

On approach to Dandoran Doran System

The call to the Clans was an oddly sour, haphazard affair that left lots of room for confusion among the constituent members; no less for Arcona than many others, if the rumor mill was to be believed. Even more so when they were tasked with addressing the situation in the Doran system, “however you like, so long as you’re not shooting each other,” as the Shadow Lady put it. To the Zeltron mercenary, it seemed typical for Lucine’s brand of instruction.

Goddamn Sith, Qyreia grumbled internally as she veered her X-Wing in toward the collection of Severian ships. There was a certain level of guilt in the thought, given one of her best friends was a well-intentioned Sith, but the ideology seemed consistent enough that it was nonetheless appropriate to grumble about.

Breeep dee-doo-doot brrtbrtt wreeow.

The sound of her R3 chiming through the intercom of her starfighter brought her out the irate thought chain and back to reality. “Hm? Oh, right,” she said, noting the blinking on her control panel before pressing the button to open the comm channel. “Yello.”

“Incoming unidentified X-Wing, this is the Severian ship Geta. State your business. You are entering a cordon of the Principate under authorization of Py’zah the Hutt.”

The Coruscanti tone on the other end was definitely not in the mood for informality, so Qyreia opted to change her tone. “This is Qyreia Arronen of Brotherhood Clan Arcona, responding to a request for reinforcement. Sending IFF code.”

A couple button presses and flipped switches later, a chime signalled positive receipt by the *Geta*. There was a moment of silence while she continued straight on her trajectory. *Sudden moves are what get you shot*, the former smuggler mused almost nostalgically as she awaited clearance. Regardless of the professionalism in the voice on the other end, her hand held tight to the flight stick. There was no telling if they would take the information and decide to shoot her anyway. Fortunately, the Severian ship seemed little inclined to waste the energy output.

“Identity verified, qek-aurek-one-four-three-six-nine. Proceed along transmitted vector to the Castus for reception.”

Qyreia’s console chimed with the received data. A simple “Roger” was her only reply before cutting the channel and angling toward the indicated direction as soon as her R3 had it programmed. “I tell ya, Reme, these Imperial types? They got no personality.”

The droid gave a whirr of casual agreement over the intercom.

Conversation went quiet, though, as they entered within range of the Principate ships. The merc hadn't been present for the Brotherhood's initial forays with the pseudo-Imperial splinter faction, and her only interaction with them thus far had been the prison break on Tenixir. To say that she was wary of their intentions in light of that would be an understatement. Still, when it came to the vying factions buzzing around each other in various degrees of hostility, the Harmonist party seemed the most peace-seeking of the bunch. If nothing else, at least they weren't pirates and slavers. Were it not for that, Qyreia might have sided with Zyft Yadar and her Expansionists. At least she was fairly certain that was the proper person. Who knew what quality the various intelligence agencies in the Brotherhood had in their reports.

But if there was one thing a trader and smuggler — former or current — hated more than the average cutthroats and business folk, it was pirates; and the years of objectification as a Zeltron shored up the hatred of slavery, to say nothing for her own and ingrained cultural beliefs.

As they passed the various ships of the Severian fleet, she saw up ahead, backed by the panorama of Dandoran below, a Nebulon-B frigate. Her updated IFF showed that it was the *Castus*, as the voice had indicated during the transmission. Without even a supplemental voice transmission, she was given a docking trajectory for the nearest hangar, the aperture of which glowed faintly blue with the shielding meant to keep the atmosphere in, and the vacuum of space out. A deckhand was available to guide her X-Wing into a parking space; one of only a few, as others were occupied by starfighters of various makes, models, sizes, and roles: a whole panoply of vessels that likely belonged to various members of the Brotherhood, given their disparate designs and paint jobs. With the single-squadron capacity of the frigate's design, it looked like Qyreia just about rounded out the numbers.

"You stay in here, Remster," she said as she opened the hatch and unlocked the ladder from the hull. "I'm gonna see what's up with these goons."

Nreeroooh-whrrp brrrt deet.

"I'm *always* careful." The Zeltron stepped briskly down and hopped onto the deck, allowing herself a moment to remove the black-and-red helmet and shake out the resultant mess of hair.

