

Behind the Scenes

The subtle vibrations and dulled hum of ship engines always seemed to calm Qyreia's nerves. She'd spent too much time on starships and waystations to not feel it. Given that the LAAT/i gunship was dropping her into the middle of the woods on Eldar alone, the small comfort of the sounds helped to ease the knot in her gut.

Intel for the operation was spotty at best. When she'd initially proposed this mission as Quaestor, the planet had allegedly been crawling with smugglers, slavers, and pirates taking refuge in the now-empty houses and fortresses. Now it was just a single fair-sized slaving operation? Things didn't add up. Compounding this was the lack of actual military might. There was an entire regiment of the Dajorra Defense Force that was administratively dedicated to Eldar — before it was abandoned, at any rate. Why it wasn't involved in this mission was a question that the higher-ups were still struggling to answer.

Even the gunship was a loaner, strictly there to get her into the mission area.

“Who planned this kark-fest anyway?” she grumbled, voice drowned out by the atmosphere outside *whooshing* by.

The crew chief waved for her attention. “Thirty seconds.”

Time to go, she thought, grabbing up her effects. These days, she felt less and less like a mercenary and more like a loyal soldier, were it not for her penchant for sass and disobeying orders. *Least I'm not under Scarlett's command. That schutta would need to OD on chill pills just to be normal.*

Barring her interpersonal relations, what really cemented the sentiment towards her position was all of the new equipment in her possession. Her usual attire was replaced with camouflaged body armor, a Galactic Civil War era speeder bike, and her wonderful A280 blaster rifle replaced with a high-powered sniper rifle. The weapon was an especially interesting acquisition.

“*Get this schutta a cannon,*” the armorer had said. “*Schuttas love cannons.*”

What she got was the NT-242 Longblaster, complete with bipod. The user's manual said “armor piercing,” which she hoped was true given its size. Now the merc only wondered if “armor” meant body armor or tanks. Only one way to find out.

The LAAT/i's doors opened to the outside world in a whirl of wind and grassy detritus just as it came in for landing. Qyreia hefted the gear over her shoulder, thumbed the repulsor on the speeder, and pushed it and herself off the ship. The crew chief offered a casual salute before the doors closed again and the LAAT/i soared away until it disappeared in the dark pre-dawn sky.

So this is Eldar, she thought as soon as her ride was far enough away that her ears were no longer ringing. Looking around revealed a forest clearing, with sparse trees and views of squat mountains in the distance. Vegetation very apparently thickened further in, reminding the Zeltron that she was on Tairiku, the continent of jungle, desert, and the Keadeans. The capital, where the slavers were allegedly based, was in the middle of the desert far to her... north, if the compass on her wrist-com's locator was to be believed.

She looked over at her speeder bike. "Shouldn't be too hard."

Qyreia secured the ungainly rifle to the vehicle before mounting it, checking the systems as she shook away the last of the pre-mission jitters. She also hated speeder bikes in general. Too many holovids of riders not paying attention and flying through the air toward a painful, bone crushing demise.

The engine whirred to life, she pulled her helmet's goggles over her eyes, and shot off into the slowly brightening woods.



Nearly two hours had passed. Two hours of silence, save for the whine of the bike's engines. There was plenty of life to be seen: plants and animals abounded everywhere, the latter finding no issues with milling about buildings and thoroughfares, and the former growing far higher than it was ever allowed to during the reign of humanoid life. Of course, that was the factor that was missing.

In two hours of buzzing around on the speeder, Qyreia had not seen a single person.

"Frackin' creepy."

Even though she hadn't even been in Arcona when the plague took hold, she'd done her homework when initially planning the expedition. The world had been abandoned, Arcona consolidating and focusing efforts on Selen and Ol'val to stem the disease's onslaught, leaving Eldar to fend for itself. Clearly, things had not gone well.

What's more, unlike so many post-apocalyptic holoflicks, the world seemed as devoid of chaos as it did sentient life. Roads, such as they were, were hardly sprinkled with vehicles; on the rivers, boats were neatly tied off to the piers with all essentials stowed; mag rail trains were all tucked away in maintenance yards or parked at passenger stations; and bodies were few and far between. Even the scattered towns and villages showed little sign of disorder or violence. However scary the plague might have been, the world's end had been an organized affair.

As much as they were there to get rid of the slavers, part of the mission was to find survivors. Thus, every so often, Qyreia would veer off of her route to check on hamlets or any remote signs of life. At one point she discovered a smoke trail to what was clearly

an old camp, their campfire having spread to torch some nearby trees as well as much of the belongings and survival equipment the occupants had.

But now they were gone. Not dead, just gone.

Must be the slavers. She dropped a piece of salvage that had been part of a rudimentary water collector and purifier. *Whatever's left, they're picking it clean.*

The fire was still lit in a few small places, meaning it was likely it had been burning overnight. No blatant trails in the underbrush meant that the Eldarians had been loaded onto vehicles and transported along the highway she had been on. They'd be far ahead of her, but likely not going so quickly that she would be unable to catch up; not unless they were in an airspeeder or starship.

"I need to call this in." Qyreia unslung her pack and powered up the signal booster, knowing she would need the juice to reach wherever the *Nighthawk* was. "*Nighthawk, this is Gal-Qek, checking in.*"

Silence.

"Nighthawk, this is Gal-Qek. Over."

Silence faded into static and, soon enough, a voice. "*Roger Qek, we read you. What's your situation?*"

"Just found a torched camp," she said as she played with her wrist com. "Sending you the coordinates now. I'll continue north to see what I can find. What's going on with everyone else?"

"Main body of troops and equipment are planetside. Spectre and recon elements have had several skirmishes, but nothing decisive. They'll continue patrols until tonight, then move to Shihon."

