

EMERGENCE / Rich Larson

When Qualia finally gets her first look at the White Fountain, she forgets how to breathe. Even with the screen polarized to its darkest setting, the view aches her eyes: impossibly bright, pulsating, somehow expanding in perpetuum without ever passing its borders. Fractal mirages seethe outward from the colorless center.

Qualia has peered into the nuclear hearts of stars and the endless bellies of supermassive black holes, and the White Fountain puts both to shame. The sheer impossibility of it—physics run in reverse, a one-way portal ejecting matter from another universe entirely—wraps a hand around her brain stem and tugs hard. It's like psilocybin and magneto-cranial stimulation and old religion all at once.

"You're drooling a little, Technologist Qualia."

Qualia snaps a hand to her chin, finds it dry, and realizes her supervisor is laughing at her. Turo's been doing that a lot since she arrived at Fountainview Station three days ago. He's been here for over a decade, but his handsome face is ageless—likely due to a telomere tweak. He came from one of the inner worlds, gravity-born with those classical human body proportions Qualia only ever saw in artwork growing up.

Nearly all the Kind here on Fountainview are from the same mold—old colonies, old genelines, old wealth—and Qualia has never felt so aware of her gangly wisp limbs.

"It's even more beautiful than it was in the training sims," she says. "Definitely worth some drool."

"It's also hard on the cerebellum," Turo says, "so don't stare too long."

But she can't resist one final look, because this is what she dreamed of for her entire childhood: standing in the enormous observatory at the tip of Fountainview's longest arm, the closest any living being can get to the portal that has shaped all of galactic history, and gazing into its gullet.

Turo ushers her back into the corridor. "I understand you specialize in quantic gravitation," he says. "A skill set that should avail you well..." He locks eyes with her. "As you monitor the approach of the mega-relic."

Qualia's heart thrums faster. Not only is she here, she's here at the most critical juncture in the station's recorded history. The White Fountain has been disgorging its mysteries since the very birth of the universe, ejecting alien relics that have seeded interstellar empires, destroyed galaxy-spanning industries, and warped reality itself.

But only recently have the technologists begun to understand the Fountain's patterns. Only recently have they begun to make predictions.

"So it's not theoretical anymore," Qualia murmurs. "The Emergence is really happening."

Of the thousand-plus artifacts that have been discovered, most are micro-relics, small enough to carry by hand—though their elemental composition and unpredictable properties generally make that a terrible idea. The outliers, the macro-relics, can reach the size of a shuttle or autobarge.

Larger relics have been hypothesized, but never discovered. Not until now.

"The mega-relic is real." Turo's voice is casual, but his eyes shine. "Yes. Though we have endeavored to keep that information from spreading too freely."

Qualia swallows. There's a reason the entry protocols upon her arrival were so much stricter than what she was told to anticipate. A reason every technologist she meets looks tense or distracted, and the whole station seems to carry a charge of nervous anticipation. The Emergence might not be just a once-in-a-millennium event, but once-in-an-eternity—momentous enough to bend the course of history with a single blow.

"How big?" she asks.

"Very," Turo says. "From what we can tell, it's about the size of that backwater Dyson sphere you escaped from."

Qualia feels herself flush. She wants to tell him she didn't *escape* anything, that her home is every bit as safe and stable and beautiful as the inner worlds—but joining Fountainview is a one-way journey, and there's a reason she strived her whole life for the chance. She settles for correcting his terminology.

"It's a Dyson *swarm*," she says. "Over a thousand individual structures in perfectly coordinated solar orbit. Nobody builds—"

“Well, here we are,” Turo interrupts, touching open a small gray door. “The instrument room.”

Qualia has to duck her head just to look inside, and what she sees makes her grimace. In sharp contrast to the observatory, this room is tiny—and even at a glance, the tech crammed inside is antiquated compared to her last lab. She’s on Fountainview, selected from a million potential candidates to do one of the most important jobs in existence on the eve of a history-shattering event, and she’s going to be doing it in a storage closet.

“Your workscreen will get you up to speed,” Turo says, already moving down the corridor. “Best of luck, Technologist Qualia.”

Qualia stares sourly after him. “Nobody builds Dyson spheres anymore,” she mutters, finishing her sentence to an audience of none. “Superstructures are hopelessly inefficient.”

Then, with all the dignity she can manage, she crouch-walks into the instrument room.

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Once she adjusts the interface to her usual preferences and settles in, the discomfort of her cramped quarters fades away. That’s always been Qualia’s talent, since she was a child: the ability to lose herself in the world of vectors and equations—a world that’s less tangible but somehow more real.

Here, that world is remade in the White Fountain’s image. Every physical law bends, some break, and calculation becomes divination. But through all the chaos, one fact becomes clear: Something is moving behind the veil, and that something is getting closer. When she maps the mega-relic’s dimensions, she sees Turo was—annoyingly—correct. It’s enormous, vaguely globular, with enough volume to nestle her entire home swarm, every solar mirror and habitat pod, neatly inside.

