

The Screaming Citadel

Ktath'atn

“This place is creepy as all hell,” Vez said. Ktath’atn—the planet, the village, and the Citadel at its center all shared the same name, which was never a good sign as far as Vez was concerned—had the look of a place simultaneously barely settled and ancient. Squat, low-tech buildings stretched out in all directions, many of them abandoned or suffering from years of neglect. It was about to rain, or had just finished, or most likely both. The planet’s namesake, the Screaming Citadel itself, towered inexorably over them.

“We’re kinda in a glass house there, Vez,” Turel replied. “Speaking of, mind helping me with the stiff? GR-1N-DR’s being prissy about it.”

The MagnaGuard huffed despite its lack of lungs. “Girl, you *know* manhandling dead people isn’t in my contract.”

PowerDuke croaked out a reply that was no doubt devastating if you were a hulking murderbot.

“Yeah, Duke,” Vez muttered, grabbing the other end of the hovercart and guiding the device down the *Black Magic’s* egress ramp. “This is *exactly* why I didn’t give you a real vocabulator on this chassis.”

As far as half-baked schemes went, this wasn’t Vez’s worst. The Queen of Ktath’atn was one of those ancient beings that amused themselves by hoarding obscure knowledge and neat toys, a Maz Kanata for people with a fetish for royalty and red synthleather. One night every standard year, the spooky schutta threw open the Citadel doors and supplicants came from all over the galaxy, each hoping to trade some novelty for a favor from the Queen. She’d only resumed the practice a few years back after an unexplained decades-long hiatus. The dinky spaceport was already at capacity with people offloading mutants, artifacts, and all manner of other oddities.

Oddities like, say, an insane Force-powered hybrid of Human and crystal captured in carbonite mid-rampage on Dandoran. Or a Jedi Master with a martyr complex. Or a one-droid army. It was always good to have options.

The skies darkened and thunder rumbled in the distance as the quartet made their way towards the Citadel. The locals milled out listlessly, stealing glances at the trickle of newcomers only to skitter back if anyone tried to make eye contact.

Do you sense anything? Turel asked, his voice appearing directly in Vez's mind. The telepathic communication had stopped being weird but the frequent practice using the Force to do, well, *anything* was still well outside Vez's comfort zone.

I don't exactly need to, boss, the Mirialan thought loudly. *I know bad mojo when I see it.*

The locals were gaunt and pale and seemed only half there. There were species who looked like diseased humanoids—offense only partially intended to Umbarans—but since Ktath'an's population was almost entirely Human it seemed more like a plague was affecting the populace. Something was eating at them, hollowing them out. They looked on the offworlders with a mixture of fear and lust radiating from too-white eyes.

No druk. That's not the point.

Vez glared at her new master, but the older Human just kept walking. Turel was right; the whole point of traveling with him was to develop her Force abilities. But the Jedi were always crikking right about everything and it was *exhausting*.

The Mirialan tried to center herself, put her body on autopilot. *One foot in front of the other, don't look at anything in particular, open your mind and ooohhh kriff—*

The feeling hit her all at once. This was a place of pain and fear. The villagers didn't just look gaunt, they were hollowed out, prey to some parasite that took their life force for food and destroyed anyone who attempted to leave. This place *reeked* of the Dark Side like a swamp stinks of mold and decay.

Keep moving, Vez, Turel's voice echoed in her mind, breaking through the sensation. *Play it cool.*

Vez blinked away tears but nobody seemed to notice. She stole a glance at Turel but the Jedi was expressionless. *Probably not the worst place he's been,* Vez thought, taking some measure of comfort from the idea that you could be open to these kinds of sensations without drowning in them.

The quartet kept on walking in silence until they reached the Citadel gate at the end of the spaceport promenade. Two guards towered over them—or at least Vez—looking not unlike PowerDuke, hulking, shiny and black. The cross-shaped visors on their helmets glowed blood red.

"We're here for an audience," Turel said.

“What do you bring for Her Majesty?” one of the guards asked.

Turel tapped on the hovercart. “A live specimen. It’s got the powers of a Jedi but it moves like nothing you’ve ever seen. Until a few months ago, nobody had ever seen one.”

One of the guards leaned down to examine the carbonite control panel. “That’s a bold claim, offworlder.”

“And if that’s not enough,” Vez cut in, “I brought one of Moff Gideon’s old Dark Troopers. A collector’s piece and it could probably kill everyone in this town.” The droid grunted. “Sorry, it wants you to know that it could *definitely* kill everyone in this town.”

The guards exchanged glances. “No droids, no Wookiees,” one finally said. “We’ll lock up the offering. The other needs to leave.”

GR-1N-DR started to huff but Turel cut him off with a glare. “That won’t be a problem.”

“We’ll need your weapons,” the other guard said.

“Sure thing,” Vez said, handing over her blaster. Turel did likewise. As GR-1N-DR sulked back to the ship and another pair of heavily armored guards led PowerDuke away, Turel dumped the duffel containing their change of clothes onto the small conveyor belt attached to the scanner.

