

“Hey, get back here!”

These words were familiar to Vicxa Varis from a hundred times before, their sting often the inevitable consequence of a sloppy sleight of hand or a more attentive than usual stallkeep who noticed her pilfering five-finger discount a bit too quickly. Thankfully, experience had also taught her the correct response to hearing them—run.

Like a greased blaster bolt, the small Mirialan darted off into the crowd of podracing enthusiasts, a still-hot sliver of sweetmeat in her cybernetic hand, while the angered yells sounded behind her. The shopkeep, a Togruta who'd probably hunted down the animals he sold himself, would not give up so easily, however, and sat off in pursuit of the fleeing thief. A quick glance over her shoulder inform her of as much as she heard a few surprised yelps and gasps as bystanders were shoved aside by the vengeful vendor.

“*Oh kark,*” Vicxa thought aloud. They usually weren't this persistent.

The sun was high overhead and the streets choked with people, clouds of dust kicking up as the mass of bystanders ebbed and flowed in the packed streets like a living organism. Trying to slip through in those clogged arteries, Vicxa moved like a virus, leaping, bounding and sliding, over, under and past all obstacles that presented themselves while her red painted metal hand still clutched her ill-gotten gains.

Though the sights and hurdles all emerged in an endless and bewildering pop-up gallery, she never missed a beat. This was her element, chasing that single stream of light that shone past all the traps and closing walls. She'd honed this craft to perfection and it had saved her life countless times when exploring the lost temples of the galaxy.

The merchant seemed to get stuck when a particularly burly Chiss happened in his path, the fierce hunter recognizing the danger of trying to shove such a beast aside in his pursuit. Smiling smugly, Vix took a sharp left down an alley that seemed less packed with people and slowed to a jog, raising her hood and trying to vanish into the crowd.

It was truly amazing how possessive people could be to something so basic as food, she reckoned as she bit into the sweetmeat. After all, were not all things entitled to life? And the Togruta had a stand full of such treats, surely he wouldn't mind if a sliver happened to find its way into her belly.

Barely had her tongue tasted sweet victory when a heavy hand landed on her shoulder, sharp digits seeking to dig into it by how hard they were squeezing.

“Stop right there, thief!” a voice growled, but it was a new one. “Tobi will be here any moment and he'll decide what we'll do with a stealing runt like you...”

Vix glanced over her shoulder and met the gaze of an ill-tempered Human wearing something approximating a security guard's garb. Well, at least he had the tag 'security' crookedly attached to a set of otherwise quite mundane coveralls.

"I'd really just prefer not to," she retorted. "He's got plenty, and others are probably ransacking his wares even now."

Her defence might have made sense, but she recognized the hint of sadistic glee in the Human's eye. He did not care for justice, he just liked the morsel of authority his badge offered him, and what it let him do to others. That changed her game plan.

"Maybe Tobi's gonna make a batch of special jerky just for me," he chuckled. "Though I don't think there's much meat on a little runt like you..."

*Yeesh, this guy's morbid*, Vicxa paled, her off-hand flitting within the folds of her poncho and grasping the handle of her knife. Something about the tone the man had spoken those words made her feel less inclined to savor her stolen treat and without a further thought, she tossed it into his face. As a distraction, it was pitiful, but as obfuscation it was sufficient. Before he'd swiped the meat off his face, she'd drawn her curved knife and sliced across his forearm, the razor edge biting through his coverall and drawing blood.

His grip loosened even as a bellowing cry escaped his lips, Vicxa turning tail and running without looking back. Up, over a crate, left, duck under a droid, slide, clamber over a barrel, bounce off the wall and through the closing door—and she was out of the streets. Panting, she looked around the small room she'd entered and let out a startled gasp, suddenly face-to-face with a man in racing leathers.

"Who the *frak*—?" He did not get any further before Vicxa had dropped down and swiped his legs from underneath him, a resounding *clank* issuing from his helmet as it met the hard floor. He seemed knocked out in an instant.

Ignoring the fact she might have given him a concussion, she frantically searched for a place to hide, but found none. Precious seconds slipped past and she could *hear* the thumping footsteps of the gastronomically maligned Human approaching. Without anyplace else to go, she headed through the only other door and emerged into a hangar dominated by a sizable podracer and a handful of expectant pit crew.

"Hey, you're not supposed to be here. Pit babes belong on the outside."

*Well, you've come this far*, she thought to herself, hearing the door violently open behind her as the brute of a Human barged into the previous room.

"Sorry boys, but I'll be your pilot for today. Poor ol', uh," she squinted to read the name off the racer's side, "Boglin, *oooh, what an unfortunate name*, wasn't feeling really well, so..." She

flashed her most disarming smile, hoping to confuse the crew for a moment before bursting towards the racer, vaulting off a pit droid's head and clambering into the cockpit.

"S-she's stealing the pod!" someone shouted, but Vicxa was beyond caring. The craft was already idling and it didn't take a genius to pull the throttle lever.

The engines whined as thrust-reversers kicked in, the pod suddenly lurching backwards and threatened to run over the maintenance crew. Vicxa yelped in shock, the sudden acceleration throwing her end-over-end into the cockpit with her head stuck in the footwell, and loosening her grip on the throttle.

