

Fort Blindshot

Selen, Dajorra System

The world was no longer upside down. Blindshot was still very much under attack, but the Arconans were no longer teetering on their back heel with the arrival of much needed reinforcements in the form of the Arconan Expeditionary Force. The numerical advantage enjoyed by the Children of Mortis was rapidly shifting in the opposite direction, forcing them to rely more and more on their upscaled weapons and armor.

Some in particular just didn't want to die.

And Qyreia was still aching from her explosive run-in with a Mortisian tank, which made aiming down her scope to observe the allegedly *unstoppable* soldier just a little bit awkward. Whatever it was, it was fast, and was sending a whole platoon into a rout through the residential district of the fort.

"Is it... is it kriffing throwing *lightning* at them?!"

The officer next to her sighed, disliking it as much as she was. "Seems that way."

Kitted out in the standard Arconan military armor, the only thing that set him apart was the crest on the left chest plate: that of the Summit Guard. Qyreia had brought a company of the specially-designated soldiers from the Citadel at Estle City to help bolster the defense and, at certain people's suggestions, act as bodyguard for the newly-appointed Consul. She had done much to organize the faltering defense and put her people in the right places. Now, it was time for the Red Qek to show her colors and inform Arcona's enemies that even the leaders were not shy of fighting.

The Zeltron's eye narrowed at the unfolding scene in her scope. "S'not *quite* the same, but it looks a lot like what we had to fight on Dandorran. Ugly, powerful, and has a one-track mind when there's an enemy in front of it."

"The reports are stating that it also has some sort of personal shield, among the other more *colorful* claims." He looked through his macrobinocs again, lip curling downward. "Though I'm starting to believe some of those reports weren't exaggerated."

"Probably not."

"We could call in an airstrike."

Qyreia shook her head. "All our flyers are busy frackin' with the enemy's starfighters and the atmospheric fleet. No, this one is on us to figure out."

"Don't suppose you have a plan."

She looked at the soldier — a captain and the commander of the troops she'd brought to the island — with a sort of incredulous amusement. "A bold tone, given who you're talking to, Captain."

His shoulders stiffened, but he didn't stammer or fluster like the junior soldiers did with the Zeltron. "No disrespect, ma'am. Just... used to the Force users. They carry themselves differently." He shrugged. "Plus, you spend enough time in the Summit Guard, and you start to lose the filter when addressing higher ups since you're surrounded by them all the time."

"Fair," she said with a smile; one that subsided as she returned her attention to the matter at hand. "We could pepper him all day, but unless we can really bombard him, he's just gonna keep coming."

She turned, acutely aware of how high she was on the bar-grating walkway on the backside of the holo-theater facade. It was the highest vantage point around the residential district, and the fighting here was relatively light save for the incursions by crystal-infected fauna and the more recent development of these "Ascendant" troopers, as the DIA feeds had been telling her. The latter, however, were turning the Arconan flank. They needed to be neutralized, and with extreme prejudice apparently.

Scanning the horizon, Qyreia took particular note of the coastal defenses that included, at intervals, various flavors of turbolaser and laser cannon towers. She rapped her knuckle on the captain's shoulder and nodded to the nearest tower, near the seaport.

"That'll work."

"What, the turbolaser?" His head bobbed in noncommittal agreement. "Sure, but how're you gonna get it close enough?"

"If they're anything like the schuttas they had on Dandorran, then they *really* don't like it when you actively try and piss 'em off."

"Think that applies to anyone."

"Yeah, but I'm talking the tunnel-vision kind. If you can hold down the flanks and let me borrow a platoon, then I can pull him into the turret's line of sight." She pointed out a broad strip of road further behind them nearer the coast. "Think that'll work?"

The officer followed her motion. "Should suffice. If you're going to be the bait, I'll coordinate with the tower for the right time to fire."

"Just make sure that the guns don't track him before he's in the killzone." She put a finger to her head for emphasis, "He's a Force user, so he's got that little voice that tells him if the bantha's about to drop a fat one on his head."

"That... is certainly a mental image."

Qyreia shrugged. "I'm married to one. I know how they work."

