

Madness in the Museum

The Nautolan said they would die screaming.

While he might have been one for a fight, his human-looking compatriot seemed less inclined for a showdown. Especially so when there were clearly so many of these “pretenders” showing up, seemingly unperturbed by the earlier show of electric vengeance. Whatever their plans, it didn’t involve a grand, decisive fight here and now. At least, that was what many of the Arconans in the museum assumed as the self-proclaimed deities withdrew deeper into the museum behind another wave of their thralls, rather than stay and fight over their precious, personal accoutrements. Not right there and then, anyway.

Cultists, though, were little more than a diversion to delay the Arconans. Their numbers proved the most avid deterrent to their advance, but between the blasters, lightsabers, and Force powers, this new wave went the same way as the last.

“The *frack* was that all about?!” Qyreia heaved, catching her breath as the combat subsided. “Now we got Nautolans down here?!”

“I believe we just met the ‘gods’ whose artifacts we are currently in possession of.”

The Zeltron rolled her eyes. “Right. Of course. What’s a trip to the museum without fighting some goddamn *deities*?”

Lucine glanced at Alaisy, who seemed content with picking through the bodies, looking for the wounded, and then leveled a stare at the Galerian Quaestor. “How would you like to prove that they are not?”

Qyreia looked up from her hunched position. “Pardonfrack?”

“You always like to joke about sending in someone... *competent* if you wish to have someone removed properly.” A subtle, coy smile worked its way onto Lucine’s lips. “Perhaps you would like to put your money where your mouth is?”

That seemed to catch the attention of the others, if only just. Corporals Rens and Heks both just seemed a little confused, albeit the latter was somewhat distracted by the Ewok treating his wounds. Not that Bub was really listening anyway. The body-gloved Sith, Alla’su’s crown still in-hand, seemed to take cursory note; a momentary pause in her gait and the slightest angling of her masked face toward the conversation. Qyreia, however, was likely the one with the oddest expression as she righted herself, now that her equilibrium was normalized.

“You want me to go after them?”

“Just one.” The redhead glanced toward the doorway the two gods had escaped through with a certain knowing glint in her eyes. “I believe one of our own is chasing after the Nautolan, Eulauti. That leaves Alla’su.”

Qyreia chewed on that momentarily. *She can sense someone out there. That or she’s bantha-poodooing me and I’m about to get double-teamed.* Still, the prospect wasn’t without its allure. “Sure. Why not?”

“I thought you might like that prospect,” Lucine said coyly as the Zeltron passed by.

“I don’t,” she replied without looking back. “But I like to earn my keep. Besides,” the merc added quietly to herself, “that looked a *lot* like space magic sparkiness.”

As casual as her exit was from the scene of the skirmish, Qyreia was all too aware that there were going to be more cultists waiting in the wings. *There’s always more cultists. And droids. It’s like they’re on karking sale at some goddamn villain mega-store.* With that in mind though, as soon as she was out of sight of the others, she immediately took on a more cautious, stealthy posture, clinging to whatever shadows could be found and bounding behind anything that could be considered cover. The sounds of fighting echoed through the glass-and-stonework halls, distant hints of the larger conflict at play. The noises were hardly infrequent either, but their quiet yet permeating nature said that there were more Arconans here than she originally thought.

More cultists too.

Probably even some of the creatures from Atolli.

So long as there’s none of those tentacle beasties, we’ll be okay, the mercenary thought with a quiet shudder. Her clothes were still crusty from the half-flooded maintenance tunnels and all their rusty water. She didn’t even want to think about the bits of gore that might be entangled in her hair or clinging to her shirt or back. Falling into the eviscerated corpse had been a bad enough experience without the shudder-inducing memories. An added foray with squid-headed quadrupeds would have just been salt in the wound at this point.

As she was making her way through a room full of artifacts from some ancient burial chamber, the sound of multiple rapid footsteps caught her attention. The Zeltron sidestepped behind a large stone sarcophagus, feeling a slight tingle for the proximity to the death paraphernalia. Instincts started to kick in that told her to get ready to shoot; to set an ambush and annihilate the group. The muscles in her shoulder stiffened in fighting this urge, withdrawing further behind the display as the dozen-or-so cultists tromped by, shouting motivations anchored in their gods and directing tactics alike. The steps grew louder and louder still. They sounded almost cacophonous, as though they were right next to her.

Qyreia held her breath, not even daring to swallow the knot sitting uncomfortably at the back of her throat.

And then the steps vanished, diminishing into echoes down the hall along with the voices. It seemed almost a miracle that none of them had noticed even the muzzle of her gun. Then again, in hunting one 'god', she might've invoked the beneficence of her own. Deities always did seem so *competitive*.

