloud, like the astronomical images he had found on the DataSphere before they left the Claimer home world. What he actually saw were soft glowing streamers that appeared to curl around the ship. There wasn't any movement he could perceive: there couldn't be from something that measured size in trillions of kilometres and existence in millions of years. He followed the shapes as they broke over the Windfall, like a wave of frozen energy.

His helmet speakers crackled, 'Move it, immi, you're not on a sightseeing trip.' Broker snapped.

Without looking back Tyler raised his left hand, extending his middle finger in response. He clipped on to the safety line and hauled himself out into the glowing night, hand over hand, head down, his boots floating away from the hull. The only illumination came from the Windfall's lights and his own suit headlight, twitching across the ceramic alloy skin of the ship. He reached an anchor point, the first of many securing the cable. Careful not to unclip the second carabiner until he had clipped in the first beyond the obstructing bracket, he continued the same way, clipping and unclipping as he went; pausing for a second when the hull abruptly changed direction, travelling away from him at ninety degrees. Then he moved onto the flat plain that was the top of the Windfall, visible only as an absence of nebulae and stars.

Across this black expanse the other crew members were tiny pools of moving light. Following their lead Tyler pulled himself along the cable towards a sharp horizon until he could look over the edge and down the starboard outrigger at Reconnaissance Tug Three – up or down were meaningless terms of course; it was a mental fiction he used to help keep his bearings in a place where they were all too easily lost. Falian was already in position in the oasis of light around RT 3's dock. He interrupted his systems check to follow Tyler's progress.

A shift in the Windfall's orientation brought the rotating, multifaceted form of the alien wreck and its entourage of spinning debris into view. Tyler froze, tightening his hold, fighting vertigo. It seemed to him that the Windfall had fallen into an uncontrollable tumble; that the alien was stationary. He squeezed his eyes shut.

There was a gentle impact as Riva bumped into him. Her voice came over their private channel, 'Tyler?'

Tyler opened his eyes and focused on the metal beams that made up the outrigger, forcing himself to see the derelict as the moving object. The Windfall steadied around him.

'I'm okay,' he said, resuming his progress.

Moments later he was strapping into the tug next to Falian, while Riva positioned herself behind.

Claimer technology had little in the way of niceties or frills and the RT was no exception. It was about ten meters long with thruster assemblies arranged at strategic points for manoeuvrability. An articulated manipulator arm folded snugly underneath. Since the tugs only operated in weightless conditions seats would be unnecessary payload: the astronauts simply stood, or floated, in the open framework of a rudimentary cockpit, secured by safety straps against a padded panel. To the rear there was a small emergency cabin, normally open to vacuum, that could be pressurised in an emergency. The tug's onboard oxygen supply allowed each crew member to plug in an umbilical to conserve their suit air.

'Everybody OK?' Falian asked. Both confirmed their status. Falian pressed contacts in front of him and a control board lit up. 'Recon 3 ready. Systems nominal,' he reported to the bridge.

On the bridge Tenaka and Yuric watched a live feed of the teams climbing aboard the RT's – multiple close ups, via helmet and tug mounted cameras, along with long range scans from the Windfall. Coffee had been brought in but no one was drinking.

'Make sure the cameras are rolling,' Tenaka said. 'This is history in the making. I want backups of everything.'

'Cameras rolling,' Yuric confirmed. 'Velocity matched. Boarding crews launch when ready.'

'Roger that. Launching now,' came Falian's response . Clamps unlocked silently. The little craft shuddered as he engaged the thrusters and they moved away from the reassuring bulk of the mother ship.

From this vantage point the Windfall's ad hoc nature was clear; a one time interplanetary shuttle, saved from the scrappers and converted for salvage operations. A wedge shaped keel jutted from beneath the rectangular hull like an afterthought; the housing for the fusion engines and jump generators. The outriggers, like angular skeletal wings, gave her a predatory look.