"Can you shoot me their coordinates? Don't wanna get mixed up in their business."

"Wilco Qek. We've received your coordinates as well. About your camp, likely they were taken on ground transport. Unless they've got stealth tech, Darkwing and us have the skies fairly locked down."

Qyreia mumbled something about how twelve fighters and a *Marauder* corvette couldn't feasibly lock down a whole planet. "Roger that *Nighthawk*. I'll keep you posted. Qek out." She shook her head as she cut the link. "Kark heads."

After a quick look to make sure she didn't miss anything, the Zeltron sauntered back to the speeder bike, taking a moment to collect herself. A snack and some water out of

the speeder's small storage compartment helped to bring back some energy before hopping back on. Pain and soreness throbbed through her lower back and inner thighs.

"Goddammit I'm getting too frackin' old for this crap." She shifted in her seat, but it did little to dull the ache. "Why do people like these things again?"

Thumbing the ignition, she took off down the wide packed-dirt road she had been following most of the morning. Part of her wanted to activate the booster, but between how long this mission might take, and not knowing if there was a bend in the road over the next hill, she wasn't about to take that chance. If she was sore already, a collision would hardly make her feel any better.

And bend it did. Kilometer upon kilometer of jungle and empty settlements sped by, with only the occasional sign that something large had come through. *At least we know it's ground transport and not flying.* When she came across a long stretch of water-logged farmland, overgrown with weeds and the odd surviving crop, Qyreia took the opportunity to speed along the open ground rather than wind through the odd collection of a half dozen houses that passed for a village. Water sprayed up and out in the bike's wake, creating a long, faint rainbow that felt both beautiful and out of place, given the circumstances. However, the welcome reprieve in the change in scenery was all too soon cut short, and back into the woodland road she went.



"These frackwads aren't as slow as I thought," Qyreia complained as she stowed the antenna and signal booster in her pack. It was already past midday, and there were still only the occasional signs of the slavers' passage.

The rest of Galeres had fared somewhat better... mostly.

Between the few active Galerians and the Battleteam, the dedicated military forces were making short work of the handful of slavers they'd found. *Nighthawk* didn't give any names, but the merc could make relatively educated guesses as to who was doing what based on the context of the stories. There were also reports about locals being "reprimanded" for "insubordination" or "insolence," with subtle suggestion that it was far more than just a tongue lashing. Qyreia could guess who was behind those incidents too.

"Buncha fracking children with god complexes and laser swords, I swear."

Following the base of a low mountain, the Zeltron sped down the path, more overgrown in some areas than in others. After passing through so many ghost towns, Qyreia strongly considered making her way to the desert as fast as possible and then on to the Keadean capital. The whole idea of looking for locals to turn into partisans against

the slavers, while simultaneously tightening the noose on the illegal operation, was a level of tedium that the lone mercenary was neither in the mood nor fully equipped for.

And I can't seem to get the smell of smoke out of my nose, apparently, she thought as the scent pierced her senses as it had back at the abandoned camp. Only it wouldn't go away. A break in the trees revealed why.

Situated in a clearing of crop paddies was a tight collection of a dozen or so homes, all surrounding a little knoll topped by an equally small fortress, smoking and ablaze at various intervals. *Fortress* was likely a poor word for it, as Qyreia got closer and the finer details manifested. It was more a palisade — a rudimentary defensive wall of thick logs posted into the ground — with a platform for seeing and shooting over the top, if the small moving shapes were in fact people. Judging by the streaks of red and green being exchanged from the wall and into the village, clearly something was going on.

“About frackin' time.”

Peeling away from the main road on the first path she came across, Qyreia sped hastily through the woods, forgetting her earlier apprehension. The closer she got, the more she could make out the sounds of battle: the pitched screech of blasters, the crack of slugthrowers and, just beneath it all, the yells of the combatants.

Up ahead was a small pinprick of light that very rapidly turned into the full light of day as the bike burst from the wood line and out into the water-logged fields. Finally, she hit the boost on the speeder, nearly falling off as the acceleration overtook her expectations. The speed sent her blood pumping though, and her previous complaints were forgotten in an instant. *Buildings are too close together,* she thought as she careened toward the village. *Rifle will be too ungainly.*

She wanted to pull her pistol, but maneuverability was more important for the moment, so the merc kept both hands on the control levers as she slowly turned to make a circuit of the village. It was important to know who was fighting who. It took some awkward angling, but she was able to extend the antenna from her pack to boost her wrist com's signal just a little.

“*Nighthawk*, this is Qek!” she screamed over the sound of the wind rushing by. “I'm at a village with a fight underway. Need to know if there's friendlies in the area.” Her fingers danced hurriedly to send the coordinates from the wrist unit, yelping slightly as she regained control when the bike lurched over an earthen divider between fields.

The silence over the speakers ate at her nerves, each second covering dozens of meters and more of the town's perimeter.

Then she saw it, just as the ship called back over the communications net, “*Qek, confirmed no friendly units at your grid. Do you need reinforcement?*” It was here. The

transport was an “ugly” — a hodgepodge of various vehicle parts thrown together to make a single unique and working piece of hardware — but this had to be it, its repulsors just keeping the cab and cargo box off the ground. That, and the gunner atop the cab that clearly saw the water spray left in the bike’s wake.

The repeating blaster let loose at the Zeltron, inaccurate for the haste, red bolts peppering a line of steaming, watery eruptions through the paddies. They landed to her left, then behind. The gunner was zeroing in.

“Try this on, schutta.”

Qyreia disengaged the boost and locked in the repulsor brake as she leaned into a jarring turn, back the way she came, as the repeater’s rounds once again flew wide. At that range, the moving target was too fast and small.

And now to really kark this guy’s day.

