

Defrost

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Defrost

by [AnInformant](#)

Summary

Cari and Whitey are annoyed with having to schlep a carbonite man from the ancient Defender. Cari's real motives for her subsequent choices are hard to pin down, and Dash nearly has an aneurysm.

“Ugh, this is heavy!” Whitey lamented, dragging his share of the carbonite-encrusted prisoner along the floor, pouting with an exaggerated lower lip toward Sosh’acari as she frowned in return.

“No complaining,” she replied, less quick with her wit than normal given recent events.

The task of transporting a stiff from the clandestine bucket of bolts Maarek had commandeered wasn’t at the top of Sosh’acari’s list after the nightmare that had been the last three days on Lothal. First, it was the barely-passable acting work of her companions that nearly had them made out of the gate on the minivan of a speeder Bruno had transported them on to show his new ‘rebel friends’ the base mechanics. Then, Maarek’s bizarre zombie walk toward *nothing* in the middle of the desert had forced her to waste a perfectly good sedative. And *then*...

Their first day on Lothal was uneventful drudgery under the cold rays of its singular sun. The good Captain may as well have been speaking a language she didn't know for all the attention she paid to his feigned interest. They had some fun at the bar, but that was nothing new. The real gift the following day had been Whitey's one-shouldered delivery of a shrieking Twilek, but they were both too drunk to be making sexually-charged decisions and the excitement fizzled until Whitey had the brilliant idea to start a fight as a distraction that Captain Madell had neither asked for nor needed, probably. Still, it's not as though Sosh'acari would pass up an opportunity to break Whitey's nose and/or ribs...again. She was perfectly capable of patching him up later, after all.

The last thing they needed after that was an assassin droid spinning up pandemonium in the interim, sent to eliminate Bruno, according to Madell's hotwash. Sosh'acari thought again on who they had discovered later was rebel leader Hera Syndulla - she and Whitey should have killed her instead of failing to seduce her in the bar.

And *then*...during a routine inspection, as Sosh'acari was mulling over her preference to be watching paint dry, she observed their pilot's sudden and unprompted behavior in response to an unseen beacon in the desert. She had felt such apprehension it was difficult to understand what had compelled the man to move *toward* it. Still, neither he nor she could deny the crawling under their skin that had spurred such a reaction. She would have asked, maybe even empathized, had he been conscious. The fact that she'd been responsible for his unplanned nap was nearly an afterthought.

And *then*...a welcome distraction. Gunfire, blood, a stim kit, the exhilarating jolt of the lightwhip in her outstretched hand as the scintillating, serpentine white blade burned elegantly through the flesh of her enemies...this should have been what it meant to feel at peace. Instead, Captain Madell was bleeding out in her arms as she tried to pilot their stolen speeder around blasterfire and even more well-perched snipers.

All Sosh'acari could think rationally about was how despondent Venka would be if she let this asshole die. Daro Madell's or Maarek's ire she could stand, but Venka's was a special flavor of pursed-lipped rage that could annoy even the highest order of Imperial management, and Sosh'acari simply didn't have the patience.

"Madell," she begged, embarrassingly, slipping her fingers inside the wound in his abdomen to pinch a profusely-bleeding vein. "I'm going to cauterize this, and then you're going to wake the fuck up and help me."

He did. It was a strange feeling, to recognize how accidentally her own skill in medicine had developed on similar battlefields. It would be disingenuous not to also recognize her indebtedness to the handsome Captain who really belonged smiling in an advert instead of commanding an Imperial spy ship. Her freedom, even the new weapon that injected purpose through her veins, was unfortunately thanks to him.

It was worse when he spoke.

"Hacarita!" he heaved, pushing up onto his knees with infuriating grace. His blue eyes pierced through her own, though she was certain that he'd be able to see them for the true vermilion red that hid behind the contacts and colored eyedroplets. "Thank you." A smile, with perfectly white teeth, before he sprang into action with surprising energy, taking a few shots with a weapon he'd pilfered from the cache on this horrible vehicle, from a compartment she hadn't even thought to check.

Sosh'acari had delivered the package directly into Venka's arms, though their technician had awkwardly patted him on an injured shoulder instead of embracing him directly. The disappointment and regret on both their faces could fuel her private Schadenfreude fantasies for years.

"Let's wake him up."

A silence, rivaling the three weeks of Demise, fell between them. Neither spoke until the next inquiry.

"Why?"

Carbonite chipped as the slab clanked against the composite. A finger inched toward the access panel.

The fire that had gripped Maarek burned at the edges of Sosh'acari's eyelids, but it felt good this

time. The ‘why’ felt obvious for a moment. An immensely valuable prisoner, she had overheard. The timing of his preservation was too much of a coincidence for him to be anything but one of the sorcerers that had played judge, jury, and executioner for the Galactic Republic.

“Come on,” Whitey whined, “he has to be important, right? He must be rich.”

Greed was so predictable and simple - it made him beautiful. “You saw the same video recall as me. He’s been in there for decades.”

“Long enough for his investments to *really* marinate, wouldn’t you say?”

He was suggesting that they help this man escape. Hadn’t they both suggested it at this point? Warming him up and grilling him wasn’t the same as actively assisting him in bailing. “It’s treason.”

It wasn’t. It could be a contingency plan, another in the complicated network Whitey had woven in his misplaced but sincere effort to protect Captain Madell and his crew. And himself. Probably mostly himself.

“I don’t think so, Cari,” he said, out loud, as if it were something savory enough to say out loud.

“Quit calling me that.”

“You know you love it.”

