

Life Day Came Early

By:

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[Editor's Version](#)

They drifted silently through the void space between stars.

The engines were cool, the thrusters unlit. Only momentum moved them now, and only basic thrust would be activated in small bursts to steer or slow them. Though they'd have preferred a more careful approach using Arx and Arx Minor's gravitational fields, there wasn't time during an active engagement, and their target was mobile. Instead, they made their initial approach coming up on the underside of the *Ocaejar* and drifting the rest of the way through what was an active naval battle as stealthily as possible. Their communications had been silent since they departed the hangar of the *Will of our Lady*, all their systems powered down save for life support and navigation.

All that energy seemed to have gone to their nerves instead, leaping like livewires, uneasy without their few cannons armed and only light armoring, knowing at any moment a stray bolt or a directly aimed hit would blow them to pieces if they were sighted. Radar-jamming was well and good, and they had a smaller profile in the gunship than in a larger freighter, but that didn't mean they were invisible even with the paint job, and the amount of live fire around the atmosphere was objectively insane. Ruka even doubted how well turning almost all the systems off in the ship would work, but kept mostly quiet while the controls were in the Zeltron mercenary's hands.

Even knowing how skilled a pilot she was, it was still close to a suicide run. But the mission was worth it, necessary, and they'd accepted with a mixture of grim determination and acidic spite, especially given their choice in partner.

"What in the Hutt frackin' hell possessed you to get a tug like this?" Qyreia said quietly, as though the sound might travel through the void of space. "Can you even fly?"

"I can fly enough," commented the Mirialan back, tone nettled. He arched one thick eyebrow. "It's got guns, it can carry a couple people if I'm goin' for a rescue, that's all I need. Why get more? Wasteful, ay."

What's wasteful is not having shields on this thing. She kept that particular thought to herself though. "Does she even have a name? Forgot to ask. Might be important when we head back."

"It...is a ship?" he asked, sounding more unsure now. "Does it need a name?"

Qyreia's flat expression bespoke her disgust. "Oh. my. god." She turned her eyes toward the growing shadow of metal in front of them. "I think we both need some quiet time after what you just said."

Ruka rolled his own eyes. "You are so dramatic. If it really makes you feel better, *crovja*, you can name it." But he did lapse into quiet again, both of them staring out at their target.

They hadn't known each other that long, but Qyreia Arronen and Ruka Tenbriss Ya-ir trusted each other. Their friendship was a completely unlikely one formed under absolutely absurd circumstances and misunderstandings, but it was one forged in fire, and they'd only grown closer through stumbles and falls since their meeting. If Qyreia was going into danger, Ruka swore to follow. If Ruka was coming loose at the seams, Qyreia would help him pick the pieces back up.

In this place, both might be necessary.

"Just a liiittle more," she nearly cooed, as though coaxing the ship by force of will rather than the miniscule thruster bursts.

Behind her seat in the pilot's chair, Ruka whispered a few strings of Mirialan, sounding an awful lot like prayers. With no inertial dampeners, and their nerves fully on edge, each tap of the thrusters felt far more jarring than it actually was. There was plenty of traffic around them to mask the miniscule energy bursts though, and soon the vague circular shape of a docking ring came into view; the kind used for when the hangars were on fire but people still needed to get on board. Or if there was no artificial gravity to *land* the ship on its struts. Or in this case, if the Inquisitorius just happened to have collected a frack-ton of intel on the massive ship and the possible infiltration points. The maintenance hatch was their ticket in, and saved them having to lay waste to a populated hangar.

"This is gonna feel a *little* rough," she warned as the ship got closer and closer.

"I'm braced," replied the Sith, and he was, feet planted and hanging onto a handle strap, the Force steady in his bones. "Impress me."

Without any warning to the Mirialan, a twitch on the yoke swung the ship to the side like a drifting speeder, making it seem like they were going to slam into the *Ocaejar's* hull. Technically speaking, they did. A jarring metal-on-metal sound clanged through the hull and the ship's atmosphere, matching the violent shudder that shook the two near-humans. Another sound melded with that of the collision though: a thick mechanical clicking noise, like large buckles

locking into place. Looking over the Zeltron's shoulder, Ruka could see it on the display. They were docked.

Qyreia's fingers danced over the dashboard keypad. "Aaand feed in the security codes... We're good. Ship thinks we're a maintenance tug." She sighed. "Never thought I'd be thanking the Inqs for something."

"They're just people too, y'know," Ruka commented, releasing his hand-hold to instead move for the bay of the ship and gather their equipment. "Sides don't mean much."

"Yeah, well," she groaned as she got out of her seat and squeezed past him to grab her rifle, "I still remember when they were *the* guys to go to for genocide in the Brotherhood."

"And now these guys," his chin jerked towards the ship hull they'd docked against, "are. Always the same— gangs, armies, whatever. Somebody's killing today, somebody's helping tomorrow. It's all just bad, so best we just do what we can to make it better in the moment, ay?" He touched each blade on him, checking they were secure, shouldered a pack. "And today...that's us probably murdering Ordam."

