

## *Primal Return*

The sky was still dark. In the extreme hours of the early morning, the only lights not provided by the resort, or the unnatural glow from the Selenian temple, were the stars themselves. In the hours that had passed since the incident started, things had calmed down. Nothing that was happening was *calm*, by any stretch of the word. It was still better than the chaos of the initial attacks. The survivors and those wounded that weren't dragged into the depths of the temple were consolidated back at the resort's main building, which now resembled something of a fortress.

DDF troops had arrived on gunships and set up a perimeter, presumably at the behest of someone on the Arconan Summit. It didn't matter much who; only that they were quickly appraised of the situation, the creatures, and how to best combat them. Casualties were lighter than before, but a fair few were still killed, torn apart, or otherwise badly mauled.

None were dragged off though. Qyreia made sure of that. And only a few were subjected to the harrowing experience of the things' ovipositor tendencies, and even then only temporarily.

"How are your arms?" Corporal Seight asked, checking the fresh bandages on the Zeltron.

"Better now that they're clean. Having some actual medication helped."

The medic, Cala, breathed a weighty sigh of relief, with the night's events clearly heavy on her mind. "What's even happening? What are these things?"

"Frack if I know," Qyreia said, noting the return of her Force user fiancée. "Any luck?"

"I was able to get you this from the troops." She set down a DDF-issue E-11 blaster on the bed of their new temporary room. Their resort bungalow was still in occupied territory. "The clothes look like they fit well, at least."

"Yeah."

The Zeltron looked down at the clothes that had been provided: a set of green fatigue pants, socks, combat boots, and a dark tan t-shirt with a DDF logo in black lettering. It was a vast improvement to the bikini she'd been wearing during her earlier excursion with the Arconan crew that had gone out to make sense of the situation. The weight of the blaster in her still-healing hands brought an added sense of comfort. It wasn't one of her guns, but it would do. At the very least, it was better than the pink hold-out blaster procured from the resort's limited armory that had blown up in her grip, which caused the injuries in the first place.

Keira only requested some pants. What she got were some tights. Under other circumstances, the Zeltron might've appreciated the view. At the moment though, she was just tired.

"They already started pushing toward the temple?"

"Slow," Keira sighed, "but yes."

"I feel like I should go with you," Cala said with morose resignation.

"We have enough wounded here to keep you busy enough. And if we take more casualties, we'll need the team here ready to receive them." Qyreia put a hand on the Selenian's shoulder. "Or is it because of Yezid?"

The auburn-haired woman chuckled weakly. "I guess I'm a little worried about him, but really there's just a feeling of all the action being outside the walls. I feel like I'm not doing enough."

"You're doing plenty enough here, believe me."

Keira quietly interrupted the moment, putting a hand on her fiancée's shoulder. "We should go."

Nodding, Qyreia stood and patted down the stiff clothing before grabbing the blaster again and making for the door. Cala's voice halted them just as they were at the threshold.

"Hey! ...Give 'em hell."

Another silent, if slightly more confident nod and they were off. The halls were abuzz with a scattering of DDF soldiers, and plenty of wounded, confused, and angry resort patrons. More than a few overprivileged moneybags still demanded to consult the manager to demand refunds or room service. Those unfortunate enough to do so in the Zeltron's immediate proximity were usually silenced with a warning blaster bolt into the floor at their feet. She was clearly in a mood, and not one that reflected her customer service background.

The pair avoided the turbolift and took the stairs instead. Something about being able to see what was above and below them more than being in an enclosed tube. Down at ground level, the ratio of civilians-to-soldiers was flipped dramatically, the only exception being the field hospital that had been set up in the ballroom and "wards" separated through the smaller conference areas. Soldiers were moving in every direction, and defenses had been deployed to cover every entrance and exit with copious blaster weaponry.

"She say anything about the creatures?" Keira asked as they made their way through the main building's foyer.

“Stumped. Whatever these things are, they’re outside the memory of modern Selenians.”

“I got as much from the others.”

“Maybe some isolated island community would know, but that would be a helluva search.”

