

Ensign Crysenia Orainn wasn't thrilled with her assignment, but she couldn't really blame the Naval Personnel Center. Volzeth's capital city spaceport was an important logistical hub for the Imperial Navy's border with the New Republic. By no means a glamorous posting, but at least her Academy scores meant that when she'd been assigned to the 41st Fighter Wing, she'd been sent to the 41st Fighter Interceptor Squadron, flying the TIE/IN Interceptor instead of one of the three regular fighter squadrons assigned to defend the ground station. She'd settled in well enough, even putting up with Commander Tane's sneering contempt for her when he assigned her as Strider 12.

"See? Worst Sabacc player ever." She lightly tossed the cards onto the table, to much laughter, especially from Lon Kara, Strider 11. He fed them back into the machine sitting at the center of the table. "Nonsense. I'm sure there's worse, you'll see! In the meanwhile, just keep practicing and you'll stop sucking."

She glared at him, "You just want my paycheck."

He returned the glare with an innocent smile, but anything he might've said was swallowed by the amber lights on the wall that started pulsing while the sirens began emitting a wavering tone. Any Imperial knew that tone, both from basic training and, unfortunately, far too often from real experience. The New Republic had arrived. Crysenia was half a second behind Lon as he and the rest of the lounge stood as one and began running to the hangar. She fell in at his left as they walked. He didn't even spare a glance at her, but started talking regardless. "Alright Orainn. You're ready for this. Stay on me, pick your shots carefully, and watch your scanners. Call for help if you need it, don't worry about the commander giving you shit after."

Crysenia would've smiled at his tone, but she was rather more preoccupied in fretting over the ordeal to come. She'd faced New Republic fighters in simulator combat for years, and she'd logged plenty of hours in both the standard TIE/LN starfighter and the sleeker, faster TIE/IN she would be flying today. She had even seen death as two of her classmates' fighters collided while maneuvering out in space.

And yet, she had never seen what she would see today. The prospect of going up to risk her life in a vehicle which is arguably inferior to the enemy was not a good feeling. Her train of thought derailed when Lon dug an elbow lightly into her side. "I'm with you, I'm good. Sorry."

"Don't be sorry, just get your head in the game." Crysenia nodded. Lon held up a fist, and Crysenia rapped her knuckles against it before heading to the ladder up to her cockpit. She dropped into the seat, took a breath, then began her pre-flight checks. The mechanical nature of the checklist did more to steady her than she expected, and the thrum of the twin ion engines was comforting. By the time Commander Tane's voice came over the squadron comm net, she was surprised to feel eager for what's to come. "Strider 1 to all Striders, report by number."

"Strider 2, green and go."

"Strider 3, green and go."

Crysenia took a breath, mentally reviewing the steps for launching from the hangar.

“Strider 11, green and go.”

Crysenia hit her transmit button. “Strider 12, green and go.” Her voice was as steady as the rest of the squadron, she realized. She had this in the bag.

“Strider 1 to all Striders, hostiles are identified as New Republic: three capital ships, several cruisers and looks like 4 squadrons of snubfighters, various types. Sortie order is us, then Jumper, Walker, and Crawler. If they cooperate, we’ll ascend to angels 10 and wait for our slower brothers to join us. I doubt they will, so targets of opportunity. Check your targets, watch each others’ backs.”

The fighters in the hangar began to sortie, first on repulsors, until the jet blast wouldn’t harm their fellows, then rocketing into the sky at max thrust. Crysenia followed once Lon left the hangar, then formed on his wing. As she exited the hangar, the vista that greeted her was breathtaking. It was a warm, sunny afternoon. The ocean sparkled like a blue jewel, and the green in and around the city looked alive and refreshing. The searing emerald of turbolaser beams matched the trees and grass around the city in a sickening manner as they streaked up to meet the descending New Republic fighters.

Crysenia’s eyes were dragged back down as a *Gozanti*-class cruiser’s back buckled under the force of several proton torpedoes launched from a pair of Y-Wings. The cruiser’s lights flickered, then died, as her upward momentum died and the wreckage fell back into the planet’s gravity, crushing several buildings under it. Crysenia waited for an opening, then hit her transmit button. “Strider 11, Strider 12. Request we vector on those two Y-Wings.”

Before Lon could reply, another voice cut in. “Strider 12, Strider 1. Less chatter. Strider 9, take your flight against those Y-wings. Jumper 1, take your...”

Crysenia tuned him out with a snarl, but kept on Lon’s wing as their fighters altered course to intercept the Y-Wings. The pair of Y-wings was escorted by a pair of A-wings, which took up the challenge and screamed down at them. Crysenia transferred power from her engines to her lasers, and prepped her jammer. The distance indicator on her console raced down, and her HUD’s aim indicator turned red to indicate laser lock. At the same time, her threat detector started screaming at her. She forgot any hope of firing and focused on not being shot down. The harsh strobing of laser fire racing up to meet her attacker showed that at least one of her flightmates didn’t have that problem.

