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Signal Runners

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** Burn the Static
- **Chapter 2** Contract at the Edge
- **Chapter 3** Azimuth's Wake
- **Chapter 4** The Prism Net
- **Chapter 5** A License to Listen
- **Chapter 6** Pilot's Razor
- **Chapter 7** Firebreak at Helio Gate
- **Chapter 8** The Ministry of Silence
- **Chapter 9** Freight of Names
- **Chapter 10** Crosswind on the Dark Tide
- **Chapter 11** Murmur's Secret
- **Chapter 12** The Neon Uprising
- **Chapter 13** Tamsin's Patch
- **Chapter 14** The Long Drift
- **Chapter 15** Songs of the Scatterlight
- **Chapter 16** Drop Points and Dead Drops
- **Chapter 17** Siege of the Velvet Moon
- **Chapter 18** Wolves of the Wideband
- **Chapter 19** The Courier's Trial
- **Chapter 20** The Broken Regime
- **Chapter 21** Letters to the Stars
- **Chapter 22** The Cost of Signal
- **Chapter 23** A Family of Outlaws
- **Chapter 24** The Truth Cascade
- **Chapter 25** Run to Daybreak

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Introduction

In a galaxy segmented by borders no cartographer can keep current and by truths no censor can quite contain, the fastest thing isn't a ship or a bullet—it's a story. Empires rise on polished narratives, revolutions kindle on grainy footage, and whole worlds pivot on a single voice finally carried to the places it was never meant to reach. The official channels hum with sanctioned comfort. The black channels hiss with dangerous, living noise. And between them, slipping through closed gates and quiet wars, run the couriers who choose what gets heard.

They call themselves signal runners. Not because they beam messages across the void—any ministry can do that—but because they carry signals past walls designed to bend, drown, or erase them. They smuggle broadcast bursts that won't survive a jump. They ferry proofs that can't be forged by a regime's machine. They plug their hearts into the battered transmitters of forgotten towns and listen for a password spoken as a prayer. By the time a lie has been lacquered and looped, a runner has already strapped the raw and the real to their hull and pointed their nose at the nearest skip-knot with every jammer in the sector raising its hackles.

This is the story of one such crew and their rust-and-radiance ship, Azimuth. The captain, Mara Quell, learned long ago how to read a blockade like an apology and a convoy like a confession. Kade Voss flies as if speed could forgive anything, all slingshot grin and storm-steadiness when the sky gets feral. Tamsin Roe speaks fluent engine and gospel splice; if it hums, she hears its hunger. Jun Ibarra can take a scream and lay it clean across a spectrum until it lands like a bell in a thousand kitchens. Cera Nyx once wrote the speeches that taught worlds to love their chains—and knows exactly how to pick the locks she designed. And Murmur, a synthetic with an ear like a cathedral, claims to hear ghosts in the noise and truths in the gaps between.

They are freelancers, which is another way of saying no one comes when they call and everyone comes when they falter. Credits keep the air sweet and the drives purring, yet money is only a map; the destination is always something heavier. A mother's last testimony, sealed and salted against distortion. Ledgers from a mine that swallows workers and spits out export quotas. A banned song that stitches a city back to its own pulse. Each payload carries a calculus: who will be hurt if this flies, who will be saved if it doesn't, and what it means to choose between a clean conscience and a living crew.

Against them stand ministries with spotless names and filthy appetites—the Ministry of Silence, the Bureau of Harmonies, the Keepers of Civic Wellbeing—each a cathedral of soft words built atop a basement full of hard levers. Pirates fly their own flags over rumor economies; mercenary broadcasters auction airtime to the highest fear. On the

edges, the Prism Net flickers: a clandestine lattice of kitchens, rooftops, shipyards, and saints, each a node, each a handoff, each a promise that no voice belongs to power forever. The runners don't topple governments with missiles. They do it with receipts and witnesses, with angry choirs and quiet proof.