Cari did not, in fact, love it. The realization that her self-referential name had slipped into Whitey’s endearment wasn’t something she wanted to focus on at the moment.

Screeching alarms echoed throughout the corridor as a fog enveloped them; figurative in the sense of the murky colloidal particle-thoughts diffusing into her mind, and literal in the very real sublimation of carbonite thanks to Whitey’s talented fingers. He was grinning, illuminated by the hazy emergency lights of the ship to which they’d been sent for this retrieval, and Cari both wanted to kiss him and punch him for his precipitousness.

Luckily, he made the choice for her. “Hit me,” he said with a sultry lilt, grin morphing into the smirk she hated herself for enjoying.

“Fucking what?”

“You and I both know I can’t keep my mouth shut about shit like this! You gotta think of a good explanation or something.”

“I’m beginning to think your kink is getting clocked in the face.”

“I won’t deny it if it’s your pretty fist doing the clocking.”

She leaned forward, too close for friendly familiarity, and stroked along his jaw over the smoking once-corpse. He stared back dreamily and winked.

The burn in her muscles as the swing connected was so satisfying she almost forgot she was meant to incapacitate and not maim - he’d still have a hell of a black eye and possibly a broken occipital bone once he awoke, if either of them were alive long enough for their injuries to begin to heal. She had the vague notion about whether or not one could conduct forensics on punches; as she held her fingers up to the bronze flesh of the prisoner’s fist as it materialized with the rest of him, she figured they were close enough in size that it wasn’t a risk.

She pressed her lips to Whitey's ghost-white forehead and returned to the semirevived corpse that was breathing haggardly as he fought for consciousness. Her diagnostic tools (including the fingers attached to the pulse point on his neck), along with the quick injection of a potent upper, showed rapidly-improving vitals, and her adrenaline surged as the intangible pull from his mind sank deeper into her own. They were making eye contact before his even opened. It had been a very, very long time since she'd felt anything like it.

"Hello," he said, deep and commanding, but far too polite.

She disengaged all physical contact but the connection felt more entrenched than ever. "Welcome back to the land of the living," she said. "You've been out for almost a quarter-century. Care to thank me?"

"Thank you," he said, to her surprise. "Where am I? Why are you helping me?"

"You're aboard your own ship, presumably, though we're docked with an Imperial cruiser deep in Empire space. And I wouldn't say I'm helping *you*, so much."

"Soft spot for your companions, then?"

Maybe a little. "What do you care? The outcome is the same for you." The mental spines dug in more deeply, almost painfully. "If you must know, all of them have expressed...misgivings about some of our mission spaces and I see the merit in 'Whitey's Rainy Day Plan' as a suitable backup." Using his absurd name for it made her cringe inwardly. "An...ally like you could prove valuable to that end. If you're not amenable, I could always put you back down." She paused and glared at him, since he had remained silent as he stretched his neck slowly, side to side, and pushed himself upright on the floor. His mind smirked though his face preserved its careful smile.

She huffed and frowned. "Also, don't do that shit to me. It makes me nauseous and I don't want to waste an antiemetic."

That was a lie; unlike her reaction to Maarek's episode on Lothal, the feeling wasn't unpleasant at all anymore. Quite the opposite, in fact - it was a rush, the same sense of power she got when she had directed Chiss exploration vessels into stable pockets of space surrounded by atom-tearing anomalies.

She had been ten when the Jedi had fallen. The homeworld had rejoiced, but Cari had felt odd about it then, and now, especially when a dead man was now pressing to his feet before her. Her 'career' with the Chiss military fleet only lasted another two years afterward before her abilities began to fade.

She hooked a hand around the man's elbow and helped him up easily; he wasn't slight by any means, but he wasn't physically intimidating either. Gray mottled his dark beard over warm brown skin, and he was dressed plainly. He looked like a nice old man if she didn't already know better.

By this point he had paused longer than she'd expected, either still fatigued or considering his next words. "I'm surprised you can sense it," he said eventually, instead of lying.

"So am I," she admitted, acting as a crutch as they made their way down the corridor. "Got any tips? Your manipulative nudges would really come in handy when I need Whitey to shut the fuck up." She gestured with her chin at the unconscious albino on the floor. "Probably healthier, too, than the steady stream of concussions I've been giving him otherwise."

He chuckled, genuine, and she rather liked the sound. "The basics don't take long. Mastery is years

of practice, in a manner of speaking,” he replied, and then, “What do I call you?”

“Cari is fine.” It was? It pissed her off when Whitey used it.

“That’s pretty short for a Chiss name.”

She bristled. “You pry that out of my brain too?”

“I can see the halo of a red sclera under your contact when you glare. Like you’re doing now.”

“Chiss aren’t the only species with red eyes.”

“Lucky guess, I’m assuming, since you didn’t correct me. It behooves me, in my position, to know the allies of the Sith rather well.”

She ignored *that* conversational direction altogether. “I take it you’ll return the courtesy? Not that I’m opposed to calling you ‘Defrosted Asshole’, though it’s kind of a mouthful.”

He looked at her thoughtfully as he limped along. “You may call me Lokanth.”

“That name-drop going to buy me anything down the road?”

“In some circles. They may insist you’re invoking a ghost, though.”

“Even if I say *Jedi Master* Lokanth?” she queried innocently, and just as he opened his surprised mouth to reply, a rustle of static from the comm speaker on her hip startled them both.

[*Hacarita, come in - Whitey is not responding. Do you copy?*]

“Shit,” she grumbled. “We have less time than I thought.”

“Friend of yours?”

