***Lost in Color***

“Let’s see… Definitely terrestrial,” the mercenary said casually as she input the data into her computer, occasionally making lazy turns in her craft to get a better view from her aerial vantage. “Computer says… Type One atmosphere. That’s good.”

*This would all sound a lot more impressive if there wasn’t a drop-down menu on this surveyor program*, she thought with a grin.

Many of the details that she was now annotating had been obvious from her orbital vantage, but determining a safe atmospheric entry vector had been a more pertinent concern at the time. Now, with clear skies overhead and assurance by the sensor data that there were no immediate dangers, Qyreia allowed herself to take in the scenery as the computer continued its exploratory algorithms. Monotonous though it was, she appreciated the image of a world as yet untouched by the hands of the galaxy at large.

Uninterrupted forest covered much of the land surface, broken here and there by vast lakes, broad rivers, and tree-topped mountains that spewed forth picturesque spring-fed waterfalls. The Zeltron even diverted her course to fly though a rainbow made from the spray of one such font, making sure to take a picture to show her friends back on Aeotheran.

“This place is pretty astral,” she mused as her gray-blue eyes looked amiably at the photo on her holocam. That’s when the ship shuddered and everything in her vision went white, and then just as quickly went very dark.

When Qyreia came to, her head felt like it had been squeezed by a Wookiee, with the blurry vision to match. Feeling around revealed that the Zeltron was on top of the transparisteel viewport, the craft turned lopsidedly on its dorsal plates. Trying to blink away the haze that filled her sight did little more than clear away the dust and detritus that had fallen onto her face – the white flash had blinded her, if only temporarily. It wasn’t an unknown condition, and Qyreia knew it would pass soon enough. The priority now was getting communication up and running, maybe even do what repairs were necessary to get the ship off the ground again.

Feeling around the shattered console, careful of sharp cutting edges, told her that this bird likely wasn’t going anywhere for a while.

*Ah kriff*, she thought, groaning as she raised herself from the thick glass, small chunks of dust and debris falling off her with a rain like *hiss*. Everything hurt, likely from being thrown around the cockpit like a ragdoll during the uncontrolled descent. Breathing hurt especially, though a cursory inspection with her fingers revealed no broken bones amidst the plethora of aches. *Probably bruised my ribs*, the merc thought, feeling the tender flesh with the gentlest of touches, only to recoil from the sharp pain. Moving her head also revealed an odd resistant sensation behind her right ear which, when manually explored, came away with sticky fingers and a sharp, lingering pain. A cautious taste of the substance confirmed the blood she could feel oozing from the gash that seemed to stretch from the top of her ear down to her neck, just behind the thicker sinews that ran vertically alongside her jaw.

“Well,” she sighed with resignation, “this is just frackin’ great. Guess I’m not making it home in time for dinner.”

Qyreia had been in tight scraps before. This seemed like just another drop in the bucket of poodoo that life had for her from time to time, so her spirits weren’t totally broken, despite how she felt physically. With slow, cautious movements, she gradually righted herself and made her way out of the cradle of the viewport, noting with some derision that her legs were thoroughly banged up as well.

“I better get paid extra for this Sithspit.”

Light began to filter through to her optic nerves as the red woman felt her way toward the supply hatch, vague shapes replacing the grayish-brown haze that had assailed her on waking. The feeling of the cold fittings of her carbine against her fingers did wonders to soothe the few frayed nerves she had that were eating away at her state of mind. Qyreia’s blurry vision could just barely make out the red case of the first aid kit, which she grabbed with earnest.

The Zeltron had just about emptied the contents to find the one bacta hypospray within, only to stop short and nervously consider the cost-to-benefit ratio in using it. She didn’t know how long she’d been knocked out, didn’t know what sort of animal life to expect, and didn’t know when her vision would come back naturally. Would she need to defend herself before then? Too many questions raced through her mind.

However turbulent her thoughts and unsteady her hand, Qyreia gingerly grabbed up the kit and replaced the hypospray. *I really need to start packing more than one bacta dose from now on.*

Luckily for her, eyesight seemed to gradually restore itself with each successive blink, her retinas recovering like one’s ears after a thunderous noise – slowly, but steadily. Waiting for the amorphous shapes to coalesce into consoles and lockers took what felt like hours. Without a chrono to look at, not that she could have read it anyway, the mercenary could only guess at the passage of time. The main hatch on the vessel was more or less sealed, so at least she didn’t have to worry about being caught unawares.

Eventually, when the urge to use the refresher called, most of her sight had thankfully returned.

“Oooh, I’ve gotta go,” the Zeltron said, her legs fidgeting as she collected up her weapons and what few supplies she had in the emergency cache. “Holy frack-balls, I’ve gotta *go*.” *And there’s no* way *that I’m pissing on the ceiling of the ship. I have* some *dignity, at least.*

Carbine slung, ready to be grabbed at a moment’s notice, she hobbled over to the small emergency hatch toward the rear of the ship and grabbed the release lever. It was harder to move than she had initially anticipated, not helped by the awkward angle the ship had landed in, and it took no small amount of effort to budge the black-and-yellow striped handle. When the hatch finally unlocked with a jerk, pain rippling through the whole length of Qyreia’s jarred body, she was met with the soft light of what appeared to be dusk. The thick wave of heat and humidity followed soon after.

