

Along the Perlemian Trade Route

31 ABY

The Action VI freighter *Art of the Pen* was as good as any ship to work on. It was clean, well maintained, and the captain of the ship was stern but fair, even if his ship was named in part after himself. Mortimer Penwin was a gruff old man who had been up and down seemingly each and every end of the galaxy. He liked good honest work, and good honest workers. Most days, he just took what he could get.

“Arronen,” he muttered from under his beard of a mustache, “how’s the fuel level holding?”

Qyreia turned in her seat, bounding from the limited tactical station on the bridge to the vacant pilot’s terminal — one didn’t need a warm body in the chair when the autopilot was engaged. “Sixty...two percent. Still dropping, but not as fast as before.”

“Frackin’ hell,” the old man growled, slumping in his captain’s seat as he ran a frustrated hand through his greasy mop of limp, white hair. “Better’n nothing, I guess.”

“It’ll at least get us to the docks at Carida,” the Zeltron added, eyes still scanning the data on the monitor. “We can get some proper repairs there and top off on fuel.”

“And Carida fuel’s dirt cheap this time of the trading season.” He perused his datapad then looked up at the red woman. “You’ve been paying attention.”

She merely shrugged. “I try.”

Penwin huffed a contented chuckle and reviewed his pad again. “Tryin’ so hard that your shift ended an hour ago.” He motioned at the door with the electronic. “Get out of here already.” With that said, he unceremoniously turned to the command panel on his seat. “Asta!”

<<Yes captain?>> came the tiredly nervous reply over the comm.

“Get your ass to the bridge so you can earn your pay and not have to use it to find transport off our next pit stop.” He looked up at the Zeltron and nodded toward the door.

If nothing else, Qyreia knew how to take a hint, and she strode briskly for the bridge door and passed through without another word. The captain of the ship and owner of the Penwin Supplies trading company was hardly someone she was about to argue with, especially when it meant free time. Asta, a Pamarthen human, appeared at a jog just as the Zeltron was turning a corner toward her quarters.

“Whoa! Hey, sorry there, hot stuff. You just get off shift or something?”

Qyreia nodded, looking curiously at the other woman’s comparatively unkempt appearance. “Yeah. You just wake up or something there, beautiful?”

“Guilty, and I *promise* I’ll make it up to you!”

“Go on,” the Zeltron said with an amused roll of her eyes. “He’s in an okay mood, but if you can track down the source of the fuel leak, he *might* not break your legs.”

“Thanks babe,” Asta said hurriedly, resuming her dash down the hall. “I owe you one!”

“You owe me *three*,” she shot back, shaking her head at the brief smack that the human planted on her own rear, before continuing further into the bowels of the ship while Asta disappeared into the bridge.

Not that she would ever get her repayment in full, but it was a small price for having some decent crewmates. After working for Penwin for nearly three years now, back from a long stint running the trade post on Kashyyyk, Qyreia almost felt like she had finally found her niche. Where once she had dreamed of being a professional waitress and bartender, even eventually owning her own cantina, there was a certain comfort in crewing a ship. Even if she started the change in career just to chase after someone. While she wasn’t especially good at running all the individual stations, she had at least picked up some basic maintenance skills, and was quickly learning not only how to fly the ship — when Penwin let her, which was growing more and more often — but also the ins and outs of travel and route planning.

It was... actually kind of fun.

Plus there were the added benefits of not being groped or ogled by anyone unless she wanted it. Sometimes it seemed like that facet of her work had followed her everywhere, no matter how many coarse words she used, or groins her shin caved in.

Asta was one of those exceptions. The golden-skinned human, with her tight body and just-between-her-shoulders-length ponytail of black hair, was definitely Qyreia’s type. Despite that, their relationship was one wholly of friendship, built on crude jokes, watching holos in each other’s quarters, and the occasional butt-grab. That, and the Zeltron was one of the only people that could handle the Pamarthen’s signature native wine. *Port in a Storm*, they called it; a bad pun in itself, which was one of the reasons that Qyreia adored her and it so much. It, much like Asta, also came on extremely strong.

That friendship didn’t stop either of them from some raucous flirting whenever Penwin wasn’t around. Sometimes even when he was.

The serious flirting was, as yet, reserved to internal thoughts for another crewmember. He was younger than the Zeltron, a year or two shy of falling into the *too young* category, but had the roguish appearance of a stereotypical pilot, but with the clumsy approachability of the genuinely nice. If it weren’t for the Zeltron still quietly getting over her fling back on Kashyyyk — whom she had managed to poach from a rival

company to work the Penwin Supplies store *she* was running at the time — she might’ve even tried pursuing this young buck. That he was also Captain Penwin’s *grandson* served to dissuade her just a little.

