

“I hate cloak and dagger karkery.”

The R3, watching its master getting ready as they approached Bespin, whirred and beeped encouragingly. It would be there with her the entire time, after all.

“Maybe. But no offense Reme: you’re not exactly the pinnacle of stealth and combat efficiency.”

*Whiireee bleepdeprrrt-doot-doot.*

*Extra careful he says*, she mused inwardly. Qyreia was already anxious about being careful, coaxing details out of Kordath and his newfound position in Dajorra Intelligence about this apparent contact: a supply broker, warehouse manager, or similar sort; the intermediary that doesn’t necessarily handle the goods directly, but definitely knows who does. The middle rung of society, in terms of wealth. That meant the Zeltron could forego fine attire, but had to mind her manners. To an extent, at least.

What she didn’t want was some schutta looking at her and zeroing in on the red skinned, blue haired woman. That look, even for a race that wasn’t planet-locked, was still very iconic in the wider galaxy. No, she wanted to blend in, even if only a little.

She looked at the hypo in her hand. *Goddamn, I hate this Sithspit.*

*Hate* might’ve been a strong word for the substance that, upon surmounting her anxiety, the mercenary injected into her neck. In fact, she rather liked how the stuff, expensive though it was, so readily masked her without the need for layers of makeup or oblong applications of synthflesh. Really, it was the almost immediate side effects that she hated. Seconds after the *pop-hiss* of the injection, she was overcome by a wave of dizziness and subsequent nausea that she almost fell over, propped up and saved by the droid at the last moment.

“Thanks Rem.”

The droid beeped in happy concern, but she dismissed it with a wave. At least the worry part. She kept the droid there for stability.

Several long, rather painful minutes passed like this while her stomach turned on itself, sparing her any vomiting only for its current emptiness. As the side effects subsided though, the intended effect started to manifest. It started at the injection site and worked its way out from there, gradually turning her cinnabar skin to a ruddy fair color typical to humans, until it reached every part of her body. Her hair she’d already given a mild black dye, so when she looked in the mirror, she was just a pretty, pale human spacer.

“How d-o I look?” Qyreia asked her droid, working through the final throes of muscle spasms in her gut as she spoke.

Rather than proper Binary, R3-M3 gave her a whistle that sounded almost like a cat-call.

“Y’know, anyone else, and they’d probably get slapped for that,” she chided, smiling nonetheless.

*Disguise complete, at least.*

All that was left was to finish flying the ship in to Cloud City. That was easy enough. Remeë followed Qyreia to the cockpit where she sat and began the laundry list of procedures for landing. She had to contact the port authority, get clearance, have a space allocated, work out any fees, and so on. The holos always made it look so easy, but that was as much a case of the *rule of cool* as it was situational. People with personal invitations might get away with just a quick comm call, but everyone else still had to go through the whole process. The real mechanical stuff didn’t even start until the *Katurno* was on final approach to the city, passing over the skirting slope of the huge disc and into the allotted docking area.

The YT-1300, in as good of condition as it was, wasn’t of a class to be landing on the uppermost levels of Cloud City, but the merc managed at least something in the lower entertainment district. As soon as the struts touched down with their usual deep *thud*, it was time to really start working.

“You sure you wanna come along this time?” Qyreia asked as she stepped from her seat and toward the crew ramp.

Remeë bleeped affirmatively.

“Okay. Be fun to have you along for once, I guess.”

The irked response made the Zeltron smile.

“Again: you’re not a combat droid. In case you haven’t noticed, most of the poodoo they send me on is *fighting*.”

It seemed mildly appeased by that answer, chirping acceptance while they descended to the dock floor. While Qyreia engaged the starport representative that met them there, Remeë spun about and linked with the ship through a connection in the nearest strut, closing and locking the ramp in place to prevent entry. Its master was adamant about that these days; ever since her return from a trip with the large Chiss that Remeë had filed away as an amiable acquaintance, though sometimes it was hard to tell if she was saying *Strong* as the proper noun or a verb. He was both, apparently. Per her instruction though, the droid added a layer of encryption to the access codes. Just in case.

Once the business side of docking was complete, the Zeltron and droid pair delved into the belly of Cloud City. As much as she wanted to venture into the entertainment

district proper, Qyreia's business was in the parts of the floating city reserved for tibanna distribution. *Maybe afterward, though.* It wouldn't be a vacation, but there was nothing saying she couldn't enjoy herself.

First though, to business.

While her mission wasn't specifically *covert*, they were working under the auspices of aliases. Hers was Miri, his Jafan. When she asked about these names and what they meant, the answer she got was amusingly practical. The DIA just ran a name-generator on the holonet — the kind writers use for their random characters — and picked the first ones that came up. There was no special meaning; no translations or operational coding. It was so simple that it was brilliant.

