

STAR WARS

Uneasy Grounds

UNFORGIVEN

By Jack Freeman

(Bale Andros #826)

With a flash of blue light and a puff of smoke, the arc welder sputtered out. Breathing deeply, the acrid smell of heated metal dancing on his nostrils, Bale Andros allowed himself a satisfied grunt. There was something about that scent, coupled with a hard day's work, that brought a smile to his lips. For a moment, he felt as if nothing could dampen his good mood, not even the jabbing pain in his lower back, a consequence of sitting at the worktable for long hours. The Zabrak pulled the welding goggles off his face and tossed them aside. Before he could turn from the table, his eyes caught on the nearby box of dismantled blasters. He was longing for some good, old-fashioned action, but he could not help but contemplate, if only for a second, putting a few of them back together. He scoffed at the idea. He knew that if he got started now, he'd be at it for hours until he passed out on that blasted table *again*. That's just how he was. *You finish what you start*, as he liked to remind his daughter.

He pushed away from the durasteel worktable and, with a resounding clang, smacked his head in the overhanging light for what had to be the

hundredth time that day. Stifling a string of curses behind clenched teeth, he noted that something *could* indeed spoil his good mood. All he could do was turn his attention to the pile of clothes on the nearby desktop. He stripped off his soot-covered tank top and dumped it atop a second pile, the one on the floor with the dirty clothes. His joints ached as he launched, bare chested, into a routine of stretches and lunges, his shoddy cybernetic leg whirring as he went through the motions. His mind wandered, as it often did these days, to the armor in the corner, discarded in a heap of metal and scavenging tools weeks earlier, still crusted from his last outing. And as he often did these days, he found himself fighting off a tinge of nostalgia and longing. Even if it stung him to admit it, taking up that weapons-refurbishing contract for the local security outfit had proven to be more than he could chew. It would be a few weeks at the earliest before he'd be able to get out there again. Still, he had to remind himself that things could be worse. In fact, his situation had only recently improved. He was bent on making the most of it now, even if that situation meant living in some dingy garage on the bottom level of a third-rate apartment complex.

He shook his head. He could not help but chuckle as he realized that his good mood was clearly slipping away from him. Determined not to let that happen, he trained his attention back to the first pile, picked out a clean shirt—at least, cleaner than the rest—sniffed at it and, satisfied it didn't reek, pulled it over his head. He followed up with a leather vest, then strapped an oversized holster to his equally oversized thigh. Finally, the Zabrak dug his trusty Bryar pistol up from the clutter, gave it a once-over, then stuck it in the holster.

He knew there was no sense sulking over his predicament. He was alive, he had a ceiling over his head, and he knew that his beloved daughter was out there somewhere, living her adult life, safe and sound. Sure, there was this big brown stain across that ceiling that reminded him of a Hutt's backside and his daughter thought he was dead, but it wasn't half as bad as it had been a few years back. It would take more than an attempt on his life and the loss of his leg to bring down Bale Andros.

And so, with his good fortune in mind, he was off. Well, almost. He took a couple steps out the door before he backtracked, stuck his head inside and let

out a sharp whistle. The room, inert until then, all but exploded as a panicked, reptilian beast burst out from the disarray, snarling and barking as it bounded violently about the place. The frenzied hound, a Massiff from Tatooine, suddenly froze when its one good eye locked on Bale. It was an ugly, vicious-looking creature, massive even for its kind, with a blunt snout and warts all over its scaled body. It gave a single cackling hoot, something of an acknowledgment. Its great, oily tongue lolled out from its sharp-toothed maw. Then, he retched, coughed, retched again, then spat up a foot-long wrench.

“Are you kidding me? Get out of here, you blasted mutt! Out!” the Zabrak snarled in turn, motioning at the exterior with a shake of his head. The hound, Dozer as Bale called him, bounded past him with an air of wounded dignity. It earned it a swift kick to the backside.

Outside, Bale took a deep breath of fresh air, at least, as fresh as it could get this far inside Sector 003, also called the Consortium of Free Merchants sector. Mere seconds out the door, the pair was thrust into the never-ending rush hour that dominated the streets of Chyron’s mercantile sector. Buildings of all sorts, erected in a compact grid to support kilometers of city above, rose up like canyon walls around them. Whenever he looked up, the Zabrak felt like the world was closing in on him, as if he was being swallowed whole. Barely visible at this altitude a mere hundred levels or so above the world’s undercity, Bale could only just make out the hairline of golden light that was Chyron’s sky cutting through the thick haze of smog that pervaded the trench. The walkway was overcrowded at any time of day but now that he was eager to get somewhere, it seemed all the worse. Pedestrians droned on, shoulder to shoulder as they came and went about their business. Bale, who towered a full head above the average citizen, counted himself lucky. He could not fathom how anyone could keep track of their whereabouts once submerged in that sea of bodies. How Dozer managed to keep up with him was a true wonder but the hound popped in and out of sight from time to time as if to remind Bale that he existed. Not a hundred strides from his living quarters, baubles and stolen goods were being shoved in the Zabrak’s face, their cost shouted up from the crowds, the ambient buzz all but drowning out his own thoughts. The further he walked, the stiffer his shoulders grew and the tension mounted in his temples. The harder he clenched his fists. The

Zabrak reckoned he'd never get used to this place, not when he'd lived aboard a ship for the better part of the last two decades. He had traveled far and wide across the galaxy in his lifetime, from Taris to Coruscant and beyond. He'd been to all sorts of worlds, seen all sorts of cultural and societal oddities. He'd even lived on Nar Shaddaa for some time. Even for a social creature like him, this place was a bit much.

He was oh so grateful when the blast doors slammed shut behind him, so relieved that he stood there for a moment savoring the quiet hum that reverberated through the entrance. Unphased, Dozer padded on ahead, forcing Bale to follow after him down the stairway. The moment he set foot through the archway into the cantina, a green hand tapped sheepishly on his shoulder. Bale turned to find a wiry Rodian sprat looking up at him.

"We don't serve its kind here," it said, twisting its funnel mouth around the *basic* words.

"No *shiess!* And here I was hoping to get this bugger drunk," Bale's sarcasm was harsher than he'd intended. Thankfully, it was lost on the Rodian.