Vez tried to keep her expression neutral as she expanded her awareness again, more tentatively than last time. Amidst the baseline feeling of unease and dread, there was a slight tingle.

The light on top of the scanner blinked red and the console beeped. Nobody else seemed to notice. The tingle subsided as Turel took their bag back, tossing a credit chit to the dour technician.

An attendant walked them through the labyrinthine palace—which barely lived up to the title anymore, the architecture was gorgeous but the decor needed some serious work—and deposited them in one of the guest suites. They had a little bit of time to kill and, of course, get themselves presentable for an audience.

“So far, so good,” Turel said. “Makes me a bit nervous when things are going well.”

Yeah, maybe don't jinx it, Vez tried to think loudly. *Odds are they have these suites bugged.* "Relax," she said aloud. "Our friend over there checks all the boxes. Exotic, unheard of, magical."

Noted, Turel's voice echoed in her mind.

What did you do back there? Vez thought.

They saw what they expected to see. I'll show you when we get back to Kiast.

Turel took dibs on the fresher to get ready. Vez laid back on the bed and tried not to think about anything. She must have succeeded, as the next thing she noticed was Turel nudging her awake. The Jedi had switched from his street clothes to a deep blue suit with some sort of dainty shimmersilk scarf thrown over his shoulders. His lightsaber was conspicuously absent, though Vez knew the older man had to have it secreted away somewhere. There was no point smuggling their weapons past the guards if they weren't accessible when the time came.

"How do I look?"

Vez groaned as she pulled herself upright, wiping the sleep from her eyes with one hand. "I'll let you know as soon as I can think of something mean enough."

"You know, my master would have made me meditate instead of napping."

"You and your master did a lot of things," the Mirialan grumbled. "And I don't have the right kind of daddy issues for some of them."

Turel suppressed a chuckle while Vez ambled into the fresher to get dressed and fix her makeup. Turel had already hung up her outfit and steamed the duffel-induced wrinkles out. It was almost like she had an actual friend now.

She got dressed: a pristine white button-down shirt, black pants, and a low-cut, single-breasted black jacket, all made from finely woven tomuon wool. Last to go on were a black bowtie and five-centimeter black heels that she could mostly walk in. Vez checked her reflection to make sure the vambraces they'd smuggled in weren't too visible under her jacket sleeves.

"You clean up alright," the Human said as she walked out into the main room. "I almost want to take a picture for Aura."

VeZ made an obscene gesture. Turel handed her a small can of pre-brewed caf and she downed the sweet, sticky concoction in one go.

“I really hope there’s food at this thing. I get nasty when I’m hungry,” she said.

Turel smirked. “How can you tell?”

“Shut up, sleemo. I’m delightful.”

“It’s been zero days since your last hurtful comment about my teaching methods.”

“Without constructive criticism you’ll never learn. Am I doing the talking or taking pretty assistant duty?”

Turel laughed. “There is no way I can turn down an option where you don’t talk.”

VeZ rolled her eyes but grabbed the handle of the hovercart and started to follow Turel out the door. “Don’t worry, I’ll make up for it on the ride home.”

The Citadel’s great hall was expansive, if sparsely decorated, and beings of at least a dozen different species milled about, making awkward small talk between canapes. VeZ and Turel did their best to blend in. The carbonite-encased crystal zombie made that difficult, even compared to the myriad of offerings the other supplicants had brought with them.

Eventually, some percussion instrument sounded and the Queen and her entourage arrived. The Queen, a very fair-skinned humanoid woman with reddish brown hair, took her place on a throne while one of her lackeys started announcing the supplicants one by one. Each party made their way to the front of the crowd for show-and-tell with whatever trinket they’d poached from an archeological site, but few seemed to catch the Queen’s interest. Finally, it was their turn.

“Turel Sorenn and Verity Hirundo of the Disciples of Odan-Urr,” the herald intoned.

Turel completely failed to suppress his grin as VeZ glared daggers at him. “You gave them my real name?” the Mirialan hissed. The Jedi ignored her and made his way to the front of the room, VeZ angrily pushing the hovercart behind him.

“Your royal majesty,” the Jedi began with a bow. “We bring you two offerings.”

The herald turned to look at his queen. Like her, he seemed more or less Human, though his skin had an almost Umbaran pallor and his eyes welled sickly white. The rest of the entourage matched. “My lady, we have taken custody of a very large and well-equipped droid. The offworlders call it a Dark Trooper and claim it to be an artifact of the Galactic Empire.”

“I modified it to be extra lethal,” Vez piped up. “Should be great for clearing away the adoring crowds when you leave the palace.”

The Queen of Ktath'atn did not look impressed. She hadn't said a word so far, not for any of the groups. Turel quickly moved on.

