

An Entertaining Evening

Lucine Vasano (14877)
Option 2

Kordath Bleu crept through the excavation site on silent feet, sticking to the shadows and being careful to avoid the patrols of Collective agents and rent-a-cops that routinely patrolled the area. The Collective maintained a heavy presence within the site as they worked to excavate the kyber crystals, having wrested control away from Temnos Excavation Co. after a series of well-coordinated bombings. But two could play the terrorist game, and a couple of well-placed bombs would disable their equipment, making it more difficult for the Collective to get their hands on the kyber.

He paused, feeling a familiar tingle of the Force, and quickly ducked behind a pile of equipment. He managed to get out of sight just as a band of huntresses stalked past, their eyes scanning the shadows for any would-be saboteurs. He held his breath until they passed, before continuing on his way.

It did not take him long to find his target, the principle mining drill. Pulling open the control panel, he stuffed it full of shaped charges. He was no explosives expert, but he had conferred with people who assured him that it would be enough to knock out the drill for a few days. He set the timer, shut the lid, and hurried away. He retraced his steps out of the excavation site and was nearly to the fence when he heard the explosion. It was followed by shouts, and the area of the drill was quickly flooded with light. Kord allowed himself a small smile as he began to climb the fence. "Choke on that," he muttered in a satisfied tone.

He landed heavily on his feet on the other side of the fence and strolled away. The Collective would start by searching the excavation site for saboteurs. By the time they thought to check elsewhere, he would be long gone. "And another job well done," he congratulated himself, as he began to consider what he would do to celebrate sticking it to the Collective once more.

Still, he had to be careful. He continued to stick to the shadows, checking down alleys before passing in front of them. He had just determined one such alley to be clear and was walking past it when a voice emerged from the darkness. "Shadow Lord?"

A figure emerged, clad in dark clothes favored by a certain secretive portion of the Arconan Expeditionary Force. It was a young man, with a serious expression on his face and a look of icy calm in his eyes. A trained killer, Kordath realized with a sinking feeling. Still, the Force did not warn him of impending danger, so he answered cautiously, "Yeah?"

Other figures emerge from the shadows, all wearing the same uniform, and bearing similar expressions. The first one spoke up, "You need to come with us, my lord. A situation has come up."

"Ehh," Kordath looked them over suspiciously. All were armed, and a few of them had their weapons locked, loaded and pointed toward the ground. At least they weren't aiming at him. Still, the apparent leader of the group spoke in a tone of voice that made it clear this was not a request. "What's up?"

"Come with us, sir. You will be briefed on the way," the man replied. The others formed a protective ring around him as they began to move down the street at a quick and quiet pace.

They arrived at a warehouse, where Kordath, the leader and a few others waited as four of them broke off to search the building. A few tense minutes passed before the leader nodded his head as if having received some sort of signal. Kordath was ushered into the building. As the doors shut behind him, the leader of the group flipped open his comm. "Higgs here. The package is secure. Awaiting orders."

"Wait, who's that? What tha bleedin' hell's goin' on here?" Kordath demanded.

Higgs cast him a look of annoyance, but Kord heard a familiar woman's voice say, "Excellent work, darling. Be a dear and put the Consul on, please."

Higgs handed thee comm to the Ryn, and he raised it to his mouth. "Red? What'd I do now? We ain't got time for these games, lass!"

He heard Lucine give a low chuckle on the other side of the line. "I quite agree, darling, but I assure you that this is not a game. There have been several recent and very credible threats against your life. It seems that the Collective has decided to target the clan leadership."

Kordath froze, considering her words. As Director of the Dajorra Intelligence Agency, Lucine was in the best position to learn about these threats. But her animosity toward him was no secret. "What threats?" he asked cautiously.

"It is unknown at this time, so we are guarding against all threats. This team was handpicked for their loyalty. You will be shortly joined by Strong and taken to a secure, unknown location. You will be guarded there until the threat has passed."

Kordath's thoughts raced. On the surface, it seemed like a good plan. But the redhead's animosity toward him was well known. *Who* were these men loyal to? If he went along with it, was he going to be murdered in some sort of coup attempt? But if that were the case, why involve Strong, who was well known to be loyal to him? "What're you up to, Red?"

