***Memories of the Summer***

***Day One ~***

The twitch just wouldn’t go away.

Standing before the mercenary were nigh three dozen children – of varying ages, genders, and species – dressed in what might be called a uniform of shorts and sleeveless tunics. It was an odd looking amalgam, but one that the Summit approved; clearly they didn’t think to ask the Zeltron about the fashion quality. What had happened, much to her chagrin, was not to ask, but order her to run this camp of indoctrination, thinly guised as a recreational vacation and learning experience.

So now, just outside the field of view of Myrmidon, they stood assembled to begin their summer camp. Watching one of the younger boys pick his nose for the umpteenth time, the twitch in Qyreia’s eye only grew stronger.

*Try to be nice. They’re just kids afterall.* The boy picked his nose again, extracting a rather large, viscous globule of mucus and other detritus. *Oh frack… I think I’m gonna be sick.*

“H-hi…” she started shakily, still trying to get rid of the mental image. “Good morning. I’m Qyreia and I’ll be your…”

“You’ve got blue hair!” one girl yelled out.

“Yes… yes I do. As I was saying, I’ll be your…”

“Are you a Zeltron?” another boy interrupted.

“Um… yes?”

“My dad says Zeltrons are all party animals and bed-warmers.”

“What’d he say?” “Party?!” “Woo, party time!” The campers quickly went from mind-numbingly docile to a near frenzy, and Qyreia was already trying to recover from being called a harlot by an eight year old. The twitch only worsened.

And then the dam burst. “*Enough!!!*” For someone who seemed so small, she knew how to project her voice, and the outburst did well at silencing the uproar. “Now, as I was saying: I’m Qyreia Arronen, your head camp counselor here. *You*,” she said, pointing at the boy with the ill-mannered father, “what’s your name?”

“P-Pohn ma’am,” he said rather timidly.

*Oh, you’re* gonna *be Pohn’d*, Qyreia thought with a chuckle. “Whatever your father told you, you can forget while you’re here. In *this* place,” she said, leaning down to eye level with the boy, “*I’m* your daddy. Got it?”

“Y-yes ma’am!”

And just like that, the twitch was gone. “Alright kids, there’s two cabins to either side of the field behind me. The one here on my right is for the boys, and the one on my left is for the girls.”

“What if you’re androgynous?”

“Are you?”

“N-no.”

“Then you don’t need to worry about it, *do you*?”

As the children ran off to their respective bunkhouses, some more scared than they probably should be before campfires and horror stories had been passed around, the underling staff ran off to make sure the ruckus was kept to a minimum. The two other head counselors, Keira Viru and Rhess Junipyr, walked up to the Zeltron carefully, noting her smoldering maniacal grin and continuing chuckle.

“Well, that’s *one* way to do it,” Rhess said with thinly veiled amusement. “Though I fail to see why I’m here. Kinda have a city to run.”

“It’s just past the woodline,” the mercenary consoled. “If there’s an emergency, it’s a five minute speeder ride to headquarters.”

“I guess.” The human shrugged, sauntering off toward the main hall. “I’m gonna go make sure dinner is being made. Have fun with the little ones!”

“Ha ha, frack you too,” Qyreia mumbled sarcastically.

“I can understand her involvement,” Keira said, coming shoulder to shoulder with her lover, “but why am *I* here? I’m not in your Battle Team, and I keep out of Naga Sadow’s business as much as physically possible.”

“I maaay have volunteered you?” The Seer’s expression said that she had already determined as much. “What?! I needed help, I know you’re reliable, and you told me yourself that you weren’t busy.”

“Still, I didn’t expect to be babysitting.”

“Camp counselor, dear; *totally* different. Besides,” the Zeltron said, sliding shoulder-to-shoulder with the half-Umbaran, “there’s plenty of woods we could sneak off into. Maybe a skinny-dip in the creek?”

Keira allowed herself a coy grin. “What about the nasty things living in the creek?”

“Taken care of already for the sake of the camp.”

“Hm… Might just have to take you up on that.”

***Day Three ~***

The sun was shining bright in the clear blue sky, but the earth was shrouded in green-tinged light, seeping through the forest canopy in the random breaches of the leaves. It kept the obstacle course cooler than it would have been in the open field, but it was more difficult to navigate overall. It also made it harder for them to see their counselors, some of whom were following close behind; some of whom were not.

“If you can dodge a blaster, you might just survive long enough to brag about it when the real thing is coming at you.”

That had been the short, self-explanatory speech that Qyreia had given to the campers, brandishing her carbine, as they prepared to enter the course. She had no intention of actually shooting any of them, and the setting was set to its lowest grade of stun in the event one of them jumped in front of the red energy bolts. It was one of the few combative elements that the mercenary had put into the camp program to fulfill the Clan’s preparatory indoctrination requirements.

Be it weaving between vertical poles or rolling around in the mud, the children moved with surprising agility and speed. Some even had genuine smiles on their faces, including those getting shot at. A few would even bring out their inner actor if the shot connected, feigning a dramatic death to the enjoyment of anyone in the immediate vicinity. *I’ll have to remember to give those kids a cookie or something*, Qyreia thought as she watched yet another holodrama-worthy performance.

When all was said and done – the stragglers rounded up along with those who tried to skip out – the whole assemblage of campers was covered in odd assortments of mud, leafy detritus, and sweat. Hardly one of them seemed disappointed with the activity.