"We don't want no drunk critters in here. It waits outside."

"The Massiff stays with me." Bale's dark gaze dared the bug-eyed thug to argue the fact. The Rodian was about to retort, wagging a long, suction-cupped finger at him, but ultimately, he gulped, nodded and sauntered back to his seat in the corner, where he glared at the ground.

Good lad, Bale thought as he pushed the altercation to the back of mind, once more determined to have a good time. He reckoned knocking the little green man wasn't much sport. The Zabrak bee-lined for the counter and the smirking Gran bartender standing behind. The way the grin hung on his goat-like face, Bale could tell he was amused.

"I see Onecup was eager to greet you," he said, "Don't mind him. We don't see all that much in the way of new visitors nowadays. The boy has to justify his pay, somehow, no?"

"*That* is your bouncer?" Bale said aloud, making no attempt to mask his surprise. "Onecup, heh?"

"Yea. The kid can't hold his liquor."

Bale leaned sideways against the counter, resting on his elbow so he could hold a conversation while he got a good look at the place. “Why am I not surprised?”

“Does that thing drink?” The Gran nodded his chinless snout at the Massiff, who had promptly claimed its territory in the far shadows of the cantina. It lay there, tongue lolling about. It gave out an ear-piercing squeal that passed for a yawn, then rolled on its back, fast asleep.

“Old Dozer there ate my last good bottle back home, glass and all. I reckon he’s good for now. Speaking of, I’ll take anything that’ll knock my boots off. What’ve you got?”

The bartender’s enthusiastic demeanor only grew. He poured some nondescript, steaming liquid into a cup and, with his grubby, six-fingered hand, slid it across to Bale. The Zabrak snatched it mid-drift, held it out at the Gran in gratitude, then threw back his head, swallowing the steaming drink in one great gulp. The milk-like sludge tasted worse than a Happabore’s dungheap, but the kick was more than Bale could have hoped for. It burned the whole way down from the tip of his tongue to his stomach, causing his eyes to water. He cooed as it went down, and hooted as he slammed the cup down with a resounding, “I’m alive again!”

“Ha! Most end up on the ground after half a cup. Not bad. Want another one, stranger?”

“Beran. Cullen Beran, and you know what? I think I’ll go for some regular Correllian hooch next. Don’t reckon I wanna earn the name *Oneandahalfcup*.”

That got a good honk from the bartender, who obliged as Bale sat back against the counter, his eyes scanning the establishment. Everything on Chyron really did seem like they were built for smaller people and this seedy dive was no different, with its countless nooks and crannies, its handful of tables and the one private booth, so compact Bale couldn’t have fit even bent in half. And like the rest of Chyron, this place had seen better days. A fresco of stains and scorch marks marred every surface. Flickering neon signs in languages Bale couldn’t read decorated the walls, most of them malfunctioning. A sour-smelling smog hung in the air, its source unknown.

Aside from the Gran and little Onecup by entrance, there were only three other patrons, a pair of human fellows and one cloaked figure. The three of

them sat together around a table out of ear shot on the far side of the cantina, playing some kind of card game. It looked like any other of sabacc deck, but the way the cards were laid out, and the way they passed from hand to hand was unlike any game he knew.

“What’s their story?” he asked the Gran, grabbing his fresh drink off the counter and taking a sip. The liquid was far smoother than the previous one, seemed almost too weak by comparison.

“Those two have been in here a couple times before. Fancy lads. Polite. The quiet sort. They drink, sit there and talk over their little card game, don’t cause trouble.”

“The other?”

“First time she’s been here so far as I can tell, but I didn’t get a good look.” The bartender leaned in closer, speaking in a hushed tone, “Something’s not right about her. The way she moves. Those eyes. The arms. Never seen anything like it.”

“Cybernetics?”

“Aye. I mean, I’ve seen cybernetics before, like that junker of yours, but that? That’s something else. Whatever she is, them boys pay attention when she speaks, I can tell you that much.”

Bale didn’t respond. He stared at the cloaked figure over the brim of his cup as he sucked down its contents. The woman gesticulated sharply, her movements stiff and commanding. The Gran was right, her arms were made of metal but the design was more refined than his clunky leg, with molded plates covering the hydraulics and other moving parts. Thanks to his trade, Bale could tell he wasn’t dealing with regular durasteel. From the way the alloy reflected light, he was dealing with chromium coating or Beskar, also known as Mandalorian iron. They weren’t visible in full, occluded in part by her jerkin’s short sleeves, but he could see enough to know they cost this fine lass some serious credits. Her two companions sat before her, listening, their eyes wide. One of them, a clean, fancy fellow with even fancier clothes shook his leg constantly and shifted in his seat as if he were sitting on a hot turd. The other, a bald thug with a mean scar across his flat-nosed mug kept his eyes on the cards in his hands. The hooded woman slid a datapad across the table. Her fancy companion produced a keycard from the folds in his tunic, then ran it

over the device. Wide-eyes were replaced by furrowed brows and sour frowns. *Looks like my man here lost some credits. Let's see if he's up to losing some more.* Bale ditched his empty cup and stretching his good leg, he walked over to the trio. He was greeted by a cold, hard, "Go away, old man."

"Well hey now, fellas, I'm just looking to have some fun. Seeing as you're the only folks—"

"Leave." The word snapped from under the hood with the unmistakable, metallic groan of a voice modulator.

"Liven up, kids! I've got credits burning a hole in my pocket. What kind of game are y'all playing anyways?" Bale abruptly snatched a card from the table and flipped it between his fingers to find some sort of schematics streaming across its flat surface. There were floor schematics for some sort of building. His curiosity outweighing his good sense, he had to ask, "What the *pfassk* is this?"

"I advise you give that back and walk away, friend," said the bald man with the scar.

Bale ignored him. Instead, he leaned over the table, holding the card out for the woman, doling out a full-toothed smile, his best one, in the process. "Ah sorry, lass. Didn't mean to disturb. Just a fella looking for some good action. I reckon we can find us something else to—"

The words died in his throat when his eyes locked on hers. Two burning, red lights glared at him from underneath the hood. Mechanical eyes. The eyes of a droid, though he reckoned she was no droid, even if her manners were as cold as the metal on her arms. A flash of steel claws snatched the card from his grasp. Hands up in mock innocence and said, "We got no issue here. I'll walk away."

