

## Part Deux: Electric Boogaloo

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## Part Deux: Electric Boogaloo

by [AnInformant](#)

### Summary

A 'friendly' spar devolves further as Venka confronts her Chiss colleague about her involvement in the disappearance of the Century Hawk.

### Notes

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Chronology: Spans before the events on The Wheel, precedes Dritte.

Venka had been intentionally avoiding everyone, stewing in silence, ever since the debacle with the Defender and the Century Hawk. Dash had given her the same party line he'd given Serathiss, and Serathiss herself had asked her to leave the room to converse with Maarek alone.

The 'why' of it was obvious, of course. Her lack of participation in some of their more morally-questionable missions had landed her in hot water. She knew that...*had* known that, when she'd made the choice...er, choices. Her much-lengthier resume to that end, rife with refusals on behalf of the nameless cadre of Imperial hackers, had demonstrated that facet of her personality rather well, so it was as-certainly in the Eye-Eye personnel files for Venka Finnall as it was in those maintained by ISB.

She could only conclude, with reasonable assurance, that she was valuable enough despite her misgivings to be allowed certain leeway.

If Captain Dash was anything, he was the King of Leeway - he trusted her suggestions so

implicitly he'd stopped considering them altogether. A warm, "Whatever you think is best, Venka," inevitably followed her unnecessarily meticulous formal requests. He had demonstrated unquestioning support of her less-lawful skills, too, especially as their missions strayed between a unit operating in direct support of the Empire and a quasi-rebellious cover ID. They were often under the guise of Dash's Raiders now, when it suited whatever assignment Serathiss had doled out to him.

All said, she'd taken the Captain's initial oath the same as anyone else, assuming its inception was at the behest of General Wolen, and intended to uphold it. That was, until recent events had thrown a wrench to short her loyalty circuits.

She'd upgraded comms, specializing in stealth, because while she had no idea if what Dash was planning was *right*, she thought it should at least be done well.

The cold Chiss agent and her Arkanian pet had seen something more than what Dash was telling her about the escape of the Imperial fugitive, she was sure of it. Whitey had been close to a friend, though not as close as Melai and Maarek, but he got bored *so* easily. He'd have set a self-destruct on the Defender just to see if he and Hacarita could bail in time, for fun, if he'd had the relevant access to the ship's emergency functions.

Venka and the former Security Chief had only had to bunk together once, aboard a smaller ship they had only appropriated for a few days, and neither of them had said a single thing to each other when she'd returned from the small shower blue and unclothed, squeezing water from her hair and yawning.

She bit her lip, trying not to say anything. Her mouth got ahead of her, though. "You conceal yourself so thoroughly elsewhere...why not with me?"

Red met her eyes questioningly. "You already knew, didn't you? Beyond that, I have nothing to hide from you."

She had barely told Venka anything about herself! Did she assume that her whole identity was wrapped up in an ISB file? Then again, the notion was safer for them all, politically.

An hour later, upon reclining in the top bunk, she had enough decorum to say, "Goodnight, Venka," and Venka in return had enough to reply, "Sleep well," even though neither of them meant it.

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The woman laughed only around Whitey. And she always scowled at Dash. The conversations she initiated in passing, as a consequence, made absolutely no sense.

"So, are you going to make a move or what?" Hacarita had said after returning the gun she was cleaning to its case and starting in on her knife collection.

Venka had choked on her tea. "I'm sorry...I don't understand."

"If I have to endure any more peripheral effects of the good Captain's bedroom eyes cast at you, I will need to request additional diagnostics from K3MD at my next physical."

"I thought, uh...that *you* were doing the physicals."

"I am, and you're delinquent. Captain Madell asked you to report a week ago. If you prefer the droid I can arrange it."

Venka paused, aware that her avoidance was intentional for loads of obvious reasons, and tried to come up with an excuse. "I've just been...busy."

"It's standard bloodwork, reflex, and ENT. For fuck's sake, Venka, I'm not going to give you a gynecological exam." Hacarita quickly counted on her fingers. "On that note, when was the last time you had one?"

"Recently enough!" Venka shouted hurriedly, trying to avoid the issue.

"Just as well - I'm not qualified for that kind of thing anyway. Do tell me if the Captain finds any breast lumps, though."

"*What!?*"

"You heard me."

