

GRUNT WORK

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“So I’m qualified now. Technically. I guess. They signed me off as a helmsman, even if the captain and Morales are still grouchy about everything I do. That only took three months. Everyone is still full of talk about how I’m going to have to step up. Step up to what?”

“I don’t know how I’m supposed to contribute around here if they don’t train me and don’t trust me to touch anything.”

--Crewman Apprentice Tanner Malone

Unsent letter, May 2275

Sensors detected the *Saguaro* long before anyone could possibly spot her with unaided eyes. The bridge had her course, her speed, standard transponders, and her trail of debris and gases. *Saguaro* arced through an unnatural course well off the usual traffic lanes into empty space.

It wasn’t until *St. Jude* came close enough for good visuals that *Saguaro*’s full state of distress became clear. The long and boxy freight hauler burned along at high speed—but also in an ugly spin. Viewed up close through the transparent canopy at the front of *St. Jude*’s bridge, *Saguaro*’s course took on a steady and intense spiral. Gases invisible to the naked eye until now left a wild, light grey corkscrew in the starship’s wake.

Standing at the back of the bridge, the on-duty helmsman and youngest member of *St. Jude*’s crew swallowed hard. Movement of his own white dagger-shaped ship could leave his stomach uneasy, and he often felt tired while underway. Tanner generally didn’t get truly sick unless he went outside the ship. Generally.

Saguaro’s wild course presented a bad omen likely to challenge his track record. Ordinarily, he’d have handed his post off to the junior ops specialist by now, but Harper was on leave. Tanner had the spot until told otherwise.

“That doesn’t look good,” said the XO.

“Think they might have undersold that distress call,” said the skipper. Stevens sat in the chair mounted against the port bulkhead of *St. Jude*’s bridge opposite Lt. Gagne’s to starboard. His bald head tilted back. “Nothing else from them yet?”

“No sir,” replied Tanner. He turned to the astrogation table that took up the rear of the small bridge compartment. A small globe of holographic light hovered to one side, presenting the ship’s two light-minute “bubble.” He’d shifted it off from the center now that they were close to their objective. Nothing else of relevance appeared in the globe, anyway. Tanner looked to scrolling text and images displaying the ship’s stats and the original distress call. “We’ve still only got the same repeating message. External lights are flashing an SOS, too.” At a thought, Tanner shifted one screen to focus on the gas trails. “The main thrusters are the only things firing now. It doesn’t look like any lateral or maneuvering jets are going. They aren’t stopping that spin but nothing is actively pushing it, either.”

Looking back over his shoulder, Tanner saw Stevens turn his attention to the older man at the center of the bridge. Ops Specialist 1st Class Reed leaned on the console staring at the instrument panel until Stevens cleared his throat. Then he blinked, looked over his shoulder, and nodded. “He’s right, sir,” said Reed. “Something probably killed their laterals and started that spin.”

“We’re close enough for live voice now,” said Stevens. “Let’s try talking.”

Reed crossed the two steps from the central helm panel to the astrogation table. “You know what to do?” he muttered. Tanner nodded. Reed gestured to the comms button, glanced once over his shoulder, and leaned in a little more. “Don’t talk to the skipper unless he says your name,” he added quietly. “Talk to me or the XO, not him.”

Tanner stopped himself from looking over his shoulder, but he couldn’t hold his incredulous expression back from Reed. He’d been on *St. Jude* for three months now. As rough as his relations and performance had been, he was a qualified helmsman. Whether or not Reed liked him, he at least recognized that. This disdain from Stevens was new. “We’re not even a meter apart,” Tanner whispered.

Reed rolled his eyes. “He thinks it’s an etiquette thing. Anyway, give it a shot.” He turned back to the helm and the ship’s officers.

Voice communications began not with a verbal call-out, but automated signals. Tanner ran the computer through its commands and got a handshake tone right away. At least that much was working. “Vessel *Saguaro*, vessel *Saguaro*, this is the Archangel Navy Corvette *St. Jude*. We are answering your distress call. Please respond.”

“How long did you say they’ve been on this course?” wondered Gagne. He leaned forward to pore over sensor data.

“Maybe an hour, at least. If they can’t correct in that time...” Reed shook his head.

Tanner repeated the callout. “We are on scene, please respond.”

“Hello? Hello?” came a feminine voice in response. Stevens and Gagne looked back, but Tanner saw it only on a reflection against the backboard. Neither got up to take over. “*S-St. Jude*, this is... uh... *Saguaro*. Unh. Mayday. We’re... we’re in trouble... helm... helm out.”

