

Aguilar strolled through the engineering bay, whistling an old church hymn he loved from his childhood. The robots that managed interior systems mostly checked out. Of the dozen that started, only two had failed during the trip. One malfunctioned and shut itself down a dozen years out of La Grange Station while the other developed a slow hydraulic leak that brought it out of service a century later.

The fun inspections, though, were reserved for the hull robots. These machines scoured the outer hull during the voyage, repairing micrometeorite strikes and checking for hull breaches, fluid leaks, atmosphere venting and damaged components. And to inspect those hull robots more thoroughly than the computer logs permitted, Aguilar needed to take a space walk.

"Aguilar to Control," he said, pressing the ship's intercom system.

"Control, Gaston." The captain's voice sounded clipped.

"Ma'am, the interior maintenance bots check out," he said. "We lost two but could afford to lose four. It appears that all the survivors did their tasks according to spec and never detected any aberrations. I'm going to suit up and check the outer hull."

"Roger that, Marcus. Stay safe. Control out."

Aguilar sized up one of the space suits. *Well, he thought, We'll see what happens when one excitable Mexican combines with one 300-year-old exposure suit in the middle of deep space. Good times.*

He pulled on one of the suits. He inspected each part carefully — every seam, every port, every expanse of polymerized cloth — looking for age-related defects. None seemed obvious, but then, he thought, it was the not-so-obvious defects that killed you.

After he geared up, he gyrated his way to one of the decompression bays adjoining an outer hatch, twisting and turning and shaking his limbs to press the suit's limits. He plugged in the air tether and power cable and watched the suit's self-diagnostic record green as the air tank and batteries filled to capacity. He remained nervous. *Just one faulty seal*, he thought. *Then I'll officially be the first idiot to die in the Epsilon Tauri system. Not the record I'm hoping for.*

He vented the bay's atmosphere to space, slowly, still watching the needles as intently as a shark watching a baby seal that slipped off an iceberg.

With the bay completely decompressed and the suit holding, he disconnected the power and air tubes and opened the outer hatch.

The view took Aguilar's breath away. Although *Magellan* was still outside of the Epsilon Tauri system, they were close enough to see the star shining brightly in the abyss. The system — known as Oculus Borealis in antiquity — included a smaller companion star and several planets. The largest of those planets, an inhabitable giant orbiting very close to the primary star, was clearly visible to the naked eye.

"Welcome home," he whispered, awestruck.

Pushing his comm button, he said, "Control, this is Aguilar. I'm EVA on the port side and will commence my inspection. By the way, the view's gorgeous from out here."

"Aguilar, this is Sutherland. I read you five by five. Don't fall off now, you hear?"

"Duly noted, sir. If I do fall off, please don't leave without me."

Sutherland's chuckle filled Aguilar's helmet. "No promises, Marcus. No promises."

"I stand warned, XO. Beginning my run, should be done in about 45 minutes. Aguilar out."

The engineer activated his magnetic boots and stepped onto the hull. Despite the ship's large size, much of the hull was smooth planes, making visual identification of problems a breeze. The hull robots — six-wheeled contraptions the size of a German Shepherd armed with various probes and tools — stationed in partially recessed pods on the hull.

Aguilar approached each pod in turn. The first three pods, all on the port dorsal side of the hull, seemed in good order. As the engineer moved to the starboard side, he caught a glimpse of a scrape that led straight to one of the robots.

Crouching down to get a better look, Aguilar visually inspected the gash. It didn't seem dangerous; it didn't even breach the skin, it just took a gouge out of the metal. But as he glanced the length of the damage, he saw that the service robot was sparking.

*Just what I need*, he thought.

He flicked his comm switch. "Aguilar to Control. One robot possibly damaged. Moving to inspect. Please cut power to pod Echo."

Sutherland acknowledged: "Roger that, Mr. Aguilar. Cutting power now, please proceed carefully."

"Understood Control, will advise. Out."

The robot's sparks died when Control cut the power, but Aguilar still approached cautiously. The robot appeared to have been hit by a micrometeorite. *Magellan* maintained her cruising speed of nearly 45 percent of the speed of light; at that velocity, even a grain of sand

weighing a mere 5 micrograms would impact at more than 1,900 psi — enough force to wreck real damage.

*It's a wonder we haven't seen more impact scars,* he thought.

The robot had an entry wound but not an exit wound. Aguilar inspected the entry point and noticed tiny bubbles of clear liquid floating out.

*Hydraulic fluid,* he thought. *Must have just hit, then. No wonder there wasn't a fault sensor tripped in the engineering logs.*

With a long pair of needle-nosed pliers, the engineer probed the damage. He rooted around for a moment, looking for a space pebble, and instead pulled out a slug that looked like a deformed metal bolt.

*What the hell?* he thought. *A bolt?*

Aguilar put the slug in one of the suit's external pockets then marched forward, along the length of the hull scar.

*We couldn't have lost a bolt,* he thought, as he scrutinized the hull along the scar's trajectory. That surface damage limited the possible sources of the projectile, but nothing forward of the damage included parts of *Magellan* open to space. The hull, forward of the impact zone, was smooth. And welded. No bolts.

Aguilar performed a cursory inspection of the remaining robots then circled back to the damaged robot, trying to arrive at an explanation. Kneeling eye-level to the damage, he looked everywhere forward of the impact site.

*Nothing.* He frowned, thinking through the options. *Nothing came off the hull. There aren't any damaged robots forward of here. I have no clue where this came from.*

His suit chimed, alerting him to dropping oxygen levels.

He keyed his comm link. "Aguilar to Control."

"Control, Gaston."

"Captain, I'm starboard dorsal. Heading back to the port lock. We have one out-of-commission service robot and no other significant external damage."

"That's good news, Marcus." The captain seemed pleased.

"Ma'am, we do have an ... abnormality."

"Explain."

"The robot was just recently damaged — maybe within the hour. And it was damaged by a bolt, but I can't for the life of me figure out where it came from."

A pause, then Gaston said: "Understood. Not the only abnormality we've seen. Head back in and report to Control for a briefing."

"On the way, captain. Out."

Aguilar eyed the damaged robot one more time then set out for the port airlock.

*The damndest thing*, he thought.