

Redemption for the Rogue

A cloud of steam billowed into the cool morning air, the flaring nostrils that had spewed it forth contracting as the sigh came to a finish. *It is way too early in the morning for this druk*, Qyreia thought as she watched the steady traffic – foot and freighter alike – move over the landing surface of Giletta spaceport. She had seen it in the distance previously, and had a short peek during her initial tour when she had taken up the Quaestor post. This, however, was her first time truly seeing it, and in so doing realizing just how massive it was.

Running her hands over her arms for some warmth, the mercenary shuffled away from the balcony and back into one of the many receiving areas of the spaceport. The doors slid open and then closed behind the her, finally within the warmth of the building. It would be warmer as the day drew on, but the high altitude of the mountains and the predawn air currents made the current atmosphere rather uncomfortable for the lightly-dressed Zeltron.

A hot cup of caf relieved her of the cold and fatigue she was feeling. The pistol at her hip and the rifle over her shoulder gave her a feeling of security. The spaceport had over one thousand Dajorra Defense Force personnel spread throughout the area – a response to an old Hutt cartel attack on the hub – but they seemed stretched thin over so wide an area. Likely the rest were standing by *en masse* to counter any concerted effort against the more dispersed elements.

Makes it real easy for, say, a smuggler to walk around and do some illicit business, she thought, taking another sip of her caf. The irony was not lost on the mercenary, who had done a bit of smuggling in her own past.

Qyreia was hardly the only operative out here, but she did stand out a bit from the crowd per her red skin and blue hair. Thankfully, her lack of a presence at the starport gave her a modicum of anonymity, and the novelty of her appearance itself lended to a sort of reasonable probability when she was looking for leads. Arcona intelligence had said they had seventy two hours before the next cartel shipment; they'd already used up twenty four.

Leveraging her experience and appearance, the Aedile demotee had been able to at least scrounge up some information. The criminal element wasn't very well established yet. That much Qyreia had been able to determine from her conversations with local spacers and less-than-reputable-looking people who congregated in equally squalid locales. Turns out that a few credits and several rounds of drinks will loosen quite a few lips; and having a second liver didn't hurt with the latter method of espionage.

She knew they weren't a full-fledged gang. This burgeoning criminal element was more a haphazard collection of smugglers that were working for their own mutual benefit – a loose alliance that would likely hold their claim so long as they thought they could hold it. A few Dajorra Defense Force personnel's pockets were appropriately greased to pass their illicit goods through, thus giving them sole smuggling rights to the area.

There was a roster of approved “traders” for this group. Qyreia already had nearly two dozen names, and she was fairly certain of where the shipment location would be. She just had to dive a little deeper into the mire to finish the job.

“And here comes my contact now,” she murmured to herself when she saw a human male, rather well kempt for a smuggler but no less zeroed in on her, walking toward the small caf

stand that the merc was lingering by. “You Rogers?” she asked, disposing of her cup as she stepped casually forward.

“I’m Rogers. First name’s Bly.”

“Bly Rogers... Can’t say I’ve heard of you.”

“I keep a low profile, Miss...?”

“Call me Qek, first name Red.” A smuggler was only as good as their name, even if it was a nickname.

“That sounds somewhat familiar.”

“Spend enough time on the Hydian and Perlemian, and you might find a few people that know it. So, ready to do some business?”

“You know,” Rogers said as they began walking through the terminal, “you’re playing a very dangerous game here, Miss Qek.”

“Please, just call me Red.”

That made the human chuckle. “Alright Red. Even so, I’d hate to see someone like you get mixed up in the politics around here.”

Would that you knew I was already part of the actual political game around here. “And why’s that?”

“These associates of mine are very insular, and they will almost certainly take your presence for that of infringing competition.”

“I’m not looking to compete, Bly. I’m looking to cooperate and get some credits in the doing. I don’t plan on paying any dues or membership fee though, if that’s what the game is.”

“Not exactly, but it is a mutual effort enterprise.”

“*Enterprise?* Big word for someone bringing in death sticks.”

He eyed the Zeltron warily. “How do you know what I’m selling?”

Qyreia shrugged, “Bat your eyelashes a few times, pour some drinks, and folks talk about the supply and demand pretty easily. As you can see, I got onto this planet – goods and all – but now that I’m making the run offworld, I need a good window where the local law might be less inclined to look. Figured that in setting up this partnership, you might have such a window available.”

