

# STAR WARS

## THE MINER'S GAMBIT

by Jack Freeman

**Bale Andros (Dossier 826)**

Bale Andros was lounging out in one corner of the cantina when they came in. With his muddied boots propped up on the table and his arms resting lazily atop the back of his seat, the Zabrak bounty hunter watched the exhausted workers file in one after the other past the doorway's metal detector. Every single one of them had a haggard, worn out look about them. Humans, Rodians, Duros, even a few Bothans, they all shared that same look in their eyes, a look that Bale had seen many a times before. He knew all too well just how hard life could be for miners out in the back end of the galaxy. He wasn't about to make it easier for them either.

At first, they weren't paying much attention to him. A few sidelong glances, a few raised eyebrows but nothing more. They crowded the bar like vultures. That long silence since he'd first entered, ordered his drink and plopped down at the back of the room was finally broken by the cacophony of their tired voices. Stools and chairs were dragged across the durasteel floor. Drinks were clinked together. Laughter slowly picked up. There was something about the raucous sounds of a bar that always lit Bale up.

He couldn't contain a big cheeky grin before lifting his drink up to his lips. Throwing it back, he gulped it down in full and slammed the glass edge down on the table.

"That's the life," Bale said aloud with a long sigh.

"Wait, you're on Aesirus already?" the voice in his ear belonged to Zehsaa Hysh, a Togrutan, agent of something called the Dark Brotherhood. He didn't know much about them. He didn't much care to, either. They paid good money and that's what mattered. For now, though, his liaison sounded none too pleased.

Resting his head back so as to mask his moving lips from stray eyes, he laid down one hot, blunt, "Yep."

"We have orders, Bale, and we were supposed to work together on this thing."

"Correction, Z. *You* have orders. *I* have a job," Bale looked around for any unwanted attention. Occasional glances were shot his way but none seemed to linger. Not yet, anyways. He slid his feet off the table and hunched forward, running both his hands through his thick, greasy mane.

He spoke again while his face was obscured by his hands, "Don't worry about it. We will work together, but I've got a hunch I might just make it easier on us."

"Where are you exactly?"

"Getting a drink."

"Damn it, Andros!" she hissed, her voice spitting static.

"Quiet."

Their growing interest was at first subtle, but it wasn't long before a few miners were staring at him with open suspicion. A trio sitting across the way from Bale turned to look at him. When their gaze met his, they awkwardly huddled back together, flapping their lips. Whatever they were saying, it was about him. Bale shook his head. They should have known better. Speculation could get a man killed. Bale could feel the heat of their discussion from where he was sitting.

"Bale?" Zehsaa was growing impatient.

"Quiet, girl. Trust me."

There was an exasperated sigh and a bleep rang in his ear as Zehsaa terminated the communication. Whether she trusted him or not didn't actually matter now.

The shrill alarm of the metal detector rang out through the cantina. As if it were common happenstance, no one looked up in its direction. If anything, the tavern-goers seemed to loosen up. The three miners glanced up at him again. Their gaze met again, but this time they didn't flinch or look away. Bale was about to say something when they disappeared behind a looming figure now standing over Bale. It was a big, ugly Weequay, his face so wrinkled and scrunched up that Bale could barely make out the alien's beady black eyes. He was an ugly fellow, made all the worse by the web of scars criss-crossing his grotesque, leathery features.

"You're in my seat, Horn-man," the alien said with the bluntness of a sledgehammer.

*An important fellow*, thought Bale, reacting to the sudden intrusion by looking the man up and down. The way the Weequay stood, hunched back, shoulders wide, fists to hips, Bale could tell the alien had been a miner all his life; decades in all likelihood. Whoever he was, he was respected. The way all the miners had relaxed when he entered told Bale he was either a Taskmaster—they say a shift is never over until the boss himself is drinking—or the Weequay was some sort of folk hero. The energy whip and blaster hanging off his belt suggested the former, or maybe both.

