

## Last Sled to Dawnsun

“You look ridiculous.”

“Af fheest I am vafm,” came a muffled reply from somewhere within puffy layers of insulating clothing.

Vicxa Varis shook her head, amusement radiating off her tattooed cheeks as she beheld her traveling companion descending the shuttle’s ramp like an over-proofed ball of dough tied up with string.

Tali Sroka, on the other hand, was still shivering. Even with barely more than her nose sticking out—helpfully identified by the strained puffs of white emanating from within the hood—the Twi’lek was freezing her lekku off. She had been to cold places before, but not anywhere this cold. Even simply stepping onto the snow made such a grating sound it sent shivers down her spine. As if she needed any more of those.

**“I for one think you look lovely, lady Sroka,”** Stre’stron’garmis said with a polite bow, emerging last from the cramped craft in only a light jacket and smart pants. **“Your beauty radiates like a sun of its own,”** he added.

“You know you’re talking to her back right, big boy?” Vicxa chirped as the Chiss was clearly searching for a reply with his gaze. His blue cheeks turned a purple shade, snowflakes melting before they touched him.

“Enuff of fiff, ve’re fere to—”

“Luv, you mind? Just a little less talking to the inside of your cocoon, maybe?” Vicxa inquired, straining to make out what the Twi’lek was saying—even more so than usual.

Tali let out an exasperated groan and, after a moment of fumbling with her heavy mittens, managed to loosen the cords of her hood enough to uncover her mouth.

“As I vas saying, ve’re here for a reason andt ve can’t affordt to vaste time. So let’s findt our guide andt get going,” she stated sharply, before turning her golden gaze at the Mirialan. “Vell, vas that clear enough?”

“Well...”

**“Perfect pronunciation, as always, my lady,”** Strong butted in before the Mirialan could dig herself any deeper.

The shuttlepad at the outskirts of Zainab was a windswept freezebox. Jagged formations of ice, blasted smooth by the arctic winds, clung onto every metal surface and the grated walkways were caked thick with packed snow. The incessant clinking of antennae rattling in

the wind was a constant companion, between the howling blasts of ion engines and the humm of repulsorlifts as craft landed and departed across the busy field.

It was early dawn still, yet the sky hung in a deep nocturnal blue, the landing pads themselves bathed in sodium yellow from searchlights overhead. Beyond, Zainab proper stretched out like a cancerous growth among the violent white—a whiteness that was threatening to devour it. What should have been a city of smoke and lights had died down to dull emergency strobes and dark, gloomy shapes barely visible in the twilight. Despite the settlers' best efforts, it was clear the city did not belong and given half a chance, Tunca would reassert its dominion. It was precisely that which they were here to prevent.

“Come on, this way!” Vicxa chirped, hurrying, slipping, and awkwardly regaining balance down a snow choked walkway that led to a collection of simple red huts at the edge of the shuttle port.

Tali and Strong exchanged a look, shrugged, and followed suit.

The cluster of huts turned out to be a medley of equipment stores, workman's shelters, and vehicle hangars with an assortment of repulsorlift, walker, and tracked vehicles all lined next to each other. The lights were out, these buildings not benefiting from the emergency power the shuttle port relied on, but the scent of burning wood told the approaching trio there was warmth to be had.

After a short search, and Strong having to drag the Twi'lek away from the wood burner inside, they found the man Vicxa had assured them would make an excellent guide. Clad in a worn blue anorak with an embroidered trim of yellow tassles, the Selenian was unassuming to say the least. Old in his years and tanned of complexion, his hair was graying and a thick beard cradled his wizened face, deep with creases. But his eyes were cold steel, ice blue and clear. The long winters had not dulled them yet.

“Hi, I'm Vix!” the Mirialan greeted him, interrupting his coiling of frozen rope behind one of the sheds. “We're heading to Dawnsun. Are you our guide?”

The man paused in his work, hunched over ever so slightly, and panned his vision across the trio. It was hard to tell what, if anything, he thought about them as he returned to his work, finishing the coil before replying.

“Yes.”

There was a long, expectant pause.

“Great!” Vicxa continued enthusiastically, seeing as nothing more was forthcoming. “Which ride is ours?”

*“Please, let it be the tractor, it looks so warm...”* Tali thought to herself, eyeing longingly at a bright orange vehicle with stubby tracks and a boxy appearance.

“We don't ride,” the man replied. “We ski.”

“Vat?” Tali blurted.

“The journey is not long. But it is treacherous. Machines do not survive the wilds,” the man stated bluntly. “Be quick. We are wasting daylight.”

Tali glanced at Strong, who could merely offer a shrug. When she turned back to Vicxa, she found the Mirialan already picking skis from a rack by the shack wall.

“Ashla have mercy,” she sighed, before following suit.

Their guide left them to their own devices, seeing as they’d already found the skis, and disappeared from sight while the Arconans geared up. Fitting the planks of shaped plastoid to their feet was more of a hassle than Tali cared for, but worse was the feeling of wobbly awkwardness when she tried to move with the Bogan-damned things on.

“This is ridiculous,” she muttered within her hood. “Our friendts are risking their lives securing the planet andt tracking down Alla’su, while ve’re out here playing camping.”

“I don’t know what you’re complaining about,” Vicxa replied, having been the first to tie up her skis and by now making loops around her two companions to keep warm. “It’s going to be an adventure!”

“This isn’t *supposedt* to be an adventure. Ve’re here to keep Youtl’s Cloak from falling into their handts, andt ve don’t have time for going on a skiing trip,” Tali snapped back.

Strong patted her on the shoulder, the soft, well-insulated shoulder that gave generously under the heavy hand until a dent had formed in Tali’s portable cocoon. **“I am certain we will make it in time. I trust our local guide. They know these lands better than we do.”**

Tali sighed, nodded, and finished tying herself onto the pair of snow-sticks. “He’dt better...”

The man returned not long after they’d finished gearing up, heralded by the bark of hounds and the jingle of tiny bells. The patter of a dozen feet on the packed snow filled the air before a dog sleigh rounded the corner, drawn by a trio of eager canines that looked more like wolves than dogs and piloted by the colorful guide. A bundle of supplies had been wrapped up under a canvas tarp within the sleigh itself while the man stood on skis behind it, letting the dogs drag both him and the cargo along. With a sharp whistle, he made the pack beasts heel and with scraping of snow under tread, the sleigh came to a subtle halt.

“You are ready.” His words were a statement, not a question, as he moved closer to inspect their bindings. Sufficiently pleased they’d managed to get everything in order, he approached Tali and pulled off his mitten.

“Yukka,” the man said, offering his hand for a shake.