“*Saguaro*, we have you in visual range,” said Tanner. “We are on an intercept course. What is your status?”

“Helm lost. Lost helm control. Engines... blew. Unh. Sorry. Dizz... so dizzy.”

“Yeah, they look it,” murmured Gagne. “Barely holding it together, I’d bet.”

“Sorry,” said the voice from *Saguaro*. “Trying to remember how to report. Status is... uh...”

“*Saguaro*, forget the protocol. Just talk to us,” said Tanner. He didn’t notice the captain’s head snap back with a glare. “We’re here to help. What happened?”

“Oh man,” she replied with some relief. “Something in engineering exploded. People got hurt. Shit flew everywhere, all kinds of stuff broke.” She grunted again, her voice still unsteady. “We vented for the fire but it’s a mess. Most of our engineers are hurt. Helm control is gone. We’re all dizzy as fuck. Can’t fix anything. Can’t shut down the thrusters. I don’t know why.”

“Ask them—” Stevens began, but Tanner was already ahead of him.

“Do you have gravity and oxygen?”

“Yeah. Mostly. Air’s running out. Gravity, yeah, but it’s damaged. The spin is killing us.”

“Right,” said Stevens. “XO, tell the chief and Freeman. We’re going over. Send Flores for the wounded. Reed, bring us in. Malone, tell them we’re going to board.”

The others set to their tasks. Tanner swallowed hard again, glancing back to the helm. Though Reed stood at the hardware controls, he used little of them. His hands worked the holo screen overlay along the dashboard instead. It made sense. Everyone here was a skilled pilot—except Tanner, who was barely competent if one stretched the definition—but this was a job for the computer.

The closer they got and the clearer their view became, the harder that job looked.

“*Saguaro*, we’re coming for a link-up,” said Tanner. “Can you send us your manifest?”

“Manifest... uh... We’re bringing back... ore from, uh, Augustine.”

“Understood,” said Tanner. He tried to hold a patient tone. *St. Jude* kicked into a new level of acceleration and turned hard enough that he felt it, too. He glanced only once at spiraling stars in

the bridge canopy screen and the image of *Saguaro* turning through space directly ahead. It was enough. He didn't need to watch his own ship catch up. Specifically, his stomach didn't need him to watch it. "How many crew and passengers?"

"F-fourteen. I don't know how many are hurt. I'm alone up here."

"Acknowledged. We're coming."

"Landing gear extended, course and speed locked," muttered Reed. This much talking seemed like an effort for him, but his nerve never wavered. Tanner thought the old salt's grumpy default mood might have the advantage of carrying him through stress without panic.

"Guess we're about to find out if the guidance and magnetic upgrades are worth the priority the Navy put on them," said Gagne. He, too, seemed steady, except for the way his hand gripped the armrest of his chair. "Thought it was all a little silly until now."

"Me, too," admitted the captain. "Reed?"

"Closing in," said Reed.

Tanner saw it all happening on the astrogation table screens. The urge to look out at the canopy got the better of him, anyway. *St. Jude* rolled and accelerated into the spiral of gas left by *Saguaro*'s path to match *Saguaro*'s spin. The much larger freighter curved into sight along the port side and then the bottom of the canopy as *St. Jude* closed in. Tanner had felt the cutter climb to a high sublight speed more than a few times since coming aboard, but he'd never felt the ship shake before now. Loose gear in drawers and secure mounts rattled against containers and nerves.

Without ever turning his head from his work, Reed hit the collision alarm.

Tanner gripped the overhead safety bar and braced himself against the astrogation table. The captain and XO dug into their chairs. Whatever Reed did, Tanner missed it as *St. Jude* clamped onto the larger ship with an all-encompassing thud. The jolt ran through Tanner's whole body. He nearly lost his grip on the safety bar.

The roar and the vibration worsened. Tanner heard Stevens order something about steadying and securing, but the tremors of *Saguaro* and *St. Jude*'s own maneuvering thrusters drowned much of it out. Tanner also had his own internal struggle to master. He swallowed hard again and again, but reached for a plastic bag he kept in one pocket of his thin vac suit for any inevitable failure.

He held on for now. So did his ship. The astrogation table showed him both ships easing out of the spiral with the effort of *St. Jude's* maneuvering jets. A glance at the canopy confirmed the same. *St. Jude* couldn't fully control the larger freighter, but she could straighten and steer with effort. Slowing *Saguaro* down would require an engine shutdown from the freighter. Presumably the freighter's crew would have tried that by now if they could.