"Aren't you supposed to be in the *Lotus*?" she asked, a scathing bite in the background of her voice as she approached the locked hatch.

"I *am*," he snapped back, and looked over at her before either of them engaged the hatch release. "And that means protecting people who need it however I have to— Inquisitorial included. Remind me to tell you sometime how Satsi kicked my face in for benching her and saving one of their Listener ships. Now, we good?"

Qyreia muttered a quiet string of mocking mimicry before acquiescing with a resigned, "Yeah." Her hand touched the door controls and it opened to a dark tunnel of a gangway, dim red light offering just enough illumination to make out the details of the surfaces, but only up close. Rifle at her shoulder, muzzle dipped just low enough to not impede her vision, the merc led the way, her Mirialan friend close behind.

For such a large ship, the maintenance tunnel seemed fairly quiet. Not that the *Ocaejar* was in the thick of the fighting. It was a flagship, deadly in its own right, but was busy coordinating the fighting of all the other fleets and squadrons, to say nothing of the landing efforts against *Nesolat* Station and even the surface of Arx itself. Maintenance wasn't really needed when there's no damage to repair yet. *Yet*. They both wanted a certain amount of payback for past grievances. Ruka especially seemed to hate this Ghafa person. Qyreia mostly just wanted to knock out another Collective cruiser and bring the war closer to an end. Not that the Collective seemed to be any nearer to running out of war materiel.

"This way," Qyreia whispered, motioning with a nod down a tunnel that led deeper into the ship. It was also when she took her flight suit's helmet and locked it down over her head, the scars of the Nesolat fight still fresh in the hard material.

As their intelligence had suggested, the dock they had entered emptied into a section of the ship currently devoid of a sentient workforce. The modified Dreadnought-class heavy cruiser was largely automated, and many sections wouldn't be regularly manned save for patrols and various other interactions from the crew. They just had little idea which sections those would be.

"Bogan willing, it'll stay quiet," Ruka murmured, his violet eyes flashing this way and that, zeroing in on every detail of their surroundings, searching for any threats his senses couldn't catch. They were in a hangar, but it seemed to be one meant to refit or scrap damaged ships more than a launchbay for fighters.

"Don't count on it. Still got a couple thousand crew, and room for a frackton of 'cargo.'" The way her voice wrapped snidely around the word and the look the Mirialan shot her in reply communicated exactly what they both thought of that prospect. It was the Collective. There wouldn't be any cargo on this ship, just inevitably more zealous, heavily modified troops armed to the teeth and eager to sacrifice themselves just to kill someone for Oligard's ideals. Whether or not that someone was even under the Brotherhood banner was an excuse at best.

They would encounter enemy contacts. That was a given. How badly it went for them, though, was not.

They set out, sticking to the edges of the hangar and slipping in and out of the shadows of metal maintenance arms and ship struts rather than brave the open.

Something clanked nearby. Ruka whirled in a blur, and then a large, wicked amethyst kukri was embedded in the body of a small, round, flat black droid. The little thing issued a few staticy beeps and chirps that twisted up into unfocused, low drones, like a record winding down. A few more sparks shot from its circuits before it chittered and stilled, silent. They both stared at it a moment before the Zeltron snickered behind her helmet, then turned it into a coo.

"Aww, you didn't have to kill the little vacuum..."

Ruka shot a flat look her way. "It's a droid. It's not alive."

"He cried when he died. Begged for his life *and* called you a murderer."

The Mirialan rolled his eyes. "Oh no," he droned as he yanked the blade free from the droid's chassis with a quick summoning gesture. "How terrible."

Qyreia was on a roll now though, making up a sad backstory. "He had a wife and two children."

"Oh yeah? What were their names?"

"Uh— droid...wife. And droid kids."

"You gonna tell stories you gotta do better than that. And work on your voices. Kids love when you do voices."

"Frack off." She thought quickly as they rounded a corner, sweeping to check one side then the other, back to back, before proceeding out. "The wife's name was Lucinda. She ran a cleaning service with her husband. Get it? Because cleaning droids? Their son, Huahn, had dreams of being a landscaper. Their daughter is still too young: operating system is being updated. Now they'll never be able to pay off the upgrade."

"That's the plot of *The Secret of Skygarden*. We literally just watched that last month."

"Noooo, that was a new one. Made it up just now," she said almost dejectedly.

"Fine, fine..." he grumbled at her. "I did landscaping, you know. And cleaning. Work was work..."

"I know a little blueboi that probably likes how you clean knobs," she chuckled, miming a horizontal motion with her fist. It was made even more ridiculous an attempt by the TIE pilot helmet she wore.

Ruka snorted. "Maybe he does. I'm not telling though, so quit trying."

"I'm okay without you telling. Most of what you two do is outside my zone anyway."

