***A Nightmare of a Silent Dawn***

*Beep beep beep beep beep…*

“Ugh… shuddup…” Qyreia said groggily, outstretching a red arm to hit the snooze button on her alarm clock, finally hitting on the fourth downward slap on her nightstand and silencing the blaring beast. Settling back into her pillow, her grey eyes fluttering as she started to snooze again. Yet something seemed amiss. Brow furrowed and eyes narrowed slightly to see past the initial haze of wakefulness and note the time – a solid hour after she had intended to wake. *How many kriffing times did I hit the snooze?!*

With the practiced rapidity of one who is often behind schedule, she slid into some clean clothes, checking the pants and shirt via a smell-check, and burst out the door into the halls of the New Sadow Palace. She stifled as yawn with the back of her hand as she made her way down the hall, heading toward the small break room nearby to get a quick dose of caffeine. *Mmm, coffee*, she thought, smelling the heady aroma as the machine filled her cup. One filled, she reached briefly for the sugar, then thought against it, knowing that the bitter taste would wake her up more.

Lifting the mug to her lips, the first drop had not yet rolled onto her tongue when she noticed something was amiss. *Where is everyone?*

The break room was devoid of life, despite the coffee maker being ready to dispense. Thinking they could be elsewhere, the Zeltron shrugged it off, taking a long, slow sip at the dark liquid. It was only when she entered the halls that the oddity cemented itself. There was no one around at all. She lowered her mug, a worried look crossing her face as she looked in every direction for some sign of life.

“Hello?” Her meek call echoed softly against the dark stone walls, further unnerving her. “Son of a Bantha… Did I miss something?” She checked her datapad for any incoming messages, but there were no new ones, save for one that had a coupon for an Echani massage parlor, and another claiming to be a Dagobahn prince that needed funds to get off-world. *Okay*, she thought nervously, *so everyone is gone for no reason. Great. Just… great.*

Slowly and steadily, she began walking the halls, searching for her fellow Sadowans. Retracing back to her room, she knocked at each door only to get no response, finding many of them unlocked and all of them empty. With each passing room and hall, her coffee got lower and lower in the cup, until there was nothing left to sip or sniff – nothing to drink, and no aroma to calm her nerves. When she returned to her room, she opened the door half-expecting to see some sort of crazy surprise behind the door.

*Nothing.* She leaned against the doorframe, head in her free hand as she tried to rationalize the situation. As she ground the heel of her hand into her forehead for the umpteenth time, a sudden electric feeling trailed up her spine, along her neck, and into her brain stem, prompting an immediate halt to all movement. Her ears were in a hypersensitive mode unique to those in a survival arena, and were there any pins falling, she would have heard it from across the fortress. Instead was the near-static sound of silence, her own eardrums betraying noise where there was none save for her own breathing and heartbeat.

Ears and mind had just begun coming down from the heightened awareness when they heard the soft sound of laughter, like a distant child playing, and Qyreia’s head sprang left toward the source of the noise. Still, nothing was visible. *You’re chewing the luna-weed here, Q. Get it together.*

When she heard it again, now from behind, her body froze and she dropped the mug which promptly crashed into shards on the floor. Saliva that had pooled in her mouth was nervously swallowed back as sweat began to bead on her skin. Her muscles stiffened and, in one swift motion, she spun into her room, grabbed her blaster from its hook, and aimed down the hallway from where the sound had come. Her sights found only an empty hall.

With a painful feeling of isolation, she rolled her shoulders along the wall until her back was against the inside wall of her room, pistol at the ready in both her hands, pressed against her forehead. The cool metal helped calm her, as did the heft of the weapon itself. “Okay… Okay, calm down.”

She took a long, deep breath in, and slowly exhaled just as a loud flurry of footsteps and more laughter careened right past her door. “Oh hell no!” She spun around and, through her doorway, sent a flurry of shots in both directions down the hall, screaming all the while, “Frack you! Frack you,” *blam*, “and frack *you*,” *blam*, “and fracking frack fraaack!”

When she finally looked at her surroundings in detail, there was nothing save for the multitude of fresh scorch marks on the bleak stonework to break the spell of the stillness she felt all around. Still panting from her adrenaline spike, she collected what few things she had – mostly her weapons – and decided to make her way toward the hangars. *Better off in space than in here it seems.*

Every nerve fiber in her body was on alert, her mind almost manic as her head jerked back and forth in visual survey of her surroundings. Yet everything was still. Even as she passed by the great windows that gave a clear view of the surrounding forests of Sepros, the world without seemed unmoving, neither breeze nor bird stirring the treetops.

