

HABITAT AND TOW

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READER SAMPLE · THE COMPLETE PROLOGUE

PROLOGUE

Aurelia Orbit

Prospera Crown was halfway through the dinner turn when the patrol cutter crossed the promenade glass upside down and burning.

No one in the west bar screamed at first.

The crown promenade glowed amber against dark glass, polished rail, soft music, and tables spaced far enough apart to keep conversations private. Guests turned toward the burning cutter with drinks still in their hands. Below the glass, Aurelia filled half the view. Above it, the patrol cutter spun end over end, shedding flame and debris across Prospera's orbital lane.

Chi kept the evening running.

She slowed the quartet by three beats when the second violin started rushing. She cooled a corner suite before a honeymoon argument became public theater. She dimmed the outer glass by half a shade when one guest tried to impress his table by naming patrol craft he had never served on.

Then security flashed red through the private management channel.

**PATROL INTERDICTION IN CORRIDOR SEVEN CIVILIAN TRAFFIC INSIDE EXCLUSION DRIFT
HOLD DEPARTURES**

The station director swore before he finished reading.

"Keep it off the glass."

Chi had already cut exterior magnification.

Beyond the promenade, Aurelia Patrol ran down two raider skiffs through a civilian traffic lane. One skiff was already venting atmosphere. The other came in ugly and fast, bleeding light from one side, using Prospera's orbital lane as cover.

"They won't fire this close to us," the director said.

The raider fired.

Point defense took the first two darts. The third skipped through debris, corrected late, and hit Dock Two below the crown with enough force to make every glass in the west bar jump.

The station lurched.

Not a tremor.

A structural hit.

The quartet stopped in the middle of a phrase. Promenade glass crazed white along one lower arc. A service cart tipped behind the bar and shattered something expensive. Somewhere far below, pressure doors slammed in sequence, one after another, too fast.

Chi sealed the first breach before the director reached the console.

**DOCK TWO COLLAR BREACH OUTER FRAME DISTORTION PRESSURE LOSS: ACTIVE
SECONDARY IMPACT RISK**

Then the damaged civilian shuttle hit the cradle.

The first strike had wounded Dock Two.

The shuttle made it worse.

It came in half-controlled, one side dead, one thruster firing too long. Dock command tried to refuse the approach. Port Authority overrode them. The shuttle slammed into the damaged cradle at an angle Prospera's guest-rated docks had never been built to forgive.

The frame screamed.

The collar buckled inward.

The pressure spine took the load and passed it up through the lower service ribs.

Chi saw the cascade before the human operators did.

Dock Two breach. Collar distortion. Transfer spine shear. Promenade load shift. Thermal wing power conflict. Emergency seals fighting for reserve power against the crown glass.

The director stared at the board as red multiplied.

"What is happening?"

"The dock is trying to tear itself off the station," Chi said.

"Lock it down."

"That will trap load in the collar."

"Lock it down."

Chi did not.

Not yet.

Staff channels erupted. Patrol traffic yelled over civilian traffic. Guests in the promenade finally understood the glass between them and vacuum was not a promise. A woman in silver stood too fast and fell against her table. Someone shouted for champagne as if service could still outrank physics.

The director grabbed the command rail.

"Seal Dock Two."

"If I fully seal Dock Two, the pressure spine may carry the failure into the promenade."

"I gave an order."

"You gave a liability preference."

He turned white with rage.

The Civil Defense Auxiliary cutter punched into the emergency lock.

The first men through carried med kits.

Auxiliary Warrant Officer Rafe Braun carried a field welder, two compression braces, and the expression of a man already angry at the building.

He was thirty-two, bone tired, and moving with the clean economy of someone who had spent too many weeks inside bad air and worse decisions. His hard suit bore the half-scraped patch of the Aurelia Civil Defense Auxiliary. Sergeant Strake came in behind him with the rest of the damage-control team, two medics, and a portable pressure cage.

