

A Measure of Trust

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[Editor's Copy](#)

The Citadel

Two months ago...

"Cora, you're fired."

"Sorry *crovja*, what?! You can't be serious about... *Cceeqa*, of course you're serious. All you done is disrespect him and us, so why would you stop now that you're Consul?"

"Might I *remind* you, *schutta*, that *you* are the one that nominated me for this seat, and you knew *damn well* that there was only going to be one ass in the seat for Proconsul."

Cora watched the exchange carefully, letting his husband fight this battle, but ready to step in at any moment. Only minutes before, the sitting Summiteers of Arcona had for all intents and purposes elected the Zeltron to the Serpentine Throne. Her first act was to give the proverbial pink slip to her blue-skinned Proconsul while offering Ruka retention of the position. Suffice to say, neither of the Force users were particularly happy about it.

"You're not a diplomat, Qyreia! I'm not! He is! If there's anyone you need, it's Cora!"

"His diplomacy might be sufficient on Kias, but what he did on Eldar left something to be desired."

"You didn't franging *listen* to him! He barely *did* anything because you were too busy being *proud*! Too busy showing off how *you* were in charge! If you actually ever gave him anything but disrespect—"

Qyreia's open hand shot out for his face, and Cora flinched to intercede, only to see her hand stop within inches of the larger Mirialan's cheek. They could both feel an emotional torrent radiating from the Zeltron, hidden behind a furious but composed facade. Once upon a time, she might have had tears to accompany her state, but not on this particular occasion, merely letting her open hand shift to an accusing finger.

"How *dare* you call it *pride*! After *every* time I've stuck out my neck for you; for *both* of you and your family."

Cora stepped forward, pointedly eyeing her for the hostile body language. "You seem to have no issue holding that over our heads as much as you have with nearly striking my husband. I sincerely hope you do not solve all your problems as Consul that way, or this Clan will become the worst of its violent and fearful impulses."

If the Pantoran's lofty comment was meant to humble the Zeltron, it had the opposite

effect. "Talk diplomacy to me when you've got the bejeweled wax out of your ears, *your highness*."

Ruka's tongue clicked indignantly on his teeth. "*More* disrespect."

The Zeltron's eyes narrowed, but she spoke as though she hadn't heard the comment. "At any given moment, someone is going to attack us, and it won't be pretty words that save us. Diplomacy's done kark-all for our fight with the Collective, Alla'su and her schutta minions, *or* these new fracks and their crystals. And now Sera's got a civil war to deal with, and it wasn't because of our *diplomacy*. It was because our guys didn't nip the weed of that insurgency in the *ass* when they damn well should've."

A moment of silence followed. The men expected her to keep ranting, and she expected one of them to chime in with some witticism or chiding remark. Instead, the soup of anger simmered, but refrained from boiling over into further confrontation. Ruka merely gestured toward the door.

"You need anything else, or are we done?"

Qyreia sighed. "Will you be my Proconsul or not?"

He balked slightly, but a squeeze of Cora's hand on his brought him back. "I keep telling you, *knegincezami*. You have my oath. I said I would and I will, whether we *disagree* or not."

"Then I expect to see you at work tomorrow."

Ruka's face was grim as he *saluted*, surprisingly crisply. The pair moved for the door, though at the last, Cora turned back, gold eyes sincere.

"I know you do not trust me, and very well, but I hope you know... We *are* here for you, both of us *and* our family, if you need or ever want. May the Force be with you, Shadow Lord."

He bowed, low and delicate, and then the doors swung shut behind them.

~*~*~*~

Fort Blindshot Present Day

"I did *not* overflow the latrines!"

The Zeltron's furious shout managed to penetrate even the loudest chatter in the adjoining room. The Dajorran Defense Force soldiers had pulled her aside to question the recently-appointed Consul over some eye-witness accounts and dubious holo-footage of her. Some of the alleged acts were mere pranks; something that might be written off

as harmless, if annoying. Others were more lascivious, and some outright sabotage and treasonous.

Qyreia was having none of it. Ruka, who she'd called in to aid in the fort's defense like so many other Arconans, stood by.

"Well? You heard her," the Proconsul said, stern, stepping up next to his Consul and discreetly brushing their shoulders as he tucked both arms behind his back, a wordless effort at support. "If the Shadow Lord says it wasn't her, then *it wasn't her*. And we have to figure out *who* or what it is. No illusion or trick of the Force can fool cams like that, only our minds, so it's gotta be really there. See if the witness reports or the footage note anything about where this not-Qyreia came from and went to and where they stopped. Put the damn skitter droids on it. They can sweep the vents too and monitor the places our fake has already been seen for us."

The Dajorran Defense Force captain, serving as the formal interrogator, and other intelligence personnel in the room looked askance at each other cautiously. The lesser charges were something that could be brushed under the rug; something they'd done under previous Consuls, to be sure. Actively sabotaging defenses during an ongoing invasion was another thing.

"All due respect, sir," the captain said with measured cadence, "we've already taken as many precautions as we can. We simply don't have the resources to dedicate to this problem any further, much less import anything that isn't going into the fight."

"What about him?" Qyreia pointed to her Mirialan Proconsul. "We can run this down ourselves, save you the manpower, and if I really am the impostor, you'll find out real quick if one of us suddenly ends up dead."

The gravity of the suggestion had the Selenian balk slightly. "I'm willing to accept that." His eyes turned to the scarred green man. "Is that amiable to you, sir?"

"Yeah," Ruka replied, immediate despite the sudden possibility of execution or assassination. He regarded the interrogator and then Qyreia intently. "Amiable. We'll figure it out. And if the worst happens, you know to lock down the other one and defer to the chain of command, ay."

