Water Over Stones

by jplus

Summary

Chapters and vignettes from Jyn Erso and Cassian Andor's lives:

Many set in the early days of their escape after Scarif and their survival together on a distant planet of aliens and "space-pickers", healing and trying to find their way back to the war against the Empire.

Some about their lives before the events of Rogue One.

Some about their return to this refuge after Endor, and the life they build there together.

Others about how they fight to protect those they love from the looming menace of the First Order.

Notes

Set in the world of "Over the Edge", but, hopefully can stand on it's own.
They find a ruined spacecraft that triggers some complex and painful memories for Cassian. If you are familiar with the massive epic that is "Over the Edge" this would fit in the early chapters.

She did not let herself use the word "happy," ever.....because how sick would that be.....but six months after they crashed, that first spring, she admitted that she had begun to feel.....good.

Both of them were fully healed at last from the burns and broken bones and strong enough to ride and hike long distances. The nightmares that had gnawed at them both through that long winter had begun to fade, on most nights at least.

No one was looking for them and no one knew, as far as they could tell, that they were even still alive. They were still stranded with access to no tech more useful than a few bits of gear and weapons pulled from the damaged black shuttle they’d escaped in, and a half-crazy AI linked to a broken Imperial beacon. They were getting signal from the outside galaxy and knew that the war raged on, that the DeathStar was gone, the Alliance was on the run....but were still unable to contact anyone. It was terrifying and disorienting.

It was also, in a weird, this-is-how-profoundly-fucked-up-you-are way, the best time in Jyn Erso's adult life.

Maybe it was the increased daylight that helped, or maybe it was the sex they'd started having in the fall... either way....“good” was the word that kept coming to her.

They set out on their first legit “explore the planet” trip down to the Riverlands.

The Taun had become very fond of Cassian after he helped them excavate some debris and had seemed eager to carry them down to see an old wrecked spaceship they knew about on the bluffs.

“Carry them” in this case meaning "climb up on our three meter high backs and hang onto our long hair while we run very very scarily fast."

She had been places where live creatures were used as transport before, although never before had any of them asked her if she minded if they practiced their singing as they ran because they had a house concert coming up and needed to rehearse.

Jogging along, she remembered shaggy hill donkeys on Ord Mandell and big reptiles on Lethe VII. Riding a Bantha on Tatooine as an adolescent came back to her too ......hot, nasty and unbearably smelly. As fiercely as she tried to seem a battle-hardened fighter, she'd still thrown up in the sagebrush as soon as they dismounted and the breeze had turned. A couple of the local Tusks had laughed....she'd picked up enough of the dialect to make out "your daughter..." and "delicate".....but Saw must have shut them down hard because nobody said a word after she came back. He handed
her a canteen and averted his eyes as she spit a little of the precious water out, just to rinse her mouth. It was kindness, at least among the Partisans, and the kind of rare fatherly gesture Saw still made, randomly, in those days. No doubt that was why she had blocked the memory of it for years.

Once they crossed the river at a shallow place the Taun knelt to let them climb down...oh thank heaven...and Jyn shuffled those reminiscences away quickly. There must have been something still lingering on her face though, because Cassian moved back toward her as his feet hit the ground and gave her a look, one eyebrow slightly raised, eyes a little darker than even usual....inquiring.

He was so quick at reading her now.

She shook her head and tried to give him a smile. "Your hair's a mess," she said.

She wasn't fooling him, but he let the pushback go. This backwards dance of intimacy and lingering concealment was something they were still working out.

It was so strange. Dying in each other's arms was supposed to be the way relationships ended, not how they began.

It seemed they had nearly reached the place Cassian's new friends wanted to bring them, a narrow valley below the old wreck. Elfla and Ferla even offered to climb up the bluff carrying them. They could uncurl their hoof-like feet into curved talons for sloth-like climbing....a truly terrifying prospect.....but Cassian diplomatically assured them that he and Jyn could easily hike up the rest of the way on their own.

"Very well then," Elfla said, in his/her oboe-like voice, "if yo-ou'd rather explo-ore on yo-our o-own. We will head do-own to check with the harvesters and co-ome back to-omorro-ow."

The Taun were a little lax on such concepts as time. "Tomorrow " might mean tomorrow morning, or it might mean two days from now, so they'd brought gear enough to camp it for a couple of days.

"It will be interesting to-o hear what yo-ou can tell us abo-out it," Ferla said, "it has puzzled me since I was a child." After a few more with good-byes and be-carefuls they galloped off down the riverbank.

For all that it was a roughish hike up the limestone bluff it took only a few hours, even with their packs.

It occurred to her to wonder if Cassian if had gotten detailed directions on looking for the wreck, but once they reached the top of the palisade, it their destination was obvious.

This wasn't a fighter or a shuttle. Whatever had come down here was......had been..... a full space ship. Even three-quarters buried and covered in tall grass it looked to be at least 50-60 meters wide. The shape could still be made out, an impressively crescent curved hull, intact if covered with soil and grass aft struts partly detached with several good sized birch trees actually growing though the gap.

"In my youth" was the vague date Elfla had given for the ship's crash....which might have meant something if either Jyn or Cassian had the slightest idea how long an average Taun lifespan was, which they didn't. Still, this thing had to have come down at least 20 or 25 years ago, given the amount of vegetation and soil build up. Erosion on the cliff face had exposed the two points of it's curve. Another decade and some good hard rains might send it toppling down to the river below. Jyn grabbed two handfuls of grass near an edge and pulled, topsoil came up with the matted roots. Cassian copied her and they quickly uncovered several meters of white and silver hull plating.
Jyn was no expert in ship identification but something about this boat rang a bell. Kestrel Dawn had gotten very good at lifting the credit clearance IDs of wealthy travelers in several busy space ports.

Steal from the poor and they notice right away, steal from the wealthy.....at least the right kind of wealthy, and not too much at any one time....and it may take them days to notice. If ever.

This sideways curve design looked familiar.....

"Fucking hell," she said, "It almost looks like a Lux"

Cassian nodded, running a hand along the scratched but still unstained hull, "Sorosub Luxury 4000. A classic, or so I've been told."

"I didn't know you were familiar with expensive vintage spacecraft, Captain." She was trying to tease him....but got no smile.

He shrugged. "I had occasion to deal with people who were." A line crossed had been crossed.

*I'm sorry,* she thought, *whatever it is I've made you remember, I'm sorry.*

"Me, too," she said.

Cassian nodded and edged around the now-exposed paneling. "There would be a main ramp entry at the front. " He moved back a meter or so looking up. "The flight deck would be above it....and this," he kicked at the rounded shape they'd revealed. "would be the roof of the starboard observation lounge." They still had several hours of daylight and a couple of folding shovels they'd borrowed from the Scavengers, so it seemed worthwhile to climb up onto the grass-grown top of the thing and at least dig a few holes. If equipment survived that would be of use to them it would probably be on the flight deck

She dropped her camp pack and shouldered her bundle of "break and enter" gear.

"Give me a boost up, Captain," she said.

He laid his pack aside and she stepped close, expecting him to lower his hands so she could use them as a step. Instead of he slipped hands behind her elbows and pulled her toward him, guiding her hands around his back and putting his arms around her.

The embrace wasn't unwelcome, oh my no, no...just unexpected...here, now. She let the bundle of tools fall and burrowed her head in against his neck, tightening her hold, as he pressed her against him.

These clothes were too bulky. Heavy jackets had been shed after getting to the top of the climb, but it still had been a cold spring morning. She felt for the shape of his back, his ribs, through the thick cloth shirt.

*Cassian?* His heart was beating hard enough to feel. Not panic attack fast…but….not in the good way either.

*What is it, Cassian?*

She couldn't ask. They didn't ask each other questions like that. You don't breach floodgates, you have to let the water out a little at a time.

He stepped back before she could turn her face up, to either kiss him, or look in his eyes.
"Sorry," he shook his head, as if annoyed with himself over some show of weakness, some mistake. It was one of his gestures, she was starting to learn.

*My love. What do you want? What do you need me to do?*

"Hey, soldier...." she said, keeping her hands on his arms, "this can wait. As much as I like wreck diving, there are other things I like more."

_Fucking brilliant way with words you've got, Jyn, she thought._

Cassian stepped back and handed her her gear again. "Good to know...I just, lost track of things for a moment. Come on. Let’s at least get a start on this first. Work before leisure." His smile made it seem as if a cloud had passed.

Letting it go, for now, she laid her right hand on his bowed-down shoulder and lifted her boot onto his joined hands. He boosted her, up onto the grassy mound. Not too hard a boost, as a joke, or too little of one, leaving her to scramble the last few centimeters,

It astonished her every day what extraordinary care he took with things, with her.

Jyn crouched low at the top and reached a hand back to help him up in turn.

The view of the river below was so pretty from up here. The sun was high now and the day was clear. She could see down the river as it wound, sparkling, down the valley toward the grasslands and the main branch of the bigger Green River. The hardwood forests stretched off down the opposite bank. It was harder to make out the shape of the wreck from on top of it. Cassian had thought to bring up a couple of long sticks and stuck one forward from the edge where they'd climbed up.

"Inward about 20 paces from this," he said. She walked across the squishy turf from where he indicated and stopped.

"Here?" she asked

He came up alongside her and took an extra step. "Short legs," he said with one of his small smiles.

"Bite me," she replied glad that the awkwardness had passed.

He was right Though. They uncovered the hatch quickly. The loos turf came up easily, just light crumbly soil, held together by matted grass and roots.

Marking out the edges, they could see the hatch was intact, still sealed.

"Holy hell," Jyn said. The hull was obviously compromised somewhere, those trees were coming up through the aft strut, but if the main cabins were sealed and undamaged....this could be a treasure trove.

The trick would be...."Manual hatch controls are inside," Cassian said, "It might be hard to get in."

"Are you speaking as a relatively law abiding citizen?"

"No," he said, "Just a man far separated from his lock-pick tools."

She rolled her eyes,...._you were so spoiled, let me show you how it's done, spy boy....then knelt and_
took a thin silica knife from the rough leg-sheath she'd made for herself. The blade was made from a cut and polished circuit board and she'd won it off one of the Scavengers in a dart game. Not a vibra-knife but a useful blade if you kept it sharpened. She slid it exploringly around the door seal and immediately heard a faint hiss of air.

"It's open," she said, astonished. The manual release must have already been engaged from inside.

The pneumatic hingeing was long gone so they had to work together to lift the hatch though once the seals were cut it prised open far easier than she would have dreamed. That done Cassian propped it with a large branch and a couple of rocks. Neither of them much liked the idea of getting trapped inside.

It was dark in there. This style of ship had lots of clear observation windows, she recalled, but those must all be covered with dirt. The torch one of the last emergency glow-flares they'd pulled from their crashed shuttle. Tucked into a glass mirrored box, like the one the Taun had given them, it gave off a fair amount of light. Jyn went in first while Cassian passed down the lamp and lowered himself in behind her. The air had not rushed out very hard as they’d forced the hatch, so clearly there must have been some cracks in this section of the hull too, or at least some open vents. It was close even so and fairly dry.

Cassian passed her a toxin-check strip. Pink. Not great, but with the hatch propped they should be fine.

The sweetish smell was immediately recognizable to both of them... *how could it not be?... it was faint and stale though, not recent.*

There were two pilots seats in the spacious cockpit but only one body. The remains were skeletal, stripped pretty clean. Disarticulated but largely unscattered over the chair and control console. *The small cracks or openings in the hull must have been just wide enough to let in the tiny scavenger lizards, otherwise an enclosed space like this would have slowed decay a little more. Bigger scavengers would have moved things around more violently.*

Jyn stepped forward with the lamp for a better look, but Cassian held a hand up, reflexively, as if to hold her back.

*Oh for heavens sake,* she thought, as if dry bones were something that would bother her.

But that didn't seem to be it exactly. As he took the light from her and crouched down to examine the skull facing toward them on the console the look on his face look seemed so strange... *a mix of questioning, and.... unhappiness? pain maybe?* The skull was elongated, humanoid but not human. There were bright circles still around some of the finger bones, jeweled rings, and rags of what might have been silk robes and brocade.

“Cerean,” he said, “looks like an elderly male.” There was something like relief in his voice.

*Cassiiian?*

They moved around the flight deck. Cut off from solar charge, most of the internal ships batteries were so down as to be useless, but they managed to get some chemical emergency lighting strips on the floor to work, opened cabinets, checked compartments.
They moved out to inspect the ramps, and the other cabins, searching as best they could in the poor lighting. There was a great deal here that could be used, or traded, but this was clearly a pleasure craft and not a military one. Lamps, fixtures, even dishes and interior windows and wire would be desirable to the Scavenger bands where they were staying, north of here. The Taun did not value such things for themselves but would appreciate having goods to trade. They liked salvaged fabric and some of these pillows and carpets would make them happy, even with a little must and mold. Jyn found a couple of outmoded but workable data pads, solar battery packs and medical equipment that she and Cassian could claim. No weapons, but they could search more carefully later, with better lamps. Some might be stowed in the interior.

There was still the sweetish smell of decay but no sign of other passengers. No visible bodies. No sign of food in the cabinets. The wine racks were empty, to Jyn’s slight disappointment. Although beautifully decorated, the ship seemed stripped, austere, at least from what she imagined of a wealthy party ship of the Early Republican Golden Age. She’d never actually been inside one. Cassian seemed to be studying the controls, dead as they were, and the one engine strut they could see into.

“It didn’t crash,” he said, thoughtfully, “he landed it here. Landed it quite well.”

She had noticed this too, everything seemed so intact. Nothing had slid. A crystal cup was still sitting on a table in the main cabin. Books, discarded jewelry, lay on others scattered between beautiful leather couches. Cassian paused by an interior door off the main lounge cabin. It was open, but too dark to see anything inside, and he held the light low, as if hesitating to lift it and look.

“What is it?” Jyn asked.

“The master bedroom,” he said, “or it should be....the way ships like this are usually laid out.”

Something was strangely flat in his voice.

“Give me the lamp,” she said. It suddenly seemed important to her that he not go in there.

“No,” he held it up a little, “I’ll be fine.”

“Cassian….please..”

He shook his head as if trying to shake something out of it, “No,” he turned to look back at her, “This ship is like one I’ve....been in before, that’s all. It isn’t that one. This ship must have come here shortly after the Purges, probably not long after after Palpatine seized power.”

“How do you know that?” she asked. He pointed to a carved jade table beside the door. There was a broken silver chain laying on it, square linked, heavy, it looked familiar. She had seen them in a few pictures.

Most recently she had seen one on Mon Mothma across the conference room on Yavin IV.

“A senatorial chain?”

“Pre-Imperial Design. The Last “free” Senate. They were all supposed to be collected and re-forged into the design for the Imperial Senate. Mothma had one and wore it for her famous resignation speech. Still wears it, as do a very few other renegades. I’m told Padme Amidala was buried in hers but only a very few survived.”

She moved close, to stand close by him as he lifted the lamp and walked into the cabin. She could make out gleaming furniture lining the walls, armoires and chests, a large gilt mirror.
Nice, the Scavengers would cut that up and sell it by the piece….Oh hell, girl, she thought, You’re already going native.

A large bed stood in the center of the room covered with what looked like tapestries. Another Cerean body lay covered in it, one skeletal hand laying above the coverlet.

“Another elderly male,” Cassian said quietly, “judging by the ridges.”

_They came here to die_, Jyn thought. _Who were they? What were they escaping? Why did they have the hatches unlocked but sealed, as if they just made no attempt to leave?_

She looked at Cassian and was suddenly filled with concern for him without being able to articulate why. This place was sad but what was bothering him was more than a mystery of two dead Cerean noblemen, dying alone ahead of the Empire’s rise.

_Something else was hurting him here. She wanted to get him out of this ship._

“Come on,” she said. “This is enough.”

He let her lead him out.

The sun was setting. It would have been safer to sleep inside the ship but she was damned if she was going to do that. A ways off from the wreck, at the top of the bluff they set up a fire and ran what the Taun called a “coal rope” of twisted slow-burning fiber around a good-sized camp site. The blue lizards came out after dark. They were mainly a problem down in the valley, not high on the hills, but burning the rope created a circle of ash that they would not cross and made it safer to camp on the ground.

Jyn laid out her blankets and sat down to eat some of the wrinkled fruit and nutcake that they had brought. Cassian had lifted his bedroll and stood for a moment as if thinking about where to put it. The sun was setting off behind the bluffs west of them and the first of the moons was already up and brightening.

“Do you mind?” he said, seeming to ask about laying it down beside hers.

_Now we are getting weird, she thought. What is this about?_

“Do you not want to?” she asked, annoyed to hear her voice sound like a teenager whose sweetheart is asking for their sweater back.

“Of course I want to, he said, “I just…I wanted to make sure.”

Even before they had become….whatever it was they were here….they had always shared a bed. Since waking up in the stone house they’d made a kind of temporary home in. Since their rescuers had pulled them, burned and broken, out of that wrecked Imperial shuttle. For months they had changed each other's bandages, held onto each other through nightmares. There was nothing left to hide, she felt. After all, even before Scarif...if "before" mattered anymore......they'd both been soldiers, liars, underground dwellers. Privacy was something people like them knew as a mental discipline rather than a physical one, a matter of millimeters, averted eyes, discretion.

He had her at a disadvantage that way of course, knowing, _or at least thinking he did_, so much about her.
Imperial prison medical records, she’d thought bitterly, sometimes, the ultimate dating information site.

She thought now, as she sometimes had before, of how it was usually she who reached for him, still. In those first days she’d been nervous about his his back, his slowly healing broken ribs, but she had been the one to….. for lack of a better word,... jump him first. His response was always so quick, so hungry, yet so agonizingly careful at the same time.

The very first time he had said, "You have to tell me, please...if I do anything .....

"I trust you," she'd said and it was true.

He trusted her too, although she wondered if she sometimes blundered into hurting him in her desperation.

Water over stones she had thought, when he ran his hands over the scars on her back and legs, when she had touched his chest, and shoulders, curled against him in the night....trying to wear away the memory of the sound his bones had made, breaking as he struck the beams falling in the data tower, smooth it into something else.

He shook his head when she offered him half the cake and took a long drink of the water instead.

It was getting dark in earnest now and the stars were flickering on. He laid down as if very tired with his head on his rolled jacket.

She watched him looking up at the stars and found herself fingering her kyber necklace, as she often did when she felt at an utter loss.

“Tell me a story,” she said, something she had a sudden memory of saying to her mother.

“About what?” he asked, looking up at the sky.

“About spaceships.”

He closed his eyes for a moment then opened them. Looking at the stars and not at her, he began:

Once there was an Imperial Military Provisional Governor. A well-bred, intelligent and ruthless man, the sort of fellow who tends to go far in Imperial Administration. He was packed off to a posting where he could have the opportunity to prove himself, as the new Military Governor on a planet… let’s say, in the Corellian Trade sectors…. with orders to bring a restive population to heel, and quickly establish secure weapons transport facilities.

The Governor was warned by Command that his continued advancement depended on both immediate job results and fewer distracting public scandals. Being a narcissistic sadist, in and of itself, was no disqualification for promotion, but he had a reputation for….intemperance. He had luxurious time-wasting tastes in wine, fast speed racing, classic spaceships, antiques, and the purely recreational physical and physiological abuse of anyone he felt to be in his power.
He had a fairly young wife who had previously been his mistress, the widow of one of his former commanders actually. There had been rumors, but the scandal was soon hushed up as his career advanced.

Maybe he was blackmailing her, or maybe she didn’t know exactly what he was when she traded up and married him. He was manipulative and could be very charming. Maybe she did know, and being ambitious herself, thought she could handle it. Whatever the case, after the “provisional” posting she found her situation unbearable. He was under Grand Moff Tarkin’s watch now, and this combination of greater work stress, added to the loss of the well-trained servants and house staff that had been her partial buffer for years, meant that she was now not just his favorite object of torment, but his only one.

She was contacted by a local resistance cell, who offered to get her off-planet and into Rebel territory in return for information on her husband’s security raids and movements. She asked for sizable payment in cash-credit up front. The Alliance would have been hard-pressed to meet her demands even if they trusted her not to just take the money and run, but they did not. They counter-offered her a smaller sum in advance, with the rest to be paid to her off-world, upon hand-over of the information. They did not hear from her again, but the cell agent who was her contact was captured shortly thereafter by Imperial Security, and committed suicide before they could be tortured.

Whether or not the Governor’s wife deliberately compromised the agent is impossible to know. If she did, the betrayal did her no good. If anything, her husband’s treatment of her became even less discreet.

The Governor was proving very effective at securing the planet, and getting the transport depot operational on-time and on-budget, but, for obvious reasons, his personal staff turn-over was high. Communications and Technical Staff began to be brought in directly out of the Regional Imperial Academies, since anyone with seniority or influence avoided the posting.

The Governor’s beautiful wife seemed to be increasingly confined to the opulent palace and her husband’s wedding gift of a now dry-docked antique Sorosub Luxury 4000 was one of her few refuges. She was also increasingly desperate. One evening, while her husband was away on a rare inspection trip, she stumbled across one of the new young staff officers, a pretty boy of eighteen or so, in a restricted part of the residential wing. He was not supposed to be there, but had broken into a social secretary’s terminal and was patching an information file onto an outgoing food service order. Her father had had a liaison job with a Bothan company in her youth and she recognized the maneuver immediately as that of a Bothan Intelligence mole. When she threatened to report him, the young man revealed that he had been recruited as a Bothan paid source, and she blackmailed him into acting as her go-between with the Bothans. For three weeks she passed him requested information and he gave her confirmation of the large payments being made into an untraceable numbered account on Kafrene.

The dark and empty ship was their meeting place. When the young man expressed concern about avoiding detection in coming and going, the Governors wife explained, with an ugly, bitter laugh, that so long as she remained “within the barbed wire” as she put it, her husband actively encouraged her to maintain such social conventions as parties, fine clothes and lovers. It was possible she was lying, of course, but the young man had been at the station long enough to have heard such whispers. “We’re in no danger doing the expected, my angel. Do exactly as I tell you and we’ll both get what we need out of this. I promise.”

The boy seemed willing to be persuaded. The messages and bank confirmations were passed on detachable film sheets pinned into their clothes. It was necessary to be very conscious of which cameras were activated when, as well as when a touch of repeater tape could make the music box in
the powered-down ship cover up a whispered conversation, and when it couldn’t. He appeared to be an apt pupil.

It was an unsustainable situation in the long term, of course, as the young man could not help but be aware. Other officers had begun giving him wide berth, and he understood what was meant when he heard a drunken maintenance worker mutter to another about “asking directions to the pet cemetery” after passing him in a hallway.

He urged the Governor’s wife to make her escape with him to their now fat bank account, assuring her that he could get them out of the palace and arrange for a Bothan ship. She kissed him then and told him how long she had waited to meet someone so brave and loyal. There was no question of simply leaving, she said. He had her watched at all times, had even had a tracer surgically implanted on her, she could never be safe. Quickly, in whispers, she revealed a plan she had clearly been working on for more than a year.

This ship was not as disabled as it appeared, or as her husband believed it to be, and neither was she. The Lux 4000 had its own Lothan crystal battery, undetectable by the Palace main power grid. It could not fly far, but was enough power to get out of atmosphere and to a small light-speed craft she had hidden on a storage satellite in near orbit, back when her chains were looser. The only sticking point was getting the landing bay open. She could get the command data cylinder, with the executive code on it, but her husband kept it on him at all times.

She would arrange for him to be called to the residence that night. Sooner or later her husband always demanded to meet her lovers personally. He would be searched going in, everyone was, but she already knew that the Bothans usually supplied their operatives with scan repellent envelopes. She would find a way to slip him a single-charge blaster, just small enough to slip inside one. He would smuggle it into the residence.

Her husband had security droids and cameras but kept the former outside his private quarters and the latter on internal feed, since he lately had reason to be concerned about some of his excesses winding up on his Imperial record file. She could disable him by drugging his evening wine, just enough for the boy to use the weapon and for her to grab the command code and use it to override the droids. They would have to run, but if they could make it to the ship they could be out and free before the alarm sounded. Free of both the Empire and the Bothan Spynet, they would have a chance together.

Her suffering was obvious and her hatred of her husband absolutely beyond question.

The boy admitted that he did indeed have such an envelope. When he dressed to go, an hour later, after she had slipped away from the ship through the darkened hanger, he found a small blaster cap, barely the length of his index finger and with a single button firing mechanism, hidden in his boot.

That evening he was called to report to the Governor’s personal quarters. His unit commander and his fellow officers did not even raise eyes from their pads, and the Sport-Net holos they were watching, to see him follow the droid out. He suspected they had already drawn lots for who would get his bunk and locker. He walked very quickly, much faster than his normal gait.

The scans cleared him at the doorways to the private quarters wing, as did the droids outside the even more luxurious “personal” apartment, within.
He knew he would have seconds at best to assess the room when the gilded door clicked shut behind him.

The governor was dead on the floor, shot through the head with a single use blaster pac. The command cylinder, or a solid reproduction of one, was still in his sleeve and a woman’s body lay on the floor nearby. It was not the Governor’s wife, but another woman, no doubt the same age, size and weight.

That surprised him, it shouldn’t have, but he was still only a very young spy after all.

“I’m sorry” he said, as if the dead woman could hear him. Laid out on her body was a timer charge with a display showing ten seconds remaining.

He took a blue disc from the envelope inside his shirt. It telescoped down quickly into a stick about a meter high and he dove to crouch against the doorframe with it held in front of him. If the explosive had been anything other than a pulse-charge grenade, the small repellent field would have been useless and he would have died, as intended. It was though and he didn’t

The blast door sealed as it was pre-programmed to do, although the fire-suppression droids mistakenly opened the several large air vents because of a malfunction that caused them to think an airborne toxin might be present. A second blast went off. Confusion delayed the Security troopers for an extra nine minutes, and when they finally forced the doors and got inside the room in protective gear, they found the mostly vaporized remains of three people. There was the Governor, the badly burned body of a woman tentatively identified as his wife, and a few handfuls of carbonized residue determined later to be all that remained of a third person. A single partial jawbone remained intact and a DNA scan matched with that of Imperial Communications Technician Corporal Edro Morran. Forensics indicated that Morran must have been carrying a second incendiary, probably in his pocket, that went off too soon, largely vaporizing him.

Although the Capitol was put on immediate lock-down, local Resistance forces, in league with the terrorist Rebel Alliance, must have been fore-warned and took advantage of the confusion to attack the airbase, the data storage and water filtration plants, the detention centers, and the physical plant of the Palace and Administrative headquarters. Fighting raged for three days until the Rebels were finally forced back. The construction of the transport station was delayed by almost two years.

“Devaron,” Jyn said.

Cassian lay on his back still looking up at the stars, saying nothing.

“You killed the Butcher of Devaron.”

“No,” he said, “I did not.”

“What happened to her? Did she get away?” Jyn had rolled onto her stomach and propped herself up on her elbows. The fire had burned low now, but the circle of lizard-repellant coals around them still glowed, giving off just enough light for her to see his face, as a shadowy profile.

“I have no idea,” he said.

She understood, of course, that the Bothan money and the account on Kafrene had never really
existed, but she had so many other questions.

*How old were you? Did you feel sorry for her, somehow, at any point? Was this the first or only time you had to do something like that? Is this one of the things makes you hate yourself a little? That make you feel like you've swallowed poison? That some choice that was supposed to be yours to make was taken away from you and you can’t have it back? Do you know how rare shame is where I’ve come from? How most people can’t even feel it and the few who can, die or get twisted by it?*

There were many things she wanted to say.

*There was an older girl and she crawled under my blanket and kissed me I think she tried to tell me she was dying inside, but I was too young and stupid to understand and a month later she was killed and I lost the gloves she gave me. A boy taught me how to swim and asked me to do more with him and I wanted to but I said not now because I was scared and later he said it was just a joke he didn’t even fancy me. He got sent on a mission a week after and got captured. I heard later that he killed himself. It was years and years before I realized that Saw knew, must have known because it was right after that he dragged me out of camp to a medical station and ordered them to give me my first long-term contra implant. He probably sent that boy on that mission that broke him. The first time I ever had full-on sex with anybody it was a smuggler who straight up told me if I didn’t have the money for transit off the planet where I was stranded.....definitely had no idea I was sixteen and had just been abandoned and left to die by my Partisan unit...that I could trade that and even get a hot meal thrown in. It was the Outer Rim, it was what passed for normal relations for the survivalist lot out there. No coercion beyond presenting the one-for-one. Probably even saw it as a generous offer. Do you know what I thought? I thought “Fine. Who the fuck cares?” and I got dropped off on Tatooine. Do you know how hard it is to find a shower in Mos Eisley? It took me three days picking pockets to get the credits for a pay-per-use sonic shower and I stood in it for an hour and cried because it turned out I cared, I cared a lot, and I couldn’t have my choices back."

She said none of those things.

“I want to tell you a story, too,” she said.

There was enough light to tell that Cassian’s eyes were closed now, and he seemed to shake his head. “No, Jyn. You really don’t….you…”

“I want to,” she said, "listen."

“There was a woman who thought that everybody left, or failed or lied. She had no home and no name anymore and all that kept her alive was spite. When they came to beat even that out of her, all she could think was, how many can I take down with me before the light goes out? At the last second she was pulled off a prison transport and back to life. Then a man appears, who is playing with most of the same pieces but on a totally different game board. Even when he lies he keeps using crazy words like hope, and trust and home, and when he says her name….which is pretty much constantly, by the way….he says it like he says those words, as if it were something he BELIEVES and fuck all evidence to the contrary. He looks at her and sometimes she hates it, because she has been hiding for so long that being seen that clearly hurts. He keeps coming back for her, even when she yells and runs and it’s stupid and he shouldn’t, and he can’t, but he does. He is the most beautiful thing that she has ever seen. Nothing will change that, not blood or fire or the past or anything else will touch it. “Let go,” he tells her, “Leave it, it’s over.” He gives her everything he has left and they lay down to die and when they don’t, they start again."

She settled back down beside him and looked up at the stars. "That is the only story I know now or need to know.”
They had talked about how they had to go back, they had to find a way to keep fighting, because while the Empire stood, there was no safety, no sitting out for anyone, but it was also true that neither of them were the people they had been before......the fires on Scarif had burned them both clean. She believed that. They lay in silence for a while.

“I like your story better” he said.

The Taun returned around noon the next day, with bags of tart red berries. They were very excited about the wreck and listened to all of Cassian’s explanations, whether or not they understood them. They asked Jyn and Cassian to take out the bones of the Cereans, since they had taboos about such things but they quickly dug a large grave at the top of the bluff, and after the remains were covered, they filled it with dirt and laid leaves on it.

The profits from stripping the beautiful ship were shared out with the Taun and helped Jyn and Cassian make a number of important contacts among the Scavengers and traders that they would need in the months to come.
Like Normal People

Chapter Summary

A small flashback to the days after Endor, when Jyn and Cassian return to their refuge on Ea and and the beginning of their new life as "lighthouse keepers" on the Edge of the galaxy. Jyn reveals that they may someday have to consider choices neither of them had ever thought to make.

Chapter Notes

Follows Chapter 81 of "Over the Edge" but was bound to happen sooner or later anyway.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Somehow they managed to have most of their awkward and painful conversations in bed, usually in the dark.

The first on the subject of pregnancy had been after they made their way back from Endor..... or more accurately from the troop transport evacuating personnel off Endor.

Bodhi had carefully coded all the keys and info about the little shuttle onto a small hand pad and given it to Cassian.

Jyn had stolen many many things but never a spaceship. Probably because, as she freely admitted, she could not fly for shit.

They moved through chaotic, pressing crowds of ground troops, flight techs and medical crews, all being dispatched to other destination transports in the days after the battle.

He checked out as "Captian Arian" a Spec Ops sniper...which, at various points in his checkered career, he had almost been. At the far end of a different end queue another set of codes would identify her as "Sargent Hallick”, munitions specialist.....her own private bad joke...but Julan Arian and Leah Hallick never boarded their assigned crowded transports. Instead they slipped sideways through the crowds to a small nondescript shuttle linked to a dozen others on a further tow platform.

Bodhi loved that little ship but gave her to them without hesitation. "Consider it a wedding present, sort of,” he'd said with as he'd hugged Cassian hard one last time before turning away in the crowd.
"Just take good care of her." Cassian was fairly sure he hadn't meant the ship.

"Te amo, hermano." The pilots accent had been touchingly bad. Bodhi must have looked the words up and practiced at some point, knowing there would be a goodbye one way or another. "Yo también..." Cassian managed to choke out...before remembering that Bodhi would not understand.

At the moment he waved his false ID cylinder past the droid doing the personnel checks, Cassian looked up for a security camera. The nearest had been on a small drone hovering above the crowd. Someone was watching on the other side of it, he knew, probably Draven but maybe someone else too.

This would be approved or it wouldn't. They would let him go or they would stop him now.

"You are assigned to the U75 Transport Desert Wind, dock H135, Captain Arian," the droid said.
"You will be given your seat assignment when you board,"

"Thank you."

He never looked back. Moving steadily through the crowds, away from the H dock he felt Jyn's shoulder against his own a hundred meters before he dared to look down at her.

They climbed aboard the little A30 that Bodhi called "Guardian" and started the engines when the tow was pulled clear.

Among the vast choreography of shuttles and transports, no one noticed the one tiny ship that didn't go into hyperspace with the rest. They'd circled Endor's star in sub-light, steering clear of the dangerous debris field of the last Deathstar.

Once they were well and truly out of sight, Portia, in her tower on Ea, guided them back in her cautious painstaking way.

After a night landing in the snow, they stumbled back to the little stone house that had been their home for two years. Both more than willing to sleep in their clothes on a stone floor, rather than in the ship an hour longer so eager had they been to be "home." Inside dry wood and blankets were waiting for them and Cassian had watched Jyn light a fire with hands shaking as much from emotion as cold, unable to hold a thought other beyond "Thank you."

It had been that next morning, lying still and side by side on the slightly flat mattress, between the blankets, as the sun peeked through gaps in the shutters that she said, "Oh, I got some news about my contraceptive implant."

In another situation, or possibly another universe, it might have been funny.

A brief panicked discussion ensued...well, panicked on his part at least, Jyn had been astonishingly matter-of-fact about the whole thing...a discussion cut short when a small high voice began to wail under the window. It was little Beri belting out that dreadful pop song that Bodhi had taught her. Company had arrived, in the form of their dear friends and rescuers. All three Sisters were there to
greet them. Eldest Sister Tova had paused at the doorway to shake herself and stomp the muddy snow from her feet, but dear Bes, now Second Sister, had not waited but rushed in with a mist of icy dew on her fur to hug them both. After a fast and happy welcome home breakfast, he and Jyn had needed to unload the shuttle and then climb the icy steps to talk to Portia “personally.”

Their War was not over, in many ways it was beginning again. They were manning an Alliance Intelligence Surveillance station.

Several anxious hours later Jyn passed on what a field doctor had explained while unhooking her from the hema-system that had replaced most of the blood she lost from her wounds at Endor.

“Sargent, you are fit to return to whatever duty they assign you. Your levels are all normal and you have approximately 1,185 days left of fertility suppression.”

“So, I told them,” Jyn said, “I said ‘What the fuck? How can this be when I paid for fourteen fucking years worth only four years ago!’…..and yes, I realize full well that this probably tipped our hand to said medic that I was not regular military but since you and that particular doctor were already circling each other like a pair of notorious hired guns who just ran into each other in a Tatooine cantina, I figured that cat was out of the bag….. and they give me an arch look and say ‘Dear, you were robbed.’

She huffed, clearly still enraged at being cheated by some far off walk-in medical droid-clinician. Then looked down at her bare feet, shuffling the slightly moth-eaten wool rug they’d unrolled under the bed. The silence lengthened.

“I meant to get a full sterilization ….” quietly, ‘I always meant to…when I first got taken to a clinic….I told Saw that’s what I wanted, but he said…later.”

*No questions was their oldest rule.*

Cassian broke it.

“How old were you?”

Neither of them had gotten ready for bed yet, she had been sitting with boots off, on the very edge of their old bed as he lay on top of the blanket.

Those perfect green eyes turned to meet his and hid nothing, “Fifteen,” she said. “Four years ago “Nari McVee” went to a clinic on Coyerti Prime….bastards….all set to pay for one then but….it took longer and required blood checks and….she just paid for the fourteen and left. I don’t know why. I could no more have imagined bringing one more child into that awful fucking life than I could imagine being Queen of Naboo. No, no, no…..but…..it was just one more choice the fucking universe was taking away from me. Stupid, selfish and stupid but that’s the way my mind was working then.”

*Jyn.*

“1185d….so it’s not like this is some huge thing. I just felt like it was the kind of thing…..married people told each other.”
“Ah…” he said, “I forgot, you married us at some point before you got to that field hospital.”

“Muérdeme,” she said, back to looking at her feet again, although he thought he could see a faint smile. “Am I saying that right?”

“Perfectamente,” he said.

He tried to imagine Jyn at fifteen….there had been pictures in her file though nothing at that age except tags in blurry security vids of Partisan attacks.

He’d been what then…nineteen? Twenty? Somewhere between Edro Morran and Joreth Sward. They were neither of them normal people, it would be wrong to pretend that they ever could be. All she knew of babies were the dolls she’d played with as a child in hiding. All he knew about babies was that his mother had died having one in a detention camp hospital.

The Emperor was dead but the Empire wasn’t. Up to half the Imperial Fleet and a dozen vicious third and fourth tier mass murderers were running through a galaxy in turmoil. There were rumors that the semi-religious cults Palpatine had been stoking over the last few years might have been more than a madman’s vanity. Some disgruntled officers might have been planning a super-secret break for years, in the hopeful case of Palpatine’s death or assasination, which would now be put in action.

In the hallway Draven had slipped him a thin sheet of an outline. Intelligence Operations: Guillotine Scenario.

He had not been stupid enough to lie to Draven, not directly anyway, in that make-shift “exit interview” on the troop transport.

“I broke,” he’d told him, and it was true. At Eadu…probably before. A field agent can die at any time but once your nerve breaks no one lasts long.

The General had nodded. This could not have been news to him, not after Scarif.

“I will die without her,” he informed his commander…simplified for effect perhaps, but true in every way that mattered, he surely would. Draven had looked surprised then. Perhaps he had expected a tangle of betrayal or battle fatigue, trauma or divided loyalties, anything but a simple love story.

Woking exile was the best he could offer them. They could stay together, away from the torment of seeing their comrades sacrifice forgotten…Rue Melshi had a sister…her name was Jaqueline, she was a flight commander….how could he ever have faced her?…Bodhi and Tonic would have to live with that…he found that he could not. Jyn would never have to hear her father called a war criminal, have to change the name she had just gotten back, never be called answer for Saw’s crimes. They would be a far-station, a voice in the dark, until such time as the Alliance released them from service or they died.

What point was there in trying to bargain? They had died together once already, everything that came after was a gift.

She knew what he was thinking…to a degree she always did.
“Hey,” she flopped down on the bed upside down, so that her bare feet were next to his head...rude...”We have almost four years....if the bloody war is still going on and we can’t leave, we’ll go down to the shore, to HarborTown or one of the other human settlements down there. Med-droids or no med-droids you know the Sisters have some methodology. Until then we do our jobs, we watch the bastards like owls hunting wamp-rats, we fuck as often and as well as conditions permit and we don’t worry about this.”

Unable to think of what else to say or do, he took one of her bare ankles in his hand and kissed it.

She giggled though she was not even remotely ticklish.

“I know you’re afraid,” came from somewhere down by his feet, “I promise you I will not ask you to talk about babies or non-babies again for four years.”

He was afraid.

He was even more afraid four years later, on the third year anniversary of the peace treaty and pretty much without a break for the next nine months.

When Macha, the Second Sister of the humans of HarborTown, put his newborn daughter in his arms he was beyond afraid. He was terrified.

Chapter End Notes

Oh......having babies.
Swimming Lessons

Chapter Summary

Cassian and Jyn take their baby into the water for the first time. Cassian remembers Kaylyra Andor's birth.

Chapter Notes

Angst+fluff+angst

The first time they brought the baby to the near pond she was almost six months old. She was born in the fall and it had just been too cold until then.

He and Jyn learned quickly that when the company of well-meaning and curious neighbors became too much for them all, just saying that Kayly was “cold” was enough to earn them space. Full-term Memsa babies were born with a covering of downy fur, so a poor bare human infant seemed in dire danger of freezing almost all the time, at least in their neighbors minds. Of course she must whisked home to a quiet fireside.

As the first non-Memsa baby most of the village had ever seen she was an object of intense, almost carnival-like, curiosity for a long time. Bes and Beri appointed themselves gatekeepers. On at least one or two occasions gentle Bes actually bared her teeth at a rambunctious grandmother who tried to pull the swaddling blankets down, convinced that such a huge child must have fur on it somewhere.

That first winter nursing a newborn was hard for Jyn for many reasons, some of which Cassian understood and some of which he knew he never would. She was so accustomed to forcing her mind and body through whatever task she had focused on. Escape in a firefight, survival on a desert planet, carrying a dying soldier across a bombed out landing strip…but this? This was a new kind of hard.

It was not until Spring came and Summer was in sight, that she began to feel, as she said…”not quite Jyn Erso but a reasonably passible alias, likely to become Jyn Erso again soon.”

The worst part for Cassian had been the last month of the pregnancy and the first few days.

They went down to the shore, to HarborTown, at Eldest Sister Tova and Second Sister Bes’s urging when Jyn got near the end of her seventh month.
“Dearest allies,” Tova said, “I have delivered more nurslings than I can count but never a human one. Though our hearts are bound with the same thread our bones are different. It is safer to go south to the Sisters there where the pattern of this is more familiar.”

So they used Guardian. Messages were sent ahead to warn their friends south, so that the mere sight of a ship coming in did not cause panic, and Cassian flew her in atmo, low and slow, to a landing place near their friend Tom Markey’s fishing shacks a short ways out from the town.

As they uncovered the small shuttle and ran the engine checks, a crowd gathered in the field at the far end of their village to watch the take-off. It had been almost five years since Bodhi Rook had flown her out over town and the new generation of nurslings had never seen the ship in flight. Jyn and Cassian were always so very very careful. Guardian was hidden under a shell of brush and scan reflector panels and had really only flown her once since coming in from Endor. Now Portia had looked out from her tower, through all her satellites, and assured them that no eyes were watching, so they took the risk.

“Oh holy fucking hell,” Jyn said, as she wrestled with the seat belt extenders, “How am I even supposed to get these restraints buckled? I am the size of a fucking GT75.”

“No you aren’t,” he said, “You look like a small snake that has swallowed a medium-sized rabbit.” She glared at him. She hadn’t thought that was funny when Beri said it and she didn’t think it was funny now.

As he engaged the lift on the controls, Cassian thought of Bodhi, so far away.

He couldn’t shake the sense that Kay was somehow in the co-pilot seat…as if his friend were a shadow-image burned onto Cassian’s peripheral vision….and could so clearly imagine the odds and percentages that would be being recited to him right now. It was all he could do not to take the ship straight up, to try to get into hyperspace and get…..somewhere,…..somewhere safer for this child, safer for Jyn.

Her near hand reached over and touched his wrist on the controller.

“It’s alright,” she said, “I’m just bitching and moaning. I’m fine, and the little spy is fine.”

One of Portia’s chosen voices came over the ship comm,… thank heaven those were programmed in, he couldn’t have handled hearing her over the earpiece right now…. “Jyn and your undelivered fetal offspring were both in good condition as of five hours ago Cassian. The head was down but unengaged in the pelvic canal and Jyn was showing no troubles with blood pressure or premature cervical dilation. There is really no reason to expect any kind of complication at this point.”

“I love you Portia. Shut up!” Jyn said.

They flew south through the sunset and landed by the edge of the saltmarshes, making the days-long journey in only a few hours. All three of the human Sisters of HarborTown were waiting for them, ready to cover Guardian with a net of seaweed. Tom’s rickety little fish shack had been fitted out with a proper bed, thick blankets hung on the walls to keep out the wind, and a tiny wood stove (made from the cut up pressurized fuel tank of a Lambda Class 4 shuttle) was keeping things warm. It would have felt like a holiday if either of them had been able to sleep.

Second Sister Macha and Youngest Sister Olwen were mildly horrified when Cassian explained that he was intending to stay with Jyn all through the birth.

“Sweet breath of mercy, WHY?” young Olwen asked.
‘Because I want to be there,’” Cassian said as gently and firmly as he could.

“Is this normal where you come from?” Macha inquired, with a raised eyebrow.

Was it? Cassian wondered. In all honesty he didn’t know.

A dim memory had come to him recently of a party of people, family, squeezed into a company housing unit on Fest.....while someone, a cousin.....he could retrieve some of the faces but the names were all lost to him, if it was Fest he really couldn’t have been more than four or five....was screaming in the small sleeping alcove off to the side. He had been frightened but no one had seemed concerned, in fact, he remembered his older uncles and aunts drinking and playing cards and giving him sweets. Somebody....Abuela?.... had come out with a baby wrapped in a white blanket.....that was what he remembered most clearly, nothing was ever white on Fest, even his memories of snow were tinged with purple from the kyanite mines.....and everybody had cheered. Hell, he might have been confusing it with some other memory, but he was pretty sure his abuelo had given him a sip of pine brandy. “La familia es la vida.”

“We are all the family each other has,” he told Macha, and that part they seemed to understand.

