

## Duel on the *Nesolat*

The evacuation and extrication of the vital personnel and materials from the *Nesolat* were proceeding slowly but steadily. The Collective was proving itself especially hardy and difficult to repel in this specific instance. As Khyrso Mallus spent more time on the station assisting the battle effort, he began to discover why. A new breed of Collective soldier had appeared on the front, overwhelming Brotherhood and Plagueian forces alike with surprising and expertly executed tactics.

The final stages of the Brotherhood's withdrawal from the *Nesolat* were in full swing at this point. There were still people and artifacts that had yet to be extracted from the facility, but they were primarily in sectors now controlled by the Collective. The higher-ups and most vital items had successfully managed their escape and it was now up to those remaining on the platform to finish up their work and make clean escapes. Among them was the Sith Warrior Khyrso Mallus.

Yet another wave of Collective forces had just been repelled from the hangar that Clan Plagueis had managed to secure control of. The last of the Ravagers and support personnel present were loading their supplies onto shuttles and preparing their retreat.

"Lord Mallus!" Khyrso turned away from the Ravagers he was supervising to respond to the voice. A male Weequay captain whom he had been working with throughout the battle on the *Nesolat*, Captain Slau, was striding toward him quickly. Without even utilizing his ability to detect the captain's emotions through the Force, Khyrso could read the worry on Slau's face. "The Collective has already regrouped and is sending another attack force. They'll be on us before we're able to lift off."

Khyrso frowned slightly, his lips pressed tightly together. "Very well. Get Shuttles 2 and 3 loaded and out of here. I'll take the Third Platoon and hold off the Collective. Tell Shuttle 1 to keep their engines hot, we may need to make a quick escape."

"Yes, m'lord," Captain Slau saluted and ran off to follow through with Khyrso's orders.

Khyrso retrieved his commlink from his pocket and opened a channel to the Third Platoon's squad leaders, ordering them to set up a defensive perimeter outside the hangar doors. After that, he paused for a moment before briskly turning and walking towards his own ARC-170 starfighter. "M7," he projected his voice up towards the astromech tucked into the fighter's droid socket, "be on stand-by, we'll be leaving soon." Khyrso turned, ignoring the droid's long-winded series of beeps and whistles.

As he strode back towards the hangar doors, the Sith couldn't help but wonder if he was better off leaving the Ravagers to defend the hangar on their own. They were dependable enough and also much more expendable than he was. Then again, with how effective the Collective had already been in diminishing the Plagueian soldiers' numbers, they probably needed his

help. He never had much remorse when ordering the Ravagers to fight to the death; with how committed and faceless they were, it was sometimes hard to remember that they weren't droids. Just the same, with how many soldiers they had lost today, keeping their ranks full and fighting ready was a necessity.

Khryso stepped out into the hallway. There were already a couple of dozen Ravagers setting up barricades and piling up Collective and Brotherhood corpses to define their battle lines. The smell certainly wasn't pleasant and Khryso couldn't help but instinctively wrinkle his nose. The red emergency lights bathing the hall in a dark scarlet seemed appropriate given the amount of blood that had been spilled here today. "I'll be supporting you from inside the hangar," Khryso announced to the Ravagers. "Let no enemy through. I will not be permitting any of you to retreat unless they have been completely eliminated. The battle will not be easy, and I don't expect all of you to make it. Nonetheless, you must fight for the sake of the Clan. Adapt, Ascend, Avail."

The Ravagers responded with quick salutes, but stuck to their tasks. Khryso, satisfied, nodded and returned to the hangar. Putting his back to the wall just beside the door, the Sith closed his eyes and dropped into a cross-legged sit. He allowed himself to fall into the Force, drawing on the anxiety and worry of those evacuating on the other side of the room, his own desire to make it through this alive, and the lingering anger they all felt towards the Collective.

As Khryso pulled himself deeper into darkness, he began to see the beings around him. Their emotions were like tiny sparks. Some of them were brighter than others, some bigger. The Ravagers' sparks were small and dim, but steady. Khryso began to reach out, collecting each spark, pulling them together. With each he touched, he felt its warmth singe his skin. Each spark individually could start a fire, but only with the proper care and planning could they burn down the Collective.

Khryso knew he needed those flames to grow into something greater, and for that, they needed fuel. Pulling the sparks into himself, holding them close, Khryso let the heat take hold. He welcomed the sparks and as they burned him, there wasn't pain or agony. The Sith wasn't just fuel, he had his own spark to add to the fire. The flames began to come together, finding purchase inside of Khryso and feeding each other. Carefully stoking the flames and holding them together allowed the fire to slowly begin to grow and build. With each new orange tongue, Khryso could feel the power building. He could also feel an imminent threat, a cold wind blowing in from afar. The Collective was approaching.