Such an arrangement was hardly preferable by anyone. It meant there was an issue of such gravitas that it required these measures at all, when those involved were already well known and, if not loved, at least respected. A full-scale manhunt would have worked better; had better optics for the Clan-wide effort that would have been shown. With this particular method, they could only hope that the population that knew about the possibly treasonous acts wouldn't cross paths with the duo and sow dissent when Blindshot was already deep in its defense.

Once out of the room, her weapons and equipment returned, Qyreia glanced back at

the closed door, then at Ruka. "So. How's *your* day been going?"

Ruka shot her a flat look, the not-distant sounds of an island scrambling to repel an attack enough of an explanation. As soon as they were alone again — or at least, not being interrogated — the Mirialan stepped away from his Consul, and whatever air of camaraderie had been present cooled.

"Where do you want to start?" he asked. "Straight to the last known location, or head right for the armory or medbay, hope they turn up to sabotage something and we can cut them off? Neither of us is that much of a tracker."

Straight to the point. Qyreia sighed and looked around. "If we hit the last known location, we might at least get some details that the boys here at HQ might've missed."

"So, flooded latrines?" The Proconsul's face remained impassive; the thought of such things didn't phase him, not after raising two children almost entirely by himself. Before, he might have even commented as much to the Zeltron, perhaps joking to her it would be good practice for her upcoming first foray into motherhood. Part of her was waiting for that commentary.

But that was before.

Ruka started down the hallway, only pausing to look back long enough to see if Qyreia agreed on the direction.

"Beats running into any of the soldiers I apparently fracked."

Her gaze dropped to the floor, clearly trying not to think too hard about that particular selection of the many allegations laid against her. They walked almost in-step toward their mutual destination, neither following or lagging behind the other. Before they'd even changed floors in the headquarters, much less reached the defunct refreshers, tension was thick in the air between them.

"Whoever is doing this could make that up about anyone," the Mirialan finally said, stiff and with a hint of anger, like he was chewing something thick. "Not just you."

It was a thin attempt at comfort, but even tense as they were, he seemingly couldn't *not* offer it up on a subject that he knew so very well bothered the Zeltron so dearly. She'd probably have preferred a murder accusation.

"If this had happened three months ago, we'd be hearing Rhylance flashed everyone in his lab coat."

"Some things are still easier to believe than others," she said flatly, eyes scanning the doors and spotting the bright placards that cautioned '*Wet Floor*'. "I think this is the one."

Not quite waiting for a response, she stepped past the rubberized floor barrier they'd

set up to stop the waterflow and tromped through the doors. A pair of soldiers guarding the apparent scene of the crime spotted the alleged perpetrator and stiffened. She merely pointed out her 'escort' before moving past and into the waterlogged room.

"At ease," Ruka ordered pointedly to the guards, pausing mid-splashing step to meet each of their gazes. "Have you two seen anyone else since you assumed your post? Anyone at all, even your commanders, especially if they were alone."

One of them, a smaller Selenian man, shifted uncomfortably. "I did sir. I was on building security and saw the..." His eyes shifted toward the refresher door. "...the general come out over the camera feeds. Not a few seconds later, water started rushing out from the cracks in the door frame."

The other stepped in, her voice almost filled with wonder. "This dam here is *after* us and some other folks managed to cut off the water and mop things up. You should've *seen* it."

"That sounds like more water than just turning on all the taps and stuffing the pipes could manage in a few *seconds*..." Ruka muttered.

The inside of the refresher looked like an artillery round might have hit the building, if not for the wholly intact walls and lack of any carbon scoring. Anything that passed for a water fixture was utterly shattered, seemingly beaten into shards and dust by any of the bent and twisted pieces of plumbing strewn about the waterlogged floor. Even at first glance, it was obvious that the perpetrator had taken one of the pipes and started bashing away, picking up other pipes as the first ones got too bent to be worthwhile to damage anything.

Qyreia offered a quiet whistle as she perused the scene. "Hooooly frack. Ruka, you might wanna see this."

Obliging, the Proconsul left off with the Selenian soldiers at her tone and stuck his head through the door. Indeed, his comment seemed spot on; this wasn't some prank of twisted taps. This was wholesale destruction.

"Sweet kriff," the man exclaimed. "And how long did this allegedly take 'you' to do?" He turned back to the soldier that had been on security duty, pointing the question his way.

"A good five to ten?" The soldier shrugged, not sure if the question was an accusation or a genuine question. "Long enough to dump a load and maybe call someone. Wouldn't be the first to call home." His gaze referenced the booms of combat that thumped dully through the walls.

"Hmm..." Ruka hummed, nodding at the Selenian. "Alright, thank you, soldier..." It was a safer form of address, when he was still memorizing all the different rank insignia between branches. Cora had kept track of those sorts of delicate and minute details so

much better. But he wasn't there to be asked now. "...Sebb. Is there anything else either of you thought seemed unusual?"

"Uh..." He looked nervously between the big green man and the red woman, both of whom drastically outranked him. "Well sir, to be honest, kinda felt like this was karkin' weird enough on its own."

"Sebb!"

"He's not wrong though," Qyreia said, allaying any immediate fears of reprisal as she sloshed back toward the door. "It *is* pretty karking weird."

