

Tipping the Pillar

Everything was way too quiet. Butterflies churned angrily in Qyreia's stomach as their small transport moved slowly toward its objective. The *Braga* was squatting amidst the chaos of the battle raging above Nancora, occasionally blinking out of sight only to reappear minutes later to fire its powerful beam weapon over the course of the engagement. It was wrecking ships: Arconan ships, Odanite ships, and anyone else that the Zeltron could remotely consider friends or allies. That had changed about ten minutes ago, when Qyreia had been thrust into this mission on a moment's notice and a fool's hope.

Somewhere onboard the *Braga* was a spy that had managed to sabotage the engines of the heavy cruiser, leaving it motionless in the tide of battle. As if to throw salt in the Collective's wound, this agent had managed to create a "hole" in the ship's sensor array just large enough for a small ship to fly through.

However, a whole Collective fleet stood in the way of the many strike craft that could have defeated the monster. It was also by no means dead in the water. Its many quad laser turrets were still very active, and friendly capital ships had to be careful not to cross the main gun's line of sight. Further, the opening in the *Braga*'s sensors was very small, and while more ships might have followed the lead in a column to capitalize on the situation, a whole flight of transports would have drawn too much attention.

So now here they were, thirty-odd people crammed into a LAAT/i gunship modified for space travel, skirting the edges of the battle with only the bare minimum of power output to be as small of a blip on the Collective's sensors as possible. All to try and infiltrate the cruiser and take out from the inside.

Just a few more of these gunships and we could take the whole damn ship for ourselves. She paused in her musing. *Okay, maybe about a dozen more. Still, we could really use the added firepower.*

"Two minutes," the crew chief barked. "Final checks. Strap down your gear and be ready to disembark. We'll be docking on the forward keel. It's on you to complete the mission from there."

The troops looked to their Arconan leader with mixed expressions. Compared to the well-equipped troopers, the lightly-clad mercenary didn't exactly look imposing. Given her own apprehension, Qyreia wasn't feeling particularly confident in herself either. *Frack being leadership and... and stuff. Damn Q, can't even swear properly anymore.*

"You'll stay put, right?" she asked the crew chief.

"Long as we can. If we're compromised, you'll have to find another way back to the fleet."

"Lovely," she muttered before turning to the group as a whole. "Stick to your squads, take cover where you can, and follow my lead. We'll make for the first big target we can blow up and go from there."

"Good enough for me," one trooper said.

"What kind of ship is this that we're doing some crazy boarding action anyway?"

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The merc shifted uncomfortably. “Intel says it’s a *Dreadnaught*-class, but the holo imagery shows some weird bit on the underside. Makes it look like a Nebulon-B frigate.”

“That’ll be the laser system,” the platoon sergeant said. He was one of the few who attended the briefing. “We kill that, and the ship is practically useless, if it survives at all.”

Such a sentiment sent a small, if brief wave of relief through the troops. Unfortunately, they were only just forward enough to call it the “fore” end of the enemy vessel. On the plus side, the landing area was nestled in a neat little space that kept them out of the field of fire of the many laser turrets. Their entrance was, on the downside, a waste disposal port.

“Guess there’s two sides to all these ports,” Qyreia mused. “Alright, let’s get this over with.”

“Such enthusiasm,” a nearby corporal said jokingly.

Then the hatch opened and they were greeted by the smell. “Right. Like I said, let’s get this over with. Fast.”

I really wish I’d have brought my friggin’ rebreather along. Instead, she and many following behind her tried holding their breath for as long as possible. It was a very long tunnel though.

Hacking and using whatever they could to filter the nauseating stench, they trudged along the narrow tube which was mercifully devoid of septic sludge save for a dried-out trickle. The Zeltron was lightheaded and worried she might die of asphyxiation, face down in crusty excrement, when they finally came to the other end of the tunnel in the glorious presence of a maintenance hatch. *Oh god, this is the most beautiful thing I’ve seen all day.* They allowed their breaching team to move forward, who proceeded to pry open the hatch and make way for the rest of the group.

They now found themselves in a corridor that, while filled with a plethora of clean air, gave no indication of where they were. “Alright everyone, let’s move out.”

“I think we should keep a squad here,” the platoon sergeant said firmly. “Third squad, stay...”

“Belay that!” Qyreia barked back. “Right now they don’t know we’re here, which means they don’t know where we came in. We leave people here, then they’ll know right were to go to cut us off and where our ride out of here is.”

That left the noncommissioned officer momentarily speechless. “Alright then. Lead the way boss.”

“What’s your name, by the way?” she asked as they moved further to the fore of the ship.

“Balsyche. Sergeant Balsyche.”

“I’m Qyreia Arronen.”

