***No Rest for the Red***

Sound sleep always seemed easy for Qyreia when the soft hum of a ship’s engines subtly permeated the air. It was a constant, almost melodic sound that only changed on command or when something went wrong, and it was easy to figure out which was happening. From her cramped bunk in the tiny freighter, her soft breathing was only interrupted by the occasional muffle snore or mumble as she spoke to the figures of her dreams. Only when the ship’s notification alarm *beep beeped* did she stir, knowing she was nearing her destination.

Zeltros, the lush planet of hedonists and sybarites, and Qyreia’s birthplace, came into view as the blue tunnel of hyperspace faded away. Naga Sadow had been relatively quiet of late, and without any direct orders from her leadership, the Zeltron had thought it best to visit her family. It had been some time since they had last lain eyes on her, and a single visit was worth at least a dozen awkward calls over the holonet.

Besides, despite being Keira Viru’s Black Guard, the mercenary’s attempts at romance had thus far failed horribly, so this would be a good chance to refresh the red woman’s metaphorical batteries. *And when I get back, ooh, that Jedi better be ready!* The thought amused her, though deep down she wondered if her advances would ever see any fruition. That, however, was not something to be worrying about on this trip. Qyreia was here to recuperate, visit the family, and hopefully avoid any extreme dramatics.

*Yeah, good luck with that*, she thought, realizing this was her *family* she was going to visit.

Thankfully her mind was alert, because the woman’s body was still waking up and was not very quick to react to the former’s commands as Qyreia started the landing procedures at the local starport. After clearing the port authority, she hitched a ride on the first taxi speeder and headed straight for her family home. They lived toward the edge of town, still close to the hustle and bustle of the city, but far enough removed to have access to the towering forests that surrounded the settlement.

Arriving at the abode, she stopped only to pay the driver before waltzing right up to the door and entering with a flourish. “Mom! Dad! I’m home!”

A clatter of what sounded like a dozen pots and pans came from the kitchen, adjacent to the entry, as Qyreia’s mother appeared. Despite being well into mid-life, her mother looked no older than her late twenties, contrasting her daughter’s rebellious short hair with a long mane that, bound intermittently, reached down below her waist. The red devil, upon seeing her daughter, pounced and proceeded to hug the mercenary with the force of a Wookiee.

“Oh Qyreia! It’s been so long!” she screamed with equal parts lamentation and joy. Her mother put her at arm’s length and examined her. “Still got that short hair, I see.”

“And I’d say that yours got *longer* since last I saw you.”

“Well when you don’t call for over a year, that’ll happen,” her mother chided with a grin. “And still so scrawny. My, you are *just* like your father.”

“I like to think I’m just slim,” came a voice from the back. Out walked her father, who was anything *but* like Qyreia in physique. Unlike the daughter, he stood at just under two meters tall, towering over both mother and daughter, though more so the latter. While lacking in any real body fat, he was also stockier than Qyreia, making him an overall much more imposing figure, despite his kind face and neatly-trimmed beard and mustache.

“Besides,” the Brotherhood member said after embracing her giant of a father, “I’m not scrawny.” She pulled her sleeve up and flexed, showing off a well-toned bicep. “Check out *these* guns.”

Her mother rolled her eyes, but her father at least offered an impressed whistle. “I think your mom owes you a drink. You’re getting buff, kiddo.”

As much as the thought amused her, Qyreia’s mother still seemed preoccupied. “Something wrong, mom?”

“I don’t know. Something seems… *different* about you. I can see that you’re happy to be home, but… I don’t know, something seems off.”

“Ah,” the mercenary said, realizing the issue. “Gimme about an hour, and I should be back to normal.”

“We’ll let you get acclimated,” her father said, guiding her mother away. “Take your time. We’ll be in the kitchen working on dinner.”

How thankful she was to have an understanding dad, even if he didn’t understand the exact reason for the oddity that her mother had noticed. She made her way through the halls, noting that everything in the house was largely unchanged. *Who needs change when there’s a new party to go to every other day?* While perhaps somewhat harsh, it was also not wholly untrue. After all, that was why she had left in the first place.

She made her way up to her old room, though upon entering she remembered everything being bigger back then. Perhaps that was simply from spending so much time within its confines when she wasn’t out exploring the woods. It even somehow still smelled like her, though there wasn’t a hint of dust or decay anywhere. Her folks had kept it clean, just in case. Setting her pack at the foot of her bed, Qyreia lay back against the crisp sheets, soaking up the old memories, focusing more on the fond ones than on those she would have preferred forgotten.