"Is it really that weird?" The Mirialan looked between the trio, arching his brows and shrugging. "I been around Selen, what, five years? The Force not much longer. And I seen...a resurrected Miraluka, wolves treated like people, mind-controlling monsters, crystal frang, super soldiers, mutated animals, explosions, fire, way more of Garmis' muscles than I ever wanted to, my husband's Master used to show off his illusions by impersonating his sister, naked...and I've heard *stories* about crazier. Honestly, I respect the kriff out of your people for putting up with any of it day in and out and staying sane."

Qyreia's expression deadpanned slightly. "Don't remind me about the damn cythrauls. Or Strong's... *muscle*." Her head shook as if trying to rid herself of a memory.

"Ma'am?"

"Our working assumption is that there's a lookalike of me running around. If anyone sees a... well, a me out there without a *him*," she jabbed a thumb toward Ruka, "then they need to report it ASAP."

"That way," the male soldier said, pointing in the direction they'd just come from.

Qyreia angled toward her Proconsul. "Explains why he looked at me so warily."

Ruka grunted. He nodded to the guards, then set his hand, a little overly obviously, on his lightsaber, as if going to check under the bed for monsters when the children had been young; trying to reassure.

"We'll check it out. Well done, both of you. If you see the 'general' again without me, apprehend them."

They both gave a crisp salute and near-simultaneous "Yes sir!" before the colorful-skinned duo turned to go back in the direction the soldier had pointed; at least enough to be out of earshot. Qyreia pointedly waited until there was at least one closed door between them and anyone else that might be listening.

"Aaalright, what now? Whoever they are, they can't get far with that disguise. If they go anywhere that the fighting is heavy, they'll be too big a target."

"Assuming they stayed disguised as you," murmured the Mirialan. "We know it's not a trick of the Force, because it was caught on camera. What about a shapeshifter? Clawdite? Might be wearing the same outfit as 'you' but already a different person between each escapade they're pinning to you." He grimaced. "I'm not sure if you could wash off that much red makeup that fast, so if it's just a costume, probably still looks like you...anyway. So. They're probably still around the base, ay? I dunno. If you were sabotaging someone's image, what would you do?"

"I'm not sure after everything else, they'd only just now change their appearance." She paused, a knuckle on her chin. "Still. Most of the havoc up til now has been... *mostly* minor, aside from the comms shutdown and trying to seal the building's arms room. I feel like the next target might be a bit bigger now that they've got people doing all this damage control."

"Armory, power grid, medical, automated defenses, communications?" Ruka rattled off. "I'd say roads for infrastructure, but this isn't exactly a whole city."

Qyreia tried to remember the layout of her own headquarters, but even such fine details eluded her. Instead, she pulled up her comm and keyed the receiver, allowing Ruka to at least listen to her end of the conversation. At the first words though, he knew that listening would've been a waste anyway. He didn't exactly speak Binary.

"Remee? I know you're still upstairs in the war room. Can you plug in and get me the location of the nearest major infrastructure?"

Beeps and whistles returned through the speaker, muffled by the earpiece against the Zeltron's head. Ruka showed patience, but only so far as time seemed to be of the essence.

"Alright. Thanks Rem. Keep helping the colonel out up there." She turned her attention to Ruka, the conversation apparently done just like that. "There's a power distribution building a couple blocks away toward the sea port. Outside of trying to sabotage the stuff around here some more, that's the closest and biggest feasible target."

The Proconsul grimaced. "Alright, ay. Let's go then. On foot or bike?"

"Unless your bike is close, foot might be faster. I brought my X-Wing, and she's parked elsewhere."

They had to be careful not to run too quickly as they left the headquarters. Suspicions aside, it didn't look very good to sprint away from anything in the midst of a battle. If it didn't look like retreat, then it might as well have been a bomb that was about to go off. Between the two of them, there were more than a few comms messages and direct conversations to the soldiers guarding the halls and entryways just to allay any fears before they properly exited the building.

Outside, they realized just how much of the sounds of battle were blocked out by the

headquarters' thick walls. Things in the war room seemed busy, but the exterior just seemed frantic by comparison: soldiers ran everywhere, some in formation, others in shapeless gaggles; supply crates were collected here and there for distribution to the various units across the front; while active speeders ferried troops and materiel alike, or sometimes dragged the dilapidated carcasses of destroyed vehicles out of the way for everything else. However Ruka felt, Qyreia had to mentally drone out the empathic influx of worry, anger, hopelessness, and pain from the people around them; especially as they passed a triage assembly area. Being a Zeltron wasn't always drinking and debauchery.

The pair, following the droid's previous directions vicariously through the Consul, jogged first toward the sea, then over one way, then back toward the coast, before coming across a fenced-off structure where some token troops milled about. Despite its alleged purpose, it looked rather unremarkable aside from the perimeter, resembling the surrounding offices remarkably as though a form of camouflage.

"Building three-fifty-one: Power distribution station 'Osk'," Qyreia said, the words pressed out of her chest from her labored breathing.

"Feels like we should have more people stationed here," Ruka commented, in comparison infuriatingly steady, like all he'd been doing was lounging. "But I guess that would make it obvious it's important, ay. Gimme a second. I'll see what I can find."

With that the Mirialan closed his eyes, going still, completely careless of the ongoing chaos and danger around them; or rather, as the Zeltron could *feel* herself, perfectly aware of an *angered* by it, but *trusting* her to watch his back.

Still.

Her hand didn't settle on her rifle, but it was ready to. She kept a lookout with sniper's eyes, head on a swivel, as prepared to grab her Proconsul and haul him to cover as anything else.

"What the kriff?" Ruka whispered eventually, after a nerve-charged, urgent minute and a half that stretched too long. The Zeltron arched her brows at him.

"Alright there?"

"It's— *what the kriff?*"

"Ruka."

