

Somewhere near the Perlemian Trade Route...

Years of training had brought her to this point. Experience in tracking prey of all kinds, across all environments, even through the void of space itself. Time was meaningless. When the final moment came, she would feel its lifeblood pour over her hands and she would eat the pieces that would convey to her the most beneficial traits of that which she had hunted.

And were any of that true, it would have made for an excellent story.

Instead, the Zeltron mercenary was tracking a roll of toilet paper across what felt like half the galaxy. She *had* traversed plenty of environments — from snowy wastes, to deserts, and more than a couple forests and jungles — and crossed plenty of space to get to each. Every wasted day infuriated her more. Every day chasing this stupid karking thing was a day wasted. Thus far though, the smoking wrecks and bodies she'd left behind weren't of her own design.

There were others after this one roll, and it seemed almost cursed how it left destruction in its wake. She had passed derelict ships and smouldering campsites with wrecked bodies hither and thither along the way. Yet she had not fired a single shot. They had all done this to each other, and every step along the way, the merc wondered who was on her trail, hunting the hunter, hoping they would pick up the scraps.

“Reme, can you help me narrow down that drive trail? I'm having trouble holding a lock when I have to kark around with our trajectory at the same time.”

The R3 unit chirped affirmatively from down the hall, wheeling into the cockpit and immediately interfacing with the scanner. On the displays, data started feeding and Qyreia was finally able to put them on the right heading. Mid-jump redirects were generally dangerous affairs, and slowed the ship's travel speed down, but it beat stopping altogether and flying at a snail's pace while she figured out the perfect route. *Perfect* was too often the enemy of *good enough*, and she only needed to catch up with her latest quarry and not crash. Simple enough. *Good* enough.

“Seems we're not too far behind now. Radiation dispersal says we're catching up.”

Brrrt beepdoop whiiiiirrrr.

“Don't worry, I've already got the guns warming up just in case.”

Wheerdrtrt brreprdrtrt beep.

“We pop out and start shooting, that's what. Prefer not to kill anyone over this nonsense, but I'm not gonna go down in a ball of karking fire for the sake of honor or some kriff.”

A thankful *whirr* emanated from the droid as it continued to fine tune the sensors. They still had to be wary of mass shadows, and while it was safe to assume their quarry's trail would be a safe route, it never hurt to err on the side of caution. At this point in the chase, caution was imminently important, if for no other reason than Qyreia had been getting less and less sleep as they closed in on the latest owner of the roll.

She tried not to remember that last part as much as possible. *My god, this is stupid. Like... get a bidet, you uncultured Huttspawn. No. That's an insult to Hutts. Frack, what's worse than Hutts? Trandoshans? Toydarians? Ehh, both of them are physically able to use bidets. Would a Hutt just use a shower nozzle?*

As her thoughts trailed off yet again, an urge for caf crept into her head, but she repressed it like so many other emotions. She was tired though, and ready for this to be over. The droid whirring and beeping excitedly caught her attention.

They were getting close.

“Think they’re stopping for fuel?”

The droid bleeped affirmatively.

“Yeaaaah, they’ve been burning pretty hard. But if they’re docked already, that could be trouble. I’m not in any hurry to be making enemies of some random port authority.”

Or maybe it's a drop, she hoped feverishly. As the trail tightened and tightened, Qyreia took an educated guess and brought them out of hyperspace. There were several mass shadows on the scanners, and none of the worlds seemed particularly familiar; not on any well-traveled or beaten path. Likely the worlds were uninhabited. The course painted out on her display showed their quarry heading to a small planet of dry vegetation, active volcanism, and a scattering of salty inland seas. And storms. Lots and lots of storms.

“This isn’t a refuelling stop. It’s a drop-off.”

Remee whirred inquisitively.

“You know: they’re selling the goods, or passing it to another transporter to throw any tails like *us* off their trail.”

The Binary equivalent of “*Ohhh*” brought a chuckle to the weary Zeltron. If this turned out to be a bust, she was strongly considering calling the whole ordeal a bust and just going home. Kark whether Lucine or anyone else wanted this stupid thing. Those schuttas weren’t paying for her fuel.

