

The Sithmas Offensive

“This was supposed to be. a *quiet. Life. Day!*”

Qyreia’s fist punched the controls to open the door as she stormed out of the apartment. Keira, her Force user fiancée, followed close behind, stealing only a momentary glance at R3-M3, deactivated and sitting in the corner. They’d shut off Remeé the instant they got a message from Ruka: something about droids going haywire and attacking people. Almost simultaneously, they got a message about the assault on Estle, and the video of the kidnapped Marick Tyriss by his father.

Whatever happiness Qyreia might have had at hearing about Atyiru’s delivery was very firmly quashed. Before the vid was even done playing, she was putting on her armor and putting her weapons into place.

Now it was almost hard just to keep up with the Zeltron’s gruellingly brisk walk.

“I know you have a plan already,” Keira said quietly, coming up alongside her lover. Her eyes went to the large rifle slung over her mercenary’s shoulder. “I take it you’re not going to Ol’val?”

“I couldn’t give a frack about Marick,” she replied coldly, typing up comm numbers on her wrist unit. She’d left the long-range pack in the apartment; they wouldn’t be going far enough to need it. “But I care about Atyiru, and I am *damn* tired of these sleemo self-aggrandized Sithspit *schuttas* showing up and ruining my *goddamned time off* for their stupid, mustache-twirling, evil-mastermind scheming bantha poodoo.”

The Force user smiled subtly to herself. That much swearing at least meant that her Red Qek wasn’t totally shut off. “So we’re taking care of Estle.”

“Yup,” Qyreia sighed tiredly as she brought the comm up to transmit. “Atty. I know you’re probably busy and getting lots of messages. I just wanted you to know that me and Keira will take care of things here. No one is gonna get you or your baby. Call my mobile number if you need anything.”

Keira looked at the Zeltron curiously as the call was brusquely closed; something that the red woman noted.

“Was just a voice message. I’ve got other calls to make that can’t wait for a conversation.”

“Fair.”

The comm came up again. “Jen, you there?”

“Yeah, m’awake. What’s up?”

“Jelenko, you’ve got *fifteen minutes* to get whatever unit is on QRF duty at Blindshot in the goddamned air. Estle is under attack.”

There was a brief pause. “*I’m sorry, wha-?*”

“*Sergeant Jennel Jelenko, get your ass out of bed and spin up whatever you can. I don’t care if it’s a platoon and a couple of gunships, but we need them here now! Do you understand?*”

The Selenian on the other end knew that tone. When rank got thrown around, it meant business. “*Yes ma’am. I’ll make the calls and get folks rolling, if they’re not already.*”

Qyreia allowed herself a slight, relieved sigh. “Thanks. I’ll see you in a little bit. Arronen out.” Another, longer sigh. Tired.

“Shouldn’t Junazee be coordinating this?”

“You think she knows how?”

Keira twitched a little at the snipe. “Whatever you say, *Colonel.*”

Despite the snide jab, the Zeltron quietly continued her grumbling — something about Lucine managing to take her “primped and powdered ass cheeks off the throne long enough to actually do something” — as they rounded another corner, coming out and onto the open platform of the Citadel that would take them to a more suitable vantage. Captain Bly was likely still in the throne room, but the Summit Guard were already mobilizing, setting up defensive positions at the major intersections and along the few traversable approaches up the sheer walls of the Citadel promontory. A few, recognizing the Zeltron as both a resident of the Citadel and a colonel of the Arconan Armed Forces — a holdover rank from her time as Quaestor — offered the occasional, if brief salutes.

A lieutenant of the Guard approached, angling his direction of travel to match Qyreia’s. “Ma’am.” He nodded to Keira out of acknowledgement, though the Force user wore neither uniform nor rank. “Ma’am.”

“What’s the situation, leth-trill?” Qyreia asked pointedly, knowing he wouldn’t have joined them if he didn’t already have a reason to.

“I was told to relay any, erm, to you,” he said almost nervously, ‘you’ being a subtle allusion to Arconans, “that you’re supposed to... go... fight.”

Qyreia’s eyes bored into him. She knew he was just doing what he was told. Probably brand-spanking-new to the military and was fumbling about with nerves talking to someone many paygrades higher up the food chain than him, not even knowing that she was just a mercenary in soldier’s clothing. Still, that she’d already been

given the messages and vid feeds, and they're *still* sending people around to tell her the mission. *I'll have to go give Bly a little talk later.*

"I don't suppose any of you are going down into the city to hold the line?"

"I... uhm..."

Either their mission was to stay and guard the Citadel, or he simply didn't know. Whatever the case, he didn't want to step on the Zeltron's toes *again*, and instead fumbled with his words, absentmindedly rubbing the shiny rank insignia on his chest like some sort of reminder to himself. Qyreia sighed, feeling Keira's expectant stare on the back of her head.

"Lieutenant," she said, stopping her frantic walking, "let me give you some advice, yeah?"