There was a tinge of suggestion in the Qyreia’s voice that Keira, being so attuned through experience to the Zeltron’s empathic bubble, noticed almost acutely for how quick and subtle the shift had been. “You suspect someone closer to home knows something?”

“Who’s always the first group to know something, and the last to do anything about it?”

“Lucine?”

Qyreia’s lips curled in mild disdain.

“Are you sure that you’re not just projecting your anger over the Strong incident?”

The mercenary was about to respond when her lips sealed shut, eyes dancing off to the side. Keira’s gaze followed the direction to her opposite side, noting the very Consul in question speaking in detail with several DDF officers, Rogon Skar Agrona brooding not far away. He’d been cavorting with Lucine during the pool party the previous day. Or earlier that day. *Hell, what time is it anyway?* Regardless of the hour, the discussion with her fiancée quieted to nothing until they were well out of the human’s earshot.

“You really *are* paranoid of her,” Keira said, breaking the silence with a chuckle.

“Shut up. You know that my paranoia is reasonable and justified.”

“Pretty sure paranoia is, by definition, none of those things.” She kissed the Zeltron’s cheek playfully; something to dissuade her souring mood.

“Oh my god, *suspicious* then!” Some passing soldiers looked at her oddly before returning to their business. “Karkin’ pedantic motherfr-...”

“Calm down. You know I believe you.” She stopped the Zeltron’s walking, holding Qyreia by the shoulders to look her in the eyes. “Are you sure you want to go back out there? You don’t seem like you’re back in the right headspace. I can feel it.”

“I’m never ‘in the right headspace’ when it comes to this Sithspit. Just gotta do it.” Qyreia sighed, very plainly forcing the smile that she showed the Force user. “They don’t pay me to sit in hotel rooms and relax, after all.”

“If you’re sure.”

“Just whap me if I start talking about ‘the babies’ or look off in the distance at the temple all funny-like. Okay?”

Keira smiled knowingly. “Same. Deal?”

“Deal.”



A familiar screech rent the air as the tentacled, abyssal creature was dealt a final blow by the pale blue blade of Keira’s saber, falling to the ground with several keenly placed holes smoking in its flank. Only a few were necessary; the others were just vindication.

One more body for the pile that the pair was slowly racking up. While the core of the resort was safe, the fringes still had the odd beast roaming through the more densely-wooded parts. Hunter-killer teams of DDF troops worked in tandem with Arconans such as Qyreia and her half-Umbaran Force user, locating the creatures and putting them down with extreme prejudice. Any eggs or spawn were just as unceremoniously eradicated. The Zeltron was especially judicious in making sure they were destroyed, sparing them only so long as doing so was requisite to saving someone infected by the oviposited clutch. Those were sent under guard to a special, secluded tent closer to the main resort.

The people were saved, if possible. The spawn were not.

More than a few soldiers, showing even the faintest sign of corruption by the siren call of the creatures, were threatened by the red woman at the mere suggestion of sparing the things. This was more than just latent fear or anxiety. This was a vendetta.

“Look for bodies!” she yelled to the nearest squad. “Keira, can you pick out any survivors?”

The Force user merely shook her head. “I don’t sense anything. Not nearby anyway.” At this point, she was searching the aether of the Force as a reflex after each engagement, rather than waiting for the Zeltron’s prompt.

That did little for the frustrated click of her tongue against her teeth. “This is taking too long. We need to move faster.”

“Wasn’t it *you* that said we needed to secure our lines first?”

“I know what I said!” Qyreia bit her lip, mentally cursing for having yelled at Keira and displaying the strain to the already-strained soldiers. “We need...”

“To get to the temple. I know.” She paused, looking out at the dark trees, though her eyes remained unfocused. “They’re not *far* away. We should be able to join with the offensive teams if we go this way.”

