

## A Noble Choice

Xander Paddox waited in the tunnel with four others. The humid, musty catacombs led to an abandoned palace in a run-down section on Pelagon. The palace had been the home of a noble around a thousand years ago, falling to disrepair when a plague ran through the town, wiping out much of the population. Ancient Tapani history, thought Xander...more forgotten dead nobles...wonder if I'm going to add my name to that list?

Beside him a large, brutish, humanoid called a "Yaka" and two average sized humans stood in a loose group. It would be beginning soon, and only one of them would walk away alive.

Taking a small breath and trying not to inhale the stench, he drew his holdout blaster and brought it close to his face, studying it. There was a small crack in the grip from when he dropped it during the last competition, but otherwise it was in great shape. His father left him the blaster as a reminder that he and his ideals would live on through Xander. Smiling, he could feel his father was watching over him.

"Don't worry about me Father, I'll shoot just like you taught me," he murmured to himself.

Xander slid the blaster back in its holster, and waited. Anticipation twirled in his gut like a mad womprat. This was what it was all about, the action, excitement, hell, even the smell of this forbidden place. After a life lived on one of the planet Pelagon's finest estates, he wouldn't trade this blood-stained tunnel for anything.

It was all about the competition. He loved watching the blaster bolts fly across the air going back and forth from one side to the other. He marveled at how fast glowing energy zipped from someone's weapon to its target. The anticipation of seeing if the bolt hits its proper destination drove him crazy. He didn't care that he was nobility and this was considered "beneath him", all that concerned him was the competition, and if he would make it out alive or dead. The thrill gave him more excitement than anything else.

The blaster competition was highly dangerous because shooting was the name of the game with only one left standing. The authorities on Pelagon did all they could to try to stop it, but the number of competitions grew too large for them to handle; Before long, some members of the authority even joined in. Xander's family made their distaste for the competition well known. "Only ruffians and thugs participate in such barbarism" his Uncle would often say over his nightly glass of brandy.

Despite respecting his family and status, the urge to strike out and seek adventure was too strong. This was his outlet. He was convinced that night after night of constantly studying scrolls and texts on law, philosophy, bureaucracies, and so on would cause his head to explode. No, this was where he found his release, far below the finely clad populace of the Tapani Sector.

A tall, reptilian humanoid with a head shaped like an upside-down triangle strolled down the tunnel. "Competitors get ready," he said, eyeballing the group of men. He was called "Chief", a particularly nasty Arconan from somewhere in the Outer Rim.

“Blasters ready!” he repeated..

Xander drew his weapon again and let it hang at his side. Closing his eyes, he prepared himself mentally for about what was about to happen. He took big deep breaths. He raised his head towards the tunnel’s mortar ceiling and evened out his breathing. He was getting geared up. This was it!

The Arconan examined each of the competitors with large golden eyes. Small vials of white powder dangled from a necklace around his wrinkled neck, falling across his wide black robe. When he approached Xander, he grabbed the hold-out and brought it close to his face.

“And you would be whom?” he asked, not taking his eyes from the weapon.

“Xander.” He kept his last name, and status, to himself.

“Your blaster is old and damaged. Do you think you can win with this thing?” the Arconan asked. He turned the holdout over in his weathered hands for another moment and handed it back. “You better hope it works- if not, you’re dead!”

“I didn’t come here to talk blasters, I came here to shoot,” Xander replied, keeping kept his nervousness in check. If Chief saw fear, he would not let him compete, banishing him from the competition.

“You don’t look like a competitor to me,” Chief said, stepping back and taking the young noble in. “But we’ll see how measure up. I’ll have a body bag waiting for you.” He moved on down the line..

Xander didn’t respond. There was too much at stake to be distracted.

“Less then five minutes until we get started!” Chief exclaimed. He turned around and eyed the group. “You all know what will happen during the competition, and each of you will be held responsible for your actions

Xander was running through his mental checklist when someone stepped up beside him. He didn’t like being bothered while he geared up himself for the competition, so he kept his eyes on the ground.

“You’ve been here before.”

He turned to look at the man who was addressing him. He was slightly taller than Xander, with shoulder length dark hair pulled back in an extreme ponytail and a scar on his left cheek. A worn, black leather body suit wrapped around a lithe body and offered the impression that he had seen some action. But what grabbed Xanders attention was a black gunbelt hanging low on his hips and two silver-plated Netfali Arms LadyKiller Pistols tucked into the holsters. Rounding out the package was a half smirk-half snarl that rested under the man’s hooked nose

“And how do you know that?”

“I know royalty when I see it,” he whispered.

“Maybe I am royalty, maybe I’m not. Not’ gonna matter in five minutes.”