*Ok, maybe some rocket science required.*

She swiftly squirmed herself the right way up, before *pushing* the throttle levers just as the Human emerged into the hangar. The backwash from a pair of tertiary-grade pod racing ion engines wreaked havoc within the hangar, the Human taking the full force of the impact upon himself as he stood behind one of the exhausts. Like a comically sized leaf, he was blown backwards and straight into the unsuspecting arms of Tobi, the admirably persistent merchant who'd refused to give up the chase.

In a blast of acceleration, the pod racer was gone—along with its terrified pilot who might have just peed a little.

Sunlight blasted into her eyes as she emerged from the shade of the hangars onto the bare track. A cacophony of noise, a mixture of cheering crowds and roaring pod engines, assaulted her ears and it was only by sheer luck that she did not run a traffic controller over as they wildly gestured at her to stop with a pair of glowing rods in their hands.

The controls still utterly unfamiliar to her, Vicxa managed to veer left instead, passing perilously close to the controller as she unwittingly guided the roaring beast out of the hangar strip and onto the race track. A constellation of other pods were already lined up for the next start and from her rearview mirror Vix was able to see the controller yelling into their comms, probably to stop the race.

It was too late.

The announcer counted down, their voice booming from overhead speakers, and the lights turned green. With a thunderclap roar, the racers took off, massive engines propelling their pilots down the track with speeds beyond ludicrous. Vicxa watched their departure with a mix of awe and trepidation, before aligning her charge with their exhausts and punching the throttles forward.

In a terrifying heartbeat she was gone.

The world had turned into a smear. Like a jump to lightspeed, every dot of light or texture had been drawn out into elongated lines that stretched from horizon to periphery. Everything was racing past her so fast she had no idea what she was missing, though she was instinctively glad she had. Raw adrenaline coursed through her veins, her body moving with the reactions of a caffed-up ferret as she fought the controls to preserve her own life.

The track opened with a mercifully wide expanse, and the other racers were leagues ahead of her, but even traversing the barely obstructed flats was testing her reactions to their limits. Minute adjustments to just keep her on course and not spin wildly into the walls was proving enough of a challenge and for the first time in ages she felt something that might have been regret for her actions.

The moment passed, swallowed by the sensation of utter dread as a sea of stalagmites rose up from the sands. Small at first, barely worth dodging at her skimming altitude, they quickly grew into massive pillars that emerged like temple columns out of the barren sands. Her eyes now darted from obstacle to obstacle, screaming panic at her at every moment. Her hands worked at the edges of her limits, shaking with adrenaline as she fought to keep her pod from crashing.

Sparks flew off the side of her starboard engine as it glanced off a stalagmite, the wobble almost up-ending her entire racer as the terrified Mirialan screamed her lungs out at the controls. The forest of stone mercifully ended, but new obstacles loomed ahead, the shaking treasure huntress feeling at the end of her tether. This was suicidal, even for her. She should just give up and end the race. Maybe she'd be able to escape before the authorities...

Something caught her eye. A ray of light at the far end of the upcoming maze of ancient bones, some krayt dragon graveyard if her memory of the track served. It was familiar, or at least it *felt* so. Trusting her instincts, as they had not failed her yet, she took the last respite before diving into the next obstacle course to steady her breath and relax her shoulders. This would have to be pure skill.

The first jutting bone almost gouged the racer in twain, the bleached spear of a rib missing the control cables by centimeters and ripping off the port side airbrake. Vicxa fought her terror and continued on, her gaze focused solely on that sliver of light she could make out ahead. Her hands, now more familiar with the controls, moved almost on their own as she kept adjusting her course, eyes nailed on the light and focus entirely on reaching it.

The world melted into a bizarre amalgam of sound and sensation, the roar of the wind blasting past her head, the scream of the ion after burners, the jittering of the repulsors over uneven ground and the swaying twitches of her own course corrections all became a singular experience that stretched on to infinity. She was racing ahead, heedless of speed or obstacles. Up, down, left, right, she veered and ducked, accelerated and swerved, banking hard with airbrakes at their limits or hammering the throttles with arms outstretched. All in pursuit of that sliver of light. It was all so *familiar*

As the speeder hurtled past the wreckage of another contestant who'd misjudged the gap between two curving rock formations, the realization hit her. Chasing things through perilous obstacle courses? Defying death at a hair's breadth? Letting her instincts guide her to the best way across vast arrays of danger and death? She *lived* for that.

Chuckling jubilantly, she hammered the throttles and raced on. Oh, she was in it to win it now!

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The cheering crowds greeted the victors on the podium, their worn pod racers idling in the pitstop lane by the time Vicxa made it to the finish line. Last place, among those who'd actually made it. It stung her pride, but only a little. She had finished the race and she was still alive. The thrill had been unlike any other and she knew this would be a singular experience for her. No way would she ever get to pilot a pod racer ever again—at least not if the handful of gruff looking security approaching her had anything to say about it.

Deciding to make herself scarce, Vicxa vacated the pod and slipped into the bustling chaos of the maintenance pits under the growling barks of angry security. Maybe she'd seen enough of this planet for a while, she reckoned as she clambered up a rickety support onto the hangar roofs. As a blaster stun bolt passed her head, she got her answer. Yes, she'd definitely outworn her welcome—as usual.