"Chief, are you good to go?" Stevens asked. Tanner looked for the chief engineer on the bridge only to realize that was silly. He had to be speaking on the intercom.

"We're set, but we're stretching thin," Chief O'Malley responded. "This is hard enough on our own engines. I can't leave only one engineer and the deckies are gonna have their hands full."

"What do you need?"

"We can do most of it but we could use another pair of hands to juggle stuff," said BM1 Freeman. Tanner saw his boss in the cargo bay on an internal screen at his table along with most of the deck hands and engineers. Everyone was suited up to go through the airlock. "Someone else here on this side would be a help."

"Malone, head down," said Gagne. "We can cover up here. Suit up for zero-g as soon as you get to the cargo bay. We don't know what they'll need over there. Don't worry about the helm changeover, I've got it."

"Aye, aye, sir." Tanner tapped out on the ship's log and headed for the "ladder" off the bridge—more like a steep stairwell, but the Navy had its words for everything. His path took him past the captain's chair. With his orders, he didn't stop to ask permission to leave. Though it was the correct decision, he didn't escape cleanly.

"Malone," Stevens barked. Tanner turned to find Stevens scowling down at him from his chair. "You do *not* tell anyone to forget about protocol over an open channel unless instructed. Is that understood?"

"Yes sir," Tanner answered.

The captain's mouth tensed like he had more to say, but he shook his head. "Get going."

No one crossed Tanner's path as he hustled down and across two decks to the corvette's cargo bay. From what O'Malley said, at least a pair of the engineers would be in their usual corner of the ship. Both officers and Reed remained on the bridge. Everyone else had to be at Tanner's destination—though a flashing light and Reed's voice announced things had already gone a bit

farther than that. “All hands, ready for cargo bay decompression,” Reed mumbled across the ship’s intercom. “Internal airlock conditions set.”

Tanner hadn’t even made it through the last hatch to the bay. He stopped to run through the procedure in his mind: double-check hatch seals, double-check personal gear, vent the passage before the last hatch, wait for the all-clear light. *St. Jude* still hadn’t run more than a handful of drills since he came aboard. He’d read all the ship’s manuals—probably making him the only one in the crew to have done so—but he had to hope the crew’s practices didn’t differ from the books. No one had told him otherwise.

He entered the cargo bay to utter silence with only a few shipmates remaining. SK2 Flores slipped down through the airlock hatch in the deck with a medical bag over his shoulders. Normally the ship’s cook stayed on board as their primary emergency medical tech, but reported injuries put Flores on the boarding team this time. Though everyone was in vac suits and zero-g harnesses with faceplates down, Tanner recognized his fellow crewman Heifer, GM3 Miller, and BM2 Morales. The three helped Flores over and through *St. Jude*’s artificial gravity “floor.”

Heifer followed after Flores. Only as he got moving did Morales look up in sudden surprise. He pointed to Tanner urgently, then tapped his helmet to connect them on a direct channel. “Did you vent that passage before you came in?” Morales demanded.

“Yeah. It’s good.” Tanner wasn’t surprised the BM2 would reflexively expect a fuck-up. He didn’t dwell on it. “What can I do?”

“You stay in here with Miller for now. Freeman went over to get on their bridge and see if he can help get that under control. Heifer, Stumpy, and I are taking a look at the outside of the ship to see if we need to seal anything off from this end. The chief and the engineers are already inside. You’re working for them. Get tied in on channel twenty-four and wait until someone calls for you. I don’t know what anyone might need.”

“Gotcha,” said Tanner. He scooped a zero-g harness out of the racks and set to strapping it on. The harness amounted to little more than straps loaded with nitrogen maneuvering capsules and magnetic clamps. It made for decent mobility in zero-g.

Miller got down on his hands and knees to poke his head through the open hatch for a look. The sight and the vacuum in the cargo bay left Tanner with plenty of questions. “We’re not doing a vestibule?”

“Not in this,” Morales fumed. “Why the fuck would we put up a whole vestibule?”

Tanner bit back a retort. Given rank and stature, he couldn't get away with arguing on a good day, let alone now. "They've got wounded. What if we need to transfer?"

"Then we deal with it when that happens. Hey." Morales stared at him with dark eyes. "You need to keep your shit together right now. Don't fuck anything up. Got me?"

