

A Ring of Truth

Through the hazy white-blue of hyperspace, nothing of the Pabol Sleheyron trade route was visible. Even so, somewhere in the reaches of space beyond, the Kessel Sector loomed like a bloodthirsty beast ready to swallow up anything unwary enough to pass into its Maw. A half-competent pilot with a decent navicomputer could find their way through to Kessel eventually, but it was still a sight to behold. Qyreia had been through a few times before, but she never quite got over the look of the swirling gaseous vortexes and carbonbergs.

Whirr blep-deet brrrt.

“No, we’re fine Remee,” the merc said, a hint of trepidation slipping out. “Besides, if we brought backup, we’d stand out like a sore thumb. A single freighter going this way’ll hardly get anyone’s attention.”

The droid stomped anxiously. *Beep deet bepbep booOOoot.*

“Well then we better hope they don’t see through our cover. Right?”

Eliciting a quiet tone of acquiescing dismay, the R3 unit slid quietly into the corner of the cockpit and set itself into observation mode, leaving the Arconan to her own thoughts, of which she had many. *Where is she going?* she mused, pulling the starcharts back up into view. The Collective wouldn’t put a whole fleet into the Maw Cluster, even if they already knew how close Arcona’s Dajorra System was. The risk and rate of attrition simply through travel would be too high. *Maybe it’s just an intelligence cell.* If that were the case, there were plenty of planets to choose from for a link-up.

Randa.

Injopan.

Zerm.

All of these were sparsely populated by small and scattered colonial groups. A random ship entering its space could go just as unnoticed as it could be blatant, depending on if the locals had any degree of planetary defenses or orbital surveillance. No. For how remote they were, all of them were too great a risk.

Oba Diah, on the other hand, was less of a stretch, and the hyperspace trail seemed to be gradually diverting there. If Ghaffa Ordam didn’t land there, she would be running out of options for safe havens. The Kessel sector was an unforgiving place, after all.

“Remee, can you do an analysis on this trail and calculate likelihood of its going to Oba Diah?”

An affirming *beep* sounded out as the droid turned about to interface with the ship’s systems and get a better idea of the situation. A soft mechanical hum lingered in the air as the droid’s upgraded computing hardware went through option after option, determining the most likely route based on current information. That they had caught the trail at all was a mix of luck and uneasy generosity. Even if the agents that had passed on the information were from the Shadow Academy and not the Inquisitorius, there was still plenty of bad blood between the Clans and the Brotherhood hierarchy, whether they admitted it openly or not. The Zeltron was no exception.

For the moment though, there was a more imminent threat to deal with.

Brrreep krt krrrrrt broop.

“Ninety six percent? *Well*, Oba Diah it is then.”

Checking and rechecking the new course, she could feel the ship shifting course in the sounds of its engines and a slight tingling sensation in her feet. It was subtle, and only recognizable for all her time as a former trader and smuggler. Oh, she knew the Kessel Run alright. She only prayed she wouldn’t have to run it.

Several hours lay ahead, which the mercenary Quaestor used to rest while she left Remee to maintain course and notify her in case of any changes. Qyreia fell asleep surprisingly quick, likely as a result of fatigue from the sudden stress of the renewed attack, especially when she had only just been relieved from suppressing the riots on Selen. Too much was happening at once, and it crept up on the Zeltron without her knowing.

Before she knew it, the raucous noises of R3-M3 were jarring her awake, along with the sounds of the ship exiting hyperspace. *Coulda woken me up before dropping us out into the open*, she thought, gritting her teeth as she stiffly crawled from her bed and walked to the cockpit.

“What’s going on?” The droid chimed several times. “We’re here? Any issues while I was out? How’s the trail?”

Mechanical grinding noises supplanted an annoyed growl for the droid who suddenly had to answer so many questions. A long string of binary passed through its speaker system, almost too fast for Qyreia to decipher.

