

## *The Lone Road Warrior*

Heat rippled from the ground, catching and curling up any surface that the oppressive air met. More than once, the ground looked like it opened up into a vast, mirror-like ocean, waiting and inviting, only to continuously slip away with each trudging step closer. Looking over her shoulder revealed the black column of smoke trickling high into the clear sky that signaled the wreckage of her ship.

*I'm sorry, baby. I'll try to come back for you.* Qyreia turned her eyes forward into the wastes. *But first I need to try and survive this karking mess.*

This wasn't the Zeltron's first time on Tatooine, but it was definitely the worst so far. Years as a freelance trader and smuggler, she'd been to Mos Eisley and even Mos Espa, but never out here. Never in the wastes of the Dune Sea or any of the other, lesser known, but no less formidably hostile territories of the desert planet. And this wasn't the Dune Sea by any shot. The ground was flat, hard-packed sandy dirt, cracked and scraggly as far as the eye could see, like a long-dried up lake bed. She hoped it was a lake, anyway. Walking across a lake, even a dried up one, would be a lot easier than trying to hoof it through what used to be an ocean: they tended to be a little bigger.

"At least I left Remee back home," she mused quietly to herself, almost wishing she had the company. "Not sure how much I could handle losing a ship *and* a droid all in one day." She huffed, feeling sweat spray from her upper lip as she did. "Frack me, even *with* the environmental seals on this thing, it's goddamn hot."

Despite the black coloration of the TIE flight suit, the life support systems were at least nominally staving off the immediate heat. At least until the power ran dry. The helmet's visor had some glare protection, so that was a bonus. With the suns at a double-zenith, the polarized lenses made it a little bit easier to at least keep her eyes on the bleached terrain. Even so, with everything sealed save for air intake, Qyreia was roiling in both the feel and smell of the accumulating sweat. She was fortunate that it was at least a clean sort of stink. For now, anyway.

Qyreia looked back again at the gradually-shrinking black plume. Part of her wanted to go back and wait for someone to show up. Memory of the sorts that frequented Tatooine's wastes, and a small bit of common sense, told her that was a bad idea. This didn't seem like Tusken territory, but someone would definitely see it, and they were very likely to not be the friendly sort.

No. Better to strike out while the smoke was still rising. The hard, cracked earth would at least keep her from being easily tracked.

Somewhere in the midst of the odd breeze that occasionally and lazily languished by, lost in the monotony of the desert, the mercenary struck up a tune. A low hum;

something to keep her mind awake before her ears just shut out all noise and she blanked into a trance while she walked.

“I’m so karking *bored*,” she melodically grumbled, “on this lonely road of karking *dirt*. Don’t know where I *am*, but I’m here right now and I walk *alone*.”

She struck up an instrumental, two heavy notes repeated a few times. Some more lyrics mumbled out incoherently before she just gave up.

“Why don’t these suits come with storage space in the helmet for music playlists? That’s what I’m gonna do next time... when I get home. Imma put a whole buncha music in here.” She kicked a wayward pebble, watching it tumble over the lip of a small crag in the dirt and disappear from sight.

It was pathetically disappointing. That rock was the only other thing out here that wasn’t dirt. Her only friend.

“Don’t worry, babies,” she said, patting her blasters affectionately. “You’re more than friends to me.” She’d spent too much time in Arcona to not follow that up with a disclaiming, “Not friends with benefits, mind. That’s not a kink I subscribe to.”

This pattern went on and on and on, not unlike the desert she found herself inhabiting. Every couple hours she would sit down to rest, cracking the flight suit seals to drink the water that she’d salvaged from her emergency rations stash on the ship. Every time she did brought the harshness of the light to glaring reality, and she would simply lay down and not look at anything. Sometimes she would nap, most times she would stare at the sky, noting how the suns’ halos got further and further away from her peripheral vision with each successive rest.

Before long, dusk was approaching. Qyreia could no longer see the smoke of her wrecked ship behind her, but up ahead the hard broken dirt rose up from the horizon in what looked like rolling hills, plateaus, and canyons in definitively darker colors than the flatlands she’d been traversing all day.

