***How to Make Friends in the Inquisitorius***

*This isn’t a hangover.* As simple an observation as it was, it very clearly delineated that the throbbing pain in her head was not the result of over-enthusiastic drunken revelry. The floor was cold, hard, and smelled faintly of poorly-cleaned digestive excretions. *Okay, so this is a jail cell of some sort*, Qyreia thought, her eyes still closed as she tried to will the pulsating agony in her skull to go away. It wouldn’t.

The floor, unyielding as it was, had become nominally comfortable once her body had acclimated, so it was a conscious effort to move and begin the process of properly evaluating the situation. When the Zeltron felt resistance at her wrist, she tugged harder, only to hear the soft *clink* of chains. Finally opening her eyes, her suspicions were realized: the mercenary was manacled; to another person, it would seem, who had not yet woken up.

“Well this is just kriffin’ great,” she muttered, noting the viewport with the fantastic view of the vacuum of space. She offered a second glance at her cellmate, recognizing too late the distinctive markings of the Inquisitorius. “When it rains, it pours.”

Shackled together as they were, the sleeping Inquisitor’s arm was a flopping dead weight; a fact that garnered a sliver of amusement from the Zeltron as she tested the bonds. Inspection and experimentation proved their strength, as no manipulation – no matter how precise or flamboyant – was strong enough to so much as warp the link’s shape. Even with her opposite’s manacle pinioned between her feet, she couldn’t wrench back enough force to break free, resulting in a sore wrist and feeling just a little bit stupid.

The mercenary was considering alternatives that didn’t involve trying to *chew* through the manacles when her cellmate stirred and finally began to wake up.

“Well *hey there*, sleepyhead,” she said so amiably that it was sickening, “about time you woke up.”

Before Qyreia could tactically position herself, the Inquisitor tugged hard on the manacle, pulling the Zeltron off-balance and into an unexpected wrestling match. Whatever martial art her opponent was using, it was soundly beating Qyreia’s barroom brawl style of combat. The mercenary at least had the advantage of the handcuffs, which threw off her foe’s form and evened the playing field enough that they ended up simply rolling around on the ground – at least until her opponent regained the initiative and pinned the Zeltron.

“Who are you?!” the female voice yelled. “Where are we?!”

“I was hoping,” Qyreia strained through the grapple, “you could tell me.” Positioned as she was, the mercenary couldn’t make out the identifying details of her fellow prisoner and assailant. “Listen, we’re not going anywhere fast, so d’ya *think* you could let go?!”

There was a brief pause, the other woman clearly considering her options, before finally releasing the red woman’s arm and allowing her freedom to sit upright again. Now, with her cellmate no longer face-down asleep on the floor, Qyreia could finally make out some features other than the Inquisitorius markings. The voice indeed belonged to a woman, of an age with Qyreia, but that is where the similarities ended. Her scalp was topped with a lengthy mohawk of snow-white hair, framing her resting-*schutta*-face almost attractively. Clearly her frame was also solidly built, as she had been able to at least equal the Zeltron’s strength a moment before.

*I’d say she was Arcanian, but they were one of the races that Pravus tried to wipe out… Weird.* “Got a name?”

“So what if I do?”

*This is going to be harder than I thought.* “Alright, listen: I woke up a few minutes ago, chained up and not really knowing how I got here – you were still asleep. All I know is that we’re on either a ship or station that’s not sitting near any planets.”

“What if the viewport is just facing away from the planet?”

“Then there’d be more ambient lighting. I think we’re in deep space, away from any solar body.” *S’gonna make it hard to figure out how to get back home.* “I’m Qyreia, by the way.”

“I know who you are,” the white-haired woman said harshly. “I was sent to kill you, but then *this* – whatever it is – happened.”

“Well at least you’re honest, for an Inquisitorius shik.” The woman growled, but Qyreia cut her off. “I’d say it was pirates, but we’ve still got all our clothes, and the only thing making my legs feel funny was that hold you put me in a minute ago.”

“Yeah… Cell is pretty clean too, aside from the smell.” Her eyes – likely supposed to be brown, but paled to the point of amber – looked at the mercenary and took a sniff. “It’s not *you*, is it?”

“Hey, I know how to bathe just as well as anyone. That *ain’t* me. Now can we focus on how we’re going to get out of here?”

It took a heavy roll of her eyes and an indignant click of the tongue, but the woman finally decided to cease pouting over being attached to her quarry –for the moment at least – and help with the escape. “So, what’s *your* plan? Woo them with…”

“Finish that Zeltron crack, and I will end your sorry existence of a failed Inquisitor.”

“You couldn’t beat me in a wrestling match,” she pointed out as Qyreia examined the door structure. “How do you think you’d kill me?”

“Very carefully,” the red woman responded only half-attentively.

The door itself was very thoroughly welded into place, with no seams or cracks left unattended to. Further, there was no control panel of any sort that she could manipulate; not even so much as a communicator. Much to the annoyance of her newfound compatriot, she pressed her ear to the door, listening for any clues as to the inner workings of the mechanism, or at least if there was a passing guard they could manipulate.