“Ordam’s trail leads here?” Remeë replied with an affirmative *whirr*. “Don’t get cocky now. Someday, that *four* percent will be what actually happens.”

The sensors on the *Katurno* weren’t sensitive enough to follow the exact trajectory of the Capital Enterprises commander, but based on their point of entry, they could at least narrow down the possible landing sites. There were still plenty of energy signatures to follow though. *I wonder how many of those are other Brotherhood members following this exact same intel.* It didn’t really matter who found it, but the advantages it could provide Arcona wouldn’t be anything to ignore. This was practically their backyard, after all.

Landing rules were fairly lax. It was a trade hub. There were too many ships trying to enter to handle every single one, even if most of them were jockeying for some spice to smuggle. The stuff was legal on Oba Diah though, so purchasing it was no problem. Once beyond the borders though, matters changed.

“I remember hearing stories from my old captain,” Qyreia mused as she landed the YT-1300. “Back when the Imperials owned this space, this whole place was damn near on lockdown. Now any kriffing merchant with a bit of cash can come by to get the goods.”

Remeë made no response. There were some things even droids don’t care about.

It was also time to get serious. Supply depots dotted the planet’s surface, though the big one — and the one that Qyreia was betting on — was Pyke Palace, home and headquarters of the Pyke Syndicate. All around them was a murky turquoise-gray cloud of mist, iconic to the planet, that blurred the outlines of the other landing pads and ships and left one wondering just how far down it went before the terrain revealed itself.

Looking for a tall, yellowish-green Nautolan, probably with body armor, and likely has a bunch of people working for her that are hidden all over this place. What could go wrong?

“State your business,” the customs officer said as she exited the ship. The two guards to either side didn’t look particularly threatening, but she was also armed. That counted for something.

“Here to check out the markets; see what’s for sale.”

“Got clearance to land?” The vibratory sound of the Pyke’s voice made almost sound like it was echoing within his own throat. It was a bit unnerving.

“I got it on approach. Go ahead and check the landing request.”

On any other world, this sort of treatment would be odd. On a world run by a criminal organization though, this was normal. The agent wanted his palms greased. What remained to

be seen was if he was willing to risk his skin against the gun-toting merc for a handful of credits. The guards flexed when Qyreia let her hand rest on the grip of her pistol, and the confident smirk unnerved them in a way that would have seemed sultry in any other circumstance. She wasn't a famous smuggler in her day, but she knew how the game was played.

After another moment of hesitation, the Pyke pretended to check the clearance list. "Ah yes, of course. There you are." He motioned toward the towering structure beyond. "You are free to enter."

"Much obliged. Remeer," she called over her shoulder, "we're good. Go ahead and close up the ramp."

Inside the ship, the droid connected to a systems inject port and raised the boarding ramp. In practiced fashion, he turned the ventral turret about to face directly ahead. What resolve the Pyke guards and official may have had to shoot her in the back dissolved. *Suck it, fracksticks.* She continued to smile amiably as she passed, enjoying the frustrated stares from their narrow blue and magenta eyes.

With no business to conduct with the majordomo or the Pyke Syndicate in general, Qyreia passed by the avenue to the seat of power and made for the marketplace deeper into the mountaintop complex. It was by no means as populated as the streets of Coruscant or dank footpaths of Nar Shadda, but a sizable number of sentients still milled about conducting a variety of business deals. The primary good for sale was spice, but there were other, less illegal but no less expensive wares. Coaxium — stored in high-powered containment cells — was present in several locations, and advertised in several others that weren't so bold as to bring the hyperfuel to the market. A map showed a variety of other locations, supplies, and shops for basic navigation in the winding indoor corridors.

All the while, Qyreia's eyes darted about, wondering who was a Collective spy, a Brotherhood agent, or just a generic dirty scumbag.

Then, for a fleeting second, she thought she saw a lime-green tendril sway from beneath a figure's hood before they disappeared around a corner. Feigning disinterest at her current salesman's wares, she slipped away to follow the unknown figure.

