

A Dance of Death

PART I: A CAPER

“You’re sure about her, Mistress?”

Lucine smiled at the question, throwing her head back in a light, tinkling laugh. Turning away from him, she gazed into her quarter’s floor to ceiling mirror, examining herself as she pondered. Her assemblage was perfect for the occasion; an austere gown of the deepest black, hugging tight to her shapely form. It spoke of strength; Arcona’s strength, as always, in the shadow.

Sometimes, her Proconsul’s constant fretting could be quite amusing. He saw everything as a puzzle to be solved, a cipher to be cracked. It was a strength in many respects. No decision of his was ever made without intense, decisive, and intelligent deliberation. It was a lifestyle that had seen his foes fall around him and brought him to the honor and glory of the Proconsul’s dais. In time, no doubt, he thought it would sit him on the Shadow Throne as well.

Other times, however, the constant dickering served only to slow him down.

“I am sure, Darling. We aren’t looking for an assassin, afterall,” she purred, spurring a slight, violet flush in her lover’s cheeks. Doubtless, he was thinking of the less than stellar performance displayed by his last catspaw. Grot had served loyally, of course. But Kordath lived... and whispers spread. Whispers that strengthened by the day, fanned by ominous tidings. War once again on the horizon. Embers of riot and rampage still glowing in the streets of Estle. A violent resurgence of the old Death Walker virus on the island of Vilcaja. The Starbird, Lady of the Night, and former Shadowlady Atyiru, rising from the grave, rousing a screaming hoard of followers that followed in her path.

Lucine didn’t need an assassin. She didn’t need a catspaw. She didn’t need a killer.

She needed a hero. Someone to bring glory, credence, and the love of the people to the throne’s side. She needed someone incorruptible, incorrigible, bright and pure. She needed a Saint, by which her sins might be absolved in shadow... and, eventually, she needed a martyr. The people of Selen would adore them, glorify them, sanctify them. When they were brought like a lamb to the altar and slaughtered, at the perfect time and place, all would mourn. That would be the moment when the Consul presented herself before them. The loving friend and mentor to the hero, waiting every moment by their side, supporting them, teaching them. The people’s adoration would be given to her willingly, without qualm. All would love her, and despair.

Light dances in her emerald green eyes as she stared down at the datapad in her hand. The prospective idol’s record was laid out before them both, detailing every step in her rapid rise through Arcona’s ranks. The Consul smiled, pointing out each individual mark as she spoke. “Distinguished service on Lyra, but

not too distinguished; awarded two silver novae, for bravery and decisiveness under fire. Knighted soon afterwards. Exemplary service under Captain Karran Val'Teo on the Voidbreaker, most of it not truly notable... until last month.”

Rhlyance nodded his head, crimson eyes glinting. Standing resplendent in his own raven-dark suit, expertly cut to match his willowy form. “The Plague... and those slaves,” he added, already arriving at his Mistress’ intended destination.

Lucine’s lips parted in a smile as she gave a soft nod. “Yes. Two stunning acts of heroism; saving so many in that city from doom might have been enough. But to turn right back round, in just a week’s time, and free one hundred thousand from bondage on Kyrellius’ station? They all heard her name; we’re lucky that she was indiscreet enough to loose it through the intercoms while she struck their chains. Now, they’re all whispering it. Not too loudly... but loud enough.”

The Chiss murmured thoughtfully, his gaze bearing down hard on the datapad, like a tissue sample that was just beginning to do something interesting. “I fought with her on Lyra. She was effective. Naive... but very effective.” From him, that was high praise indeed.

The Consul nodded, turning the back of her gown towards Rhlyance so that he might lace her up. “Strong has said much the same. Not many people can provide him with any sort of challenge, hand to hand. Apparently, she managed it.” Her proconsul stiffened slightly at the mention of the other Chiss -he viewed him primarily as a source of unwanted, unneeded competition- but the strength of the recommendation was indeed undeniable. They weren’t just looking for a powerless stand-in, afterall. Their selection would make a poor idol if she was a weakling.