The Selenian looked at her, rigid with military bearing but also an expression of curiosity.

"You're doing fine. Relax. I'm not angry at you; just the droids." Her eyes danced over to the edge of the platform. "Two things. Can I ask you for two things?"

"Y-yes ma'am!" The young officer stood even more rigid, ready to receive his orders.

Frack me, how did this kid get into the Summit Guard? "First, we need a ride. A speeder. *Something* that'll get us down to the lower rings quickly."

His eyes danced while his brain processed the request before, fumbling slightly, he pulled out a datapad and started typing rapidly on the screen. It was hard to tell if it was a direct message, or a requisition form, but whatever he was doing, it was getting done quickly. "Go ahead ma'am. I'm still listening."

Okay. Not bad. Multitasker. "If it hasn't been done already, need a broad-band message sent out to the civilians. Get to the higher levels if they can; hunker down in basements or closed or reinforced spaces if they can't. We need to try and keep casualties low."

The Selenian nodded. "Speeder is on it's way to the pad there," he said, pointing out an empty space further on. "I'll find out about the message, ma'am."

Finally, the Zeltron managed a smile. "Good work. Keep it up."

This time it was the lieutenant that smiled, a hint of pride in his face as the women turned toward the landing area and resumed their walk. "Yes ma'am. And... may the Force be with you."

She merely replied with a lazy three-fingered wave as they sauntered away. In the distance, the faint sounds of blasters could be heard as the local police and the few

civilians with guns did their best to stem the tide. As relaxed as the Zeltron appeared, there was an air about her that matched the tenseness of her posture and the way her hands seemed to flex despite merely hanging at her sides. Keira was in tune enough with her fiancée from years of exposure to be able to notice; enough to know that she was fighting back the anger from being unable to do anything from so far away.

Some of the sounds seemed far closer though.

An explosion went off, and both women exchanged a glance before running over to the edge of the plateau. Far down below, they could see an odd mix of blasters and the signature waving glow of lightsabers.

“They’ve already reached the Citadel?” Keira whispered.

“Frack.”

Qyreia heaved her rifle from its comfortably slung spot and brought the stock to her shoulder. Looking through her scope, she could make out several of the more easily identified characters she was so familiar with. Ruka was pointedly smashing droids with telekinetic heaves, while Cora and his green lightsaber wove a tapestry of glowing red-and-yellow streaks in the metal chassis of the droids. AAF troops flanked them to either side, peppering the droids with fire and thinning the numbers that made it close enough for the Force users’ reach.

In the fray and flashing lights though, many things went unnoticed until it was already on them. Like a droideka rolling into position just out of lightsaber throwing range.

“Frack,” she spat again and she more pointedly steadied herself for a shot. Keira could only watch curiously, wondering with mild worry as to what Qyreia was looking at. In the scope, the destroyer’s spherical body rolled into a neat little gap in the road surface, unfurling itself into its firing position. The handful of Summit Guard to either side watched along with Keira as the Zeltron exhaled, stilled.

Then they all seemed to jump when the gun went off with a deep *th-keeu* from the sniper. The droideka’s body was rent by the high-powered bolt, exploding briefly with the energized shot before being left a sparking, smoking mess. Noticing this amidst the furball of action, Ruka looked up and waved. *Dumbass probably can’t even see me up here*. Still, she waved back just before they resumed their fight and Keira tugged at her shoulder.

“Ride’s here.” The Force user jerked a thumb back toward the police speeder waiting for them.

“Well frack then, let’s *go!*”

The speeder was definitely the better choice to make. While the others had the situation in control at the foot of the Citadel, the Zeltron's bet was that if she and Keira could get further toward the outer fringes of the city — even if it was no further than the Sinchi Ring — then they could divert some of the droids away from their friends and the other, more populated areas of Estle. It seemed a reasonable enough plan. All that was left was to find a high enough vantage point that the woman with the cannon, which lay across both their laps in the speeder's back seat, could get a commanding view of the surrounding terrain. Keira would be the in-close defensive line, destroying anything that got through her Red Qek's firing arc. It was a tactic they'd used before, and as the saying went: *if it ain't broke, don't fix it.*

Their eyes scanned the city surface, looking for a good landing space as much as they were for a good position. Trails of smoke worked up from a myriad of points across the city like the spines of a sea urchin, showing where things were going poorly in the fight. Still, the city wasn't utterly aflame, and the smoke trails could just as easily have been wrecked droids. This fight was far from the worst thing they'd ever faced. If anything it was just a distraction from whatever was happening on Ol'val.

Keira pointed out her side of the speeder. "What about that?"

Craning her body, Qyreia could make out a small plaza or large intersection down below which, after some turns, led to the curtain wall that separated the Sinchi Ring from the Capac tier of Estle. And there, poking up from the tremendous ledge, was a tower, of sorts. They'd seen them before in passing, but never really bothered to consider what they actually were. One thing was for sure though: plenty big enough for a sniper and her Force user bodyguard to cause some chaos.

