Stasis

“What if this thing is not a ship?” Ferguson stared up at the looming bulk of the vessel.

“We’re on an uninhabitable planet in space, what else is a two-kilometer rectangle of alien metal going to be?” Taylor shot back.

“Terraformer. Tunnel borers back home are almost a quarter this size,” Michaelson offered.

“That too. I was thinking ore processor, but terraforming sounds cooler. I was also about to point out the lack of engines, and conspicuous absence of crash damage,” Anna added.

They stood at the exposed end of the machine, staring at the wall of dark metal that rose two hundred meters from the cavern floor. The far end, the suspected source of the time dilation, was partially buried. Odd shapes protruded from the vertical surface, but none resembled a ladder nor any other means of access. They backed off to get a better look at the higher sections.

“There. Halfway up, left of center. Hemispherical depression.” Fergusion pointed with his light.

They trained their binoculars on the illuminated section. Several lines reflected the light in a manner that suggested a door cut, bolstering their hope. Taylor began triangulating his shot with the leader rope crossbow. Anna broke out her climbing harness and began suiting up. The others followed suit.

“Clear! Taking the shot.”

The others were already out of range, but backed up another step out of habit, then craned their necks to watch the weighted neon green bolt sail through the thin air, pulling the leader rope behind it. He succeeded in sending it over a large cylinder that stuck out above the hemisphere, however it bounced off several other protrusions and wound up hanging a dozen meters off the ground.

He gave the line a sharp tug, then quickly gave it slack, coaxing the bolt towards the ground. Rather than slide smoothly, the rope dragged across the surface of the of the top-most cylinder, worrying Taylor. Encountering friction on otherwise featureless metal often indicates the presence of sharp edges, a problem for load-bearing ropes.

“I need eyes up there,” he said.

“Taylor, you need a lot of things,” Anna quipped, laughing. “Put a sleeve on it.”

Taylor grumbled, but acquiesced. They had wanted to fly drones down here before their descent, but this is the heart of the radio dead zone. Further, the rotors would kick up so much dust that it risks defeating the purpose of observation. Encasing the impacted section of line was the obvious choice. He slipped a sleeve onto the rope and began preparing another line to pull it up into place.

“Next time he gabs too much I’m going to use that. Put a sleeve on it,” Ferguson said to Michaelson.

“I heard that!” Taylor replied without taking his eyes off the line. He wrestled with it for several minutes more, then declared it secure.

Anna clipped onto the line and attached a mechanical ascender. She stepped into the ascender’s foot straps grabbed the handles. She rose silently up the line, and within a minute was nearing the circular depression. She stopped level with its center, then stabilized herself to point her helmet light at the site. The indentation extended into the wall a couple meters laterally before becoming hemispherical, offering a place to stand. She climbed in, but remained clipped to the line.

The grooves they had seen from below were more pronounced up close. A small rectangular panel sat to the right of the grooves. She waved her hand in front of it then pulled back. Nothing happened. She touched the largest shape on the panel. Red light filled the depression, startling her and causing the rope to jerk.

“Whoa! What have you got up there Anna?” Taylor asked.

“Just lights. Now I’m getting little bursts of air, like it is self-cleaning. Hold on, the next shape below the one I touched just lit up. Pressing it now.”

She felt machinery working in the walls. Curiosity gave way to fear. She held her breath. The door opened. She heard herself start talking, mechanically describing her observations.

“Double doors. Looks like an airlock. The far wall has a second, matching panel, perhaps six meters in. Markings on walls, both sides. Correction, indentations and grooves. Perhaps stowage for suits. It’s beeping at me now. I think it’s telling me to get inside or shut the door. Pressing the blinking light, and remaining outside.”

The door slid shut. She climbed up to check the sleeve, then secured both sides of the rope to each other, locking it in place. The others joined her. They rigged a safety net along the edge of the thin shelf, to permit unclipping from the line. They doubled checked each other’s gear, then looked to Anna. She aimed her comm laser at the relay below.

“Anna Sorensen of Stellar Mining, Limited. Establishing Finder’s Rights. Team of four entering alien artifact. Will contact again in two hours. Request assistance if late. Sending video of door panel sequence. Sorensen out.”

Anna repeated the process on the panel. The doors slid open once more. They stepped inside. The outer door closed automatically behind them, followed by a hissing sound.

“High levels of carbon dioxide and methane. Not breathable,” Michaelson reported.

The hissing stopped, followed by a red indicator light, blinking on the far panel. Anna pressed it, and the inner doors slid open.

“I guess red means go to this culture,” Ferguson offered.

“There’s a thought, an entire culture is behind this ship. What else does red signify to them?” Taylor asked.