Bale sat in silence, starring the alien down for a moment longer. It was surprising to find that rising tension could make that face even uglier. Stroking his goatee once, he finally pushed himself up out of his bench with a sigh.

"Oh yea?" he asked with a cheeky grin as he pushed himself up from his seat.

The Weequay's expression changed, his jaw slacking as he took in Bale's colossal physique. The Zabrak bounty hunter was at least a head taller than him and far more muscular. The alien's black orbs flicked a glance over to the imposing scatter gun holstered to Bale's hip. He, too, had kept his gun when coming in. The scrawny Twi'lek bartender had kept his head

down as the metal detector had gone off, not daring to say something to the horned hunter entering his cantina.

The three miners who'd been glaring at him all pulled up out of their seat with a mischievous grin on their lips.

*Here we go*, Bale mused silently.

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Several hours past sundown, they stumbled out of the cantina, leaving a rumbling tidal wave of laughter in their wake. Some of the boys inside were still cheering and chanting. The Weequay taskmaster, whose name Bale had learned was Eido, missed a step. He would have sprawled out flat on the ground had it not been for Bale's arm holding him up. The other three fellows burst out of the bar, lumbering after them. All five of them moved on wobbly knees, swaying this way and that. One of them burped. Then another moaned as he swerved away from the group, mumbling something about a leak. Taking one, or repairing one, Bale could barely make out individual words in the guy's slurred speech. The Zabrak called out after him—tried to call after him—but choked down on his words, coughing and hacking before he too exploded in laughter. His boot dug into a rock and it was his turn to stumble, nearly slipping down a meager slope if not for Eido's counter-balance.

"Favor paid back, Horn-man, don't you roll on me," Eido slurred with a cackle.

The Zabrak gave his new Weequay buddy one big toothy grin and a jab to the chest as he said, "You know some of my race would take offense to you calling me that."

"Bah! You're a miner like us!" squealed the Weequay, tapping his jagged finger at Bale, "Species ain't got nothing to do with it!"

"Yea! You get the life, you talk the talk," croaked one of the goons strutting behind them.

It was true. Bale had told them all about his past and moving around from one mining operation to another when he was growing up. He had quite a few mining-related stories of his own. It was a treat to get to tell them. Not only had it been a good way to get in their good graces, being back in a mining colony after all these years had taken him back to carefree times. There wasn't much of an audience for miner tales. But nostalgia was a treacherous thing, and for just a moment, one minuscule nanosecond, he would have gladly traded in his blaster for a vibro-pick.

“Say...” Bale began, careful to keep his tone goofy, “You all mentioned mining up Kyber all night. Sorosuub actually found Kyber crystals out here?”

“You betcha, big guy! Loads of it, like you never seen!” answered one of his new buddies, this one was a Duros named Hyxenos.

“Shut it, Hyx! You know you can’t talk about that,” groaned the taskmaster in Eido. The Weequay instantly seemed sobered up and angry with himself, “Heh, sorry, horn-man. It’s classified stuff. He’s right though, it’s a sight to see.”

Bale nodded, curling his lips up in mock disappointment. He wondered if perhaps he’d been wasting his time all evening. It was all fun and games, but he did have a mission to accomplish. The little Zehsaa would box his ears in if he showed up empty-handed. *Trust me*, he’d told her like a big fool. He’d never been good with words. Why he had expected it to work differently tonight was beyond him.

He looked out behind him at the two goons trailing behind them, Hyx and a grimy Bothan. Try as he might, he could not remember the Bothan’s name. Something scrappy like Swak or Twak. It didn’t really matter. The third one, the leak guy, was nowhere to be found. He had likely dozed off in some dark corner of the shanty town.

So, there were three of them, including Eido. Bale could easily take Eido down before they realize what was going on. A blast of the shatter gun to Hyx’s guts. A single punch would send the Bothan flying. Before security could react, Bale could drag the taskmaster off somewhere. Then he would have a nice, meaningful one on one with the Weequay. The Zabrak bounty hunter was no imperial interrogator, but excessive application of force had a way of loosening a tongue, even more so than booze.

