

*The Only Way to Win is By Not Playing*

Battle is a fickle thing. One moment, you might be walking or slinking through some underbrush; the next, you've got a smoking hole in your head. The *snap* and shrieks of rounds flying overhead or rattling off in the distance filled the air — a concerto of dull thuds and echoing roars made all the more crisp as an X-Wing flew overhead. The explosions of its strafing run rolled over the dilapidated buildings moments later. Faron City was a bombed out shell of its former self, tall industrial towers smoking at intervals along their heights, while the streets beneath their shadows were filled with more rubble and ruin than most “civilized” sentients could likely imagine.

Then there were the bodies. Despite the heat, the stink had not yet taken hold of the area. Few enough civilians were part of the gory menagerie. Brotherhood and Collective troops alike mingled their blood in the dust. Limbs protruded from piles of broken concrete, buried by an artillery shell's impact.

For now, the area was devoid of action. It only made the scenery all the more eerie as Qyreia led the way through the streets, her feet emanating a soft scrape with every step on the dusty ground. Four others followed behind — Arconan soldiers that had survived a brutal assault by a unit of the Collective's Fanatics. They moved quickly and in relative silence, save for their steady, labored breathing. Two Selenians, a baseline human, and a Rodian. They were quite the motley crew, by all appearances.

“You smell that?” One of the Selenians, a tall male named Teric, cocked his head to the side as they passed through a narrow causeway of street with blown-out sinkholes to either side.

“Opened up the sewer,” his female counterpart, Hale, said neutrally, trying to maintain the image of the stoic leader. She had just been promoted to corporal before the war started. Now she had to face the reality of responsibility in the worst fighting she'd ever seen in her three years in the army. “Pollomy, you seeing anything weird?”

Their Rodian's eyes darted around carefully, his infrared visual spectrum giving him an entirely different view than that of the others. “Just a lot of steam. None of the bodies are even warm anymore. Well, no warmer than everything *else* around here.”

Stevenaeus, or “Steve” as the others called him, remained quiet. His eyes had stayed largely glued to Qyreia, though in an effort to mimic her movements and manners. If she'd survived this long, then she was worth copying. It was the only reason the Zeltron hadn't lost her mind with him eyeballing her for the last two hours, especially from behind. A bit of pity also helped. After all, everyone else from their company was or so badly wounded that they were out of the battle and on their way to a hospital ship.

“Ma'am,” Hale said quietly as she closed the distance with the mercenary Aedile, “GPS is saying we're in Odan Urr's sector right now. We need to turn left and go about two clicks to get back to our own AO.”

“I know, Corporal. Keep heading straight.”

“Ma'am?”

“Urr is lagging, and I’ve got fresh intel on a juicy target not far from here.” She looked around as their pace slowed for the conversation. “Besides, their Consul owes me a drink. After this, he’ll owe me a barrel or we’ll be even, depending on how he feels about people stealing his thunder.”

“Can’t say I know much about Sorenn,” the Selenian woman said with disinterest as she made sure her people were where they should be. “At any rate, we’re well past Odan Urr’s front lines as well. I’m surprised we haven’t run across any Techie grunts, or any of the other freaks for that matter.”

“What’s this target?” Pollomy whispered harshly. “This is looking more and more like a suicide mission.”

“Collective leadership.” The Zeltron pulled up a holo of a red-haired woman. “Captain Chelsie Crimson. Real *schutta* with a blaster, according to intel, and a rather good officer.”

“What a hottie,” Teric said unabashedly. Hale shot him a hard stare, but Qyreia chuckled and nodded.

“That she is. Probably not so hot in her armor. Be on the lookout for red and black; old Clone Wars type stuff.”

A unanimous nod went through the four troopers before the group resumed its march. After the revelation from their team leader though, everyone seemed to hug the buildings a little more closely; their steps a little bit lighter and their eyes just a bit more wary for an ambush. It always seemed to be an ambush that started a fight. These urban environments were rife with them. An ambush would turn into a firefight and, as subsequent units came to the front, it became a protracted engagement that usually ended with one side withdrawing a block or two to repeat the process.

No one wanted to fight the battle of meters inside the buildings. Just one reason why the Fanatic attacks were more effective than they would have been in another, more open setting.