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Dash had called her to his new makeshift quarters on the Defender to complete her usual bug sweep after the Century Hawk was lost - *stolen*, if she had to guess, and with Whitey and Hacarita's help, if she had to elaborate. The Captain hadn't consulted her, though...he always would have, before. He'd backed her up as 'squeamish' after her refusal to participate in some of their previous mission objectives, which wasn't untrue, but it seemed less compelling to Serathiss than his ridiculous fabrication about a carbonite-encrusted old man overwhelming their two most competent soldiers.

Melai had been odd, murderous, *gruesome*, but at least he was predictable. She'd watched Hacarita cleave off the head of a man she'd never met on Lothal without moving a single muscle in her face, on Dash's order. Whatever deal he'd struck with Wolen to exchange them must have been a hell of a negotiation. After several months, she'd gleaned no additional details from Dash or Hacarita herself, though she was loath to engage either of them on the subject given her uncomfortably intimate knowledge on the Security Chief's untimely exile. Maarek and Whitey, seemingly, had accepted her incorporation unconditionally.

For what it was worth, Venka was glad the Chiss didn't have a penchant for collecting body parts. At least, not one she overtly identified. A few careful sweeps of some of her bags had revealed dresses and lingerie of exemplary craftsmanship antithetical to her usual armor, but nothing bizarre.

Venka had made a mistake to check more than once. The second time, a note waited for her: *'Feel free to borrow anything you like'*.

What the hell was that supposed to mean?

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Just before she'd left, after completing her work on his conference office with a makeshift bedroom partition, Dash had inquired directly over her shoulder, startling her - she jumped, but he put a calming hand out to steady her. "You've checked this corner three times since you got here. Speak your mind, Venka. What's bothering you? You know you can always talk to me."

How could she even begin to answer that? The reverse wasn't exactly true either. Her thoughts had been a whirlwind since she'd realized in no uncertain terms that the reanimated fugitive had definitely *not* assaulted the Arkanian. That meant it had to be Hacarita...but why? Whitey had, presumably, not implicated her when he'd awoken, unless Dash was being even more cryptic than she'd supposed.

There was the other possibility - that Hacarita had confessed, and Dash had covered for them. That was even more challenging to digest.

Since a hundred words wanted to make their way out of her mouth, she bluescreened, “No...it’s nothing,” and left hastily without waiting for a reply.

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The Wheel, BDT-0978, was glittering and magnificent. The Mid-Rim space station had the diameter of a small moon, and she found herself staring wide-eyed out of portholes in awe of its other features that were, on their own, triumphs of engineering.

She helped negotiate the technical specifications of the Defender repair while Dash smiled and shook hands as he normally did, trying not to think about the havoc the other three crewmembers were sure to wreak in his absence.

The eventual encounter with Rodians, who had done them the favor of arriving at their ship after an ill-advised chase instigated by Whitey, had left them with deliverable cargo and personnel to Onderon.

The others, for some inconceivable reason, insisted on a stop-off at a *shadow port* afterward as if it was somewhere to put your feet up and relax with a cocktail. By the excitement in Whitey’s eyes, she knew it was more about weapons acquisition. By the absolutely unreadable expression in Hacarita’s, she predicted the Chiss had more information than she was disclosing to either him or Maarek. By Dash’s casual dismissal, she knew he had the same information as Hacarita. Being excluded from these decisions was casting errant sparks toward her last fuse.

The Empire wasn’t *perfect* by any means, though she’d never say so out loud, but it was certainly an improvement over the corrupt Republic that had preceded it. She wouldn’t have written a ringing endorsement of their politics, mostly because she didn’t claim nor want to understand them, but the socio-economic boost she’d earned from the Imperial military was impossible not to be grateful for.

And to travel in deep space, on these missions, unhindered, with freedom afforded by the former Ambassador, struck a similar chord. Her hesitancy on previous missions, and the mind-manipulations she couldn’t completely parse, Venka was able to write off for the aforementioned benefits. She’d have thought Dash would be able to as well.

As she prepared to turn in for the night, she wondered about where the others had holed up - Hacarita, in fact, hadn’t slept in the same room as her for a month. On this ship, though, sharing the small bunk really was a sensible thing - it’s not like she was unaware that Venka had picked up on her nonhuman heritage, given her overt lack of modesty, so her desire for privacy couldn’t be because of that. Where she’d gone off to on the ship was easy enough to figure out, though.

The medical wing had a hospital bed and its own shower. Maybe Venka should have done a similar security sweep of the space as she’d performed on Dash’s quarters, but they didn’t exactly enjoy talking to each other, so the point seemed moot.

