

Blood in the Water

Taking down a target behind layers and layers of defenses was hard enough on a *good* day. Grabbing one *alive*, bringing it back through all those same layers of defenses, and all while “on the rag” was quite another.

At least it's not my birthday too. No, that was a few weeks ago, when all this fracking bantha crap started.

Peering carefully from around the bulkhead she was using for cover and concealment, Qyreia looked for any signs of enemy presence. The Collective forces on the space station waxed and waned in each section, depending on how the battle outside was going and where they had to repel boarders most fervently. For now, it seemed, they had largely abandoned this section: the hall ahead was devoid of life, though the sounds of others beyond the three-way-intersection hinted there were at least *some* soldiers to contend with. All the more headache for the Zeltron.

Her R3 unit chimed quietly in rushed binary. “No Remees,” she replied, “I don’t see any. Don’t suppose there’s an interface around here that you can use to recon for me?”

“*Brooot*,” the droid answered somberly.

“Aight.” Qyreia tightened her grip on her rifle. “Guess we’re doing this the hard way.”

Getting onto the station hadn’t been necessarily difficult. Coming into this section with her own ship, and following the dedicated boarding craft of Brotherhood troops, had allowed the Arconan Quaestor to set down rather safely behind a safe screen of soldiers before slinking off deeper into the belly of the station. Time was of the essence to capture Kendra Icasta, lest she managed to sidestep the entire offensive and evade capture in an escape pod or other ship.

Despite only having been with the red woman for a short time, the droid knew from its many intense experiences to help where able, but otherwise stay out of the way. As Qyreia moved up the corridor, Remees followed a safe distance away some meters behind. Their pace slowed as they neared the corner, with the gunslinger hugging one wall to get a better view of the opposite side of the intersection. The voices became clearer, and the droid could make out tones from either end.

“*Beedeet boopbreedoot deet.*”

“Shh,” she hissed, the sound barely covered by the incessant wailing of the red-alert klaxons and irritation blatantly upon her face.

The droid watched the movements of her eyes and noted the subtle movements of her shoulders. She’d heard and understood the warning. Remees was sure of it.

If there was one thing he’d seen in the Zeltron when it came to her approach to tactics, it was her audacity even in the most adverse situations. Despite being knowingly outnumbered, she sidestepped with practiced rapidity until she was at the corner of the T-intersection. The Technocrat soldier barely had a chance to see her before an aimed bolt of red energy split it apart

at the neck. Without revealing her whole silhouette, she swept her rifle around to the other side to deal with the other enemies, now very aware of her presence.

From his angle, Remeë couldn't see much beyond the red woman, the flash of her blaster, and the near-misses from her opponents that screamed by her head. To the sentients, it was one of those instances that might have "seemed longer than it really was." For the droid, it was all succinctly recorded for later review, even as the guns went silent and his "master," such as she was, relaxed her posture.

"Whew. That was close."

"Bepbep doo-weeet."

"I know there's more. I'm not looking forward to the rest of this, either. Now come on! I think I see a security station up ahead."

The security station, as it turned out, was more of a janitor's closet than it was a security station, in that it *was* a janitor's closet. Even so, in the symmetrical mirage of Technocratic construction, the droid didn't blame her too much. Besides, there was an interface within that the maintenance droids that usually inhabited the tight confines would use to detect mechanical faults that needed attending.

"There a rank prioritization system in there?" the Zeltron asked as she warily watched the hall outside the closet.

"Beweeoo," the droid confirmed.

She breathed a sigh of relief, mouthing "thank you" into the air before returning her attention to the droid. "You know who we're looking for. Look for ID tags relevant to Icasta's."

Remeë's sensors could hear the groan from his master's lips as the hormonal headache relapsed, and the soft rattle of the bottle of painkillers she had in the medkit. She popped a pill and swallowed, replacing the container and making a mental note to restock her supplies once she was back on a friendly ship. *Ugh. I need water. And food.* She thumped her chest in discomfort. *Anything to get this karking pill down.*

Despite the distraction, the droid was hardly perturbed from his duties. His processors whirred fervently as each successive section of the station was labeled either as a positive or negative hit on the map within the droid's mechanical brain. Removing higher access tiers narrowed the search. Eventually there were only a handful of options on the station.

