

Point Nadir

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Point Nadir

by [AnInformant](#)

Summary

Maarek remembers Dritte differently and follows orders. Cari and Venka try to rationalize their choices while Dash struggles to maintain unit cohesion. Whitey is Whitey.

Prologue

“Hey.”

“What do you want, Maarek? I’m exhausted.”

Maarek observed that she wasn’t any more dismissive than usual. It had been a few hours since Dash’s interrogation, and she hadn’t said a word to anyone - not to Serathiss, who glared at her, or Wolen, who looked like he actually wanted her to, as the whole squad made their way back to the Defender. “You’re the only one who really saw anything. What happened to my ship?”

Hacarita sighed, leaning against the doorframe. “I’ve already gotten grilled today, so please spare me.” He must have really looked disheartened, because she actually relaxed her defensive posture and steadied him at the shoulder. “Maarek, are you alright?” She took out a small, bright flashlight from her belt and passed it in front of his eyes. Was he meant to follow the beam? He didn’t want to; it hurt.

“Yes, just the headaches. Same story.”

“We’ll move your next physical up, just in case. Maybe after we’re finished at The Wheel.”

“Fine by me.”

She clicked the light off and made direct eye contact. It was a little disconcerting, but he wasn’t going to back down. “The sh…”

“Yes, yes, I didn’t forget.” Completely unreadable. “You’ll get your ship back, Maarek.”

Finally. “How do you know that?”

“Well it’s kind of famous, right? The guy’s flying a fucking neon sign that says, ‘Capture me!’. He’ll ditch it first chance he gets, and then we’ll pick it up.”

And the fugitive, too. “Did you talk to him?”

“Goodnight, Maarek.” She turned away and slammed the button on the door. It slid together with a hush and he stood there for a few more seconds before shrugging and heading down the corridor.

Hacarita had relaxed substantially up through their encounter at The Wheel. Her initial wariness of him, wherever it had come from, had softened to the point that the good-natured ribbing he bounced off Whitey caught clever quips from her on their way back. He was still irritated with her avoidance of the subject of the escapee, enough to bait her about Dash in front of Venka, but he didn’t regret it. He just needed the woman to give him *enough* to go on to complete his objective.

Now was as good a time as any to try again, if she would quit asking medical questions for five seconds.

“You mentioned some trouble with headaches recently. Can you describe them in more detail?”

He sighed. “Sure, sure. It’s just a nuisance. Made worse by your interference on Lothal… Whitey said you sedated me!” His condition really had deteriorated since then - maybe he had some kind of allergy to the sedative.

“You were making us look really stupid. It could have blown our cover.”

Half-truth. She was good at those. “Bullshit,” he said good-naturedly. “I’m sure you’re right, but that’s not why you did it.”

She didn’t even look back at him when she replied, “Care to regale me with your version of events, then?”

Fine, this was as good a segue into what he really wanted to ask anyway. “It was so obvious. 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’d 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.”

A brief, strange pause followed his admission, and then one of her own, “I do admit I felt a certain...distress, I suppose, but nothing like the pain you describe in the aftermath.” She was fiddling with something in her hands that he couldn’t see. “Did your migraines develop in adolescence, or later into adulthood? ...or more recently, perhaps?”

An image of the ion cannon on Lothal flashed over his vision, bright like he was staring into a sun, and then it was gone. He rubbed his eyes and shrugged as she walked back over with the syringe - ah, she must have been dispensing something for his head. It would be most welcome, now. “Don’t recall,” he said as she stuck him again; this needle was bigger, and it stung more. “Ugh, I think I’m done with getting stabbed for now.”

“Fortunately for you, that was the last one.”

That was as good a mood as he was going to get. She had a way of dancing around direct questions, but he would just have to push harder. “Looking forward to Onderon?” he asked innocently.

Her flat gaze in response revealed nothing. “I know we have passengers and cargo to drop off, but...Whitey was rather insistent on making some procurements first. I’m inclined to support him.”

The albino’s participation in this debacle was another pin in the cushion he could yank at later. “I’m just itching to get the Century Hawk back.”

“And you have reason to believe it’s on Onderon?” she asked curiously.

Whitey, he knew, wanted to go to Point Nadir. Venka and Dash wanted to finish the mission they had acquired at The Wheel. That meant Maarek himself was the deciding vote, if the captain didn’t exert his override authority. She wouldn’t pass up this opportunity if she had a strong opinion either way. “I don’t have reason to believe it’s anywhere in particular,” he replied. “Do you?”

She chewed on her lip. It was out of character. “I told you we would get your ship back, and I was telling the truth. Advocate for Point Nadir and I will prove it to you.” She rubbed her temple.

So, she had manipulated Whitey too. “How do you know it’s there?”

“I don’t! Not...not for sure.”

Try the direct approach again, why not. “Did you work with the fugitive to arrange for its delivery there?”

“I tried to kill him!”

“Not hard enough, apparently.”

“You have no idea what he’s capable of. He told me...”

“He told you? So were you talking to him or trying to kill him? Which story is it now?”

“I couldn’t even if I had wanted to!” She was rubbing both sides of her head now.

“You didn’t *want* to?”

“Maarek, I am trying to help you!” she snapped. Keep talking. “I asked him to leave it at Point Nadir. He *told me* he would.” She was clutching her head in her hands, as if in tremendous pain.

“The fugitive is there?” He flexed his hand, looking down at it. It felt like he had picked something up for a moment, but it was empty.

“I don’t *know*...” She wobbled and curled over, thumbs pressing into her eye sockets.

The obvious conclusion. “You betrayed this team, first by helping an enemy, and again by withholding this information.”

He moved toward her, and she stepped back, ungracefully tripping over her heel and toppling to the ground. She scooted away from him, breathing heavily. Moisture was collecting at the corners of her eyes and she tapped her fingers to them, pulling out her human contacts. As if looking into her real eyes made any difference to him for something like this.

“I will endorse your detour,” he continued, crossing his arms. “Do you understand why?”

Her mouth was moving but she was silent. He cocked his head and leaned a little closer, until an answer could be heard though it was just a whisper, “...Daro Madell’s ship.”

“The Century Hawk?” he repeated. Obviously she would be focused on that - she’d already said that. This ship was important, sure.

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

That was more like it. Now they would be, anyway. He had what he needed. She was just misguided - Serathiss could save them all as long as they corrected the indiscretion, no matter how they’d participated. “Finally.” Seriously, “how’d you let that miscreant take it anyway?”

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t strong enough.”

It wasn’t quite the guilt-trip he’d been hoping for, but it would do for now. Luckily for her, and the rest of them, Maarek was strong enough for all of them to do what needed to be done. “Yeah, well, you’ll have backup this time.” It came off a little more tentative than he wanted, considering...

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

“Oh, I actually feel much better now.” He did, on all fronts! Hacarita was finally being forthcoming, to her ultimate benefit, his headache was dissipating with whatever medication she’d shot into him with that last jab, and his mind was clearing from his other intrusive thoughts. He might actually sleep more than two consecutive hours tonight.

Maarek looked around and pulled his arm behind his neck, stretching his shoulder, making to stand, but found he was already standing. His blaster was on the bed and his squadmate was still sitting down, of all things, on the grey tile of the medbay as far from him as she could get. “Why are you on the floor?” he griped condescendingly. For someone who didn’t back down from a

fight, the willingness to remain in such a meek position was annoying.

She gave him the one-fingered salute, but it just improved his disposition.

Friend or Fugitive

Dash argued with Maarek over where to park; he preferred the Tethers. That argument had been preceded by another with Cari, that Dash had expected to be about Venka, but her name didn't even come up.

His pilot didn't *seem* out of sorts - Cari's plea to relieve him from duty was compelling until Dash had interviewed him at length, under the guise of revising their last routine mission report. He had been responsive, logical, and thorough. Save for the incident on Lothal, he had always been. Maybe not driven by a particular moral compass, unless unwavering obeisance for Serathiss' orders counted, but that theme of transgression, if he was even at liberty to call it that, had mostly served them well.

"He pointed a gun at my head," Cari said gravely, arms crossed and eyebrows narrowed before him in his office. She had refused to sit down.

"I have seen you disarm three men at once before they even had time to react. Why didn't you relieve him of his weapon?" His skepticism was warranted, because he'd never seen her let her guard down in the thick of a fight.

"I was unable to move."

"How? Did he nick you with one of your tranquilizers?"

"No..." she protested, an edge of trepidation in her voice he couldn't remember hearing before. "He did it with his mind."

It sounded ridiculous, but she'd gone off on this tangent before. "Why would he do that?"

"I don't think...I don't think he has control over it. I don't think he knows what he's doing. It's some expression of anterograde amnesia."

"It is difficult for me to understand your position," Dash replied, full negotiator persona in effect. "Can you be more direct in what you are suggesting about Maarek?"

"There...there are *two*. One of them likely knows why *I know* more about the circumstances surrounding the escape of the fugitive than I ought to." She paused. "He's dangerous," she whispered.

"He's *useful*," Dash countered. "Your report indicated nothing amiss because *you chose* to omit these details. I cannot justify relieving him on a verbal account, but..."

She hunched, so opposing her usual stalwart posture that he softened his tone immediately. He stood and strode deftly around the desk, gripping her shoulders even though she refused to look at him. "But," he continued. "I *do* believe you, and I am listening. This neurology doctor you spoke of - do you know where to find one?"

"I was hoping your connections would be more fruitful to that end," she enunciated, looking up into his eyes finally and relaxing under his touch.

The conversation with Dash hadn't exactly gone as planned. Had Cari been in his place, she'd have assessed the psychological profile of a woman with that profound lack of eloquence as a total

basket case, which was honestly an offensive and inaccurate representation of a person with a legitimate psychiatric disorder.

She wasn't exactly an expert on those, but the self-diagnosis of post-traumatic stress couldn't be too far from the truth given what she'd endured under the thumb of the Chiss military and Maarek's unprovoked and unwelcome mental trespass. Every once and again, in an industrial space with a lot of space-faring vessels, the scent of something resembling the particular exhaust from the fuel composition of a Chiss fleet vessel would cause her throat to close and her heart to race.

More disturbing were the tingles she got in her fingers when she passed by the helm of the Defender, whether Maarek was there or not. Piloting had always been necessary drudgery, but she hadn't felt the G-force exhilaration of Sight-guided certainty since she was twelve.

Once, he had stopped her with a firm grab at her wrist when she tried to leave the bridge. She didn't react. "Still sparring in the morning?" he asked playfully, still blissfully unaware of what he'd done.

"Always," she said casually, then raised her voice to shout at Venka across the room. "See you at eight?"

The other girl looked surprised, then palmed at her hip. Good instincts! She was learning after all. "I didn't realize I was still invited," Venka said softly.

"As you can see, Maarek is terrified. Give him a good reason to be," she finished, wrenching her arm from the pilot's grasp and beelining down the hallway without looking back.

She tiptoed down the hall next time, when their *guests* were happily snoozing in a food coma instigated by Dash, who apparently could cook. Their captain had negotiated a mission to give two sisters, part of one smuggling guild or another, passage (along with their merchandise) to Onderon. Cari certainly hadn't been surprised that he had wanted that out of the way as quickly as possible, not understanding that the retrieval of the Century Hawk was on an uncomfortable clock.

Whitey, her steadfast partner in crime, was traveling backwards as they lugged the entirety of the x-ray apparatus down to the cargo hold. It wasn't *really* meant to be portable, but it was the only undetectable assay method they were going to be afforded for Amari and Nee'na's clandestine cargo. Dash had insisted they find out what the hell it was *without* opening the boxes. Their latest 'customers' had begrudgingly approved the diversion to Point Nadir, at least.

There was a precarious two-stair drop into the cargo hold, and whoever had designed this fucking ship had Cari's eternal condemnation, because Whitey tripped and nearly dropped the damn machine. Cari really wouldn't have blamed him, given the navigational difficulty, and also given the weight, but he somehow had managed to catch it with two pinky fingers before curling the rest underneath in a more stable purchase.

Then, he winked, and *she* almost dropped the fucking thing. "Go," she growled, and he skittered backward at an alarming pace toward their targets, snickering.

Personal deflector shields were very rare and very illegal, and Whitey immediately had a hundred plans to steal them. The other package afforded too much shielding for her device to penetrate.

"We can negotiate for a few, I'm sure," she said to him back in the medbay, passing a pilfered bottle of the Captain's whiskey between them.

“Ugh, you sound like Dash,” he lamented, gulping more than a few shots and handing it back.

“Or, we could kill them and take it all.”

“Now you sound like Melai.”

“Who the fuck am *I*, then!?”

“You’re great!” he beamed, before toppling back onto the pillows of the hospital bed.

She fought desperately the urge to curl next to him like Dash had done for her.

They had managed a proper docking station closer to the market Whitey was salivating over. Dash had gotten no further with Cari, except for in the carnal sense, or Maarek, in the traditional sense. The man was looking at him strangely now, though, and Cari seemed to be avoiding the pilot even though Maarek was perplexed by her behavior. By the sound of things, he’d held his own against Cari in hand-to-hand even without Whitey, so maybe she was upset about that. Or, the threat on her life. Which still sounded preposterous, because Maarek was a fall-in-line soldier before all else, and he wouldn’t be hostile towards his own crewmates - would he?

