

Lighthouse

“Spooky-One, this is Red Qek, tracking five minutes ETA. Same for you?”

“Roger Red Qek, we’ve got same. Payload is ready for drop, but Nighthawk is saying skies are hot. Care to intercede on our behalf?”

“I got you, Spook. Shoot us the coordinates and we’ll get you sorted.” Qyreia flipped off the open comm channel and opened up the S-foils on her X-Wing, enjoying the sound of the heavy mechanical *whirr*. “Reme, you got that telemetry from the *Nighthawk*?”

The R3 unit locked into the back of the starfighter beeped affirmatively, feeding the data into the ship’s scanners and IFF reader. Two red blips appeared, still well out of range of the convoy of LAAT gunships flying alongside the Arconan. Pulling back on the stick, she rolled up and over the Clone Wars-era vessels before banking off from their vector to intercept the would-be interceptors.

“Couple’a Z-ninety fives shouldn’t be too much trouble, huh Remster?”

Bree doodoot brrtbreedoo wheeoo.

“Well let’s hope the seventies stay up in space then, huh?” She huffed, muttering to herself, “Wish I had some wood to knock on. Might as well say I’m retiring next week.”

Blep-drrtdrrt wrhhoooo.

“Son of a... First, stop listening to *everything* I say, and second, I *know* I’m not retiring next week!” *Goddamn droids, I swear.* She rechecked the scanner screen and adjusted course. “Whaddya say we force them to pick which they want more: get flanked or change course away from our boys?”

Reme’s Binary response brought a wry grin to the Zeltron’s lips behind the black facade of her helmet. She genuinely hoped that the T-70s of the Collective’s arsenal stayed up in space — what few were left to them, anyway. With an uncertain battle still raging overhead, landing troops seemed like a desperate move to inflict damage rather than achieve any major strategic objective. The damage was largely to the Dark Council and the Iron Navy, while the Clans would remain comparatively unscathed, especially against the severe damages dealt to the Collective forces that so often seemed to enjoy fighting to the death.

This was, at least, the mercenary’s perspective of things. Of course, the space wizards always seemed to be hiding just one more ace up their sleeve, just like the Collective. If it weren’t for her handful of friends and loved ones within Arcona — her compatriots in Naga Sadow long since having cut ties with the Zeltron — she might have

been utterly ambivalent to the Collective threat. Now she was charging headlong through the skies of Arx to fight yet another battle, in yet another system.

She was fortunate, at least, that the Z-95s didn't seem to notice her right away as they came into view as black dots against the otherwise clear sky.

"Okay Remster, buckle up," she said, noting how the growing black dot turned toward her, matching the IFF blip on her screen. "I think it's about to get bumpy."

Her laser cannons went off first, letting loose a stream of red-tinted energy as each one fired in turn. At the extreme range, the Collective starfighter could easily avoid the incoming shots, but the evasive bobbing and weaving prevented an opportunity to repay the hostility in kind. When it veered off entirely, pointedly as its partner was on approach, it seemed almost too convenient. *A little bait and switch huh?* Qyreia continued to ease the nose of her ship along the enemy's flight path. *Not worth much if you can't switch.*

Her targeting reticle met with the computer-calculated lead and her finger squeezed on the trigger. There was a burst of red streaks and the lead Z-95 was reduced to a brief explosion of flame and a long trail of smoke as the remainder of the hulk careened down to the planet's surface below.

Then the true joust began. Banking back into the oncoming starfighter's path, Qyreia had little time to line up her shots, almost strafing her enemy as she came around in a wide arc, trading shot for shot. Her ship rocked, and she heard the explosive *pahp pahp* of her own hits on the opposing vessel. She throttled down, tightening her turn, before rocketing forward again to see the remaining Z-95 listing heavily, thick black smoke trailing from its right wing and one of the engine nacelles, doing its utmost just to maintain course. The mercenary's finger hovered on the trigger, pressure built to the tipping point.

A sigh escaped her chest and she released the pressure.