Then came the tough part.

During the transitory period when she was trying to separate herself from her people’s stigma as much as possible, Qyreia had managed to learn how to suppress her species’ variable pheromones and limited emotional telepathy. Initially, she had used some mild suppressants that she had gotten prescription for, but over time, she learned to better control it on her own. While it took some extended concentration, she was now able to more-or-less turn it on or off entirely on her own.

Grabbing a pillow, she shoved the scent-laden cushion over her face and took in the old smells, letting her mind go blank of anything else, focusing her thoughts on pulling out her mental stopper. Other galaxy-travelling Zeltrons usually learned to harness these abilities more vigorously; Qyreia had done the opposite, almost shutting it off entirely. The air beneath the pillow grew hot and stuffy, the smell of her breath and the humidity against the fabric made her heart race as the mental locks were undone. Memories of other times that her bedding had been so intimately abused came flooding back, only serving to make her breath harder and faster. She nearly blacked out before she could mentally feel the final barrier break off.

When the daughter walked down the steps to rejoin her parents, her mother met her in the hall with a softer, more comfortable embrace. “It’s good to have you back, honey.” While there wasn’t any verbal emphasis, the way her mother had moved; the way her expression had changed when she said “you” seemed to hold a much greater feeling, to say nothing for how Qyreia could once again feel her parent’s emotions on the invisible tides of thought.

It felt strange, yet comforting to be able to feel it all again.

With the status quo normalized, she joined her parents in preparing dinner. Though of no real surprise, she was still visibly happy to see that their cooking skills had not deteriorated over the years. Her stomach was equally happy when it was finished.

Over the next couple days, the Brotherhood mercenary regaled her parents and old friends with stories about her time as a merchant, smuggler, and mercenary, usually stopping short of her most recent employment. The closest she had come to really talking about the Brotherhood was the second night at home, when her mother had asked if there were any fun stories of romance in Qyreia’s travels.

“Nothing exciting,” she said, almost saddened by the admission. “There is this *one* person right now, but I’m either not her type and she’s too nice to say it, or she’s denser than duracrete and doesn’t get that I have a thing for her.”

“*She*?” Her mother’s eyes turned sour.

“Now dear,” her dad stepped in, “we’ve been over this. Grandchildren are still possible if we contact a gene-therapist.”

“I know, I know,” her mother said, cooling off. “I just always want to see how handsome of a boy my pretty little girl could bring home! I mean look at her! What idiot would turn down a girl like that?!”

“One who’s into bigger chests?” Qyreia snickered as she poked her dinner with her fork. That got both of her parents laughing, though somewhere deep down she thought that might actually be a potential reason.

“Is *she* at least cute?” her father asked.

“Oh my yeees,” she responded, almost melting into her chair.

That had garnered even more laughter from her parents and, for the most part, that was the end of their questions. Their daughter had enough questions for them: who was together, who had married, who had a new baby, who had died, and so on. It was not until her third day on Zeltros that the proverbial Sith hit the turbofan.

The mercenary had just returned from a visit with some old friends – two had toddlers running around their ankles – when her mother, who had been watching from the window, walked quickly from the door to meet her.

“Hey mom, what’s up?”

“You didn’t tell me this Keira girl was coming over,” she whispered hurriedly, pulling Qyreia along at an equally rapid pace.

“Waitwaitwait, she’s *here*?!”

“Shh! Not so loud! Yes she’s here, and she’s looking for *you*.”

“Ohh boy. That’s not good.”

“Are you kidding? I think she finally found her senses.”

The poor girl was about to deny it, but her mother was too quick and dragged her into the house. Her father had apparently been keeping Keira entertained, both of them seated at the dinner table and speaking casually. Small glasses of wine had been set out, which meant mom had been doing her best to be a good host to the stranger. As soon as the Jedi saw her Black Guard enter, she sat up just a bit more straight.

“H-hey boss.”

“Hey indeed. I didn’t realize that you had left until I tried to catch you in your quarters, which I found empty.”

*Could you have phrased that more awkwardly?* The look on Qyreia’s mother’s face suggested that it couldn’t have gotten much worse. “I’m sorry. I meant to tell you, but I was… some folks were frustrating me to no end, and I just had to get away for a few days.”

“You are not allowed to just leave whenever you wish,” she said in such a casual way that both of her parents got a *“That’s kinky”* look on their faces. “I am returning tonight, and I expect you to come with me, or forfeit your position.”

