

Staring Down the Hive

“Jeeen, why’s the comm suddenly so quiet?”

“I don’t know.” The Selenian keyed her earpiece and kept her voice low. “Y-Yoda-One, this is Qek-Resh. What’s going on at your position?” She looked over at the Zeltron as soon as the mic clicked off. “Why did you pick these callsigns again?”

“Because I enjoy making the Sithies squirm while we save their stupid frackin’ asses again.”

“*This is Yoda-One,*” came the hushed reply. “*The advance team was in contact and overrun. We’re currently pulling back.*”

“Pulling back?” Sergeant Jelenko muttered. “Aren’t we supposed to be counterattacking the boarders?”

Qyreia shook her head, tempering her own anxiety over the same thoughts with curiosity over what could have knocked out their vanguard before they could even report. “Roger that, Yoda-One. Notify when you’re close so we don’t shoot you.”

Infiltrating Nesolat Station had been enough of a chore. Between all the Clans trying to get their piece of the pie — causing no small amount of confusion in combat sector ownership — and the sizeable Collective assault, the Arconan strike teams were hardly unscathed by the time they landed. The Zeltron mercenary had a platoon of line infantry to direct at her discretion; part of the larger group of Expeditionary Force troops spread out through their roughly-designated section of the Shadow Academy space station. The fighting thus far had been rough, but standard fare when it came to the Collective. A whole team wiped out was a rather serious blow to manpower with their already extant casualties.

“Tell the rest of the platoon to take up defensive positions,” the merc told her aide. “Get interlocking sectors of fire on the entrances.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Sergeant Jelenko dashed off deeper into the archive to inform the other leadership. Things might have been easier if the lieutenant and senior sergeant hadn’t been wounded in the most intense fighting at the outset. Now the Zeltron was in charge by grace of her vicarious rank through Arcona. *Colonel* Arronen, as she’d been styled during her time as Galeres’ Quaestor. Even outside of that office, she’d kept the moniker. She was always with the troops anyway; preferred them to the Battleteam members that could never manage to work together.

Though having some of those Force users right now might come in handy, she thought. Even with the advantage of time to prepare, their position was less than ideal. This branch of archives gave plenty of cover in the form of dense shelves riddled with data drives and the occasional artifact or piece of physical text. However, their close proximity to each other relative to the size of the hall left little in the way of tactical flexibility: either the guns on the entries were reduced to almost nothing, or they risked shooting each other. The chamber further along was nothing more than empty space, with nothing more than support beams in the corners and an offshoot corridor to a series of archives and rooms parallel to the ones the Zeltron's forces occupied. Without the materials to set up defenses, the most they could do was use the doorways for early warning and deterrent.

Jelenko returned minutes later while Qyreia was still in the midst of considering their tactical situation. "Troops are positioning themselves, ma'am."

"Good. Then when the rest of First Squad gets here..."

"Yoda Six, this is One!" The comm was alive with noise behind the voice: blaster fire, explosions, and other people yelling. *"We're under attack and need reinforcements! These Collectives... They're different!"*

"Get to cover. We're on our way." She shot a glance at Jelenko then out to the rest of the archive. "Fourth Squad, on me! We're going to reinforce up ahead! Move!"

"You sure about this?" Jelenko asked quietly while the soldiers surged up from the rearmost ranks.

"Can't just leave 'em to get merc'd." The irony of the term was hardly lost on the Zeltron, but she had more pressing thoughts as they poured through the doors into the intersection chamber beyond.

A lone soldier was already there to meet them, bleeding and out of breath.

"R-run," he gasped, stumbling toward the familiar faces and uniforms. "We need to go!"

"The frack happened?" Qyreia asked as he fell into another soldier's arms.

"They're right behind us," he panted, groaning through the pain.

"What *they*?" she demanded impatiently, stopped only by Sergeant Jelenko's hand on her shoulder.

"Easy," she mouthed silently.

The Zeltron ground her teeth, but nodded. “Whatever this is, we need to knock it out.”

“No!” the wounded man belted. “We need to run! Retreat!”

“Eaaasy bud. You’re safe no-”

A streak of gold lanced into his helmeted head before he could finish.

At the far end of the junction, a quartet of blasters poked out from the dark doorway, and no sooner had the Arconans noticed than a flurry of identical bolts seared through the air. Several of the AEF soldiers dropped instantly before they could even return fire.

“Frackin’ *run!*” Qyreia belted, throwing crimson energy at the door while Sergeant Jelenko helped her pull their casualties back along with the handful of soldiers that remained. The glimpse she got through her scope as it bobbed through her frantic escape showed black, stormtrooper-like helmets. *The frack are those?!* They ducked aside before any of the return fire could hit them. Another wave struck as the Arconans backed through into the archive, saved only by the timely closing of the mechanical doors.

“The *hell* was that?!” Jelenko hissed as soon as they were in the relative safety of the archive.

