

# **Point Zero**

*by*

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*Like a slowed down film kicked into rewind, the spiral arms of galaxies, clusters of stars, the glow of hot planets decelerate, pause in their drift uncertain of their fate, before gravity snares their collective mass and they begin to pull together at speed. Giant supernovae burst into radioactive flame, illuminating the void around them.*

In the beginning there was only pain. Pulsating, it engulfed everything in its wake.

The sound of company fire ricocheted through the ship's battered hull as another wave of agony ripped through Tyler's consciousness. Trailing a splay of bloody handprints, she hauled herself towards her gun, pulled herself to a half crouch.

“Lose the weapon.”

Tyler dropped the gun to the floor where it clattered, skimming the red-brown pool at her feet.

“I'll save you the trouble of lying Tyler. It is Tyler isn't it?” The Company officer eyed her with distaste. Her gloved hand reached for the ship's display, but then withdrew. “We already know that you're carrying black market. No chip see?”

She held up a small Company tracking unit. It flickered red.

“I just don't get you lot. What makes you think you can live this way?” She stabbed a silicon tipped nail at the data screen. “Don't you think that now, of all times, you should be falling in step with the rest of society? We have rules. The rules are the glue. No glue, it all falls apart.” She took off her regulation helmet, running a hand through her hair.

“Point Zero is your worst fear isn't it?” snapped Tyler. “You're all about control and look

where it's got you. The same distance from imminent oblivion as me.”

The officer bent down, too close, gun in hand, stroking the barrel across Tyler's face. “I would love to blow you to oblivion but you're right. There really is no point is there? Just give me access to your cargo hold. Immediately.” She withdrew the gun, placing it in her holster as she stared down at Tyler. “Don't get up, I'll take myself down there.”

*It is pain unlike anything she has ever known. White hot, intense, all consuming. It tears through her body. The more she fights, the more it takes hold. Just as she thinks she can sustain this no longer, she realises that all she needs to do is relinquish control.*

The bunk creaked under Tyler's weight. She leant forward carefully, the pain in her abdomen still raw and swiped the panel that would slide back the radiation shields. Recently, she found herself repeating this procedure ritualistically at the end of each day. The shield slid back with a thud and Tyler moved closer to the viewing gallery window.

A thousand tiny islands of light glittered, each one a star near the end of its life. The combined glow diffused and distorted into something of breath-taking beauty. She didn't know the name of this cluster - didn't need to - the ship's computer took care of navigation and Tyler had grown lazy, letting it take her wherever she needed to be. Occasionally she'd glimpsed the gaseous indigo or orange rings of a planet, glad that she was removed enough to gain the emotional distance necessary in the wake its certain demise.

Somewhere, far away, but drawing inevitably closer as the universe shrank in upon itself, billions of intellibots calculated the exact date of the end of everything.

These last few moments had peeled away at hyper-speed, the sheer velocity blurring

everything around her. Once the black market cargo was delivered, payment received, the crew would immediately go spend it. There was no point hanging onto wealth now. They would find a casino, bar or whore house and cast it away readily, cramming as much sensorial pleasure into their bodies as their nervous systems could cope with.

“Would you like a repeat dose of the painkiller?” the ship asked. Tyler fingered her abdomen where the plasma stitches were starting to heal. There was a twinge of pain.

“No. Thank you.” She wanted to relish the discomfort.

“Would you care to see the...the human infant?”

Would I? Tyler stared intently at the glow of the dying star cluster and thought of the small being, the semi conscious collection of cells that she'd accidentally glimpsed on leaving the medibay. She couldn't fix her thoughts around the impossible as she stared at the shrinking field of stars, some faded to black dwarfs and others, supernovae, blazing out their last. She forced the memories to the darkest recesses of her brain's synapses. Like the archives of the ship, she would simply store them away, erase them from her active data banks and get on with the business in hand.

“No.” She pressed the switch and brought the radiation shutters down. “Give me an update on the situation in the cargo hold please.”

“The crew have managed to contain the Company officers. De Marquez believes he may have a way of discretely disposing of them.”

She leant forwards, caution prickling. The chief engineer's solutions were rarely straightforward, often dangerous.

“What does he have in mind?”

“He believes it may be possible to transport them through space-time. Conceal them from

Company eyes.”

“A parallel universe?” Tyler sighed. Something else she'd have to deal with.