This compartment, luckily, had a spectacular view of deep space - Venka fell asleep with darts of light coagulating in an afterimage on the back of her eyelids.

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The new day promised to be interesting. It’s when Hacarita had, many months prior in a rare gesture of camaraderie, suggested Venka train with her in hand-to-hand combat on a weekly basis. Venka had skipped the last session, citing fatigue, though her self-isolation was becoming too

obvious at this point. She stepped into the cargo bay, observing that Hacarita was staccato-stabbing a makeshift punching bag with a short dagger while Maarek bravely held it from the other side. Whitey probably wasn't awake yet.

The Chiss was clearly a subject matter expert, likely moulded by some off-the-books Imperial assignments and similar training and programming to Venka and the other Deathtroopers. She eyed Venka upon her tentative entrance and walked toward her, flicking the knife behind her back without looking toward the bag.

The trajectory wasn't toward the bag at all - it was directly at Maarek's head. He caught the blade-end with his bare hand and complained, "Hey, watch it!"

"Don't have to," Hacarita said, bending her elbow over a shoulder and catching his return-fire by the hilt before tossing it toward Venka.

Venka caught it ungracefully as it descended in an arc toward her, thankful that it wasn't a targeted strike like the other two had been playing at.

She had noticed immediately that the woman didn't have any of her makeup on, exposed skin radiating ultramarine in the fluorescent light against the grey bulkhead. If Maarek cared, he didn't say anything. Black sweatpants and a baggy tanktop shifted with her step at her approach, long thick braid curling its end by her waist. It was an odd adornment for close combat - one yank and her neck would twist. Venka had tried it before, actually, and Hacarita had retaliated by hooking a thumb and index finger around the thin bones of her hand on her opposing arm, squeezing and bending so hard she thought her tendons might snap. "Congratulations - your wrist is broken," she had said. "Don't touch my hair."

On this day, she said, "Nice catch, now ditch the weapon."

Venka knew what that meant. She poised herself as steadily as she could and launched the dagger back toward the hanging bag; it was quite the distance, and Maarek looked wary, but it sunk home dead-center. She cheered inwardly and put up her arms defensively as the other woman attacked.

There was no getting around it. Hacarita had a foot in height and forty pounds on her, easily, so she was quickly overwhelmed, as always. She was back-first on the ground in moments. Maybe it was her imagination, but she felt like the slam into the concrete was more gentle than in their previous engagements.

"Time?" Hacarita shouted back toward the pilot.

"Six point two seconds."

"What?" Venka asked.

"Just kidding. Wasn't timing. Seemed longer than before though."

Hacarita rolled her eyes. "I don't see why I invite you if you're not going to be useful."

"I'd be more useful as backup for her, since you seem to delight in kicking her ass every time."

"Yes. This is my delighted face." Flat, stoic, unassuming. About right.

Venka groaned and pushed herself to her feet to resume a defensive position. "I don't *need*..." On second thought, the pilot on her side may be a good idea. She'd been shy and reserved her entire life, with no need to be physical from behind a keyboard and computer screen. Dash had

encouraged her participation in this activity as in the expansion of her abilities, but it was slow-going especially with the others being so domineering. *This* time, though, she had an anger that had been budding in her heart for the past week, and this was the only possible situation she could conceive where she would have the Chiss before her unarmored and disarmed.

“What I *need*,” she started again, “is to understand what happened to the Century Hawk.” Tug at Maarek’s heartstrings too, that couldn’t be a net negative. She was right; his face scrunched and he yanked the dagger out to inspect it.

Hacarita already looked exasperated, and she hadn’t even said anything. “I already told the *Captain* what happened. If you’re really that curious, you should...”

“He’s *lying* to me!” Venka replied through grit teeth. “And by extension, so are you.”

“I take it you have compelling evidence of this claim?” she said calmly. “There were no cameras and no audio recordings. All anyone has is my word.”

“Whitey was incapacitated after de-thawing the prisoner. Our things were stacked neatly in the corridor. *You* were trapped on that ship with a supposed *elite combatant* for at least ten minutes, and you’re *still alive*.”

“Circumstantial,” she replied clinically. “And again, I already explained this to our commanding officer.”

“Fuck you, that’s not what I was asking.”

“Oh, I think Captain Madell is on top of that, quite literally,” Maarek piped up, now cleaning his fingernails with the knife.

Venka was silent. “Excuse me?” she whispered.