“That almost looks like the holos of the Jundland.” She prodded at her wrist unit only to find an unsurprising lack of maps. “Well, at any rate, I can probably get some shelter in there.”

*I just hope there’s no Sand People here.*

With the ruddy orange balls ever lowering toward the horizon, the merc trudged on, noting with some disdain how long it took to actually reach the towering mounds. Terrain made for elusive reference points, when it might look close, only to be revealed as so large that it merely appeared so. A light breeze kicked up as the temperatures shifted, noticeable now, throwing some dust around her knees. She flipped off the environmental controls on her flight suit, letting the latent heat build up. If she knew

one thing about the desert, it was how it didn't like to stay warm at night. The power was running low anyway. Tomorrow would be the real physical test.

She didn't go far into the canyon. Darkness was not the time to be exploring.

A decent depression in the rock with a good field of view was all she needed, and in ridges like these, there were at least a few readily available. The Zeltron found one such spot in a nice concave turn in the wall facing out into the flats: vision for kilometers, and a position where someone couldn't use the canyon wall itself to sneak up on her except from above. Some scrub vegetation for a fire would have been nice, but she decided it better to count her blessings as she settled up against the wall and pulled out a ration bar.

Part of her wanted to hold off, reminded of some survival info she'd digested once upon a time. Then she tore it open and started chewing. *I'll run out of water before I run out of food. No sense in dying thirsty and hungry.*

As darkness wholly overtook the land, Qyreia huddled to the back of her alcove, clutching her rifle close while she attempted to get some sleep.



Dawn was not what woke the Zeltron.

Darkness still lay over the land, with only the faintest hints of sun fading into the deep midnight-blue, giving the ridges a dark silhouette profile against this palette. The evening breeze had long since died. What caught her attention was instead the *crack-pop* of distant explosions. As Qyreia scurried and scraped her way over the gritty ground to the mouth of her overhang, she could at least tell there were both actual, if small, explosions ringing out wherever this apparent fight was going on, as well as the report of slugthrowers in fairly high frequency.

"Well *that's* a helluva scrap going on." She checked her equipment, making sure nothing fell off in her sleep, and shouldered her supply bag. "Let's go see what's happening, shall we?"

She didn't need the helmet for this part, so it got hooked to her belt as she scrambled out of her shelter and back into the open air. It was cool — not cold, but the warmth was largely gone from the air — and the breeze was minimal. Another series of noises caught her ear, giving her a direction to follow, and she dashed along the loose-soil slopes along the base of the vertical inclines that led to the tops of the plateau. *Just need one good one*, she thought, scanning the cliff walls for decent handholds.

Before she knew it, her running had carried her until she was looking at the mouth of the canyon proper. Catching her breath, she looked down the winding way, seeing a

faint orangeish corona filtering and flickering up from the other side of one of the rocky walls. The light of fire; one big one, or many.

More shots rang out. Now that she was closer and still closing the distance, she could make out the sounds of blasters among the more potent snaps of the slugthrowers. The echoes didn't just sound like they were going back and forth either; more like... a funnel cake. Already hungry again, the Zeltron couldn't help but imagine anything else: an interior ring shooting out, and an exterior ring shooting in.

An ambush.

*An ambush before dawn, no less*, she mused as she came to the cliff face, having zeroed in on a section that at least looked climbable. She didn't like having to put away her rifle, or having both hands occupied with climbing the rock face. And much like her run-up to the canyon system, this seemed much smaller from further away than it did when it was right in front of her face.

"I really need to... ngh... work on gauging my distances better." *Too used to figuring it out from the size of people in the scope.*

Scraping her way up little by little, she soon found herself looking over a large swathe of land to her left and right. Even in the relative darkness, between her eyes' natural adjustment, the ambient light from the flames, and the increasing glow of the incoming sunrise, she could make out in odd shades of blue the contours of the land. That, and the large, dark, shifting shapes some ways off further down the canyon. Qyreia paused momentarily to regard the things more closely, only to see a handful of other, smaller shapes pacing around the larger ones.