Again she turned, forcing his shots wide of the mark as the gunner continually tried to adjust for speed and trajectory, rocketing directly toward the slaver. *Not bad, Hutt humper*, she thought, thumbing the safety on the speeder’s gun. *But I’m better*. It was a joust, and while the gunner once again reoriented the gun, Qyreia had already laid in her sights. *I learned this in the Freeworlds, schutta*.

She leaned left, then right, juking away from the gunner’s shots, letting the computer work and account for her movements.

Her first shot screamed from the cannon and exploded just above the driver’s door.

The second shot deflected off the gunner’s metal shielding.

The third wrecked the gun and, as he panicked, the fourth took him in the neck.

Every part of the merc wanted to stop and open the transport and tell everyone inside to hide. She fought that instinct away. There was a battle going on.

“Qek, this is Nighthawk. Respond. Do you need reinforcement?”

“Frack, I forgot!” She keyed in her comlink as she brought the speeder to a halt alongside the other vehicle. “This is Qek. Got things under control. Might want to send medical and triage.” She listened to the feeble banging on the inside of the container. “I’d wager we got a couple dozen at least.”

She didn’t even bother listening to the reply as she dismounted and slid the heavy blaster pistol from its holster. Its weight was a comfort; a known entity in the craziness of this ordeal. Her feet moved swiftly and as silently as the muddy road into the town would allow. There was plenty of noise to cover her tracks though. Up on the hill, she could more clearly make out the shapes of humanoids in fleeting glances. The slope was

too steep on this side for the slavers to ascend, but the repeating blaster had kept the defenders from trying to spy over the crenelation.

Speed was key. If she held still for too long, then the locals might think she was one of the slavers, and the whole thing would devolve into a three-way battle. In the tight confines of the village alleys, it would be a rough ordeal. She pulled the knife from her boot just in case.

The mercenary did not have far to go before she spotted the first of the slavers. He was a Weequay, big and burly, carrying a blazing torch in one hand and a bundle of sticks in the other; clearly intended to be added to the other conflagrations meant to burn the inhabitants out. Qyreia blasted him away before he even had time to investigate the sound of running feet.

His buddy, hiding around the corner of the building to provide covering fire, was less surprised. The human turned the corner to shoot this new assailant, but Qyreia was already so close that the barrel of his gun only got entangled under her arm. Their movements were frantic as they tried to get the upper hand in the unexpected melee. The Zeltron slashed at him with her knife, only to make the shallowest of cuts. The slaver returned the gesture with a punch to her ribs, dulled by her new armor, but not enough that she didn't lose some wind and feel the tinge of pain. With her arm beyond his reach though, she elbowed the side of his head, knocking it back just long enough for her to bury her knife in the side of his throat.

When she tore it away in a spray of blood, the brief fight was over, leaving the Zeltron panting, bloody, but otherwise unharmed compared to the slaver.

Ignoring the slight discomfort in her ribcage, Qyreia pushed on, noting how the defenders had been watching her since the knife fight. They didn't shoot at her, but they also didn't really let up on the slavers. *Good. Keep the sleemos occupied.*

She came across the bodies of villagers and slavers alike, scattered here and there throughout the village; evidence of the skirmishing before the siege. Among the bodies were what she expected the holdouts were using: spears, bows, and some rudimentary muzzle-loader slugthrowers. Seeing the occasional colored energy bolt told the merc that they likely also had some blaster tech from the days when Arcona still occupied the planet and traded with the locals.

Whatever they were using up there, they were doing a good job of holding the slavers at bay. Qyreia noticed, as she wove through the tight alleys between the seemingly flimsy wooden structures, that the criminals were very scattered throughout the village; relatively few in number against their intended captives. Clearly they were hoping their superior technology would win out.

How'd that work out for you? she thought, coming up behind another slaver and shooting him in the back.

One by one she picked her way along the village, until only a handful remained. These ones had noticed the fires slowly dwindling along the wall and were in the process of withdrawing to their transport when the Zeltron came upon them. While the structures' walls were fairly thin, they still provided more cover than being out in the open, so the criminals took to the nearest one and tried to pick off the Arconan merc, who only took to cover of her own.

It was a standoff, both sides trading shots, but neither really gaining an advantage. The Keadeans tried throwing large rocks through the roof, but the house was too far from the wall for any sufficiently sized rock to be thrown far enough.

Wood-and-paper walls and doors do not make for very good flame-retardant material though, and cinders soon began forming in the slavers' makeshift fortress.

When the locals realized this, they began hurling flaming arrows and burning chunks of wood onto the building, hoping to either burn them or smoke them out. Once the slavers realized what was happening, they tried to leave out the back way to escape, but the Keadeans only concentrated their fire on that spot. The first and only one to try was filled with arrows and holes from lead balls.

Qyreia saw this and pulled the grenade from her belt, tossing it thoughtfully. "I was gonna save you for later, but..." A blaster bolt exploded off the window sill near her head. "Frack it."

Laying down a flurry of blind-fire with her pistol, the merc peeked only momentarily over the lip of the window before rising just enough to pull the pin, angle her arm back, and heave the grenade across the avenue and through a latticed paper door. The shooting died out quickly, with a few brief yells before the whole building seemed to burst outward, sending splinters of wood and bits of shrapnel in all directions. While the support beams and roof were relatively unscathed, the more fragile walls and doors were either gone or in tatters.

There was some groaning among the wounded — all two of them — but the remainder were very much dead. As the Zeltron hogtied the pair that were still alive, the locals slowly made their way out of their fortress, sentries still on the wall to watch for further trouble.

"Hello," she said as the man who she assumed was the leader approached. "I don't suppose you speak Basic?"

"I do." The man's — she assumed it was male — voice was thickly accented, but it was clear and understandable. "You have our thanks for your help."