And that, she *certainly* wasn’t.

“We’re decided, then,” Lucine pronounced, smiling softly. “We have all the leverage we’ll ever need on her. Her affection for the crew of the Voidbreaker, and its captain, is strong. They’re our bargaining chips... the spurs in her side. Today, we bring her into the fold. Tomorrow... all we need do is set her on the course, and the rest will sort itself out.”

The redhead pursed her lips, smoothing over the black fabric of her garment. Looking herself over in the mirror once more, she gave a thoughtful hum. “I do hope that she likes that new dress that I picked out for her. A heroine in white... and the cut will do *so much* for those horns of hers.”

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PART II: A WALTZ

Sera creased her brow, giving herself a rough once-over in the refresher’s mirror, blue eyes glittering with an unsure light. The new dress was certainly an improvement over the last selection, but she still wasn’t quite decided on how she felt about it. Sulith had loved the thing, of course, babbling on in her sincere

way about how clean it looked, how it stood out against the dark-maroon of her tattoos, how her leg looked, as shown off as it was. Still... it was a dress, and the zabrak had almost needed to be wrestled into it to see how she looked in the first place. It just didn't *feel* right.

It was measured to full length, the soft, silken fabric falling just short of her ankles, clinging so closely to the curves of her flesh that the tight contours of her musculature could be clearly made out underneath. Undyed, the brilliant, snowy white coloration set-off the dark maroon of her tattooing perfectly, tattoos that were put on peak display with the way the dress was cut. A long slice on the left side revealed the whole of her left leg, all the way up to the dagger strapped to her upper thigh. It was matched by a smooth rent in the center, displaying the swirls of color along her abdomen, mirrored by a similar window along her back. Even the boots were just right; much better than any torturous heels, the soft, buttery-brown leather made a perfect addition.

The Zabrak's nose wrinkled, a hand running over her horns. It was only *slightly* creepy how well the clan's tailors knew her size... but she preferred not to think about that right now. Instead, taking a deep breath, Sera turned and made her way out to her plus-one. Karran couldn't have been outfitted in a fashion more different from her, his suit sober and jet-black. Still, she marked the smile that he gave, and grinned in return, holding out her arm. "You all ready to go, fancy-pants?" she questioned with a smirk.

"Of course, *kachinka*," he responded, taking her arm in his as they strode off their vessel's loading ramp. The ship had been parked at Giletta so that all might attend the Gala. Most had already left to do so, peeling off in odd pairs and couplets. Striding out into the darkening evening, Karran turned his gaze to Sera, dark eyes glinting with the reflected light of Estle. "You're prepared, yes?"

"Prepared for what?" Sera replied quizzically, one brow rising. "It's just a party, right?"

"In Arcona, it's never just a party. By what I've heard, at least."

Sera nodded, a slight chill running over her scalp. The steel of her dagger felt cold against her thigh.

Never just a party. Right. But... what was the worst that could happen?

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The gala was... extravagant to say the least. The venue was just about the most gorgeous setting that Sera had ever laid eyes upon; a cavernous, vaulting ballroom of glass, brass, and sandstone, it seemed to catch individual sound made, carrying it back and melding it with the rich, golden sound of the live Sinfonia orchestra. Multiple antechambers peaked off to the side, places for private conversations and pensive negotiations, set over gilded plates of sumptuous cuisine... of which there was no shortage. It was packed to the gills with influential Estle's upper-crust, powerful diplomats from the Severian Principiate, throngs of notable, influential Arconae. The two zabraki were bounced between them, greeting, smiling, grinning and joking. It was intoxicating, a whirl of voices, hands, and eyes... and Ancestors, was it glorious.

At some point, Karran peeled off, joining in some negotiations with a Severian captain of industry. She didn't mind all that much. With the captain away, a huntress could prowl as she wished, moving to make her own acquaintances. Free with her smiles, quick with her charms, and easy with her affections, Sera had no issues making friends with total strangers. Disconcertingly, more than a few of them seemed to know her name already... and quiet whispers piled in the thoughts of those who didn't know that they were being read. Murky, fleeting thoughts of the infected hordes in the islands, and a name; Kyrellius. It appeared that word of her record had gotten out... likely, through the slaves that she had freed. Now, it seemed that she had a reputation building.

