***Breaking and Entering***

Looking around at the beachfront city of Kel Rasha, Qyreia wondered how she had never managed to visit the city before. *It’s almost as nice as the Archipelago*, she mused, throwing her leather jacket over her shoulder. *Now if I could just remember how frackin’ hot it gets around here, I might not have to sweat my choobs off every time I hang around these tropics.* Despite the lush and nigh utopian atmosphere provided by the unique urban planning, the streets seemed eerily empty. The plague that had been gradually creeping through the city had brought much of the local vibrancy to a standstill. Quarantines left whole quarters of the municipality devoid of visible life, while others seemed to be brought to heel strictly by fear.

Those few still milling about were either the very brave or the uninitiated – those who had arrived so recently that they were completely unaware of the danger. As a picturesque tourist and residency locale, this left enough population on the streets that the Zeltron didn’t stand out like quite such a sore thumb. A good thing considering her target seemed a wary one.

Hiram Possert was one of the potential scientists that engineered the virus. What motivation he could have had in doing so, the mercenary couldn’t tell. The file that had been provided little information on the intellectual: male, human, mid-thirties, a promising career in microbiology, and not necessarily bad looking. Were Qyreia not a more discerning sentient, she might’ve considered him a good catch. Now she found herself casing his home from a café across the street. While many of the residents were holed up inside, most of the businesses remained open; the smalltime operations that Kel Rasha catered to couldn’t afford to close, even in the face of the looming danger.

“Alright,” she muttered, sipping her caf while her eyes subtly watched the building’s entryway, “let’s get a move on, bub. I’ve got things to do.”

As if on cue, the doctor came out dressed for his afternoon jog, taking off down the street on the same route he had taken the previous day. *A few minutes late today, aren’t ya?* The scientist, usually so punctual, disappeared around the corner, allowing the Zeltron to finish her drink, pay her tab, and casually make her way over to the large apartment complex. In truth, being located toward the central tiers of the township, the structure was hardly great in size when compared to those situated nearer the mountain ranges to the east. It still offered enough space to house quite a few people, which offered as much convenience as it reduced security. A good thing for the former Black Guard whose skills were not quite so trained in slicing and other particulars useful in breaking into private homes or offices.

She already knew which apartment was his, and there was no security check to get past in making her way up the stairs and to his door. Upon arrival, she discovered the ingress to be locked by an electronic key deadbolt; crude but effective. It would have been more effective had the door been made of a sturdier material than the thick hardwood that offered more decoration than protection.

Slipping her blaster pistol from beneath her jacket and the knife from her boot, her steely gray-blue eyes glancing to her left and right to make sure no one was watching, she pinioned the blade against the door before hammering it deep into the wood. Placing the jacket over the pommel dulled the noise somewhat, but it made wrenching the blade no easier. It took almost a dozen such strikes before she managed to cut out a square from around the door handle and lock mechanism. Once done though, it jiggled loose almost as easily as if it had been unlocked in the first place.

“Jackpot.”

Hoping the maneuver had sounded like little more than an earnest visitor knocking at the door, Qyreia slipped inside the darkened apartment, acutely aware that the clock was ticking. The room was dark and cool; clearly the cooling system was running at peak efficiency on the hot, sunny day. The apartment was more a flat than a true abode – a good match for the bachelor inhabitant – but it all looked neat and well-ordered. That made finding his desk and general workspace all the easier to find.

Unfortunately, nothing stood out as particularly relevant to the city’s affliction. No microscopes or other scientific equipment adorned the shelves or tables. A few pieces of soldering and other hobbyist paraphernalia dotted the fringes of the room, while Possert’s desk dominated the corner by the window. She skipped over the obvious areas where there would be nothing to find – places too small to fit anything of value aside from small jewelry – and moved for the desk. Light from the midday sun filtered through the blinds in tight beams across the wood surface, contrasting each angle sharply in the otherwise dim light of the apartment.

