

The Perfect Vacation

This was perfection. The warm Selenian sun on her purple skin, the cool ocean breeze saving her from the midday heat, the magically refilling cocktail glasses, and a week of absolutely nothing but relaxation. Oh yes, she had definitely deserved this, Tali Sroka thought to herself as she reached out to grab the freshly re-filled orange cocktail whose name she'd forgotten and took a long, refreshing sip. A few droplets of condensed water dripped down her chest, but she didn't mind, she was far too relaxed to be annoyed by such small things.

The hubbub and noise of the resort was but a distant memory and throng of ogling eyes no longer crawled up her body like ants. That nobody on the entire island seemed interested in actually visiting the beach proper was beyond her, though she suspected it had something to do with the thick jungle that began right at the resort's edge. It did not exactly look welcoming.

Still, she had a bottle of water, a crossword puzzle, and a whole day of unbridled sunshine to herself. What more could a tired Twi'lek ask for?

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This was perfection. The humid jungle air, the buzz of insects around her, and the rustling of foreign flora under her feet with titillating prospects of new discoveries behind every tree. What could be better? Vicxa Varis wiped muddy sweat off her green brow and pushed onward, red tipped raven locks matted with leaves and twigs, and the odd insect caught in their web. Her goal lay somewhere ahead, she was mostly sure of that, and even if she missed it, the Mirialan was certain she'd find some other adventure all the same. She usually did.

Most of the tourist traps around this place were revolting, and she couldn't bear the thought of going to one of the cookiecutter water parks for even an hour, but in some bizarre twist of fate the island was also home to some truly remarkable attractions, though one had to venture well off the beaten path to find them.

However, off the beaten path was precisely where she was best at home, and unless that somewhat shady merchant she'd bought her map from had lied to her, the temple ruins should be very close by. What more could a mirthful Mirialan ask for?

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The blissful tranquility of her beachside retreat came to a sudden and rubbery end as an inflated ball appeared out of nowhere and bounced off her lekku.

“Aaaaaa! It’s gettin’ away! Aaaa!” The shrill screams of prepubescent voices followed in a cacophony of noise and a small dust storm’s worth of kicked up sand as a trio of colorful kids raced past, hot on the trail of their escaped entertainment.

“Tiba! You need to share it with your sisters, you hear? We’re not getting another one if you lose it!” The motherly tone of a weary Togruta sounded behind her and Tali felt sufficiently perturbed to see what was going on. The sight of a slightly overweight crimson Togruta carrying a loaded hamper while obviously trying to follow some holonovela on her datapad was about as unwelcome as a blaster to the face for what it promised of tranquility. The woman flashed a kind smile and began unpacking her belongings nearby, choosing to make base camp for herself and her offspring right next to the only other person on the entire beach.

Tali suppressed a growl of annoyance. So much for a fun vacation.

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The jungle thickened into an almost impermeable brush of criss-crossing vines and shrubbery, stalling her pace to a crawl as she squeezed through the narrowest of gaps or made her very own. The curved knife in her hand was ill-suited for this sort of heavy work, but she made do, pluckily carrying on despite the beads of sweat on her brow having turned into trickles and by now small rivers. The sweltering heat of the humid jungle was starting to get to her, but it would all be rewarded handsomely when she found—

—an electrified fence, recently erected by the looks of it, barring her path. For a moment, the Mirialan merely stared, stupefied by the unexpected obstacle that had seemingly appeared out of nowhere in the middle of the thickest jungle, but a further peek behind its glowing bars betrayed its true purpose. The map had not lied after all. The temple ruins were indeed here, she could tell as much from the shape of the overgrown ‘hill’ before her.

The fence was not ancient, however, and she hazarded a guess that it was not put in place by the original builders. Doubly so, since she’d seen speeders loaded with excavation equipment parked outside one of the local diners back in town. Just her luck to be in a race against some stuffy archeologists who probably cared more about getting their name in a paper as the discoverer of an ancient chamberpot than appreciating the singular opportunity presented to them.

Her momentary dismay soon faded and was replaced by cocky determination. She’d hoped to maybe take her time and appreciate the ruins in peace, but if a race was to be had, she was more than up for it. Now just to settle the matter of one electrified fence twice her height.