She flipped on the local open net. "Buzz off, mother fracker. Go back to your fleet and tell 'em the Red Qek let you go, and to stay the kark outta our space."

It was difficult to tell if the wiggle of the Collective ship's wings was acknowledgement, or simply the pilot struggling to maintain stable flight. Regardless, Qyreia turned back for the convoy, knowing that particular starfighter wasn't going to be back in operation any time soon; not soon enough to harass her ships, anyway. When she turned away and it didn't follow or veer from its course, she was sure that it wasn't coming back to harangue her or the gunships.

"Hey Spooky, this is Qek. Patrol neutralized. You've got clear skies again."

“You sure about that? We’ve still got one on the IFF reader.”

“And he’s flying away. He’s out of the fight. Let’s focus on what we’re heading into, shall we?”

It didn’t take Force powers, or even the Zeltron’s preternatural abilities, to feel the uncertainty in the convoy leader’s tone. Between the two of them though, Qyreia had the rank to override him, courtesy of her position in Arcona proper. As far as the Dajorran military was concerned, she still held the rank of colonel that she’d had as Quaestor of Galeres. It tended to help end most arguments quickly enough.

A good thing too, given the sight before them as their destination came into view. Smoke was already rising from multiple points around Eos City, the occasional blip of an explosive flash appearing among the buildings. Far to the north could be seen the shadow of the Dark Ascent, looming and seemingly untouched as yet by the raging battle. At least, it appeared so from so far away. The merc put the thought out of mind, focusing on their objective: a small patch of ground in the increasingly desperate battle for Eos.

“Spooky-One, I’m going to head in and make sure our LZ is clear. You guys maintain your course.”

“Roger that, Qek. Standing by to support if you need it.”

Qyreia let her altitude drop as her speed increased, S-foils closing to ease the strain on the starfighter’s frame. Feeling the shifting rumble of the atmosphere around her ship made the Zeltron wonder how it must have been before repulsors and interstellar craft, when flight still relied on lift and forward momentum. The shaking became an afterthought, though, as she got closer and closer to the city. On the fringes were the assembly areas of the Collective forces, with swarms of black dots pouring from transports and into craterous gaps in the once formidable duracrete walls. There, streams of blaster fire and splashes of heavier guns bespoke of a desperate battle to hold the gaps. Other aerial craft zipped over the densely packed structures, some friendly, others not; those that weren’t Arconan took extra time for the IFF and her droid to process, making the whole situation all the scarier.

Swooping in low, the Zeltron guided her X-Wing toward the location indicated from Reme’s database. Between the ship’s scanners, her droid, and her own eyes, the roadway they were to use as their landing zone looked clear enough, with a few advance AEF soldiers laying down marker lights for added ease. *That’s nice of them.* Really, it was only to get them landed and moving all the faster. They were to set up a secondary defensive position along the narrower trade ingress further along, coming into view as Qyreia soared overhead. Blaster fire inside the walls showed that the Collective had already penetrated the gates and checkpoints and were inside the city.

“Let’s give these frackers something to think about,” Qyreia mused aloud as she brought her ship back into combat mode. Her droid whirred worryingly as it hunkered into its socket.

The rattling burst of cannon fire she let loose into the infantry inside of the wall was short lived, but it felt good to give them pause. She banked around again to give them another taste, this time with a proper angle to rake them down the length of their battle line; a feat made all the easier by the rigid gridding of the city’s buildings. Down and down the length, she held down the trigger until her indicator warned of an overheat. Only then did she break off into the skies.

“Frack yeah! Suck it, ya Hutt-humpin’ sleemo karknuts!”

Even Remeë offered a celebratory *whirroo*.

Qyreia turned her gaze to the left, beyond the wall, and saw the Collective assembly area for this sector of the battlefield, and a devious thought entered her mind. “Whaddya think, Remster? Time to go three for three?”

Before the droid could respond, the Zeltron turned over in a roll, levelling out toward the open space beyond the wall where they could see troops, vehicles, and supplies. *This is too good to pass up*. Once the broken defense structure was passed, she unleashed everything on the hapless enemy. Laser cannons and torpedoes tore a swathe through the camp. It seemed almost too easy to lay such havoc.

