

“No, no, no, no!” shrieked the girl as she was dragged through the stone halls by her hair, her ink-stained fingers scrabbling at the claws gripping her. Her researcher robes fluttered and snagged on uneven flagstones as the beast paid her little mind, its fellows stalking alongside as if guarding them.

It was dark, her mind cataloging everything going on in a detached sort of way. But it wasn't pitch black as she suspected it would be. Luminescent fungus stretched along parts of the walls and ceilings, and cracks allowing sunlight shone down at some places. She caught out of the corner of her terror-filled eyes the sight of murals etched into the walls, of faces on bodies that looked very much like the monsters taking her further into the temple, as well as a Human-like form, more likely Selenian part of her brain offered up, female in nature on a throne.

Soooooon

Violet D'San jerked as the voice brushed her mind. It had been feminine, dark, and deep. She whimpered, thrashing anew in the grip of her captors.

It had seemed such a simple idea, a walk through the humid jungle from the resort to the temple site. Strong had offered to escort Lucine, it had seemed only natural after their previous evening of 'private swimming lessons' to spend more time with the redhaired vixen. The walk itself had been rather pleasant, they had managed to go before the sun had risen much and the heat and humidity were not yet unbearable.

Strong did not mind the prospect of humidity and warmth as he walked alongside his Consul, clad in the casual attire of a pair of cargo shorts and a sleeveless shirt. At least, he didn't mind whenever he glanced over at the fair-skinned woman in her sundress making her way down the path. They didn't have such articles of clothing back on Csilla, it never got this warm, they fascinated the Chiss almost as much as her red hair and green eyes did.

“Are you going to keep staring at my dress, Darling, or watch where you're going?” she teased as he nearly smacked his head into a low hanging branch.

Before he could retort, the sounds of blaster fire suddenly filled the air and Lucine found herself pressed into the dirt, three hundred pounds of big blue man hunkered over her. Screams rang out through the jungle as well, and Strong could hear Lucine sigh with resignation below him.

“We cannot have a simple vacation without *something* going awry, can we.”

“It would appear not,” he responded in hushed tones to her statement, eyes scanning the area ahead for danger as the sounds of blaster fire tapered off. He slowly rose, offering a hand to his Lady and effortlessly lifting her back to her feet. He stood guard, peering into the jungle as she

fixed her dress, his jaw set and fists clenched. "We should head back to the resort, my Lady, and check to see if a distress call was sent."

"That, my dear General, is probably the smarter course of action, yes," she replied, shaking her red tresses and sighing again. "And it was looking like such a lovely day," she murmured, a hand lightly touching his tense arm before her eyes widened and head snapped to stare into the jungle.

"What is that!?" she hissed, seconds before something dark and grotesque burst from the foliage. Her hand went up, the Force lashing out to slow the creature's charge, its claws rearing back and animal-like face set in a grimace as it found itself pushing against a telekinetic wall. Her other hand dropped to her side and she winced; her lightsaber was sitting on the nightstand of her room.

The creature scrambled to push past the invisible barrier keeping it from the curvaceous meal before it, only for a rock-like blue fist to connect with its snout. It stumbled back as the Chiss stepped in, another jab to the thing's chest slowing it further, a follow up right hook to the jaw sending black blood and stained teeth to the jungle floor.

"**Hrah!**" bellowed Strong, bringing both fists down on top of the dazed creature's head, sending it to the ground, twitching.

"Thank you, Darling," said Lucine, straightening her dress *again* after the interruption. "I sense our temple dig site up ahead has been severely understaffed suddenly, and I suspect these....things....might be the cause," she said with annoyance. "I can still feel some of our people there, alive, but their number is growing fewer and weaker. A shame," she affected a look of regret, "that I forgot my weapons back at the hotel room and cannot go and save them. Such heroics would surely earn me standing in the eyes of our fellows."

Strong turned, an eyebrow raised and reached down into the pockets of his cargo shorts. He withdrew a silvery hilt and held it up, "I thought you wished for me to carry it, since there seemed to be no...convenient manner in which to place it upon your dress. It would have ruined the lines, most certainly," he murmured, looking her up and down.

The Shadow Lady stared at the weapon, realizing she had talked herself into a rescue mission, her face carefully still.

