

417th Special Squad

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417th Special Squad

by [AnInformant](#)

Summary

Narration of some elements of a Star Wars FFG campaign; M for violence, language, and thinly-veiled innuendo. Enjoy!

Coruscant

Dash allowed the left corner of his mouth to turn upward into a real smile; not that he was opposed to a deception, of course, and he made sure that the permutations of expression carefully crafted on his face could not be a reliable indicator of his true feelings on anything. He'd been the consummate actor since childhood, when it became clear that his well-connected family were individually more untrustworthy than the smarmiest Toydarian, and had been summarily praised for it.

This time, surprisingly, it was genuine. He released the grip of his handshake after a final squeeze and appraised the woman in front of him. Venka Finnall had also been assigned to the 417th Special Squad, a 'Technician' by title, but he knew from her file and their previous interactions that she was a skilled computer engineer as well. That meant hacking, of course, but their employers weren't exactly going to call out the classified, black-hat side of her training lest someone else seek to exploit it.

They had met in passing during drills, briefly on Scarif, and...he couldn't shake the feeling that they had collaborated on a more significant project, but maybe she just had one of those faces. Attractive, sure, soft brown hair and dark eyes spaced flatteringly above a small, upturned nose, dotted with freckles and the pink hue of a fading sunburn, but nothing that would stand out beyond his initial evaluation. The way those eyes darted away from him, though, upwards and then down, side to side, betrayed a nervousness that curiously soothed his fraying composure at having to put on an act with everyone else at this event. The conversation had been awkward, but it was kind of a relief.

"It has been a pleasure speaking with you, Venka," he said genuinely, his grin widening into a full-fledged smile, straight white teeth and all, and he was looking forward to the demure blush he usually got from girls for such a gesture, but she pursed her lips as though he'd just commented on the weather.

"Likewise! Ambassador...?"

"Dash."

"Ambassador Dash! If you..."

"No, no, just 'Dash' is fine, on its own...and it would be Ambassador Madell, actually. It's a small ship, though - formalities are unnecessary." Not to mention he couldn't stand them, earned though his was.

"Oh, yes! No problem. Dash. And you can call me Venka."

"Yes, I already..."

A beep along with a short buzz emanated from her belt and she looked down, brow furrowed. "I gotta go. See you on the ship?"

He smoothed his jacket. "Indeed."

"Have you met the other crew?"

"Not yet."

She snickered and hid her mouth behind her hand. “Ah, well...good luck then.”

What on Coruscant did she know that he didn't? His research had been impeccable. “Thank you,” he replied simply, with a final nod, before they turned away from each other simultaneously.

He canvassed the venue diligently, looking for the rest of them - he found Melee easily, having requested him personally for this contingent. It had been a small lie he'd told Venka, that he hadn't met the other crew, but he wasn't about to advertise his internal allegiances so early (if he deigned to at all).

The man was nondescript in every way that was important, short brown hair, tanned skin, and average height slotting him tightly in the role of a generic Imperial Soldier. He'd have been overlooked if not for his other unsavory qualities. What Dash was far more interested in, of course, was his unwavering, bordering on zealous, loyalty to the Empire. Dash knew there was nothing more dangerous than a true believer - in fact, he was counting on it.

Melee was leaning against another man, elbow on his shoulder and baring his substantial bicep, chewing on a toothpick. Dash looked skeptically between them. “Melee, nice to see you again...who's this?”

The other man chuckled. “Craig. One of my favorite arms dealers. He's outfitting my...*your*...”, he reconsidered again, “*our* ship with a few extra accessories.”

Dash tried to keep the exasperation to himself, not particularly keen on what qualities would constitute Melee's *favorites*. “Imperial standard?” As if any close-combat weapons Melee would select would be routine-issue.

“Pffft. They should be. What I wouldn't give for a bone saw in the thick of it,” he said, as if he'd just asked Dash to pass the salt.

He nudged this ‘Craig’ with his elbow and gestured with his head. “Fuck off, will you? I have to introduce the good Ambassador here to a new friend.”

Dash was even more worried by what sort of person Melee would consider a *friend*. ‘Craig’ smirked but didn't reply, leaving them with a curt nod and salute as he departed.

He and Melee fell into step with each other as they traversed the promenade, the city lights of Coruscant glittering above in the newly-descended darkness of the evening. The whir of speeders above overlaid a soothing white noise on the din of the music emanating from the main gallery. To Dash, it felt and sounded like home, which was apt since he'd spent most of his life on this planet, save for the last several years.

“I was pleased you accepted my recommendation to instate the Arkanian to our little group,” Melee said, interrupting what had become an agreeable silence. Dash found himself annoyed despite the compliment.

“I'm not sure Imperial Intelligence was particularly swayed by my requests. I get the sense they already had their minds made up. Still, your endorsement is appreciated.”

Melee raised an eyebrow. “Eye-Eye? This is starting to sound like a mission with a little more gravitas than is typical for the recently-commissioned, Ambassador.”

“You would be right. I'm meeting General Wolen in half an hour to discuss.”

Melee let out a low whistle, the grin that had been tugging at his lips manifesting into a full-on

smile. "When did you become such a hotshot? Seems to me Daddy would be kind of proud, which is at odds with your objective to piss him off."

Dash scowled and thoroughly regretted telling the man anything about his personal history.

A burst of white distracted him as Melee's well-muscled arm shot out like a viper to capture the shoulder of another man who had been in quite a hurry to get somewhere else, by the looks of it. "Whitey!" he shouted. "Take a moment to ingratiate yourself with the new power-that-be, Ambassador Daro Madell," he said with a little more force than the words suggested.