"Hey," Qyreia said to their pilot, "can you get us down there?"

"It's going to be a hot landing, but I should be able to."

"How weird does it feel?" Keira asked as the Zeltron eased back into her seat, legs stiffening as their descent angle steepened.

"How weird does *what* feel?"

"Being the passenger rather than the pilot for once."

The Zeltron offered her fiancée a smile. There were plenty of times that she was the passenger and not the pilot. The vast majority of those times just so happened to be military operations for Arcona. A lot of those times. *I really need to take a proper vacation and just take a normal transport ride. Maybe a cruise liner. Away from these schuttas and their crazy karkery.*

There was little time to concoct a response before the vehicle touched down in the large intersection of two major ground transport routes. Before the doors were even open, a peppering of blaster fire thumped against the lightly armored paneling of the

speeder. They were fortunate that it was strong enough to sustain the pelting. Opening Keira's door, the couple slid out from the back seat and used the speeder as cover. Their driver didn't seem intent on getting out, but at least did them the courtesy of staying put while they tended to the incoming droids.

"I count a couple supers and a spidery-looking thing."

"Spidery?" Qyreia peeped over the speeder's roof, noting a BT-16 between the two B2 Super Battle Droids, before slipping back down behind cover. *The frack kind of droid is that?* "Yup. Spidery's a good word."

The driver's voice yelled from within, "Hey! You mind doing your thing so I can leave in one piece?"

Qyreia glanced at her Force user. "I'll get their attention. You wreck the spider with the repeater."

"Got it."

Their driver watched, somewhat wide-eyed, as the Zeltron spun, planting her rifle across the hood of the speeder and taking quick aim before blasting at the chest of the B2 droid on the left of the formation. The armor-piercing shot caved in its front plating and burst the back in an explosive spray of fire, smoke, and metal detritus just before it began teetering over. The two other droids instantly turned their attention on the Zeltron, sending a concentrated barrage across the front end of the speeder, and very likely causing significantly more damage than the initial shower the vehicle received.

Plenty enough opening for Keira. The Force user gave herself just enough room to watch the Perimeter Droid, outstretching her hand and focusing on its thorax-like body to lift it from the ground. Then, with a wrench of her arm, the droid became a black blur, hurtling skyward. The remaining B2 had only enough time to look to its side and notice its counterparts were now both gone before its blaster arm was torn off by another powerful red bolt as Qyreia took advantage of the pause in its fusilade. As it turned toward its targets, the last thing it saw in its visor-like optical sensors was a blur of bright whitish-blue arcing down on it.

The B2 split apart at the glowing-metal seam from Keira's lightsaber, falling to either side. As she looked back over her shoulder to smile at the Zeltron, it seemed almost theatrically timed for the BT-16 to come crashing down a few meters away, flailing in its last moments before crumpling in a heap on impact with the duracrete and stone.

Qyreia offered a whistle. "Damn."

"Real impressive," their driver said, opening his window enough to be heard. "Now get your gun off the hood so I can *maybe* get this thing back to the station. There's still a fight going on."

“Yeah yeah,” the merc chided, stepping back for the speeder to lift off and begin its ascent back to safety. “Thanks for the lift!”

Keira sidled up to her fiancée. “What a frackwad.”

Qyreia looked to the Force user, smiling even more appreciatively at how her swearing habits were rubbing off so much these days. “I knew there was a reason I loved you.”

“You mean *other* than for my body?” Keira asked suggestively as she started walking in the direction of their intended destination.

The Zeltron watched the pointed sway of her hips. “I mean... that too.”

As the pleasantries of conversation died away into rapid movement, the pair realized just how extensive the depth of the attack was. While there were plenty of droids about, they seemed to focus their numbers in attack columns, while scattered parties such as the one they encountered roamed the more peripheral avenues, ravaging anything that crossed their path. Judging by the scattered bodies, that meant AAF, police, and civilian alike. Even age didn’t seem to be a discriminating factor as they passed two children, face down and motionless on the damp and dirty pavement.

Whatever lids had capped their anger and frustration rapidly started to give way again, especially so for the Zeltron. She was hardly what some would call a ‘*momma bear*’, but to her, there were certain things that you just didn’t do. Fighting folks in uniform, and people that want to shoot at the invaders; sure. But unarmed townspeople? *Kids*? She was starting to hate the Tyrisian Hutt’s-perineum more and more with each passing moment.

Just as they’d seen from the air, the tower structure was not far away. Only a pair of B2s stood between them and the building. Those were quickly dispatched by the Zeltron’s rifle, giving them free rein to cross the open ground to the structure.