“Oh kriffing Hutt babies, why’d it have to be *hot*?”

Resigning herself to leaving the ship regardless of the circumstances, the Zeltron painstakingly hauled herself out, taking extra care not to flop to the ground lest she risk further injury. Once on solid earth, she took a moment to scan the area, particularly wary for any predators that might want to have her for dinner.

Looking around revealed the extent of the damage to the ship, laying on its back with most of the essential flying systems trashed or damaged beyond the mercenary’s level of technical repair skills. While the interior had been mostly disheveled, with only the most fragile bits and pieces coming undone, almost the entire exterior hull was crumpled or shorn, making it look more like an oversized metal raisin than a starship. The terrain didn’t look in very good shape either, the thick jungle canopy rent into shards from the steep angle the ship had come in, turning her patch of forest floor into a woodchip-covered clearing. Whatever caused the crash had also generated a great deal of heat, judging by all of the scorch marks that stretched the length of the devastated glade.

Qyreia was in such a daze from the sensory overload that only the nagging pressure from her bladder brought her back from the bantha-in-the-headlights state. First instinct told her to make a dash for the tree line, like any person used to hiding their nakedness, but then the fear of predators catching her with her pants literally down halted that thought.

“I can’t believe I’m actually doing this,” she grumbled as she set her carbine against the hull next to her while she undid her pants and did her business, using the hull as a back-rest so she didn’t have to full-on squat. Circumstances aside, it was a welcome reprieve, and Qyreia had to stifle a sigh of relief behind a wry grin.

As soon as she was finished, the Zeltron thought it a good idea to do some reconnaissance while there was still a semblance of daylight. Making sure to shut the emergency hatch to prevent wild animals from getting inside, she set off in the direction of the nearest mountain, using it as a means to maintain her direction in the otherwise indistinct terrain.

There was little protection in the decimated clearing, but once among the trees, instincts kicked in. Qyreia less walked and more shuffled, hunched over to reduce what visual profile could be made out in the dark, dense vegetation. The forest floor was rather sparsely populated by thick entanglements like brambles and thorns, instead pockmarked by thick collections of ferns and soft, leafy bushes that covered whole sections of the ground like a waist-high carpet. Vines hung from the trees in various lengths and thicknesses, sometimes laying across the ground like some great serpent or hunter’s snare, while others dangled just above one’s head.

It would have been beautiful in the daylight, but in the gathering dark, the world seemed to crawl with hidden creatures waiting to pounce. The mercenary avoided the ferns and foliage where possible, preferring the cover of the trees to the unknown contents of the undergrowth as she moved along the forest floor.

Everything was strangely quiet. Even having grown up in a suburban environment, Qyreia had walked the woods of her homeworld and countless others to know that the woods are not a quiet place. Insects buzzed, birds chirped or hooted, and on occasion one could hear the sound of the local fauna making some cry or another. Yet *this* jungle seemed completely silent, save for the soft rustling of the leaves in the wind high above her head.

*Something’s not right here*.

As much as she wanted to tell herself that the animals were still scared from the crash, it had been too long since it happened for there to be no sounds of life. The mercenary moved in far enough to just barely be able to make out the crash site before, despite her better judgement, turning left to explore the perimeter around her downed ship. It all looked like the same jungle, with the same lack of nature’s music to soothe her ears and, sore as she was, it took its toll on her nerves.

That was when she saw the light.

“The hell is that?” she whispered quietly as she crouched ever lower, despite the sharp, throbbing pain in her ribcage. What glimmered just over a rise in the terrain was not some reflection of the ever-lower setting sun; it came from ground-level and, what’s more, danced with shadows of moving figures. Stopping to watch the spectacle like a woman possessed, Qyreia spotted other movement – movement from among the trees and ferns: shapeless shadows that crept among the darker places of the forest floor. *Sentries*, she thought, keeping completely still so as not to draw attention to her rather stand-out features.

What intrigued her the most about the – what she surmised to be – firelight display was the profound lack of noise. Straining her ears, the Zeltron could make out quiet conversation with stern undertones, though the voices were so muffled that she couldn’t make out the words or language. *Not that I’d probably be able to understand them anyway.*

Then a voice rang out, louder than before, calling back the sentries who left the cover of the underbrush and crested the hill to return to the fire, giving Qyreia a decent view, albeit a mere silhouette. They appeared human, or at least near-human, with stout wiry builds. Clothing appeared… optional; more decorative in function than for warmth or propriety. The merc suddenly became very conscious of the heat and how her jacket was quickly being saturated with her ever-increasing flow of sweat. *Nothing I can do about it now*, she thought with a sigh, returning her attention to the mysterious assemblage, only to see the light and people shifting away: down toward the crash site.

“Frack.”

