

Spirits of Our Lives

Why do I always volunteer for this Sithspit? she thought as the darkness consumed the room.

The holocron glowed on its pedestal, but seemed to give off no light. It was as if the photons were simply absorbed into the miasma of black that the Zeltron found herself in. Almost as bad as the darkness was the quiet. Where her footsteps had echoed in the ancient temple's barren stone halls before, the scrape of her boots on the floor now sounded hollow somehow; empty.

It almost made her want the wraith back. Him and his wailing warning. His *challenge*.

"Spirit of a loved one, spirit of regret, and an enemy. Fan-fuhracking-tastic." For how cold it still felt in the room, if it could be called that, it seemed odd that Qyreia couldn't see her breath against the backdrop of the holocron.

But that was hardly the worst of her problems.

The Arconan Consul could have given this job to anyone. Anyone at all. Instead she took it on herself to come all the way to the ice-covered expanse of Vandor for the pure rumor of a holocron. Something for the Force users to be happy about, since it wouldn't do the mercenary any damn good. The abandoned temple in the windswept heights of the snowy mountains was interesting enough on its own, and she'd come prepared for the cold, or even for a longer expedition if things went sour.

Safe to say: things had gone sour.

"So where's this first ghost, huh?" she called into the echoless void. "Buncha big talk and nothing? What, is the HoloTube signal buffering?"

Silence.

Buffering real hard, apparently.

Reverence for any kind of ghost was clearly not on her mind, and the longer she was left alone, she grew more sarcastic rather than delving deeper into dread. That was, at least, until the light of the holocron seemed to get darker.

"What?! Oh no, no you don't!"

She was several paces away, and with each stride closer it dimmed and dimmed until it faded to naught but black. Her hand swept out where the pedestal should have been, but met only air.

She swallowed back a sudden, nervous knot in her throat. "Okay. Holonet's done buffering I guess."

“Do I seem like just some holonet feed then?”

She knew that voice. Spun. Maybe blinked. In the complete darkness, it was hard to tell, but by the time she stopped, there was enough light to blind Qyreia. As her aching pupils adjusted behind her hand, her ears picked up the difference, and she started to notice less... *emptiness*. The sound of her breath didn't seem to just disappear into the void.

And then she heard birds.

Soft footsteps.

Qyreia dared to look at the floor and saw well-polished wood, the corner of a kitchen counter, and red feet in fine bead-detailed sandals.

“Are you going to look up, Qyrie, or are you going to hide behind your hand the whole time?”

No. There's no way. She squeezed her eyes closed, not sure if she really was hiding or simply trying not to cry. But she knew those sandals, and the light trill on the *r* in each word.

And only one person ever called her Qyrie.

“Gram-gram?”

Hesitantly, she let her hand fall away from her eyes, raising them to see the Zeltron before her. Her grandmother looked just like she had: bountiful blue hair down to her waist, a slim figure much like Qyreia's, and only the slightest hint of wrinkles at the corners of her bright blue eyes. And the instant she said her grandmother's nickname, her smile lit up.

“That's better.”

Qyreia might have said the moniker again but for the embrace she found herself in — half of her own volition, the other half of the apparent specter's — with her face buried against the older Zeltron's shoulder. She could almost smell the cinnamon and roses she always associated with her grandmother; one of those things where she wasn't sure if it was soap and perfume, or just the pheromonal aura. Folks that got close enough to Qyreia always said she smelled like fuel and lavender. The fuel was simply from being around starships so much. The lavender though, she couldn't always explain.

But this was her *grandma*. Everything about her was... *her*.

There was an inexplicable otherness about it, though. She felt warmth in the ghost's skin, but none came off of it. She could smell the old kitchen and her father's-mother's scent, but it did not linger in the air. Qyreia could feel her, but it felt like only a dream, however cruelly vivid it might have been; a memory in reality, there but not there.

When they finally separated a half-step, they looked each other over as if they simply hadn't seen each other for a long time.

"You look..."

"Good for a ghost?" She chuckled. "Qyrie. My Qyrie. I remember when I last saw you with my own eyes." She tapped the mercenary's nose. "Not counting that time with the medium. What was her name again?"

Qyreia shook her head, eyes tearing up as she tried to maintain her composure. "I-I can't remember." She didn't care about some psychic's name as she launched herself into another hug. "I've missed you."

