

Stand By Me, Because I'm Not Strong

I thought I was done with this Sithspit.

It had begun with a little bug, hardly noticeable in the vast machine that Myrmidon had become; a glitch in the system that seemed innocuous to the average dockworker at the starport. “Cloned files,” the message on Rhess Junipyr’s – the civil leader of the town – inbox read. Rare enough to bring up, but mundane enough not to worry over; or so the tech crew reported, at any rate. With that knowledge, the old spacer had all but dismissed the anomaly.

Until it showed up a week later in the water treatment facility.

...and at the city council offices.

...and in the peacekeepers’ office within the Redoubt.

“And why aren’t you telling this to Aul?” Qyreia asked as she rubbed the grit from her eyes, acutely aware of the early hour that the call had come in. “*He’s the Battle Team Leader.*”

“Because I don’t know where his loyalties lie,” Rhess responded over the comm system. *“I know yours.”*

“And what do you want me to do? I’m no slicer. Sure, it’s weird, but I don’t know a thing about ‘programming glitches.’”

“Dammit Red, think! Why would a bunch of clone files suddenly show up?”

The Zeltron let loose a heavy sigh. “Frack, fine! Gimme a sec...” Pacing back and forth in her darkened living room, her tired and half-awake brain wracked itself trying to put pieces into place. “Okay... Where did you find these files? What part of the computers?”

“What did Igg call ‘em? ...They were temporary. ‘Clipboard’ I think he said some folks call it.”

The outdated term tugged at Qyreia’s mind. She had dabbled enough in text processors and holonet mail services over the years to know the term though. “Does the system show who had accessed the computers?” she asked carefully.

“How should I know? I probably know less about these systems than you do...”

“Rhess, this is *important*. Find out. Call Igg, see what he can dig up, and get back to me.”

“It’s like... two in the morning. Don’t think he’d appreciate...”

“Then why did you call me?!”

There was a pause on the line. *“I’ll call Igg and get back to you in a few minutes.”*

As the call ended, the mercenary let out another long, beleaguered sigh. *I really thought I was done with this cloak-and-dagger druk.* Her bare feet were in the process of wearing a trench into the carpet when the faintest whisper of sound from the stairwell met her ears. Keira was standing warily in the shadows, her pajamas and tangle of long black hair doing nothing to conceal the look of cold concern in her otherwise soft features.

“What was that about?”

“Rhess called about some data glitches. ‘Cept she doesn’t think they’re glitches.”

“And neither do you,” the Seer returned, more a statement than a question.

Tensions had largely cooled since their heated argument nigh two months prior. Things weren't the same though. Qyreia had all but quit drinking, save for the occasional glass of wine with dinner, to put the Force user's mind a little more at ease. It always seemed, however, that since then the pale half-breed was measuring up her former Black Guard's intentions – every word and action scrutinized. Whether it was a conscious or unconscious action, the Zeltron couldn't tell, but some of the warmth had left their relationship since then. It hadn't made things any easier after getting back from her 'meeting' with a certain Sorenn.

“Talk to me, Q,” Keira said gently, taking a few steps forward.

“...No, I don't think they're glitches. After what happened in these recent attacks... I think someone's getting into the systems and collecting intel.”

“You think the same will happen to Naga Sadow?” Once again, more a statement than a question. How much she actually cared for the Clan was debatable, but Keira knew that her lover wouldn't just roll over if her erstwhile friends were in danger.

“Seems that way.” The phone rang, and the Zeltron answered immediately, putting it on speaker so the Seer could hear. “What's the news?”

“Bless that karkin' Ugnaught, Q. Systems said that it was all different users on the systems at the time, but ol' Igg dug a little deeper. Went into the security footage, checked time stamps, and found a funny little surprise.”

“Rhess, I'm sure the dramatic tension is great on your end, but right now we could have a lot more lives on the line than you initially thought.”

There was a momentary pause that belied the ex-smuggler's realization. *“We got ourselves a spy. Human, male, 'bout one-eighty-three tall, black hair, pale skin for someone livin' on Aeotheran.”*

Qyreia looked at Keira, noting the very similar physical descriptions, but knowing that it couldn't have been her father; he was much taller than the description. “Got a name for this choob-sucker?”