When the chipped med-droid in the camp had brought him the too-small bundle of his sister to hold for just a minute she had been wrapped in white too.

Six weeks passed and it proved to be a busy and useful time. They met with lots of people in HarborTown. Contacts were updated. Agreements negotiated. Eldest Sister Perin looked Jyn over carefully but pronounced everything normal.

“The child is not overly large,” the iron-haired Lady said, “But you are are small. It may take a little wrestling but she should come to meet us with little trouble when she is ready.”

A girl. Tova had told them she thought it likely but....

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He had finally told Jyn the story when she came to him more than a year ago, sitting on the stone wall outside Portia’s tower.

“Could we have a child?” she had asked him, miserable, unsure, “is that something that could happen?”

It was the way she said it that broke his heart. Doubt was not something Jyn Erso expressed. She said yes, and she committed herself utterly or she said no, and only hell could move her.

So he told her.

Sitting on the wall and holding both her hands he told about the camp and the hospital and his mother and the little baby girl who probably never even opened her eyes. It was a common story, a short story. Even if he had wanted to make it longer he couldn’t. There were too many things he
didn’t know. He’d barely been seven.

A few days later, he got up early leaving Jyn to sleep in after the late shift in the tower and went out to the little “garden” beside their house. Years ago, before Endor, he had come home from a trip and Bes had shown him how she and Jyn had made a garden of stones, following a Memsa tradition. Carefully chosen stones, and one heavy metal bolt, one for each of their fallen comrades of Rogue One, were arranged along the back wall. At the corner were two more, her parents, while a rough dark grey stone stood by itself....Saw, he expected, though he had never asked. Bes explained, “You choose a stone for your remembered dead, and hold it sometimes so they are never lost to you but you can lay them aside when you must and know they will be safe til you come back.

Too many rocks, he had thought at the time, I would need a quarry.

Now he reached into his pocket. The smooth dark stone he had found by the pond, picking it up with no clear idea of what he meant to do with it. The small round white one had been slipped into his pocket on the ocean shore last spring. It must have fallen down into the lining, forgotten, only to be found yesterday by Tova, who had insisted on mending the lining of his old blue jacket when he visited. “Look what has found you again, Cassian-ally!” she had said, handing it to him.

Kissing one stone and then the other Cassian laid them in the grass near the house wall then went back inside to wake Jyn.

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Jyn never really screamed.

“Do not worry about sparing my ears, child,” Eldest Sister Perin had said, rubbing Jyn’s back as she paced the room between the contractions, fingering the kyber stone on the string around her neck, “around here we measure a woman’s strength by whether or not the Bequa can hear her at the bottom of the sea.”

“Fuck that,” Jyn snarled between gritted teeth.

The closest she ever came to outright screaming was yelling “What the FUCK, kid?!” which she yelled a lot. After what seemed like hours, Macha and Perin helped her stand up...to kneel really.. on a kind of padded half rocking stool and half-kneeling bench.

He thought improbably of the little prayer chapels in the Kyber Temple in Jedha City.

“You,” Perin said, to him, “If you must stay, do what her mother should be here to do and hold her,” Olwen showed him how to stand, shoved him really, behind Jyn so that she could lean back against him. “When it is time, she may need to stand up and then you must not let her fall.” She was pale but not as pale as she had been in the field hospital at Endor.

“Portia’s right,” Jyn gasped, “This is fucking insane.”

“Jyn Blackbird,” Macha was kneeling at Jyn’s feet, “If you think you and this child are having a fight, it is time to let her win. Keep breathing, lean forward and push.” Olwen got in front and let Jyn brace hands on her young shoulders.
“CASSIAN!” Jyn said as he slipped his arms under hers “PLEASE! damn it!” she said, “Tell me this is going to be alright. Lie if you have to. OH!!!”

He took her weight as best he could, “It’s going to be alright,” he said beside her ear.

Macha said, “One more time Jyn.”

“Say my name,” Jyn whispered, panting as if about to take a leap.

“Jyn,” he said and she leaned against his arms and finally yelled, loud. Lots of things happened that he did not notice because an extremely pink, slippery looking, messy baby appeared in Macha’s hands and began to cry.

“A new pattern is cast and a new thread begins it,” Eldest Sister Perin said, passing down some of the soft blue blankets they had been warming by the stove, in a black box made from the casing from a crashed Imperial mining rig.

“Welcome little bird,” Macha said, “Little far-flier.”

“Give her to Cassian,” Jyn said, “Please…Cassian…you hold her.”

The Ladies did as she said. Perin took Cassian’s place holding Jyn, letting her lean back on the stool. He managed to kneel down on the floor and Macha put the wrapped damp bundle in his arms. “Stay here,” she said sternly as if she thought he was an idiot and might try to run out the door with the child, “Old cords and bindings must be tied off, stay out of the way.”

The baby looked frightened. She had stopped crying but her eyes were wide and looked aggrieved. Whatever she had expected of the world, it had not been this. He could feel Jyn’s hand stroking his hair.

First word, first thoughts. That was what the Memsa said were important.

Perdónanos, he thought, Forgive us.

“Me despierto y veo la mañana,” he tried to sing to her, the old miner’s prayer. It was all he could think of to comfort her. She looked up at him curiously.

The Memsa had been swimming in the ponds since the ice melted, Cassian and Jyn had both taken their first swims a few weeks ago but they hadn’t had the nerve to try to bring Kaylyra in until the sun was warm to compensate for cold water.

“She’s probably going to cry,” Jyn said, untying the blue cloth sling that bound Kayly in front of her.

“Maybe, Cassian said, “We’ve spent all these months telling people it’s too cold for her and now we’re going to publicly dunk her in water. We’re going to lose all credibility.” He laid a blanket on the flattest spot on the pebbled shore and sat the baby up.

“Will she swim?” Beri asked. Kayly crowed with laughter, she adored Beri.

“Not like a Memsa child,” Cassian said, “we’ll have to get her used to the water and then teach her.”
Beri was slack-jawed in amazement. “Teach her? Did someone have to teach you?”

“Yes,” Jyn said quietly, and stood to pull off her clothes and lay them, folded, on the blanket.

“Were you a baby, Cassian-ally? When you learned to swim? Who taught you? Your mother…..or someone else?”

Memsa children generally lived exclusively with their mothers, fathers were only involved day-to-day if children were orphaned and no nursing females of their mother’s family could be found to adopt them. His involvement in his baby’s life was an endless astonishment to them. They were not disapproving just bemused and curious.

“No,” he said, “I was fourteen.”

Jyn’s head turned, this was not a story she had heard.

“I was taught to swim by the Army of the Alliance to Restore the Republic, in something called Basic Training. They had to teach you to swim before they could give you zero-gravity training or you wouldn’t know how to move, was the theory. My teacher was a boy almost my same age, named Ruescott Melshi, shoved me in a pool on a Mon Calmari training ship and I damned near drowned. He felt bad about it for years.”

His daughters mother’s green eyes met his, over Beri’s head. Bright and strong and missing nothing. 100% Jyn Erso again.

“I’ll get in first, mi amor,” she said “then you pass her down to me.”

Kaylyra did not cry, although her eyes opened very wide as Jyn ducked down into the cool pond water with her. She began to laugh and splash as if she were born to it.
Three Years Market

Chapter Summary

Little Kaylyra Andor takes a holiday trip with her parents, and while little pitchers have big ears they don't always know what they are hearing.

Chapter Notes

Shameless world-building and even more shameless throwback to the first chapter of "Over the Edge"

We are incapable of even child fluff w/o angst.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kaylyra Andor was seven the year her parents first took her down to the Three Years Market. They had not gone last time, because Mama had been too tired from having Galen.

There were Markets at the RiverTown in the Summer for fruit and fish, and Markets every Fall for apples and grain and goats. There were cloth Markets at HarborTown. They even had a small Market at Nexa in the Fall and sometimes in the Spring for pine chips and made-things. The biggest and best though, everyone knew, was the Three Years Market at the RiversMouth. It lasted for a whole week and people came from all over the South, and Islands and the Uplands to camp in tents or cabin-wagons.

There was a Hiring Fair, and games. You could buy anything from boats to beets to buns, at least that’s what Eldest Sister said. She also said that, even though humans always bragged that they could have babies anytime, most of the human babies in the world were born nine months after a Three Years Market.

“Was I?” Kayly asked, as they all walked up the River Road with the goat carts.

“No,” Eldest Sister said, “Because Jyn and Cassian would not wait three years. They were so eager to make you that they tried almost every day for a thousand days which makes you the most special human-child anywhere.” Eldest Tova laughed very hard then and so did Second Sister Bes and Youngest Sister Beri.

Mama laughed too, but Papa gave Eldest a stern look and said, “Tova.”

“How long did it take to make Galen?” she asked, looking doubtfully at her baby brother who was riding with the bags in the the back of the cart, licking pieces of straw and trying to stick them to his own legs.

“Nine hundred and Ninety-Nine days,” Sister Bes, said with a smile, and everybody laughed even harder, except Papa, but even he smiled, before he said “That’s enough of that conversation!”
They found a spot camping on the bluff above the town. It would be further to walk in the mornings, but less “soggy” for camping. Lots of families were up there because there was better "sanitation" as Mama called the privies. Even better, they had a new very big tent now that the Taun given them as a present. Kayly had asked for her own small tent so she didn’t have to sleep with Galen.

“He’ll stay on his own cot, if you don’t want him in with you, or he can come in with us,” Mama said.

“Un niño grande!” Galen said. Papa had taught him that and he was very proud of it, because he had just figured out that he was more like Papa. She supposed it was true, but she still wished he’d stop taking his pants off in public so much. He was embarrassing.

Clearly that extra day was important.

They came up with the idea of putting the small hand cart inside the tent with a blanket over it to be Kayly’s special cabin inside the big tent and Mama and Papa would have their mattress on the ground. Galen would sleep in his little cot by himself or with them.

They were camped right on the edge between the people from their village and a bunch of humans from the South. The Sisters of all the Circles all had their own camping place on another hill so they could have meetings. Everybody hugged and kissed and said they would find each other later. Sister Beri let Galen try on her sunglasses when he asked, which was not a good idea because he got them sticky. Beri didn’t care, she just licked them off. Which made Galen laugh and Papa wince.

Kayly knew very well that their family was different from all the other families in their village. They were the only humans who lived in Nexa all the time. Sometimes Kayly wished she was a Mem so that she could dive, and almost never get cold, and see at night, but that would have meant Papa didn’t live with them and she wouldn’t have swapped that for anything. Galen tried to stick things to himself for fur all the time.

“Why don’t we live by HarborTown with other humans?” she had asked Mama once.

Papa was usually the person it was best to ask questions, because he never said, “Not now, Kayly!” or ever get mad when you interrupted him, BUT he sometimes gave complicated answers, or didn’t really want to answer, so he told you about something else, or asked you why you were asking. When Mama DID answer she would always give you short real answers. If you were really lucky she would give you an “inappropriate” answer.

“Jyn!” “What?” “She doesn’t need to know that yet.” “She asked.” “That doesn’t mean you have to tell her….it’s impropio....” “Really? Really? Would you rather have her ask Portia? Because Portia will show her pictures.” “You have no filters sometimes, you know that?”

Once Papa had said, “Your mother was raised by wolves” but Mama only laughed and chased her all around the house growling until Papa smiled and joined in.
“Because this is where we fell,” Mama said, “Kaytoo brought us here, and Portia landed us, and Bes and Tova and Then-Eldest Sister Iola took care of us when we were hurt. Because we love this place and all our friends and this is our home now.”

They’d been weeding in the garden and Galen had been smaller and napping on a blanket. Mama liked pulling things and digging holes and she was in a good mood that day so Kayly decided to press her luck. She’d heard some of this before, of course, but only in pieces.

“Why didn’t Kaytoo come?”

She knew why. She knew the names of the stones in the little garden, but she liked things repeated because answers changed and got added to sometimes.

“Because Kaytoo died. He stayed behind to guard the door so Papa and I could get safely into the tower to send Grandpapa’s message and they killed him.”

“The Empire soldiers and the stormtroopers.”

“Yes.”

“He was Papa’s best friend wasn’t he?”

“Yes.”

Kaytoo was a “droid,” that is, a machine-person. Which Kayly knew all about, although she had really only seen dead ones. Portia showed her pictures of live ones, but there weren’t any on Ea anymore. How he flew the ship even after he died was a mystery. Mama said they still didn’t know, which was what “mystery” meant, and also “misterio.” She was named after him and he was very brave and good at maths.

“If he didn’t die would he have come here?”

Mama, sat back on her heels, thinking. “Yes.”

“Would he and Portia have been friends?”

“Wow,” Mama said, “Maybe. That would be a hell of a show.”

“I wish they were all here.” Kayly said, meaning all of the stones, all of Rogue One. “We could have a whole village of humans and Mems and droids.”

Mama poked at the ground with her white metal shovel, even though there was nothing left in the hole.

“Me too,” she said.

Then Galen woke up and Mama had to feed him.

The Three Years Market was insanely crowded….more people than Harbortown, more people than she had thought were in the whole world. Papa let her ride on his shoulders, even though Mama said
“Only for a little while, Cassian, and put her down if it hurts your back.” She carried Galen in the blue sling on her hip, even though he wasn’t a baby anymore, and he didn’t even fuss about it because he was a little scared of the press of crowds at the gates too and hid his face against her side.

There was a HUGE children’s area. Her favorite part was the thousand bird-shaped kites flying from the roofs of all the wooden houses, and all the booths, and a band, and the four flavors of honey cakes, and the jugglers. She went with her friend Niki and little Ava and saw two kids she knew from HarborTown, one named Young Dylan and one named Mab. They all had little red metal chips to trade for goat rides and snacks. Mama stayed until Galen threw up from eating too many cakes too fast, then she put him in the small hand-cart to sleep and went to meet Papa, who was doing “business” with some of the Scavengers in the big giant Wreck part of the Market. She made new friends with a big human boy named Dex and two very shy Taun kids named Doma and Dima. Dex taught her how to play dice, which was kind of like knucklebones except with numbered squares but then Ava swallowed one and a fight broke out.

It was, like Mama would say, “Good times.”

They came back early because of Galen being a fussy mess and sat on the bluff and to make a fire and eat with the other families in their camping spot. They sat and listened to the music coming up from the town below.

Kayly lay down in her wagon when it was time to sleep and pretended it was her own private house. She was super tired but the music kept waking her up. Once, she could hear her parents talking.

“…did they say where they found it?” that was Mama.

“They’re being cagey….defending their turf. They’re not used to falls there so they think they’ve hit some kind of jackpot. It can’t be from the North though, we’d have heard.” Papa said.

“Would we, though?”

I know what you think and you know I think you’re being paranoid.”

“Ooooor….says the spyboy who still sleeps with his boots pointing outwards in case he needs to jump into them in the dark….but somebody’s been getting gear to those Raiders.”

“Fair enough, knives-hidden-under-the-flagstones-woman, but trust me, this thing is the size of a full scout ship, almost intact from what I’ve heard, there’d be rumors if nothing else.”

“Talk to Markey, get him to pull us some strings, we need to see this fucker, up close, before the auction.”

“On it.”

“ This is off somehow, Cassian.”

“Shhhhhhh…..”

“te amo”

“Shhhhhhh….yo también te amo.”
The Second Day was like the first, except that the Taun had races down on the beach, adult ones and some for the kids. So they all went down to see her new friends Doma and Dima race and they were super fast and one first and second place and got necklaces of flowers. She got stuck watching Galen for a while, which sucked because he was being a rat baby, but she took him to the Cloth part of the Market and found Second Sister Bes there getting colored thread balls, and she played with Galen and an old Mem Sister from another place taught Kayly how to juggle.

On the Third Day, she met her old and new friends at the childrens area again and they decided they would all be a “gang” and play “Raiders and Scavengers” in between all the booths. She and Dex argued about who should be the leader so they agreed to share it with her being leader before the noon bell rang and him after. A fish seller got mad at them, when Niki knocked a basket of sardines over, and bared her teeth and called them names. They had to make a run for it.

On the Fourth Day she went to the Fruit part with Mama and Papa. They wanted fancy dry fruit for Winter, because Papa loved that, and some nut oil and waxed cloth and a whole list of things. Papa said trades were better on the Fourth Day because there was still stock, but traders were starting to think of what they would need to carry back with them. Mama said Papa was too foxy for his own good. Kayly was glad to see them smiling because they had been up late talking again the night before, and when she woke up early in the morning, Papa was already up, sitting by the ashes of the fire and poking them with a stick, looking serious, although he smiled when her saw her and they got to eat breakfast together, just her and him, which was nice.

She and Galen were each carrying a basket, although hers was much bigger, when she saw her new friend Dex there with one of his moms…..the really tall one….she’d met them both yesterday when they’d come to find Dex after the “sardine” incident. They had a fruit booth and were trading beach plums and jam and Dex had told her he had to work sometimes.

She knew some human kids in Harbortown that had two mamas. Which puzzled the hell out of Niki, so Kayly had to explain about her humans and “pair-bonding” again for the 500th time.

"Hi, Dex,” she said.

“Hi, Queen of Naboo” he said, snarky, because that was what she had been calling herself yesterday, after the heroine of one of Mama’s stories.

Dex’s tall mama was staring, but not at her, over her head at Mama and Papa

Dex’s other mama was there too, she was squeezing through the crowd at the back with another basket, “Tee,” she was saying, “this is the last one…I..” then she seemed to see where Dex’s mama Tee was looking and looked in the same direction. She stared too.

“Hey Mom,” Dex was saying, “It’s Kayly and her…” but his tall mama, the one he called Momma, as Kayli recalled, reached out and put a hand on Dex’s shoulder and pulled him back toward her behind the counter.

It was scary when grown-ups were scared.

She looked around. Nobody else was acting afraid, just Dex’s mothers.

“Momma?” Dex looked up at her confused. His other mom had put down the basket and was standing by him.

I want somebody to say something, Kayly thought.

“Hey, there,” Mama said, “How’s your end of the Rebellion going folks?”
“We don’t want any trouble,” Dex’s Momma Tee said.

“No reason there should be any,” Papa said, quietly “That I know of.”

“Jam!” Galen said, “Can we get some jam Mama?” He loved jam. Galen loved anything sweet and sticky.

“Kayly,” Papa said, “there are some chips in my bag. Take them out and go with your brother over to the cake booth and get him a jam biscuit.”

“Dex,” the shorter mama, the one named Ems, said,” Go back to the wagon and pack some more jars.”

“Mom, there aren’t any…” Dex said, nervously.

“Now!” both his moms said at the same time.

Wow. Two mamas at the same time must be murder, you probably never got away with anything.

She put down her basket, found the chips and did what he said. You did not argue with Papa when he used his quiet voice.

They sat on the ground by the side of the cake stall and Galen stuffed his mouth. Dex came and stood there too.

None of the parents got any closer to each other but they were all talking.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“Fuck if I know,” the older boy said.

After a few minutes, Mama called her back. The got their stuff at the other booths, stopped at the fountain to rinse Galen off and went to meet up with Second Sister Bes and Youngest Sister Beri at the music tent. Papa and Mama went off on their own and later, sitting up on the hill to watch the kite contests with Nikki and Ava, she looked down and saw Papa and Mama walking toward the Wreck part with both of Dex’s mamas. They were talking together. Nobody was looking happy but nobody was looking angry-going-to-fight either, so that was good.

That night Mama and Papa stayed up late to talk again.

Kayly heard tapping on the side of her wagon bed.

“Kayly?”

“What is it Galen?”

“Can I come in with you?”

“No.”

“Please?” he sounded snuffly.

“Oooooo……damnit….Ok, but just for a minute.”

She lifted the blanket at the end and he climbed inside and got under her covers.
“Did you have a bad dream?” Kayly asked him.

“Yeah.”

“A Mama bad dream or a Papa bad dream?”

A *Mama* bad dream was the kind where you were trapped or somebody was trying to hurt you and a *Papa* bad dream was where you did something bad and you were sorry, or you were trying get somewhere and you couldn’t.

“A Mama one,” he said, “a monster was chasing me and I fell down and it was going to eat me.”

“Nobody’s going to hurt you Rat.”

He fell asleep so she let him stay.

They went down in the morning to fill the water bottles and say goodbyes to everybody.

She saw Dex with his mammas and he said, “Goodbye Queen.”

She gave him a dice she traded for to make up for the one of his that Ava swallowed.

That afternoon they packed for the long walk home.

Chapter End Notes

Based partially on being turned loose with my baby brothers and a pocketful of fifty-cent pieces at the Illinois State Fair.
The Dance Lesson- Part One

Chapter Summary

A very young Cassian Andor learns to dance

The idea of Imperial propaganda videos dubbed with the voices of telenovelas meets small boys learning social dancing.

Chapter Notes

* ¡Debo tenerte! = I must have you!

**Eres la única mujer que he amado!=You are the only woman I’ve ever loved!

***¡No no! Realmente te amo, pero nunca puedo ser tu esposa! = No! No! I really love you but I cannot be your wife!

**** no mames = @no fucking way

*****Me vi obligado a sufrir. Debes ser forzado a sufrir. = I was forced to suffer. You must be forced to suffer.

******Usted será feliz algún día que usted sabe hacer esto = You will be happy someday that you know how to do this

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When they first told him, it seemed like the worst thing he could imagine.

The “assembly hall” had once, people said, actually been a sports gym. It was still one of the few buildings in Oeste camp that had been a real solid building before. Most structures were just temporary plas-and-metal-clip. All housing was set up behind shield wire fencing and stun barricades over what had been the grounds and playing fields of the University park.

“Temporary emergency shelter for displaced persons” four years ago, it had quickly grown into a teeming makeshift city/prison camp.
The “Sala” as everybody called it served as a dining hall, theatre, indoor play space and day-care for little ones and the elderly, and sometimes school. Ostensibly they were all supposed to be watching Imperial broadcast “education” sessions, for two hours five mornings a week. ....attendance was mandatory, your family could be denied food credits if you didn’t show up.....fortunately somebody ...probably Tio Samuel and some other “somebodies”.... had tinkered with the feeds so, although the holo images were still of pretty teachers in grey suits and friendly stormtrooper puppets, the audio was from a rotating series of old Festan melodramas.

Many years later, pinned down for hours in a damp, darkened service tunnel, waiting/hoping for extraction on a job gone bad, he had seen a tattered poster of the wise and kindly “Emperor P.” from the show on a wall behind some pipes. It was peppered with holes from thrown darts, and he thought....At least I will die down here with fellow Rebels....He remembered the robed figure in the vids pointing at galactic maps .....some sort of stellar geography lesson no doubt......and the pair of fair-haired children who always played the students in all those things. The benign Emperor been smiling at a map of the Core Worlds, and as he moved his lips a gravelly male voice said, “¡Debo tenerte! Eres la única mujer que he amado!” As a small arrow pointed to Coruscant, a high-pitched voice squeaked in reply ¡No no! Realmente te amo, pero nunca puedo ser tu esposa!” Oh, how they’d all roared.

He had still been laughing when the team got to him and Kay had immediately slapped an oxygen mask on him, convinced that he was hypoxic from the bad air....which, looking back, he probably had been.

Real "school" was what happened in the late afternoons, and sometimes in the evenings. There were only a few hundred working data pads in the whole camp so the children wandered in in shifts. Half the professors from the University were in detention. In a way, it was his Separatist-sympathizing abuela’s dream come true: The children of the rich and the children of the poor, all together receiving the same educational opportunities. His first math teacher was the former Keane Technologies Chair of Higher Applied Mathematics and Stellar Imaging, of the Imperial University of Carrida.

The curriculum was very eccentric: History (wildly unsanctioned), Practical Astronomy, Universal Biology, Chemistry, Physics... all at odd times and in no particular order.

The summer he was nine, for no good reason anyone could explain to him, there was a class in ballroom dancing.

"No mames!” He had said when Tio Samuel had told him he had to attend.

His older cousin Isra had laughed hysterically. "Me vi obligado a sufrir. Debes ser forzado a sufrir.”
There were always lots of little intermittent classes on Festan and Carridan History and Culture, which were very important to adults in the camp. Social dancing had been a standard line item in the former school curriculum, so apparently this was seen as some major rite of passage. Every term had ended with a dance "back home" the old people said, misty-eyed. For his part, Cassian remembered very little about Fest and most of what he did was so layered in with memories of cold feet, Papa and Abuelo arguing, and terrifying random searches by the Mining Company Security Forces, that nostalgia was hardly a selling point for him.

With a cheerful smile, Tio Samuel said, “Usted será feliz algún día que usted sabe hacer esto.”

He pushed his welding goggles back down onto his face and went back to work on the broken T-17 water reclamation unit he was trying to re-repair.

The matter was closed.

No mames! Cassian told himself….not if he lived to be a thousand.

The teacher was a kindly but firm grey haired lady who clapped her hands a lot and took it all very serenely. A squat little blue droid played the music and they practiced when the tables were pushed back after the noon meals. It was hot and the cooling system seldom worked, but……not that any self-respecting nine-year old would admit it… it slowly became kind of….ok. There was a circle dance and something called a “wedding dance” where you had to walk up to someone else and do some steps and then they had to copy you and then you spun each other around and then you went over to somebody else and did the same thing. The older kids made it like a contest and it got pretty wild.

Then came something called the “vals” and the “conjunto de dos danza” both of which were for two people only. You could pick who you wanted to dance with but one person had to be….leading…steering. You spun around and the leader had to hold the other person up by putting a hand on their back for them to lean against. The follower had to hang onto the leader's shoulder for balance and step sideways and between their feet. If you did it right you could turn like a slow top but balancing off each other was important. The “conjuncta” was the same only faster, with galloping, so you had to learn the “vals” first.

“It is about weight, and communication, and it is about trust,” the teacher said. “You can dance well by mastering the first two, but ah… niños,” she clasped her hands together, “when you have all three, that is beautiful dancing.”

The teacher would let you pick partners for some dances but other times Señora would clap hands and say “new partners!” then you had to switch. Everybody had to learn both parts.

This went on for a few weeks. They put on a demonstration dance at the end, and families could come and watch. Cassian was picked to be a leader and matched with a girl his age but slightly shorter than himself, which made it easier. He knew her, although he was better friends with her big sister.

The girl's name was Cora.

They had to wear clean shirts and some of the girls wore costume skirts, if they had them, and they wanted to. Tio Samuel made him comb his hair slicked back and Isra lent him a neck scarf. When the time came for the “vals” the leaders were supposed to go over to the line where their partners waited, bow and hold out a hand. Cora took his left hand, just like they had practiced. When she stepped forward, he put his right hand on her back. She had very long hair that she usually had in two braids pinned up, but this time she had put it in one braid down her back and it brushed the back of his
Señora had told them that if looking in peoples eyes made you nervous, you should look at their nose, or at their left ear and then it could just seem like you were looking at their eyes.

He made himself look right in Cora’s eyes.

The music started, but it wasn’t the blue droid this time because lots of the grown-ups had brought instruments to play all the music. He remembered what he was supposed to do, and so did Cora. She leaned back a little he held her up and they moved around balanced off each other without crashing into anyone else. When the music stopped everyone stopped. Cora stepped back and he bowed. The adults all clapped and some of them even wiped their eyes, as if they were crying. He expected Isra to tease him mercilessly when he got back to his seat but his cousin hadn’t said a word, only patted his shoulder. There was lots more music afterwards and even the adults did some dancing.

When the curfew warning sounded all the lights dimmed and he ran to get his water bottle, from where he had left it by the wall in the little hallway. Cora was there too, grabbing her coat. Everyone had to hurry. You were docked food credits or worse if you were out after curfew. Cora saw his bottle and handed it to him.

“You did a good job,” he said to her.

“Gracias, Cassian,” she said, then she smiled, “It was beautiful.”

He meant to kiss her on the cheek, but she must have moved, because he found he had kissed her on the lips.

He turned and ran back to Samuel and Isra and they all had to run to get back to their little unit on the far side of camp before the second and last warning.

Cassian was stupidly happy that night. “I danced with a girl and I kissed her,” he thought, over and over, laying there in the dark, squeezed between Samuel and Isra and the 20 broken droids in their little ramshackle house. It wasn’t even really about Cora...not really. It was just the idea of it that made him happy. They had different schedules for “school” but sometimes he saw her around camp. When they met she would smile and he would smile. They never really talked to each other much after that dance but always smiling, as if they shared a secret. They were just kids.

It was almost a year later that Samuel put a bag on his shoulder and told him he had to go. He climbed a fence while gunfire rang behind his back and did not turn around.

Cassian did not think of Cora or the dance lessons again for a very long time. There seemed no point, it would hurt too much and have served no purpose.

Samuel was right though, later he was very glad.

Many years later his son asked him a question and he was able to answer, truthfully, "When I was nine I danced with a girl named Cora and I kissed her. It was beautiful."
Chapter Summary

Liaison Officer Joreth Sward dances with a young woman at a reception.

Chapter Notes

The second of three of Cassian's memories of dancing. Two sweet, one bitter. This would be the bitter one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Imperial officers were expected to attend all regimental social events unless officially excused by an authorized medical technician.

"Frankly," Captain Lorem said, "I would think it better policy, aesthetically, to have the medical technicians authorizing who CAN attend. I want it physician verified that some of this lot have any feeling in their lower extremities at all."

"I believe the point is a display of authority and unit cohesion," Liaison Officer Joreth Sward demurred, sourly, "Not pleasing choreography."

"I hope so," Loren said. He looked around to see if any of the ranking commanders were anywhere in sight. "Dessert is served, Sward. It looks as if it's every soldier for himself for a little while, shall we go harvest in the fields of Industry?"

The Incom company executives and staff at the facility had been informed a few weeks before that they were now all considered military sub-contractors and, as such, were also expected to be at this function as "guests of the newly appointed Imperial Supervisor, at a reception in his honor." The smooth grey uniforms of the Imperial officers gave them all the look of sharks moving among the brightly colored formal wear of the civilians. Lorem was one of the ones who took his role as a top predator seriously.

“I'm not much of a dancer,” Sward said,”Besides, I think it best to wait until the Admiral is finished with dinner before I go looking for my own entertainment.”

Lorem gave him a sideways look of disgust. Clearly he was marking the new aide down as a brown-noser and a striver. “Suit yourself,” he said and moved off toward a huddle of young administrative secretaries wobbling on their first high heels.

Sward surveyed the room again. Security was tight. Troopers were not visible within the ballroom, but every interior door was watched and the hallways outside were bristling with them. Small black security drones, highly mirrored so as not to distract from the decor, hovered at regular intervals, K45s, all fully armed.

Incom was the largest civilillian ship manufacturing company not under direct Imperial control and
they had bought the continued “independence” of their operation by designating this manufacturing plant as an Imperially “supervised” production facility dedicated to their defense production.

Fleet Admiral Grendreef was here to supervise, liaison and maintain security on the planet. These people were all hostages. They just didn’t know it yet.

The woman caught his eye at once. Young, tall, blonde, good-looking, wearing an expensive dress that didn’t quite fit and darting her eyes around far too quickly. She kept moving her hands to the side of her voluminous skirts then stopping...her palms were sweating.

Not a gun or a conventional explosive. The scanners here were far too good. He’d swept the room himself. No chance for poison or a biological, the droids were vapor testing.

A garrote....she didn't move right for that...insufficient upper body strength...a knife then. Something biologically derived that would have made it past the scan.

Oh hell, no, Sward thought, No, no, no, no.

It was only his fourth week imbedded. They didn’t have anything set up yet. He had no communications rigged, no idea where the mothballed fighters were. He hadn’t been able to get to anyone in Incom corporate yet...

.....You won’t get anywhere near close enough to him you stupid fool and even if you could.....

Alliance info was that this was a “trial” project. Grendreef’s innovative plan of getting what they wanted out of Incom by making a sacrificial lamb of this planet, was considerably cheaper than seizing all 20 of Incom’s manufacturing planets/moons/stations in a high tech, version of Kashyyk.... slaughtering half the population and then having to convert them all to Imperial production. Imperial Command was within hairs breath of doing just that, but the Admiral had proposed this alternative and been given the trial.

He could take the girl out publicly, now....halting an assassination attempt was a sure way for a new aide to win his Commander’s trust.....but the mere fact that this amateur had gotten so far could cause Grendreef to re-do all the security, at best, setting the Alliance’s intel here back months. At worst it would send the paranoid bastard scurrying back to Tarkin and triggering the full Incom takeover.

He could try to dispatch her quietly, but then.....Fuck! The hallways were crawling with troopers. How would he even get a body out?

He moved over to one of the server droids and initiated a command protocol. He asked if it were possible to for it to deliver a message and a drink to someone later.

“Of course sir,” the droid said, “may I ask to whom and at what time?

When he was finished with the droid, he returned his attention to the woman, who was now moving through the crowd that was milling toward the rear of the command dining suite. She was far too focused on the door to notice him. Moving up behind, he took her wrist lightly and kissed it. She whirled to face him.

“Dance with me,” he said.

The young woman’s eyes darted away but she quickly caught them back and smiled at Sward.

Some nerve and a great deal of physical courage.
“Oh, thank you,” she said “but I already have….”

“Please,” he said, “I am the Admiral’s aide and may be summoned any minute to attend him. This is could be the only chance I’ll have to dance tonight. You caught my eye at once. A few turns by the door is all I ask.”

He slipped a hand behind her back, firm, forceful but not threatening,...not yet. If she was afraid she might panic....in which case he would have to go to plan b... if she was unsure she might hesitate long enough for this to work. He had to get her to think, for a moment at least, that dancing with him could be to her stupid plans advantage.

“I was afraid I might miss seeing the Admiral,” she said, laying a none-to-steady hand on his shoulder.

“Well dear,” he said...let her think he’d had one drink too many but not that he was drunk...”Then I am the only man in the room you ought to dance with....he won’t leave without me.”

She let him turn her a few awkward steps, stiffly, never quite leaning back into his hand. He had billed himself as a bad dancer and this would cement his reputation. She was managing to smile almost convincingly but he could feel her heart pounding through the boned silk of the back of the dress. Her pupils were noticeably dilated.

Bone stiletto,...real bone probably....stitched into the dress.

*In better hands it might have been a clever move. Did you see it in a murder mystery vid, dear?*

“Excuse me,” the mirrored droid popped up, “I was asked to bring you this message and a glass of wine with the compliments of an admirer.”

Sward stopped, “Ah,” he said, “Perhaps, I made my move too late.”

The girl looked at the thin message film, clutched it in her hand and then looked around the room.

“Ah,” the comm tag on his cuff buzzed, and he glanced down at it, “My bad luck is compounded. It seems that I must go. There has been some change in the Admirals’ plans,” Sward said, disappointed, “Perhaps we able to finish our dance, another time.”

She looked like a deer caught in bright lights.

*Fool. You would never have made it past the bio-sensors at the door to the executive dining room.*

“I’m so sorry….” she stammered., “Another time…”

He bowed and she fled.

“My beautiful one,” the message had read, “if you came for another he has already left without you. I am with your friend but would be delighted if you joined us.”

She hadn’t gotten in here alone. Let her think her friends had been caught. Let her think that the Admiral had been warned and already removed. Once she was out of the ballroom she’d never be let back in, he could discretely suggest that security gently escort her out for “personal” reasons. If she made a scene, attacked a guard, it could still go wrong...*but he had a plan c for that....* if she didn’t, he had saved one life, for one more day at least.
If the message were ever checked, the code used to instruct the droid was that of Captain Lorem, who would be too drunk within the hour to remember which women he had talked to and why.

Who she really was and how she and her friends thought they would ever get close enough to the Admiral to kill him, he never even tried to find out. He determined that she had gotten in as part of the legitimate facilities staff, and somehow passed clearance. She also must have had help from at least one person on the cleaning crew in order to have hidden the dress,…judging from the fear in her eyes, a family member or loved one. They were lone wolves with no connection to the Alliance or any known local Partisan group. Personal revenge? A burst of patriotism? Despair?

He quietly closed the loophole and encouraged the general staff to start rotating vendors.

Grendreef was determined to make this innovative “public/private partnership” work. He proved to be an economical, strategic and tireless man. Liaison Officer Joreth Sward saw his methods up close for the next year and a half. He saw many many faces go into rooms and never come out again, frequently he had to hold the door.

Never her face though, never the woman he danced with. That’s why he was able to forget hers afterwards.

Chapter End Notes

Next, a wedding....although not quite...quite, the one you might think......oooo I gotta lighten up after this one.
The Dance Lesson - Part Three

Chapter Summary

In which Cassian teaches Jyn how to waltz. Cassian and Jyn bring Kayly to HarborTown. Kaylyra Andor is an almost ridiculously cute baby. Male friendships are considered. Cassian gets to be best man at a wedding. Jyn gets a dress. Cassian tries to give marital advice....not quite. The Blackbirds slowly become part of life on Ea.

Chapter Notes

Bits about love and friendship. Moments of normalcy, friendship and almost safety amongst the angst. As fluffy as I get, really.

* Muy similar. No ha cambiado mucho = "Very similar. It has not changed much."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They all laughed too hard the first time Cassian tried to get Jyn to dance with him, up in Portia’s tower. Everybody had been in tears.

Tears were pretty close all the time in those days before the safe flight window opened, when Bodhi and Guardian were on standby, waiting to set the satellites and fly out to get word to the Alliance about Endor. At least these had been happy ones.

When things lined up properly for Portia’s “eyes”... her sensor arrays...she could capture signal from across the galaxy in great thin “slices. Or so she described it. They sometimes lasted only fractions of a second but within those thin, intermittent "blinks" of her sight almost nothing escaped her.

It never failed to astonish Cassian.

Afterwards he and Jyn would comb through the data looking for clues and patterns, information on what the Empire was doing.

After the Surrender they searched for clues what the shattered bits of the Imperial Fleet were doing. When Draven's last message came, they "vanished," as ordered, but they never stopped watching, for Bodhi, for the missing chunks of the Fleet, for signs of what was happening in the Galaxy outside.

Portia sifted through things for her own purposes too, “news” as she called it. They knew that perfectly well.
Those tense days before Bodhi left them though were the first time that she played music. Apparently she could have done it at any time previously, it was just that they had never thought to ask her.

Sister Tova gave drumming lessons at their farm and so Bes and Beri often sought refuge in the tower….it was still undecided then, who would go and who would stay and what might happen, so they all spent as much time together as they could.

Bes and Bodhi had been talking about how he had had to take flute lessons as a child on Jedha, when suddenly in the fourth level of the tower music began to play. Cassian recognized the sound. He had only ever visited Jedha while it was under Occupation, of course, well after the destruction of the Temple had begun, but while the small shrines remained standing some “normal” life still went on. There had been music that drifted out of the shrine schools, and street musicians, still in the cafes and markets…at least for the first few years.

Bodhi’s face was caught between joyful astonishment and pain.

“Portia! What? …Where are you getting that?”

Portia projected an image of a slim older woman with short grey curls. “Files of ethnographic audio, of the traditional music of the Old City of NiJedha” she said. “I made a random selection to assist in Bodhi illustrating his point. It’s a children’s flute orchestra playing what are described as ‘traditional tunes.” The image peered at them inquiringly,”Was I intruding? Bodhi seems to be distressed?”

After that it was music parties of one sort or another every day. Bes was obsessed with Mid-Rim pop, the more annoying the better. He blamed Bodhi for this. Jyn, to his surprise, asked for old Onderean jazz ballads and instrumental stuff.

When Bes had asked him, “What is your favorite kind of music Cassian-ally?” he found he had truly never thought about it.

_It was not that he didn’t like music,…although that “Pavillion Flux” Sparkle-Bop shit that Bodhi had introduced Bes to was pretty damned annoying…..it was just that he had always listened to whatever was playing, never having been in much of a position, for most of his life, to be the person in charge of the playlist. He remembered General Merrick ordering Nabban classical symphonic played loudly in the fighter bays on transport missions. One of the Intelligence officers had complained that it was distracting, as they all sat in an alcove planning a surveillance drop. “Don’t let Merrick hear you,” General Cracken had said, not even looking up from his data pad. “Why?” the woman asked. Draven and Cracken's eyes met over the reports in their hands. “Light opera,” they both said, smiling slightly._

Then a memory came to him, as he sat there, watching Jyn tap her foot while Beri ran in circles and Bes and Bodhi tried to imitate a Max Debbo drum riff on the edge of the table.

“La Martiniana” he said.

‘Cassian,” Portia-as-the-woman said, “I shouldn’t need to point out that I can find…’
Something tinny that sounds like it’s coming out of a broken R1 unit and echoing in a converted gymnasium full of underfed children…

“Any simple instrumental version, Portia, anything at a slow waltz tempo.”

“Jyn,” he said, standing up, “dance with me.”

After she said “No!” about six times she said “Ok,” suspiciously.

She did not look less suspicious when he explained the steps. He laid his hand above the small of her back, and, as instructed, she put her left hand on his shoulder while he took her right in his left. She looked up into his eyes and smiled.

*It was like a sunrise every damned time.*

“Is this something we shouldn’t be doing in front of the “children?” she said, mischievously.

“Only if we do it right,” he said, bending close to her ear.

Bes and Bodhi literally put their hands over their eyes and shrieked with laughter. Jyn stepped on his feet and swore a lot for the first half hour, but eventually they got it right. It was beautiful dancing

When Kaylyra was about two and a half they went down to HarborTown for Tom Markey’s wedding. She was big enough now to be carried short ways on a Taun’s back and to sit on someone’s lap on a slow speeder. She knew to sit down flat in the bottom of a boat….for a few minutes at least. After a bad cold at the end of winter she had stopped asking to nurse, even at bedtime. Which made it easier for other people to take care of her.

*Jyn actually seemed a little sad about that, which was surprising, considering how hard it had been for her at first.*

“Oh, this is so weird,” she had plaintively said, as Perin and Macha coached her through the first few weeks. “It’s like finding out your earlobes dispense beer and then somebody makes you go open a bar.”

It was a terrifying thing to contemplate, but he actually knew more about babies than she did, and he knew nothing.

In the end, Bes came to meet them and help bring her home. He had suspected at first that Perin had sent for her, convinced that he and Jyn were unsafe to leave alone with anything with needs more complicated than a turnip. It turned out though that Portia had told her to go.

*He had put on the ear-clip so that Portia could see the baby shortly after she was born, and let*
everyone know they were well, although he had drawn a hard line against wearing it during the birth. Portia had a great deal of in-depth information poached from the Holo-net about the biology of human childbirth and delivery and he had not wanted to hear any of it….especially in his mother’s voice.

Braced for a fair amount of editorializing about how messy and unappealing biological reproduction was, he was surprised when, instead, she said only “Muy similar. No ha cambiado mucho,” and thereafter kept her thoughts to herself.

He forgot sometimes that her “organics” had been…all? mostly?…human. She must have gone through this with them many times, long ago.

“So hey, little blackbird chick,” Conn said to Kayly, hoisting her high over his head when he came to meet them at the Green River Crossing, “Look at you, like a Far Islander queen coming back to visit the place of your birth.”

Markey was marrying a Fisher widow. A lovely woman with her own boat…that was the highest praise people on the coast gave each other….. “Oh, they are lovely people. They own their own boat”….she also had a half grown son and a house at the edge of the Long Pier. She was tall, soft-spoken for a HarborTowner and, it seemed, had carried a quiet torch for him for many years.

Cassian had seen a few weddings from the outside on his travels south but he had never been a guest.

Many couples “householded” without fully sharing a a dwelling. This seemed to involve a public declaration in the marketplace and giving each other the gift of a chair, also a small party.

“Marrying” was a rarer thing because it meant moving in together, declaring intent to share “goods and property, children and all of Ea’s gifts and trials from now until this pattern’s end.” It usually meant both partners taking on the name of whoever's house or property the couple moved into, but not always. Sisters might gift the new husband and wife with string bracelets to wear for their wedding day and night, or they might not. On the Coast these were thrown into the sea on the morning after the wedding to symbolize….casting your yourselves to fate or something.

There was also a large party, this was not optional.

All of this was for humans only of course. The Memsa did not marry or household and found the whole concept astonishing and generally a sign of some inborn need to embellish and complicate things.

You live in the house you choose. You keep what you earn. You share what you can. You are Active in your time. Females have babies if the Pattern brings it and everyone gets their own chair, was how Iola had described it to him years ago.

They did, however, really like the parties.
Markey and Thea Doonan’s party looked to be impressive. At least three dozen orphans and wayward youth Tom had helped over the years were grown and prosperous citizens now, eager to help their old friend. Half the traders and business people on the coast either owed him favors or knew they probably would someday. Additionally, both of them had big families eager to celebrate their happiness.

Given all the coordination that entailed, it surprised Cassian when he found Markey waiting, at what Conn told Kayly was “her” fish shack, standing up on the dunes when they arrived.

“Didn’t know if you folks would want to stay out here for old times sake or be more comfy in town?” the man said. “Ahhhh…look at that fair tiny babe!” he scooped Kayly up, just as Conn had done. Her feet were obviously not going to touch the ground until they got home. Cassian had a vague recollection that most babies were expected to be afraid of strangers, but Kayly seldom was, unless she was tired. She stared at Markey a moment then put her hands on his face, slapping his cheeks a little. “No? Papa?”

“Papa?” she looked around until she saw Cassian, then craned her head around the other way, “Conn?” she pointed her new favorite person, then put hands on Markey’s face again. “No Papa.” she said, firmly “Conn.”

Jyn laughed. “You both don’t have beards, she means….no scratchy face like Papa.”