Several blocks further down their route, Pollomy halted the group and everyone took to cover. He pointed to a building that was still largely intact — some form of clothing shop before the fighting started — where the briefest shadow of a muzzle poked from the shadowed window before disappearing within. *They haven’t seen us yet*, Qyreia thought, thankful they hadn’t been caught completely off-guard.

With practiced efficiency, they moved toward the structure, hugging the walls on the same side of the street so as not to be seen by the sentries. The tough choice that they had to face was whether they should shoot everyone within, or stay silent and try to do the same without raising the alarm in a two block radius. An even more tempting course of action was to bypass it entirely, but it seemed better to not have the enemy at their backs when they were already so far behind their front lines. Quiet or loud, they decided it best to kill the enemy within. They would just have to play it by ear.

Getting close was no easy feat. The occupants were well prepared and clearly practiced in maintaining a security posture, if a little sloppy in the doing. *Judging by their clothes*, Qyreia thought as she peered through a first floor window, *they’re part of the mercenary forces*. The uncoordinated clothing and mixes of various armors carried well with their low, guttural speech, confirming the Zeltron’s suspicions. That, at least, meant these were Liberation Front troops.

Trained well enough, but their equipment was lacking somewhat compared to the troops of the other two pillars of the Collective.

Hauling herself quietly over the lip of the window, the Zeltron slipped her knife from the sheath in her boot and crept forward. She was halfway across the room, closing the distance to her victim, completely unaware of the soldier that had been lingering in the corner that was simultaneously sneaking up on *her*.

A meaty *crack* caught the attention of both the Zeltron and her target, turning their heads about to see the rearmost pursuer fall to the ground alongside the rock that had taken him in the side of the head. For a brief moment, Qyreia and the Collective mercenary looked at each other, not entirely sure how to proceed. Being caught in the act of trying to kill someone — especially by one's own target — is always an awkward experience. The Aedile remedied the silence first, foregoing her knife and, taking the rifle in both hands while the knife sat awkwardly in the middle, she swung the stock right into the enemy trooper's throat, crushing his larynx before knocking his own blaster away with a follow-up strike.

The other Arconans surged inward, their only sounds coming from the scuffle of their boots. Hale and Teric took the stairs upward, while Stevenaeus and Pollomy continued further into the first floor. Sounds of clothing racks toppling accompanied that of silent struggles from both directions. They'd kept the element of surprise. The results weren't pretty, nor was the execution as palatable as just shooting them from two hundred meters out, but they cleared the shop on all levels of Collective presence.

"Got two up on the second floor, and a sniper on the third," Hale reported, somewhat winded and sweat heavy on her brow.

"We had another pair in the next room," the Rodian added nonchalantly. "All clear now, though."

Hale set the team into security positions around the room before returning her attention to the Zeltron. "How much further? I don't think it's gonna be this easy next time around."

"That depends," Qyreia said, picking up a communicator from her kill, "on what they're saying right now."

*"...-oving to the front. Scarlet-Six is with the formation. All positions report in."*

Qyreia eyed the rough map on her own wristcomm's screen and listened. *Those are... letter combinations? Of what?* She listened more intently, Hale hovering over her shoulder.

*"Two-Aurek-Forn."*

*"One-Grek-Herf."*

"The numbers..." She looked at the map, noting the barely legible street names. "The numbers are distance by blocks, and the letters are street names!" She turned to the human of the group. "Steve! Street signs! What do they say?!"

More than a little surprised at the outburst, he vaulted out of the window and ran to the nearest intersection. He returned seconds later, panting slightly. "Gallic and Morainne."

"Thanks," Corporal Hale said in a clipped but pleased reply. "Back to your position."

Stevenaeus complied, leaving the two females to hover over the communicator. The positions gradually came closer, until the last one reported three blocks from them and the line went quiet.

“That’s us next, I bet.”

“Any women in the group?”

Rather than reply, Teric quietly slipped from his position over to the pair. “What’s the distance?” Qyreia showed him three fingers. “Three, Grek, Mern,” he said, following the letters that the Zeltron mouthed to him.

*“All positions confirmed. Expect thirty minutes until we reach the front line trace. How copy?”*

“Copy three-zero minutes. Over.” Teric confirmed.