“Not constructive, Maarek,” Hacarita chastised, right fist loosely clenching, as if itching for a weapon she couldn’t brandish.

Venka buried her face in her hands. There was *no way* Dash had been taken in by that. The Chiss was tall and beautiful, and her body emanated heat like a furnace, but her manner was icier than their overseer Serathiss. “I’m not hearing any denials,” Venka said quietly.

“*I’ve* never lied to you, Venka.”

“A lie of omission is still a lie.”

Dash chose that extremely inconvenient moment to stride through the access door, a tablet in hand and a mundane question on his lips...that was, until he saw Hacarita glowering in an offensive posture with her arms crossed, and what Venka imagined was a tiny mouse with short brown hair on the verge of tears.

He cleared his throat. “Maarek, I noticed our flight stabilization system was displaying an error up on the bridge. Please see that it’s corrected.”

“You got it boss,” he said, snickering. “Pilot stuff. Nice work, by the way, hope it was worth it. I’m taking bets on who murders you first, Whitey or Venka.”

“*Thank you*, DT-4171, please leave.”

Maarek saluted dramatically and remained silent, though he was still grinning, and exited to the corridor, likely to head to his quarters for a drink, despite the early hour, instead of evaluating Dash's fake diagnostics problem.

"So we've exchanged audiences now," Hacarita said, glaring at them both. "It makes no difference to me. Go on and repeat your accusations. Then, I need you to think very carefully about what you're implying."

"You're a traitor to the Empire," she said, standing her ground. "You aided and abetted an Imperial prisoner for personal gain."

"Venka, you can't..." Dash started, but Hacarita interrupted him without hearing.

"What personal gain!?" she shouted, the first flash of legitimate anger Venka had seen cross her face. It was about time she got emotional about this, too. She had the same reflexes as the other combat soldiers, delicate unconscious checks at where her weapons belt should have been.

"What else is there?" Venka responded in kind, throwing up her hands. "The same thing Whitey's always on about 'contingency plans', money, weapons, who knows what this guy had to offer."

Hacarita was fuming, now, while Dash had snapped his mouth shut and set the tablet, nearly cracked in two from his grip, on a nearby crate.

Her blue lids closed, an attempt at re-centering, but Venka was getting to her. The response started deep and metered, gradually increasing in volume. "Let's say you're right."

Dash's face fell.

"I know I am," Venka said, trying not to look at him.

"You've waited more than a week to report it. I'm sure my torture and execution will be fun for you, but you're also accusing *him*," she gestured at Dash, almost a shout, "of covering for us by lying to Serathiss and then following up that spectacular treachery by *sleeping with me*. What do you think will happen to him?"

Venka was finding it harder to concentrate from all the blood rushing to her ears. She notionally heard Dash's voice in the background, terse, say, "Your provocation is out of line, Cari. Stand down."

"So informal now, Dash, what will your technician think?"

"You should be concerning yourself with what *I* think. This dispute is better managed in a calmer setting than..."

The Chiss interrupted, "Always such pretty words with you! I rather think your mouth serves better occupied with other things."

"So does *yours*," he snapped, before remembering he had another spectator.

"The lot of you can sit around a table later and *discuss* things until you strip your vocal chords," Hacarita continued, stretching her shoulders and cracking her knuckles as she approached Venka again with malicious intent. "We're in the middle of something else right now, though."

Venka saw red. She was charging before she even realized her feet were moving. Hacarita looked smug, then sidestepped at the last moment. Venka's momentum carried her into a stack of cargo

boxes, but she was nimble enough to ping off of one with a quick pushup and take another swing.

“Your anger is making you sloppy,” Hacarita said, dodging it easily. That was nonsense; she’d be on her ass again if the Chiss had an opening. Another swing, and *finally*, a connection, though it was more of a glance off her shoulder and most of the energy sailed through the air instead.

Hacarita still rubbed it, exhaling sharply through her nose and rolling her deltoid backward. “Concentrate. Your enemies won’t care that your delicate sensibilities have been offended,” she sniffled, mocking her as she swept Venka’s legs out from under her. She landed hard on her back, again, gasping for breath as the woman stood over her, blocking the overhead light with her hands clasped behind her.

“Get up.”

Dash had, wisely, stepped back to the wall and was rubbing his temple with his left hand, as she had seen him do often, though less frequently as of late, likely making quite an effort not to interfere while covertly arming stun settings on his side piece.

