

THE GLASSHAND

a short story by

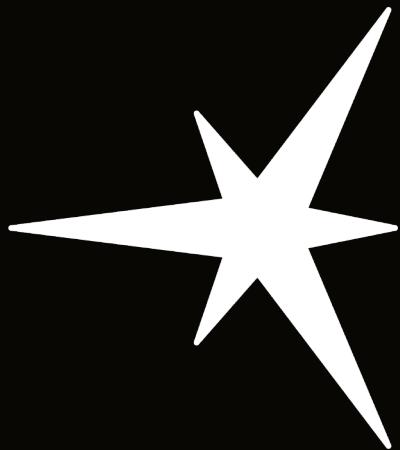
Rich Larson



FROM THE WORLD OF

EMERGENCE

created by David S. Goyer



THE
GLASSHAND

a short story by
Rich Larson

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It's been three days since the Emergence. Three days following the trail of a macro-relic it flung past the planet Boreas and straight into an uncharted ice field. It's also been three days since Pixa was last able to sleep.

She can't blame the ship's environs: Unlike some, *Bellerophon* runs a proper night cycle. The biolamps are cocooned shut, the corridors are lit only by pale yellow holo, and crew from a half-dozen different worlds and genetic derivations try to brute-force themselves onto the same work schedule.

She can't blame the faulty gravity conductors. She grew up in low-grav no-grav, spindly limbs designed to swim vacuum. She can't blame the cramped cabin, shared with an octopode Shardy who spends most of the night cycle reapplying the slimy gel-suit that staves off dehydration. She's bunked much worse on much dingier ships.

The reason she can't rest is that she's finally working aboard *Bellerophon*, the most famous freebooter vessel of all time. She's finally serving under the myth-making Captain Skadi, who once pulled a relic off the event horizon of a black hole, who once bested the Gloom in a battle of wits, who very recently saved Fountainview and a whole host of foolish warships from their own hubris during the violence of the Emergence. Not that Pixa's seen hide or hair of her—the captain is an elusive sort.

But she has a chance to join the legends all the same, thanks to the Emergence. A myriad of new god-tech artifacts are scattered across the galaxy, and their ship is closing in on the first of them. The scientists at Fountainview will pay out the nose for it—or, in the case of the Ghast and Shard, likely some other orifice.

If Pixa falls asleep for even an instant, a small, mad part of her is certain she'll wake up where she was two weeks ago: back on the Plough Snail, coring endless boring asteroids instead of hunting down deadly alien artifacts. So tonight, after a few hours of tossing and turning and listening to the wet slap of gel-suit maintenance, she decides to go see the bridge.

"Going for a walk, Otto," she announces, rolling up her privacy shade. "Restless legs."

Her bunkmate turns, fixing her with one great luminous disc of an eye. Shardies evolved in the darkness, hunting aquatic bottom-feeders by sight—she only remembers that at night, when



Otto's glowy gaze makes her feel like prey. His arms do an intricate, slippery dance; the babeltech built into his shell translates it for her.

"I didn't realize you had a distributed nervous system." The synthesized voice makes it impossible to tell if he's joking. "When my limbs are uncooperative, I sometimes chop-and-regrow. Have you tried that?"

"I'd prefer not to, Otto," she says, spooning her feet back into her boots. "See you soon."

One slimy arm approximates a salute, and Pixa glides out of their darkened cabin. The ship is usually a buzzing hive, but during the night cycle everything is frozen, waiting, silent. She clammers up Bellerophon's metallic spine, passing no one on her way to the bridge. It's an easy climb in low-grav, but when she arrives at the top, she's suddenly breathless.

Pixa knows, in theory, that she's still inside a massive nano-alloy shell, encased in liquid armor and heat shields, sheltered from the vacuum. But it doesn't feel that way. The entirety of *Bellerophon*'s bridge is wrapped in high-fidelity holos showing the space around the ship, and it feels like she's adrift in the middle of starry infinity. She stares out at the innumerable pinpricks of light, the smoky pillars of distant nebulae, the vast swaths of darkness between them. She imagines all the ejected relics that might still be winging through that void.