Tali winced at the idea of taking off her glove, but realized it was probably custom. Daring the biting cold, she mirrored the gesture and shook his wiry hand. "Tali," she replied. "Get us to Dawnsun like the planet depended on it, because it very well might."

Yukka cracked a toothy grin as he replaced his mitten. "Then I hope for all our sakes you can ski fast."

She shot him a glare, but said nothing, thinking the matter resolved. He, however, had one final thing to say.

"You should lighten the clothing. You will overheat. You will sweat. You will be damp. And when we stop, you will freeze even more."

"I'll take my chances, thank you," Tali muttered.

Yucca made a sign of acknowledgement, thumb and middle finger joining, and turned to the pack, snapping a singular command and just like that, they were off.

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"I'm melting!"

The cry came out not long after the lights of the shuttleport had been swallowed by the swirling gusts of snow. Not a full kilometer from the base, Tali was sweating herself alive as she trudged along the track left by Yucca and Vicxa, with Strong taking up the rear—as he so often had wanted to do.

"You should have listened to him," Vicxa quipped. "I tried to tell you too, but..."

"Ugh, I *hate* the arctic! We are *never* setting foot in this place again! How anyone could have thought it a good idea to settle in such an inhospitable place is beyond me," Tali complained, before finally relenting as heatstroke seemed inevitable and began to peel off her many coats.

"**I quite like it,**" Strong rumbled, pulling up beside her to offer a helping hand and pack up the doffed pieces of clothing into his man-sized bergen. "**Reminds me of Csilla.**"

"Was it this cold and snowy there too?"

"**Well, not quite as frigid or snowy, I must admit. But there are stark similarities in the crisp air and the rugged wilderness. Quite beautiful, though not as beautiful as—**"

"You call this beautiful?" Tali scoffed, throwing a soaked sweater to the Chiss, who utterly failed to see it coming and caught it with his face. "There's nothing here but ice and darkness. The skies are all grey and the scenery is nothing but white."

"**You may have a point, but you see, the true beauty of this place—**"

“Won’t show itself at first blush,” Yucca chimed in, pulling up next to them. “Are you ready to continue? The pack is getting restless.”

Strong shuffled with muted annoyance, but said nothing.

“Yes, we can continue. How much further still?” Tali asked.

“We will make camp before nightfall, if we can keep the pace up,” Yucca replied.

“Goodt, I wouldn’t want to... Vait vhat? Camp? You’re not expecting us to sleep out here?!”

“Yes.”

Tali gave the man a withering look, feeling duped and betrayed, but he remained as impassive as always.

“If that is all. Let us continue,” the man stated and turned to follow the sled.

Tali bristled under the light jacket that she’d left on, but the cold was beginning to nip at her lekku again so staying in motion seemed preferable to airing her grievances here and now. Besides, they had bigger fish to fry—planet sized to be precise.

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The terrain got worse.

What had begun as a flat and simple plain began to rise as the glacier of the northern ice cap made itself known. Jagged slabs of ice jutted out from the ground here and there, forcing them into narrow pathways that snaked their way up along a slippery and treacherous incline. The sky had remained stubbornly clouded, releasing gentle flakes of snow that descended lazily around them in a neverending cascade and smothering out what little light remained. The sled came equipped with its own illumination and Strong had another lumen placed on his bergen, but neither offered proper light to see beyond a few meters and the oppressive darkness was making Tali grow weary.

Skis slipping and sliding as she struggled to muscle her way up the slope, her huffing and wheezing soon turned into muted cursing as beads of sweat ran down her lekku, only to freeze at their tips into icicles. Her nose running and her arms crying out for a rest, she made the ascent to the next small plateau where Vicxa and Yucca were already waiting. With a final growl, she managed to push her skis over the lip and prepared to slide forward when something snagged on the bottoms and halted her momentum in its tracks. For a perilous moment gravity clawed at her back, pulling her down the way she’d come, her arms flailing wildly in a vain attempt to stay upright. At the last moment, she felt a solid hand on the small of her back, pushing her forward and over the lip onto the plateau.

Behind her, Strong *walked* up the slope atop mounds of packed ice, the bottoms of his skis resembling stalagmites as he soldiered on and reached the plateau as well. Out of breath, Tali pulled out her water bottle from her pack, unscrewing the lid and up-turning it for a nice

drink—only to find the neck frozen solid. Beside them, Vicxa was stabbing her own bottle with her knife, picking apart the layer to get to the water that still remained drinkable. Behind her, Tali heard Strong crunching on ice cubes.

Yucca observed the struggling team for a while longer before speaking up, pulling out his own canteen from within his jacket and taking a swig..

“Have any of you skied before?”

“No? Why wouldt ve have? Ve, have, speeders!” Tali panted.

“**I was more familiar with snowshoes on Csilla,**” Strong admitted.

“I have! On Tatooine,” Vicxa chirped.

“There is no snow on Tatooine, Vicxa,” Tali grunted.

“I didn’t say *snow* skiing.”

“Vhat else kindt is there?”

“Sand skiing! It’s basically the same.”

“No, it is not,” Yucca stated, shaking his head. “It seems you could do with the basics, so listen closely.” What followed was a curt and to the point explanation on how to move about in the arctic. How to make the skis work for you, instead of fighting against them. How to scale obstacles, and how to get up in case one fell over into deep snow.

“—and if you want your water drinkable, keep the bottle under your jacket so it does not freeze.”

With actual instructions on how to move, the pace quickened significantly. By the next break, their water was liquid, and although Strong stoically claimed he preferred the crunchy water, he did not complain too much. As the day wore on, the unusual wanderers settled into a routine, making good pace across the expanse of Tunca’s hinterlands that finally relented in their snowfall.

The sky slowly cleared, letting pale sunlight filter in along the heavens though the star itself barely managed over the horizon this late in the year. The jagged ice cliffs gave way to vast fields of gently rolling snow, shaped by the winds into dunes of purest white. In the distance, a lonely range of flat topped mountains rose through the permafrost, dotted by sparse rings of evergreen trees. The crisp air filled their lungs as the rhythmic shuffle of their skis brought upon a trance of serene nature, no words breaking the stillness as they made their journey across the wilds.

As twilight neared, the vista dyed an ethereal blue. The parting clouds had vanished, and as the sun settled beyond the horizon, they reached their destination. A half-buried outpost in

the middle of nowhere sat beside a small cluster of hardy conifers, the lean-to old and worn but still managing to support a meter of packed snow on its roof.

“How are there trees this far inlandt?” Tali asked as they let down their packs to begin preparations for the night.

“The subterranean vents rise high nearby. Not enough to melt the snow in winter, but in summer, the ground is thawed enough for trees to grow,” Yucca explained, picking a hatchet from the sled and heading for the trees.