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Tali was grinding her teeth, and her dentist would not be happy about it. The serenity of her personal slice of beach heaven had been turned into a miniature recreation of a Tatooinean sandstorm filled with the brews of Dewbacks and Banthas, or at least Togrutan children. Between the three of them, they were managing to offend almost all of her senses and their mother was positively glued to her series rather than keeping her offspring in line.

“Mommy! Taka won’t share the ball!” the smallest girl yelled, almost in tears.

“Tiba! Tell your sister to share...” the mother muttered halfheartedly, chewing on a biscuit and paying no attention where the trio were playing. Clearly, the episode was coming to a crescendo from how tense her breaths were.

Tali had half a mind to interrupt her just at the point of revelation out of petty spite, when Ashla, or possibly Bogan, chose to intervene. A dark warning flashed on her datapad screen and the woman let out a yelp of almost physical pain. *Low battery.*

She hurriedly began to upend the hamper, tossing blankets and food items around herself in a desperate effort to find a charger, but came up empty-handed. Tali tried to suppress her smirk, hoping that the woman’s addiction might perhaps force them back into the hotel when their eyes met and the Togruta visibly got an idea.

Tali felt a knot in the pit of her stomach when she put on a best effort of a kind smile and spoke those dreaded words.

“Excuse me, miss? Could you watch my kids for just a moment?”

A dozen barbed quips and retorts flashed past her mind as she smiled a sickly sweet smile of her own, intent on savoring this petty victory to its fullest. Yet, what came out of her mouth was...

“Sure.”

It had happened so quickly she did not even realize it until the woman had stuffed the pad under her arm and was charging for the hotel, yelling at her kids to ‘stay with the nice purple lady’. Whether any of them registered, Tali had no clue. At least it made no visible impression upon their horseplay.

Dejectedly, Tali resigned herself to her bottle of by now lukewarm cider, only to almost get her teeth chipped when the infernal ball slammed once again into her head, followed by a discordant chorus of ‘sorryyy!’

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“Carefulling, carefulling...” Vicxa muttered to herself as she inched forward along the arcing limb of a convenient tree. The crackling shock fence lay below her, so close she could smell the pungent ozone, and the limb she’d estimated to be sufficiently sturdy for her needs was bending distressingly closer to it with each inch she advanced. Perhaps she’d put on a few extra kilos since her last balancing act? Or maybe the local flora was just particularly pliant. She chose to go with the latter, though it made no difference to her now.

The Mirialan paused and considered her options. Swaying almost three meters above the lush jungle floor, suspended on a creaking branch above a high voltage shock fence, her options were admittedly rather limited. She could attempt to crawl further, or make a jump for it, or maybe, try to build up some momentum by swaying the branch and...

The wet crack of breaking greenwood made her pupils dilate. ‘Oh no’ was all she had time to think before gravity took hold and pulled her towards the awaiting shock fence along the breaking tree limb. Acting on instinct and ungraceful panic, she scrambled to keep the branch between herself and the fence beams, bounding clear the moment she felt the branch make contact.

Her panicked plan was sound. The execution; lacking. A sharp jolt of electricity coursed through her body the moment the branch struck the fence, making her planned leap more of a twitching spasm that barely got her clear of the barricade. She landed roughly on her left shoulder amidst a yelp of pain, but at least she wasn’t spasming in the fence like a giant bogfly.

Shaken, and suffering from a few misfiring nerves, she picked herself up and brushed the worst of the muck off her.

“That could have gone worse,” she admitted with a huff, trying to stay positive as she watched the fence continue to spit and hiss as it electrocuted the freshly sheared branch in a fascinating lightshow of cascading purple embers. Then the limb caught fire.

“Oh...”

Vicxa decided to make herself scarce.

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“Aaaaa! Tiba broke the ball! It’s leaking!”

“I did not! Taka’s a lying liar!”

Tali felt like she was caught in some twisted Dark Side torment chamber specifically designed to get under her skin. Could these three not give her *one* moment’s piece and quiet? And where in the seven stars was their mother? It could not take this long to get to the hotel and back. She’d

already been gone for—she checked her chrono—three minutes. Tali slumped into the sand and buried her head under the crossword.