With a sigh of relief, as well as resuming her normal breathing, Qyreia stepped out from behind her cover, rifle panning the room just in case, before continuing on her way. The route took her along a balcony walkway that overlooked the foyer where, below in the lobby, she could see what looked like the Nautolan, Eulauti, dashing out the front door. Or through a broken facade window. It was hard to tell. What was more clear was Strong and Ruka tearing after him.

"Please do not harm yourself doing battle with such a creature, Mister Ya'ir!"

"Tey tvhron, ey baaciniiro ZCEPI?!"

"I do not know what that means, sir, but I assume it was ill-mannered!"

"I said would you shut up?!"

"Good luck, guys," Qyreia whispered with an appreciative grin as they too disappeared in their pursuit. *I've got my own schutta to deal with.*

The mercenary's brain told her that the goons were likely all taking their orders from a central location; likely a central figure. Of course, there was probably the head-cultist; the grand wizard, or whatever he or she styled themselves as. But adjacent to the mortal leader, just maybe, and probably likely, was the self-styled goddess. She seemed the directing type, preferring to tell people what to do and where to go rather than so much as chip a nail.

Almost like we have one of those ourselves, Qyreia thought with a wry grin, the image of Lucine coming into her head. Part of her had wanted to say something to the Sith about how, at least this time, she didn't think the redhead was behind this. After the last social event though, where Lucine and the Zeltron had butted heads each in their own crude fashion, it didn't seem right to make any jabs. No, if Qyreia wanted to twist that knife, she'd wait until the right moment. She wanted Lucine to keep thinking that she'd forgiven her, if she believed it at all. Or make her *think* that the merc thought that she thought that...

Too complicated. Let's focus on one high-and-fracky schutta at a time.

First though, she had to find Alla'su.

Follow the stream, find the source.

A room filled with textiles encased in rows upon rows of glass offered quite the upstream viewscape. Qyreia's eyes fell upon clothes, banners, and tapestries of all Selenian kinds; some merely fanciful or ancient patterns, others telling a story of man, or myth, or both. And there she was in the midst of it, crusty and angling her rifle left and right in expectation of the next random attack. Somewhere deep inside, Qyreia recognized the gross disparity of what these dichotomous images offered. How, once upon a time when she was younger, she might've taken the time to read the placards and take pictures, walking through with friends or a romantic partner. Never with a weapon. Never out for blood. It gave her a renewed longing for the normalcy she always wanted. For herself, and in the same offhanded way people prayed for peace, she wanted the same normalcy for the Selenians.

A snarl caught her attention and she froze. Her eyes scanned in every possible direction that wasn't the solid floor below her, but only came away with more views of stylized weavery. *Okay. They're in here, but unless they're invisible, she thought, still glancing around nervously, I can't see them. Maybe they haven't noticed me either.*

Taking extra careful steps to avoid making noise, the merc sidestepped off to the right and behind a display, away from the animalistic sounds. Again her trigger finger itched, especially so with these monsters that kept creeping out of the woodwork; and again she suppressed the itch in favor of prudent caution. Her feet carried her along the length of the display, ears constantly trained on the growling that seemed ever present, making it impossible to tell if the creature was ghosting her movements or not. Step by silent step. Qyreia was hesitant to even grab the sling for fear of unnecessarily rattling the metal attachment points despite the same risk if she didn't.

Just go back to looking at the pretty pictures, you creepy motherfracker whatever you are. I'm not even here.

Passing from display to display was the worst part. It left her nice and open. The first time went smoothly. The second attempt was cut short as she saw one of the larger specimens traipsing slowly down the line several rows over. *Tentacles*. She *really* wanted to avoid this one. Fortunately, it didn't seem to notice her, and the Zeltron reattempted her crossing successfully, moving further and further along until she was through the door and into the next part of the museum.

As a center of art and culture like Celeste, it was unsurprising that — even underwater — the museum had a large colonnade hall. But things were quiet here. Eerily so. There was nowhere else to go, though.

Qyreia took to the expanse at a quick but cautious trot. There couldn't be much more room to the museum, and she had now gone through several layers of goons, plus the monsters that seemed to be held in a reserve capacity of some kind. She had to be close.

"C'mon you little self-aggrandizing schutta, let's get it on."

A large, heavy-looking double door stood sentinel at the far end of the hall, closed but unguarded. Based on the sounds that still managed to eke weakly into this sanctum, of sorts, most of their forces were still occupied elsewhere. Her pace slowed as she reached the door, plans finally starting to take shape now that she was potentially within reach of her target.

Probably a Force user, so telekinesis? Maybe likes the shocky stuff like her bug-eyed buddy? Might even sense me coming, so I don't even have the element of surprise.

The last note in her thoughts had her approach the door more cautiously. Her gut said something wasn't right, but she was lacking in almost any other option, save for blowing it open, but she wanted to save her explosives for the actual fight.

