

**DIVING**  
**INTO**  
**THE WRECK**



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For Sheila Williams



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*I tell people I sleep alone because I prefer to be alone. I do prefer to be alone. I like my own company. But the reason I sleep alone is that I dream.*

*Or, more accurately, I nightmare.*

*I thrash and moan and frighten anyone within hearing distance. The cabins on my ship, Nobody's Business, have soundproof walls, as does my berth on Longbow Station. I put my bed in the center room of my apartment on Hector Prime, and hope no one can hear me through the floor.*

*So far no one has. Or, at least, no one has tried to come to my rescue.*

*Even though I was rescued before.*

*For almost forty years, I have had the dream every night—unless I'm traveling in the Business or in my single ship. Movement—movement through space—somehow negates the dream.*

*Or maybe it echoes the rescue.*

*For the dream is based on fact. The nightmare actually happened.*

*My mother and I suited up and walked, hand in hand, into a room on an abandoned space station. Mother wanted to explore, and I didn't want her to go alone. I was maybe four, maybe five. I don't remember exactly, and no one has ever talked of it.*

*What I do remember is a jumble—colored lights, beautiful voices singing in six-part harmony. Mother's face turned upward toward the lights.*

*"Beautiful," she said, her voice blending into the chorus. "Ob, so beautiful."*

*And then she left me and floated toward that light.*

*I called for her, but she never came back. I huddled on the floor of that room, surrounded by light and voices, and wrapped my spacesuited arms around my spacesuited knees, waiting.*

*Alone.*

*I didn't scream then, and I don't scream now. I never scream. But I gasp myself awake as the oxygen in my suit fails. My visor cracks, and even though I am four, maybe five, I know I am going to die.*

*Obviously, I didn't die. My father found me and brought me back to our ship. But he never did find my mother.*

*And he never spoke of her again.*



*PART ONE*

***DIVING INTO  
THE WRECK***



# ONE

**I** hurtle through the darkness of space, snug and secure in my single ship. I've just come back from a salvage operation run by a friend, a salvage operation that held no real interest for me except as a way to pick up some extra cash.

That, and my friend promised me I could have the tourist dive site if the wreck was one I could use. By use, we meant that I could bring inexperienced divers to the wreck and give them the pretend adventure their money has paid for. Since this wreck is suited for tourist dives, I'm planning to file a postsalvage claim when I get back to Hector Prime.

My single ship is small, little more than a cockpit (which fits only one) with a bedroom/galley behind. I never sleep on the single ship. It has automatic controls, but I shut them off as I travel.

If I can't take the ship from a port to a station or a station to a hub in thirty hours (which is the longest I can go safely without sleep), then I travel in my full-sized ship, *Nobody's Business*.

But the salvage is an easy week from Hector Prime and there are a lot of space stations along the way, so I take the single ship. It's inconspicuous, and I like that—not just as a woman alone in the vastness of space, but also as a wreck diver.

Too often, the *Business* has attracted thieves and claim jumpers, people who would just as soon kill you as give up the ship you've discovered.

No one has ever followed my single ship. To my knowledge, no one has ever tried.

On the way back, in the only stretch of space that made me nervous as I planned the trip, my sensors blip.

Most pilots ignore a blip like that. Most ships' automatic circuits actually filter such blips out. That's why I fly the single ship manually.

Small sensor blips mean that a faint energy signature is somewhere nearby—although “nearby” is relative in space—and faint energy signatures often point to abandoned and distressed ships.

I specialize in abandoned ships. I dive them, sometimes for salvage, sometimes for curiosity, sometimes to locate a good tourist wreck.

The work pays well enough that I can indulge my true love—diving ancient wrecks for the history value. I collect ship types the way some people collect glassware. I want to be able to say I dove a previously undiscovered Generation C-Class or an abandoned first-issue space yacht or a commandeered merchant ship from the Colonnade Wars.

After I dive the ships and map them, I often turn them over to museums or historical societies. Sometimes I leave them in place for tourist dives, and sometimes I don't report them at all, leaving them in their floating grave for some other enterprising diver to discover.

I've explored more than a thousand ships, and still a blip on my sensors sends my heart pounding.

As quick as I can, I drop out of faster-than-light. Then I press the screen in front of me, replaying the readout to make sure I haven't misread the blip.

I haven't. It existed for only a fraction of a second, but it existed.