A sort of nervous appreciation took over the mercenary’s expression. She wanted to fight these things. So much of what they were doing was counter to everything she stood for. They were lower than cythrauls, as far as she was concerned, on the intelligent animal scale; and the Zeltron was hardly a proponent of the large wolves either. But cythrauls — or at least the ones they were familiar with — didn’t slaughter people wholesale, or fill their chest cavities with eggs that would eventually burst through the rib cage to freedom.

It was murder and rape, and for once, Qyreia didn’t feel disturbed by the idea of purging something from existence. These weren’t the Undesirables of Pravus’ reign. These weren’t sentient races caught up in political chicanery; they were creatures that rose from some dark depths to wreak havoc, and the Zeltron would be damned if she would suffer that, much less give any of the less well-intentioned Force users time to try and make them out as harbingers of peace and love or some kark.

*And I can already think of a few Sithy types that would love to try and control these things,* Qyreia thought as they rushed through the undergrowth. *Use the hugs-and-cuddles folks to engender good feelings with these monsters. Not if I can help it.*

Reaching the front lines showed that the offensives had stagnated in the face of stiff resistance and thinly-stretched forces. They were well shy of the temple, serving only to anger the Zeltron more, when she and the team of Force users had made it to the front gates previously. But there were also significantly more creatures to contend with this time, evident enough in the volume and frequency of their hellish, if by now iconic shrieks. The couple discovered this as they happened upon almost a platoon of DDF soldiers frantically battling four creatures of the amorphous menagerie. At least a half dozen were dead or wounded on the ground, with another pinned to the ground by a claw, and yet another frantically trying to free themselves from evisceration in a creature’s chomping maw.

A hissed “frack” was all that made it past Qyreia’s lips before she was surging forward, Keira instinctively hot on her heels. Her borrowed E-11 lanced red energy into the face of the chewing monstrosity, sending the thing reeling and flinging the hapless and gouged human off to the side. Keira dashed in with her lightsaber to separate limb from body, the pale blue blade searing through the gaunt limb like a hot knife through warm butter, freeing the pinned soldier in the process.

“Focus your fire!” Qyreia directed, pointing out teams of soldiers and targets for each. “Geta medic up here! Move!”

Between the dark and the flashing glow of blaster fire, it was hard to tell the wounded man's condition. The way that his abdomen seemed so lumpy and... *open* did not bode well for his chances.

All that yelling caught her target's attention though, and she only narrowly avoided a bite at her legs, rolling away and coming up with her finger already squeezing the trigger. She pumped the thing with blazing shots, walking them up from its shoulder and into its face, until there was nothing left but a black, mushy, smouldering crater. Keira, meanwhile, had continued to dis-arm her opponent, paused only when she was forced to halt a clawed swipe with an invisible hold through the Force. That pause gave her enough initiative to close in and remove yet another limb, reducing the thing to a single leg and general immobility. She raked its belly with her blade before leaping atop its back and severing the spinal column at the neck. The injection of mayhem gave the soldiers enough reprieve to refocus their fire on the flanks, saturating the two remaining creatures with violent energy until they too were brought to ground.

*Birdthing, Bigboy, a Spines and a Cat.* Qyreia was starting to recognize some of the more familiar patterns of the greater mysterious xenos phylum. Or family. Whatever, she wasn't a taxonomist.

"Who's in charge?" she asked as the action died down and the troops gradually reorganized.

"That'd be me," came a hoarse reply from a rather beefy-looking Selenian woman in the midst of nursing a gash on her forehead. The patch on her shoulder denoted her as a sergeant, and she seemed to catch some of Qyreia's confusion. "Lieutenant is dead and you uh... *helped* the platoon sergeant." A nod toward the eviscerated soldier still being treated was enough hint.

"Is it like this everywhere?"

"Just about. And then some folks get hit and are too scared to move forward. Had one guy start ranting about '*babies*' and we had to send him to the rear."

Qyreia tried to process that on a scale relative to the larger offense, already too familiar with it on the micro level with her earlier patrols. Keira's presence as she walked up on the conversation was a comforting injection that brought her out of her own headspace.

"What's your name, sergeant?"