“Well, well,” Conn said, “I DID shave close this morning. I was hoping some ladies might notice….but I must admit, I was also hoping they’d be a bit older.”

“Papa!” Kayly shouted and held out her arms to Cassian. She had just noticed the ocean and burrowed her head against his neck, hands over her ears. “Loud! Too loud!”

They put their bundles in the shack, and Jyn put Kayly in the sling. Markey seemed to be hanging back.

“He wants to talk to you,” Jyn said, as she trussed on the blue cloth sling and Cassian lifted Kayly in, holding her up, while she knotted the ends across her chest.

Cassian had noticed. “I wonder why?”

Jyn reached up to take the clip from his ear and put it on her own. “Probably has questions about how to make women happy in bed.”

“Cheerfully follow directions?” Cassian said.

“Good answer, soldier.” She kissed him, “Meet us in town. Say 'Bye-Bye Papa' Kayly!”

“Bye bye, Papa! Bye bye Markee! Bye bye Conn!”

“Oh no little chick! I’m going with you!” Conn said.

Cassian watched the three of them walk up the beach toward the Town, Kayly cheerfully shouting “Loud!” in an attempt to out-shout the ocean.

“She’s a fair strong girl and no mistake,” Markey said, watching with him. Then, turning to re-hang a
“Yes,” Cassian answered, *there was a lot packed in the ‘yes’ but it was the truth.*

“The war…” Markey said, “Any word from the ghost on where the last of your Raiders have gone?”

“They’re holed up,” Cassian found himself looking up, almost involuntarily, and Markey followed his gaze. The large moon was still faintly visible. “Scattered, most of their ships destroyed.”

“Most…?” Markey said, “but not all?”

“Not all,” Cassian said, “it seems.”

“Not to give you people advice,” Markey, kicked some sand, “but that sort of thing tends to come back and bite you in the ass, if you don’t keep an eye on it.”

*Yeah, Cassian thought, I hope I made that clear.*

“You and the Missus, and the little chick……” Markey said, looking out at the ocean “What will you do now? They gonna….I don’t know, call you home or something?”

*Macha and her Sisters hadn’t told him…..the Circles knew that he and Jyn had made their decision years ago, but the Ladies tended to keep their own council about a lot of things. He realized now that they had never really told other people down in HarborTown.*

To fight and oppose the Emperor and his forces, by any and all means;
To refuse any law contrary to the rights of free beings;
To bring about the destruction of the Galactic Empire;
To make forever free all beings in the galaxy.
To these ends, we pledge our property, our honor, and our lives.

*The Emperor was dead, the Empire had surrendered.*

*Neither of them had hesitated.*

“There’s nothing for either of us left out there, Tom,” he said. “Nexa’s home for us. We’ll shift here.”

Markey smiled and nodded. “Glad to hear it,”

Cassian laughed.

“That being the case,” Tom said, “I was wondering………”
“He wants you to do what….?” Jyn asked him when he caught up with her at the open-air pub down by the end of the Long Pier.

Conn had taken Kayly on his shoulders down to see the fishing boats, since, as Jyn said, she was clearly Conn’s boss now.

“Stand up with him” is what they call it,” Cassian said.

“You’re the best man.”

“What? Like at a fancy Capitol wedding? No… it’s not like that. It’s just that the husband has one or two male friends who walk over with him from his house and the wife has two female friends that walk over with her….also, I think I have to carry a chair. Conn is going to be the other one.”

“Do you have to find strippers for the party?”

“Jyn! No! What….no….that is not what goes on down here.”

“Really?” she arched an eyebrow, “You need to go drinking with Macha and the Ladies more often.”

“Not for weddings anyway.”

“Hmmmmm…..” Jyn said, “Word is, these parties can get wild,” she sounded vaguely hopeful.

“Tom Markey isn’t a terribly wild person. Thea Doonan doesn’t seem like one either. I’m just surprised he asked me….if it was anyone else, I’d think it might be a strategic thing…but.”

Jyn refilled his beer….She had gotten a pitcher. This combination of no longer nursing, being away from home and constant and enthusiastic babysitting was clearly growing on her…..and eyed him shrewdly.

“Stop looking at it through your “spy” glasses, mi amor….. He thinks of you as a friend. I don’t think he thinks he has that many.”

Markey had no brothers, it was true. He had a dozen cousins but they were mostly much younger.

He had had a younger sister, Cassian knew, Dora, of whom he seldom spoke, but who had died at sea long years ago. She must have been a remarkable person, for she was still remembered up and down the coast. “A fair light, snuffed out,” he had heard an old Fisher at RiverTown say of her once, looking at Markey’s boat.

Still, he’d fostered scores of youngsters over the years at that group home/warehouse/trading post he had out on the docks, the closest thing to a father or a brother most of them would ever know. He knew every business keeper and trader “from the Islands to the Ice” as people said around here. He was liked by many and well-liked by more than a few. Why chose a “fallen” stranger, who, even if an ally, was an infrequent and slightly notorious figure in HarborTown, to stand with him on his wedding day?

“You see him as he is, Cassian Blackbird,” came a voice over Jyn’s shoulder. It was Olwen, Youngest Sister of the Ladies of the Harbor, young, fair, and relentless. She put her arms around Jyn and kissed her. Cassian stood, a bit of “foreign” manners that always made her laugh. She sat beside Jyn and took a sip of her beer.

“Partly because that is the sort of man you are, but also because you never knew Bold Dora. You
never pitied him, nor ever looked at him and thought....“he’s a good lad, but if only....” Cassian took his seat again. Youngest Olwen had clear grey eyes that always made you feel you should check to see if your shirt was mis-buttoned. Cassian made a point of always meeting them levelly. One professional to another.

“lt doesn’t matter, you see, if he lives to be a hundred and ten. Dora will always be 23, full of strength and promise, forever. It’s the burden those who live carry for those who die.” Olwen looked up toward the peak of Markey’s warehouse, with its blue fish flag, far down at the other end of the Pier.

“He admires you, too” she continued, ”He sees you as a fellow who carries that same weight tripled and more, but has not been broken by it, done good, and found love deserved and returned. For all your sharp Blackbird ways, you give people hope, you know.”

She stood then and let out a shreik, “Look at that precious duck!” Conn was coming back with Kayly, and Olwen dashed to meet them

If Draven and Tano had had five like you the war would have ended ten years sooner, he thought. The wedding party eventually proved wild enough to meet even Jyn’s expectations, not that they were still up when wedding guests started doffing their clothes and jumping off the end of the Pier.

The “cermony” had been fairly simple, he and Conn had gotten dressed in new clothes and met Markey at his house, his real house, the one he was never in and mostly used for storing sailcloth because he lived at the warehouse.

He had not known about the new clothes part. Markey had presented him with a new white high-collar shirt, blue slacks and dark blue wool jacket. Conn got a set much the same. He’d worn much finer clothes in his life, but never as himself. It had never really been him wearing them. A little embarrassed, he’d polished the many-times repaired old Imperial black boots.

Gifts of new clothes for guests were a Markey tradition.

“Be glad they’re taking his name,” Lissa, the owner of the pub, told them, “The Doonan’s give fish, which is lovely, but gets awkward if the party runs long on a sunny day.”

Jyn got a gift of a fitted red blouse with ribbon ties and full skirt the same color, expensive, he knew, because red dye traded dear. Even Kayly got a little blue smock with puffy sleeves.

“Ohhhhhhh....” Jyn said unwrapping it, “Ohhhh, do I have to? I mean, it’s beautiful but.....”

“You have to,” he told her.

If anyone had asked him if he had opinions about what clothes Jyn Erso wore, he would have laughed and truthfully said he did not. Suddenly though, just for that one day, he found that he very very much wanted to see what she looked like in that red blouse and skirt.
“You nervous, old goat?” Conn asked, as they started out.

“No,” Markey said, “I probably should be, eh? Half of Thea’s uncles are already drunk and likely to fall right of the dock, but…no..” He stood tall, and buttoned up his new jacket, looking happier than Cassian had ever seen him. The couple of shots they’d fortified themselves with from Conn’s seal-tooth flask probably helped.

“She fair cried when I asked her, you know,” he said, handing Cassian the painted folding chair he was supposed to carry, ”she said, she thought she’d never be happy again and now…” he choked up for a moment, then laughed, “I didn’t know…what it was like. You look at other folks together and you think, ‘That’s a beautiful thing, but never for the likes of me,’ and then….it is. I looked up at her, pulling up nets one day and she was looking at me….it wasn’t so simple as that, but it was like I saw a door I’d never even known was there before.”

He looked at Cassian, as they walked up the boardwalk toward where half of HarborTown was waiting. “I know it’s like a fish talking to a bird, it’s all been different for you, but she looks at you, that way, your missus, like you’re the world to her sometimes.”

She stole my own gun right in front of me, and said “Trust goes both ways.”

We were in an alley under fire in a city about to burn and I turned to cover her and saw a tiny woman take out four stormtroopers with a riot truncheon I had not even known she had, and I thought, Damn!

She stepped between Kay and a rifle and she HATED Kay then.

She shot out a window, jumped through it without hesitation and looked back at me to follow her.

She smiled on the edge of hell and told me it was all worth it.

She lived a life that taught her to trust nothing and no one and she trusts me absolutely ….even though she knows what I’ve done and what I’ve been.

She stood in the rain and cried from the nightmares and she let me carry her back inside.

As they came up toward the people gathered on the Pier, between moorings and warehouse sheds, he could see Jyn in red, next to Conn and Toma in the crowd, with her hair down. Kayly was in her arms, playing with the ribbons on her new dress. She saw him and pointed. He couldn’t hear her, but he could see that she was saying to Kayly, “Look, there’s Papa.”

“Hold onto it with both hands, my friend,” Cassian told him. It was the only thing he could think of to say.

After, there was music and dancing and truly outrageous amounts of drinking the whole length of the Pier.

The music of HarborTown was lively, with little bowed guitars, and flutes and small sets of bagpipes. Most of the dances were line dances, but they danced in couples here too. The Memsa down south played sideways drums and somehow that circle dance Bodhi had taught up north before he left had worked its way down here.
“Where is our daughter?” he asked Jyn when he found her leaning against a wall with Toma, after Perin dragged him through a line dance that nearly knocked the breath out of him.

The band started playing another tune, Thea’s sister sang a song to it

“Thea’s son and mother carried her away,” Jyn said. “She’s sleeping through all of this somehow. They’ve tucked her into bed there with Markey’s little second cousins, and Femmie’s little ones. They took her bag and promised to bring her back to us in the morning.”

“Seriamente, woman! Did you just give away our baby?”

“Only for nine hours, soldier, let’s make the best of it,” she stepped into his arms and kissed him long and hard, ”Dance with me. Let’s show people how it’s done.”

Chapter End Notes

Lots of bits of things.....more world-building, too much? New parents at their first post-baby wedding. Always goes to their heads/
Kaylyra

Chapter Summary

How Jyn came to even consider having babies.

Chapter Notes

because Rebelcaptain baby stories.

Cassian would never have asked it of her, she knew. Having a baby was the most terrifying and profound leap of faith she had ever taken....well one of them.....top two, or three definitely....and the only one she had ever taken from a place of doubt, not because she believed it to be right or necessary but because she so desperately wanted it to be both.

Papa's words in that flickering holo, a tall, straight-backed, bone-thin, man saying "....if you left the Rebellion and Saw behind......found a place....made a life....maybe a family.....happy....no less proud...enough…” they echoed in her head so often now.

At the time she hadn't even registered that part of his message. She'd been on her knees at Jedha. The black cave walls of her childhood prison had been closing on her mind, and only his instructions to Saw had burned like fire through that darkness, "...a flaw in the reactor ventilation system. A direct strike.." There had been steel in Papa's voice then, hate.

Oh how he must have hated them, to fight, to survive as he did so long alone.

It was that voice that cut through her childish terror. This wasn't the Papa she remembered, the gentle protector, or even the imagined weakling she had bitterly taught herself to despise.....who had stood and watched Mama die, left her forgotten in the dark.....this was a Galen Erso she'd never known. Even so, it was the familiarity of that voice that reached her. She had always thought, without actually ever really letting herself think about it, that her anger, the rage that kept her moving forward all those years, was her mother's legacy but it wasn't. Mama's anger had burned hot but Papa’s had burned longer. It was her own voice she heard on that holo.

Papa’s anger had echoed her own, it was what propelled her to the Alliance, to Scarif, to destroy the monster that had broken their family.

Now the Deathstar was gone.....a boy from Tatooine had found Papa's bomb and blown it up. The Man in White....he'd had a name, it seemed, though she refused to learn it....was dead.
Cassian had killed him. He’d climbed back from hell, shot the bastard in the back with a dead troopers pistol and then forgotten all about him. "Leave it," he’d said about the corpse of all her rage and suffering, "Let's go." He'd put himself in her arms to carry and they'd gone out to face what the fucking Force had left in store for them.

They healed and they kept fighting. Endor, another Deathstar, another battle.

Then came the day they told them the war was over. That last honeycombed base at Jakku had fallen and apparently Star Destroyers had just rained out of the sky on the poor benighted place. Somebody in Couruscant signed something and Organa and Mothma had signed it back.

Draven wrapped one private message string around a coded set of orders about mapping the decaying Sanctuary Pipeline hyperspace corridor.

“…bird secure…”

Anything to do with birds, or fish or things that flew was Bodhi. Bodhi was safe.

Cassian had looked for more, they asked Portia to re-check, but there was nothing else. He slid the pad over to her with one hand, and drew her head to his shoulder with the other, as much for his comfort as her own.

Always before there had been a coded reference to Bodhi Rook and a coded reference to Stordan Tonc…..usually something to do with football or baby animals….this time there wasn’t. There never would be again.

She did not cry until days later when she found a stone and laid it beside the others in the yard outside their house. Bodhi was alive but Tonc was not. It was just the three of them now, all that was left of Rogue One.

Bes and Beri, who noticed everything, saw the new stone at once when they brought fresh bread up the next day. Jyn looked out to see Beri standing by the wall, wiping tears from under her little glasses and ran out to reassure them that it wasn’t for Bodhi, that he was well. They remembered and loved Bodhi. He was the one who had come here but Tonc never had.

“When we get this shit cleaned up, Sarge, I’m gonna make Rook bring me. Super Secret Spy Base or not. We’ll party with all those cute people. I am gonna drink rosebud beer out of those little tiny cups and crash on you and the Captain’s couch like an old army buddy should. I'm gonna be obnoxious.”

They never even knew Tonc, Bes and Beri and Tova, but they cried for him anyway because he was part of Jyn, Cassian and Bodhi. They called it being “Heart Companions." It meant people who were bound together by great trauma or shared purpose. You were in a story together, woven in a Pattern of some greater event. It was a bond like family, only stronger. Down among the River or on the Harbor they called she and Cassian “married,” husband and wife. She did too sometimes and Cassian teased her about it but up here among their Memsa friends it was enough to say they were Heart Companions.

It was after that, as she walked into the village with Bes, bailed lavender with Eldest Sister Tova in
their field, or finished cussing Dov out because the shifty asshole tried to take two bales of the wire they’d brought up from RiverTown rather than the one in trade they’d agreed on, or watched Cassian frying the bread he liked to make….that the rest of the words of her father’s message kept coming back to her.

“Portia,” she said, the next time she’d been back up in the tower, “You scan us when we’re in here, right?”

Portia walked around the table, projecting one of her familiar images, of a plump middle-aged woman with long silver braids.

“Why do you ask?” she sounded suspicious, tipping the woman’s head slightly.

“Portia, don’t play coy, we know you do, it’s fine. I need to ask about…..uh…..some hormone levels.”

“Yours or Cassians?”

The fuck?

“Mine.”

“Good, because it would be unethical to discuss his with you without his verbally expressed content.”

“Portia, I’ve been on fertility suppressants since I was a teenager and…”

“Your fertility is currently still under synthetic suppression.”

“Yes. Good, what I wanted to know is if there was any way for you to tell me….”

“Slightly over 173 standard days…..roughly six and half fertility cycles.”

Oh shit. She’d thought she had closer to a year left…..bastard store-front med-techs!

The woman in the grey braids seemed unconcerned.

“If your intention is to biologically reproduce, your health is otherwise good, so that would be possible any time after about 186 days. If not, you’re going to need to systematically restrict any behavior that involves the exchange of …”

“THANK YOU, Portia, I DO know how this works.”

“May I ask a question?”

“What?”

“Are you planning on using Cassian’s genetic material?”

“I’m not planning on anything right now Portia, I just need to know my situation. Thank you for the information.”
“You two must talk to each other. This really isn’t the sort of thing I should be acting as an intermediary for. The phrase “not my job” is appropriate.

Jyn stopped, as she had been walking to the stairs. “Has Cassian been asking you questions about this?”

“I mentioned my ethical constraints, Jyn.”

So she had given Portia her verbal authorization, and then gone down to sit and wait by the wall, miserable and unsure, and talk to Cassian when he came up to check the feeds. He had held her hands in his own and listened to her, just as miserable, unable it seemed to even speak, much less to answer her questions.

Is this even possible? Is this something we could ever do?

His face had had a look she barely even knew on him, that she had seen in his eyes only a few times. Fear. He was afraid. She’d seen it at Endor, hovering over her, wounded, and at Scarif when Kay said “Goodbye” as the data vault door began to close, and as the fire rolled toward them on the beach.

She loved him so much. She could never have asked it of him.

For two days they barely spoke until he came to her in their house, as she was taking dry clean clothes out of a basket, and made her sit beside him on the bench. Looking at his hands, not her face as he spoke, he told her the story of a small boy in a detention camp whose mother died in childbirth and the too-tiny girl infant that probably never took a breath. About how light she was when they gave her to the boy to lay on the cot beside his mothers body.

“What would her name have been?” Jyn asked, because their ‘no questions’ rule was already broken.

Cassian shook his head. “I don’t know. No one ever told me.”

Oh hell, she could see him. Six, he’d said, maybe seven.....a beautiful boy with dark eyes and cowlicked dark hair. A quiet kid, quick, smart, a little on the sneaky side, but with a sweet smile, small for his age maybe until one day he wasn’t.

“Fuck them,” she said, quietly, turning his face toward her. “Fuck them all.”

Fuck the people who hurt that boy, who took all our choices away from us.

“Jyn...I do, if you want to, I just don’t know if I can,...if anything happened to you....”

She almost laughed then, which would have been horrible, so she didn’t.

I’m not going to die....don’t be afraid of that, mi amor.....Dying’s not the part I’m afraid of, I’m afraid of the damn baby.

“Major Andor, I love you. Fuck the bastards, Let’s have babies.”
Then Draven sent the last message. The New Republic was de-militarizing. The Outer Rim worlds were demanding cuts to the central Security and Intelligence. They were being decommissioned.

Jyn thought of Endor, of the angry little people there skewering Imperials on sticks, *Let's ask them, shall we?*

Portia showed them a speech that Organa made on the floor of the Senate, protesting the bill. It was too soon. The Imperial Remnant was still unrepentant, they couldn’t be trusted to disarm. The last Princess of Alderaan.

“The last laser-rifle can and should be handed over,…immediately after it is fired into the chest of the last standing Stormtrooper.”

“I like her.” Portia said.

Draven’s last string was attached to the decommission order. They told him it was wrong. Cassian repeated it twice. Draven knew it was wrong too. You could tell.

“*new landlord….last round...porch light...question....snow.*"

There was really no question. “*porch light*” mean handing over all their records and data, revealing Portia, and Ea and everyone on it. They were too close to the Unknown Regions. The New Republic wasn't going to protect these people.

Jyn was six months pregnant.

Well, they had already died at Scarif. Draven and his merry band wouldn’t even need to lift a finger. They vanished like the snow.

Their only regret was Bodhi, but he had the ear clip, Portia’s last “mod”. Maybe he would find them someday.

First word, first thoughts, is what people around here always said.

*Are you proud of me Papa?* she had thought, as Cassian put the baby in her arms.

“I’m naming you after a cranky murderous droid,” she whispered in the small wide-eyed creature's wet pink ear, “later you may be mad about that but trust me he was awesome.”
In Honor of

Chapter Summary

Portia reviews "Team Ea"'s situation, and recalls when Jyn and Cassian informed her of their decision to stay. She and Cassian discuss the ways they remember their lost loved ones.

Chapter Notes

a little bit about Portia.

As with so much else in life, what ensured their safety also endangered them.

Isolation had protected them all. The Empire/Imperial Remnant/First Order or whatever the murderers were calling themselves these days, had for the most part avoided PL.3A/UDUR/SY1138 as their charts called this planet....the aboriginal sentients all called it Ea, which was very nice and Jyn and Cassian had taken to doing the same. Portia still simply called it "home.".....Navigation was risky, and she made sure to keep that old Imperial beacon that was wedged on her upper levels sending plausible danger signals, tricking ships away, and crashing a discreet number.

Those miserable curs from Jyn and Cassian's "Empire" had technology sufficient to create a small number of temporarily stable Streams to enable faster than light travel. "Pipelines" or "Corridors" they called them, as if they were building some kind of office park and not manipulating the transcendent foundation materials of the Galaxy. It was enough to make one weep.

She resolutely held to her own people's more descriptive and elegant terms for describing them.

There were also far better and less wasteful ways of doing it than their ugly "C Stabilizers" too but she certainly wasn't going to tell them that.

Near the end of Jyn and Cassian's war, the Empire had built a huge and particularly hideous one, heedless of the cost, to move their ships and equipment to the Endor system. In the years that passed it had quickly deteriorated, as badly-built things did.

The natural hyperspace Stream, the one she had been born to guide ships through long long ago had drifted a bit, rotationally speaking, making it hard for their simpler....be fair, dumb, she might as well say it. It wasn't as if they built capacity for hurt feelings into the poor things anymore......ships to navigate.

Well, that was alright, that's what she was here for, even diminished and myopic as she was now but the deteriorating of the artificial "Sanctuary Pipeline" made it even harder. Even if it would have been a good idea....debatable....to have consistent traffic with this "New Republic " it would have
been difficult, and drawn too much attention to her and home. They all agreed that caution was the best way forward.

Jyn and Cassian had cleverly left several portable connectors on Endor, so she could see through the remaining Imperial station cameras and satellites and at least watch that planet and the system beyond. No one really went there anymore, which was just fine. Those poor aboriginal sentients had been through enough. It also gave her perverse joy to see the shattered ring of debris from the ruined weapon station still circling the planet.

*There were even tiny shards of crystal, "kyber" was the colloquial name, like the one Jyn carried, the ones the Knights had used to power their showy laser weapons. They were embedded in the debris and still gave off small distinctive energy signals. It was like music. She sometimes thought of telling Jyn this, but she suspected she would find no consolation in it.*

She could still hear the rest of the Galaxy, and see it in long blinks, but she had to sort through gaps and echoes and sending messages became even trickier than it had been. The murderous beasts that Jyn and Cassian’s friends hadn’t had the good luck or the good sense to kill outright had fled, many to places she could see, but some, *damn them*, to places she still could not.

The “Empire” had fallen, but the Darkness that had fed off of some organics within it was still out there somewhere, wounded and hissing. Cassian and Jyn had fulfilled their oaths to their Alliance, and now they stood along with her, the sentients, and the descendants of her long-lost family, partners in a new/old endeavor. They watched and they protected their home first and foremost but they had a responsibility to the rest of the Galaxy too. They were all war veterans after all.

Bundles of information and carefully coded warnings were whispered out into the dark, although it was not clear who, if anyone, was listening.

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Before Kaylyra and Galen were born Portia had passed the last messages between Cassian and his commanding officers. Jyn had been 180 days through her gestational cycle with Kaylyra, in fact.

"Portia," Cassian had said, between the second-to-the-last message received and the last one sent. "We are staying here."

*Good, she had thought. Because that so-homely-it-was-cute little patchwork ship of Bodhi Rook's that they had come here in was decently shielded….mostly…. but why take chances with a developing fetus?*

She knew that was not what he meant though.
Biological reproduction was a melodramatic but time-honored way of staking a flag. They were going to stay here and make a home just as her people had, so long ago. It was very brave of them, as there were considerable risks, but they were brave people. They had that kind of bright flickering courage that the best organics had.

“Tell me what I can do to help,” Portia said. She had been imaging (Lila/Assistant Geological Engineer) on her second heart level to talk with them and made a point of sitting the image at the table in order to communicate rapport.

Jyn had laughed out loud and Cassian had smiled.

*She was quite pleased with herself for successfully lowering their stress levels slightly at that point, especially Cassian’s. He was a wreck through the whole pregnancy.*

She could keep track of their general medical health, while they were inside with her.

*By the time they left to go South to secure the assistance of the human midwives at the coastal settlements, Jyn’s levels of chorionic gonadotropin were @6,100 mIU/mL, estriol 4460pg/mL and her progesterone @ 55-200 ng/ml. All seemed well within normal ranges for humans of her descent line, at this time. Her relaxin levels were a shade up…..which was why they had conversations on the second level rather than the fourth. Stairs hurt her back.*

This was not, as Tova like to say “her first trip to market” when it came to humanoid reproduction. She made a point of telling them such things as hormone levels only when they directly inquired. Cassian usually asked when Jyn was not around and Jyn had told her that it was fine to share medical data him.

“Whatever makes him feel better, Portia,” she’d said. “He worries.” She herself never asked.

*Kaylyra proved to be a normally developing infant, as did Galen three years after her…well within normal ranges for humans of their descent line in this time…. and Jyn and Cassian both asked to be reassured about this quite often.*

When they had first brought the infant up to the tower, it had been a bit of an occasion. Portia had “seen” her before, of course, since she could see whatever Jyn and Cassian saw when they wore the external mods….made for her beloved Jula so long ago…. but, as Bes said, “Now she will finally get to see you.”

Tova brought cakes and Beri carried the baby around singing while Jyn took a nap on the fourth level. Later they ate up in her tower. Several of the other Memsa from the village dropped by. It was a very pleasant visit.
When Cassian took a quiet moment to check the data pads, Portia imaged next to his bench.

“How did you choose the name?” she asked.

She had accessed a lot of data about naming traditions, which varied wildly among cultures. Cassian had been born on Fest, she knew, and there was a tradition there of naming a child after a deceased genetic relation, although Cassian had never seemed to much observe many Festan cultural traditions, despite his strong attachment to the dialect and some endemic musical styles. Jyn had been born, “in prison” by her own account and seemed to feel no connection to any but the most general cultural traditions of the “Core Worlds.”

“Jyn’s mother was named Lyra, so I thought that would be a good middle name.” Cassian said.

_The one who had given Jyn the crystal. Very little data was retrievable about her._

“And K?”

_Cassian seldom spoke of his dead friend. It was clearly a source of residual trauma for him. Most of what Portia knew of K2, as a specific person, quite aside from his engineering perimeters, she knew from Jyn._

Cassian looked at her image. He liked to know why people were asking questions before he answered them. It was his nature.

She expanded the question to provide him additional background to her inquiry, _the poor thing was stressed enough, best to humor him._

“Was it for K2S0?”

He nodded, “Jyn wanted to, ” he glanced over at where she lay sleeping, her cake uneaten, “She felt that it was….honoring him….in a way.”

_Ah...Jyn and her intuitive leaps._

Portia made sure her image (Sandar/Solar Mechanics Supervisor) nodded to indicate understanding. Cassian was choosing his words carefully. Something she knew he did either to initiate a tailored understanding of his message, or because he was still working out meaning as he spoke.

“Memorial rituals and gestures are important,” she said. “Are you comforted by this one?”

He looked at the image of Sandar very directly. “Does it comfort you, Portia? Is that why you use the images of your people when you talk to us?”

It could have been interpreted as an aggressive question, but she could see his face, and measure his heart rate. It was a genuine appeal.

_Oh my. What a very, unCassian-like response. Fatherhood was changing him already, it seemed._

She made sure that the image smiled. It was important that he know she was not speaking from her loss, but from its opposite.
“I do it for several reasons,” she said, “Because it makes it easier for you to understand me, because sighted organics often react with anxiety to people they cannot visually access and since the organics in my family and I were all bound by modifications I can reproduce them very expressively.”

She made sure that Sandar’s head tilted to indicate that she was placing additional focus on the next point.

“Mostly,” she said, “I do it because I am the only one who remembers them now.“

She turned the image’s head, to indicate ‘looking around’, emblematic of encompassing all of this home/tower/world.

*Cassian knew perfectly well, that she could see 82% of the planet’s surface at any given time under normal conditions, but she used the action as a metaphor to amplify her meaning.*

”They are gone forever, but if you and the others see them….even as bits of their images, data divorced from its original source and re-interpreted as part of some other living person, in this case, me…. some tiny part of them still exists. They are ever so slightly less lost. It cannot diminish the pain, that is part of me now, for as long as I live, but it alters it. Gives it a new meaning. So, yes, it comforts me. Is that what you mean?“

She had surprised him, she could tell by his corneal dilation.

*That was always gratifying. He wasn’t an easy person to surprise.*

“Thank you, Portia,’ he said.

Beri brought him back the infant, Kaylyra. She was hungry and that required a lactating female, in this case, poor tired Jyn. Who at least got to finally eat her cake because Cassian fed her spoonfuls while the baby nursed.

K2S0 had clearly been a most remarkable person. She had retrieved every scrap of data possible, but there had just not been enough. Talking more about it would only cause Cassian additional pain, and serve no purpose, so she didn’t.

Kaylyra became the messenger and the pilot. She was the one who brought Bodhi Rook back to them, and became, in her way their gift back to the Galaxy.

It was a fitting honor for K2S0.
Elder Sister Tova remembers the birth of Jyn and Cassian’s children and helps young Kaylyra Andor begin to navigate some lessons about her parents.

Chapter Notes

I can't help it. I love the Memsa.

"There comes a day in every child's life when they learn that their mother casts and is contained in her own pattern, of which they are a part but not the whole," Eldest Sister Tova said during Lessons once.

They had been working in the big garden and a work lesson about dividing the comfrey plants had turned into talk about how a young last-born male in their village, Sen, had never even known that his mother had once been a basket maker, had travelled up and down the RiverLands and lived with the Taun in her youth and even had a grown child down in RiverTown, until one day at a market he was greeted by an elder brewer as his brother. “Usually the learning is not so dramatic and does not involve buying a stranger lunch in RiverTown, but one way or another, it comes to all.”

"What about Kayly?" asked Rocco, one of the young males who had a rude tendency to blurt things out.

Oh Ea defend those who cannot find the end of their own nose in the dark, the child had quick hands and a sharp eye but he was denser than a rock when it came to words.

Eldest Sister had given him a stare, because that was the sort of remark that could mean a lot of different things, about half of which could get you knocked over or bitten on the ear by your age mates out in the fields at play.

Most of the young ones knew already that you were way more likely to get knocked over if you made Kayly mad and you'd better be ready to do the same because her ears were flat on the side of her head and harder to get to quickly. Tova considered that Jyn-ally must have been like this when she was young and it often made her smile.

To his credit, Rocco realized that he had just stuck his full foot in his own mouth, because he stuttered to explain. "I...I...just meant because she and Galen have an extra male-parent to be a Father so...so...does she get two days?"

Kaylyra no doubt was displeased, she bristled self-righteously sometimes if she thought her
“differences” or Galen’s were being pointed out to tease or quarrel, but she was eleven that summer and she and her age-mate female friends were full of a superior sense of their own maturity. She only huffed disgustedly and went about her work of carrying cuttings over to the new-dug section of the beds where the healing plants would be planted. Second Sister caught Tova's eye in smiling sympathy as she leaned on her hoe at the other side of the field by the wall. Children.

It warmed her heart later when she saw little Rocco go over to Kayly on his own, as the youngsters rested by the shade of the wall, and take her hand in Apology for Causing Unintended Distress. Kaylyra turned her fingers round and must have given Friendship Restored after Misunderstanding, because the little fellow smiled and after Kayly kissed the top of his head, ran back happily to nap under the apple tree with his friends.

Yes, it was a great and most worthwhile challenge, teaching the human youngsters of their village amongst all the others.

The day when Ancient Portia had shown one of her ghostly forms and shone a light in her window to tell them that Jyn-ally had safely delivered her long-worked-for firstborn they had hurried to go all three together to the tower for news.

On the way to they had met Dov and Mose at the end of the field, working together to cart a bundle of large stumps down to the bowl-cutters on a sledge made of smooth black metal though they had clearly just stopped and were arguing over who tied the best knots.

They stopped barking as soon as they saw them coming.

"Grandmothers!" Dov said, "we saw Ancient Portia in the field. What is the news?"

Bless them, they were both most fond of Cassian-ally, and Jyn-ally as well, not just for what they taught them about falls and wrecks, which was much but because, odd as they were, they modeled resourcefulness and courage.

Dov maybe especially, Tova considered, who from childhood had made a pattern in his own mind of himself as an unlucky person. Cassian-ally’s friendship had helped him re-weave that.

They had let sweet Youngest Sister share the news, her excitement bubbling too hard to keep a lid on, "Jyn-ally is well! The new child is a female and all signs are well!"

"Only one?" Mose had asked, twitching his nose a little as if concerned.

“Mose-child,” patient Second Sister said, "There was only ever the one."

"So Cassian-ally told us," Mose agreed, "but, she looked so....even before they left she seemed so.....very..." 

"Large," Dov said.

"Swollen," his friend amended.
Tova had sighed. *Lastborns both of them and slightly stinted on imagination, clearly.*

They had sent them on their way to carry stumps and news into the village, and climbed the steps up into Ancient Portia's tower.

"Will there be ghost-pictures?" Youngest Sister asked, taking her glasses off as they passed out of the bright sunlight.

"Likely there will be," Tova said, "So we must prepare ourselves."

"Remember," wise Second Sister said, for she had seen infant humans in her youth, "no matter what the baby looks like, all that matters is health and Jyn and Cassian-ally's great joy of her. We will love her no matter what." And so they had.

Kaylyra had many near-enough age mates when she began to come for Lessons because that spring before her birth year had brought about an Active time for many in the village. She and dear Second Sister had been so busy with deliveries that even brave Youngest Sister, although terrified and far younger than would have been usual to take on the task, had wound up delivering the unexpectedly-quick-arriving firstborn of a desperate young Scavenger female from Mose's crew. She did a splendid job. Tova had feared for a time that Jyn might stubbornly insist on trying to birth her child in her own home, but the Pattern they cast on the question and good sense all agreed that she should go to the human Circle at HarborTown for their aid and all had gone well there.

At Ancient Portia's wise-but-unexpected suggestion, Second Sister went down to help bring them home when the baby was deemed ready enough to travel.

It was a great adventure for her. Second Sister had not travelled so far South since she had first come to them, carried piggyback by old Mona, a Scavenger who had found her on the Coast in a half-stripped wreck, left behind by those who should have protected her.

*No greater gift could Ea have brought their Circle.*

"Are you afraid dear Second Sister?" sweet Youngest had asked, squeezing her two hands in Heartfelt Inquiry. The good-hearted child no doubt meant of the distance and the travel alone.

"No," their sister answered, with a calm smile, "Once I might have been, but now I am not."

Weeks later when she returned, flying on the small ship with Jyn and Cassian-ally and the astonishingly odd-looking infant who would grow to be their dear Kaylyra, she brought tales for Youngest….of the sea and the Bequa, who had come calling to the water’s edge to wish Jyn and Cassian-ally farewell,… all the many humans of HarborTown, the gossip from the wise and cagey Circle there and how Cassian-ally had promised that he was flying “slow” but had not even remotely been doing so.

“I will admit,” she said frankly, “I hid behind Jyn-ally’s chair and whimpered like a baby starling for most of the journey.”

She had also told of their dear allies.
“Their joy is great but they feel their lostness, now,” she said, “more than they ever expected to. You must remember how, since they had readied their hearts and minds to die in battle, they struggled so at first to even bind each other back into life. I am sure they never let themselves imagine a Pattern that would bring them to a casting like this. Even the humans of HarborTown cannot advise them, for a child makes them feel even more “Fallen-ness” I think.”

“They miss Bodhi Rook,” said Youngest.

“Most fiercely, as do we all,” Second Sister agreed. “But his brave and wise heart was needed elsewhere and Ea needed them here. We can only give our love and such help as we may, while they find their way in this new pattern.”

“Is the baby really supposed to look like that?” Youngest whispered again, nervously.

“I am assured that she is,” patient Second Sister had said.

It was two years or more after that, when Kayla walked and talked and was in the garden running up and down the rows, holding Youngest Sister’s hand and singing the names of the flowers, that Jyn first said.

“I am thinking of trying to….maybe have another baby….maybe.”

Tova and Second Sister had looked at each other astonished, behind her back, as Jyn-ally reached for a basket for the carrots she had been peeling with a knife.

*Oh be serious, my dear, what else have the two of you been doing if not trying to have more babies again almost since Kaylyra learned to sleep for more than two hours span?*

“I….just don’t want her to be alone,” their friend said, looking up then at Kaylyra, pulling puff flower seed pods, but seeing, Tova knew, some other child in some other place far away. “I mean, when I was little I remember asking for a sibling. I made dolls and toys and called them my babies and my army and my sisters and brothers…..I realize now that I probably made my parents so sad doing that, I think I even made my mother cry once….and Cassian, he was supposed to have a sister, but she died. I watch him with Kayly and I think about how much it would have meant to him to not be alone.”

*Ah…it is the patterns begun and cut before finished, she thought, those woven back into the whole perhaps but left unresolved in themselves, that brought the most pain.*

“Besides,” Jyn-ally said with a laugh, “Top of the list for words I never thought I’d say, I’m not getting any younger.”

The not-bearing of children was one part of her calling to her Circle that Tova had never grieved for, much as she loved the little ones and great as the joy she took in seeing them enter the world. She
had watched her mother suffer too much and had known even as a nursling before Then-Eldest Sister Solla had taken her hand, that it was not her path and felt nothing but relief at the knowledge. She had enjoyed Activity in her day but now that those days were done she was content that it be so.

Second Sister had found it hard though and shed tears, she knew. If her Pattern had been woven differently the dear one might have wished for babies, but that choice had been cut for her long ago by cruel ones who set a little child to crawl into dangerous falls that burned her, so Ea in her mercy had woven her bright thread into a new one and oh, how many lives had been saved thereby?

Cassian-ally suffered from his well-hidden fears just as greatly with Jyn’s second pregnancy as her first but Kayly distracted him from it a little. Jyn in some ways suffered less the second time, like a warrior fighting over ground now more familiar to her.

Sister had told her what the Second Sister of HarborTown, the bold human female with the striped reddish hair, had said of Jyn and her struggles giving birth. “Hers are the trials of one who fears the weakness more than the pain.”

Dear Galen came to be born the Spring after. A little male, which was very odd, oh my yes, but with thick dark hair and shining eyes that followed everything but most especially Kayly, until nine months….concerningly late for a normal child but actually early, Ancient Portia assured them, for a human one…..when he ran/walked after everything his eye caught. Keeping that one in possession of all his limbs had been a chore at first.

After the Garden was set and the Lessons of the day had been learned, well or less so but tomorrow was another day, the children all went to their own homes for their families and afternoon chores. Galen had walked home on his own but Kaylyra lingered moving stones helpfully, sweeping, as one-by-one her friends went.

_She wanted to talk_, Tova could see.

“Come tall Kayly,” she said, “help me put the drying baskets up in the loft and spare my old bones the ladder.’

Inside the house, she had set the girl at the table and had her start bundling the sage flower and laying it on the flat baskets.

_It will take a minute for her to come to it_, Tova knew, _she is like her mother in this._

“Tova,” the child had her head bent over the work in her hands and clearly strove to keep her voice lighter than whatever it was that troubled her heart, for she was like Cassian-ally in this. “Do you know anything about K2?”

“No child,” Tova said, passing her more lengths of string for the tying, “Only that he was one of
your parents Heart Companions, your Father's great friend, and was a machine-person like Ancient Portia but unlike her because he was not a ghost and had a body that walked."

Kalyra nodded, stacking bundles….too many deep, but that could be fixed later….”Papa had one of his bad bad dreams the other night.”

*Oh brave Cassian.*

“You were surely concerned. Did he wake you Kayly-child?”

“I mean…” She stopped tying and turned a leaf over in her hands, “It’s been a long time, and Mama and Papa both talk in their sleep sometimes.” She shrugged, ”usually it’s no big deal and we just ignore it..everybody has dreams right? But….this time he got up…”

*I remember child, I remember when the poison of it was still so fresh in his mind that we had to tie him down so he did not re-break his own bones.*

“I heard him saying….I thought he was calling me…”Kay!”” he kept saying, “Where’s Kay?” and I came down the ladder from the loft. Mama was with him but he was standing by the hearth and his eyes were open but he didn’t see me. Mama was just sitting on the bench with her hands out like she was trying to keep him from stepping too close to the coals, but she didn’t touch him.”

“You must have been afraid, to see him so,” Tova said, laying a hand upon hers in sympathy and Acknowledgment of a Loved One’s Pain, making sure the pressure was light to impart Imperfect Understanding but Wish to Share.

“Mama came over and told me to go back to bed and keep Galen quiet, that Papa was OK and it was just a bad dream. Actually, first she said to ‘get my butt back in bed’ but then she said “sorry” and “please.”

She could think of many things to say to the child, but Kayly had a question in her heart and too many answers might block her from bringing them forth herself.

“I went back up but I could hear him still, “He said ‘No,’ and “No puedo…No puedo soportarlo” that means “I can’t…” or “I can’t bear it”.. I think even…. “I can’t carry it..”

*He can, he has, he will.*

“Was he well in the morning?”

“Yes,” Kayly said, “He said it was just a bad dream and he was sorry he woke me, that he doesn’t have them much anymore and that it was just bad stuff from the War and how much he misses Kay…” she looked at Tova now with clear and worried green eyes, so much like her mother’s, “but he…it HURT him..he was crying, I think.”

“Dear child,” Tova said gently, turning Kayly's palms to lay her own on them, Imparting of Hard-won Wisdom, “Poor little Rocco spoke true in a way. You will have two days, maybe even more than two.”
**Field Day**

Chapter Summary

A village tradition is born. Jyn worries about how she and Cassian, but mostly she, can find their way as parents hampered as they are by their lost childhoods. Siblings fight and drive their parents crazy. Cassian is inspired to coach a little soccer with chaotic results. It takes a village. Fortunately they have one.

It had been a trying summer the year that Galen was six-just-turning-seven and Kayly was ten-soon-to-be-eleven. Almost out of the blue the two of them had truly started fighting like hill-cats. Not all the time, to be fair, but when they did, BOOM!

Jyn had no idea whether all this was something she should worry about, but in the meantime it really pissed her off.

Kayly was still remarkably kind to her little brother at times. Jyn had seen her helping him re-tie knots on the climbing rope just yesterday, and last week she had sat with him for an hour talking him through one of Portia’s crazy-ass math problems. She was still protective, in spurts at least, and Force help anybody who teased him or got rough with him when she was around.

When he’d gotten in that fight, with some Mem boys down at Green River at the Spring Scavenger Fair, Kayly had waded straight in and cold-cocked one of them. *She was totally in the wrong, Jyn knew, and Galen had absolutely “started it.” Cassian had given them both a stern lecture, but it was a pretty nice punch for all that….good dodge to the side to deflect the return blow too. Galen hadn’t thanked her for it, oh no.. “I can handle myself!” he’d protested with a handkerchief to his bloody nose., ‘I’m not a baby!’ “You’re welcome, Rat,” Kayla had snapped.

“There were two of them,” Jyn heard her telling Nikki and Ava later, “and he’s a stinky rat but he’s *MY* stinky rat.”

Some days that summer though, it was as if the village wasn’t big enough to hold them both. Force knew the stone house wasn’t. Cassian had finally gone up into the loft and built a small wall in the dormer under the roof they’d shared since Galen could be trusted not to fall off a ladder at four. It gave them each just enough room for a bed and a box and a tiny bit of floor space, but Kayly was most insistent that Galen’s continued survival depended on it. He’d started putting things in her bed….pinecones, peeled potatoes, even…..*all time best….* a big moon moth inside a hollowed-out lizard egg shell. *Honestly, he must have worked on that one for weeks.* She found the egg in her
pillow and when she’d pulled it out it split open and the moth flew out in her face. She’d cursed in Basic and Festan so loud that Beri claimed to have heard her in the village.

*She didn’t learn those words from me, Cassian insisted later. It must have been Portia.*

“Why?” Jyn asked Galen, once she’d wrestled him out of Kayly’s clutches and Cassian had sent their raging, precious daughter out to split firewood and cool off. Her son had looked up at her with his father’s beautiful eyes and an almost bewildered expression. “Sometimes I’m mad at her Mama, but sometimes I’m not…I just have to….because she yells SO loud.”

*Oh Force. Cassian is so much better at this part. He can keep a straight face no matter what.*

She tried to take comfort in that Cassian, while not thrilled with the prospect of facing a winter cooped up with this new near-daily boxing match, was less disturbed by it than she was. “Kids quarrel,” he said. She couldn’t tell if he was echoing Tova or really speaking from experience, she suspected the former but he put up a good front. He’d been around other children more than she had growing up, for a little while at least, so she had to trust him.

