

Lorelai Ametkus tried not to grimace as she took a long pull from her mug. Though she had long ago become accustomed to the terrible caf that the clinic served, she had yet to develop a taste for it. Of course, the fact that it was now ice cold was not an improvement. She glared at the greasy black fluid in her cup, before draining the last of its contents. There was no way of knowing when she was going to be able to have her next cup.

With a heavy sigh, she ran a hand through her lank brown hair and checked to make sure that her datapad had sufficient charge. It was time to return to the war zone.

The scene that met her eyes was one of mass chaos. The Apothic Memorial Clinic was filled to capacity, as it had been every day since the gang war had started so many months ago. Every patient room was filled, often with two or three patients. The walls were lined with stretchers and chairs for those who were able to sit upright. The waiting room was packed.

Many of the patients were wounded gang members, as the fighting had continued even after the Hutt had been killed. However, there were just as many civilians; those who had been wounded in the subsequent fighting or injured during the cleanup efforts. It sometimes seemed like the line of patients would never cease.

Lorelai set her face in her trademark scowl before glancing at Marter, the strapping Togruta nurse whose primary job was triaging the incoming patients and maintaining order. "What've we got?" she asked as she activated the interface of her datapad.

"Nothing critical in the past few hours, thank the Stars," Marter replied without bothering to look up from the files he was updating. "A few broken bones here and there, and a kid with a fever, but it's been mostly—" He paused abruptly, realizing what he had been about to say. In their profession, the word 'quiet' typically heralded a fresh wave of insanity. "Well, you know," he finally said in a sheepish tone.

"Yeah, I know. Anyone I need to see first?"

"There's a crushed hand in room two that'll need some work. Also a possible head injury in five, but I think he's faking for the meds. Oh yeah, and some woman showed up wanting to see you."

"A woman?" Lorelai repeated blankly. "What the frak does she want?"

Marter gave a noncommittal shrug. "I dunno. She asked for you by name, though, and wouldn't listen when I told her you were busy. I put her in the breakroom and figured you'd sort her out."

"Oh, I'll sort her out, all right," Lorelai growled. "I don't have time for this doshing poodoo. Tell Amra to prep two; I'll be in just as soon as I take care of this." She stormed off in the direction of the breakroom, not bothering to wait for a response. Not that she expected one. Marter was

smart enough to keep silent when Lorelai was in one of her moods, and which lately seemed to be all the time.

She strode down the hall, some of the gang members who were frequent customers of the clinic hastened to get out of the way. They also understood that it was best not to get in the way of the person who got to select the needle size for injections. As a result, it only took a few seconds to reach the end of the hall and the break room door. She threw it open and allowed it to bang off of the wall, as she glowered at the people in the room: a redhead who was reclining in one of the cheap folding chairs and a slender Chiss in a fine wool suit who stood behind her. At the sight of Lorelai, he moved to the caf-maker and began to fiddle with the ancient device.

“Doctor Ametkus, I presume?” the woman asked with a pleasant smile, apparently unruffled by the diminutive physician’s anger.

“Yeah, that’s me,” Lorelai snarled. “Who the hell are you, and what the hell are you doing in my clinic?”

“My name is Lucine Vasano and this is my butler, Tabriss,” the woman replied as she gestured toward the Chiss with one manicured hand. “We have been sent here to help you.”

Lorelai stared at the woman, trying to formulate a proper response. Before she could find the words, the Chiss finished whatever he was doing with the caf-maker and placed a cup under the dispenser. “Oy, get away from that!”

The caf-maker was an ancient model that was referred to by the staff as Karking Joe. On good days, it produced a greasy sludge that was barely on the right side of drinkable, while on bad days, it was more likely to shoot scalding water at whoever was trying to coax caf from it. The last thing they needed was another patient at the clinic.

But the Chiss paid her no mind and switched Karking Joe on. Instead of the ominous grinding noise, it usually made, the caf-maker gave a quiet purr as it filled the cup. The Chiss retrieved the mug and presented it to Lorelai with a smile and a deferential bow. “Forgive my insolence, Doctor, but it looked like you were in need of some caf. You do take it black, correct?”

“Uh... yeah,” Lorelai replied as she hesitantly inhaled the rich, pleasant aroma coming from the cup. Amazingly, it looked and smelled like actual caf, instead of the foul substance that Karking Joe typically produced. “How did you do that?”

“It was a simple matter of making a few adjustments to its internal settings. A butler who cannot do this much is not worth his salt.

“Hmm,” the Doctor said thoughtfully. She took a sip of the caf and was surprised to find that it was good. Better than good. This is probably some of the best caf I have ever had, she realized

with dismay. She hastily pushed the feeling aside, remembering that she was supposed to be angry. “So. Anyway. Why exactly are you two here?”

“As I said, darling, we are to here help you,” Lucine replied smoothly as she took a sip of her tea.

For a moment, Lorelai considered asking her where she had gotten it since Karking Joe’s hot water spigot had been broken for ages but quickly decided against it. The situation was strange enough already. “Help me with what, exactly?”

“With whatever it is you do around here,” Lucine replied with shrug. “You requested assistance as part of the cleanup effort, so here we are.”

“Whatever it is— wait, are either of you two medics?”

“Not as such, no. However, Tabriss does have a small amount of medical training.”

“Right,” Lorelai groaned and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Look, I appreciate your fixing the caf-maker and all, but things are a mess right now. I don’t have the time to train a couple of new people with all this going on.”

“Can you really afford to turn two extra sets of hands away?” Lucine asked.

Lorelai started to speak, but the words caught in her throat. The fact was that they were severely short staffed. Still, when she had requested the assistance, she had thought that the powers that be would have at least sent people who had been medically trained. “Ugh, fine,” she groaned at last. “Go ahead and change into your work clothes while I see about some non-skilled tasks for you.”

Lucine gave her a blank look. “Work clothes?”

The Doctor stared at her, aghast. “You mean you were planning to work in that?” she demanded as she gestured toward Lucine’s expensive silk dress. “Are you nuts? This is a clinic! Blood and body fluids all over the place!”

“As it turns out, Tabriss is a genius when it comes to getting bloodstains out of silk,” Lucine said with a saccharine smile.

“Of course he is,” Lorelai groaned, deciding to avoid thinking too deeply about the implications of the woman’s words. “Fine, you two can stay. Tabriss, help with triage. And as for you,” Lorelai paused, trying to think of a place where Lucine would actually be helpful. “Well, I guess I’ll figure something out for you.”

“Excellent, darling. You will not regret this,” Lucine said with a brilliant smile.

They filed out of the break room to get to work, and Lorelai paused, staring down at the cup of coffee in her hand. Work at the clinic was often strange, but this was likely one of the strangest encounters she had had all week. Though they had spent the last few minutes talking, she felt like she was no closer to figuring out who those people were, why they were there, and who had sent them.

Why did it seem like it was such a good idea to let them work here? she wondered. But she simply could not come up with a good reason. She shook her head, resolving to keep a close eye on them, and trying to push aside the strange feeling she got from the two of them.