

*A Shadow of War*

It felt good to sleep in for a change. Working with and for her father had its benefits, providing plenty of amusement and opportunity to get out of the house, but Keira still felt the need for a modicum of stability. *Besides*, she thought as she rolled over in bed, *I need my dose of Qek every so often*. Blissful images and memories passed through her mind, enjoying the dreamlike feeling as she became ever more entangled in the cool, comfortable sheets. It was curious that her lover hadn't returned home yet, though. She'd even left a message on the mercenary's comm nearly an hour ago and, given how long Keira had been away, she had assumed that Qyreia would be *running* home. There wasn't even a reply. Between the sounds of the bedding against her ears and the background music, she might have blamed the noise on not hearing any sort of notification *ping*, but Keira had been checking the screen every fifteen to twenty minutes in expectation.

Her lips pursed as the reminder of her frustration crawled back into the fore of her thoughts. Sure, the Force user had returned not long after the Zeltron had left for work, but it was well into what was normally their dinner time. With a flick of her finger, she deactivated the music player to get some quiet and clear her head. Yet when the player should have turned off, the music only seemed to change to a different song.

It also sounded significantly more dramatic.

Also it was coming from beyond the bedroom door.

There wasn't anyone on the Citadel Keira knew that would be bold enough to come into their apartment uninvited — the Zeltron was surprisingly territorial, and between her blasters and iron shin, even the bold ones tended to shy away. Her father was an exception, but his apathy was already acutely noted in the annals of her relationship with the current Aedile of House Galeres. *Funny*, she thought as she cracked the door for a peek into the living room. *I was a Quaestor when we started dating. Now she's the one in charge of people.*

Unsurprisingly, sitting in the glow of the holoprojector was her beloved; her Red Qek. What did surprise her, however, was the amalgam of weapons parts scattered across the small table in front of the sofa. Between her Umbaran vision and the light of the holoshow, Keira could make out a stern, determined look on her lover's usually smiling face. While she couldn't make out the program from where she stood, it sounded like some sort of war documentary.

Horror movies, sure. Sometimes they even watched romantic comedies. Documentaries though? Keira slipped through the door, hardly making a sound as she approached the rigidly concentrating Zeltron. If Qyreia noticed her, she didn't so much as bat an eyelash as her hands worked over the machinery of her stripped weapons.

"Hey," Keira said quietly.

"Hey." The red woman's eyes never left her scrutinous work. Her silence was unsettling.

"Odd time to do maintenance isn't it?" the Force user half-cooed, trying to coax the Zeltron into some bedroom hijinks with some visual cues. It didn't stick.

"Needed doing and you were asleep."

"How did you know I was asleep? Or even here?"

"Door was closed," Qyreia said, staring at what looked like a splotch on the metal. "It's never closed unless we have company or one of us is sleeping, and I didn't see Kordath wandering around anywhere."

"I... huh. Never thought of that." Keira's attention returned to the intense glare in her lover's eyes. "What's wrong?"

A long sigh passed from the mercenary's nostrils. "In case you haven't noticed, there's a whole lot of bantha druk going on. Not even Atty can really explain it."

"You mean Pravus' disappearance?"

Qyreia's eyes rolled dramatically as she fidgeted with a power inlet port. "Tip of the iceberg. Inquisitorius pulled off the frontlines, folks trying to bash in each other's skulls... all that targeted hate we had for the Iron Throne has turned to anyone and anything around everyone's general vicinity."

What the Galerian Aedile didn't mention was how much pressure she was feeling from the whole ordeal. Arcona's military was a wreck after its recent internal struggles, and rather than being *the* person to get things in working order, Qyreia was demoted from her job as Quaestor and given over to inane scouting missions. Meanwhile, it seemed everyone other than her was getting some sort of input on the rebuilding of the Shadow Clan's armies. *Don't ask the one gal around here that knows how to actually use a blaster. Nooo. Leave it to the gaggle of frackin' space wizards.*

It hadn't stopped the mercenary from collecting every ounce of intel that she could on units, strengths, and staging locations. As a former smuggler, she knew where to put a ship down to avoid trouble, and where to stage one to bring the hurt. She knew how to use a blaster at range and as a club better than many of the Force users could manage with their lightsabers. Arcona's troopers wouldn't be super soldiers or have the Force to draw from: they would have their bodies, armor, and weapons.

If Qyreia was going to try and lead these folk, she had to be ready herself.

"Q," Keira said quietly, bringing the Zeltron from her mental torment, "come to bed. Please."

She sighed, wanting to tell her girlfriend that what she was trying to do was more important, but that wasn't right. Her rifle, Selen, Arcona, and the Brotherhood would still be around tomorrow. "Two minutes to wipe off the oil and put 'er back together?"

Keira squinted tersely at the Zeltron. She raised her hand and the pieces of the rifle floated into the air — turning, locking, and snapping together smoothly — until the weapon settled gently to the table, fully assembled. "Done. Now... you were saying?"

Qyreia grinned, defeated. "Fine, fine. You win." She wrapped her arm over Keira's shoulder as they walked toward the bedroom. "I'm gonna *wreck* you in here, though."

"I can't wait."