“Well, I figured out *one* thing.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“We’re on a ship, not a station.”

The Arcanian lookalike stared at the mercenary with an expression so skeptical it was almost funny. “And you figured this out… how?”

“Ships and stations have different sounds. I’ve spent enough time on both to know the difference pretty accurately.” That garnered at least a curious raise in the other woman’s brow. “You wouldn’t happen to be any good at door slicing, would you? I can’t figure this karking thing out.”

“I can slice, but there’s nothing here *to* slice.” She looked around, her eyes glinting with devious intrigue when they fell upon a vent some three meters up the wall. “Feel like doing a bit of crawling?”

Qyreia looked at the shuttered opening skeptically. “Not sure if you noticed, but we’re attached by our *hands*. How do you intend on getting up there?”

“Very carefully,” she joked, guiding the Zeltron to a position just beneath the opening. “Stand here and *don’t move*. I’m going to balance on your shoulders and bust into there.”

Steely eyes darted skeptically between the vent and this white-haired woman, finally acquiescing with a sigh. “Whatever. Let’s give it a shot.”

After carefully situating herself by the wall, Qyreia steadied herself as the other woman, with seemingly effortless grace, hopped up and into a handstand on the mercenary’s shoulders. *Okay… that’s pretty nifty.* When she wobbled, the woman gave a quick, cold glare at the Zeltron before returning her attention to the task at hand. *There’s no way she’s going to be able to do this*. Very, very carefully, she rocked back from the wall, extending one leg out as far as she could manage before, with surprising speed, slamming her foot into the vent cover with a raucous *clang*.

The cover remained in place, and the woman was cursing quietly from the pain.

“Well, it was a valiant effort, but…”

“Shush,” she said, taking up her other foot and gingerly lifting the panel away. The kick had not been meant to break the whole cover; just the seals that kept it in place. “Now for the tricky part.”

“Getting in?”

“Getting in,” she nodded. “Gonna have to borrow your arm.”

Extending herself up as far as she could, the Inquisitor inched her way into the vent, pinioning her feet and legs to maintain friction as the mercenary helped with the vertical ascension. The whole process was agonizingly slow, and eventually they reached the pivotal point: the other woman was halfway up her thighs, but could go no further because of the Zeltron’s limited reach. Qyreia was beginning to see the plan though, awkward as it was, when the assassin used all her strength to lift the red woman to the point that she could grab hold of the lip of the vent, though not without giving the merc a face-full of her chest.

“Well *this* is interesting,” Qyreia’s muffled voice said amusedly before the white-haired woman began slithering backward into the duct, gradually bringing the Zeltron in as she went.

“You’ll have to be my eyes when we move, not that you’ll be able to see much. It’s pretty tight in there. Hope you’re not claustrophobic.”

“Not usually,” the mercenary thought, more concerned with moving around in an unknown space where there might be people with blasters looking for them.

“Banta, by the way. That’s my name.”

“Banta? Well, given the circumstances, I’d say it’s nice to meet you.”

“I’ll say the same when *you* start doing some work.”

Despite the jab, Qyreia shuffled into the duct with a grin. *I like her.* The going was slow with Banta moving backward in the tight confines, making the dim lighting conditions all the more difficult to navigate with. With this in mind, the duo decided it best to leave the airway as soon as possible and risk discovery rather than be unable to maneuver, and while neither considered themselves claustrophobic, the ever-increasing breath-induced humidity between them was making it difficult to not panic just a little bit.

Thankfully there was not too far to go, and only one turn to take, before they happened on a vent hatch leading into the main hall. They listened for a few minutes to make sure there were no patrols in the area before hammering the cover with their fists. As Banta had been first into the duct, Qyreia was given the “honor” of being first out – in short, the scout that would take the initial beating if their observations had been wrong.

With the “all clear,” the Inquisitor slid out and made a flawless landing. “Alright. Where to now?”

“Need a shuttle. Weapons’d be nice, but I’ll take transportation over armament right now.”

Picking the most likely direction, they began making their way through the ship. Apparently their presence in the brig had not been a high priority that required too much attention, because no alarm was raised as they moved about. Passing patrols were easy enough to avoid, though the manacle between them made for some interesting positions when they had to squeeze together.

“So, I’ve been meaning to ask,” Qyreia said as they skulked through the vessel, “what’s with the white hair? You seem a little young, and not many folks our age that go for that particular style.”

“I’m Arcanian,” she replied flatly as she peered around a bend.

“But… what about the Grandmaster’s edict? Undesirables and all that?”

“I’m not in his direct sight, and I have proven myself useful enough to the Inquisitorius to be spared the culling.”

“How can you serve people like that, though?”

“I have a place in this galaxy and within the Brotherhood, and they give me opportunity to make myself better than I was. My people tend to think they are the epitome of evolution, but they can’t see that there are so many more that can exceed us.”

“So you work for the people that slaughtered whole swathes of Arkanians and other species because what? They were too weak?”

