

Eos City
Arx
41 ABY

“Here we go!”

The shimmering portal rippled like a pool of mercury, the faint outline of a not-reflection visible on its dexter side. The Arconan advance guard’s passing settled along its surface as the ripples slowly calmed, offering a misty view of their backs as they walked away the way they’d come, though inside a world of shadow and gloom.

Trying to think about it too much was hurting Vicxa Varis’ brain and so she threw herself upon the familiar comforts of her gut and instincts. It hardly mattered how it all worked. This was going to be a once-in-a-lifetime adventure, and she wouldn’t miss it for the world.

Pulling up the poncho hood over her red-tipped raven locks, she took a running start and leapt into the portal, Arx’s last rays glinting off her cybernetic arm.

Vertigo. Nausea. Disorientation.

The transition between planes was uncomfortable to put it mildly. For a second that stretched on to infinity, up was down, left was past, future was present, and her insides were out. In a heartbeat, her very essence had been torn from herself, twisted and wrung like a towel, before being slammed bodily into the meat of her being as she stumbled through to the other side, a phantom pain lingering in her left leg.

The advance guard turned towards her, alarmed and surprised. None seemed as affected as she was, the pale unlight of the Ethereal Realm reflecting dark skyscrapers from their unflinching visors as they observed her cautiously.

Around them, the streets of Eos were rendered in shadowy simulacrum of their realspace counterparts, the mustering grounds an eerie hive of activity as men and machines marched to war amidst echoes of warfare past. The buildings around her seemed solid enough, but further away, some seemed *undecided*. Flickering in and out between ruin and polished magnificence, even straying to glimpses of future prominence none had yet to witness with mortal eyes.

“Halt,” the sharp command broke her of her astonished gawking. “Identify yourself,” the Arconan guardsman demanded, their voice made genderless by a vocoder.

“Vicxa Varis,” Vix replied chirpily. “I’m with the Qel-Droman detail.”

The guard took a moment, obviously verifying something before raising their blaster and stepping closer. “Impossible, she came through here minutes ago.”

“What?!”

For a moment, her reflection was caught in the visor of the approaching guard and she realized she was staring at a total stranger. Or at least an oddly familiar stranger.

The red tips of her black hair had gained ground, turning her locks a vivid crimson. Yet half of them had been shaved to a short buzz cut along the right side, leaving her hair wild and dramatic. Worse still, she could pick up many more scars on her face and as she reached a hand to touch them in disbelief, she almost made another as the studded knuckles of her cybernetic brushed her cheek.

Looking down, her comfortable adventurer's garb was also gone, replaced by heavier armor plates and a rag-tag medley of ripped pants, scarves and far too many belts to be practical. Yet, worst of all, she noticed the unmistakable glint of durasteel where her cybernetic left foot had sunk into the shadowy soil.

That had definitely not been there before.

"Stop fidgeting. You're under arrest until we can figure out who—" the guard never got any further as they placed a hand on her shoulder to restrain her. The next instant, the Mirialan bolted skyward, propelled by the magnetic accelerator hidden in the base of her cybernetic leg.

Vicxa was as surprised by this sudden development as the guard was, sailing through the air with arms flailing. Yet somehow her body *knew* how to compensate and soon enough she had regained control of her trajectory and was aiming to land near a trio of unguarded speeder bikes.

"Stop her!" the guard cried out, firing a stun ring after her but missing wildly. Vicxa felt the familiar tickle of the descent in her belly as she dropped down by the speeder bikes, casting a swift glance over her shoulder to see the guards shouldering their blasters in hot pursuit.

She would never let them have that chance. Gunning the throttle, she sent the speeder bike into violent motion, darting away from the Arconan assembly area and towards the city's peripheries.

"Ok, this is officially weirder than usual," Vicxa muttered to herself once she was decently sure she'd lost her pursuers. The sound of her own voice, even with the wind whipping in her ears, almost made her crash. Had it always sounded so *harsh*? She dabbled in many narcotics but never to the point of developing a habit. Yet she sounded like she'd spent the last three years smoking two packs a day.

