

The destination didn't have a name beyond the coordinates the crew had been given. Far behind them was the Hydian Way, along with any other trade lane, minor or major. The stars had dwindled to faint specks against the galactic backdrop of deep space, leaving a rather lonely view for those with the ability to see beyond the dull gray bulkheads of the *Baleen*-class bulk freighter. Among the minimal, hodge-podge amalgamation of beings that comprised the crew, Qyreia was the possibly the least comfortable.

For one, she hated not knowing what she was doing.

The massive ship required little in the way of crew when compared to warships that were like thriving cities unto themselves. Four hundred meters of ship sat largely empty, the thirteen sentients as impactful as a pencil in a hallway. That left the Zeltron as one of the few personnel with piloting experience, though not with such a large vessel, requiring quite a bit of direction from the captain or executive officer – whoever was on duty at the time. However, for every piece of information she was told, it seemed like there was three or four things that she and the other lower echelon crew were not. For instance, they had no idea what their cargo was.

What had compelled the mercenary – or any of the other crew, for that matter – to take on the job was anyone's guess. After almost a week in the dilapidated ship, Qyreia was beginning to question her motives more and more. *At least the credits will be worth it*, she thought as the navigation indicator signaled their arrival at the destination system. In the distance, she could barely make out the speck of the tundra-covered planet that was to be their final stop.

"Bring her in nice and easy, Red," the captain said gruffly. "Jules," he called over the ship's comm system, "how's the engine doing?"

"*Do'n arrigh' ca'n*," came the engineer's response. Qyreia sometimes wondered how anyone could understand the man who so thickly slurred his words. "*Tha' las' hotfix'll do'er 'til w'get back on't agin.*"

"I frackin' hope so," she grumbled quietly to herself. The trip had seen breakdown after breakdown on the ship. With every jump to hyperspace, something had gone wrong. The most common affliction had simply been the engines overheating as they tried to keep pace with the hyperdrive system, whose compatibility had to be jury-rigged in the first place for it to function. That had brought a trip that should've taken no more than a couple days to a grueling crawl. Other ailments included a jump in temperature and humidity when the life support system went on the fritz; a lack of hot water that made trying to get clean a rather frigid experience; the artificial gravity generator hiccupping every few minutes so that one might be floating one minute, then falling on their head the next. The last one had caused a broken arm in Qyreia's alternate pilot and the loss of a finger in the ship's cook when a large knife had fallen along with him during dinner prep.

*Thank the Force it's almost over*, she thought as the captain started coordinating the rest of the skeleton crew into action. Despite Jules' reassurance, the controls seemed to shudder and jerk subtly under the Zeltron's direction, prompting her to shoot a signaling glance at the captain.

"Double check the system just in case, Jules. We're having some response issues up here." He nodded at the mercenary before closing the comm line and standing from his seat. "Think you can handle getting us to the planet without someone over your shoulder?"

"After five days of this Sithspit? Yeah, I think I can handle it. Be about an hour before we reach orbit."

"Alright. I'm going to go get the cargo prepped for drop. Let me know if there are any issues."

"Any chance you'll let us in on what this cargo is?" she intoned as he made to open the door.

"Any chance you want to give up your pay?"

She couldn't tell by his usual aged, stoic tone if he was being serious or joking. Considering she hadn't seen him more than grimace the entire trip, she assumed the former over the latter and kept her mouth shut as he departed for the bowels of the ship. *At least it'll be quiet in here*. Not that the trip had been particularly eventful outside of the mechanical failures. Still, the secretive nature of the job left an uneasy feeling in her gut that just wouldn't go away; even when she was shivering in the shower because they still hadn't fixed the hot water issue.

After an hour of reclining in her seat, making the occasional adjustment to their course, the mercenary was starting to wonder where everyone was. When the command station's communication panel started beeping, she nearly toppled over trying to get out of her seat and to the right button quickly enough.

“Hello? This is *Yorick’s Remembrance*, in orbit of... whatever this place is called...”

“*Maintain orbit and submit your security code,*” came the terse interruption.

