

**A BOUNTY HUNTER STORY**

# **NOTHING EASY**

**By Jack Freeman**

(Bale Andros #826)

It was supposed to be an easy one. Bale Andros was no lazy chump, but today, well, today the Zabrak was as tired as a Hutt in a foot race. Big bucks, low danger, not really how he liked his jobs—too few explosions—but this was just what he needed. But it was all wishful thinking now. The moment that spaced-brain goon of a Weequay, Rysh'tak, showed up he knew this would be no cakewalk. That dog had all the morale compass of a rabid Gundark and a twitchy trigger finger to go with it.

One flash of that ugly grin of his and easy went out the window. Well, it was less of a smile and more of an extra crease on that wrinkled, old leather mat that passed for a face, but it burned with that competitive fire that he shared with Bale. That *one* thing they had in common. This time, though, there was something else in that smile that bothered Bale. Something not quite like usual. His gut told him the Weequay knew something he didn't, and he did not like it. He did not like it one bit.

So Bale kept his gob shut, packed on some extra firepower, and rode in the back of the landspeeder, one leg dangling over the side, his heavy repeater cocked back against his shoulder. His free hand hovered near the handle of his Bryar pistol. Rysh rode shotgun next to the Rodian who'd hired them. The Weequay wasn't carrying half the arsenal Bale was and seemed satisfied with the twin blasters strapped to his hips. He had to be carrying a knife somewhere. Bale knew that from experience.

As for the Rodian, she was some big shot archaeologist named Huxlia. He'd never heard of the skimpy bug-eyed lass but then, to Bale, scavengers were scavengers no matter how they dressed themselves up. He'd done his share of scavenging too, nothing big and fancy about it. The haphazard excuse for an armor that he was wearing was proof enough. It was some old Clone Wars-era Katarn-class armor he'd come across and cobbled back together with extra parts. You really couldn't tell from looking at it, though. Point was, he didn't much care for how that Rodian looked down her trumpety nose-mouth thing at him, as if he was just some big dumb goon. That was all Rysh. Bale was different. Granted, he was big, and he had to admit he didn't look too sharp, certainly not smart, but he was no baseline merc.

His eyes flicked from the Bryar pistol to his heavy repeater, passing by a pair of thermal detonators clipped to his bandolier. *Maybe that's exactly what I am*, he mused with a self-indulgent grin. Then his eyes fell on Rysh. *But I'm a damned sight better than this Bantha poodoo.*

"Two clicks and we're there," announced Huxlia a good hour after leaving the landing zone. Rocky crags and gigantic metal debris had given way to some surprisingly lavish flora, making it hard for the Rodian to manoeuvre the speeder forward. More than once, Bale wished he had ridden his own bike. Tall bushes with big fat leaves almost as wide as a man surrounded them, dwarfed only by trees far

taller than any he'd seen before. It was a breathtaking sight. As a bounty hunter, he'd been around the galaxy in his time, but something so lush was a rare sight. It confused him though. He'd heard that most of Endor was reduced to a cinderling wasteland after the Battle of Endor. It had been decades, but still, such vegetation could not have grown back in twenty-some odd years. It had seemed logical, with the fabled Death Star exploding in orbit. Gravity had to have sucked its twisted innards down worldside. *The Endor Holocaust*, as it was called by the Empire in those days. Bale was beginning to think it was all propaganda.

It didn't really matter. They were here now, beneath a thick canopy of leaves that blocked out most of the sky. Rysh's excitement was palpable as he bounced up and down in his seat. It really didn't seem like the Weequay to get so worked up by pretty sights. Huxlia, on the other hand, was silent. She didn't seem one for fraternization.

Fur.

Bale did a double take, craning his neck back where they'd just driven through. He could swear he'd seen something furry, some small rodent of some sort. It was a blur, but he could have sworn it had been standing upright. Had it been carrying some sort of stick? It had looked almost like a spear. The creature, if it had been one, was nowhere to be seen. The Zabrak shook his head. For all he knew, it might have been a misshapen tree stump.

