

**“If you do this, then we can be free.” She wrapped her arms around him, holding him tightly. She felt so small and fragile, trembling slightly as he wrapped his arms around her. “Please, do it for me. If you don't, then we'll all be killed. Please Tabriss...”*

There were screams then, and a swirl of half-forgotten memories. Screams. An older man, slumped over in his seat, blank eyes staring at him as if in accusation. A half-eaten meal, and a pristine table cloth spotted with blood.

Through the cacophony, he could still hear her pleas, spoken between sobs.

“Please Tabriss....”

“Please Tabriss....”

*“Please Tabriss....”**

“Tabriss?”

He snapped awake as his mistress's voice cut through the nightmare. Tabriss was on his feet before sleep had fully departed, bowing in the direction of the voice. “Yes, my lady?”

Lucine Vasano leaned against the door frame of his small room. She was dressed to go out in her favorite black attire: night black armor, gloves and boots. The cowl and hood that accompanied her ensembles was swept back to reveal that her curly red hair was swept in a utilitarian pony-tail.

She tilted her head, her eyebrows lifted in an expression of surprise. “Were you sleeping?”

Tabriss felt his cheeks grow warm at the realization that she had caught him in a moment of weakness. The clock on his bedside table read 6:08; they had planned to depart on their evening excursion at 6:05, right after sunset.

Not only had he been caught sleeping on the job, but he had caused her to be delayed. Inexcusable. He hid his embarrassment by pressing his fist to his heart and bowing his head. “Do forgive me, my lady. I shall be ready to go momentarily.”

Lucine remained where she stood, studying him intently. He could feel her mind probing his as she looked him up and down, and he made no effort to hide his thoughts as he began donning his own evening attire.

“Stop,” she said at last. “Look at me.”

Tabriss paused, turning to face her. He held his head high as he looked at her, awaiting her command.

She crossed the room until she was standing only a few feet from him, gazing fully into his eyes. “You have not been sleeping well of late, have you?”

He hesitated for a moment, considering his words. Not to lie to her, never to lie. But it would be unseemly for her to be concerned for him. “It is a mere trifle, my lady. Please do not concern yourself with it.”

Lucine did not respond. Instead, she continued to study him intently. "Your memories are once again returning." She smiled ruefully and shook her head. "I warned you that I could not make them go away forever."

"It is enough, my lady," he said. And it was. If he could not remember, then he could continue to serve.

He forced himself to assume his usual half-smirk, to prove to her that he was his usual self. "Do forgive me, my lady. My tardiness has already cost us time and it would not so to delay you further. I assure you that I am fit to serve. I shall be ready to depart in just a few minutes."

"Hmm," Lucine's expression turned thoughtful, before shaking her head. "No, darling. I think it is best if I perform this particular mission alone tonight."

Tabriss felt a clenching in his gut at her words. Lucine's nightly activities trended toward the dangerous. He could not sufficiently protect her if he was not there. "My lady, please. There is no reason that I would be unable to fulfill my duties to you."

"I have made up my mind," she said firmly. "I command you to remain here for the night. Have a bath and a glass of wine ready for me upon my return, but otherwise I want you to rest. We shall deal with the matter of your troubling memories in the morning."

He opened his mouth to protest, but her words left very little room for argument. His sensibilities as a butler were clear: once given an order, for good or for ill, he had to obey it. Ordinarily he could find creative ways to work around her commands, working within the letter if not the spirit. But his mind was still hazy from his impromptu nap. It was difficult to come up with anything suitable creative.

"As you wish, my lady," he said, though his tone of voice made it clear that he disapproved.

If Lucine noticed his tone, she did not show it. Instead, she gave him a beaming smile. "Good, I am glad that it settled. I shall send you a message when I am enroute home. Have a good evening, Tabriss."

With that, she turned and left, shutting the door behind her. Once it latched closed, Tabriss sank down onto his narrow bed, as he considered his next steps. The idea of merely resting while she was out risking herself was unthinkable. But her command had been clear.

He looked slowly around the room, taking in the plain furnishings and undecorated walls. His twin slug throwers lay on a clean cloth on the dresser, freshly cleaned and oiled, ready for service. His armor hung in the corner, in a similar state of readiness. His closet was full of identical sets of tailcoats, his chosen uniform while in service.

There was no evidence of a life outside of service. No indication of what things had been like before he had come to serve Lucine. And, other than a few fragments, he had no memories of it either. But that was precisely how he preferred it.

But now it seemed that life was coming back to haunt him, and it was already causing difficulties. Perhaps it was better if he stayed behind. He was in no state to sufficiently serve his lady in his current state. Tomorrow, she would once again remove those small fragments of memory, and life could return to normal.

He sighed and leaned back on his bed, closing his eyes to rest. Just as he had been commanded.

* * *

**“Please Tabriss.”*

She pressed against him, looking up at him pleadingly. “He has to die. If he does not, then we all will. It is a mercy, really. He is old. Not fit to serve anymore. The other families see his weakness, and they think it applies to all of us. House Jikarian is making plans to move on us, I know it.”

He wanted to push her away. This was improper. It would not do for a mere servant to embrace one of the daughters of his lord. “Lady Makara'Lai'karanos,” he said, separating himself with some difficulty. “I understand your plight, truly I do. But the master has placed his trust on me. I cannot betray it.”

The Chiss lady's mouth twisted in a look of disgust. “His periods of lucidity are becoming more and more infrequent. If he could see how things are going, I have little doubt he would give you his blessing. Father worked all his life to build this family from the ground up. It would break his heart to see what his 'leadership' is reducing us to.”

She pulled something from her sleeve, a clear vial which she placed in his hands. “I can save this family, but I cannot do it while he lives. Please Tabriss. Do him this kindness. Do not let all of faher's work be reduced to ash.”

He held the vial in his hands, staring down at it. It was still warm from being so close to her body. The glass reflected off of the light of the chandelier overhead, making the substance in the vial sparkle.

Indecision tore at him. He knew her words to be true. But to kill his master. It would be the ultimate betrayal.

*“Please Tabriss...”**

A distant scream and the sounds of blaster fire tore him from his sleep. He was moving before he was fully away, three knives appearing in his hand as he bolted into the hallway in search of the threat.

Only the sounds of an empty living space met his ears. He stood still for a minute, listening to the sound of his thundering heart. He could hear the steady clocking of a clock, but the beyond that, only silence.

Finally, he sighed and slipped his knives back into their hidden sheathes. A quick glance at the clock told him that it was just past six in the morning, about the time when he usually awoke to see to the household.

Pushing back the last vestiges of his fitful sleep, he retired to the small refresher that adjoined his rooms to wash.. The icy water of the shower left him feeling a bit more alert as he donned a fresh uniform and slid his weapons into their usual places.

He then set himself to his usual duties, seeing to his lady's breakfast and morning tea. There were no

messages of immediate import for her to see to, otherwise he would have given them to her along with her breakfast tray.

