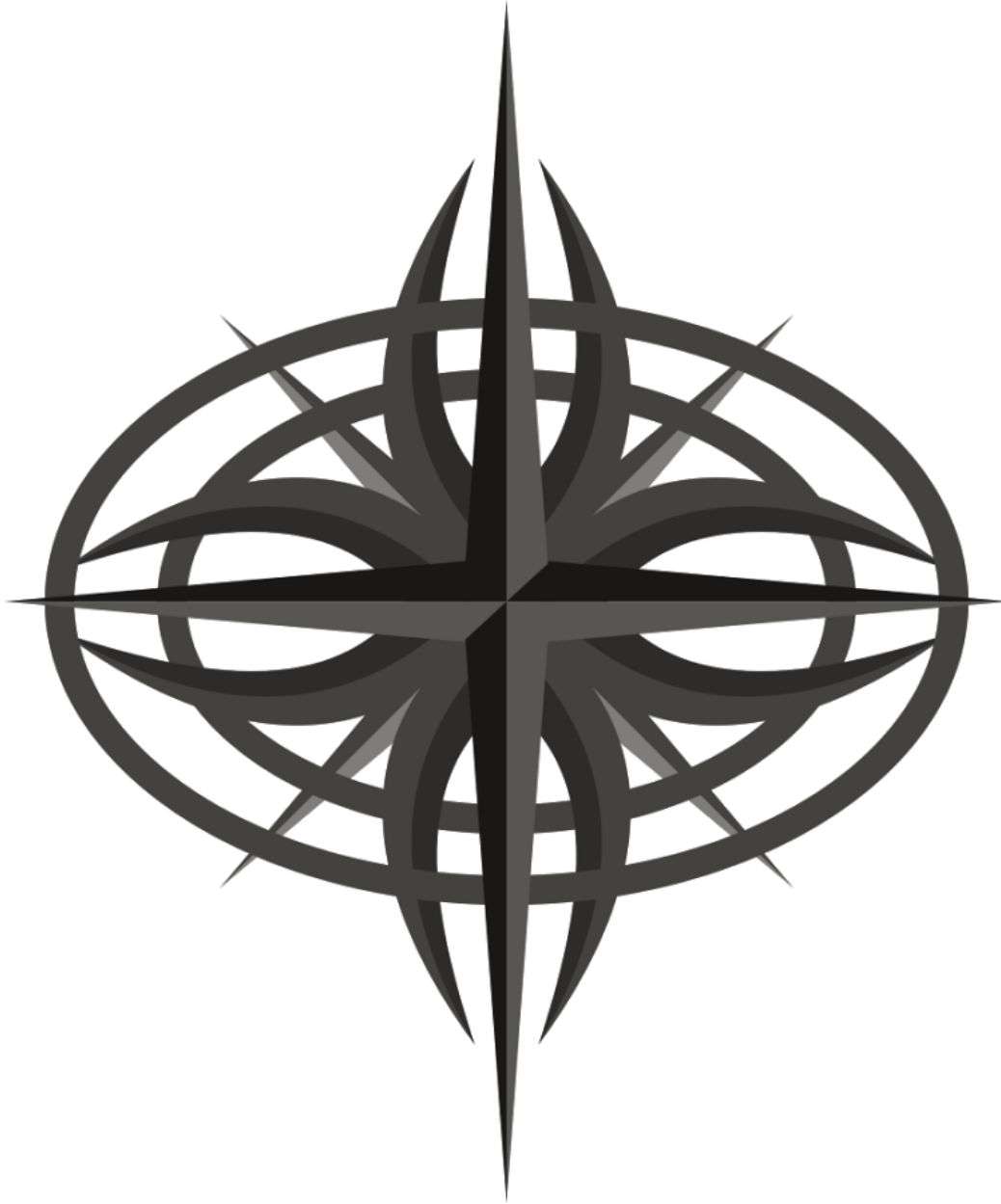


# Riven



**A Great Jedi War Fiction  
(XI — Round One)**

*Shattered stone. Sand churned to mud with the blood of his squad and the boots of godlings throwing light and fire and air itself. Nightmares come to life.*

“Lance Corporal Knoath, I asked you a question.”

“Sir!” replied the soldier, crisp but strained, concentration plain on his care-worn face. His hands remained clasped behind him. *At ease*, he thought, swallowing a harsh chuckle at the irony. Though his posture was stiff and unfailingly correct, his right thumb ran methodically across the smooth wood of the penance piece he held.

