

The Last Wall

Nesolat was hard-fought. In consistent fashion, the Collective made it as difficult as possible to board, made things harder as the Brotherhood forces pushed to repel them off the station, and now were making it difficult just to hold onto. Battlegroup Elysium's troops surged aboard through the few hangars left secured to them. That concentrated force pushed and pushed ever outward, enlarging the bridgehead with each passing minute and hour. It was all that the combined forces of the Brotherhood could do to slow them down, delaying them long enough to evacuate the Shadow Academy's staff and students, as well as collecting what artifacts and data that they could.

A stream of people and paraphernalia made its way to docked ships, by ones and twos and by dozens. As ships were filled to bursting, they fled, leaving the station's relative safety for space to run the gauntlet of Elysium's fleet down to the surface of planet Arx.

There were still a handful of shuttles left in the hangar where Qyreia and her troops were set up. It was her job to hold long enough for those ships to escape and, Force willing, delay the Collective troops.

Stragglers from across the deployed Arcona Expeditionary Force — of those who had been sent to the station — stood ready behind deployed positions of cover, be it infantry defensive walls or freight containers butted up against one another. At the far end of the hangar, troops waited by the door. Waiting to lock them in and to lay traps in a frantic dash before the Collective surged into the large expanse.

“How we looking, Jen?”

The Selenian sergeant heaved after sprinting across half the hangar, pausing to catch her breath before replying. “Last of the evacuees are coming through on the east side. West side looks clear. About to button it up.”

“That's a relief,” the Zeltron muttered, clutching her shoulder where the armor plate was partly shorn away.

“You should be going to the rear with injuries like those.”

“Nah nah, bacta's kicking in. I'm just sore is all.” Sergeant Jennel Jelenko was a good soldier, and over time had become a better friend among the Dajorran troops. Qyreia knew she was just worried in the same way she would be were the situation reversed. “Those karking marines of theirs did a number on me though, huh?”

“I think we can expect to see more soon,” the Selenian said soberly.

“Well at least they won't have the advantage of cover like they did in the archives.” She sat down, eager to ease the strain in her back. “Make sure the guys know about the

whole dead-man switch thing. They might try to suicide rush us just to clear out some chunks.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Jelenko stepped away to talk to the command node’s comms operator to spread the word. The Zeltron didn’t want a repeat of what she’d already been through. Almost half a platoon killed or wounded by just four of those Collective monstrosities. It seemed that with every fight, their capacity to fight was only exceeded by their willingness to do literally anything to achieve victory, even if it meant giving up not just their lives, but their identities, their bodies, to the cause. For all their hate of the Force users within the Brotherhood, such fanaticism seemed only to exemplify in excess what they were trying to destroy.

“Ma’am!” Jelenko shouted as the comms operator frantically worked to pass information. “Collective troops coming up along the west corridor. Doors are sealed and we’re taking defensive positions.”

“Good. How are the other avenues looking?”

“Clear so far. Central is closing down now. East still has friendly traffic.”

They could stand to hurry the kark up, she mused. The whole cardinal direction method of designating the large double-shutter doors was a little odd for the mercenary, but she couldn’t deny how neatly it worked. Just like port and starboard, east and west were nothing more than analogues for left and right relative to their collective position as opposed to any individual’s perspective. From behind her helmet, she could see the west end troops dashing back to their static defenses, where they’d have a commanding view of their space when, not if, the Collective breached into the hangar.

The sudden sound of blaster fire, distant and further down the central corridor, caught Qyreia’s attention. “What’s going on, Jelenko?”

“Hard to tell,” she said hesitantly, ear still to the headset. “Runners. There’s a few friendlies left, but enemy’s hot on their heels. Our guys are trying to help stall, but it’s gonna be hard to seal the doors like that.”

Her hand flexed, trying to allay the itch in her trigger finger. While Qyreia had an appreciation for commanding the AEF and DDF troops through her time with Arcona and its militant House, her preference was always on the front lines. From here at least, in her centralized position, she could sight in through her blaster’s scope and maybe provide some more direct assistance. *Come on, schuttas. Hurry up so we can close those doors.* Through the slight magnification, she could see the runners and the troops making a fighting retreat. Crowded as it was, it was too much to try and hit the shadows of enemy soldiers through the throng.

They poured out into the open with reckless abandon; a dozen or so sprinting Academy personnel, some with telling packages under their arms, making for the nearest transport. When some couldn't fit, they tried for the other two transports only to be turned away for the rear and, hopefully, a ride waiting for them in the next hangar in the curve of Nesolat's torus.

