

Groundwork

If there was one thing that would give them away, it was her stomach. By now, it was growling every few minutes, and it seemed louder than any of the birds perched or flying overhead, or even the distant crash of waves along the shore. In her head, a thousand curses and profanities played out on a reel in a myriad of languages — some of which she didn't know the proper translation, and only understood the general idea — unable to speak them aloud. The trooper next to her poked her lip with a blade of grass, and she slowly chewed on it. It had a sort of sweet flavor to it; one that calmed her stomach long enough for them to concentrate on the task at hand.

They didn't observe the pirate holdout for too much longer, thankfully, and they were relieved by another pair of scouts, allowing Qyreia and her partner to slink back into the jungle. The trip back to their outpost was a long one, but the 11th Special Forces Company liked it that way; kept the enemy off their back, or so they said. *Frack knows that I wouldn't wanna patrol out this far*, the Zeltron thought begrudgingly. That the troops called themselves "Eldar Rangers" was an interesting turn, and she wasn't sure if it was a genuine moniker, or an adopted legacy.

They knew what they were doing though. That was good enough for her.

Having a hot meal waiting for her when they got back also helped. "Ohhh, you guys are my favorite, you know that?"

A bout of quiet laughter went up among the soldiers as she took her mess kit and started eating voraciously. Some more chuckling ensued, but one medic approached her with a little less mirth in his face.

"Ma'am, eyes up at me for a second?"

"Hm?" The Selenian that met her gaze was rugged from days out in the forest without a shave, but his stripes still showed darkly through his already tanned skin. He instantly went about shining a little flashlight into her retinas, testing her pupil dilation, and other assorted low-impact examinations.

"Looked like hell walking in here. Major wanted me to check on you."

Qyreia's eyes went to another Selenian sitting over by a small collection of overturned logs and camouflage-pattern tarps that served as lean-to shelters. She waved at him and he at her before they both went back to their immediate concerns.

"I'm okay. Just... *really* hungry."

"Yeah well, you probably should lay off the observation tours for a little bit 'fore your body starts eating itself."

She tilted her tin plate of food in obvious display. “Working on it.” That at least got a grin out of the medic. “See anything?”

“No,” he shook his head, a little happier for it. “No, you’re alright, ma’am. Get some chow and some rest.”

“Amen,” her partner said, taking a seat alongside as the medic sauntered off. “You doing okay though? Be honest.”

“I’m good, Kalb. I’m good.”

Kalb — formally Corporal Dren Kalb — had been her stalwart companion over the past few days as they prepared for the real operation to come. Together, they’d mapped out Scalebeard’s compound down to the crates in the sand and the routes of his patrols. His fieldcraft had kept them hidden, and his rare moments of whispered conversation had kept her sane. The sweetgrass to curb the hunger pangs helped too.

The intelligence they gained was, combined with the other scouts’, invaluable. The fortress was, in actuality, a two-part stronghold: a small peninsula-bound walled outpost, and a larger compound set nearby on the short, sandy beachside bluffs. Both were walled by thick mud-packed palisades, overgrown in some areas by jungle vegetation they’d attached as both camouflage and as fire retardant. Inside, aside from a contingent of pirates and bodyguards, there was space enough for a pair of small transport ships. Between the fortifications and the bristling emplacements, it was a formidable position.

Scalebeard himself struck an imposing figure. Qyreia had caught enough glimpses of him through the scope of her rifle. He was tall, strongly built, and striped with scars that bespoke of a rough rise to power. Contrary to his name though, he did not sport a true beard, scaled or otherwise, instead having a long stretch of scale-covered skin reminiscent of the dewlaps on reptilian animals. *Helluva beard.*

Were the codes for the pirate-held bunker not lodged in his ugly cranium, the mercenary might have relieved him of the burden several times over. Instead they remained unseen, watching.

“So Major,” she said as the company commander approached, “what’s our battle plan?”