As they quickly discovered, the building — of which there were many scattered across Estle City — was a large service elevator, half-embedded into the wall face, while the exterior half served as a sort of buttress to it. It was the sort of thing used for heavy construction equipment or bulk transport that was easier to maneuver along the ground than try to find a ship large enough to move, land, and deliver from above. That was probably why it stood a good thirty or so meters above the edge of the ring’s plateau: if a crane had to fit in there, it had to be big. The large, pointed pair of spires topping it off served as communications signal relays that helped to supplement Estle City’s overarching network. It was the epitome of cheap, sturdy, utilitarian construction one might expect is needed for a city built into the side of a mountain.

“Stairwell or elevator?” Keira asked as they reached the towering structure’s facade.

Qyreia keyed the door open, pistol ready as a precaution, and looked up into the various workings of the building. “Uh... Stairs then ladders.” She looked at the Force user. “You holding down the fort here, or up there with me?”

“Rather be with you,” she said, as if there were any other option.

The Zeltron grinned in subtle appreciation. “Fair enough.”

After sprinting through the streets, the stairs felt a little like salt in the wound. Keira had a fair time of it, but the merc suffered under the ungainly weight of her body armor and hefty blaster rifle. *I need to start training with this Sithspit. Go on runs with armor and carrying the guns. Frack, this is heavy.* By the fourth or fifth level, the Force user concocted the idea of levitating at least the rifle up while Qyreia climbed. It made both of their lives a little easier, and the going a little faster.

When they finally burst forth from the hatch, it was too a gentle but steady breeze blowing off the mountain, no longer hindered by the buildings that had surrounded them below. While the sniper went to the railing to find some targets, Keira ignited her saber to give the hatch a little spot-weld.

“That should at least slow down any droids that try to come up that way,” she said as she approached the Zeltron who was setting up her rifle on the low duracrete wall, the barrel of her gun resting in the space between the gray stone and mounted metal railing above it. “Find anything?”

“Patrol of six,” Qyreia said flatly. “Maybe they found something? They’re moving quick, but it’s in a straight line.”

Without warning or pause, the muzzle flashed red with the same heavy thrum it had earlier.

“Patrol of five now; headed this way.”

Keira quirked a brow. “Should I be ready to fight?”

“Nah.” Another shot. *Four.* “Check the other cardinal directions though and lemme know if you see anything. I don’t care if it’s two droids or twenty. Shoot enough of ‘em, and they’re bound to head this way.”

For a time, that was their method. While Qyreia blasted away at droids, Keira sought out the next batch. One after another, they plucked and picked at their numbers with little to no risk to themselves. Only one of the Sentry Droids managed to return fire, and even that was too far away for its arm-mounted blaster to be of much use before the Zeltron hammered away at its armor until she could slag its internals. It was almost pleasant, while it lasted.

As with so many other incidents such as this, the pleasantness didn’t last.

“Hey hon?” Keira yelled from the Sinchi side of the tower. “I think you pissed them off enough.”

Qyreia, who had been plucking at a trickle of droids from the Capac Ring side of the tower, picked up her things and jogged over, flushed from the work but in good spirits. “What do we goot~~whoa~~.”

No sooner had she reacted to the several dozen droids entering the plaza below than the droids began to vigorously shoot at them. The women instantly dropped to the floor, letting the duracrete absorb the punishment while they processed the situation.

“Okay, yeah, that’s a lot of them.”

Keira peeped over the edge, ducking low again when the corner of the wall burst in a spray of crete chips from a near-miss. “I swear, I didn’t spot them once, and I was looking.”

“Think they got wise to us?”

“Must be.” She peeked again. “The ones still arriving are coming from back alleys we can’t watch.”

Frack. “Yep. Probably droid brains managed to figure out where they were dying and plan an alternate route.”

“Clever girls.”

Qyreia stared at her in mild, appreciative shock.

“What? Isn’t that the line from the holo with all the krayts on the one island?”

“I mean... yes. I’m just surprised you *know* it.”

“I *do* pay attention.”

The Zeltron’s eyes rolled while her lips grinned widely while she readied her rifle. “I love you.”

“Love you too.”

Keira’s lightsaber burst to life as she dashed away down the length of the wall, arcing and slashing at the incoming fusilade of energy bolts, batting them away without concern for reflecting it back to a droid so long as she didn’t get hit. It was *her* job this time to turn the attention of the droids. If they weren’t shooting at her with quite so much ferocity, she might have had time to toss a few about with the Force, but just keeping herself from getting shot was eating enough of her concentration as it was.

The Zeltron, meanwhile, was careful not to pop up from her position of cover too soon, lest she risk losing the effect entirely. As soon as she felt Keira was sufficiently

away, she eased the barrel of her rifle back over the lip of the duracrete. *Come on, be good little schuttas and space yourselves nice and close.* She barely made out a pair of the Sentry Droids clomping rapidly into the door at the base of the tower. *Sithspit. That's a thing to worry about now.* Refocusing, her scope settled on a droideka and several B2s bunched rather nicely together.

“Perfect.”

