



SUBMITTED IN ENTRY TO GJW XII COMPETITION -
COLLECTIVE STRIKE

Fire and Smoke

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Clan Scholae Palatinae

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1 The Empress

Times were hard in the city of Ohmen. Food was scarce, and few struggled more than the family of twi'lek outcasts, led by a single father raising a family of four. His wife had died giving birth to the youngest, Tonal'la, a girl who wasted away in the corner, the last to receive what little food the family possessed. He hated Tonal'la, on the day she was born she had killed his wife and burdened the family with another mouth to feed. He didn't even care that she was begging on the street for food aged four. He'd rather strangers feed her than have to take food from her older brothers to do so.

Colonel Zentru'la forced the flashbacks out of his mind. Thirty years had passed. His three sons had died fighting in wars. The woman who stood before him was no longer the same girl he once called his daughter. And not just because she looked like a Togruta now. She had taken on her own identity, became powerful in a way her father could never have imagined. Likewise, Zentru'la had changed throughout his own rags to riches story, from a common blacksmith to Colonel of the Imperial Scholae Army's 2nd Regiment, a mountain of twi'lek muscle, heavy armour and heavier weaponry.

He was unsure of whether he had any right to be proud of his daughter's achievements. The Empress was his flesh and blood, but he was painfully aware that he had little to do with her development as a person, and even more aware that she would be the first to reject any claim he laid to be responsible for her success.

Since entering her life after thirty years out of contact by saving her life from the Sith Lord Darth Fallax, Zentru'la had wanted nothing more than to right the wrongs of his past by winning back the affection of the daughter he never had a chance to see grow by proving his worth to her. She was the only family he had left.

'Agents from Imperial Scholae Intelligence have reported the location of Gwendolyn 'Sparks' in the city of Hydra.' As always, Elinicia's facial expressions gave nothing away. For Zentru'la, his daughter was impossible to read, she stayed strictly professional when it came to mission briefings. ISI agents report she's one of the most dangerous and talented explosive experts in the Galaxy, a pink skinned young twi'lek with a cybernetic eye.'

'And you want me to eliminate her,' Zentru'la responded with a voice that was beginning to turn coarse in his advanced age.

‘You are the only one we have who has a chance at matching her talent for explosives. You will travel planetside to Nancora, to Hydra, and eliminate this Sparks character. A ship has been prepared for a stealthy approach.’

‘I will kill Sparks, or die trying,’ Zentru’la said with resolve, eager to prove his worth to his daughter once more. ‘For the empire! And for you.’

Elinicia’s voice dropped to a whisper. ‘Good luck, dad.’

2 The Dragon’s Head

Hydra was a technological masterpiece of a city. Even the Dragon’s Head Cantina, a known haunt for off duty mercenaries of The Technocratic Guild, seemed like a science festival compared to the establishments of Ohmen. The people, Zentru’la had learned, were the same everywhere, especially off-duty mercenaries. Twi’lek dancers shook their bodies provocatively on pedestals, an embarrassment to his species. He had heard Sparks had been spotted in the area.

The purple emblem of Scholae Palatinae on the pauldron of Zentru’la’s heavy armour had been painted over, replaced with the logo of the Technocrat’s Guild. The colonel was never one for the stealthy, sneaky approach, and not much good at it either, but his mission required little interaction and the patrons were far too drunk to pay too much attention to any details that might give him away and he trusted the judgement of his daughter.

Zentru’la approached the bar, ordering a Corellian Brandy on autopilot, barely paying attention to the bar staff as he listened to the conversations around him. This was turning out to be a fruitless endeavour. Most were far too intoxicated to be discussing anything useful to him. He took the drink and walked towards an empty table, attention still focused on hearing short segments of conversations of groups he walked past. Between tall tales of domination of enemies on the battlefield and of women in bed it was difficult to piece together any coherent information worth knowing. He thought he heard something about a fight in the Dragon’s Head Cantina, something about a woman threatening to blow the place up. It was at that moment that he hit something solid.

His attention snapped back to his immediate surroundings. A human stood in front of him, shaved head and a mean glare, dressed in a military uniform now covered in ale.

Zentru'la backed off, apologising and offering to replace the spilt beverage as attention began to grow around the commotion. The man wasn't interested in Zentru'la's apologies and threw a punch at the colonel. His form was sloppy from a few too many drinks and Zentru'la raised his hands in defence to block the attack.

His guard was strong as durasteel, unmoving under the weight of his assailant's punch. His counter-attack hit like a hammer, a low punch to the man's solar plexus. There was little finesse to Zentru'la's combat style, but sheer brute force could take him a long way. His opponent doubled over in pain in front of him. He felt a strong push in the back from one of the soldier's drinking companions. He didn't have time for this. In a swift motion Zentru'la pulled a heavy repeating cannon from off his back and launched a strike to the head with the butt of the weapon.

3 Sparks

In a flash Zentru'la flipped the colossal cannon around, ready to shoot up the place if possible. There was an awkward silence as no-one really knew what to do next. Zentru'la had come armed to the teeth with a grenade launcher alongside his heavy repeater.