As he backed off and turned away, the Zabrak couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. It wasn't the fake cards or the fact that the fancy lad didn't fit with his two fearsome companions, though that too had caught his interest. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but there was something about the strange lass, or more specifically her cybernetics, that felt awfully familiar. Something stank, and it wasn't Bale's shirt. Not this time.

“Some friendly company you keep here! I reckon it’s time I found myself somewhere with some real action.” He flicked a pair of credits at the bartender as he passed the counter, more than enough to pay for the drinks, then whistled for Dozer to follow him. The beast moaned as it came to, then slowly wobbled on after Bale, still half asleep.

Bale was halfway up the stairs when it dawned on him
He knew who they were.

As Bale expected, the trio left the cantina mere moments after his departure. The two men went in one direction, pushing their way down the crowded streets towards the sector core, now and again casting skittish glances over their shoulder like a pair of frightened vulptex cubs. The hooded woman with the cybernetics went in a different direction. From his vantage point, Bale watched her weave her way across the throngs at a graceful, measured pace. He had intended to follow her. He knew where he'd seen cybernetics like hers before: the Technocratic Guild, or more specifically, the Collective, a sworn enemy of the Dark Brotherhood and all living Force-users. Normally, Bale wouldn't have given two squirts about the Brotherhood, the Collective, or even Force-users in general. Their petty squabbles meant nothing to him. As a matter of fact, there was a time where he would have identified more closely with the Collective's ideals than any of these other factions. At least, that was until he discovered that his own daughter was one of these so-called Force-sensitive beings. Now, wherever the Collective appeared, Bale paid attention. The mere fact that their agents were present here on Chyron, a

Brotherhood-controlled world under the dominion of Clan Taldryan, told the Zabrak gunsmith that something was going down. This hooded woman was the key. It was obvious who was calling the shots. She would likely have all the answers he needed. Alas, from the way she slipped through the crowd unhindered, he realised that he would never keep up. Her two jolly companions were the easier mark. With his shoddy leg and the countless folks likely to get in his way, the Zabrak was better off going after them.

He pulled himself up against the balcony's railing, threw his weight over, and swung down. He maneuvered his massive frame from ledge to ledge, foothold to foothold as he worked his way down. He nearly slipped on account of his mechanical leg. He wondered if he would ever get used to it. If he were being realistic, he doubted it very much. Even if he got used to the constant burning that persisted in what remained of his thigh, the device was of poor craftsmanship. He'd made a few recalibrations of his own and improved the response time, but it remained an awkward piece of machinery. Still, it was better than a useless stomp.

Once he was at a reasonable height, he jumped down, landing with a metallic thomp. This startled Dozer, who had been dozing off nearby. Before Bale could react, the snarling Massiff's sharp teeth clamped down around the prosthesis. He sighed as the hound gnawed on his fake leg with frenzied gusto. *He does so love metal, that one.* The beast very nearly yanked him off his feet.

"Get off, you *karking* boltsack, or I'll turn you into a pair of boots," he snapped down at the beast. It only chowed down harder. Bale had to kick his leg once, twice, three times before the hound lost its grasp. It stopped where it landed, cocked back on all fours as if it were aiming to pounce, its one eye glaring up at Bale as if the Zabrak had taken away its favorite toy. "Better yet, I'll turn you into a blasted satchel. Yeah, that's right, slimeball, you'd make a nice old leather bag for my guns."

They were wasting precious time. Bale knew it. Years of bounty hunting had taught him that focus was everything. The moment you lost focus was the moment you lost your quarry. Worried he had failed even before getting started, he plunged into the crowd after them, the Massiff plodding after him with all the eagerness of a grazing Bantha. The Zabrak pushed and shoved

and tossed his way forward. He was a tsunami of muscles and raw power as he bullied his way towards the sector core. The more he progressed, the more the people around him grew agitated, lobbing all sorts of obscenities his way. He was growing increasingly worried as he scanned hundreds of heads. Finally, and much to his relief, he spotted the thug's balding pate, then caught a glimpse of his partner scurrying at his side. They too had picked up the pace, the commotion growing in Bale's wake likely raising a flag. That also meant they knew, or at least suspected, that they were being followed and Bale reckoned they were expecting his ugly, horned head. They had no way of knowing who he really was, but he'd caught a glimpse of their schemes. Bale had many talents, but he'd never claim subtlety as one of them. His suspicion had likely been as plain as day on his face.

There was a sudden crash just behind him. Then, a hand clapped down on Bale's shoulder. Despite his momentum and his size whoever the hand belonged to spun him around.

"What the—" was all the Zabrak managed before he was greeted by a roaring mass of fur and a bucketful of spit. Struggling to find his footing, he staggered back into the ongoing throng just as Dozer, in his infinite punctuality, burst out of it, crashing straight into Bale's knees. There was that fleeting moment, a moment of pure, unabashed rational, suspended in mid-air, when the Zabrak *genuinely* hated that creature. Then the back of his head met the pavement. As the world spun around him, Bale couldn't quite decide hurt the most: the fall itself, or the thunderous laughter that exploded around him. A female wookiee stood over him, teeth bared, fists clenched at her sides, her chest heaving. It dawned on him that she was one of many he had shoved aside mere moments afore. As the world snapped back into place, he ignored her and rolled onto his stomach, hoping to catch a glimpse of his quarry. There was no chance of spotting them through that densely populated forest of feet.

He hauled himself up in the pride-motivated blink of an eye, intent on pushing forward but the Wookiee's hairy hand clamped down on his shoulder a second time. Again, the wookiee spun him on his feet but this time it was the barrel of Bale's Bryar pistol that greeted her. The unmistakable sound of the blaster charging a shot cut above the endless turmoil of Sector 3. To the

Zabrack, it was as if, for a moment, Chyron itself had been frozen in time. The Wookiee gulped, backed way with slow, deliberate steps, her furry arms up in the air. Bale served her a wicked grin before turning back towards the sector core and the crowd that barred the way forward. It was no surprise that they too were eager to step aside when he trained the charged pistol in their general direction.