A long string of Binary told the mercenary as much, and where they should look next.

"What about security systems?"

"Grrt grrt," came the negative reply.

"Can you at least find out what we'd be up against and where?"

This time, an annoyed flurry of *beeps* and *doots* came out until the Zeltron halted it with a hand.

“Alright. I get it.” She sighed. “Are they at least on this arm of the station?”

“*DOOoot.*” No, sadly.

Qyreia grumbled, thinking. “Okay. Send the search results to my commlink. I can at least follow the data that way instead of running around blind and relying on you for directions the whole time.”

A hint of indignation escaped the droid’s speakers before being silenced with a red-handed slap on his dome. Data sent. The notification chimed inaudible on the Quaestor’s wrist-mounted device beneath the claxons, but she saw it all the same. *Two turns, a long corridor, probably heavily defended, and then on into the central body of the station.*

Whatever was holding up the Brotherhood troops seemed to be largely bureaucratic in nature, as that was the only thing that could have caused such an absence of their presence thus far. That, or they were clearing the entire wing of Meridian Station before moving on, which was just as likely. Their delay, however, meant that the bulk of the reinforcements — piecemeal though they were — collided head-on with Qyreia as she approached the long hall leading to the main body of the station.

It was all from one piece of cover to another, never firing from the same spot twice consecutively, lest a Technocratic soldier zero in on where the merc’s head would pop out. Sweat beaded on the Zeltron’s forehead and ran down in thin rivulets, wiping her hands on her pants from time to time to keep her grip on her blaster dry and firm. For his part, Remeé made for an excellent distraction, throwing out holograms from time to time that drew fire from the Collective’s standard-issue E-11s. Despite the number of enemy soldiers though, the narrow and direct confines of the long bridgeway constantly and consistently trampled Technocrats’ efforts at a direct assault. At first they were mowed down by automatic fire but, as the fight wore on and their numbers dwindled, they were merely picked off at longer and longer ranges until they could hardly mount an effective resistance.

“Two, maybe three squads,” Qyreia mused. “Gotta be more in the upper levels.”

The R3 unit gave a nervous “*bereeo*” in agreement.

“No doubt they’ll cut us off on the way back.” She moved forward. “C’mon. We need to move.”

Remeé had just started to skitter forward on his wheels when his sensors caught an energy spike. Shields activating. The droid nearly toppled over as he halted, preventing him from being cut in half by the energy barrier, but cut off from his owner. Qyreia looked back, surprised despite the expectation of something like this, only to be doubly troubled by the second shield that blocked her forward progress.

“R3! Get these shields down!”

The droid was in the process of explaining that the nearest interface socket was quite a ways back when an ominous hissing sound began to pervade the air in the Zeltron’s small patch of real estate.

Gas! They all knew about the dioxis. Even on Nancora, the Collective had picked apart the Brotherhood’s assault elements with varying forms of traps, so this was nothing new. It was still just as scary to see the gray-green fumes billowing out of the vents, even as Qyreia dropped to a knee and quickly strapped on her breath mask.

The sound of clean air cycling through the tube was like the sound of heaven in that moment.

“Hooo boy,” came her speaker-augmented voice, “that was too close. Reme, go get these shields down and turn off the gas.”

Speed was essential. Not only was the biological lifeform in there on a limited-supply air tank, but reinforcements might appear from the rear at any moment. They’d be cut off from any way of saving themselves, as individuals or both. Despite the ever-present worry, the hall remained mercifully clear, and the droid was able to get back to a working interface and disable the shields. He couldn’t turn off the dioxis, but he could shut the vents dispensing it and reroute the flow; into space seemed a reasonable relocation.

When the droid returned however, the woman was gone.

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Gas still visibly lingered in the air even after the restricting force-fields went down and the dioxis influx halted. With Reme elsewhere, Qyreia couldn’t wait for the droid to come back. *If he’s okay, he’ll catch up. If not, I’m screwed regardless.* Grabbing her blaster, she bolted from the idling cloud and toward her objective deeper into the beast.