“Hacarita said you threatened her,” Dash said to break the silence.

“You mean when she jabbed me with that giant needle? I was just responding to her beside manner - it’s a thing me and her do,” he shrugged, steering them gracefully into a slot at the slips just behind Fische’s Pub at the auspicious Point Nadir. “I also kicked her ass yesterday. She’s probably ticked off about that.”

“Next thing you know she’ll be piloting you under the table!” Dash grinned, clapping him on the back.

Maarek laughed, a full belly of it, and almost lost his concentration on the docking maneuver.

“That will be the day!”

Upon landing, as the Defender settled in, Venka completed her final system backup and pocketed the drive just in time for the debarking ramp to deploy. Dash usually took up the forward position, to engage the locals, but this time Maarek pushed past all of them.

A drab-looking Hutt was blocking his egress, and starting speaking, “*H’chu apenkee!...Kava su nudcha?*”

“I’m going to stop you right there,” Maarek said, swatting the creature with the back of his hand on the way by and gesturing with his thumb behind him. “Talk to him.”

Dash was speechless, only for a moment, but did look very much in charge when flanked by the Arkanian and the Chiss, unconcealed, in full armor. Whitey, apparently, hadn’t been paying a whole lot of attention in general, because the first thing he said to a frowning Hacarita after the initial shock of her appearance wore off was, “Why so blue?” Venka was positive she was going to hit him again, but the other girl just smiled and turned away.

Venka peeked around him to observe, their passengers in tow behind her.

“...Do you speak Basic?” Dash inquired politely as the Hutt was toggling his large, amorphous eyes between Maarek’s gaffe and the Captain.

“Some Basic,” the mafia scab replied, voice deep and rattling and heavily-accented. *“You owe three-thousand credits for protection.”*

Oh okay, a protection racket then. Why the hell had Hacarita and Whitey been so insistent on coming here, again!?

Dash’s charm, luckily, was pervasive even for other species of the same gender. “I was told it was only a hundred!” he pouted, hands on his hips, and his *protectors* played the part, unholstering their weapons. The Hutt looked alarmed.

Venka leaned over to Amari, who was blinking rapidly and looking between Dash and the one-grunt blockade. “This happens all the time,” Venka reassured. “They’ll come down to three-hundred and call it a day.”

“One thousand would be acceptable.”

“I will come up to two hundred, but I must insist! This is a grievous insult.”

The Hutt’s eyes darted nervously back and forth, looking at nothing. *“I could accept three.”*

“Three hundred! I suppose. Whitey, pay the man please.”

Whitey was certainly not the bearer of the purse strings, so he fidgeted in his uniform for a moment before removing what was *definitely* a pickpocketed chip. “This has three-oh-four?”

“A generous bonus!” Dash replied, swiping it from Whitey’s hand and baring his pearly smile one more time. “Please see that our ship is left alone,” he requested, striding down the ramp. Whitey and Hacarita followed, and Venka with the sisters brought up the rear. She reviewed the checklist in her mind one more time to make sure she hadn’t forgotten anything.

It took them a moment to catch up to Maarek, who had already generated a holo-image of the escaped fugitive and was showing it to passersby with abandon, as if he had never been on an intelligence mission.

Hacarita tapped Dash with her elbow. He responded immediately. “Maarek, please be more discreet.”

“The objective is to complete our procurements and leave quickly,” Hacarita followed.

“What was it, exactly, that you were here to look for Whitey?” Venka asked skeptically.

“Don’t worry,” Maarek said with his usual certainty, but he was looking at Hacarita instead of either her or the albino. “My method is sound. This enemy of the Empire took our ship, so if we find him, we can arrest him and make him take us to it.” Why hadn’t he been similarly insistent at The Wheel, then?

He paused like he wanted to say something else, but Dash had turned away to murmur something to Nee’na and Maarek’s eyes went straight to his ass like a homing beacon. Dash caught him, of course, likely used to such evaluations from most women, and more than a few men, but not *Maarek*. The pilot looked at the ground, brow furrowed in confusion, after the eye contact.

Dash cleared his throat and relaxed his arched eyebrow, likely as bewildered by the once-over as Venka. “Fine, Maarek, do it your way.” Hacarita was usually unreadable but Venka saw surprise twitch into the fine muscles of her face before she could stop it. “Venka, go with him.”

What? Incredible. She wouldn't even have to ask for it.

"Whitey, Hacarita, ladies...with me." Amari and Nee'na shared a look before falling in step, and the Chiss couldn't help but get in a jab, apparently.

"I'm still waiting for an apology," Hacarita said to Venka unsympathetically. "I have an arrhythmia."

Was she serious? "You're going to be waiting a long time," Venka retaliated. The other woman just smirked so she added, "You're going shopping, right? You ought to avoid picking up any more audacity, because you already have a fucking lot of it."

Even Dash's eyes snapped up at her for the curse, but she couldn't be bothered. Maarek beckoned with a finger and she followed, gladly.

Team Alpha set off toward the Nest - Dash would normally be in the lead, but Cari had hurried as quickly as Maarek in the direction *she* wanted to go. "Where to?" he asked her with a well-practiced tone, wishing her answer could be, 'to the beach for a sunset walk,' instead of what it was.

"Cruelest Cut," she replied without elaboration, scowl plastered on her face as she eyed anyone who came within twenty feet with a look that made them scatter.

"I'll barely need this giant weapons bag," Whitey said from Dash's other side. "They're terrified of you, Cari! It's amazing!"

"It's a more diverse crowd than we're used to, but I still doubt that many of them have seen someone like me."

"You think it's your cool gear, your intimidating presence, or your extraordinary beauty?" Whitey sweet-talked, elbowing her in the tricep and waggling his eyebrows. Dash expected her to tell him off but she rolled her eyes and *laughed*.

The girls behind them did too - Nee'na's giggles stifled by her hand and Amari's by the crook of her elbow. The latter spoke first, "What a charmer! How do you all resist?"

"With excruciating difficulty."

Dash tried to find the humor in it but could only manage one of his fake smiles which, in his humble opinion, was still pretty potent.

Cari had pulled Whitey in close and whispered something to him, and from the mischievous smile on his face and how quickly he fell back to converse with their passengers he had a feeling it might be about the deflector shield belts.

Their merriment faded when they all caught sight of the lower echelons of the fighting pits. Dash wished he'd brought earplugs to drown out the cacophony of shouting from betters, fighters, and slavers trying to buy or sell them. He didn't like it.

Hacarita was staring at one of the arenas where a Pantoran and a human were already beaten and bloody, and...he hadn't thought about it before, but with her contacts alone she could certainly pass for the blue-skinned moon species, though she was more...vibrant than the man who was clearly winning his match. She had the look in her eye like she wanted to crawl in there and show them both how to really fight.

The rest of his party was...less interested. He'd been around enough as an Ambassador to pick up on the sudden extended silence and sour expressions of Whitey and his previously jovial companions.

Hacarita went back to scanning the crowd for something, when Whitey addressed him. "Hey boss, when Cari's done here can we blow this place up?" He sounded serious - almost angry. The origins of his species were rooted in forced manual labor too.

Dash opened his mouth, but before he could speak Whitey kept talking, "You know, after we evacuate or something, because the sisters are really upset, and I haven't gotten to explode anything in *weeks*, and Venka could even remote detonate, and..."

He held up a hand. "I hear you, Whitey. It doesn't thrill me either. I won't interfere if you and the ladies would like to use your *leisure time* for whatever you wish."

"You may want to inquire with Venka about support supplemental to remote det," Cari, who had been eavesdropping, replied to them both. "Destroying infrastructure is fun, but it can be rebuilt. If you want to take them down, have her change a few ones to zeros and cripple the whole syndicate."

Nee'na thumped her on the back and Cari coughed, raising a hand to retaliate but then letting it fall when she saw who it was. "That's the spirit! We'd certainly owe you for that one."

"[*What was that?*]" came Venka's voice over the commlink, privately to him.

"A side project you may be interested in," he replied, smiling. "We can talk later."

"[*Very well. Maarek and I have some leads, but we'll be open if you need us.*]"

"Roger that."

Cari froze suddenly, eyes widening and then snapping shut. She took a deep, steadying breath while Nee'na looked on worriedly, and then opened them again. "I need a drink," she said.

Nee'na looked around and then pointed at a sign further down the long haul, with an arrow that pointed away from all the noise. "That has a mug on it. Can't be too far off."

Cari nodded and returned the open-palm *thwack* on her back, causing her to stumble forward. "That's the spirit," she replied, smirking, and Nee'na stuck out her tongue.

"Hopefully literally," Whitey contributed. "I'm thirsty too."

As they approached the indistinct, attached bar secluded from the fighting, Hacarita quietly disabled the outgoing comms and Dash did the same. Even if he had already told Venka the truth, it was still better to give her plausible deniability. He nudged Whitey with his fist and pointed to the mic, and he said "Oh, right," before flicking the switch himself.

Venka and Maarek had ended up visiting seedier and seedier places after a series of (drunk) leads beginning in Fische's Pub had pointed them to an information broker in a small but well-kept retail outfit in the trade district that was clearly a front for something else.

The Toydarian was drunk himself, certainly, and was eyeing Maarek up and down while ignoring Venka entirely, maybe unused or uninclined to dealing with women. He was reluctant, that much was obvious, since they didn't have the cash he was asking for.

“I MAY have seen. Cannot recall,” Porlo replied to Maarek’s display of the fugitive’s hologram.

Maarek’s eyes glittered excitedly in the artificial light above them despite the tepid reception.

“How about an... *exchange*, then? We happened to come upon some details concerning the Rebel capabilities on Lothal recently - anything you would be interested in?”

Porlo slammed his fist on the table. “Hard to believe. If you...”

Venka interrupted, “I can corroborate his assertion *and* provide other details on their defense network that may be relevant to your clients.” She tapped a few more times on the tablet and slid it across the table to him. His eyes were wide as if seeing her for the first time, before they dipped to scan the screen before him, getting bigger still until she was concerned his eyelids had receded permanently into his head.

“Bold to assume my cooperation before agreement. However, very interesting. This man always at BAR in Cruelest Cut. He meets and then he heads into mines. Many times in recent weeks.” He leaned forward and gripped Maarek’s shoulder, and the pilot was less distressed than he ought to be in Venka’s opinion, given the attention he’d gotten so far.

He politely pried Porlo’s fingers away and gripped his hand like he would an old friend. “You have done a great service,” Maarek said, and the broker looked *bashful* of all things.

“It is HONOR to support great Century Hawk pilot. I have something FREE for you - location of ship.”

“What about the fugitive?” Venka whispered behind her hand toward him, and Maarek looked at her and blinked.

“That’s sorting itself out, once you can get me a secure channel to Serathiss.” Was that a direction or a suggestion? He certainly had the aura of someone who was of the same mind as her, but what if she was wrong?

“Ha, ha,” Porlo laughed, at least...she thought it was a laugh. “Famous ship is nearby. Porlo tell you if we exchange information for future collaboration?”

“Uh, sure,” Venka said, and he slid a spec sheet with account information across the table.

Maarek concluded their conversation and they left hastily.

They were traveling down the steps outside the establishment when he reminded her, “Secure channel?”

“Ah, yes...I ran the encryption while you were still...conversing with the asset.”

Once he had the voiceline and dataline were open, he was not secretive about his intent. “Location confirmed. Send in the cavalry.”

Serathiss had been moderately cooperative with Venka, given her generous influx of condemning intel, but had assigned her a secondary contact so as not to deal with her directly. That man had been...strange, but he knew what had to be done and wasn’t shy about asking for what he wanted.

Even with Maarek, Serathiss only said four words. “Acknowledged. Good work, Soldier.”

It was around that time that their comms with the other team cut out. She stalled Maarek with an arm and reached out to make sure, “Dash, come in. Do you read me?”

Silence. Of course he didn't. He hadn't been able to read her in any sense since he had lied about the fugitive's escape. And he likely didn't need what Porlo had just told them, either - Team Alpha was probably already there, if her assumptions about Hacarita's prior intel were correct.

She checked the transponder; still functional, just disabled. She wanted to believe they'd entered an area that the signal didn't penetrate, but she had *just* upgraded these things. They had a built-in backup feature, to keep recording when the signal was lost by any means, or when an individual chose not to transmit livetime, and then upload to a user-designated repository within range once the link was restored.

It wasn't like she'd failed to mention it to Dash; she'd provided thorough specs on the requisition request as she always did. Even if he had seen the footnote, though, would he have comprehended what it could be used for?

The bar was a welcome respite from the fighting pits - acrid smell of Deathstick smoke, stale liquor, and sweat permeated the air as Cari stepped into the small enclosure adjacent to the cantina, only realizing that she'd done so ahead of everyone as Dash had retreated to speak with Whitey while the sisters glanced around warily, one of them lighting up herself.

Maybe it was intentional - his ability to read the room was certainly more honed than hers. A couple of barfights echoed around them as she pushed forward, but the tightly-packed array of bodies parted for her as panicked faces got an eyefull of her blue face and red eyes.

