

**Tekpantli**  
**Selen**  
**41 ABY**

“Get down!”

A tossed javelin passed overhead, passing the space occupied by the Mirialan’s head only an instant ago. Tucking into a roll, Vicxa Varis found cover behind the sturdy trunk of a palm tree as another stone tipped projectile thunked into it out of the greenery.

“Holdt them off, I vill hunt down their leader,” Tali Sroka called out, her golden saber-glaive swatting javelins out of the sky like superlative ease. In a burst of purple lekku and whipping white robes, the Qel-Droman Quaestor had dashed off into the thick of the jungle, eyes squarely on the abominable deity that had toyed with their minds not hours earlier.

“Wait up!” Vicxa called after her, but the Jedi had already vanished out of sight, only the humming of her lightsaber still audible though swiftly fading. She cursed her fickle companion under her breath and pulled out her blaster pistol, feeling its weight in her cybernetic arm. The worn weapon had seen much, and though it pained her to admit it had taken lives, she still preferred to keep it on stun by default. Hardly seemed fair against javelins and stone knives to begin with.

Peering cautiously from behind the palm trunk, Vicxa scanned the environment with keen eyes. This was not her first time in a jungle, and although her green hue helped her blend in, the locals always tended to have an advantage. Her ears perked as a twig snapped to her left, blaster trained in the direction of the sound at the speed of thought. A faint rustling could be heard just beyond a thicket of ferns not ten meters from her.

No. The ambush had started with absolute precision, and if it hadn’t been for Tali’s preternatural warning, she would have ended up skewered by the eye. The locals weren’t amateurs. They would not make such mistakes, *unless...*

Vicxa swerved around in the nick of time, catching the obsidian dagger aimed at her throat with the barrel shroud of her blaster. Chips of black stone broke free from the assailant’s weapon as it was batted aside, a deep gash in the S-5’s side testament to its sharpness. The local lunged for her again, his skinny frame moving with surprising swiftness as he ducked down low to provide an even smaller target.

Vicxa had to pirouette aside the charging youth, dodging his ferocious attack while blocking the serrated knife once more. He screamed as he passed, eyes sharp as pin pricks, following her every move and searching for an opening. Two more cuts followed, stone striking sparks off her cybernetic arm while she continued to back away, not offered enough space to level her weapon for a shot.

The man screeched in frustration, clearly annoyed at the superiority of durasteel over stone, but did not relent. He kept slashing, though clearly holding back, driving her further away from the palm tree and into a clearing by a narrow stream. His eyes locked with hers for the entire time, except the very end.

That moment of hesitation betrayed his plan.

Vicxa caught the motion, realizing her peril just moments before the trap was sprung. A feline creature as black as night and slick as oil leapt out of the ferns with claws out, ready to latch onto her back and drag her down. Instead, it sailed right into a bright blue halo of stunning energy.

The creature let out a yelp and slumped to the ground in a limp heap, her assailant letting out a tortured cry of anguish as the body hit the dirt. Half expecting to feel the stinging kiss of an obsidian blade in her guts, Vicxa stared in shock as the man simply rushed past her and knelt down beside the unconscious creature, dropping his knife to cradle the animal in his arms while cooing soothing sounds.

For a moment, the pair stared down the barrel of Vicxa's blaster pistol, the man glaring at her with streaks of tears down his cheeks. Then, she lowered her weapon.

"It's alright," Vicxa said as softly as she could. "He's not dead. Not dead." She shook her head. "Stun. He's stunned." She mimed being hit in the head and getting knocked out. "Still breathing. Still alive." She thumped her chest in a heartbeat pace, then gestured at the creature, beckoning.

The man, anguished and suspicious, but mildly curious, leaned his ear against the animal's chest and listened. Fresh tears welled from his eyes as he hugged the animal close, nuzzling it affectionately in enraptured joy. If Vicxa didn't have second thoughts about fighting the natives before, she was definitely having them now.

"Look, we only came here to explore. We didn't mean to invade or hurt you," she said, maintaining her distance as non-threatening as possible.

The man looked up from his pet and for the first time his eyes seemed more *human*. No longer mad pin pricks, but a calmer mahogany brown. "Gratimony," he spoke, the syllables flowing as fluently as boulders in a landslide.

It took a moment for the Mirialan to realize what he'd tried to say, but when it dawned upon her that he had some passing familiarity with the Selenian dialect of Basic, she could not suppress the smile tugging at her lips. A common language, now they were getting somewhere.

"He will wake up soon," she said, gesturing at the animal. "No hurt, only sleep."