"*It's you.*" His eyes snapped open, a corona of gold ringing the violet and staying there, lingering like an ill omen. "I can sense *you*. Right in front of me, and in there. The soldiers, us, other lives must be the workers — and another you. That shouldn't be possible. That's *not* possible."

Qyreia might have questioned it — *wanted* to question it — but after so many varied experiences with Force users, she merely felt like she should have been more surprised. Instead, all the revelation got was a sigh. "Well, at least we don't have to keep looking across the whole base for this schutta." She motioned for the door. "Let's put this Hutt-fracker down."

If Qyreia was blandly accepting, Ruka seemed genuinely disturbed. He didn't respond to her immediately, just staring, and the Consul had to snap her fingers in his face to draw his attention.

"Oi, Selen to Ruka. I said, let's get this done."

"I heard you," the Mirialan snapped, that gold in his eyes flickering, and Qyreia's spine straightened in an instant, stance squaring.

"You wanna put that town away?" she growled, reminding, and her Proconsul grit his teeth and sharply pivoted towards the building.

"On it," he grunted.

Qyreia sighed. "Ru... How long are we gonna be like this? Always just a hair's breadth away from tearing at each other's throats."

"I don't have an answer for that, Shadow Lord," replied the Mirialan stiffly. He ducked his head. "Forgive my snapping. I'm ready at your order."

"Right," she said, a sullen touch in her voice. *What else was I expecting?* "Let's just get this done. I want these schuttas off my island and my karking planet."

The Zeltron's shoulders squared, and like that her sad tone and empathic atmosphere was just *gone*. Dutifully, Ruka followed her inside. Several soldiers recognized them both and they were offered greetings and salutes but, when questioned about seeing the Consul already, all of them had fairly recently traded shifts at the power station. None of them had seen another Zeltron, much less the Shadow Lord, enter the building. An inconvenience as far as Qyreia was concerned. They knew the impostor was here. They only needed to narrow down the search.

The only problem was that, inside the power station, there was so much energy moving around that it was difficult to pinpoint this 'other Qyreia'. Less so the electrical charges and more so the plethora of people working in there, muddled with so many other Force signatures, not the least of which were the panoply images in Ruka's head from so many of the crystal-infused creatures roaming the better part of the island. It made tracking a single entity, even at close range, somewhat difficult.

"I swear, we've checked almost every single office in here, questioned multiple people, and *none* of them can tell us where this other schutta me is!"

Suffice to say the Zeltron's frustration was visibly palpable, even if her inner demons were kept steady and at bay.

"Maybe they *did* change. Maybe they're not you anymore." Ruka ran a gloved hand down his face, scowl black. "I never heard of anyone mimicking a Force signature, just masking them, but who the kriff knows anymore? There's crystals growing out of the ground. Maybe they can do it, and they changed while we been running around."

His hand curled into a fist, then, flexing. He took a deep breath, then let it out slowly.

"What's the most damage they could do here? We'll just— forget finding not-you. We'll just cut them off. Guard the main breaker area, most likely."

"Or we find the schutta and kill it so we don't *have* to worry about it." Qyreia growled in her throat as she exhaled. "Frack this. I need to use the little Consul's room. Mind escorting me to the refresher?"

Ruka's expression ticked, but he nodded, looking up and down the hall for the nearest indicated directional markers and starting that way. Their walk was perfunctory without stopping to interrogate anyone this time, and as soon as they were before the refresher door, her Proconsul stood at attention and set his hand on his saber, like an actual escort on duty.

It was the smallest comfort, though, that this *was* still Ruka, and the Consul could still spy the slightest cringe of hesitation when his glance clocked to the door for the ladies' room.

"Do you want me to check inside first?"

She actually snorted a laugh at that. "I think I can manage. Thanks though."

She paused just shy of stepping past him, wanting to say something, *anything*, to address the proverbial bantha in the room that stood between them. Instead, she merely grimaced and walked on through and into the refresher, letting the door close behind her.

Several minutes of silence passed while Ruka patiently waited for the Zeltron to finish her business. His good ear perked slightly when he heard the sound of the faucet. Even in a warzone, clean hands were important, apparently. When the door opened again to reveal the Zeltron, it was with the same plain expression as she'd gone in with. When her gaze met him, she paused, seemingly a little off-put.

"You okay there? D'you need to make your own pit stop?"

Ruka's brows rose minutely, struggling to show surprise when the day already had his face in such a deeply-set scowl.

"I'm fine. Let's go for the breakers. Maybe we can catch them first, but if not, we'll at

least be in position."

"In position..." She rolled her eyes. "That's if the Children even come out this way. But sure. Let's go to the main breaker area and wait."

The Mirialan's eyebrows climbed higher. "Wait, the Children? Do you think they have something to do with your copycat?" His grip on his weapon tightened briefly. "*Kriff*, of course, why the frang not?"

"They're the ones attacking as we speak. It makes sense." She paused her initial step toward the breaker hub. "Are you sure you're alright? Maybe I've been spending too much time in the headquarters, but seems like the Mortis thing was an obvious connection."

"I'm fine," her Proconsul grunted, barely short of another snap. The crystals, the *war* just a few kliks outside these walls, their everything, his lack of anchor to Cora and the Light— it was all *chaffing*. The Dark was patient. And generous. But it was also hungry. "Sorry I can't make *kriffing obvious* connections, ay. You should have kept Rhylance around if you wanted someone smarter. *Let's go*."

"You have some serious insecurities, Ruka." She sighed. "But fine. If you say so. Let's go and wait for something to happen."

