

“Good evening, ma’am. Did you have a reservation?”

Elegant dining music spilled forth from behind rich velvet curtains, the polite hubbub of amused discussion and the clinking of crystal glassware bursting out with each passing waiter that pierced that hanging veil. Dressed to the nines, Vicxa Varis stood at the entrance of a premiere restaurant on top of a beachside skyscraper, the setting Selenian sun dying the oceans a striking honeyed scarlet. The rays of reflected sunlight bathed her void black dress and danced off carefully placed sequins that twisted around the attire like a living pattern of vines.

“Of course, by the name of Marqess,” the Mirialan replied, her usually wild black mane now primmed and coiffured, the fire red tips curled and arranged according to the latest fashions.

They’d met the day before by chance. Marqess had been ‘slumming it’ as he himself put it, in one of the mid-class watering holes in Estle’s entertainment district. The young scion had stood out like a sore thumb, but after a few drinks at his expense, she’d managed to get on his good side. Spinning a tale of a similar kind to his own—that trick usually worked on types like this—she introduced herself as a sheltered heiress to a minor corporation, out seeing the sights of the galaxy before her betrothal. He’d bought it hook, line, and sinker and before she knew it, he was positively demanding he let her show Selen’s finest view. How could a girl say no to that? And who knew, maybe he would get lucky tonight? At least he wasn’t hard on the eye.

The meticulous maitre’d ran a white gloved finger down a list on a datapad before nodding and gesturing for her to enter.

“Right this way, Mr.Marqess has yet to arrive, but may I extend the house greeting in the form of a glass of something refreshing while you wait?” the Chagrian male pulling back the velvet curtain and guiding her to her table.

The dining room was awash with gold, mother of pearl and crystal, glittering and reflecting Dajorra’s languid farewells. The posh and well-to-do rubbed elbows with Selenian officials and cultural elites over glasses of sparkling refreshments from the far corners of the galaxy and dined on the finest local delicacies. It was a place so beyond her means, and yet so familiar.

*My parents would have loved this place. They’d lived off these people for months!*

She could picture it now, her mother in her outrageous fur coat, and her father in his impenetrable shades, sweet talking their way through Selenian high society, making waves and racking up debts faster than a Hutt could gobble a roast Mynock. And by the time their elaborate lies inevitably caught up to them? They’d be but a speck of light among the stars, heading for the next planet, with a fresh identity and pockets flush with credits.

“Would you care for a refill?”

The meticulous maitre’d offered politely, the bewildered Mirialan finding her glass empty as time had slipped by almost unnoticed. So too, it seemed, had the first glass of

complimentary champagne. She nodded, of course, why wouldn't she? After all, she was on a date. And although she wasn't *quite* as bad as her parents, if some rich snob wanted to splurge on her, who was she to say no?

As the Chagrian poured another glass for her, Vicxa felt her communicator buzzing. A short, apologetic message. Understandable, rich kids tended to have a fleeting grasp on the concept of time.

"Oh, and bring me the cocktail menu. He said he'll still be a while," Vicxa called after the waiter.

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"Excuse me, ma'am, but I'm afraid I am going to have to ask you to vacate the table for now," the meticulous maitre'd informed the already inebriated Mirialan.

"What? Why? I've only been here for—"

"An hour and twenty-seven minutes, a generous allowance for dallying, but unfortunately inconvenient for the running of this restaurant. You are welcome to continue waiting for your cavalier by the bar, and if—*when*—he arrives we shall arrange a new table for you," the Chagrian male informed her.

Vicxa bit her tongue, eager to chew the man up but realizing this was not the place or time to make a scene. Like her mother had always told her; be seen, not a scene. With her best faux smile, she let herself be escorted to the bar and ordered a stiff drink to make up for lost time. While the Xexto mixologist behind the counter worked his four-armed magic, she pulled out her comm and typed her date a short message.

"*He'd better be here soon,*" she thought to herself as yet another glass was placed before her, the Mirialan staring into her shimmering reflection. She'd totally forgotten how the idle rich treated women. "*He's not getting any tonight.*"

Time passed and despite her messages, Marqess remained elusive. The servers had begun talking, their subverted voices low enough to slip past the usual clientele, but even in her inebriated state the veteran treasure huntress didn't fail to pick up on their subtle cues. She was starting to draw attention to herself, and for all the wrong reasons.

"*Frak that sleemo, no dinner date is worth this,*" she finally resolved, pushing herself off the bar counter to make her exit when she bumped into the unyielding chest of the meticulous maitre'd.

"I take it your companion remains *indisposed*?"

Vicxa's expression hovered between a polite smile and a venomous sneer, twitching at the corners of her mouth.

“He...had to reschedule. He told me he’ll be in touch shortly,” Vicxa lied through her teeth, sliding off the chair and eyeing the velvet draped exit.

“Actually,” the Chagrian informed her, “he already did.”

That caught her attention. And not in a good way.

“He informed us of a mix-up and that some, to use his words, ‘spacer sloozy’ had made the reservation in his name on a stolen comm.”

“Y-you’re not implying—?”

“The description he gave matches to a T,” the Chagrian stated smugly, tapping her tattooed cheek with a gloved finger. “Now, your outstanding tab amounts to five hundred and twenty-seven credits and I am afraid only cash will do. Once that is settled, these two gentlemen will escort you out of this establishment, into which you will never set foot again. Do I make myself clear, girl?”

