

Helvegen
The Way To Hell



Darkness was all there was. Somewhere in the void was the distant memory of screams; the screeching noise of metal rending apart and the roar of flames. It was faint, flitting away into nothingness to be replaced by the quietude of unconsciousness.

Then the *snap-hiss* of sparking electronics eked in. Then came the crackling of a fire and the sense of smoke in the air. No, it was the smell of smoke. All too suddenly, the unconscious void became the conscious mind, and the body was reminded of the jarring halt with a wave of pain. Qyreia did not want to open her eyes because of the pain in her head. It felt heavy and swollen as it throbbed with pulses of agony. Her shoulders ached as did her groin — any points where the safety harness of her seat in the escape pod secured her.

“Aaagh... fraaack...”

Slowly, with gentle coughs that still felt like they jarred her skull, the Zeltron opened her eyes. What she saw was worse than she had hoped, but about what she had expected. The space battle had been harsh, and a few lucky shots had hit the escape pod. With the shielding gone, things went from bad to worse as they entered the atmosphere. It was hard to say what had hit them: enemy fire, a large piece of battle debris, or any number of other things. *Something* hit the rear section of the vessel, creating a gash in the hull. As they burned through the upper atmosphere, gouts of jet-like flame scorched sections of the interior into char, along with the nearby occupants. The pilot had done their best but, as evidenced by the battered remains of the corpse in the equally damaged cockpit, their efforts hadn't worked too well. The forward thrusters had done just enough to keep the front of the ship from becoming a shattered mark on the landscape. The rear of the ship had disappeared shortly after the fires of atmospheric entry had died away, sheared off by the air resistance and structural weakening from the tear in the hull.

Qyreia had lost consciousness sometime shortly after that.

By some miracle, she had only suffered some severe bruising from the harness and a nasty case of whiplash, both of which became all the more evident as soon as she unbuckled and slipped out of her seat. It hurt to stand. It hurt to blink. The whole experience was generally nauseating. Somewhere between a hobble and a crawl, she slunk around what remained of the cabin looking for other survivors. Her limping pace notwithstanding, it was a short search.

Remember where you are, she told herself. Any friendly troops on the ground would be occupied with Collective forces, and all the space forces were still engaged high above. If anyone would come for the ship, it wouldn't be anyone that Qyreia wanted to meet. That the communications systems were completely compacted into tech-mush did not help matters.

In quick order — or as quick as she could manage it — the Galerian Aedile collected her effects from the lockers beneath and adjacent to her seat. In the process, she managed to scrounge up a canteen of water, some rations, a flare gun, and a datapad from an emergency supply kit which was thankfully well-maintained. It was almost quaint that the inspection plaque showed the regular intervals that the case was opened and inventoried. It wouldn't have lasted a full pod for very long, but it was something at least. With just her to sustain, it would last a while.

Such was her thinking until she stepped out and suddenly felt the oppressive heat of Nancora wash over her. “Well kriff.” A little more water might have been nice after all.

As much as the mercenary would have liked to have stayed in what remained of the escape ship's climate control, getting caught with her proverbial pants down by Collective troops was not high on her to-do list. There was also the danger of the thruster fuel cells exploding. Also dust storms. In general, the ship was more a danger than a blessing.

"I need to start carrying a backpack," she thought aloud as she trudged along in the wind-blasted Badlands. Her jacket served only to keep in body heat, so she repurposed the garment as a haphazard satchel. Due to her lack of any sewing supplies or other means of closing off the bottom of the jacket though, the main body became a quasi pauldron while the sleeves — tied together at the ends — served as the storage points. It was a blessing, in Qyreia's mind, that her scavenged supplies were small enough to fit in the sleeves, their weight serving to keep the makeshift carrier in place.

Hours passed, and the Zeltron was no closer to being anywhere recognizable. In the distance she could see specks of what could have been civilization, but were just as likely Collective bases or, worse yet, troop formations. Her paranoia was not helped by the feeling of being watched that had permeated the air since she'd stepped out of the wreck of the escape pod. Only the occasional *thump* of an explosion far off in the distance reminded her that there were battles raging across the surface.

"Someone's gotta be out there." Talking to herself was almost cathartic in the otherwise barren landscape and helped to steady her thoughts. It was also a fantastic venting mechanism.

"Muthafrackin' *schuttas* think they can just shoot me down and then... do whatever they *feel like*?! I don't think so!" She honestly had no idea who was doing what, or where any of the ground forces were in relation to her position. The Collective might have ignored or not seen the crashed pod; they might have also deployed a party to track down survivors.

"Need to find shelter. It's too kriffin' hot for this Sithspit. Who inhabits a planet without a *single frackin' tree* on it?! No water anywhere!" To a point, her gradually increasing ranting pulled her attention away from her surroundings.