But when he let himself into her room to deliver her breakfast, he saw that her bed was unoccupied, and still made from the previous day.

Tabriss frowned at the sight of the empty bed. He set down the tray and went to check his communicator. It was not unheard of for his lady to seek Rhyllance's company after a particularly bad night, but she usual thought to notify him of her whereabouts.

But there were no messages waiting for him on his communicator.

He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. So then. She must have run into some trouble the night before, and would likely need to be extracted. He returned to his rooms, where the datapad that he used for running the household stood on its doc. He pulled up the app that allowed him to trace her whereabouts, thanks to a small chip implanted within her armor.

A red and white message flashed on the screen, indicating that it could not find a signal. The chip had gone dark.

Tabriss stared at the screen as he considered his next steps. He knew what she had been planning to do the night before. There was nothing for it. He would have to trace her likely steps and find her that way.

He quickly donned his armor, making sure that his weapons were prepped and ready for action. He also tossed a few grenades into a blackout bag, just in case. His lady had such a predilection for getting into trouble, who knew what he was going to find when he found her.

"And she was doing so well, too," he said with a sigh. It had been almost six months since the last time she had managed to get herself captured. That nasty business on Nar Shaddaa. When he had run into—

His mind paused, drawing a blank of the name. Someone... familiar. Someone whose name he should have remembered. But that was from Before. So, he supposed it did not matter. Not anymore.

Tabriss opened the door to the living space where Lucine called home and nearly tripped on a package that had been laid on the doorstep. It was addressed to him.

He frowned down at it, before checking to make sure that his white gloves were firmly in place. He then picked it up and carrying it into the kitchen. He set it down on the counter, studying it intently. It was tightly wrapped with brown paper, completely nondescript except for a single word written on the top. **Washita'bris'skayene*, his Chiss name written in a delicate feminine script.

He tore open the paper, watching carefully for any powers or indications that the package was otherwise trapped. It was not. The brown paper covered a plain white box. And inside the box, resting on a few sheets of delicate blue tissue paper was his lady's dagger and a communicator.

Tabriss frowned down at the weapon. It was a vile, gaudy trinket that his lady had taken a liking to, for some reason.

He glared at the dagger suspiciously as he picked up the communicator and inspected it. It appeared to

be new. As he held it, it chirped in his hand, indicating that there was a message on it.

“Hello Washita'bris'skayene. As you have no doubt guessed, I have taken your current employer prisoner. If you do not wish for her to come to harm, then meet me at L'cafe Azul at noon. We have to talk.”

The voice on the message was feminine and familiar. Achingly familiar.

**“Please Tabriss...”*

He pressed his lips together as the voice echoed in his mind. The daughter of his former master. What was her name? After a few moments, it came to him. Makara'Lai'karanos. The daughter of his former master.

He played the message a second time, and then a third. There was no longer any room for doubt. It WAS her. And she had taken his lady hostage. That made his next course clear.

He paused long enough to double check his weapons, before setting off for the cafe. It seemed he had a lunch date to attend.

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L'cafe Azul was a small restaurant located in the heart of Estle City. Tucked away on a small side street near the center of the capital, it was one of the city's best kept secrets, specializing in local Selenian breakfast food. His lady particularly enjoyed the plantain dumplings in peanut butter soup.

Tabriss pushed open the door, and was immediately met with the combined scents of baking bread and roasting meat. He slowly scanned the room, taking in the patrons that were gathered at the tables that had been scattered around the large main room. There were many native Selenians here, along with a number of people he recognized from the Citadel, grabbing a quick bite during their shift. None of the people present seemed distressed or on guard.

“Tabriss!” Takara, the restaurant's owner, emerged from the kitchen and offered the butler a broad smile. “Good morning!”

Tabriss inclined his head politely in response. Given how much his lady enjoyed the food here, he had spent a week in his off hours learning to cook some of their more popular dishes. L'cafe Azul was a family owned establishment with a small number of employees, so Takara had appreciated the assistance.

“Are you here to pick up a to go order?” the older Selenian woman asked, furrowing her brow. “I don't remember seeing one for you, but we can get it out real quick if we have to.”

“I thank you for your consideration, but I am here for a meeting,” Tabriss replied, scanning the room once more. “But it appears she has not arrived.”

“Ah.” Takara wiped her hands on her apron. “You're talking about the Chiss lady, then. She was real insistent that she have privacy. Paid extra for it, even. We got her set up in the side room.”

"I see. Thank you," he said as he brushed past her. Takara raised a silver eyebrow at that, but he did not bother to explain.

The Selenian woman caught him by the sleeve of his tailcoat. "Hold on. Is everything all right? I mean, you're usually stiff, but this is new even for you."

He paused and glanced over his shoulder at her, softening his expression into something like a smile. "I assure you that all is well. Thank you for your concern. I am merely anxious to see an old acquaintance whom I have not seen in some time."

Takara relaxed slightly at his words, her shoulders losing some of their tension. "Oh. Well that makes sense. Go one back then. I'll send in some squid fritters to get you started."

The side room had once existed as additional storage before Takara and her family had cleared it out to install additional seating. The white-painted walls featured paintings of the various Selenian beaches, as well as some of the home-made crafts that Takara's grandparents had made. Somehow they had managed to fit four tables into the room, but three of them were empty.

**She* was sitting at the fourth table, furthest from the door.

Makara'Lai'karanos. The eldest daughter of his former master. She was a slender woman, with dark blue skin and the red eyes that were characteristic to his people. Her thick black hair was streaked with light blue strands, and fell in gentle waves over her shoulders.

She smiled at him, an achingly familiar expression, as she rose to her feet at the sight of him. "Washita'bris'skayene! Oh, it is so good to see you!" she said in their native Cheunh.

His face was a stone mask as he stepped fully into the room, and addressed her in Basic. "It is Tabriss now, Lady Makara'Lai'karanos."

Her eyes narrowed slightly at the correction. Still, she switched to Basic as well. "Is it? I see. I will never understand the Human penchant to truncate perfectly good names. But very well, you may refer to me as Ralaika."

"Very well." He kept his voice cool.

Ralaika took a deep breath, her smile returning to her face. When she spoke, the previous chill was gone from her words. "Are you going to hover by the door all day? Come and sit down. We could do some catching up."

Tabriss crossed the room, his eyes scanning for any threats as he went. But there was nothing. No traps, and no hidden weapons that he could see. It seemed as if Ralaika had truly come alone. It was either a sign of overconfidence or a sign that she was well prepared for their meeting. Unfortunately, with so little of his memory intact, it was impossible to know which one was which.

"With respect, Lady Ralaika, I am here solely regarding the matter of my missing lady," he said as he took a seat across from her.

Her smile wilted slightly as her eyes took on an icy look. Proof that she was poor at masking her emotions. He found that he was not terribly surprised by this reaction.