“Okay Remster, gimme their approximate location then unhook,” she said as she flipped off every non-essential system. “We’re in for a bumpy ride.”

Even with the inertial dampeners — one of the few “non-essential” systems she’d kept online — entry into the atmosphere was rough. Thermal updrafts caused by eruptions and the veins of lava wrought havoc when met with the cooler oceanic and solid ground patches. Beyond that, as their altitude got lower and lower, the YT-1300 entered a vicious thunderstorm, with winds that buffeted them about like a small child with its rattle. Motion sickness had never been part of the mercenary’s repertoire, but she considered making an exception this one time.

The flashes and surges of electricity had made it difficult for Remea to get an exact pinpoint on the vessel they were tailing, but they had narrowed it down to a small enough patch that Qyreia was confident in her ability to scout it out. What was more, the storm was a double-edged sword, helping to hide the ex-smuggler on their approach to the surface.

Below the clouds, everything was by instruments. Rain choked the canopy so much that the ground was only visible at the lowest altitudes, and even then it resembled a waterlogged impressionist painting. As much as she could, the Zeltron hugged the ground, rolling into the dead zones between spurs of soaked savannah and piles of black, cooled lava flow. Once she wagered they were close enough, she set the ship down in a wide ravine with the start of a river flowing over the tumble of broken volcanic rock.

“You see something that ain’t me,” Qyreia said as the ramp lowered, “blast it.”

She could hardly hear the droid’s affirmative response when the sounds of thunder, wind, and torrential rain all came tearing through the air. It was times like this that the Zeltron wished she had a hood to throw on, but she didn’t even have a hat to keep the rain at bay. *Wet again*, she thought as she trudged through the rising waters of the stream and into the gloom beyond. *Could’ve at least used a hair tie.*

Gradually, the ship behind her disappeared in the rain and fog. Following the rolling terrain, she came across what at first looked like a steam vent, only to discover it was a trickle of lava meeting a runoff stream. The main flow was cooled and caked over by the smooth, soft-looking black rock, which the Zeltron only dared to even step on after giving it a few whacks with her rifle stock. Even then she was unsure, but continued across the narrow band regardless, happy when she was on assuredly solid ground on the other side.

Such was the depth of the storm and lava fog that she nearly missed the faint blip, in and out, of a white light as she crested another yellow grass-covered spur. *Hello signal lamp.* As much as she hated it, she crept and scrambled low over the terrain toward the light, crossing her ravine in the process. At least she hoped it was hers. Otherwise she was karking *lost*.

Up the opposite bank and further along she crawled, transitioning from a crouch to her hands and knees, and then again to her belly as the light got briefly brighter before

going out entirely. By then, however, she could clearly make out the shape of the little *Nebula*-class freighter that had been flashing its light, nestled on a small plateau where, further on, Qyreia could make out the dark silhouette of another ship, and the small shapes of its crew approaching.

One, two, three... five total. She checked her position against the wind, and considered the grenade on her belt. *Yeah. Yeah, I think I can take five.*

The rain did not let up, but the sharp breeze calmed slightly as the two groups came together, those from the *Nebula* carrying a small container under an arm. She was close enough that, with the humanoids yelling to be heard, she could make out what was being said with only minor difficulty.

“You were followed!”

“We lost them in the storm,” the *Nebula* crewman replied. “Lotta people after this thing. We just wanna get our creds and make streaks.”

Qyreia sighted in the one with the box, steadying her breathing and easing a wet blob of dark blue hair out of the way. Her lips licked away at the minor irritant that was the water running in rivulets over every part of her, noting the acrid, ashy taste melding with salt that could have been the rain as much as her own sweat from running around. She wanted the shots to be quick and easy, so she waited; waited for them to sway onto one foot or the other so that, facing each other, they were staggered and all lined up in her field of view.

“Just give us the package and we’ll give you your cash.”

“Show us the creds first! Lotta people *dying* over this thing too. I ain’t looking at a court room without my lawyer fee, eh?”

Aaand... boom.

The impending argument was cut short but the red bolt of energy that streaked into the package-carrier’s back. Both he and the box fell with a rocky, muddy *plop* into the waterlogged dirt, followed swiftly by one of the men from the other ship. Guns were drawn and eyes glared directly at where the shots had originated.

