

A Balm for Naught

They hadn't said anything about rationing. They hadn't said anything about there not being enough food or medicine or other necessary goods. Suddenly all the straws were breaking on the bantha's back, and from their perch on the Citadel, the Arconans got to watch it all crumble and fall into disorder. With Xenna and the *Nighthawk* departed for Port Ol'val, Qyreia was left to her lonesome on Selen, the little Ryntron baby her only company.

That made her briefings with the Consul that much more tense.

"Atty," the Zeltron said curiously as she perused one of the reports on her datapad, "what's this I'm seeing about food rations running low? I've been eating just fine."

"It's not for you. It's for Estle City and the rest of Selen." Her tan brow furrowed into the cloth band that covered her eyeless sockets. "I had hoped this would have been resolved by now, but I suppose there's no more hiding it. We're in the midst of a crisis."

"Pravus..."

"To hell with him. Selen is starving. We're running out of food, and without the infrastructure already set up, we can't produce enough to support the cities. What's worse, I've received a cacophonous number of reports about a rapidly developing illness. So now the whole planet isn't just hungry; they're sick too. I've already made the quarantine order."

"What, for the city?"

"For the whole *planet*, Qybbles. Estle isn't the only one affected, and I fear that things will only get worse."

What followed could only be described as the most heated debate between the Zeltron and her usually so cheerful boss that they'd yet had. The former smuggler at first requested, then pleaded, then angrily demanded that she be allowed to organize a supply drop. She had contacts that could get through any pissant blockade that the Iron Fleet might be effecting at the time and bring food and medicine. Atyiru denied it at every turn, saying that it would just risk the spread of the disease. No amount of cajoling would change her mind on the subject.

So Qyreia watched the city slowly dwindle into a skeletal husk that she had only days prior thought so lively and brilliant — a placid jewel in a sea of turmoil, now devoid of its verve.

Between scattered return transmissions from Ol'val that offered little to no information on what was happening with her Battleteam Leader and Aedile, Xenna and Kordath, Qyreia hunkered down with little Shay'lra and waited impatiently. The feeling of impotence was overwhelming. She was a Quaestor of Arcona — a Quaestor without ships or troops or ability to even help because she was neither doctor nor agriculturalist. With every account of the increasing virulence of the virus, her stomach churned and her teeth grit ever harder.

"Frack this bantha druk."

After nearly a day of waiting for some development, some change in the Consul's methodology, and a capital in growing volatility, the Zeltron decided that the time for waiting was over. *Frack Atty and her prohibition. I'm calling in a favor.* With the Ryntron cradled in her lap, she went to her ship and — with a little help from her droid — opened up a secure channel to an old acquaintance. The Citadel could still likely hear it, but they'd have to work harder for it.

“Mik. Mik Ezail, if you can hear me, you furry stinkin’ fart, answer your damn holocalls!”

There was a pause as the message continued to chime before a gruff response returned and the blurry image of the Ryn materializing on the screen. *“Whaddya want, Red? It’s the middle of the karkin’ night!”* His eyes spied Shay’lra and he fell from the bunk he’d been sleeping on. *“When’d you get a kid?! An’ them’s Ryn bits on ‘er face too! You saucy...”*

“She’s not mine! I’m watching her for a friend.” She sighed heavily. “I need a favor Mik, and *before* you ask,” she added before he could interrupt, “there are a lot of lives at stake.”

He grunted undecidedly. *“Don’t recall owing you any favors. ...What’s the job?”*

“Planet I’m on is under quarantine. They need food and medicine, though I’d bet right now, they need a meal more than anything.”

“You want me to feed a planet? I’m good, honey, but I’m not that good. And who’s gonna pay for this little venture of your’n?”

“I’ve got credits, Mik. Just bill me. Please, I need your help here.”

That brought a bit of pause to the scruffy smuggler on the other end. *“You really are in a tough spot, huh?”* he pondered, stroking his bushy white mustache. *“Aaagh, fine! I’ll help ya. You say the whole planet is hungry?”*

“And sick,” she added soberly.

“Hm... I’ll see if I can call in some old friends that’re looking for something to do. Won’t be much, but it’ll be something at least.”

“Oh god, Mik, thank you.”

“Don’t be thankin’ me yet. You said this place was under quarantine?”

“You just let me handle that part.”

Years of smuggling had taught Qyreia plenty of tricks to get past security measures of all kinds, but the Citadel was true to its name, and thus a touch nut to crack. Thankfully, the mercenary had the advantage of being on the inside and in possession of a liberal amount of authority.

