

There was a certain thrill being back in space, on the way to civilization. Even though many of her counterparts back in Arcona's home system — to say nothing for the rest of the Brotherhood — were hardly pilots of renown, it was a rare event that Qyreia was called upon to fly anywhere. This was thus something of an opportunity. Watching the twinkling lights on the surface of the ecumenopolis only made her more excited.

“Finally, a planet that's not a total backwater.”

*“Breet whoorwee-oooh.”*

“Don't get me wrong,” she replied to the droid, “I *like* Selen and all. But there's something to be said about a *real* city.”

The R3 unit made a series of reluctantly acquiescent noises.

“Don't worry. I got this. Besides, you'll be staying with the ship. You're too shiny to be walking around with me on the streets. More likely you'd get stolen or draw attention that we don't need.”

R3-M3 whirred indignance and scuttled out of the cockpit.

*Droids.* With practiced efficiency, the Zeltron keyed in a request for landing clearance, making sure to get one as close as possible to where her target was supposed to be. On any other planet, finding a flabby green Twi'lek would be a walk in the park. On Coruscant, things were likely to be a little more complicated. It was fortunate that the Inquisitorius dossier included the location of the last known sighting.

A certain fire twisted her guts, thinking about the semi-secretive organization even as she slid into the atmosphere, weaving between buildings and around traffic. She had spent a lot of time and energy actively fighting them and the purges under Pravus' reign. Now... it was like everyone had forgotten the atrocities for the newest bad guy.

“Ugh,” she sighed as the ship's landing struts touched down on the pad, hidden in the seedier depths of the city. “I don't have time to be worrying about that karkery.”

Aside from the giant red lettering on her ship, its clean appearance stood out against the otherwise dingy neighborhood. Just looking around from her seat in the cockpit showed several locals eyeing the YT-1300 with more than just passing curiosity. She threw on the hood of her jacket, checked her pistol holster, and made for the ramp, noting as she passed how the droid was already linked into the security systems.

“Have fun, Remster,” she called back as she descended. “Lock her up while I'm gone.”

As if in response, the gun turret swivelled around, startling the locals that had been lingering nearby. Many of them walked off quickly, disappearing into the myriad dusky alleys. At least for now, the *Katurno* was safe.

With the initial difficulties out of the way, Qyreia slipped seamlessly into the underbelly of Coruscant. The streets were dingy, lit by neon signs and fading yellow lights, but they were all full of people. Humans, near-humans, and humanoids of all kinds milled about, or sped past on swoop bikes and speeders with near-reckless abandon. Here and there were signs of the criminal element that ruled more and more territory the further down into the urban depths one went: painted sigils on doorframes, shifty-eyed groups at openings to alleyways, and a couple instances of obvious contraband deals to name just a few. *If I had a few less scruples, I'd make a fracking killing here just with a couple smuggling runs.*

Her smuggling days were largely behind her though, and even then, she would never delve into moving hard drugs or weapons. What she did retain, however, was her sense of subtlety. Zeltrons tended to stand out in most crowds — even more so than Twi'leks — so she tugged her hood a little further over her face before hiding her red hands in her pockets and hunching over for added effect. It was not masterful disguise, but it did the trick.

She had studied the map of the local area on the dossier enough to know vaguely where she was and where she wanted to go. A Coruscant Security Forces patrol speeder hovered slowly overhead, passing her by as noncommittally as it did everyone else; a reminder that she needed to be careful if this was going to go smoothly.

A few bends in the road later, she found the cantina she was looking for. The exterior was dingy and most of the old duracrete was stained or cracked, with only a pair of dim wall-mounted lamps illuminating the entrance. Upon stepping inside however, Qyreia was met with a warm atmosphere; one that struggled to compete with the limited aesthetics offered by the dilapidated structure. Cheap rugs served as carpet and tapestry alike, while the seating varied between wood, metal, and sofas, some of which were even comprised of what appeared to be ship salvage. This was a place made on the cheap, with the cozy hominess of a well-worn space station establishment.

