

Lucine stumbled down the darkened street, weaving unsteadily from one side to the other. Every step brought a fresh wave of agony. She kept her lips pressed tightly together to muffle the whimpers of pain that threatened to escape. Quiet. She had to be quiet.

How far had she gone? Not far enough. She could barely hear the shouts of her pursuers echoing off the walls over the sound of her thundering heartbeat. If she could just make it a few more blocks, she could find a place to hide while waiting for Tabriss to extract her.

The idea of traveling a few blocks seemed impossible. Her legs were growing heavy, and the droplets of blood her left a clear path. At this rate, she would not make it.

She turned a corner, and a bright light caused her vision to blur. Terror flooded her for a moment, thinking it was one of her pursuers carrying a glowlamp. But it was just a light suspended over a small alcove. Her breathing was ragged as she dragged herself into the light and leaned heavily against the wall. She wanted so badly to sink down into a sitting position, but kept herself upright by sheer force of will alone. If she sat down, it was unlikely that she would be able to stand up again.

Lucine closed her eyes and reached within herself, drawing upon her fear and pain. She felt a familiar thrum of energy as the Dark Side of the Force responded to her call. Not much power. She was far too exhausted to command much more than that. But it would have to do.

She let that small trick of energy flow through her. Gradually, her body responded to her will, muscle and tissue beginning to knit back together so very slowly. Healing had never been her strongest skill.

A cough tore through her, and she brought her hand up to her mouth to stifle it. Flecks of red stained her palm when she pulled it away.

*Hemothorax, she heard Rhylance's dry voice echoing in her mind. Accumulation of blood in the chest cavity, compressing the lung and eventually causing it to collapse. It is typically fatal within a few hours, unless urgent treatment is administered.*

"I am quite aware, darling, thank you," Lucine muttered hoarsely. But her mental image of her lover was just as persistent as the man himself.

*Multiple stab wounds to the abdomen, with likely lacerations to the liver and spleen. Also typically fatal within a few hours. Cracked ribs and pelvis, sustained during a fall from a significant height. Blaster burns to the left shoulder, lower back and right thigh. Oh, and three broken nails. Nonfatal in and of themselves, but they do worsen an already grim clinical picture. Even a man of my skill would have significant difficulty treating such extensive injuries.*

"It is fortunate, then, that I have access to the Force," Lucine muttered. She could feel her injuries beginning to heal, but the progress was slow. Too slow. But she was not looking to heal herself entirely, just enough to keep herself moving and on her feet.

She let the power continue to trickle through her as she turned her thoughts to the events of the night. How had things managed to go so terribly wrong?

The sound of boots scuffing against the duracrete pulled Lucine out of her reverie. She reached down, wrapping her bloodstained fingers around the hilt of her lightsaber.

A moment later, a black-robed Togruta came into view of the alcove. She pushed herself off the wall, half stumbling toward him. He gave a yell of surprise as she slammed into him, pressing the lightsaber hilt against his upper abdomen and flipping the ignition switch.

The Togrutan's cry was abruptly cut off as the plasma blade seared through his abdomen, chest, neck and base of his brain. She pulled her blade free, nearly losing her balance as he fell limply to the ground.

This place was no longer safe. She turned and limped away from the cultist's corpse, making her way toward the main street. Some of her pain had faded, but it was replaced with numbness and exhaustion. Lucine altered the steady flow of dark energy, willing her screaming muscles to keep going. Her only hope of survival was in eluding the cultists.

The main street was only about twenty feet away, but the going was slow. Even with the Force enhancing her muscles, her body threatened to collapse at any moment. The world teetered and spun, shadows dancing at the edges of her vision.

She thought she could hear dark whispers in the back of her mind, offering assistance in exchange for a favor. The dagger was trying its luck again.

"No. Kark off," she mumbled, too tired to think of any words beyond base profanity. The dark voice in her mind responded only with mocking laughter.

After what felt like an eternity, she finally reached the main street. There were more people here. The street was decorated in reds, pinks and whites in preparation for the Valentine's day party that would take place the next day. A number of people, mostly happy couples, strolled the streets, taking advantage of the enterprising street vendors that had chosen to open early.

Lucine emerged from the side street, only to stumble directly into a man who had been hurrying along the sidewalk. The world tilted dangerously as she lost her focus. The shadows at the edges of her vision surged inward, threatening to claim her.

Arms encircled her, keeping her from falling onto the pavement. She was dimly aware of brilliant blue eyes staring down at her.

"Miss! What happened?"

The question sounded like it was being shouted from the opposite end of a long tunnel. Distantly, she heard the words 'bleeding' and 'hospital'.

"No!" she gasped, clutching the man's shirt. The Cult of the Voidlight would surely know if she checked into a hospital. "No hospitals! Please!"

She could see the man's lips move, but whatever he said sounded muffled. Her grip on his shirt slowly slackened as the last of her strength fled her. Her body went limp and her eyes slowly slid shut as unconsciousness claimed her.

\* \* \*

Lucine opened her eyes. For a moment, she was surprised by that fact.

She took a few deep breaths, simply appreciating the fact that she was alive. The movement brought with it a dull ache from her ribs as they complained about the abuse she had taken the night before. While the pain was less than ideal, it was a welcome reminder that she was still alive.

She lifted her head from the pillow to take in her surroundings. She laying in a narrow bed. The sheets were starched and of a lower thread count than she was accustomed to, but they were clean. There were two other beds in the room, but they were empty.

The room itself could be best described as shabby and clean. The walls were painted white, and had been poorly patched in a few places. The furniture had a run-down quality to them. Three beds, each with a table next to them, and a chest of drawers set on the opposite wall. Probably to store the belongings of the occupants.

Where was she?

There was nothing on the walls to indicate where she was. The only decoration was a clock over the door on the far wall, which told her that it was just after 8 in the morning. She had been out for close to ten hours.

She pushed back the blankets and slid out of the bed, taking a personal inventory as she did so. Her torn and bloodied armor was gone, replaced by a thin white hospital shift. Her body was covered in scratchy white bandages, secured with paper tape. Blood stained a few of the bandages, particularly the one that covered her abdomen.