“Do you truly have nothing else to say to me after all these years apart? Tabriss, you served my family faithfully for decades, right up until the end. You were almost a member of the family yourself! You were there when—“ her voice cracked, forcing herself to pause for a moment. “You were there when we lost everything. Are you truly telling me that it all meant so little to you?”

“I barely remember it,” Tabriss said. In this, at least, he was telling the truth.

Ralaika set her jaw, her hands curling into fists. She looked down, recognizing the display of anger and placed her hands on her lap, obscured by the table. She opened her mouth, but whatever she was going to say was interrupted when one of Takara's grandchildren came into the room, bearing a tray laden with freshly baked bread, hearty black coffee and a plate of fruit.

As the young man set down a stand next to the table and moved to set the heavy tray on top of it. As he did so, she lashed out with a hand, knocking the stand over.

Tabriss saw the young man's face turn to a look of horror as the tray began to topple to the floor. He moved quickly, dropping to one knee and grabbing it before it could fall, managing only to spill a bit of coffee in the process. He frowned slightly at the few drops of liquid that now dotted the tray. Further proof that he truly was out of sorts. But it could not be helped, given the circumstances.

Ralaika ignored Tabriss as she fixed the young man with an icy glare. “I said I wanted privacy! If I wanted any of your disgusting Human food, I would have sent for it! Now leave us at once!”

The boy did not need any further prompting, hurrying out of the room as quickly as he could and leaving the tray behind. Tabriss set it on the stand and gave Ralaika an icy look. “That was poorly done.”

The Chiss woman gave a derisive sound and waved her hand. “As if I care what some menial thinks. And it is not your place to tell me how to act. I am the last scion of House Karanos. I will do what I wish.”

Tabriss pressed his lips together as he regarded the woman. The pieces of memory were beginning to return, constructing a picture of Ralaika as how she was. A spoiled child, who apparently had grown into a spoiled woman. Quite the contrast from his own lady. “Including, it seems, kidnapping my lady,” he said at last.

“Yes, including that. Your talents are wasted with her. You should be back home, serving me instead. I have a lot of work to do rebuilding my family's House, and I will need your skills to do it.”

“That is not possible,” he said. “I have signed a contract to serve Lady Vasano. It cannot be broken even if I wished to do so.”

“Then I will simply kill her. A blaster bolt to the back of her head will end the contract just as assuredly as if you broke it.” Ralaika's smile was tinged with malice as she said that.

“If you did that, then there is not a place in this universe where you would be safe. I would make it my

life's work to avenge her," he said, feeling an unfamiliar tightness in his chest. It was... anger. It seemed that emotions were also returning, along with his forgotten memories. The situation was only getting worse and worse.

She raised her eyebrows at this and burst into laughter. "Oh, Tabriss! Still so very serious!" He sat stiffly in his chair as he waited for her giggles to subside. "Surely you can see that this is all an exercise in futility. I will get my way. You will serve me."

"That is not possible."

Ralaika gave a dramatic sigh and rolled her eyes. She picked up a piece of bread from the tray and examined it, before tearing off a small chunk and tasting it. She made a small sound in the back of her throat as she tossed the remainder of the bread back onto the tray. "Human garbage. You could do so much better than this filth." She wiped her hands on her napkin before turning her attention back to him. "Very well then. How shall we resolve this?"

"Return my lady to me and leave this planet, and I shall forget this ever happened," he said promptly.

"No, no, no," Ralaika said. "I meant, how shall we resolve this in a way that is satisfactory?" She paused, closing her eyes to think. "Ah! How about this. I propose that we perform **salai karam*."

He narrowed his eyes slightly as he considered her proposal. **salai karam* was a duel of skill on the Ascendancy, often utilized for matters of great import. The rules and terms of the duel were rigid, but once completed, both members would be required to honor it.

Ralaika may have been a spoiled brat, but even she would honor tradition. Not even she would dare go against it. Would she?

A fragment of memory returned to him, Ralaika as a child throwing a temper tantrum over a lost game. She had broken a priceless bone china tea set in the course of her fit. No, he could be certain that she would not honor tradition.

"Alternatively, I could simply kill you now and go to find her," he said at last.

"Oh, please. You would shoot an unarmed woman during a peaceful meeting? That would not reflect well on your employer," Ralaika said with a smirk. "Besides. I left my people with strict orders. If they do not hear from me, then they will simply murder the redheaded slut. I assure you, she would be long dead before you could figure out where I have hidden her."

Tabriss breathed out a long, slow sigh. Truly, that was an unforgivable outcome. "Very well. I accept."

Ralaika smiled and clapped her hands in delight. "Oh, excellent! Very well. As the challenger, I shall name the terms. Let us keep it simple, shall we? If you win, you and your," her mouth twisted in disgust "**employer* are free to go. But if you lose, then I get to kill her and you will transfer your contract to me."

Tabriss frowned slightly at Ralaika's delight at the prospect of murdering his lady. "And you guarantee safe conduct following the duel?"

“Do you doubt my honor?”

He did indeed doubt it. Her non answer was almost proof of that. But he let the matter pass. He would simply have to find a way to ensure his mistress's safety following the duel. “Very well. I accept your terms. As the challenged party, I name the skill to be cooking.”

She laced her fingers in front of her and gave him a mocking smile. “And elegant solution, I think. Entertaining and delicious. I am, of course, aware of your skills, so you actually might have a chance at this. I, of course, reserve the right to utilize a proxy.” She leaned back in her chair, looking entirely too smug. “Now, regarding the field of battle. I believe I know just the place. A close associate of mine happens to own the studio where they film **The Great Nar Shaddaa Cooking Competition*. I am certain they will allow us to use the space. I am certain this friend will also be willing to provide some impartial judges too.”

Tabriss raised his eyebrows. This whole thing seemed a little too net for his liking. “And who is this friend of yours?”

“Oh, you might not have heard of him. His name is Geshal Nomira. But I think you will definitely have heard of his group. The Cult of the Voidlight?”

Tabriss stiffened in his seat at the mention of the group. He did indeed remember them. They were a cult devoted to enlightenment through creative applications of debauchery. His mistress had gotten into quite a bit of trouble a few months back while trying to steal one of their artifacts. “These... people are your backers? I do not see why they would have any reason to be impartial,” he said at last.

“They have been most generous in my efforts to rebuild my House,” Ralaika said. “Oh, trust me, they very much have a reason to be impartial. After all, Geshal wants her alive so he can take his own revenge. Apparently, it was quite a valuable artifact that she stole.” She shook her head, as she could sympathize.

“Of course, if you lose and she dies, then their ends are served just as well. Besides, those people are all about the pleasures of the flesh. If anyone would know anything about good food, it would be them.” Ralaika said. “Of I could just kill her now and be done with it. You will come around to me eventually. What other options do you have?”