Qyreia took a moment to look him and his entourage over, now that she was finally close enough to see. Their skin ranged from olive green to tawny brown to an extremely pale pink, comprised of smooth, flat scales. While height and build varied between individuals, they all had the same sort of blunted reptilian snouts, and eyes with slitted pupils with broad nut-brown irises and a barely-visible yellow sclera. From their heads hung in various forms of styling what appeared to be long limp feathers that resembled grass for its coloration and texture. Some of the males even had whiskers, like that of a cat, which they either let hang loose or tied into a sort of mustache.

All in all, they were as appealing as they were imposing to a first-time viewer, especially when all of them were armed in some way shape or form. Their leader especially so, with a stylized sword on one hip and an old model blaster pistol on the other.

“You all seem to be doing pretty well here.” Qyreia emphasized their slightly reduced emaciation and the fields that were mostly devoid of weeds.

“We are... surviving.” One of the others asked a question in their native tongue, only for the leader to respond in a very clipped and seemingly impatient tone, prompting the asker to bow and back away. “My... apologies for his insolence.”

“I didn’t even know what he said,” she replied, somewhat amused by the show of propriety. Then her mind raced back to the transport. “Crap. Follow me!”

Before any of the Keadeans could ask what had so excited the red woman, she was off, running toward the far end of the village and to the parked transport. Unbidden, the reptilians had dragged the prisoners along; perhaps one of them had a key. Fortunately, the external locking mechanism was a simple one, and Qyreia had only to lift a series of bars out of their sockets to allow the door to open.

The creatures inside were largely of the same reptilian race, but one or two inside comprised other species: a human here, a Twi’lek there; a small representation, but not uniformly the local fare. All in all, there were nearly thirty people inside, almost all of whom showed clear signs of emaciation, and violence in a scattered few, judging by the bruises.

The lead lizard rattled off something that sounded thoughtful, only to repeat it in Basic when he remembered his company. “Where did they all come from?”

“They were scattered throughout the jungle,” she said, waving her hands to try and coax the frightened occupants out. “Ran across an abandoned camp this morning. Probably two days’ travel if you had to walk.”

Her ears picked up the faint rattle of the sword in its scabbard, and she looked to see the leader’s hand on the hilt.

“We do not have the... supplies.”

She put a soothing hand on his, easing him down from whatever fatalistic thoughts he had been pondering. “I’ve already called in for help. They’ll be able to pick you all up and take you someplace safe.”

“I shall not leave here. This is *my* territory.”

Right. Feudal culture. Kriffer’s probably a minor lord. “Your territory will still be here when you get back, but right now you need to focus on *surviving*.”

He pondered this momentarily and was about to respond when something on the horizon caught his eye. It caught everyone’s attention, including Qyreia’s as she finished helping one of the captured sentients off the transport. *That’s our ride*, she thought, the small black dots coalescing into a trio of LAAT/i gunships.

They landed not far from the gathered collection, the repulsors kicking up a spray of water momentarily before settling again. Qyreia jogged out to meet whoever was coordinating the evacuation, while the Keadeans watched from the relative safety of the slavers’ transport.

An armed and armored lieutenant hopped out of the nearest vehicle and offered a rapid salute to the Zeltron. “You Qek?”

“I am.” She waved toward the locals. “Those are the ones I was talking about on the coms. There’s more in the cargo container. Guess about forty people in total.”

Unbidden, the leader sauntered out through the wet fields to meet them. “Who is this?”

“I’d ask you the same.”

The reptilian inhaled a subtle growl. “Torranaga.”

“This is Toranaga,” Qyreia repeated, skipping over the guttural *r* sound. “He’s the local... lord?” She eyed the Keadean for confirmation and he nodded, albeit hesitantly, likely because the word was as close as Basic could accomplish. “So this whole area is his. Mark it on your map for headquarters to track.”

“Ma’am?”

“When we get all these folks repatriated, we’ll need every karking detail we can get to avoid confusion.” *And violence.*

“Understood ma’am.” The lieutenant turned his attention to the situation at hand. “Mister Toranaga, I have medical supplies and personnel to get you to our base of operations. If you know of any other occupied settlements, we can get them aid as well.”

Their voices trailed off as they walked back toward the transport, leaving the Zeltron standing in the knee-high water, appreciating that she finally got to do some good. As she watched the DDF officer talking to the locals, she saw Toranaga waving his hand at one of his people, then at her speeder, then at her, likely barking orders the whole time. Sure enough, the smaller Keadean grabbed the handles of her bike and jogged it over to her, silently but for some muttered words in their language, before bowing and running back.

From his spot at the transport, Toranaga watched as the lone soldier waved, mounted her vehicle, and sped away. “Who was that?”

The lieutenant paused his coordination efforts. “Uh, she’s called ‘Qek’ on the coms net, but I think her name is... Kaireeuh or something like that.”

“Qyreia,” a sergeant corrected. “Best not let the Red Devil hear you bugger her name like that, sir. She was a hard lady back on Blindshot.”

Toranaga grunted an approving laugh. *Qyreia eh? I hope we will meet again.*

~*~*~*~

Relief was the best way to describe the mercenary’s feelings when the jungle gave way to dry, open prairie. It meant that she was done with jungle duty and worrying about ambushes around every corner. Her one regret was that she didn’t take some time to interrogate the two wounded slavers back in the village. Even so, with the sun setting on her left, and the dark twinkling blue of night on her right, things felt alright.

She glanced back at the rifle still strapped to the back of the speeder bike. “Soon, my darling. Soon.” It was silly, talking to one of her weapons, but it gave her a chuckle and passed the time.

Dusk was just settling in when the soil and grass started giving way to sand, with the odd yellow-and-green strand poking up from the pale grains. From here, it was a straight shot to Shihon and, allegedly, the slavers’ headquarters. A good opportunity for one last check-in before crossing the arid desert.

