

A Bridge of Light

Beep beep beep beep beep beep...

“ShadDAP!” A red hand, black in the dark room, shot out to the bed-side comm, looking at the caller ID while her wife stirred behind her. *Atyiru*. “Why’s it always at stupid o’clock in the morning?” she muttered, shuffling out of bed and into their small living room as she hit the *accept call* button. “Atty, this’d better be important.”

“Qybbles! Now is that any way to speak to...”

“*Atyiru*, it is *three in the morning*.”

“Alright, alright. Sourpuss.” There was a pause while the Miraluka presumably was collecting herself. “I just heard the news and I was... Well, I was just so excited that I wanted to congratulate you first, before anyone else could!”

Qyreia’s eyes narrowed. “Congratulate me for what?”

“For the competition you won, silly beans!” Another pause. “Though I never pegged you for being into engineering.” Qyreia could mentally see the noncommittal shrug from the Force user. “Oh well. That’s what I get for assuming, I suppose.”

The Zeltron’s eyes pressed closed as she rubbed the bridge of her nose. “I’m not... Atty, why are you up at this hour anyway?”

“Oh, Kirra needed feeding, so we’re doing that right now. Aren’t we, sweet thing?”

“And you heard about this... *competition* thing how?”

The Miraluka’s response was a bit flatter, more serious than her previous bubbly application of her tone. “You don’t sit in the Serpentine Throne as long as I have and not hold on to certain information sources, dear.”

That gave Qyreia a jerk of hesitation. “R-right. Well, you... you get back to feeding Kirra, then get some sleep.”

“Alright. You get some rest too, dear Qyreia. Not every day you get to build a bridge.”

As the line went silent, the mercenary was left looking at the comm in her hand, confused, and just a little bit frustrated.

“A frackin’ *what?*”

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Standing at the shore of the river, the Zeltron mercenary felt just a little bit small and alone as she looked across the water. It looked muddy, and the grade of the shore made it seem shallow, but it was as wide as it was deep. Or so the contract coordinator assured her.

There weren't even any roads out in this stretch of land so far south of Estle; not any worth particular mention, anyway. With the expanded influence of the old Selenian "deities", as they touted themselves, this was a way for Arcona to solidify a foothold within the local communities both visually and practically: the public saw a great public works project from the government, and the Citadel got a free transport route into the hinterlands located on its own front lawn.

For a planet that was supposed to be part of a system-wide confederacy, it still seemed like they were all stuck in the past somehow. Selen with its remote, quasi-tribal outlying communities; Eldar, with its cold war between the feudal nobility and the theocratic oligarchy; even Port Ol'val and its touted status as a major trade hub when it was in actuality more of a den of iniquity that was only barely a cover for House Qel-Droma.

"How the frack am I gonna build a *bridge*?" she muttered to herself. *I can't even keep the steam up in my own House.*

The whole thing stunk of some conspiracy; more shady business from the *Shadow* Clan. There wasn't much longer to ponder though, as she heard the contractor foreman approaching.

"Ms. Arronen?"

"Missus," she corrected casually. There was more important business than titles.

The all-business Selenian, replete in clothes that might have been as appropriate in a conference room as at a construction site, nodded in curt acquiescence. "Right, sorry. Now that you've seen the bridge site, when do you think we'll be able to start talking design and blueprints?"

He must have seen a modicum of equal parts apprehension and relief in her expression.

"I understand the competition didn't stipulate having the bridge plans already done, buuut we were wondering if maybe you had some sort of idea already started..."

"I'm gonna pause you right there, Mister... uh..."

"Pol. Pol Jenniks."

"Right. Now this might come as a surprise to you, but I didn't enter any sort of competition."

The Selenian looked at her, confused. “But...”

“Shshshsh,” she cautioned, “no buts. I’m not an architect, engineer, or even into terrain modeling. I didn’t enter the competition, and whoever did it was playing a cruel joke.”