Shaking off the uncomfortable sensation of a stolen voice, she took a hand off the yoke and flexed the digits of her "upgraded" arm. It felt heavy and worn, definitely more sluggish than her old cybernetic, but judging by the dents and nicks covering its surface it had been put through the wringer as well and was still working fine.

Something caught her eye as she inspected the thing, a small manufacturer's tag dated to 44 ABY. She furrowed her brow and considered the possibility of an error in the assembly

line. Possible, but then again. The guard's words echoed in her mind. Could it be? Was she not herself anymore, but a *future* self?

"Yes, definitely weirder than the usual amount," she concluded, though that partial answer only raised more questions of their own. First and foremost being, what in the world would happen to her that would change her to this extent, and in three years, no less? She cast a worried look at the metal leg that had saved her from imprisonment and shuddered. After losing the arm, she'd been rather particular about not parting with any more of her bits.

She caught movement in the corner of her eye and she swerved the bike around, managing to avoid a collision as a similar speeder bike jettied past her across the street, the pilot's weather-worn poncho flapping in its wake. Vicxa would have recognized that particular garment anywhere.

"Give me my body back!" she yelled, pulling hard on the controls to wrangle the bike around and sat off in hot pursuit after the fleeing—herself? She tried not to think too hard about it. Even a cursory glance at the realm she'd stepped into elicited more questions than answers and she was one to roll with the punches. If that meant chasing her own body down the shadowy mirrorscape of Eos City then so be it.

Other-Vix, for her part, seemed intent to not be caught. Like an obstinate shadow fleeing its owner, no matter how hard Vicxa gunned her speeder bike's engine or tried to cut herself off with masterful piloting bordering on the reckless, she was only barely inching closer to her own self. Still, she did not fail to appreciate how *fast* her reflexes were. How composed and strong her handling of the speeder between her thighs. Her feet worked the pedals like second nature and her eyes almost instinctively sought the optimal flight path.

Had she not been so utterly consumed by the chase, she might have even felt a pang of jealousy at just how *competent* her future self was. Far from the blundering adventurer who'd made it this far through a mix of luck, fluke, and good fortune, she felt like a seasoned veteran with the confidence of experience to justify all the same bad decisions she would have made anyway.

The pair raced down along a wide avenue, flanked on either side by columns of military vehicles. A mix of alarmed yelps and the rush of their wake was the sound of their passing, repulsors whining at their limits as the speeder bikes zoomed past armored crawlers and angular battle tanks.

Unannounced, one of the vehicles veered to the side, lurching under the fluctuation of the very ground it trod on as a crater flickered in and out of existence. The crawler braced to halt its fall, a ponderous mechanical leg stomping right in the two bikes' path like an unmovable object.

Other-Vix veered right, scraping the paint off her speeder bike's chassis as it struck sparks off the walker's angled foot and almost careened out of control. Struggling hard, she managed to wrestle control of the bike before it slammed into a lamp post, the bike's repulsor bank bleeding electric embers as she tried to limp away.

Vicxa broke left, diving beneath the walker in a brazen act of overconfidence. Tucking her head down just before a low hanging cable would have garotted it off, she momentarily lost control of her charge as the bike barrel rolled under the violent change of direction.

Up was down and sideways once more, the world a blur of shadow and durasteel as she clenched the bike's controls almost hard enough to split the yoke, before a sudden and firm impact broke her spin. Instinct trumping thought, her cybernetic foot was dug deep into the shadowstuff that passed for Eos' ground, the hardy limb having suffered extensive scratches but little else from the jarring impact.

"Whoa."

Vicxa stared in awe at her new or future limb, feeling a conflicting mix of emotions as the prospect of having such a powerful upgrade did not seem quite as unappealing as it had mere moments ago. Perhaps she ought to trust this new body of hers a bit more. Future-Vix had clearly put it through its paces.

