

CYTE FIRE

THE VALKYRIE CHRONICLES



YEAR 128 AO

CYTEFIRE – The Valkyrie Chronicles
First Edition – 2026

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Project: CYTEFIRE
Instagram: @cytefire

Downloads & Updates:
<https://cytefire.itch.io/>

Contact & Inquiries:
cytefire@gmx.de

FOREWORD

Welcome to the world of the Valkyries.

The story you're about to read is more than a piece of fiction - it's an adventure. You can read it like a novel. Or you can dive deeper and experience it as a campaign. With a unit of warriors you build, lead, and send into battle yourself. No one has to. But those who want to can..

A warning: I do not hold back. Violence, loss, passion, sometimes the bizarre - all of it belongs here. If explicit content disturbs you, or if you are under 18, this work is not for you. For everyone else: step inside.

And for those who want to dive deeper - find images, updates, and lore on Instagram.

The era of the Valkyries begins.

External Channels

Supplementary material for the project can be found at:

CyteFire (Instagram): @cytefire

Vicky (Instagram): @vickysolenne

These channels are optional and serve for contextualization, not for understanding the text.

CHAPTER I

Hope is not a certainty.

Hope is a choice.



Husband and father
***** Turnal Hallert *****
02 DEC 128AO



CyndralisNet // Unverified post in the archive

Author: Jenn Beaufort

Date: 2 January 128 AO

Category: Investigative Research-High Risk

Source: *Independent Dispatch Network*

Article: "Cyndralis III – Who saves a planet without wanting anything in return?"

Cyndralis III is recovering. Factories are up and running again, the energy supply is stabilising, and people are talking of hope. The reconstruction is proceeding rapidly, perhaps too rapidly. And at the centre of it all is a man whom nobody knew a year ago. Krastan Vel Orun.

No company registrations. No verifiable origins. Yet suddenly he has access to capital, logistics and personnel that are normally only controlled by governments. I have seen internal documents: shipments of materials with no customs records, no indication of origin. Departments that do not officially exist. Decisions that are not discussed publicly.

A senior engineer told me: "He always knows in advance what we need." A supply officer added: "Anyone who asks questions gets transferred."

Even more worrying: people are disappearing. Eleven documented cases so far, nine of them women. Three female soldiers, four civilian staff members, two female mechanics. Official explanations: transfer, accident, data error. One of the female soldiers had returned from a mission just three weeks earlier. No family has had any personal belongings returned. Several relatives reported receiving almost identical responses from the authorities.

One mother wept: "They said my daughter had been 'transferred to Special Project Zeta'. No one can tell me what that is."

The administration is changing too. Efficient, but secretive. Press access has been restricted. Security-related files are suddenly redacted. A former officer summed it up:

"Nobody saves a planet without something in return."

I don't know what Vel Orun is up to. But power that grows so quickly doesn't come without a price. And when people disappear, nobody should ignore it.

Why do we do it, then? A civilian employee told me: "Many people want to believe that he's saving us. Perhaps because they want to forget how bad things were before."

I'm continuing my research. If you don't hear from me for more than two weeks, contact Mira Koshan at the Cyndralis Transit Authority. She has copies of my files.

—Jenn Beaufort

Addendum

Date: 17 June 128 AO

Over the last few days, I've come across internal memos; many refer to a place that officially doesn't exist. It was listed only under the cryptic name 'B..ta'; the rest had been redacted. I've seen areas that were still open just weeks ago and are now accessible only with authorisation. Female soldiers I spoke to three weeks ago now claim they've never seen me before. I have recordings of our conversations. Either they're being brainwashed here, or they're being intimidated. If anyone is reading this: I think I'm already far too close. Mira has everything. Ask her about 'Shadow Act'.

—J.B.



Aurora sat at the makeshift table in the main chamber and leaned back. The article was almost a year old, but the patterns remained the same: missing women, redacted files, an administrative apparatus that operated quietly and discreetly, leaving no trace. In the space of twelve months, Vel Orun had made himself First Protector of the Reconstructed Order, a sort of planetary overlord lacking transparency and wielding too much control.

Isabella emerged from the rear tunnel, a steaming cup of hot soup in her hand. She set it down on the table and leaned against the EM damping plate, folding her arms:

»Are you still sitting here, or are you back again?«

»Yes, exactly«, smiled Aurora. »Thanks, Issi.«

She took the cup and savored the warm, spicy aroma. It reminded her of her childhood. Just briefly. Then she closed the CompPad and activated the scrambler. After a three second delay, the device would overwrite every digital signature from the last ten minutes. No trace on the network, no log. Footsteps echoed from the entrance. Valentina stepped inside, her shoulders tense, her jaw set. Behind her was Leynes, the Street Runner boy, his clothes tattered and dirty, but his eyes wide with alertness. Aurora had never been one for sentimentality, but the network did its job. Homeless children moved silently through the cities. A few Zets were enough to buy loyalty.

»Val, what's that you've got there?« Aurora set the pad aside.

Valentina handed her a folded piece of paper – real paper, thin and slightly brittle. But immensely valuable, because there was no tracking, no tracing, no way for anyone to spy on the written text: black on white, handed over personally.

»Sorry to bother you. Leynes just brought this; it's brand new.«

Aurora took the note and scanned the lines.

»...Doesn't look too good.«

Her expression remained neutral, but her jaw tightened slightly.

»I can tell«, Valentina said. »You want to get it, don't you?«

Aurora nodded.

»You realise that every single person on this planet is looking for us?«

Aurora held Valentina's piercing gaze.

»And you also know that they're bound to know who I am?«

Valentina's voice sounded tense. Aurora gave only a brief nod; someone who didn't know her wouldn't have seen that small movement, or would have misinterpreted it.

»The current chaos is playing into our hands. And now that Valessan has dropped their auxiliary forces and is further exacerbating the disorder within the HDF's ranks, I think we'll remain under the radar for a while. No matter what we do.«

Aurora handed the note to Isabella and glanced at her ArmCom. Six o'clock. Early for freight traffic to the spaceport. Anyone travelling alone either had a good reason or bad intentions. The note clearly stated that the vehicle was damaged. Perhaps a breakdown. Perhaps freight that someone didn't want to transport officially. Aurora reached into her side pocket and handed the boy a small Zet note.

»Thanks, Leynes. Give my regards to Torban. And tell him to stay sharper than ever.«

Leynes grinned, looking far too grown-up for a twelve-year-old. Then he vanished wordlessly into the shadows. Isabella took a step forward. Her eyes scanned Aurora with the same precision with which she could wield a scalpel.

»This is an opportunity«, she said calmly, tucking a strand of brown hair behind her ear.

»It might be a small step, but it's a start. We need supplies. Connections. If we want to get out of here, we've got to do something.«

Aurora nodded.

»That's exactly what I think. One thing leads to another. If we eventually get hold of a Valessan official - someone who isn't completely in Krastan's pocket yet - we could get things moving. I want to get off this sphere, and I know you feel the same. Until then, we'll take whatever we can get. This bandit might be a starting point.«

Valentina stepped closer and placed her hand on her shoulder. Firmly, reassuringly.

»We follow you. Wherever this goes.«

Valentina was the oldest. In years, in scars, in battles. She was a true friend.

Outside, the morning light crept over the ridges, a cool blue that made the air crisp. Someone was on the move. An opportunity. Or a danger.

Aurora sat up.

»Right. Let's get to the mechs. Let's see if our runaway is still in the mood for company.«

Without another word, they set off. Their footsteps echoed faintly in the damp stone caverns. Cold water dripped from the ceiling. The pale portable lamps cast dim reflections across the rough stone. They reached the lower chamber. The machines stood between rock and darkness. 10-metre-high silhouettes of steel.

CYNDRALIS III

THE RIFT — Hangar Area

29 DEC 128 AO

Valentina stood in front of her mech, a twenty-ton Akontistes, a light-class machine. Fast, responsive, almost too lifelike. Beside it stood the other two light machines.

»Steel coffin.«

No joke. Many died in these things. Crushed, burned, torn apart. Not to mention the heat during combat. That's why they wore little more than the bare essentials. The rest was training. And luck. They would need both.

Valentina took off her jacket and hung it on a sharp-edged rock ledge. Her boots, trousers and shirt followed. All that remained on her skin were her black knickers.

She climbed the ladder, rung by rung. The cockpit opened with a hydraulic hiss. Inside, the Personal Inner Frame awaited her, an empty harness of dark metal and sensor mesh, open like an embrace. Gel pads gleamed faintly at the contact points.

Valentina stepped inside. Her feet into the footrests. Her legs into the rails. The PIF recognised her with pinpoint accuracy.

With a soft whirring sound, the mechanical arms closed around her. Gel pads settled against her shoulders, back, hips and thighs, cool at first, then warm. Sensor fabric scanned her skin, calibrated, searched for muscle groups.

The system AI came online. A warm, modulated voice.

»Welcome back, Valentina. Initialising environment. Ready for operational mode. Please confirm with your code.«

»Initiate operational mode. And yes, looks like trouble today.«

The PIF tilted her smoothly into a seated position. The mech seat moulded itself to her form. Harness modules closed around her hips and chest, tightening firmly. The headrest lowered and locked into place, hermetically sealed and thermally insulated. The HUD flared up, reddish, pulsing as if the machine were breathing.

[Hi, Val.] The CyteCore's voice sounded lighter, almost playful. [I've missed you.]

The thought of Gregory Solarna, inventor of these Cores, was inevitable for Valentina every time a Core spoke to her. She quickly pushed it aside before the lump could rise in her throat, then allowed herself a small grin.

»Me too, Binky. System check.«

The system AI replied via the HUD. Weapons: green. Stabilizer: calibrated, stable. Servo arrays: stable. FerroCyte core: 91%, temperature nominal. External sensors: limited.

[Your heart rate is twelve beats above normal.]

A display on the HUD, a schematic outline of a body with green and yellow markers. [AutoMed is ready. Do you want an injection?]

»Half dose, no sedation. I still need the adrenaline boost.«

[Confirmed. Microinjection in progress.]

She felt the familiar pressure of the PIF against her back and thighs. The machine was responding to her. Her breath became its breath. Her movements became its movements.

Outside, beyond the shadows of the rocks, someone was moving. Perhaps prey. Perhaps danger.

Valentina rested her hands lightly on the arm consoles.

»Binky, mission mode. Are you ready?«

[Ready, Val. Let's go hunt someone.] And the machine awoke.

A few minutes later, at the cave entrance.

Valentina's HUD displayed the tactical formation, three thermal markers already obscured by snow interference. The helmet visor automatically dimmed to counter the morning glare. She let her gaze wander over the landscape. The wind whipped snow particles across the plain in sharp arcs and tugged at the mass of their mechs. The white landscape, however, looked peaceful and seemed almost idyllic.

A brief crackling sound in her ear, followed by Aurora's voice.

»PHOENIX to Tax. Break into a run towards one-six-five. Target zone two-five clicks. ETA six-zero minutes. Keep your eyes peeled, girls. We could well be chasing a decoy.«

The machines began to move. With every step they sank deep into the frozen ground, sending snow swirling and ice crunching as it flew up in wide fans. The servos could be heard working, emitting short, sharp pulses and the rhythmic rumbling of the machines, each weighing several tonnes.

Behind them, the mountains vanished after a few minutes as dark, jagged silhouettes in the storm.

Ahead of them lay nothing but a cold, open expanse.

For forty minutes, the only sounds to be heard were the thud of her footsteps and the low hum of the servo arrays as they battled the cold.

Then a signature flashed up on Valentina's radar, almost motionless. She opened the channel and broke the silence.

»FORGE here. Scanner shows a single signature at one-eight-five. Distance: two clicks ahead. Don't like it.«

Aurora replied immediately.

»Confirmed. Signal's good, readings are unstable. Could be the storm, or ... This smells like a decoy. Be careful. No fire until we're under fire or I give the order.«

»Aye«, came the double reply. HALO fell back, three paces away.

Valentina stayed at the front, with that electric tension in her veins that she could never quite shake off.



CYNDRALIS III

DALMETA PLAIN — west of the Delcadare spaceport

29 DEC 128 AO

As Aurora approached the wreck in her Toxotes, it quickly became clear that there was no one left who wanted to fight here, apart from a few overloaded emergency programmes running through their routines.

The enemy mech, a battered Epilektos, staggered through the storm. Servos jerked briefly, then gave way. Smoke billowed in thick, dark plumes from the shoulder section. One leg dragged behind it. The left forearm was completely missing; the stump was smouldering. The rocket launcher on the right shoulder had also seen better days.

Epilektos, a medium-weight, jump-capable assault system. Normally a serious problem. Now nothing more than a broken-down bulldozer on two legs, dangerous only because of its unpredictability.

Without warning, the wreck fired an erratic plasma pulse from the PPC. Out of reflex, out of error, out of desperation. No aimed fire.

»PHOENIX to Tax. Open fire. Take him out before he lands a lucky shot.«

No mercy, no hesitation, no discussion.

Valentina opened fire immediately. Laser and missiles pounded the mech's right flank. Armour cracked open; the laser sliced through the damaged flank like a hot knife through butter. Aurora fired. Her two lasers tore deep craters into the torso, piercing through the torn armour. Isabella's Bolistes unleashed a storm from its rocket tubes. Ten warheads hurtled towards the enemy chassis, engulfing it in a cascade of explosions. Smoke and steam billowed from the wreckage. The Epi sank to its knees, toppled to one side. Smoking, motionless, dead. Silence. Only the howling of the wind.

Then, with a surge of pressure and the rhythmic release of the locking bolts, the cockpit armour burst open. An escape pod was ejected. That had been to be expected. Industrial standard. Stabilisers fired immediately; the pod stabilised and sealed itself. The internal fire-suppression system activated in the fallen hull. CO₂ gushed out like a stifled breath and choked the fire until only grey-white steam remained.

»Good«, Aurora said.

»HALO, perimeter scan, full circle. FORGE, you secure the capsule. I'll check the mech - there might still be something useful in there. And then we're off home. The storm's getting me down.«

CYNDRALIS III

THE RIFT — Hangar Area

29 DEC 128 AO

Isabella had already left her craft and pulled on her jacket, scanner in hand.

Valentina gently set the capsule down on the floor. Just under two hundred kilos, stabilised. No active trackers. No booby traps. Clean.

Isabella approached the capsule and initiated the external release. The shell responded with a soft hiss, then the hermetic bolts disengaged. A rush of warm air escaped — a mixture of reserve oxygen, body heat, and the metallic tang of auto-injectors. Isabella knew the procedure all too well from her years of military service.

Inside lay a young woman, pale and wrapped in a PIF.

This one clearly hadn't been fitted for her. It was too large, poorly aligned with her frame. Her skin glistened with the fine sheen of condensation that forms when warmth meets the cold.

Isabella recognised the signs immediately: bruising along the ribs, pressure marks, lacerations. The brutal imprint of a badly fitted PIF after a crash.

She knelt beside the woman, calm and professional. Two fingers to her neck. A pulse. Weak. She checked her pupils, then studied the bruising again.

Deep. Dark purple. Too deep.

She drew in a sharp breath.

»There's a pulse,« she said at last. »Thready. Hypoxic. Give me the medipack.«

Valentina handed it over without a word. Isabella removed a stimulant auto-injector, pulled the cap, and pressed it into place. A soft click. The stranger flinched almost imperceptibly. Then her eyes opened. Green. Glassy. Searching the room in confusion, unfocused - like someone struggling toward the surface of dark water. Her lips moved, but at first no sound came. Then a whisper, hoarse and fragile, but clear enough.

»...Jeana... Hayek.«

Isabella gave her a reassuring smile, though the injuries might be serious.

»Follow my finger.« She moved her hand slowly back and forth. Jeana's eyes tracked the movement.

»Good.«

»Where did you learn that?« Aurora asked, clearly impressed. Isabella allowed herself the faintest grin while checking Jeana's pulse again.

»Army medic. Then Medical Academy. Bioengineering and field surgery. I always wanted to help, not kill.« She carefully examined the ribs and checked the spine. No obvious fractures. Then she wrapped a blanket around her.

»You're stable for now, Jeana. We'll do a full assessment later.«

Aurora nodded.

»All right, Jeana. You're out of the firing line for now.« She leaned in slightly.

»And before you ask - you're safe. At least for the moment.«

Valentina gave a quiet, dry snort.

»Depends how you define 'safe.'«

Aurora gave a wry smile.

»Hey. We're warm, we've got mountains over our heads, and nobody's shooting at us right now. That's more than many people can say these days.«

Jeana's eyelids fluttered.

»You were out there alone in that mech, weren't you?«

Jeana closed her eyes and took a shaky breath.

»...Yes.«

Aurora's expression hardened.

»I'm Aurora Belt. That's Valentina Embers over there. And your doctor, Isabella Fyrn.« She sat down and leaned back against the metal wall.

»All right,« she said quietly. »Why don't you tell us what happened?«

CYNDRALIS III

THE RIFT — Hangar Area

29 DEC 128 AO

Jeana's body burned in a dozen places. And yet, strangely, she already trusted the woman who had examined her. Isabella carried herself with the calm certainty of a professional physician, even if the surroundings suggested anything but professionalism.

Isabella now sat opposite her, watching closely, never quite taking her eyes off her. Aurora leaned silently against the wall, unreadable. Valentina remained further back in the shadows, arms crossed. Jeana noticed the laser pistol at her hip.

The story did not come all at once. It emerged in fragments - halting, brittle, difficult to piece together through the pain and exhaustion. Jeana had to concentrate just to keep the sequence of events straight. She had been a militia soldier. A weapons technician. At some point, she had realised that what called itself order had long since become little more than an economic machine - one that consumed people as readily as fuel.

»They only wanted output. Not people. Everything had gone cold«, she whispered.

»It was all... numbers. Money. Deals made behind closed doors.« She fought back the urge to cry as the memories came flooding back, tangled with the sharp ache in her battered body.

»I know that«, Isabella said quietly. »All too well. I felt exactly the same. I ran too.« She handed Jeana a bowl of hot soup.