“Igg's running it through the peacekeeper facial recognition system now. Shouldn't be more than a minute. Told him to send it direct to you.” They heard a chuckle on the other end. *“That little bastard is a whizz with tech. Gonna have to be careful that he doesn't hack the whole system someday.”*

A soft ping from the mercenary's personal computer called her and Keira over to the monitor. *Opus Surmack* the name read; some lowly technician that had been contracted as general purpose support staff. *That would explain how he had access to all the locations,* the Zeltron thought. “I hate to ask more of you, Rhess, but I need you to get a hold of the folks at Seng Karash and the Archipelago; see if they've had similar 'glitches' in their systems too.”

“Uh, not sure if you've noticed, but Karash is still workin' out its political bantha druk, and neither of them really take kindly to us out here. 'Backwater hicks' I believe was the term they used.”

“Then use Aul's authority codes.”

“Hold on there, missy. I’m always up for a little light snooping, but what you’re going after could get me an’ a lot of other folks in trouble.”

“What part of ‘lives on the line’ did you not frackin’ understand?!” She felt Keira’s hand rest gently on her shoulder. *Calm down, Qyreia*, her expression said, not unkindly. “Rhess, Taldryan and Scholae have already been hit. We could be next. Please.”

A deep sigh was heard from the other end. *“Tell me what ya need, and I’ll see what I can do.”*

The list was lengthy, if not a little outside the realm of what the Zeltron had ever expected to be doing with her life. Rhess would contact the other major population centers’ security forces and inquire about similar breaches in their systems, asking about this Surmack fellow in the process. Igg would slice the Devil’s Shroud systems and give the mercenary unbridled access to the powers therein – access that would get her a ship, for instance, as well as authority to collect information from civilian personnel without the normal legal measures. Everything would be forwarded to her datapad.

She was halfway dressed when Keira stepped up and blocked the door. “I’m going with you.”

“Like hell you are. Move. I need to go *now*.”

“All that yelling you did before about how I don’t stand with you when things are tough, and now you want me to sit idle while you go off and fight a war on your own?”

“Really? You wanna do this *right now*?”

“I’m going with you.”

“No.”

“Yes.” The merc stared her down intently. “You’re unarmed, and I could turn you into a drooling mess on the floor with my brain. See how far you get.”

Qyreia grit her teeth, but relented with a sigh. “Fine. Be nice to have someone watching my back for a change.”

The Force user was at the door minutes later, fully dressed and with her lightsaber at her hip, while the Zeltron was still trying to buckle her boots. *Damn, she’s fast*. The half-Umbaran went so far as to hand the mercenary her blasters and holsters, taking payment for rendered services in the form of an unexpected kiss, before opening the door.

“Come on, *Red Qek*! We’ve got bad guys to catch.”

The red woman shook her head, grinning as they walked off into the lamp-lit streets. Rhess was waiting a couple blocks away with a speeder and more intel, which she explained while they careened down the road toward the spaceport. Turned out Surmack, who was supposedly at home sick from work, was no longer in the area, Rhess having stopped by his house on the way to pick up the Zeltron. Their Ugnought spy had confirmed this with a quick review of the port’s video surveillance – the mole was two days gone already, headed for Sepros according to the itinerary. What made matters worse, while he had used different aliases, the same anomalies had been detected and tracked in Seng Karash and the Gilded Archipelago as

well, but political turmoil and corruption in each location, respectively, had prevented any sufficient action.

Rather than requisition some poor trader's ship, Rhess lent her old tug to the duo, giving the startup codes to the Zeltron before leaving for her office to try and collect more information that might be of use. Loading up into the dated freighter, Qyreia made all speed to the Clan's homeworld and the Temple of Sorrow – places that both she and Keira were intimately familiar. To that end, at least, they had some small advantage.

“Do you think you could convince Locke to lock down the traffic?”

“He and I haven't exactly spoken in a while. I'm not sure he'd listen to me.”

“Think I've got a better chance?” Keira's silent look of skepticism said enough. “Well, let's hope that this Hutt-humper hasn't left yet.”

The arrival of two Sadowans on Sepros was no great cause for alarm, and with the Clan's headquarters under the sun of high noon, the timing was as innocuous as it could have been. Everything after that was rather more conspicuous.

