***The Making of a Mercenary***

No path is chosen upon a single instance of one’s life – it is forged from experience; trial and error that can sear itself onto the very soul like a burning brand, that takes shape over time to create the larger picture. Likewise, it is no more set in stone than the shape of a snowflake or the roll of a wave, waxing and waning with the changes in life that can turn one path down another.

The path of Qyreia Arronen began on Zeltros, a planet renowned for its hedonism and state of near constant revelry. She was born into this culture and, until her teen years, was as engrained into it as she was ignorant of the outward image that Zeltron society garnered. As a child, she played and enjoyed all the sensory things that children take for granted, absorbing every experience and lesson like a sponge, relishing in the rewards that the adults would pass down in the form of sweets or welcomed praise. As she grew, the sight of her peers began to draw out more nuanced thoughts: boys were handsome and the girls were beautiful, and she learned to kiss with both.

At fourteen, reaching a point of maturity and freedom she had previously not experienced, the young Zeltron accompanied her friends to the inner districts of their city in pursuit of fun and the joys that chance might bring. Qyreia was one of the youngest of the group and had never entered the more populous sectors of town without her parents, much less without some specific destination in mind, so walking amongst the throngs of people – Zeltron and alien alike – was an overwhelming experience of wonder.

Dressed in attire typical for a Zeltron – form fitting and revealing – she walked the streets in comfort. “What’re *those* people?” she asked one friend, pointing out a large-eyed alien she had never seen before.

“That’s a Rodian; and there’s a couple Duros next to him. Looks like merchants, judging by their clothes.”

“Ooh, nifty.” Her steely blue eyes looked around. “Hey look! A Hutt!” Qyreia’s friends gawked at the large alien whose size vastly overmatched theirs. Hutts were not an oddity on the planet, but they were rare enough that the uninitiated marveled at the creatures. “Where’s he going?”

The girl’s friends had turned their interest elsewhere though, so the young Arronen ran off to follow the alien through the throng. She had always liked the starport and the other aliens, finding an odd fascination with how their moods melded with their Zeltron hosts’. Her feet carried her down paths she had never trod, past buildings she had never seen, with eyes that watched her with expressions she had never witnessed. *What sort of place is this*, she wondered as the Zeltrons deeper into the locale seemed more and more lightly dressed; their motions and gestures more sensual.

As these things processed in Qyreia’s mind, the word *cafarel* – the Zeltron word for courtesan, or the less savory term of prostitute – came up from her memory. Suddenly it all made sense. The stares that the humans and other aliens offered were not ones of curiosity toward the red-tinted humanoids; their friendly gestures not ones intended for the normal sort of party that the young Zeltron was familiar with. The atmosphere was mind-numbing, heady, even overpowering… and it scared her.

“Hey there sweet thing,” a human said, reaching out to take her hand and draw her in. “Haven’t seen *you* here before. You up for some fun?”

Qyreia understood and yet didn’t understand what was happening, her mind at odds with itself. She could feel eyes on her as much as she could feel this man’s hands on her shoulders. *This is wrong*. Without a word she pulled away and ran as fast as she could back toward familiar territory – back toward home.

Zeltron society was built, thanks to their very biology, on seeking out pleasure. Their emotion-based telepathy even made negative emotions quietly shunned. Yet Qyreia gradually closed herself off from the rest of her people after seeing how the sampling of the galaxy at large perceived them as she had witnessed that day. Worriedly, her parents coaxed her out to parties and local get-togethers which their daughter quietly suffered through. The advances of the boys, and at times girls, no longer seemed so innocent or enjoyable; the parties no longer held the same allure as they had before. Everything around her seemed to crumble from what it had been in her mind – relationships appeared fleeting while the nigh constant partying looked to her like a drug addict chasing a high.

Night after night passed with Qyreia staring at her ceiling, ashamed for her people that they had devolved into this state, and she hated herself for feeling this way. These were the people that had raised her, and had nothing but good intentions for her. Yet she couldn’t get over the feeling that all others from off-world only saw sex-crazed party animals, causing a single thought to repeat itself over and over in her mind:

“I need to get out of here.”

When she turned eighteen and a legal adult by galactic standards, her parents asked what Qyreia would like for her birthday. Her answer was one they did not expect: their daughter wanted to leave home.

“But… why do you want to leave? Do you have to go *right now*?” her mother had asked worriedly. This was supposed to be a time of celebration, and yet their daughter was going to do so by tearing herself away from those who loved her.

“I want to see the galaxy,” Qyreia half-lied. Her love of meeting new people had never waned, even if she trusted their intents somewhat less than before. “I love Zeltros, but there’s so much to see out there! The wars have calmed down, so it should be okay to travel and… Mom, dad, I can’t just stay here my whole life.”

