

Hiding on the Doorstep

Tree branches scratched softly at the viewscreen of the cockpit, swaying with the trees that danced amid some soft breeze above the forest canopy. Landing lights showed starkly against the green-and-brown curtain, making the world seem so much smaller against the dark atmosphere beyond, where other tree trunks quickly faded into the inky black.

In the pilot's seat, Qyreia fumed, her anger tempered only by her fear of what was lurking out there. Likely the same thing that had taken the controls of *her ship*, and brought it down in these woods.

This is the exact reason I left the Brotherhood, she thought, happy at least that the culprit had taken her ship down during a joyride above her homeworld.

"Remee," she said over the comms through gritted teeth, "any luck fixing the controls?"

The droid's binary reply was less than motivating.

"Keep trying. Keep an eye on the sensors. I'm shutting down the lights. Can't see anything anyway."

Despite the surety that filled her voice, she hesitated to actually follow through. For what little good they did, it was rather comforting to have the yellow-white glow shining against the night. Swallowing the knot in her throat, she leaned forward and flipped the switch, settling back in her seat just as quickly in expectation that something would jump at her. Her fear was met only by the same soft sounds of branches scratching against the exterior of the transparisteel. Even so, her eyes still darted left and right, the soft blue glow of the control panel lights growing more intense as her pupils adjusted.

A hand went absentmindedly to the pistol on her hip. *At least they can't hack this.*

Just when her heartbeat had finally started slowing down, a flash of light eked between the leaves blocking her view. It was small and, had it not flashed again, Qyreia might have thought it was a figment of her imagination. The droid's whirring over the intercom nearly sent her out of the seat she was already on the edge of.

"Beetdoot brreep deet boopboop whiirr."

"Yeah, I see it too!" Her reply was a bit harsher and... *louder* than she'd intended, but the Zeltron quickly collected herself. "Stop worrying about the hack, Remster. I don't

think we're going anywhere." She looked at the light that drew closer and closer. "Meet me at the ramp and for god's sake, make sure you can't be hacked too."

What if he already is?

Well then we're really karked then, aren't we?

Listening to the conversation in her head wasn't helping her state of mind. As she was leaving, the mercenary grabbed her rifle for added security. Of all the things that could be said about Qyreia, one could hardly accuse her of being unprepared. R3-M3, or Remees as she liked to call the droid, was waiting dutifully for the Zeltron at the ramp, fidgeting nervously.

"What's up?"

A worried "wrrrr" expressed the droid's feelings as it turned its video sensor toward the gangway. It was already open. Given the nervous purr of Remees's inner workings, the merc quickly determined that the droid was not the one that had done the opening.

"It's okay buddy," she said half-heartedly, patting his dome. "We'll be okay." Even so, the rifle took a more ready posture in her hands.

And then the lights flipped.

Without any warning, the ship's interior lighting turned off and the exterior turned on. While the shock provided no physical, ocular backlash, it made both the Zeltron and the droid jump in their own respective fashions. Fairly certain of what the hacker wanted, master and droid went down the ramp and onto the soft loam of the forest floor. The light that Qyreia had seen earlier was much closer now, and was slowly bobbing its way through the uneven pathway that led to her YT's parking spot.

They were just coming to terms with this when all the lights went out.

"Frack!"

Qyreia searched fruitlessly in the dark for... *something*, but she didn't even know what she was looking for, much less what she'd do when she found it. The total blackness, save for the ever-approaching light, shocked her senses enough that she lost her bearing long enough for the ship's ramp to start retracting. What's more, she didn't know where it was by the time she realized it.

"God *dammit!*" she railed as the whine of the hydraulics continued to seal their fate. "Remees! Light!"

Dutifully, the R3 spun its dome and shone a tight beam of light from the socket that usually facilitated holoprojection. Light was still light, though. It gave them just enough time to watch the ramp slip the last dozen or so centimeters shut.

Profanity upon profanity slipped through the Zeltron's mind, some crawling out from between her gritted teeth for her droid to inwardly recoil from. It knew quite well what such a reaction from its master meant. Anticipating the next order, Remeé wheeled its light around toward the oncoming *thing* that held its own electric torch. Qyreia gripped her rifle. Her eyes narrowed against the directed beam.

She was only mildly surprised, but no less happy, to see the thing in question was a peacekeeper droid.

"Halt," it ordered in a synthetic voice that seemed almost pleased.

Qyreia's shoulders slackened and she relaxed; nigh amused. "Yeah yeah, I'm halted."

"You are hereby detained by the Zeltron Security Force."

"What's my charge?" Were this not her first time with Zeltrosian law enforcement drones, she might've been a little less casual.

"You are charged with hacking planetary security drone pathfinding, illegally commandeering a planetary security patrol craft, resisting arrest..."

"Hey now, I'm not resisting!" She sighed as the drone tried to process this. "Check my ID against the database. Qyreia Arronen."

"Unable to access database. Searching local files."

"Why're you unable to...?"

"Identity confirmed. Criminal record unknown. You are under arrest for..."