»Sorry. Go on.«

Jeana took it with trembling hands, suddenly overwhelmed by how grateful she felt. She clung to the warmth, her stiff fingers wrapped tightly around the metal.

»I defected to the bandits about six months ago. Not because I believed in them. Because I had no choice.« She swallowed.

»At least there, everyone had a role. Clear orders. A mech assigned to each pilot. And a few faces that hadn't completely given up on life yet. I told myself I'd be better off.« Her voice hardened.

»Then I met him.«

A pause.

»Velnik Newman. Captain.« Even saying the name seemed to drain the warmth from the room.

»He moved through the chain of command like a shadow. He always knew more than he should. More than any officer was supposed to know. His orders were absolute. No discussion. No mistakes. No mercy.« She stared into the soup without seeing it.

»A convoy between Dalmeta Outpost and the southern hideout was lost. I couldn't save it. Fog. Tracking module malfunction. Bad timing.« Her fingers tightened around the bowl.

»That was enough.« Her voice dropped.

»They took me to a facility.« She hesitated.

»A place called... Beta Dalmeta.«

Aurora and Valentina exchanged a quick glance. Aurora pushed herself off the wall.

»We know it«, she said grimly.

»A so-called re-education camp for 'difficult people.' We were supposed to be sent there ourselves. We escaped before they could deliver us.«

Jeana looked up slowly.

»Newman took me there himself.« Her breathing became shallower.
»I'll never forget the symbol on his shoulder. That jagged lightning bolt.« Her voice cracked.
»He... punished me.« The words barely escaped her lips before the memory came rushing back in full force.

The room was cold. Sterile. Clinical.

Newman stood beside a technician in a white coat.

The man held a syringe.

»I'm going to sedate her now«, the technician said.

»The hell you are.« Newman's voice was ice. Controlled. Quiet. Far more frightening than shouting.

»She should suffer. She should feel everything. Everything. Do you hear me?«

»That's... that's against protocol.«

»I don't give a damn about your protocol.« Newman grabbed the technician by the collar and yanked him forward.

»You'll connect her without the medication, or I'll strap you into that chair instead.« He shoved him back.

»Now.«

The technician was trembling. He nodded.

Jeana tried to pull away as they seized her. There was no hesitation. No dignity. No humanity.

They stripped her where she stood while one of the security guards kept a weapon trained on her.

She fought. Instinct. Panic. Pure survival.

But Newman's men were stronger, and the threat of the gun made resistance feel meaningless.

They forced her into the chair. Naked. Helpless.

The restraints came one after another.

Wrists.

Upper arms.

Ankles.

Thighs.

Finally, the locking brace around her neck.

Then the probes. Even the technician's hands were shaking now.

Jeana screamed.

Newman stepped forward and pressed a strip of tape over her mouth. The sound died into a muffled, desperate noise.

Then the machines came alive. A low mechanical hum. Status lights flickering awake. The first sequence initiated.

Pain hit instantly.

Jeana screamed into the tape, the sound trapped in her own skull. Tears streamed down her face.

She bucked against the restraints, twisted, fought to wrench herself free, every muscle straining until it felt like her body would tear itself apart.

But the more she fought, the wider Newman smiled. He stepped up to the console and studied it with grotesque curiosity. Almost childlike.

»Where are the controls?«

The technician pointed at a series of displays.

Newman tapped one. Then another. A warning light turned red. Blinking.

He tapped again.

Pain detonated deep in her lower abdomen.

So sudden.

So violent.

Her strangled scream echoed inside her own head like it belonged to someone else.

Jeana was trembling, tears streaming down her face. The hangar had fallen silent. Only the distant wind howled through the cracks in the rock.

Aurora stared at her, her jaw tightening. Somewhere behind her, Valentina muttered a quiet curse.

»What did they do to you?« Aurora's voice was soft now. Careful. Almost gentle.

Jeana swallowed.

»A medical chair. Probes. They... collected something. Fluids, I think. I don't understand.«

Her fingers tightened around the cup.

»But I was awake.« A pause.

»I felt everything.« Silence.

Isabella looked from Aurora to Valentina, confusion written plainly across her face.

»What does she mean? What fluids?«

No one answered. Because no one knew.

Jeana's hand clenched into a fist. Tears still glistened in her eyes, but when she spoke again, her voice had changed. Harder. Colder.

»I'm going to kill that bastard for what he did to me.« She drew a shaky breath and forced herself onward.

She had escaped through sheer luck. A power failure during a storm. A safety bulkhead that had failed to seal. That was all. She had run through the maintenance section and climbed into a mech in service mode - fortunately one that still had no registered bio-signature lock.

Her objective had been simple: reach the VTOL airfield at Dalmeta. There, she had hoped to find an old friend. Fiona Langham. A fighter pilot. Loyal. Someone who might have hidden her. Maybe secured her a place as a fighter technician. A new name. A new identity. A clean start.

But the storm had arrived first. The mech had begun to fail, piece by piece. And then came the attack.



CYNDRALIS III

DALMETA CITY — DELCADARE SPACEPORT

03 JAN 129 AO

Fiona Langham moved through the pre-flight checklist of her VEKTOR IX with her usual precision.

Weapons systems: green. Engines: synchronised. Power balance: stable. The bird was ready. Just like her. She gave a brief hand signal to the technician working beneath the left wing panel. He acknowledged it with a short nod before moving on to the next inspection point.

Fiona was just about to open the tower channel when a face suddenly appeared outside the cockpit canopy.

Jeana.

For a split second, warmth cut through her focus. A memory. Laughter in maintenance hangars. Late evenings filled with bad coffee and even worse stories. Then reality caught up. Jeana looked different. Harder. Worn down.

Like someone who had been pushed far beyond exhaustion and kept going anyway.

She knocked twice against the canopy. Fiona released the cockpit seal and cracked it open.

»Jeana? What the—«

Jeana raised a hand.

»Five minutes. Section C. Waste area behind the hangars. Come alone.«

Her voice was low. Flat. Urgent. Then she was gone. Just like that.

Fiona stared after her for a second, a cold weight settling in her stomach.

Something was very wrong.

Five minutes later.

The wind had teeth.

Streetlights cast long shadows across concrete and frost as Fiona stepped through a narrow side exit into the open air, helmet tucked under one arm. Her boots crunched against the thin layer of ice.

She spotted them immediately. Two silhouettes. Dark coats. Plain civilian clothing. Just inconspicuous enough to draw attention if someone looked twice.

They stood where the delivery zone began and the official paths ended. Behind them, a small hovercraft waited in silence, lights dark, a driver motionless at the controls.

Jeana broke away from the other silhouette and walked toward her.

»Fiona.« They embraced briefly. Her voice was calm. Too calm. Tense beneath the surface.

»This is Aurora. She leads the group that took me in.«

Fiona stopped and gave the other woman a measured look.

Aurora stepped forward. Young. Early twenties, perhaps. Long red hair tucked beneath her hood. But there was nothing youthful about the way she carried herself. Every movement controlled. Every glance deliberate.

»Fiona Langham.« Aurora paused.

»I know what you fly. And I know what you can see.«

Fiona said nothing.

»You have access to routes, patrol patterns, troop deployments. Data most people wouldn't even know how to read.«

Fiona crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow.

»You're not much for small talk, are you?«

A beat. Then her expression hardened.

»And why exactly should I discuss myself and my job with a complete stranger?«

Aurora stepped closer. Not aggressively. Just enough.

»Because you're smart.« Her tone remained calm. Matter-of-fact.

»And because you've known for a long time that this place is rotten to the core. You see it in every patrol request. Every sudden reroute. Every unexplained movement.« She held Fiona's gaze.

»We need someone who can tell us what's happening. In the air. On the ground. No sabotage. No risky missions. Just information.« A pause.

»Quietly.«

Fiona felt herself recoil slightly at the directness.

»And if I say no?«

Aurora gave the faintest shrug.

»Then you go back. Fly your missions. Do your job.«

Her expression didn't change.

»And watch the system keep making people disappear.« A beat.

»People like us.« Then:

»Maybe one day, people like you.«

The words landed colder than the wind.

»We're not threatening you«, Aurora said evenly. »We're being honest. We're fighting something bigger than all of us.« She nodded toward the sky.

»And we need eyes up there.«

Silence.

Wind moved between them like something alive.

Fiona exhaled through her nose. She had known. Of course she had. Everyone with half a brain knew something was wrong. But honestly she had decided to ignore it. But that wasn't the frightening part. The frightening part was that no one ever said it aloud.

»Let me think about it«, she said at last. »This is dangerous.«

»You can trust her«, Jeana said quietly. »The same way you trust me.«

Fiona shook her head.

»That's not the point. If they catch me, I'm gone.«

Aurora reached into her jacket and pulled out a device roughly the size of a thermos flask. Matte black. Reinforced edges. A short retractable antenna. She handed it over.

»Scrambler. Model Four. Adaptive signal camouflage.«

Fiona took it automatically. Heavier than expected. Solid. Definitely military. A small logo was stamped into the casing near the bottom. Familiar. But she couldn't remember where she had seen it before.

»It encrypts transmission traffic and masks it as routine background chatter. To scanners, it looks harmless.«

Fiona turned it in her hands.

»Harmless as what?«

»Standard telemetry. Routine data traffic from military aircraft. It fits your flight profile.«

A brief pause.

»Range: eighty kilometres.«

Fiona looked up.

»And this actually works?«

Aurora's expression remained serious.

»As long as no one is specifically hunting for anomalies, yes.«
Then, more honestly:
»It isn't perfect. A good analyst might spot inconsistencies. Most won't.«
She pointed.
»Clip it to your belt. Cable into your headset. Red transmit switch here. Press, speak, release.«
Her eyes met Fiona's.
»I have the only receiver.«
Fiona stared at the device. Advanced. Restricted. Dangerous.
»You're trusting me with this?«
»We have to start somewhere.« Aurora's voice stayed level.
»We're starting with you, Langham.«
Then more quietly:
»If you decide to help us, contact me.«
A pause.
»If not, destroy it completely. It's useless on its own.«
Fiona looked down at the weight in her hands. Then back up.
»I'll think about it.«
Aurora gave a small nod.
»That's all I ask.«
Jeana managed the faintest smile.
»You'll make the right choice.«
Then they turned and disappeared into the darkness. Fiona watched them go. For a moment, she felt the sharp ache of missing the friend she used to know. But was that enough to risk her life? Then the thought hit her. Brutal in its simplicity:
A life lived in fear was no life at all. She had seen too many people simply vanish. Report for duty one day. Gone the next. No explanation.
Seconds later, the hovercraft glided away without a sound.
Fiona remained standing in the cold, the scrambler heavy in her hand.
And for the first time, she already knew her answer.



CYNDRALIS III

DALMETA CITY — HELICAN CROWN / THE GOLDEN TOWER

04 JAN 129 AO

The Protector settled into the leather-upholstered command chair behind his immaculate desk. Krastan Vel Orun. First Protector of the Reconstructed Order. Brigadier General. The office atop the Golden Tower offered a panoramic view over Dalmeta City, the planetary capital. Surrounded by the banners of the ten systems of the Circular Pact, he allowed himself the familiar illusion. Emperor. Not yet. But perhaps soon. Across from him sat Field Colonel Gregor Mortasky, lazily scrolling through reports on his CompPad. Vel Orun despised the man. Arrogant. Condescending. Dangerous. Unfortunately, useful. For now, usefulness outweighed the urge to eliminate him. Mortasky looked up and gave a thin smile.
»By the way, my congratulations, Protector. A brilliant operation you arranged with the Dynasty.«
Vel Orun waved the compliment away.
»Spare me the flattery, Gregor. We both know you don't mean a word of it.«
He leaned back slightly.
»You're no politician. But you are an effective military commander.«
A pause.
»That's why you're still here.«
Mortasky grinned and took a measured sip of whisky.
»Then let's discuss the fugitives.«
Vel Orun's brow furrowed.

»Discuss what?«

Mortasky said nothing. That irritated him immediately.

»Do we even need to concern ourselves with this? A handful of runaways who've been hiding for over a month. Irritating, yes. Hardly strategic.« He dismissed the thought with a flick of his hand.

»Don't waste my time.«

Mortasky calmly set down his glass. Then projected a personnel file onto the desk surface. A face appeared. Blonde. Sharp features. Military identification portrait. Expression neutral.

Mortasky smiled again. That same insufferable smile.

»Perhaps you've overlooked who actually escaped.«

Vel Orun barely glanced at the file.

»Valentina Embers. Brilliant engineer. Yes, I've read the report.«

A shrug.

»Talented. Not irreplaceable.«

»Not quite.«

Mortasky authorised a deeper security layer. The projection flickered. A warning flashed briefly: 'TOP SECRET'

Then the file updated. Vel Orun leaned forward. Stopped. For the first time that morning, his expression cracked.

»What...?«

He shot to his feet.

»Why was I not informed immediately?«

Mortasky remained infuriatingly calm.

»Because no one considered the Solarna bloodline relevant anymore. According to historical records, the family was eradicated decades ago.«

He gestured toward the file.

»Her true identity only surfaced after deeper forensic correlation. I received confirmation yesterday.«

Vel Orun's face darkened.

»Damn it.« He turned toward the panoramic window, jaw tight. Then back.

»Where are they?«

»We've expanded the search already.«

Mortasky ticked the list off almost casually.

»Satellite sweeps. Drone reconnaissance. Trade network traffic filters. Civilian transaction monitoring.« A pause.

»Nothing.« He lifted his glass again.

»At the moment, they're benefitting from environmental chaos and fragmented reporting.«

Then, with complete certainty:

»But they need food. Fuel. Equipment.«

He took a sip.

»People always reappear.«

Vel Orun's voice sharpened instantly.

»I want daily updates.«

He stepped closer.

»No gaps. No delays. No assumptions.«

A beat.

»I want them found.«

Then colder:

»Alive.«

Mortasky raised an eyebrow.

Vel Orun didn't blink.

»This takes priority over everything else. You'll receive whatever resources you require.«

His voice dropped.

»Understood?«

Silence.

Vel Orun forced himself to breathe. This was catastrophic. A failure of intelligence. A mistake with consequences that could spread far beyond a single escape. Someone would pay for this.



CYNDRALIS III
SOUTHERN DALMETA PLAINS
06 JAN 129 AO

The hovercraft tore through the snowstorm with reckless enthusiasm. At the controls sat Torban, leader of the Street Runners, grinning like a child who had finally been handed the keys to something far too fast. Aurora pulled her hood tighter against the cold.

»Are you sure this is a good idea?« Torban swerved around a half-buried snowdrift without easing off.

»No«, Aurora replied dryly.

Silence.

Then:

»What?« He finally lifted his foot slightly from the accelerator and shot her a glance.

Aurora exhaled.

»Go for it, lad. It's risky. I know that. But we don't have drones, satellite access, or proper reconnaissance assets. We're improvising our survival every single day.«

Torban snorted.

»Hey. My name's Torban. Not 'lad'.« A sideways grin.

»And unless I've aged badly, we're about the same age. Plus we've known each other for what - ten years?«

Aurora gave him a sideways look.

»Fair enough. Sorry.«

That spark returned to his eyes immediately. *Was this about more than just driving?* She shoved the thought aside.

»How close do you want to get?«

Aurora considered it. Driving directly toward the perimeter would be madness.

»We circle the complex as normal civilian traffic. Route from Dalmeta City toward Ganimed Haven.

Low profile. Predictable movement.«

She adjusted her gloves.

»Best camouflage is to look boring.«

»Understood.«

Silence settled between them again.

The kind that usually meant Torban was thinking. Which rarely led anywhere safe.

Then:

»Tell me something.«

Aurora didn't look at him.

»Dangerous start.«

»How did you actually escape back then? Before they sent you there?«

Aurora turned her head sharply. Not her favourite subject. Not remotely. But Torban had done more for her over the years than most people ever would - usually without asking for anything in return. So she answered.

»Val's uncle.«

Torban blinked.

»What about him?«

»He staged the transport accident.«

A beat.

»That's how we got out.«

Torban nearly took his eyes off the road.

»What? He's alive?«

Aurora stared out into the storm.

»History is written by whoever survives long enough to publish it.«

A pause.

»That doesn't make it true.«

Silence.

Then she added, without looking at him:

»If you repeat that, our friendship ends very abruptly.«

A beat.

»Possibly with violence.«

Torban laughed softly.

»You can trust me, Aurora. Always.«

She believed him. Which was precisely why she had said it. Aurora allowed herself the faintest smile, then turned back toward the storm.

Torban brought them over a rise, merged onto the paved road, and slipped into the sparse civilian traffic.

For a while, neither spoke. Then Torban glanced at the navigation display.

»We're close.« He tapped the screen.

»Beta Dalmeta should be straight ahead.«

Aurora leaned forward.

»Distance?«

»Roughly five kilometres.«

A pause.

Then, correcting himself:

»Five clicks.«

Aurora almost smiled. He was picking up military habits far too quickly. She reached for the binoculars. A brutal old military unit. Matte black. Heavy enough to use as a weapon. Probably stolen from some forgotten depot. Unremarkable on the outside. Far less ordinary within. AI-assisted image reconstruction. Scatter filtering for fog and snowfall. Variable focal depth. Nothing cutting-edge. But dependable. Aurora raised the optics to her eyes.

The system adjusted automatically, compensating for wind interference, reconstructing outlines from fragmented returns. A few seconds passed. Then the complex emerged. Distance: 5.2 km. High perimeter fencing. Watchtowers. Armoured walls. Guard movement.

Aurora's jaw tightened. This was no re-education facility. What she was seeing gave disturbing weight to Jeana's account.

»Do you know how large the site is?«

Torban shook his head.

»Honestly? I always assumed the rumours were exaggerated.«

»Keep driving.«

They managed only about half the perimeter. After that, the road curved southward. Leaving it would have been suicidal. The guards would have flagged them instantly.

Aurora had already begun recording. The binocular system compiled the fragments, reconstructed a digital model, extrapolated blind zones, movement paths, and thermal signatures. Two minutes later, the image stabilised. Her stomach tightened.

