

Fort Blindshot Selen, Dajorra System

Despite the pit in her stomach as she watched the crystal-covered raptor shredding into a hopefully dead soldier's body, she couldn't help but mentally note, *Clever girl*.

These particular Mortisian abominations seemed far smarter than they should be, and apex ambush predators despite their size. If there was one fault in them though, it was the same trait that many animals at the top of the food chain held, especially while enjoying the fruits of their vicious labors. Post-kill complacency.

It was the right place at the right time. Qyreia's finger slowly tightened its squeeze on the trigger. At this range, the blaster rifle that could penetrate tank armor would have no issue with the exposed fleshy bits.

Her first shot practically vaporized its head, leaving a skull-shaped crystal casing in its wake.

By the second high-energy blast, there was nothing that would provide sentience to the body, even if the crystals managed to reanimate it. While a particularly thick one seemed to grow from its steaming neck hole to replace the head, the body itself remained unmoving.

The shots didn't go unnoticed though, and soon there was a hail of blaster fire surging toward the building she was in.

"Frack me!" Qyreia ducked, spun, and dashed for the hallway of the half-destroyed administrative building she was in. A hand keyed her comm as she ran. "Sergeant! Raptor's down, but they got a leg up on their advance. Retake you platoon's previous position!"

A curt, elated-yet-sour "*Yes ma'am*" followed while the Arconan Consul withdrew. They would fight and hold as long as they could.

It was like this all across the battlefield. The Children of Mortis' attack had been swift, pushing quickly into the base proper, threatening the headquarters and starport both. The one painfully wonderful thing about island fortresses though: the moat was *huge*. While Fort Blindshot was not the hardened citadel that many military bases were, it was no less rife with powerful gun emplacements that played havoc with the Children's supply and reinforcement lifeline.

But it wasn't enough. The numbers were two to one, against, and the enemy was stacked to the chin with armor that treated blasters and slugs alike almost like beskar. Slowly, ever slowly, the Arconans were being pushed back.

She huffed and panted as she ran, hearing a fresh cacophony of grenades and gunfire behind her. Her fingers dialed in the command frequency.

“Colonel! How’s the starport holding?”

“Hard pressed. The towers are keeping the worst of it at bay, but it’s a choice between keeping the skies clear, or pushing back the enemies on the ground.”

She slowed, trying to catch her breath and get her bearings. “The evacuations?”

“Civilians are at approximately ninety percent complete; equipment stores at thirty.”

What do they even want here? Attacking Blindshot won’t cripple us. She pinched the bridge of her nose, using the pressure to drown out the distracting thoughts and increasing background noise. *Focus, Q ol’ girl.*

“How much time can you buy me?”

A pause. *“In our current positions... an hour. Two if we were to collapse down to the starport only.”*

“You know as well as I do: we do that, and we don’t just lose the headquarters. We lose the turrets by the seaport and let them focus everything on one point.” A long pause followed; one where they both contemplated the same thing. “Colonel, the Fifth is yours, but this is *my* island, and I’m going to do everything I can to *keep* it that way.”

Another pause followed, one that Qyreia knew likely came with untransmitted grumbling. *“I will see that the regiment does all that it can, General.”*

“That’s all I ask. We just need to hold on a little longer.” *Long enough for the AEF to show up. We can’t expose our other cities for this.* “I’m going to keep doing what I can out here.”

He knew what that meant. For a mercenary, the former Quaestor of Galeres, Arcona’s militant House, was a familiar face to the soldiers of the Dajorra Defense Force. She wouldn’t waste lives on pride, just as he would act as prudently as he could within the bounds of her orders. As she cut the transmission with the regimental commander, she switched over to her droid, who was remotely tied-in to the command network. He would point her to the next hotspot.

“Whatcha got for me, Remster?”

