

五: Dedicated Détente

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Summary

After the prison break and safely aboard the Gladiator, Cari contemplates her debt to Wolen, her unlikely position as a healer, and her physical, definitely-not-emotional connection to Captain Dash.

Notes

Author Credit: AnInformant

Chronology: After Point Nadir.

The light blue coat mingled with the stain of red such that it really couldn't be considered its original color anymore - it was more of a morbid copper, something Cari normally would have appreciated. Being covered in the blood of her enemies was traditionally the indicator of a day well-fought.

Being covered in the blood of her *friends* was...

She had only reluctantly used the word for Maarek in the first place, but he was an afterthought in the haze of violence that had consumed them all on the Devastator. She was gripped by a familiar anxiety, the same feeling she'd gotten around the pilot when they had first met. Just when she thought she had succeeded in keeping Wolen safe, Harkon's revenge had been flung toward them with so little time to react.

At least, she assumed it was him in death throes that had summoned the wherewithal to cast the damn grenade in the first place. Wolen's situational awareness had always been superior, which is

why he'd been hurt instead of her.

The hairpin had prevented him from bleeding out, and her attempt at surgery may have saved his leg. Without extensive physical therapy and possibly bionic implants, though, he'd probably walk with a limp - too much of the muscle tissue had died and she wasn't talented enough to regenerate it. It was moments like that when she wished she was a *real* physician, one who had gone to medical school instead of becoming an Eye-Eye enforcer.

She realized, once Wolen had been sedated and was resting comfortably on the only hospital bed in the medbay, that it was mostly his blood on her uniform, since she had carried him to the Defender upon their escape. It was odd that she could tell Maarek's blood apart - it seemed to glow, and she wanted to burn it out.

Wincing, she extracted the pieces of glass and fiber from her shoulder carefully with tweezers, disinfecting them in between, considering that she *had* been hurt - the magnitude of the injury just paled in comparison.

"How is he?"

She jumped, shamefully, and dropped the implement. It clattered to the ground, metal tinkling to rest, and she cursed.

"Oh...sorry." Dash smiled charmingly and retrieved it for her. "Can I help?"

"No!" And then, softer, "No. Wolen needs a blood transfusion, and there was never a stock on this ship to begin with."

He looked at her like that's not what he'd meant, but went along with her subject change anyway. "That's the voice you use when you have a solution, but you don't particularly like it."

"I would gladly give my own. Though, as you've probably noticed, I am of a different species."

"It may have crossed my mind. What about me?"

She sighed. "There are two matches on your crew manifest...Venka,..."

His face fell. "I will have to update the manifest."

"...and Maarek."

He rolled his eyes. "Didn't he already lose a lot of blood, thanks to you?"

She still didn't know how she felt about that. The discomfort may have been guilt, but whether it was for hurting the pilot or letting down Lokanth she couldn't say. Who cared about the Jedi, anyway? He didn't even know what she'd done! And Dash certainly didn't need to hear about the fucking *voices in her head* telling her to kill people; his expression was serious when he'd made the statement though, as much as she hoped he was trying to be glib. "Yes," she said bitterly, "but it may not be wise to put me in a position to bleed him dry." That was as self-aware as she was willing to explore, for now.

"I will order Whitey to supervise. He'd be likely to just chop off one of Maarek's limbs and hang it over a drip pan. At least your approach is...presumably...medically-sensible."

"Maarek will probably ask for *you*."

“Then he’s a fool. I wasn’t able to stop you, Cari. Whitey was.”

She didn’t reply, irritated that he was right.

Dash continued, “Whether any of us like it or not, Maarek is still a part of this crew, which means that he’s still my responsibility. You didn’t listen, it was like you couldn’t even *hear* us. Are you going to tell me what’s going on with you? You said you got the same feeling about this ship, on our approach - do I still need to be worried?”

“Probably,” she said flippantly, regretting her tone instantly.

He frowned. “Then I’m glad I’ve confined us to our ships. We don’t seem to be in any immediate danger, except, *apparently*, from each other. JR suggested we get some rest, so once you’re...”