Her whole body was a chorus of aches and pains. The wounds on her abdomen burned with every movement. The blaster burns on her shoulder, back and thigh also burned, but it was less immediate than the one on her midsection. Her ribs complained with every breath and movement, and a dull headache. She reached a hand up, and felt the bandage that was secured to her forehead. When did she cut her head? Probably when she fell from the roof of the cultists headquarters. But the fact that she did not remember it was concerning.

There were no mirrors in the room to allow her to fully survey the damage. But she was at least able to peel back the bandages to look at the stab wounds on her stomach. They had been sewn closed with a line of neat, precise sutures. Rhyllance would have approved.

She closed her eyes and felt the energies of the Force within her. There was more there than there had been last night, but not as much as she was accustomed to. Clearly she had pushed herself to the limit with her exertions last night. Her power would return with food and rest, but for the moment it would be best to conserve her energy. Especially since it was likely that the cultists were still looking for her.

Lucine directed a small amount of energy toward her wounds, encouraging them to heal faster. She then padded across the room to the chest of drawers that stood across from her bed, where her belongings would likely be kept.

The chest was empty.

She paused, staring at the first empty drawer, before pulling open each of the drawers in turn. They were all empty. She checked the other two chests as well, but they were just as empty as the others. Her belongings were missing.

Icy panic flooded her for a moment, followed quickly by anger. What had happened to her dagger? Her lightsaber? The artifact that she had stolen? Where were they?

She whirled toward the door, intending to search the whole building until she found her belongings. But before she could cross the room, the door slid open, revealing the man from the night before.

She schooled her expression into neutrality as he stepped into the room, looking him up and down.

He was so tall that his head nearly brushed the top of the door frame as he stepped into the room. But not muscular. Instead, his frame had a slender, wiry sort of musculature, like a runner or a swimmer. The sort of body type whose strength and speed tended to be surprising. His features bore a sort of rugged handsomeness, with blond hair cut close to his skull, a strong jaw, and thin lips. His blue eyes widened in surprise at the sight of seeing her out of bed.

Then his expression became closed. Cold. Professional.

Lucine raised an eyebrow at this. Interesting. She remained silent as he studied her, allowing him to speak first. She would let him set the tone for how this conversation would go.

"I'm surprised you're able to move after all that," he said. He held a tray in his hands, laden with bandages, a pitcher and a glass. He set it down on one of the bedside table, filled the glass with water and held it out to her. "How are you feeling?"

Lucine took a tentative sip. The water was cold, clean and untainted. She suddenly found that she was parched, and drained the whole glass. "Remarkably good, thank you. I am happy to be alive. I suppose I have you to thank for that?"

He inclined his head slightly. "Just doing my job, ma'am. I couldn't let you just die on the street."

"Well then, you have my gratitude. May I have your name?"

"It's Barrett. Barrett Reynolds." His words were clipped and professional, but held the ring of truth. No false names for this man.

He gestured toward the bandages on the tray. "May I?"

"Of course." She sat down on the bed as he put on a pair of gloves and began to change her bandages, examining each wound in turn. His movements were quick and precise, indicating years of practice. A doctor or a medic, perhaps?

If he was surprised by how rapidly her wounds were healing, he did not say anything about it. Instead, he leaned back and studied her with a hooded expression. "Well, looks like your wounds are healing well. How did you get them in the first place?"

Brif flashes of memory flashed through her mind. She had made it to the roof of the cultists' headquarters, where she had planned to make her escape. But some of the cultists had been waiting there for her. Among them had been a muscular Zabrak with a cold look in his eyes. No, not cold. Dead. No emotion or expression at all. A man who was well accustomed to doling out death.

She had killed a few of the cultists when the Zabrak suddenly loomed before, moving far too quickly for even her enhanced senses to keep up. She remembered the way the light flashed off his dagger as he stabbed her three times in the stomach.

There had been pain then. She remembered stumbling, then falling off of the roof. It was only due to her connection to the Force that she had survived the fall at all.

She shivered, remembering the sight of the Zabrak's gaze as he peered down at her from above.

"I ran afoul of some people," she said simply.

Barrett grunted. "I'll say. What were you doing when you 'ran afoul' of them?"

"I was retrieving an artifact they stole." That was truth enough. He did not need to know that she had no intention of returning it to its original owners.

He smiled wryly. "Ah. And they didn't like that."

"That's putting it mildly," Lucine said, allowing herself a small smile. "Speaking of which, where is it?"

"It's safe, along with the rest of your gear. I'll be holding on to it for you."

Lucine felt a small surge of anger, but kept it masked behind her smile. "That is really quite kind of you, darling. But as you can see, I am quite healthy. I think it's best if I go ahead and take my leave, before they figure out where I went."

"You don't need to worry about that. This clinic is well guarded." He pressed his lips together. Behind that wall of ice in his eyes, she caught sight of another emotion. Regret? Shame? "Sorry, ma'am, but I can't let you leave."

"And whyever not?" She could hear the anger creeping into her voice and tsked inwardly. The fact that she was letting her emotions show so easily was a testament to how much more healing she needed to do.

He sighed and shook his head, his mouth twisting into a frown of distaste. "I'm sorry, Arielle. I really am. But the people I work for found out that I had brought you in. They've decided to hold you for ransom."

Lucine raised an eyebrow at this. Arielle Vespertine was one of the pseudonyms she used when conducting less than savory operations, in an effort to keep her own name clean. This particular alias did not have a lot of wealthy connections. But apparently, it was wealthy enough to inspire greed in Barrett's employers.

“Ransom,” she repeated. “Really.”

He gave a curt nod as he picked up the tray. “I was hoping you'd be out for a few more days. This whole thing would be resolved by then. No such luck, I guess.” He shook his head again. “I'm sorry, but I don't have a choice.”

She studied him intently as she toyed with the idea of simply ordering him to release her. It would have been so simple. But he seemed so regretful about the whole matter. That made her curious.

She could free herself at any time. He had gone to a significant amount of trouble to save her life. And if they had sent the ransom demand to any of the contacts attached to her file, then her butler would find out eventually and take steps to extract her. She could afford to linger a bit and find out more about the situation. “I see. Do you have any tea?”

He paused, his eyes widening in a look of surprise that quickly vanished behind that wall of professionalism. “You... you're taking this remarkably well.”

Lucine shrugged her shoulders. “Would you prefer screaming hysterics?”

“Well, no.”

