***Red Chases White for Black***

“I have to do *what*?!” Qyreia’s shout surprised and agitated several other patrons of the local starport, but her attention was securely focused on the communicator in her hand.

*“You need to locate and rendezvous with the Quaestor. She will likely try to avoid capture, and…”*

“Capture? I *thought* you said *rendezvous*?!”

*“I don’t make the rules, red, I just relay them. Just find Viru and hope she doesn’t make your head explode with her brain. Dispatch out.”*

“Greeeat,” she groaned. “Well, at least I know what she looks like already.”

While her mental pictures went into different corners concerning the Quaestor, her eyes surveyed the starport around her. The whole island group of Jewel’s crown was by far the busiest of the Gilded Archipelago, *that* she could see: the lobby of this relatively out-of-the-way world’s starport was bustling with enough people to rival a busy smuggler’s station. Her first step was to start asking around, and the local port authority would have likely have seen Keira, though how much attention he paid was up in the air.

“Yes ma’am, I saw her.”

“Great,” she said with a fake grin, particularly painful after being called ma’am. *How old do I frackin’ look?* “Did she say where she was headed?”

“Sorry, but I didn’t talk to her – just saw her walk though. Try around at the resorts; maybe she checked in to one of them.”

She offered her thanks, though once out of ear shot started grumbling a long string of various curses from different corners of the galaxy. The one upside to her predicament was that the Gilded Archipelago was a major tourist and urban hub in the area, so finding a taxi was not difficult. With directions to take her “to the nearest resort, and without any detours,” she kept a watchful eye through the window as the speeder zipped through the air toward a large complex of beachside structures. She paid the driver on arrival and stepped out briskly, hoping that things would go better soon. While finding one pale Umbaran on a chain of resort islands shouldn’t be too hard, she knew that Keira blended in far better than her red skin would.

*This is* not *going to be easy.*

The thing that really got to her was not so much the nigh-tropical atmosphere, though that didn’t help her in her current attire, but the sudden party atmosphere upon entering the resort lobby nearly overwhelmed her. Vacationers, tourists, and persons that she didn’t even *know* why they were there were walking every which way, dressed in all sorts of revelry. “Oh kriff me,” she grumbled. “This is what I *left* Zeltros for.” She made a bee-line for the receptionist, who seemed as busy as she was bored.

“Hello,” she said in near-monotone, not even looking up from her keyboard as she continued typing, “and welcome to Jewel’s Primus Resorts. How many in your party?”

“One. I’m looking for this woman.” She held up the picture on her datapad. The receptionist looked at it briefly before returning to her typing.

“I’m sorry ma’am, but company policy doesn’t allow me to verify private guests’ identities.”

“If she’s *not* a guest, you *can* verify it.” Qyreia knew this game all too well, and the response seemed to get the attendant’s attention.

“A fair point. No, I have not seen her, nor is she a patron here.”

“Thank you,” she said wearily. *I’m already getting tired of this bantha fodder*. She left before the receptionist could make a reservation for her.

Her feet carried her down the length of the line of beach resorts, stopping at the occasional shops across the way. She even snuck onto the beaches a few times, seeing no pale, dark-haired women, much less any that looked like her Quaestor. *I try and ask her out on a date, fumble my words, and now we’re playing hide-and-seek on another planet. That makes me oh-for-two.* The bouncers that chased her away were harmless; they just wanted her off of the property. It was the patrons that bugged her the most. Aside from some of the most impractical clothing she had ever seen, it seemed that her skin gave off the wrong impression to quite a few people.

“Hey Zeltron girl!”

“Over here, red!”

“I’d like to charge up *your* loading ramp, girl!”

The commentary nearly drove her to homicide several times, though it was this last utterance that tested her most. She had just shown a picture of Keira to a couple that seemed to recognize her, only to hear the fateful words said from right behind her. She knew the origin because it was promptly followed by a smack to her rear. Were her face not already red, it would have turned crimson with rage, which the couple only briefly saw before Qyreia took control over her expression and turned to face the clearly over-partied human male.