“I don’t need *rest*, I need you to explain why you’re so fucking forgiving about Maarek turning on us when you can’t even stand anyone to *mention* how Venka...”

“She ABANDONED us!” he shouted, and she wasn’t sure if she’d ever seen him legitimately angry. He had said ‘us’, but she had heard ‘me’. “Maarek did not.”

“He couldn’t even if he had wanted to, seeing as how he couldn’t *walk*.”

His voice hardened. “Cari, I’ll be direct if you’re going to be difficult. Report to me in the conference room when you’re done here.”

“I wo...”

“*Immediately* after you’re done here.” He paused, clearly even more frustrated. “You know what? Get over to the Century Hawk and stitch up Maarek, first. I want to know how he and Whitey are faring too, and I don’t trust Maarek’s verbal account. If he’s healthy enough, get his consent and fill a few blood bags for Wolen.”

Maarek agreeing to it was easier, of course, but any reluctance would not stop her from taking it anyway. Dash didn’t have to know that, either. “Fine.”

“Excuse me?”

She grit her teeth. “Yes, sir.”

She was still wearing the bloodstained uniform when she returned to Dash, even more wound-up than she’d been before the traipse to the other ship. She could still see the beady eyes of droids aboard the Gladiator boring into her - Dash had insisted that they not engage the locals, yet.

Maarek was a presumptuous little shit - he’d given freely for the transfusion, but was adamant that he was doing it solely for Wolen. Cari had neither insinuated nor expected that it be for *her*, so the protest was more than a little insulting. In addition, Maarek had either been playing dumb for the entire conversation or genuinely believed that he hadn’t betrayed them - the kind of mental gymnastics that notion demanded exhausted her just thinking about it.

Still...he had heard the Voice too, and while she couldn’t convince him that he was experiencing something spectacular, they had found enough common ground to at least come to an unsteady truce, which was hopefully enough to placate the captain.

“Damage report,” Dash demanded when Cari stepped in the room, and she straightened her

posture.

“The Defender took more hits from the TIEs than the Century Hawk, but the hull is mostly intact and repairs are expected to be minor.”

“I am aware of our ships’ conditions. I was referring to personnel damage.”

She had known that, but was still feeling defensive from earlier. “Of course, Captain. Whitey was unconscious when I arrived, likely passed out from the strain of the pilot’s completely unnecessary theatrics upon landing. The pilot himself had received a stim kit from the aforementioned Whitey, and was overconfident in his ability to recover without my intervention. I physically restrained him and finished my work.” She paused when Dash didn’t react, though ice and caramel-colored whiskey swirled in his hand with a more fervent angular momentum. “Amari took a laser blast to her nonbiological arm, which she insisted she could repair herself. Her sister was distraught but miraculously uninjured. The Lasat refused to complain but was clearly exhausted.”

“And you?” he asked softly, downing the drink in one go.

She stared at him blankly, wondering if he had simply called out the omission or was genuinely concerned. “I experienced minor bruising on my jaw from my encounter with the purgetrooper. Burns on the anterior sides of my hands from the forcefield. I also extracted some shallow shrapnel from my right shoulder, as you saw....” ... “...and I’m really hungry.”

He guffawed, definitely inhaling a bit of the whiskey, and she fought a smile. It was a risk...but if he relented? She approached him slowly. “I’m not finished,” she continued. “Our captain suffered a major contusion to his left occipital bone,” she was close enough to graze it with her thumb, “...though it appears unfractured.”

“My bones are stubborn,” he said.

“Unclear is his emotional state,” she said, barely a whisper now, and his hand had brushed along the cross-buttons of the uniform collar, undoing one, and then another. “What damage was caused by the abject betrayal of someone he loves?” If she wasn’t going to pull the pin on this grenade now, then when?

“A strong accusation,” Dash replied, and his word choice told her more than his inflection.

“Does he deny it?”

“I could have loved her,” Dash said, standing confidently despite the influx of alcohol. She waited for more, but it didn’t come.

