

**“In Transit”**  
**by: Chris Hayes**

Clara took a deep breath. Her resolve wobbled for a second or two, then solidified. She waited, painstakingly applying the flame of her welding torch to the tiny micrometeorite punctures in the section of hull in front of her. From her perspective the *Sam Houston* stretched above and below for half a kilometer, its mass over eighty percent engine. Roughly three hundred meters to her right, her shift partner Manuel Sanchez did his assigned repairs. Outside of her line of sight the other ten members of her work shift were performing the daily external maintenance tasks necessary to keep an interstellar generation ship the size of the *Sam Houston* operating safely on its voyage from Earth to Proxima Centauri.

External maintenance was easily the most dangerous job aboard ship. Clara had studied long and hard to earn a place on the EVA crew, figuring in her naivete that risking her life every day would give it more purpose. But it had taken only a few months for her to discover that any duty could become tedious with sufficient repetition.

As soon as Manuel’s back was turned, she diverted the beam of the welder. It sliced through her tether neatly, and she pushed off, spinning in relation to the ship like a bit of flotsam in one of those turbulent rivers she’d read about, yet another thing that she would never see in her lifetime. As she tumbled, her suit’s radio transmitter sputtered to life.

“EVA Control, we have a tether malfunction at work station twelve,” came Manny’s steady voice.

*Damn. Too quick.* She’d counted on having more time.

Clara stabilized her spin with a jet of precious fuel until she faced the ship, then used the welder, its flame pushing her backwards, to get more distance. About three seconds into her flight she saw Manuel leave his station. The idiot was pursuing her.

Clara cranked the welder’s beam down to minimal intensity. The tiny flame would be her salvation from a life of meaningless tedium only if she managed to use it in the next thirty seconds. She’d done the calculations. Successful rescue was too likely if she waited any longer.

She hyperventilated for several seconds to work up the courage, but could think of nothing but that first fateful encounter with her supervisor.

*“According to Command, you have been incorrectly assigned to the engineering section. Higher ups believe you would be better suited to crèche duty at this time.”*

*“I’m a qualified engineer, and they want to make me a glorified babysitter?”*

*“You said yourself that your current duties have become meaningless.”*

*“I was born and I’m going to die aboard a ship in deep space. I’ve never seen Earth. I’m never going to see our destination. Why should I care about anything?”*

*“You are vital to this mission. Working with the youngest cohort will remind you of that.”*

*“I don’t see the point of…”*

*“Report to the nursery at 0800 hours.”*

Clara had stayed clear of the nursery until she was ordered to go. The idea of forcing a child to share her miserable life made her feel queasy. The velvety soft feel of a baby’s tiny head resting in the palm of her hand was nice, sure. So helpless. So needy. It felt good to be needed, but not good enough to screw up some kid’s life by making the poor thing have her for a birth mother. And when Captain Katherine King herself had called her into her ready room for a panic-inducing interview and finally told Clara why she was different from the others, all it had done was make things worse.

*“Keeping your destined role from you was a calculated decision, Clara. It was vital that you didn’t consider yourself superior to the others while you were growing up.”*

*“So instead you let me believe I was inferior? How is that conducive to learning leadership skills?”*

*“Arrogance is a fatal flaw in a leader, Clara. It leads to despotism. You studied history. You know that.”*

They’d genetically tweaked her for increased creativity and intelligence and gotten a chronically depressed, authority questioning loner instead of the super-captain they’d been aiming for. The idea of someday being in command of the *Sam Houston* terrified Clara beyond all reason.

She turned the welder toward her thigh and kept it in place until searing pain told her she’d burned through. The shock of it made her vision go gray for a moment. She dropped the welder. It spun just out of reach, still burning, then shut off as its safety protocols kicked in. A schematic of a suited figure appeared in her heads-up display. The figure’s right thigh glowed red. Clara ignored it.

“Hang on, Clara! I’m coming!” Manuel’s voice sounded hollow and distant, as if it were coming from the end of an access tunnel. He was a good friend—sometimes inconveniently good. In fact, he’d instigated Clara’s most recent round of counseling visits.

*“You reported me, Manny!”*

*“How could I not, Clara? You’re not eating. You barely sleep. All you talk about is how we’ll never see anything but this ship. You’re depressed, and you need help!”*

*“Forget it. You don’t understand.”*

*“We got a raw deal being born in transit. I know that. You know that. But someone had to do it. Our descendants will walk and live on a planet where no human has ever walked before. Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”*

*“It means that my parents saw their dream come to life and my kids will walk on a new planet, but I’m stuck patching holes in my prison over and over again until I die. That’s what it means.”*

She’d planned it all down to the last second, maximized her chances of success by lying about her intentions to everyone. But now, with her lungs straining and right thigh burning, it was hard to remember why she’d been so determined.

*“I told you, I’m not suicidal.”*

*“That’s good to hear, but I still want you to take this medication. I’ll see you weekly, and I want you to take a week off from your engineering duties”*

*“I’ll volunteer at the nursery for a few hours a week if you want me to, but I want to continue working with ship maintenance. My team members need my help. Please don’t take that away from me.”*

She felt as if she were about to doze off. Hypothermia was setting in. It would have been a pleasant way to go had she not been having second thoughts.

*“You need a rest from your responsibilities. Give the treatment a chance. Come in for your sessions. You’ll be thinking more clearly in a few weeks.”*

*“Why? I’ll still be trapped in a huge tin can floating in space for the rest of my life. Why should I expect to feel any better?”*

*“You’re clinically depressed, Clara. Trust me. You’ll feel better soon, and then you’ll realize how much you’re loved and needed by everyone here. Your life has a purpose. I promise.”*

Clara fumbled with her repair kit. Her hands felt like they were no longer attached; her vision tunneled until she could no longer see her heads-up display. Futilely gasping for air, she watched the adhesive canister float out of her numb hands, and realized too late what a mistake she’d made.

*Bad timing. The story of my life.*

A hand reached in and grabbed the canister. Another hand gripped her work belt to stabilize her while the first sprayed a thick layer of foam adhesive over the defect in her suit. Seconds later, her breathing eased. Still foggy mentally, she reached toward her suit’s oxygen supply, but hands blocked her exploration. A helmet bumped hers, and she saw the face of her rescuer. Manny’s

warm brown eyes met hers. He smiled wryly and shook his head, then clipped Clara to him, her back to his chest, and piloted his jet pack toward the ship.

Clara closed her eyes and let her head fall back, annoyed with herself for becoming the proverbial damsel in distress after a lifetime of doing things her own way. “Stupid, stupid, stupid,” she muttered.

“Can’t disagree with you there,” rumbled Manny. His tone was half-joking, but she could hear the concern in his words. She felt bad for causing him so much trouble.

“Sorry, Manny. I’m an idiot,” she told him. His only response was to hold her tighter against him. The *Sam Houston*’s bulk loomed in front of them.

*Home.*

“If you hadn’t had the repair canister ready to go, I might not have been able to plug the leak in time. What made you change your mind?” Manny asked.

*Clever man, trying to make me say it.*

“I decided I didn’t want to be dead after all,” admitted Clara. “Things can’t get any worse. Might get better.”

Manuel actually laughed. He’d always had a strange sense of humor. “Sounds like a good plan to me.”