“*Nighthawk*, this is Qek. Sending you my current coordinates. Making my way to the capital. How’s things looking with the others?”

Her com unit crackled to life with surprising quickness. *“Copy all, Qek. Artillery should be in place within the next couple hours. Ground troops will be taking up attack positions shortly after that.”*

“Roger. I’ll check in once I get close or if I get in any trouble.”

Once the pleasantries were finished, she readjusted her seat on the bike and sped off into the night. Without any tree branches to catch on, she kept the antenna raised in case of any emergency messages. If anything, she could hear any fun goodies that came in from the other groups.

Dark set in quickly, it seemed, but with the sky devoid of clouds, and one of Eldar’s two moons low on the horizon, there was plenty enough light to see by. As an added precaution, the merc made sure that the lights on her speeder were either dimmed or turned off. No need to broadcast her location to any enemy sentries. But with such a long distance to go, and no more than a few low hills and dunes to look forward to, Qyreia let loose with the boost to cut down on travel time.

The ride was surprisingly calm. Even keeping her eyes open for trouble, she saw no movement other than the occasional reptile or arthropod. *Either these fracksticks are really good at hiding, or they’re not this far out.*

Gradually, the sand and dunes gave way to expanses of hard, broken earth and scattered, dehydrated scrub. While there didn’t seem to be a pattern to it, it offered periods of much smoother rides compared to the up-and-down of the sand mounds. The added speed got her to her destination that much faster.

Shihon, the Keadean capital — and ostensibly the planetary capital — stood out like a sore thumb amidst the otherwise flat terrain. It was clear that the slavers knew they were coming. Rather than the whole area being lit up like a life day tree, it was completely dark. They were being cautious. The question then was: how cautious were they actually being?

Qyreia needed a better vantage if she was going to find out.

Relaxing her speed to reduce any dust trail in the moonlight, she angled the speeder away from the city, heading toward a raised outcrop of packed sediment and the deep ravine that ran through it: remnants of a long dried-up river. Qyreia couldn’t remember the river’s name off-hand, but as she parked her speeder beneath a shallow overhang, she knew that it had once fed water into the Keadean capital, and its departure turned the otherwise verdant region into a wasteland.

She pulled the rifle from the bike and the grappling hook from her belt, hefting it in her hand. “Let’s see what’s up there, shall we?”

In the quiet of the desert night, the sound of the grapple shooting high into the ravine wall seemed as loud as a cannon. After so long on the speeder, the sounds' contrasts seemed stark. Even so, it was worth the noise: climbing up the rocky face unaided, while feasible, would have been difficult at best and dangerous at worst. With all the equipment, her arms felt dead by the time she reached the top.

"Need to do more push-ups or something," she huffed as she heaved herself over the lip.

The merc spent a brief moment to check her surroundings before pulling some more gear from her pack. The scout bag that had, until now, only served as a communications relay, was rife with goodies that suddenly proved useful. Namely, the cloth tarp and camouflage netting. While the netting was more suited to a woodland environment, when combined with the tarp and a healthy helping of sand and rocks, it made for an excellent sniper's nest. With most of the rifle's gun barrel hidden in sand, the whole thing would be nigh indistinguishable from the rest of the terrain unless one got up close and personal.

"Ugh," the Zeltron groaned as she slid under the dusty cover. She took off her helmet and ruffled her hair, finally feeling a little more normal. "I want a nap." She sniffed at the air and checked her armpit. "And a shower." Grabbing a ration snack, the merc settled in behind her gun, happy for the bipod while she simultaneously ate and peered through the scope. "Lessee what we gots here."

If Aldaric and Skar had gotten one thing right, it was that these slavers were entrenched. Zooming in her scope, Qyreia could make out quite a few repeating blaster emplacements, as well as one big laser cannon. *That's a goddamn P-Tower. If they get a good enough gunner on there, they could knock down our fighters.*

"Frack, I need to start marking this down."

Maps of key areas on Eldar had already been downloaded to her wrist com for quick reference. Manipulating them was tedious work, even with the miniature holoprojection of the city. So tedious that after marking the third gun emplacement, she merely let her forehead fall onto the rough ground.

"Ashla-frackin'-Bogan, this is bantha crap." She scraped away the dust from her forehead and hefted the rifle back to her shoulder. "Big picture, Q. Let's just find the good stuff now and mind the details later."

The city was densely packed though. The map said the sprawl was hardly five square kilometers, and a good portion of that was dedicated to the two spaceports, one of which was plainly in view. Judging by Qyreia's location relative to the city, it was the larger municipal Supresa Spaceport, and there was plenty going on. Several ships of varying

make and model were parked on the landing pads, with cargo containers not wholly dissimilar from the one on the hover transport she'd encountered earlier in the day.

“So *that's* where they're keeping 'em.” The concerning part was that, while things were plenty quiet and dark on the outskirts, the landing pads were alive with plenty of activity. “Looks like they're trying to load up and skip town.”

Without taking her eyes off the action, she fumbled around for the signal boost, shoving the pack toward the slim opening under the tarp to give the antenna more open-air access. As she keyed in the *Nighthawk*, Qyreia realized she had no idea what she'd do if the bantha crap hit the fan.

“*Nighthawk*, it's Qek. I'm in position with direct observation on the town. Lots of stationary positions, and it looks like they're trying to bug out in a hurry. The main spaceport is frackin' crawling. What's the status on the other units?”

“*We read you Qek. Ground troops are still en route to assault positions, ETA one hour in order to maintain element of surprise. Artillery is in place and Darkwing is on standby. If you can mark targets...*”

“Breakbreakbreak! Negative *Nighthawk*, they've got captives on the landing pads. We blow the ships, we kill the people we came to save.” She heaved a heavy sigh, likely while the crew high above was contemplating alternatives. “Listen I'll... I'll keep observing. Anything crazy happens, I'll try to stall them.”

