

**S**<sup>o</sup>. I'm not in an ideal situation right now.

I've got ten percent of air left in this portable tank. Ship's been decompressed, which . . . not great. Have to rely on the tank. Okay. Okay. I've got maybe an hour of air left.

But I also know for a fact that there's another ship here. It's the competition, sure, but my radar shows they're in range, and surely a fellow scavenge ship wouldn't be so ruthless to ignore a distress call?

"Come on, come on," I mutter, staring at the slowly blinking communication light. I sent out the signal back when I still had half a day of air left. This nearby ship, I can tell on the radar, it's big, so there's got to be a whole operation going on, crew and everything. It's not a little rig like what I have. So, even if I'm the competition to them, I wouldn't be much of a one.

Plus, my ship has a hole on one side. A big one.

The air gauge ticks down to nine percent.

The comm light blinks.

Eight.

Blink. Blink.

Seven.

“You have *got* to answer this comm signal!” I scream at it, deeply aware that takes extra air. I’d like to punch something, but gravity’s out on the ship too, which means if I hit the console, I’d just fly backward in the opposite direction. Ricocheting around my own ship doesn’t seem like a good use of my limited time.

Blink.

Blink.

The other ship is *not* that far away. It’s been well within range for the past hour. What are they all doing, just laughing at a distress signal and rubbing their hands with the knowledge that my ship, though damaged, is another one to loot?

They’re not going to let me die, right?

. . . *Right?*

Blink.

And then—

“Hello?” It’s staticky and dim, but it’s an *answer*.

“Hello, yes?” I say. The ship’s signal’s already routed to my earpiece. “Took you long enough to answer!”

“You’re not authorized to be in this sector,” a different voice says, one that rings with authority and contempt.

“Neither are you!” I take a deep breath, then silently

curse as the gauge ticks down another percent. “If you’re going to get nitpicky about laws, you ignored a live distress signal for hours.” I can hear them start to answer, but I plow on. “And now I’m down to six percent in my air tank.”

“What?” The first voice again, sounding a little confused. Male, I think. “This is a *real* distress call?”

“It is for the next thirty minutes or so, because after that, it’ll just be body removal,” I snap. “My ship had a breach. I’m in a suit, breathing what’s left of the only tank I’ve got.”

“What are you even doing out here?”

“Can I answer that when I have more than half an hour left to breathe?” I say, eyes wide at the shock of how dim this other crew is.

“We’ve got a lock on your signal. You really only got half an hour?”

“Mm-hm.” I’m too tense to put it into words, but I try to get the full gravity of the situation in that grunt.

“We’ll be cutting it close.”

Great. *Great.*

“I’ll try to hold my breath, then,” I say. Because what the fuck else can I say? I can’t exactly refill an oxygen tank in a breached ship.

Whoever answered my call sends me a locator signal. My radar picked them up in this sector, but they’ve got some basic anti-detection shields up, so I didn’t have an exact location. They really aren’t far, but are they near enough? I

check my tank again. I don't like this. I don't like cutting it *this* close.

But I can't risk doing this any other way.

I stare out the hull window. The planet below curves into view. I've been in orbit for about a week. First to the scavenge site. Not an easy haul. When I picked up the other ship approaching, I knew I couldn't compete with them, even if I'd only finished half the job.

A breach in my cargo hold followed by explosive decompression and total life support failure hadn't exactly been in the original plan. But what's a girl to do? I know how to improvise.

The air tank gauge flashes red before my locator shows the larger ship moving closer to me. I'm at two percent by the time they're in sight, and I'm taking shallow sips of air, keeping still, trying my best to convince my body that oxygen's optional.

I was right. Not about oxygen; things are going to get real dicey soon on that front. I was right about the other ship. It's a big one. Maybe even government-issue. It's not a looter, that's for sure; it's far too sleek and new. I bet every part of that ship is original, not held together by cheap welds and luck like my little *Glory*.

Another voice clicks onto my comm. "D-class, our scans show your breach."

"Did you think I was lying?" I mutter.

“Do you have a port for our cofferdam?”

“Yeah, that’s part of the problem,” I say. The breach broke the airlock system. Again, plans awry, improvisation, the usual.

