***The Reward for Aid***

Of all the places in the galaxy known for its ties to smuggling and organized crime, the “Smuggler’s Moon” was not among the places that Qyreia had ever visited. With its sprawling urban landscape, it was much like Coruscant or other similar megalopolis worlds, only without the well-managed atmosphere and pollution controls. It also came without the added bonus of protection on the ground, save for a blaster on one’s hip or a knife hidden discreetly away – both of which the mercenary already had.

At least she could look forward to an exciting time. The mission details alone dictated as much: look into a missing Jedi and the datacard of sensitive information that he was carrying. *Seems I’m working for these Undesirable special interest groups a lot more, lately. They’re lucky I’m doing this out of moral obligation, or this’d be costing them a whole ‘vette full of creds.* Getting to the world of shady dealings had been easy enough, hitching a ride and paying for transport in short jumps that kept her well under the proverbial radar – not even an IFF signature for any Inquisitorius agents to pick up on and track.

Getting a ride back to friendly space would prove a different demon, but that was something to be concerned with when the time came.

Odan-Urr’s contact had at least afforded the Zeltron some leads as to where the Jedi in question’s last known location was prior to his disappearance. The cantina would likely be under surveillance and the purported droid that this Jedi supposedly left the datacard in would just as likely no longer be there, or at least in possession of the list after so long. Even hyperspace could only afford so much speed. A well-placed tie in her hair however, along with some makeshift horns, and she had managed to make herself passably resemble a Zabrak to make up for her total lack of cover story.

*Not even that good a disguise*, she thought as she entered the cantina, seeing a *real* Zabrak among the throng. His brief glance seemed to be rather disinterested though, so it seemed that the ruse was holding for the moment, at least.

“What’ll it be?” the bartender asked as she took a stool at the counter.

“Depends on what you’re offering. I’m looking to buy *and* to sell. Know anyone that might be able to help?”

The barkeep, a Besalisk of rather great stature, shifted with a mix of unease and confident curiosity, one pair of his enormous hands wiping down a glass while the other pair leaned heavily on the bar. *Oh yeah,* this *won’t attract attention*. “What’re you *buying*?”

“Drinks,” she said coyly, leaning casually to the side while flashing a disarming smile at the curious creature. The giant made a deep, gruff chuckle as he passed a double-shot of some sort of whiskey over the table, which Qyreia promptly paid for and drank in one smooth motion. “…And information,” she finished, laying a finger on her glass to indicate she wanted another.

“You don’t mess around, do you?” he said, eyeing the extra credits she discreetly slid across the bar. “And what sort of information are you looking for?” He punctuated this by producing another drink just as swiftly as he pocketed the money.

“There was a fight here recently. Know who was involved?”

“You’re playing pretty sly for a Zabrak.”

“And *you’re* pretty tight-lipped for an information broker,” she said, sliding the drink away from him and firmly to her side of the countertop. *No info, no more money.*

“Hrmph. Alright, there *might* have been a scuffle.”

“Who?”

“Looked like a Jedi and some angry cheeka. Brooding, dark clothes, the works.”

Qyreia finished her second drink, slower this time, and repeated the earlier transaction. “What did she want from him?”

“Aside from wanting him dead?” By this point, the barkeep had lowered his voice to well below the din of the surrounding atmosphere. “Some says he had information of his own.”

“Any idea where either might have went?”

He rubbed his thick fingers together. “Two stories requires two drinks.”

*This kriffer is gonna bleed me dry at this rate.* She still paid for the drinks. “So?”

“Force-boy they took with them; long ways off by now. This information of his got passed to one of our serving droids. Might be I still have it.”

“Might be that you’re lying, too. Now enough of these half-answers, Besalisk, or I’m liable to start getting rather angry.”

Another low chuckle crept from his lips. “Look around you, girl. Think you can take on every low-life here that would rather keep this place a quiet business establishment?” He made a move to take one of the two fresh drinks that he’d placed in front of Qyreia, but was halted when she jammed the barrel of her pistol down into the glass.

“I just need to take on the one that has the information I want, and far as I can tell, that’s *you*.” She slid the drink back over and took the pistol from the amber liquid, muzzle still dripping as she set it on the counter, before picking up the glass and holding it just shy of her lips. “So, since I’ve already paid for information, you can tell me easy or you can tell me hard, but you *are* going to tell me what I want to know.”