Shuffling backward kept the mercenary from being seen by the group’s pickets before she hustled away to the gash in the forest where the remains of her ship were. Only when her breath caught in her throat as her chest heaved with pain did she slow to a more stealthy pace, well ahead of the mysterious beings. Crouched at the edge of the clearing, she did not have to wait long for their arrival.

Torches marked their coming before the figures took shape, the flames dancing amidst the trees in something of an organized herd. Almost two dozen of the humanoids trickled out from the wood line, while a multitude of others remained just beyond the border of devastation. What appeared to be spears and bows were at the ready in the hands of the guards that flanked the more official-looking party in the center, largely made up of older looking women and men, judging by the body shapes. As they drew closer to the ship, she could make out their very humanlike faces by the torchlight, though the skin color seemed… off.

What was of more concern, however, was their scrutinizing analysis of the ship, such as it was. Qyreia grumbled quietly to herself, enduring the kicks and sticks banged against the hull, knowing they couldn’t do any harm with those dangerous but flimsy weapons of theirs. Then one of them spotted the emergency hatch that she had used to get out, and suddenly the Zeltron was worried. What if they got inside and started beating on the sensitive communications equipment? What would happen if the emergency beacon – that she had forgotten to turn on in her rush to relieve herself – was damaged or destroyed?

“Things can’t ever be easy, can they?” she growled, hauling herself to her feet when she saw one of the warrior-looking blokes climb atop the vessel. When he reached for the lever to open it, Qyreia decided that it was time to take some action. “Hey!”

The group’s heads all jerked in her direction almost simultaneously, clearly not expecting company. Several brandished their spears and shouted back at her in their unintelligible language.

“Hey you,” she yelled, pointing at the man with his hand on the door latch, “get off my ship!” She motioned with her hand in a swiping motion, hoping he would get the hint, only for him to respond in his native tongue, thumping his chest with club in hand. “Just not gonna cooperate,” she muttered. “Dammit… Alright, last warning! Get. Off. My. Ship!”

More yelling and posturing from the natives only aggravated her more and more until she finally lost her composure. A bolt of red energy lanced into the air with a noise made all the more thunderous by the queer acoustics offered by their surroundings. Qyreia had hoped the warning shot would be enough to drive them off, but it only seemed to scare them into action, one warrior becoming bold enough to step forward and send an arrow through the air to land a meter off her left. *You Hutt-humping son of a crap-kriffer!* The mercenary sent another blaster bolt flying from her carbine, this time to burst in the dirt and wood pulp at her would-be opponent’s feet.

*That* seemed enough to get their attention in the proper place.

With a few quick words from the elders of the party, they scampered off like a family of Nelvaan squirrels, their guardians still posturing with their weapons but none daring to openly fight the Zeltron. Qyreia watched as they ran off into the woods, remaining on the outskirts for some time before finally wandering off, though she was certain they left some scouts to watch her.

“In hindsight,” she said as she turned to enter the remnants of the ship, “that *probably* wasn’t the best way to make first contact.”

Once inside – no small feat thanks to her injuries – the red woman worked quickly to seal the hatch behind her, just in case the natives decided to get frisky during the night. Her next step was to see what damage had been caused to the communications relay so that she might have a hope of successfully sending out a distress signal. What undamaged lights remained were all at her feet, complicating the altered perspective of the hardware that she had to rifle through to find what she needed. Luckily, the comms system looked more or less undamaged, with only a few torn wires and busted indicator lights.

“Lessee… where did that rat-fink bastard say the spare parts kit was?”

After searching through Force-knows how many piles of refuse that had been scattered across the ceiling after the crash, Qyreia made the assumption that there were no spare parts to be found; just a few repair tools and a good deal of redundant wiring. Despite the longer day and night cycle of the planet, the mercenary still had to work late into the night to fix the communications equipment.

Once it was complete, a few flipped switches and a bit of rerouted power was enough to get the signal out. With any luck, a Sadowan ship would come by in a day or two to pick her up. Until then, she would just have to make do with what she had.

Unfortunately, that didn’t account for much. A couple days’ worth of rations and a two liter bladder of water were all the consumable supplies that could be found. Neither would last very long, even if Qyreia stretched out their value. With her increased metabolism to consider, the Zeltron was either going to be hungry in two days, or *very* hungry in four. Then there was water, of which there was little and less within the ship’s systems.

“Well I’m downright kriffed here,” she said, munching on a bit of her food.

Most of Qyreia’s appetite was eaten up by soreness and worry over the natives, unsure what sort of retribution she could expect from them. With the hatch sealed up, they would need a lot more than spears and bows to break into her tiny fortress, such as it was. The mercenary’s only worry now was getting some rest. Despite waking up only recently, the earlier excitement did not help her already beleaguered physique, and she was already exhausted.

The mattress from the sole bunk had already fallen to the newly-dubbed floor, making the red woman’s job that much easier in turning in for the night. What little power she had devoted to life support kept the cabin relatively cool, so at least for the moment, she would be nominally comfortable. Though everything hurt, while her hunger and thirst seemed equally acute, Qyreia was quick to fall asleep, blaster at her side.