"Merely protecting the leadership, darling. Doing my job, as it were," Lucine replied, though there was a touch of irritation to her voice. "If I am being honest, it was a smart move to make me Director of the DIA. I despise failure, and in this case, failure means letting you die. So well played, darling."

Kordath gave a musical snort through his fluted nose. "Yeah, great," he said. "So what're you doin' durin' all this?"

"I am keeping an eye on the Shadow Scion. His life is also at risk. So, you get Strong and a handful of men whose loyalties I have personally verified. Unless, of course, you would rather have *me* guarding your back."

"Heh, nah, that's okay," the Ryn replied quickly.

"I thought that would be your preference. Now, Higgs will be using a random number generator to determine which of 26 potential safe places you'll be taken to. Not even I will know which one you will go to, so hopefully, it will also throw off the Collective. So do be careful out there! I will be most cross with you if you were to die!"

"Yeah, I'll bet," Kordath muttered. "All right, fine."

Lucine smiled as Kordath finally gave his assent to the plan, before handing the comm device back to Higgs. She confirmed a few more things with him, before finally severing the connection. "There now, that is done."

"So, is there any particular reason why I am not being taken to a secure location?" Rhyllance asked dryly as he took a sip of the dry red wine he had ordered.

Lucine favored him with a brilliant smile, before glancing around at their surroundings once more. Many parts of Eorilia's moon was still open and thriving, despite the recent attacks. Cafe Beaujolais was once such place. It was an upscale dining establishment located in the center of the colony, known for its extensive wine collection and world-class chefs. It was a better place to enjoy a nice date, rather than making a stand against a pack of murderous Collective thugs. But that was the whole point, wasn't it?

They were in the restaurant's bar, enjoying a drink before dinner. They had deliberately chosen a spot where they could converse freely, without fear of being overheard. It was something whenever they managed to find an evening together, as they both valued their privacy.

"Maybe I just wanted to see you get all dressed up again, darling," she replied. "That boring uniform you prefer gets a bit tiresome after a while."

"As I have told you on numerous occasions, that 'boring uniform' is functional and perfectly suited to the work that I do. It certainly makes more sense than some of the outfits that you favor."

Lucine smiled flirtatiously and struck a pose, sweeping out the hem of her floor-length black ballroom gown with a flourish. "And yet, judging by some of the looks I am getting, my outfit is doing everything I want it to," she replied with a wink. "You particularly seem to like it."

"I will not deny it," Rhyllance replied. "But you have not answered my question."

"It is simple, darling. You wish to be Consul someday, correct? To do that, you have to be *seen*. So we pack Kordath off somewhere to hide, make sure that you are well protected and in the public eye. We will show them that you are unafraid of any threats made by the Collective. It makes you look like a strong leader."

"The point would be moot if the Collective winds up murdering me," Rhyllance replied dryly.

"Give me some credit, darling. Unlike Kordath, I would prefer to keep you around," Lucine murmured. "Frankly, I am not certain they will even show up. There are currently three people in the DIA that I suspect to be Collective spies. I selectively fed each of them information, including different locations where you are supposed to be. But none of them have your real location. That was kept a close secret."

Rhyllance inclined his head slightly in acknowledgment of her words. However, his expression remained skeptical.

"Besides, if they do not show up, then at least we get to have a nice dinner. I do not know about you, but I am getting tired of living off field rations and freeze-dried food," Lucine added as she took his arm. "I hear that the head chef here is fantastic. Let us try to enjoy the evening, shall we?"

"I suppose," the Chiss replied grudgingly as he allowed himself to be led toward the platform where the maitre'd stood. He was rewarded with another brilliant smile from the redhead and allowed himself the barest of smiles in response. "At least the company will be good," he added grudgingly.

The maitre'd confirmed their reservation, and swept them with a critical eye to make sure that their attire met the strict dress code of the establishment. When he was satisfied by what he saw, he led them past the great archway that separated the lobby and bar from the rest of the restaurant.

