

OBJECTIVE 1

DEEPSTRIKE

There was an eerie silence among the troops. Cramped in the small confines of the LAAT/i gunship, the soldiers of Aurek Company, 4th Special Operations Battalion, waited patiently for their landing insertion. Had they used more ships, they might've had more leg room; might've even been able to sit down in the troop seats. More ships would have meant a bigger signature on sensors though. So in the thirty-capacity transports, each of the three vessels was jammed with about forty-five and some change.

Qyreia, dressed in her flight suit that doubled as combat armor, was the “some change”.

“Thirty seconds to drop,” came the pilot’s voice over their headsets.

“Thank god.” The Zeltron twisted her arm around, finding just enough space to slither her hand to her own communicator. “Major, care for a last-minute brief for the kids?”

“Yes m’am,” he keyed back. *“For this operation, we’ll be going by the callsign ‘Anvil’. Anvil-8, our attachment from Higher, will be joining us, and might even show some of you how to shoot straight.”* Some elbows jabbed jokingly throughout the cramped assemblage. *“We go in, kill the enemy anti-air, and set up a defensive perimeter until Hammer shows up. Order of movement from the LZ is scouts, rifles, repeaters, engineers.”*

“Ten seconds!”

“Force be with you all.”

That phrase never sat well with the mercenary, even when she was feeling confident. It didn’t sit right this time either. It felt just as weird given the very acute disdain for Force users within the Collective. *I bet they avoid that phrase like the plague.*

There was a shudder, then a jolt that rocked the whole ship just before the doors opened. For all their professionalism and training, cramming so many bodies together had a spring-like effect. The first to leave the ship didn’t so much *exit* as *fell* out the door, trying to roll away fast enough for the people following behind not to land on them. It wasn’t pretty, but it was effective. In under a minute, the whole company was on the ground and the gunships were on their way to the safety of the Arconan staging point, offworld and out of range of the ground-based sensors.

“Well, this is a change of pace,” the Selenian officer said when he found Qyreia, motioning toward the scenery.

“Yeah. Definitely not what we’re used to.”

Despite the briefing they had received prior to leaving for the unnamed rock, the surface of the planet was a different picture than what they thought it would be. Boulders and gray, dusty soil comprised most of the ground. In the dim of night, one could not even make out the black lichen that clung to so many surfaces. On a world that had precious little water and almost no plant life, the lichen actually provided the majority of the world’s breathable atmosphere, thin though it was. It was a far cry from the lush islands, mountains, and forests of Selen.

Nighttime itself wasn’t so oppressive. With such a lackluster atmosphere came a lackluster weather system. No clouds floated in the sky, there was hardly a hint of wind, and the stars shined brighter than any terrestrial body Qyreia had yet seen. It made the otherwise dark night eerily less so. It meant they would be able to see the Collective that much more easily though. The same, however, could be said for the reverse.

“Scouts, you got our heading?” The point-man gave their commander a thumbs-up. “Alright. Lead the way.”

This far into enemy territory, they had to walk their way into the objective. The first strike in the operation had to be unexpected and devastating. Anything less and the small contingent might be wiped out before they could escape, and the entire offensive slowed to a halt. Even worse, the Collective might call in reinforcements or abandon the area entirely, taking the supplies with them.

However, the next greatest obstacle would be the terrain. While there were not any large hills or mountains barring their way, the same lack gave them precious little to work with in finding a position of advantage. The whole world seemed to be a series of rises and dips ranging between three and ten meters in elevation change. It played havoc with communications, especially the low-frequency headsets the troopers used. Just like the light though, it also kept the enemy from being able to catch any of the Arconan signal; at least when in the low ground.

Even from a distance, the facility was not hard to spot. Cresting a sharp rise, Qyreia saw the glimmer of work lights in the distance. She looked through the scope of her rifle to get a better view. While it had little zoom to offer, the little bit offered at least the outline of the AA gun batteries reaching up over the surrounding structures.

“Too bad we don’t have missile launchers or something,” she remarked as they trudged along, drawing ever closer to their objective. “They don’t look too sturdy.”

“We’re still far away, ma’am. They’re bigger up-close.”

Please stop calling me ma’am. Qyreia for once felt happy to have a helmet on: the commander couldn’t see her cringing at the title. She also wanted to throw in a “that’s what she said” joke, but thought it better to keep up the professional facade. After all, she was supposed to be a colonel in the Dajorran military; at least according to the data that Arcona had fudged as part of their activities as the Shadow Clan.

Compared to the regular troops though, the special operations group was so much easier to work with. More than once, they came within eyesight and earshot of roving patrols, but sidestepped them at every turn. They truly *were* behind enemy lines. Once within firing range of the facility, the scouts moved off to find better observation positions while the infantry and engineers prepared to breach the defensive perimeter. They were efficient, they were quiet, and the faux colonel hardly had to lift a finger in the process.