The best part about being Miri was how people looked at her. It wasn't that passersby didn't look at her, or check her out. All that was a given; normal. It was in the volume of glances; the greater degree of subtlety and lack of whistles or racist remarks. As far as they were aware, she was human, and not being a slab of meat for once was utterly refreshing.

It reminded her of why she'd left the cantina circuit years ago. Why she started working in jobs where she could keep people at arm's length, and didn't have to pull her punches if they tried to get fresh.

Why she stuck to one lover at a time.

*Now's not the time to get reminiscing, Q ol' girl. We got deals to make so we can hit the fun stuff before heading home.*

Jafan was an easy man to find, fortunately. Qyreia had only to follow the directions given to her. Unfortunately, the directions led to quite the trek through the depths of Cloud City. While she didn't inherently distrust the mining platform's denizens, including the vast population of Ugnaughts, she also knew that it was wise to keep droids and personal belongings close at hand when wandering through. She'd done tibanna runs before, and been warned plenty enough by her trader friends, back when she still did those things.

With Remeé hot on her heels, she walked to the storage facilities. Obviously she couldn't ask around for a Jafan. That wasn't his name, nor what people would know him by. So she had to go to the exact place indicated.

The exact place.

In a floating city, in one of the most industrialized partitions, with hordes of people and droids and vehicles meandering in every direction.

After a certain point, she just let the droid lead the way.

*Goddamn confusing as frack layouts. If it weren't for Rem, I'd be suspicious as kriff rolling through here asking for some rando. What Hutt humping genius thought to have this hole as the meetup spot? Why couldn't it have been a nice restaurant? Or a casino? I don't even like gambling, and I'd take a casino over this.*

When the R3 unit led her to the otherwise nondescript door, the Zeltron felt a pointed sort of relief.

A little more so when the door revealed a normal human.

*I half expected him to be some disfigured cretin.*

“Miri?”

She smirked. “Jafan?”

He motioned her inside with a pleasant smile. “Please, come in.”

“Thank you.” Remeë followed close behind, the door shutting promptly once they were through.

There was a moment of time to appreciate her host and his apparent office. The space was simple, unkempt in the way that a busy person can't quite keep up with the mess but still makes an effort to keep everything in its place; or at least in a place to be sorted later. Organized chaos. And it looked like he lived there from time to time, given the pile of clothes sitting at the end of a small sofa that had a pillow and blanket splayed over half of the seating space. Jafan was, by comparison, a little more neatly kempt. Not a prime specimen, by any stretch, but not bad. A body that bespoke of a lot of office work and a lot of walking, but not a great deal of actual exercise, and a metabolism waning with difficult to discern years. His dark, smooth skin made him look younger than his bearing suggested, but a speckle of gray in his short black whiskers and short-cropped hair said late thirties at the youngest, unless he was *really* unfortunate, or was aging especially well.

“I'm a little surprised,” he said as he passed her and took a seat at what she assumed was *his* chair; the one that he used for business. Given how he motioned to another free-standing chair that wasn't the sofa, it was a good guess.

She wasn't about to say no to a sit down after so much walking though. “About what?”

“I expected someone... scarier? You don't exactly look like a business type, or the muscle.” He nodded at the pistol on her hip. “Cept for that, I suppose.”

“Girl's gotta have protection,” she replied, offering a smile that relaxed the stiffness of unfamiliarity in his posture. She was sure her pheromones were doing some work

too, but that was a thing no longer under her control. “I’m just glad I’m not working with an Ugh. Didn’t bring a protocol with me, and I only speak Basic.”

*And Shyriiwook, but you don’t need to know that.*

“Fair.” He was casual, but business casual. Professionally easygoing. That he wasn’t looking her up and down said something for that. “Caf? Afraid it’s either that or water, unless you like it Rissian-style.”

Qyreia offered a curious smirk. “Fraid I don’t know that one.”

Jafan leaned over to a cabinet on his desk and pulled out a bottle of what looked like whiskey. “Word is Baron Administrator Calrissian liked his caf with a drop or three, depending on who you ask.”

“Just caf’s fine,” she dismissed with a wave. After the cosmetic drug’s effects, a little pick-me-up didn’t sound too bad.

“Hope you like it black.” He poured a cup and passed it over, both their arms stretching to their limit, before he poured one for himself and drank a good gulp.

“Black’s not bad. More of a cream and sugar sort, personally.”

Remeë droned quietly in response.

Jafan raised a curious brow. “What was that just then?”

“Hm? Oh, just complaining.” She knocked on Remeë’s dome playfully. “R3 here likes to pretend to be the maid sometimes, so I get to hear all the same complaints.”

That seemed to broaden the human’s full lips to a genuine smile. “Sassy little droid. Alright.” He sipped his caf again. “I don’t suppose you’re here for pleasantries though?”

Qyreia shrugged. “Came all this way. I could sit and talk. Could also go for a steak too. You’re the man with the goods.”

He seemed to appraise that, nodding thoughtfully for a moment. “Fair.” Another pregnant pause passed between them. For a businessman, he definitely seemed to appreciate silence. “Do you have an offer?”