The whispered word hardly left her before her finger squeezed back on the trigger, the red streak tearing down and into the droideka. They were easier to kill while their shields were down. A slight shift in her posture put one of the B2 Supers in her crosshairs. Its beady metallic visor of an ocular sensor angled up with its torso to the origin of the fire that wasn't theirs, only to have the faceplate explode and spark angrily when the next shot hit home.

“C'mon, c'mon...” Another shot, another droid. “Keep 'em comin', Q ol' girl.”

The muttering was merely something to steel her nerves; a quiet motivation as the attackers' attention split from the distractionary Force user and toward Qyreia's firing position. More than a few blaster bolts collided on the far side of the duracrete wall, showering her with gray chips and bursts of hot air. *Breathe in. Breathe out. Squeeze.* Another blast resounded from the muzzle of her rifle, and another droid when smoking to the ground. Only when her ears picked up the sounds of banging on the hatch behind her did she break concentration. When she spun around, sliding down and out of harm's way from the ground-level shooting, it was only to see the thick metal of the access hatch shake once, violently, then burst open.

She had only just enough time to swing the weight of her rifle around to shoot the droid that appeared half a heartbeat later. It went down, clanging roughly back the way it came, but the sounds of its friends followed shortly thereafter.

“Crap,” she breathed, relieved, as she properly aligned the rifle against her shoulder toward the hatch. “Keiraaa?!” she yelled. “Your turn to shine, babe!”

Her fiancée was on the far end of the tower, quite occupied, but the Zeltron's yelling caught her attention. “Coming!”

“I love it when she says that,” Qyreia muttered with a grin, shooting again at the hatch to keep the next Sentry Droid on the ladder from cresting, only to hear an angry beeping from her rifle. *Now?! Now you want to overheat?!* No sense arguing with the tech, she let the rifle drop and tore the pistol from her leg holster, firing several more shots.

Keira moved as fast as her legs would carry her, adding a little “space magic” — as her Red Qek liked to call it — for good measure. Rather than risk merely running along the same path, she broke off from her defensive lightsaber swings to the centerline of the

maintenance tower. It yawned open into empty expanse at the space reserved for the lift's maximum elevation at roof level, with the actual platform far below. She'd already run the distance. The rapid *pat pat pat* of her boots scraped for a few more steps before, carrying the momentum, she hopped up to the guardrail and launched herself across into open air.

It was difficult *not* to watch the spectacle, and Qyreia's distraction proved convenient for the droids that had, until that point, had so much difficulty in surmounting the crest. Finally, the Sentry Droid popped up and wrenched its arm-mounted blaster in the direction its friend had been shot from.

The muzzle flashed a brilliant red, then angrily sizzled silent as Keira, leaping again from the near-side railing that she landed on, flipped and drove her lightsaber blade straight down through the droid's head and into its torso. As she withdrew the glowing blade, faintly appreciating the smouldering hole, her vision caught sight of the other droids very near behind it on the ladder reading their own blaster arms at the new target. A swift jerk of her hand launched the dead droid back down the way it came, its weight and their limited grips allowing it to take the other two along for the ride to crash hard, after several metal-crunching bounces, to the floors far below.

A little breathless, Keira looked over to the merc. "Cutting it a little *close*, don't you think?!"

"Stop complaining," she grunted back as she fished the frag grenade from her belt, "and send them this present."

She tossed the explosive over to Keira who guided the projectile to her hand with a little nudge of the Force, pausing only briefly to find and press the arming button before floating it just inside the hatch. She watched as the droids below were creakily recovering just in time to see her release her invisible grip on the impact-detonated explosive. Keira had only to lean aside to avoid whatever shrapnel might have made its way the full distance back up to the hatch. Once the *boom* went off, she looked back down to see the droids stunned, but not horribly damaged by the relatively weak explosive.

"I'll be back," she huffed, springing into the open hatchway and out of the Zeltron's sight.

Qyreia took the time to re-holster her pistol and vent the remaining sliver of excess heat from the rifle, noting with some discomfort the exceptionally warm spot on her trousers where it had landed. Through the sounds of blaster bolts careening overhead and her fiancée's lightsaber echoing from within the tower, a distant echo caught her attention: the sound of flight engines.

Squinting her eyes in the direction of the sound, she could make out two gray-white specks against the bright blue of the sky, when the view wasn't impaired by columns of smoke. Staying low, she brought up her rifle to look through its scope.

"LAATs?" She looked again, eyes and grin both widening at the sight. "Frack yeah! Woo! Haha! Yes!" The Zeltron rolled and dashed over to the hatch. "Keira! The gunships are here! They made it!"

"That's nice dear!" Keira grunted back, tearing through another B2 that had managed to get inside courtesy of the break in fire from above. "Mind shooting these fracks a bit?! Getting a little hot down here!"

Woops. "Right! One sec!" Qyreia bolted back to the wall, activating her comm on Sergeant Jelenko's mobile frequency. "Jen!" she belted as soon as the call picked up. "I saw the gunships! You made it!"