A man who hadn't been paying attention was thrown back-first by his opponent into her torso, and she glared as the adrenaline of a real fight she could actually participate in incited a comfortable violence in her heart. She grabbed him by the scruff of his neck, the thin skin pulling in what must have caused significant pain, and slammed his face onto the bartop, sending both full and empty glasses flying.

Dash came up beside her and whispered in her ear, "I asked you to leave it at one - can you?"

Her grip on the spine of the instigator didn't relent. She had promised Dash that, impassively, not expecting it to actually come to this. She didn't reply, but let her captive go, and he scurried away hurriedly without another word.

Cari kept her mouth in a thin line and glared at the bartender, who had come to scoop the broken glass into what was clearly a sharps container, likely used to this sort of thing. He was wearing a black vest and tie, despite the fact that this was definitely a dive bar.

"Sosh'acari'tarung," he addressed, filing the last of the shards away with a towel and smiling welcomingly. "A friend of yours let us know you were coming. Drinks are on the house, of course."

She flitted her eyes between him and the impressive array of legal and illegal spirits. "I'll take that," she pointed, and he had the wherewithal to know exactly what she meant.

"A fine choice," he said, though the chatter in the room had not resumed as he slid the ladder on its wheels down to the proper location and climbed up it delicately to retrieve her selection.

He tiptoed back to where she stood by Dash and settled two glasses on the countertop before acknowledging her other companions, who had drifted to a high table behind them. "Two...five?" he wondered, nerves creeping into his previous security.

"You misunderstand," she said frankly. "I'll take that - the whole thing."

The man gulped and set it in front of her.

She chanced a side-eye at Dash, who was grinning lasciviously as she swiped the bottle. “A gift,” she said to him. “For your patience.”

“She with you?” some drunk slurred next to them, pointing between them as if there wasn’t any danger.

Dash said, “Yes,” at the same time she said, “Bodyguard.” They looked at each other and he chuckled, curling a very presumptuous hand around her hip before tucking the bottle into an inner pocket of his cavernous trenchcoat.

She looked around for where Whitey had gotten off to but found him entranced by something Nee'na was saying, gesturing wildly with a carafe of beer she’d probably picked off of another table. She handed it to him and he took a drink, thinking it over, before giving her a thumbs up. Nothing like other peoples’ spit, right?

Cari pouted until she heard Dash’s voice again. “Looks like Maarek’s efforts will be in vain - there’s your Jedi.”

She caught the swish of grey robes and grown-in, grey-er hair before he was gone, out a back door, and it was startling because she had expected an emissary, *not* Lokanth himself.

Her feet flew underneath her toward the egress before Dash could get another word in.

Dash was rather surprised when she bolted, noticing relief pass the bartender’s face along with some of his patrons, though Whitey was oblivious. *Some bodyguard*. He smiled to himself and was lost in thought for only a moment before realizing he should really, really go after them. He had a litany of questions for their would-be ally that couldn’t wait much longer. Whether Cari would think to ask them was...doubtful.

His pace was hindered by his heavily-laden trench and the fact that these *people* would just *not* get out of the way. In fact, it’s like they were trying to get *in* it...it was easy to see why when he looked up, ping-ponging off another Rodian he hadn’t seen beside him and nearly tripping over his own feet.

Cari’s braid swung side to side as the crowd parted for her as if by anti-magnetism and folded back in on itself directly in Dash’s path. She looked very much, actually, like she was part of an elite security force chasing down a fugitive - not too far from the truth.

He gave up, finally, and stood on a nearby bench to get a better view, in between some imposing black buildings that bordered the courtyard of Cari’s pursuit.

When she finally reached the man in question, Dash expected to see the guy turn angrily, tired from the chase...his expression was worried, but something about it looked glad to see her. He grabbed her shoulder and spun them into an alley, but Dash couldn’t see which it was. *Come on, Cari*, he thought. *Draw him out to me*.

He was breathing heavily, now partially hunched over, while she had barely gotten her heart rate up to a decent cardio interval. She’d just been trying to annoy Venka with the quip about persisting heart problems - her careful monitoring, medication, and gradual ramp-up of exercise had taken care of the condition rather quickly. “Lingering effects from the carbonite withdrawal?” she suggested. “Deep breaths.” It had been nearly a month; he should be fine by now!

He laughed and then coughed at the effort. “No, Cari...you’re just in incredible shape. I had no idea you were that fast.”

She smiled, for the first time in a while. “With just a few years of practice, you too could be as amazing as me.”

“I was about to say the same to you. You’ve been training, on your own...more progress than I expected. Perhaps I was too quick with my assessment given your preference for tactile violence. I take it you found my resource helpful?”

“There was a little too much ‘guided meditation’ for my taste, but not enough for me to strangle you. Besides, I did find it...helpful.” The unfortunate encounter with Maarek had sprung to the front of her mind, unbidden as it always was. Unlike Dash, though, the man before her had the capacity to understand immediately.

He reached out to her temple, and she froze. Somehow, he had put up a block between her perception and his, something Maarek had failed to do, so he was able to see without her having to relive it.

“There is another on your ship - like you. I felt the presence when you landed, but I...he could have killed you.”

“Yes I *know*, that’s why I...”

“Not just with the gun.”

“I was *powerless*. I haven’t felt that way since...”

“I know, Cari...”

“I am so fucking *angry* at him for not even *acknowledging*...” A thumb snapped her chin back and she nearly toppled, only realizing now that she was looking down at his face - he had always felt taller, somehow.

“You need to let go of that anger,” he said softly. “It will not serve you, nor will impulsive violence. That side of the Force is not the Way for you.”

“As if the Sight has *sides*,” she snapped, finally giving into the urge to swat his hand away, stepping backward, but the alley was narrow and she had only backed herself up against the wall. The stones were cold against her back.

He frowned. “You weren’t powerless. You wanted to help him. You *still* do. That desire, to help - it’s what made you anything *but* powerless in that situation. You remembered the words from the resources I gave you and used them to center yourself, and then you *stopped him* from hurting you, or himself, irreparably.”

“We are both irreparably hurt.” Still...she hadn’t thought about it like that. If she could, with the assistance of a real neuro professional, repair the fissure that had developed as a result of his dissociations, maybe he *would* be able to control it. Her thoughts sidetracked briefly to Venka, and she was now nervous that the other woman had been sent off with him alone in this hostile climate. If something set him off...

Lokanth leaned back against the stonework and cast his eyes to the side, weighing carefully how to continue the conversation. She decided to do it instead.

“You ran from me. Why?”

“I told you last time that it is not a good idea to contact me,” he said openly. “I was trying to protect you as much as myself. There are eyes and ears everywhere, even though I led you somewhere isolated.”

She instinctively checked the switch on the receiver at her neck. He looked troubled. “It’s off,” she said. His head didn’t move, but his finger dipped to the switch, and she felt a slight zap at her neck that she immediately forgot about.

“After what she’s done to you,” he whispered, and did he fuck up the pronoun?, “your instinct is still to be concerned. That is admirable.”

Maybe not, and now he was prying too far. “If you mean Venka, yeah, she tasered me and I kind of earned it. Neither she nor her limited family deserve to be caught up in the die that I cast with you.”

He looked smug for a moment. “Ah, I understand now what changed about my other pursuer. Taking a lover is not a constructive development, Cari - you need to be careful with attachments.”

She scoffed, but was no more irritated that he’d read that than anything else. “He’s a lover because I’m trying to *avoid* an attachment.”

“Nevertheless, the drinking and the carnal indulgences have to stop if you intend to concentrate on developing your abilities.”

“If you had told me sex and booze were off the table when I’d first inquired about re-exploring the Force, I would have told you to fuck off.” She looked between him and the flask she had just extracted from her pocket and thought of Dash, standing on a park bench looking out at her with concerned eyes as Lokanth had ducked with her into seclusion. She pursed her lips. “I’ll think about it. But one thing at a time.” She twisted the cap off and poured it out between them, the smell of cheap whiskey mingling with the creosote and mustiness of the black moss-covered ground.

He chuckled again and reached a hand into his own pocket, removing a small, yellowed paper card between his index and middle fingers. “I’ve nearly made up my mind about giving this to you. I just need you to answer one more question. Your people allied with my enemies. Your employers exterminated us. It has been eating at me these past few weeks: *Why* did you help me?”

She had asked Venka the same question. She had asked Dash too, in so many words. Was she expecting *them* to come up with an answer even Cari herself didn’t have? They’d both gotten pieces of it, maybe. She thought more clearly around Lokanth, she considered, even though she wasn’t drunk.

“I tried to convince myself that you had controlled me completely. I tried to convince myself it was for money, like Whitey wanted, or for an ally, the very plausible motive I told Dash. I can’t say I endorsed the genocide of your kind, but was I opposed enough to want to save one of them at the possible expense of my very long and trusting relationship with another mentor, even if it might benefit my people? Of course not. I’m sure there were a few assholes among you that warranted an execution, but...there are assholes everywhere.” A long pause followed the thought, and then, “They will never stop hunting you, Jedi.” She wished she could give him some reassurance, some hope that she might be able to help, but the notion was already *so* big. She tugged on her braid, nervous for the first time, then leaned her head back and closed her eyes in a bid to really concentrate like he was telling her to.

He was waiting, patiently, despite her lack of tact and the urgency brewing beneath his contemplation.

“I don’t know why I helped,” she finally admitted, and Lokanth’s expression didn’t change even though his eyes brightened a bit. “It felt right, saving your life instead of condemning you to death, or worse. I’ve been responsible for *so much* death. To experience the Sight return so suddenly...it felt like I had a destiny beyond that again.”

“You always did.” He was smiling freely, with pride, something she’d always loved to see on Wolen’s face - she wondered how they might get along. He handed her the paper, a long string of numbers, and she memorized it thoughtlessly before taking her lighter to it. It was a transponder code. The slip flickered hotly at her fingertips and the slight breeze carried the smoldering ashes away.

Lokanth continued, more anxiously, “Now I’m worried I have kept you too long - you need to gather your friends and leave Point Nadir. Here...” He reached toward her again, without a card this time, and she *knew* what he intended, but it was too late. A haze of static and a blockade of Imperial ships flashed in an instant of Foresight, but she couldn’t make any of them out, and a panic seized her as if she had caught the smell of those Chiss ships, so she shut him down.

“No,” she said firmly, also erecting the Wall in her mind. “I can’t handle that yet.”

He drew back, “I apologize, I was only trying to help. There may not be a way out, now...there may never have been, since you and I landed here. Some things are etched in stone before we have the awareness to influence them. But you have to try, as I do. I...I wish we had more time. We need to go, separately this time if you’re going to help your friends.” He grabbed her palm between his own; the skin contact forged a strange connection. “Be careful, Cari. *May the Force be with you.*”

She inhaled sharply, imbued with a determination she hadn’t felt since Lothal and a gnawing awareness of suffocating *danger* that hadn’t been there before, sizzling around them on this asteroid. “{*May you be guided by the Sight to good Fortune,*}” she replied in Cheunh, and it marked the first time she had said it to anyone since her sister’s final mission. She blinked and he was gone - she couldn’t even tell in which direction he had disappeared. She felt another soft snap of electricity on her neck - damn thing must be shorting out.

Dash checked his wristwatch again - it hadn’t even been four minutes, but apprehension sat heavily in his throat as he waited.

Cari emerged, alone. She didn’t have to scream, “Out of my way!” to the others in the crowd, since they were already moving, but did anyway, several times. “Move it!” She shoved the last poor soul out from in front of Dash, where he still had the high ground with his hand on his Nova. He was about to nag her about when the supposed ‘benefits’ of this alliance were supposed to materialize if he never even got to *speak* with the Jedi, but the resolve in her eyes and in her tone stayed his tongue.

“Something’s wrong,” she told him. “Something big.”

“Did he say what?”

“He tried to *show* me, but it was all scrambled...it wasn’t...I resisted, because it felt too much like what Maarek did, and he seemed surprised. We need to leave Point Nadir. NOW.”

“He asked about Maarek?”

“Extensively in the little time we had.”

“Why does he care that...”

“For the same reason *I* do. Are you back on comms?”

“No...and we still need to find the Century Hawk before we depart, Cari!”

“Maarek and Venka will have found it by now.”

How could she be so sure? “Whitey is going to be livid that he didn’t get to go shopping,” he muttered, hopping down from the bench finally and wrapping an arm around her shoulder, tugging her closer.

“You believe me?”

“I’m in too deeply on too many levels to stop believing you now.”

Her heart leapt with elation and she told it to shut the fuck up. She re-engaged the party link at the same time he did. “This is Hacarita, come in Bravo Team.”

“*[There you are!]*” Maarek said exuberantly, and if she hadn’t been sure before she sure as hell was now.

“Any luck with the fugitive?” Dash asked convincingly.

“*[Nah, we’ll get him though. Get everyone over to Keane’s Emporium. You’re not going to believe this.]*”

Get Your T-Shirts

Whitey cackled as he waved the mug around, already decked out in a Century Hawk-branded t-shirt and beanie over his armor. “How did we not see ads or something for this when we docked?” he said. “It is the worst luck that none of us ran into this shit randomly.”

