

Dritte: Who Built the Labyrinth

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Dritte: Who Built the Labyrinth

by [AnInformant](#)

Summary

An innocent, clinically-relevant inquiry into Maarek's past has unforeseen consequences for the crew's de-facto physician.

Notes

Author credit: AnInformant

Beta/edits: Bluescreenofdebt, MadellsMoon

Chronology: After Part Deux (and events on The Wheel) and before Point Nadir.

“What’s on the roster for today, Doc?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary. Have a seat.” She gestured toward the hospital bed, which she’d laundered and re-made after every night she had spent using it as her personal quarters. It was an easy and formless courtesy.

Unlike Venka, the rest of the crew were never shy about the routine testing the Empire military (through General Wolen) had tasked Cari with. She could tap knees with rubber and perform nearly pain-free phlebotomies without too much effort. What she *wasn’t* equipped for was a cordial relationship with any of them. She’d anticipated being a cog that completed the job and then moved on, though she hadn’t expected to be afforded the consideration of a Real Mission ever again after her violent but necessary display at the Coruscant embassy.

The subsequent relocation to Hok should have been a slap in the face at the time, and yet...she missed being a Security Chief a little, mostly ordering people around. Her men were likely infantry dregs to get assigned to such a place, but they liked drinking and playing cards, which made them

pleasant to be around, too.

The theme of her assignments had always been to gather intel on the Imperial Security Bureau - the fact that both of the Imperial intelligence agencies were so distrustful of each other had always been amusing, but it had earned her some magnificent lovers all the same, so she had never had any complaints to air with Wolen or his Eye-Eye companions.

‘Cordial’ was certainly a generous characterization of her association with Maarek Steele, though she’d bitten into the armor by getting him to spar with herself and Whitey from time to time. He had given her an uneasy feeling since the moment they’d met, though that had dissipated somewhat the more they fought. His talent really was wasted as a pilot, she thought, because his anticipatory nature leant itself beautifully to the one-on-two combat arrangement she usually initiated. That said, unarmed, even he and Whitey together were no match for her strength and speed, though their efforts had improved markedly over the several weeks leading up to their assault on Lothal.

She still wished she’d spent the venture less intoxicated, but entertaining that thought would mean feeling something, and it wasn’t a subject she was willing to broach just yet.

The only real hiccup in the mission had been Maarek’s trance. She’d rehashed it a hundred times and didn’t want to agonize about it more during his physical. He had different ideas, though.

“I’m pissed at you,” Maarek said, frowning at her and re-donning his shirt.

“That’s pretty bold coming from the man who instigated a literal physical altercation in which I almost died,” she replied evenly, removing the stethoscope from her neck and retrieving the blood-draw kit in its stead.

“Not that! That was very entertaining.”

“Better get to the point, then. My time and my patience run thin.” The sterile smell of isopropyl permeated the room where she rubbed it on his arm. Cari hesitated with the needle, tapping the juncture at his elbow and finally plunging the steel into a vein.

He winced even though her aim was perfect. “Your nonsense with Venka made me anxious!” He made to throw up his arms, but she restrained him at the bicep of the arm from which she was drawing blood. Thankfully, she only needed a few more milliliters.

“You can’t move around so much. If you are uncomfortable with anything I need to do, I can appropriate K3MD.”

He rubbed his arm as she withdrew the needle, pressing a cotton ball to the puncture and forcing his opposing hand to apply pressure.

He looked worried. “Isn’t it...broken?”

“I don’t *think* Venka intended for it to prompt everyone to prepare for rectal exams when she did the last firmware update. It surprised the fuck out of Madell, though.”

Maarek’s humor returned. “Ha! Did it manage to remove the stick up his ass?”

She smiled and handed him a glass of water and a couple of pills. “While I certainly encourage diligence to one’s prostate health, I can’t say that I’ve investigated to that extent. Though I imagine after your outburst yesterday that you’d have more than worrisome knowledge on the subject.”

He batted his eyes innocently. “I thought you’d be angrier, honestly. I’m a little disappointed.”

Unabashed shit-stirrer. He was unusually perceptive, obvious ever since he'd called out her ancestry a week into her reassignment from observing the 'way she carried herself'. "I just wanted to know what made you so sure."