It didn’t stop them from sharing the occasional awkward greeting and coy glances when they passed each other. Especially when no one else was around, such as if Qyreia happened upon him sitting on a countertop in the mess hall for a post-shift snack.

“Hey Kaleb,” she said quietly in passing to the refrigerator.

The human was torn from his reading and caf-sipping to see the Zeltron already standing in front of him. “Oh! H-hey.” He watched as she opened the door and hunched over to peruse the goods inside. “Finishing up or coming on?”

“Finishing,” she muttered, noting a small container of leftovers and snatching it up. “About to go take my break. You?”

“Mid-break,” he said as though it were something to be embarrassed about, lifting his datapad as reference. His eyes lingered a little on the Zeltron as she stood there toying with the container. “Your uh... your hair looks good today.”

Oh boy, she mused internally, outwardly touching at the messy bun of dark cobalt hair rolled against the back of her head. “I *always* wear my hair like this.”

He balked a little. “I mean... yeah, *I* knew that. It just... looks nice, I dunno.”

Qyreia held back a chuckle at his attempt, no less biting at her lower lip. *Goddamn, why do even dumb compliments work? Focus, Q. Focus.* “Thanks. I’m...” She hiked a thumb over her shoulder. “...’m gonna go eat. Nap and... stuff.”

“Right.” He stared at his datapad a moment as she started to slowly backpedal away. “H-have a good break!”

“You too.”

Her fingers played at the edges on the container as she crossed the mess hall and disappeared down the corridor to her quarters, imagining stupid things with Kaleb that would get her into even *stupider* amounts of trouble. *Only if we got caught.* She shook her head. *No. We are not going to be rebounding with the boss’ grandson. We are not going to rebound at all. Focus on work.*

She sighed, looking down at the leftover salad longingly. “I miss you, Tiron.”

Halfway to reminiscing, and nearly at her quarters, Qyreia was brought back to reality by a jarring that shook the entire ship underfoot, coupled with sounds that seemed a little too indicative of bad things. She was thankful, at least, that she’d managed to catch her food container rather than dropping it amidst the ship-quake.

“The kark was *that*?”

As if in reply, she heard the intercom pop to life with the sound of the captain’s voice. <<*Attention all hands. The ship has been pulled out of hyperspace. We are under attack. Arm yourselves and prepare to repel boarders.*>>

The food dropped from her hand to pop open and scatter at her feet. “Prepare to what?”

Then the alarms started. It wasn’t a deafening noise, but the klaxon was there; the lights weren’t blinding, but the emergency lights still pulsed to remind the crew to assume an emergency stance. Despite all that, Qyreia was momentarily frozen in place with a fearful realization.

Pirates were an ever-present danger on the trade lanes. The bigger the hyperlane, the better the pickings, but the more likely they were to be intercepted by a system’s security craft. Unless of course the vessel in question was between systems. Especially so if it was unarmed, say, like an Action VI bulk freighter. After two full years of quiet runs before coming back to crew the company ship, the worst she ever knew of it was just the horror stories the captain told her.

Unfortunately, that was *all* she knew about pirates, outside of what they sold on the holonet. *Murderers. Thieves. Rapists. Slavers.* Those were the catch-words she’d always associated with them. Only now they were coming for their ship.

Another rocking of the ship brought her out of the moment of panic. *The frack was that?* Another rocking; two of them. “...The sleemos are *shooting* us!”

In an instant, she turned on her toes and started sprinting back the way she came, leaving the wilting lettuce and shredded Endorian chicken on the floor behind her. She had to get to the rest of the crew, the armory, *something*. The Zeltron tried not to think about what she would have to do in an actual fight. Crushing someone’s gonads with her shin for getting fresh was one thing. She’d never *killed* someone before.

The thought alone sat sour in her empty stomach as she turned the corner into the mess hall. Several other members of the crew were already there, passing out the handful of blasters that they had. Asta was among them and, upon seeing the Zeltron, rushed over to offer a quick hug, made awkward by the blasters she had in-hand.

“Are you okay?” the human finally asked as they peeled apart while more crew filtered in and out.

“F-fine, fine. What’s happening?” She looked briefly past Asta, noting that Kaleb was already gone. “I mean...”

"I know, hon, I know." As if remembering what she was holding, Asta took one of the Zeltron's hands and pressed a little EC-17 pistol into her palm. "You know how to use this, right?"

"Technically?"

Among his other lessons, Captain Penwin had at least given the Zeltron some rudimentary training in how to use a blaster, using the little hold-out piece she was currently holding no less. '*Knowing how*' and '*being ready to*' were very different things in Qyreia's head, though. As if her expression didn't say enough, her shaking hands likely did plenty more. The ship shook a little too as the pirates battered away at the dwindling shields, causing Qyreia to flinch a little and her friend to look worriedly at her.