"And Satsi?! Just *waltzes* right on into Arcona like she owns the damn place and says 'I'm in charge now, listen to me!'" Her impersonation might have made small children laugh by its ridiculous pantomime, but there was no one to hear it other than herself. "Friggin' *schutta* needs to get laid... or get cut off from her source of sexy times. Learn herself a little common courtesy with some negative reinforcement training. I think that's what it's called..."

"I hate rocks. They can all die. I'm so tired of seeing rocks." She kicked a lone pebble for good measure. "Eat that, you little bastard." She kicked a larger one. "You too." She nearly kicked an even larger one, but thought again when she considered that doing so might break her foot, given its size. Then she noticed the ground looked darker than it had a minute ago and looked up.

"I take it back. I love rocks."

Towering overhead was a small mesa, throwing a cloak of shade almost one hundred meters from its base that the Zeltron had unknowingly walked directly into. Low, rocky hills dominated her newfound surroundings, dotted with the occasional plateau or sister mesa to her own. With her attention renewed and her sanity put snugly back in place, Qyreia decided to take a break, laying down and enjoying the shade.

“Set alarm for one hour,” she said into her newly acquired datapad. The command was instantly registered and she set the tool aside. She took one final look around then settled in. “Just gonna rest my eyes a bit.”

Between the heat and her injuries from the crash, Qyreia was quick to doze off. Stretched out comfortably on the rocky ground — as comfortably as one can be on such surfaces — she was blissfully unaware of the Collective troops that had arrived at the crash site.

“Search the area again,” Icasta said in a derisive monotone that inflamed the other Technocrats’ egos just as much as she had intended.

“We already have,” Drake intoned. “There is one survivor that we are aware of based on the tracks and the opened emergency supply cache.”

“And how far did you follow these tracks?”

“Further than the rest of the occupants in here got! Amirite?!” The two other Technocrats looked at the diminutive Sparks with a somewhat concerned look. “Feh, what do you two know about comedy anyway?”

Kendra was about to give the Twi’lek a mild reminder about going too far with the jokes when one of her Shikari slid out from the gutted hull and presented herself to her commander. “Yes?”

“Clues about the prey. Zeltron female, possibly injured though we could not determine to what extent.”

“Force user?”

The Huntress shook her head. “It didn’t seem so. From what we saw in the occupants, her attire was not in keeping with a Force user, and there was no sign of a lightsaber that we could find.”

Kerwin and Gwendolyn listened carefully to this information, as impressed by the psychometry of Icasta’s ilk as they were unnerved by it. This result of their genetic engineering teetered between the science of the Guild and the powers of the Jedi, and the mere likeness to the latter was enough to alienate the Chiss from some within their pillar of the Collective. To Sparks’ credit, she was more interested in how to incorporate the ability into one of her bombs. As yet, she’d had no success.

“Collect the other Shikari and send a scouting party ahead to follow the tracks. I will follow with the rest momentarily.”

Her subordinate offered a swift nod in affirmation before slipping away to execute her orders. The Devaronian was less than pleased with what he was hearing. “I will tell my troops to prepare...”

“I will not need you on this. Your Brute Squad would be better utilized on the front lines against the other enemy formations that are landing their personnel as we speak.”

“Field Commander Ordram sent us here...”

“If you do not want to fight Jedi, then stay, but this is *my* hunt now. I am tasked directly with finding this... *survivor* and bringing them back for questioning.”

Sparks shrugged and shook her head. “One little girl is hardly worth what I’ve got stashed away. A formation of tanks, on the other hand,” she mused deviously as she turned and walked toward her shuttle. “Have fun with your Zeltron, Kendra!”

Drake was less pleased by the situation, but the fact that there were Jedi out there for him to fight as opposed to a lone Brotherhood soldier turned his attention. This wasn’t worth arguing over. He would just have to accept being slighted by his Chiss counterpart this time.

“Let me know when you have completed your mission.”

“Of course, *Commander* Drake.” Kendra bowed low in a placating, if half-mocking gesture. “Please be sure to give those Force users my best regards.”

He smiled. “Oh, you can count on it.”

Quite some distance away, Qyreia was woken by her alarm, much to her chagrin. Her sleep had been mercifully dreamless and she had found a position, awkward though it was, that was comfortable enough for her to maintain and not constantly wake up. The headache had abated though, as had some of the soreness, and she felt it was time to keep moving. The slight improvement didn’t stop her from taking one of the weaker painkillers from her medpack, taking it down with a swig of water — just enough to wet her parched throat and get the pill down.