“Strider 10, one A-wing down!”

“Strider 4, Strider 3. Where’d you go?”

“Jumper 6 to any available, I need help, I have on-”

One of the A-wings exploded with a tremendous *bang* as they ripped past each other. The other would be a problem, but not for a little bit. Long enough for them to kill the Y-wings, at least. Crysenia swallowed her surprise as Lon dropped back to her wing. “Strider 12, this is 11. I’m your wing. Go for the second Y-wing, the one with the blue trim.”

"Strider 12 copies you, 11." Crysenia transmitted quickly, arrowing in on the trailing Y-wing.

"Walker 4, one X-wing down!"

"Crawler 8, I'm hit!"

Crysenia angled in from behind and below to avoid the Y-wing's turret and lined up her HUD's aim indicator. The Y-wing desperately tried juking away, but the bomber's pilot wasn't skilled enough to keep away from even a novice interceptor pilot. Crysenia pressed the triggers on her yoke and watched the Y-wing's shields flare and then die. As the shields collapsed, the bright green darts lanced into the strut connecting the bomber's right engine nacelle. The connection exploded as the fuel line to the engine vomited flame. The rest of the bomber crumpled as the engine went careening away from the explosion. Crysenia howled in triumph, her first aerial kill!

"Strider 12, one Y-wing down! I'm on your wing, Strider 11." Crysenia didn't wait for an acknowledgement before dropping back onto Lon's wing.

"Strider 1, Strider 9. Both Y-wings down. We've got more bombers bearing down."

"Strider 9, Strider 1. The port will have to deal with them, I need your flight up here. Good work on the ones you got."

Lon moved his fighter to rejoin with Striders 9 and 10. As the four of them arced upwards, Lon's fighter exploded. Crysenia gasped as a New Republic X-wing swooped through the expanding cloud of shrapnel that was the pilot who had so generously taken her under his wing. Without bothering to say anything or ask for permission, she slammed her throttle back and her yoke to the left then hauled up, bringing her interceptor up on the X-wing's rear. Even through her anger, she kept a cool hand on the stick, and waited until her aim indicator turned red and stayed red before firing. The X-wing snapped up on its left s-foil and dove away from her, but she kept at it.

"Strider 12, Strider 9 has your wing. Let's get him." Crysenia's eyes widened for a bit as she was actually being supported in this fight. She'd expected a reprimand. 9 formed up on her wing, and she dove after the X-wing. Both of them fired this time, and the combined power of their guns was enough to breach the X-wing's weakened shields. The back of the fighter erupted into flames and two of its engines died as the fighter began spinning uncontrollably. The canopy erupted in flames as the pilot ejected.

"Strider 9, Strider 12. I'm your wing." Crysenia formed up on 9, and they resumed their interrupted ascent. As they ascended, Crysenia watched as a New Republic frigate filled the space between it and an Imperial Light Cruiser with angry red darts. The cruiser attempted to

reply, but it had clearly suffered from the New Republic fighters before managing to make it to the frigate's level. As she watched, the cruiser belched fire from the hangar bay facing the frigate. The New Republic ship clearly hit something essential, as the volume of fire from the cruiser sharply decreased, and it attempted to veer away from the aggressor.

Crysenia's attention was dragged closer as they ascended into the dogfight. She pushed her control yoke to the left and down slightly to keep on 9's wing as they formed up with a pair of fighters from Walker Squadron. "Strider 9 to flight, we're going up against those Y-wings that are moving to engage the guns on the ground. Stay in tight."

Crysenia kept on 9's wing as they closed. Their approach was spotted, and several X-wings attempted a head on duel with them. Crysenia was determined to get off a shot this time, and her determination almost paid off. She got off a quad burst, drilling through the forward shields of an X-wing to damage the craft's nose, but she took a nasty hit in return, her canopy cracking.

She ignored the X-wings as they zipped past them, staying on 9's wing. As they approached the Y-wings, ion fire from one of the craft's turrets stitched her Interceptor. She winced in pain as she was shocked, but pushed through it. Her display flickered, then died, as did the everpresent hum of the twin ion engines. Without their power, her interceptor began to lose speed and altitude. She attempted to maneuver, but without power, she had no repulsorlifts or engines, and the flight surfaces didn't move in response to her commands.

8000 meters. She attempted an emergency restart. No luck.

7000 meters. She attempted to drain the laser capacitors into the engines and restart that way. No luck.

6000 meters. She kicked out the small foot pedal that allowed her to manually lower the landing gear. She pumped with all her might, until the landing gear locked and the pedal swung freely. She'd hoped it would kick on the auto-landing routines. No luck

3000 meters. She attempted another restart. This time she started to lose composure a bit. She was out of ideas, and rapidly running out of time. Still, no luck.

2000 meters. She checked her ejection seat. It was a mechanical system, so it wouldn't be affected, but the repulsorlift connected to it might very well be dead too. Worse, the only way to check was to activate it, which she could only do once she'd ejected.

