

Dust was settling into the jungle canyon, casting an orange hue over the horizon. The beams of sunlight spilling through the tree canopy just minutes ago were being suffocated by the emerging dark storm clouds. From atop the northern cliffside guarding the only entrance into the valley, Yassari watched the leafy silhouettes dance across the foliage below, following a pattern he has seen countless times. Each time, the darkness enveloping the jungle. Each time, his pride fighting the dark metal goliaths in the entrapping gluch. Each time, failing.

*Not this time*, Yassari thought to himself while scanning the dense vegetation down below for any indication of moving metal or automaton surrounded by the vast labyrinth of undergrowth. The glowing green eye sockets of his Valkyrie rotated in spheroid motions as they darted across the maze underneath, keeping a crisp resolution for the pilot's receiver in the cockpit.

*No, this time, we're the predators. We're the ones hunting them.* He knew his compulsion to defeat the programmed Sleipnir pilots must have been bordering on mania, but his pack continued to follow him through this never ending cycle, their resolve and loyalty ingrained into their genome.

"Talha, give me a sitrep"

The one pride mate unable to pilot a Valkyrie was analyzing tactical data from an ODIN command post, "Hour and forty eight minutes into our run time. Three Sleipnirs showing on TacMAPS. Zero-four is still dark." Stationed safely outside the skirmish, Talha continued to asses his pride's current situation, poised over the blue-lit rectangular data table. The table sized TacMAPS device provided by the academy updated the location of his pride in real time with green blips on the satellite imaging map, along with a visual feed from each of their machines' cameras.

Doubt crept into the corner of Talha's mind, scanning across the map and noticing inconsistencies in the enemy's' movements and tactics. A chronic anxiousness resurfacing once again, "Hey, um, guys.. you know normally, they'd just let us hit run-time and outlast our sequencers, but they're coming back this way. I..I don't understand, the zero-one always gives us a wide berth, and they never separate a unit from their pack. It's like they're challenging us. They're not supposed to do that."

"Like they're enjoying themselves this time around, right?" Yassari had come to the same conclusion. As successful as their unit had been in destroying the enemy encampment, they overexerted their machines to keep up with the fleeing targets. The pride leader had given orders to shut down all non-essential functions on their machines to preserve their sequencers. Yassari's sweat drenched white jumpsuit was a testament to that. Only the dense humid air of the jungle vented through their units, the smell of thickets running rampant throughout the cockpit.

Yassari did not care whether units were deciding to play games or being cocksure. "If they wanna give us a chance I'll make them regret their lapse in judgment," Yassari affirmed to his pride, the sudden turn in events adding fuel to the fire driving him.

*Right now this is all I can do. This is the only way to get back at them for stealing lives that they had no right over.*

"Kaylee, where's your man? Do you have visual on zero-four?" Yassari asked his squad mate regarding the unit separated from the pack.

Hesitant to reply, for fear of being chided, her response came slowly, "Umm.. negative, sir. The nearby heat vent formation is messing with the thermal sensors, so nothing there either."

Moving his line of questioning quickly to the next squadmate, searching for answers, "Markov, what do you see up there? Give me something, we gotta move".

The dozens of camera sockets in Markov's visor whirred and buzzed as they darted back and forth, focusing in on Kaylee's mech, "Oi, why does it fall on big brother to fix 'er mistakes? Zero-four was dropped from rotation to keep the overwatch. All silent back 'ere," retorted Markov. Concealed up in the tree canopy behind his squad, the pride's scout kept watch of his unit entering the valley through the lens of his GX-450 sniper attachment. His green hued Valkyrie was a smaller, nimble machine that carried a lighter payload allowing him to hide in trees, away from the enemies' line of sight.

"Hey! Who's the one always taking the shots for you while you're lounging in the back all cozied up, huh?!" Kaylee came back with a chippy response.

"*Enough!* Both of you! We've never been so close to taking them out before! Do you really want to blow this now? Get it together pride!" Yassari's irritation at his squad and thrill at being giving the chance to defeat the Sleipnir squadron was mixing together and boiling his emotions into a flurry.