The droid’s binary reply rattled off several incidents, relaying street intersections and building names as reference points — anything that might tell the Zeltron where her next target was. The DDF troops were giving it their all, fighting building to building with the Children of Mortis, making them pay for every inch, even with their enhanced

equipment. And wherever she could, Qyreia appeared from a window, a doorway, an alley, anywhere she could find an opening to unleash her overpowered fire from. While her R3 might feed her information, there was always a fight *somewhere*; some squad, platoon, or even company that she ran across in the midst of some intense fight.

Someone that could use another rifle. Somewhere she couldn't linger and just *fight*. But her voice had to be on the comm, coordinating the battle, evacuations, and reinforcements; her body where it was most needed and where the fighting was at its worst.

This Consul business blows bantha chunks. She was used to having the limited responsibility of her House and its constituent parts. This fight for Blindshot might have stung her deeply as the Quaestor that helped establish it. As the ostensible Shadow Lord of Arcona, the pain was rife with a deeper unease; one that she had to — like she once did with her own preternatural Zeltron abilities — repress and push down for the sake of what was happening in the moment. There would be time later for worrying over emotions. Maybe.

Do it for Keira. Do it for Qyreia Junior.

Her feet followed R3-M3's directions, but her thoughts wandered to her pregnant wife back at the Citadel in Estle City. She wanted to be home with her, *them*; to rest after the most recent violence that had wracked Selen. Only the sound of her droid's screeching in her ear brought her out of the self-serving stupor.

"Sorry Rem. Got lost in my own head. Say that last part again?"

"Breet wrheeeoot breet-bleep doot-drrtdrrt."

"Confirm: you said a *tank*?"

"Blee-doot."

Qyreia looked at the ceiling, inhaling sharply. "Okay. Tank. It's not far... explains some of the traffic I've been hearing..."

The forward turrets are destroyed, or they found a way around them. Both are bad; one is worse. Can my gun kill a tank? I don't have a missile launcher. Are there more? Are we about to lose the left flank?

"Frack me. I'm not gonna like this, am I?"

The tank in question was in the midst of a bounding group of infantry a few blocks away, slowly pushing toward the seaport and, in the process, cutting off the troops still in the residential quarter further west. More still, they weren't done evacuating the

civilians, and a good portion of that was happening by watercraft to spare the air power for stemming the Children's advance. The tank had to die, and quick.

Still sweating under her armor from the earlier exertions, Qyreia worked her way downstairs and out into the street. Further along were DDF soldiers holding the Mortis advance, but passing down an alleyway to the next street showed the effects of the tank that was even further along. Arconan troops were mixed in with Mortisian, fighting among the administrative buildings, streaks of exchanging blaster fire the only clue as to who was where. From her alleyway, she watched a DDF squad surge from her side of the street to the other, likely hoping to circle around the enemy on the second floor.

That was when she caught sight of movement further down the road, with the distant extinct volcano providing a dramatic backdrop for the heavy repeating blaster being set up by the Children, with more soldiers pouring out from behind it.

Oh, the frack you are!

She couldn't hear the coils spinning up or the gas injectors siphoning tibanna into the reservoir chamber at that distance. But as she shouldered her rifle, she could see the gap between the gunner's helmet and chestplate through her scope; could see their shoulders flex while the emplaced gun readied to unleash fury on the unsuspecting Dajorran soldiers.

Breathe... squeeze.

Her rifle kicked into her prepared shoulder, the potent discharge having little mercy on the target's under-armor attire and the flesh below that. And while it collected the attention of the Mortis troops, it also alerted her own people that were out in the open. And with the element of surprise gone, all guns turned frantically toward each other and a fusilade was flung either direction along the avenue.

As Qyreia took proper cover behind the corner of the building, several shots that had no business flying by at the angles they did *curved* into her alleyway, screaming through the air mere inches in front of her face.

"...The actual *kark* was that?"

A moment later, mustering her courage and assuming they'd forgotten about the one lone sniper, she peeked out from behind her corner and resumed firing. Unlike the fanatics she was used to fighting in recent years, the Mortis soldiers didn't seem intent on fighting to the death, preferring instead to retreat and regroup for another attack. *Smart. But if they're that smart, then why are they here?!*

Some light cheering and profanities were hurled after them from the DDF troopers, and some more encouragement as the Zeltron emerged and hurried across the road.