Working quickly, Khryso continued to build the flames up, sheltering them from the stray gusts of wind that flew by. The closer the growing storm came, the bigger the fire grew. Until, at last, it was time to unleash the heat against the oncoming onslaught. Casting the fire outward, it began to quickly spread, consuming everything before it. The wind and rain began to clash against it, working hard to extinguish it. As the wildfire continued to spread, struggling to stay alive against the power of nature, Khryso reached upward, seeking for a way to diminish the

storm's effect. His own body, still alight with flame, became a shield against the gales. A true battle of the elements was taking place and neither seemed to have an edge over the other.

The fire was growing out of control and it was only a matter of time before it was simply too vast and strong for rain or wind alone to deal with. Khryso was almost ready to relish in his victory, but was suddenly cast down into the fire as a bolt of lightning struck him. Something was wrong. With the lightning came thunder and clouds, strengthening the storm and cowering the flames. Suddenly, things had turned around and Khryso couldn't figure out how. Shedding his own flames to feed the growing fire, the Sith reached up and took firm hold of the clouds, pushing them back and away. He shook off the lightning as it stabbed at his body, looking for a weakness.

The clouds started to give under Khryso's push, giving him the momentum he needed. With one final thrust, the clouds dissipated, scattering into nothing. The storm was also beginning to flag, its once fierce winds now mere breezes and its harsh rain a gentle shower. It had done its work, however. The flames were all but gone, only a few stray strands of red managing to hold on. Khryso focused inward and extracted himself from his meditation, slowly raising back up into a fully conscious state.

As soon as Khryso's eyes opened, he jumped to his feet. The grogginess took only a moment to pass as he reached out with the Force to open the hangar door. Two Ravagers, surrounded by their dead brethren, were pinned down by a handful of Collective soldiers down the hallway. Khryso's violet blade came to life in his hands and he dashed out into the hall, catching some of the blaster bolts and deflecting them back to where they had come from. It wasn't easy to maneuver in the space with the dozens of Ravager bodies cluttering the floor, but by allowing the Force to guide his lightsaber, Khryso was able to advance past the cover on the remaining Collective soldiers.

He caught one of the hostiles with their own bolts, dropping them to the floor. As he dashed forward and cut a second down, the Ravagers' cover fire managed to take out a third. Streaks of violet light left the last two soldiers dismembered and deceased. Khryso paused, allowing himself a breath, but as he turned back towards the hangar, he was surprised to see the last two Ravagers dead, one of them impaled on a sword. The rapier had gone cleanly through the break in armor on the back of the Ravager's neck. The blade's bearer quickly withdrew their sword, flicking it to the side for a brief moment to shed what blood still stained it.

Khryso raised his saber into a defensive posture. This must be the lightning. It was a Falleen man clad in black, form-fitting armor underneath a black cloak. Khryso got the feeling this individual was more than just another Collective goon. "Warrior Mallus of Clan Plagueis," Khryso introduced himself, his face remaining neutral.

"Good for you," the Falleen responded with a smirk, quickly sliding his rapier into its scabbard and producing an E-11 from beneath his cloak. Blaster bolts began to spray down the hallway,

centered on Khryso's chest. The Sith easily began to deflect the bolts, even as his opponent began to rapidly switch up where he was aiming. The Falleen was now using the same cover the Ravagers had set up to avoid being hit by any of his deflected blaster bolts.

Khryso began to march forward to close the distance. As it were, he didn't want to risk throwing off his timing by removing a hand from his saber to grab his blaster. Instead, he would just have to close the gap and look for an opening to take out the Falleen. That opening came in the form of a reload pause. Khryso dashed forward, drawing his blaster with one hand and wielding his saber in the other.

As he jumped over the cover, however, the Falleen jumped in the opposite direction, rolling beneath Khryso and coming up behind him. The Sith realized something was wrong as the flow of the Force pinged his awareness. Khryso allowed the Force to flow into his body and the moment his foot touched the floor, he instantly bounded back up, performing a front flip and twisting his body to bring his lightsaber between him and the Falleen. He barely got his blade up in time, catching the first volley of blaster bolts from his opponent as some kind of explosive detonated where he'd been a moment before, spraying out blue goo in a small radius around it.

Khryso landed unsteadily on a body of corpses, stumbling as he was pressed back by additional volleys of blaster fire from his opponent. Khryso's lips pressed together tightly as he tried to find his footing and think up a strategy. Clearly this being was not messing around. The Sith had underestimated his opponent and was now on the back-foot. His next chance to make a big play would be when this clip ran out, so he needed to come up with a plan before then.