They were a few turns clear of the bay then, checking each corner or room they passed and finding them empty, but the quiescence wasn't to last. Indeed, they quickly came upon a troop patrol doing a sweep of the very level they were on. The Mirialan gave a little hiss, and the mercenary tapped his arm, jerked her chin back in the direction they'd come. All humor gone, Ruka nodded, and they rapidly retreated on light feet, back to the automated launch bay. There was no telling how many people were ahead of them that might hear a skirmish, but the hangar had been empty and spacious with clutter; it would be a good staging ground.

They found a spot to hide and waited, ears pricked for the sounds of marching steps drawing closer. The gaggle of Ghafa's troops came into view, framed by blast doors, before moving in, their rifles pointed at the flooring as they made meandering sweeps. Rather than aim her own weapon, Qyreia looked to Ruka, met his gaze and his short three-fingered affirmative signal, and watched him as he crept forward. They'd generally agreed on a tentative plan on the journey over: that they would infiltrate as far as they could as quietly as they could until either

they reached their objective or things got louder. That meant lightsabers and blaster carbines both staying holstered.

Ruka was quick about it. As the four-man unit passed by where they were crouching behind some welding machinery, having spotted the wrecked droid out in the open, he struck. His hands lifted, flicked around, and with the motion came two loud, cartilage-ripping *cracks* as the heads of the two soldiers in the rear spun around at unnatural angles. The sound startled their brethren to turning, but already the Mirialan had gestured the same way in reverse, and already their necks were snapping too. The bodies went limp, though they did not drop in a clatter of armor and weapons and dead weight. They hung suspended just slightly, as if floating on a current, before they were carefully spirited across the hangar and over to where the partners hid, being set down gently behind all the crates.

"Okay, I've got a Force user for a fiancée, and that was still just a little bit creepy."

"It's quick. No mercy, right?" he murmured, idly lifting the droid's broken carapace as well and adding it to the pile of corpses hidden from immediate view. "Or did you want me to electrocute 'em?"

Qyreia huffed quietly. "I dunno. Collective are assholes, but I prefer to be better than them. Let's just find out where this Ghafa schutta is and go."

But Ruka didn't move yet. His jaw had clenched at her comment, and he asked, quiet but tight, "And you think I'm as bad?"

"I dunno, man!" she hissed impatiently, eyes darting away from Ruka periodically to see if they'd been spotted yet. "I just saw you karkin' *hang* a buncha dudes on invisible nooses and then float 'em off to the side like some horror sideshow! Sorry I find that creepy!"

He merely grunted at her, then uncurled from his crouch to prowl back out of the repair bay, taking point this time. A quick check both ways down the hall, and he gave a little wave to show they could proceed again. The Zeltron followed his cue, if warily. It seemed to her that Ruka had a chip on his shoulder with the Collective. Moreso than she did, at any rate; and it worried her that he might choose the path of conflict when a gentler touch was needed.

"You got a plan here, Ru, or are we just gonna wander until we find her?"

"I figure there are a few places she's more likely to be than not," the Mirialan whispered to her as they prowled down the corridor, moving quickly but cautiously. He seemed to be following the markers on the wall indicating the maintenance access tubes rather than for the turbolifts. "The bridge, if we're unlucky, always a good bet, right? Since she's commanding this thing. Or the captain's quarters. That intel they gave us makes me think she's not exactly out and about with the troops."

Violet eyes looked to her, a clear question with brows raised, his expression actually visible without a helm of any kind.

"I vote her quarters. I'd rather not make the bridge the first stop on this adventure."

Ruka nodded, then turned for the utility tunnel, still watching every corner, before pausing to open the hatch. He ducked his head in, looking for any other occupants, before climbing up.

Qyreia looked around nervously, waiting impatiently as the Mirialan steadily ascended. "Hurry up, Ru. Who knows when the next buncha crew will swing by."

"I'm going," the man said, and began an ascent at somewhat dangerous speed.

His haste made the Zeltron grin, if only worriedly, as she was finally able to sling her rifle and start climbing. The tight confines made movement just as slow as Ruka had made it out to be, and it seemed ages before they were both on the next level up, their breathing claustrophobically labored. No sooner was the merc standing upright again than her eyes met the Mirialan's, a blatant *'I told you so'* evident in his grin.

"Shuddup," she whispered.

"I didn't say anything."

"Yeah, well you were thinking it real loud."

She opened the access door, only for a shocked silence to overtake them as the group of deckhands on the other side noticed the noticeably not-Collective-uniformed red and green pair. A quip passed through Qyreia's head momentarily while her reflexes did the talking for her, tilting the muzzle of her gun up and unloading into the crew as she instinctively took cover. Beyond the doorway and the resonating loud echo of blaster fire, they could hear the calls of reinforcements and the tromp of their heavy booted feet.

"Well there goes the element of surprise," Ruka yelled, halted momentarily from invisibly hurling the whole group by a flurry of energy pops and explosions on the other side of his particular bulkhead.

