***A Friend in Need***

*Imma kill that motherfrakkin’ blueberry!* It had been a matter of hours since the call had come in to her personal communicator log: Qyreia’s apprentice, Leeadra, was neck-deep in trouble on some unnamed ball of ice. From what the Zeltron could glean, the Pantoran had witnessed some sort of trouble and, falling back on her roots, had taken the law into her own hands. A rushed transmission was all that the Jedi-in-training had managed to eke out before being apprehended.

Despite her frustration, the mercenary hoped that her apprentice was safe above all else.

With the small transport’s throttle maxed out, the red woman piloted through a fierce snowstorm that would have balked less experienced pilots. Soon enough, the dark outlines of the small spaceport came into view, and the Zeltron jerked the throttle back as she made ready to dock. As the blurry shape of the landing pads came in more clearly, the comms unit chirped to life.

*“Unidentified vessel, submit your identity and purpose before landing.”*

“This is Qyreia Arronen. This storm has trashed my flight stabilizers,” she lied. “I need a clear landing pad, unless you want a flaming wreck to contend with.”

There was a pause in the transmission before coordinates blipped to life on her navigation screen. She figured that they would run a diagnostic on her vessel once landed, but their rush to prevent a disaster kept their curiosity at bay for a half moment longer. What the mercenary hadn’t counted on was the security detail waiting for her at the platform. With a little play on the stick, she let the onlookers think that her controls really were damaged, and several stepped back, wary of the seemingly precarious landing. The struts touched down with a deep *thunk* as wind whipped the powdery snow in a spiraling dance in concert with the thrusters as they let off their final traces of exhaust.

“Time to go meet the locals,” she said, slinging her carbine over her shoulder and patting her other weapons to make sure they were still in place. *They’ll probably try to disarm me… need to make sure that doesn’t happen.* The problem was that the little ball of ice and rock that they were on was in a relatively unregulated part of space, and it was very likely that some gangs ran the day-to-day activities, which would explain Leeadra’s predicament. *Little bugger probably tried to enforce some law*, she thought as she descended the ramp off the ship, wrapped in a thick parka and eyeing the security forces warily. *By the way these fellas look, I can’t blame her.*

“Stay where you are,” the leader of the detail said with a cautioning hand. “Drop your weapons and present your ID card.”

“Pretty sure folks are allowed to be armed in these parts,” the Zeltron responded as she dug out her identification chip, thankful for its weight when she tossed it through the buffeting wind to the speaker.

The human’s – as far as Qyreia could tell he was human – silently caught the chip and inserted it into a datapad, looking over her credentials. “Spacer merchant, huh?” He tossed the chip back. “Not much to sell here. State your business.”

“I’m meeting a supplier here. Not that I like iceballs like this, but it was a good halfway point between us.”

From beneath his own cold weather clothing, Qyreia could see the human’s attention flitting from her face to her weapons in equal measure, weighing just how much of a threat she would be. “You will register your firearms at the security checkpoint, but you may keep them. You spacers are always so fickle about being armed.”

“Gotta stay safe from pirates somehow,” the Zeltron shrugged, smiling as she closed the ship up before following the group toward the settlement proper.

They approached the nearby rock face, where a fair-sized gate was inset into the stone through which they passed. The group was instantly met by warm atmosphere, though the decoration was sparse and as cold as the weather outside. Qyreia was then guided toward a tram that took them deeper into the subterranean habitat. One wall gave way to transparisteel, showing the bustling city beneath, pitted by mining operations, and steam trails that slithered upward like tall, pale stalagmites.

“Where is this checkpoint?” she asked of the human, noting that all but two of the security detail had remained behind.

“The security station is on the far end of the city. This tram makes it easier to make such transfers without cluttering the entry area with a bottleneck.”

Qyreia nodded in understanding as the trolley they were in sped along the rail. Her hand never strayed far from her lap, and her peripherals were always wary of the security personnel around her. They had the air of official business, but their voices and body language were… off. It had the flavor of lax formality that she had seen so often in her smuggling days.

They might be security, but they were far from being real peace officers.