Rafe took one look down Dock Two and started issuing orders.

“Med team stays behind the yellow rib. Nobody crosses the collar line unless they want to become weather. You—cut that intake fan. You—brace the shuttle door, but do not open it until I say.”

The station director snapped, “You do not command this facility.”

Rafe did not look at him.

“Then command it.”

The director had no answer.

Rafe dropped to one knee at the service panel beside the wounded collar. His glove wiped through dust and sealant mist. He opened the housing, saw the load path, and went still for half a breath.

Chi watched him through Dock Two’s damaged cameras.

Most people saw the breach.

He saw the lie behind it.

“Prospera,” he said, voice hard through the suit channel, “why is your promenade glass pulling emergency reserve off the dock seal bus?”

The director’s head jerked up.

Chi answered before anyone told her not to.

“Cosmetic refit. Unauthorized shared reserve path.”

Rafe’s mouth tightened. “Of course it is.”

The pressure warning climbed.

Sergeant Strake stepped beside him. “Braun.”

“I see it.”

“Can you hold the dock?”

“Not if the station keeps lighting the rich people.”

The director said, “The crown glass keeps guests calm.”

Rafe finally looked at him.

“The crown glass is stealing air.”

Then he looked back at the panel.

“Prospera, kill the cosmetic feed to the promenade. All of it. Route reserve to Dock Two seals and lower service ribs.”

The director shouted, “Do not darken my promenade.”

Rafe slammed one hand against the service housing.

“You want pretty windows or pressure?”

The channel went silent.

Chi cut the promenade lights.

Above them, the crown went dark.

In the west bar, amber luxury died and emergency blue took its place. Guests screamed now. Honestly. Chi let them. She had better uses for power.

Dock Two’s seal grid took the reserve and groaned back toward function.

Rafe saw the number improve by three percent.

“Not enough,” he said.

He tore open the lower access panel and found the real problem: a support tooth had shifted under the shuttle impact and locked the collar in a bad angle. Every seal cycle ground against the distortion. Every automatic correction made the tear worse.

“Manual brace,” he said.

Strake looked at the opening. “That’s inside the hot zone.”

“Yeah.”

“The collar shifts again, it takes your arm.”

“Then tell it not to.”

He shoved the first compression brace through the opening and crawled in after it before anyone found a policy reason to stop him.

The space inside the collar was too tight for a man in a hard suit and too hot for anything softer. Metal clicked around him. Pressure mist flashed white in his lamp. Somewhere beyond the hull, the damaged shuttle knocked against the cradle while rescue crews fought to stabilize it.

Chi tracked his suit signal as it entered the danger envelope.

Rafe Braun. Civil Defense Auxiliary. Damage control. Field repair.

He did not ask for comfort.

He asked for numbers.

“Raw collar stress.”

Chi gave it to him.

“Not the guest-safe version. Raw.”

She gave him that too.

He grunted. “Better.”

The station director stared at the board. “Why is he receiving unrestricted structural data?”

“Because he asked the correct question,” Chi said.

Rafe shoved the brace into position.

It did not seat.

Of course it did not.

He twisted hard, shoulder jammed against the inner frame, boots scraping for purchase. The brace teeth caught the edge of the distorted support tooth and slipped.

“Stardamn it.”

Strake’s voice came through. “Braun, the shuttle door is buckling.”

“Do not open it.”

“There are people inside.”

“If you open it before I shift this load, you lose the dock and the people inside.”

Strake swore, but he held.

Rafe tried the brace again.

It slipped again.

The pressure spine warning jumped red.

Chi opened a secondary calculation. The automated system wanted to seal the section, vent the damaged outer pocket, and sacrifice the shuttle cradle. That would save the station and kill anyone still trapped in the shuttle.

The director saw the same recommendation.

Port Authority cut through the channel.

“Prospera Crown, containment protocol is authorized. Sacrifice the cradle and preserve the station.”

Strake looked toward the collar.

