

# STAR WARS

## SCAVENGER

By Jack Freeman

(Bale Andros, dossier 826)

A single ship cut a swath through the black of space. It was a crude thing, a massive floating rectangle with a blunt nose to greet the cosmic radiation with all the grace of an asteroid. Its maneuvering fins jutted out from a disproportionately small, flimsy looking reactor compartment at the back. It looked more like a heap of metal than a ship. Some floating debris jettisoned long ago by some star destroyer. *The Reek*. It looked like a deathtrap, but it was *his* deathtrap. And no one could argue that it suited him perfectly.

Bale Andros slapped his empty mug down on the cockpit dashboard. Wiping away stubborn flecks of foam from his mustache, the Zabrak bounty hunter let out a good old, resounding burp, the rancid kind only a career drunkard could conjure up. The Rodian pilot seated next to him didn't say a word, but then that was half her job. The other half, actually flying the ship, she did splendidly. Bloody good thing, that. He had a feeling they'd be putting that know-how to the test before the end of their mission.

"Why would someone send a bounty hunter and his crew after a black box?" wondered the Weequay, Hurx, standing behind them, arms crossed over his barrel chest. He'd spoken up, but Bale reckoned they all thought it and he didn't blame their logic. They were retrieval experts, alright, but their marks usually had a habit of moving and fighting back. This mission required an engineering crew, or at least someone considerably less trigger-happy. That said, a job was a job.

“What? Doubting my ability to carry a box?” He shot over his shoulder, his gruff voice booming in the crowded cockpit. “It’s what we do, Hurx. It’s what we do.”

“Heh, none’s arguin’ ya skill, boss,” said Jooka, the pilot, in rough common, “But, huh, we don’t do spacer jobs.”

“Not when we’re talking enemy patrols, anyhow” the Weequay added. They all had a point, of course. The *Reek* packed some considerable firepower, but they’d be hard-pressed fighting off a Collective squadron. If Rose Squadron showed up, they’d need to get creative.

“Grow some blasted *coonies* already,” the hulking Zabrak spat.

They fell silent. If these no-good, crooked sops understood one thing, it was that you didn’t mess with the boss. They could run their mouths all they wanted, they had free rein on almost anything, but they’d been on the receiving end of his temper enough times to know to quit. Once his mind was made up, nothing they said got through. *That* was the extent of his leadership. He couldn’t bank on their loyalty, but he figured they could back on him getting the job done. And that meant they got paid. That was good enough a reason for these greedy *skags* to fall in line. Truth was, they weren’t wrong. He didn’t rightly grasp why the Dark Brotherhood or their so-called Inquisitorius would call on him of all people. He figured it was one part skill, two parts expendability. Don’t gotta pay the bounty hunter if he gets himself killed. Funny how he’d never gotten around to demanding payment upfront, but then, he hadn’t gotten killed yet.

“There,” Jooka said, pointing one green suction-cupped finger, a mushroom on a long bony stem, beyond the transparisteel of the cockpit.

It took Bale a moment to see it against the backdrop of space, his eyes darting back and forth until they caught a glint of metal. There it was. The *Psi Termina I*, or rather, what was left of it. If the *Reek* was a trash heap, this was a Toydarian’s junkyard after an explosion. The Inquisitorius ship hung in the void, its hull charred and twisted, spinning on itself, ripped to pieces all bent and torn like a gutted fish splayed out before the galaxy. Arcs of lightning flared up from what remained of the reactor core. He made a mental note to steer clear of that area.

“No sign o’ patrol. Plan? Not easy getting to that,” said Jooka, and she had a point. With all that debris, they’d be lucky getting in close without a nice, big, fatal hull

breach, or worse yet, without knocking something right into that reactor. Bale did have an inkling of a plan, but he didn't rightly know how to go about it.

*Baby steps*, he thought.

"Hurx, send our little Viper out on its way. Jooka, make sure it's relaying data. Let's get this show started."