*No sense checking the chrono*, Qyreia thought when she finally woke, a new stiffness wracking her body to complement the soreness from her injuries. What little light crept in around the corners of the dirt-covered viewports told the Zeltron that it was still rather dark. *Damn, I can’t wait for daytime. That’s going to be hellish long.*

Remembering her situation with the supplies – or lack thereof – the mercenary had to decide what to do: stay in the ship and hope rescue came quickly, or head out into the forest to forage for some more food and, Force-willing, some water. “Better to collect your firewood before winter, rather than try to cut frozen timber,” as the saying went. The power reserves on the ship would hold for weeks on the minimal use she was putting it through. Of greater concern was what awaited the Zeltron outside of the hatch.

Blaster pistol in hand, she decided to find out.

With a violent heave, Qyreia thrust the hatch open, half-expecting a spear in her face, only to be met by dark sky and twinkling stars. She peered out and around the vessel, but saw no signs of life, humanoid or otherwise. For once in this fatalistic endeavor, she actually felt relieved, beyond taking care of natural bodily functions that is. Grabbing up her small pack of supplies, as well as a couple tools, the mercenary hauled herself out of the ship and shut the hatch behind her. As a precautionary measure, she used the torch that had been in the toolkit to plant some rough spot-welds on the hatch, just in case the locals decided to get curious again.

Taking only a brief moment to scan the edges of the tree line for hostile entities, the Zeltron took off at a brisk pace, once again heading toward the mountain in the distance as a point of reference. In the shattered clearing, the stars provided a fair amount of ambient light, even for one so accustomed to bright artificial lighting; but in the forest, the canopy blocked all but the brightest slivers of luminescence. Qyreia’s pupils strained to see anything, exacerbating her already pounding headache as she searched the forest.

One thing had changed since she’d slept: the forest was alive again. Birds, bugs, and all sorts of life could be heard all around as nature seemed to have recovered from the shock of the fireball that had been the mercenary’s landing. *Might even be able to snare something*, Qyreia thought. *Not sure how big to make the snare, though. Who knows what kinds of animals they’ve got roaming around here?* Pausing beside a particularly gnarled tree that she recognized from her pre-sunset reconnaissance, the red woman knelt and dug a fair-sized hole, covered it with some ferns, and set about stringing together some of the more pliable vines within reach.

It was a simple snare, but it would do. As Qyreia walked, she set more and more traps: sometimes a snare among the ferns for small game, while others were dug out of logs with downward-pointed protrusions and a shiny bauble at the bottom. They wouldn’t catch anything big, but whatever it caught would be a meal at least.

As she set what felt like the dozenth trap, the first faint light of dawn began to eke through the sky above, visible in the rare breaks in the thick tree leaves. Deciding that it was time for a break, the Zeltron sat in a recess of a tree’s roots and opened up a ration pack. *There’s another meal down*. The thought was disconcerting, but her appetite had returned during her rest, and the paltry repast seemed all too meager.

“Guess I better get used to this,” she said, feeling her stomach rioting against the lack of nourishment with a loud growl. “Hey, you be quiet.”

While game traps were nice, there seemed to be little in the way of ground-borne foodstuffs. Not a single tuber, berry bush, or fallen nut could be found. Qyreia wondered if this was just the way it was in this forest, or if that local tribe had already scoured this area, leaving it barren for the likes of her. Sighting in on the tree boughs through her carbine’s scope offered no hint of fruit or seed. Even the ferns, plentiful as they were, were bitter and offered little nutritional value that she could discern.

Lacking any hope for supplemental food for the moment, the next logical step was to look for water. As more light filtered into the woods, the searching process became easier, though actually finding a water source still eluded the lonely merc. Cutting open one of the thicker vines revealed moisture, but nothing that offered a sustaining drainage. The trees, massive as they were, held similar results, and as the sun rose, so too did the temperature. It quickly became apparent that rationing the water would be top priority in the jungle that Qyreia knew would be sweltering as the day dragged on. As far as she figured, her best hope was in finding one of those springs that fed off from the mountains; perhaps a pond at the base of one of those waterfalls, or a creek that ran toward the crash site if she was lucky.

The mountain, as it turned out, was much farther away than it appeared. After walking through much of the day – which lasted for nigh twenty standard hours – Qyreia had only just reached the halfway point, while the sun was already on its decline toward the horizon.

“I’m gonna kriffing die out here,” she brooded, mopping a layer of sweat off her face; a fruitless venture, since her hand itself was already saturated in the salty fluid. “Fracking damn, it’s hot.”

She had long since removed her leather jacket, and now she decided it was time for the shirt to go as well. Stripping off the sopping cloth and hanging it on her pack to hopefully dry, Qyreia was left with just a bra to cover her chest. *If this keeps up, I’m gonna have to make some shorts out of these trousers.* The relief was almost immediate, her body sloughing off the heat much more easily once rid of the insulating layer, thin though it was. The chafing from her pack was also more acute now that there was no buffer layer, but some strap adjustment and grit teeth put off the problem for the moment.

