***The Red Qek Strikes Back***

*Corellia, you heartless barve, why’s it always gotta be here that I end up?*

A Zeltron though she might have been, Qyreia wondered how she always managed to find her way back to the human-dominated planet instead of her homeworld. The latter seemed the more likely, and yet here she was, back in the place where she had made so many memories – both good and bad.

“At least I’m just going to CEC, then getting the frack outta here,” she muttered as she made her way toward the tram station.

Of everything that worried the mercenary about this mission, the location was not the top of the list. When the Pravusian resistance had called through encoded messages and dead-drop notes, even then she was not wholly worried. The Inquisition had hounded her on several occasions already, so these messages seemed rather innocuous compared to the previous half-handed attempts. The call for aid had sent her here, and that was what worried her: the Brotherhood couldn’t operate openly here, but reinforcements for the former Black Guard were also lightyears away.

Even on the melting pot of Corellia, the Zeltron stuck out like a sore thumb, which did not help her attempts at remaining incognito. The best thing she could hope for was speed and a diligent underground to get her sorted before the minions started coming out of the woodwork. As her eyes searched the seated and standing passengers alike, she tried to think of what to do in the event of an ambush. Would the enemy try to take her down before the link up, or wait until they were all gathered at the risk of being outgunned?

The way things usually went, probably both.

Nothing happened on the tram, though. Nor did anything transpire on the streets as Qyreia walked casually toward the area she had been told to wait. *These sympathizers must have a lot of eyes, ‘cause they gave me a big area to linger in.* Rather than a specific location, the contacts had made sure that the Zeltron would wander in a larger area of operation almost four square city blocks in area. Foot traffic was high in the streets and causeways, most bustling about to shop or grab some food in one of the many shopping blocs.

Lacking any further information, the mercenary took a seat at a nearby noodle shop and opted for some lunch while she thought through her next moves. *If it’s a CEC ship, then I can fly it, unless it’s one of their capital-line numbers.* The exact model of ship hadn’t been divulged, but she knew that if the sympathizers were from the Corporation, then it was likely one of their own makes. *Prob’ly a ‘vette. Those things are cheap enough that they can afford to unload one on something like this. Spend some time modding it, and it’d hold its own against some of the Brotherhood ships.*

She shook the thoughts from her mind a moment to enjoy the food set before her, grabbing a set of grub-sticks and snapping the wood pieces apart before digging in. The hot food tasted good and, like all the other patrons, she slurped at the noodles diligently, occasionally stopping to pick up a piece of meat or bundle of vegetables from the broth. At least she could enjoy some food that one couldn’t find in Brotherhood territory.

Nearly halfway through her lunch, the seat next to her was filled by a human who ordered with a thickly accented voice that sounded almost Mirialan. A quick glance revealed a darker, almost olive skin tone that would have made her rethink the ‘human’ observation if not for the lack of tattoos. Too quickly for her to avert her eyes, the man noticed her glimpse and turned in his seat.

“Hey there. Never seen *you* around here before.”

*Oh joy, one of* those *types.* “Used to live in Coronet. Meeting some friends here.” The Sadowan hoped that she might be able to shoo the human without making a fuss with short responses. It didn’t work as easily as she’d hoped.

“They not show yet?”

“…Not yet.” She looked down into her noodles and took up a mouthful to try to prevent any more talking.

“The whole Zeltron thing aside, you don’t look like you’re from around here.”

“Shanks. What wash your firsht clue?” she said, a thick trail of pasta dangling from her half-full mouth.

“You dress like a spacer, but you’re too well-kempt. Even your hair is neatly trimmed, despite the scruffy styling.” Qyreia paused and turned her head slowly, actually impressed by the observation. “I’m Hermes, by the way.”

Regardless of her relationship status, the Zeltron’s chest beat a little harder as the words came out like silk on her ears. “Q-Qyreia. I’m Qyreia.”

“A pleasure.”

Hermes’ food arrived and he began eating, allowing the Zeltron to collect herself a little. The human’s voice matched his looks, and it was hard for her to not be enamored. *Really hope that Keira can’t Jedi her way into my memories, ‘cause damn.* Once again, he caught her staring, and responded only with a coy smile that made Qyreia’s face turn just a little bit redder.

“So,” he said as he finished a mouthful of his food, “when were your friends supposed to show up?”

“Erm… Y’know, at this point I’ve no frackin’ idea.”

“They haven’t tried to reach you on your comm unit?”

“No, not yet.”

The human smiled in a way that seemed all too familiar, and yet it had a tinge of something else hidden behind it. “Well, my new friend Qyreia, care to take a walk with me while you wait? I promise I won’t bite.”