The flat terrain offered little in the way of knowing what lay ahead, and the mercenary wanted to get a good lay of the land. Close inspection of the mesa she had chosen to nap by revealed several slopes that weren’t quite so steep or perilous as the others, and it was one of these that she chose to climb. That it was also in the shade didn’t hurt. Up and up she went, taking her time to keep from tiring or perspiring too much, finding good purchase for her hands and feet with relative ease. The fact that she was on a slope as opposed to a sheer cliff helped her nerves in the process: she wasn’t afraid of heights, but climbing straight up without safety gear was just plain stupid in her mind.

With a scurrying sort of finish up the final spot of sedimentary stone, she slipped over the edge and onto the flat top of the rock formation. It took a moment for her legs to stop feeling like gelatin, but once she got her nerves back, Qyreia stood and took in her surroundings.

Rocky outcrops dotted the landscape for miles around, often coupled by squat plateaus and small valleys walled in by rolling ridgelines of hills that were less than impressive in size. Further out were larger terrain features that stood more pointedly against the horizon, but those were days upon days away if she were to go by foot. Under the blazing sun she could also make out the thin trails of smoke that were indicative of far off battles, though who the exact combatants were was impossible to tell. Closer at hand was the ruins of some long-forgotten settlement, though it seemed that some recent action had taken place. *Intel did say they do training out here.* Turning back toward the way she came, Qyreia could even make out her own downed craft, if only as a faint speck.

“Not too shabby, Q ol’ gal.” She breathed a contented sigh, but paused when she thought she saw movement in the terrain leading from the ship. “Is that...?”

Between the ripples of heat permeating the air, it was nearly impossible for her to be sure, but the mercenary had the sinking feeling that she could see a dark splotch far off that looked to be moving. Given the positioning, the splotch could only be coming her way. *Am I hallucinating? Just a rock maybe?* Try as she might, Qyreia couldn’t be sure. The doubt of the

situation, however, was enough to set her spinning on her heels and moving with a quickness that wasn't particularly safe as she descended the slope that she had come up from.

"Stupid stupid stupid," she growled to herself as she reached the base and started heading the opposite direction of the blur's movement. "Took a fracking nap in the open and now they're following. Karkin' great!"

With her pain nearly forgotten, the Zeltron took up a light jog, only to see the very clear tracks she was leaving in her wake. The dusty surface of the planet was betraying her position better than anything short of a homing beacon. Qyreia breathed deeply to keep from screaming in frustration. Fortunately, she was still well ahead of this search party. Unless they were able to *run* the twenty-some kilometers that she'd marched without stopping, then she could at least keep some distance and lose them in the mire of cracked landscape beyond.

"I hope this works."

The Zeltron set off at a brisk walk, very seriously contemplating removing her shirt to help cool off. Past experience had taught her that was a quick way to get some serious skin irritation from whatever pack she was toting. Given that her carrying implement was leather, she wasn't too fond of the idea of her sweaty skin sticking to it as she walked through blazing heat beneath the red sun of Nancora. *At least I've got my lucky color overhead*, she thought jokingly. *Red sun, meet the Red Qek.*

Lacking any company or sounds beyond the drop of her footfalls on the dust-covered ground, Qyreia was left to walk in abject silence. Every labored breath filled her ears like an annoying cacophony of raspy wind. At one stretch, it felt as though she walked for ages while only minutes had passed. The next thing she knew, a check of the datapad's chrono revealed that an hour had passed. Through it all, Qyreia prayed for darkness. Or water. Or both; whichever decided to make an appearance. She didn't care.

Hours passed, and while she could not see her pursuers, she was sure they were still following the rounded impressions she left behind in the dirt. Her blue hair hung damp against her face, partly crusted with salt from the sweat that had evaporated over the passing hours. Her shirt clung to her in sticky patches that very clearly displayed the red skin beneath.

"Any Brotherhood elements," she called over her wrist-mounted comlink, "this is Qyreia Arronen calling over a secure channel. I've landed on Nancora and am being pursued by Collective troops. Requesting assistance."

This was not her first attempt at calling for help, and at every try she'd sent the encrypted message with an embedded note that contained her current grid location. On the upside, the Collective would need to truly work to decipher her messages, if they were intercepting them at all. Unfortunately, only those who were on her particular channel and had the same security coding would be able to receive and decipher the content. It was a double-edged sword that the merc was fairly certain was more likely to cut her than the enemy.

Shouldering her rifle, she peered back in the direction from whence she'd come. No black spots or ripples could be seen, but she was also in the flat lowlands. She re-slung the weapon and continued her march.

As the afternoon wore on, the sun still high overhead, Qyreia decided she'd had enough of the heat and discomfort of her own clothes. Momentarily dropping her jacket-pack, she

quickly unbuttoned her shirt and clumsily wriggled free of the sweat-soaked garment. Her black bra would do little to protect her from the friction of her jury rigged pack, but the air at least didn't feel so oppressive. When she fashioned the shirt into a sort of keffiyeh hat that flowed out over her neck and shoulders, the mobile shade seemed a fair tradeoff. *Half naked in a combat zone. Well, check this one off the bucket list I guess.* Even so, her pace seemed to quicken and the time didn't feel as though it dragged on quite so much anymore. Another sip of water didn't feel too bad either.