The man he'd stopped had paperwhite skin and hair the color of starlight, and he would have been beautiful if not for the vacant, homicidal look in his cobalt blue eyes as they met Dash's.

Dash put on his Face and extended a hand. "It is my pleasure to meet you. You must be the weapons expert Melee has told me so much about. Welcome to the 417th."

Whitey looked at the proffered hand for a socially-unacceptable amount of time before bumping it with his fist, a feral smile occupying most of his face. "That's me! It would be my honor to blow shit up for you. Just say the word. *Really*. How epic would it be to spot a few charges under the champagne fountain?"

"I'll leave you two to chat," Melee said suddenly, turning away.

"Melee,...*Melee*," Dash whispered, but it was too late to recall him. He regained his composure quickly and turned back to the albino, who was fiddling with something in the pouch on his belt.

"No?" the man suggested, eyes flitting around like he had a tic. "How about the throne? That thing is fucking stupid," he said, and Dash couldn't help but agree. It was only there, in the main ballroom, for the highest order of dignitaries, or the Emperor himself, but had been collecting dust for as long as Dash had known it to exist.

"I don't think that would be wise," Dash countered, and Whitey frowned, and it was *terrifying*. He couldn't imagine what this individual would be capable of when he was upset, or worse, *bored*. He needed a distraction, and quickly - he had to figure out what would placate Whitey if they were going to be traveling in such close quarters.

Luckily, a slew of politicians from Imperial High Command had been invited to this initiation too, so there was no shortage of eye candy. A dark-haired angel in a floor-length sparkling red gown passed nearby, and he directed Whitey's attention that way instead. "Have you been on Coruscant before? I hope you've had the opportunity to partake of its many delicacies," he said, chancing the physical contact of his reassuring hand on Whitey's shoulder. His blue eyes darted between the hand and the woman as his expression faded to something neutral. That had to be a win, right? Gorgeous women and sex were the easiest distractions in the galaxy. "Isn't she breathtaking?"

Whitey blinked. "I guess."

That wasn't encouraging, seeing as she was the most stunning person he'd seen tonight, which was saying something. Maybe...? "How about him?" Dash attempted, pointing toward a tall, handsome diplomat with a strong jaw he recognized from 500 Republica.

Whitey snorted. "He'd be prettier with his skull cracked open on the floor," he spat, wrinkling his nose. Dash could feel his skin pale a bit - was wanting to destroy things a sexual identity? He'd just have to maintain an endless list of things he needed destroyed, he supposed.

He recalled, then, rumors of a recruit in Basic who had obliterated an entire city block with

homebrew explosives during a training exercise, quickly covered up by High Command, of course, and wondered if this Offshoot was involved. He wouldn't be surprised if the event had spurred the, er, *friendship* between Whitey and Melee. For all his oddities, Melee was as politically beneficial on the soldier side of things as Dash himself was on the command side.

"Red would certainly complement the marble," Dash said finally, to a surprised look followed by a toothy smile from Whitey. He was lean, bordering on skinny, and in their formal boots they still saw eye-to-eye. It was surprising, given what Dash considered to be his own imposing height, and only added to his intimidation. "Shall we go find our pilot?"

"Whatever you say, Boss," Whitey delivered in a sing-song, and with that they were off into the crowd.

They never did find him intentionally, instead being waylaid by social intrusions that Dash lived for and Whitey despised. Having the Offshoot flank him was a powerful intimidation bonus he hadn't considered when Melee had first introduced them, but the man had flipped his loyalty switch and was incredibly protective once given the incentive.

When Dash caught sight of Melee again, at the bar of course, he raised his hand to indicate another black-clad Imperial Army soldier with hair longer than the standard buzzcut and a deceptively soft countenance. Why hadn't Melee engaged this person himself? It gave Dash pause despite the good nature of their relationship.

"Maarek Steele," Dash said on approach, and the man smiled emptily, reciprocating the handshake. His hand tingled at the contact - Maarek had a different quality about him, something Dash couldn't place, but he did know instantly that this man would be invaluable to their mission, whatever it turned out to be.

"Daro Madell," he replied, with a smirk. "I rather think we did that in the wrong order, seeing as that's your name and Maarek is mine."

The drop of the honorifics was not lost on Dash. "We all knew each other before this event, no?" he replied effortlessly. "I can't imagine I'm the only one who read the bios for the 417th before attending tonight."

"If you lack imagination, that will be problematic for our mission." He examined his fingernails, black eyes scanning them before elevating to stare into Dash's again. The diplomat couldn't find the energy to be alarmed; by the look of him, he'd be a boon in close combat as readily as he'd dodge asteroids and other deep-space anomalies at the helm of their ship.

"If you're questioning Lady Serathiss' ability to teambuild, then I would also question your sanity," Dash countered easily, retrieving the whiskey that the bartender had slid to him, neat, since he never trusted the ice.

"Oh, is *she* our Master?" he inquired, not as perturbed by the admission as Dash thought he should be.

"Close enough," he replied, taking a generous swig of the copper-colored liquor and offering the second glass that had appeared to Whitey, who, again, looked bored. He downed the entire three-ounce pour in a few seconds without a 'thank you' and went back to brooding.

"Did you meet the girl?" Maarek said, changing the subject, and Dash raised an eyebrow.

"Of course. She's delightful," he replied, surprised at his own truthfulness.

