**Swordsman’s Challenge**

Jon braced himself against a wall as he felt yet *another* explosion rock the *Nesolat*. He felt the shaking come to a stop, counted to ten, and when no further quakes came he rose from his cover and entered a dead sprint down through the corridor.

*This is bad*, he thought. *At this rate, it doesn’t matter if* Elysium *can punch through our defenses, they’ll be nothing left to defend!* As if to prove his point, another quake tore through the station, causing him to stumble.

*The Force just loves proving me right, huh?* He thought as he rounded a corner.

Waiting just on the other side was a group of a half dozen Collective soldiers, all of whom immediately turned to him. Jon swore.

“Ah… Wrong door?” he said sheepishly. He dodged out of the way of six firing blaster rifles. In the same motion, he ducked back behind the corner, while tossing his *one* stun grenade at the squadron.

As he heard the blaster fire cease and give way to shouting, Jon hunkered down behind the corner, and counted off the seconds until he heard the familiar *snap stzzzt* of his stun grenade going off. He ducked his head out, carefully, and counted all six soldiers lying unconscious in the hallway

*Well, that’s one brutal death averted today,* he thought, breathing a sigh of relief. *Wonder how many more of those they’ll be before we’re done?*

*“Scimitar Squadron, come in Scimitar Squadron,”* a static-filled voice crackled to life. Jon, knelt down next to the man wearing sergeant’s colors, and found his comm device.

*“Scimitar Squadron, this is Commander Dreen, if you can hear me, respond. What is your status, Scimitar Squadron.”*

*“Aww, wassamater Dreeny? Your boys run into some trouble? Did some old teacher get in their way?”* Another voice asked. Female, and tinged with more than a little crazy. Curiouser and curiouser.

*“Be silent, Gwendolyn!”* “Commander Dreen” snapped back. *“Those are good men down there! I wouldn’t expect you to understand.”* Division in the ranks? That could come in handy. Jon left the comm device on, and clipped it to his belt.

It took him less than a minute to make sure the unconscious soldiers *wouldn’t* be getting back up, and two more stash their weapons somewhere their compatriots couldn’t find them (for a school, the Shadow Academy sure had a lot of helpful hidden passages, if you ignored the scary glowing objects inside of them). Three minutes of eavesdropping on the enemy revealed a lot:

1. The Collective’s goal was to use the *Nesolat* to bypass Arx’s planetary shields. Bad.
2. “Gwendolyn,” the crazy one, and “Dreen” the prissy sounding one, were both leaders of a joint operation to pull that off. Also bad.
3. Dreen had a bit of an… ego problem. Bad for *him*. Useful for Jon.

 The mercenary knew the *smart* thing to do would’ve been to get out of dodge. Let the Brotherhood forces know what was up, and let them handle the dangerous work. Odds were bad that they’d be able to respond in time, though; by the time he found someone and gave them the intel, they’d probably already be well on their way to completing their goal. Really, was that his problem though?

 “A smart contractor,” his grandfather had always taught him, “Is one who knows when to ditch a contract. Leave the honor to the Mandalorians and the moralizing to the Jedi.”

A year ago, he would’ve done the smart thing.

Instead, Jon turned towards the direction he’d seen those soldiers coming from. It was a safe bet that was where he’d find Commander Dreen. “Sparks” didn’t seem like the sort of lady who could keep an operation together without her babysitter. Cut off the head, and the body will blow itself up. He just hoped it didn’t take the *Nesolat* with it.

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 Commander Dreen, as it turned out, was a relatively young Falleen, who carried himself with the air of a man trying to look far more important than he really was. It was the way he always walked at the very *front* of the line of soldiers, the entire time Jon was stalking them through the *Nesolat*’s halls, the way he never let his posture be anything other than ramrod straight and - most *especially* in Jon’s opinion - the way he never once took his hand off the hilt of his rapier. He looked like a man constantly posing for some great painting, and as a consequence, really just looked stiff and uncomfortable.

 Jon, once he’d tracked them down, had been carefully following the procession from just out of sight. He was no Jedi, or Sith, and he knew that a one-man head on assault on the group would only end with him as a smoking corpse. Instead, he was waiting for just the right time to take them all out at once.

 He found it when they moved to cross over a bridge, a walkway between two sections of the *Nesolat*, with a long fall underneath it.

 As always, Dreen felt the need to be at the very *front* of his procession. That was fine. Made ambushing him that much easier. Still, he knew he’d only have one shot at this.

 “Single-file men,” Dreen called out - he had a nasally voice that didn’t fit at *all* with the air of command he was trying to give off. “Heads on a swivel. I don’t want anyone catching us by surprise.”