“Am not! Tell the lady I’m not a liar, Tora.”

“Tora?”

“Hey, Tora? Where are you?”

“Toraaa?!”

The kids distressed calls stirred some primal reaction in her and she rose up, suddenly aware that, despite her personal misgivings about the whole thing, she was effectively responsible for these three. And right now, she could only see two.

“Where didt your friendt go?” she asked the girl.

“I don’t know. She was here a minute ago,” Taka replied.

“Maybe she went after mommy. Tora doesn’t like being away from her,” Tiba added, holding a quickly deflating beach balloon under his arm.

“Okay, okay...” Tali muttered, feeling her pulse quicken. “Can you two just stay here andt... not move? I needt to findt your sister.”

“Is that a game?” Tiba inquired, tilting his head inquisitively.

“Uh, yes. Let’s all play a game! Vho can stay still the longest?” Tali suggested with a big, beaming smile that was utterly at odds with the creeping panic crawling up her spine.

“Ooh! Ooh! Me! I can be still forever!” Taka exclaimed.

“I can be still five-ever!” Tiba declared boisterously.

“That’s not a number!”

“Ya-haa!”

“Na-aaa!”

“Ya-haa!”

Tali chose to leave the two bickering children to their own devices, confident she’d be quicker on her own while she swiftly traced their mother’s steps towards the hotel and found the missing

kid. She might not have appreciated having the kids foisted off on her like that, but they were still someone's kids, and she knew how bad things could go if the wrong sort of people found them.

She just hoped she could find the girl before their mother arrived.

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"Hmmh, just a branch. False alarm."

"I'm not sure, branches don't just fall off like that."

"There's no sign of entry, and that thing looks rotten to the core."

"Everything is rotten around here. Including your head."

"And your attitude."

"Zip it, private. Let's secure the perimeter and make sure the boffins get to dig in peace. We don't want a repeat of last time..."

The two black clad guards visibly shivered and then moved along on their patrol.

Vicxa peered slowly from behind a toppled column, its overgrown bulk having offered ample refuge from the guards' halfhearted efforts to find her. She almost regretted the pile of mucky foliage she'd hastily thrown over herself to blend in even further. Almost.

With the coast once again relatively clear, she darted across what must have once been some sort of parade ground but now was little more than an expanse of mossy lumps, and pressed herself against what she judged to be the bottom rung of the main temple. Even at a distance, she'd assumed the building style to be flat and angular. Now that she could peel aside some of the vines that crawled over the ancient stonework, she was proven correct.

The ziggurat must have once been quite the sight, she reckoned, running her remaining organic hand across the jet black obsidian. She could barely make out shallow carvings upon the rock, ancient glyphs that probably held some very important meaning to some dusty lecturer, but to her were at most just amusing anecdotes. Her real goal lay somewhere within that ruin.

Casting one more look over her shoulder to make sure the guards were well and truly away, she grabbed a hold of the vines with her cybernetic arm and tested them for purchase. The red durasteel digits did not slip, nor did the vine instantly detach from the stone. Good. With a smile of excitement on her lips, the Mirialan began the ascent.

"Here we go relic hunting again!"

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"Tora? Toraaaa?!" Tali shouted into the dark jungle, her voice increasingly desperate. She'd traversed the path to the edge of the hotel grounds, surely making far better speed than any small child could have, and yet she'd found no trace of the missing Togruta. Where could she have gone? Worry gnawing at her heart, she reached out for any sign of life around her, before latching on to the nearest one in her desperation. It was far, surprisingly so, and moving away from her, but she could catch it if she just ventured through the jungle.

With a sigh, she sat off at best possible speed, only barely cognisant of the fact a bikini and flip-flops did not a jungler attire make.

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"What are you doing?" a soft, shrill voice asked the two mostly motionless Togruta children who kept staring at each other.

"Tora!" Tiba exclaimed, turning towards his sister and losing the intense stare-off. "Where were you?"

"I drank too much juice..." the youngest admitted sheepishly, before looking around slightly worriedly. "Where's mommy?"