"Perhaps we should at least investigate the site, though if they managed to gain access to the temple finally we should stay above ground. Until reinforcements arrive, of course," she said taking the saber hilt from him.

"Of course, my Lady," he gave a slight bow, his hand pulling another item from his pocket. "Also I felt...for some....reason," the Chiss looked confused as he withdrew a very familiar and

ancient-looking dagger from his shorts, “that you would require this as well. I...cannot recall why, though,” finished lamely.

She bit back a curse, taking the short, scabbarded blade. It seethed with a twisted mixture of annoyance and amusement as she took a moment to strap it to her thigh, high enough that the hem of her dress mostly covered it. It was not a look she cared for, reminding her of Sera’s proclivity, and the feeling of the rebellious ancient Sith spirit trapped within so close to her own flesh made her skin crawl.

“It may come in handy, yes. Did you happen to stow a comlink away in those ever-useful pants of yours, my dear?”

Strong’s cheeks purpled a bit, and he gave her a slight shake of the head. She shook hers in turn, jaw set as she stepped past him towards the direction of the dig site. A crunch behind her and the sound of a boot being dragged through the undergrowth suggested he had finished off the creature on the ground. She glanced over as he returned to her side, just slightly behind her, and noted that his hands were sporting a pair of large brass knuckles. If the Son of Garmis was resorting to weapons, he was more nervous than he let on, she knew.

They arrived shortly at the dig-site. Her senses strained, nothing had come to attack them on the path beyond the first creature. She could feel things though, in the trees. A ravenous hunger that was traveling in every direction. It was unsettling, unnatural, almost letting her ignore the dagger strapped to her leg.

There were bodies everywhere. Or parts of them. Half gnawed on limbs, torn open corpses. It was a charnel house. She stepped carefully, not wishing to bloody her sandaled feet, and shook her head. Such a waste of resources. She heard Strong grunt, looking over to see him crouched over a body clad in armor, the man looking for something. A bloody hand rose to inspect something he’d fished out of the mess.

“Darling, is that a comlink?” she asked.

He nodded and removed what she thought might have once been an ear from it, wiping the piece of gear on his shirt with disdain before raising it to his lips.

“This is General Garmis at the temple dig site. If anyone is receiving this transmission, there has been an...incident. We require DDF forces here immediately as well as medical personnel in reserve. The location is *not* secure. Repeat...”

She turned and looked around as Strong sent the same message several times, likely changing the frequency as he did. Looking past the bodies it was interesting to see the pattern. More of the dead lay further from the temple than near it, as if the people had tried to flee. Or, her brow furrowed as she reached out with the Force, feeling fading life signs below ground. Or they had

taken *her people* and dragged them into the once sealed temple, the heavy stone doors now a gaping void.

"I have requested aid, Mistress," announced Strong, stepping again to her side and looking around. "Hopefully the DDF has received, that comlink was half-eaten but seemed to have power still. I cannot believe a few beasts like the one we encountered were capable of so much destruction," he shook his head, "it was not nearly strong enough."

"These were scientists and researchers, Darling," she said, "they lack my talents or your ability. Likely they were easy pickings, though the soldiers..." she trailed off, looking at the bodies, and shook her head. "That is concerning. I also still feel people alive within, so the creatures are not simply murdering and eating our personnel, but kidnapping them as well."

"No doubt for nefarious purposes," growled the Chiss, cracking his knuckles and taking a step towards the open doors.

"Darling, where do you think you're going?" she asked, her tone cautious. It would be just like the big, single-minded man to go charge in on a rescue mission. Alone. "We shall await the arrival of reinforcements. We are not equipped to go...spelunking, or whatever they call temple delving."

"I wish to secure the entry point, at the very least, Lucine," he spoke gravely, stepping over another dead scientist. "It is a blind spot, I would not have any of these beasts assault us while we wait."

She shook her head but followed, picking her way through bloody puddles and piles of discarded entrails to the entry. Her vision took a moment to adjust, though she was already tweaking her eyes with controlled use of the Force to make the room easier to see in the low-light. Streaks of blood ran across the entry chamber's floor, towards a short hallway leading to another room.