*That’s too bad*, she thought without realizing. *No! Bad Q!* “Sure. *Just* a walk?”

“Just a walk,” he reassured her.

Deep in the back of her mind, the mercenary thought this might be that trap she had been expecting so much. Muscles in her forearm tensed as though to prepare to draw her pistol at a moment’s notice, only to be suppressed by a concealed force of will; if anything, so as not to cause a scene in the small restaurant. It would be better to get some distance in case Hermes was, like many Brotherhood assassins, a Force user.

They each paid their bills and walked out, almost arm-in-arm for how close they were. Qyreia’s arm swung naturally at her side, yet every time her hand brushed by her DL-44, the hand’s swing slowed by a fraction. *When’s he gonna do it? When’s this Hutt-humper gonna try and get me?* It was hard for her to look at him and think that he was some sort of assassin though; too handsome, with a voice far too soothing to belong to that of a killer. At least, that’s what her hormones were telling her.

“So… you from Zeltros, or did your parents move somewhere?”

“Nope. Totally homeworld-grown and raised. What about you? Sorry, but I have to ask: you *look* human, and yet you don’t.”

Hermes laughed at that. “Well, it’s not the first time I’ve been asked that, but probably the most direct. No, I’m human. Corellian too. What’d you think? Mirialan?”

“Yeah… How’d you guess?”

“I spent a lot of time working with a group of Mirialan engineers who were trying to sell a ship design. Picked up their accent, and now I can’t get rid of it.”

“It suits you,” Qyreia said almost sheepishly, evoking another smile from her companion.

“Are you nervous?”

The Zeltron stopped, not because she was scared, but because she realized she *was* nervous, and she had no idea why. She *did* know who the cause of it was, and that made it all the worse.

*Huh*, she thought as he drew up to her, *he’s taller than me. Didn’t notice that before.* His hand came gently to her chin, and once more her heart beat faster; she knew what was coming. *I’m sorry Keira*, she thought as he bent down and kissed her. The mercenary could smell the soap on his skin; taste the heavy flavor of the noodles they’d eaten not minutes before. She couldn’t help but let a slip a slight whimper as he pressed harder. Qyreia’s head was swimming, but she couldn’t give in entirely – there were still agents about.

“See that little street over there?”

The Zeltron followed his head motion with her eyes. “Yeah?”

“What do you say we go down that way and wait for your friends?”

“S-sure,” she said airily. *Guess we’re going for broke*.

Taking her firmly by the hand – her firing hand at that – Hermes led Qyreia briskly away and down the darkened avenue. The mercenary wondered at where it was they were going, even as the human took one turn, then another, before entering through a nondescript door. *How far are we gonna go before we get down to business?* They walked down a long flight of darkened stairs and through another door that sealed shut behind them before the human finally stopped and released Qyreia’s hand.

“Are we good?”

“Yeah,” he said, sighing heavily, “we should be.” He turned toward the Zeltron. “Thank the Force, I was worried that wasn’t gonna work!”

“You’re tellin’ me,” she replied, thumbing away some of the leftovers at the corner of her lips. “That was… kind of intense back there.”

“Corellian overdrive kicked in. I’m glad you recognized the passphrase combo.”

“I was wondering how you were gonna question my origins twice in the exact order you did, but damn. They train you boys here at CEC right, don’t they?”

“Used to work for CorSec, so that was nothing.” He motioned toward another door. “Shall we?”

“I thought we’d never get to this part, the way you were kissing me.” *Keira is gonna be busy when I get back*, she mused as they made their way further into the compound.

Through this third door was a large, rather dimly-lit room that was far more lively than the décor suggested. People of all sorts were running about – humans, Selonians, Drall, Ithorians, Twi’leks and more – doing things that Qyreia knew had to do with fighting Pravus’ directive. As if it weren’t bad enough, it worried her that it so deeply affected beings all the way out in the Core Worlds. This was reaching farther than she had ever expected.

“You’re not from Odan Urr, right?” Hermes asked as they walked.

“No. The contacts preferred that, since Pravus is watching for them so closely, their workhorse be someone from another Clan.”

“Smart of them. Would’ve preferred a human since we blend in better with a crowd, but you definitely know your way around an… operation.”

“Make any jokes or mention of that kiss,” Qyreia said with a wry grin, “and you can forget about having children.”

“Understood, ma’am!” He laughed off her hostility, but she knew he would comply, as much for her sake as his own.