"Oh there you are! I'm so glad you kept playing nice together," the motherly tone of the red Togruta called out as she emerged from the jungle path with a half-charged datapad in hand. "But where is that Twi'lek woman I told to keep an eye on you?" she added more sternly.

"She spoke funny," Taka mused.

"She left to—" Tiba began.

"Tiba! Is that ball punctured? I told you to be careful!" the mother chided, shaking her head. "I am very disappointed in you."

"But mom! It wasn't my fault. Taka "

"I don't want to hear any excuses, young man. Hmph, I guess we should just pack up and return to the hotel. Come along now, pack your things."

The trio let out various groans of annoyance, but did their best to pack up the hamper all the same while their mother continued to tap at her pad, searching for the next episode in her series.

“Mom? Should we pack her things too?” Taka pointed at where Tali had left her belongings.

“Don’t bother. She didn’t care to look after you, so we won’t look after her either. Honestly, what a terrible woman! She would make for an awful mother!” the Togruta concluded with a huff as she picked up the hamper and led her offspring back to the hotel.

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As she closed in on the life form she’d sensed, Tali began picking up a trail in its wake. Disturbed brush, snapped branches, all signs pointing well to a wandering child. Eschewing her esoteric senses for the more mundane, she followed the trail ever deeper into the thick jungle until she was suddenly confronted by a gaping black pit into which she almost stumbled.

It was small, barely large enough for a person to crawl through, but obviously man made. The black obsidian had been carved by tools and a faint breeze flitted out from its gaping maw. She bent down to call out the girl’s name into the darkness, but only an echo replied. The trail ended here, and she had to make a choice.

“Seven stars damn that *schutta*,” Tali spat bitterly, cursing the pushy Togruta with all her heart before dropping down on all fours and crawling into the tunnel.

The cold dampness made her shiver and she was positive she felt *something* dripping down her exposed back. What that something was, she tried not to think on too hard. Shouting into the dark quickly became old and so she just crawled, going deeper and deeper down the hole with only a sense of duty and a fool’s hope to guide her. She *had* to find that kid. She wasn’t losing any more daughters; her own or someone else’s.

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Vicxa had seriously misjudged the effort of vine climbing. She was barely halfway up the ziggurat when she had to halt lest her shaking arms lose purchase on the treacherous vines. She was not one to be easily scared of heights, but the prospect of tumbling down the way she’d climbed was not exactly appealing. Locking her mechanical grip onto the vine she was clinging on to, she reached for her canteen for a swig of water when her ears picked up an odd humming. It was faint, very faint, but it was definitely coming from nearby.

Interest picked, she moved around her fulcrum to find the source of the sound, but all she could manage was to estimate it originating from somewhere between the stones at her level. Probably a crack of some sort where air was rushing through, she reasoned. But the steps of

the ziggurat were *massive*, each level had to have been constructed of stones at least as thick as she was tall. That a crack could have propagated through them seemed implausible, and from what she'd seen of the construction, it seemed almost seamless.

There had to be another explanation.

She pulled out her knife and began cutting vines, arduously building herself a better foothold and then crawling underneath the layer of vines that had overgrown the temple. She could hear it more clearer now, a definite breeze that emanated from close by. She squeezed and twisted her lithe frame past vines too thick for her knife to cut until she suddenly felt the air flow against her tattooed cheek.

It beckoned her.

Eagerness growing, she scraped away the moss and growth around the crack she'd found, uncovering a slab of stone that others might easily have missed. With a smile, she ran the curved knife along the crack, outlining the obsidian panel until she felt the tip snag on something.

"Gotcha," she mused to herself before putting all her weight into pressing down upon it. *Click*.

The slab gave way like it had suddenly turned transparent, sliding into a carved recess like on glass. The surprised Mirialan, having put all her weight against it, found herself tumbling for the second time today as she fell forwards into the passageway it had left in its place.

"Aaaaa!" Vicxa yelped as the passageway turned out to be a ramp and sloping rather aggressively. With nothing for purchase or to arrest her, she slid down the untouched obsidian with increasing speed, picking up centuries of dust and cobwebs as she went.

"Wooo-hoo!" the pint-sized treasure hunter cried out in excitement, her laughter echoing inside the ancient temple as she raced towards an unknowable destiny—and adventure!