What did come was him finally relieving her of her uniform top and her undergarment, careful, dexterous fingers working over the remainder of the buttons and clasps. She stood, frozen, knowing what it looked like - the pale makeup shade she’d chosen blending into blue below her clavicle; human above and alien to him below.

She barely noticed him pulling her along with him toward the bathroom suite and testing the shower temperature with his hand, before pushing her under the stream of water, steam billowing around her. She grabbed the knob and twisted it as cold as it could get instead.

“You’re a monster,” he said, stepping in beside her anyway once he’d disrobed, and she generously adjusted the temperature to something that would feel lukewarm to him.

“I run hot,” she said against his ear. She didn’t elaborate that he wouldn’t last ten minutes on a

Chiss vessel - human ships were always sweltering.

Cari pulled the pins out of her hair and set them on the ledge, careful to segregate them appropriately, and he ran his fingers through her braid to unweave it. She watched the beige pigment wash down her chest and circle the drain.

“Your eyes...” he said, and she understood because this was always the worst part. The reaction with water dissolved the white, but it hurt more than the original application of the droplets to change the sclera. She was usually good at hiding her pain...but it became more difficult around Dash, especially when she turned her face directly into the tiny, turbulent streams of water.

The physical pain was one thing, but the residuals also made the crying easier to process...not when he was clutching her shoulders, though, leaning over so that his lips were on her neck and his hands were sponging the makeup and dried blood from her shoulder. *That* elicited an unsavory sob from her throat, one he smothered with his mouth, and her hair was wet along with everything else as she devoured him desperately, wrapping limbs around his body until she could no longer stand of her own accord. He lifted her as easily as he always did, pressing her back against the warm, slick white tile, lips still affixed to hers even though his hands wandered.

It was desperate, fervent, unhindered as she submitted completely, moaning when one of those extraordinary hands found its way between her legs and worked its magic until she was trembling beneath him, screams muffled by lips and then fingers.

A washcloth wiped the remnants of the disguise from her face, once he had cut the water, but she hadn't recentered and the tears were still spilling from her now-red eyes.

He extended an index finger toward her left and pinched the contact with his thumb. She pretended that the mirrored moisture on his face was only from the shower. She didn't blink when he repeated the motion on the other side, noting that he had laid them thoughtfully in the soap dish. She'd have had to clean them later anyway, but the bar itself had ended up near the drain.

He hadn't gone further with his own body than his tongue down her throat in the shower, but now that he was exploring her curves with a towel she was acutely aware of how strongly he was reacting, hot and heavy against her thigh, and her dissipating distress was gradually replaced with the identical, consuming lust that had gripped her in the same conference room months prior, when her supposed betrayal of the Empire was a simple mistake and she'd only failed Wolen in spirit instead of physically.

“I don't want to see this again, unless it's mission-critical,” he demanded, tossing the stained washcloth onto the floor. She opened her mouth to protest but he covered it with his hand. “You are too stunning to conceal, and I'm too selfish to allow it,” he spoke as close to her face as he could get, blue eyes severe in the artificial light as water from sapphireblack and blonde hair dripped at their feet.

He pulled his hand back, still cupped and hovering over her face, and she took a deep, steadying breath. “Yes, sir.”

It was just enough time to really avoid talking about anything of substance, being summarily distracted as they often were. Cari wondered if she had prevented him from seeing things clearly, when Venka had plotted against them and Maarek had - well, what had Maarek done, really? If he had truly been in bed with the purveyor of the ISD as Venka had been with Harkon, would Whitey's persuasiveness (as surprising as that was to everyone involved) have gotten Maarek arrested along with the rest of them?

She had been in a very enviable position when she had still subscribed to the cultural ideal of her people, Chiss superiority behind closed doors and Imperial compliance amid open ones, but her identity had shifted with the abandonment of her military post and subsequent recruitment by the Coruscant embassy...and Wolen's wing of Imperial Intelligence.