*I wonder how the drinks are.*

Slipping between the populated tables and the one apparent waitress in the cantina, the Arconan mercenary took a seat at the bar. Even as she waved her hand to the bartender, the large bearded human was already making his way over.

“No hoods,” he stated sternly.

Qyreia pointed to herself questioningly, only to be ocularly reprimanded by the barkeep. Reluctantly, she let her hood drop, revealing her red face and blue hair. While

it caught the attention of some of the patrons, the big human seemed to be merely satisfied with the new state of affairs.

“Now, what can I getcha?”

“You got any Corellian ale?”

“Fresh out, m’afraid. Fresh batch of Starfire ‘skee in yer interested though. Got some local amber brews as well.”

The Zeltron weighed her options, smirking tiredly. “I’ll take the ‘skee.”

“Glass or jorum?” he asked as he turned to the tall glass tubes intermixed with the other taps and liquors.

“Jorum.”

In moments, the bartender had a deep green drinking bowl set before her, filled nearly to the brim with the dark, blue-tinted brew. He then walked away to attend to other customers, making the Zeltron wonder if he just assumed she’d want an open tab. Hooking a thumb over the lip of the bowl, she lifted it to her lips and took a long drink. It burned fiercely, from tongue to stomach, but somehow it seemed like a pleasant, enlivening jolt.

Part of her hoped that the Twi’lek would just conveniently show, just like in all the holonet dramas. Hell, it had happened to *her* before. But as she worked through the first drink and started her second, it seemed like the search would be a little more difficult than that. *Shoulda tried the Outlander Club*, she thought as she spun on her stool to watch the street through the windows. *That place is probably more this guy’s scene*. She took her time with the drinks, merely watching outside and eyeing the other patrons warily. There was always the chance of some other agency watching for her target, or watching *over* him. Either was plausible.

After the third jorum of ‘skee, she paid her tab and sauntered out into the streets once more, throwing her hood back up as the door closed behind her. *A little walking never hurt anyone*. As a stranger in a racial minority, even for the panoply that Coruscant was, outright asking about the Twi’lek, Maurfai, would be akin to painting a big light-up target on her face.

Walking aimlessly through the streets proved just as fruitless a venture as waiting at the cantina where he was last seen. After an hour of wasted time, Qyreia slipped into an alley and keyed her wrist comm.

“Hey Reme. How’s things on your end?”

Since the droid was linked to the ship, it easily transcribed its binary chittering into text on the wrist unit's screen. **All is well. No criminal activity against the ship. How are you?**

"Fine. Nothing on my end either." She sighed. "I'm not good at this stuff. Gimme a blaster and I can frack up anyone's day, but this? Ugh."

A long pause followed as the droid tried to process its master's emotions. **It is understood you do not give up easily. Keep trying.**

The Zeltron knew her R3's mannerisms enough to recognize its crude, mechanical attempt at motivation, and it brought a smile to her hooded face. "Thanks. I'll check in again later."

Even with that small bit of stoking that the droid gave her inner fire, Qyreia was still very aware that she was trying to find a needle in a haystack. She was stowing the wrist comm back beneath her sleeve when she heard a shuffle from the dark alley behind her. She spun around to see a pair of street thugs, one carrying a pipe as a crude cudgel and the other with a vibroknife.

"Well well," Knife said coyly as they approached. "Look what we've found here."

Cudgel chuckled, baring filed teeth that were well on their way to rotting. "Tha's a red one, she is. Wonder wot kind."

"Maybe she should show us, eh?"

Qyreia grit her teeth. *Karkbaskets. I do not need this kind of crap right now.* She took a step back toward the main street, shifting her body for a fight-or-flight snap reaction. "Maybe you boys should go back to whatever it was you were doing and leave me the frack alone."

She took a second step, only to hear another set of feet scrape the pavement behind her. Before this new ganger could take another step toward her, she tore the pistol from the holster at the small of her back, pointing it at the scrawny human that had tried to get the jump on her with a hold-out pistol.

"Oh hey! Pretty lady's got a gun." Knife chuckled, bolstering Pistol's resolve. "Come on and put that thing down. You ain't gonna..."