It seemed a waste to go back empty-handed, but it seemed there was no other recourse to take. Rather than trudge through the dark, as sunset fast approached, the Zeltron made only a short return march, following her initial path for a few hours before spending the better part of the evening fashioning a shelter under the low-hanging branches of a young tree.

Just as she was finishing her small perimeter defenses of strung-up sticks on tripwire vines, and a few small stake pits, a loud *squawk* called from just above her head. Sitting on the branch that swayed from its weight was a massive avian the size of a large nuna, but with brilliant feathers that swayed majestically with each movement of its beaked head. All Qyreia saw was hot, juicy dinner; rotisserie style.

Slowly, she brought her hand back to the pistol holster on her leg, the soft *snap* of the strap’s fastener catching the attention of the bird who eyed her warily. She could see in its eyes that it saw her methodically working to grab something and, with a flourish, took to the air. *Dammit!* As quickly as she could draw, she brought the DL-44 to bear, launching red energy at the escaping avian, not caring if she vaporized part of the bird so long as the rest was edible. This creature had clearly been shot at before, and flew in odd weaving patterns, narrowly avoiding every shot, before simply flying behind a tree and out of range.

“Damn it!” Forgetting her injuries, the Zeltron kicked at a nearby root, only to have pain rocket up the length of her leg in addition to the stubbed toe that she could now add to her list of ailments. “Fracking… son of a schutta’s Hutt-kriffing druk spawn!”

Panting from the cathartic outburst, Qyreia eyed her pack and the ration packs within. *No, no, can’t go losing it already. Need to make the food last.* After walking all day, and only the meal from early that morning having graced her stomach, she felt like she was already starving to death. *There’s six packs… well, five now; good for three meals a day for two days. I can up my intake to two per day, but that’ll only get me to three days’ worth. But one per day… I can stretch it to six if the hunting doesn’t work out.*

“Ugh. I’m so hungryyy.” In a pronounced flop, she dropped to the ground, landing on the blanket she had packed with a soft *thud*. Her stomach growled angrily, but Qyreia merely curled into her knees, intent on surviving the misery until breakfast some fifteen hours from then. *Or is it twenty? So long from now…*

She didn’t know when she fell asleep, only that it was dark when she woke, unsure of how far into the night she was. What caught the mercenary’s attention more was the rustling sound just beyond her perimeter. Something was sniffing around her camp.

Hardly a sound passed as the Zeltron slowly pulled her carbine by its sling to her shoulder. Whatever was testing the air didn’t sound too big, but she didn’t know if it might be poisonous or some dangerous predator with razor sharp fangs or claws, and she wasn’t about to take the chance. Seconds passed by like eons while she listened, homing in on the sound, until she was sure she had its location in her sights.

“C’mere you son of a *schutta*.”

The whispered threat caught the thing’s attention, causing it to inadvertently step into the perimeter of wind chime sticks and confirm its location. The bolt that shot out seemed far louder in Qyreia’s hyper-strained ears than it should have, but the sound that caught her attention most was the halting screech that came just before the heaving *thump* as the beast fell to earth. The Zeltron dared not move, her sights still trained on where the thing had fallen, unsure if it was feigning or actually dead.

How much time passed before the adrenaline wore off and she unintentionally fell back to sleep was impossible to say. An hour? Two? When she woke once again, the forest was still as dark as pitch, but the soft nocturnal sounds had returned to normal. Slowly and quietly, Qyreia simultaneously slipped her pistol from its holster while she pulled the mechanic’s light from her pack. It didn’t have phenomenal range, but it was definitely bright enough to illuminate a nice wide area. Flicking the lamp on, she held the pistol at the ready as she crept forward toward where the animal had fallen.

What met her eyes almost shocked her back onto her bedroll. While not exceptionally large compared to other creatures around the galaxy, the dead jungle cat was nearly as long as she was tall, with brown fur and black splotching that was halfway between stripes and spots. The thing would have been almost as invisible in the day as it was at night.

Now it was breakfast. Or dinner. Depended on one’s perspective.

Finding dry wood was near to impossible, as even the fallen branches and downed trunks absorbed so much of the humidity that much of it was soft and moist. It took almost an hour to find sufficient wood in the dark, followed by the gruelingly slow process of getting the fire going. Once caught though, it stayed lit, merely requiring the addition of more fuel while Qyreia skinned and gutted the cat.

The fire did wonders for the Zeltron’s spirits, bringing light into this dark world in which she found herself. The heat she could have done without – it was hot enough already – but the look of the meat cooking on the various sticks and lines she had strung up made her forget about the temperature entirely. Not knowing what to expect in terms of disease and parasites, Qyreia fought back her hunger just a little longer to make sure the meat was thoroughly cooked. She also made sure to drink some more water, as the digestion would require fluids, and she had no desire to be plugged up from alien cat meat.

Despite its size, the creature was lean and thus offered less meat than what might have been expected. Still, Qyreia was able to fill her belly and still have plenty left over, which she packed in leaves tied off with small, pliable vines. Everything else – the skin, innards, and bones – were unceremoniously tossed aside. Whatever was willing to eat such fare was not something she wanted to trap and eat; and she had none of the materials needed to treat the flesh to make leather, which would have been better than the leafy method of storage she had been forced to use.