In truth, the Cafe Beaujolais was quite similar to many other restaurants that catered to an exclusive clientele. The tables were placed deliberately to ensure privacy for its patrons, with each place set with the full complement of dining ware. The atmosphere was quiet, the low hum of conversation and the chink of silverware against fine china muted by the music of a small band situated in the northern corner.

But there was one aspect of the restaurant that drew a reaction from both Lucine and Rhyllance: the restaurant featured a dance floor. However, their reactions were decidedly different. The Chiss, who ordinarily eschewed overt displays of emotion, actually managed a smile at the sight

of it. Lucine grimaced when she saw it, though she hid the expression of distaste quickly. Almost unconsciously, she moved to place Rhylance between herself and the dance floor. It was a fact that did not go unnoticed by the Chiss, and he raised his eyebrows at it.

"I do believe this night is getting better by the moment," Rhylance said quietly once they were seated. Their table afforded a lovely view of the finely dressed couples who whirled about gracefully on the dance floor. However, Lucine had surreptitiously turned her chair to avoid looking at it. "Of course, I must insist on a dance later," he added.

"And no doubt a handsome Chiss such as yourself will have no trouble finding a partner," Lucine replied sulkily. "You know I despise the activity."

"Yes, but you continue to refuse to tell me why," Rhylance replied. "Perhaps you will share the story tonight?"

"Alas, it is a long and depressing tale," the redhead replied with more cheer than she felt.

"My dear," the Proconsul said as he reached out and gently took her hand. Lucine arched an eyebrow in surprise at the relatively simple action. Of course, she knew that Rhylance was an extremely passionate individual, but he tended to hide his affections while in the public eye. "I have put my trust in you regarding this operation, have I not?"

"You have," she replied cautiously.

"All I am asking is that you return the favor. I confess that I do not know the reason why you dislike dancing so much, but it almost seems like you fear it at times. Why is that?" he said.

Lucine paused, searching his crimson eyes with her emerald ones. Rhylance's words got straight to the point. She opened her mouth to deny his statement, but quickly closed it. They both knew any denials on her part were simply lies. "It is complicated," she replied evasively.

"And no doubt related to your long and storied past that you refuse to go into detail about," Rhylance said. His voice carried none of its usual biting sarcasm.

"You guessed it in one. Well done, darling."

"And now you are defensive," the Chiss remarked.

"And you are as perceptive as always." Lucine focused on the glass of wine in front of her, taking a measured sip to avoid looking at him.

"But the fact remains that dancing is an activity that I enjoy immensely. It is one that I would like to enjoy with you. Perhaps exposure in a more positive setting will help you to overcome whatever aversion you have developed," he suggested.

Lucine contemplated her words as she idly swirled the red wine within her glass. Much as she didn't like it, his words made sense. "Why, Doctor, are you trying to rehabilitate me?" she asked, half-jokingly.

"Only partially. I rather like most of your pathologies," Rhyllance replied with a smirk.

"And I am thrilled to hear it," the redhead said. The very idea of dancing with *anyone* made her skin feel clammy and loosed a kaleidoscope of butterflies in her stomach. But she also disliked having such an obvious weakness, especially when it came to an activity that was commonly done in the social strata that she aspired to live within.

"Oh, very well," she said at last with more irritation in her voice than she felt. "One dance, and we will see how it goes."

"Of course, just one," Rhyllance agreed.

Once the sharply dressed waiter had taken their drink orders, the Chiss rose from his seat and offered her with a courtly bow. "There is no time like the present to begin facing your fears," he said as he extended his hand to her.

"I never said I was afraid," Lucine replied defensively.

"Your current pallor says otherwise," Rhyllance replied dryly. "If I had to guess, I would say your current heart rate is in the 120 range. Really, my dear, you are usually so good at hiding your emotions!"

Lucine narrowed her eyes at him. His attempts at manipulation were obvious, but what was worse was that they were *working*. "Enough, darling. I said I would dance with you, and I am a woman of my word," she said as she took his hand.