*Those are banthas.* She looked up to the cliff's edge, then back at the small shapes. *That means the slugthrowers are Sand People.*

She bit back the curses she so desperately wanted to verbalize, choosing instead to continue climbing lest the tribals on the canyon floor notice her ascent. It was a wonderful, if tired feeling of elation when she finally scraped her way over the corner of the cliff edge. Her arms and legs were sore in equal measure, feeling like jelly for several long moments while she collected her breath on the dusty, hard ground. When she turned her head, she could see a group of Tusks firing into another spacious expanse. Further along, in both directions, were other small groups of the same infamous raiders, all firing down into the same general area.

*That's a lot of them*, she thought, vaguely counting them out. *That's a whole lot of them. How the hell am I supposed to... The hell am I even doing here? Am I helping the people down there? Maybe?*

Qyreia breathed, pulling the sling from her shoulder and gripping the rifle tightly. About halfway between her and the nearest group of ambushers was a rock outcrop; one of many irregularities in the terrain, but by far the most obvious in the dim backdrop lighting.

“Hohh, I’m gonna regret this.”

She half-rose, scraping along on her knees for a few paces, feeling out how her legs for any more wobbliness, before taking to her feet and making a break for the rocks. It was almost more tiring to try and run hunched over, but she wasn’t about to take any chances with so many guns in one place, even in the dark. It was less a matter of *if* she was spotted, and more a matter of *when*. She just had to keep running. Every breath in rhythm with her steps was a whispered curse; usually frack or kriff or kark. They were short and easy to say on the quick. And they very aptly fit the mood when the first of the desert-robed humanoids saw her by chance.

It leveled its long-barreled slugthrower, she brought up her blaster and fired.

The lance of red went wide over the being’s shoulder, but surprised it enough that the *crack* of the gun heralded only a large puff of sandy dirt and rocky shards off the Zeltron’s right. *Sithspit! Run faster Q ol’ girl!* Her blaster had practically been a beacon flare to the handful of Sand People, and they turned their attention solely on the dark shadow running toward the rocks. There were plenty of other raiders to handle whatever quarry they had.

Another *crack* and flash of the muzzle brought a slug singing past Qyreia’s head in a high-pitched warbling whistle. Yet another she could almost swear she felt the air warp around her left cheek. The rocks were close now. Dipping low on her back leg, she skidded across the ground, grinding over the grit and leaving a little dust trail behind her. But it worked. With only a little extra jolt, the rocks stopped her forward momentum, and she quickly steadied her rifle on the crest.

What came next was almost too easy.

The Tusken weren’t even in cover. Shooting down into whatever valley they were, the lip of the canyon was their cover from their targets. Here though, they were wide open. Flashes of red covered the ground with a ruddy glow as it passed before making contact with the screeching humanoids. The battlecry was clue enough that they were intent on nicking her from their list of things to worry about. Other nearby groups were also noting the new firefight and were zeroing in on the Zeltron. Qyreia ducked and changed firing positions as slugs crashed angrily against the rock. Blaster fire peppered one flanking group, the Zeltron rolled over to the other side of the rock, then harassed the other group of flankers, leaving both of them regretting — if not seriously

questioning — the wisdom of their choices. They faltered; their advance stuttered to a halt. The merc allowed herself a satisfied grin at how well this was working out.

That was when she heard the rapid tempoed scrape of feet coming rapidly toward her rocks. When the merc looked up, she saw a Tusken just about to charge over her position of cover, gaffi stick brandished menacingly overhead. There was little more than an instant for her to throw her body away from the downward swing, leaving a harsh metallic ringing in its wake as it struck the rock instead of the Zeltron.

A frenetic melee ensued as the merc took to her feet to face off against the practiced strikes of her Tusken opponent. Fortunately, it wasn't much different from fighting anyone else with a melee weapon, with the added benefit that it wouldn't cut through her blaster like the lightsabers she so often trained against.

She juked back.

Deflected down and away.

A nice uppercut clothesline with the rifle knocked the Tusken on its back foot.

Grunts and vocal breaths intermingled with the metallic clunks of their weapons parrying each other, and the muffled thumps of Qyreia slamming the butt of her rifle first into her opponent's gut, and then again on its back as it doubled over from the first strike. It was enough to leave the Tusken sprawled on the ground and her standing victorious.