Except for a few hollows in the walls with soot staining the walls behind them and holders for torches long since rotted away, the entry held little of note. She grit her teeth as her self-appointed bodyguard crept into the next room, her eyes on the bloody streaks on the floor. It glistened, fresh, the blood was a new addition to the temple's decor. Strong quit moving, and her eyes were drawn to how his back stiffened. She stepped to his side and peered into the room beyond.

It was roughly circular. With the portal they stood in, there were four exits out of the room. The blood trails lead to the one opposite of them, around what looked like an ancient, weathered altar. Statues and etchings lined the walls, some well preserved from the passage of time. A cursory glance showed much of the same astronomical data that had been crossing her desk the past week, the bodies of the Dajorra system aligning. Others showed the very creature

they'd encountered in the jungle, as well as many...many others. Statues of a woman in a flowing robe, set low on her shoulders with a regal bearing, flanking the exits.

Next to her, Strong was unmoving, his eyes not on the blood, or the murals, or even the statues, but on the altar itself. His breathing seemed shallow, and his gaze unfocused. Lucine stepped to the side, looking between the altar itself, a carved rock seeming to be part of the floor itself, and her Chiss paramour. She had seen him like this before, in an ancient Sith temple beyond the borders of the Dajorra system. A pulse of amusement could be felt from the dagger.

"Strong, Darling," she spoke cautiously, watching his head slowly turn towards her. Last she saw him like this the man had barely been able to control himself, influenced by dark energies and with passions inflamed. While at another time it would be interesting to explore the effects the Dark Side corruptions had on the large man, the chance for the beasts that had killed her people returning was simply too high. "Focus, dear, we are in a dangerous place and...I will need my gallant protector," she finished, her voice dripping in honey with a mix of the helpless damsel.

He blinked, "Ah. I apologize, my Lady Vasano, my mind seems to have...wandered," he murmured, looking her over with a gaze that was hungrier than strictly appropriate for the situation. "Have I complimented your choice of dress this day, Madame?" he asked.

"Several times, Strong," she spoke drily, her eyes returning to the altar and the blood on the floor. She stepped towards the carved rock, her hands reaching out to trail over the dusty surface. It was simply carved, with no intricate designs nor symbols. It was tall, reaching to about six inches above her own waistline. She felt the dagger on her thigh grow warm and then felt Strong behind her, his body just touching her own, hands reaching past her to lay on the altar. His arms were to either side of her, impassable if she were not to duck.

"Strong," she began, her voice firmer as she heard his boots shuffle and felt him press just a little closer. She could hear his breathing grow more erratic. She turned, her hip and side rubbing against him as she did so, his ever-growing presence becoming more forceful as he closed the gap, pushing her back towards the altar. She placed her hands on his chest, pushing back slightly. "*Strong,*" she spoke, her voice infused with the Force, "*stand down, Darling, now is not the time to allow such base urges to take over reason.*"

He blinked down at her, his face already having moved towards her own with that unfocused look in his eyes, before staring with clarity.

"My lady," he growled through gritted teeth, "I fear I have been compromised again. Perhaps it would be best if we waited outside," he managed, though he made no effort to move away, his grip on the altar tightening till they could hear stone creak. "Before I do something unforgivable."

"Well then, Darling, just st—" she didn't get to finish her statement as her senses flared. "Oh, no," she groaned.

Claws scabbled on stone as the creatures came charging in from behind, back into the temple. Blood dripped from jaws and claws as they poured in, a dozen or more of them. One made a noise close to a howl, and its fellows moved to attack. Lucine watched Strong straighten and turn, his arm passing just over her head, the muscles flexing as his knuckler-clad fist nearly passed through one of the creatures entirely, splashing the nearby wall with blood.

Sooooon

She jerked and turned, looking past the altar at the blood-stained floor. Someone had just contacted her telepathically, despite her own abilities at keeping her mind safe.

The beasts corralled Violet, their clawed grips almost gentle now that the waifish librarian had worn herself out. They lifted her to the large, broad stone platform set in the wall, pushing her back against it and holding her in place. She struggled weakly, her mind still taking notes. The surface they'd sat her on was smooth, at least where she sat, as if someone had used this as a chair for a very long time. The structure of the room itself seemed an audience chamber, everything about its architecture drew the eye to where she was, no matter where one stood inside.