“That will not be necessary,” Tabriss replied. He rose to his feet and straightened his tailcoat. “I expect that my lady will be well treated while in your care.”

“I will behave so long as she does,” Ralaika said with a thorny smirk. “We shall convene in two days. I will send you a message with the location.” She looked entirely too self satisfied.

“Then our business is concluded,” he said, turning to leave. Turning his back to her was a clear sign of disrespect, and they both knew it. He could almost feel her glare boring between his shoulder blades. But he did not care. He had preparations to see to.

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“Let me see if I understand this,” Rhyllance said, not looking up from his current experiment. “You have somehow managed to allow Lucine to be captured. Again. And now you have agreed to some sort of asinine cooking competition in order for her to be returned safely. Relying, of course, on a pack of psychopaths to adhere to a tradition that is not even part of their culture. Does that describe the situation?”

Tabriss took in a deep breath. It sounded so much stupider when spoken out loud. The doctor's dry and slightly sarcastic tone certainly did not help matters much. “Yes. That adequately describes the situation.”

“Lovely.”

Silence fell between them as Rhyllance focused on his work. One of the caxquettes had been restrained to the table in front of him, and he was doing the delicate work of slowly dismantling its brain with a scalpel while it was still alive. A variety of sensors had been attached to its head, relaying vital signs and brainwave data to the large computer that stood in the center of the room. From where Tabriss was standing, it was impossible to tell if this experiment had any sort of scientific value, or if the doctor was just doing it to relax. It could have been either one.

They stood in the center of a large and brightly lit laboratory, one of the many that Rhyllance possessed. Each of the walls were lined with a variety of complicated-looking machines. Some of them hummed quietly, while others had monitors displaying strings of data and information. Tabriss could not make sense of any of it, but apparently it had some meaning, as Rhyllance periodically glanced at it as he worked.

“Tell me, Tabriss, what exactly is it that you do for Lucine? I am beginning to wonder,” Rhyllance said as he made a delicate incision into the creature's frontal lobe.

The butler pressed his lips together. “It is my duty to see to the lady's household, her day to day needs and her safety,” he said stiffly.

“Well. You are doing amazing work. Particularly on the last one.”

The caxquette thrashed on the operating table, squalling at whatever Rhyllance had done. The doctor took a step back, coolly observing the reaction. “M.O.R.S.E. Mark the time for further analysis.”

He then shifted his attention back to Tabriss as he picked up his scalpel once more. “First there was the the botched mission on Nar Shaddaa six months ago. Those cultist psychopaths nearly killed her twice. Now I find out that you did not actually remove them as a threat, and they have returned to cause additional trouble, endangering her once more. I am beginning to think your reputation is vastly overrated.”

Tabriss's eyes narrowed, but he could not deny the truth in Rhyllance's words. He had known at the time that he should have removed the Cult of the Voidlight from the equation, but he had been so concerned with seeing to her recovery that, by the time he had returned to do so they had utterly vanished. He had assumed they would not resurface, and certainly not this soon.

Rhyllance continued his vivisection, seemingly not caring that Tabriss had not given a response to his question. The caxquettte continued to thrash on the table, shrieking in rage and pain at the doctor

continued to cut upon it. Suddenly, a gush of fluids erupted from the inside of the creature's skull, spilling viscous purple fluid over the operating table and onto the floor. The caxquette abruptly fell limp, even as a few of the machines began to flash and alert at the sudden loss of life signs.

Rhylance sighed in annoyance and tossed his scalpel onto the sterile field next to him. "M.O.R.S.E., collect samples for future analysis and dispose of the body."

When he looked back to Tabriss, he raised an eyebrow. "Well? How do you intend to rectify the situation?"

"The competition takes place in two days. While I must attend, I would just as soon see to it that the lady was removed from the situation beforehand. I was hoping that you had a way to track her that I do not."

Rhylanced shrugged his shoulders as he stripped off sterile gown that was now covered in the creature's blood, revealing light blue surgical scrubs underneath. "Unfortunately, she found the tracking chip I placed on her lightsaber weeks ago." He shook his head in annoyance. "I am becoming inclined to just surgically implant one in her. It is a painless and simple procedures that is regularly done to pets, so why not do the same to people who actually matter? All arguments of invasion or privacy and bodily autonomy seem moot when you consider the alarming frequency with which Force Users get lost or kidnapped."

Tabriss suppressed a slight smile, but did not comment one way or another. He would leave it up to his lady to deal with that particular situation, and at the current moment, he was having a hard time coming up with an argument against the doctor's reasoning.

"But I am certain I have a few prototypes that will help," Rhylance continued, glancing around. "Ah! I have a new poison that is intended to liquefy the mucous membranes within a matter of minutes that requires additional human testing."

He strode over to a small refrigerator on the western wall, and began to pick through the vials. "Likely a mixed group, so species specific poisons will be insufficient," he muttered as he thoughtfully tapped his finger against a couple of the vials. "Since this farce is to be a cooking competition, it might be an opportunity to test the new multi-stage poison from caxquette poison I have been working on." He grinned wickedly as he selected three vials and handed them to Tabriss.

The butler held the three vials up to the light to inspect them. His training included the use of poisons and also rendered him immune to them. It certainly made sense to utilize them in a cooking competition. "I thank you for your assistance, doctor. I assure you, I shall bring the lady home safely and ensure that this does not happen again."

"I have no doubt," Rhylance said. "Especially since I will be going with you to ensure that is the case."

Tabriss, who had been starting to turn toward the exit, paused and turned to stare at the doctor. "Excuse me?"

"If you want something done right, you must do it yourself," Rhylance replied as he selected a few other vials, before moving to inspect a unique collection of devices that hung on the wall. "So I will be accompanying you."

Tabriss drew in a slow, deep breath through his nose. “Doctor,” he said at last. “I suspect that my lady will not wish for you to see her in such a state.”

“Then she will likely do a better job of not getting herself kidnapped in the future.”

While he had to admit that Rhylance's unique personality would cause his lady no small amount of annoyance, he suspected that she would also be annoyed if he allowed the doctor to risk himself. He shook his head, and tried a different tactic. “This is to be a cooking competition. While you have no small amount of skill when it comes to the scientific arts, I doubt they will translate well into this specific scenario.”

“I assure you, Tabriss, my knife work is top notch.” He paused, and both of them glanced at the caxquette corpse that was currently cooling on the operating table. Tabriss raised an eyebrow at the doctor, but Rhylance simply continued. “And, in any event, cooking is a little more than a practice in advanced chemistry. You will need support during the actual event, so I will act as your sous chef. And when this debacle descends into anarchy and violence, you will need help extracting Lucine. So I will be going and I will hear no arguments to the contrary.”

Tabriss actually did sigh at that, and raised his hand to pinch the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. His lady had often complained about the doctor's stubbornness, and now he had the opportunity to see it first hand.