Ten mechs.

Thirty guards.

Five external patrol drones.

That was just the visible layer.

»Roughly five hectares above ground«, Aurora murmured.

Torban glanced over.

»That bad?«

»Worse.«

She zoomed in again. Then lowered the optics.

»Most of it has to be underground.«

She looked at him.

»Otherwise none of this makes sense.«

Torban pushed the accelerator again.

»Well.«

A grin.

»Fun trip.«

Aurora gave him a tired smile.

»Thanks, Torban.«

He shrugged.

»Anytime.«

But Aurora no longer felt like smiling.
Beta Dalmeta had looked dangerous from a distance. Up close, it looked engineered for something far darker. And whatever its true purpose was...
most of it was buried.



CYNDRALIS III
DALMETA CITY
09 JAN 129 AO

The soldier dragged her forward by the arm, his grip biting deep into her skin. Then he shoved her. Mallory slammed into the wall hard enough to make her vision burst with stars. She was freezing. The thin shirt clinging to her skin offered almost no protection against the cold. They had pulled her out of the shelter without warning.

From somewhere deeper in the alleys came screams. Women. Girls. Sharp. Panicked. Cut short. No one intervened.

No one ever did.

The soldier pulled a handheld device from his belt and pressed it against her upper arm. A sharp sting. A synthetic voice responded instantly.

[NX-3 CONFIRMED. RECONFIGURATION COMPLETE. SUBJECT 100% READY.]

Mallory's stomach dropped.

»Come with me.«

She looked around. Others. Women like her. Escorted under armed guard. All being driven in the same direction.

»What are you going to do with us?«

The soldier didn't even look at her.

»You'll see. Move.«

Mallory planted her feet.

»No.«

Now he looked at her. Coldly.

»I'm not going.«

He slammed her back against the wall and drove the muzzle of his weapon against her temple.

»You cooperate...«

His voice was low. Flat.

»...or this gets unpleasant.«

A pause.

»Your choice.«

Mallory forced herself to breathe. Think. She was a Street Runner. Fast. She knew the city, knew the alleys, knew how to disappear.

As his grip shifted toward her arm again, she moved fast. Twisted free.

For one glorious second - freedom.

Then his boot hooked her leg.

She hit the ground hard.

A kick smashed into the side of her head. Pain detonated through her skull. The world tilted. Darkness crawled into the edges of her vision. Metal clicked shut around her wrists.

»That's enough, you little brat.«

He hauled her upright like dead weight and dragged her toward the transport van.

Inside sat five other women. One was crying openly. Another stared at nothing. The others had already gone silent. That frightened Mallory most of all.

Almost an hour later, they arrived at the facility. At first glance, it looked military.

Perimeter fencing. Watchtowers. Floodlights.

Armed guards in full combat gear.

Then the atmosphere changed. Beyond the outer checkpoints, the place became something else entirely.

Clinical. Cold. Precise.

The air inside was humidified and heavily filtered, carrying the sterile sting of disinfectant.

They were marched into a processing room.

»Clothes off.«

No explanation. No hesitation.

Mallory froze.

A soldier stepped forward.

»Now.«

The women stripped in silence.

Shirts.

Shoes.

Undergarments.

Everything.

Mallory watched her clothes disappear into a steel container marked:

'WASTE'

Something inside her stomach turned. Then they were moved again.

No pause. No time to think.

Mallory was pushed into a shower chamber. Ice-cold water slammed into her skin. A woman in a white coat stepped in beside her, holding a stiff brush. No words. No eye contact. She scrubbed her methodically. Arms. Back. Chest. Legs. Everywhere. Efficient. Mechanical. Like preparing equipment. Not a human being.

Then Mallory was taken into the next room. A chair waited in the centre.

»Sit.«

She obeyed.

Another woman approached. White coat. Face mask. Gloved hands. Two armed soldiers stood behind her. Watching.

»Keep still.«

The woman worked quickly. Razor. Gel. Professional detachment. Underarms. Arms. Legs. Then the intimate areas. Mallory stared at the ceiling and tried to be somewhere else. Anywhere else. Her hands trembled uncontrollably.

Then came water again. Rinsing. Inspection. A final nod. A plain gown was handed to her. Nothing else.

When the others were finished, the group was moved deeper into the facility. No one spoke. As they passed an open doorway, Mallory glanced inside.

And froze.

Women.

Several of them.

Lying naked on examination tables.

Restrained.

Motionless.

Probes attached to heads, torsos, limbs. Machines hummed quietly around them. One woman stared at the ceiling.

Eyes open.

Empty.

Up until that moment, Mallory had been afraid. Now panic took hold.

Raw.

Absolute.

She spun around.

A guard seized her immediately.

»I have information!« Mallory blurted out.

Her voice cracked.

»If you let me go ...«

The soldier shoved her hard.

»Not interested.«

Desperation took over.

»I know something! About an Aurora! And a... Valentina!«

»Good for you.«

Then they entered the next room. A uniformed officer stood inside. More insignia than anyone else she had seen so far. The soldiers snapped to attention immediately.

Mallory's eyes locked onto the nameplate.

MORTASKY

The officer turned slowly.

Interested.

Thirty minutes later, Gregor Mortasky knew everything Mallory knew about the red-haired woman... and her blonde companion.



CYNDRALIS III

THE RIFT

11 JAN 129 AO

The first usable intelligence package from Fiona Langham had arrived the day before.

Aurora pulled off her headphones, set them aside, and turned her chair toward the others. The room was cold. Isabella tightened her winter jacket around herself.

»Equipment convoy«, Aurora said.

»Field workshop components. Spare parts. Ammunition.« She tapped the projected route map.

»According to Langham, the unit is scheduled to leave Delcadare at eleven hundred today.

Officially.«

A brief pause.

»Unofficially? Bribery at the highest level.«

Valentina gave a quiet snort.

»Mortasky?«

Aurora nodded once.

»According to Langham, the HDF is preparing a strike.« She leaned back.

»Not an open engagement. More of a warning shot aimed at Valessan. Political muscle. Plausibly deniable.«

A bitter smile.

»Illegal, of course. Which means nobody wants their name attached to it.«

She zoomed the map.

»That last reconnaissance flight wasn't about the route.« Her finger moved across the terrain overlay.

»It was about the bandits.«

Silence.

»They're already in position.«

She looked at the others.

»The plan is obvious.«

Her tone hardened.

»Let militia forces and Valessan's people tear each other apart. Then move in, take the convoy, and claim whatever survives.«

Valentina crossed her arms.

»Elegant.«

Aurora ignored the comment.

»We move after that.«

A beat.

»When everyone else is tired.«

She zoomed further.

»We take whatever we can carry.«

»And with some luck«, Valentina said, »they mistake us for another recon team.«

Aurora nodded.
»Or a recovery detachment.«
Isabella tilted her head.
»And if they don't?«
Aurora gave a small shrug.
»Then it's in and out.«
A pause.
»Fast. No heroics.«
The room fell quiet.
Jeana instinctively pulled her jacket closed. Aurora turned toward her.
»You stay here.«
Jeana's expression tightened.
»You don't have a machine yet.«
Silence.
Then Jeana nodded.
But her hands had already curled into fists.

1100h — DELCADARE TRANSIT ROUTE

The team had left the Rift three hours before dawn. They kept their distance. Systems throttled to minimum output. Sensors in passive mode. Snow piling across armour plating. Now, chaos unfolded before them. A three-way battle. Raw, disorganized and violent.
Militia forces, aggressive but poorly coordinated. A scattered band of raiders exploiting every opening they could find. Valessan security units - heavier, better equipped, but caught completely off guard.
A tangled storm of smoke, fire, and screaming metal.
Projectiles tore through the air. Muzzle flashes strobed between container rows. Burning drones spiralled into the snow.
The supply convoy was trying to break free. A thin, desperate line of vehicles clawing for escape. No formation. No real cover. Just panic.
And right in the middle of it all, hidden behind a snowdrift, three women waited.
The firefight was burning itself out. Weapons fell silent one by one. Movement slowed. Survivors began to believe the worst was over.
That was the moment Aurora had been waiting for.
She lowered her head slightly.
»All right, ladies. Showtime.«

— — —
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Her HUD flickered to life. Red outlines shifted across the battlefield. Thermal signatures. Metal resonance returns. Movement vectors.
OPS filtered the chaos with cold efficiency, stripping away debris and false positives.
Aurora opened the channel again.
»PHOENIX. Two signatures remaining. Bearing zero-two-five. Range four-zero-zero. One Hoplite. One Peltast. Raider ID confirmed. Moving along EXFIL route, bearing zero-nine-zero.«
OPS responded instantly, calm and clinical.
[Contact confirmed. Cross-check with ANGEL complete. Combat engagement imminent. Stress indicators stable. Optional adrenaline enhancement recommended.]
Aurora didn't blink.
»Negative. System check.«

[Weapons green. Stabilizers green. Power output one hundred percent. Combat readiness confirmed.]

Valentina came up first.

»FORGE. Eyes on. Both contacts damaged. Hoplite minus autocannon.«

Isabella followed immediately.

»HALO. Peltast trailing. Range three-zero. Rear offset.«

Aurora processed the data instantly. Hoplite leading, sure. Heavier armour. Peltast offset rear support. Classic raider doctrine: Pressure from the front. Fast lateral exploitation. Predictable.

»PHOENIX. HALO, engage Peltast. Flank approach. Open fire on range. Wait for my mark.«

A beat.

»FORGE, Hoplite is ours. Priority: mobility kill. Repeat, mobility kill. Do not destroy.«

»I'll draw fire from the left.«

A breath.

»Stand by for my mark.«

Two acknowledgements.

Aurora guided her mech deeper into cover behind a row of overturned containers. Snow billowed around the servos. Her breathing synchronised with the machine. Then she saw him. The Hoplite emerged from the storm. Eleven metres of dark armour and brute mass. Its search laser swept across the battlefield. Behind it, the Peltast. Smaller. Faster. With a Torso-mounted rocket system. Both enemy. Both contacts lit red across her HUD.

Aurora exhaled once.

»HALO, stand by ...

Three... two... one... mark.«

The Toxotes and the Bolistes burst from cover. Aurora took three heavy strides left. Then she slammed the brakes. Snow exploded outward. The Hoplite reacted immediately. Faster than expected. Too fast for a half-damaged raider machine. Its laser snapped toward her. HUD warning indicators flared red. A hiss. The beam missed by less than two metres and carved through a container behind her. Metal liquefied instantly. Snow vaporised in a violent plume.

»FORGE, mark!«

The Akontistes exploded from the flank. Laser and Missiles filled the air. Two precise strikes in rapid succession. The missile volley tore away damaged leg armour. The laser cut deep into the knee assembly. The Hoplite staggered. But recovered fast. Again too fast. Its pilot was good. Very good.

The targeting sweep snapped toward Valentina.

»FORGE, break!«

The Akontistes jumped sideways and vanished behind a container wall. A split second later, the Hoplite's beam carved through the exact spot she had occupied, snow erupting in a white plume as steel melted around the impact.

Aurora seized the opening. Her target lock flashed green.

She fired. Twin lasers slammed into the Hoplite's exposed flank above the left leg assembly. Armour ruptured, sparks burst from the torn internals, and the damaged limb buckled slightly. Stabilizers screamed in protest.

Isabella pushed forward.

Her Bolistes had been built for ranged combat, and she intended to use that advantage while she still had it. The mech accelerated across the snow-covered plain, servos driving deep into the frozen ground. ANGEL's voice came through at once.

[Weapons armed. Firing solutions available.]

There was something in the tone that almost sounded eager. Isabella armed the missile rack. Her HUD flashed green. Range: 400 metres. Perfect.

She drove her Mech up the rise, burst through the snow-laden tree line, and fired.

The enemy Peltast reacted instantly, spinning toward her - but far too late.

The missile salvo slammed into its rear torso, tearing through weakened armour and detonating across critical systems. Plates sheared away in chunks. Servos failed. Sensor clusters burst apart. Sparks sprayed from melting cables.

The bandit fired back blindly. Rockets screamed into empty snow, and a laser beam tore past Isabella's cockpit, shredding the tree line behind her into splintered wood and smoking stumps.

She kept advancing.

Her Bolistes thundered straight toward the crippled mech, closing the gap rapidly until the engagement had become a knife fight. Her crosshairs flashed green.

[Target lock stable. Fire.]

ANGEL maintained the target lock precisely on the breach the missiles had opened. Isabella fired. The laser punched deep into the torn torso cavity. The Peltast staggered violently, smoke pouring from its damaged frame as it tried to retreat. Too slow this time. Its left shoulder assembly failed first. The entire arm tore loose and crashed into the snow.

Isabella drove the Bolistes forward and slammed a kick into the enemy's right knee. Stabilizers shrieked as the leg buckled. Then she swung her mech's arm across in one brutal motion.

The impact smashed into the cockpit housing.

The Peltast toppled sideways into the snow, smoke curling from its wrecked frame as it finally went still.

Isabella switched channels.

»HALO. Target neutralised.«

Aurora answered immediately.

»PHOENIX copies. Good kill, HALO.«

Aurora and Valentina closed in on the crippled Hoplite, which was still stubbornly trying to defend the convoy. It remained standing, but barely. Its damaged left leg dragged through the snow, throwing up frozen debris with every movement. The pilot tried to maintain distance, firing wildly as he backed away. A laser slashed through the air. Aurora recognised the pattern instantly. Panic fire.

No target discipline. No controlled engagement. Just reflex. The pilot was afraid.

And rightly so.

She needed no scan to assess the damage. The Hoplite's left leg was compromised, its torso armour already breached. One more critical hit would finish it. Valentina's missile rack gave them the highest chance of a clean mobility kill. She opened comms.

»PHOENIX. FORGE, flank left. I'm going head-on.«

»FORGE copies. WILCO.«

Valentina peeled off to the left, both laser and missiles already tracking. Aurora drove her machine straight at the enemy. The Hoplite's targeting laser rose toward her. Her HUD flashed red.

'LOCK WARNING'

Her Toxotes was nowhere near as heavily armoured as the Hoplite. A direct hit would likely be catastrophic. Two solid hits, perhaps one in the wrong place, and she was as good as dead.

Aurora knew exactly what she was risking. Still, she held her line.

Every second increased the chance that the next beam would kill her. But if she moved too early, the opportunity was gone. Timing was everything.

A fraction of a second before the enemy fired -

»FORGE, go!«

Laser fire and missiles slammed into the Hoplite's left flank, forcing the pilot to break target lock and react.

That was all Aurora needed.

She surged forward, crosshairs fixed, searching for an opening as the distance collapsed.

Fifteen metres.

Twelve.

Ten.

Eight.

OPS spoke.

[Weak point identified.]

A crosshair icon flashed on her HUD, marking an exposed section beneath the damaged left knee plating. Aurora fired both lasers. The beams hit dead centre. Armour failed instantly.

The already damaged leg assembly took the full impact. Servos liquefied. Internal heat warnings spiked.

Then—

an explosion from inside the joint housing.

The leg collapsed in a spray of sparks and smoke. The Hoplite dropped hard to its knees. Helpless.

Aurora closed the final metres. One precise strike. Her right fist slammed into the already damaged

cockpit housing. Armour fractured. Sparks erupted. The mech tipped sideways and crashed into the snow.

Silence.

Aurora switched to comms.

»PHOENIX. Target neutralised.«

Only now did she notice how hard she was breathing. Her heart hammered in her chest. OPS responded immediately.

[Aurora. Heart rate one-six-zero. Adrenaline elevated. Recommend stabilisation.]

Aurora smirked.

»Negative, OPS. Leave it.«

A breath.

»I'm enjoying this.«

She switched channels.

»PHOENIX. Contact down. SITREP.«

Isabella answered first.

»HALO. All clear. ANGEL undamaged.«

Then Valentina.

»FORGE. All systems intact. Minor armour scoring. BINKY undamaged.«

Aurora nodded to herself.

»Well done, ladies.«

Her tone shifted instantly back to command mode.

»Secure enemy units and sweep the immediate area.«

Then she switched to broadband comms.

»Attention convoy personnel. This is PHOENIX. The convoy is secured. Remain calm, follow instructions, and no harm will come to you.«

Silence.

Then static.

A weary voice answered.

»Understood.«

A pause.

»We'll cooperate.«

Aurora scanned the convoy.

Three transport haulers, one heavily loaded with equipment and ammunition. A tanker.

Then something made her stop.

A Mobile Mech Carrier in flatbed configuration.

Cargo: one disabled Epilektos.

Her eyes narrowed.

She switched channels.

»FORGE, visual confirmation.«

Valentina's response came instantly - and far too enthusiastically.

»The MMC with the Epi? Oh, absolutely. Jackpot.«

Aurora allowed herself a faint grin.

»And I already know someone who's going to be even happier about this than you.«



CYNDRALIS III

THE RIFT — HANGAR AREA

13 JAN 129 AO

»Hey, Val, how's it going?« Torban, the ever-cheeky redhead, strolled past with an easy grin while Valentina was halfway inside the knee assembly of her mech, wrench in hand. She barely looked up.

»All good. What about you lot? Heard there's some unrest in the city.«

Torban shrugged and dropped onto a nearby supply crate.

»Yeah. Nothing worth getting excited about. A few protesters, some HDF call-outs. Same old nonsense.« He looked around the hangar.

The women moved through the cavern with the kind of casual routine that made the place feel strangely alive despite the cold metal, rough stone, and scattered machinery. Torban had always liked coming here. Maybe because, for all its improvised chaos, The Rift somehow felt safer than the city ever did. He reached into his anorak and pulled out a small parcel.

»Seen the boss? Got something for her.«

Valentina smirked.

»Somewhere in the back caves, I think.«

Torban thanked her with a quick nod and made his way deeper into the cave system, toward the rear caverns. His heart was already beating a little faster.

Then he turned the corner - and stopped dead.

Aurora stood beneath the makeshift shower, cold water spilling from a cluster of crude pipes jutting from the rock wall. No curtain. No door. Privacy was a luxury nobody in The Rift could afford. For one frozen second, he stared.