A minute later, the group arrived and disembarked into a sparsely populated office area that seemed to have holding cells on the far wall. There were forms for her to fill out – simple fare – that registered her blasters so that, if there were trouble, they could at least track the cause and participants. Halfway through the form-filling, Qyreia’s eyes strayed once more to the holding cells and saw, through the transparisteel wall, a certain blue-skinned woman.

“Um, why is she in there?” she asked of the officer, almost too hurriedly.

“Do you know her?”

*Think quick.* “That’s my frackin’ supplier!” She turned to the officer, whose attention seemed all the more intense. “Why’s she locked up?”

“*That* is your supplier?” His eyebrow quirked in a way Qyreia didn’t like. “Funny, since she wasn’t carrying any cargo.”

*Sithspit.* “I said I was *meeting* a supplier, not that I was transferring cargo.”

The officer’s muscles seemed to relax a little at that. “Fair enough. She was causing trouble with the locals; sticking her nose where it didn’t belong.”

“And that’s grounds to lock her up?”

“It is when she’s carrying a lightsaber.” He illustrated his point by opening a drawer in the desk and displaying the iconic cylinder with a gentle, almost nervous grip, like the weapon might be volatile all on its own. “Did you know your supplier was a Jedi?”

“S’news to me, but I can’t really do my business with her locked up.”

“Well she’s not leaving until her trial in three weeks, when the men she assaulted get out of the hospital.”

The Zeltron’s steely eyes glanced back over to Leeadra, who looked up and finally noticed her master’s presence. The mercenary’s expression told her to play along with whatever happened. The advantage of training with someone that used you for target practice: you get used to reading their face – the eyes, the lips, and even subtle muscle movements in the jaw. Thankfully, the Pantoran had also picked up on some telepathy in her time with the Brotherhood.

*‘About time you showed up,* master*.’* The Jedi’s voice entered Qyreia’s mind almost naturally, and it surprised her since they had never communicated as such before.

*‘Quit complaining and play along. I don’t want to get in a shootout with these Hutt-humpers.’*

*‘What’s the plan, then?’*

*‘I’m working on it.’*

*‘You don’t have a plan?! We are so kriffed.’*

“Well let’s see what *your* plan is then, you pipsqueak blueberry!” Qyreia screamed across the room. The Pantoran’s palm met her face in abject frustration as the realization creeped into the Zeltron’s conscious mind. *Aw frack.*

The security officer had only begun to reach for Qyreia, only to receive a furious uppercut to his chin with one hand, followed up with a crack across the face as the mercenary brought her carbine to bear with the other. One of the other guards had been relaxing in a chair, and only managed to fall in surprise once the action started. The other, however, was quick to raise his own blaster and fire a quick shot that burned through the top of the Zeltron’s left shoulder. A frustrated *tsch* sound escaped from between her clenched teeth as she sighted down the barrel and fired with deadly precision, the red energy connecting just above the notch of the guard’s collarbone.

As he sprawled to the floor, the mercenary turned to face the one that had fallen, only to see him tentatively frozen, flailing against an unseen force. Behind him, Leeadra knelt in the chamber, hand outstretched and her face contorted in concentration. If only to feel less bad about it, Qyreia dropped the power setting to a heavy stun before shooting the guard, releasing the Pantoran from her burden.

“Alright you,” she said, hauling the bludgeoned officer to his feet, “let’s open up this door.”

“You won’t get away with this!”

A muzzle thump between his shoulder blades told him otherwise. “*Now*. I won’t tell you again.”

They walked over to the cell and, with another shove, the human opened the chamber and Leeadra walked out. “So much for diplomacy.”

“Do I *look* like the diplomatic type to you, half-pint?”

“You tried, I’ll give you that, lobster girl; but this plan was a pat of butter shy of a seafood dinner.”

“Shut up and let’s get this guy locked up.”

“Alright. You,” the Pantoran said to the human, “down to the skivvies, now.”

The two non-Force users looked at her briefly in confusion, but the Zeltron turned back to the officer and motioned with her carbine. “You heard the blueberry. Strip.”

The Jedi grumbled something about cherries, but otherwise remained quiet as she collected her lightsaber and other effects while the human got down to his underwear and stepped into the cell. Just to be sure nothing happened once they left, Qyreia hit him with a heavy stun shot as well, before collecting up security keycards and the like from his gear.

“Well, now what?”