Asking or demanding a sensor blackout on any area, or for the defense techs to look the other way would have been too obvious, and the Summit members still present would have her locked up before her allies even landed. Or at least that’s what she believed. At this point, she was willing to risk a great deal if it meant making lives just a bit easier. Hours of research and a few feedings of Shay later, and the Zeltron had a way to get her rendezvous inside the city limits.

In the dead of night and wearing a breath mask, she slunk down into the bowels of the city streets. The quarantine had established curfew hours that would make her stand out as much as hide her from prying eyes if they weren’t looking in the right spot. With the sleeping Ryntron under the watchful, glassy gaze of her R3 unit, Qyreia slunk through the shadows of the narrow streets and alleys until she came to the dark little plaza where she would meet the ship.

There was still local traffic on Selen, and while the majority of urban denizens were restricted to their homes, planetside transports were not so limited. With a little fudging of the records and tactically acquiring a good IFF registration, she figured that a shuttle could enter the

atmosphere on a less inhabited part of the planet and come in on the friendly sensor identifier. If there weren't any external lights running, it could theoretically land without issue, at least if one ignored that it would be landing in the middle of a city street in the dead of night. She set out a small formation of chemical glowsticks to designate the landing site and waited.

Her timing could not have been better. Qyreia had lingered only a quarter hour when the soft whine of the ship's engine came into her auditory range, growing louder with each passing moment. Before she could have imagined its location, the ship was hovering silently overhead, a certain Ryn illuminated dimly in the cockpit of the YT-2000. He followed her practiced directions as she waved two glowsticks to position the ship just right in the tight confines of the square. Judging by the whine of his engines, he'd clearly modified it for silent running — both on sensors and for observers alike.

"This is what you call a landing site?" Mik hissed through the microphone of the environmental suit as he walked down the loading ramp.

"It's what I've got." Her cheeks betrayed the smile behind her mask. "Nice getup you've got there."

"Hey, I ain't gettin' sick! You should be more careful too, what with that baby of yours."

"I told you, she's not *mine*."

"Whatever. Not my business you spread your legs for..." Qyreia's hand snapped out at his helmet and he heard the characteristic *crack-hiss* of the seal being broken. "Oi! What're ya doing?!"

"Better watch your mouth, fracktard, or I'm gonna do a lot worse. Now be quiet and let's start offloading these supplies."

Mik grumbled under his breath as he reengaged the environmental seal. "Just a joke. Didn't have to get prissy about it."

Getting the supplies off the ship was an easier task than either had anticipated, although the urgency for stealth and speed unconsciously accounted for that. Small, scattered crates of food ringed the street surface around the ship in an organized mess. Despite the earlier conversation, they were rather proud of their handiwork.

"Alright, the folks around here will sort out distribution in the morning. C'mere and I'll show you the next drop site."

Much as the Ryn wanted to argue over a second trip, he looked at the map on his partner's datapad and watched where she pointed. She couldn't risk leaving a marker on the device for some techie to decipher later, nor could she send him off with the slate and risk incrimination for them both. No, Mik would have to make do with what she gave him. When he finally took off back into the dark sky, grumbling about how much detox scrubbing he had ahead of him, Qyreia wondered just how much good they were doing. While it looked like a huge amount of food was set out, the pre-packaged meals within wouldn't do much once they were spread out to the surrounding neighborhood. Perhaps one or two extra meals per person. Coupled with the vitamin supplements, it'd be something, but it wouldn't be enough.

Sanitizing herself was quite the chore, but given the plethora of hazmat showers in the slowly-filling Citadel hospital, it wasn't too hard to get into one unnoticed and leave just as

subtly. Besides, if someone even walked near the rings below the fortress a sanitization was looked upon as normal, and the Zeltron was already known among the other Arconan denizens for her ventures out toward the city. Once back in her home, she took another shower just to be sure before finally relieving the droid — Remee, as she like to call it — of its duties over Shay'Ira.

Between all of her personal preparations and precautions, Qyreia was hardly worried for her health. The little baby Ryntron was a whole different matter. Given that Kord had left the baby in her care, she wasn't about to take any chances. That she secretly adored the baby made her care all the more acute.

"I wish Keira was here," she whispered quietly, flipping a tuft of the little one's soft white hair as she slept. "I mean, I'm happy she's not here and liable to get sick, but... I miss her. What with the quarantine, probably gonna be a while before she can even come back from wherever she's off to with Atrabutt."

Shay shuffled and mumbled incoherent syllables, but the emotions wafting on the ether suggested that she was happy, or at least comfortable.

"I don't suppose you'd want to wallow in my self-pity with me?" The baby gurgled. "Yeah, didn't think you would."