Venka struggled to her feet, panting. “My *delicate sensibilities*? I wouldn’t use either of those words to describe how serious this is to me,” she sobbed, grasping for words that never seemed descriptive or eloquent enough. It’s why she’d learned to stay quiet. “I don’t deserve to feel this. It’s agony.”

Her adversary laughed, a sharp, monosyllabic sound that echoed in the large hall. “How unfortunate. You can’t just come right out and say how you’re feeling, you know, it gives me an even more substantial advantage. Are you going to try again or am I wasting my time?”

“I’m telling you that I’m *hurt*. Why can’t you understand that?”

“And I’m telling you to Get. Over. It.”

Just like that! Venka knew very well it wasn’t that easy for her, either. She let her head hang for a moment, cheeks caged by a brown curtain of hair, staring at the floor and willing her introversion to take back over. The pendulum swung the other way, though. “Get over it. Of course. Like how you ‘got over’ whatever it was that led you to slit a man’s throat at the Chiss Embassy on Coruscant - kind of like that? What did he do? Something selfish that made you question every loyalty you’d ever professed? Because that’s what you did to *me*. On multiple fronts.”

Hacarita’s glowing red eyes seemed to pulse as her eyebrows narrowed. It was enough to tell Venka that she hadn’t been far off from guessing correctly. “This isn’t about me at all. Your participation in the murders of Imperial soldiers, civilians, *children* isn’t treason, but whatever you think Whitey and I did in saving a man’s life *is*?”

“I was *not* complicit in...”

“Your *inaction* is participation, Venka!” She was yelling now, gesturing wildly and pacing back and forth like a large predatory cat waiting for its target to attempt an escape. “You’re even worse than what you’re claiming about me, you know. You perch yourself up on a pillar you think is the Right Thing and look down on the rest of us, but you’re just another paranoid Imperial spy bereft of any semblance of what it actually means to stand up for something. At least when I have the opportunity in front of me, I reach out and *take what I want*.”

Did she imagine Hacarita’s brief glance back at Dash? Two small pops echoed in the bay, a sound she identified instantly as holster safety catches releasing.



Venka had finally tried the other woman's patience enough, though, because she struck first this time, but had stopped pulling her punches. If her first shot at the side of Venka's head had landed, she would have been out cold. The second, a powerful right hook, clipped her jaw painfully and she saw stars. If Venka wanted to fight back with her fists now, it would be impossible with the disorientation.

Those movements, careful, graceful steps to tower behind her for the coup de gras...Venka had seen this sequence before a dozen times in sparring and combat; it was devastating and sometimes deadly. It's what she'd been waiting for.

The grapple closed a bare blue elbow and toned bicep around her neck, and she couldn't breathe, but knowing what Hacarita's other arm was going to do to restrain her made twisting one shoulder away simple. It left a single pale hand free; not for a strike, but to grab a device in her waistband and activate it. The Chiss only had a fraction of a second in warning at the crackle of electricity, but it wasn't enough before Venka shanked it back into her ribs just under her breasts and pressed the discharge. She was the perfect height for this, really.

Her reaction was truly a spectacle. She gasped and spasmed, releasing her chokehold involuntarily as Venka felt the residual minor jolts from the skin contact. The smell of burning flesh and the blood dripping from the corner of her mouth as the woman fell with a clunk should have made her sick, but instead a shameful delight tightened in her chest at the triumph.

Dash was running back toward them now, eyes brimming with concern and fury, probably regretting now not stepping in to stop them earlier. "You brought a *weapon*!?" he scolded, gripping the incapacitated woman by the shoulder as Venka stood and leaned down over her face, ignoring him.

"Thanks for the advice on taking what I want," she hissed. "This is a good start." Venka pocketed the taser and didn't look back on her way out, even when the laboured breathing of her victim became more erratic.

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"K3MD to me, on the double," Dash shouted into his commlink, before his addled brain remembered the droid wasn't onboard. "Shit...Cari... *Cari*," he begged as she tensed and arched her back again, red eyes to the ceiling as the aftereffects started to dissipate. "What were you thinking...did you have to rile her up like that?" he muttered, pulling her shirt up to inspect the charred flesh marring her defined abdomen. *Ouch*. Some of the skin was already black, peeling away to reveal pale blue underneath. Surrounding it was a constellation of other scars, slashes and stabs, some dark and some light, but he'd mapped those out already. Seeing her lie there, actually vulnerable unlike the gracious show she put on for him in the bedroom, made his throat tighten with genuine worry.