But it would be good to have assistance in this matter. He could not deny that. While he would have preferred to handle this matter alone, he at least knew that the doctor was able to handle himself in high-stress situations. He was certain that it was not what his lady would have preferred, but decreased the likelihood of failure in this particular mission.

“Very well,” he said at last. “You are welcome to accompany me.”

“You say that as if you even had a choice in the matter,” Rhylance said with a smirk.

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The next day was a blur of training and preparation as Tabriss did his best to impart as much knowledge as he could regarding the fine art of cooking. There was a lot of ground to cover, so he kept his lessons to the ones that they would most likely encounter in the competition kitchen.

Rhylance, for his part, took to the lessons the same way he did any new inquiry of study. He remained stoic and calm, absorbing information easily as Tabriss taught him to make sauces, roast meats and even put him through a crash course in baking.

But the countdown to the **salai karam* was not the only evidence that Tabriss was running out of time. Hour by hour, his memories were returning.

**A family of five Chiss, strong and proud. His Lord and Lady and their heirs: a daughter and two sons. House Karanos, a House build brick by brick by the iron will of the family's head and mortared with blood. Tabriss had been with them from the beginning, and had killed more than his fair share of*

people to ensure the House's success.

He pushed the memory aside sauteed slices of lightly seasoned Corellian pork, the savory aroma wafting from the pan.

**The Lord sitting stoically in his chair as a meeting of the Houses. But his gaze was blank and his hands trembled. From where he stood at his master's side, he could see the looks members of the other Houses were casting their way. Greedy, hungry looks.*

He tossed delicate Tatooine lettuce in a light vinaigrette that Rhy lance had made only a few minutes before, watching as the leaves took on the appropriate level of wilt.

**An explosion that claimed the Lady's life. Ralaika weeping next to the burning wreckage.*

He arranged delicate ice lily petals from Hoth on a delicate platter, adding a delightful garnish to the iced dessert arranged in the center of the plate.

**"Please Tabriss..." Ralaika said pleadingly as she pressed a clear vial into his hands.*

Tabriss and Rhy lance stood together at the counter, carefully inspecting the dishes that they had prepared. They seemed perfect... artfully decorated, with delicate, complimentary aromas that drifted off of them. And each dish was absolutely loaded with poison.

They were ready.

* * *

**"For today's lunch, we have roast pheasant cutlets in a sage and rosemary gravy, paired with roasted potatoes and a green salad."*

Tabriss placed the plate before his Lord with a flourish, but the man did not stir. He remained slumped in his chair, his eyes gazing off into the distance but seeing nothing. He had been like this ever since the Lady had been killed, retreating into himself even as illness ravaged his body.

When the Lord made no move to eat, Tabriss gathered some of the meat onto a fork and held it in front of the older Chiss's face. The Lord's nostrils flared as the aroma of the food reached them and he turned his head slightly to take a bite. He chewed and swallowed, but it was purely mechanical. There was no evidence that he even tasted the food that he was eating.

Tabriss gazed at the wreck of a man that his Lord had become, and shook his head. A once great man, now reduced to this. He knew that if his Lord could see himself now, he would have given the command to end it.

Yet despite that knowledge, Tabriss could not bring himself to do it. His loyalty to his Lord meant that he would remain by his side. He could not simply kill his Lord simply because he had become inconvenient.

But he could not bring himself to dispose of the vial of poison Ralaika had given him either...

When the Lord stopped eating the forkfuls of food, Tabriss began clearing the remnants of the meal. He picked up a cloth and began wiping a bit of the gravy that had leaked down the Lord's cheek.

The Lord grabbed him by the wrist.

The movement was so sudden that Tabriss pulled back, but the Lord gripped his arm with a surprising strength. He turned his head to look at Tabriss, as if noticing him for the first time. "I know..." he wheezed in a reedy voice. "I know what you are planning."

Tabriss pressed his lips together at the accusation, but he did not deny it. Instead, he looked steadily down at his Lord.

"Do it..." the old man wheezed. "Tonight... at the banquet... let them see me die... I will only drag our House down while I live...."

*His grip slackened and fell away as the Lord's strength ebbed. He slumped in his chair once more, his fugue returning. "I command you...." he whispered, before his jaw became slack.**

A sharp pain in his arm caused Tabriss to jerk awake with a gasp. He looked up to see Rhyllance standing over him with an injector gun in his hand. When he glared up at him, the doctor merely shrugged as he pocketed the device. "Relax, it's merely a stimulant."

"Was that really necessary?" Tabriss asked, rubbing his arm.

"Based on my observations, yes. Absolutely it was," Rhyllance said as he took a seat across from him.

The engines of Rhyllance's ship hummed in the background. The hyperdrive had disengaged, meaning they were approaching Nar Shaddaa space, where the competition would take place.

Tabriss declined to comment further as he began checking his weapons to ensure maximum functionality. Three slugthrowers: **Honor*, *Duty* and **Loyalty*. They had served him well over the years, even as he had served his own masters well.

He suspected he would need his weapons before the day was over. Even if they won the competition, there was no way that Ralaika would allow them to leave unmolested. Her pride simply would not allow it. They would likely have to fight their way out.

Rhyllance watched him for a moment, his keen eyes missing nothing. "Do not think I have not noticed how... distracted you have been of late." Tabriss paused in his preparation and glanced at the doctor once more, but Rhyllance held up his hand. "I do not claim to understand what is going on with you. Nor do I care. The only thing I care about is getting Lucine back safely."

Tabriss inclined his head slightly. "That is, of course, my top priority," he replied as he returned his weapons to their holsters, hidden beneath his coat.

**Honor* and **Duty* holstered on each side, with **Loyalty* holstered at the small of his back. Once they were in place, they were impossible to see. The Lady's tailor had been particularly clever in the creation of his uniform, the lines of his tailcoat obscuring the outline of his weapons.

Rhylance gave a small nod at Tabriss's response. "Good. Because I will not tolerate anything less than your best effort." Though he spoke in an offhanded tone, there was an edge to his voice. "You should know that if she dies, I will hold you personally responsible. And I can get very creative when it comes to dealing with such matters."

Tabriss merely inclined his head again. "I would expect nothing less," he replied. Indeed, he would not have it any other way.

They landed on Nar Shaddaa to find a cultist in black robes waiting for them with transport to the intended arena. The ride over was a quiet one. Tabriss and Rhylance sat in the back of the speeder in silence, each one wrapped in their own thoughts.

The speeder came to a rest in front of a nondescript warehouse a half hour before the appointed time. It was located in the warehouse district, surrounded by similar unmarked buildings. The cultist led them in through a door beside the loading docks, where they were met by three other cultists.

