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Sitala (Opening)

The Navigator lay among the stars, the blackness of space wrapped around it like a shroud. It could feel the old man surrounded by his family. He was unconscious—unresponsive but aware. His family talked to him. They spoke of the past, not sure he could hear them but hoping anyway. He could, and it made him happy. But the old man knew the end was near, and his thoughts turned to the Navigator, the being he called Sitala.

They'd met only once. It was decades ago now, when the old man was young, a scientist on a deep-space research vessel. His ship had brought him to a distant planet, and there he'd found a race of beings, almost human but not quite. The Navigator had lived among these beings for many years, and the bonds that gave it life had been strong. It had hidden itself from the researchers until it saw the young man.

It sensed something in him, a stillness deep inside that was missing from his companions. The Navigator had waited until the man was alone and then gone to him, sharing itself freely and deeply. The man had christened the Navigator Sitala, and the

name had brought it pleasure. It had never had a true name before.

Eventually, the man left the planet, but he took the memory of the Navigator with him as he traveled among the stars.

That planet was gone now, its peoples swallowed up by war, and the memories of the Navigator were lost with them. The Navigator had lived on, its memory carried through time by the man. Now the man was dying, and he was the last to have known of the Navigator.

The Navigator felt the old man's heart flutter and stop. It felt his final breath.

The old man was gone.

The Navigator was forgotten.

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Mika looked down at the remains of the battle cruiser and smiled. To some, the metal carcass, bigger than even the tallest skyscraper still standing in the cities, was a marker—a tombstone for humankind. It represented the end of man's dominance over the planet. The end of civilization.

To Mika, it was an opportunity.

The starship was huge. The rear half sloped away, disappearing beneath the surface of the ocean. Six months ago,

this entire area had been underwater. In a few more, maybe a year, the whole ship would be exposed. Assuming the scavengers didn't find it before then.

The ocean had taken its toll. The metallic hull was pitted and worn, stained with patches of rust. The long gashes that ran along its body, signs of some far-off battle, had been worn smooth at the edges by water. Piles of silt had built up at the base of the ship. To Mika's eye, they cupped it like a mother's fingers. Chunks of metal thrown loose by the crash or coaxed free by the motion of the water lay strewn around the ship, half-covered by their own silty drifts.

Despite the damage, the wreck was prime salvage. You could live a hundred lifetimes on the spoils of a ship like this. Of course, Mika didn't have salvage gear to pull the carcass apart, or the vehicles to haul it away. She'd have to make do with whatever morsels she could pry free with her crowbar and carry on her motorbike. But that would be enough to feed her for a month or two.

And if she was lucky, she could return for more salvage. She could keep coming back as long as no one else happened to find the crash site. But Mika was at the western edge of the constantly shifting patch of half-submerged land known simply as the Swamp—deep in scavenger territory.