"Of course, my dear," Rhyllance replied as they moved between the tables to the dance floor. As they drew nearer, Lucine became even paler, and the Chiss detected the faint tremor in her hand. Though her face was set in a pleasant smile, her pupils were constricted. She was displaying all the classic fight or flight responses, similar to what he had seen in his experimentation into the mechanisms of fear. He marveled at the woman's restraint but was no less determined in his course of action.

Once they arrived at the cleared off space on the floor, he took her into his arms. The quartet was playing a popular waltz, and he carefully lead her through the first few steps. Whatever her

feelings about dancing, Lucine was well trained in it. She matched him step for step and managed to do it with some grace. However, her gaze continuously darted around as if she expected something terrible to happen at any moment.

“There now, see? This is not so bad,” Rhyllance said in encouragement.

“So you say, darling,” Lucine replied through her smile and gritted teeth. “Though I suppose it is not as bad as it could be. At least you are good at dancing,” she allowed grudgingly.

Rhyllance only chuckled as he guided her through a natural spin turn. “So what happened? Did someone stomp on your feet too many times?”

Lucine pressed her lips together and did not answer. Instead of pressing the issue, Rhyllance led her through a complete reverse turn. Midway through the turn, Lucine saw the maitre’d stumble through the doorway, crimson staining his flawless white tailcoat. “Oh... oh dear. Rhyllance, darling, we have a problem.”

The Chiss smirked down at her. “Forget it, my dear. You are not getting out of this so easily.”

“It is not that. We have a Collective problem.” As she spoke, a man dressed in the uniform of a Collective partisan placed the barrel of his blaster against the man’s head and pulled the trigger. The man’s body jerked once, before crumbling to the ground. Behind her, a motley collection of partisans and green-haired huntresses strode into the room, weapons drawn.

Rhyllance performed a chasse so that he could face the door, and took in the forces arrayed against them. His movement brought them closer to the tables, where several patrons were still oblivious to the dancer that had just arrived. “Troublesome,” he muttered in irritation. “How did they find us?”

“I believe we have a bigger issue, darling,” Lucine hissed as the soldiers raised their weapons and began to fire into the crowd with little regard of the innocents that stood between them and their targets.

Rhyllance and Lucine moved together, diving behind a table as Rhyllance reached a hand out to overturn it, providing them some measure of cover. Screams rang out around them, compounded with a few heavy thuds as the blaster bolts hit a few of the patrons.

Chaos erupted within the restaurant as the panicked patrons sought cover or escape. The attackers kept firing, aiming at any target of opportunity in their attempt to get at their target. Clearly, collateral damage was not a concern.

“I thought you said you had pointed them to other restaurants,” Rhyllance said as he drew his blaster pistol from his suitcoat.

"I did, darling. But it appears the spy is better informed than I gave them credit for," Lucine replied. "On the bright side, I now have a fairly good idea who he is."

"Stellar," Rhyllance replied dryly. "So, now what? The odds seem rather stacked against us."

"We go out through there," Lucine said, waving her hand toward a small alcove behind them that obscured the door that led to the kitchen. "There is a back door that leads out to an alley. We can lose them there."

"In case you did not notice, there is a rather large space to cover between here and that door," the Chiss pointed out.

"Attractive *and* observant," Lucine replied. She kept low to the ground as she peered out from around the table, aligning her mental cross-hairs on their attackers. She drew upon all of the fear she had felt only moments ago and *pushed*, sending the heavy mahogany tables flying into them. Much of the blaster fire abated. "Go!"

Rhyllance did not need to be told twice. He moved as quickly as he could, keeping low. Some of their attackers were still firing, and he heard a shout as they sighted their quarry. Lucine kept close behind him, her lightsaber in hand and ready to deflect any shots that got close enough. Fortunately, none of them did.

Oddly, it seemed that more than a few of them were aiming at thin air. Rhyllance darted into cover before giving Lucine a questioning look. The redhead merely gave him a sweet smile. "Illusions?" the Proconsul guessed.

"Got it in one! Now, shall we go?"