Lucine beamed at him. “Good, because I doubt it would help things. I do not wish to be in this situation, and it seems that you do not like it either.”

Barrett grunted quietly as he averted his eyes from her gaze. “That's for sure.”

“Well then, let's make the best of it, for the moment. Oh, may I also have a change of clothes? This hospital gown is a bit... breezy.”

The man studied her for a long moment, his lips pressed in a thin line. Finally, he gave a curt nod. “Sure. I'll see what I can find for you.”

True to his word, he returned a few minutes with a dark gray set of pants and a black button up shirt. They were made of durable, inexpensive synthetic cotton, a far cry from the expensive handmade dresses she was accustomed to. But they were clean and they fit reasonably well, which was a vast improvement from the open-backed hospital gown she had awakened in. Barrett also brought her boots, which had managed to survive without getting too much blood on them.

Things were already looking up.

Lucine let her wavy red hair fall loose on her shoulders, and applied just enough of an illusion to give the impression that she was wearing make up. She may have been forced to wear common clothing, but there was no reason not to look amazing while doing so.

Fully clothed and feeling a bit more like herself, Lucine touched the door of the sleeping quarters to find that it was unlocked. Apparently, her calm reaction earlier had earned some trust from Barrett. A promising start.

The dorm stood at the end of a narrow hallway that was in a similar state to the room itself: brightly lit,

with white-painted walls which showed evidence of repairs. There were three other doors leading off of it: two that were closed and one that was open. She could hear Barrett's voice coming from the far end of the hall, where it opened up into a larger room.

Lucine made her way down the hall at a leisurely pace, checking each room in turn. Both of the closed doors had windows at eye level. The first appeared to be some sort of supply room. The walls were lined with shelves containing a variety of medical supplies, and it appeared that there was also a med dispensary in there as well. No wonder Barrett kept that room locked.

The second closed door led into an anteroom with a stretcher. A second door stood opposite that led into a brightly lit operating room. She did not know much about medical equipment, but the pieces that she could see looked remarkably similar to the ones she had seen in Rhyllance's lab. However, the equipment here had an old, run-down appearance to them.

"I suppose Barrett's keepers could not bring themselves to purchase state of the art equipment," Lucine murmured to herself as she studied the operating room. Still, it was a fair bet that Barrett had used this room the night before to treat her injuries, so she could not complain too much.

The third and final room appeared to be a combination break room and office. A battered metal desk stood against one wall, laden with datapads and flimsiplasts. The floor was covered with a thin green carpet that was worn nearly through in places. A caf maker stood on a small table beside the door, humming quietly as it kept its carafe warm.

It was not tea, but it would do. She found a chipped mug in the sink and filled it to the brim with caf. There was no cream or sugar to be seen. She did not bother to wait to let it cool, instead taking a long sip of the steaming liquid.

It took all of her willpower not to cringe at the taste. Apparently, Barrett liked his caf strong. The caf had a bitter tang that spoke of stale beans percolated into a double strength brew. The result was something far worse than even her efforts to make caf, an impressive feat.

But it was hot and caffeinated, and her only option for the moment. She would have to make due.

At last, she arrived to the room at the end of the hall. It was a nonsterile exam room, featuring a single exam table and three mismatched chairs that stood against the wall. The room also seemed to serve double duty as a supply room. Oxygen tanks and drums containing chemicals for medicine production were stacking in the corner.

A Twi'lek child was sitting on the exam table, kicking her legs as Barrett listened to her chest with a stethoscope.

As she entered the room, both Barrett and an older Twi'lek, apparently the child's mother or grandmother, turned to look at her. The Twi'lek woman quickly returned her attention to the child, but Barrett shot her a warning glare.

She returned his look with a placid smile, before taking another long sip of her caf. Satisfied that she was not going to make trouble, Barrett returned his focus to the child.

As she watched, he performed a thorough examination, listening to the child's heart and lungs, poking

and prodding with the efficient movements he had used earlier. But unlike before, his mannerisms were gentler. Almost kind.

When he was finished, he offered the girl a half smile. "It appears that the pneumonia has improved significantly," he said, prompting a sigh of relief from the Twi'lek woman. "Have her continue to take the antibiotics until they're gone, and come back in a week."

The Twi'lek woman thanked Barrett profusely as she lifted the child to the floor and ushered her out. As the door slid open to allow them to exit, she leaned over slightly to see what was on the other side. It appeared to be a waiting room, filled with even more mismatched chairs. Most of the seats were occupied by tough-looking types, each one sporting a variety of tattoos and dangerous expressions on their faces. None of them got up to be seen next. In fact, most of their attention seemed to be trained on the door that led out to the street.

Well, that explained why Barrett was unconcerned about the cultists pursuing her. There were enough toughs in the waiting room to scare off anyone who might consider attacking the clinic.

"A kidnapper and a dedicated doctor. It seems that you are a man of many talents," Lucine said as the door slid closed behind the two Twi'leks.

Barrett tsked under his breath. "The kidnapping wasn't my idea. If I'd known they were going to do it, I would have just brought you to the hospital."

"So they've never done anything like this before?"

Barrett's eyes narrowed. "Nnnn—" He abruptly cut himself off before he could outright deny her words. "Not recently," he said at last, begrudgingly.

"Charming," Lucine murmured into her caf mug. "I am relieved to know that I am a rare exception."

He sighed, his shoulders slumping slightly. "I know, I know," Lucine said before he could open his mouth. "You would not be involved with this if you had been given the choice. So why are you involved at all?"

Barrett pressed his lips together. He opened his mouth, but he could not bring himself to say whatever it was he wanted to say. Finally, he took in a deep breath as he slowly pulled his shoulders back. "I do not have to justify myself to you." He said, speaking slowly with emphasis on every word.

Lucine raised an eyebrow as she watched the man wrestle with his emotions. She got the distinct feeling that his anger was not directed at her.

There was so much emotion in him. Her lips curved upward as she shifted her focus away from the slow trickle of healing energy being directed to her wounds. It would only take a small push on his mind to force him to spill his secrets.

But before she could speak, they heard a shout of surprise coming from the waiting room. It was followed by blaster fire punctuated by screams.

Both Lucine and Barrett turned toward the door. "What's going on?" Barrett asked, though Lucine



knew about as much as he did. But she had her suspicions.

“I do believe my friends from last night may have caught up with us, darling,” she said as she backed away from the door. “You should return my weapons to me.”