The Zeltron did not offer an intimidating figure, nor was she particularly adept at such manipulation, but something about her maneuvers at least seemed to intrigue the barman. Not many of her stature would be so bold as to threaten someone of his gargantuan frame, much less in such a setting. With a smirk and a nod, the Besalisk sauntered away to a back room for a brief moment, leaving Qyreia to wonder nervously what to expect next. Things rarely went so easily, if this could be called easy. *Keep gambling like this, and you’re gonna get vaped one day, ol’ Q.*

Before she could worry any further, the bartender lumbered casually back out behind the bar, one of his meaty hands balled into a fist, as though gingerly clutching something. He took and served a few drink orders on the way, so as not to draw too much attention to the “Zabrak” that had been so engrossing him for the past several minutes.

“Here it is,” he said, subtly sliding the datacard across the counter. “Figure I got some credits out of it thanks to you, so I can get rid of it before it causes me any real trouble?”

“And what makes you think I’m not trouble?” Qyreia said with a devious but amiable grin as she grabbed the card and began perusing the contents.

“I’m all too aware that trouble comes in pretty packages, just like you.”

She nodded as she read the dossier. “You didn’t make any copies?”

“No. That there is the only one, and now that it’s in your hands; I’m washing mine of the responsibility.”

“Well, I thank you for your… hospitality.” The mercenary slid the untouched shot over to the Besalisk while taking up the one she had buried her blaster in. “Cheers, mate.”

“Safe travels, Zabrak.” The barkeep and his patron knocked back their drinks, the former returning to his duties as though nothing had happened, while the latter pocketed the datacard and walked out of the cantina just as casually as she had come in.

“Thank the Force *that’s* over with,” Qyreia mumbled to herself once back on the streets. “Thought he was going to try and take me to the back room for his ‘payment’ for a second there.” She shuddered at the thought, dismissing it as she ran her fingers along the datacard in her pocket. *Now to just get this thing off-world*.

If it had been so long since the Jedi had been captured, the mercenary thought, then it was likely that he was tucked away in some Inquisitorius facility, well away from Nar Shaddaa. Without a good deal of backup, and significantly more information, he was best considered a lost asset; a morbid thought, but not inaccurate given the Zeltron’s circumstances and the realities of the situation. The game was not yet over though, and she still had to find transport back to friendlier skies where she could transfer the list, and maybe get compensated for the money she spent in acquiring it.

Just like any planet of such massive urban sprawl, the streets were crowded amid the cornucopia of businesses. Parts shops stood side-by-side with cantinas, while bottom-floor cantinas turned into brothels on the upper levels, and all while ventilation grates steamed up from the street, venting the manufactory heat from the bowels of the megalopolis. It reminded Qyreia of all the space stations she had worked on before joining the Brotherhood – seedy, dirty, but no more dangerous than any other place once you learned the rules. In a place like Nar Shadaa, the rules were simple: stay out of the crime bosses’ way, mind your own business, and keep your weapons close in case the first two options didn’t pan out quite right.

Winding her way through the throng, the mercenary couldn’t help but feel like she was being watched or followed. At first she dismissed it as paranoia, continuing along toward the starport at her casual gait, but wary eyes have a tendency to wander, and each reflective surface seemed to reveal one or two people whose own eyes were watching the Zeltron very carefully. She went another block and checked her surroundings in a shop’s exterior camera feed, noting the same people still behind by a half dozen paces. *Frack.*

Unlike a human, her skin tone gave her away in a crowd. Even disguised as a Zabrak, the horns would do little to disguise her movements, so she lifted the hood on her borrowed jacket and ducked low into the crowd. Her pursuers instantly knew that she was aware of their presence, but the traffic was so thick that they couldn’t make out her location.

*Stay low, move fast. Stay low, move fast.* A blaster bolt that caught a neon sign above her head was indicator enough that staying low was no longer keeping her hidden, as people all around started to make for the nearest shelter. With the haphazard running of the bystanders, it made picking out the lone female all the easier as she made as much of a direct path to the starport as possible. Several more shots rang out, one even taking a bystander right next to Qyreia in the shoulder. “Sorry pal,” she muttered, breaking into a full run and vaulting over a food cart.

What the Inquisitors always seemed to have in candor and raw combat power, they apparently lacked in agility and speed when penned in by other moving parts. Because of this, the Zeltron quickly gained distance from her pursuers, despite that the roads and alleys were growing ever more clear of the living obstacles. *If I were trying to catch a mouse, I’d cut off the escape routes*, she thought, eyes darting to the rooftops just in time to see a sharpshooter’s round light up the architecture. The distance offered Qyreia just enough time to sidestep the shot, lifting her own pistol in a dangerous duel while the other pursuers gained ground.

