

Fort Blindshot
Selen
40 ABY

The air smelled of sand and blaster fire. Deep craters ravaged the idyllic island, gouged in her fair skin by proton artillery. Cries of alarm went out once more as another volley descended, screaming, from on high. Laira Savic ducked for cover, hot shrapnel whizzing past and tearing crunks of duracrete from the battlements. The bastion was holding, though only just.

“Hold fast! Drive them back!” Laira Savic called out, her voice barely wavering despite the hours of grueling combat they’d been through. She was exhausted, and at the end of her tether, but the baseline soldiers were faring far worse. Some had collapsed out of sheer exhaustion, others shaking so bad their fire was mainly suppressive. It shouldn’t have come to this.

They should have won by now. They should have, but in war very few things ever went to plan. The droning of Arconan Expeditionary Forces LAATs overhead had been sweeter than the cry of a firstborn, their rocket volleys tearing up the ranks of the attackers, but the infernal artillery barrage was keeping them from landing. The few brave pilots that had tried, now little more than burnt skeletons within their broken craft.

Brushing off blackened sand from her robes, the cinnamon skinned Sephi could sense the wavering morale of the fort’s defenders. They were all fatigued, running on fumes and low on ammunition. The LAAT strike had saved them from collapse, but the battle was not over and they needed reinforcements. There was only so much hardship a mortal mind could bear.

The enemy wasn’t faring any better, though, and she could tell this was their final effort—at least for now. Finding the calm haven within her warrior heart, she slid down cross-legged in the shadow of a barbette and extended her guiding senses to the weary troops under her command.

So few.

She brushed the thought aside, her war mask blotting out the empathy before it could consume her. Now was not the time for remorse. There was only the Force.

A visible surge of strength rekindled broken hearts as the weary defenders pressed back one last time. Expending what little they had to give, they fought back with blaster and blade until the power cells drained and their vibroblades broke—a valiant defender throwing himself bare handed at the throat of a scaling Mortis soldier. They both vanished into the roiling dust cloud below the battlements.

Another punishing volley of artillery battered them, snatching another life into Ashla’s tender mercies. For the meditating Sephi, it was just another golden thread cut short. She had witnessed enough for a ragged tapestry that was her life. As abruptly as violence had commenced, it ceased, with only the ringing of eardrums and the taste of blood and sand lingering. This enemy fought to the last, there were no fighting retreats.

She was snapped out of the moment's contemplation by a crackle of static in her earpiece.

"Commander Savic, come in. We have an urgent mission for you."

"Savic here, what do you need, command?" Laira replied, steadying her voice to hide her own fatigue.

"We need to silence the enemy guns. Aerial scouts have located a potential location, but our own guns can't reach that far. Lead a team and take them out."

The Sephi looked around the battlements, blowing a stray strand of white hair off her face. The men were worn out. They would break if she pushed them to assault.

"I understand that, but my troops—"

"We have four armored units with air support waiting for you at the main gate. Force be with you, commander."

"May the Force be with you," she replied on instinct, suddenly feeling a little dizzy. Had he really said armor *and* air support? Ashla was smiling upon her today.

The angular hulls of 2-M hover tanks greeted her as she arrived at the central courtyard, the commanders' heads visible from the turret hatches. There was no infantry support, with every available hand needed to hold the fort, but out in the open they would be more a hindrance than help. What they needed was a swift armored thrust that bypassed any major resistance and blew up the artillery before melting back to the Fort.

"Oh no, it's *her*," the lead tank gunner called out over the vehicles' shared comms.

"Who?" another replied.

"Commander Savic, a real troop shredder. See that platoon of grunts holding the wall? Poor lads barely standing and she kept them engaged to hold the enemy off."

"Isn't that what she's supposed to do?"

"Yeah, but that platoon started the day as a company."

The second gunner went a little pale, barely noticing the Sephi had closed the distance and was hailing to come aboard. Only after a sharp call from the Jedi did he acknowledge her presence and lowered the troop ramp, letting her climb aboard.