“See?” Vicxa beamed though her cheeks were cherry red from the cold. “Didn’t I tell you he was good?”

“How didt you even findt him?” Tali asked, sidestepping any claim of their guide’s excellency.

“I foundt him in a ditch,” Vicxa replied as she undid the straps on her skis.

“You vhat?”

“Well, maybe not a ditch-ditch, but definitely a puddle outside a tavern in Zainab. He’d been kicked out for picking a fight with the owner.”

“Andt this made you think he vas a goodt guide?” Tali rubbed her temples while Strong pulled out her jackets.

“No, not that alone. But *after* I got him back on his feet, we went on a pub crawl and he *a/ways* led us to the next place without error. If he can navigate that well while piss-drunk, imagine how good he is when he’s sober?”

Tali stared at the Mirialan like she wasn’t all well in the head.

**“I must admit miss Varis has a point. Intox—”**

“Strong, I know you mean vell, but *not now*,” Tali hissed, grabbing her jackets to bundle back up as the cold began creeping in now that motion had stopped.

Yucca returned with armfuls of prickly conifer branches, the evergreens being piled up in a long matt near the fireplace. A pair of logs as tall as he was were extricated off the sled and after some finagling, were placed in front of the lean-to, ready for lighting. In a few minutes, the fire was crackling merrily along the log’s length, burning slowly into the wood as darkness crept in around them.

Pots and kettles came out next, mounted up over the flames to begin melting the plentiful snow while Vicxa helped Tali set up her sleeping gear in the shelter. By the time the kettle was boiling and tea was served, almost total darkness surrounded them. The bubbling of the pot, filled from cans Vicxa had brought along, let out a faint scent of legumes in a cheap spice mix that nevertheless beckoned the weary Twi’lek more than any steak she’d sunk her teeth into.

With a mug of tea, a bowl of beans, and a fire before her, she sat down on the conifer branches alongside the others and ate. The bowl disappeared in an instant, and before she knew it, she was scraping the pot for seconds.

“You like ‘em?” Vicxa inquired with a cheery smile.

“Not usually,” Tali admitted. “But then I usedt to live off cup noodles.”

“Beans are really useful. They’re really easy to stea—”

Tali shot her a glare.

“—ew. Very easy to prepare!”

**“Legumes are very nourishing,”** Strong added with a sage nod. **“Though I wish they were more agreeable to digest.”**

“We’re in the wilds, big boy,” Vicxa said, cocking her head incredulously. “Who cares?”

“The one who has to sleep next to him,” Tali muttered into her mug.

“I thought you liked him? Thought you’d enjoy spending the night in a place like this,” the Mirialan smirked knowingly, earning a blush from the purple Twi’lek.

“Yes, total darkness is such a romantic setting,” she quipped back.

Yucca, who had by now settled in on the conifers after tending to the pack dogs, stared at the fire with thoughtful puffs from a pipe rising up into the air. Lazily, he reached into his pack and produced a flat drum of tribal design, marked with runes of the Tuncan nomads, and a piece of bone carved to act as a drumstick.

Softly at first, he began tapping the drum, its soft beat barely audible over the crackling flames, but growing as his fingers warmed. The steady rhythm was soothing to behold, lulling the bickering Arconans into a respectful silence as they were enthralled by its primal music. The flames kept licking hungrily at the log, smoke rising off the embers towards a sky that had suddenly turned clear and all around, the vast expanse of the cosmos shone like a billion diamonds caught in a celestial tapestry.

Tali craned her neck up, cooing in awe as the colors of the grander heavens yawned in all directions, cool and pure. She saw nebulas and distant worlds, even the glinting of Dajorra’s asteroid belt where somewhere, Ol’val lurked among the rocks. She nursed her mug of tea and rested her head against Strong’s shoulder, sighing contently.

A faint whisper of a tune stirred to life next to her. Seemingly out of nowhere, Vicxa had produced a short wooden whistle on which she played a melancholy tune to the beat of Yucca’s drum. If the man minded, he did not show it, and as the somber music played, Tali



relaxed under the Chiss' arm, the scent of smoke and cool air etching to memory. Perhaps the outdoors had its perks.

"I didn't know you played any instrument," Tali said to Vicxa when the melody came to a pause. "I never learned, but I think I might have liked a valachord."

"My parents gave it to me when I left," the Mirialan replied. "We, uh, *moved a lot* when I was growing up, so we didn't have many possessions. Mom used to play lullabies on it. Figured if I ever got lonely on my travels, I'd remember them better."

Strong stifled a stoic sob.

"You play it beautifully," Tali spoke softly, a kind smile on her face. "Can we hear more?"

"As long as the old man can keep up," Vicxa smirked at their guide.

Yucca sipped something from a hip flask and returned a tooth grin. "Uppity youngster," he grumbled before starting anew, Vicxa joining in the tune while their small audience cuddled the night away.

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Morning dawned with Tali crawling out of her sleeping bag with much resentment. The world was cold and harsh, whilst her sleeping bag was warm and wonderful. She had no desire to ever depart, but the bustling of the others preparing to leave forced her hand. A quick breakfast later, they were back on the move, skiing in the sleigh tracks through the Tuncan outback until finally, they saw smoke rising in the distance.

The terrain sloped down hill, making their travel easier still as the settlement of Dawnsun came into view. A small hamlet of a few dozen houses, the settlement was still the local center of governance for the indigenous tribes and their path would need to pass through in order to seek passage to the site where Youtl's cloak lay. Situated at the shore of the arctic ocean, it had been built at the mouth of a spring river that carried masses of fresh water from further inland and made for a fertile breeding spot for numerous species of fish.

Some of the squat huts were painted in bright colors, reds and yellows from natural dyes standing next to sun grayed wood that glittered like silver among the snow. Lamps fuelled with whale oil burned bright, though the stench they emitted had clued the Arconans to the town's presence from kilometers away. Though she was sure the smell would take weeks to air out, Tali was still glad to see such light after the darkness that had seemed near all-consuming.

By the shoreside, racks for drying fish and wharfs for maintaining boats and skiffs stood now buried underneath the ice and snow while the shores themselves were choked with pack ice, huge slabs of grey and blue that had washed ashore from the sea. It made launches difficult, but clearly not impossible, as a few enterprising kayaks patrolled the fish traps at the river mouth.

“Welcome to Dawnsun. I hope our journey has not been in vain,” Yucca stated as they crested the final ridge and laid eyes upon the village proper. “I wish you luck.”

“Are you not following us to the ruins?” Tali inquired, not liking that their guide was choosing to back out before the job had officially been completed.

“Oh no, I mean luck with *her*. The Matriarch takes a dim view on letting outsiders dig through our ancestry. Your previous envoys spent a week negotiating passage, and even then, a handful under escort were allowed.”