A long pause followed. “*Roger Qek. We'll see if we can't get everyone moving a little faster.*”

“Appreciate it. Qek out.” Once again, she settled in behind her sights with a groan.

So she watched. She watched and she watched and she watched. To rest her eyes, she read snippets of the gun's manual, occasionally checking ranges to targets. If she had to shoot, she wanted to make sure the first round didn't offer her target a second chance. The only thing that could have made the situation any better in her mind was if she was on a higher elevation. Being able to see *into* the town rather than just the one piece of the pie would have been much preferred.

Can't have everything, she thought, looking through the scope again. “Hellooo, what's this?”

With the scope zoomed in, she could make out the rough shape of a humanoid with cat-like ears or some other protrusions arguing with some of the other criminals of the group. The only way to tell it was arguing was by the way their arms moved as they talked; no sound other than gunfire would reach *that* far over the desert. *Cathar? Zygerrian? Frack, could be a fat-headed Devaronian for all I can tell.*

Whatever it was, it was clearly agitated and pointed a pistol at its compatriots. The threat was enough for the arguing people, apparently, as they backed off and the lone creature sauntered away into the dark avenues of the city.

“Wish I coulda heard what they were talking about.” That was when she saw the slavers on the docks picking up the pace. “Frack! *Nighthawk*,” she belted into her wrist-com as she sighted the driver of a hover dolly, “they’ve sped up the departure time. Get those reinforcements moving and key me into the artillery when you get the chance.”

“Roger Qek. We’ll send in Darkwing to buy time.”

There was no arguing with them this time. Qyreia could already see the faint red glow of the engines circling downward.

“Crap.”

She adjusted her aim toward the heavy gun emplacement where the gunner was alert, but not looking skyward yet. *Alright baby, time to shine.* She leveled her sights to hit center-of-mass, breathed out slow and, at the base of the exhale when everything was still and settled, her finger squeezed the trigger.

The recoil was rough for a blaster.

The shot sang out like a dream.

The slaver was sent into a nearby wall missing part of his torso.

“Ohhhohohoho *HO YES!*” She sighted in her next target, the slaver operating one of the hover dollies. “Schuttas love cannons.”

The deep report of the gun as the butt stock drove into the pit of her shoulder was like music. Watching the powerful red bolt slam through the driver’s door and leave the interior a smoking mess was the cymbals signalling the crescendo. It also sent the slavers into a panic. The alarm was up. If they were merely prepared before, now they were imminently looking for the Arconans.

“Darkwing, this is Qek, your eyes on the ground. Keep an eye out for heavy gun emplacements. Knocked out a P-Tower, but they could have more.”

“We read you Qek. What’s the starport look like?”

“Hot,” she said, letting loose at one of the criminals that looked like he might’ve spotted her. “Try to just wreck their cockpits. No telling how many captives they already have loaded.”

“Can do.”

The faint red specks in the sky grew brighter, coming lower and lower to the ground. Then, one after the other, red lances shot out from the dark shapes, the focused strafing run doing just what it intended. As they got lower, a golden streak flew skyward, then another, this time hitting one of the X-Wings. Its flight trajectory wobbled before pulling away entirely, trailing smoke in its wake.

“Darkwing Leader, this is Five. My stabilizer’s gone. Gonna try and link up with the mothership.”

“Understood Five. Six, provide escort. We’ll handle the rest down here.”

It’s so nice to work with competent people, Qyreia thought just before another yellow bolt flew into the night sky, followed by a multitude of smaller blaster bolts in just as many colors. *Snot, where’s that coming from?* While the pilots filled her once-quiet communicator with chatter, the merc watched for another shot from the heavy gun. Seconds later, the gold light flashed and she zeroed in on the thing. Unfortunately she could only see part of the barrel and some of the armor plating.

“Darkwing, Qek again. I’ve got eyes on that heavy gun but I don’t have a clear shot.”

“Can you shoot in its general direction? Hard to make out what’s what up here, but I can follow your blaster trail to the target.”

“Too easy, Darkwing. Wait one, and watch for where the red light stops.”

It was a narrow shot. *Fattest part is at the base of the barrel.* She sighted it in, making sure that even if she missed, it’d be close enough for the flyboys to get the jist. Her finger depressed the trigger and the red bolt flew true, straight into the base of the heavy gun.

“Marker spotted. Three, on my wing for an attack run.”

Qyreia watched as two of the starfighters dove through the inky sky. The lead X-Wing let loose with a fusilade from its cannons, but taking a hit to one of its S-foils in the process. As it peeled away though, she watched the second one unleash a glowing streak of reddish pink before also pulling away. The proton torpedo finished whatever the guns had left behind and then some, unleashing a massive fiery explosion against the dark backdrop.

“Gun down! Thanks for the help, Qek!”

“Yeah, no worries.” As she waited for her gun to cool, looking for another target, the dark shapes of a pair of land speeders coming her way materialized. *And the fliers are all occupied.* Once again, she keyed her wrist-com, this time adjusting to the artillery’s channel. *“Hammer One, this is Qek. I’m at the objective with fast-movers on the ground. Need fire support.”*

“Roger Qek. Nighthawk said you might be calling. Send us your fire mission. Over.”

“Crap. Coordinates... coordinates...” She thought to pull up her map, but decided to slow down the speeders first. “Let’s see how you handle something with a little more armor to it.”

Her shot zipped through the air and through the reinforced windscreen of the speeder, removing the driver and sending it swerving so hard it landed on its side. The other speeder stopped nearby, its top gun shooting wildly in Qyreia’s direction. In the dark, every little lump of sand and rocks looked like any other, so she was relatively safe for the moment. It did not mean she had time to dawdle though, and so her map was up in an instant.