*“Good copy three-Grek-Mern. Scarlet-Six-Resh out.”*

Hale breathed a sigh of relief while Qyreia sent Teric back to his position with an impressed “thanks.” The tension in the room did not subside though. Rather than moving on an assassination target, the five Arconans were likely to face down a much bigger enemy. Several long minutes were spent in deliberation before the Zeltron finally called everyone into a huddle, with the Rodian remaining on guard within earshot.

“She’ll have at *least* a platoon,” Hale said as they looked over their rough map of the area they’d made on the floor with clothes, debris, and spare office supplies they’d found. “Maybe a company.”

“Cap’ns usually command the latter,” the human chimed in.

“Either way, ma’am, we are *grossly* outnumbered.” An artillery barrage in the direction of the Odanite-Collective frontlines interrupted the Selenian, the walls and floor vibrating subtly around them. “If we can get this info to Odan Urr, or maybe our air corps, we could have them take care of it.”

“You didn’t seem to have a problem going in when it was all sneaky, even if it took us to the heart of Collective territory.” The corporal didn’t have an answer for that. “Listen, we just need to get Crimson. Once that’s done, we slip away and make space-dust back to our own lines.”

“Don’t know if you noticed, ma’am,” Pollomy said, his eyes never leaving their watchful vigil, “but we’re not exactly kitted out for this sort of thing. Teric’s our grenadier, but he’s got, what? Two grenades left?”

“One,” he replied flatly.

“Right. And we’re toting E-11s which, don’t get me wrong, are nice guns and all, but they’re not suited to sniping out one person from a big group.”

Qyreia rumbled incoherently to herself, listening to the others, but clearly focusing on some unspoken battle plan. “Anyone know anything about construction? Or rather, *destruction*?”

“Worked on a good chunk of the newer establishments in the Sinchi Ring,” Teric said with a sliver of pride working through his apprehension.

“Do you think we could make any of the local buildings crash onto the street?” She pulled out her Denton Charge. “I can supply the catalyst.”

He let out a soft whistle. “That might just do it.”

Hale looked down at their terrain model. “Knock out a chunk with the rubble after they’ve started passing?”

“Yup.”

She shook her head. “Won’t be enough to take ‘em all out.”

“Doesn’t have to,” Qyreia said, shaking the Selenian by the shoulder encouragingly. “Just has to buy us some time.”

“Well,” Teric said confidently as he tossed the explosive in his hand, “I can guarantee you, we’ll get plenty with this.”

### *Twenty minutes later...*

“All Scarlet elements, we’re nearing our final checkpoint. Check your spacing and keep your guys’ heads on a swivel.”

Confirmation replies came in steadily through Chelsie’s communicator embedded into her armor’s vambrace. Her eyes were watching her little DRK-1, flitting from building to empty building. It was strange to see, given that only days ago the whole street had been alive with business and civilian traffic. It was nothing compared to Nancora’s glory days, back when the world was still green and had readily available water. Now there was even less.

*Rath will make them pay for this.* She allowed herself to drink in the visual memories she had of their charismatic leader. Such dalliances were becoming more and more scarce of late, and she saw less and less of the man in person as much as the dwindling number of holo-calls. *I can’t wait to get out of this armor. Two days of this Sithspit, and I’m sore. Probably stink too.* She subtly sniffed at her armpit, briefly forgetting the armor. *Gotta relieve some tension, regardless.* When her droid let out a trilling *beep*, she returned her attention to the situation at hand. That was the droid’s warning signal. Something was wrong.

That was when she saw the flash of red and heard the screeching sound of blaster fire.

*“Contact front! Seventy five meters!”*

The radio came to life, her leaders running battle drills they’d practiced hundreds of times; some of them in Faron’s abandoned streets further toward the outskirts. This was just a live rehearsal, as far as their training went.

“Let him figure out what’s happening,” she told her senior sergeants. “Clear the net of superfluous chatter.”

“Roger, CeeCee.”

She was halfway to calling up to headquarters when the world seemed to turn upside down. It wasn’t so much the shockwave from the explosion, though that definitely helped, as much as the soldier that came up from behind and tackled her away from the building that was falling on top of the formation. The helmet spared her ears the ringing that those around her

were experiencing — those that escaped the mountain of rubble that covered the entire width of the street, that is.

“H-how...?”

“Ma’am!” A stunned trooper was yelling to get her attention. “CeeCee, are you alright?”

“I... Yes, yes I’m alright. What the hell happened?”