The Zeltron unleashed another burst before taking cover from the counterfire. "Less smug, more space magic!"

"Oh, *now* you want me to wave my hands and fix your problems."

"I *could* point out that if you were *paying attention*," she yelled amidst the fighting while he conversed, comparatively unperturbed, "you might've *sensed* the assholes were on the other side of the *door*!"

"How many times do I have to tell you that my senses ain't that good!" he shot back, drawing his lightsaber at last. "Once there's danger, though..." The blue blade ignited. "Stay low!"

Then he threw himself out the hatch in the heartbeat between one salvo and another, moving like something straight out of a holo. He twisted, leapt, and lunged with preternatural speed, a blur in grays and greens, a streak of plasma, moving to some unheard battle-song. They couldn't even touch him. He was in one place then the next as if he could tell exactly what was going to happen, where the best shot would go. It only took a couple breaths for the Collective crewmen to drop in various pieces, neatly severed by a weapon of light.

That speed, however, didn't undo the fact that they'd been discovered. One severed arm still held a communicator crackling with voices calling for details, relaying that backup was coming. Ruka picked it up and tossed it to Qyreia as she climbed out to join him, stepping around bodies.

"We might be a little in trouble."

"You think?" she scathed, but not meanly. The utilidors would be out of the question now. Too easy to get pinned in them. The turbolifts would be just as bad for a killing chamber.

"You think?" she scathed, but not meanly. The utilidors would be out of the question now. Too easy to get pinned in them. The turbolifts would be just as bad for a killing chamber. They picked a direction and barreled that way, looking for any other promising access points.

Instead, they found a *lot* more Collective. The firing and ducking and running started awfully quick.

"Aww, a welcoming party, just for us! Frackin' fantastic."

"What, you don't appreciate their hospitality? Where's the mess? We can grab snacks, have a chat, catch up a little."

"Oh, yeah. So how's the genocide? Good, good. And your mom? She seemed pretty great when she left my place last night."

Ruka snorted, though it cut off as he flipped head over feet to dodge a shot and landed, punching his fist outward. The telekinetic hammer bowled several troopers over, giving them enough of a break to scramble across the corridor and slide around the opposite wall for cover. Qyreia fired off a few more. Ruka took an ammunition kit out of his backpack. She lifted her

brows. The Mirialan didn't use blasters, had never fired a gun at all— which showed. "I haven't fired nearly enough to need a recharge yet," she told him, a little bemused. "And I have my own packs. Been doing this awhile, you know."

"Oh, right. Gotcha." He stored the pack again, somewhat awkward, but she gave a brief, strained grin since he'd clearly had her in mind. She fired a few more shots to drop a few more cyborg zealots while he whirled into the open and dropped a bubble of blackness over the hallway, covering them to advance again.

They moved one after the other, almost leapfrogging. Down two more corridors and past another intersection, listening to boots pounding behind and ahead of them. As they burst into the open space before a turbolift entrance, Ruka shouted and yanked Qyreia into his hold, just in time for a bolt that would have dropped her to graze his arm. The Lotus-emblazoned armor smoked, melting a little at the edges where the shot had sliced through.

"Feck! You good?!" the Zeltron barked at him, shoving them down to crouch more against one wall.

"Be fine," Ruka replied, focusing down one direction as the footsteps grew immediately close. Their backs pressed together, each of them prepared to defend their front. As soon as their enemies came into view, the mercenary's rifle was singing, and so was the Force in the Sith's grasp.

"So," Qyreia said over the din, sighting, aiming, pulling the trigger, "how're the kids?"

"Seriously?"

"Didn't get to ask earlier."

"Fine," Ruka snapped, then huffed. "Actually. Been better. Leda wants to ask a boy out." His hand jerked, back and forth, and a group of six armed and armored men in front of them lifted and *slammed* into one wall with a meaty *crunch*. Then into the opposite wall. Then back again. And again, and again.

They dropped to the floor at angles that suggested powdered bones. Red and whitish gray smeared the durasteel.

"So? Isn't that good? I'm picking up on some frustration here."

He huffed again. "No! It's not— I mean, yes, of course, but— it's new, okay? I'm freaking out about it, leave me alone."

"I think you're overreacting here..."

"Oh, I'm sorry, do you have kids yet? No? Still haven't gotten married after a year? Yeah okay."

"Hey, SCHUTTA, on your left!"

"I KNOW."

Another armed Collective goon met the ceiling with his teeth. Qyreia whipped a glare over before her eye was back on her crosshairs through the scope.

"Schutta, I will put a ring on when I am DAMN WELL good and ready! And Shay is NOT at an age where she can date!" If possible, even her shooting sounded angry, rifle ripping out a rapid report as high-impact bolts exploded their chest cavities at closer range than intended.

"Yeah well I don't get to be *ready* about this! If I tell her no, I'm the bad guy, but if I encourage it..."

"What? Are you afraid of her growing up? You gotta let go sometime, schutta."