"I've missed you too, dear." Red fingers pulled back the hood of Qyreia's parka and stroked gently at her hair. "You're growing it out again."

"Call it getting my confidence back," she said, a slight touch of embarrassment in her face.

It was a story few knew the full scope of: year after year since leaving home of harassments and attempted assaults simply for her race and what people thought that meant. Of the pirates that boarded the ship she was crewing and how she watched her captain get dragged around by his scalp. How she killed the bastard that did it; that had killed her friends. Her grandmother knew it all from the visit to her grave and the long, long overdue story time over ten years in the making.

Like she said when Qyreia and her wife visited the medium: "We hear, if you talk to us." And while she was on her sabbatical back home, Qyreia spent a lot of time talking to the headstone of her grandmother.

"It looks lovely," her grandmother said soothingly. "You've always been lovely." She held the bundled Zeltron at arm's length again. "Now tell me. How's your lady, Keira?"

"Good. *Very* good." Her smile grew truly bashful. "We made cookies."

The specter-made-flesh all but jumped for joy, hugging her granddaughter anew and motioning for them to sit, or at least relax. "Boy? Girl?"

"A girl. *Ileta*."

"*Ileta*. Oh, what a darling name. I wish I could see her, circumstances being what they are."

"Once we get everything settled; maybe stock up on diapers a bit more."

"You're not using cloth?"

"Gram, you are *not* going to use this rare moment to give me Sithspit over how we

clean up our child's *ass*."

The ghost smirked and rolled her eyes, but assented.

A long stretch of idle conversation followed that seemed like hours should have passed, all of it in the odd comfort of her grandmother's kitchen. Just how she remembered it. It was almost like being a kid again, sharing stories over tea and cookies, staring at her beautiful grandmother with rapt attention the whole time. *The spirit of a loved one*. The temple wraith's words echoed in her mind, making her wonder what her grandmother's ghost was meant to do to her *other* than provide comfort. For such a foreboding warning, it didn't seem to match the spirit of her current situation.

"Gram-gram?" She hesitated, looking at the tea kettle on the stove she knew wasn't really there. "Why are you here? Much as I love... you and this and *everything*, it's not why you're here."

It was odd knowing that the sigh from her grandmother's ghost held no breath to it. "It's something of a *roulette*. Do you remember with the medium, when I talked about rules for us?"

"'Terms and conditions', I think is what you called them."

"Right. Well this pact breaks some *rules* and fills the gap with new ones. The... I'll call him the Host. He wants you whittled away by the three visiting spirits, but he can't choose who they are; only what they *represent*."

"And you're the loved one."

"If that's what I am," her grandmother said, apparently pleased by the title.

"Do you know who the other ghosts are?"

Her grandmother looked around as if testing the air — like looking at the sky to predict the weather — and held herself with arms hugged tight to her chest. "No. But they're close. I don't have much more time."

The last sentence came with such an unnerving gravity that Qyreia had never seen before in her grandmother. "And?"

Her bright blue eyes leveled sadly toward the mercenary. "And you won't like it. I'm sorry dear, but I'm not allowed to say more than that."

"Terms and conditions?"

The ghost laughed, the sound somehow more hollow than just a moment ago. "I'd say you would make a fine spirit, but I wouldn't wish that on you. Oh, but what I would give to hold you for *real* though."

“This whole thing seems like a fever dream.” Qyreia choked back fresh tears. “I don’t want you to go.”

“Nor I, Qyrie.” She looked nervously over her shoulder, as if a voice had whispered in her ear. “But like all dreams, we have to wake up.” The Zeltron ghost stepped forward and wrapped Qyreia in a tight hug. “Just remember that. You just need to last long enough to wake up.”

The merc had to accept it, despite how much her arms ached for how tightly she held onto her grandmother, tears flowing freely but quietly. She could no longer help it.

“I love you, Gram-gram.”

Her words were met with silence.

Realization slowly set in that the warmth was gone. Her cheeks, damp with tears, felt cold. Blinking away what was left in her eyes, she peeled her face away from the embrace to see only darkness, realizing that her arms were wrapped around the stone plinth that held the holocron, somehow on her knees despite knowing that she was standing upright only moments before. Not quite sure if she should even feel awkward about it, she released her hold on the stone and stood back up, pulling up her hood and putting all of her cold weather gear back in its proper place. Whatever reality she was in before, she was back in the one that was located on a wintery planet now.