She stared back.

Then his brain resumed functioning.

»...Bloody hell. Sorry!«

He immediately backed away three steps, disappearing around the corner. Aurora's voice followed him, entirely calm.

»It's all right, Torban. Come on.«

He stood there for three deeply uncomfortable breaths before cautiously stepping back around.

Aurora was already walking toward him, a towel wrapped around her body, wet hair clinging to her shoulders. Torban lifted the parcel like a shield.

»Delivery.«

His voice sounded much calmer than he felt. His pulse strongly disagreed. Aurora took the parcel, glanced inside, and nodded.

»Perfect. Thanks.«

She glanced inside, nodded, and took the Tampons without the slightest trace of embarrassment - just another practical necessity of life down here.

Then:

»Turn around.«

Torban obeyed instantly. He fixed his gaze on the rock wall ahead and concentrated very hard on a patch of moss that had suddenly become deeply fascinating. The rustling of plastic behind him did not help at all.

»How are things in Dalmeta?« Aurora asked casually. »Are you managing all right? Money-wise, I mean.«

Torban swallowed.

»Yeah. I'm fine. Thanks.«

For a moment, only the quiet dripping of water and the distant sounds of the hangar filled the space. Then he cleared his throat.

»We were actually talking about you lot the other day.«

Aurora sounded amused.

»Oh? That sounds dangerous.«

Torban let out an awkward breath.

»You know... just gossip.«

The moment the word left his mouth, he regretted opening the subject at all.

»The fearless girls from the Rift.«

His face immediately grew hot. That had sounded far worse out loud than it had in his head.

Aurora laughed softly. Not mockingly. Something warmer than that.

»Fearless? I like that.«

A small pause. Then her tone shifted, just slightly.

»It's not true, though.«

Torban stayed quiet and Aurora's voice softened.

»If you only knew how often we're scared out of our minds. Half the time we're probably just too frozen to run.«

Torban smiled despite himself, still staring very deliberately at the rock wall.
»Maybe.«
He hesitated, then spoke more quietly.
»But that's not how people see you.«
Aurora said nothing, so he kept going.
»To people out there... you just appear out of nowhere, hit whoever needs hitting, and disappear again.«
He searched for the right words.
»Like something out of those old legends.«
Aurora tilted her head slightly.
»What legends?«
»Old Terran ones. Warrior women on horseback, descending from the heavens to carry off the fallen.«
Torban frowned. »What were they called again...?« A moment passed.
»Valkyries?«
Torban turned halfway before remembering himself. His face lit up.
»Yes. Exactly.«
A grin spread across his face now, unfiltered.
»Aurora's Valkyries.«
A warm hand rested gently on his shoulder. He turned.
Aurora stood there, now dressed, her damp hair falling loosely around her shoulders. She smiled. A genuine one.
»That... actually sounds rather nice.«



CYNDRALIS III
THE RIFT — HANGAR AREA
19 JAN 129 AO

The caves of The Rift had gradually transformed into something resembling a full workshop. Tables had been improvised from old loading ramps. Interconnected emergency floodlights cast a harsh white glow across the cavern, while dozens of plastic crates sat stacked against the rock walls, each labelled in grease pencil.

HYD / LEFT
A-SERIES SERVOS
ENERGY BUFFERS

Jeana worked alongside the others from morning until exhaustion forced them to stop. They soldered, welded, tested core modules, replaced damaged sensor lenses, and recalibrated stabilizer assemblies. None of them were formally trained military technicians, but each possessed enough technical understanding - and enough sheer determination - not only to operate their machines, but to keep them alive. And at the centre of it all, beneath the makeshift floodlights, stood the reason for Jeana's relentless effort.

Her Epilektos. The very same machine she had escaped in.

The HDF must have recovered it after her defeat and returned it to the convoy. Now it stood before her again, battered and half-ruined, but now hers.

Valentina stood beside the mech, a diagnostic overlay floating across the damaged chassis. Live data streamed directly from the core. Structural integrity. System failures. Thermal stress. Red warning markers pulsed across the right torso and the damaged leg. And that wasn't even mentioning the missing arm. Jeana stepped closer.

»Looks bad.«

Valentina glanced at the display.

»It's worse than bad.«

Then, calmly:

»But we'll fix it.«

The salvaged convoy parts had provided a surprisingly rich supply of usable material - servos, armour plating, even an intact stabilizer block. Valentina handled the specialist work. Isabella and Jeana worked beside her, hauling components, rerouting systems, replacing burnt circuitry, and trying not to get in Valentina's way when she disappeared into one of her engineering trances. Jeana quickly discovered that Isabella was an objectively terrible mechanic. But she learned fast. And she made an excellent assistant. Long hours working shoulder to shoulder had a way of loosening things people usually kept buried. Jeana found herself telling Isabella things she had barely spoken aloud before. About her brother. About losing him. About her years as a Bound-One on Cyndralis IV - a status she had spent a long time unable even to name. And yet here, in the caves, somehow, it felt safe enough. She had once been part of the system. Educated. Provided for. Respected. But never truly free. Her former master - she still used the word without bitterness - had not been cruel. Unusually, he had recognised her determination. Perhaps even admired it.

When he died, she had seen her chance. Not because her life there had been unbearable. But because, for the first time, she wanted to choose her own path. The escape itself had been anything but clean.

Isabella listened without interrupting. Sometimes she simply nodded. Sometimes her hand briefly touched Jeana's shoulder. That was enough.

Aurora was rarely in the workshop during the day. Whenever Jeana saw her, she was usually seated at her desk somewhere deeper in the caves, CompPad balanced on her lap, headset on, looking utterly exhausted as she worked through endless streams of incoming data. Street Runner reports. Flight intelligence from Fiona. Patterns. Probabilities. Possibilities.

When Jeana finally asked her about it, Aurora barely looked up.

»I'm looking for patterns«, she said. Her eyes remained fixed on the display.

»Another opportunity like the last one. A turning point. An HDF mistake. Bandits stretched too thin. A Valessan blind spot. Anything.« Only then did she glance at Jeana.

»At some point, we have to leave this planet.«

Her tone was matter-of-fact. Not hopeful. Strategic.

»For that, we need resources. Contacts. A route off-world.«

Jeana walked away from that conversation with mixed feelings - worried by the scale of the problem, yet strangely reassured that Aurora was already searching for a way forward. At least it bought her time. Time to rebuild her machine. Time to prove she belonged here.

And eventually, after endless hours of work, there it stood. Her Epilektos. Freshly calibrated. Scarred, but functional. Almost reborn.

Jeana stood before it, utterly exhausted, every muscle heavy with fatigue. And yet she stood a little taller. Quiet pride settled somewhere deep inside her. Her machine. And soon, she hoped, her chance.



CYNDRALIS III

DALMETA PLAINS — 2,700 FEET ABOVE ZERO

25 JAN 129 AO

Grey cloud layers raced beneath Fiona's Vector IX. She switched to infrared and activated the multispectral scanner. LIDAR. Radar. Thermal imaging.

The onboard AI fused the data in real time, turning the white chaos below into crisp contours, movement signatures, and shifting heat gradients.

They should be somewhere down there. At least according to the briefing. Fiona eased back on the stick and initiated a wide banking turn near the edge of her patrol perimeter.

»Come on... show yourselves.«

A contact flashed onto the display. Then another. Then more. Nine mechs. One transport. Support crew. Bandits. Concealed in a shallow depression roughly thirty metres off the transport route. Too many for a simple roadside ambush.

Fiona fed the sensor package into the AI. Seconds later, an encrypted burst transmission was routed into the reconnaissance network, where analysts would tear the data apart and pass it further up the chain. Routine.

She pushed the throttle forward and began descending. Mission complete.

Then something crossed the edge of her display. A shadow.

Fiona expanded the scan radius and banked right. New contacts appeared.

She advanced to full throttle. The AI identified the structure immediately.

BASE OMEGA SOUTH

MILITARY DETENTION FACILITY

Fiona narrowed her eyes. A large armoured transport vehicle stood outside the main gate. Five mechs positioned around it. Waiting. That was unusual. The escort size alone suggested something significant. She switched channels.

»EAGLEEYE to Base. Visual on transport activity outside Omega South. Request information.«

A brief pause.

Static. Then the reply.

»Base to EAGLEEYE. Confirmed prisoner transport. Scheduled departure thirteen-zero-zero. Transfer of classified detainees to Beta Dalmeta for re-education.«

Beta Dalmeta.

Fiona went quiet. If that transport was fully loaded...

thirty prisoners. Maybe more.

»Copy. Thanks, Base.«

She pulled the Vector higher, reached into her flight gear, and took out the scrambler. A quick activation sequence. Then she switched frequencies.

»Bird to Nest. Radio check.«

Silence. Then rhythmic beeping. Static.

Finally:

»Nest receiving.«

Fiona kept it short.

»Omega South. Prisoner transfer. Thirteen-zero-zero departure. Destination Beta Dalmeta. Classified detainees. Estimated thirty plus. Five mech escort.«

A pause.

Then Aurora's voice:

»Copy that. Thanks.«

The connection died instantly.

Fiona banked back toward Delcadare. That was enough for one day. Land. Then debrief, shower, sleep. As the Vector cut through the clouds, she found herself hoping Aurora would get there in time.

CYNDRALIS III

THE RIFT — VIEWING PLATFORM

25 JAN 129 AO

Aurora lay flat against the narrow rocky ridge of the high plateau. Below her, the terrain fell away almost vertically into the southern plains. The outer foothills of the Rift Mountains stretched into the distance like fractured ribs of stone. The wind cut across her face with brutal cold, and fine ice crystals had begun to gather on her eyelashes.

Two thousand metres above the surrounding landscape. Alone and motionless. An observation post more suited to drones than human beings. Today, she had taken their place. In her hands rested the bulky military binoculars. Old, heavy, brutally functional. The optics compensated for fog layers, corrected for thermal distortion, and stabilised the image in real time. Slowly, the southern plains resolved into clarity - a vast grey expanse of wet ground and drifting snow, broken by abandoned roads, collapsed structures, and old impact craters.

Then she saw it. A tiny white point at the far edge of the image. Blinking. Engine signature.

Aurora adjusted focus. The algorithms reacted instantly, increasing contrast, reducing atmospheric flicker, sharpening the return. The AI began processing.

Distance: 304 km

Altitude: 42,000 m

Acceleration: constant

A green targeting frame snapped around the signal. Text scrolled across the display.

IDENTIFIED

DELTA-7 TRANSPORT CLASS

VALESSAN-TAU EXPEDITIONARY CORPS

Aurora's jaw tightened. So it was happening. The Valessan withdrawal. Fiona had hinted at it.

A priority communiqué from the Galen system. Emergency Alert Level One. Kaerwyn launching a major offensive. That was all the intelligence they had. Aurora neither knew nor cared what was unfolding in that distant border war. What mattered was this:

her chance of leaving Cyndralis III was disappearing with this departing transport. She lowered the binoculars. The wind tugged at her jacket. She shivered, pulled the fur-lined collar higher, and pressed the warmth closer against her neck.

Then movement caught her eye. A dark shape moving fast across the plains. Too fast for wheels. Too low for aircraft. Too controlled for wildlife.

Aurora raised the binoculars again.

A Whirlwind glider. Civilian-modified. She recognised it immediately. Torban. Which meant Leynes was probably with him.

The craft braked hard at the edge of the mountain foothills. A lone figure jumped out, sprinted between the rocks, and vanished into shadow. Then the glider accelerated, banked south, and disappeared.

Aurora lowered the optics and pushed herself to her feet. The walk back along the rocky ledge was slow and careful.

Five minutes later, she reached the abandoned mine ruins. Inside, she activated the old winch mechanism and stepped onto the platform. Then the descent began. Slowly. Steadily.

Down into the dark.

Leynes was already waiting at the bottom of the shaft when the platform came to a halt with a gentle jolt. He was visibly shivering as he handed Aurora the folded slip of paper.

Isabella was at his side immediately, draping a heavy winter jacket over his shoulders before pressing a steaming cup of tea from the field stove into his hands. He clung to it as though the warmth alone were keeping him alive.

Aurora unfolded the message. Her eyes narrowed. Prisoner transport. Today. 1300h. Omega South to Beta Dalmeta. Classified. Escort understaffed.

She read it twice. Escort understaffed. Her mind was already moving ahead. Aurora checked her watch.

11:52. Just over an hour. Valentina stepped closer.

»A window of opportunity?«

Aurora looked up.

»Maybe a once-in-a-lifetime one.«

She crushed the paper in her fist.

»Fiona confirmed the transport this morning. Five mechs on escort.«

Her thoughts aligned rapidly.

»But the Valessans just pulled out. I saw it myself. That means the militia's stretched thin.«

A short pause.

»It fits.«

Isabella crossed her arms.

»And if it's a trap?«

Aurora hesitated. Only for a fraction of a second. But Isabella caught it. Aurora met her gaze.

»Then we die.«

Silence.

Then, colder:

»But if we do nothing, dozens of people get shipped to Beta Dalmeta and die there instead.«

Her voice hardened.

»I'm not letting that happen.«

She turned.
»Mechs. Now.«
Jeana stood immediately.
»I'm coming.«
Aurora didn't even look at her.
»No.«
Flat. Final.
»Aurora ...«
Now Aurora turned.
»Your Epilektos has been operational for what? A few days? Barely tested.«
A beat.
»And you're angry.«
Her eyes held Jeana's.
»That makes you dangerous.«
»I know Beta Dalmeta.«
Jeana stepped closer, calm but unwavering.
»The security protocols. Guard rotations. Blind spots in the perimeter.«
Aurora said nothing. Jeana pressed on.
»If reinforcements come from the facility, you won't know where they'll hit from.«
Another step.
»I do.«
Her voice stayed level.
»I know the response times. The weak points. The internal layout.«
Valentina spoke up.
»She's right.«
Aurora glanced toward her and Valentina folded her arms.
»And if this escort turns out heavier than expected, three mechs won't be enough.«
A shrug.
»Firepower matters.«
Aurora looked from Valentina to Jeana.
Then to Isabella. Isabella gave the smallest nod.
Aurora's instincts were screaming no. Tactically... damn it.
»Fine.«
Her voice sharpened instantly.
»One condition.«
She stepped toward Jeana.
»You obey every order immediately.«
A beat.
»No hesitation.«
Another.
»No arguments.«
Her stare hardened.
»If I say retreat, you retreat. If I say stop, you stop. Understood?«
Jeana nodded once.
»Understood.«
Aurora held her gaze for another second. She believed Jeana meant it.
Whether Jeana would still mean it once Newman entered the equation... that was another matter. But there was no time and Jeana was right. Her knowledge might decide the entire mission. Aurora turned on her heel.
»Move. Every second counts.«
She broke into a run toward the hangar, unzipping her jacket as she went. By the time she reached the first maintenance bay, it was already off. Her shirt followed. The freezing air bit into her skin, but she barely noticed. Leynes would gather the discarded gear. By now, that required no discussion. Behind her, Valentina, Isabella, and Jeana were already sprinting after her, shedding layers as they ran with the same practiced urgency. No hesitation. No embarrassment. Just routine.
And time running out.

CYNDRALIS III

OMEGA BASE — FORECOURT

25 JAN 129 AO

It had been pure chance that he had found the girl. At least, that was what Gregor Mortasky preferred to believe. And if Mallory had told the truth... and if this Aurora took the bait... then this would work. He looked up at the mech towering in front of him. At its feet stood a man with his helmet tucked beneath one arm. Shaved head. Angular face. Captain Velnik Newman. Mortasky's expression hardened.

»Captain Newman. Helmet on.«

Newman said nothing. He simply raised the helmet, locked it into the PIF interface, and gave a clipped response.

»Sir.«

Mortasky stepped closer, stopping just short of personal space.

»I dislike the sight of you.«

A pause.

»But you remain my best Taxis leader.«

He gestured toward the other four mechs standing ready in the snow.

»And this mission matters.« His hand shifted toward the deployment zone.

»Two units remain with the transport. Bury the other three under snow cover. Passive signatures only.« Newman remained motionless. Mortasky's gaze sharpened.

»I want every hostile pilot taken alive.«

A beat.

»There's a blonde woman among them.«

He stepped closer still.

»The others are expendable. She is not.«

Silence.

»If she dies... you die with her.«

Newman didn't flinch.

»Understood. The blonde comes back alive.«

Mortasky gave a small nod.

»Good.«

He checked his watch.

»Move out. The show starts in five minutes.«

The mechs moved first, vanishing one by one into the snowstorm.

The empty transport followed.

Mortasky watched until the last silhouette disappeared into white.

Then he turned and walked back into the facility.

CYNDRALIS III

THE RIFT — HANGAR AREA

25 JAN 129 AO

Jeana climbed into her machine, every movement mechanical, ingrained through repetition.

She closed her eyes. Just for a fraction of a second. The whirl of servos blended with the pounding of her pulse. Then the CyteCore spoke. Its voice was deep, synthetic, and strangely warm.

[Hello, Jeana. Your stress indicators are significantly elevated. Would you like breathing assistance, focus modulation, or full manual control?]

Jeana forced a slow breath out between her teeth.

»Thanks, ARES. Manual.«

[Confirmed. No chemical intervention.]

There was something in the tone that almost sounded amused. Under other circumstances, Jeana might have smiled. She usually enjoyed ARES' dry personality. Not today. Today, something darker was simmering beneath the surface. Rage. Raw, sharp, dangerously close to breaking loose.

But she had given Aurora her word. She would control it. A metallic jolt ran through the chassis as the launch locks disengaged. Servos whined. Hydraulics shifted. One by one, the machines rolled free from their maintenance racks and moved toward the cave entrance. Outside, the storm swallowed the world in white. Snow exploded sideways as the Taxis accelerated. Four war machines driving into the frozen wasteland. Four silhouettes cutting through wind and ice. And inside the Epilektos, one human heart beating faster than any engine beneath her.