“Our illustrious leader.” She mashed the button for the airlock that connected this ship with the Century Hawk and shoved him through as the pressure differential hissed around them. “Hope you can fly this thing. The prelaunch sequence takes five minutes or so, which we definitely don’t have, so when they get here I’m probably going to have to try to kill you.”

He arched an eyebrow and punched her shoulder good-naturedly with a fist, which she found annoying. “Please don’t try too hard.” With less urgency than Cari found appropriate, he ambled around to several control panels on the bridge, engaging various systems.

She thought of something. “I’m going to collect all our shit and get it off the ship.”

He thumbed his beard, trying to divide his concentration between successfully ‘stealing’ the ship and listening to her. “Fine by me. Though if your intent is to conceal your treachery, that looks a little suspicious, don’t you think?”

She extracted one of their technician’s favorite gadgets from a compartment by her chair, though Cari had no clue what it did, and tossed it into the duffel she’d already relieved once of a stack of Whitey’s guns. “Definitely. If that’s the nail in my coffin, so be it. Execution is in many ways preferable to Venka’s endless complaining if she loses this crap.”

He laughed fully then, graveled and joyous, and she fought a grin of her own. When he spoke again, the edge of caution he’d spoken with up to this point had softened. “...I have every intention of returning your ship to you, Cari.”

It was Maarek's ship, really, but that wasn't the point. He was going to be just as torqued as Venka and Madell. "That's very generous, and prudent. This ship will attract a lot of attention in this quadrant, and not just from the Empire, that you probably don't want." She looked back down at the walkie, which had just crackled again, though no voice came through this time. After delivering another bag of weapons and belongings to the corridor of the ancient corvette, she decided that enough time had passed to respond.

She took a deep breath, and then started panting, willing faux panic into her long-delayed reply over the group comms. "...He...he's gone!" she strained.

Disbelief returned through the ether from two voices simultaneously.

[*He what!?*]

[*Who? The man in carbonite? That's impossible.*]

[*How did he fucking wake up?*]

"Just hurry!" she shouted back, and then released the talk trigger and pointed at Lokanth. "If you botch this, I will turn on you so fast your head will spin."

The smirk had returned, but for real this time. "And what would you tell your overseers?"

"That you manipulated us. It's true enough, the extent of which isn't important."

"And would they believe you?"

About his sorcerers' magic? Wolen might. Semi-lying to him wasn't particularly palatable either, though. Cari had already turned away from him without answering and was sprinting back to where Whitey lay, still mercifully unconscious.

She grabbed the common blaster from his hip and checked it for his creative...modifications...before decreasing the firepower to a mild stun and turning it on herself, angling her body so that the weapon would fall into the shell of carbonite and hopefully be ignored in the rest of the mayhem. The lapse in consciousness should only last a minute or two, and wouldn't require burning any of her medical supplies once Madell found them.

It was Venka's concerned face that greeted her when her eyes finally peeled open, though. "Oh my god, are you okay?" Her soft voice sounded nurturing and angry at the same time. It kind of reminded Cari of her mother...she nearly gagged and quickly swore not to make the comparison ever again.

She turned her head on the ground toward Whitey, whose mouth was pooling saliva on the floor now as Madell poked the toe of his expensive shoe less-than-gently into his ribs a couple times. "What happened here?" he directed at Cari, now, and he sounded *menacing*. She would be impressed if not for the delicate political situation she was about to bullshit her way through.

"How did someone who just woke up from a decades-long coma manage to knock out *Whitey*?" Venka said under her breath, and Madell tilted his head towards Cari, a heavily-loaded question mark needling through his eyebrows.

Cari swallowed. "I..." The roar of an engine interrupted, reverberating through the tasteful red sconces on the corvette. Excellent timing! Maarek may have recognized it immediately, but it didn't take Venka long either.

“That’s the Century Hawk,” she gasped, palming her blaster and looking to Dash for direction. Cari observed then that Venka was flanked by two of Serathiss’ Stormtroopers and a cadre of droids.

“Move it!” Captain Madell commanded, breaking into a sprint while gesturing with his hand for the lot of them to join him. The HK droids sputtered around them as they made haste toward the ship.

“Whitey...” Cari started, but Madell responded as if from a script Cari herself had written.

“Leave him! We have to stop the prisoner.”

Cari leapt to her feet and followed, matching their breakneck pace with ease and unholstering her Kyuzo petars, starting the charge sequence on the red electric blades and chanting, *Take off...take off...* in her head as they approached the closed airlock. She considered briefly wielding the lightwhip, but it felt...wrong, somehow.

Madell hit the button, each time with more force, and cursed as the door remained stationary.

Venka leapt into action, connecting one of her tablets to the console next to the nonfunctional button and manually forcing the override with consummate skill.

Lokanth was still at the helm and looked up calmly. Captain Madell took a pointless shot that missed, dodged or diverted somehow...Cari was not going to wait for the man to start talking, so she took the initiative.

She charged with a cry and the first slash connected very enjoyably...with the fabric of his blue cotton tunic. If his clothing had been sentient with nerve endings, it’d be hurting a lot. Cari hadn’t even noticed him sidestep. She took aim again and the second blow sunk into his deltoid, narrowly missing his neck as he twisted his body inhumanly.

"Set for stun!" Captain Madell shouted, possibly directed at her and her lethal attempts.

[STUN SETTING NOT FOUND], the droids replied mechanically.

Ah. Perhaps not.

Cari flipped her own switches at the outright order; but she really had a shot here. Actually killing him wouldn’t be so bad - he couldn’t implicate her then. Whitey would be disappointed, and it was unlikely they would be presented with an opportunity of commensurate magnitude ever again, but it’d still be a good story once she was too old to care about the consequences of telling such a story.