Tali’s lips pressed into a line. She’d been told in no uncertain terms by Ruka that they were to honor and respect local customs—but the entire planet was about to eat itself and just because the locals liked living in the stone age didn’t mean they got to drag the rest of the planet with them.

**“Fret not, lady Sroka. The worst thing she can do is say—”**

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“No,” the Matriarch stated, blunt as a block of ice. “And that is final.”

The town’s elder lived in a house, or the closest any of the huts came to being an actual house, painted a vivid blue. How they found natural dyes for such, Tali had no clue, but its color was not far off from Yucca’s tunic. The Matriarch herself, a barely seeing woman dressed in colorful scarves and shawls, sat at a very normal looking table and sipped dark tea off a saucer. Perched between her cracked lips, a block of sugar stuck out like a misbegotten tooth, and through it she slurped the tar like beverage that brewed constantly on a coal pot by the dwelling’s entrance.

Her wizened features rivaled ravines in microcosm, gray wisps of hair spilling out from underneath a gold-red scarf tied neatly around her head. Her eyes had long since lost all color except glassy gray, and their milky whites did not bode well for her sight. Even so, she commanded respect with her presence and voice, a woman knowing her own worth and imbued with a mind as unyielding as granite rock.

And in her mind, the matter had been settled.

“Please, I ask you to reconsider,” Tali tried. “Ve have come a long vay, andt ve only ask to be let inside for a day. It is for the goodt of the planet. Think of all the other tribes of Selen!”

The Matriarch let out a derisive scoff, spittle bursting from her purpling lips. “What of the other tribes? They have long since abandoned us. Forgotten us, and themselves. They were so eager to leave the past behind, but the north remembers,” she slurped her tea. “At least for a while still.”

“What do you mean, they’ve forgotten themselves?” Vicxa chimed in, butting in past the Twi’lek who was struggling to play her part as diplomat. She had already helped herself to

some of the same tea, though filling a mug with the stuff and now inviting herself to sit at the Matriarch's table.

Tali made a whimper to the effect of stopping her, but the Mirialan was annoyingly swift and determined in her movements, fleeting past before even her Jedi reflexes could catch her. If the Matriarch took offense, she showed none of it.

"Such an eager little off-worlder. Here to pilfer our secrets, like your men in white from the South?" she pressed.

"I'm just curious," Vicxa admitted innocently. "If we're not getting anywhere, at least there's a story to hear."

Tali wanted the earth to part and swallow her now. A Strong hand on her shoulder would have to do as the Chiss patted her patiently.

The Matriarch gave a curious grin, leaning back slightly as she finally put the saucer down and plucked the sugar lump from her mouth. "What better way to spend the darkest days," she agreed. "So listen well, off-worlders."

"You've heard the songs, the Binding of Youtl? It is not our verse, but few are those who still remember it. It was collected by a poet many decades past, and perhaps that is why it still survives. But the full verse is longer, and tells much more."

"King Youtl was not born a god. He was a prince, back before the skies fell and the sun was still young. He was a bold and good man. A leader of men. He bested many challenges to become King and when he united all tribes under his banner, we rejoiced. Youtl the Wise, he was called, and people that came to him, always had their needs met and questions answered. None were turned away from his court empty-handed, until a small child arrived in the dead of winter, and asked if the great King could not banish the dark."

"King Youtl, wise as he may be, had no answer. For a time, he pondered, but could not find a way. But he had heard of the gods. Of wondrous beings that ruled the southern shores. If he could not fulfill the child's request alone, perhaps they could? So, he prepared his boat and traveled below..."

"Below?" Tali interjected. "As in, below the groundt?"

The Matriarch grumbled. "The verse is unclear. Perhaps they mean he went under the earth along the river, perhaps he traveled South, but what matters is that when he returned, the Cloak had been placed upon his shoulders. And with this Cloak, he could banish the dark."

"For the first time, we did not need to live in darkness, and Youtl banished the long night. So we called him Youtl the Radiant. This part the Southerners forget, when they sing of his pride and the darkness. He was the lightbringer first, before he almost snuffed it out. That is the true lesson of his story, how in the brightest light, lies the seed of darkness."

The Matriarch's milky eyes had by now nailed into Tali's and she felt a vague unease clutching at her core. She'd not sensed her being Force Sensitive, but then she had not

expected her to be. Now alert and aware, she could feel her presence near her mind, prowling like a limber huntress so far opposite the crone that was its home.

She knew she was being tested, judged. But so she had her entire life and she did not balk from it.

“What do you seek, off-worlder?” the Matriarch croaked.

“Ve seek the Cloak of Youtl,” Tali replied, making no attempt to hide her intent.

“He took the Cloak to his grave. You will not find it here.”

“Ve think otherwise. The poems say, Youtl vas vrappedt in a radiant cloth, but the vordt usedt is not the same as for his Cloak. But the vordt shows in the name of a place, his palace. The one our people came to study.”

“They came, and studied, and found nothing. What makes you think you’d be any wiser?” the Matriarch pressed.

This time, it was not Tali who spoke, but Vicxa.

“Because, we have a key!” she proclaimed, digging into her jacket pocket and fishing out a stubby bronze cylinder, decorated with engravings and symmetrical perforations.

This time, the Matriarch could not hide her surprise.

“Where did you find this? We thought they had all been lost to us.”

“I found it in warmer waters,” Vicxa smirked. “The boys from SIMASS were mucking about in one of Alla’su’s temples, but they were taking forever to get in. So I found another way. That led to a haunted crypt and an underwater passage with ravenous sharks and, *long story*, but what matters is, I found it in the hands of some dead guy who’d been left to rot. Felt weird why they’d draw arctic animals on it, so I figured I’d let the eggheads have a look—seems I was right.”

The crone nodded, before leaning back and picking up the sugar and saucer once more.

“You are quite eager to set foot in our temples,” she stated. “Confident you’ll find something more with this *key* you have. I can save you the trouble, you will not.”

“Please, let us try? I’m *really* good at finding things,” Vicxa pined. “I’m not even in it for the Cloak. I just want to see a cool ice temple.”

“Please, madam, it is of vital importance to Selen and her people,” Tali added.

“Ah yes, *your* people. Who came from the stars and spread across the worlds. You who built your cities in our domains, now you seek our permission? And what if I refuse?” Her half-blind eyes were suddenly clear as ice, staring daggers at the Twi’lek though Tali was

certain nobody else could see it. In her mind, she felt the vague cry of danger, elusive but clearly there. Like smoke on the wind. Her instincts called for her saber.

“Ve’re here to ask politely,” she replied, forcing calm upon her with sheer will.

