

STAR WARS

Uneasy Grounds

Guarded

By Jack Freeman

(Bale Andros - 826)

The stars shone brightly against the black void of space. Chyron and the gas giant around which it orbited, Serune, were little more than specks of dust in the sky. The further away they drew, the freer he felt. After spending months landlocked, far longer than at any moment in the past two decades, the Zabrak had begun to feel like a caged animal. Sure, he'd had plenty of work to keep him occupied, but whenever he'd look up, he'd found himself daydreaming of better days. To be flying through space again, even as a passenger, was just the fix he needed. Say one thing about Bale Andros, say he wasn't one for city life.

"The Chancellor has put her trust in your people, Master Andros," the Protocol Droid was saying though Bale barely registered the words.

"Bale," he said in response.

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"No masters, no sirs. Bale. I'm not your maker, chromebrains," the Zabrak growled.

"Oh my! But that would be to function against my programming!"

Bale had already turned his attention back to the window or, more specifically, his own reflection against the transparisteel. He poked a pair of fingers at the bags beneath his eyes. Had it really been that long since he'd last slept? Being grounded had done him

no service, that was dead certain. He looked like he'd aged ten years in the span of a few months. His beard, the crown of horns poking through his scruffy mane, even his eyes, it seemed like everything had lost its healthy sheen, not to mention how his armor was getting real snuff around the midriff. The more he looked, the more he reminded himself of a beast locked in a cage, deprived of the hunt for too long.

"Master Andros?" The Protocol Droid tapped him on the shoulder.

Bale sighed.

"The Chancellor wishes to--" The end of the sentence was muffled by the Zabrak's hand over the droid's mouth.

"To see me," Bale finished for him. Then with a non-too-gentle nudge, pushed him out of his way. "I heard you the first ten times. Take a seat before you bust a bolt."

He wasn't out of earshot before the droid lamented to himself, "How rude!"

This was the third time since departing Chyron that the Chancellor had requested he join her in her chambers. He had heard the woman was as fickle as she was demanding and he was beginning to believe it. He reckoned he should relish the idea that she wanted him there with her, but her two bodyguards took all the fun out of it. If one was gone, the other was present. More often than not, he had both of them breathing down his neck.

It didn't take much for Bale to remember he wasn't there for pleasure. As a matter of fact, the electrostaff that barred his way each time he entered the chamber did a fine job of it. He held his hands up as he always did. The crackling weapon stayed up for a moment--a moment too long, if he was being honest--before finally dropping out of his way. He gave the guard a daring grin then pushed through into the Chancellor's living quarters. They were deadly-looking creeps, those two guards, with their slick, reflective black armor and ridged helmets. He didn't know how much protection those alloy plates offered, but he knew it allowed the guards to move freely, and it certainly made you think twice before attacking them.

He turned his attention to the one who had summoned him. *Again*. The Chancellor lounged on a luxurious couch, dressed in all the finest silks on Chyron, looking nothing

like someone whose life was in danger. This annoyed Bale more than anything. He'd always made a point that he could get along with anyone who was willing to share a drink with him, but he could not abide by such imprudence. The Collective wanted her dead. She should have been pacing, looking around like a frightful Loth-Cat, not lounging about sipping Lotildean wine.

"You requested my presence?" He had learned not to waste energy trying to reason with the woman. It would serve no purpose to scare her now.

"I wish for you to modify your plans," she announced as she took a sip of wine. Her smoky eyes stayed on him throughout. "It will simply not do, sneaking into my own retreat through the countryside. After all, I have my personal landing pad."

"I understand your concern but I will not change my plans now, your highness. My team is already in place. Changing things now will only endanger you and *them* further. That landing pad is a sound location for an ambush, or better yet, an excellent place to rig a bomb."

"My goodness! A bomb, you say? And what would lead you to such conclusions, *Bale*?" Funny how she always managed to say his name as if she were spitting.

"Because that's what I'd do."

"What you'd do?"

"Rig a landing platform to explode when a ship lands. Either you take a chance and pressure-load the device, or you detonate it manually from a vantage point. The former is safer, but you can hit the wrong target. I reckon the Collective won't be taking any chances with you."

"And why not ambush us mid flight?"