"Not just yet," Rhyllance replied as he looked around the kitchen. His crimson eyes quickly fell upon what he was looking for: the cooking appliances. He darted into the kitchen, turning all of the knobs of the stoves on.

"What are you doing?" Lucine asked.

"Making it a little more difficult for them to follow us," the Chiss replied. "All right, that should do it."

"Fantastic," Lucine replied as she strode toward the back door, with Rhyllance hot on her heels. They had just about made it when they heard a shout from the door they had come through only moments before.

"That's him!" a huntress shouted, before losing a bolt from her energy-bow. The bolt flew through the air, igniting the gas from the stoves as it went. Rhyllance tackled Lucine through the door as a deafening explosion ripped through the kitchen, creating a wall of light and heat behind them. The force of the explosion sent them rolling over the pavement in a tangle of limbs and clothing.

The back door led to a narrow alley that ran between the restaurant and the upscale apartment building that stood next door. A glance around proved that there were no enemies immediately in sight, which allowed them a few minutes of respite.

"What in the hells was *that*?" Lucine gasped, picking her head up to stare at the flames that poured out from the doorway.

"Some older kitchens use natural gas for cooking still," the Chiss replied. "Fortunately, that kitchen was one of them."

"That sounds rather dangerous," Lucine said, thinking back to a few of her own cooking mishaps.

"My dear, I am beginning to understand why Tabriss refuses to allow you into the kitchen," Rhyllance said dryly as he assessed his status. The pavement felt uncomfortable beneath his back, and the redhead landing on top of him had knocked the breath out of him. But his arms were still wrapped around her, and the feeling of her pressed against him *did* feel rather nice. All in all, a net positive, he decided at last.

It took Lucine a moment to recover from her shock at the explosion and realize their situation. Her lips curved into a mischievous smile and she lightly traced his cheek with her hand, before climbing off of him. "Well, I doubt you were lucky enough to get all of them with that blast. We had best move on. If we hurry, we might still be able to make the opera."

"You got us opera tickets?" the Chiss asked as he stood up and brushed himself off.

"I honestly did not think they would find us," Lucine replied with a shrug. "Really, I had just planned for us to have a nice evening while this mess blew over."

"A shame they ruined that plan," Rhyllance said. "Perhaps the evening can still be salvaged."

"Oh, I can only hope," the redhead purred, as they started toward the entrance of the alley. However, they had not quite reached in when a chill went up Lucine's spine, warning her of impending danger. At the same time, four men in ragtag uniforms that marked them as Collective partisans came into view, their weapons raised. Acting by instinct, she grabbed her companion by the arm and dragged him into cover behind a large waste receptacle, moments before blaster bolts cut through the space where they had just stood.

"I suppose we should deal with them first," the redhead said.

"Expediently," Rhyllance said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small metallic canister.

Lucine stared at it, for a moment, before narrowing her eyes at the Chiss. "You brought a bomb on our date?"

"Why of course, my dear. Opportunities for scientific experimentation can come up at any time, and I would prefer to be prepared when they do."

"But that does not change the fact that you brought a *bomb* on our *date*," the redhead hissed as she peered around the corner of the waste receptacle. More partisans had joined the four that had first attacked them. They stood directly in the entrance, blocking any escape as they fired indiscriminately at anything that moved.

"It is not a bomb. It is a canister of fear toxin," Rhyllance corrected.

"That does not make it better!"

The Chiss merely shrugged and angled his arm back to throw it. However, he stopped when Lucine reached out and grabbed his arm. "If you throw it now, they would likely kick it away. Allow me to soften them up first."

Rhyllance's crimson eyes narrowed. "You are not going out there."

"Of course not," Lucine replied as she reached down and picked up a sizeable rock. She picked a few of the would-be assassins and concentrated for a moment, before throwing the piece of duracrete.

"Gas!" one of the partisans shouted. The three men she had chosen dived out of the way, as they had been fooled by her illusion into thinking the rock that had landed at their feet was a dioxis grenade.

Though some dived for cover, most were not fooled. "What tha 'ell you doin'?" grunted one of the partisans in front.

