

The sun rarely shone on Dromund Kaas. Wrapped in dark clouds like a silken veil over rotting meat, Vicxa Varis was not sure whether the clouds were to protect the world from the light, or the light from the world. Darkness permeated everywhere she looked. A cold, unnatural darkness that did little to hide the vulnerable, yet obscured the dangerous and ruthless.

Streaks of water ran along the *Élan's* bulbous cockpit as it breached the layer of dark cumulus, the capsule shaped pod of a craft gently lowering itself towards the source of the distress beacon. It lay far from Kaas' major cities, within the impermeable jungles that had swallowed millennia of dark constructs—one of which had recently been unearthed by a colleague of hers.

Well, colleague might have been a strong word, but the man had on occasion been quite helpful and the Mirialan treasure huntress felt she owed him. The signal pings grew more pressing as her craft closed the distance with the half-buried temple, its ominous shape looming through the jungle canopy that had been rent open by some foul energies. Whatever he'd found in there, it was probably not benign.

The small shuttle touched down smartly in the side of the clearing, its repulsors humming as it settled slightly off-balance when the insectoid landing legs sunk into the soft ground. The first waft of air was pungent with rot and decay, the jungle that had seemed so flourishing from above now baring its putrid state.

Vicxa pulled a loose scarf over her mouth in a vain attempt to mitigate the smell and sat off towards the temple doorway, pale digsite lumens casting a sterile glow upon the black basalt that seemed to devour it all. Discarded tools and a crate of explosives betrayed their means of entry, if the rough edges of the shattered slab hadn't done so already. She remembered a time when he'd have chastised her for using such violent tactics to gain entry to a site of historical value. So much had changed since then.

"Hello? Dr.Nanov? Anyone?" Vicxa shouted into the dark, her voice swallowed by the sheer volume of the foreboding temple. Up above, the humid air grew more pressing, thunder rumbling in the distance. It was a malicious sound, primordially sentient, and it made the Mirialan's skin crawl.

"*Karabast...*" she muttered to herself as she fished out a stablight from her vest pocket and headed deeper inside. She'd had to have some words with Nanov when she found her. He'd always been eccentric in his methods, but now he was getting reckless. She'd made the mistake of assuming a Sith temple as easy to explore as a Jedi one. The red digits of her left hand glinted in the artificial light. She wouldn't make that mistake a second time.

Blaster pistol in hand, Vicxa made her way ever deeper inside the temple, its dark corridors lined with the mute images of long-dead Sith. Or at least she hoped they were.

Even in her limited experience, she'd found the Sith in particular had a bad habit of clinging to life beyond all reason.

The air smelled of a tomb, the cloying stench of death and vile corruption stifling her breath and feeding her mounting anxiety of something abhorrent lurking just beyond the pale beam of her stablight. Her breaths were short and shallow by now, eyes darting at half-heard sounds, distant creaks, or the muffled echoes of her own passing. She knew she was letting the place get the better of her, but that knowledge did little to reassure her racing heart.

"Doc? You in he—?" She swallowed her words as a definite, wet snarl sounded seemingly just beyond the next bend. Far too close for comfort, and most assuredly not a figment of her imagination. The light winked out of existence as she instinctively pressed herself into a small recess in the wall, crunching dessicated bones under her weight.

A hot, heavy breath stirred the silence of the tomb. Ponderous steps brazenly stalking forward as something looming emerged from beyond the corner and made its way up the narrow corridor she was hiding in. In the near total darkness, making anything out of the creature was almost impossible, but by its sheer presence and bulk, she reckoned it had at least four legs and stood as tall as her, if not more.

The muzzle of her blaster pistol slowly rotated along her thigh, aligning itself towards the sound of the ponderous breathing. Her heart was thrumming in her ears, the mummified remains of a forgotten Sith cradling her in their cold embrace as she tried to make herself as small as possible and not be sensed by the creature by now a scant meter from her.

It paused, sniffing the air and letting out a low, guttural snarl. It was hungry. Unnaturally so, but for now its prey remained elusive. After a moment that in Vicxa's mind seemed to race onto eternity, it turned its head away and padded off into the dark.

