

Zekk paced the command deck of the *Warrior*, biting his nail nervously. The *Warrior* was the closest ship to answer the mayday call from Sin Squadron, and had made the hyperjump before anyone else. The rest of the battlegroup was not far behind. Zekk hated to lose any one of his pilots, and he wasn't about to let it happen this time.

He felt the *Warrior* lurch as the long, thin lines of light became shorter and shorter, until they became single dots of light. Zekk looked out at the scene before him. Three New Republic MC90 Star Cruisers had surrounded Sin Squadron, enveloping them, as two full wings of New Republic fighters chased them about. The fact that every TIE Sinister was still flying was a miracle. Zekk sprinted for the deck to read the diagnostic layout. He slammed his fist down on the comms button as he read it. All across the ship, the red alert alarm sounded.

“General Frown! I want every damn ship with a laser on it deployed right *now!*” yelled Zekk. Commander Hogan was at 30% hull. Firebreaker had half an engine left. Even Rando was only at 80% shields. The rest of Sin was faring just as well. Zekk scowled. He turned to his droid. “Beer, go prepare my TIE Sinister for flight.”

“Sir?” Beer replied. “We are outnumbered. I cannot guarantee the remainder of the battlegroup will reach us in time. I would not recommend you go into combat.”

Zekk turned to glare at Beer. “Was I not clear? I don't have time for this, Beer. By the time we are close enough to deploy, my TIE better be ready for takeoff,” said Zekk. Beer nodded, and clanked away. “Navigation!”

“Aye sir!” came the call from the control pit.

“Full speed ahead. Turn the ship to place us in between our fighters and the cruiser and bring all our autoguns to bear on their ships,” yelled Zekk.

There was a slight delay in answering. “Sir, you want to cross the T against three MC90 Star Cruisers? We'll be surrounded,” came the reply from the young Lieutenant in the pit.

“Good, then they can’t get away,” replied Zekk. “Do as I say, Lieutenant, or I will find someone who will.”

The Lieutenant thought about it for a moment as Zekk felt the engines kick into overdrive. The ship began turning hard to port. “Commander Hogan!” yelled Zekk into the comms. Zekk continued to read the scrolling reports as Theta, Kappa, and Rho Squadrons launched.

“Aye sir, Commander Hogan reporting,” came the reply over the comms.

“What the hell happened? We were out looking for pirates!” exclaimed Zekk.

“--out of nowh--, sir,” came Hogan’s garbled reply. The little bit of shields he had managed to regenerate dissipated as he took laser fire, causing static over the line. “--ot looking –good, sir. Rando, keeping us –ive, sir.”

“Yeah, he does that. Robert, you hang in there. Keep yourself and your men alive, help is on the way, do you understand me? Keep your men alive and head to the *Warrior*,” said Zekk.

There came static on the line, and yelling as Zekk heard more laser fire. The status report showed Robert’s TIE Sinister was still flying. Zekk looked out the viewport as one of his attaches stood next to him. “Sir, I don’t think we’re going to make it in time,” he said.

Zekk felt his anxiety rising. He couldn’t just stand here on the deck watching his men die. “I don’t think so either, Captain,” replied Zekk.

The comms crackled to life again, direct to the bridge this time. “Sir?” came the voice over the line.

Zekk didn’t recognize the voice immediately. It sounded vaguely familiar, like he had heard it long ago. “Aye? Who is this?” replied Zekk.

“Lieutenant Colonel Rando, sir,” came the reply over the line. “Commander Hogan has issued the retreat order.”

“I know. I issued the order. All of Wing II is on the way, but you need to get back to the ship. You can’t stay out there. They’ll eat you alive,” said Zekk. Zekk couldn’t even remember the last time Rando spoke over comms.

“Sir, I wanted to say, thank you for everything,” replied Rando. The line went dead.

