

The Rundown

A Submission to the Competition:
GJW XII Phase II Fiction – Survival



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35 ABY

**The Badlands
Nancora**

Orion Gale let out a stream of expletives as he stumbled away from the open hatch of the escape craft in which he had crashed to the surface of the planet. He glanced around to take in his surroundings, and his prospects grew even slimmer. He recognized where he had landed.

Based upon the intelligence that his friend Reiden Karr had given him, which had been gathered by various Brotherhood assets, he knew that he was on the planet of Nancora. More specifically, he was in the vast, barren area known as the Badlands. This was the very planet which was home to the stronghold of the Collective. And it just happened to be the very worst possible place to wind up, at least before the time when he was supposed to have arrived.

The original plan was for Reiden, a Sith Force user within the Dark Brotherhood, to land on the surface with a strike team. Other intelligence reports that had been received indicated that there was a high-level Collective asset on the planet. Reiden and his team were to make their way to where the sightings had been noted and either eliminate or capture the asset. Orion was supposed to land on the surface some time later and rendezvous with Reiden and the strike team to provide any assistance as needed.

However, all that planning was now meaningless. It had been thrown out the window when the Collective's ships had unleashed their suicidal pilots and sent them crashing into the forces of the clan that Orion had been working for, Reiden's own clan of Scholae Palatinae. He and Reiden had been on different ships, but after seeing wave after wave of kamikaze pilots sent out, he would not have been surprised if the vessel that his friend was aboard suffered a similar fate. Orion was forced to evacuate the ship on the escape craft he had landed in, along with three other members of the ship's crew. Unfortunately, none of them had survived. Orion was now on his own — on an unfamiliar planet which was teeming with enemy forces.

Orion cast one last glance around him before heading back inside the escape craft. He searched through the interior for anything that could prove useful to him while he attempted to establish contact with Reiden and his strike team. He came away with a datapad, water canteen, a pack of ration bars, and a flare gun with one round. He checked the datapad and let out a sigh of relief when it powered on. Switching it off to conserve the remaining charge, he stowed it and the rest of his newly found supplies into the scout pack he had brought along for the mission. He stuck his head out of the doorway and cast his gaze towards the sky, squinting slightly at the bright sunlight. He pulled on his polarized goggles to protect his eyes and set out into the barren landscape before him.

Orion knew that the badlands wasn't simply an empty swath of land on the planet. Although it was barren, there were gnarled ruins of various structures jutting out from the ground, scattered about. His ride down to the surface had proven as much, having caught a glimpse of such ruins through the viewport. What he needed to do now, however, was get a better look at his surroundings, try to figure out where he was. He needed to get to higher ground. Looking out into the distance, he scanned the horizon and spotted a tall metallic structure which lanced out from the ground toward the sky that wasn't too far away. He headed over to it and gave it a cursory examination. It seemed sturdy enough, and was likely buried deep in the ground, so it should support his weight.

The Kiffar laid a hand on a beam and concentrated. A faint but familiar sound filled his ears, almost like that of rushing water or wind, as his mind was pulled into a memory. Orion hadn't used his psychometric abilities in a while, but since he was one of the few Kiffar that was born with the ability and presently in enemy territory, he wanted to have every advantage available to him. Normally when he used this skill, he could get a sense of how long ago it had taken place, and the memory that was revealed at that moment seemed quite recent. He saw a group of young women, all with similar appearances — almost like they could have been sisters. They all had tanned skin, dark hair styled into dreadlocks and pulled back into tails, and yellow tattoos across their faces. The way they moved seemed odd for people, but not so unusual if they were a pack of animals. Orion let the memory fade out and he removed his hand with a muttered curse. He knew exactly what he had been shown, and his day had just gotten worse.

Those women he had seen were must surely the Technocrat Huntresses. The Brotherhood intelligence reports that he had seen described them as genetically modified soldiers created for the purpose of tracking down enemies of the Collective. He knew that it would be hard even for a Force wielder to escape from their clutches once they had picked up a trail. It might be tough to evade their attention for long, especially given that they had the advantage of being familiar with the area.

"Frak me," Orion said to himself. "I know things don't always go according to plan, but I didn't expect it to go quite this far off track. I'll just have to do the best I can with what I've got."