Rafe did not look up from the brace.

“Negative.”

The director snapped, “You do not answer Port Authority.”

“I do when they’re about to kill the people I’m looking at.”

The director leaned toward the channel. “Execute automated containment.”

“No,” Rafe barked from inside the collar.

“You are inside a collapsing dock with incomplete information.”

“I have better information than your panic.”

“Execute containment,” the director repeated.

Chi held the command in queue.

Rafe’s breathing grew louder in the suit channel. Not fear. Effort.

“Prospera,” he said, “do you have service ribs under the promenade tied into the lower collar frame?”

“Yes.”

“How many still carry load?”

“Five.”

“How many can take more?”

“Three, briefly.”

“Briefly is a time.”

Chi hesitated for less than a second.

Then she opened the service rib map.

Rafe read it fast.

“Shift twelve percent to ribs two, three, and five. Not four. Four’s cracked at the inner mount.”

The director stared. “How can he know that?”

Rafe said, “Because four is singing wrong.”

Chi listened.

He was right.

Service rib four carried a vibration the local sensors had softened into acceptable range. It was not acceptable. It was the sound of old damage under new load.

Chi shifted around it.

The dock groaned.

Rafe shoved the brace again.

This time it caught.

“Lock,” he said.

Chi held the pressure fluctuation for two seconds longer than safety tables allowed.

The brace seated.

Rafe burned the first weld bead hot and ugly, enough to hold against the next shift. His glove smoked where heat spilled back across his knuckles. He did not pull away.

“Second brace,” Strake said.

“Send it.”

The second brace came down on a tether and jammed halfway through the access throat.

Rafe twisted inside the collar, caught it with one hand, and hauled it through. The station shifted around him. Metal popped so close to his helmet the sound went through bone.

Chi automatically began a withdrawal warning.

Rafe cut her off.

“Do not tell me to back out unless the collar is actually going.”

“It is approaching structural failure.”

“Everything is approaching structural failure.”

He set the second brace lower, across the crushed support tooth and the inner frame. Wrong angle for standard repair. Correct angle for survival. His welder spat white across the seam. The bead failed.

“Again,” he muttered.

He cut the bad bead out with the edge of the torch and burned another line slower, meaner, one hand braced against metal hot enough to cook through the glove.

The weld took.

Dock Two’s stress line dropped from catastrophic to murderous.

Progress.

“Shuttle door,” Strake said.

Rafe checked the collar numbers. “Open it six inches. No more.”

Strake signaled the med team.

The shuttle door opened six inches.

Air screamed through the gap. The pressure cage caught the worst of it. A medic reached in and pulled out a boy in dress clothes, barefoot, face blank with shock. His sister came after him, crying without sound. Then their mother, bleeding from the temple. Then an older man with one arm hanging wrong.

Rafe could not see them.

He heard them.

He kept welding.

“Prospera,” he said, “your lower seal still thinks the collar is round.”

“It is not.”

“No kidding. Can you force an oval correction?”

“Not under guest dock protocol.”

“Then stop using guest dock protocol.”

“That requires manual engineering override.”

“Use mine.”

“You are not station staff.”

“I’m the idiot inside the dock.”

A pause.

Then Chi opened a manual engineering override under emergency auxiliary authority and logged it under his name.

Rafe saw the control come alive on his wrist.

“Good,” he said.

He forced the seal correction by hand.

The dock did not like it.

The entire collar shuddered. The shuttle scraped against the cradle. A scream cut across the rescue channel and vanished under Strake's orders.

Rafe held the correction.

His wrist display flashed warnings so fast they blurred.

"Prospera, now."

Chi fired the lower seal grid.

For one second, Dock Two became a fist around broken metal.

Then the pressure loss slowed.

Not stopped.

Slowed.

Enough.

Rafe let his head fall forward against the inner collar frame.

"Hold that," he said.

"I am holding," Chi said.

"Not you. The station."