Oh well. Sera had never been the most private of people in the first place... and it wasn't like what they were saying wasn't flattering.

Slipping the company of Gilletta spaceport's main sharehold, Sera moved on by one of the long buffet tables, skimming a plate as she went. She caught a glimpse of Alaisy, the tall Sith's head poking out over the crowd like a beacon, fielding a quiet conversation with Skar, the Kaleesh that had almost shot her on Vilcaja. She spotted a flash of Qyreia's crimson skin -piling a plate with food- and even better, a glimpse of a three-legged Cythraul, padding her way past flowing fabric trains and clacking heels without a trace of concern. Smiling, the Zabrak moved to follow the fluffy little beast, opening her mind to the Force. The feedback was instantaneous, almost overwhelming -*so many thoughts, so many feelings*- but Atyriu would stand out like a star among candlelight.

Sera's probing thoughts brushed gently over the Gala ... before freezing, scattered by a dark, foreboding presence. It wasn't unfamiliar to her. No, she had felt these thoughts before. Still didn't make it any more pleasant the second time.

Plate in hand, Sera turned from the crowds, stepping out onto the ballroom's sweeping balcony. It pressed several dozen feet out over the side of the plateau, providing a grandiose view of the Capac ring, far, far below. Here, a few odd pairs were clustered about, whispering, their heads close. One couple was kissing, enjoying the vista. The Zabrak hadn't come to disturb any of them, though. Turning she padded towards the balcony's darkened corner, where the light of the Gala within didn't quite reach.

A single point of amber light ignited, flaring in the night as blue, fragrant smoke wafted towards the stars. Two shining eyes stood out over the lit cigarra, clutched by a muscular hand that was covered in knotted scars.

"What the kriff're you doin' out here, hot-stuff? Lookin' to finish our little dance from earlier? It might get a little chilly out here, but if you can spread yoru legs as wide as you did last time, we could prob'ly manage without takin' off that fancy dress of your's," Satsi questioned brusquely, crimson painted lips rising up in a cold, lascivious smile. She'd dyed her hair since the negotiations -from coal black to a silvery grey- but it didn't exactly seem like she'd come for the Gala. For one, her clothing as was plain as it came, a dark leather jacket, tight trousers, the works. Certainly not black-tie material. Plus... there was more than one blaster slung from her hips, and multiple shining daggers as well.

That didn't bode well for anyone.

"Actually, I was just kinda wondering what you were doing out here on your own. You're missing out on the food," Sera questioned curiously, offering the woman her plate. Satsi just rolled her eyes, blowing a small cloud of smoke in the Zabrak's face.

"Those are bad for you, ya know," she chided brightly.

"So are karkin' parties, when our sweet scarlet *wench* is playing hostess," the human replied dangerously, flicking her spent cigarra over the edge. "I came here as... kriff, I dunno. *Schutta* insurance. In case Lucine tries somethin'."

"What do you mean 'tries something'? I thought she organized the party," the young zabrak asked quizzically, one brow rising. Satsi gave her an even, level look before sighing, pinching the bridge of her nose.

"...I don't think Karran shoulda brought you here, kid."

"I'm not a kid!" Sera responded sharply, her eyes flashing. That just prompted a sark, sultry chuckle. There was no humor in the laughter; none that the Zabrak could find, at least.