This book is a chase and a chorus. It is metal singing under acceleration and breath caught at the threshold of a door that opens onto a different life. It is the inside of a cockpit blooming with alarms, the hush of a relay hidden in a field of glass grass, the first syllable spoken into a microphone when the world might end if it goes wrong and begin if it goes right. It is about the way people invent family from whatever refuses to leave them, and the way stories braid those families together across distances that math alone can't measure.

You will meet them mid-burn and mid-argument, with a contract that promises too little and asks too much. You will see how a lie can feel like a lullaby, how a truth can wound and still be a kindness. You will watch a crew take on work that feels like theft and tastes like grace, learning again and again that freedom isn't quiet and that speech doesn't guarantee sense—only the chance for it. And you will decide, alongside them, when a broadcast is a torch and when it is a fuse.

Strap in. Check the seals. Tune the gain until the hiss resolves into breathing. Somewhere out there, a thousand silent rooms are waiting for a voice that sounds like their own. Somewhere closer, a gate is opening, just wide enough for a single story to outrun the dark.

CHAPTER ONE: Burn the Static

The Azimuth shuddered as the drive cores spooled up, a low thrum that seemed to vibrate through the deck plates and into Mara Quell's boots. She stood in the cramped cockpit, one hand resting on the worn leather of the pilot's chair, the other flicking switches with the practiced ease of someone who had spent more time staring at starfields than at ceilings. Outside the reinforced viewports, the nebula of Vesper Rim painted the void in bruised purples and sickly greens, a reminder that even the most beautiful sights could hide a trap.

Kade Voss lounged in the co-pilot's seat, boots propped on the console, a half-eaten nutrient bar dangling from his lips. His grin was wide enough to split the ship's hull if he tried, eyes sparkling with the kind of reckless optimism that made Mara both grateful and wary. "You sure this route's clear?" he asked, voice muffled by the bar.

Mara didn't look away from the nav display. "The Ministry's nets are thin here. They're busy chasing ghosts in the Orion Spiral. If we hit the skip-knot at 0.42 light-years, we'll be past their latest ping sweep before they even know we're breathing."

Tamsin Roe floated down from the engineering hatch, a grease-smudged wrench tucked into her belt. Her hair, usually tied back in a practical braid, had escaped a few strands that now clung to her forehead like static. "Drive's humming clean," she reported, voice low enough not to startle the sleeping synth in the bunk. "But the flux regulator's still singing a flat note. I'll need to tweak it before we jump, or we'll end up dragging a wake of fried plasma."

Jun Ibarra appeared at the communications station, his fingers dancing over the array of dials and sliders that made the Azimuth's transmitter sing. He wore a pair of cracked spectacles that constantly slid down his nose, giving him the perpetual look of someone perpetually surprised by the universe. "I've got the burst ready," he said, tapping a faded red button that pulsed like a heartbeat. "It's a fifteen-second package—audio, video, and a data slab of the mine ledgers. If the Ministry gets a sniff, they'll try to jam it into oblivion."

Cera Nyx leaned against the bulkhead, arms crossed, her expression unreadable. She had once been the voice that whispered sweet nothings into the ears of dictators, crafting speeches that turned dissent into devotion. Now she wore that past like a shroud, her eyes constantly scanning for the slightest flicker of deception. "Remember," she murmured, "the truth isn't just a payload. It's a weapon that can backfire if you misaim."

Murmur, the synth with a cranial lattice that resembled a stained-glass window, floated silently near the ceiling, its many tendrils tapping against the overhead panels. A soft, harmonic hum emanated from its core, like a choir holding a single note. "I hear the gaps," it said, voice layered with echo. "The silence between the words is where the truth hides."

Mara smiled faintly. "Then let's make sure they hear it loud."

The ship lurched forward as the skip-knot engaged, space folding around the Azimuth like a piece of origami snapping into place. Stars stretched into lines, then smeared into a radiant tunnel. The drive sang, a deep resonance that seemed to come from the very fabric of spacetime. For a heartbeat, everything was quiet—just the hum of the engines and the distant thrum of the universe itself.

