

## Loyalty

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## Loyalty

by [AnInformant](#)

### Summary

Dash thinks that giving his crew gifts will inspire loyalty. He's not wrong.

### Notes

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A low whistle filled the large storage bay as Dash surveyed the stacks of boxes sitting in CB1. Between Whitey, Dash, and Venka, enough things had been purchased this evening to fill up a third of the expansive space. Serathiss' endowment...generosity, maybe, had afforded some luxuries that would make their future missions easier, and Whitey less 'whiney'.

"Quite a haul we pulled today, right Whitey?" Dash asked, slowly loading a small cart with a few choice boxes.

Whitey glanced up from the two open weapon crates he'd been drooling over, before happily exclaiming, "Oh, yeah. I've been trying to hunt these two beauties down for a while. Now we've got our very own LD-1 Target Rifle and LBR-9 Stun Rifle." He paused for a second, his tone becoming a bit more sour. "Wasn't able to find a GLS Firelance though. I'll have to keep my eye out for one of those."

Dash barked out a short laugh. "You mean to tell me that Beltriss isn't enough gun to keep you happy?"

Whitey raised an eyebrow. "You gotta have options man. After all, it's not like I see you wearing the same outfit every day. Or engaging in any form of monogamy with the ladies at every outpost."

The latter was true, but he could leave it alone. "A weapon for every occasion then?"

Venka looked up from her tablet, and failed to stifle a snort, adding, "You use your weapons as fashion accessories?"

"You know it." Whitey winked at her.

"Just don't go and break your back trying to carry every option into combat. We may have a field medic on staff now, but even her handiwork isn't good enough to repair your spinal cord," Dash quipped in return.

"Wouldn't mind a therapeutic massage from *her*, but you know I'm plenty strong enough to carry my own weight." Whitey flashed a mischievous grin and hefted his inanimate companion for emphasis. It looked like a bulbous golf bag on steroids, but instead of small metal poles sticking out, there were rifle butts.

"I'm more worried about how many of us it'll take to carry your bag if you get downed. Not to mention your deadweight carcass."

Venka quietly interjected, "I'm pretty sure that bags getting left behind if he goes down...it's not like any of us can carry it..."

Whitey turned to glare at Venka, "Hey now, this bag is full of valuable merchandise. Don't go leaving it out in the cold where some drifter will make off with it." He turned back to Dash, "Besides, not all of us watch our elfish figures trying to impress the girls. Some of us just have raw charisma." Whitey pointed to his flexed bicep for emphasis.

Venka lobbed some packing peanuts at Whitey's head. "Show off."

"I didn't ask for free tickets to the gunshow. Knowing you, and your arsenal, that kind of performance would last a long time."

"Guns and stamina for days."

Dash rolled his eyes. "Regardless, good work out there today. Thanks for pointing out that specialty shop. Their hardware will certainly bolster our capabilities in the field." Dash thumped the box on top of the pile for emphasis.

"Anytime. You know I love shopping for stuff like this. And today, it was like a giant candy shop, only the candy is lead. Oh, that reminds me! When should I ask you about a raise, or at least a bigger weapons budget?"

Dash let out a sigh. "Are those things so different?" he called as he beckoned a droid to wheel his cart out of the cargo bay.

After Dash disappeared down the corridor, Venka added, "I could transfer some funds from some criminal's account for you. Course they might come after you if they notice."

Whitey looked thoughtful for a moment before replying "Whose definition of 'criminal' are we using? That could be fun!"

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After he had tended to his other command responsibilities, Dash stepped onto the bridge where Maarek was sitting in anxious silence, fiddling with the nav computer. A miniature galaxy was displayed in front of him, with a yellow trail connecting two of the stars.

"All of the crew is safely on board, Maarek, personally verified. We're ready for liftoff when you

are.”

“Roger that.” Maarek’s fingers flew across the console, flicking multiple switches. The hum of the engines warming up vibrated through the cabin. He glanced briefly back at Dash. “Do you want to make the call?”

Dash shook his head. “You can do the honors this time.”

There was a brief crackle of static from the radio. “Victor Four Niner, this is the Century Hawk preparing for departure. Docking bay seven will be empty in T-minus two minutes. Over.”

A robotic voice echoed back across the airwaves. “Roger Roger Century Hawk. Records show your docking fees paid in full. You are clear for liftoff. Over.” With a clunk, the magnetic locks on the landing gear released.

