

Max stared at their logic. Protection. Reformulation. Self-sustainability. *A generation ark*. But that was impossible, there hadn't been sub-light ships in millennia. Certainly hadn't been any of this size she'd ever heard of... Out here, in the space between the galactic arms... *A thousand lightyears of nothing at all*. The lance shook in her hand—just enough for a warning to flash yellow, pull her muscles taut.

She stood at a vertical crossroads. Pipe up, pipe down. Two doors bordered in honeycomb ceramic. A swirl of thoughts larger than her skull.

*Incessant obsolescence*. Stones thrown so fast into the void they overtake their forebears. A rat race of cosmic discards.

What were the odds? Countless cubic parsecs. And one just happened to stop in front of a line.

*Assuming this place really was a ship. Assuming stopping was an accident*.

The hand that wasn't locked tapped out accelerating beats against Max's left leg. She slowed it tendon by tendon. Balled a fist. Hit her thigh. Couldn't afford the distraction. Couldn't afford some diversion she couldn't solve. One pipe up. Two doors. Make a choice.

A *click* made it for her.

On the left, the door unlocked. Faint hiss from the seal. The ghost-lights slid across its swing—opened into *terra incognita*.

The headup logged natural motion. Auto-aim didn't move. Nothing on the heatmap.

Max's heart beat in her ears. Training took her to one knee, raised the plasma as the holo-sights jittered across emptiness and shadows. She steadied breaths that rang overloud in her ears. Raised an eyebrow at the sudden backwash of chlorine in her nose.

The cam checked her escape route: full slide back down a level. Waste resources and end up back in habitation zones. She logged the path to hardwired augs all the same. If mapping took her off a cliff again, she couldn't rely on a mid-fall rescue. Couldn't take more broken ribs.

Two steps to the frame. She hugged the wall. Let the barrel guide, same as usual, kept the half-open door as a shield.

No response.

The darkness fluoresced into sketched outlines of mid-blue and violet. Shone under a multi-spectrum overlay. She stepped through the threshold.

Tall, narrow, raked with pipes that nested in sets like geometric decay. Fat and bulbous in the centre, hustled by the parasitic lines of upkeep and support. They ran in rows down one wall and Max leaned in. Tracked them the room's short length. Took note of the tunnel attachments further up the tall walls, those same gantries. She'd finally found an engine room.

A faint *gurgle* sent a thrill from her chest to both shoulders. *Liquid*.

The cam rotated through the corners. Max hooked it to the plasma, let it borrow her arm and bumped the warning level to natural movement. Jumping at shadows beat unwelcome surprises.

She reached her free hand around, found the storage bladder on her suit, nestled in the small of her back. Prayed the filters would work as the Company advertised.

Max scanned the pipes. Made a calculated guess. No one would put test faucets on things they couldn't take spilling. *Probably*. She discounted the ones with probe sockets. Didn't dare scan the contact points in case it could feed back. Her fingers closed around a hex-nut, squeezed, turned, let a small puddle of clear fluid splash to the floor. Nothing started dissolving. Good start.

Crude solutions would have to do.

She heated the plasma barrel. Took it through pre-warming, tracked the heat change with the cam. Plunged it in the pool and watched the vapour.

373.56K

She smiled. Grin pulled tight across stress-weary cheeks.

The suit's storage bladder filled, tap-nozzle interfaced to its port, and the filter began work. Wasn't much she could do if there were nanites. The worry built, peaked, collapsed. Drinking was more important. The water-skin bulged—pressed against her own; a low slung backpack that kept her shoulders free, weight redistributed.

On the headup, a silhouette at bodyheat-orange watched in silence from the third portal up the wall. A soft *bleep* noted its presence, deferred to inaction at her instruction.

Max kept still. Held her arm steady and slowly returned the plasma to her hip.

The figure didn't move.

*It was worth the cost.*

Thirty litres at her back added weight. She'd have to be quick. Her muscles tensed.

She leapt. Two metres. Straight up. Gloves clamped to the pipe on a fast release. Three repeats took her to six and she jumped outward. Across. Skidded into the tunnel only slightly out of breath and the outline was already at the first bend and still accelerating.

*Motherfucker.* Coated carbon blurred. An offset lag through sonar return, imagined space spreading before her as interpolation guessed the difference. Her footsteps pounded on the curving surface. Her ankles protested. *Flat, turning left. Then right.* A new room arrived in a flash. Same as where she'd first woken up; machinery lurking under skin, the bulbous mechanisms of these pitch-black arteries. Hadn't seen any similar since. She didn't stop.

The figure flickered into the next passageway. Max followed. Jumped the ceramic. Refused to slip.

A slight incline beckoned and her target gained distance. She considered shooting it. Hard to aim at this speed. No way of telling how much damage plasma would do.

She panted. Frowned. Kept panting.

Long distance wasn't worth it. Metrics shifted, outcome balance no longer in her favour.

Hesitation entered her paces. Indecision ruled.

[High-Energy Field Warning]

Charge density built up a bar in one corner of her vision. In her suit, hair stood on end. Atmo hummed. Higher and higher; an incessant whine.

A burst of light as the passageway straightened.

She sprinted and memory flashed across vision. *EM burn. Full plumes. Mass ripped and reassigned by force. Temp had to be in the tens of thousands. She wouldn't even be dust.* Ceramic marked the end of the organs. Space spread—vast, blurring beyond sight. A sheer edge. Short gantry. Max tried to stop.

She hit the railing in a burst of pain. The expected *clang clunked* instead. *More ceramic?* Added weight from the water bruised something. Pillowed her fall in return. Clinging to the gratings over kilometres of drop she couldn't see the base of, Max's skin prickled and crawled.

[DANGe&7: @!0001141x|

Charge peaks at levels the augs can't process. Nervous interface disrupts. In the intervening microseconds, Max's stripped-naked eyes only catch a sudden flare of bluish-white.