“Fierce and feisty! You know, I’m going to hate having to tell your dear sweet Uncle Paddox that I shot his nephew down like a wild mynock.” He stopped and clapped Xander on the shoulder. “No, wait! I forgot...I HATE your family...so, I’ll be enjoying the frell out of the look on his face!”

“Well,” said Xander, shrugging the man’s hand away, “You do what you have to do, and I’ll do what I have to do.”

“Oh...I will Paddox, I will at that,” the man said backing away, and grinning widely. “I smell some royalty in this area!” he shouted with a cocky tone in his voice. “Does anybody else smell them some stinking royalty?” He stopped and stared directly at Xander. The other two competitors snickered and threw curious glances at the two.

“I smell something,” Xander said, strolling towards the man. He turned his nose in the air and sniffed at the air surrounding the man. “Smells like...Fear.”

“You frelling noble, I’ll...” He began to draw back but Chief was between them in a heartbeat. “Competitors, next!” the Arcona commanded and gestured towards a set of wooden double doors at the end of the tunnel. “Go on Domascus, you’ll get your shot.”

The man snarled at Xander and jabbed a finger in his chest. “I’ll need only one shot Chief. I’ll see you burn slow Paddox,” he said, turning and storming away. Xander calmed himself, feeling the adrenaline pumping wildly through his veins. The Arconan looked at him and his golden eyes narrowed into slits.

“Better save some of that energy boy.”

Xander nodded and strolled towards the large wood double doors.

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The next run of competitors had to wait at the doorway to the arena while the corpses from the previous contest were removed.. Boxy housekeeping droids moved quickly, steaming the cobblestone clean of blood and tissue. The Arconan stirred with impatience. No matter how long the droids cleaned, the stench of smoke and death still hung heavy above the arena.

Ignoring the stench, Xander focused all of his attention to the layout of the arena. It was a circular room, roughly 30 meters across with a dingy cobblestone floor. Surrounding it was a stone wall that ended about ten meters up and turned to blaster proof transparasteel. This is where the crowd sat.

Off to his left Domascus began to pace in a small circle.

“I hate having to wait,” he said snarling. His black leather gloves played over his silver-plated Ladykillers. “What about you boy?” he asked, stopping and looking at Xander. “You tired of waiting to die?”

“Nope, just tired of hearing you rattle on” Xander replied, casting a bored glance towards the ceiling.

“I just don’t like nobility, bunch of pompous scum who think they are better than the rest of us. It sickens me. So today, I’m gonna taste me some noble blood.”

“Here in a few minutes you aren’t going to be around to taste anything,” Xander quipped.

“Oh...you marking me kid?”

Xander leveled a bored stare at Domascus. “Guess so.”

Anger contorted the man’s face and he spat something in Rodian . Xander was looking away when a stone whizzed past his nose. Instinctively, he drew his holdout and spun, bringing it up to within an inch of Damascus’ forehead. The surly gunslinger froze, his eyes crossing comically and coming to rest on the holdout’s barrel.

“A fight before the competition, maybe?” asked Chief. The Yaka and other man had frozen, watching the development with interest.

“No fighting before the competition...save it for the arena,” the Arconan snarled.

Twirling the holdout, Xander replaced it just as quickly as he had drawn it.

The last clean-up droid exited the arena and the Arconan, backing away, giving the signal for the tunnel doors to be closed. Xander tensed as they slammed shut behind him. They would have sixty seconds to move or take cover among the various boxes and barricades before the diffusion field surrounding the arena was powered down, allowing them full use of their weapons.

Looking to his left he expected to see Damascus’ cocky grin but the man wasn’t there. The hum of a vibroblade ignited behind him and he spun, catching Damascus’s wrists before a slender blade could be plunged in his back. The dark haired gunslinger growled and lunged again, pulling the knife away and slicing Xanders jacket open in the process. As Domascus closed, Xander pivoted on one heel and spun, bringing his elbow down across the man’s neck as he raced by. Sprinting, Xander darted past the downed gunslinger and made a mad dash for a cluster of barrels in the open arena.

Drawing his blaster, he peered around the corner of a barrel only to duck a series of blaster bolts that struck the thick container above him. The smell of scorched plasteel drifted down and he could hear the crowd roaring...even through the thick protective wall.

Scanning the area, he found another set of barrels off to his left and decided to make that his next stop. But before he could move, he needed to find out where the other competitors had set up. Springing up above the barrel for a moment, he squeezed off two random shots with his holdout

blaster. Dropping back down, he mentally marked the location of two shooters as their returned fire thudded into the containers. Two shooters-so where was the third?

Xander jumped up with his blaster aimed at the point where the other blaster bolts originated and fired. Sprinting he broke towards the other wall of barrels and dove to cover as several bright red bolts slammed into the ground behind him.