The third strike *should have* plunged into his heart. Instead, the air filled with magic and the blade simply *stopped*.

Laserfire from her maybe-friends and the other soldiers was deflected as if the man was manipulating a light-bending field through sheer force of will. Objects flew through the air towards them, smacking into knees and shoulders and heads, toppling the soldiers and barreling encompassing confusion through his targets’ expressions, Madell’s most of all.

Cari pushed forward toward the Jedi with all her strength; the magic field was impenetrable. To feel the physicality of it was more exhilarating than the earlier probe into her mind. It was raw, visceral, like an invisible hand wrapped around the sizzling blade of her petars poised dangerously over his neck and other vitals. She could almost smell the searing flesh as the latest attack deflected into the ground and she was flipped onto her back like she was as light as Venka, stuck

beneath him as she watched the rest unfold helplessly.

The other woman and Dash looked at each other in surprise as Lokanth's outstretched hand that wasn't restraining Cari's weapons seemed to overreach its range, sending them flying back into the Defender with their counterparts. She called out to them, but no sound emanated from her throat.

The stick at the helm shifted on its own, and a screech of tearing metal echoed throughout as the Century Hawk tore through the connection. The airlock closed again with a rumbling slam. The ship launched without further fanfare.

Silence greeted them as Cari dropped her weapons, breathing heavily. She wanted to rub her eyes but also didn't want to mess up her makeup. *It doesn't matter*, her brain said. *He already knows what you are.*

He rolled off of her with a sigh of his own. "You were really going to do it."

"I told you I was. Can't you people tell when someone is being truthful?"

"Usually."

She blinked. "I'm challenging for you." It wasn't a question.

"You're good at putting up a Wall - you're suggestible, but I can't interpret your motives or intentions."

"Why would you admit that?"

"I think it's talent that could be developed."

She snorted. "Pass. I was 'developed' plenty as a child for the Chiss military and I left that shitshow the second my abilities started to fade."

"Force sensitivity doesn't *fade*." He paused, looking pensive, and then...if she had to guess at emotions, which was really not her specialty, she'd have pegged him for *guilty*. The stars whirled by in the sapphire glass beyond his face, and the look passed so quickly into detachment she thought it might have been imagined.

Her own emotions always had to be controlled. Dulled with alcohol. Drowned in gunfire. Deferred with every bounty payout. Confined. Her combat rage was fueled by cold bloodlust, not emotion. Deny your feelings lest others exploit them. He could see it, now more clearly, even though she'd never made any attempt to hide it.

A Jedi mindset, the former prisoner said, and it took her a full ten seconds to realize that he hadn't said it out loud. It wasn't even words, it was pure sentiment, and she wanted to laugh at him. "I imagine navigating space artefacts is a bit different from manipulating people and telekinetically whirlwinding crap at your enemies."

"You don't have the aptitude to be a Jedi, but you have enough to help the people you love. You already have, haven't you?"

She ignored him again, digging through a drawer near where they were still sitting on the floor and retrieving one of Whitey's flasks, hoping that it was full. She shook it a little; maybe half.

The first sip was heavenly; the second settled into her heart and warmed her chest enough to feel

generous enough to share. She handed it to him; he held up a flat palm. “Don’t touch the stuff anymore,” he said.

She shrugged and polished it off. “I don’t think I needed magic to exact my extremely cool and definitely well-thought-out revenge plot.”

“Revenge for what?”

“This. Cocksucker,” she started, already regretting her decision, “...sent my...” Her what? Best friend? Sister? “...my *colleague* on a suicide mission that he *knew* was a suicide mission, and it was supposed to be *me*, but we were eleven for fuck’s sake, and she...”

There was no way she was voluntarily sharing any of this. Daro Madell had been trying to crack her for months, and he was gorgeous. Lokanth was persuasive in a way that would make the Captain color with envy, but he’d never believe in this extraction of magic long enough to be convinced that even Maarek had been twisted by it.

She pushed back violently on his mental dagger, and he visibly winced. “That part of my life is over,” she insisted. “I discovered that the bastard was attending a stupid embassy event and made *sure* the Empire had their most reliable Chiss mercenary at their beck and call. It may have been cleaner if I hadn’t slit his throat in front of all those dignitaries but...far less satisfying.”

The tension hadn’t left the Jedi’s shoulders or expression. “How did you get that close?”

What a ridiculous question. “I was among a bunch of pompous, insulated idiots who wouldn’t have suspected in a million years that the Chiss woman dressed in *this-season* Qalmain was going to assassinate the resident kiss-ass.” Madell would have appreciated the gown, if nobody else.

“How often does that happen? That those around you are oblivious until you drop the figurative hammer?”

“Very often! You don’t think Captain Madell would have sent me to pick you up with *Whitey*, of all people, if I hadn’t...” Hadn’t what? Influenced the decision? It certainly hadn’t been in words. She wrinkled her nose. “I’m certainly not participating in *involuntary* sorcery.”

“Do your companions recognize the power of The Force?”

It was her turn to wince. “My people don’t call it that.” Cari wasn’t a particularly good actor. Or particularly good at following orders. Maarek had always felt alien, in a way that had nothing to do with speciation. Melaei was a killer, born and bred. Who was she? An exploited child? Whitey could understand. Venka may as well. Even Madell, in his own way, especially after Venka’s interferences had gutted his family fortune.

“You’re not responsible for your guardians’ failure to keep you safe. Be careful, though...the Force is a sword without a hilt.”