“My squad went dirtside at 05:10 local, sir. Hostile fortifications had already been strafed from the air. The advance scouts reported minimal hostiles, so the order came down to send in the groundpounders. We were in the second dropship...”

“And?” replied the captain, impatience plain in his voice.

*The larty's hatch swung back, her repulsorlifts kicking up sand and chips of stone as she hovered a few meters above the harsh desert ground. Grit scoured his visor and obscured his vision, but he jumped regardless, trusting the pilot to drop them someplace relatively clear. He was on point, and his squad was waiting on him.*

*Trusting or not, Dralin ran as he hit the ground, dropping into a crouch just clear of the LAAT/i's upwash. He tracked his E5 carbine up and across the horizon, searching for any skyliners. Pink and orange draped the bleached landscape, sunrise washing color across an otherwise drab waste. He did a second pass over the pitted, durasteel structure in the distance, then waved with his left hand over his shoulder. The roar of the larty's repulsors drowned out the world, but he knew his squad's boots would be hitting the ground. His hand moved to his chest, feeling the piece of carved wroshyr wood that hung around his neck. It pressed into his sternum, beneath his uniform, and felt like scent fresh-cut lumber. Donny appear to his right, just breaking his peripheral vision, and the world in front of him suddenly seemed a lot less empty.*

“And things went south, sir. Our intel was good, but...” Dralin trailed off, his quiet voice winding down like an old, mechanical chrono. The captain just looked at him, a mix of disgust and pity on his face. *Goddamn IOs. Not a crease in his pants or a fleck of dirt on his boots.* He knew what he wanted to say. An inferno rose in his throat, roiling, but he clamped down on it. It didn't take much to figure out why they were investigating the encounter, and the corporal wasn't going to help them point fingers. *Even if Command did kark things up.*

The young soldier took a breath, wincing at the vise that tightened around his chest, leaving his lungs feeling hollow. Wishing he had a bottle of ebla beer to sooth the fire in his throat, he looked back to the officer and forced himself to meet the man's dark eyes. “There were equipment problems, and we had to make due with the boots we had on the ground. We knew we were short on men, but we hoped surprise and training would make up for the lost edge.”

"It didn't though, did it?"

The captain's voice still sounded greedy, but its impatience was tempered by satisfaction. He knew the answer he sought, and saw the edges of it in the corporal's words.

"With all due respect, sir, it did. We made it from the LZ to the target without being spotted." Dralin's fingers slid back and forth along the polished wooden coin in his hands, and he forced his voice to remain calm. "The trouble didn't come until later."

Pain lanced through the soldier's head and the scent of charred ozone filled the room. He tried — unsuccessfully — for another deep breath, then did as the medic had suggested, forcing himself to recall his favorite jizz<sup>1</sup> tune by the *Modal Nodes*.

"Yes, fine. Good. Then get on with it, Knoath."

*Dralin pressed his body against the worn stone outcropping, remnant of some tumbled ruin that predated the ancient Academy itself. The town he'd grown up in, Menat Shaw, was considered rural, even by New Tython standards. Like most of Milil'ea's eastern coast, it was newly settled, and the idea of structures that dated back millennia boggled the young man's mind. I wouldn't mind seeing their carvings, though. Maybe bring a piece back to da's shop when they let me go back home. Kern nodded to him from his left, and Dralin peeked around the corner. There wasn't much to see, just rocky dunes and juts of stone, like the one he was using for cover, dotting the expanse of empty sand that stretched from his position to the Academy. Despite the apparent solitude, the corporal did as his sergeant had said, looking for glints of reflected light that might betray an enemy's scope.*

*"All clear," he murmured after a few moments, looking to his right.*

*Trejo, their Devaronian sergeant, returned the glance, then tilted his head to the rest of the fireteam. Dralin moved first, taking the lead, with Kern to his left and the sarge to his right. Donny, with his Heavy Repeater and its concussion grenades, would be bringing up the rear. The New Tython native headed northeast for the next set of ruins that looked marginally intact, roughly a hundred meters from the Academy. The other two fireteams that comprised Aurek squad would be doing likewise, hopping from cover to cover, closing as much distance as they could before converging for a frontal assault. Besh and Cresh squads were supposed to be approaching the Academy's rear, waiting for the diversion of Aurek's incursion. Their job was to knock - loudly - and keep the locals pinned down as much as possible while Besh and Cresh cleared out the militants holed up inside.*