“I don’t know,” Qyreia returned quietly while the wounded and dead were carried off by the medics. “I don’t know.” She paused, looking around for something, *anything* they could use. “Can we barricade the upper levels?”

“Doors are locked, ma’am!” a soldier called down from the walkway above.

“No, *barricade*. Blowing open a door is one thing, but blowing one open with a bunch of poodoo behind it is another.” She breathed, trying to think, trying to plan. The squad leaders — what few remained now — gathered around, knowing this was where the plan would come out. “Okay, we’re up against some Technocrat Guild frackery. They... They are *stupid* accurate with their blasters, and they shoot in sync for maximum damage.”

“Any explosives?”

“Maybe. They just shot at us. Yellow bolts, so there at least won’t be any confusion in a firefight.” It seemed a small consolation to the soldiers. “Knock down the shelving. Crack it in half if you need to, but I want those doors blocked *now*.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Without another word, the squad leader dashed off, ordering his soldiers to at least try to do what she’d just demanded. It proved fruitless, the metal framework bolted and

welded to the floor so thoroughly that not even the top-heavy construction could be toppled. Rather than waste any more time, they all settled into the best cover they could find, filling the narrow spaces facing the doors, or covering one of the three man pathways to either side or down the center of the double row of memory storage banks. None too soon, as the sealed doors of the upper levels began to acutely spark and spit gobbets of molten metal to the floor.

“Plasma cutters?” Jelenko mused as she and the colonel watched from their centralized position on the floor below.

“Maybe. Make sure the first floor is still keeping watch.”

The Selenian had just disappeared into the archives when a series of explosions rocked the hall. In the smoke and fire, the doors of the second floor were blown open, one wrenched free of its frame to topple over the railing and onto the floor below. On the ground floor, a gaping hole was left in the two nearest memory banks from the explosives. *Jen...*

“Jen!” Vaulting from her position, Qyreia dashed through the shelves while the air filled with the sounds of blaster fire. She found the Selenian slowly rising from the ground, gripping her head, a sizable hole in the databanks smoking just above them. “Hey, you okay?!”

“I th-think so,” she stammered, eyelids opening and closing at odd intervals. The way she covered her ear and moved her jaw showed she was having some trouble hearing as well.

“Get to the rear.” She could hear screams, and waning fire from their own troops; heard it enough times in so many exercises that she knew the sounds.

“N-no. You n-need help.”

“Get to the *rear*, Sergeant Jelenko! Go!”

Even injured, her wince at the chastising order still showed through, but a second explosion served to put some pep in her step, leaving the Zeltron with some breathing room. Straining her toes to mount the shelves, she peered through the still-smoldering hole, able to see the shifting shapes of helmets and the multicolored flashes of blasters. Mostly yellow. *Frack*. She pulled a grenade from her belt, ready to prime it, when she saw the helmet disappear. *That won't help you, schutta.*

Then it popped up and fired.

Qyreia avoided the streak of yellow energy by a hair's breadth. Truthfully less, as the smell of singed hair wafted into her nose. "Too close," he breathed, pulling up her comm. "Pull back to secondary positions."

The muffled sounds of confirmation were lost as she heard the sound of more fire up on the second level. Peeking out revealed one of the dark-armored Collective troops already staring at her. It was a trick. They both fired, both just shy of their mark in the attempt to avoid the other's shot. Knowing she was soon to be all alone this far forward, Qyreia took to her feet and ran for the wall, preferring to avoid the open space in the center for the moment. Just as she neared the end, her earlier target whisked around the corner, blaster at the ready. Again, Qyreia juggled with her blaster, firing wildly as she ran. It saved her the fatal shot as the Technocrat shifted to avoid the red bolt, but the retort still struck her shoulder, shearing into the armor plate and sending a shock of pain through the nerves of her collar and down into her fingertips. There was little time to appreciate any of this as she bowled into the Collective trooper, sending them both toppling against the wall and to the ground.

Both of their blasters were knocked free of their hands in the tumble, leaving them both in an awkward spot as they regained their bearings. The Collective trooper found its knife the most ready weapon, jerking it from its scabbard. Qyreia found her rifle within arm's reach, but facing the wrong way. She had little time to be picky as the Collective trooper lurched from sprawl to crawl to lunge.

Clutching the barrel of her rifle, she swung it around like a bat, meeting the enemy's helmet with a solid plastoid *crack* and sending it sprawling.

For the first time in this whole fight, she got a good look at her opponent. Black armor, reminiscent of the old holos of the Clone Wars or of stormtroopers, but different, more sinister somehow, with flashes of red across various parts, including the visor. Save for the stark contrast of the type of protection offered, the color aesthetic wasn't too dissimilar from the Zeltron's.

