

Trident

“Trident!”

Vicxa Varis glared at the jubilant hoodlum as he proudly splayed out a sextuplet of badly worn play tokens as wide as his sharp toothed grin, but couldn't find a fault in his hand. Her own, by comparison, was distinctly lacking and any attempt to challenge the other player would surely earn her no friends. The two were sitting in the center of a loose ring of spectators, various riff raff that formed the generously named working class of Celeste. Weak alcoholic beverages, local snacks, and even a small coal burner upon which some shellfish was sizzling with a tempting scent, provided the preferred libations as they wasted away the late evening hours under the sea.

“Luck sure seems to be on your side today, Ryha,” she replied in broken Nautolan as she folded her hand and let the grinning man collect his winnings.

“By Alla’su’s grace,” Ryha chuckled, hungrily scraping the low denomination Calamari flan off the piece of cardboard and into his pockets. This earned him a round of laughter from the crowd around him, as well as a few sympathetic pats on the Mirialan’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry, Ryha’s known as the Spearfisher for a reason,” a one-eyed Quarren rumbled in equally broken Basic.

Vicxa rolled her eyes and took a swig from the liter bottle of lukewarm light beer she’d been slowly working her way through for the better part of the evening. Despite being located leagues beneath the waves, Celeste had a rather thriving streetlife at its fringes and there was something quite unusual in lounging around the low income housing districts with millions of tonnes of water suspended overhead.

“You should not invoke our Lady’s name in vain, Ryha,” a dour-faced Rodian muttered from the back row. His eyes, even for a people known for glazed metallic sclera, appeared dull and his voice held an unpleasant undertone of malice.

“Go suck a gooberfish, Pitu,” Ryha spat over his shoulder. *“Nobody wants to hear about your new age banthapoodoo.”*

The Rodian looked incensed, but didn't say anything further. Ryha began shuffling the tokens for another hand, when the lights suddenly flickered and died, leaving only a scant illumination of pale green emergency strips glowing in the streets. These occurrences had become more frequent, and this was the third she'd witnessed during the evening so far.

"Hey now, no dealing while it's dark," Vicxa made an attempt at humor, though the string of losses were wearing hers quite thin.

"You don't trust me, sandwalker?" Ryha grinned, his head tendrils flopping as he shifted his weight to a more comfortable squat. *"If you're afraid of the dark, you should not stray to the fringes."*

"Don't think a blackout discriminates," Vicxa replied nonchalantly.

The group around them exchanged some looks and chuckles. It seemed she'd misspoken.

"Of course it does, sandwalker," Ryha replied, dealing a new hand. *"The main conduits keep the rich well lit and warm. We get scraps of everything out here, even power. But it's not so bad, every creature living in the deep knows to avoid the lure of light."* The way the Nautolan grinned at the last bit made her feel rather uneasy.

"Why not get some power generation of your own?" she inquired. *"They use GNK-droids for that in other places."*

Ryha let out a hearty chuckle. *"Sandwalker saving us from our own stupidity, eh? We had units for that, but we're not made of money. When the blackouts started, our GNK-droids began going missing. Stolen by black marketeers to be sold to the more well-to-do. This city's an endless bubble of greed, just waiting to burst!"*

"I see..." she muttered, picking up her tokens and suddenly noticing that a one face was missing from the crowd. *"Where's Pitu?"* she blurted in Basic.

That prompted a round of over-the-shoulder glances and shuffling, even from Ryza. Enough of a distraction to sneak a cheeky glance at the tokens she'd been dealt. *Not good.*

"Must have answered nature's call," the one-eyed Quarren replied.

"Or his Goddess," Ryha scoffed, chipping in the blind to the pool.

Vicxa tapped the cluster of diamond tattoos on her chin thoughtfully, before tossing her tokens into the pool and deftly rising to her feet. He couldn't have gotten far, and she had a sinking suspicion.

"Thank you for fleecing me, Ryha," she declared with a curt nod. *"I am far wiser to the ways of the Trident."*

The Nautolan's expression was one of disappointment, but it soon switched back to a smarmy grin. *"Anytime, sandwalker. Come back when you have more flan for the Spearfisher!"*

She chose not to reply as she hastily gathered her meager belongings, shucked a sizzling shellfish off the small coal burner next to them, and dashed off after the enigmatic Rodian cultist.