“Please,” her mother pleaded kindly, “you’ve only just arrived. I’m sure you can stay the night at least. Enjoy some of Zeltros’ famous hospitality?” *Shut. Up.* Qyreia mouthed while the Quaestor’s eyes were turned.

“She told me it was that same ‘*hospitality*’ that she left Zeltros to avoid.”

“Keira!”

“Qyriea!” her mother shrieked.

“Well it’s kriffing true,” she yelled back, deciding this was happening whether she wanted it or not. “You’ve known the whole time, and yet you always pushed me to be like all the other kids, but that wasn’t *me*. Do you realize the kind of reputation we have off-world?!”

“Who cares what other people think of us? Say something, you’re her father,” she shouted to the silent giant, who only shrugged.

“*I* care! I care that people don’t look at me like some sort of *thing* to be used for entertainment! I care that I can go on a date – when I can actually *get* one – and not think that it’s because I wooed them with my fracking pheromones!”

“Perhaps we should calm down,” Viru suggested.

“*You* shut up! It’s your damn fault that I’m in this mess right now, so you can shut your commo-box and *listen*.” The Umbaran bristled, but if the death-glare the red woman was making wasn’t enough, Qyreia’s recently-awakened telepathy conveyed enough rage to keep Keira from acting as rashly as her Guard clearly intended. “By the way mom, dad, did I introduce you to my *boss*, Keira Viru?”

“She’s your *boss*?” her mother exclaimed, while her father simply got another *“Kinky”* expression.

*Dammit dad, you’ve got a one-track mind*, she thought, suppressing a grin. She wanted to be angry for once; to put her foot down on who or whatever decided to wreck her day any more. Instead, she did what any good slave to her emotions does: she pushed all of her anxiety and emotion down into the pit of her mind, cramming the lid shut, right along with her pheromones and telepathy. The instant her parents felt the change, they knew she wasn’t staying another night.

“I need to go,” she said, trying to sound angry, but only coming out sullen. “I’ve got a contract to keep, and this lady needs protectin’.” She looked over to Keira. “I’ll be down in a minute with my things, and we can take off.”

“We don’t need to rush,” she said, trying to bring her mercenary back from her dark place.

“Apparently we *do*,” Qyreia said tersely.

She didn’t bring much, so packing was easy and quick. She hugged her parents on the way out, saying she would call more often and find some time to make a real visit, before almost dragging the significantly more powerful Jedi out. They made it all the way to the starport without a word said between them, save for the occasional attempts at starting a conversation by Keira, only to be promptly aborted. Not until they were in space and Qyreia was prepping their ship for hyperspace did the Umbaran make another real attempt.

“I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable, but I can’t just have you running off whenever you like. You’ve got eyes in the Summit, and you’re my personal guard at that.”

Qyreia, tears beginning to flow over and down her cheeks, nodded, grinning in that saddened, sarcastic manner. “Of course. How kriffing *silly* of me.” She shunted the lever for hyperspace forward, her eyes staring blankly at the white-streak stars stretching back. “Go take a bunk in the back. I need some time alone.”

“But…”

“I said go sit in the back!” she screamed, the recently applied block on her emotional telepathy coming loose just enough to make the ship seem to shake with a flurry of negativity. Her usual muted red pallor was vibrant, smooth cheeks glimmering as she just barely kept herself from bawling in front of her superior. Keira stood, ignoring the outburst, her own indignance finally flared.

“You forget yourself, *Yeoman*!”

Qyreia stood just as quickly, and would have thrown the pilot seat if it weren’t attached to the floor. Instead she spurted and sputtered incoherently as her mental circuits broke one by one, her face contorting into every expression of rage and anxiety that she had, until, squeezing her eyes together, she let everything out in a single burst.

“Frack it!”

Letting go of all reason, all sanity, the Zeltron did the one thing she had told herself she would never do. Hands clasped Keira’s face just before Qyreia’s lips met her Quaestor’s. Every ounce of anger, frustration, and anxiety that she had melded with the desires that she had kept to a bare minimum around the others at Sepros was poured into that single embrace. All or nothing, as the saying went.

When, after several seconds, she finally drew away, the look of abject confusion on the pale woman’s face meant that she had lost her gamble.

“I… I don’t underst-…”

“Just…. Just go,” Qyreia said, waving her off as she returned to the pilot seat. After several long moments, she could hear the soft steps of Keira’s feet walking smoothly away, finally falling off as the passenger compartment closed. Not wanting to collect the attention of her employer again, the mercenary kept her cries at bay. She forced herself to be content with a dead-eyed stare while a steady stream of tears rolled endlessly over her face as she piloted them both home to the Temple of Sorrow.