A whispered, "Here goes nothing," and she was pushing the door open.

The heavy thing creaked loudly on its hinges. Plenty of warning for the lithe creatures waiting on the other side. In an instant, they were pouncing down from perches on the stonework above the doors, snarling with teeth and claws bared to tear into their prey. Qyreia threw herself forward, twisting to shoot the nearest one as it fell onto her, taking a claw to her shoulder for the effort. Her attention turned toward the second creature just as the pain of the fresh gash in her skin just started to register, noting with some satisfaction that the heavy door, no longer held open by her, had closed on the other assailant, leaving it scrambling to free itself.

The merc didn't give it that opportunity. However, it seemed her blaster left a very scream-like echo in the atrium she now found herself in.

"My children," came a somewhat weak voice from below.

With the ambush abated, Qyreia took a moment to take in her surroundings as she righted herself to find the source of the voice. The Zeltron was, to her surprise, on a sort of balcony walkway in a large rotunda, with columns that circled the room on both floors: thicker on the bottom for support, thinner above for more decorative purposes, and all in varying shades of polished pink and white granite. Marine life skeletons were scattered throughout, with a huge skeleton suspended from the ceiling dome over the open ground level. There, with two more, larger creatures, stood the raven-haired goddess, Alla'su, and she did *not* look happy.

"Oh I'm sorry," Qyreia called down with blatant sarcasm, "was... was that one of yours? You know, it's hard to tell them apart after... well, after you've killed so many of them."

"You pretenders know nothing of the games you play at. I was here millennia ago, and I'll..."

The merc let loose a shot from her blaster, and Alla'su only narrowly avoided the collision, throwing up a barrier even as one of her remaining guardian beasts stepped in

front of her to catch the bolt. The human gave a wry smile in reply to watching the red energy dissipate, only to lose it as the Zeltron tossed down another quip.

“Sorry, were you still talking?”

Something about the ancient woman seemed to glow without glowing, and her twin entourage seemed to move with unspoken coordination. It was so quick that Qyreia, somewhat distracted by her own banter, couldn't sight in the creatures before they disappeared underneath the balcony, shadowing her movements to prevent her from simply circling around to shoot them. This seemed to please the goddess, who still looked to be maintaining her invisible shield, given her posture.

“You are not even one of the usurpers. You are a servant, like my worshippers.”

That gave the Zeltron pause from looking for a way to get at the creatures. She peppered the human's barrier with blaster fire; ineffectual, but it seemed to catch Alla'su's attention. Her eyes darted to the columns below the red woman, watching as her children clambered up the smooth stone.

“Lemme tell you something, you inconsequential fish-fracker,” Qyreia said, noting how the irreverence so irritated the human. She also noted, some couple dozen meters around the curve of the rotunda, a stairway that likewise curved with the room down to the ground floor.

“You impious little...”

“You know all those burned pets and eggs of yours back on Atolli?” she interrupted. “That little island? Torched your temple and all? Hiii, *you're welcome.*”

Qyreia could have sworn that she saw a blood vessel bulge in Alla'su's pretty features. She kept the goddess' attention with another burst of blaster fire, pelting her every few steps just to hold her in place. The sound of a scrabbling claw on the railing behind her caught the Zeltron's attention, and she threw a hip-fired shot at the creature. The red bolt exploded on the stonework and it disappeared. Down below, the goddess took the moment of respite to unsheathe her daggers, brandishing them with deadly intent, only to be stopped after a couple steps and throw up her barrier again when Qyreia resumed the fusilade.

“I will teach you to respect your gods!” Alla'su seethed, her pretty features framed in all of her subtly elegant gold finery twisting in a mix of fury and gleeful expectance.

“*Schutta,*” Qyreia called back, volume spiking as she called down wrathfully, “*I'm the only goddess here! And I'm fresh outta mercy!*”

Such affrontery the ancient Selenian deity had never heard in her life. For half a moment, she thought the red woman had gone mad when the red blasts of energy redirected toward the ceiling in an ineffectual show. She was even on the cusp of

laughter when she realized just a little too late that the shots hadn't missed. They were just aimed at something else.

Something like the cable anchors for the giant aquatic skeleton hanging from the ceiling.

Her mind had only to touch at the fringes of her children's minds. The nearest leapt from its pillar toward Alla'su even as the monstrous bone display came down in what appeared, for its size, to be in slow motion. Her caxquette collided with her in a blur, cradling and throwing her aside just as the bleached carcass crashed to the stonework floor.

Simultaneously, the other child tore from its place of safety to charge the Zeltron. It was fast, even a little surprising, but close enough for Qyreia to flip the weapon to automatic fire and unleash a burst that tore into its flank. Its pounce rolled over mid-air, ragdolling to collide in a meaty heap against the wall. That was when the raucous and cacophonous crash of the giant skeleton caught the merc's ears, turning her head momentarily before she simply dashed for the stairs.