"Stop!" The drone, somehow with a modicum of curiosity, complied. "Listen, I'm... ugh, my ship's been hacked too. I didn't *want* to land here. And if I *were* the one to hack your patrol speeder, do you *really think* I'd lock myself outside of my own ship without any *lights*? At *night*?!"

"Processing." Qyreia fumed but kept her calm — what was left of it — to keep herself on the good graces of the law. *"Reasoning algorithms support your claims. You are no*

longer under arrest. Please note this is subject to change in the event you are found to be guilty of something.”

Irritation only manifested itself in her deadpan stare. “Thanks.”

“You are welcome, citizen.”

“Where’s your patrol craft and live officers?”

“This drone’s officers were unfortunately killed in the line of duty. I was sent to get help.” It paused, flexing its visual sensor aperture thoughtfully. *“Would you help?”*

In all reality, she really had no other options. Somewhere in the back of her mind was the remorse for the two random Zeltrons that were dead now because of... something. Whatever hacked their speeder had wanted it crashed; not captured. That the drone was still in one piece was a miracle, but it also left them with the continued lack of clues as to the identity or motive of their mutual assailant. What the drone lacked in conversational skills though, it made up for in its secure and powerful sensor suite. It wouldn’t find the unknown culprit, but it would at least help prevent an ambush.

The pervading issue then was: where would they go?

The drone, designated FV-33, offered a solution. A distress beacon was weakly signalling for help deeper into the woods. *Deeper* really meant any direction as far as they were concerned, but it at least offered some hint of answer, so they followed their only clue thus far.

33 led the way with its potent light, while Remea took up the rear to keep anything sinister from creeping up behind them. It was slow going between the uneven ground and the relative lack of a beaten path. Except there was. As they eked their way through the dark, it became apparent that the albeit narrow gaps in the ground-level foliage were part of a lengthy, if ill-trodden trail.

So many questions filled Qyreia’s mind, but remained silent in favor of listening for any sign of trouble. Her waiting did not go unrewarded.

As they rounded the base of a small tree-covered hill, FV-33’s light cast upon a tree trunk that was... not so much a tree trunk, instead a metal column with a flat base of the same material. This not-tree broadened out above them to form the outline of a small transport, long disused if the growing tarnish and rust was any indicator. They continued quietly, finding more and more ships and speeders in what seemed like some sort of vehicle graveyard.

“Your database got anything on this?” Qyreia asked of 33 in the quietest whisper she could muster as they passed a single-occupant starship.

“Unfortunately, I would require access to the planetary database. My internal memory is reserved for subject analysis and identification.”

Of course. Not much further on though, a soft orange glow radiated through the dense trunks. FV-33 extinguished its light at the Zeltron’s insistence and all three of them crept forward; at least as much as two droids and a former mercenary *could* sneak. The trees opened up into a clearing, with a power generator, several pop-up hab structures, and a central heating lamp on which several humanoid figures were talking excitedly.

“Got us a nice’un Benny. A nice’un!”

“We best set off now, ‘fore she gets away in the woods,” a big one, likely the group’s muscle, added slowly, as if his mind needed to work hard to form each word.

“I like ‘em leeean,” the first speaker added, his rail of a frame somehow making his manic speech all the more eerie. “How you think this one’ll do, Benny?”

Up until now, the other two at the coil had remained silent, one rubbing down a blaster with an oilcloth, while the other watched a holomonitor while he toyed with the keys on the datapad in his lap. The latter, some kind of near-human that she couldn’t quite place in the dim light, was this “Benny” that the scrawny one kept yammering on to. His response was far more steady, measured, and brimming with technocratic acid.

“Likely far better if you were to do your job and retrieve her instead of wasting time here.”

“Ain’t no’un seein’ in *this*. No’sir.”

“Too dark,” the big one added.

“I think our companions,” the older-looking human with the blaster chimed in, “are saying that they have no way of tracking our quarry.”

“That’s what *you’re* for. Your helmet has the visual augments to see at night.”

The old man chuckled, setting his blaster on his thigh as much to relax as to visibly challenge the younger Benny’s attitude. “Oh really? And we’ll all share it I suppose?”

“Should have thought of that before demanding I pull down a ship.”

He pursed his lips and nodded acquiescence. “Fair.” He stood, groaning with the aches of age. “Let’s go. Best not eat this one though. Our buyers haven’t gotten a live one in a while thanks to you, Ype.”

The manic one grumbled. “Test ‘er breedin’?”

“Up to Benny. I’m sure he’ll be hard at work contacting our buyers and seeing what sort of price we can fetch for a thirty-year-old Zeltron female.”

The frack?! I’m only twenty nine, asshole! Qyreia had seen enough, and she wasn’t about to let them walk off into the woods. She knew this type all too well: slavers. Guesswork filled in most of the blanks as to how they operated. Benny would drop the ships in the middle of nowhere, the other three would round up their victim, and sell them off to the highest bidder. The ships likely sat idle long enough to lose their heat, then sent off to be sold as well. Judging by the number of ships back in the woods, they’d been doing this a while.

But... did he say “eat?”

