

Flash in the Pan

Dacien Victae di Plagia, #7388

Outskirts of Faron City

Nancora

Four days after the destruction of the *Braga*

Major Ferro Morl huddled behind a small outcropping of sand-blasted red rock just large enough to obscure him from the sight of his pursuers. He risked a quick peek over the top of the formation. Back the way he had come, the massive artifice of Faron City loomed, a worn and sallow husk of durasteel and smoke. His brief time in the city had shown him that despite its unwelcoming exterior, it housed a remarkably vibrant and robust population for such a lifeless planet. Too bad so many of them had to die.

Not seeing any immediate sign of the Technocratic Guild's hunters, he settled down with a sigh. He reached into his equipment pack and removed a remote detonator, flicking open the safety lock and hovering his finger over the trigger. He began to count.

Ten grand-master. Nine grand-master. Eight grand-master. Seven grand-master. Six gra-- Before he could finish the six-count, he heard the telltale whine of blaster fire. He hesitated, then growled in frustration. Closing the safety lock and returning the detonator to his pack, Ferro gripped the old Merr-Sonn 44 blaster at his side, removing it from its holster and double-checking its battery charge. Reasonably satisfied that the gun would fire if he asked it nicely, he carefully edged his way around the side of the outcropping, finger on the trigger.

More blaster bolts sounded, followed by the *pop pop pop thud thud thud* of a slugthrower, each *thud* sounding closer than the last. For span of heartbeats he couldn't see the source of either weapon. Then, obscured by the heathaze of the infernal planet, he spotted one of other members of his infiltration team, maybe fifty yards away and charging headlong towards his rock outcropping. The human -- called Cresh in his team's Aurebesh-based codename system, his true name unknown to Ferro -- turned to fire over his shoulder at an unseen enemy.

As the blinding red blasts left Cresh's weapon, Ferro heard another report of slugthrower fire. Cresh suddenly twisted, a cloud of blood erupting from the right side of his chest, then collapsed in a heap, his blaster clattering to the dry, hard dirt. Ferro cursed under his breath, caught between an urge to help his teammate and the dead certainty that he would suffer the same fate if he revealed himself. His grip on the blaster tightened, his knuckles white. He waited, watching Cresh struggle to get back to his feet but fail even to lift himself with both arms.

Within seconds, Cresh was surrounded by three near-identical humanoid figures with dark hair, dark eyes, dark skin, and yellow tattoos under their eyes. *Shikari*, Ferro thought, *I assumed I'd die in space, but I guess I'll bleed out in this unforgiving hellhole instead.* He watched, blaster at

the ready, as a fourth figure joined the Huntresses. She wore a form-fitting light red armor that made her look both deadly and comfortable in the damnable heat. Ferro recognized her immediately: Kendra Icasta, reported by the Inquisitorius to be the leader of the Technocratic Guild's *Shikari* Huntresses. One of the most dangerous people in the Nancora system, which was saying a lot.

One of the *Shikari* kicked the fading Cresh in the head, knocking him onto his side and leaving him senseless, if he even still lived. Icasta shouted something angry-sounding but incomprehensible at the Huntress, who quickly stepped back from Cresh and stared sullenly at the ground. The other two *Shikari* appeared to be giving Icasta a report of some kind. *A tally of their bloody hunt*, Ferro brooded.

This wouldn't last long; they'd soon begin sweeping the area for any remaining survivors of his team. He hadn't heard from any of them, nor had he seen any except poor Cresh, in hours. He had to assume they were already dead. Their mission -- to infiltrate Faron City, gather intelligence on possible high value targets, and sabotage the city's power and defense grids -- had been an abject failure. They'd been uncovered almost immediately, thanks to their lack of the bizarre cybernetic implants these technophiles all seemed to sport. Having been exposed, they'd scattered and attempted to reach predesignated extraction zones on their own. He had nearly made it, too, even managing to rig some denton charges near a power relay on his way out of the city.