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This couldn't be right. There was no way the kid could have gone this far. She was wasting her time and probably getting lost herself. Tali continued her arduous journey along the cold damp tunnel which at least had widened enough to let her proceed in a hunched shuffle. She'd have been making the journey in utter darkness as well, were it not for the glow of bioluminescent algae that clung to the walls, and probably her back as well by now.

Sighing, she contemplated whether she ought to just turn around and admit defeat when she heard a faint sound in the distance. It was faint, very faint, but with a little help from the Force, her earcones picked up what sounded like a child's excited cry.

She did not pause to consider it further, the sound all the evidence she needed to press on at speed. With renewed faith she let the cool power of the living Force flow into her limbs and renew their strength as she carried on past scuffs and bruises, pushing aside her own discomfort in lieu of greater speed.

The tunnel which she'd feared was endless reached an abrupt terminus, the Twi'lek suddenly finding herself within some sort of ancient cistern that echoed with the sound of falling droplets. She picked her way along a treacherous walkway slick with slimy algae, finally reaching solid footing upon a platform that must have been constructed centuries ago.

She recalled mentions of ancient civilizations living on Selen, though she'd never paid them much heed. Running House Qel-Droma had kept her occupied well enough without picking up archaeology as a hobby. Still, some small part of her was thrilled and a little excited to be within this ruin, though another was equally terrified to consider the structural integrity of the vaulted roof above her.

A single path led out of the cistern, and so she followed it, the darkness disturbed only by the cautious *flap-flap* of her sandals.

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"Whoaah!" Vicxa exclaimed with a mix of joy and trepidation as the chute she'd tumbled down abruptly ended. The obsidian ramp spat her out into a vast chamber, its cavernous size sparsely illuminated by pillars of light leaking through overgrown cracks in the ceiling. Her fall was short, but the landing mercifully softened by a patch of fungal growth that collapsed under the impact in a cloud of choking spores.

Hacking and wheezing, she crawled away from the slick remains of the exotic mushrooms and wiped the worst of the muck off her. Regaining her footing, she took a moment to appreciate her surroundings, laying eyes upon what she reckoned had to be the central chamber. It had been left untouched by sentient hands for centuries, perhaps millennia, and for all she knew, she was the first to see it since whatever civilization built it died out.

Broken flat faced pillars lined the chamber with walkways of stone and wood running along its sides. She picked out alcoves and recesses all along them, possibly holding crypts or lesser altars within them. The chamber floor had sunk at places into the basement levels below, leaving the ground treacherous to cross, and the black abyss shimmered with what she presumed had to be accumulated water.

Vicxa suppressed a giddy hoot, a shiver of excitement visibly coursing through her. This was what she'd been waiting for. And those dusty academics were nowhere near gaining entrance,

as usual, which meant she'd have had first pickings of anything of interest long before they'd even managed to decipher the welcome mat.

Her experienced eye picking out a route across the ruined hall, she sat off on her scavenger hunt, eyes firmly nailed to what looked like a grand altar at the far end. A lesser staircase rising to a podium flanked by statues she couldn't quite make out in the gloom, she knew instinctively that place held some greater significance and so it had to be explored!

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"Tora? Hello? Are you here?" Tali called out, her voice twisting and echoing within the broken ruins of the ancient temple's catacombs. The path from the cistern had taken her up to a maze of corridors that seemed to lead in every possible direction. The pungent smell of rot hung heavy in the air and the soft squelch of organic mulch under her feet was not an uncommon sound.

The further she pressed on, the colder she felt, a sense of foreboding slowly creeping up her spine like a razor-limbed spider. The walls themselves were cold, unnaturally so, and the temple was steeped in a darkness that went beyond the gloom of half-light. She felt it ever clearer the deeper she ventured and it disturbed her. Not least that such a place had existed right under their noses, but that a holiday resort had been built practically on top of it.

No, someone must have known. Arcona lived and breathed intelligence and information. It was impossible that these things had been unknown to whomever had approved the building plans.

"The Consul," she muttered. Nothing happened on Selen without the Consul's tacit approval. And these resorts were so fresh the concrete was still drying on them, and that meant...