Just in time for her to spot a duo of Severian personnel approaching. She was just familiar enough with Galactic Empire insignia to recognize a naval lieutenant flanked by the deckhand that had guided her T-65 to its parking spot. Both were notably human, and the lieutenant had the rigid and superior posture one might expect from an Imperial Remnant-style navy. Both were young, maybe mid-twenties, but were otherwise not remarkable in their appearances; sevens on a ten point scale.

"Miss Arronen?"

The Zeltron chuckled. “Haven’t been called *Miss* in a long time. Most folks in Dajorra call me *colonel*.”

It seemed almost impossible that the lieutenant’s posture could stiffen more, but he somehow managed. “I apologize ma’am. It’s just that I don’t recognize your rank, and...”

“Don’t sweat it,” she interrupted casually with a dismissive wave. “Besides, technically I’m a *missus* now. You just can’t see the ring with the flight suit.”

The two Severians shared a confused glance, with the deckhand merely shrugging before the lieutenant returned his attention to the Zeltron. “O-of course. Well, apologies, but I must escort you to the briefing room at once. The...” He hesitated on his word choice. “...*reinforcements* such as yourself have been designated for an immediate mission and sortie.”

“What sort of mission?”

“That is for the briefing room,” the young officer replied. “I will take you there, if you would follow me?”

“Lead on, *leftenant*, I think is how they say it on Coruscant.”

“I wouldn’t know. I was born in Severian space.” He sighed, sort of smiling. “*But*, that is how many of us speak, so I’ll grant you that.”

After a few brief words with the deckhand, Qyreia and her escort walked briskly through the hangar toward what she could only assume was the briefing room. At least she hoped that’s what it was. It wasn’t like she was unarmed, just in case. Her escort seemed a little on edge as well though, and that only made the merc even more nervous as they disappeared deeper into the bowels of the ship.

He seemed to be looking around, nervous, wary less of the Zeltron than of his fellow shipmates. The more Qyreia watched him, the less worried she was of a trap. *Am I about to get sucked into some Impy intrigue?* It wasn’t until they were clear of any immediate passersby that the lieutenant rounded on his guest, halting their walk.

“If I might be so bold, ma’am: who’s side are you on?”

“Sorry?”

He sighed, backpedalling his fervor. “I am sorry. Perhaps that was too on-the-nose. But you *are* aware that the political situation within the Principate is... *divided*, shall we say?”

And in the Revenants, but I don’t know how much these guys know. Some things are better left unsaid. Qyreia crossed her arms, eyes wandering left and right to assess their privacy. “I’m anti-pirate and anti-Imperial.”

“We’re not...”

“I know what your government *says*, and I frankly don’t believe one frackin’ bit of it. If you really wanna know though, for now at least, I’m with the *Harmonist* group.”

The human breathed a soft sigh of relief. “Praise be. There are many of us on this ship that follow a similar way of thought, but there is a fine line between politics and mutiny, as far as the command sees it. Especially with tensions so high.”

She nodded, not entirely sure how to respond, but also inwardly happy that there was no foul play. Not yet, anyway. “I don’t think I ever caught your name.”

“Arnik. Lieutenant Kale Arnik, ma’am.”

“*Well*, Mister Arnik, we should probably get to that briefing before someone *does* think the ol’ *mern*-word is afoot. Hm?”

A sort of realization hit the young officer and he motioned further along. The briefing room wasn’t too much further away, and it seemed there were more security personnel than admin folk. *Seems they don’t trust a bunch of space wizards and their mundane counterparts when the battle lines are so muddled.* Walking into the briefing room itself only seemed to confirm the assumption, as the hodge-podge of pilots and people pretending to be pilots were hardly what most would consider professionals. Qyreia was quite possibly one of the few that actually looked like she belonged in a military unit. A few of the faces seemed at least vaguely familiar, but for the most part, they were all strangers.

“Is this the last one, Arnik?” an older man situated by the main holoprojector asked her escort sternly.

“Y-yes sir!”

The older officer, with his seemingly perpetual and overdrawn frown of disappointment in his wrinkles, huffed an acknowledgement and motioned for the newcomer to join the others. She hadn’t even found a seat when the lights dimmed and the briefing started. As it stood, the Principate had a strong hold on the area, but it wasn’t foolproof. A Revenant *Quasar Fire*-class frigate, *The Screeching Osprey*, had been spotted on scanners and was inbound for Dandoran, presumably to drop off more ground forces, or to relieve those already there.