Her rifle was shouldered and ready as she went down, but it almost seemed unnecessary as she surveyed the chaos her little scheme had wrought. The bones were wrecked, broken and splintered all across the floor, but plenty enough survived to pin and crush the creature that had tried to save its master. Alla'su was, for her part, stunned but saved from the damages of thousands of pounds of calcium on her otherwise beautiful but frail form. Visually, it was almost a sad sight to behold. For the Zeltron, feeling the edges of the human's anger and despair churned her stomach slightly; even more so when she leveled her rifle at Alla'su's chest and the would-be goddess's countenance took on an air of realization.

There was still enough time to resist. She had to. She had convinced herself of their victory; been bolstered by Eulauti and his vigor. She had dared to fight this battle, however long it had been planned, and how fleetingly it seemed to have lasted.

At least her barrier could hold off the red woman's gun. Maybe even long enough to call for help.

"Let's see how your dumb karking magic powers like *this*."

Dropping a hand to her belt, and still firing with the other, she pulled the frag grenade from her belt and lobbed it in the human's direction. It was hard to tell if Alla'su recognized the device at all. It wasn't exactly new technology, much like blasters or other firearms, but Selen was a special sort of place in its isolation. Her eyes danced to the fist-sized bit of metal as it dropped, clunkily bounced toward her, and settled to a gentle roll all the way up to her barrier, even bumping it gently and rolling backward a hair's breadth.

For half a heartbeat, she felt back in control. Then the grenade went off, and her world became a flash of screaming hot orange and white.

Qyreia was spared the brunt of the deadly fragments by the skeleton itself and the thick pillars that lined the rotunda. Once the detonation was done and the worst of the shrapnel had either embedded itself or bounced off the walls, she slipped from her position of cover, rifle up, to see Alla'su kneeling, her olive skin mottled with smoke and rivulets of her own blood from the metal shards embedded in her flesh. She was still alive, but the barrier hadn't held like she'd thought. Hadn't focused. Now the shield was broken, and there walking toward her was the impious, impudent, red skinned blue haired woman that suddenly seemed a lot larger.

A moment passed between them of just taking the other in like this.

Then it ended in a flash of red.

Rather ignominiously, Alla'su lay half-sprawled on her back, contorted, still beautiful despite the damages wrought to her. Given her fine and appreciable curves, coupled with the stark black hair, her body reminded Qyreia far too much of Keira, and too suddenly the feeling of her finger on the trigger brought a sharp nausea to her stomach that she struggled to swallow back. There was still one more thing to do after all.

She hefted the Denton charge in her off hand, weighing its sizeable potency thoughtfully, before walking over and settling it in the crook of the dead woman's breast, cradled between her arms like so many had cradled the eggs and hatchlings that had burst from their own chests back on Atolli. The Zeltron stepped back, soberly appreciating the scene, before turning and jogging back behind a pillar. She dared to peek her head around the edge of her cover and take a final look, but paused when she heard what sounded like one of the doors to the room groan open, like so many heavy wooden doors do. From the upper floors, there was a sleek shadow that seemed to peer down momentarily, then leap with a grace that seemed almost like flight, to land at its master's side. The caxquette regarded the dead goddess' body carefully, not even aware that across the room, a red finger was adding pressure to the activator button.

One less of you.

The Denton charge went off with such violence that Qyreia was nearly knocked off her feet, even from behind the massive column of pink granite, and she worried for a moment that it would totter back and land on her. But the only great damage was in the floor, where a rather large crater of shattered stone created a gruesome indentation in the otherwise pristine room, not counting the latent heat and smoke from the explosion.

The skeleton was almost non-existent anymore.

Alla'su's body, and her creatures that had been at her side, were vaporized, save for a few chunks scattered here and there about the room.

There was a grim realization, a feeling of not-quite-satisfaction, that sat heavy in Qyreia's chest. She looked at the bits of jewelry and pieces of smoke-choked, red-coated olive skin and chunks of flesh, considering for a moment to take something. *A memento mori*, even a bit of evidence for her contractor. But if Lucine wanted a trophy, she decided, she could come get it herself. Alaisy could deck herself out in a collection of dead women's finery all she liked. The Galeres Quaestor would not be part of that, though.

Zeltrons respected the dead. *Qyreia* respected her opponents, even if she hated their creations.

For now, she just needed to call in to the Consul that the job was complete. Then fight her way out, get to Keira, and forget this ever happened. Go home and have the wedding she should have been at right then. *I should be home right now*, she thought soberly, looking at the devastation and hating herself a little more for it. *One thing at a time, Q ol' girl.*

She keyed her comm, feeling very lonely in the room as her voice echoed off the walls.

"Lucine? It's done."