*Bantha’s whore, I do* not *have time for this!* The sniper had the advantage of elevation and significantly better cover, so the best that the mercenary could do was keep pressing on her trigger to keep the enemy’s head down. Things got complicated when the followers caught up, some engaging with their own firearms while others moved forward, ready to brandish their shock-batons and lightsabers once in range. There was no question about their weapons; even poorly disguised as gangsters, they still had the tell-tale markings of the Brotherhood, and their movements were stereotypical of Force users.

So Qyreia risked it: she ran.

Firing wildly behind her and up toward the sniper, she bolted from the area with all the speed she had, hoping that her athleticism would keep her one step ahead of her opponents. Those with their lightsabers moved quickly, keeping hot on her heels as she dug deep into her lungs and her legs. *Come on body, don’t fail me now.* She ducked through small holes in barriers and vaulted over crates and fences alike, but the Inquisitorial goons would not relent, their bodies clearly being augmented by the Force to help them keep pace and match her parkour step for step.

It was not surprising that, as close as they kept, one was able to knock off a lucky shot, catching the red woman just above the thigh. She went down with a yell, rolling over to shoot at her pursuers and hopefully take one or two unwary ones out before they were on top of her. None were felled, but the accurate counterfire was enough to dissuade them from getting any closer, for the moment at least.

“Gah! Right in the frackin’ choobs!” Qyreia groaned as she slid herself into a position of cover behind some crates. “I *knew* it would happen one day, but I was *really* hoping that it wouldn’t be a day where I’d have to run.”

“Come on out, Zabrak. All we want is the datacard. Give us that, and we’ll let you go free.”

*Holy Sithspit, they still think I’m a Zabrak. Ha! This just gets better and better. Guess my disguise wasn’t so shoddy after all.* “I’ve got a lot of credits riding on this,” she called back. “Seeing as how you already shot me, got anything to sweeten the deal?”

“We won’t kill you. That should suffice.”

The mercenary *tsk*ed at the offer. “Now you see, that’s just bad business.” She looked over the crates and fired at the encroaching assailants, forcing them back into cover. “Did I mention this is worth a *lot* of *credits*?!”

“Yes, you did. Now hand it over, or you’ll never see another credit again.”

That was when the cavalry arrived in the form of every local thug, hooligan, and gang member that had heard the words “lot of credits,” and came running with blasters primed. Shots rang out from all angles that the Inquisitors had previously left unsecured, several falling in the first volley of fire. It was a mad house that the Brotherhood agents had not bargained for, and a gamble that Qyreia had made yet again, and it paid off. In short order, her assailants were pressed back into a handful of buildings, fighting off the gangsters while the Zeltron made her timely escape. Their training would mean that they would likely beat back the locals, but the mercenary hoped it would buy her enough time to get to a transport.

Despite having little in the way of an easy time, complete with her newfound limp from the hole in her rump, she arrived to the starport and, with a little cajoling, got transport back to friendly space.

***Undisclosed Location***

***Several hours later***

“You owe me some credits.”

“Clan Odan-Urr thanks you for your assistance, Privateer. Your efforts will not go unforgott-…”

“I have a *hole* in my *right choob cheek*! I had to *pay* with *my money* to get this information. Credits. Bacta. Chop-chop.”

“And what of our Jedi that was captured? Were you able to retrieve him?”

“You know that part where you said ‘captured?’ He’s in some Inquisitorius holding cell somewhere, likely being interrogated. In case you didn’t notice, I’m not a strike team unto myself. You want him, I suggest you start reaching out through the Force to find him, and put some of your own people in harm’s way.”

“Like how our world was destroyed by Pravus?”

“Don’t turn this around on me, bub,” she said, plucking off the fake horns on her head and flicking them away. *Itchy little bastards.* “I’ve already taken my share of beatings for this cause. I just want my rear patched up and my accounts set even.”

“You mercenaries are all alike,” the Jedi liaison muttered. “Only in it for the credits. Fine, it will be done. Go see our medic, and I will see about the funds.”

Qyreia’s teeth nearly grit audibly at the comment about her loyalties, but somehow kept her mouth shut. Her rear hurt enough as it was; she didn’t need her pride hurting any worse. At least the list was safe, and she was getting what she wanted. That was all that mattered.