Jenniks looked at her as though she had just dropped a starship on his house. Suffice to say, he was not pleased.

“But... But you... and the bridge... The roads will reach here in a few weeks!”

“I know...”

“And you... *you* don’t have a— don’t even know *how* to design a bridge. Can you even design an *interior*?!”

Qyreia’s expression, while understanding at first, was quickly souring; a condition amplified by the Zeltron’s wafting emotional state. “Mr. Jenniks, calm down.”

A pointed finger went very near her face. “*Don’t* you tell *me* to calm down! Do you even understand what this means?!”

“Means if you don’t get your karking finger outta my face, I’m gonna break it,” she replied flatly but sternly. She didn’t really plan on it, but she was hoping his resolve wouldn’t hold up to threats from an obvious outsider.

The gamble, it seemed, paid off.

While not cowed in fear, the threat at least broke the cascade of frustrated panic, and Pol took stock of the situation. He withdrew his gesture and stepped back as he collected himself. It gave him time to think. Conveniently enough, it gave Qyreia time to think too.

The Selenian spoke first. “So... you have no idea how to design a bridge.”

“No,” she sighed back, resigned to the truth. A pause stretched between them as he saw a glimmer in her eyes. “But, I might know some people that do.”

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A couple days later...

Jenniks had brought his own entourage: assistants with computers, datapads, tables, and holoprojectors. On his proverbial heels were an inbound assortment of temporary lodging for the workers, office space, and sustenance assets for food and hygiene. Behind that by a matter of days would be the actual construction materials for the as-yet undesignated bridge. Despite such formidable resources behind him, he was still taken aback by the uniformed people waiting for him at the bridge site.

“Mrs. Arronen,” he greeted courteously, but cautiously in the presence of what he recognized as DDF soldiers, to say nothing for the obvious Aurebesh insignia on their collars. “I see you brought some friends?”

“I did,” she said with a modicum of pride, glancing to her unnoticed spouse over by the LAAT/i gunship that had brought them all out there. “Mr. Jenniks, may I present the — and sorry if I mess this up — the Horizontal Construction Command of the DDF’s Corps of Engineers.” She looked to an older looking Selenian man. “Did I get that right, Hass?”

He nodded with a pleased smirk. “Just fine.” He extended a hand to Pol as they exchanged pleasantries. “Colonel Hassen Kaol. We hear, Mr. Jenniks, that you’re in need of a bridge.”

The comparatively younger Selenian nodded, still processing this. He wasn’t displeased, at least. “Y-yes. Yes, that’s our project right now.” He nodded toward Qyreia. “Mrs. Arronen won a design competition, and…”

“We’re aware of the details,” Kaol replied amiably, but firmly. “And we’ve discussed Colonel Arronen’s desired end state.” He motioned toward a young specimen standing among the collection of uniformed persons. “Captain Gweyl surveyed the site with his team and will brief you.”

“The short version is that we need to adjust our location by a few hundred meters,” he said, guiding Pol by the arm along the river upstream, the civilian’s team surprised and speechlessly following close behind.

“But why?”

“This whole stretch is a riverine turtle spawning ground. Up ahead the ground is just as good and…”

As his voice trailed off in further explanation, Kaol looked at the Zeltron. “I think we’ve got it handled.”

“Thanks again, Hass. You guys are really saving my bantha on this one.”

The older, relaxed features smiled as he shrugged. “We do what we do best. And like you said: this will look really good for the force as a whole.” He offered a light chuckle. “That, and I can appreciate your design choices.”

Noticing that Captain Gweyl was getting rather far away, he motioned for his other staff to follow, leaving Qyreia to watch the whole scene from a distance. The merc wasn’t left alone for long as she felt Keira’s arms wrap around her from behind.

“And what design choices were those, *colonel?*”

The Zeltron aspirated a scoff at the title. “Sturdy enough to support armored troop movements and take a few hits while they’re at it. Minimum impact to the environment. Not super tall. That was about it.”