*Get it together man! Where's that discipline they've been shoving down your throat all these years? You can hate it or you can use it for once.* Relaxing his body and taking a breath of the heavy air sitting in his cockpit, Yassari steeled himself for the upcoming engagement.

"If they wanna fight, we won't back down. Asmi, regroup at the base of the cliff, we're engaging the enemy. Kaylee, find zero-four. Markov, continue overwatch." The four machine hunters began to move.

As Yassari marched his twenty-five foot goliath down the cliffside, he spotted Asmi creeping out of the jungle brush, a green blip displaying her as a friendly on his display.

"Talha, engagement time."

"Forty-five seconds. One hundred meters north."

"Asmi, set up behind the fallen trunk. Aim for zero-two's shoulder socket, it should be loose from our last encounter. I'll draw their fire from the flank"

"Yessir," Asmi began to move towards the edge of the small gorge in the ground. The Valkyrie slid down into cover behind a felled tree trunk, balancing her rifle on the bark, giving her vision of the circular, open field in front of her. The small moorland separating the treeline from the beginning of the cliffside was spotted with shrubbery and vegetation, and the ascending jungle floor would allow her to fire down on the encroaching enemy.

Talha reported in, "Sleeps are twenty seconds out. I've marked zero-four's estimated location on Kaylee's HUD. He's farther down the canyon. If you commit too hard we won't be able to reach you if shit hits the fan. Be careful K."

"Thank you Tal! For being a *helpful, positive* team member!" the fiery redhead responded playfully as she devoted her attention to finding zero-four.

Yassari crouched down behind the foliage, some fifty feet northwest of his pride mate. Equipping the Valkyrie's rocket ordnance, Yassari peaked out from cove.

*One in the chamber. I gotta make it count.* Scant signs of movement could be seen

behind the treeline, signaling the approaching enemy. Yassari counted three units, their black and green splatter paint camouflage forcing him to strain his vision.

*Careful, not too early. Don't let them spot you. Don't blow this shot.* Beads of sweat started to trickle down the side of his cheek, but Yassari kept his hand on the trigger, for fear of missing his opportunity.

The APSS reticle on his mounted display flashed green. *Now!* Yassari fired his projectile, exhaust and smoke being forced from the other end of the barrel. The rocket whizzed into the treeline, but the hypersensitive enemies heard the volley, dodging backwards. The missile exploded in a raging inferno in front of them, blowing soil and soot into the air. The enemy machines were immediately alerted to the squad leader's position, opening fire.

"Asmi, now!" Yassari barked as he dropped the explosive ordnance to the ground, bringing his rifle to bear. The enemies poured down on Yassari, destroying chunks of bark and vegetation.

Asmi peered down her rifle's scope, aiming for zero-two. Her breathing was ragged, the golden chain of the locket around her neck seemingly tightening and constricting her airway, but as soon as zero-two peaked out from the leafage, her training took over again. Fixating on zero-two, Asmi fired in short round bursts of three. Two of the metal slugs connected with their target, blowing away pieces of metal and blasting thermal lubrication across the jungle floor. What once was the Sleipnir's left arm was now a socket with jagged metal and gutted wires popping out, crippling the unit, but not disabling it. Recoiling, the machine recovered and sprinted towards Asmi, pulling out a hand cannon and firing towards the pride member. Asmi returned fire, bullets smashing into bark and crags, outlining the charging enemy.

"Dammit! APSS won't lock! I can't hit him," Losing her composure, Asmi stood up from cover to fire into her opponent, to no avail. The Sleipnir mechanism shot into Asmi's Valkyrie, bullets tearing through the rotator cuff in her right leg, locking it in place. The enemy barreled into her machine, bringing his sidearm up to the Valkyrie's head, trying to shoot a hole through the neural uplink to ill the pilot connection. The Sleipnir pilot pulled the trigger, only to hear the click of an empty magazine. Out of ammo. The unit threw the weapon aside in favor of the heated scorch blade holstered atop its chest plate. Asmi attempted to struggle her unit free as the enemy brought the blade down to her head, but the Sleipnir straddling the Valkyrie rotated its weight to hold her down.