The shot went out with the Zeltron hardly batting an eyelash, leveling Pistol much to the shock of his comrades. "I ain't gonna *what?*"

"Ah *frack* man!"

Knife made to cut and run, but Cudgel grabbed his arm. “We ain’t runnin’ from no *schutta!* We’s gon’ git’er!”

Cudgel had hardly lurched into his assault when Qyreia swung the gun around and planted a red bolt square in his chest, forcing him to the ground with a scraping *thud* against the damp duracrete ground. Knife dropped his namesake, backpedalling several meters before tripping over himself in the frantic attempt to escape, only to find the hooded figure leering over him with the gun pressed firmly to the tip of his nose. For all the bravado he’d had before, the growing dark spot in his pants betrayed his true emotions.

“I’m sorry! We didn’t mean anything by it!”

“Bantha crap.” She shoved his head to the ground with the muzzle of her gun. “Since you’ve caused me trouble, you’re gonna pay me back. Sound good?”

“Yes! Anything! Just d-don’t...”

“I’m looking for information on someone. Who should I talk to?”

The would-be punk’s face went white as he tried frantically to concoct an answer, stammering as each second ticked by with growing impatience on his captor’s shadowed visage. “I know a guy! H-he’s called Em’an’em! O-or Manny!”

“Speak plain Basic, kid. I’m running out of patience.”

“*Basic*, motherfracker! Do you speak it!?”

After the earlier blaster fire, Qyreia’s raised tone was hardly doing any favors for her subtlety, but it seemed to be working wonderfully for the weak-willed Knife.

“I-I dunno! Yes! I m-mean yes! I speak! H-he’s an information broker! His name’s Manu, we call him differently. H-he could m-maybe get your information?”

*Manu? No. This can’t be... I mean, I guess he only has Collective ties. He’s got to have a baseline business too.* The Zeltron crouched down over the whimpering human, rotating a dial on her pistol. “Good. That’s much better.” She aimed at him.

“W-wait, you said...!”

The red bolt walloped him in the chest, knocking him out cold on the ground. Qyreia stood and replaced the pistol into the holster at the small of her back. “Stun round, kid. You’ll wake up iiiiin... a few hours maybe. Big ol’ karkin’ headache too.”

As she turned back toward the street, she could see another collection of street urchins all watching warily from around the corners of the buildings flanking her.

Noting their wariness, she stepped forward, eyeing the creatures that shifted defensively the closer she came.

“I’m looking for Manny, the information broker. Anyone know where I can find him?”

One of the larger children — they were at least small enough to be children — nodded to a smaller one who, dejectedly, nodded to the hooded lady, motioning for her to follow. Qyreia took a few more steps forward, noting how they all watched her expectantly, eyes flitting to the unconscious hoodlums that had just accosted her.

“They’re all yours,” she muttered, following her guide as the little humanoids bolted from their position of safety and ravenously looted the bodies.

The merc put the frenetic commotion out of mind, following the child before her. Some of the streets were familiar, having been traversed on her way to the cantina hours prior. As they went further though, the avenues were no longer recognizable. It was only the fact that she had a map that could guide her, and a homing beacon in case of emergency, that she was not quite so nervous or rattled.

They eventually came to a doorway, half-recessed into the ground and preceded by a small covered stairway. The child scampered toward the door, timidly reached out a hand, and rapped rhythmically on the metal surface. *One. Two. Threefour-Five.*

Qyreia reached into a pocket and slipped a few credits into the kid’s hand as he began slinking away back toward his mates. He seemed happy enough with the reward and dashed off back the way they’d come. The Zeltron’s attention quickly returned to the door though, which sounded like it had some sort of movement behind it, but didn’t budge. She approached, and repeated the knocking sequence.

*One. Two. Threefour-Five.*

Almost instantly, a thin peep-latch opened, with a pair of brown eyes staring her down. “What do you want?”

“I’m looking for information. Some kids told me to look for Manny, or Em’an’em, or some other bantha fodder. Manu I think was...”

“*Manu* is the correct name.” She heard a gruff sigh. “One moment.”

