

Battles....IN SPACE!

## Ziost Upper Atmosphere

41 ABY

“M7, begin plotting our course to Hyperspace.” Khryso Mallus, Warlord of Clan Plagueis pressed his lips firmly together, a blend of relief and frustration running through his body. The Chiss was somewhat surprised they had gotten away as easily as they had. As *Solidago*, his ARC-170 starfighter, cut its way through the atmosphere of Ziost, he glanced down at the satchel sitting beside his seat.

“If you’re thinking that was easy, don’t get too excited.” Nefilee Ath’muss, Khryso’s Devaronian girlfriend and current co-pilot, spoke over the ship’s internal comm system. Currently she was seated in *Solidago*’s rear gunner pit, with a clear view of the planet below them as they raced away from it. Before he responded, however, Khryso felt a ripple of uneasiness in the Force. That, combined with Nefilee’s words, told him everything he needed to know. They were being pursued.

Khryso reached over and quickly began to focus the range of *Solidago*’s scanners in an effort to pinpoint the location of their pursuers. “It looks like you’re going to get the fight you were after,” Khryso muttered, hearing a slight chuckle in response over the comms.

“You should know by now, Khrys, it’s never that easy.”

Khryso nodded in muted response, glancing over the instruments as they began to readout the details on the bogey. “Looks like a Tribune...ZH-40. It’s definitely them.”

He could feel the smile no doubt playing across Nefilee’s face as he pulled his focus inward, immersing himself in the Force. Ziost was one of their many recent expeditions the two Sith had undertaken on their “vacation” from official Clan Plagueis business. There were plenty of interesting Sith artifacts scattered across the galaxy that Khryso had learned about in the Shadow Academy, but only now had he had the time to venture out and see them for himself. This particular item, the Blighted Frost, was only the second they had actually managed to successfully recover.

Unfortunately, they had not been alone in their search for it. Their current pursuers, who he had first assumed to be simple scavengers, had been hot on their tail for most of their exploration of the cavernous catacombs on Ziost. Khryso had been sure they had given the trio of thugs the slip on their way out, Frost in hand, but evidently, he had been wrong.

Khryso reached into his internal well, drawing on the anger he had at the scavengers for their attempts to soil a sacred Sith artifact. They had dared to try and take the artifact from him, and now dared to threaten his life, and Nefilee’s. She was there, in the back of *Solidago*, her own excitement welling up like a growing flame. Khryso summoned his own cold fury and their auras spread, reaching for each other. Like frost spreading across the ground, meeting the encroaching dawn that tried to melt it away.

Heat and cold clashed and a storm of power welled. Khryso reached out, tampered it down, and focused it. His mind sharpened to a point, prepared for the task at hand. He felt Nefilee beside him, as if they were touching. He could feel her intentions, her movements, her very breaths, just as she could feel his. The meld was ready.

*Target closing*, Nefilee and Khryso thought in unison. Lock-on systems began their work as Khryso's hands flew across the control panel, taking *Solidago* into a sudden reversal and rocketing towards their pursuers. *We can take them. Prepare for the pass.*

Khryso put *Solidago* into a spin as an alert lit up on the control panel. He was familiar enough with it to know that the enemy craft was attempting a lock-on of its own. At a glance, he quickly registered the level of shielding their scan was reporting on the opposing vessel. As they sped towards each other, the Tribune opened fire, spraying red laser fire in a scattered net. By cross-checking the scan as he took evasive maneuvers, keeping his nose pointed in the direction of the opposing vessel, Khryso determined the Tribune had some after-market cannons bolted on.

He felt excitement surge through him as the dogfight officially began. Not his own, but Nefilee's. Khryso quickly tamped it down, maintaining his focus as he prepared for their maneuver. As the ships drew closer to each other, he lifted up *Solidago*'s right wing, taking a hit to the deflector shields. M7 called out a warning, but Khryso ignored it. The droid should know by now, this was part of the plan.

