

“Come on, Tali! We are going to be late!” Koliss hollered through the refresher cubicle’s door as the sounds of furious make-up application and general fussing could be heard from within.

“Juuuust a moment!” The Twi’lek replied, clearly distracted by whatever she decreed more important than punctuality on a dinner date. Koliss stepped back from the door and sighed, slumping on the worn sofa in his cramped apartment and observed the mess. Clothes were strewn all over the place, with seemingly every available surface covered in Tali’s belongings after a furious session of trying to find the best outfit for the night.

Though he had at first been overjoyed to observe the purple skinned lek-head play dress-up, the novelty of being cross-examined over his true preferences between two almost identical tops had quickly worn out and he had had to fake a migraine to be off the hook. A migraine that he felt might soon be very real.

A few more moments passed as he fidgeted with the collar of his dress shirt and flicked off imaginary specks of dust from his polished shoe tips before the door to the refresher cubicle slide aside and the Twi’lek stepped outside. Koliss had to momentarily remind himself to breathe as the the amber-eyed lek-head stood before him in a sleek ivory dress, its gently patterned fabric running down her form like carved bone and accenting the hue of her skin. Her lekku, prominently displayed, were wrapped in cloth of similar fashion, a vine-like pattern of bone white twisting its way up the alluring appendages, finally terminating in subdued silver rings that held the lek-sheaths in place. A pair of reasonable high heels left her even taller than before and Koliss found himself having to minutely strain his posture to match her, less than an inch now between them in height.

“So... do you like it?” Tali asked, giving a little twirl to let him appraise the attire in its full as the hem of her dress gently rose from the motion.

“I, uh...” Koliss stuttered, feeling a suddenly pressing urge for something else to rise as well, but managing to maintain his professionalism. Being around the Twi’lek had allowed him to grow at least mildly used to such displays. “I do, yes. You look beautiful.” He finally managed, with a faint cough to clear his throat.

“Really?!” The Twi’lek beamed. “I had to pick something new for our date. I know Zuji’s going to put in the extra effort too, so I can’t let her be the only one...” She leaned in and gave him a warm hug, her left lek gently caressing his cheek as the flabbergasted human stiffly replied in kind just as she was beginning to pull away.

“Erm, yes. Quite. I’m sure she will approve.” Koliss muttered, awkwardly lowering his hands once more and glancing at his watch. “But she won’t appreciate us being late and we wouldn’t want to disappoint our Gate Wardeness, now would we?”

Shaking her head, Tali picked up a small purse to go with her attire and then navigated her way over the debris field of her own clothing to Koliss’ apartment door, the man himself following suite. Checking one last time they had everything they needed for their night out, the pair headed out.

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The pair arrived at their chosen venue, a more upscale establishment called the *Gilded Mynock*. It had been Zujenia’s recommendation, though Tali suspected there might have been a reason for it. Koliss dressed in his navy blue dress pants, white jacket and polished black shoes and her in the creamy

white number he had some impure thoughts about licking off her, the pair were easily noticed by the already waiting pair of Ryn when they entered.

Waving them over, Zujenia rose up to embrace the Twi'lek whom she'd not seen in a while, Koliss shaking hands with Kordath who seemed to have brushed up rather well after his recent appointment as Aedile. Dressed in a sharp suit that made the Ryn surprisingly presentable and mirroring well the ruffled gold-and-black number Zujenia had chosen to wear, the two made a cute couple. Tali did feel a tad sad about the two having so little time together nowadays with Kordath being stationed on Selen and Zujenia still on Ol'val. Being privy to the tying of bonds between the two, she could not help but share the Gate Wardeness' pain in being so far from her husband-to-be.

"Tali!" Zujenia exclaimed, having to stand up onto her toes to fully manage to wrap her arms around the tall Twi'lek's neck and pull her into a hearty embrace. Tali muttered something in reply as she hugged her back, though her words were muffled in the Gate Wardeness' thick white hair. When they finally separated, the Twi'lek managed to regain some semblance of composure and bowed politely. "Thank you for inviting us, Zujenia, andt sorry that ve're late."

"Oh, don't mention it!" The half-ryn replied with a beaming smile. "We were just catching up with Kord." She stated with a glance at her fiancé who was exchanging a few words and a chuckle with Koliss over a firm handshake.

Tali had no heart to admit she'd noticed and instead kept up a polite smile before shaking Kordath's hand while Zujenia did her best not to get makeup on Koliss' pristine jacket while still giving him a warm welcome.