*At least, that had been the plan. The chatter he'd overheard in the larty said that something had felled up a stabilizing fin on the other dropship. No word on their ETA. Trejo looked fit to gore someone with those horns of his when control said to press on for now and improvise. Sure. Attack an entrenched enemy*

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<sup>1</sup> An upbeat, swinging genre of [music](#), popular in cantinas and crime lords' dens.

encampment. Over thirty suspected hostiles. Oh, and there might be a few Force-users in place. *Dralin shook his head in frustration.*

*"No problem though. We'll improvise."*

*"What's that, Woody?" the Devaronian barked.*

*"Nothing, Sarge. Sorry," muttered the corporal, half embarrassed at the outburst, half at the nickname. Not everyone can be a soldier, he mused, rubbing the wooden penance piece through his chestplate. Someone has to make the tables. Of course, off-planet that someone was usually an automated fabrication plant. Yet another reality Dralin had never considered. What good were woodcarvers when everything was made out of steel? What place was there for him in that sort of galaxy?*

"There were ruins of old stone outbuildings surrounding the Academy. I think Sarge said that before the school was built, there had been some sort of temple there. He thought they had been outbuildings back when things were 'hoppin', as he put it. We were cagging up towards the target—"

"Cagging?"

Dralin paused for a moment, looking for the words to explain the maneuver. He tried to visualize it, but all he could picture was Farah, his pet Nexu, hopping from tree trunk to tree trunk. His da' had rescued the cub from a larger male and brought it home. She was always playing stalking games, trying to catch him and his sister as they hid from each other in the forests outside town. *Of course, she's getting on in years, now. I wonder if she'll still be alive when I get back. Her kidneys aren't too good. Not enough raw meat in her diet.* The young man shook his head, focusing instead on the swinging rhythm he had been humming in his head. *Concentrate. Farah will be fine. Sharin is looking out for her.*

"It's where you rush from cover to cover when approaching a target", continued the corporal, finding the words. "Like a Cag jumping from rock to rock when trying to get near-enough to campers to swipe their food."

The captain acknowledged the explanation with a nod and made a twirling motion with his hand, indicating that Dralin should continue. He tried. He opened his mouth to speak, but he couldn't seem to form words around the lump in his throat. The normal hustle and bustle that surrounded the officers' field posts was suddenly punctuated by explosions, and the lightweight prefab pitched at an awkward angle. The officer, for his part, seemed unperturbed. The corporal struggled to keep his balance and thought about Sharin back home, ignoring the dizziness and willing the recollections to subside. *She better not be getting mixed up with any boys. She's the one who was supposed to finally get off that rock and see the galaxy. Relationships are nothing but trouble.* He rolled the penance coin between his fingers, his

hands still clasped behind him, and tried not to think about Jaelyn. Tried not to hope they'd patch things up when he made it home.

"Well," he said softly, finally speaking again. "We made it to the edge of the target zone and were waiting while we could to see if Besh and Cresh had found another ride. That's when those copperheads started rushing out from the Academy."

*"Cover!" Dralin's throat felt like it tore open as he shouted the warning to the rest of Aurek, throwing himself to the dirt and bringing his carbine to bear on the line of grey-clad troopers pouring from between the durasteel doors. "We've got incoming!"*

*Somehow he had lost his helmet in the dive, and he shook his blonde hair from his eyes as he sighted along the barrel of his carbine. A chuff of breath from his left told him that Kern had hit the deck beside him, but even that was quickly drowned out by the staccato whine of blaster fire. Dralin pulled the trigger on his carbine, spitting a hail of scarlet at the troopers as they ducked behind the balusters that ringed the Academy. He had been cold moments before, but the chill had been banished by the oppressive heat of battle. He'd once had shore leave on Tatooine, and noon in the Judland Wastes had felt cooler.*

*Donny's repeater whomped from behind him, and a concussion grenade sailed towards the Academy, landing just shy of its entrance. The explosion ripped through a dozen soldiers, sending torn limbs and shreds of cloth hurtling through the combat zone. A second round landed moments later and the resulting shockwave twisted the metal-frame doors and caused them to fall in against one another, temporarily blockading the doorway.*