The man nodded, cautiously rising to his feet while cradling the animal in his arms. "Kinditude at foe-folk? You are premier. Other-kin hurt-burn-kill. Outsider only pain."

Vicxa nodded, the smile vanishing from her face. "Outsiders not gentle. No words. Only pain," she agreed. As if to accent that very sentiment, she heard a tree getting sliced in twain by a lightsaber in the distance, its creaking fall heralded by the keening caws of frightened birds. "Me different," she insisted. "Me Vicxa." She gestured at herself.

“Ki'ayk,” the man replied cautiously, clearly not trusting of the outsider but willing to at least exchange names. The stirring of his pet in his arms ended their exchange, however, as the animal groggily opened its eyes and whined, confused and disoriented. Ki'ayk, overjoyed, held the critter in his arms like a precious infant before slowly letting it down on all fours once it became obvious the pet seemed less enthused about the hugs than he.

Legs barely holding it upright, the animal turned towards Vicxa and hiss-snarled, the sound unmistakably caxqettish, though a far cry from the blood curdling howls she'd witnessed in Tunca. Ki'ayk swiftly shushed his pet, reassuring it she meant no harm.

For her part, Vicxa knelt down and fished out a ration wafer from her pack, offering it as a treat to the suspicious animal. Up close, and moderately sized, they didn't seem quite as bad as when threatening to rip your guts out in one swipe.

The animal sniffed the wafer curiously, sensing its nutritional purpose. Eyes narrowing, it pounced, snatched the wafer from Vicxa's hand and made a run for the undergrowth, hind legs struggling to keep up as the stun slowly wore off. Ki'ayk chuckled at its antics, sighing contently as his pet seemed mostly back to normal.

“Follow,” he said, gesturing downstream. “Share equals.”

Vicxa had no time to protest, or even inquire further, when Ki'ayk had already sat off along the riverbed, traversing swiftly along the water flow. Casting one wary glance over her shoulder in the direction of the sounds of continued violence, she took a deep breath and followed. Tali surely could handle herself. It wasn't like she was the *only* Arconan on this island, right?

Ki'ayk led her further into the thick of the jungle, dexterously scaling fallen trees and boulders that crossed the water's path. Keeping pace worked up a sweat, but when they finally emerged into a small secluded clearing, she was not many paces behind, a feat which clearly impressed the man.

“Vicxa not statue. Move like monkey,” he stated.

“Thank you,” she huffed, “*I guess.*” Catching her breath, she took in the small clearing and the dilapidated village of stone dwellings that occupied it. Squat and rectangular, the huts had been constructed out of black volcanic rock, shaped in the ways of the ancient temples though much more crudely.

Few signs of life were about, the village itself devoid of people and only some penned livestock mulling about at the edge of the settlement. The thatched roofs had collapsed in many places, only a single home still having any semblance of care to its appearance, but even so the jungle had not claimed the place.

Brow furrowing, the more she focused on that particular detail the more it chafed her. Looking around, the edge of the thick jungle seemed to begin almost like a wall, while the clearing of the settlement was devoid of all but the lowliest of grasses. The same distance

repeated all around, except near particularly damaged dwellings whose walls had collapsed by age. There, vines crawled along the stonework and the jungle encroached further, but daring not violate this invisible barrier.

“Come,” Ki’ayk beckoned, urging her to follow to the one clearly lived-in hut.

When she passed out of the jungle and onto the grass, she did feel mild unease tingling in her teeth, like walking too close past the ion engine of a landspeeder. Still, nothing seemed to happen and so she carried on. The effect probably only affected plant life, she reasoned as the animals seemed perfectly normal.

Ki’ayk, having vanished inside the dwelling while she dawdled outside, emerged once more with a gourd in each hand and a smile on his lips. He led her down to the center of the village where rows of stone cut benches and tables still lay, though most weather worn and crusted over by age.

Offering her one of the gourds, the man eagerly gestured for her to take a seat, finding his own spot rather swiftly across the table that had once probably seated fifty people with ease. Now, only one spot seemed polished by repeated use.

Vicxa accepted the offering and sat down opposite him, inspecting the hard shelled vegetable that nevertheless sloshed within. Before she could inquire more about it, Ki’ayk held his own out, gripped the stem and twisted, pulling out the disguised cork with a low pop. He held out the gourd and spoke a word in native Selenian before drinking deeply from the vessel.

Vicxa butchered the word in response, having only caught half of the syllables, but made up for her poor manners by eagerly partaking in the exotic beverage. Its taste was sour and lumpy, but the sting of alcohol was definitely present, as well as the cloying sweetness of pulped fruit.