Yet there’s something insubstantial about it, too. Maybe because of the reality-warping forces exuded inside the Fountain’s gullet; maybe because her sensors can’t properly parse what’s happening. Qualia hinges forward, puts her eyes so close to the workscreen she can feel the hum in her orbital bone. She waits, intent, unblinking, until she’s sure of what she’s seeing.

Every so often on its slow approach, the mega-relic seems to *shiver*. She marks the anomaly down for further study.

#

Qualia's spent by the time her shift ends, all the mental strain transmuted to bone-deep fatigue and heavy limbs. The warpsickness doesn't help matters. She was warned, of course. She knew it wouldn't be pleasant, especially since she doesn't have the same malleable designer cells as old-colony Kind.

But nothing really prepares you for every cell in your body reversing its chirality, every molecular structure becoming its own mirror image. There's a reason joining Fountainview is a one-way journey: After a few painful weeks of transition, it's impossible to breathe the air or break down sugars anywhere else.

Thinking about digestion sets her stomach gurgling, so Qualia heads for the galley. The corridor stretching from the observation arm to the station's center is full of strange twists and turns, reminding her that Fountainview, for all its splendor, was not a single grand vision planned and executed.

The station is almost a millennium old, grown more than built: The slow accretion of instrument and architecture was begun by the Shard, refined by the Ghast, and finally perfected—Turo's words, not hers—by the Kind. Now this nanocarbon spindle, winging its endless patrol about the White Fountain, is the only place in the known nebulae where all three species work together in peace.

The corridor curves one final time, and she enters the galley. The induced gravity is stronger in the communal areas, for the comfort of the planet-born majority, and she feels her heavy legs grow even heavier. Or maybe her steps are slowing because she's nervous. Normally, she likes people and doesn't mind crowds, but it's different now that she's the only wisp around—a gawky giant towering over her classically proportioned peers.

When she enters the galley, it feels like every single head, Kind and Shard and Ghast alike, swivels her way. Her knees do a tiny tremor. She reminds herself that there's little turnover here on Fountainview, so naturally a new arrival—a *tall* new arrival—stands out. Maybe it's a welcome distraction from the stress of the impending Emergence, too.

She makes her way to the dispensers and grabs a tray. There are colorful cuisines from a dozen different worlds, all sorts of delicious-looking things she remembers seeing in educational holos

as a child, and the smell alone triggers a hot jet of saliva under her tongue. Then the dispenser scans her face, and slides her a bowl of quivering pink sludge.

Of all the White Fountain's wonders and mysteries, the warp is officially her least favorite. Nobody has been able to determine *why* organic beings in proximity to the Fountain inevitably undergo the chiral reversal—all their DNA and RNA twisting in reverse—and nobody has been able to prevent it, only accommodate it. That's why the air and food on Fountainview would be poisonous anywhere else.

It makes it a tough go for visitors, and tougher still for those intending to stay. Qualia has rebreather implants in her lungs to help her transition to breathing the station's inverse air, and artificial amoebae in her gut to help her transition to eating the station's inverse food. But the latter is a long process, and it starts with—

"Transitional diet." Behind her, someone gives a sympathetic cluck. "Truly unappetizing, but it *does* help with the warpsickness."

Qualia turns, sees a woman with the same perfect skin and perfect smile as Turo—old genelines, old wealth. "Oh, no, I love it," she says, smiling back. "I always wanted to know what it's like to swallow my body's entire supply of mucus at once."

The joke bounces right off, possibly reflected by the woman's gleaming white teeth. "That's an interesting ambition," she says, blinking. "Are you from one of the rim worlds, then? You seem like..." She purses her lips, obviously choosing her words carefully. "You seem like you might have been born in non-standard gravity."

"I'm from Orpheus Colony," Qualia says. "It's a Dyson swarm." Her nervousness compels her to make another stupid joke. "Planets are just middlemen taking a cut, you know?"

The woman doesn't seem to hear it. She makes her clucking sound again. "This must be incredibly difficult for you," she says. "Moving from the farthest edge of known space to the very center! Contending not just with the warpsickness, but gravity, too—is your spine all right? And I imagine the cultural differences are *extreme*." Her eyes have a slightly manic gleam. "I would love to hear more. All anyone can talk about now is the mega-relic, and we end up in these awful circular arguments, and...well, I've never been to a Dyson sphere. You could teach us all about it."

Qualia feels her smile slipping and her exhaustion doubling. In some other quantum branch, she makes friends with this woman, explains that Orpheus Colony isn't at the *farthest* edge of known space, explains that communications technology unmoored cultural distance from physical distance a very long time ago, explains that there is no such thing as a Dyson sphere.

In this quantum branch, she shakes her head. "I'm really tired," she says. "I'm just going to eat over there, alone, and then go to bed."

The woman's face falls.

"It's the warpsickness," Qualia reminds her, and then, hating herself a little for it: "Plus, the gravity. Oof. Such high gravity."

That satisfies her fellow technologist, who goes for a comforting shoulder-touch but only reaches Qualia's elbow. "Of course," the woman says, voice thick with pity. "God, you are so *brave*."