Keira led the way from the shuttle, leading them straight to the main security branch for the hangar, where she proceeded to subdue the small number of personnel in quick succession. With no one to ask questions about their business, it gave them a small window of opportunity to delve into the security feeds and find their mole. Much of the technology was identical to that on Aeotheran, and it took only the input of Surmack's image into the system to find a match. It just so happened that he was not only still there, but having what appeared on the camera feed to be a rather intense lunch break with three other people – two male, one female, and all human.

“Okay, I need you to lock down this hangar while I go meet up with these *schuttas*.”

“Not exactly sure how to do that,” Keira said, tension slipping through her otherwise calm voice. “Maybe I should...”

“Here,” the merc said as she went to one of the consoles that overlooked the hangar. In short order, the force field that guarded the entry came alive, ensuring there would be no *unscheduled* departures. “See that lever panel down in the hangar itself?”

“Yeah?”

“Go there, flip the two outer switches. That'll work the manual override and keep 'em from bugging out with the security codes that they probably have.”

“How do you *know* all this?”

“Hellooo, ex-smuggler here. I've had to evade the law before, honey.”

Keira looked worriedly at the distant panel. “Wait for me before you try to take these guys on alone?”

“I'm going ahead,” the mercenary said matter-of-factly. “You know where to go, so meet up with me as soon as you're done.” She threw her arms around the Seer and held her tight. “We don't have much time. Besides, they won't sense me like they would you. I think you Force users do that sort of thing, anyway.”

Her lover nodded. “If things look rough, get away until I can reach you.”

Everything they said seemed to have so much finality to it; a fatalistic tone that they couldn't avoid, no matter how positive they tried to sound. This wasn't some sort of coordinated Resistance mission: there was no backup save for Keira, and there was no telling how the personnel inside the Sadow Palace would take the Zeltron shooting at four seemingly-innocent people. Time was not on their side, however, so the pair left for their respective tasks after an intense but all too brief embrace.

"Time to nut up or shut up," Qyreia said quietly to herself as she prepped her carbine, the heavy feeling in her stomach turning to butterflies as her partner disappeared from sight. *Whatever powers that be, please don't let me lose any body parts. Especially the ones that keep me alive, but I'd also like to not lose a leg or anything. I don't wanna be called something like 'Stumpy' the rest of my life.*

If anything, the Zeltron hoped that the security personnel remembered her for all the time she spent in the Temple, and all the trouble that seemed to follow her that so ingrained her image into their everyday work. When she arrived at the mess hall however, the group had already left. Several of the other patrons had seen them walk off down one of the opposite halls, and the mercenary wasted no time in following. Their presence was almost palpable. A sense of foreboding seemed to guide the Zeltron down the long and lonely halls that felt all too empty for a structure that was the headquarters for the whole of Clan Naga Sadow.

When Qyreia came to a long corridor that had only the path behind her as an exit, and the quartet to her front standing in an enclosed atrium, the curious circumstance seemed to answer for itself.

Ah Sithspit. It's a trap. Where's a Mon Cal when you need one?

"I knew I sensed something wrong," the one she knew as Surmack said from among the group. "I didn't think it'd be..."

His speech was promptly interrupted by a bolt of red energy, narrowly blocked by his freshly ignited lightsaber. "You kriffers and your exposition," Qyreia growled almost pleasantly, a wry grin creeping over her face as the other three of the party brought their own sabers to bear. "Why can't you ever just get to the fighting?!"

A torrent of fire surged from the muzzle of her gun, made all the more accurate as she took a knee to steady her aim. With four enemies to contend with though, it was little more than a delaying tactic. *What I'd give for a grenade right about now.* As her opponents gathered their bearings, several shots were sent back in her direction, forcing her to take cover among the decorative obsidian pillars that partitioned the bay windows that ran the length of the corridor. The stone singed and splintered in miniature explosions as the energy burst on contact, the dark shards threatening to fly into the mercenary's eyes if she wasn't careful.

What she lacked in sheer volume of fire, she made up for with deadly accuracy that, when placed appropriately, was difficult to redirect back at her while still endangering the target. There were still four of them, though. There was no way for her to keep *all* of them occupied. That was evident enough when one of them ripped a stone block from the fragile columns and sent it hurtling at her position of cover.