"I wasn't! Figured you'd deny it in the heat of the moment. Only sorry to hear I didn't get to see how badly Venka wrecked you."

It was like he'd taken a page out of her book, but she wasn't Captain Madell, and this wasn't a bedroom. "Admirable deflection," she replied.

"Fine, fine. I heard your voice down the hall in the middle of the afternoon, a day or so after we left The Wheel. You were making the same sound you do when Whitey lands a particularly hard punch, and I thought I had missed the memo for a sparring session. I'm glad it was something else, though, Dash has been insufferable until recently."

"That's not something I ever wanted to know about myself, Maarek."

"I'm praising your seductive skills, not criticizing you."

He'd missed the point again.

"I can't imagine you're romantically inclined," he continued, rolling up his pant leg. "You should know that I saw Dash get one of those holographic lightflowers for a bartender at Tirahann, very expensive, and then kiss her hand while reciting poetry."

"You would be right...Great Outer Rim, Venka would love that shit." She felt along the outline of his kneecap, where he'd sustained an injury a few weeks prior, and determined that it had healed well enough. For good measure, though, she prepared a cortisol shot and administered it; Venka may have flinched; he looked bored.

She stood and walked back to the small counter, rearranging some things in the cabinet above and talking to him without looking back. What they had left to do for this dull activity was simple, after all. "You mentioned some trouble with headaches recently. Can you describe them in more detail?"

She heard an exasperated sigh. "Sure, sure. It's just a nuisance. Made worse by your interference on Lothal...Whitey said you sedated me!"

His descriptive efforts had been mostly consistent with migraines; she made to prepare the necessary medication. "You were making us look really stupid. It could have blown our cover."

"Bullshit," he snapped angrily, and it sounded so unlike him in that hasty snarl of a voice that she paused in her ministrations. "That is," he continued, his usual cadence restored, "I mean, I'm sure you're right about that, but that's not why you did it."

She swallowed, her back still turned, hoping he didn't notice. "Care to regale me with your version of events, then?"

"It was so obvious," he said haggardly, now with considerable effort. "When I'm at the helm of the Century Hawk, or the Reaper, my instincts just take over, you know? I am *so* sure I bet my life on it - have, many times in fact, along with the rest of yours. It always pans out. *Always*. It got us this ship, didn't it? The headaches come afterward, like I was thinking too hard..." he trailed off, a remnant of hostility in his voice though she did her best to rationalize it as residual anxiety.

Well, at least it didn't appear that Dash had corrupted him with one of his own narratives about hallucinogens. How far back, exactly, did his experience go?

Cari decided to indulge him. "I do admit I felt a certain...distress, I suppose, but nothing like the pain you describe in the aftermath." She breached the foam cork in the medication in her left hand with a syringe, trying to be casual, and pulled on the plunger, talking to the wall. "Did your migraines develop in adolescence, or later into adulthood?" A beat, all silence. "...or more recently, perhaps?"

A cold dread suddenly gripped her heart and she mishandled the vial of painkiller. It rolled like a marble off the small counter and shattered on impact with the tile on the ground, but she couldn't even hear the tinkling of broken glass as the liquid spread into a glimmering circle of lace.

She pulled her head up from her gaze at the floor with excruciating difficulty, toward Maarek, expecting a monster with hooves and horns and a thousand teeth, but he sat still hunched, feet dangling over the edge of the bed, eyes glazed. He was looking right at her, but it was right *through* her in a way that was truly unsettling.

Her ears rang with the high-pitched whine that could only be wrought by quiet and a lifetime of gunfire without ear protection.

As if down a concrete tunnel, a sound pierced the silence - screaming, gut-wrenching enough for her to want to assist, until she realized it was her own voice. The replay of the memory was so vibrant she could feel the rumble on the bridge as she watched her would-be sister Mitth'amare'n's ship disintegrate on the viewscreen of the man who had meant to damn Sosh'acari instead.

She had never memorized a face as meticulously as she did in that moment, confident she could age it forward and backward. As was typical for a spy, she didn't trust the name on the invitation to the Chiss Embassy commencement, but when she saw for herself the finely-aged lines etched by undeserved decades of laughter and merriment at the expense of children like her and Hamaren, something repressed at the base of her skull had snapped.

