

Meridian - the Final Push

If there was one thing that a mercenary knew how to do, it was to eliminate threats. Of course, they all had their specialties. Some were bounty hunters that would take their prey alive for the biggest profit; some were assassins that assumed the cold duty of eliminating a target; while others still were bodyguards, dogs of war, and so many other duties endemic to their trade. Fighting, one way or another, was the means to their bitter end.

Qyreia's means was a blaster, and she was pretty good with it. In the tight confines of Meridian Station's corridors and restricted movements of the larger bays, a good gun was worth just as much as any lightsaber.

"I'm gonna push left," she yelled to the Arconan troops above the din of blaster fire. "Cover me!"

The Arconan Expeditionary Force's push against Meridian was only one spoke of the Brotherhood's pinwheel focused intently on the space station and the surrounding area. Dashing across the broad walkway, shooting from the proverbial hip as she went, the Zeltron hoped they could do enough damage to the Collective to secure the base before any of the other groups, be it Clan or the Dark Council.

Energy bolts shattered in smoky plumes against the bulkheads as she sped into cover, the AEF troopers' covering fire reducing what effective aim the Technocratic soldiers could muster. The Quaestor of Galeres peered out, aimed, and fired before slipping back behind the protective barrier, angry hornets battering the metal in reply to yet another fallen comrade of the Collective. This was how the fighting went, meter by meter, hall by all, and room by room.

Qyreia motioned to the soldiers to move forward before slipping her gun sights out of cover again, unloading a furious barrage into the enemy positions. Any Collective personnel foolish enough to peep out from behind their defenses or, worse yet, leave its safety entirely, were quick to teach their comrades the error of their ways.

Their resistance began to crumble. Return fire faltered and dwindled.

"Push!"

The enemy was either breaking or launching suicidal assaults to try and close into hand-to-hand fighting. The Galerian and her AEF troops, in a manner of practiced rehearsals, fluidly consolidated on the move and advanced as one group, maximizing their firepower and speed in one go. Shoulder to shoulder and "nut to butt" as the troops put it, they were stacked on one another as they pressed the advantage. Force willing,

they'd take some prisoners and not have to kill every single one of them. The Collective, to say nothing of the Technocrats, were full of zealots and fanatics. Finding some with a greater will to live than meet death in the face of their antithetical foe would be a challenge.

Qyreia's group was only one of the many strike teams spider-webbing through the station. The greatest efforts by far were on securing secondary hangars and escape pods. They wanted to cut off escape and maximize control. There was enough trouble to deal with in the form of the rioting prisoners.

Whatever resistance was left seemed to be melting away though. The Arconan forces pushed and pushed until they reached the end of the straightaway, turning a sharp right, only to be met with a decisive fusillade before they had any time to react. The soldier next to Qyreia took a direct hit and fell in a slump, one of several others in the front line that took the brunt of the beating.

"Get in cover!" the Zeltron and several others screamed. Before heeding her own warning, she crouched low, firing her rifle in one hand while she grabbed at the fallen trooper's kit and dragged him across the dangerous expanse into cover.

Once again, they found themselves in a knock-down-drag-out brawl. There was hardly even room enough for medics to tend to the wounded, and the vicious counterattack that followed paused any and all medical attention. The Technocratic soldiery loved their close combat. Qyreia had only just managed to pull out her first aid kit when she heard the clunky sounds of boots hurrying toward her position. *Frackballs*, she thought, standing behind the support beam she was using for cover and readying her blaster like a bat. When the Technocrat came by, she swung the gun around, catching him in the throat and crushing his larynx just before he fell to his back, sprawled out on the ground.

The follow-up shot to the head was as much a mercy to end the suffering quickly as it was to keep him from rising from the proverbial grave and shooting her in the back.

It was only five minutes later that they managed to secure the new beachhead, but they were a *long* five minutes. Those AEF troops bringing up the rear moved forward to set up a perimeter amidst the Collective's former defensive positions, salvaging a repeater turret and turning it around in anticipation of another wave.

"How're we looking, Lieutenant?" she asked the leader of the platoon assigned to their sector of the station.

"Two KIA, another five wounded. Getting a CASEVAC and reinforcements sorted. Enemy's turned tail. Planning to wait until the backup arrives, then move out."

“We need to go *now*, not *later*. The longer we wait here, the longer they have to reinforce whatever positions they have deeper in.”

“Ma’am, there’s still a hangar and two escape pod bays to secure. We *need* reinforcements.”