That was where the assortment of Brotherhood folk came in. The squadron’s-worth of starfighters would sortie from the *Castus*, intercept the frigate, and neutralize it. Disable, destroy, commandeer; it didn’t matter so long as the Tenixirs were prevented from building up their combat power in the area.

And that was it. They were all dismissed to their ships with nore more coordination than that. No flight leaders or plan of attack. Lieutenant Arnik insinuated in hushed

tones that there was some discontent with the apparently uncoordinated reinforcement of the Principate, who were supposed to be allies to the Brotherhood. Compared to their previous battles together, this helter skelter response was not being well-received by the higher-ups who had awareness of it. How the Triumvirate would take it was another matter entirely.

Qyreia followed the general herd back to the hangar, each one seemingly with their own escort. *Thank god I got one of the friendlier ones.* She could only imagine what some of her more lascivious counterparts from Arcona might say or do in such a situation. No doubt, it would be something that she would gladly kick in some gonads over. As they made their way into the hangar, Arnik offered her a friendly handshake as a parting gesture.

“Good luck out there, Miss... I mean, ma’am.”

“S’fine,” she chuckled as she returned the handshake, only to hear a displeased huff just outside her peripheral vision.

Standing there was the older officer from the briefing. The Zeltron’s knowledge of rank identifiers wasn’t good enough to recognize his, but his age and the greater number of colored pips said he was at least a commander; maybe a captain by rank, if not by duty.

“You may return to your duties, *leftenant.*”

“Yes sir.” Arnik shared a knowing glance with the red woman over the pronunciation before nodding and walking briskly away, leaving her with the senior officer while ships were taking off throughout the hangar.

His expression was, as before, seemingly disappointed. “Why are you not in your ship yet?”

“Little busy in the air right now,” she said, pointing at one of several TIE models that had docked vying for clearance with a Firespray. “Figured I’ve got time.”

“Time is the one thing we *don’t* have,” the human huffed, though it was unclear if he was speaking generally or in regards to her delay. His gaze went to her X-Wing. “Though how you intend to defeat the enemy with *that* outdated machine, I can only guess.”

A tick went off in Qyreia’s head — the kind that happened when someone insulted her ship. “Y’know, that’s funny, coming from a wannabe Imperial.”

For the first time since she’d seen him, his brow seemed to show a modicum of emotion; attentive irritation in this case. “And how is that?”

“Because between your outdated ideals and my outdated ship, only *one* of them won the war.” She smiled coyly, even fluttering her lashes as R3-M3 whirred to say it was time to leave. “Take a wild guess which one it was.”

It was difficult to tell if the jab brought color to his face, or if that was simply the glow of so many thrusters, but it did seem to at least quiet him while Qyreia hauled herself up the ladder into the cockpit. With her mode of ingress stowed and the canopy shut, she took only a moment to don her helmet again before running rapidly through the pre-flight checks and lifting off from the deck, offering the old officer still watching a curt salute before bringing her ship about.

Leaving the hangar for the blackness of space offered a satisfying peace to the haphazard departure of the *Castus* and the quips of her officers. However, as her attention panned across the void, she was reminded of the gaggle of disparate ships. Three Decimators, a Starhopper, several TIE fighter models, the one Firespray, an ‘ugly’ variant of an old TIE bomber, and a rather shiny-looking B-Wing. *Quite the group we got*, she mused, hazarding to turn on her comm to the channel given during the brief — the one piece of coordination they’d gotten. Given it was a Severian channel, it was likely it was as much to monitor their progress as it was to give the Brotherhood starfighters a means of communication.

Although given the cacophony of voices that met her ears as soon as she flipped the switch, *communication* might’ve been too strong of a word.

“...been flying for years, and I’m telling you...”

“...can’t even dent a ship like that with your weapons...”

“How do I launch a torpedo?”

Qyreia blinked hard several times. “Goddamn. I think we’ve got our work cut out for us, Remster.”

The droid gave a sad, understanding tone.

Okay, let’s get this over with, she thought as she opened up her own mic. “This is Red Qek over in the X-Wing. I know a lot of ship models, but not their loadouts. Who all’s got heavy ordinance?”