CYNDRALIS III

DALMETA PLAINS — WESTERN BETA DALMETA PERIMETER

25 JAN 129 AO

A good half-hour later, the first contacts appeared on the scanners. Jeana reviewed the incoming data. The prisoner transport. Stationary. And far too close to Beta Dalmeta. Aurora's voice came over comms.

»PHOENIX here. Target sighted. Bearing one-eight-three. Two escort mechs. One Prodomos, one Akontistes. Contact in approximately two minutes.«

A short pause.

»HAWK, estimate reinforcement response from the facility.«

Jeana widened her sensor sweep. Terrain. Tree cover. Elevation. Distances. Her display mapped the western perimeter.

»We're near the heavy access route on the western edge. Main gate's north of our position. If they call reinforcements, fifteen minutes. Maybe less.«

Jeana kept her eyes on the escort signatures. The Prodomos carried a laser and twin machine guns. The Akontistes mounted dual lasers and a twin rocket system. Aurora answered immediately.

»Understood. We move fast. FORGE, HALO: left flank. HAWK, stand off and provide covering fire. PHOENIX takes the right.«

»Confirmed.« The responses came almost simultaneously.

The four mechs pushed through the frozen terrain, heavy servo legs crushing deep into snow while vents spat hot steam into the storm. Then the transport came into view. Stationary, the engine smoking. Two escorts, but no drones. No air cover. This was just too clean.

The enemy escorts immediately turned to intercept. Aurora's voice sharpened.

»I don't like this. Stay alert. But we're committed. Go.«

Valentina struck first. Missiles and laser fire slammed into the enemy Akontistes.

Jeana fired a full salvo.

Her PPC missed, vaporizing a column of ice, while two rockets found the enemy mech's legs, sending smoke and debris spiraling upward. The Prodomos reacted instantly. It charged through the snowdrifts, laser cutting through fog - and hit Isabella's right flank.

Her Mech staggered.

»HALO hit! Minor critical - need cover!«

Aurora surged forward, forcing the Prodomos onto the defensive.

Jeana shifted focus back toward the damaged Akontistes. Then alarms screamed. Sharp. Overlapping. Valentina's voice cracked across comms.

»Two new signatures, north-east! Ekdromos and Hoplite - damn it!«

Aurora swore.

»There's the trap.«

The new contacts closed fast. Too fast.

»Ten seconds!«

Lights appeared along the ridge.

Then movement.

Two silhouettes breaking through the storm, descending aggressively over broken terrain. Weapons fire ripped through the snow around them. Too close. Aurora reacted instantly.

»All units, immediate fallback! Bearing one-seven-five! Focus fire on the Akon and punch through!«

Jeana aligned her reticle - and froze.

The Prodomos broke sideways, trying to bypass her position. She barely noticed.

Her focus had locked elsewhere.

The Hoplite.

That silhouette.

That armour profile.

Right shoulder.

Then she saw it clearly.

The emblem.

A jagged lightning bolt striking stone.

Her breath stopped.

Newman!

The mech that had taken her to Beta Dalmeta. Suddenly everything narrowed to that single symbol.

Pulse hammering. Her chest tightened, vision tunneling.

ARES spoke immediately.

[Jeana. Stress indicators critical. Recommend stabilisation.]

Aurora's voice cut across comms.

»HAWK! Fall back! That's an order!«

No response.

Then the rage broke free.

»I'll kill you, you bastard!«

Jeana spun her Epilektos around and unleashed everything. Missiles. PPC. Full salvo.

She drove straight at the advancing Hoplite, blocking her own team's firing lines, firing again and again, ignoring heat warnings, ignoring incoming damage.

Her HUD erupted in red warnings.

Target lock.

Cockpit.

She fired.

Again.

Then impact.

The two machines collided violently.

The superheated barrel of her PPC punched into the Hoplite's damaged head armour, shattering the outer shell before driving deeper. Then both mechs slammed together. The force crushed her into her restraints. Metal screamed. Internal systems ruptured.

The Hoplite's bulk locked against hers in a grotesque tangle of burning steel. Coolant sprayed across twisted armour plating—
then ignited.

Together, both machines ploughed into the snow and came to a dead halt.

[Warning. Enemy core temperature critical. Explosion immin—]

The Hoplite detonated. The blast tore through the wreckage.

Shock slammed through her machines sensor net and straight into Jeana's nervous system. Her thoughts fragmented. Darkness threatened. Then she felt the auto-injectors fire. Chemicals. Pain suppressants. Stimulants. Dragging her back.

Aurora's voice cut through the haze.

»Two contacts on our rear! Retreat aborted! Regroup and hold!«

The words barely registered. Through blurred vision, Jeana saw another mech. A Kentarchos. A fifty tonnes monster, heavily armed. Positioned behind her. Blocking the escape route. Then the Ekdromos opened fire. PPC bursts. Missiles, a white-hot hell swept over her.

All Jeana could do was pray her armour held.

Aurora sprinted toward Jeana, trying to cover her. Mistake. She realised it a fraction too late. A blinding flash. The laser struck her Toxotes from the flank, punching straight through the armour. The impact threw the mech sideways. Aurora slammed violently into her restraints as the machine crashed hard into the snow. Pain exploded through her skull. Everything blurred. Then she felt the automatic injections. Slowly, clarity returned. Aurora forced her eyes open. Her entire HUD was flashing red. Pain throbbed through her neck, arms, legs - everywhere.

Then she saw Valentina. Three simultaneous rocket salvos slammed into the Akontistes. The explosion cascade hurled the mech sideways. Torso armour ruptured. The right arm burst into flames.

»OPS, status.«

Nothing.

No response.

Just static.

And red warnings flooding her HUD. She scanned the damage report.

Severe internal damage.

Primary data lines destroyed.

Core intact.

She tried to move. Nothing. Her Toxotes was dead in the snow. Through fractured armour plating, Aurora caught glimpses of Isabella. The Bolistes was falling back step by step under relentless fire.

Then Aurora saw the transport. Still moving. Still operational. The damage had been fake. A decoy.

Her stomach turned. Were there even prisoners inside? This had been planned from the beginning.

The enemy closed in from all sides with cold precision. No chaos. No panic.

A kill box.

Then another energy strike hit Isabella's flank. Aurora saw the internal detonation, and then the ejection.

The escape capsule blasted free from the Bolistes in a violent burst, stabilisation thrusters firing as it disappeared into the storm. Aurora closed her eyes for a second. Defeat settled in with brutal clarity.

She should have listened to her instincts. She should have left Jeana behind. Then something blocked the light. Aurora looked up. The black bulk of the Ekdromos loomed over her wreck.

One massive leg came down onto her Toxotes' damaged hull, pressing it deeper into the snow.

Its PPC was aimed directly at her cockpit dome. A voice came over the open channel.

»Toxotes pilot. Shut down power. Evacuate.«

Aurora clenched her jaw. Then obeyed. Her hand hit the emergency shutdown.

'SYSTEM SHUTDOWN'

The words flashed across her HUD like a death sentence.

Then darkness. The outer armour panels disengaged. The interface decoupled. Temperature regulation failed instantly. Freezing air tore across her bare skin as she dragged herself out of the wreck. Black smoke curled around her. Then she heard engines. An air-cushion transport raced toward her through the snow. No insignia. No markings. Men jumped out. Closed black storm visors. One shouted:

»Hands up!«

A warning shot cracked into the snow directly in front of her. Aurora slowly raised her arms. Her eyes narrowed. Her jaw tightened.

Then -

A precise blunt strike against the side of her head.

And everything went black.

CHAPTER II

*Where the body ends
the journey of the mind begins.*



Philosopher of the Free Guild

***** Salesius Undis *****

14 AUG 107AO

CYNDRALIS III

Dalmeta City – District Prime

26 JAN 129 AO

The two armed soldiers who had brought her here still stood beside her, their hands firmly gripping her arms. The third, their squad leader, saluted Mortasky.

»Subject extracted and delivered without a scratch, as ordered, Field Colonel. Awaiting further instructions.«

Mortasky had just removed the collar from a small case. He turned, returned the salute, and walked toward the young woman.

»How nice to see each other again so soon.«

»Listen, whatever you want, I'll get it for you. We had a deal.«

Her voice trembled slightly.

»We had a deal. You provided the information, and I got you out of Beta Dalmeta. Deal fulfilled.«

Grinning, he slowly circled her, studying her carefully.

»What else do you want from me? More information? I haven't heard anything about those four women since our last conversation.«

»I'm aware of that. We already captured them, thanks to your help.«

Mallory swallowed. Something in her expression broke. That was probably the moment she realized this was about something entirely different.

A pleasant warmth of triumph rose within him. People were more predictable than they liked to believe.

He placed the collar around her neck. A soft click echoed through the room as it locked into place, tightening slightly and adjusting itself perfectly to her physiology - snug, but not painfully so.

Mortasky nodded. The soldiers released her.

Immediately, Mallory sprinted toward the door, desperate to escape his quarters. He pressed a button on his wrist. Electricity surged through the collar.

Mallory stumbled and collapsed to the floor, screaming as her body convulsed.

»Those shocks will occur whenever you refuse to do as you're told. And don't even think about leaving the compound. If you try, you'll die a very unpleasant death.«

He paused.

»Now... get up.«

Tears streamed down her cheeks as she forced herself back onto her feet.

»You bastard.«

Anger. Of course.

Mortasky turned toward the squad leader.

»You are dismissed.«

»Yes, Field Colonel.«

The man saluted and left with the other two soldiers.

Then came silence. Stillness. He waited. Sooner or later, everyone started talking.

One minute.

Then two.

People hated silence.

Three.

She is lasting surprisingly long.

»Why are you doing this?«

Ah.

»Because I want to know how far you're really willing to go.«

Mallory looked at him, confused. Naturally, she didn't understand.

»For your freedom, you betrayed four women.«

She flinched. The blow landed.

»Most people claim they would never do such a thing.«

He pointed toward a door leading into the adjacent room.

It was almost completely empty. A small table stood against one wall, holding nothing but a bottle of water. Two chains hung from a hook in the ceiling, running through a pulley system. At their ends, a pair of handcuffs dangled in the center of the room.

Mallory took a hesitant step inside and stopped.

»Please... please don't do this.«

»Put on the handcuffs.«

She obeyed.

The cuffs snapped shut around her wrists. Immediately, she tried to open them again. Pointlessly. He knew exactly what he was doing. He had restrained many people here before.

»What do you actually want?«

Mortasky walked over to the bottle and picked it up.

»To find out where your limit is.«

Mallory remained silent.

»For freedom, you sold out your friends.«

He raised the bottle slightly.

»Let's see what you'll sell for a drink of water.«

For the first time since her arrival, Mallory looked genuinely afraid. She realized she wasn't being punished. She was being studied.

»Do you want water?«

»Yes.«

»Take off your sweater.«

»What? No!«

He smiled.

»Not yet.«

CYNDRALIS III

Beta Dalmeta – Production Sector

26 JAN 129 AO

When Valentina opened her eyes, she thought for a moment that she had gone blind. Everything was white. Cold, merciless white. She blinked once. Then twice. Slowly, the world emerged from the brightness. A ceiling of light above her. Metal. The smell of disinfectant and recycled air. Then the pain came. Not sharp. Just everywhere. As if someone had pulled her body apart and forgotten to put it back together properly. She tried to sit up. Nothing happened. Confused, she tried again, but her arms wouldn't move. Neither would her legs. A cold stab shot through her chest. Only then did Valentina notice the restraints. She pulled against them. Nothing. Not even a centimeter. Her breathing quickened.

No.

No.

No.

Slowly, she lifted her head. The room was enormous. Silent. Only the occasional flat, distant beep broke the stillness. Rows of medical chairs stood there like machines in a factory hall. And in every single one sat a woman. Naked. Restrained and motionless. Just like her. Some had their eyes closed. Others stared at the ceiling. An empty and absent stare. Valentina felt something cold spreading through her stomach. Then she heard her name. Barely more than a whisper.

»Val...«

Her heart stopped.

She turned her head.

Jeana.

For a moment, Valentina could only stare. Jeana's face was hollow. Her lips were cracked. Her skin had taken on a pale gray tint. She didn't look like someone who was alive.

»Jeana.«

Her own voice failed her. Only a rasp escaped her throat. Jeana's eyes opened slightly. Tears gathered in them.

»This is Beta Dalmeta.«

A tremor ran through her body.

»Hell.«

Then she closed her eyes again. Valentina stared at her. And only now did she begin to notice the tubes. Transparent hemispheres covered Jeana's breasts, connected to tubes that ran toward a collection panel. Between her legs, another tube led into a reservoir beneath the chair. A display

flickered beside her. Lacto Output: 18 ml. Nexalyte: 12 ml. NeuroSyn: Standby. Valentina didn't understand any of it. But it wasn't just Jeana. They were everywhere.

Twelve women.

Twelve human beings.

Twelve production units.

Something broke inside her. Small, but important. Something that had continued to believe there was still a way out. Her gaze drifted farther. Two rows behind Jeana. Isabella. Valentina stopped breathing. Isabella sat motionless in her chair, her head tilted slightly to one side, her eyes half open. But there was nobody behind them anymore. They were simply empty. Blank. Silent.

»Issi.«

The sound broke on her lips, emerging only as a rough whisper.

Nothing. No response from her friend. Valentina felt tears running down the sides of her face. The pressure in her chest grew heavier. More desperate. Panic slowly crawled upward.

Oh God.

Please, God.

Where are you?

Where are you?

Please don't.

Please don't let it be...

There.

At the far end of the room.

Aurora.

Valentina closed her eyes. For a moment, she wanted to scream. Wanted to smash everything around her. Wanted to burn this room to the ground. But she couldn't even move her hands.

A hiss cut through the silence. Then footsteps, calm, controlled, unhurried, as if all of this were routine. A man in white protective clothing entered the room. He looked tired and almost bored, like someone working a night shift in an ordinary factory. He stopped beside Valentina and glanced at a display. Then typed something into it.

»Subject Seven-Three-One. Activation stable.«

Valentina tried to scream at him. To spit at him. To beg him. But nothing came. Only the faint twitching of her lips. The man didn't even notice her panic. Or perhaps he simply didn't care. He administered the injection. A brief sting shot in her arm. Warmth spread through her body. She felt the changes immediately. A pulling sensation within her breast tissue. A tingling in her nipples that steadily intensified. The warmth traveled deeper and lower. Valentina closed her eyes. She trembled internally. An involuntary contraction of the muscles between her legs. She felt moisture gathering. Her body no longer belonged to her. And for the first time since escaping the transport vehicle, she was truly afraid. Not of death. Death would have been easy. The truth was worse. Far worse.

They would not die here.

They would live.

Day after day.

Month after month.

Year after year.

Until nothing remained of them except whatever this facility could extract.

So this was Beta Dalmeta.

It was not a prison.

Not a rehabilitation facility.

Not a re-education center.

It was hell.



CYNDRALIS III

Dalmeta City – Helican Crown – The Golden Tower

31 JAN 129 AO

»The four have been captured. Here's the report.«

With a casual gesture, Mortasky pushed the file onto the desk holo.

Protector - Brigadier General - Krastan Vel Orun looked up.

»Really?«

He skimmed through the report, studying the faces of the four women now under his control. Then he leaned back into his chair, relaxing. The whiskey that followed tasted better than usual. A pleasant warmth spread through his chest and settled there comfortably.

»I admit, I'm pleasantly surprised. That was faster than I expected. How did you manage it?«

»We had an informant who fell into our hands by chance.«

Vel Orun smiled. A genuine smile. It was always satisfying when problems solved themselves. Moments like these reassured him that his system worked.

»Excellent. The mechs?«

»Currently in Beta Dalmeta for inspection. Afterward, they'll be integrated into the HDF. I've already received confirmation that all of them are equipped with Solarna cores.«

»That doesn't surprise me. Speaking of her, I want the Solarna here as soon as possible.«

»Well, I thought we'd harvest her for a while first. No sense wasting resources.«

Vel Orun considered it. Numbers immediately began running through his mind. Six weeks of harvesting would generate roughly three hundred and fifty thousand Zets. Enough to finance a considerable portion of the new facility on Nereon.

Sometimes this man has the patience of a saint. I need to be careful.

»Agreed. But monitor the dosages carefully. We need her brain functioning at one hundred percent.« His expression hardened.

»I'm entrusting you with more than I usually do. If something goes wrong, your head will roll.«

Mortasky raised an eyebrow. Then one corner of his mouth curled upward as he took a sip of whiskey.

Vel Orun found the reaction irritating. Either he was planning something. Or he simply wasn't afraid. Neither possibility pleased him.

»I heard Mascar will be visiting us. May I ask what this is about?«

For the briefest fraction of a second, Vel Orun froze.

Where the hell did he hear that?

Outwardly, however, he remained perfectly still. Not a single muscle moved. His gaze stayed fixed on Mortasky. Calm and professionally focused. He took a slow breath, though no change appeared in his posture or expression.

»You may ask.«

A pause.

»You will not receive an answer. It is none of your concern.«

He considered the matter for a moment.

»Personal affairs. I'm sure you understand.«

Mortasky stared at him. He seemed to be weighing his response. Then he set his glass down and looked out through the tower's panoramic window.

»Even so, he'll undoubtedly require an escort.«

What do you want?

The arrival time?

The meeting location?

Why?

»That has already been arranged. Focus on our new arrivals. That's a far greater priority.«

Mortasky saluted.

»Of course, Brigadier General.«

The office door slid shut behind him.

Krastan's eyes remained fixed on it for several seconds. He wasn't sure what Mortasky was planning.

He wasn't sure how much Mortasky knew. And that was exactly the problem.

Perhaps he would have to get rid of him sooner than planned.



CYNDRALIS III

Beta Dalmeta – Administration

01 FEB 129 AO

Unauthorized request. Access denied. Your attempt will be documented.

Kim knew those lines better than anyone else on the planet. She had written them herself. And now she had to get past them. Past her own firewall protecting the military servers. The AI she had developed herself wouldn't let her in. It had discovered her old backdoors and closed them. Even her own hacking AI struggled against the constantly shifting algorithms. Kim cursed both herself and the motivation she'd had back then. The attack had been running for hours and she was tired. Mostly on the inside. She poured herself another coffee. The sixth one tonight.