*Don’t make a scene. Don’t make a scene. Don’t make a—frak it.*

“Outrageous!” Vicxa chimed, clutching her chest and visibly recoiling. “Keep your hands to yourself, serf!”

Around her, the pleasant hubbub died in an instant, eager eyes turning towards her. The meticulous maitre’d was stunned, wrongfooted, but as she turned around to address the other guests his eyes narrowed.

“Is this how you treat every lady without her cavalier? Try to smarm your way into her graces and reach for things beyond your station?” Vicxa declared, doing her best to mimic a Coruscanti accent on the fly. “If this reflects the status of this establishment, you can forget about my patronage!”

She tossed her head back in an exaggerated harrumph and made to pace for the exit as swiftly as she could get away with in her heels, shocked gasps and clutching of pearls echoing in her wake. She made it five paces.

“Stop right there, you scoundrel,” the Chagrian growled. “I tried to settle this without a scene, but since you insist on disturbing the peace of your betters, then so be it.”

Before she could react, the pair of bouncers had caught up with her, each grabbing a vice-like hold of her arms. Ignoring her vocal protests, he reached up behind her neck and tucked out a piece of flimsiplast that had peeked out in the midst of her flamboyant theatrics.

“Your act is as cheap as your dress, *girl*,” he scoffed, snapping the tag off her dress. “A discount store. Should have known. Vermin like you are the reason the rest of us can’t walk these streets in peace anymore, leeching off your betters and thinking you’re owed this life simply because you exist,” he chided her. “I doubt you even have two credits to your name, do you? Or did you spend those too on that cheap paint job?” he sneered, pointing at her

cybernetic arm where the fresh coat of red lacquer had already chipped under the rough handling. "*Pathetic.*"

Vicxa glared daggers at him, black smears running down her tattooed cheeks. She felt like screaming, but didn't. They could ridicule her all they liked, but they could not take her dignity if she didn't let them.

"Take her outside and make sure she finds her own kind," the Chagrian spat, crumpling up the price tag and tossing it in the garbage to a round of approving applause.

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"And stay out!"

Vicxa landed in a heap in an alley outside the kitchen entrance, her dress torn and hair askew. Knees scraping along the pavement, she came to halt in a pile of garbage. Choking back tears she waited for the door to close before letting out a scream of pure, violent anguish. Heart pounding in her chest, the ragged remnants of her dress draped over her form, she shivered from the cold and adrenaline. Wrapping her arms around her for warmth, though only one of them could truly offer it, she hobbled away on a broken heel, scuff marks marring her knees.

Most people paid her no mind, either too intoxicated to notice, or merely avoiding the *unsavory* types, while others seemed to linger, hungry eyes evaluating easy prey. Those she immediately flipped off, signaling she was aware of them and far from a meek victim though in reality she was in no shape for a scrape.

Vicxa had made it five blocks when her communicator buzzed. Reading through the cracked screen was a chore, but perhaps also a blessing in disguise.

*Hope you learned your less—*

She didn't need more to know who'd sent it, shattering the comms on the pavement and limping away.

She had been hurt before. Much worse than this. The metal of her arm was proof enough of that. But never had she been so *despised*. The feeling turned in her gut, or perhaps it were the dozen drinks without more than breadsticks to tie them down. Lurching for a decorative plant, she barely made it before the revulsion overwhelmed her.

Passers by gave her a wide berth, scowling at the sight of the party girl regretting her life choices. Wiping her mouth on the back of her hand, she could taste the regret. With her last credits, she managed to buy a ticket to the shuttle hub and in a blur she remembered little of, she found herself in the back of her shuttle.

The cramped Punworcca 166-class sloop was the closest she had to a home and as the door hissed close behind her, she finally felt safe. Throughout the journey back, she'd been holding a swiped cutlery knife pressed along her wrist, ready to dissuade anyone who wasn't

deterred by a rude crimson digit. Now that knife clattered onto the deck as she sank to the floor and wept, hands pressed against her face.

“Fraking *sleemo*...”

The metal of the sloop’s frame felt cool and sturdy against her back, the inside of the well-worn shuttle reeking of dirt, alien flora and spicy meals. The low illumination showed her equipment scattered about, next to plastek cups and muddy miscellanea. All the tracks of her life. A life of solitude and adventure. Of simple pleasures, out in the wilds.

She pulled her jacket off the pile on her bunk bed, fishing a metal tube from its breast pocket and unscrewing the cap to withdraw a simple wooden flute. Calming enough to remember how the melody went, she raised the instrument to her lips and exhaled.

Fingers moved along the flute’s stem, coaxing out the mellow, mournful sound of a lonely lullaby. It was the only tune she still remembered from her youth, and it had kept her calm even when her father was desperately trying to keep their shuttle from being blown to spacedust by vengeful lawmen or worse. Even now, she still felt the tremors along the sloop’s spine.

Silver pearls slowly tumbled along her tattooed cheeks, dripping onto the deck below. The music swam around her, soothing, comforting. When the music finally ended, so did the tears and for a long moment there was only silence.

Tonight had been an experience. An unpleasant one, but one she would not easily forget. Tomorrow, she would wake up one experience richer, and Marqess would still be a total son of a b—.