“Mmm, delicious,” Vicxa smiled, chunks of fermented fruit caught in her teeth.

“Warrior greeting,” Ki’ayk explained. “Good hunt.”

She nodded and took another sip, the flavor hardly improving on the second go. “We also share drink after hunt,” she said, fishing out a dented hip flask that had miraculously survived the marooning. Unscrewing the top, she took a sip first to show it was safe, then offered the canteen to Ki’ayk.

The man accepted the metallic container, fascinated by it alone as he traced its sides with his fingertips before daring to taste its contents. A spray of cheap brandy erupted from his mouth amidst a hacking cough and furious spitting. A few gulps from the gourd washed the worst of it away, but his eyes still watered when he handed the flask back to Vicxa.

“Metal men in metal birds, drink metal fire,” he complained.

“Trust me,” Vicxa chuckled, politely bemused. “It does get better with time.” She wiped the lips of the flask with her sleeve and took another swig before putting it away while her host kept to his gourd.

“Do you hunt often?” she inquired. “Many reasons to drink?”

Ki’ayk shook his head, sullen. “Yes hunt. Hunt with As’lak. As’lak no drink. No feast from hunting.”

“Who is As’lak?” she asked, to which he gestured at the roof of the hut behind her where the inky black caxat sat and tended to its fur.

“I see,” Vicxa nodded. “Other tribes? Hunt with them? There are others on the island, yes?”

Ki’ayk considered the question, nodding half-heartedly.

“Tribes, yes. Ki’ayk lonely tribe. No hunt with others. As’lak Ki’ayk’s tribe,” he managed, struggling with his limited vocabulary.

She nodded, thoughtfully, taking another polite sip of the gourd. “You don’t fit in with the others? You walk your own path?”

He averted his gaze, but nodded. “Own path. Ki’ayk’s tribe different. Not in favor of Maustli.”

She furrowed her brow, recognizing the name of their deity. “Do you mean you do not like Maustli? Or that she does not like you?”

“Yes.”

*That clears things up wonderfully.* She thought to herself, piecing together theories of how the tribe might have come to be so isolated while the others seemed to thrive. Having such magical stonework to keep the jungle at bay must have been a useful talent to share with the others...

She paused, leaning in closer to the table and brushing its surface with her cybernetic. The metal scraped along the stone, clearing away centuries of neglect to reveal symbols engraved in it so shallow they were almost imperceptible. Yet the shape was familiar. Painfully so.

“You worship Alla’su.”

Ki’ayk nodded, almost ashamed. “No more. Tribe did. Blessed by Goddess Alla’su. Came to teach others. Showed power of Alla’su’s blessing. Others chose Maustli. Tribe lived alone while Goddess slept. Soon forgotten.”

Almost like sensing his distress, As’lak deftly descended from the rooftop and leapt into his lap, curling up and *purring* in a wet manner. Ki’ayk brushed the pet’s coat with the back of his hand and cleared his throat, taking another glug from the gourd.

Vicxa mimicked the gesture, finding the taste more agreeable despite its persistently slimy mouth feel. “We can offer you travel back to the main islands. I have seen Alla’su’s temples. Maybe there are others—”

Ki’ayk raised his hand. “Other-kin far too generous. This is not how Ki’ayk’s tribe ends. Alla’su is passed. Her magic crumbles,” he gestured at the broken buildings. “When it ends, we will be together forever,” He stated, scratching As’lak’s ear. “Then we will hunt and drink together. When we are of one form once again.”

Vicxa leaned back in her seat, momentarily forgetting it had no seat rest and almost falling flat on her back. The way he described it, it almost sounded like As’lak hadn’t always been a caxette. Or that he would be so forever.

A booming explosion ended their conversation abruptly, a fireball blossoming over the tree canopy like a second sun. Flocks of wild birds scattered into the wind, followed by a surreal stillness. It broke from the static of her ear piece.

*“Vicxa, are you there? Come in, we have subduedt the target.”*

She raised her wrist to her chin and replied. “Subtle. Does anything not end with an explosion on this planet?”

*“You’re one to talk.”*

“—point,” she admitted, feeling the weight of det tape and sonic imploders in her backpack.

*“Where are you? Come to the temple, the others are here.”*

“I’m, uh...” she looked at Ki’ayk and As’lak, the man staring at this magic display before him while the caxat purred idly in his lap. “...just enjoying some local produce. Cheers!” she said and emptied the slimy dregs of her gourd.