The icy cage around her heart didn’t thaw, but beneath it thrummed a warbeat that rattled at a frequency in harmony with the absurd spycraft Madell had organized through Imperial Intelligence. Rebels were garbage, right? The man who had killed Mitth’amara’enth was garbage. He was dead now. The last vestige of the last twig of patience that had, at last, snapped during her final mission as an official Imperial spy. The man in front of her was a means to the next end - Madell would understand, eventually. Venka would respond to his coaxing. Whitey, sold out of the gate, would follow his wallet and his baser instincts.

The Jedi looked at her expectantly and flitted his eyes back to where she had re-holstered the

petars. “That’s a very nice weapon.” It would have been a come-on at a bar. He was also definitely not talking about the blades that had nearly ended his life.

Cari disconnected the lightwhip from her belt and tossed it to him. “I know.”

“You didn’t use it against me.”

“I needed a short-range weapon.”

He flicked the slider switch and the whip roared to life, coiling dangerously above the hilt, and he looked legitimately surprised. “White is unusual,” he stated, not letting emotion seep into his voice but giving away his excitement nonetheless. “How did you come by such a thing?”

“The good Captain found it and charmed some jackass into selling it to us. I didn’t protest, I think it’s awesome.”

He let the deadly light drip onto the ground, singing the metal as the white twists danced in his black eyes. Then he smiled boyishly, twirling his fist and lashing the end out toward the wall, a delightful *CRACK* in its wake, and Cari forgot to be terrified by a Jedi in possession of a lightsaber weapon.

“Where’s yours?” she asked against her better judgment.

He looked sad. “There were a few things aboard my ship. I imagine they were already confiscated by your crew.”

Maarek had indeed been cryptic. She’d hand-waved and played (and lost) a card game with Whitey. “I don’t think I can retrieve anything else for you.”

“I’m heartened to know that you’d make an attempt.”

“It will be difficult enough to explain all of...” she gestured wildly, to everything in particular, “...*this* to them in the first place.”

“There’s no need for that,” he said softly, extending his hand with the disabled lightsaber for her to reclaim.

She took it without losing eye contact and furrowed her brow. “I don’t understand.”

“You’re already aboard this ship. A...hostage, if you want to be. Come with me.” He smoothed his palm over his bald head, still suspiciously devoid of sweat, and finally stood while offering her his other hand. She accepted, and felt better towering over him by several inches. The low baritone of his voice was soothing, but she suspected more brain-moulding.

It was, objectively, a way, way better idea than returning to the Imperial cruiser with the venomous Serathiss, who had likely already drawn her own conclusions about what had transpired. If Cari were in a similar position, she’d exterminate the entire squad, starting with its Captain. That’s why she had to go back.

“I told you earlier,” she said, shakily this time, pulling her black hair out of its tie and finally rubbing her eyes. “Hard pass. Besides, given my history I can’t really abide by people who used children as weapons.”

“We don’t...”

"I admit I don't know enough about your practices to make a judgment," she interrupted, sincerely, upset about her outburst but not really knowing how to reconcile. They stared at each other for several moments more before she shifted her gaze to one of the escape pods offset from the bridge.

"Maybe..." It was an absurd suggestion.

"Contacting me later is dangerous for both of us," he said flatly, knowing where she was going with it before she even did.

"I *still*...wouldn't mind learning *something* else..." Perhaps it wasn't such a 'hard pass' after all, if she could glean the utility without the indoctrination. Her previous training as a Navigator, plus Lokanth's expertise, could be, well...if Maarek, for example, ever figured out and honed what he was doing, he'd be orders of magnitude more dangerous. Couldn't the same be said for her? Absent the Jedi's desire for freedom (and survival) and Whitey's impassioned self-interest, could Cari let herself believe that she wanted to reopen the door that had caused her so much anguish before? Enough to risk taking the key from one of the Empire's greatest enemies?

Actions speak the loudest, drowning out intrusive thoughts. She had made no move to stop Whitey's chaotic button-pushing.

"I don't know how much of my network is intact." The Jedi's vocalized considerations snapped her out of the void. "When I have found a friend or two I will send an envoy to...discreetly...reach out to you. There's also a..." he hesitated, eyeing her before choosing to proceed. "...a drive, that may still be hidden, that may be of interest to you. If any of your people try to break into it, the thing will destroy itself. You already know how to decrypt it, though."

She did? It's not as though he'd written down a password, or...*Oh*. She wished his Second Sight didn't stir up her endorphins; no wonder the Jedi's brainwashing had been so effective in the past. Still, now she not only knew where to find it, but how to access its content. If it was some dumb meditation manual, though, she was going to strangle him next they met.

"That's all I can offer for now," he said, as if he hadn't just shared damning secrets with a professed agent of the Galactic Empire. He exhaled a puff of breath as she tapped the flask against her knee. "Don't mistake my hesitation for a lack of gratitude," he continued. "Your companion isn't wrong about being on the right side of my favor. I won't forget this."

He was certainly saying what she wanted to hear, all things considered. "See that you don't."

He gripped her shoulder tightly. "I'm not afraid to spell it out. I am in your debt. If I can give you what you're asking for, and more, without compromising our positions, I will."

She nodded, suddenly exhausted as the rest of the adrenaline filtered from her blood and her liver took over to process Whitey's poison. They must be getting pretty far away by now, nearly out of comms range for the escape pod she'd eyed earlier.

"Where do you want to retrieve your ship?" he whispered, the matter settled. "I can easily reach The Wheel in a day or two. Your Imperial commanders will almost certainly..."