"No! Why does this one always go for the eyes!" Asmi screamed in a panic. As the heated red blade came down on the trapped Valkyrie, a metallized coil slug from above drilled through the Sleipnir's eye socket, blowing away the top right half of its helmet. The round blue neural core in the center of its metallic skull was exposed to the environment, flickering on and off, damaged. The glowing light blue color of the oval neural uplink faded into a dying violet; SNS. Severe Neural Severance between pilot and machine caused the crippled Sleipnir to go slack, falling to the Valkyrie's side.

Asmi's eyes were glued to the monitor in the cockpit, the golden locket under her jumpsuit quickly rising and falling with her frayed breathing. Her heart thumping painfully hard, Asmi let out a sigh from her temporary respite, attempting to calm the rush of adrenaline from the joust.

"Hey, babe! I know you're into that S&M shit right now, but cut it out! Save me the pain

and take the damn shot quicker!” Asmi spouted off while she tried to recollect herself.

“So..wait, can I like cash in on pain I save you from for later use, or, what? Actually, consider it an incentive to better my reflexes! Ha!” Markov chuckled at his own doltish joke. The pride’s resident couple, usually in sync with one another outside of their machines, would find ways to be at odds with each other when it counted most. Markov began to readjust his line of sight when the communication channel suddenly bursted with activity.

“Markov. Get down! Now!” Talha shouted from the control room too late. A burst of energy exploded in the tree canopy, ejecting Markov and his machine from their safe haven hundreds of feet above ground. The Valkyrie whipped through the canopy, tumbling hundreds of feet towards the ground floor. The machine smashed into soil, spinning out of control down the plateau, jarring the cockpit. Blood ran down the side of Markov’s temple. He grabbed for roots and vines on the jungle floor, digging his Valkyrie’s fingers into the dirt to slow his spinning crash.

“Sitrep! Markov what the *hell* is going on over there?!” Yassari demanded over the comm channel.

“Air to ground missile!” Talha reported in confused surprise. Palming the 3D map to view the atmosphere, a descending unidentified black blip was falling towards the battlefield. He clicked and pinned away at the table, enhancing visual of the falling object. “Incoming Sleipnir at thirty-five-hundred meters! Red striped insignia across its chest. Commander class!”

“What are you talking about? We’ve accounted for every unit we took down, these guys aren’t supposed to have reinforcements!” Yassari responded in an angry state of confusion.

“I tagged every enemy unit from the encampment. I don’t know how System is handling a commander but it’s on Markov’s ass! Kaylee, TacMAPS marked a waypoint on your hud to Markov’s location, you’re the only one close enough to get him!”

*Damn it!* Yassari chided himself. Not only did he play into the enemy’s trap, he allowed himself to lose focus, forcing Talha to take charge. The situation turned on his unit.

“Kaylee, listen to Talha. We’ll hold off the other two, go get Markov.”

“Yessir!” Deep in the opposite side of the canyon, Kaylee turned her machine about face, activating her unit’s backpack thrusters, boosting forward. Her Valkyrie lifted off the ground and flew towards her comrade. Out of the corner of her eye, Kaylee saw a green and black brush begin to move, quickly turning her unit ninety degrees to the side to avoid the oncoming blade that swiped at her machine’s throat. Missing it’s chance for a fatal blow, the enemy unit grabbed on to the leg of the Valkyrie as it flew by. The back burner on Kaylee’s thrusters burned through the protective plating of the Sleipnirs arm, but not before the enemy collapsed her flight path and forced them to crash and skid across the floor.

“Gah, fuck! Where the hell did you come from?!” Kaylee exclaimed in exasperation. “Mark, hang in there, I have to shake this guy off!”

“Ugh, damn. Oi, what the hell happened?” Markov asked, vexed by his encounter with the jungle floor. Still dazed, he reached for his weapon; the scope had been completely crushed in the fall.

“Sleipnir Commander class about to hard drop right on top of you,” Talha scanned the TacMaps, looking for a resolution. “Kaylee got tied up with zero-four. There’s a Bromovsky

steam vent formation I tagged for you on your hud. Stall him in the gas fog while Kaylee comes for you. It's gonna sting, but it beats getting shot up. Go!"