Rogers had contacted her in the first place. A Zeltron smuggler running in on the developing cartel’s territory was something that didn’t require any bribery to spread the word about. Most of this information was likely already known to him, but being able to corroborate the hearsay with the actual source would go a long way. *And folks just think smuggling is about making hyperspace jumps and doing the Kessel Run in as few parsecs as possible.*

Evidently, he was willing to take the bait. “Alright. Say I have a meeting in a day or so. Is your ship ready to leave?”

“Always.”

“And you already have your cargo?”

“It’ll be ready whenever it needs to be.”

Bly smiled. “Good. I will let you know the time and place by tomorrow. How can I reach you?”

“I’ll be at that caf shop,” she pointed back from whence they came with her thumb, “at eight, the Juney Cantina further down at noon for lunch and the Giletta Spirits Club for dinner at eighteen-hundred. I’ll make sure to have seats for two.”

Her counterpart seemed impressed, if a little surprised about her thoroughness, but he said nothing about it before taking his leave, presumably to speak with the other smuggler captains. Despite his polite mannerisms, Qyreia smelled something was off about the whole affair. When Bly had inquired about the readiness of her cargo, that had set off some red flags in her head: you don’t ask another trader about the status of their cargo; if they’re ready, then they’re ready. In a business of illegal trafficking – whether the goods are harmless or volatile – it was best to know only the essential details.

Tired as she was, the mercenary continued on her walk, stopping by a pastry stand for some breakfast before continuing about her day. As much as she wanted to send up a report about what had transpired, she assumed it was a safe bet that she was being watched. With the multitude of people in the starport, it was hard to discern one individual from another unless they were of some non-human or distinct near-human race. Going to her ship would be just as dangerous as going to a communications terminal.

In effect, Qyreia had to act the tourist and trader until she had all the cards in her hand. Or at least, more cards than she had at present.

That was a more difficult task than she would have originally assumed. The first hurdle alone was in merely resisting the urge to go to her actual home on the Citadel. It had also been several years since she had been a smuggler. She would have to act wary in a place where she was, in actuality, very safe. It was a case of acting suspicious nonchalantly.

I’ve got to be overthinking this, Qyreia mused as she strolled through the concourse, noting the security posts and restricted area signs. *It’s almost fun to be back in the game though.*

Grabbing a shopping bag of snacks, frozen dinner, and a six pack of some Selenian variety of cider, she made her way back to her rented room, located halfway between her ship and where she thought the cartel was basing out of. It was close enough to one of the many landing pad sections that it might throw off any suspicion about her ship. The room was cheap and appropriately furnished for the price. The two bonuses were that the bedding was legitimately clean, and there was a very good vidscreen with a decent selection of channels to watch. Qyreia fell asleep on the bed watching a cheap horror movie about some blob monster, with the liquor gone along with most of the food.

Wakeup was a frantic affair when she looked at the bedside chrono and saw that it was a matter of minutes before the time she had given to Rogers the day before. A flurry of profanity flew from her lips as she threw her clothes on, telling herself to shower after she was done with breakfast. Despite the lateness of her waking, she was only a few minutes behind when she arrived at the caf shop.

No sign of her contact made an appearance through all of breakfast. The Juney Cantina at lunch was lively and offered a good selection, but yet again she was left waiting for a

rendezvous that never happened. The day wore on, the sun had begun its descent below the horizon, and the starport calmed its din for the day. The Giletta Spirits Club was, like its façade suggested, a fine dining establishment with the lighting atmosphere of a place where there should be nothing but dancing and loud music. Instead, there was the low murmur of conversation from the sequestered booths that surrounded the central floor, occasionally broken by the clatter of dishes or the clink of glasses full of – as the name suggested – fine alcoholic drinks.

I should really get a few casual dresses, Qyreia thought as she sipped at her cocktail, comparing her black buttoned shirt and gray slacks with the sleeker clothing of some of the other patrons. Her choice of attire was nicer than her usual outfit, but it still wasn't going to win over any hearts compared to a black leg-slit dress.

She was looking at the menu for the main course, some appetizers already in the works, when her familiar contact appeared and sat down at the seat across from her.

"Is this seat taken?" he asked in as suave a manner as might be mustered.

"I was wondering when you might show up," Qyreia replied with a coy, inviting smile. She motioned to the waiter. "Care for a drink?"

