

Max sat between two doors she didn't trust and looked at neither.

In one corner, the hab-tent sat in orange defiance of the room at large. Too bright. The final two days of cal-pouches turned in her hands and everything *else* turned in her mind. Over and over; strange loop for a strange room. The shifting stars churned on the small screen to strobe the space; above them, the art project screamed its history. The suit-cam pointed behind her and up, toward the organs' mouth.

Just in case.

*The structure isn't static.* Any estimate of time that relied on its traces couldn't be trusted. Opaque intelligence its guide. The realisations had their own gravity, tugging thought into an accretion disk wider than her skull. She fought the current. Teased the skein of the fabrication log clear of the pull and set it aside. Context missing, the strands frayed.

*Amorphous pursuers, shifting in the fog. The silhouette of a humanoid, seen only through thermals. The solar creep of mass rebuild, its energy levels obscene.* They had to be connected, had to give some clue to where Ben had been and what he'd done.

Suspicion nagged at her brows, shying away from the questions that demanded answer. *How are they powered? What do they want?*

Max bit her tongue. Pared focus with pain: attack or defence, necessary action. Priorities stacked.

Find Ben. Find the Andromeda. The communication line must be restored, though she no longer knew how. The turning stopped and the sudden slosh of gel within rocked weight across her palm.

Food. Water. Augs could only do so much. She'd have to resupply soon.

Further back in the tubes, where she'd first woken, passages spewed, mad and twisting in every orientation. *Which one to pick? Where did they lead?*

She stowed the pouches. Paced to the tent and lay on the mat and dove *inwards*.

[System Sync: Liminal]

The semi-Mesh boots. Max adjusts to the space. Not a bad one, but not like she's used to. It's hers, alone. Free association drifts, data lent form through her subconscious.

The contents of the data-chip spin like a galaxy-hybrid. Half network, half stars. The margins churn, numbers spinning through formulations that fail to burrow deeper. Just a map and a translator and she's already pushing the boundaries.

Ghosts on ghosts and she within them. A flick and the galaxy drifts away, relegated to spare cycles. She needs to reach a decision.

Attack or defence. Find resources. Memories rise as background context, glittering a web-relation of implicit bias; she skims through. Downside of augs. They're just as clean as the first time. Relive the past in colour, without the benefit of its rose tint. Hindsight in 20/20.

A face flashes and she stops the scroll. Ben's. Younger, but not so much as to drop to human. A line of blood trickles from between the telefactors. His eye is bruised, mauve blush fading to turquoise.

*He is on the floor and blows rain down from a sandy-haired waste of carbon named Jess. The cohort above. Our competition, they lost the bid for our first mission by half a percentile. Ben should not be in the training hall. Perhaps he is waiting for me. It is three days before departure. Anger is messy, imprecise.*

*I do not care.*

*Jess' cam spots me at the entrance. He starts to move. Ben runs interference. I ping Andromeda; bring the whole team here. Snatch a training pistol from its slot. Andromeda bypasses the system-lock with ease. I raise it and the first shot tags Jess' left hip mid-dodge.*

*A ripple of electricity. He falters and words fail. Threats? Mockery? It doesn't matter.*

*Andromeda urges caution, reminds me that They're watching. I up the voltage anyway. Augs won't help if the muscle is overloaded. Five more shots, even spread, high pain. Men have their weakness front and centre. I sprint while he's still twitching.*

*My kick steals his breath. Kneels him down on the mat, eyelids flickering. Two blows to the throat and he doubles over. I flip him. Straddle his chest. My thumb meets the inside edge of his eye. He's not going to fuck with our chances. Not again.*

*Segmented alloy wraps my wrist as Jess' eye bulges from its socket. I look up and a trickle of blood drips from the grey flesh of Ben's face. I recognise the kink of his implants. For him, it's smiling. I do not understand.*

*"Not worth it," he sends on the Mesh.*

*Vitreous humour distorts beneath my thumb-tip but I do not press through to brain. Not yet.*

*I wonder why Jess has not responded. I look back down. A probe has jacked his port and foam spills from the boy's mouth as Ben takes what he wants.*

*"Needed grounds," Ben sends, "easier if I'm the bait. Find their sources. Know where they're coming from."*

[Replay interrupted]

Max smiled up at the tent's roof. *One last check.* Then she'd pick her direction.