A throne? Why the blazes am I on a throne?

One of the creatures moved to directly in front of her, a yellowed eye blinking as it stared into her own, it snuffled and grabbed by the chin, forcing her head back. Her eyes watered as she stared up, blinking as she saw a narrow opening above, leading up to a pin-prick of light.

In the stars above, the last of the Dajorran moons settled into place, bringing the alignment to completion. A pulse of energy could be felt throughout the system, by those sensitive enough to such things.

And Violet shrieked as she felt Her pushing at her mind.

Lucine's saber flashed, cutting down another beast as they tried to swarm her and Strong. A dozen of the creatures were in pieces or bludgeoned messes around them. She spun her weapon around, stabbing another, teeth locked in a grimace. So far these beings had been ignoring her more subtle uses of the Force, her illusions and commands falling on deaf ears. Perhaps they were simply too single-minded, or stupid, to even comprehend what she was doing.

It was frustrating, doubly so when she noticed the rips in her dress. The audacity of these creatures to even try and— a claw wrapped around her left forearm, sneaking past her defenses. She twisted her body to try and bring her saber to bear, hissing in pain when another monstrous hand buried itself in her curls, jerking her head back. A palm reeking of old blood clamped itself over her mouth, muffling her cries as her eyes widened and stared at the back of her Chiss companion. More of the monsters fell on her, knocking the hilt from her grasp and dragging her past the altar, towards the dark hall. With one final push of concentration, she shoved a jumbled thought of alarm at Strong, who was being mobbed by the remaining beasts.

His head jerked around, red eyes blazing as he spotted Lucine being dragged away. He bellowed in anger, grabbing the nearest creature besetting him and slamming it forcefully into the altar with a sickening crack of the spine. It slid to the stone floor limply, its fellows rushing to fill the space its death had opened, even as Strong tried to push through the throng to reach his Consul.

The creatures were relentless, climbing up his back and wrapping hairy limbs around his neck, clawed fingers tugging at his mouth, covering his eyes as he fought blindly and immobilized. Lucine watched him get dragged towards the floor under the mass just as she was pulled out of sight, still fighting with her own captors with telekinetic strikes to try and drive them off of her.

Strong grunted, crushing anything that he could close his hands around in an effort to get these things to relent. He had to save her, his honor demanded it, as did his affections. This would not stand! He thrashed, he fought, he wondered if this is how it ended. Dying under an unending tide of hairy, animalistic beasts. He tried to shout in anger, but they filled his mouth with their disgusting fingers to muffle him. The pressure around his neck grew, and he realized that they were trying to bring him down rather than kill. He should have suffered a thousand cuts, bleeding him dry, by now.

Captivity might be worse than death, he knew, but it meant a chance to save his Lady.

It didn't mean he stopped fighting, not until blackness encroached and his heavy form thumped against the stones.

She opened Her eyes, sitting upon a throne ancient and remembered. It was disappointing. No grand offerings from the local islanders to greet Her on waking. No cushions on Her seat even. She shifted in annoyance, feeling the bony nature of Her new frame. Her children crowded the throne room floor, a seething mass of black hair, sharp teeth, and claws. They all watched Her to some extent, waiting in barely restrained bloodthirstiness.

Alla'su slowly stood, stretching for the first time in millennia. She raised her hands to inspect them, frowning at the stains.

“How pedestrian,” she sighed, moving on to look at her attire. Robes. Robes were....okay? Though these were plain, drab, and again, covered in ink markings. What kind of Selenian did her devoted children find for her to inhabit anew? She pulled a sleeve up and narrowed her eyes. No. Not Selenian. Unless the people had lost their stripes while she slumbered. What was this creature she’d taken over? She closed her eyes and looked inward, smiling as she found the cowering, former resident.

‘Well well, hello little one. Not the most graceful of creatures were you? Though your mind was quite...inquisitive. What were you?’