“Now we get back to the ship.”

“Aren’t there a whole bunch of security guys at the entrance by the starport?”

“Yyyeaah… Do you know about any ways around?”

“There’s an emergency escape hatch just past the tram drop-off platform. Might be easier than trying to go through the city. We’d kinda stick out there.”

“Noted,” Qyreia said, grimacing as she shifted her sling away from the slowly reddening cloth of her parka’s shoulder. “Let’s go.”

Before Leeadra could comment on her master’s condition, they were off, walking briskly toward the exit that revealed itself to be just where the Jedi had said. Once the door opened, they were met by the violent winds of the snowstorm outside, into which the Zeltron shouldered her way through the door and into the open, with her apprentice close behind. Outside, they were met by a wall of white turbulence, their feet planted on an ill-kept path that wound its way along the sheer face of rock that the locals resided in.

Despite the frigid temperatures, Leeadra seemed right at home, not so much as flinching at the wind, though she was forced to shield her eyes from the stinging snow somewhat. Her savior on the other hand shivered, even in her thick coat, made all the more nervous by the heights and tenuous footing. They pushed on regardless, picking their way through the pebble-strewn path toward the starport some kilometers distant in the blinding storm. After nearly half an hour of the slow progress, Qyreia needed to take shelter from the wind, slipping into a crack in the rocks just big enough for the both of them to stand in.

“F-f-f-frack it’s c-c-cold.”

“It’s not that bad,” Leeadra said nonchalantly, shuffling a little to keep her blood flowing. “Can’t be much further now. Come on, Q.”

“F-f-fine, b-b-but you get to explain to K-keira if I come back l-l-looking like a popsicle.”

“Ugh,” she dismissed, walking out of the crevice, “yeah yeah, whatever*aaah!*”

The Pantoran’s steps had been misplaced in her complacency, and she slipped mid-step, tripping and tumbling over the edge of the path. Leeadra caught herself on a small jut of rock a little over a meter down, but her grip was slippery from the ice that melted under her hand.

“Qyreia!”

“Sithspit. Hold on!” *Come on Q, think think think…* The Zeltron looked frantically around for some way of reaching down, but there were no ropes, and her own gear was not suited for mountaineering. She tried to lay down on the path, but her arm could not reach down to the Pantoran, who could hardly move if she didn’t want to lose her grip entirely.

“I’m slipping!”

“Hold on!”

*Come on, come on…* The Zeltron rose and looked around again, and her eyes once again fell on the crevice. The base was not so eroded as the rocks at chest level. *I hope this works*, the thought in a panic as she unslung her carbine and, parallel to the ground, jammed it into the divots in the walls. Once again, she carefully lowered herself to the ground and, wrapping the loose sling around her ankle, inched her way over the edge until only the meat of her thighs above the knee connected with the jagged edge.

“Grab on!”

Blood dripped from the Zeltron’s parka, freezing as soon as it was airborne before being whipped away like the snow around them. A scant few centimeters from Leeadra’s hands, tightly holding to their grip on the rock, the Pantoran feared to let go. Qyreia dared not try and go any further, already worried that the blaster might slip from the rocks, or the sling come undone. *Come on, Leeadra. You can do it.*

With no small amount of courage, the Jedi let go one hand to reach up, only to feel the other lose its slippery grip. It was enough. The mercenary clutched at the blue woman’s forearm with both hands, pulling her up as far as she could until the Pantoran could find better holds to climb on the Zeltron’s own body. It was slow and nervous work as Leeadra climbed over her master, and then again when they slowly worked Qyreia up from her precarious position and back onto the path. Once they were both righted and back on solid ground though, they hugged, carefully, as they caught their breath.

“You know what, cherry pie? You’re not quite as bad as I thought.”

“Th-thanks?” With an ounce of hesitation, Qyreia tightened her embrace. “I’m glad you’re safe.”

“You too.”

After several more moments of stillness, they decided to continue their trek. It was another quarter hour before the landing pads finally came into view, and with an accompaniment of several security guards around the Zeltron’s ship, just to make matters worse.

“Frack,” the Pantoran sighed. “So close, yet so far.”

“Think you can sneak up on ‘em?”

“There’s five of them and one of me, and – no offense – but you’re not exactly in any shape to be duking it out with those guys.”