“I know, hon,” her father said. He was always the supportive one when it came to Qyreia’s odder requests. “We’ll get you some travel gear and some credits to start you off.”

“You’re just going to let her leave?!” It was odd to see her mother so affected, usually being the one to press the positive emotions harder than her father did.

“You can’t stop the girl; she’s got to make her own path. She takes after you that way, you know.”

Her mother rolled her eyes, but it brought a smile to her lips. “Alright, alright.” She sighed, “If it’s what you want, then I can’t say no. Just make sure you keep in touch.”

“Of course, mom!”

Within a week, Qyreia had packed a handful of her more portable belongings and a large travel bag’s worth of clothing. Her parents and some of the neighbors had gathered a good sum of credits that would see her through at least a month of travel plus expenses and, in true Zeltron fashion, they sent her off with a party.

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Knowing there were no free rides in the galaxy, the now-independent young woman made her way to Kuat in search of employment. Out on “the ring” of Kuat Drive yards, she tried her hand at the most prevalent job in the universe: cantina waitress. The job was short-lived however, and paid poorly so that Qyreia found herself quickly approaching debt with her housing office and, coincidentally, her employer.

“Three months you’ve been late on your rent, Qyreia,” the former Imperial engineer told her one day in his office. He had left the military to become a management officer of one of the many partitions of the ring, offering him quite a deep reach into the businesses and profits therein. He essentially owned the place.

“I’m already working overtime,” she said tiredly, fighting back the sleep she so desperately wanted. Three back-to-back shifts had worn her already slim figure down, compounded by similar streaks in previous weeks. “Besides, I’m still paying the full amount. You know I’m good for it.” She didn’t mention the pay cuts for every time she had swatted away a customer’s wandering hand, but her expression said as much.

“It would help if I didn’t have to comp every other meal or drink that you served.”

“It would *help* if they kept their *hands* off of me! Come on! You’re not being fair about this!” *I need the money. Don’t fire me.*

“Perhaps you need a change of occupation? I have other positions available,” he said nonchalantly changing the conversation’s direction as he thumbed a datapad.

“I’m… I can’t do that other work.” Qyreia looked down as her fingers interlocked nervously.

“Surely, as a Zeltron, you know something about *dancing*.”

Her blood boiled, but she kept the lid on the kettle so that the manager could only faintly sense it. “I’m not much of a dancer; especially *that* sort of… ‘dancing.’” She remembered the pay scales though, and how the dancers lived so comfortably compared to her. *Slaves to their own paycheck.*

“At this rate, you’re not going to have much choice. Kuat *does* offer contracts for indenture, if you want to hold off this debt and make some extra credits. I personally have some positions in mind that you could fulfill…”

The look in the man’s eyes when he suggested the thing made Qyreia shudder deep down; they were the eyes of someone who was looking for “a little extra.” The Zeltron shook her head and rose unsteadily from her seat. “I c-can’t. I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to quit working here. I can’t afford the apartment anyway. Maybe there’s something further into the Core.”

Oh, such protests from the manager. He cooed and placated, but every motion only divulged his true intentions further. When the young woman tried to rise to leave, he rose too and cornered her by the door. He pressed close, and Qyreia had to turn her head to avoid making contact with the human.

“Your contract says you owe me two weeks after notification. Think you’ll be able to pay your bills in those two weeks?” The Zeltron’s eyes shut to keep from crying. *No… I wouldn’t be able.* “Perhaps we can make a little arrangement? Hm?”

The human’s breath was hot on her cheek, and she barely dared more than a hidden glance through her lashes. *I came all this way, and this is how it ends up? Damn it, I don’t want to do this.* She could feel his hand at her hip, moving up her side with deliberate slowness. *I haven’t been gone six months, and it’s already come to this. The little Zeltron with her irresistible allure, or some such Sithspit.* This human’s hand reached her rib cage. Qyreia felt her stomach roil, wishing she would throw up and maybe keep him off long enough for her to escape.

“I can’t…”

“You can,” he said, his cheek against hers.

Qyreia had never practiced her feminine wiles; she was as practiced in intrigue as much as she was physically intimidating, and the conscious knowledge of this made her hesitate all the more. If she touched him, it would only be an invitation. *Just say ‘no’ and you can at least get him in court… if you could afford the legal fees… and don’t hate yourself in the interim for letting him do this.* Her limbs shook with frustration and fear in equal measure as he touched her, until finally they acted as though of their own accord, her arms launching outward to shove him back against his own desk.

There was no point in waiting for a reaction or to hear what he had to say, if he said anything at all. The young woman did the one thing she knew how to do: run away, and quick. Her feet carried her home to her meager apartment where she quickly gathered her things before running to the space docks. It didn’t matter where the shuttle was going, so long as it was leaving immediately. Somewhere in the back of her mind, on the ebb and tide of emotions that she could sense, the manager was right on her trail.