*Typical*, she thought. “I’m sorry; I don’t think I caught that.” *I was too busy fantasizing about your imminent demise*.

“I *said* I’d like to hook up a power coupling with you,” he said. He was holding a beer, but his breath said that he was still sober; which meant he was also just an idiot.

“I thought so.” She smiled and half-made to turn away before twisting back around and, really putting her hips into it, careened her shin into the paltry lump between his legs. The tight swimsuit did not make the post-impact image any prettier. He feigned having better places to be and limped off, both hands cradling his hurt pride, allowing Qyreia to return to the couple who were no so visibly frightened of the diminutive Zeltron that they quickly said they had seen the Umbaran at a nearby cantina just last night. They then promptly hurried off, and the bouncers once again became an issue for her continued presence.

Walking around as much as she had, Qyreia needed a cold drink and to get out of the heat for a while. She followed the clue to the cantina in question, ordered a cold fruit juice in one glass and a tall beer in another, and started asking questions. Few of the patrons could answer her positively, and few enough answered at all without looking her over. *I swear, if one more person stares at my chest, I’m going to rip their kriffing throat out.* The bartender was more helpful in that he at least kept things professional, but could only confirm that Keira had been there – no more.

After finishing her drinks, she stepped off yet again, following her same search pattern, and continued to get similar answers; they had seen Keira Viru, but they didn’t know where she went afterward. The final clue that she got was from some jogger who had just come from the nearby Jewel’s Crown Nature Park, and said that she had just seen a similar looking Umbaran walking in not half an hour before. She stripped off her leather jacket and stuffed it into her pack that had what little additional gear she thought she might need, then started running as fast as her skinny spacer legs could carry her.

*I need to catch her. Come on, Arronen, you’ve got this.*

When she arrived at the park, she realized just what she was getting into. Thick forest, cascading rivers and waterfalls, and so much more abounded in this natural refuge in the midst of the tourist beach buzz. As she ran in, she noted that there were very few designated trails, and quite a few more unofficial hiking paths. Likewise, there were few people, and those she managed to ask about Viru had not seen her. *That means she’s off the trail.* She knew enough about the Quaestor to know that she was a Jedi, gray or otherwise, and those Force-using monks tended to like tranquil places.

“I knew this tourist map of the park would come in handy,” she said, peeling her datapad out of her pocket and looking at the map she had downloaded at the entrance. She had to wipe some of the sweat that had soaked into her clothing off of the screen before it could be clearly visible, but it all seemed to be in working order. “Quiet places… quiet places…” Her finger traced the different sections of the park and found a small waterfall that fed into a small lake just off the center of the park. “Gotcha! Keira Viru, your pale patoot is mine!”

While she knew where she was going – a land map is easier to read than a star chart – Qyreia did not anticipate the difference of terrain. She was used to fighting through cargo bays and hoofing it through large cities; the dense jungle foliage that separated her goal from the beaten path was a whole different demon. Then there were the steepening rocky slopes, which also had vegetation to navigate, which went up and down through oddly-formed ravines and column-like formations. *Kriffing volcanos and their islands*. Although she was fairly certain that the Archipelago wasn’t volcanically formed, it was the easiest way to gripe.

Soaked in sweat and the humidity of the lush forest, the red woman finally managed to find the lake on her map, although she nearly slipped off a thirty meter drop in the process. She backed off enough to stay hidden behind a particularly well-grown fern and slunk down to the ground to get a better view. *Oh right. Red skin miiight stand out against green and gray background*. Grabbing her jacket from her bag, she slipped it over her head to darken her somewhat poignant features, and shuffled forward on her belly toward the edge.

Down below, in the clear, turquoise water was her quarry, intermittently wading and swimming in the sandy pool. While she wasn’t wearing her boots, corset, or sheer, decorative pieces of her clothing – which were neatly placed on the beach – the remainder of her clothes were on as she enjoyed the water. Beads of sweat dripped from the Zeltron’s nose and chin, and her breath came heavy as much from the sight of Viru as from the oppressive heat. *What I’d give for climate-controlled air right now.* She licked away some of the salty moisture beading on her lips, yet almost as she did so, she noticed Keira’s posture in the water seem to stiffen, standing and surveying the area as a stream of water cascaded from her wet hair.