There it is again! she mentally blurted as the same figure turned another corner further away. She followed, faster now, moving less casually and more purposefully. When she came around the second bend, the figure was gone, but there were three humanoids standing guard. *I don't like this.* Even so, she continued forward, knowing it would look more suspicious if she were suddenly to stop going on this route. As expected, the closer she came, the more rigid the

road guards became. She could also hear talking down a side alley that she could only assume included her mysterious target.

Before she could get far enough to see though, she was stopped by a raised hand and a firmly held blaster. “This road’s closed. Go around.”

“I-I’m just trying to get to that side street over there,” she pointed to a nearby hall. “If I could just get through...”

“I *said* road’s *closed*,” the guard replied more tersely, shoving the merc backward.

“And *I* said I need to go *there*,” she said as she returned the shoving gesture. The other two guards instantly had their weapons up. “Who the frack do you think you are?! I need to get the Pykes down here?! ‘M sure they’ll love someone running roughshod in *their* territory.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

Out from the alley where she’d heard the voices walked a very tall figure, and even under the hood she could see the head tails in their viridian hue. The figure pulled back the hood to reveal a Nautolan’s face, red eyes, and a selection of feature-defining tattoos. *Not my type, but she’s pretty in a certain... grandiose way.* While the guards backed away, they did not let their guard down one iota. Further, there were *four* people with guns against her now, to say nothing for anyone hiding in the shadows and archways of the marketplace.

“I just wanna get through,” she said, maintaining the annoyed facade. The large red eyes unnerved her somewhat, and she had to tighten her gut to remind herself that there wasn’t room to cringe away.

“When someone says a road is blocked, most would go around,” the Nautolan murmured inquisitively. “Why are you so intent on going *this* way?”

“Uhh...” She could see the guards’ hands tightening on their blasters and, armed though she was, she felt naked under the large woman’s scrutiny. *Think Q! Think!* “T-there’s a fine clothes shop just over there, and the only way through is this way. It’s a dead end on the other side.”

The Nautolan’s eyes narrowed and she turned to one of the guards who nodded. “So it is. Have you been there before?”

“Just saw it on the map back there,” she pointed back in the direction of the market’s nearest entrance, “and I thought I’d get something for my girlfriend back home.” *And a good thing I remembered it, too.* Then she spotted the stone cube in the Nautolan’s large hands.

“Wassat?” Her opponent flinched, but Qyreia just smiled unassumingly. “Looks pretty. Don’t know what it is, but it looks nice.”

The tendril-headed woman relaxed slightly, but the Zeltron could still see scrutiny in those red eyes. *This is definitely Ordam.* While she was glad to have met one objective, she still had to get back and tell... *someone* what was going on. Despite the conflicting emotions in her head, she had the mental fortitude to keep everything in check and maintain her expression. The best lie was often the truth.

“It *is* rather pretty,” the Capital Enterprises commander admitted with casual caution. She paused for a moment before turning to the side. “Let her pass, gentlemen.” The guards did as they were bid and Qyreia started to walk past, but was stopped by the taller woman. “Perhaps when I’m done here, I can see this store you’re talking about.”

It was only a brief glimpse, but the Zeltron caught sight of a humanoid shape that definitely looked like some of the Technocratic Guild personnel on Nancora. Her attention immediately returned to Ghafa when she saw those red eyes looming close.

“O-of course. Maybe you can give me a second opinion on any ideas I get.”

The Nautolan only smiled before motioning Qyreia along. As she gained distance, she had to force herself not to break into a run. She was still outnumbered by a large margin, and they had a clear shot at her back. *Just keep walking.* As if to reinforce her innocent intentions, she tossed back a wave before turning down the small avenue that led to the clothing and jewelry boutique. She would have to wait to get back to her ship before relaying any messages. She still didn’t know who was watching whom.

Might as well do that shopping I was talking about, she mused, looking at several intricate rings. *I’ve got some time.*