Such convenience was quickly explained when the anti-air defenses opened up on the lone starfighter, cutting Qyreia’s destructive streak abruptly short. Suddenly it was all she could do to not be completely overtaken by the ground fire, siphoning power from her guns and shunting it all into shields and speed. *Frack frack assmonkeys frack!* Twisting and climbing to try and gain some distance between guns and target, she narrowly avoided shot after shot, some glancing with explosive shudders on her shields. A small column of scout mechs caught her attention as she veered roughly back toward the wall. *I just need to angle this right*, she thought, rolling into a dive that brought her guns in line with the armored walkers.

“C’mon schuttas!” she growled, unleashing a flurry of red energy. Many of the underpowered shots pelted fruitlessly into the pavement, but several hit home, damaging the walkers. She pulled back on the stick, leveling her high-speed vector just meters off the ground, too low and too fast for the defensive guns to reasonably track. A tap on the launcher trigger sent a torpedo flying into the rear of the column, hammering into one walker and devastating another with the secondary explosion. The X-Wing peeled up and away just in time to avoid a collision with the fireball, allowing the Zeltron a moment of victorious elation.

The sudden shock and shudder of two explosions at the rear of the starfighter's chassis brought her out of the reverie.

Klaxons blared and warning lights flashed on her terminal that an engine was hit, along with the shield generator, leaving a smoking trail in her wake. *Frack frack, c'mon baby, turn!* She barreled into a dive over the lip of Eos City's defensive wall, just narrowly avoiding the duracrete as she sped back to the assembly area. Only when she was on final approach did she dare to breathe a sigh of relief.

"Well, *that* coulda gone better. How we looking, Rem?"

Breet dootdoot brrtdrrt.

Qyreia tossed her head back, frustrated. "Frack. Any chance you can fix it locally?"

The droid gave a series of angry chirps, but gave some assent: it would be able to at least get partial functionality. Eventually. It would take some time, though.

"Well, you'll have plenty of that," she said as they approached the landing zone, the LAATs already offloading their varying forms of cargo. "I might be busy for a while with this next bit."

Following direction from the troops on the ground, the Arconan set her ship down in a snug space off to the side of the road. It didn't hide the whole ship, but it placed it enough between the buildings that it offered a difficult target for any Collective pilots brave enough to push this far into the Brotherhood's battle lines. As the canopy opened and the Zeltron made to disembark, she noticed that not all of the people on the ground were soldiers. Civilians of all kinds filtered in a sporadic stream toward the interior of the city, some carrying their family belongings, others bundles of food and water, and some with only the clothes on their backs.

"Y'know Reme," she mused quietly to the droid, "it's Sithspit like this that reminds you how we have a tendency to force our poodoo on people that were otherwise just minding their own business. Y'know?"

The R3 unit gave a doleful drone of understanding as its master finished descending down the ladder and onto the broken pavement below, blaster rifle in hand. Working her way past the retreating throng, she found some familiar faces among the uniformed personnel. Since her last excursion on Eldar, the 11th Special Forces Company — self-titled the Eldar Rangers from the days before even Qyreia had joined Arcona — had taken a liking to the Zeltron, so she was assigned to them for this mission. Or they were assigned to her. It was hard to tell sometimes.

Major Sherrick, the company commander, was first to spot her with his discerning, narrowed eyes. "What happened? You looked about ready to crash."

“Engine trouble.” It wasn’t a complete lie, at least.

“Among other things.”

“Hey, if you *don’t* want an intel report on what’s marching our way, feel free to keep complaining.”

That got a chuckle out of the lean Selenian. Ironic, really, that most of the so-called Eldar Rangers weren’t actual natives of Eldar. “Mind if I send Kalb and Sergeant Jelenko here with you? Can’t be letting any of the *Citadel folk* go unprotected.”

“Oh, you’re *funny*,” Qyreia chided amiably. Her eyes darted to the other two standing, thus far quietly, amidst the conversation. “How do you two feel about that?”