Once she was sure she was out of the reaches of the gas, she took off the breath mask and shut down the flow of atmosphere from the tank. “Now, if I were a cyborg Chiss with a bunch of cyborg Kiffar, where would I be?”

The question was as rhetorical as it was already answered. She glimpsed the tiny display on her wrist comm, noting where she *should* be and the ID marker that R3 had highlighted. *They’ll know I’m coming.* Qyreia shook her head, the earlier ache numbed but still present.

“I frackin’ hate this gig sometimes.”

Lacking fine armor or attunement to the Force, she continued on, watching and guiding herself on the static map between spurts of action against trickles of Technocratic soldiers. Their Katarn-class armor was good for only a few hits before the marksman’s fire found permanent purchase, prompting for the Zeltron to aim for the sweet spots in the joints.

Closer and closer she got. Nearly there, she engaged a trio that had been standing guard. One went down with a searing hit to the shoulder, but the Collective trooper threw a concussion grenade at the advancing mercenary. The weak throw left Qyreia on the fringes of its blast radius, knocking her backward onto the floor and giving her beleaguered head a slight case of whiplash. Dazed, she shuffled over to a nearby bulkhead in the otherwise clinically featureless hall, losing some cloth from her attire and a few layers of skin to several rounds that passed by far too close for comfort.

Gritting her teeth, she lurched her rifle around the corner of the protective cover and let loose with a blind automatic burst. She was rewarded with the meaty, plastic clatter of another soldier falling to the ground nearby — clearly charging forward only to be halted at the last meter.

She breathed in deeply, then slowly exhaled. “Okay... here we go.”

Firing another flurry of blind rounds, she slid out from cover, roughly unhooking an impact grenade from the dead trooper’s belt as she lurched to her feet. The last soldier was waiting by the door, weapon drawn but his shots going wide in the face of the onslaught. Of all the medley weapons Qyreia had used in her life, tossing a grenade never looked so haphazard as she sidearmed the studded sphere before rolling behind a bulkhead on the other side of the corridor.

There was an explosion, then silence.

The Zeltron waited. Waited for a footstep. Waited for a blaster bolt. Waited for a moan or a scream or a cry. Nothing met her ears though. *The frack?* Hyped as she was on adrenaline, she readied herself like a coiled spring and flung herself around the corner of the bulkhead, eyes staring down the sights to see empty air. *Huh?* More careful examination revealed the scorch mark on the floor that the grenade had left behind. Strewn around it were the slagged remnants of the Technocrat’s Katarn armor plates; all that was left after the impact grenade’s direct hit.

“...Frack yeah.”

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“That was loud,” *Three* observed, her head turned in mild discomfort as the ringing in her implants slowly abated.

Seven watched with some amusement from her corner of the micro command suite, glad that she was not on door guard duty. *Eight* stood close to Kendra, who was monitoring the action via her handheld scanner.

“There’s only one of them left,” she noted, her previous craving for a drink subsiding at this new curiosity. “Or one that came all the way through the defenses alone.”

Eight looked over her shoulder. “There’s an auxiliary door. We can withdraw and prepare a more suitable ambush.”

“Agreed,” Kendra said, motioning for the Huntresses to pull back. “*Three*, hold the door until we can cover you from the other exit.”

The *Shikari* nodded soberly, stun baton in one hand while the glint of gold forewarned of the vibroknucklers she was wearing. *Eight* moved to the back of the room, opening the hatch and ensuring there was no hidden enemy presence that might have been hiding from Icasta’s scanner. She signalled all-clear and they started sequentially slipping away. First *Eight*, then Kendra, followed by *Seven*. As she neared the door, she motioned for *Three* to move, only to be stopped short by a heavy, magnetic *thunk*.

They all paused as *Three* turned her head curiously. “That wasn’t the door.”

Eight and their leader grabbed *Seven* as she struggled to get to her sister in time, only to see her disappear in a choking ball of black smoke, fire, and metal shrapnel. *Seven* escaped the inferno by a hair’s breadth, taking only a deep gouge in her arm for the efforts.

