

One Way Trip in a Stasis Suit

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THE COMMANDER'S VOICE was a false calm. Mechanical. He was already dead and he knew it.

“All personnel, evacuate sections one through six. Repeat, all personnel ...”

The warning came scant minutes before a cascade failure destroyed half the station and killed much of the crew.

In the preceding 300-odd seconds, I took what little action I could. Averting the imminent catastrophe was certainly beyond my ability. But I had two jobs: serve and protect. I wasn't going to sit on my hands and watch. I headed to Compensation Engineering. I could at least protect the compensation drive.

Or maybe even ...

No. It had been too soon to even think about that.

I turned down the long gangway to Compensation and saw Breen, the backup compensation engineer, several steps ahead of me.

He stood in silence, looking out the window.

That's when it hit me. Silence. The commander's voice at last cut off. Whatever doom had been coming was at last here.

I went to the window beside Breen. We were on a remote connector gangway on the large, open network of the station, and more than a kilometer from the failing piles. Distance meant safety, for the moment, so count us among the lucky ones.

But it also meant a clear view of the horror show.

We saw every bit of it. The station's underbelly glowed a red death, and then fire plumed from fresh seams in the superstructure as the station cracked apart. Blue-orange plasma swirled silently into vacuum, and jetsam followed. Equipment. Personal items. Garbage.

Bodies.

Not bodies, I told myself. People.

And space suits that might contain people.

I burned with equal parts rage and failure.

Serve the crew. Protect the station. I had managed neither.

Amid the debris cloud expanding from the wrecked station I saw three stasis suits, but even from this distance I could see the beacon on each flashed red-to-orange-to-red: "Occupant dead; resuscitation possible if attempted immediately."

At last I tugged at Breen, my voice jagged. "Breen."

He let himself linger a minute longer, then finally tore himself away. His eyes were wide, frantic. "My wife ..." he said.

If she had been in that, she was certainly gone. I didn't need to say it.

Instead the next words out my mouth were something of a surprise, even to me, as I uttered them. A deep breath, then calmly: "Are you prepared to break the law? Maybe save Xiang?" Maybe save everyone.

Breen blinked at those words. He really saw me for the first time then. He registered my face, my uniform, my badge. He stood up straighter.

He glanced down the corridor. He knew, of course, exactly what I was asking. One of my duties on this station was to keep the compensation drive from being used in the manner I was now suggesting.

But there it was. One miserable chance of a way out.

A whisper: “Yes.”

“Then it has to be now,” I urged.

We still had air, and by some grace our section of the station was still spinning, so gravity too. We made our way down the long, curved gangway to Compensation. There were too many obstacles and it was too dark to run properly. We made a fast scramble.

“You really think you can do this ...?” I asked Breen. Training taught me just the basics of compensation engineering, enough to know the sanctioned uses of the drive, and the criminal ones as well.

An uncertain pause. Then, “Yes. Xiang” — he said his wife’s name in a whisper — “has a file with detailed notes. She and I discussed it at length.”

“But you’ve never done it before?” I asked. Not exactly an accusation.

“Us?” A pause ... too long? “No. You’ve got to wear a stasis suit to even try it, and even then the process might still be fatal. The acceleration differentials on sending back something as small as a person ... I figure about half an hour is the outside limit for a nonlethal trip. It’s extremely dangerous even at that.”

I didn’t need to be a compensation engineer to know it was dangerous. Time travel was never intended for such purposes. Used responsibly, to compensate for time lost during near-light travel — that’s one thing. It keeps society running on the same clock. Keeps humanity glued together.

But to use time travel for this? It was illegal for a reason.

Even so, to go back and warn the station that this calamity was coming? Yes, it was worth the risk. And the criminal offense? It was certainly better than doing nothing.

As we made our way in the dim light, the corridor whined from some unseen torque. We each staggered, then continued, reminded that what was left of the station was likely not out of danger.

The gangway settled into silence. At last we reached its end, the alpha airlock to Compensation. The hatch opened — full atmosphere on the other side — and then swung wide out of Breen’s hands.

A body had been propped against the other side of the hatch. It slumped forward, into Breen's open arms. It was heavy, and Breen let it spill onto the deck.

A stasis suit.

The suit's beacon flashed yellow-yellow-yellow: "Seek immediate medical attention."

Breen turned to me. We locked anxious eyes, our faces jaundiced in the flashing light.

Is this me in the suit? I wondered. Or is this you?

Could Breen be thinking any differently?

...

Wordlessly we each knelt at either end of the body to carry it. I took the armpits, Breen grasped around the bent knees.

We lifted. Suddenly, oddly, we were in a tug-of-war. After a moment the body slumped backed to the ground.

"What the hell?" Breen demanded. "Where are you going?"

"Getting this out of the way so we can close this lock and keep moving. What are ... Surely you're not taking it with us?"

"How can we leave him? It's one of *us*. It's got to be. You know that."

As a law officer I deal with facts, and on this point I could not say for certain. The faceplate was engaged, in full life support mode. The bulk of the suit hid all but the grossest features — it could have been nearly anyone on the station.

That it was very possibly me in the suit, what did it matter for the task at hand?

But seconds were bleeding away. Our destination wasn't too far off. Breen was the only person on the station other than Xiang who could work the compensation drive off spec. I definitely needed him more than he needed me. "Fine."

We pushed the body through the airlock. The Compensation Engineering module was well lit, as we had seen during our approach. If it didn't have power, this whole exercise would have been pointless.