“I’m just mad you didn’t bring the cannon,” Corporal Kalb said, faux disappointment choking his amusement. Another Selenian, Dren Kalb was a bit beefier than his commander, karmically countered by a stature slightly shorter than the Zeltron’s. His sandy-colored hair was also evident in a closely-cropped beard that matched his similarly cut coiffure.

“Probably wouldn’t fit,” the one female Selenian of the group said with a knowing grin. “Cockpits aren’t that big.”

The odd-woman-out was Sergeant Jennel Jelenko, her old adjutant from the Quaestor days. The Selenian was technically part of the Dajorra Defense Force, but the old job had stuck with her enough that, of late, she accompanied the Zeltron almost everywhere that Arcona had a fight. Between the long blonde ponytail and tan-striped pale skin, she looked almost too soft for field work.

The major looked less than pleased by the banter, clearly more interested in getting to their battle positions and getting everything ready to fight off the Collective. “About what I asked?”

“Of course,” Qyreia assented. “I’d be glad for the company.”

“Droid not coming?” Jelenko asked as they began walking in the opposite direction as the refugees.

“Remees working repairs. Not sure what he’d be good for in a fight like this anyway.”

“Droids like that are great for ships and some random stuff that might come up,” Kalb mused, “but not so much in a long-range fight.”

Jennel’s eyes fell on the refugees and her mirth died somewhat, especially as some of the civilians glanced and glared at the soldiers. “What do you think’ll happen to them?”

“They’ll be fine, Jen,” Qyreia said soberly, offering a reassuring smirk. “So long as we hold out, they’ll be just fine.”

Their conversation died for a long while after that, with only some occasional pleasantries shared between them until they arrived at their destination: a small plaza that served as a small market and intersection along the rigidly-planned transportation routes. Sounds of explosions and blaster fire raged in the distance, the sounds so distorted by the urban environment that it was hard to tell just how near or far the fighting really was. Meanwhile, static deployable defenses were mingled with the buildings’ already extant cover, giving the company a wide and easily defensible area to cover. Looking at how it was set up, the hardest places to cover would be the streets to either side of the plaza that ran perpendicular to the main road. They were just as, if not more narrow, leaving only a small margin of space to actually fire on an enemy before they were already on top of them.

When Qyreia voiced this concern, Major Sherrick seemed to share this concern, but was less bothered as he pointed back to where they had landed.

“Once everyone is set up, the nineteenth is gonna open up on the whole block. Only cover will be a bunch of rubble.”

The Zeltron’s nerves settled for a heartbeat, only for her eyes to narrow as a thought entered her mind. “Have we checked for civilians in all these buildings?”

“They’re all supposed to’ve cleared out, weren’t they?” Kalb said, asking the obvious question.

“*Supposed to,*” the major confirmed, but his steady gaze on the red woman showed doubt. “Damn.” In an instant, he had a hand on his earpiece, relaying orders for a platoon to split up and clear buildings to either side of the plaza. It was a half-measure at best. There was no way they would be able to make sure they were all empty before the Collective showed up.

At least if they get caught up in the barrage, they’ll get buried in there, and that’s less enemies to worry about, Qyreia thought halfheartedly, her fire dimmed by the prospect of burying innocents with the same fel stroke.

A yell was heard from one of the perches in the square, and all eyes turned toward the main road once again, with multiple figures fast approaching. Before they could even ask if it was more refugees — or worse, the Collective — the shapes materialized as the bedraggled troops that Qyreia had seen during her earlier strafing run. Those not wounded were clearly tired, their Iron Legion uniforms and armor showing clear signs of vigorous fighting. They came in ones and two at first, then a sporadic trickle, moving faster and faster the further back they were in the retreat.

Some could be coaxed into reinforcing the positions while the wounded continued on toward the rear. Some kept running, regardless of who or how many bellowed at them.