Still scanning the area around her, she gradually took more and more time to peer at the forest outside. Despite its unnerving state of motionlessness, it still offered a sense of escape from this nightmare. Just as her heart seemed to finally slow, a great creaking sound – like that of a large tree holding against a great wind – echoed from behind. *What? There’s no tree… A rope? It could be a rope? Why would a rope creak unless…?* She halted her mind from finishing that thought; wanted to keep herself from following the noise to its source. Yet her feet turned at the next juncture, where the sound repeated its emanation, toward a central gathering area.

As she grew closer, the sound seemed to grow not louder, but more numerous. When she finally reached the doorway, it sounded as if there might be dozens or hundreds of weighted ropes holding onto their parcels. She swallowed hard against a dry throat, one hand holding her pistol as the other reached out for the door panel. The door opened with a mechanical hum, settling into its slot as the Zeltron took one hesitant step into the darkened chamber.

The room was dark – pitch black save for the beam of light seeping in from behind her diminutive frame. She didn’t need to take a second step in. Her ears directed her view up and, though she could not make out who was above her, she could dimly make out the shapes of a multitude of feet, all swaying gently from the ceiling, the ropes holding their hosts groaning in a unified cacophony with each motion.

Her lip trembled as she backed away. “Nope.” In a heartbeat, she had turned and was running down the hall toward the hangar that housed her little transport. As the air rushed by her ears, she heard more feet running around behind her, though not necessarily with her, accompanied by that same laughter as before. Only now, it seemed as though the rushing wind as she ran held voices of its own, whispering incoherently as she went. When she had to slow to a halt in order to gain her bearings, she realized it was not the wind, as the whispers continued in her ears.

The closer she came to the hangar, the more intense was her fear. One thread of *pitter patter* behind her seemed so near that she turned and, for an instant, saw a child-sized shadow dash around the corner. From then on, she ran with both hands on her pistol, finger on the trigger.

When she finally arrived at the hangar, the dead world around her seemed so alive that she almost considered silencing it with the blaster to her temple, but pushed through when she saw her ship. “I’d take a good ol’ clambake to this bantha-fodder any day,” she said as the ramp lowered, not even waiting for it to touch down before she vaulted in and shut the gate behind her. Once in the pilot’s seat, she spun up her engines and lifted off, breaking one of her landing struts and knocking over several smaller ships on her way out the door.

“Sorry to throw you all under the speeder,” she murmured sullenly as the Palace grew smaller and smaller, “but it was me, or no one.” *Just a merc, after all*, she thought sadly, noting that she wasn’t being paid to deal with this kind of mess.

As the cold expanse of space enveloped the ship, Qyreia finally felt able to breath, folding her arms on the control panel and laying her head down. Her eyes fluttered, and she felt ready to catch some rest as the ship’s autopilot began its hyperdrive preparations, when she heard quick, small footsteps on the metal of the corridor behind her. She spun so hard in her chair that she fell to the floor, cringing and pressing back against the console when her eyes met the dark shadow coming toward her, burning out the lights as it approached, keeping itself in darkness.

“No… No!” She pulled her blaster and fired fruitlessly into the dark. “Kriff you! Eat it you son of a Sith!” Hot tears streamed over her cheeks as the darkness closed the distance. Just as it was about to reach her, she stiffly turned the pistol to her temple. “See you on the dark side.”

*Crack!*

Qyreia bolted upright in bed, sweat soaking her pajamas and sheets, breathing heavily and eyes wide in panic. When she looked over to her nightstand, she saw a large figure standing there and was about to go for her weapons when he grabbed her arm.

“Time to wake up,” the orderly said. The woman noted his hand jammed firmly on top of her alarm clock. *Wait, that’s* my *alarm clock!* She looked around. *This is my room!* She looked at him. *This is… I don’t know who this guy is but damn am I happy to see him!* She half-jumped out of bed and hugged the orderly who was understandably confused. “Um… ma’am?”

“Sorry,” she said, retreating to her covers. “I just had one hell of a nightmare.”

“Who said it was over?”

Qyreia’s eyes bolted upright. The orderly was gone. Outside of her closed door, she could hear the *pitter patter* of little feet, and laughter like that of small children.