“Why not tall?”

“Makes for a bigger, more precarious target. Actually worked out in favor of the first point.”

Keira hummed approval, squeezing her hug until her wife returned the gesture, grabbing the forearm that crossed her chest and squeezed back. The Force user was the only one that had seen Qyreia’s nerves fraying at the daunting task; how she had bounced between trying to way-too-quickly try and learn anything and everything about civil engineering, and trying to find people that knew anything about the topic. And while Keira hadn’t been privy to the calls and conversations with the military command chain, she had at least been there to keep her Red Qek in one piece when she needed it.

“Do they have a design yet?”

“Sec.”

Pressing into the woman behind her, Qyreia fished into her pocket and brought out a small holo disc. The press of a button brought up a three-dimensional display of what could be: a long, squat bridge with four sleek but robust support columns.

“There’s a lot of internal stuff that increases its survivability,” the Zeltron said, slowly turning the display with a steady flick of her finger on the projection.

“It’s definitely a bridge,” Keira said, kissing the red woman’s cheek before resting her chin on the shoulder in front of her.

Qyreia chuckled. “But?”

“Just seems rather plain for a design competition winner.”

“I didn’t *enter* the...”

“I *know*,” Keira huffed. “I know, love.” She planted another kiss on the red cheek. “Maybe something will come to mind though. Something special.”

The Zeltron sighed, looking away from the display and toward the wide, steady flow of the river. She felt the warmth of the woman holding her; her rock in the storm.

And a thought entered her head. “I might be able to think of something.”

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It was two weeks of hard construction to meet deadlines without cutting any corners. More workers had to be pulled in just to turn the limited working hours in the day to a round-the-clock operation. While the Galerian Quaestor was present, she was by no means in charge of the construction, and she was okay with that. Between the DDF engineers and the contracted workers, there were more than enough people that actually knew what they were doing to make up for her impotence on the topic. She stuck to managing information and logistics. If nothing else, the former trader and smuggler knew how to do that. She just had a different list of goods to track.

After two weeks, the southward-moving road crews finally met the northern end of the bridge in a quasi-ceremonial display of laying the joining slab of road. The other road, coming up from the south and all the remote villages and towns therein, would connect there in another week.

For the moment, the plasteel-covered Turtle Bridge would remain traffic-free.

The idea was a loose one at best that was initially met with some skepticism: cover the bridge with a weather-proof “shell” to provide shelter for vehicles passing through. While they were generally far enough inland to be safe from the worst effects of the tropical storms that wracked the more coastal settlements at this latitude, heavy winds and rain weren’t uncommon in the area. The construction was even halted by a day due to a particularly rough storm.

That storm had done a lot to support the suggestion though. After some discussion with Hassen and his team, they were able to design a somewhat bulbous cover, with its widest diameter at the center and closing toward the ends to negate the parachute effect.

The result, with the four thick legs and the round top, resembled the turtles that had altered the bridge’s location in the first place. It was even a little more pleasant to look at now.

Qyreia could tell as much as she watched Keira touring the quiet span as night started to fall, head cocked sideways a little while she appreciated the woman’s shape as much as the Force user’s own awe at the design made real.

“And the plasteel is light enough to not need a lot of support,” Keira observed, fingers running over the smooth, translucent surface, “while still being strong enough to stand up to the elements.”

“*And* low-power weapons fire,” the merc added with a modicum of pride. “Our guys crossing will at least be safe from one or two strafing runs from a starfighter.”

Keira rolled her eyes as she spun around, sauntering up to the Zeltron and putting her arms over the prideful shoulders. “You and your soldiering. One track mind.”

“Hey now,” Qyreia muttered, nosing her lover’s face. “You were *just* saying how you *liked* it.”

“Admit it. You’re halfway to wearing the uniform permanently. Pretty soon you’ll be saying...”

“Noooo, no I won’t,” Qyreia said playfully but sternly.