An hour passed in this relative comfort when the Zeltron felt the oddest sensation against her skin. Her headdress seemed to billow more than it did from just minutes earlier. Pausing amidst the heat, the realization hit her. *Wind! Oh sweet, succulent frackin' wind! Oh god, I could just stand here like this all day.*

When she looked around to survey the direction of her savior, she was met by a somewhat sinister sight. Dark clouds loomed on the horizon. On any other planet, it would mean a major rain storm. This was Nancora though, and Qyreia had read the intel reports about this place. The brown tinge to the quickening cloud only confirmed her fears.

“Ohhh druk! Dust storm!”

She didn't need a rocket surgeon to tell her it was time to run. Everything was cinched as tight as it could so it didn't bounce around as the Zeltron made a mad dash for the nearest outcrop a couple kilometers away. The storm moved quickly over a distant ridgeline, rolling onward as though nothing had barred its path at all. It did the same with a plateau nearer at hand. Qyreia passed through an ancient, run-down settlement, but kept running. She didn't know how they'd stood up against such onslaughts before, but she wasn't about to trust her well-being to them now. She had her eyes set on a rocky outcrop near a large mesa that bordered yet another, newer-looking but still ramshackle settlement.

The outcrop, as it turned out, was a wasted venture. The rocks were too short and scrawny to provide any real cover from the storm that was already giving the Zeltron troubles. Wind whipped at her ad hoc hat, and sediment pricked her skin at high speed. Lacking any other recourse, she made for the wide column of stone nearby. Veins had been worn out by years of weathering, and Qyreia made quick work of squeezing into one of these spaces. Then her feet seemed to go out from under her.

She half-slid, half-tumbled down into a small cave cut into the mesa that now was quite literally above her head. Between the shock of falling and the eerie sensation of being in the surprisingly dark tunnel, it took several moments before the mercenary righted herself and examined her surroundings. Judging by the way the sand and dust whipped in ornate spirals at the entrance, this small sanctuary was cut out by the peculiar wind patterns that she was witnessing. It must have taken ages for this to happen; perhaps helped along by some ancient waterway back when the planet was more habitable.

“Well... worse places to weather out a storm, I guess.” For the first time since abandoning ship, she shivered. “Oookay, time to put the shirt back on, I guess.” Aside from the strip that had soaked up the sweat from her scalp, her shirt was warm and dry.

As the storm covered the landscape above, the cave grew progressively darker, and Qyreia couldn't help but feel the fatigue wearing on her. Hours of walking in the baking sun, then sprinting for shelter, all melded with the constant spikes of fear-induced adrenaline had

broken the mercenary down physically. *Need to eat a little first. Get some water. Can't sleep yet.* It was a pleasant thought that, while she might be stuck where she was, her enemies were just as immobile. At least, that was what she hoped.

Using the datapad as a light source, she slipped the rations and canteen from their respective sleeves and had what she could only assume was dinner. *Gonna need a little extra water to digest the food,* she thought, worried about her ever-dwindling water supply.

“Not gonna matter if I run out in the next day or so if I don't have the energy to fight those creeps.” Her solitary voice in the relative quiet of the cave was somewhat unnerving. It reinforced what Qyreia already knew, but feared to acknowledge.

She was utterly and absolutely alone.

The deaths of all those aboard the escape craft had so easily been swept under her mental rug. In all her battles, she'd had a way out, and part of her had never given up that idea while she trudged through the sun-blasted Badlands. Now she was alone in the dark, realizing that there was no ship to run to; no friends that were receiving her distress signals; and surrounded by enemies that were fanatical to a point that surpassed even Pravus' madness. Suicide bombers. Legions of cybernetic drones and brainwashed lunatics. Whole armies built to destroy any and all Force users, along with anyone that stood beside them.

The irony that her girlfriend Keira was a Force user was not lost on the Zeltron. It was almost funny. At least, it was until Qyreia remembered her predicament again. Sitting against the smooth walls, she drew her legs to her chest and stared longingly at the dull glow of the datapad.

“Better start facing facts. I'm not going home. Not this time.”

She wanted to cry, but couldn't. She wanted to scream, but the fire in her chest felt like a candle flickering in the rain. She wanted so much, but the universe felt empty before her eyes. It had been so long since she had felt the warmth of Keira's embrace, she couldn't even bring herself to yearn for it. How can one desire what they cannot recall?