Barrett shot her a furious glance. “I can't do that. If they find out—” He bit off whatever it was he was going to say. Instead, he pushed past her to go into the office. He retrieved a satchel from one of the desk drawers, along with a scuffed up blaster. His voice was all business. “That's not going to happen. Come on.”

He slung the bag over his shoulder before ushering Lucine down the hallway back to the med bay. As he went, he checked the blaster's energy cell, using the same practiced motions he used when examining his patients. His hands were steady, and there was no sign nervousness or anxiety in his movements.

This was a man who was accustomed to handling a blaster and thinking quickly under fire. A soldier perhaps?

Something heavy slammed against the door to the waiting room with a heavy *\*THUD*. And again. On the third impact, the metal of the door started to bow inward.

“That does not bode well, does it?” Lucine asked as she crouched next to the door frame, peeking down the hallway. As she watched, the metal bowed further inward.

Barrett shook his head grimly. “The gang members had the code to get in. I guess they lost.”

Lucine frowned slightly as she made a twisting motion with her hands, using the Force to lend power to her words. “Return my weapons to me. Now.”

He scowled at her. “No. Make sure you stay behind me.”

Lucine pressed her lips together. Bother. A strong-willed man. Were it not for the fact that they were facing likely death against overwhelming odds, she would have been intrigued.

The banging against the door occurred two more times, before it finally gave way, revealing several people. They each wore dark robes, with daggers sheathed on their belts and a variety of weapons in their hands.

Barrett cursed under his breath at the sight of them. “Cultists?! You stole from the karking Cult of the Voidlight and forgot to mention it?!”

As he spoke, he fired three times. One took a Mirialan in the head, while the subsequent two burned into the chest of the man standing behind her. They both crumpled to the ground, unmoving.

“I thought their reputation was overblown,” Lucine replied with a shrug.

Whatever he was going to say in response was drowned out by blaster fire, as the cultists shot back at them. They ducked behind the wall as blaster bolts flew past.

“Do you happen to have any grenades in that bag of yours?” Lucine asked as she nodded toward his satchel.

“Of course not! Do you have any idea how many people need this clinic? I'm not going to throw grenades in here!” Barrett hissed. He leaned out long enough to snap out a shot. It was followed by a scream, indicating he had hit one of the cultists. Unfortunately, that scream sounded like it was coming from the hallway.

“Surrender the woman and the holy artifact, and you will be released!”

Lucine froze at the sound of the booming voice from the lobby. She peered around the corner to see the hulking Zabrak shoulder his way into the room. Unlike the others, he was clad in dark armor painted with red sigils. She narrowed her eyes at the sight of it. Something about those sigils looked familiar....

She then looked to Barrett. There was no sign of indecision on his face, not even the smallest indication that he was considering the Zabrak's offer. Instead, he leveled his gun on the Zabrak and shot as quickly as he could.

Five shots sailed toward the Zabrak, each one ricocheting off the armor.

The massive cultist responded by pulling something off of his belt and lobbing it down the hallway at them.

The world seemed to slow down as they watched the frag grenade sail toward them. Barrett cursed as he launched himself toward her. Lucine's attention, however, was focused entirely on the grenade. She narrowed her eyes at it as she extended her hand, flicking two fingers toward the metallic object. The grenade abruptly halted in the air, before sailing back in the direction it had come.

A moment later, Barrett crashed into her, shoving her onto the ground and landing on top of her. Her ribs and back screamed in protest at the sudden impact.

A explosion ripped through the waiting room as the frag grenade impacted, followed shortly by a series of multiple explosions. A wave of heat reached them, combined with the smell of chemicals.

*\*The chemical barrels,* Lucine thought through the haze of pain. The schrapnel from the frag grenade must have caused sparks.

Barrett was already moving, rolling off of her and pulling her onto her feet. She looked down the hallway to see a wall of fire, the air distorted by the sheer amount of heat that the flames were putting off.

“Fire! We have to put it out before the whole clinic goes up!”

He started to run down the hallway, but Lucine grabbed him by the arm and pulled him back. “Do not be a fool! There is nothing you can do!”

He looked to her and back to the inferno that was consuming his clinic, indecision written on his face. She saw movement over his shoulder as the hulking Zabrak emerged from the curtain of fire.

“Just my luck,” she hissed under her breath, before pitching her voice louder for Barrett to hear. “We have to leave! A dead hero is no good to anyone!”

Her words finally reached him. His shoulders slumped, but he turned away from the fire and allowed himself to be pulled back into the dorm. He slapped the button on the door panel and the door shut behind him.

“Come on,” he said. His voice was hoarse, but it was impossible to tell if it was from the chemicals and heat in the air, or if it was something else.

Whatever it was, it did not prevent him from acting. He hurried to the center chest of drawers and shoved it to one side, revealing a hidden door. “We can reach the street this way,” he said as he punched a code into the keypad, causing the door to slide open.

They hurried through as something heavy impacted against the door to the med bay. Clearly, the Zabrak was not giving up.

The dark passageway led to a narrow alley. Barrett allowed Lucine to take the lead, his steps slow and hesitant, as if he was still debating going back to try to put out the fire. His pace was so slow that Lucine finally took him by the arm and pulled him along with her.

They finally emerged onto the crowded street. The Valentine's day festival was in full swing, the street lined with kiosks and stalls, decorated with some combination of red, white and pink. As Lucine looked around, she could see everything from games of chance to food vendors to a wide variety of tools to add spice to the love life. A small crowd had gathered outside the clinic to watch it burn, but a larger number of people were too caught up in the festivities to care.

Barrett turned, watching the flames devour the clinic with a look of despair on his face. He did not protest as Lucine ducked into a nearby clothing vendor.

She browsed through the racks, keeping an eye on Barrett through the windows as she searched for something to make herself a little less noticeable. Under normal circumstances, a simple illusion would suffice, but she still needed to conserve her power.

Finally, her gaze fell upon a rack of mass-produced black cloaks. They all seemed to be of terrible quality, made from cheap material with cheap dye. But this was Nar Shaddaa. A black cloak was practically the uniform here. What better way to blend in?