The human seemed to chew it over a little, looked around, and grabbed Qyreia's hand. "Follow me."

While the rest of the crew went the other direction, Asta took the Zeltron over to the wall lockers in the corner of the room, where they all kept their coveralls and other generic equipment for when they were doing the dirtier work that came with running a ship. Qyreia didn't have time to see if it was hers or the human's that she got stuffed into; only that one second they were dashing over, and the next Asta was throwing open a door and forcefully coaxing the red woman inside.

"Stay in here," she cautioned, busying herself with pushing random personal effects aside. "Stay in here and stay quiet. The rest of us are going to the hold to try and fight off these pirates. We'd use the bridge, but they could just tear that up with their guns and not worry about ruining the cargo."

"Asta..."

"You *stay in here*, you got that?!"

Hesitantly, Qyreia nodded, trying to hold herself together. She'd never seen Asta look nervous or scared. Even muted as it was, her wide-eyed look told the Zeltron she wasn't the only scared one here.

"I'll come get you when the fighting's over, okay?"

"But..."

"If I *don't*," Asta continued, already knowing where the question was going, "then you *stay in here* until you *know* you can escape. You understand?"

Another nervous, shuddering nod. "Mhm."

Asta grabbed Qyreia's face. For a moment, her dark brown eyes just stared into the Zeltron's gray-blues. Qyreia didn't even have time to register what was happening when the human tugged her close for an intense but all-too-brief kiss.

“Asta...”

“Stay. *here.*”

She pushed the Zeltron back into the locker and slammed the locker shut, offering Qyreia only a sliver of view through the vent slits in the door as Asta turned and started running in the direction of the cargo hold. Just like that, she was alone, listening to the dwindling frequency of incoming fire against the ship’s shields and the almost imperceptibly constant hum of the *Art of the Pen*’s systems.

It was hard to breathe. No claustrophobia or lack of air; only that her heart was beating too fast in her chest, her mind fighting her own fight-or-flight instincts by doing neither and just hiding uselessly while everyone else was probably in the middle of a gunfight in the hold. And where was Captain Penwin? She hadn’t seen him at all. It took a long time for all these thoughts to settle, along with her heaving chest and panicked breaths, to where she could just watch the outside of her locker. As she shuffled to try and maintain a semblance of comfort, the weight in her hand reminded her of the blaster.

At least if they find me, I can take out whoever’s stupid enough to open the locker first.

It was a small consolation, but at that moment, she was taking whatever she could get. Especially so when the ship rocked again, only this time with a dull echo of metal on metal. *Something’s on the hull.* Another thud followed soon after. *A few somethings.* While she couldn’t see it, Qyreia could still hear the *snap-hiss* of the airlock doors far down toward the ship’s midsection.

Then there was shouting.

Okay, so they’re on board. Her hand flexed around the pistol’s grip.

The footsteps were muffled and quiet at first, seemingly going every which way — not that she had any directional comprehension of the sounds from inside a *locker* — but at least a handful definitely seemed to be getting louder.

They’re coming this way.

She couldn’t hear the door to the hold open, as far away as it was, but the sounds of gunfire had a way of penetrating bulkheads, however incredibly dull and muted. Qyreia sucked in her lips and squeezed her eyes shut, doing everything she could to ignore it. *Stay calm. They’ll be fine. Just stay here and stay quiet.* It was harder to ignore the tromping of feet getting closer and closer. She tried to focus on it; tried to work out how many, but could only figure at best that it was a small group.

Her attempts at surveillance were at least rewarded by being correct: five armed and unfamiliar human men in various forms of garb and armament stormed into the mess hall. Their apparent leader, a middle-aged man with the first speckles of salt in his

not-quite-military-cut auburn hair, replete in black jacket and pants, pointed out to his orders to his companions.

“Bisk, take those two that way toward the crew quarters. These kinds of tugs aren’t that modular, so it shouldn’t be any different from the one we took down a few months ago.”

“You going for the bridge, boss?”

The ‘boss’ got a wicked look in his eye and resulting grin. “Why blow the ship when we can take the whole damn thing? Maybe load the gravity well into the hold once we’re done with the crew and cargo. Now move out.”

Stay here. Stay quiet.

Qyreia practically held her breath as the bossman and his accomplice came close, storming right by the lockers before rounding the corner to head toward the bridge. The others did as they were told, disappearing in the direction of the crew quarters deeper in the hull. Only when the footsteps had subsided did the Zeltron feel comfortable enough to breathe again, doing her best to control the gasp for air and settle her nerves all over again.

Stay calm, Qek. They can’t see you in here.