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A small black shadow crept across the bow of the *Psi Termina I*. Its red, glowing eye stuck out against the darkness. Underneath, five black tendrils twisted and writhed this way and that, barely visible from across the black. The Viper sentry droid moved slower than Bale would have liked. Its repulsorlift engine weren't worth a *kriff* outside a gravity well, but Hurx's ingenuity and a healthy dose of luck had gotten it across well enough. Now it was pushing and pulling its way across the ship's fuselage. Hurx and Bale watched it work in real-time, monitoring its progress through the holoprojector on the engineering deck. Apparently the room had more use than storing crates and gathering space dust. The droid pulled itself over and around a bend in the fuselage and it was gone from sight. Blue, floating debris danced before their eyes above the projector. The Viper's mechanical arms swept them meticulously out of the way.

"This could take a while," sighed Hurx as he sunk back into his seat.

"Maybe you'd rather suit up?" Bale grinned through his beard. That leather-faced goon had all the beauty of a cheap rug, and he was always complaining, but he had some brains about him. Knew his way around droids and computers well enough. Plus, he knew how to use a blaster, when push came to shove. Made him well worth keeping around. "I reckon we don't got a while."

"Uh. Ain't the one with the rocket boots, eh Boss?"

It was Bale's turn to pull away from the projector, but he did so with a chuckle.

"I need a drink. You want one?"

"Don't mind if I do!" The Weequay knew his way around some booze too, not that Bale thought about it. Probably why they got along. At the very least, why they endured one another's company.

Bale stepped over to the liquor cabinet, tapped a keycode into the container's activator. The container hissed open, revealing a full arsenal of liquor. Corellian Hooch, Rancor Teq, Muldoon Ice, all the best drinks to make man go blind. He smacked his lips when he spotted his favored budget swill. He wasn't feeling all that fancy. What he needed was something that burned good. The Zabrak got his wish, right then, but not in the way he'd hoped. He reached for the drink. His hands never made it. The floor dropped out from under him as the *Reek* was rocked up and down, throwing Bale face first into his prized collection. Glass shattered. Glass dug into his forehead and a nice, sizzling shower of alcohol poured in right after. He staggered back roaring and cussing and clawing at his face. There was another tremor that bounced him on his feet. Hurx was frowning up at him.

"The hell happened?" Bale growled as he pulled a shard of glass from his forehead. He glared down at it. He recognized the blue tint of Muldoon Ice. *What a waste.*

"Shot off the stern."

The speakers crackled and Jooka's voice stuttered through, "Boss, being hailed."

Wiping at the stream of blood oozing down his forehead with the back of his hand, Bale went for the intercom. "Patch it through to engineering, I'll take it here."

Almost immediately, the tattooed face of a female pilot appeared over the holoprojector. A pretty, tattooed face, if Bale was being honest, with high cheekbones and pouty lips like she'd sucked down on a piece of jorgan fruit, lessened somewhat by the sharp, stabbing glare. He recognized the black tattoos that highlighted her ruby eyes as Zabrak patterns, Iridonian if he were a betting man, which he was. He grinned. Another Zabrak, and not just any Zabrak at that.

"Emery Rose!" He said it as if he were welcoming an old friend into his home.

"Bale Andros. Why is it that your ugly mug keeps washing up wherever there's destruction?"

The bounty hunter couldn't help but grin. It was true. He had a knack for getting in her crosshair. Twice now he'd been put up against her squadron. Twice he had bested her, extracting Collective assets from under her nose, but they had been working planetside. He was on her turf, now, and he didn't relish the notion of pitting Jooka against the Zabrak pilot. Her skills with a starfighter were legendary. He reckoned he may not get much choice in the matter.

“Just couldn’t help myself. Scraps like this ship out here make for some good credits.”

“I know why you’re here, Andros,” the Collective pilot affirmed flatly.

“Uh. Wanna come aboard so we can talk about this? I have a fine bottle of Rancor Teq saved up just for you. And a nice warm cot.”

“Leave now.”

“But I do so love this place.”

“I asked,” she spat. A vicious, pointed grin split her lips. Was that joy he saw in those burning eyes? “I am going to enjoy this.”

“Yea, reckon you will.” And with that, Bale cut the communication. Emery Rose vanished. He reeled on Hurx like a Rancor on fresh meat, “You get that blasted droid working double time. Find me that *kriffing* black box!”