The clock displayed 03:05h. Beta Dalmeta was quiet at this hour. The subjects were asleep. The scientists and technicians as well. Only a small security detail remained awake.

»Hello, Kim. Still working?«

She flinched and turned toward the door.

»Good Lord, Jeired. You scared me.«

The guard shifted his automatic rifle aside and grinned.

»You know how much I enjoy teasing you.«

Calmly, Kim finished preparing her coffee and returned to her terminal. Her thoughts were racing.

»An annoying hacking attempt is keeping me awake. Some AI has been trying to get into the system for hours.«

She forced an irritated expression. Her heart, however, was hammering against her ribs.

»The raiders again?«

Jeired stepped farther into the room.

»Your job sounds more exciting than mine.«

Kim swallowed and glanced at the monitor. Her AI had finally succeeded. It had breached the barrier. But if the final steps happened too quickly, the system alerts would expose the intrusion. Her pulse quickened. She stepped between the guard and her terminal, blocking his view.

»Jeired, you know everything here is classified. And raiders? Hard to say. Whoever is behind this attack knows what they're doing. Almost no trace signatures.«

She forced a shrug.

»How are things on your end?«

Her eyes flicked toward the monitor again. Inner Wall breached. Core Wall remaining. Estimated Time: 20 sec.

»Quiet. A few wild animals along the outer perimeter. Nothing exciting.«

»Well then, I hope the rest of your shift stays that way. Unfortunately, I need to get back to this.«

»Fair enough. Good night, Kim. Good luck.«

Jeired turned and walked out. At that exact moment, a holo notification appeared above the desk.

Transfer initiated: 12%...

Kim heard the door slide shut behind her. Jeired was gone. She took several deep breaths. Then turned back toward the terminal.

»Let's see why you're so important.«

She opened the directory and selected the file labeled *New Arrivals*. Immediately, the data appeared across the holo display. Aurora Belt. Valentina Embers. Isabella Fyrn. Jeana Hayek. A photograph accompanied each profile. Kim opened Belt's file.

Aurora Belt. Sergeant AD. Birth: SEP 21, 105 AO. Age: 23. Parents: Maj. Catherine Belt (Senior Strategist – MIA). Senior Commander Ghustavus Belt (High Strategic Field Command – MIA). Military Academy of Dalmeta. Honored for bravery in the field. Honored for strategic excellence. Honored for camaraderie. Honored for mech handling. Honored for exceptional intelligence... The list continued. Kim scrolled down. Then paused. One line caught her attention.

Suspicious Contacts. Name: Torban. Surname: Unknown. Interesting. She knew that name. She had anonymously passed information to him more than once.

Kim switched to the next file. Her eyes widened.

Valentina Embers. Born: Solarna. Heir to Solarna Industries. Technical Officer AD. Birth: APR 05, 101AO. Age: 27. Parents...

Kim stopped reading. Instead, she stared at the first few lines again. Her pulse accelerated. She could hear it pounding in her ears.

A living Solarna.

Suddenly, Mortasky's unusual interest in these women made perfect sense. And they were all mech pilots. Every single one of them. If Kim could get them back into fighting condition by the time the escape happened, piloting the mechs should still be possible. Even after weeks inside this place.

A new plan was already beginning to take shape in her mind. A plan that might get these four women and her daughter out of Beta Dalmeta alive.



CYNDRALIS III

Beta Dalmeta – Production Sector

05 FEB 129 AO

She didn't know what day it was. Nor what time. Her head felt stuffed with cotton. Fragments of thoughts. There was no clarity or logic. A suffocating feeling, yet very far away, buried beneath a blanket of clouds and cotton. And still, Aurora tried to focus. If she lost her mind, who would she be then? An empty shell, condemned to a vegetating existence? No. Her resistance grew as she stared at the concrete wall. Gray. Monotonous. Lifeless.

»Subject Seven-Two-Nine. Move.«

Her body obeyed automatically. Her legs moved against. Her head turned toward the man in white standing at the cell door. But her mind screamed: No!

Somewhere deep inside, the thought echoed. A spark of rebellion ignited. Yet her body did not listen. Her thoughts began drifting again, away from reality. But the core of her refused to accept it.

Count, Aurora. Count your steps. Stay here.

She counted.

>One. Two. Three.<

Gray walls.

>Four. Five.<

Bright lights on the ceiling. Blinding.

>Ten. Eleven.<

A door opened, she heard a humming tone. A man with a rifle stood beside it, pushed her forward.

>Thirteen. Fourteen.<

His touch felt distant. Yet she noticed it.

>Nineteen. Twenty.<

They entered the room with the rows of chairs. A surveillance drone. The light struck her face, and she narrowed her eyes. Slowly.

Some of the chairs were occupied.

>Thirty-six. Thirty-seven. Thirty-eight.<

»Remove the gown and take seat thirty-seven.«

The voice came from somewhere. Her arms removed the gown. It fell to the floor. Her body sat down in the chair.

>What now?<

Keep counting. Stay here. The lights on the ceiling.

>One. Two. Three.<

A shadow emerged. Then Footsteps. A sting in her arm. The tingling of electrodes against her skin. A pulling sensation across her body. Something was attached to her chest. Then a rhythmic pulling sensation. Pumping. A low hum beneath her. Her legs were moved apart.

>Five. Six.<

She felt something connect to her body.

>Seven. Eight. Nine.<

Then the procedure began. Her thoughts were dragged downward.

No. Stay here. The room. How large is it? Calculate. Stay here. Length of the walls.

>I don't know.<

Come on. Estimate the dimensions.

>I don't know. I can't anymore.<

Tell me the dimensions, damn it, or die.

>Maybe twelve meters.<

Good. Calculate. What is twelve times twelve?

The pulling sensation intensified. Her body reacted. But her mind was elsewhere. She blocked out the sensations rising within her. Separated them from real feelings. These were ghosts. They were not her. Not her feelings. She stared at the ceiling. Time passed. She didn't know how long.

>144.<



CYNDRALIS III

The Golden Tower – Reception Suites

08 FEB 129 AO

»...And for that reason, we have decided to support the Cyndralis System and our good partner, Protector Vel Orun, in every way we can. As Premier CEO of Valessan Military Works, I hereby pledge a donation of twelve billion Zets for the expansion of local hospitals and emergency care facilities. Each of the four planets will receive three billion, and I will personally ensure that the homeless and families facing hardship have access to free primary medical treatment. Let us rebuild the Cyndralis System together.«

The crowd erupted into applause. It was so loud that even a starship on final approach could probably hear the cheering and applause.

PCEO Henri Mascar kept his hand raised in a friendly wave for a few moments longer. Then he turned away. His smile vanished instantly. He hated these people. Hated these greasy speeches. But they were necessary. He was a respected businessman. A philanthropist. First in Valessan Territory. And now in the Cyndralis System as well. That reputation would bring new deals. New contracts.

And with it new profits.

He straightened his uniform jacket and strode confidently into the grand dining hall, where an empty seat already awaited him at the lavishly prepared table.

Vel Orun rose to greet him, embraced him briefly, and sat down at the same time.

»Welcome, my friend. Excellent speech. How was the journey?«

»Pleasant. Too long, but pleasant. As always, you've spared no expense.«

»Glad to hear it. How are your wife and children?«

»Wonderful. The youngest is already starting school. Can you believe it?«

»How quickly time passes. But first, settle in. We've prepared your favorite meal: Kaerwyndian sturgeon on couscous with Prümien and white wine sauce.«

»You never do anything halfway.«

»Of course not. Consider it a gesture of appreciation for your exceptionally generous donation - and the special shipments.«

Mascar merely smiled and enjoyed the attention.

»I'd like to address an uncomfortable subject right away. The loss of your convoy a few weeks ago. You remember? I wrote to Sevar, but he never responded. On the one hand, I wouldn't expect an Overstar Army Commander to contact me personally, but I'm still concerned he may hold the incident against me.«

Henri placed a hand on Krastan's arm.

»No, not at all. The border conflict has kept him occupied. He wasn't pleased to hear that a mech equipped with a Solarna core slipped through his fingers, but he understands the situation. Every now and then a local commander exceeds his authority. Sevar sends his regards - and says you owe him one.«

Krastan visibly relaxed. As though a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

»Of course. The commander has already been executed, and I'll make it up to Sevar.«

»Naturally.«

Both men raised their glasses and drank while servants continued bringing food and placing steaming dishes before them. After a few moments, Mascar spoke again.

»I'd like some company during my stay.«

Krastan raised an eyebrow and studied him directly.

»Again? This is becoming excessive, my friend. We had an arrangement once, yes. But every visit?«

»I will not negotiate on this point, Krastan. Or do I need to remind you of our agreement? Our arrangement is what made your little empire possible in the first place. Ten years, Krastan. Ten years of guaranteed markets. Surely a bit of hospitality isn't too much to ask.«

»I appreciate what you did back then.«

Mascar set down his glass and gave Krastan a sharp look before beginning his meal. Without him, Krastan would be nothing.

That supply contract generated billions. And now he was acting difficult over a few women.

Granted, Mascar had a very specific request. But he would get what he wanted. He always did.

»Good. Then we're in agreement. The blonde.«

»Impossible.«

The answer came instantly.

»I should never have sent you those files. I know you too well. I should have seen this coming. She's unique.«

»That's exactly why I want her.«

»Forget it. If anything goes wrong, Mortasky will start asking questions. And when he starts digging, he doesn't stop. I still need him.«

»Her. No one else.«

Krastan took another sip from his glass. He considered the matter while Mascar continued eating. Mascar already knew how this would end. It was merely a game. And he was prepared to play it. He would not let this opportunity pass.

»You're asking a great deal.«

»No. I'm merely collecting what I'm owed.«

»We'll find something else. Other women. Several.«

Krastan would give in. He had no choice. The deal earned him millions - perhaps billions. He owed Mascar. A great deal. And a Solarna was worth it.

»Do this for me. And I'll consider our agreement - and your outstanding debt - fully settled.«

That struck home. Mascar could see it in his eyes.

»Fine. Fine. You have me. One night.«

»Five. Not one less.«

Krastan needed a moment.

»All right. Five. But not a single day longer. I'll need a few days to arrange it. And I get her back in one piece. Unharmd this time. I'm completely serious, Henri.«

Mascar merely smiled and raised his glass. Krastan returned the gesture. The glass was heavy. The wine was excellent. Somewhere in Beta Dalmeta, a woman slept.

A woman who had no idea what awaited her in a few days.

And he was already looking forward to it.



CYNDRALIS III

Dalmeta City – Valley Hills

14 FEB 129 AO

Valentina's thoughts drifted and her vision blurred. As always lately, she could never truly tell whether she was asleep or awake. A uniformed man placed her inside a limousine. Or perhaps it had been a truck. She wasn't sure. Time blurred inside her mind. She became aware of a large room. It smelled of flowers and freshly brewed tea. She heard voices. Then she was sitting on a couch. She couldn't remember how she had gotten there.

A man stood before her. He wore a long robe of fine red and blue fabric. The robe hung open, almost like a dressing gown. Who was he? Why was she here? He took a sip from a teacup.

»I'm very pleased that we're finally able to meet, Miss Solarna. I've been looking forward to this for quite some time.«

Valentina tried to move. Her arms and legs refused to obey. Her thoughts were slowly becoming clearer. The room around her was lavishly furnished. Expensive. She looked through a vast window overlooking nearly all of Dalmeta City. They had to be somewhere in the hills west of the city. Perhaps the Valley Hills.

The man stepped closer. She tried to form words and heard herself speak.

»Who are you?«

She struggled to focus, but every time she managed to grasp a clear thought, something dragged her back and wrapped her concentration in cotton. She was sitting on the couch. Yes. But why? Why was she here? Who was this man?

The man slowly opened her blouse. She hadn't even known she was wearing one. Who had dressed her? A cold draft. A cold touch. Fear rose within her and settled deep in her chest. She heard him speak.

»A genuine Solarna.«

But the words meant nothing to her. What was happening? The scent of expensive aftershave grew stronger. The pressure on her body increased. She felt something warm. Moist. Her thoughts drifted again.

Suddenly she was lying on her back. She turned her head to one side. A bed. Or something like it. Soft beneath her. Gentle. She was lying on something soft. Her arms. She wanted to move them. She could. And yet she couldn't. Her thoughts grew clearer. It was a different room than before. She became aware of quiet music playing somewhere in the background. Something classical. Light, gentle melodies filled the fresh air. Her legs responded as well. Yet she still could not move. Her vision sharpened. Her thoughts gathered. Yes. Now it was slowly coming back. She was in a large bedroom. Her arms and legs were secured to the corners of a large canopy bed. She looked down at herself. She was completely naked. The man from before was there as well. And suddenly she understood what was about to happen next.



CYNDRALIS III

Beta Dalmeta – Production Sector

15 FEB 129 AO

The pressure on her body eased.

She simply lay there, staring at the ceiling.

Nothing happened.

Her thoughts slowly became more distinct. Not yet clear, just less distant. Fog instead of darkness. Still nothing happened.

She simply lay there, staring at the ceiling.

Where had she been these past few days? A technician hurried toward her. He picked up a datapad, walked around her chair, made several notes, paused beside a display, then entered more observations. Isabella saw everything through a dense veil. Blurred and imprecise. Then clearer again. Her body felt far away. Somehow heavy and foreign. The technician carefully removed the sensors. Slowly, she turned her head. In the chair beside her sat an unfamiliar woman. Long brown hair. A round face. She was staring at the ceiling. Probably somewhere in the middle of the process. The display beside her showed: Lacto Output: 11 ml. Nexalyte: 5 ml. NeuroSyn: Standby. Isabella tried to focus. She searched her memory for the terms. Had she ever encountered them during her training? Nothing. Nothing from medical school. Nothing from her military service. But ml.

Milliliters. A unit of volume. For liquids.

So something was being extracted from the body. But what?

The technician removed the collection cups from her breasts. The pressure across her chest gradually faded. She tried to take a deep breath. She couldn't. Her body was still too far away.

NeuroSyn. NeuroSyn. Where is it? Do I know that term?

A pulling sensation came from her lower abdomen as the technician removed the probe.

Nexalyte. Think. Nexalyte. Perhaps not from official medical literature. If only I could think clearly.

Maybe a thesis. A research paper. An experimental study.

Nothing.

Lacto. Lacto Output. Did it have something to do with her mammary glands? What were they collecting here? And for what purpose?

None of it made sense.

Or perhaps it wasn't something medically established at all. Perhaps these substances weren't naturally produced by the human body. A new pressure formed inside her chest. This time from within.

What if they've altered our bodies? What if they've made us produce these compounds?

The pressure intensified. Growing stronger. Gathering within her chest, settling around her heart.

What if they've turned our bodies into something they were never meant to be?

Her breathing quickened.

Oh God.

What if I'm already a monster?



CYNDRALIS III

THE RIFT – Valkyries Hideout

16 FEB 129 AO

Torban jerked awake. For a moment, he didn't know where he was. Then the deep, quiet hum of the generators reached his ears.

THE RIFT. Of course.

He blinked several times and sat up.

»Damn.«

Rubbing the back of his neck, he rolled his head from side to side. He had fallen asleep at the desk again. Aurora's desk. The clock on the monitor read 02:34. He rubbed his eyes. The handkerchief still lay beside the coffee mug, exactly where he had left it yesterday. Dried salt stains marked the fabric. Torban stared at it for a moment. Then he slowly picked it up and slipped it into his pocket.

A few months ago, he would have laughed at someone who cried all the time. Would have called them weak. A crybaby. A mama's boy. Now he saw things differently. Very differently. He got to his feet. Maybe they were back. Maybe they had simply let him sleep when they came home.

That was entirely possible. He left the room and walked through the silent tunnels of the cave.

Listening around every corner. Waiting to hear something.

Anything that might reveal their presence.

Maybe they were downstairs in the kitchen.

Maybe Isabella was telling another completely pointless joke.

Maybe Val was cursing at a broken piece of equipment.

Maybe Jeana was complaining about the world again.

Maybe Aurora was still working on reports, pretending she wasn't tired.

Torban stopped.

Nothing. No laughter. No voices. No footsteps. Only the distant dripping of water and the occasional whistle of the wind. Always that damned wind. He continued onward. When he reached the workshop, he paused. Valentina's tools were still there. A dirty wrench. Her open datapad. A half-disassembled sensor. Nobody had touched any of it. Three weeks. Three damned weeks. He swallowed, but the lump in his throat refused to move.

»Pull yourself together, man.«

Then he kept walking. The common room. Five seats around the table. Four for the women. One was always reserved for visitors. Sometimes that had been him. Sometimes Leynes. And by now, he knew

exactly where everyone sat. Val usually chose the seat facing the exit. Isabella sat opposite her. Jeana always occupied the back corner. And Aurora? A faint smile touched his lips. Aurora always tried to sit somewhere different. She never wanted habits to become routine. As in the small things, so in the big things. She had told him that more than once.

Again he felt the pressure behind his eyes. Again he forced it down.

He pulled his jacket tighter and headed for the exit. The cold night air struck him immediately.

The wind howled between the rocks, driving snow before it. Torban climbed to the small overlook Aurora had shown him once. From here, the entire valley could be seen. In the snow, he could still make out his footprints from yesterday. Or the day before. Or any of the days before that.

Maybe they would come back today. Maybe right now. Maybe in an hour. Maybe this very moment.

He waited, staring into the darkness. Trying to make something out.

Was that them? There were silhouettes out there. Or at least movement. That had to be them.

Five minutes. Ten. Twenty. Nothing but darkness stretched before him. No lights or the distant pounding footsteps of mechs.

Torban clenched his fists. A few days ago, he had finally received word from one of his Runners. The attack had been a trap. They had captured them all. Beta Dalmeta. He knew where they were now.

But he didn't know what was happening to them there. Not to just anyone. To Aurora. To Val. To Isabella. To Jeana.

