

“Oh no you did not!”

A raucous chuckle filled the air as inebriated youths and other assorted delinquents joined in the well-meaning jeering, the social ribbing a time-honored tradition in Celeste’s barnacled underbelly.

“Oh, I did. And more!” Vicxa Varis replied in turn, never missing a beat as she continued her tale of how she recovered the Crystal Scepter of Tantalos the Wise.

“So there I was, deep inside Tantalos’ crypt, having dared traps and tribulations,” the Mirialan proclaimed, squatting beside the others in a wide ring in one of the farthest parts of Celeste’s breathable domain. “I saw the tomb itself, and upon it lay the scepter and some sort of metal tube. I knew I had to be careful. The whole place would probably collapse on my head if I made one wrong move, and so I pulled out my water bottle...”

She picked up her liter bottle of light beer, by now more than half empty, and held it aloft as a prop.

“And I looked at the scepter. I had to get this right,” she unscrewed the cap and took a swig. “No, not enough.” Another swig. “Not quite...” Another. “Oops, didn’t see that gemstone!” She spat back into the bottle to much applause and laughter.

“Bottle in hand, I reached for the scepter, placed the bottle beside it, and *rolled* real gentle like to get it off its spot.”

She placed the bottle next to a bag of snacks that lay in the middle of their circle and began nudging it towards her waiting palm, then paused.

“Did it work?” Someone asked.

“No,” Vicxa replied with a sigh. “I died in that tomb that day.”

There were some mixed gasps, before full realization struck the inebriated crowd as Vicxa snatched the bag and held it aloft victoriously.

“What happened then?”

“Oh, there was some posh sod who tried to kill me, and some big ol’ lizard beast what didn’t like me trespassing, but nothing *actually* challenging,” Vicxa replied nonchalantly.

Another round of drunken laughter echoed in the dilapidated park square.

“And *that*, my friends, is how I became the first person in centuries to even lay eyes upon Tantalos’ tomb!” she concluded triumphantly, picking a handful of snacks from her prize bag and flicking them into her waiting mouth.

An hour or two of imbibing later, Vicxa squatted on a park bench and stared at the hydrostatic barrier keeping tonnes upon tonnes of ocean water from crushing them all like insects. To her mildly buzzed mind, it was quite the peculiar sight as the barrier shimmered with a golden blue hue in tune with the ocean currents softly battling against it. The Selenian seas were vast, and no doubt held many secrets more than what she’d found ashore so far.

She fished out a few last snacks from her jacket pocket and downed the dregs of the second light beer when one of the chavs she’d just hung out with approached and took a seat beside her. They exchanged glances, but nothing more, the Nautolan youngster betraying precious few signs of intoxication despite surely having drunk more than his fair share during the gathering. Most of them had.

“Was it true?” the Nautolan said after a while of staring at the ocean. “What you said back there? Or were you just flapping your gums?”

Vicxa let out a soft chuckle and emptied her bottle. “Yurp,” she belched. “Why’d I lie to strangers for no reason?”

The youth nodded thoughtfully. “I guess that makes sense. Though most probably didn’t believe you.”

She shrugged, not that it bothered her any. “And you?”

“I *wanted* to believe.”

“What’s stopping you?”

“I ‘unno. It just seems so far fetched. Like, ancient ruins and such. Isn’t that just for holovids and myths?”

The Mirialan chuckled again. “Yeah, I thought so too. But then I found my first temple, and though the special effects aren’t quite as flashy for real, the danger at least is.” She held out her cybernetic arm with a significant look.

“You lost that in a temple?” the Nautolan inquired, enraptured. “How’d that happen?”

“I got cocky. Used to have one of those sweet brimmed hats. Made me look like a proper badass it did. Kept getting knocked off all the time, though. Once, it fell off at a real bad time and I tried to nab it from under a closing door...”

“And weren’t fast enough?”

She shook her head. “I learned my lesson that day. Sod the spoils, I’m just innit for the ride.” She raised her bottle to her lips for a swig, realized it was empty, then tossed it away with a disgruntled huff.

“Wow, wish I could do that sometime,” the Nautolan sighed listfully.

“What? Lose an arm? Plenty of ways to get your limbs shot off, trust me.”

“No, I meant find some ruins and explore them!” His copper eyes were suddenly alight with youthful fantasy.