Ahead the derelict filled the sky, rotating through the illumination cast by the salvage ship's powerful floodlights. A large egg shape at one end connected to a fat, faceted, cylinder at the other via a tube of repeating organic shapes. Fins radiated outwards at regular intervals from what Tyler had begun to think of as the stern. Long curved tendrils connected the fore and aft sections. It dwarfed the Windfall. Not a single part appeared intact: the metallic surface was littered with holes and missing panels. Countless tumbling pieces of debris surrounded the main bulk. It's skin shone like burnished silver in the searchlights.

'It's taken a hell of a beating,' Falian said. 'Hard to see what's keeping it together.'

Riva was focused on a floating virtual screen: green lines of scrolling data reflecting in her helmet visor. 'Hull is open to vacuum,' she reported. 'Interior as cold as space. No life signs.'

'OK,' Falian said. 'I'll get us closer.'

'Just beautiful.' Tenaka was transfixed by the view beyond the observation ports.

'Has to be the most complete artefacts ever found,' Yuric agreed. 'This will be big news when we get back.' He frowned, peering at his console display, 'Hold on...!' He pressed a few contacts to fine tune his readings. 'That's new.' Tenaka looked over his first officer's shoulder. Yuric pointed. 'Temperature has risen a few degrees above absolute, just there.'

Tenaka's forehead furrowed. He noted the tug coordinates, represented on the screen by four slowly moving green dots arrayed around a graphical representation of the alien craft. He leaned closer to the com, 'Attention tug crews, we're detecting a hotspot in the wreck. RT 3, you're the closest, what can you see?'

'Nothing obvious from here Bridge,' Falian's voice came back. 'We're moving in now.'

Falian manoeuvred the tug into the debris field. The sensation was peculiar. Every time he applied the jets “down” became the direction against the angle of thrust. The acceleration was slight, a fraction of a gee, but the feeling started to make Tyler feel nauseous as Falian deftly avoided the largest sections of the shattered ship. He was making it look easy, but it was as skilful a piece of flying as Tyler had seen. A fractured piece, serrated like the blade of a giant hunting knife, skimmed silently above their heads, close enough to touch: featureless against the nebula, it shone brightly where the tug searchlights caught it. Tyler jumped as a small fragment bounced off his faceplate, the loud crack reverberating within the confines of his helmet.

'Watch it, Falian, or one of us will end up with a cracked visor,' he snapped.

'Feel free to take the controls,' Falian retorted. The tug dropped suddenly into clear space just above the alien's hull.

'That's better,' said Tyler.

Riva looked up from the scrolling information. 'Yeah, we are clear to the hull now. The derelict's mass must have sucked in all the closer junk.'

They became a satellite of the egg-shaped structure and looked down on an intricate surface, made more confusing by the rhythm of light and shade sweeping over it. A circular feature slowly emerged round the tightly curved horizon.

Tyler pointed. 'There,' he said, excited, 'Is that a hatch?'

As Falian manoeuvred Recon 3 to face the derelict they looked down on what did indeed appear to be a hatch; one that wouldn't have attracted comment if they'd seen it on the side of a station or a ship.

'Get us closer, Falian,' Tyler ordered.

'Yes sir,' Falian responded sarcastically as he arced the tug back, bringing her within easy reach of the structure and matching its rotation. The nebula and the Windfall began to orbit about them as the derelict became their stationary frame of reference. Using the claw at the end of the manipulator arm, Falian clamped the tug securely into place.

'OK,' Tyler said. He undid his safety harness, unclipped the air umbilical and without hesitation made the leap across to the other craft.

'Hey,' Falian shouted. 'Tyler, we're supposed to wait for orders.'

'Tyler, wait,' called Riva, unbuckling her own webbing to join her husband on the alien hull.

Tenaka turned to Yuric, 'We need to stabilise that rotation,' he said.

'I've got Tugs Two and Three looking at that,' Yuric replied.

Tyler's voice sounded over the intercom, "'We're on the alien hull looking at what appears to be a hatch.'

'I don't recall giving that order,' Tenaka said. He looked across at one of the monitors... 'Can you get it open?'

A few seconds later Tyler answered, voice slightly distorted, 'I don't think we need to. Hull's punctured on this side. Couldn't see it on approach. We can easily get through.'