They were escorted through darkened narrow hallways until they arrived onto a brightly lit set, surrounded by cameras. Three large cooking stations dominated the space, each equipped with top of the line cooking equipment. Opposite of the kitchen was a long table, likely where the judges would sit. This, apparently, was where **The Great Nar Shaddaa Cooking Competition* was filmed.

The black-robed members of the Cult of the Voidlight were everywhere, seeing to the final preparations before the cooking competition. Two of the cultists, a Cerean and a Togruta, were already at two of the cooking stations. Unlike the others, they wore attire more suitable to cooking.

The judges were already in their places at the long table: a Twi'lek male and a female Human both clad in the signature robes of the cult, as well as a swarthy male Togruta in black armor. Ralaika was there too, lounging in a chair next to the Togruta as they talked.

His Lady was with them as well.

Lucine Vasano sat at the head of the table, at the place of honor. She sat like a queen reigning over a feast, though she was flanked by two heavily armed cultists who insisted on keeping their weapons pointed directly at her.

As the two Chiss were escorted to the judge's table, Tabriss studied his Lady intently. Her armor had been damaged in places, and there were bruises on her face and arms. Her posture was unusually stiff, hinting at hidden injuries that made it difficult to relax. Tabriss narrowed his eyes slightly.

"Tabriss! Welcome!" Ralaika said cheerfully as they approached. "I am so glad you decided to make it. This is Geshal Nomira, the leader of the Cult of the Voidlight and our host." As she spoke, she gestured toward the Togruta.

"I recall you saying that you would not harm her," Tabriss said coolly, ignoring Geshal entirely.

Ralaika paused at the sudden change in conversation, and scowled at him. "When you become my servant, I will not tolerate such rudeness. And for the record, I said that I would behave if she does. But the irritating whore does not know when to shut up."

Tabriss glanced toward her Lady. As if to prove Ralaika's point, the redhead was engaged in quiet, one-sided conversation with her two burly guards. They glared at her sullenly, contributing little. When she realized they were looking, Lucine gave Rhyllance and Tabriss a smile, as if this were merely a party instead of a hostage situation.

Ralaika tsked under her breath as she rose to her feet. "Do you see? Always talking. How incredibly annoying." She raised an eyebrow, as if noticing Rhyllance for the first time. "Who is this?"

"May I present **Docrh'yllanc'ehause*, my Lady's paramour. He will be acting as my sous chef today."

Ralaika's lip curled in disgust. "A commoners name. Your current employer actually **chooses* to lay with commoners? Disgusting. I am doing you a favor by separating you from her, Tabriss." She sighed and waved a hand toward Rhyllance in clear dismissal. "Oh well. I suppose cooking is a preferable alternative to those dreary mines your lot tends to work in. But it is still menial work and I have little interest in conversing with stupid commoners. Why don't you go say your goodbyes to your lover and let the real people talk."

Out of the corner of his eye, Tabriss saw Rhyllance stiffen slightly, his impassive features turning cold. He suspected that the doctor would have an ample amount of motivation to will the competition now. Fortunately, he did not bother to say anything to Ralaika. Instead he spun on his heel and went to talk to Lucine, leaving Tabriss alone with Ralaika.

She looked around the bustling set with a dour expression on her face. "All this because you wouldn't break your contract and come serve me. I really do not understand, Tabriss. How can you not see what I am trying to do is important?"

Tabriss shook his head slightly. "It is not simply a matter of a contract, Lady Ralaika. It is a matter of loyalty."

She tsked under her breath. "What of your loyalty to my House? You served my father well, and I will need you to do what needs to be done."

He took a deep breath as he remembered his former Lord as he was. A man of vision and strength, who fought and scraped and sacrificed to build something from nothing. "Your father was a great man, and it was my honor to serve him. He had his reasons for doing what he did. While your intentions are similar to his, I strongly suspect your reasons are entirely different." He adjusted the sleeve of his tailcoat, and felt the vial of poison that was hidden there. "Why are you doing this?"

Ralaika's eyes flashed as she glared at him. "Isn't it obvious? Everything that my father built, it should have passed to me. It **would* have passed to me if he'd just done us all the courtesy of dying in a timely manner. But he didn't. All the other Houses made their move and destroyed us, taking away what should have been mine by right. All that power and wealth, it should have been mine! I will take it all back."

Her voice had started to become high pitched, her words coming in a rush as her anger became clear. She paused, taking a deep breath as she schooled her expression into one of relative calm. "All that begins with you. Once I have your contract back, you'll be loyal to me. You'll be able to help me do what needs to be done."

Though she spoke with determination, her mouth twisted into a petulant scowl. Tabriss was reminded of the time when her younger brother had taken one of her toys, and she had pushed him down a flight of stairs in retaliation. It seemed that Ralaika had not changed much since that time.

“Loyalty is earned, not given. I served your father because I respected him. He had earned my loyalty. My Lady is the same way.” He glanced toward Lucine. Rhy lance had taken her hand, and they leaned close together in quiet conversation. “She is a woman of strength and purpose, who is willing to undergo any sacrifice in order to achieve her ends. You, meanwhile, are little more than a spoiled, petulant child. You whine about what you want, but are unwilling to do what's necessary to achieve it.”

Ralaika stared at him, aghast. “What do you think all this is?!” she demanded as she swept her arm wide. “Here I am, dealing with **Humans*, trying to gather support to take back my House!”

“Humans you have paid, so you would not have to do the hard work yourself,” Tabriss replied coolly.

“How **dare* you judge me,” she hissed. “You don't think I know exactly what my father did to form our House? What **you* did at his command?”

Tabriss shook his head slightly. Of course she did not understand. “Your father was willing to do the work. He never gave a command that he was unwilling to do himself. But despite everything, he was a man of honor who dealt fairly with both friends and enemies alike. And his House grew because of his efforts. I doubt you have what it takes to succeed him.”

Ralaika's scowl deepened, her cheeks flushing purple with anger. “You have no idea what I am capable of,” she hissed. “But I'll show you. I'll make you see.”

She rose to her feet and raised her voice to address the people gathered there. “Let's get this started. But before we begin, there's a bit of formality we need to attend to. Search them.”

As two cultists stepped up to pat Rhy lance and Tabriss down, Lucine spoke up. “You waited until now to do this? Clearly they are unarmed. Otherwise my Tabriss would have shot you in the face the first opportunity he got.” She tsked and shook her head. “Sloppy work. You truly are terrible at choosing underlings, darling.”

Lucine had never in her life referred to him as 'my Tabriss'. That was new. If he had too guess, it was some sort of tactic to unbalance her captor.

Apparently it worked. Ralaika crossed the distance between them and lashed out, slapping Lucine across the cheek so hard that it caused her body to jerk within the restraints. The Chiss woman's voice was an outraged shriek. “Shut up, shut up, shut up! I told you to keep your mouth shut!”

Slowly, Lucine righted herself in her chair and daintily spat out a mouthful of blood. She ignored Ralaika entirely, and instead focused her attention on him. “Tabriss, darling? Before this is over, I want you to kill her.”