“I’d like passage on this transport please,” she said at the departures office.

“How many in your party?”

“One adult,” she said hurriedly against the bored monotone of the attendant, looking worriedly over her shoulder.

“That’ll be two hundred twenty credits.”

“Two hundred twen-…?! Where’s this thing heading?!”

“Corellia, ma’am.”

*It didn’t cost that much to get here all the way from Zeltros!* “F-fine. Here, you price gouger!”

“Thank you ma’am, and enjoy your ride aboard CEC Lines. Next please.”

With a quick pass-off of her luggage to the attendants, Qyreia boarded the ship without a second glance. So long as she was leaving Kuat and the Drive Yards, she would be safe. It wasn’t until the Zeltron had taken her seat that she took time to notice her surroundings. *Okay, maybe there was a reason this cost so much.* What she had thought was a standard passenger liner was something more of the luxury variety.

“Well, at least I get to leave this place in style,” she joked, forcing a smile as the ship undocked for another unfamiliar planet. The handful of complimentary drinks helped the transition somewhat as well.

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Corellia, home of a fiercely independent and enterprising culture, where innovation flowed in as much volume as their famous liquors; and now it was home to a young Zeltron as well. As much as she hated the idea, cantina work was the first thing that Qyreia could find to pay the initial bills. As soon as she was able, despite friendlier accommodation than at Kuat, she made for another source of employ. For a time, she worked in construction, learning technical skills and growing strong under the physical demands that even machine-assisted labor required. But the work was temporary, especially for a newcomer like herself, and she had to find other gainful employment. At the very least, she had gained a little confidence to go along with the subtle increase in muscle mass.

Back to the cantina circuit she went, working as a bottom-end waitress or – more preferred – as a bartender, where the patrons couldn’t put their hands on her so easily. The Corellians themselves usually kept to themselves; it was always the off-worlders who got fresh with the Zeltron. It didn’t matter that one had pressed her against a wall and ripped off half of her shirt; the broken groin and bruised face on the customer is what the boss saw, and Qyreia saw herself off to another employer.

Compounding this was her efforts to suppress the pheromones and emotional telepathy that her people were so famous for. Where other Zeltrons learned to better harness it, doing the opposite required more effort and, initially, medical assistance. Medication was the best way for Qyreia to dampen these abilities, coupled with meditative therapy, but these cost money, and thus employment was so crucial.

The next source of steady income came from a wealthy businessman who needed a housekeeper and tutor for his daughter. Stark Morellis, a middle-aged widower with dark hair that was just starting to catch its first strands of gray, was a decent employer. He gave Qyreia a roof over her head, a bed to sleep on, and food to eat, all in addition to the fair pay that she received. The only consistent problem for the young woman was that his daughter, just entering her pre-teen years, was a complete hell-raiser.

“Maid!” she screamed one day after lunch, “I’ve spilled my drink! Come clean it up!”

“I’m not your maid, Ellay. I’m the housekeeper, and if you keep pulling these stunts, I’m going to start getting your father involved in these little *fits* that you like to have.”

“Maybe then daddy will need to see the bruises where you beat me.”

“What bruises…?” The human girl threw herself against the countertop, connecting square in the ribs before falling to the ground with a cry. “What the frack are you doing?!”

“You’re so rough, Qyreia,” Ellay said, lifting her shirt to reveal a red splotch quickly swelling where she had hit herself with the furnishing. “What will daddy think?”

“Your father is a smart man and will know the truth when I tell him what you just did.”

“Who do you think he’ll believe? His only daughter, or the Zeltron housekeeper?”

“*And* tutor,” she reminded the girl firmly. “Speaking of which, time for your math lesson.”

“But my chest!”

“Grab some painkillers and an icepack; you’ll be fine so long as you didn’t break any bones.”

“And if I did?”

“If you paid attention to that anatomy lesson from last week, you’d know that if you get marrow into your bloodstream, it can cause an embolism that can kill you if not treated quickly enough.” That scared the girl into submission, and the remainder of the day passed uneventfully.

Such blatant outbursts were rare, more often manifesting in staying out late with friends or sneaking out of the house. For his part, Morellis was a well-meaning father, but he also understood that his daughter was more than a handful, and so believed Qyreia when she would relay the day’s mishaps. It was a great deal of work and drama for the red-skinned woman, but it paid well and with little to no personal cost that she could speak of. Mr. Morellis was even cordial with her – friendly yet professional – and never seemed to have any greater desire than to see both Ellay and Qyreia succeed in their own way.

Each little incident with his daughter wore on him however, and it ate into him piece by piece. He hid it well, but Qyreia could see it in him even without her emotional telepathy. She had grown fond of him in the months spent working in his home – over half a year of cleaning and teaching, which was a record for the man’s employees – and thus worried over the growing disconnect he had with what remained of his family.

