

Cold.

That was all she felt when stepping into the corridor, its curved and looming walls like slightly parted lips in a toothless smile. Black, burnt stone embraced the shadows and formed a tunnel for insects to burrow in. It was all cold. Cold air, cold marble, cold echoes as her boots made subtle clicks against the chiseled walkway.

There was never a hint of warmth in these places. One would think, given that the entrance to any of these damn caverns or vaults or dens would be typically deemed, “a mouth,” that it would exude some form of heat much like an actual mouth would. That word needed to be changed. Perhaps she was entering the “dislocated jaw” of the vault. Or the “stiff maw,” perhaps having already achieved rigor mortis. Or maybe just the “opening,” or “entry.” That would do away with the implication of anything warm to begin with. It was more clinical that way, and consequently, more accurate.

Enough overthinking. It was wasteful to her these days.

It had not taken much to do away with the guards who were supposed to protect the entrance - emphasis on *supposed to*. For such a seemingly fantastic vault, it certainly lacked in capable security. Two grunts standing post with lousy blasters, two grunts toppled with some Force-aided punches. There was no puzzle to unlock for the door, no password or secret code, no hidden traps or barricades. Nope - just a couple of random guys to render unconscious, and the Vault of Erised was open to all.

That suited Ronovi just fine. As she walked toward the door leading into the vault, she already had an inkling of what it would provide her. After all, her deepest, fondest desire was meant to be tucked away within the vault’s walls. Let it never be said, she thought to herself, that the great drinker wasn’t easy to please. Perhaps a swimming pool-sized vat of whiskey awaited her. Obviously, it would have to be Whyren’s Reserve. She’d recruit members of her clan to bring buckets and barrels to dredge up the stuff and load it onto her ship. She had always wanted a guaranteed lifetime supply.

She let her scarred palm settle on the chilled surface of the door and snorted when it gave easily. The hinges squealed in protest as the door swung open, and Ronovi’s snickers became louder laughs. Whoever had designed such an allegedly prestigious vault certainly didn’t seem to care about who broke into it. They hadn’t invested in *anything* that would have *remotely* impeded the Epicanthix from getting in. This was like a romp in the meadow, only instead of bright green grass and flowers

and trickling sunlight, she was instead cavorting in a dark hallway leading to a probably even darker chamber full of Sith-knows-what.

Ah, well. It was an adventure. And again, Ronovi could always use more whiskey.

The open door led to a small flight of stairs, and the small flight of stairs ended in a rather small room with just as black and cold walls as the initial entryway. Ronovi let her eyes scan for another passage, or another door, but there was none. She frowned. She let her Force senses emerge like wires from her body, probing the space and checking for live currents. But this seemed to be it. A tiny, empty chamber with not a single treasure or item to be found in it.

Had she come to the wrong vault? Had it all be an elaborate trick performed on her? Who did she have to maim to find answers?

She walked toward an adjacent wall and again let her hand rest flat against the stone. She could feel her own pulse radiating off the surface, before that, too, seemed to grow frigid. She nearly expected her breath to freeze in the air as she exhaled, her fingers tracing little outlines of amorphous shapes. She tried again to sense something - *anything* - leading into another chamber or space that would yield more than this. Something that led into the true vault. The *real* vault. If there even was one to begin with.

And then she heard his voice.

“Scavenging around for trophies?” he asked with a deep, hoarse chuckle. “Feels frivolous, if you ask me.”

Ronovi smelled the dry tobacco on him before she even turned around. His gray stubble shone like silver despite the dim lighting, his smile above him teasing and playful. He stood a good two or so inches above her - he always remained taller than her, no matter how much she wished she had beaten him in that competition - and kept his hands shoved in the deep pockets of his work slacks. Slight stains of fuel and ash could be seen on his tunic and waistcoat. The hair on his head stood on end, stark white. His eyes were the same watery green they had always been, set deep in his brown skin.

It was as if he had just finished a day at the shipyards, and he had returned home for the night, odors of chain-smoked cigarillas and engine residue baked into him. Even his elbows remained dusty as if he had just finished repairing a YT-1300 or a Firespray. The prodigal mechanic. The Epicanthix who

had never conquered, only settled. And there he was, beaming at his daughter, as if this were a simple and standard family reunion.

The Proconsul's jaw tightened as she absorbed his presence. He shrugged his shoulders mischievously, showing teeth now as he grinned. Ronovi could feel her heartbeat quicken.

"No," she muttered. "No, please. This isn't funny."

Zane Tavisæn, unscarred from the freighter crash that had killed him over eleven years ago, laughed. He shook his head as if to ward off flies and sighed.

"You've wanted to see me again for a long time, haven't you?"

"This isn't real," spat Ronovi, stepping back. "You're not here. You died in Eden City in 25 ABY. You are not here."

"You've missed me." Zane nodded sadly. "I've missed you, too."

He removed his right hand from his pocket and held it out. The fingertips were blackened from managing ship parts, and the rest of the skin was speckled with tobacco stains. Ronovi did not touch it. However, she could feel, for the first time, heat from him even from a distance. *Warmth*. She stayed rooted to where she stood, her tongue working feverishly against her teeth. She would not touch him. She would not succumb to this delusion.

"You're telling me," she sputtered, "that my ultimate desire was to see my father again?"

"It's never as simple as that."

She felt her touch on her before she could snap her head back. Now, she didn't want to look. Familiar fingers smoothed the creases on her coat as it fell naturally across her shoulders. Warm, warm breath settled on the nape of her neck. Lips maneuvered to bare skin and rested there. Hot lips. Trembling hands.

"Chrai?"

"You have no idea where I am these days, do you?" her ex-lover asked, her voice just as smooth and silky as Ronovi remembered it. "I think you're dead, for all you know."

"Leave me alone."

"I haven't found anyone quite like you, you know," cooed Chrai Dewal. "Then again, that might be for the better. Those nights spent together - the way you'd taunt me, hit me, even..."

"I never wanted this!"

“I know you *think* that,” smiled the woman. “But that doesn’t make it true.”

Ronovi whirled around as if to strike, only to become paralyzed at the sight of vibrant red hair beneath a pork pie hat, a snake tattoo winding its way across a bicep, and a coy smirk dancing on that tempting mouth. The Epicanthix snarled and felt her hands slip up to the sides of her head. She staggered to the nearest wall, sliding down and sitting against it, slightly rocking back and forth and back and forth as the apparitions never seemed to stop looking at her.

It had all felt so...foreign. And yet...so familiar. The laughter from her father. The caresses from her lover. All the moments of humor and joy and elation and ecstasy that she couldn’t get from any narcotic or drug.

Why couldn’t it have been whiskey down here? Why couldn’t it have been a giant pit of booze awaiting her? Why this? Why now?

Love made her weak. Love made her sick.

And yet...here it was. This was the Vault of Erised, was it not? This was no deception. Merely a projection of her own suppressed reality.

Ronovi stopped squeezing her temples and let her hands reach out toward empty space instead. She held Zane’s weathered hand in one fist. She found Chrai’s soft cheek with the other. Stroked it with the back of her knuckles - not to hurt, but to heal. Let the warmth overwhelm her for just a moment.

But then the spirits of the past were gone, and it was cold in the chamber again.