“Contemplate later,” Anna intervened. “We still need to see if this thing is generating that field Michaelson wandered into.”

“Taylor’s onto something. I don’t know if our existing protocols are enough. Suggest we remain one team, no splitting up,” Michaelson proposed.

Anna looked to the others. Ferguson nodded, Taylor seconded him.

“Ok. One team. Let’s head north, towards the anomaly. Call this end the stern, the northern end the bow. Confirm recorders rolling.”

They started moving into the vessel, periodically stopping to turn around and record the view for their return trip. After a few dozen meters the hallway opened into a gargantuan cavern, with paths forking into a series of odd gangways. The space was over one hundred meters in both width and height, and stretched into the distance for at least half a kilometer. Giant machinery filled the space, cylinders and spheres connected by webs of pipes and conveyors. They stood in the middle of the stern end of the cavern, on a suspended walkway thirty meters below the roof.

“Looks like mining from here,” Anna said.

“Over there,” Ferguson pointed while looking through binoculars. “Possible command center.”

On the left, or western wall of the space a set of windows sat in a high room overlooking the operation, two hundred meters to the north of their current position. They turned left to face the entrance of the gangway, now seeing it in detail for the first time. An elliptical opening greeted them, taller than it was wide. Tubular metal rails traced the outline of the skeletal walkway, twisting and coiling into arced segments and broken helixes. They looked down, expecting to see a wire mesh floor like terrestrial mining rigs employ, but instead saw more rails snaking into the distance. Gaps lined the path at irregular intervals, perhaps for egress or to let others pass. They struggled to envision how this was supposed to be traversed.

“Whoever built this is not bipedal,” Anna surmised.

They roped together, then entered the gangway. They progressed slowly, stopping several times to catch their breath. Ceru’s lesser gravity afforded them some relief, but climbing laterally through hundreds of meters of twisting pipes took its toll.

Lights came on as they exited near the control room door, glad for the return of a solid floor underfoot. Anna unclipped from the safety rope and threw the loose end through the doorway. The carabiner on the end of the rope bounced with a clank, followed by silence. The room showed no reaction to its presence.

She cautiously led them into the room. Panels lined every surface, each covered in unknown symbols. Lights flashed on several displays in a manner that seemed to invite interaction. Michaelson placed his gloved hand on a shape that might have been the silhouette of an appendage.

The lights dimmed and a three-dimensional wireframe map filled the space in front of them. A small red sphere marked their current location. At the far northern end a bright yellow starburst blinked insistently. Its location in the bow matched their estimated coordinates for the center of the anomaly.

Anna placed her fingertip into the pulsing yellow orb, which wobbled in reply. She pinched each side with her fingers and stretched the virtual object. The map zoomed in, revealing a large room that housed a locomotive-shaped device. The yellow orb now marked the southern end of the device.

Michaelson put his finger on the device. Controls appeared on the map, set in a wireframe panel that glowed a dark orange. A halo of white light encircled the red control, which they interpreted as denoting the current state. A black button sat beneath.

“Red for on, black for off?” He posed to the group. They nodded assent. “Touching the black control now.”

The halo of light moved from the red button to the black, indicating a successful state change. Nothing happened for several seconds, then the floor shook. The lights flickered, followed by a deep, rumbling noise that came from the bow. A sharp jolt knocked them all to the floor. Tremors barraged them for thirty seconds, then concluded with a detonation that caused the entire structure to ripple.

Anna climbed to her feet, then zoomed the map out to its maximum field of view. She gasped. The bow end now lay under half a kilometer of rock and soil.

“I’m registering ultraviolet from the map. Location is a short distance north of the device we just shut off.” Michaelson pointed to the spot, concerned. Ultraviolet occupies the opposite end of the spectrum from red.

“That sounds bad.” Ferguson looked on.

“Was that thing holding something up?” Taylor wondered.

“Could be, put that on hold for now,” Anna interjected. “We need to get out of here, contact base and then see if that anomaly is gone. Then we can figure out if it is safe to come back here and inspect that device.”

The others nodded, then filed out of the control room after her. They made their way back to the airlock without further incident, and cycled back outside. Anna pointed her forearm-mounted comm laser at the relay, signaling their return and requesting a lift. They rappelled off the vessel and walked the short distance to a location directly under the bore hole. They waited for the basket to travel the vertical kilometer from the surface to the base of the cavern. It kicked up a small puff of dust on impact, then they climbed aboard.

By now the Ceru sun was at its mid-day peak, filling the space with more light than before. They took advantage of the chance to view more of the cavern.

“That’s a big hill on top of the bow,” Taylor said through his binoculars.

They all turned to face the five-hundred-meter mound that covered the northern end of the vessel.

“Get the echo gear. We need to know if that is done falling,” Anna said.