“Welcome home,” she said as per usual on his return from work one late evening.

“Where is Ellay? Any trouble to report?”

“Oddly, no. Perfect angel, if you can believe it. She’s at a friend’s house for a sleepover.”

“You didn’t ask me if she could go,” he said tersely, but amiably.

“The girl’s parents will be at the house the whole time supervising.” She took his coat and hung it in the entryway closet. “I’ve got a whole itinerary from them if you want to see it.”

“Maybe later I’ll give them a call, just to check in. You know, Qyreia, you have honestly impressed me. No one has stuck through this as long as you, or been so damnably thorough. It’s… refreshing.”

“Th-thank you, Mr. Morellis. That means a lot to me.”

“You know you can call me by my first name, especially when Ellay’s not around.”

“I prefer to keep things professional,” she said despite enjoying the thought that he saw her on equal intellectual footing. “I’ll keep it in mind, though.”

The sweetness of the moment darkened quickly when, as Qyreia turned to begin making dinner in the kitchen, she felt the father’s hand firmly grasp her shoulder. *You’ve got to be kidding.* What amiability she had for him vanished in the following moments. Forced against the wall in arms stronger than hers, there was only one thing that he could have in mind. Resistance only served to tighten his grip and bring a growing sense of fear into the woman’s heart.

“Stop it, Stark! What the frackin’ hell do you think you’re doing?!”

“Come on, I know what you do in your room at night. These walls aren’t as thick as you might think, and I know it’s me you’re thinking of.”

“Newsflash, skrag! I’m not into you!”

“Please, Qyreia,” he said, the sound of fasteners coming undone reaching his employee’s ears. “All you Zeltrons are into this sort of thing. You play coy and hart-to-get, but deep down, you’re all looking to get o-…”

His grip broke the instant her shin met his groin. She was about to run when he grabbed at her again, this time more forcefully and with even greater intent. Held to the wall by her throat, Qyreia floundered for something, anything, to fight back with. Almost as though through the intervention of the Force, her hand found a decorative desk statue which she promptly smashed over his head, knocking him out cold.

Once again, Qyreia packed her things, heartbeat still racing in her chest as she dialed CorSec to tell them what happened. In the end, the authorities swept the incident under the rug – the Zeltron was just an *ekster* that had confused Morellis’ better judgement with her pheromones. They didn’t even bother to do a medical check to note that her pheromones were hardly any more potent than a human’s. She counted herself lucky that she was able to collect her final paycheck.

Corellia was still the best home she had found, and large enough that she could find another job away from such scum. A month later she was able to find steady work as a bartender alongside a Devlikk named Krill. While the work was no different, Qyreia found herself physically reprimanding people that sought to lay hands on her and, in one case, on Krill and his family. While Corellia was renowned for its police force, it was also home to a seedy underworld that sought profit wherever it could, and as with Morellis and the Zeltron, Krill was an immigrant to Corellia – an *ekster* – and therefore disposable compared to one that was born in the system. Qyreia caught wind of this extortion and personally dealt with the petty gangsters, earning her a place in Krill’s family, as far as he was concerned.

She lost this job when the building manager caught wind of her fighting yet another overly-touchy customer, despite that the cantina itself belonged to Krill. This job lasted almost a year.

What was left of her time in Corellia was spent hopping from place to place, doing odd-jobs for anyone that would take her, but often with the same results. Eventually, tired of the constant search for someone that would – or could – hire her, Qyreia packed her things yet again and shipped herself off-world, heading toward the Outer Rim.

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After nearly a year working the cantina circuit on Outer Rim hyperlane waystations, as well as a failed relationship with a particularly attractive Zelosian girl, Qyreia used her contacts among her many more amiable clients to find employ in a business she had, for some reason, never considered: a spacer merchant. *How hard can it be?* The Zeltron quickly learned there was more to the trade than just moving products from Point A to Point B. And…

“Alright, gimme the mic. Hi, I’m Qyreia, also known as Q, the Red Qek, and a variety of other names – some good and some bad. You wanna know how I became a mercenary? You don’t need to know all those details that too you *however long* to read through. I was a merchant, then a smuggler. Pirates boarded our ship, and I killed one of ‘em. Bam, done, dead. Turns out that I didn’t mind killing folks so long as they were the bad guys.

“So I started taking contracts as a gun for hire, though usually as nothing more than a pretty-looking bodyguard. Let me tell you though, I was (and still am) damn good with a blaster. I could sear off a wart on a Hutt’s choobies from two kilometers without breaking a sweat. Worked my way through the galaxy for about a year or so like that until Marcus Kiriyu picked me up to work for the Brotherhood and Clan Naga Sadow.

“See? That didn’t take nearly as bloody long as *this* droning narrative you’ve been chewing up until now. Cheers!”

*-Q*