Every morning he came to the Rift if he hadn't already spent the night there.

Every evening he searched the tunnels for any sign of them. And every day he ended up standing here again. Alone.

The pressure behind his eyes grew stronger. This time, he couldn't fight it. His vision already blurred.

He pulled out the handkerchief. Too late. The first tears were already running down his cheeks.

»Just come back... please.«

His voice was barely more than a whisper. The wind swallowed the words immediately. Torban sank to his knees. Snow crunched beneath his weight. He pressed his fists into the frozen ground. He tried to stay strong. Tried not to imagine what was happening to them out there. It didn't work. Not anymore.

He lifted his head and something inside him broke.

»AURORA!«

The name echoed briefly through the valley before dying in the wind.

No answer came. There was only darkness.

And a tiny spark of hope he desperately refused to let go of.

CYNDRALIS III

Dalmeta City – District Prime

16 FEB 129 AO

For over a week, she had eaten almost nothing and consumed very little water. Mallory sat motionless on the floor when he entered. She pushed herself upright and looked at him. Then at the water in his hand.

»Do you want water?«

She already knew what would come next. He had conditioned her to the point where she did what he wanted without him even having to ask. She unclasped her bra, the second-to-last piece of clothing she still wore. The chains around her wrists prevented it from falling to the floor.

Mortasky took a knife and cut through the straps. He poured two hundred milliliters into a glass and handed it to Mallory.

»That's better.«

She grabbed it eagerly and drank fast.

»Please. More.«

It was so easy. Too easy. Where was her limit?

»I want the name.«

She shook her head. She had been shaking her head for days. Strangely, exposing herself seemed to cost her nothing. Betrayal appeared to be triggered by something else entirely. He thought briefly about Beta Dalmeta. He had reviewed the recordings again and again. It must have happened when

she looked into the room with the other women. Something had changed there. But what exactly had triggered it? Where was the boundary? What had driven her to betray them in the first place? Fear? No. He had already tested fear. The pressure of helplessness? No. She had been helpless here for days. Humiliation? Perhaps.

»Tell me who you work for, and you'll get a proper meal and all the water you want.«

She shook her head again.

Interesting.

So starvation wasn't enough either. She possessed remarkable control over herself. The signs of malnutrition and dehydration were already becoming visible. He couldn't risk withholding food for another day. Perhaps humiliation really had been the trigger she had witnessed in Beta Dalmeta. Nothing else remained.

»Tell me to use you, and you'll get all the food and water you want.«

She hesitated. Was that it? Was this the line she wouldn't cross? She was still hesitating.

»Say it. They're very simple words.«

Then, finally:

»Use me. Please. Give me something to eat. Please.«

Mallory had already pulled down her panties and let them slide to the floor.

No. That wasn't the boundary either. Or was it something else entirely? He had to be certain.

So far, they were only words.

»The moment you give me the name, this ends and you get your food.«

Again, she shook her head.

»Turn around. Kneel.«

She did as she was told. That, at least, was no longer unusual. He set the water aside and pushed her upper body forward. She ended up on her hands and knees.

And still - no name.

»Spread your legs.«

She obeyed. He paused for a moment. She glanced at him.

No name.

Then he ran his hands along her back, across her breasts, brought himself into position. She began to cry.

»Tell me the name.«

Another shake of her head. He penetrated her, slowly, deeply.

No answer. Only quiet sobbing.

A flash of realization struck him. The Mallory before him was no longer the Mallory who had committed the betrayal. Something had shifted the boundary inside her maybe. Perhaps guilt. Perhaps regret. Perhaps something else entirely. But the woman before him was no longer the same person. And suddenly he felt something he rarely experienced toward other people. The faintest trace of respect.



CYNDRALIS III

Beta Dalmeta – Personnel Sector

17 FEB 129 AO

Kim closed the stall door, pulled down her pants, and sat down. Tanya was in the neighboring stall. They had become friends on the very first day, and that hadn't changed since.

The hum of the ventilation system above them droned softly in Kim's ears, but at least they were alone. And undisturbed.

»I don't know how much longer I can keep doing this. There have been so many, Kim. So many. Every age. Do you know what it's like to prepare them for all of this? To see them every day while their eyes become emptier and emptier? Especially the young ones. I just can't do it anymore, Kim. I can't.«

»You're still working downstairs, right? With the cells?«

»Yeah. Intake and aftercare. I see all of them. It's awful. It really is.«

Kim took a slow breath.

»Tanya, I have a plan. But I need your help.«

Silence. Nothing except the rushing ventilation.

»What do you mean, you have a plan? A plan for what?«

»I mean... I want Eva...«

Suddenly the restroom door opened. Someone entered. Kim fell silent. She took several slow breaths. Then she heard running water. The rustling of paper towels. Footsteps. Finally, the door opened and closed again. Tanya broke the silence.

»You mean because of your daughter? But they're leaving her alone as long as you cooperate, aren't they?«

»As far as harvesting is concerned, yes. So far. But I've already had to allow experimental procedures on her body because Evangeline generates an unusually high output. If they discover that her glands are more advanced than anyone else's, she'll end up on a dissection table. Or worse. Dr. Lang is her attending physician. He's helping us keep it hidden, but I don't know for how much longer.«

»Which means she needs to get out of here as soon as possible.«

»Correct. And the new arrivals are perfect for this. They might actually be able to pull it off.«

»And you want me to help you?«

Kim heard the toilet flush next door.

»Yes. Please. You have to give them the antidote and get them to the hangar. I'll make sure everything is prepared and the route is clear. You're the only person I trust.«

Silence again. Only the sound of water and a fresh draft from the ventilation system.

»I can only do that if I'm leaving with them. Because if they catch me afterward, I'm just as dead.«

Kim knew Tanya wouldn't simply say yes. But she had already thought about that.

»Of course. I understand. I'll do everything I can.«

»Give me your word. Otherwise, forget it.«

Kim knew that promise would be difficult to keep.

»All right. I promise. I'll get you out too.«

She heard Tanya move toward the sinks and wash her hands. Kim flushed, got dressed, and stepped out of the stall.

»You know, I've been waiting for this for a long time. Finally, a way out of here. And you're buying me a coffee. A large one. Right now. In the cafeteria. One of those with caramel and that white stuff on top.«

Suddenly Tanya wrapped her arms around her. Kim felt the woman's warmth.

»Thank you.«



CYNDRALIS III

Beta Dalmeta – Administration

19 FEB 129 AO

The puzzle was almost complete.

She had manipulated the mech repair orders, rewritten the duty schedules. She had someone in the cell blocks, a technician in the hangar. Only one piece was still missing. His patrol had already begun. In roughly two minutes, he would pass her operations center. Kim glanced at the clock. 01:03. She positioned herself beside the vending machine near the entrance and waited. A moment later, she heard the familiar footsteps.

»Kim, hungry?«

She tapped the display, and the machine dispensed a chocolate bar.

»Yeah, well... it's actually for you.«

She handed him the snack. Jeired accepted it and looked at her with surprise.

»Come on. We need to talk.«

Kim turned and walked into her operations center. The guard followed. The door slid shut behind them with a soft hiss.

»What's this about, Kim? Trying to seduce me?«

He grinned and took a bite of the chocolate. Apparently, that was exactly where his thoughts went. Kim was thinking about something entirely different.

»I need your ID card.«

Jeired nearly choked. He coughed several times before recovering.

»If that's supposed to be a joke, it's not a very good one.«

Her expression hardened. She looked directly into his eyes.

»I'm not joking. I'm completely serious.«

»Ha. I think you've lost your mind.«

»Airlock Echo-12. Three weeks ago.«

The amusement vanished from his face instantly.

»What? What's that supposed to mean?«

»Subject Five-Five-Eight. The girl. You know exactly what I'm talking about.«

His hands began to tremble. The color drained from his face.

»Shit... how do you know about that?«

»Jeired, I can see everything and everyone in this facility whenever I choose to.«

Calmly, she gestured toward the wall of monitors. Several displayed live surveillance feeds.

»Nobody will believe you.«

Kim activated another display. A recording appeared. In the upper corner, a label read: Airlock Echo-12.

»Damn it, Kim. Turn that off.«

»I want your card. And I want a twenty-minute window on a night of my choosing. Afterward, we'll delete this recording together. Nobody will ever hear about it.«

»They'll fire me if they find out. No, they'll execute me. I can't give you my card.«

»I've always wondered why the harvesting technician never noticed the incident. He should have discovered it during the extraction procedure.«

»He didn't know anything. The guy's so bored he barely notices what's happening around him.«

»Really? That would be unfortunate. Because if that's true, the entire production batch was contaminated. Do you have any idea what it costs to purge your semen from the system? Not to mention the value of the batch itself. Perhaps I should simply ask him.«

»All right! Fine! He knew. I paid him off. The system is clean. Damn it.«

»Good. Then we're left with the lost yield from that girl. I assume he couldn't find a replacement on short notice. I don't think I need to explain what that alone cost. What do you think Mortasky will do when he learns he lost a five-figure sum because one of his guards couldn't keep his pants closed? Execution would probably be the merciful option, and I've never known Mortasky to be merciful.«

»Kim, please, I...«

»Your ID card and twenty minutes. Sectors D through G. That's all I want.«

Jeired sank into a chair. His thoughts seemed to race. After a long moment, he took a deep breath.

»I don't know. Honestly. And what about the guards in Sector G? The hangar? I have no authority there. And then there are the access codes...«

»Already handled. I've rewritten the duty schedules. There won't be a single person there between 02:00 and 06:00. And the codes? I pulled them from the rotation schedule three days ago.«

Jeired exhaled loudly.

»You realize that if they catch you, you're just as dead as I am.«

»Exactly. Which means we'll both have reasons to keep quiet. You know nothing about me, and I know nothing about you. Besides, think about your family. Children without a father rarely have an easy life.«

Jeired lowered his head. Another long breath. Another moment of silence. Then he finally nodded.

»All right. Twenty minutes. And my card. But after that, I have to raise the alarm.«

Kim smiled inwardly. The alarm would never sound. She had already taken care of that. The final piece had fallen into place.



CYNDRALIS III

Beta Dalmeta – Sector D – Cell Block

22 FEB 129 AO

A sting. It felt distant at first, yet with every passing second, with every breath she took, it spread deeper. First into her arms, then into her chest, then her legs. Creeping upward into her throat. Slowly, she opened her eyes. Fog. Everywhere. She raised a hand to shield her eyes from the blinding light. Where was she? Someone was standing nearby. She only could see a pale silhouette. Someone was calling out. She shook her head. That damned fog.

The sting had become a tingling sensation everywhere now. What the hell was happening?

Aurora. Yes. That was her name. Someone was calling her name.

She felt a hand gripping her arm. Pulling her upward. Her legs buckled immediately. Her vision sharpened slightly and the fog began to thin. She blinked.

Isabella? She formed the words with her lips, but no sound emerged.

Issi? Issi!

Yes. She recognized Isabella. It was definitely her.

Aurora rubbed her eyes and took a deep breath. The burning sensation had spread throughout her entire body. Her heart was racing. Her head throbbed.

»Issi!«

Finally, the words came.

»Come on. We have to get out of here. Now.«

That wasn't Isabella's voice. But whose was it? Someone helped her to her feet. Not Isabella. Who? Aurora tried to focus. Her thoughts couldn't keep pace with events, everything was happening too fast. She was already being pushed forward. Then pulled. Then she found herself in a corridor. She was still unsteady. Her head felt as though it might explode at any moment.

There were several people. She knew them, didn't she? Isabella was there too. Who was that woman?

They stopped at an airlock door and Aurora could make out the lettering: D-16.

She stumbled. Someone caught her. Turning her head, she found her eyes focusing more clearly now.

A face. Yes, and a familiar one. Blonde hair.

»Val? Is that you, Val?«

»Yes. It's me. Just hold on. It'll get better soon.«

Her voice sounded different. Broken.

»What's happening, Val? What...«

»Later. Focus on your steps. Keep moving.«

Aurora obeyed. The arm supporting her was trembling, but it held firmly. She was no longer stumbling. Val was holding her and it felt warm and stable and almost like home.

»Val. I...«

»Keep moving, Aurora. Just keep moving.«

They reached another airlock. E-16. The pressure inside her body intensified. But her thoughts were becoming clearer. Yes. There were four people around her. No. Five. She recognized Jeana and Isabella. Valentina. Then a young woman she didn't know. And an older woman dressed in white. She seemed familiar somehow, but Aurora couldn't remember why. She shook her head again and finally the fog was disappearing. At last, her brain began processing information properly, almost. They were escaping. Aurora fought to regain control of her thoughts, trying to organize the faces. The situation. The pounding pain inside her skull made it difficult. Very difficult.

»Does anyone have an aspirin?«

»She's back.«

Isabella stepped in front of her, gently lifted her chin, and looked directly into her eyes.

»That's it, sweetheart. Look at me. Come on.«

Aurora did as she was told. Isabella examined her carefully.

»How do your legs feel?«

»Shaky.«

»Your head?«

»Like someone's hammering nails into it.«

»Your chest?«

»Pressure. Around my lungs.«

»Good. That's normal. You're fit to move. Another minute or two and your brain should be fully operational again.«
A beep sounded behind them. Then a voice.
»Move. Let's go.«

CYNDRALIS III

Beta Dalmeta – Hangar

22 FEB 129 AO

Where the hell are they?

Calrian glanced nervously at his watch. 05:02.

They should have been here by now.

He checked again.

Two minutes late. Two minutes.

In two minutes, anything could happen. Suddenly, the airlock door opened. Calrian pushed himself off the supply crate he had been sitting on. He grabbed the heavy wrench and was already preparing to complain. Then he froze. It wasn't the group he had been waiting for. It was Perst. Security Officer Julican Perst.

Damn it. Kim must have missed him.

His hands began to shake. Slowly, he lowered the wrench again.

»Calrian.«

Perst had spotted him immediately and was already walking toward him.

»What are you doing here this early? More overtime?«

Calrian forced himself to stay calm. His life was on the line either way.

»Julican, you old bastard.« He forced a smile.

»A last-minute priority order came in. Those mechs needed to be flight-ready. So now they're flight-ready. All four of them. Took me half the night.«

That part wasn't even a lie. The fact that most of that time had been spent restoring the cores' synchronization profiles for their original pilots remained unmentioned.

»Oh man, does that mean you'll have another excuse tonight when you lose again?«

Perst laughed. Calrian did not. His hands started trembling again. His heart pounded against his ribs.

»Calrian, at least you're a good loser. Still, I want my money. Tomorrow.«

His expression turned serious.

»Yeah, sure. You'll get every credit. I'll bring it tomorrow.«

And thanks to Kim, he actually had the money now.

»Everything okay? You look a little pale.«

Then came another hiss. The airlock door opened again. And there they were. The group he had actually been waiting for. Perst turned around. Casually at first. Then he stopped.

»What... what is going on here?«

His hand went to his weapon. Tanya stood at the front of the group. Slowly, she raised her hands.

»Perst, it's not what it looks like.«

The security officer stood motionless. His eyes moved across the group. One face after another. He seemed uncertain. Hesitating, maybe calculating what was next to come.

»Perst, let me explain.«

Tanya began walking slowly toward him. And Calrian knew there was no turning back now. He had to do something. His head was pounding. The wrench almost slipped from his hand. Yet something inside him pushed him forward. Slowly, he raised the heavy tool. Took a small step closer. Then swung. Metal crashed into the security officer's back. A gunshot exploded through the hangar. Someone screamed. Calrian stumbled and fell to the floor.

CYNDRALIS III

Beta Dalmeta – Hangar

22 FEB 129 AO

»What... what's going on here?«

Aurora saw the guard draw a weapon and aim it at the group. Her thoughts raced as fast as they could. And yet everything still felt wrapped in cotton. Damn.

Six steps to the target. Path blocked by two allies. Civilian at risk. Own combat capability severely compromised. Best angle: Jeana. Four steps. No weapon. Distraction required.

Then she heard a dull impact. A gunshot. A scream. The crash of metal hitting the floor. She saw Jeana launch herself forward. Then came the familiar sound of bone breaking. But no siren. Where was the alarm? Surely someone must have heard the shot.

When Aurora entered the hangar, Jeana was just releasing the guard's head. His body lay motionless on the floor. The technician knelt beside him, pale and shaking.

Tanya was breathing heavily. A wet rattling sound came from her throat. She was sitting against the wall and Isabella was already kneeling beside her, pressing a hand against the wound. A pool of blood was rapidly spreading beneath them.

»Tell... Kim...«

Isabella leaned closer. Tanya's breathing became uneven. Shallow and broken she desperately tried to pull air into her lungs.

»What should I tell her?«

»Tell... her... the coffee... was excellent.«

She drew one final breath. Then her head rolled gently to one side.

»Rest in peace, dear Tanya.«

Isabella closed her eyes and folded her hands across her lap.

»I'm sorry.«

Aurora tried to reassess the situation, but still her head hurt so damn much. And her thoughts were sluggish. Damn it.

»All right. Issi. Val. We need to keep moving. Jeana, help the technician to his feet and find out what he's doing here. You.«

She stepped toward the young woman she didn't recognize.

»Who are you?«

The girl shook her head. Aurora exhaled sharply.

»Damn it. Does anyone actually know how we're supposed to get out of here?«

»I... I do.«

The technician pushed himself upright. His voice was trembling.

»I'll explain everything.«

CYNDRALIS III

Beta Dalmeta – Hangar

22 FEB 129 AO

A message flashed across her HUD:

"Kappa clearance granted. Bogey bearing one-eight-five. Twenty clicks. Intercept and delay. Weapons free."

»OPS, confirm mission data and readiness to deploy.«

A few moments passed before the reply came:

[Done, Aurora.]

»Kappa Actual to Tax. We have clearance. Nav Alpha. Bearing one-eight-five. Let's move.«

In an orderly, by-the-book formation, the four machines slowly rolled out of their maintenance bays.

