

*“Do you want to get high? Real funny lek-head, real funny,”* Vicxa Varis grumbled as she hammered another piton into the sheer rock face of the windswept mountain with the back of her cybernetic hand and looped the rope around it. Pulling hard, she tested its hold before daring to place true weight upon it and scale higher still. Below her was nothing but a sheer drop for a hundred meters—the rest swallowed by clouds.

The Mirialan wasn't *too* perturbed, however. Even if the prospect of drug induced hallucinations was a hard offer to surpass, she begrudgingly admitted she'd never scaled a mountain for a dead drop before and at altitudes like this—she paused momentarily as loose rock shifted under her boot and skipped down into the abyss—all drops were deadly.

The spot couldn't be far now. For the better part of three hours, she'd spent clinging to the mountainside to reach it and though she never counted scratches and bruises on her adventures, there were limits to her endurance as well. Her muscles ached for rest and the cold wind was sapping what little warmth remained under her anorak, the rest fleeing from numbed fingertips into the stone itself. Only a single part of her wasn't freezing, and that was simply because she'd not felt anything with the hand since she lost it.

Grunting, the plucky adventuress swung a hand over the lip of the ridge and pulled, expending every remaining iota of energy she had to pull herself up and over. Feet scrabbling for purchase, dislodging chips that vanished into the gaping abyss below, she managed to scramble over and roll onto a ledge that offered much-needed respite.

An oddly flat and well-tended ledge, she realized, as her weary back lay flat against the stone that lacked all the usual discomforts of natural terrain. Rearing her head to look around, she felt her stomach drop. *“Oh frak.”*

Letting her gaze wander, she realized she had managed to scale onto a distant parapet of what looked like a neo-classical citadel. Far below, she could spy the courtyard and its fountains and pleasure gardens. Beyond, alcoved walkways and crenelations where hooded figures shuffled along on their mysterious errands.

Tali had warned her about this place, highlighting that under no circumstances should she venture within its perimeters or especially make her presence known to its inhabitants. Apparently, they were some flavor of cultists related to the Force—as if there were any other kind. They did seem perfectly harmless from a distance, but appearances could be deceiving, she'd learned as much from the last batch of Force cultists running amok on Selen.

Luckily, it seemed her presence had thus far remained unnoticed, so she could still make good on half of Tali's warnings. Pulling out the tracker fob she'd been issued, she quickly deduced the direction she was to go and to her eternal chagrin it of course went *up*. Thankfully, scaling the battlements was far easier going than struggling up a mountain and though cover was next to nonexistent, she managed swift progress along the narrow walkway that snaked along the compound's upper limits.

Several hundred stairs later, the winded Mirialan reached the peak of the battlements. The tracker fob flashed and beeped so excitedly she was afraid it might betray her position, but it

seemed the cultists were more interested in their books and rituals to bother posting regular guard rotations this high up. After all, who'd be so stupid as to scale a mountain just to get here?

Running her fingers along the underside of a particular decorative fixture, she felt something shift. With a gentle tug, a stone slab slid out of place to unveil a hollowed out nook within. A tiny data drive lay inside, the vital intelligence finding a new home within Vicxa's anorak as she carefully replaced the stone to maintain the illusion of its integrity. None would be the wiser.

"Hey, you! What are you doing here?" a sharp voice inquired, pressing for an answer.

Acting on raw instinct, Vicxa dropped to a knee and drew her S-5, the blaster pistol already set to stun and discharging a ring of blue energy at the source of the voice before she'd even taken in who'd been addressing her. Her eyes went wide as the stun ring made contact, knocking the lanky academic off his feet and sending the food tray he'd brought with him clattering across the stonework.

By his shocked expression, the man had been more surprised to find her than the other way around, that shock now frozen onto his paralyzed features as he teetered and toppled, crashing against the battlements and flipping over the lip.

"*Karabast*," Vicxa spat, realizing she might have been able to talk her way out of an academic's lunch break, and dived in after him. Cultist or not, he didn't deserve to die on account of his choice of reading group alone.

Tucking into as aerodynamic an arrow as she could, Vicxa hurtled through the air towards the onrushing courtyard below, its immaculately pedicured gardens offering scant promise of a soft landing from such height. The cultist's fluttering cloak was distinctly less aerodynamic, retarding his fall just enough for the Mirialan to catch up and grab a firm hold of his wrist before loosing a grapnel from her blaster into the citadel proper and bracing for the pain.

The zip-line twanged taut in a heartbeat, the servo motor of her ascension gun whining in protest as the combined inertia of the two was suddenly and violently brought to a halt. Gritting her teeth, Vicxa stifled a cry of pain as she felt the tethers of her prosthetic pull at marrow and bone, the sudden jolt threatening to rip the entire arm off the meat. Still, she'd survived worse.

Flicking the motor in reverse, Vicxa descended with her unconscious cargo suspended below her until she was close enough to the ground to safely drop him into a discrete shrubbery just at the citadel's side. Sheer luck had kept her unnoticed thus far and she had no desire to press it further. Taking aim skyward once more, she fired another grapnel and ascended the battlements, leaving the cultist to no doubt thank whatever Force apparitions he worshiped for his survival.