"Get ready to give them some covering fire, boys and girls!"

Rifles came up to the lips of the defenses, steadied and ready for opportune targets, while the repeaters cycled their power in anticipation. Qyreia's aiming eye narrowed, watching one of their own — perhaps an Arconan or any number of the troops from the other CLans present for the battle — fall from a shot to the chest, while the one that tried to pick him up took a shot to the shoulder.

She replied with a bolt of red that careened across the open space, over the fallen soldier, and into the offending Liberation Front partisan. *Frack you, assbucket.* "Jen! Forget the door and tell those guys to get out of the way so we can shoot!"

"Yes *ma'am!*"

The retreat was frantic as they poured out of the corridor and into the hangar. Those on the east end watched with some trepidation, with two transports still waiting, at the very real possibility of being flanked. Some of the fleeing soldiers were herded among those on the east end, providing a little added bulwark.

Once everyone was clear though, the fight really took off.

Streaks of red crisscrossed the expanse, the Arconans laying concentrated fire into the opening. Despite this, the Collective troops were able to bound forward from the limited cover in their causeway. A large, dark shape caught the Zeltron's attention momentarily before she saw a flash and the telltale sign of flame and smoke trail. She and several others ducked in time to avoid the miniature rocket's impact against the defensive wall which, to the relief of many, held up to the explosive. Before she could bring the familiar shape of the marine into her sights, the enemy popped several smoke grenades, quickly obscuring the view of the corridor and some added space around the opening of the large doorway.

"Keep firing! Don't give them any breathing room!"

If there was one thing the Arconans didn't lack, it was ammunition, and for a while, it seemed the unending fusilade was proving too much for their opponent. Spirits were rising.

There was only a moment to see the black shadow in the smoke before it erupted into the air.

The elite Collective marine, its jetpack alight, surged at the central defensive position, seemingly on a direct path for the command node. Qyreia's order to put all guns on it came almost instinctively. The command was too late to stop it from sending a rocket flying toward the comms. Fire and shrapnel ripped through the rearward personnel while the marine received the full brunt of over a dozen blasters and repeaters.

When the fire let up to a peter, Qyreia lurched over to a repeater, shoving aside the confused gunner as she continued to hammer the riddled corpse, slowing its aerial advance with each successive heavy shot.

"Get down, motherfrackers!"

Another explosion rocked them, the airbursts effect sending shrapnel raining down onto the soldiers below. Because of its limited advance though, the troops sustained only minor injuries. Angry and with her blood pumping with adrenaline, Qyreia roughly returned the heavy repeater to its gunner, seeing the carnage wrought by the missile. *Jen.* Medics were already frantically tending to the wounded, even as Qyreia made her way amidst the mess.

"Sergeant Jelenko! Jennel!"

"I'm here!" came the coughing response. The Selenian was sitting nearby, nursing the jarring effects of the explosive shock, but otherwise looking none the worse for wear.

"Are you alright?" Qyreia asked, kneeling next to her and busying herself with checking her over.

"I'm fine. Fine. Really." She coughed again, eyes wincing from an apparent headache. "Just... *really* got rattled there."

"I bet," the Zeltron said, managing a light chuckle. "You good to keep going?"

"Yeah. The tinnitus will wear off eventually."

Qyreia helped the sergeant to her feet and they quickly made their way back to the fighting line where things were rapidly deteriorating. The Collective marine had done more than sow chaos in his suicidal assault, apparently, as others had left the fog leading the Liberation Front partisans in pinpoint attacks on the tentative defenses around the shuttles. *He was scouting for them, Qyreia pondered, relaying the locations mid-flight. The hell kind of Sithspit are these guys made of to be able to do that so quick?* The only saving grace for the waylaid soldiers was the enfilade fire from the central positions, with a little help from the west end. The east end positions were hampered by the presence of the transports and those refugees still filtering out from their corridor.

As if matters couldn't get any worse, a dropship not belonging to any Brotherhood element that Qyreia was familiar with surged through the field that separated the hangar

from open space, its forward guns laying into the closest of the transports while Collective troops poured out the back. The transport stood little chance, quickly overcome by the laser cannons before the Arconan troops could even turn their own heavy repeaters and dedicated anti-vehicle weapons on the offending ship.