Venka couldn't help but agree - Porlo's intelligence turned out to be practically common knowledge. The cavernous hall in which their ship was on display for *tourists* spanned several blocks, surrounded by giant screens on which the Century Hawk Maneuver was playing on a loop. Maarek was looking quite proud of himself, amused to see the people in line marvel over his skill even though they didn't know the man responsible was steps away.

“Whitey, I hope you got swag for everyone,” Dash said, and then lower, muttered, “...Unbelievable,” as he twisted a Century Hawk pen over a few times in his hand, before relegating it to the bottomless pit of his trench. Venka hoped he never had the misfortune to slip off a dock into a body of water - for the amount of curiosities she'd watched him tuck away in that garment over the last year, he'd surely sink to the bottom as if it were lined with lead instead.

“Of course - this shit's gonna be collectors' items after we steal it back.”

“Keep it *down*, Whitey!” Venka objected.

Hacarita was laughing again, and Venka rather thought she should be taken down a peg or two, having absolutely no right to any happiness whatsoever over the situation given that it was almost entirely her fault.

“Looks like mostly couples for the tour...though I can't imagine why it's a romantic endeavor,” Dash observed, rubbing his chin with his fingers and looking between Maarek and Venka. “You two can get close enough to engage the launch sequence and make off with it, yes?”

Venka looked at him wide-eyed. “You can't be serious.”

“I mean...unless Maarek would rather go with me,” Dash continued in that voice he used to get free drinks, and Venka would have found it funny if not for how Maarek seemed to choke on his own tongue in an attempt to protest.

Hacarita had a long-fingered hand covering most of her face and Whitey was the only one properly doubled over in laughter as he was handing out swag. “Fucking classic. What do you have to say about that, Maarek?” Whitey asked, waggling his eyebrows and elbowing Maarek in the ribs.

“I would prefer Venka's company,” he managed, straightening his posture and glaring at Whitey, who hadn't stopped laughing. He addressed Dash, next, “You can send *him* with us for... supervision...if it pleases you though, Captain.”

“We are capable of taking care of things if we encounter any problems on our way to the Defender. Whitey, what are your thoughts?”

“Don't worry boss, I'll go with them - Maarek and I lifted the damn thing on our own the first time.”

Venka frowned; Whitey's presence complicated things. What was Maarek playing at? “How does that fit with the couples' motif?”

Dash always had a social solution for everything. “Whitey. Pretend to be a weird uncle.”

“Not a stretch,” Maarek suggested, and Whitey gave him a thumbs-up.

“Hacarita and I will return to the Defender with our passengers and rendezvous with you when it’s safe,” Dash asserted, gesturing with his chin toward the expressionless Chiss.

He kept *picking her*. “Safe?” Venka repeated.

Whitey’s face fell. “Well, shit. We’re leaving, aren’t we? I didn’t even get to taste the gun I wanted.”

“Taste?” Hacarita said, the first word Venka had heard since they’d reconvened.

“I need to lick it to make sure it’s a good one,” Whitey replied.

“I’m going to let that, and all the obvious accompanying jokes, just die right there,” Maarek said exasperatedly.

“We need to go now,” Hacarita contributed, and it was very unlike her not to attach herself to Maarek and Whitey’s banter with equally-cutting remarks, and even more unlike Maarek not to have a followup.

She’d had the thought too soon, though, because he *did* have one; it just wasn’t what any of them expected. “We have plenty of time. What’s with the urgency?”

The Chiss stared at him without replying, and then beckoned Dash. “Let’s hurry.”

Venka wondered, as they ran off together with the sisters close behind, if that was the last time she’d ever see him - she’d had the same thought dozens of times that day, wishing she could catch his eye just one more time as he ran his hand through his hair and told her what an irreplaceable asset she was. They were about to find out just how true that was.

Cari slowed down just enough not to be suspicious as Dash endeavored to keep up with her and the others on their way back to the Tethers.

“How much do you trust Maarek,” she asked, though without the inflection of a question, and Dash was baffled by how blatant it was.

Amari seemed to agree, shedding her overcoat as they made it to the bridge. “I’ve known that guy for two minutes but he was definitely acting weird,” she said, passing by her sister to strap into a passenger seat.

Dash scoffed, “With my life.” Maarek would never do anything in deliberate opposition to the safety of the squad - he’d professed such to Dash on multiple occasions. Then again - Cari and Whitey had said their release of the fugitive was in *Dash’s* best interest, and that claim was more dubious by the minute. *Something* about Cari’s shrouded explanations spoke to him, even though he didn’t know why, yet. He’d be naive to believe that her physical engagement wasn’t informing his opinion at least a little but...she wasn’t misrepresenting herself. Of that he was sure.

She had taken the words at face value. “Engaging warmup sequence...” A very pregnant pause followed as Dash tapped his own buttons on the console. OS error? “OS error 27182? What in the hell could be affecting our operating system?” He cursed the Hutts under his breath and wished he’d paid more - this was a hangup they couldn’t afford.

“Call Venka.”

“How much could she do remotely?” Dash snapped, standing abruptly and striding toward Nee'na to lean over her and rifle through her passenger compartment.

“Oh,” she blushed, hands up as he dug through its contents, remembering at least to politely apologize and flash a winning smile.

“This is where Whitey normally sits. After reading through his Lothal mission report, I think he stashed something that might help.”

“You don’t have time to read a fucking *manual*,” Hacarita hissed, spinning around in her chair at the helm.

“He said there were plenty of pictures,” Dash retorted, delighted to discover he was right - the error was indexed intelligently and he found the reset sequence easily. “Hacarita - kill the power to the main thrusters and life support...we won’t need that until we’re out of the...” he gestured wildly around him with a single hand, hoping that conveyed enough, “...atmosphere. Then, engage the backups - those should be unaffected by whatever this block is.”

She didn’t delay; he wished she’d be so amenable to orders *all* the time. “Reset sequence complete. Ready for takeoff, Captain.”

“Go,” he commanded, and slipped back into the pilot’s seat just in time for her to ascend with...a flair he didn’t realize she was capable of.

“How many years as a bounty hunter, again?” he asked with a smirk.

“That was a cover ID for Wolen,” she replied in a monotone, maneuvering expertly between and out of the Tethers without his assistance. “Are our passengers adequately restrained?”

He looked back at Nee'na, who was giddy with the ups and down, clapping excitedly, and her sister, who had her arms crossed and was looking vaguely sick.

Hacarita hugged the curves of the rock caverns, a passage that should have had a much tighter margin of error than she made it seem, while Dash made micro-adjustments from the main controls, though they were superfluous.

They emerged from the cave to an ominous display; an Imperial Star Destroyer was flanked by swarms of TIE fighters looming heavily in the viewscreen. Starbursts of tractor beams were scooping up a litany of Point Nadir bug-outs who hadn’t gotten the memo in time. Sprays of rock and ice from the comet exploded at the surface where weaponsfire had missed the intended targets.

The Imperial loyalist in Dash should have been glad to see them. The skeptic that had taken root on Scarif and the part of him that believed everything Cari had disclosed told him to *fight*.

Somehow they’d gotten stuck with Whitey. It wasn’t ideal, but...nothing about this situation was ideal. He was back-and-forth with Maarek like usual, though.

“You assholes owe me for bailing so hard,” he snipped, hoisting his bag up on shoulder for the millionth time from where it had drooped too low.

“Hacarita seemed intent on ‘bailing hard’ with Dash,” Maarek prodded, hooking his elbow with Venkas and dragging Whitey by the wrist. He didn’t resist.

“Obviously the two of you know something the rest of us don’t.”

“Don’t tell me you didn’t know,” Maarek scoffed, and for the first time Venka thought to intervene.

“He’s had the blinders on for that woman since we encountered her on Hok,” Venka said to Maarek, doing her best to smile at the ticket-takers who collected a fee to look at their own ship.

“You mean the woman whose record *you* scrubbed and whose reassignment *you* brokered with Wolen after you saw her speeder bike acrobatics and absolute decimation of those assholes trying to kill us?” Whitey countered, eyes narrowed and tone as serious as she’d ever heard it.

“Don’t be...”

“Don’t be what, Venka?”

“So you’re just cool about their *thing*?” Maarek contributed, lip curling in...disgust, hopefully? Abject curiosity, maybe?

“Yeah, did she even talk to you?” Venka asked, pulling Maarek in front of her to conceal the fact that she was connecting a tablet to an access panel near the bridge. The robotic tourguide voice directing them told them to move on, but she needed a few more minutes.

Whitey ushered other people past them, without looking. “You’re both being unreasonable. Cari can do whatever she wants, and Dash can too. I won’t stand here and tell you I’m not disappointed, but it’s not up to me to dictate choices other people make. The fact that you’re so concerned makes you pathetic. I thought you two were on our team - you should want them to be happy.”

Venka opened her mouth to reply, but she had no idea how to respond. Maarek knew exactly the wrong thing to reply with, though. “Did you just say something a rational, mature adult would come up with!? Are you feeling okay?”

“Fuck you Maarek. Can you get us out of here or not?”

“Obviously.” He walked onto the bridge and sat down at the helm, flexing his fingers before sending them flying across the consoles; a concert pianist would have trouble keeping up with half the elegance. Tour staff objected sternly, but Maarek’s selective hearing had tuned them out while Venka tried desperately to be the demanding wife - *That’s enough, dear, and You shouldn’t touch the display!* would have been better-acted if she wasn’t who she was.

Where Whitey had developed the social acumen to motivate a crowd she would never know.

“ATTENTION assholes! Please leave immediately, or I will shoot you!” He grinned from ear-to-ear and brandished his most intimidating weapon, the name of which she’d forgotten the moment he’d told her about it back on Serathiss’ ship.

A heavy silence hung over them for a moment before all hell broke loose - Venka could have gone her whole life without the panicked screaming six inches from her ear, but had no trouble manhandling the women to the exits while Maarek engaged the startup sequence.

Whitey fired a few warning shots above her head and she snapped her head back at him, angry. He would *never*...she expected the jokester that had tripped her six months ago so that she fell embarrassingly into Dash’s lap, but what she saw was a man who knew exactly what his current position was. She’d been content to write him off as a hapless pawn in Hacarita’s bizarre collaboration with the fugitive, but his blue eyes, more unnatural than Dash’s and more cerulean than the Chiss’ skin, told her that she had been right beyond a reasonable doubt to include him as

an equivalent co-conspirator. He returned the weapon to his bag and stared her down, lingering for longer than he should have before departing at Maarek's insistence to get on a weapons station.

Once the ship was clear of trespassers, Maarek lifted off without his usual fanfare as soon as Whitey took out the docking pylons from one of gun turrets. The security for this tourist trap was clearly sub-par.

He guided them gracefully between easy obstacles, knowing exactly where to go. They emerged from the commercial sector into a wide expanse of space above the comet that would have been the obvious exit if not for what lay before them.

The Star Destroyer was magnificent hovering in their viewscreen, the size of a city in its own right, and Venka had expected some more substantial resources to be diverted to capture the fugitive that Hacarita had abetted, but she hadn't expected *this*.

"Whitey, I think you should stay off the bridge," Venka said over comms with a bite that surprised her.

There was silence, for a moment, as he too surely caught sight of the Imperial blockade. "[*Sure. I'm assuming this is Maarek's colossal fuck-up. Call me when the fireworks start.*]"

He chose *now* to be observant? Maarek looked at her with a curious expression, weaving between other panicked ships toward the asteroid's only exit, seemingly by memory.

"[*She's going to fucking kill you,*]" Whitey said in his last transmission over the comms.

"She's welcome to try. I did this to help her," Maarek said flatly, radio-ing the docking staff to get landing coordinates. "Devastator, this is Maarek Steele aboard the Century Hawk - permission to land."

"[*Granted, loading dock five-four-bravo. Ties and tractors ordered not to interfere.*]"

Venka exhaled an unsteady breath she didn't realize she'd be holding.

Dash dodged TIE fire, endeavoring to channel as much of Maarek as possible as Cari played the part of a true maestro conductor, pulling back to swerve around the twelfth tractor beam that aimed at them, though their targeting was really a shotgun system given the amount of perceived criminals the ISD was trying to detain.

"Our nav computer is fucked too, by the way" she said nonchalantly, braking in an unexpected override of his primary pilot controls; she was right, though - hellfire rained on the ship that had cut them off. He knew it was a vasovagal response when his skin heated at the explosion that occupied their viewscreen in brilliant orange and yellow hues, but that didn't make it any less terrifying.

"Great...anything you can do?"

"I'll try," she replied, and that meant everything until they were finally ensnared by one of the ISD's myriad beams; he felt the lurch of the ship toward the docking bay and heard the sisters arguing behind him.

"This was supposed to be a simple delivery!" Nee'na screeched, gripping the sides of her knees as she tried to curl into a fetal position in her seat.

“Well someone on Nadir wrote a *really bad fucking check* for this fucking battalion to show up, so what do you want me to do!?”

Cari turned around stoically to address them. “If you have contingencies, now would be the time to employ them.” She didn’t admit to being the cause of their predicament - then again, Dash had no evidence of that either. It *did* seem like too much bad luck for Cari’s warning from the Jedi to be unrelated. The other ladies didn’t need to know that, though.

“Right,” Amari said, unbuckling her belt and then snapping her sister’s off as well. “Let’s go! Now’s not the time to be squeamish.”