Sergeant Balsyche was about to make a joke about how she managed to spell her name when they saw a four-man security patrol round the corner ahead of them. There was a momentary pause of surprise for both parties, but it was the Zeltron’s group that already had their guns up, and it was the merc herself that loosed the first shot. Then a short but furious burst

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from the other front-most troops took down the remaining three, with only one of their own taking a wound in the arm.

“Keep moving,” the merc said flatly as soon as the casualty was treated. The time for casual conversation was over. It was time for killing.

It didn't matter which of the “three pillars” they belonged to, they all fell down the same. As the platoon made its way further into the ship, they quickly found themselves moving from the fringe halls to the main causeways of foot traffic. Much of the ship's operations were automated, leaving the flesh-and-blood personnel to pursue security and other shipboard combat roles.

“How we gonna do this, boss?”

“Frackin' storm the hall, take cover, and shoot everything that moves in either direction.”

Balsyche couldn't help but grin. “Well, that's just bull-headed enough that it just might work.”

“Firm believer in the K.I.S.S. method, sergeant. Keep it simple.”

“Roger that.” He motioned to the troops behind him and, as soon as the nearest patrol passed by, they rushed the space beyond.

The sudden appearance of so many armed people that clearly weren't with the Collective caught more than a few crewmembers off guard. Then the fires were lit. In both directions, various colors of blaster fire screamed through the air. The Arconan strike team lost a pair of stragglers as they tried to cross over to cover opposite the entryway, the others hugging the walls and bulkheads in any number of positions. Qyreia was one among many, squeezing her trigger whenever some unfortunate soul passed through her sights. The close confines made target acquisition a fleeting game, but the mercenary was well versed in the game of shipboard combat. It was, after all, how she'd started her career in gunslinging.

After several long minutes, the return fire dwindled to a pittance, but they all knew that this was a temporary condition. Leaving a squad behind to guard their rear so they wouldn't have to fight the whole ship on their return, the platoon continued forward toward the composite laser that had made the modified Dreadnaught so deadly. *They'll think we're moving to either the bridge or the big guns. Both will be heavily defended, especially now that we've raised the alarm.*

“Hey boss,” her new favorite sergeant said as they moved forward under the constant defensive fire from the crew, “I'm thinking we're in a pretty tough spot here. There's enough room for a few thousand of these karking sleemos.”

“So we need to move quick.”

“I can take a squad and make for the bridge. It'd be a good distraction, and it might draw their troops away from the laser system.”

“...A suicide mission.”

“The whole thing is a suicide mission. At least this way you have a slightly higher chance of making it to the objective.”

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Why are these guys always so eager to die for their country and all that Bantha druk? She grit her teeth, knowing that it was also likely to be the best course of action. “Listen, get in there just enough to draw the troops away. Don’t get surrounded and totally wiped out. I’m gonna need every one of you to get the hell off this ship.”

“If you think we actually can.”

Qyreia’s lips pursed and her brow furrowed just before she clocked the man across the back of his helmeted head. “Do what I frackin’ say, dumbchoobs. You wanna do that crazy Sithspit, then hop in one of those Collective bombers and go vape yourself against an asteroid. I aim to win and *not* die in the process!”

A burst of fire from ahead caught their attention momentarily until the Zeltron returned the gesture, but with more accuracy. It was hard to argue with her with such results. “Alright. Just make sure you hurry.”

She nodded and veered off at the next junction, heading down into the belly of the ship and toward the powerful weapon system, hoping that they’d make it back with enough people to call the mission a success. More than once, she had to hold herself and the attached squad at bay while troops passed by them just beyond a door or camouflaging grate toward what they were sure was their compatriots that were pushing ever more toward the bridge. The knot that was choking her throat made it hard to concentrate. *They’ll be fine, Q ol’ girl. Just keep moving forward. Kill the ship. Quicker you do that, quicker you and the rest of the guys can get home.*

“Any Force users?” she heard from the Collective troops as they rushed by.

“Not sure. If there are, they’re in for a big surprise.”

Maybe you schuttas should’ve trained how to fight a normal enemy, she mused, straining to find some positivity in the situation. A few isolated patrols along their route were caught off guard when the enemy that was supposed to be fighting toward the bridge suddenly appeared from the shadows. It felt like an eternity as they pressed ever further down the cramped corridors. Sweat beaded on Qyreia’s forehead and she was growing increasingly aware of her labored breathing. She wasn’t tired or done yet, but the stress was starting to wear on her resolve. *Just a little further*, she told herself.

Her sights were trained to the rear, watching for anyone that might catch them off guard, when one of her troopers tapped her shoulder. When she turned around, she realized that they were in the energy collection chamber for the composite laser.

