***The Red Inquisition***

*Beep beep beep beep beep beep…*

Groaning as she rolled over, a red hand reached out toward the nightstand and fumbled for the button that would turn on the comm unit. An empty bottle fell to the floor, thumping softly onto the carpet, while other detritus was shuffled around until she found the comm unit.

“M’yello,” she said sleepily as the communicator came to life.

*“Professional Arronen?”*

“Speaking,” the Zeltron responded a little more tersely. “What is it?”

*“There’s someone here to see you, ma’am. Says she’s from the office of the Voice. Her credentials check out.”*

*Why would the Voice want to talk to me?* “Alright. I’ll be… transport security office?”

*“Yes ma’am.”*

“Got it. I’ll be over there in about ten minutes.” The duty officer confirmed and closed the line, leaving the Zeltron to roll over and gently wake the woman sleeping next to her. “Hey Keira,” she whispered, “I’ve gotta go.”

“Mm, yeah I heard,” the half-breed said with an odd level of alertness for one so drowsy sounding. “What do you think they want?”

“Search me. Haven’t even worked with the Contract Bureau for a few months, so I don’t know what the guys from the Council want to do with me.”

“Be careful. The Dark Council doesn’t send representatives lightly. If something happens…”

“I will call you straight away,” the mercenary said, placing a gentle kiss on the Jedi’s temple before getting up to dress.

With practiced agility, the former Black Guard threw on her standard attire of khaki pants and white shirt, topped by her well-used leather jacket. As a precaution, she strapped her heavy blaster pistol to her hip and slipped her boot knife subtly into place and out of sight. *There, that should do the trick.* In truth, she felt no immediate need to arm herself, but force of habit coupled eerily with her former Quaestor’s words. Even walking toward the security office held its own suspense in the mercenary’s mind, wondering what this surprise visit was about.

When she reached the checkpoint just outside the hangar area, Qyreia found a guard speaking casually with two rather well-dressed people. The first, a human female, had long blonde hair tightly pulled into a ponytail, with nary a loose strand to be seen. She stood just a little taller than the Zeltron, although part of that she attributed to the thick heels in the woman’s shoes. The other was a tall Falleen male, rather nondescript despite the rarity with which the mercenary had seen their species, but his appearance was less showy than most others, matching the professional business attire of his female compatriot instead.

*That bugger didn’t say there were* two *of them.*

“Professional Arronen I presume?” the blonde asked with rehearsed diplomacy and a well-trained smile. Qyreia had worked in the service industry long enough to know the expression.

“Yes? And you are?”

“I’d prefer we speak somewhere private, if you don’t mind.”

“Your *name*, or I’m going to have this security officer show you to the first shuttle off this *planet*.”

“I told you she was smart,” the Falleen said amiably in a deep voice. “I am Maxis Kzad, and this is my associate, Adrian Jules. It is a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Arronen. Word of your exploits reaches even us in the fleet.”

“Alright there, smooth-talker, cool your engines,” Qyreia said, an amused grin forming on her lips. “Why’d you call me down here this early in the morning?”

“We have introduced ourselves,” Jules said politely but firmly. “May we now speak somewhere less open?”

“Of course. Right this way.”

With a motion for them to follow, she led the pair down several halls to a section of the Temple of Sorrow where private conference rooms were located. They were simple, with only a central table and six chairs in each. What’s more, they were quiet and secluded, and would offer all the privacy in the world that these two persons seemed so intent on.

“So,” she said as the pair sat adjacent to each other at the table, “what does the Voice want with me?”

“My my, no time for pleasantries with this one,” Kzad said with a broad smile.

“We are here on business, *Chief Inquisitor*.”

“Ah kriff,” Qyreia said, rolling her eyes, “you’re one of *those* people.” She sat lazily into a chair opposite the Inquisitorius duo. “So, I assume there’s some top-secret bantha fodder that needs to be taken care of?”

“In a manner of speaking,” the human said, pulling out a datapad from her bag and placing it neatly on the table. “What do you know of the Undesirables?”

“Well, first off, they don’t taste like chicken; don’t believe the rumors.” The joke fell on apparently deaf ears, as the only response was a continued smirk from the Falleen. The blonde simply expressed her disdain for the joke with a flat expression.

“Right… I will get straight to the point then. There has been some intelligence received that puts you at the scene of several cases of escaped Undesirables.” Her finger gingerly woke the datapad, opening a file and sliding it over to the Zeltron. “I’ll just let you look that over for a moment.”