“Okay,” Qyreia said as she wiped away the last vestiges of moisture from her cheeks, “frack this place in *all* its holes.” Her eyes went to the holocron, noting the similar effects it didn’t have on the black that surrounded her. It. Them. “So is this you, or that dumbass ghost?”

The holocron didn’t answer.

“Well frack you too then, I guess.”

Her mind went to her grandmother; how her expression had changed so drastically when it came to the other spirits. Qyreia never said it, or made a conscious thought toward it, but part of her wondered if the whole thing really *was* some sort of dream — a memory made real by the invasive powers wrought by the Force. It was something she knew existed. It was in their repertoire. But there was one thing that made her realize that it wasn’t just a memory.

Her grandmother looked worried, even scared when she talked about the other spirits. Qyreia had never seen that expression on her before. Ever.

Step by careful step, she backed away from the holocron. Part of her wanted to just get some distance. At the same time though, the merc thought that maybe, just maybe if she got far enough away, whatever spiritual or telepathic link it had might be lessened enough for her to break away.

The dead sound of her feet on stone continued to pervade as she stepped further and further back, the holocron's glowing shape dwindling smaller and smaller. The walls that had encased the area around the artifact definitely were closer than that. But she never ran into anything. No columns, no debris, not even an ancient rotted carpet to trip over. All the while, the pale blue shape shrank and shrank, until it was no more than a pinprick. *Close your eyes and maybe we can wake up from this Sithspit.*

She let the lids close, enveloping her in complete darkness, and took a step back.

And she hit a solid wall.

When she spun around to touch the surface, she wasn't even sure if her eyes were open or closed anymore for the absolute nothing that filled her pupils. The sheer strain of it gave her a headache, but she was so absorbed in the change in anything that she was at least temporarily distracted.

That was until she heard the blaster fire.

When she spun around again, the walls had closed in, and tightly. But there was light through the horizontal slits in the door in front of her. More blaster fire sounded beyond the door to the apparent locker that she was in.

Locker? She looked through the slits more carefully, seeing a ship's galley, and realization sank in like a stone.

"No."

There was another surge of blaster fire out of sight, and then all went quiet. The Zeltron knew this place. Even so, she still leaned close to the door, listening intently for the next part of this reenactment.

"Qyreia!"

The whisper sounded like it came from right outside the door, and so suddenly that she jumped in the tight space, slamming her head on the ceiling of the locker and feeling like everything from her jaw to her spine was utterly jarred. Somewhere in the disorientation and violence of movement, she managed to push open the door and stumble out onto the floor.

She half expected to see corpses when she looked up. Something. Anything.

Instead it was all just empty.

Qyreia took a couple hesitant steps forward and heard continued blaster fire down the corridor. It was just how she remembered it. The *Art of the Pen*, the Action VI freighter she'd crewed nigh a decade ago, was in the middle of its worst moment. *Her* worst moment. It was the first time she'd ever been truly scared for her life. It was the first time the Zeltron had taken one.

This was a time she never wanted to remember.

More blaster fire sounded from deep inside the ship. *The cargo bay. That was where they fought the pirates.* But those sounds hardly bothered her anymore. Too many battles since then. What surprised her nearly out of her skin was the sound of the locker door slamming on the wall behind her.

She didn't know what to expect when she turned around. Much like her grandma had said though, the Zeltron knew it wasn't going to be good.

Seeing the dead woman standing there confirmed as much.

"A-Asta?" Her head shook slowly in disbelief as her voice weakened, a throaty whisper working its way up past her lips. "No, no not you."

The human's expression was one of muted disbelief. Even showing the red disfigured stain of blood on her abdomen, the rest of her looked almost healthy. Burnished golden skin with only the slightest ashy tint, jet black hair in its familiar ponytail that hung down between her shoulders, and all the clothes she wore on the day she died. Died fighting in the cargo hold after shoving a terrified Qyreia into the locker to keep her safe.

Only the Zeltron ended up fighting anyway. Ended up killing anyway. And Asta, her best friend among the crew, who in the fateful last seconds before that locker door closed had kissed Qyreia as a final act and admission of something held under the surface for however long... she died.