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Pitu had almost gotten away. Almost. The Rodian had donned a mask of sorts, obscuring his features from casual observers, and wrapped himself in a long traveling cloak that hid the rest. Nevertheless, he couldn't mask the particular olfactory trail that someone who'd not felt the gentle caress of soap in weeks left in their wake, and though it sent shivers of revulsion down her spine, let Vicxa catch up with her nose alone.

The Rodian travelled surprisingly quickly, speaking of purpose to his departure as he caught transit after transit with seemingly practiced ease, until finding himself in the cultural districts of Celeste and near the Museum of Natural History. Stepping off the public speeder, Vicxa pressed herself behind a street counter as the man suddenly turned around with a paranoid glare, but managed to stay clear of his vision.

He ventured down a side alley and cut across the courtyard towards the Museum, where a handful of similarly robed individuals were clustered in the otherwise vacant square. Peering from the shadows, Vicxa observed the group exchange a few muted greetings, before letting Pitu pass. Judging by the poorly concealed outlines of blaster rifles underneath their cloaks, she gathered her presence might not be equally appreciated.

Shooting her way in was not an option. Not least because she had no blaster to hand, but there also might not be a need to since the daunting bulk of the museum seemed to hint at no shortage of alternative means of entry. Especially from above, where the building's roof was lined with statues and frescoes that offered convenient handholds for any enterprising urban mountaineer.

Giving the guard squad up front a wide berth, Vicxa snuck from shadow to shadow, until making her way to the far side of the museum, where it was separated from the next building by only a narrow maintenance corridor. Propping her back against one wall and her feet against the other, she slowly and arduously shuffled up the vertical surface until her hand could reach the lip of the roof overhang. Daring a moment's vertigo, she let her feet slip off the opposite wall, leaving her dangling for a moment by her fingers alone until she could scramble up to the museum roof.

Her smug grin disappeared almost immediately when she found herself staring at a masked, cloaked individual brandishing a flare-nosed blaster rifle at her.

"Hey you!" the woman blurted. "You shouldn't be here!"

Vicxa chose to give a nonverbal retort, her sweeping kick knocking the blaster aside before she could press the trigger. Pressing her advantage, she threw herself at the shocked cultist,

pressing her down onto her back with sheer momentum, and pinning her cybernetic forearm against her throat. The woman coughed and sputtered, struggling for breath and trying to knock her off, but the Mirialan wouldn't budge and within a few hectic moments her struggles ceased as unconsciousness claimed her.

Panting hard, Vicxa rolled off of her and picked up the discarded blaster, hoping to arm herself against future encounters. When she inspected the weapon closer, however, her brow furrowed even further. An ion blaster was a peculiar choice for a self-protection weapon, let alone for a perimeter guard. Then again, ion blasters would be easier to slip past Celeste's strict blaster control.

It was of no use to her, so she left it where it lay, but that was not the only useful thing the woman had upon her person. Sneaking around in plain sight seemed like a far surer bet than risking her red-green visage being spotted among the sea of masked brown. A few short moments and unlocked roof door later, she found herself inside and cursing the masks' previous owner for their choice in supper. Had nobody down here heard of breath mints?

The museum's top floors were mostly dusty storage, exactly the sort of place she loathed. Countless crates of exceedingly wonderful items locked away from sight and kept hoarded by academics drier than the papers they wrote. None appreciating the wonderful uniqueness of the artifacts themselves. Shaking her head, she pressed on into the main hall that dominated the museum proper. Yet even before she'd gotten that far, she could already pick up ominous sounds that reminded her of some rather harrowing moments in Atolli's temples.

Muted chanting formed a dreary background, against which the droning hum of power circuits added a slow heartbeat, the whole occasionally punctuated by a reverberating *'gong'*. Her demeanor soured the further she explored, lips pressing to a line behind her mask when she reached a railing and peered under it at the procession of hooded cultists shuffling towards the exhibition halls.

There were many. Far too many. And she was quite positive they'd not paid admission. What's more, it seemed they had been in here for quite a while, judging by the fact that snaking coils of heavy duty power conduits had been drawn out between the various halls and exhibition wings, the trunk of the arrangement seemingly leading into the main exhibit chamber where a convenient poster informed her about the presence of a mummified Selenian priest.

