

K'zye
by Sean Boyle

I clutch my k'zye, sweat soaking into its leather wrapping and making my hand stick to it even more tightly. This world is hot and humid, a perpetual haze of fog hanging over its magenta-tinted landscape, and there is no wind. Its suns are older than most in the nebula, both a dim red, and the swirling ionized hydrogen of the nebula itself reddens their light even further. It's an unpleasant place, but I was fortunate enough to find it. Not every planet has a breathable atmosphere and a temperature conducive to life. I crouch, still and silent, beneath a rocky outcropping some distance from my crashed ship. The Morgeniens know I'm here somewhere, and they won't stop looking for me until they know, beyond any question, that I am dead.

I hazard a peek from my hiding place. My crystalline vessel is barely visible in the distance, half-buried in the soft, sandy earth. Fractures mar its translucent milky surface, and smoke still trickles from its open cockpit, mingling with the mists of this unnamed and unknown world. I hear distant footsteps, crunching lightly in the sand, but I can't make out Morgeniens armor just yet.

I duck back within my hiding spot. I can't go invisible just yet; they haven't seen me, and it takes effort to remain hidden in such a way. The problem is that their scanners will pick me up soon, whether I'm visible or not. I can bend light around myself, which includes the entire electromagnetic spectrum, but I still radiate heat, and I move the air around me, and leave footprints. And they will definitely pick up my teleport.

So, I'll just have to wait, and then strike when I get an opening, when they draw closer, following my footprints. If I can kill this entire squad, I may have a chance of escape. Their suits may have something I can salvage to get my ship flying again, or at least I might be able to jury-rig their telescanners to send a transmission to my own people for help.

Not that they're likely to come get me deep in Morgeniens-infested territory. My situation looks hopeless. But I didn't get this far as a spy and a warrior by giving up. I'm a survivor.

The shadowy forms of bulky Morgeniens battle armor come into view. They circle my ship, their telescanners flashing and beeping softly. Their weapons are trained on the open cockpit, and they are vigilant, carefully watching their surroundings, each protecting another's back. There are eight of them. I think for a moment, sizing them up. They all have the same equipment, training, attentiveness, hatred and paranoia, the same weaknesses. If I'm fast, I can probably take half of them before they are able to react. The rest would be a challenge, but no greater than I've faced in the past. This is a challenge I can overcome. **I will.**

They have completely circled my tiny craft now, leaving each one out of the view of a third of the others. It's my chance to strike. I grip my k'zye tighter still, and steel my resolve. I have no hesitations or misgivings about slaughtering Morgeniens; they would do the same to me and all my people. However, I know that each battle could always be my last. I need to prepare each and every time, and remember why it is that I fight.

My planet, Korvasia. A beautiful world, its crystalline landscape a wonder to behold. The way the formations catch and glitter the light from the stars and gases of the nebula always soothes and calms me, even in mere memories. Our civilization of philosophers and explorers was once a beacon of enlightenment within the nebula, a place of art, learning and peace.

My wife, Ketellia. I have known her since we were both children, and she has only grown more beautiful with every year we've been together. She keeps her long black hair pinned back with a crystal pin I made for her myself, styled after the shape of my own k'zye, to remind her that my blade will always ensure I return home to her. Her dark eyes, filled with so much love and peace, gaze so calmly into mine, always helping my nerves settle after long periods away from home. Her voice, melodic and soft, even now sings in my ears.

Our children, Garum and Roimora, son and daughter, eldest and youngest. Garum, now twelve, wants to be an architect. Roimora, only seven, says she wants to be a librarian like her grandmother. As long as they know peace, they can be whatever they dream. Their smiles

brighten the darkness that creeps into my mind; the sounds of their laughter are my anchors. But I haven't been home in almost a year. I wonder how they've grown, and whether they miss me, or even remember me now.

My home, the home of my ancestors, a crystalline dwelling grown a thousand years ago by my forebears. Its architecture reminds me of who we, the Korvasians, are as a people. It represents our culture, our heritage, our art and science, everything we once were and strive to be yet again. My k'yze was once part of its walls, carved by my own hand from my very home, tying me even more deeply to the land my ancestors have always known.