As it turned out, the hideout was located beneath a hotel, so their movements would be well masked by the life signs above them, and the pair’s movements in the “back door” even more subtle. When asked if the mercenary knew how to fly a CR90, she could only say she’d *seen* them fly, if that was any indicator. *I know small ships and freighters, not the big boys that you all design.* On the far end, Qyreia met a handful of her crew that would be doing most of the actual flying and running of the vessel. Like the others, they all came from a variety of races and backgrounds, but they all had the same goal: help the fight against Pravus.

Well, judging by how Hermes was watching the Zeltron, there was *one* more goal within the group, but one that would go unanswered.

They then went down, via grav lift, into the depths of the city. The construction suggested it was a sewer of some sort, but there was no smell save for mildew, so it must have long-since fallen out of use. They went down and down, until Qyreia started to wonder just how far down they were going – how much further they *could* go. She was about to ask her new compatriots where this ship was supposed to be when the dark vertical tunnel opened up to a vastly larger horizontal one, and her questions were answered.

Just barely fitting inside of the enormous tube was the illuminated shape of a CR90 corvette, its landing struts sharply angled to accommodate the curved surface of the old sewer.

“Do I *want* to know how you got this thing down here?”

“Very carefully,” a Drall crewmember said. “And you’re going to be the one to take her to her new owners.”

“She’s pretty.”

The words barely escaped her lips, hushed as they were, but the crew around her – many somehow connected with Corellian Engineering, smiled at the appreciation of their work. None of them had designed the ship, with the blueprints at least sixty years old by then, but they had smuggled and pieced the ship together from the bottom up in the dank pit. They wanted to see their creation fly like she was meant to.

“What’re we waiting for?” Qyreia asked. “Let’s get this show on the road!”

It would be another hour before the vessel was fully ready to go, giving the Sadowan plenty of time to get to know the rest of the crew. They would be running a skeleton set of fifteen-some personnel; hardly half of a fully-operational warship complement for its class. *If we come under fire, we’re gonna be in a tight spot; especially if they try to board us.* To her relief at least, the crew was well-acquainted with the vessel’s operations, so the Zeltron would be more of a glorified babysitter for the operation. What they had in technical know-how, though, they lacked in actual experience operating the ship; even less-so in combat. It would definitely be an interesting trip.

It was a strange feeling, being the captain of a ship that actually had a crew of more than one or two, even if it was more of an honorary post for the merc. Still, when she stood on the bridge and watched the steady process of lifting off, there was a yearning in her chest to keep the vessel for herself and see what she was really made of. The sickeningly slow pace of getting the ship out of the many kilometers of tunnels tempered her fire somewhat.

“Are we making any turns or elevation changes?” she asked the helm with anxious curiosity.

“No ma’am, but you might have noticed it’s a tight fit in here?”

“If the Brotherhood is looking for this ship, then we need to move quicker. I’ll bet my credits that these chuff-suckers’ scanners can get this far down, and if they *are* looking, they’ll see a big ol’ ship going at a nice and easy pace for them to catch up to.”

“So what are your orders, *captain*?” a Selonian said with a small degree of derision in the title.

“Set a steady course straight through the tunnel and give us all available speed.”

“I think our friends in Odan Urr want this ship in *one piece*, not one hundred.”

“Just do what she says,” the Drall she had spoken with earlier said, the creature now manning the gunnery station for the vessel. “I don’t want to be a sitting womp rat with those guys around.”

There were hushed mumbles, but the helm did as bid and increased throttle until they were speeding faster than Qyreia had thought possible for a ship of its size, and all down a comparatively small subterranean tunnel. The tight confines made everyone nervous, but the speed bolstered the Sadowan’s resolve just a little more. *C’mon baby, show me what you’ve got.* Hermes was in engineering, so she knew the ship’s functions were in good hands at least. Soon enough, there was a pinprick of light that, at their speeds, quickly grew and grew until it enveloped them, the ship bursting from the side of a deep slope well away from the cityscape.

Knowing that Brotherhood forces would be watching, the ship was first directed on a random but safe vector out of the Corellian sector. The last thing they wanted was to bring the ship, only for the Jedi recipients to be ambushed in the process. Loronar seemed the best direction to head, and from there make sever more feints until they felt safe enough to embark toward their actual destination.

When the ship dropped out of hyperspace just outside of Loronar, there was plenty of traffic for the crew to track, making it hard to tell if they were followed. They went at top-speed through the system, always watching their backs, only to see numerous other vessels clogging the sensors. There was no way for them to tell who was who.

“Get us to our next waypoint. Galactic north, just off of Quellor.”

“Aye,” said the helm, less terse this time. “You know your star directions.”

“Comes from spending a lot of time as a trader.”