Sweat beaded on her forehead and filtered into her long blue hair, forcing the disheveled loose strands to droop into her face. It was hard to tell if it was hot inside the locker or if it was merely her body on overdrive. Not that she could even focus on such details. Somewhere in the back of her head, she knew that people were dying across the ship, pirates and her crewmates alike. She still had her mental blockers up; no Zeltron empathy to convey the panoply of emotions that were likely wafting through the freighter at that very moment. She still *knew*. It didn’t take a starship engineer to know that.

Just as she was choking back some of the darker thoughts and possibilities of what might happen, there was a raucous cacophony of blaster fire from the bridge and a swift, heavy scurry of booted feet. She nearly yelped, stopping herself only by biting the meat of her hand, when she saw Captain Penwin lurch into the mess hall, falling forward to the deck to reveal a bloody cut on his face and a smouldering black circle in his right shoulder. The smell of burning leather and charred meat wafted to Qyreia’s nostrils, and she had to bite harder on her hand to suppress the retching feeling the scent gave her.

In much more measured steps came the pirate boss, not far behind her employer, his breathing labored but otherwise seeming unharmed.

“What’s the *hurry*, gramps?” He thumped his boot on Penwin’s leg. “Can’t take yer medicine for killing me crew?!” The human rounded to the old man’s front and planted

another kick, far harder, into the captain's chest. The echoing *snap* noises told them that at least a couple ribs were broken as a result. "I'm gonna have my fun with you for that."

Leave him alone, Qyreia begged quietly in the safety of her mind. Her whole body flexed, holding back a cry, as the pirate kicked him again.

Stop hurting him!

Another kick, now to the old man's face.

Stop it!

And another.

"Stop it!"

The Zeltron didn't even realize she'd screamed the words, much less that she had busted the door open or that her knuckles were bleeding for the effort. Once things actually clicked, she only knew she was hurtling herself toward the pirate only a short distance away. With his previous focus on Penwin, the bigger human hardly had time to react to the surprise encounter, and they collided roughly and clumsily. Qyreia fell to the ground, and the pirate was pushed into the mess hall table, knocking the wind from his lungs and sending him to the floor as well.

Another blink in Qyreia's awareness registered movement, and she opened her eyes to see the assailant trying to right himself and reach for his holstered blaster. She made to get up, only to feel the pistol still in her hand when she tried to push herself up.

They both looked at it, almost simultaneously, then looked at each other.

There was a jerk of the pirate's arm like he was going to reach for her, or the gun, or both, only to stop short when, almost on reflex, the Zeltron's finger closed on the trigger. At that range, it was hard to miss.

He lingered on his elbow a moment as the final surges of neural energy kept him upright, then sort of just sag-slumped to the floor, chest up to the ceiling to let the black-scorched hole vent. Qyreia looked, watched, for several moments while her brain registered that he was dead, swallowing down a knot in her throat and putting moisture back in her mouth. When it finally clicked, she dropped the blaster and scurried the short distance to Penwin.

"Cap!" She struggled to heave his head into her lap, trying to assess his condition with the first aid they taught her back in middle school while simultaneously wracking her brain about where they kept the med kit. "Captain Penwin, hey, stay with me."

Through the blood-soaked matting of hair and all the sticky, gleaming red that covered his face, she could just barely make out his eyelids peeling apart the blood seal and opening to weakly look at her.

“Ar-ronen?”

“Yeah cap’n. It’s me. I...” She swallowed back another knot, trying not to think of the body behind her. “I got him. You’re gonna be okay.”

“Ahm...” He coughed, a little blood coming up with it. “M’alright. They still... running around?”

“Yeah. There’s still pirates on board.” Her hand reached out to the pistol and pulled it close, just in case. “I... I hate to ask, Mr. Penwin, but can you walk? We need to get you somewhere safe.”

“I’ll be, ngh... fine,” he groaned, struggling to get up. Qyreia might have tried to stop him, only she was far happier having someone else around that was alive and not a pirate. The old man managed to get to his feet and turned his head from the locker to the corpse. “You saved me,” he struggled to say through the broken ribs, “so I won’t ask why you were in a locker.”

The Zeltron’s expression drooped and her gaze went to the floor. When she felt Penwin’s hand ruffling her hair, she looked up to see a weak but broken grin.

“Think you got a little more of that left in you?”

Qyreia looked at the pistol in her hand, shaking maybe even harder than it was before as she now had the spike of adrenaline to contend with. She clasped her other hand on it to steady her grip and nodded to her captain. “I th-think so.”

He waved his hand toward him. “Hand me his gun. Mine’s back at the bridge.”