 *Little late for that*, Jon thought. *They* still *haven’t seen me coming.*

 Jon crept close to the back of the procession, silent enough not to be heard, and kept behind the corner of the doorway. Once the last of Dreen’s men was on the bridge, Jon sprung. He drew four knives, two in each hand, and launched.

 “Hostile spotted!” someone shouted, and Jon cursed. Someone near the back of the procession had spotted him. Instead of opening fire, however, they moved to protect their precious commander. Impressive loyalty. It even likely would’ve been an impediment if he’d been *aiming* for Commander Dreen.

 Instead, his fan of blades hit their marks perfectly - the cable lines holding up the bridge. They realised what he’d done a handful of seconds too late. The wires, already worn from the constant shaking of the *Nesolat* from *Elysium’s* bombardment, and straining under the weight of carrying so many men, were slashed, and weakened *just* enough. There was a loud and high pitched screeching sound, like tearing metal, and the soldiers looked at each other in horror as it dawned on them what was about to happen.

 “Move you fools!” Dreen shouted.

The spell was broken, and the men rushed back across the bridge, but it was too late. The walkway gave beneath them, wires snapping and metal platforms collapsing as the bridge surrendered to the artificial gravity. One by one, men fell screaming into the dark beneath them, and Jon could hear each one land with a *thud* as their screaming silenced.

Every single one of them, that was, except Dreen.

Jon wouldn’t say he wasn’t impressed, as he watched his opponent leap and dodge across the way, using the falling metal and his own falling comrades as platforms to keep himself aloft, even as he worked to avoid gravity.

Finally, he landed gracefully back on the same side of the bridge as Jon. He took a moment to catch his breath, glaring at the mercenary all the while.

 “Those were good men,” Dreen said quietly, glaring at Jon. “Dedicated to the goal of eradicating the *plague* of the Force from our galaxy. Heroes, that you just *killed*.”

 “Tell that to the bodies up stairs,” Jon retorted, stomping out the fire that had started on his cape. “Students and teachers, mostly non-combatants.”

 “‘Non-combatants’ training in sorcery that can rival armies!” Dreen shouted back. “Why are you even defending them? You’re clearly not a Force-user. You should be with *us* as we purge our Galaxy of the -”

 “Yeah, yeah,” Jon said dismissively. “I know the spiel. ‘Rhetoric, rhetoric, Force is bad, propaganda, propaganda, elevate the common man, blah blah, something about Palpatine.’ Doesn’t change the fact that *you* came at *us*. Justify it however you like, *you* started this war. I’m not gonna feel bad about treating it like one.”

 “Quite,” Dreen bit out. “Alright then, [let’s go to war!](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mUmBOrCg1Pk)”

 Almost faster than Jon could react, he swung his blaster rifle out of its holster on his back and began opening fire. The whole thing took only a single motion. Jon was impressed at the speed and discipline.

 If he hadn’t been expecting it, that might’ve been the end of him. As it was, he just barely moved in time; the instant he saw Dreen so much as twitch, he ducked and rolled behind one of the metal pillars, his long cape billowing behind him.

 Jon came out on the other side, a volley of blasts firing from his vambraces. Dreen was quick, though, and rolled out of the way, coming up kneeling. Before Jon could fire off another round, a volley from the rifle forced him back into his hiding position, singing the tip of his hat.

 Dreen, it seemed, was a significantly better marksman than Jon was. That was gonna be a problem. Luckily, Jon was accustomed to outsmarting problems.

 Quietly as he could, Jon backed up and slapped a ricochet pad onto the wall behind him.

 *Force, I hope I placed that right*, he thought just before shouting out: “Hey Dreeny, over here!”

 Dreen took the bait, firing in the direction Jon had called from - Jon moved just quick enough, and the blaster bolt hit home on the ricochet pad, sending it right back where it came.

 Jon poked his head out, *daring* to hope that, Force willing, Dreen’s blast had come back to hit him in a lethal spot - and had just enough time to avoid the return fire. No such luck, though judging by the scorch mark on Dreen’s sleeve, it *had* been a near thing.

 *Not near enough though*, Jon realised. *This isn’t working. Sooner or later he’ll get in a lucky shot and then… Ok, new plan then.*

 “Tell you what,” Jon called out. “We *could* keep playing cat, mouse, and blaster, but I’ve got another proposition for you!”

 “Your surrender?” Dreen chuckled. “I accept. Just come right out, and I’ll place one right between your eyes. Quick and painless.”

 “Tempting,” Jon said sardonically. “But not what I had in mind. Couldn’t help but notice that rapier at your side. You any good with it, or is it just for *show*?”