Arcona invicta was a phrase she avoided like the plague, to the chagrin of plenty in the circles the Zeltron frequented. It didn’t make enemies, but neither did it make friends. A lot of times, it left Qyreia feeling on the isolated side; one of many reasons she leaned so heavily on her spouse. Especially lately.

“Besides,” she added, nodding toward the darker side of the bridge, “your snarky ass is missing the good part.”

“I’ve got the good part right here.”

“Shaddup,” Qyreia demurred. “Really. Look.”

Keira had missed the initial show, but darkness fell quickly in these parts. And when she looked over to the shell of the bridge, she noticed a distinct, multicolored shimmer working up from the thick duracrete guard rails, spreading steadily up and over the surface of the shell. The longer she watched, the more the rainbow of dancing light filled the entirety of the steel panels.

“What...?”

“Fiber optic projection,” the Zeltron murmured, rather taken by this newfound awe. “Lights up the interior without throwing out a bunch of light pollution. Something more subtle than the usual street lights.”

“This is *subtle*?” Keira laughed. Still, her eyes were locked on the fluctuating colors. “It’s beautiful.”

“I had some good inspiration.”

Keira couldn’t help but tear up slightly at the comment. In an instant she was back in her lover’s arms, hugging her tightly. When she finally let go enough to look into Qyreia’s eyes, she was beaming. “You built a *bridge*!”

“No... No, *they* built a bridge,” the Zeltron said, nodding toward the sleepy worker’s camp, where she knew many were watching the same light show. “I just gave them some parameters.”

“Shut up,” Keira chided, thumping her wife’s chest with a knuckle. “This whole competition might have been some bad joke, but you took it seriously, and now *this* is here. *This* exists! *You* got the people together! *You* told them where to build it and how to build it!”

Qyreia's head dipped; a familiar sign to the Force user. A hand under the Zeltron's chin brought their gazes back together.

"You might be a deadly force to reckon with when blasters are involved," Keira said quietly, stroking the Zeltron's cheek, "but you're a builder too. It's hard to see when the world always looks like it's falling down around you, but you've built up so much. Me," she said with a kiss. "Your House. And now this."

Their eyes went to the light show that had spread to completely envelope the shell, equally appreciating it as much as how it sparkles in the other's eyes.

Keira pressed her forehead to Qyreia's. "*You* built this."

The Zeltron's bashful smile lasted a long, quiet while — a time they merely spent holding each other — until she chuckled. "They wouldn't let me name it the Keira Bridge."

Her raven-haired wife laughed appreciatively. "Well, that might be a bit much." She kissed the red forehead before tilting the gray-blue gaze back up to her own eyes. "*You* built this."

"Alright," she finally acquiesced. There was a long moment where she just stared at Keira.

"What are you thinking?"

Qyreia bit her lip nervously. "I know we talked about it before but..." Her hand trailed around to rest on her wife's stomach. "There's something else I want to build. If you want to. With me."

Old conversations crept into Keira's mind, and there was the briefest moment of hesitation before, smiling softly, she put her pale hand over the Zeltron's. "Who else would I do it with?"

"...So yes?"

Keira nodded, pressing her lips together in nervous happiness. "Yes."

The smile that spread on Qyreia's face was as broad as it was fast, eclipsed when she threw herself at the other woman, pressing their lips together in a furious passion. In the fleeting moments where their eyes slitted open, they saw their lover's skin covered in shimmering hues of light. Tears flowed among the kisses, and standing in the middle of the empty road of the bridge, they stood there wrapped in each other's arms.

"Thank you," Qyreia finally whispered, voice croaky from the joyful tears that choked her throat. "Thank you."

After so much anxiety and stress, and so many times she felt lost, her chest felt like it was bursting. The wrongs felt righted. All the loneliness from each battle far and away was fizzled away. Hands and machines might have built the Turtle Bridge, but love had built the bridge of light.