*She stares at the small pink thing. It is alive. Secure in the nano-biotic protective atmosphere, it moves the four limbs and twitches occasionally. A fine down covers it's almost spherical skull. The outer layer, the derma is blotched and wrinkled. She peers closer through the inspection gate. What appears to be its mouth opens, and it emits a strangled sound. She steps back as the medi-droids appear and go about their duties.*

The ship neared the space station where they would make their next drop. The crew prepared themselves for the landing, planning what to do with the evening. Tyler checked her weaponry.

“Will you be coming?” De Marquez asked. The bars on this particular space station, one of the most outlawed and dangerous this side of the universe, were legendary, though not for the right reasons. He tested his com and stuffed a small backpack with provisions.

“Think I'll stay close to the ship. You know what these places are like. No love lost among thieves.” She knew this didn't sound like her. Normally she'd be the first to lead them off board, straight into the nearest bar or drug den. After all, what had she left to lose. The end was close and this party would be a good one.

De Marquez shrugged. “Call if you change your mind.”

*She moves closer to the infant. Its chest flutters rapidly and its outer layer, the skin, is now*

*less mottled, plumper. Leaning in, she absent-mindedly raises a finger to the casing of the nanobiotic atmosphere and watches as the small being clenches its fists. There are tiny nail beds at the end of each of its ten delicate digits.*

Tyler's client arrived in the loading bay of the space station, drew their own ship close. Once the cargo was off and she'd pocketed the hefty payment she closed the doors and watched as the ship blasted away from the landing area. Would there be time for another run? She doubted it.

Company research on the brains of dissenters had shown that, left to their own devices, humans would take one of three actions depending on how they were wired. They would either collapse beneath the weight of the knowledge, rebel and fight a battle they could never win, destroying only themselves in the process or dodge it, absurd in their attempts to outrun the certainty of death. Tyler had often wondered how she would react. Up until now, she suspected she'd been too intent on the next drop, avoiding the Company's policing ships. But now, that had finished, distractions done with, she glanced down at her shaking hands, the grubby nails, and thought of the child in the medi-bay.

The crew arrived back late. They talked of how the bars never closed now, the neon glow of the signs left to burn themselves out while the clientele would carry on drinking, imbibing drugs until their bodies crumpled through toxic overload. No one cared anymore. As she listened, she looked into the leaden eyes of those she'd once cared about and knew that they were lost, already dead.

She left, went to analyse the flight records although there was really no need. As she wrapped the charts and reams of calculations around her mind, a blanket of calculus and distance, the flight deck hummed gently, the creaks and whirs of the aged ship mechanic sighs. She kept the

radiation shutters down now, preferring the green illumination of dots and lines on the screens. It was easier this way.

In the early hours, the ship contacted her with an urgent message. She was glad of the distraction, the knowledge of what lay in the medi-bay was making her calculations of the ship's transit uncharacteristically messy.

“There's another craft following us.”

She turned to the charts before her. How hadn't she spotted it?

“Can we lose it?”

“I don't know. De Marquez used a lot of the power reserves when he attempted to transport the Company officers cross multiverse.”

She examined the drifting illuminations on the screen. “Can you identify it?”

“A Company ship. One of their fleet of elite battle cruisers.”

The main com device crackled with distortion until a voice could be discerned. Tyler held her breath.

“This is Officer Drake of the Intergalactic Company. We have a warrant for your arrest. You must allow us to dock immediately or we will open fire.”

*The child sleeps, an idyl of peace amongst the blood and disorder. His chest rises and falls gently and his tiny eyelids flicker. He dreams. She puts her hands to the protective nano-sphere and presses the sensor that will open it. For one moment, she fears she will hurt him. After all, he has never left the safety of the synthetic cocoon. This is all he has known. She holds him close and his skin brushes her face. He shifts and settles as she carries him from the medi-bay, holding him close,*

*shielding him from the smoke and panic.*

De Marquez's equipment was as he'd left it. Holding the child with one arm she examined the console and wires. It looked preposterous, unsafe. Did it even work? The ship was now almost in complete darkness, the computer blasted into coma, leaking power, leaving a trail of energy across the shrinking void of space behind them. Tyler wondered if the ship resembled a dying star and if so, whether it was fading to nothingness or burning up in glory. She cradled her son to her chest and stepped into the transportation area. For the briefest moment she questioned the wisdom of her actions but as the child's eyes opened and she saw, for the first time, that his eyes were blue, she touched the transporter buttons and prayed.

*Giant black holes, the unseen bogeymen of science, grow hungrier. Super hot gases dance around them, whirling dervishes in the dark as matter coalesces and is consumed. The firmament grows hotter, brighter. Everything erupts into radiation and fire. Whole galaxies explode into nothingness. The whole of the universe condenses towards an unseen single point.*

*In death, all returns to the beginning.*