

Unexpected Turns

Nevo Race Tracks, Tipool City
Qotho Peninsula, Dandoran
Doran System

"You have got to be kidding me," Seliana Braslow said in a deadpan voice as she glared at the lanky Chiss in front of her.

"I do apologize for the inconvenient timing," the Chiss said with a small bow.

"No, it's fine," Seliana said with a sigh. "I guess I should be happy for the help. All right, Tabriss, welcome aboard." The green Twi'lek paused, looking home over. Tabriss was tall and lanky, with blue-black hair that fell into his eyes. He was clad in the uniform that marked him as a casino employee: a white button-down shirt, black tie, a too-loose red vest and black slacks. Strangely, the lines on the shirt and pants seemed unusually crisp. Had he ironed it? "You ever been a bartender before?" she asked, trying to keep the doubt out of her voice.

"I do know a thing or two about mixing cocktails," Tabriss replied.

Seliana quirked an eyebrow at the non-answer. "Right," she said as she gave him another up-and-down glance. There was something off about him. Maybe it was the way his gaze seemed to take in everything around them, or his stiff, slightly formal speech and demeanor. Maybe all Chiss were like that?

But the orders were stacking up, and the drinks weren't going to make themselves. "Right," she said again. "Well, welcome to the oh-so-glamorous life of bartending for the beautiful Nevo Race Track and Casino." She gestured around the back of the bar area, like a game show host showing off a marvelous prize. "It's busy as hell all the time and the customers are rich, entitled pains in the ass, but they're nothing compared to the management. But hey, the tips are good and the food discount is pretty decent. Just keep your head down, pour heavy when you can, and you'll do fine."

Tabriss inclined his head slightly as he regarded her with those odd, too-sharp eyes. As Seliana studied him for a moment more, trying to decide what to do with him, a droid approached the bar with another large order for the VIP room. "Anyway, the group in the VIP room got here early, and so I didn't get a chance to finish my prep work. How about if I get caught up on the drink orders while you work on that? And afterward, I'll show you around."

The Chiss inclined his head again, acknowledging her words and moved to get to work, rolling his sleeves up as he went. Seliana watched him with narrowed eyes, before turning her attention to the orders. She had deliberately avoided telling him what exactly needed to be done behind the bar. If he knew what he was doing, then he would be able to figure it out pretty easily.

After several minutes of mixing, shaking and pouring, she turned to check on her new co-work, fully expecting to see nothing done. "Hey, how're you— wow!"

The pile of glasses that had been stacked in the sink was washed, dried and artfully arranged in an intricate pyramid. All of the garnishes had been cut into perfectly sized, uniform pieces. Extra bottles of wine had been pulled and arranged on the wall behind the bar. And the bar itself almost sparkled, its brass accents and mahogany wood gleaming as if they had just been freshly polished. Not only had Tabriss accomplished his tasks, but he had done so perfectly, and in significantly less time than Seliana would have. Much as it galled her to admit it, it seemed that she strange Chiss actually knew what he was doing.

"I do hope this is sufficient," Tabriss said. "Unfortunately, I did not have time to dust and polish the light fixtures."

"Yeah... that'll work," Seliana said slowly as she continued to survey the work area with amazement. "All right. Well. Do you want to help me with these drinks?"

They worked together, addressing each of the orders in turn. The crowd within the casino kept turning in orders at a regular pace, though the work was made more chaotic by the VIPs.

"*Another* round?!" Seliana gasped as the droid placed the order slip in front of her. Her lekku twitched with agitation as she scanned the order. "No way. Those people in the VIP suite are putting away more liquor than a pack of Zeltrons on Spring Break!"

"Truly, they are dedicated to their alcoholism," Tabris agreed. He picked up the order slip and held it between his gloved thumb and forefinger, as his red eyes moved down the list. "Well, it is fortunate that we brought up more bottles of the Corellian Mark."

"We'll have to make another trip to the storeroom at this rate," Seliana grumbled. "And oh look, a few of them want cocktail shots. I guess shotgunning whiskey gets dull after a while." She reached for the tumbler to begin mixing the shots, but the new guy had already grabbed it. "Wow, you work fast!"

"Thank you," the Chiss replied as he moved around the bar, pouring the necessary liquors into the shaker. "I have had many years of practice."

"Yeah?" Seliana replied with a grin. "Well, it shows. You're really good at this! Where'd you work before this?"

Tabriss stood with his back to her as he continued making the shots. "I was a butler for one of the more powerful families within the Ascendancy," he said. As he spoke, he pulled a small vial hidden in his sleeve and poured its contents into the shaker. It was but one of the many that he had slipped into the drinks headed for the VIP room.

"A butler? Huh. I guess that explains why you've been so formal." Seliana's voice remained even and free of suspicion, a sure sign that she had not noticed what he had done. Once the vial was hidden once more, he turned back to her, shaking the tumbler to blend the shots. "What was that like?"