The soldier pointed at the remnants of the building. “Explosives took it down from the inside. More’n half the company is stuck on the other side of that pile.”

Her expression soured, unseen beneath the helmet’s visor. “Scarlet-One,” she said over the radio, “what’s your situation?”

*“We’re pinned down in an ambush. Currently trying to get my squads to maneuver forward and clear the buildings. Over.”*

“Save one for rear security. We just had a building fall on top of us.”

“A... a building?!”

“Yeah. I’ll be moving up to your position. Scarlet-Six out.” She turned to the soldier that had saved her from being crushed. “Get the rest of the company over that rubble. We can see about recovering any wounded after the fight is over.”

“Yes ma’am!”

The soldier offered a formal nod — one doesn’t salute in the field, much less when there is an active enemy presence — and dashed off to ensure his commander’s orders were followed. Crimson moved forward, helping up dazed troops and cycling the power in her blaster. As the sounds of fire grew louder, she began moving from cover to cover, letting her droid flit about and provide her a modicum of situational awareness.

As she approached, she could see a squad dash across the open ground of the intersection to a building that clearly was occupied by the enemy. They took one casualty in the crossing, but all seemed well once they were lined up on the door. That was until a crossfire erupted from a window in a separate structure overlooking their position. Two fell dead and one was seriously wounded. The only safe haven was inside.

Seconds later, an explosion burst the windows outward and the squad’s comms went silent.

“Dammit.” *These Brotherhood scum are gonna pay for this!*

Further up the road, watching the action from yet another structure, Qyreia peered through the scope of her rifle while Corporal Hale stood by.

“Well, there goes my team’s last grenade.” She looked down briefly at the one on the Zeltron’s belt, but refrained from mentioning it.

“Tell the guys to start pulling out. They’ll be overwhelmed otherwise.”

“Yes ma’am.” The Selenian woman stepped aside and gave the orders, receiving replies of confirmation from all except one. “Pollomy’s not responding.”

The Aedile watched as the Rodian's building was stormed by another Collective squad, the sounds of blaster fire filtering faintly through the gaps in the distant walls. After a few minutes, all went silent.

"I need to get him help!"

"He's dead, Corporal." The words were bitter on Qyreia's tongue. As cold an exterior as she put up, she hated every death that happened as a result of the conflict. Still torn as she was over Atyiru's fall in the initial stages of the war, even the Collective troops had families that would be bereaved at their deaths. "Get the rest of your men out of here."

"What about you?"

Her gray-blue eyes narrowed as black and red armor entered her scope. "I've still got something to take care of."

Hale hesitated. "W-we'll wait for you at the rendezvous point."

"Thanks. I appreciate it." She sighed. "If I'm not there in three hours, or you're compromised, don't worry about me; get out of there."

The blonde woman nodded knowingly and slipped out the door, her rapid footsteps dwindling beneath the sounds of battle several stories below and many meters out. *Frack, I hope they make it. I hope I make it.* Qyreia resettled her buttstock against her shoulder, exhaled slowly, and squeezed the trigger.

Call it the "will of the Force," or a fluke, or a freak accident. Chelsie couldn't help but feel like something was off; like there was electricity rolling over her neck, telling her to juke left and forward. It almost resembled a trip in its execution, but the split-second reflex let her watch as a bolt of red energy careened past her shoulder and explode on the pavement. Beneath her helmet's visor, her blue eyes darted to a building further up the road of the intersection. Another shot lanced out, but she easily sidestepped the projectile as such range. Dashing to cover, she took aim with her E-11 and fired into the window that had assaulted her.

Qyreia barely had time to duck before the red energy tore through the air where her head had been. "Ho-lee Sithspit!" She peered over the windowsill and was met by a burst of material shards as another shot hit the edge. "Damn, that cheeka is frackin' good."

Down below, Captain Crimson bounded forward as a squad came up to reinforce her, accompanied by its lieutenant platoon leader. "What's the status on the rest of your platoon?"

"Caught a Rodian holed up in that spot across the street from that grenade detonation. My men dealt with it." He conveniently left out the part about how the melee had resulted in a combat knife slowly going into the still-fighting Rodian's chest. His commander didn't need that level of detail. "I saw the sniper shot. I'll send my squad and..."