"Love one." He made his order which arrived only moments later alongside the appetizers that the Zeltron had requested prior. "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting all day. My associates merely wanted to make sure your credentials checked out."

"And did they?" She sipped her cocktail while her eyes seemed to drink him in.

"The name 'Red Qek' shows up in several areas – other smugglers vouching for your name. No law enforcement record to speak of."

"S'because I never got caught."

"So it appears." Bly leaned forward in his seat, his expression one of comfort and ease. "I talked to my partners. They're interested... but they want to see what you have to offer them." His eyes wandered so far down that it was hardly subtle.

Keep looking bub. It's the last good view you're gonna get before I put a blaster bolt through your chest. "Information, and a bit of a long arm in the galaxy. Most of you guys trade the local runs I take it?"

"What makes you say that?"

"Every major populated world sells death sticks, Bly. I'd bet a hundred creds that you don't get your supply from the Core; you get it from somewhere closer. Maybe not as good of quality, but what would the locals know about that, eh?"

The human chuckled, waving his hands in mock surrender. "Alright. You got me."

"I can get you and your friends some reach – bring in the *real* good stuff – without stepping on any toes. Woods, textiles, specialty foods, you name it. I just won't touch drugs or trafficking."

"Fair enough," he acquiesced. "Tomorrow morning at eight-thirty, docking bay thirty two, pad four. Bring your ship for the convoy. We'll work out the rest of the details then."

"You're not sticking around for dinner?" she cooed as he slowly rose from his seat.

“I feel like if I were to stay in your company any further, we would both be getting more than we bargained for.”

“Mutual profit then. Isn't that what this whole deal is all about?”

That gave Bly pause, but only for a moment, before he continued walking away, though the broad smile on his face showed just how intrigued he was. *Ah well. I was hoping for some company for dinner, but I guess it's just me tonight... again.* With her plan to ply him for more information with flirtation and alcohol foiled, Qyreia sat back in her seat and picked away at the appetizers, moved on to dinner, and left with hardly an ounce of entertainment to the evening.

Well enough, I suppose. Got a lot of planning to do for tomorrow.

Returning to the hotel for only a brief time, the merc gathered her things, changed her clothes, and left for her ship. There were preparations to make and not a lot of time to make them.

By eight-fifteen the next morning, the *Katurno* – Qyreia's YT-1300 with a massive *qek* letter painted in red across the top – landed at the appropriate place. Save for a handful of humanoids standing nearby, the whole area seemed devoid of life, even though her sensors told her otherwise. She unbuckled from her seat as the landing struts connected with the ground with a dull *thud*.

“Alright Remece,” she said to the R3 droid waiting in the hall behind the cockpit, “you know what to do.”

R3-M3 chimed an affirmative and whizzed down the hall to the central column of the ship while the red woman sauntered down the ramp, pistol at her hip and rifle slung over a shoulder. Mr. Rogers and his friends looked almost as comfortable as they were fidgety.

“Good morning,” Qyreia called through the dead air that hung over the assemblage. Her confident smile did not seem to set any hearts at ease.

“Morning Red,” Bly said as she came closer. “Thought you should meet my partners in crime; no pun intended.”

“Is that even a pun?” She offered a chuckle for the joke. “Now, down to business.”

“Indeed,” grumbled an older man — an Anzat of more than a few decades in age, if the peculiar dimples and his gray hair were to be believed. His cheeks looked similar to Qyreia's old Quaestor's. “Enough of this charade, Bly.”

As though on cue, the assembled smugglers drew their weapons, save for Rogers, and aimed them at the lone Zeltron. The mercenary looked surprised. She wasn't surprised in the least, but first impressions are very important, after all.

“Bly, what the hell?! I thought we had a deal!” Off in behind the crates and large containers, she could see blasters peeking out; more than likely the crew of the lowlifes before her. “You double-crossing, Hutt humping, no-necked, yellow-bellied son of a Trandoshaan whore!”

“Language, young lady,” an amiable-looking old human said, his head a mop of gray and white hair with a massive comb of a mustache to match.

“Can’t risk competition coming in, Red. You know how these things work. If you walk away now, you might just get to keep your life.”

“You have any idea how long I worked to get this ship, you *schutta*?!”

“Wouldn’t you rather keep your life?”

“Wouldn’t you rather keep yours?”