*Sithspit, did she see me?* Qyreia lay completely motionless, every muscle tensed, yet her panic seemed to betray her somehow, and Keira’s eyes seemed to lock onto the Zeltron’s section of ridge. In a flash, she was sprinting through the shallows and retrieving her things. *Yup, she saw me. How, I don’t know, but she saw me.*

“Wait!” she called down, completely exposing herself in hopes that the Quaestor might not run if she recognized her hunter. “It’s just me! I was supposed to…” Viru looked up for a half-second, clearly recognizing Qyreia, before dashing into the nearby woodline. “…to rendezvous with you,” she finished, mumbling.

Quickly turning to try and follow her along the ridgeline, she forgot the loose soil on the rocks and lost her footing. “Oh fra*aaaa-…*” she yelled as she fell backwards over the side. “…*-aaaaaaaack!*” She hit one of the pieces of rounded rock that just barely jutted from the cliff face. “Kriff!” She spun, hitting a bush that had implanted itself into a breach in the rocks. “Choobies!” She took one final roll before falling the remaining twenty-some meters. Her eyes caught a glint of blue before she crashed into the water, head-first and body askew, still clutching her jacket and pack.

The fall nearly knocked her out, and it felt as though every bit of air had been ejected from her lungs, so it was instinct fighting instinct when her body tried to suck air back in even though she was under water. She could feel sand grating her shoulder, meaning she had just narrowly avoided a broken neck even after hitting the water. Strap over one shoulder, and still holding her jacket, she managed to orient which way was *up* and frantically swam toward the light. Breaking the surface and flailing her arms wildly, she coughed and hacked as her lungs expelled the fresh water and fought for air, all the while slowly dragging herself toward the nearest piece of shore.

She made it to the shallows when she collapsed on her hands and knees, coughing up the last streams of water and trying to catch her breath. Her pack slid off her back and splashed into the water, the strap secured around her wrist as it floated listlessly in the water. Her jacket she let sit idly in the shallows as she slowly and painfully recovered. After a few seconds, a drop of blood fell into the water below her head. She felt at it with her left arm, not wanting to lose her pack, only to wince at the pain in her limb as she moved it. Her hand came away with a smear of blood from just above her hairline. Forgetting her arm pain and frustrated beyond reason, her hand balled into a fist and she dashed it into the water with a loud “Kriff!” This only served to send a shock of pain up the entire length of her arm, and she collapsed sideways into the shallows.

Her breath rattling from the near-drowning and now the quickly-manifesting bodily pain from the fall, she rolled onto her back and stared at the clear blue sky. “Daaamn!” she yelled angrily. For all of her colorful vocabulary, this single word, yelled over and over again, seemed to capture her feelings best at that moment.

After several more utterances, and knowing that Keira was quickly gaining ground, Qyreia rolled onto her good arm and got up, noting a sharp pain in her hip. *Great. That’ll make running* really *fun.* She gathered her things and shuffled over to the beach, stopping only briefly to stow her jacket and tear the sleeves from her shirt. She stowed one and tore the other into a bandage, which would at least stem some of the bleeding from her head. The lessened coverage also helped cool her off a little, though sopping wet as she was, the sun just seemed to make the air around her permanently humid.

*I just hope it dries before I reach civilization. Wet and white cloth don’t mix well.*

Hobbling as quickly as she could, she took to the trail, following Keira’s direction as best she could. The park didn’t have much in the way of large animals, so seeing the occasional broken branch at chest-level was a good indicator, although she hardly left any other clues save for the occasional footprint in the sandy loam. Still, she got a vague idea as to which direction the Quaestor was headed.

When she finally burst forth from the jungle, she found herself at the very edge of the park, facing the more urbanized sectors of the island group. She followed the wet and dirty footprints of what could only be her quarry for as long as they lasted. One local tried to stop her, commenting on her physical state, to which she responded with a terse “Switch off!” When the footprints stopped though, suddenly and without first diminishing, it could mean only one thing. *She hitched a ride*. Speeder taxis were everywhere in this section of the island where businesses met the natural sway of the park.