No one would remember her fight here. There was a war raging overhead. People were fighting and dying everywhere, bleeding and screaming for their mothers. Kids too young to be called soldiers and old folks who should've hung up their guns years ago were falling by the hundreds; maybe thousands. Killing for their Clans. Killing for their beliefs. Killing for the sake of killing. Hundreds of thousands of names that would go down in the annals of conflict, some hero and some villain, but all remembered.

“No one even knows you're down here,” she sighed.

Back on Zeltros, her parents would get the news that their daughter had died fighting for... for what? A cause? For revenge? Self-preservation? Mom would likely tear out her hair and dad would try to console her. What would Keira do? She'd keep on fighting alongside everyone else — join Atra and maybe survive long enough to wonder where her Zeltron lover had gone. In the time it would take for the realization to settle in beyond the confines of Nancora's gravity, her body would be long-since covered by the shifting dust.

Qyreia's heart ached like she was dying, and yet she couldn't manage a tear, try as she might. Her whole body shook and everything ached from the muscles tensed for so long.

Finally, before she even realized that she was prostrate on the ground, fate gave her the mercy of sleep.

Lost to a dreamless slumber, she was unaware of the storm destroying the world above her. Darkness overtook the plains of the Badlands as hours passed without the winds abating. Whole columns of stone were whittled away in the night by the fury of the tempest, while dust settled into mountainous dunes elsewhere, shifting the whole of the landscape in a violent fantasia. The grit that had covered the small settlement nearby was lifted to reveal a graveyard of structures and skeletons of vehicles long since abandoned. Somewhere around late morning the next day, the storm finally dwindled, lumbering by in the direction from which the Zeltron had come.

She had woken hours earlier, her mind already awash with thought. The torment of the night was still raging in her chest, but sleep had given her a cleared conscience and a clarity of thought that she couldn't afford the previous day. Watching the rolling tumult of dun, airborne minerals, she considered her options.

You can keep running or you can fight.

You can let them take you wherever they want, or you can choose your ground.

You're probably gonna lose... but at least you can go down swinging like the bad-choobs mother fracker you are. You're the goddamn Red Qek. The RED FRACKIN' QEK!

"No matter what happens, Q ol' girl, we're gonna make these Hutt-humping techno-schuttas wish they'd never come chasing after us."

Qyreia figured she had maybe until the early evening to make her preparations; longer if they got lost on her trail that no longer existed thanks to the storm. There was no wood to make stakes, but there was plenty of metal to hammer away at, and more than a few rocks to use as hammers. The land wasn't a natural fortress, but the merc just needed a few good vantages. Her knuckles rapped on the hulls of old landspeeders, hearing the sound of tanks that still had a bit of fuel in their rusty holds.

It was long and sweaty work, but the storm lingered over her foes longer than expected, buying her precious time. Her shirt was discarded in the heat; a scarecrow on the shattered remains of some street pole. It wasn't pretty, or nearly as much as she had hoped to complete, but it was what she had.

Beneath a sky of fiery red and darkening purple, the dark figures approached.

Icasta and her Shikari had trained in the thrashing storms of Nancora many times before, but the previous night's storm had surpassed their physical tolerances. One of her number had tried to scout ahead while the others took temporary shelter. They found her tattered remains nearly buried in a shallow dune the next day. Whoever this Brotherhood soldier was, Kendra was going to run her to ground. If there was time, she would get a little payback out of it when she finally caught the little devil.

They'd lost her trail, but they had a good idea what direction she'd gone. Sending out a fan of recon parties, she received reports of a small fire late in the afternoon. Moving as quickly as she could, they made all speed for the shattered village. As they came closer, their movements became more measured. They took to whatever concealment they could find, their light armor whispering with their movements.

In the growing twilight, the Chiss' cybernetic eye cycled through its modes of imaging: too bright for nightvision, while thermal and infrared alike were nearly useless in the scorching heat — everything absorbed and radiated a nearly uniform temperature. A few cold spots suggested air pockets, but nothing stood out. The ultraviolet setting gave her a clear image, but still she saw nothing out of the ordinary. A quiet hum vibrated in her throat when she caught the glint of a shard of metal protruding from the ground in an alley between two dilapidated buildings. *So that's her game.*

“Our prey is here, my Shikari,” she whispered over their secure comms net. “Surround the area and flush her out.”

Atop one of the mesas, the barrel of her rifle lay motionless under her dust-covered jacket that had been baking under the heat. The added touch of rocks made for good camouflage, but the damn thing was way too hot to wear, even if it would have blended in a little better than her red skin. Still, red was better than the off-white of her shirt which fluttered alluringly down below.

“There you are,” she muttered just loud enough to hear it on the inside of her ear drums. Amidst the rocks and dunes, she spotted a scattered collection of what appeared to be women. It was hard to be sure but, in the fading light, she was fairly sure that they were all the same skin tone, with the same thick pointy-tailed hairstyle. *Well... that's weird.* In their hands were what looked like bows, though the bowstrings glowed a faint purple.