1000 meters. She had a plan, but it was the kind of plan that would get her kicked out of the academy. Without more time to think, it would have to do.

500 meters. She patted the fighter's controls, almost in a goodbye.

200 meters. She exhaled shakily, then yanked the ejection handle. The explosive bolts threw the hatch above her away from the fighter, and barely half a second later, yet more explosive bolts slammed her down into the chair as she was ejected from the fighter. The small thruster under her chair died, and as expected, the repulsorlifts on the chair were just as dead.

The fighter slammed into the picturesque water below her, and she felt herself picking up speed. With no time to lose she unstrapped herself from the chair, gathering her feet under her.

Once she estimated she was about 10 meters from the water, she pushed off explosively, putting all her might into pushing away from the chair. She straightened her back and legs, pointing her toes and crossing her arms over her chest.

The water slammed into her, ripping the helmet off her head as she dived. It hurt, and the cold water quickly became darker than she was comfortable with. She immediately began stroking towards the surface.

Crysenia broke the surface with a massive gasp, filling her lungs with desperately missed air. She crashed back into the sea on her back, spluttering as she kept trying to catch her breath. She ripped off her life support block, then laid in the water until she could breathe without gasping. She could taste blood, and her nose and cheek felt like they were on fire, likely from her helmet when it was ripped off in her impromptu dive.

She turned over, and began swimming to shore. It was a long swim, easily several hundred meters, but she was in no hurry. She all but washed up on shore, then rolled over and stopped moving, just letting the waves wash over her. After far too short a time, she rolled over and attempted to stand. It took a few attempts, but she managed. Once she was vertical, she took stock of her surroundings. A few hundred meters down the beach were the tangled remains of a Y-wing. Lacking other options, she walked towards it.

Once she got close enough, she recognized it. It was the same blue-trimmed Y-wing she had shot down. As she got closer, she examined the wreckage. The canopy and cockpit were still closed, and intact enough to be recognizable. As were the pilot and gunner. The gunner was a quarren, tentacles hanging limp, and glassy eyes looking at nothing.

The pilot, however. She looked to be Crysenia's age, her brunette hair tumbling from her shoulders now that she'd removed her helmet. Her blue eyes looked down at her chest, and she barely noticed Crysenia, as she was too busy staring at the piece of durasteel that had impaled her.

Crysenia stared at it too. She had no medical supplies, she couldn't even stem her bleeding nose. In that moment, all hate for what the woman in front of her represented drained out of her, leaving her exhausted. She took her gloves off, casting them aside. She reached into the shattered cockpit and gently pulled the woman's head to look at her instead of the wreckage of her body.

“Look at me. I’m sorry, I don’t know how to fix you. Just look at me, it’s okay.” Crysenia whispered urgently to the woman, holding her face in both hands and meeting her eyes. It was the least she could do for the woman she murdered.

The pilot looked Crysenia straight in the eye and attempted to speak. No words came out, just blood. Crysenia didn’t know what else to do, she just kept speaking to the woman until the light and pain and fear left her eyes. Once that happened and the woman drew a last pained breath, Crysenia slowly let her head droop forward, then shrunk away from the shattered Y-wing. She folded down onto the soft sand and looked around. To her left was a magnificent beach and a lovely ocean that she’d spent both far too much and not enough time enjoying. To her right were verdant trees and abundant grass.

In front of her... She couldn’t look again. She didn’t have to, to see the image of horror that was the shattered remains of her first kill. What she would’ve looked like, had she not gotten lucky enough for her fighter to crash down into the water where she had a hope of surviving.

Crysenia looked up. The sight should have been visually striking, but she was trapped between two images. One, years ago, of a similar vista that had robbed her of her father, and the one that she simply had to look down to see. She couldn’t stop the sob that reached up and took her, and she broke down crying. The day had been too much. Commander Tane could judge and lecture and sneer all he liked, she’d been pushed through limits she didn’t dream possible.

Crysenia didn’t know when she crossed from sobbing helplessly to passing out, but she woke up in the base hospital. She shook her head, attempting to clear it, then made a soft sound of pain as that made the shooting pain in her head worse. A spear of light thrust itself through one of her eyes a minute later, followed by another through her other eye. The doctor finally spoke to her once he was done. “You’re awake, good. Any pain?”

Crysenia closed her eyes. “My head’s killing me, as is my nose and my face. Aside from that, no.”

The doctor leaned back. “Good. You have a concussion as well as a broken cheekbone and nose from your dive. The Search and Rescue Team found you a few hours after the battle ended. It took a few stitches to close your cheek. Aside from that, once your concussion is healed you’ll be cleared for duty. I’ll keep you here for another day, just in case, then you’ll be good to leave.”

Crysenia nodded, opening her eyes again. “Understood. Thank you, doctor.”

The doctor was already moving onto the next bed, but paused to smile back at her. “Anytime, Ensign.”