A pang of guilt shuttled through the vein in her neck and she tried to dismiss it, but she had to check on him. He was due in for painkiller and another sedative, if he'd woken up. She hoped he hadn't - that kind of injury would take a long time to heal without more technological intervention and would be excruciating in the interim. It was possible this strange ship would have a better answer, but none of them had ventured out among the stoic droids except for her, and she had been heavily armed. And made sure Maarek wouldn't wake up himself for half a day, at least.

A hand shot out to grip her wrist as she made to stand, and she looked back at Dash because she was an idiot, at his perfect jaw and perfect nose and perfect hair and eyes, only minutely satisfied by the bruise Harkon had wrought on his perfect cheekbones. But *that* somehow fit too, an imperfection that he wore like a badge of honor. He was defiant even in defeat, he reached out for her even though it was her fault they were here.

She whispered something under her breath in Cheunh; he stopped her with a yank, pulling her forward back onto the bed.

"I missed it last time you said it," he breathed, twisting his leg around her ankle and positioning himself on top of her. She hadn't had time to re-clothe, and he was about as modest as her even when given the opportunity to dress himself, so she was prepared for another diversion. "What are you saying?"

"You quoted Mitth'iminde'nuruodo before, so I assumed you would..."

He looked away sheepishly, then descended onto her skin, trailing his lips down her neck and his hand down her side, muffling his admission that, "I memorized it but I had no idea what I was saying."

"It's..." she hesitated, biting her tongue, and tried to push him away. He acquiesced and leaned back, patiently. "It's better a 'show', not a 'tell'."

"Show me, then."

She looked to the side, then back at him, pushing him more insistently with flat hands to his chest, but what harm could it do? "Fine." She flipped him with all her strength and he had the decency not to yelp, though he did look surprised - she didn't take advantage of her superior strength that often in bed. "We don't..." How the fuck do you say such a thing to someone who was raised in a completely different world? "We don't get all *mouthy* with affection like humans do," she explained, and reconsidered that she too may have used the wrong word despite how carefully she copied their aristocratic accent.

His smug chuckle confirmed it. "I've been accused of that before, but it is usually a compliment."

Well then, *he* was using the word incorrectly too, though he certainly wasn't wrong in his assessment of the prowess with his mouth, in any sense. "Are you going to cooperate, or...?"

"Yes, Cari."

"Okay, then." She leaned forward, hovering over him, and closed her eyes before brushing their noses together.

He laughed through his nostrils and she pulled back, glaring at him. He pushed her hair over her shoulder from where the ends had been dusting his neck, and smiled up at her warmly. “It makes me feel like I need to sneeze,” he said honestly, and she didn’t know what to do with that information.

“Maybe I’m doing it wrong. I would see people do it who were...together, you know, but I haven’t attempted a legitimate implementation until now.”

He was hiding even more glee now, and she could feel her expression sour even though she wanted to share his amusement. “Are you saying,” he said, pressing his fingers into her thigh with one hand and into her neck with the other, “...”

His silence was annoying, though his shoulders were still shaking. “What are you...”

“Are you saying that was your first kiss?” he finally got out, and his chest was rumbling with laughter now, despite the fact they were already naked, despite the fact that they’d been *fucking for months*, and she was about to threaten him when he smiled so brightly she couldn’t imagine anyone erasing such a thing from the universe, if she had anything to say about it.

Her silence had always been more powerful, anyway, but it was so hard to stay quiet. “I need to go,” she insisted.

He gripped her hair and pressed closer. “General Wolen needs your administration, yes?” She nodded. “Go to him, {but come back quickly}.”

It wasn’t thirty seconds upon her return that he did again what she had attempted, a caress of soft cartilage from face to the tips of their noses, and surely that was how it was meant to feel, because her heart ignited and she was certain she had turned a permanent shade of violet.

“Do you think she really kissed him?” Nee’na asked, well into her third plate of Dash’s (now-famous) carbonara; he’d made enough to feed an entire platoon when he’d been buttering up the smuggling sisters, and the leftovers were better still. Cari had easily put away a few thousand calories herself, but didn’t comment.