On one of the screens Tyler was examining a large tear in the skin of the ship; ragged twisted strips punched inwards, the apparent result of extreme violence. Tenaka and Yuric moved closer, as if doing so might resolve detail in the blackness. The entire bridge crew stared at the screen.

'You're right over the hot spot Tyler,' Yuric said. He turned to Tenaka. 'Do we send in a remote?'

'Maybe. Tug Three, do you have a remote on board?'

Though he knew the answer Falian looked down the length of the tug. 'Negative, Captain, we don't. It wasn't replaced after Sera 4.'

Tenaka sighed, 'OK. Stand down Tug Three. Let's get another team over there.'

Tyler's voice came back sharply, 'A remote might not be the best idea Captain. I think we need human flexibility here. No telling what we might need to react to. We should be going in.'

'Negative Tug Three, too much of a risk. Tug Four, can you get over there and take over?'

Tenaka sounded impatient.

Broker's voice was smug through steadily worsening radio interference, 'Roger that, on our way.'

'We found the hatch Captain!' Tyler said, trying to keep the anger out of his voice, 'We are here and ready, we should be going in.'

'Negative Tug Three. Stand down Tyler, that's a direct order. Falian, get your crew in line.'

'Yes, sir,' Falian waved frantically. 'Tyler, Riva, back on the tug. Now!'

A shadow swept over, plunging them into darkness. Husband and wife turned to see the rival tug inbound, only minutes away. Tyler looked at Riva, a featureless shape against distant brightly lit superstructure. Only her disembodied face remained visible, underlit by green interior helmet lights.

'I'm going in, Riva,' he said over their secure channel. 'I'm damned if I'm handing this over to Broker.' He turned to the opening.

'Wait, Tyler,' Riva grabbed his shoulder, spinning him round to face her. She looked into his eyes. Their helmet visors touched. 'We've always been in this together.' Light burst around them as the shadow continued on its path. Grasping his hand she led the way, two bright sparks against the black maw of the tear. A moment later their suit thrusters powered them into the ominous interior.

Tenaka watched dumbfounded, 'Tug Three, what the hell are you doing? Tyler, I told you to stand down! Falian, what's happening? I warned you about Tyler. Get them back, now.'

'Damn you Tyler!' cried Falian, 'Sorry Captain, I tried. They're gone!'

'You... are... to... stan... down... resp... tha... ord...!' Tenaka's angry voice slowly faded.

Tyler and Riva sank in silence and blackness.

Riva could see Tyler through the Echo Pulse Facility of her suit: bouncing radio waves off her surroundings it built up a grainy, grey-scale image she could see on her helmet Heads Up Display. The EPF was good for about twenty meters. She watched the grainy echo-located form of Tyler fixing Bread Crumb Beacons every thirty metres or so. Each time he did this a new pulsing icon appeared in her HUD; an electronic lifeline out of the derelict. Her helmet spotlight illuminated unfathomable shapes moving quickly upwards, marking her swift descent into the bowels of the alien.

'Desi damn it all, I can't believe I let you talk me into allowing Tyler on this ship Falian!' Tenaka sent his coffee flying across the bridge with the back of his hand. Ceramic fragments and dark liquid splashed across the floor and up the deck consoles.

Yuric was shouting into the com, 'Tug Four, do you have visual?'

'Negative control. No sign. Shall we deploy the remote?' Broker's voice sounded over the bridge speakers, gravelly with distortion.

Tenaka frowned deeply and stared at the deck, 'Negative,' he said at last. 'We lost communication with Tyler and Riva very quickly. The last thing we want is an uncontrolled remote blundering around down there. Tyler had a point I guess. Desi damn them! We'll have to give them their chance.'

Broker's disembodied voice cut through the increasing white noise, 'I could follow them in.'

'Absolutely not! I'm not risking any more crew,' Tenaka looked down at Yuric: 'And what's up with communication?' he added angrily, 'Can't we clear that interference?'