She picked through the rack, searching for the one with the least number of loose threads as she considered her next move. She could just leave. Barrett seemed to have lost all interest in stopping her. Most of her belongings could be replaced. Her lightsaber could be rebuilt. But the artifact was one of a kind. She had already gone through quite a bit of trouble to obtain it, and she did not want to leave it behind so easily.

Which meant she still needed Barrett. Bother.

Besides, he *\*had* tried to protect her, as misguided as the attempt had been. It was rare to see such displays of chivalry and idealism. Endearing almost. It would be a shame if she left him to fend on his own and he died as a result.

Once her cloak was purchased and draped artfully into place, she returned to stand at Barrett's side. He had not moved. "We should get off the street, darling. They will come looking for us eventually."

He turned his head slowly to look at her. "What?"

"Come on," she said, taking his arm and pulling him up the street and away from the burning clinic. "Let us go and have a talk. Perhaps we can work something out."

"Work what out?" he asked, narrowing his eyes at her.

"Well, darling," Lucine purred as she wrapped her arms around his. To anyone looking on, they would look like any other couple enjoying the festival. "I think it is fairly clear that it was a terrible idea to try and hold me hostage." Barrett opened his mouth to speak, and she cut him off. "I know, I know, it was not your idea. But that does not change the fact that you are involved now. Those cultists will not stop until they have gotten what they want."

"So what are you suggesting?" he asked, wariness in his voice.

"I am suggesting that you buy me breakfast, and we come up with a plan to deal with the nasty situation." She steered him toward one of the restaurants with windows facing the street. A brightly colored sign out front announced a breakfast special for couples.

"And why am I buying you breakfast?"

"Because I am hungry. And you stole my wallet along with the rest of my belongings."

Barrett sighed heavily and rolled his eyes as he allowed himself to be pulled into the restaurant.

The restaurant's interior was decorated with greens, oranges and turquoise blues in style that had been popular about twenty years ago. Judging by the state of the furniture, it was more than likely due to the fact that the décor had not been updated, rather than an intentional design choice. Red and pink streams had been added in honor of the holiday, creating an appalling clash of colors that almost caused Lucine to lose her appetite. Almost.

But the restaurant was nearly packed with couples, indicating that the quality of the food was significantly better than the owner's sense of interior design. Lucine and Barrett were led to a small table located near enough to the window to allow them a view of the street without being easily spotted themselves.

Their server sported a bow-tie pinned to his orange shirt in a futile attempt to improve the restaurant's ambiance. But he moved quickly, dropping off their menus and beverages before rushing off to attend to other patrons.

As soon as they were seated, she once again set herself to the task of healing her injuries, this time redoubling her efforts. The pain had faded from all but her most severe wounds, but the dull headache was worsening. Rhyllance had once opined that her powers had a metabolic component to them, wondering if the body burned calories in order to sustain any major effort with the Force. Perhaps that was why Tabriss always served her high calorie foods on the days she used a significant amount of her

powers.

It seemed like a good time to put that theory to the test. She needed to rebuild her reserve of power in a hurry. With that thought in mind, she lifted her menu to study the offerings.

Barrett appeared to be studying his menu too. His head was down, and there was a clouded look in his eyes.

She watched him stare blankly at the menu for a moment. "You should get something to eat, darling," she said at last. "You've had a rough night."

He looked up at her, as if remembering that she was there. "That's an understatement," he said as he shot her a glare. "I'm not hungry."

"I see," she said and set her own menu down. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Talk about what?"

"About your little breakdown back there."

Barrett's scowl deepened, and he snorted under his breath. "I did not have a breakdown."

"Oh please, darling. I recognized the look on your face when you were watching the clinic burn. It was the look of a man whose life was being reduced to ashes before his very eyes."

He smiled wryly. "Is that something you've seen a lot of?"

"Once or twice," Lucine replied with a cat-like smile. "My point is that you do not strike me as the sort of man who would fall apart in the face of a setback. It is why I find your reaction so surprising."

Barrett paused, his smile fading as he studied her intently. There was a guarded expression in his narrowed eyes, that of a man who was unaccustomed to sharing anything about himself. The proverbial man of mystery.

Lucine's smile did not wilt under his scrutinizing glare. She could not deny that she enjoyed men who kept to themselves. It made prying out their secrets so much more satisfying. Even better, this man had proven he could withstand her mental manipulations to a certain extent. That made him particularly interesting to her.

"What makes you think you know anything about me?" he growled at last, when it became clear that she was not going to wither under his glare.

"I have already gleaned quite a bit, darling," Lucine replied. "You're from here originally, I can tell based off of your accent. You have a military background, likely starting from a young age. Perhaps you joined in an attempt to improve yourself. If I had to guess, I would say it was likely Imperial training. That is also likely where you received the bulk of your medical training. You're highly intelligent, driven and also motivated to do good." As she spoke, she ticked off the details on her fingers, though she avoided using the three fingers that had broken nails.

As she spoke, his glare became more and more glacial. Confirmation that she was right. She so loved it when she was right. Of course, she had arrived on most of her conclusions based off of basic observation, but he did not need to know that. Let him think it was some sort of Force user mysticism.

“So then, the big question is how a man such as yourself would wind up under the thumb of a middling local crime syndicate. You do not strike me as the type to favor gambling or spice. Based on your closed off nature, it was because of someone you care about. A lover, perhaps. Because of them, you find yourself in a seemingly impossible situation. Quite heartbreaking really.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. Yes, that had struck a nerve. She allowed her smile to fade and softened her features into an expression of concern. “I could help you, you know. If you wanted it. I realize that you are not the sort of person to ask for help. But the cult has marked the both of us, and that makes us allies. I always strive to do right by my allies.”

The server chose that moment to come take their order. His sudden arrival caused Barrett to jump, his hand instinctively reaching for the blaster he had stowed in his waistband. Apparently, the server was accustomed to such a reaction, because he did not even flinch.

Barrett ordered a cup of black caf, his words clipped and short as he did so. Lucine ordered a double order of the pancake special. Barrett quirked an eyebrow at the amount of food that she ordered, but she simply shrugged her shoulders. The food was unlikely to be to her usual standard, but at the moment, she was not interested in quality. She was going, instead, for quantity. She needed calories, and a lot of them.

Once the server departed, Barrett took a deep breath and settled back into his chair. His back was still a bit too straight. It was as if he was trying to force himself to relax, and failing miserably at it. “So what do you want?”