Qyreia rolled her shoulder, still sore from some of her previous fights on this damned station. “Lieutenant, I’m not *asking*. Get our wounded sorted and tell that backup to hurry the frack up.”

“Yes ma’am,” the AEF officer said begrudgingly.

While she didn’t necessarily hold formal military rank within the Brotherhood — being a mercenary and all — the Shadow Clan had its own special way of establishing government and military ranks amongst the Dajorran organizations. To the AEF lieutenant, and all the other soldiers for that matter, she was *Colonel* Arronen. *And god only knows what rank Kord has with them.*

“Contact front!”

Only a few shots rang out before the world disappeared in a flash of white and orange, without even enough time for the Zeltron to see what was coming at them. Her ears rang painfully and her head throbbed as the spots in her vision diluted enough to see the world around her, even though the first thing she saw was the floor she had landed on when the rocket went off.

After something like that, Qyreia knew better than to simply stand up. She fumbled for her rifle, gripping it tight before rolling over to face the origin of the explosion. What she saw was some grotesque monstrosity — an amalgam of flesh and machine more egregiously compounded together than any of the most teched-up Technocrats. As icing on the cake, the thing had an artificial arm that more closely resembled a factory robotics arm, all mounting a rocket launcher.

“What the kriffing frackchoobs is that?”

Those soldiers who hadn’t been caught up in the blast pelted the thing with blaster fire, most shots hitting but having surprisingly little effect. What biomaterial the thing had on its chassis gave way under the fusilade to armor plating that seemed to cover every critical system. Even the mercenary’s own addition to the firestorm only managed to slightly increase the damage as it started to glow a ruddy orange under the scorch marks.

“It’s reloading!” she heard through her newfound tinnitus. Sure enough, in jerky and disturbing motions, the abomination pulled out another rocket from a compartment in its back.

“Keep pouring it on!”

Please let me hit this thing, she thought, trying to steady her aim as she brought the aiming reticle in her sights over the rocket in the thing’s more human-like hand. Behind it, more Collective troops were surging forward to take advantage of the breach.

Pew.

The muffled noise of her blaster was nothing compared to the cacophony as the bolt of red energy sheared into the metal casing of the high explosive. Fire and shrapnel burst out in a red and black ball that, for the brevity of its existence, engulfed the Technocratic Guild’s experiment along with the squad of soldiers that had been storming up from behind. Qyreia and the other Arconans were far enough away that they were spared injury, but the concussive force in the otherwise tight confines of the station knocked some people off their feet all over again.

Then, almost as quickly as it had started, it was over.

“LT,” she said shakily as the troops poured forward to reform the perimeter and collect the wounded, “gimme a status report.” When there was no response she looked around more carefully. “LT?”

Among the scattered bodies near what used to be the defensive barricade was the sandy-haired form of the Selenian lieutenant, face down and motionless.

“God. Fracking. *Dammit!*” she growled, catching the attention of some of the other troopers. They understood though; all too well.

When all was said and done, they had three more wounded and three KIA from the monstrosity’s ambush. That meant nearly half of the platoon was out of the fight. The Quaestor was left with the burning decision: risk going forward and failing through attrition, or staying put and waiting for reinforcements while they painted a target on their foreheads. *We can’t get caught with our pants down like that again though.*

“What’s our status on the evac and reinforcements?”

The sergeant, now nominally in charge of the group, sat up, his bloody and bandaged head making the Zeltron feel bad for even asking. “QRF is bringing up the medical team. Last radio check said about eight minutes out.”

“How long ago was that?”

“About thirty seconds ago.”

Well fracksticks. “Sergeant, you wait here with a team to help the medics and the wounded. I’m gonna take the rest of our guys up and keep the pressure on.”

“All due respect ma’am, that’s stupid. It’s not enough combat power.”

“We get hit here, everyone gets nicked. At least if I push forward, you get some advance notice to protect the casualties and we get a fallback position.”

He scoffed in resigned acquiescence. “Don’t suppose I have much a choice.”

“Not really,” she said, patting his shoulder amiably. “Keep doing good things.”

“Yes ma’am.”

It was hardly more than a squad that accompanied Qyreia further on toward their objectives. The rocket creature must have been something of a trump card though, because resistance was remarkably light as they went compared to what they had faced earlier. The enemy was either routing or withdrawing, and no one could say which it was. Not even a check-in with the Dajorran Intelligence Agency personnel over the comms net offered any insight. It allowed them to at least capture the first of the two remaining escape pod bays with a fierce but mercifully short firefight.