Qualia manages to keep smiling until she departs, but it's a near thing.

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Of course, it's not just Kind aboard the station. As Qualia fills her metal cup with water and ice chips, scanning for an unoccupied table to be alone and tired at, she sees plenty of Shard technologists squelching around in their customary gelsuits, tentacles whirling in signed conversation. For them, the White Fountain doesn't just *feel* like old religion—they truly worship it, sometimes with frightening zeal. It's fun to watch them change colors, though.

Less numerous are the Ghast: If the Shard are unnerving, with their slick tentacles and luminous predatory eyes, then the Ghast are outright terrifying—tall and thickly muscled with fearsome red-and-blue faces. They have their own way of thinking and their own mathematics, but their penchant for brutality makes them all too like the Kind.

Those first cross-species encounters were not amicable—Qualia has read the histories. But the only table with free seats is the one with a hulking Ghast technologist slumped at the end of it, apparently shunned by their peers.

If there was ever a time and place to make cross-species contact of her own, it's now. This is Fountainview, after all. Everyone is here for the same reason, working toward the same goals.

The warp binds them to the station. In a way, that binds them to each other, and Qualia has zero desire to sit with Kind who treat her like an alien herself. She takes a deep breath and saunters over.

From up close, the Ghast seems even bigger. Technologists have strict hygiene protocols, but she still gets a whiff of something very pungent, very organic, as she approaches—but it's not like anything could possibly make the pink sludge on her tray taste worse.

"Hello," she says, enunciating for her babeltech. "I'd like to sit here. Is that alright with you?"

Several nearby conversations die mid-sentence. Behind the Ghast's shoulder, she sees the woman from the dispenser line frantically shaking her head. Qualia's stomach gives a churn, this time with dread rather than hunger. But she's already committed.

"Mating cycle now," the Ghast says, with apparently no need for babeltech at all. "Irritability increased. Isolation recommended."

"I know that feeling," Qualia says, but her grin is a nervous one, because she's read about Ghast mating and knows there's often dismemberment involved. "But you've got meds for it, right? And I'm Kind. So, you know, pheromone-free."

The Ghast considers for a moment, then slides a chair out for her. Feeling the stares on her back like tiny needles, Qualia deposits her tray on the table and sits down. It's her third day on Fountainview, and she's already shattered some kind of taboo. She might as well lean into it.

"My name is Qualia," she says.

"I have never killed-and-eaten," the Ghast says.

Qualia's brain freezes up for a moment, sheer limbic terror at the possibility of the Ghast deciding to fill that gap in experience right here, right now. But then she remembers conventions, remembers that Ghasts don't receive a name until they kill—which means, for non-combatants, never.

"Nameless," she guesses.

"Yes," the Ghast says. "Nameless is pleased to meet Qualia."

“Likewise,” Qualia says, feeling an unexpected spark of delight. “Qualia is pleased to meet Nameless.” She lifts a spoonful of sludge. “Qualia is not pleased to eat mucus.”

Nameless does an odd shudder. “This is laugh,” they explain. “Qualia-Mucus-Eater has made a jest, so Nameless must laugh.”

“Exactly,” Qualia says with a real smile. “No choice. Laughing at my jokes is mandatory.”

“Must laugh now,” Nameless says. “Soon, everything changes violently.” Their vermillion throat sac swells and deflates, producing a harsh whine that aches her teeth. “The mega-relic violently changes everything.”

Qualia blinks, wondering if her tablemate might need to switch their babeltech on after all. “How?” she asks.

“You will see,” Nameless says. “Eat your mucus.”

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When she stumbles inside her sleeping quarters a half hour later, Qualia is exhausted but happy. She made it through her first workshift, she choked down her transitional diet a little bit easier than yesterday, and she maybe even made friends with a Ghast. It feels like her new life has officially begun, and her old one can be set adrift.

“You’d be proud of me, Ma,” she mutters, undressing for bed. “Or maybe you wouldn’t give a quark. Never could tell with you.”

She looks at herself in the closet smartglass, which she’s done periodically since the warp began, as if she might find evidence of her helices reversing, her DNA rotating right to left. Back when she was a kid, she always thought the White Fountain’s chirality swap would turn her into her own mirror image, all her tiny asymmetries exchanging places. Every time she saw her reflection, she saw the dream: her warped self working aboard Fountainview, orbiting the pulsing heart of the universe.

Now, she mostly just looks like shit. Her skin is slick with sweat and her body is emaciated from the nutrient transition, shedding mass as her digestive system learns slowly, painfully, to use left-hand sugars. It reminds her, with a lurch, of how her ma looked near the end, when she was so skinny her ribcage looked like a bony hand clenched tight.

But that was the old life, and it's better to forget. She switches the smartglass to an exterior feed—lower fidelity, not as overwhelming as the observatory—and the White Fountain reappears. She imagines the mega-relic on the other side of impossibility, churning slowly toward the event horizon, ready to be born anew. They have a lot in common, she and the mega-relic.

A giddy thought comes to her as she blanks the screen, tumbles toward her bed: It makes sense that the mega-relic shivers. It's leaving behind everything it knows to enter an entirely different universe, and it's nervous. If the motion pattern holds, Emergence is two days away.