The slat shut loudly and she could hear several locks being undone before the door opened slowly, revealing a tall, green Twi’lek with a mild paunch standing in the entryway. He motioned for her to enter, which she complied with. After all, this was the guy she was looking for.

“Helluva time finding someone that could help me out.”

“I am aware.” She turned to see him holding out a basket. “If you don’t mind depositing your weapon.”

*Frack.* “How’d you know?” she asked, slowly drawing the pistol from its holster and dropping it in the container.

“If I gave away my secrets, I wouldn’t be a very good information broker, now would I?”

“I suppose so.”

He motioned for her to follow, leading them both down a long hall that led to a small, well-furnished and comfortable office area. A large leather chair sat behind an equally large desk, simple in design but lavish in its material. The seat for customers was simpler, clearly intended to dichotomize the power in the room. Along the back wall was a simple black leather couch that just seemed... off. Like it was not a place for sitting down for light conversation.

Manu took his seat behind the desk, setting the basket at his feet, well out of reach and sight of the Zeltron. “Now, how can I help you today, Miss...?”

“Virus.” It felt strange to adopt her fiancée’s name, but it was likely that he would be less familiar with it than with her real name.

“Alright Miss Virus. What sort of information are you looking for?”

*And now it’s storytime! Great. Just pretend that he’s Shay’lra and you’re putting him to bed. But no baby-talk.* “Well...” Shaking her head, Qyreia pulled the hood off her head, fully revealing the red skin and tousled blue locks, offering a shy smile that seemed to relax the Twi’lek and bring a curious glint to his eye. “I’m looking for my brother. We were on a transport from Zeltros, and we got raided by pirates. They weren’t very good, so they weren’t able to take the whole ship, but they got a bunch of the passengers, including my brother.”

“So now you’re trying to get him back.”

She nodded, her lips tightening in a sad, understanding smile. “Yeah.”

“And your brother’s name?”

*Uhhh...* “Arta.” She swallowed nervously. “Arta Virus. Little taller than me. About ninety kilos. He’s got... similar hair to mine. Bit longer.”

Manu seemed to be absorbing the information like a sponge, taking rapid notes on his datapad in a way that seemed it was more for recordkeeping than for actual recollection. “And how do you know that he was taken to Coruscant?”

“They said something about The Works during the firefight. Didn’t take a whole lot of holonet diving to figure that one out.”

He chuckled, pleased, and perhaps a little intrigued. “Very good. Any unique markings that you could see?”

“I uh... I couldn’t see much of anything at the time.”

“Oh?”

“I was in the refresher... when they attacked.” She sighed, chuckling at the mere thought. “I was literally *pissing myself* during a pirate attack. I know that sounds stupid...”

“Not at all.” He reached into a drawer and pulled a tissue. “If anything, you were quite brave to remain so calm as to learn all these details.”

He held the towelette out to the Zeltron, which she likewise reached for. “Thanks.”

Then she grabbed his wrist and all hell broke loose.

Leveraging her legs against the desk, she jerked the Twi’lek from his seat, hammering his diaphragm against the furnishing and stunning him momentarily. Qyreia then threw her weight forward, slamming her shoulder into Manu’s body and sending him toppling backward onto the ground, with the merc sprawled out on top. At the sound of a side door opening, Qyreia scrabbled for her pistol, drawing it from the basket just as Manu’s bodyguard burst into the room. Green and red energy shot past each other.

Where the bodyguard had flinched in an effort to not shoot his own employer, Qyreia’s shot hit true, and the Zabrak fell to the ground hard, thoroughly knocked cold by the stun shot. *Lucky guy. I forgot to change the settings back after the fight.*

The Twi’lek was just returning to his senses when he felt the warm, metallic muzzle of the pistol against his head. “Imma make this quick. You’re coming with me. If you want to do so in one piece, you’ll do exactly as I say.”

Manu’s eyes twitched, clearly trying to parse out the situation and, perhaps, even make sense of what just happened. A quick clap of the handle on his sternum brought him out of his thinking space. “Agh! Fine!”

Qyreia was quick to scramble off of him, making sure to keep her eyes on his whole person at all times. He was taking his time, dusting off his clothes, making the Zeltron somewhat impatient.