“Ha! She’s awkward as fuck, and will dig up literally every speck of dirt that’s ever existed on you and anyone you love,” Maarek said with a laugh, swiping the next pour of whiskey and extending four fingers to request the next round. Melee was looking at him warily from the end of the bar, flipping a switchblade in his hand as he watched the interaction.

“Sounds like a powerful ally to me,” Dash said, raising his next glass, and he was pleased when Maarek clinked his own against the crystal.

“I had my doubts about you, Ambassador, but that pick certainly changed my mind.”

“Bold of you to assume that I had the authority to pick.” Self-deprecation was always in style, but Dash’s influence wasn’t exactly a secret.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Maarek replied, holding up another four fingers, “Wolen would trust your judgment over any of ours, and for good reason - nobody leaves the ruling class on a fucking whim.”

Long overdue for his meeting with the General, Dash hurried down the corridor while simultaneously straightening his uniform, hoping that the man had been delayed with previous meetings.

He hadn’t been, though, the exemplary custodian of others’ precious time as he was, and he greeted Dash warmly upon his arrival.

“Ambassador Madell, welcome!” They embraced briefly and Wolen gestured to two blue plush chairs, facing each other. Their orientation was parallel to the entry, which made sense, offering the General and his guests equally-invulnerable tactical positions.

He stilled for a moment - an old man in the Imperial military was a formidable force indeed - neither Dash himself nor his compatriots had joined for the lifespan advantages, after all.

“I’m glad you were able to meet the rest of your team in person,” he said, deep voice reverberating through the room, and Dash found it soothing even though he should probably be more wary.

“They will be tremendous assets in accomplishing our mission objectives,” Dash said, a practiced speech, though his follow-up was not. “Which are...?”

Wolen nodded sagely. “Your crew has an...unusual permutation of skills. You will be granted the rank of Captain, though it may or may not help you with this lot,” he said, chuckling, arm draped over the back of his chair.

Dash considered his next words carefully. “May I ask who is responsible for this assembly?”

Wolen looked contemplative for a moment, then relented. “You have a right to know, though I suspect with your connections you already do. Follow me.” He stood sharply, a novel counterpoint to his previous relaxation, and headed towards a door connecting his suite with another.

Dash expected to be led to Lady Serathiss, of course, Wolen being right as he always was. He *didn’t* expect her to be the woman he’d highlighted to Whitey, who belonged on that throne he’d threatened to explode moreso than any other being at the event. She was still cloaked elegantly in sparkling red silk, long brown hair slinking over her shoulder in a delicate fishtail braid, smiling with eyes accented by dark makeup and a fair share of mirth.

“Hi, er...Lady Serathiss,” he said eloquently, saliva trapped in his rapidly-tightening throat, and she

blushed the way he had hoped Venka would, but in this instance he knew that it was fake.

General Wolen was scratching at his grey beard, clearing his throat, but she spoke first. “Hello Mister Dash,” she said, and her voice was like velvet infiltrating his ears, and he forgot to be offended by her ignorance or outright rejection of his real name and title.

In his desperate need to fill awkward silences with his own voice, he spoke again, “It is a pleasure to meet you,” he repeated for what had to be the fortieth time that night, but felt the edge of deception in the words that he hadn’t felt with the others.

“Likewise,” she said without hesitation, rising in a swish of fabric as she approached, clicking her tongue at a watchful servant who scurried away to retrieve beverages. Dash was sure he didn’t need any more drinks, but, like a good diplomat, he accepted when one was offered. He swirled the red liquid in the glass appreciatively, inhaling the tannic aroma as he chewed on the first sip.

The wine was flawless - not that he’d expect less from the de facto head of Imperial Intelligence. “We’re expecting great things from your team,” Serathiss added after a stilted fifteen minutes of conversation, fluttering her eyes and tilting her head unassumingly to sweep her gaze over him, pretending this was the first time she’d done such an evaluation.

“We will endeavor to uphold the interests of the Empire in our pursuits,” he said easily, the additional influx of alcohol certainly helping. Wolen, he couldn’t help but notice, looked uncomfortable.

“That’s good to hear,” she said, “because your first assignment is a matter of life and death.”

Weren’t they all, really? The conversation was a haunting mirror of the one he’d had with Venka at the beginning of the evening.

Dash saw her again late the next day, consumed with the logistics of loading the ship; his own sparse belongings had been delivered early that morning, and he was pleased to see stamped boxes of Melee’s arsenal making their way into the cargo hold.

Venka brushed a lock of short hair over her ear, smiling and waving, and he wondered again if the psych eval had been wrong about her lack of sociability. It certainly wasn’t wrong about Whitey, who was deadlifting desperately-heavy equipment on his own and glowering at anyone who offered to help.

The ship was magnificent in its mundanity, sleek grey steel shining in the early light of a brilliant Coruscant morning. It was, by any observable metric, a standard-issue Imperial battalion ship, save for what Dash knew about its ‘enhancements’ per his subordinates’ admissions, but it had a certain charm that entranced him anyhow, because it was *his*.

Melee swaggered up a few minutes later, their pilot Maarek in tow, sporting some new ‘jewelry’ by the looks of it. Dash was about to say something when Venka beat him to it. “Are those *fingers*!?” she grimaced, and Dash rubbed the bridge of his nose. Even if they were, why the hell would she think it reasonable to call out? The cold white of bone on his necklace against the shiny black of his Deathtroopers’ uniform was rivaled only by the practical translucence of Whitey’s skin, and he seemed neither to notice nor care.