After years of being a trader and smuggler, Qyreia was used to the occasional unforgiving traffic controller, but between her difficulties with the unfamiliar controls and the nameless cargo, she found her confidence wavering in the face of the cold voice on the channel. “I don’t have any securit-”

“*Submit your security code or leave orbit. If you fail to comply, our defense systems will destroy your vessel.*”

“Listen Hutt-humper, I’m not the captain! Gimme a few kriffin’ minutes!”

“*Submit your security code or...*”

“Yeah, yeah! I heard you the first time,” she yelled at the comm, trying to figure out how to call up over the ship’s internal system. “Captain,” she said, pressing what she hoped was the right button, “I’ve got someone on the line up here that needs a security code right now or they’re going to blow us up.”

Several long moments of silence followed, and the Zeltron was about to try calling again when the gruff voice came over the line. “*Echo Alpha Upsilon five-one-one-six.*” No more was said, but despite the worry over such brevity – uncharacteristic even for the aged human – she wanted to become space particulate even less. In short order, she sent the code down to the planet, waiting nervously at the silence that followed.

“*Synchronize and maintain orbit over coordinates being sent to your navigation terminal now.*”

“Do this, Q. Do that, Q,” she grumbled as she shuffled nimbly through the tight confines of the deck. “A kriffing ‘thanks’ every once in a while would be nice.” Just as indicated, the coordinates were displayed in the navigation panel and, with a little work, she was able to put them into the indicated position. “Well *that’s* done at least.”

When she tried to update the captain though, she was met with silence. *Okay, that’s weird.* A call to the executive officer was met with similar result. Even the chef wasn’t answering, and she dreaded trying to call up the gibberish of the chief engineer. Barring running out into the massive ship and trying to physically find someone, it was her last recourse.

“Jules? You there? This is Red.”

Much as with the captain, there was a long, tense moment of silence. “*E’Red?! Y’s’ill th’r?!*”

*I never thought I’d be happy to hear that borked-up Basic.* “Jules, what’s going on? No one’s picking up the line.”

“*We nee’t’git’ff t’ship, Red!*”

“Whoa whoa, slow down Jules. What’s going on?” As much as her instincts to run were kicking in, she knew that information was important when she didn’t know what she was running from.

“*Ra’t’rs! W’nee’t git!*”

“Jules, I can’t karkin’ understand your Sithspit Basic! Now what the hell is going on?!”

“*Ra’t’rs! Ra’t’rs! Imma git’n! Imma git’n o’t’sh’p!*”

“Answer me Jules, what is going on?!” Silence followed. “Jules!” Several long moments of nothing came from the comm. “Jules? ...Snot.” Returning to the main communication channel, Qyreia called down to the planet, hoping for someone that might have an answer. “*Yorick* here. I can’t get anyone on the line, and the engineer is going nuts. I was wondering if anyone else has called down to you.”

“*Negative. What was the engineer’s report?*”

“I don’t know. Sleemo can barely speak Basic. All I got out of him was *ratters*, or something like that. Now he’s trying to hightail it off the ship.”

Not surprisingly, there was a tense moment of silence from the radio that followed her statement. *I should start running a tab for all the not-talking they do for me.* When sound rang through the control room again however,

it wasn't the monotone voice from the surface: it was the tactical combat alarms. A weapons-lock claxon sounded off like a petulant child, never ceasing to remind the general vicinity of its impending mayhem. Despite the sudden panic of her mind, Qyreia managed to throw the shields up just in time for the first salvo of turbolaser fire from distant orbital defense platforms.

"What the *hell* are you doing?! I'm still up here, choob-licker!"

"*Your ship has been compromised. We cannot allow you to land...*"

"Compromised by *what*!?" The Zeltron was answered by another salvo of turbolaser fire. "There's an old XS stock freighter in the hangar area. Gimme two hours to get past whatever is causing you all to go barvy, then you can shoot this ship to your heart's content. Okay?!"

"...*You have one hour.*"

*Should've asked for three. Maybe then they would've given me two.* The mercenary wasted no time in responding or trying to figure out what was happening. There was only one hour before whoever was down on the planet decided to destroy the bulk freighter and everything on board, and with something causing this big of a stir, she figured that trying to go the measly four hundred meters would require every available second.