She was no sniper, but the former merc knew how to draw her sights on someone without making much of any noise. The unfortunate aspect in this action was in being paired up with a peacekeeper droid. They like to take their suspects alive. FV-33 made sure that she knew.

“Put down your weapon!” it ordered, shining its light on the Zeltron and blinding her in one eye — the other was mercifully turned away still. *“These individuals are now to be apprehended by the authority of the Zeltros Security Forces.”* The small red-and-blue light flashing on top of its chassis only made the scene all the more comical for the outlaws.

“Seems our quarry came to us.”

“Imma get’er.”

Qyreia kicked 33, knocking it aside to flounder momentarily. “Like hell!”

Ype, brandishing a crude curved knife used for skinning animals, lurched forward and sped the short distance toward his prey. He wanted a cut of flesh, even if it was just a small one. He’d been stuck on spacer rations so long, and the redskin meat always tasted so intoxicatingly sweet.

Oh he was going to like this one.

If only he didn't have a large portion of his chest explode away in a mist of searing gore. Ype stopped. The humans and Benny stopped. Even the Zeltron stopped. They all watched as the little devil twitched his head, curiously regarding the gaping wound.

"Thas'a sore bit."

How much spice is this guy on? Qyreia readied another shot, but the human recognized her motions and shot first; wild, but close enough to force her head down.

"Burhl! Get in there and help Ype!"

Burhl, apparently the large slow-wit individual, made some guttural grunt and charged into the prone woman's position, barrelling through her *and* the dirt mound she'd been hiding behind. He towered over her, kicking aside her rifle and readied a meaty fist.

"Anytime you wanna *help*, Remeel!"

From the shadows, the droid wheeled forward with a piercing squeal, shock-prod extended and sparking. Burhl was distracted just long enough that the R3 met with his thick calf and sent electricity visibly arcing through his body. The oversized man fell twitching to the ground, catatonic and foaming from the mouth.

Upon seeing his friend so abused, Ype was torn from his own adrenaline-fueled moment of oblivion, and instead turned his energy on tearing the skin from the woman. He screamed wildly as he ran awkwardly at her, knife raised.

FrackfrackfrackfrackFRACK! Qyreia struggled with the latch on her pistol only for a moment before deciding it was too much work and, in the heat of the moment, aimed her leg at the manic creature and fired the gun through the leather bottom of the holster. She felt the heat on her pant leg, but she was still in far better shape than the cannibalistic human, who faltered for half a step before falling face-down in the soft dirt.

"Halt! In the name of the law!"

Before the older human could turn his gun, he was blinded by the recovered FV-33. Benny made to make a run for it, and his counterpart looked to follow suit, but the Zeltron fired a pair of warning shots that halted them. While Benny clung to his datapad, silently tapping away at it either to try and hack the off-grid droids, or to purge the evidence from his hard drive. Another shot, grazing his ear, made him drop the device. The older human smiled in that pleased *so-you-finally-caught-me* manner and tossed his gun to the ground.

"Well played," he said, eyeing Qyreia.

Benny was less pleased. "I have rights."

"You're about to have only your *lefts* if you don't shut it, kid."

"I have...!"

"Benn'hyr!" The older man sighed, resigned. "Shut up already. It's over."

"You are both hereby placed into the custody of the Zeltron Security Force. Please come quietly." The droid rattled off their legal rights but, given the circumstances, Qyreia wasn't sure what good any of them would do.

Further back in the woods, Burhl groaned as he came to. "Ohh, m'heeed." When he looked up and saw what was going on, he looked at the old man. "We caught?"

"Yeah, we're caught. Time to pack up."

"Deputy," 33 said to Qyreia while simultaneously watching Burhl with a peripheral camera lens, *"I require your assistance in bringing the suspects to the nearest precinct."*

"Deputy? You never deputized me."

"Ah hah! So this is an illegal arrest!"

Tired of Benny's antics, Qyreia took a wide step, spun on the ball of her foot, and launched her opposite shin into his groin. The young man fell to the ground, squeaking at his newfound inability to breathe.

"Told you Benny. Shoulda shut up."

"I did not deputize you?" the droid asked, again ignoring but not ignoring the ongoing dramatics.

"No, you didn't." Remeë bleeped a similar response, but she didn't dare translate it for her captives. It was too strong of language.

The drone's processors whirred. *"Very well. You are hereby temporarily deputized into the Zeltros Security Forces."*

Qyreia picked up the datapad that had caused all this trouble, looking around the little campsite now that they weren't fighting. She thought she saw firewood off behind

one of the habs, but they looked oddly pale and... lumpy. She realized what it was all too quick and turned her attention away — anywhere else that wasn't *that way*.

Hacking the ships was harder work than releasing the controls, and Benny had set up quite a user-friendly interface on his datapad for controlling the vessels. She quickly released the control locks on her ship and remotely sent a message with coordinates to the nearest precinct, then cut the ties to her ship entirely. The authorities would be by soon enough. They would find several years' worth of stolen goods and at least six cannibalized bodies, as well as ledgers for over a dozen other people — Zeltrons and others — kidnapped and sold into slavery.

At least now, it was finally over.