It was difficult to imagine something so large and heavy moving so fast, simply through the will of a single person. Had Qyreia not already been crouched low, the impact – which shattered the pillar in a storm of dusky debris – would have taken her head clean off, to say

nothing of the rest of her body. *Where the hell are you, Keira? I thought you were supposed to be helping me.* Another burst of fire staved off the enemy's advance, but it was clear that the mercenary had gone into this fight outmatched from the start, and without the advantage of terrain or range that she usually had. *Keira... I hope you can find me now.*

The quick-release always hurt. Even after years of practicing locking and unlocking her preternatural Zeltron abilities, it was always a relatively slow process to switch from one to the other. It took concentration and a steady mind to prevent a physical backlash. But time was not on Qyreia's side.

The scream was hardly muffled by the hand she had clasped to her mouth, her head pounding and guts wrenching so much she felt liable to vomit, while the coppery taste of blood pervaded on her tongue. The outburst, as much as the sudden tangible change in the atmosphere, seemed to give pause to her opponents; for a moment, at least. Swallowing back the nausea, the mercenary gasped for breath, trying to count how many she took to keep from forgetting that there were people still trying to kill her.

One... Two... Three...

"Well, isn't *this* a change," Surmack said from a distance that sounded way too close for comfort. "So you're this 'Red Qek' I keep hearing about: the Zeltron that suppresses her pheromones and all that other druk, just so she can 'fit in.' How cute." Qyreia was just about to turn to shoot when the human appeared overhead, saber ready to strike. "Peekaboo!"

It had little grace, but the lurching strike Qyreia made with her buttstock connected nicely enough with the Dark Jedi's groin to occupy his attention.

"What did I say about exposition?!" The mercenary followed up on her first strike with a vertical thrust, connecting solidly with the human's jaw, which sent him reeling back several meters. She was about to take advantage of the opening, blaster already tucked in the pit of her shoulder, only to be sent flying backward down the hall, bouncing several times on the unforgiving floor before crashing to a halt in a heap.

Ow. Still not fully recovered from her transition, everything hurt all the more after the tumble as she struggled to right herself. The carbine was several meters away, having flown from her hand on the second or third bounce, so she resorted to her pistol.

"You three go on ahead to the hangar," Surmack said, easily deflecting the shots aside. "I'll finish this and meet up with you."

The trio had just begun to file out, down the hall that they had all come from, only to have the first one that turned the corner sent flying backward into the thick transparisteel, culminating in a sickening *crack* when his neck broke on impact. The other two backed away quickly as Keira emerged from the intersection, her stylized Renatus' pale blue blade shimmering on the dark stone.

"Sorry I'm late dear. Traffic was *murder.*"

"I swear to god," Qyreia said with a smile she couldn't suppress, collecting her carbine in the pause that ensued, "if you waited around just to make that joke, I will *kill* you after this is all over."

The Seer returned the smile. “Had a hard time finding you until you did the thing... whatever you want to call it. Very clever.”

“Thanks. Helluva migraine now, though.”

“Enough of this useless chatter!” Surmack yelled, pointing his blade threateningly at Qyreia.

“Oh, *now* you don’t want to talk,” she chided jokingly. “Think fast, skippy!”

In well-practiced fashion, the mercenary brought her rifle to her shoulder and sent a controlled pair of bolts down the hall. The first, aimed directly for his chest, was easily deflected, while the second was easily sidestepped. What he didn’t anticipate was the Sokan adherent behind him, sweeping her saber around to return the projectile straight into his back.

“*You* were not the skippy,” Qyreia said as she limped forward toward Keira, who was keeping the remaining pair at bay. “*She* is my skippy.”

“So,” Keira said, her eyes glaring sternly at the two wary spies, “what do you want to do with these two?”

“Hm... Have them drop their weapons? Might be a good start.”

“You heard the lady. Drop them.” The Inquisitors hesitated, prompting the former Quaestor to persuade them with a not-so-gentle pressure on their throats. “I said *drop them*.” They promptly complied. “There. That wasn’t so hard.” Keira turned her head to the Zeltron. “You couldn’t handle *these* guys on your own?”