As the partisans who had sought cover tried to explain themselves, Lucine targeted three different partisans and threw another rock. These three, having seen what had happened to their companions, flinched, but didn't move. "They're witchin rocks to look like bombs!" shouted one of the particularly astute ones.

“That the best ya got, ya Force-lovin shutta-sons?” the apparent leader called into the alley. “Throwin’ rocks? Quit hidin’ and face yer deaths!” He then began shouting orders for the others to form up to advance down the alley.

“That should do,” Lucine said with a satisfied smile. “Whenever you are ready, darling!”

RHylance nodded. He activated the canister and hurled it at the mob of still-jeering partisans. This time, none of them bothered to move. Instead, they did their best to shoot the CHiss as he ducked back down behind the trash receptacle.

The canister whirled through the air and landed with a metallic clinking noise at the feet of the one who had hurled the challenge at them. It began to hiss, eliciting clouds of sickly yellow smoke that enveloped the partisans. Still, they were not ‘fooled’, even as the gas caused them to cough and their eyes to water.

The fear toxin quickly began to take effect within the partisans. It began with a feeling of dull anxiety, that quickly grew into a sensation of suffocating terror. That was when the hallucinations began, as the men present began to experience their worst fears. Once it became clear that the partisan’s advance was not going to happen, Rhyllance cautiously peered out, studying the group with rapt attention. Though he did not have his datapad, on him, he made several observations of note, which he filed away to be recorded later.

Lucine raised an eyebrow at the Chiss, before drawing her lightsaber from the folds of her dress. “Much as I am sure you are having fun, darling, we really should remove ourselves from the area.”

The Chiss agreed, and they carefully picked their way out of the alley. Lucine lead them, her lightsaber ignited and ready as they walked. Some of the partisans were firing madly at whatever terrors they were seeing, and Lucine deflected any shots that came toward them back the way they came. Some other men had collapsed to the ground, curled into a fetal position. Some called out for loved ones, others pleaded, a few others screamed profanity and threats. Still, the redhead and the Chiss were able to move among the writhing, terrified partisan and escape the alley.

“Perhaps we should take a few back for further study,” Rhyllance suggested as he turned back to admire the effects of his fear toxin.

“Are you planning to carry him?” Lucine asked as she examined her reflection critically in a nearby shop window. Her expensive dress was torn in some places and stained with bits of food from the firefight inside the restaurant. She wrinkled her petite nose in concentration, placing an illusion of the dress over the ruined one.

“Well... not as such, no.”

“And how would you explain his presence at the opera?” the redhead pressed. “I suspect his screaming might ruin the show.”

“You do make a valid point, my dear,” the Chiss replied. “Besides, previous experiments indicate that heart failure occurs in approximately 87.3 percent of those affected by the toxin. It would be unlikely that if we did take a specimen that he would survive until the opera was done.”

“Then I suggest we salvage what remains of our evening, and save taking prisoners for another evening.”

Rhylance quirked a brow. “And what about the spy? The one who informed the Collective about our whereabouts?”

Lucine shrugged her shoulders. “I will make a few queries, but I will know within a few hours. And then? You remember the evening of the speed dating event?”

The Chiss’s lips turned upward in a faint smile. *That* was an evening was impossible to forget. It had ended with four murders, followed shortly by a very intimate and memorable few hours. “I do.”

“Well, once I know who it is that tipped them off, then I suspect we will have the occasion to repeat many of the events of that evening,” Lucine said with a wicked grin.

Rhylance chuckled softly at the thought of what her words implied. “Well, while that does sound quite entertaining, there is one other thing I would like to do this evening.”

“Oh? What is that?” Lucine asked as she took his arm.

“We never did finish our dance.”

Lucine’s face fell at the Proconsul’s words. “Oh, dear. I had hoped you would have forgotten about that during all the excitement.”

“Never, my dear,” the Chiss replied with a smirk.

With that, the two left the restaurant behind and the terrified partisans behind. As they walked, Lucine entertained thoughts of ways she could get Rhylance to forget about her promise to dance with him. A few intriguing ideas sprang to mind, and she could not help but to smile. It promised to be an entertaining evening.