"No," she said. "Hold on to it for a little longer. Conceal it at Point Nadir and tell them Sosh'acari'tarung expects to retrieve it, *intact*, within two weeks. Maybe spread some rumors about what an incredible badass I am, for good measure." Anticipation gripped her throat as she felt the air electrify. It really was remarkable, his ability.

"How much do you want it to hurt?"

She wasn't a masochist, necessarily, but she couldn't allow the intrusion to look voluntary either. She tapped a few buttons on the nearby console. "Do your worst," she said.

He nodded, that smug smile still affixed to his face, and snapped his palm toward her stomach, launching her with unnatural force back-first into an escape pod. Her skull cracked on a bulkhead and the bliss of unconsciousness claimed her just as the door clicked shut.

Dash's attention latched on to the distress beacon from the Century Hawk. "There she is," he said, and suddenly Venka was in his personal space like it belonged to her instead.

"How did she escape?" she asked suspiciously, now endlessly frustrated by the fruitlessness of her efforts to find *any* video surveillance at all of what had transpired aboard the museum relic of a corvette and the Century Hawk that was now lost to them.

"Good question," he said. "But Hacarita has proven resourceful before," he said with surety, chancing a hand overlapping Venka's on the control panel while giving her his most reassuring smile. The slight dilation of her pupils was his only indicator that his gesture had had an effect of any kind.

The Stormtroopers pulled her body from the pod, and Dash's heart dropped when he believed for a moment that the prisoner had killed her. The steady rise and fall of her chest, though, disputed such a conclusion as he pressed a hand to her fevered forehead.

Her dark hair, free-flowing absent its usual braid, looked like she had tossed and turned all night, but her eyes, as they opened wearily, were as bright as ever without a dark circle in sight. It really was an extraordinary concealment, and he was consumed again with the thought to order her to forgo it altogether. A Chiss bodyguard would be a powerful intimidation bonus for him in almost any conceivable...then again, he already had...

"Whitey..." she groaned, swiping his hand away from her forehead, and it would have been cute if not for their very incriminating circumstances.

"Restrained nearby," he said, as casually as possible, though it still earned him an eyebrow-raise from Hacarita as she miraculously recovered enough to stand and brush herself off. Venka took a step back. Dash felt his blood pressure spike with irritation; he was so frustrated he could scream.

Whitey, who *had* been restrained last time Dash had checked, was now rubbing his wrists where the cuffs had chafed the skin as his tongue lolled out of his mouth. "Cari!" he said gleefully as she approached, kneeling to undo the restraint at his ankles with graceful long fingers.

Dash pouted, since neither of them had the keys. He supposed the spies Eye-Eye hired were expected to have those kinds of skills, though.

"I'm so sleepy," Whitey whined, refusing to get up.

"No sleeping," she chastised. "You have a concussion. I probably do, too." She looked back at Dash without acknowledging Venka, who looked increasingly distressed. "Also, we're about to be interrogated."

"You're fucking right about that," Dash snapped, in full earshot of Serathiss' troopers. "Leave us," he told them, and they obeyed, saluting and marching elsewhere he couldn't be bothered to consider. He set his mouth in a firm line and crossed his arms. "Venka already swept the northwest barracks. You'll tell me the truth and then I'll report to Serathiss and General Wolen."

Hacarita's expression remained infuriatingly neutral. She looked away from him and ran her hand up Whitey's calf; he looked quite pleased, which made Dash mildly uncomfortable, but he didn't question it when she pulled a cricket pistol from the loose part of his boot.

"Oooo, you found the secret gun," Whitey snickered, and didn't try to stop her as her pat-down continued up his thigh and into his uniform jacket.

As it turned out, there were more 'secret guns'. Dash really, really didn't want to let him have enough figurative ammunition to catch on to the obvious double entendre. "Wrap it up," he barked impatiently, then winced on reflex once he realized what it sounded like.

The geometry of Hacarita's other discoveries was really quite impossible; a scoped laser rifle with so many mods that its original design was indecipherable, a curved blade that would be dangerous to transport outright let alone concealed, and...throwing stars, that probably exploded on impact, followed the cricket, and Dash found himself begrudgingly more impressed than annoyed.

The woman voluntarily disarmed herself too; several well-hidden daggers, a full-size blaster pistol with the firing mechanism removed in her breastplate, and a few hairpins joined Whitey's weapons on the floor in front of them. He'd have to ask her about the hairpins, but it was pretty low on his list of questions at the moment.

In short order, Hacarita and Whitey headed into the bunk room. Dash hung back a bit, rubbing his temples, and tried to regain some semblance of composure. With a convincing-enough veneer in place, he walked to where Lady Serathiss was waiting for him with the corners of her mouth downturned.

"Could I ask you to retire to the passenger seating compartment for a bit?" Dash's words came out clipped, but polite as always. "Both Whitey and Hacarita have been cooperative so far, but just in case something goes sideways, it might be safer for you to be somewhere else." His intent, of course, was to get to the truth away from the Empire's ubiquitous ears, so his concern for her safety was small lie he slipped in naturally. Well, it was more like half-truth; if Whitey and Hacarita really wanted to tear either of their heads off, neither would need weapons.

"A wise suggestion," she said softly, but there was a toxin in the words that made him doubtful she actually agreed. "I don't think I have to explain to you how badly the optics of this reflect on our operation. Allowing such a high-value target to..." she paused to rein in her building rage, "...*escape*...is something that *must* be corrected."

Ah, that might be good, actually; she was more concerned about how she looked to her superiors than how the mess had been generated in the first place. "I understand, Lady Serathiss. I'll give you a distilled report once I have it and we can discuss how to proceed."