I look down at my k'yze. The dampness of this world is causing condensation to form on its gleaming, translucent blade, and the dirt from my struggles so far mars its edge and wrap. But it is a good weapon. It has saved my life many times. I carved it to be a balance of offense and defense, while many others of my people focus on one over the other. But this design has served me well. I take in its flowing form as I always do before I am forced into action, knowing each time it may be my last. The beauty and elegance are soothing.

The primary blade, protruding straight up from my grip like a sword, has tasted Morgenian blood more times than I can count. Its very tip is blunted, chipped and worn from repeated use, but it can still penetrate Morgenian armor with the right force and angle behind it. At the grip, the crystalline blade curves around, twisting but remaining ever sharp, forming an arcing shield-like blade around my arm. A weblike mark is the most notable scar, the result of an unlikely Morgenian pulse blast deflected by sheer luck. But the k'yze held, as it always does.

It is my life, and my enemies' death.

I tense the muscles that bend the electromagnetic spectrum around my body, and I feel the light warp, see my form blend with my surroundings. The Morgenians are probably expecting this from me, but every little edge counts. It takes some concentration, like holding a certain position, but I'm still able to activate my spatial-bending muscles as well. I teleport almost silently, appearing behind the closest Morgenian, his back to me and out of view of all but two of his compatriots. Before he can even register my presence, I thrust my k'yze into his back, sliding it between the two armor plates separating his chest from his lower torso. I keep pushing until it will move no more, satisfied with the wet crunching that emanates from within his artificial shell. He tries to gasp as the cold crystal blade pierces flesh, bone and organs, but I know Morgenian anatomy too well. He is dead before he hits the soft ground.

I rip my k'yze free and let him fall. His digital link to the others has already alerted them to his death and my presence, but I can still move quickly. I teleport again, appearing beside the soldier to my left. My k'yze finds its mark in the soft, flexible seal between his shoulder and helmet. Water vapor sprays from the open wound, and he makes a soft, morbid gurgling as he falls. I then teleport back to my previous position, over the first dead body, just as the Morgenian from my right arrives.

My k'yze passes through his energy shielding with no difficulty, one reason I prefer it over less visceral ranged weapons. But my aim is off a little; the blade, meant for the gap in his armor below his sternum, glances off his pectoral plating. He is startled, though, and unable to react before I swing the curved portion of my blade down into his helmet. I smash the faceplate in, shards splintering into his face like shrapnel. Another quick move as he gasps and lifts his weapon, and he is disarmed. Then I let him stagger away to suffocate in the argon-oxygen air.

There are five left. And now my challenge begins. I've lost the element of surprise, and not only will their scanners now be trained on me, but my invisibility is effectively useless in this thick fog, which swirls and parts around me. My only chance is to reduce their numbers further, and then finish them off more strategically. I take but a moment to take a breath, then rush at the next closest one.

He sees me coming, and fires his weapon. The packet of dimensional energy his weapon fires is propelled by a magnetic impulse, leaving it slow and relatively easy to see coming. I dive under it, rolling in the soft ground, and come up, swinging my weapon between his legs.

The edge of my blade grates along his armor, bits of ceramic and crystal sloughing off into a fine grit, mingling with the thick mist. The force of the blow staggers the Morgengian back a step, and he swings the butt of his blaster at me. I deflect the blow with my k'yze, but his tactics are swift; he sweeps my leg with his own, and pushes his weapon against mine, causing me to topple backward toward the ground.

A quick glance behind me shows two of his allies rushing forward, the barrels of their weapons glowing with blue light as they prepare to fire. I let my invisibility drop, since it's useless now anyway, and tense my teleportation muscles. I reappear behind my opponent, stabbing into him as I did my previous prey. The momentum of my fall, carried through my teleport, works for me this time, driving my k'yze straight through him, penetrating back into the air through his chest plating. He lets out a startled choke, but his astonishment isn't alone; my blade is stuck.

They know their ally is already dead, so the two that rounded my ship open fire. I hold fast, using this body as a shield, as a dozen pulse blasts slam into him. His shield flares, glowing brightly and sending waves of tingling static through me, then overloads, having reached its limit. I'm able to yank my k'yze free, thanks to the repeated impacts from the blasts, and leap back as his shield explodes.