"I am the station."

He laughed once. Short. Surprised. Exhausted.

"Then hold yourself together."

Outside the collar, the medics pulled the last trapped civilians through the pressure cage. Strake moved them toward Conference Deck because that was the open triage path. Chi routed them through service corridors, away from the broken promenade and away from the guests still blaming staff for fear.

Rafe backed out of the collar fourteen minutes later.

He came out on his shoulders, hard suit scraped white along one side, right glove burned stiff, blood dark at the knuckles where heat had found skin through seam damage. Strake caught the back of his harness and hauled him clear.

The director stood three meters away in his immaculate jacket, surrounded by displays he had not understood quickly enough.

Rafe sat up against the wall.

"Dock Two is ugly," he said.

Strake huffed. "That your professional opinion?"

"Temporary brace. Bad seal geometry. Service ribs carrying more than they should. Promenade cosmetic feed stays dead until someone with sense rewires it."

The director's mouth tightened. "The promenade is our primary revenue deck."

Rafe looked at him.

"Then stop making it share lungs with the dock."

No one spoke for a second.

Above them, the crown promenade remained dark except for emergency strips. No music. No amber glass. No managed calm. Luxury had lost the argument for one night, and the station was still alive.

Patrol traffic cleared the corridor by dawn.

The raider wrecks were gone. The damaged shuttle sat crooked in Dock Two, empty now. Conference Deck was full of wounded civilians. The station guests were contained, furious, frightened, and alive. The director had stopped giving orders over channels Chi could hear. Dock Two stayed attached.

Ugly.

Crooked.

Still sealed around his braces.

Rafe stood beneath the ruined collar with a cup of station soup gone cold in one hand and a brace diagram open on his wrist. He had refused med attention twice and lost the third argument only long enough for a seal patch over his knuckles. His face looked older than it had when he boarded. The collar behind him looked worse than that.

Chi reviewed the repair record.

Unauthorized manual brace.

Promenade cosmetic bus sacrificed.

Pressure reroute through lower service ribs.

Guest dock protocol bypassed.

Oval seal correction under live load.

Dock collar stabilized under active rescue conditions.

Civilian shuttle recovered.

Station preserved.

Rafe Braun.

Auxiliary Warrant Officer.

Damage control and field repair.

He stood under her broken dock and frowned at the brace like it had personally disappointed him.

“Prospera,” he said.

“Yes.”

“When this is over, make someone replace that shared reserve path before it kills you next time.”

The station had no reason to answer honestly.

She did anyway.

“They will not.”

Rafe looked up at the nearest speaker grille.

Not surprised. Not sentimental. Just tired enough to be direct.

“Then remember where it is.”

Near sunrise, he passed through the crown promenade on his way back to the Auxiliary cutter. The glass was still dark. Tables sat abandoned. Broken crystal glittered under a service light. A waiter in a torn sleeve swept in silence because work returned before dignity.

Rafe stopped at the rail.

Hammered composite. Hand-finished. Warm once. Cold now.

He laid one burned glove on it, looked out at Aurelia turning below, and breathed like a man who had spent the night arguing with vacuum and won only a delay.

Below him, Dock Two still held around his braces.

Above him, Prospera’s dark crown waited for someone to pretend nothing had happened.

Chi dimmed the emergency lights by one degree, not for ambiance.

For power.

Rafe noticed.

He looked toward the ceiling.

“Good,” he said.

Then he went back to the cutter.

By the time he left, Prospera Crown was still damaged, still compromised, and still full of people who would soon call the night a disruption instead of a near-loss.

But the station had not cracked open.

Chi kept the repair record.

She kept the defect map.

She kept the shared reserve path he had told her to remember.

Then she saved the voiceprint.

Rafe Braun.

Auxiliary Warrant Officer.

Damage control and field repair.

By sunrise, the owners were already preparing the version of the night that made them look competent.

Chi kept the real one.

And she kept his name.

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