Only one of the dozen was launched from its moor, the rest sitting idle and empty. They called it in to the AEF ships that were far and away outside the station, giving the coordinates of the bay and trusting their space-borne counterparts to determine trajectories and the like.

Next is the hangar.

Their next objective hardly classified as a secondary hanger, but it still provided valuable escape means for the Collective. Even two or three Lambda shuttle’s worth of escaped personnel and materiel could allow them to restart or reinforce their efforts somewhere else. Heaven forbid these Pillars ever made a single concerted effort. Taking on one at a time was hard enough.

The problem was, the hangar was almost assuredly a trap. If they had heavy defenses anywhere, it’d be there. *Where the hell are those reinforcements?*

“Alright. Everyone grab whatever explosives you can off the dead. Let’s give these boys a party.”

What a variety they had; a nigh cornucopia of fragmentary and concussive death, *au gratis* from the dead Technocrat forces. Even just the few corpses in the escape pod bay could knock out a bunker or two on their own. Continuing beyond, down the hall that led to the hangar, they were offered more “gifts.” By the time they reached the blast door, the AEF troopers had a maniacal glint in their eyes and at least one or two grenades apiece.

Qyreia put a hand to the door control panel and held up five fingers with her other. The soldiers watched the countdown.

Five... four... three... two... one...

The portal slid open quickly, and the response from the other side was just as swift. blaster fire stormed through the widening gap, screaming through the air but hitting none of the troops stacked behind the door’s support framework.

Another hand gesture signalled the throw. One arm was hit as they tossed their grenades into the hangar, but they all sailed through the storm of energy bolts, scattering among the crate barricades and the troops behind them. A collective silence pervaded the air as the Arconans waited and their enemies realized too late what was happening. The chain of detonations tore through the flimsy fortifications, concussion grenades tossing bodies and detritus into the air while frag grenades peppered every direction with shrapnel.

Once the explosions stopped, the real fight began. The Arconans surged through the doorway into the open space of the hangar, noting the slight indentations in the floor where the grenades had partially buckled the reinforced deck. Qyreia could see a dozen or so Collective personnel loading onto U-Wing transports, some splitting off to handle the influx of hostiles. It was the sound of revving engines that really caught her attention.

“Don’t let that ship take off!”

“How?! We don’t have rockets, and this pea-shooter will hardly dent that thing’s armor.”

Shots were already fizzling by their heads as the Zeltron’s gray-blue eyes darted to and fro. “There’s the hangar control deck...”

“Too far away, and no way to get to it from here without taking a major detour.”

She grit her teeth, turning toward the opening that led to the safety of space. “There!” She pointed toward the bland-and-yellow banded control station at deck level. “Maintenance controls! Cover me!”

“You’re damned insane!” the sergeant yelled, but she had already started running and gunning her way through. “Grah! Alright boys and girls, you heard the lady! Lay it on ‘em! Suppressing fire!”

Qyreia wove her way through the scattered supply crates, hunched over as she ran full-tilt toward the control station. Off to her left she could see the first of the two transports’ engines flaring, a light dust cloud billowing from the repulsor thrusters. *Oh no you don’t!* Tossing her rifle aside, she sprinted as hard as she could, heart pumping beneath her flight suit. The U-Wing was taxiing toward the exit, the other ship beginning its own takeoff preparation when the merc arrived at the maintenance console.

“C’m on c’m on...” she muttered as she tried to find where all the controls were. She was forced to take cover behind the terminal when two Collective members — seeing what she was doing — charged her way. “I don’t have time for this,” she growled as she jerked her pistol from its holster.

A quick turn around the edge of the console and the Zeltron had the closest one in her sights. The heavy blaster bucked as the gun went off and her target dropped. Just as she was changing targets, another round came in from the side, knocking the oncoming trooper in the side. Qyreia averted her gaze to see the squad leader offer her a quick nod in acknowledgement of his timely assistance before returning to the firefight. *Note to self*, she thought as she hauled herself back to her feet, *I owe him a drink*.

It took several more seconds to figure out the controls and activate the door closure procedure, but she watched with mild disdain as the first U-Wing slid through the narrowing gap with room to spare. *Dammit!* The second transport was less lucky and, while it managed to take off and reach the door, its wings were sheared off along with part of its rear section. On the little monitor, Qyreia briefly watched it briefly spiral out of control before whoever was piloting it simply cut power to the engines. They were dead in the water.

