



# CYTEFIRE

— FILES —

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CYNDRALIS III

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[ 11:12H ] THE RIFT OUTPOST

There were three rules in The Rift:

1. Trust no one.
2. Pay your debts.
3. If you break rule 2, there are no more rules.

Mara Kess had broken rule number two.

Now she was sitting in a dusty storage room at Irontooth, an illegal trading post consisting of welded-together shipping containers and old spaceship hulls. In front of her sat Vek Thorai, a burly man with scars on his face and a pistol on the table.

»14,000 zets, Kess. Four months overdue.«

Mara leaned back, folding her arms.

»I'm working on it.«

»Not fast enough.« Vek tapped the table. »My patience has limits. And they were exceeded a month ago.«

»Give me two more weeks.«

»Two weeks?« Vek laughed, short and hard. »I'll give you two days. Or I'll sell you to the dynasties. They pay well for skilled pilots and pretty women.«

Mara's jaw tightened. Being sold meant a contract with no return, forced labour in some border war, or worse. On this side, The Rift was lawless, but at least she was here.

»Two days,« Vek repeated. »Bring me the money, or I'll take it from you.«

### [ +00:36H ] OUTPOST BAR

Mara sat at the bar, a dirty glass in front of her, weighing her options. Raising 14,000 zets in 36 hours was impossible unless she took a job so dangerous that it paid accordingly. And in The Rift, there was only one kind of job that paid that much money: smuggling through Dynasty territory.

»You look like you have a problem.«

A voice beside her.

Mara turned around. A woman, perhaps in her mid-thirties, dark hair, a scar above her left eyebrow, pilot's gloves. Her jacket looked worn, with the faded logo of an old freighter guild.

»Who are you?«

»Kallas. I heard you're a pilot.«

»How did you know?«

»You hear a lot here.« Kallas sat down. »I need someone for a transport. 18,000. After completion.«

Mara's pulse quickened. 18,000—more than enough to pay Vek and have a buffer.

»What's the cargo?«

»FerroCyte plates. Ten tonnes. To Nebulas Ridge, beyond the Dynasty border.«

»FerroCyte? Nebulas Ridge?« Mara knew the name. A tiny, barely charted outpost, deep in disputed territory.

»That's Dynasty space. They patrol there. If they catch me, I'm as good as dead.«

»That's why I'm paying 18,000.« Kallas' eyes were cold. »You fly without transponder, low signature. If you're good, they won't see you.«

»And if they do?«

»Then you've got a problem.«

Mara was silent. Flying through Dynasty space without a transponder was suicide—unless you could fly like a ghost. She could. But one mistake and she'd end up either dead or in a Dynasty labour camp, which was worse.

»Why me?«

»Because you're desperate. And desperate people ask fewer questions.«

Kallas stood up.

»Make your decision now. We take off in four hours.«

#### [ +04:00H ] LANDING PLATFORM

The freighter was an old model, a Shadowclaw, built for speed, not armour. Kallas waited at the snowy ramp, next to her: the FerroCyte cargo, neatly stacked, sealed.

»Everything's here«, Kallas said. »You fly, I'll navigate. We'll share the cockpit.«

»You don't trust me?«

»In The Rift, nobody trusts anyone.« Kallas grinned. »Rule number one.«

They climbed in. The cockpit was cramped, with two seats and worn consoles, but the engines hummed cleanly. Kallas started the systems, Mara took the controls.

»The route is simple«, Kallas said, projecting a map. »We fly along the Dynasty border, through the asteroid belt here, then a quick jump to the nebula edge. Total time: three hours.«

»What about the patrols?«

»They scan every twenty minutes. A small window.«

Mara nodded. The freighter took off, glided out of Irontooth, and accelerated into empty space.

#### [ +01:30H ] DYNASTY BORDER SPACE

Mara flew in the shadow of a large asteroid, engines at 40 per cent, no active scans. Kallas monitored the sensors.

»Patrol, range 200 kilometres. Two ships, light cruisers. They're moving slowly.«

Mara adjusted the course, using the asteroid as cover. The freighter glided past, silently, invisibly.

»Time window in three minutes. Then you have to go full throttle, direct course to the edge of the nebula. We have ten minutes before the next scan.«

»Ten minutes isn't enough for the distance.«

»Then fly faster.«

Mara waited. The seconds crawled by.

Then:

»Now!«

She pushed the engines to maximum. The freighter shot forward, stars blurring, G-forces pressing them into their seats.

Kallas stared at the sensors.

»Eight minutes. No contacts.«

Mara held her course. The ship vibrated, engines roared.

»Six minutes.«

»Four minutes.«

Then: a ping on the passive sensor.

»Contact!« Kallas' voice was sharp. »Heat signature, behind us. 150 kilometres.

Interceptors. They're accelerating.«

»How fast?«

»Faster than us.«

Mara swore. She pulled the freighter into a tight turn, using an asteroid cluster for cover. The pursuing ships followed.

»Two minutes«, Kallas said. »But they're catching up.«

Mara saw the target on the display, a tiny dot, a platform in the middle of nowhere. She pushed the engines beyond their limits.

»If we overheat—«

»Then we'll overheat!«

Mara's hands flew across the console. The freighter shook, warning lights flashed. But they were gaining distance.

»One minute!«

One pursuing ship fired. Plasma bolts whizzed past, narrowly missing. They struck an asteroid, which exploded with a shock wave, sending debris flying in all directions.

»Nebulas Ridge in sight!«

The platform appeared, small, primitive, but in neutral space and with docking clamps.

Mara threw the freighter into an emergency brake, engines in reverse, G-forces pulling at her. The ship crashed into the clamps. Magnetic locks activated.

The pursuing ships slowed down, keeping distance. Then they turned away.

»They don't want an incident,« Kallas said, out of breath. »Nebulas Ridge is neutral. Officially.«

Mara exhaled. Her hands were shaking.

**[ +01:00H ] NEBULAS RIDGE**

The cargo was unloaded, the money transferred. 18,000 zets, just as promised. Kallas stood at the ramp, ready to go.

»You fly well, Kess. If you ever need work again—«

»No, thank you.« Mara shook her head. »I'm out of this business.«

Kallas grinned.

»They all say that. See you next time, then.«

**[ +19:00H ] THE RIFT**

Mara placed the money on Vek's table.

14,000 zets. Exactly.

Vek counted the money carefully, then looked up.

»Interest.«

»What?«

»Now it's eighteen. Finding you work costs.«

Mara stared at him. Her jaw tightened.

Slowly, she reached into her jacket, pulled out the remaining 4,000 zets, and placed them beside the rest. Vek counted again. Nodded.

»Debt settled. You're free.«

Mara turned and walked toward the door.

»Cheeky.«

She stopped.

»Next time you owe money, I won't be so patient.«

Mara left without answering.

There were three rules in The Rift.

She had learned rule two.

Now she knew she would never forget rule one.

# CYTEFIRE

## CYTEFIRE FILES

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