His Force-cursed luck had also brought an *extremely* high value target, Icasta, to kill him. If he couldn't save his team, he could at least detonate his charges and then try to take Icasta with him. Determined, Ferro again removed the remote detonator from his pack, flipped the safety lock, held his finger over the trigger -- and pressed it. For a moment, Ferro feared it had failed, the charges discovered and disarmed, the detonator damaged in his escape from the city. Then the already-bright sky grew incandescent, a flare of heat noticeable despite the planet's naturally high temperatures. The ground *rumbled* and a deafening roar, like a mortally wounded animal, shattered the silence.

Ferro, stunned, barely registered the gouts of flame and billowing smoke that he could see over his rock, or the shocked looks on the *Shikari* faces. The three women started moving as one back towards the city, first a brisk walk, breaking into a run. Icasta remained, ignoring the explosion and her Huntresses' departure. She slowly turned in a half-circle away from the city, surveying the countryside with a predatory glare.

Crouched in the shadow of the rock outcropping, Ferro shook his head slowly and focused back on the task at hand, leveling his blaster to try and get at least one shot off before Icasta located him. He took a deep, steadying breath then aimed and pressed his finger to the trigger. A sudden fear gripped him. There was something terribly wrong about this. An assassin as skilled as the *Shikari* leader would *never* leave herself open to attack.

He heard the electric discharge of a shock baton. In an instant, Ferro dropped into a sideways roll, rotating over onto his back with his blaster aimed above and behind where he'd been crouched. An ID9 Seeker droid hovered above him, electro-shock arm extended into the empty space where his head had been a moment earlier. He didn't hesitate this time, firing his blaster point-blank into the droid's central optical sensor. The tiny droid crashed to the ground, sparks and smoke rising from its husk.

Ferro, breathing heavily and heart pounding, rolled back over onto his front and quickly hopped up onto his feet. He could only see a thick cloud of acrid smoke where Icasta had stood seconds earlier. He fired blindly into the smoke, hoping against hope that he would get a lucky hit. Instead, he felt a slight, stinging impact on his exposed neck, followed by a growing pinching sensation and a mild burning. Ferro's instincts took over as he raised his left hand to his throat and found a small dart sticking out. He grabbed it and spared it a quick glance -- no markings -- and stuck it into his belt in case he needed to find an antidote to whatever poison was now coursing through his veins. He spun on his heel and ran.

He didn't make it far, collapsing into the dirt as his breathing grew labored. Darkness tugged at his vision, his muscles somehow aching and numb at the same time. His thoughts came slowly. *This is it. What is it?* He thought he heard footsteps, a female voice taunting him through a cloud of confusion. Darkness fell.

He awoke some time later, face down in the dust and the heat. His mind clouded, at first he couldn't recall where he was or what had happened; but when he tried to roll over and couldn't, the memories flooded back to him. He wasn't dead, obviously, and he couldn't feel any wounds other than the burning itch in his neck.

After a few more minutes, he could feel a subtle change as the worst effects of the poison began to fade. Still unable to move, he could at least make out sounds and had some limited vision returning. More importantly, he could think somewhat clearly again. Icasta was probably waiting for more *Shikari* to arrive and take him back to the city for interrogation, certainly a fate worse than a quick death by poison. *Poisoned but not dead. The Shikari leader...but why send her after a ragtag team like mine? And why not just kill me like Cresh?*

As he focused on regaining some motor control, he realized that Icasta hadn't even bothered to strip him of his gear and weapons. *Overconfidence, so sure of her skills that she doesn't even check me for weapons.* He surreptitiously, and painfully, moved his head around to take in his surroundings. Icasta stood nearby, speaking into a commlink as she stared at the still-burning scar in Faron City where Ferro's charges had detonated. Closer to him lay his equipment pack, nearly within reach.

Ferro knew he would not get another chance. While Icasta's attention was occupied elsewhere, he slowly, carefully squirmed, trying to force his body to move *just a little closer* to the pack. The poison still had a powerful grip on him, forcing him to exert all of his willpower to move

those few inches. Out of breath and covered in a sheen of sweat, Ferro struggled to raise his arm towards the pack, gripping its side and tugging it close enough for him to get his hand inside it.