Serathiss didn't speak again, but merely nodded and beckoned her Stormtroopers to follow her into the compartment on the other side of the cargo bay.

Another hot flash of anger lit behind his eyes as he watched her shapely regal form disappear behind the closing door. If only she hadn't been nearby when all of this shit occurred, they would have had *time*. Hours, maybe even days to sort through this absurd ordeal. Instead, he had minutes, maybe twenty or thirty, before she would expect an answer.

"Stars preserve me and give me strength," Dash murmured darkly to himself as he strode with purpose back down the corridor.

Taking a deep breath, he called out “HKs on me.” The ancient droids with their deadly rifles, which he’d recently learned had NO STUN SETTING, clustered around him as he approached the bunkroom door. “New Order: No one except myself enters or leaves this room. Stand Down Code on my voice print: Echo Lima Foxtrot.”

Venka’s petite frame stiffened and eyes went wide as she quickly grasped the implication. With a small shudder, she pulled a coin sized microphone transceiver from one of her pockets and slapped it on the wall a little ways away from the bunk-room. She pointed to it, and then at her ear. Dash nodded in understanding, and kept an eye on her as she warily walked towards the bridge.

He stared at the closed door, gathering his thoughts. He needed to at least appear calm if he meant for his presence to be comforting rather than threatening, knowing rather well how these two responded to threats. In this case, there was still time to defuse this situation. He tried desperately not think about the fact that his *home* had been stolen, the second ship under his command that he had lost.

Dash tried to decide if sentimental attachment to the thing was more compelling than his affection for the reckless two waiting for him. He kind of expected it to be a closer call - in the end, though, his people would always win out. *They* couldn't know that until he was finished with them, though.

This had to be Whitey. Hacarita was remarkably adaptable, but it would have been just like Whitey to play the idiot. A brief, vindictive mental image formed in Dash’s mind of Whitey drifting out an airlock, or being grilled by specially-programmed Imperial interrogation droids. The fantasy burst as his stomach churned, the contrast between this thought and his previous musings jarring.

Dash stared down at his clenched hands for a few moments. He owed it to himself and his crew to give them a chance to prove they were still loyal. It might result in a series of dancing some circles around Serathiss, but...if they couldn’t trust him with the truth, or worse, flat out lied, he wasn’t sure that they’d be afforded the courtesy of the benefit of the doubt. At that point, they would be at the mercy of other professional Imperial Interrogators.

He relaxed his hands and smoothed the front of his shirt, a placid smile spreading across his face.

He’d give them a chance. A chance to persuade him not to hand them over.

Despite Venka’s objections, both Hacarita and Whitey had been isolated together from the rest of the ship's crew and passengers. Hacarita now sat in front of Dash stoically while Whitey hooked a pinky finger into his right nostril.

Dash’s expression was, he hoped, somewhat friendly, or at least stable. Whitey’s nasal adventure wasn’t helping matters, though his disregard for decorum was par for the course.

“I hope you both know you’re treading on thin ice right now. An Imperial fugitive escaped, one who was encased in *carbonite*,” Dash let that last word hang in the air for a few precious seconds. “To make matters worse, this happened while we were debriefing our Imperial chain of command.” The words now flowed out of his mouth with mounting momentum. “Not to mention that during aforementioned escape, this supposedly immobile, fragile old man...Took...MY...SHIP.”

He turned to the albino. It was him, it was *always* him who instigated shit like this. “Whitey what the *fuck* were you thinking?!” Dash shouted, threading his hands into his golden-blond hair, now surely in uncharacteristic disarray.

“Don’t know,” Whitey said. “Don’t remember.”

“Head trauma *can* cause retrograde amne...”

“Quiet, for the good of the Empire, Hacarita, or so help me, I’ll...”

“You’ll what?” she challenged. “Have us executed?”

Dash’s fist slammed on the cold steel door behind him. Blessedly, the throbbing helped center him. He took a deep breath, trying to stop himself from scowling. “Right now, I’m what’s standing between you and a much more painful interrogation, and *right now*, you need to convince me why I shouldn’t move aside and let them have their way. To be honest, you’re not leaving me a whole lot of options if you don’t tell me the fucking truth.”

“You haven’t exactly given us an opportunity.”

Hell, she was unusually talkative. Typically Whitey would have run his mouth by now. “Okay then, since you seem to be taking charge of this response effort - what in the fuck happened down there?”

“I will answer direct questions,” she said, glancing between Whitey and the doorway. “And so will he.”

Dash looked at him expectantly. “Yeah, sounds right,” Whitey conceded, abandoning his nostril and twiddling his thumbs while checking his clothing hidey-holes reflexively for the now-nonexistent hidden weapons.

Dash sighed, more exasperated than he’d ever been with his two impulsive fighters. Leaning on his former life as a skilled diplomat, he pulled hard on his emotional reins and let the frustration drain from his face. What was left was ice.

“How did the prisoner get thawed?”

Hacarita looked at Whitey. He got the message. “Oh, yeah. That was me.”

“What he means is,” Hacarita interjected, “that he initiated the revival sequence by pressing a button on the diagnostic panel.”

Direct questions. Fine. ‘Why?’ was too vague, and would almost certainly be met with Whitey’s aggravating go-to response of ‘Because I felt like it’. Instead, he continued to establish a timeline: “What happened afterward?”

“I don’t remember.”

“I gave the reviving man a stimulant to speed his recovery and punched Whitey in the face to make it look like we were overpowered.”

“Hot.”