"If I can do it, you can do it," she whispers.

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The warpsickness is worse the next morning, but she drags herself back down the winding corridor, back down the station's long arm. Despite the fact that every security door seems to suddenly require a face scan, she arrives at the instrument room with twelve seconds to spare.

She tries to sink into her work and leave her ailing body behind, but even the mathematical version of the Fountain makes her queasy—too much motion, too many variables. The quantic-gravitational fluctuations she was brought here to monitor feel like they're happening inside her gut. Within minutes, Qualia has to stop.

Leaning back from the workscreen, she shuts her eyes and pushes the heels of her hands against them, like she can tuck her eyeballs back into the comforting darkness of her skull. She takes ten deep breaths for a mental reset, and she wonders how Nameless does mental resets, seeing as how Ghasts don't believe in fixed integers.

"Testing object permanence, are we?"

Turo's voice is probably the second-to-last voice in the universe she wants to hear, but it's a small station and he must still be bound to some supervisor duties. Qualia opens her eyes to see her fellow technologist framed in the doorway—he doesn't have to stoop to fit under the frame—with his broad, white smile firmly in place.

"Just taking a little break," she says sourly. "Still warpsick."

"Of course, of course," Turo says, and Qualia notices that even though the grin is there, his eyes are elsewhere. "It's to be expected."

"Did you see the anomaly I flagged for analysis?" Qualia asks. "The little shiver, yesterday? I thought it might give us some clues to the structure's materials, its integrity—"

"There was a sensor miscalibration yesterday," Turo says. "I'll look at it, but the data might be no good."

Qualia feels her cheeks heat up. "I had everything calibrated right," she says. "I triple-double-checked."

"Your work was perfectly fine, Technologist Qualia," Turo says, and now his eyes are fully out the door. "The miscalibration was caused by exterior interference. There was a cloaked Ghost cruiser on the boundary line, trying to do a survey of its own."

Qualia blinks, remembering back to her conversation with Nameless in the galley. "They know about the mega-relic?" she demands.

Turo's smile tightens like a vice. "They weren't meant to," he says. "But Fountainview is not a closed system. Everyone knows about the mega-relic, and suddenly their ideals of cooperation and neutrality are slipping out the airlock. I'd hoped they would show more circumspection. More respect for our work here." He shakes himself. "I'll leave you to it, Technologist Qualia."

Before she can launch her next question, he's moving down the corridor. She returns to her workscreen, checks her calibrations, tries to refocus. She knows Fountainview is not alone in its obsession with the relics: entire industries, agencies, and fleets of freebooters once competed to hunt them down, traversing the nebula with organic sniffers and jerry-rigged sensors.

New relics are rare, and Fountainview's multi-government funding and neutral status gives them legal claim to anything that emerges from the White Fountain. Qualia had assumed, maybe stupidly, that the mega-relic would be treated no differently. But now, Turo's tight smile and Nameless's ominous words circle inside her head like binary suns.

Soon, everything changes violently.

She sets to work, watching for the shiver.

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The anomaly never shows, and Qualia is forced to wonder if Turo was right about a miscalibration fluxing up the data. One thing is clear enough: The mega-relic is getting very, very close to the breach point. At this rate, Emergence is only a day away. That fact should have given Qualia joy and wonder. Now, she can almost taste the dread hanging in the station's inverse air.

It becomes even more apparent when she gets to the galley. Normally, there's a sense of hustle-and-bustle, off-duty technologists milling or squelching or lumbering about, depending on species. Today, each table is a tiny fortress, its occupants clustered tight and speaking low, and she doesn't see a single Shard signing to Ghast, or Ghast rumbling to Kind.

All three species have retreated into their own—so much for Fountainview solidarity. Qualia gets even more stares than yesterday as she walks to the dispensers, and this time they feel sharp enough to cut. Nameless is nowhere to be seen, so once she gathers her sludge and water, she steels her nerves and heads for the table of the woman who patted her elbow.

"Me again," Qualia says. "Can I sit?"

The Kind all look up at once, some with more suspicion than others. Instead of offering the blinding white smile, the woman purses her lips. But she nods, so Qualia sits, hunching instinctively to get closer to the common height. They watch her eat a few spoonfuls of sludge before they return to their conversation.

Qualia listens, and learns bad news. It's not just the cloaked cruiser anymore: While she was ensconced in the instrument room, an unmarked war-frigate took up position just outside Fountainview's spatial boundaries, on the very edge of violation.

"Still refusing to answer any identification requests," one of the technologists murmurs. "And of course, no corporate or political entity will admit ownership."

"This is only the beginning," another says, strumming nervously on the tabletop. "Word travels faster than light, and if everyone knows about the Emergence, knows a once-in-an-eternity mega-relic is approaching..."

"Soon we'll have a whole slaving pack of interlopers on our threshold," the first technologist agrees. "All of them *claiming* they're only there to observe, *claiming* they won't interfere with

Fountainview business.” He grimaces. “But a chance at controlling the mega-relic might be a chance at controlling the entire known nebulae.”