“What’s stopping you?” Vicxa smirked. “This planet’s full of surprises. You just need to know where to look.”

“Oh? You mean like a map?”

“Yeah, something like that. But unfortunately those aren’t easy to come by. At least ones that are of any real use.”

The Nautolan fell silent for a moment, then looked back at her. “What if there was...?”

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“What is this place?” Vicxa coughed as another gust of stale, briny air wafted into her face from a gaping length of plumbing as they rode down a wall less turbolift into the the dark depths of Celeste’s lowest levels.

“It’s mostly maintenance work, cooling and heating pipes, energy conduits, hydrostatic generators. You know, the sort of nasty, heavy industrial stuff the rich folk up top don’t wanna know or see—or hear,” the Nautolan replied with a wide smile as a throbbing grumble grew suddenly louder as they descended past one of the generator hubs.

“Right, but *what* is down here?” Vicxa repeated her question with a bit more emphasis while clapping her ears against the noise.

“You need to see it to appreciate it,” the youth chuckled. “But we call it the Bilgezaar.”

“The *what*? You mean like a bilge bazaar?”

He gave a knowing smirk and tapped his nose. “In the end, all good things run into the Bilgezaar.”

The rickety turbolift came to a creaking halt, swaying on its rail for a perilous moment before locking clamps secured it in place. Vicxa let out a sigh of relief she hadn't realized she'd been holding, finding her hand had flitted to where she usually kept her S-5 blaster in case she needed to launch a grapnel in a hurry. Of course, Celeste's security would have taken a rather dim view to her bringing one to the city, not to mention the disruptor pistol, and so she was left with her trusty knife for self-defence. Judging by the cavalcade of dark walkways and dimly lit stalls lining what appeared to be the industrial scaffolding of the entire city, she might very well need it.

"Come on!" the Nautolan said as he jumped off the lift and slid down along a support beam onto a corroded walkway that bent slightly under his weight. "I know you're gonna love this!"

Never one to back down from a novel experience, the pint-sized adventuress threw caution to the wind and followed suit. The Nautolan led her along the corroded gantry, up an inclined ladder, down through a section of old ventilation piping, and across a dozen different makeshift walkways, before finally halting before one of the numerous stalls that dotted the perplexing bazaar.

Her head on a swivel, Vicxa had spotted dozens of vendors all around, the lights of their shacks and stalls the only real illumination in the gloom beyond some bale industrial lights that shimmered off the walls of major machinery. The spiders' web of walkways and paths were all somehow interconnected, and the Mirialan felt like there must have been some method to their madness if she could only spend a while observing.

The Nautolan, however, demanded her attention.

"Here! This is the place!" he waved, pointing at a small shack carved into what looked suspiciously like one of the massive legs that supported Celeste's street levels. In fact, the more Vicxa looked around she realized most of the major structures must have been part of keeping everything topside from collapsing. That realization put a whole new light to her mistrust of the dilapidation.

Following the excitable youth's direction, she stepped through the curtained doorway into a humid little hollow that reeked of rotting paper and kelp. A positively ancient Mon Calamari woman sat behind what passed for a counter, sipping tea off a tiny mug with a kettle steaming beside her atop a candle. Her milky white eyes were almost blind, but still she kept staring at a small screen where, judging by the few identifiable sounds Vicxa overheard, she was following a Huttese holonovela.

"Hey, Cekye! I brought you a customer!" the Nautolan yelled.

The woman blinked slowly, then raised a greying orange hand and waved him off. "I told you, Haas. Stop interrupting my shows."

“Oh come now, Mrs.C! You’re barely breaking even as is, living off tea and kelp! ‘Sides, she’s an expert in ancient stuff. I bet you could interest her in some of your *special* wares.”

That seemed to get some reaction out of the woman as she wearily paused the show on her holopad and turned to observe the two visitors. Vicxa gave an uneasy smile, trying to act natural, while Haas was already busy picking his way through the shelves of damp books and scrolls for something of interest.

“What brings you here, young’un?” the Mon Cal croaked at Vicxa.

“I was led here by this charming rogue,” she gestured at the Nautolan. “I guess he might have mentioned something about maps?”

“Maps, hmm?” Cekye grunted, running a carapaced digit along her chin wattles. “The bad thing about maps, my dear, is that they don’t always take you where you need to go.”

“Oh really? Sounds like someone just had the wrong kind of map then.”