With her stomach full and plenty of food to spare for a time, Qyreia drifted off into a comfortable sleep.



The sun was just below the horizon when the Zeltron awoke again, evidenced by the paling color of the sky. Making quick work of packing up her belongings, she set out for her ship, a little extra pep in her step after having gotten her first meal in almost a standard day. Despite knowing that the days and nights were drastically longer, the sheer amount of time that Qyreia had spent on the planet had eluded her thoughts, even though it added up to nearly three standard days to the planet’s two.

While she was quickly running out of water to dehydration, she was doing much better on her food supplies than she had originally thought.

With so much energy, the mercenary deviated from her original trail, sidetracked as much by her mood as by the search for water. She walked for hours with hardly a sign of the life-giving liquid in sight. Crossing through a draw in a hilly part of the terrain, she heard the sound of splashing just beyond the next rise. *Animals in a creek maybe… A creek… Water!* Qyreia couldn’t fight her excitement at finally finding water, having gone through only a liter and a half in the fifty-some hours since her initial crash. Her thirst overpowered her caution.

That was why it was such a shock when she came across not only a group of the natives, but the whole village, several children in the midst of playing with a pail that had just been pulled from a well.

Now in the albeit muted light of day, she could make out the features of the tribe in ways that she couldn’t before. While the children were generally various shades of tan in skin tone, they seemed to sport random patches of color that seemed almost tattooed. Looking at the adults, this clearly seemed the case, as their flesh was mottled various shades of green, brown, blue, and other hues that one would not expect on a human. Looking at them in full view, she could see the camouflage value of it. It also seemed to be a mark of age, and thus seniority, as the older members had more splotches of varied color.

Qyreia had plenty of time to notice these features since they wasted no time in running after her. *Frackfrackfrackfrack…* Arrows whizzed by, prompting the Zeltron to return some hasty fire of her own, though there was little she could muster effectively at a full-tilt sprint. *Need to get back to the ship*, she thought as she frantically tried to orient herself in the right direction, maddened yells in the natives’ unknown language hot on her heels.

That was when the patrolling sentry came out from behind a tree and clotheslined the mercenary. He paused to look at the odd creature only briefly before knocking her out with a swift blow from the butt of his spear.



“Elder Mirn, I don’t think this outsider is from the Urrik tribe,” Loph said gruffly as he took his turn among the others in the council. As one of the chief hunters, he had a powerful voice within his tribe, but the elders held a great deal of power. “Don’t even look at the skin. Look at her hair! It is an unnatural blue. No person holds such color to them.”

“Loph, I have heard your words, but this woman – whatever she is – is no *demon*. She bleeds and hungers just as we do. She came from the skies above, not the fires below that boil the water in the springs.”

“Who is to say that demons only come from below?” Iymir, Mirn’s granddaughter and skilled dowser chimed in. “Grandfather, we have gods in the earth as in the sky. Could we not also say the same of demons? You saw what effects her fire-spear wrought.”

“A piece of wood the size of my fist, torn from a tree in a burst of flame and cinder,” came another voice in support.

“I do not deny her weapon’s great power, but what power does the red woman hold herself?” The voices of the council fell introspectively silent. “We must see what happens when she wakes. If she is a demon, she will try to inflame our minds with her will.”

“This is true,” elder Amyia, Mirn’s distant cousin said. “The ways of demons are drawn into our histories.” She motioned to the paintings on the many hides that decorated their wooden longhouse; tapestries of great hunts and terrible wastes. Among them, one showed a red creature, with red lightning arcing from its outstretched hand, while the other hand coaxed the humans nearer.

“She has already tried to kill members of our tribe. When she heard the sounds of our children playing, she came running up in a frenzy!” A muttering of assent went through the gathered tribespeople. “I will follow elder Mirn’s guidance, but know that my spear will be at her throat when she reveals her true nature for all the tribe to see.”

A louder grumbling and muttering went through the group, but the decision had been made. They would wait and see what the red stranger would make of herself. Mirn wondered if their first meeting had been a misunderstanding; a barrier of the tongues. The woman had screamed *ship*, pointing at the great metal boulder. Perhaps it was a vessel of some kind? If so, was it her mount from the heavens? Or something that tunneled up from one of the multifaceted hells? Even Amyia could not determine it, though she was a great spiritual leader. The old man’s bones ached, and he knew that this day would be a long one.

The prisoner was tied by wrists and ankles to a pole within a cage, her body stretched vertically so that she almost seemed to float a fist’s length from the ground. Demon or not, she would not be able to physically fight. Splotches of red darker than her skin showed the many injuries she had sustained, including the fresh cut on her head from where she had been hit by the spear. It looked almost sad; like a massive borra bird, with its wondrous plumage, caged and unable to fly.