It's so beautiful she nearly misses the crew member seated on an equipment bank, holding a bottle up to their lips. Their head is tipped back to take in the stars, while their feet dangle in the low-grav, whirling one way and then the other. The motion reminds Pixa of a pool she used to dip her legs into as a child.

The scene feels strangely private. But Pixa knows she has as much right to the bridge as anyone, so she steps forward. Her fellow insomniac somehow spots her without turning their head.

"Welcome." It's a woman's voice, soft and scratchy and almost familiar. "Here for the view?"

"Yeah," Pixa says, and is about to try to say something that does it justice when the other crew member gives an abrupt, bitter laugh.

"Is this it, you think?" They wave their bottle overhead, nearly losing balance on the equipment bank. "Is this all there is?"

Pixa blinks. "What do you mean?"



The woman jabs her bottle toward the void above them. Her voice vacillates between gleeful and acrid. “I mean, is this all there is?”

Pixa stares up at the beautiful, head-spinning vastness of space, sown just days ago with countless immeasurably powerful artifacts hailing from another universe entirely, then at the small drunk woman below. “What, it’s not interesting enough for you?” she asks.

The woman laughs again, hard, jackknifed so her head nearly touches her knees. She straightens up. Uses the crook of her arm to wipe the mouth of the bottle. “Here,” she says, holding it out. “Have a swig.”

“I don’t drink offworld,” Pixa says, with a growing annoyance. “I like to be focused.”

“Focus is a matter of well-positioned prisms,” the woman mumbles. “When you’re in the right spot, you’ll be focused. This is not the spot for focusing. This is the spot for—” She sets the bottle down to tug at her opposite sleeve. “The spot for hollowing oneself out in preparation for...further hollowing. Harrowing.”

Pixa’s annoyance surges. Veteran crew should not be drinking or drugging themselves to the point of incoherence this near to their destination. Especially not veteran crew on Bellerophon. The woman has some sort of medical membrane wrapped around her left hand and wrist; she picks at it now, maybe searching for the seam.

“We’re about to chase a macro-relic through an uncharted ice field,” Pixa says. “We should all be in top condition for it.”

The woman shrugs, adjusts her perch, and yanks the wrist covering free. The membrane unspools, and Pixa finally sees it: a twisted crystalline claw where a left hand ought to be, eerie purple veins catching the holo-cast starlight.

Pixa’s heart stutters in her chest. She knows what it is. She knows all the stories. It’s the Glasshand, the battle-scar-turned-talisman, memento of the first relic Captain Skadi ever captured, and the divining rod that has led her to a hundred more since. And that means—

“You should try to get some sleep, then, crew,” the captain says, still slurring. “And leave me to my...” Her brow furrows. “To my prevarications.”

Pixa's mouth is stuck open and her feet feel stuck to the deck. She wants to babble apologies, ask a thousand questions, perform the crispest, coolest salute the captain has ever seen. Instead, she can only stare as Captain Skadi shifts position, pushes the Glasshand against her temple. Heavy-lidded eyes flutter shut.

Pixa watches an inhuman blankness settle over the captain's features, and knows the Glasshand is whispering to her even now, directing her toward their target. The captain whispers something too.

"Fuck off."

Pixa's feet come unstuck. She throws a terrible salute and flees back toward the ladder, pausing for only an instant at the top. Captain Skadi is still sitting: Glasshand pressed to her face, flesh hand clutching the bottle. Backdropped by the starry expanse, features illuminated by the holos, she looks almost like a relic herself. Something old and alien, dangerous and incomprehensible.

Then she grabs a sicksack from her pocket, retches twice, and balloons it full of vomit.

Pixa gets down the ladder quicker than she's ever done in her life.



She has nobody to tell but Otto, and Otto is a bad audience. He's unperturbed by the fact that Captain Skadi is skulking around the ship at night blind drunk, unimpressed by the fact that Pixa had a whole conversation with her, and uncurious about how different the Glasshand looked in reality versus Pixa's imaginings.