“You misunderstand,” Cekye murmured, “the maps we seek are for places we long for. Not where we should.”

“To me they’re the one and the same. I go where fate takes me. Map or no map,” the Mirialan replied with a smile. “Though, if you do happen to have anything showing some old sites, perhaps that’s where I should be going?”

The Mon Calamari narrowed her milky eyes in thought, taking another long look at the Mirialan before sipping her tea anew. “Come then, mapless wanderer. Let me help you find your bearings.”

Much rummaging and a narrowly avoided flimsilanche later, Cekye held out an ornate tube of bone the size of her forearm and placed it gently on the counter. Pulling out the top cap, she spilled out a collection of resplendent silver filings. Or at least that was what Vicxa first thought they were before picking one up and realizing they were fish scales.

“Scales? Mrs.C, have you finally lost it?” Haas scoffed. “I was trying to help you.”

“That is a map, my dears,” Cekye croaked. “Or it used to be at one time. But age is unkind to all things.”

“So you’re selling a broken map?” Haas inquired.

“Disassembled,” Cekye corrected, filling up her tea mug.

“*Caveat emptor...*” Haas muttered and turned to Vicxa who’d bent over the counter and taken a hair pin out of her raven locks to begin poking and prodding at the scales with great interest.

“Hmm,” she mused.

“What hmm? Don’t tell me you’re buying this? I honestly thought she’d have something cool to offer, but—”

Vicxa silenced him with a sharp gesture, poking a few more scales in place upon the counter and turning towards him with a smug grin. “Look,” she nodded at her work.

Peering over her shoulder, Haas gazed at the handful of scales Vicxa had begun putting together like a puzzle. The distorted diamond patterns lined up, and in the pattern he could see the reason for the Mirialan’s excitement. There was writing, and the unmistakable serpentine smear of a shoreline.

“I’ll be damned...” he spoke breathlessly.

“Do we have a deal?” Cekye said over her tea mug, already angling towards her holonovela.

“Name your price,” Vicxa chuckled and scooped the scales back into the tube.

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The rickety gantry groaned under her feet as Vicxa made her way back towards the turbolift. Haas was still in mild shock at how much flan she’d just thrown at Cekye, but at least the old coot wouldn’t go hungry for a while. For her part, Vicxa was already daydreaming of what wondrous sights this might lead her to, far too distracted for her own good as jealous eyes observed their passing.

The gantry joined a catwalk, leading to a leaning ladder best crawled up on all fours. When she made her way to the top, map case dangling around her back on a sling, Vicxa saw a familiar sight. Her own reflection from the mirror shined toes of Imperial style jackboots.

There was a *click-whirr* of a blaster pistol being primed at her head and she cursed herself for her lapse in attention.

“What a wonderful evening for a crawl, Miss Varis,” a smarmy Coruscant accented voice spoke up. As she craned her head up, she saw the second familiar face, though this one far less handsome in her own humble opinion. Gaunt and pallid, he was far from a healthy specimen of the Human species, and the thin mustache somehow only added to his almost reptilian appearance. His dark grey eyes were piercing, like frozen steel, and the deep creases on his balding forehead spoke of a lifetime of academia.

“As if you’d ever get your hands dirty, Corwil,” she spat back.

“Charming, as always,” the haughty man muttered. “But we’ve been here before, and I loathe repeating myself.”

“Yes we have, and how did those work out for you?” she retorted while silently cursing her lack of weapons.

“I’ll admit I’ve given you less credit than you perhaps deserve, my dear. But let me assure you, this time I am most serious. Now, *the map*, please.”

“Or what? You blow my brains out and watch me tumble into the abyss with it?”

“As amusing as that might be, I’m not out for your head, my dear. I’m only interested in the map. And if you are interested in your young friend’s head—” Corwil gestured behind her where a brutish thug had his arm wrapped around Haas’ neck and a vibrodagger pressed at the jugular. “—you’ll relinquish it into my custody.”

Vicxa’s heart sank as she realized the peril he was in. Sure, Haas was basically less than an acquaintance, and he’d been the one suggesting a trip down here, but all the same his life was at risk and she didn’t trade in lives, only relics.

“Fine, you *frakker*, I hope the next tomb you rob is cursed,” she spat and began awkwardly pulling off the map tube from her back.

“At least you’re being sensible,” Corwil mused. “Though you might wish to mind your language. So unbecoming of a young lady such as yourself.”