Time to welcome them to the party.

“I know this area,” Kendra said to one of the Huntresses that had lingered with her. “There are tunnels that undercut the ridges that we can use...”

Before she could finish, the air was rent by the high-pitched screech of a blaster shot. If she had blinked a moment sooner, she might have missed the red streak that tore down from the mesa into the ground below. Though there was no sound in return, she knew that one of her own had fallen. Another red bolt shot out, but this was returned by a storm of purple that tore through the gloaming light in an upward shower of light. Another solitary red bolt belted out and then the mesa went silent. When she saw a figure atop the mesa, a sliver of a humanoid form, she knew their quarry was on the move.

Qyreia was running as fast as she could. Three of the would-be ambushers were dead, but their furious counterfire had staved off her ability to keep up the hurt. Nearly stumbling on the steep incline, she climbed down the interior face with almost reckless abandon. The rough stone tore at her bare skin, but she ignored the pain. There was fighting to be done.

Once at the base, she rounded toward the outside edge of the natural barrier, waiting patiently for the Collective troops to turn the corner. Turn it they did, but with bows already drawn and firing. In her rush, the Shikari had heard the Zeltron coming down from her perch and could determine just where she would be waiting. Their quick shots were wild, with only one connecting in a graze on the mercenary's left arm. In her haste though, she left herself wide open and outside of cover.

Four down.

Stamping a metal sphere against the miniature canyon wall, the Zeltron withdrew, receiving and dealing a withering fire for what seemed the fiercest seconds of her life before

throwing herself into cover. The Huntresses made to follow, only to find themselves caught in the blast of the red woman's Denton Charge. Those who were not killed in the explosion had a matter of heartbeats to avoid the torrent of stone that shed itself from its mother formation, collapsing on so many other scattered Technocrat elite. The explosion had taken Qyreia off her feet as well, her thigh catching on one of the old stone buildings and tearing a patch out of her pants and shearing a harsh scrape into her flesh.

Run!

Heart pounding, she ran through the dilapidated alleys, hopping over her metal punji stakes and sidestepping the razor-sharp shards that she had balanced or jammed into partially-stable brick seams. Halfway to her destination, the dark silhouette of another enemy appeared on the opposite mesa — the same one Qyreia had slept beneath the previous night — and fired her energy bow at the Zeltron. It hit an old overhang, the sparks briefly blinding Qyreia to the second shot that sung by her ear before she finally was able to take cover. Her return fire was narrowly avoided, but the athletic target could only avoid so many shots at once; the same fatal flaw of Force users in battle. Others joined their now-dead comrade though and, soon enough, she was harangued by a withering fire from above.

As darkness overtook the sky, the lone bonfire in the town square seemed to throw vibrant and vivid shadows against the walls of the surrounding rock formations. With each shot, they danced amidst the colored flashes — a purple shimmer; the sporadic flash of red; and then the cacophony of both.

The Shikari knew the terrain well enough, but Qyreia knew it too, and she was the better shot. Several times, the fluttering white shirt caught the eyes of the Huntresses, and they engaged the harmless garment instead of the true threat, much to their own detriment. It kept the tide at bay but, meter by meter, she was forced into the mousetrap that the cat had laid. By the time she reached the town square, so too had Kendra Icasta.

The appearance of the Chiss momentarily threw Qyreia out of her rhythm, giving the Huntresses an opening to attack. One leapt at her from the shadows only to catch a blaster bolt to the chest. A second fired her bow and caught the kneeling gunslinger in her right arm. The next shot nearly took off the Zeltron's ear, the surprise jolting her aim upward and catching the Huntress in the top of the skull; a harsh wound, but not fatal. The repeated failures, however, forced the Shikari hunting party into the shadows, save for the handful that stood abreast Icasta herself.

By the time the Chiss woman drew her pistol, Qyreia was already trained on her. Firelight danced off of their features: Kendra, smooth and clean, her expression the example of calm under fire; Qyreia, grimy with salt and soil, what clothes she had torn while blood trickled from her open wounds. Unlike Icasta's face, the Zeltron's was set and stony.

"You're surrounded," Kendra called out. "It's over. I offer you a fair surrender; unconditional, of course."

"Bite me, *schutta*."

The Chiss' blood boiled, and a predatory grin crossed her face. "You want to keep up this hunt? Then die like the animal you are."

She motioned for the Shikari that had been repositioning themselves in the shadows to attack, and they did so with gusto. Almost in slow motion, Kendra watched as the Zeltron turned her rifle slightly downward, and she caught the sour scent of fuel. Had she reacted a split second later, she and her bodyguard would have been immolated on the spot. Instead, she dove aside and watched as her attack faltered. While many balked at the explosion of flame, one doing so amidst the thick line of fuel-soaked dust, two took the mercenary in close quarters.