I memorize the coordinates—which are a long way from me now—and I work my way back.

It takes two jumps and a half day of searching before I find the blip again and match its speed and direction.

I'm already fifteen hours alone in the single ship. I should find a place to get a meal and a good night's sleep, but I'm too far from anything. An energy signature this far out belongs to a ship that's lost.

My stomach clenches. I never know what I'm going to encounter when I find a lost ship.

Five separate times, I've found ships in distress. One still had its beacon going decades after everyone on board had died. Two other ships had dying crew members on board, crew members I was too late to save.

I had to help the last two ships jury-rig some kind of fail-safe, and then leave, promising that I would send help—which I always did. Leaving is the hardest part. The people on board, no matter how professional they are, have panicked. They're near the end, and they always believe that a single pilot will never send anyone back for them.

They're convinced I'll never tell anyone about them when they hear that I'm a professional wreck diver. They think I'm going to wait until they die so I can come back and loot the ship.

I'm sure some of my colleagues might do that, but I never would. I do business as ethically as a wreck diver can. I file the proper documentation (after I've dived, however), and I try to keep my group dives injury free. Every

wreck diver has lost a team member at one point or another, and I'm no exception, but as dive companies go, mine is pretty accident free.

I pride myself on that, just like I pride myself on helping people who need it.

But I don't like helping. It's fraught with emotion of all kinds, and I do my best to stay out of emotional situations. I'm as pure a loner as someone can be. Space suits me. I can go weeks without speaking to anyone, and I don't miss the company.

So going from my single ship to a situation potentially filled with needy, dying people always makes me nervous.

I ease the single ship forward quietly, lights and communications array off. Once I happened upon a group of marauders who used a distress signal to lure in unsuspecting do-gooders. I managed to get away before they could harm me, but I've heard of several other pilots who've suffered the loss of their ships and worse.

I'm being as cautious as I can.

My sensors are on full, but I'm not recording with them. Instead, I'm using a link I've built into the single ship that attaches to a small computer I wear on my wrist.

The additional link was simple enough to build: single ships are designed to monitor the pilot's eyes, heart rate, and respiration rate. Should my heart slow, my breathing even, or my eyes close for longer than a minute, the automatic controls take over the entire ship. Unconsciousness isn't as much of a danger as it would be if the ship were completely manual, but consciousness isn't a danger either. No one can monitor my movements simply by tapping the ship's computer.

The additional link that I've set up only feeds information in one direction—into my personal computer. The coordinates of the blip, the readings I've taken as I've approached, and everything about the blip itself are stored on my system, not the single ship's.

All someone probing my ship from a distance will learn is that I've come to an unusual region of space for a reason they can't entirely determine.

But I know. The faint energy signature has led me to a black lump against the blackness of space.

A ship, just like I'd hoped and feared.

My breath catches. I scan for distress signals, for signs of life. But my sensors tell me that the ship has no environment and no active power systems. The energy signature I've found remains weak—one final system that refuses to turn off or, perhaps, a sort of stardrive that I don't entirely recognize. One that's built on some form of energy with a half-life that'll give off readings for generations.

The wreck is huge—five times the size of the *Business*—and it has a configuration I don't recognize. My single ship's computer hypothesizes that the ship is Old Earth make, at least five thousand years old, but I ignore that hypothesis since it has to be wrong.

Ships that old could never have made it this far from Earth, not in five thousand years. Maybe not even in ten.

This ship is something else, something my not-so-sophisticated single ship computer system doesn't recognize. The system doesn't guess per se—computers still lack the ability to do that—but it sends me information with confidence, picking the closest ship from the array it has in its database.

What I can tell for certain is this: The wreck has been alone and abandoned for a long time. The giant hull is pitted and space-scored, with some kind of corrosion on the outside.

As I circle the thing, moving slowly and keeping my distance, I notice some holes as well, where debris has hit the hull over time.

The holes mean there are no working shields and no way for someone to still be alive on that thing. I suspect, with something as old as this ship appears to be, that scavengers have already looted its interior.

The ship is derelict, abandoned and worthless.

To everyone but me.



I leave the ship as I've found it, drifting. I make no mention of it in the mandatory reports that I have to send to the next space base. I tell no one what I've seen.

I just make note, and I keep my own computer files on my personal system. I never let that system out of my sight.