"Bogan damn you, Lucine," she sighed. Perhaps she had been holed up in Ol'val for too long and not kept an eye on her old friend like she should have. The Consul might not admit it, but at times, she needed someone to save her from herself. Much like herself.

Tali was snapped out of her dour introspections by a novel sound, bestial and threatening. A slaving growl reverberated from the dark and she realized she had been pressing on with little caution into a place that surely would have interested all manner of fauna. And not all fauna on Selen were herbivores.

Her hand moved instinctively to her hip to grasp her lightsaber, but her fingers found only each other. Of course she hadn't carried a weapon with her to the beach. She was supposed to be on vacation.

"Oh sithspit..." the Twi'lek muttered when a quadruplet of beady red eyes opened up in the shadows, followed by another, and another. The snarls grew into bellowing roars, and she ran.

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Vicxa was giddy with excitement, wonder and awe. She had a hard time suppressing her giggles as she vaulted across gaping chasms in the sunken floor, dashed up broken pillars, or bounded off the chipped visages of ancient statues. The temple was like a playground, each new wonder hers alone to explore and experience. She cared little for the order, but let her feet take her where her heart yearned. For the moment, there was only now.

Slowly but surely, meandering wildly, she did find herself gravitating towards the raised altar until her feet touched the lowest of its foreboding steps and she stopped. Craning her head upward, she took in the sundered majesty of what had once been. The grand tapestries hanging ragged off the walls, featureless and blackened by rot. The intricately carved statues of deities or warrior kings, now overgrown by snaking tendrils of nature. The exquisitely fitted stonework called for her and so she ascended, but each eager step she took sent shivers down her spine. She paused, almost at the zenith, but in that moment's hesitation she felt the eyes of all these long-dead kings or dormant primordial gods upon her, desecrating their altar with her insignificant presence.

Vertigo clawed at her, chill fingers clasping at her heart. Rank vileness in the air made her shudder and the tang of copper lingered on her mouth.

Then it was gone, vanished like an irksome insect in the breeze, but the trepidation was harder to shake. The summit was close, just a few more steps, and she had come this far. Surely not to turn away? No, she did not balk from a challenge and who cared about hokey religions and antediluvian gods?

Steeling her mind, she committed to the final ascent. Chipped durasteel digits finding purchase on the glass-like obsidian, she gritted her teeth into a determined grin. Just a few more steps.

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Everything was a blur as the Force guided her past sunken galleries and crumbled columns, ducking under collapsed archways and leaping over shattered statues. The sounds of the pursuing beasts waxed and waned, growing so loud she almost felt their jaws snapping at her heels before falling impossibly distant a heartbeat later. The maze of tunnels and corridors passed in a stream of bioluminescent black, but somehow she knew the way. Or at least her feet did.

Sunlight, pale and sparse, felt like a blinding photon flash grenade as she emerged into cavernous hall that defied her sense of scale. Tali skidded to a halt, rubbing her eyes in a vain effort to exorcise the optical specters still haunting them, but the beasts were right at her heels. She could not dally.

She needed a weapon, or at least some advantage if she was to take on however many of these creatures she'd managed to pull into her wake. There was all manner of broken debris littering the chamber floor, but none of it looked sturdy enough to bet her lekku on. That just left the imposingly tall obsidian altar and the high ground it afforded. Perhaps high enough that the slaving beasts couldn't reach.

It was worth a shot, and with ravenous monsters at her tail, she threw herself against the steep steps—and climbed.

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Red durasteel digits grasped the lip of the final step and with a final grunt of effort, the green Mirialan pulled herself up onto the final precipice. Rolling onto her back, she huffed with exhaustion, staring at the vaulted ceiling above and trying to regain her breath. She'd made it. Finally.

Pushing herself to her feet, she looked around the cramped podium to find her treasure, but reality was sometimes bitter. All there was was a blanched skeleton hunched over a lectern, its ancient robes withered gossamer thin, and a bronze walking staff lying beside it. Not exactly the glittering prize she'd hoped for, nor a remarkable artifact to bring back for her efforts.

No matter. She lived for the experience, not the prize. She would find some other way to pay for her trip here and...