The Matriarch held her gaze a moment longer and in the next blink, her eyes were back to their milky selves. “I cannot deny your folly. Waste your time if you must, but *that* will not gain you access to Youtl’s palace,” she said, pointing a spindly finger at Vicxa’s key.

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“Come again?” Tali asked incredulously. “The place ve’re going is calledt...?”

“White Agony Creek. Says so on the map,” Vicxa stated, holding up the digsite map left over from the SIMASS crew.

“Vhat a lovely name,” she scoffed, fixing up her skis for the journey. “Vhy not name it Painful Death Cove, while they’re at it?”

“That might be the point,” Vicxa replied. “I had a map of these parts, I’d be in no hurry to check out Agony Creek, when Beaver Point is around the bend.”

Tali opened her mouth to make a rebuttal, but annoyingly, the Mirialan had a point.

**“It does not appear to be that far away. If we make good speed, we will reach it before sundown,”** Strong commented.

“The big fellow is correct. It’s not far and the path is easy going. We may have to cross the river, but it’s frozen solid this late in the season,” Yucca added, hauling a fresh crate of supplies to the sleigh. “I don’t know what you did to earn her approval, but few have managed. She must be getting soft in her old age.”

“How oldt even is she?” Tali asked, curiosity getting the better of her. Yucca gave a knowing smile and finished tightening the cargo straps.

The party departed in short order, venturing out from the relative safety of Dawnsun. As they passed the longhouse, Tali caught a glimpse of the Matriarch from the window. She was staring after them, her expression unreadable. She raised a hand, and made the gesture of acknowledgement, thumb to middle finger. From somewhere, a soft, steady drumbeat not unlike the kind Yucca had played the night before emerged. This time, however, it felt more foreboding.

“To ward off bad spirits,” Yucca explained, seeing Tali’s apprehension.

“For us?” She raised an eyebrow. “Or *at* us?”

“Something like that,” he muttered and urged the pack dogs to a trot.

The group made good speed, their technique improving alongside their confidence, further spurred on by the pressing urgency of their mission. Breathtaking vistas of rugged arctic beauty were passed in glum silence, skis shuffling ever forwards through the tundra. The winds shifted and the sun settled on its short parabola, bathing the land in dark blue twilight.

Kilometers passed by and eventually they arrived at the shores of a frozen cove. The creek had frozen over solid, a coat of fresh snow spread across the ice between the banks where handfuls of conifers jutted, their branches clotted with packed snow. On the opposite side, carved in the face of a jagged bluff that stuck out underneath the vertical face of the Tuncan glacier, was the entrance to Youtl's palace. Thick beams like mining tunnel supports covered the entrance, yet seeing their goal so close filled the weary Arconans with newfound strength.

"We need to cross," Yucca said, stabbing at the ice with his ski stick. "Seems solid enough, but keep your spacing. The creek never freezes fully, but the ice is thick enough to carry."

"How long if we just go aroundt along the shore?" Tali asked pensively.

"We'll be skiing in the dark," he stated curtly.

"Alright," the Twi'lek acquiesced, emphasizing her commitment with a nod.

Yucca led the way as usual, the dogs eager to keep moving. With ample space between each crosser, they ventured onto the flat ice and started the crossing. The brackish water made for coarse ice, their skis gliding poorly while the familiar snaps and cracks from the frozen nature around them edged nerves to the breaking point.

A sudden crack froze all motion, Tali expecting the ground to give way under her weight at any moment, but nothing happened. Up ahead, Yucca continued on, seemingly unperturbed.

"The temperature's dropping. Ice is contracting again. It keeps doing that, don't worry," he called over his shoulder.

Tali glanced at Strong who seemed equally pensive about the explanation, but whether he had a dissenting opinion or not, he kept moving. The short crossing dragged on agonizingly slowly, but with each scraping shuffle of skis on salty ice, they inched their way closer to firm land.

A gust of wind burst forth out of nowhere, frozen branches clattering in its wake. The skies, already in twilight, darkened in a heartbeat as clouds drew in from all directions. Tali felt a deep wrongness in the Force, the same foreboding she'd sensed before and knew by heart.

"They're here," she hissed, eyes peering at the shoreline. "Ve're late."

The heavens rumbled, or so she at first thought, until the ground itself began to shake as masses of ice incomprehensible in weight shifted under the will of a forgotten god. Snow skittered down the glacier, rushing towards them in ever growing streams. But an avalanche was the least of their worries.

A sickening sound like breaking femurs crackled all around them, jagged lines snaking along the ice in a spreading spiderweb none of them could evade. A crack appeared under Tali's ski and she did not need the gift of precognition to realize her peril. Shifting her weight just as the other slab of ice broke loose, she watched the frozen raft break free and slip beneath the rest of the ice, drawn in by the frigid current.

"Move!" she yelled, though the others were already in motion. Up ahead, Yucca snapped commands to the pack, urging them on against the odds while Vicxa followed in close pursuit, thrusting with her ski sticks as fast as she could to keep up.

Ice slabs shattering all around them, the dogs tried their best to get to shore when the ground gave way underneath the sled. The river snatched it as soon as the skids hit the water, pulling it under with ferocious force. The dogs gave a panicked yelp, digging their claws into the ice, but against the river's current and the weight of the submerged sleigh, they could not hope to win.

"Hold on!" Yucca cried, throwing himself after the dogs and drawing a knife to cut the reins. The leather resisted, but only so long until cold steel prevailed. The dogs bolted the second they were loose, by now panicked by the rumbling ice and mortal peril. As they leapt off the ice float, the balance shifted, the prone Yucca sliding off the ice and into the river. Only a swift stab of his knife let him cling on, the river's grasp drawing at his skis, hungering for another victim.

Vicxa did not hesitate. Not for a moment. Cutting off the bindings of her own skis, she dashed after him, skipping across the unstable platforms to reach his side. On the very last landing, her foot slipped, landing squarely on her back with the sound of tearing fabric, but rolling over and crawling closer to the beleaguered Selenian.

"K-key... T-the key!" Yucca called out, pointing behind her.

She shot a glance at where he was pointing, spying the bronze cylinder rolling along the ice amidst the spilled contents of her pack. She couldn't reach it, and he was barely holding on, face white with hypothermia. Maybe she could save them both if she moved quick.

The choice was made for him when Yucca's grip failed and he slipped into the stream. Without hesitation, she dived after him, the cylinder rolling over the lip and plunging into the river.

"Vicxa!" Tali yelled after her, but it was already too late. Amber eyes scanning the frigid river for any signs of life, she felt panic grip her chest at watching her companions simply vanish in such a way. "T-they couldn't have..."