"I saw her use it, too," Pixa persists, herding a faulty smart cable toward its socket. It's morning, and they're refitting the launch—*Bellerophon*'s small, sleek, secondary craft—for the ice field. "She put it up to her head, listening for the relic. That's why she's better than any scanner Fountainview can build, or any bloodhound they can grow in a vat. The relics speak to her."

Otto's skin ripples, turning the affronted shade of mauve she's seen a few times now. "Relics don't speak to bipeds," his synthetic voice blares. "They barely speak to the Shard. Only our most astute scholars and prophets can decipher the Fountain's song and the Makers' intentions."

“Well, maybe things are different now, after the Emergence,” Pixa says, partly just to watch the chromatophore show. “Maybe Captain Skadi’s the first bipedal prophet. Would be kind of fitting, I think. She’s been the first everything else.”

“Captain Skadi is not a prophet,” Otto says, mauve mixing with flashes of electric blue exasperation. “She is merely a very capable and successful freebooter.” His arms do an idle spiral that means he’s thinking. “Which has come at great cost.”

Pixa knows the story. She spent half the night pondering it, every detail resharpened by her glimpse of the Glasshand. The captain was a child when she found her first relic, half-buried in the sands outside her village, and like any curious child, she touched it. The activation killed every living thing and person on the planet except for her.

The captain has every right to the occasional drink-and-drug binge.

“One survivor out of twelve billion people,” Pixa murmurs. “Imagine being that forever.”

“I would prefer not to, Pixa,” Otto says, proving he does have a sense of humor, or at least dark irony. She suspected as much.

“Less chatter, more labor!” First Mate Bujum comes bouncing through the bay; his dense, muscly body often reminds her of a wrecking ball, but he moves it with impressive precision. Most wides never take to low-grav work. “We’re nearly to the ice field, you lags and glitches!”

He’s always bellowing, but always grinning as well—which makes him preferable to most officers Pixa has shipped with. She salutes; Otto pulses a respectful mottled cyan, and they get back to work.



The night cycle arrives and Pixa cannot help but visit the bridge again. When she crests the ladder and sees she is alone with the holos, she feels a soft implosion in her gut, cool relief mixed with acrid disappointment. The view is still staggering, of course. Better than any port she’s peered through or sim she’s run. They’re close enough now that she can even see their destination: a cloud of jagged ice formations, remnants of once-orderly rings, in decaying orbit around a barren black planetoid. *Bellerophon*’s trajectory is overlaid as a glowing yellow trail leading deep into the ice field.

If Pixa pivots, she can see the trail spooling out behind them as well, a ghostly imprint of where they've come from. She peers at the cluster of stars, finds the planet that must be Boreas—from which they set out. She finds the asteroid belt where she feared she would work forever.

Then she traces back, back, remembering other ships, scavenging jobs, survey jobs, moving through time and space until she finds her birthplace: Janus Station. At this distance it's invisible, of course—but she can see the star it circles in wide orbit. The station was built as skyhook first, habitat second; but it still houses half a million Kind.

Most people born there never leave, but Pixa's grandfather ruined that for her . He was a kindly old pilot who came down the skyhook one day and met someone worth staying for, and it was his bedtime stories—stories of lost relics and fearless freebooters—that sent Pixa adventuring off-station when she was barely grown.

She does still miss home from time to time. Pixa shuts her eyes now, picturing its spindly corridors and sloped houses, its ever-glitching holographic sky. She recalls the wild and lush hydrogardens where she played as a child, where she dangled her feet in a cool burbling pool and listened to her grandfather's age-husked voice.

Then she imagines all of it turning into jagged purple glass, just like Captain Skadi's homeworld. An unstoppable metamorphosis, an incomprehensible reaction chain, every living and non-living thing transformed in an instant. She shudders. Opens her eyes.

Still can't stop seeing it.



A half-day out from their destination, the captain makes her next appearance. Pixa and Otto and four others have just finished reinforcing the hull of the launch, and when the first mate shows up to inspect their work he's not alone. Captain Skadi trails after him, wrapped in a long coat that swallows her skinny frame, infamous left hand tucked away inside.