Markov cursed under his breath, realizing the irony of the situation; if he survived this incident because of his little sister he would have to regret his earlier comments. Markov pushed himself off the ground, attaching the rifle to the back of his chassis via the magnetized weapon holster and began sprinting towards the waypoint. The ion shield protecting the incoming Sleipnir during its atmospheric entrance began to tear apart as the enemy rocketed towards the ground. The plummeting machine fired off three more missiles, but the extra camera sockets allowed the Valkyrie ample time to jump and avoid the explosive barrage that roasted the jungle floor. As he pounced and skid through the brushes down a decline, the fresh greenery of the forest began to die off, replaced with the murky purple miasma of the steam vents. The poisonous haze allowed only the toughest of jungle life to thrive in its little crater of land. The ground underneath the vents began to grumble. As if responding to the tremors, long vertical vent shafts blew out gaseous energy from deep under the planet at incredible temperatures. The mist had already begun working on entering the Valkyrie's air supply, not giving Markov much time to be saved. He would have to improvise.

The falling enemy touched down on the jungle floor. The impact from the high velocity metal armor cratered the ground, blowing away tree and lifeforms alike. The Sleipnir arose from its landing position, rising up and scanning for prey with its single yellow eye socket implanted in the middle of the skull. The Sleipnir walked towards the location it had last sighted Markov, stopped, scanned the area once more, and then jumped into the gaseous fog in pursuit. Scanning for movement, the Sleipnir spotted a change in atmospheric pressure, dodging down and to the right away from an incoming sniper slug. The pellet grazed the machine's left collarbone, scratching the striped red ODIN insignia on the plate armor. The pilot quickly locked onto the location of the shot, calculating the distance and leaping forward, a jaguar pouncing on overzealous prey. *Smash*. The Sleipnir clasped his hands together, coming down on Valkyrie metal in a fisted ball, but Markov's machine was not to be found. Looking down, the only metal visible to the Sleipnir was a sniper with a tripod attachment now broken in two.

Markov's Valkyrie allowed him to fire his sniper remotely. Setting up his sniper and firing in the fog cost him his weapon, but bought him time to sprint out of the mist leaving his adversary behind. Markov clawed up dirt, climbing out of the vent pocket. The gases had already vented into his unit, the heavy fumes dragging his consciousness down, dizzying the pilot as he grasped for the surface. A temporary respite for the pride member ended with a large *thud* ahead of him. The chrome black enemy had already located the wounded Valkyrie, jumping out of the gas fog to cut off any escape. As Markov attempted to stand, the Sleipnir grabbed at his back and flung him into a house sized boulder. The metal cyclops grabbed the Valkyrie by the neck and slammed him into the bedrock. Markov tried to struggle with the vice grip imposed on him, but the weaker aluminum metals of his suit were no match for the dominating commander. As if in annoyance, the Sleipnir grabbed at the Valkyrie's flailing arm and with a surge of brute force, ripped the arm out of the socket.

"YEEAHHRRH". Markov screamed out in crippling pain. The neural uplink between pilot and machine was a double edged sword. It allowed for faster reflexes and coordination, but any damage done to the machine would be felt by the driver. Just as Markov's consciousness

was fading, darkness overcoming his vision, sparks of bullets piercing metal lit up the Valkyrie's visual receiver, bringing Markov partially back to reality. The Sleipnir dropped Markov, releasing him from the jaws of death to defend against the onslaught. To Markov's left was a shorter, more rounded, filled out machine barreling towards the two.

"Get off him you little one-eyed shit," Kaylee screamed as she barreled into Markov's bully. Her left shoulder slammed into the Sleipnir chassis, sending him back into the steam fog. "That's right! Run, bitch!" In her riled up anger, Kaylee released all twelve of her shoulder mounted rockets from their pods into the gaseous patch.