"Kayli Ahken, ma'am." She laughed, wincing from the way it flexed the bleeding cut. "Seen you enough at Blindshot to know who you are. Not a whole lot of people look like you on Selen."

"Fair," Qyreia sighed, smiling, relaxing a little at the lighter conversational tone. "Do you have comms with the other units?"

“Some,” the sergeant grumbled. “Lots of ‘em are in contact right now, so not much talking.” She nodded in the direction of a rather fierce-sounding firefight far off through the trees. “Why? You trying to get somewhere?”

“There’s a temple further along: sandstone structure in a basin surrounded by cliffs. That’s the source of this nonsense.”

“Temple? Temple to what?”

“We don’t know,” Keira injected. “More than likely some ancient Selenian cult.”

Qyreia sighed. “All we know is that SIMASS was there, and when it opened, these things came pouring out. And now they’re dragging people off and into that temple; presumably to make more monsters.”

Sergeant Ahken’s face wrinkled knowingly. “Yeah. I seen that business firsthand.”

“Think you can get your boys and girls together and keep pushing?” Qyreia nodded toward the heavy sounds of battle. “Me and Keira here are gonna see if we can’t ease up some of the pressure.”

“You got it, ma’am,” the Selenian said tiredly. “Don’t ever let the AEF say that us Defense Forces don’t do work, eh?”

“Hold at the cliffs,” the Zeltron added before they left. “We’ll regroup there and make a consolidated push. Get the word out.”

“Yes ma’am.”

It wasn’t much, but there was a little more fire in Kayli Ahken’s eyes as the two Arconans dashed away toward the sounds of the guns. Qyreia and Keira could both hear the Selenian’s voice barking out orders, rallying her troops and coordinating their next moves. It was oddly satisfying, especially when compared to the quiet horrors of the hunter-killer patrols.

Finding this beleaguered unit on the flanks was more of a task than either would have initially anticipated. The couple’s dead sprint gradually slowed to a run, then a jog, as they realized that the sounds were carrying far beyond their expectations. Only the actual presence of the frantic shooting kept their pace up. *Anyone laying down that much fire is definitely in trouble*, Qyreia noted, her breath heaving as she tore through yet another batch of ferns. They even ran into another patrol along the way; one not currently under fire, though their numbers suggested they’d seen better days. The Zeltron passed on the same orders as she’d given to Sergeant Ahken and continued on.

Closer, closer, and closer still. Before they even found the soldiers, Qyreia nearly ran headlong into one of the tentacle-headed genus of monsters.

A yelped “Frack!” escaped from her as she skidded and dove aside, the thing reacting in equally curious and angry fashion. The Zeltron’s mind raced with flashbacks of what she’d already seen these things do, as well as other betentacled altercations that weren’t even related to the creatures. Keira was quick to hamstring the beast though, slashing through a hind leg in a blur of motion, tearing its attention away from the red woman long enough for the mercenary to bring her gun up and let loose with a relentless fusilade.

A lightsaber jab through its skull confirmed that the job was finished, and the pair continued on into the main battle. Determining the scope of the engagement was difficult though. Unlike the previous assailed platoon, this fight was not concentrated in a central clearing. Instead, it stretched for several hundred meters through the forest, with harsh attacks from the monsters penetrating the formations before withdrawing back to the shadows, only to repeat the process all over again. It created a ceaseless battle that not only tied up the troops, holding them in this singular area, but also served to slowly attrit the DDF numbers in wounded, dead, and captured. This much was evident in the first few such fights that Qyreia and Keira happened across, bursting through the foliage to catch one such creature as it was retreating. The Force user focused her energies and thoughts on it, hand outstretched, just managing to stop its motion and allow her Zeltron to engage the thing, rallying the other troops in the process through sheer show of force. Two were dead in the creature’s spines, and another severely wounded, but the thing itself was dead.