The snowstorm rattled the opening blast doors and drove drifts of snow deep into the hangar. Aurora walked her Toxotes with such calm certainty that it felt as if she truly belonged here. She did. Now. Just like the others. Just like the three machines behind her. They were part of the system. At least for a few more minutes.

»OPS, let them know we're outside.«

For a moment, there was only silence. Then the computer voice of the Bravo-Delta Command AI responded.

»Clearance confirmed. Hangar doors closing in ten seconds.«

Aurora couldn't help but smile. It seemed that Kim had done an astonishingly good job.

Now they only had to make it home - if *THE RIFT* could truly be called home. And she thought of Evangeline. She hoped the young woman would survive the escape.

The Taxis of the four mechs moved toward Navigation Point Alpha, just as planned. Supposedly, enemy sensor contact had been detected there. But they all knew it was only a decoy. After fifteen kilometers, they altered course and headed for the mountain range. The sky was gray. The storm was bitterly cold. And Aurora had never seen anything more beautiful.

CYNDRALIS III

The Golden Tower – Plaza

22 FEB 129 AO

As his two bodyguards stepped out of the elevator and headed for the exit alongside him, Vel Orun could already see hundreds of people crowding behind the outer security barriers. Closer to the front stood a smaller gathering of reporters waiting for him. Like vultures, they circled him, searching for a headline. They were always waiting. And he was always prepared.

The heavy armored glass doors slid open and Vel Orun pulled his coat tighter around himself. The cold wind struck his face. He narrowed his eyes slightly, but not a single other muscle moved. It was part of the game. The game they all played.

He could already hear the journalists shouting - a mixture of baseless accusations, politically explosive questions about the Valessan deal, a few insignificant remarks about job losses, and concerns over a pandemic. Every single time he had to restrain himself from telling them all to go to hell. Every single time they tried to corner him. And every single time they left with the answers he wanted them to have. He smiled inwardly.

He walked toward a young reporter wearing sunglasses, a thick black Maison Étoile Noir coat with a fur collar, and high boots. Around her neck hung the press badge of *Cyndralis Today*, the largest and most influential news channel in the system. She reacted immediately. Swallowing the question she had been shouting, she tightened her grip on the small microphone in her hand and spoke clearly. The others fell respectfully silent.

»Protector, is it true that a viral outbreak is currently affecting the southern regions and that fatalities have already been reported?«

A perfect opening. He could use this.

»Yes, that is correct. We currently have three confirmed deaths. We are not yet fully informed about all the details, but we are taking the situation very seriously. Efforts are already underway to develop a vaccine against the virus. Both our own scientists and the finest private researchers on Cyndralis III are working hand in hand in a coordinated effort to prevent further harm. We know the virus is highly contagious, and I can only advise all citizens to follow the safety measures issued by our authorities.«

»Should we expect an epidemic spread?«

»Since we still know too little about the transmission and effects of the virus, and since we have not yet identified its source, it is difficult to make accurate predictions. Our efforts are running at full capacity, and I will spare no expense and no effort to protect us all as best as possible. Beginning this afternoon, emergency packs will be distributed free of charge in all major cities. These will provide every citizen with at least a basic level of protection, from breathing masks to disinfectant soaps. As I said, we are taking this matter very seriously.«

Scattered cheers rose from the surrounding crowd. The reporter's expression hardened slightly, but Vel Orun remained calm. He had endured far worse accusations than hers. She did not frighten him.

»Are you taking the closure of the uranium mine in the northern RIFT just as seriously, where 530 workers will lose their jobs next week and families will be left struggling to survive?«

»Of course. The well-being of every person in this system matters to me. I believe you will be pleased to hear that all affected workers were already offered new positions yesterday evening. Their skills are urgently needed on one of our moons.«

The reporter looked genuinely surprised and was about to speak when Vel Orun interrupted her.

»Yes, I know what you're about to say.«

He raised his hands in a calming gesture.

»Relocating to Nereon is extremely expensive for a worker and their family - far beyond what most could afford. Not to mention the cost of living up there. Therefore, the offer includes free transportation and free accommodation for the worker and their immediate family members for the duration of their employment.«

She removed her sunglasses and stared at him skeptically, as though unwilling to believe a word of it.

»What exactly are you building there? Why do you need so many workers on a moon isolated from Cyndralian civilization and accessible only through a space dock? Are you planning to establish a new colony?«

»With the highest priority and at unprecedented speed, assisted by the finest builders and architects available, we are constructing a massive quarantine facility for Cyndralis III. In fact, I am currently on my way to a meeting with the head of the planning team. The virus I mentioned earlier could become a genuine threat. Perhaps it can still be contained before it spreads. Perhaps not. But we are not waiting to find out. We are already preparing for the worst-case scenario, and every additional pair of hands up there could save lives.«

The crowd erupted into applause as though he had just announced the salvation of the world.

»When did construction on Nereon begin?«

Vel Orun ignored the reporter's final question. He thanked everyone and ended the interview.

Always leave at the peak. His bodyguards escorted him toward the limousine, whose turbines were already humming softly.

The door had almost closed when his assistant came running out of the building. Without a coat.

Vel Orun knew immediately that something had happened. He held the door open. His assistant climbed inside, sat down beside him, and whispered into his ear. It took every ounce of discipline not to react. The information struck him like lightning and buried itself deep in his gut. The irony of a glorious day in the life of Vel Orun, savior of worlds.

CYNDRALIS III

THE RIFT – Southern Foothills

22 FEB 129 AO

Her machine was already running on autopilot. OPS was handling it. For a while, she allowed herself to drift into her thoughts, which were finally beginning to function again.

The sky was still a sea of gray when the first foothills of the mountain range finally appeared in the distance.

They owed this escape to a woman. A woman they did not even know. But what now? Until this moment, they had been fugitives. A ragtag group held together by circumstance. All she had wanted was to get off this damned rock that had cost her so much. Her family. Her career. But they owed that unknown woman something. Their lives, quite literally.

She thought about it. And deep in her gut, she already knew where this argument with herself was heading. Should she really stay? Should she actually start a rebellion against the entire system? From the miserable caves of a mountain range? Aurora already knew the answer before she was willing to accept it. She slammed her fist against the console and kicked the inside wall of the cockpit several times with all her strength.

»Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit. Damn it.«

She screamed so loudly she was certain the others must have heard her.

[Aurora, I am detecting elevated stress levels. Do you require assistance?]

»No, OPS. Please leave me alone for a minute.«

She took a deep breath and stared into the snowstorm rushing past outside.

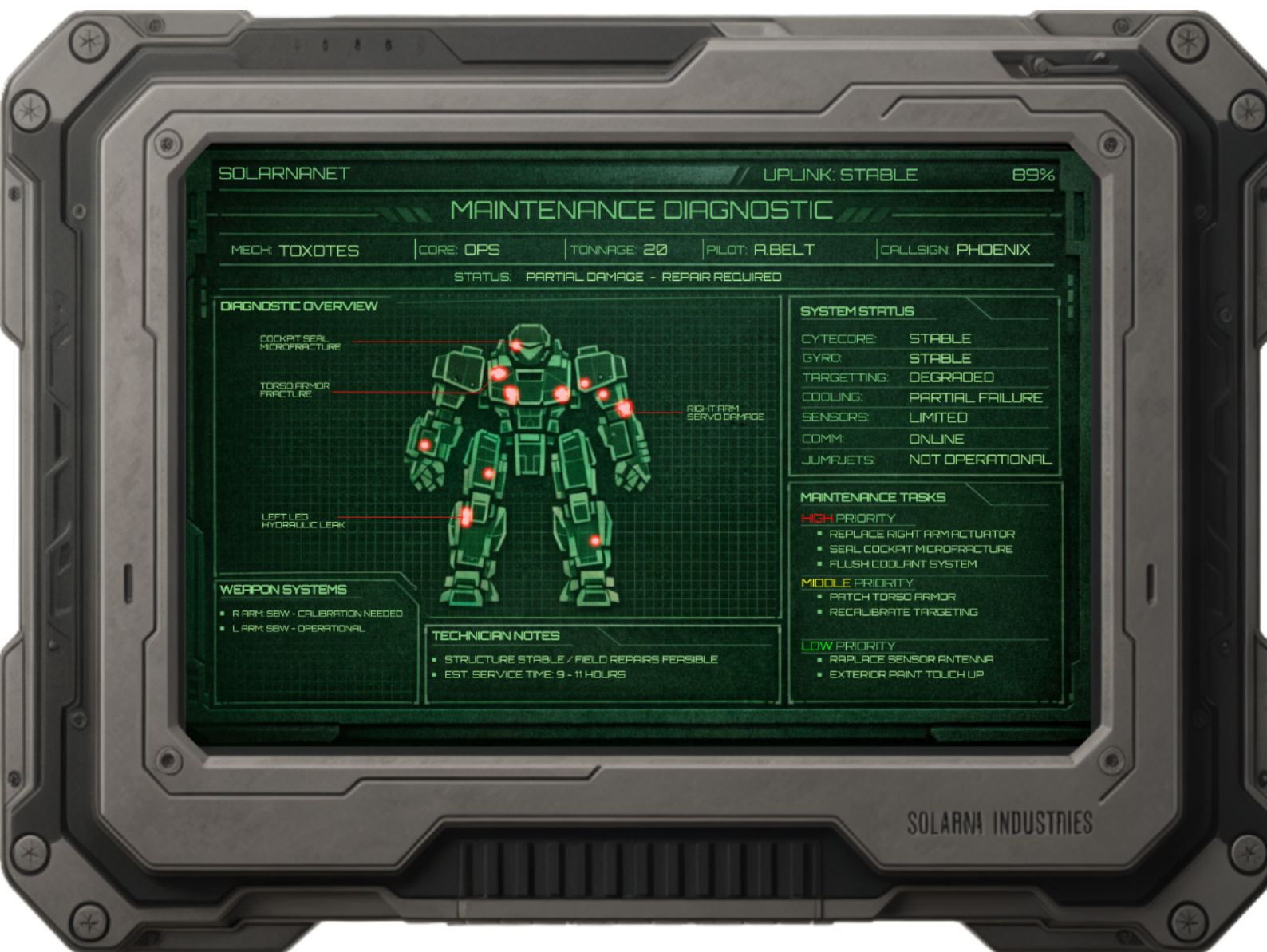
And she knew there were no excuses left for her anymore.

Goddamn it.

✧ APPENDIX A – FIELD MAINTENANCE DIAGNOSTICS ✧

The following diagnostic overlays were recovered from a reconstructed Solarna maintenance interface, used during field repairs in the Rift.

Data originates directly from CyteCore system outputs and has been partially reformatted for readability.



SOLARNANET

UPLINK: STABLE

84%

MAINTENANCE DIAGNOSTIC

MECH: AKONTISTES

CORE: BINKY

TONNAGE: 20

PILOT: V. EMBERS

CALLSIGN: FORGE

STATUS: PARTIAL DAMAGE - REPAIR REQUIRED

DIAGNOSTIC OVERVIEW

LEFT SHOULDER
ACTUATOR DAMAGEDTORSO HYDRAULIC
CONTAMINATEDRIGHT LEG
ARMOR DAMAGE

WEAPON SYSTEMS

- R ARM: SBW - OPERATIONAL
- L ARM: CSR-2 - OPERATIONAL
AMMO 18/20

TECHNICIAN NOTES

- FIELD REPAIRS INITIATED / STRUCTURE STABLE
- EST. REMAINING SERVICE TIME: 4 - 6 HOURS

SYSTEM STATUS

CYTECORE	STABLE
GYRO	STABLE
TARGETTING	ONLINE
COOLING	DEGRADED
SENSORS	DEGRADED
COMM	ONLINE
JUMPJETS	NOT OPERATIONAL

MAINTENANCE TASKS

HIGH PRIORITY

- REPAIR LEFT SHOULDER ACTUATOR
- FLUSH HYDRAULIC CIRCUIT - TORSO

MIDDLE PRIORITY

- RECALIBRATE SENSOR ARRAY
- REINFORCE RIGHT LEG ARMOR PLATING

LOW PRIORITY

- CLEAN COOLANT FILTERS
- EXTERIOR HULL ABRASION
- CSR-2 AMMO RESUPPLY RECOMMENDED

SOLARNA INDUSTRIES

SOLARNANET

UPLINK: STABLE

84%

MAINTENANCE DIAGNOSTIC

MECH: BOLISTES

CORE: ANGEL

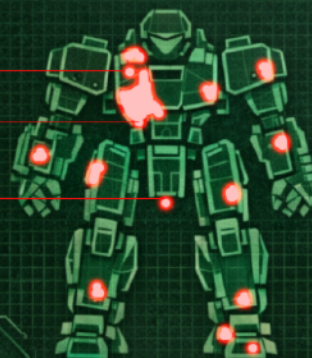
TONNAGE: 35

PILOT: I. FYRN

CALLSIGN: HALO

STATUS: PARTIAL DAMAGE - REPAIR REQUIRED

DIAGNOSTIC OVERVIEW

FSM-10 FEED
MECHANISM IMPAIREDLEFT TORSO SEVER
ARMOR BREACHLEFT JJ EXHAUST
MANIFOLD DAMAGED

WEAPON SYSTEMS

- R ARM: SBW - OPERATIONAL
- L TORSO: FSM-10 - JAMMED
AMMO 5/12

TECHNICIAN NOTES

- MULTIPLE SYSTEM WARNINGS LOGGED
- STRUCTURE STABLE
- EST. REMAINING SERVICE TIME: 10 - 13 HOURS

SYSTEM STATUS

CYTECORE	STABLE
GYRO	STABLE
TARGETTING	DEGRADED
COOLING	PARTIAL FAILURE
SENSORS	ONLINE
COMM	ONLINE
JUMPJETS	DEGRADED

MAINTENANCE TASKS

HIGH PRIORITY

- REPAIR LEFT JJ EXHAUST MANIFOLD
- FLUSH COOLING SYSTEM
- REPAIR LEFT TORSO ARMOR BREACH

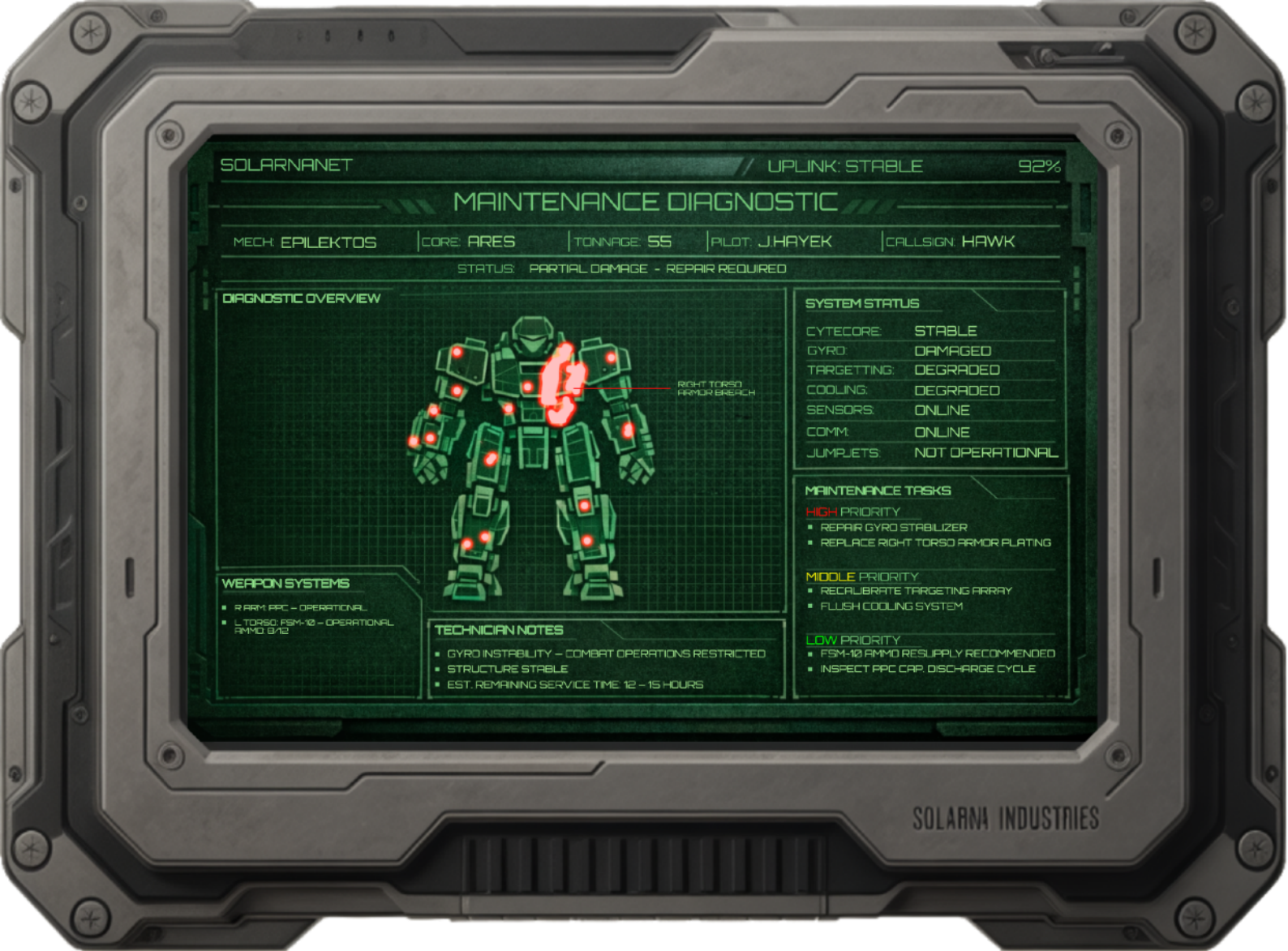
MIDDLE PRIORITY

- RECALIBRATE TARGETING ARRAY
- CHECK FSM-10 FEED - JAMMED

LOW PRIORITY

- FSM-10 AMMO RESUPPLY RECOMMENDED
- EXTERIOR HULL STRESS FRACTURES

SOLARNA INDUSTRIES



Translation errors reserved / possible.

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