

The Front Lines

Civilians fled for their lives through a hail of blaster fire as friendly soldiers desperately converged in front of them. The Collective's troops advanced another street before the Iron Legion and its allies could finish fortifying the next, much less get all their forces pulled back to it. Moving forward in unnervingly synchronized action, only one of the enemy troops had to break the pattern to see what was ahead, and the rest fired blindly over their cover with perfect precision. More bodies hit the pavement down the block, and the invading soldiers moved up again without so much as a pause in their motion.

Freaking hive minds. What a day.

In a momentary pause of fire, Sulith leapt out from cover, her shield raised. "Go, now!" The three civilians behind her bolted for the makeshift barricades. Sulith carefully measured her footing to keep herself aligned between their path and the enemies' position. Out of the corner of her visor, she watched them dive for safety.

Okay, they'd live. Now all bets were off for these Collective troops.

She barely had time to whip her head around to shout, "Clear!" before bolts of plasma began pelting her decaying shield. It was getting easier to feel the impacts through what was left of the cracked and burned sheet of betaplast affixed to her arm.

Sulith lowered herself to minimize her exposure as more shots focused on her shield. "I said clear!" she stressed aloud as she backpedaled.

The beating against her breaking shield came to a halt in sync with the sound of a new blaster on the field. Rett's repeating blaster ripped apart the enemy squad's formation from their left flank, but it didn't take long for the Collective troops to refocus their fire on him. The Quarren managed to blow enough holes in one soldier to drop him, and the other hive-minds spontaneously scattered in anticipation of what came next.

Perfect execution, and now for the fun part. Sulith popped back to her full height and sprinted head-first toward her enemies, her free hand going for the power hammer at her back. The downed soldier's corpse erupted into a blaze against the darkening sky, and his creepy squad was left divided.

With all manner of haste, Sulith lifted her shield to soak up another few shots before throwing her massive weight into the nearest goon. His feet left the ground, letting him helplessly drop to the pavement. The busted sheet of metal dropped beside him just before Sulith brought both

hands to her hammer overhead and smashed. What remained of his breastplate in the wake of the impact-triggered pulse became indistinguishable from his fresh corpse.

No time to think — Sulith wrapped her fingers around the trooper's miniscule leg and slung the body with all her might at the next nearest enemy. Plasma bolts panged against her personal energy barrier only an inch from her body as she scrambled to get distance from the next incoming explosion. One shot broke through the protective layering before she rolled behind the vehicle next to Rett's.

Damn it. That armor was all she had left.

The corner of the street went up in flames once, then again several moments later. Three down, three to go. If the last several city blocks had been any indication, another squad was certainly on the way.

Sulith gritted her teeth as her fingers tenderly poked at the spot in her lower back where they'd gotten that last shot in. Her armor had absorbed the brunt of it, but some of the plasma had seared through.

"We gotta book it, Sully," Rett shouted as their allied soldiers began returning fire once more. "Hey, you alright?"

A forced grin spread under Sulith's helmet as she glanced over. Didn't matter that he couldn't see it. "Yeah. Totally." Her hand waved dismissively. "Had way worse."

"That ain't reassuring," he called back.

"Just needs a bacta— patch..." Sulith's ears flickered, honing in on a new sound joining the gunfire. That wasn't any abandoned speeder — too much heft to be any civilian vehicle. Well, things were about to get more interesting. "...Yeah, okay, booking it sounds good."

Rett must have heard it too, as they both turned to face further up the decimated street. Out from between the perfectly squared city blocks, a small fortress on repulsorlifts floated into view several buildings down, hulking cannons rotating to face the Iron Legion.

Sulith's ears fell flat with a grimace. "Tank!" she shouted back toward her allied soldiers. It didn't take peering out from cover to tell they were already scrambling.

"You gotta be kriffin' me!" Rett's fist thudded against the ground. "I swore I'd never go back to this battlefield kark, and now a *tank* is staring me down." His tentacles twitched as he growled, regretful. "...Now what?"

That was indeed the question. Sulith looked the other way; she could see the upper beams of the bridge over her fellow soldiers' makeshift fortifications. The split in the mountains beyond wasn't much further. This was very much not okay, anymore.

Sulith leaned over as much as she could without exposing her head between the vehicles. "We gotta buy more time for the evacuation. No one's gonna make it to the mountain pass with that thing coming at us."

"Well what the frack are we gonna do about it?"

"Improvise?"

"That's how we get killed, you daft idiot!"

An thundering explosion that shook the ground immediately destroyed a third of the barrier the Iron Legion forces had set up. Sulith nearly bent her hammer's shaft. That burn in her back still stung.

Whatever she was gonna do, it was undoubtedly going to suck, but it would have to be worth it. No exception.

Her eyes darted to the head of her power hammer. Its next pulse was ready. Her ears flicked back up. "Idea!"

"I swear to the seas, Sully," Rett started, already expecting the worst.