Now here she was, standing there and staring at the Zeltron. Qyreia couldn't help but just fall to her knees, stumbling over so many words to the many formless thoughts pouring through her mind, trying to take shape into something coherent.

"I... I'm sorry." Qyreia licked her lips and swallowed back the dry knot in her throat. "I'm sorry. There's so much... If I had known..." It was near impossible to fight the tears.

It's all my fault. I should have been there. Even if we both went, then at least I'd be with you. You wouldn't have been alone. Qyreia shuddered out a long, low sigh, and her eyes squeezed shut. *We'd both be dead.*

Kneeling there, struggling to be there, she didn't hear the human step forward to settle to the floor in much the same position in front of her. When Qyreia opened her eyes again to see Asta so close, looking intently at the Zeltron, she felt the strongest urge to look away; to avert her eyes to anywhere but the human's. Her gaze caught the blood stain again, and she felt her own insides twist at the memory. She wanted so much to look into the human's brown eyes again, but she couldn't bear it when she felt so unworthy, alive when *she* was not.

A scream rang out in her ears, like an echo of a memory. A shrill cry of pain that dissolved into voices.

"Asta..."

"You stay in here, you got that?! I'll come get you when the fighting's over, okay?"

"But..."

"If I don't, then you stay in here until you know you can escape. You understand?"

"Mhm."

"Stay. here."

Then she heard the sound of the locker slamming shut, metal on metal, even though she could see it past the visage of her dead friend, still wide open like she'd left it. She still cringed all the same, just like she did back when it wasn't a memory, when the door had shut in her face. If this was the holocron, then she might damn well blow the thing up when she got out of this.

Looking toward the back wall, Qyreia caught the human's steady, unblinking gaze. "Why won't you say anything?"

Asta's lips parted as if to speak, but stopped short, her face a picture of regret.

"Can you not talk? Or won't you?"

The human looked at her with an expression that could have suggested either was accurate. Qyreia hung her head, not sure what to do.

"How many times do I have to relive this?"

There was a palpable pause despite the silence from the human. The next thing that Qyreia knew though, one of Asta's hands was gently laid on hers. Hesitantly, she looked into the deep brown eyes that were an indecipherable mix of emotions.

"I wanted to forget. Tried so hard because I couldn't stop thinking about you. About every single sign that... Why didn't you ever tell me, Asta? Why did it take losing you?" Her head shook of its own volition, parsing out thoughts she hadn't dug up in years. *"I... I can't tell you how just... utterly destroyed I was after that. I had to kill, and... and you were the best thing I had going for me then. You knew about Xeipha and all the dumb reasons I joined Penwin's crew and... frack, Asta, I would've..."* Qyreia choked back her hesitation. *"I was in a dark place when... when you died."*

It felt like a stab to her gut when she said it. It hurt so much. Maybe that was why the human put a consoling hand on her shoulder. Another on her cheek to lift her gaze up to lock eyes once more.

“I couldn’t... Please, Asta just say something. Even if it’s to call me a coward or worse, let me hear your voice one more time.”

Her voice choked with every word, and the pain in her stomach worsened so much that she nearly doubled over. The reflex was too strong for Asta’s hand to stop so that when Qyreia looked down, she could see the deep red stain slowly blooming from inside the parka under where she’d been gripping.

She was *bleeding*.

“Ngh... Wha- Why?” The Zeltron looked at Asta. “N-no. I can’t. Not here.”

Qyreia lurched forward, her fall stopped only by the silent ghost’s hand while she clutched at the bleeding wound in her abdomen; in the same spot as Asta’s. The human’s face still looked sorrowful, searching the Zeltron’s features. The Arcona could have sworn that, between the redoubling pain and her attempts to keep her thoughts in place, she saw Asta’s lips silently move.

‘It’s the only way.’

The mercenary’s jaw set as she tried to push the pain away. *The ghost of regret. Not karking wrong.*

“I regret... mfh, so much, Asta. Not seeing *nh* how you f-felt. Not b-being there with you-*ngh*. *Frack*.” She lifted a shaky hand from her bloody stomach, setting gently to the human’s cheek. Despite the blood smear, Asta nuzzled into the touch. “But you’d be p-proud. Made me b-b-braver. ‘m a fighter *nghow*. *Mngh*-married. Have a k-kid.”