“Turo says we’ll seal the proverbial airlock,” the woman adds. “No envoys permitted. No new crew permitted. In order to prevent infiltration.” She gives Qualia a tremulous smile. “You might be the last warp for a very long time.”

“The last warp,” mutters a man with a shaved angular head. “Or the first infiltrator.”

On cue, every head swivels in Qualia’s direction. She nearly chokes on her sludge.

“He’s joking,” the woman assures, face flushed as if she’s the one who was just accused of being some sort of spy. “It’s just a little joke from earlier, because of the timing of it all, and the fact that the outer worlds are so often under the sway of organized criminals.”

But the faces around the table do not look jokey. They look frightened, or suspicious, or both.

“If I’m an infiltrator, I’m doing a terrible job,” Qualia says flatly. “Because I just watched the thing for six straight hours and still have no clue what it is.”

The tension does not subside a whit.

“It’s bigger than any relic we’ve ever found, and it’s giving off absurd amounts of energy,” she pushes on. “But that doesn’t mean it’ll be usable, right? There’s all sorts of relics that aren’t usable. I don’t see why anyone would risk...”

The woman seems to know what Qualia’s next word will be, gives a minute shake of her head, but Qualia says it anyway because she’s sick of the cagey quiet.

“War,” she finishes, loudly enough for her companions’ synchronized flinch to ripple outward through the galley, loudly enough for the many babeltech implants in the room to pick it up and translate it. “I don’t think anyone would risk true war, intraspecies or interspecies, to control a relic that for all we know is a giant...” She raises her bowl. “Transitional sludge dispenser, or something.”

There are a few darting smiles, some brittle scattered laughter. But deep down, Qualia doesn’t believe her own words. She might be from a Dyson swarm, but she knows the galactic peace

has always been a tenuous one, and that the theoretical power of a never before encountered mega-relic might be enough to shatter said tenuous peace.

She just doesn't know why she's trying to reassure a bunch of inner-worlders who are only halfway joking when they suggest she's a spy. She earned her place on Fountainview, far more so than they did in their old-colony schools and social networks. Qualia looks at Nameless's empty table, wondering if the mega-relic madness is making their mating cycle even worse.

The conversation is stuttering back to life, but Qualia has no desire to follow it. She takes a few more bites, mutters her go-to excuse about warpsickness, and leaves the galley altogether.

#

Qualia doesn't want to go to her sleeping quarters, and only really knows one other place on the whole station. So, she heads back down the serpentine corridor, bypasses her cramped workstation, and steps inside the observatory. The view is just as beautiful and brain-pulping as last time, but now the awe is tinged with menace.

Yesterday the mega-relic was her cosmic counterpart, moving boldly into a new world. Today, it's the trigger that could plunge the entire nebula into bloody war. She spots the interlopers: The station's sensors render them as tiny orange specks against the White Fountain's seething body. When she pulls up a magnification, she sees the mysterious war-frigate has been joined by two more, clearly of separate provenance. Both bristling with weaponry, both ready to discard treaties that have endured for centuries.

The thought comes to her: Her hard-won life aboard Fountainview might be over before it's even really begun.

"Qualia-Mucus-Eater."

The clacking, bone-dry voice makes her jump. She spins, sees Nameless's massive silhouette framed in the observatory entry. The waft of mating cycle pheromone comes stronger than ever, pungent enough to itch her throat, and she feels a reflexive, ancestral jolt of fear as the Ghast ambles inside.

"Nameless," she says, forcing her voice steady. "How's it going?"

"It goes at an angle," Nameless says, which Qualia figures is about as meaningful as any of the traditional Kind answers. "Workshift is over." They stretch and rotate their muscly limbs; Qualia hears a surprisingly familiar popping. "At long last, I can expand."

"They have you in a storage closet, too?" Qualia yelps, fear forgotten. "Who the hell designed those things? They're so *small*."

"Undignified," Nameless agrees. They point toward the observation port, where another highlighted speck—another buzzard waiting on the mega-relic—has appeared. "The violent change begins."

She feels her shoulders slump. "You knew as soon as we found the mega-relic, then," she says. "You knew it would lead to this. Lead to war."

"It will be barely-war." The throat sac under Nameless's jaws pulses, producing the hair-raising squeal Qualia figures is related to their mating cycle. She winces. "Ghast will eradicate Kind and subjugate Shard. Sorry."

Qualia snorts. "I forgive you."

For a long moment, both of them stare out at the White Fountain without speaking. Then, Qualia's pent-up frustrations, the ones she knows are absolutely petty in comparison to the matter at hand, come spilling out.

"They don't think I belong here," she blurts. "All the other Kind. Because I'm not from an inner world, and I don't have stubby little gravity legs, they act like I somehow snuck onto the station while no one was looking. One thinks I'm a spy, even."

"All technologists sacrifice," Nameless says simply. "Some sacrifice more."