She'd intended a clean, stealthy kill in a secluded back alley or bathroom stall, but when it came down to patience and a demure facade, she just couldn't pull it off. The feeling of hot blood washing over her fingers in front of a horrified audience was more exhilarating still; the image still helped her sleep very, very well at night.

General Wolen, patient and fair soul that he was, could only have given her deeper exile or something desperately dangerous after such a display. Captain Madell's team was certainly competent, moreso with her in tow of course, but they had been subjected to such condemning odds that she couldn't help but wonder...did Dash know how much earlier he'd been deigned to fail? They all should have been dead on Lothal, nevermind the missions Sosh'acari hadn't even been present for.

She and Whitey - and Maarek, if she had to be honest, which was fine because none of it was being vocalized, had drunkenly overcome absurd combat challenges to complete their missions and return to the ship. Venka, in the shadows, had protected them with technical genius Sosh'acari could only dream about understanding.

It was all tied to the treasure that rested under the ion cannon. The screaming and the blood didn't recede, boiling at the edges of her memory, but there was something else now - a brazen pilot for the Empire, fueled by adrenaline and a sweeping command of the Third Sight, landing a bucket of bolts in a cinematic display of intuition and skill. At first, Sosh'acari had thought it was the profoundly stupid landing on Lothal that had earned Dash's Raiders the renown of the Century Hawk Maneuver, but she had been three sheets to the wind in the cargo hold with Whitey at the time. Now, after witnessing his unwitting command of the Sight for herself, she felt both acute empathy and stark trepidation to be in the presence of a man who could neither acknowledge nor

control it.

The skyline was different - a vast industrial landscape with the halos of three suns in the pleasant recess of twilight. Pats on the back upon his egress by Galactic Republic officials, when she was still serving the Chiss and the Jedi were still the prescient order.

The cognitive dissonance was staggering - Maarek's file suggested he was younger than she, by six years, so he could only have been four years old, at most, when such an event had taken place. She tried to override it as a gross conceptual error in understanding the relative maturation of human versus Chiss children, but, in all likelihood, the events being forcibly mirrored into her mind had occurred when both of them were very young. They couldn't be memories, then!

"Maarek," strangled, barely conscious, though maybe that was optimistic, because she'd ended up on the floor at some point, back pressed against cool glass. He remained eerily expressionless. "Maarek," she tried again, "...Stop it...You're hurting me."

She hadn't fought Lokanth's intrusion, because it was superficial and she had wanted it, but this was Something Fucking Else. The lights around them flickered threateningly, and a medical tool sparked on the workbench.

Her lungs filled with ammonia when she inhaled again, its fumes burning her throat and nostrils. An order had come directly from Serathiss, and Dash looked more serious than she had ever seen him. Sosh'acari was relaxed though, legs crossed and head reclined in interlaced hands. The short buzz cut dug into her thumbs, even though she had always kept her hair long.

"I want you to repeat the order," Dash said, clearly recording.

Serathiss didn't hesitate. "Eliminate the witnesses. Any knowledge of these events is a threat to the Empire."

"Which the rest of us will definitely have if we go through with it. Unless you're planning to wipe our minds again, or have us killed too."

What was Dash talking about? The only path was obvious - Sosh'acari couldn't understand why he would worry so much when the Captain didn't even know a single man in this unit. An enlistment in the Imperial Military was a willingness to die for the Empire's cause. It was their duty and their honor.

Serathiss looked at her, then, red lips turned upward in an enchanting smile. That didn't matter, though, she just needed to talk. "Maarek," she said, and Sosh'acari corrected her posture, leaning forward expectantly. "See that it's done."

"Yes, sir," she replied, and stood without waiting for Dash. Her center of gravity felt oddly-placed as she strode quickly from the room toward the helm, hands flexing in anticipation of giving this ship something to *really* look forward to.

Dash was hot on her heels. "Maarek," he hissed, stopping him abruptly with a violent clasp at her elbow. Sosh'acari would have punched him, but her body and mind in this state just cocked their head curiously. "These are our *own people*."

"What other course of action do you suggest?" they asked him in return, genuinely curious.