The Kiffar took hold of his grappling hook and fired it towards the top of the ruined structure before him. He gave the line a tug to ensure it was secure, and then he began his climb to higher ground in order to survey his surroundings. Once he reached the end of the cable, he perched on another crossbeam he found, hooking an arm around a vertical beam for extra support. He then removed his electrobinoculars from his pack and scanned the landscape around him. Even with the magnification, little else was revealed to him that he hadn't already taken note of before. But then some movement caught his eye, and he followed it to its source. It was a faint wisp of smoke, and at the origin of it, he saw telltale signs of a battle: scorch marks from blaster bolts on another ruined structure out in the distance, and not far from those were more scorch marks, but these were larger, likely the result of some kind of explosion. Orion pulled the device from his face and exchanged it for

the datapad he had found inside the crashed ship, powering it up. He compared his current location to that which had been his original destination. He was still a fair distance from where he was supposed to have landed to meet up with the strike team, but at least he knew that he wasn't in the middle of nowhere like he had previously believed. He unhooked the grapple line and stowed it in his pack with the rest of his gear, then made the descent down the structure by hand. He may have need of the grapple later, so it would be best to keep it with him — not to mention the fact that taking it with him would hopefully lessen any signs that someone had been there and not tip off the Huntresses.

Now that Orion had a point of reference, he knew the direction in which to head. But before moving out, he tore some cloth free from his armor and wrapped it around each of his boots. He had hoped this effort would ensure that he left as little of an impression in the ground as he could manage while trying to avoid his enemy.

Orion trekked through the barren landscape with caution — the last thing he wanted to do was run into the Huntresses. He took cover wherever he found it. As he hid, he would slowly sweep his eyes over his surroundings, and listen carefully. Seeing and hearing no signs of activity, he would wait a moment to be sure. Once it was clear that there didn't seem to be anything nearby, he would set off once again. After a time, the bounty hunter was beginning to wonder if he would be able to make his way to the rendezvous point without incident. The Kiffar approached what looked to be a half-buried home, with its walls partially collapsed and the roof slanting towards him like a ramp. Taking care once more, he climbed up the roof and peered over the edge. As he did, all hopes he held of avoiding an encounter were dashed. Off in the distance, he could just barely make out the vague shape a group heading in his direction. He muttered a curse to himself as he swung his blaster rifle off his shoulder and put his eye to the scope. He focused on the figures and saw that his fears were confirmed — a small team of Huntresses was heading over, and they numbered four in total.

He knew that the likelihood of them spotting him from such a distance was low, and he had made sure not to expose himself too much as he had climbed the roof to check the area. However, he didn't want to take any unnecessary risks if they could avoid it. Sometimes that meant avoiding a confrontation, and other times it meant taking out the enemy before they could get the chance to attack, themselves.

Orion watched the Huntresses draw closer through the scope of his rifle. Luck was on his side with the sun shining behind him and towards the agents of the Collective. It was a small blessing that they wouldn't be as likely to see the sunlight glinting off of his scope, and he was happy to take it while he had the opportunity. He waited until he was sure they were within range of a shot and focused on his first target — the lead Huntress. He lined up the shot and took a breath. On the exhale, he squeezed the trigger twice, following it up with a third just to be safe.

The shots all hit the Huntress in center mass, dropping her to the ground with a small puff of dirt as she made contact. She didn't move. The other three looked startled before glancing around furtively, trying to see if they could spot any enemies. But Orion had already slid down the collapsed roof, taking cover behind it. He risked a glance around the side and saw that one of the remaining Huntresses was kneeling beside her fallen comrade, checking for vital signs. She shook her head at the others, a grim expression on her face. Not wanting to pass up another chance, Orion quickly let loose a second burst of shots at one of the other Huntresses. Due to his rush, however, his aim had been thrown off this time, and the blaster bolts went wide from their intended mark. One shot hit center mass while another struck her arm, with the final one boring into her abdomen. It certainly wasn't the cleanest grouping, but the damage was done. Even if the Huntress didn't die from her wounds, at the very least she would be unable to continue on, especially without receiving any treatment first. Now it was time for him to get moving once more.

Orion scrambled to his feet and started running back in the direction he had come from. While his destination lay towards where he had spotted the Huntresses, going there now would be suicide. Instead, he opted for backtracking and then making a wide arc as he reversed direction once more, hoping to outflank the Huntresses. Given the fact that blaster bolts gave away the direction in which the shots had been fired, Orion knew that the two remaining Huntresses would soon find the spot where he had hid. His only hope now was to put as much distance between them and himself as he could manage, and pray that the arc he had taken was wide enough to avoid their grasp.