“Um, excuse me?” Qyreia nearly jumped out of her skin, and her expression when she turned must have had similar effect on the people that had tried to get her attention. It was the couple that she had been talking to earlier. “Are you alright?”

“Do I *look* kriffing alright?!” She saw their expressions and managed to calm herself. “Did you happen to…”

“See your friend?” The Zeltron’s expression must have given her away, because the couple seemed relieved. “She just took a taxi; said she wanted to go to the geothermal station. Might want to hurry though; there’s supposed to be a storm coming this way.”

She looked up at the sky, still a clear blue. “Um… a storm?”

“It’s an island, hon,” the other man said. “It’ll be sunny for days, freak storm, then back to normal.”

“Right,” she said, noting that knowledge for later use. “Thanks.”

With a wave goodbye, she called for the nearest taxi and asked to go to the geothermal station, which the driver nervously expected. Traffic was heavy – a result of the impending storm, the driver said: everyone wanted to get home. She tossed some extra credits at the driver and told him to get her to the station by any means. She was rocked back into her seat as the driver planted the accelerator to the floor. Soon enough though, she saw the storm clouds approaching with a speed exceeding that of the taxi.

The vehicle made it as far as the island on which the power plant stood, but the driver had to take cover in a local vehicle bay. High winds and speeders don’t mix, the driver had said, but Qyreia didn’t have time for that. She threw her jacket on, buttoned it up to her throat despite the heat, knowing the cool breeze on her face was only just the start of the squall. She had only started crossing the street when the rain started pelting down in large drops. Another block further, and her visibility was down to less than fifty meters. *Good thing I know the direction this place is in*, she thought, wiping a dripping clump of hair out of her eyes, only to have the rain push it right back. *Bork my life.*

She limped furiously through the rain, only half-aware of the ground vehicles that nearly hit her when she crossed an avenue. With the light that eked through the clouds and rain, and the occasional bolt of lightning, she was able to make out the distinctive shape of the tall power plant’s structure. As she was mounting the stairs, without any tapering off, the rain suddenly stopped, followed by an ever-increasing presence of light.

“You’ve gotta be kriffing me,” she sputtered through the water cascading down her face as the late afternoon sun came into view.

Without anything more than a shake of her head, she entered the main doors into the lobby. The whole room was busy with people in suits and a handful in work clothes, many of which looked at her like a wet, stray dog. The volume of water dripping onto the floor didn’t help that image. She scanned the area, looking for Viru, when almost by divine providence she saw the pale-skinned woman standing at the other end by the turbolifts. The Umbaran spotted Qyreia as well and, finding the nearest open lift, rushed in.

“No… No! Get out of my way!” The mercenary, bedraggled as she was, managed a hobbling run at the elevator as Keira pressed the button for the doors to close. When they didn’t close fast enough, Qyreia saw her reach out toward the door face and, faster than most lift doors do, it closed. “Frack!”

She was trying to formulate her next step when a pair of large, burly men walked up to her. *Security*. “Excuse me miss, but you’ll have to…”

Before he could finish the sentence, she stepped away and whirled around, drawing her blaster pistol from its holster on her leg. “I ain’t going *anywhere* until I talk to Keira Viru! Now *back off*!” When the partner made to call for backup on his communicator, she shifted her aim. “Call your friends, and I shoot you. Now *shut up* and *back off*, ‘cause I’m feeling mighty blaster-happy right now!”

They did as they were told.

Half-crazed and her pistol hand shaking as much from pain as adrenaline, she slowly backed toward the lifts, the other people arcing out in a wide berth. When she reached the lift, she watched the indicator above the Quaestor’s lift doors, seeing it descend to each level: two, three, four… She pressed the button to bring it back up, but it only kept going.

Five… six… seven… eight… nine… ten.

It hovered on ten for a long while, and while she pondered this, a passing R6-model droid, clearly painted to match the interior décor started passing by, oblivious to the current gun-in-hand situation. As it wheeled in front of her, she tapped its dome with the butt of her pistol grip. It *whirred* in alarm, but before it could retreat, she pointed the barrel at its camera lens.