“What about the—“

“Now, you cosmic scab!”

Bale was already taking the steps up to the cockpit three at a time. He burst in on the Rodian pilot to find she was already flipping switches and adjusting dials. The *Reek’s* systems lit up.

“On it, big boss,” she croaked without a word from him.

“How far are they?”

“Warning shot from long range. They coming now.”

Another blast shook the *Reek*. Bale was so certain they’d have more time. Dead certain. He reckoned they might soon be just dead.

“Patch our coordinates over to Jorm on the *Blaze*. Pretty boy’s sitting back with the Imperial Scholae Navy. We need him. *Now*. Then get me close to the fuselage.”

Jooka shot him a glance. He could never tell what those Rodians were thinking, what with those bulging black eyes, but he figured it had to be shock.

“Plan?”

“Just get me as close as you can!”

“Get *you* close?”

“You’ll see!” Bale was already halfway across the ship shouting back over his shoulder.

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“The hell are you doing?” slurred Hurx as he stuck his head into the armory. Bale ignored the Weequay as he shouldered past him, double-checking the seal on his helmet. His forehead was throbbing and itching, driving him half mad. The rug-headed mercenary followed suit without taking a hint. “The hell’s in the bag?”

The Zabrak bounty half-jogged down the hall towards the cargo bay as he secured the bag on his belt. The straps hook, he gave it a tug. It was rather heavy, but nothing he couldn’t handle. Satisfied, he pushed through the door and stopped cold. Hurx slammed into him with a grunt then stumbled back a few steps.

“Seal off the bay.”

“Huh? What?”

Bale was grinning hard, though Hurx couldn’t see that through the old, modified Katarn helmet. There was something about desperate times that always put the Zabrak in a chipper mood, something about imminent death that was oh so liberating. He jabbed one grubby finger at the doorway between him and the Weequay.

“Seal. This.”

“You’re going out there?”

“Someone’s gotta speed this up!” Bale was moving again. This time, the Weequay didn’t move to follow. *Smart boy.*

“Wait! How will you make it back?”

*Huh. Good point, that.* Bale almost wished Zehsaa or Kaela had been along for the ride. One of them could have put their Jedi tricks to good use for once. *Would've been pretty useful right about now!* Still, he wasn't one to linger on what wasn't available. His mind went hounding for a solution.

"Here!" Hurx tossed something at Bale. The Zabrak caught it with one gauntlet, nearly crushing the diminutive device in his grip. He frowned down at the rounded, satellite-dish looking thing.

"Target beacon?"

"Yep. *You're* the target."

"*Pfassk*," Bale cursed. But it was as good a plan as they had sitting around and they didn't have the time to conjure up another. Another tremor bounced him around the deck. "Seal that door. Seal it now!"

"May the Force be with—"

"Ha!" Bale did so love that joke.

The ship shook again once, twice, then a third time. There was a loud, ear-splitting screech as something raked the *Reek's* hull.

Jooka's voice pinged through the speakers, "This as close a'we get!"

Bale responded via intercom, "Disable the shields!"

"What?"

"Disable the *kriffing shields*! Why is everyone making me repeat myself today?"

There was a hollowed thud as all entry points into the cargo hold came down. Hurx sealed the cargo hold off. The Zabrak didn't wait for the depressurization process to complete before he kicked the access hatch open. It swiveled open to the black void of space and he went through as if the ship was on fire behind him. He had the sinking feeling it might soon be. A green bolt of plasma shot past him and exploded against the ship's heavy plating. Bale was nearly thrown into space, managing to hold on only by the tip of his fingers as the blast rocked the ship.

*Blast me, I ain't getting back from this.* He had to be realistic about these things.