'Not sure, Skipper. The distortion seems to correlate with a power surge building up over there.' He surveyed his screens for a moment and turned to the Captain. 'What do we do?'

'Set up a proper line of communication so we can keep track of what's happening the next time someone goes in,' he said to Yuric, then, into the com, 'Tugs One and Two, carry on getting the wreck stabilised. Three and Four: stand station, wait for Tyler and Riva to return.' He kicked fragments of the coffee mug from under his command chair. 'What the hell do they think they're doing?'

Riva's voice crackled in Tyler's helmet as he fixed another BCB. 'What are we doing, Tyler?' The tiny device lit up with a bright flashing rhythm that would attract from some distance.

'Apart from making history?' He pushed himself away from the jagged piece of alien architecture.

'Apart from that.'

'This was for us Riva. We found the hatch, we should be the ones to go in. Anyway, what choice did I have? I wasn't about to hand the First Finder's Percentage over to Broker.'

Riva saw a burst of light as Tyler fired his SMU 'First Finders Percentage of what? We don't know that we're going to find anything.'

'Are you kidding me? Look around. We'll find something.' He watched strange half-seen details slide past, then peered into the featureless dark, trying to see beyond the EPF image overlaid on his helmet heads up display .

'Tenaka will be royally pissed off. This is going to be your last salvage operation.'

'Screw him. A berth on the Windfall was never a career move.'

'And Falian? He put his neck on the line for you.'

Tyler laughed, 'For me? We both know he didn't put his neck on the line for me, Riva.'

Riva sighed, 'Without him we wouldn't even be here.'

'I'll thank him later,' Tyler adjusted his rate of fall. 'Anyway, Falian will be OK. Tenaka likes him, as much as he likes anyone. Both of them will get over it.' He slowed his descent even more with a short burst of propellant. An angular shape had appeared, crossing their path.

'Watch yourself here,' he warned.

'Yeah, I see it,' Riva responded. She was momentarily silhouetted by a flash from her suit thrusters as she followed Tyler's lead around the obstruction.

Tyler waited until she was safely past then said, 'If this works out we'll be able to put all our past mistakes behind us Riva.' Then, when he couldn't tolerate the silence any longer he said, 'You're thinking, "As long as this isn't another one of your mistakes" – Right?'

'Stop it, Tyler. I told you we were in it together and I meant it. Stop beating yourself up all the time. It's getting old.' The absurdity of their situation suddenly struck Riva. She laughed.

'What's so funny?' Tyler said, annoyed.

'Nothing.' They were falling into an alien machine of unknown origin and intent, into a situation of uncertain danger, sounding like an old married couple having a domestic. She checked her oxygen level, 'If we don't get somewhere soon we'll have to go back anyway.'

Tyler looked quickly to his own monitor. 'Temperature has risen by ten degrees. We are getting close to something.' He sighed. 'You shouldn't be here at all Vee.' slipping into his old familiar name for her. 'I told you not to come on this trip.'

'An immi on his own with a bunch of redneck Claimers. How well was that working out for you?'

'I tried to fit in, Vee,' he paused. 'You should have listened to your Dad, married a good Claimer boy like Falian.'

'You're right.'

Tyler's heart sank.

'But life would have been a lot less interesting.'

Tyler could hear the smile in her voice and he smiled too, 'You always were a little crazy, Vee.'

'Why else would I have married an immi loser?'

Tyler laughed, 'That would explain it.'

They fell. The space around them was narrowing. The EPF rendered details that had previously been out of range. Riva saw something like a twisted claw slide into view, then turn into a line of pitted blocks as her perspective changed.

'I've waited a long time to get the old Tyler back,' she said.

'I'm sorry, Vee. Things are going to change, I promise. This is a good move. It will clear our debt. We'll have our baby.'

Riva stared hard into the dark. When she responded, her tone of voice had changed, 'Is it getting lighter?'

Tyler realised that he was seeing more of the alien architecture than was being projected by the EPF: a red glow below them was back-lighting parts of the ragged interior. As it brightened they began to see details beyond their headlights in the curving walls.