Gunning the engine until the repulsors screamed, she sat off once more after her fleeing self, though this time with a distinct advantage on her side. Other-Vix might have been good, excellent even, but there was only so much raw skill could do to shore up a damaged engine.

The trail of bleeding sparks was hard to miss in the shadowy halflight that permeated the Ethereal Realm, a string of glowing breadcrumbs that burned golden bright against the dark. Vicxa closed in on her other-self, inexorable as the tides, and try as she might her elusive double could not evade her forever.

The chase had led them away from the main muster, away from the others. Eos City lay deathly still, or at least it would have were it not for the ghostly shapes eerily observing from behind hollow windows. Their pale turquoise auras added an unnerving and deathly quality to the area as the pair raced on, one gaining on the other.

"Stop!" Vicxa cried out once she was close enough to her other-self that she could make out the stains on her poncho. "I just want to talk!"

Other-Vix glanced around her shoulder and for the first time she stared herself in the eye. Not like a mirror, but as others saw her. The flair of her tattoos, the emerald green of her cheeks, the shine in her eyes, they all seemed so alien though she knew they ought to have been anything but. The moment's awestruck distraction was all the other Vix needed to suddenly bank left to try and ram her off the road.

The back of her speeder collided with the twin forks at the tip of Vicxa's bike, lodging the two together for a terrifying moment before Other-Vix was able to wrench her bike free. The force of the separation tore a steering vane off Vicxa's speeder bike, sending the vehicle careening out of control, though Other-Vix did not escape without damage either as the already compromised repulsor unit was spitting ionized fire.

Realizing her peril, Vicxa leapt clear of the hurtling bike, landing with a hard roll on the shadow dirt, while the bike crashed into a surprisingly substantial wall of mist and darkness. It exploded in a blossoming fireball that bathed the twilight street in vibrant yellows and reds. Colors that seemed utterly alien to this realm. Illuminated by the backdrop of the fiery display, Other-Vix's struggles with her bleeding bike played out in silhouette, her desperate attempts to coax life to her failing steed ending with a lesser detonation as the repulsor stacks failed catastrophically.

Sprawled on the street, Vicxa watched in shock as the other speeder bucked violently, throwing its seat high in the air and launching her other-self like a boulder from a catapult. For a moment she feared to witness a tragedy, before the resourceful Mirialan-turned-missile deployed her ascension gun and transformed her fall into a wide swing towards a foreboding office block instead. Vanishing inside the building like a colorful fly swallowed by a trout, her elusive double had once again escaped her clutches. But at least she had nowhere to run to anymore.

Vicxa picked herself up from the street, thankful for the protection her borrowed armor had afforded her. Perhaps she too ought to pack a bit heavier next time? Skirting danger in little more than a synthweave poncho and good vibes was not exactly a substitute for ablative plastoid in a pinch. Still, her other-self had managed to escape harm as well, and judging by her actions would probably not go down without a fight. Drawing her own S-5 heavy blaster pistol, she sat off towards the building, intent on getting her body back. Somehow.

The interior of the office block was, if anything, even more unnerving than the streets of Eos. Where buildings occasionally seemed *unsure* of their place in time, their insides were even more chaotic. Minor details flickered in and out of existence almost constantly, the changing patterns and shadowy outlines of decorations as constant as wisps of smoke. It was akin to stepping inside a living organic thing, a ceaseless shifting of mass and detail that was nauseating to behold. The perfect spot for an ambush, Vicxa realized, and the phantom pain in her left foot was only getting worse.

Slowly making her way up the stairwell towards the higher levels, blaster raised, she caught movement at the third landing. Words hadn't yet left her lips when she felt her trigger finger curling, barely managing to stop the mechanical digit before it could fire. The reflex seemed morbid and wrong, but she shook it off as nerves. She would give herself another chance to talk this out; then resort to stun bolts.

