

CYTE FIRE

THE VALKYRIE CHRONICLES



YEAR 128 AO

CYTEFIRE – The Valkyrie Chronicles
First Edition – 2026

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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.