The red light grew brighter still. They rounded a sharp curve in what had become a jagged metal corridor and floated out into a vast space. At its centre, surrounded by and connected to oddly shaped structures and cables lay... something; something huge and complex. A strange sculpture, hundreds of meters across, fashioned by minds with non-human aesthetics.

'Like a huge metallic flower,' Tyler said.

The light stained everything the colour of blood.

They floated towards the centre of the "flower", through a space filled with slowly spinning flotsam of all shapes and sizes. The centre resolved into a complicated organic mass of radiating tubes in which sat an object about a meter and a half long, tiny compared to the rest of the huge edifice in which it nestled. It reminded Tyler of something. Then it came to him. As a child he had seen an image of an ancient Egyptian sarcophagus.

'Any guesses?' whispered Riva.

Tyler was shaking his head, 'Hibernation chamber maybe?'

Riva's eyes widened '...and still active?'

Tyler nodded, he could hardly bring himself to say it out loud, 'We've struck gold Vee, ...First Contact.'

They looked at each other through their face plates.

'We'll always be remembered as the first. Humanity's ambassadors.'

They edged closer, Tyler taking the lead. The light emanating from the object began a slow pulse; a quickening heartbeat.

Then a blade of green light stabbed out, catching them at their feet and travelling quickly the length of their bodies to the top of their helmets. A high pitched warbling note blasted through their suit coms. Both grabbed their heads in a useless attempt to cover their ears. For a second they reeled senseless.

'You OK?' shouted Riva, blinking away the after-image of his silhouette. 'What just happened?'

'Suit tech's gone haywire. I think we've just been scanned!'

There was something else, just on the edge of their senses. A vibration seemed to be rippling through the structure. Tyler blinked, wondering if his vision had been affected.

'Do you see that?' said Riva.

Some kind of atmosphere was forming around them, and with it came a low whine, like an animal in pain. From the huge petals poured an icy white vapour, cloudy streams falling, a surreal radial waterfall. As its density increased it completely obscured their vision.

Riva's EPF kicked in, projecting a grainy image of Tyler over the milky fog, 'I've lost visual on you...', she began, then, her voice strained, 'Woah! check your suit readouts, what do you see?'

Tyler checked his displays, 'It's... it's oxygen.'

'Yeah, that's what I'm seeing,' Riva was incredulous. 'Pressure half an atmosphere already and rising.'

'Temperature's up too.'

The oxygen swirled into a bubble around them, becoming transparent as it warmed and the whine rose to a repetitive, high pitched grinding that set their teeth on edge.

'Tyler,' Riva whispered. 'Look.'

The Sarcophagus had begun to split open, revealing six petals; a small copy of the larger structure that contained it. Inside a black liquid stirred; sluggish, iridescent, grainy in texture.

'How can a liquid behave like that in weightless ...?' Riva moved closer to the shimmering fluid. 'Is it alive?'

'Don't touch it!'

The black liquid began to bubble. A shape was forming.

They both jumped as a tremor shook the alien spacecraft. A grinding roar, as of an approaching avalanche, reverberated through the newly formed atmosphere.

Alarms sounded. Tenaka and the command crew looked up, then at each other.

'What the... ?' Tenaka said. 'What's happening?'

'Not sure, Captain,' Yuric was anxiously scanning his readouts.

'Look!' one of the other command crew exclaimed, pointing.

Tenaka and Yuric stared out of the bridge viewport.

'It looks like... it's shrinking,' Tenaka said.

The debris field had begun to collapse, slowly at first, then with gathering speed. Chunks were raining down on the alien's hull and being – absorbed. The skin puckered and writhed, glints sliding along the wrinkles as they reflected the beam from the Windfall's floodlights.

'Readouts are off the scale, Captain!' exclaimed Yuric. 'Something big is happening.'

Tenaka and Yuric watched open mouthed as their prize began to implode.

'Get them out of there, Yuric,' Tenaka snapped. 'Now!'

'All tugs, ABORT, ABORT, ABORT!' Yuric screamed into the com.

