

Evelyn knew that with her unique power, came great responsibility.

Survival was basic out this far on the tundra, in the village simply named “Ohana’da”. Eat, sleep, find small joys in the comfort of the tribe, and repeat. Most of the villagers, living in their small simple homes, had never traveled far enough north to see grass. Generations of evolution had helped weather their skin to the cold. They had learned to hunt and use pelts and furs and to insulate their homes.

Evelyn was not like the rest of them, though. She was not from this planet, or even of the common species that had interbred over the generations. She was an *osina*—an outsider—but fortunately she had a very special gift.

In the privacy of the outhouse, she was able to be herself. She scratched absentmindedly at her natural, scaly skin. Her eyes were dark as ink. As she looked at her reflection in a shard of glass-like ice, she wondered if the people of this village even knew what a Clawdite was. Most in the galaxy didn’t, or had a list of wild misconceptions.

“Eve!!” another delicate voice called. “When you’re done, could you be a dear and gather some fresh water from the lake?”

““kay” she called out in response, exhaling slowly. As easy as breathing, her scaly gray skin morphed into smooth tan lines with angular features, tattoos, and bone piercings common of the members of the tribe.

She pulled the drawstrings of her winter coat tighter, trying to minimize the amount of skin that was exposed to the elements and headed out towards the lake. It was such a routine task that she didn’t even notice that it was darker outside than it perhaps should have been, or normally would have been. She hummed to herself, lost in thought, and found herself alone on the outskirts by the lake.

This was routine. She didn’t even notice that it was quiet. Too quiet. There was no ambiance at all, really. No sound of the wind across the snow drifts or the smell of frozen, clean water.

So she did not see or sense the shadow, a serpentine figure that slithered through shadows cast impossibly out of an absence of light. She did not see the creature, cloaked in inky blackness, sprouting four purple tentacles like legs against a scaled body. Black ichor dripped from rows of fangs, sizzling silently as they made contact with the ice and snow.

Eev did not even have time to shift or scream. The *ro hypa* born *caxqette* unhinged its shadowy

jaws, and let out an ear piercing shriek of delight as it consumed Eve, fangs sinking in, paralyzing, as it swallowed her now limp body and began to digest it at an accelerated rate.

There were no cries or screams, but slowly, the caquette started to change and shift its shape until it slowly started to resemble a human body. It formed two eyes, white and unblinking, and then assumed a few curves of a female humanoid. It looked off into the distance, as if connecting...to the rest of its kind. Knowledge was shared with those that had evolved beyond their primal state into a more...complete being.

"...oh...yes..." its voice hissed, an ethereal, *wrong*-sounding sapient whisper.

<=xXx=>

A crimson Flare-S swoop bike *whooshed* across the snowy terrain. Zig had managed to affix windshields to the front to help cut down the bite of the icy wind, and had made sure the engines were primed and fueled to handle the stark temperatures. She was nice and toasty beneath her full suit of tailored beskar armor, T-visor helmet toggled to infrared to better see through the snow.

Mex was awkwardly wrapped around Zig on the back of the bike. Face full of snow that was thankfully kept out with the help of their goggles. Although wrapped in some well-fitting scavenger's gear, they could still feel the chill of the sub-zero winds in their carapace like a sheet of ice over skin. Mex's antennae were frozen in place, blasted straight back and given rigid form from the bike's speed.

Trying to look straight ahead and get a bearing on where they were, the Verpine shouted their query over the loud wind. "Hi Zig! Where are we going!?"

"Distress beacon from this remote village. Everything suddenly went dark after the rolling power outages across the planet. Usually a village like that wouldn't be affected, but for them to go completely quiet?" she shook her head slightly. Her voice was modulated from beneath her helmet. "I have a bad feeling about this..."

"Ok. I think I agree, it is very cold!" the Verpine shook their head as they missed the point as always, before they continued. "Ok. Maybe they just had a communications failure. Cold weather adversely affects many components of technology." Mex was still new to traveling the galaxy stirring up trouble, still a bit green and naïve...and that's exactly why Zig was guiding them. The two soon arrived at their destination, and just as their bike stopped the weather cleared into an eerie, still, white silence.