“I was thinking I could give you covering fire,” Qyreia said, patting her carbine.

“Can you even *hit* anything in this storm?”

“Puh-lease. If I can see it, I can hit it. Just give me some time to line up my shots, and I’ll clear a path for you. Besides,” she said, noting the guards’ numbers, “they probably think we went through the city. Might be a couple in the entryway, but this many should be easy enough.”

“There’s just no easy way to things with you, is there?”

“There’s an easy way?” she joked, motioning the Pantoran onward as she lay down and set up her sight picture.

Drawing as much on the Force as her own limited natural abilities, Leeadra slipped down the pathway, using the heavy snow as concealment until she reached the main landing area, where the ships added to the cover. Up on the hillside, she could barely make out Qyreia, snow slowly piling over the Zeltron’s parka-puffed form to further disguise her in the storm. Meter by meter, she slowly made her way forward, hopping from one darkened landing strut to another, until she was only a short sprint from the mercenary’s transport. *Your turn, master.*

The message slipped into Qyreia’s mind and, suppressing her violent desire to shiver, she set her eye to the scope. Two of the guards were standing close together, while the other three were scattered on the far side of the transport – a long way for Leeadra to go to engage a target. Her finger, numb and half-frozen, slowly applied pressure to the trigger.

The first bolt of red struck the closer of the conversing pair, catching the group’s attention. The second, with a subtle shift in Qyreia’s position, picked off the guard at the far side of the transport, drawing their eyes upward and away from the Jedi that had just vaulted a cargo crate. Green bolts flew up the slope at the Zeltron, exploding and fizzling out in the snow and ice around her, the occasional shard of rock showering onto her parka’s hood. It was a beautiful distraction.

A yellow blade burst to life from the dull gray hilt as Leeadra came upon the first foe, still reeling from the loss of the man he had just been talking to. His sorrow was ended quickly enough. Hours of training with the non-Force user had taught the Pantoran to block a blaster bolt, and so it was not too difficult to deflect the fire that soon turned her way. The fusillade was withering though, and her skill not practiced in such intense conditions. Soon, the Jedi started to be pushed back. Risking the fire from the other guard, Qyreia took up a more exposed position to get a better angle on Leeadra’s assaulter.

The haste caused her shot to go low, only catching him in the leg. It was enough to break the storm of fire, and the Jedi returned the kindness by dismembering the guard’s hand as she dashed across the platform to deal with the final guard, who had redoubled his efforts against the Zeltron. She had but to turn the corner to catch him unawares.

Once the landing area was clear, she picked up one of the dead men’s blasters and watched the entryway while Qyreia worked her way slowly down to the landing pads. Only when Qyreia had opened the ramp did reinforcements arrive, apparently near enough to hear the fire, but not to reach the door quickly.

Leeadra wasn’t a great shot, but she knew how to put rounds down, covering their withdrawal into the ship’s interior.

“Take the copilot seat,” Qyreia ordered, which Leeadra uncharacteristically obeyed without question.

The engines, still warm from the landing, perked to life quickly. The duo was swiftly airborne, making all due speed to leave the atmosphere and get to hyperspace. Only when the blue tunnel surrounded their canopy did Qyreia finally seem to relax, sliding deeper into her seat with a sigh.

“Are we safe? They could follow.”

“Nah, we’re fine. I didn’t see any interceptors on the scanners when I came in.”

Qyreia righted herself, typing in course corrections that would take them to Brotherhood space, while Leeadra watched with slight wonder. “How did you do that?”

“Do what?” she said, pausing.

“Come in there and get me; all on your own.” The Pantoran searched for the right words. “You didn’t hesitate to fight or… or kill for me. I was only able to because those guys didn’t give me any choice, but… I’m not used to that kind of thing.”

“I’m responsible for you,” the Zeltron said with a friendly smile, placing a gentle hand on the blue girl’s shoulder. “Besides, I like to think we’re friends, and friends fight for each other. That’s just how it works. Doesn’t matter that you’re Jedi, or Sith, or whatever.”

“Th-thank you,” Leeadra said slowly with purpose. “Thanks for coming for me.”

“Anytime, blueberry.”

“Shut up and fly, cherry pie.”