The collapse quickened as the tugs began to pull away. Reconnaissance Tug Two was turning as a large chunk slammed into it amidships.

'We're hit! We're hit! Mayday May...!' The tug captain's voice sheared into a high pitched squeal and abruptly cut off. The crew on the bridge gaped as Recon Two disintegrated into bodies and bits of metal; briefly expanded from the point of impact, then joined the now torrential rain of wreckage onto the derelict. Tenaka and his crew watched them dwindle until they struck the surface. They sank without a trace.

'It's coming apart, Riva. We have to get out of here!'

Large pieces of superstructure were shaking loose, drifting through the chamber, colliding and re-colliding chaotically, while in the black liquid at the heart of the metal flower a strangely familiar shape was coalescing. Small, quick movements agitated the surface.

'Ty; look, it is alive,' Riva seemed hypnotised.

Beneath them the deck buckled and heaved, spinning razor edged shrapnel across the chamber. A metal column heaved out of the floor; smashed into another punching across horizontally shattering more debris into the swirl around them.

Tyler looked up and saw the exit shrinking, 'I don't know what the hell is happening, but it's time we weren't here.' He grabbed hold of Riva's arm, steering her away from the thing in front of her.

A deafening shriek blasting through their suit comms made them both jump. Riva pulled herself free of Tyler's grasp and headed back to the sarcophagus.

'Riva!' Tyler shouted, 'No! Come back!'

She ignored him. Black liquid was flowing outwards, defying physics, exposing... Riva tried to make sense of what she was seeing. Maybe her suit had punctured and she was suffering hypoxia-induced hallucination. In the sarcophagus lay the figure of a human baby. She stared at it in wonder. Surrounded by harsh alien technology it looked utterly vulnerable, soft and incongruous.

The baby made eye contact. Its face screwed up and it let out a shrill scream. Riva reached down into the black gunk to cradle the child in her gloved hand.

'A girl,' she whispered.

'Holy shit!' Tyler had reached her. The baby was connected to the container by fat tubes. He pulled at them experimentally.

'What are you doing?'

'I think... this is what we came for Vee, it's the answer to all our problems.'

'Tyler – it's a baby!' Riva sounded shocked, confused.

'It's not. I don't know what it is, but it's not that.'

Riva moved to face him on the other side of the sarcophagus, still cradling the child. 'This is way too weird, Tyler. Maybe we should just leave her here.'

'You are joking? Imagine what the First Finder's Percentage of this will be worth.'

'It's not always about what something's worth.'

'Really.' Tyler's face twisted into something close to a sneer. 'Just why have we spent four months on that piece of shit ship? Not for the charming company; not for the greater good of mankind "what something is worth" is exactly why we are here.' He went back to pulling the tubes, not looking at her.

She put her hand on his arm, 'Wait Tyler. Taking some... artefact out is one thing, but this, this is beyond anyone's experience. We have no idea what's happening here, what the consequences might be. This responsibility is way beyond a couple of salvage grunts.'

Tyler stopped what he was doing. He made a big show of looking to his right and left, then back at his wife, 'I can't see anyone to ask Riva.' He went back to examining the sarcophagus, 'We're on our own and we'd be insane to pass on an opportunity like this.' He pulled hard and twisted one of the tubes. The baby squealed in pain.

'Stop it, Ty you're hurting her!'

The derelict heaved violently again. Splits and cracks were appearing all round them; the oxygen cloud dissipated as the integrity of the ship failed. The baby was wheezing and coughing.

'Oxygen's going, it's smothering,' Tyler said.

The baby looked straight into Riva's eyes, its purple face contorted in pain.

'Do you really want to leave her here to die?' Tyler asked harshly.

'I don't... I don't know... What are we supposed to do? What... what can we do?'

Tyler's efforts had moved the Sarcophagus and it was floating free. 'Here. Hold on to it.' He reached into a pouch in his suit and pulled out an Emergency Evac Shroud. Together they stuffed the Sarcophagus and the baby into it. The EES inflated with breathable warm air. The baby's distress lessened.