"Welcome aboard, Commander Savic," the pale-faced gunner greeted her. "I take it you'll be in charge of this operation?"

“Correct, sergeant. We’ll be operating with air support, so don’t worry about the skies. Just focus on getting us to the objective in one piece and blast anything with a crystal protruding out of it.”

“Right you are, ma’am. I’m patching you through to the platoon comms now.” A few swift clicks later they were all sharing the same frequency and the order to move out was given. Single file, the hover tanks sat off, emerging through the half-blasted gate in single file but fanning out as soon as terrain permitted.

The four gleaming hulls shimmered under their shields in the setting Selenian sun, a quartet of daggers poised at the enemy’s heart. Ahead, the battlefield was a cratered hellscape, pockmarked by artillery blasts and littered with the charred remains of Mortis troops. They’d thrown themselves recklessly at the Fort and paid the price.

“Contact front!” the lead vehicle reported, strafing left to keep the enemy gunner off his mark.

“I see it! Assault tank on the ridge, four hundred meters!” his wing tank replied.

“Blast ‘em!”

The pair opened fire the same moment their foe finally got a bead on the lead tank. Two medium lasers spoke as one, meeting the single return shot of the assault tank’s heavy blaster cannon. The lead vehicle’s shields flashed brighter than the sun, deflecting the heavy shot but overloading. The return fire peppered the assault tank’s crystal-enhanced armor with little effect, the gunner adjusting his aim for a kill shot.

Sitting within the crew compartment of the third tank, Laura waded deep within the Force. The short respite of riding within the tank had given her enough time to buoy her spirit and though her senses were still raw from the hours of heavy fighting, she knew better than to let it impede her work. Guiding the fire from the third and fourth tanks to suppress the enemy, she did not hesitate to throw the second vehicle in harm’s way, the pilot gunning the engines to place his vehicle in between the enemy and the lead tank.

The assault tank’s blaster spoke once more, but instead of a kill, only a second shield was stripped. There would not be a third. Suppressed by harassing fire from the two rearmost tanks, the enemy commander failed to retreat in time, the nimble 2-M’s sweeping up around its flank to deliver a volley of concussion missiles to its side.

Crystal enhanced armor could do many things, but surviving a missile strike at point blank range was beyond even its capabilities. The heavy assault tank burst like a ripened melon, splitting open in a blazing fireball as armor cracked under the force of an internal reactor detonation. Shrapnel rained on the 2-Ms but even without their shields their armor was proof against such minor damage.

“Good shot,” Laura called, easing her concentration as the sound of fighting reached her senses once more. “Let’s keep moving before they realize we’ve broken through.”

Air support arrived not soon after, joining in formation and keeping watch overhead to deter hostile fighters from getting too close. LAATs might have been clumsy and slow by starfighter standards, but bristling with weapons, the quarter was still a danger to any lone ship that got too close. With the comforting drone of their engines thrumming overhead, the tank column pressed on.

Making full use of their home field advantage, Laira guided the tanks along the defilades of the dunes, masking their movement along a seasonal riverbed. Sand whipped into the air in their passing, but was swiftly scattered by the winds and within the chaos of the grander battle, no one would surely notice.

That did not mean no resistance was met, but it was thankfully light, with only a few handfuls of ragged Mortis troops caught in their path. Brutalized by prior fighting, they were swiftly brushed aside by the combined firepower of the four repulsortanks and the LAATs' guns. Coming up to a patch of palm trees that formed one of the 'islands' within the sea of sand, Laira called for a sensor sweep. They were getting close to the enemy guns.

"Nothing on scanners, but they must have noticed us moving in. Better hurry," the gunner said from the turret.

"We move with purpose. Fourth unit up front and expect enemy contact," Laira agreed, though she could not shake the nagging feeling that something was awry. There was a chill in her heart that would not relent, eluding her.

The tanks moved out, number four taking point, forced into a narrow pass between two major palm topped dunes. The terrain dipped low, cutting vision to mere meters. Beyond the next ridge the dull thumps of firing artillery pieces beckoned—suddenly drowned out by the grinding of heavy wheels.