Wiping the snow of their goggles, Mex got a good look at the scene around them. The village seemed abandoned, without a sign of an exodus. Building lights were still on, there were no signs of rushed tracks in the snow, and Zig's infra-red was picking up no life-like heat signatures... except... just on the outskirts of the village, there seemed to be signs of something moving. It was hard to tell from the interference bleed from the idle buildings, but it was their only lead thus far.

"Alright Mex, on me. Be ready for anything." Zig said, motioning the Verpine to follow suit. The two tramped through the snow, towards their target until two signatures could be made out of the helmet's display. Eventually their trail led them to a peculiar sight: a lone house with the front door wide open. The two Arconan's stopped in their tracks and glanced at one another for only a moment before a shrill screech was heard from the home. Snapping their heads back towards the building, Zig now noticed that the heat signatures they were tracking had become a *single signature*.

With a high pitched electrical whine, Zig readied her Shockboxing Gloves. Noting the elevation in aggression, Mex was poised to grab their blaster at their hip, but hoped not to use it. The two crept in slowly, and as silently as possible until...

In the kitchen, there *it stood*, alone. It seemed to shift and writhe and left even Mex uneasy at the sight of it.

"Mex! Now!" Zig shouted, causing the creature to turn without enough time to react to a shocking uppercut performed by the Zygerrian. Quickly drawing their blaster, Mex waited just long enough for Zig to get clear before firing on the stunned creature. One shot! Two shots! Three shots! The creature only retaliated when Mex hesitated on a fourth, throwing some knives from a nearby knife block at the Verpine. Mex almost tripped into a dodge behind the dining table, and the creature now had its sights set on Zig.

Going in for another stunning strike, Zig was surprised when the creature had deftly dodged her, only to grasp onto the Zygerrian's hands, holding tight. Activating her shock gauntlets she attempted to taze the monster, but the creature opened its maw wide and crept its fangs towards her for a kill. Mex, finally back on their feet, grabbed a chair of all things, and smashed it off the back of the creature, causing it to flail back with one of its arms and throw the Verpine against the wall. That was all Zig needed to quickly use her now free hand to grab her Beskad and impale it right into the creature's face as it turned back to face its prey.

The monster went limp and hit the ground with a resounding *thud*. Grabbing her weapon from the creature's cranium, Zig looked to Mex. "A chair? Really?" she questioned.

“Hi Zig. I did not want to hit you with my blaster!” Mex responded in a poor attempt at a defense. With a light chuckle, the Zygerian offered the Verpian a hand up before the two stopped to take a look at their quarry.

“There are bound to be more. This one is just a small-fry,” Zig explained from beneath her helmet.

“Small...and fry...like what they do to the nuggets made from the nerfs?”

Zig didn't exactly facepalm, but somehow her entire body beneath her full plate armor sagged slightly in suspiration. “This is one of the **smaller ones.**”

“Ok. And what are these ‘ones’, again?” the Verpine inquired curiously.

“They're called *Caxqettes*. Or that's what the higher ups call them. I just call them shadow-dudes.”

“Cax-kew-wetts,” Mex tried to sound it out. “Ok. Shadow dudes. Does this mean they are all...male?”

Zig shook her head. “Hard to say, since they reproduce unconventionally. But, ‘dude’ is gender neutral.”

“Ok. I understand,” Mex said, even though he did not, in fact, follow.

“Look, just be careful. They adapt to whatever they consume, so they can come in any shape or form. Headshots are usually the most effective, but if you land enough damage they do go down. Try not to let them pin you down, though, or surround you. They tend to move in packs—”

As if on queue, a cacophony of cawing served as the only warning to the sudden wind displacement from the beating of demonic wings. The simple roof that had protected the dwelling was ripped free from the foundation by a pair of gnashing shadow talons, exposing the duo once again to the still but frigid air outside.

Looking up, Zig and Mex saw two winged shadow caxqettes begin to circle.

“Kist,” Zig swore. “Don't worry Mex, I have something for this,” she assured as she tapped something on her wrist to activate her jetpack.

“What can I do?” the Verpine asked quickly.

“Work with what ya’ got,” she replied unhelpfully as she shot up into the air and maneuvered away from the now topless shelter.

Mex watched her go and tilted his head. Then they looked around at ‘what they had’.

<=xXx=>

The armored Zygerrian propelled upward until she was hovering just above the two winged creatures.