Dash chuckled, and he *did* seem less broken-up about any mentions of Venka, now. “Maarek got that thousand-yard stare and mumbled that he didn’t want to discuss it, and Whitey said he doesn’t kiss and tell.”

“He literally told us already,” Cari griped.

“He said he doesn’t ‘anymore’.”

“I can’t say I blame Venka,” Cari continued. “Sometimes I want to do it myself to shut him up.”

“I’ll remind you that you have a history of silencing him by punching his lights out,” Dash smiled, collecting dishes.

“Those things might not be too different for her,” Amari smirked from the corner, where she was cleaning her fingernails with a switchblade.

Cari couldn’t find it in herself to be upset by the assertion. “Love and battle are both intimate acts, done in heat and sweat with the sound of cries echoing in your ears, and really - who is to say which is more dangerous?”

Nee'na cried, "OH!" and the Lasat startled awake, nearly falling out of the chair that was desperately too small for him. He remembered he had food and started shoveling it into his mouth again.

Dash was still smiling, either at the situation or at her, as he stood and smoothed his uniform. "Enjoy the rest of your...breakfast. Cari, with me please?"

She nodded and followed, not forgetting to flip off Amari when she whistled after them.

He was untroubled, and had clearly picked up her quoted reference as they walked side-by-side down the hall toward the exit ramp. "I can see how Valeria would inspire you. Very cultured." Was that supposed to be a compliment? "Still, I'd rather you didn't do either."

She didn't follow. "Either...?"

"Punch him or kiss him." Oh...Whitey was out in the hangar making 'friends' with the droids and they couldn't leave him alone for too long, hence their hasty exit from the dining area, but what did that have to do with anything?

"I already promised I would do my best not to assault anyone." She stopped and he did too, after another step, turning back to her, fingers threaded behind his back. She blinked. And not that she would, since she had explained already that anything physical with Whitey was out of the question for a whole host of reasons, but, "Why can't I kiss him?"

"Because I'd rather have you to myself."

"Oh." That was an unexpected request, especially given the nature of quite a few of her previous intelligence missions. Was Dash's affection genuine, or was Cari a desire of convenience? He was no stranger to using his good looks and charm to get what he wanted, as an Ambassador or a military asset, so could she be a pawn in his network of manipulations to control his crew, to control *her*, specifically?

If she couldn't tell the difference, did it matter if there was one?

"Please don't punch me though, Cari."

Her eyes widened. "I wouldn't..."

"I know, I know! I'm just trying to lighten the mood. You had that look, like a bantha in a spotlight."

"I hope your esteem for my aesthetic is better than *that*..."

He lifted a hand to her ear, pushing some escaped strands behind it, and she remained stiff.

"You're like nobody else I've ever seen," he said gently. "When I opened my eyes on Lothal, I saw you, saving my life. I wish you had shown me *this* earlier, under a different pretext," he continued, dragging the backs of his fingers along her bare blue shoulder. "I don't know what's waiting for us out there, but I need you."

"I can't replace..."

"You are *not* a replacement," he protested angrily. "You can't replace a person who was never there for me...not like you are." If he meant physically, at least that much was true. He read her mind, "...and I don't just mean *that*."

He was good with words, and she was speechless.

“Cari, say something. Am I making a fool of myself?”

She didn't want to say anything. Anything she said would be the wrong thing. *She* was the wrong thing. He looked earnest, but his talent was deception. “Do you believe me?” she said finally, letting out a breath she didn't realize had been stuck in her lungs.

“About Maarek? About the Jedi? If my actions up to this point have been unclear on that account, then let me set the record straight now.” He leaned his face closer, and she was entranced in a way she had promised never to be again. “I am a skeptic by nature, but there is *something* about your conviction that's...”

Convenient? Distressing? *Alarming?*

“...comforting. I am interested in Wolen's position, but I am committed to yours.” He hovered his lips over hers, and she wanted to consume him starting with his flawless face. “Are you with me?”

Reckless, unprecedented, barely audible...”Yes.”

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