"Oh, that is *definitely* a possibility. Refusing Clan Taldryan's offer to send starfighters to escort you was a mistake."

"I am not keen on flying alongside your clan's colors. Not yet in any case. Our alliance is not yet a public one and I would have it remain as such for a while longer. Besides. You are here, are you not? I accepted that."

“Maybe, but I can’t pull a starfighter out of my pocket. Can’t fire lasers out of my arse either. How am I supposed to take on Rose Squadron if they get the jump on us? I ain’t sure I packed enough seismic charges for that kind of action. This is a diplomatic vessel, Chancellor. You’ve got shields, sure, but they wouldn’t last long against a barrage from the Collective’s best. We’d be sitting mynocks.” Bale scratched the back of his head, not sure how much he was willing to reveal. “I do have a contingency plan in place if that were to happen but the risks remain high.”

“I do wonder why the Lady Seraine thought it wise to put a mercenary in charge.”

“Because this mercenary has seen a whole lot in his time,” Bale explained, his tone growing harsher, more sinister as he locked his eyes with hers and continued, “I may not be much of a strategist, but I’ve had to hunt down my share of fancy damsels such as yourself, your *highness*. I know *how* to do it and do it well.”

The Zabrak noticed the hand that held Chancellor’s glass was shaking, the red wine sloshing about within. It was a subtle tremor but Bale could not restrain a vicious, taunting smirk. She swallowed hard.

“That’s enough,” hissed one of the guards, a female called Sakina Orian whose face was obscured by a full-face helmet. Her voice was sharp, commanding, and wholeheartedly threatening. Something told Bale she would have loved to give him a taste of her electrostaff. With that fire, he reckoned he might enjoy giving her a taste of *his*. He was half-tempted to press the Chancellor again only to elicit further reaction, but an announcement over the comm put a premature end to his shenanigans.

“We are prepped and ready to jump to lightspeed,” announced the vessel’s pilot, a Bothan named Taegis Karm. “On your command, Chancellor.”

“You m-may leave,” the Chancellor said to Bale, her words catching in her throat as she spoke.

He shrugged, winked at that Sakina guard, and then left, glad to put another productive meeting behind him. He wondered how long it would take before she called him back in. Perhaps next time she would have something worthwhile to say.

Sakina rolled away panting, her body glistening in the faint red light of Bale's quarters. The Zabrak lay next to her on the bed, grinning up at her like a buffoon through the tangled, sweaty mess of hair sticking to his face. She grinned back, a vicious, hungry kind of grin. Her dark eyes reminded him of the black void of space, ominous, dangerous yet serene. She raked her nails across his heaving chest, then she was gone, already pulling on her jumpsuit. He watched her a while longer before he lazily pushed up from the bed and put his own clothes back on. When he turned back around, he found a guard in full armor, face concealed under her helmet.

"Next time maybe you can keep the helmet on," he joked.

"Next time we meet, I won't be so kind, *pirate*," she replied coldly. The sudden switch in personality surprised Bale, but he suspected there was a sly smirk lurking beneath that visor.

"Don't stun me, sis," he held his hands up in mock defense. Then she was gone.

It wasn't long before Bale, too, left his quarters and joined Taegis Karm in the cockpit, fastening his armor along the way. The cockpit was plunged in vivid blue light, the bright

streaks of hyperspace shrieking past the ship outside the window. Even after thirty years, the beauty of it never wore off.

“Taegs, how are we doing?”

“Flying as smooth as a baby Hutt’s backside, coming up on the retreat,” the Bothan explained as he reached over the flight stick to adjust the thrusters and ready their arrival.

“Be prepared when we come out of hyperspace, they could be waiting for us.” Bale knew his advice was redundant, he’d already warned Taegis on multiple occasions, but he reckoned he’d rather repeat himself than miss any detail.

“What do you expect?”

“To be honest? That’s the thing with the Collective. They come at you from different sides and you never know which. The last time I encountered them, I thought I was doing the hunting. Turned out, I was the quarry.”

“So much for the big bad bounty hunter, huh?”

“I’ll drink to that.”

“Ever consider that might be the problem?”

“What problem?”

“The drinking.”