Qyreia’s eyes carefully looked over the screen, scrolling through the different files with exacting efficiency. Some were little more than hearsay-grade accusations, but several stood out with her at the helm of transports and small cargo runners evading the Brotherhood authorities. *Knew I shouldn’t have used my actual ID line to try and get by*, she chided herself. Out of all the stacked evidence, however, they lacked any audiovisual proof of it actually being her. The Inquisitorius was looking for a rat, and they were the cats let loose to find her.

Her eyes turned up, a charming smile curving her lips. “This… Gotta say,” she waved the datapad, “this is probably the *worst* intel report I’ve ever read.”

“You are clearly implicated,” Jules began, but Qyreia cut her off.

“You don’t have snot. All you have is a clearance code, used a few times, on ships running these ‘Undesirables,’ as you like to call them.”

“And what would *you* call them?” Kzad said smoothly. His steady gaze seemed to drink in the Zeltron without looking away from her eyes. It was at the same time alluring and eerie.

“Stick to the point at hand, Maxis,” the mercenary said with a little of her own coyness. “If you’re going to accuse me of something, say it already, but please tell me you have something more than *this* to pin me with.”

The human’s expression soured and her voice hardened. “You may be of equal rank to us in the Inquisitorius, Ms. Arronen, but we have higher authority here, so kindly watch your tongue.”

“Or *what*? What are you gonna do, huh? You come in here, wake me up and stupid-o’clock, and then throw some half-cocked charges from a super-secret society at me?! Get to the kriffing point or get out of my face.”

“So you deny that is your identification code, then?”

“No, that’s my ID on every one of them.” The Zeltron was trying to balance her fluster with her amiability, but it was difficult to walk the thin line between. “What you *don’t* have is solid proof that it was *me* that gave the code.”

“How so?” The Falleen cocked his head, curious and seeming to listen.

“There’s no audio to match my voice, and no visual confirmation that I was the one flying these tugs you’ve got listed.”

He seemed to ponder this for a moment before turning to his associate. “I would speak with her alone, if I may.”

“Be my guest,” she said, clearly agitated as she stood and left the room.

“What crawled up *her* choobies?”

“You *do* realize that we are here to investigate you, correct? You are being charged with treason against your fellow Inquisitors. Adrian is a fine woman, but she does not have the same sensibilities as you or I.”

“What are you getting at, Maxis?” The Zeltron felt eerily comfortable with the first-name basis with this other Inquisitor, though it helped that he wasn’t trying to eat her head off like the human seemed to be.

“If *you* are not guilty, then help us find out who *is*. Someone had enough access to your files to pull up your personal data, copy it, and then use it for these smuggling operations.”

“You’ve got all this information… How much work for the Inquisitorius do you think I’ve actually *done*?”

He smiled. “Fair enough. You are not exactly the most active agent we have in the society, but you *do* have skills.”

“And what do you wanna bet,” Qyreia said, laying on a sultry smile, “that you’re not just interested in getting into my head, hm?”

“Is it working?” he said, leaning forward invitingly.

The Zeltron tapped a finger cutely on his reptilian nose. “Nnnope.” The look of confusion on the Falleen’s face was priceless. “Come on! Did you really think using pheromones on a *Zeltron* would *work*? I’d heard you Falleen were full of yourselves, but *come on*!”

Kzad sat back in his seat with a devious smile – one that did not imply friendly intent. Before Qyreia could even move a hand to her pistol, the door opened and in walked Jules, quickly closing the distance. Her attention split, the mercenary didn’t even see the Falleen reach across the table to grab her by her collar and pull her forward, almost on top of the furniture.

“The frack are you doing?!”

“Our duty,” he said before throwing the Zeltron backward into the human’s waiting arms. The blonde was stronger than she looked, and just as quick, knotting her arms around Qyreia’s so that she could neither move nor flail.

“Not so tough now, are you?” the human hissed in her ear as the merc tried to struggle. “Go ahead, keep fidgeting. You’ll just be tired during your interrogation.”

“Why don’t you let go, bugslut, and see how tough I *really* am?”

“That will be quite enough, Ms. Arronen,” Kzad said in his characteristically calm demeanor. “You Zeltrons were always prone to passionate displays, but I can assure you that your bravado is quite useless.”

“Get over here and say that to my face, you lizard-lipped sleemo.”

The Falleen cocked a smirk and, as if without effort, shoved the table aside and into the far wall, slipping through the chairs effortlessly. *Sithspit… not good.* He drew close, going so far as to reach out a hand and brush aside the hair falling into the mercenary’s face.

“I must say that despite the uninhibited emotion, your people *do* possess a certain allure that even humans cannot match.” Qyreia pulled her head aside and away from his touch. “As to your query on evidence though, I am afraid that we *do* have images showing you boarding a refugee ship and even firing on Inquisitorius commandos.”

“Those people were innocent civilians and should have been *protected* by the Brotherhood!”