The ship cut across the expanse of space from one trade lane to another, landing outside the Quellor system with relative easy. The colony was well-populated, but they were far enough out of sensor range to catch the eye of any onlookers in the planetary defense force. *Come on, you rat-fink bastards. Show your faces.*

The ploy seemed to work, as one by one, a squadron of a mix of starfighters and boarding transports. *You don’t run smuggling operations without learning how the police forces like to catch their prey*, Qyreia mused as the ships circled just outside of effective range. The ships were a medley, but they were all powerful military-grade ships that clearly denoted their affiliation. It took no instruction for the tactical stations to ready their systems – guns came online and shields were given extra juice in preparation for the initial strike.

“Miss Arronen,” the human manning comms said, “they’re contacting us.”

“Audio only, but keep us muted unless I signal.”

“Aye ma’am.”

Speakers flicked to life as a nondescript voice came over the soundwaves. “Professional Qyreia Arronen, you are in violation of the Grand Master’s directive that…”

“He’s posturing,” Qyreia said as the hunter continued to speak. “Target their transports and blow them away!”

“Aye aye!”

“…aiding the vile Jedi… What are you doing?! Evasive maneuvers!”

“That’s *Privateer* Arronen, you kriffing earworm!” she yelled with a rapid motion to comms before having them cut off again. Qyreia didn’t have to know how to fly the ship – she just had to know what she wanted to do with it.

The initial fusillade destroyed one of the transports and severely crippled the other, while another fighter took some nasty damage of its own. *Two ships down, ten to go.* Corvettes of this variety were well-used against pirates and smaller interdiction. Under normal circumstances, the ship might have even been on par with the Brotherhood vessels. As it was, they were still heavily outmatched. Guns from the CR90 interchanged fire with the starfighters furiously, the smaller vessels weaving in and out of the slower turbolaser fire, while the corvette soaked up the hits in its comparatively powerful shields.

“Ma’am, we keep getting hit like this, and we’re going to start seeing ruptures in the hull!”

“Focus your fire on that transport! I don’t want to have to fight off a boarding party *and* these fighters!”

“You’re not the one that has to shoot ‘em,” the Drall grumbled as he tried to compensate for the evasive maneuvers. “The fighters are messing with the targeting when I’m going for the transports too. They’re too fast.”

“Aim about fifteen… make that twenty degrees off their noses. That should lead the targets enough for you to hit.”

“How do you know?!”

“Honey,” Qyreia said, walking up as fire jostled the inertial dampers, “I may not be good with cap-ships, but I know my way around a blaster – and these guns are mighty big blasters.”

The Drall stared at her for a moment then returned to the console. “Aye aye, capn’.”

“And you at the helm,” the mercenary shouted, “keep that tail end of ours moving. I’ve trailed enough CorSec ships to know there’s a massive blind spot back there.”

The Selonian confirmed the order, not sure how this random Zeltron could know so much about Corellian ships and their capabilities. Qyreia was, deep down, equally surprised. She’d had plenty of run-ins with Corellian ships – from flying on them to flying away from them – but in the heat of the moment, her head seemed remarkably calm. *Must be all that time in the Brotherhood is finally paying off.* Even when the shields were breached and the hull began taking hits, she kept a cool head over the desk jockeys that were only tasting battle for the first time.

“Just keep shooting,” she’d told the gunner Drall. “Don’t give them a meter to work with.”

Hermes called up several times, asking why he was frantically running around the ship and having to fix it already. Slowly though, one by one, the Brotherhood ships were destroyed or damaged to a point near destruction, and the corvette came out as the final victor. No ship was allowed to leave, even if it meant destroying the handful of ships trying to flee. They couldn’t afford to let their location leak out. It seemed heartless to the engineer-based crew, but they knew it was necessary. If they were attacked again, it would be with more troops and bigger ships.

“We did it!” came the general cry from the bridge.

“*You* did it,” Hermes emphasized toward Qyreia. He didn’t even give her a warning when he scooped her up in his arms and kissed her with more energy than he had back on Corellia. For a brief moment, the Zeltron forgot where she was and even leaned into the embrace. Several pounding heartbeats later though, she came to her senses and, with a playful smile, slapped the human hard across the cheek, sending up laughter throughout the bridge.

Adrenaline was still pumping through Qyreia’s veins and that of everyone else when she gave the order to jump to hyperspace. Despite the victory, they would continue their evasive maneuvers for as long as they felt necessary, until there were no ships that could possibly have followed their flight path. It would add almost a dozen hours to their trip, but one close call was enough for everyone.

*“Keira,”* the former Black Guard typed in a message to the Force user back on Sepros, *“you had better be ready for a long night when I get back. It’s been a rough day, and I’ve got just the thing to let off some steam.”*