"I'm good to go." Tanner doubted Morales believed him, but nothing else he said would assure his biggest critic, anyway. Proving him correct, Morales threw one more glare through the lenses of his faceplate before he went through the hatch.

Straightening up to make room for Morales, Miller gave Tanner only a shrug before he found a couple of containers to lean on. Tanner tied himself into the crew's channel as instructed, but heard no chatter. He flipped over to a contact channel and touched Miller's arm. "Anything else to catch me up on?"

The gunner's mate looked back like it was a weird question. "Why the hell are you asking me? You were on the bridge."

"Because you've been down here and you're already on the channel. I just got here."

"So? Guess you should pay more attention," said Miller.

Tanner wondered if Miller should aim his critique at himself. With nothing better to do, Tanner double-checked the settings on his zero-g harness and listened for chatter.

"I've got two casualties near main engineering," Flores reported. "Both have burns and some bleeding. They've gotten some first aid but I'm checking them out now."

"Understood," said Stevens. "Chief, what's the situation in engineering?"

"Not good," replied O'Malley. "Something went boom and sent shrapnel everywhere. This is a two-level space and half the catwalks are fucked up. Still a lot of smoke. We're trying to get around to the problem."

"Chief, I think the emergency shut-off is stuck in place," Wells spoke up. Like Tanner, Wells hadn't been to a rating school yet, but he'd established himself as a competent enough apprentice technician after a year on the ship. "I can see the panel from here but I can't get to it. There's a hunk of metal stuck inside, and it's sparking."

"Lots of sparks in here," grumbled O'Malley. "Freeman, are you at the bridge yet? Can you try an engine shutdown from there?"

"They've tried," the head bo'sun answered after a pause. "I think I know what's wrong. Who's in the cargo bay?"

“Malone and Miller,” Tanner spoke up when the gunner’s mate didn’t answer. Miller looked up from the open hatch with a start.

“Miller, bring over one of the emergency battery units,” said Freeman. “Half the panels in here are dead. Maybe we can bring them back up.”

With his head and shoulders rolling in annoyance, Miller turned pulled the requested battery off one of the supply racks. He pushed through the hatch without a second glance to the last man in the bay.

Tanner stared down the hatch. With the ships attached by *St. Jude*’s two-meter landing struts, the view offered no more than a grey hull under the corvette’s running lights. He got down on his hands and knees, mindfully activating the magnetic relays on both to keep him glued to the deck. Safe and secure, Tanner leaned over for a better look.

Wisps of smoke so thin as to go nearly unnoticed whipped past. A hunk of broken metal shot by and disappeared out into the void. Then Tanner saw a break in the hulls of the two ships, and in that break he saw stars—spinning stars. His brain threatened to spin with them.

He jerked back into the bay. Nothing made a sound in the airless compartment, though the vibrations of the deck through his feet, knees and hand made up for some of it. Warning lights blinked in silent reminders of the ship’s situation as if he could forget.

This was new. In the three months he’d been on board, Tanner had been on boarding after boarding—all technically unqualified—as refugees from Hashem poured into Archangel space. That was a crisis, but it was one of big numbers and people who’d escaped danger. Now his ship had danger right in arm’s reach. People were hurt. They’d lost air, power, and who knew what else. Tanner wanted to help. He also wanted to stay the hell out of the way.

He reminded himself of how ill-trained he still was. Basic prepared him well, sure, but as with the communications channels and the airlocks, every ship had its own expectations and practices. Relatively few had been made clear even now, three months in. This was a real emergency. He didn’t know if he was ready for it. He didn’t know how to help.

There’s gotta be something I can do. Something I won’t fuck up.

“Shit. Malone, you still there in the cargo bay?” called O’Malley.

“Yeah. Yes, chief.”

“Open up Locker Three. It’s got a couple of big yellow damage control bags. They aren’t that heavy. Bring ‘em both over to engineering. We need them right away.”

Tanner already had the locker open before the chief was finished speaking. As promised, he had no real trouble shouldering one and carrying the other. They felt stuffed full but relatively light. In his three months on board, he hadn't opened one of these, nor trained with the contents. He didn't have time to peek now. "On my way."

St. Jude's artificial gravity floor always required a fight. Tanner always won, but it took effort and inflicted vertigo every time. With no vestibule to pass between ships, Tanner also had to pull a line from the umbilical cord reel immediately outside the airlock and attach it to himself before coming out. He didn't mind the safety, but it was one more unpleasant transition on top of the usual unpleasant sequence.