"No, I'll handle this. Have your troops secure the perimeter around the base of the building." She fired another salvo to answer a burst from above. "I can handle one little Brotherhood sympathizer."

*She needs to pay for all this damage; all this death.*

Between the accurate fire from the well-armored Crimson and the suppressive onslaught from her apparent bodyguard, Qyreia couldn't so much as raise her head or blind-fire from her

vantage. *Time to move, I think.* Staying low, she crawled quickly out of the room, finally able to stand again once she was in the hall. *She'll have to take the stairs to get up here. Elevator is busted.* She looked again at the broken grav-lift rails, half-melted by repeated blaster fire and warped to unusability. The redhead might be able to go up a couple floors, but it would take less time to walk, and Qyreia planned to be long gone by then.

The Zeltron had just started ascending the stairs when a blaster bolt sheared off a section of handrail. A quick peek revealed Crimson rapidly climbing up the flights, releasing a shot whenever the Arconan came into view. *Friggin' frackballs. When did she get there?* Qyreia returned the gesture with like accuracy, making the Collective officer hug the space beneath the steps of the square stairwell.

It became a game of cat-and-mouse, both fighters circling ever up the steps, trading blaster fire, but never finding purchase despite their accuracy. Qyreia was too observant, and Crimson's muscle memory too precise. Their running battle brought the Zeltron all the way to the top stair, halted by a locked service door that led out onto the roof. She was trapped, and the human below was quick to notice this. A flurry of red energy darted up, forcing Qyreia against the wall as she considered her options. The door was too sturdy to kick down, and she had no way to hack the security terminal.

"Kriff this," she growled, turning her rifle and firing into the locks and wall-mounted computer in frustration. She was pleasantly surprised when the door slid open with a sputtered *hiss*. "Well... I didn't expect that to work."

The rooftop was, however, about as useful as she'd expected: flat, with no cover, and a good five meters from the next rooftop. Shad had to think fast. Crimson was right on her tail.

Chelsie knew better than to charge headlong into any area. A rooftop offered too many opportunistic vantages. The shooter might've hopped to a different building, or taken cover amidst a forest of ventilation ductwork. Blaster at her shoulder, she stepped carefully forward, scanning the doorway as she crested the stairwell. The building horizon seemed clear, but that could have been a ruse. All that time spent training her troops was filtering into her own mind, scenarios playing out like a holo-recording on loop.

Stepping out to clear the rooftop seemed such a simple task. When her vision filled with the silhouette of a rifle stock, she reconsidered this task. While the impact may have had a very plastic-like *clack* quality against her helmet, Crimson felt the whole of the impact as it clotheslined her, knocking the commander hard onto her back. The Zeltron came into view in the next moment, and she had just enough wherewithal to kick out with her legs and knock her assailant off of *her* feet as well. The melee that ensued was nothing short of ridiculous. Qyreia had fought Force users to a standstill, and Chelsie had trained rigorously in hand-to-hand fighting in all its forms, but neither could get a true advantage. Crimson struck at the Zeltron with an armored fist, connecting, but the lithe, red woman moved with the strike, giving back what she took in the form of her rifle-turned-club.

The captain swung, Qyreia sidestepped. The Zeltron made a kick for CC's groin, only to have her shin catch the edge of the crotch guard and send her yelping in self-inflicted pain.

"Enough of this!" Chelsie drew her pistol, only to have her movements matched by her opponent.



Qyreia Arronen, #14369

Gray-blue eyes stared at the armored woman, narrowed less in anger, and more in frustration; perhaps a little curiosity as well. “Well... been a helluva monkey-lizard chase with you, cap’n.”

“I could shoot you right now.”

“And I could do the same.” Their feet shuffled, ready to dodge or circle their opponent, but neither moved.

“I lost a lot of good men because of you.” Not releasing her gunsights from her target, Crimson tore off her helmet, wanting her opponent to see who it was that would be her downfall. “Tell me why I shouldn’t kill you.”

“Oi, snot-for-brains, the Collective started this war! How many people have to die before it ends?! How many more friends...” She stopped, chewing her lip to keep from saying too much.

“You can’t escape.” The scarred redhead eyed the Zeltron warily over the barrel of her gun. “It’s too far to jump, and you know there’s a whole squad of my troops downstairs that’ll finish you if I somehow lose.”

“Water mixes with water, honey.”

“What?”