"Of bloody course," Vix muttered under her breath.

The chanting began anew as the procession of cultists shuffled on to pay their respects to the mummy, but her gaze lingered on the conduits. She couldn't hope to stop this alone. Even last time, it had been thanks to the Twi'lek and the Kaminoan, plus a backpack full of explosives. With little more than her wits and a knife to her name, and bereft of surprisingly competent allies, the best she could do was delay the cultists until help arrived.

With everyone gathered in one place, she reasoned, they probably had left only a token presence to guard wherever the other end of those power conduits was. And her knife might be small, but it was still capable of making a mess of an electrical cabinet, when thrown across live wires. With something of a plan in mind, she made her way to the ground floor and down into the basement levels, stepping around the thick bundles of cables as she went.

The further down she got, the fainter the droning chants grew, though ominously the 'gonging' grew ever louder. The reason for this became clear when she arrived at a basement level restoration floor which was packed *uncomfortably* full of GNK-droids, all hooked up to the power leads.

"You've got to be kidding me."

There were, even at a conservative estimate, at least a hundred or more droids shuffling together and letting out forlorn 'gonks' every now and then. Power hissed and sparked in the conduits, the sheer amount of current fed through them making the Mirialan's teeth itch and hair begin to stand on end. It seemed that she wasn't the only one being affected, however, as even as she watched a GNK-unit let out its final groan, the lights sputtering out from its photoreceptors before keeling over with a dull thunk. The droids around it let out another 'gonk' in mourning, but could do little to aid their fallen comrade.

Vicxa had no real love for machines or material possessions, but even so, this treatment didn't seem exactly humane. Even as she weighed her options on how to proceed, however, a door at the far end of the restoration floor opened to let a pair of cultists herd another bunch of mismatched GNK-units that seemed to have been *picked off the streets*.

Oh.

The chips began falling into place, and her ire towards the cultists just took on a more personal flavor. Something told her she wouldn't have much time, but perhaps it would be enough to subdue the guards and detach the GNKs. Pulling out her curved knife from its sheath, she looped the finger ring around her index finger and sighed. It was unavoidable, lest the city be thrown into even greater peril.

She let the long folds of the cloak hide her hand and weapon, approaching the two guards with a blurt of broken Nautaloan, intentionally unintelligible. It was a friendly query, and it seemed to work.

The two masked cultists looked up from the droids and towards her, halting their work of hooking up the new batch of droids to replace the ones they'd already drained.

"What was that, sister?" one of them inquired.

"I say, where did we place the hydrocutters?" she replied.

“Hydrocutters? We didn’t see any—*uuurgh!*”

The first cut was swift and precise, the knife darting out from the folds of her cloak and finding the gap between mask and collarbone. The cold steel tore through sinew and flesh in a spray of crimson, leaving the cultist clutching at his throat as the front of his brown robes dyed red.

The other stumbled backwards, scared for his life. He reached for a crowbar lying atop a crate, but his wild swing was easy to duck under. Vicxa slammed the butt of her knife into the man’s face, cracking the mask from forehead to chin and sending him into down for the count. As he crashed against the floor and a faint pool of red began oozing out underneath him, she knew she wouldn’t have to worry about him getting up anytime soon.

A chorus of ‘gonk’ almost gave her a heart attack, the droids shuffling nervously in place, yet seemingly unable to flee. Her eyes narrowing, Vicxa began spotting the reason why as she picked out restraining bolts on the droids to keep them docile. She was only scantily aware of their method of operation, but what little she knew left a sour taste in her mouth. Though droids had no *true* consciousness, it still felt like an awfully draconian method of control to restrain what passed for their ‘free will’.

In a fit of justice, she reached for the closest GNK-droid, a colorfully beaten up unit that, judging by the pink unicorn scribbled in its side in crayon, some kid had used as an artistic outlet. The droid let out a muted *gonk*, but could not shuffle far. Vicxa grabbed the restraining bolt and slid the tip of her knife between it and the droid. With a grunt of effort and sharp twist that surely didn’t do the blade any favours, the puck detached like a limpet off a rock and clattered onto the floor.