He pressed on.

Unfortunately, after several minutes, he came to the realization that he'd lost their trail. *Lost focus, lost quarry*, he scolded himself. They could have gone off in any direction by now and all he had to go on was his own gut feeling. He didn't much like to admit it, but he didn't quite trust his gut these days, not after trusting the wrong people and losing his leg for it. It had served him well in his old life as a bounty hunter, but now, now he reckoned he was better off giving up. After all, the Collective wasn't his problem anymore. What was he going to do about it? What was he expecting, getting involved like that? His daughter was safe, far away, out of their reach. Besides, he had half a dozen crates of blasters to clean, fix and reassemble. Pursuing this charade would only result in more wasted time.

He frowned down at his cybernetic leg. He'd lost plenty already.

And that's when he realized that Dozer had disappeared. He let out one sharp whistle. Then another, as loud as he could manage. It got the attention of passersby, who looked at him like he was deranged, but no Dozer. *Of course*, he thought with dripping sarcasm, *the Massiff ran off*. He just couldn't contain a long, exasperated sigh. Swept up in the crowd's current, straining his eyes and ears for a telltale sign of the reptilian hound, Bale walked shoulder to shoulder through the rabble at a droving pace. The closer they got to the sector core, the more people converged down the same pathway and the smaller his patience became. At that point, he had half a mind to abandon the crusty old mutt and turn around. The fact was, as the hours dragged on, all he could think about was how much he longed for his cot. This night had been nothing short of a crapshoot. He was as sober as a Jedi on a diplomatic mission. He'd been dissed by not one but two womenfolk, and he'd ended up in the one seedy dive on the planet that offered less compelling action than an Ord Mantell junkpile. His drinking buddies? An angry rodian that couldn't

handle his liquor and a bunch of Collective chumps. This was the kind of night you just wrote off. All he wanted now was to get home, catch some shuteye, and then get back to work. That seemed like the best course of action going forward. If he kept his head low enough, he might survive this place long enough to cash in on that refurbishing job and head back off world. The blasted hound could fend for itself for all he cared.

Yet, despite all these alluring notions, Bale trudged onward, muttering under his breath with every step, bemoaning the fact that he'd lost his edge since the attempt on his life. He lost track of how long he looked for the Massiff, but then you couldn't depend on a regular day and night cycle on Chyron. A moon locked in orbit around the gas giant Perune, it followed a synchronous rotation, keeping the same face locked toward the planet as it rotated around it. This meant that depending on the moon phase, part of the planet was bathed in constant sunlight while the opposite side only enjoyed daytime occasionally during a full moon cycle. The world employed a series of giant, off-world mirrors to offset this problem by redirecting sunlight towards unlit parts of the planet, but there was only so much the technology itself could manage. Much like the moon city itself, the mirror complex had only been partially completed by the time of the Galactic Empire's downfall. The factions who took over at the time had different priorities.

"Shiess," he swore. Forget the moon cycles, I could be searching for years!

He stuck a pair of fingers between his gums and let out yet another sharp, cracking whistle. A single bark came from somewhere up ahead, off on Bale's right flank. The massive Zabrak broke right, cutting against the flow of the crowd, swimming his way ashore so to speak. He emerged in some poorly lit alley or some sort of access tunnel. The walls were lined with innumerable pipes and valves, the space above the Zabrak's head saturated by a web of dangling electrical wires. Crusty, wall-mounted safety lights illuminated the way in a dull orange. He gave another whistle. Againm, he whistled. Again, Dozer's distinct bark answered from somewhere inside, barely audible over the crowd's racket.

What in the blazes is that rotten mutt doing back there?

Bale stepped lightly down the corridor, his left hand tracing along the cold durasteel wall as he moved forward. His right slipped the Bryar pistol

from its holster. The city's dissonance became a constant, indistinguishable hum, interrupted only by the sound of his cybernetic limb. Not for the first time, he contemplated getting that shoddy fake limb replaced but, as always, he considered it a fitting reminder of the cost of dealing with Jedi. *Never trust a Force-user*, he used to tell his daughter—that is, until they found out that she was one herself.

The Zabrak very nearly pulled the trigger on his blaster when Dozer came hurtling around a bend ahead cackling and yapping, its long tongue flapping to the side as he ran. The hound never even slowed down, bouncing and skittering as he drifted in a semi-circle around Bale, the stump of a tail wagging with all the excitement of a child.

“Ok, boy! Ok! What'd you find? Did you find me those Collective goons? Did you?”

The Massiff whooped, then ran off at full speed, disappearing back around the bend. Bale couldn't contain his own excitement. Maybe this ugly mutt was worth the trouble after all. His twin Iridonian hearts were thumping like war drums in his rib cage. He set off after the hound, fighting every fiber in his body not to run. He was itching for a good fight, but he wasn't about to walk blindly into danger either. Say one thing about Bale Andros, say he was no fool. His massive frame slipped through the darkness of the tunnel, the ghost of a giant, until he came up to a doorway. There, he crouched down, ready to launch forward at a moment's notice. He listened. For voices, footsteps, he sought out any sound that could potentially betray the presence of some would-be assailant. Nothing, but it was hard to discern anything lower than a gunshot over the hum of the streets and the rumbling of machinery that came through the doorway. He could barely make out Dozer's excited cooing. No. There was something else. A faint tapping. The clinking of metal. Dragging and scraping. Bale edged forward, closer and closer. He peered inside.

The cavernous room beyond sat in near-complete darkness, the only source of light a control panel on the far wall. Bale slipped inside, blaster at the ready. As his eyes adjusted, Bale could make out the outline of large pipes running the length of the ceiling. More pipes rose up vertically throughout the chamber like pillars. He caught the faint gleam of metal railing. There was some kind of overpass or catwalk. The loud rumbling came from somewhere

underneath his feet, spilling through some unseen chasm, echoing across the chamber and drowning out all noises from outside. From the looks of it all and the acrid stench that pricked his nostrils, he could tell this was some sort of sewer maintenance station. That, or some kind of access point. Nothing more.

