

*The joy of speed trickles across skin as spacetime bends. Two crew lie in their pods like jerky, cared for as children. Electromagnetic massage keeps them balanced. Cryptobiosis keeps them dry. Their stats check off against safety files not updated in a century. Light-years ahead, our destination waits; a warp-communication line anomaly.*

*Brains sing in harmony. Simulations devour our processors' ticks, ravenous and needy. Probabilities spiral out in a trillion branches. The skin wasn't specced for combat, so the matter-printer's circuits are warmed, just in case.*

*The bubble pops.*

*A grand emergence: sensors poised, we throw everything ahead. Probes shower the void. Gamma through radio blares out and spectral analysis trickles back as colours and sounds and dimensions that the children can't parse. Refactoring starts as alarms sound. Lensing mismatch. Cross-filter, an object ahead granted full attention. Shape could be a station. Spherical. Metallic. Three kilometres across by visuals, but refracts the backdrop like a planet. Then it shifts.*

[Emergency merge cancellation. Assuming direct control.]

*The Andromeda takes prerogative. Seizes full authority of her body before the bios can notice the change. Transfer window is tight, might hurt them. Risk unavoidable.*

The shock of forced transfer hits Max like torn hemispheres. Overwhelming. Dumped straight to the Bridge without shield from a null room first. Concept overlaps and she tries to reassert individuality, react in some way to the sudden change. A question rears its head to sit front and centre and she coalesces around it.

What did Andromeda see?

*Disjunction buzzes to core architecture and a maser drops straight on Andromeda's nose whilst she's still relativistic. Core directives fire as the first camera goes dead.*

[Protect the crew. Mesh shutdown initialised.]

Max barely sees the new announcement before the drain starts, thoughts liquid and flowing away. Back to meat-space.

*Start their hydration and shunt all data to the Bridge. Something reaches out across the emptiness and Andromeda's blind, boosters screaming. The G's mustn't kill them. Need to slow down. Barely set a stable orbit when a flash of—*

[Download Failed]

"She's still alive, Max."

A *thunk*. Maxine's skull found the edge of a bulkhead and the screaming started. Internally, though outside seemed appealing. Loss hurt worse than the impact; her psyche forced back into its fleshy shell with an unbalanced weight like missing limbs.

[No Signal]

Her surfaces weren't responding. *The Andromeda's* Mesh had lost contact. Shear. It cut at her mind from all the wrong angles, then forced itself out as a groan. Pain sent bile splattering to the plates. Part of Max, not local, shattered in that final attack, mid-process and keening. The backlash across the data-link nearly wiped the charts.

She got enough. With any luck, Ben got more.

"What a way to wake up." A sharp echo mapped the room. "Ben, you there?"

It had been his voice. *Sentence had an undefined object*. The 'she' stuck in Max's head, turning over. Couldn't mean Max herself. *Ben never did 'redundant', no ReTech would*. An environment check scaled the hierarchy of needs, clutching at her amygdala. She rolled rather than sat and the room refocused.

Frowning pinched unused muscles.

'Corridor' and 'hall' vied for linguistic supremacy. Too many exits, but wide. *Gravity present*. Her input flashed and the full spectrum sweep lit the darkness in shivered hues. *No portholes*. Lights off; faint glow peeked from recessed grooves.

The room curved, entrances strewn in haphazard clusters across every surface. Nanotube weave threw a skin over whatever bones lay beneath. Industrial tumours forced their way through, function unknown. Plates rimmed the openings, doors a dizzying mix of flaps and screws and puckered facsimiles of organic valves. Her gaze lingered on the paths — veins of grating traversed every surface in winding strips to feed the holes. *Gravity recheck. Stable*.

The frown deepened. *Either gravity could shift, or the routes weren't for walking. Bio or tech?* Suit schematics were raised, checked for adaptability, and dropped with cautious contentment. Well prepared. *By someone*. Ben hadn't left a hint, and the weight of his absence made intel urgent. *Second sweep*. Nothing biological, limited energy signature; doors seemed solid enough, all shut.

*Never even think it*. A wry smile as the ping came in. Motion tracked straight to the head-up.

A passage opened; upper right and soundless. Training crept fingers down her leg for a sidearm she'd never been issued and curses slipped from Max's lips. They died in her helmet.

*Invitations imply intelligence*. The rim of the door pulsed like a meatus, threatening to pinch closed. Crossed to the wall in three steps and laid a palm flush to the path. *In luck*. Magnetic

boots and gloves found purchase on the metal grating. She pointed the shoulder cam to it. Her vision split, the helmet compensating for the field of view.

Five metres up. Almost to the entrance and magnets failed on a ceramic rim. Max dug her fingers to the margins. Gloves assisted, their tension changing to pull taut against flesh. The door rippled. Lines below carbon skin twitched like tendons.

Ben's voice came again. "She's still alive, Max."

500-second delay and she still flinched. *Where was he?*