Qyreia left for her own bed and comfortable pajamas, sleeping away what little was left of the night. Beyond the walls of her Citadel apartment, the hours flew by and the sun rose from its berth beyond the horizon. Within the Consul's quarters, Atyiru was rising well before anyone else that followed a normal sleep schedule, though to say she slept would have been a stretch of the term. Her night had been restless, worry and thought overtaking all things.

Well enough that she was awake. There was work to do.

Despite the tightrope balancing act that she was maintaining with the populace of Selen, there was still a clan to run and her own personal tasks to attend. Taking a small breakfast to her personal office, she began perusing the reports that had come in during the night. *More sick. We'll have to set up a field hospital here just to handle our own people.* The numbers were staggering. Despite the quarantine, families isolated in their homes, some of whom were infected, only made the local dilemma worse. Short of herding them into camps of ill and healthy though, there was little else they could do.

"What's this?"

The computer reread off an account from one of the air traffic controllers, attached to the security captain's daily log. Shuttle landing inside the city limits. Morning patrol revealed food crates, many of which were already being rummaged through by the neighborhood locals.

Atyiru's brow furrowed. There was no hard evidence, but the Miraluka was sure that she knew who the perpetrator was that broke the quarantine mandate. In lighter circumstances, she might have brushed off the flagrant disobedience. This was not one of those times. *Doesn't she know that she's endangering more people?* Ol'val and the *Nighthawk* still had not reported in. The afflicted numbers were growing. *I'll deal with her later, so long as this doesn't become a problem.*

And then it happened again.

And again.

With the Citadel now full of sick peoples of Arconan and Selenian background, the Consul's patience was tempered only by her frantic attempts to stem the tide of the plague. She could sense the Zeltron moving about, performing her duties as able but otherwise just trying to stay unobtrusive to the medical personnel who actually knew what they were doing. Even without the time to properly address this insubordination, Atyiru could sense the mercenary's disquiet. There was much being hidden to the untrained eyes of those who looked, but for the Miraluka, the anxiety was open for her to see.

I'm just trying to help, Qyreia thought, seeing Atty's expression from across the room. Despite her boss' lack of eyes, she could only think that the tanned woman was glaring at her. *You've got fancy space magic and all the experience in medicine. I just shoot things. At least I can do something this way.* Even so, Qyreia spent her shift in the triage ward as far away from the Shadow Lady as possible.

No one had gotten sick. That's what Mik was saying, at least. He and the other two smuggler folk that had made the drops had played it safe and treated every surface of their ships like a hazmat site. The small supply of immunity-booster hyposprays that they'd passed off to the Zeltron was likely keeping her healthy as much as her own precautions. Every night out, though, had her more and more worried for her young charge back home. Every passing day was not loosening security, but tightening it. The next drop would be outside the city walls, well out of eyesight, and smuggled back in on a utility transport speeder through the less-patrolled entries.

"I tell ya, Shay," she said, spooning pureed food into the baby's mouth, "things are kriffin' tough right now." She poked at the bags under her eyes, which the little one found hilarious for some reason. "Wait'll you're my age and *you* start getting sleepy-sacks."

The child merely laughed happily, oblivious to the pandemonium welling up in the city below. Qyreia knew well enough to contain her feelings around the little one. When she finally ventured out to her nightly task, she could still hear the medical staff working in the main hall, trying to tend to the throng of bodies. Moving out beyond that, thankful she didn't run into the Consul, the Zeltron came across another mass that had been growing on the Citadel of late.

Rows and rows of black sealed bags, neatly lined up next to one another, slinked across the plateau. These were merely the dead that Arcona had suffered or that had been brought in from Estle proper. The merc swallowed hard behind her breath mask before slipping down into the bowels of the city.

Out beyond the sights and sounds — silent though it was during curfew — of the city, Qyreia lifted off her mask. The shipment sat in the grass before her, the pilot long gone into the safety of space, leaving her to do all the heavy lifting. She took a seat on one of the crates and stared back at the soft glow on the horizon that indicated where Estle lay nestled against its mountainside foundation.

"Times like this I wish I had a cigarra," she said quietly, the low volume barely able to hide the tremor in her voice. "Need to start smoking first."

The halfhearted chuckle that escaped her lips did nothing to settle her nerves. She drew her knees up to her chin and hugged her legs, staring blankly at the subtle aurora in the distance. In her mind, all Qyreia saw was the body bags. In her ears rang the sounds of the sick and dying.

Qyreia Arronen, #14369

As much as she wanted to help, she didn't want to go back. She didn't want to have to stare into another child's eyes, clouded with near-death. Another being, frail with hunger.

Every helping hand brought praise to Arcona; to the Citadel, their protectors. Praise that turned Qyreia's stomach at every pitiful utterance. *We're the ones that did this to you, you karking idiots. It's all our fault.*