It takes me three full travel days (with stops along the way) to get to Hector Prime. I keep an apartment there, although I don't call that home.

Home, to me, is *Nobody's Business*, which I have modified for my every need. But I keep two "real" residences—the apartment on Hector Prime and a berth at Longbow Station.

The berth at Longbow gives me privileges at the station. The apartment on Hector Prime allows me to store my stuff somewhere relatively safe.

I like Hector Prime. It's at the very edge of the Enterran Empire, so far away from the Empire's center that the government actually seems lax here. I'm not antigovernment; I just don't think about it much. Because if I do, I worry.

The Empire started the Colonnade Wars all those years ago. It wanted more territory, and it succeeded in getting that territory. If things had gone differently, Hector Prime would have been part of what the Empire calls Rebel Space. The rest of us call it the Nine Planets Alliance, and we travel back and forth between the Alliance and the Empire.

Technically, the Empire holds my citizenship, but in reality, the Alliance touches my heart. That's probably because the Alliance doesn't want my heart—and the Empire does.

Or maybe I just like misfits, since I consider myself one.

Still, my official address is on Hector Prime. I keep an apartment in one of the more expensive sections of the city. I like the area's security—the way it'll notify the *Business* if someone is breaking into apartments in the area, not to mention if someone were to break into mine.

Most of my possessions, while valuable, mean little to me. But the computer system that I store there is almost as valuable as the one I have hard-wired into my quarters on the *Business*. On my apartment system, I keep coded records, logs, and other information.

I doubt anyone can break the codes, but I want to be informed if someone tries.

For buried within all that information—a lot of flotsam and jetsam of galaxy history, favorite reading materials, downloaded holoplays, and fake genealogy charts for the family I've long ago abandoned—are the locations of my favorite wrecks. Not the ones the tourists dive, but the ones that hold a special place in my heart.

The ones filled with history. The ones that matter more to me than anything.

I don't record the new ship's presence in any of those logs. I won't record it until after I've dived it. But I do make a hand-scrawled note and paste it to my kitchen wall. All the note has are numbers: the date I discovered the wreck followed by the identification number of my single ship intermingled with the wreck's coordinates. The code is simple, and a determined someone could break it, I suppose, but no one has yet.

And it's a nice security feature in case someone steals my systems—all of them.

Right now, I don't care about much of the information on them.

All I care about is the new wreck.



My apartment is almost as spare as the single ship. I have a kitchen, a bedroom, and a living room. I sleep in the living room and use the bedroom as a workspace. It's littered with computer parts, old and new. It would take a burglar a while to figure out which system is the current one.

Sometimes I change from a modern machine to an old one. Sometimes I add components that don't really fit just to throw people off.

While I have been robbed on the *Business*—by a former colleague, no less—I haven't been robbed in the apartment.

But a diver can't be too careful.

It's a competitive business, and what a diver has, besides her diving skills, are the locations of her favorite and upcoming wrecks. No matter how much money a diver has, no matter how much loot she finds, she learns that those things don't matter.

All that matters are the wrecks.

I switch the systems around again before I begin research on the new wreck. First I download the ship's shape and the specs I could gather by flying around it.

Then I let the database work, seeing if my extensive collection of historical ships has any record of something of this shape.

I'm loath to work on the public networks. Sometimes an inquiry is enough to notify a claim jumper. I prefer to use the databases I've developed.

Even using mine, it takes a full day of nonstop work before it locates a match.

The system shows me the match holographically, creating models of the ship I saw and the ship in the database. The holographic ships cover the carpeted floor. I can walk around them. I can put one image on top of the other. I can enlarge or reduce them.

I do all of these things. My computer believes these ships are the same, and my eyes tell me that they are as well.

But I don't like what I'm seeing.

Because that means my single ship computer was right: this wreck is five thousand years old.

Worse, it's Earthmade.

And even worse than that, it's a Dignity Vessel.

Dignity Vessels, while legendary, have never traveled more than fifty light-years from Earth.

Dignity Vessels weren't designed to travel huge distances, at least by current standards, and they weren't manufactured outside of Earth's solar system. Even drifting at the speed it's currently moving, it couldn't have arrived at its present location in five thousand years, or even fifty thousand.

Yet it's there.

Drifting. Filled with mystery.

Filled with time.

Waiting for someone like me to figure it out.