"Look sharp, lags!" Bujum bellows, but without his usual grin. "Captain's on deck!"

Pixa snaps to attention, heart thrumming. Captain Skadi does not look sharp. The bright lights of the bay make her look sickly, disoriented, like a nocturnal animal forced from its burrow. She ambles forward, accepting a diagnostic wand from Bujum's brawny hand. Her eyes scroll up and

down the armored hull of the launch. They land for a nanosecond on Pixa, who hopes fervently that there's no conduction fluid on her face.

The captain gives no sign of recognition. She circles the shuttle, tapping here and there with the wand, once stowing it under her armpit so she can tug open an exhaust hatch. The Glasshand is hidden again, swathed in black medical membrane.

The crew watches the inspection in silence. Even Otto can feel the tension; Pixa sees a spackle of orange creeping slowly across his shell. Next, the captain heads inside with Bujum, and for several interminable minutes Pixa imagines them finding her wirework clumsy and imprecise.

But when they finally emerge, Bujum has his usual grin back in place.

"Well done, crew," Captain Skadi says in her faint, scratchy voice, swinging down from the top of the launch. "Very well done."

Some of the tension seeps out of Pixa's shoulders, and she exchanges a pleased look with Otto's nictitating yellow eye.

"The relic is hidden deeper in the ice field than our first scans showed," Captain Skadi continues. "Which is why we'll require the launch to reach it." She hands off the diagnostic wand and retrieves a holoslate instead. Pixa sees a cascade of miniature faces: the crew files. "We'll also require crew experienced in high-hazard, object-dense environments."

Pixa feels her heart surge. She's suddenly grateful for every boring asteroid, every grimy exhausting day she spent hopping rocks in the belt. Even before she sees her tiny face on the holoslate, she knows.

"Crew-woman Pixa," the Captain says, fixing her with an unblinking stare. There's still no hint of recognition in her void-dark eyes. "Are you amenable to a more extreme degree of risk than anticipated? Your share will go up accordingly."

Pixa would do it for free, but she tries to mask her excitement. "Yes, Captain," she says. "I'm amenable."

The captain gives a scalpel-sharp nod, then she slouches away with her first mate following. Pixa looks over the launch, which has a whole new aspect now that she knows she'll be aboard it, one of the chosen few accompanying Captain Skadi all the way to the relic. A couple of the

other crew offer their congratulations; one muscly wide slaps her on the back and nearly sends her flying.

When they disperse, Otto is waiting for her, his thoughtful arms awhirl. He's a color she has never quite seen before, ochre slashed with vivid red.

"That's not jealousy, is it?" she asks, mostly joking.

"No," Otto says. "I am glad for you, Pixa." The red weals widen. "And I am also worried you will die tomorrow."

Pixa feels her smile tighten. "Cheers, Otto."

There is roughly zero chance she sleeps tonight.



From the bridge, the ice field was beautiful. From aboard the launch, peering through the forward viewport, it's terrifying. The jagged labyrinth fills the entirety of the display, impenetrable and ever-shifting. Some of the fragments are rough spheroids as big as Bellerophon itself; others are tiny, frozen lumps no larger than Pixa's fist; between them are all shapes and sizes imaginable. Regardless of their mass, they weave together in a slow, drifting dance punctuated by shattering collisions.

She witnesses one on the approach: A massive shard of ice cleaves through its weaker neighbor, splitting it in two and sending a snow-spray of particles in all directions. The casual obliteration triggers a nervous sweat under her arms. Their launch is armored—she did some of the soldering herself—but she knows it wouldn't fare much better against these frost giants. There's a reason everyone is wearing hull-suits.

"All right, Pixa?"

She turns and sees Inoui: a wisp like her, but from a low-grav planet much farther along the spiral arm. She's veteran crew, having served aboard Bellerophon for either six or seven years. Pixa can't quite recall their conversation in the galley. Everything warm and bright and friendly seems very far away.

"All right," Pixa says. "It's just..." She tries a smile. "It's packed a lot tighter than any asteroid belt I've been in."

"Tight like a fucking neutron star," Inoui agrees. "Lucky for us, we've got a good one in the pilot seat."