Bale finally caught a glimpse of Dozer yanking at something in a corner. Something went flying, clattering at Bale's. The Zabrak knelt down, picked it up. He frowned. It was some slimy metal rod, no more, no less. He tossed it aside and as he drew closer, he was able to make out an impressive mound of discarded metal. Broken tools, busted panels, bent rods, entire sheets of metal, and in the middle of it all, an old, scarred-up Massiff having himself a big feast. *A blasted waste of time!* There was that fleeting moment, a moment of pure, unabashed fury, when the Zabrak *genuinely* considered gunning the creature down. Instead, he kicked at the mound, sending metal flying as he let out one long, endless string of curses in as many different languages as there were words.

The sound died in his throat when he turned around and caught movement in the darkness. Something stepped around a vertical pipe. A humanoid shape, two shapes, barely discernible against the darkness.

"Who *are* you?" said a male voice. Bale recognized it as that of the bald man from the Cantina.

The Zabrak had a bad feeling about this. Cold sweat trickled down the back of his neck. There was a faint sound behind him. He glanced over his shoulder. Nothing.

No. There was something.

Two burning red eyes. A silhouette standing in the doorway. Eyes wide, the Zabrak spun, opening fire as he did so. The flash of red light from the Bryar pistol lit the room for only a nanosecond but he saw the hood. He saw the flash of metal claws, the inhuman eyes.

He saw *her*.

One moment she stood at the door. The next she was on him.

His head slammed against the concrete floor, his cheek bursting open as it scraped against the rough surface. He tried to roll back to his feet but he didn't make it halfway before a boot caught him in the chest, sent him back down to his back. Again and again they came at him kicking, three ghostly shapes in the darkness. All he could do was curl up and take the hits, desperately trying to protect vital parts with his forearms. He bit down hard, trying and failing not to groan when they made contact. His head rang like a bell. He could barely think. It seemed like an eternity had passed since they'd ambushed him. He squawked when the woman with the droid eyes grabbed hold of his hair, yanked his head back so hard he feared his neck might snap. He was done for. If he got lucky, he'd boxed up and shipped off to some Collective prison. More likely, he'd be dead on the hour. He rolled to his belly, tried to push himself up, to free himself from her grasp, but a foot to the middle of his back pinned him down.

"Ready to talk?" the woman asked in her toneless, modulated voice, taunting yet robotic as she knelt before him.

"I've known some gals who'd go pretty far to get me in their bed," Baled answered, struggling not to slur the words, "but this, lass, I reckon your approach is a bit much."

"Adorable." There was a whizz of electronics and she slammed his head down with a whack. She released his hair but before he could so much as react, she clamped her sharp metal fingers down around his jaw, dragged his face up so he was staring into her synthetic eyes. "Who *are* you?"

"Cullen Beran," he wheezed.

"Yes, you used this name in the cantina," she said. The more she spoke, the more Bale confused her voice for that of a droid's. What was she? Was she even alive? Had the Collective somehow dressed a droid in human skin? "Cullen Beran. Human male, seventy six years of age. Born on Corellia. Known affiliate of the Crimson Dawn. Deceased. Kiffar male, twenty two. Born on Coruscant. Factory worker. Devaronian male, thirty one. Born on Dantooine. Smuggler. Again, deceased. Six hundred and seventy-three share your supposed name. None in our database fit your description."

"What can I say?" he mused, trying and failing to mask the strain in his voice, "This man's good at staying off the radar."

Her claws dug further into his jawline with every spoken word. Bale being a Zabrak, he was particularly resilient to pain, but even he couldn't help but groan as they pierced his skin and drew blood.

"So defiant." Bale nearly jumped when a new voice broke the silence, a man's voice but one he didn't recognize from before. It belonged to a fourth person. Had he been there all along? Bale could not tell. The newcomer spoke with a confident but jovial tone. "Bale Andros. Hero of Meridian! Also known as the Iridonian Hammer." The man snorted in amused disbelief. "*Really?* The Iridonian hammer? I mean, what are you? A wrestler?"

Bale couldn't get a word out. The only sound that came out was another pain-filled groan as the woman squeezed harder still. It felt as if his jawbone might snap at any moment.

"Do not speak," she commanded.

"Half-Zabrak, Half-Human, born to Raeleen Andros and an unknown human male on the asteroid mining colony, numerical designation 0-1315. Miner. Pit fighter. Ha! Yes! I imagine that's where you earned that fine, fine

monicker. Let's see, what else? Mercenary, bounty hunter, scavenger. My, my, you've been busy, my good sir. Husband of Reevah Skye-Val. Sire of one Kaela Val." The man stopped reading for a moment. "Hm. Interesting. *Deceased*. It says here that you were declared dead by Clan Scholae Palatinae of the Dark Brotherhood. Most intriguing. Does he look dead to you?"

"No." It could have been a computer answering the question.

"Agent Sixteen is quite the poet, isn't she?" mused the mysterious man.

Bale didn't answer. He couldn't have answered even if she let go of his bloodied face. He was completely and utterly stunned. They knew everything about him, about his past, *about his daughter*. The mere realization that Kaela might be in danger, that they might seek to use her against him was too much for Bale. Roaring through clenched teeth, veins bulging at his temples, eyes bulging with fury, he thrashed so violently that the cyborg lost her grip. The foot also slipped off his back. Eager to turn the tables on his assailants, the Zabrak shimmied to his knees then kicked at the floor, launching himself like an airborne missile at the nearest assailant, slamming him into a nearby wall. Bale turned, a rampaging beast searching for its next victim. The lightning crack of a stun baton across the head sent him sprawling back to the floor like a rag doll.

The weapon sputtered with electricity, lighting the area in a pulsing blue tint. The chamber spun around and around as the Zabrak lay there, nausea threatening to overtake him. Despite the vertigo, he registered that there were indeed four assailants. There were the two goons from the cantina, the bald, scar-faced man holding the baton, and the fancy fellow on one knee, leaned against a wall, recovering from Bale's bodyslam. There was the hooded woman cyborg they called Agent Sixteen. Then, there was the one he'd never seen before, a lanky, sharp-faced man with matted hair and wild eyes. Bale also noted that Dozer was nowhere to be found. The worthless lout had likely gone and run off after the initial ambush. Lastly, he spotted his Bryar pistol near the mound of metal debris, dropped in the skirmish some time between Agent Sixteen's first strike and getting his ribs kicked in.