It reminded Dash too much of Venka. He wished she were here to fix the nav - Hacarita was slamming her palm down on the console every few minutes as she tried to get around the blackout. “No use,” she said calmly even though her physical actions had been frantic.

“Task at hand,” he commanded, ushering every anti-tractor maneuver he’d ever learned from his brain to his fingers.

The red overwhelmed him when she caught his eye again, iron seas that told him to pull up without the words. She, maddeningly, pushed the other way, but the opposing forces of their thrusters was enough to dislodge them with a jarring shake. The relief was indescribable; he dove nearly to the surface, then dodged stalagmites in a serpentine motion until his way was clear. The whole thing had happened so quickly he almost couldn’t process it; her look now was surprise and... admiration?

“Holy shit...” she whispered, hum of the engine the only noise in the cabin as he released his grip on the controls. “That was incredible.”

He found himself just in time, “Never thought I’d hear that from you in *this* context.”

A peal of giggles erupted from behind them - the other girls had finally made it to the exit - Cari wrinkled her nose and insisted, “He’s still available.”

Nee'na still had her face covered with a hand, and shoved Amari through the doorway when her mouth turned over into a frown. “How about your Arkanian friend? He has nice guns.”

Cari’s expression soured. “I’m sure he likes the attention.”

“Cari, let’s find some cave cover and see what we can do about the nav,” Dash said, trying desperately to change the subject.

“Roger.”

“Ladies, if it gets dicey again we will page you.” Amari acknowledged with a curt nod and then they were gone.

A steady beeping and a flashing red light above Cari’s console indicated a hail. “It’s the Century Hawk,” she said hopefully, patching it through. The signal wasn’t the best given the general clusterfuck comms jam instigated by the Imperial fleet, and it was made even worse by the fact that the Defender was now surrounded by rock.

Maarek came through though, enough for Dash to get the gist.”[*Hailing...Defender. This is Maarek aboard the Century...[kkcchh]. Please relay your position.*]

“I take it the ship retrieval went well?” Dash said, pretending like the audio stream was smooth.

“Did you manage to evade the tractors? I can’t say I was expecting such a flamboyant sendoff.”

“[...*relay...position.*.]”

“We found groundcover, we were planning to wait this out. Where are you?”

“[*Docked...Devastator.*.]”

Cari muted the call and looked over at him in disbelief. “He fucking *parked!*?” she yelled, throwing her hands up.

Dash furrowed his brow. That couldn’t be right. “Maarek I don’t have to remind you that we still have a sensitive mission to complete - playing along with the Imperial fleet is bad tradecraft.”

“[*Transmit coordinates.*.]”

Cari smashed the transmitter again and spat back at him, “Maarek you and I both know that giving away our positions over an open line is *suicide.*”

She was right, of course, which made Maarek’s insistence very odd. Dash couldn’t help but be summarily distracted by dismissing all the other warnings that had been triggered by the failure of the nav computer, and only caught a few words as the signal crackled.

[...*message is for Dash, not for you. You froze me out. I approached everyone - Hacarita straight up lied and you may believe you didn’t...your...didn’t work on me and it didn’t work on Serathiss either...location of the fugitive. Where there’s a stolen ship, there’s a thief...a favor...look under shield generator controls for a hidden compartment...*]

“Hidden compartment?” He looked up from his processing long enough to see Cari’s eyes glaze over. Dash leaned further to his right and indeed, a nearly-flush grey panel with a small hook in its bottom left corner was exactly where Maarek said it would be. He tugged on it and withdrew a gorgeous bottle of Twi’lek liquor - it was thoughtful even though the rest of his rambling was nonsensical.

[...*join OUR REINFORCEMENTS in hunting down the fugitive.*]

What the hell? *Maarek* called in the ISD? Serathiss had *believed* Dash’s story, mostly because it was so encompassingly believable - the truth was substantially more far-fetched, what pieces of it he’d gotten from Cari and Whitey, anyway.

In any case, he couldn’t concern himself with whatever cards his pilot thought he’d be able to play in hunting the ghost of a man that had captured Cari’s attention - he had a mission to complete.

For Sosh'acari, Maarek’s transmission came through clear as day, smooth and condemning directly into her brain like he was sitting beside her sliding a needle into her temple. “We aren’t meant to get out of this,” she said sinisterly, standing slowly and resting her hand on the glowing panel in front of her in a great effort to remain upright. Dash didn’t look as upset as he should. She could feel the wrong kind of attention converging on their position. So...their location had been skimmed after all. “They know where we are.”

“How?” Dash asked incredulously. “Did you send Maarek the...”

“Of course not. It was taken from us.”

“That data is some of the most heavily encrypted...”

“And who do we know aboard the Century Hawk that can pull apart encrypted data like tissue paper?”

He shook his head. “That’s impossible. She wouldn’t betray us like that.”

“I’m only happy that Venka’s defensive slicing against *me* was comedic overkill,” she laughed, kicking her chair. “What I wouldn’t give for Gena to pop out of a closet at this very moment and show her a thing or two,” she snarled, heading toward the exit.

Dash did not make to follow. “Who?” he asked.

Sosh'acari ignored the question. “I’m going down in the hold to find out what our guests’ backup plans look like. Feel free to join us when you determine that we are inevitably about to be boarded.”

Overplayed

Cari pulled on the Imperial Navy uniform, shocked that the sisters had stashed one that would fit her tall frame. It was clearly a mens' cut, being tight in a few particular places, but the pants were long enough for once. They had *everything* in that other crate though - infantry, standard-issue stormtrooper weapons, helmets that would grant enough permutations to fake their way into almost any military outfit - it rivaled Cari's bottomless lingerie bag in terms of diversity, though it would be a challenge to determine which was more useful. A black corset and darktrooper helmet was sure to be more compelling than either in isolation, of course.

She tried not to stare as the other two disrobed, failing even more miserably when Amari pulled off her shirt to reveal a cybernetic arm of exquisite craftsmanship.

"No questions," she demanded preemptively.

"Don't have any," Cari replied, securing her favorite dagger in the zipper of the uniform boot and buttoning the light blue military collar across her shoulder. She admired the contrast between the deep color of her hand and the fabric of the long sleeves - Nee'na voiced her trepidation about that particular skin feature before Cari had time to comment, though.

"Err...I mean no offense of course, but...you don't look very...Imperial."

She nearly laughed - the Chiss Ascendancy had been Imperial since before the Empire had even existed. "I understand," she said instead, extracting her bag of tricks from the parcel she'd retrieved from the medbay, complete with a tripod mirror, which set up quickly as she began to work - the gloves could come last, when dexterity was no longer a concern.

Once her skin was sufficiently humanized, she tilted her head back and pushed the bulb of the eyedropper filled with milky fluid. It dyed the sclera but seared the delicate tissue. She was used to a spectrum of pain, but the liquid poison biting into her eyes and blinding her for a moment was still distressing. Contacts followed, and then she re-folded her braid down her left shoulder to distract herself.

Nee'na appeared beside her, poking her cheek as if it was hers to touch. "Remarkable!" she said. "This seems like a lot of work - why don't you get a permanent skin fixture?"

For some reason she decided to be honest. "I don't want to completely abandon who I am yet. Despite the outcome, this venture has been...freeing."

"Outcome?" piped Amari. "We don't know what's going to happen."

"I suppose not." She paused, fingering the saber at her hip - as much as the thrill of challenging the boarding party appealed to her, she couldn't risk it. "Got another one of these?" She tugged on the collar of the uniform, indicating that she would need one that would fit Dash - the merc look wouldn't serve them even if their boarders knew who they were. "Maybe a size up, if I had to guess." Amari tossed her another with command pips, which she caught gracefully. "Be right back."

She took the opportunity for solitude to stash her lightwhip and petars in the cistern of the medbay toilet.

Dash put the final lockouts on the controls and did his best to conceal the nature of their cargo - if

one of the troopers checked the manifest they would find standard medical equipment. Considering the itemized list hadn't previously had Nee'na and Amari's crates on it at all, he considered it an improvement.

Cari was back, looking unlike herself - her human disguise was still beautiful, but it felt uncannily artificial to him now. The uniform was becoming, though, and he didn't notice she had one for him until she thrust it into his lap unceremoniously, before closing out a few last tasks on the console she'd used as copilot.

"How are we doing on time?" she asked.

"You were right, not that you'll be surprised about that - I just got a hail to prepare for boarding."

"And how did you respond?"

"I tried to sound disinterested. Indicated we were on Imperial business and that it would be better for us not to meet, but...they were unconvinced, even though they identified us as the 417th."

Cari ran her fingers through her hair, probably forgetting that it was already up, and pulled a few strands away from her face before dismantling the whole style to start over. She stood and was pacing anxiously. "I can't believe Maarek would..."

Halfway into the Navy coat, Dash stood beside her and pushed her gently back against the wall by the nav panel. "We can worry about him later, Cari. Let's get through this part alive and then think about what's next. Okay?"

She nodded, but was holding her breath, so he twisted her wrist into his right hand, the way she liked, and pinned it over her head.

This kiss was different, mostly because he didn't have time for it to lead to anything else, but where he had expected an annoyed grunt before being pushed away sat something else entirely. Her faux-rose lips parted and she miraculously relaxed, and when he pulled back her eyes were closed looking completely unopposed to the advance.

"[{An ember through brush, why are you doing this to me?}]" she asked, so softly he wondered if he was even meant to hear it, and he doubted immediately that he had translated the phrase properly - there was an idiom in there he wasn't familiar with, probably.

"We've gotten out of worse," he reassured, turning away and exchanging his pants. "These guys will have their hands full with other, actual criminals - we just need to go along for the ride until an opportunity to extricate the crew presents itself. Are you with me?"

There was no hesitation before she said, "Yes."

"And are *they*?" The ladies responsible for the smuggling ring had certainly been around, but this situation was something else.

"This isn't their first run-in with this type of outfit, so I wouldn't doubt it - I can question them about..."

"Ah, no, just direct them away from the hangar until we...I...can figure out how dire the circumstance is."

Cari paged them quickly and recommended they play cards at the table in the small kitchen.

A clang echoed throughout the corridor as he affixed the last buttons of the uniform. They strode down the hall together, Imperial as they were going to be in this situation. The Navy excuse was flimsy, but the optics were definitely better if they looked (what the Imperial soldiers would interpret as) professional.

He led the greeting, of course, as he always did, but the contingent that awaited him was *massively* more formidable than he'd envisioned. Forty stormtroopers - at least - flanked the one that approached them first, adorned in red accents along his shoulder and helmet. He was part of a special forces unit, like Dash's crew, but he couldn't recall which.

He stepped further into the hangar with Cari behind, hands behind her back and chin up, to address the newcomers. They'd sent an appropriate number of soldiers if his companion decided to get violent - the Chiss could take out a half dozen before they were mowed down, so an order of magnitude more than that as a countermeasure was just good tactical planning. That meant, of course, that they'd had the intel to *do* such tactical planning.

"We're flattered by the well-populated welcome," Dash said first, before their leader could get a word off. "But you are interfering with an Imperial intelligence mission, and I have to ask you to leave."

The standout trooper pressed his gloved hands together, tilting his head downward, and then spoke through his helmet, a mechanical voice with a lilt that suggested amusement and perhaps a hint of frustration. "Captain Daro Madell, I take it? You have a fascinating resume. It seems like most of your support system isn't here, though."

"Well, you see..."

The trooper interrupted, "Do you know why? Your pilot was *so* insistent that we treat you well when he sold you out. And the lovely Venka, what an absolute *delicacy* she is, so thorough, so compliant, I barely had to..."

"I am not *interested* in anything you have to say about Venka," he said calmly, avoiding the subject entirely as he always did, though his assertion certainly did add evidence to Cari's theory she had something to do with their computer troubles aboard the Defender. If Maarek or *this* unsavory individual had coerced her...

The trooper shrugged. It looked odd in the armor, but he gestured with his hand and his companions lowered their weapons. "That's just as well. I don't like involving myself in any personal dramas, I just want to do my job."

"And what is that?" Dash said, sensing a more conversational shift.

"Killing Jedi."

Cari stiffened behind him when he glanced back, and he felt in the pit of his stomach her desire to retrieve her lightwhip.

"You know," the trooper continued, not noticing or not caring, "I'm glad Order 66 wasn't comprehensive. The stragglers have been so fun to torment before I end them."

Disturbing at best, but, "I can't say I've thought too much about Jedi myself, Mister..."

"Technically, *Commander* Harkon. Not Mister Harkon, certainly, that's my...well, it's kind of awkward to talk about our *fathers*, isn't it gentlemen?"

His contingent chuckled, lazily swinging their weapons at their sides, and it was honestly the most lax stormtrooper unit Dash had ever encountered. He extracted Serathiss' token nevertheless and presented it to Harkon. "Check our credentials for yourself," he said. "Allow us to depart and it will be like this never happened."

Harkon tapped on his helmet and shifted his rifle from one hand to the other. "I...well, don't exactly care about whatever immunity you think you've earned. I only care about the Jedi. To that end,..." Harkon raised the butt of his gun and closed the distance between himself and Dash with incredible speed, descending it onto his cheek with a force that caused a burst of extraordinary pain and a momentary blackout...when he came to, clutching his face on the cold floor of the hangar, he heard a few gruffs and clicks behind him before raising his head to observe what had happened.