The man's jaw clenched, biting back a comment of, *Yeah, you already knew that!*

It wasn't the time, and she wasn't wrong, and they had an actual war to handle and imposter to stop.

"By your leave," he intoned, deferring to her right shoulder.

As Qyreia made to leave, the refresher door opened to reveal a Zeltron patting her hands on her trousers to dry them.

"Okay, I feel a bit better." She looked up and saw Ruka and another Qyreia. "Oh you've gotta be karking kidding me."

"That's my line," the Qyreia next to Ruka said, glaring down the recent arrival.

In a flash the Mirialan's saber snapped up and to life, leveling at the Qyreia next to him rather than coming out the door as he angled himself away.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"Pardonfrack?! What, you think I'm the impostor all of a sudden?!"

"You would be," the recently arrived Qyreia said.

Both red women's hands hovered near their pistols; the rifles too ungainly for the tight confines

Ruka's expression didn't waver, even as his gaze twitched between the two, both swearing so similarly, both ready to draw.

"Qyreia wouldn't have said what you did to me like that," he said to the first to come out, though even as he spoke, it seemed like doubt crept in. Qyreia also didn't pull punches or bother much with being gentle when she was fed up or thought she had the right. Given how their day had been going so far, maybe she would've just said something like that.

But, no. She knew him better than that. Didn't she?

Some of the Mirialan's growing hesitation must have shown on his face; in the gold-violet flicker of his eyes as the ground rumbled with a distant artillery dispersal and the casualties joined the cacophony fraying at his senses. Regardless, both 'women' suddenly warned, "*Ruka*."

"What did she say, Ru?"

"I told him he was an insecure schutta for all his hang ups in leadership."

"That..." Other-Qyreia paused, clearly at odds with her emotions. "No, that checks out."

"It— it was *how* you said it— *she* said it. They! Whatever," growled the Mirialan. "Cut the frang. Drop whatever disguise or shapeshift this is and tell us who you are and what you're doing here."

"Shapeshift *what?!'*" She pulled up her sleeve and punched at the red skin, which colored slightly with the pressure. "I go to take a piss and suddenly I'm the impostor? Did you consider that maybe I'm a little quicker on the porcelain than that?!"

"Get real," the other-Qyreia said, pinching her own skin. "I can do that too. Ru, I don't know what she's selling under there, but I'd bet creds she still has DDF baby batter in there."

"Th-the *what?!'* You frackin *what?!'*"

"Oh for Bogan's sake, it's like the kids tattling on each other," the Proconsul snapped, and lowered his saber. Instead, what went *up* were *both* Qyreias, lifted in a telekinetic hold, arms straight to their sides. "So here's what we're going to do: time out."

"What the *KARK*, Ruka!" they both belted in near unison, each wriggling to get free.

"About the expected reaction," he grunted. "For the record, ay, I'm sorry to one of you about this, but someone's been observing our actual Consul closely, and I can't *feel* the difference right now. But you can't know everything. So here's what we're going to do. We're going to take both of you to a quiet room, comm our Mern-Penths, and show them there's an imposter. Qyreia gets cleared, eventually, and no more trouble gets made.

Please don't make me hold your mouths closed too."

"And then what?" one of them said. "I just sit out the rest of the battle?!"

"And while you're at it, you remember the *last* time you restrained me? Do you *really* wanna go there?"

The Mirialan ignored both comments, not willing to argue or be manipulated either way right there in the hallway where anyone could see. With a brief glance at the refresher, debating, he shook his head and then started quickly down back towards one of the empty offices, a hand raised slightly behind him guiding the arrested "Zeltrons" along. Checking inside to be certain of both emptiness and— yes, there was a cam in the corner there — the Proconsul telekinetically sat both women in opposite chairs on either side of a bare desk and closed the door behind him, putting his back to it. Holstering his lightsaber and waving his then-free other hand, the weaponry on their persons floated free, disassembling with a complicated twist of his fingers, the parts lowering gently to the ground.

After all, one of these individuals was still his Qyreia, and he wouldn't treat her "baby" badly.

"Tell me about it, then," he said, finally. "The last time I restrained Qyreia. How'd that go for me, exactly?"

"Almost got your nose broken. *Again.*"

"Perhaps the Proconsul would like a repeat demonstration?" the other Qyreia said through gritted teeth.

"One right," he nodded to the first Qyreia, and then looked to the threatening one. "One pissed. Your turn. What's my favorite drink? I told you, after the nose breaking bit."

She blanched slightly. "I... don't know! Water?!"

It seemed Ruka had found the right one; at least until he saw the other Qyreia staring away at the floor, expression one of stressed thought.

The Mirialan huffed, muttering at himself, "Too unspecific, *tvhron.*" Looking back to the pair, he clarified, "Alcoholic drink, not anything."

"How about a frack you cocktail! I don't. know! You don't even *like* alcohol!"

Ruka's scowl had returned. Perhaps his disdain was too common knowledge. Perhaps he needed to be more specific still? He looked to the other. "What about you? *Why* don't I like alcohol? Be *detailed.*"

"You mean your hose-bag mom or that one time you got overpowered by Kord? I just know that only one of 'em managed to make things awkward at my karking wedding."

A sort of choking snort actually erupted from the Proconsul, as if it was a little too painful to laugh at but also too awkward to do anything else. He nodded again, then looked back to the heretofore subparly performing Qyreia.

"Ready to drop your act yet?" he challenged.

"Please Ru," she sneered. "You're not exactly quiet about your reasons for sobriety or your run-in with Kordath. I remember at least *one* dinner party where it was a rather big deal."