“That’d be me in the B-Wing and the TIE.”

“This is Blaster-One in the Firespray. The rest of us have missiles, except for the Starhopper.” The way she said the latter part said she didn’t care for the limited little ship. But they at least weren’t talking over each other anymore.

“Anyone know what this ship’s toting?”

“They said it was ferrying troops...”

“And there it is on scanners!”

After flying so long on the anticipated trajectory, the lead TIE quickly broke off from the vague semblance of a formation that had started to coalesce. Others quickly started following suit, the broad triangular shape of their target just barely visible at a distance and making a bee-line for the planet.

Remee bleeped something over the internal comms that caught the Zeltron’s attention and had her instantly on the main channel. “That’s not a *frigate!* It’s a *carrier!*”

Whatever shouting and arguing resulted from that was quickly overwhelmed by the sound of scanners rapidly chiming new threats. Even once the first cloud had come fully into scanner range, more blips were steadily filtering out from the hangars under the ship, all on a direct course for the *ad hoc* squadron.

“Everyone take evasive action,” Qyreia said through the noise of her S-foils reverberating through her hull as they locked into combat mode. “Don’t take them straight on; *especially* the bombers.”

“I know what I’m doing, Qek!” the lead TIE yelled over the comm.

Weapons indicators showed maximum range, but from the back, the merc could hardly get a firing solution without endangering her own people. *Frack.* Shots from the lead elements of both groups lit up the darkness in streaks of red and green as the swarm came in. An A-Wing leading the Tenixir group took a hard hit and went spiraling off in a fuel-fed fireball. The mouthy TIE pilot had just enough time to shout a cocky *“I told you s-!”* before two of the lead Revenant’s wingmen riddled his ship with red lances of laser cannon fire.

About that, she thought briefly before seeing the various ships angling in towards their chosen targets, including her X-Wing. She pulled up into a sidelong roll, trying to get closer to their heavy hitters, rattling off several shots at an approaching A-Wing and being rewarded with a crippling, but non-fatal hit. *One less gun to worry about, at least.*

“Decimators, try and thin the herd with those turrets, but *don’t stop moving.* I’m linking up with the bombers to try and catch the Quasar.”

Her shields took a beating as what seemed like another wave of ships rolled over and around them, drowning out the response from the decimators. Several more ships exploded, too quick to see who was taking the casualties. *Where the frack are those bombers?* Z-95 Headhunters were starting to join the fray, and it was a trio of them banking around high that brought her attention to where the bombers were, trying to cover each other but clearly not aware of what was coming after their tails. Qyreia pulled hard on the stick, nearly colliding with a separate group of Z-95s, only narrowly slipping between two of them. Part of her hoped that one of them overcorrected and hit

his wingman, but her focus was on catching the Headhunters pursuing the Brotherhood bombers. Her scanners said her hopes were in vain anyway.

Her targets were just lining up behind the B-Wing when she got her firing solution. She muttered “Eat this,” and squeezed on the trigger button, unleashing a rotating chain of fire from each of her laser cannons that tore into the rearmost of the chasing trio. They likewise opened up on the B-Wing, battering away at its shields and catching one of the short wings, shearing off its mounted cannon, drawing a half-growled “Frack” from the Zeltron as she adjusted her reticle to the next ship, all while drawing ever closer.

Breeooooow!

The R3’s screech brought Qyreia’s attention around just in time to see a pair of A-Wings barrelling down on her. Her hand jerked back on the stick so hard that she thought it might snap, but she needed to try and bring her guns to bear: the little ships were faster and more nimble than her T-65. They could just linger behind and swivel as they liked until she was space dust. Her jaw and so many other parts of her clenched in anticipation of the battering fire.

So it was with some surprise that the lead A-Wing was pummeled by a string of green energy shots that kept going as they turned on the second interceptor, damaging and driving it away.

“Got your back, Qek!”

Qyreia looked over her shoulder through the canopy to see a Decimator veer into view, chasing off the A-Wing with one of its quad-turrets while the other chattered away as some pursuing Z-95s.

“Much appreciated!” she yelled back, almost laughing as she pitched back toward the bombers, which were much more actively weaving and dodging, but still under heavy fire. “Reme, get ready to do a hot-swap target solution on those two up ahead.”

