

Initially, the interior of the Droon base resembles a storeroom rather than a stronghold.

Meling sounds confident: "There's nothing here. We are wasting time."

For once, Ramirez actually agrees they are safe. "Apparently," but naturally does not say so.

"Appears they had another good time celebrating the demise of the Dayigons, demolished everything and made a run for it." Meling's assumption is not entirely wrong since the installation was abandoned only a few months ago and looks quite trashed. Strewn about pieces of armor, scraps of clothes, broken lamps, and demolished computer towers testify to the insurmountable odds the greenling's faced in their last hour.

"Come on, let's go. Stop rummaging around, you idiot!" Meling impatiently orders.

Ramirez, however, fights his way through the debris to a buried computer console. Clearing some space, he pushes a knob and a few garish, bluish tube lights come on. He turns around and looks past Meling at the back wall of the room to a flickering sign saying 'Sub Level'.

When Meling reads the sign - for she certainly can - she turns to Ramirez, dissatisfied. Wordlessly, he walks past her with his head bowed.

Communication and eye contact is not necessary since both know what the other is thinking. Implicit trust, in a way.

Ramirez shoves a few empty metal boxes aside, exposing elevator doors, which open smoothly after pushing the button. He enters and turns around facing the opening, his gaze still directed at the floor.

As Meling joins him, she cannot suppress derogatory thoughts or keep her face from twitching. It is obvious something has upset her and she has no qualms taking her dissatisfaction out on her, more or less, defenseless partner. She could just as easily order Ramirez to turn around and report they

did not find anything. However, she refrains from doing so because a part deep inside of her still somewhat believes in the mission.

As the elevator starts to descend, Ramirez broods about his lack of competence, if applying himself more could change his behavior and why he has to suffer such misery considering he has always shown ambition and manners. Habitually, he questioned authorities, yet he has never argued vigorously with them. He is unsure if he should feel guilty, nor does he know why he is cursed with such a crippling antisocial spirit. The gods that have been shown to him so far are not even worth a blasphemous exclamation, so where to look for the reasons? Squinting unobtrusively to the left, he ponders if Meling's armor has been tailor-made for her bust and she fills it or if in reality, her flesh is soft and saggy when unsupported by the metal cups. As he becomes aware of what he is thinking, he abruptly forces himself to stop. He eyes the gray elevator doors, wondering why anyone would want such facilities so deep underground.

Meanwhile, Meling makes no effort to hide how she feels. Her posture says it all, standing there with her arms crossed means something akin to; I'm going to stay mad at you until I find a new reason to pick on you and exact my revenge. In anticipation of this, Ramirez tries to come up with an apt response and memorizes it for quick retrieval when needed. Both are busy hatching plans.

When expecting something, expect the unexpected.

As the elevator doors open, a sensor beam cuts through the blue light illuminated haze. A salvo whizzes through the air into the elevator chamber right between Meling and Ramirez and detonates against the rear wall. Its force catapults the occupants out and to either side of the elevator in the hallway.

Ahead in the darkness lurks their hard-to-see opponent.

The ambushed quickly keep on rolling across the hallway out of the line of fire and lean their backs against the wall. Another salvo erupts peppering the area just vacated, leaving behind black smoking holes in the metal, with a few catching the closing elevator doors. Meling regards the bullet holes with panic on her face. Silence. Only the humming of the motion sensor can be heard.

“What did you get us into?!” Meling snaps, but she is too afraid to leave it at that and adds, “What is that?”

Despite the circumstances, Ramirez is quite unimpressed. “You’re asking me?”

“Yes, that’s your specialty!” Meling hisses back.

“I can’t tell, it’s too far away.”

“Then go look!”

A brief moment of silence, then Ramirez peers around the corner down the dark hallway.

“A cyborg.”

“A what!?”

“A robot with Droon parts.”

“How do we put it out of commission?” Her voice betrays her fear.

“I’d say take its head off.”

“You sure that works? You little madman!”

“It seems we are officially at war with the Droons. This is a glimpse of what we are up against and what our chances are.” For some reason, inexplicable to him, he enjoys his words. Since his side of the hallway dead ends, he

glances to where Meling is squatting against the wall and sees a door a few feet past her.

“Go see where that door leads, maybe we can sneak up on that thing from behind.”

“Sneaking up from behind, fuck no, what if that thing turns around?”

“It can’t.”

“Why not?”

“It has no legs. It’s only a torso holding a weapon and leaning against a box.”

“You get over here and check it out!” Her voice betrays distress.

“Tempting, but I’ll never make it. You’ve seen how fast it is and jumping the gap, I’ll only get cut down mid-air and land in pieces at your feet,” Ramirez says to himself as he stares at the bullet holes in the elevator doors.

Meling slowly snaps out of it as the initial shock wears off and reminds herself of her physical abilities and that even this opponent can be subdued. Immediately anxious to be in control again, she says, “Fine then,” and begins to strategize.

“So, I’m going through this door to look for a way to get behind that thing. Don’t start with some stupid innuendo. Once I’m in position, I’ll give you a sign. I’ll throw something down the hallway. I’m sure I’ll find something in all that rubbish. As soon as you see or hear my signal, whichever, start banging your sword as hard as you can against the corner of the wall where you are sitting. That should draw the thing’s attention to the front and I can sneak up from behind and render its weapon useless.”

She does not bother to wait for a confirmation from Ramirez – who is still regarding the doors, albeit a little more apathetically – if he understands her instructions.

The door seems sturdy, heavy and seamless, and does not stand out from the monotonous design of the base. Meling sees a lever, apparently to open the door, and pushes it to the left. Nothing happens, the door remains closed. She pushes against it with all of her weight, but it does not budge. Ramirez is watching the scene out the corner of an eye and cannot help but smile a bit maliciously.

But, as Meling takes a running start and jumps with both feet against it, the door finally falls open. The room is illuminated by bluish light and filled with whirling dust. Meling disappears into it without another glance at Ramirez, who is not quite sure if he likes the new deadly silence. In Meling's company, he feels oppressed, but as soon as they are apart, he yearns for her, which is more loneliness than personal. Lost in his reverie and hearing no sound from the motion sensor causes him to forget about the threat down the hallway. Since he feels unobserved and no one is around to accuse him of being weak, Ramirez assumes the fetal position. He pulls his legs up with his arms wrapped around them, his forehead almost touching his knees. It is an ideal moment to catch a little nap. Nobody to say goodbye to or any pressing matters.