They briefly exchanged thoughts and plans before the company commander started making his way down to relay the Zeltron's instructions. It was a simple enough plan: get

the Ascendant's attention and draw him into the concentrated fire of a platoon under General Arronen — as she was styled between her rank in Arcona to the Arconan Armed Forces. He pointedly neglected to mention the part of the plan the turbolaser would play. The Zeltron had been adamant that as few people as possible know what the actual end-goal was. The more genuine their reactions, the more likely they would fool both natural and supernatural senses in their enemy.

The mercenary had surprised Keira like that once, dropping out of a tree and managing to surprise and tackle her then-girlfriend to the ground.

“How the hell did you manage to sneak up on me?”

“Your future-sensey-thing...”

“Precognition?”

“Yeah, that. It really only alerts you to immediate threats.” There was a kiss. “And I’m not a threat.”

“That’s not how the Force works.”

“And yet I have some rather fond memories of another way the Force ‘doesn’t work.’”

Qyreia cocked her head to either side, stretching the muscles and putting aside the more private thoughts that came with the little bit of reminiscing. It was time for the fighting to start. Settling the stock of her rifle to her shoulder, and giving her sprained wrist a little shake to loosen it up, she centered her sights on the Ascendant trooper's chest.

It was still following the retreating platoon, their blaster shots clearly dissipating on its shield, while it continued to pursue, cutting down one soldier with a lightsaber, then flinging another violently against a wall; usually with gory results.

“Frack you, schutta.”

Her rifle lanced green at the trooper, walloping its shield directly level with its chest. The energy shimmered briefly before once again fading away to invisibility. Whether the Ascendant knew the shield would take it, or was so distracted by the DDF troops it was running down, the high-powered shot caught its attention.

“Frack you.” As did the second.

By the third “Frack you” though, it was clearly done with simply accepting the bolts to show off its resilience, batting it away into a brick wall.

Qyreia fired again, only when the bolt reached the Mortisian trooper, it struck the energized gas back at the Zeltron in her distant perch. Perhaps because of that distance, the bolt struck wide, hitting the backside of the marquee well above her head. *Oh, he*

didn't like that. Regardless of the effect she was having on it, she'd clearly managed to get its attention. While it still pursued the withdrawing DDF soldiers, it was very intent on finding a more direct route toward the sniper.

"That's right, you Hutt-licking choob-canoe. Come to mama and get your medicine."

She wasn't about to let it get close enough to viably reach out and touch her with the Force, so she hurriedly rushed over to the metal ladder and gingerly made her way down rung by rung. She would have slid, but her wrist was having none of that, to say nothing for the bruises in her hip and back.

Down on the ground, her platoon was spread out in a defensive perimeter, with the platoon leader and sergeant waiting near her exit from the theater roof. "Cap'n give you the plan?"

"Draw the enemy's attention away from other friendlies, engage with concentrated fire, conduct fighting retreat to the seaport as necessary."

"Hopefully it dies before we get that far," the sergeant said, his grizzled face and stout body belying his longevity in the army relative to the young lieutenant.

Qyreia nodded, brows doing likewise halfheartedly. "Agreed." She motioned toward the others. "You ready to go, or...?"

"Just waiting on your word, ma'am," the lieutenant said a little stiffly.

"Hm? Oh, no, we need to go. Like, *right now*."

The sergeant looked at her, confused. "But aren't we supposed to engage it first?"

"Dunno about you, but I'd rather shoot it from somewhere *other* than where it thinks we're holed up."

That got her a snort from the veteran. "Fair. All right, Guards! On your feet and follow the general!"

With some amusement at the show — perhaps emboldened by it — the lieutenant attempted his own, motioning toward the door like a bell boy or host. "After you, ma'am."

While the Zeltron appreciated the sudden burst of confidence from her troops, she made sure that once they were out the door, their take on the situation was significantly more serious. The sentiment was hammered home when one of the soldiers spotted the Ascendant some distance away, far across the speeder-lot of the theater and the adjoining commercial strip. It was hard to miss the crimson beam of energy emanating from its hand.

"Fire and fall back," Qyreia reminded the platoon's leadership. When they hesitated,

she rounded on them. “Get control of your platoon! Now!”

She could see it in their eyes as they started getting people behind whatever cover they could find. They were afraid. Not enough to make them run pell mell in terror, but enough to make them second-guess their actions. Qyreia could feel it too, with or without her race’s finer abilities. This wasn’t fear from simply seeing the Ascendant. It was *radiating* from it.

And it was *running* at them.

