

## Tipool City Dandora, Doran System

*We just have to get the data to back to the ship.*

That should have been a simple enough task. *Should* being the operative word; one that Qyreia was increasingly starting to consider over- and misused. R3-M3, her droid that was better known as Reme, was situated away in a dark alcove of the building while the Zeltron mercenary ponder what the kark to do about the lumbering mass of flesh and crystals standing between her and her ship.

Judging by the blazon on the armor — what parts of it weren't covered by the protruding red crystals — these were the unfortunate volunteers that the Restorationists had cobbled together through their perverse sciences. All in all, they weren't too dissimilar from the same creatures that had been spawned by the tribal-looking woman in the intel brief. Still, it was something of an "I told you so" toward the faction of Imperial Remnants that so espoused their elevated ethics and political distancing from the old Empire.

It shambled toward where its last victims had fled, bits of flesh hanging off the crystals jutting out from its skin and from gaps in its armor — some gaps the unfortunate result of those same crystals. What sorts of tissues, or whose they were, was left to the imagination.

"Sick frackin' schuttas, all of 'em," Qyreia muttered as she watched the *thing* shuffle a little further on.

This was likely going to be their biggest obstacle in getting back to the Harmonist sympathizers in the Severian lines. With Reme carrying the sliced data from the skull-wearing woman's ship, getting back was of paramount priority. Not wanting to have this thing potentially at her back, much less attacking any of her actual friends — to say nothing of the other members of the Brotherhood who espoused the Harmonist cause — simply going around wasn't an option either.

She slunk through the building up to the second story, finding several windows that had been trashed in the wanton destruction the creature had caused. Shredded bodies and weapons lay on the ground, the former exhibiting deep cuts that were as likely to have been from the crystals as from being thrown through the window. One of those had caused them to bleed out into the carpet.

Even Qyreia's careful steps squished on the thick, red-soaked fabric.

The Restoration trooper was still in sight when she came to one of the windows with nearly all of the glass broken out of the frame. She had to stand to aim over the knee-high pane that remained, preferring to free-hold her heavy rifle rather than approach the jagged edge and use it as a firing platform.

*This is almost too easy*, she thought briefly as she centered her sights on the thing's back. She regretted the idea as bad luck before she even squeezed the trigger. Then she fired, feeling the satisfying kick as the rifle lanced green into the crystals on the thing's back.

Seeing the creature double over gave her hope. Seeing him... *it* get back up, the crystals glowing for a second or two before fading, reversed any high spirits the Zeltron had.

It didn't want the fleeing Revenants anymore. Now, as it turned, it wanted *her*.

"Ah frack."

The Restoration trooper didn't so much roar or scream as just bellow in an oddly hollow, almost quiet tone. It was as if the crystals were screeching rather than whatever remained of the formerly-human thing's vocal cords. As it shambled rapidly forward, a blaster, seemingly held by the crystals that were once its hand, rattled off a burst of red bolts that peppered the space around the merc.

Shaking off the initial shock of the scream, she reshouldered her rifle, aimed at a soft spot in its shoulder, and fired again.

The joint practically evaporated from the armor-piercing shot, punching it hard enough to send it lurching back onto its off leg. As it heaved its torso back upright though, Qyreia witnessed its shoulder *reassemble*. It wasn't a recreation of the joint, in the proper sense. Rather, it looked as though the same sort of crystals boiled up from his exposed tissues and blood, filling in the gap until a red growth, similar to the rest that covered its body, sat jutting up from where the hole had been.

For a moment, the thing seemed to inhale before letting out another not-scream, trundling rapidly toward the building and its target while unleashing burst after burst of blaster fire.

"Oh great," Qyreia huffed as she dashed through the spattering carpet, "now we've gone and made it mad! Just what I wanted! Just. karking. *swell!*"

Part of her said to run away, up to the roof, where she could maybe fight a running battle to a last-stand on top of the building. The other part said she could beat the beast out the back door.

She nearly slipped on the slick red coating on the soles of her boots as she wheeled through the door and down the stairs. All the while, she could hear it firing, pausing only long enough to let the mechanisms and barrel of its blaster cool. *So it's not mindless.* As she rounded the ground level landing and turned back into the main structure, she was met by a rather close-encounter as the thing stared at her from across the room.

A blink of a race ensued to who could bring their gun up first. It fired, but the burst only singed over her shoulder, not even biting through the armor save for some heat. Once Qyreia's rifle was hefted up, she fired straight at its head. As if anticipating it, the Restoration trooper twisted its torso, protecting itself with the fresh crystalline growth like a tower shield or pauldron. The movement might have spared its head, but it also spared the Zeltron its second burst, which went wild, peppering the wall in bursts of smoking plaster and tiny flames. Just enough distraction to let her slip away out the back door.

Her eyes danced over her equipment as she ran to another structure across a different street. *Frag grenades won't work. Just cause more crystal growth.* Part of her wanted to try and get nice and close to jam it down in a gap in the crystals like the war holos of soldiers doing the same with tanks, but something in her gut said that she did *not* want to get into a wrestling match with that thing.

It was out the back faster than she could cross, and it let loose another burst of fire that caught the Zeltron across the back. She fell forward, briefly wondering how fracked she was, until she heard the telltale sparking, shocking sounds of busted electronics. A glance over her shoulder showed her recon pack smoking: the shot had apparently hit her communications equipment, effectively destroying it, but leaving her comparatively unscathed. It also reminded her of what else was in there. It gave her an idea.