The trigger fingers on her company tightened. “Red, I’m warning you. This is your last chance.” He motioned for a pair of humanoids — DSDF Selenians by the look of them and their uniforms — who had cuffs and blasters ready. “You know you can’t win. We’ve been watching you. No crew and an outdated ship model, apparently full of cargo. The scales on the pad you landed on tell us that much. Now, I implore you: step away from the ship.”

“I’ve got five words for you. Bite my tight, red choobs!”

An odd thing had been happening inside of the ship, unbeknownst to the gaggle of smugglers outside. While Qyreia and the would-be double-crossers were talking — short though the conversation was — the R3 droid was scurrying to the ship’s weapons control point, interfacing and prepping the targeting algorithms. While it wasn’t necessarily in its primary programming, Remeë saw itself as its master’s caretaker: it was tasked with protecting her, and this it would do, even if it meant a little stress on its circuits.

The soft hum of its inner workings didn’t even register in its audio sensor suite as it watched the exchange between the ship’s captain and the targets. The boarding ramp blocked many of the targets, but the ones on the flanks were easily accessible. That was when it heard its master yelling — something about her “choobs” — and knew it was time to start firing; though what its master’s posterior had to do with the engagement rather eluded it.

No sooner had the Zeltron turned to sprint back up the boarding ramp than the laser cannons on the underside of the ship began to open fire. The unguarded bags of meat never stood a chance. Clearly they had expected some sort of fight, but nothing on this magnitude, and it was one hell of a distraction for the retreating merc. A harsh graze to her thigh was the greatest price she paid for the stunt, but the Zeltron managed to return to the cover of her ship otherwise unscathed.

Closethehatch closethehatch closethehatch...

A bit of return fire from her pistol prevented any party from attempting to charge up the ramp, forcing those who were unscathed for the moment to withdraw to the cover of the large containers as it slowly lifted shut. Once fully secured, it gave Remeë the full three-hundred-sixty degree field of fire that was so very fine for such a firefight. As he battered away at the flimsy containers within the hangar, Qyreia limped through the ship toward the main hold. Most of the food and water was gone, but the ship’s septic tank was very much full of the waste of the platoon of Dajorran Defense Force personnel she had discreetly tipped off. It was a tight squeeze for the poor fellows, but they were very much ready for the fight that was going on outside.

“Captain,” Qyreia said to the commanding officer, “I believe I’ve found your smuggling ring. Not sure if Remeë vaporized the guys that were paid off, but if not, they’re outside and all yours.”

“Your droid will know not to shoot *us*, right?” the captain half joked. When the merc nodded, he motioned to a trooper behind him. “Lieutenant, get this scum off my spaceport. Alive if possible; dead if they resist.”

“Yessir!” The spritely youth who hardly looked like he should be in charge of so many people called the multitude forward toward the ramp which once again lowered. As much as she could never find herself in the uniform of a dedicated soldier, Qyreia had a small admiration for the troopers, charging down into the fray with blaster bolts flying all around with not regard for their own safety beyond finding some cover and shooting anyone that was aiming for the person next to them.

“Remee,” she growled excitedly over her personal communicator, “cover me. These boys ain’t having all the fun.”

Nearly an hour later, the area was secured.

The DSDF were grateful for the aid of the seemingly random spacer that was so willing to help shut down the smuggling ring. Even the captain, from whose company the platoon had been requisitioned, was unaware of how many strings had been pulled and how many proverbial pieces had been moved to give the current Aedile of House Galeres the assets she so desperately needed. No matter how she had thought it over after the final meeting with Rogers, Qyreia couldn’t think of a way to singlehandedly take out the smuggling ring. It required more than what she could bring to the table.

Still, she had provided ample support, and no small amount of firepower of her own. At the end of the day, only a little over half of the cartel ringleaders were apprehended or captured. The others presumably fled, as the following weeks sowed a marked reduction in reports from the local police over contraband in the area. Save for a few individuals far higher up the chain of command, they had no idea what part the Citadel played in their actions.

As the *Katurno* rounded the planet to dock at the Citadel, away from the immediate sensor sweep of Giletta, Qyreia leaned back in her seat, thinking rather intensely, wondering if this might be her redemption. Would the Consul see that she was trustworthy? That she was as able as she said, even without oversight of the Clan?

“At least I get to sleep in my own bed again,” she groaned, stretching her body in one long arc. “S’about frackin’ time.”