The wreckage was about to get that much bigger if the *Reek* sat around much longer. He had to get moving. So the bounty hunter begrudgingly set about his plan with all of his trademark determination. He swung his bulk into action, half-climbing, half-crawling his way along the ship's hull, fishing around for whatever handholds he



could find. It took longer than he'd have liked but the derelict ship reared its ugly, shattered head into view. It was farther out than he'd anticipated. Much farther. A right fool move this was, again, he had to be realistic, but there were no two ways about it. Arms pushing, legs kicking, he launched himself away from the *Reek*. Best way to get stranded in space was for your feet to leave solid surface. Didn't matter none. *Do or die*, he consoled himself as he punched a command into his wrist computer. There was a sputtering from underneath the sole of his boots. Then, with one explosive spurt of fuel combustion, he was transformed into a living missile. He screamed the entire way across. He screamed as he dodged around glinting debris with all the grace of a falling rock, screamed as he slammed against and bounced right back off what had to be a wing. He was still screaming when the world somehow screeched to a stop. He was still screaming as he clung to the fuselage like a petulant child to his mother. It took a while longer for him to register that he'd made it across. That he wasn't floating in space, doomed to a slow, boring, booze-less death. It took another moment for his fists to agree with him and let go of their handhold.

*Still alive!*

He shot a glance back over his shoulder. The *Reek* was gone. A split second later, a full squadron of Collective starfighters shrieked past the *Psi Termina I*, their sights clearly set upon his beloved ship. *Keep her safe, Jooka.*

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"No! Not like that, boltbrains!" Bale punched the Viper droid out of the way. It left a gleaming dent in its dome and nearly launching it out into space but the Zabrak was already squeezing his hulking frame into the cargo hole through a carbonized breach. His shoulder pads scrapped the whole way through, the bag dangling from his belt had to be dragged along, but he made it inside without a hitch. That is, until one pauldron got hooked on a safety net. He pulled with all his might, tugged at it with his fingers, but it was as if he were fighting some aquatic monstrosity on Mon Cal. The more he struggled, the more it got tangled. So he sighed, floating still inside a dead spaceship, hooked like a fish and wishing for a drink. The droid, which had miraculously figured out how to get inside, stared at him blankly, unmoving.

“Little help here?”

The Viper droid whined and wheezed as it pushed down on Bale’s helmet, its five arms poking and punching and thumping, managing only to give the Zabrak a splitting headache.

“Cut the *kriffing* thing!” he snarled through the helmet’s commlink.

It whooped and set upon the net with grudge-like aggressivity, mandible-like claws *snikt, snikt-ing away at* the woven fabric. Bale propped his feet up against a nearby wall, shoving at it with two feet, then there was a rip and he fell away, glorious free. He glared at the droid for a moment as he floated belly up from one end of the cargo hold—or rather the chunk of it that survived—to the other. Hurx had said it could take a while for the droid to find the ship’s black box. Bale was beginning to understand why.

“Let’s move. Black box was in the tail end, always is.”

The droid responded with an inquisitive whirr.

“Of course it’s not in the cockpit! Come on. The longer we take, the more damage the *Reek* takes,” he groaned. The droid gave an all-too-enthusiastic whine. Bale couldn’t decide if that was for the mission or the notion of the *Reek* getting blown up. Somehow, the latter seemed more likely.

*Blast it all but I need that drink!*

There was something inherently creepy being the only living soul in the immediate vicinity, floating down the *Psi Termina I*’s dark, twisted halls with a reconditioned Imperial probe droid in tow, the only source of light its sensors casting red ghosts along the wreckage. Creepy and somewhat exciting. Or perhaps that was the fact he was running on a suitful of air without any kind of back up. Maybe it was the fact he might get stranded out here with an idiot droid. He pushed his thoughts back to finding the black box. He didn’t have time for worry and fear. He had a job to do.

The sound of blaster cannons split the deathly silence before brighter spurts of red light lit up slits through the debris. Wailing engines filled his ears, then the world exploded around him. He slammed from one wall to the other as the cargo hold spun round and round. The sound of engines seemed to cut the air all around him.

He wrenched his hand into some sort of alcove, planted his boots down on the wall to steady himself. Suddenly, it seemed only the droid was spinning. The metal felt weak, creasing beneath his feet. He swung one boot down hard against it. Then

another, and another. He hammered at it, kicked at it, punched at it, the blackened metal denting and swelling out under his blows. Then it came away, revealing more space and a bright flash of lightning.