She shakily raised her right hand; he thought she was going to caress his face, but her fingers settled deeply into the pulse point on her own neck instead. She closed her eyes tightly in concentration.

"Dash..." Cari strained, groaning. "My heartbeat...is, *ah*... irregular. Charge the defibrillator from the E-kit to restore sinus rhythm."

He'd done the same basic medical training as any recruit, so while he knew how to use the damn thing, his adrenaline in an actual emergency was doing him no favors of concentration. One thing Cari had insisted on being installed on all of their ships were readily-accessible emergency kits with equipment like the defib and stypics - it was certainly serving her well now.

Dash extracted the two metal plates and settled them gently below her clavicle, wincing as the zap caused her body to convulse. He was only mildly ashamed that he found the movement a little erotic.

She read her pulse again, but her expression was so blank Dash couldn't tell what she was thinking. Her breathing seemed to stabilize, though, and she struggled into a seated position on her own, sighing and finally looking over at him directly.

"We will need to set up the requisite equipment in the medbay so I can give myself an EKG," she directed as she removed her shirt, carefully pulling the fabric from the burn wound before lifting it over her head. He blinked and tried not to stare, still wishing she was wearing a bit less than a supportive undergarment.

She went to work diligently on first-aid for the damaged skin, while wiping blood from her mouth and chin with the tank top.

"Are you...?" Could that weapon even cause internal bleeding?

"Bit my tongue," she said. "Don't worry, the rest of the damage is superficial." She looked like she was desperately trying to temper all of the cursing and shouting that should be coming out of her mouth instead of blunt clinical statements. "I'll self-monitor for a few days," she continued. "That wasn't a normal taser, which is designed not to conduct through the heart. Likely one of Whitey's modifications. He *really* does excellent work." The last statement was followed by a tentative smile, so he returned it.

"Are you sure you're alright?"

"Physically, eventually. I'm not sure why you're still here with me, though. I underestimated your plucky technician. She really is just as depraved as the rest of us. You should probably head that off before she goes on a rampage."

"I will have a talk. You should probably have someone looking after you tonight, though."

She caught the angle and grinned wickedly. "Hm, I would advise a patient who sustained such an injury to avoid vigorous physical activity," she said with a lilt, raising an eyebrow.

"Then you shouldn't struggle so much." He brushed his thumb along her cheekbone and grasped her hand at her hip.

"Stop that," she said firmly, pulling away.

He frowned. During their last hot-blooded tryst she had called it all a 'biological imperative'. Was she really that afraid of something other than physical affection? To suggest to her face that she was afraid of *anything* would likely land him in the hospital wing too, though.

Dash stood them up together and gripped her upper arms, pulling her just close enough to make her think he was going to kiss her before looping an arm under her thighs unexpectedly and hoisting her into his arms. She gasped initially, then looked irritated.

"I can walk, you know."

"Not yet. Tests first. Plus, this is much funnier for me."

She didn't protest verbally but the glare he got as he extricated her back to the medical bay stirred an arsenal of scandalous thoughts. He did his best to re-blank his mind as he left soon afterward in

search of her unlikely assailant.

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Dash found his technician in the engine room, tapping away at an array of consoles as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. She had changed out of her sparring clothes and into a crisp, fresh uniform, though he wished she hadn't had time. He'd given it to her, in a way, by taking too long with his...other responsibilities. But neglecting to track Venka down, and subsequently burning time searching the rest of the ship, had given her time to get buried in work.

He took a breath, intending to speak first, but she had noticed his presence already and took the initiative. "Something I can help you with, Captain?" she asked politely. She turned to glance at him as she spoke, before twisting back to the screen. Her detached coldness and forced formalism was irritating, but it was not like he didn't understand.

*Of course, Venka, what are your thoughts on taking down a massively more imposing, elite Chiss warrior? Just another day, yes?* He admired her for succeeding even though he'd never, even under duress, admit that to either of them.

Instead, he sighed. "There's no need for an official address. I have to understand where your head's at, Venka."

She remained stubbornly facing the screen, all but ignoring him. "As you can see, my head is currently engaged in an engine calibration."

He moved to stand between her and the viewscreen she had been looking at, imitating the poise of a drill sergeant even though he had never been a military commander. "Save your snark for someone who deserves it. The incident this morning has been brewing for a while; you've been off your game since we debarked the corvette!" He leaned a little closer, softening his posture, trying to glean her expression from the face hidden behind wisps of bangs, but all he saw were the unshed tears that had manifested in the cargo bay prickling at the corners of her eyes. She shifted her eyes to look up at him defiantly, but the rest of her face was stone.