"We got the mobilization warning before you even called, apparently. I only just managed to get onto one of the LAATis."

"Woops. One sec." She leaned out of cover and found a droid closing on the front door. She shot almost straight down into the machine, giving its death-fall a little extra drama as its knees buckled from the pressure. "Okay, go ahead."

"Are you in the fight right now?" There was worry in the Selenian's voice that bespoke more of administrative worry. The kind that said getting more favors pulled would be difficult.

"Little bit," Qyreia tossed back just before she threw fire at another target, then ducked to avoid the retort. She glanced back down into the plaza, noting how the local droids were very quickly gaining in numbers, and could only assume the enemy was actively taking advantage of their neglect of the Capac side of the tower. "Don't suppose you guys can support us a bit?"

The pause that followed supported her earlier tone. *"We have to drop off these troops to the LZ first. I'll see what I can do after that."*

The Zeltron ducked back into cover, pulling up the wrist unit's screen and hurriedly tapping out some coordinates, including her own. "I'm sending you our position. If you follow that trajectory, should be able to get a whole mess of 'em along the open roadways."

A moment passed while Jelenko perused the data and Qyreia went back to dipping in and out of cover to shoot at the ground-level droids.

"I'll pass this along." Qyreia was about to respond when the voice came back. *"Don't get your ass killed."*

“Rest of me can get karked, but save the ass. Got it.” She peeped, shot, and dropped down again. “Thanks Jen.”

“Roger that. Jelenko out.”

“So formal all of a sudden,” Qyreia chuckled.

Still, it was nice to know they weren’t totally alone out here. Just *mostly* alone. And with the ever-thickening crowds of droids, she at least knew the plan was working. They were diverting the droids away from the Citadel. A minute or so passed in the steady rhythm of combat, plinking away at the droids and letting Keira handle the stragglers that managed to slip through, pausing every so often to appreciate the growing number of droids dotting the roadways. With more of them in one area, they were getting bolder, even if they couldn’t engage at extreme ranges.

That was when an exceptionally loud *thump-click* resonated from behind her, toward the elevator shaft. *Woops. Forgot to keep an eye on that.*

Keira seemed to notice too. “Q, what was that?!” her voice echoed up from within the tower’s body.

She rushed over to the guardrail to see a scattered crowd of droids, far too many to handle, slowly ascending on the industrial lift. Some of them noticed the speck silhouetted against the sky and fired, forcing the Zeltron back.

“Droids ‘re coming up the lift! *Lots* of droids!”

The sound of Keira cleaving through a droid of her own preceded her reply. “How many is ‘lots’?”

“A fracking *lot*, I didn’t take time to *count!*”

Another flurry of lightsaber swooshes accompanied the sounds of blasters, followed by sparking and crashing. “Can you stop it?!”

“Stop it?” she muttered, looking around, her mind racing now with worry over the Force user and the droids and now the lift. Her eyes darted around the edge of the maw of the elevator and spotted a control panel on the Sinchi Ring side of the railing. Without even thinking, she dashed over, hoping to find an emergency override or locking switch. *Something.*

She didn’t account for the slope of the lift, however high-angled, that gave just a little more visibility to the droids riding it slowly up toward the roof. Before she even reached it, they were shooting at her, and it was only the suddenness of her movement in a new area that saved her from being hit. She dove to the floor as she came within arm’s reach of the panel as the blaster fire from the lift got too intense. Somewhere behind her, she could hear Keira’s voice saying something, but it was impossible to make out amid the

din. Qyreia looked at the panel and reached up, only to be stopped by a flurry of blaster bolts searing by and battering away at the railing.

Just don't kill the controls, she prayed, reaching up again and throwing open the little metal door. Her gaze scanned and flitted rapidly, worriedly focused and barely able to ignore the streaks of red in her peripheral vision. *Locklocklocklock where's the goddamn LOCK?!* Finally, she spotted a heavy-looking slider switch, red, with its slot bordered in bands of yellow and black. *Frack me, I hope that's it.*

She read the Aurebesh as she shunted it to the right and turned the knob next to it. *Manual Brake*. The dial next to it: *Safety Lock*.

A relieved breath escaped her chest when she heard the lift *clunk* and groan deeply as it suddenly stopped from the manual override. Relief gave way to shock when the panel exploded at the back, hit by a blaster bolt, the Zeltron reflexively throwing herself to the ground and unappreciatively hard on her ass.

Owww. She hissed and groaned at the spike of pain, but was at least secure in the knowledge that she didn't have any fresh holes in her chest. A quick pause to listen as she nursed her tailbone confirmed that the laws of chance didn't favor the droids: the lift wasn't moving after destroying the controls.