"No, I'm afraid of her getting *HURT*," he snarled, voice distorting with some supernatural rage as lightning lanced from his fingertips on one hand, a storm striking a small group, the stench of burnt meat filling the enclosed space. His other hand again sent necks snapping with invisible hands. "What if some little franger sticks his hand under her skirt and finds something he ain't expecting and beats her bloody for it?"

"That's for her to decide how to handle." There was a brief and very sudden hush as they were left to a reprieve at the intersection, this wave of opposition ended. The stolen communicator on her hip told them exactly how long that lull would last. She decided it was long enough for a little reality check. "But getting hurt is part of love. Not that sex should be part of her repertoire just yet. How old is she? Thirteen? Teach her to communicate. Less surprises, less pain."

They both put their backs against a wall, breathing hard. "I'm not sayin' it SHOULD be yet unless she wants it to be, she knows her stuff by now, but— you and me *both* know no doesn't always mean no. I thought you'd, I dunno, get where I'm coming from here."

"Dude, you can't just equate her getting into dating age with 'she's gonna get raped.'"

He groaned, about to comment, but then twitched. "Down, *now*!" he barked, and they dropped to the floor as golden bolts burst through the wall they'd been against. "Holy kriff—!"

They both looked up. Down the hallway, a small, tight formation of frighteningly armored troopers were marching towards them, carbines in hand, grenades on their belts. They moved

with a terrible and eerie synchronicity, and they were alone, no other Collective goons from the various factions with them.

Ruka's instincts absolutely screamed, and the Force wailed with them.

"*Crovja, run!*" he hissed, voice gone so utterly cold and urgent, an undercurrent of real fear there that the empathic Zeltron could taste on her own tongue, feel shiver under her skin. For once she didn't protest. She just scrambled up and started sprinting, Ruka hot on her heels; she knew he could overtake her easily, so he had to be staying there to cover her.

Golden bolts sailed over them with pinpoint precision. Qyreia yelped when one singed her cheek through her helmet, millimeters from drilling through her skull. She heard the snicking, snapping hiss of a lightsaber trying to catch the shots, heard the pained noises that indicated failure, but still they ran.

Turned a corner. Nearly slammed full-tilt right into another quartet of the supersoldiers.

Ruka snagged her around the waist, dropped to the floor, and slammed his fist into the plating. A rip tide of the Force blew outwards with them at its epicenter, tossing the marines like windblown leaves in a hurricane. He exhaled hard, a gasp, and the Zeltron knew that even he was reaching his limits. How hurt was he?

Her head whipped about, and she spotted another about-ship tunnel hatch. Dangerous or no, it had to do. They had to get away.

The mercenary shouldered her rifle and shoved her friend forward, ordering, "Come on!" She ignored for the moment when her gloves came away from him bloody. Ruka staggered upright, sweating but grimly on his feet, and scrambled in. She followed, closing the hatch behind them.

They only went up one floor before Qyreia stopped Ruka and shoved them both out. A cursory glance about and she ducked into the nearest room, shutting them in and praying the Mirialan hadn't left a splatter trail, that their pursuers wouldn't check so close to their last location. She yanked off her helmet and gloves and pulled out her little medpac.

"Let me see," the Zeltron demanded, sticking a hypospray between her teeth while she drew out a large, bacta-primed adhesive bandage, the press-and-go sort. "We g'tta getchuu 'atched up n' go."

Miracle of miracles, he didn't argue with her. The Mirialan unclasped his cloak, peppered with holes despite the armorweave, and rapidly started undoing the locks on his pauldrons and chestplate. He offered her his expansively tattooed back once it was bared, and she swore to see the multitude of burns and blasterholes; at least only one was through-and-through, lower

on his side, at the ribs, dangerously near to a heart-shot. What the hell kind of freaks were those soldiers?

She went to inject the hypo, and he shrugged away with a hurt noise. "Don't. Can't be slowed or nothin'. I can manage the pain. Just— I'm bleeding."

"I got it," the woman assured, grimacing but setting aside the syringe. She put one patch over the hole in his back and one over the exit wound on his torso. A bit of topical spray went over the rest of the burns and over her own facial wound. The mercenary repacked and stored the kit again, then helped her friend back into his gear and pulled her helmet back on.

"Good?"

"Fine. Let's go."

Almost as soon as they were out of danger, they were right back in it. *Hive Mind Marines*. That's what they'd discovered the ultra-coordinated Collective troops were called after Arcona and other Brotherhood teams had pieced together whatever remnants they could of the exploded bodies. That they blew up on death was a double-edged sword in combat, but it was definitely bad for intel collection. Qyreia muttered as much to the Mirialan as they took a position further along to better engage the things before descending back down to the previous level.

"How're we supposed to fight them if they're that good?"

"Do the thing," Qyreia said with a crushing hand wave, "with the floating and the smashing. They're good in conventional tactics, but don't know *anyone* that can just stop that telekinesis karkery."