“Ah, *pfassk*,” he moaned.

The wreckage had shifted. The *Reek* had cut in close, sweeping debris away behind her momentum. Jooka likely hoped the debris would give her a chance to put some distance between them and their assailants. Good plan, that, had he not been trying to get across the blasted wreck in the first place! But he was getting close. It was hard to tell one twisted heap of metal from another, but he thought he recognized what would have housed much of the ship’s auxiliary systems. He also recognized that it was getting a whole lot harder to breathe inside his suit.

He had to get going.

He looked out at the sparking husk of the reactor core, then to the bag on his belt. This was as good a place as any to leave it. He reckoned carrying what lay inside any further might get a might dangerous.

He unhooked the bag and tossed it at the droid. It caught it greedily and again it whined a question.

“You stay here. Keep it safe.”

It booped.

“Stay. Simple enough, yea?”

It meeped its agreement.

“I’ll see you in hell,” Bale spat as he flung himself out the hole in the wall.

More space. He frowned out at the blue lightning, drawing uncomfortably close, wincing at the thought of being getting fried. It would be a fitting end to his adventures. Fool Zabrak zapped by a random bolt of lightning while floating over a dying reactor core bundled up in metal from head to toe. Sometimes, when things were all nice and quiet, Bale liked to think back on his decisions. Now, he didn’t rightly know what he’d been thinking the last he’d stood on the *Reek*’s deck, about to fling himself into space.

Say one thing about Bale Andros, say he was impulsive.

Somehow, he made it to destination unscathed. He sat there for a moment, contemplating just how deep his luck ran. It was bound to run out sooner or later. He

watched as the *Reek* danced in the far off sky, spun and looping and diving, with a full swarm of Collective starfighters mirroring its every movement, pelting it with a torrent of red blaster fire. Green bolts spat back into the fray from *Reek's* quad laser turret. *Come on, come on. Just a while longer, Jooka.* There was still no sign of Jorm and the *Blaze and Bale* sure hoped the Kiffar hotshot wasn't passed out from drinking back with the fleet. He was a touch unpredictable, that Jorm, but he'd never run from a fight before. *Don't you start now, boy.*

The battle raged on the distance. Jooka had maneuvered the *Reek's* blunt nose straight into the swarm, bashing a massive wedge into their formation. It was a wonder the ship's shields were holding up, but it couldn't last that much longer, not with Emery Rose keeping the pressure on.

More pushing and crawling and climbing. Bale moved as fast as he could towards his goal, bounding recklessly along the *Psi Termina I*. His lungs were burning. His head was pounding. His eyelids were getting terribly heavy. He wasn't about to give up now, not when he was so close, the black box all but dangling at his fingertips. He didn't know all that much about ships, but he'd flown one long enough to know a thing or two, and it looked like he'd been right on the money. A smile split his face the moment he stuck his head in through the breach. There it was, a mess of boxes and wiring that could only be the ship's servers.

He stifled a might yawn. Boy was he getting sleepy right then. He felt surprisingly calm and at peace with the world, especially considering his situation. All he wanted now was to kick his feet up, close his eyes, and just float away for a while. He sighed, a soothing kind of sigh, but a little voice at the back of his mind reminded him that he still had a job to do whether he liked it or not. Sluggish, Bale fished Hurk's targeting beacon out from one of his belt pouches and flicked it on and a blinking red light appeared at its tip. He then released it, left it floating near the flight data recorder, a little metallic moth in the darkness. He pulled himself back up towards the breach, yawning as he stuck his head through the opening, and for a moment he wondered why he was having such a hard time seeing. His breath was clouding up his visor. *Odd,* he thought with only a tinge worry swaying on the back of his mind. *That shouldn't be happening.* He figured there wasn't much that he could do about it now except wait. It was all in Hurx and Jooka's hands, now.

His eyes were drawn to the dance of spaceships beyond the haze, a graceful yet violent dance, and he had a front row seat. The ship up at the front, the massive, ugly thing with the boxy nose, was swinging this way and that, all erratic-like. Something seemed off, but Bale couldn't quite wrap his mind around it. He had trouble thinking with his head swimming the way it was. He watched on as a swarm of little, pink-striped fireflies came up on its tail, watched as the bigger ship was suddenly turned into a fireball. The blast was blinding and when it died out, the big ship was gone.