The ground shook, sand frothing down the dunes in an avalanche as a mighty warmachine crested the ridge before them and engaged with wild abandon. The size of a hab block on wheels, the Juggernaut slammed into the sand with enough force to be felt inside the repulsorlift tanks.

A moment's terrified silence passed before well-drilled doctrine took over. On trained instinct, the tanks fanned out left and right, seeking to outflank the enemy but in the narrow gorge there was no space. Repulsorlifts struggled for purchase on the shifting sheets of sand, they simply could not climb the steep dunes on either side. At least no quick enough.

Fire from the Arconan tanks raked the Juggernaut's armor, splashing harmlessly against the slabs of alchemical durasteel. Chips of blood red crystals pulsed within the hull of the hostile machine, beating like tiny hearts and subsisting on the pain and punishment the mighty vehicle was receiving. A true Sith warmachine.

The crystal infused weapons atop the behemoth's boxy forehead swiveled around to target the lead vehicle, cycling up and spitting out a withering hail of white-blue bolts. The shields of the 2-M shuddered, flashing a kaleidoscope of color before shattering under the onslaught, the magnitude of the overload blowing out the shield generators in gouts of flame.

The crew did not have time to taste fear, their armor stripped in a heartbeat and the guts of the tank slugged into a runny soup that dripped out of the ravaged fighting compartment amidst off-cooking munitions. The second vehicle gunned its repulsors for all they were worth, sand and dust choking the drives even as the pilot plowed the tank into the side of the dune for a clearer shot.

Laira could feel the panic and desperation within the vehicle, the crew's mortal urgency lapping at her mental defenses. She extended her presence to calm and guide them, but she was weary and their terror swelling. A turret at the Juggernaut's side extended to track them, crackling with charging energy like tongues of a ravenous beast. The gunner could wait no longer and unleashed the payload of missiles, just as Laira reached their minds.

Streaking across the near nothing distance between the two armored combatants, the concussion missiles slammed into the Juggernaut's flank at an oblique angle. The first glanced off into a corkscrewing ascent before detonating overhead, but the first struck true and blossomed into a furious fireball. A fireball pierced by a crimson beam that eviscerated the 2-M in a single hit.

The Jedi felt the full brunt of their atomization, the ravaging Force imbued energies that ripped metal and flesh asunder like paper. She clutched at her chest, second-hand pain making her gasp for breath as she felt as if a part of her soul had just been rent out of her body.

Her focus shattered, the Battle trance ended and the tankers realized the folly of their situation. "*Retreat!*" Laira heard someone cry over the coms, the motion of inertia barely registered over dulled senses as the tank she was in backed away, firing furiously at the sand banks until a cloud of dust thick enough to obscure sensors had been kicked up.

"Where the blast is our air support?"

"Coming in now! Slag that sithspit!"

Laira *knew* what would happen, instinctively, but had no strength to prevent it.

As the LAAT gunships swooped in from above, guns blazing on their strafing run, the Juggernaut calmly reared its weapon mounts and returned fire, its dark metal hull shrugging off direct hits of composite beam cannons while ripping gunships out of the sky. All but one came down in flaming wrecks, the last limping away with black smoke trailing from its starboard engine. The rest became coffins for their crews.

The surviving tanks retreated as fast as their pilots could manage, ducking and weaving to kick up as much dust as they could to confuse the enemy's sensors and make themselves a harder target. Blind fire stabbed through the dust clouds, a rain of sapphire bolts that glassed the ground where they struck. A single stray hit impacted Laira's tank as it dipped behind cover, stripping the shield and scoring a deep gash on the thin rear armor, spraying the troop compartment with white-hot shrapnel.

Searing pain snapped the Sephi back into the now, the jostling of the speeding hovertank shaking her to her senses. Looking down, she saw her robes mottled with black edged holes, tiny shards of metal now embedded in her flesh.