“Exactly,” Banta said, her voice temporarily hushed as a crewman passed by. “Call me a naturalist, but I’m not into the genetic manipulation that some Arkanians piddle with. S’why I also didn’t get pissy when you called me ‘shik’ before.” She inclined her head back for a moment. “And what about you? Infrared vision or no, you don’t act like the other Zeltrons I’ve met.”

“I’m a mercenary. I’m just in it for the credits.”

“Bantha druk. You’ve got a personal vendetta with Pravus and the Inquisitorius. That ain’t ‘just in it for the credits.’”

“If you’re a naturalist, then I’m a sentimentalist. I *can’t* watch as the Brotherhood slaughters its own people.”

“Have you *read* the Brotherhood’s history?! It’s *rife* with Sithspit like this.”

“So what? I’m supposed to just roll over and let it happen?”

“You’d be safer, wouldn’t you?”

That silenced the Zeltron for a moment, recalling a recent drunken argument she’d had with someone very near and dear to her, almost ending the relationship over her insecurities, one of which was this very issue. *Sure I’d be safer. But then how could I live with what happens to everyone as I just stand by?*

“We’re nearing the shuttle bay,” Banta said, pointing to a hall that clearly had pilot foot traffic moving through. “I say we rush them. Bust past, get our hands on a ship, and zip off.”

“*Or* we could wait for the shift change to end and just *sneak* in. Less chance they’ll seal off the docking bay doors.”

“That could take hours.”

“Shift *change*, not *shift*. Look,” Qyreia said, pointing out the pedestrian movement, “there’s a *lot* of folk walking through here. Even for a prison ship, that’s a lot of people, unless they’re in the middle of a changeover.”

Banta looked at the mercenary curiously. “How do you know this?”

“I’ve lived most of my adult life on freighters and stations. Pay enough attention, and these kind of patterns are easy to spot.”

“Like the power plant sounds?”

“Exactly.”

The Inquisitor sighed. “Fine. If this takes more than fifteen minutes though, we’re going with my plan. I don’t wanna get caught out in the open like *this*,” she said, lifting her manacled wrist.

True to the Zeltron’s observations though, traffic died down well within Banta’s time hack, and the pair made their way into the hangar. The space was fair-sized, but only large enough for transfers of prisoners and personnel, so there were few enough ships to begin with. As the pilots and crews had taken off, the only vessels remaining were largely undergoing some level of repair. Furthermore, neither one of the pair could make out any distinguishing marks on the workers – they still had no idea who had captured them, or why.

“What now, miss mercenary?”

“Gimme a sec,” she said, eyes narrowed to scan the different ships. “There. Across the hangar. That ship’s just got some redundant power couplings being replaced; routine maintenance stuff.” She looked at the Arcanian. “Wanna be the one to do the shakedown run?”

For the first time, Banta’s lips stretched into a confident smile. “Y’know, if this works, I might decide not to kill you.”

“I would appreciate it,” Qyreia said as they started making their way across the open space.

Most of the personnel were busy with their tasks, so they didn’t notice the pair of shackled women moving across the hangar. They had crossed almost three quarters the distance when someone finally looked up and recognized who they were, prompting them to make their nondescript walk into a full-tilt sprint. Knocking the mechanic aside, they dashed into the shuttle, Qyreia immediately moving them into the cockpit and starting up the systems while Banta buttoned up the boarding ramp and started up the shields.

Escaping the ship was easier than Qyreia had expected, the hangar’s shields only powering up well after they had passed beyond their reach. She set the nav system for an emergency random-coordinate hyperdrive jump and sat back as the white streaks of hyperspace took over the viewscreen.

She expected the double-cross any moment: a knife at her throat, some hidden blaster, or even the chain of their bonds around her throat. Yet it never came. When Qyreia looked over at the Arcanian, she seemed lost deep in thought.

“We made it, partner,” the Zeltron said amiably.

“Don’t speak to me like we’re friends,” Banta returned coldly. “We’re still enemies in this war.”

The mercenary’s smile soured as she turned back to the controls. “Didja learn what you wanted from me?”

“What?”

“If you had really been sent to outright kill me, you’d have done it already. They want information on the Resistance, yeah?”

The familiar growl emanated from Banta’s throat.

“Listen, tell them I wouldn’t talk and evaded your capture. Tell them whatever you want, really. I’ll drop you off at the first major planet we come across and you can get pickup from there.”

“What makes you think I’ll just let you go?”

That was when Qyreia pulled out the small holdout blaster that had been stowed by the pilot seat and, in a swift motion, shot out the link on the cuffs that had so annoyingly joined them together.

“Because I think there’s still a part of you that can appreciate a friend like me. At the very least, I don’t want to kill you.”

“What *do* you want?”

“I want the killing to stop.”

“Won’t that put you out of a job?”

A chuckled escaped the Zeltron’s throat. “Like you said: the Brotherhood’s history is full of fighting. I’d just rather be fighting a real enemy rather than a made up one.”