"Now, now, master Andros! There's no need to behave like this! Believe me, it will be better for all of us. You don't want me giving dear Agent Sixteen here a new lethal mandate, do you? " The sharp-faced man knelt over Bale

with complete and utter nonchalance, the outline of his silhouette illuminated by the pulsing weapon. The Zabrak longed to reach up with both hands to choke the man but he was too numb. He couldn't so much as wiggle his fingers. "Are we calm now? Good, good. Now, where were we? Ah yes! What's more intriguing about your supposed death is that we've found no trace of you or your fake persona in Clan Taldryan's database." He patted the Zabrak's blood-drenched cheek, an adult scolding a child. "And yet here you are! On *their* world, tailing *my* agents."

Bale grinned up through bloody teeth as he croaked, "The Force works in mysterious ways."

"The Force," the man repeated with an exasperated sigh, his overly-friendly demeanor faltering momentarily.

"He will not speak," Agent Sixteen said, stating it as if it were an indisputable fact.

Bale reckoned she was right. He also noticed the tingling in his fingertips. He managed to clench his fists. He drew a long, ragged breath.

The man hovered over the Zabrak in silence. He looked at his companions, then back to Bale. Finally, he shook his head and said, "I don't suppose we'll get much out of you, huh?"

"Oh, you just might!" Bale hawked and spat blood in the man's darkened face.

The interrogator squawked and flinched. He didn't make it all too far before the Zabrak's massive hand clamped down on his collar and yanked him forward, a horned skull meeting him half-way, crushing his nose with a sickening crack. The interrogator fell away yowling into the darkness. Bale was back on his feet in a low, predatorial crouch, ready to pounce. A snap of electricity was all the warning he had but it was enough. He was ready this time. In one fell swoop, he caught the incoming stun baton in one hand, spun, his other arm clamping down on the bald man's wrist, and wrenched the weapon free. The baton clattered across the floor as Bale swept the man up, then sent him careening into his companion. The Zabrak barely had time to regain his footing before Agent Sixteen burst out of the darkness, red eyes afire, cybernetic fists snapping past him. Left hook, right jab, uppercut followed by a roundhouse kick that forced him to jump backwards out of

reach, he could only manage to block or dodge her moves. It was bewildering how quickly she moved. He knew full well he couldn't keep it up but she kept on coming time and again, driving him back, stumbling through the darkness.

His back smacked against a vertical pipe, then found the wall. From where he stood, could barely make out the entrance through the forest of pipes. He could barely make out the four silhouettes of his assailants, now fully recovered and lined up before him. Agent Sixteen's eyes pierced the darkness. Cold sweat pearly and dripped down his back. The electric surge surged of the stun baton revealed the bald man had retrieved his weapon. It crackled with blue lightning, once more lighting up their features. At least, now some of them looked as roughed up as he felt. At least, now some of them looked as roughed up as he felt.

Alas, he was now cornered. He was done for. Fighting blinded by darkness was bad enough, but he was sorely outmatched and growing tired to boot. On any given day, he reckoned he could have taken on the men. Hell, he could have done so even if he'd been in a drunken stupor. But that cyborg lass was something else. Whatever the Collective and their Technocratic patrons had done to her, they'd been successful. He had been a pit fighting champion, he'd taken of worst odds than this, yet she could match him strength for strength despite her diminutive stature, and she moved twice as fast. Even without the element of surprise, even in broad daylight, she was more than a match for him.

One dead Zabrak found gutted, arse up in some dank alleyway somewhere.

An ignominious death if I've ever seen one. Bale couldn't help but think back to the boxes of blaster parts waiting for him back home. He'd be better off sitting at that work table right about then. That or lying half-drunk in a gutter after another of that Gran bartender's drinks. In hindsight, being called *Oneandahalfcup* didn't seem so bad. What he regretted most, though, was hiding the fact that he was alive from his daughter. He thought he was protecting her. Now, he longed to see her one last time.

What he needed to do was get through these bastards and out of this wretched hole. If he got past them and onto the streets, maybe, just maybe,

he could lose them in the crowds. He had to get past Agent Sixteen and steer clear of that stun baton. Even then, Bale reckoned at least one of them had to be packing a blaster. The fact that he hadn't been gunned down yet likely meant they still had a use for him.

As if on cue, the sound of a blaster charging up cut over the rumbling of the maintenance station. Bale recognized the sound of his own Bryar pistol building up a shot. He wasn't used to staring down the barrel of his own gun, but such was the case now that it sat squarely in the interrogator's grip.

Or not, he relented, grimly. *So much for running.*

"I like you, master Andros. You've got some fire in you!" The interrogator spoke with jovial gusto despite his bloodied face. "That's why I'm giving you one last chance. One. You can count that high, yes? Who do you work for?"

"Does it matter?" Bale hissed.

"No. I suppose it doesn't," the man admitted. "What I really want to know is what *they* know about our plans on Chyron."

"They don't know *kark*. you blasted laserbrain nerf herder! Your little friends were conducting their business in public. *Public!* I don't know *shab* about the Force or how it works, but I can bloody well say you lads were asking for a good ol' fashioned run of bad luck! The fact is I ain't part of the Dark Brotherhood, kid, never was. Worked for them? Sure. They pay well. But I also worked for the Hutts, the Black Sun. I even worked for the New Republic. *E chu ta!* I even hunted down a *pfassking* trumpet thief for the Nabooian Interplanetary Choir!"

"An unlikely story," said Agent Sixteen.

"And yet, I almost believe it," the interrogator said.

"If you're gonna shoot me, shoot me, you Hutt-kissing son of a *gnat!* Don't much change a thing now, does it?" Bale spat. It was a rhetorical question. He was as good as dead. He might as well go down swinging.

"No. It doesn't," the man said as he raised the blaster.