Tabriss gave her a small smile as he pressed his fist against his chest and inclined his head. “As you wish, my Lady.” He caught the look that Rhy lance was giving Ralaika. He would have to carry out that particular order quickly, or the doctor would take matters into his own hands.

Ralaika looked between the two of them and scowled. "As if you'll get the chance. Maybe you can't count, you stupid whore, but the numbers are on my side." She shot a glare at the cultists who had approached to search them. "Well? What are you waiting for? Get on with it!"

Tabriss suppressed a sigh as the cultist began to roughly pat him down. He tensed when the cultist's hands brushed one of his slugthrowers. The lines of his coat hid the weapons, but there was no way that the cultist would not notice the feeling of the cool metal against his hand.

Yet the cultist continued his search without comment. "He is unarmed," he reported to Ralaika.

A moment later, the cultist who had been responsible for searching Rhyllance stepped up. "He is unarmed," he said, using the exact tone and cadence as the first.

Out of the corner of his eye, Tabriss saw Lucine smirk. His Lady was skilled at manipulating weaker minds. Apparently the cultists had weak mental defenses. She had given them a small advantage in making sure that they could keep their weapons. Given the numbers arrayed against them, he would gladly take any advantage he could get.

Ralaika tsked under her breath. "Fine. Let's get this over with. I'm sure everyone here knows the basic format of a cooking show. Three contenders are each given a basket of ingredients and will have to make a dish including all of the ingredients. The winner will be decided by our panel of judges," she paused and gestured toward the three cultists sitting at the table. "If Tabriss and his commoner friend lose, then Tabriss will sign on as my butler and the other two die. But if they win, they'll be free to go."

Tabriss looked around, taking in the glares that the other cultists were giving both him and his Lady. He had the feeling that they would not handle his victory very well. Still, he ignored them. The only thing that mattered was completing this task and rescuing his Lady.

Ralaika smirked, having seen the dark looks the cultists were given them. It seemed that she was fully aware of whatever they planned, and had no issue with it. So long as she got what she wanted, nothing else mattered. "You will have an hour to complete your dish before presenting it to the judges. I am looking forward to seeing what you come up with." She gave Tabriss a sly look, indicating that there were still more surprises in store. "So then, let's begin!"

Tabriss and Rhyllance hurried to their section, where their basket of ingredients awaited them. The butler flipped open the lid, and pressed his lips together when he saw what they had to work with.

It was the smell that struck him first, a potent odor emanating off of rubbery slugs that had been arranged artfully on a plate. Nar Shaddaa sewer slugs, barely on the correct side of freshness. The basket also contained Corellian couscous and a jar of peanut butter. It was not even name brand, it was the cheapest store-brand that could be found.

Rhyllance looked over his shoulder at the paltry options in the basket, then glanced at the other competitors. It seemed that each chef was given different ingredients, though the others seemed to have been given foods of markedly higher quality. "Well. This is problematic," he said.

"Problematic, but not impossible. We trained for this," Tabriss replied. He handed the peanut butter to Rhyllance. "Begin making the sauce that we practiced. I shall prepare the 'meat'."

The doctor looked down at the sewer slugs with a raised eyebrow, before picking up the peanut butter and moving to the refrigerator which contained additional ingredients.

The hour passed in a blur of intense concentration as the two Chiss focused intently on their tasks. Rhyllance saw to the sauce, the same peanut butter concoction that they had practiced the day before. Once that was started, he began seeing to a green salad with a homemade vinaigrette. Unlike Tabriss, he had multiple vials of poison hidden on his person, and he made sure to apply a liberal amount to everything he cooked. It was a shame that so many different types of poisons would make it impossible to study their individual effects. But this was a special circumstance.

Tabriss, meanwhile, focused his attention of applying the appropriate seasonings to mask the flavor of the slugs before breading and frying them. He also saw to the couscous, applying the appropriate seasonings to compliment the flavor of the dish.

The meal came together as the minutes flew past. Finally, it came time to plate it. Tabriss selected a location away from the eyes of the cultists as he began to assemble each plate with an artist's eye.

First came the couscous, shaped into a delicate bed in the center of the plate. It was pale yellow in color, speckled with sauteed red and green peppers for a bit of extra color and flavor. Next came the sewer slugs, which had been seasons, battered and fried to a golden brown. These were placed delicately on top of the couscous.

Tabriss gave his sleeve a shake, palming the vial of poison as it slipped out. He cracked the seal, as the vial glistened in the overhead lights.

**The gathering was in full swing. A once a year event, where members of all Houses gathered to make business arrangements for the following year. Circulating among the building were representatives from the highest echelons of the Ascendancy Elite.*

The plans were set. He would do as his Lord bid, and once he was dead, Ralaika would make her move to take control of the House. Hopefully she would be able to gain respect of the other nobles quickly, to prevent any further bloodshed and secure their political footing.

It all began with a single step. Tabriss's hand shook slightly as he sprinkled the clear fluid over his Lord's plate.

Tabriss closed his eyes tightly as the memory came unbidden to his mind, before returning his attention to the task at hand. He focused his attention back to the task at hand. His Lord was dead, but his Lady was very much alive. For the moment, anyway.

He divided the vial evenly between the four plates, before drizzling a bit of the poisoned sauce over the fried slug and then on an artful pattern on the edge of each plate. Additional sauce would be provided on the side, along with a fresh green salad with the vinaigrette.

At last, the time was up. The two other chefs were allowed to go first to present their offerings. As Tabriss studied their plates, he decided that their skill was mediocre at best. Clearly these two had some skill in the kitchen, but little to no classical training.

Finally, it was their turn. “Today we have seasoned slug fritters on a bed of Selenian-style couscous, topped with a peanut butter sauce. It is paired with a winter salad of mixed greens, apples, cranberries and walnuts topped in a champagne vinagrette.” He placed the poison-laden dishes in front of each of the judges, and an extra one for Ralaika.

The Chiss woman raised an eyebrow as she poked at the main dish with a fork. “Human food,” she said with a sigh, before pointing to Lucine. “She has to try it first.” She met Tabriss's gaze with a sweet smile. “I would hate to think you would stoop so low as poisoning me, after all. But one cannot be too careful!”

Tabriss sighed quietly as he picked up the plate and moved to the chair where Lucine sat, restrained. He bent to set it down, and as he straightened, he absently straightened his tailcoat, tugging on the silver chain that adorned it in the process.

Lucine raised her eyebrows at that. Unlike Tabriss and Rhyllance, she did not have an acquired immunity to poison. Her immunity was tied directly to the Force. But it sometimes pleased her to let her enemies see her consume poisoned food, if only to leave them flabbergasted when she did not suffer any ill effects.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, a sure sign that she was drawing upon her Force abilities. Tabriss took his time gathering a small bit of the slug and couscous concoction onto a fork, before presenting it to her.