“Many things,” Lucine replied simply. Mostly, it was to irritate him. If he was going to insist upon asking such vague questions, she was content to give vague answers. However, she was trying to gain his trust. More of a response would be warranted. “In this specific situation, I want to get off this planet safely and with all my belongings, preferably after teaching those cultists a lesson in civility and respect. And I would prefer for my butler to not have to rescue me. He would never let me live it down.”

“Your butler.”

“Yes,” Lucine replied. The server hurried past their table, pausing long enough to drop off two cups of steaming caf. She picked up one of the mugs and took a sip. “He is quite skilled, which grants him a little leeway when it comes to taking verbal liberties. Given the fact that he has not heard from me since last night, I suspect he is already out looking for me.”

Barrett looked perplexed at this, and she let him wonder. It was difficult to describe Tabriss's capabilities without seeing them firsthand. “At any rate, that is what I want,” she pressed forward. “And what about you?”

Barrett took a long sip of his caf as he considered his response. “I don't know. To survive this, I guess.”

She quirked an eyebrow at this. “Merely to survive? Surely, darling, you can do better than that.”

"I don't know," he replied slowly.

"Very well, then let us take a different tactic. Who is it that currently holds your leash?"

He scowled at her over the rim of his caf mug. "You are not going to let this go, are you?"

"Of course not! I am nothing if not persistent."

He sighed heavily and shook his head. "I'm working for the Fins. They're the ones that owned the clinic."

Lucine paused as she recalled the research she had performed prior to coming to Nar Shaddaa. The Fins were a small local gang who made their money off of street crime, gambling, prostitution and the like. They were mostly composed of small-time thugs who scraped a living off of the paltry leavings of the larger Hutt organizations. Under normal circumstances, she would have considered them to be beneath her notice.

"I see. And how did you come to be owned by them?"

Barrett shifted uncomfortably in his seat as he weighed his words. "My brother got deep into debt to them."

Lucine sighed inwardly. It was quickly becoming apparent that prying information out of this man was going to be like pulling teeth. "So you assumed his debt, which was too high for you to pay."

"He died. Drug overdose. But the Fins wanted his debt paid. They threatened my parents, but there was no way they could pay. So I had to work it off, patching up the gang members after skirmishes with rival gangs."

Lucine suppressed a feeling of disappointment. Unfortunately, such a sad tale was a dime a dozen. Still, it gave her something to work with. "No doubt by the time the debt was paid off, you were in too deep. You did too good of a job, so now they think you are indispensable. There was no way they are ever going to let you go."

"Yeah." Barrett's shoulders slumped at that. She was only saying things that he already knew. "At least with the clinic, I could also provide care for those who need it."

"So you were never going to leave anyway. Likely, Targen knew this," Lucine said, naming the leader of the Fins.

Barrett narrowed her eyes suspiciously at her at the casual mention of the gang leader's name. "I suppose that's true."

"And now that the clinic has been destroyed? Well, they will likely find a way to blame you for it, despite the fact that it was their ridiculous decision to try to hold me for ransom that caused the situation in the first place. Were it not for that, the clinic would not have come under attack by the cult." Lucine leaned back in her chair and shook her head. "Well. Your situation is a difficult one, but it is not impossible to overcome. I do have some connections here. As I said, I am willing to help you

with it, if you want it.”

His expression and posture remained stiff, but something softened in his eyes. Yes, there it was. The faint spark of hope. Perfect.

“How?” he asked, his voice gruff.

She looked over his shoulder to see movement on the street. The hulking form of the Zabrak stalking down the street. His armor was scorched, but he had managed to find more cultists to replace the ones who had died in the fire. The Zabrak's face was twisted with rage as he scanned the street, looking for them.

That was a problem that would need to be dealt with in the very near future. She brightened at the sight of the server coming toward them, bearing a tray laden with their breakfast. The first step would be to restore her power. Then she could pay the Zabrak and his lackeys back for every insult they had given her.

“I have a few ideas,” she purred. “But first, I want you to tell me everything you know about this gang of yours.”

\* \* \*

Barrett leveled the cheap-looking modified slug rifle and took aim. “Are they following?”

Lucine looked around the crowded street. She could see two black-cloaked cultists skulking as casually as they could on a nearby corner. Another glared at her at a stall across the street, where he was pretending to examine the selection of chocolates displayed there. “Oh yes. It seems we have been spotted.”

Barrett gave his usual scowl. “Wonderful.” He began to shoot the rifle, barely taking time to aim between each shot. One by one, bottles at the opposite end of the gallery shattered as each shot connected with their target.

“We have a winner!” The Zeltron who was running the shooting gallery plucked the toy slug rifle out of his hands, and handed him a small stuffed Ewok clutching an anatomically correct heart in its paws. “Here! A nice prize to give to your lady friend.”

Barrett looked at the stuffed toy with raised eyebrows, before handing it to Lucine. The redhead beamed at the prize. “Why thank you, darling. So chivalrous!”

“I just don't want my hands full if this goes sideways,” he replied as they began to wander up the street. “You're sure they won't attack us out in the open?”

“They are a secret cult, darling. Emphasis on secret. There are too many witnesses here,” Lucine replied. She glanced over her shoulder to see that the three cultists were now following them. “They will wait until we reach a relatively secluded location to make their move.”

“Lucky for us that we're headed for a 'secluded location'.” Barrett said dryly.



“Fortunate indeed!” There was significantly more enthusiasm in her voice. “But you still have not told me where we need to go to retrieve my belongings. We should do that first.”

“A little eager, aren't you?” he asked with a wry smile.

“Darling, I make it a point to never go anywhere without the proper accessories. My lightsaber would be an excellent asset, given what we are likely to face.”

Barrett remained quiet for a moment as he digested her words. Surely he had figured out that she was a Force user when he first took her belongings, but he had not brought up the subject once. “What, you can't just throw around heavy objects or leap tall buildings in a single bound?”

It was Lucine's turn to smile. “I am not that sort of Jedi.” In truth, she was not any sort of Jedi, but that was beside the point. “Most of my powers have a different area of focus. While they will be helpful if we need to fight, I would feel significantly better if I had my weapons. Surely you understand.”

She would like it even more if she could get her hands on the artifact that she had worked so hard to steal. Hopefully, Barrett hid all of her belongings together.