“In exact amounts?”

“Yes.”

“...No.”

“No?”

She shook her head. “I’ve got about three thousand in discretionary resources right now, but it’s locked behind an admin wall.”

Translation: she didn’t actually have the money. Arcona gave her some resources for the mission, but that was in the way of ships and manpower; not cold hard cash. Fortunately for her, Jafan knew how to speak her language. It gave him an idea of how much he might be able to ask for up front for his dealings; a hook to his fish.

“Well,” he pondered, thumbing the rim of his mug, “I think we can work out an arrangement. Don’t need payment right this second, anyway.”

Remeë bleeped and whirred again, and Jafan’s brow quirked again. Were he not so surprised by what he heard, Qyreia might not have caught his expression. *Ohhh, so he knows Binary after all.* She put a hand on the droid’s dome and stroked it soothingly. It didn’t have nerves, but it had sensors and knew her mannerisms. It was just voicing worry that this human might have ulterior motives — alternate *payments* — in mind. *Protective little guy. But I don’t think that’s what he meant.*

“So what’re we talking here, Jafan? Payment on delivery?”

“Fair.” He nodded. “A fair question.”

*Frack, this guy likes that word.*

“I think I could work with that, plus a cut of the profits.”

“Commission is for the suits to work out,” the merc said, pausing to sip her caf. “The gas is for us; not resale.”

“Well,” he sighed, seemingly resigned, “they’re not going to like that.”

“They’re already going to be upcharging us, and especially if the deal works out like they get to do the hauling. Tack on a... a tariff for every liquid liter or something. Something small. I prefer if you bit into *their* cut, but a little tax on our end won’t utterly bankrupt us.”

That made him laugh, low and steady, but a laugh nonetheless. “Fair.” He leaned forward in his seat, still thumbing the cup. “So you’re here. Already know I’m willing to deal. What’s your group gain by sending you here with words and no ‘pad?”

“They knew you worked this scene. Me talking to you is the soft-knock approach.” Qyreia knocked back the bitter, burnt brew, working hard to suppress her face contorting. “This is safer for us. Too many people listening to transmissions that’re too easy to pick up from outside of scanner range.”

His eyes narrowed, appreciatively curious. “What makes you think that whoever’s listening to your calls isn’t listening to us now?”

“If they’re listening, then they’re not the ones trying to blow up our ships. If they *were*, then they wouldn’t be *listening*. They’d be busting down your door to put two in the back of my head.” She mimed a pistol going off for added effect.

That definitely caught his interest.

“And me?”

“If they’re listening in on your office to catch me, then you’re already working with them, and you’re safe.”

“What if these... unsavory sorts find out I’m working with you?”

“You’re not,” Qyreia said with a slight, knowing grin. “We’re working with the companies. You just happened to talk to someone to help them talk with another someone. All you do is handle the tibanna storage on this quad.” She winked. “Right?”

His smile broadened as he sat back. “Fair.”

“Fair.”

His coal eyes watched her, curious, wary, discerning. He knew the game, and could tell that she knew it too. It wasn’t even business savvy; it was just basic logic. Sometimes that was the most confounding thing to a potential adversary, whether they held jurisprudence or violent intent. Cloud City might have the former, if what they were doing was illegal. Qyreia was mostly certain that it wasn’t. The Collective had the latter, but their intelligence network lacked the potency to sift through the bureaucracy of the Principate, Cloud City, *and* the corporate machinations of private and publicly owned enterprises.

Rather than open up with another line of questions, or more repetitions of *fair*, he turned on his chair to the terminal on his desk and began typing away. The screen was turned in such a way that neither she nor her droid could see the screen, leaving them to look at each other awkwardly for a moment before returning their attention back to the human.

When he finally returned to his guest, he held in his hand a data chit, aloft, ready to dictate terms and conditions. She knew the look.

*Got him.*

“I will talk to my contacts,” he said plainly. “You get me some actual financials and we can start to really do business.”

Qyreia fished a similar chit of her own from her pocket: logistics details that the gas companies would want, if not need, before even thinking about selling their wares to this hitherto unknown entity. “Maybe this’ll help. Trade? Meet up again when things are ready?”

He nodded, smiling. “Fair.”

“Oh my god, man, just *take* the thing already.”

This time he laughed hard, clearly having said it on purpose after seeing how it was starting to irk her.

And that was it. They traded information. There would be more meetings. More discourse over messages and in offices. Hopefully, if the Zeltron was involved, it would include food or entertainment. As their business concluded, she at least now had the time and opportunity to do a little indulging as she liked.

“Whaddya think, Remster? A little pazaak after some lunch?”

The droid whirred happily, then down-turned its tone.

“...Frack. Right. Droids might not be allowed.” She looked over. “Bring you an oil cocktail?”

*Brrt-brrt.*

She shrugged. “There’s just no pleasing some people, I swear.”