It happened in a flash. One moment, Satsi had been standing still, leaning against the balcony's rail. The next, she was millimeters from Sera's face, a razor-sharp blade pressing into the hollow of the young Zabrak's throat, one hand tightly clutching the back of her scalp. The human's eyes were flaming, a rabid, vicious fire burning somewhere behind her soft brown irises. Her breath was hot, scented with the acrid-sweet smell of burnt tabac, her white teeth shining. "Now, Karran made me promise not to karin' hurt you, but he never said a zerkin' thing about teaching you a *lesson*," she hissed, her grip tightening on Sera's neck. "You *are a damn kid*. In every way it karkin' matters. I can see it in you; the trust, the light, the frakking *hope*. You think you can trust Lucine? You think can trust *anyone*, here? It's all *sithspit*, kid. Those people in there know your name now; Lucine'll karking *use it*. You let your guard down for *anyone*, this clan will chew you up and spit you the frakk out in the streets, for the rats to gnaw your horns. You get me?"

There was silence for several seconds, dark-brown eyes clashing against bright, shining blue. Then, Sera poked her own Zabradi dagger into Satsi's side... just hard enough to draw a small bead of blood. She had felt the attack coming, of course, the Force shocking her from placitude and spurring her hand to rise.

"I get you... but I am not a child. I am a *Huntress*. I trust who I frakking trust because they've *earned it*.... And I can watch the hell out for myself, besides," the zabrak snarled softly, her own pointed teeth baring in a warm, savage smile.

They held in deadlock for a few moments more, butting wills, before Satsi released her grip, grunting with some sort of satisfaction. The plate of hors d'oeuvres had not been spilled.

“Well...well well well. At least you’ve got some horns, hot-stuff,” Satsi admitted, grinning. “Naive. It’ll still get ya killed... but you’ve got some damn horns on you.”

“Most Zabradi do,” Sera replied brightly, flipping her dagger in hand before sheathing it at her thigh. Heartbeat returning to its normal pace, Sera plucked a chocolate covered strawberry from her plate and took a bite, savoring the mix of sour and sweet. After a moment, Satsi did the same.

They stood there for a few more moments, watching one another. Satsi’s gaze was piercing; evaluating, deconstructing, and piecing back together. Even if the other woman couldn’t grasp the Force, Sera got the sense that Satsi could see right through her regardless. Or, maybe the mercenary was just oggling her more... salient features, put on display by the dress. It was sort of hard to tell.

The laughter came after a few more moments; deep, rollicking, and genuine. Satsi doubled over, running a hand through her hair, while Sera looked on, joining with a slight giggle. “Oh that *poor schutta*. I karkin’ pity her if she comes after you, Horns. Surprise her like you did to me...oh, I’d give my ass to see that.” There were a few more seconds of harsh, snorting laughter before the storm subsided. Sera was pretty sure that there was a tear standing in the corner of the human’s eyes when she was done. “Tell you what, hot-stuff. You feel lonely when this damn party is over... find me out here. We can go back to practicing those damn splits. Until then...”

Satsi moved back towards Sera, her mirth gone, intensity returning to her gaze. “*Don’t trust Lucine*. If she had a soul, she gave it away taking this damn Throne. You understand me?”

Sera waited a few moments, before nodding. “Yeah. Yeah, I get you.” Inwardly, she thought “*But I won’t trust you, either.*”

“Good girl. Now, get back in there. I’m sure Karran’s already lookin’ after you like some abandoned puppy dog.”

Swatting Sera on the backside, Satsi sent the Zabrad on her way, a course which the younger woman took willingly. That conversation had been deeply disturbing, at just about every level. Perhaps that was just Satsi... but Sera suspected that it went deeper. Far deeper.

There was a Chiss waiting for her as she strode back into the Gala, her white dress streaming behind her. Tabriss. She recognized him from the negotiations with Kyrellius.

“The Shadow Lady, Lucine Vasano, would like to speak with you, Knight. An honor. Follow me, please.”

Sera hesitated for half a moment, eyes widening. Then, her, her brow furrowing just slightly, she walked off after him.

Satsi's advice, unfortunately, hadn't met a receptive audience. The zabrak would think about it, sure... but her trust and friendship was easily won.

But... the human had been right about one other thing. A sacrificial lamb Sera might have been, for sure... but she had horns. Her honor, and her hearts, were not for sale. The Consul might get her idol in the end, but getting it to obey her will was another thing entirely.

As always, Sera would dance to her own tune. Ancestors help them all.