Alla’su settled back in her throne, trance-like as she focused, delving into the mind of the girl who’s body she now lived within. Humans....how incredibly boring. Flashes of other species, other worlds, metal vessels in the spaces between worlds filled her mind’s eye. A hungry smile spread across her face. More worlds for her children to feed on. For her to dominate as Goddess-Queen. Faces cycled through, all tinged with apprehension or fear for her host body. She frowned, this child had been fearful of everything it seems. Except for her books. So much knowledge.

She opened her eyes and smiled again. So. Much. Knowledge. She paused her musings, feeling a group of her children returning with another living tribute. She arranged the drab robes, making a note to see if anything better could be found for the skin and bones frame she now inhabited, and straightened on the throne, hands folded in her lap, chin up imperiously.

“Release me,” commanded the redhaired....Human that was dragged kicking, biting, and clawing into the chamber, before she noticed the throne sitting one. “Violet!?”

“Violet?” responded Alla’su, arching an unkempt eyebrow. “Ah. That was the host’s name, indeed, I hadn’t even bothered looking for that information. Hmmm, so you knew her?”

The woman on the throne closed her eyes briefly, before grinning and looking down at her again.

“Lucine Vasano. Shadow Lady. De facto ruler of this world...my world. My children have done so well, bringing you to me upon my waking. What luck,” she clapped her hands and laughed. “My but you,” her eyes traveled up and down the disheveled, though somehow rapidly righting itself, appearance of the redhead. “Ah, and a witch as well. I see. Oh...” Alla’su raised a hand and concentrated, causing some of the dust on the floor before her throne to shift and swirl. “So was young Violet, I see. Interesting, a new ability to explore. How delightful.”

She affected a sigh, “Though now I must chastise my children. How much easier this all would have been if they had managed to bring you here first. The Queen of Selen would have been a much handier host then this little bookworm.”

“Queen,” Lucine rolled the word around for a moment. “Normally I do not indulge myself with such terms. I am the Shadow Lady of Arcona, and you have stolen, and presumably killed, a research team belonging to me. As well as their security detachment,” she waved a hand to her side, her hair shifting and righting itself to her usual curls. One would be forgiven to think that the area top her head had been styled into a crown-like feature.

“This attack came, to my believe, unbidden. Your....children...attacked my people.”

“My children were hungry,” spoke Alla’su, beckoning one of the nearest closer. It settled in front of the throne, allowing the goddess to stroke the top of its hairy head. “The loss of life is of course wasteful, but they must....eat...,” she grinned as she sensed more of them returning. “And oh my, such a meal is being brought,” she bit her lip.

Lucine could feel them getting closer as well, trying to maintain her outward cool. The thing inhabiting Violet hadn’t outright killed her or had her ‘children’ devour her, so it was possible it could be reasoned with.

“You are Alla’su, then,” she stated, not questioning. The reborn goddess turned to look at her, amusement twinkling in her eyes. Seeing so much expression from Violet was unsettling, at least emotions that weren’t fear and subservience. “A goddess of ancient Selenian lore. Most of the researchers your children devoured did not believe you existed. I suppose you thinned the foolish from my ranks,” she gave a dry chuckle, turning to watch the beasts struggle to drag Strong’s body in.

“Ah. My companion lives. Good, he can bear witness.”

“Witness?” Alla’su arched an eyebrow again, laughing and settling back in her throne. “And what shall he bear witness to, my children devouring the ruler of this world?”

The monsters made a cascade of chattering noises that might have been laughter.

“You would kill a fellow ruler out of hand? Without regard to what we can offer one another? I suspect such single-mindedness is what got you banished before.”

Lucine held her breath. The topics of ancient Selenian deities had not been something that had caught her fancy, nor did old stories. She hoped she was getting this right, that Alla’su had been destroyed in the past. Why else would her temple be closed and an entire astronomical event would be needed to return her to life.

“You would barter with me?” Alla’su sounded amused, but intrigued, Violet’s memories showing so much of what this woman could offer her. Avarice filled her eyes. “In exchange for what, your life?”

Lucine waved her hand dismissively, "For a pact of non-aggression. I will order the island quarantined, remove the staff from the local resort. It is furnished luxuriously, believe me, and would make a more suitable palace than this...hole in the ground, filled with dirt and bones. My people will leave you in peace, should you not break the borders of this island."