“Toes, actually,” Melee replied, chuckling, as if he were answering a question about what company had made the zipper on his jacket he wore in defiance of the dress code over his armor. Dash cocked his head - Naboo, if he had to guess, one of the best metalworkers on the planet, actually.

He owned a few of their cufflinks himself.

He looked back at Venka, concerned - she was green enough to pass for a Mirialan by this point. He had to put his commander hat on, lest he lose control of the situation.

“Look. All of you,” he said with the density in his voice that the atmosphere deserved, “I know it will take some getting used to, but we’re a team now whether we like it or not. Cohesion will be what separates us from our rivals, so I need you to, um,” he stuttered, quite unbecoming of someone of his stature, “er...*get along*.”

Melee twisted the tips of some of the toes at his neck and then grabbed Venka’s hand, raising her knuckles to his lips in a faux-reverent kiss. She stayed blessedly silent, but wide-eyed. “Of course, Captain,” he said with a smirk, then turned to Whitey and Maarek. “Fast friends. Am I right?”

Maarek flitted his black eyes between Venka’s fragile fingers and the weapons cache they’d all just observed being loaded onto the ship. “Naturally,” he said.

“Oh my *god*,” said Whitey, who clearly hadn’t been paying attention to any of them. “If one more fuckhead touches my shit with their clumsy-ass hands I will *personally* decapitate them,” he snarled, and Dash could swear he saw Melee’s eyes light up a little.

However, Dash somehow didn’t doubt that Whitey knew precisely how sensitively to handle his wares, and reprimanded the offending parties appropriately before establishing a more even-keeled assemblyline.

As the afternoon wore on, he glanced at the other ships on the dock boarding for their own suicide missions, a determined sigh leaking from his throat. General Wolen and Lady Serathiss had taken a special interest in them, hadn’t they? Or had the Captains of the other vessels received a similar welcome?

If they were in their own boat, so be it. Melee was right, unfortunately; his father would certainly have no objections to a gallant Madell making a name in the Imperial Military. He stepped onto the bridge with trepidation, despite his commitment to the cause.

Dash’s blood pressure spiked as Maarek ascended them into the sky. After all of this, he was *still* concerned about his father’s approval, his abject spite for it notwithstanding, since he had signed on the dotted line. He wondered, briefly, as they exited the atmosphere, if the shadow of his family’s legacy would ever truly leave him alone.

Jakku

The sandy beige of the surface of the planet Jakku consumed more and more of the view as Maarek made his approach with the Tie Reaper into the atmosphere. Venka had never been here, which wasn't a particularly remarkable statement given that she wasn't all that well-traveled, save for her sporadic Imperial assignments. For most of those, she was kept in the dark, sometimes literally, plugging away on a remote terminal from inside a crate or in the cargo hold of a ship millions of parsecs from the actual target.

This mission was more, eh, 'hands-on' according to the ambassador, which meant that the two soldiers were part of a ground contingent with her, along with a medical droid.

Dash had gone on to explain that the heir to TaggeCo, one of them anyway, had disappeared on the planet not long ago. The company was apparently '*...Everywhere You Are*' except for one of its most famous associates. The man's father, and current Baron, was supposedly despondent, though Dash hadn't met him personally and Venka preferred to rely on firsthand experience.

Well...that would be secondhand experience, wouldn't it? She had developed such an innate trust of Dash's emotional intelligence after how she'd seen him handle the crew over the last several weeks that it hadn't occurred to her to distinguish the two.

Nevertheless, Bartlett Tagge was gone, and it was up to them to locate and rescue him. Rumors of religious cults and other unsavory anti-Imperialists were abound, from the meager intelligence they'd been provided, but more information than that was inaccessible even with the relentless employment of Venka's skills.

It was unusual for such large organizations as the implicated 'Black Sun' to be completely off-grid, and she'd spent the three days they'd been in range becoming increasingly annoyed as each of her attempts resulted in nothing. *Less* than nothing, if you counted the processor she'd fried with a manual overload. Then again, she supposed that's what was meant by *overload*. It usually worked despite that, though, so it was especially frustrating.

The descent onto the surface would have been uneventful, if not for the pilot's flourish Maarek absolutely refused to do without, and by the time Venka's stomach had processed the abrupt shifts, Whitey was ushering her toward the vehicle loading bay where their speeder bikes were housed. Melee turned his head over his shoulder to look back at them, toothy grin betraying his excitement for some legitimate action after having been cooped up on a small Reaper.

Melee had, thankfully, forgone his macabre necklace, though she couldn't help but wonder what lurked under his armor and, more worryingly, in the bunk he shared with Whitey.

She didn't envy his position, necessarily - the two had a little too much in common - and her personal arrangements were satisfactory. Venka was with Maarek and Dash in the other adjacent alcove that had three bedspaces, stacked over each other, but Dash usually fell asleep reading something on the small bridge. At least, that's what they had all guessed, because no one could seem to catch him actually sleeping. Melee had suggested that he was Bith with an inordinate amount of plastic surgery, but no glamors beyond droid skins were *that* convincing.

"I'm just saying," Maarek had insisted, "that nobody has ever seen him play a floo horn. What if he's amazing at it?"

Whitey had vowed to steal one at the next outpost.

The Reaper had departed quickly, so as not to draw attention, and Venka rolled her eyes considering the flashy landing operation Maarek had just expertly executed - his showmanship would get them the wrong attention soon enough, she was sure.