It took a small surge of courage to rifle through a dead man’s things. Other than her grandmother’s funeral back when she was a young teen, she had never even *seen* a dead body, much less touched one or perused its pockets. Fortunately he’d already been in the process of reaching for his gun, so she had all but to brush aside his jacket and yank it from the holster. The DL-44 was a lot heavier in her hand than the EC-17, and she almost had mixed feelings about giving it over to Penwin. Bigger gun meant more powerful; more powerful meant safer.

She could’ve gone for a little safety at that moment.

The captain seemed to appreciate the heft as well, weighing it in his hand and visually looking like he caught his second wind before nodding at her. “You see any others run through here?”

“Three.” She nodded in the direction of the hall. “Toward the crew quarters.”

“Hm. I’ll need some help, but I bet my ship we can take ‘em.”

Qyreia sighed, pushing herself to her feet, feeling a little more confident with the captain, already so bloodied, still ready to fight for his vessel. “Okay. Just tell me what to do, captain, and I’ll do it.”

Captain Penwin, as it happened, was quite the crack shot. While not quite so limber in his current condition, he could still pull a trigger and direct the Zeltron where to fire hers. As soon as they found the pirates that were milling about in the crew quarters, he had her lay down on the floor and fire blindly from around the corner. It was enough to get their attention and keep their heads down. When she angled her shots away to the other side of the hall, the raider no longer under fire would peek out to shoot, only to have Penwin pop him in the head for the effort. The second pirate went much the same way. The last one was on his way to surrendering, but he was mid-sentence when he came out from the room he was taking cover in.

Penwin’s shot took him in the chest before either had time to register what the other was doing.

“Couldn’t be more’n a dozen or so,” the old man grumbled with an almost sad tone as they hobbled back to the mess hall. “I only saw three ships out there, and they weren’t that big, neither.”

“I wonder how everyone else is holding out.”

He groaned, somewhere between pain and thought. “We should take out the third ship before they decide to board us too. That or just shoot us while we’re sittin’ gizkas.”

“How?”

He nodded toward the corridor that led to the cargo hold. “They latched on down thataway, and their shuttles had turrets.” The curl of his mustache bespoke a devious grin. “Probably wouldn’t expect their own ships to shoot at ‘em.”

None of that sounded good. The Zeltron had quite enough killing for one day, but her captain pushed her on: if she wouldn’t do it, he at least needed some help getting over to the airlock. And regardless of any of that, she was still part of *his* crew, and this wasn’t a polite suggestion.

With the muted sounds of blaster fire still popping in and out of existence from the direction of the cargo hold, they made their way over to the portside airlock, where the door was waiting wide open for them. The captain leaned on the wall and motioned Qyreia forward to check for any occupants. Cautious and slow, she inched toward the door, hardly daring to make a sound as she leaned her head toward the opening, just enough to get one eye past the lip of the hatch frame. The interior was relatively small, dirty, and smelled like too many people had been crammed in there for too long. At the far end, between her and a blatantly empty pilot seat, was a pair of legs standing on a

platform, with the creature presumably attached to those legs hidden in what she could only guess was the shuttle's turret.

She tried to silently communicate as much to Penwin, and he merely waved her forward. *That's an order, Qek. Time to earn your pay.*

As she slipped inside of the attached shuttle, she recognized the hum from its own systems, different from the *Art of the Pen*. Louder and a little more whiny, like it was poorly maintained, or the little hull was merely in a natural state of rattling because of its own engines. Amidst that, she also heard the gunner in the turret humming to himself, oblivious to who or what was creeping around him.

Her gaze went back to the hatch where Penwin was slumped, watching. He weakly mimed pulling a trigger and pointed at the pair of legs.

Goddammit. Qyreia crept forward a little more, catching more and more view of the gunner, who was at least humanoid, and probably either human or near-human, given the rest of the pirates' demographics. Another knot choked her throat as she brought the pistol up, only to flinch when she saw the feet shuffle and heard a high-pitched male's voice call down.

"Hey Bisk, that you? We done here? My leg's're gettin' tired." He grumbled as he shuffled again, "Shoulda had a *seat* put in this thing."

She tried to swallow back the knot, choking a little as she angled the pistol up into the turret and fired. Her hand twitched when the human kept moving, likely in its death throes, but it only served to have her unwittingly fire again. Only when he completely stopped moving did the Zeltron let the pistol drop.

Then she followed suit, collapsing to her knees on the floor and retching bile and whatever her body could muster onto the deck plates.

After the first burst of the dam, it was mostly dry heaves, though whether or not that was a fortunate thing was lost to her. Tears welled over her cheeks as she coughed and sputtered, acid-laden saliva strings dangling between her lips and the floor while she quietly cried between heaves and coughs. She wasn't even sure if she was happy to feel Captain Penwin's reassuring hand on her back, patting her gently and muttering reassuring words. It felt like ages before she could breathe somewhat normally again, and as she steadied her still-shuddering breaths, she already knew what was coming.