He’d told her quietly, over the years, bits and pieces about the camp on Carrida, about his mother’s death, about an uncle and cousin and a plas-sided shack full of droid parts and ration-packs of food, but most of what she knew about his childhood she knew from listening to him talk to Galen and Kayly. There had been a rough contraband school where they made him take dancing lessons...*a story told as he let Kayly stand with her feet on top of his while they twirled around, her giggling. About a man named Oskar who taught him how to tell which turn was the most frequently travelled at any T intersection, from differences in the shine or dampness on a wooden walkway, edges of grass, wear patterns on stone or dry dirt. There were always clues, he told them, like it was a secret. Every time they travelled together, in the glider or on foot, in unfamiliar towns or on paths in rough country, he’d stop at any crossing and make them tell him, “Which way?” turning survival skills into a game.*

“They actually get along really well about 69% of the time,” Cassian said, when she shared her worries as they re-stacked the wire back in the new shed, “and the other 39% of the time they are trying to murder each other.”

*Percentages. Oh my love, she thought. It caught her heart the way it always did and always would.*

*You can’t even hear yourself when you do that, can you?*

“That’s not true,” Jyn said, “Sometimes they sleep.”
They had promised each other at the very start that they would never lie to their children, never try to hide truths from them, but it was very hard sometimes. They had a way of blindsiding you from directions you’d never even thought about being blind from.

“What was your mama’s name?” Kayly had asked Cassian, when she was eight and she and Ava had tried to come up with names for the twenty pea-chicks they’d hatched as a project for Tova.

“Esperanza,” he’d said after only the barest moment’s hesitation, picking up an escaping chick before it could dash off their table and helping Ava get it back in the lidded basket. “Esperanza Cameron.”


“That’s exactly what it means.”

For an instant she was back in the market at Jedha….tense, defiant… hearing a man she hardly knew retort, “Rebellions are built on hope,” as if daring her to disagree with him. Where would she be now if he hadn’t? Where would so many people be?

When she was pregnant with Kayly she’d asked Portia, “What can you find out about my mother?” but even Portia’s searching gaze hadn’t been able to find much. It was just too late. After Endor, so many Imperial data depots were destroyed in the riots on Couruscant, Dagga 3 and Hosnian Prime. Besides, someone had purged Imperial records of all traces of her parents long before.

Portia found one reference.

She looked through her collections of “slices,” those peeks through HoloNet and other data visible though her periodic sweeps, finding only a letter still on a University administrative file. It was sent by a human female named Nari Sable back to her advisor at the University of Rudrig, asking permission to reschedule her thesis presentation so she could attend the wedding of her former roommate and best friend Lyra to a researcher named Galen Erso. They’d met while doing their geology internship on Espinar. The girl was chatty and informal but not above pleading. “Please Dr. Mayburn, I hope the committee can see clear to change my dates. I am sure that several of them have had Lyra in their classes and know that her mother is in poor health. My hope is that at least I can be there for her at the ceremony. Since I am not expected at my interviews back home on on Alderaan until 1.3.69BBY I would be available for any open slot.
Mama had a mother, and a friend named Nari, both of whom were almost certainly dead.

Other than that there was only an old copied and recopied news vid of a young woman with a baby in her arms, liberated in a prisoner exchange from a Separatist prison camp. Lyra Erso, wife of an Imperial Scientist. A low-res in profile only. Pale. Dark eyes. Hair the same color as Jyn’s own.

Hello Mama.

I’m sorry. I was so angry at you for so long and now it’s too late.

Cassian came up while she was looking at it on the pad in Portia’s Tower. He hovered pretty much every minute after she started showing. Poor spy boy. It was pathetically obvious. Draven and company would have been ashamed of him.

She’d shut down the flickering image. It wasn’t that she was trying to conceal it from him, they were well past such things, but she felt guilty. The last thing she wanted to do then was remind him of his mother.

“Viallt,” he said, quietly, laying a hand on her shoulder and sitting on the bench beside her.

“You’ve seen this before?” Oh well fuck, of course he had. Those long-ago Intelligence files on her, the ones that had haunted her once and seemed so far away now.

He nodded and she had to ask. “Was there ever anything else. About her?”

“No. Very surprisingly little. The Empire erased your father but even so…. it was strange, almost as if someone else had gone back and re-erased her. I couldn’t help but wonder if it was Gerrera. We didn’t find even a family name. Aria Prime was listed as her birthplace, so she probably had one but she was using Erso on the only records we ever found….a rejected teaching application and a nursery school record for you.” He smiled gently, “You were adorable by the way.”

Saw’s voice in her memory, sitting beside her on a crash-seat in a dark rumbling shuttle bay, drying her tears with a scrap of cloth…it must have been the very first days, she would never have cried after... “Your mother was a brave soldier, child, all the braver because she fought to the very end and where no eyes could see. We must pick up her banner and go on.”

No eyes but mine, Saw.

Rather than face the memory of her mother with a blaster in her hand, falling face down on the dune-grass, she had turned away from everything. Only mismatched fragments floated up sometimes now.

Mama singing a silly song about a flea on a mouse, and a mouse on Tooka cat, and the Tooka on a dog and the dog on a bantha, and…what was it after that? One of those ones where you add on more and more impossible things. They sang it to time how long to run the water purifier.

Papa using the hand sprayer outside to wash the black sandy mud out of her hair and ears after she had decided to pretend she was a mole, and saying “She does NOT get this from me Lyra!” while
Mama laughed and laughed in the doorway.

It was all she had and she would have to hold on to it and try to build from there.

Between them they had almost enough pieces to construct one functional parent and for the rest of it….thank the Force for the village and their friends.

It was at the end of the small Market they had in Nexa in that late Summer, that her brilliant common-law husband and the father of her children came up with the accidental best idea ever.

Usually that local late-Summer fair was called the “Pine Market” because it was mostly wood and tree products. The hard-to-gather pine nuts, tree and ground nut harvest, fresh oil, lumber, bowls, furniture and things carved from wood were sold and it was where local carpenters hired out for the year’s jobs. Jyn loved that small Market because, unlike the Scavenger Fairs, she and Cassian didn’t have to work much during it and they didn’t have to travel to get there.

Conn came up that year, a few days early, to bring some equipment, and go over Portia’s data to report to folks back at HarborTown. There had been some disturbing things coming up in falls North and past the Islands and Portia was detecting some worrisome funky activity that warranted conference with Markey’s people and the Circles. Unexpectedly he’d even brought one of the warehouse kids along, a boy named Bill who was halfway between Kayla and Galen in age. Kid seemed at loose ends, shy around Kayly and her tight circle of friends but a little aloof from Galen and his pals…maybe thinking himself too mature for their shenanigans. Poor boy had been so astonished at Portia’s image, a grey-haired woman with braids, as she visualized on the field the first day that he’d stood for several minutes actually putting his hand through the image and pulling it back out again, mouth agape. When Portia finally said, “It’s only light, child, there’s not going to be any tactile response.” He’d jumped back with a yelp and some of the local kids had laughed. He’d been mortified and after that he’d stuck to Conn no matter how much Jyn and Cassian tried to draw him out.

On the afternoon of the last day, the big field had already been clearer as most of the big timber lots had been dragged off already and the food booths had started to discount the cakes. Galen had been driving Kayly frothing crazy all day, following her and her friends around. He was tired and sugared-up and his friends Kemmi and Fox were no better. Cassian had had the bright idea of making him bring a kicking ball down from the stone house to kill time if he got antsy. Galen had forgotten all about it but when he saw Kayly and Nikki playing catch with it, he wanted it back. Voices began to rise.

Cassian’s eyes met hers. There was only one way this kind of thing ended these days and it usually involved each of them dragging a kid in a different direction. Damn.

Cassian took the ball from Kayly.
“Hey,” he said, “There’s enough flat space here. We could almost play proper football. Who’s up to learn?”

All Jyn really knew about “proper football” was that there was a ball and a field and teams. People from all Mid-Rim and a half dozen Core worlds were crazy for it. There had been about forty different planetary leagues, even not counting the old Imperial Federation teams, and at least half the Holo-Net kiosks in any given bar showed matches constantly. She’s seen hardened Partisans huddle over tiny data displays in dark caves watching pirated game footage when they thought Saw wouldn’t see them. The appeal escaped her. Any game that both required organized team play and didn’t allow you to directly take all of the loser’s money when you won just didn’t sound like fun.

The local Mem kids had a game like dodgeball that they played with a fiber-stuffed leather ball, “Whacker” they called it, and a game called “Auntie” where you threw a hard wood ball to knock a block off a post or a wall, but Cassian had taught Kayly and then Galen to kick and play “football catch” in the back garden. He’d stitched the ball together from shuttle-seat covering and a latex float liner brought home from the big Scavenger Fair at Green River. There was something about the look on his face when he’d finished it and rolled it to a toddling Kayly that had just about killed her.

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“Sure. What’s that?” said Kemmi. Always a game kid, that one, small but up for anything. He and Galen were dangerous together.

Everything got out of hand from there. Cassian had probably thought he was just working something out for eight or nine kids in a dozen square meters of trampled grass but the project started growing. As soon as he explained the rules a crowd started to gather, of local and visiting Mems, the small handful of humans and a couple of the younger Taun. People started to move some of the booths and tables back and somebody dragged a bag of carpenters chalk out and drew wobbly lines on the grass while a couple of others set up a canvas frame at one end and a stack of baskets at the other end for goals.

Cassian tried to describe “the Rules” and was swamped with questions.

“What do you mean we can’t use our hands? EVER?”

_Only if you’re the goal._

“In the goal?”
No, playing goal position.
What if you knock the goal over and steal their spot, can you be the goal then?
No.
“Can I hit it with my head?”
Yes, maybe, but be careful.
“Can I hold it with my teeth?”
No.
“My teeth are part of my head.”
Still no.
“No fair, Cassian-ally, Dorla and Nirla have four feet."
“Is my nose considered part of my head?”
“If I run on all fours the whole time can I…?”

There were rules and positions and it was decided that the Taun could use the knees/elbows only on their front legs but in the back their feet only.

Noses ok for Mems, NOT for humans. No teeth at all ever.

By this point they had at least twenty-five people of various shapes, ages and configurations lobbying to get involved so Cassian announced they would play eleven on eleven. He also announced that he would be Midfield for one side with Galen as a Forward because they knew the game, almost. Bes was their Goal.

“Jyn can be Midfield on the other side,” he said.

“No mames! Why me?”

He smiled that beautiful Cassian Andor half smile. “Because you are so good with rules.”

Oh, it is ON now Major.

They were doing something called a 4-4-2. Which, as Cassian explained it was four Midfielders, four Defenders, Two Forwards. Kemmi was their goal, Conn got drafted to be another Midfield. Beri and Ava’s Grandmother called Defense. Kayly was supposed to be one of her Forwards along with Dorla, and everybody else just sort of divvied up parts at whim.

Beri took off her glasses and handed them to Tova, who walked quickly back to her house with them to keep them safe….or maybe to get bandages and salve because she clearly foresaw what was coming.

Jyn was very relieved to hear that Cassian was suspending the “Off-sides” rule because they were all beginners, especially since she had no idea what that even was.

They let Kemmi’s Grandmother toss a chip for who got the ball first and Cassian’s team won.

“What exactly do we do Jyn-ally?” Dov whispered, as they all set up. “I wasn’t exactly listening.”
“Simple. Get that ball away from them, kick it past Second Sister, no biting. Whomp all necessary ass to accomplish it. Repeat.”

Nikki kicked the ball toward Cassian and all hell broke loose.

Nobody bit anybody and most hand-like appendages stayed away from the ball, mostly, but pretty much every other rule went out the window. Everybody ran after that plas-leatherette ball like a screaming horde.

Kemmi tried to block one mighty kick by Dorla by wrapping himself completely around the ball so Dorla kicked him and it into the goal.

No score. Portia agreed to Referee.

Such concepts as ‘out-of-bounds” were abandoned early when the chalk lines were wiped by falling bodies and people started chasing the ball through the booths, behind the walls and at one point right through the Community Hall. Who was on which team got confused and at one point Kemmi’s Grandmother, who wasn’t even playing, got overexcited, ran out into the middle and chipped the ball over Cassian’s head straight to Kemmi because she thought he got the point if he caught the ball. Ava’s Grandmother body-checked Mose and sent him sprawling. Dorla threw herself down on the ball at one point and nearly popped it and Fox with it.

The absolute end came when Kayly got the ball away from Dov just as he got tripped by little Rissa who bolted out from under a nut cake booth and knocked him over, along with all the remaining nutcakes, Running toward Kemmi she yelled to Dorla who had been eating cake off the grass but now ran toward the goal. Desperate, Kemmi ran out to stop the ball but slipped on a piece of cake and crashed into Kayly, who crashed into Cassian, who had been trying to move up in case Dorla didn’t make it. Everybody crashed into each other in pile-up worthy of speeder traffic on an icy landing strip. Jyn stopped herself, but Nirla didn’t and knocked her right over, head free but legs pinned under a Taun.

Only Galen and Bill, managed to avoid the collision, skidding on the now shredded grass and cake to stop themselves.

They stood staring and, from under the pile of bodies, the ball suddenly popped out and rolled to Galen’s feet.

Kemmi, still Goal, was somewhere on the bottom of the pile.

“Hey! Hey!” Galen kicked the ball to Bill, maybe because the pile of the entire village of Nexa was between him and what was left of the goal. "Take it! Take it!"

“Bloody hell!” Bill said horrified, “What am I supposed to do?”

"Kick it at the baskets!” Galen yelled.
Bill nudged it with the toe of his shoe and it rolled sloooowly into the last standing ground-nut basket.

Score. Portia said, placidly, from beside the wall.

“That’s it!” Tova loudly said, walking onto the field “That’s quite enough proper football for today, I must say!”

Bill was a hero and he and Galen became best pals after. Tova made poor Kemmi get his eyes checked before she would even let his Grandmother take him home. The Grandmother was terribly proud, still convinced he “won.” Kayly was so excited that she stole the ball from Conn, on whom she had small crush, not once but twice that she didn’t even care that Nirla fell on her. Dov declared that this was the “BEST GAME EVER” and Ava’s grandmother wheeled three barrels of beer over from her booth, tapped them and everyone had crushed cake and beer, sitting scattered on the wrecked field, while Tova and Bes patched everybody up.

Later, as the sun was setting they all limped back up to the stone house. Jyn limped a little more than everybody else. Kayly, Galen and Bill took the ball out to kick around the garden some more until it got too dark and Conn fell straight asleep, snoring, on the extra bed that had once been Bodhi’s.

Cassian sat by the fire and undid his shirt, peeling it back from one shoulder while Jyn wrapped bluemint leaves in a cold wet cloth and laid it to the massive bruise appearing below his right shoulder.

“Ouch. Rough one soldier,” she said when he winced a little, “What did that?”

“Your elbow,” he said.

She kissed him and they laughed so hard it hurt. The children could hear from outside and thought they were crazy.

The Post-Pine Market Proper Football Game became an annual Nexa tradition, despite all that came after, through good times and bad.
The Visitor

Chapter Summary

Dex, the son of TH411 and MS916 remembers meeting a playmate's father on a couple of different occasions. Two deserters-turned-farmers are reminded that no one gets to hide from the past forever in this struggling galaxy.

Chapter Notes

More Blackbird tales, and a visit again with the lost stormtroopers of Over the Edge.

Hola ovejas! = Hello sheep!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was a foggy morning, otherwise Dex would have seen him sooner. A man in a blue Fishers jacket with the hood pulled up against the misting rain was walking up the path from the direction of the Town road.

At this time of year strangers never came that way. If the boy hadn't been hiking down from the upper meadow to bring goats to the little paddock he wouldn’t have seen the man at all until he was practically to the house. Normally his chore was to bring the silly things down right after breakfast but being the closest thing to a break in the rain yet today he'd talked his moms into letting him clean the stalls first and was bringing them down now.

Even so Dex recognized him from as far away as the fork and knew before he'd even turned who it must be.

He still remembered the man real well.

At the last Three Years Market he and his friends had met that little girl, Kayly from Nexa, kind of
bossy but fun, and all her Mem pals. It was her who’d started a wild game of “Scavengers and Raiders” that almost got them banned from the Fish Market. Also the smaller one had just plain swallowed his dice like they were candy the first day. No grudge though because, to her credit, that Kayly gave him a nice bone pair with the dots carved-on-not-painted-on before she left, which was pretty decent of her. He still used them.

What he remembered just as well was a strange tense not-argument between his parents and her mother and father. Momma yelled at him and he and the girl had to take her round-faced baby brother to Martin’s cake booth while it all got patched up. In the end Mom said it was fine and she’d explain later, though she never really had.

Kayly's mother had been little and green-eyed with foxy-colored hair. Her father had been dark and had a small beard.

It was him that Dex saw two other times in River Town after that. The first time probably didn’t count though, since it had only at been at a distance.

He should have been hurrying but he'd been sitting on the hill side above the flats, eating a hot buttered roll before starting home after a late winter day in town, watching a bunch of Taun and humans walking together out the river road away from the town. Two of the humans walking with the shaggy yellow Taun, seemed familiar to him somehow. Kayly’s parents, he’d thought, although the little girl wasn’t with them.

*It had been a funny thing to notice but there had something familiar about the way they walked, that man and the short woman with him, the way they carried themselves. It was just different. Kind of like Mom and Momma in a way.*

He told himself he'd mention it to his parents when he got home but it was dark by then and he was so busy getting scolded he forgot to. Even after he remembered again the next day he just hadn't. He wasn't sure why.

The following Summer he saw the man again, all alone. Well....at least his partner, the little foxy woman, hadn't been there with him. It was the week before the last Scavenger Fair and Dex had been in RiverTown with his Mom.

That time he'd actually talked to him.

His family never put their own booth up at the Scavenger Fair. It was the only one that they didn't go to at all and that by itself was kind of funny, because it was one of the biggest. The rest of the pressers and brewers did well there and always looked forward to it but his parents, as Ferla said, had a "weird thing" about that one fair. They just wouldn't go.

"Yo-our parents have stro-ong bo-undaries abo-out unusual things," the Taun said with a hair-shake and a shrug, "I'm betting they have so-ome trauma."
Ferla said that in the same what-can-you-do tone most kids reserved for any other annoying parental habit.

When he was very little Mom Ems wouldn't come into town at all unless she and Momma could go together. Now she would go with Momma or Dex.

"Tee," he remembered hearing Mom say, when they had been talking out at the well and they hadn't known yet that he could hear them up in his newly-built fort. "I know it will be good for him...I know there are things we really need out here but..."

"Babe....Ems babe... " Momma said with a voice like she used when he was scared of thunder or something, "we've taken bigger risks than some swampy low-tech town right? We can do this." They had both laughed a little then and the next day they had all gone together with their first fruit wagon.

Dex went into town now every chance he could get with his parents or now that he was older, on his own for all that it was a half days walk.

He loved where they lived on the edge of the Grasslands, he really did. His treehouse and having wool goats of his own and all was the best ever but way out where they lived the only neighbors were Ferla's family up in the oak grove. Until they started going to RiverTown for markets he barely ever saw anybody and no Mem's or humans at all except for at harvest time when lots of people of all kinds came out for two weeks to rake berries in the bogs and pick plums and apples.

Now he had town friends as well as friends among the kids whose parents travelled for Fairs. He didn't see them every day but at least every other week or so, and he liked working the booths and talking to people. His folks had made more friends too, although in the end it was Momma Tee who was usually shyest around new people.

Scavenger Fair though, was right out, non-negotiable.

What they did start doing was delivering extra cider and juice to a couple of the pubs and victualers the week before the Fair. Last year Mom brought him in with her and even left him to stay and have lunch and play cards with his pal Nebbie at her uncles pub while she did the last of the deliveries by herself.

It was at Nebbie's that he saw the man, the Kayly-girl's dad, again. He'd been in the pub leaning on the counter talking to a couple of Traders.

"Hey," Dex whispered, although he wasn't sure why he was whispering, "hey Nebbie, who's that guy? The one in the blue shirt?"

Nebbie started to turn around, "Which guy?"

"Fuckssake! Don't turn around ya loon! The tall one with the mustache and the little beard."
"Oh," the idiot said in her donkey-loud voice, turning right around on the bench and staring then flopping back down, "that's the Blackbird, he's prob'ly down for the Fair."

_She said it like he was just supposed to know what that meant._

After a while the Traders left and Nebbie's uncle called her to go clear the tables. Dex laid out the cards for solitaire but the Blackbird man was still leaning against the high counter drinking some hot leaf tea and looking at a paper book so Dex sort of edged around, like he was going to walk back by the kitchen. That way he figured he could get a better look at the fellow from behind without being seen staring.

"Do you want something son?" The man asked quietly. He didn't turn around and didn't even look up from his papers.

"Um, sorry," Dex was a little startled. The man looked straight at him now. His eyes were very dark brown like an Islander, well most of Islanders he’d seen anyway, and he spoke just a bit funny.

_Ok.. Ok....might as well just ask straight out, right?_

"Um, can I ask you a question, mister...um, I met you before right? You're that girl, Kayly's dad?"

"Yes," the Blackbird said, blowing on his hot tea and taking a sip.

"You um, ....." There was nothing to be so nervous about. The man was fairly tall but he wasn't all that big, only a bit taller than Momma really. He didn't sound grouchy and he was just drinking tea for fuckssakes...why did he seem a little scary?

"How...um....how do you know my parents?"

The man closed his paper book.

"Where's your mother, son...Dex is it?"

"Yeah....I mean yes. My Mom Ems is delivering our cider around down to the Shore pubs for next week. Momma's home at our place."

"How old are you now Dex? Thirteen?"

“Elev....Twelve, mister."

"Ah. I see," he nodded like that was some piece of slightly interesting news he was storing away for later. "Well, I think Dex, that your mom would rather talk to you about that herself."

Nebbie yelled for him to come back in the kitchen and see the crates of crabs.

He didn't go though.

Instead he stepped a little closer to the man and asked a question he really wanted to ask, although it hadn’t formed in his mind until just that very second. "Did you know my father? He died before I was born....but they....are you one of..?"

The man stopped him right there.
"Talk to your mothers, son" he said firmly.

Nebbie was yelling again, so Dex had to run back into the kitchen to see what she was on about. When he came back out the man was gone.

_When Mom came back with the wagon for supper, he told her about the man and what he'd said..... all except for the part about asking about his father._

"Oh fuck," she said, which was usually Momma's swear.

"You know the Blackbird?" Nebbie's uncle asked.

"Yeah, you could say that," his mom said. "We've met a couple of times."

"Is that his real name?" Dex asked.

"No, no. That's just what people call him when he's not around. He comes and goes as he pleases that one. Well, they both do, I suppose." Nebbie's Uncle Jon said.

He went on then about how the Upland Circle had declared the man and his woman partner allies years ago and they were said to live up there mostly. It was also said they were big heroes at HarborTown after that awful crash years back and had business there too.

"You hear a lot of stories about those two, about just half I figure to be true. Some say they're Fallen," the man's voice dropped a little and he shook his head, "I don't know about that kind of nonsense for he's always seemed a normal and polite fellow when I've met him, though a close one. Him and her....his missus....they're fire and ice for sure."

Uncle Jon shook his head. "You and Tee should come in more often," he said to Mom gently, "I know you like your privacy out there but...."

_The big secret was that Mom and Momma were Fallen. They came down in a broken space ship before he was born. The neighbor Taun all knew. In fact, Ferla would ask sometimes about weird stuff like "were all the stars really the same size and some of them just look smaller because they were farther away?"

"No, but yes," Momma Tee said.

Ferla also wanted to know if space travel was fun.

"No," both his parents said.

_He was never ever ever supposed to mention or talk about that to anyone in town because "people have uninformed ideas and will treat you different" and "It's nobodies' fucking business."

As their neighbor Morla pulled the now-much-lighter wagon of empty casks, Mom and he took turns pulling the handcart on the inland road back toward home.

After walking for a quiet while she said, "If you see that man again, you need to tell one of us right away."
"Mom," he asked, walking beside, "That girl's dad......the Blackbird, did you know him "before"? I mean....was he a soldier in the army with you?"

"No," she said, "He was a soldier, but he was in the other army."

When you got right down to rock, like the saying was, all he knew was what they told him when he was little.

Momma was from a bunch of places, but she was born in....on....they always said "on" like it was islands....Meren Four where the sky was pink not blue, which sounded cool but was really not. She lived for a long time on a place called Alderaan that was pretty but she had a stepfather there who she hated and used to hit her and her sister. So she ran away and joined the army of the Empire. An Emperor which was like an Island king only in charge of everything. There was a Senate, like a town council but they were a bunch of corrupt dicks. The soldiers were supposed to stop bandits and Separatists and the Rebels.

The Rebels were crazy and blew things up all the time because they hated the Emperor.

Mom Ems was born on a place called Hosnian Prime that was mostly one big city, way way bigger than RiverTown, where there were spaceships everywhere. Her Father died and she joined up because he and all his aunts and uncles had been in the Army of the Republic and she thought it would have made him proud, also she had nowhere else to go.

The army was cruel and didn't care about the soldiers and sent them out to get killed for no reason except to make the Emperor richer and use them to do his “dirty work.”

"Where the Rebels the good guys then?" he asked. 
Because he figured somebody had to be.

"I guess so, in the end.....some of them, yeah," Mom said. 
She sounded so sad when she did.

Everybody hated the troopers because of what the dick Generals and the Emperor made them do and they could only depend on each other and sometimes not even that because people ratted each other out. They and a few of their friends decided to run away and not fight for the Empire any more but it wasn't easy to do because they would kill you if they caught you. Mom Ems and Momma Tee and their friends, Dex.....who was super smart and brave and got killed helping them escape.....and Eft.....who was his father but died from a poisoned lizard bite before he was born......stole a ship away and fell here.

"If they hadn't died would I have two Fathers and two Mothers?" he'd asked when he was little.

Mom and Momma looked at each other surprised for a minute before Momma said "Sure," and gave him a hug, "why the hell not?"

He'd been very little then after all.
Now the dark-haired man that Nebbie’s uncle called the Blackbird walked through the wet grass with even strides toward the lower paddock. He even lifted a hand and waved, probably just to show he knew Dex was watching him.

The boss goat was on the rope lead and the four others trotting behind, still complaining about the rain. Dex put her inside first and after the others all followed he closed the gate and tied off the peg latch.

"Hello," the Blackbird said.

"Hello mister."

"My name is Cassian Andor," he said. "But it's fine with me if you call me Cassian. Are either of your parents at home?"

"Yeah...I mean yes. They're up at the house. I can show you the way."

Cassian Andor smiled. "No," he said. "If you don't mind, it might be better if you go up and tell them I'm here, and that I'd like to speak with them."

"I gotta put some hay down for these goats first," Dex said.

"That's fine." Cassian said. "Let me know if I can help."

Dex thought about it.

"If you could stand by this gate while I throw the hay over, that'd be a favor. Ceefor, she's the big grey one, she thinks she's funny and likes to push it open unless I wedge it shut with the pitchfork. Sometimes I have to chase them."

The man lowered the heavy canvas bag he had slung over one shoulder onto the grass, and walked round to brace his hands against the makeshift gate. Dex used the iron fork to toss some salt marsh hay over the rough-cut railing.

As soon he walked away Ceefor scampered over and tossed herself right against the slatted opening. She'd have popped that gate right open, the sneak, except the man had been holding it shut. Cassian was startled and said some words the boy didn't understand, something like "Hola ovejas!"

He laughed a little, at himself it seemed, and Dex laughed too.

Whatever he did in the Uplands he sure didn't keep goats. For some reason, that made him seem a little more normal.

After he got some hay into the roofed feeding rack and replaced the fork against the gate, Dex thanked the man and ran up to the house.

_He felt weird leaving the fellow down there but the rain seemed finished now and a few ragged patches of blue were even showing on the horizon. Cassian Andor leaned against one of the posts and waited, while the goats ate, only now and then looking up to eye the man's back curiously._
Momma was walking out from the shed when he told her.

"Ems!" she called, and Mom came out of the house with a wooden bucket in her hands.

"Dex says Alliance is here, waiting down by the paddock."

“Oh hell. Why?”

Momma shoved her hands in her work coat pockets.

"I'm guessing because he has something to fucking tell us," she said.

Mom looked at him, serious and a little pale "Dex, was he alone?"

"Yeah.....I think so.....yeah.....I mean, I watched him all the way up from the road and didn’t see anybody else."

Momma sighed, "It's not like he'd see her even if she's out there, Ems. I'm pretty sure they still know how to do their jobs. I'll go down to talk to him. You stay here with Dex."

"I'm going with you," Mom said, but Momma just smiled.

"Don't make me pull rank on you babe. I'll go down. I'll get the fucking political news. I'll come back."

She buttoned up her jacket and walked down toward the goat paddock.

Mom took him by the elbow and made him go in the barn with her.

"Mom," he said, scared now that he'd screwed up somehow. Why the barn? "What's going on? Is this guy trouble?"

"No, no Dex....I don't think so. It's just that he said they'd leave us be, so if he's come out here something funny must be going on, Tee will find out. It will be ok."

She put her hands on his shoulders and tried to hug him but he shook them off.

"Is it about the Empire?" Dex asked, "Are you and Momma in trouble? Are they coming to punish you for running away?"

Mom looked at him wide-eyed, "No, baby boy. Why would you think that?"

She did hug him then, and he let her.

“I promise you, Dex, the Empire is gone. The Emperor died and they all forgot about us a long time ago. I think the Rebels probably forgot about that man and woman...the little girl's parents....a long time ago too.”
They stacked some hay and scraped the tools, just to have something to do in there.

After about an hour, Momma came back up and the man, Cassian Andor, came with her still carrying the black bag. The rain was clearing out properly now, though it was still damp, and the sun was shining.

“Good morning,” the man said to Mom, “I’m sorry to bother you but I felt you both deserved to know some of what’s going on. Also, I wanted to ask you a few questions.”

"Let's do this inside," Momma said.

When Cassian got to their door and saw the mats, he even took his own boots off and put them there, neatly side by side not tossed like Dex always got in trouble for doing. Mom and Momma took stuff off the benches and chairs and everybody sat down. Dex moved his chair up too but his parents both said "No," at the same second, like they did sometimes. Although this time nobody laughed.

Mom told him to go out to the barn and stay there and he would have argued but it was an order so he went.

Anyway, he knew already what he was going to do. It worked if he was hiding from chores. Out the back of the barn, he climbed the fence behind the house. He was tall enough now to get up onto the turf roof and then slip into the window of his loft above the kitchen. He also knew that if he lay flat on the floor, he could hear down below and even see through some of the gaps in the boards.

“……already told you we don’t want to get involved with this. We’re done.” that was Mom.

“‘Unless they come here’ was how you put it,” as I recall,” Cassian. “Exactly how much warning do you think we would get, and what do you think that warning would look like?”

“What does your fucking Republic have to say about this?” Momma.

Silence.


“I didn’t come out here to argue and I didn’t come to try to recruit you. Other people in RiverTown are part of the alarm network. You are welcome to join or not, that’s up to you, I just wanted to be above board and let you know directly what was happening. Transparency in operations is probably not something you’re used to…..” for a second the man almost sounded just a little sharp.

“I thought you said you DIDN’T want to argue Captain?” Mom’s voice was low.
Another silence.

The man sighed, and went on, “Fair enough, I apologize. I have one more question and a gift, then I will be on my way.”

“What question?” *Mom.*

“Have you ever heard the names Thrawn, Sloane, or Hux?”

“We were bloody Cargo Transport Security based on Brethal and Gandria and Corellia.. We moved fucking boxes and made sure nobody stole them at one end or the other. Who the fuck do you think we were supposed to know?” *Momma.*

“Thrawn wasn’t human, was he?” *that was Mom, almost too quiet to hear.*

“Ems, what are you talking about?” *Momma.*

“There was that Commander, Regar…sadistic dick…on a spot inspection he found a kid, R4-11 with a little disc music of some Ortolan band hidden in his locker. Arfor loved jazz. We all had to stand as they dragged him off. One of the Internal Security black-armors made some crack about Admiral Thrawn being the only non-scum blue in the whole Empire and Regar backhanded him hard. That’s it. Its the only time I ever heard the name.”

*Cassian now.* “He was Chiss…we think….Unknown Regions. It’s possible he was a sleeper mole for the Chiss Acendancy the whole time or maybe he actually did sell out his whole system for a shiny uniform and a seat at Palpatine’s dinner table, it was never really clear. He vanished before the Battle of Yavin, but dead or alive his maps got some minochs fleeing a burning ship their foothold out there…we think.”

“Fucking Maker….” *Momma.* “Who the fuck WERE you?”

“Nobody important. A Rebel. A shadow.”

“We can’t help you,” *Mom was saying,* ”we probably would if we could but we can’t. We have a child now.”

“I know. So do we. Two as you probably remember.”

There was a sound of chairs scraping back.

“Thank you for the time then. I’ll be on my way,” Cassian was saying, “You know how to get word to us if you want to talk. Otherwise, I won’t bother you again. I did bring these, no strings attached. Whatever happens you might be the only people around here who won’t need a training in order to use them. Consider it a gift and a gesture of trust.”

There was a sound of something heavy being placed on a table. It must be that bag the man had carried.
Dex scooted around a little. There was a gap in the floor that would give him a glimpse straight down at the table.

Mom’s hand was opening the bag. Inside were three of the shiniest whole blasters he had ever seen. One was a very big one.

“Goodbye. Perhaps we’ll see each other at Market, perhaps not. Either way please tell your son that Kayly sends her regards.”

Chapter End Notes

Family holidays in places with no Wifi thwart my writing schedule again. Back to it!

TLJ leaves me feeling validated in many respects
Clothes

Chapter Summary

An odd little bit about old clothes and the stories they tell us.....in the case of Jyn and Cassian's old clothes quite a few stories.

They kept baskets stacked, some for washing and others for mending and rags.

It was, by necessity, one of the first things she learned. Very little in the way of fabric ever went to waste at Nexa. Clothes and bags, rugs and blankets, were always repaired, re-sewn into useful things or unravelled so that their threads could be twisted into yarn and rope or shredded, boiled and spread into felt or paper.

People who lived around here had a Memsa tradition of ribbon skirts, although fashions changed every few years as to width and color. Only the very old or the very young, or those who had some sickness that caused their fur to fall out, ever wore much more. In abnormally cold winters or for extended trips north sweaters or ponchos would be knitted but these were sort of special and unusual. They would be made and then hung on a wall as decorations for years sometimes before they were needed again.

Several people donated old sweaters, or knitted them to clothe the new strangers, as Jyn and Cassian were called, before they became "allies". Most were brown, blue and red, some were thick wool and some thin linen or hemp. It always pleased their neighbors when they saw them wearing one they recognized.

The brown one Jyn had worn at Endor had been originally made for Dov's younger sister Revi. Somehow she never got it back from the field hospital after....or maybe it had never even gotten there because Berman or Dameron had pulled it off of her when the Pathfinders team had been trying to stop the bleeding.

"I'm sorry," she told Revi later, but the baker had been thrilled.

"This is awesome! My sweater is on another planet! It was in battles and kept people warm while they were fighting monsters. I am so proud of my sweater."
Socks were harder. You couldn't even explain socks to the Memsa. They became like latinum to them in those first years. Jyn and Cassian traded for socks every chance they got and carefully washed theirs out and set them to dry each night. Fortunately they were both used to that from army bases and...well, prison.

When their rescuers had first found them, they were sealed in the wreckage of that gleaming black shuttle, it had been a race against time, almost, to get them out before they died of their wounds.

*Bes had told her about it, in bits, haltingly, over that first year of being stranded here.*

The ship had come in wrong, or perhaps just been so badly damaged by debris-strikes in its blind trajectory through the firefights above Scarif that the hardened stealth-cloaked hull actually cracked on impact. That it had survived hyperspace was a miracle.

Brave little Bes had climbed inside and found them both badly in shock with serious second and third degree burns. Jyn had been concussed, with a shattered knee and Cassian had been quite literally dying, with broken ribs, internal bleeding, and a punctured lung.

Her sisters had passed through blankets and strapping and Bes, all alone, had wrapped and tied Jyn so that the rescuers could pull her through.

*Jyn remembered none of it, although they told her she had been semi-conscious at times.*

She had been clutching Cassian’s shirt so tightly and poor Bes spoke of her own panic and calling through to her sisters for advice and help.

“I was quite anxious and had a mad idea for a minute that I would have to break your fingers but Eldest calmed me down and pushed through scissors.”

She had cut Cassian’s khaki shirt and her sisters had pulled Jyn out with a large scrap of it still held tight in her right hand.

“I touched him to do the cutting, which I had been afraid of before because I thought that he was dead, and then I could feel his heart still beating. You made sounds too, and spoke a little,” Bes said, “which gave me hope.”

Bes had told her this part of the story as they had been walking around the little yards and fields closest to the stone house they were staying in. Jyn realized right away that while this might have
been partly to familiarize her with the area it was mostly for physical therapy.

“What did I say?” Jyn asked as they watched the sun set, pink and orange behind the ruined tower on the hill.

Bes had reached out to hold the hand that had not been holding a cane.

*Then she had not understood, but now she knew that it must have been Reassurance that a Painful Event is in the Past.*

“’Don’t leave me,’ ” Bes told her, ”you said it several times.”

Clothes in general had been an issue. There were almost no humans in the Uplands in those days. The Taun wore even less clothing than the Memsa, although they loved cloth and prized rugs. The nearest human settlement was at Green River, three days walk away as the blackbird flew, in good weather. Even as they were still in bandages at the Sister's farmhouse, Eldest Sister Iola had made some strong-arm arrangements with Traders to buy things for them from the Fishers there.

*It turned into a funny story later. Mose and Keen had walked into a fair and asked for pants with no clear idea what it was they were asking for. They laughed wildly when Jyn put them on her legs. Apparently they had thought they had been sent to find a weird kind of hat.*

Tova cut up several pairs of old table cloths to make them long simple shirts. Most of these were re-sewn into dish towels now, but Cassian still sometimes wore a faded brown one.

They had had to cut the clothes off both of them to wrap and soak them in the bacta-like solution that healed their injuries. With the same loving care the Sisters seemed to use for everything, they had tried to cut along the seams, and afterward, brought most of the clothes back to them, cleaned and re-sewn.

*“Is this cloth from a plant or an animal?” Tova had asked biting off the thread and smoothing Jyn’s newly patched mechanic’s vest.*
“Hell if I know,” Jyn had said, which shocked Tova a little because how could a person not know what their cloth was made of?

“Mineral,” Cassian had volunteered.

“Oooooo,” all three Sisters had whistled, astonished.

They had issued her that dark blue prison shirt at Wobani and she had quickly snatched the lightly lined vest for warmth when another prisoner, a nameless Mixti, had been dragged out of the holding cell at Processing and left some of her things behind. All the pockets had been torn and emptied and the Mixti had been shorter than her, so it rode a bit high, but "Liana Hallick" had zipped it on quick and gotten back to her seat in seconds while the other prisoners scrambled for the blanket.

The guards had surely seen her but shrugged. What did they care if the scum stole scraps from each other?

*Somehow it had come with her. She had kept it on for padding under the Technicians cover-all at Scarif instead of tossing it on the floor of Rogue One the way she had her scarf.*

The zipper had broken long ago but she had sewn on ties to close it. Kaylyra wore the vest for a while when she was younger but now that she was taller than Jyn it had been handed back.

She still wore the grubby thing for gardening sometimes. The pockets were useful.

The prison shirt had been cut up for patches. One was on Galen’s blue workshirt.

The knees of the grey Imperial uniform slacks they had cut off of him were patched and had still fit once he was able to stand, although Cassian was even thinner by that time. Never snug... *that Imp had been almost Cassian's height but a few pounds heavier...*they had become so loose that Jyn used a screwdriver to pierce an extra hole in the belt for him.

*“Thank you, Quartermaster,” he had said, trying it on and buckling it, while she sat on the bench nearby. He had looked down at her and smiled that little half-smile he had and damned if her heart hadn’t fluttered.*

*They had still been so much strangers to each other then.*

*It would be weeks before she threw all caution away and kissed him, and a few days after that before they tangled hands trying to take that belt off again.*

The pants were still folded up at the bottom of a trunk, patched and re-patched.

That belt was long gone mostly. It had worn out and broken but part of it was now a strap on Galen’s hiking pack. Cassian had a blackish-brown one of dyed lizard skin now with a square buckle made from a shuttle cargo-storage belt.
The black leather Imperial uniform boots they had both been wearing, his high quality officer’s boots, hers well-oiled service buckle-and-lace-ups, had been carefully saved.

The Taun were skilled leather-cutters but boots were as hard to come by as pants and more expensive.

They still had them all these years later but they had been re-stitched and re-soled at RiverTown several times. Cassian wore his for “dress-up” occasions mostly now and wore his scuffed brown boots for every day. She had a very handsome pair of hand-tooled blue boots, thank you, but still wore hers sometimes.

_The Empire were evil murdering bastards but they issued a hell of a pair of shoes._ She had blue laces on them now.

Cassian’s Alliance-issue uniform shirt, had been a total loss.

_In the days after the crash Tova had rolled up the rags of it to lay by her head. Scorched and spotted with blood as it had been, it had seemed to calm her they told her._

_“We were afraid that you would wake up and try to fight,” Tova had said, “and we had our hands full with him, I can tell you….if it kept you quiet we were willing to risk a little infection.”_

They gave her back the torn thing when they moved them down from the farm to the stone house ....in other words once they where reasonably sure that they would not die.

_Cassian had still been in very rough shape physically then and she…..well, they had both been in rough shape mentally._

When Bes gave her the shirt, she showed Jyn what she found inside the sleeve. There, pinned with staples, was another scrap torn from a heavier brown fabric.

Jen recognized it at once. It was the rank patch and insignia from his uniform jacket, two silvered green circles..._Captain_…. and above that the embroidered red Starbird of the Rebel Alliance.

_When could he have done this? She remembered him wearing the jacket as he reported to the Council. He’d had it on when they boarded the shuttle. Had he been wearing it in the cockpit when Bodhi conned them in through the Shield Gate? She couldn’t remember. It must have been sometime before they had passed them up the dead Imp uniforms, hand to hand to hand from the cargo bay to the gangway space where they’d changed._

_When had he found the time or the space to pull them off and pin them inside his own shirt? Why?_
It wasn’t a spy thing to do. Even she knew that. You removed all rank and insignia.

It was the kind of thing that had overwhelmed her sometimes in those early days.

Who was this man?

She knew him as well as her own hand and she didn’t know him at all.

After Bes left them with food and wood for the fireplace, she hobbled to the table and looked at it. Cassian was asleep on the two mattress-platforms they’d pushed together as a bed, propped up with pillows because lying flat was still not good for his breathing then. He slept a lot in those first two weeks, which was good. She was actually supposed to wake him up sometimes to make sure he drank the resinous and minty teas that Iola had left for him and to make sure he didn’t roll onto his side for long.

It came to her as she sat there running her fingers over the red thread of that patch.

He followed her, as they all had, on what every man of them knew must be a suicide mission. Whatever this spy had done, whatever masks he had had to wear, he was going to at least die a soldier, a Captain of the Alliance to Restore the Republic. It must have been important to him. So important that it didn’t matter if he was the only one who knew.

“I told myself it was for a cause that I believed in….”

Her mother’s necklace, his patches, the flag that Saw had wrapped around his neck like a scarf each and every time he lay down to sleep….it was all suddenly too much for her then and she knew that crying would wake him so she went out the door as quickly and quietly as her limp would let her. Pulling closed the blanket they’d hung as a door, she managed to get as far as the flagstones in front of the house before the tears started. Crying, and furious at herself she blindly reached around and pulled up the flat stone closest to the wall, the same one that she had moved only a few days before.

The thing was still underneath.

Before Cassian had quite awakened one morning she had been searching around the interior of the house for good places to put things…lamps, matches, knives….and found a loose “tile” by one of the windowsills. Cautiously lifting it up, half worried about sticking her fingers into a mouse-nest , she found herself touching cold metal and lifted the stone right up.

Jyn had only ever seen pictures of them. Her mother had told her bedtime stories about Queens and Knights and had even a couple of old cell-books with pretty pictures. Not that you could really mistake it, nothing else looked like that. It was a light saber.

No, she thought, terrified she was hallucinating. No. No. No. Not my story.
They hadn’t met Portia yet. Tova and Iola had not really even told them the story of the house. All she knew of the Jedi was noble tragedy and broken promises.

Her mother’s faith was not hers.

*I’m sorry Momma, no.*

She wanted that thing away from Cassian and away from her so badly she had carried it outside and hidden it under a stone. *Irrational.*

Now she took it out again, wrapped it in the torn shirt and placed it back underneath. *Extra irrational and she knew it.*

*Later, she would show it to him later.*

She kept the patches out because they were his, and laid them on the mantle. Then she crawled into bed beside him.

Sanity eventually returned and she showed him the light saber after they first met Portia.

Now it lived in the toolbox. They’d used it to cut things up in the Tower and on Salvage. She wasn’t sure what that meant, but that was were it was.

*The khaki shirt, scorched from the fires of Scarif had been too torn up to even be oil-rags. It disappeared sometime after she showed Cassian the light saber. She had a feeling he had either burned or buried it but she never asked.*

Cassian had cut off the Captain’s rank insignia and given to Kayly when she volunteered to take lessons on flying. She’d been so nervous and so determined not to show it. Their daughter stitched it inside the jacket she kept in the training shuttle….”for luck,” she said.

*He gave Galen the Starbird patch and their son with a kind of childish pride pinned it on his coat for a while. When the sleeves of that coat got too short he kept it in a box up in the loft bedroom.*

After Bill died in the Fire, they found a faded Markey Blue jacket he had left at their house, probably the same day he’d walked out onto that field.