Ruka's flat expression was thickly tinged with amused intrigue. "Well okay then."

"I'll distract them. It's not gonna be pretty, but it'll get you line of sight." The Zeltron hopped a little in place, rolling her shoulders as they heard the group's footsteps get closer. "Ready?"

"Ready."

In a flash, the merc dashed back into the hall, unleashing an automatic fusillade at the marines who instantly took cover, their synched situational awareness saving them precious milliseconds of reaction time. The maneuver didn't go unanswered and more flashes of gold energized gas streaked through the air and pelted at the wall that Qyreia hid behind, screaming profanity at them and firing blindly. In any other scenario, Ruka might have thought her desperately in trouble. But knowing her let him see the over-the-topishness of her performance. He allowed himself a smirk just as she nodded to him, still blind-firing, to signal his move.

His move was one that was as easy as putting a lightsaber through butter. Or most anything else, for that matter. Bending the Force to his will to pick things up and toss them around took hardly a second thought, and with the Collective elites firing away at the Zeltron, he was left with ample opportunity to display it. He focused momentarily, picking out with his mind's eye one of the marines in the center of the formation, before turning the corner just enough to see everything with his own eyes, motioning with his hand to lift the unfortunate soldier just off the ground.

The Collectivite, with all its equipment and implants, made for a fantastic wrecking ball as he swung the body left and right, smashing it up and down like a toddler with a stuffed animal. That freed up Qyreia to come out from cover enough to see what was happening.

"Hold him there!" she barked.

Ruka complied, holding the marine aloft in the center of the hall while the others hurriedly recovered. The Arconan merc was faster on the trigger, shooting not only the floating body, but also those still half-prostrate. *Cover.* The thought rippled through his mind as a reminder just as the Zeltron ducked behind her position again. He dropped his invisible hold and wheeled back as well, just in time for a chain of explosions to surge through the confines of the ship passageway. One explosion after another in quick succession pounded their ears, setting a tempo and count that, by the end, accounted for the whole squad.

From the other end, a small team of reinforcements burst through a blast door, only to see the devastation. Qyreia and Ruka saw, and looked at each other in the pause.

"Leave one for questions."

Ruka grinned again. "You got it."



"He's not talking," Ruka growled, halfway to ending the Collectivite simply to tie up the loose end. "I've tried everything."

Qyreia pursed her lips in thought for a moment, sighed, and bent down to pull the knife from her boot. "Gimme... five or ten minutes." The Force User's *'What the frack'* expression said it all. "You want the information or no?"

"Do it."

"Alright buddy," she said, crouching over the soldier, "I know you wanna keep quiet for the cause and all, but I don't have time to search this whole ship for one person."

"...The frang?"

"Yeah... you should probably leave for this part." Ruka lingered, hesitated, drawing her attention. "Or would you like to watch?"

That brought him to his senses. "No. Nope, I'm good."

Ruka stepped out, letting the corridor hatch hiss shut behind him. There was a little window inset into the door, and he contemplated watching, but something told him he shouldn't. Qyreia was far too confident in what she'd said; like she'd done this before. Even in the faceless, impersonal pilot suit, she was still not exactly an imposing figure, and her well-worn feminine voice was not one that chilled the bone. The more Ruka thought about it, the more he realized that she wasn't playing. She was serious, and this was how she got others to take *her* seriously: at knifepoint.

Mulling over the various repercussions and newly discovered nuances of his friend seemed to blur time, surprising him when the door opened with a hiss sooner than he thought. Behind her, he could see the Human passed out on the floor, sweat still shining on his forehead.

"I got the thing."

"What did you *say* to him?"

She shrugged. "Told him he had the choice of talking," she hefted her knife, "or have this pointy thing slowly driven through his testicles."

The Mirialan blanched, wincing. "Okay, I'm just gonna... stand over *here* not next to you."

"I didn't *actually* cut them off!"

"That doesn't make it better! You can still *feel* it." The Sith looked like he was struggling mightily not to cup between his legs as if to shield himself.

"Well next time *you* can use your space magic to get us information."

That comment made him uncurl, back and shoulders gone rigid instead. "Thought my 'magic' made me a monster like them."

"Holy frackwaffles, is *that* what you're upset about?"

"I'm *upset*," he hissed, low, "that we're stuck in another war with these people, that this *scum* we're after laid hands on the man I love, that I can't protect *anyone*... that my friend thinks so little of me is far down my list right now. We can talk about it later if we survive. Just get us to Ordam."

Qyreia's eyes blinked. Then again. And a third time. "Oh hell no," she said, shoving him against the wall, nominally out of sight even in their maintenance access tunnel. "I do not have the time, patience, or crayons to explain to you why we don't have time for your existential crisis right now; and all because I thought a bunch of dudes floating by their broken necks was creepy! Ruka! Get your poodoo together! Get it all up, roll it up in a ball, and get your poodoo together. Put it in a backpack. I don't care! Just get your poodoo together."