“Sure, I get that,” Barrett replied, absently brushing his hand against his blaster. “I hid your things in the same building where we're going. In a silver weapons locker against the western wall. Hopefully we'll be able to get there early enough that you can get them.”

They wove their way through the crowded festival, making their way toward the building that Barrett had described over breakfast. It was a large warehouse that was often used by the Fins to process stolen speeders and hovercraft. It was located at the edge of the collection of blocks where the Valentine's day festival was taking place. Just far enough away from the crowds to avoid witnesses, but close enough that they should be able to get in before the cultists had too much time to attack them.

“Is Targen the punctual type?” Lucine asked as they turned onto a side street and the warehouse came into view. It was a squat, square building, with most of the surface of its dull silver walls covered in graffiti. The large bay doors on the front were closed, preventing easy access from the street.

“Nah, he thinks he's a showman. He'll probably show up late,” Barrett replied with the same scowl he usually wore whenever he spoke of the minor gang lord.

He led her past the shuttered bay doors and down a side street just past the building. “Come on. We can get in this way.”

About halfway down the building was a narrow metal door. It was so covered with graffiti that it was nearly indistinguishable from the wall.

“Urban camouflage. How very... utilitarian.” Lucine commented as Barrett entered the key code. He shot her a look over his shoulder, and she shrugged in response. “What? Even you have to admit that it is a far cry from art.”

“I didn't realize you were an art critic,” he muttered as he pushed open the door.

"I am a woman of many talents," Lucine replied with a toss of her hair. "It is such a shame that you refuse to recognize them."

He led her into the warehouse, which was basically a single large space, partitioned off by metal grates and stacks of crates and containers. According to Barrett, it featured a large work area near the bay doors, surrounded by a maze of smaller areas. This was where they would enact their plan.

Barrett had also told her that the warehouse would be empty at this hour, as the place was most active at night. But as they wove their way amid the narrow aisles toward the main work area, they could hear voices. Someone was here.

"I guess they decided to get here early," he muttered. "You sure about this?"

"Well, it is too late to turn back now," Lucine said softly. She would have liked to have retrieved her weapons, but the western wall was on the opposite side of the voices. She'd have to make her way over there at the first opportunity.

They emerged into the work area to find a group of seven people waiting for them. Five of them were the usual muscle-headed tough types that gravitated toward this sort of career path. They had positioned themselves in a way that they could watch down as many of the aisles as possible, while also keeping an eye on the other two, who seemed to be in charge.

A tall, broad-shouldered Human stood in the center of the work area. His nose was crooked, as if it had been broken on multiple occasions, and he had the confident grin of a man who thought he was in charge. Based on Barrett's description, that would be Targen. When meant the short Rodian who stood next to him was Zelig, the second in command. By all accounts, he was the brains of the outfit.

"Nice of you to finally join us!" Targen boomed as he caught sight of them. "So glad you didn't lose our little payday here. You'd have been in deeper shit than you already are."

"Oh, come on," Barrett said. "It's not my fault those maniacs attacked my clinic."

"It wasn't your fault, but it's definitely your problem. Do you have any idea how much all that medical shit was worth?"

"Better than you do, I'll bet," Barrett snapped.

Targen grinned, but there was nothing friendly about his smile. It looked more like the smile of a shark about to devour its prey. "Then you know how much we lost in that little bonfire. I'm gonna be adding it to the money you already owe us."

Barrett's mouth snapped shut, and Lucine could almost hear him grinding his jaw as his anger grew. Frankly, she could see why. She already found Targen to be insufferable and she had only known him a few minutes.

"Yeah, good plan. Keep that mouth shut. You're damned lucky you're decent at what you do, or I'd've had you killed years ago along with that worthless brother of yours."

The medic growled softly under his breath as his fingers twitched closer to the blaster at his waist.

Lucine raised an eyebrow at his reaction, making a mental note to never disparage Barrett's family.

Still, it would be better to turn the conversation to something else. It would not do for this to devolve into a brawl just yet.

She stalked into the work area until she was face to face with Targen. "So you're the low-life scum who dares to try to hold me for ransom? How dare you! I'll have you know, you cretin, that I have friends in high places! They will not stand for it when they hear how abhorrently I have been treated!" She pitched her voice theatrically high, and loaded it with as much scorn and indignation as she could. It was not hard. She spent enough time around spoiled socialites to know how they acted.

"Oh, brother," Targen rolled his eyes in the face of her indignation. "Barrett, you weren't kidding. This schutta's a real piece of work."

Lucine shot a glare over her shoulder, and Barrett merely shrugged in reply. But there was slightly less tension in his face now that he was no longer under scrutiny. Good.

"Listen, babycakes, it's nothing personal," Targen said. "Think of it as a brief stay in one of Nar Shaddaa's finest medical establishments, and a bit of charity work on the side."

As he spoke, Lucine extended her awareness into the man's mind, getting a better idea of his personality. She could sense a myriad of emotions there, chief among them pride. Well. She could work with that. "Perhaps you will be able to use the money to buy soap," she said. "You call it fine? Please. The thread count in my sheets was lower than your IQ!" She sighed, and struck a dramatic pose. "*\*Really*. Why couldn't I have been kidnapped by a *\*classy* crime syndicate instead of a mere dime-store knockoff? This has been an *\*awful* experience."

Targen glared down at her. "You'll find out how awful it can be if your contact doesn't show up with the money."

"Threats?!" Lucine shrieked. "On top of *\*everything* else? How disgusting!" She rolled her eyes. "Don't you worry, you disgusting pig. My butler will be here soon enough with the money. A small price to pay to be away from this slum and your filth!"

A quick glance over her shoulder allowed her to see Barrett's bemused expression. Clearly he thought she was laying it on too thick. But Targen's face was beginning to turn red with anger.

"You'd just better hope he's got all the money," he said, his voice thick with rage. "Or I'll be making you work to pay off the difference. I'll bet I could find a couple of buyers if I gagged you first."

"Well, I hope you're not planning to try to count it all yourself," she said. "The amount will be significantly higher than what you can count on your fingers and toes. And I do *\*not* want to spend another second here than I absolutely have to!"

Targen growled low under his breath and raised a hand to backhand her. She sensed Barrett move forward to intervene, just as one of the guards straightened and raised his weapon, peering at something in the direction they had come from. "Hey, boss? We got company."