"SERVER WARNING. CRITICAL HEAT CAPACITY REACHED. RUN TIME CRITICAL. RECOMMENDED COOLING SEQU-"

"Oh shut up, I know what I'm doing!" Kaylee lashed out at the warning her machine was giving her from firing all her ordnance at once. Turning around and marching towards her brother, Kaylee helped up the wounded machine. "Look at you, you're pathetic! I leave you alone for five minutes and now I'm cleaning you off the floor! What were you thinking running around in those fumes!"

Markov's response came in strained, patchy segments, "Well...not my fault...slow ass sister..."

"Yea well look who finished off zero-four *and* saved your ass again! Hmm, if we win, I bet I can get Yassari to take me on a d-- hey what're you?!"

Conscious enough to make a final decision, Markov pulled what remained of his unit across Kaylee's chest and placed himself in front of an incoming particle shot. The giant electric ball of energy carried the Valkyrie several dozen meters, completely electrocuting the machine and pilot. "Gah!" Markov coughed up blood, "Who's saving who now, eh little sister?" Markov got out one more witty comment before his Valkyrie slouched over, the glow of his visor fading indicating a neural connection loss; pilot death.

Kaylee turned to see the cyclops warrior brandishing the smoking hand cannon that incapacitated her brother. "I've had enough of you!" The Valkyrie boosted forward, crashing into the enemy with bone shattering g-force throwing both of them back into the misty pit. Equipping her wolfram metal blade with inhuman speed, Kaylee sliced open the Sleipnir's bicep. Black ooze spilled out of the enemy as she dug her blade down the arm unit, the Sleipnir struggling for control as the ground began to grumble again. The Sleipnir vied to roll and flip the Valkyrie under him, her blade still gashing his arm to shreds. As Kaylee worked her way down to his wrist, a rush of white hot gases from the vent under the combatants blew out trying to escape, but ended up getting caught in Kaylee's backside. The lights and monitor in the cockpit went dark, her controls stopped responding.

"CRITICAL HEAT CAPACITY ERROR. VENTING INITIATED. REBOOT REQUIRED."

"No no no NO! Fuck! FUCK! MOVE! I had him! He's mine! COME ON." Kaylee screamed her frustrations at the controls, jamming them back and forth and fruitless effort. From outside the cockpit she could hear her opponent freeing himself from their entanglement. Completely despondent, understanding her total defeat, Kaylee yielded in exhaustion, "Well c'mon then, this is your lucky chance you stupid ape," but the killing blow did not come. She heard the clang of her knife hit the ground, ripped out from the arm it was ravishing, the sound of footsteps slowly retreating from her. "Hey! Where are you going?! You think this is funny? Are lives aren't your

play things! Come back here and finish the job damn it!" She yelled and screamed, but with her machine shut down there was no one there to answer or listen. The footsteps slowly faded away, moving on to hunt the rest of her pride. Her anger turned into frustrated sobs, the only noise left to her besides the hiss of the steam vents as the gas slowly crept into her cockpit, numbing her mind, reuniting with her brother.

----

Yassari and Asmi were being pushed back up the cliffside.

"Talha. What the *hell* happened to my squad?!"

"Uhm, uhh, well, good news is Kaylee dispatched zero-four for you and beat up on the commander some. Bad news is that she couldn't get to Markov in time. They're both SNS."

"*Damn*. Alright one problem at a time now. Asmi, let's clean up this mess before more company arrives."

"Yessir!" The duo's damaged units continued to flee upward into the cliffside while firing down on their opponents, but zero-three and zero-one were making good use of the foliage for cover. The Sleipnirs were firing down the middle of the formation, splitting Asmi and Yassari apart.

"Cap'n, my rotator is jamming harder now. I can't keep up this up much longer!" As Yassari formulated a response, zero-three jumped from cover and boosted towards Asmi.

"Ohh? You can't finish me off that easy!" Asmi swiftly eighty-sixed her damaged leg unit, ejecting it from the waist socket it was connected to, throwing her off balance to the right causing the enemy to miss its target. As the Sleipnir whizzed by the Valkyries fired from both sides, tearing the unit apart from front and back. The suit's boosters slowly fizzled out of commission as the unit crashed into the edge of the cliff and slid to a halt, crowned by a small patch of dirt and grime picked up in the slide.