Pixa turns the other way, creaking the neck of her hull-suit. Captain Skadi is motionless inside the pilot's cradle, eyes shut, breathing slow. She's plugged into the shuttle's navigation system by spinal port, but she has enough brain free to overhear.

"Don't jinx me," she says. "We're entering the collision zone."

The two crew on the other side of her tighten their safety webbing; Pixa follows suit. They're right up on a giant now, approaching a sliding wall of ice. It splashes their own ghostly blue running lights back at them. Captain Skadi twitches in the cradle, and suddenly they're burning forward, hurtling at their blurry reflection. Pixa's slammed back in her seat, her whole body tensed for the impact, pulse roaring in her ears, and then—

The trailing edge of the giant appears, and they slide neatly through the split-second gap. Pixa hears an involuntary curse from the other side of the launch. Captain Skadi cancels the thrust with a directional burst, and they're drifting again. Pixa waits for her pulse to subside.

They're inside the labyrinth now, surrounded on all sides by its glittering innards. Pixa tries to make sense of the viewport. The shuttle's reflection is mapped to a thousand facets, splitting and refracting, spreading in all directions. She imagines an endless mitosis, a thousand new shuttles and a thousand new Pixas. Hopefully not all of them are drenching their hull-suits with fear-sour sweat.

"Prisms," the Captain says. "An enormous assortment of very cold prisms."

The other crew exchange uncomprehending looks, but the word ticks Pixa's memory: the bridge at night, Captain Skadi slumped on an equipment bank, gesticulating with her bottle. Another twitch in the cradle; they burn upward, narrowly avoiding a spar of ice Pixa would have spotted much too late.

"What is the utility of prisms, crew-woman Pixa?" the Captain asks.

So she remembers her after all.

“Focusing, Captain,” Pixa says.

“Focusing,” the Captain echoes. “Keep your nerve, crew.”



It’s a game of micrometers, stop-and-go, long lulls and sudden rushes. Once a passage is too narrow; they jolt to a bone-rattling halt and have to use the engine to melt themselves free. Once a rogue ice fragment hurtles in from nowhere, clips a directional jet, and nearly shears it off its mooring. They’re hobbled until Pixa and Inoui bring the backup online—Pixa is pleased to see her hands don’t shake, even if her heart is hammering her ribs.

Drift, burn, drift, burn. Captain Skadi finds the gap over and over again—the launch’s sensors and her own modified nervous system and whatever mysterious intuition the Glasshand provides all working in perfect tandem. Bellerophon stays in contact, monitoring the movement of the largest formations, but Bujum’s voice becomes more and more distorted the deeper they venture into the ice field.

Pixa imagines them getting lost in here, wandering in circles, chasing echoes and reflections that never end until the engine dies and the launch is coated in ice and they become one more frozen dancer in the pattern.

She shakes herself. Refocuses.

They’re approaching the last obstacle: a curving wall of ice, part of a massive globe that has so far sheltered the relic from any collisions. At this distance, the shuttle’s sensors can finally detect a heat signature. The thermal scan scrolls across the viewport, showing the relic as a tiny blob of orange amongst the deep blues and purples. The display flickers for a moment, and she sees a ghostly double splitting off from the blob.

Then it self-corrects, back to a single mass radiating energy brought from some other universe, flung from the pulsating throat of the White Fountain itself. The thought sets Pixa’s spine tingling. As they shoot the final gap, she prepares herself for revelation, something that’ll make her a believer the way Otto and most Shardies are.

“We have line of sight,” the captain murmurs.

But all there is to see is another chunk of ice, this one about half the size of their shuttle, floating alone in the center of the globe. The relic's true shape is already hidden by thick layers of accreted frost. Pixa tamps down her disappointment. As they drift toward their target, she hears a whir and scrape from under her feet, the sound of the launch's grapple extending.