The entire restoration floor was suddenly drowned in silence.

“There, you’re free now,” Vix stated and patted the droid on the side.

“Gonk?”

“Yeah, free. You know, to get away from here.”

“Gonk?”

Vicxa looked around at the sea of droids and sighed.

“I’ll try, but I don’t know if I can get them all. I should find a way to just cut the cables.”

“Gonk! Gonk!”

“Oh,” she paused to clear her throat, “well good that you mentioned before I did that.”

She considered prying another bolt off the next droid with her knife, but didn't like the way it had made the blade creak in her hand. Her gaze fell upon the discarded crowbar and her lips curled upward. *Perfect.*

A carefully aimed overhead swing later, a second GNK-droid was freed, and then a third, and fourth. Within short order, she'd dismantled the bolts off the replacement GNK units, but getting through all of them would be too slow. Much too slow.

"Hey, you know you could help me," Vicxa said to the colorful unit she'd first freed.

"Gonk?"

"These bolts aren't terribly sturdy, it seems, and you seem pretty sturdily built. So... you know?" She formed two fists and bumped them together. "Smash."

The droid took a moment to compute, but then its lights flared bright with realization, chorused by happy gonks. Immediately, it turned around and shuffled towards its closest enslaved brother, picking up as much speed as GNK-unit was able, and smashed its body against it, cracking the restraining bolt between their bulks like a sea slug.

The chorus of excited gonks was terrifying to behold.

"I'll leave you to it, then," Vicxa stated as the other droids followed suit, eager to vacate the premises as the walking nuclear reactors turned the restoration floor into a bumper-skiff park.

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Things had escalated.

By the time she'd made her way back to the upper levels, the chanting had reached an oppressive fever pitch and though the power from the cables was getting weaker, this did not seem to bother anyone. The reason was soon made clear when Vicxa snuck into the main exhibition room along a narrow ceiling-level maintenance catway. The whole place was rigged with massive capacitor banks, bristling with accumulated energy. Judging by the amount of power even a single GNK-droid was able to pump out, the Mirialan almost wet her trousers when a zap of static lanced from the catwalk to her still fleshy hand. The cult was playing with powers beyond their comprehension, in more ways than one.

The sarcophagus of the mummified priest lay in sight, a makeshift contraption erected around it that fed directly from the capacitors and whose purpose was fairly obvious from past experience with the reanimating shadow beasts from Atolli. She studied the arrangement for any convenient weak spots, but found the whole to be somehow short a key component or two. In fact, the entire procession seemed short a key figure, as none of the cultists seemed even remotely in charge of proceedings.

Clack. Clack. Clack.

The lazy cadence of a brass pole striking the polished stone floor forebode a cataclysm. Emerging through the double doors into the exhibition hall, flanked by a handful of chosen acolytes, came a half-dressed Nautolan male carrying an ancient trident. Its brass form had turned a scaly green by age, matching the skin of the man that held it, and with each step he took, he let the weapon strike the ground to send unnatural echoes reverberating around the halls.

Vicxa hadn't seen him before, but she recalled inscriptions from the temples of Atolli that matched his appearance. But those had been ancient carvings, several centuries old, and the man appeared to be in his prime. Not even the space magics she'd recently learned about were capable of that. Surely he was just a symbolic figurehead.

The Nautolan reached the sarcophagus and turned towards the throng of hooded cultists.

"My children," his voice boomed like breaking waves. "I bring you word from Lady Alla'su! She is pleased with your toil and will reveal herself to you all, soon."

There was a chorus of applause and adoration, cut into deathly silence by a single gesture.

"But until she does, Lady Alla'su expects more. She *demands* more. She brought me back by her own power alone, and she gave it upon me to ensure her faithful ministers are ready to conduct the Penultimate Consummation when the time is right. And you, dear faithful, shall witness the first of her priesthood return to guide you into her waiting arms."

None of that sounded particularly reassuring to the Mirialan's ears and when the Nautolan raised his trident above his head, the fervorous cheer that rose from the gathered cultists sent shivers down her spine. She watched with growing trepidation as he brought the tri-pronged weapon about and slotted it into the machine around the sarcophagus. *The missing piece.*

She knew she had but moments to act, and a hasty glance at a coil of cabling lying neatly by the catwalk's side gave rise to a foolhardy and desperate idea. Good thing few words better described her. Grabbing the rubberized cabling, she coiled a loop around her forearm and made sure the other end was attached somewhere firm enough to hold her weight. Then, she jumped.