For the briefest of moments her war mask slipped, the pain and fear overwhelming her. She was alone in a claustrophobic metal box, injured and confused. The air was rank with hot sweat, fear and blood; the uncomfortable odors of fighting men permeating her senses as her chest rose and fell in panicked breaths. The contents of her stomach threatened to escape. For a moment, she was that scared little girl on a pilgrim ship straying too close to Arx, not knowing where the men in polished armor were taking her as they tore her from her mother's side.

There is no emotion, there is peace.

Her breathing calmed just enough to swallow the rising bile.

There is no ignorance, there is knowledge.

She closed her eyes and reassured that little girl that all would be well. She'd be one with the Force and the Force would be with her.

There is no passion, there is serenity.

She opened her eyes as the war mask slipped in place. The fear dulled like an aging blade, the pain losing its keen edge. Reaching through the Force she embraced Ashla and the wounds in her side knit shut, enough to stem the bleeding.

There is no chaos, there is harmony.

She reached for her comms. "Section halt, regroup at nearest dune. Our mission is not done."

The surviving Arconans followed her command, though she could tell they did so begrudgingly. Disembarking to address the crews, she straightened her posture and did her best to hide the lingering pain in her ravaged flank. Now was no time for weakness.

The dune offered them scant protection from the ongoing battle, its few palms barely enough to cover up the tanks from overhead observation. Even so, the men needed direction and they all needed a plan.

"What is your status?" Laira said, eschewing any pleasantries as the tank crews huddled next to her.

"Third unit minor damage, but functional," the gunner from her tank replied.

"First unit operational," the tight-lipped gunner replied, hands balled in fists. "We're all that's left, second and fourth are gone, *ma'am*. They're dead." His voice trembled.

“And they’ll be mourned as heroes once we win this battle, but now we cannot lose sight of the objective,” Laura pressed.

“We can’t get past that thing!” tank four’s gunner spat. “It just took out half our unit and ripped the LAATs to shreds! We don’t have a chance! We need to get back and call in someone else to deal with it. I’m done with this.” The man turned to walk away, casting a glance at the other crewmen. Their hesitation was palpable.

“Who else?” Laura called after him.

“What?”

“You said, let someone else deal with it. I want to know, *who else?*”

“I don’t know, some other unit or—”

“And they’d fare any better? You want them to suffer as we did? And while we wait, those guns keep churning up our friends and comrades at Blindshot.”

The man had stopped walking.

“We are soldiers,” Laura spoke, her azure eyes alight with a cold fire. “We swore to defend this world and that is what we’re going to do. Even if it means sacrificing all to do it.”

The gunner’s fists tightened.

“What do you know of sacrifice, *troop shredder?* It’s us who are dying, while you’re just sitting there watching us die! You don’t care how many of us are left, as long as you get your victory! We mean *nothing* to you,” he spat bitterly.

All eyes were suddenly on her, and for the first time in a long while, she felt that accusation through her mask. Her ears sank.

“That’s what I thought,” the gunner scoffed and turned for his tank. “Let’s go, she can finish this war on her own.”

Their footsteps crunched on the sand and the wind rustled the palm leaves overhead. The shell shock in her eyes was more real than any artillery strike could muster. The man was right.

“I—I am sorry,” Laura called after them. “You’re right, I do ask much of you. Sometimes too much, but I don’t do it for the victory. I don’t lead you, because I care about the honor, I do it because that is how we, the most of us, come back alive. If we don’t do this, they *will* send someone else. And they’ll face that same monster and perhaps they will prevail, but many will certainly die.”

The steps halted. Expectation hung in the air.

“You say I don’t care about your fates. I have shared every one of them,” *Laira* pressed, voice trembling. “When we fight together as one, we are more than a well-oiled machine. We are a living thing. And when someone under my command dies, I feel like losing a part of myself. But I know if it was not under my lead, someone else would be there in my place, and they would lose many times more.”

“I regret what I am,” she admitted. “I am death to those I command, because they will throw us all into the darkest places and we will all bleed.” She tucked at her robes, showing the bloodied shrapnel wounds in her flank. “But even in the darkest of night, there can be light if we bring it with us. And in the end there is no death, there is only the Force.”