“Gundarks take me, Horn-man, you’re one of us,” suddenly declared Eido after they’d walk several paces in silence, “You’ve got to see it before you get off-world.”

“You know I’d love it, Wrinkles!” quipped Bale as he subtly slipped his hand off the scatter gun on his hip.

The playful banter that ensued told Bale that they were none the wiser. These were miners just like he once was. Back in the day, he would have barely noticed someone running around waving a blaster. Fat chances he would have noticed if they’d reached for a weapon. He was glad. He never did like offing good, hard-working folks like these ugly fellows.

Especially not for employers like them from the Dark Brotherhood.

He liked that Zehsaa girl well enough, she was good company, but her employers, or whatever they were, he did not care for them. Not one bit. Anyone who could say *Scholae Palatinae* without unhinging their jaw or laughing aloud wasn't worth trusting.

The brief trek out to the hangars was a slow, tedious affair. Making progress towards his objective had sobered Bale up, at least to some degree, but the other fellows still moved with the grace of flailing Gungans. It was as if they had rubber for legs. Bale kept Eido upright more than once. He was even forced to carry the Duros over his shoulders after the addle-brained creature had fainted. Bale wanted to leave the alien behind to sleep it off in the mud, but there had been no convincing Eido. It was clear why people respected him. Even when he was drunk out of his gourd, the Weequay took care of his people. There was something commendable about that.

That Bothan though, he was a different story entirely. His movements were still somewhat sluggish and awkward, but sharp, suspicious lucidity had returned his piercing stare. The goofy, canine grin was gone, replaced by a tight-lipped frown. Bale could sense the scrawny alien's eyes on his back.

The Zabrak bounty hunter would have to be careful. One wrong move, that Bothan might just hail Sorosuub security.

It wasn't much longer until they reached the hangars, if they could be called such. Really it was more a haphazard heap of metal than an actual building. With beams jutting up out of the uneven ground to hold up durasteel sheets overhead, it looked like it would all come crashing down at the first sign of a gale. Bale suspected it was like his new companions. They might have looked shaky and rough around the edges but these were rock solid fellows. At least in terms of willpower and hard work. They were still a little wobbly in their boots. It would take a while longer before the booze wore off. Bale counted on it.

"Here's my girl," croaked Eido as he slapped his hand against the one landspeeder that looked in working shape. It was an ugly thing, big and bulky with twin thrusters propped up vertically behind the vehicle. It was a make Bale did not recognize and he figured it was more than likely it had been put together by Eido and his crew.

"Why do I have a feeling we'll end up a black smear on the side of a mountain side?" Bale made a show of not wanting to get on that thing. He moved around the speeder, inspecting the thing over and under. He glanced over his shoulder at the trio of miners.

"Where's the trust, Horn-man?" Eido seemed sad.

“He’s too used to his shiny bounty hunter goodies now. Ain’t got the heart of a miner!” Hyx jested, causing his two friends to explode in laughter.

Bale bent down to look under the carriage, using the distraction to plant a tracking beacon inside the speeder’s frame. He gave the vehicle a mock shake, as if he were expecting a wing to fall off. He flashed a grin over to Eido as he said, “Well, if I’m going to die, might as well be today!”

With that, the Zabrak swung himself over the railing and into the bulky landspeeder, plopping himself in the front passenger’s seat. Hyx and Eido both gave a cheerful woot as they followed suit. The Weequay dropped himself into the pilot’s seat while Hyx climbed in behind Bale. The bounty hunter looked around for the Bothan. He wasn’t there anymore. Suddenly, an engine roared out behind to more rows of weather-beaten speeders. The small furry alien rounded a pillar atop a lithe speederbike.

“Irshwak! You going to keep up in that thing?” howled Hyx.