He looked conflicted, then pained. Sosh'acari *hated* seeing him that way. They didn't understand the emotions that crossed his face. "I will organize the militia in the cargo bay. We will drop them off back on Scarif."

"Message received, Captain." They gave a crisp salute and finally settled in behind the controls, a calm sweeping over them as they engaged the engine.

Excitement buoyed in his throat as he descended rapidly, bottoming out in a local minimum before pulling a high-G climb into the stratosphere. The effect should be swift; their passengers would be stunned long enough for him to vent the cabin. Sosh'acari pulled his hand back from the lever, and the memory glitched.

She wrapped her arm around his throat, and he choked. "What the *fuck* are you doing?" Her voice was choppy, distorted.

He snarled, fighting the strangle, "Following my orders! Who are you?"

She could *feel* what he was feeling, a strange sort of pride, and it was desperately uncomfortable given her usual aversion to empathy. She couldn't speak, though, because he was choking her, now, even though his hands were still occupied with the controls. The lever depressed on its own.

It felt like drowning, and she collapsed behind the pilot's seat. She couldn't hear the terrified screams of his victims because they were so far away. No oxygen was reaching her lungs. It didn't need to; this wasn't her body and there was no reason to breathe in a dream. The burn in her chest didn't alleviate.

He turned away from her dispassionately and stabilized their flight pattern, swooping back down toward the surface. "Whitey was firing over their heads. Venka walked away. Dash, unwisely, objected directly to our Imperial commander. I'm the only one who can do the right thing."

He pressed a red button on the dashboard that started blinking as Sosh'acari suffocated. "Commencing initial strafing run," he said in a monotone, pulling up on the joystick and engaging the weapons systems to glass the ground below. She couldn't hear those screams, either.

She had once heard torture described as pushing the body past the limit of pain beyond which one's brain would have mercifully breached unconsciousness; she'd had a few fingernails and a back tooth or two removed in her day, but she had a high tolerance for pain and an aptitude for breaking through restraints. Those screams, of her assailants turned prey, she relished.

Oxygen deprivation should have resulted in her passing out within three minutes, though she had been trained to hold her breath for longer. Death should have followed soon after. The feeling of not being able to breathe for an indeterminate amount of time, while her awareness was still sharp, was torture from which she would never recover.

Maarek dispassionately wiped out the remaining Imperial troops. She tried calling out to him.

Even his name was wrong. All of the crew's were incoherent strings of syllables to her, compared to the lyrical quality of Cheunh, but his was nonsense on a completely different linguistic plane.

"*MAAREK*," her lips fit around the M, cautious and deliberate, but the sound it made was too short to be more than one syllable, but it was a *real* sound, echoing off the walls of the exam room on the Defender. Cold air flooded her mouth and she inhaled, the feeling foreign after so long, stinging the delicate tissue of her throat as her life returned.

"Who?" he replied, the first word he'd uttered since she'd collapsed. It was more of a grunt from deep in his lungs than a question. He continued emotionlessly, "I'm sorry, Miss. You must have me confused with someone else."

Anyone in the galaxy calling her *Miss* would have been clotheslined in short order. Maarek's

nescient digging into her mind burrowed further, though, and Sosh'acari promptly forgot about it.

She desperately tried to compare the invasion to a physical feeling, for something grounding, and vaguely remembered a time when she'd been fighting with a similar team only to be pierced in the abdomen with a shortblade dagger from medium range - it's why she'd promised to become proficient at swordthrowing. It was a deep shot, but had barely missed her vital organs. Against what would have been her own medical advice today, she extracted it and cauterized the wound with a taser off the body of a comrade.

His mind was spiraling even though he was outwardly calm. It was a descent she had to prevent. Maybe she had been coerced by the stuffy general on the CEDF vessel Tell'andra'n. Maybe Lokanth had convinced her that turning over Maarek's own ship was for the best. He'd asked her to come, though, to abandon them. Sosh'acari could no sooner abandon Maarek than the others.

What had that Jedi's crazy books said about Influence? The mind was a maze and an innocuous token was the beacon to freedom. That meant concentration on an unrelated, inconsequential event. Her childhood and history of assassinations were charged with distracting emotions. Maarek's memory overlap may not even be real. The pilot had found a cube on the Defender. Lokanth had recorded a message for his allies. She had lost to Whitey in a card game.