“Oh really?” Vicxa’s eyes narrowed as she unclasped the tube. “How’s *this* for unbecoming!” She swept around with as much momentum as she could, smacking the map tube against Corwil’s blaster with enough force to snap his trigger finger. The weapon went off, the near miss scorching the wall beside her as a crimson bolt flashed past her head. Corwil stumbled back, holding his broken hand while the blaster clattered to the gantry.

“Aaargh, you *schutta!*” he howled in pain.

“Language!” Vicxa sneered as she snatched up the blaster and trained it on the goon’s head behind her.

He tensed, almost accidentally cutting Haas’ neck in the process, and looked suddenly very unsure of himself. Backing away a pace, while trying to put his impressive bulk as much behind the svelte Nautolan as he could, the brute stuttered a half-hearted threat.

“Don’t try anything! Or the boy gets it!”

“Fine, how about a deal? You let him go, and I let you live.”

“Hmph, he told me all about you. The moment I let him go, you shoot me in the back!”

Vicxa looked almost hurt at the accusation. “I’ve *never* shot anybody in the back,” she scoffed. Taking a glance at the blaster in her hand, she tossed it into the abyss. “There, now let him go!”

The thug’s face turned into a wide grin. It was a warning, but it came too late.

“You’re far too trusting!” Corwil roared as he slammed his cane into her back, drawing a sharp yelp of pain from the Mirialan. She stumbled forward, almost toppling off the walkway, while groaning in pain. Corwil wouldn’t let her recover, and a sweeping uppercut impacted her jaw as the cane smacked her once more with jarring force.

Reaching out, Corwil grabbed the map case and yanked it from her slackened grip, before pressing the tip of his cane against her chest. “I bid you *adieu*, Miss Varis. May we never see again.” With a casual shove, he pushed her back and sent her stumbling over the lip of the walkway.

The growing smile on his face faded swiftly and turned into ire as her flailing arm found the ladder she’d crawled up along and grabbed onto it with all her might. The cybernetic arm locked in place and would not let go. Dangling over the abyss, Vicxa grit her teeth and glared back up at Corwil.

“Ugh, what an insufferable tick,” he muttered, flipping his cane around to begin bashing at her surviving mechanical digits. The walkway shuddered with the clang of metal upon metal, while the Mirialan dangled by her prosthetic. Slowly, her hand was being beaten into submission and her grip was failing, but the moments she’d bought herself were enough to clear her mind after the sudden beating and find an opening.

As he raised his cane up for a final blow, she used what strength she had left to pull herself up and meet his swing head-on. The servos of her arm groaned in protest, but she managed to reach up and swat his cane aside. His swing carried on, deflected, and the momentum swung him off balance.

With a terrible yelp of sudden realization, Corwil tumbled forward, before sprawling on all fours atop the slanted ladder with a sharp grunt. Craning her neck back and then slamming her forehead into his for good measure, Vicxa pulled herself up through the rungs and grabbed the concussed man by the scruff of his neck.

“You want to get paid?” she spat at the grunt, blood trickling down her forehead where her green skin had broken. “Let the boy go, or your paymaster flies.”



"Y-you wouldn't..." he muttered. "You don't shoot in the back!"

"No, I don't," she panted. "But I'm fine with letting others down." Her tone was as cold as a Hoth summer.

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"Thank you," Haas muttered as the two made their way back to the turbolift.

"Don't mention it," Vicxa replied. "And sorry for dragging you into that. Corwil's always on my case for some reason. I think he's obsessed."

"Seems that way," the Nautolan agreed. "You going to be alright?" he asked, concerned.

"Not the first time I've bled over a map," she replied with a grin, before wincing as she pressed a fresh piece of apparently antiseptic kelp against the wound in her scalp. "Won't be the last."

"So, what now?" Haas inquired.

"Seems I have a puzzle to figure out," Vicxa replied, tapping the tube.

"And then?"

"Well that depends."

"On what?"

"What the puzzle shows me," she winked.

He snorted. "And if it's a treasure map?"

"I suppose I'll have places to be," the Mirialan replied as they boarded the turbolift and headed topside. "You want in?"

"After that?" Haas gestured at the rapidly vanishing Bilgezaar below. "No thank you!"

Vicxa couldn't help but give a small chuckle at that. "Smart lad."