Moments later, the freighter gently ascended into the black of night. As it made for open space, Maarek deftly dodged a pleasure yacht that zoomed dangerously close to them. Once their trajectory was clear, Maarek engaged the hyperdrive, and with a lurch the viewscreen stretched into the familiar, comforting sight of hyperspace.

“Course is locked in, Commander Dash. Should be smooth sailing to Lothal.”

“Excellent work, soldier,” he replied, meaning it. This pilot was almost too good to be doing such mundane tasks as taking off, but even that he did with grace and flourish. “I can watch the helm for a few minutes. I left you a surprise in your weapons locker.”

Maarek turned his neck, and Dash imagined it was a tremendous effort to draw his concentration away from his instruments. “A surprise? I don’t suppose you can give me a hint as to what it is?”

“I think a pilot of your skill and accomplishment will appreciate it.”

Maarek’s eyes lit up as if he wanted to hop from one foot to the other, but instead he rubbed his hands together thoughtfully. “I’m off, then! Don’t go crashing this damn thing while I’m away.”

“I’m incapable of being that incapable. The autopilot should be able to handle everything else. Go.” Dash made a shoo-ing motion with his hands and ushered Maarek out of the cockpit.

He settled in at the helm to observe the response function of the autopilot, inhaling the artificial oxygen and then exhaling through his nose in a practiced rhythm. It was meant to be centering, and it worked, when parties and martinis were involved, but the inevitable calls that followed promised to be intentionally tense. Talking to women under the aforementioned condition was easy, when everyone was there for the same reason, but talking to *these* women was a true exercise in discipline. It would have been easier if they had more conventionally unattractive qualities - unfortunately, or maybe fortunately for him, they were both uniquely beautiful, so their company was welcome whether they had the social fortitude to engage him in conversation or not.

He mulled over who to summon first, then sent out a brief page to Hacarita. *Meet me in the cockpit.*  
-Dash

After another moment of staring out the viewscreen, the click of shoes down the corridor drew his attention. It didn’t really speak to stealth, but then again, if she wanted to be subtle, the mercenary would have made an effort. That meant her approach was meant to intimidate.

Before long, behind him stood her imposing form, only requested this time instead of accidental. Her camouflage was impeccable - when she’d hauled him up by the neck toward her face, he had

looked for a trace of her Chiss ancestry, but he'd only had a moment to search for the tint at her hairline before she'd released him.

She paused in the doorway, and her hesitation gave the brief impression that she would salute him. It was fantasy, though; the arm stopped at her hip, hand digging into her shiny black armor as if she'd stifled the move.

"Shut the door behind you, please."

After a brief pause, she hit the door release behind her and took a few more steps into the room.

"Shopping went well, I take it?" Her voice was warm, but her demeanor was cold.

"Quite, but that's not really what I invited you here to discuss."

He rose from his seat at the helm and took a few steps towards her. "Instead, I want to talk about your place in this outfit. This unit is composed of elite military assets identified by the Empire, each with unique, complementary skills that lend themselves well to a balanced team. All are formidable on their own, but their greatest strength is as a unit, functioning together." His stride shifted as he began to slowly orbit her. "Both your record and Wolen's favor speak well of your abilities." He paused directly in front of her.

Her expression didn't change. "I know." Modest too, then! "What's your point, *Captain Madell*?"

"My point," he said, though not aggressively, "is that what binds this team together is loyalty. Your last approach to me was...*antagonistic*. As new blood to the team, what I am asking for in recompense is yours, unconditionally. I don't mean loyalty to the Empire, or the Chiss, or even to Wolen. Can you be loyal to this team? To do what is in our best interest as a unit?" He hadn't called out her heritage directly until now. Would she deny it?

"You don't need to worry about my loyalty to the Chiss."

How delightfully unspecific. "We'll table that."

"Empire next?"

"If you like." If she wanted to direct the conversation, he wouldn't oppose; a person who kept talking always gave him more information than they meant to.

He maintained his silence, so she filled it by continuing, "My people are...allies." The pause was puzzling.

"Wolen, then?"

"I can be loyal."

"Imprecise sentiment is not exactly what I'm looking for here Sosh'acari'tarung. I want to know, without preamble, that you will be loyal to us."