“Aight Hammer One, coordinates are Aurek-Vev-one-three-eight erhm... niner-four-three. Over.”

“Roger Qek, copy Aurek-Vev-one-three-eight-niner-four-three. Over.”

“Good copy, now *shoot* these Hutt-humping spice lickers!”

Qyreia could have sworn she heard Hammer One laughing on the other end of the line. However, she was too busy with sighting in the gunner that seemed to be getting ever closer with his shots. He was dealt with soon enough. Another slaver saw this and started mounting the gun turret while the survivors of the overturned speeder let loose with their own individual firearms.

The mercenary was about to shoot again, only to see a trail of shooting stars arcing from over the horizon to her left, slowly crawling higher into the sky, then slowly coming down, getting bigger with each passing second. As preoccupied as they were, the slavers didn’t even notice, the functional speeder starting to move forward as its gun came online. The first few shots peppered the dirt several meters in front of the Arconan’s position. They were readying for a second volley when the first proton cannon round landed on the roof of their vehicle.

More explosions followed, filling the desert field with light and smoke, and showering Qyreia’s concealed position with dirt and detritus. The Zeltron ducked her head down out of habit as much to protect her eyes from any flying debris. Once the explosions settled down, she looked up to see nothing but craters — burned splotches that stretched a hundred meters in either direction.

“Hammer One, this is Qek.” She breathed a sigh of relief. “Good effect on targets. Thanks.”

Just when she thought she’d be able to breathe again, her communicator went off with an all-bands notification. She checked her immediate area for any sneaks that had

evaded her vision. Feeling satisfied, she opened the channel, taking the moment to breathe again, noting the calm voice that she knew was Aldaric's.

“—proach to objective from south and west. I repeat: we are beginning our approach on the city from the south and east. Spectre and Ranger elements, commence attack immediately.”

“And someone tell me who got everyone shooting in every direction!”

The sound of Scarlett's angry voice had Qyreia sucking in her lips, struggling between trying not to laugh and trying not to respond with a snarky retort. She let a snort escape before settling in behind her scope once again, spying the hodge podge approach of Spectre Cell; a sort of organized chaos in their movements. One of the repeater gun emplacements came to life, peppering and slowing their advance.

“Excuse you, those ass nuggets are *mine*.” Her gun fired and the repeater position went silent. “Get your own.”

As she panned back over the battlefield, zooming in and out as necessary, she spotted a familiar figure in the growing moonlight as the second celestial body joined its twin. *Speaking of ass nuggets*. She knew the human's predatory gait — refined, but with a sort of violent chaos — and her short hair among her other features. The swoop bike was a nice touch. *Never seen that one before*.

Satsi was otherwise unaware of the Zeltron watching her, more occupied with crossing the open ground into the town. She fired as she advanced, making full use of the blaster cannons on her bike to whittle away those she could see, and keeping the rest's heads down. Once at the actual structures of Shihon, she parked the vehicle and pulled her dagger before hurling herself into a building. It was so dark that none of the slavers knew what was happening until it was too late. Not long after, Satsi appeared out the back door, wiping the hair from her eyes, a wry grin crossing her lips.

She was thus rather surprised to see the streak of red fly just above her field of vision, connecting with another human that had been aiming at her on a balcony nearby. The lady Temeike looked back and forth between the dead slaver and the direction the shot had come from.

She keyed a direct line. *“Well, I wonder who coulda done that.”*

Qyreia chuckled. “I got your back, angrytits.”

“Bet you're watching more than that, flat-rack.”

“You wanna know what I...” She paused, hearing a scrape in the dirt behind her just before feeling a strong grip on her ankles and a strong, swift tug. “Yeeah!”

Instinct took over. While one hand scrabbled at the hard dirt, her other went to her pistol, throwing her elbow into the ground to twist her body and face upward. No sooner was she under the sky than the large silhouette standing overhead was briefly illuminated by a pair of red flashes. The slaver's grip on her ankles slackened and, slowly, he tipped backward, a jerky kick from the Zeltron finally sending him toppling over the edge and down into the ravine to land with a meaty *thud*.

"Q?! Oi Pinky, you alright?!"

Qyreia took a few moments to catch her breath and let her heartbeat slow down, dropping her head onto the ground and just staring at the moons before responding. "Y-yeah. Yeah, I'm alright. Musta been a sentry that I didn't see."

"Frackin' dumbass, don't scare me like that."

The Zeltron was taken aback by what sounded like genuine concern. "Sorry."

"Ya better be!"

The channel cut out as Satsi continued on with the battle, leaving Qyreia in the relative silence far away, still staring at the sky.

"Frack."

It was several more seconds before she got up, crouched low as she shuffled over to the edge of the drop-off to and scanned the rocky face, pistol at the ready. *All clear*. Taking a moment away from the larger battle, she picked up the rifle and surveyed the terrain in every direction. Once satisfied, she let the gun finally rest on her knee.

She sighed. "Clear."

Off in her own little world as she was, it took a moment for her to realize that someone was calling for her over her com unit. *"Qek? Are you there?"*

Rolling her eyes, the Zeltron keyed the wrist unit. "This is Qek. Go ahead."

"This is Ranger Two-Six. We're at the spaceport but we're pinned down, and neither Nighthawk or Darkwing can fire because of the overhead ship cover."

Frack! Qyreia rushed back to her firing position, foregoing the concealment of the sand-covered tarp as she got her bearings. *Spaceport, spaceport... Aha! There you are.* "I see you Two-Six. Standby..."

There were two of them, one on a heavy repeater, and another shooting from between two of the shipping crates presumably full of captives. She waited until he was behind the metal plate and then...

