

Return to Sender

It felt odd working for a Battleteam again, especially given that she wasn't even part of the damn thing. Spectre Cell was already tasked with other objectives though, and it felt wrong to give the recently-reformed group a full plate without taking anything in kind. This would be Qyreia's task. If the kids were going to be working, she would too.

"How we haven't managed this nonsense already is beyond me, but hey: 'Arcona invicta' or whatever," she grumbled, bringing her YT-1300 around through the debris field.

Space was difficult enough to navigate outside of hyperspace, but this was like trying to find a needle in a haystack. The ambush that had so crippled — if not utterly destroyed — the *Nighthawk* left a good deal of detritus and wreckage behind, much of which still remained unclaimed. Where exactly it remained was somewhat unclear. Whallata the Hutt's little episode outside of Port Ol'val left the old DIA ship listing through the dangerous maze of the Dajorran asteroid belt, and the imminent threat of the Collective had restricted many of efforts that would have led to its recovery.

Things had stabilized though, so it was time to lay the past to rest. Besides, the data onboard the *Nighthawk*'s computers was valuable enough that a concerted recovery effort was well overdue.

"Remee," she chimed over the ship's intercom, "be a dear and work the scanners for me. These asteroids are pretty tight."

An affirmative *whirr* replied through the speaker, and the successive beeps told the mercenary that her droid was hard at work. *If that ship has even survived out here, I'll be surprised*, she thought as she gracefully nosed down to avoid one of the massive floating rocks. There was no telling if the Collective was still lurking on the fringes of Arconan space, but it was duly assumed they were. A fleet searching the asteroid belt would be a dead giveaway. One little ship though? Might just be one of the lowlifes that frequented Ol'val.

Qyreia was counting on such ideas as she delved deeper into the search perimeter that planet-side computers had calculated was the general location of where the *Nighthawk* might be. It was still a big space to look through, and the rocks played havoc with sensors.

"I'm gonna give you some more juice to work with, Remee." Red fingers deftly flipped switches and turned dials that siphoned power from the shields and redundant systems over to the scanners. "Shields only need to stop the little stuff. We hit one of the big ones, and we're toast no matter what."

“Whirr bleep bopboop.”

“I promise you I won’t hit any big ones, okay?” she chuckled at the droid’s worried tone. “You catch anything yet?”

“Bliboop bip drrrt dt.”

“Alright, I’ll make the course adjustment. Let me know if it was a real ping, or just a ghost.”

The droid said there was some shadow that had popped up in the scans, but it was only momentary and disappeared almost as quickly as it had shown up. Its shape was vaguely ship-like, but out in this morass there was no telling if it was some random derelict, their target, or something less friendly.

“C’mon, c’mon,” she mumbled to herself, knuckles pink on the steering yoke and throttle. “Where are you, you stupid metal schutta?”

A directing sound came from the droid, which the Zeltron dutifully followed. Chirp by digital chirp, she brought the ship around asteroid after looming asteroid until, sure enough, the mysterious signal materialized into the hull of a ship. Once upon a time, it might have measured nearly two hundred meters long. Now, broken and bent in so many places, it lacked over fifty of those meters.

“Looks like an Agave-class. Remeet? Any ID you can pull from our target data?”

A pregnant silence of several seconds passed before the R3 droid sent out a positive series of sounds. *Thank god.* Unbelting from her seat, Qyreia passed control of the ship to the droid as it inched them closer, talking about the *Nighthawk*’s status all the while. Most of the outer hull — what wasn’t totally destroyed — was very evidently scavenged, along with all of the ship’s guns, leaving clean empty sockets where they had once been. Military-grade equipment sold well on the black market.

“Once we’re close, drop our power signature; just enough to keep us stabilized and the ship intact,” she said as she put on her flight suit. Out in the void, it would keep her alive, if only for a short while.

“Brrt wheeo bltblt brrtraooo.”

“I don’t know what else might be out there. Scanners, shields, and engines. That’s all we’ll need.” She patted the helmet of her ensemble. “Just be ready to turn life support back on.”

There was one final confirmation beep before she sealed herself up in the black encasement and walked somewhat awkwardly toward the ramp, making sure the other doors

were shut to prevent losing air in the adjoining rooms. The ship's systems did the rest of the work and the ramp opened with a subtle *hiss*.

Of all the things that one could do in space, zero-gravity work was not among Qyreia's favorites. It usually meant something wasn't going right, and there was always a faint queasiness whenever she started floating. Remeë had gotten them within spitting distance of the old *Nighthawk*, so Qyreia had only to kick off the nearest wall to send her throttling into the gaping hole she was faced with. Then out came the glowrod as she delved into the ship's depths, such as they were.

"If I were a computer databank, where would I hide?" Her voice seemed to hiss within the hardened confines of the flight helmet.

The HUD in her helmet's visor was of little use, but between her commlink and scanner, she was able to determine where she was based on data she'd collected before leaving Selen. *I hope this job goes smoothly. I don't want to frack with any idiots.* While one hand tugged her along the rails mounted in the halls, she let her other hand touch the pistol at her hip; a reassuring gesture that kept her moving through the blind darkness. With only the light from the glowrod, everything looked the same — every hall and bulkhead.

Despite her best efforts though, she found the central data terminal in the belly of the decrepit intelligence-gathering ship.

"Remeë, schematics." On command, the droid sent the layout of the computers and where Qyreia would need to work. Some people still called it a "black box," but most data repositories were an ungainly rectangle painted in bands of yellow and black. *Not often I get to use these*, she thought as she pulled her hydrospanner and arc welder from where they were hooked on her waist. Cutting through a panel and unbolting another revealed the elusive box that was the center of so much hushed attention. Given its size though, there was more than just some navigational data stored within.

"I've got it, Remeë. Coming back to the ship now."

The trip back was no less eerie than coming in. A previously unencountered corpse drifted into the hall, scorched almost entirely black from some explosion during the ship's final moments. *Sorry bud. Not here for you.* She left the creepy sight behind, making as much progress as she could back toward the *Katurno* with the massive crate in tow. *This thing is almost as big as I am.* It was quite the relief, as she strained against the momentum and weight to stop, when she saw her own ship again.

"Coming aboard. Standby to get us out of here."

Even though they'd been in contact the whole time, it was good to hear the droid's amiable and happy bleeping. Following her earlier example, she pushed off a half-closed door to get aboard, only for that door to give way and send her on an off-kilter trajectory. *Frackfrackfrack...* Ripping the cloth loop in the process, Qyreia wrenched the grappling hook from her waist and fired haphazardly into the open maw of the loading ramp, even as she slid sideways and the gap went slowly out of view.

The feeling as the wire went taught was better than sex. *Thank you god for not letting me go out like that.* Spooling up the wire, she brought herself and the package inside, promptly closing the hatch once she'd gotten her footing.

"I'm in. Get us out of here," she said as the artificial gravity resumed. "I'll be up shortly. Once we're out, send the *Nighthawk's* coordinates to the fleet over a secure net, and get me Grot on the line. I think he'll be happy with the news I've got for him."