Qyreia’s eyes lidded. Too much blood loss. The world was starting to go dark, and as Asta realized it, a small panic seemed to set in as she tried to keep the Zeltron upright; keep her awake.

“I’m so sorry, Asta,” she said through streaming tears, struggling to control the pain too much to sob. “But at least you made me... better. I... did... whatcha said.”

Everything was fading so quickly, all she could see in her limited tunnel vision was the human’s increasingly concerned, tender face. Qyreia almost didn’t see her move closer. She could barely feel the human’s lips meet hers.

Softer than I remember. Huh.

It was all too brief as the Zeltron’s strength ebbed away, all but slipping from Asta’s grasp as she was lowered to the floor. She could faintly tell that the spirit was close, hovering forehead to forehead.

“You stay alive out there, hot stuff.”

Her voice. That was Asta’s voice. Qyreia struggled against the numbness, even the

pain slipping away as the entire front of her white parka was covered in crimson.

“As...ta...”

“I’ll come get you when the fighting’s over.”

There was a faint sensation as fingers tightened on the mercenary’s hands, but that too faded as the world dissolved away to blackness. There was nothing. No sound. No feeling. No thought.

And then Qyreia’s eyes shot open as she gasped for air.

It was still very dark in the citadel chamber, but the Zeltron was alive. Frack, was she alive. Her abdomen felt like it was on fire, aching and sore, but lacking any apparent injury or the blood that had previously impregnated the entire front side of the parka. After a good few moments of catching her breath and coming to the realization that she hadn’t actually died, she finally managed to look up and see that she was laying within arm’s reach of the pedestal and the holocron.

“Well... *that* was... frack.”

Asta was the ghost of regret. That’s a whole load of baggage I’m gonna need to process once I’m out of here. She looked warily at the holocron. So long as this ‘spirit of an enemy’ doesn’t kill me first.

Every part of her felt unsteady as Qyreia worked to get back onto her feet. Something about experiencing a twisted sort of death had her body feeling almost like it was trying to remember that it was whole and hale. Even once she conquered her shaking limbs, the sense of dizzy vertigo that she got once upright had the Zeltron nearly topple all over again. Not quite knowing the passage of time in this dark chamber, it could have been several moments or several minutes before she got her body back into equilibrium with all of the blood flowing in the right direction. Even then, many of her muscles had a rigid soreness about them that she didn’t want to acknowledge as some manifestation of rigor mortis.

The merc had bigger problems to worry about, anyway. *How the hell do you fight a ghost?*

If the increasingly visceral apparitions were any indicator, the spirit of an enemy would likely be the worst of them all. Given how many people she had killed or pissed off in her years in the Brotherhood, it could be any one of a number of nameless sods she’d killed or had a hand in the demise of.

She didn’t want to hope for any one in particular. Experience with the myriad Force users had taught her that, when it comes to predetermined chance like this, the universe would always pick the thing you want the least. Better to just let it be, and maybe she’d get something with only a middling threat level.

Still a ghost though. Can't really win fights with them. Try to kick them in the gonads and the shin just goes right through. Jerks.

Even so, Qyreia went through the motions of checking her weapons, making sure everything was in its proper place. Feeling the lightsaber at her hip was always an odd one of late, but after skewering a monster's head with it in Selen's frozen north, the merc found even its rudimentary utility extremely useful, even if she wasn't a proper practitioner. The Force users were rather picky about guarding their 'lightsaber forms'. Fortunately she was better with her blasters than most of them were with their laser-swords.

"Who will it be, who will it be? Let's wait around indefinitely," she muttered, waiting for the final spirit. The rhyming helped calm her nerves. "Nothing left but to wait and see."

More than anything, she wondered what the latest venue might be. Each one had matched the ghost thus far: her grandmother's kitchen, the merchant ship she worked on as a crewmember. She could just as readily be tossed into a cold ice field as a scorching desert or dense cityscape. And while the waiting was fine for easing out the tension from her muscles, it played havoc with the pit of her stomach, with familiar pre-action butterflies energetically flitting about the entire time.

She wasn't quite ready for the voice that seemed so clear in the cold dark.