A stray thought entered the Chiss' mind. He could always make a run for it. His ship was ready to go and at the moment, he was much closer to the door than his opponent. The thought left his mind nearly as quickly as it had come. No, he had to deal with this. He couldn't leave someone like this behind to hamper the rest of the evacuees. Not only that, but he would feel ashamed to have run away like that. He had never felt guilty for sending Ravagers to their death, but that didn't mean their deaths were meaningless. He would avenge them.

Finally finding purchase for his feet, Khryso stood firm. When this clip was done, he would charge his opponent again. Now, however, he was prepared for a dodge. With his blaster in his free hand, the Sith could respond to the Falleen's movements with a spray of blaster fire. The alternative, if the Falleen chose to stand his ground in order to fake him out, would mean his opponent was met with a violet blade of plasma.

The opening arrived and Khryso jumped forward, avoiding the quickly evaporating blue goo and his finger on the trigger of his LL-30. The Falleen, in one smooth motion, jumped backward, quickly holstering his rifle and releasing his rapier from its scabbard once again. "You're going to have to be smarter than that if you want to stay alive," the Falleen cackled, jumping to the side as Khryso fired his blaster and hit empty air. The Falleen's jump carried him to the wall,

where he took a few quick steps before launching himself at Khryso's side opposite his blaster hand.

Khryso slashed out with his lightsaber, quickly trying to pivot to adapt, but the Falleen easily avoided the strike, sliding beneath the sword and landing a quick nick with his rapier on Khryso's leg. The Sith's blade was already moving to strike at the soldier's new position, but the Falleen had already spun back and out of the way, once again pivoting with ease between his rapier and blaster.

The light stab didn't hurt much more than a sting, but Khryso knew that it wasn't a simple stab wound. There was something more to the attack. He couldn't stop to think about it, however, as his anger at being hit began to well up. "Tell me your name," Khryso requested, facing down the Falleen as the Collective soldier flipped behind some nearby cover and resumed his barrage.

"I suppose any being would want to know the name of their killer," the Falleen relented, "Dreen. Konnus Dreen."

Khryso's saber was a violet blur as it deflected blaster bolts back at Dreen. His fatigue was starting to build due in no small part to the long day of fighting that preceded this encounter. "I'm afraid you don't understand. I will not be dying today." Concentrating, Khryso drew on his anger to try and replenish his energy. It helped, but not by much. "Sometimes, I just like to think back and remember my stepping stones. One of which will be you."

Khryso raised his blaster and began to return fire. He had to be extra careful to ensure he didn't accidentally reflect one of his own blaster bolts back into himself. However, unlike with deflection, he was able to aim his blaster much more carefully. This forced Dreen further into cover, causing the Falleen to rely more on blindfire. With some of the pressure taken off of his defenses, Khryso could think a bit more clearly. Taking advantage of the moment, Khryso was able to channel some of the Force energy flowing through him directly to his leg, closing up the small wound.

This also gave Khryso the opportunity to realize his position. Dreen was behind the cover the Ravager's had set up, which meant his back was to the hangar door. Calling upon his telekinetic ability, Khryso activated the hangar door controls, opening the hangar doors. The door opening caught Dreen by surprise, and while staying in cover, the Falleen turned to fire into the door, assuming there were soldiers on the other side of it. No longer having to deflect blaster bolts, Khryso threw his lightsaber. The sword rode the wave of the Force, slicing into Dreen's cover.

Dreen quickly dove into different cover as Khryso fired his blaster, managing to graze Dreen's abdomen. Dreen started to raise his blaster to attack the now seemingly defenseless Khryso, but his spray of blaster bolts into the hangar had drawn the attention of the few individuals still

inside. Captain Slau, who had been waiting by Shuttle 1, had now drawn his blaster and was racing towards the door, firing towards Dreen. The Falleen's shots towards Khryso went wide as he sought out alternative cover. The mad scramble gave Khryso the opening he needed to pump the Collective soldier full of blaster bolts.

The Falleen's body collapsed onto the pile of Ravager corpses, life evacuating it before Dreen had the opportunity to utter any final words. Khryso leaned up against the wall to catch his breath. Captain Slau ran into the hallway, holding his blaster at the ready as his eyes swept over the area, searching out hostiles. After a few moments, the captain turned to Khryso. "Lord Mallus, is everything alright?"

Khryso slowly straightened up. "No. This place is disgusting. Let's retreat before the next Collective wave arrives." Slau saluted and made his way back towards Shuttle 1. Khryso took one last glance at Dreen before marching back into the hangar. The man may have been formidable, but now he was just another corpse on the pile.