A unbridled snort escaped from her mouth. "You mean loyal to *you*. What do you want from me? To swear a ridiculous 'oath of fealty' to you, here? Now?"

Dash rolled his eyes. "Do you think I'm actually a politician? Barring the absurd language that you have chosen, an...oath...notwithstanding, in this case, swearing loyalty to the squad and myself are roughly synonymous. I ask because I want to be sure that I can trust you when things get rough out

there. We're frequently covertly inserted and surrounded by hostiles, and I want to know that your demonstrated and admitted indiscretions won't get our squad killed. I consider us an assembly of equals, but you know as well as I that someone has to be responsible for the outcome of these missions and their value to the Empire, and our *management* has selected yours truly. That means, for better or worse, your duty to me is more important than any other declaration you could make."

"The words are unseasoned symbolism. I'll say anything you want if it will get you to drop these lines of inquiry." She looked away for the first time, consumed as much by the stars as he had been before she entered. He thought to rebuke her for the diversion, but she continued, "I can tell you that my trust in you is implicit, because Wolen would not have reassigned me otherwise."

Dash maintained his impassive stare, and hers returned nothing. Symbolism? Sure, why not. "Then let's take a page from an 'Oath of Fealty.' Do you, Sosh'acarit'arung of the Chiss Ascendancy, swear to be loyal to this squad, and to me, above even the Empire itself?" He knew that last line could be construed as tantamount to treason, but also knew that blind devotion to the Empire would limit tactical options in the field. Given her previous disclosures, he thought he knew, but how she answered the question in this context would be telling.

Hacarita hesitated for just a moment, as if she were weighing each of the words individually, or was dismissing them entirely. She parroted the formula, enunciating each word. "I, Sosh'acari'tarung, formerly of the Chiss Ascendancy, swear to be loyal to Quindaro Madell the Fourth, above even the Empire itself."

It was truth, discerned despite expert concealment and contacts, and through her other unclear motives. He had been taken aback by hearing his full name on her lips, having gotten far too used to being called 'Ambassador,' 'Daro,' or 'Dash'. He had the thought that Wolen might have given her a few files on Dash himself in return for Venka's hack.

"Very well then," he said, trying not to let his gratitude show. "I will hold you to that." He turned, and heard the door open behind him. "Before you wander off, I'm a little surprised by your lack of curiosity on just how successful our shopping expedition turned out to be. I wouldn't forget about any of you when it comes to the finer things. To that end, I have acquired something you might like."

She had paused in the doorway and turned her head back over her shoulder. "Here?" Her incredulous retort was matched by her expression as she glanced around the sparse cockpit.

"No, I left it in my quarters. Follow me." He brushed past her into the corridor and started heading towards his cabin.

Hacarita blinked and followed without question, despite the invite to a private space.

Along the way, to his delight and dismay, he spotted the other woman he intended to engage. "Venka," he called out. "You should join us. I have something for you as well."

Venka looked from Dash to Hacarita with one eyebrow raised, then shrugged and fell in step with them. Their height difference was staggering; Hacarita was shorter than himself, though only just, and towered over the petite technician. If Hacarita noticed the shift in direction, she didn't let it show.

Upon entering the room, Dash strode straight over to his bed. "Hacarita, I admit I don't know a whole lot about this tech. But it should be...interesting for you to explore." He chanced a glance over his shoulder while his fingers deftly worked the catches of a box. Both Hacarita and Venka were silhouetted beautifully in the doorway, either too shy to enter or waiting for orders to do so.

As the sound of the catches reached Hacarita, though, she took a few short strides to stand beside him.

She reached out a hand and then snapped it back, looking at him strangely.

“Go ahead,” he encouraged.

Her eyes glowed, redder than the hazel contacts should allow, gingerly lifted the lid of the box. Inside sat a silver cylinder, some parts covered in a rubberized coating.

She may have been able to control the reaction if it had been a standard weapon, but instead her pupils dilated deliciously and her breath caught as she reached into the box, cradling the slim device in her hands. She felt its weight and shifted it from hand to hand, like it had been made for her.

With a thrum of power, a hot white stream of light erupted from one end of the cylinder and loosely dangled towards the floor, sputtering in its coil with an ominous sound that put both Dash and Venka on edge.