Qyreia chuckled. “Ol’ Dantari saying. Problem that can’t be solved. You *could* shoot, but you know I’d shoot too, and we’d both end up dead. I won’t surrender, but you won’t just let me go. If I were more into that sort of thing, I’d offer to frack ya for safe passage. You are *definitely* my type, Miss Crimson.”

That caught Chelsie off guard. “Y-you know my name. What’s yours?”

“Qyreia Arronen. Some folks call me the Red Qek.”

“Bit melodramatic, dontcha think?”

“Says ‘Captain Crimson?’”

The human scoffed, somewhat amused by the mid-battle exchange. “I didn’t pick the name.”

“Really? Huh.” Down below, reverberating up the alleys, the two women could hear the sudden outburst of blaster fire.

“What is that?”

Qyreia scowled appreciatively. “I think my friends came back for me.” *Morons*. “So how do you want to handle this?”

“Pardon?”

“We can stand here until the end of time, waiting for the other person to make a move, or we can just... go.”

Crimson’s blue eyes narrowed again. “You know I can’t let you do that.”

“And while we talk, more of our people are getting killed!” That seemed to get the human’s attention. “I know you love your troops. I can see it. I’m not stupid.”

“Stop...” She’d faced down some of the worst fights the galaxy could offer and faced them head-on, but this standoff was beyond stupid. Trying to fight anymore was stupid. “What do you propose?”

Qyreia let a hand slip behind her back. “How about a game of... *catch?!?*”

The grenade flew from her hand in a fast, shallow arc right at the surprised human. *She’s suicidal!* Crimson threw her arm out, knocking the explosive back at the mercenary only to realize she’d left herself open. The heavy blaster pistol took the commander in the shoulder, knocking her off of her feet, and leaving her wondering how long before the grenade would finish the job. Dizzy with pain, she watched as the Zeltron picked up the grenade, realizing too late that the fuse hadn’t even been activated.

“So,” she struggled to say as Qyreia loomed over her, “I suppose you’re gonna kill me now. Just make it quick, alright?”

The red woman rolled her eyes. “You’re all too damn stubborn, ya know that?” She kicked the human’s pistol away as she replaced the grenade on her belt before kneeling down to be at eye-level with the woman who was struggling just to sit up.

“So what? You’re just gonna let me go? That’s it?”

“Mm... Not entirely.” She grabbed her armored opponent by the back of the head and pressed her lips to Crimson’s. “Not bad, Chelsie,” Qyreia said with a chuckle. “I even think my Jedi girlfriend would approve.”

Captain Crimson could only sputter a reply as the Zeltron stood to leave. *Jedi? Girlfriend? Not bad?!?* She wasn’t sure if she should be infuriated or sexually confused, so her brain concocted a combination of the two.

Qyreia breathed a heavy sigh. “Well, so long I guess. Wish me luck!”

Without any more warning or hint as to her intent, the Arconan spun about and ran full-speed for the building’s edge. *She’s not going to make it.* It would save her the trouble, but part of her felt bad at losing to an opponent that was apparently suicidal. Then Qyreia jumped, and the world seemed to slow. Then the Zeltron disappeared below the lip of the roof. *Well, that was short-lived.*

“Got it!”

“Wha-?”

Hanging by an arm and rather regretting the jarring impact that her leap had wrought, Qyreia dangled from the edge of the roof on the other side of the five meter gap. Despite her best efforts, she’d made it.

“Zeltrosian track and field, eat your heart out!”

Chelsie couldn’t help but laugh, baffled as she was inexplicably happy as she watched the Zeltron climb up and onto the opposite building. The Aedile called off the rescue mission from her team in the streets below, and the firing petered out to a halt. With a wave, Qyreia left the wounded commander.

“Love the taste of your chapstick, by the way,” she offered as a final parting shot that only re-infuriated and re-confused the human woman. *She’s cute when she’s flustered. Gotta*

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*tell Keira this story when I get home. 'Yeah, I smooched the cute, redhead enemy commander just to say I could.'* After several long minutes of running down stairs and through alleys, she met up with Hale and the two wounded remnants of her team. "Miss me?"

"It's good to see you too, ma'am."

Qyreia laughed as they started their brisk walk back to friendly lines. "Thanks for your help back there."

"Did you get Crimson?"

"In a manner of speaking."