A flash of red strobed under the ice, a dozen meters downstream. With a whine of blaster fire, the ice burst open in a spray of shards, a grapnel flying out an instant later and latching onto the cap. Line tightening, a red metal arm emerged from the frozen depths, Vicxa holding the unconscious Yucca under her other arm while hauling them up by her S-5 blaster.

"H-he n-n-needs v-v-v-warmth!" Vicxa stuttered, lips blue from hypothermia. Her clothing soaked through, the pint-sized adventuress was losing body heat fast.

"Ve have to get to the other side," Tali said sharply, turning her attention to Strong. "Take off your skis andt jump as far as you can. I'll do the rest."

The Chiss knew better than to argue, though he hated this maneuver for how *useless* it made him look. All the same, he did as she asked, taking a running start to leap across the remaining distance. Behind her, Tali closed her eyes and focused, drawing upon the Force around her to wrap her mind around him and *propel* him through the air.

The landing was inelegant, but at least he was across and dry. Turning to the freezing pair downstream, Tali let her Force guide her step as she ran, bounding from slab to slab with the assured footing of a mountain goat even as each foothold gave under her momentum. Without fear, she skipped across the disintegrating ice cap, snatching Yucca's arm around her shoulder and pulling Vicxa up by her neck.

"Don't die on me now," she pleaded, shaking her up and awake enough to stumble the rest of the way while she hauled their unconscious guide. Clearing the river just before the rest of the ice collapsed and was washed away to sea, Strong grabbed the two casualties and bundled them up in what jackets he had in his bergen. Administering first aid to the unconscious Selenian, Strong managed to get him breathing again, but he was almost frozen solid.

"F-fire. W-we need fire," Vicxa croaked, shivering so bad her teeth were clattering.

Throwing caution to the wind, Tali looked to the nearest conifer and drew her saber-glaive. The bright yellow beam of plasma emerged with a hiss, its radiant glow illuminating the dark shoreline as she sized up the ancient tree and lopped it off with a singular strike.

The tree came down with a crashing violence, branches snapping in a cacophony of noise and billowing snow. Wasting no time, she stepped in at the fallen tree's base and thrust her weapon inside. Hissing, the plasma ate into the wood, instantly atomizing the biomatter and charring the surrounding wood to embers. In a slowly growing circle, she moved the blade outward until suddenly the wood burst into flame.

Hauling the two closer, Strong harvested branches like Yucca had the night before, forming a makeshift insulation for them with what little they had to hand. As the fire continued to consume the wood, Tali swiftly sliced the trunk up until a roaring blaze had formed, the heat starting to dry up their soaked clothes and breathe life into them.

As the situation calmed, and it seemed both of them would pull through, even Yucca showing signs of stirring while Vicxa no longer shivered *as much*, Tali took stock of what had happened. Craning her neck up toward the sheer face of the glacier, she could make out a spiraling vortex somewhere beyond. Her teeth were *itching* with the prodigious use of the Dark Side and she did not need two guesses as to what was likely happening.



They would need to hurry to get inside the palace before the so-called gods did, and that would require the key. *The key*. A price paid for a life saved. Still, they'd come this far. They couldn't just give up. That was not the Arconan way.

"We're heading in. I don't know what we can do, but we'll find a way to stop them from getting the Cloak," she told the recovering Mirialan.

"B-b-ut t-the k-k—"

"Key, yes, I know," Tali sighed. "But didn't the Matriarch say we wouldn't have gotten in with it either way?" She wasn't sure whether that was just hopeful thinking, but at this point, any hope would do. Nodding to Strong, the pair ventured into the tunnel while Vicxa and Yucca remained by the fire, slowly thawing off.

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The tunnel was crude and ancient, its superficial likeness to a mining tunnel surprisingly accurate. The beams held up a low ceiling, with runes carved into every surface and inlaid with flaking gold. Tali had no understanding of their meaning, but something told her they were of a religious or protective nature.

Reliefs, depicting scenes of Selenian legends she was passingly familiar with through the Selenian Edda, decorated the walls. The story unveiled, though in a way closer to what the Matriarch had spoken. Youtl's rise to power, saving of the planet, and eventual slip into madness. Yet, at the very end, the story added one final chapter.

The residents of Tunca, in their distinct dress and fur-hide cloaks, met with the southern peoples to exchange *something*. The relief was worn and she could not make out the details. Weapons, knowledge, something of importance was shared between the tribes and clearly in secret from the gods. As the southern people sailed to their homes, they carried with them dark-tipped spears and the gods in their heavens watched on with concern.

In the final panel, Youtl's palace was devoured by the ice, but a path was maintained by the Tuncans. They sealed the entrance with spells and wards, and threw a feast with music and dances. A sign caught her eye in the carving, some ancient chief and his shaman sharing it as they sealed the entrance to the palace; thumb to middle finger.

The tunnel ended abruptly, to a frozen disk of bronze carved full of runes. The sheer size of the portal, as tall as Strong and looking to be equally wide, beggared belief. That a primitive folk could have cast such a massive slab of bronze did not seem feasible, yet here it was, blocking their path.

**"This must be the entrance,"** Strong said, hefting his hammer. **"I do my best to respect other cultures, but we may not have a choice but to go through."**

Tali nodded, brandishing her saber-glaive. "I'll try to do the least amount of damage. We're already on shaky terms with the locals," she agreed, igniting the plasma blade that bathed the tunnel in a golden glow.

Carefully aiming the blade tip at the disk's center, she braced and pressed it forward, expecting to meet some resistance, but only minor. To her surprise, there was none and instead her weapon sank forth before the emitter shroud tapped off the bronze with a clang.

"What the...?" Tali stared at her deactivated saber. She had to double-check to make sure she was still holding the trigger stud depressed, and yet the weapon had shut off the moment it touched the bronze. A second try yielded the same result, the blade shorting out the instant it touched the bronzework.

"*Karabast*," she spat. "This can't be real."

**"Perhaps the ancients had a few tricks they did not share,"** Strong murmured, rolling his shoulders as he hefted his hammer. **"Delicate care was commendable, but forceful action may be the better option."**

Standing back, Tali let him do his thing, and with a mighty grunt he swung the electrohammer at the obstacle. The world erupted in cacophony as a reverberating soundwave blasted from the door like a giant gong had just been struck. Strong was thrown off his feet by the percussive impact, Tali clutching her earcones in agony as a gust of ice and snow coughed out of the tunnel entrance.

By the fire, Vicxa looked on with concern, startled by the sound.

"T-think they'll be o-k-kay in there?"

"Not the faintest," Yucca replied dourly, accenting his opinion with a sneeze.

"I don't t-trust those two not to m-make a mess of it," she said, finishing drying up her jacket. Thankfully, this was not her first venture into the wilds and she'd picked sensibly quick-drying garments.