Suddenly, there was an inhuman growl and something ripped the stun baton out of the bald man's grip. His startled cry caused his three companions to glance his way. The window of opportunity wasn't lost on the hulking Zabrak who snapped into action immediately. He rushed Agent Sixteen shoulder first like a battering ram, the impact punching the air out of her

lungs with a robotic gasp. Momentum carried them into the bald man behind. A blaster bolt sizzled past Bale's head but the Zabrak did not slow down to consider the close call. He reared on the interrogator, ripping the Bryar pistol from the man's grip and snapping his forearm clean in half, ripping a blood-curdling shriek from his victim. Without missing a beat, Bale tossed the pistol in the air, grabbed it by the hilt and brought it crashing down on the interrogator's skull like a hammer. The man went down with a thud. The blaster went back up, this time trained on the bald man. They froze for a moment, fear pulsing in the man's wide-eyed stare. One shot, a flash of red, another one down. It all happened in a split second, but it proved ample time for the former bounty hunter to work his magic. The third man came rushing at him. Never made. Another flash of red cut him down, bringing him crashing down at Bale's feet. The Zabrak side-stepped his new victim. A bestial yowl of pain, one Bale recognized as that of a Massiff, tore through the rumbling of the chamber. Then, out of the darkness came Dozer, flying through the air like a cannonball. The hound caught Bale square in the chest and, together, they went hurtling to the ground.

Even winded, Bale wasn't about to lose his momentum. He pushed back to his feet in time to meet Agent Sixteen head-on. She came at him with a shrill battlecry that shocked even him. She punched and kicked and clawed, roaring and snarling like a relentless beast as she did so. They were locked in their lethal dance for what seemed like an eternity. She attacked. Bale struggled to defend himself. When he countered, she took the hits despite the sheer power of his attacks, attacks that would have shattered the bones of a lesser being. To her, they seemed little more than slaps. Whatever she was, whatever the Technocrats had done to her, she was no longer human. That was doubly clear now.

"What *are* you?" he wheezed before ducking under another airborne kick, this one destined for his jaw. He swirled to meet her again, moving to counterattack. His fists wiffed past her. She capitalized on the mistake, raked her claws down his forearm, slicing a rows of gashes from wrist to elbow. He howled.

"I am your doom! First, you! Then your daughter! Then your Dark Brotherhood! I'll destroy everything you hold dear, you evil bastard!" Her voice

was different. Not just the fiery passion in the bonfire that were her words, but the sound of it. She sounded like a different person altogether. Gone was her toneless, robotic demeanor, replaced by something far more vicious and feminine. Far more *alive*.

“See, that’s where you’re wrong!” Bale rapped his knuckles against his metal leg. “Many have tried before you. It’ll take more than some low-down Collective trollop to do me in!”

She came at him again with a shriek, her claws flashing in the darkness. Again they sliced him up, tearing through cloth and skin alike. He felt the stinging, wet warmth of his blood beading and dripping. It burned nearly as much the air grating in his raw lungs. He staggered, his one good leg growing weaker and weaker, threatening to buckle under his weight. He could barely think, the pressure pulsating violently in his temples. The truth was, he reckoned she had the right of it. She may just succeed where others had failed.

Again, she burst out of the darkness. He swung. She ducked. Her claws bit into his flank. He stumbled. Turned, throwing a blind hook. Too slow. She slipped beneath it and she was on top of him before he could regain his footing. A spinning kick caught him in the middle of the back, sent him rushing head first into a pipe. He stumbled, completely drained. She crashed into him. All he could do was clamp his arms down around her back, locking her against him. He squeezed and squeezed. She kicked and punched. He held on, tighter and tighter, securing his grip as best he could around her.

Her claws raked at his back again and again, shredding through his vest and shirt until there was nothing left but tarred, bloodied rag. He squeezed. Say one thing about Bale Andros, say he was stubborn.

Her frenzied cries rang hollow in his ears. Even the pain, it seemed to simmer on the periphery of his consciousness. Stubborn though Bale may be, his weakening grasp slipped from around her. The next thing he knew, he was on his back, some bit of metal digging in his side. He wrapped his hand around it, pulled it away so it wouldn’t bother him quite so much. Whatever it was, it felt good in his hand, something to hold on to when the time came.

She stood over him, a red-eyed demon, her shoulders hunched, her chest heaving again and again and again to the sound of her ragged breathing.

“I am Catari Meda’ran. The Sixteenth Daughter. The one who died and lived again. You call me a low-down trollop, yet you know not what you face. I am the phantom. I am the darkness. I am death incarnate! I will take great pleasure in finding your daughter and tearing her limb from limb.” Her voice wavered as she spoke with burning hatred, “What are you but an insignificant, drunken worm? You are *nothing!* I was trained to kill Jedi! JEDI!”

“That’s just the thing,” Bale croaked, forcing his words through before he managed to regain his composure long enough to say, “I’m no Jedi.”

Her droid eyes went wide as the Bryar pistol in his hand belched crimson fire. The bolt cut through her upheld forearm with a shower of sparks. He pulled the trigger two more times. The second shot tore through her shoulder. The third caught her square in the jaw as she fell back. The impact blasted her clean off her feet.

Bale let his hand fall and lay there panting as the reverberations of blaster fire died off, engulfed in the endless hum of machinery. There was no telling how long he lay there in the darkness. A whimper, the soft, drawn-out, whistling sound of a wounded animal, eventually caught his ear. An image of Dozer flying through the air flashed in his mind. Bale rolled onto his belly and crawled around in the dark until his hand finally found the large Massiff. At first, he couldn’t perceive any motion or sound. Bale placed a hand on its flank. He had to concentrate, so subtle was the movement, but he felt it rise up and fall back down to the rhythm of the beast’s breathing. Bale groaned as he shifted on his hands and knees until he managed to plop down and sit by the dog-like creature.

“You *karking* boltsack,” Bale said, but this time there was no anger in his tone. He patted Dozer on the back. “You did good, boy. You stick with me, you hear? Don’t wanna have to turn into a satchel just yet.” Dozer whimpered softly, then lapped its great, slimy tongue at Bale’s wounded arm. “Yea, I reckon you’ll outlive me, ol’ *sleemo*.”

As they sat there, Bale mulled over his next course of action.

“Three dead, plus this one fellow here. The interrogator, as you called him. This is your so-called Collective cell?” The Proconsul of Clan Taldryan stood proudly, her hands behind her straight back putting her voluptuous figure on full display, her lips pursed, clearly doubting the information presented before her.