The mechanical arm appears at the bottom of the viewport, telescoping toward the entombed relic. There's a slight lurch as it makes contact, another as the pneumatic muscles tighten and the pitons dig in. The plan is to secure the whole chunk first, then carve it down to size for ease of transport, then—

Pixa blinks hard, and beside her Inoui takes a sharp breath. They've grabbed onto the ice, and the ice has somehow grabbed them back: A translucent tendril, barely visible in the low light, is slowly wrapping itself around their grapple. Pixa recalls the momentary glitch on the display, the bifurcated heat signature.

Then a creature she has never seen or even imagined unfurls from hiding. It's enormous, amorphous, a cascade of undulating membrane expanding to fill the whole of the viewport. The tendril coiled around their grapple is one of hundreds: the whip-thin tentacles, far longer than Otto's and tipped with spines, form a menacing halo around the body.

The thing responds to their running lights with one of its own, a pale green bioluminescence that turns its tentacles into an ethereal rippling forest. Pixa searches for its center mass, sees what might be vestigial remnants of a skeleton, a possible cluster of organs. She finds no eyes, but as the creature hangs there in front of them, as beautiful and terrifying as the ice field it inhabits, she swears she can feel its gaze.

The noncount tentacles coil for an instant, then explode forward. Captain Skadi jerks; they burn starboard but half the tentacles still find their mark, slapping to the hull. Inoui sees the danger before anyone else. She wrestles out of her safety webbing, lunges for the Captain's cradle, disengages the nerve conduits just as the creature's entire body gives a powerful pulse—

The shuttle lurches. The viewport dances with nonsensical overlays, multicolor holos shredding through each other. Pixa hears a sizzling sound, a fleshy impact, a scream that might be her own before everything goes dead and they're drifting in the dark.



Captain Skadi was pulled clear of the cradle before it could cook her cerebrospinal fluid, but Inoui paid the price. When the shuttle slewed sideways, and inertia hurled her against the bulkhead, her spindly shin snapped in two. Pixa knows the pain of shattered bone from several firsthand experiences—wisps are not bred for high-G maneuvers.

She feels a flood of mirror neuron relief when the emergency syringe goes in and Inoui goes quiet. But then the quiet is too quiet, because there's no comforting hum of electrical wiring, no reassuring whisper of recycled air, no crackling radio or growling engine. At least they have plenty of light: The creature's rippling body is stretched across their viewport now, bathing the interior of the launch with an eerie pale green.

It can't get in. The whip-thin tentacles are delicate; the spines at the ends even more so. But they can't get out, because the creature's membranous body is draining every last spark of power from the shuttle's engine and backup. They're adrift inside a globe of ice, surrounded by a shifting labyrinth of the same, with no means of contacting *Bellerophon*.

"They might come anyways," someone mutters. "Bujum has the coordinates, and he has the big gun, he could blast a path through..."

"First Mate Bujum will do no such thing," the captain says, strapping Inoui back into her safety webbing, gently repositioning her head. "He was given express orders not to enter the ice field under any circumstances. Doing so would risk the entirety of the crew."

"Then what's the plan?" Pixa asks, louder than she meant to, startling the others and even herself. She is trying to stay focused, trying to keep the panic at bay, but if they're lost in this endless ice with only a monster for company and no plan to fix it—

The captain looks up at her. "We're going to give the beastie all the energy it can handle," she says. "But to do that, we'll have to take a walk. Crew-woman Pixa, is it safe to assume you did your share of EVA work in the asteroid belt?"

None with a hundred-limbed horror-show outside, Pixa wants to say.

"Yes, Captain," she says.



They have to drag the airlock open manually, and Pixa feels the long, shuddery screech in every bone. There's a final visual inspection, scanning each other's hull-suits for fissures or faulty seals. Captain Skadi gives her the all good tap. Pixa returns the favor . Then they haul the inner door shut behind them, and open the outer.

The captain pushes her head to Pixa's, to speak by vibration. "Think of it as wirework," she says. "Like herding a smart cable. I'll meet you at the socket."

She flings herself out into vacuum. The organism must be able to sense her tiny hull-suit battery, but it's sluggish now, bloated from gorging itself on the shuttle. The tendril that wriggles to intercept her is slow. Captain Skadi hurtles out of its reach, toward the distant curved wall of the globe, her orange hull-suit disappearing into shadow.