“West end,” Qyreia demanded over her own comm, “we need you to get that hangar door closed.” She turned at the sound of the one remaining transport prematurely closing its ramp and rocketing out the east end opening, flinging someone that had been holding onto the closing ramp into the void in the process. “East end, same for you,” she added flatly. *Frack.*

The situation deteriorated rapidly on the flanks. The west end, now fighting the troops surging out of the slowly wilting Collective transport, reaching the door controls became a frantic battle of supremacy. On the east end, academics and soldiers alike were cut down as they tried to cross the open ground, past the burning hulk, and into the defenses at the rear. There was at least enough breathing room for them to shut the hangar door there, shattering the controls as soon as the actuators engaged.

“Jen, stay here and help direct the guys pulling back. I’m gonna try to help the guys over there,” she yelled above the din, pointing to the battered Collective transport.

“Let them fight their own battle, Qy- *ma’am!*”

“They need help, Jen.” She squeezed the Selenian’s shoulder. “Hold down the fort here. I’ll be back.”

She watched as the Zeltron dashed off to, as she so often did, play the hero. “You better be.”

Qyreia had forgotten her injuries. In the heat of the initial action, all the soreness and lingering pain had vanished in the sight of a solid and clear fight. Now, sprinting across the open ground to the sister defenses, all that pain came rolling back. *I’m gonna need a nice bacta bath after all this poodoo is over.*

If nothing else though, she preferred this kind of battle. Open. Clear. She only had to slow her pace to a trot to be able to aim and waylay the partisans and other Collective troops rapidly trying to close the distance into a melee and take the defenses. Those who turned to face her fell first, red energy lancing out from her A280 in a rigorous, accurate fusilade. Then attention went to those already engaged with something or someone else. Before she knew it, she was already on top of them. When a gray-and-gold clad enemy looked back to see the source of the heavy footfalls behind him, his face was introduced to Qyreia’s buttstock with a sickening *crack.*

The Dajorran troops were almost amazed to see the woman, her armor already battleworn and distinctive for the stark red markings on her helmet. Qyreia was just as happy to see they'd held out so well.

"Gimme five," she asked, almost demanded in her rush to fight.

The lieutenant in charge of this sector picked out a number of his troops and approached the merc. "What're you planning, ma'am?"

"We're taking that shuttle and using it as a forward position," she said, pointing toward the Collective ship. "You stay here and coordinate. I'll let you know when we're clear."

He barely had time to respond with a confused, if impressed "Yes ma'am" before she dashed off again. Qyreia's little squad wasted no time, rounding the back of the shuttle and riddling the inside with blaster fire, felling a handful of crew and lingering troops with the shock attack. The fire from their own lines onto the ship had dwindled to nothing; a good sign that the lieutenant was doing his job. Leaving the squad at the back ramp, the mercenary vaulted up to the cockpit, rifle at the ready.

She was met with stillness within. Spinning around the pilots and crew's seats revealed that those who had remained were riddled with smoking holes all over them. Breathing a small sigh of relief, she hauled the gunner's body out of his seat and quickly started examining the controls. *Come on baby, please be working still.* Power was still on and, after flipping several switches and pounding her fist on the console, the gun controls came to life in her hands.

"Ohhh hohoho yes. Eat this, you Hutt-humpin' sleemo fracks!"

The little ventral turret beneath the cockpit spat hate at the rear of the Collective troops, leveling whole swathes that had been so direly pressing the Arconan troops in the increasingly short range fight. Soon enough, with this new and incessant threat, the enemy hesitated in their advance before turning to a retreat, then a rout. The AEF soldiers kept plenty of fire on their heels, motivating them to run faster and faster until the hangar was clear of any hostile element, save for the odd sharpshooter trying to pelt the Arconans from beyond the corridor openings.

Hearing the sound of the other hangar door closing, Qyreia slumped in the dead man's seat, finally able to breathe a sigh of relief. Bodies littered the hangar in contorted patterns, densely packed for the confines of the battlefield. As much as she disdained the Collective for its ideals, part of her stomach churned on seeing the carnage. *Why do they follow this dogma so blindly? What the kriff do they see in all this death?*

"Boss, this is Jelenko," she heard through the communicator in her helmet. "Enemy's withdrawn. We won. Should we pull back to our next positions?"

Qyreia looked at the field again, then at her troops, sighing. “You kidding, Sergeant? We just whooped their asses. Consolidate our troops, sort out the wounded, and buckle down. We’re gonna hold this schutta.” She closed her eyes, rubbing her sore shoulder. “Let’s see how badly they want it.”