"You in here?" she called out. "I saw you, you know? Or me. This is really confusing and I just want my body back, okay? I'm sure whatever's going on, we can fix it together. Can you come out, please?"

There was no answer, beyond the click of footsteps growing distant. She was running.

Karabast.

Fleeting up the stairs, Vicxa reached the landing and aimed down the corridor to catch the fluttering hem of her poncho disappearing behind a corner. As she was about to bolt after the Other-Vix, she became pressingly aware of a pale turquoise glow shining behind her.

Swerving around and stumbling, falling flat on her backside on the landing, she narrowly avoided the scything talons of an ephemeral ghost. The vague apparition had solidified into an alien monster she recalled having met on one of her expeditions back when... she felt a lingering pain once more, this time where her arm ought to have been.

Another talon came down in a wild overhead strike, the Mirialan rolling aside as the bladed appendage lodged itself into the shadowstuff floor. The apparition turned its leering mouth at her, displaying a wicked row of razor teeth in a predatory snarl, but this time her reactions took hold as she replied in kind. The blaster pistol leveled against the beast's face just as it ripped its talon free and turned for another strike. Vicxa felt her cybernetic finger curl around the trigger and the landing flashed crimson.

The apparition vanished like a wisp of smoke, a perfect hole punched clean through its dissipating cranium, a gaping burn burrowed into the wall beyond. Vicxa breathed a sigh of relief before she caught her senses and checked her blaster's settings. She *never* carried the blaster on anything but stun as default.

Little by little the clues began to fall in place. The armor, the reflexes, the spiked knuckles, the *hair*. What had happened to her? Or worse yet, what *would* happen to her? She needed to find her other self. She needed to find some answers.

As luck would have it, answers found her.

"Drop the blaster."

This voice sounded more familiar than the one she herself currently spoke with, but even so the harshness of it sounded alien. Vicxa did not need to glance over her shoulder to know who was holding her at blaster point, but at least they did finally wish to talk. Silver linings.

Dropping the blaster on the ground, she raised her hands and turned to face herself—and froze. The sight of her own visage, twisted into a cold killer's sneer, struck her to her core and the numb pain in her leg intensified. This couldn't be herself. It just couldn't.

"Who are you?" she managed, fumbling for words.

Other-Vicxa stared at her for a long moment, searching with her eyes for something inside her own reflection before suddenly, her demeanor softened. She lowered the blaster and gestured for her to get up.

"I think you know who I am. I certainly did," Other-Vix replied.

The implications of those simple words sent Vicxa's head spinning, more than it already was.

"Wait. Hold up. You *knew*? Past tense?"

The faintest of smiles tugged at the corner of Other-Vicxa's mouth. "I knew I was a smart girl. Now come on, we don't have much time. Ironically enough."

“Time? Time for what?”

“To save this entire *bumblefrak* of a mission,” Other-Vicxa replied and headed up the stairs towards the roof access, not waiting to see whether her other self was following. She already knew the answer.

The pair halted on the eleventh floor, the massive windows offering a view over Eos City’s skyline that strobed with flashes of distant blaster fire. At the far edge of the business park, heavy artillery could be seen deploying into firing positions as the battle proper was about to commence.

“Like the view, but weren’t we short on time?” Vicxa pressed as her other self seemed to count down long seconds. “You do know that even the worst self-help guides usually have at least *some* content, right? So if you want myself helping yourself, then spill it.”

“The Children,” Other-Vix explained as she pulled out her blaster and a flash grenade. “They always try to take out our heavy guns first. They’ve got a seismic charge launcher two levels above and once the artillery park is all set up, they’re going to hit it. If they do, things are going to be a lot harder for the rest of you.”

The past and future tenses mingling in her speech made Vicxa’s head spin. Here she was, in a body that was hers, but also not-hers, talking to ostensibly herself and being lectured of events to pass which had already happened.

