A Battle in Red

*Don’t panic… just a dark, spooky cave-thing. Nothing to be scared of… I hope.* Qyreia loved dark places that she was familiar with: they are good for hiding, sneaking in some sort of fun, or just to get away from the hustle and bustle of the mundane. This network of tombs and shrines, seemingly long-since out of use, was a great place for wayward persons to hide and seek refuge. As deep down as she was though, Qyreia was well past the proverbial comfort zone of the catacombs in which she found herself.

The soles of her booted feet scraped slowly along the dark passage, the only ready source of light being her hand-held torch. The ground was dry, almost sandy, and though the walls seemed damp and slick with ground moisture, they were as desiccated as the occasional bodies set into the various alcoves along the path. The electric light extended for quite a distance, yet still the darkness of the subterranean tunnel seemed to eat the very photons from the air, making even the closest concentrations of light on the walls seem almost dim. Every breath echoed so that it sounded as though there was another person always right behind the little Zeltron.

This didn’t help at all when the walls seemed to suddenly disappear as the tunnel emptied into a massive underground chamber. “Fraaaack,” she whispered, yet the sounds echoed more acutely, returning to her ears with a *ck-ck-ck* sound like a throaty old chuckle. However, what the tunnels lacked in light, the seemingly natural cave chamber reflected and refracted the light from her torch in a dazzling array of beams. Shunting the handle casing upward, the torch became a lantern which Qyreia set on the ground and, to her relief, filled the room with a comfortable amount of ambient light, if still a little dim from the sheer volume of space being filled.

*That’s better*, she thought as she made her way across the floor of the expansive gap in the bedrock. Along the edges of the floor to either side were scattered rocks and pieces of what appeared to be debris, as though this place had been inhabited on at least a semi-permanent basis some time long ago.

As her eyes peered through the weaving reflections, the Zeltron’s attention seemed captured by one particularly large amalgam of rock chunks. Hesitantly and with a peek over her shoulder, she stepped gingerly toward the heap and looked carefully through the various pieces of old architecture. As her fingers clawed through the small boulders and dust, a flash of something more coherent caught her eye. A little bit of digging and rearranging revealed a small statue, its design and character not resembling anything that Qyreia had seen previously.

“This could fetch a pretty price,” she murmured softly, weighing it in a hand as she used the other to return to her feet. When she looks up though, she watches as the last strands of the underground chamber flutter away before the new location she found herself in. She turned on her toes, looking at the familiar scenery. “I know this place,” she said to herself as she spun around and around, visually taking in the thick foliage among the rolling hills that towered about her. She was standing in a ravine or a draw, the ground interrupted by a brook that paused in a small pond in front of her. Lowering herself to the water’s edge, she could see fish that she knew were native to Zeltros swimming through the nigh crystalline water. When she looked up though, taking to her feet once more, she saw something that was not normal, yet still very familiar.

Too familiar in fact, and that was what made it so strange. It was her.

What could only be described as a mirror image of herself, yet as physically present as her own corporeal self, stood haughtily on the opposite bank several yards away. The same short stature; the same reddish skin; the same short hair that lengthened at the top – it was all the same, right down to the color of her doppelganger’s clothes. When her other self stepped forward, the sudden break of the observatory stand-off made Qyreia balk and juke in reverse.

*This can’t be real. One minute I’m spelunking for some loot in a bunch of old caves, the next thing I’m back on Zeltros looking at a carbon-copy of me! What the frack is going on?!*

“What are you staring at, pipsqueak?” the other her called from across the pond.

“Who are you calling ‘pipsqueak’ you scarlet squirt?!”

“Is that honestly the best you can muster?” She began circling the pond and Qyreia followed suit, keeping her at the opposite end. “Sounds more like bad innuendo than a proper insult.”

“Who are you?”

“I am *you*. Well, a *better* you, truth be told. All of your strengths – few though they are – and none of your weaknesses.”

“How is this happening? You can’t be a clone…”

“I’m not a *clone*, you idiot! I. Am. You!” She made a dash around the pond to close the distance, but Qyreia made her own sprint and kept the distance between them until they slowed to their previous, ponderous walk. “What are you afraid of, little bird? Scared I might pluck your wings?”

“To be honest, I’m more afraid of any latent sexual tension that my alter ego might have for the non-alter-ego me.” *Finally a decent comeback!*

The other woman stopped in her pursuit, and Qyreia wondered – as she halted as well – who was the actual mirror image here. It was starting to seem like *she* was the one copying the other.

“Enough of these games, you chuff-sucking bugslut! Once you’re gone, then it’s *my* life to play with.”