Qualia plucks at her ear. "I studied my whole life," she says. "And my whole life, people on Orpheus Station acted like it was wrong of me. They didn't care that I was doing it for *them*, doing it to study relics that could make life on the rim better, life in the swarm easier." She grimaces. "They thought trying to get to Fountainview meant I was trying to be an inner-worlder. Thought it was unnatural. Now I'm here, and I'm unnatural all over again."

"Unnatural is natural here," Nameless says. "Nameless will never kill-and-eat. This is unnatural to Ghast."

"You sacrificed having a name," Qualia realizes aloud. "Fountainview doesn't permit military personnel. Screens for any history of violence."

"Yes," Nameless says. "I sacrificed a name. And without a name, my brood will not remember me long. Scents fade. Children are forgetful."

"Oh." Qualia hesitates. "Do you want to show me a holo of them, or something? I bet they're adorable."

"They are very ugly," Nameless says. "I only miss them during my mating cycle, due to chemical imbalance."

"Was it worth it, then?" Qualia asks quietly. "Was coming to Fountainview worth it?"

Nameless does the throat sac squeal again. "It *was*," they say. "Now, perhaps it is not. War begins, Fountainview ends."

"Yeah," Qualia says heavily. "Bad timing on my part." She stares out the viewport, biting her cheek, wondering if Ghosts have the concept of oversharing. "I had to wait for my ma to die," she blurts. "She was sick for ages, and I thought about leaving her, how you left your brood. But I waited, and it made me fucking resent her, and now all the resenting, and all the studying, and all the dreaming—it's all for nothing, isn't it?"

Her fellow technologist stares at her, considering, and Qualia crosses her fingers for a bit of comforting Xenoghost wisdom that will make everything make sense. "Untranslatable," Nameless says.

"What?"

"What I would like to tell you cannot be translated into any Kind language," Nameless says. "And only crudely approximated in Shard color-dance."

Qualia grimaces. "Yeah. Fair enough." She turns back to the view, eyeing the ever-growing crowd of ships. "Guess that might have been your last workshift, huh?"

"At least it was interesting," Nameless says. "There was an anomaly. I flagged it for analysis."

All Qualia's melancholy is forgotten in an instant. "What sort of anomaly?" she demands.

"Relic approach rate remains fixed," Nameless says. "But for intervals, its dimensions flared outward, then contracted."

The shiver. Qualia feels her heartbeat accelerating, feels an itch in the back of her mind drawing her back to her other world—the world with a problem that might actually be solvable. If these are Fountainview's final hours before being taken over by relic-mad militaries, or blown to bits in a crossfire, there are worse ways to use them.

"You sent all this to Turo?" she asks.

"Turo-of-Displayed-Dentition," Nameless corrects. "Yes. But he is harried, as are the other senior technologists. They are more concerned by the war-frigates."

"Show it to me, then," Qualia says. "Before things went crazy, I was working on a bit of a theory."

#

They cram themselves into the instrument room, shoulder to spiracle, barely enough room to move, but Qualia doesn't notice her discomfort. She's in the other world, fully focused on dissecting both instances of the anomaly and extrapolating potential patterns. When she first flagged the shiver, she'd hoped it might give some insight into the design of the mega-relic—the hitherto unknown materials that would allow for such sudden expansion and contraction. But something about the motion itself had stayed gnawing at her subconscious.

Now, watching in frozen increments as the mega-relic's energy signature ever-so-briefly changes shape, observing the tiny asymmetries therein, she sees a far more obvious possibility than unknown materials. A possibility any denizen of Orpheus Colony should have spotted instantly. She pushes her forehead against the workscreen, shuts her aching eyes, and cannot help but laugh.

"Is there a jest?" Nameless asks.

"A bad one," she says, leaning back. "The mega-relic's not a single structure. It's a fucking swarm."

Nameless's throat sac squeals again; the noise feels sharper and more agitated this time, drilling through her eardrums. They tap one finger against the corner of the workscreen. "This explains the current anomaly," Nameless says. "The rapid contraction."

Qualia blinks. She'd been ignoring the live feed from the sensors, too busy poring over the recordings. What the numbers show now makes the shiver look like nothing: The mega-relic is still on its steady approach, closer than ever to breaching, but its dimensions are collapsing at dizzying speeds.

The swarm is condensing, packing itself down into a sleek projectile shape, a final transformation before the breach. Maybe it's a natural response to forces exerted. Maybe it's the only shape that can pass through the White Fountain's final stretch and puncture the last veil between that universe and this one.

But every other contraction was followed by expansion, and if that rule holds, and if the latter is as violent as the former...

"We need to tell Turo," Qualia says. "We need to tell *everyone*."

Then the whole station gives a violent lurch, the screen flickers, and emergency sirens start to wail.

#

The corridors are chaos. All the accumulated tension of the past few days has spilled over, and now half the station is stampeding toward the lifeboats while the other half stampedes toward the observatory. Qualia picks the second option, and Nameless helps her bully through the sudden crush—even in the panic of a potential evacuation, nobody wants to tangle with a Ghast on their mating cycle. She's still trying to raise Turo on the commlines, but she suspects she's one of about a hundred calls.