The Denton Charge had done its work. Qyreia had taken cover a good distance away, but she was prepared for the effects. As soon as the damage was done, she charged the gap, tossing a looted concussion grenade into the room before taking cover on the other side of the gaping hole. Kendra and the *Shikari* leaned back to avoid the blast, the latter adjusting their aural implants with a tap. This would be loud.

A light vibration rattled the walls and floor as the explosive went off, but the trio were otherwise unscathed. Kendra cocked her head at *Eight*, motioning for a welcoming response.

That should’ve gotten them, the mercenary thought as she turned the corner to clear the room, only noting all too quickly that the place was empty, save for some scattered detritus from the wall explosion. Her eyes darted about, keeping her cheek firmly planted to her buttstock for split-second sighting, while she steadily advanced into the now dilapidated command room. It was clear that this place was more for observing activities inside the station than it was to genuinely direct troops. With the holotable now damaged and large supply crates strewn about, it was more likely this was largely unused for its intended purpose; perhaps as a resupply location. Qyreia had just noticed the smaller door across the room when a glint caught her eye.

When the metal sphere bounced off the table with a sonorous *clang*, she dove for the nearest cover. The concussion grenade’s explosion shattered the thin outer edges of the holotable, crumpling the nearest crates and scattering any not already dispersed by the first two explosions. Underneath the table, the Zeltron crowded the central support column of the furniture, even as it cracked beneath the pressure of the grenade. With her ears ringing and heart pounding harder than her head for once, she shouldered the table over so that it fell toward the door with the grenades coming from it.

From their safe position, *Seven* and *Eight*, each tossed in a smoke grenade, to which their prey reacted with surprising calm, remaining stationary behind the table remnants. They couldn’t see the temporary panic in the Arconan’s eyes, thinking the cylinders were another

dioxis attack, only to realize what the billowing white clouds were. By then, the Huntresses had their bows drawn and had slipped inside.

Three directions, Kendra signalled. They would flank this assailant and, once finished, move out to secure the inter-section bridge.

Seven could hear their prey's labored breathing, growing calmer with each passing moment. These weren't death rattles, she could gather that much. The smoke filled the room, with only faint slivers toward the ceiling that allowed her, perched as she was atop the stacks of crates, to see *Eight* taking position on the other side. Through her bionic eye, Kendra watched the whole drama unfold in colored thermal hues. The hot gases from the smoke grenades played some havoc with the outlines, but it was more than her *Shikari* or their quarry could make out.

She gripped her pistol, waiting for the moment to strike. She was *the* Huntress, after all. There was still a chance to pull herself out of the political murk of past failure.

Draw them out.

Kendra and Qyreia had the same exact thought.

From her position under the tilted tabletop, the Zeltron could see little and less of her surroundings. The *Shikari* were exceptionally skilled at moving around unseen and unheard, and it was the latter she was relying on in this instance. Her ears strained, the muscles in her arms taut and ready to snap in any direction.

Come on, you dirty kriffing schuttas.

Then she heard in. Behind the dwindling hiss of the smoke grenades as they neared total expenditure, a soft, high-pitched trill like a whispering bird caught her ear. *Left side*. She turned over to fire, but the whine fell away into the murk, only for it to reappear on the opposite side. With barely enough time to see the purple-hued energy of the bowstring and projectile, Qyreia turned over again, shouldering the table and causing it to roll in a wide circle, like a top laying on its side.

Eight's bolt landed short, just by the target's rear end, while the second was blocked just in time by the table. Smirking, she kept firing, moving in a quick, wide arc. The being under the table only shouldered it again and again, spinning her cover around and around in its wide pattern. That is, until they all heard the *crunch* of the table's central broken support column smack against its equally broken base. The table stopped rotating.

Qyreia's back was exposed, and she only realized it too late. Kendra aimed her pistol, fully aware that *Seven* was likewise at ground level again and aiming her bow. *It's over*, Qyreia and Kendra thought.

"BeerwEEEoo!"