There was an intermittent staccato of gunfire from the engaging squads while others engaged, which Qyreia quickly corrected. “Fire at the same time! They can block it one at a time, but not everything at once!”

That cost precious seconds; seconds that were used to close the distance. Qyreia added her own fire to the first concerted volley, giving the warped Force user something to really worry about. Sure enough, several shots made it past his defenses, striking his energy field around the extremities. The sheer volume of fire also made it hard to redirect back at the origins, with only one such shot managing to graze the arm of one of the Guard. The Zeltron noted with equal satisfaction and disdain that it took particular care to block *her* shot from amid the fusilade.

Well frack you too.

She might have said it aloud were she not more perturbed by how the Ascendant’s pace slowed to a jog, the slitted eyes of its helmet looked curiously at a speeder. It kept jogging as it lifted its hand like it might lift a box, and the speeder from the ground in direct concert with the motions. Qyreia didn’t see the arm movement so much as she saw the speeder suddenly careen bullet-like through the air at the troops.

Her voice screamed “Get out of the way!” but it was already too late by the third word. One soldier had an arm utterly shattered, limp and jagged with compound fractures. The other one was simply gone, crushed and smeared across the pavement wherever the vehicle tumbled.

“Fall back!”

There was no telling if it was her or the sergeant that said it, but the command was hardly argued by anyone. Only some rapid but careful handling and commands spared them complete chaos. Qyreia, for her part, wheeled about to follow along, though at a hobble. When the sergeant saw this, he begrudgingly doubled back and tried to help her along; help that she actively tried to refuse.

“Ma’am, are you injured?!”

“No! Maybe! A little! But now is *not* really the time to ask!”

“Have you taken anything for it?”

“No!”

“Why?!”

“Because I’m karking stupid, now *move!*”

Unbidden, he grabbed one of her arms and threw it over his shoulder. She might not have been particularly fast in her current condition, but the help definitely sped her along at a much brisker pace.

There were other speeders though. Other blaster bolts redirected back to their senders. When they looked back, the Ascendant trooper was no longer jogging, but running after them, keeping pace with them. Gaining. When they passed the second squad, Qyreia forced the sergeant to pause long enough for her to turn about and join the volley. He practically tackled her to narrowly avoid the both of them being decapitated by a flung rotor blade of a once-parked speederbike. But the hefty volley slowed him down, back to a jog, if only for a little bit. Where once the armor was clean, there were now a pair of scorch marks on the otherwise unblemished plates.

Then it was fall back again. Watch the fleeing Summit Guard be picked off again. Pass through the next squad again. Fire again. Rinse and repeat, over and over and over.

After a while, Qyreia stopped counting the dead. There weren’t a lot of them to start with, and now there were fewer. The Ascendant was once further away, and now he was closer, grabbing soldiers by the spine as they ran, while she remained just out of reach. They kept bounding and bounding, simply trying to slow it down; to buy time for their red-skinned leader to hobble a little further away.

Then she heard the lightsaber.

More than just the swinging *whoom* was the sound of a Guard losing a limb, then the gurlges as he was finished off. Qyreia tried to turn, but the sergeant that was propping her up kept her feet going forward. Kept her *listening* to the carnage as their steady withdrawal became less and less organized.

Her voice was a growl of effort as they pushed on. “Lemme *fight* ‘im!”

“Ma’am, due respect, you’ll die, and I don’t abide stupid.”

“They’re *dying*, sarn’t.”

“Dying for *you*. Don’t waste that sacrifice.”

“Frack that martyr Sithspit!”

I know one thing in this violent galaxy we live in, sergeant, she thought as she wrenched free of his grip, spinning on the ball of her feet to crouch and level her rifle at the thing tearing through her troops. You don't stop fighting. No matter what. At this range, she didn't even need to look through the scope to know where her muzzle was pointed. Once you stop, you've given them an opening to win.

She fired, slamming green energy into the Ascendant's shield at leg level while it held a trooper aloft for imminent slaughter. Instead, it reached out to the Zeltron, grabbing her up by the throat with an invisible hold that no less choked her airway and drew her upward off the ground.

So you don't stop, sergeant.

Her rifle was lost to the pavement, and she knew there was nothing to grasp around her neck. No hand or arm to try and fight against. So, with gurgling, choking noises, she jerked her hand down to her hip, wrenching her pistol up to batter away at the shield.