It took her long moments to stop her heart from obscuring her other senses, its pounding so loud the beast had long since vanished by the time she regained her hearing and realized it truly was gone. Creeping out of the alcove, Vicxa sat off even more cautious than before, suddenly determined to either find Dr. Nanov quickly, or not at all.

Fate, it seemed, had decreed on the former.

Vicxa found the Nautolan archaeologist in a vast chamber that glowed with a pallid green light. The basalt carvings no longer resembled people, but symbols that made her eyes sting to look upon. Vast obelisks grew from the ceiling, forbidden texts writhing upon their surface whenever she averted her gaze. The doctor had made his way onto a podium at the center of the chamber, his bronzed eyes studying a Sith artifact that

glowed and pulsed with the same sickly energy that seemed to empower the entire temple. His robes were tattered and his flesh marred by wounds that should have caused him more hindrance than they seemed, the same energy slowly flowing from the artifact into him and imbuing his shape with the green glow.

"Fascinating," Dr. Nanov sighed breathlessly.

"Hey, uh, doc? We really should get going. Your research team is outside and—" Vicxa began as she approached him cautiously along a flared walkway.

"Is that...Little Vix?" Nanov inquired, the syllables dripping lazily from his tongue. "Ah yes, I remember you. Such a little rebel, such a curious mind."

"Umm, yeah, that's me. Now come on, put that thing down and come with me. I think I've got some bacta on me, but you really need to go see a proper medic." It pained to see him like this, and she had a bad feeling it was going to get even worse.

His reply was a hollow laugh, a distant echo of the warm, endearing chuckle with which he'd responded to any clumsiness on his part or a surprising new revelation.

"Why would I leave? When I've just made my greatest discovery?" He was no longer even looking at her, eyes nailed to the holocron in his hands, seeking to pierce its depths with his gaze alone.

"This place is not just some temple," Vicxa pressed. "It's a tomb!"

"And? You've pillaged through countless tombs before. Why suddenly deny me this achievement?" Nanov hissed, the strong emotional reaction finally managing to snap his attention away from the alluring artifact.

"I..." Vicxa felt wrong footed. Even though he was no longer entirely himself, Nanov had a point, and she was definitely not guiltless either. But she'd come to rescue a friend, so that was what she was going to do. "...am taking you with me, whether you like it or not!" she declared with significantly more bravado than she felt she had to offer.

"How quaint," Nanov scoffed. "Try it, and see how well you fare."

Vicxa growled, biting her tongue as she clicked her S-5 blaster into stun and fired a bolt of energy right at the gloating Nautolan not ten meters from her. She missed. Impossibly, she missed at almost point-blank range.

Nanov chuckled dismissively, stepping out of the shadows to her left. "Things changed since we last met, my dear. The Jedi holocron you left me with, though a fragment, opened my eyes to a whole new world beyond the mundane." He lazily paced towards

her, dodging a second stun bolt with casual ease. "It awakened me to see and hear the voice beyond the cosmos, a voice that only a few ever can. But the teachings were slow and incomplete, they teased me with power, but hid it under more and more senseless metaphor. I needed to find out more, Vicxa, I needed to find this." He held out the glowing holocron in his hand, its light by now suffusing his body with raw Force energy.

"Y-you're not Nanov anymore!" Vicxa spat, backing away from the advancing Nautolan until her foot almost slipped over the lip of the walkway and into the pit below the chamber. "He'd never put some trinket over his family!"

That seemed to give him pause, though only for a moment.

"I suppose you're right, little Vix. He never would have had the strength to tear away those burdens and embrace the true power that lay dormant and forgotten under these stones. Doctor Nanov is dead, I see that now. There is only *Darth* Nanov now..."

A feral snarl snapped their attention towards the doorway, the shock giving Vicxa the moment she needed to sidestep the crazed Nautolan and slip away towards the podium. A second, hungry bellow issued from the darkness and the walkway trembled as the heavy bulk of a shadow beast the size of landspeeder emerged into the unlight. The creature was pure muscle and chitinous armor, its features a twisted amalgam of canine and insectoid. Its slavering maw was lined with rows of bone white teeth, while its eyes were segmented and opaque.