Seeing the red skin amongst her camouflage-patterned armor told them exactly who it was.

“Get ‘em, ma’am!”

“You bring the colonel with you?”

She grinned, almost a sneer as she tried to suppress the modicum of pride. “Get back to it! Fight’s still on upstairs!”

A younger-looking soldier looked at her curiously, a little expectant, while his squad made to breach the lower floor. “You’re not going to help?”

Qyreia paused just shy of the next alley that would take her closer to the tank that, she was fairly sure, she could hear just above the general din that permeated the air. “I’ve got bigger schuttas to frack with. We each got our fights, kid.” She pointed at the upper story of the building, the sounds of blasters still a cacophony of muffled shrieks. “Right now, that one’s yours.”

His squad leader stepped over and grabbed the young man’s shoulder, nodding to the Zeltron. A quick return of the gesture, and she was gone.

The emotional tug for conversation was beaten down in the back of her brain, much like the soldier’s worry that the Zeltron could feel coming off of him. This was a desperate fight they were in: outnumbered two to one against an enemy that was enhanced both technologically and... crystallogically? Was that even a word? Either way, Qyreia thought, the Arconan forces on the ground knew that this was a desperate fight. *I’m doing my best, kid.* They just had to hold on a little longer.

Heading further along between the buildings, the sounds of armored battle seemed to be getting louder. “Must be getting...”

A heavy *thump* echoed gently over the combat ambience, large talons ticking impatiently on the ground as the raptor righted itself after its rooftop drop.

“...close.” Another *thump* landed behind her, a sort of trilling growl telling her what her eyes soon discovered directly, making her once heavy breathing a cautious whisper. “Kriff me, another one?”

Were there more room, the oversized saurians might have circled her like proper prey. With the situation as it was, they merely stepped cautiously forward, each in turn, sniffing out the air in deep jetlike breaths, eyeing the morsel with care. Qyreia made sure that they both knew she was watching them both, jerking her head back and forth, while a hand cautiously made its way from her rifle, edging toward the pistol on her hip.

“I don’t have time for this,” she said through gritted teeth. “This about your friend earlier? Don’t suppose he was a cousin of some Sithspit?”

One of the raptors flexed, the crystals running along its spine ruffling like a dog’s hackles as it directed a sort of trilling roar-hiss at the mammal.

“*Sister?* Well lemme tell ya, that schutta was a cheap date. Laid right out for me. Put things down her throat that even *she* didn’t like.”

She couldn’t understand any of the chirping growls that were exchanged with her or between the two creatures — not that she could understand anything from the reptiles anyway — but it got them a little closer. She needed that. Firing the rifle out of one hand, she didn’t have the stability to handle the recoil and maintain accuracy. *This is gonna hurt.*

They stepped closer, she shifted one direction, and the frackas began.

Her trigger clicked against the back of the trigger well and the discharge replicated much of what happened to the last raptor, striking it under the jaw and traveling upward. It reeled away but not quite dead, unlike the Zeltron’s wrist that felt just shy of dislocated. Reflex took over as her other hand tore her pistol from its holster, firing in the face of the other creature a fraction of a second after the first shot. Muscle memory was a poor substitute for an aimed shot though, and the DL-44’s blast, however powerful, merely seemed to dash against the crystal feathering on what passed for a forehead on the raptor.

While the shot merely splashed its face with superheated gas, the effect was enough to turn its snapping charge into a pained flail of its head. The Zeltron made to fire again, but the creature swung its head around and used its mass to send Qyreia bodily into the opposite wall of the alley, her pistol spinning away and well out of reach.

She spun, it lunged, and the boxy muzzle of her rifle lodged roughly into the ridges of the raptor’s oral palate. It pushed and thrashed, more focused on getting to its prey than it was getting the thing out of its mouth. Qyreia merely held firm, both her and the stock pressed hard against the building where it met the pavement. *Frackfrackfrack* repeated over and over in her head while she struggled and fumbled amid the thrashing, as much concerned with keeping the creature from getting closer or letting its viciously clawed kicks make contact.