“And this is a specimen we captured during the recent trouble on Dandoran,” he said. There were scattered murmurs from the crowd. Dandoran wasn't Nar Shaddaa or Canto Bight, but the Restoration Troopers and the newcomers had made enough of a fuss that word had quickly traveled through Hutt Space and the underworld.

“As you've probably heard, highness, the Severian Principate deployed specially enhanced troopers to deal with the Tenixir Revenants. Within moments, they'd seized control of the battlefield. That is, until these guys came out of nowhere and started tearing them apart. They have more Force abilities than most well-trained Jedi, probably thanks to whatever this is.” He tapped one of the crystalline protrusions for emphasis. “They put up quite a fight and this was the only one we managed to take alive.”

The Queen sat for a moment in silent contemplation. Then she nodded.

“Everyone else may leave,” the herald said. The crowd grumbled. “Immediately,” he added, and another squad of armored guards filed in to settle the point. He turned to the two Odanites. “You will enjoy the Queen's hospitality.”

Veze and Turel exchanged awkward glances and fidgeted with the last of their food. Ktath'atnic cuisine was all meat and cream and root vegetables, which was one thing, but the nearly raw meat had a tendency to bleed into the cream in a way that was not appealing.

The Queen was actually speaking now that she didn't have to impress a galaxy's worth of brownnosers with her stoic majesty. She sat at the head of the table, Turel and Vez seated to either side of her, and her entourage paired off down the length of the banquet. She had accepted their offering—including PowerDuke, despite how annoyingly unimpressed everyone seemed with him—and their price: everything she could tell them, fact, rumor or conjecture, about the creators of her new prize.

It was not as much as they hoped, though given the state of Ktath'atn in recent decades, the Odanites hadn't come with high hopes. But now they had a name: the Children of Mortis. They were old. They were powerful. And the eyeless freak who had led them on Dandoran wasn't even at the top of the food chain.

A pair of emaciated servants brought a matching pair of silver-domed serving platters and laid them before the Odanites. "Dessert first," the Queen purred. "And then our business is concluded and we shall wake up my new prize."

The servants moved to take the lids off the platters. Turel lifted a hand. The lids stayed shut as the servants struggled awkwardly against the invisible force Turel was using to hold the domes in place. There was a scratching sound from inside as something desperately tried to claw its way free.

"Wow, lady," Vez said casually as she pulled up one sleeve and pressed a button on her vambrace. "You really need to update your playbook." The device shot off a volley of beskar-tipped rockets that whirled around the room, each finding its target at the base of a minion's skull. The lot of them slumped forward, brains and bits of Abersyn symbiote dripping out of the new holes in their skulls. "Every mando I've ever met is dumb as a box of rocks but *wow* their tech is sexy."

The queen narrowed her eyes as the two servants fled into the hall. Turel darted after them, shifting his focus to telekinetically bar the doors. Vez pressed a different button, loosing a torrent of flame over the dessert course.

"We figured you'd try to infect us with Abersyn symbiotes," Turel grunted. "Didn't think you'd use the exact same trick, though."

"Yeah, guess we gave you too much credit," Vez said, trying to sense through the Force if the heat had been enough to kill the parasites.

"*How?*" the Queen hissed.

“Oh, I did some work for the Resistance a few years back,” Vez said, leaning back in her chair. “Their pay rates suck though, so I went digging through their databanks looking for anything good to poach and found Leia Organa’s journal. She’s pretty stingy on most of the details, but ‘the Queen of Ktath’atn is an Abersyn host who tried to eat Skywalker’ has a way of sticking in the mind.”

“And when you showed up, trying to rebuild your influence after a couple of decades, we figured it was worth a shot to get some information out of you before destroying your hive and freeing Ktat.. Kathat... this planet,” Turel said.

The Queen unleashed an unholy shriek of rage and lunged for the Jedi, her jaw nearly unhinged as she started to draw his life force from his body.

With a purple flash, she fell.

“I was hoping you had that thing handy,” Vez said, rising from her seat. “The old girl moves quick.”

“Not quick enough,” Turel answered, deactivating his saber but keeping it in one hand. “I think it’s time to leave.”

Vez raised a hand to the comlink in her ear. “Duke, make some noise.” The Mirialan scrunched her face at the reply. “No, I don’t mean yelling. Get back to the ship and kill a bunch of stuff on the way, you big beautiful idiot.”

The pair left the room to the sickening sounds of the Queen’s Abersyn symbiote working itself free of her corpse. They hoped to make their way back to the entrance before the guards could figure out what was happening.

“She’s probably still hoping to trade up,” Turel said.

“It’s just going to break her little black heart when she finds out that thing is dead and I just sliced the control panel to show normal life signs,” Vez laughed. “You hate to see it.”

“You know, you don’t have to take so much glee in other beings’ misfortune.”

“I do when I’m the one who caused it.”

Turel sighed. “You are the Force’s way of avenging every authority figure I’ve ever met, aren’t you?”

VeZ winked at him. "Trust me, Master Sorenn, I have not yet begun to disappoint you."