Then it was on to the next fight. And the next fight. And the next. Qyreia goaded the troops off their back foot and into offensive action. Keira slunk into the forest, always within earshot of the Zeltron, seeking out adversaries hidden in the trees and undergrowth. Her lightsaber would signal an attack, and the Red Qek would direct any blasters in the area. It was fast, tiring, even a little dangerous, but otherwise ruthlessly efficient. Those creatures that didn’t run were gradually killed off all the way down the line. Unfortunately, the chaos had taken the company down by a large margin of manpower.

“We’re not taking another step into this jungle,” their commander said. The captain was justified in his feelings, but the person he was addressing was hardly in the mood.

“We are *attacking*, captain. All along the line. That includes *you*.”

“Look at my company! We’re down by at least fifty percent! And that’s only if you don’t take out the walking wounded from the numbers!”

“Captain?” Qyreia took the man’s shoulder in her hand. “Meet *colonel*. Consolidate your forces, get your dead and wounded to the rear, and push on to *these coordinates*.” She tapped his tactical datapad, pointing to the cliffs overlooking the temple basin. “That’s an order. This is not up for discussion or debate. Do you understand?”

His face soured, and there were clear grumblings from the troops around them.



“You hold here and you’re just going to end up fighting them the same exact fight that *we*,” she motioned to herself and Keira, “just got you *out* of. Move up though, and we reconstitute the lines, concentrate our forces and our firepower, and slap these schuttas back to the hole they came from, and save a whole frackton of people in the process.”

The grumbling abated, and the emotions seemingly redirected toward anger at the creatures. It wasn’t much, but it was a start; an emotional beachhead that would at least tip them in the right direction toward continuing the fight. *That’s all we need. Just keep going. Keep going. Keep fighting. Kill these frackers and keep our people safe.*

Something about those thoughts didn’t sit right with the Zeltron. They seemed too hostile, nearing on genocidal. Too much like what she’d fought against so much, years before. There was no questioning that what these creatures were doing was *bad*. That was hardly a point of contention. But her utter desire to wipe these things out was a more poignant matter. Maybe it was to maintain normalcy. Maybe it was because part of her knew that certain groups on Selen would readily latch onto these things as religious icons, hide them away, and potentially even weaponize them not only as points of faith, but also as bodies for strife. The cult around Atyiru was volatile enough. Allowing these things to be added to the mix would be a grave error in judgement on the part of Arcona and Selen.

There were always the Sith, though, that would put their own agendas far ahead of anything resembling stability or common good. *Lucine. Alaisy.* She hesitated to name Ruka as well, knowing how he was an odd example of a Sith. Xenna too; hardly one to seek the proliferation of grand schemes. But those first two? They were dangerous simply by grace of their willingness to sacrifice others for the sake of themselves.

This needed to end, and quickly.



The arrival of gunships made a huge difference. It felt like such a slow process, but as the too-early hours of the morning dragged on, they found themselves on the same cliffs that Qyreia, Keira, and their whole band of Arconan companions had fought over hours before. The previously besieged comms relay was once again secured. Troop formations filtered into proper battle positions, with intersecting fields of fire that slaughtered wholesale any of the ancient fiends that dared enter, much less attack. Casualty rates for the DDF dropped. Morale cranked upward.

But the gunships made a heap of difference.

“Wesk-one-four, you’ve got a flier coming up on you, nine o’clock low.”

Qyreia could see the action unfold through the binocs she borrowed from the lieutenant laying on the rough stone next to her. The LAAT/i, flying with its wingman, leveled its flight path as the flying beast careened upward from the canopy below. A stark green beam streamed from the wingtip turret, nearly cleaving the creature in two from its shoulder to its abdomen, leaving it to fall in a steaming heap back into the forest below.

They'd originally come to drop off troops at the front lines and take wounded back to the resort and further on to other nearby bases. Qyreia pulled some strings though. Sergeant Ahken wasn't the only one that knew her from her time on Fort Blindshot as Galeres' Quaestor, and the flyboys were able to divert a handful of ships to assist with some attack aviation support. The effects were deadly and immediate. Soon, companies and platoons were calling strafing runs and rocket strikes on not only confirmed enemies, but even suspected ones, catching more than a few of the monsters off guard and reducing many to rent piles of flesh and bone.