“Hurry up. Toward the door. Let’s go.”

Begrudgingly, the broker led the way toward the door, with the Zeltron close behind. He was contemplating trying to slam the door on her and make a run for it until he felt the barrel sticking into his ribs through his robes. When he glanced back, he could see that his captor had already pulled her hood back up over her head, with the gun tucked inside of her own jacket to make it seem as though they were just walking intimately together.

“If I may...”

“You will do *exactly* as I say. No questions. I even *think* you’re doing something stupid, I will shoot your choobies off. Understand?”

Now Manu was the one to swallow nervously. “I understand.”

“Good. Now we walk out. Make some light conversation along the way.” Before he could try to question the woman any further, she practically shoved him through the doorway, closing the metal barrier behind them. After a few steps, he looked to his captor and she was smiling at him. “Thank you again Mister Maurfai! I can’t tell you how much this means to me!”

He stammered momentarily, only to remember the original feigned purpose of her visit. “Oh, oh yes, but of course Miss Viru. With *payment* such as yours, how could I refuse?”

She jabbed him hard with the gun, nearly forcing a yelp out of him. “Careful with the commentary,” she hissed.

He leaned low to whisper back. “I quite often take such favors as payment. I am being more genuine for the onlookers.”

Qyreia growled under her breath, but quickly regained her composure, engaging the Twi’lek in intermittent conversation: sometimes about her imaginary brother, sometimes about Manu’s virility, and as often as possible about the weather and Coruscant in general. Anytime the fictional sex was brought up, she would jab him with the gun until she started to worry that he was enjoying the pain. Then she *ground* the barrel into his ribs. That seemed to work well enough.

“Where exactly are we going?” the informer whispered harshly after they had been walking for some time.

His captor nodded to the YT-1300 on the public landing pads in view. “Oh, just a little further I think.” She shoved him gently, making sure that he kept his focus on walking and prohibiting his ability to concentrate as much as possible.

That didn't stop the people that had been following them from finally making their appearance.

"Manu Maurfai! Stop where you are!"

Qyreia turned to her prisoner. "I don't think you're the one they really want."

"How astute of you."

In a flourish, the merc swung the gun backward, turning to aim at their pursuers and firing into them, dropping one on the first shot. After that, they were running.

"Remeel!" she screamed into her wrist comm. "Open the goddamn door!"

With the Zeltron goading him forward and blaster shots singing past them from behind, Manu felt little recourse but to seek shelter in the transport ship while his captor blindly fired at their assailants. The ramp dropped just in time for them to ascend, while the ventral turret began firing at the Collective agents, scattering them and forcing a general retreat.

"Now what?!" Manu screamed, frustrated, while the ramp closed behind them.

Panting and fed up with the information dealer's complaints — and the mission in general — Qyreia leveled the pistol at him and, despite some brief protests, shot him in the chest. The Twi'lek dropped to the ground in a heap, twitching.

"Would you look at that. Still on stun mode." She kicked his feet out of her way to get to the cockpit. "Lucky you."

The droid scuttled into the hall, happy to see its master in one piece, whirring and bleeping about her success.

"We need to get going, R3. Coruscant Security'll be here any minute." She threw the throttle forward and took off roughly, screaming out of the docking area without any clearance or avionic guidance. "If Manu wakes up, hit 'im with your shocky stick until he knocks the kriff back out."

*"Brweeeooo!"*

The binary salute made Qyreia chuckle, even as she could see flickering blue and red lights streaming toward them. She juked and weaved the ship through the traffic, up and up, past the rooftops of the cityscape and into the atmosphere. She vectored the *Katurno* as neatly as she could toward their hyperspace route, checking the scanners for any ships that might be in the way.

"Alright! Here we go!"

With a jerk, she shunted the hyperdrive to life, the bright blue-white lines of hyperspace snapping into existence around them just as they broke atmosphere. It was several minutes before Qyreia's racing heart rate slowed enough that she finally stopped to breathe normally, settling back into her seat.

"Frack... Let's... Let's *not* do that again."