"Malone, exiting now," he announced. It was in the books. It was part of his training. No one else had said it on their way out—something he realized only after he spoke. Grimacing, Tanner shoved himself out of the airlock and toward a hull hardly any farther than his natural height. The necessary muscle work still left him slamming against it hard. Thankfully, the relays in his suit and harness held him fast.

A short crawl along speeding metal brought him to *Saguaro's* external hatch. Though all the condition lights were out, Tanner knew the hatch worked. Everyone else had gone through. Miller used it only minutes ago. Resorting to the manual control, Tanner turned and wrenched the handle—and flew back as the hatch snapped open with a rush of smoky air.

On pure instinct, he let the blast carry him upward. That sent him into *St. Jude's* underside, where his magnetic relays once again held him fast. His head and his stomach reeled in opposite directions. This was bad, but at least he clung to a solid surface. His insides didn't feel so solid at all anymore, and that was an even more immediate threat.

The rush of air ended as soon as it began. The airlock had still been pressurized, but sealed on the other side. Lights inside revealed a safe refuge. With his heart pounding with adrenaline and his guts screaming of revolt, Tanner sucked in one more breath and shoved himself across the gap into the airlock. He swallowed hard enough to choke himself as he wrenched the hatch shut behind him and jammed the pressurization button on the inside.

Air rushed in. It likely wasn't enough, but he couldn't wait any longer. Tanner shoved back the faceplate on his helmet and wretched his guts out all over the cramped deck. He gasped for breath, even turning his face into the vent to make sure he didn't choke, but at least the one ugly surge was enough to clear his stomach.

His heart still thudded in his chest. Every lethal possible outcome of his airlock accident flew through his mind. The embarrassing ones came immediately after: he had a good hour's worth of air on him and the crew wouldn't have abandoned him, but he'd surely have been humiliated. Reprimanded, too, given the patterns of his supervisors. Then again, he might really have been killed outright.

Tanner realized the truth as he pushed himself off the bulkhead. The airlock's internal lights and readings worked on their independent batteries. This wasn't his mistake. Someone had left the airlock pressurized on both sides.

Fucking Miller.

He looked down to the mess on the deck. No doubt he'd catch hell for this. He didn't have time for it, though. Not with all this going on. Tanner popped the second hatch of the airlock and pushed on into a passageway not nearly as bright and welcoming as the entrance. Half the lights were out. The rest flickered, revealing a thin haze of smoke. Reflective paint along the bulkheads revealed the way to engineering with labels in English, Spanish, and Chinese characters.

The signs even listed the distance in meters. *Saguaro* was much bigger than *St. Jude*. Tanner broke into a jog.

"Malone! Malone, you there?" Flores called out over the link. "You've got DC bags, right?"

"Yeah. I'm inside now. On my way to engineering."

"Chief, I need him, too. Only for a second. He's got first aid shit in there."

"Go," said O'Malley.

"Right outside engineering," said Flores. "We're in the water pump room. Hurry!"

Tanner broke into a run. He practically leaped down the steep ladder well on his way, worried what might happen if he delayed. One intersection left him spinning around looking for signs. Another had him coughing from smoke until he slammed his faceplate down again. He found his destination opposite a hatch broken halfway open by some kind of blast with debris scattered across the deck. At least he wouldn't have to search for engineering later.

The pump room opened with no trouble. Flores stood over a woman in a vac suit laid out on a work table with blood pooled at her hip. Two more of *Saguaro*'s crew sat against a bulkhead, one gingerly holding a blue cooling bag against a blackened and bloody arm and the other pressing thick gauze at the side of his head.

“Malone. Okay,” Flores grunted. “There should be first aid kits at the top of the bags. I need one. Already running out of shit from my own bag.”

Tanner opened up the bag and found the boxy kit as expected. He also found large, flexible cubes wrapped in foil—and an assortment of wooden wedges and cones.

His mother had been a damage controller in the Union Fleet. She’d told him about this. Basic training made him work with wood blocks and hammers, but basic had often been crude and crazy. Not for the first time, Tanner swallowed a thought about how often military life and space travel turned to primitive solutions.

He set the first aid kit on the table. “What else? Anything?”

“Yeah, hold her down by her shoulders,” said Flores.

“Huh?”

“Aw shit,” grumbled the woman, but she set her head against the table.

“Hold her shoulders down. This is gonna hurt.”

Tanner did as he asked. “Okay, but can’t you sedate—?”