"I can't do it," she half gasped, half choke-heaved. "I jus' can't."

"Last one, Arronen," the old man tried to console, "promise. But I can hardly walk much less crawl up in this thing."

He struggled to tug at the body while the Zeltron remained hunched on the floor, inching the corpse off the gun controls until its own weight had it sliding in an

uncontrollable heap from the turret to the main deck. The wounded captain had barely enough time or strength to heave the deadweight away and keep it from falling on the only crewmember he knew he had left. Qyreia started to turn toward the corpse, but Penwin dropped the heel of his boot between her gaze and the dead pirate's face.

She looked up to see a stern, concerned look in his blood-caked eyes. "Trust me. Don't look." He didn't want her to see the concave visage hidden behind his leg. She'd seen enough, as far as he was concerned. He nodded instead toward the turret. "Last one."

He promised, Qyreia thought weakly. She felt bodily dead as she pulled herself up to her feet, not even bothering to get fully upright before slowly clambering into the turret. Only then did she straighten herself out, noting the carbon scoring and the spatters of gore on the controls and terminal. She wobbled and felt like heaving again, but was steadied by Penwin's grip on her ankle and his firm voice.

"Focus Arronen. Is the *power on?*"

Power on? Power on, power on... As her thoughts refocused to the directed task, her eyes scanned over the controls. All the lights were working, yes, but she knew he was talking about the turret itself. Looking at the control levers, she thought of the easiest way to test.

She gave it a little nudge, and the whole turret moved.

Penwin's grip on her instantly disappeared and he yowled angrily. "I told you to... Hell, woman! I guess the power's on at least!"

Despite everything, the dose of angry, complaining old captain had Qyreia laughing, however briefly. A few outbursts as she was reminded of happier times from only an hour ago. Her employer seemed to calm down at the sound and merely huddled close enough to be heard this time, not actually reaching in.

"Alright, you okay in there?"

"Y-yeah. Fine. Now what?"

"Can you see the third ship through the cupola? Should be portside, aft, high. Least that's where she was before the bridge got busted into."

Portside, aft, high, portside, aft... Qyreia looked around and, sure enough, saw the chunky shape of a ship, highlighted by its own flight lights. "I see it."

"Alright. Take the controls there and, just like you nudged it, turn the turret toward that other ship. It should be on the proximity-aim display, if these mudscuffers actually *have* one."

The Zeltron looked at the yoke and at the screen in front of it. “They have one,” she muttered, turning the control mechanism and watching the guns swivel toward the pirate ship interchangeably on the screen and through the viewport. As the aimpoint got closer to the ship, she got more and more comfortable with just looking through the targeting computer. She swallowed back a fresh twist in her throat, wiping off some of the salt-itch from the wet streaks on her cheeks. “Okay, now what? Just... pull the triggers?”

“Try it.”

She squeezed both of the buttons that very clearly resembled triggers, only to be left with silence, and a little flashing notification on the targeting computer: *Safety Lock*.

“There’s a safety on it,” she grumbled somewhere between frustrated and relieved.

“Check the humb controls, like we have at the helm.”

He wasn’t wrong. There were two buttons, one on each arm of the gunner’s yoke, that had ‘SAFE’ in bold Aurebesh above each. Not knowing if she needed to press only one or both, she went for the latter option and checked her point of aim on the display. *Last one.*

“Just like playing a holo-game,” Penwin said calmly; reassuringly. “Just pull the trigger and the bad guy’s ship goes...” He made some garbled imitation of an explosion, and it was hard to tell if that was encouraging or not for the Zeltron.

She didn’t know. All she knew is that she had the pirate ship in her sights, locked in. A voice came in over the ship’s communicator, asking rather angrily why the guns were pointed at them. Qyreia’s thumbs pressed on the safeties, and her trigger fingers squeezed on their namesake. Her face and mind were blank as she held the triggers down, red flashes lighting her face and the turret interior in rapid succession. The voices on the comm quickly turned to panic and the ship *tried* to turn about and get away. By then though, the damage was already done. Only when the target detonated in a spray of starship fuel-fed flames and metal detritus did she relent on the triggers.

When she slid down from the turret to sit on the raised floor of the gunner’s station, Penwin knew it was over. Her dead expression said plenty on its own.

“You did good...”

“Don’t,” she whined. “Just don’t.”

They sat in silence for some moments before their attention was called to the rapid footfalls coming down the hall. Penwin’s blaster was up and Qyreia had a ready grip on hers, only to see the face of one of their own crew appear.

“Captain! You’re alright!”