*"Open sheaf!"*

*Dralin barely registered Trejo's order until he saw the next concussion grenade land fifteen meters right of the first pair. As Donny tracked right, Dralin and Kern aimed left, spraying fire further down-range. It was an exercise in futility, trying to nail a target with a carbine at that distance without stopping to aim. But then, that was never the intention.*

*Just as the fourth grenade landed, Heavies from the other two fireteams opened up, raining mayhem down on the troops arrayed against them. As the grenadiers bombarded the enemy line, Dralin drew a bead on a trooper nearer the structure's entrance. The enemy soldier was turkey peeking around a column to locate Aurek's Heavies. Not on my watch. He depressed the trigger, stitching a trio of bolts across the militant's chest and dropping him to the dirt. One by one, Aurek's riflemen took out the soldiers lining the Academy's forward courtyard - those that weren't ripped apart or knocked unconscious by the concussion grenades.*

*The entrance fell into a quiet punctuated only by the cries of wounded and the angry shouts of those stuck inside the building and listening to their comrades die. A single durasteel column, stressed beyond anything its designer ever intended, collapsed.*

*Then all hell broke loose.*

"I take that this is when 'things went south?'"

"You'd think so, sir. But no, that actually went reasonably well. Everyone knew their jobs and did them. I found out later that we did have one casualty from fireteam three. Moryn caught a piece of shrapnel with his teeth—"

The corporal paused suddenly, his words grinding down. Moryn had been a good man. Steady. He knew most of the fireteams had a survivors' agreement, to take care of each other's families. *Who's going to take care of his little girl now?*

Dralin sighed and wiped a line of sweat from his brow. "Sir, I know it's a desert and all, but do you think we could kick the environmental controls up a notch?"

"They're already on high, corporal," replied the captain, puzzled, as he glanced to the thermostat on the wall. "It's only 20 degrees<sup>2</sup> in here."

"Oh, of course," came the soldier's muttered reply. "I don't know what I was thinking, sir."

It was the officer's turn to sigh as he looked the corporal up and down. "Do you need a break, son? I know this is rough. And that cast on your leg can't be making things any easier. We'll get you in a bacta tank as soon as this is over."

Though the captain never said it, Dralin heard the truth behind his words. *He might as well say it outright: "We'll give you the treatment you need once you give me the information I want. And not before then." Karking IOs!* Dralin shook his head and squeezed the *wroshyr*-carved piece in his hands. He could remember when he had made it. It had taken nearly a month for his hands to learn the hundreds of ways to run a blade along the stock of wood in order to get just the shaving you wanted to whittle away. The young man could smell the varnish of his father's workshop and the feel of his calloused, gnarled hands guiding Dralin's own. He'd shaped, carved and lacquered the piece from beginning to end as his father taught him the basics of his trade. Dralin had carried it ever since. In a way, it was his hope and heart. Gradually, the storm clouds receded from his gray eyes.

"No sir, I'm fine. Most of the rest is a blur anyway. We'd taken out the majority of their defenders. There were some stragglers still penned inside, but we had superior numbers and the Academy didn't have much in the way of choke points, so we thought we'd be able to settle things pretty quickly. That's when they showed up."

*He tasted copper and spat, blood-flecked spittle spraying across the sand-smoothed stones beneath him. Laughter rang out from the entryway, but there was no joy in it. Steady, boy. Take a deep breath, then get*

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<sup>2</sup> That's 68°F in real measurements.

the frak up! *The voice sounded familiar in Dralin's ears. Worn from years of smoke and work, but with an unspoken glow beneath the surface. He knew the voice. But he couldn't place it. It belonged somewhere else. In another life.*

*As the clouds of sand settled and his tears washed grit from his eyes, the courtyard swam back into focus. A Devaronian – Sarge, that's Sarge – leered at him crookedly, one of the pillars crushing his right leg. Something was wrong. Dralin wasn't very bright, but he knew he wasn't thinking clearly even by those standards. Something small – a chunk of stone, maybe – struck the back of his head, and he heard the voice again. Get up, kark you, and run!*

*"Da'?" It sounded like his dad, but that couldn't be right. He looked again at Sarge, hoping for confirmation, and suddenly noted the unnatural angle at which his neck was twisted. Panic knotted his gut and he tried to glance left, but the ground got in the way, reminding him that he was still prone. He inhaled, for the first time in what felt like years, and pain lanced through his chest. The breath died, aborted, and he gasped reflexively - sending a spear of fire through his lungs. His chest expanded and felt something stabbing into his sternum. Frakking ill-fitted armor. Should have known it would splinter. Kriffing quartermasters! A choking cough forced its way out, but he managed to push up against the ancient stones and turn his head to the left, hoping to see Kern with his carbine at the ready.*