Zekk looked at the comlink in disbelief. “Rando?” said Zekk. There was no response. “Rando! Rando!” There was still no answer. Zekk looked up into his viewport as the *Annihilator*, the *Eradicator*, the *Pan*, and the *Mithras* all arrived at once. Reinforcements had finally arrived, but it was going to be too little too late. As Sin Squadron limped back to the *Warrior*, Zekk observed a lone TIE Sinister turning around and screaming through the New Republic’s fighter lines. It danced through laser fire as A-wings and X-wings exploded around it. Several squadrons turned around to follow Rando, the rest crashed into battle with Wing II. Rando was buying Sin valuable time.

“Rando, you motherfu...” Zekk trailed off. He dropped his comlink and ran in a dead sprint to the hangar bay before his regular stormtrooper escort even realized what was happening. They broke after him. He shed his hat and tunic on the floor as he ran, wearing just his undershirt and pants by the time he arrived. He began donning his flight suit with the help of the flight crew, and began climbing up the ladder to the hatch when he felt a tug on his leg. He looked down to see Fleet Admiral Plif.

“Rear Admiral Terrik, stand down. You cannot go out there,” he said calmly.

“Let go of my leg, sir. My pilots are going to die out there,” said Zekk through gritted teeth.

“Your pilots are doing their job. Look out the shields,” said Plif.

Zekk leaned over, looking out the shields of the hangar bay. The command deck of one of the cruisers was on fire and listing badly to port. Its engines were clearly dead. A lone TIE Sinister, with one dead engine and no shields, was endlessly doing strafing runs on it as the other two broke into a full retreat. Their pilots, desperately trying to reach the hangar bay before they fled, were being chased by the pilots of Wing II.

“Rando made his choice. You know this. Stand down,” said Plif. Zekk looked up at the hatch, then back down at Plif, and slammed his fist down on the ladder. He reached up through the Force, and the hatch closed on its own as Zekk descended. He turned to look at Plif.

“He’s going to die out there,” said Zekk.

“Yes, but he chose that. He’s going to die so your pilots will live,” said Plif.

The hangar bay alarm sounded as the deck officer came up to them. “Sirs, I recommend you clear the deck. We have ships coming in hot,” he said. They cleared the deck quickly as TIE Sinisters came limping in; as Robert’s TIE entered the oxygenated atmosphere of the ship, it immediately caught fire in its engine. One of its wings was completely missing. The fire crew put it out quickly as other TIEs came barreling in, landing as best they could, some skidding across the hangar bay and throwing sparks. Miraculously, all of Sin survived. The pilots of Sin emerged from their crafts, drenched in sweat. Robert stood doubled over, catching his breath, before looking around to count the ships. He stopped.

“We’re missing...where is Rando?” said Robert, as Zekk and Plif approached him. “Sir? Deck officer! Get me a spaceworthy ship! I’m going back out there!”

“Stand down, Commander. Rando has made his choice. Look out the hangar,” said Zekk. Plif gestured. One Calamari cruiser was breaking apart in space. The two remaining cruisers made a hyperjump and behind them, a lone, long black streak followed them. Rando was gone.

One week later....

Zekk stood at the briefing table with Fleet Admiral Plif onboard the *Warrior*. The holograms of Rear Admiral Phoenix Berkana aboard the ISD *Hammer*, High Admiral Anahorn Dempsey aboard the ISD *Challenge*, and Grand Admiral Rapier aboard the SSD *Avenger* joined them.

“So you are going to look me in the eye and tell me we’re not going after him?” said Zekk.

“Zekk...” said Rapier. “Rando has done this before.”

“Yes and he always comes back. Something is wrong, sir. We have to go after him. Not only is he a valuable member of Wing II, he is my friend. The *Warrior* leaves no man behind,” said Zekk.

“Zekk, Rando disobeyed a direct retreat order to save the rest of Sin Squadron. You would have lost many more men if not for him,” said Plif. “We must honor his sacrifice.”