“Sithspit!!” Xander groused between clenched teeth

The other gunfighters positions burned into his mind, Xander selected a target. The other human was directly in front, forty feet away crouched behind a discarded chunk of duracrete; the other, the Yaka, was off to his left behind a wall of crates. He knew which was which based on the color of their blaster bolts. The Yaka was using an older weapon that fired long piercing green bolts, while the human was using a sector rangers model that spat ruby red bursts.

More blaster fire lanced out from behind the barricade. Crouching down, he noticed on the ground next to him a small piece of broken glass. Gently picking it up he turned the highly reflective material over in his hands. He looked upwards, searching for the brightest spotlight aimed in his direction and found it, located directly above the entrance to the arena.

Moving quickly, he slid his hand from the cover of the crate, the glass cupped in his palm,. The human’s head appeared slowly and Xander twisted the glass so that it reflected the spotlight directly back into the man’s eyes. He winced and Xander moved, squeezing off two shots and ducking back to cover. He was satisfied to hear the man shriek and his weapon clatter to the stone as it fell from his dead grip.. He didn’t relish the moment long, as green bolts slammed beside him into his cover.

An odd quiet filled the arena and he steadied himself, letting his breathing even out. No one was shooting, which meant that they were changing positions. Slowly, he inched towards the edge of the crate hoping to get a peek of what was going on. The blaster shot froze him. Squeezing his eyes hut he waited for the crate to splinter...instead, he heard a muffled thud come from somewhere in the arena.

“Hey! Prince Holdout!” Domascus’ voice drifted to him. Xander readied his weapon and chanced a glance around the corner.

He was standing out in the open, with the body of the dead Yaka at his feet. From the wound, Xander could tell the man shot the alien in the back of the head.

“How about coming out and we can settle this like men...I know you are not familiar with that, being nobility and all...but that’s how we do things here in the underworld.”

Gripping his hold-out he tamed the rage building inside. This lunatic wanted a showdown, out in the open. Smiling to himself, he checked the charge on his blaster. Good.

“Oh, you want a showdown huh?” he yelled from behind the crate.

“That’s right!” the man screamed, dropping the Ladykiller back into it’s holster. He held his hands out to the side. “What do you say? We count three and the fastest man wins?”

“Nah, I don’ think so,” Xander said, emerging from the cover of the crate. Leveling his hold-out he squeezed off two shots into the mans kneecaps. The gunslinger, caught off guard, screamed in agony as his legs buckled beneath him, dropping his body like a sack of mud onto the ground.

“My God! My legs!!!! You son of...you blew out my frigging KNEES!!!!!!!” the man screamed, clutching at the remainder of his kneecaps. His face had gone white and smoke drifted through his fingers. The smell of scorched leather assaulted Xander as he approached..

Reaching down, he plucked the Ladykillers from his holsters. “Yeah .I did. We nobles may not be as hardy or streetwise as you folk, but we are a damn sight smarter,” he said walking away. He was halfway to the door when the Arconan entered the arena waving his hands.

“No, no, no! This goes on till someone dies...those are the rules. This contest will continue until someone is shot down!”

Xander went to walk around him but he pushed the young noble back.

“You finish it! This crowd wants blood!”

“Ok...I’ll give them blood,” he said, shoving one of the Ladykillers up into Chief’s throat. “How about I decorate the ceiling with your brain matter Triangle Head?”

The alien’s eyes bugged and he held his hands out to his side. “No...no need for that...this was a good contest...you were the underdog...you won...everyone got their moneys worth. But why? Why don’t you kill him?”

Throwing a glance over at the prone gunslinger still writing on the ground, Xander shrugged.. “Well, killing him would make me feel good for about a minute or two, but seeing him hobble around for the rest of his life? Now I’m gonna enjoy THAT forever.”

“Frell you! Frell you! Paddox!” Domascus screamed through the tears now streaming down his face. The cleaning droids had already entered and were working in a circle around his prone body.

Stepping through the concealed doorway and into the street, Xander stopped and breathed deep. Salty sea air and the smells of a nearby bakery filled his nostrils and his stomach let out a deep growl. He realized he hadn’t eaten in over a day.

Looking down, he admired the plating job on the Ladykillers. “Well, at least he wasn’t a cheapskate,” he murmured and made room in the deep pockets of his jacket for the two new acquisitions. Pulling his holdout free of the pocket, he let it rest in his hand, running a thumb across the cracked, worn handle.

“How about you and me go get something to eat,” he said, slipping the small weapon into the left breast pocket of his coat. Tossing a glance down the street, he stepped onto the cobblestone, heading north towards the bakery.

THE END