'Now let's get out,' Tyler shouted. The derelict twisted and buckled around them as they moved, their strange prize between them.

The exit was about a third of its original size, the corridor beyond similarly contracted. They dodged larger pieces of floating rubble, ploughed through the smaller stuff, heading towards the first BCB. Behind them light erupted from the alien mechanism, casting their distorted shadows onto the spasming interior.

Falian stared at the shrinking tear. His horror as Recon Two plunged to destruction had goaded him to pull his own tug clear of the collapsing wreckage. He had panicked when the tug would not respond to the controls, but then, sluggishly, as if she were climbing out of a severe gravity well, Falian managed to steer her away. The effect lessened as he passed into clear space and the little craft began to behave normally again.

'Broker, Falian,' Yuric's voice was getting hard to understand through white noise. 'Return to base immediately.'

'Roger that!' Broker was already firing his engines.

'We have to give them more time,' Falian said

'We don't know what that thing is going to do, Falian,' Yuric insisted, 'We're moving the Windfall away.'

'No, sir. Riva is still in that wreck. She might be alive, we have to give them more time.'

'We can't risk the lives of everyone on board for two people who are almost certainly dead,' Yuric shouted. 'Get back here now, Falian, that's an order.'

Falian, immobile, didn't take his eyes off the shrinking alien craft.

The wreck convulsed like something alive as Riva and Tyler followed the BCBs back towards the surface; erratic chunks of superstructure shot across their path as if the derelict was trying to stop them leaving.

A pulsating blob of light appeared in Tyler's HUD. A moment later and he could actually see the bright rhythmic light from the device. He felt a rush of jubilation, "It's the last BCB, Riva. We're going to make it.'

They followed the curving, narrowing space until, at last, the ragged exit framing the blue glow of the nebula lay before them. The rate of contraction was now so fast Tyler could actually see it closing.

'Faster. We don't have much time.'

An extra boost from the SMUs increased their speed.

'We'll have no gas left to use outside,' Riva warned.

'Won't matter if we don't get outside.... Won't matter either way if they've gone. I don't know what they're seeing out there, but Tenaka will want to move the Windfall clear of danger.'

'Falian will wait.' Tyler nodded. He was hoping that as well.

A shaft of burnished metal flashed across the space above them, fragments glittered in his head light. 'Watch out!' He gave her a violent push. The action cost him some of his forward momentum, so when a second deadly spear thrust out of the opposing wall he was still in its path. The metal beams scissored together, trapping him by the ankle. Yanked to a full stop, he gasped in pain, flailing wildly. Riva spun round with a reckless use of propellant.

'My god, Tyler... wait, I'll get you loose'. She manoeuvred in front of him. Clutching the Evac Shroud with one hand, she planted a boot on the metal at either side of his leg and pulled hard. Above her their way out was closing fast. They had minutes left.

Tyler looked at the woman he loved. The woman who had given up everything for him, had defied her family and culture to be with him. The woman he had let down so badly. He grabbed Riva's armoured shoulders and pulled her to him until their faceplates touched. He wanted her to hear his voice directly.

'What are you doing, Tyler, let me go, I'll get you free.'

'Vee ...' transmitted through the faceplates his voice sounded small and distant '..Listen. We're out of time...thank you.'

'For what?'

"I love you." His hand reached to the small of her back; to the intermix valve, where he had made his repair.

She realised what he was about to do and tried to break free, 'No... Tyler!'

He yanked hard. The valve broke. Her suit's remaining fuel ignited and Riva was snatched out of his arms. She sped away towards the blue light and he watched the horror on her face; watched until he could no longer make it out. Riva and the Evac Shroud shot out of the tiny exit. Seconds later the opening reduced to a blue dot, then nothing.

In the darkness which followed Tyler had only his ragged breathing for company. But the darkness didn't last long; below him the red pulsing light grew steadily brighter.

Falian's instruments showed an energy build up in the Windfall as it powered up, preparing to move. His hands hovered over the controls, but he didn't engage the tug's engines.