The droid whirred in the affirmative and Qyreia once again lined up her guns. Given her angle, she opted to ease her fire onto the lead starfighter. Her initial salvo hammered it, and it went dead in the void, though lacking any showy explosion. Its wingman tried to turn in toward the new threat, only to have its path carry it right into the path of her still-firing cannons. She pulled a tight roll around the resulting explosion, twisting her X-Wing around to fall in with the two bombers.

“You two alright?”

“Only just,” the B-Wing’s pilot replied. *“Shields are going to take a minute to recharge, and I’m down a gun.”*

The TIE bomber wiggled on its roll axis, showing off the holes in its solar collector panels. *“Still flying over here.”*

All but a moment could be spared to take stock of the situation as the Zeltron glanced between her scanner and the starfighter furball. The Starhopper was holding its own, but almost solely on an evasive footing. The remaining TIEs looked almost to be dancing around the A-Wings, each trading maneuvers with the other, but the Tenixirs' tactics were lacking once things got hectic, and they couldn't seem to coordinate a tactical break to reengage from a better position. The Firespray was foundering, smoking from multiple gashes in its hull, protected almost entirely by a Decimator that looked to be as equally damaged; both limping their way back to friendly lines.

I don't blame them. Her gaze went toward the curve of the planet, where *The Screeching Osprey* was continuing to press on toward the planet, though not so much as to put an oppressive amount of distance between itself and its starfighter contingent.

"We need to get to that carrier. Can you two bombers," she said, wishing they'd taken at least a little time to delineate flight names or something, "push for it while I cover?"

"We can give it a shot."

"Try and attack its topside or the rear. Its turrets are on the nose and have a pretty good angle on anything underneath or in front."

"We'll try and keep these karks occupied," came the familiar voice from the Decimator that had saved her only moments before. *"But don't take your time, a'right?"*

She was fairly certain they'd just taken a hit, but didn't have time to confirm. *No time to look a gift bantha in the mouth.* "Alright, Besh and Trill, lead the way. I'll cover from high."

"Got it."

"Roger."

At least they understood the nicknames. There was no time to explain things at this point. While the Brotherhood ships had overmatch in terms of modernity, the Tenixirs had sheer weight of numbers that was rapidly whittling away at them. One of the TIEs was caught in a burst of Headhunter fire, while another simply rammed an A-Wing in the course of trying to dance around it. Even the retreating pair weren't left unmolested, as a breakaway element caught the Firespray in the rear, leaving little more than the pilot's brief cursing scream on the comm. The Decimator was able to critically damage both Revenant craft, leaving one to float away without power while the other struggled to veer back for home.

Whatever had the Severian Principate's fleet so occupied that they couldn't assist, Qyreia couldn't begin to guess. What little amount of thought she could put to it suggested there was something they weren't telling the pilots that were out fighting. They needed to end this fight.

Fortunately, *The Screeching Osprey* was not an incredibly fast ship, and the three torpedo-armed starfighters were bearing down on it quickly. The Tenixirs had taken note though, and a flight of their remaining A-Wings tore through space to intercept them. They broke through the Decimator screen, ignoring and dodging the green bolts that chased after them, and started to batter away at the bombers anew.

Given the TIE/sa's lack of shields, Qyreia did everything she could to dissuade the starfighters from harassing it too heavily. She destroyed one in a pass and drove off more while the A-Wings reeled from the initial shock. When they finally broke away to lick their wounds, she almost felt good about herself until she realized that the B-Wing's evasive maneuvers had broken it away from their little group. Between its shields and its dodges, it was doing well enough, but the pirates were gradually pushing it further and further into the path of the Quasar Fire, which was now turning toward the engagement in a bid to finish the fight.

"Besh! B-Wing! Adjust your heading! You're in the carrier's firing arc!"

"I can't get these frackers off me!"

The X-Wing banked down, power shunted to the engines in a vain effort to try and catch up, only for the previously routed A-Wings to return and harass the Arconan. A turn and pull, guns *womp-womp-womped* and shattered through the canopy, and spat fire into the hull of another as she rolled and yawed to the right. Her head jerked around toward the B-Wing just in time to see the pursuing A-Wings break off.

