

Corrective action

Accidents will happen.

John Gilbey

I was the only passenger in the 16-seat shuttle for the last leg of the journey. When we finally landed at Sentinel Observatory — after a low-G ballet that left my lunch far too close to the surface for comfort — I watched closely as the airlock cycled through all three sets of checks before swinging open. Picking up my kit I unconsciously reached out for a hand that wasn't there, felt stupid and numb, and then stepped out of the lock.

In the service corridor, my host was waiting. He looked oddly like a lizard, perhaps appropriately for a corporate trouble-shooter. "You the safety guy?" he asked, despite the bold legend 'SAFETY DIRECTORATE' on my flight suit and the orange Priority flashes on my luggage. I nodded. "I thought you people worked in pairs?" he went on. He obviously didn't know that I was currently the only Commission Safety Inspector on the Moon — so he must be a new hire, brought in to reassure the client universities and make the place look respectable.

I didn't know him, but there has been so much growth recently that us old lunar hands have been diluted — a bit like the safety regulations that supposedly protect the folk who do science here. It appals me that the Directorate goes doggedly on through the bureaucratic motions around fatal incidents, while seemingly being powerless to stamp out the lax corporate practices that cause such preventable loss of life.

The Facilities Manager took me through the standard stuff while the lizard looked on: service logs, safety briefings, stats on mean time between incidents, staff certification and policy review. It all looked perfect — even if the ink was still wet on some of it — all that was missing was an explanation of what had gone wrong.

The next formality was, of course, to view the corpse. I've lost count of the number of dead bodies I've seen since I shipped up here — clutching my brand-new PhD on Planetary Operations Safety — and I've yet to see one that looks happy about what happened to them. The medical tech looked bored as she rolled the storage rack into position. I suppose that, up until that point, some sort of defence mechanism made me think it would be a different 'Pedersson, A' on the slab. It wasn't, of course.

Anna did not look happy, she no longer looked pretty either — in fact, she looked barely human. The decompression had been rapid, her death had probably been slightly less so. I stood silently for a moment, looking at the heap of ruptured plumbing that my partner of nine years — the only person on this rock who meant anything to me — had now become. Only her hair, blonde and tightly braided, was remotely recognizable. With a huge effort, I took the formal images for the report and noted the cremation and repatriation request from her HR file. Then, eyes



brimming, I touched her hair in farewell. The tech made a bad job of hiding her impatience.

A couple of hours spent nosing around in Engineering brought grim understanding of the incident and a slow, dark realization of my preferred outcome. The operations logs showed lazily obvious tampering, intended to conceal the untreated failure of a vital software upgrade. I felt a deep, cold fury build as I ran the analysis: Anna had been doomed from the moment she started to run the routine safety test-cycle on the big cargo lock. In daily use it would run fine, and observation work would carry on, so who the hell cared that a safety upgrade of the portal controller to version 6.2R had stalled? That Shift Supervisor Clement didn't care was obvious — those clumsy edits had been made from his console.

Clement was like his work, crass and lazy. He tried to talk me into signing off the incident before we even got out of his office; he told me that he "was too busy to run around after every loose connection". I managed not to hit him, but it was close, and eventually I got his fat arse out of his chair and down the access way to the cargo lock. Clement stomped around the battered, filthy space — swearing and gesturing — while I studied the controller. It obviously hadn't been touched since the incident; there was no sign that the interface patch had been opened for maintenance and certainly no 'Upgrade' tag on the panel history.

I turned to Clement, resolved to finish this. "You killed a Commission Safety Inspector because you couldn't be bothered to do your job. If I hadn't been down with a virus you'd have killed me too. The Corporation will probably cut your bonus for that, and the Commission will no doubt fine them a few thousand dollars." He looked at me shrewdly, almost risking a smile on one side of his face. "It's a tough world, ain't it?" he hazarded, with an edge of amusement.

I nodded slowly, and turned to the panel. "So you are happy that all the safety work on this system is now up to date?" I asked him over my shoulder. "Of course," he blustered, "I signed it off myself."

"Liar," I thought. I typed in the code for the full system check that Anna had performed, hit 'Enter' and paused over the 'Confirm' tag. "Are you sure?"

I asked him. At the last moment he realized I was really going to do it and lunged towards me. By the time he hit me I had already confirmed the command and, as Anna had so fatally discovered, hitting any number of 'Emergency Stop' patches would make no difference.

When the outer door cracked open, Clement was hammering bloodied fists on the toughened glass of the observation window. Sudden, roaring mist flooded around us and I reached out my hand for Anna — knowing she wouldn't be alone much longer.

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