“The Grand Master thinks otherwise.”

“The *Grand Master* can suck my chuff.”

In a blink, Qyreia launched her head back into the tightly-positioned face of the human holding her, knocking her back and off balance. Before the Falleen could react, the Zeltron launched her feet off the ground and, using the human as a base, quasi-dropkicked Kzad square in the chest, sending him sprawling onto the floor. Once her feet landed, she stomped down on Jules’ and managed to wriggle free.

At least until Maxis recovered and stretched out his hand.

An invisible force clutched at the Zeltron’s throat, immobilizing her and choking her just enough to let a sliver of air through. She fought at it, almost clawing at her neck before the human recovered and once again pinned her arms. Panic shone in the Zeltron’s eyes, and it brought a smile to the Falleen’s face.

“*Now* you see why this is futile, Qyreia. I must admit, I did not expect a mundane such as yourself to be so resilient, but I suppose that is why you bear the mark of the Black Guard on your arm.” She struggled against the hold of the woman behind her as she tried to suck in air, but neither venture brought any success. “Cease your fighting or you’ll asphyxiate that much quicker.”

“Krff… yuuu…” she choked out through puffed cheeks.

The world started to shrink and go dark, dizziness nearing total blackout as she continued to struggle in vain. *Keira… help…* Her eyelids went limp and all was about to fade when the pressure magically lifted from her throat and her body instantly reacted, sucking in air with alarming quickness. Hacking and coughing, Qyreia thought she had been saved; that her former Quaestor had somehow heard her.

Then she felt the steely grip of Jules’ arms around her. The image of Kzad standing before her came into focus. He had only let go of the ethereal grasp on her windpipe.

“Let’s try this again…”

“Kiss my choobies, you Hutt-humping gravel maggot!”

“Adrian?” At the Falleen’s invitation, the human tightened her grip, the slight pressure change pulling Qyreia’s shoulders out and back with sickening pain. This time, the Zeltron screamed. “Are you ready to listen now?”

“Eat me, jerk-ass,” she growled, still wincing from the blonde’s initial assault on her joints, which only resumed as soon as she finished the last syllable.

“I guess that we need to apply a different sort of pressure.”

With an invisible hand, he drew the table back between them, onto which the human slammed Qyreia face-down. Once again she was pinned, only this time she was bent over the table, her thighs flush with the edge of the furniture. Behind her, she could hear the woman chuckle softly.

“What’s so funny, *schutta*-aah!”

“Looking at you like this… who’s the bugslut now?”

“That is enough Adrian,” Maxis said calmly. “Now,” he said, leaning low, “who else in Naga Sadow has been fighting the Inquisitorius? We know that you’ve been helping the dissidents.”

“Who’ve I been helping?” she said, her words squished like her cheek against the table. “Well… there’s your mother, for one. Every night for three weeks strai-yaaagh!”

Jules had kicked her thighs into the wood, the Zeltron’s muscle a poor buffer as both it and the bone beneath felt the bruising. Qyreia tried to struggle, only to receive another debilitating kick, bringing tears to her eyes as the pain pushed her threshold well past what she could withstand without cracking at least a little. Her lungs panted for breath, trying to recover, as the Inquisitors watched in temporary silence.

“You know, I’m glad you picked this room, Qyreia. Out of the way, and practically sound proof. We can talk *aaall* day without interruption.” A whimper of pain slipped past her lips and the Falleen smiled. “Perhaps the great Red Qek isn’t so powerful after all.”

“Y’know how I refer to Force users like you, Kzad?” He leaned low to listen to the quiet grumbling. “Eff youuu.”

He shook his head. “Raise her, please.” The human pulled on her arms and lifted her torso from the table. “Thank you.”

In one swift movement, the Force user brought the back of his hand hard across Qyreia’s face, the faintest of *cracks* audible as he impacted her cheekbone. As if to add insult to injury, she was throttled back onto the table, the broken side of her face slamming into the surface to elicit another shock of excruciating pain. With a motion of his hand, he signaled Jules to pull the blaster from her hip holster, handing it respectfully to her partner. The Zeltron’s eyes went wide, watching the weapon with equal parts care and fear.

“Clearly direct stimulus is not sufficient. Perhaps what we need is to destroy something you love.” That raised her head from the table enough to catch the green alien’s attention. “Perhaps former-Quaestor Viru? I’ve heard you two are quite close, and what better way to motivate a Black Guard than by killing her charge right in front of her?”

“You leave her aloneargh!” She had tried to kick at the human’s legs, only to have her own leg bent at the knee – calf to thigh – and pressed painfully into the table’s edge. The Zeltron’s teeth ground together as she struggled to concentrate through the pain. “If you hurt her – agh! – I swear by every living thing in this galaxy that – yegah! – you… you’ll wish you’d have never even *heard* the name Qyreia-aah!”