"Good to see ya, lass. Been up ta no-good viv' ya new boyfriend?" He chuckled with a meaningful wink.

"No!" Tali responded defensively, the Ryn's grin only widening. "And't he's not my boyfriendd..." She muttered, a faint blush visible on her purple cheeks as a hand moved over to caress her lekku.

"F course he nae ain't..." The Ryn replied sympathetically, though Tali was not quite sure if there had been a double negative in his reply. She did not have time to ponder, however, as the Ryn was already moving to get everyone seated and the night underway.

"So, what is everyone having?" Zujenia mused as she browsed the menu.

"Wine." Kordath replied almost reflexively, causing her to shoot him a poignant glare. "Oh! Ya meant far eatin'! Right, I'll try tha cushnip."

"Good, then I will go for the baked dru'un in fish sauce." Zujenia declared with a smirk. "And sample some of your cushnip."

"Oh, ye can do more 'an sample ma cush." He chuckled with a hushed tone, causing the Gatewardeness to blush ever so slightly.

"Andt you, Koliss?" Tali asked, turning to face the thoughtful looking human, trying her best to avoid the flirting.

"I think I will take the seared redsprouts." He replied after a moment of thought. "With the extra spicy sauce. And you?"

"Roasted mynock." Tali admitted with a faint blush. It was her favorite and Zujenia had no doubt known it when she chose the venue.

"An' wine all around!" Kordath declared, earning himself a stern look from his better half, though she said nothing.

The waiter arrived to take their orders along with their drinks and a few moments later they were seated patiently around the cozy table with cocktails before them. Koliss had stuck to his Coruscant Cloud Car while Zujenia nursed a Brazen Wookie, a brown mixture that looked much more suspect than it tasted. Tali, having been recently educated on proper cocktail etiquette, had eschewed her Pink Lekku in favor of something more suitable for such a higher class establishment, a mix of white wine and vermouth which she soldiered through for his sake. Kordath drank whisky. Like always.

After a few moments of idle chitchat and pleasantries, the Gatewardness seemed to inch closer to the subject that intrigued her the most. "So..." She began, idly fiddling with her straw in the remains of her drink. "Have you met his parents yet?" The half-Ryn asked innocently, her eyes shifting towards the Twi'lek who proceeded to choke on her drink, not unlike the human sitting beside her.

After a few moments of throat-clearing coughing and a sip of water, Koliss managed to reply on her account while Tali was still struggling to regain her composure. "Erm, no. I haven't introduced her yet." He admitted, though his answer only seemed to widen the nosey woman's smile.

"Ah, I see. So when are you planning to, then?" She pressed on, clearly enjoying teasing the not-yet-official couple.

Turning to look at Tali, Koliss searched for some help or an out, but the Twi'lek seemed almost as intrigued as the half-Ryn about the answer to the question and remained as expectant as she.

Sweat beads beginning to form on his forehead, Koliss struggled to find the right words. "Umm, well, you see..." He cleared his throat with a meaningful cough. "Damn, that really went down the wrong pipe..." He muttered before coughing some more and hoping Zuji would have shown him some mercy, but as his eyes returned to hers they seemed as expectant as before.

"Go on?" She beckoned, gesturing softly for him to finish his reply.

"Well, you see, I have been quite busy with a lot of my work as of late and though I would jump at any opportunity to introduce her to my parents, who would surely love to meet her as well," he glanced nervously at Tali, "I simply have been unable to find the time. Quite unfortunate."

Zujenia seemed to buy the excuse, but he had not expected Tali to speak up in turn. "Vait, but you haven't been to the clinic for weeks andt last time you saidt they vere doing surprisingly vell without you, so ve vere free to take a SPA weekendt."

"Erm..." Koliss ummed, feeling like a cornered animal.

“Ah, leave tha poor bloke alone, the two o’ ya. He nae done a thing wrong.” Kordath suddenly interjected, downing the last of his whisky. “It can sometimes be hard ta introduce a new ‘un to tha folks. ‘Specially when they might be expectin’ someone particular.”

Tali turned to look at Koliss with a mixed look of hurt and shock. “You haven’t spoken about me because they are expecting someone... different? A human?”

Her words cut him deep, but could only mutter something incoherent in response.

“You have at least toldt them about me, right?” She pressed on, earning only more mutterings.

Meanwhile, Zujenia had turned to glare at her clearly intoxicated husband-to-be. “What was that supposed to mean? And when was the last time you took Me on a SPA weekend?” She snapped, eyes narrowing.