Cari had every weapon in the room trained on her...well, not *every* weapon, because one she'd pilfered from a stormtrooper was in her right hand pointed back at the troops, set to a widebeam stun, and the other was in her left, pointed inches from Harkon's head. Her eyes didn't need to be red for Dash to see fire in them.

Harkon raised his hands melodramatically, gasping for effect. "She speaks!" he cried, even though she hadn't. "Are you brave or stupid?" He was completely unafraid of Hacarita with a weapon... weapons... - that was short-sighted especially if he had intel on her too.

"Don't touch his face," she demanded, making absolutely no alterations to her posture and clicking the safety out of place on the blaster. "I really like his face."

Harkon sighed and flipped his right hand over his shoulder, springing some of his unit into action. They began combing through the hanger and plugging tablets into consoles. "Of course, I understand - you'll find that I'm very understanding as a general rule. It would be profoundly rewarding to unpretty your face instead. Might be hard to discern the bruises under all those layers, though."

"I don't doubt this weapon will dissolve your face entirely, sparing me ever having to look at it."

"Cari, please."

Her eyes cast down at Dash, then back up at Harkon, arm frozen, before she lowered it with her arm straight.

Harkon linked his fingers together in front of him as Dash pushed to his feet, Cari absorbing most of the weight under his shoulder, though she didn't make it look that way. He was pulled away from her by stormtroopers before he had a chance to think about it though.

She reached out for him, but Harkon clicked his tongue and shot out an arm, now within range, to grip her jaw roughly. "I can't wait for you to tell me where he is," he said, mechanical voicebox inches from her disgusted grimace.

Cari remained, for the first time in Dash's recollection without his direction, completely silent. It didn't last very long.

Harkon twirled two fingers over her head and she spun around. "Drop the weapons...wrists up... that's it, hold still..."

"I know how to fucking get arrested."

"Of course you do, your bizarre record is deliciously redacted, but I'll correct that sooner rather than later." He clicked the manacles together at her lower back and pressed the shock button. She

spasmed and fell to her knees, gasping for breath, kicking out a foot to catch the shin of a trooper that had gotten too close. He toppled, and it was the only concession Dash suspected they'd get.

"She was cooperating!" he snapped, feeling his own arms wrenched behind him and his face pressed against the floor next to hers.

"Your affections are not my concern," Harkon said drily as they were pulled to their feet and hurried toward the exit by the other soldiers. "Your allegiances are."

Amari and Nee'na were ushered into the cell not long after them, looking irritated but no worse for wear. Everyone was getting a cursory search, which meant that the protective belts had been confiscated (at least they hadn't needed them), but stormtroopers were processing a huge volume of lawbreakers picked up on Point Nadir and it seemed that Harkon hadn't afforded Dash and his crew any special treatment at all. It was probably a good thing to blend in, all things considered, but the privileged attitude he'd been raised to display told him they should have at *least* gotten something more private. Or, maybe he was being influenced by the man twice his size with the face tattoos that had growled at him when the trooper had shoved him a little too hard into the cell. Dash had barely tapped the guy with his elbow, but he was expecting to add a few more bruises, and possibly a dislocated shoulder, until Cari had snuck behind the behemoth and pinched his trapezius where his neck joined at the shoulder.

He wasn't sure he'd ever heard someone that size squeal, especially like a dying cat, so he almost missed when she crouched over his ear where he had collapsed and said, "None for you. It would be wise for your idiot friends to back off too."

She was already angry - any of these guys provoking her further wouldn't end well for them. Dash looked up to see three similar-looking fellows looking between themselves and Cari worriedly.

"Can I hit him?" Amari asked from behind him, and he turned toward her with an arched eyebrow, before realizing she'd asked Cari and not him. "You know, to assert dominance. I've been in prison too."

She shrugged and released her grip on the guy's shoulder. He coughed and tried to scoot back. "It's better for everyone if he's not conscious."

Nee'na giggled excitedly as her sister stepped forward and wound up before landing an absolutely bone-crushing punch that should have been impossible for someone her size. Even Cari looked surprised when the man hit the ground with a clunk. "I might have to arrange an amputation or two. What do you think, Amari? Right or left?" She flexed both arms and nudged the lifeless body with her toe; his associates had wisely retreated to a far corner of the cell.

"More trouble than it's worth, I promise," Amari said, grinning. What in the Outer Rim were they talking about? It certainly wasn't a question for now, though he shifted a good bit of his sentiment to gratitude that while he was incarcerated, at least it was with a violent entourage of beautiful women.

He brushed himself off and joined them in a huddle. "Thanks, ladies."

"What now?" Nee'na asked fretfully.

"We wait," Dash replied. He tried to sound reassuring when he followed with, "If there is a way for me to get you out of here, I will. This endeavor has become a bit more complicated than I intended."

Amari pointed at him and Cari sternly with two fingers in a V. “You will *owe* us more than that, especially if my cargo is compromised.”

“We understand.”

Venka fidgeted nervously on the platform and felt her heart rate spike when she caught sight of Harkon and a small stormtrooper unit on his approach. Maarek was behind her with his arms crossed, curious but not concerned, and Whitey was brooding over his bag of guns not far away. The Arkanian had been...cooperative, which was honestly more alarming to her than if he'd blown something up just to cause chaos. He'd always had decent self-preservation instincts though, enough not to act too reckless in front of their allies.

Maybe she should have waited for a greeting, but she was too anxious. “Did you...?” she started to ask, stepping forward to meet him. He outstretched his arms like he was expecting an embrace and she stopped abruptly.

He was unperturbed, fitting both hands on his hips instead. “Ms. Finnall! How wonderful to finally see you in person. The visuals in your military file really did not do you justice.”

He was probably taller than Hacarita and Dash, and wearing a strange, imposing trooper armor that made him substantially more menacing in person than he'd been over comms. They had never shared a video line, and she'd given some evidence directly to Wolen, not to him.

Everything lined up rather well, exonerating Venka herself, until Wolen had shared a strange conversation with his long-time Chiss agent about Maarek, that Venka had set to record when she thought she was configuring the private channel for Dash. The magnitude of Hacarita's betrayal of the Empire didn't seem to faze him much - it almost sounded like he'd asked her to commit similar acts before. Venka could never bring herself to ask him if he was objecting to letting the prisoner go as an ethical and nationalistic qualm, or because he hadn't carefully prearranged resources and politics before ordering Hacarita (or Dash's team as a unit) to do it himself. He'd outlined several ways it could benefit them now, but Venka was dubious that any of those plans could work without the Chiss' cooperation.

Harkon was...not Wolen. With Venka he shared his name, his position, and why he was so interested in the information she had collected. “My work is simple,” the purgetrooper had said, on their first call. “I am a collector of loose ends - our Empire is young, and some of those who opposed its creation still wander the skies spreading treasonous misinformation. I tie them up, and then I go on to the next. Your little project certainly would have been easier for me if this wayward anachronism were still encased in carbonite, of course, but *far* less entertaining. Do tell me who's responsible so I can...thank them.”

His voice was always even, but his inflection didn't change even when he was discussing something gruesome. It had been clearer in their previous conversations than it was now on the ramp; maybe he wasn't wearing a helmet, before. The image of the head of one of his ‘loose ends’ on a pike outside his war room flashed in her mind and she swallowed heavily.

“Um, did...”

“Yes yes, I was getting to that. Your traitors are a little banged up, probably decidedly moreso since I've thrown them in the pit with some of the more savage roundups. But, you worry too much! Slaughtering them now would be *so* much more paperwork, and I just despise bureaucracy.” He looked around at his troopers, who were checking their weapons much like an unarmored person might check their fingernails. “Well? Get on with it then!”

If it weren't for the calamity of tractor beams and laserfire outside the hanger, Venka was sure she'd have been able to hear a pin drop.

"Who are we arresting, sir?" one of the braver soldiers finally said, sounding afraid that he should know already.

"I only have one name on my list, straight from the top. He should be coming in...ah, that's it, that shuttle there." He pointed at a black dot among all the other warring ships, still quite far away. "Wait for that crew to debark and I'll give you more specific orders. As for the Century Hawk, I believe that is up to our stunning source. This was all her idea, after all."

Venka looked back at Maarek, whose lip twitched but who otherwise didn't react. Whitey was shaking his head. "Him," she said firmly. "Whitey, please don't resist."

He scoffed, but he didn't throw any punches or detonate anything when two stormtroopers and a lieutenant approached him with cuffs and pulled his hands roughly behind his back, though he was still standing. "Me? Venka, I don't know what you think you have on me, but from what I hear you barely did anything to stop this guy while he was escaping. I wasn't even conscious. And Maarek? You didn't even pursue him with the Defender. You speculated a whole lot about what a grievous crime this was, but you don't want us harmed? That's not how the Empire deals with traitors."

Venka had intended for Hacarita to suffer the most; she held no illusion that the Chiss would change her mind even if Maarek was holding out hope that her supposed guilt would persuade her. Maybe they would be merciful if she showed her hand for what she knew about the fugitive's whereabouts, network, and abilities, but the rest of them should spend a year or two in a white collar Imperial prison and have plenty of time to think about what a huge mistake they had made.

"The others know they made a mistake!" Maarek shouted then, an unusual volume for him, like he had been reading Venka's mind. "They can help the Empire find the fugitive and we can go on our way. That was the deal. Incarcerating them is a waste of resources."

"That wasn't *my* deal," she snapped at him. She had enough to cover for herself, and Maarek was going to have to justify his plea for leniency for the others on his own.

She was *so* tired. The brain editing on Scarif, the fake roles they had played as Rebel sympathizers, the dissolution of her professional relationship with Dash, the backstabbing, the *lying*. Especially the lying. It was too much. And yet...she wouldn't be able to bear seeing Dash suffer. It may take a few days, but she would be able to capitalize on her favor with Harkon and Wolen to transfer her contingency plan to him by arranging a 'goodbye'. By then, Whitey and Hacarita would be so deep in the hole of interrogations that they would be unreachable, and Dash would be alone.

The contingency sat against her wrist underneath her forearm, the metal sharp and warm. It had taken her weeks to make, in secret. He might try to rescue the others, once he was out, but at that point her loyalty debt to him would be paid.

Harkon's second in command was looking between the three Century Hawk passengers, then back at Harkon himself, who was tapping his foot and doing much the same, clearly impatient with the bickering.

"...Sir? What are your orders? These weren't exactly the stories we were expecting."

He sighed and leaned his head back, clicking his blaster back in place on his belt and pressing his palm against the forehead plate of his helmet. "I told you I hate bureaucracy. Arrest them all and I'll sort it out later."

“What!?” Venka gasped as the cohort converged on her...and Maarek too.

“Don’t worry darling,” he said in the type of voice that communicated the opposite, stepping closer to her. He turned his head. “Leave the girl out of cuffs Lieutenant, she looks like she’d snap like a twig if you even breathe on her. She’s with me.”

“Very well sir.”

She was about to protest again when the soft whirl of the shiny black zeta-class shuttle alerted her as it settled in next to the Century Hawk. A gentle breeze dusted over her as the ship displaced the air nearby, and she shivered. Harkon took that as an invitation to wrap a long arm around Venka’s shoulder and pull her to his side, and she knew better than to object.

Her eyes tracked the passengers as they exited, more stormtroopers with weapons drawn dragging along another man in restraints. *It couldn’t be...*

There was no question when he got closer, eyes sunken and exhausted, hair impossibly more grey than before, but walking with his head high and looking straight ahead. He didn’t even glance at the Century Hawk.

She was going to call out to him, but Harkon beat her to it. “General Wolen! How kind of you to join us. I take it your journey was uneventful. Well...except for all of the chaos outside your intrepid pilot is responsible for.”

He stared at Harkon coldly and Venka felt her throat tighten. It was probably a wise strategy under the circumstances, but she wished he would say *something*. “General, I...”

He finally looked at her and shook his head, eyes grave. Was he waving her off? For her protection or his? What hand had she miscalculated that could have caused this? They were leading him away toward the prison wing of the Devastator before she could share another word.

She craned her neck up to look at Harkon, who was already looking down, and put her hand on his chest against her better judgment. “Commander, you *can’t*, he’s...I went to him with this intel, all of it. He’s the reason any of this is possible.” Her voice was strained and her eyes stung with tears she was desperately trying to hold in.

He inclined his helmet toward her further. This whole attempt at intimacy was so strange without eye contact. “So sorry, I do hate seeing beautiful girls upset, but this comes from above me. I’m sure they will consider your testimony after I’m finished with him.” He snapped his fingers with his other hand and another trooper approached him. “Ensure the General is detained in the isolation cells, delta block, somewhere he can get...comfortable. I don’t want him talking to anyone until I get the Chiss woman to myself for a few painful hours. We’ll be along shortly.”

“Right away sir.”

He turned his attention back to Venka. “Does her species have the same number of teeth as humans?”

The implication was gory, and Venka was fighting emotional turmoil, but, “I’m sure she has a few extra rows,” came easily and the Commander threw his head back and laughed, patting her on the shoulder.