Heat still washed down on her face despite the convective cooling of the artificial wind whizzing by them on the speeders. Goggles protected her eyes from the sting that whipped around her hands and wrists at the handlebars, and all three of them were wearing expensive, but allegiance-less armor on the orders of General Wolen, who had demanded they be nondescript.

Their target for the moment was a downed ship that Maarek had spotted on radar and visually confirmed during their approach. As they came closer, more detail was obvious from the smoking wreckage.

“Isn’t this Bartlett’s ship?” Venka asked, dismounting her bike last and walking up behind Melee, whose brow was similarly furrowed as he surveyed the damage.

“This thing is already blown up,” said Whitey, irritated. “That’s boring.”

“Not just that,” said Melee, though his tone was that of agreement. “This ship was landed properly,” he gestured toward the landing gear, “and this damage is from detonators and other surface weapons. *Recently*. Not a week ago.”

Venka found it even odder - if the man had been shot down during a firefight and kidnapped, why would the ship have been intact for several days and only freshly defiled?

“I need to get in,” she said to Melee, adjusting her goggles to rest on top of her head. It was comfortable, actually; kept the hair out of her face without pins.

“In the ship?” Whitey interjected. “Just climb the ladder. The door’s blasted off.”

“Yes,” she said, “and into their systems. If I could have done that from out here, I could have done it from the Tie Reaper, and we wouldn’t be wasting time on foot.”

“Hmph. Well, what are *we* here for?” His trigger finger twitched between himself and Melee, before it settled behind his ear to cure a nervous itch.

“We’re here to protect the nerd,” Melee said, elbowing Whitey to a displeased grunt, “and save the princess.”

“Is Bartlett a girls’ name?”

“You don’t have to be a girl to be a princess.”

Venka didn’t suppose he was genuinely trying to be endearing or inclusive, but let herself believe it anyway.

The security footage seemed to confirm her and Melee’s suspicions about Bartlett. His crew had tucked the ship neatly at the base of this cliff where they had found it, intact, on his orders. They had resided there for several days making their way through their stores of Corellian whiskey, entertaining a revolving door of guests from nearby settlements.

One woman in particular caught Venka's eye, though - she was short, with dark, sun-kissed skin and even darker hair pulled back into a strict bun at the base of her neck. Fine robes like a noble would wear - she bet Dash would know where they were made - and the imposing presence of someone whose expression never changed. While Bartlett and his female companion were animated, jovial, even, this visitor was a flatline from the way she walked to her literal lips which remained parallel with the floor, neither smiling nor frowning.

It took her a few hours to recall why the woman was familiar. She was part of the massive stack of vaguely-interconnected intelligence files that Colonel March had instructed them to commit to memory. Still, Venka was pretty sure she was the only one that had taken the order to heart, since Melee had shrugged and Whitey's stare was blank as ever when she explained to them who she was.

"Who the fuck is Black Sun?" Whitey whined, swinging his leg back over the speeder, his gun(s) depressingly unfired.

"A criminal syndicate and enemy of the Empire," Melee spat, grimacing.

"Rebels?" The engines roared to life underneath them.

"Might as well be, Whitey. The only good enemy is a dead one," he managed to say before all hell broke loose.

Laserfire whipped past their heads and at their feet and Venka reached for the weapon in its hilt at her hip before Melee turned to her, grinning. "No," he told her. "Hit the deck."

She didn't need convincing. Her face was in the sand, hands wrapped behind her head, before her companions got a shot off.

"*Finally*," Whitey groaned, elated, as he withdrew half his smorgasbord of explosives from his speeder's small cargo.

"Who are they?!" she strained from her prone position.

"Scavengers, most likely," Melee said casually, popping off two headshots in sequence to the figures that had just emerged from over the ridge, as he and Whitey surrounded her, backs to each other and keen eyes surveying for other targets. That didn't make sense - Bartlett's ship was already a ravaged carcass. "They picked the wrong fucking party to rob, though." Oh. Venka imagined that their armor and equipment might seem worth the risk from a distance, but...

The air shattered in her ears as one of Whitey's 'field deployments' hit home, sending at least five bodies flying off the cliff in a fit of stone and smoke. Her ears were ringing, but over the cacophony of explosions and weaponsfire she could still hear his insane laughter at the carnage he was wreaking.

The two were true to their roles as protectors; none of the scavengers got within a hundred feet of Venka or her equipment. Whitey was running after the retreaters, more bombs in-hand, when Venka got irritated enough with the sand in her nostrils to assist. One of the items in her arsenal was a short-range EMP, though its directionality was...questionable at best. The medical droid caught her drift and backed away to a presumably-safe distance.

A few clicks and button-presses in her favorite bag, and she heard the telltale whine of fizzling electronics, her own bike an unfortunate victim, as was Whitey's blaster. It had the desired effect, though - the vehicles of their assailants were rendered useless as they tried to flee.

Whitey halted his momentum and tapped the trigger a few times with the barrel pointed at a scavenger's head, and when nothing happened, he flipped the weapon in his hands and used the butt to knock the guy out.

The other one, who looked a stone's throw from shitting himself, started begging. Whitey had cocked his fist to take out a few yellow, misaligned teeth, when Melee stopped him with a firm hand at the elbow. Venka could barely make out what they were saying.

They seemed to remember her intelligence summary, though, because she heard Melee inquire about Commodore Keno and her base of operations for Black Sun before he snapped the man's neck.

Maybe it was her more recent Imperial Intelligence training, or maybe she was already tired, but her reflex to cringe was suppressed by indifference as she pushed to her feet and trudged toward them.

"You're an asshole," she heard Whitey say to Melee. "I wanted to punch him first."