"They'll probably need some administrator codes to get that schutta moving again." As she took a moment to regain her bearings, Qyreia heard the sounds of heavy combat from within the tower, toward the access hatch. "Sithspit. *Keira!*"

The mercenary bolted for the opening, hoping that her fiancée was at least holding her own. Her boots skidded and scraped her to a halt at the square doorway and she knelt to look down over the edge. Keira was alive, but she was hardly fighting anymore, almost exclusively focused on maintaining a semblance of an invisible shield. A *Force field* Qyreia might've called it, were she not so suddenly and freakishly worried. Keira focused the invisible energy's direction with one hand, while the other batted at red bolts with her brilliant blue saber. Bolts that should have stopped at the barrier, but didn't. There were holes in the barely-maintained field.

Qyreia leaned back, dropped the rifle aside and drew her pistol before leaning back in. Fortunately for her, it was fish in a barrel. *Or rancors in a cage if they decide to shoot back*, she thought as she took aim and pulled the trigger. Even with their potent armor, the pistol still packed a good punch; enough to batter away at them and drop a few in the process before they were able to turn their attention. She could almost *feel* Keira's relief.

That relief turned to horror when a droideka, unfolding at the rear of the droid formation, turned its guns up on the Zeltron. The bolts of energy whizzed up at her in furious reply to her sniping, jarring her more in surprise than from any actual impact, but causing her to stumble forward in her rush to get out of the line of fire.

Stumbling forward was bad. Stumbling forward was down.

“Qyreia!”

The Zeltron fell, bumped the ladder with her back, catching her armor awkwardly and twisting her already haphazard fall so that she landed the roughly five meters on her back, fortunately on the topmost landing rather than all the way to the floor below.

As the wind was crushed out of her lungs, Qyreia’s world went black.

Keira however, as she turned her eyes back towards the droids, saw red.

In an instant, her usual measured control snapped, and she lashed out with the Force, sending the front row of droids hurtling backward into their compatriots behind them. She pushed them. Pressed them. Her fatigue was forgotten as she slashed through the droids that were unprepared for such a frenetic and vicious counterattack. One by one, droid by droid, she worked her way toward the door. The last through the blasted-open rectangle in the duracrete, one of the larger Sentry Droids, attempted to crush her under a swing of its heavy metal arm.

So she cut it off. Then she cut *it* in half.

More droids were appearing from beyond the door, and Keira did the only thing she could think of. Wrenching her hand around and around, she directed the smoking and sparking corpses of her victims into the doorway, clogging it with their detritus. With her chest heaving from the exertion, she used up what willpower she had left to cram the bodies in, focusing and pressing until they were so tightly packed in the small space that it would take some dedicated explosives to get inside.

She was exhausted. Done. Her gaze went up to the Zeltron’s hand, overhanging the ledge of the catwalk, and she forced herself to choke back tears as she hobbled back up the steps and clawed her way up the ladders again. By the time she reached the walkway, seeing the tousled blue hair and the cinnabar skin, she could hardly hold herself together anymore.

Something was amiss though, as she neared the body. The air smelled of ozone from all the energy shots. The walls were spotted with black char and divots. But Qyreia was... not.

“Qek?” Keira dropped and scrambled over to the Zeltron, looking her over in a frenzy, and finding no holes, smoking or otherwise, that weren’t supposed to be there. She swallowed back the knot in her throat and briefly closed her eyes to focus, choking on her breath as she just barely managed to concentrate enough to feel the Force. To feel *her*.

She could feel a presence. Her fingers went to the Zeltron’s throat and, through her sweat and own pounding heart, she felt a *ba-bump*. A little rhythm.

In an instant she was shaking Qyreia. “Wake up. Come on, Q, wake up. Please. Come *on*.”

There was a light shudder in the Zeltron’s body, and her eyes fluttered open as Keira’s shaking subsided with each new sign of life. “M’up. M’awake. Wha’s...” Qyreia’s eyes bolted open, suddenly remembering what happened, only to reel when she tried to sit up too quickly.

“Owww.”

Keira eased the pain, too tired to use the Force, in what Qyreia would call ‘*the old fashioned way*.’ Her arms wrapped around the red woman and held her close. Tightly. Thankful.

“I was so worried. I saw the shooting and you fall and... I thought you were gone.”

She felt Qyreia’s smile on her shoulder as the Zeltron’s hand touched lightly on her back. “Me too, for a second. Though I’m *really* glad I didn’t fall all the way.” The sounds of banging and clanging from below caught their attention, and Qyreia finally looked down to see the droid-formed plug in the doorway. “*Damn*.” She looked back at Keira. “*You do that?*”

“I told you,” the half-breed whispered, thumbing the collar of Qyreia’s uniform, “I thought you were gone. I was... upset.”

“I’ll say.” In the oddly quiet moment, save for the dull noises downstairs, she quietly held Keira’s face and gently kissed her for several, aching long seconds. “You are amazing. But remind me to *never* piss you off.”

Keira allowed herself a quiet laugh. “Okay. I can do that.”