Pixa takes a final bracing breath, then pushes off. She floats free of the airlock, past the undulating mass of their attacker, drawing a few curious tendrils in her wake. She dodges them with an airburst—she has to be sparing with those, since every change of direction is one less breath—but tries to stay inside their range of motion.

From here she can see the geometry: The launch is half-enveloped by the creature, but still connected by grapple to the ice-encased relic. A three-body problem, if not in the traditional sense. Most of the translucent tendrils are slapped flat to the hull, but she's managed to get a few of the outliers to follow her.

Overhead—or at least, what she chooses to think of as overhead—the captain is already on her rebound, heading for the back of the ice chunk. Pixa can just barely make out the shape of the laserbore cradled in her good hand. Timing is all-important now, but Pixa doesn't have a souped-up nervous system or an alien talisman to help her.

She jets right, and her followers wriggle along. Using the smallest bursts possible, she maneuvers herself beneath the launch, along the underside of the grapple. The tendrils are quick to lose interest; she has to strobe her helmet lights to keep them coming. Slowly, painstakingly, she lures them toward the underside of the ice chunk.

She sees a flare of reflected laserlight, a gush of vapor: Captain Skadi is boring through the backside, tunneling toward the relic. Pixa doesn't want to think what might happen if she bores too far, if the relic's shielding has weakened over the millenia. Behind her, she feels the entirety of the organism stir.

"I can see it." The captain's voice is tinny inside her helmet, distorted by the rush of refreezing steam. "Bring the cable."

Pixa is lightheaded; she realizes the red flare of laserlight was hiding a low oxygen warning in the corner of her visor . But she has enough air for two more bursts. Strobing the helmet lights for all they're worth, she jets forward, then up around the bend. Captain Skadi is a blurred silhouette in the particulate cloud, clinging to the ice with her good hand, reaching out with the other to stop Pixa from drifting past. Pixa finds her way to a thick spar of ice, lets her gloves burrow handholds for her.

Then she turns to see the borehole, and the lone faithful tendril that has followed her all the way to its edge. She can feel the heat coming off the relic now, no longer masked by the ice. The ever-hungry organism can feel it too. The lone tendril hesitates for only a split second, then dives inside the borehole.

Pixa doesn't see the moment of contact, but she feels it: Cracks vibrate through the ice, racing and splitting and squealing. The tendril writhes, feeding its find back into the body, and suddenly everything is rocking, shaking as the creature convulses. Its membrane leaps and rolls; its bioluminescence flashes blindingly bright.

Too much energy, and the only place to shunt it is back into the shuttle. Through the pounding in her skull, Pixa hears the sound—transmitted from engine pod to chassis to grapple to ice—of the launch coming back to life. She laughs aloud, a wild laugh that takes the last of her oxygen, because they've done it. The shuttle's systems are back online, and the creature's tendrils have gone limp, either stunned or glutted by the relic's energy.

She's vaguely aware that she's crawling, letting Captain Skadi guide her along the grapple, back toward the shuttle. Hand over hand, air-starved muscles searing, moving only because the captain's voice commands it. Black rubber is squeezing the sides of her vision, clamping her temples. Her vision is starting to swim.

"Nearly there," the captain murmurs. "Nearly there, Pixa."

The airlock opens, and gloved hands pull them upward. They reenter the shuttle in a tangle of limbs, collide softly with the ceiling. The airlock clanks shut behind them. Someone unseals her helmet for her, and the first breath feels like sucking back broken glass, but all she wants is another, and another after that.

She turns toward the captain, who drifts there boneless, exhausted, face drenched in sweat. She wants to thank her, but her tongue is thick and her head is muddled and the sight of a tear in the captain's hull-suit distracts her . A jag of ice or metal cut through the fabric of her left sleeve, and through the medical membrane too. Pixa can see a gleaming sliver of the Glasshand.

"Patch," Pixa says numbly. "You need a patch."

She pushes her gloved hand to the hole, and contacts the Glasshand.