"I found the work to be very stimulating," Tabriss replied in a neutral tone as he poured the shots into the lined-up glasses without spilling a drop.

"So then what changed?"

The Chiss rolled his shoulders in a shrug. "The family was unable to retain my services." Politics within the Ascendancy was more like a bloodshot than anything else. In the rare instances when two families fought, the hostilities did not cease until one house was completely obliterated. Unfortunately, he had been on the wrong side. "I left to find something better."

Seliana smiled wryly as Tabriss's words struck a particular chord with her. "And you found it *here*?"

"This is only temporary," Tabriss said.

"Yeah, that's what they all say," Seliana said. "I remember saying it too, ten years ago."

The Chiss quirked an eyebrow at her, which was all the encouragement she needed. "Time seems to run funny here," she said. "I was just looking to earn a few extra credits before I took off to explore the galaxy. But there were always more bills, and more reasons to stay."

"What did you want to do before you started working here?"

Seliana paused and gave a small laugh. "You know, I just realized how long it's been since I actually thought about it. But before I embarked on the exciting life of being a bartender, I wanted to go to Coruscant and get into the fashion scene. I don't think that'll actually happen. But I think I'd be happy to just get out of here and travel."

Tabriss gave a small nod, as he leaned on the bar, listening to her speak. "Well, perhaps you simply need the proper impetus to get you out the door," he suggested. He reached into the front pocket of his vest and withdrew a gold chrono at the end of a chain. He raised an eyebrow as he checked the time. "In fact, inspiration might strike you to leave sooner rather than later."

"What?"

There was a trace of sympathy in Tabriss's smile as he slid a credit chip across the bar toward her. She caught it and gave him a questioning look. "I am afraid the casino is about to see a significant amount of violence. Once the shooting stops, the Hutts will have a lot of uncomfortable questions for anyone they think might have been involved. That," he nodded toward the credit chip, "contains enough credits that you can have the life you're looking for, far away from here."

The matter of fact way Tabriss spoke of impending violence made her mouth go dry. "What's going to happen."

The Chiss smiled ruefully and pressed one finger against his lips. "The less you know, the better." He removed the apron he had been wearing and folded it neatly, leaving it on top of the bar.

As he moved, she noticed his shoulder rig for the first time. Two slugthrowers were hidden beneath his vest, their outlines obscured by the fact that it had been too big for him.

The weapons. His too-sharp gaze and strange demeanor. His sudden appearance, seemingly from nowhere. She had known something was amiss, though she had ignored her initial misgivings.

"Who are you?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"No one, really," Tabriss said. "I am simply one hell of a butler."

+*+*+*+*+

Tabriss hurried across the casino, pausing only long enough to retrieve his duffel bag full of weapons and hide them on his person.

He had to be sure that he achieved his objective. Dwipp Bruskars had to die. Given the sheer number of alcohol that had been served to the VIP suite, it was highly likely that he was going to have to cut through a significant number of pirates to get to him. Hopefully, a few less pirates, if the poisons had done their work.

As reached the third floor and the long hallway that led to the VIP suite, he felt a familiar calm settle over him. He hadn't lied to Seliana, per se. He had served as a butler for one of the great families of the Ascendancy. It was a family that specialized in some of the more underhanded dealings that took place on Csilla. By day, he would serve tea and run his masters' household. And by night, he would often be sent out to remove any threats that might cause his masters' problems.

In the end, he had missed one, and that small oversight had cost everything. He would not repeat that mistake. He would not fail. He would do whatever it took to provide perfect service for his new mistress or die trying.

As he reached the end of the hallway, he saw a single janitor a few feet from the entrance of the VIP, mopping the marble floor. He was now within range of the small recording device that he had stuck to the bottom of the tray that he had given to the droid, he could hear the raucous cheers of the pirates as they played their drinking game and reveled in their leisure time. Nothing seemed to be amiss just yet. Good.

"Excuse me," he said, and the janitor looked up at him with a questioning expression. "Do pardon me, but I am afraid the boss wants to see you."

The janitor raised his bushy eyebrows in surprise. He looked down at the credentials that Tabriss had pinned to his lapel, before looking back up at his face. Meanwhile, Tabriss's disarming smile never faltered. He felt perfectly confident in the forged ID badges that his mistress had arranged for him.

"Did he say what he wanted?" the janitor finally asked, after completing his inspection.

"No. He simply stated you need to go see him immediately," Tabriss said. Remember what Seliana had said earlier, he added, "You know how management can get."

"And don't I know it," the janitor replied with an expressive eye roll. "Let me just put my mop up and I'll head right down."

"I can take care of that," Tabriss replied. "I'll even finish the floor for you and put it away if you're not back in time."

The janitor thanked him and handed the mop to him, before taking his leave. Tabriss continued to mop until he was out of sight.