Dash glared.

“I mean, uh, good thinking to uh, punch me.”

“I suppose it was your idea.”

“What can I say? I’m pretty hot too.”

He did his best to ignore their banter. “Why...*how*...were our things removed from the freighter?”

“I told the sorcerer I was removing articles of interest to the corvette and he didn’t object.”

Sorcerer? “What happened on the Century Hawk after it decoupled from the Defender?” It was the first time any emotion had infiltrated Hacarita’s face, but he couldn’t tell what it was.

“I’ll answer that if you like, because I told you I would, but the question you should really be asking is what happened *before*.”

He hadn’t thought about it since Venka’s bewildered expression had whizzed past him out of the airlock, trapping Hacarita inside the Century Hawk with the escapee. *Had* she been trapped, though?

“You told me about the cultists you confronted on Tong, how they did things you couldn’t explain...how can you explain what happened when we fought the man who Serathiss and Wolen claimed was a sworn enemy of the Empire?”

A flash of memory. A chair, robed cultists, and empty caves. Those psychos had used weaponized hallucinogens right?. Would a prisoner in carbonite be frozen carrying something similar? Would it still work after all that time? “Are you claiming that this guy got in your head?”

“I’m claiming no such thing, even though it might be true.” She sighed. “Forget about all that. You think I’m a traitor, right?” He didn’t want to, but... “Listen, Dash,” she said in an unusual address by his nickname, “I really, *really* considered going with him. Instead, I elected to return because I’m loyal to you.” Conspicuously absent was a profession of loyalty to the Empire. “Before this you had a body on ice to turn over to Imperial Intelligence. Now, you have a powerful ally, but only if you *back us up*.”

“You must have had less than ten minutes with this guy,” Dash objected. “You’re trying to convince me *you* forged an alliance on that kind of timeline?” He wouldn’t admit to her outright that he was intrigued, but the question could be a giveaway.

“I may not be *you*,” she snapped, “but any moron would be grateful for an escape route away from the kind of torture that certainly awaits *me* if you inform Serathiss what I did.” Her voice caught but she recovered quickly. “I set up all the pieces for you to be able to spin a narrative, anything you like. We need to do this. If you turn me in, even if I confess everything to Serathiss’ wetwork team, the Jedi will sense a trap and flee before her men even board that ship.”

“*Jedi?* ”

“Not to mention that two-fifths of your crew voluntarily let a...yes, ‘*Jedi*’... escape. You may delay your culpability but you’ve already cast the line of suspicion. That kind of *management problem* doesn’t get solved without more spilt blood.”

Good grief, that sure sounded like a threat. “Jedi,” he repeated, incredulous.

“You owe me,” she continued sinisterly. The silence hung thickly for more than a moment. “Us,” she corrected and Whitey gave her a thumbs up. “I saved your life not too long ago. You won’t regret saving mine.”

His mind whirled. Putting aside their supposed ‘powers,’ weren’t Jedi supposed to be scholars? What Dash would have given to pick that man’s brain. Despite her probable lack of subtlety with the negotiation, Hacarita was right about his utility. Locked away so long, his intel was likely antique, but he was still a living witness for a brutal but triumphant part of Imperial history. What

had he done, or who had he maligned to end up in that state? What else had the Empire re-written to fit their narrative? There had to be more to the puzzle than simply being part of a 'Jedi' religion.

He revealed nothing with his face, letting the uneasy air wrap around them until Whitey squirmed and Hacarita's composure began to fray. "Please," she breathed, with what seemed to be tremendous effort, and he imagined it might be since he was so shocked the word was even in her vocabulary.

Dash rubbed the bridge of his nose, ineffective against the rapidly-encroaching migraine. "So let me get this straight," he said placidly, undoing a button at his uniform collar. "You two unloaded our things onto the Defender preemptively, expecting to use it as our new base of operations. Whitey was attempting to access the diagnostics on the carbonite enclosure, and accidentally triggered the warmup mechanism. The prisoner was a skilled warrior who overwhelmed you, and I witnessed you try to stop him, but you, and I, were unsuccessful."

Relief flooded her eyes. She had *way more* to explain than that, given her babbling about long-eradicated sorcerer cults, but the rest was enough for him to work with.

"Just so you know, we will pick this conversation up again when less pressed for time." His eyes bored into Hacarita's, returned by her in equal measure, defiant and determined. "I know I haven't heard everything yet."

"If you wish," she said evenly.

As Dash turned to leave, he paused with his left hand over the door controls. "Oh, also, Whitey?" Whitey perked up and cocked an eyebrow. Dash's free hand quickly unholstered his blaster, and let loose a stun shot near his head. His cool demeanor slipped briefly when the fire smacked harmlessly against a nearby bunk. In response, Whitey's fists rose, preparing to wallop him.

"That kind of shit is very *dangerous* for you," Whitey spat, in the first real display of seriousness since all of this began.

Unfortunately for the soldier, Dash had already triggered the door mechanism. "Your impulsive actions have consequences, DT-4175." It opened to reveal all four HK droids with weapons aiming over Dash's shoulder, eyes glowing ominously. "I think it's time you're reminded that *I'm* pretty dangerous too."

He turned away, a power move considering that turning one's back on Whitey after antagonizing him was usually a death sentence. "Echo. Lima. Foxtrot." Dash spoke as he strode through the door, snatching Venka's bug off the wall and pocketing it.

While Whitey reflexively pawed at his body looking for some sort of weapon, the HK droids lowered theirs and turned to follow Dash.

Dash, in turn, braced himself for an uncomfortable meeting with Serathiss.

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