*Hah, not so **high** and mighty now are ya nowwww—!*

She wobbled and jerked slightly midair before she stabilized and found her equilibrium. Everyone assumed it was super simple to use a jetpack—just click a button and *nyooooom*. It was obviously a bit more complex than that. Still, she had been practicing maneuvering in her armor just for this kind of occasion.

<=xXx=>

With limited time to think, Mex had to find a way to assist Zig in the fight. Their gaze darted around the room until it rested upon the heating unit on the floor. The Verpine’s antennae shot out as if an idea was hatched, and they scurried downstairs. This building had to have a hot air furnace, it couldn’t be a boiler as the water would freeze every time the heat was off - Mex could use this to their advantage. Finding the anticipated heating unit, the Verpine was quick to work on a solution.

Ripping off the panel with their bare claws, Mex shut down power to the unit and took out the motor. Taking off their Cold Weather Backpack Mex used their scavenger instincts to overclock the motor and jury rig the contraption onto their pack. Grabbing the power cell from their pack’s heating system, Mex had one shot to get up to one of the monsters. Rushing back up stairs, the Verpine hopped up onto the table, and adjusted their posture to prepare for flight.

From below Mex could see Zig was about to get tag teamed up there, the Verpine had precious moments to spare. Adjusting their goggles, Mex hit the switch.

<=xXx=>

The first winged shadow dude tried to claw at her pauldron. The claws raked against the pure beskar without so much as a dent. Just the dull pressure and weight of the attack. Zig rolled off the attack, using the momentum to spin her armored frame into an aerial pirouette. This allowed her to dodge the second shadow dude's strike, and put her in the perfect position to test out her new toy.

Tapping a button on her vambrace, she mimicked the sound of a whistle as a swarm of tiny silver darts launched from her wrist. True to their name, the whistling birds darted through the evening sky like angry space wasps. The closest winged shadow dude tried to bank away from the volley, but the projectiles followed as if drawn by a powerful magnet. The whistling birds connected and detonated into a rolling wave of explosive ochre clouds. Flames engulfed the winged beast as it let out a dying caterwaul and careened down to crash into the snowy terrain.

Great success. Now, that just left the first shadow dude that had attacked her...

It materialized behind her, having used the inky vapor trail of its dying brethren's corpse as a smoke screen. She tried to pivot midair, but wasn't going to be quick enough. She winced as she braced for impact...

<=xXx=>

...Fwoosh!

Like a projectile, the hot air blasted Mex up and towards the second target about to strike Zig. They grabbed their Vibrodagger and poised to stab the creature in the head like their mentor suggested. Arms wide, Mex tackled the monster mid air, and the two plummeted down into a spiral, struggling to grapple with one another. Wrestling to get their arm free, Mex bit down on the monster's own arm with their mandibles before raising their weaponized appendage back and stabbing the monster over, and over, and over again, finishing with a clean stab into the face.

Mex positioned their foe under them, but even with the snow, the landing wasn't going to be soft. As they plummeted into the snow, Mex attempted to break into a roll off the creature, sliding across the snowy ground and under the snow.

<=xXx=>

Clever bug, Zig thought, half annoyed she had to be rescued while also feeling smugly proud at her new protegee's ingenuity. But now, Mex needed her. Tucking her hands to her sides to

minimize her wind resistance, the armored Zygerrian shot towards the ground where the lanky, winter-clothed Verpine had been swallowed up by a mountainous snow drift.

While there was a moment of panic and concern for Mex's safety, the thrill of battle and her ever growing confidence as a leader drove her forward with abandon towards the *caxqettes'* now exposed back.

Her left arm extended forward, and from the vambrace a fiber-cord grappling line shot forth and wrapped around the creature's ink-feathered neck. Zig grunted as she heaved with all her might, reeling in the winged beast until she could hook her legs around it and pulled up on her grappling line like it were the reins to a bantha.

The caxqette sneered and squawked and flailed, but Zig maintained a firm grip. "Yeeeeehaww!" she screamed through her helmet as she quite literally crashed the creature into a nearby hut. Just before contact, she released the grappling line and kicked off the creature's back, propelling herself to safety.

As the explosion from the collision with the home's small heater and fuel system erupted, Zig landed by where she thought she had seen Mex go down.

"Mex!?" she called out, voice modulated through her helmet. She looked around frantically, but couldn't find the Verpine. Her infa-red sensors were still flaring thanks to the fading explosion as the village went eerily quiet once again. "MEX!?"