His ship was gone. The *Reek* was gone.

Realisation set in. Terror clawed at Bale's numbed senses. Panic. Hopelessness. Anger. Then darkness swallowed him whole.

“Pfassk!” Something cold and wet brought Bale roaring and cursing back to consciousness. Everything was blurry dark shapes but it didn’t stop his fists from swinging. His fist caught something. He went fishing for more. Again and again, he swung awkwardly as he rolled on to his knees, then on his feet. Someone kicked him in the gut. Through the fury, he felt nothing. His hands clamped down around his attacker and he heaved them over their head.

“Bale! Stop!”

The voice stopped him cold. He blinked. *Zehsaa*? He was holding her over his head, ready to throw her. The Togruta, for her part, sneered down at him. Her lekku hung in front of his face. He was shaking, his beard damp with slobber, his lungs begging for air. He half-lowered, half-dropped the Togruta. His vision cleared. The splitting headache settled in. He needed to sit down. Instead, he found Jorm training a blaster on him. His jaw was red, and looked like it had a bit of a swell to it. That didn’t stop the plucky Kiffar from grinning.

“We cool, now?” he asked. Bale didn’t move. He didn’t say anything. Jorm holstered the blaster. “Glad to see you too, Hammer.”

“How did you get to me?” Bale asked. The Kiffar was already halfway out the door. *Zehsaa* answered with a wave of her fingers, a sarcastic smile on her lips. The Force, of course. *Great*.

“The *Reek*?” was all the Zabrak managed.

Ever the sentimental, coddling type, Jorm yelled his answer from the hallway. “Poof!”

“*Pfassk! Pfassk!* Blasted, *kriffing pfassk!*” Bale kicked at a nearby crate repeatedly until a sharp stab of nausea doubled him over. He toppled. It was Zehsaa’s turn to half-lower, half-drop him, though he reckoned she did a whole lot more dropping than lowering.

“Did you guys get the black box?”

“Yea, we did. Now shut up and stay out of our way,” was the answer. Zehsaa’s voice was cold, accusatory, a far cry from the way she used to speak to him. They’d been close. Lovers, even, if one could call their rocketship fling love. These days, her every word came laced with poison. Despite this, despite the animosity that had settle over them, she crouched and placed her hand on his. It was soft, surprisingly soothing. More than likely, it was for Hurx and Jooka’s benefit. There was a pang of sadness. Then the hand was ripped away when an explosion rocked the *Blaze*.

“They’re here,” Bale announced.

Jorm’s nonchalant voice came through the intercom. “Yea, Zehsaa? If you two aren’t already naked, I’d appreciate you getting to a turret. If the big guy’s able, well... You do what you do best, Hammer! Get moving!”

Zehsaa was gone in a flash of lekku, disappearing out the door without so much as a glance back towards him. The Zabrak got to his feet, groaning the whole way up. His armor felt a whole lot heavier than usual. He worked his fingers over the straps, unclasped the pauldrons and let them clatter to the floor behind him. He made his way across the ship at a strained, lumbering pace, discarding bits of armor plating here and there, stopping only to fight off the nausea. He staggered into the cockpit to an onslaught of curse words courtesy of his new host. The *Blaze* wasn’t designed like other YT-type freighters. The way the cockpit was made, there wasn’t room to stand next to the pilot. Bale forced himself up into the co-pilot’s seat, perched behind Jorm, then threw on a commlink headset that was sitting hooked over an armrest.

“I told you! Turrets, you giant *mook!*”

Bale ignored him, “How long until we can jump to lightspeed?”

There was a momentary silence before the Kiffar responded, “Too long. Can’t have you doing two things. Right now, we need Rose squadron off our backs. Zehsaa can’t do that alone.”

“Zehsaa and I both couldn’t do that if we tried.”

“Damn it.” More silence. “Alright, then help me. We stay alive long enough, maybe we can make it! Prep for the jump.”

Zehsaa’s voice crackled, “They’re getting close!”