“Just *stop* for one second!” she snapped, harsher than she would have liked but the stress was getting to her. “You’re me, right? But from the future? And this is your past, but you’ve also done this before. Several times?”

Other-Vix turned to face her with a patient expression. “Look, you wouldn’t believe everything I had to say to you before they start blasting. Believe me, I’ve tried. All I can say for now is this: Trust me like you trust yourself and we’ll make it through this, together.”

Vicxa stared into the eyes of her double, or her own eyes—it was hard to keep track—and sighed. It was clear she wasn’t getting anything more out of her, but the stakes at least were obvious. The lives of her friends were at peril and she had a chance to make a difference.

“Fine,” she sighed. “Lead on, *timelord*.”

“We spread out at the next level. I go the long way around while you draw their fire. I’ll sabotage the launchers and rig them to explode. When I give the signal, you *leave*. I recommend keeping to the eastern side. There’s a hab stack just within ascension gun range. Aim for the third floor window at the corner. That’s the softest landing.”

Vicxa was sure she only got half of all that, but her other self was already running. At least she had the simpler part of the mission, though then again simple rarely meant easy. They parted ways at the next level, Vicxa watching her own behind swallowed by the perpetual

shadows that shrouded everything like a veil. With a sigh, she pulled out her blaster and headed up the final flight of stairs.

The door to the thirteenth floor opened without a sound, letting the Mirialan into a foyer that kept switching between a cloakroom and a gallery. Sneaking inside, she peered around a divider wall that appeared the least prone to flickering in and out of existence, and peeked further into the office proper.

The Children were clearly not expecting company. Not that there were many of them to begin with. She counted a dozen, maybe a few more, all working feverishly on preparing a pair of snub-nosed mass-drivers to launch as many seismic charges at the Brotherhood artillery park as they could.

It did not take a military genius to realize this was a suicide mission. The moment they opened fire, they'd be living on borrowed time as the Brotherhood had guns to spare to turn on them. It was an act of pure spite, or perhaps desperation, to weaken the assault on their fortress and make the Brotherhood pay an even steeper price in blood.

No wonder she told me to leave in a hurry.

Getting her head in the game, Vicxa pulled her blaster close and exhaled. Her body was calm, ready, almost excited for what was to come. She realized these feelings were not her own, but in that moment she surrendered to their call. This body had seen worse things than she had and paid the price for its experience. She would have been a fool not to listen.

Violence broke with a single blaster bolt. Before the first Mortis sapper had hit the floor, a second was clutching his chest where a follow-up bolt had carved into his armor. Reaching for his weapon, the fanatic tried to call to his compatriots but could not make a sound with burned lungs. In the end, only a pointing digit betrayed her position before a third bolt struck him silent.

Vicxa ducked behind the wall and scrambled forward, swiftly changing position as the Children drew their weapons and sounded alarms. Blaster fire shredded the flimsy mist wall she'd covered behind, but she was already elsewhere. Popping up behind a cubicle frame for long enough to squeeze off a pair of bolts, she ducked down and moved. Never stationary. Always moving.

Pandemonium swept the Children's ranks as calls for suppressing fire clashed with orders to prepare the guns. Slipping into the chaos from the other side, Other-Vix added her own spice with a perfectly timed flash grenade that stunned the closest foes and left them open to her sweeping knife strikes. Caught unawares and pressed from two sides, the Children fell back to a defensive perimeter, running their blasters red with indiscriminate fire that tore through the flimsy shadowform office.

Crouching low and hoping to not be hit, Vicxa watched as the boots of her other self shuffled across the office, pausing and then continuing as a cubicle wall formed in place exactly when needed. The Mortis did not seem perturbed by the chaotic terrain, but she excelled in

it, moving exactly when she needed to maintain cover and changing positions moments before the previous vanished.