Bale furrowed his brow. They stared at one another for a long time before the Zabrak and Bothan pilot exploded in raucous laughter. It went on for a while, the Bothan giggling as he continued to ready the ship. Then he activated the comm.

“Ready to drop out of hyperspace on your command, Chancellor,” he announced.

An unusual amount of time went by without a response. Bale and Taegis exchanged glances. The panic in the Bothan’s eyes confirmed what the Zabrak feared. Something was amiss. He hadn’t yet registered the precariousness of their situation that Bale was thumping through the ship’s narrow corridors, readying his Bryar pistol all while screaming over his shoulder, “Drop out now! Get us to destination no matter what!”

Could she have been asleep? No. Her guard would have woken her. Had an assassin snuck onboard? In Hyperspace? Bale scoffed. A ridiculous notion. Could they have been

here all along? Hiding? His mind locked on Sakina. Had they been hiding in plain sight? The interest she had shown him had been surprising but not unwelcome. But then, it allowed her to keep tabs on him. She had played him like a fiddle.

He reached the Chancellor's chambers to the vivid hum of the hyperdrive revving down as they dropped out of hyperspace. *Almost there*, Bale thought, hoping it wasn't too late for the Chancellor. The entire ship bucked suddenly, slamming Bale into a nearby wall. He managed, if just barely, to keep himself upright and moving. Whatever hit them, he had to trust Taegis could handle the situation. *One thing at a time*. A second jolt had the Zabrak reconsidering the trust he so freely put in the Bothan. Everything seemed as it should be when the door slid open to the Chancellor's apartment. The lady was lounging on her luxurious couch, though she had spilled some wine and was glaring down at the new stain with a mixture of shock and anger. Sakina was standing behind her as she always did. The second guard was nowhere to be seen, likely catching some shut eye in his quarters, though, surprisingly, this wasn't his usual time. It was but a split second before the sickening truth punched the Zabrak in the gut. The Chancellor wasn't moving. In fact, that red stain was *not* wine. A black-clad hand and forearm were visible on the ground behind the couch. The other guard? An odd place to rest. Bale's eyes locked on Sakina and the Vibroknife in her trembling hand.

"Wait!"

He heard her but Bale didn't register the simple request. Wasn't about to be fooled twice, no sir. His Bryar pistol went up, belched a barrage of crimson bolts in her general direction, forcing the assassin to duck for cover behind the couch. Bale being Bale, he didn't circle around the couch. He didn't lie in wait for her to show her face. No. He wasn't about to give her an opening. The massive Zabrak outright threw himself over the couch like a great stone cast from a catapult to land atop Sakina. She screamed. In surprise or pain? He didn't care. Pinned beneath his weight, she could barely move and though she tried to snake her legs around his arm, she couldn't gain leverage. He wasn't about to let her get the better of him. His gigantic hand clamped down on her throat. She gasped, a desperate, breathless gasp, her dark eyes bulging as he squeezed that much

harder. Even as her hands raked his wrist and drew blood, his grip did not loosen. Not one bit. He buried the barrel of his blaster into her temple.

“Plea—” she tried to say. It came out a squeal.

A violent shudder threw Bale off of his quarry. As the ship righted itself, the chancellor’s limp body slumped off the couch onto the floor. Sakina skittered away on all fours past the dead guard. Again and again they were sent thrashing as the ship came under what had to be enemy fire. *I’ve got a bad feeling about this.*

“Bale! I’m going to need you on the turrets!” Taegis’ voice crackled over the intercom, the panic in it betraying the direness of their situation.

“A little busy here, pal!” Bale groaned but the Bothan wouldn’t hear a thing.

The entrance door swished open and Sakina dashed out of the chamber.

“*Pfaask!*” Bale swore as he started after her. He’d dropped his Bryar pistol in the skirmish, but there was no time to waste recovering the weapon. Three stumbling strides and he too was out the door after her but he didn’t make it far before something rammed the side of the ship. The impact, the greatest one yet, sent Bale back to the ground and plunged the ship in darkness. It took a moment before the auxiliary power kicked in plunging the corridor in a dim, red light. Sakina was standing over him, Bryar pistol trained on his forehead.

“Blast it, Andros, where *are* you?” The Bothan’s voice was beyond panic. That was despair.