When she finally managed to find the trigger, there was no proper grip or position. Merely her finger jammed into the trigger well, and a full-arm jerk to fire it off.

The result all but removed the raptor’s face, its feathering of crystals either vaporized or dispersed in an explosion of energized gasses. Pivoting her body against the gun let the dead weight shift sideways as it slumped to the ground without burying

her under the corpse. A good thing too, she realized as she stood, when she heard the twitching and thrashing of the other raptor. Its garish wound was filled with fresh crystal growths, but it was still struggling to relearn how to move with mineral-lattice nerves. Qyreia shouldered her rifle properly this time and unceremoniously ended the saurian's suffering as she walked by.

There was still a tank to contend with. No time to contemplate the morality of warping the creatures, much less killing them over trying to return them to their unaltered, non-crystalline state.

Actively nursing her wrist as she was though, Qyreia did her best to find an entrance to an unoccupied building and travel a little more covertly. She could ponder that much, at least. That and the reason that the Children of Mortis attacked Selen at all, much less one of the most defensible positions on the planet. *These crystal-whoring schuttas are just like the Collective, rolling in wherever they... Wait.* She paused just inside the entrance to the door.

“They’re after the crystals?” She glanced at the distant sliver of green-covered volcanic slope; all she could see from her current vantage. “But... the crystals aren’t even *here*.”

It explained so much though. Why they were attacking in such force, but doing so without risking being wiped out. This wasn’t a battle of attrition. This was a raid. The Children were simply trying to get their hands on the crystals and get out; maybe cause some damage along the way.

Faulty intelligence or not, they were here now, and there was a tank up ahead that the Consul of Arcona could still hear firing away at her soldiers, creeping ever closer to the docks and seaport. *Give ‘em one more, Q ol’ girl. You can do that. Come on.*

One more street over. One more set of stairs. One more soldier of the Children that had to be subdued. All to buy just a little more time for her people; to hold onto their island — *her* island — just a little longer. The guns were loud now as she ran along the upper floor, dipping in and out of offices to find a window, a door, a balcony, anything that would let her see this thing and maybe, if she was lucky, fight it. Eventually she reached a long hall that ran along the exterior of the building, an equally long window serving as the exterior facade for the stretch that let her look down at the offending tank.

Quad blaster cannons rattled down the street, tearing away at buildings as the vehicle tried to strike at the DDF soldiers scrambling for cover. Their blaster rifles had little effect on the T2-B’s armor, to say nothing for the shields that prevented so much as a chip on the paint.

Qyreia stared through the glass with mild frustration. “So much for shooting the damn thing.”

A moment of grumbling and agitatedly fidgeting with her equipment brought the mercenary's hand to a rather rotund orb attached to her kit. She hefted the Denton charge in her good hand, looking at the street below that had both tank and troops that wouldn't like what she was pondering. To be fair, *she* didn't like what she was pondering.

"I'm really not gonna like this." She lifted her rifle toward the window, aiming at one of the infantry below. "But shields don't stop solid objects."

Her shot ripped through the window, blasting it apart as the remaining energy struck her intended target and knocking it to the ground, not quite dead for the power lost against the glass. Qyreia didn't have time to notice the soldiers' attention at the new direction of fire coming at them, especially as she regretted the shot at all courtesy of the ripe pain in her wrist. On the other side of the coin though, the Children's troops hardly expected to see a humanoid body leap from the second story to careen through the air and land on their armored support.

Between the height, the distance, and the lack of Force powers, the Zeltron collided roughly onto the roof of the tank, her impact-breaking roll stopped abruptly by the blaster cannon mount on the turret.

That's okay, I didn't like air in my lungs anyway.