The Zeltron’s eyes went up to the bright, square opening above them. “We should probably get out there and keep doing the thing.”

An exasperated sigh left Keira’s chest, but she nodded. “Right. I’ll help you up.”

“Preciate it.”

The Force user eased her groaning fiancée up, noting how she would probably be sore for at least a few days. They only paused to collect Qyreia’s pistol that, fortunately, had only tumbled a meter or so away, but still on the walkway. Going back up the ladder was the worst part though, with the Zeltron working through her battered aches, and Keira through her bedraggled fatigue. But they made it, back into the sunshine, pillars of smoke, and the sounds of angry droids.

As they looked around, the merc’s wrist-comm sparked, zapping her with a light shock that had her yelp and jump, tearing it off and away onto the ground. Her forearm was sore, and very clearly bruising. Apparently her wrist hit the walkway guardrail

during her tumble, hard enough to break the communicator, which probably spared her a broken bone.

“So much for calling for help.” She felt the back of Keira’s hand pat at her shoulder, turning her attention to where it pointed. “What?”

“Whatever you asked for, I think we got it.”

Gray-white blobs with neat, dark red trim, angled down from the direction of the Citadel, growing larger and larger in their view as the LAAT/i gunships lined up on the large roadway along the edge of the Sinchi Ring. Qyreia’s smile could have hardly been wider as she looked at the speckling of droids, whose attention was so aptly turned by the sudden noise of roaring engines from above. That noise was rapidly overshadowed by the turrets of both vessels as they opened up in a devastating strafing run.

Beams and staccatoed dashes of brilliant green poured into the droids, tearing them up as much as it dug furrows into the concrete-and-stone pavement. Just as one gunship passed over to leave its devastation behind, the other followed behind, battering at those droids still moving. Qyreia whooped and cheered as each passed by the tower, so close that they could easily make out the crew members in their positions. As the gunships careened by and approached the mountain face, they banked hard to the right in a harsh u-turn, setting them up for another strafe on the return trip. Only this time, they focused on the lower Capac Ring. Both women jogged over to see just what had gathered there, finding a similar view to what had been assaulting them from the Sinchi side, and similar effects as the LAATs maneuvered along the curve of the wall, wreaking havoc among the droids in a long line. One of the wing gunners on the second ship even tore through the assembled droids on the elevator; likely after the lead vessel spotted them in passing.

Keira suddenly remembered the commlink among her pieces of equipment and passed it over to the Zeltron. “You should probably thank Sergeant Jelenko.”

Smiling appreciatively, she dialed in her former adjutant’s comm number. “Hey...”

“What’s going on?! You haven’t been picking up at all!”

Qyreia looked at Keira. *Woops.* “Uh... sorry. Got caught up. Wrecked my communicator in the process.”

She could hear the Selenian sigh on the other end. *“Fracking... Okay. I could hear the gunships. Are you all clear now?”*

Keira held up a pausing finger while she walked to the edge of the tower to appraise the destruction. “Still some left, but not enough that it’s worth worrying about.”

“Mostly,” Qyreia said into the comm. “We can handle what’s left.”

Another sigh. *“Alright. Whew. Had me worried there... ma’am.”*

“I owe you Jen. When the fighting’s done, send someone over to open the door.” She looked at the Force user. “*Someone* plugged the door with droid corpses.”

“Roger that. I’ll ping you on this comm number. Is it Miss Viru’s?”

“It is.”

“*Thanks for keeping that dumbass alive, Miss Viru!*” the Selenian yelled over the comm, nearly making Qyreia drop it while Keira just laughed.

Qyreia, annoyed but amused, cut the channel and walked over to Keira, who had taken a seat behind the low duracrete wall. “She send her regards,” she said as she handed the comm over and took a seat as well.

“Not gonna shoot some more droids?”

“In a sec. Just... need to pause for a bit.” Her hand sought out her lover’s, and their fingers almost reflexively intertwined. “I’ve been thinking... I think it’s time we just get this engagement thing over with.”

Keira thought for a moment that she meant the fighting sort of engagement until she felt a distinct pressure on her ring finger. “*Oh.*” She paused, hesitant. “I can’t help but still be worried I’ll lose you. I already thought I did once today.”

“Married or engaged or dating... Doesn’t really matter. If you lose me, you lose me, or I lose you.” Qyreia looked over at Keira’s face, lips curled in a sad, worried, but loving smile. “But I’m not gonna keep waiting for a perfect moment of peace that we *both* know is *never* gonna happen.”

Keira smiled, chuckling and chewing her lip as she thumbed over the Zeltron’s knuckles. “Alright. I can do that.”

“We’ll talk dates and who’s taking whose name when we get home,” she said, kissing the Force user’s cheek, both of them smiling from the brief sweetness of the moment. “And guest lists,” she added with a tired sigh.

“Later though.” This time it was Keira that kissed her. “We’ll get married on our own terms.”

“Yeah.”