*"Appreciate the heads-up, Qek-six. Secondary flight will be inbound shortly, and we'll head home for refuel and rearm. Hopefully you'll still have some action for us."*

"I honestly hope it'll be over by then," Qyreia sighed. "We're about to move in. Watch what you're shooting at. If it's big, ugly, and looks like an abomination to nature though, vaporize it."

*"Roger that. Weak-one-four coming around."*

She handed the comm back to the lieutenant, who traded it off for a cup of caf. "Thanks."

"No problem, ma'am. You've been in this fight since before we got here." He looked over at Keira, curious as to her attire, but otherwise kept his young eyes averted from any forbidden places. "Though I'm kinda glad we're not the ones going into that temple."

"An assault company is better suited for it," she said, sipping at the bitter brown liquid, relishing the warmth in her chest that followed. "The E-Webs that stay out here will reinforce the perimeter, and the others that come inside will hold down key passages."

In truth, they were throwing quite a bit into the temple. Qyreia didn't know what all Force users were involved, other than Keira; she was the only one that the mercenary was actively aware of in the area. It was a good bet there were others though. More Arconans in general likely intermixed throughout the lines; some out beyond the temple hunting more of the creatures; maybe a few even inside the temple itself, either as prisoners, combatants, or collaborators. She had to shake the inherent mistrust from her head. If she met up with someone inside the temple, that would be handled *then*. For now, she just needed to make sure they made it inside before *all* the captured people

succumbed. She didn't even want to think about how many might've died just waiting for the cavalry to arrive.

"Q," Keira's voice called the Zeltron from her mental space, "they're ready."

"Alright." She stood, patting her DDF partner on the back before dashing off to join the assault team. "Thanks for the caf, leth-trill."

Keira led them down the narrow path to the basin below, with electric lights above coupling with flares and the unnatural glow of the temple to bathe almost the whole area in a sickening color combination of light. As they waded into the troops consolidated at the base of the cliff, they heard a creature try and break out of the temple doors, screeching angrily before its brief charge was cut short after only a dozen meters, the multitude of weaponry atop the cliff laying into it with extreme prejudice. Then everything was quiet again.

In fact, the whole area was much quieter now. As the soldiers' lines pushed forward, whittling away at the things' numbers, the screeches and howls had gradually dissipated. With it, fewer and fewer people felt compelled to enter the temple, seek out the creatures, or save any *babies*.

Even on her return to the place, Qyreia felt less afflicted than she had previously. Perhaps it was the reduced numbers; the lack of stress from not having to be the group's medic and surgeon; or her general fury at what was happening that was keeping her sane in the midst of the insanity. Maybe it was Keira too. *Something* was holding her together, and she was infinitely thankful for that.

"We ready for this?"

"Hell yeah we are, ma'am."

Qyreia knew that gruff gruff female voice. "Sergeant Ahken?" The Selenian waved her down to the front of the group. "What're you doing here? Aren't you bleeding from the face?"

As they got close, they could see the Selenian pointing out her bandaged head. "Got it taken care of."

Keira chuckled, looking toward the temple and weighing her lightsaber in her plan. "If we're all ready, shall we go then?"

Qyreia hefted her loaned E-11. "Let's finish this Sithspit."

Orders went out quietly, and the soldiers quietly and carefully stepped out from their cover and concealment. Almost immediately, as if waiting for the attack, a group of creatures stormed out of the woods opposite them, charging and screeching across the limited open ground. Qyreia, and everyone else with a blaster, opened up. Then the

troops up on the cliff, reinforced with the E-Web repeating blasters joined the fray from their positions. Then the gunships, W-14 and W-18, swooped overhead with laser cannons blazing.

Only one of the creatures survived long enough to retreat back into the darkness and the woods beyond, limping and streaming blood behind it.

“Guns up, schuttas!” Qyreia yelled, noting with pleasure the sight and sound of Keira’s saber activating as they approached the temple’s entry. “Let’s go get our people.”