Jyn brought it back to HarborTown the following year to return to Tom Markey and Thea but they insisted that Galen should keep it. A few weeks after his return from the coast their son asked for needle and thread and sewed the patch onto the right shoulder.

“Is this where it goes Papa?” he’d asked.

“A little higher,” Cassian said quietly and showed him the regulation placement. Galen moved it and after that he always wore it when he travelled. Almost no one here knew what it meant of course. It occurred to her that someday maybe no one anywhere else would either.
Jyn had cried again that day but she made sure neither her son nor her husband saw her do it.
Down by the Sea

Chapter Summary

A small angsty fragment of a leftover chapter about Jyn and Cassian's raw early days after Scarif and their travels to explore their new refuge on Ea. On a first cooperative trading venture, they find they may not be as prepared as they thought they were for the sight of an ocean.

Jyn's compulsive list-making continues.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Before that first year was half out he would start to take short trips by himself, eventually even going as far as the big port at HarborTown with Tom Markey, a Fisherman-Trader he tapped early as a promising contact.

That initial trek to the coast though, that one they went on together.

Cassian and Jyn came down on foot from the Uplands along the Green River road to RiverTown. Elfla and Norla and a few of the Scavengers from Nexa brought them along to help trade salvage taken from that fine Sorosub shuttle. A year had passed since their escape from the fires of Scarif and the scars were fading but neither of them felt quite strong enough yet to consider more than a night's separation.

Everybody was nervous. After all it was a bold entrepreneurial venture into new markets for the Taun and Dov's crew.

"You just let me do the talking at first, Cassian-ally," Mose said. "My mom used to bring me down here when I was a nursling and these humans down here can be a little tricky, she always said. No offense."

"None taken," Cassian answered smoothly.

"Speak for yourself," Jyn objected.
"This is very exciting," Elfla said, shaking a shaggy head in what seemed to be delighted anticipation, "I always liked coming to RiverTo-own when I was young. The marsh grass baskets are very durable and light and they have fried do-ough."

"I admit," Jyn said, walking along the Taun's side, "you guys make it sound great."

She was smiling but the hand she slipped into his as they walked betrayed a little unease.

*She'd have denied it if he asked of course, so he didn't.*

They were operating under their new rules pretty well.

He did lift her hand though to kiss the back of her knuckles quickly before she could snatch it away. That bought him a smile.

Dov covered his eyes with his hands but Mose only laughed, "Get used to it cousin. I forgot about that....I'm thinking these two must be the worst ever but you better still brace yourself. My granny used to say that half the humans you ever meet are being Active at least half of the time."

"Ooohhhhh...." Dov groaned. "I am embarrassed to even be around this. Please, Jyn-ally, Cassian-ally you must stop soon. I don't mean to question your valor in getting some babies or anything but there comes a day when a person just has to write it off as a lost cause. Try again next year."

"Excuse me, jackass!" Jyn said, punching the Scavenger in the arm, "not your business."

"No promises," Cassian said, then Jyn punched him too.

Breaking camp at dawn they followed the last few k. of the road along the River. Very little traffic came down this direction from the Taun areas of the Riverlands so they had the highway to themselves for most of the morning until they came up behind three humans slowly pulling a wide cart full of nested barrels. Some were made of wooden slats and others of black plas-steel. They looked to be freighter ductwork pipe or fuel rings that had been crushed and then hammered into shape again.

"Good morning!" a sturdy looking middle aged woman, said. "Can you get past us here on the path or should we pull over?"
"No-o, thanks!" Elfla called. "We can get aro-ound yo-ou alright."

It took a little maneuvering. Elfla and Torla were carrying the bundled cargo strapping and spooled wire on their backs. The rest of them were just carrying packs, mostly loaded with glassine circuit panels, solar reflector chips and a few precious (around here) uncracked window screens.

Jyn had wisely advised the Taun to introduce their newly found riches from the shuttle very slowly and scattered across several different markets.

"Trust me on this pals," she said, "you show up with a whole bunch of fine swag all at once and people will start backtracking you pretty quick to figure out where you got it."

"Well, that sounds damned sneaky," Mose said.

"Explains why, a couple of years ago, that whole little round thingy was smack empty by the time we got back for the second load though, wouldn't it?" Dov scratched his chin, thoughtfully. "You must have been a pretty shrewd master Scavenger back in your old place Jyn-ally."

"I had my moments," she said.

It was not until they had squeezed past the cart and barrels, exchanging a few more "Go-od days!" "Excuse me's" that Cassian realized these people....the woman, a long haired adolescent and an older man with a white mustache.....were the first other live humans he and Jyn had seen in more than a year.

He was surprised at how tense he found himself after that, but rationalized the catch in his breath as weariness. Jyn fell very quiet but kept her hand in his.

It wasn't as if they'd been in utter isolation in their refuge at Nexa.

Together they had watched all the vids Portia could capture whenever her window for data opened. Gritting their teeth they climbed back into the wrecked black shuttle that had brought them here to find one more working data pad and over that long hard winter, the bits came though, the horror, battle and redemption, Imperial propaganda and desperate scraps of hope from a war that still raged on without them. Cassian had wrapped the old Fulcrum codes around random data packets and Portia tossed them out like bottles into a sea but no answer had come back. Portia could safely try again in ten weeks, she said, but they were still on their own. He had been trained, if not for this then for something like this. There were steps to building a field support system when stranded. He
was still a soldier of the Rebellion. They both were. After all they had endured, how could they live with themselves if they didn't try to keep fighting.

Coming out of the last turn in the road they saw the Green River spread below them and empty out into the grassy tidal marshes. Ahead was a narrow sandy neck that led across into the wooden town, built on piles out above the shore. They also saw the Ea's oceans for the first time.

"There!" Elfla said, hopping excitedly on long claws that curved into hooves. "The sea! The sea!"

Dov and Mose were both slack-jawed with astonishment.

"Holy hell that's a lot of water," Dov whistled.

There was a ringing in Cassian's ears.

"Are you ok?" That was Mose talking, "Hey, Cassian-ally, is Jyn-ally ok?"

When he turned to look at Jyn he understood at last what he had been feeling for the last k or so, and why she had fallen silent.

The people on the road hadn't been the trigger for this, this sensation of bands slowly tightening around his chest. It was the sound, right about then was when he must have started hearing the surf in the distance.

He'd blocked it out. That's how broken he still was. What kind of Intelligence officer panics like this? What kind of operative panics and hides the real reason why from himself until he sees it in someone else's eyes?

She had turned away from the view before them. Jyn Erso, who never flinched from anything.

"Jyn...." He reached for her but she moved her hands to grip his forearms tightly, pulling in to press her head to his shoulder.
"Tell me the ways it's different," she said, against the blue cloth of his shirt.

He pushed back the scarf she wore to kiss her hair.

"Please. Just name things."

"The sand is...a different color," he whispered. "The water is gray not blue. It smells like..." *It doesn't smell like burning fuel.*

"..... Laurel leaves, do you know those? Like on Naboo, and something like roses." *That was true, something spicy and warm mixed in with the salt breeze smell. It must be the pink flowers in the brush along the road.*

"There's birds here," she said, breathing slowly.

*The shore birds must have all fled the beaches at Scarif. The firefight would have driven them off. Maybe some of them even got far enough away, probably not, but maybe.*

"It's colder. Also I'm...I'm standing up straight." *You aren't carrying me.*

Miracle that she was she laughed then, like a rough cough, and looked up into his eyes.

"That's right," she said, "you are, we both are."

He felt something on his back. It was Dov's hand.

*I know that one,* he told himself.

*The Sisters used it often, he was asking about Wellness.*

The yellow-brindled Mem's expression was terribly worried.

*Oh Force. They must look a sight.*

"O-oh," Elfla said, "stay up here. Do-o not go-o do-own if it causes yo-u pain."

"We will co-ome back and say what we have seen," Norla agreed, large brown eyes filled with concern.
"Hell, yeah," Dov said, "we'll even get you some fried dough."

"No, no..." Jyn said, "Fuck this stupidity. I like oceans. I used to live by an ocean."

She turned her head to look at the path down to the shore and up to the boardwalks of RiverTown beyond.

"Come on, Captain," she set her jaw and laced her fingers with his, "Come with me. We can do this."

She said it as a statement but he knew her eyes well enough now to see the question.

_All the way, mi amor._

He took her hand and they walked across the low-tide beach road into RiverTown with their friends.

Chapter End Notes

An extra bit left over from OTE, that I didn't want to lose because I love Jyn's lists and also fried dough.
The Strength of the Warp and the Quality of the Thread.

Chapter Summary

Macha and the Ladies of Harbortown deal with the occasional youthful excess. Sixteen-year-old Kalyra Andor gets in a dockfight. Overtures are made to the Raiders. Macha reflects on what she had learned of Jyn and Cassian and how the Blackbirds have become friends. A young girl carries the burden of her parents legacy.

Chapter Notes

Many "Blackbird" bits.

It was a great blessing that Fennie Tully was Warden on the docks that day. It would be cruel to say aloud but he had at least seen a thing or two, that young man. The sole advantage of having only one eye, Macha supposed, lay in that it seemed to have made him a little more cautious to think past first glance.

The small Warden's shed at the end of the dock closest to the shore was full to overflowing with a dozen youngsters. Most were soaked with seawater to some degree and a fair number were nursing cut lips and knuckles. She saw a few bleeding noses and at least one strapping Fisher lass from the Point was nursing what promised to be a splendid black eye.

It was a fine warm afternoon and the town was still a bit crowded with the Fisher fleet from Point and the Harbor Islands still in port after the Early Fish Fair. Pockets were full with trade chits and various young people from town and the boats were reeling from what the quick wit of Youngest Sister called "the heady thrill of near proximity to age-mates not related to one by blood or fostering, well-leavened with liquor, sunshine and a few days free from the hauling net or cleaning silver fish." The warm-weather dances out on Point and on the Docks had begun.

Summer mistakes were being made by warm tempers and warm blood.

She must remember to check their stocks of witch hazel for cuts and tannis root for the boys and Moon root for the girls. What had seemed like plenty in the Fall might fall short if, as it seemed, fights were already breaking out over who danced with whom and whose eyes and hands had made new voyages.
Their intervention was usually sought on such matters only if health seemed at risk or some other great disruption threatened, but Fennie had sent his youngest son to call she and Youngest out from a conference of sorts at Lissa’s pub.

Eldest, who now had little patience left for these wrestlings of the young, had remained there with Jyn and Cassian Blackbird, Old Tom Markey, bright Thea, and Toma Stark. Exciting news had come, perhaps even good news, the first in some time. A Raider boat that had come in up to North Inlet under truce and talked to young Rhia Markey.

The Raiders, at least some of the bands and clans might, MIGHT be seeking parley.

_This was a thread every Circle that touched Ea’s sea or stood within two days march up, had sought for long lifetimes. It had seemed in reach sometimes before, but all too often the bright strand had broken or proved too short to bind._

_This was just one boat. They couldn’t get their hopes up, Cassian said. Echoing Eldest Sister’s cautious wisdom, as he often did without knowing. It had to be handled carefully._

Still, she saw the flicker of admiration in the eye he cast Jyn. She was the one who had gone out alone to make tentative contacts with the some of the bands in weeks after the RiverTown attack three and a half years ago. The Fallen “Storm-troopers” had sliced first through a Raiders shore camp that dark day and rumors of this and how the trauma of it rippled among the various Raider bands was coming in from Near Traders and Far Traders both. _It was an opening,_ Cassian said. They had to try. _The Raiders were the “wild card” as he said, the missing link in their Alliance._

In the end they sent Jyn. Of course. Bold Jyn with her osprey’s eye and the thin silver scars of burns still just to be seen when bright light fell sideways on her lightly tanned cheek and brow.

“I can handle these people,” she said that chilly dawn, tossing back a good-voyage last shot of liquor before she pushed off in the little rowing skiff, gun and knife stowed below the seat in a waterproof bag. Taking the silver earring from Cassian’s hand, she had smiled at him, bright as a blackfish lamp, “Hell, soldier, _I was_ these people. If it gets too bad I’ll just swear at them like your grandma would have.”

Cassian Andor-Blackbird had watched her row away and then walked with Macha and Eldest back toward the docks of HarborTown to stay at Markeys with his children. His handsome face was held calm by some far boyhood’s training. _What teaches a man how to hide his heart so well? Fear, she knew, tore him inside like a wolf-fish and would until Jyn returned. She understood now what she had not in the days when Jyn Erso came to them to bear her children and she had inexplicably begged Cassian to stay with her through her trials and he had stubbornly, irrationally, refused to_
The bravest thing they ever did was leave each other.

Jyn had returned a month later, unsure whether any of these “B-vid pirates” had listened to a “fucking word she said.” Tom Markey shrewdly pointed out that they hadn’t killed her which was in itself a huge accomplishment. Now it seemed that her words had born some slow fruit on that broken soil. Of course they had. The wild and lawless Raiders might not have believed her, suspicious and violent as they were, but they would not forget her. No one ever did.

To leave this discussion just as beer was being poured and have to go untangle a shoving match fight among the Fisher youth of Dock and Point seemed like one of Ea’s regrettably necessary lessons in the importance of blending the great and small matters.

It was not until she and fair Youngest approached the shed and Fennie Tully walked out to meet them that Macha saw what made this fistfight different than all the others. Sitting on the bench by the Warden’s shed door, with her head in her hands and some visibly scraped knuckles was young Kaylyra Andor.

Tully explained the situation briefly, clearly mortally embarrassed to have to do so. He would have much rather been dealing with outright boat theft or a cat stuck in a water spout. There had been some kind of adolescent drama. A Fisher girl’s brother had gotten his heart broken when he’d fallen so hard for some “Upland” girl at the dance two days ago that he’d parted company with a long-time sweetheart who also happened to be the Fisher girl’s crewmate and best friend. Fisher girl had gotten a few drinks in her after trading off her catch, spotted said “Upland girl” and picked a fight…..to shorten the story, Kayly had dropped her and there being a crowd of Fisher and Trader kids about sharing a noontime shandy, most of whom had not known what the fight was about but just liked joining in any scrabble that involved people knocking each other off the dock. Fennie and the nearby food venders had waded in and there were no injuries beyond cuts, bruises, saltwater and hurt pride. It happened….not usually before sundown, admittedly…..but such little storms blew up and over several times each summer. This time though, the day’s Warden had had sense enough to see trouble in bud. Fennie had lost his eye to the Black Fall almost twenty years ago and was on the Watch, even if not one of its leaders.

Cassian, and Old Markey had taught a generation to think just a little further than the end of the pier.

“It might be nothing, Ladies,” the man told her, “It’s just the way that one,” He pointed to the Fisher holding a cold sponge to an eye, while her friends handed her dry clothes, “it was the way she said “Upland girl”…’cause really, there’s only the one “Upland girl.” I figured the last thing anybody needed right now was get hard feelings going with any of the local boat crews and….you know..” He hooked his thumbs together and wiggled his spread fingers in the mime of a flying bird.

Really, dear?

She and her Youngest exchanged a glance. Agreed, Fennie was not the sharpest hook on the line but he did have a point.
Kayly looked up from where she sat, between Sanna, who was dabbing a bloody nose with a cloth, and Mary Markey, who was still squeezing salt water out of her long brown braids. Macha saw in her green eyes a plea she had seen in a thousand pairs of eyes and expected to see in a thousand more before Ea came to call her. “Please don’t tell my parents.”

Beautiful Youngest sighed. “I’ll take the sulking defeated, oh wise sister,” she said, “You take the little Blackbird.”

By sight or story she had watched Kayly Andor grow up. Sixteen years since she had knelt to help her entrance to this world with her own hands. Jyn or Cassian, and usually both together, came to the Coast at least once most years to stay, sometimes for several weeks. They almost always brought their children. Tom Markey travelled up to Nexa almost as often, taking one or another of his people with him. Toma’s Dora and young Bill went for the last several winters to stay and take lessons with the ancient and loyal ghost in the Tower, the one who watched the stars.

Macha herself had gone there only once, for the mighty Great Council called in the days after the Black Fall.

*When that true-hearted…and if memory did not deceive most handsome….spaceship pilot Bodhi Rook, had flown Guardian across the skies to give Portia-the-ghost eyes to watch for them and a voice to trick the Enemies of Ea the way the Fish-Sirens in the old stories were supposed to deceive Raiders and Greedy Fishers to their deaths with song. Fallen, but a Hearts Companion to Allies and declared trustworthy by the Circles he left Ea to fight elsewhere, as did Jyn and Cassian, but unlike them he had not returned.*

Though Macha reckoned that she would have soon perished living so far from the sea, Nexa was a lovely place. The Upland woods and ponds were beautiful. The hills were green and the Memsa of that village quirky, kind and welcoming people. The Upland Circle were Sisters whose light showed bright and brave, no hands ever wove better or truer. Even the ghost herself had proved a very interesting person completely aside from her vast skills. Yet for all that happened there, Macha would have been glad forever anyway that she had gone to Nexa for it was there that she first saw Jyn and Cassian as she knew them now.

Blackbirds might fly south to warn of fire and disaster but to do so they must fly from somewhere. They must have a home.

Keen and respected as they might be on the Coast, loved as friends by those few who knew them well, here they were more than that. At Nexa they were made Allies. They were home.

The subtle and mysterious Cassian Blackbird whose dark eyes had seen more death than hers ever would, had gotten on his knees to fix a chair for the Elder Sister there and that wise old Mem, whose
pattern then was so near its end, had laid her dark hand upon his hair with the blessing of a mother toward a son.

The Jyn Erso she had seen only as a guarded and battle-quick stranger had shown her a little house whose tumbled almost-living stone felt as if it could hold away fire and time and yet hold inside both sadness and joy, great healing and powerful loss.

“So, well, this is our place.” Jyn had said with a shrug and a smile like a working Fisher woman showing off her first hard-earned boat. The door was a trimmed salvage hatch and the front garden held mostly stones and accidental sunflowers.

How could Kayly and Galen not be different from other children? Harbor-born but Upland raised, Mem but human. Ea’s own, but Fallen. It was foolish to be dramatic about such things, of course. They two were hardly the first, didn’t the bones of every human carry the same tale after all? If the gossip of the RiverLand Circle were to be credited they were not even the only such ones now. They were young persons of fiber no different from many others. Still, they were the Blackbird’s children and for good or ill that built a warp they would have to weave their lives on that no one else could advise them about.

Macha took the girl into the nearest boathouse and sat her on a stack of sail. Knowing better than to ask questions at such a time she answered the unasked plea instead. “No, there is no way to keep this from your parents Kaylyra. They will both hear it on the dock by sunset, or I can fetch one of them now.”

The girl groaned and put her head in the hands.

“I didn’t hurt her, much,” Kayly said, “I lost my temper, but I took her in two moves and once she was down….uh, off the dock…. everybody else started swinging punches.’

“Welcome to the Fish Fair, child.”

“Mama, will tell me I was stupid getting in a fight with somebody, over somebody else fighting with a boy. It’s like a fight three degrees removed. Oh hell," she lowered her head again, "Galen is never going to shut up about this, ever.”
If her brother’s teasing was to be believed Kayly had cut a wide exotic swath through the human boys and girls at RiverTown in the Spring. The Mems lived their lives by a different more predictable calendar about such things, so Jyn had brought Kayly down to them two years ago to learn how to make Moon teas and cast a simple pattern to manage the matters every woman must if she wished to lie with men even occasionally. The ghost had also provided information. Poor Dora had said the light pictures presented at that lesson had been truly astonishing.

As Youngest said, “Oh my, please place such a thing first among the sights I wish to see if I ever again return to Nexa.”

“I think he just wanted to kiss somebody who wasn’t the first girl he ever kissed.” Kayly said, flexing her scraped knuckles. “I appreciated his honesty. We didn’t do much else. That would have been way too much. It was all strictly above water….that means..”

“Thank you child, I am perfectly aware of what that means,” Macha said, “This Point boy, was he a good kisser?”

Kayli smiled a little, “Pretty good, he got markedly better over the course of two days. It seemed like he had some real potential.”

Oh child, I am sure you did cut a swath through RiverTown.

“I didn’t hit her because of that, him, whatever… I wasn’t even sure what she was talking about at first…she took a swing at me and I just…I reacted without thinking. Please don’t tell Papa that…he’ll be so disappointed.” She paused, “Also, she…well, she said something about “not having any human friends”…that’s when Sanna jumped in and..”

Ah, a variation on the kind of trash that got talked to Town youth in general and Markey’s orphans in particular sometimes, but that must be seen to at once.

“Papa and Mama when they were my age. They….they were soldiers, they fought for, important things, not stupid things.”

I think your mother fought for food sometimes. That is not a look you can ever quite lose. They fought fire and death and the despair of other men, or so the Sisters of Nexa tell us. They fought for daylight. They fought for air and for each other. They fought their own fear and pain. They fought to have you, child, both you and your brother. Your father’s face when you opened your eyes was a miracle. Jyn begged me to give you to his hands before the cord was even cut. Such a thing I had never heard before, but later she told me that he had had a sister his mother died in bearing far far away in a terrible place and that they had put the poor little body in his hands when he was a small boy. She wanted him to hold a child alive sooner than all custom permits. She wept when Galen was born and she saw he had his father’s eyes. “We were supposed to die,” she said to me once when Cassian went to walk with you while she rested with Galen in her arms “He came back for me and then we lay down to die together and I was only sorry I couldn’t give him back everything he lost in return.” You will fight for important things, Kaylyra. You will have to. I have seen it in the Pattern. We will all fight. They will not think you stupid because you kiss some Fisher boy who wants a taste
of starlight. They fought for that too, they just never thought they would win it.

“Mama,” Kayly said finally. “Go get Mama first. She’ll be mad, but..” she laughed a little and rubbed a sore ear,” Maybe she’ll be a little less mad because you can at least tell her I took down an opponent with weight and height advantage in two strikes.”

The meeting was done, though all save Thea were still at the table. Macha entered and kissed her Eldest Sister on the cheek in welcome. That valiant one would tell her all that she had missed later. Lissa had refilled pitchers and Tom Markey was trying to tell Cassian a very long joke about two Fishers walking into a Scavenger tavern. Toma kept interrupting him.

“Dear Jyn,” she said lightly, with a hand on her friends shoulder, “I would talk with you for a short while.”

“Can I talk with one more beer?” Jyn Blackbird asked with a smile.

“You can and should bring some of Lissa’s fine beer with you, but take a walk with me now.”

Cassian, quick even in those few times and places he relaxed, raised an eyebrow. “Is this a ‘need to know’ situation?” he asked.

Macha lifted Jyn by an elbow to guide her and her mug of beer out the green-painted split wooden door. Eldest could deal with him later, for now a girl needed to talk a little with her mother.

“I have no idea what that phrase means dear ally, but I’m taking a guess that the answer is yes.”

“I’ll write from jail!” Jyn called over her shoulder, “Don’t forget me sweetheart!” She was in a very good mood indeed, that would help.

As they reached the now cloudy daylight on the boardwalk, Macha found a slatted fishing bench and outlined the situation as quickly as she could to a disbelieving Jyn.

“Kayly? The fuck? She knows better. The only person she fistfights over stupid things anymore is Galen.” She shook her head, “A boy? That’s a change from last summer. Seriously? How bad is it? The last thing we need right now is trouble with the local boat crews.”

“Not as bad as it might be,” Macha said, “Fennie Nally is the warden today and had the sense to send for us. Dear Youngest spoke with the hot tempered Fisher on the subject of putting one’s own fist behind a loved one’s concerns without consulting them, I understand the lad in question to be mortified and the jilted friend as well. The matter may come to have more to do with the Fisher’s dashed moony hopes for an alliance between her friend and her kin than anything else. They are all too young for such things to hold long. Handled properly it will pass before the geese come south.
I’ve given her some advice on smoothing things over.”

“Thank you.” Jyn nodded then drained the last of her beer and tucked the mug under the bench. “Wait, wait…She won right? How big was this Fisher girl?”

“As sometimes happens my friend, you focus on the last thing first.” Macha laughed.
The Toy Box and The Bassinet

Chapter Summary

Cassian reflects a little on Jyn as an unexpected kind of mother. Thinking back on some of the toys she made for their children and the memories and lessons they hold. Also a short sweet-but-sad bit centered around a cradle/bassinet they are given and their early uncertain days as new parents. Flashbacks. Also, K2 with a kitten.

Chapter Notes

More bits about Jyn and Cassian as struggling parents and linked to the physical objects of their lives.

As fluffy as I will probably ever get.

Also, K2 with a cat? Couldn't help myself.

Mi amor, ¿por qué lloras? = My love, why are you crying?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Toybox

Even through war and fire and the blessed improbable years together she still floor-drop astonished him so many times.

One truly staggering surprise came in the first weeks after Kaylyra was born. Jyn Erso sewed and assembled little dolls.....actual toys, with her own hands,.....for their children.
They found a few things waiting for them when they came home as baby gifts, along with swaddling blankets and an endless series of knitted hats. Memsa babies traditionally received small wooden teething toys, often carved into linked rings or oval rattles, as tokens from family and friends. The custom probably arose because they were usually born with little sharp "milk teeth" that needed to be kept occupied but even though Kayly and Galen's newborn toothlessness was the source of enormous concern to their neighbors the rattles were still generously given and happily gummed.

Before they left HarborTown after Kayly's birth, when their firstborn was only a few weeks old, he came home from a short walk to find Jyn sitting up in bed with a basket of scraps and some cleaned goat-fleece that Macha must have brought her.

*Sewing? Would he even have guessed that she knew how to sew up anything but a cut? Not in a million years.*

With some small borrowed scissors she had cut up a piece of blue-green wool cloth and already stitched it roughly into a star-shaped thing. Black thread had been sewn across it's upper half in the approximation of a wide smile, two round black circles had been placed as "eyes," and blue ribbon wrapped and stitched around the "ears" to make what he supposed were stripes.

"What are you doing?" was what he said.

*What he thought was, Oh Force, who ARE you and what have you done with Jyn Erso?*

"I'm making a stuffed tooka cat." Her tone implied that he was an idiot.

Using the end of a spoon left over from the chowder Olwen had brought them for dinner, she finished pushing fluff into one open gap...*was it an ear or an arm?*...before stitching the hole closed and biting off the knotted thread. Then she surveyed her work with a certain satisfaction. "They are supposed to be a good pets and a luck symbol for children because they chase away pests and vermin."

Cassian had seen a fair number of tooka cats in his life, but none of them had looked like that.

As Jyn put the rough-stitched thing beside their infant on the bed a funny memory came back to him.

It had been on a drop mission, one of the first after he had been cleared to bring Kay along as a mission pilot, and they had concealed their escape shuttle under a tarp in the service alley of a crowded marketplace on Duro.

He had been pulling the camouflage cover off while K2 did a visual check to get the ship ready for a quick departure. Suddenly Kay had stopped near the vent of the aft engine. From the corner of his eye Cassian saw him reach his left arm and head into engine itself and slowly pull out a rather mangy violet-furred tooka kitten, clearly a stray that had crept into the engine cover to keep warm. The alleys were full of them. With a restraint he didn't always show to other creatures he handled, Kay...
had firmly but gently grasped the squirming little thing by the scruff of it's neck and bent himself to place it on the graveled ground. The cat had hissed and swiped small clawed paws at him as he did so, which Kay ignored. After being released the kitten scrambled away a meter or so to dive behind a rubbish bin.

Stressed as he was, Cassian would have probably registered the image of Kay dangling a dappled street kitten as amusing and then promptly forgotten it, but as Kay straightened to his full height and turned back to the hatch, there was a sound like a hiccuping purr. The cat walked out from where it had hidden and approached the droid. No longer spitting and angry it walked forward and crouched cautiously at Kay's feet.

"Run away," the droid had intoned very seriously, looking down at the small thing, "or you risk being seriously injured by the engine."

But the kitten had not moved back. Instead it cautiously approached his thin metal leg and rubbed a cheek against the reinforced joint at the back of Kay's "ankle." Cassian had already had occasion to see Kay use that foot to stomp a fallen storm trooper hard enough to crush the helmet and probably the skull inside, but now the droid only stared at the animal, then swiveled to turn his photoreceptors back toward Cassian as if to ask "What now?"

*Oh hell, Kay,* he found himself thinking crazily, *please don't ask me if we can keep it, because we can't.*

Receiving no direction, K2S0 turned his gaze back down and produced a short high whistle. It must have been in a sonic range painful to the cat's ears, because the kitten bolted off.

"They are considered invasive pests on nine worlds," Kay pronounced, climbing aboard and initiating the stealth launch sequence, although whether to Cassian or himself was unclear. "But not this one. That was the correct course of action, wasn't it?"

It seemed such an odd thing for him to say instead of the expected short lecture about how shredded cat would have adversely affected engine performance.

Did it mean K2 was self-evaluating his ethical programming? That had to be good, he reasoned, and felt curiously proud but apprehensive.

*Are you sure I'm the person you ought to be asking?* he thought.

"Yes, Kay. I think it was."

They made their rendezvous and escaped to relative safety that day. Hopefully so did the cat.

*We named a baby after you Kay and now we have to set her ethical programming. What do you think of that?*

Jyn placed the little doll in Kayly's basket-crib where she naturally ignored it until several weeks later when she began to grow big enough and strong enough to grasp at it and poke the cloth eyes.
Months later still Jyn began to dangle the cat over Kayly's head, wiggle it and make it talk. "My name is Tookie" she would meow. "And I will bite all the storm troopers to get back to my little girl," and she would growl and dive the creature under the blankets to tickle Kayly's toes and make her laugh.

*Continually unexpected.*

The one she made for Galen three years later would be blue, with shorter ears and was called "Tooks."

Jyn made dozens more stuffed animals and dolls over the years. There were bears of grey felt, pillow-like Bequas, Tachs with long ribbon arms, two "wookies" made out of shredded brown yarn tied together in bundles to form arms, and even a flock of wool-goats out of balls of fleece puffs with sticks stuck in for legs.

*Cassian stepped on them in his bare feet in the dark because the "shepherds" forgot to pick them all up before bedtime.*

Anything broken, torn or too small for any other use went for toys although it was not always easy to tell. More than once he would gather up what he thought were broken chips of casing lined up on the garden wall and toss them into the workshop recycle basket for melting only to find Kayly and Galen outraged and protesting that he had "destroyed the Rebel fleet."

"Puppet shows" like the one in which a braided ball of white yarn stuck with dried flowers was the "Queen of Naboo" and she and her "Circle" of brown wool "best friends" who were all Mems with Jedi powers fought Raiders...usually played by stick people with crabapple heads to win back a crystal treasure....usually Jyn's necklace.....or rescued a stuffed baby Taun from blue sock lizards, because Galen always wanted to be a baby Taun and make howling noises.......became a staple of one particularly long winter. Cassian most often had to be the audience although sometimes he got to be the handsome "King of Naboo" and be rescued by the Queen on Taun-back

"Naboo is an elective matriarchal monarchy," he protested, "There's never a king."

"Papa!!!!" You be the the king!" Kayly would insist.

"Just man up and wear the paper crown, "Handsome," Jyn would say with a sly smile.

After the children grew older the surviving "toys" were gradually packed away in the little salvaged cargo lockers Cassian had given each of them. Blue for Galen, green for Kayly.

Five or six months after the Fire had burned so many homes in Nexa, they found themselves in...
another hard winter. The quickly weatherproofed Community Hall was set up to serve as a sort of
impromptu nursery, dormitory, gathering place and food pantry while people rebuilt. One cold
blustery day, while Jyn and Cassian were meeting in one corner with Tova and new mayor, and Bes
and Ava's grandmother were cooking great vats of soup in the massive hearth/fireplace, Galen came
in from the raw grey afternoon carrying his scratched old toy locker.

He laid it down by the cleared stones near the central fire pit then brought over two tall backed chairs
and placed them back to back a meter or so apart. He laid the tent pole he had carried in from outside
across the top of the chairs.

"What are you doing, Galen?" a bridled little one asked, watching him curiously.

"I'm getting ready to tell an exciting story, little Gus," his son said, "Do you think anyone will want
to hear it?"

"Oh yes, Galen!" the child said.

Gus's older sister and a handful of other children began to gather around.

"Bring me that red blanket, will you Lori?" he asked and the golden female ran to fetch it.

Galen laid the blanket across the pole to make a curtain for his little "stage", the same way Jyn had
once done in the big room of the stone house.

Now a dozen nurslings were gathered, wide-eyed, and he opened the scratched blue trunk and laid
out the old puppets one by one.

"This," he said, bringing out the braided yarn figure, "is the brave and beautiful one chosen from all
the smartest and hardest-working females to be the child-Queen of Naboo."

"She has white fur like youngest sister!" said little brown-furred Pim.

"So she did," Galen said. "And these are her five.....uh, six...brave warriors and friends." He laid out
the rather moth-eaten brown and grey sweater scraps sewn with bright button eyes, "greedy enemies
attacked their city, but they did not give up hope!" As he spoke he slipped his hand, still lightly
scarred by fire, into the cloth body of one of the puppets and made it bend and bow, to the nurslings
giggles of delight.

Even the adults began to gather then and Cassian saw Bes dry her hands on an apron and smile
widely as she watched from the cooking fire.

"What were their names?" grey-striped Willi breathed, awestruck.

Galen looked up from where he knelt on the flagstone floor toward the back of the big room where
Jyn had moved around to stand by Cassian's side.

"Mama?" Galen said, "Can you help me out here?"

His brave and beautiful wife walked over and sat beside her son on the floor. "Their names were
Kayly, Ava, Nikki, Norla, Dora and Leia."

They put on a wonderful show in which the heroes fought bravely, worked together and defeated
their enemies.
The Bassinet

When they brought Kaylyra home she was almost a month old and their neighbors had made a little wooden and rush basket cradle for her.

Of a traditional Nexa design, it was actually a large wooden handled basket that could be lifted and laid right in their bed or fitted into a carved yellow pine box with runners underneath to sit on the floor and rock like a cradle.

It was terribly handy, really. Conveniently they could lift the basket to bring Kayly right into bed with them at night so Jyn could feed her, a process Jyn never ceased to find barbaric.

It occurred to him that maybe it was odd to be so deeply moved at the sight of this beautiful tigerishly brave woman he loved more than his life, untie her sleepshirt and sit up on their bed holding a tiny baby, his baby, to her breast. She'd lean down to kiss Kayly's small head with great tenderness and whisper, "Ok you little crazy leech, lets get this weirdness done and agree to never ever talk about it."

"Jyn," he'd say, genuinely worried at first. "You can't say things like that to a baby. She can hear you."

"Cassian, relax. She doesn't understand any of the words," Jyn would insist, "Tova says what matters most is sincere emotion and tone of voice.

"I love you little spy," she'd stroking her daughter's soft cheek, and singing sweetly, "I always thought that the Mon Calmari were were smart...hmmhmm... but now I know they're geniuses...hmm hmm....because being a mammal is freaky bat-shit."

"Oh. Don't watch this, it must look horrible," she'd protest at first, genuinely distressed when he'd wake in the night each time Kayly did. "Sleep while you can." Sometimes he could and did, eventually, but he could not in the early months with either baby.

He'd been terrified many times in his life and he'd been happy too. Being both at the same time was a revelation.

The basket actually eased a few of Casian's worries, especially the ones that involved Kayly rolling out of bed or getting tangled in the blankets and once she was sleeping through the night they moved it to the rockers on the floor within hands reach.

Though they never spoke of it, what they were most afraid of was what would happen if the dreams returned during that time.
Blessedly they were were both spared for those months. Maybe it was hormones or maybe Jyn was too exhausted to even dream. Whatever the reason he even dared to hope, wrongly as it turned out, that the nightmares were gone forever, for both of them.

Only once when Kayly was maybe four months old did Cassian wake to find the small glow lamp lit and Jyn on the far other side of the room, in the rush-seated chair by the window. She was holding her crystal and crying softly, with the baby still asleep in her basket at the foot of their bed.

He got up as quietly as he could.

She wasn't shaking so he knew it wasn't Scarif. It wasn't the fire.

The cave? He went over to where she was. The floor was cold even through the rug, but he knelt to touch her shoulder.

"Jyn?"

She looked up, dabbing her eyes with the corner of the extra blanket she'd wrapped around herself, "I didn't want to wake you."

"Mi amor, ¿por qué lloras? What is it?"

"The Cave," she said, "but....it was different, this time."

She dried her cheeks with the palms of her hands and tried almost to smile, although it came out a little crooked. "Mama came back for me. She said that she was sorry."

He persuaded her back into bed again and she dozed off, curled beside him.

Kayly woke up a few hours later but luckily didn't start crying right away. Sometimes nowadays, she would lie in her basket and make bird noises for a while before realizing she was hungry. On lucky days, if you changed her and kept her distracted it took her a half hour or more to remember why she woke up in the first place.

It was a cool morning so he bundled her up in the wooly bag Beri had knitted for her, tucked her inside his blue coat and took her outside to watch the sunrise. They sat on the wall for almost an hour, with him singing the old Miners Prayer to her and she staring up at him, warm enough for now and cooing at the unexpectedness of it.

It didn't last long. Eventually Kayly remembered why she wanted mama but he'd bought Jyn another hour anyway.

"You maniac," she groaned as he put the baby in her arms still wrapped and she felt his cold hands. "Why do you do things like this?"
Chapter End Notes

Traveling for events and no time to write but I found some bits in the notebook. Hopefully back online with the sagas within the next few days.
Weight

Chapter Summary

Cassian Andor remembers his first days as an Alliance recruit and his long friendship with Reuscott Melshi.

Chapter Notes

I was trying to put this into a couple of paragraphs as a flash back for Cassian as he prepares to dive down to sabotage the First Order ocean platform in Chapter 19 of "Fire" but it turned into a reminiscence of young Cassian Andor and his friend young Ruescott Melshi and Basic Training in Cassian's first days in the Alliance and ...*sniffle*...I love Melshi so I'm putting it here and attacking Navigational Support Platform M16.02.07/Beacon #1 in "Fire" tomorrow.

Hijo de puta = son of a bitch

Le digo con respeto pero ... muérteme, señor = I tell you with respect but ... bite me, sir.

espíritu = ghost/soul/spirit

Culero = asshole (lit. ass salesman)

It was designed as a glass-tiled water park, a jewel-like amenity on a Mon Calmari luxury cruiser. By then it had become a training facility for Alliance recruits. He’d been standing on the emerald squares at the edge along with a dozen other young-to-very-young recruits. “When it happens, it can be this fast,” the Pendarran teenager with the brown jacket had said and shoved Cassian backwards into the water.

Those had been the first words.
His first thought had been, “Hijo de puta!”

“This Alliance is in its infancy,” the Mon Calmari captain used to say. Dronarr was his name, yellow-eyed and striped silvery blue with a wide wry smile. He would be killed a few years later leading a fuel raid on an Imperial shipyard.

“Yes, “ Airen Cracken had been heard to sigh in reply, “and so, it seems, are too many of its soldiers.”

Clearly he’d been talking about Cassian Andor and the rest of his cohort of recruits.

Le digo con respeto pero ... muérde me, señor, he remembered thinking, when he was ordered to go to these sessions but he breathed through it and stayed quiet. Cracken and Draven had already made it clear to him. He may have had more “active theatre” hours….considerably more….than most of the other recruits and have tested out with high marks on all the firearms training but it was not enough.

“Take aim at your targets and fire on the mark” the Twi’lek officer said in the insulated former bowling alley of the Mon Cala cruiseship they were using as a “base”...it would be months still before the temporary training camp on Dantooine was ready.

Trooper-shaped holo-outlines appeared down each lane and a row of armed and clipped general use T-8’s were lined up on a table.

“What part of the target?” he had asked, genuinely thinking he must have missed something. “What exactly am I aiming for?” Oskar never let them waste even the tiniest spark of power in real blaster clips unless they could tell him within a millimeter what they were aiming on and hit it twice with blank beams first.

The stout, middle-aged, blue male eyed him suspiciously. “Let’s just aim for the head right now, ok kid.”

Cassian shrugged. The bloody gun had a firing sight for heavens sake. A baby could have done it if you gave it a chair to stand on. He took the four in his lane in the right eye screen and then stopped and looked at the instructor, assuming that there must be some sort of trick.

The Twi’lek handed him back the data pad. “Go back up the lift, Andor,” he said, “you’ve passed.”
As Cassian recalled it, that was the last easy thing he was asked to do for the next six weeks.

He could shoot and he could rewire a half dozen random sorts of droids and communications arrays, but he couldn’t read or speak anything other than Festan and Basic….and nobody here spoke Festan….and didn’t know how to fly even a basic land speeder, or work the controls on a sonic shower. He’d thought the jeru juice sauce on the dining tables was a beverage and had to admit when interviewed that he had been in space exactly twice in his life, once on the trip from Fest to Carrida when he was five and once when Draven had brought him here. He’d pretty much slept through both trips. There was also the nagging issue of still limping a little.

The synthetic derma patches on his feet had come off, but the new skin was so tender he had taken to lining his boots with napkins from the dining hall.

Cassian had been sound asleep in bed with his shoes off when the Troopers had stormed the warehouse. His gun was in bed with him but his shoes were at the end by the wall. Everything was a blur of noise, gunfire and shiny black. He never got a shot off but it wouldn’t have mattered. They were Death Troopers. No gun the Carrida cell had would have cut that armor. They had burst in the door and started laying down fire across the floor and at shoulder level. If his bed hadn’t been just a mattress high up on top of a refrigerated cabinet he’d have been cut apart too. As it was he’d rolled backwards off to fall between it and the wall. Somehow it came to him to lay the blaster muzzle against the plas-and-lathe wall and just fire until the gun overheated and broke. He crawled out through the smoking hole he’d made and ran. The hot broken bits and glass in the alley had cut his feet to ribbons but he hadn’t felt it until he finally fell down in the doorway of the house where Oskar had met with his Alliance contacts. He had no memory of how he even found it again.

The red-haired man he’d then known only as Laiso found him there.

It wasn’t that he was unique, many recruits were raw kids from the Colonies or the Outer Rim, idealists who had never fired a blaster or seen a holo-gram. All they shared was hope and a desire to fight the Empire. The combination of proud Mon Calmari refugees, hard-boiled former Clone Wars veterans and dissident Imperials who were forming an army out of thin air would take all comers. They were willing to start from the beginning with many and took them to spread-out training camps in refuges on Ruul and other places. Other recruits were older teens and adults who had defected from Imperial Academies, had actual Jedi training or were from military families on Outer Rim worlds. These were tagged as “experienced” and quickly run through general Basic Training aboard the flotilla, to bring them all up to some level of unified skill set and discipline before being assigned to the Commanders to be placed wherever they could be useful.

He fell neatly into none of the categories, "neither fish nor cake,” Captain Dronarr cheerfully pointed out to him once.

Cassian Jeron Andor may have have been throwing rocks at troop-transports at six, forging transit papers at ten and crouched on a roof with a rifle to take out a guard post at eleven but he was also a scrawny rat with a Mid-Rim accent who might as well have had “Separatist Rabble” painted on his forehead. Still, Field Commander Draven brought him in personally and that had to count for something. This rat was determined to learn whatever was needed to to fill the gaps. He’d chosen his path.

Holding a data pad in bandaged hands he’d read the oath carefully twice before reciting it back to
Cracken without hesitation in the hold of that freighter, and found he believed every damn word of it.

Abuela’s espíritu would just have to fucking deal with it.

The Rebellion at that point had something of the character of a caravan. Constantly jumping from safe havens and secret bases as they rebuilt craft and people. Constantly in danger.

Bug-outs came every few days at best, either drills or real stakes scrambling fast-jumps when Imperial ships came too close. Everyone in the flotilla had to know how to get to escape pods and do all kinds of ship evacuations. This few hundred Mon Cala ships, handfuls of ex-Imperial and Jedi officers and raw recruits were the seeds of what would become the Alliance army and Fleet. They had to survive.

The second time Cassian saw the thin boy in the brown jacket was a few days later.

A group of them had been lined up at the side of an open landing bay platform. The lesson was on how to get into a survival suit and mask in zero-gravity conditions and practice for an outside ship-to-ship crawl.

There had been an older raw-boned kid named Ematt, two identical pale Dondorran girls about his age, Risa and Kholri...he still had not known one for the other... an Abednedo adolescent, and a round-shouldered gangly kid called Anthony with a Mekkan facial tattoo and a faint mustache.

He recognized the teenager who was passing out the gear all too well though.

“Hey, there,” Ruescott Melshi said.

Cassian hadn’t actually learned his name when the “teaching assistant” had shoved him in the deep end of the pool five days ago to demonstrate “fast gravity loss.”

Cassian had sunk like a stone and swallowed a fair amount of lightly salted water trying to fight his way back to the surface. Melshi had dived right in to pull him out and as he’d been throwing up half-blind on the side he was sure he’d clearly heard the boy protesting, “Honestly sir! I never would have….I was sure he could swim!”

He only knew the culero’s name now because it was stitched onto a label on the guy’s right shoulder.
“Andor, right?” Melshi said, handing Cassian the training breathing mask.

“Right.” Culero.

“We’re just practicing now.”
“Ok.” Cassian said neutrally.

“Right,” the other boy said hiding his nerves under a tissue-thin facade of professionalism. “So, we’re just going to line up on the benches here and practice getting them on and off and setting up the air. Then we’ll work on how fast we can combine with that getting the suits up and time ourselves.”

“Right.”