“Arright kids,” the Zeltron belted out, “you did good. So good, in fact, that you’ve got ten minutes to run to the cabins and get your swimsuits on! We’re going to the creek to do a little swimming.”

The uproar of utter glee, followed by the rampant stampede toward their habitations, made more than a few of the counselors laugh. Those that had tried to play hooky were told to shower and then come to the main hall to help get dinner started. After only three days of this, one simple rule had been established: if you work hard, you get to play hard; if you try to skip out, we’ll make you work while everyone else plays. For the most part, the kids even seemed to accept it.

“I’m gonna go make sure they’re behaving,” Keira said with a wink before jogging after the herd. Rhess came up to the Zeltron, watching the Force user carefully, though not so intently as the red woman.

“So *she’s* your girlfriend?”

“Mmmhm,” Qyreia replied absentmindedly, her thoughts already moving to images of her former boss in a swimsuit.

“Huh. Well, not into cheekas, but she’s a cute one. I’ll give you that.”

“Mmmhm.”

“I take it you’re feeling better since last time we talked then.”

The mercenary looked at Rhess, her wistful expression straightening somewhat to be more serious. “Yeah. Things are still a little sketchy. Might’ve said some things that I shouldn’t have, but doing better.”

Nodding in understanding, the retired spacer roughly patted Qyreia’s shoulder before moving off to join everyone else, the former Battle Team Leader close behind. In no time at all, the campers and staff alike that weren’t otherwise occupied were dressed for the beach. While the creek was not vast, it was deep and wide enough to swim or wade in comfortably, with water comfortably cool but not anything that would cause a chill. It was one of the reasons that Qyreia had chosen the site for the camp.

Creature comforts are important after all. The image of Keira in her swimsuit burning in the Zeltron’s eyes solidified that. *Man, I should’ve gone to camp more often as a kid. Might have to bring her back here.*

***Day Eleven ~***

“I can’t believe she’s teaching a music class,” Rhess said to Keira as they watched their mutual acquaintance organizing a choral number out of the campers.

“*I* can’t believe I’ve never heard her *sing*.”

The Force user listened in mild wonder to the harmonies and melodies that reached her ears. The Zeltron’s voice alone stuck out to her from its familiarity, but there was a certain quality to the sound that seemed exceptional for the mercenary who was so often rough of speech. What was more enamoring was that it didn’t seem forced or indoctrinated – it seemed as natural as she was with flying or handling a blaster. When Qyreia glanced over and saw Keira staring at her, a soft smile crept across her still-singing lips, her gray-blue eyes offering a look that would have made the Seer’s heart melt if it weren’t already in a puddle. It seemed almost cruel when the red woman’s attention returned to her students.

She couldn’t have said what the campers were singing; only that it was remarkably beautiful to listen to. Afterwards, as the campers gathered their sleeping bags and roasting sticks in preparation for sleeping under the stars, Keira called the Zeltron over to her, just out of hearing of the staff building the several fire pits that they would be using.

“Hey, what’s up?” The former Black Guard seemed out of breath from the day’s exertions, but not lacking for energy in any way.

Despite having called her over, Keira was somehow at a loss for words. “When we’re done with this camp thing… could you maybe… sing for me?”

The Zeltron shifted in place, contained by her lover’s tentative grasp. “What’s this all of a sudden?”

“I’ve never heard you sing until today, and… you were *good*.”

“Well, Zeltron upbringing and all. The fine arts are one of the higher priorities in our curriculum.” She paused. “Wait, ‘never heard me sing?’”

Keira shook her head. “I don’t know if there’s some special reason for it, but I wouldn’t mind if the trend changed.”

Qyreia leaned forward and pressed her forehead to her former Quaestor’s, closing her eyes as the same relaxed smile drew upon her face. Neither said anything, merely holding each other’s hands for a time, before the Zeltron planted a quick yet heated kiss on the half-breed and dashed back toward the festivities, glancing over her shoulder at Keira several times along the way. She would get her song.

As the sun set over the camp, with only a few days remaining to the test iteration, everyone seemed far more at ease than what had been expected at the outset. The children had been given a basic grasp of Naga Sadow’s business and ideology, but if that was the sole intent, then Qyreia was firmly aware that they had hired the wrong person for the job. Listening to the younglings singing and joking around the fires, roasting mallow puffs, or whispering secrets from beneath half-closed sleeping bags, seemed all the more worthwhile an experience to the Zeltron. It was already evident enough that the staff would be up late into the night simply to keep the older kids from sneaking off into the woods for a little extra camp fun. She was content enough to lay back and stare at the stars, lost to a myriad of thoughts whirling through her mind.

When the fires had burned down to flickering flames and rippling embers, and the quiet whisper of the forest had overtaken the sounds of the sleeping multitude, Qyreia still lay awake, staring at the twinkling points in the dark azure field. So lost was she in her own private musing that she was a little startled when Keira slid into the pit of her shoulder, having stealthily moved her own sleeping system over to the red woman’s spot.

“What’re you doing?” she whispered so quietly that Qyreia almost didn’t hear.

“Watching the stars. Thinking about stuff. Nothing special.”

“Mind if I join you?”

The Zeltron wrapped an arm around Keira’s shoulders, fingers gently playing with her raven hair. That feeling – the pressure of her lover’s hand – and the soft sensation of Qyreia’s growing smile tickling her cheek, was enough answer for a lifetime. If she could make it so, she wished this summer would never end.