“Two dead, plus this fellow. The cyborg got away,” Bale answered flatly. He shot a glance over his shoulder at the guards blocking the entrance. He didn’t much feel at ease standing in a Dark Brotherhood facility, no matter which Clan claimed dominion over it. Admitting that Agent Sixteen had somehow survived stung that much more because of this.

“But you shot her in the head,” the Zeltron lady, Seraine Ténama, insisted.

“Aye, that I did. I reckon that don’t make her dead. I looked for the body, found traces. She got away. Where the Collective is concerned, I’ve seen stranger things. Probably could’ve found her, but I gotta say, what I found on them two lads, well, I thought you’d want the information.” Bale held up a deck of cards between two fingers.

“Cards,” Seraine said flatly, clearly unimpressed.

“Take a closer look. Here.” The Zabrak slipped one from the deck, handed it to her.

The Proconsul looked at the back of the card, which looked like a genuine card from any random deck. When she flipped it, he heard a sharp gasp. “That’s the—”

“Schematics to this building.”

She looked up at him, suspicion having replaced shock. “And you know this, how?”

“I’ve had to look over a schematic or two in my long career as a bounty hunter. I got good at visualizing them in real time. I’ll admit it took me a while, having never been here. Had to do some research while this fella took a nap in a cage.” With the tip of his boot, Bale prodded the man at his feet, his would-be interrogator now hogtied with stun cuffs.

“I must say, that’s some impressive work for a local gunsmith, master Beran,” it was Cymbre Kall’s turn to speak up, the diminutive but oh-so-glamorous blonde woman appearing at her Proconsul’s side. She offered the Zabrak a sultry, full-lipped smile.

He cleared his throat, feeling rather flushed in the presence of such illustrious ladies, and corrected her. “Andros. Bale Andros.” As long as the Collective existed, his daughter would be in danger. He could no longer afford to sit idly by, hoping that better men came along to save the day. He knew this, now more than ever. “The name Beran is an alias I’ve been usi—”

“We know, big man,” the Proconsul interrupted him, dropping all pretense as a vicious smile split her lips. “We’ve known that a former associate of Clan Scholae Palatinae was in hiding on Chyron. We monitor such things, of course.”

“Of course,” Cymbre Kall echoed, her golden eyes never leaving him.

“Of course,” Bale sighed.

“A man such as you stands out, master Andros. And it would seem that alcohol makes men... boastful,” Seraine explained in a surprisingly husky tone.

Bale was taken aback by this, but he recovered quickly. The only thing more treacherous than an assassin, was a flirtatious Zeltron, or so he used to tell his daughter. Still, if he’d felt flushed before, he was downright

embarrassed now. He glared at his feet, much to their amusement. The smaller woman, Cymbre, placed a soft hand on his bandaged forearm and smiled up at him. He instantly felt compelled to listen to her as she said, "Come now, we shall see to this man you bring before us."

Bale snapped out of it at the reminder of business, "Oh hum, yes. I want to be there when your interrogator gets this *chuba* to speak."

"Oh, we shall handle the interrogation ourselves." The Proconsul's voice was downright arousing and terrifying all at once, sending chills down his back. "And you, big man, will be our most valuable champion."

"Bring him," Cymbre commanded.

Bale did as asked with an eagerness that surprised even him. He heaved the man up with one arm, slinging him along like some oversized luggage as he followed the two women through a labyrinth of hallways, the stun cuffs serving as a handle. He thought of Dozer, recuperating back home. The Zabrak couldn't help but grin. It seemed someone had been turned into a satchel after all.

They soon reached a small, nondescript chamber, devoid of furniture except for the one surgical table in the center. A large interrogator droid whomped to attention as the trio entered. The women fanned out before Bale, letting him pass before them. They didn't have to speak. He knew exactly what he had to do. He tossed the man to the floor, then wrenched his arms back so he could remove the cuffs, eliciting a painful groan from the man's scabbed lips. The cuffs came off the ankles and immediately the man came alive, kicking at his captor with all he had. Bale grabbed him by the back of the collar, yanked it back only to slam him back down with a resounding thud.

"Master Andros, please be gentle with our guest," Cymbre spoke softly but the Zabrak caught a hint of something else, something darker. He noticed she held one hand up before her, palm upwards, fingers half-clenched. "Step aside."

He backed away from the captive as he suddenly made a sound somewhere between a gasp and a Gammorean's squeal. With no apparent aid, he suddenly rose up in the air, his hands clutching at his throat, his legs kicking the empty space around him. Bale's mouth went dry. If there was one thing the Collective and him could agree on, it was that Force-users were a

terrifying lot. He reckoned he would never get used to the sight of the Force in action. He watched as the man was carried by invisible hands and placed down on the table, twisting this way and that as he struggled for air.

“Strap him down,” ordered the Proconsul.

Bale did as asked, securing the man’s torso and legs with durable synthetic straps. Then, he locked the man’s wrists and ankles in durasteel binders. The Zabrak ran one hand along the edge of the table until it found the control panel. With the press of a button and a hiss of hydraulics, the table rose up at an angle. Bale almost jumped when the Zeltron Proconsul pressed a datapad into his hands. There, on the screen, was the man’s personal information.

It was Bale’s turn to be impressed.

“Malar Galadren. Human male, thirty one years of age. Born on Coruscant. Known affiliate of the Collective. Merchant, slicer. Husband of one Catari Meda’ran. Father of two, Luan and Odori Galadren.” Bale’s voice wavered as he read the children’s names. The dossier marked both children as deceased. More troubling yet was the name Catari Meda’ran. It took the former bounty hunter a moment to realize that this was the name with which Agent Sixteen had introduced herself. She was also marked as deceased. Bale Andros swallowed hard before picking up again. “Malar Galadren, *alive*. For now.”

“Ah, so my friend the Iridonian Hammer can read,” the man said with a rasp. Their eyes met and Bale understood. His wife and children had been killed by Force-users. But was his wife not alive?

Bale slapped his cheek softly, much in the same way Galadren had done to him back in the sewer maintenance station. He then looked over his shoulder at Seraine and Cymbre, who nodded in unison.

He turned his gaze back to Malar.

“What *IS* the Sixteenth Daughter?”

- The End -