*The Dondorrans…sisters? cousins?… and the other boy, Caluan Ematt….all had theirs already.*

“If you’ve never…” Melshi began, speaking low as if protecting Cassian’s privacy somehow.

“I’ve worn an air-mask and breathing pack before.” Cassian said.

*I was born in a mining settlement and they used to tear-gas us during food riots at the camp, so how different can it be?* he thought but didn’t say.

“Ok. Right-o, so it’s pretty similar.”

He turned toward the rest of the group. “If we can all get ourselves up to speed on this,” Melshi said, “We can actually drill it in the loading hatch and then practice an exterior hull escape, after 21:00.”

“Excuse me….Melshi, it it?” the Abednedo kid asked, “But isn’t this a little nuts? I mean, what’s the point? If there’s a hull breach or something, and you can’t get to to an escape pod, the odds of surviving long enough to do this and then getting out alive by a line-free hull escape must be 1000 to one.”

*The Albenedo, Rik, was an ex-military school type and probably resented being trained in anything by somebody younger than him.*

Melshi didn’t answer right away. He turned over one of the masks from the rolling rack of them the little red R-1 had pushed in.

“That depends on a number of factors, Rik, the site, the nature of the breach, your familiarity with the equipment, and whether anybody is there to help you,” he said, cool and even, “If you were, for example, on an Sienar G-15 Grand passenger transport full of civilians, but you’d practiced the drills in school a lot, then in a compartment of say….fifty kids between fourteen and six…with a sudden or violent decompression…..from say, an Imperial assault strike with partial shields holding for maybe thirty seconds, it might not be impossible for, say, two of those kids to get out and hand-over-hand it into an intact compartment. Maybe that’s the point.”

That shut the room up pretty fast.

“So. If there are no more questions,” Melshi said, with a nod. “Let’s get on with it then.” He set up
the timer and they drilled, solo and in teams for the next few hours, until they were all of them were able to suit up and pass check in the thirty second timer limit.

When they took a break, Cassian stayed to help repack the suits and hang the masks for the next group. He’d been planning to stay and hit the pool on the next level afterwards anyway. He was going to pass that swim test if it killed him.

“Just one thing, I wanted to check on,” he asked Melshi

“What’s that?”

“When you decide to demonstrate by pushing somebody out an airlock, if I promise to buy you a beer will you use somebody else?”

The older boy smiled wide.

“Oh for fucks sake Andor you great baby, how many times can a fellow say he’s sorry? Besides, you can’t buy me a beer, what are you? Ten or something?”

“I’m almost fourteen, but what's that got to do with it?” Cassian asked, genuinely perplexed.

They’d stayed friends, if a strange kind of friends, for the years that came after.

He showed Cassian the footholds of this new army he’d joined, how to make a bed and press a jacket, timed him at the pool until he could pass the tests, and taken him down to the Quartermaster to get two pairs of thicker socks.

Rue and his sister had grown up on a sheep farm on rural Pendarr II before both getting full scholarships at one of the elite Pendarran III military schools for two years before their parents had seen the way the wind was turning and refused to let them go back after holidays the second year. They’d tried to get out before the crackdowns, mostly worried that Rue would be conscripted. They hadn’t made it off that transport but Rue and Jaqueline had.

In those early days they’d sometimes run missions out together. Rue could pass for a little older than he was if he didn’t shave, Cassian could pass for younger for an annoyingly long time.

Melshi was tapped into operational Spec. Ops and Pathfinders once units started forming. There was no one better. He never asked the odds and he always found a way but it was a hard road. He lost every member of his first two squads.

Cassian had already been marked for Intelligence on that training ship…probably had been since Draven had taken him out of that doorway on Carrida. It was not something he’d resented or felt manipulated into. He knew where his strengths lay already at that point in his life.

Cracken and Tano were just starting to lay the groundwork for Fulcrum and the war broadened and darkened.

The kind of camaraderie that even the high-risk ops units had was something Cassian knew he had to hold himself back from more and more as time went on. His path through the shadows kept becoming narrower and narrower. Still there was the very occasional drink and discussion of football. They never visited each other in medical units but usually managed to “run into” each other after release from one, or at least get a bottle of beer delivered.
Their paths crossed in extractions, and reconnaissance operations sometimes and it was Melshi and his team that had gone in and pulled Cassian out as the sole survivor of that shitstorm on Lothal when the order to “orphan” somehow conveniently didn’t get heard.

*He’d been lying inside a locked shuttle access hatch with the fading binary beacon strapped to his ankle and considering whether the short-term pain of trying get to the tablet in his sleeve would make for an easier exit than just passively bleeding out from the stab wound. Light had appeared around the edge of the doorway above him and a voice had said, “Head’s up recruit, it’s time for swimming lessons.”*

Anytime Draven asked him to recommend ground support personnel he always asked for Melshi first. In and out of an Imperial prison camp in under an hour? There had never been a question about who he wanted to “extract” Liaana Hallick.

“One woman? What is she, like 1.60 m.? 54 k. in boots….probably less now they’ve had her for a month, eh?” Rue had asked with a faint smile when Cassian slipped him the file.

*He had not asked, “Why her?” Why the huge risk, the bribes to get the transport logs, a ship, twelve skilled lives put at hazard all for a single Non-Alliance personnel extraction? He knew better than to ask.*

“If it comes to it I expect any one of us can just tuck her under an arm and run. Can I assume she’ll at least be glad to see us?”

Cassian had looked back at the the thin sheet of the film-file. He’d had it’s contents memorized by then.

“She was one of Gerrera’s top people and went downhill from there. Assume nothing and don’t turn your back on her, ever…”

*Rue had nodded and turned to go out when, Cassian almost as an afterthought added, “Take Kay.”*  

*He’d gotten the communication from Wobani as they swung around Yavin for secure entry. Yes!*  

*They had their phantom at long last, a thin thread that might lead them through Gerrera to the Weapon Projects. It was hope. He can’t realized how little he had left until he saw the text.*

*Kay had, of course, attached an full report which Cassian would read later as he prepped the Senator and General Draven, but Melshi’s comm had been short, *10/10.a.1* = “success on location and extraction, en route” and a note, *handbase-circle-fixed-object-debt-identity-pup* = “keep the handcuffs on her… you owe me you son of a bitch.”*
He’d looked up to see him in the back of that room on Massassi Base.

As he walked off the dais after giving his statement to the Council, Cassian stepped around Jyn, who stood ready to move up after him when Mothma called her. A clean dry shirt was underneath that prison vest now and partisan black was lining her eyes. The tears of Eadu were gone. A fury rolled off her that he felt like heat even from the half meter between them as she passed. That fierce green glance flicked over him dismissively and moved on. He was damp kindling to her now, not even worth the trouble of burning.

He’d seen the way Mothma turned her head, already glancing around at the delegates, counting the votes.

*No.*

*She didn’t understand. They had reached the end. There was no tomorrow to plan for anymore. The Council did this now or they might as well die in a hole like Gerrera, crying out for someone else to save the dream. It would all have been for nothing.*

Draven had met his eye briefly as he walked off the platform and Cassian caught the slight hand signal as his old teacher’s gaze had moved quickly back towards Jyn.

*“Questions. Debrief after.”*

*No. No sir.*

Jyn was talking behind him and though he badly wanted to turn and look at her there was no need. He didn’t need to hear the words.

*His overpowering thought was to find Kay. They still had the Imperial shuttle. There had to be a way….*

Head down and moving through the unexpected crowds….it had to be half the base. How had word
gotten out? Had it been the Jedhans they’d left on the landing strip?… he was stopped by a hand on his arm and found Ruescott Melshi standing against the back wall, wedged near the doorway.

“Cassian,” he whispered, eyes wide, “Is it true?”

“Yes.”

“It’s complete…operational? You believe her.”

“I saw it and yes, I believe her.”

Rue stared back past him at the people on the dias. Cassian did not turn. Jyn was talking, the crowds were murmuring and the Councilors were shouting out questions.

“Right. Fuck this noise then,” Melshi said. “What’s the plan?”

_He could have said, You have a sister. Reikken’s talked about moving you up to Command. Nobody’s coming back from this. He didn’t._

Rue was twenty-eight years old and he had grey in his short dark hair.

_How big was that shuttle?_

“We need ten to twenty, people who understand the… consequences. This is past dark.” _This is mutiny Rue._

Melshi was still looking past Cassian’s shoulder at the lit platform and the passionate young woman on it.

“If you think she’ll take us in she’s got to be worth a small army.”

_Oh my friend, you do not know the half of it._

“Try to tap the Imperial pilot, he’ll want to come and we’ll need him,” Cassian said.

_How did he know that? Not sure, but he did._

“Dock four in twenty,” Melshi said, nodding.

He let go and Cassian moved on.

He quickly found Kaytoo, standing alone like a statue on a largely empty loading platform.
His friend had looked down and turned his head inquiringly. “May I take it the Council is unwilling to proceed on action without additional confirmation.”

“Yes.”

“That would be disastrous. You should tell them.”

“I did.”

“Well then, that presents an unfortunate course of action,” the droid turned his head to look up at the sky, although what he saw when he did so, Cassian was never sure. *Spectrum breakdowns and thermal imaging he expected.*

“Who will come with us?”

“Rue Melshi is getting some men.”

“That is satisfactory, I suppose. He has a high mission success rating,” said Kay, “high percentages of field casualties as well but that may be an avoidable factor resulting from high-risk assignment.”

He swiveled back to regard him, narrowing his ocular array slightly, “You don’t want to know the likelihood, do you?”

“No Kay, I don’t.”

“No,” the droid said, so tonelessly as to sound sad. “Of course not.”

The last words he’d said to Rue Melshi had been “Light it up,” over an Imperial comm. Whatever Melshi had answered had been swallowed by static.

Bodhi had told him that in his last voice contact Melshi said he was taking his team out under brutal fire to try to activate the master power switch, so they could get a message out to the Alliance ships from the shuttle.

Bodhi didn’t know anything more.

Obviously they had found a way. Somehow.

Cassian had never asked for the story. Bodhi had told him this because he clearly needed to and Cassian had listened because he owed that listening to both of his brothers-in-arms, but he had lived on Ea now longer than he had ever lived anywhere else.

He found he had come around to the local way of thinking, that first thoughts and words had as much or more weight than last ones in the pattern of a story.
When Kayly is two and starts to travel with her parents Jyn finds herself, somewhat to her own surprise and very much to Cassian's, bringing up the subject of a second child. The Taun child-proof a tree house. Having one baby never quite prepares you to have another no matter how much you think it is going to. Galen's birth is more difficult and Cassian holds it together bravely except when he doesn't. Jyn shares some history with Macha.

A long-missing chapter about Galen's birth. Rank sentiment.

Jyn thought about it a lot before she actually brought it up to him, even broaching the subject to Bes and Tova to test out the potential insanity of the idea.

"I think we should have another baby," she said.

They were traveling down to RiverTown and a day out from Green River. Elfla and Norla had left a message that a tree house platform was being set up just for them. This had not sounded like an even remotely good idea for a two-year old and Jyn and Cassian had both prepared for stubborn defense of camping on the ground.

Last year Kayly had been young enough to stay in a basket and be carried up and down the ladders in a secure sling on Jyn's back. This summer she wasn't only walking she was running, climbing and jumping, and they were both agreed that they must hold firm on this no matter how heartbreaking the disappointment in their friends big brown eyes or how anxiously convinced they were that lizards would gobble them all.
Jyn and Cassian's skill with firearms and an after-dark rescue/escape from a feeding pack several years back had impressed them significantly but not enough to make up for generations of human and Mem Fishers meeting ghastly ends along the grassy shores and the story they'd heard about the traumatic death a few years ago of a survivor from a pack of deserting stormtroopers. The poor bastard had turned out to have a freak allergy and died from a shore lizard bite.

Since they bone-deep believed all humans were just lizard-snacks walking, a human baby must surely be no better than a sweet roll with sap-sugar on top.

When the crossing camp was reached though there was a surprise waiting for them.

One of the open platforms up in the trees was fenced all around with brush and small branches piled thickly to make it a kind of giant Ospreys-nest with sides at least a meter high. Within that circle huge pieces of colorful cloth and rugs had been lashed together to make a tent house.

Cassian laughed out loud.

"Holy shit," Jyn marveled, "That is some epic baby-proofing."

Taun did not smile visibly but they hooted and swayed when happy.

Elfla and her clan stood around the tree and crouched up in the branches fairly bouncing with pride.

How could anybody with a heart say no?

While their daughter napped, practically sewn into her little hammock inside the tent with her favorite stuffed Tooka, Jyn kicked her boots off and lay down on one of the rugs laid out on the wooden deck. Arms crossed under her head she watched Cassian as he crouched to unpack their rucksacks and lay out all the gear for the night. Carefully he took out each of their daughters little stuffed creatures .....they'd limited her to seven small ones for the trip.....and propped them all up in a line.

Like her father, Kaylyra cared how certain things were arranged.

None of this was ever supposed to happen.....this time, this happiness, these good people who cared about her, this child who faced the sunshine with the relentless joy of a damned plant, this soldier whose shaggy hair was in his eyes again as he rearranged the dolls made of rags because for some reason the blue "baby mouse" was supposed to go in front of the big brown "Taun" in the world according to Kayly these days.

None of it was ever supposed to be and all of it could be taken away in an instant. She knew that. How could she of all people not know that?
She lay on her back holding her mother's necklace, as she often did when thinking.

"Trust in the Force," Mama had said, young and desperate and with no idea in hell what an awful thing she was asking, Jyn was sure now.

"Cassian?"

He looked up, shaking the hair out of his eyes.

"What?"

"I think we should have another baby."

He didn't freeze. A field operative almost never froze because a sudden stop could sometimes draw even more attention to you in a dangerous situation. He just went very very still.

"Do you?" he asked quietly.

"For fuckssake Cassian, relax. It's just an idea."

Why did you even bring this up Jyn you idiot? She berated herself.

He sat down cross-legged and continued to look at her like a man who'd just uncovered a land-mine in a laundry basket.

"Are you pregnant?"

"I am going to throw you out of this damned tree, Andor!"

She sat up, "of COURSE I am not bloody pregnant. Was human biology not explained to you adequately? I don't mean immediately."

Hell, did he think she drank that stuff every month because she liked it?

At that minute, of course, their daughter chose to wake up and start yelling, "Papa! Mama! Want DOWN!"

So it was not until hours later, after some splashing in the River and several Taun-back rides while she and Cassian got updated on the news from South and West and met with some visitors from Heron River, and after a dinner of roasted potatoes was eaten around the campfire and Kayly was tucked down for the night with a song and their hosts bade them goodnight and climbed up higher to
their own sleeping platforms, that they lay down in their sleeping bags and the subject was revisited.

"Jyn," he said, after a long silence,...not even needing to explain what he was talking about, "we...I don't even know what I'm doing with this one child right now. We have no idea what will happen here."

_She had made lists of reasons in her mind as she always did, without even meaning to, over the last few months:_

_I wanted a brother or a sister and you wanted a brother or a sister but the universe fucked us over._

_She will be alone here in so many ways, no matter what we do. Maybe this way she'll be a little less alone._

_We have beautiful babies together Major, seriously, the universe might need more beautiful._

_There were also the corresponding lists of reasons against:_

_You barely survived last time and you could theoretically worry yourself right to death this time._

_What if something went wrong? Could you ever forgive me? Could I ever forgive myself?_

_Being pregnant sucks. Hands down._

_No real beer for nine months or better._

_Spending almost two years being a part-time dairy animal is hard work._

_In the end it came down to a somewhat surprising conclusion._

"I only know I want to," Jyn said, only taking his hand in the dark of that tent, laying still beside him and looking at the stars through the hole in the top.

She wanted to give him space. It was a fearful thing to ask of him again, of both of them, she knew.

"But that doesn't mean I'm right by a long shot. Think about it, just think. We'll finish here and go home, then down to HarborTown at the end of summer and not talk about this again until after that."

_The words, "we have time," hung in the air but she couldn't say them. She didn't know if it was true._
When it turned cold that fall she found him out in the "workshop" one morning with their daughter repainting the runners on her little basket-cradle with a jar of the white paint Sera mixed and traded at the Pine Fair. More of the paint was on Kayly than the cradle.

"It's for new tiny babies!" Kayly said, "we might get some."

Her brave soldier followed her through another window.

The second pregnancy was no worse if no easier than the first except for the fact that Kayly grew progressively more annoyed at the diminishment of Jyn's lap.

"Likely a boy," Tova had told them, having cast a Pattern.

*She did not ask any questions about what else it might have said.*

As with Kayly's birth Eldest Sister advised them to go South again for the delivery and this time they went a little earlier, at almost seven months.

The weather was iffy and Portia seemed nervous about some distant activity in the Unknown Sector beyond Endor. There were no signs of scanning, she said, and nothing at all happening any closer than half a sector away. Still, ships in the distance made her uneasy, so when she gave them the all clear they pulled Guardian out of "mothballs,".....*a phrase of Cassian's that their Mem friends found delightful.....*and the three of them packed up quickly and flew low and slow down to HarborTown barely taking time to kiss Bes and Beri goodbye and close all the doors and windows.

Galen set himself as different from his sister even before he was born.

She had been walking on the docks with Kayly and Conn, back toward Lissa's pub from Markey's, when her water broke.

*It was a toss-up between who was more profoundly horrified by this, her or the young Trader.*

Kayly was whisked off to stay with Thea and Tom by young Sally Markey, who was unloading cloth nearby and by the time Lissa came running to help Jyn walk barefoot.....*those canvas shoes were never ever getting worn again that was for damn sure.....*and Conn had run for Cassian, the
Ladies had already gathered. The fact that she wanted to go back to their little shack on the shore mattered not at all, Perin said. This child would be born a little before time and in the big guest room above the pub.

"All mine were born there," Lissa reassured her, "two boys and a girl. Yell as keen as you want and I'll just tell old Donn to play louder. None of the customers will even know."

Ignorant as she still was about such things Jyn had thought that it would be the same as it had been before, a long day of building discomfort and worry and then mission accomplished, but that, it seemed, was not to be her foxy boy's way.

The pains started, then stopped and came back with a vengeance.

When the time came there was no arguing with the ladies about letting Cassian stay. He held her as he had before but this time Macha laid a hand on her belly and called to Olwen to bring hot cloths and a basin.

Something was different. Something was wrong.

"Not yet, Jyn," she said.

"What the fuck?" she growled, clutching at her friends shoulder...because holy hell "yet" was absolutely happening.

"This child hurries and has tangled himself, he will need to be freed. We must teach him a little patience. Breath lightly and do not push."

_Cassian, she thought, Oh Cassian. No. No. No._

She could not see his face, only feel his chest against her back and his arms under hers.

"Jyn," he said, by her ear, so calm, "take it easy. We will have a glass of ale already poured and standing by but you have to decide which kind."

He was a miracle.

"Dark," she gasped, "We have to pick a name...Kayly wants to pick but..." it hurt like hell, "....ah, ah...we can't name him Bluebird....."

"Youngest," Macha said, "take my place, a small hand will serve better, do you see?"

_Oh fuck. No, no, Cassian, no....._

She squeezed her eyes shut. "Cassian....please.....go find Kayly...." _This was awful. He would never_
"I'm right here. I'm staying here. We're ok."

"There you are my love, there little one." That was Olwen's voice. "Is that better?"

"Now push Jyn." Macha said.

Then she did yell.

"Welcome, little Voyager," Olwen said and there was a silence for such a long moment that she was terribly afraid, more afraid than the fire, maybe even more afraid than the tower. Jyn found she could not look at anything but Cassian's face. Then a baby began to cry and when she looked she finally saw her son, small and fierce.

*Baby, learn from this. Don't do everything the hard way,* she thought.

"He has your eyes," she said, and realized she was crying.

*Olwen lifted the tiny thing wrapped in blue as his sister had been.*

"Oh Cassian do you see? He looks like you."

It took longer to recover than it had before and they would not let her walk around or lift anything or even sit up for several days.

There was grave danger of bleeding, or so she learned later.

Either Olwen or Macha sat with her day or night until the time of risk was past. The first time they sent Cassian out, to check on Kayly, he refused to go, turned a look almost dangerous on Macha...*who had never seen him that way before, the way he had looked at Jedha, in the hold of the shuttle after Eadu...*so that even the bold Second Lady of HarborTown took a step back.

"Go," Jyn told him, "go get her. She'll feel safer if she sees it's you. She'll know everything is ok."

She smiled as convincingly as possible. "I will be fine. I promise. All the way."
In the end, unwillingly, he kissed her and went, "Thirty minutes," he said, "not a second more."

*Perin went with him, which was good. If anyone here could slow him and talk him down a little it was her. Tom Markey might talk to him at the house, maybe even walk back with him.*

"I'm so sorry," Jyn said, still shaken as Macha helped her turn and changed the bedding around her, laying her sleeping newborn back beside her, readying them both for Kayly's visit.

"He....." She wasn't quite sure how to explain clearly,"this is so hard for us both but for Cassian..it's the worst."

"I understand," the woman said, sitting on the floor beside the bed frame and kissing the baby's dark-haired head softly, "there is no need to apologize. He is not the first frightened father to get angry in our company. Sometimes it is worse with the ones who are bravest in all other things. Fear is the enemy the brave fight most fiercely."

"No, Macha, it isn't that...I mean it isn't just that. It's me he's angry with right now, even if he won't ever say it. He put himself through this because he trusted me," Jyn said, "Listen, I know this will sound stupid, but you have to promise me that you won't let me die today, just today, not here, not like this."

Macha stared at her, surprised.

So Jyn told her why, or tried to, about the labor camps at Carrida and the brave boy who lost his mother and sister, about Scarif Tower and Endor. It was not a story the Second Lady of the Harbor understood all of, certainly not as much as Bes, who had taken them out of the Black Shuttle or even Portia who had heard Kay call for help in the dark, but she listened.

She listened enough so that a little while after, when they heard Cassian coming up the stairs with the anger gone from his voice and a chirping Kayly in his arms, saying, "....no, only kisses and very gently because Mama's stomach hurts," and, ".....not for a long time, he has to sleep a lot and get strong but he will when he's older. His name is Galen" Macha knew how much it meant.
Rosheen: Part One of The Raiders

Chapter Summary

More tales of the Blackbirds. The first part of Jyn's..."embassy may not be the right word..."outreach" to the infamous Raiders. A group of child-workers in a Raider camp on the bare rocky island of Arrow, plan a dangerous escape and spy on both their captors and the strange woman who has arrived from the mainland. The Raiders are, as expected, a fairly brutal and marginal lot but some of their leaders may realize their world is changing and and this stranger might...might...hold the key. Jyn in turn thinks about her "first-contact" mission, what she had learned about the infamous Raiders in her time on Ea, the similarities between these marauding bands and the criminal gangs she knew in her desperate youth on the Outer Rim.

Chapter Notes

The Raiders have been mentioned so many times I had to give them some backstory, as well as a Jyn Blackbird mission. This would be placed a few years before Chapter 15 of this fiction and a year or so after Chapter 83 (Market Day) of Over the Edge.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The whole pack of them except for Little Hina were up on the sod roof of the near house looking down at the dock and the wide deck and pathway in front of it, Rosheen herself, Gull, Jemmy, Mac, Noisy.

They weren’t supposed to be there of course and it would have been a thrashing if they'd been caught. All of them should have been at their bond-jobs, been picking stones out of wrack-weed,
washing laundry or twisting rope, stirring cooking pots or scrubbing floors with sand. All work at the camp had stopped though, in the big houses and even on the boatyard. Everybody had gone out to see the Stranger who’d come under truce to bargain with Big Rike. "Everybody" meaning everybody from Cutter captains and Boatmen and crews to house bosses and servants had gone out to look, nobody was even pretending to work and that meant nobody was watching them. As soon as the bosses and lackeys stepped out the children cut up quick to the roof to lie on their stomachs and peer down.

“Who is she and whadya’ think she’s bringin’?” Jemmy wondered, but they all ignored him.

Rosheen watched from the shed roof as the woman pulled the little boat ashore.

She’d been sure the whole time it was a woman, a little woman even though Noisy had said it was a big he-Mimmie when the corricle-boat first came in and Old Man Rike sent his Cutters out to follow it in like it was dangerous or something. The person stood up as they came up to the tie-up posts and pulled back a blue headscarf. Then you could see a little face and some shoulders and tell it wasn’t a Mimmie.

She wished she’d bet him then and there about it… not that it would have been any good. He would just have lied and clocked her one and swore he never bet at all. Noisy was a welcher.

The whole camp practically was standing back from the Dock as the woman climbed out. She wasn’t graceful about it….didn't do a showy jump like the Cutters did when coming back from a rich Raid……just tossed a good size blue cloth bag up onto the dock and then used her hands to pull out slow and awkward from the tippy little shell of a boat like an old person or an inlander.

There was a few of Kine's and Needle's thugs that cracked a smile, and nudged each other in the back, Rosh could see, but nobody laughed out loud and nobody shouted anything. She was somebody. That seemed damn sure.

The little woman just got to her feet and tied the small boat off with her own rope as cool as you please, then looked all about her. The dock and every doorway behind was packed with stretchy-neckers but she only glanced right and left then set her eyes center as if she didn't see any of them and wouldn't care shit even if she did.
“It’s just one old lady,” Mac said almost disappointed like he was expecting some three-meter Far Island man-Warrior shirtless and covered with purple pictures.

*She might be old but not too awful old. Her hair was all brown anyway, she’d tossed that bag pretty hard. Oooooo but they was all standin’ back from her weren’t they though?*

Then Big Rike came down parting through his people like a Bekkie through the sea, with his boys all behind and beside him and stopped in front of her.

"Whatshe sayin?" Gull said through his missing teeth.

“Ha!” Mac said, “Look at him. He’s flapping his jaws like she’s brought barrels of trade.”

And so he was. They watched what they couldn't hear.

The little woman knelt down and started to open the bag and three of Rike’s boys stepped up quick then, one with a gun and two with short bows drawn on her. Even from up on the roof edge the children could see her look at them and the white shine of her teeth as she smiled. She untied the strings that bound the thing shut and stood up , dumping the contents onto the boards.

*Rike didn’t jump back but ooooo some of his big boys did.*

Black and white head-masks were rolling around like empty nut husks.

Beside her Gull counted under his breath, “One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten.” Actually two of them weren’t white-black they were silver. Rike pointed and one of his lackeys picked up a silver one and handed it to him.

There was a bit of talking again and two of Rike’s Cutter captains, Fesk and Rian, stepped up on either side of her and the woman walked off with them. Neither of laid a hand on her though.

They must be taking her off to the boathouse. Was she a prisoner? She damn sure wasn’t walking
like she was. It was like she was walking them.

Some of the lackeys were picking up the head pieces and putting them back in the bag.

Rike waved a hand and, still carrying the silver mask under his arm, gave a yell for all the owners and captains to follow him. Everybody started crowding into the big Hall.

Noisy poked her in the back. "You gotta go down in your hidey place. I want to know what they're saying!"

Why me? She could have said but it would have done her no good. By unanimous decision Noisy was the boss of them all that summer.

He’d just toss her down if she said no. Gull might cry but nobody else would try to stop him or say boo. Right now Noisy was the biggest and meanest of the worker-children on the dock. Small for his age which might be twelve, not much older than Rosheen but meaner. Once or twice she’d fought him to a draw but he had fire in his eye today.

He was a tar-and-caulk on all the boats and some of the Cutters had started using him to send messages up and down the dock and gave him extra food for it when they didn’t give him kicks. If he liked you he’d share the food. If he didn’t he’d share the kicks. Noisy also had all his fingers and all of his teeth still and he could wiggle his way into advantage like a mouse into a bin of flour.

He was the one who came up with the plan…fair credit…..but they’d all agreed.

Strange things had been happening. There was talk about a Raid, or maybe that Arrow would be abandoned all out and they’d all have to row out to the islands because of some impending attack.
That would wreck Noisy’s Big Plan, obviously, so they had to spy it out.

Rosheen grumbled and protested but it was mostly for show. Truth was she was curious too. Scared but curious.

They all carefully worked across the roofs jump and crawl until they got to the one on the big Hall where Rike was living now and usually had meetings.

Noisy tied the long red string to her pinney-shirt so she could yank it or feel it yanked for signal. Mac and Jemmy pulled back the sod-blocks with the wooden shingle they’d wedged in and Rosh wiggled down the ladder-like planking into the narrow space partway down between the back wall and the fireplace chimney. When sent up to re-sod last summer Noisey’d pulled out the cedar insulation to leave a spy-hole.

It was a real tight squeeze.

She was getting too big for it. If Noisy’s plan didn’t work and they couldn’t run away soon somebody else was going to have to do it.

Probably poor Gull who’d be too scared to remember what he heard even if he didn’t get caught.

Rosheen got an elbow scraped as she worked her way down slowly, slowly but in the end she got into the spot, wedged her feet and peeked out through the top of the two gaps in the wall planks. From there she could see down at the space in front of the big fireplace where the benches were usually set up for meetings.

She watched and she listened.
Some people were sitting and some were standing but they were all crowded in.

Light came in from the roof-hatches propped upon with poles and Rike sat on a bench while everybody half-circled round him. She could see him clear. He was holding that silver head, and reached his hand inside it. No blood but she could see him poke his finger right out through a little hole in the eye then flip it round to poke through another just like it on the other side.

“Ferry’s crew had been sent for,” Dany, his front Boatman was saying. “But they’ll tell you the same thing I do.”

“This ain’t no guarantee of anything,” Fat Near was saying, “I’ve seen a hundred of..”

“Not like this one you haven’t,” Rike said with finality, laying the pierced helmet on the floor in front of him. “Nobody has. This was one of them.”

“So it’s true then?” one of the Cutters said, “That there’s more coming and they can only be killed by their own kind.”

Big Rike rubbed his eyes with the back of his knuckles.

Iko and his crew started to argue, “Just because she fooled those in-breds at the Passage doesn’t mean we have to buy what she’s selling!” said one.

“It’s a trick!” said another.

“You gonna take all that on one fat HarborRat’s word?” said a third.

“She ain’t fat or I’ve never seen lean and if you think she’s Harbor you’re a bigger fool than even your mother took you for,” came a new voice from the corner by the fire.

That was Seal talking, the wife of Big Rike’s dead brother. She never said much but Rike listened when she did because she was a shrewd one, everyone agreed. She was the Weigher and Measurer for all the goods brought into Arrow.
“I seen Fallen before an she ain’t…” Iko was saying, “she ain’t no…”

“You’ve seen shit, boy!” Old Farra sneered. “You weren’t there and don’t lie and say you were. All you’ve seen is dead bleached corpses in a wash-up, or maybe white man-shells stuck in the rocks with bones rattling in them like a babbies toy!”

“Enough!” the Big Man said, “All out save kin!”

The Big Man stood himself up and towered over the half-dozen younger Cutter captains.

“I’ll eat with my kin now and you’ll tend to your own shit-business, little boys. Take your rabble off and rile yourselves up about it as much as you like. You’ve better have all pissed it out and calmed yourselves down by evening gathering though. Pick one or two of you to speak the piece for each crew and ask her what you want then and nobody lays a hand on her or talks to her until then. OUT WITH YOU!”

When they’d gone off grumbling….Rosheen couldn’t see the doorway quite but they all must have gone out fair quiet ‘cause she could only hear the creaking of the floor boards and the swish of the curtain as they passed through…. Rike sat down right where he was and didn’t move as the bond-servants set up a table in front of him and brought more benches to set up so his other kin could sit. Food was brought in on plates and people started grabbing at it. Grilled meat…birds on plates….apples and fried pudding.

Damn her mouth was watering. She’d had nothing but a cup of broth and an egg all day and she’d given half the broth to Gull.

“Just one woman. You figure they’re jerking you or paying you an honor?” said Farra, chewing loudly enough to hear.

“He coulda come himself, instead of sending his woman,” that was Rike’s biggest boy with his first wife, the dead one he’d liked.

His name was Lot. Rosh hadn’t known he was there before because he hadn’t said anything. He was a big-shouldered fellow with short brown hair, and a big scar where an Islander spear half ripped off his arm and it never hung quite right even now. He’d taught himself to shoot and throw a line damn good left-handed after. Never talked much ashore people said.
“He who?” said Rike.

He was testing the man….he did that all the time. Nobody knew for sure they said if he was setting up to give over his place someday to Lot or one of the other ones. He was always tossing them things or knocking them down or asking them questions and smacking them if he didn’t like their answers.

Lot was a big fellow and not a mouthy seals rump like Needle and Ben, the other two….oooon why weren’t they here?…..but that arm was a notch against him. The other two would gang up on him on his bad side and then fight each other after when the Old Man finally went down. That’s what Noisy said.

“Him,” the man said, taking his daddy’s test on straight, “the Blackbird.”

“It would take some stones to send your best woman alone and unarmed to bargain,” Rike’s cousin Healt, who captained his fast boat, was saying, slurping something down noisily.

*Rosheen’s stomach was growling so loud she feared they’d hear it.*

“What make’s you think she’s his best woman?” Farra chuckled meanly, “Maybe he just wants to be rid of her.”

“What makes you think he wants to bargain at all?” Rike said.

“There was no talk of selling, from what I heard. Besides, if that’s not his best woman, then I’m gonna start looking at the stars with a jealous eye.”

The other men hooted but the Big Man went on as if he wasn’t joking.

“You short-cocked drunkards! You think I’m just talking about her having a nice ass for a woman grown? I’m talking about fight and brain. Did any of you see the way she dropped Tieth’s man at the Passage when he tried to lay hands on her? That could have been his head she cracked with that heavy pin, just as easy as his kneecap. You want to bet that knife she gave over was the only weapon she had? Because I sure as hell don’t.”

Seal laughed then, “You stupid men. If there really is a Blackbird, and it’s not just something those
shore witches made up, what make’s you think she’s not it?”

Damn it all! Rosheen was not only biting hungry now she also had to pee. Life was not fair, not ever even a little. If she tried to scramble up now they’d hear her for sure and she’d get the beating of her life or worse.

Rike spoke to Seal, Rosheen couldn’t see his face now but he was leaning that way toward her, “You think she’s a witch?”

“I’d say no but what would that even mean? She’s Fallen,” the woman said, “who knows if they’ve got witches up there or what they’d be like if they did?”

The string was getting pulled on from up above and Rosh took the noise of the kitchen girls clearing the plates to get her first steps up.

She wriggled her way out onto the roof and safely let go the mighty sneeze from the dust she’d been holding back by force of will since the pudding came out.

"Ain’t nobody can hold a sneeze!” Mac said one time when his sneezing got them caught in the clam cellar stealing.

"Blow little puffs out your nose, you idiot! And breathe through your sleeve after!” She’d been so mad she shook him hard, still nursing the black eye she’d gotten from the Pantry woman for a week.

He never could do it though. None of them could, not even Noisy. She was the only one who could.

Only Gull and Noisy were still up there. Work had started again and they all had to scramble for it.

"Meet me by the washer after the bell!” Noisy hissed as they climbed down and ran. Him running for the beached boats and her and Gull back to the kitchens.
They were going to steal a boat. That was the Plan. The five of them and Little Hina from the kitchen were going to make a run for it. They had to plan it real careful though.

They'd do it while the Cutters were out on a big raid. Noisy would know. He'd make sure one of the little boats up for repair was left unwatched and untied. The night before a raid...or some other big move.... They would push it out and Gull and Little Hina would pole it out and around the point. They were supposed to pull it out then, carry it up onto the hill and hide it in the bushes. Hina would bring the food she'd hidden food in the floorboards. Noisy had caulked some little wooden barrels for water and Gull would fill them an bring those. They would throw some broken boat pieces and a few of their clothes in the water so catchers would think they'd drowned.

If a boat disappeared and a bunch of bond-kids at the same time everybody would know but if it was just Gull and Little they wouldn’t look long.

Nobody expected the weak ones to run away, it was always the strong ones they watched.

The rest of them would slip away two or three nights later. Rosh with some kitchen knives. Jimmy with rope and Noisy with a chunk of sail.

It was risky but it was only a matter of time for any of them right?

Hina and Gull wouldn't make it through another hungry season. Jemmy’s boss was already talking about selling his bond and splitting him and Mac up. Noisy had his own reasons. It was all they’d talked about since Tall Mary had been sold off to Back Rock camp and Coney had got the damp-sickness and died last year.

“Fortune favors the bold!” that’s what Rike always yelled when his Cutters went out on a Raid. They were going to take the big bastard at his word Noisy said.

Hope could keep you alive when everything else wants to kill you. Somebody told her that once.

Three-fingered Cern gave a her a half-hearted kick for being late and sent her to the washing. Probably figured she'd been out on the dock gawking with everybody else, which she had been in a way.

A couple of arm-aching hours later she was sent to take all the dry cloth around and deliver it.

That's when she saw the Blackbird woman.

Rosheen had figured they'd locked her up on one of Rike's boats like a hostage , or stuck her in one
of his houses and set watchers on her, but when she went to stick the basket-box of folded cloth on the porch at Seal's big house there was the woman just sitting there on the step all alone, looking out at the cove but with her head tilted like she was listening to somebody or something.

Well, this was an improvement over her last stop, anyway, at least she hadn't had to bust anybody just to establish some negotiating ground rules.

She'd mostly been trying to reassure Cassian when she'd said, "I know these people," but holy hell she did know these people, their kind anyway, all too bloody well.

_I was never enough of a joiner to be a real pirate. I never worked for slavers, never stole medical supplies on the Outer Rim, never got so dead inside that I air-locked somebody who meant me no harm and stole their ship for cash, never thought that the cruel and lucky deserved more than the weak and fucked-over but, Force forgive me, Nari McVee and Lianna Hallick surely sold to people that did._

They'd heard of the "Raiders" almost as soon as they'd come here, to people on the Uplands they were bogeymen on the edge of old stories. No place in the galaxy was free from violence and greed, not even Ea.

Over the first years they'd met some sketchy types among the free-lance Scavengers inland, thieves, con-artists, double-crossers and lizard bait who'd cheat their Grandmother in a trade. Even among the
Memsa the Sisters and Councils had to deal with the occasional crime of passion, but outright war was only remembered among the Far Islanders and the Raider/pirate bands of the Coastal archipelago.

Eldest Perin and Macha had given them the lowdown, at least as far as the Circles were concerned, when she and Cassian had come up with this idea not long after the trooper attack at RiverTown.

Eldest Sister Bekka from the Sweet River Memsa village had come to talk to them too.

"At one point," she lectured them in her sweet piping voice, "many more than two hundred years ago, Raider war-lords commanded vast fleets, hundreds strong. Most were said to be human but there had been many wicked clans of Mems among them too. They pillaged and burned along Islands and the Coast and sent raiding parties inland as far as Green River Crossing according to the old stories. Something happened afterwards that restrained them, some stories say a curse but most credit unified attacks by the Islanders, the Bequa and the Far Islanders. They were driven back, after years of war, to the rocky islands of the Eastern Reaches and have remained there....mostly....since."

"They prize a myth of themselves as a separate people," Perin said, "but the Pattern tells us that this is not true."

"Some of our old stories call them "the Lost" or the "Forgetful Ones" because they have wandered away and forgotten how to live with others," Bekka said.

"The Far islanders, with their unfailing gift for a dramatic turn of phrase," Macha said, "call them the "Unforgiven."

Delightful stuff.

"What exactly does the Pattern say they are?" Cassian had asked, no doubt fully aware he might not understand the answer.

"Those who had suffered and then made others suffer so that the little Pattern of their pain could make sense to them," Bekka said shaking her head.

Hardly a sin limited to bandits, Jyn thought, agonizingly grateful that Cassian was wearing Portia's link. To hear Saw's voice asking questions during this particular history lesson would probably take her back to a place she did not want to go.
"Exiles," Perin said, "Descendants of Far Islanders cast out from their traditional societies and bitter against their kin... as I hope you will take no offense to hear said aloud what you know better than even the wisest of us.... Fallen who could not let go of the hatred they had learned elsewhere."

Bekka went on, small hands folded, "Some forty years ago they swept in again, Mems and Human bands both attacking the Southern settlements. They burned, murdered and sometimes took captives for ransom for a handful of bloody years but they were fewer now and the Circles more united than they had been in the dark days. Though many lives were lost and the city of Old Harbor burned, the peoples of the coast banded together and drove them back. It was a time of tears for those who endured it, but there has been a truce on the coast for many years since."

The communities along the Sweet River Coast and up toward Egg Rock Island were the only Memsa villages she had ever seen with walls around them.

**Jyn remembered Tova showing Kayly and Galen how the third finger of her left hand bent a little slowly because it had been bitten almost through and stitched after when she was young in SweetRiver.**

*Injuries to the hands and fingers were considered most grievous to the Mems.*

"Who bit you?" Kayly had asked with her resolute need to know details.

"A very frightened nursling," Tova answered.

"Who stitched it?" Galen had asked with his resolute need to know gory details.

"I did," Tova said, "and I did a bit of a bad job at it, but I must forgive myself because I was very young."

"Why didn’t somebody else do it?" Kayly had asked, clearly horrified and having had several rounds of stitches herself, knee, forehead, thumb.

"Because there was no one else left except for myself and the nursling," Tova said calmly.

Galen, five, had put down his mug of sweet tea and climbed directly onto Tova’s lap to kiss her hands in Sorrow for Suffering Past.
“The Bequa say there are only a few hundred left and these live by harassing the Islanders and Far Traders….and each other. They are not so separate now as tales would make you think. The remaining Mem Raider groups from the Keys have begun to quietly trade with the Inner Islands. Some groups of Raider Humans are said to given up the sea altogether and settled on the northern coasts to fish,” Macha said, eyes downcast, “It is our hope that now, after all these generations, the Lost Ones may remember again that Ea’s children, no matter how estranged, are family still and must stand together in the dangerous times to come.”

These wretched outliers were not some powerful crime warlords, in the style of the Hutt Cartel in its glory days, maybe they had been once but not anymore. What remained was maybe a dozen loose confederations, constantly splitting and re-forming more like the gangs she’d known on the Outer Rim.

Like Azemeron’s pack of highjackers, the Two Horns Gang, or Tau-C’s so-called "syndicate."

“Are you idiots going to watch me the whole time?” she’d said to the two flunkies brought her to one of the driftwood and slate shelters.

Her “escorts” were strapping gap-toothed boys with the kind of squinty gaze you got from staring into the sun for too long. Now though they were just looking at each other, confused.

Oops. Apparently their orders hadn’t gotten past bringing her here.

“Go remind your boss that he’s the one who called for this meeting, not us. I’ve gone to a lot of trouble to get here, I promise I’m not going to run off until I’ve said my piece.”

The lunks argued about it for a while and then actually left her there because, as she suspected, watching a 49 k. middle-aged woman take a nap was not their idea of bad-ass criminal valor.

Jyn sat down on the “porch,” just a wooden floor raised on short piles off from the front of of the slate and earth shack, with her back against the doorframe and her legs stretched out in front of her.
Just between you and me, Portia, I’m damn tired.

Somebody would come soon, she figured. As soon as this Rike fellow figured out how he was going to spin it.

A stripe of heavy ribbon was sewn down each leg of her trousers. Concealed by the fabric on the right side was a wafer thin six cm. sliver of circuit-board sharpened to a razor-edge. Too thin and flexible to be felt on a pat-down it was still enough of a weapon to leave her with options.

[“This is a poorly sited camp for this many people,” Portia said “There is inadequate fresh water and no possibility of sufficient agriculture for a diet diverse enough to provide adequate nutrition.”]

Because they didn’t pick it for the good of the many, Jyn thought, they picked it for the harborage and the fact that they can whip in and out of here fast and almost unseen in those little cutter boats on the prevailing winds to attack ships coming through on the eastern current.

[“Don’t drink the water if you can help it. Use the purification tablets.”]

That gave her both a shiver and a laugh because it was something Saw had actually said to her on more than one occasion.

She could survive this because she knew her children were safe. Galen was billeted with Bill at the full-time Dock-urchin pandemonium that was Markey's warehouse, no doubt picking up enough bad habits to drive Kayly and his father crazy for the rest of the summer. Kayly was staying at Tessa and Tom's with Mary and the Doonan cousins.

Cassian was supposed to be staying there too but she didn't need to ask Portia whether or not he was sleeping at the comm station. She knew he was.

“How is he holding up?” she whispered.

[“As nearly as I can tell from the conversations I’ve had with him at the Harbor comm station he is anxious, but in general managing his anxiety well. I have assured him twice in the last five hours that you are unhurt and that your situation, while not without risk, is unfolding roughly as we had thought
They were a couple of cripples still.

*She needed to get home, where she could reach out and touch him soon or she was going to start fraying.*

“Did you tell him I busted a kneecap with a truncheon yesterday?”

Portia paused before answering. *It was just the sort of expressive gap where an “organic” person might put an exasperated sigh.*

[“I mentioned that you had employed non-fatal violence in self-defense and in order to establish a level of status in this cultural backwater that seems to award respect to strangers on the basis of physical dominance.”]

*Ah my love. In the Partisans we used to call that “high marks for style.”*

She looked out at the tidal river....*It was actually a nice view from here...* and thoughtfully rubbed her mother’s crystal with the fingers of her left hand.

*Ah Force, Cassian. These bastards keep people in something like slavery. I haven’t heard the word yet but I know it when I see it.*

*That particular flavor of cruelty came from outside,* some instinct told her. *The peoples of Ea fought and even if outright war was rare killing certainly wasn’t unknown. That dark thread of forcibly denying people agency, though, that was us. Mustafar, Kashyyk, Nasori...maybe a thousand years ago, but that was us.*

*They were right to fear the Fallen.*

She heard a sound behind and to her right and stayed still, moving only her eyes.