He forgot about it almost instantly when his eyes settled on the old, rusted out carcass of an AT-ST scout walker. To his surprise, neither of his companions seemed to notice it. Vegetation had all but swallowed the imperial vehicle, but one was a scavenger, another a guard. It was their job to notice things. His mind returned to the walker. It was always a thrill to see relics of the Empire. As a kid, he'd owned toy replicas of Imperial warmachines. Bale had not seen many real ones in his lifetime, and only two still in operation, used by some border-world baron to protect his keep.

"And we're here," the Rodian croaked as she veered the speeder to stop before some kind of mound overtaken by vines and moss. There was an opening beyond the dangling vegetation; some sort of cave.

Bale was the first off, kicking his leg over the side of the speeder before it had fully stopped. One foot crunched in the dirt. There was a dull thud under the other. Looking down he found a dented plasteel dome. He dugged it up and found himself staring down an old Stormtrooper helmet.

"Look here!" he called after Huxlia as he waved the dome her way. She looked back over her shoulder with her bulging eyes, her mouth twitched, then she turned her attention elsewhere. Bale starred at her blankly as he threw the helm aside.

"You'd expect an archeologist to show *some* interest in old relics, huh?" Rysh said

with amusement.

“She missed a whole walker on the way through too,” Bale noted.

“Whoa really? I’d kill to see that thing.”

“Tough luck, bub. Missed it too.”

The Rodian bee-lined through the area without so much as glancing down as she stepped over stumps and wartime debris. She reached the mound in record time, pushing through dangling knots of moss without slowing down. She disappeared the mound’s angular roof. That’s when Bale realized the mound itself wasn’t natural. It was some manmade structure, nothing particularly big. This couldn’t be more than a remote outpost at best, some garage at worst. He figured they might find a speeder bike depot. Didn’t seem worth their trouble or the money Huxlia was paying him.

Bale exchanged glances with Rysh. For all this uncertainty, Rysh sure looked unaffected. He simply heaved his shoulders in ignorance and set after the Rodian. Bale followed suit with weariness. Pacing backwards, he scanned the treeline around the site. There were two more walkers out there, harder to spot than the previous one, and the more he took in the scenery, the more plasteel armor he spotted. A battle had happened here. Again, even if nothing stuck too obviously through the overwhelming vegetation, it was impossible that some big shot archeologist would have missed all of it. Not unless she was terrible at her job, but Bale doubted that very much. Whatever she was after, Huxlia knew exactly where to find it.

Blaster fire tore him right out of his reverie. Wheeling back around towards the structure, he watched Rysh blasting out through the moss, firing into the darkness.

“What the—“ Bale growled as he trained his repeater on the running Weequay.

“Ambush!” yelled the Weequay, blaster bolts sizzling past him as he slid into cover behind the speeder.

Bale reacted slower than he should have and it nearly cost him. He dove for a nearby tree stump as a bolt caught him square on the shoulder. The impact spun him. He fell hard but he managed to scamper up behind the stump in time for a blaster bolt to explode overhead.

There was a sharp pain in his collarbone. It had been pure luck that the shot tore armor plating away and not the shoulder itself.

“What did you do now, you lump head?” screamed Bale over the blaster fire.

Rysh ducked out of cover, fired a salvo at the structure, but Bale couldn’t see any shooters just yet.

“Black Sun! Remember that job we—“ Rysh began to explain in earnest before Bale cut him off.

“That job *you* messed up! Don’t you pin that on me.”

*“C’resh m’nwah! You were the one who blew that ship to smithereens!”*

Blaster bolts peppered the speeder’s bow and the tree trunk in quick succession, shutting them both up.

*Not good. Not good at all.*

In truth, it wasn’t Bale’s first run in with the Black Sun. Not now, not during that job Rysh had messed up either. As a matter of fact, he could scantely recall a time when the crime syndicate hadn’t been out for his blood. They’d been gunning for the Zabrak for the better part of his adult life. They just couldn’t get over the fact that he’d killed their agent on the mining colony back home. Granted, he’d been running the place, but still. How could he have possibly known the cheating bastard of a Falleen had been a Black Sun operative? Case in point, he didn’t know about the Black Sun at all! Through luck, mostly, he’d managed to stay out of their way for some years until a job had plopped him right back in their sight. And partnered up with a numbskull like Rysh, they’d botched that job something fierce. Black Sun was all too eager to a bounty on their head.