A deafening crash from the bar broke the silence, followed by screaming. Fragments of metal and glass sprayed across the cantina. Zentru'la's heavy armour protected him from the shrapnel that caused lacerations in the other patrons. In the corner of his eye he saw a pink figure escape through a back door.

'Get out of my way!' Zentru'la roared as he fired his cannon towards the door while sprinting towards it. This was not the time for caution, Zentru'la kicked the door open as he ran through it, finding himself at the bottom of a metal staircase. He heard a cackle from the top of the stairs before an explosion collapsed a large portion of it.

Through nothing more than upper body strength and force of will Zentru'la was able to climb the pile of rubble that was quickly forming around him as the building became structurally unstable. Sparks was waiting for him on the roof of the two floor building. The second he emerged from the top of the staircase he was forced to take evasive action, diving to the side to avoid a wrist rocket fired by the diminutive twi'lek.

From his prone position, Zentru'la returned fire with a volley of bolts from his repeater cannon. Sparks stepped to the side, allowing the shots to fade harmlessly into

the distance and fired another rocket at the downed opponent. Zentru'la's reactions were lightning sharp, detonating the rocket mid-air with an accurate shot from his cannon.

Sparks stood back to the edge of the building and laughed. 'Boom!' She shouted as she turned and hopped off the edge of the building, climbing down the outer wall to the streets below. Zentru'la threw a thermal detonator after her but was too slow as she escaped the explosion radius. Immediately afterwards, a devastating explosion rocked the lower level of the building as Sparks landed on the street and fled.

4 The Tower

Zentru'la jumped off the building as it began to collapse, although not quite as gracefully as Sparks. He hit the ground with a thud as he tried to cushion his fall. Behind him, the roof of the building caved in, the walls began to fall apart under the structural instability. The cold night air was thick with smoke, the street bathed in a warm orange glow from the fire.

Sparks was gone. But there was no sense chasing her, Zentru'la knew he would just be lured into a trap. If her dossier was at all accurate, Sparks would see him as a target and stop at nothing to hatch some elaborate scheme culminating in his explosive demise. He walked the opposite direction to the way Sparks had fled. Eventually, she would come to him.

He took the time to relax and let his heart rate return to normal levels. Fairly sure that Sparks would be waiting, ready to spring some elaborate trap to prevent his pursuit, Zentru'la felt fairly safe. He enjoyed a good meal to replenish his energy and located a weapon shop to replace his thermal detonator before returning to his safe house, a dull apartment on the ground floor of a towering block on the outskirts of town, for some rest.

His sleep was rudely awoken by a terrible bang. As fast as possible he put on his armour and grabbed his weapons, the heavy repeater cannon and a grenade launcher, and jumped out of the ground floor window. Seconds later a second, even more devastating explosion ripped through the lower levels. He recognised the explosion, it was characteristic of a thermal imploder. Sparks' armament was very similar to his own.

The tower block collapsed in on itself as the foundations gave way. Zentru'la sprinted away to avoid the falling debris. With the destruction of the Dragon's Head Cantina and

now the apartment block, he didn't even want to think about how many civilians Sparks had killed in the last twenty-four hours.

5 Round Two

His heart pounding, his eyes scanned the surroundings frantically for any sign of Sparks. He saw her grenade first, launched from the roof of the neighbouring tower block. Zentru'la dived into a roll to escape the blast and quickly returned to his feet. 'I have the high ground!' she teased from the top of the tower, firing a barrage of grenades from her launcher. Zentru'la returned fire with a series of suppressive shots from his repeater cannon, forcing her into cover to give him the chance to hide behind another building.

He had no idea how she had tracked him to his location but there was no time to think about it as Sparks peppered the area with grenades, wanton destruction without a care in the world for the people she killed. Who *wouldn't* want to die in something as beautiful as an artistic explosion?

Running from cover to cover, Zentru'la fired at Sparks' position as he moved, avoiding barrage after barrage of missile fire and grenade volleys. It was as if Sparks had infinite ammunition up there. He switched to his grenade launcher, an identical model to Sparks', and tried to land some shots on the roof, but they fell short, hitting the side of the building and smashing windows on the upper floor. Sparks' position on the roof gave her a significant advantage.

Zentru'la switched back to his repeater cannon, firing a volley of shots at the roof to keep her pinned once more. Sparks responded by arcing grenades over the edge from her position, but without line of sight on her target she was unable to predict his movements. When Sparks finally raised her head to look for him, he was nowhere to be seen.

He had taken cover in the atrium of Sparks' tower. He looked really hoped it wouldn't come to this, he was a professional and had avoided unnecessary civilian casualties throughout his entire military career. He looked down at the thermal imploder in his hand. He thought about the families above him that were getting caught up in this. But his own family was more important. This needed to be done for his daughter. He dropped the imploder and ran.

The lower floors of the building disintegrated under the force of the blast. Zentru'la ran without looking back as the tower block collapsed to the floor, with Sparks on top. There was no way she could have survived a fall like that.

Zentru'la returned to his ship to report to his daughter. Many innocent people had died in his pursuit of the mad bomber. He knew the Empress would not care about the common folk, but he felt a heavy heart over the destruction of so many families to strengthen his own. He tried to push the thoughts out of his head. Proving himself to his daughter was all that mattered.