“I already do. This has been so fruitless thus far.” He looked up to his partner. “I will return shortly.”

“I’ll keep her here.”

“You get back here when I’m talking to you-aaaagh!”

He turned at the door. “Please be quiet,” he said soothingly. “We don’t want your Clanmates to hear, do we?”

“You so much as *look* at her,” Qyreia sputtered through pain-wracked breaths, “I will *kill* you, you son of a b-yeeargh!”

“Thank you Jules.”

*Yeah*, the mercenary thought, her contorted hand finally in line with the rim of her boot, *thanks Jules.*

The motion was awkward but quick as she drew the knife from its sheath, twisting her wrist just enough to make a shallow jab into the human’s arm. The sudden shock of pain forced the blonde to release her grip, allowing Qyreia to twist away and face the Falleen, whose back was still largely turned her way. He knew she was coming, and instantly brought up a hand to choke the air from her once again. What the reptilian did not expect was the blade flying through the air at him.

The wild throw struck Kzad in the eye, instantly breaking his concentration and releasing the mercenary before she could even lose any wind. Half-stumbling, she dashed over to the hunched alien, driving her throbbing knee square into his face as he dropped the blaster he had so confidently taken. Dropping down, Qyreia swept up the weapon and swung it around just in time to fire a shot point-blank into Jules’ gut. An already bloody hand reached down to cradle the smoking hole in her abdomen, staggering backward before tripping against the table and crashing to the floor.

*Your turn, Maxis.* Despite the swelling clouding the vision in one eye, the Falleen was hard to miss, still recovering from the initial onslaught. He was still in the process of pulling the knife from his eye when Qyreia shot away the hand at the wrist, causing the Force user to howl in pain. Just to be safe, she fired into his other arm, tearing it apart at the elbow. *No more chokey chokey for you.*

Still burning with pain in all of her joints, the Black Guard gingerly knelt down by the ad hoc amputee. He tried to turn away and crawl from her grasp, but she had the advantage of still owning her hands, and so pulled him onto his back. A knee to his collar both pinned and partially choked the Inquisitor as Qyreia grasped the knife – still in his eye socket – and twisted, calling forth a blood curdling scream from her victim. She twisted it again and again, replacing the knife into his gut when there was nothing left of his eye to destroy.

“I warned you,” the Zeltron growled as Kzad screamed, “that if you tried to hurt her, I would make you suffer.” She bent low so that her lips hovered by his ear. “When you get to hell, tell ‘em the Red Qek sent you.”

With a jerk, she tore the knife from his riven intestines and stood, gore dripping from the blade, before unceremoniously raising her blaster and firing into the Falleen’s head. The moans of the human behind her echoed among the disheveled furniture, and she considered quieting this second nuisance before reconsidering, instead opening the door and screaming for a medic. A whole cavalcade arrived within minutes as medical personnel and bystanders alike flocked the area. Before they could fully save the blonde woman’s life though, Qyreia stepped in to speak to the lead medical officer.

“I want her kept in that condition and sent back to the Council fleet.”

“Ma’am, she has to be properly stabilized, and…”

With a jerk, the Zeltron grabbed the aid-giver by the collar and yanked him within centimeters of her face. “Back to Voice, *just as she is*. Freeze her, put her in carbonite; I don’t care, but I want her to still be clutching her guts when she lands on their doorstep. *Understood?*”

“Y-yes ma’am.”

It was a cruel and vain hope that they would follow her instruction. Black Guard or not, she was not in a position to be making such demands. What was worse, word had reached Keira faster than expected, as the Jedi caught up with her lover before the Zeltron could get in the bacta bath.

“What the *hell* happened to you?!”

“Long story,” the mercenary said, wincing through the pain as her clothes were removed for the procedure. “Pretty sure I just declared a personal war against the Voice.”

“What?! Why?!”

“Like I said: long story.”

The facial swelling had largely gone down after the on-site treatment, so Keira was given full view of the Zeltron’s saddened expression. *I couldn’t let them hurt you*, she wanted to say. It was impossible to know if the former Quaestor heard the internal message, yet she approached all the same as tears streamed silently down Qyreia’s face. The pale arms moved slowly, surrounding the mercenary to embrace her. The need was too great for the bedraggled woman though, and she brought her arms around the Seer and held her tightly, despite the pain that seared in her joints.

“I-It’s alright, Qyreia,” the Jedi said, tenderly running her hand through the shimmering cobalt hair as the red woman quietly cried on her shoulder. “It’s okay. I’ve got you.”