How could he do this? The pain was even more tangible now, hot pokers behind her eyes such that she could barely see. Maarek had stood up. She had lost to Whitey in a card game. She couldn't move, but he could. His hand glided through syrup to retrieve his blaster from his previously-discarded weapons belt.

Gunfire ricocheted past her head in the sand; a dagger protruded from her stomach, white uniform now coated in red. Her hands were blue, bare of the required gloves. A pilot landed spectacularly in a storm. She had lost to Whitey in a card game.

The Cube was a Message. Maarek was in front of her, but his eyes weren't his.

Maarek was in front of her, but he wasn't him.

She had lost to Whitey in a card game. A knife protruded from her memory.

She pulled at the hilt, wanting to see more blood, a gaping stab wound exposed to the elements. Gruesome injuries were so beautiful, even moreso as they healed, true marvels of biology. Instead, what remained was her pathetic body panting with its back against the bulkhead in the medical bay where she'd retreated, but not quickly enough. Sweat trickled down her neck and absorbed into the thin cotton of her undershirt. No need for armor in the presence of an ally, right? Venka's attack should have put her guard up better than this.

It made the gun pointed at her head a little more upsetting. The transfixed pilot was still staring into nothingness, black eyes hollow as she hurriedly removed her contacts. She couldn't erase her panic, but she could redirect it.

Cari could almost feel the weight of it in her hand as she tugged on the blade also buried in his mind. It slipped toward her, millimeter by millimeter, as if it had been cemented for an eternity. She couldn't remove it entirely, but the parity inversion was nearly immediate. He was blinking, hand still outstretched, clearly hurting and trying not to show it. She found her voice again just in time. "Can we talk about this before you kill me? It's me, Sosh'acari. I'm your friend aboard Daro Madell's ship." Friend? Where had that word come from?

His eyes brightened and he lowered the blaster, tossing it back onto the bed as if it annoyed him.

“The Century Hawk?”

“Uh, yes! Well...we’re on our way to retrieve it.”

He had completely snapped out of it like nothing had happened. “Finally! How’d you let that miscreant take it anyway?”

Cari had never apologized for anything. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t strong enough.”

“Yeah, well, you’ll have backup this time,” he said. She would have dismissed the skepticism in his voice if not for the circumstances.

“I should hope so. With regard to your cluster headaches...”

“Oh, I actually feel much better now.” He paused, observing his surroundings as if it were the first time. “Why are you on the floor?”

She sighed and flipped him off.

He gave her a couple finger guns, much preferable to real ones, and chuckled disarmingly. “Got it. Head pain notwithstanding, I’ve got a clean bill of health, yes?”

Aside from the dissociation and near-dismantlement of her mind, along with threatening to finish the job Venka had started? “Clean bill is what will be in my report.”

“Good times. Thanks.”

The written record may be clean, but the verbal disclosure to Dash would be anything but.

There were three possibilities concerning Maarek’s appointment. The first was that neither the pilot nor the Empire knew about the nature of his episodes, and would kill him if they found out. The second was that Imperial Intelligence *did* know, and expected him to materialize as a time bomb on this ship once Dash and his crew had outlasted their usefulness. The third was that they *both* knew, and Maarek was deceiving them all.

She wanted to shake the man violently, to force what he knew out of his throat with the threat of physical violence that was the only way she knew how, but if the Jedi’s intrusion had taught her anything it was that there were less-traceable ways. She would have to find a real doctor versed in neuro-linguistic programming. Whether Venka would help her with such an endeavor, or even speak to her, was unclear.

Sleep that evening was elusive.

Like with any trauma, her brain’s coping skills for the events of the previous day involved smoothing out the sharp edges of what exactly had happened in the medical bay with Maarek’s physical. As she prepared her morning tea, a habit she had picked up from the technician, Cari could hardly believe the frantic notes she had scribbled upon his departure. The memory was fuzzy, but the wound, like the one Venka had written on her stomach, was still seeping even though the weapon was gone.

This cauterization was going to be substantially more painful.

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