The tank crews look at her and then at the recalcitrant gunner. His tight-lipped demeanor relented and the four returned to her.

“What do you need of us?”

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The *Juggernaut* stood as imposing as ever in their path, blocking the way to the tireless artillery battery. Its dark bulk bore blemishes from their previous engagement but dismayingly few scars beyond. *Laira Savic* pressed low near the root of a palm tree, a pair of magnoculars aiding her vision as she surveyed the battlefield. The plan should work—she hoped—for all their sakes.

“*We’re ready, Commander Savic,*” a voice over the comms informed her. It was now or never, they would only get one shot at this.

“Do it,” she replied, before sliding into a cross-legged position and reaching out to guide her willing soldiers.

The two hover tanks advanced, rounding the lip of a tall sand dune that formed the other side of the canyon where the *Juggernaut* lay in wait. Carefully, feathering the throttle controls, the drivers inched their craft sideways around the corner, the tanks’ turrets pointed squarely down the gorge.

The moment their guns cleared the sand bank and caught a line of sight on the *Juggernaut*, they opened fire. Stacked so close to each other, deflectors entirely focused on their exposed frontal arcs, the 2-Ms presented a minuscule target, barely more than their cannons and a sliver of their side hulls—the first perfectly covering the second as if moving as a singular.

The fire of their main guns would never be enough to harm the *Juggernaut* itself, but it did have the desired effect all the same. The *Mortis* warmachine gunned its engine, heavy wheels churning as it accelerated towards the annoying tanks like a charging mudhorn. Its forehead cannon spoke, but this time the *Arconans* were ready and in perfect synchrony they disengaged further and further, making full use of their mobility to maintain only the slimmest possible frontage to the *Juggernaut*.

Bright blue bolts splashed around them, churning up sand and plumes of solidifying glass. But this time even the stray bolt that did get lucky only struck reinforced deflectors or glanced off the extremely angled armor. And all the while the tanks kept firing, sending crimson bolts splashing against the Juggernaut's glacis until it glowed red hot.

Like a mudhorn, the warmachine was slow to accelerate, but once in motion picked up speed at a terrifying rate. The tank pilots struggled to keep up, adjusting angular speed and rotation of their craft like fighter pilots, but theirs was a finite gambit. As the Juggernaut reached flanking speed, they knew their time was up.

Hitting their engines to full reverse, the pair of 2-Ms backed away as quick as they could, guns depressing and searching for the marks they'd left in the sand. The Juggernaut came crashing around the dune, kicking up a spray of sand that rained for a hundred meters, breaking into view like a whale breaching the surface. Its hungry cannon sought the tormenting prey, barely registering the peril of an aerial alert.

Rising from behind the cover of a crop of palm trees, the surviving LAAT unmasked its twin mass-driver launchers and fired. The tanks joined in a heartbeat after, their main guns hitting the piles of concussion missiles stashed just beneath the surface.

The plume of the combined detonation rose above the treeline, blanketing the area in sooty sand. The violence of the detonation jostled the Mortis crew within their machine, throwing off their aim and saving the life of a tank as the blue bolts careened wildly off mark. Yet at the end of it, as clumps of matted sand rained upon their hulls, the Juggernaut stood. Shaken, but alive and angry.

It stood—and began to sink.

Spreading slowly at first, yet speeding up by the moment, a dark shadow swallowed the ground beneath the mighty warmachine. Water, bubbling up from the underground river, turned sand into slurry as all traction vanished from beneath the wheeled monster's treads. Spinning futilely in place, the Sith warmachine listed, before sinking beneath the sands as Selen itself devoured the hateful invader.

Back at the small outcropping, Laira Savic gasped with supreme exhaustion. She had pushed herself to the limit to choreograph it all, but the nerves of her men had held and the way to the artillery was open.

"You're all clear," she called over her comms, wearily picking up her magnoculars to verify her claim. "Now go blow those guns and we'll get home."

This was *their* moment of triumph. They had earned it.

"*Arcona Invicta*," came the reply.