“We need to get into positions and blow these buildings,” Sherrick said, the scouting troops already returning. “Artillery’s coming in.” He looked at the Zeltron discerningly. “Ma’am, can I ask you to take that high-rise at the end of the line? We need good eyes, and I know you and Corporal Kalb make a good team.”

“Hell yeah we do,” the corporal chuckled.

Qyreia’s eyes went up to the building in question. It stood a good five or so stories taller than any other building in the area, with wide windows that would indeed make for a good vantage, though she was less fond about the lack of balconies. They would need to blow a window or two if they needed to shoot, which would undoubtedly give away their position. Not that blasters didn’t leave a light show to follow by their very nature. *Damned if you do, damned if you don’t.*

There was little she could do but acquiesce. Fortunately the power in their particular sector of the city hadn’t been severed just yet, and so were able to take the turbolift up to the top floor where they could get the best vantage. *Those stairs would’ve killed me*, she thought, looking at the stairwell door as they exited out onto their neatly furnished observation post.

Kalb nodded appreciatively as they set up, already able to see some movement from their enemy. “Not bad. Good field of view, climate control is still running, and... yep. Refresher right around the corner. All we’re missing is a caf machine.”

“I don’t think we’ll be here that long,” Qyreia said, her tone somewhere between foreboding and hopeful.

So they settled in and watched the world unfold below them.

They directed the artillery strike that leveled the structures and so many Collective soldiers with it. They recorded and relayed troop movements, giving the defenders ample time and ability to point their guns where they needed. And they listened. Listened to the blasters and cannons and artillery. Listened to the best and worst parts of the battle unfolding over the comm.

It all looked to be going so well. At least at first. The longer it dragged on, the more the Collective troops were able to mass their forces. Compared to the reinforced company below, their enemy could simply absorb the losses as they pushed closer and closer, until it became too dangerous to pelt at their front lines with the heavy guns. Those beasts of burden were likewise suffering. Ammunition was not infinite, and the rate of fire began to dwindle as the fight wore on simply to keep firing while they waited

for resupply. When the Collective artillery started counter-battery fire, it only frustrated things further, until there was almost no fire support at all while they relocated to a spot the Collective hadn't zeroed in on.

"I can't stand this anymore," Kalb finally said, standing away from the window and unleashing his blaster on it to shatter and melt the glass away, making a hole big enough for him to poke his gun through. He hadn't really given the Zeltron much time to react, such was his frustration.

"Frackin' hell, Corporal! A little goddamn *warning* next time, yeah?!"

He sighed as he settled back into his perch. "Sorry ma'am. I'm just... Watching from up here seems wrong, somehow."

"Sometimes you get the jobs you don't like." Qyreia shrugged as she drew up next to him, poking her own muzzle through the gap. "Just gotta make the best of it." She turned her head to the other Selenian. "Jen, you good?"

Still monitoring the battle, Sergeant Jelenko was occupied with updating the icons on their commnet holo-display. "I'll feel better when we're back on the ground and not getting shot at."

"Fair." Shifting again, Qyreia eased into her rifle, lining up the sights with the action and the moving blobs of color below.

"We hitting anyone in particular?" Kalb asked. This wasn't their first sniping gig together. He was still mad that the Zeltron didn't have her 'cannon'.

"Anyone that looks like leadership and anyone shooting our guys. Focus on the firefights before hitting their rear."

"Roger."

The Zeltron picked her way across the field, the blobs now clear shapes in the scope of her A280C, if still a little small. Her scanning brought a heavy repeater crew into her line of sight and she shifted her body, readying herself for the shot. A whisper told Kalb to expect the noise, there was a pause, then the report of the blaster as a red bolt streaked across the open air several hundred meters to its target, taking the gunner in the chest. Then another shot as the other two scrambled for cover. Then another, popping one in the head as he peeked out. The other went down when he tried to retreat to the safety of his comrades.

"And that's a gun team down."

"Sweet," Kalb said appreciatively, calm, just before his own rifle went off. "Got a lieutenant or captain."

“Nice.”