Whitey was quietly seething as a trooper picked up his bag to confiscate, and they started moving him in the same direction, but Maarek still didn’t look angry at all.

Venka only had a few more moments to make a decision. Any eventuality that condemned Dash or Wolen was unacceptable, though, so there was only one choice on the table, even if it meant they could *all* get away.

“Wait, Harkon...” she said softly as he pulled her along in the line. “Please let me say goodbye. I’ve spent a year of my life with this crew, and I...”

He held up a hand. “Very understanding, remember? Whatever you need.” He had insisted on that personal quality, several times, over the course of their talks. It was unnerving for reasons she couldn’t pinpoint.

It wasn’t like she could run away at this point even if she had wanted to, but she still cased the hangar one more time. Mind made up, she strode toward Whitey and gently nudged one of the troopers escorting him out of the way - the soldier had looked back toward his commander, who flipped a hand to indicate that he should allow whatever she was doing.

She centered herself in front of Whitey and inhaled deeply. He was still mad, but now confusion tugged at his eyebrows. “Venka, what...” Without further delay, she pulled him forward roughly by the collar of his armor and kissed him full on the mouth.

“Oh, hello!” Harkon exclaimed with a chuckle.

As Maarek was being forced to walk behind Harkon, she heard him mutter, “What the hell!?” incredulously.

She wrapped her arms around Whitey’s neck and deepened the press of her lips. He inhaled sharply and tilted his head to allow it. He’d caught on, maybe - meanwhile, she slid the thin card out of her sleeve with her thumb and directly down his back, so that it would be sandwiched securely between his skin and the fabric and metal of what he was wearing.

She pulled back and stared at him as his eyes reopened. “Uh...” he choked, flushed, but must have realized he probably shouldn’t talk.

Venka steeled herself; one of the most dangerous tasks in spycraft was passing a message in full view of potential hostiles.

“I’m sad that this door is closing, Arca. Even if there was a key that could unlock them all again, it would never have worked between us!” she lamented, turning away with her face in her hands.

“Ideological differences,” Harkon sighed. “I get it. Been there.”

She kept her head down as she walked back over to the commander solemnly. Admittedly, the show would have been more fun to perform with Dash, the Chiss included in their audience, but that door was closed too. She should have done it anyway, at random as they passed each other politely in a corridor, or as far back as that night on the bridge of one of their many stolen ships when he had gotten drunk and finally opened up about his heritage. Take what she wanted, like Hacerita had said. That traitor was wrong about so much else, but she had been stone cold right about that.

L'appel Du Vide

The worst part about prison was the boredom. She had been a... 'security consultant' for several Imperial facilities as part of her routine work, along with getting legitimately locked up by a few Rebel factions in the course of her missions for Eye-Eye, but only served one complete sentence of six months when she was twenty. That had been absolute hell, since most of it was spent in solitary - everywhere else she would at least start a fight every couple of days just to stay in shape. Being Chiss was an advantage, since most were unfamiliar with her species and weren't completely sure if she could spit acid or something.

She and Amari had perhaps been too aggressive right out of the gate on the ISD; the several dozen others in the cell with them were keeping a wide berth since they'd incapacitated the man who had threatened Dash. Half a day had gone by and they hadn't seen Harkon or any of his minions again.

Nee'na had been fiddling with the forcefield mechanism on the doorway but hadn't made any progress with Cari's hairpins. Cari always kept the poison-tipped one behind her ear so she wouldn't forget which it was - she'd have used it on Harkon if he hadn't been encased in armor.

When a familiar voice echoed down the hallway, she almost didn't want to believe it was real. Maybe she'd been holding out hope that he had clocked Maarek and Venka and escaped, so the simultaneity of her heart leaping and sinking left a strange void in its wake once the feeling had dissipated.

The optimism won out for now. The white hair coming into view of the wide-open pane of their cell was still a welcome sight. Dash caught her eye and smiled sadly, likely of similar mind.

Whitey sounded... jovial, though, if she had to put a word to it. He was cuffed like she and the others had been, but smiling and then... *laughing* at something the stormtrooper beside him had said.

"What can I say, Jim? I'm quite the ladies' man myself, as you saw."

"Definitely the strangest arrest we've ever made... hey, I didn't tell you my name, so..."

"Yeah, yeah, I know, you just look like a Jim."

"We all look the same," the trooper on his other side said with confusion.

"Not to me Dave, and may I say that you maintain your armor impeccably! What kind of polish do you use?"

"Uh... standard issue."

"That's the best. I'm a deathtrooper so the black is easier to keep clean but harder to buff out."

"Oh, so that's what the DT in your designation means."

"Did you think yours was 'ST' just because those letters were cool?"

"*Whitey*," Dash interrupted finally, and the albino looked over and grinned at him.

"Hi there boss," Whitey replied, rubbing his wrists when 'Dave' removed the cuffs, a little bit too early if Cari had to make a security assessment. He could have taken them both out in the time it

took for them to pass him through the barrier. Why didn't he? "Fancy meeting you here. I'm sure you've figured out by now that Venka and Maarek are traitor bitches."

"Are they okay?" Dash asked, and his concern was cute but entirely misplaced.

"You'll see for yourself in a moment. Cari, Amari, Nee'na!" he exclaimed, throwing his hands up. "You're looking well yourselves. I'm glad."

"I'm pissed," Amari spat, and then her scowl softened. "But not at you. Sucks that you got stuck with us in here."

"I can't think of anyone else I'd rather be stuck with," he said, and what had him in such a good fucking mood!?

He turned back around to the two stormtroopers who were entering his processing information on a datapad, presumably, smirk still affixed to his face. "Nice to meet you, boys. You might want to find something to do in a different wing, my tall friend here gets *real* messy when she's violent and you do *not* want to be on cleanup duty." He winked at Cari and eyed the spatter of blood nearby, from the split lip of the man that *Amari* had hit, not her dammit! She folded her arms and frowned.

"Ah, well...er, thanks for the advice Arca. We'll get scarce. Your bag is in the equipment box at the end of the hall as you requested, by the way. I'm sure you'll be out in no time once this whole misunderstanding gets resolved."

She cocked her head at the address and Dash raised an eyebrow. She'd read it in his personnel file of course, but had never actually heard anyone call him that.

"Oh, I'm sure I will. Glory to the Empire!" Whitey saluted dramatically.

"Glory to the Empire," they replied in unison, returning the gesture, and then they were gone.

A few moments of silence passed between all of them, with the exception of the quiet murmur of voices across the room filtering through the air. Shouts could also be heard in adjacent cells, but the soundproofing was good and they were faint. Cari should have known Dash would interrupt the peace first.

"Maarek certainly had his hand in summoning this monstrosity to Point Nadir, but I find it hard to believe that Venka would act against us."

"Venka is a fucking idiot," Whitey said without reservation, and it felt extremely good to hear out loud. "Cari told her exactly what would happen if she tried to pull this bullshit and she let her jealousy write the story for her anyway."

"How did you...?" Cari started, but he finished.

"Maarek has a big mouth. When I see him again I'm inclined to shut it permanently."

Anger and anticipation boiled in her chest; now *that* was camaraderie she could get behind. Dash was being too easy on them.

Nee'na giggled. "And when do you think that will be?"

"Very soon. I got them arrested too."

"I can't believe this," Dash muttered, mostly to himself, clutching his forehead. He looked a little

dizzy, come to think of it. Cari wasn't close enough, but Amari caught him by the elbow when he stumbled and sat him down on the bench.

"Shit," Amari said, "you have it bad for her, don't you?"

Cari bristled and strode over quickly, tilting his head up to look at his pupils. He just looked sad. "How many fingers am I holding up?" she asked clinically.

"Four. Now three. One." He wrinkled his nose. "Did you have to use that finger?"

"He hit you hard enough that you might have a concussion. In fact, I'm sure of it, because the cocksure captain I know wouldn't be wasting his emotions grieving over someone who betrayed him."

The walls must have been listening, because Harkon appeared then with a scared-looking Venka in tow. Cari had a few more choice words prepared for her, but Whitey spoke up first.

"Took you long enough! You two stop for a quickie in the elevator? Venka, I can't believe you dumped me for this loser."

"Watch your tongue, Arkanian, or I will remove it."

Dumped him? What the hell was Whitey on about now?

"You can't put me in there with them!" Venka said anxiously, grabbing hold of his upper arm, and they sure did look *awfully* cozy.

Harkon pressed his hand to his chest in mock horror. "I wouldn't dream of it, beautiful! When I said you were with me, I meant it. I'll even let you watch me take apart your former colleague braincell by braincell if it would please you."

Venka's expression turned over into something darker than fear. "It might," she told him, and then reached into her pocket to extract a small thumb drive. "This will give you a good start."

"Thanks sunshine. I take it this is the last of it? Have you given any more thought to an appointment aboard my ship? My last computer tech was a traitor too, and I had to kill him, so really I know how you feel. Good help is so hard to find."

Cari rolled her eyes, because his threat had been pathetic, but Dash was, predictably, not taking any of it well. "Venka what the *hell* is going on with you?" He'd recovered enough to stand and slam his fist on the forcefield, where it crackled and rained sparks by his feet. Well, diplomacy was out the window too - good.

Venka opened her mouth to reply, face contorting with guilt, but no words followed. She was staring at something else, now.

Cari felt dread fill her lungs on her next breath when she saw four more troopers escorting General Wolen down the hall, followed by unfettered rage. "You *fucking* bitch, you dragged *him* into this?" she hissed.

Wolen said nothing, which is probably how he would encourage her to behave if that wasn't the case.

"This is going to be easier than I thought," Harkon remarked, and then turned toward the entourage to sucker punch Wolen in the stomach. He doubled over, coughing.

Venka covered her mouth in shock and Cari flung herself at the forcefield next to Dash, willing all her strength to push through it. Unlike Dash, though, she didn't pull back; the white electricity burned her hands after a few seconds and she should have been more alarmed that the smell of charred flesh was comforting. The light sparkled and illuminated their faces; it reminded her of the lightwhip. She found the cold monotone she liked to use for genuine threats and directed it at Harkon. "Let me out and I'll show you how to throw a punch."

He ignored her and flipped his palms upward in disbelief at his soldiers. "Were my orders unclear?"

"Delta block is full, sir."

"Do I have to do everything around here? Shoot someone and throw him in there with the body. It'll give him something to think about while I'm occupied with the Chiss."

She gasped and clutched her chest, overwhelmed by the Sight trickling into her brain once again. She could feel *him*, at the end of the hall. He stopped suddenly, but was pushed forward such that he almost tripped. She couldn't see them, but he could sense her, too, she was sure of it.

"Oh *now* she's scared," Harkon laughed, misinterpreting the situation entirely.

The voices continued in the background, but the words no longer reached her ears.

Maarek brought the ISD. Maarek had condemned Wolen, and the crew, and possibly Lokanth to the twisted agenda Harkon had engineered. Whatever Venka had done only had somewhere to stick because *he* had been the conduit.

By the time he stepped into view, she was on her ship hurtling through space away from Csilla, sitting beside their pilot and directing every twist and turn as easily as breathing. She learned much later in life that the rest of the galaxy called this part of space the Unknown Regions, but she could feel every dangerous crevice and contour as if it were a relief map under her hand.

By the time he stepped into the cell, seemingly of his own volition, the metal of the blade she had smuggled burned hotly against her ankle, begging for blood. It was supposed to be for the right moment, to broker their escape, but *waiting was so tedious*.

By the time he stepped toward her, {It} was speaking, slithering through her mind like silk.

~~You hate him.~~ Yes. ~~DO it.~~

He *hurt* her. He betrayed her. The Sight had always been a guide until its influence waned, but never like this. Renewed fury ignited in her heart as she crouched enough to slide her hand down her calf, and the Voice *cheered* before an intrusive though interrupted her reverie.

>>You need to let go of that anger. It will not serve you, nor will impulsive violence.<<

An inconvenient memory! Lokanth's words were a jarring slice through the euphoria. He couldn't have meant *this*...it wasn't *impulsive* violence. It was justified. It was carefully considered. If Maarek was dead, he wouldn't be able to wield his power against anyone ever again.

How she wished she had more time! He would look so good sliced open like an autopsy on the grey floor of the cell. With her medical equipment, she could keep him alive and drugged awake and aware for hours, *days*, while she prodded every organ to see which one caused the most pain. She always suspected it would be the kidneys, if she could manufacture a few stones to make their way through ureters as he writhed in agony and begged for death.

Sadly, time was a luxury, and his was up.

{It} agreed. ~~YES,~~ the Voice blared, resonating in her skull. ~~END IT.~~

She could only see his eyes through the fog, like he *knew*. He was waiting for it. He wanted it. She had always followed the Sight, especially now that it was back in her mind, flowing out through her fingertips, grip steady and sure on the hilt of the weapon she had used to kill countless other enemies. The Sight was always right. Maarek was the Chaos and instead of guiding her ship around it she was going to cut him out of the universe like a tumor.

She brandished the knife and leapt toward him just as he closed his eyes, aiming for his exposed neck, when a pair of strong arms wrapped around her from behind, compromising her aim. The blade sunk into his left thigh instead and his composure broke enough to cry out in pain.