The wet growls of wild animals caught her attention. As she swiveled around to face the sound, she saw a pack of oily black hounds bolt out of a dark corridor and head straight towards her. She took an instinctive step back, and almost fell off the podium, but managed to grab a hold of the stone lectern to keep herself steady.

Feverishly looking around for a quick exit, she realized she wasn't alone, nor necessarily the hounds actual target. Scraping sounds on the other side of the podium betrayed another, a native purple Twi'lek covered in glowly war paint and dressed in primitive garb was ascending the sheer steps. How had she not noticed the place was still inhabited?

Even so, she could tell the woman was running from the hounds and though she might get into trouble later for trespassing on her holy site, she wasn't going to let her die. Bracing herself against the lip of the podium, she extended her cybernetic arm and offered it to the Twi'lek.

"Come," she urged her. Though she was certain the primitive didn't speak Basic, the gesture spoke for itself.

The Twi'lek looked surprised, shocked in fact, to see her but it lasted by a moment. The next, she'd grasped her arm by the wrist and together they managed to scramble her up the last

steps and onto the top, just as an oily skinned beast leapt up and snapped its razor fanged maw shut in her wake.

There was no time for introductions, especially not when the Twi'lek immediately began looking around the podium and picked up the bronze staff to arm herself with. Vicxa regained her footing once more and peered nervously over the lip of their obsidian sanctuary at the pack of beasts circling them like sharks. Not good, she decreed. But perhaps together they might make it out alive and not join the dead in this tomb.

Turning back to the Twi'lek, she cleared her throat and began very slowly and clearly. "Do. You. Speak. Basic?"

The woman looked confused, as she had assumed she would, and then gave an unintelligible reply in whatever tribal language she spoke.

"Vhat the frak?"

"We." Vicxa pointed at the Twi'lek and herself in turn. "Fight." She made some hacking motions with her hands. "Together." She joined her hands, fingers interlaced. "Beasts." She pointed at the snarling hounds with a little 'grr' for effect.

The Twi'lek's expression was utter deadpan.

"Oh sod it," Vicxa grunted and pulled out a snub-nosed pistol from her thigh holster, and took aim at the closest hound. With the squeeze of the trigger, a pulse of ionized radiation shot out and the hound simply *ceased to exist*.

The Twi'lek stared at her, probably in horror at the 'magic' she'd just performed, and so she waved awkwardly. "Uh, boom-boom stick. Make monster go poof!"

The Twi'lek's eyes widened in shock and she raised her staff to strike her, prompting the Mirialan to raise her hands defensively in protest. "No, wait!" She got no further in her defence when the Twi'lek struck. Moving with unnatural speed, she dashed forward and brought the staff around to smack a leaping beast in the head with bone shattering force. It collapsed into a pile at the foot of their holdout amidst a ringing chorus of angry growls from its pack mates.

The creatures demonstrably *could* reach them, though only off certain angles where fallen statues provided convenient ramps. That made it easier to predict their movements, but there were more than two directions to watch and the beasts seemed viciously intelligent.

Instinctively, the two women backed against each other, purple against green, and did the only thing they could. They fought.

Hounds lept at them from left and right, snarling maws and razor claws chipping at the lip of their refuge. But their defence was formidable, and between the disintegrator and the bronze staff, they sent half a dozen more oily skinned monsters to the great beyond.

Then, Vicxa's weapon whined and fell silent, its energy cell spent. She had time for a yelp and little more before the beast was upon her, slamming her into the obsidian with enough force to knock the wind out of her. But before the creature could sink its fangs into her throat and tear it out, the Twi'lek had spun around and jabbed her staff into one of its eyes. The beast mewed in agony, the weapon snagging and wrenched free from the Twi'lek's grasp as the beast flailed around in pain.

Her attempt to retrieve the weapon left her open, and the a razor claw of a yapping beast sliced at her calf. The Twi'lek sank to a knee with a sharp cry of pain, twisting around and shunting her arms at the hound that tried for another swipe.

Vicxa was sure she was hallucinating, because the next moment the beast was hurtling through the air before breaking its spine upon a support column with a sickening crack. The Twi'lek hadn't touched it, and even if she had, there was no way...