Her arm swung out, the heavy metallic *thunk* telling her that the charge was attached, while the droning beep told her it was counting down. Her dismount was less than graceful, rolling off into a pile and staggering up, biting back the scream of pain the stabbed her in the feet and shins. That was definitely the last time she jumped like that without a space wizard to ease the landing.

A few staggered steps, with the enemy soldiers looking at her with blasters ready to go, she stopped abruptly and, almost as though passing out, dropped face-down onto the street.

"...I think she fainted."

"Do you hear beeping?."

"Is she surrenderi-?"

The tank, which had continued to slowly hover forward, seemed to buckle downward onto the ground, the flash and fire briefly contained under the energy shield before it seemed to crack, breaking loose in a thunderous wave. Even prone, Qyreia was thrown off the ground, feet peeled from the pavement by the shockwave to fling her end-over-end down the street.

She was the lucky one, though.

Those soldiers that hadn't noticed what was happening in the brief few seconds they had to react were blasted away. Armored bodies were flung into nearby walls, and sheets of shrapnel disarmed and de-legged several of the soldiers, among other gruesome injuries caused by the wrent metal. So much devastation exploded outward in a matter of a second. Then all fell silent.

While the sounds of battle raged in the distance, the closest sounds of blasters and cannons seemed to abate at least momentarily in the wake of the explosion. In the immediate area, smoke choked the otherwise sun-drenched street, the quietude broken by the *pitter patter* sound of falling pieces of pavement and assorted debris that had been thrown skyward. The DDF troops' footsteps soon joined in as they surveyed the scene and began inching their way out of cover to advance on the dust cloud and crater.

Inhaling — that first real inhale after having the wind knocked from her lungs *twice* — was a brutal experience, especially so when it included a mouthful of dust and smoke. As violently as she coughed though, Qyreia was simply happy to still be alive.

Getting up hurt. *Everything* hurt. She was fairly certain that if she didn't have a broken *something*, then she was going to be bruised enough to look like something was broken. Slowly, achingly, with shaking and unsteady limbs, she pushed herself off the ground, little pieces of pavement falling from her shoulders as she did so. When she finally got to her feet, it was to the sight of the smoke clearing and the Selenian soldiers working through the collection of bodies. Most were unmoving, but some still stirred with life returning to consciousness.

Off to her right, Qyreia saw one of the enemy soldiers starting to come to, his armor showing signs of heavy impact. Her feet shuffled toward the supine creature, knees bending to allow her to pick up her rifle before standing over him.

She could actually see his eyes, such was the condition of his helmet. *Just a human. Huh. Half expected another crystal thing.* Before he could make for a sidearm, she carefully but purposefully put the muzzle of her gun under his chin and a foot planted on his chest.

“Imma give you one chance ta surrrdender... sur... frack it, jus' give up, mate.”

The soldier of the Children seemed like he too was still a little stunned. The comment steeled him somewhat, though. “The Force is with us. We'll...”

Her gun pressed on his larynx, just enough to get him to briefly choke; to stop talking. “The Force, huh?” She turned up her ear, as though listening to the sounds around them, or something else entirely. “Hm... Odd. Because the Force says don't

change the subject, just answer the *karkin' question.*” She twisted the gun, turning up his chin slightly. “Do. you. surrender?”

There was a fire in his eyes, but it was tinged with worry of the unknown. “We outnumber you. Have more and better equipment. You can’t hope to hold this island.”

She was contemplating just finishing him rather than risk further issue, but something came on over the Zeltron’s earpiece; something that, for the first time in a while, genuinely caught her attention. Qyreia looked up and saw what almost looked like a swarm of large birds high in the sky. Only they weren’t birds, and one of them was, however faintly outlined because of the altitude, very triangular shaped.

She grinned wryly. *Here comes the cavalry.* “The Force says she can get me out of this mess,” she said, returning her gaze to her prisoner. “But she’s pretty sure: you’re fracked.”

She eased off the supine Mortisian soldier, the muzzle of her rifle still pressed firmly to his chin under the lip of his helmet.

“It’s *my* island.”