“We own the skies, but for obvious reasons we don’t want to utterly destroy the fort he’s got built here.”

“Fair.” She poked around at her food, spooning another blob of the rehydrated stew. “Sho I take it we’re ushing Darkwing Shquadron then?”

“Ideally, so long as they haven’t been repurposed.”

Qyreia swallowed her food, shaking her head. "I think we'll be safe on that account."

Safe meant distracting Sera and the Battleteam with the prospect of shiny baubles in the form of the pirate's looted hoard. Xenna was fine with having an easier mission for once, and her penchant for collection worked well in the Zeltron's favor for redirecting their direction. Of course, there was always the security detail for the bunker itself, where most of Galeres' troops were massing for the final push for the other minions to "manage." The last thing she needed was the dysfunctional antics of the Force users melding with their vivacious new leader and turning this mission into another fiasco. She liked them as people, most of the time, but their combat and tactical savvy left much to be desired more often than not. *Goddamn I miss Satsi. Who woulda thought I'd be saying that one day?*

Of course, she knew Rogon was monitoring her every move, but he had the wherewithal to stay out of her way. A rare thing in recent memory, which was filled with their bickering.

"And we're attacking at night, yeah?"

Kalb tapped at his helmet with its built-in nightvision. "They don't have what we got."

"And tonight should be moonless."

"Damn impossible timing," the corporal said happily. It was rare that at least one of Eldar's two moons didn't make an appearance during the night, if not both of them. This meant it would be almost pitch black save for the glimmer of stars; just enough for their helmet systems.

On paper, the plan was simple. Pick off a few sentries and draw the pirates to the walls. Darkwing had three objectives: destroy the transports, level the outpost, and blow a pair of holes in the compound walls. From there, the 11th would storm in, wipe out any scrub pirates that were dumb enough not to surrender, and batter the hell out of Scalebeard to make sure his scattergun didn't do too much damage. On paper it was feasible, but there was always room for a hiccup in the plan.

"I'd love to be flying this run," Qyreia mumbled over the remnants of her food after the plan was briefed. "I'm always on the ground team for this stuff."

Kalb chuckled. "You can fly?"

"Allegedly," she replied with a smile. "Frack knows I fly most of the higher-ups around when the AAF isn't available." She sighed. "Or when it suits them. Or if I'm within arm's reach." Her eyes met the scout's dumb grin. "Oh frack you."

“Only if you cuddle afterwards,” he wheezingly laughed into his plate. “At least you’re popular?”

“Double frack you.”

Qyreia took the rest of the daylight to rest and recuperate, including some snacks along with another proper meal as the day waned. Under the canopy of the thick forest, darkness came on quick as the sun dipped lower and lower, filtering less through a net of leaves and more the tangle of trunks and ground-level vegetation. Only when it was truly night did they break camp and start moving back toward the pirate keep.

Moving at night was a difficult task in itself for those creatures not naturally suited to it. The Zeltron, while lightly armored, lacked the same low-light vision tech that her counterparts had, forcing her to very closely follow and rely on Corporal Kalb to direct her path in the dark. It made the already long walk seem significantly longer. There was still plenty of noise to keep them company, though. Bugs and birds alike filled the air with a melancholic buzz, as though trying not to wake the sleeping daylight denizens despite themselves. Between living in the city or on a ship for so long, the orchestra of nature gave Qyreia a quaint sort of nostalgia for her life back on Zeltros or her time on Kashyyk that softened the blow of their nighttime march.

The company’s sharpshooters were spread out along the treeline by the time Qyreia arrived with Kalb. Not that she could see any of them; that was just the plan, and she knew they were there, if for no other reason than because they had all been steadily reporting up on the comm net.

“Think you can climb this?” Kalb whispered as they approached a wide-trunked tree at the fringes of the woods. Against the glittering stars Qyreia could just make out its outline, and the shallow angle up to the thick lower branches.

“Pretty sure.” Even so, she let the Selenian climb first so that he could help her — and her large gun — up to their perch.

