

*Antarctica, fourteen kilometres west of Ingham Station*

2037-06-06, 09:15 UTC

Corporal Milica Adoti raises a gloved fist. Her six commandos freeze. The battle-rattle of equipment harnesses is silenced, leaving only the howling wind.

She scans the horizon for a moment. It's almost mid-morning, but the stars still twinkle at the rim of a velvet-black sky. There will be an eerie twilight in a few hours, though the sun won't rise properly for three more months. Even with her graphene-strip contact lenses, which react to photons in low-light environments, visibility is poor.

Her virtual assistant automatically cycles through the spectrum. Ultraviolet shows nothing, which means no electric arcs. Infrared comes up dry, too. Whatever moved in her periphery, it's no hotter than the ice around it.

Probably just a swirling eddy of snow. But 'probably' gets good soldiers killed.

Her mastoid implant vibrates, bypassing her ear and tickling the bones of her skull. Her assistant recites a message from one of the commandos, using a clone of his voice. The text also also appears in front of her, floating just below eye level:

*Guillory > Problem?*

Adoti thinks, *Not sure. Do a sweep. Sixty metres.* Her implant detects the thought, translates it into text, encrypts the message and sends it, all in a fraction of a second.

Her commandos fan out, EF88s raised to their cheeks, barrels sweeping side to side. Fingers off triggers—the side-mounted grenade launcher could blow a hole in the ice, leaving them to drown in the brine beneath.

Adoti moves forward in a combat crouch, boots crunching softly on the ice. The cold air scorches her lungs. She peers through the sights of her rifle in case they pick up anything her lenses missed. The red dot traces a line across the snow.

This evaluation needs to be unobserved. If the new equipment doesn't work, Adoti doesn't want any foreign actors to know. And if it *does* work, well, she doesn't want them to know that, either. But while Antarctica may be shrinking, it's still bigger than Europe, and has a winter population of less than twenty thousand people. It's extremely unlikely that anyone else is here.

The rifle is only four kilos, but keeping it raised for so long is starting to make her pectorals sore. Her assistant tweaks the settings on her implant. Magnets stimulate Adoti's brain tissue, exciting some neurons and muffling others. The pain fades.

Soon her commandos have reached the sixty metre radius. She can barely see them, which is the point of the Multicam arctic uniform—without the tags floating above their heads, she'd have no hope.

They turn slowly, scanning the ice. Then they message her, one by one. Her assistant reads the messages in their voices:

*Guillory > All clear, Corporal.*

*Fehr > Clear.*

*Mabius > Clear.*

*Pounsett > Clear.*

*Kretschmann > Shit all out here, boss.*

*Vavasseur > Clear.*

Adoti clicks through the spectrum one more time. Nothing fluoresces. If anything was here, it's gone now.

She thinks, *All right. Back to the rally point.* Her assistant sends the message. A moment later, her soldiers start jogging back.

Guillory is the first to reach her. He's a twenty-eight-year old from Wagga, with close-set blue eyes and a shaved head, currently hidden by his mask and helmet. The army is his

[Type here]

second career—he used to be a drone pilot for Amazon. He seems to cope well under pressure, but Adoti is conscious of the fact that he wasn't in Tigray in 2029, or Cabo Delgado in 2031. He's only done combat missions in VR. Never been shot at with real bullets. Never had a fourteen-year-old sprint across the bloody dust towards him in an explosive vest.

Adoti glances across at the other four commandos as they approach. They're almost invisible in the snow, indistinguishable from one another in their helmets and flak jackets spun from ballistic silk. The soldiers look tough, but other than Kretschmann, who fought briefly in Marib in 2030, none of them have seen real action.

She tells herself it shouldn't matter. Down here there is no president to assassinate, no palace to bomb, no city to terrorise. Just eleven million square kilometres of empty ice.

She thinks a message at the commandos: *Unload the truck.*

The vehicle looks like an ordinary eighteen wheeler except for the tank treads, and the boom out front which scans the ice ahead for weaknesses. Guillory unlocks the shipping container, then he and Kretschmann climb in. A moment later they reappear, dragging a polycarbonate coffin behind them. They need the assistance of Fehr and Mabijs to get it out of the truck.

Adoti watches. *Too heavy to deploy quickly.* Her assistant recognises this thought as part of her evaluation, and saves it to her notes app.

Vavasseur stands uncertainly nearby as the other soldiers unload the coffin. His parents got rich off a lithium mine in the Pilbara, and Adoti suspects he grew up pampered. He's not exactly lazy, but he seems to need permission to help.

He's only twenty-two. Adoti hasn't given up on him.

*There's a handle on the end,* she thinks.

*Vavasseur > Yes, ma'am.*

He hurries around to the back of the coffin, helping the others carry it over. They dump it at Adoti's feet with a heavy thunk.

*Kretschmann > Be careful, for fuck's sake.*

*Fehr > Don't worry, it's not fragile.*

*Kretschmann > I don't care about the robot, I'm worried about the ice. I wasn't planning on swimming today.*

*Mabius > It's seven metres thick, Kretsch. We just drove a twenty tonne truck over it.*

*Kretschmann > Great. Comforting.*

*Guillory > You want the others out, Corporal?*

There are no signs of exertion in his cloned voice, but he's visibly puffing.

*Just one for now*, Adoti thinks. Guillory nods and closes the container on the back of the truck.

Adoti lifts her goggles and pulls down her mask, exposing her face to the frigid air. She crouches next to the coffin.

'Nine, one, zero, zero, four,' she says.

Three green lights appear on the lid as her code, voice print and face scan are approved.

The latches pop open.

'All right,' she says, lifting the lid. 'Let's see what Santa got us for Christmas.'