Flores reached into the tear in her vac suit under her arm. The woman screamed. Tanner kept her down as she tried to thrash until Flores tugged a piece of bloody metal away and cast it aside. He checked a holographic screen set on the table at her hip and let out a sigh of relief. The ship’s cook held a thick pad of gauze against the wound. “That was too close to her lung to leave it there,” he explained. “No time for sedatives. I’ll suture her up and give her painkillers now. Go get this stuff to the chief.”

Though stunned, Tanner took up the bags. Outside, another crewman from *Saguaro* beat him to the broken hatch. Rather than trying to open the broken portal, the man simply crawled inside. Tanner pushed one damage control bag ahead of himself and squeezed through to follow with the other on his back. He came onto a black catwalk overlooking a smoky room no brighter than the passageways except for the occasional flash of sparks from broken systems.

“Boss, I’m back,” announced the civilian crewman. “Where do you want me to—shit!”

The catwalk creaked and gave way. Tanner spun to grab the crewman by the wrist, hauling the man back onto his more stable side of the platform. Metal broke and tumbled off into a mess of spilled chemicals and sparks five meters below. Tanner held onto a man half again his size until the crewman got a grip on the catwalk with his free hand and began pulling upward. “Holy shit,” the man gasped. “Holy shit.”

“You good?” Tanner asked once the stranger got his hip over the ledge.

“Yeah. Yeah. Glad you were here.”

“No worries.”

“Malone, you here yet?” called O’Malley.

“Just now, chief!” he called. “Where are you?”

“Same level you came in! Follow my voice down the catwalk. It’s solid over here. Split-level. I’m behind the converter assembly.”

Tanner had no idea what that was, but O’Malley’s voice was enough. The chief stood with his hands inside a massive piece of machinery. Not far away, Wes struggled to sort out a mess of broken cables. Leone, another junior engineer, dug through a tool closet nearby on some urgent errand. “How can I help?” asked the new arrival.

“Open up the bags,” said O’Malley. Tanner obeyed. “Take out one of those big foil-wrapped packages. Okay, see those foam sheets inside?” O’Malley nodded at the deck. “Need you to sop up all this oily shit all over the place. Some of it’s flammable.”

Tanner blinked. “Flammable?”

“Yeah. Crazy, isn’t it? Fluids for some secondary system. Somebody’s getting sued. Anyway we’ve got way too many sparks in here to mess around and we can’t shut everything off yet. We need the power to cut off the power, basically. Can’t vent the compartment to cut off the air with all the punctures in the bulkhead, either. Just start laying that stuff down and get the worst of it.”

“You got it,” said Tanner.

The foam absorbed and expanded quickly as Tanner hustled to stuff one pad into place after another. The engine room offered an abundance of dangerous chemicals in need of care. It wasn’t until Tanner broke into the second bag and got down on his hands and knees under the converter assembly to swab out more chemicals that he thought twice about his task.

Hell of a long way to come for janitorial work, thought Tanner.

“Hey, chief?” he asked. “I’m sopping it up, but now we’ve got a big pile of flammable pads. I probably ought to get all this out of here. Gonna need more for the lower compartment, too.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” O’Malley grunted. “You’ll have to go back for more. Take all the used pads out along the way, would you? Dump ‘em out the airlock. Nobody’s gonna care.”

* * *

Tanner scrubbed and wiped as fast as he could. The light made it easier to work here than anywhere else in the ship. Thankfully, none of this mess had frozen up. In seconds, everything transferred to a scrunched-up foam pad—one among many bunched up in his fists. He had the deck cleared when the internal warning light flashed in the silent, decompressed airlock.

Morales and Stumpy loomed outside. They stopped, apparently surprised to see him. Morales tapped his helmet to switch to the deck department channel. “What’s going on?”

“On my way back to the cargo bay to get more gear,” said Tanner. He gestured with his fat bundle of chemically-soaked pads. “Throwing out some trash, too.”

Stumpy watched Tanner hurl the bundle out sideways into space. At this speed, they’d float off into infinity. “Hey, Freeman said you did the right thing with the open channel talk,” he admitted grudgingly. “That saved us time. Don’t worry what the captain said.”

“Keep moving. We’ve got work to do,” said Morales.

“Right,” said Tanner. He made way in the airlock, tilting his head toward Stumpy. “Thanks.”

“Whatever. Guess it’s about time you did *one* thing right,” Stumpy grumbled.

Tanner took up a detached umbilical cord and jumped for his own ship. No one else noticed, but it was a little easier this time.