We let the body down for a moment. While I closed the airlock, Breen uselessly tried to reach his wife over the communication channels. We regained our burden and pressed on the last several meters, cursing gravity now with every step.

We arrived at the compensation drive controls with our breath jagged from exhaustion and nerves.

Breen pointed wordlessly at the empty suit kept in the room for emergencies. The serial matched the string of numbers on the body we had left at our feet.

So that suit was going back with someone in it.

In nervous relief, sweat broke out on the back of my neck. Prematurely, but I couldn't help it.

This might work. Or it *would* work. Or it *had* worked.

I turned to the compensation controls, grateful to have Breen with me as I considered the array with utter bafflement. "How long to set up?" I asked.

Breen didn't answer. He was looking at the figure on the floor.

"Orange now ..." he said, almost absently. Trip-yellow lights had deteriorated to yellow-orange-yellow at some point. I hadn't noticed. Things were looking worse for the suited time traveller. And Breen's focus was not where it needed to be. Time was precious.

"Breen!" I snapped.

He turned to me. "Jesus, Mandar." Then catching himself: "Officer."

"You have two choices. Pick either, but make it fast. One: You can pull the faceplate and see who that is, but that's going to interrupt life support to the head. If this guy has brain trauma or a collapsed lung or who-knows-what, it'll kill him. Two: Get it through your head that it *does not matter* who is in this suit."

"Of course it matters. How do we know who to send?"

"We send who we send. Checking now to find out doesn't change that. And if it's *me*," — I stressed the word hard — "I'd appreciate you not killing me just to satisfy your curiosity."

Breen's shoulders relaxed a degree. Had he visualized me in the suit? Had it given him a small comfort to think of that body as mine?

I took equal comfort in thinking of Breen as a coward.

"OK." He turned to the control and got to work.

He called for Xiang. No reply. Station communications were still dead.

"Go to the common archive and look for Xiang's notes," he said. "It should only take a few minutes for me to set things up, but she has made some calculations based on unorthodox m and t combinations. Those will save some time."

He uttered his next remark with forced casualness, like it was an offhand thought instead of one that was plaguing him. "And one of us is going to have to suit up."

In that moment I hated him.

I was going to go. I was *always* going to go.

But have some self-respect, Breen.

I kept to myself the fact that I had already volunteered. Let him sweat a little longer.

I found Xiang's notes and rattled off her figures as Breen requested them. He made the necessary adjustments, and at his direction I cleared a few bits of loose debris from a spot on the deck: locus zero-zero-zero-zero, relative. My platform for a one-way trip backward.

"Mandar!"

I turned. Breen pointed at the stasis suit on the floor.

Its beacon wasn't flashing a series of lights any longer.

It was solid. Blood red. Unequivocal death.

Breen knelt to release the faceplate.

"Stop," I said. He obeyed, a reflex. "Why? What will you do differently when you learn who that is?"

"If it's me, I'll ..."

"You'll what? Not go?" Paradoxes were the farthest thing from my mind.

Duty, Breen. The station depends on what we do next.

“Try to do something ... different?” he offered weakly. “Save the station.”

“But maybe the station *is* saved. You’ve been asking yourself the wrong question the whole time. *Who’s in the suit?* doesn’t matter. *Did they succeed?* is the question. The five-minute warning that the station had, maybe that came from whoever went back in time. Maybe that was already the difference between partial and total destruction. We have no choice. We do this.”

“Stop me if you want,” he said at last, eyes flicking to the weapon on my hip.

I indulged the thought of it. But how would harming him help me? “Get on with it,” I said.

The emergency medical mechanisms built into the stasis suit had already disengaged the corpse inside. The faceplate came off with a few clicks and a wet, sucking sound.

I have seen some profoundly unsettling things in my tenure in space, but I suspected I was not prepared for this. I braced myself.

Hollow eyes stared at the ceiling.

Breen let out a low sob.

It was Xiang.

I exhaled in a moment of confused relief. “Breen ...” I said. “I’m sorry.”

Xiang’s face was horribly discolored. She must have made the trip with stasis settings off — how else to be aware and able to send a warning upon her arrival? When she activated the suit, it was far too late to save herself.

Breen lifted her limp body, suit and all, cradling Xiang tenderly in his arms. “No,” he said, softly.

“I’m so sorry,” I said.

The realization took him just a moment.

His head snapped up and he looked around, back in the direction we came, toward the alpha airlock, then up to beta and charlie.

He had it now. “She’s still alive,” he said, urgently.

Yes, she certainly was. And coming any minute through one of the three entrances into Compensation Engineering.

He had a chance to save her.
To not let her go back.
“So, so sorry, Breen,” I said.
I raised my sidearm to his temple. It brought me no pleasure.
Breen collapsed atop his beloved.
How much time did I have until Xiang arrived? And could I expect better from her than from Breen? In truth I hadn’t known either very well.
But given the sacrifices made by the woman on the floor, I dared hope.
I dragged Breen to the far end of the room, away from any of the entrance paths, and I covered him with a blanket from a hypothermia kit. That would be one less distraction for Xiang. A small mercy.
Little could be done about Xiang’s corpse. I rested the faceplate gingerly over her wrecked face. No reason for her to have to look at that, even if she deduced what — who — it was.
Then there was nothing left to do but open the empty stasis suit strapped to the wall.
And to wait.

THE END