He found what he was searching for instantly -- his only remaining grenade, a flash grenade. He could prime it and try to roll it closer to her, and probably succeed in blinding or disorienting her. But he had no faith in his ability to take advantage of any time that would buy him. He knew he couldn't run; he likely couldn't even walk five feet without collapsing again. *No*, Ferro thought, *I need to get closer.*

Flash grenade in his left hand, Ferro used his right hand to scrabble at the dirt, his feet flailing behind him. It was awkward and painful, but he made some progress, slowly closing the gap between him and the *Shikari* leader. Icasta still appeared to be preoccupied by her ongoing communication and the damage to the city. Ferro got the distinct impression from her tense and slightly obscene gestures that she was furious no one had yet answered her summons to come collect Ferro.

"I tire of repeating myself to you, Ordam," Icasta hissed into her comm unit, "I am not your *errand-slave*. You already have me and my *Shikari* hunting a phantom from a crashed shuttle. A priority, you said. The pilot could be *anywhere* in the Badlands, but you hinder me in that search, for what? To sit watch over an incompetent saboteur while Faron burns?" Her pitch and volume rose, anger clearly overpowering her restraint, "You *dare* to *order me*? You can order nothing from me!" She shouted the last, drowning out an insistent response from her interlocutor.

They're just like us. Fighting petty turf wars while the world falls apart, Ferro thought, grimacing against the pain. He slumped to a stop nearly within reach of Icasta. He'd managed to get very close without alerting her, but that was the easy part. He placed his left thumb over the grenade's primer and pulled it close to his chest, arranging his body so that the grenade would be hidden from Icasta's view.

"I'll tell...what you want...," Ferro croaked, his throat raw and burning from the poison in his neck, "don't...kill...me...." He lowered his head back to the ground and tensed, preparing to use every meager scrap of himself in one last gambit. Icasta turned and glared down at him, genuine surprise on her face.

"That's the plan," she scoffed, lowering her comm unit and ignoring the angry insults it emitted. "How did you manage to get over here?" she asked quietly, then kicked him in the ribs, drawing a gasp of pain. "Go, go, crawl back over there," just gestured towards his pack.

Ferro didn't respond, laying perfectly still.

"Go!" She growled at him, drawing her left leg back for another swift kick.

As her leg flew towards him, he rolled into the kick, grabbing her leg and pulling with all of the -- limited -- strength he could muster. It wasn't much, but it put her off balance enough to stagger backwards, trying to wrench her leg from his grip. He relented instantly, so that she overcorrected, both feet flying out from under her as she toppled backwards into the dirt.

Ferro lunged, thumb pressed firmly onto the grenade's primer, throwing all of his weight onto her prone body. He smashed the grenade into Icasta's dazed face, a look of stunned disbelief in her eyes as he lifted his thumb.

"One grand-master," Ferro shouted at her, closing his eyes and turning his head away but unable to cover his ears without losing his tenuous grip on her and the grenade.

The world around him vanished in a blinding flash. He felt a surge of white-hot pain in his left hand, still pressing the grenade to Icasta's face. And then the pain was gone, replaced by no sensation at all. He couldn't hear anything, no screams, not even a high pitched ringing, just the silence of death. After a few heartbeats, he opened his eyes. They worked, at least, though the light of day hurt tremendously.

He looked down at Icasta's limp form beneath him. Her body appeared to be intact except for her face, which wasn't there at all. Just a charred lump on the front of her head. He looked down at his left arm hoping to see a wounded-yet-salvageable hand, but all that greeted him was the grim sight of a burnt stump below his wrist. The pain of the phantom limb hit him like a pod racer. He retched, the putrid smell of burnt flesh and the acrid sting of smoke suddenly assaulting his senses.

Ferro rolled off of Icasta's lifeless body and just laid there for several minutes, breathing, living, painfully. *At least*, he mused, *I won't bleed out*. Uncontrollable laughter erupted from deep within his chest, equal parts joy and terror. He stayed that way for a while, the laughter fading, the realization that he was still stuck in enemy territory dawning on him.

Eventually he sighed and clambered to his feet. He walked over to retrieve his nearly-empty pack, then rifled through what few useful supplies he could find on Icasta -- she had enough food and water to last him two days with careful rationing. Then he reoriented himself and resumed his original path out into the Badlands in search of the extraction zone, covering his tracks as he went.