“How we gonna do this?” the corporal asked as they looked around. “I only brought a couple explosive charges.

“Where’s the power capacitors? Kill those and they’ll have no way to store energy for the laser. And then...” She pantomimed an explosion with like sound effects. “Bye bye Dreadnaught.”

One of the sappers pointed toward a collection of large metal cylinders that hung snugly against the wall above them. “I think that’s our target then.”

From what seemed to be out of nowhere, a trio of red streaks tore down from above them, catching a nearby trooper in the neck and forcing the rest to huddle against anything solid. Qyreia was the first to raise her rifle and, spotting the team on a catwalk high above, sent out her

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own greeting, rewarded as one tumbled over the rail and down into the darkened depths below. More Collective troops filtered in above and below their position and started to lay into the lone Arconan squad, who tried to fire back as best they could.

“I’m gonna try to lay the charges,” the sapper yelled above the din.

The Zeltron reached back on her belt and handed him the Denton charge that she’d brought along for just such an occasion. “Will this help?”

“Yeah.” His head jerked down as a shot of plasma fizzled against the handrail that he was squatting behind. “S’gonna be a long climb,” he said, looking up at the distance between them and the capacitors.

“I’ll cover ya,” she said with as much confidence as she could muster. “Just don’t drop those goods, and give us a ten minute window.”

Offering a final grin, the sapper weaved across their little platform and to the nearest line of pipework. It didn’t take long, once he started climbing, for the enemy to realize what they were up to. Thankfully, the sapper was smart enough to know to stay tight against the wall and behind any cover he could find. Qyreia directed the majority of the squad to take care of the exposed troops below while she aimed up the ones high above. *C’mon you Hutt-humping chuff suckers. Show me something.* An arm peeked over the lip of the armored railing and she let loose in the empty space where she knew the shooter’s head would be in half a heartbeat. It was only a grazing hit, but it was enough to keep them at bay.

Gotta lean over to get a shot on us, dontcha? The thought brought a slight malevolent grin to her lips. *Do it again. I dare ya.* Sure enough, another Collective soldier leaned over the rail and threw blaster fire at the sapper who had resumed his climb. The shots landed dangerously close, and the trooper hesitated for a moment until he heard the fizzling sound from above that signaled his red-skinned leader had hit her mark.

“Keep going, you karking idiot,” Qyreia muttered as her gaze flicked momentarily at their one hope of blowing the ship to smithereens. She had no other recourse than to keep shooting. She sent a few stray shots at her targets, huddled behind the sheet of metal high above, to keep them down. Or lean over into her sights; whichever they preferred.

A staccato of fire poured steadily from her rifle. The sounds of the others filled her ears: another trooper had fallen and two more were seriously wounded. Their sapper was so close. Then a flurry of blue bolts rocked the piece of wall he was climbing and a smoking crater erupted in one of his legs, his scream of pain piercing the noise of combat just enough to catch the squad’s momentary gaze.

They waited... but he didn’t fall. He righted himself and kept climbing.

“Kill the schuttas on the walkways then watch the frackin’ doors!” Qyreia yelled as she lifted herself and leaned over the protective rail to pour accurate fire down on the enemy below. “Cover the chokepoints and don’t give them a fracking inch!”

She was rewarded by a shot from above that raked down her back, leaving a shallow but smoldering hole in her jacket that exposed the seared flesh beneath. Her own troops replied with their own fire in every direction as Qyreia staggered backward, fighting her own brain’s impulse to collapse. *You’re fine. Just a bit of pain,* she thought to herself even as her vision blurred slightly. It was a blessing when her hand caught the bulkhead that told her she was at the door

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they'd come through. The squad — or what was left of it — was doing its best to keep the Collective troops from reoccupying their positions below and suppressing those above. *Good job, guys.* She looked up tiredly, catching her breath, only to see a quartet of soldiers starting to rappel down from a platform high above. *You've gotta be fracking kidding me.*

A light rain of fire tore into the Arconan heads, wounding one and killing another. Qyreia shook the fuzz from her head and leaned against the wall, steadying her rifle on the cool metal. One shot, a soldier hung listlessly on his rope. A second shot, the one next to the first drooped back until he was upside down, unmoving. The third shot caught the target in the groin, severing the harness he was wearing and sending him tumbling through the air to land on their own platform with a sickening and squelching *crunch*. The fourth shot zipped past one meant for the Zeltron shooter, catching her in the thigh and her target in the chest.

“Son of a mutha frackin’ piece of Hutt chuff!” Qyreia fell back against the wall, eyes closed tightly in pain as she tried to remember how to breathe. The adrenaline coursing through her veins was likely the only thing keeping her from passing out. Red hands floundered for the medkit strapped to her belt, her mind only vaguely aware of the battle around her.