“There were *four* of them. Pardon me for not being a powerful space-wizard,” she said, waving her hands about as though casting some mysterious spell. “Now if’n you don’t mind, I’ve got some interrogatin’ to do.”

“Be my guest,” Keira obliged with a motion of her saber-wielding hand.

“Alright you punks! Who is your daddy and what does he do?” They looked at each other, confusion on their faces. “Okay, let’s try this: who sent you, and what’s his position in the Inquisitorius?” She looked to Keira, “Better?” The raven-head nodded. “Cool beans.”

“We won’t tell you anything, traitor,” one of the pair said. “Nothing you can do will pull the information from us.”

Qyreia’s expression tightened, as though scrutinizing the spies, before unexpectedly taking her blaster and obliterating the speaker’s groin. “I’ll have you know,” she said as he screamed in pain, “that I am *not* a very patient person. *Especially* when some lowlife thugs think they can come into *my house* and cause *trouble*. So we can do this the easy way, or we can do it the Red Qek way.”

“It’ll take more than that to break us, whore,” the female of the group said.

“Dear, do your *thing* and make the pain worse for this choob-licker.”

Keira eyed the Zeltron. “Come again?”

“...Please?”

“That’s better.”

Touching on the waves of the Force, the Seer broke into the vault of the wounded Inquisitor's mind, spinning a web within to fool his synapses turn his conscious mind into little more than an existence solely of agony. His screams curdled even Qyreia's vengeful blood, but she swallowed back any remorse she felt, reminding herself that these people had tried to hurt her adopted family; dysfunctional though they may be. Keira's expression remained stoic, though the Zeltron was unsure if it was because she took no pleasure in the act, or if it was because of the concentration required for the interrogation.

"Stop! We'll talk! We'll talk!"

"Start talking, *then* we'll stop," the mercenary said coldly. "I'm tired of playing these frackin' games with you goons." The screams from the partner intensified. "Better hurry. I think he's about to go into shock."

"Pravus! It was Pravus!"

"No. Really? The guy who ordered wholesale murder is sending spies to attack *more* Clans? Who would have guessed?" Qyreia fired into the female's leg for good measure. "Try again, *schutta*."

"Ventus!" That brought Keira back from her concentration, just enough to give the crotch-less spy a reprieve. "The Voice gives the orders, but Ventus disseminates everything."

More information that I already know. "And who does he disseminate it to? Names. Now."

"You don't scare me, *Zeltron*. I'd rather die than face the punishment waiting for traitors like *you*." She paused to look at Keira. "...And your little girlfriend here."

Kiera's grip loosened and the female broke free, but not with enough time to react to the mercenary who dropped her rifle with a clatter, drawing her knife in one swift motion to bring it to the Inquisitor's neck. The human shuddered at the steely gray-blue eyes, the steel biting into her throat.

"It's a stupid thing to threaten *me*, but *no one* threatens my family."

The red woman gripped the human tightly as she slid the knife across, the resulting gore darkening her clothes to a hue that surpassed her skin tone. Keira just barely maintained the hold on the male who hovered just off the ground, feverishly afraid of what fate awaited him.

Qyreia was not a particularly skilled interrogator; she knew this well enough. Diminutive stature and musculature did nothing for her generally happy features when it came time to intimidate someone. Actions speak louder than words, as the saying goes, and she was nothing if not persistent with her actions. It took some time, but the secluded hall was apparently the perfect place for activities such as the mercenary's method of information gathering. After a certain point, Keira's invisible hold was not even necessary to keep the hostile Force user in check. That he would not survive the process became obvious after a time, and the Zeltron's cold methodology did nothing to ease the passing.

At least she came away with a handful of names. That much the former Black Guard was thankful for. When she finally finished her task, the look she saw on Keira's face was one of pity; sorrowful, horrified pity. A knot formed in Qyreia's gut as she walked away, covered in blood, trying not to linger on the expression.

Qyreia Arronen, #14369

“Now you know why I drank so much,” she said quietly as she collected her weapons.
“I’ve gotta go tell the Summit what’s going on. I’ll meet you back at the hangar.”

“Qyreia...”

“Please... Just this once, do as I say.” *I can’t stand to see that look in your eyes.*