They both settled in, finding good positions to lay out on the branches or leaning against the main body, and started the waiting game. Even without the scope on her rifle, she could tell the pirates weren’t much for dousing their lights, or at least not all of them. A faint orange glow peeked over the ramparts, the handful of lamps scattered among the huts behind the wall silhouetting the sentries on top of it.

Qyreia pulled up her comm and pinged the commander. “Black Six, this is Qek. We got an ETA on Darkwing?”

“Ay-firm. Should be swinging low in ten. Target is in his abode, so no immediate risk to mission. Want to start this party for us?”

“Oh, Black Six, you know how to make a girl happy,” she whispered, shouldering her rifle and lining up the crosshairs on a silhouette. “First baddie in three.”

A few seconds passed. Then a streak of red screamed out of the woods and sent the sentry — what was left of him — reeling off the wall and into the enclosure. A moment passed where the other sentries were staggered by the suddenness of action from the dark. It took another shooter picking off an emplaced repeater gunner for the general alarm to be raised.

Then the fun started.

Blaster fire of all kind began erupting from the wall, strafing across the woods in the general direction they felt the enemies were located. Most shots went high, while others burst fruitlessly on the trees, and as more pirates mounted the walls, the fire intensified. That was when the marksmen really went to work.

Prime targets were emplacement gunners and anyone barking orders at the other pirates. Qyreia focused on the latter, since she could at least make them out in the dark. Just as planned, they focused their casualty-producing shots on the two opposite ends of the circular fortification, making the pirates mount the walls in those locations, reinforcing in expectation of the main attacks there. It was nice to see a plan coming together for once.

Kalb seemed happy enough to watch the lightshow.

“Fre-ackin’ *hell*, that thing sounds beautiful,” he hooted after another successful shot by the Zeltron. “Can I try?”

Don’t you have better things to do? Still, the idea amused her enough that she slunk back against the trunk and handed it off to him. “Mind the barrel. She heats up quick.”

“I bet.”

He leaned the gun up against the tree trunk, still standing, and took aim. A few seconds later, the gun shrieked as it let out another armor-piercing shot, Qyreia following the red blur the couple hundred meters to the wall until it exploded in a pirate’s chest. Kalb shivered, rolling his firing shoulder as he handed it back.

“Yep, she’s a beaut.”

Qyreia nodded, smiling as she resumed her position. She let the other marksmen peck away at the pirate numbers. They were spread out along the length of the wall, but the greater majority were right where the Dajorran troops wanted them. Through her scope, she searched the wall’s length and in among the huts, looking for their target; the *real* reason they were here.

She found Scalebeard near the back, likely using his abode as the de facto headquarters, motioning violently with his arms and bending his back as his jaw frantically moved. *He's trying to direct the battle. Barking orders at subordinates that only know enough to do that.* Seemed that, while the leadership had some brains to them, the underlings were largely fodder for their profit margins. Whatever skill they had merely dictated their roles. It explained the halfhearted attempt at counter-sniping the Zeltron when Galeres raided their woodland camp and blew a giant hole in the front door of the abandoned DDF compound. Qyreia only hoped that, when they captured the Trandoshan, his accent wasn't nearly as annoying as Torol's.

Oh, I can't wait to put my boot in that one's Hutt-karkin' taint.

"Heads down, folks. Darkwing, coming in hot."

Looking up into the sky revealed the soft reddish-pink glow of quad engines. Twelve specks of them. *Ooh, they brought the whole squadron. Guess they got tired of air ambushes.* The Arconan troops didn't have to look up to know to get behind something solid. It wasn't until the fire died down and they heard the roar of engines that the pirates bothered to look up. By then, the red lights had launched several faster moving pinkish blobs of light hurtling toward the ground. Qyreia ducked behind cover just enough that she was protected, but settled her armor's goggles over her eyes to watch the show.