"Lessee, what sort of business makes people want to blow up a ship in orbit," she mused as she tightened the straps on her pistol holster. "Chemicals? ...Meh. Flesh eating disease? ...Okay, grabbing the gas mask."

Quickly throwing on the uncomfortable breathing device, Qyreia made a bee-line for the massive hangar. The first step was getting down from the control deck. *I frackin' hope Jules fixed these like he said he would.* When she pressed the button for the lift, her spirits rose exponentially as the level indicator lights steadily pinged upward. It was a slow, loud wait as the rattling and creaking cage crept its way toward the Zeltron. If not for the factory-standard safety measures, she would have trusted the half-rusted ladder more than the elevator, but she stepped in all the same as soon as the doors were open. Another press of a button and the doors closed to begin the descent.

A sigh of relief escaped her lips as she leaned back against the wall, almost relishing the shuddering that reverberated into her bones. It seemed an odd comfort in the confines of the doomed ship and constricting mask. Somewhere in the background din though, it sounded as though there was more than just elevator making noises.

Qyreia didn't notice it until the lift sputtered to a halt.

"The hell is going on now?" The mask clipped and wheezed with each breath, but it was the sound of heavy banging echoing from the elevator shaft that suddenly caught the Zeltron's ear. After a week of riding up and down this lift, and on occasion having to climb the long ladder to and from the main deck to get to her quarters, she knew the noises of the dilapidated lift. These were not the usual noises.

She had hardly thumbed off the securing strap of her holster when the ceiling concaved sharply from a series of powerful, rapid strikes that deafened her ears in the confined space. The initial shock has sent her to the floor – a lucky course, as the thin sheeting above her tore open in a blossom of sharp metal, pierced by what looked like a massive reddish tentacle. *The frack is that?!* There was little time to muse over the answer to the question as the thing lashed out wildly, hammering at the side walls, feeling for its prey. Even when she shot at the appendage with her heavy blaster pistol, it shrugged off the damage and only searched more violently.

*Dammit, I need to get out of here and away from that thing.* All the more poignant an observation when the walls began to buckle, like they were being compressed from without. Rather than try to fight a losing battle, Qyreia made for the emergency escape hatch in the floor, blackening the tentacle with her blaster in the process. There was a sharp lurch as the walls groaned inward. *There go those safety mechanisms.*

It was a fortunate thing that she slipped out, grasping the rickety ladder just before the friction brakes gave way along with the rest of the lift. The mercenary watched wide-eyed as the wrecked lump of metal fell away down the shaft, taking with it what looked to be a large ball of meat with an amalgam of tentacles and an angry-looking maw full of sharp teeth.

"Well," she said, tearing off the mask, "I guess I don't need this thing anymore." She had hardly taken two steps down when she heard the crash of the lift, coupled with the angry shrieks of the creature below. "Rathtars. Not ratters. *Rathtars.* Ugh, why me?"

She could hear the wounded one still shrieking below, figuring that it would recover soon enough. *I need to get to that ship.* Not wanting to catch the attention of the furious beast, she slipped into an adjoining duct – one of the many defunct tubes that ran useless through the old ship. *Good thing Jules didn't get to fixing these.* As she made her way through the dark orifice, she could swear that she heard screams in the distance. Down below, through a grate in the tunnel, she could just barely make out the XS ship down on the main floor. In the shadows on the fringes of the bay, she could make out vague moment; at that distance, it was a big something doing the moving. *How many of these karking things are there?!*

The going was slow. The Zeltron had to stay quiet and yet manage to move through a space that was barely wider than her shoulders. Precious minutes slipped by like a hot knife through butter as she crawled, inch by inch. After what seemed an eternity, she flopped out of the duct on the other side of the hangar, though still several dozen meters higher than the bottom deck. *That's gonna be sore in the morning.* In the honeycomb halls that lined the shell beyond the hangar, all seemed deathly silent despite the sound of Qyreia's heart pounding in her ears. Roars from the creatures echoed sonorously through the corridors, making it impossible to tell where and how far away the predators were lurking. Minutes were ticking by though. There was little time for skulking.