A small figure stood in the doorway, carrying an armful of grey and white cloth. A child...nine
maybe?..close to Galen’s age… bare-legged, sun-tanned, with messy short brown hair and wide, dark suspicious eyes.

“My name is Jyn,” she said, keeping her gaze sideways until she saw how the poor kid responded. “What’s your name?”

The child looked side to side furtively.

“They left. I sent them back to their big boss,” Jyn lifted her head but made sure to keep her eyes mostly on the shore. “Somebody will come back to check on me soon, but this whole not-killing-the-messenger thing is new to them so I’m guessing they have to argue about it for a while first.”

Since her visitor was still standing motionless she ventured a more direct glance.

“Whose house is this?”

“Seal’s” the child said quietly.

“And which of those assholes on the dock was Seal?”

That got her a ghost of a smile, fleeting and gone.

“She’s a big one here. One of the Old Man’s kin. The Measurer and Weigher for captures, shares and goods.”

“Ah.”

"The Old Man" was what each group called their local chieftain or warlord, she’d figured that out at the Passages.

“I brought the clean laundry from Cern. I’m supposed to put it in the chest always and take the dirties away.”

When Jyn shrugged, “Do what you need to,” the child stepped cautiously up the step and walked into the ramshackle house.

It was laid out like rougher version of an Islander’s two-room raised house but with stacked slate walls instead of wood and a grass-sod roof.

The child practically tip-toed past, giving her wide berth. Jyn made sure to keep her gaze on the view off the porch.
The little laundry-deliverer wasn’t physically restrained, but that was hardly necessary to hold somebody prisoner on a rock like this.

*After all, where were you going to go? Swimming for the mainland was right out, and as for boats, if the Bequa hadn’t shown up to help her she’d never have gotten that stupid little boat through the rough currents around here without being smashed or drowned.*

*Fuck, she hoped word of that never got back to Macha, the teasing would never end.*

Still, who knew what kind of physiological bullshit got played in a nasty corner like this?

There might be rough consequences for the kid if they got caught talking to strangers.

Best to hold back.

In the dim interior near what looked like a sort of stone hearth...*not unlike the one in their house really...*was a big wooden box. The child lifted the woven lid and put her burden inside, then picked up a heavy-looking canvas bag that sat on the flagged stone floor and started to scamper out.

At the far edge of the "porch" where Jyn sat they stopped and seemed to wrestle indecision. Finally lowering the bag to the floor and tiptoeing closer a few steps, they peered around cautiously and said quietly.

*I'm Rosheen."

Jyn looked at the child directly.

*Thin but sturdy. About the same size and age I was when Saw put a blaster in my hands for the first time.*

*"Hello, Rosheen."*

Another cautious check around and a whisper.

*"Where you from?"

*What was the point in saying Nexa? Nobody here would have heard of it. Anyway, she was pretty sure that wasn't what Rosheen was asking, not with wide eyes like that and a nervous twitch.*

*"Depends on what you mean." Jyn said, "I live Inland with my family now, way up the Green River. Do you know where that is?"

*A shake of the head.*
"I was born somewhere else, further away."

Rosheen stared at her for moment then flexed short-nailed, scraped fingers and slowly lifted one little hand to point an index finger up at the grey sky.

"Yes," Jyn said.

A sound of voices came from the path behind the house. The child snatched up the laundry bag quick and bolted like a frightened deer, jumping off the platform and running out the other way.

A tall woman with long black hair streaked grey and braided down her back stepped up onto the platform. She wore black trousers and sealskin boots and long red embroidered blouse. There was a younger bearded man… big, long blue shirt, grey pants, well-used long knife in a leg sheath… behind her but she stepped up without even looking back at him.

*Bodyguard or muscle maybe but the woman was clearly the one in charge.*

*And you would be Seal, Jyn thought. Now we’re getting somewhere.*
Shameless world-building....think Vikings (the tv show), meet a little of Mad Max.
The First Wedding in Nexa

Chapter Summary

One hot summer, while their children are young, in the busy days before the Pine Market, Cassian makes a proposal...an actual proposal...to Jyn Erso. Two people with difficult upbringings and no family traditions make their own and plan a surprise wedding, for themselves.

Chapter Notes

Rank sentiment. For those of you who have wondered about Jyn and Cassian's Memsa non-wedding wedding since the days of Over the Edge, or have read Kayly's brief recollection of it for Draven in Chapter 22 of Jetsam, here it is.

Refresher on Ea's wedding customs in Chapter 7 - The Dance Lesson: Part 3.

It seems long but I kept having to stop to dry my eyes with a tissue....must be allergies. I love weddings.

soldadito = little soldier

¡No estás al mando aquí, pequeño! = You are not in charge here, little one!

Detenerlo Jerron! ¡No hay espacio para esto! = Stop it Jerron! There is no room for this!

Siempre hay espacio, Esperanza! Mira, Cassian, ¿no es tu mamá una bella bailarina? = There is always space, Esperanza! Look, Cassian, is not your mama a beautiful dancer?

¡Basta! = That’s enough!/Stop it!

Eres hermosa= you are beautiful.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It had been a busy week, not all of it the good kind of busy.
To make it even more trying the last month of that summer had been wickedly hot, although Bes assured them that the weather would break soon.

The Pine Market was just weeks away and though everyone was getting ready, Cassian felt worst for Sela and her crew. They had begun brewing turpentine on one side of the hill while they were still burning charcoal down by the Lower Stream. Two hot jobs even when the days weren’t sweltering. Despite the help of her crews of sons and daughters, siblings, nephews and nieces the work demanded a lot of tramping back and forth between the two camps by Sela and her frail mother and chief chemist Old Piri.

Jyn, worried, had offered them the of use their two big hand carts newly emptied of salvage after the GreenRiver Market and Sela had gratefully accepted although she stubbornly insisted on paying them with some sealed glass jars of solvent and glue.

When he brought them down to her Cassian also offered Sela a laser heat charge from their store. Compared to the weeks-long method of burying the wood chips in an earthen pit "kiln" the charge would have greatly speeded up carbonizing the charcoal but the builder politely turned it down.

“People find out I did that I’ll never get another customer, Cassian-ally,” Sela said with a head-tilt and arched brow that implied that he was a flat-out fool to be advising her on her own business. “Once in a generation some idiot tries a shortcut like that and winds up with a fat-ass pile of unsold charred scrap and a pressing need to find a new career.”

“Oh no. Oh no, Scavenger…customers can smell shortcuts and the poor quality a k. away…” Old Piri was chuckling to herself from the corner stool where she had been dozing. The aged Mem stood up and tottered over, lifting her bushy grey brows with her left hand to peer up at him. “Who are you anyway big fellow? Are you here for the Fair?”

“Mummy,” Sela said, soothingly, “It’s Cassian-ally.”

“Oh, welcome then…oops, no offense meant dear….most people can smell it anyway.” The old lady smiled widely and bopped him lightly on the nose with a wizened finger.

Cassian kissed her hand in Greeting to an Honored Elder which made her laugh with delight.

Sela could do nothing but shrug apologetically.

Placing her aged mother in one of the handcarts she wheeled away down the path toward the stream, while her youngest son Dil pushed the other.

*Old Piri’s voice could still be heard as they went round the turn by the wall, “Oh it had lovely manners! Sela, do you think it was a male or a female? I hope the Sisters will let it stay, poor bare soul.”*
Piri would be herself again for several hours after a few cups of tea.

Even as she faded she was cherished as the best resin-brewer in the Uplands.

Cassian walked back up to the stone house in the afternoon heat, to find Jyn and Galen working in the back garden.

Jyn had proudly fashioned a sort of temporary irrigation system out of some salvaged tubing pierced with holes and Galen...tanned, grubby and shirtless...was standing on the roof, ladling water out from the cistern, into a funnel-like thing attached to a long well-washed piece of coolant hose that snaked down into the back garden.

“Is it working Mama?” he shouted.

“Perfect!” Jyn answered.

“Now do I do the typhoon thing?” Galen called.

“Siphon, kiddo, it’s called a siphon, yes! Suck that air out and stick the end in the water lickety-split,” his mother said with a smile.

Galen must have managed it somehow because water began to drip steadily around the base of Jyn’s chaotic arrangement of vegetables.

“Hurrah!” she beamed, “We did it! It’s a farming win!”

“Why is an eight-year-old on the roof risking heat stroke?” Cassian asked as he came round through the gate.

Jyn straightened to stand and look back at him, barefoot, with shins scratched and tanned under rolled up trousers and one of the loose shirts Tova had sewn for her out of undyed linen.

She wore a wide ragged straw hat but even under the shadow of the brim her smile was bright.

This is never getting old, came to him as it always did.

He lifted the straw hat and kissed her sweaty and freckled nose.

“The eight-year-old was the only one willing to go up on the roof because the twelve-year-old...hey!..” she grabbed a handful of his damp blue shirt, before he could step away, “What was that? Give me a proper kiss dammit.”
“I figured you’d think it was too hot,” he defended himself.

“Oh it’s way too hot soldier,’ she agreed, putting the battered hat on his head and standing on tiptoes to kiss his mouth lightly, “but sacrifices have to be made.”

“Ohhhh!” Galen groaned from the roof, sounding as if he were in abject misery. “Do NOT do that where people can see you!”

“Toughen up, son,” Jyn said sweetly, taking her hat back.

“Put the cover on the tank and get down here, soldadito!” Cassian said, “It’s too hot up there, come drink some water in the house. Maybe we’ll go to the pond when your Mama says we’re done in the garden.”

“Sí!” Galen called, dropping the wooden lid none too gently and scampering across the tiled roof on the other side to climb down onto the front wall. “No kissing!” his voice echoed across from the other side.

“That’s enough, Galen!” Cassian said, sternly

“¡No estás al mando aquí, pequeño!” Jyn shouted back laughing, “If you don’t like it stay in the house and close the curtains.”

Poor Galen. He had recently announced that it was ok for them to kiss each other on the mouth “at HarborTown and at RiverTown maybe” but not at home. It clearly wasn’t easy having the only human parents for a four-day walk in every direction.

Besides, all children were embarrassed by parental displays of affection, or at least he thought they probably were.

He held onto a dim memory of his Papa waltzing Mama around the kitchen of the tiny faculty flat, trying to twirl her under his arm as they bumped into the folding chairs. She had been laughing… “Detenerlo Jerron! ¡No hay espacio para esto!” “Siempre hay espacio, Esperanza! Mira, Cassian, ¿no es tu mamá una bella bailarina?”….try as he might he could call up no other memory of her laughing. He would have been about six, no more, Papa was dead soon after and they were in the camps.

He couldn’t remember though he supposed he might have been embarrassed at the time, now he was only grateful.
The boy he had once been had needed to leave so much behind, just to stay alive. Most of the little he still carried had to be put carefully away, as if in a box, for many years. Cassian Andor had almost forgotten the box even still existed until a quiet moment in the elevator of a burning data tower, looking at a woman he didn’t really know while death gathered around them like a building storm.

What he feared when they did not die…*when he woke up in this place, broken but saved, when this fierce person who burned through every shadow in him like sunlight sat on the floor to help him put on the boots his bandaged ribs wouldn’t let him reach….what terrified him most was the thought that he might open the box only to find it empty.*

It hadn’t been, not entirely, there had been just enough left inside.

*Is that why you so love to dig in the dirt, Jyn? Were your parents happy for a little while on La’hmur?*

He didn’t ask her such questions. They pooled all the splintered pieces they each had left and built something good and strong. That was what people did here.

“Your son is an unspeakable little prude sometimes,” she said bending to push some now-damp brown soil over the make-shift irrigation. “Kayly should be back soon, she is getting help from Tova for that waxed-pinecone selling project down in their cellar.”

*Two weeks until the Pine Market and the whole village was abustle despite the sluggish heat. Kayly, Nikki and Ava were setting up a little booth together, trading firestarters.*

“It’s too hot to cook,” she said, wiping her hands on her pant-leg, “When she gets back, how about we just take some of that bread and plum butter, bring sandwiches to the pond, and soak ourselves until bedtime?”

*A brilliant idea. It was always a little cooler inside the stone house in summer, just as it was warmer in winter, but in this cruel heat a late swim in the ponds made sleeping easier.*

He nodded, “Portia says the heat will break not tomorrow but the next day. A front is coming through, we should have good weather before Tom and company get here.”
“Bes says the same thing,’ she said, standing.

*He was not the spy he once had been and there must have been something off in his voice.*

Pushing her hat back she turned to eye him suspiciously, “What’s wrong? What else did Portia say?”

“Nothing’s wrong.”

“Good. I repeat, what else did Portia say?”

“She’s seeing movement….nothing close.”

“Fuck that. Where?”

“Queluhan Nebula.”

“Into or out of?”

“Into… a few ships from Denon on the Inner Rim. Light transports, from what she can make out. No heavy armor. No change in alarm status. It’s just more grist for the mill.”

She huffed, kicked a stone on the path and said no more, only walked up the path toward the shadow of the house by the back door. He followed her.

*There was nothing they could do but log it, wait, and hope for a day when somebody in New Republic Security smartened up and paid attention.*

“Ok,” she said, “I guess she’ll keep an eye on it. Once we make it through the Market, assuming the Football game doesn’t kill us, we can get the new sensors set up at RiverTown when we go down for the Market.”

“Jyn we are not playing football again, that was an full-on riot last time.”

*Oh, that shade was blessed relief, dropping the temperature ten degrees, or so it felt.*

There was a covered bucket of water by the door and Jyn dipped a kerchief in, wrung it out and wiped her face and neck with the damp cloth.

“Oh there will be a rematch, Major,” she said with a wicked smile. “Public excitement is building. I saw Beri throwing a ball against the Tower wall this morning, I think she’s lobbying for goal position.”

She re-wet the cloth and reached up to wipe his forehead.

“Clean up,” she said, “Let’s go swimming and embarrass our youngest child further.”
He couldn't put his finger on what triggered it. Even years later he didn’t know what came over him at that moment but something did.

Cassian stopped her hand and kissed it, damp now and cool, considered kneeling but then thought better of it.

“Marry me,” he said, “please.”

She didn’t laugh or argue, only looked at him with those clear eyes as if trying to read him like a book.

Her hair was tied back but coming loose, in damp tendrils around her face, cheeks flushed, and dusted with freckles.

“Yes,” she said quietly, “of course I will.”

It was planned not unlike a covert action. No one had had a wedding in Nexa before, at least not in living memory, probably ever. Most people in the town didn’t even really know what one was. Getting supplies two weeks before the Pine Market was also a little tricky but when he went to Tova and told her that he and Jyn wanted to have a party at their place for the whole village on the morning before the Market started she had been surprised but supportive.

“What is the party for?” Bes asked, raising an eyebrow.
“Well I promise you it's not because I’m pregnant again,” Jyn announced bluntly.

“Oh,” Tova and Bes said at once, perfectly poised between disappointment and relief. Beri burst out laughing.

“It’s a celebration of our gratitude,” Cassian said, which was absolutely true.

Tova offered to open up her cellars, as usual having brewed far more beer and cider than was necessary for the Market anyway. Cassian walked down to the Grasslands edge a few days later after the rains came through and ended the heatwave. He passed word to their Taun friends to bring some supplies when they came Upland.

Mostly he needed flour and oil because he knew that his chief contribution to the party would be lots of fried bread. Tom Markey showed up three or four days after that, come for the Market and to meet with Jyn, Cassian and Portia about “Alliance” business as well as parts for a comm station they were setting up at HarborTown. Conn and Bill were with him, ostensibly to help but both keen for a football rematch. Dora had tagged along because she and Bill were inseparable in those days and Toma was expecting again and needed a break. None of them had exactly anticipated being put to work in the kitchen frying bread, but they took it all in good grace. Jyn sent the children out to pick late-summer meadow flowers the day before.

Neighbors offered to bring more food and musical instruments. There was nothing Nexa liked better than a party, and they accepted all offers. Mose’s mother sent him down with some big boards for tables, on the promise that they would return them and the trestles by the next day to be set up for the Market.

Early in the morning Jyn climbed up the ladder and woke Kayly and Galen.

“Come down,” she said, “I laid out clothes for you.” Galen, as always was up like a shot but when Kayly grumbled Jyn told them, “Shhhhhh…it’s a secret, but this is a wedding. Papa and I are getting married.”

Kayly leaped up then and scampered down the ladder like a monkey.
New clothes were laid out for both of them. Tova, who by then must have had some inkling what they were up to, had indulgently made a white shirt for Galen to match his father's and a smocked, sleeveless shift for Kayly who had come home from HarborTown that Spring with a new and brief interest in clothes.

The Sisters were used to their madness.

“Why?” Kaylyra asked, as she wriggled into her first “dress” since babyhood, delighted but confused, “I mean… we already have a house.”

“My parents were married and had a wedding, so did your mama’s. It was something decided we wanted too.”

Portia, hearing them planning had serenely offered to look up wedding customs of the Core and Mid Rim but that was not something either of them found they cared about. He did not know if his parents had had anything like a traditional Festan wedding vigil, visiting the graves of ancestors to put down flowers or exchanged platinum rings. Even if her mother had been alive to give it to her Jyn would have no more worn Courscanti white lace than she would have flapped her arms and flown. Those were not among the pieces that had been left to them so they decided they would make their own.

Galen’s mouth was in an astonished “o.”

“People don’t have weddings at Nexa,” he said.

“Then we will have the first,” Jyn said firmly.

“Will there be chairs?” Kayly practically squealed with excitement. Having seen a wedding on the docks at HarborTown last year she was clearly already fully on board.

“Yes,” Cassian said. He’d put two out in the workshop last night. Jyn had hidden one by the garden wall. “But you can’t tell anyone until the party. It’s a secret.”

That was all it took to win over the suspicious Galen. He loved secrets, even enough to put on a new shirt.
The night before, curled against him in their bed, she kept whispering in the dark long after he thought she must be asleep. Was she nervous? That was a odd thought.

“We should have that song.”

“What song?”

“That song that Thea’s cousin sang at their wedding, the one about the river and…you know, following stars and starting over.”

He remembered, though he was surprised that she did.

“That’s their song.”

“It’s a wedding song. We danced to it, ask… I like that song.”

“If I knew you were going to be this funny about it, I’d have asked you to marry me years ago.”

She tried to turn then, probably to slap him but he held her tightly so she couldn’t wrestle around and they both shook with laughter… afraid of waking the children… then as it drained away he began to kiss the back of her neck and down across her shoulders.

She sighed, pressing back against him, then paused, her hands over his.

“I wish Bodhi could walk with us,” she whispered.

“I know,” he murmured against her hair, “me too.”

Then, “Do you think we should send Draven an announcement?”

¡Basta!

He pinned her back against the mattress and they laughed so hard they probably did wake the children.

The weather turned out to be perfectly beautiful, dry and pleasant, not too hot, a light breeze but not windy.
The guests from the village wandered up the path and everyone milled around eating and talking. Tova’s drumming students played and Ava’s grandmother and Mose got a flute jam session going.

After things were well underway Cassian slipped away to meet Jyn inside the house. Laid out on the bed was his good blue jacket, the one he’d gotten at Tom Markey’s wedding and seldom worn since. He put it on and straightened the sleeves.

He’d already trimmed his beard that morning but now Jyn brushed his hair back with her fingers.

“Damn, but you’re beautiful,” she said resting her hand against his cheek.

“Why do you get to say that to me, but always get angry when I tell you?” he asked, marveling that he was still just as undone by those green eyes here and now as he had been the first time they had snapped up to look at him across a tense interview room on the other side of the galaxy.

“I am willing to concede that I have issues on that subject,” she said smiling.

Jyn’s red dress had faded only a little and, at Kayly’s instance, she had braided her hair back with cornflowers in it.

“This is what happens when you let maniacal little girls dress you,” she had laughed.

Kayly had obviously let an excited Dora in on the secret and Nikki and Ava too, although the Mem girls had no experience with weddings but just loved sticking flowers in things.

“You look so beautiful, Mama!” Kayly said.

Galen was running around outside the house with Bill and Kemmi, probably getting dirty.

“Go tell your brother to come round to the front path, we’re coming out in a second” Cassian said, leaning over to kiss his daughter’s forehead…. She’d gone a little wild on herself too, or someone had, her dark hair was in four braids and half a field of flowers seemed to be stuck in them…“Shhhh, now, keep the secret.”

She ran out with her friends, giggling.
“RA-AT!” they heard her yelling before she was even out the door, and rolled their eyes.

“Eres hermosa…the most beautiful thing I have ever seen,” he said, “Do you believe me?”

“Mostly… 99.9%,” she said quietly. “Statistical certainty.”

She laced her fingers with his, then looked up with a smile, “Come on, soldier.”

Outside everyone was standing around talking and snacking.

Jyn walked up to Bes in the crowd by the wall, listening to the music. “I need your help for a minute, dear.”

“Oh!” Second Sister said, eyes wide, her flawless serenity shaken for a moment. “Oh! Must I?”

“Yes, I’m afraid you must,” his beautiful Jyn replied.

Cassian spotted Tom Markey at the cider table with several of the Scavenger crew, already several drinks in. Tom had brought his own pint mug rather than deal with small Memsa cups.

“Holy smokes, traveller,” Keen was saying, “if you drink that much at once you are honor bound to hurt yourself.”

Cassian laid a hand on the HarborTown man’s arm. “Tom,” he said, “Can you come help me carry something from the workshop?”

On the way he tapped Dov as well, “Dov, I need you too, come with us.”

It was pretty gratifying in it’s way.

Tom Markey really truly had no idea what was going on until Cassian handed him the chair and told him to carry it out to the front of the house.

“What? Oh! Oh hell Cassian! This isn’t…?”
“Actually it is.”

“What’s happening?” The brindled Scavenger asked, utterly confused.

“The sneaky bastard’s getting married,” the big red-haired man laughed, shaking his head.

“What? Wait, I’ve heard about that. That’s like….like declaring a one-person-only Active Feast, like…..forever right?” the Mem asked.


“Bloody hell,” Dov whistled, “….but don’t you guys do that all the time anyway?”

“Just carry the chair friend,” Tom said, “I’ll try to explain it to you later.”

They placed the chairs just inside the door of the house they would…did…had… shared together since they came here and there being no one to say the words for them they stood by their friends and said them for themselves, a shortened variation on the Coastal human vows.

“To travel together, and share what Ea shall bring, all labor and all rest, all trial and all joy, from now until this Pattern’s end.”

It was enough.

*Tom cried. Kayly hugged Galen and he mostly let her. Dora and Bill threw flowers. Dov leaned over to Bes, and whispered, “Second Sister, what are the chairs for?” Bes smiled like the angel she was, and whispered back, “Dear child, I have no idea.”*

“This is all very interesting, I must say,” Tova said,” And we are glad and honored to be at your Thankfulness and Sharing Party, Jyn and Cassian-ally, but when will the dancing start?”

“Now,” Jyn said.
The next morning the rest of the village was busy with the hubbub of the Market and Jyn and Cassian got up early to clean up in the yard and the gardens. A hung-over Tom and Conn carried the trestle tables back down to the field while the exhausted children slept late packed into Galen and Kayly’s loft rooms.

“Cassian!” Jyn called to him from the tiny side garden, the one that held her stones, and not much else, still.

“Come here.”

He came round to find her staring over the low wall with a very strange look on her face, not as if she were unhappy but as if she were near to tears.

The yellowing summer grass surrounded the stones she had laid. All the little memorials….his parents and hers, his sister, the crew of Rogue One, and by the wall, Saw Gerrera….and beside each one was a yellow, white or blue flower.

“Did you do this?” she asked, astonished. He shook his head.

It was not until later, when they spoke to Portia that they learned it had been Galen. He had come up just before the party and asked her what people did for weddings on Fest.
This would also follow the events of "Field Day" and, stop here if you want this with no angst whatsoever, precedes the events of the "Market Day" chapter of OTE by a few months.

All comments desperately welcome.

The continuing adventures of Rosheen the Raider child and her encounter with Jyn Blackbird will resume in the next installment.
Rosheen fairly ran back with the washing and tried to make up the lost minutes. She mostly succeeded although not quite well enough to avoid a backhanded cuff from Cena. At least it was the glancing absent kind without much attention behind it. Even the bosses and lackeys were off their step it seemed like.

When she met Noisy at the cistern he grilled her as they passed buckets. Gull was there too, eyes getting wider with every word. "Bloody rutting hell..." Noisy whistled softly between his teeth when she'd finished, "you just....walked right up to her?" He looked impressed and Rosheen felt a little flush of importance. "An she just admitted it? Straight out?"

He spoke for a minute like they were just agemates, without any of his usual leader-swagger.

"Sh-she coulda been lyin," Gull whispered, dumping another bucket in his little water-cart, "she just looked like a regular l-land-born."

"Like you'd know?" Noisy snapped, his moment of weakness past. "Didn't ya see how they all stood back from her. Not a gun or a seal-sticker on her either. Old Man believes it. That's for damn sure."
Be almost sweeter if she was lyin, eh? Foolin’ em all.”

*Oh, she wasn’t lying.* Rosheen was sure but she didn’t know a way to explain that Noisy or anyone else would understand. She’d spent her whole little life watching adults and bosses with a survivors keen eye.

*Seal brought her bodyguard to talk to a little unarmed woman and Seal feared nobody.* She thought of saying.

It was more than that though….It was little things, like her accented talking voice and the way she sat with her legs out in front of her instead of crossed and whispered to herself.

She stood like her bones were just a little different….like a rope that’s pulled anchor feels different in your hand than a rope that pulled sail, even if they're twisted and tarred the same.

*She couldn’t say that though. That would sound daft.*

"I'm Land-born, remember Gull?" Rosheen said instead, ignoring Noisy's sniff of disdain, "I oughta know and that woman is no Lander."

*True enough, though all Rosheen remembered about her life before was a little row of wooden houses all shaped like triangles with doors painted blue, and a woman with grey hair who gave her soup in a bowl and a red casing spoon to eat it with. There were other children too and she remembered scooping the little silver fish in wide mesh baskets in a stream.*

Gull didn't remember anything except being here and at the winter camp across the bay. So she told him stories at night, about the clothes she wore, a pet white goat, hot barley cakes with butter and a mother with long red hair who sang songs. They might have been true…*sometimes she thought they were*….but all she remembered for all the way sure were the houses and the good soup, the red spoon and lots of people laughing and picking up slippery wiggling silver fish with their fingers as the water drained out of the baskets.

“"Ww-ill she help with the Pp-plan?” Gull asked.

Noisy considered. “Bloody knobs,” he swore softly. “Maybe. We been waiting for a move or a storm. Remember what Rosh said Lot Brokewing and Seal was saying to the Big Man about Blackbirds, eh? Blackbirds only come before the big storms.”

He looked at the bucket in his hand and then at Gull.

“Fill up them little barrels I hid behind the cook-shack, Gull-boy,” he said, “and cork-em good and tight. Tell Little Hina to stay by you tonight. Just be ready is all. I’ll tell Mac and Jem the same.”

The big black-haired boy looked around and as he made a fuss of tying the tarp over the water barrels he took a breath in and out, muttering half to them and half to himself maybe.

“Tonight or tomorrow, seems like….damn sure seems like …” He looked down at Rosheen suddenly like he was asking a question or looking for back-up.

*You looking to me for back up? You wanted to be boss, you blue-nose bully,* she thought.
Fortune favors the bold? Yeah, maybe, and maybe not....Rosheen’d seen a dead Raider come home stuck full of black-shafted arrows and heard his sweetheart wail. She’d seen servants jump up and fight back only to get their heads broke for it.

Then another thought came of thin Little Hina, and the cold winds at the Winter camp, and of poor Coney dead of the coughing sickness last year.

One thing she also knew for damn sure though was that running for the high wooden walls might get you safe or it might not but being scared to move….freezing til it was too late …..that got old people cut down where they stood and little people picked up like sacks and tossed in the shore-wolf boats to be starved and kicked for other peoples work.

Fortune might not favor the bold but it bloody well shirked the scared. Never again, she swore to herself. She’d take a chance and if that failed she’d take another otherwise you stayed and let it happen to you and that she couldn't do.

“Yeah,” she said, “I think you might be right.” Gull was looking at her scared but nodded.

Noisy smiled.

“After slops and dishes,” he said, “I’ll come find you. We gotta figure out a way to watch that Fallen lady for clues.”

They slapped hands on it and split up quick after.
“Did they give you food at Passage?” the woman asked her.

*Oh no cousin, Jyn thought. This is not a negotiation. There’ll be no “sizing up” or small talk…and it’s damn sure not an interrogation.*

*I’ve been interrogated by far better than you anyway.*

She gave the woman her best stone cold stare and got up from the floor slowly. Not dragging the process out but in no hurry either.

“I didn’t come here to eat,” she said.

The woman, to her credit, didn’t smile.

She was taller than Jyn but that hardly registered. Jyn had been staring down people taller than herself since she was eleven.

“You want to do this standing up like a Far Island kite-starver, or would you sit like a Trader?” the woman said coolly.

[“That’s probably an insult that implies cowardice…the Grey Kites being the most common local carrion.”] Portia informed her.

Jyn merely shrugged, “Your choice,”

The woman turned to her muscular companion, “Get two chairs,” she snapped.

*Oh thank the Force, preliminaries were over.*

They weren’t proper chairs so much as decorated folding stools. Hardly surprising, status luxuries would have to be portable here, with even the top predators prepared to pack at a moments notice and move from island camp to island camp ahead of attack or any shift in the weather. The poorest of them seemed to live in their boats, flipped upside-down as shelters on bare beaches.

The man put the chairs just inside the posts that hung the wooden doors of the house in a square of sunlight that came through the West facing door.

Jyn sat down and Seal sat across from her.

“You want protection and ask to speak to Rike and his kin and followers. What payment do you offer for the favor of leaving with your life?”

*Seriously?*

“Other than those helmets?” Jyn asked, “I brought nothing but words. Do you speak for Big Rike?”
The woman the laundry girl had called Seal smiled almost imperceptibly.

“I listen for Rike,” she said, “Rike is the chief and speaks for himself and all the Coursers here.”

_Coursers?_

[“Interesting. That’s a term we haven’t heard in this context before. The other groups we’ve encountered referred to themselves as “Raiders” or “Marauders.” It might imply a desire by this particular band to differentiate themselves.”] Thank you, Portia.

“Fine. So Rike wants to hear what I’m going to say before I say it in front of…..I assume….his whole gang. Fair enough. I don’t know how much you people talk to each other but I’m going to tell him, and you, the same thing I told that Teith and Ferny at the Passages.”

“Teith and Ferny have four arms, four legs, three eyes, one dick and half a brain between them,” the woman sneered.

“You may be over-counting,” Jyn said, “But that’s not my business. I came to tell you people a story. You’re in it now and you ought know your options.”

The Raider raised an eyebrow.

“What if we say we are not in your story?”

Jyn allowed herself her own near-smile.

_I’m getting better at this Cassian. You’d be proud of me._

“Too late…..but you know that now, even the fearsome Raiders don’t get to opt out of this one. The whole Coast and the Inland knows how those bastards stuck Raiders first. You’ve either heard what happened at Green River or you very much need to.”

Seal looked up at the big bearded fellow standing by the doors if trying to come to some decision. She must have decided yes because she laid both hands on her black-trousered knees and tipped them palm up.

_Oh?_

[“That is a signal common to many Far Islander groups although it is usually done further from the body. It signifies a mutual agreement of non-harm. There is no knowing what it’s meaning is among this sub-group or in this context. You should be careful about responding before we know if……”]

Jyn imitated the gesture and then reached across to lay her palms on the other woman’s briefly. Seal drew hers back and nodded as if satisfied.

Open palms to a Far-Islander signaled peace, or at least agreement not to fight right now. Flat palms laid together among the Memsa signified a willingness to listen, or accept instruction although usually only the right hand was used.
“Oh dear. Well. I have no idea what you just told her.”

Me neither, Jyn thought, I just hope I didn’t accept a marriage proposal or give away my first-born son.

The thick-necked pirates at the Passage camps had wanted specifics about the trooper attack. They’d catcalled everything else she said but been just scared enough to let her pass on to Arrow. Obviously they were small-time operators who wanted to see how the big operations played it.

This Rike, or maybe just this woman, wanted more.

"I am called Seal," she said, "born at Black Rock Camp and bound-widow as I was bound-wife to Rike’s brother Tollen the Sea-Wolf who is dead these twenty years. I am the Weigher of Spoils at this camp. Who are you?"

Ok. Fine. They could have it.

“My name is Jyn Erso. I was raised on a place called Coruscant in the Mid-Winter Veil,” she said…the bright bulge of the Galactic Core could only be seen here as a milky dust-like cloud of stars on the far Southern horizon around the Winter Solstice and then only when both moons happened to be down…. “although I was actually born on a planet called Vallt, which orbits a star even further away called V138,” she allowed herself a small smile. “I came to Ea when I was a girl of twenty two after a badly-managed youth.”

“Why?” the woman asked, determined not to look unnerved and mostly succeeding. Her bearded boyfriend by the doorpost had stopped trying and was a little slack-jawed.

“I can’t say why because it wasn’t our choice. We were wounded, dying to be honest,” Jyn said. “We came same way everything from outside comes to Ea, as jetsam, falling in a broken ship.”

“And how many are “we?”

“Two. Myself and my husband, whose name is Cassian Andor, with no other decorations. The Memsa of the Upland saved us. That is our home now and our first loyalty is to them.”

Simplistically put, but all true.

“You were shell demons? Like the ones at..”

“No.”

That came out too fast and too hard, Captain Andor of Alliance Intelligence would not approve. Get
“a grip Jyn. ‘They were….are our enemies. We were at war.’

Seal considered this.

‘Who won?’ she asked.

*Good question.*

“We fought in battles that we won, though many…nearly all of our friends were killed in them. Whole planets were destroyed. In the end the Enemy retreated, crippled. Now they are back with bells on and we think the war may be starting again.”

“The shell demons. What do they want? Can they be bought off?”

*That followed. So far these people were nothing if not bloody-mindedly transactional.*

[“*You should tell her it wants Fear and Death. In the end that's all it ever wants.*’”]

*Oh for fuckssake Portia. You can’t just tell people that on the first day. You’ve got to work up to it.*

“No. I’m telling the truth when I say they want nothing we have here. This whole world and everything on it is worth less to them than the dirt under their jackboots. To the degree that they want anything they want the Veil itself and everything in it. Worlds, stars, space ships, unchallengeable power….and the slaughter of anyone or thing that ever once did or might inconvinience.”

The woman took a moment to process all this, how Jyn had no idea. *Who knew what stories these people told themselves about their history, or even if they did.*

A thought came to her.

“That pod…the debris those ten stormtroopers down came in….it was opened at Windward Beach, on the coast at a Raider shore camp and they jumped out and killed just about everybody they found …. *’*”

*They had heard this before those dick pirates at the Passages had all but confirmed it but the whole thing had seemed a little open-ended. Why had Raiders been bringing salvage to the coast?*

*Bekka had said there were unnamed groups of Raiders trying to establish shore settlements on marginal land.*

What if this Windward hadn’t been just for a raiding base, or a keel-hauling stop. What if some of their people were actually experimenting with “going straight” there but had been unable to resist one last big score with that sweet “fall” they’d brought ashore and popped open? *Ouch.*

“Was that camps yours? Were those your people they killed first?”
There was a long silence. At least it seemed long.

“Who shot the silver one?” Seal asked finally. Beard-boy had stepped away from the door and stood now behind the woman’s stool.

She could see the resemblance now, around the eyes. He wasn’t her boyfriend, or her bodyguard, he was her son.

“I killed one. My husband did for the other.”

“Then I owe you a debt,” the woman said. "I had kin at Windward, as did Rike."

Seal stood up so Jyn did the same.

“Stay here. Eat your own food if you don’t trust ours. You will be sent for before the meeting and Duren will bring you. Rike will listen to your story. Though he will pretend not to at first. Be prepared for that. Speak little and with as cool a head as you have here. Try not to break any legs. He has sons who will need to be managed. This must look like a bargain to his advantage or he will lose status but it can be arranged. I will talk to him.” She signaled the young man, and they turned to leave….damn, I wish my son did what I wanted that fast….but Seal paused and turned back.

“What did you call them? The shell demons.”

“Stormtroopers,” Jyn said.

The Raider woman nodded slowly as if this confirmed something she had already expected, then turned and walked out across the platform with the young man. The light had shifted and the doorway was dark now.

This Seal woman reminded her of Macha in sad way. Of what someone as strong and shrewd as Macha might be like in some stunted place without her Sisters, if the joy and bone-deep kindness had been sucked out of her. It was damned depressing.

[“That went reasonably well.”] Portia said in Saw’s voice.
Noisy had a gift for figuring out when you could squeeze minutes out of situations. Rosheen really credited him that. Even more than his fists and his size it was what made her go along with him being chief. Nobody was better at timing how long you could leave a pot before it boiled over, how long a drunk argument or a skin-wrestle between two lackeys would last before they’d notice you were gone, or how far you could stretch between two chores before you raised a suspicion.

When he tapped her shoulder by the washing pit she'd tossed Hina her twig-brush and run with him. There was a big assembly coming. All work would stop soon for the crews and Cutters to attend and everybody else was going to squeeze around to watch on the edges. Being as everybody was tense and looking out for themselves it also meant a two bond-kids carrying bags of rags quick-double to the boathouses wouldn’t get noticed.

They squatted below the edge by the back platform and peeked in. There was no fire in the hearth yet and it was fair dim inside but if you looked straight through the open doors to the front platform to there was still plenty of afternoon light outside.

There she was just laying flat on her back on the porch floor.

*Oh shit. They killed her.* Rosheen though for a minute, but then saw that the woman’s blue scarf was rolled up and her hands tucked under her head, elbows splayed out.

The stranger was napping, just like a wooly-goat on a sunny rock.

*Wow. That took some nerves.*

Pulling at the boy's pinney-shirt Rosh pointed up through the dark front room. They could hear noise from people hauling boats and gear by the waters edge but didn't look to be anybody else inside the house. If somebody was watching guard they'd be watching from outside anyway, to make sure she didn't make a run for it or such.

Together the children tiptoed through and crouched down low by the doorway. The visitor moved an arm to lie along her right side but otherwise stayed still, breathing easy.

"Hello, Rosheen," the woman said then in a low voice with eyes still closed, "who's your friend?"

Jyn Blackbird sat up very slowly, then after a minute or got to her feet and stretched her arms yawning. Then, as if looking for something to do walked just inside the door of the darkened house, keeping her face not toward them mostly. As she talked she kept her gaze mostly out like she was still looking at the water to the path, just in case anybody was looking.

*They didn't have long.*

Noisy, for all his nerve and keen timing just stared at the side of the Blackbird woman's face for a whole minute in the dim light before he said anything. To Rosheen's surprise the first question out of
him was about a crazy thing. He pointed up at her right ear.

"Is that a Far-Island earring?" he whispered.

"Yes," she said, "They gave it to us," she took it off for a second and held it flat on her palm just far enough out for him to see, then put it back on her ear, easy as you please. "When I wear it I can hear a ghost talk to me through my ear."

*See, stupid boy, Rosheen thought, This is how she talks.*

If Noisy thought she was lying before he clearly didn't anymore. He looked like he was fair starving to ask questions, but there wasn't time as he surely knew.

"I can't take you with me, if that's what you've come to ask," the woman said, like she knew what the hell they were about, which was scarier that the talk of ghosts even. "I'm very sorry. I wish I could but my boats too small and they're going to be watching my every move after Rike and I have our little chat. It'll be all I can do to get myself out alive, I expect, even with this Seal helping on the sly. I will try to get back around after and ...."

"You don't have to," Rosheen whispered urgently, bursting right in and cutting her off.

Noisy pinched her arm black and blue but she blurted the plan straight out....about their planning to make a run, the little kids stealing the boat maybe even while the assembly was going on and the trick with the broken parts and them four stealing away after.... every detail out in a hushed rush,

The woman said nothing at first but tilted her head like she was listening to somebody they couldn't hear.

"Ok," she said nodding, "It's not a bad plan at all...it's pretty good actually...but tonight won't work. There'll be too many people by the harbor coming and going before and after. It will be too hard to get a boat out without being seen. Hold tight and wait. Not tomorrow either, the skies will be too clear. The day after will work. Tell your friend to go out after dark the night after tomorrow right after the big moon sets. A squall will come in fast after. I can have somebody in the harbor there to help your friends get to your hiding place faster than they could row on their own."

*Somebody?*

"Bekkies?" Noisy said real quiet, "Bekkies don't help Raiders."

"They'll help you."

The woman chewed her lip then thoughtfully, while looking out across at the horizon, to the lowering sun beyond the boats pulled up on the exposed shore. The river was at low-tide.

"These people don't trust me and they don't trust each other. They may post extra guards just because they want to show they're on the ball and keep their young bandits busy..." she knelt down on one
knee then like she was checking her boot, eyes down.

"How old are you?"

"Eleven," Rosheen said. *I think.*

"Twelve." Noisy said like he was sure.

The woman's hand slid up along her blue trouser leg, then dropped to press something down on the boards near her foot.

"This lays flat. It's easy to hide but it's also damn sharp so be careful. Can you use it if you need to?"

It wasn't clear which of them was getting asked but boy and girl both whispered at once, "Yes."

Rosheen was closest so she reached out quick to slide the thing over into the shadow.

*It was a silver-grey knife, thin as a razor but longer.*

Jyn the Blackbird flicked her eyes sideways for a second and Rosheen could see they were green like that lucky flash when the sun goes down over the open water. It wasn't a regular color for people's eyes, not around here anyway.

"It's a good plan," she said again, quietly. "Once you start don't hesitate or look back. See it through and deal with each chance as it comes. Keep moving. There's a place called Shell River on the Coast. I'll get word to people there to watch for you....Mems and humans both. It'll be hard but make yourself trust them. They'll help."

There was somebody on the path now, more than one. You could hear the tramp of feet up from the shoreline.

"Good luck," the woman stood up and without turning stepped out onto the porch to meet who was coming.

Noisy grabbed the back of Rosheen's shirt and they scrambled backwards into the shadows of the house, slinking along the inner wall until they could drop out the side and run for it.

They used the distraction of the assembly to meet among themselves although it went on long into the night and they could hear the shouting. Rosheen did not dare to take the risk of squeezing into her listening post. It wasn't needed anymore anyway. The children's course was set and there was no looking back.

By morning the Fallen woman and her little boat were gone. On the second night after that, Gull lifted Little Hina into the small boat Noisy had marked for them and they paddled out with rag-muffled oars while dark clouds slowly covered the high stars and smooth grey and ghostly white backs lifted from the water to push them on, voices in the water whispering "shhhhh..."
Rosheen did see Jyn Erso again, but not until years later.

On the Coasts and Inner Islands as elsewhere Ea’s people kept their history, such as it was, in stories big and small, whole and broken.

Big Rike of Arrow’s name was long remembered as one of the last of the Raider Chiefs of the Narrow Seas.

Piracy and highjacking went on after him of course, hearts and minds don't change the habits of centuries easily, but continued to slowly dwindle. Rike was certainly one of the last to put his name to an organized band of Cutters more than fifty strong. Through brutal as a warrior he was also remembered one of the early visionaries, along with the famous Mem Raider, Hurn BlackTooth, who saw the future and began to establish trading and gathering camps, paving the way for treaties with the people of Still and Sweet River and as far North as the Bear Islands.

One of the first generation of Blackbirds came to visit Rike at his own camp stories said.

On the Inner Islands they said that a she-Blackbird came to sue for peace and brought the Big Man the heads of ten Stormtroopers in payment for his help in the wars.

The people on the Coast and the Bear Islands told the story differently, saying that the Blackbird and her kin came to show Rike the heads of their mutual enemies but only in a show of strength to intimidate him into a bargain with the Witches of the Harbor.

Despite, perhaps because of this meeting, all accounts agreed that Big Rike of Arrow was murdered just two years after the Blackbird’s visit by his treacherous son Needle, who stabbed him at dinner and was then immediately killed by another son of his, Lot Brokewing who snapped his brother’s neck with his one good hand, in a fury of revenge for his father.
Stories of patricide, betrayal and revenge never got old.

Rike’s band split up afterwards and histories recorded that while some stayed to follow Lot and others gave up the rocky islands and sea-raiding altogether and settled ashore at Little Bear River under a Courser named Duren.

Both men’s names were kept in records at HarborTown because they met again there some years later in their old age, along with the Blackbirds and others to broker the treaty of the Beacon, the first truce ever between any significant number of the Raiders and their ancient rivals the Far Islanders.

Stories of the Fallen continued to thrill and frighten almost everywhere, and tales of the War and the comings and goings of the Blackbirds had a mystery and a romance that made them popular for generations from the Uplands to the Islands and to the Ice. Stories changed with retellings of course as details were rearranged or forgotten.

The ancient ghost at the Tower in the Uplands never forgot any detail though, no matter how small. Neither in what she saw with her own watchful eyes nor in the accounts others brought her. She held onto things that otherwise might have slipped away.

Big Duren was succeeded as leader at the Little Bear settlement by a daughter he named Seal after his mother and that name remained very popular for girls on that part of the coast.