You don't stop fighting.

She watched the other floating trooper snap in half. Behind her, the sergeant turned on his heel and started furiously launching energy bolts at the Ascendant before he too was wrenched free of solid footing, gravity, and sense.

Ever.

"Keep him there."

In the back of her head, Qyreia knew that voice. Even as the world started going dark, she heard the voice over her earpiece. Watched out of the corner of her eye as the hazy image of a turbolaser turret down the road turned in their direction.

The world went black.

Then everything was upside down again.

~*~*~*~

Her ears rang, but she didn't recall any noise to cause the deafening, dull, foggy sounds that filled her eardrums in accompaniment to the sharp whining ring. All she knew was that where a moment ago she heard nothing and felt only the growing pressure in her head from lack of air and constricted veins, now she was coughing, violently, somewhere amidst the haze of a dust cloud.

When she finally calmed her coughing and wheezing to manageable levels, she finally noticed the prevailing scent. *Ozone.*

The dust was from the turbos. She wondered if the *thing* was still alive; if *anyone* was alive. Where her body hurt before, now she was just *done*. It took most of her

energy just to hold herself up on her hands and knees, hacking up god-knows-what onto god-knew-what-else.

With the searing headache and likely concussions ravaging her head, Qyreia hardly wanted to even open her eyes. But when she felt a hand on her shoulder, her hand went reflexively to her boot and the sheathed knife there. It was the only weapon she had left.

“mMmmmM MmMm mM mmmMMmm”

“Wh-wha? I-I can’t... I can’t hear...”

Her eyes peeked open, and she saw the sergeant standing unsteadily over her. She wasn’t sure if his hand on her shoulder was to reassure her at this point, or to hold himself up. Maybe a little of both. He was dirty, covered in carbon soiling common among those that stand just a little too close to an explosion. His head was half-caked in blood, but his wounds didn’t seem especially serious.

She pointed at her ear with her previously knife-grabbing hand. “I can’t hear you.”

She couldn’t hear his muffled words either, but she could see his lips mouthing out, *“I can’t hear you either.”*

He pointed through the dwindling dust cloud at a shelf of broken pavement. As the dust continued to settle, Qyreia realized it was a crater. Several craters, in fact, all piled into one very specific spot. A sort of crystalline glimmer hung in the air with the dust, catching the ambient tropical light filtering through the dun gloom. They both watched the expanse for a long time, almost like submarine explorers that churned up the silty bottom and were waiting for the seafloor to settle and reveal its secrets to them.

The first movement they saw was that of the remaining Summit Guard platoon filtering back through the area, clearing and securing the hole. While she couldn’t make out the words, Qyreia could hear the muffled sounds of one soldier pointing at them and, presumably, calling for a medic. Given the figure that approached had both insignia and medical bag, the Zeltron quietly congratulated herself on the correct assumption. If this deafness thing turned out to be permanent, maybe it wouldn’t be so bad.

While her hearing was dulled though, her sense of touch was not, and the hypospray to her neck was hardly a pleasant feeling. However, whatever painkiller-and-bacta cocktail was in there worked quickly. Soon enough, she was treated to the painful sounds of shouting and distant gunfire all over again, albeit still a little fuzzy around the edges.

“Can you hear me now?” the medic asked while she attended to the sergeant, multitasking with practiced efficiency.

“B-better.”

“You may be concussed, so try not to move too quickly until I can better examine you.”

“S’fine.” Qyreia looked at the sergeant, who held out a fist. She bumped it with her own, weak though the gesture was. “I owe you a drink.”

He growled a laugh back, much to the medic’s chagrin. “I owe the same.” His eyes panned out to the large crater that was growing in size and clarity. “Didn’t think you Summit types had it in you. Not like that.”

A flash of her wife and an imagined pink blob with blue hair in her arms passed through Qyreia’s mind. A blink of her parents. Of her former apprentice, her Miraluka friend, the Mirialan she couldn’t get over, the two green kids that wouldn’t leave her alone. A pair of Ryn and their Ryntron kid, a tall man with dark hair and a dark beard, a trio of Zeltron women. All familiar faces she knew that the sergeant wouldn’t understand if she were to ramble off about them all.

“Got a lot to live for. Thas all.”

And I won’t ever stop fighting for them.