"Witness, the rebirth of the Old Ways!" the Nautolan boomed to the enraptured crowd, just as a streak of green swung in from the side and slammed both feet into his shoulders. The man was sent flying into the sea of brown cloaks amidst an uproar of gasps, but Vicxa paid them no mind. Even as the machine crackled to life, she foolhardily reached out to grab the trident and yanked it out of its socket.

The machine's growing humm reached a frantic beehive pitch, before a crackling bolt of electricity coursed from its conduits and enveloped the contraption and the sarcophagus in a brilliant display of raw power.

It was over in a heartbeat. Every single strand of hair on her body stood on end, but she wasn't dead. The trident was still clutched in her hand, now thrumming with a resonance that didn't feel *right*. Around her, the sea of cultists slowly recovered, cowering in shock and confusion at what had just transpired. Then the Nautolan rose to his feet and singled out the Mirialan thief still dangling off her makeshift rope with a single, accusing digit.

"Get her! Get her now!" he roared. "And bring me back my Trident!"

The booming command galvanized the cultists into action, the closest scrambling to grab at her, while others fumbled to bring their ion blasters to bear. She swung the trident around, beating back the most fanatical and giving pause to those behind as she scrambled to find a way to escape. Her options were limited and she'd always been a vertical thinker, and so the only real way to safety was up.

Climbing with her cybernetic firmly clamped around the cable, her feet clutching the same for dear life, while her fleshy hand brandished the ceremonial weapon in wide, sweeping arcs to dissuade her pursuers, she was making good headway when the cultists finally got their blasters out. The first volley was inaccurate, but did make her flinch. In the heat of the moment, she'd forgotten they were merely ion weapons, but the adrenaline helped her speed.

The lip of the catwalk was almost within reach when a bolt struck her and she felt her back muscles clench uncomfortably from the tingling shock. It was unpleasant, but little more than that. Shrugging it off as best she could, she made to swing the trident onto the catwalk when suddenly her grip on the cable slackened and she felt herself crane backwards against her own volition.

Bright blue ion sparks danced across the red metal of her cybernetic arm, now slackened and unresponsive.

"Oh *sithspit*."

Gravity asserted its dominance once again, though luckily the cultists made for a softer cushion than the polished stone floor. Trying to scramble away while the world still spun around, she did not get far before too many arms caught hold and brought her to heel, pinning her down and whisking the trident away from her grasp.

"Let me go!" she hissed, though she knew voicing such a demand was as useful as telling the planet to cease its rotation.

The hands pinning her down clamped down harder, keeping her in place while the cultists hurriedly reunited their leader with his weapon. The Nautolan let out a satisfied sigh when his fingers wrapped around its brass shaft, as if breathing free once more, before turning his vengeful glare towards the source of the ritual's failure.

"You," he hissed, like sand across stone. "Will make a fine sacrifice to Lady Alla'su. What better way to greet welcome the ancient ways." He stepped forward and raised the trident high.

GONK!

The exhibit room shuddered from the sheer mechanical sound of a hundred GNK-droids charging towards the cultists. Energized by vengeance in their burning fusion hearts, the boxy brigade shuffled along in a terrifying torrent that broke into the cultists' rear and mauled the hapless fanatics under their tread. Alone, a GNK-droid would pose no danger, but in such numbers, they were a force of nature.

Screams of panic and pain filled the air amidst the droning bellows of 'gonk'. Frail organic bodies met blunt durasteel chassis, while damp fanaticism duelled fiery logic in an unlikeliest of melees. Amidst all the chaos, Vicxa could sense the grips on her captors slacken, their attentions turning to their own survival, and in that moment she made her move. Unlocking the latches on her prosthetic, she left the arm behind, rolling to the side and yanking free her other arm from a cultist's grasp. Their cries of alarm were too slow, as she unsheathed her knife and slashed wildly at the ones holding her legs, driving them back with deep lacerations.