Nima Outpost was the sort of place Venka would rather avoid, and also the sort that Imperial soldiers would go out of their way for to get a drink or in a fight. So, naturally, Melee and Whitey were in their element...social, anyway, for their combative element obviously involved less constructive mayhem with more spilt blood.

It hadn't taken long for their triumph over the scavengers to become the latest local gossip, and Melee's account of how Venka had personally downed a dozen with her wizardry had effectively dodged her some seedy suitors, tall though the tale was.

One particularly burly, bearded miscreant was undeterred, though, and it took Whitey threatening to remove his fingernails for him to give up. Venka wasn't sure if he had been coming to her aid or if he genuinely wanted to peel at the man's thick, stubby appendages for his own sadistic purpose, though, and chose not to think too hard on it as the albino slid into the now-unoccupied seat beside her. She smiled weakly at him and tapped his shoulder with an open hand. He looked quizzically at where she had touched him for a moment before they were rejoined by Melee and another man, though Venka couldn't place his species.

"Finnall," he addressed, having found another toothpick to occupy his mouth. "I'd like you to meet Craig," he continued, nodding. "He has some information you may be interested in."

"How do you know Melee?" she asked Craig, oblivious to her colleague's visceral and immediate negative reaction to the question.

"Bowling league," said Craig, arching an eyebrow at his 'friend's' obvious discomfort.

"What's bowling?" asked Whitey, slamming another shot of whiskey before palming the nonexistent blaster at his hip; all weapons had been checked at the door, of course. Not that either of them would have actually needed a weapon to take out half the bar.

Venka always considered herself lucky that doormen at establishments like these never considered any of *her* equipment a threat, because they didn't understand what it was. Craig clearly knew better; he'd been eyeing the scanner on her forearm warily since they'd been introduced. Their conversation was cordial, if a little stilted, and Venka found herself wondering again how exactly he and Melee had first been associated. A vague wish for Dash to be among them floated in the back of her mind and lingered even after Craig had taken his leave. Venka knew she was no good

at interrogations, if one could even assign that label to this interaction, but Melee insisted as they departed the bar that she was still the best choice due to her ‘natural abilities’. She was halfway through explaining that she had no natural extroversion at all when Whitey exclaimed, “No no, no. No no,” and then made a lewd gesture cupping his hands under his pectorals and squeezing the air. Well, then, that made more sense. Venka supposed that if she had to carry the damn things around that they might as well be good for something.

K3M3 chose that moment to return from his foray into the land of the locals and met up with them out front after they had retrieved their firearms. “I believe I have determined the whereabouts of Black Sun’s base of operations,” the monotone mechanical voice explained.

“And I know the tech and layout of Keno’s security systems on that ship too,” Venka contributed.

“You do?” Melee arched an eyebrow. “I thought Craig’s descriptions were a little vague. And they blindfolded him before taking him there.”

“Kinky,” Whitey said, itching his chin with the back of his fist.

Venka ignored him. “There’s only one manufacturer that uses that kind of encryption,” she replied confidently. “But again, I need to be on the ship itself to disable it.”

“Oh no,” said Whitey, with no inflection, “now we’ll have to destroy our way in.”

Now that their objectives were practically common knowledge with how quickly the gossip had traveled, Black Sun operatives kept coming for them, steadfast in their pursuit despite getting trounced by the soldiers of the 417th at every opportunity. The two men delighted in the butchery of besting them, modest challenge though they were, and Venka attempted to harden herself against an emotional reaction to it, replacing the anxiety it stoked with appreciation for their skill and diligence at looking out for her and their mission.

The ship was still hard to find even if one knew what they was looking for. The tall, razor-thin profile of Black Sun’s ship was almost completely hidden under an embankment made of the same beige stone as everything else on this planet and surrounded by metal latticework. A dampening mesh would certainly explain why Venka and Maarek had failed to detect it despite their sweeps of this exact geography not twelve hours prior.

“Any reason to be stealthy about this?” she asked Melee, completely aware that stealth wasn’t even a part of Whitey’s vocabulary.

“They already know we’re coming. We just have to hope they haven’t killed Bartlett yet.”

“Sooooo...guns blazing?” Whitey said excitedly, practically vibrating on his feet as he cherry-picked his favorite permutations of explosives and guns. Venka had been riding with Melee since she was light though her gear was not, still irked that her previous play had disabled her speeder. A few hours and a couple replacement parts from the Tie Reaper would fix it, of course, but they didn’t have that kind of time. She imagined it picked over by another troupe of scavengers at this point, though there would be little to find.

Whitey hoisted a large gun onto his hip, fastened by a strap wrapped around his waist and shoulder, and it was desperately unfair how radiant he looked in the light of the golden hour of the setting sun, reflecting a murderous glint off the shine of his eyes. If that man had any diplomatic ability at all, Venka’s own ‘natural abilities’ wouldn’t hold a candle to his.

As it stood, though, he was a blunt instrument, and he dispatched their enemies quickly as they

approached the ship with Melee barely lifting a finger. Well...that wasn't entirely true, seeing as he was lifting literal fingers off the dead as he brought up the rear, slicing through the flesh and bone with his knife like he was cutting roses for a bouquet, no doubt to add to his collection. Venka pretended she didn't see it.

It was almost too easy to sidle up to an external control panel, rewire a few things, and connect her portable console to the security systems. She disabled all internal firing capability and remote monitoring, and downloaded the entirety of the ship's database as an afterthought stemmed more from reflex than requirement. Then, she nodded to Melee, who set charges at the sealed main entrance and then pulled her back by the upper arm behind a pylon as he triggered the detonation. The roar of an explosion and subsequent rain of debris hurt her ears, because she'd covered them a moment too late.