“Oh, bork me,” Qyreia muttered, suddenly aware of what that statue had done. It didn’t make a copy so much as pull a separate consciousness from her – one that wanted to win possession of their mutual body. *That would also explain why the statue isn’t here anymore.*

The alter-Zeltron burst into a sprint and leaped over half the diameter of the pond, leaving little more than five or six meters of waist-deep water to wade through. Without hesitation, Qyreia’s hand snapped to her hip for her blaster, only to feel the fabric of her clothes and no blaster. *Lovely*. All those times that she skipped out on her martial arts classes as a child suddenly seemed so important as a mirror image of herself surged through the water. *Though if I had knew some fancy fighting, she would too, so this works out to my advantage*, she thought with almost confident optimism.

Her temporary complacency earned her a solid fist to her left cheek.

Almost thrown off of her feet, the Zeltron managed to recover enough to not slide or roll into any rocks or trees and just barely avoided a stomping kick aimed at her head. *Holy Hutt-humper that was close!* She regained her feet with just enough time to raise her arms and catch her opponent’s knuckles on her forearm. Pain zipped all the way up the limb, but only briefly, and with a rapidly receding intensity in the face of more potential contact. The adrenaline surge that she was starting to actively feel was likely helping as well.

“You’ve been hogging this life for too long,” her body-double quipped. “So many parties; so many lovers; so much life *wasted* on you!” She threw a kick into Qyreia’s lower leg to try and catch her off balance, only to meet a solidly-planted shin. She grabbed at her arms, attempting to get past the frantic guard. “You’re hardly fit to call yourself a Zeltron!”

“I’m not *like* them!” Qyreia nearly screamed as she planted her knee in her opponent’s groin. When her other-self doubled over, she grabbed the gasping head and, bringing her leg back again, planted her knee square into her rival’s face, sending her sprawling backward into the grass. Qyreia was about to pounce when her double kicked her legs out and spring-boarded Qyreia mid-air into the middle of the pond. Both women recovered from their positions quickly, but it was the doppelganger that had the advantage of the attack as she launched herself into the water. With the surface reaching up to their chests, it was little more than a frantic grappling match.

“Aren’t you though? Just because you don’t give in doesn’t mean you don’t *want* it,” the twin groaned as their arms thrashed at each other, spraying water in each other’s eyes in a vain attempt at distraction. “The only difference between you and me is that I want to live life like a Zeltros *should*.”

“Only *you*,” Qyreia yelled as she snuck an elbow up from under her opponent’s jaw, “would *kill* for it!”

With her opponent stunned in the water, Qyreia clutched at the double’s scalp and head, submerging the creature waist deep into the depths. She shifted just enough to keep the other-her from gaining any footing as she thrashed beneath the surface, a torrent of bubbles surging up between her arms. Her shoulders ached as they strained to hold their quarry in place, yet the greatest pain was in her eyes. Through the sopping mat of hair that clung to her face, Qyreia could not make out what was water draining onto her features and what were tears. Every fresh jolt or shudder from below brought forth another anguished sob, until the water lay still about her save for the ripples from the hot salty droplets that stung her cheeks and eyes.

No more movement answered her grasp. No more fight was left in her.

She couldn’t look at what she had done. It felt wrong to use her hands, yet they knifed through the water and clawed at the muddy shore, pulling her out of the now-murky pond. She huddled, fetal, clutching her knees to her chest, her whole body shuddering from an indescribable feeling of loss. The world itself – the comforting scenes of Zeltron – seemed to slip slowly away as she lost herself in her own mind among stifled sobs.

When she came to, everything was dim and the world around her smelled like stale rock, if rock could even *be* stale. Qyreia wiped at the crust that had collected on her eyes, blinking away the remaining disorientation to reveal that she was back in the cavernous chamber of the catacombs, the mysterious statue lying on the stone hardly a meter from where her hand had been.

Every muscle in her body seemed to ache as she stood on shaky legs, the very effort dizzying her as she gained her feet. Off at the other end of the chamber glowed her flashlight, exactly where it had been when she had set it down. As she surveyed her surroundings, she felt her hands shaking. She lifted them, staring at the trembling fingers and arms that held them, then shifting her gaze to the statue on the ground. Without thought, she took a sudden step and reached out her hands as though to lunge and break the thing with nothing but her own muscle, only to stop at that first step.

Her gaze fell upon those outstretched hands, and she withdrew them to her side, bringing her other foot up to stand heels-together, the statue nearly at the toes of her boots. A boiling hatred burned up from within and, feeling the heavy weight on her belt, pulled her blaster pistol from its holster and let loose into the stationary stone.

All that remained was slag and bits of rock, unrecognizable as something that was once some mysterious statue from days gone by. Without a word, Qyreia turned and left the cavern, pausing only to collect her light, leaving the broken pieces in the dark – where they belonged.