Then the alarms began to blink.

A red cascade washed over the console, the Ministry's signature jamming pattern flaring across the spectrum. Kade's grin faltered as he gripped the armrests, his knuckles whitening. "They've got us on the hook," he muttered.

Tamsin's eyes flicked to the readouts. "They're trying to scramble our burst before it leaves the ship. If they succeed, the data will be corrupted beyond recovery."

Jun's fingers flew over the transmitter, adjusting frequencies, trying to find a sliver of clear space amid the noise. "I'm pushing it to the edge of the band," he said, voice tight. "If we go any higher, we'll fry the antenna."

Cera stepped forward, her hand hovering over a dormant override switch. "There's a backdoor I helped design years ago," she said quietly. "It's a low-power pulse that can slip through their filters if we time it right."

Mara nodded, her mind already calculating the trajectory of the pulse against the incoming jam. "Kade, hold us steady. Tamsin, keep the drive at maximum thrust. Jun, fire the pulse on my mark."

The Azimuth shuddered again, this time from the strain of fighting against the Ministry's digital grip. The view outside the cockpit turned into a kaleidoscope of distorted light as the ship fought to maintain its skip-knot trajectory.

"Three... two... one... mark!" Mara shouted.

Jun slammed the transmit button. A thin, brilliant spike of energy shot from the Azimuth's nose, piercing the jamming field like a needle through silk. For a split

second, the console flashed green—a clean transmission burst.

Then the jamming intensified, a wave of white noise that threatened to drown the signal entirely.

Cera slammed the override. The low-power pulse she'd mentioned erupted from a secondary array, a whisper of energy that slipped through the cracks in the Ministry's defense. It rode the back of the main burst, a hidden carrier that would deliver the payload even if the primary channel was fried.

The ship lurched as the drive cores overloaded, a warning klaxon wailing. Tamsin's hands flew over the emergency vents, venting excess plasma to keep the drives from melting. "We're pushing past safe limits," she gasped. "If we don't drop out of the knot now, we'll tear the hull apart."

Mara made the split-second decision. "Cut the thrust! Reverse the skip-knot!"

Kade yanked the lever, the ship shuddering as the spacetime fold began to unwind. Stars snapped back into points, the nauseating tunnel collapsing into the familiar black of space. The Azimuth coasted out of the jump, drifting just beyond the edge of the Ministry's detection bubble.

Silence fell, broken only by the ragged breathing of the crew and the soft, persistent hum of Murmur.

On the console, a small green light blinked steady—the burst had been transmitted. The data slab, the audio, the video—all were now hurtling toward their destination, a forgotten outpost on the fringe of the Perseus Reach where miners had been forced to sign away their lives for a pittance of ore.

Kade let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "Well, that was... close."

Tamsin laughed, a short, relieved sound that echoed off the metal walls. "Close enough to singe my eyebrows."

Jun glanced at the readouts, then at Mara. "The Ministry's gonna be pissed. They'll probably send a scout after us."

Cera's expression hardened. "Let them come. We've got more where that came from."

Murmur's tendrils twitched, emitting a faint chord that sounded almost like a laugh. "The truth is already out there," it said. "It's just waiting for someone to listen."

Mara leaned back in her chair, feeling the familiar ache of adrenaline fading into a deep, satisfied fatigue. She looked at her crew—each a patchwork of scars, skills, and secrets—and felt the weight of their shared purpose settle like a warm mantle over her shoulders.

The Azimuth drifted silently through the void, a small, defiant spark against the endless dark. Somewhere ahead, a gate waited, just wide enough for a single story to slip through. And somewhere behind, the Ministry's silence began to crack, one stolen broadcast at a time.

The crew exchanged glances, no words needed. The job was done, for now. The next contract awaited at the edge of the system, and the static was already beginning to burn again.

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