Peering just over the crest of the last ridge of rocky dirt, the Zeltron could make out the whole interior not blocked by buildings. The place had clearly been recently constructed. While some sections of wall were made of large duracrete barriers and sturdy guard towers, most of the perimeter consisted of simple energy fencing and razor wire, with bulldozed soil providing footsoldier fighting positions. The anti-air guns really *were* larger up-close, and they had a strong network of interconnected fields of fire. Even a ground attack would have a hard time with those things up and running.

“What’s the plan, major?” she whispered.

“Scouts will make sure we don’t get hit from the rear or sides.” He pointed out the positions as he continued, “Rifles and repeaters will provide overwatch for the engineers. They’ll break up the wire and cut the fence. If we can get in quiet, this’ll be easy.”

“Odds of that?”

“Pretty slim,” he admitted, grinning.

“Well, at least we can shoot through the fence.”

“Positive thinking there, ma’am.”

“*Please stop calling me ma’am,*” she said, hunkering low as the engineers approached the line of razor wire. “Makes me feel old.”

They both saw a flurry of movement from the engineer squad and readied their rifles along with almost everyone else along the line. Then they saw the pair of Collective soldiers come out from behind a large shipping crate, apparently patrolling the perimeter. They all watched, guns ready. Qyreia's own gloved finger hovered anxiously over her trigger. Either they were too engrossed in their conversation or the light fell on the Arconans just right, but the patrol just walked by. A collective sigh of relief passed across the group.

"Frack that was close."

"This is where it gets loud."

"Loud?" she asked as the engineers rushed back from the fence. "I thought we were going in quiet and stealthy."

"We were. And now that we're in, we go loud."

"When did we get *'in'*?! In what way is this *'in'*?!"

"Inside their lines, ma'am." He raised a hand to the detonation team and dropped it. "Pay attention."

In melodramatic fashion, the engineers took the signal from his hand as he finished the sentence and detonated the breaching charge. A bright flash of fire and concussive force sent the obstacles — or what was left of them — flying skyward, landing in a scattered mess. The nearest Collective troops reacted quickly, only to be cut down by the AEF's repeating blasters.

"We need to go," the major said, rolling low over the crest of the ridge and dashing down the slope, followed by the rest of the troops. Qyreia had little choice but to follow.

The inside of the compound was not especially suited to an in-depth defense, but it offered the greater numbers of the Collective plenty of room to maneuver. In this situation, they needed speed more than they needed to kill the enemy: their goal was to kill the AA guns so that the main force could take down the defenders. It was a strange sensation overall.

In the rush of adrenaline and excitement, the Zeltron completely forgot about the scouts. Her thoughts did not go to them out of concern though. Rounding one of the permanent structures, she was met by a Collective soldier taking aim at her party. Before she could even raise her rifle, a shot of energy clove clear through his torso. *Fraaack*, she thought, looking briefly for the sniper only to give up and continue on, knowing they were well-hidden and could take care of themselves.

For all the time it took for them to hike to the compound, the action was almost miserably fast-paced, and the merc had a hard time even finding an opportunity to fire her rifle. One gun after another, they approached and cleared the area with the infantry, set explosives with the engineers, and detonated on the way out to the next gun. Before she knew it, having lost count just trying to keep up and keep track of where they were, the things were smoldering heaps of duracrete and metal. She just barely managed to link in with the commander as he reorganized for their exfiltration.

“We going back to the breach, major?”

“No ma’am,” he said, ignoring her earlier request, “we make a new hole. They’ll be expecting us to go the way we came.”

“Sir,” one of the engineers interjected, “about that. We’re out of explosives. Down to a frag grenade or two, but that won’t punch through...”

“I gotcha covered.” The men watched in pleasant surprise as she tugged a Denton charge from her belt. “I take it this’ll work?”

“Yes ma’am,” the trooper said, taking the offered ordinance and dashing away to their exit point.

“You had that the whole time?”

“If you weren’t so busy trying to leave me in your dust, major, you might’ve learned a whole lot more.” They heard the explosion rip through a nearby section of duracrete barrier. “Now let’s go. I don’t plan on getting blasted today.”

“Yes ma-... You got it.”

As they ran out, taking their handful of wounded with them, Qyreia turned and left the defenders with a few parting shots before rejoining her group. Once in cover and panting from the mad dash, she looked up at the sky while the AEF soldiers started getting read for the counterattack. Among all the clearly defined stellar bodies, she saw several dozen small lights, flickering, moving, and getting bigger. The *real* party was just getting started.