"There's nothing I can say to you that I haven't already said out loud. I expect you to lie to our adversaries, but I don't expect you to lie to *me*." She reached her fist out to his chest and shoved him lightly; he rocked back, out of courtesy, but let the silence linger until she wanted to speak again. "I...I was your confidant for *so long*. You trusted me with protecting your crew and using my technical skills to protect *you*. You even shared your past, and what your family did to you, and what they deserve. Somehow, the actions of a woman who hasn't been with us for two months and those of *our friend* who she manipulated onto a marionette have supplanted that, and for what? At best, they let a felon get away. At worst, it's actively aiding the Rebellion." She hadn't even paused to breathe, and when she did at last, it was only one long, ragged intake of air before she continued, visibly more upset. "The worst of it though, Dash, the *worst* of it, is that she took *you* for the same ride. Mind *and body*, if Maarek's account is accurate."

She paused to see how he would react, but he chose not to. The tears had escaped now, forming rivulets down her cheeks flushed with effort and sentiment, but it didn't stop her from *really* asking. "*Is it accurate?*"

He was a master of deflection, and wanted to avoid that thread altogether, easy with something more inflammatory. "You nearly killed her, you know," he said instead.

"That's a shame," Venka replied hastily, but he didn't know if she was disappointed that she hadn't or upset about how close she'd come. "It's obvious now why you have been deceiving our superiors for her. What exactly do you want from *me*?"

"I want you to cool down!" he retorted angrily, twisting away from her for a moment; he took a deep breath, steadying himself in the bubble of anger emanating from Venka that was assuredly affecting him, too. "Right now...if I were to write a report, I'd have to describe you as 'unfit for duty'. I am empowered to relieve you and I won't hesitate if you won't cooperate, but we both know you're better than this."

She flinched at the last comment, and for the first time he actually got a good look at the black bruise staining her jawbone. He reached a hand up to her face, tenderly grabbing her chin with a thumb and forefinger, tilting her head back to examine it more closely. "I'm not surprised you wanted to hurt her, but did you have to dump the full charge?"

She pulled away from his grip and glared at him, swiping his wrist away from her. "I was mad. Still am, especially at you. How could you go along with such a stupid plan?"

Dash leveled his gaze and cocked an eyebrow. "You thought they had a *plan*? An Arkanian Offshoot with a twitchy trigger finger and a girl who murdered a diplomat on a whim in broad daylight? I'd expect you to give me a little more credit than that." He turned away, folding his arms. "If you're asking if I agree with their conduct...no, I can't say that I do. They should have cleared it with me first. And I sure as hell wouldn't have agreed to the defrost while our superiors were quite literally next door - all I'm doing now is damage control. And part of that, unfortunately, includes some compartmentalization."

"That's a big word for 'keeping me in the dark'."

"Neither you nor Maarek have been very amenable to flaunting Imperial directives when it's necessary."

"If you were so worried about me blowing the whistle, how could you possibly justify this sequence of events as *necessary*?"

The hum of the engine provided a pleasant backdrop of white noise, similar to the static bouncing around in his brain, and he fought the urge to reach out for her again; to tug on an elbow, grace a thumb lightly over her lips, or pull her into his arms. "You're too smart to be put in that position. I should have known, but I was leaning on too much of my earlier skillset when I was surrounded by..." He hesitated to call out the morons he'd had the displeasure of dealing with before his military appointment, thinking better of the comparison. "Well, that's not important. The full story is that Hacarita and Whitey were blinded by different expressions of greed, some aspects of which I haven't fully parsed. They were supposed to have our ship unloaded and the man gone before we got there, but as is typical for *your* efforts," he praised, "we were too quick. It is likely we will get our ship back, though I'm not sure where. Now you're up to speed."

"Do you need me to spell out the definition of 'traitor'?" She had mouthed the last word, silently. It was a small but significant acquiescence that a lesser negotiator would have missed.

Dash shook his head. "You can't assault people just because you think they made a mistake. Hacarita is right about your lack of evidence and the unfortunate timing if you did decide to come forward now. I have a hard time believing that you, of all people, especially given all of the other terrible things we have been responsible for, would insist that the preservation of a life and the acquisition of a potential ally is worse than the alternative."