The hideous creature had smelled what it hungered for, and its unblinking gaze was squarely fixed upon the self-declared *Darth* Nanov. A purple tongue slithered from its mouth, wetting its teeth in anticipation of another meal, but the Nautolan had other plans.

Recovering from his shock, his face twisted into a snarl of disdain as he extended his hand, palm splayed, and bellowed with a grunt of effort. Dust and sand skittered across the walkway as the telekinetic shockwave concussed with the beast's cranium, but if Nanov had expected the thing to reel, he was sorely mistaken.

The creature merely swatted aside the strike as if only mildly inconvenienced, and lunged for the Nautolan with its jaws. Nanov let out a terrified yelp as he willed more speed into his limbs to evade his demise, the beast missing its mark but snapping at his heels as he tried to flee for his life from the tomb before it became his as well.

Up on the podium, Vicxa tried to assess the situation as best she could. The fight between the monster and her old acquaintance was devolving rapidly and though he was charged up with whatever energies the holocron contained, it wasn't enough in his untrained hands to make a difference. In his desperation, she watched him drain more

and more, his skin withering before her eyes as he drank the wellspring dry in an effort to save his own skin.

Finally backed into a corner, Nanov slumped against a pillar with nothing but the chasm to either side. The beast knew it had him, but advanced cautiously nonetheless. It would not let this moment go amiss.

Seeing an opportunity, Vicxa hurriedly cycled her blaster's ascension gun and tried to stomach the headache of aiming at the ceiling obelisks. "Just let go, Nanov! I know you're in there somewhere! Just let go of that frakking cube and we can still get out of here!"

"No. No! I don't need your help! I don't need anyone's help! I have me, and raw power! Unfettered, cosmic power!" the Nautolan cried, stabbing his hand out at the beast and unleashing tongues of iridescent lightning. The attack struck the beast square upon its muzzle, the sting of the impact making it reel. But the gloating chuckle of the pilfered Sith ended abruptly as the creature opened its yawning maw and ate. The lightning, purchased at such cost to his mortal frame, disappeared down its gluttonous maw in an instant, threatening to suck out what strength he had left if he did not cut the connection at its source.

Death staring him squarely in the eyes, Nanov whimpered—and let the holocron slip from his fingers.

The grapnel shot out with a sharp report of compressed air, striking into the black basalt of the inverted obelisk and trailing a filament wire. At its other end, Vicxa palmed a folded stack of tape, before leaping off the podium and swinging towards the shadow beast.

Freshly fed, it snapped its maw in appreciation, a morsel to satiate its unending hunger for more Force energy. That moment of complacency was all the reckless Mirialan needed. Her feet slammed into the side of the beast, kicking hard into a plate of dark chitin covering its flank. The beast lurched, a hind paw slipping over the precipice of the chasm, but its claws found purchase as it regained its unsteady footing.

"T-that was your brilliant plan?" Nanov jeered, incredulous as he realized he'd gambled his life on insufficient momentum.

"No," Vicxa replied, slapping the creature's side. "This was." Vaulting off the beast's armored flank, she leapt as far as she could and withdrew the detonator to her det tape stack. The concussive wave of the explosion rocked her hard, almost tearing the filament, and driving Nanov into a huddled heap. But more than that, it launched the shadow beast off the platform and into the abyss, its howling screams growing swiftly distant before vanishing into the perpetual dark.

Vicxa landed beside the stricken Nautolan, hands shaking. Of course she'd trusted her plan, but...

"Th-thank you..." Dr.Nanov croaked, his bronze eyes having lost much of their sheen but a familiar glint finally returning to them. "I cannot thank you..."

His voice trailed away as the holocron pulsed behind her, lying discarded upon the floor. He leaned towards it, crawling like an infant though he could barely move his limbs at all. Vicxa turned around and—for the briefest of moments—considered snatching it up before he could have it. After all, had she not just won the right to its power?

A swift kick sent the object sailing over the precipice, Nanov almost crying as he lurched feebly after it, but managed only to tangle himself up even more. Its glow was swallowed by the same darkness that permeated everything on Dromund Kaas.

"Come on," Vicxa grunted, offering the Nautolan a hand to help him up. "Nothing you can find inside a temple is worth losing your life over," she said as her bionic glinted in the twilight. "Trust me, I know."