Despite the presence of this new arrival, life in the village carried on as it always did. Foraging parties went out to trim the vines – small ones for their sweet flavor, and thick ones to fill their bellies. Mirn contemplated the well-cooked jogar flanks found on the red woman’s person, thinking they would make for a fair meal for the village. Such a treat was rare, as the great cat was as dangerous as it was crafty, and it was not unheard of for a villager to go missing or a hunting party to lose several members hunting down such a beast. That this red creature brought one down alone was enough reason for many to fear her.

Children ogled the cage and its occupant as they played, tagging each other’s color-marks with gentle swats of sticks in a running game of the hunt. It made them fast and agile, the best often becoming skilled hunters or foragers. Several older girls and boys flirted by the well, the only way to get water aside from the great springs of the mountains; but there was no game there aside from lean and cruel raptors that made their nests in the heights. A little digging, and one could find water aplenty in the ground. The elders – parents, grandparents, and a few unwed adults – tended their fires outside, grinding dried ferns for their bitter herbs. It was a horrible-tasting medicine, but even Mirn could not deny its potency, having saved his arm from a horrible swelling after breaking it as a boy.

He wondered about the Urrik, though. They were the only tribe that anyone knew of that marked their skin red, and few of them ever managed to convert the whole of their flesh as this woman appeared. The elements needed for the process were rare enough. No, this woman was not of the Urrik. Indeed, if one thing Loph said held true, it was that her shimmering blue hair marked her as an outsider among outsiders; something not of this world.

It was not until after midday that the first stirrings in their new arrival came to pass.

The entire village crowded around the enclosure, watching wide-eyed as the red woman slowly woke, groaning and clearly unaware of her surroundings; at least at first. As her wits slowly eked their way to the surface of her consciousness, she herself grew wide-eyed.

*“What’s going on? Who are you people?”*

Mirn stepped forward, others of the council either holding back the crowd or drawing closer to make sense of the caged creature. “What are you? Why have you come here?”

*“My name’s Qyreia. Please, if you let me go, I can explain. This whole thing is a big misunderstanding.”*

“I cannot understand you, child. Can you not speak our tongue?”

“It’s because she speaks the demon’s tongue,” Loph grumbled.

“And what do you know of demon’s tongue?” Amyia chided with a whack of her cane on Loph’s shin. “Be silent for a moment.”

Mirn nodded to his cousin in thanks before returning to the stranger. “Are you a demon, sent to harm us?”

*“I. can’t. understand. you,”* came the slow, clipped response, as though trying to make herself understood. She shook her bonds, clearly in discomfort. *“Fracking dammit, let me go!”*

As though on a wave of wind, Mirn could feel the red woman’s rage, subtle though it was, course through his mind. Before he could wonder if it had been an illusion, his eyes caught the expressions of the other council members, all wrought in various degrees of fear. Loph mouthed the word that was suddenly on everyone’s mind: demon. The old man didn’t want to believe such a thing, but turning back to the captive only confirmed the emotions he felt that were clearly not his own. What’s more, the red woman seemed to recognize its effect.

*“Oh kriffing druk. You’re feeling my emotions, aren’t you? Sithspit, need to turn this off now, or they’re gonna think I’m some sort of monster.”*

The panic from the creature was almost palpable as she frantically squeezed her eyes shut, as though trying to will herself away or return her powers to their hidden state.

“Grandfather, you can feel it too, can’t you?” Iymir said, fear and the warming coals of hatred in her eyes. “She is not in control of herself, but we can all feel her demon’s power.”

“She must be killed,” Loph said far too loudly for Mirn’s liking, “before she can set herself to controlling us!”

*“What’d he say?”* the red woman said frantically toward Mirn. *“Seriously, help me. I’m not trying to hurt you. Oh god dammit, get me out of here!”*

“See?! Even now she is casting a spell to bend our minds to her will!” Loph turned to the gathered villagers. “We must purge this demon from our midst before she can do us harm!”

“Loph, stop this insanity!” Amyia grabbed the hunter’s arm pleadingly. “You are better than this. Stop. She has done us no harm. She is just a scared girl, can you not see that?”

“The red demon has corrupted your mind, elder. You feel her fear so that she might gain pity. Then what? Will you let her walk free?!”

“Loph, you forget yourself.”

“No elder Mirn, you have forgotten *your*self. That *thing* is not one of us. You can see it in her skin and her hair. You can feel it in your mind. Admit it!”

“Loph…”

“Admit it!”

*“I don’t suppose you know Shyriiwook, do you?”* Mirn looked at the woman with a heavy heart, unsure of what to do or say. *“I’ll take that as a no.”*

The old man sighed, the weight of the creature’s fear as heavy on his heart as the disbelief at the abject panic of his tribe. What more could he do to stem this wind? He was a crumbling stick, not a solid mountain. “Do as you must, and let the consequences rest upon your souls.” He turned to the demon, her fear ripe within him. “I am sorry.”

*“Wait, what’s going on?”* Realization seemed to set in as the angry crowd rushed in, tearing open the cage. *“Hey! Old guy! A little help?!”*

“Silence, demon!” Loph drove the shaft of his spear against the creature’s back, eliciting a shriek of pain. “Set her over the fire. Let nothing but ash remain and the wind scatter her evil from our land!”