Squeezing off a few more bolts while scrambling to stay alive, Vicxa felt the tide of the battle turn. The withering hail of fire had forced her to go to ground and now most of the taller obstacles had been blasted to chest height. She felt the noose tightening around her as orders were barked to find the interlopers while the rest prepared the guns.

Crawling on all fours, she waded through the fragments of coalesced darkness to get to a better vantage point, managing to slip away from a pair of Mortis troopers who came looking. With blaster in hand, she drew her own knife and stalked forward, feeling her cybernetic leg tense with anticipation as she reached the perimeter around the second mass-driver.

It hadn't been her job to handle them, but time was running out. Someone had to do something.

Her leg agreed and as she stepped around the cover and locked eyes with the sentry, it propelled her forward with the speed of thought. The trooper hadn't raised his blaster by the time her knife already stuck through his throat, ripping free with the faintest resistance as flesh and synthweave parted.

A pair of flashes lit the scene, her blaster gunning down the sapper about to load a charge into the mass-driver's breach. A heartbeat later, a third shot silenced the commander. She knew the patrol she'd dodged must have heard that and ran behind the gun for cover, blaster bolts chasing every step.

Pinned down, she squeezed off a few pot shots over her shoulder before return fire struck her arm and tore the blaster from her. Her escape plan. *Karabast.*

Feeling her time run out, she drew back her knife and stabbed it into the mass-driver's console, hacking away until the device was spitting sparks and thoroughly unusable. If all that did was take out one of the guns, that would have to do. Pressing her back against the cold durasteel of the mass-driver's bulk, she prepared to sell her life dearly.

A booming wave rattled the floor, bathing the world in white and scattering debris everywhere. Motes of shadowstuff floated in the air as Vicxa regained her frazzled vision, ears ringing and disorientated. She saw Other-Vix running towards her, shooting one-handed as she gunned down the last of the Mortis crew. Yet it did not seem like she was slowing down.

Her mouth moved but she could hear no sound. There was only a dull ringing. Other-Vix repeated her words, the motion of her lips clear enough to understand. *Run away, now.*

She rose to her feet and lurched for her blaster, clutching it in her arms like the most precious artifact she'd ever found. Following Other-Vix's example, she bolted for the eastern side of the building as her hearing began to clear, the ringing slowly dying down—only to be replaced by a growing whine.

The Brotherhood artillery crews below proved depressingly swift to the trigger once the flashes of blaster fire had been spotted. The first shell barely missed, striking the building two floors above and tearing a massive chunk off its face. The force of the impact knocked both Vicxas to the floor, but she was the faster on her feet, aided by the cybernetic.

She reached her fallen self and offered a hand, pausing to aid her up even though a second shell was already screaming towards them. The two locked eyes, Other-Vicxa smiling.

"I wish I'd never change," she said as she took her hand.

Vertigo. Nausea. Disorientation.

Up was down, left was past, future was present, and her insides were out, yet again. She came to lying on the floor, gasping for air and painfully aware of mortal peril. She felt a force tug at her arm, pulling her to her feet and yanking her along as she stumbled forward. A growing whine sounded behind her. A voice called her to jump.

A red flash blasted the window into a thousand black diamonds before them, the two Vicxas, past and present, leaping out side by side as the plasma shell landed amidst the seismic charges. The entire top half of the office building vanished in a cacophony of noise and criss-crossing disks of violent energy.

Hands working on instinct, mind rattled awake by the blast, Vicxa fired her grapnel across the street and towards the building ahead, angling her swing down towards the third floor window by the corner. It was an impossible target, her angle and speed far too great to make it. Yet somehow she almost did.

Tucking her legs in at the last moment, she crashed through the window. Pain lanced through her body as she landed on the shadow equivalent of a king sized bed felt something buckle beneath her. Outside, the Brotherhood artillery swiftly reduced the entire office block to rubble, unaware of the peril they'd just dodged. Inside, Vicxa turned to stare at the stump of her leg, shattered against the window sill and twisted the wrong way.

The stump of her left leg.