“And Arronen here.” Her grip on the pistol slackened at his acknowledgement. “Everyone else?”

There was a pause. “Being brought up through the other corridor to the mess hall. Two of the pirates surrendered.”

Old Penwin nodded thoughtfully. “And Kaleb?”

“Alive,” came the reply, relieved but tinged with remorse somehow.

He nodded again and looked to the Zeltron, conjuring up some of his usual commanding fire. “Arronen. Are you good?”

She sniffed and wiped off her face, trying to get her own positivity back while ignoring the corpse and the puddle of bile. “I’m good, captain.”

Helping each other, they all made their way back to the mess hall where the rest of the crew were packed in: twenty humans, near-humans, and a few humanoids, plus the pair of prisoners, all tending to their own wounds or someone else’s. One of the easiest to spot was Kaleb, reclining off to the side and seeming rather chipper despite the ghastly pale color of his skin.

“My boy,” Penwin managed, Qyreia helping him over to his grandson’s seat, “you look pale, but no worse than me.”

“Not so bad, cap,” he replied with a modicum of formality. Though when he tried to offer a playful salute, as he would usually do, they were both treated to an image of a stump rather than an arm.

Captain Penwin stiffened, and might have fallen over if not for the Zeltron’s grip on him. “Ah... What... What happened, Kal?”

“Scattergun,” the young man replied with a smile and a seeming air of pride in his voice. “We turned a corner at the same time, and the shot took it clean off.” He nodded toward the ship’s surgeon who was busy treating the other wounded. “Doc said it’ll be a clean fix with a prosthetic.”

The old man chuckled weakly, unsure of how to react to such a positive outlook on having an arm blown off. “That’s good to hear.” He looked up to see Qyreia’s attention split, searching the room despite Kaleb’s gaze on her. “What’s wrong?”

“Hm? Oh I’m just...” She looked at Kaleb, finally realizing she’d been so quiet this whole time. “I’m glad you’re okay, Kaleb. Y’know... much as you *can* be.”

“The painkillers help,” he chuckled back. “I’m glad you’re alright, too.”

Qyreia nodded, her attention still torn. She was happy for Kaleb, but there was someone else she wanted to see. “Excuse me. I just... need the Doc for a sec.”

The captain waved her off without a word and returned his attention to his grandson, leaving the Zeltron to go over to their medical officer who was very thankfully whole and hale. Were it not for that stroke of luck, judging by some of the bandaging on the other crew, they'd be a few more bodies short. She tapped the Rodian's shoulder and he seemed relieved in his own way to see the red woman, if only because it was one less patient to worry about.

"Qyreia. You're alright. That's good."

"Have um... Have you seen Asta? I've looked around like five times now, and I don't see her." She felt sort of dumb for admitting it, but it at least gave her a bit of a chuckle.

The doc's expression, on the other hand, did not. "Follow me."

With a quiet demand for patience from his current patient, he rounded the large table and made his way to the far end, the Zeltron worriedly close behind. They didn't have far to go, though. There were two figures laid out on the end of the table, shrouded with sheets, and instantly she knew where this was going. The doctor had only just pointed to the shroud on the left, and Qyreia was already stifling tears, her breath hiccuping between snuffles.

"I will... give you some space."

A quiet "Thanks" was all she could muster as he walked past and back to his work. Covering her face, eyes ever on the shroud, she inched forward, the occasional stifled sob snaking through her nostrils. She could hardly decide if she wanted to sit or stand or drop to the ground as she came up alongside, staring at the profile of cloth that was stained red at the abdomen. A red hand reached out and, slowly, peeled the sheet back from the face, past the shoulders and the chest, to reveal what Qyreia already knew.

Asta looked surprisingly at peace, like she was sleeping if not for the weird way her lips were parted as though she were still trying to breathe, or how her usually burnished skin now had such an ashy pallor.

Qyreia just stood there, staring, knowing somewhere in the back of her head that there were at least a few sets of eyes on her, but that was outside her sphere of care. She let the back of a finger trail across a cheek, noting how it was still warm to the touch, and wishing for a moment that it meant she was still alive, and crushing her own dreams knowing that she wasn't. By then, stifling the tears was impossible, and sputtered breaths quickly turned to a long, high-pitched whine as she sagged over Asta's body, bawling as she cradled the dead woman's forehead to hers.

No one stepped in to interrupt, or try to console her. They knew as well as anyone that it wouldn't do anything. Even when the sobs and whines turned to keening wails, they let the Zeltron alone.

“I’m sorry,” she mewled, not even caring who was in the room. “I’m sorry I was such a goddamn coward, Asta. If I’d’ve been there, maybe...”