I suppose that’ll do for now.

The Collective forces, outnumbering the Arconans even after their haphazard evacuation, were holding their ground, and the situation was quickly growing more dangerous for Qyreia’s small, beleaguered force.

It was quite the relief when she saw the long-awaited reinforcements come surging into view from the door they'd entered through. They spread out, and soon the Collective troops weren't only outnumbered, but they were being surrounded. It seemed a miracle, after such a tough fight, to see them start tossing their weapons aside and throwing their hands in the air. There weren't many left *to* surrender, but it brought a certain joy to the Arconans that simply killing them did not.

"One more to go, sergeant," she said as she approached her ragged squad, picking up her rifle on the way. "You guys rest here with the prisoners. I'm gonna take our reinforcements and keep pushing forward."

The squad leader didn't fight her on her decision. Leaving them to sort out the prisoners of war, the Zeltron motioned for the fresh platoon to follow her onward. Like the other escape pod bay, it was only a short distance from the hangar, and they were met with little more than a trickle of personnel that were trying to make their way to escape in those same transports that were now locked in.

It was oddly peaceful in the bay, all present and accounted for. *Likely they were told to evacuate but not quite abandon ship wholesale.* She sent a squad ahead to secure the far door and set up guards so they wouldn't have any surprises, but there was a short third hall that bisected the narrow room.

"Leads toward the prison," the platoon leader said as she looked at the schematics on her datapad. "What the Hutts is *that*?!"

Qyreia spun around to see the door opening, revealing another grotesquerie. This one screamed in pain, likely because of the power pack in the thing's chest, which coincidentally powered the two repeating blasters that had replaced its arms. What's more, it wasn't just in pain: it was angry. Enough so that as soon as it saw the meatbag targets, it didn't matter what side of the fight they were on. Qyreia had just enough time to pull the lieutenant out of the way and behind cover around the bend in the corridor.

"The hell is *that* thing?!"

"Probably another Technocrat experiment," Qyreia replied calmly but clearly more focused on the heavy volume of blaster fire. "You missed the one with the rocket launcher."

"The *what*?!"

Before she could answer further or return fire, the shooting stopped suddenly, a pregnant silence filling the air. The Zeltron was about to look and see what was

happening, only to double back when the thing's body went flying through the air, crashing roughly into a bulkhead separating two escape pod doors.

I know telekinesis when I see it, she thought just as the Force user came into view, hand still outstretched. He seemed caught off guard when he saw the well-armed soldiers and turned his attention away from the experimental creature.

"Hold on! We're with the Brotherhood!" The lieutenant started moving forward, recognizing the glaring man as a prisoner from the station's cell blocks. "You're safe no-kch!"

The young officer was lifted from the ground, her fingers grasping at her throat to dislodge the invisible grip that was quickly choking her. Qyreia's rifle went instantly to the pocket of her shoulder.

"Let her go!"

"You think I care that you're with the Brotherhood?" he said calmly, as if there were no one else present. "Put down the gun and I'll make your deaths quick."

Stun setting, she thought consciously, forcing the power dial back on her gun before unloading on the fool of a Force user. Other soldiers watching, as well as some prisoners that had been hiding in the deranged man's wake, watched in a mix of amusement and horror.

"I think he's done, ma'am," a trooper told her as she finally let up on the fusilade.

She walked up to the prostrate and unconscious body, looked at it, and shot the assailant again in indignance. "Yeah, you're probably right." *Goddamn space wizards think they own everything*. "Get this guy restrained." She looked back at the door that was slowly filling with other prisoners escaping from the cell blocks. "And get us some more people. We've got lots of folks to tend to."

"Roger."

The lieutenant, her coughing finally subsiding, took the Quaestor's offered hand and stood back up. "Sorry about that, ma'am. He caught me off guard."

"You did the right thing. Dude's just a frackwit that probably lost his mind cooped up in a cell. Or just the frackwit part."

"I'll uh... I'll start organzing and escort for the prisoners."

“I’ll call it in,” Qyreia replied, waving the lieutenant off. She keyed her communicator. “*Eldar’s Anthem*, this is Colonel Arronen. Objectives Besh-Jenth One, Two, and Three secure. Escorting prisoners back to Besh-Jenth Two for processing and pickup.”

“Acknowledged. Will notify when support is closing.”

“Roger that *Anthem*. Arronen out.” She sighed as she unkeyed the channel. “Who came up with these objective initials? Seriously? Ugh.”