He pushed her away, not hard, but hard enough. "What did I just say? Ghafa. Ordam." The look on his face suggested he had more to say but was swallowing it. "Which way?"

"The same way everyone else gets what they want," she said, simmering, stepping back into his bubble. "Try asking again."

The Mirialan let out a fierce string of his native tongue. "*Cceeqa*! You tell me to get my sithspit together then want me to say *please*? Are you out of your godsdamned min—" He dragged a hand down his face, cutting off his own exclamation and its increasing volume with a frantic glance about. "*Qyreia, let's go. Please.*"

"What I *want*," her voice dropped low, even soothing, "is for you to think less with your *heart*, and more with your *head*. 'Cause if you think you are right now, I can tell you that you very much *aren't*." Hesitantly, she put a hand on his shoulder, squeezing. "This schutta's supposed to be smart. Real smart. So we need our heads level if we're gonna beat her. Okay?"

"I know," he hissed back, clenching his eyes shut when she touched him, briefly hiding the war of flickering gold in his irises. "I know," he repeated, and took a few measured breaths. "I'm sorry. Okay. Let's go. I'll keep it together."

"I trust you to," Qyreia insisted with a last pat, and hoped it was enough to ground him. He eased off the wall, a slight wince making her remember his battered back and feel a little bad for the shoving, but he seemed to be determined, so she didn't comment. They took a quick stock of their weaponry and position, and, bearing in mind what her interogee had admitted, the Zeltron took the lead. He hadn't known exactly where Ghafa was, or even too much about the hotspots she regularly visited on her ship—turned out the Nautolan was the secretive sort that didn't particularly give much credence to those she commanded beyond their usefulness as pawns, nevermind socialize or broadcast her patterns. He had known, however, the location of the commander's quarters and at least a way there. It was still their best bet.

As it turned out, Ghafa Ordam was in her private space when they came upon her, having fought through or dodged around more troops. As it also turned out, she was prepared for anything, even being caught with her metaphorical pants down, and already had a muzzle trained on them before they'd even fully stepped in her door.

"Did you sincerely presume this would accomplish anything?" scathed her watery, imperious tones. Her unlidged, unblinking crimson eyes watched them, predatory and disturbing. Qyriea focused on a point just over the other woman's shoulder, wary of being shot. Maybe she was the sort of person that liked to talk all about themselves.

Or maybe she just liked to shoot—

The mercenary swore when only the quick lighting of a lightsaber blocked a shot. It disappeared just as quickly, and the Nautolan spat.

"Force-using filth—"

Ghafa lifted her gun again.

Her limbs locked up, slammed down to her sides as if caught in a vice. The sudden movement snapped her turned arm at the elbow to force the limb into place, and she let out a bubbling scream. The weapon clattered to the floor, and the door clattered closed behind them as Ruka stepped further inside.

"Hard, isn't it," spoke the Mirialan whose hand was extended towards her, his eyes glowing gold, veins popping black around them, "to defend yourself when you're chained up?"

He didn't even move his hand further, just glanced down, and her first finger snapped.

Then the second.

Then the third.

She gurgled and cried out each time, while Qyriea looked aghast, having paled. "Ruka, what the frack?!"

"S-stop," Ordam begged. For all her earlier confidence, it had certainly crumbled completely once she was overwhelmed.

"Funny. That's what my husband said when *you* hurt us. He begged you. He treated you like a person." The man sneered. "But we weren't people to you. So, no. Don't think I will."

His hand rotated. Her snapped arm spun slowly around at the break, grinding bone to bone, ripping cartilage and sinew. Her broken-twigg fingers did the same, all wrong angles. She shrieked again.

Qyreia cringed. "Ruka, that's enough."

"Leave then," he growled, his vision a tunnel on the Nautolan. Focused. Almost pleased with the pain.

"Ru! I said enough!"

"We're supposed to kill her," he snapped, eyes wild but fixed on the Nautolan. He loosed a little tightly controlled burst of lightning and she screamed. His lips twitched upwards. "Just let me."

"Motherfracker, we're supposed to *stop* her, not torture her to death, and I. said. *stop!*"

"I said NO," he belted, whirling on her, snarling, only to see the Zeltron's blaster raised. "She. Hurt. Cora!"

"Ruka," he heard, the Zeltron's voice wavering slightly as her hand tightened on the grip of her rifle, finger squeezing precipitously on the trigger. "Ruka, that's enough." He could feel the scared, poised calm in her, the sound sad and disappointed. "What would Cora say... What *will* he say when he finds out about this?"

The Mirialan paused, looking at the Nautolan writhing in agony, his sweet retribution right there at his fingertips. His jaw worked, his whole body one long line of *beskar*-tense muscle, of coiled violence. His eyes flickered rapidly in a maelstrom of color.

And then he wrenched himself aside as if pulling free of some hooks buried in his skin and gripped his head in both hands, sagging. Ghafa dropped to the ground in a heap, like a puppet whose strings were cut. The Mirialan let out a shuddering sob.