"It's been a while."

Qyreia spun in a heartbeat, pistol wrenched from its holster and pointed at the figure that stood just within the glow of the holocron. Even with the pale blue light creating a limit to the colors available to see, Qyreia knew those red eyes and the red, high ponytail.

Kendra Icasta.

She hadn't seen the Chiss since she handed the Technocrat over to the Brotherhood as a prisoner on the Meridian Prime space station; the second of two meetings the women had. The first, on Nancora, had ended in Icasta's favor, and the Zeltron briefly ended up a prisoner of the Collective. To say there was bad blood between them was accurate, if not an understatement.

"Seems the bigwigs decided not to keep you around," Qyreia said hesitantly, pistol trained on the woman but refraining from firing just yet. Most of their discourse had been with blaster bolts flying through the air. This was an oddly interesting change of pace.

"I am a hunter; a soldier. They wanted information that I didn't have."

"So they killed you?" It was more statement than question. The Zeltron felt strangely disappointed by the revelation. "That's disappointing."

“You’d rather I’d been indoctrinated to your Jedi-worship?”

“Listen schutta, the only Force user I worship is my wife, and even that’s usually when her clothes are off.”

That was when she finally saw Icasta’s right hand come up in a fist, previously bathed in shadow: a strange amalgam of the original blue-skinned limb and the mechanical one that Qyreia knew far better. A glance at the left hand revealed the trigger finger was still missing — a result of the fight that had gotten the Collective officer captured.

“You’re a disgusting stain on the galaxy.”

“You are in serious need of getting un-brainwashed *and* getting laid.”

Qyreia briefly watched the fury burn in the Chiss’ eyes. Then the blue woman simply disappeared into the black.

She was about to make a snide comment about disappearing tricks, but was stopped short when she saw the blue hand snake over her shoulder and grab her roughly by the jaw. The Zeltron tore away, spinning to face the former Technocrat, who had a very satisfied look on her blue features. It was strange seeing a normal red Chiss eye rather than the cybernetic that once inhabited the right socket.

“How do you feel about the Huntress of the Collective now?”

“You’re still a dead mother fracker, and I ain’t.” *Let’s see if we can’t make you more dead.* Qyreia raised and fired the heavy blaster pistol square into Icasta’s chest.

The red bolt, bright and blinding in the otherwise dark void, passed harmlessly through her to burst against some stone wall beyond. Qyreia’s lips pressed together, disappointed, while the Chiss looked at her chest, then up at the Zeltron.

“You didn’t *really* think that would work, did you?”

“Worth a shot.”

Kendra disappeared again, reappearing at the Zeltron’s back, tsking as her quarry jumped at the repeat jump scare. “I am *ethereal*. You can’t harm me anymore than your words can. How are the marks I left on your back with my whip though?”

“Gone. Bacta’s a helluva drug when you use it right.”

The Huntress disappeared again, but her voice seemed to fill Qyreia’s ears as if she were right behind. “Let’s see if we can’t fix that.”

It was as though she could feel Kendra’s hands on her shoulders, holding her there while pain seared across her back and shoulders, drawing out screams with each

successive line. There was a certain feeling of déjà vu beneath the torment as the lines matched, blow for blow, the strikes of Kendra's whip back on Nancora. And just like with the last ghost, the wounds bloomed red from under her clothes that remained otherwise undamaged. Qyreia couldn't see her back, but she could feel the warm and sticky sensation against her shirt. She managed a quiet sort of relief when her memory counted out the last of the lashes, Kendra reappearing in front of her almost simultaneously.

"Just surrender already, and you can leave with just those souvenirs."

"Mngh, f-frack you," Qyreia said with labored breaths as she recovered from the pain. "Kriffin' complaining about Force users, and you're just as much of a cheating schutta. Least when we fought before it was a relatively even playing field, even if you *did* need your sleemo Shikari girlfriends to do half the work for you."

She punctuated the jab with a pair of blaster bolts through the specter. It wouldn't do anything, but it made her feel a little better.

"Your stubbornness is why the Brotherhood needs to be exterminated."

"My *stubbornness* is why you schuttas are an endangered species now!"