And then she looked up and saw the others glaring at her — at least she assumed it was glaring, given their masks — with a certain hesitance. As she watched them, she noticed how a lot of the other shooting had petered off. Most seemed to be drifting back to what she assumed were their bantha staging areas like the one she'd seen earlier.

The question remained for those lingering around her: how many wanted to go down just to take out the Zeltron.

"If any of you can speak Basic," Qyreia said through her labored breathing, eyes darting from one side to the other, "take your guy here and go."

They looked at each other, some muttering in their native tongue, grating though it was even at a low volume. Their expressive hand gestures suggested there was more to them than simple amplification of what they were verbally producing, but Qyreia understood none of it regardless. She only watched, careful not to let the one at her feet get out of her bubble of awareness.

One came forward a step, the others warily lowering their rifles and gaderffiiis. It made a few guttural grunts, but largely motioned with its hands. The suns' light was

starting to truly penetrate into the sky, making it easier to at least see the motions even if the fiery balls weren't quite yet visible. It made it no easier to translate.

"Wai-Wait wait, slow down. One more time."

A frustrated, tired grunt. But the Tusken tried again, slower. Qyreia's eyes focused on him, nervously aware that this was taking her attention away from everything else.

"You take this guy, and you'll leave me alone?"

There were some angry, gravelly noises and some yelling while they pointed at their previous targets' location.

"Sooomething about whoever's down there? I don't know them."

The Tusken growled angrily, hand going briefly for the gaffi stick, only for Qyreia's rifle to come right back up on her ad hoc hostage.

"Easy there, schutta!"

That defused the issue, if only making things more tense all over again. Back and forth, back and forth, they slowly eked out some common — if limited — understanding. The Zeltron let the clubbed Tusken limp back to its own people, while the rest slowly withdrew. At the very least, the Zeltron had worked out a tentative ceasefire with the Sand People for herself. Whoever they were raiding, they were fair game, and if Qyreia was among them in the course of another attack, then she was on her own.

It was a fair enough deal. Given the conditions, she couldn't really ask for much more. It left her with a little time, at least, to figure out what she might salvage from the ambushes; maybe leverage her scattergun diplomacy success to get her to some sort of civilization.

She still watched the Sand People carefully as they filtered away, only redirecting her attention when she was absolutely sure she wasn't going to get shot in the back. As dawn genuinely broke the horizon, and with her feet carrying her at a walking pace, it seemed so much longer before she reached the opposite edge to the one she'd ascended. She was nearly there when she heard a blaster shot ring out, followed by a couple more shots that sounded bigger; rounder.

"The frack is it this time?" Qyreia grumbled, resuming her crouched, cautious stance as she approached the ledge.

The image of a dozen-plus speeders and swoop bikes filled her view, seemingly surrounding a sandcrawler in a disorganized crescent. Little black dots that the merc could only assume were Jawas occupied the various windows and firing positions on the sandcrawler. Mixed in among the swoops and speeders, larger shapes milled about,

using the vehicles as cover from the Jawas; probably humans and near-humans. Multiple shapes on both sides were strewn across the ground or hanging off their respective chariots: unmoving bodies that showed the ferocity of the three-way engagement.

Qyreia was trying to pick out exact numbers when one of the people behind the swoops looked up and saw her shape. Instinctively they fired at her, though the range proved too much for their weapon and abilities, and it only served to puff against the rocks below her. The Zeltron returned fire hurriedly, leaving a burning black scar on the speeder, and lay low against the ground.

A pause followed. For a moment, she could have sworn she heard talking.

“Oi! You up there! You a Sandy?”

“Are they talking to me?” she mouthed before crawling forward, rifle ready. “You wanna try that again?”

“Are you a *Sandy*? One o’ them Raiders?”

“What do you think?!” she yelled back.

“Well, Tusken’s’ve got them cartridge rifles,” the thickly accented voice shot back. “Blasters ‘re a little bit rarer wit them.”