What greeted them on the other side was an eerie, silent, unmoving cadre of robed individuals, only their noses and chins visible in the rapidly-fading light.

Venka felt a surge of adrenaline sink its talons into her chest, and she'd only felt that once before, on Scarif during an Imperial training exercise. It terrified her then, and even moreso now that she realized it hadn't been a panic-induced hallucination after all.

Whitey was either unaffected or drew energy from the surge, though, because he mowed down the line without a second thought. Piles of bread-brown robes with swiss-cheese patterned holes remained, devoid of bodies, and Melee looked profoundly disappointed as he sifted through them with a careless foot before passing them by. It was more than disconcerting how brief the encounter had been, and how convincing the illusion was. Were it not for the clothing left behind, Venka would have suspected they were holograms.

She looked back at Melee, who was wiping blood off his fingers with the wall, and he gestured with his head to continue deeper into the ship. Now that their movements were concealed thanks to Venka's handiwork, they slipped down a maze of corridors as K3M3 endeavored to tend to minor abrasions that had resulted from their previous scuffles. Melee had said, "Fuck off, I like the scars," but Whitey watched in morbid fascination as his own lacerations were expertly stitched back together, when he was standing still long enough for the medical droid to actually perform his work.

"The last of the security footage showed Bartlett holing up *here*," Venka proclaimed, running her finger along the number etched into the wall next to an electric door. This ship was massive...extravagant...expensive, and it didn't make sense because ISB's files on the syndicate had dismissed them as an impoverished nuisance. Eye-Eye and General Wolen must have known there was something else to it for the 417th squad to be assigned.

She made quick work of the electronic lock on the door, one of her own programs a keen rake for this vendor's flavor of encryption.

Once the door finally hissed open, the man they were looking for was cowering in the back corner, shivering, clinging to a much larger woman who glared at Venka like she was an enemy. Well...*was* she? "We're here to rescue Bartlett Tagge," she said to them, as gently as her combat-fueled voice would allow.

"Rescue!?" the woman said incredulously, rising from her protective embrace and stepping towards them. Bartlett curled into a fetal position without her, while Whitey and Melee tensed on their weapons. This person really did not have good self-preservation instincts. "Did his father send you? Tell him we're not interested in returning. Please leave us alone," she said, but there was an earnest quality to the words that the others would certainly miss even though Venka did not.

Venka tried ignoring her and addressing the scared man on the floor. “Mr. Tagge, I know this is all very frightening, but can you tell me why you were kidnapped?”

He looked up then, eyes of a color she couldn’t discern bleary with tears, and she didn’t notice anything else about him because the glare was so striking. “I *want* to be here,” he said. “Those Empire fucks think they own my family, but they’re *wrong*. Genn. *Genn*. Tell them,” he pleaded, tugging on her pant leg. Her look back at him was pity, maybe.

Venka felt her stomach drop as the ship lurched forward and began to rise into the sky. She hoped to hell Maarek was paying attention.

“I’m Genn Talisi,” she said softly, maintaining eye contact with Bartlett. “And I don’t know what lies you’ve been fed, but Black Sun are not our enemy.”

“I think I’ve heard enough of this bullshit,” Melee said flatly, aiming his closest weapon directly at her head.

Venka snorted and stepped in front of him. “Prisoners make for better intelligence assets than corpses,” she hissed, shoving a finger hard into Melee’s sternum. He didn’t have the presence of mind to look ashamed, but he *did* lower the gun.

It was ill-timed, though, because Commodore Keno herself emerged from a passageway with weapon drawn, and her loyalists now flanked them on all sides as they trickled in from the entrance to the room.

“Why don’t we all have a discussion?” Keno said dully, matched by the blankness of her face. Venka could never have guessed that she’d only hear seven words from the woman and that they’d be her last, but whoever else had stakes in this farce had rigged a protocol droid to stumble from behind Keno’s entourage and grip the collar of her robe to drag her toward Bartlett and Genn. She gasped, the first real emotion she’d shown even during the hours of security footage.

Whitey had the fastest reaction time, and fired at the droid without a second thought, but the resulting blast *had* to be a self-destruct or remote-operated thermal detonator, because its destruction was widespread and immediate.

It didn’t breach the hull, but Genn had managed to shield Bartlett at the cost of singed linen and skin on her shoulder and left thigh, and Melee had tackled both Venka and Whitey behind a comm panel to shield them.

Keno’s followers were frozen, many dead, and looked back and forth between each other like zombies.

“Time to go,” Melee decreed, pulling Venka to her feet as Whitey brushed himself off. She rushed to Genn’s side and lifted her up, and she screeched in pain as she put weight on her injured leg.

They were almost out of the atmosphere, now, because Venka could feel the switch to artificial gravity. A torpedo shattered against the ship’s impressive shields and shook them where they stood, causing the rest of the unfriendlies that had surrounded them to scatter. It had to be the Tie Reaper, she was sure of it; Maarek and Dash would have certainly detected the launch.

“Escape pods,” Venka demanded, shoving them forward into the main gangway, now very glad she’d memorized the ship blueprint and knew precisely where the closest one was located.

“Can we all fit in one?” Whitey asked, and Venka almost laughed because he’d draped the sobbing Bartlett over his shoulder in a fireman carry as he jogged alongside them. Genn, to her credit, could

keep up.