Eight, standing near the gash where *Three* had last drawn breath, turned just in time to be hit by the shock prod of an R3 droid. *Seven*, her bow drawn, was likewise distracted, and in the

thinning smoke, the glow of her weapon was easy to spot. Between the warning from Remeë and the chirp of the bow, Qyreia rolled over and fired from her supine position. The red bolt caught *Seven* full in the chest and she fell backward into the pile of supply crates, conveniently buried as they toppled onto her.

Kendra could only see *Eight* go down, the table blocking the droid's entry, and the momentary lapse cost her *Seven*. She sighted her pistol just as her quarry was scrambling for cover, taking a shot just as she rounded a loose crate. The scream of pain brought at least some satisfaction with it.

"Gah... god... fr'cking... d'mmit...!" Qyreia's labored and pained breathing was sporadic as she leaned against the safe side of the holotable. Through her frantic attentions with the medkit, she could hear Remeë give the tricky Technocrat another shock before wheeling over. "R-Remeë," she groaned, "you sly mother f-fracker."

The droid responded amiably if worried, watching as his owner injected heavy-duty painkillers and haphazardly threw a bandage over the wound.

"D-don't worry," she whispered, struggling through the pain. The wound, while serious and painful, would take hours to outright kill the Zeltron.

She pulled her pistol and motioned to the other side of the table with a nod, motioning in an explosive manner with the fingers of her free hand. Remeë flipped open his blow torch, turned, and let the gas billow for a moment. No sooner had he done so than his sensors picked up movement just on the other side of their cover. He hit the ignition, creating a large — if relatively harmless — fireball.

Kendra's vision was alight. She had just barely seen the droid's dome when the fireball went off, singeing her blue bangs and shortening her eyebrows. Throwing herself back to avoid total immolation, she fired blindly into the table, the rounds shearing through the surface, and even snapping off the droid's torch arm. Just as she hit the ground though, she saw the pale eyes amid red skin sighting down a heavy blaster pistol directly at her.

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"Y-you know what I could... really go for?" Qyreia groaned as they made slow progress back to their landing site. "Chocolate. I *really* want a goddamn candy bar right now."

Remeë's databanks suggested a joke about female hormones and cravings during their menstrual cycle, but decided against it based on other coinciding data concerning aggression levels. Between his wheels and the Zeltron's laborious walking, they were able to drag the unconscious Kendra Icasta along the floor, tied up by her own electro-whip and some spare cloth lengths cut from her cloak. Remeë's databanks also had something to say about the peculiar array of knots used, but likewise kept that to himself.

"*Deet beepbrroot brrt bedepeep.*"

“F-fine. I... ‘m good to keep walking.”

The droid turned his dome about to look at the two women. Icasta’s chassis was hardly damaged, only missing a finger from where his master had shot the slugthrower away, and a bruised groin where she had been kicked, subduing the Technocrat. Qyreia, on the other hand, was not in quite so good of condition, and largely from the one slug round. What adrenaline had kept her fighting was now wearing off. Only the painkillers were keeping her on her feet now.

“I tell ya, Remster,” she said as they reached the other end of the bridge, “we g-get done with... with this, I’m gonna take a vacation. A *real* vacation.”

Whatever reply Remea had was cut short by the sound of rapid footsteps to their front. Clutching her side as she was, the mercenary could only handle the pistol, hefting the thing and aiming. A worried tone escaped the droid’s speakers.

“C’mon you crap-frackin’, two-toed, Hutt-humpin’ s-sleemos!”

One Technocrat turned the corner of the intersection, then went down.

A second came around and was also thrown off his feet by the pistol.

Silence followed, awkward and expectant. Then, a flurry of blaster fire that sent another Technocrat soldier reeling backwards into the pair’s line of sight. A few seconds and some tense questioning later, the Brotherhood troops came out from around the corner, finally out from their little beachhead to secure the rest of their sector of the station. Qyreia slumped against her droid as the medics came forward to check on her while the others continued to sweep the area.

“I t-think we found the c-cavalry.”

“*BrreeeOO beetdoot beep.*”

“About frackin’ time indeed.”