Qyreia dared to peer through her scope and get a better view. The speaker was a portly-looking fellow; hairy, as unkempt in his grooming as his clothes were mismatched. The rest of the speeder-jockeys were just as disheveled in appearance as their apparent leader, sporting a wide variety of haircuts and odd jewelry choices that pegged them as stereotypical gangers. *Seems the Tusken’s weren’t the only raiders out here.*

“*That* and ya didn’ scream like a stuck womp rat after the first shot!”

That made her chuckle, if quietly. Said reverie was broken by a resounding shot from the sandcrawler: a Jawa ion blaster that left a lot of smoke from the shooter’s muzzle as much as on the big, dilapidated looking speeder of the swoop boss.

“Seems you made some friends!”

“These parasites?! They took salvage from *our* territory!”

“Yeah?” A grin crawled back onto her lips. “What’s the haul?”

The big man guffawed, making his sweaty, dirty exposed belly jiggle slightly, even seated as he was behind his speeder for cover. “Sorry lady! Ahm afraid that’s trade secret!”

Another shot rang out from the Jawas, traded off by a little burst from the swoop gang. They were in a stalemate.

“Well if I were *you*, I’d be a little more forthcoming with secrets to the person that’s got your hairy chest in the center of her crosshairs.” She saw a slightly worried expression wrinkle the neatly trimmed facial hair that circled around his lips — the one part of him that was well-kempt. “And that besides, the one that saved your collective choobies from getting karked by a tribe of *Sandies*.”

That at least brought a crooked grin to his otherwise worried expression. “Ya got a point there. Starfighter. Out in the flats. She was leaving a smoke trail a kilo high yesterday, but the rats nicked her and ran off. We cornered ‘em here an’...”

“You said *starfighter*?”

He paused, interrupted. “Yeh?”

“What kind?”

“The hell should I know for?!” he belted, frustrated now at this stranger that was equally threatening him and offering help in the same hand. “What’s it matter to you?!”

“My ship was crashed out in the flats yesterday!” Her eyes darted to the Jawas that seemed to be listening in on the exchange. “A T-65 X-Wing.”

That caught both parties’ attention. The swoop gang suddenly seemed a lot more excited at their potential quarry, and these besiegers’ morale soared. Meanwhile, the Jawas looked to be convening about something, those outside turning their attention to the dark interior. Qyreia shifted her head for a moment, half expecting to see Sand People crouched in the distance when she looked over her shoulder. There were, thankfully, none to be found.

“Well lady,” the boss belted, noting his gang’s renewed vigor, “rules o’ the desert an’ all, tha’s finder’s rights!”

“And it seems you’re not the *finder*!” She flicker her head at the sandcrawler, noting the Jawa watching her through a set of binocs. “Maybe I should be negotiating with *someone else*.”

The leader jerked upright with an indignant jiggle. “You what?!”

Qyreia’s grin was a little more toothy now, and definitely more devious. Not that *they* could see that from down among the swoops. “Hey Jawas! Whaddya think? My ship and some parts to lift this for you?”

A buzz of excitement went through both camps, the gangers arguing and fuming, the Jawas jabbering on with random screeches of “Utini!” That was the only Jawa word the merc was even familiar with. The non-Jawas came up with the first offer though.

“We’ll get you back to civilization if you help us out! Even cover your transport costs!”

*What part of “my ship” don’t you Hutt-lickers get?* Her eyes went to the Jawas.

Unsurprisingly, the one that tried to speak for them babbled away in their native tongue.

“*Basic*, motherfracker! Or get a droid!” She rolled her eyes as the small robed figure excitedly disappeared. “Or a goddamn Wookiee, I don’t care.”

“How about this speeder, huh?” The boss ran up to one of the lower-grade vehicles of his band. “And a personal escort to the Mos Espa starport?”

She glanced at him and his raised bid. “You want a military starfighter in exchange for *that*?”

The Jawas angrily shot at him, maybe because they were already angry at each other, but Qyreia could’ve sworn it was also because he was trying to cinch the deal while the opposing party was still trying to get their first bid. The shot threw up a burst of detritus at his feet, but otherwise left the rotund human unharmed. It was also starting to get warm now that the suns were clearly breaking free of the horizon. *At least it’s not in my eyes this time*, she thought, watching the boss maneuver around his increasingly agitated subordinates.