“I’ve, uh, I’ve been busy, Zuji-luv. Tha new job an’ all that’s been going on as of late, ya know...” Kordath tried to weasel his way out of any further blame as best he could, but she knew him better than that.

“Right, so while Koliss is ‘busy’ saving lives as a charity and still has time to go out on a weekend getaway with his girlfriend, you can’t be bothered to take me out on date unless I specifically request it?” The Gatewardeness glared at him, causing the Ryn to audibly gulp.

Koliss’ sweating had by now become very obvious and he felt the fabric of his dress shirt cling to his back as he really wished this conversation would end. He had no good answers to give her, feeling equally terrible about the situation, but knowing that he had to offer at least some excuse about the whole mess. Biting the bullet and hoping for the best, he sighed and steeled himself for what he was roping himself into. “I know that I haven’t been as, uh, open as I should have with my parents regarding, well, you Tali. But I acknowledge that and shall strive to amend this post-haste.”

The Twi’lek’s sour expression had not changed one iota, though even as he watched, she raised a cynical eyebrow ever so slightly. “Huuuh...” He groaned, feeling like the oxygen content in the ambient air had suddenly decreased drastically. “What I mean is... I’ll take you to see them next month. I promise.”

The Twi’lek’s eyes seemed to light up and her dour expression melted into a smile. “Really? Ve’re going to see your parents?” She beamed, lekku tingling with delight.

“Uh, I guess we are now!” Koliss replied with a hint of anxiety, already dreading what he’d just promised. “Going to be a bit tough with all that’s been going on as of late though, so...” He trailed off as he caught a glance at Tali whose eyes had narrowed considerably after he began weaseling his way out of his commitment. “...ooo, I will move heaven and earth to make that happen!” He added with an uneasy cough.

“Ah promise, I’ll take ya to tha best SPA on Selen. Swears it on me life!” Kordath tried his best to placate Zujenia as their food mercifully arrived to save the men from even further missteps. Though the irritation had been palpable, the prospect of the finely prepared meals was enough of a distraction to draw even Zujenia’s attention away from Kordath and towards the dur’un and fish sauce.

His hands moving swiftly, Kordath poured more wine to them all, shooing the waiter away as he made to let them sample the vintage in peace. Filling up the four glasses in record time, the Ryn proposed a toast.

“Ta love, and those lucky enough ta have it!” He declared, Koliss swiftly joining in the greeting with Tali and Zujenia acquiescing as well as they raised their glasses.

“Andt may ve all be lucky.” Tali added with a diplomatic tone, Zujenia nodding as they began their meal, Koliss and Kordath sharing an unspoken sigh of relief.

They dined in relative silence, the tension from the earlier discussion still lingering in the air as for a moment all that could be heard were the hungry sounds of cutlery and the ambient music playing in the background. The pleasantly decorated establishment seemed to grow more calm in tune, the music melting into a soft tranquil melody that drifted in the background while the flickering candles cast their warm glow upon the diners.

As more wine left the bottles and entered the gathered, Zuji and Tali both seemed to realize they might have been too harsh upon their respective mates. It was the Gatewardeness, always the more level-headed and mature of the lot, who spoke first. Reaching under the table with her tail to find Kordath’s she ensnared it in her own while offering a soft smile.

“Sorry about earlier.” She sighed. “I must have just gotten a bit... emotional what with us being apart all the time and... you know.” She glanced at their hands, very distinctly still lacking wedding bands.

“Ah know that, luv.” The Ryn replied with a soft tone of appeasement. “But ah promised. I’ll take ya to a nice SPA once this all blows over an’ we’ll have a nice relaxin’ vacation. Stars know we’ve both earned it.” He chuckled softly. “Maybe ask Tali ta stand in fer ya. Make it an extended weekend...” He winked slyly. “I’ll make it wortha ya while.”

The Gatewardeness blushed as she considered his proposal, tempted to say yes as memories of their last escapade resurfaced. She still managed to maintain a relative air of professionalism as she gave his tail a gentle squeeze with her own, neither Koliss nor Tali the wiser of what was taking place beneath the table.

For her part, the Twi’lek was feeling bad about putting Koliss through the wringer and though she felt he should have at least mentioned her, she dreaded in equal amounts what would become of the unavoidable discussion regarding Her parents. She had alluded to the fact they were dead, but Koliss was a smart cookie and she wouldn’t be giving him enough credit if she thought he wouldn’t find out the truth eventually.