There's good reason for that. As she learns from both the Fountainview network and from fragments of shouted conversation, the interloper situation is escalating—fast. The boundary line is crowded with Kind frigates, Ghast cruisers, even a stately pair of Shard nautiluses, something Qualia never expected to see in her lifetime. Smaller scavengers are ready to try their luck, too: A motley flotilla of freebooters arrived only an hour ago, with the legendary Captain Skadi rumored to be among them.

One of the largest Kind warships ended up on a collision course with a Ghast cruiser, and saw fit to fire a warning shot—and by astronomically bad luck or math, hit Fountainview’s spinning arm.

“Completely accidental!” Qualia hears Turo’s voice hollering the words as she and Nameless shove their way inside the observatory. “We were *not* the target, and only minor damage was sustained, so we will remain *calm*.”

Calm is no descriptor for the crowd in the observatory. They’re pressed up to the viewport, howling and gesticulating as warships finally leak across the boundary line and head for the White Fountain itself. The Shard technologists are turning bright blue, a color Qualia vaguely remembers is reserved for only the gravest sacrilege.

“Turo!” she shouts, struggling to get closer to her supervisor. “Turo, the anomaly’s repeating!”

His classically proportioned head turns her way, brow furrowed.

“The mega-relic is contracting,” Qualia gasps, ducking an elbow, “and I think when it breaches it’s going to...”

Turo keeps right on turning, and she realizes he hasn’t heard a word. She’s head and shoulders taller than any other Kind technologist in the observatory, but his eyes slide off her like she’s not even there. Qualia feels fury and frustration constricting her windpipe, choking her, and for a moment all she can think about is the slimy feeding tube they pulled from her mother’s throat the day she finally passed.

But Qualia’s not going to die today, and neither is anyone else. She whirls toward Nameless. “Can you do the thing?” she demands, tapping the skin beneath her chin. “But *loud*. Loud as you can.”

“I would never make a copulatory vocalization in public,” Nameless says.

“You’ve been doing it ever since we met!”

A quiver of surprise goes through Nameless’s body. “Mating cycle,” they say, by way of explanation. “How embarrassing.” But their bright red throat sac swells, ballooning so far outward it obscures their face. “Very well, Qualia-Mucus-Eater.”

They squeeze their throat sac empty. The screech is so awful that Qualia claps her hands over her ears; all around the observatory people are doing the same. But the hubbub falls off, and when they look to the source of the sound, they see her and Nameless standing side by side.

“We’ve got bigger problems than getting clipped by a stray missile,” Qualia says, heart pounding loud in the sudden silence. “The mega-relic isn’t a sphere, it’s a swarm.” She throws the live feed across the viewport, so everyone can see the contraction. “And the instant it gets through the Fountain, there’s going to be a violent dispersal.” She glances sideways at Nameless. “As in, it’s going to explode.”

All eyes snap to the sensor feed scrolling across the viewport. The mega-relic is still compacting itself, coiling like a spring, now just estimated minutes from Emergence. Turo’s furrowed brow furrows deeper. He rounds on her, and she can already see the dismissal forming on his lips, something about miscalibrations and bad data.

“Then we need to contact all ships within the vicinity at once,” he says instead. “Thank you for your persistence, Technologist Qualia. Technologist Nameless.”

Qualia’s surge of hope is tempered by a flare of light from the viewport, the White Fountain somehow turning even brighter than before. She squints through the phosphorus glow, sees a tiny black speck in the Fountain’s center, barely visible but growing larger. The time estimate was off.

The mega-relic is already emerging.

#

There’s no time for privacy or protocol, so the captains of a dozen different warships and twice that many scavengers are splashed across the viewport, a cacophony of blurry holos. They’ve all been sent the data, warned of the danger. Only half of them believe it, which makes Qualia want to reach through the display and wring their necks.

“This ploy of yours is unnecessary,” growls one of the Kind captains, an ancient-looking man with a snowy white beard. He was the one who fired the warning shot. “We’re only here to ensure the secure transition of the mega-relic into Fountainview’s possession. If we leave, there’s no telling what the Ghast— ”

“The Ghast respect law,” comes the babelspeech rejoinder—the captain of the cloaked Ghast cruiser that first interfered with Fountainview’s sensors. “We will only act if a Kind interloper attempts to seize the mega-relic for themselves—”

“I respect no law.” The voice is hoarse, quiet, and Qualia can’t understand why the high-ranking military captains fall silent—until the woman raises the infamous crystalline club where her left hand should have been. “But I respect the damage a relic is capable of dealing,” Captain Skadi continues. “If the fountainheads are right—and I think they are—there’s no time to flee. Our best shot at protecting ourselves and Fountainview from the blast is to form a shieldwall.”

Her words trigger a wave of dissent: headshakes and howls from the Kind, ominous clicking from the Ghast, affronted color-changes from the Shard.

“Another ploy!” snarls the captain with the beard. “This time from a freebooter. You’ll start firing the instant we reroute our shield capacities.”

Qualia does the rough math in her head: if every single ship gets into proper position, drops their aft shielding, puts all available energy fore...