His Lady took a bite, chewing experimentally. Finally, she favored him with a small smile. “Your efforts are acceptable. Well done, Tabriss.”

He placed the plate back in front of Ralaika as the judges waited a few minutes to see what would happen to the redhead.

**His Lord began to twitch violently in his chair at the head of the table. Reddish-white foam streamed from his lips, forced out of his mouth by violent choking and gagging.*

But nothing happened. Finally, the judges began to taste their own dishes.

It was the Twi'lek who reacted first. As he placed the first forkful in his mouth, his whole body tensed in ecstasy. His lekku twitched and thrashed as his body shuddered in delight. “The sewer slug is perfection! The crisp fried exterior is a perfect contrast to the chewy interior. And the blend of spices perfectly highlight the subtle flavor!”

The Human female gave a shuddering moan as she tasted her own dish. “And the sauce! The savory peanut butter lends a nutty flavor to the dish, sweet and savory at the same time!” She hugged herself, writhing in ecstasy in her seat.

Togruta male was no less impressed. His eyes drifted shut and he gave a low rumble of approval. “It's good. Really really good.”

Ralaika cut a small bite for herself, gasping in pleasure as she tasted it. For a brief moment in time, all of the colors in the room seemed to take on a sharp clarity as the subtle combination of flavors exploded in her mouth. She drew in a shuddering breath, feeling goosebumps raise on her flesh.

She glanced down the rest of the table to see the judges eating eagerly, their moans and cries of satisfaction almost sexual in nature. “Well,” she said at last, handing the plate to the chefs so that they could give it a try as well. “It seems we have a clear winner.”

Tabriss realized that he had been holding his breath, and let it out. Rhyllance, meanwhile, seemed too distracted by observing the reactions of the judges with a raised eyebrow and a perplexed look upon his face.

“Congratulations, Tabriss, you and your commoner friend win the competition,” Ralaika said, clapping her hands slowly. But her tone of voice was mocking, and she had a smug smile on her face.

He knew what was coming, what she had planned. Tabriss stepped forward. “Lady Ralaika. Makara'Lai'karanos. I implore you to not do what you are planning to do. Conduct yourself with the honor inherent to your House.”

“My House no longer exists,” Ralaika replied with a scoff. “But it will rise again, better than before. And you will help me rebuild it.” She made a slashing motion with her hand. “Kill the Human whore and the commoner. The butler belongs to me.”

The room abruptly exploded into chaos. The three judges suddenly began convulsing, vomiting thick clots of blood onto their plates. That soon ceased as their airways swelled shut, cutting off the ability to breathe.

The two guards that had been guarding Lucine, as well as a number of others in the room, suddenly snapped to attention before firing on the cultists. They wore dazed expressions on their faces, the result of hours of intensive mind trick commands having been woven into their minds.

The cultists, meanwhile, fired back, too distracted by their treacherous brethren to devote too much attention to the two Chiss standing in the center of the chaos.

Lucine, meanwhile, pulled her hand free from its restraint, having picked it with the thin wire Rhyllance had slipped to her while they had been talking. She snatched her lightsaber off of the belt of the nearby guard and used it to cut herself free.

“It appears that the poison combination had a delayed effect...” Rhyllance muttered, dictating his notes as he ducked behind the table, shoving aside one of the dying judges as he began snapping off shots at the cultists. “Approximate time of onset was 2 minutes and thirty-four seconds. This will require additional testing to confirm...”

Tabriss, meanwhile, drew two knives from his sleeve and threw them with a flick of his wrist. One sank into the throat of a nearby cultist, while the second plunged into his shoulder. He moved low and fast, trying to avoid stray blaster bolts and plasma slugs as he sought out Ralaika.

He had a command to see to.

* * *

Rhylance had just finished dictating his notes when he caught sight of movement out of the corner of his eye. A cultist had taken cover behind one of the cameras and his raising his blaster to fire. The bolt traveled toward him in slow motion, but at the last minute, there was a **Throom* and a crack as a lightsaber swept in front of him, batting the bolt away.

“Hello, my love,” Lucine said, her eyes sparkling brilliantly.

“My dear,” he replied, shooting the cultist twice in the chest, before firing a third shot that banked off two pans that were hanging from the ceiling before searing into the head of a cultist that was sneaking up to stab Lucine in the back.

They turned as one, standing back to back. Them against the world, as it was meant to be.

“It has been awhile since we have danced like this,” Lucine said, as she ricocheted a blaster bolt off her blade and sent it back into the cultist who had fired it.

“You know I prefer more traditional forms of dance,” the doctor replied, shooting another cultist in the face before he could get close enough to stab him.

“Perhaps we could do that later, after a nice dinner,” the redhead suggested.

“Are you actually suggesting that we go dancing? I was under the impression that you hated that sort of activity,” he said, shooting her a surprised look over his shoulder.

“Well,” Lucine replied with a toss of her hair. “You know how chaos and homicide puts me in the mood, darling!”

Within a few minutes, the shooting had stopped. All of the cultists were dead or dying, leaving only the two of them standing. It was only then that Lucine realized that something was missing. “Where is Tabriss?”

* * *

Ralaika was sobbing as she slammed open the door leading to the room, tears of rage and frustration. Her stomach was cramping painfully. Stupid Human food. She coughed in between sobs, and found blood speckling the palm of her hand.

The door slammed open a second time, and she turned to see Tabriss emerge onto the roof behind her. His eyes seemed to glow in the dim light, and he carried a slugthrower in his hand.

“I’m leaving,” she said, gasping for air. It was hot. So very hot. But seeing him gave her hope. “Are you coming with me?”

The butler shook his head. His voice was empty as he spoke. “No, Lady Ralaika. I will not do that.”

Ralaika gave another sob. “Fine! Just let me go then! Please!”

Tabriss approached slowly. There was not even the smallest hint of emotion in his eyes.

"I'll just go..." Ralaika said, collapsing onto her knees on the roof. "I'll go and never come back. I'll... I'll leave your employer alone! Just please, let me go!"

For the first time, emotion flickered in Tabriss's eyes. Pity and disgust. He now stood over the Chiss woman, as he raised his slugthrower and leveled it on her head.

"Please!" Ralaika howled, desperation in her voice. "Please! For the love you once bore my father, don't do this!"

Tabriss took in a slow breath. "I do this **because* of the love I bore your father," he said. "And for the love I bear for my Lady."

"What are you?" she wined, staring up at his blank expression.

He squeezed the trigger, and the slugthrower kicked as the shot was fired. Ralaika fell to the ground with a heavy thud, her eyes staring blankly at the sky. Tabriss stared down at her body for a moment. Nodding his head in satisfaction, he tucked **Loyalty* back into its holster and turned to return to Lucine. "I am simply one hell of a butler. Farewell, Lady Ralaika."