'Last chance, Falian,' Yuric's voice was determined. Falian felt made of stone, his gaze riveted to the rip, tiny now compared to what it had been. From the corner of his eye he saw the Windfall dwindle to nothing. He was alone with the deadly, unfathomable alien. He swallowed, fighting hard to control despair. Then, a movement! His vision blurred, he almost missed it. A black speck powering up through the collapsing rent, just before it closed for ever.

Riva shook her head to dislodge tears. They floated loose around her face, 'Tyler, you stupid, stupid ...what have you done?' she sobbed with mingled grief and anger. He had sacrificed himself to save her but the sacrifice had been pointless. There was no sign of the Windfall or Falian. The salvage ship had gone, moved to a position of safety and Falian must have left with them. Although her suit was broadcasting an emergency SOS, by the time they got back it would be much too late. Her last acceleration would propel her into space at the same speed forever: there was no way to stop or even slow down. They would never find her, should the thought to look even occur to them. Better she and Tyler had died together than for each to suffer a lingering and lonely death. Between her boots she watched the alien ship recede. It was hard to believe she was looking at the same object they had entered only a few hours ago. It had shrunk to about a third of its size and had become a ragged ball, its surface seething and rippling as the last fragments of tumbling junk splashed down.

Then a vicious impact sent her spinning violently. For a wild moment she lost her grip on the Evac Shroud, grabbed frantically as the smooth plastic slid through her gloved fingers. Desperately she dug into the soft membrane with just enough pressure to stop it. She checked her suit diagnostics for damage, convinced she had been struck by a chunk of the wreck, but as she continued to turn she saw the irregular shape of Recon Three. Falian! He was firing his thrusters in quick succession, trying to match her velocity. Her sense of relief faded; the tug was moving past too quickly. She grabbed the cockpit framework, it's speed pivoting her violently so that she crashed painfully into the tug's side and almost ripped free. But she held on grimly to both the tug and the Evac Shroud. In the cockpit she could see Falian's mouth moving but there was no sound. She realised that her suit com was still set to private.

'... pened, Riva, are you OK, where's Tyler?' His frantic questions broke in on her as she engaged a wider frequency. 'What the hell is that ...', then, 'Oh my god.' as he saw the Evac Shroud's contents.

Riva clambered into the cockpit, securing herself first and then the sarcophagus behind her. A shout from Falian made her look up. She followed his pointing finger and, in awe, they watched the derelict contract to a point. There was a moment's pause, then a massive silent pulse of light, so bright it triggered her suit's safety protocols. Her visor turned opaque, saving her sight. When it cleared all that remained of the alien ship was a sphere of thin, expanding gas.

Riva turned back to the baby, letting Falian's angry, excited questions wash over her. The baby stared at Riva with clear blue eyes. Ty's eyes, she thought, shaking her head at how ridiculous that thought was. As she watched the tubes which connected the baby to the sarcophagus dissolved into a fine powder. They left angry red circles on the baby's skin until those too faded, leaving the child unblemished. Perfect save for a strange mottling on the left side of her face and torso. The black liquid which had held her turned rusty red, sticking to the bottom of the alien container.

The Evac Shroud's limited oxygen was running out. The baby began to cough and splutter. Quickly Riva pressurised the emergency compartment, setting the timer on the shroud to open in 15 seconds. She pushed the whole thing through the rudimentary airlock and closed it.

'Brace yourself,' Falian said as the expanding gas from the implosion reached them. But when it did it was so tenuous that it simply rocked the tug; a gentle caress from all that was left of the derelict, the crew of Recon Two and Tyler as they expanded into the cosmos forever.

'What the hell happened, Riva?' Falian demanded. 'What happened to Tyler and what the hell is that?' He jabbed a thumb to the cabin behind them.

Her voice broke, 'Tyler sacrificed himself to save me and' she glanced in the direction of the emergency compartment then back to him, 'Falian, I need your help. Will you help me?' She searched his face.

Falian let his hand drop and stared back into Riva's liquid black eyes. He didn't know what she was going to ask him to do, but he did know that, whatever it was, there was no chance he would refuse.