The Bothan, Irshwak, gave a toothy grin, flashing his canines before exploding towards the camp’s exit. Eido howled as he punched the landspeeder at full speed.

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Three hours. It had taken them three hours, riding in the dark of night over sharp, jagged terrain and through bodies of water. Aesirus was a world unlike any Bale had ever seen. The world had no oceans and no land masses that could be labelled as a continent. The world was instead made up of thousands—if not millions—of islands, separated by a spider web of rivers. Bale could not fathom just how someone could possibly keep their bearings. It all seemed the same to him. Eido, however, had known where he was going.

Bale felt genuine awe as he stood inside the gigantic Kyber crystal caves. It was unlike any mines he’d ever worked in. He was used to cramped, narrow tunnels burrowing deep into the earth. These caves were like a world of their own, the interior so gigantic he could barely make out the ceiling overhead. Thousands upon thousands of crystal veins shimmered, giving the cavern the appearance of a starry night sky.

Eido and Hyx were both grinning at him. He tried to regain his composure but he was hard pressed to do it. He felt like a child inside.

“Yep. That was our faces when Sorosuub sent us out here. Each and everyone of us,” Eido said as he chuckled. Bale could tell by the glimmer in his beady black eyes that Eido was reliving the excitement by sharing this moment.

“You ever see anything like this before?” Irshwak looked up at Bale expectantly.

The towering Zabrak shook his head, still trying to put words together into a cohesive sentence. He hadn’t and he was almost jealous. But he knew that their lives were about to turn to Acklay droppings when Zehsaa’s people descended on Aesirus. He felt a pang of regret for playing a part in these games. At least he *was* being paid handsomely to do it.

The four men stared up at the shimmering cavern walls for some time longer before they made their way back out. Bale moved faster than they were, walking briskly ahead of them, all too eager to complete this mission and stop cheating these fellows.

That is, until the sound of a blaster charging up pierced the night air.

Bale froze in his tracks. His hand went instinctively to the scatter gun hanging from his belt but he stopped shy of the pommel when Eido warned him with a *huh-huh*. Moving slowly, the bounty hunter turned to face his companions. He had expected Irshwak to have been holding the weapon, but to his surprise, the Bothan seemed to be the most afraid of the lot. Instead, it was Eido who trained a Bryar pistol on Bale’s forehead. Hyx stood besides the taskmaster with a gigantic grin on his face.

“What’s this?” Bale asked dully.

“Welp, Horn-man, we figure we got a spacer here with us, and looking at the ship you rode in on—yes, we’ve been watching—we reckon you’re worth a pretty credit or two,” Eido explained.

Bale couldn’t help but grin.

“Wrinkles, if you think it’s the first time that someone’s tried to rob me at gunpoint, you’ve got a lot to learn,” the Zabrak said, his tone dark and foreboding. The Weequay and Duros didn’t flinch, but the quivering Bothan all but jumped behind his mates.

“And you think you’re the first bounty hunter to cross my path?” Eido had a point, but there was a vast difference between any random bounty hunter and Bale Andros. That, they didn’t know.

Bale sighed. He actually liked these guys. If someone knew just how hard life was in a mining colony, it was him. He did not blame their fool notion of wanting to round off their month with a unwary traveller’s belongings. In all likelihood, were he still working the mines back home, he too would have likely thought it a good idea.

He remained silent as he watched the three of them, weighed them, their ability to fight. Eido clearly pose the biggest threat. The big fellow could likely go toe to toe with Bale in terms of raw physical power, and he already had his gun out. From what he could tell, the Duros wasn't feeling all too threatened. He had not bothered to unstrap the slugthrower rifle off his back. Even if he managed to grab hold of it, the bolt-action gun was built for long range precision. It would take sheer, unabated luck to hit Bale from this distance once the action went down. As for the Bothan, he might have been quaking in his boots, he could not be discredited. It didn't carry a gun, but it had vicious-looking vibroblades strapped to his hips. If Bale turned his back during the scuffle, the canine-looking alien might just bite.