There was no craft to her methods; no finesse save for that of experience. Despite this, Qyreia took her rifle and, between flaring shots of red plasma, screamed defiantly as she caved in one Huntress' skull with her rifle stock, and beat the other one until she was a tangled mess of flesh and bone. Whatever skill the Shikari had with their myriad weapons, Qyreia had in spades with just the one.

Those that had faltered at the edge then tore at her with their energy bows, and the mercenary was forced to dive into the wreck of a speeder, flame licking its sides as a line of fuel caught; evidence of where she had pulled the resources of her trap. Blind-firing kept the Technocrat devils at bay, but it was looking like this would be the final scene.

“Eat my red choobs you Hutt- frackin’ chuff suckeers!”

Several more shots peppered her quickly deteriorating cover, only to stop entirely seemingly out of nowhere. Her breath heavy, Qyreia palmed over her bare torso but couldn't find any blood or smoking holes. Then she heard the electric *snap* of a whip. Peering cautiously over the lip of the speeder door, she saw the Chiss woman standing inside of the firestorm, an electrowhip in one hand and a set of knucklers on the other that seemed to glitter in the flickering golden light.

“Come out, Zeltron,” Kendra said, her voice throaty and sensual. “I’ll not have my prey so carelessly squandered.” Qyreia made to shoot, but the other woman *tsked* in derision. “Mmm, I wouldn’t do that. Then my Shikari will just have to keep shooting until you’re nothing but a charred mess.”

Frakin’ hell. “So what do you propose?” she yelled amid the crackling flames. “Obviously I don’t plan on surrendering to you freaks, and you don’t want me dead.”

“Now now, freaks is hardly the word I would use, especially coming from someone who associates with the perverse machinations of the Jedi.”

“Oh honey,” Qyreia returned mockingly, “you don’t even *know* how *perverse* I get with them Force ladies.” *That one’s for you, Keira,* she chuckled as Kendra ground her teeth.

“I offer you one chance: face me. No guns. No explosives. No tricks. Just you and me.” *Predator and prey.* “What do you say?”

Qyreia scoffed within her hiding spot but, after a brief moment, slowly rolled out and onto the dusty ground, tossing her blaster aside as she stood upright. “Don’t suppose your girls will let me go if I win.”

“Likely not,” Kendra said, her eyes alight.

“Pft. Figured as much,” Qyreia replied as she slipped her pistol from its holster and let it fall to the ground as well. Then, slowly, she crouched and slipped her knife from her boot. The flames reflected in a dark display that cast a shimmer on the bedraggled Zeltron. She still had

plenty of energy. At least, that was what she told herself. “Come on then. Don’t keep me waiting.”

The merc knew how whips worked. She’d seen slavers and pit fighters alike use them in the seedy underbelly of the galaxy. Kendra was no different, only she was quick on the draw when her opponent was so close. The tendril curled upward faster than the Zeltron had expected, and she hardly had time to react, bringing up her free arm to catch the whip rather than let her knife hand be taken. The Chiss grinned and sent a charge through the cord, sending Qyreia to her knees, screaming in agony. Kendra stepped forward, ready to let fly with another shock, but the Zeltron flicked her arm and unwound the device from her flesh, though a bright red sear was evident on her forearm, circling around like a coiled, smoking snake.

This is it, she thought as the whip lashed out again, just barely sidestepping the first strike and backpedaling from the follow up. *Come on schutta, give it to me*. The blue-skinned Huntress wound up for another strike, but Qyreia lunged forward with her knife. Kendra almost lazily deflected the attack with her golden vibroknuckles, but the Zeltron was able to sidestep the counterattack. No matter how she taunted or lashed out, Kendra could not break her prey, who all the while gave her the same defiant glare.

Let’s see how you look after this! Winding up her whip, she snapped it in Qyreia’s direction, only for her to dodge it as expected. Only the Chiss wasn’t aiming for her prey. The whip instead wrapped tightly around one of the metal shards the Zeltron had left protruding from the ground. With a flick of her wrist, the whip came soaring back from behind her unsuspecting opponent.

The metal gouged into Qyreia’s back, making whatever counter she had planned falter as she tumbled forward, screaming in pain. Kendra pounced on the supine Zeltron who barely had time to catch the vibroknuckles aimed for her ribs. The Chiss fought to pierce the red woman’s chest, but the slim creature was stronger than she looked. Qyreia threw the fist-borne weapon aside and caught Kendra in the jaw with a left hook. She would have followed up with her knife had the blue woman not hopped away and deterred her with a flurry of stylized kicks, one of which took her full in the cheekbone. Her vision blurred and the world went spinning before she crashed into the dust, dizzy and using all her energy in that moment just to stay conscious.