The shot went out, crossed the desert, the landing pads, and through the thin walls of the crates. Hit body went down about a meter away. *Next.* The heavy blaster gunner was more exposed, even with the small energy shield. If only to save power and spare some gore, Qyreia reduced the power setting, aimed, and domed the gunner, watching him go limp atop his own gun.

“You’re good Two-Six.”

After that, things got quiet. There was still plenty of fighting in the city, but they were more short-burst skirmishes than the powerhouse affair from over the previous hour. Qyreia watched from time to time, but mostly she just sat back and rested; ate some rations, drank some water, and even closed her eyes momentarily.

The communications net was nothing but situation reports and sass. Qyreia heard every word of it. For some reason, it brought a smile to her face. Eventually though, a thought nagged enough at the back of her head that she had to key in the lead ship.

“*Nighthawk*, this is Qek. Got a favor to ask. Can I get a lift?”

~*~*~*~

It was in no way part of the mission. Few enough of the modern Galerians likely knew the place even existed, save for the “old boys” that kept to themselves. But the LAAT/i landed on the far side of the planet regardless, promising they’d linger for a few hours at least; maybe do some maintenance. It would be more than enough time.

So Qyreia sped off into the dim, late-morning light, her internal clock completely cracked because of the intercontinental travel. Aifreann was less jungle and more temperate forest, and so was far less dense than the Keadean homeland, making the ride an easy one, save for the gloom of the overcast skies. The Arconan had to follow the map on her wrist unit to keep her on track for the journey — no roads or trails existed that led to this place; not anymore, at least.

It was meant to be a secret though. So it was no surprise that she didn’t see the walls of the base until they were right in her face, narrowly avoiding the collision she’d been so worried about for the past twenty four hours or so.

“Where’s the front door to this place?”

Slower now, the Zeltron made her way around the perimeter, finally finding the main gate. What she found inside was eerily peaceful — a courtyard of sorts that broke off to a series of structures. A barracks, a mess hall, offices, and silos. The Galerian base hadn’t been touched for years and, as she approached the lift to the lower levels, she wondered if there was still a power reserve.

She pressed the button and the light showed dimly, but functional. Kurs'kranak was still alive.

The trip to the lower levels was a slow one, and the lift rattled occasionally from disuse. Once there, the lights were just finishing up flickering to life expectantly. Deep in her mind, Qyreia had imagined the place being dusty and decrepit, with leaves from the trees above strewn about and light fixtures torn from their ceiling mounts. Just as in Tairiku, the Keadean continent, she had expected some post-apocalyptic stereotype. Instead, there were but a few scuff marks on the smooth floor, likely from boots running to meet the evacuation shuttles. She took a moment to get her bearings before turning down the hall toward a large doorway that opened slowly to her presence.

The Grand Arena. That's what it was called in the records, at any rate. *More like a grand eyesore to vanity*, she thought as her boots stepped softly on the dark carpeting. Embossed names on grand pillars flanked the great dragon-shaped throne that completed the room's grandeur, not counting the emblem of Galeres imprinted on the ceiling above.

Part of her wanted to break that throne to pieces, knowing how inflated some of her fellows' heads were already. But she wasn't here to vandalize. She only wanted to see this lost facet before it was draped in someone else's banner.

Her head slowly angled left, toward one of only two other doors in the room, not including that of the main corridor.

Qyreia felt almost like the floor would fall out from under her and into the main House living quarters on the floor below, but the stonework was sturdy enough that it let her reach the Quaestor's office door.

Inside there lay dormant further testament to the previous owners' elevated sense of self-worth. A file repository in one part of the room meshed seamlessly with the decor that all surrounded the grandiose desk and seat, clearly intended to remind any visitors who was in charge. It was behind the desk though that her objective lay: a code-locked door, with a code that only the Quaestor of Galeres knew.

"Or a former one," she muttered thoughtfully, inputting the alphanumeric password that hadn't changed since the evacuation.

The same password she had found when she had started planning the expedition to Eldar. The same expedition that was now under the current Quaestor's name. But in so many years, without another leader to change the password, it had remained the same just as the rest of the subterranean base had.

The glint in her eyes was almost hungry to see the chamber as the keypad turned green in acknowledgement and the door opened with a smooth motion, if a little gritty in

sound. *A little oil and TLC will fix that.* She was met by automatic lighting, soft and subtle, that illuminated everything without assaulting the eyes, catching the outlines of every piece of furniture. Black and gold were the dominating colors, the same dragon motif emblazoned on the carpeting and the pillows of the bed.

“Not to kink shame,” she said as she circled the bed, feeling the smooth cloth, “but this is one *hell* of a fetish.”

It didn’t stop her from sitting down on the mattress, feeling the firmness beneath her, before laying out and relaxing, enjoying the lavish material. *The hell was I thinking?* she pondered as she stared at the ceiling. *Mom was just fine. Now I’m all karked up on pheromones and the old crap...* She looked at her still-bare left ring finger. *But I doubt I’d be engaged right now.* As her self-reflection waned, her eyes focused on the ceiling and lack of more dragons adorning it.

“Surprised those schuttas didn’t put in a mirror to admire themselves a bit more.”

A few more minutes of relaxing in the bed, and then the Zeltron called her excursion done. There would be more trips here, to be sure. Well, at least to the base; not so much the bedroom. As she returned down the main corridor, having locked the Quaestor’s quarters behind her, she contemplated deleting any security measures, but decided to let the system keep any records. If she got nothing else out of the expedition, she had this at least. The first person to set foot on Galeres’ old stomping grounds.

She arrived not long after at the landing zone, the gunship waiting just as they had promised. A twirl of her finger, pointed skyward, indicated just what they’d been waiting for.

“Spin ‘er up boys. Time to head back and see what sort of damage we’ve caused.”