“How are you going to—”

I do not have time to mince words. “Get as close as you can,” I say. I’d had my foot latched to a hold bar, but I let go and twist around, already heading aft, using the bars to propel myself through the micrograv as I float down the corridor. I go through the bulkhead door, the heavy metal seals wide open to allow me passage. Straight to the ripped-out hole blown in one side of my ship. “If you pull up starboard and open up an airlock transfer, I should be able to get to you without a cofferdam.”

“Without a . . . D-class, how are going to—”

“I have a name,” I say. “Ada Lamarr, nice to meet you, thank you for saving my life.” I’m already at the hole in the side of my ship, careful to avoid the sharp edges of metal that could compromise my suit. I stare out at the massive A-class vessel sidling up alongside my little bird. Dozens of positioning thrusters blow out, edging the leviathan a little closer to me. I scan the side of the ship. Various portholes, a few cargo loader arms, a large shuttle bay—there. An escape airlock hatch for emergency use.

“D-class—Lamarr, exactly how do you intend to reach the *Halifax*?”

*Halifax*. Old name. Classic. Maybe not government-issue.

“I’m at one percent,” I mention as if it weren’t my life with minutes to spare. “Can you maybe just trust me on this and open up a door?”

I hold my breath—ironically—and count a few more seconds down. Midship, the airlock door on the side of the *Halifax* pops open.

“Thanks,” I say. “See you in a bit.” I check my suit and fling myself into the void.

An object in motion stays in motion, that’s what Newton said, and the proof of it’s here in space. As I kick off the side of my ship, past the jagged metal edges of the hole, I would keep going forever through the black at this exact same speed and direction if I didn’t hit something. I mean, I’m *hoping* I hit the *Halifax*, which is absolutely my intent, but if that fails, I’ll either get sucked into the gravity of the planet below us—unlikely, given my weight compared to the planet—or I’ll, you know, float in the empty black void of space until I die.

Which, according to my air gauge, is any second now.

I’m missing my target. The *Halifax* is coming at me a little quicker than I’d thought. Turns out flying through space without a tether can fuck up your concept of relative locations. Also, while it looks pretty certain I’m going to hit the side of this other ship, I’m not at the best angle to hit the

open airlock, which is what I need in order to actually *board* the ship.

My O<sub>2</sub> tank may be almost empty, but my propulsion tank is aces. I ignite the jetpack, which does speed me up but at least also speeds me up in the right direction. That little door open on the side of the *Halifax* is calling my name, and even when I reverse the thrusters, I still come in hot enough to slam into the interior door. I would've bounced right off it, but I have the wherewithal to grab on to the latch and hold as the outer door seals shut behind me.

I get a blur of faces at the porthole, a flurry of movement behind the interior wall. This is a classic hyperbaric chamber airlock—a tiny room with one door that opens to the outside, one door that opens to the inside. The inside door won't open until the chamber is repressurized and air's pumped back in. Even as the outer door seals shut, I'm still floating. There's no gravity, no pressure, no air.

Which is a damn shame because there's also no oxygen left in my tank. I suck at nothing, my lungs left wanting. I get up to the porthole window, and through the heavy carbonglass and the thick protection of my helmet, it's hard to see too clearly who's on the other side. I bang on the window with a gloved fist, but I know it's pointless. They can't hurry up a hyperbaric chamber. It's a failsafe to prevent someone from getting the bends and gravity sickness with the artificial grav generator, but at this point, I'd trade that

for some air. Black dots dance behind my eyes. *Glory's* chamber can take up to five minutes to normalize, but she's an older model. I can probably hold my breath two minutes?

My feet hit the floor, then my knees. Gravity's back on. I can barely think; my body keeps trying to breathe air that's not there. My panicked heartbeat in my ears doesn't distract me from the *emptiness* of my lungs, a sensation I've never had before. Screw decompression sickness—I rip my helmet off. Bent over, my body makes a gagging-gasping noise. The air is too thin. *But there is air*, I think, registering that I can actually hear that dying-choking sound streaming out of my raw throat—no sound waves without air.

My arms give out, and I fall fully on the floor, face against the metal. My body bucks, my shoulders spasming as I gasp at air too thin to fully inflate my lungs. My vision goes red.

The last thing I think before it all goes black is:

*Fuck.*