Bale could sympathize. He reckoned this was a good moment for despair.

He glared at her. Her black helmet seemed all the more sinister in the darkness, the crimson light reflecting off of it and reminding him of a Sith’s lightsaber. He swallowed hard.

“Do it,” he spat.

She said nothing. He saw her hand trembling.

“*E chuta, sleemo!*” Bale hissed at her, swiped with one arm at her leg. The sole of her boot nailed his arm down. “End this, Sakina!”

“No.”

He froze. She was sparing him?

“I am Ceyra Ky’Lian.”

“The Chancellor?”

She nodded. Then, she lowered the blaster.

With speed that belied his size, fast enough to surprise her, Bale was on his feet. Snarling, he grabbed her by the throat once again, the sheer strength of his attack knocking the pistol from her grasp as he slammed her into the wall. He all but ripped the helmet off her face with his free hand to reveal Sakina’s dark eyes.

“How am I supposed to believe this?” he roared in her face, flecks of spit flying with his fury.

“It was—” she squeaked, then he loosened his grip slightly to let her speak. “It was her idea, Sakina’s.”

“What nonsense is this?” The shock of the revelation was numbing. The Zabrak staggered back. Ceyra dropped to her knees, clutching at her throat and coughing.

“It’s true! I’m Ceyra!” she managed to say.

“Bale? Bale!” Taegis was shrieking over the comm.

“Prove i—” Bale didn’t get two words out before the world exploded around them.

Bale woke up to burning wreckage and sparks and nausea. There were no perceptible sounds but the ringing in his ears. The world about him refused to stand still. Still, somehow, he managed to climb his way onto his feet even as his wobbling knees threatened to give under him. Everything was a blur. He remembered Sakina. He remembered her dark eyes. An explosion. He remembered instinctively grabbing her, folding her into him as the ship spun and spun out of control, bent on protecting her against all odds.

Sakina. Ceyra. Whoever she was, she wasn't anywhere to be found. He pushed through the smoking, twisted heap of metal that remained in lieu of a ship. He could barely recognize any part of the structure. A ray of light caught his vision, forcing him to shield his eyes as they adjusted. They had made it, alright. Not exactly according to plan, but they'd reached their destination. He pushed onward and somehow, despite the structural damage, he found his way to the cockpit, or at least, what remained of it. That's where he found her, kneeling over Taegis' broken body. The Zabrak stared at the diminutive, furry fellow for a long time. He didn't move, even when Ceyra pushed herself up and brushed past him, tears shimmering upon her cheeks, to exit the wreckage.

He had failed them. All of them.

He reckoned he wasn't cut out for this sort of life anymore. Warfare. Politics. Mercenary work. He had been through too much to let this affect him, and yet, the guilt hit him like an electrohammer.

It would be some time longer before he joined Ceyra outside. He sat down in the wreckage next to her, looking onto the horizon. At first, they said nothing. What was there to say? They had been through far too much in so little time. As the Zabrak replayed the day's events in his head, he could barely put the pieces together.

"Why?" he asked, finally breaking the silence.

"Sakina, it was her idea for me to assume her role as a guard, while she stood in for me, as a decoy. I didn't think it would come to pass. I... I truly believed that your people were making a big deal out of rumors. The Collective. The Brotherhood. The Force. It all seemed so... ridiculous. I could barely react when he killed her or Koshan, the other guard. I... tried... but it was too late." she spoke softly, her tone haunted.

"What I meant was, why me? Why did you join me in my room?"

The Chancellor seemed taken aback by the question. Perhaps she was surprised that he would stop at such inconsequential details, perhaps she thought him foolish for even thinking of such things at a time like this. Still, she answered, "There are few freedoms in a position such as mine. As a guard, I went where I pleased. There is no one quite like you, Bale Andros."

"I reckon you've never been to Mos Eisley," he mused.

She laughed, a surprisingly pleasant sound against the backdrop of despair. "No, I believe I have not."

Once more, he pushed to his feet, wincing at the pain in his back. He held his hand out for her. "Come on, we need to get you somewhere safe. The Collective isn't done with either of us."

In fact, Bale feared they were just getting started.

The End