Alla'su narrowed her eyes, "This island will only provide for my children for so long. They must feed. They must grow."

The redhead this time grinned, sensing her Chiss companion was not yet near rousing.

"Clan Arcona has many enemies, my dear Alla'su. Many of them are useless to us. The island of Atolli will be a fine final resting place for them. It is easy enough to convince my own summit that I've decided to turn this island into a prison. And prisoners who do not survive long are not a burden upon our resources."

"And if we decide this place is too small?" hissed Alla'su, beginning to rise from her throne. She suspected this woman would cage her. "If we decide it is time to leave our home and spread across Selen once more?"

Lucine smiled, before waving a hand at Alla'su/Violet, pushing her back in her seat with a barely contained gasp from the goddess.

"That is a discussion for when you have regained your strength, I think, Darling. Consider this. Arcona will ensure you have prisoners for your children to feed upon. We will ensure that none breach your island in some misguided effort to destroy you. And should someday you desire to spread beyond this island, we can discuss that as well. There are many worlds in this galaxy, and I am certain we can find one suitable for your needs. Bountiful feeding grounds, a climate you'll enjoy."

Alla'su grit her teeth. The witch should not have been able to sense how weak she was still.

The long game, then.

She glanced over at the blue man who was beginning to stir.

"Leave that one, then, as a meal in good faith. My host has an amazing amount of resentment for that man. Something about leaving her to perish."

"He was simply following orders," Lucine waved off the command. "A bit too much to the letter perhaps, but he is a useful tool, I would prefer not to abandon him. He has....so many....uses," she spoke with a barely contained smile.

"He is your mate? This...Violet...seems to believe so."

“A Queen can have as many consorts as she requires, no?” questioned the Consul, smirking. “No, as a show of good faith I will remove those loyal to me and quarantine the island. It is regrettable, the resort is *quite* nice, but the staff could have been more dutiful. You may have them.”

And a reminder to myself, to have the payments for this vacation canceled. Such a breach in security.

Alla’su chewed on her lip, her fingers fiddling with themselves, a habit of Violet showing through.

“Very well. You have until morning to remove yourselves from Our island.”

“Excellent, well-negotiated your eminence,” Lucine gave a slight curtsy. “I will have a care package delivered, including a com device should you ever wish to discuss departing Selen. Now then...if some of your children can escort my...consort, and I, out of your temple? I fear that with how I was brought to this audience that I did not clearly see the way.”

She paused, and off handily added, “Oh, and if you can see what Violet knows, you should know the power of my fleet, yes? I would hate to see such lovely architecture reduced to rubble because I did not safely return to my people. Emergency protocols and all.”

Alla’su grit her teeth, baring them in a facsimile of a smile. “Very well.”

“My Lady?” groaned Strong, rising to a sitting position. Several of the creatures scrambled back, sensing impending violence. “My Lady! We are surrounded! Flee, I shall slow them, it is the least that I can do to absolve my dishonorable conduct of allowing your capture,” he growled, getting to his feet unsteadily. His fists were raised, shoulders hunched, when her hand gentled touched his bicep.

“Strong, Darling, everything is sorted. A misunderstanding. We must return to the others and prepare departure.”

“Sorted? They killed many of our people, my Lady.”

“Diplomatic incidents always start with the loss of life it seems,” she sighed, patting his arm, “come along, dear, we must depart.”

“I shall expect to talk to you again before long, Queen Vasano,” rasped Alla’su, watching the Chiss with a bloodthirsty glare.

“And I you, Lady Alla’su,” replied Lucine with an incline of her head. Several creatures shuffled past, one looking back with expectancy, prompting the two Arconans to follow them. A corridor later Lucine seemed to relax slightly, her hand holding the crook of Strong’s arm. “Well that was exhausting.”

Strong walked in silence, his mustache seeming to twitch, before glancing down at her.

“What?”

“Oh, nothing, your Majesty.”

Lucine sighed wistfully, “My, wouldn’t it be easier if they just made me royalty.”

“Perhaps I can commission you a fitting crown,” mused the Chiss aloud.

“Oh, Darling, you do get me the nicest gifts,” she murmured, pressed into his side as they walked, looking tired. “I do believe we deserve a well-earned vacation after this.”