The snarls of the wounded beast thrashing almost on top of her snapped her to more pressing matters. The staff still lodged in its eye made the creature's next lunge unwieldy, but as it tried to bite her, she instinctively raised her right arm and fed its fangs with durasteel bones. Confused and disoriented, its maw still clenched shut around Vicxa's cybernetic limb but its teeth shattered, the beast hesitated. The Mirialan did not. Pulling her knife free from its sheath, she slashed the curved blade across its throat, drawing a black fountain of blood.

The beast tried to scramble away, but slumped dead not seconds later.

The blood seeping into her clothing like a sickly ichor, Vicxa shuddered with revulsion, but pressed on. Dislodging the staff from the animal's cranium, she braced her foot against its head and pulled. Her bloodied hand slipped before it found purchase again, and when it did, her fingers curled around a slight indentation.

Bzeeem!

The sound caught them both by surprise as a brilliant yellow plasma blade erupted from the staff's tip. Vicxa thought it was about to explode, but the Twi'lek's eyes lit up like recognizing an old friend.

Though injured, she pushed past the pain and snatched the weapon from her hands, before turning towards the beasts with renewed purpose. What ensued was the most terrifying welcome scene of carnage the young Mirialan had ever witnessed, and by its end, the Twi'lek was as drenched in black blood as she. Of the beasts, not one drew breath.

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Tali panted hard, leaning on the lightsaber staff with more weight than she really wanted to. The beasts' foul blood lingered on her tongue and the cut in her calf was burning like a blaster bolt. Still, she was alive, and so was the odd Mirialan.

Turning her head towards the podium, she saw the woman slide down the altar and make a rough landing on unsteady feet, but pick herself up almost immediately. She was bloodied, and shaken, but still functioning.

"Who are you?" she called out to her.

The Mirialan looked up, confused, then replied in a painfully slow Basic. "Me. Vicxa. *Vicxa*. Me... friend."

Tali furrowed her brow. "You do understand I speak Basic. Right?"

The Mirialan, Vicxa if she'd understood her right, looked perplexed. "Did you just say Basic?"

"Yes. I speak Basic," Tali repeated as clearly as she could.

Something seemed to click inside the smaller woman's brain and a wide smile of understanding spread on her lips. "Ooooooh! You do! A thousand apologies, I thought... with the attire... and the warpaint... *and the accent...*"

"What?"

"Erm, n-nothing! Nothing!" she raised her hands defensively, an embarrassed red on her cheeks that almost matched the tips of her hair. "Yes, I'm Vicxa Varis, adventuress and recreational treasure huntress. And who might I have the pleasure of making the acquaintance of?"

"Tali Sroka," she replied, offering her hand for a shake. It was a strong, if odd one with the Mirialan's damaged prosthetic.

There was a sudden rumbling in the distance as mild explosives were set off and a pair of giant slabs that had once been doors were blown inward. With the smoke and dust still clearing, armored guards with SIMASS badges pressed inside alongside white clad research fellows and teams of eager interns.

"Hey! Over there!" One of the guards shouted, pointing at the two.

Vicxa instinctively covered behind the taller Twi'lek and looked about ready to dart. The only thing stopping her was a friendly hand grabbing her by the shoulder. Tali smiled at her and said. "They're vith me."

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"Soo, what exactly are you?"

The question was innocent, and clearly spoken after much deliberation. Tali turned to Vicxa and let out a soft grunt as they walked across the hotel courtyard where a SIMASS speeder had dropped them and headed towards the reception.

"Vhat do you mean, vhat am I?"

"Back there in the temple. You did something to one of the hounds. It was going to cut you, and then... *bam*, it was lying halfway down the chamber."

Tali remained silent, inspecting the Mirialan as they walked, herself still limping a little despite the fresh bandages and bacta.

"And that weapon, you've seen that before, haven't you?" she continued, pointing at the bronze staff.

Tali looked up at the sun, feeling its warm rays upon her skin once more, and caught movement on the upper levels of the hotel's lavish sun deck. A small Togruta girl was waving at her through the railing. Then two more joined her.

She smiled awkwardly, and waved back, before turning back to Vicxa.

"I vill tell you, but how do you feel about hokey religions andt ancient veapons?"