“You’re right, sir. And every single pilot of Wing II wants to go follow that hyperjump and find him,” said Zekk. “What do I go to tell them?”

“The same thing I told you,” said Plif. Phoenix and Dempsey looked at each other. Zekk looked at Plif, who looked at Rapier.

“We will continue the mission, Rear Admiral. I have made my decision. We will not put the entire fleet in danger to save one man, no matter who it is. Return to your post, Zekk,” said Rapier. Zekk picked up his datapad.

“Very well, sir,” he said quietly. As he headed to the door he slammed the datapad into the wall, shattering it into pieces. The rest of the briefing room got quiet.

“I sense he is still alive. We have not seen the last of Rando. I don’t think the Rebels have either,” said Rapier.

“I agree, sir,” said Plif.

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As Zekk approached the hangar bay, Sin Squadron stood milling about in their flight suits. They sprang to attention as Zekk entered the hangar. Their newly repaired and retrofitted TIE Sinisters stood behind them, gleaming, shining, and ready for more combat.

“Stand down, Sinners. Don’t waste your time,” said Zekk.

Robert looked at him in disbelief. “Sir?” he said.

“The Fleet Commander will not risk the security of the fleet. Three MC90’s jumped the battlegroup’s elite squadron out of nowhere. Something is up. We don’t know what we’re walking into, and he doesn’t want to risk it,” said Zekk.

“But sir...” said Robert.

Zekk looked down at a flight helmet sitting on the floor, and angrily kicked it across the hangar. A couple mechanics looked up from where they were playing cards, and promptly looked back down as it bounced across the floor.

“He’s right,” said Zekk. “Rando is gone.”

Robert stiffened as his face went expressionless, and he responded with the tone of voice that indicated he clearly did not agree, but was following orders. “Yes sir,” said Robert. Behind him, Firebreaker let out a mournful Wookiee cry. Zekk heard grumbling as the rest of Sin began to slowly, sadly remove their flight suits.

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Rando never returned from his hyperjump. In the weeks following, as the efficient Imperial recordkeeping caught up to the situation, the full enormity of what transpired reached everyone. The combat logs indicated Rando had destroyed a total of 75 New Republic fighters and one MC90 Star Cruiser during the engagement – slightly more than a full wing of fighters. He had saved the lives of his entire squadron and prevented catastrophic damage to the *Warrior* through his sacrifice. Personnel officially declared him MIA, presumed dead, and he was posthumously awarded the Gold Star of the Empire for his bravery in combat. They even had a funeral for him, placing his few material goods in a casket along with his new medal and ejecting it into void. Zekk gave a brief eulogy at the funeral.

“I was Rando’s commander in Sin for a long time,” he said. “I’m alive today because of him. He saved my life more times than I can count. We are all here today because of him. Because of him, we are alive today to celebrate his sacrifice and his life.” Zekk could hear sobbing in the audience.

“We are here today to mourn the loss of a brother, a great pilot aboard the *Warrior*. Likely the greatest pilot in the fleet. But in our loss we have also gained. We are here to celebrate the thousands of Rebels he killed and, because of his sacrifice, we can continue our mission to restore the Empire. We will not let Rando’s sacrifice be in vain,” said Zekk.

Rando did not use the Sin bunkrooms for much more than sleeping and, unlike the typical TIE pilot, did not drink alcohol at all. He spent all his time in the hangar bay, and would often sit on top of a crate of warheads sipping tea. His free time was spent inspecting his TIE in and out, polishing it to a fine shine. Occasionally he would stand up, walk over to his TIE, and wipe a slight fingerprint off of it with a rag, then return to his crate and tea. The men of Sin Squadron later petitioned their Commodore to rename Sin's hangar bay, where Rando spent most of his time, to Hangar Bay Rando, which Zekk granted.

And after the funeral, Zekk joined his men in Hangar Bay Rando to raise a cup of tea to honor Rando's sacrifice. It was time to get work.