Yucca nodded, wringing his hands in the warm radiance of the blazing fire, and pulled off his tunic. "Here, you'll freeze to death without it."

The Mirialan felt like arguing, but the locals weren't fond of having their minds changed once set, and his gaze was like solid stone. "Thanks," said with a nod, donning the colorful tunic and hurrying down the tunnel.

She found Tali and Strong still confounded by the doorway, plasma burns around its edges hinting at some outside-the-box thinking by the Twi'lek and, judging by the molten handprints of prodigious size, some hands-on attempts to muscle it open by the Chiss. All efforts had, however, failed.

"Ve're not getting past," Tali said, exasperated. "I can *fee/* there is some alchemical vardt on the door, but ve can't get past."

**“Did you try moving it with your, um, mind?”** Strong suggested, even after all the years he’d been around Force Users, finding it hard to put to words their abilities.

“I didt, but it’s like trying to grasp onto a greasedt bar of soap—vith chopsticks.”

Vicxa considered the obstacle and her surroundings. This wasn’t the first temple or tomb she’d raided—or *aggressively archeologised*, as she preferred to put it—and something of a pattern had formed in her mind on how the ancient peoples had designed their forts. Often built during times of great upheaval, and painfully aware of how easily spoken records could be lost or forgotten, it was not inconceivable they’d left some clues to its operation.

Returning to the wall carvings, she traced her metal digits along the inscriptions, trying to understand the full picture and what it conveyed. In modern times, useless detail was cheap to place into artwork, but when every chip had to be dug out by dull tools and weary hands, few things were left to chance.

Her eyes caught the gesture, thumb to middle finger, and as she looked over the musicians in the final relief, they all seemed to hold the same note, hands identically aligned on their flutes. Flutes, short stubby things by the looks of it, short like—

“I have an idea,” she spoke up, catching the Chiss and Twi’lek off guard as they argued about what to try next. Pulling out her heirloom whistle, she blocked the holes with thumb and middle finger, before sounding the tone.

The entire tunnel reverberated with the sound, amplified by the same harmonics that had blasted out when Strong had struck the door. But the sound was grating and harsh, off key at the very least. Yet the reaction gave her hope and she pulled out her knife.

“Vait, Vix, that’s your mother’s—” Tali protested, seeing what she was about to do.

“I know,” she replied. “And I know what I’m doing.”

Cutting into the wood to shorten the whistle until it was as long as the ‘key’ had been, she covered the holes once more and let out a much higher sound, now clear and sharp. The resonant wave appeared almost immediately, but this time it was amplified ever further as the sound bounced off the tunnel walls in ways seemingly impossible for a primitive peoples to have predicted. The wall shook as the bronze disk began to vibrate in harmony, the frozen metal buckling and bending under the strain before cracking open along the middle. Both door halves collapsed out of their sockets, unveiling a pristine walkway that led to a glacial palace inside an impossible cavern. A cavern whose roof had been torn open by foul magicks.

Tali and Strong looked on impressed as the Mirialan stowed her whistle, both lost for words. Vicxa simply drew her blaster pistol and pressed on by, heading towards the palace at a brisk jog.

“Come on, slowpokes, they have a head start!” she hollered at them. As one, the trio was on the move once more.

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“At last,” the olive-skinned Human mused, her sapphire blue eyes gazing hungrily at the pristine cloak of silk and silver that stood at the end of the throne room. “Our brother will be pleased to don his full regalia after so many years.”

“Are you still sure this is the best idea?” Eulauti muttered, the Nautolan suppressing a shiver of unnatural cold as he recalled why Youtl had earned the nickname Mad King. “We could simply use it ourselves, why do we even need him for any of this?”

“He was a useful tool once,” Alla’su spat, “he can be so again—one last time.”

“I don’t like this,” Eulauti grumbled, grinding the shaft of his trident against the cold stone. “We could have chosen anyone else.”

“They’d take more to awaken than him, and our powers are not what they used to be—else I’d have cracked these wards like an egg the moment we got here,” Alla’su cursed, continuing her alchemical ritual without pause.

The Cloak hung on a cross beam beside Youtl’s throne, but the stones around it were carved with golden runes that proved vexingly potent. Even for a goddess of creation. A mangled Caxquette whimpered by its mistress’ side, having tried, and failed, to claw its way through before bursting into flame for its efforts. Had she not loved her pets as much as she did, she’d have let Eulauti let it out of its misery. But given time, she could mend it back to health.

“You gave them too much,” Eulauti continued complaining. “They could have bound Youtl with a fraction of the knowledge you gave them. And now we’re paying the price of your hubris.”

“I gave them crumbs off my table and nothing more,” Alla’su hissed. “Their shamans made these runes by themselves. But then again, none of us were wise enough to foresee how crafty our treacherous subjects could be. We should have culled their shamans when we had the chance.”

“It will be my pleasure to hunt them down, or what few are left,” Eulauti smiled, licking his lips.

“Very good, brother, now give me your hand. I have need of you.”

Eulauti did as she bade, stretching out his arm over the sigil she’d carved into the floor. Knowing full well what was to come, it did little to ease the pain as Alla’su’s dagger sliced into his flesh to draw his potent blood into the circle. She chanted in an ancient tongue that made the walls creak and teeth itch, the runes around the throne burning bright like molten metal. As her voice grew to a mighty boom, far surpassing her diminutive stature, the stones began to crack and pop like light bulbs, shattering under the sheer might of the channeled Force energy assaulting the barrier. By the time the last of Eulauti’s blood vanished and the ritual sigil dulled, the barrier had collapsed entirely, leaving the way open for their prize.

His blood clotting swiftly, Eulauti let the pain of the cut strengthen his resolve as he picked up his trident and advanced on the throne. In the old days, he might have once or twice admitted a twinge of jealousy at the mere mortal who'd reached apotheosis. That same buried jealousy salivated at the idea of donning his fabulous Cloak and, for as long as it was viable, wielding the powers of *two* gods.

**“Not so fast, you overgrown mollusk!”**

Eulauti could have recognized that voice anywhere and his blood ran hot with rage as he remember the bloody insult he'd been dealt beneath the waves. Turning around with a vengeance, electricity crackling at the tips of his trident, he glared at the meddling Chiss who walked into view from the shadow of a carved pillar.

“You!” he roared. “You dare intervene in the plans of gods?!”

“Ve dare, andt much more,” Tali said as she walked up and light her saber with a *snap-hiss*.

“Ah, I was beginning to worry that none of your misbegotten kind would even attempt to stop us,” Alla'su purred. “It would have been quite unsporting to so utterly outmaneuver you. I'm glad you chose to provide us with this light entertainment before our victory.” She drew a second dagged that pulsed with a sickly purple glow, eyeing the Twi'lek with violent intent.