The ones aimed at the main fortress hit first. Two massive explosions rocked the very earth beneath them, blowing holes into the thick stockade wide enough for a speeder to glide through with room to spare. Humanoids and splinters of detritus flew into the air, some bits falling among and pelting the woodline. Further distant, a barrage of the torpedoes all but obliterated the peninsular outpost; the ground itself being the only thing left standing, if only as a shattered and blasted ghost of what it had been only minutes prior. A flash of laser cannon fire heralded the takedown on the parked ships at the back of the bastion.

Just as quickly as they'd come, Darkwing Squadron flew away into the night, secondary explosions following in their wake, along with several fiery columns of smoke.

That was the signal for the company to move in.

Sharpshooter fire picked up quickly, felling anyone brave enough to stand up and raise a gun. Qyreia was quick to slip from her perch, much to Kalb's surprise, who followed her quickly enough with his own blaster in hand.

"You gonna take them on with that cannon?" he chuckled, noting the assault teams rushing across the open ground to either side of them.

“Nah.” She slung her rifle over her shoulder and pulled her more war-weary DL-44. “*This* cannon.” Her eyes met the Selenian’s in the growing light. “Schuttas love cannons.”

“Apparently!”

The merc decided she liked Kalb. He enjoyed the same simplicities she did. He didn’t ask questions. Plus, he could pop a pirate at three hundred meters with just an E-11. Given the reputation the Stormtrooper Corps gave the weapon, such a feat gave the Zeltron pleasant goosebumps.

Far off to their right, they could see the sharpshooters picking off stragglers in the outpost. Whoever was over there was poodoo-out-of-luck. They didn’t have the manpower to be assaulting two positions. If anything was left afterward, they might go salvage some prisoners and weapons from the wreckage. In the meantime, the Zeltron and Corporal Kalb joined the fray through the breach to the right, pouring in with the other special forces troopers.

Setting her power to a lower stun-grade setting was a new one. Very rarely did Qyreia have a fight where taking someone prisoner was the sole objective; usually it was more a matter of luck that enemies surrendered and were made captive. *Bet creds this Scalebeard kriffer isn’t going to go down so easy.*

A scattergun shot tearing through the corner of a building nearby answered that question.

“Frack me!” the Zeltron belted, jerking out of the way just in time. Another trooper wasn’t so lucky, with a nasty smoking scorch in his arm. The surrounding soldiers dragged him away, a medic not far away.

“Come at me!” they heard the Trandoshan belting. “More where that came from!”

Kark this, the merc thought, motioning for Kalb to follow and for the others to be ready. For *what*, she hadn’t quite decided yet. She threw herself into the same hut that was still suffering from a fresh, smoldering hole. The rough hewn wood floor was less than quiet though, with the pounding of boots across its surface supplying ample warning — and tracking mechanism — for the Trandoshan outside.

Kalb heard the scattergun go off half a heartbeat before the rounds burst through the thin plank walls. His white-knuckle grip shot out, grabbing the Zeltron by her shoulder and jerking her violently back and onto the floor, a spray of green light flashing across their vision as they hit the ground. A second blur of green shattered another hole into the wall above their heads, only to hear what sounded like a dozen blasters hammering away behind them. The scattergun fire abruptly stopped, and the two of them breathed a sigh of relief.

Qyreia's breath was a bit harder though. Looking down, she saw a clear black mark in the belly of her armor. Kalb saw it too, and the pained look on her face.

"You alright?!"

"Yeah," the merc groaned, easing herself up to a seated position. "Didn't penetrate. Grazing shot." She touched at the smoky streak. "Frackin' still hurts though."

Her soldier counterpart breathed a sigh of relief, dropping back onto the floorboards. "Oh good. Major woulda had my hide if you got nicked with me around."

That gave Qyreia a laugh, interrupted by voices from outside.

"You two okay in there?"

"Fine!" she called back, soon joined in the hut by a handful of soldiers. "I'm hit, but the armor took it. You get 'im?"