Qyreia’s sights panned over the battle lines, spotting a particularly intense firefight that looked to be going in favor of the platoon of soldiers that, by their uniforms, looked to be part of the Liberation Front. Most of the enemy soldiers, in fact, looked to be part of that particular ‘pillar’ of the Collective. It didn’t make them any sloppier than their counterparts, but it did leave them generally less armored, moving around like soldiers should move on a battlefield. Organized chaos. Of all the pillars, Qyreia liked this one best. They were the least dehumanized; the least warped by technology or other unsavory methods of so-called *improvement*.

One shot, then another left her muzzle, energized gas screaming at her targets below, throwing off a would-be assault still in its assembly stage. It took several more shots and casualties before the Collective troops really started to scatter for cover, and in the process realized where the shots were coming from. Assailed from two sides though, they could hardly engage the Zeltron and her Selenian companions without exposing themselves to the AEF troops across the street.

She saw one point at them. He went down.

The world seemed to take exception to that. Within seconds, a barrage of laser cannon fire tore across the face of their building from base to crest, blasting the glass apart and shearing through the duracrete and walls as if they were nothing. If not for their prone and seated positions, Qyreia and the two soldiers would have been vaporized in the first volley.

“The goddamn frack is this?!” Jennel yelled above the crashing energy explosions.

Qyreia dared to peer back, seeing the walkers she’d pleaded at earlier from her X-Wing now in battle formations among the ruined buildings, many battering away at their once-sweet position. “Walkers! Angry ones!”

“We need to leave!” Kalb screamed as a streak of energy whizzed just above his head to blow a hole in the wall behind him.

“Stairwell!”

The three crawled and stumbled to the indicated stairway — the only one in the building — just as a screaming echo permeated the air. Qyreia just barely caught sight of the large ball of energized high explosives hurtling their way before she pushed herself and the other two down the stairs. While they tumbled violently down several flights, it was better than being caught in the tremendous blast that utterly destroyed the top floor and a good portion of the floors below.

Kalb was screaming and the two women were dazed and bruised all over.

“What’s wrong?”

“Broke my damn leg!” Kalb spat, trying to hold back his cries as the Zeltron hurriedly worked to give him first aid, starting with painkillers.

Sergeant Jelenko stood, checking herself over and looking around. Her gaze fell to the rest of the stairwell as muffled words came through the comms, just barely making it past the ringing in their ears. “...*your position... defensive measures... can’t reinforce...*”

“Uh, guys,” she said, bringing her E-11 to her shoulder. “We have company!”

“What?!” Kalb waved Qyreia off as the Zeltron moved over to the railing, spotting the file of Collective troops making their way up the stairs. “Oh, they are *not* happy with us if they’re concentrating like this.”

“What do we do?”

The merc pulled a grenade from her belt and pressed the trigger. “Improvise and overcome.”

She dropped the grenade down the small gap, watching and hearing it clang against the guard rails down and down below. *Please work*, she thought, pulling Jelenko back from the lip. They heard the detonation, echoing sharply in the starkly furnished stairwell, leaving behind agonized screams and the slumping sound of bodies hitting the floor.

“That bought us a minute,” Qyreia said, patting the sergeant’s shoulder. “Check this floor for any good cover. I’ll hold off any reinforcements until we can get something set up.”

“You sure? We can’t just call for our own guys?”

They both listened momentarily to the comm, the sound now coming in clearer as their ears adjusted from the earlier explosion. “...*I say again. We are to hold at all costs. Fall-back positions are not ready. We are to delay the enemy here. Make them pay for it, Eldar Rangers. Out.*”

“Think that answers our question,” Qyreia said soberly. Even through the walls, she could hear the exchange of blasters and artillery; mortars and mechanized weapons platforms tearing through each other. “Go on, Jen. I’ve got us covered here. Get Kalb sorted then come get me when you find us a good spot. Understood?”

Sergeant Jelenko smiled wanly, holding onto her confidence in the Zeltron. “Yes ma’am.”

Backs to the wall. Alone in a sea of fire. They had to hold, no matter how thinly stretched they got. In this fight, they were a light at the end of the world.