*Instead he saw a sack of meat, vaguely shaped like his friend, but distorted by tusk-like protrusions and covered in sand-streaked blood. It took a moment for Dralin's mind to sort out the image, to identify the dozen different compound fractures that punctured his bronzed skin. His breath tried to catch again, tried to strangle him into the peace of unconsciousness. He knew that he should look around for Donny, but he couldn't seem to make his body obey him. As if his brain had seen too much and gone on strike, it refused to pass the message along to his neck that he needed to turn around. Instead, defying the screaming in his skull, he found his gaze tilting upward towards the malignant laughter that had startled him to wakefulness.*

*Three robed figures, one dark, one black, the other light, crossed sabers near the Academy's doors. Lightning flew from the dark one's fingertips, skittering across blades of crimson and gold. The black-robed figure lifted a hand and seemed to draw the lightning towards it. It coruscated into a point, growing until it threatened to blind Dralin. It seared his pupils, and he knew he had to look away. And yet his eyes refused to listen. Then, without warning, it disappeared, and a gale of wind flew from the figure, throwing his adversaries against the building's walls. Columns flew in the gale's wake, careening in every direction. The soldier tried to duck, but was thrown onto his back by the force of the wind. A column flew by overhead, low enough that it would have decapitated him had he retained his footing. He looked up again and the dark-robed figure had skewered the black, violet blade piercing his belly and extending through the other side.*

*It's too much, Dralin thought, looking away. He could see a veritable fleet of dropships approaching in the distance. He didn't think it mattered though. This would be over long before they arrived. With resignation, he looked back at the trio. It looks like dark and darker are down. That's something at least, he mused, assuming the Jedi was more likely to leave rank and file soldiers alive.*

*Then the white-robed figure laughed – that laugh – and Dralin knew: surely the galaxy itself was mad.*

“In the end,” murmured the corporal before trailing off. “...well, you know what happened in the end.”

“We do. But you don’t know how? You didn’t see their fight? Or the ruse?”

Dralin shook his head again, slowly. “No. Thank god, no. I don’t think I could have handled it if I did.”

The officer looked at him in silence for a few moments, as if knowing he was lying but also knowing that Dralin wasn’t going to give him any more ammunition. *You can investigate all you want. We did our jobs.* Finally, the captain nodded.

“Very well. Thank you, Lance Corporal Knoath. You’re dismissed.”

The enlisted man saluted sharply, remembering just in time to switch the penance piece to his off hand. The captain returned the salute and Dralin limped out, doing his best to approximate a normal gait despite the cast’s encumbrance. He rubbed the carving in his hand as he left, admiring the burnished surface and the tiny caricature of an ancient Jedi that decorated the wooden coin’s back. He’d be home soon. Maybe he’d make Jaelyn one and she would forgive him for leaving. They’d release him from his conscription any day now. With the fighting over, they’d have to, wouldn’t they? Dreams of home swaddling him, he barely registered the conversation picking up as he left.

“Doc, are you sure we can’t take that chunk of wood from him?” the captain asked, unfeigned concern in his voice. “I mean, I know he made it, that it reminds him of his family, but still. It seems unhealthy. Especially riven like it is.”

“Yes, I’m sure. It’s a...a touchstone. In a way, it’s what’s left of him, of his home.”

“But all those splinters...”

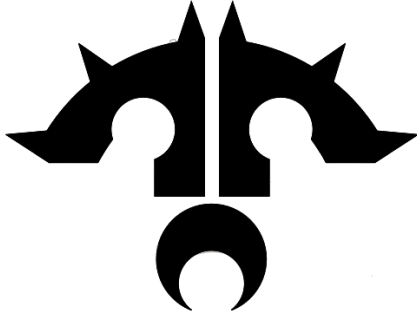
“I know. We remove them a few times a day and rebandage his hands. That’s all we can do for the moment, though, until he starts talking about what he saw. Anything else would do more harm than good.”

“Will he snap out of it?”

“Time will tell you more than I could, Captain. There’s always hope, though.”

“Not for him, there’s not. It’s been shattered.”





**Invictus, 91**  
**House Qel-Droma of Clan Arcona**