There was a joke in there somewhere, a bounty hunter with a bounty on his head, but a blaster bolt shrieking just over Bale’s head cut him short of the punchline.

“Ideas?” Rysh begged.

*So much for easy*, Bale thought with an exasperated shake of his head. Somehow, this brought on a yawn, reminding him that he’d been up for the last seventy-two hours. No wonder he was so sluggish. He decided now was as good a time as any for a little pick-me-up. A bolt kicked dirt and smoke up near his feet.

“Damnit, you blasted rucksack, draw fire!” he shouted at Rysh as he recoiled from the blast.

“You draw fire!”

Another bolt exploded just around the edge of the trunk. The stench of carbonized wood made Bale nauseous. That tree trunk wasn’t going to hold up much longer. A third bolt fizzled past him. The fourth showered splinters down on Bale. The fifth pissed him off. Swearing furiously, he fished out an injector from his belt pouch. He popped the plasteel cap off the thing. One breath, two breaths, and he stabbed the needle into his forearm. The device’s pneumatic mechanism hissed as it released its contents.

“My body wont like me tomorrow,” he muttered.

One, two, three more bolts hammered his cover. By the time the third hit, the drug was taking root. It started with a tingle along the nape of his neck followed by a prickling lightness in his scalp. It was nothing compared to the full rush of adrenaline that flooded him. Exhaustion become excitement, anger become a full on frenzy. His

consciousness did not fully register what followed. It was as if the world moved in slow motion and at lightspeed all at once. He wasn't sure which was loudest, his bloodgurgling roar or the shriek of his heavy repeater as he mowed down his attackers.

Somewhere in the chaos he saw Rysh join the fray, twin blasters spraying fire. He saw the Rodian operative scrambling for cover behind her strike team. They could have been five, they could have been fifteen, they could have been a whole army, Bale didn't count. All he saw was black and gold composite armor. And that armor didn't do much to protect their wearers from Bale's firepower. Three went down before they could so much as scream. Sharpshooters lined the top of the structure and went down under concentrated fire. Something hard slammed against Bale's plastron. Another impact knocked him one step back. He pressed forward two steps. The carbonized smell wasn't lost on him. Another hit. He powered onwards. A blaster bolt slammed caught his wrist-mounted computer, the impact knocking the repeater right out of his hands. Bale didn't stop. He couldn't stop. There was no pain in his world, only raw anger. Somewhere, somehow, in the void of his frenzy, the Zabrak caught himself laughing as he ripped a thermal detonator free off his belt. A thumb armed it. Red lights flared around the device's diameter and a shrill bleep sliced through the roar of battle.

A shot whizzed past his head. He found the shooter only to watch Rysh put him down. He nearly chucked the explosive at Rysh for taking his kill. Something in the back of his mind stayed his arm.

Bale looked down at the thermal detonator, back at Rysh, then from the corner of his eyes to the Rodian. *New target.* Huxlia saw him. Her nose-mouth thing curled in what could only be fear. Rodians really were a bunch of ugly bug-eyed freaks. Bale was surrounded by ugly!

"Rysh?"

"Yea?"

"Boom time!"

Bale lobbed the live grenade straight at the Rodian. A wave of panic struck her group. They scattered but not soon enough. In one swift motion the Zabrak unhooked his Bryar pistol, aimed and charged one single shot. He waited, that split second that seemed an eternity as the detonator soared into the scattering group. His finger went up. The Bryar pistol spat one, supercharged red bolt.

The rest was history. Everything disappeared in a wall of fire. The force of the blast tore Bale clean off his feet. Then, nothing.

Black out.

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When Bale came to, it was nighttime. Tiny, blurred flames still flickered here and there somewhere off to his right, and the all-too-familiar stench of smoke still clung heavily in his nostrils. His throat, too, was burning, but more than anything, he felt like he could sleep for a lifetime. Every single muscle in his body was throbbing. As his consciousness returned fully, he grew aware of the discomfort in back. He was propped up against a tree trunk, the same one he'd taken cover behind. Had he landed there? The crunching of boots nearby told him he didn't. He wasn't alone. His hand shot instinctively to the Bryar pistol on his belt. He was happy to find it was still there.