Daggers cut the pole from the cage, leaving the demon woman hanging along its length as they carried her over to the central fire. Several of the elders watched at the fringes in horror, Mirn and Amyia holding each other sorrowfully. Those in the throng were less distraught, sending stones and sticks flying into the demon’s exposed skin, spitting on her if they were near enough.

*“Ow! Stop it! What the frack are you doing?! Agh! Stop! Stop it, please!”* Tears cascaded from her eyes that, upon seeing her destination, only grew wider with fear. *“Stop this! God damn you, stop this! Old man! Help me! Fracking help me! Someone, please!”* She sobbed as they cleared the spit of the meat they had been cooking. *“I don’t wanna die! Please, for the love of mercy, help me!”*

The flames had hardly graced her skin when a great roar came down from the sky, sending the branches of the trees rocking in an angry cacophony. Red flames burst through the canopy, crashing into homes and sheds while tearing a hole large enough in the greenery to allow passage for the great metal boulder that came hovering down on jets of fiery air. Almost instantly, the villagers dropped the demon at the base of the fire, clearing away as the enormous roaring beast came to ground. Only Loph, spear in hand, stood firm as the boulder opened. Strangely-clothed creatures poured from the platform, nearly a dozen in number, with metal devices that looked similar to the red woman’s fire-spear.

*“Qyreia, are you alright?”* the lead figure said to the demon.

“I am Loph, chief hunter of this tribe! This demon is our prisoner!”

*“Alright kid, put down the spear, and we won’t have to hurt you.”*

“Your demon tongue will not scare me! You have no power here!”

He made a lunge at the central figure, only to be lanced with a bolt of red lightning, instantly charring a hole into his chest. The hunter staggered, disbelief wide in his eyes as he stepped back, mind and body separated from consciousness. Step after step, he walked back steadily, until he tripped on the bound red woman and toppled backward into the fire. He did not scream; he was already dead.

*“We got your distress call. We would have found you sooner, but there is some seriously nasty electrical interference that this heat causes. Almost took some of the heat lightning on the way down.”*

*“Is that what it was?”* the red woman said almost calmly. *“Listen, untie me. Ask the old guy in the back there where my stuff is.”* She nodded in Mirn’s direction, causing a stir among the villagers. *“Don’t hurt him. I think he tried to help me.”*

“Don’t be afraid, cousins. Do not fight them. They merely come for what is theirs.” One of the newcomers stepped forward and patted his own fire-spear, then pointed to the red woman. “Follow me. I will take you to her things.”

The stench of burning flesh followed Mirn as he led the stranger to the opening of his longhouse, opening the door but briefly to grab the red woman’s bag and other effects. Handing them over, he followed the stranger back to the assemblage, his eyes cast but briefly on Loph’s blackening body. Everyone in the throng stood fearful as the red woman was released from her bonds, standing on shaking legs.

*“Help her inside. We’ll take care of these bastards.”*

*“Don’t hurt them!”* the red woman shouted, tearing herself away from the one that had been helping her.

*“Sorry ma’am, but we can’t let such a blatant insult to Shar Dakhan go unanswered.”*

*“Believe me when I say that I’m karking pissed at them too, but I think you’ve already made your point.”* She pointed at Loph’s burning corpse. *“Let’s go, sergeant. I need water and a shower like you wouldn’t believe.”*

The strangers made to leave, all but the red woman having reentered the metal boulder. Or perhaps a bird, since boulders don’t fly, after all. She looked at Mirn sorrowfully and walked forward. Iymir stepped forward to stop her, but Mirn waved her off harshly. *You’ve done enough, child.* Stopping less than an arm’s length from the old man, this so-called demon stared at him, tears still drying on her cheeks.

*“Qyreia,”* she said, placing a hand on her chest.

Tears welled in Mirn’s own eyes – tears for the slain Loph, for the villagers that would now have so much more to fear than the jogar, and tears for this tormented red woman. He returned the gesture, motioning to his own breast. “Mirn.”

*“Mirn,”* she said, pointing to him, then back at herself, *“Qyreia.”* Finally understanding, the elder nodded, his smile contrasting his tears. This Qyreia leaned forward and wrapped her arms around him with surprising tenderness, yet strong for one of her size. *“Thank you, Mirn.”*

He could only guess that she had said something sweet; perhaps thanks for his vain attempts to keep her alive. Returning the embrace was all he could muster, sobbing a little onto the woman’s bare red shoulder as realization at his tribe’s loss ripened in his mind. It seemed like an eternal moment that transpired, endless and yet all too fleeting, before Qyreia drew away and limped into her vessel that closed with a *hiss*, sealing her away before taking off once more into the sky.

A moment of silence passed before an explosion rocked their hearing: they had destroyed Qyreia’s metal vessel. Though they left, these strangers’ mark had been forever left on the land and in the tribe’s memory. Mirn wondered if, generations after his death, they would remember what transpired; if they would comprehend the tapestry in the council longhouse of the red woman holding the villager in her arms.