Their cries of pain, or perhaps the scent of fresh blood, roused the Nautolan to return his attention to the unwilling sacrifice just in time to parry her wicked knife. The sheer ferocity of her unexpected assault force him back a pace, but the element of surprise was highly perishable and the Nautolan had size and reach on his side.

"You insolent urchin!" he roared, swiping the trident around and catching the Mirialan in the jaw with the pommel. Bloody spittle sprayed in an arc, but she'd had worse. A foolhardy cultist tried to nab her while she was dazed, but her hand moved like clockwork. Before he knew what had happened, the small curved knife had stabbed and slashed his midriff into wet ribbons that bloated his robes.

Even before the man had sunk to his knees, Vicxa was already moving, ducking and weaving past would-be foes armed with truncheons and other makeshift weapons, while trying to make her way towards the still-charged capacitor banks.

The Nautolan roared in frustration as he watched the insufferable eel slip away once more, turning his attention instead to the more pressing matter of the metallic menaces pulverizing his supporters. Hefting the trident aloft, he pointed it at the droids while muttering ancient words in a language not spoken for centuries. The humming trident reverberated in tune with his ominous syllables until a spark of lightning suddenly manifested between its prongs.

A bolt of cascading power struck the GNK-droids, leaping hungrily from droid to droid like a prowling wolf. The hardened droids shuddered, resisting the impact far better than most would, but ultimately began succumbing to the shock. The harried cultists, seeing their chance, managed to level their ion blasters anew and add their fire to the fight. Between the two-pronged attack, the industrial automata faltered, and failsafes engaged to see them shut down in short order.

Vicxa caught all of this from the corner of her eye, but couldn't spare a thought for their safety. Not now. Not when she was so close. Angry yells hounded her, blunt cudgels and rusty daggers screaming for her blood, the cultists by now worked up into a frenzy. The masked murderers closed in from every angle, and her curved Claw had its work cut out. Drenched in blood, most of it not hers, Vicxa got within reach of the capacitors.

The Nautolan seemed to realize the danger, and screamed for her to be stopped, but it was too late. Flipping her bloodied knife around to hold it by the blade, she took aim at the fragile insulator disks and threw, leaping inside a coil of heavy cabling the same instant the knife left her fingertips.

The museum was enveloped in white lightning, the electrical cacophony roaring louder than thunder and rending the very air asunder with the power of its discharge.

Everything smelled of ozone. Then of acrid smoke. Then of charred meat. Vicxa realized she was burning, the flash fires having immolated the exposed folds of her disguise. Discarding the burnt robes with the haste an arachnophobic jettisoned a spider, she emerged from her hideout in hideous shape, but alive.

The same could not be said for the cultists, whose burning corpses littered the exhibition hall. Of the Nautolan or his trident, there was no trace. The boxy bodies of the GNK-droids began to slowly stir as reanimation protocols booted up and the last of the capacitive discharge was grounded. Many had managed to survive, though most had not.

Nevertheless, their 'gonks' were triumphant.

Vicxa crouched down to pick up her arm. It would require some extensive maintenance to fix, and she'd just lost most of her flan to a local fleecer. "Bloody brilliant," she muttered, even as one of the GNK-droids shuffled over and paused at a respectful distance to observe. When she turned around, she recognized the now-sooted unicorn crayoned to its side, and smiled.

"Gonk," it greeted.

"I'm glad you're alive too," she chuckled, breaking into a hacking cough as the acrid smoke got the better of her.

“Gonk?”

“No, no, I’ll be fine. Just need some clean air.”

“Gonk-gonk.” The droid turned around and began shuffling away, but bumped into the stand still somehow holding up the dead priest’s sarcophagus. It was the final nail in that coffin, as the stand crumbled under the sarcophagus’ weight, it too shattering as it met the unyielding floor below.

Mummified dust spilled out from the cracked coffin, ensuring that particular priest had given their last sermon for good. Yet something shining caught the Mirialan’s keen eye amidst the remains. She brushed aside the fine coating, exposing a golden medallion finely inlaid with mother of pearl and precious stones in the shape of a trident.

She gave a dry huff, and pocketed the item, hoping it might earn her enough to fix her arm, and maybe buy another bottle of light beer. She’d more than earned it, and perhaps the GNK-droid would get a can of oil as well.