They were so tightly packed. The ground was slick and slippery, and the scabbly rocks underfoot provided little purchase when running for non-existent cover. Only one of them had the sense to run for the landing leg of the freighter, the other two either standing still and shooting wildly from the hip — *dead* — or running off to the side in some haphazard attempt at a flanking maneuver — *dead*. And when the one in cover dared to peek out and contemplate grabbing the package and making a run for it, he was dead too.

Of the many firefights the Zeltron had been in, this one was not among the impressive numbers on the list. A modicum of caution was still shown as she approached, nonetheless, her gun ready to pick out any new target that might appear from the fog. She made a brief perusal of the bodies, finding all but one to be humans or human-looking. The rain splattering on their pain-wrought expressions was miserable to behold, and she made quick work of the next part of her plan.

By the time she made it back to her ship, rifle in one arm and package in the other, she felt like a wet mongrel. The droid at least seemed happy for her return.

“Get this ship off the ground and take the fastest route to the Perlemian you can find. I want our trail so mixed in with the regular traffic that no one is finding us.”

Brrt beedoot preeeeert beedrrtdrrt.

Qyreia looked down at her sopping clothes, then at the droid. “Really?”

Beedoo.

Her eyes pressed together in frustration but she acquiesced, moving for the cockpit. “Fine. But once we’re on the Perl, you’re driving and I’m taking a shower.”

The droid had a lot of questions for the Zeltron, most inherently fussing over its master and her well being. She regaled the droid with the brief fight and how she’d turned on every system in the freighters before grabbing the package and making her way back to the *Katurno* as fast as she could. The revved power signatures would, hopefully, draw away any attention from her own ship; at least long enough for them to disappear into the void.

Having followed parallel to the Perlemian Trade Route over the course of this latest leg of the chase, they were soon on the busy hyperlane, and the merc gleefully passed over the controls to the droid. From here it was smooth and simple sailing back to Arconan space, so long as no one caught wind of their trail. Still dripping and now cringing with every movement as the cooled parts of her clothes shifted and prodded her like icy darts, she made her way to the refresher, peeling the clothes off and praying there was still a fresh set in her cabin. The package had come too — a sort of “*not letting it out of my sight*” reaction — and just as she was readying to enter the shower, she looked it over and opened it, revealing the white, triple-ply roll that had caused so much fuss.

Like a grenade, she hefted it in her hand, feeling a certain pressure in her gut, and a wry grin on her face.

The Citadel

Estle City, Selen, Dajorra System

There was a certain amount of satisfaction in a job well done. Lucine always enjoyed it when the underlings did what they were supposed to, and even better when they delivered in a prompt fashion. Seeing the Zeltron walking, in her usual cocksure way, into the throne room seemed promising, especially given the dull gray box held under one arm.

“Is this it?”

“And I’m not getting you another one,” Qyreia said, setting it unceremoniously in the human’s lap. That the small bits of mud and dirt still caked on it were thus put onto Lucine’s likely expensive dress only made it more satisfying to do. “Mind if I go now? I need a nap like you wouldn’t *believe*.”

The small bit of elation left to the Consul overrode the irritation of the grime now encrusting her dress, and she waved off the Zeltron with her hand just as much to unlatch the case with an invisible touch. At first it seemed her eyes met empty air, even as the mercenary’s footfalls echoed away at the far end of the throne room. When she tipped the box, a hollow, disappointing *clunk* of a sound came out, and she could see a dull brown cylinder sitting listlessly at the bottom.

She was already furious, but her temper held itself in check when she noticed what looked like writing on the empty roll. In big, bold Aurebesh was written **INVICTA**, along with a smattering of hearts and stars.

“That... that...”

There was a post-script she noticed, further along the cardboard as she turned it over.

Now you can pretend to be a pirate on the high seas! Don’t forget to wash your hands!

So many thoughts tore through the crimson-haired woman’s mind, and she was left speechless as both the box and the tube both fell to the ground. Before any of the anger and loss, a question was foremost in her mind.

“That was a full roll. What did she do on her own with a *full roll*?!”