Every step on the metal grating seemed to echo louder than it should have. Every breath felt like a gale on the Zeltron's ears. She couldn't slow down for fear of still being aboard when the timeline cut out, but her caution was turning to paranoia, and she had to fight herself to keep moving.

"Where'm I now?" she whispered, pausing on a stairwell landing to get her bearings. All sat silent around her, but not unmoving. As her eyes scanned down the next flight of stairs, she saw a large, undulating mass covered in tentacles, prompting her to slowly step back. *Maybe it didn't notice me?* Almost as though it had smelled her thoughts, the rathtar swiftly turned its pustule-covered body to face the Zeltron. It let out a horrendous shriek before hurling itself up the stairs after its suddenly very mobile prey.

"I just *had* to think it. Good job Q!"

For something so bulky, the creature moved with surprising speed. The mercenary found herself slapping door controls and vaulting through tight gaps between haphazardly placed containers to try and slow the beasts' progress, but found only moderate success. When she came to a three-way intersection, she was met by another of the slug-like animals to her direct front, with the other barreling down on her from behind. Qyreia made a hard right turn and bolted for the next corridor while the two rathtars who were suddenly chasing her, in their haste, collided at the junction, giving the merc precious moments to run while they briefly battled it out over their bestial dominance.

Not even bothering with the steps, the Zeltron slid down the handrails as fast as she could, putting her that much closer to the hangar level. Spinning toward the next flight of stairs, she slipped on a puddle, only barely managing to catch herself before landing in the mire that, upon inspection, was the mushy remains of one of the other crew members. Looking half-chewed and partially digested, she couldn't even begin to guess who it had been.

They were dead and she wasn't. If she didn't keep hurrying, that would quickly change.

Despite her best efforts, she managed to reach the bottom floor, the shrieks of an unknown number of rathtars filling the halls behind her. There was no way to sneak across the expanse, so her already fast run became a full-tilt sprint. When she reached the ship, Qyreia quickly set to work on lowering the hatch. The ramp had hardly dropped when she heard heavy footsteps and labored breathing coming from around the other side of the vessel, quickly revealed to be Jules, who had somehow survived his own harrowing trek.

"Jules," she whispered excitedly at the near-toothless engineer. "You're alive! C'mon, we gotta get onboard!"

Before she could make a step, he lifted his blaster behind the Zeltron. "Don' m've. D'rs a'one b'hind ya."

Contrary to his orders, Qyreia turned – albeit slowly – to see one of the creatures steadily moving toward the stationary prey. It was hardly ten meters distant, and her experience thus far said that this was the crucial point. "Jules... Don't shoot it. Don't shoot, you'll just make it mad." The rathtar seemed intrigued by the prey that wasn't moving. Clearly it still had the intention of eating the both of them, but it watched the duo curiously while the human's gun-wielding hand shook nervously. Qyreia was about to remind the human to get in the ship when a random shudder twitched his finger and sent a burst of blaster fire into the observant creature.

In an instant, the monster was upon them. It knew what had shot it and thus focused all its attention on Jules, arbitrarily flailing one of its massive tentacles into the Zeltron and sending her flying up the ramp and into the

Qyreia Arronen, #14369

ship. The screams of the old engineer, even more garbled than his usual speech, filled the air as the rathtar tore him apart piece by piece. Qyreia watched this for all of a few seconds before hitting the ramp control panel, leaving the horrific scene behind as she vaulted for the cockpit.

“Sorry Jules.”

The light freighter was more her style, and it took only a matter of moments before she had the craft up and running. A quick check of her chrono showed that there was still several minutes before the crucial moment, and she breathed a sigh of relief as the craft took off and passed out into the void of space, several creatures flailing fruitlessly behind her. Qyreia didn't even stop to see if she'd still get paid. Based on how the folks on the planet below had responded to her before, she thought they would sooner turn her to space debris than talk payment. Besides, she had the little freighter that she could at least sell off now.