I tumble in the powdery sand amidst the rain of shrapnel that was once a Morgengian and his armor. A few larger shards make contact with my back; it hurts, and I feel them embed themselves in my flesh, but I have to keep moving. There's something in the mist that I can't smell or taste, but it burns the gashes torn into me. I swear I hear a sizzling sound. But there's no time to worry about it now, I still have enemies to kill. They have no ship here, having teleported to the planet's surface, but if I can get hold of one of their telescanners, I can activate its recall function, infiltrate their ship in orbit, and find some means of making my way home from there. A long shot, but I've accomplished similar feats before.

I teleport again, jumping to the opposite side of my crashed vessel, away from the Morgengians' direct line of sight. The pain of my injuries breaks my concentration, and causes me even greater pain when I bend space, and my trajectory is thrown off. I land hard, slamming into the ground farther from the ship than I planned. I slide a ways, the powdery dust puffing into my face and choking me. I cough and sneeze, despite my best efforts at suppression, knowing it will draw the Morgengians' attention to my new whereabouts.

Gripping my k'yze, I scramble to my feet, losing purchase in the soft earth. I cloak my appearance again, crouching low, and peer into the mist behind me, waiting, not moving, hoping to get the jump on the next unfortunate soldier. By my count, there are half of the original number remaining in this party. I've done well so far, but have injuries to show for it, and they are now even more on guard. Survival will be a challenge. And even if I escape, the Morgengians will never stop until they have proven my demise.

I hear the beeping of a Morgengian telescanner locating my presence a moment too late. The soldier is behind me; somehow, they anticipated my maneuver, and the two I didn't see broke away from my ship, waiting for me to circle around so they could ambush me through the mist. I whirl around, the end of my blade raking through the earth, and I swing my blade up, straightening my legs, bring it up with all the force I can muster. Even if a blind slash like this is deflected by the Morgengian's armor, it might throw him off balance enough to buy me a moment longer.

My k'yze connects with the butt of his pulse blaster, aimed by the soldier in a downward parry. For a moment, time seems to stand still, as my incredulous mind struggles to comprehend what happens. My eyes go wide, my body seems suddenly numb to the pain, and my ears don't even register the sound of shattering crystal.

The blaster's solid metal buttplate connects with my k'yze at just the right point, where it was already weakened by an old crack. The crystal fractures and splinters around the enemy weapon, becoming a thousand gleaming shards in the dense white air. Tiny pieces of my home, my history and my life rain to the ground, pelting into the dust like micrometeorites. Some ricochet off my enemy's armor, his all-concealing faceplate obscuring his gloating features from view and protecting him from the spray of shrapnel. I gaze, stupefied, at my own

reflection, my own eyes wide, looking deep into them and into my own self. I see the end is coming, my only hope of survival shattered with my blade.

The form of the final Morgenian appears through the mist behind me, but I haven't the time to react. I feel a sharp pain, hear a deafening thump in my head, as the butt of his blaster meets the back of my skull. My ears ring, and my vision swims. The world around me swirls and spins, and I find myself on the ground, lying on my back, looking up into the reflective faceplates of four Morgenian soldiers. The enemy. But all I see looking back at me is my own reflection.

I lay there, crumpled, unable to find the strength to move my splayed limbs, pain and colors swimming in my head. I think the Morgenians are laughing down at me, wanting to torture me, to kill me right here in exchange for their fallen friends. But that is not their way. They will not believe me dead, for certain, until they have brought me back to their ship, confirmed my identity beyond a shadow of doubt, and killed me in some painful and ultimate fashion to be completely sure I have been utterly destroyed.

My head lolls to the side. I see there, just out of reach of my hand, the shattered remains of my k'zye. It is gone, now nothing more than a useless lump of battered crystal. I want to reach it, to grip it, knowing it will serve me no longer as a weapon, but the comfort it brings will help me through my final moments, my final days at the hands of my captors and executioners. One of the Morgenians kicks it away, and mutters something to me, but I can't understand him, the throbbing in my head is too disorienting. I close my eyes, thinking of all the k'zye reminds me of. My wife, my children, my home, my world. None of them shall I ever see again. If the Morgenians have their way, all will be destroyed one day. Maybe one day soon.

There is nothing left for me now. Nothing left to do but let them take me. It's over. I've done a good amount of damage to them, undermined their operations, killed their soldiers, sabotaged their ships, misdirected their intelligence. Now I must pay the price they impose for such transgressions, or, more accurately, the price they impose for me being Korvasian. I won't struggle. I'll let them take me.

This world, with its thick mist and lack of wind, is too hot and humid anyway. Just take me away.

It's time to go.