Bale couldn’t help but grin as he remembered something. Then a thought popped into his head. *Here we go again.* “Head back for the wreckage.”

“What? Why?”

“Trust me. You’re going to *love* this.”

Jorm did as asked. He pitched the ship back around despite the cannon fire battering the *Blaze*’s shields. Bale leaned over the Kiffar and pointed straight for the fuselage.

“Cut in as close as you can.”

“I’ll cut *you* as close as I can if you get us killed, bastard.”

Bale’s grin was now a devilish smile as dropped back into his seat. His fingers worked quickly over the the terminal and the overhead consoles as he prepared the ship for hyperdrive. He watched as the gutted remains of the *Psi Termina I* loomed in closer and closer.

“Zehsaa, fire at the cargo bay!”

“Blast *you*, Andros!” her voice crackled into his skull. For a moment, he thought she might ignore him. Then the *Blaze* shrieked past the wreckage and Zehsaa opened fire. Bale clung onto the ship’s controls, his knuckles white.

“Here we go!”

There was no better shot than Zehsaa Hysh, and she proved it once again. The quad laser turret spat once, and the cargo bay exploded to smithereens. A good old fireball. Nothing else happened.

“Huh, Bale?”

“Blast it! It moved! That *kriffing* droid moved!” Bale was on his feet, stomping and shaking his fists angrily. He had no idea what happened next. “Fire... everywhere!”

He watched as Zehsaa peppered the fuselage with blaster bolts. One. Two. Three. Ten shots. Nothing. Fifteen. Still nothing. Jorm banked the *Blaze sharply* coreward, sinking the Zabrak down into his seat. Twenty shots. No dice.

“We’re going to need another plan!” announced Jorm.



“I see it! I see it!” Zehsaa’s screams cut through the commlink as she fire again and again. She wasn’t taking any chances.

Bale’s eyes followed the barrage of red bolt from the *Blaze* to the minuscule shape floating just above dead ship’s core. A normal hit would have caused a bright, orange fireball. What they witnessed was something entirely different. First came a blinding flash of white like, which then gave way to a gigantic ball of swirling, blue energy. It swelled and swelled, sucking in and swallowing debris as everything fell deathly silent around them. Bale realised he could barely hear the *Blaze*’s own engines,, as if the explosion was drawing in all sound particles. It kept on swelling and then, it stopped. It hung in the air for but a nanosecond before the blast came. A massive disk of energy ripped through the *Psi Termina I*, shredding it remains and turning them into projectiles. The shockwave swept them up, shoved the *Blaze* out of trajectory as raining metal clattered across the their hull. Space spun around and around through the cockpit window. Jorm was laughing.

“What was that?” Bale barely noticed Zehsaa speaking in his ears. He sat back, exhaling loudly, only now realizing he’d been holding his breath all this time.

“Seismic charge!” Jorm squealed, “Seismic charge! Ha! Ha! You were right, big guy! I do so love what’s in that horned skull of yours!”

“They pulled away,” announced Zehsaa.

“Do your thing, pretty boy!”

“Don’t gotta tell me twice,” Jorm answered.

The starfield beyond the cockpit stretched into streaks of light as the *Blaze* jumped to lightspeed and out of Emery Rose’s grasp.

*Still alive!*

Somehow, that thought didn’t bring him the usual comfort. In fact, it put him in a right somber mood and the trip back was a silent one. He mostly stuck to himself. He crossed Zehsaa’s path once and they were like fire and water, her eyes shooting bolts his way, and he wondered there and then if their story really was over. He’d always enjoyed the Kiffar’s flippant company but he found it did little to lighten up the tension. Bale didn’t even feel like drinking and had a mind to refuse the drink Jorm offered him. He took it in the end, of course. You don’t go about turning down good liquor. He didn’t much enjoy it though. His mind was elsewhere, out there in the black

with Hurx and Jooka. He thought of those two no-good, crooked sops and all they'd been through together, the three of them. He reckoned he never rightly appreciated them. How much he wished they were sitting across from him now.

*May the Force be with you*, he thought with a raised glass and a sad smile.

- The End -