 Jon could see Dreen twitch a smirk, and watched his posture change. *Hook.*

 “Are you proposing a *duel*, sir?” Dreen asked, smugness dripping in his voice. *Line.*

 Time for the gamble. Jon stepped out from his hiding place, arms open at his sides, in full view of Dreen - an open target for his blaster rifle, should he choose to take the shot; Jon was betting that he wouldn’t though.

 “You and me, right here and now. Prove what a great warrior you are the old fashioned way,” Jon said, making a show of dropping the blaster cartridges from his vambraces. Both dropped onto the floor with a soft *clink*. After that, he drew Kanshou and Bakuya from their sheaths, and joined them at the hilt.

 “Single combat?” Dreen asked, letting his blaster rifle fall to his side, his smug grin giving way to a bloodthirsty smile.

 “Single combat,” Jon said with a nod.

 Dreen laughed, before dropping his rifle to the floor, and kicking it away into the darkness. He drew the blood-red rapier from his side, and took a stance. [*Sinker*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cgNP77uKa5A)*.*

 Jon made the first move - he charged forward, the connected black and white blades of his weapons twirling over his head, and brought them down. Dreen parried, letting the sharp black blade of Kanshou slide down the blade of his own rapier, sparks forming. Jon leveraged his weapon, the ivory edge of Bakuya swinging upward at Dreen’s exposed calf, but the Falleen kicked Jon in the stomach, and sent his strike off course. Bakuya’s tip buried itself in the floor, jamming tight.

 Dreen tried to take advantage, and lunge the tip of his rapier in a strike for his opponent’s heart. Jon reacted quickly, splitting the couplers of his weapons again, and blocking with the now-single Kanshou in a reverse grip.

 Jon took a fan of daggers from his side with his other hand, leaving Bakuya where she was for now, and hurling them with precision at Dreen. He spun out of the way, his dark grey cloak whirling behind him, and leapt back to put distance between them.

 Jon didn’t give his opponent time to recover. He rushed him, one hand gripping Kanshou in an overhead strike, while the other drew Fang from his belt.

 Dreen dodged the strike from the sword, and grabbed the wrist holding Jon’s dagger with his free hand. His grip held tight, and twisted. The dagger clattered to the floor, where Dreen kicked it away, before knocking the wind out of Jon with a knee to the stomach.

 “Nice try,” Dreen said as Jon fell to his knees, raising his blade for a Coup de Grace. “Do better in your next life!”

 He thrust his rapier forward - and Jon fell backwards, limp on the floor, as the crimson blade sailed inches over his face. From where he landed, he grabbed the fallen Fang, and slashed at Dreen, forcing the man back.

 Jon rose steadily to his feet, picking his weapons back up, and glaring at Dreen with a look of determination.

 “Heh. You’re not half bad,” Dreen said with a smirk. “For a Force-loving pirate, I mean.”

 “Neither are you,” Jon said, rising to his feet and pulling Bakuya from the floor. “For a boot-licking fascist, anyway.”

 Slowly, the two began to circle each other, watching each other. At the slightest opening, the other would dive in, but for now they merely observed.

 “I meant what I said,” Dreen hummed. “You’d do very well with the Liberation Front. We can pay your triple whatever this Brotherhood is giving you.”

 “Not too long ago, I might’ve taken you up on that offer,” Jon huffed, both blades held in a defensive posture. Once again, it was probably the “smart thing” to do.

 “But?”

 “But… I made some new friends recently,” he smiled, raising his swords. “And despite my best efforts… they’re kinda rubbing off on me.” Jon lashed out, one sword back to parry while the other slashed for Dreen’s throat.

 The Commander sidestepped the strike, and slipped his thin blade between Jon’s defenses. The tip was aimed directly at his throat.

 “A pity,” Dreen said. “To see such talent go to waste.” The tip of the blade came within an inch of Jon’s vulnerable throat - and clashed with the vibrant electricity of a force field.

 “What?” Dreen gasped. “How did you - ”

 But it was too late; Jon swung his blades around in a pair of synchronous arcs - Kanshou from above, Bakuya from below, and the two crashed into his rapier, shattering the blood red blade.

 Jon took a heartbeat - and not a nano-second more - to admire the look of shock on Dreen’s face, right before he drove both blades into the Commander’s chest.

 “You’re right,” Jon whispered, pulling the blades free. “It *is* a waste.”

 The light faded from Dreen’s eyes, and the man fell dead on the floor. Just one more body for the day.

 Jon stumbled, wearily, out of the room, leaving his opponent behind, forgotten. This was one fith won, but there was a *lot* more fighting to be had before this was over.