

Tipool City Outskirts
Qotho Peninsula, Dandoran
Doran System

Kamlin Xarel was dead by the time she hit the ground. Adlez screamed, in shock as much as anything. Vairya's hands trembled. The moment seemed to stretch out into eternity.

Vairya turned, tears streaming down her face, and leveled the blaster at her remaining colleague. "Adlez, I swear..."

The Twi'lek stared back, blue eyes defiant in the dim lighting of the command tent. "You might as well shoot, traitor," she snapped.

"Actually," a mellifluous voice called from the entryway, "I think there's been more than enough excitement already."

The triumvirs' heads snapped to look at the voice's owner, who was herself holding a blaster at the ready. Alethia Archenksova nudged Kamlin's body with the polished toe of one boot, her eyes focused on the dead Falleen's compatriots. "I suppose we have you to thank for the monstrosities ripping their way through the OEF line.

"I didn't know," Vairya gasped, "I swear." The barrel of her sidearm danced in her trembling hands.

"That much is obvious," the Odanite quipped. "For the Force's sake, Vairya, put that down before you hurt somebody."

The Triumvir of Oaths dropped the blaster.

"We're saving the Principate," Adlez spat.

"Spare me the 'end justify the means' speech if you don't mind, Alethia answered. "I've given it enough times to get the gist by now. How do we stop them?"

The Twi'lek sneered. "You don't. That's the point."

"Right now, your Restoration Troopers are killing everything they can catch, not just the Revenants. And anything they can't catch, those other things *can*. If you want any of your own troops to make it off this hellish rock, call off or shut down or just stop them."

The Triumvir of Words narrowed her eyes. Her delicate fingers danced across the control panel of the comms console and panicked voices filled the room. Principate positions all over the city were being overrun, ripped apart—in some cases literally—by the Ascendant creatures. Whatever she and Kamlin had envisioned for the day, this was certainly not it.

“Attention, all Principate forces: this is Adlez Freewoman. All units withdraw to the nearest extraction point immediately. Restoration Troopers, cover the retreat.” She tapped a button and the tent went silent again. “Are you happy?”

“Deliriously,” Archenksova snapped, but she lowered her blaster. “The Jedi bought us a few minutes but we need to get you to—

Adlez seized on the split second of inattention to reach for her own blaster, brought up to aim at Vairya. A shot rang out. Vairya screamed and returned fire.

The flash faded, both women staring at each other in disbelief that they had both missed.

Alethia lifted her own weapon and Adlez Freewoman fell, her corpse sprawled across Kamlin’s.

“Kamlin was a fool,” Alethia said, sure to let the coreward, Imperial, accent saturate her voice. “But she was a decent shot, at least.” She tucked the blaster back into a coat pocket, took Vairya’s hand, and pulled her from the tent.

“Why are you doing this?” the Chalactan asked, stumbling after the Odanite.

“Because I spent my life serving the Empire,” she replied, not daring to look back lest the other woman see the pain and fear in her eyes. “And then I got a second chance. The Severian Principate is the Empire’s second chance—and you seem to be the only one left who understands that.”