Sulith winced in pain as she straightened herself to risk a view. It only took a second for a blaster to point her way, and she dropped back down as three bolts flew through where her face had just been. The remaining Collective troops hadn't advanced, but they weren't letting up on their attack, either. There wasn't a safe path across the perpendicular street so long as they had the area in their sights. The repulsor tank was floating closer, only a block away now.

The Togorian checked her mechanical left arm. Its pain receptors deactivated, and she breathed deep. "I'm gonna need your energy barrier."

"What you need is to make it to a kriffin' medic," Rett argued.

"I *am* a medic!" Sulith assured. She heaved the straps of her medical backpack off her shoulders. "I need your eyes so I can get patched up."

"...No," Rett stated. "Sully, you are *not* about to charge that tank!"

"What's the worst that could happen?"

"I dunno, you *explode*, maybe?!"

Sulith knocked on the plating of the vehicle at her back. "Ah, that won't be a problem for too long, especially if the civilians make it."

Rett shook his tentacled head in disbelief. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"My back, that's what. Watch out!" Sulith slammed her hammer into her own cover, sliding the vehicle a few inches and deeply denting in its plating. Easy pickings, now. She pulled off her gloves and began prying at the edges of the plates with her claws. "Come on, patch me up!"

"Damn it, Sully, no!"

"Sully, yes!" She turned toward Rett, wishing he could see the sudden, stern expression on her features. "You got a better plan?" she demanded to know.

"I don't need a better plan to tell you this is suicide! The hell are you trying to prove?"

"Prove what?! No time to argue, just—"

Another blast from the tank annihilated a huge chunk of their allies' fortifications. At least the thing was slow.

Rett breathed deeply. Even behind a protective mask, something seemed to shift in him. "...Frack you." Hefting up his heavy gun again, the Quarran dove from behind one vehicle to the next, and quickly slammed his back next to Sulith as a few shots flew by.

He didn't grab the medical gear. His weapon hit the pavement, and he grabbed Sulith's hammer.

"...Rett?" She made to grab him, but he pulled away.

"Cover me."

Sulith's chest sank. "No no no, don't you dare—"

Rett shoved his boot against Sulith's side, halting her before she could move for him again. "You're a freaking idiot, Sully... but you've got a heart. That's more than I ever had. So make at least one smart move and live for those people you're trying so hard to save. They're gonna need you."

As Sulith clenched at her stinging injury, Rett ripped off the rest of the plate from the side of the vehicle. He was smaller than her — it would cover him a little better. And he had solid muscles, enough to swing a power hammer.

Well... blast it. She hated this.

“Don’t,” Sulith eked out as Rett dove back for his prior cover, a few precious feet closer to the tank.

“Cover me, damn it!” He glanced out toward the tank, then turned back. “Soon as it fires again, I’m going!”

She begrudgingly released her clutch on her injury to take up his heavy repeating blaster. Her whole being wanted to demand he come back and let her be the one to go for it, but their time was up, and she knew it. It was like Cyrkon all over again. She suddenly regretted everything.

The tank fired again, significantly closer than before. It wouldn’t be a long run, then. There was no need to check the damage it wrought at this range. Sulith instinctively shielded herself with her arm, but as soon as she saw Rett wince, her grip tightened on the blaster. Across the gap, he heaved the hammer to magnetize to his back and gripped the broken plating as a makeshift shield. He took one step, hesitated... then sprinted.

Damn.

Weapons fire redirected toward Rett, and his makeshift shield didn’t last long. Sulith pulled out of cover and began unloading in the Collective troops’ general direction. As one got nicked in the leg, they began dividing their attention. Perfect, almost. She should’ve been the one running.

Rett dropped the plating as the plasma bolts began melting it. Pangs of energy flickered as his barrier deflected shots. The lesser cannons on the tank turned toward him as he drew forth the hammer. With a desperate effort, Rett reached the foot of the tank and slung the hammer up and around by the end of its shaft. The head impacted the muzzle of the tank’s main cannon with a pulse of such force that it bent inward and cracked all the way up its barrel.

A small victory that would go a hell of a long way. Except, she should’ve been the one running.

The singular, crippling strike would be his last. Even with attention divided and suppressed, his barrier inevitably took enough fire to break. After a few shots from the soldiers pelted him, Rett took a direct hit from the tank’s lesser cannon, sending his body into the corner of a building, where it ceased to move.

She should’ve been the one.

The Collective assault pushed forth, and Sulith had no choice but to drop back into cover. When the tank tried to fire its next massive shot, it only succeeded in destroying what was left of its main cannon. The hive-mind soldiers pushed forth with the lesser cannons at their backs, but they'd suffered enough damage that, with patience, Sulith made it back to relative safety behind the Iron Legion line, and the evacuation continued at the same discomfoting pace as before. At least the civilians hadn't lost *more* time for their escape.

A part of Sulith regretted that she'd escaped with them at all.