Distinctive enough that the identical foe that came down on a jetpack from the floor above could discern the difference. *Bork me, they have jetpacks?! Her eyes fell on the recovering trooper. They have jetpacks. Sithspit.*

The mercenary kicked out her leg, knocking the downed trooper in the face yet again. When it tried to grab her foot, Qyreia yanked her rifle to her shoulder and held the trigger back, unleashing several bolts into its helmet before relenting, if only to scramble away from the newly arrived jetpacking enemy. Only as she frantically heaved herself into a run, she heard the jetpack again, not to follow but to escape. *They're running? I got 'em on the run?!*

The explosion that erupted from where her fallen enemy's corpse was answered her question readily, just as it threw her off her feet, along with toppling several of the

sturdy databank shelving units. Landing on her injured shoulder was just metaphorical salt in the literal wound.

“Owww,” she groaned as the dust settled. “Owww owowow. Fr’ck.”

She rolled onto her back, half expecting to see that jetpack trooper already descending on her, only to realize she was momentarily safe despite the blaster fire that raged on in another part of the room.

“All units, be advised. These karks got dead-man switches. They blow up when you kill ‘em.” She looked back at the devastation. “*Big boom, too.*” A lightbulb went off in her head and she checked her belt. *Frack, I dropped my grenade. Probably blew up with him.*

“Yoda-Six? Is that you?”

Jennel. “Yeah, s’me. Is everyone back at the secondary position?” she groaned as she eased herself back onto her feet.

“Affirm.”

Odd. Jen doesn’t usually talk so formally. “Roger. Keep them there. I’m on my way.”

She checked herself momentarily, looking for anything sticking out that shouldn’t or any new holes, noting her helmet hanging from her waist by a strap. *All these explosions, I should probably put that on before I get a real concussion.* It was a hurried job, but she didn’t need to fully seal the thing. She wasn’t *in space*, after all.

The harsh clank of metal on metal caught her attention just as she was collecting herself, and her eyes caught the outline of a fist-sized cylinder. “You’ve gotta be karking *kidding me!*” A second went by, then two, the Zeltron tripping over herself to twist around the corner of a shelving unit before the little device went off with a tremendous explosion. As the Zeltron righted herself yet again, she was met with the sight of one of the Collective elites on the far side of the room. What was more, she could see one of her own troops hiding under a pile of debris just a few shelving units away. *That’s why Jen was acting weird. Probably thinks they’ve tapped our comms and didn’t want to give away our guys. Smart gal.*

She dropped to the ground, avoiding the initial burst of fire from the waiting Collective soldier, and crawled back toward the far wall where the grenade just went off. The sound of a jetpack followed her, muffled behind the databank between her and her pursuer, while the other kept up the suppressing fire.

I’m getting real tired of this frackery. Her hand went to the Denton charge hanging from her belt, planting it at the base of the shelves near the wall. *Let’s make some noise.*

With the footfalls still softly trailing her, Qyreia set the detonation to her wrist comm and made a break for it down the narrow pathway along the wall. *Come on, come on! Shoot me!* The heavy beat of her footsteps seemed to draw the dark-armored enemy from behind the databank, much to the Zeltron's relief. "Eat this, Hutt humper!"

Her finger touched at the wrist unit and the world seemed to spin.

Maybe it was the blaster round in her lower back.

Maybe it was the explosion that sent shockwaves of heat and detritus.

For the briefest moment before everything went dark, when her ears felt liable to burst from the roar of the conflagration and the air burned her lungs, Qyreia wished she had finished sealing her helmet. Once her body, lifted into the air by the explosive concussion, hit the ground and knocked her out, it suddenly wasn't her problem anymore. Everything happened so fast, and yet it burned through her unconscious mind like a slow-burning ember, still processing the world through a sluggish haze. She could hear the muted *thump* of heavy footsteps, quiet at first, growing louder, coming closer. If she had the conscious ability to parse out a thought, she might have considered her life up until then, or maybe gone through the list of her regrets.

There was a dull, screeching sound of a blaster and a heavy weight. *White light, here I come*, she thought absentmindedly in the void.

Only there was no light. Just nothing. Then there was yelling and more blasters and more yelling until everything was quiet again. At the fringes of her senses, the soft sound of footsteps once more grew from a whisper to the dull stomping of someone at a run.

A voice called to her. Even through the hazy filter, Qyreia could hear her name and the weight lifted from her. The ground seemed to lift away and light overtook her as the helmet was slipped away.

"Hey. Hey Qek." Jennel slapped gently at the Zeltron's cheek, her eyes finally fluttering open. "Heeey! You're alive."

Qyreia looked around, still dazed and just a little confused. "I am?"

The Selenian nodded, holding the red woman's head while the medics tended to the holes in her flesh beneath the melted and seared gaps in her armor. "That explosion really threw them for a loop. Gave us an opening to counterattack *and* rescue our people that were trapped or hiding."

"That's good," she sighed, some of the lingering tension melting away, though that might've been the painkillers she was sure the medics were injecting.

“Regular Collective troops are coming up behind these marines, but we’ve already got them contained, and reinforcements are inbound. You just rest now. We’ll get you patched up, boss.”

Rest. That sounded lovely.