"Now what?" Targen snapped.

As if in response to his question, a blaster bolt cut through the air, searing into the guard's chest. That was her cue. Lucine dived into cover as the air was suddenly filled with projectiles. The cultists had arrived.

Lucine wove a weaving path between the crates and containers, making her way for the western wall. She could hear shouts and curses behind her as the cultists fought against the gang members. Hopefully Barrett would have enough good sense to take cover from all that.

She reached the wall and scanned the various boxes that were collected there. There were four or five of them that met the description that Barrett had given her. She closed her eyes and extended her senses, searching for the exact one that she needed.

There. The one closest to the corner seemed to radiate with darkness. That was the one she wanted. She hurried over and threw open the lid to see her belongings lying on top of a collection of worn tools.

At last, she had what she wanted.

“Thief!”

The Zabrak's voice boomed from the work area. She had been so concerned with retrieving what she had lost that she had not noticed that the firefight had stopped.

“Come out of hiding! Now! We have your partner!”

“Oh, bother,” Lucine muttered as she stuffed her dagger and her lightsaber onto her belt. She glanced around, but there were no obvious doors to slip out of. It appeared that the closest window ran along the ceiling. She could probably reach it, but would likely get shot in the process.

She reached down to retrieve the artifact. As her fingers brushed the black bag, she felt a rush of power shoot through her. It was an item of immense power that had been used for the past several years being the focus of numerous profane rituals. So much power. Could she really give it up?

“You will surrender and return the artifact, or we will kill him!”

Her eyes darted between the window and the work area as she considered her options. Unfortunately, there were not many. Finally, she sighed heavily and shook her head. “The things I do for people I like.”

“I am coming, darling,” she called back as she turned toward the work area. “Keep your ugly robes on.”

She emerged from the maze of crates to find that most of the gang members had been subdued. Some of them were still alive. She could see Zelig writhing under a stack of fallen crates. Targen, however, was dead, blaster burns seared into his face. Such a shame, that.

The Zabrak stood in the center of the carnage with Barrett kneeling at his feet. His armor gleamed in the overhead lights, though it had been burned in a couple of places where he had been hit with one projectile or another. He held a dagger to Barrett's throat. The medic, meanwhile, looked like he had at

least put up a good fight. Though there was blood oozing from a cut on his forehead, the four cultists that surrounded him looked like they had taken a beating. Still, they seemed well enough to keep their weapons steady on him.

“Here I am, darling!” Lucine said, striking a pose. She felt a chill as the Zabrak's icy gaze fell upon her. She could feel dark energies radiating from his armor, the same type of energy that came from the artifact. Perhaps that was where his armor drew its power from.

The Zabrak's blaster did not waver. “You have much to answer for, blasphemer.”

“Hmm. That is a new one. I do not believe I have been called a blasphemer yet. Thank you, darling, for at least being original.”

“You will return the artifact now.”

“Of course,” she replied. She glanced at Barrett, met his eyes and tried to push an image into his head of what she was planning. Telepathy was never her strong suit, so she could only hope that he got the message. “Catch!”

With that, she slung the bag in the Zabrak's direction. He caught it with one hand and quickly slid his dagger into its sheath. He reached into the bag and retrieved his contents.

When he saw what he had, his expression changed for the first time. He stared down at the stuffed Ewok, his face twisting into a look of rage that promised pain and death. “Kill this one and take the woman alive,” he said. “Her suffering will be an example to all who would rob the Cult.”

But Lucine was already on the move. Icy dark energy shot through her muscles, lending her strength and speed as she closed with the group. Her lightsaber flared to light, bathing the area in emerald light as she whipped it through the nearest cultist, bisecting him at the midsection.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Barrett try to roll out of the way, but he was not fast enough. The cultist nearest to him opened fire with her blaster, sending a bolt of searing red into his leg and causing him to collapse onto the ground.

Lucine cursed under her breath and juke to one side, narrowly avoiding getting shot herself. She closed the distance just as the cultist was leveling her weapon on Barrett's head. The plasma blade seared through the cultist's arm, sending the blaster flying. Lucine twisted, and sent the blade slicing through her neck.

Movement behind her. Lucine whirled and thrust outward with her blade, catching another cultist in the midsection. The fourth one fell a moment later, cut from shoulder to hip with a single cut.

That just left one threat. Before she could turn, something heavy bowled into her, knocking her into a stack of crates. Black stars exploded in front of her eyes as one particularly heavy box slammed down onto her head.

The Zabrak loomed over her a moment later. She lashed upward with her lightsaber, but the tip of the blade skated over the armor. His massive hand closed around her throat, hauling her up out of the boxes and clear off of the floor.

He pulled back a fist, before slamming it into her midsection, driving her breath out of her. He then roared, tossing her into another column of boxes.

For a moment, she could only lay there, struggling to catch her breath. Then pain shot through her as the Zabrak kicked her in the side, accompanied with the shattering of her newly healed ribs. Perhaps the only bright side was that she was already hurting so much that the second and third kicks did not hurt nearly as much.

He reached down and grabbed her by the throat again, hauling her up and slamming her into one of the support beams. Black fog once again surrounded her vision, unconsciousness threatening to consume her. Twice in a twenty-four hour period. How embarrassing.

Through the haze, she could see Barrett was crawling away from the Zabrak. Good. Maybe he'd survive this.

“Where is the artifact?” The Zabrak boomed. “Where have you hidden it?”

“Gone...” she managed to whisper through the hand clenched around her throat. “Destroyed.”

“You lie!” He slammed her against the beam again, her skull cracking against the metal. “Tell me where it is.”

Maybe she could make him mad enough to just kill her. It would be a preferable end to whatever he had planned for her. She no longer had the breath to speak, so she did the next best thing. She spat blood into his face and gave him a mocking smile.

He growled in rage and raised a fist to strike her again. Behind him, she saw a brilliant flash of crimson light. Though the Zabrak could not have seen it, he still froze, a look of surprise on his face. He then crumpled to the ground, dead from the blaster bolt that had seared into the back of his skull.

The last thing Lucine saw before she lost consciousness was Barrett crawling over, still holding the weapon he had shot the Zabrak with.

*Author's note: Alas, I ran out of time before I could write the conclusion! Suffice it to say, they all lived happily ever after.*