"Get the stun cuffs on my belt," he said in a rush, words a slur as he trembled, hard.

A moment of hesitation crossed the Zeltron's mind, wondering if this was some weird trick, before she got down and did as he insisted. And just like that, Ghafa was their prisoner — a little more on the side of tenderized than ideal, but otherwise neatly cuffed and ready for transport. Once secured, Qyreia shifted back to the Mirialan. She extended a hand, carefully, to rest on his shoulder. When he didn't recoil or lash out right away, she eased into a sort of half hug, her arms draped across his shoulders, leaning on him.

"Thank you, Ruka." She gave him a light, friendly tap with her helmeted head. "Whaddya say we get the frack outta here?"

"Yes," he answered, still obviously shaken. "Get out of here. Yeah. Let's go."

"Do you think you can carry her?" The Nautolan was awfully large herself, and he was working with a wounded back and shoulders, nevermind his clear instability.

"I can *lift* her," Ruka replied, and just so, Ghafa's limp, cuffed form levitated very gently this time, more like a babe being swaddled than a mastermind commander being strung up.

Qyreia nodded, glancing one more time around the quarters. They'd want to leave stealthily if they could manage; she highly doubted using Ghafa as a hostage was any good with the Collective. Too diehard. But, maybe a distraction...

It didn't take her long to set the denton charge in the middle of the room, a lengthy timer ready. She went over to Ordam's computers, opened a ship-wide channel, and sent a quick distress sequence for her location. Then, she went back to activate the grenade and joined Ruka in the hallway. They hoofed it to the tunnels and ducked into the nearest room to wait and hide.

A flurry of activity passed, partisans and agents called to action. They both felt and heard when the detonator finally blew, taking plenty with it, judging by the screams and smell. The pair hurried out amidst the haze of heat, smoke, and charred meat and metal, scrabbling down the maintenance corridor ladders with Ghafa hovering over them like some sentient umbrella, a meat shield to catch blasterfire like rain water if it came.

None did, though.

Getting out was worse in some ways than getting in had been. The whole ship was abuzz now, on high alert, and there was nothing stealthy about a hostage. Especially not once, in the middle of another firefight on their way back to the repair hangar, Ghafa woke up. Only briefly, though. Qyreia downed her again with a swift stun bolt to the face; Ruka refrained from touching the Nautolan as if she was a bomb, instead focused solely on clearing them a path out, silent and pale. It made the black ink of his tattoos stand out even more.

By the time they reached their breach point, both of them were panting again. Qyreia had actually needed to switch out her blaster's charge, and was peppered in scratches from the shrapnel of a grenade Ruka hadn't entirely been able to redirect. The Mirialan was leaving red bootprints in his wake, either from some new injury or from the earlier chest-shot having soaked through his patch-job, aggravated. Still he stayed stoic, like he was iron instead of flesh, reassuring that the Force was with him and similar such kark.

The Zeltron spent her last two grenades, both fragmentation types, blasting away their enemies at the door. Ruka used a terrible and mighty effort of telekinesis to actually *pull down* the open blast doors, crumpling them and the archway together, the wall groaning as it seemed to pinch

in on itself in a warped mess of metal. He wavered on his feet himself when it was done, and they were well and surely shut in. The Collective goons chasing them would need to bring plasma cutters or explosives of their own to get to them now, and Qyreia fully intended they be gone by then.

Of course, because nothing went as planned, it wasn't even a minute before someone started sawing through. Frackers.

"Go, gogogo, feck!" she hurried her companion, who couldn't seem to keep their Nautolan prisoner afloat anymore. They were both forced to get a grip under the woman and drag her along by the armpits, hooked over their arms. The Sith's blood splattered the floor in earnest at the physical weight.

The pair hurried back across the docking corridor and into the relative safety of their own ship, dropping Ghafa to the side like a sack of rocks. Ruka slammed at the control for the ramp while the mercenary dove for the cockpit, disengaging their clamp and powering up the engines. They lifted away, and she heaved out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding, though there was little time for relief.

Behind her spot in the pilot's seat, Ruka collapsed onto the floor, curling up into himself, arms wrapped over his head. Qyreia didn't say anything about it when a concerned look over her shoulder revealed he was still conscious. There wasn't exactly much he could do now for their escape—he was welcome to the breakdown that had been building behind his eyes since they'd started this damn mission.

It hurt. It hurt in her chest and it hurt in her throat and it hurt in her bones, to feel his distress, to listen to him sobbing but ignore it. To *endure* it while she navigated them away from the *Oceajar* and through the battlefield at a full burn, trying to outmaneuver laserfire in a craft not as quick as her own fighter. For all her initial skepticism though, the vessel did still have a smaller profile than the *Katurno*, and its dark coloring and ferrosphere coating made them harder to lock on to. She vowed to get the Mirialan to name the stout lady if she and they made it back to Dajorra in one piece.

Everything else...they'd deal with then too.