“It’s over, Zeltron,” Kendra said confidently, wiping a thick gout of blood from her lip and chin. “I win.”

“Frack... you...” Qyreia groaned in reply, knuckling the ground as she tried to raise herself.

“You Jedi-lovers just don’t know when to *learn!*” The Technocrat punctuated her sentence with a strike of her charged whip, eliciting a cry of pain from her prey. “You’ve *lost!*” Another strike. Another scream. Still, she tried to get up. “Give up!” Another strike.

...and another.

...and another.

Tears streamed over Qyreia’s cheeks. The pain was excruciating. She could hardly form coherent thought anymore, much less throw out any clever quips beyond a gurgled “frack you,” which only earned her another strike from the powered whip. Her lungs felt like they were seized up; she couldn’t breathe. Any air that passed her lips was a desperate gasp that was

rewarded by another coiled assault. Her arms shook as she tried to lift herself. At the last moment, her ears caught the sound of the whip winding up and, almost by accident, she rolled aside and narrowly avoided the weapon.

Kendra struck at Qyreia again, who once more caught the whip on her forearm. Before she could activate the electric charge though, the mercenary jerked hard on the whip, catching the Chiss off-balance, making her stumble forward a pace.

...Just within reach of Qyreia's booted foot. The kick landed squarely in Kendra's most sensitive of anatomical parts, and the world seemed to blur for a moment. It was enough for even the dilapidated Zeltron to come to her feet and close the little distance that remained between them. One of the Shikari saw what was coming and fired her bow — just enough power to hurt but not kill — into the mercenary's back. Qyreia stumbled momentarily, catching part of Icasta's vibroknuckles on her shoulder.

Kendra, on the other hand, felt the full length of her prey's blade press into her abdomen.

The Chiss gasped and fidgeted, trying to fight the death-grip that Qyreia had on her. Her vibroknuckles jabbed frantically into whatever flesh they could find, but the awkward angle afforded her little purchase. Another jolt of pain shot through her as the knife turned and cut upward through her insides with a bloody squelch. Another energy arrow shot out from the dark into the Zeltron's back, but the nonlethal wound only forced the pair to their knees. No matter what, Qyreia would not let go.

Inch by excruciating inch, Kendra's hand felt the jerks of the Zeltron's arm as she clutched at the red woman's bicep, trying in vain to force the knife out of her.

Then, despite that they were surrounded on all sides by flame, she felt cold, as though all the heat of the world had gone. Her body jerked as the red woman jammed the knife deeper into her chest cavity. It was hard to say which took her first — the shock or the blood loss — but as the Zeltron held her tight, Kendra Icasta passed into the night.

As soon as she realized what had happened, Qyreia went to pull out her one remaining grenade, but the Shikari burst forth from the shadows and disarmed her. She fought with dirt and teeth, but the sheer numbers overwhelmed the drained Zeltron mercenary. She offered a last parting shot with the flare gun she'd stowed beneath the emptied speeder wreck, burning a hole through one of the Huntress' feet. They let her drop to the dust.

Then the beating began.

They took turns on the bloodied and battered Zeltron. Sometimes it was a kick to the ribs or a fist in her scalp. Those were the easiest blows to bear. It was the shock batons that were the cruelest: the electric charge would always bring Qyreia from her fatigue and shock-induced unconsciousness. Then they would start again with the more mundane methods. As incensed as they were over the death of their leader, they were not about to kill the target that they had worked so hard to capture. It didn't mean they couldn't blow off steam though.

Hours passed by between consciousness and blissful periods where Qyreia was injured to the point of blackout. After a while, she hardly felt anything at all. Not even the shock baton could rouse her. She was too broken.

By then, dawn was lighting the sky and the sun was cresting over the shattered horizon. Any minute, Qyreia expected them to finish her. End it all. Get their revenge. *Come on you*

Qyreia Arronen, #14369

fracking sacks of chuff-crusteD druk. Do it. But the death blow never came. Instead they collected up the bodies and scattered weapons, and called for a transport. It was the calmest they had been since the duel — if it could be called that thanks to their interference — had ended. All the Shikari that remained stood, crouched, or sat in utter silence amidst the ruins of the old settlement. That was when the pain truly set in; the sort that settles into the bones and can't be remedied by any amount of pain medication. It was fortunate that the mercenary was too weak to cry.

In the silence, it felt like ages passed before the transport finally arrived. First they loaded the body of Icasta. Then they loaded the Shikari dead. Then the equipment. Last, they loaded the Zeltron, their prisoner and soon-to-be plaything for Field Commander Ordam and Chancellor Antillus. Death, it seemed, would have to wait. These Technocrats had other plans in store.

Qyreia Arronen was a prisoner of the Collective.