A pair of boots trotted into view, stopping right in front of him. A figure loomed over him for a moment before kneeling. A jagged, leathery face assaulted his vision, ripping a startled yelp from Bale's lips. *Rysh*.

"Boy, you are one ugly schuck," the Zabrak muttered, the air scraping his throat as he spoke.

"You tell that to the girls back at the base hanging off of me every night," the Weequay answered as he offered his hand.

Bale glared at the hand. The thought that he needed *Rysh* to get up almost made him sneer. *Blasted numbsack*. Still, he gritted his teeth, grabbed the hand, and struggled up to his feet. He couldn't tell if it was his armor or his bones creaking as he straightened up, but there was satisfaction enough to be standing where the Black Sun lay face down on the ground all. Well, face down, or in tiny cooked pieces of meat. They were probably still steaming somewhere off in the darkness.

*Damned fools never learn.*

"You're not going to keel over on me, are you?" *Rysh* taunted. Bale realized he'd been swaying but the Weequay's word poked his ego like a cattleprod.

"Get back to the speeder, bantha face," the Zabrak growled as he shoved his would-be helper away.

*Rysh* stumbled, nearly twisted his ankle, but the grin didn't leave that awful face as he made for the landspeeder. He was about to say something but the crack of the Bryar pistol's handle to the back of the head stopped him cold. The Weequay down like an oversized rock with Bale standing over him. The Zabrak was truly tempted to leave him there, sprawled out in the dirt. He could get on the speeder, ride back to the landing zone, take the Rodian's shuttle and leave this entire mess behind. *Rysh* could find his own way home. But he and Weequay had unfinished business. Bale would

be damned if he let that go now.

He rolled his victim over with a boot to the sides. The Weequay came up coughing and wheezing. Blinking wildly, Rysh tried to speak but the words came out slurred out beyond recognition. It was Bale's turn to kneel over him, with one big difference: the Bryar pistol barrel pressing down against the Weequay's filthy gob.

"You don't actually think I'm that dumb, do you?" Bale was done getting played. "I saw the way you handled yourself before we got here. That *shlesh'shiass* grin of yours. You were as cocksure as *she* was!"

Rysh babbled a response but his words were muffled by the blaster's barrel.

"You knew *exactly* what was going down. You had a deal with them. That deal went south. So, what *did* you do? Huh? Leave it to your sorry hide to do something stupid and get yourself shot up. You haggled for more creds, didn't you? Or did she just play you, too? One rock, two kills? Rookie."

Oh, how Bale wanted to pull on that trigger. There would be some satisfaction to killing Rysh. Forget the bounty. *Splat*. It'd be worth it to leave his body for the spear-toting rodents he'd glimpsed earlier. Assuming that creature would stoop to eating something like that mottled leather purse Rysh.

No more Weequay interfering with his jobs; at least, not this Weequay. What an enticing thought.

He fingered the trigger. Rysh gulped. The Zabrak sighed and pulled the gun away. In lieu of the blaster, he offered his hand. Rysh looked at it from his prone position, a mix of doubt and surprise in his black eyes. Bale thought he might have even glimpsed a little relief in there. Hands locked, and the hulking Zabrak pulled his shorter partner up to his feet with a grunt.

"You could have shackled me while I was out cold, claimed that bounty for yourself," Bale explained.

The Weequay was rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet, still stunned by the blow to the head, but that ugly grin cut his lips again. Bale's mouth suddenly tasted bitter. He *really* hated that grin. Maybe it wasn't too late to shoot the bastard.

"Thought about it," Rysh revealed, but instantly threw his hands up in mock defense before an inevitable punch knocked him on his arse, "I saw what you did to these guys. I'm not putting you inside my ship. I like it in one piece."

"Good call."

Bale held a clenched fist out in front of him.

"There's always next time," Rysh said, flashing a full set of teeth as he bumped the fist with his own.

"That there is!"