Ruka seemed unimpressed. "I don't tell people about my *mother*. Didn't tell anyone about Bleu either, though I'll give you how much I can't stand being around him is obvious. Anyone in the room could know that. Or, what, asking witnesses? Hacking cams? You've got information on things happening on *Selen* over years, apparently. The Children ran a lot deeper than we thought, ay."

"Thank god. Now will you let me go already?"

The questioned Zeltron grew frantic. "You idiot, it was the same night you gave me your sweater!" There was a pause while the other Qyreia quieted. "The stupid kriffing game of truth or dare. The night I *met* you." Her eyes seemed glossy, their corners shining. "Or is that just some false memory implanted from a *security cam*?"

That gave the Mirialan pause. He looked to the other-Qyreia, expression crumpling to see the shine in her eyes, and then back again to the other.

"I...that was still on Citadel grounds. It...it could have been..." he trailed off, his own gaze flickering, flickering, gold-violet-gold, and clenched his eyes shut.

The Zeltron not on the verge of tears struggled in her seat. "Ru, focus. They can make all but perfect copies of us; and probably not just me. They did their homework." She managed a strained, but very real grin. "But there's a limit to how recently they could monitor."

"Such as?" Ruka spat out, eyes opening, now stuck struck-gold. He put a hand to his head. The screaming in the very fabric of reality from a war outside their door seemed to be *right here*.

"Ru," she said, staring at the nearly-crying Qyreia, "How long are we going to be like this? Always just a hair's breadth away from tearing. at. each other's. throats?"

Gleaming eyes locked on dry, slate-steel, deep-water ones pinned to their doppleganger, and the Proconsul stared a long moment. Slowly, he nodded to himself, then looked to the cam in the corner. Stared. Turned back.

"I don't know," he echoed, and then, taking a deep breath, walked over to the *other* Qyreia and gestured widely with his hand as if actually untying her. He dropped to one

knee and knelt down next to the Zeltron, reaching to gently wipe away a falling tear. "They're pretty good, ay, but they don't know we'd *never* be at each other's throats, ay, *knegincezami*? I'm so sorry I grabbed you, but it's over now. We can grab the guards and arrest that thing or whoever over there."

Both Qyreias looked at him curiously, the freed one narrowing her eyes at his first sentence after kneeling, while the other seemed aghast that he'd chosen the one that had been so unremarkable at recalling her own friendship.

"Ruka! What are you doing?!"

The other one, her emotions subsided for the moment at least, looked at the distraught Qyreia, then back at Ruka. "I... Yeah. Let's get some guards in here. Detain this..." Her gaze fell back on the other Zeltron. "...whatever it is."

"Picking my girl," the Mirialan murmured in response to the currently-struggling not-Qyreia's shouting. "I don't know how you knew anything we was *just* talking about, but...me and her, we *kriff up*. We're kriffed up right now. At each other's throats. You answered a little too good."

Nonetheless, Ruka was still tense, visibly shaken, glowing gaze pained by the dismissed tears of one Qyreia and the distress of another, even knowing...*hoping*...he'd chosen right.

"H-how do you answer 'too good'?! How could I have known except that I was *there*?" she said, a sense of franticness in her voice.

The chosen Qyreia looked back at the apparent doppelganger, but addressed Ruka. "We need to check our comms encryption. I'd bet money she... *it* tapped into my link with Remee somehow. Listened in on our conversation passively." She paused. "The whole Brotherhood's encryptions are probably cracked right now, to some degree. We should try to push a message to the other Clans while we're at it. Maybe Arx too, if we're feeling generous."

"Can you stop talking about this like I'm not even here?!" the other Qyreia bellowed.

"You'll be sorted out by a medical professional," the Zeltron said. "A nice in-depth scan. Something that will tell us what's underneath that skin: bone, machine, crystals, whatever."

Ruka flinched at the shout. He gripped at his head again, muttering, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," even as his Qyreia spoke. Tears welled in his own eyes, the black veins starting to spread underneath them, and—

It was just a moment, that his concentration on holding someone telekinetically for all this time failed from the stress. But a moment was enough. The alleged imposter

felt the invisible pressure restraining her disappear.

With those unseen binds gone, the increasingly frantic version of Qyreia all but threw herself over the table separating her from the other Zeltron. What ensued was a wrestling match that Ruka would have better expected from one of Noga and Leda's cartoons or comics; a cat fight between ostensible clones. If not for the raging voices in his head and the high emotional states, it might have been amusing to watch.

"Frack, I know I been working out," the chosen one growled while the impostor tried to pin her from on top. "But I ain't *that* heavy. Hope you weren't on top of that soldier ya fracked."

"Stop trying to pin it on me! I'm Qyreia!"

"That right?" she grunted, curious what the hell Ruka was doing. It didn't matter much. "Then as Qyreia, you'd have your knife on you."

"My what?"

She couldn't reach it without giving up the stalemate, but she didn't need to win the wrestling match; only last long enough to either use the blade tucked away in her boot, or get Ruka's attention in the process. Releasing the infiltrator's arm to reach for her boot earned her several punches to the face, and she was nearly rolled over if not for the blade that lashed out, cutting the doppelganger's arm deeply. Deep enough to reveal a metallic skeleton underneath layers of what they hoped was synthflesh and fake blood. Given the Children of Mortis' predisposition for the grotesque, it was difficult to tell.

The maneuver created some space between them though, with the fake clutching the fresh wound in its arm.

"Y'all must've been so busy looking into my private life and mannerisms that you missed a simple little detail." Qyreia coughed out a chuckle. "You must've cost the Children a nice bit of credits."