“This is a mistake!” Bartlett cried. “I have money. *So much* money. I can give you whatever you want. Please don’t turn me back over to the Empire!”

“Can you get me a PLX-2M portable missile launcher?” Whitey asked, and it was impossible to tell if he was serious but the bet would favor the affirmative.

“Anything!” he promised, head bouncing about on his captor’s shoulder.

“*Whitey...*” Melee chastised with just his name.

“I’m sure Dash can find one for you,” Venka reassured, connecting to the onboard computer of the escape pod and overriding the capacity limit.

“Will we all be able to breathe in there?” Genn asked, and it was the most intelligent question anyone had asked Venka since they’d landed.

“Not for long,” Venka said. “It’s designed for two, not five. But the Tie Reaper will only have to retrieve us within twenty minutes.”

Sirens blared as another precision strike breached some of the lower decks; Venka could assess the damage on her tablet. She quickly patched a secure communications channel and admonished Dash’s brash pilot. “Hey, Maarek! We are still here. Can you hold off obliterating this ship until we’re clear of the blast radius?”

A surprised voice returned, “Oh. Did you manage to re-establish the network? I didn’t know you were on this ship.”

“Well, now you do, moron!” Melee screamed into Venka’s receiver, and she rubbed her ear in irritation. “Quit wreaking havoc for one fucking minute.”

They piled into the escape pod and Venka engaged the launch sequence; she transmitted a coded Imperial beacon that Maarek would be able to recognize in his sleep, so the other pods that launched got picked off while they drifted further away from the Black Sun ship.

“You have made enemies here today,” a voice crackled over the wide-band distress broadcast channel, and while Keno may have had half her face blown off she was still clearly able to drag her broken body to a panel.

The explosion that resulted from Maarek’s perfectly-aimed missile launch was silent and beautiful, a shower of sparks replacing the sleek metal of the hull, and Venka was entranced by it despite the myriad deaths it promised.

Their retrieval by the Tie Reaper was a blur, and the only thing she really processed was Dash’s concerned hand on her temple, worry in his eyes. Somewhere, distant, Bartlett was screaming.

Once her brain settled, compassion took over. Bartlett Tagge was shaking, head in his hands, as the newly-arrived General Wolen looked on while conversing with Dash.

K3M3 was diligently healing a burn in front of her left ear. She gently pulled his arm away from her and looked up at him into those black, shiny beads that passed for eyes. They still might be more expressive than Maarek’s, though. She directed the droid, “Our guest...please scan him for any injuries. He seems okay but I’d rather be sure.”

The droid hesitated for only a moment before wandering toward Bartlett. He jumped at its first touch, but seemed to relax slightly afterward, though the general wariness he'd exhibited since they'd first encountered him hung heavily around his eyes. Genn, beside him, gripped his shoulder warmly.

Both of them left through the airlock with General Wolen a half hour later, after Dash had engaged their commanding officer in another intense conversation. Venka had only caught a few words here and there, but more telling was Wolen's face - it looked like relief, maybe even gratitude, that he had been their first call despite Bartlett Tagge's pleas and desperate promises of bribes to take him elsewhere in the galaxy, not to mention Colonel March's insistence that he take the lead.

Distracted by the subsequent outbrief led by Dash and the General before the latter's departure, she forgot about the original inquiry until hours later, when she was 'closing up shop'.

The multitool clicked back into place as she finished the last of the medical droid's routine maintenance; he'd need a few more extensive repairs when they reached the waypoint Wolen had designated before departing on their next mission. "Oh," she tapped his shoulder with the tool, a very satisfying clink echoing in the small cargo hold. "I meant to ask - was Bartlett otherwise uninjured?"

K3M3 tilted its head to the side, like a human would to express confusion, and replied, "Only his surface is biological."

She didn't think she'd heard it right. Surface? "...you mean his skin?"

"Affirmative. His skin was undamaged."

Her eyes stared up at the cool grey metal of the ceiling from the top bunk as she resumed counting shaaks leaping over a fenceline between imaginary farms. Several fitful bursts of short sleep spiked her adrenaline through broken dreams. The images shifted between Bartlett's haunted eyes and the bright, miraculous destruction of Scarif that had somehow left her unscathed enough to evacuate with other Imperial soldiers. It had been a long time since she'd thought about that, since it always left an odd taste in her mind, but now the memory was presenting itself unbidden along with a totally unrelated oddity. Why would her stubborn brain associate the two events?

Instead of dwelling, she softly padded down the rungs and back out onto the small bridge, to get some other work done. In one of the seats, Dash's eyes were closed with his hands folded neatly over the tablet on his chest, breathing slow and steady.

She stifled a giggle. So...he slept after all. The others would be disappointed, but he looked peaceful and Venka was glad at least one of them was.

Sitting quietly at a terminal, she began troubleshooting the problem that Maarek had been complaining about with the manual controls for some subsystem of thrusters that no human should really be manually controlling.

Still, her thoughts drifted. The field work for Imperial Intelligence was something else entirely from the familiar, comfortable recess of her consoles, even the ones before her, the insulated pockets of noninformation that gave her just enough to be effective but not to see the bigger picture. Out here, in close quarters with several deliriously potent killers, a pilot too talented to be responsible for a few grab-and-gos, and an ambassador handsome and charismatic enough to live up to his nickname, she saw and heard a little too much to pretend not to put a few pieces together.

The kidnapping story and the supposed intent of their orders were starting to unravel, and with them, Venka's previously-unshakable allegiance to the Empire.

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