It was a risk, going for his scatter gun. There was no way he was getting a shot off before Eido and he had no way of knowing just how good a shooter the Weequay actually was.

A small red dot suddenly appeared on the taskmaster's face, dancing over his ugly, wrinkled features like a Nabooian firefly. At the sight of it, Bale flashed his pearly whites at the trio of would-be bandits. He gave a shrug and opened his arms wide in a show of peace.

"I imagine there's no chance we can all head on our merry way?" he asked.

The arrogant, sharp-toothed grin on Eido's face only grew wider at the bounty hunter's apparent pleas, "Hey, you can always turn your back and try. See if I let you walk."

The Duros laughed at his boss's taunt but the cackling died the moment its almond, crimson eyes drifted to the Weequay's face. He stuttered before finally say, "B-boss? What's that?"

"Huh? What's what?" Eido spat, refusing to take his eyes away from his mark.

"He's talking about the laser dot searing a hole in the middle of your forehead," Bale explained in good humor. The Weequay grew paler with each word that followed, "*That* belongs to an imperial sharpshooter. Don't know the rifle's make but that doesn't really matter. They all make a nice round hole."

"You're bluffing," hissed the Duros as he reached for his own rifle.

"Big mistake," announced Bale.

The red dot slid away from Eido and disappeared momentarily only to reappear right dab in the middle of Hyx's reaching hand. A split second was all it took for a sizzling red bolt to pierce the cold night sky. The Duros shrieked as it carved a hole in his hand. He tumbled down into the mud, writhing around in agony. The laser dot was back on the Weequay.

Bale offered another grin as he said, "I bet he wishes we'd let him sleep back in that shanty town of yours."

Eido immediately threw down his bryar pistol. The Bothan was already on the ground with his hands shielding his head. *Boy did I read that guy wrong*, Bale thought to himself as he frowned at the pathetic creature.

Bale walked slowly towards the frozen, wide-eyed taskmaster. Halfway to him, the bounty hunter slid the imposing scatter gun out of its holster and held it loosely at his side, trained on the ground as he trotted with nonchalance. Visibly shaking, the Weequay recoiled as Bale reached him and placed one hand square on his left shoulder. The sound of a charging blaster filled the air again and the Zabrak pressed the scatter gun into Eido's guts.

"I'll make you a deal, Wrinkles, because I actually like you," Bale began, his voice laden with threat, "I won't shoot you, right now, and as pay back, you will owe me a favor."

Eido seemed confused, "A favor?"

Bale gave a shrug, "Oh you know, in case of a... hostile takeover. Could always use an upstanding fellow to sway the masses."

It went over Eido's head. He had no clue what Bale was talking about, and in truth, Bale wasn't entirely sure himself. But something told him Eido and his boys would want to be on the right side should Zehsaa's friends move on these coordinates he had just gotten them.

"Deal?" Bale insisted.

"Alright! Alright! Fine! Whatever you want, Horn-man, I'm not dying here tonight."

"Good," the Zabrak said as he lowered his gun. Without warning, he reared his head back and brought it crashing down square in Eido's face. The taskmaster gurgled as he joined his two companions in the mud.

Bale stood over them for a moment, debating whether he was doing the right thing or not. He had the coordinates the so-called Dark Brotherhood had paid him to acquire. He could shoot them all here and now and nullify any chances of future reprisal. Weequay weren't exactly known for their forgiving nature. *If they were to show up back home...* he began but stopped that train of thought before it derailed him. No. He'd made his choice.

One short breath was all it took to regain his composure. He turned his back to them to look out at the seemingly empty, craggy landscape that surrounded them. Wherever she was hiding with her rifle, he knew that Zehsaa was looking at him—and probably rolling her eyes—when he gave her a thumbs up and a big toothy grin.

Now, he owed her drink and he knew just where to get one.