With a casual flick of her wrist, the string lashed out and neatly severed the neck off of a bottle of Corellian Whiskey that had been sitting on his bedside table. Dash tried in vain not to imagine why she’d already be proficient with a whip. At least she had alcohol-related priorities?

The molten glass quickly cooled, and Dash recovered enough to deftly pour two fingers each into three glasses. “Glad to see you’re enjoying your new toy. Thank you for saving me the trouble.” A glimmer of mirth twinkled in his eye. He’d let the other implication hang - she was definitely the type.

With a click, the sizzle of electricity ceased, and the string of light receded.

“Of course,” Hacarita replied with an attempt at emotionlessness, though her excitement was impossible to conceal. She accepted the proffered glass. “What girl wouldn’t enjoy something that felt so perfectly customized?”

He nodded, avoiding the obvious return comment, and letting even his own obvious innuendo linger. Dash held out the third glass to Venka next, who had chosen this safer moment, now that the weapon had been powered down, to step into the small room.

After a few moments, each of their glasses were emptied, and Dash topped them all off again. “No sense letting good whiskey go to waste.” It had been an excellent bottle, probably having one-to-two pours left in it. Normally, such an imbibement would have resulted in conversational giggles among the ladies he’d invited to his personal accommodation, but this was not the spacious mansion he’d grown up in and these were not socialites desperate for his attention.

He spent a moment staring at the pattern formed when the previously molten ‘new’ lip of the bottle had cooled and re-solidified, in a daze. This whiskey, for whatever reason, was hitting him hard. His tongue felt a bit sluggish in his mouth.

Venka took a small sip from her freshly topped off glass and savored the flavor before chancing a glance back at the weapon in Hacarita’s hand. Her face pinched cutely with concentration before saying, “I already stowed all the gear we bought...”

“No, you didn’t,” he said with a wink, holding up the bottle for emphasis. “I got you a little something extra.” He gestured to the remaining boxes strewn throughout the room. “Hidden among the rest, of course.”

“Which should I open?” she asked hopefully, momentarily forgetting about the danger brandished in Hacarita's fist opposite her whiskey.

Dash tapped his chin thoughtfully, as if he didn't know exactly where it was. “Yours is over there.” He gestured toward a box on his desk. She tiptoed gently over to it, too cautious, but he couldn't blame her after the overwhelming demonstration of the lightwhip. As Venka opened the case, a look of surprise lit up her face. “A Nova? Wasn't this for you?”

Dash took a step closer to her, opening the trenchcoat to reveal a holstered Nova on his leg. A great equalizer, especially in the path of formidable warriors like Hacarita and Melai, if they were so unlucky to encounter enemies as talented. “This one,” he pointed down, “is mine. That one,” he pointed at the desk, “is yours to keep. When I saw how you looked at it, I decided to get a second one for you.” A small platitude; neither he nor the others could always look out for her in the field, either.

After a moment's pause, Venka suddenly embraced Dash in a hug, before blushing and disengaging. “Thank you very much,” she managed to whisper, looking away, her face now a pleasant and revealing shade of pink.

It took Dash's addled brain a moment to process what she had said. *Did she just hug me?* As soon as the second thought had crossed his mind, he realized he already missed the embrace too. “I'm glad you like it.”

She quickly grabbed the case and hurried out the door, leaving Dash staring after her, still entranced by the first bit of physical affection he could recall her sharing with him. In his daze, he thought he'd caught a shy, furtive glance cast over her shoulder as the door whisked shut.

“I was beginning to think she'd be too oblivious to get the hint. Wouldn't call it smooth, but it can't be a bad career choice to make a move on the Captain like that either,” Hacarita jested, refilling her glass from the now nearly-empty bottle and slamming it like a shot, as if it was bottom-shelf swill. Her deliberate sarcasm at his fake title wasn't lost on him.

“Gratitude is a good look on both of you.” He glanced sideways at her, spreading his arms. “A lightsaber isn't enough for a proper hug from you too?”

“Did Maarek or Whitey hug you? If so, maybe later.” Her calibration to neutrality - he'd come to learn it well, he was sure. She turned her head away to look at something, before Dash even realized there was something to look at.

A jarringly-loud whirring sound flooded in from the hallway. “What the hell...” Dash started to say, and moved towards the door, gently nudging her shoulder to lean out into the corridor.

Maarek's panicked voice echoed before them as his form flew by the door in a blur. “How do you stop this thiiiiiiiiing?”