He paused again and she bit her lip. He dropped the volume of his voice into something soothing, noncombative, and trailed four fingers along the crease of worry over her eyebrow. Her eyes fluttered shut. "They are still members of this crew. As are you. They chose to be honest with me, and I spun it so we didn't get spaced. I don't expect you to be happy about their choices, or mine."

What I need to know is...can you live with them?"

She flashed defiance and looked away, so he continued, "If this team fails, we fail as a unit. If it comes to that, I can pull the trigger first and explain that it was my idea; state on the record that you acted under my orders, insisting that it was against your better judgment. It may not shield any of you from the fallout, but such are the hazards of leadership. I alone am ultimately responsible for all of you, and for everything you do.

"It is important for me to know - can you still perform your duties as part of this team? You will have to come to terms with what happened on the Century Hawk if so."

"Their actions were selfish and stupid."

"I challenge you to tell me you've never made a selfish and stupid decision."

"I wouldn't do something so...so..." She choked and swallowed again, digging her fingers into his uniform shirt as if trying to cut through the fabric. He gripped her wrist and pressed on the delicate bones under her wrists with his thumb, though not painfully.

"It's easy for me to admit. I'm not a stranger to being a huge idiot, and I learned from it...why is it so hard for you?"

Some of the fight left her body beneath his hands, and he took the opportunity despite his earlier misgivings to pull her into a chaste hug. Her voice at the crook of his shoulder was soft, hushed, when she spoke again, "Why would you do that for us? For me?"

He would have looked at her quizzically if they'd still been looking at each other. His reply was tinged with sadness even though he fought it, "I've been willing to do that for you since our first mission. Whitey in particular sure as hell doesn't make it easy to extend such goodwill, though."

A sharp exhale that may have been a stifled laugh warmed his neck, but he knew he'd back up that lunatic as readily as the rest - *had*, on many occasions - his chaotic nature was more valuable despite its pitfalls.

"Don't confuse my concession for surrender," he continued, skimming the back of her head with his fingers until she relaxed further, "I have no intention of rotting in some Imperial prison. I've developed enough tradecraft to disappear so handily even *you* would have trouble tracking me down." He pulled back and tilted her chin up gently, until their lips were only inches apart. "I'm certain I'd hate running, especially without you, knowing that you would suffer for my choices. But, and I say this without a hint of remorse; it's not like the Madell family name can sink any lower."

She looked taken aback and finally met his eyes with hers that had been downcast, lips rosy and tears still glistening on her face. "I don't know if I can still help you, Dash. Is that enough? I can't process this if you're willing to sabotage my effort in order to..."

"My appointment affords some latitude on that front," he whispered, taking her hand. She tried to recoil, but ultimately let him thread her fragile fingers through his own. "Take everything you need and come to me when you're having doubts. I'll do the same; I need your counsel, especially for something as serious as this."

A new set of tears overflowed from her eyes and she wept, uninhibited, while clinging to him in a now-desperate embrace that he returned emphatically. Her chest heaved with the effort as he stroked the back of her head, wishing there was something else he could say.

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Exhausted, he delivered Venka to her bunk and trudged down to the medical wing. It must only be mid-afternoon, but he felt like he'd gotten hit by a freighter. Neither Whitey nor Maarek had made an appearance since the altercation, likely smelling the blood and knowing better than to pry.

He found Cari reclined, hooked up to a monitor, watching the neon spikes glide across the small screen with rapt attention. Her hair was splayed out behind her head in a dark halo against the sterile white of the pillowcase. In a different world, one where she wasn't living in exile having to rely on fighting and cunning to survive, she may have made a life as a healer instead of a destroyer. The thought was bittersweet and he didn't share it.

She didn't look like she was in a talkative mood, not that she ever was, and said nothing as he laid next to her and placed a hand on her stomach just below the bandages. She tensed, and then relaxed as he rested his head on her shoulder. Her comment about personal gain made him think of the drive she had looted from his room. There was certainly something still that she wasn't sharing, yet, even though she had promised to, but he had her alone often enough now to pry when it was more appropriate.

She didn't ask, but he had prepared an answer anyway. "I don't know what she'll do. You may want to reconsider fleeing with your new friend if you have another opportunity at Point Nadir."

"I would return to Csilla. No Imperial may follow me there, no matter if the Emperor himself wants my head. The Chiss do not extradite."

Back to her homeworld, then? That was certainly a surprise. "{I would miss you.}"

"I told you to stop that."

So she did. He chuckled and drifted off into a surprisingly restorative sleep, given the circumstances.

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