“Ve'dt never hope to disappoint,” Tali quipped, before bursting forward like quicksilver, Force flowing through her as she flowed through space. Alla'su's glib reply died in her lips as she was pressed back by the ferocious attack, daggers hissing against plasma as she was forced on the defensive, still weakened by the ritual.

Eulauti eyed his opponent, sizing him up though knowing already fully well his abilities. The trident in his hand crackled, forks of lightning lancing out from its tips, but striking the energized shaft of the Chiss' electrohammer. Gritting his teeth, Strong braced against the impact, smelling ozone and charcoal as the attack grounded into his weapon. This time, he would finish what he'd started.

Seeing his attack ineffectual, Eulauti growled and stepped closer, lowering his trident to meet him head on. They had unsettled scores, and he was eager to repay them.

“Ignore him!” Alla'su shouted, ducking under Tali's lightsaber and driving her back with a vicious riposte across her midriff. “The Cloak! Remember what we came here for!” With a sharp whistle, she sicked her Caxquette at him, the injured beast obeying its mistress without hesitation. It pained her to ask so much, but they'd come too far to lose now.

Eulauti hesitated, but acquiesced, turning tail to rush for the Cloak. Seeing his enemy retreating, Strong sat off to pursue, only to be tackled by the charging Caxquette. Man and beast tumbled across the cobbled floor, slamming into a pillar with such force the roof shook with a cascade of falling shingles.

A wicked smile crept on the Nautolan's lips as he watched Alla'su's pet snap and claw at the blue menace, the smirk soon wiped from his lips as a stubborn right hook slammed into its snarling maw. The Caxquette's roars melting to whimpers, he snarled in disgust. These bastards just did not know when to quit.

Hurrying up the steps to the throne, he reached for the Cloak when a thought crossed his mind. Last time they'd fought these two, there had been a third meddler. Surely they could not be so predictable? His senses flared, hand rising up on its own accord into mid-air, suddenly in the perfect place to curl around the neck of a Mirialan swinging in from above to snatch the Cloak from his grasp.

*"Uuurk!"*

Vicxa choked as Eulauti's digits dug into her neck, squeezing her throat with enough force to break bone. She kicked and flailed, beating ineffectually at the Nautolan's midriff with her boots, but to no avail. She hated fighting Force users so much.

"Cease your pointless resistance!" Eulauti shouted. "If her life means anything to you."

Strong tossed the wounded Caxquette off of him, the beast limping away to lick its wounds, while Tali broke contact with Alla'su, both women panting hard and glaring daggers at the other.

"Throw down your arms and beg for forgiveness," Eulauti commanded. "For we can be a god of merc—*huumph?!*"

The Nautolan choked as a sudden blanket of silver cloth wrapped around its head, tightening fast and obscuring his view.

"Nobody. Chokes me. Without. Consent!" Vicxa croaked, her anger coursing through the Cloak and into its very weave. The silver thread, luxurious and reflective, suddenly burst to life with all the intensity of her emotion. Wrapped around Eulauti's face, the effect was instantaneous and horrific.

Screaming in agony, the Nautolan clawed at his eyes, dropping the Mirialan as he tried to pull the Cloak off his face—or gouge out his own eyes as searing light burned his retinas. Holding on for dear life, Vicxa rode him like a wild wampa, the Eulauti trashing and bucking to throw her off, but the persistent huntress clinging to her one trump card.

Shocked, Alla'su could not believe her eyes, barely hearing the warning of impending doom when Tali's saber blade sliced past where her head had been a heartbeat prior. Forced on the back foot, she threw up her best defense, but the Twi'lek was relentless, driving her back and—into the Chiss' path.

At the last moment, she recognized her peril and chose a different path. Dropping a dagger to free up a hand, she fanned a trio of throwing knives at the Chiss, catching him in the upper arm. Twisting the Twi'lek's saber aside, she dove in close to slam an elbow into her

chest, drawing a grunt of pain from her stubborn opponent, and buying her enough space to turn her dagger on herself.

Muttering a hasty incantation, she cut her own arm, divine blood seeping onto the stones as dark energy blossomed around her. Lightning striking through the rent in the glacier above, the gods vanished in a flash of brimstone, Vicxa slumping to the floor still clutching Youtl's Cloak in her hands.

"Come back and fight me, you frakkers!" she cried after them, shaking her red fist at the retreating foes.

Plucking knives from his arm, Strong hefted his hammer anew as if expecting a follow-up that never came. "**Are they gone, lady Sroka?**"

Tali closed her eyes and let loose her senses, waves of consciousness rippling outward like a pebble thrown in a pond. They lapped against many things, but none that wished her harm.

"They are," she sighed, heart still pounding. "I can't believe ve didt it."

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"I can't believe you did it," the Matriarch gasped. "In all my years... Youtl's Cloak, as real as night and day."

"Ve thank you for allowing our passage," Tali said with a bow, the bandaged Strong beside her mimicking the gesture.

The old woman ran her fingers along the fabric, feeling it with the fascination of a maiden trying for her wedding gown. With a weary sigh, she let the garment go, letting the Mirialan stow it away in her pack.

"What now, then?" the Matriarch croaked. "Will you bring these spoils to your liege and be handsomely rewarded for your plunder?"

"Ve vere toldt to safeguardt the Cloak. Ve vill bring it back to the Citadel."

She nodded sagely, mockingly. "And when your kin learns of its power, what then? Will you keep it safe from new gods, as well as the old? Another war in heaven on Selen's soil?"

Tali did not like her pointed questions, but they struck a disturbing chord. Rhy lance had always been fascinated with the Force. He was a 'mere mortal' and if pride and hubris were to be matched with wisdom and skill, he was surely the crux of them all. A second Youtl, just waiting to happen.

"Vhat wouldt you have us do?" she asked, voice strained.

“The time time of gods has passed,” the Matriarch said solemnly. “Great heroes of old have earned their rest. Perhaps it’s best their legends become legend, and our verses the same.” She sighed, shoulders sagging, and in that instant Tali feel the full weight of her years. “I am tired of keeping the watch. I wish to see my sisters. But as long as it remains, my watch must endure. Someone must remember.”

Tali glanced at Strong, then at Vicxa. The latter shrugged, the former looked away. They would not tell what happened next. She nodded at the Mirialan, who produced the Cloak anew and held it up in her hands.

The Matriarch reached out and ran her fingers along the weave, between the fibers of black and silver, until she plucked out a single golden thread. With a soft gasp and a weary smile, she pulled thread from the loom, the weave coming undone before their eyes and scattering in ashes upon the snow. Next to the still body of the last Selenian shaman.

Around them, the drums began to beat one final time, and high in the heavens, the Aurora Borealis shone brighter than the moon.