She yanked it out with a savage twist and turned the knife on her attacker, but an even stronger grip closed around her wrist and swiveled her away from Maarek so that she was staring back at Venka instead. {It} was still with her, searching for targets, and the succulent terror in her eyes was enough to make Cari wonder how it would feel to have the other girl under her instead, *begging*...

Harkon had wandered off down the hall to encounter an irate Serathiss, whose words she couldn't make out, but Harkon was shouting over both of them. "They're mine now, honey. You don't get a say in what happens to them anymore...I...do you ever stop talking? Well, I...sure, sure, if you insist, but I'm going to have to take her brain apart. Not sure what will be left when I'm done. She'll wish the execution had come sooner when..."

Venka saw the flash of metal before anyone else did and gasped as Hacarita lunged at *Maarek* with the knife she'd somehow snuck past the seizure of their gear.

Whitey reacted instantly, tackling her, though neither of them fell. Maarek wasn't so lucky; he yelped and collapsed, clutching his leg, as Whitey attempted to control the psycho physically.

Venka caught her eye, then, and really regretted it - she was overcome by something cold and sinister. Maarek's blood slid down the blade and over the wooden hilt, coating her thumb, and she licked it away lewdly above Whitey's hand, staining her tongue. The red in her gaze blared even through the hazel of her disguise with a delight at the violence that made her even more terrifying. Her eyes said *You're next*, and her smirk said, *I'll enjoy it*.

She was devastated that the last she would see of Dash was his beautiful eyes looking at the Chiss, worriedly, as he tore the arm of his uniform to fashion a tourniquet for Maarek. He didn't even notice her slip away down the hall - neither did Harkon, who was still distracted by Serathiss, or the troopers, who were just as entranced by the show as the other prisoners.

Run, Dash.

Venka didn't let the tears fall until she realized she was truly alone.

"Now, now, Cari - you know how much I love it when you get stabby, but we can hurt him later. Let's focus that rage on our captors for now, yeah?"

Dash tightened the knot and slapped Maarek on the knee. He winced and wouldn't look at him. "You're lucky to be alive. I'm not sure I would have shed a tear, Maarek."

Cari was still acting like she was in a daze, selectively hearing and seeing - he'd called out to her to

stop, but she hadn't reacted. Whitey had, luckily, and it was fortunate that he was probably the only other person on his crew who could legitimately restrain her. She still hadn't acknowledged Dash, but she leaned back into Whitey's restrictive embrace and whispered something absolutely *filthy* to him in Cheunh, and he must have caught the gist because Dash couldn't recall her voice sounding that seductive even in their own time together.

"Whoa, okay, I'm sure that's lots of fun, but...uh, Dash? Translation?"

"She's grateful for your quick reflexes."

"Uh huh. Cari, how would you like to go kill Harkon instead, and rescue General Wolen?"

"Wolen?" she repeated, and just like that she seemed to snap out of it, going limp and releasing the knife. It clanged on the floor and Dash retrieved it, wiping the blood on his pants.

"If I let you go, do you promise not to turn around and snap Maarek's neck?" Whitey asked like he was inviting her on a picnic.

"Snap Maarek's...the fuck are you talking about, Whitey? Why are you holding me?"

"Are you feeling okay?" Dash interjected, now concerned that her memory of the last five minutes had lapsed. Is this what had happened to them during the incident Cari described in the medbay?

"Do you recall attacking Maarek like five seconds ago?"

"I feel fine," she first answered Dash, and then, "He had it coming," to Whitey as she peeled his hands off her torso and glared back at the pilot, who was slowly bleeding out on the floor.

Oh, so she did remember. Why had she been acting so oddly, then?

"Okay, it really sucks here. We can work out all our issues later. Let's go," Whitey said impatiently, reaching his arm over his shoulder as if to scratch his back, but instead he extracted a thin metal rectangle with an engraving on it.

"What's that?" asked Nee'na, and Dash realized they had been stone silent during Cari's episode, though they were probably unamused by Maarek's antics as well.

"A get out of jail gift card, I'm assuming! Venka gave it to me when she kissed me."

"When she what?"

"When she *what!*?"

Well, she couldn't resist getting one last 'Fuck you,' over on him could she? Dash wished he could dismiss his feelings for her as readily as similar sentiment had bloomed for Cari.

"I'm just glad she didn't use the prison wallet," Whitey continued, and the sisters burst out laughing right along with him. Maarek looked like he was going to throw up, but that was probably more from the blood loss.

Whitey tapped the card near the field generator and it fizzled before dissipating entirely. A murmur echoed through the cell as the rest of the prisoners realized that they could get out too. He rushed down the hall toward the bin he'd asked Jim and Dave to stash his stuff in, cackling and smacking the card along all the other cells as well in what was sure to breed the exact kind of chaos he thrived in.

Dash was hot on his heels.

“Hey, Venka’s shit is in here too,” Whitey said, pulling out her Nova and tossing it to him. He caught it reflexively; the weapon was light, but the weight of its meaning on his heart was anything but.

He turned around to look for Cari, but she had taken off in the opposite direction down the long hall and was beelining for Wolen, who was still in restraints though Serathiss was now between him and Harkon.

Whitey hoisted his gun tote over his shoulder and started tossing other random firearms toward the other prisoners. “Get your weapons, free weapons here!”

“Don’t mind if I do,” crooned a Lasat who had escaped from another cell and had been the quickest to follow them, snatching a bo-rifle out of the air.

Dash retrieved the shield belts before the rest of the swarm converged on them, and then it was sheer pandemonium.

Gunfire ricocheted around him as he and Whitey returned to their cell, where they distributed assault weapons to the sisters, who were standing guard over a woozy Maarek at Dash’s insistence.

“Alright Maarek, get in the bag,” Whitey demanded, and the pilot looked up at him finally.

“Wha...?”

“Amari, put him in the fucking bag for me will you?”

“Can’t we leave him?”

“Maybe on a deserted moon once he flies us out of here; we definitely need a pilot right now though.”

She shrugged and lifted him up bridal-style with that insane strength and deposited him between some of the heavier rifles. His head poking out of the top like an admonished pet would have been comical, if not for the fact that he was dying.

He, Whitey, and the girls stepped out into the hall together, strapped to the teeth, where a battle was raging between stormtroopers and escapees.

Harkon had been frantically directing his troops until he saw Cari barreling towards him; even unarmed she was confident that she was faster and stronger. He raised his electrostaff to zap her and she would be *damned* if she was going to catch the brunt of one more fucking electric weapon, especially wielded by this unfathomable asshole.

She tackled him to the ground and had every intent of knocking him out even through his stupid helmet. His troopers already had their weapons raised, but she and Harkon were in such a tangle they must have hesitated because they didn’t want to hit him by accident; their aim was notoriously bad, after all.

His staff had been flung into the wall behind him and it clattered to the ground. He backhanded her instead, and she spat blood right in his face as she went in for another strike. The troopers made to extricate her physically, when she heard, “Cari, move!” in that wonderful voice that hadn’t come a

second too late.

She rolled off of him toward Wolen and swiped the electrostaff, pushing herself to her feet.

“Time for your best impression of swiss cheese, cocksucker,” Whitey said before unleashing the musical autofire of his Beris.

Harkon cursed as he was pummeled with lasers and Cari wrapped her arms around Wolen before pulling him toward safety.

Serathiss had moved aside when the calamity began, and was easy to forget about, but she stepped back in Cari’s path before she could make it back to Whitey and Dash.

“Get the *fuck* out of my way!” she screamed, still riding the high of her brush with the Sight and her assaults on Maarek and Harkon.

“{ YOU need to learn to CONTROL yourself, }” Serathiss hissed at her in perfectly respectable Cheunh, not that Cari would ever afford her the compliment.

“{ *You* need to quit standing there like a pretty, useless statue and *help us*. }”

“Hacarita, show some respect,” Wolen said quietly, holding up his wrists for Serathiss to release the cuffs. She did, and then handed him something that he pocketed immediately.

Cari looked away from him, ashamed - he had been the only person in the galaxy who could make her feel that way until she had met Lokanth. How disappointed would he be that she had gone after Maarek? He had said to listen to her instincts, to follow the ways of the Force, hadn’t he?

“Captain Madell,” Serathiss shouted over her shoulder. “Consider yourself stripped of your title. I can still use you as assets, but you won’t have Imperial top cover.” She looked back at Cari with a glare that could turn a man to stone. “*You* make it less appealing to help,” she said. “However...” Tremors of capital ship fire rocked the prison wing and she smirked.

“What the hell was that?” Dash said as the battle came to a standstill as both sides eyed the ceiling warily.

Cari tried not to look at the woman again as she and Wolen walked toward the rest of the squad. It turned out not to matter, because she apparently had ducked into another passageway and disappeared as soon as whatever distraction she had called in made its move.

A tap on the ground behind Cari alerted her and she looked back, and then time slowed to a crawl. An active grenade spun around in slow motion, and she lifted her arms to push Wolen away, but he was already moving to protect her. It was enough to shield her from the detonation almost entirely, though she did catch some shrapnel in her shoulder. Wolen wasn’t so lucky.

A high-pitched whine screamed in her ears as she tried to call to him, shaking his unresponsive body where he had collapsed. His body was still mostly intact, but he was unconscious and his leg was *substantially* worse-off than Maarek’s.

She still couldn’t hear but she could read Whitey’s lips. It was mostly, “Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit!” as he pulled a real tourniquet out from under Maarek’s ass and tossed it to her. A calmness settled over her mind, the same control that had given her the capacity to triage her wounded on countless other battlefields. Keep him alive. That was it. The emotions could come later.

She applied the tourniquet quickly and slipped a pin out of her hair and into the open wound,

pinching the vein that had been severed.

Dash said what they were all thinking, though surely his ears were ringing and his mind was reeling too. “Let’s get to the ships.”

Epilogue

The clear blue light filtering from the bacta tank made her yellow skin appear as an odd, sickly shade of green, though he wouldn't have said so even under threat of death. He only looked up a few times from where he was standing to where the thin woman was sitting, to see if she was appraising his reaction. She wasn't, not that he could tell anyway.

He watched the footage again, pausing when the 'security chief' that the 417th had recruited from Hok sank low to the ground, eyes fixated on the pilot. She was a tightly-wound spring, ready to strike.

"What is your opinion of them?" the woman interjected curiously, without antagonism.

He only considered it peripherally. "Same as before. Captain Madell is a hell of a diplomat, much to my chagrin. I'm honestly surprised he didn't talk his way out of this mess."

She tutted and flipped her fingers dismissively. "Venka Finnall's evidence is damning. He technically talked his way *into* it, by being so open with the instigator. Not that Harkon would have been susceptible to his charm even if Madell had been allowed to talk."

"That's a surprise - I always thought she was carrying a torch for him."

"Attachments are weaknesses. His could still be exploited if the feeling was mutual. Was it?"

"Hell if I know."

"Hm." She tapped her fingernails on the desk, looking at him carefully now. "And the others?"

"Whitey...er, Arca Jeth, is just fantastic. I'm not surprised he flicked the domino that started all this. Karn is a character, great intuition, best pilot I've ever seen. His newfound notoriety is amusing."

"Yes, he is...exceptional, by design."

Why would she say a strange thing like that? Sure, the man had been trained as a pilot in the Imperial military, once he'd shown a talent for it. Maybe she was referring to that.

She seemed to be lost in her musing about Karn for a moment, before gesturing for him to re-approach from his position by the tank. "And the girl?"

He smiled widely then, not as familiar with her as he was with the others, but he couldn't hide his enthusiasm. "Look at her," he said, setting the tablet on the desk and rotating it so she could see. The security footage from the prison break on the Devastator wasn't the best quality, but it was enough for the yellow-skinned woman to get the same sense that he had. "She loves it." He unpaused the recording and they both watched her impossibly quick strike on Karn, deflected and ultimately aborted by Whitey. Still - it was something else, something rare. "I can't imagine a Jedi being interested; she's a born killer. It thrills her as much as me." He felt his own fingers tingle with excitement as he watched her blade plunge into the pilot's leg again and again.

"The Jedi are killers too," she said matter-of-factly, standing then to walk toward the tank. She pressed her hand to the glass and stared at the fallen purgetrooper contained within, where red tendrils of blood were still leaking from his wounds and curling around his body like a macabre garland. "He is unlikely to survive," she said, sounding very much unvexed by the eventuality.

“That sounds like a job opening.”

“My organization could certainly use a man of your...unique skills in such a position. It’s quite the bonus that you’re already familiar with some of our more tantalizing targets.”

“I didn’t realize I was walking into an interview. I’ll be honest with you, Inquisitor. As long as I’m collecting souvenirs, I’m a happy man.”

“I meant to ask, as part of verifying your credentials, of course...” she said slyly, slinking back to the desk and handing the tablet back to him delicately. The lightsaber on her belt glowed even though it was off. “...how did your last *assignment* pan out? The whole town was leveled.”

He grinned wickedly and rubbed a proximal phalange that he had recently threaded onto a necklace. “Successfully. Craig sends his regards.”

She lifted Harkon’s helmet from the post beside them and extended it to him. “Consider this a trial run, then. Search the mines for the Jedi known as Lokanth. I’m expecting great things from you, Melai.”

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