The real Qyreia had barely finished speaking when the fake was thrown like a ragdoll into the far wall with a resounding, flesh-muted, metallic **BANG!** Ruka, panting as blood dripped from one nostril, held out a hand and held the imposter up like a pinned insect specimen. He knelt next to his Qyreia, grabbing her shoulder.

"Kr-kriff. Are you okay?"

Though he spoke to her, his eyes were fixed on the doppler, evidently needing the sightlines to concentrate now. Through the blood and gore of the wound Qyreia had made, that glimpse of metal wasn't visible.

The faint red glow of crystalline structures, however, was.

"Fine," she panted, giving Ruka a conciliatory squeeze on his shoulder. After the

brief, sweet moment, she looked to her imposter curiously. "She really does look real."

"Because I am! I *am* real!" Despite the relative futility, the android still struggled against Ruka's hold. "The Children told me so! They told me..." Its eyes, so lifelike, went to Ruka, the expression seemingly downtrodden. "They said if I helped them here, then they could help me to have you."

His expression twisted further like he'd been punched in the gut. "*Have me?*" he rasped, pain and guilt wracking the words. "You...I...oh, Bogan."

Slowly, she lowered down the wall, a gentle setting. Still rooted in place, but no longer pinned like an active threat, a thing. Just held. Like a person. Who thought she was real. Who—

Who looked at him like *his* Zeltron did when—

Qyreia — the *real* Qyreia — felt sick. This was just a little too much. The Children hadn't just done their homework; they'd been watching intently, taking notes on anything personal that they could get their hands on. And then, it seemed, taken their crystals and imbued them with actual *life*.

The only problem was, it was *her* life they'd stolen.

"Ruka." She put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed hard. "Keep holding her... it there. I'm gonna get us some soldiers and get this... Frack. We need to figure out how they did this."

"Okay," was all the Mirialan whispered, and clenched his eyes shut, tears breaking free. His raised hand shook. "I'll— okay. Yeah. Yes, sir."

Maybe it was easier, then, to make it an order. Qyreia gave another hard squeeze, almost a shake, weighing in that moment leaving him alone with the doppleganger when he was so obviously compromised.

But they trusted each other. Even at their throats. He'd just trusted her when she was proving to be a worse friend than some other woman — thing — with implanted memories.

"I'll be *right* back," the Consul insisted.

"Ay," was all her Proconsul managed, and lifted both hands, shaking, as if he needed them both just to keep one person in place. When he'd literally torn down an entire cave system and held back explosions.

'Right back' went as far as the door, throwing it open and screaming — louder than Ruka had ever heard her before — for anyone nearby to show up. Orders were barked at unseen persons in the hall, and before his tired mind knew it, she was unexpectedly knelt next to him again. Her voice filtered into his good ear almost like he

wasn't there, one hand pressed to the comm switch on her ear.

"Yeah, we got her. Looks just like me." Muffled voices came through unintelligible, and she turned to the Mirialan. "Ru, I'm throwing you on speaker. They wanna confirm I'm not lying."

"—*at's not what we said,*" the voice on the comm said as she switched modes.

That sparked some more life out of the man. He growled, "She's not lying." His voice cracked halfway, though, and it came out more a croak. He coughed to clear it. "Proconsul Tenbriss Ya-ir here. I can confirm— c-confirm that we've detained an imposter. Seems like. Maybe a droid. There's crystals inside. Make sure anyone who comes to handle it has some kinda protective equipment. And no other Force-Users. We don't want these things twisting more minds." He paused in his ramble. "I made sure we'd be on cam. You can see footage of two of the Consul at once, if nothing else."

There was a notable pause while the personnel on the other end of the call very obviously patched in to the security camera feed. "*Yes, we see you. We'll have a proper security detail over in five to ten. They'll have a medic as well.*"

"Thanks," Qyreia said, a soft breath of relief passing her lips. "We'll stay available, but since you can see us, I'm gonna close the call."

The reason being that the android infiltrator was still, rather helplessly, sitting against the wall, eyes moving just like Qyreia's did when she was thinking hard about something. It could have been about an escape attempt, or trying to come to grips with its existence, or any number of things. The Children of Mortis were such an enigma when it came to their ideology and reasons for attacking the Brotherhood that it was hard to figure out why they would put so much effort into such a sophisticated infiltrator. The Zeltron couldn't even tell if the emotions were fake or not; she could feel them on the empathic waves either way.

"I don't like this, Ru."

"Makes three of us, apparently," *her* Mirialan commented, unable to look away from his target of focus but leaning, just slightly, into the Zeltron kneeling beside him. The other-Qyreia seemed to catch that movement, and her deeply thoughtful and parsing expression cracked at the edges with suppressed agony. "Gods, I'm sorry. I'm sorry to both of you. These— *monsters.*"

For a moment, his trembling stilled. His tone evened to something cold and undeniably *dark* in more than one sense. His eyes burned nearly orange.

"I'm going to make them pay for this."

The impostor, despite its malaise, scoffed at the remark. "Make them pay? Pay for what?" She looked up from the floor into the gold-violet rorschach of Ruka's eyes. "I was

supposed to knock out the infrastructure and defense grid. They would capture you and we'd live out the rest of their conflict in quiet comfort. Now I'm the one that's captured, and you're going to kill me and the people that made me who I am." The android looked at its rent arm. "Make them pay. S'not your life that was ruined."

Ruka had no reply for that. No part of it; not where he was some prize piece, not where they were murderers of her and her creators, not where a life — lives? — were ruined.