“Don’t go anywhere, little guy.” It stopped, evoking a wry, if manic smile from the red-skinned woman. “Good. Now, I need to get down to whatever is past the tenth floor.”

*Whirr bleep bleep bippity bloop brrrzt.*

“I know enough about lifts to know it doesn’t take *this* long to close up and start moving again.” She tapped the muzzle on the droid’s dome for emphasis. “Now tell me where it goes.” The droid made a binary *sigh* as the doors opened up behind Qyreia. “Come on in with me. We’ll settle this together.” She waved the gun at the onlookers. “Don’t try anything funny or…” she looked down, “…or the droid gets it!”

The confused looks on their faces made her want to re-state that, but she knew time was of the essence. She coaxed the droid inside and pressed the button for it to descend. She pressed level ten, just in case.

“Don’t try any of that shocky-probe business,” she said, finally relaxing a little in the enclosed space.

*Brrrt brap boop boop bleep.*

“Sure you wouldn’t.” *I don’t believe this little guy for a second*. “Now, take me down to where Keira Viru is.”

*Bloop beep brrt grt bloo.*

“Don’t know her my bright, red butt. Just do your little droid magic and get me there.” The droid made a binary growl and Qyreia tapped his dome again. “Don’t you take that tone with me.” It made another series of noise. “I don’t care *who* programmed you, just *do it*!”

With another, but much quieter growl of reluctance, the droid wheeled over to the control panel and, using one of its many tools, popped open a small service door. It then deployed its probe to wheel the mechanisms within around, and Qyreia could see the indicator above the door switch from *ten* to *fourteen* as the target floor.

“Fourteen huh? I take it this isn’t on the official floor plan?”

*Brrt.*

“Any guards?” The droid gave the same response. “Good. I don’t want to hurt anybody; just talk to Keira.”

*Wheeer beedoo bleeoo.*

“*Yes* I just want to talk! Snot, you wave a gun around and suddenly no one believes anything you say.”

*Brrrt blee bortbort brrrat beedoo.*

“I don’t need a lecture on ethics from a *droid*. I like you so far, little guy, but I’ve had a *really* bad day so far. Please don’t make it any worse.”

*Bee ro.*

“Thanks; appreciate it.”

When they finally reached the intended floor, she was met by a large and seemingly blast-proof door that was just finishing its closing procedure, showing a brief but clear sliver of an image of Keira Viru. It slammed shut before Qyreia could say anything. *Frack*. The droid *bleeped* out a “good luck” that she accepted well enough as the droid went back about his business on a higher floor. The Zeltron made her way forward, pondering how she was going to get inside. Inside her pack was nothing but sopping-wet clothes and what used to be half of a sandwich. *Times like this I could really use some explosives. Not that it would help, but it’d make me feel better*.

Left with few other options, she walked up to the door and started banging. “Hey! Keira Viru! Quaestor of Shar Dakhan! Open up, I wanna talk to you!”

She was met with no response. *Ah kriff.* She walked in a small circle, kicked the door only to remember her injuries the hard way, then paced a few more times before hunching over in front of the door, banging a few more times. After several more long moments of silence, she could hear the familiar mechanical whine of disused speakers warming up, followed by a screen on the wall appearing from behind a thin sheet of metal, showing the Quaestor’s video image.

*“What do you want Courier Arronen? Who sent you?”*

“I was told that you had an opening for the Black Guard thing, and was told to ‘rendezvous’ with you here. I had to find you, meet up, blah blah blah; the point is that I can’t get in there.”

*“Seems like a personal problem.”*

“I’m right here, more-or-less where you are! That’s a rendezvous! I never got told I had to physically *tag* you or any such snot! What the Sithspit?!”

*“Well, you still lost the game. Now go away.”*

“Get out here and say that to my face!”

*“Not that it would be hard to defeat you – no offense – but I’m perfectly fine right in here.”*

“Hmph. Fine. I’ll just wait you out then.”