Where the hell are those pain meds? To an observer, it would have looked like she had no idea what she was doing. The bandages seemed to go everywhere, and the other bits seemed barely contained within the case. She slapped a bacta patch over the hole in her leg, wound a bandage tightly over it, and jabbed herself with the painkiller hypospray.

“Frack, that feels better,” she said with an almost sensual air as the medications began to take effect.

Drug and fatigue-induced apathy brought her head around slowly to take in the scene. The sapper was placing the charges, setting timers and generally doing the things they're good at. Qyreia only knew how to make the things go “boom.” Beyond that, her knowledge and experience with explosives was somewhat limited. Then she saw the sapper coming down from his high perch, and a small bit of relief eked into her mind.

That was squashed when two bold Collective crew stood and fired at the sapper, two rounds catching him in the back. The assailants were quickly killed, but it meant nothing for the Arconan soldier bouncing lifelessly on any protrusions that barred his fall. The timers on the bombs were already set, though. It was time to leave.

“Grab the wounded,” she slurred as she shakily stood. “We’ve got less than ten minutes to get back to the ship.” Qyreia took up the rear of the group, holding off the Collective forces who were pouring in now that there was no one to effect a solid resistance. She keyed her commlink as she finally left her post to follow the squad. “Sergeant, you still alive?”

“Barely,” came the muffled response, blaster fire and grenade explosions overwhelming his voice. *“We’re falling back right now. I hope you’re on your way. Now sure how much longer we can hold the rendezvous juncture.”*

“Well, we’ve got less than... nine minutes to get back to the ship. We’ll be to you in one. Then we high-tail it outta here.”

“You better be a fast runner.”

The Zeltron considered her heavy limp and the lethargy the painkillers were inflicting. “Totally.”

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The way back, nondescript as it was, remained largely clear on the return journey, so the mercenary and her squad returned right on schedule. One of the seriously wounded had died *en route*, and the others volunteered to stay behind to provide covering fire — they would only slow down those who could make it out on time. None of it sat right in Qyreia’s stomach, but a firm shove from Sergeant Balsyche kept her moving toward their exit while blaster fire zipped by.

“Keep moving, Arronen,” he chided gruffly. “Already left a lot of good people behind. I don’t want to have to leave you too.”

She looked around at their paltry numbers. Only three from her squad of ten had survived, not counting the wounded that were covering their retreat; Balsyche had two from his. While most of her was concentrating solely on moving forward, a small part of her mind hoped in vain that these losses weren’t indicative of how the rest of this war would turn out.

The running seemed to go on forever, and no matter how much she checked her watch, Qyreia constantly worried that the next second would bring a firestorm of destruction. *Five minutes to go*. Somehow, despite their best efforts, the ragtag group managed to regroup with the squad they had left behind. Five of their number were dead, but they were bolstered by the spy that had gotten them here in the first place.

“We need to go. *Now!*”

They didn’t need her to say it twice. Going back down the way they came, the Arconans made a running battle of their dash to escape. Another was killed on their way down back into the waste tunnel, but he offered the Collective a parting grenade when they came nearer his body. Qyreia and the others heard it from inside the tube. She didn’t even notice the stench anymore.

Somewhere between hobbling and running, the hunched soldiers shimmied their way back to the hatch. A quick comms check confirmed the LAAT/i was still sitting on the other side, whole and hale. They all poured inside with reckless abandon, as happy to be outside of the reach of the enemy’s blasters as they were merely trying to ignore the losses they’d suffered.

“Get us the frack out of here,” the Zeltron managed to croak before she fell to the floor out of sheer exhaustion. Between the running, the wounds, and the drugs, she was spent.

The tight band of sensor clearance might have still been active, but the *Braga*’s guns were quickly training on the spot where they knew the waste shaft led. Guns flared from both ships as the Arconans tried to make their escape, garnering no small amount of attention toward their otherwise solitary part of space.

“Ten seconds,” Balsyche said quietly, looking at the Zeltron’s chrono as the ship rocked from a hit by one of the Dreadnaught’s laser cannons.

They all counted the seconds in their heads, each shake of the hull one more nail on their coffins. *C’mon motherfracker*, Qyreia thought as she fought to stay awake. *Frackin’ die*.

They couldn’t hear the explosion through the vacuum of space, but the incoming fire suddenly stopped. The flight crew confirmed moments later that the *Braga* had suffered a fatal overload of its main gun. Some of the aft section remained intact, likely with plenty of survivors waiting in airlocked chambers, but the ship was in effect no more. Now they only had to make it back to their own lines.