Such sudden peace settled the pilot's hand on the controls. *"I think I'm clear!"*

That was when the turbolasers from *The Screeching Osprey* came to life and, in a great flash of powerful green energy bolts, the lone B-Wing ceased to exist.

"Knock out that fracker's engines!" Qyreia belted at the TIE bomber that was now readily within range.

"What about the shields?"

"I'll take care of them. If that doesn't work, get under the shields and do it close, but you don't let that schutta get away from here!"

The carrier turned slowly to maneuver on the offensive starfighters, and had the T-65 within its firing arc, but without the A-Wings to harass her, Qyreia was able to weave and juke aside the green lances that tore through the black. A flip of a switch and a button press later, two torpedoes sailed through the same space, framed by a red energy reply to the turbolasers. The guns would do little against the capital ship's power, but even a little bit could be enough to tip the scales when the ordinance struck the shields. When they impacted, the combined explosions penetrated and overwhelmed the relatively weak shields, leaving a wave of dissipating energy to follow as the Zeltron brought her ship low over the topside hull, peppering the plating with fire as she went.

All just in time for Qyreia to see a blackish splotch, set against the colors of the planet below, bank around toward the rear of *The Screeching Osprey*. She didn't quite see the ordinance launched, but the corona of the detonations were, given their situation, a wonderful thing to witness.

"All primary engines destroyed! Going for the small ones now."

"Do it then fall in behind me," she said to the view of more flashes of green cannons and ordinance impacts. Her X-Wing passed over the aft end of the ship just as the TIE bomber was making a final run on the last of the thrusters. "I've got something to take care of."

Her T-65 rolled over and pitched the starfighter up to fly along the underside of the carrier, taking special note of the bulbous protrusion on the underside of the bow. She might not know where the bridge was, but she knew where those turbolasers were, and she meant to get a little payback for the B-Wing's fate. Qyreia nosed down a little, then came back up to strike hard at the belly, firing both torpedo tubes and banking away, making sure to keep the turbos within view.

Their barrels were just starting to turn toward the starfighters when the explosives hit. Without any shields to protect them now, though, the ordinance's effect on the lightly armored cruiser carrier was devastating. While the nose of the broad triangular ship was still mostly intact, the turbolaser banks erupted in a volcano of fire and debris as the guns' power banks created secondary explosions that caused further damage to the greater superstructure. It was a satisfying sight in the wake of the damages the Brotherhood pilots had suffered.

"There's one victory for the Harmonists," Qyreia muttered as she girded herself for the fight with what remained of the squadrons.

What she didn't expect was to hear the old Severian officer's voice over the comm. *"Ah, so that is where your loyalties lie."*

Sithspit! Channel's still open. Regardless of that, there was a renewed fight to be had. Or at least she thought so, until she saw what was probably two or three squadrons' worth of A-Wings and Z-95s turning toward open void and blipping out of existence as they disappeared into hyperspace. *Taking their bloody nose rather than dying to the last man. Smart.*

"Hey Qek," came her bomber wingman's voice, *"check out the reinforcements."*

It was hard to tell which group he was calling reinforcements, exactly. The Decimators and the Starhopper, along with one other TIE-type fighter, listed in the former battlespace, surrounded by debris and generally looking to be in poor shape. But they were still technically operational and, more importantly, alive.

What caught her attention more was the collection of small transports scuttling along toward the now utterly disabled carrier. Given the varied models and appearances of them all, she hazarded they were Brotherhood stock as well. *So they were hiding something after all.* Remeë chirped through her internals that there was a secure line pinging her.

Hesitantly, she accepted the call. “Hello?”

“*You would do well to be less vocal about your allegiances,*” came the older human’s voice. Qyreia could see his sour expression in her head, and it only served to irritate her.

“And why’s that?” she asked rather sternly, caught between her lingering disdain for him and his newfound presumptuousness.

“*Because next time you may not be so lucky to speak among like-minded individuals.*”

That caught her attention.

“You’re...?”

“*Take care, Colonel Arronen. See that you don’t leave Lieutenant Arnik without someone to believe in.*”

Without another word, the channel was cut, leaving Qyreia in a brief silence while her R3 rotated them back to the group channel. “Y’know Remster? I think things are starting to get interesting.”