So the Mirialan merely bowed his head and went silent, the flash-flare of righteous anger sizzling out into quiet, chastised despair.

Beside him, his Consul squeezed his shoulder once more, grim herself, her nostrils flaring with a telltale sign of repressed anger. When her copy lifted its stare from its arm, their eyes met, and hers narrowed back as though staring down scope, in that moment lacking sympathy, baring challenge. Her anger was a quiet stone, lodged like cold iron, like a bullet in a gun. Anger for sending her Mirialan further into one of his spirals, which she apparently knew *intimately* about. Anger for the intent to kidnap him. Anger for what it said about *her*, that this android built on her memories would feel all that, do all this. How much of it was rewritten and reshaped by the Children? How much had they omitted — Kiera, their family plans, her own sense of fracking morality — to make that Qyreia like this? Someone that still loved Ruka, but would destroy him to have him?

The true Zeltron sneered.

"Frack your pity party," she growled. This thing wanted to claim its life was ruined? Hers was the one violated. Made into something else for the enemy's means. "Bet your scrap bucket ass they're gonna pay for this."

That much was more for Ruka's benefit, as she shook him by the shoulder once more, trying to shake him out of his plummeting mood, so much more dangerous for the powerful Sith than a typical anxious-depressive bout. Dangerous for people around him, too.

Part of her wanted to sigh. Maybe it was time to comm Cora.

But before any of that luxury, there was the matter at hand and a war to get off her island. The Defense Force company arrived in short order, many dressed indeed in full personal protective equipment as had been indicated, like any of the scientists working on their crystal sample had been required to. The android tried one last time to manipulate, but quickly gave up, sneering and then insipid. The soldiers went to cuff her with high-grade durasteel stuncuffs — hopefully restraints for a rampaging Force-User could also beat whatever superpowered combination of crystal, metal, and flesh the fake was — only to find that they couldn't pull her away from the wall.

The soldiers turned to the pair. Qyreia cleared her throat and knelt down next to

Ruka again, having risen to coordinate with the medic upon the troop's arrival.

"Hey, Ru...it's time to let go now. You did it, you can let it go. Let the boys and girls do their jobs."

A long, awkward pause followed the words, and then finally, the Proconsul's eyes died dim, and he said, "Okay, *knegincezami*."

His hands dropped, and so did the android, right into the waiting arms of a [military police] escort. In short order, the android's wound was bound, Qyreia was looked over for concussion and given a hypo for the swelling starting in her face, and Ruka was declared physically fine. All dismantled weapons were picked up, and the Zeltron seriously debated just having the Mirialan reassemble her blasters for her. Time was at a premium in this mess.

The trek through the halls was a somber but brisk affair, the officers having cleared the way to the most immediate exit of any personnel for this particular escort, though doubtless the facility would be busy again the second they passed through their wake. Qyreia and Ruka half-marched, half-trudged along side by side, him on her right, as a Proconsul should be, and the soldiers no longer looked at her askance quite so *obviously* at least.

They stepped back out into the tropical, stifling light of day, the air heavy with both moisture and the churn of blaster and artillery fire and smoke. It wasn't any farther than a few meters to the fenceline when suddenly, the Proconsul went rigid. The mercenary-turned-Consul, who had spent enough time with both the man himself and Force-Users like her wife in general to *know better*, similarly stiffened, dropping a hand to a blaster that *wasn't there*.

"Ruka, what is it—" she began, and ahead of them, still marching on, the android suddenly doubled over in her captor's hold, a look of perfect shock on her face.

"**QYREIA!**" the Mirialan screamed, like he was being torn apart, throwing out a hand, reaching for the *other* even as his other arm curled around the waist of the Zeltron beside him, tugging her tight into his side protectively.

The soldiers scrambled. The Consul braced. The Sith's eyes lit again.

The bomb went off.

High above them, thrown by an invisible god's grip, the other Qyreia burst apart in a blitz of crystalline shards, evaporating flesh, and hydraulics. Perhaps because of the crystals, the explosion was immense; the heat wave a riptide that washed over them, blistering exposed flesh in a flash. The Zeltron cried out through grit teeth even as Ruka's body sheltered much of it, and his armor, hopefully, sheltered him. So too the troopers, though their cries were mingling more of shock and then, immediately after, barking orders.

A new frenzy: recovery from a grenade thrown in a platoon's midst. The Defense Force members knew this pattern, and they were quick to recover, ushering their superior officers not back inside the relay station with its many potential explosive parts, but to the nearest building more like a bunker.

It was only a few minutes of chaos swiftly ordered. The medic was back then, a perimeter being set up, reinforcements being called for, bomb specialists ordered in. The doctor tried to get a look at them, but Ruka was clinging too tightly. Qyriea twisted in his grip, not to free herself, but to wrap her arms around him, hugging his face to her chest and trying not to think about how this was the first time they'd been so close since her appointment. Trying not to think at all, really, because the emotions rolling off of him were suffocating, and she needed to shut them down for both their sakes.

"It's okay, Ru, it's okay. It wasn't me. I'm right here, right? So snap out of it. Listen, you can hear my heart, can't ya? I'm right here, I gotcha, it wasn't me..."

"Qyriea," he sobbed, clinging, clinging. "It—"

"I know, Ru," she replied. *It wasn't me, but it felt like it.* And as far as the Mirialan's senses were concerned, she'd just exploded right in front of him.

It wasn't her, but it felt like it.

They weren't okay, and it felt like that.

They trusted each other, but they didn't know how long they'd be *at each other's throats.*

The Zeltron just kept rocking until the crying slowed, repeating, "I know. I know."