Qyreia saw the slightest hint of a genuine scowl on the Chiss' otherwise pretty features before she slipped silently away into the shadows again. She tried to follow the fade, firing into the darkness, but only serving to send red energy bolts fruitlessly into the dark to be swallowed up. Kendra reappeared at her side, the undead iron grip on her shoulder and a blue thumb openly in view pointed at the Zeltron's trunk.

"Another reminder then."

The thumb passed harmlessly through her clothes, but pierced the Zeltron's flesh like a hot iron rod, penetrating skin and oblique muscles, stopping somewhere among her intestines.

It was the slugthrower round on Meridian station all over again.

It's just an illusion, she tried to tell herself, but the thought was drowned out by the fresh scream of pain. The Arconan tore away again despite a brief struggle with the unearthly grip of Icasta, reflexively firing her blaster where the ghost stood. It had the same effect as all the others.

When Qyreia squared off with the specter again, Kendra merely faded out and in to close the distance and swat the blaster out of the Zeltron's hand. "I once respected your tenacity, but now you're just being stupid."

"My stupid still beat your schutta ass." *Twice.*

The knife wouldn't do anything, same as her other blaster or any of the grenades.

Her hand went from the fresh wound in her side to the thick metal tube hanging from her hip. *Thing's made with the Force, right? Or something?*

Biting back the pained groan, she drew up the lightsaber from her hilt and clicked the button. The deep *snap-hiss* and slight vibration in her hands from the active emitter was somehow comforting, and the hot red glow from the blade contrasted sharply with the cold blue off the holocron.

Kendra all but laughed. "You don't learn. The fight is already *over*."

"I'm not fighting, Kendra," she hissed against the pain as her parka warmed with more blood. "I'm waiting."

"You can't out-wait the dead."

She wasn't wrong, and Qyreia hated that. There was nothing saying that these wounds weren't real this time, and that it was just a matter of time before this ghost just disappeared. Hell, the Zeltron would *rather* fight given those circumstances, rather than be whittled down by some creature she couldn't do anything to other than say *mean things*. Adding insult to injury, the Chiss stepped forward into the blade, showing how even the crystal-formed weapon was just as impotent as all of the other attempts at violence.

As she contemplated her fate, Kendra's smug expression dimmed, and Qyreia couldn't help but notice the ethereal hand that reached past her to clutch the hilt along with her own hands.

When she looked over, she saw her grandmother, a stern but confident expression in her beautiful, wisened features.

"Gram?"

She felt another light shift in the hilt and twisted her head to see another familiar.

"Asta?"

Neither spoke, and both looked far more translucent than their previous visitation forms, but there was a certain change in the mechanical hum of the lightsaber — like how a starship's sounds would change based on minute flexes in power flow or mechanics. Or maybe it was the brightness of the red beam. Maybe it wasn't either, but something felt definitively different.

And Kendra looked concerned. Even more so as the area of her chest around the blade embered.

"What is this?"

"It's like you said: the fight's over. See how much *you* like being stabbed."

Kendra stepped back, eyes aghast as her previously corporeal form slowly ebbed, becoming more and more translucent, the bright orange glow in her chest likewise fading as she drew further and further back into the darkness. No more words passed the blue lips, and the last thing Qyreia saw of her was the circle of heat disappearing into the black.

“That’s three times I’ve beat you, Hutt-fracker. Ain’t that right...” She looked to her right and saw nothing. “...Gram?”

She looked left for Asta, but also saw only air.

Then she looked at the lightsaber, bringing it more vertical and closer to her face. Even as the stone walls that had collapsed and enclosed the space around the holocron lifted away, she stared curiously, almost sadly at the glowing blade. She couldn’t tell what sounds it normally made and if it still had the hum of their touch. Even as the last stony grinding faded away, she still hoped deep down that they were somehow still next to her; still alive in her saber.

She lost them both once in life. Then again, each in turn, as ghosts. Twice in a single night was something that she couldn’t help but think about, even if it was far-fetched.

But as she let her hand and the saber drop to her side, she finally noticed the light peering into the citadel from the main doorway and the broken windows and rooftops above her. She was free, and it was daytime outside. Qyreia’s eyes went to the holocron and, half expecting the first wraith that had given its sobering warning to reappear, she grabbed the device and tucked it under her arm, walking back toward the entrance and her ship. In her other hand, the lightsaber still glowed its vibrant red.