Turning to look at him, she offered a meek smile, her lekku shifting subconsciously to gesture an apology. “I’m also sorry, Koliss. I know your family is, very different from mine, andt that you have certain reputations to upholdt, so I’m really not upset if you don’t...” She never got any further before feeling Koliss grab her hand and holding it up to her mouth, silencing her.

He looked deep into her amber eyes and spoke softly. “Listen, lavender. What my parents want does not matter one iota to me. They’re free to make any judgements about you as they wish, but I know you better. I’ll take you to meet them, don’t worry, but no matter what they might think, it won’t change our relationship one bit. Ok?”

The Twi'lek's expression shifted slowly to a warm, affectionate smile as she gave his hand a soft squeeze in return. "Thank you, Koliss. I could not ask for more.." She hushed, the Ryn couple trying to be as inconspicuous as possible while observing the 'totally not dating' couple having a moment.

"Well, ahem... you know. The least I could do." He muttered, chuckling awkwardly while painfully aware of the Ryn couple's stares. If they'd been alone, he might have said or done something more, but with their friends watching, he felt a bit too uncomfortable to say the words that burned in his chest to the lavender Twi'lek of his dreams.

"Now, who's up for some dessert!" Kordath suddenly exclaimed, breaking the sudden silence that had descended upon the four, fetching the menu to browse the selection of dessert whiskies and pulling Koliss aside to assist him in the most crucial of endeavors.

Leaning over to Tali as they looked over the various delicacies on offer, Zujenia smiled knowingly. "You two make an adorable couple, have I mentioned that?" She chuckled softly while 'the boys' kept discussing about the finer points of malt versus peat and smoke balance.

Tali sighed and shook her head, repeating the words she'd become tired of stating over the course of the evening, and beyond. "We're not dating, Zuji. He's not my boyfriend."

"But do you want him to be?" She asked with a faint giggle, causing the Twi'lek to seize up entirely and mutter something incomprehensible. "I'll take that as a yes." The half-Ryn mused with a sly wink. "But you know, you could ask him. It's not like the feeling isn't mutual..."

"No!" Tali objected so loudly it caused both males to glance at her in perplexion. "Erm, I was just saying no milk. I'm, uh, lactose intolerant..." She spun a quick lie that seemed to suffice for the two who shrugged and returned back to comparing shortlists.

"I... I'd love to, but... I'm too afraid. What if he says no? What if I drive him away?" She whimpered with a hushed tone, desperate eyes pleading at her to provide some miracle cure.

"Listen, tail-head." Zujenia began, placing a soft hand on her shoulder. "I'm telling this as a friend. He's not going to say no, so just ask him already. You won't believe how long it took me to goad butt-tail over there to pop the question. Time's precious and so are you two. So stop worrying and just ask him already." The Gatewardness gave her shoulder a reaffirming squeeze and smiled as warmly as she could, letting the meek Twi'lek know that whatever happened, she would have her back.

Nodding to the Gatewardness, her spirit already lifted, Tali's smile broadened as she replied. "Ok, I will do it. Thank you, Zuji." She sighed, feeling the tension begin to mount, but in a good way. She knew what she had to do. Now she just needed the correct moment to do so.

Selecting a slice of cake for herself and Zujenia picking a cheese platter to share with Kordath, they placed their orders while the boys ended up selecting three glasses of whiskey, unable to decide on just two. While they waited for their orders to arrive, Zujenia gave Kordath a meaningful wink and began.

"So, Koliss and Tali, there was a reason beyond just enjoying your lovely company why I, we, invited you over." She began.

"Aye, we've been ummin' an' arrin' about it fer a while now and we thought ta finally make it official." The Ryn added before pulling out a pristine card, laced with a white velvet bow and inscribed with a fine silver font. *'You are hereby invited to celebrate the wedding of Zujenia and Kordath Bleu d'Tana.'*

Tali looked at the invitation and then at Koliss, beaming like a hundred watt bulb. "Awww! Congratulations you two!" She squealed in delight, reaching over to hug Zuji, her lekku wrapping around the half-Ryn's neck as well in a sympathetic gesture.

"Wow, I always knew that it would come one day, but... Congratulations, sir. Well played." Koliss smirked as he held out a hand to shake Kordath's, the Ryn grunting something in the vague shape of a thanks as he accepted his congratulations. "It be time fer me ta settle down an' I nae knew anyone I'd rather do it with." He turned to look at Zujenia, still struggling with the overbearingly elated Twi'lek, and smiled.