“Or my speeder! It’s yours! Just help us!”

He *did* have a nice speeder, she had to admit. The make and model were a little bit outside of Qyreia’s immediate span of knowledge, but the hood ornament seemed familiar. Plus, even with the dents and carbon scoring, it was still in very good condition; a lot better than her starfighter was at least. But the speeder didn’t support four laser cannons and have a bunch of astrogation coordinates in it.

*Frack. I forgot about those.* Qyreia’s attention was pulled away by the renewed gibberish of the Jawas. They had what looked like a very rudimentary protocol droid with them, given how cobbled together it appeared.

“He-lo. We wa-nt tr-a-de wi-th you.”

*Well, at least it speaks Basic*, she thought tiredly as the Jawas let out a victorious “Utini!” Apparently they weren’t exactly sure the thing would work. The swoop gang

leader looked like he wanted to interrupt, but was a little bit off-put by the extra guns aimed at his crew.

“I want my ship,” the Zeltron called back, “with *all* of its constituent parts, *and* a ride to the nearest starport.”

There was a long string of angry gibberish, some at the air, more at each other, another string at the droid, and a handful at the one apparently trying to fix it on the fly.

“Whassit saying?!”

“Shut up!” Qyreia belted at the human. He didn’t seem to appreciate it, but he did as he was told.

“Trade ba-ad. Can give tr-tr-transport to settle-ment. Other parts t-t-t-to sell for off-world.”

Beef, as Qyreia’s more and more agitated mind was starting to name the swoop gang’s boss, wagged his finger in accusation at the Jawas. “Nah nah, we can do bettah! Your ship *and* we tow it back to our shop, eh? Sound good?”

Not that Qyreia wanted to be in the middle of the gang’s hideaway, but it did seem the better deal. Besides, judging by the looks of things, she could outfight most of them anyway, even outnumbered. She figured most of the casualties laying on the ground were caused by the Tusken slugthrowers, given how the repeated pot-shots between them had yet to effect any results. The Jawas’ furious burbling only redoubled, along with several wrench-bangs against the droid’s chassis. They huddled together, chittering quietly for several long moments, before finally turning around to address the Zeltron again.

“If you ge-et rid of *burrakas*...” They slammed the droid’s hull again. “...get rid of ass-thieves, we will give-return ship with parts and take to Espa po-po-port.”

She looked down at the swoop gang. “Well?!”

“Well what?! We gave you our final offer!”

“Boss,” one of the gangers said, scooching closer from behind a bike, “them Jawas just gav’er a better deal.”

“Shush!”

“Your boy’s right,” Qyreia called down. “So, you got a choice. Either make a better offer, or make like a dust storm and blow off.”

The look on Beef’s face was near raging as he blustered. “Or you’ll what?!”



“You know, I can’t thank you enough for this, guys,” Qyreia said happily, enjoying the breeze from atop the sand crawler.

The Jawa next to her chittered happily and offered her something resembling a drink, but she politely waved him off. It would be a few days’ ride to Mos Espa, but that was just more time for the Zeltron to work on her ship. Her benefactors were shrewd, even underhanded, but if they seemed to respect one thing, it was a bargain. And they got their money’s worth with her.

The densely-packed carcasses of a dozen swoop bikes in their chop-shop was testament enough to that.

She was still wary of the little buggers. They liked to poke at her sometimes, as though she were an oddity. Given how they smelled — and it was a pungent odor — she figured it had something to do with pheromones. She’d heard something once about Jawas’ non-verbal communication methods. But they were her hosts, and she wasn’t about to look a gift-bantha in the mouth.

Besides, it gave her a good excuse to strip the flight suit to her waist. If not for the heat, then because it was easier to work on her crumpled X-Wing. While they weren’t the best at speaking Basic, Jawas understood parts and maintenance. And with the extra parts offered for her services, the ship would be close to working order by the time they reached Mos Espa, where she could get the real services.

*Just enough to get her space-worthy and with a working hyperdrive. Repairs back home are free. They can do the heavy lifting.*

For now at least, she bathed herself in the mild afterglow of victory and the light of the twin suns. It was as easy as it came out in the Tatooine wastes.