After what felt like forever, Orion stopped running when he found shelter beneath a twisted metal ruin that was on his path to the rendezvous point. He was breathing hard and his lungs burned from the effort he had been exerting. He pulled the water canteen from his pack and took a swig. The cool water felt like a blessing to his dry throat. He slumped down to the ground, leaning his back against the metal of the structure. He knew that he probably should have stopped for rest a while ago, but he feared risking it. At least here he had some form of cover to shield him, at least partly, from the eyes of the Huntresses. For all he knew, they could be hot on his trail and about to discover him. But even so, he knew for certain that he wouldn't last much longer if he didn't get some rest sooner rather than later.

"Okay, let's find out where we are now," he mused to himself quietly.

The Kiffar removed the datapad and booted it up again, accessing the map function he had used before. He marked his starting point and his current location, and then zoomed out to view his final destination where he hoped to meet up with Reiden and the strike team. He made a quick check of his progress thus far and grimaced. He was maybe two-thirds of the way there. Not as much progress as he had hoped for, but it was better it had been before. It couldn't be helped though, given the backtracking he had done before attempting to circle around the other Huntresses. Now he just hoped that he didn't run into any more while he was making his way to the rendezvous. It was a slim hope, but he held onto it nonetheless. Orion shut down the datapad and swapped it out for the pack of ration bars from his scout pack. He took out a bar and ate it, hoping to restore some of the energy he had expended while running from the Huntresses.

By now, the sun's position had shifted with the passage of time, and Orion wasn't sure how much daylight he would have left. He packed his things away and got up, setting out into the barren landscape. He hoped to make it to the rendezvous point soon. That is, assuming that he could avoid any further confrontations with the Huntresses that were likely still out there, searching for survivors from the various downed Brotherhood ships that had suffered a similar fate to his own. There could be countless allies out there that would be at the mercy of the Collective's agents. The thought of that served only to anger Orion. He pushed the thought to the back of his mind and continued to push onward.

As Orion made his way through the windswept and sun-scorched barrens of the Badlands, he noted numerous other ruins of structures. He briefly took cover behind the larger ones to check behind him for signs of the Huntresses, as well as to make note of his own progress towards the rendezvous point. Despite the current situation, he couldn't help but wonder what the ruins may have been, before they had been reduced to their present state. For all he knew, that information may have even been provided in the various Brotherhood intelligence reports. However, he had only wanted to learn of things that would be immediately relevant to the mission at hand, so Reiden had left out any extraneous information — such as the majority of the region's history. If it wasn't tactically relevant, he didn't think that it would be worth learning. But, of course, that never stopped him from wondering before. Orion paused for a moment longer to take a drink from his canteen, then lamented at the fact that he didn't have more water with him before setting out once again.

The bounty hunter checked his datapad and let out a sigh of relief. It was just a little bit further to the rendezvous point. There was more old wreckage ahead, though these ruins looked larger, more complete, and less run-down. He was about to round a corner when noise drifting on the wind stopped him dead in his tracks. He hid behind the corner of the structure in front of him and listened.

“—must be survivors out there among the crashed escape craft. Find them and eliminate them at once!” a female voice ordered. It was followed by various responses in the affirmative and quick footfalls.

Orion's stomach dropped. Based on the information in the reports he had read, there was little doubt in his mind that the voice he was hearing belonged to Kendra Icasta, the leader of the Huntresses. A quick glance around the corner confirmed his suspicions, and he muttered a quiet curse. This was not even close to the way the plan was supposed to unfold. He had run into one of the possible targets that Reiden and the strike team were to take on, but now he was on his own, and with no idea when or even if any kind of backup would be arriving. The only saving grace he could find was that the footfalls of the Huntresses setting out were headed in the opposite direction. He backtracked a safe distance away to one of the ruined structures he had passed before and took cover. He needed to get in touch with Reiden and hope that he was on his way over with the rest of the team. It would be a risk, but he had to take it. He activated his comlink and set it to the prearranged frequency for making contact.

“Reiden? This is Orion, come in.” He paused, and when there was no sign of a response, he tried again. “Come in Reiden, it's Orion. I've got some trouble here... Frak, it's no good.”