The waiter, having noticed the moment and stayed away so as not to intrude, was waved over as Tali finally let go of her prey, though she continued to fidget in excitement as she marvelled the fancy invitation. "So, where are you going to have the ceremony? Vhat can ve bring? Vill there be some special dances or such? Do you needt anything for your home?" Tali flooded the two Ryn with questions that they struggled to answer until the Gatewardeness managed to divert her attention.

"Say, Tali. I heard you had an announcement of your own to make, had you not?" She not-too-subtly hinted with a meaningful look towards Koliss, managing to finally silence the overexcited Twi'lek.

Tali glanced at him and blushed, fiercely. The instinct to tug at her lekku was barely battled down as she glanced at Zujenia, but said nothing. "Haa..." She sighed, trying her best to calm her nerves before turning to the expectant human. "So, the thing is..." She began, struggling for the right words. "I've come to realize... I like you a lot andt I vas vondering... if maybe you vouldt consider..."

The restaurant was rocked by a violent explosion, shards of glass filling the air as the windows imploded and flew n a crystal rain over the screaming patrons. A wave of collective panic washed over the diners as sounds of blaster fire echoed in after the din of the explosion. Sobs and screams of pain, horrified shrieks of agony and the wailing of injured filled the air as blood flowed upon the floorboards, the elegant restaurant transformed into a devastated wreck in an instant.

Tali coughed, clearing smoke from her lungs as she brushed loose shards of glass from her lekku. Koliss groaned beside her, his jacket torn to shreds and blood welling up along his back. Zujenia, sitting further away from the explosion, had only suffered superficial damage while Kordath, ever the lucky one, was merely choking on whiskey he'd accidentally swallowed down his windpipe in shock.

"V-vhat happenedt?!" Tali blurted, looking around bewildered as Koliss grunted in pain, causing her to check on his injuries and begin to pull out the shards sticking from his back as delicately as she could.

"We're bloody under attack, that's wha'!" Kordath snapped, vaulting over the table and inching his way across the devastated dining room towards the shattered windows to take a peek outside. He could see crimson flashes of blasters down the alley, a very one-sided firefight soon dying down between the Ol'val security forces and their assailants.

Taking in the scene outside, he deduced a bomb or grenade had gone off just in front of the restaurant. Though if it had been carried or left there as a dead drop, he could not tell as there were no remains to speak of beyond a black scorch mark.

“Wait ‘ere, I’ll take a looksie. Stay wi’v Zuji, she’ll know what ta do.” Kordath stated, pulling out his dagger from seemingly out of nowhere and setting off out to check up on their opponents. Zujenia shouted a sharp protest, but he did not listen, instead disappearing through the blasted window frame and into the streets outside.

“Ve needt to get Koliss to a hospital!” Tali stated sharply. “He’s bleeding badt!”

“Nonsense, it’s.... Urgh, just a flesh wound...” The human muttered, teeth gritted in pain as a palm-sized chunk of sharp window pane stuck out from his back, too large for Tali to dare remove.

“Right, come with me. I know the quickest way.” The Gatewardeness stated bluntly, her mind shifting from one role to another as the drunken stupor seemed to disappear, removed in part by the adrenaline now coursing through her veins.

The trio moved through the broken restaurant, each footstep crunching with broken glass under their tread, until they reached the read exit and left through the kitchen. Tali helping Koliss move, despite his adamant protests to needing such help, Zujenia could not help but snatch a kitchen knife with her, just to be sure.

As the Arconans made their way along the narrow back streets they now found themselves in, more sounds of gunfire began to filter in from seemingly every direction. “What the frak is going on?!” Zujenia cursed, reaching for her communicator to reach Kordath, but could get no signal. Comms were down, probably from a jammer.

“Tali, Koliss, this is serious. We need to get Koliss to safety and arm ourselves. Ol’val is under attack and we need to defend our home. Do you understand?” The Gatewardeness stated adamantly, her words carrying all the weight and impetus of a leader, despite her ruffled outfit and small stature.

Both recently ‘graduated’ Arconans noded in unison, Koliss leaning rather heavily on the Twi’lek with blood slowly seeping onto her clothes. “Ve von’t let you down, Zuji.” Tali promised, her right lek moving up to give a salute while her hands were preoccupied with keeping Koliss standing. “Though, ve do needt to get his vounds treatedt. Quickly.” She added hastily.

Nodding, Zujenia pulled out the knife she’d taken from the kitchen and sighed. “Alright then, let’s get to it then, and show this nerf-humpers they don’t karkin’ attack our home...” She added with a low growl that sent chills down Tali’s spine. The battle for Ol’val had begun.