"Haha yeah! Finished him!"

"Yassari! Asmi! Watch out, he has a DusterCanon!" Talha saw zero-one's transformation. While zero-three recklessly tried to finish off the Valkyrie, the right hand of the other unit dissolved into its arm unit as a massive gun barrel appeared from its wrist. The Sleipnir targeted Asmi's immobilized mech suit and fired off a 155mm shell. Asmi had no chance to scream in agony or pain as the ordnance incinerated her unit instantly. Thousands of broken metal shards and grease spillage showered the cliffside.

"What the hell?! When did they outfit zero-one with that monster? That was never in any of the dossiers they gave us! This is bullshit, what is System playing at with these changes out of the blue?" Talha fumed.

"It won't matter if we can finish this!" Yassari sprinted downhill at zero-one, slamming into his helmet with a clutched metal fist. A crunch could be heard as the Sleipnir's camera sockets cracked under pressure, its armor denting inward. The pilot tried to fight off the Valkyrie, but Yassari's continuous barrage of force cracked open the helmet and damaged the neural core, causing the pilot to lose his coordination.

Yassari went down for the chassis next, clawing his fingers into the metal shielding and ripping it apart. The brutal battle and loss of his pack turned him into a ferocious rabid dog

fighting for survival. He reached the door of the cockpit and stripped it open, exposing the pilot cowering from Yassari's vicious assault. The Valkyrie picked up the pleading voice of the pilot, but Yassari heard nothing, being completely overtaken by his emotions and enslaving compulsion for absolute victory. Drawing his fist back, he smashed into the cockpit, the pilot popping from the sheer pressure of the attack. Blood and organs slushed around in a gruesome scene as Yassari continued to crush and pulverize any evidence of a cockpit. The dull, aching buzz in the pride leader's ear from the rush of adrenaline began to recede as Yassari came down from his killing high, the drone of his final surviving comrade's voice bringing him back down to reality.

"Yassari! YASSARI! In front of you! Look up dammit!" Yassari finally heard Talha, coming to his senses, and looked up from the macabre scene that he caused. Some fifteen meters ahead of the Valkyrie stood the Sleipnir commander, staring down at Yassari like a disappointed parent watching his child throw a pathetic tantrum. Yassari stood completely motionless crouched on the ground over zero-one carcass. A spine-numbing chill ran down his backside, the sweat covering his every pore suddenly turning ice cold. He could no longer feel the humidity of the jungle for the enemy's presence was utterly overwhelming and had taken over the entire surrounding area.

Yassari found himself staring down the barrel of the hand cannon that had disabled Markov earlier. *He has me dead to rights. One wrong move and all of this was for nothing.* The goliath started to move towards Yassari, but instead of firing off his weapon, the Sleipnir lowered it, allowing it to fall to the floor. In exchange, a two meter hidden blade in each of the Sleipnir's wrists appeared and extended out. The machine bent down slightly, putting its center of gravity into the unit's quadriceps, challenging Yassari.

"Yassari, go for the right arm. Kaylee shredded it pretty bad before he got her, it should respond a lot slower for the pilot," Talha whispered slowly to his leader. Even though only Yassari could hear him, the enemies domineering presence was still felt to Talha, completely removed from the combat zone. Talha's gripped the TacMAPS table with all his might to hold himself upward, his legs about to buckle from complete anxiety.

Yassari rose from the carnage around him as the commander in front of him awaited the inevitable duel. Yassari drew the combat knife hanging from his waist unit, shifting his weight onto the machine's back left leg.

The gravity of the situation was felt in the back of his mind. *This is it. This is what you wanted. A shot at beating their little pet project and getting off this rock. I have no choice.* The conditions were set. The statue still machines suddenly raged at one another in a flurry of movement, their will and determination of each pilot sensed by the other through the clash of metal and machine. The Valkyrie clawing for the limbs, the Sleipnir slicing for the throat.

The bout was over in a sharp instant.

The battle simulation had ended.

Yassari Devarakonda's fight was over.