A verpine head shot out of the snow, absolutely covered in the cold white powder. "Hi Zig. I am here".

With a loud sigh Zig dug out the bug that was now white from head to toe and shivering. "Ok. D-did we win?" the Verpine asked with a stutter from the cold. Without saying anything, Zig gave him a pat on the shoulder and the two made their way back to the bike.

"You go back to the bike. Take the extra blanket and wrap up. Wait for me." Zig instructed Mex - the bug was more than happy to comply. Shivering, they padded back to their ride.

<=xXx=>

The presence had not registered on her helmet's sensors. Instead, she *felt* it, somehow, deep in the core of her being. She was being watched. She was prey. The edges of her mind felt the weight of whispers, flickers of the past trickling into her vision. She did not want to remember, but she did.

She remembered the temple, and their first encounter with the caxquettes. She remembered Yezid, and her failed attempts to save him from a fate she still had nightmares from. But just as visceral were the images of **her**...giving in willingly to the pack-mind of the shadowy monsters.

Of course her nemesis would use these memories against her. Before she turned away from Mex and started to walk out onto the smooth white stretch of tundra, she knew what would be standing waiting for her.

The caxquette had chosen the form of a seven foot woman with very high heels. Like ink dripped from an ancient sith scholar's quill, the creature had an impossibly narrow waist, curved hips, a very prominent bust and a helmeted face with a high, tied-back ponytail. It was eerily accurate how the being looked *exactly* like Alaisy Tir'eivra.

"Hey Kaliska," the shapeshifter replied in what was almost a perfect mimic of the Sith's voice. Something was off, like the uncanny valley some used to describe when cybernetics were so good that they looked organic.

"Your mind games won't work on me," Zig replied defiantly as she squared up with the caxquette.

"Oh, but you will still succumb to your base desires. One way, or another," it chuckled darkly as it stalked forward, hips swaying and its siren song lilting out and pressing into the corners of Zigs mind.

The Zygerrian grit her teeth beneath her helmet and sneered.

No...I can't let them win.

She clenched her fists, which activated her Shockboxing gloves. The familiar static feeling around her knuckles through her gloves helped her fight back, to focus.

She could do this. She raised her fists and readied herself. The creature drew no weapon, but continued to stalk towards her, until it was close enough that the shadowy details faded away entirely and it was indeed a spitting image of the real skin-and-flesh Alaisy standing just before her.

Zig hesitated for just a heartbeat, and in that moment, the creature struck, shadow tendrils wrapping itself around the Zygerrians neck and lifting her up into the air as she flailed and kicked in resistance.

"Foolish child, you were always meant for us..." it hissed.

Abruptly, a loud crash was heard, and Zig was released. Looking back up to where "Alaisy" was standing, instead a weird sight was before her: Mex on her bike.

The Verpine had crashed full speed into the caxqette. Shaking their head from the impact, Mex looked down to Zig.

"Hi Zig," a hand reached down to the Zygerrian. "Did we win now?" They asked, scooting back to let Zig drive, nice and warm in the blanket offered to them.

Zig glanced down at the crumpled form of the plowed-over shapeshifter. It twitched and slowly, very slowly, tried to rise back up. The armored Zygerrian did not give them the chance to do so. With a firm sense of resolution, she lifted her vambrace and unleashed a cone of roaring flame into the creature's body. It started to writhe and shriek in agony as the flames engulfed it.

Then, Zig tapped a button on her wrist, and the flames went from bright ochre to an eerie blue. She overclocked the vambrace flamethrower's output, having calibrated for the risk of it blowing up by instead drawing power away from other systems in her armaments.

Her entire hand started to feel the effect of the thermal consequences. Wincing in pain, she cut off the stream of flames.

What remained of the creature was nothing more than a pile of black ichor in an amorphous blob of dark sludge against the white tundra. Even so, Zig lowered her right wrist and fired off three quick blaster bolts from the vambrace.

When she looked over at Mex, who tilted their head in confusion, Zig shrugged. "Always double tap."

"Ok." Without hesitation, Mex un-holstered their blaster and fired two more shots into the black sludge. "Double tap." They stated, proud of themself.

Zig gave Mex a nod of approval before revving up the bike and speeding off into the night, snow dusting up amongst the bright moon behind them.