The mercenary first checked his personal computer, but found it password protected. *No surprise there*, she mused at the loss. *Would that I could pick through code, this’d probably be a whole lot easier.* Lacking any other recourse, she started rifling through the drawers. Flimsis and files filled each one, but many appeared innocuous or related to legitimate work. Deft fingers flipped furiously through them all, but nothing struck her as relating to the town’s affliction.

“Not *one* goddamn file?! Frackin’ hell.” Her foot lashed out at the furniture, catching on the corner and eliciting a stream of profanity the likes of which she hadn’t uttered for quite some time. “Okay,” she whimpered, “let’s try another spot.”

Not a single drawer, cupboard, or container was left untouched. Not a single one of them had anything beyond what was practical – kitchen knives in the kitchen, remotes in the living room, and so on. A quick check of her chrono showed that she had mere minutes before the scientist came home to find his battered door. Things could only get more interesting from there.

“If I were trying to hide something from prying eyes, where would I put it?” Qyreia’s eyes darted around the room, concentrating hard on all the possibilities – few though they were – before landing on the large bed tucked back in a shady corner. “Oh ho! Little Hiram’s been hiding the dirty mags under his mattress, eh?”

What she found was far from pornographic, but it was no less corrupting. Data chips were neatly arranged in a recessed part of the bed frame, along with several well-filled files, with plain-Basic notes about a *certain* pathogen that caused many of the symptoms that were so afflicting Kel Rasha’s populace. *You’d have been better off keeping everything digital and on your computer*, she mused, hefting the evidence in her hand just as an exclamatory gasp slipped in through the damaged door. Setting the evidence aside, the mercenary took up her pistol and, in quiet measured steps, crossed the room to hide behind a protruding wall, just out of reach and sight of the door.

Possert had two options: go and tell the management about the break-in first, or make some investigations of his own before that. With the evidence resting so unsecure – hidden though it was – he couldn’t take the risk of the authorities running across it. He opened the door and took a cautious step inside.

“Welcome home, honey,” Qyreia said as she spun from around the corner to throw her knee into the unprepared human’s abdomen. Grabbing a fistful of his shirt, she pulled him inside and away from the door, punctuating the act by throwing him to the floor. “Doctor Possert,” she said, pistol carefully trained on him, “pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“W-who are you?” he sputtered as the wind slowly eked its way back into his lungs.

“Right now, I’m the one asking the questions, that’s who.” The Zeltron motioned with the muzzle of her gun. “Mind explaining those files over there?”

Possert’s eyes darted over to the bed where he saw his work splayed across the sheets. “Damn.”

“Mmhm, that about sums it up. Normally I’d interrogate you and get some information, but I think I’ll leave that to my higher-ups.”

“Who’re your ‘higher-ups?’”

Qyreia only chuckled as she keyed her communicator. “Hey, this is Qek. I’ve got Possert and the data here at his apartment. Care to come pick him up?”

*“Affirmative. We’ll be by in five minutes with a security detail. Hold tight.”*

“Roger. Qek out.”

“Why aren’t *you* going to interrogate me?” The human seemed more nervous about his unknown fate at the hands of the unnamed organization that was taking him into custody, hardly aware that it was the ruling party of the Orian system.

“I could, but that usually involves removing your unmentionables. I’m a very crude interrogator.”

“N-noted,” he said, swallowing back his nervousness. For his involvement in such a catastrophic scourge, he hardly seemed emotionally stoic enough to be one of the perpetrating parties.

The pair refrained from talking for the duration of the wait, though not for lack of trying on the human’s part. Qyreia wanted little and less to do with the scientist and his disease. *The sooner I get back home, the better*, she thought when the Sadowan detachment arrived. *Locke and Sang should both be happy too. Worked fast, and no one had to get bloody.* There was a brief report to the command staff, followed by a decontamination shower, but the Zeltron was allowed to go home all the same. Myrmidon wasn’t that far away, after all. They knew where to find her if they needed her.