The Kiffar took off his pack and dug around within it, removing a signal booster. He powered it up and tried again. “This is Orion, contacting Reiden. Come in.” Another pause, and more silence followed. “Okay, I don't know if this thing is working, but I'm going to go ahead and hope for the best. Reiden, we've got a big problem. The ship I was in took on too

much damage and we were forced to evacuate. The escape craft I was in managed to make it down to the surface, and I set out to wait at the rendezvous point. I encountered some Huntresses along the way, but dealt with them. However, once I reached the location, I heard some conversation. Kendra Icasta is here. I repeat: Kendra Icasta, the leader of the Huntresses, is *here* at the rendezvous point. I need you and your team to get here as soon as possible. She sent out some of her unit to search for any other survivors, so watch your back out there. Listen, I'll send up a flare so that you can find my location. I know it's risky, but I can't just sit here and wait forever. Please, get here soon. Orion, out."

He severed the connection and stowed his gear away. With another muttered curse, he pulled out the flare gun and took aim at the sky, pulling the trigger with a silent prayer. He tossed the spent gun aside and began checking his blaster rifle. He held onto hope that Reiden had received his message and wasn't too far away. Nonetheless, Orion prepared himself for the worst. He would go down fighting if he had to — and he'd take as many Collective soldiers with him as he could.

The Kiffar peered out from his hiding spot to see a group of Huntresses heading towards his location. It was inevitable after firing the signal flare, but he still didn't like it. He fired off a short burst of shots in their direction before taking cover again. Soon after, the Huntresses responded in kind by unleashing their own volley of plasma arrows from their energy bows.

"Karabast!" Orion swore as he borrowed the curse he had heard Reiden use many times over the years since they had met. "That damned Force user and his team better get here soon. There's only so long I can hold out for until these harpies overtake my position."

He stuck his blaster around the corner and fired off a stream of blind shots, hoping to at least hold his enemy off even momentarily. He pulled his arm back, waited for retaliatory shots, and then risked a glance once more. Orion took aim this time before squeezing the trigger in rapid succession. His shots struck home on a few Huntresses, but he had no idea what kind of damage they had done before he was forced back into cover.

The exchange continued on in similar fashion as the Kiffar did his best to hold off against an enemy with superior numbers. He caught movement out of the corner of his eye and diverted his gaze to that direction. A team of two Huntresses was closing in on his location. He wouldn't stand a chance if more were sent with them, or if others were sent to the opposite side in a pincer maneuver. He fired off a burst of shots in their direction as well, pushing them back. A moment later, he caught sight of more Huntresses coming to join their sisters from that side, and he bit back a curse. He was beginning to lose what little hope he still held. He only hoped that Reiden and his team would have more success than he did in taking on the forces of the Collective.

Orion continued to shoot quick bursts of blaster fire at his enemies. He even briefly entertained the notion of attempting to surrender. Such thoughts were quickly shaken off, however. He owed much to Reiden, and he couldn't abandon him like that, even if it meant

his death. He'd go down swinging. He took a deep breath and readied himself to make a final stand against the Huntresses that had circled around to his side. Just as he was about to leave the cover of the part of the ruined structure he had hidden behind, the sound of blaster fire filled the air, and bolts tore through the Huntresses that were on the sides of the group. This was followed quickly by a shape leaping to land behind the Huntress in the center. An audible *snap-hiss* was heard and a moment later, the viridian blade of a lightsaber burst through the chest of the central Huntress.

Reiden and his strike team had arrived! Orion let out a sigh of relief and sent a few well-aimed blaster bolts at the other Huntresses of that small group for good measure. With his hope renewed, he returned his attention to the larger group of Huntresses that he had first spotted, unleashing another volley of blaster fire at them. It turned out that Reiden had received his transmission and seen the signal flare after all — and they had arrived on the scene just in time.

“Well it's about time you guys showed up!” Orion flashed a grin at Reiden as the Sith approached and took cover with him. The other members of the strike team took up positions behind various other pieces of ruins sticking up from the ground.

“Sorry it took so long to get here. Our ship was also damaged from the suicide bombers and we were forced to evacuate as well. We tried to get to the rendezvous point here as quickly as we could, but we encountered some trouble of our own,” Reiden explained, returning the grin.

“Well you're here now, at least,” the Kiffar replied. “Are you and your team ready to do this?”

Reiden let out a brief laugh. “You know we are, old friend. Let's take care of these troublesome enemies.”

Things were finally beginning to look up and Orion's usual determination had returned. The fierce force of will was lit like a fire within him once more. Now that Orion was no longer alone — and especially since he was now being aided by a Force user — he knew that things were about to get interesting.