Khryso jerked *Solidago* in the opposite direction, intentionally overcompensating and taking another deflector shield hit. Their game of chicken was almost at an end and Khryso took the dive, veering to the left and allowing the enemy ship to pass behind him. As the ship took a wide turn, eager to resume the chase, Nefilee unleashed a torrent of laser fire from the aft cannons, scoring a few deflector hits before the chase was resumed and their opponent took evasive action of their own.

Khryso took a moment to glance at the lock-on progress. Both lock-ons, theirs and their enemy's, were almost complete. Khryso reached over to ready the torpedoes when his hand suddenly turned, as if acting on instinct. *Evasive action*. The ARC-170 moved in a spiral, suddenly climbing up, and initiated a new scan readout. The enemy vessel had deployed a hidden torpedo tube and was preparing to launch. They needed to delay their lock-on.

"M7, divert power from forward deflectors to thrusters," Khryso muttered, speaking over the droid's pointed concerned whistles at Khryso ignoring his warnings up until now. Khryso continued moving *Solidago* in spiraling climbs and sharp dives, his eyes constantly darting between the various lock-on alerts, scanner readouts, and *Solidago*'s power distribution.

*Let them lock on. Once they think they have us, they'll let down their guard. If our counterattack fails, we'll be sitting ducks. They already think they can take us, they'll underestimate us. They want the artifact, so they won't take any critical shots.*

Khryso set his lips in a firm frown as his brow furrowed. Dropping out of his evasive maneuvers, he settled into a basic movement pattern to avoid the haphazard spray of laser fire from the enemy craft. "M7, buff up the deflectors, and brace yourself." The exact plan was still forming Khryso's and Nefilee's mind as the enemy vessel's lock-on neared completion. Allowing his hand's movements to fall into muscle memory, Khryso took a moment to breathe in, allowing the storm he had previously tempered to brush over him.

Wind whipped through his hair and robes, rain dashed across his skin as the distant rumbling of thunder shook the very air. He could feel it, the power, the raw intensity and uncontrollable nature of the Force. Khryso had no intention of dying here, no intention of losing. That determination, that stubbornness, is what kept him on his feet as the storm washed over

him. Gentle winds became cutting gales, pricks of rain became a deluge, and the thunder rattled his skull.

*Enemy lock on complete. They've launched a torpedo.* Khryso could see it as if he was watching it with his own eyes.

The scavenger stood across from him, weathering the storm with a hand to his brow. His gaunt, ghostly features threatened to be washed away, but nonetheless, the scavenger raised his blaster, firing a shot straight into Khryso's forehead. Khryso didn't hesitate, however, raising his own blaster and firing back. The storm rose to a cacophony as the competing blaster bolts fought their way through it.

Out of the clouds, like a falling star, Nefilee's figure formed, like an elemental avatar of the storm itself, her red blade ignited, batting away the blaster bolt coming for Khryso. However, Khryso's own bolt found its home, burrowing into the scavenger's head and popping him like a bubble.

As the scavenger's shattered remains were lost in the power of the wind and rain, slowly but surely, it began to calm. The sun peeked through the clouds and the sky turned from a sinister gray to a pleasant blue. The lashing, harsh energy of the Force slowly withdrew as Khryso and Nefilee's meld fell away. The battle was over and their enemy vanquished.

"Did you see that?!" Nefilee's voice came screaming out of the comm's system, bringing Khryso harshly back to *Solidago*. Her excitement was so loud that Khryso could hear her through the internal mechanics of the starfighter. "I actually managed to shoot their torpedo out of the sky!"

"Well done," Khryso said, allowing himself a small smile of relief. Looking out the viewscreen, as the blast-tinting faded, Khryso saw the Tribune tumbling through the sky, several smoking holes in its hull. As the torpedo had fallen in behind them, Nefilee shot it down as Khryso had turned and pushed through their deflectors with a barrage of laser fire. Simple, but sometimes simple is best. "M7, did you finish those Hyperspace calculations?"

As *Solidago* pointed its nose away from the planet, Khryso glanced over the wall of text M7 had sent to his control panel concerning proper combat scenario communication procedures. After a brief pause, M7 gave a defeated beep of confirmation. "Good. Then let's get out of here."

In mere minutes, *Solidago* had breached the atmosphere and left Zios behind.