“Muldone here.” Another freebooter, by the look of him, rubbing his chin. “I trust Skadi’s judgment.”

“Agreed,” chimes a third freebooter, a wide woman with twisting braids. “And I don’t trust relics.”

“The Ghast do not trust either of *you*,” says the cruiser captain. “Freebooters are notoriously prone to meddling, to deception—”

“There’s no ploy, and there’s no time!” Turo bellows, at a volume Qualia never thought he had in him. “Form the fucking shieldwall, or we die in the explosion!”

The pronouncement seems to hang in the air. Qualia looks past the holos, sees the black speck of the mega-relic is now a blot the size of her fist. Her heart jackhammers at her ribs. No time. No time at all.

“Rerouting shield capacities,” Captain Skadi says into the silence. “Good luck to you.”

She blinks off the viewport.

“Rerouting,” says the man called Muldone. “If these official assholes won’t do the right thing, us freebooters will.”

He vanishes, but the chorus has begun now, and each announcement fills Qualia with a bit more hope.

“Rerouting.”

“Rerouting shields.”

“Rerouting.”

As each captain disappears, there’s a corresponding flare on the viewport, the spark of a ship’s energy shields turned to maximum, overlapping those of its neighbor. Qualia watches the wall assemble, her throat clenched. It’s a race between the growing web of shields and the emerging mass of the mega-relic behind them, close enough now that she can see proof of her discovery, see the shifting units that compose the ominous black bolus.

For a moment she thinks she sees a tiny craft, maybe a lifeboat, heading *past* the mega-relic toward the Fountain itself. When she blinks, it’s gone.

“Rerouting shield capacities.”

“Rerouting.”

“Rerouting now.”

Finally, it’s only the white-beard and the Ghast captain left. They stare at each other through the holo for a long moment, then, without speaking and almost at the exact same moment, they disappear off the viewport. Qualia sees the twin flares of their ships joining the wall, and her heart leaps—but behind the glowing band of shield, the mega-relic has fully exited the White Fountain. No longer anywhere near the size of Orpheus Colony, but still massive, still fearsome—a writhing mass of potential energy.

It drifts closer, maintaining the same inexorable pace Qualia has measured and monitored for days. She considers the quantum branch in which she’s wrong about everything, in which the mega-relic gently unfurls back to its original size, calm and benign and ready for study. That

would be embarrassing, on par with accidentally making a copulatory vocalization in public, but she thinks she would still prefer it.

She's about to say as much to Nameless when the mega-relic erupts. The viewport can't darken fast enough and the flash sears her eyes, sends purple pinwheels all across her field of vision. The shockwave slams Fountainview so hard that gravity fails; Nameless plucks her out of the air just before she goes flying, wraps her in a protective embrace. The other technologists are jolted off their feet, sent into a spinning maelstrom of bodies.

Through a gap in the chaos, Qualia gets a glimpse of the viewport. She sees the shieldwall fizzing and failing, sees damaged ships listing out of position. One of the Shard galleons is punctured, leaking its aquatic environment into the void as a slushy cloud, but its neighbors are already racing to help it. The shieldwall did just enough to prevent any true disasters.

But the space where the mega-relic was is utterly empty. For a moment she thinks the entire swarm disintegrated, converted to pure energy.

Then she sees the trails. As gravity slowly stabilizes, as the emergency sirens stop wailing, Qualia wriggles free from Nameless's grip and presses herself up against the viewport. The so-called mega-relic is gone, but innumerable glimmering threads, stretching in every conceivable direction, radiate from where it used to be.

If there were myriad relics all along, moving in unison just long enough to pass through the White Fountain, and those relics are now speeding toward the farthest corners of the galaxy—

"Everything changes," Nameless says, crouching beside her. "The race to claim will be...fierce."

"Definitely," Qualia says. "But I'll take a treasure hunt over nebula-wide war any day."

"Nameless agrees." They point toward one particularly bright trail. "I think this trajectory might interest Qualia-Mucus-Eater."

Qualia can't do Ghost math, but she pulls up a prediction on screen. Barring a sudden change in direction, the relic is going to end up just an asteroid's throw from Orpheus Station, within easy reach of a swarm that never could catch a break. The realization hits her like a second shockwave: In this race, for the first time ever, it'll be the outer worlds that have a head start.

She feels a smile spreading across her face. Fountainview is intact. Everyone's alive. What comes next will be chaos, yes, but not war. And with countless new relics to study, the mysteries of the White Fountain might be solvable yet.

"Sometimes things change for the better," Qualia says. She blinks. "Speaking of which, any chance at a new nickname? Something to do with us saving Fountainview, maybe."

"Qualia-Heroic-Mucus-Eater," Nameless suggests.

"Sure. That works."

Qualia stares out at the glowing trails, eyes leaping from one projected trajectory to the next: a planetoid deep in Ghast territory, the ice field out past Boreas, the endless ocean of a rim-world she's never seen before. They all look like pathways to a future she can't wait to discover.

She's reasonably sure she's not drooling, but she puts a hand to her chin to check, just in case.