*Thank you god.* She rolled to her back, a burst of red energy beating into the pavement where she'd just been, while she brought her gun to bear, firing as soon as she knew the barrel was even remotely pointed at the creature.

The flash of green took it in the leg, severing the upper limb from its lower, only to be just as quickly reconnected by red crystals, if at a slightly *off* angle.

In an instant, she was rolling back onto her feet and dashing for the low structure ahead. It looked like some sort of boutique that attempted to mimic the ostentatiousness of the distant casino, but at bargain bin prices. The result was a good number of shiny things that cracked and melted when the Restoration trooper's blaster fire struck it, rather than shattering like a proper mirror and stonework tabletop. Qyreia had just enough time to smell the burning plastic as she ran to the back room, her bag unslung and a hand searching its contents.

When she came away with a Denton charge, a light smirk crossed her lips. "I am so glad he didn't hit *you* with that gun."

Her bag was dumped to the floor as she rounded into the room. Blaster rounds beat into the flimsy construction, tearing gaps in the thin wall and giving Qyreia a view of her opponent that was as much a blessing as it was foreboding, given how easily she could end up like the wall. Another burst barely missed her as the creature struggled to see through the small holes, only to get a reply as she put her barrel through the resulting

gap and fired, staggering it as the round impacted its lower chest. As before, it rewarded the Zeltron's efforts with more crystals.

*Okay, she thought as she withdrew her gun. Okay, I think I know how to get close enough.*

A hunch-grade plan was better than no plan at all; and the thing's constant ability to merely shrug off her high-powered rifle, or regenerate when she *did* hit, was quickly eroding away what few ideas she had.

She stepped to the door, the thing getting ever closer, angrily tearing through the boutique's front counter rather than go around just to get to her. Qyreia readied her rifle, balancing the explosive in her off hand.

"Okay, Q ol' girl. Moment of truth."

Qyreia rounded the corner, just as the Restoration trooper was righting itself from the half-shattered debris of the counter, and she charged. It nearly had its arm raised to fire only to be ruthlessly staggered when she fired into its crystal-covered chest. At such short range, the high energy bolt rocked it back into the counter, just barely catching itself with its gun arm.

It was all the opening she needed, taking the Denton charge and *slamming* its connective surface onto its chest crystals. The activation light glowed as she brought her hand away and vaulted over the crushed remnants of the furniture, barely escaping the creature's arm as it swung around viciously.

She fell, rolled, and was halfway to getting back up when the burst-action rattled off again, one of the shots taking her in the back of the thigh. A scream of pain precipitated her fall to the floor, rolling just to try and maintain forward momentum as much as to prevent another easy shot.

*Come on come on come ON!*

The pulse from the explosive quickened, and the creature seemed to pause briefly.

*Blow already!*

Prayers are rarely answered. To some extent, Qyreia regretted asking for it so fervently as the room erupted in a deafening blossom of flame and debris, throwing the Zeltron bodily through the ruined front facade. Shards of wood and glass nicked at her face and buried painfully into her armor before she finally hit the pavement outside, rolling to a rough stop while the building tried in vain to keep itself upright.

Burning and shattered framework toppled down into the craterous gap left in the wake of the explosion. As much pain as she was feeling, Qyreia looked up, scraped and bloodied, with mild appreciation.

“Regen *that*, frackwad.”

As the dust settled though, she could see a glow. At first, it was like a fuzzy bulb of bright reddish light. Slowly though, it materialized into polyhedral, pointed, crystalline shapes.

The sight that met her eyes was that of the creature, its semblance of crystal appendages glowing like near-white-hot metal, absorbing the destructive energy in a vain attempt to protect itself. The Restoration trooper’s chest, and most of its lower head, was not so lucky. Its ribcage was practically blown open, crystals struggling to manifest from the viscera; one even creeping out from the shredded, empty space of a lower jaw in sick mimicry of a tongue.

Qyreia heaved herself up, collecting her rifle as she limped heavily back toward the creature. She let loose a round into its exposed guts, feeling the scream of pain in her head rather than hearing it.

“That’s enough out of you, you goddamn pile of Hutt slime.”

She fired again, removing what remained of its mid-spine. Another screech. Another shot into the soft tissues.

“Shut. up.”

She shot again, and the crystals’ glow seemed to fade and dim, struggling to stay alive. *Living crystals*, she mused angrily as she stepped close enough to heft the rifle directly at the trooper’s face. The screech was weak, almost a whimper. For a moment, she could have sworn she heard a pleading whisper in her ear for mercy; to live. When her finger settled on the trigger again, and either the crystals or the human beneath or both realized what was coming, it roared out in defiant anger.

A whistling *crack* of energy lanced from her gun, and the screaming stopped.

All of it stopped.

She let her rifle arm drop to her side, just barely holding onto the gun as she stood there, staring listlessly at the body.

“*Told* you to shut up.” Sighing, she put a hand to her earpiece. “Hey. Reme. Come on out bud. I took care of the thing.”

The droid’s elated screech of ‘*victory*’ met her ears before she’d even turned around, and travelled all the way from its hiding place and into view by the time she’d managed to limp to the street. The R3 unit’s angrily concerned string of Binary brought the faintest of smirks to her lips.

“I’ll be okay, chrome dome,” she said as she patted the droid’s chassis. Qyreia looked back at the creature, unmoving and dilapidated, and sighed again. “Let’s go home, Rem,”

she grunted as she started limping back onto their original path to friendly lines. “We’re done here.”