The scream seems to come from inside her skull, an agonized wail that sets fire to the whole of her nervous system. It's not her voice, though. It's a child's voice, joined now by a deeper one, and then a thin, reedy one, and then another, and another, a chorus pouring through her head, bellows and shrieks and gasps of pain—

Captain Skadi yanks her hand away. Her dark eyes are all hollowed out. "I'm sorry," she says, and whatever she says next is inaudible because Pixa slips unconscious.



"Is everything all right, Pixa?" Otto asks, arms moving in silhouette beyond her privacy shade.

"All right, yeah," Pixa says on automatic.

"I am glad you were successful in retrieving the relic," he says.

"Me too," Pixa says, even though she was still passed out while they towed it back to *Bellerophon*.

"And I am glad you are alive," he says, as he's done every night since the ice field.

Pixa wants to say more than a muttered thanks—wants to tell him how scared she was, how scared she is even now, how every time his tentacles move in the corner of her eye she's transported back to heart-pounding terror . She wants to tell him, most of all, about what she heard when she touched the Glasshand.

But she can't. Instead, she waits for the gel-suit squelch to subside, for Otto's privacy shade to darken. Then she slips out of bed and heads for the bridge. She takes the ladder slowly, how

she's done every night since the ice field, shutting her eyes as she pulls herself up the final rung, picturing a hunched-over figure, a bottle.

Tonight, it finally works.

"You again," Captain Skadi says.

Pixa salutes. "Captain." She hesitates. "Inoui says we're going to be rich off the ice relic," she murmurs, to avoid the other thing. "Since it's the first claimed from the Emergence. Says Fountainview can't wait to study it."

Captain Skadi blinks. "I don't really give a fuck, Pixa."

But there is nothing unkind in the captain's voice, so after only a moment's indecision, Pixa climbs up onto the equipment bank and settles in beside her. They stare out at the void for a long stretch. Pixa tries to keep her eyes on the stars, but when the captain's arm shifts, when Pixa sees the membrane-swathed left hand, it's impossible.

The question burns like bile on its way up her throat.

"Is it always like that?" Pixa asks. "The screaming?"

"Worse since the Emergence," the Captain says.

"Can't you..." Pixa grimaces, recalling Otto's solution for misbehaving limbs. "Can't you get it removed? Have a new one grown, or use an arti, or—"

"I'm not going to do that," the captain says. "I can't." She swills from the bottle. Shakes her head. "My memories, trapped sound, that's all that's left of them. I have to preserve the evidence. For when I present it."

"To who?" Pixa demands.

"To the parties responsible."

Pixa stares out along the spiral arm, through eons of cold space, toward the distant burning center of the galaxy. "The ones who made the relics," she surmises.



"Them," her captain agrees. "The ones who toss their trash through some universal disposal chute, and if one stupid child touches it, twelve billion people die in agony." She swills from her bottle. "Not that it stops us from hunting down the next bit of trash, of course."

Pixa wonders if Otto has a blue bright enough for that sort of heresy.

"Why are you still freebooting, then?" she asks. "If you survived a relic once, and it did that to you, why...?"

"Because they just pumped our nebula full of the damn things," the captain says. "Better I find them than another stupid child does." She taps the bottle against her forehead. Her voice is harsh, stretched. "And maybe one of these relics remembers the way home. Maybe one of them can take me where I need to go."

"Where?" Pixa asks softly.

"Back through the White Fountain," the captain says.

Nothing can pass back through the White Fountain. It's a fact as implacable as lightspeed, entropy, heat death. But looking into the captain's fevered eyes, her pain-weathered face, Pixa believes her. She believes her so fully she would follow her there.

"I'm going to meet the ones who send the relics, and see if they're gods or if they're monsters, and then..." Captain Skadi gives a twisted and brittle and crystalline laugh. "I'm going to exterminate the lot of them." She stares out at the stars. "That's it," she says, in almost a whisper. "That's all there is."

She holds out the bottle. Pixa doesn't drink offworld, but she takes it to feel the trace warmth of the captain's living fingers. They sit and watch the universe go by: dark into light, light into dark, whirling, whirling.

THE
END