Glancing at the doors of the VIP room, Tabriss gave a nod of satisfaction when he saw that none of the pirates seemed to be paying attention. In one fast motion, he kicked the bucket over, sending soapy water cascading over the marble floor. Almost as an afterthought, he set the wet floor sign to the side and leaned against the wall beside the door to wait for the fireworks to start.

+*+*+*+*+

He didn't have long to wait. The pirates' leisure was interrupted, first by the sound of blaster fire, and then by the appearance of warships in the atmosphere. One of the pirates gave a shrill whistle and a brief, impassioned speech. That speech was met with cheers for blood.

And then the poisons started kicking in. As the cheers died down, some of the pirates began to cough. Their coughs took on a moist quality as they began to bring up large amounts of blood as the poisons raced through their bloodstream. Tabriss had chosen some of his nastiest poisons for this particular job.

It was time. The Chiss pulled out the frag grenade and tossed it into the room. "Bomb!" one of the pirates screamed, and Tabriss had just enough time to pull the earpiece out before the grenade exploded, a deafening **boom** that was accompanied by screams of terror and pain and the smell of cordite and burned flesh.

He darted across the hall to take cover behind one of the pillars that lined the hallway. Now all he had to do was wait.

+*+*+*+*+

Dwipp's ears rang and his lungs burned. "Damned Principate," he said in between coughs as he drew his blaster and glanced at the other two Revenants. Somehow he had avoided most of the shrapnel from the frag grenade, but Nervitt hadn't been as lucky. He seemed to be bleeding from multiple deep wounds as Rasha struggled to drag him along. She wasn't looking so good either. Though she didn't have any obvious injuries, she was pale and sweating. All around him, the other pirates who had been celebrating with him only moments before were now either grievously injured or dying. There would be no fighting the Principate, not with this group.

Dwipp cursed under his breath again as he peered into the hallway. Instead of seeing an army of Principate scum, the hallway was empty. Someone must have thrown the grenade and run.

"It's clear," he said hoarseness. "Go!"

Rasha didn't need any further prompting. She half carried and half dragged Nervitt through the door. But then she stopped, her whole body jerking as if she had been punched. She then fell forward onto her knees, clawing at her neck. Nervitt fell with a boneless thud beside her. His glassy stare told Dwipp that he hadn't felt the impact, and wouldn't feel anything else ever again.

"Rasha!" Dwipp gasped, grabbing her by the shoulders. She stared up at him pleadingly, unable to speak as blood bubbled around the throwing knife embedded in her throat.

Movement out of the corner of his eye spurred him to motion, and he drove back into the charnel house that had once been the VIP suite, barely avoiding the shot that had been aimed for his head.

"You karker!" the Rodian shouted hoarseness. "You fragging karker!" He braced himself against the doorframe, his blaster pistol at the ready. Now that he knew where the threat was, he could deal with him. "You'll pay for killing them!"

"Well then, by all means," came the reply. "I would like to get back in time to prepare my mistress's tea."

Dwipp gave a quiet sob, grief overshadowing his pain. "You'll pay," he hissed. "You'll pay!" And with that, he darted out of the room, firing rapidly as he ran.

Apparently, the Chiss hadn't been expecting a direct assault. He darted back into cover, hissing with pain as one of the blaster bolts seared into his shoulder. Dwipp allowed himself a surge of malicious glee as he reached the center of the hallway. He'd kill that Chiss bastard, and get revenge for both Rasha and Nervitt.

Suddenly, Dwipp's feet flew out from under him. He landed on the hard marble floor with a heavy thud, stars exploding in front of his eyes as his head struck the wet floor. Then, his vision cleared and he saw the Chiss standing over him, clutching his wounded shoulder with one hand while aiming a slugthrower with the other. Dwipp had but a moment to register the Chiss's impassive expression and icy stare. Then, he heard the slugthrower roar before everything went black.

+*+*+*+*+

Tabriss ducked into a nearby restroom, where he changed his clothes as quickly as his wounded shoulder would allow. Then, heating his duffle bag, he hurried to the entrance where he was set to rendezvous with his mistress, Lucine.

All told, the mission had been a success. Yet, as he listened to the blaring alarms and carefully avoided the security teams as they hurried to put a stop to the trouble, he could not help but wonder about one last loose end. Even though he knew it would take him out of his way, he took a quick detour, to the bar situated in the center of the casino.

Seliana was gone, and so was the credit chip he had offered her. Her apron was neatly folded and placed on top of the one he had left behind. Seliana was gone.

Tabriss allowed himself a small smile and a sense of satisfaction. His life had taken an unexpected turn, which had forced him to leave the Ascendancy, in search of work. Now, he was in a far better place, doing work he could be proud of, in the service of someone he believed in.

In some ways, he had caused her life to take a similar turn. He could only hope that things turned out just as well for her, wherever she ended up.