

A subtle not-quite-sound snapped Max's eyes up. The filings crunched as she raised to one knee. Ears strained.

She squeezed the plasma's grip. Took half a step. The connection cable pulled her sleeve taut. Max's instinct guided the barrel and jabbed it at a dark corner; absolutely nothing happened. Her trachea beat to her pulse and trigger finger creaked and pupils drank light they couldn't see.

Enough seconds sank for her pulse to tick back to normal. Then it came again, loud enough to be *noise*, just to mock her. A faint hissing from the back of the room. A flash on the headup as the download finished. Max stood, link recalled from the port.

Between two wrecked units, a lighting fixture swung from the ceiling tiles, setting shadows in a kaleidoscope dance. The hiss turned hum. She peered closer, sweat beading in her gloves. Then a warning beep reached the overlay.

[Emergency Override]

An approximate Mesh boots locally. Without permission. Max's senses stretch as the line between 'bio' and 'aug' grows blurry. Metrics flash, hard refresh by the millisecond.

Anomaly

Point temp: 303K...

456K...

721K...

1138K...

An upper limit is passed.

Current sparks, twitching triple helix myofibril not usually found in humans. It throws Max flat faster than she can think.

The force hit her elbows with numbing pain. Eyes closed and gloves covering her face, the glare still peaked at white. Heat roared above her. A choking physical force that pulled air from her lungs. A blink and its sudden absence threw the world back to darkness.

Ash floated to brush her suit amid the *plink* of cooling metal. The augs took over, her back cracking as they flipped her upright. Autopilot fled for her. Max's feet met the corridor at a dead sprint, the clatter of incoming fire echoing from the fab room.

The sign bloomed its dying flower on her back and Max's surprise flared at the lack of following shrapnel. She spared a glance with the cam. Gas billowed from the half-melted door and the adrenaline spike hit in full.

A complex roar of destruction. The pressure changed, greyish fog drawn back.

Away, her implants screamed, and she had no intention of arguing. *Can't let it find the tent*. She ran at random, halls and rooms flung behind in a dilapidated blur. The camera swivelled back and she tried to ignore the feed.

Something followed. It wore the fog as a cloak, heat signature drifting within, ephemeral and formless.

A multi-band bellow and warnings sprinkled vision. Her head twinged in agony, eyes vibrating. Earplugs cut the noise but it shook straight to her bones.

Another turn. She bounced off the wall and kept running. The shock up Max's arm rattled her joints. Behind, paint bubbled as the gas rolled across it. The helmet regrew from her suit to wrap her head. Her view shrank; a widescreen clip to the scene.

Her whimper fogged the glass. The corridor ended fifteen metres ahead, a freefall straight through five levels. Rooms fronted on the other side, walls lost to a fissure carved through the entire building. She didn't think *by what?* Another screech seared like a brand on the inside of her skull.

"[Jump/pounce]!" A voice comes from nowhere, only the subtitles' return lifting it above the deafening tattoo of Max's heart in her throat.

Five metres. No turnings, no options. Max leapt. A phantom shot from far above to meet her, bruising ribs on impact.

Her world flashed piercing white. Afterimages flickered across Max's vision before the pain hit. Burning engulfed her shoulder and the bitter reek of charred flesh followed. Ferrocete boiled to gas as the beam reached the far side. Giddy relief followed. *She wasn't dead.* The clamp at her back wrapped bands around Max's torso. Brutal tightness sent her diaphragm into shock. It yanked her upwards.

Somewhere below, the *thing* in the fog screamed in multi-frequency rage that grew toward a microwave burst. At the ceiling, a vent chamber swallowed Max whole. Its mouth pinched shut in her wake.

Max's visor retracted and cold floor rose to greet her. She threw up on it.

Acid burned at her lips. The tang mixed with scorched meat scent and her next heave recoated the carbon-fibre. She trembled on all fours and exhaustion arrived like a rising tide.

But not all ships lift equally.

Max shakes. Slips. Slides down one wall to meet the fibres. Her augs don't care. Seven metres behind their host, a not-so-dissimilar heat signature ducks out of sight around the next bend.

They borrow an arm, twist muscle until the barrel of a plasma lance tracks its outline alongside the suit-cam. Just in case. A *ka-chick* Max can't hear and an image is saved.

For when she wakes up.