Her voice cracked again and she had to fight the swelling feeling in her throat, sniffing and blinking tears away just so she could look at the human.

“I did what you said, babe. I... Fr’ckin’ *hell*, why’d *you* have to go and leave me too?!”

Her sobs redoubled for several minutes, while some of the others in the room quietly pondered the outburst. They didn’t know too much about the Zeltron other than what she brought to work. Kaleb knew a little, but only surface level. Penwin knew, but only what was on her personnel file or what she divulged on the bridge, which was little enough. Asta knew.

And now she was gone.

Carida

Two days later...

Carida authorities took the prisoners without any issue, and the fates that lay in store for them were no better than any of the other pirates onboard the *Art of the Pen*. The two shuttles were in decent enough condition to be sold to help pay for repairs on the freighter. The leftover credits, against Captain Penwin’s better judgement, were doled out to the surviving crew as a ‘*hazard bonus*’ of sorts. No one was getting rich off of it, especially split eighteen ways, but it was sizeable enough to be appreciated. While they awaited repairs, the authorities were kind enough to subsidize some nice hotel rooms for the captain and his crew.

When Qyreia was called into the lobby by the elder Penwin, she knew it was about her share, and was ready to just take it and get back to drinking alone in her room.

He was sitting over by a waterfall-window that looked out to the artificial garden that the space station-borne lodgings maintained. Seeing the Zeltron seemed to simultaneously lift and sink his spirits, leaving him with his usual professional demeanor as he motioned to the seat opposite him.

“Chair’s there if you want to sit.” He wouldn’t be surprised if she didn’t. She was less than amiable since the attack.

Still, she didn’t see any sense in standing there while he talked, which seemed to put him at ease. “Is this about the hazard bonus?”

“It is,” he said with some sobriety, noting the Zeltron’s puffy red eyes. “And some other things. Employee-to-employer poodoo aside... Are you going to be-?”

“Don’t *ask* if I’m going to be *alright*,” she hissed a little too angrily, even for her own liking. Realizing it seemed to make her curl inward.

“Fair enough.” He paused, seemingly trying to parse out how to continue. He reached out to the little table between them and set down an envelope. “That’s your share of the hazard pay.”

She was about to grab it up, thank him, and disappear, when he produced another envelope.

“And this is your... inheritance, I suppose. Legacy, I think is the legal term...”

“Wait, my... what?”

Penwin set the noticeably larger envelope down and sat back. “I’m not sure how you’re going to like this, so I’ll just say it. In Asta’s will, her personal effects were to be returned to her family — postage pending her own accounts, et cetera.”

Qyreia’s eyes went back to the envelopes and was halfway to saying *something* but the captain cut her off.

“*And* she named *you* beneficiary of her accounts, Force knows why.” He watched carefully as she processed that, a hand going to her face to hide the renewed tears. “Once you’ve got your head wrapped around that, there’s one more thing.”

“Goddammit, *frack* your one more thing.”

He stared at her a moment, declining to raise his bushy brow in favor of letting the bacta treatment do its work on the still-patched cut. “I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that, because I want to throw some ideas at you. A recommendation, if you will.”

Qyreia turned her head, staring out the water-choked window, merely waving for him to continue.

“Arron... Hrm, *Qyreia*. You’re one of the best crewmen I’ve ever had. You did more than stellar work on Kashyyyk, and... well, you saved my life. Maybe the whole ship, for vaping that last transport.” He sighed. “I’d be proud to keep you on, if that’s what you want. I know Kaleb... well, that’s your business, but you’d be missed if you decided to leave.”

She turned her eyes toward him, angling her head slightly, curious.

“*But*, I also understand if you want to go your own way. And if I can make a recommendation...?” He paused, looking for permission; something that he never did, outside of legitimately personal business.

Knowing that prompted Qyreia’s nod.

“Get the hell out of my company and go make something of yourself.” He smiled weakly, trying to make the comment as positive as possible. “You know how to fly, know how to protect yourself, and you know most all the tricks of the trading business.” He nodded to the envelopes. “Won’t *buy* you a ship, but you could lease one and start up your own business.” He leaned closer. “And I *know* you’d be good at it.”

The Zeltron turned her head curiously, still mentally chewing on all the compliments, and how her boss had just told her to get lost. “Why are you telling me all this?”

Penwin leaned back into his seat, scratching his head. “Dammit, Arronen, I’m tryin’ to say you’ve got the spark to be *good* at something. I seen it before, and you’ll probably just be miserable if you stay on.” He briefly motioned to take her hand, but stopped short. “I’m not saying you need to decide *right now*. Too much happening, I know. Just... think about it.”

Qyreia looked down at the envelopes, almost glaring at them through the combatting emotions in her head. “Okay. I’ll... I’ll think about it.”