*“I hate to break it to you, but there’s a years’ worth of foodstuffs in here. Security will probably get you before that, so good luck.”* She stuck out her tongue at the camera for good measure.

“Oooh you… you… Bork you! Bork you, you chuff-sucking, droid-kriffing, hump-Hutting… argh! *Hutt-humping* piece of snot!”

*“If you’re going to use* that *kind of language, I’m afraid we’re done speaking. Good luck with waiting me out.”*

With that, the screen cut out and started sliding back into the wall. Raging and frustrated, Qyreia raised her pistol, screaming and firing off a pair of shots at the mechanism. The first shot shattered the upper corner of the screen; the second bounced off the reflective metal and made a deep glancing hit into her right arm. She dropped the blaster entirely, falling onto her knees and screaming an unbelievably long string of profanity from the pain.

Grinding her teeth, she slid the pistol over to her, then sat up against the wall, facing the turbolifts. *Man, I hope they got their blasters on ‘stun,’ because I* really *don’t want to die during a* test*.* Her head dropped, a hand passing through the long hair atop her head. The bandaged wound still stung like hell, and the longer she sat, the more acutely aware she was of all her other aches and pains. It was more than she was used to and, if memory served, the worst beating she’d ever taken. Worst of all, *she* was the one responsible; no one else. Not even Viru could claim fault in this.

“Dammit,” she muttered pathetically, “I was so kriffing close. *This close!*” she said, emphasizing with her fingers. “Look at me now: broken piece of meat, sitting outside an impenetrable vault, whingeing like an Ewok just trashed my walker.” She buried her face into her knees, painful though it was. “Some mercenary I am.”

She sat there for a few moments when there was a sudden, deep *crack* that emanated from the wall behind her. She wanted to ready her blaster just in case, but her hand wouldn’t move; only her legs slackened, stretching out to a less painful posture as she turned her head toward the now-opening blast-door. It opened about a meter, then stopped.

Keira Viru stepped out a step, as cautious as she was confident. Her eyes glanced at Qyreia, then looked away in a reluctant sort of pity. She extended her arm toward the Zeltron, hand flat, palm up. “Tag my hand,” she said like an older sibling talked into playing with their junior.

“W-what?”

“*Tag my hand!* You were depressing *me* with your talk. Besides,” she said, sounding about as sincere as she likely could sound at the moment, “I *suppose* you technically rendezvoused with me. Now *tag* me.”

She softly slapped the Quaestor’s hand.

“Good enough I guess. Game’s over now.”

The mercenary didn’t know what to think. On the one hand, she was angry about the whole situation in the first place. On the other hand, she was ecstatic that she managed to “catch” the Quaestor. On a third and heavily-repressed hand, a part of her was simply marveling at how the light caught the woman’s pretty features. *Quiet you. We’re angry… also hurt… kinda hungry too.*

“So… Did I win?”

“We’ll see how your competition does.” She looked down, regarding her more closely. “You look like hell.”

“I’ve had better days.”

That brought half a chuckle from Keira’s lips. She looked a moment longer before, making a quick trip into the bunker, squatting down by Qyreia and applying some real medical treatment to her wounds. “Were you *really* going to try and wait me out?”

She shrugged, “Well, I didn’t really have much other option.” She nodded toward the lift. “Needed a droid to get down here; judging by the keypad, I’d need one to get back up too – that or the code. Plus, according to the droid, you were the only one that actually knew about this place, except for him since he’s apparently the maintenance monkey around here. I doubt there’s any actual security anyway.” She looked over, suppressing a blush when she saw just how close the Quaestor was. *You have soft hands*, she thought, at it seemed that for a split second, the Jedi paused in her treatment, only to continue unfazed. “So yeah… didn’t see any other option.”

Keira shook her head, not sure what to make of it all. “Well, you’re persistent, I’ll give you that much.” She tied off a proper bandage around the arm wound, trying to ignore the emotions she was feeling radiating from Qyreia. “We’ll see about the position later. For now, let’s get you patched up.”

“Best words I’ve heard all day, Miss Viru.”

“Call me Keira.”

“Okay… Keira.”