"Yes ma'am," the soldier — a sergeant, judging by the insignia — said, giving Kalb a stern look before helping the Zeltron to her feet. "Your stunt provided a pretty good distraction."

"Well, I am nothing if not here to serve," Qyreia replied with a small, showy bow, to everyone's amusement. "He talking yet?"

"Let's find out."

Picking up her corporal companion, she made her way outside where more soldiers were milling about: gathering up the prisoners and wounded, poking through huts for intelligence or some small scrap of loot, even finding and freeing a few captured Keadeans in cages. In the center of the gaggle of soldiers, with the background fires and the lamps that had so dimly lit the camp before, lay Scalebeard. He seemed even more imposing up close, his "beard" even scaller and more pronounced. More importantly though, with a medic attending to him, he was very much knocked out.

"Oookay, so I guess he's not talking right now."

"How many stun rounds did you throw at him?!"

"A lot."

A frustratingly large general consensus showed agreement among the troops, most if not all of those present nodding their heads. Qyreia didn't know whether to laugh or scream. She met herself halfway with a sigh.

"Well, at least he's not *dead*." She bent at the waist toward the medic. "*Right?*"

“No ma’am, he’s fine. Probably be an hour before he’s in talking shape though.”

The merc clicked her teeth, frustrated, but not wholly displeased. “How’re *we* looking?”

“Casualties are pretty light.” The familiar voice of the company commander stiffened most of the backs of the gathered soldiers. “We have wounded, but only a few will require any hospitalization. More stubbed toes than anything else.”

“Good. I’m glad your guys are alright.”

“*Your* guys too,” Kalb said, elbowing her ribs. He stiffened when he saw the major’s stare. “Er... sir. Ma’am.” His lips curled in a curse, forcing Qyreia to laugh, which softened the blow.

“There’s worse families to be adopted into,” she said, garnering quiet, appreciative laughter from the other troopers. “So now what, Major?”

“Now?” He looked at the Trandoshan. “We wait for this one to wake up and get the *qek-and-aurek* started.”

After a little more light conversation, the commander dispersed his troops for security and mop up. A handful of prisoners were taken at the fringe outpost, but most of its garrison was obliterated along with the peninsula’s surface when the torpedo barrage hit. Darkwing, somewhere off in the night sky, was screening the LAAT/i gunships that were on their way to pick up the soldiers and their quarry. While all these parts were moving about, Qyreia merely took a seat on the stoop of one of the huts to rest a little before things started up anew.

The lamps the pirates had were something of a blessing even after the fight. The fires caused by the torpedoes and fusillades of blasters were either dying or were put out, drowning the area in darkness once more, save for the dim light from the handful of electric bulbs. It let the Zeltron see the hustle and bustle, including Kalb, fresh from hauling detritus from the planned landing zone.

“Feeling any better?” he asked, pointing to the welt in her armor.

“Yeah.” She paused to think on it as he took the seat next to her. “Y’know, I don’t normally wear armor, but I think I might start doing it more often.”

“Probably not a bad idea.”

“The Trannie wake up yet?”

Kalb shook his head. “Nope. Even when he does, and we get those security codes from him, I don’t think this is going to be a good fight.”

Qyreia shrugged. “We take it slow, use cover, and keep an eye out for traps. Far as I’m concerned though, we should just level the place from the outside. Building new bunkers doesn’t cost any lives.”

“True,” he conceded. “But Eldar’s got enough ghosts, and battle dead tend to be less angry than someone that starved and suffocated in the belly of some underground complex.”

That piqued the Zeltron’s interest. “You say that like you’ve seen ghosts around here.”

“Spend enough time here, and you’ll see,” he said quietly with a sober nod, noting the gunships landing in the field beyond the stockade. “I was here before the plague. They were here then, and now that there’s been so much more death... well, who’s to say it didn’t get worse?”

“One thing at a time.” Qyreia took the offered hand of the Selenian to stand and make their way toward their ride. “First the pirates, then we deal with the ghosts of the past.”