Two little bond-children ran away… the Sea Raiders in those days kept captive children and unredeemed hostages as forced servants, a cruelty they often left out or glossed over in shame in their own stories of themselves but it was important that it be remembered…..took a boat and drowned in a storm just a day or two after the Blackbird’s visit. A common loss such as this was barely even remarked on at the time on Arrow, but it became a story repeated again and again at Shell River and in other places. Eventually finding its way into a ballad with a delightful twist ending that revealed how the brave children had fooled their captors and actually escaped to a hidden cove where the Bequa came and carried them and several of their friends to safety.

A related tale, though never a song, was re-counted at Arrow camp for a season or three before being completely forgotten. This one told of the escape of four other bond-children away from the Harbor and into the rocky hills in the confusion after a storm or the Blackbird’s visit or both.

This loss was a cause for some grumbling discontent by the holders who demanded reimbursement from Rike, especially after the body of a camp watchman who should have spied the escape and sounded the alarm was found on the hill path with his throat cut. Others said that bond-children could never have gotten their hands on such a keen weapon without being seen and it must have been Islander spies, who sometimes had been known to come into camps and make personal revenge killings after raids. Such people noted that the cut was made left handed and a stone put in the dead...
man’s mouth which was a mark of Far Island justice.

Big Rike’s people removed to Winter Camp early that year anyway, disturbed by all the upheaval. It was assumed that four runaways would starve on bare Arrow Rock by Spring and though it may have contributed to some resentment against Rike’s leadership the details were soon swallowed up in bigger events..

A version of this story did survive, somewhat less dark in it’s details, but not among the descendants of Big Rike and the Raiders.....whose stories obviously preferred to remember the stubborn survivalism and physical courage of some of their ancestors, not their cruelty..... It lived on though and was re-told quietly among the children, grandchildren and great grandchildren of six human men and women who lived mostly in the settlements between Shell River and Still River.

Chapter End Notes

Slightly grandiose. Apologies.
Deja vu

Chapter Summary

A snippet from the very early days of Jyn and Cassian on Ea post-Scarif. Looking back to their very first journey together on Jedha as distrustful and unwilling partners. The check of a hot-wreck debris ship in Scavenger territory ends badly at least for the TIE and in the night that follows a bed-time ritual triggers for Jyn the memory of Jedha and her first tense overnight with Captain Cassian Andor.

Chapter Notes

An odd bit that's been kicking around from the early days of OTE. (before the Chapter 1 of that opus actually) Much of it in Jyn's head in the skipped-over-in-the-movie-but-you-know-it-had-to-happen-it-was-at-least-a-days-walk-from-where-they-left K2-to-the-City.

They set camp downslope from the shattered TIE and got a good campfire going even before sunset. The rest of the crew set off back toward the base camp to fetch the heavier tools they would need to cut up the half-crushed fighter. Two days well north of Nexa was out of the range of the blue Lizards and well south of the legendary forest wolves…or so everybody said….but Cassian’s Scavenger buddies advised them that a good fire was a worthwhile precaution. Fire was the accepted signal that somebody had claimed a crash site.

“Scavengers always acknowledge first-come-first-claim,” the grey furred Keen had said, rubbing his ears thoughtfully. “Well, at least the decent ones do anyway.”

So they tossed a lot of wood on the fire and made camp. Somebody had to stay and watch.

Jyn was glad for two things, though she did not tell him so. Glad that the stupid Imperial son of a bitch had been so obviously and unmistakably reaching for the manual beacon signal even after Cassian told him to raise his hands, and glad that she was the one that took the shot.

He’d had one hand on the edge of the hatch and from that side had the nearest shot on the comm panel itself so he took it. She’d been on the other side with the clearest angle on the pilot.
They worked together now without needing to talk much about it, every now and then it still seemed wonderful to her even on a sorry job like this.

_Someday if a Fall came down with a live civilian or an Imp inside it capable of surrendering they would cross that bridge. This hadn’t been the day._

He didn’t say “I’m sorry you had to do that,” or “It should have been me,” although she knew he thought both those things.

She didn’t bother to point out there was no way that poor fuck was going to surrender. TIE pilots were drilled so hard on that death-before-dishonor bullshit they didn’t even bother putting adequate radiation shielding in the non-command fighters.

She didn’t say I wish it was over. I wish I could spare you all of this, us all of this, but I can’t.

They had made rules and they worked hard at keeping them.

They were still soldiers. There was a war on and telling yourself you could hide from it was the biggest most dangerous lie of all.

Surviving hell and fire and ten months over the edge of every map couldn’t change that even though it had changed almost everything else.

Jyn piled fresh soft-needle pine boughs between the lengthwise logs and untied the thicker wool blanket to lay on top of the nest.

“Wait,” he said ducking his head under the tarp they’d slung between the trees and tossing a few more armfuls of boughs onto the bed she’d made.

“It’ll compress a little overnight,” he said, kneeling to help her roll out the padding and blankets.

_Yes, please_, almost slipped out, but it was the wrong time to tease about such things.

“Lay them out together,” she said instead. Comfort fucking under field conditions might or might not be a good thing now but if it was going to be a rough night for either of them it was better to be close. That was a lesson they’d learned very early.

He nodded and unfolded the blankets to make a two-person sized pocket, catching her right hand as she reached for the stuff-sack to plump up as a pillow and laying a kiss on the palm.

She traced the roughness of his jaw with her fingers and thought for the thousandth time what she hadn’t had the courage to speak aloud yet. _I love you._

"Rough day," she said. "Let's get some rest."
Using a damp corner of the camp towel she scrubbed her teeth with a dab of the powdered-salt-and-resin powder from her bag, then rinsed with water from her canteen. Looking up in the firelight she noticed Cassian tucking a blaster under his sack “pillow.”

* * *  

A precaution against some “not decent ones?” Sensible.

“Give me mine too,” she said and a very odd feeling came over her.

* * *  

What was that Naboo word for a feeling that something had happened before almost the way it was happening now? It meant “already done” or something.

She’d slept soundly for most of the flight from Yavin IV to Jedha, for the first time in months. There with a weapon by her side and the only two creatures near were highly unlikely to kill her before this bullshit job was done and even then not just to steal her boots.
It was the closest thing to safety she’d known since Garel.

“Captain Cassian Andor of Rebel Intelligence” woke her just as they came out of FTL into low orbit and a spiraling descent.

“Miss Erso,” he said.

*The sound of footsteps and a voice was enough to jolt her awake, but she was confused for a second… “Who?”*

*It took a full minute for the meaning of the name to sink in.*

“We’re here.”

Jyn sat upright on the bench as the Alliance officer pulled some nutrition bars out of a locker under the cockpit ladder.

The rumpled khakis and faded jacket were the same but otherwise it was almost as if he’d turned into a different person. This one handed her a bar companionably then moved back to peer out the porthole window smiling as if he were chatting up a girl in the seat next to him on a transport flight.

“There below us, that’s Jedha, or what’s left of it.”

What the fuck are you doing? she’d thought, contemptuously. Seriously Rebel Intelligence, you’re talking about the scenery? Are you going ask me next if I’m new in town and want to get a caff?”

She’d counted four Cassian Andors so far, maybe five.

There was the sardonic interrogator, the vaguely threatening man in the shadows, the hurried soldier pissed off that she’d pocketed his extra gun but unable to toss her out the door because he’d obviously been ordered by Big Red to bring her along whether he wanted to or not and most unsettling of all the man who’d gone silent when stubbornly demanded to pay respect for respect, trust for trust...that one whose dark eyes had swept over her with such deliberate care, as if she were a page he was making himself read, memorize even.

*A shiver of surprise had gone through her then. She hadn’t expected whatever it was she’d seen in those eyes. Resignation? Weariness?*

Whatever it was it passed. The soldier returned, nodded and turned away to climb up into the cockpit and silence the outraged droid. She hadn’t seen that mysterious man again since.
After scoping out the city from a distance...the "soldier" returned then, less pissed off and determined to be professional... they had left the shuttle concealed up on the ridge above the Pilgrims Way.

The disgruntled K2-SO climbed back into the cockpit still muttering, apparently to himself since Captain Cassian Andor of Rebel Intelligence didn’t seem to be paying attention, “…high-security prisoner yesterday and today unsupervised and cleared for a gun, so we’re probably tossing all risk assessment analysis out the window. Of course I’ll just stay here then....” as they started down the slope on foot.

It would take a couple of hours hiking to reach one of the Way shrines that served as gathering places for the devout before they started the half day walk into the Holy City itself.

Her companion didn’t talk much as they maneuvered the narrow paths, for which she’d been quite grateful.

Jyn’s head was swirling with words but none of them were words she wanted to say to him.

Why Saw? Why? Was it because I told that boy my name? I burned out my own identity and set up all the scan-docs and files. I was ready to live and die as “Kestral,” Saw. Talliet was dead and Jyn Erso was dead, but it wasn’t enough for you was it? Was I a potential security risk? Or just an inconvenience? You told me I did well on that last mission you said you were proud of me you son of a bitch. Did you think I’d die there and you be spared putting a blaster charge in my head yourself? But even if I lived you knew I’d never sell you out to the Imps didn’t you? however much I hated you there would always be someone I hated worse after Kashyyk, after Maia, and Dibsy and my mother and Hadder...you don’t know about Hadder... but probably counted on that didn’t you. Galen Erso is alive Saw. Alive and still working for the fucking Empire. Did you know? Did you always know? The people who killed my mother. The bastards who are winning because you are fighting AT-ATs with a knife. I waited Saw....a fucking bunker, you knew about the cave, you knew you more than anybody else and you left me in a fucking bunker....held out for five days. I only had water for three. By the time I finally gave up and walked out walked not crawled the only ride left was some sketchy smugglers, yeah. Do you want to hear about that Saw? Was it a test? Was I supposed to fight my way back to the Partisans to prove my loyalty? If it was I flunked. I told my real name to a little street kid in an alley on Garel because fuck you. I beat up five stormtroopers to save her cat because scared little girls shouldn’t be left to cry. You have someone the Alliance needs, a poor runaway Imperial who says he’s seen Galen Erso. My father. The man Talliet said was a collaborator, the father you said was dead, the father you said I was never ever ever supposed to think or talk about again. Somebody’s thinking about him Saw. I don’t care if Galen Erso lives or dies and I won’t sell
to the blood-sucking Empire but I will trade whoever or whatever to your Rebel Senator pals and
their little army for a chance at the truth you owe me Saw.

“Let me know if you need a break,” Andor said to her when her foot slid on some gravel and she
shot the tall bastard a backwards glare.

How thick was my file spy-boy? Did it tell you I’ve crippled men for implying I couldn’t keep up on
the march?

He was smart enough to confine himself to silence after that except to pass a canteen.

Jyn concentrated on walking, on where she was and what she was doing, and struggling to keep her
face blank and her head clear.

As they approached what she took from the top of the ridge to be a huge hollowed-out shelter in a
red sandstone boulder Andor spoke again.

The angled mid-morning light revealed the “shelter” below them to be a massive cowled head
buried up to it’s earlobes Milling groups of people were crowding around it with more still coming
down the path. Figures in red could be seen moving through the crowd.

“Follow my lead here. Religious pilgrims are allowed into the city in groups of only fifty at a time
now. We’ll join this band, camp with them at the hostel shelter of the Esoterics at sundown then
climb the temple stairs and enter through the old gates when they open at daybreak.”

“Do we have a cover story or something?”

“We have scandocs, whenever they’re asked for.”

He knelt and dropped his pack, pulling two blue doc-clips from a pocket inside the bag.

“Here,” he said, handing her one.

She tapped it for a short read.

Having to work with other people’s forgeries always made her nervous.

Good work though.

Nice job reproducing that fuzzy aspect ratio they always used in regional outposts... Security
Services coding numbers in just the right range.

The casing on the clip was even scratched and worn on the corners... a sweet touch. Oh look, I’m
an organ donor.

Albarrio, Terris Sandra, age 21.
“Who are you?”

“Martin Loren Albarrio.”

Odds were on Sandra and Martin not being cousins.

She said nothing but he went on as if as if she had, eyes still down.

“The Great Temple is the only place where Jedhan marriages can be legally recognized and supposedly the stones of the inner shrine had the power to grant infertile couples…”

You’re just telling me this now?

She’d noticed before they left the shuttle that he’d tidied up that mustache and scruff of beard at some point while she was asleep but had taken it as soldierly routine.

“Cut to the chase Captain……….how damn married do we have to pretend to be?”

Hell. Was there going to be snogging?

Traditional Jedhans are very reserved she remembered. There wasn’t likely to be much privacy at a hostel camp anyway and wouldn’t PDA on a Pilgrimage be bad form?

Whatever. She’d kissed far worse than him to fool security droids or guards but unless it was life or death he’d better keep his damn hands to himself.

“Nothing overt,” he said gravely after a moment of silence. “You didn’t sign up for that and it won’t be an issue, you have my word.”

"My word?" Heavens, an officer and a gentleman….or was this another mask Captain Andor?

She hadn’t been worried, really. The Alliance might be called traitors and saboteurs by media but they weren’t the Empire and they damned well weren’t Zegonian people-runners, Thalassian pirates or the Hutt.

He’d let her take the gun and if he hadn’t known what that test was about he was too stupid to last an hour in Saw's company.

“It’s also common for pilgrims to take a vow of silence while walking the Way,” he added, “so we don’t even have to talk much just stay close and try not to look like you hate me.”

“Well, you haven’t given me a reason to hate you yet so that shouldn’t be too hard,” she said.

He cast her that dark “reading” look again, then turned back to finish re-zipping the pack.
It was a joke Captain.

Fine. Clearly the droid was the one with a sense of humor.

She slipped the chip inside her jacket sleeve pocket. “Will these hold up if we’re stopped inside the city?”

“Let’s hope we don’t have to find out.”

Either this was skillfully feigned nonchalance or he genuinely did not give a rat’s ass. Her gut told her the former but she couldn’t say why.

And Force knew her gut had been wrong in the past.

They joined the groups of people, most of them humans with a few Amonids sprinkled in, milling in the shelter of the sandstone cowl from the bracing desert wind. Figures in red cloaks were directing everyone into groups of twenty-five and passing out red ribbons to be pinned to searched bags.

When the queue they’d joined reached the table by the hollowed-out sandstone nose one of the red-robed hooded men checked their docs and looked at the bags.

Her “husband” put a protective hand on her shoulder. “It will mean much to our grandmothers for us to go to the city,” he said, unbuttoning the scuffed blue parka he wore to show the lining. Jyn grit her teeth and opened her olive thermal jacket.

The white-mustached “Disciple” lifted his scarlet hood in turn and glanced over their heads toward the grey-uniformed security escorts hassling the Amonids.

“Blessings of the living Force upon your grandmothers,” he said and pinned red ribbons onto their un-searched bags.

She didn’t see the bribe pass but she was pretty sure it might have been when Andor laid his gloves on the table to be checked.
Joining the crowds they walked the dusty road toward the city side-by-side. Some people were chanting, others rang small bells but most walked as they did, in silence until the short Jedhan night fell.

The walls of Ni-Jedha rose above them dark except when lit briefly by drones that circled like bats shining searchlights on the walls and approaches.

The huge triangular abomination of the Imperial Destroyer faded against the darkening sky but still loomed like a threatening shadow above the city, blotting out part of the stars but lit across the bottom with the lights from open bays, portals and targeting cannons.

A moving stream of bright dots marked the ceaseless flow of shuttles, taking the last scraps of the kyber out of the hill mines of Jedha ….white, green, yellow….up and gone.

The “hostel” was no more than a series of covered platforms set off from the road and the massive stone staircases cut up the sides of the mount of the Holy City.

Shabby humans and droids sold small bottles of water and packets of sketchy protein nuggets along the railings but Jyn and her companion had already packed food and water into their bags before leaving the shuttle. They drank part of the water and washed roughly with what was left before sharing their small meal in devout silence.

By means of signing and a few coins Captain Andor got them a good space, on one of the small "private" wooden platforms, arranged around the central heat units like very low tables. Open but marked out in painted red lines, they seemed to be mostly reserved for old people and families, although two people could be a family, she supposed.

As the light of the sun slipped away people began to lie down within their painted lines, to get whatever rest they could before the last climb up the steps at dawn.

The “pilgrim gates” were open to the foot traffic of pilgrims for only a few hours each morning. It was the only way into the city now that didn’t require a body scan or, she was sure, massive bribes.

Some pilgrims set up in tiny one person tents, others simply lay on the bare boards within their designated space.....not that much smaller in size than her cell. Most though, like Jyn .....or rather “Sandra” and her husband opened their packs and took out thermal sleeping bags. They fit within their allotted space. Also attached at the opening of each bag was a cloth pouch. Captain Andor rolled up his blue parka and slipped it inside to act as a pillow after pulling a green cord on the outside. One whole side if the bag inflated slightly then to make a thin pad. She copied him and her bag did the same. Several people around them had them too. Clever.
Jyn was rather pleased. Her bunk on Wobani had been a metal shelf and a blanket, between this and the padded bench on the shuttle she’d slept on last night things were looking up dramatically comfortwise. She tucked her rolled jacket inside too.

There was a kind of ritual privacy to the wall-less "rooms."

Sunset relaxed the vows of silence a bit it seemed because she heard a few whispered voices around them but most people had succumbed to exhaustion. Many had walked far further than they had.

The occasional beam of the passing drones was the only light now.

She climbed into her sleeping bag.

It was good material. With her arms tucked in against the cold night air she’d be warm enough.

Alliance was moving around and she sensed rather than saw that as he lay his boots beside his pack he had taken something out from it. No question in her mind but that he’d slipped a blaster out from it’s hiding place inside the pack and slipped it under his makeshift pillow.

Then he worked his long legs in and settled into his own sleeping bag strangely careful not to bump into her. No small trick in the dark.

Jyn reached her hand up and out to touch his shoulder as he settled back.

He rolled toward her a little, his face closer to hers and she rolled onto her side toward him.

As close as she could get to where she thought his ear must be without actually touching him she whispered, “Give me mine too."

It seemed as if he might have sighed. Then he sat up in the dark and fumbled a little with the pack before laying back down and sliding something beneath her “pillow” too.

Jyn slid a hand up to check. *Trust but verify.* Sure enough it was the A-180 from her pack. The one she’d “found” for herself before they left Yavin.

She felt his breath on her hair as he leaned a little over her.

*Never before in her life had she ever wished for an Imperial drone to fly by but now she found she could not help wishing to see his face a little, to at least know which man was looking at her there in the dark.*

Then he whispered in his turn.
“Mine actually.”

*Maybe the droid wasn’t the only one with a sense of humor.*

She pulled herself further down into her cocoon and he must have done the same as he turned over with his back to her.

*Jedha was above them, a war zone.*

*An actual fucking Imperial destroyer was fixed above them.*

*Calm cool and collected as this Alliance played it she knew in her bones he was nervous, had to be.*

*This whole thing was very likely a scam or a trap. The only question was whose?*

"Planet-killer" sounded like Imperial propaganda right up there with Old Palpy and his torture-monster Vader having superpowers, but what if it wasn’t? Captain Cassian Andor of Rebel Intelligence seemed to believe it and that couldn’t make for a good night’s sleep.

*Saw might find her tomorrow…. she might see him…say out loud the words that had roiled in her through so many dark nights for the last five years…..find the truth.*

"*There is a man there who says he has a message from your father...*"

It should have been a terrible few hours, for both of them.

Jyn didn’t expect to sleep at all.

She did though. They both did.

Just before dawn the distant prayer bells and the growing rumble of traffic and machinery on the transport ramps a few k away woke her from a sound sleep. Immediately she was conscious that mothers crystal was in her hand, a blaster was under her pillow and someone was beside her, there was the unexpected comfort of a back against her own.

It wasn’t that she was disoriented. Jyn knew where and when she was. The shape and weight of the other body beside her wasn’t some faded memory of Maia, or Hadder or that Bespani boy on Cerea.

It was a man she knew not one true thing about except that that he favored a modified A-280 that had seen a lot of use, close range use to judge by the polish on the barrel.

*You used to rail against the Alliance for not being willing to “get their hands dirty” Saw. Yeah, well, you may find they’ve hardened up a bit.*
He was here to do a job, get a defector away from Partisans.

She was just as likely to be bait or trade goods here as a contract broker.

Yet she stayed still, not moving for a few more seconds, breathing and letting the contact last. Waiting for the tall dark-eyed stranger to move first.

A crazy idea came to her that he might be doing the same.

_This is pathetic Liana Hallik, clearly you’ve been in prison way too long._

Then little speaker-drones began to move through the shelter chiming a sound of bells.

“Pilgrims, the temple gates will open in fifteen minutes. Assemble with your assigned group. Leave nothing behind…. Alhujaj, savatimu fath bawwabat almaebad fi 15 dqyq, altajamue mae almajmueat almukhasasat alkhasat bik. la tatrik shyyaan wara’ak…. “…

The message repeated in Basic again and at least six other dialects

The man beside turned just a little away from her.

She pulled the blaster down into the bag and concealed it in her shirt before getting up. Captain Andor was no doubt doing the same.

_Tired out from the march, she would tell herself later. You’ve gotten soft Kestrel, better not let the old lion see that._

They worked together to get the gear rolled and stowed quickly. Her instinct was to keep her eyes averted but she made herself look up at him. _Newly marrieds would, right?_

He handed her back the dark blue scarf she had draped across her pack last night and she covered her hair as the other women in their group did.

The smile he gave her might have been convincing except it didn’t match the dark eyes.

Shouldering their packs, he took her arm like a protective husband and being tall navigated their push through the crowd. When their group was called and everyone started started up the long stairway
into the ruins of the broken and occupied holy city of Ni-Jedha.

Once within the gates they would quickly abandon their larger packs in one of the washing stations. No doubt Imperial bomb squad droids were called in within minutes to assess the unattended luggage but on finding inside only bundled sleeping bags and redi-meals they would move on leaving the contents to the child-thieves that prowled the crumbling amenities stations.

Once released from observant silence he would hustle her through the crowds toward the market streets surrounding the shattered temple with growing unease, telling her his plan but clearly already unnerved by the ratcheted-up Imperial security.

Within four hours they would be in a firefight. Within 36 hours the city would be gone. Within ten days billions would die the War would begin and she and the stranger she had slept one night beside would go through fire together.

Jyn worked her way around the campfire, and placed her boots under the tarp before climbing into the bed they’d made.
The pine boughs were a damn fine mattress really.

Under the blankets she maneuvered close and into his arms as quickly as she could.

“Are you cold,” he said. “What is it Jyn, is something wrong?”

_He meant "besides the obvious" but he didn't need to say that either._


Only the small moon was up so the stars were fairly clear above them, but she buried her head against his chest.

“I'm here,” he said.

They did not need the blasters under their pillows, not that night at least.

Just after first light Keen and his crew returned and they started taking the broken TIE apart.

The body of the pilot was gone.

“Yeah,” Dov said, slapping the dirt off his small furred hands, “It was making the tall-boys..” …_he meant the Taun who had taboos about the dead…._ “nervous. Besides, didn’t seem right you should have to deal with that eh? I mean Jyn-ally shot the runt bastard, so it seemed like the least we could do to help out was bury him. Saved that baggy black suit it was wrapped in though…thought that might come in handy some day, eh?”
Chapter End Notes

Looking back pre-Jedha to a bitter and slightly more feral Jyn and a shut down Cassian.

Also more bits of Girl Scout backwoods camp-setting. Where I learned to love pine trees.
What Will You Become?

Chapter Summary

Memories and rumination on a number of things including firearms, equipment, names and changes that Jyn finds come over herself and Cassian. Set on Yavin IV, at Jedha, and after the end of the Civil War is declared.

Chapter Notes

A number of bits left over from OTE, bound....loosely I admit.... by Saw's most famous unused-in-the-movie line.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

YAVIN IV

She sat on a crate at the edge of a carved-from-the-jungle landing strip, sleeves rolled up and already sweating. It was humid but bearable in the shade of the ruins, though it was clearly going to get hellishly hot very fast when the sun cleared that tree line. She’d held onto the vest because she’d start thinking of it as lucky but if things got much warmer that bit of sentimentality might need to be reconsidered. Waiting she turned the crystal on her necklace absently and tried to take stock of her surroundings.

They’d given her a few blissful minutes in a real live hydro shower, a quick impersonal med-droid scan and a meal of carb-nuts, protein crumbles and some kind of yellow fruit that she’d wolfed down so fast she hadn’t tasted it before she asked for seconds. An R4 astromech had even returned her prison shirt to her clean and dry, a weirdly hospitable touch. It made her wonder where the bloody laundry was. They had also given her a not-new-but-new-to-her pair of trousers and decently fitting light boots.

A woman in pale blue coveralls brought her a scuffed rucksack that was empty except for some basic necessities.

Inside she’d found, soap discs, Bacta-fluid and some UV/UVA cream, a small med-kit, three pairs of thin wicking socks and ..oh Force, extra clean underwear. 

Busting me out of prison was great but now I’m really grateful.
The same woman with a polite smile she did not return handed her a brown jacket and lightweight scarf that she carried under her arm. Scarves were always useful...shade, protection from smoke and dust, concealment. Jedha would be cold maybe and if she remembered correctly many women kept their hair covered in the temples, or something.

No gun though.

That was a problem that needed to be solved. *If they thought she was going to Jedha without a gun they were out of their still-wearing-our-Senatorial-rob...* minds. *What was the fine line between a trusted...or at least legitimately hired...operative and a coerced prisoner?*

She was betting it was a blaster.

“When was the last time you heard from your father?”

*Calm, Lianna, keep it together.*

She made herself look around while stone-facing that she wasn’t. *Let them think I do this sort of thing all the time...or that I don’t give a rat’s ass.*

It was mostly second-hand stolen Imperial equipment. Makeshift, repurposed or bought with "liberated" cash no doubt but it was still a damned impressive base for all that.

Ships. These people had ships and not just boosted shuttles but X-wings, A-wings fueling and taxiing out, being landed and moving back into hangers in those cool dark temples and people, so many people, old, young, humans mostly but she’d also seen Twi’lek, Abenado, lots of droids...all moving, purposeful. There was a sense of unity here. These people could do some DAMAGE.

*Which begged the question. Why weren’t they? What were they waiting for?*

She forced herself not to count ships, personnel, fuel tanks, not to think.

This was not her war anymore. She was doing this to pay for her freedom and get to Saw, to get into a room with him and find out the truth.

*Because the woman who had been Kestrel Dawn and Tanith Ponta knew something these people did not. No one can save the Galaxy if it’s determined to destroy itself. No one can even save another person...not really, or at least not for long.*
This secret base of the Rebellion. Was this where Hadder would have ended up if “Tanith” hadn’t persuaded him to not go with his friends when they stole that ship and went to join the Rebels?

“Stop him!” Akshaya had begged her, “I cannot lose the only child I have left. He will listen to you. He’s in love with you.”

Would he be here right now if she hadn’t shaken him and said that dying in a hopeless cause wasn’t noble, it was just dead. I was born High Imperial and raised a Partisan Rebel, she told him, I know how this will end. Tanith Ponta might have kept her head down on the Rim for two years but that didn’t mean she was blind or deaf.

There was no real Rebellion with a chance. The Empire had crushed it at Onderean.

It had felt like treason as she spoke it, like the last nail in Kestrel Dawn’s…or was it Jyn Erso’s?….coffin but she’d been desperate. The Partisans to the degree that they even survived never showed up anymore except on the most illegal of the illegal pirate feed-reports…they had dwindled to a handful of boogyman raiders, she told him….bombing the occasional transport rig at Jedha, Sullest, Lothal and likely racking up more civilian casualties than Imperial when they did….. Mon Mothma’s precious political Alliance had been on the run for years, Force only knew what those self-righteous mice were up to other than pushing propaganda and polishing uniform buttons.

“You have your mother,” she’d said, leaving the “you have me” audible if unspoken.

Had any of it been true? Or had Tanith just wanted it to be, been willing to say anything to save him, to make one person she cared about stay by whatever means necessary?

So she lied, or at least twisted words try to protect him.

Yeah. Look how that turned out. The Empire killed them anyway

STOP.

She found herself clutching the small stone around her neck so tightly that her fingers hurt and forced herself to tuck it back inside her shirt.

Do not go there. No back-sliding Lianna. Eyes forward. One foot in front of the other. Breathe.

Her bodyguard/escort/parlay partner….interesting how no one had been real clear on that….Captain Cassian Andor of Rebel Intelligence approached and nodded in a businesslike fashion. He seemed very different than he had in that dim almost chilly Conference room.

Captain Andor was perspiring ever so slightly in that jacket and she wondered how late in the morning that layer of professional military cool lasted here in the tropics.

There was a rucksack over his shoulder and a coat under his arm as well but he was still dressed in what passed for a uniform around here, khakis with insignia pinned on, a variation of the Starbird she and other little Partisan punks had graffitiied onto the side of Imperial buildings until Saw made them stop.
She appreciated that he didn’t bother even with the small-talk of “are you ready?” He only nodded to her and looked in the direction of a nondescript Zeta-class D4 being fueled and loaded on the nearest space to their right, assuming she’d follow his gaze.

“That’s for us,” he said, so she stood and walked beside him toward it.

His legs were long but he measured his steps to match her stride. It took her half the length to the shuttle to realize that he was doing it without seeming to either slow down or make her take an extra step to keep up.

How very odd, she thought. Is he doing that on purpose? Why would he bother?

“We’ll land outside the city and go in through the Pilgrim Gate…..” he began as they walked.“We have an opening with…”

We? Us? So was it to be partners then, at least tactically? It had been a while since she’d had back-up….a long while. It made her uneasy in a way but it beat the hell out of having to be handcuffed again.

As they reached the shuttle bay door a young man was loading some small bags and a crate inside. Captain Andor tossed his blue coat on as well.

As he did so a voice shouted out crisply from the other side of the noisy cargo strip.

“Captain Andor…a word”

It was Big Red from the interrogation.

What’s this about I wonder? Oh please tell me he’s not coming along.

Andor stopped, glanced up in the older man’s direction but didn’t react otherwise.

“That’s General Draven,” he said as if apologizing for some interruption. “Give me a minute Miss Erso.”

“No rush,”

It’s your war, pal.

Miss Erso. Jyn Erso.

She needed to be Jyn Erso again after years of being told she absolutely desperately needed to be anything else.
“Captain Andor’s mission is to authenticate this pilot’s story and if possible locate your father.” The most wanted woman in the Galaxy had said.

Only Saw could tell her the truth, and now….for once, maybe he would.

And after that? Who would she be then?

No. Not going there yet.

Later after she’d made the murder-droid’s charming acquaintance and successfully staked her ethical and strategic claim to one of guns from the captain's duffel, she had a quick look around the shuttle itself. Mostly she’d been looking for a bench or something to sleep on but knowledge was power...so..

The A-180 she’d claimed was a decent utilitarian gun but he’d yielded it up with less fight than she’d expected and she soon saw part of the reason why.

As suspected the weapon she’d scored was the “extra,” his personal gun was in the grey bag with the map pad and some recon scopes.

Blastech AD-280.

Tricked out by the glimpse she’d gotten, too heavy for her taste and too long for her arm though likely not for his.

The standard 180 was a trifle long as well but when it was beggars v. choosers, the beggars always won. She was a quick and good shot, even better than good actually but she was an opportunistic marksman. The places she’d moved, the life she’d lived in the last few years...hacking, dodging checkpoints, swapping covers, street searches, prison... had been not conducive to keeping a gun in hand so she used what she found when she found it.

She’d also spotted a couple of flash-clips, vibra-knives in one of the crates and she was definitely scoring a couple of those if she got the chance, you could be damned sure. Hand-to-hand she was not out of practice with.

The 280 had been in the separate shoulder bag he laid on the ground when he went back to talk to
his boss. The cargo boy hadn't touched it. Andor had been the one to pick the parcel up and place it inside the hatch as he climbed in, dropping it on the floor behind his seat. Not as if he was trying to hide it though. The movement had the feel of a routine. That comforted her a little. The mark of a true professional is that he puts the really important equipment in last and he does it with his own hands. This spy made her uneasy in lots of ways she couldn't quite pin down but at least the man seemed like he could handle himself.

Saw had railed against Mothma and the secret High Council of the Alliance in her hearing more once, as “idealists” willing to let others take the terrible risks and make the hard choices. The word “cowards” was not used but it was implied. “They are law-chamber revolutionaries” who think they can defeat the dragons by exposing their crimes to the sheep,” he had roared.

“Do they think the sheep do not already know?” she remembered Yaddo laughing.

*Maybe Saw.....but they can break people out of Wobani just to chat, they have damned X-wings now, and at least one of the sheep is packing a Blastech A280.*

"Too extreme" the lady had said. *Why are they worried you won't give them this prisoner when they ask for him?*

She found a bench, tried to clear her mind and slept.
After the Partisans captured them at NiJedha they had quickly and roughly taken all their guns. Even the blind man's crossbow.....about which, what the hell?....but the Alliance officer was straight up the chief target of their wrath. At least a few of them had clearly seen Cassian pick off their man when he had been about to toss a grenade into the tank she had been standing near. That he had taken out a dozen Imperials at the same scene was not going to be a mitigating factor for them. Would it be for Saw? Also something about Cassian just seemed to piss them off.

She tried to keep her ears open. With hands tied and blindfolded she couldn't protect him. All she could do was hope that Saw was still maintaining top-down order, that they wouldn't dare harm potential high-value hostage/prisoners without his express ok.

That raid had unsettled her with more than a percussion headache.

It was sloppy. Saw's attack cadre was a lot of things but sloppy wasn't one of them. Something was very very wrong.

They marched them blindfolded across the flats for hours and she heard the two Tognaths talking.

“No. That wasn’t what he said then but I think it’s her/designated female. I remember.”

“Even so, that one he’ll kill for sure, just as a lesson to the cowards/flinchers and if he doesn’t I will.”

“The gun was good, keep it separate/alone. The barrel was shortened nicely.”

Grudgingly. “I saw the shot, he was lucky or he was good/blessed.”

“He was good/blessed.”

“As good/blessed as Gor?”

A rough chuckle. “Probably not, he only looks like a hawk-hunter/skilled archer, but not a supernatural being/madman/one possessed by the Demons.”
Gor. Oh Force.

There had been a sharpshooter Saw brought in on his own for a couple of missions. A short and dark human male named Gor, Corellian, or so she remembered Doreth’a saying. The man had only shown up sometime after Commenor and try as she might she couldn’t remember ever hearing him speak to anyone except Saw and then only in a whisper. His beard and hair were jet black and unkempt and his eyes never seemed to focus on much, except his rations, or mapping holos during briefings, but never on people.

The consensus on Gor ran from “something is not right with the guy” to “nuts.”

On Saw’s lead assault cadre “nuts” was a pretty high bar to clear….especially after Commenor.

Saw gave him his orders separately and seemed to keep him away from…well everybody…the way you do a dog you don’t quite trust not to bite.

Jyn did notice that Gor kept a blaster on him 24/7. Not remarkable in and of itself, they all did when not in the showers or underdressed for some other reason, but his was a heavy D2-28, modified. You could see the bulge of it in his belt or side holster, under under a coat or rain-cape, in all weathers and under all conditions. The 20- series DTs packed enough power to punch through armor panels which was damned useful she’d supposed but hardly walking-around armament, she’d never have thought of a near-cannon being a quick-shot weapon.

Then came a mission where they set up a stake-out on Oba-Diah.

The team was hunkered down on an abandoned transport platform for sneak attack on an Imperial fuel convoy. They had a prime location but the weather was tricky and there was no way of knowing if the convoy would pass today, tomorrow or the next. The plan was to move in, stay in position, set watches and wait.

During blackest part of a long Oban night two days in, something happened.

The Sentries hadn’t seen anything and sensor lamps on the perimeter showed no metal or energy signatures, but while half the group was asleep on the darkened platform one of the motion alarms Saw always placed on either side went off with a series of shrill beeps.

Jyn and Mara had both leaped up and grabbed their guns in the pitch dark but fortunately they didn’t leap up fast enough because Gor had already opened fire from the ground, fan spray of at least ten rounds in narrow-beam thuds.

Jyn felt the sizzle of one scorching her shirt as it passed.

The IR lights from the sentries guns went on and instantly Saw was standing tall in the middle of the circle of cowering Partisans, back-lit in scarlet from the IR and roaring “Tactical! Stand down! NOW!”

The firing stopped at once and when Jyn lifted her head she saw Gor sitting up, his back against a fragment of railing, dark eyes wide in the red light and his heavy gun still up in both hands.

It had only been a flock of tufted bats, a dozen lay scattered around them, a coin-sized smoking hole through each.
The Corellian stared at Saw blankly for a moment, then tucked the blaster back, rolled himself up in his coat and lay down to sleep again.

“Bats!” Mara had hissed against her back later, though not so loud that Saw could hear. “It was just bats! The fucking maniac could have killed us all.”

The next day Gor single-handedly picked off the ten guard troopers on the moving convoy with equal skill.

It was on the march out, after caching the unexploded fuel tanks at the depot, that Jyn heard Beezer Fortuna argue with Saw, a very rare occurrence.

She had been trudging silently behind… single-file Tusken formation….but being always closest to Saw in their standard line-up she caught bits of the conversation.

“.best in the Galaxy won’t matter if he gets us all killed…too unstable…you have said yourself, sir…”

“.that can be managed…” she heard Saw say, as the wind took almost every other word, “…you think such skill comes easy brother?…. war exacts a price. The Empire makes the whole Galaxy pay, at least we pay fair. We use the coin of our own minds and souls.”

“Hmmmm….?” Fortuna gurgled. “Aye sir…but some were very poor men to start with and… when nothing is left….empty….”

Saw stopped then and the whole line stopped with him, turned and roared at his Lieutenant, “You think so Fortuna? What will you do when they catch you? What will you do when they break you? If you continue to fight, what will you become?” They all stood frozen. “What will any of us become?”

Fortuna loyal, had bowed.

Saw mastered himself quickly and the line moved again.

They marched to the next depot to wait for extraction.

Gor vanished soon after but she never heard where he went.

Forty-five standard days later Mara was dead.

One hundred days later she turned sixteen and twenty after that Saw told her to hold her position and left her behind on Tamsye Prime.
Hours later when the last of Saw’s loyalists dragged her into a cave tense with fear and fury braced to confront her fallen idol and hero, a shattered half-mad old man limped toward her in a dark cavern saying “Jyn? Is it you?” She thought, in that first instant of Gor.

_No, no …what have you done Saw? …what did you pay…?_

_____

EA

When word came to them that the Concordance had been signed they had been sitting in their little stone house, drinking cold beer from the stone jug they kept cooling in the well. Since they had spent most of three solid days on the data pads in the tower Portia finally kicked them out and all but ordered them to go home for a few hours to wash and rest. When she signaled a steady light from her windows for _News Not Danger_, Jyn slipped the ear cuff on even as she ran back.

Some bunch of Moffs on Coruscant had formally surrendered. The “War” was over.

_What did that even mean?_

The Emperor had died a year before, the fires of Jakku were still smoking but Mothma was making a speech, as was Ackbar. A New Republic was being formed. Organa should have been there but apparently she was having a baby right at that very minute it seemed. _Holy hell?_

They watched the feeds and listened to speeches.

People on a hundred worlds were lighting fireworks, praying and celebrating.

People on Jakku were identifying the remains of the dead.

Jyn stood beside Cassian while he sat on the bench and looked at it all. Portia watched them from the stairs in one of her disguises, that of a small girl with long silver braids.
After a little over an hour he dimmed the vid screen, closed his eyes and turned to lay his head against her. All she could think to do was smooth his dark hair and kiss it as he put his arms around her waist, still, quiet.

*He had fought since he was six, he told her long ago, and taken an oath at twelve to defeat the Empire. Now the Empire was gone.*

She knew what he was asking himself, “Who am I now?”

*You are my home, my husband and the love of my life,* she thought. *You are a good man and brave past all reason. You were always meant for more than war.*

"Leave it," she said “let’s go home,” and they had.

Two years later Draven’s last message had come through.

“new landlord….last round…porch light…question….snow.” *They are shutting you down. Come home now and we will find away to bring you in. Otherwise..melt away and leave no trace. There will be no further support.*

Cassian questioned the order, asked for confirmation.

He’d done it in code of course but the upshot had been: Were they crazy?

Then he went outside and chopped wood for two hours swearing in Festan she was pretty sure even Portia would be unable to translate intelligibly.

They lay in bed that night and talked.

It was a shock but not entirely a surprise. Portia had been keeping them updated on the "politics," of the DMA negotiations but surely somebody somewhere understood that two combat trained analysts and an intermittently omniscient if slightly cranky AI off the edge of the New Republic’s maps might
be super-useful to keep in a back pocket?

At least two destroyer squadrons remained unaccounted for after Jakku. They had jumped into fucking hyper-space. Did nobody care where?

No fewer than four high-level Imperial Fleet Commanders were known to have vanished into the UR. They had no firm locations other than a cryptic trailed message back to the Velcar System from somewhere in Sector D.3.14a stating “Rax dead/contingent victory”

Did anybody really think these bastards had retired and taken up gardening and lawn-bowling?

They had surveillance access here that no one else could provide.

In twenty-four hours Portia told that she would open the real-time window again.

Jyn was five and a half months pregnant with Kaylyra at the time, a personnel detail they had not shared with Draven.

It was a frightening season for them both. Cassian was frightened of her giving birth. She was frightened of some poor baby having her for a mother.

This planet had precious little mechanical of its own and access to only one small spaceship, no real tech weapons except for a few thousand scattered taped up blasters, one light saber in a toolbox, some organic chemicals, and lots of teeth, claws and spunk…. also some ladies who could do mystical braiding.

“What do you want to do?” he asked., looking at the ceiling. “Do you want to go back?”

“I go where you go,” she said because it was true, but she rolled onto her side to see his face in the moonlight from the window.

“But back to what?” because that was true too. ”Who would I even be there?”

A war criminals daughter? The last of Saw Gerrera’s terrorist Partisans? What would my name be?

“Mi hogar. Mi mujer. El amor de mi vida,” he said.

She smiled and laid a hand on his chest, felt his heartbeat beneath her fingers.

“Fair enough, but you forgot “La madre de mis….oh shit, what’s “children?”

“Hijos.” La madre de mis hijos,” he lay his hand on top of hers.
They stayed quiet that way for a little while before he spoke.

“So we stay then?”

“If you can bear it, that’s my vote..” She laced her fingers with his.

The next day the same message repeated.

“new landlord….last round...porch light…question....snow."

“If you are not ready to reply I can get another window in…” Portia, now a tall and friendly-looking bald man began but Cassian cut her off.

“Send the last file bundle now and message it “summer,” Cassian said.

"vanish us..we will disappear."

Since she could now, after three wretched months, finally bear to eat things that had the color green in them again they went home and made a salad from the garden. Friends from the village came up for dinner.

It was not the end of the fight of course, not the end of pain or loss or being afraid. It was not even the end of the war but they were more than they had been before and that changed everything.

Chapter End Notes


La madre de mis hijos = the mother of my children
Chapter Summary

A band of Taun return from Market with a group of friends from Nexa and a tragedy is averted. Elfla comforts a child with a story about two Taun wanna-be traders and the first Human they ever meet.

Chapter Notes

More of Cassian and Jyn as other people see them. One of the early adventures of Cassian and his Scavenger pals.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The little child was unhurt save for the bruises, which could be salved, and the broken nails which could be tenderly washed and kissed and would soon grow back again, but it had been very much frightened and that is harder, so much harder to heal.

The First Caring Parent dried tears and carried the small one carefully up onto their family platform. “I am fine,” the child said over and over, stubbornly, tremblingly, trying hard to sound older and brave even as it clutched its favorite blanket around itself.

Up in the safety of their platform the child embraced each of its First Parents when they came to check on it. Even as they looked at the poor nails, murmured reassurances and kissed the downy head it insisted earnestly that they had truly NOT been running foolishly on unsafe ground, or doing anything dangerous at all by the water and NONE the other children had been EITHER and it was NOBODIES FAULT and an ACCIDENT.

The parents knew this by then of course, although when they had first heard the cries for help and come running to the scene of the emergency what had been happening was not clear and some unfortunate things may have been thought or said in the confusion.
The children had indeed been running ahead on the green bank playing a rambunctious chase game, “Tag,” that one of them had invented. It was true that they were all over-excited after their trip to the GreenRiver Fair and had been shouting and laughing and rather wild while the various adults unloaded the carts and talked together on the riverbank. It was also true that that particular part of the meadow was indeed very close to the narrow crossing of the marsh and sometimes was forbidden but it had not been off-limits that year by any means and though the afternoon sun was low and late it was not yet sundown and the children had not yet been called to come in.

No, no, the parents all agreed, you did nothing wrong, it was not your fault, none of you could have known.

For when they looked together afterwards the adults realized how it must have happened and in truth, they blamed themselves.

There had been many ground wasps in the meadow the summer before. The adults who policed the banks had diligently marked several small nests in that area and when the insects departed for the winter, after scraping out the leftover honey, had properly dug away the hollowed out places and filled them with clay and rocks as was always done.

Wasps were not in themselves unwelcome. They make sweet paper and honey, usually much far more than they can eat and though they can be troublesome if disturbed and will sting Memsa on the nose and ears and poor bare Humans all over, they can easily be driven away by loud singing. The only danger from a great swarm comes afterwards. Dried up old nests in the ground can cave in suddenly and trip someone or most dangerously, if the very big ones are not found broken up and filled in, Blue Lizards may find them and decide to make a hiding place inside.

This swarm must have been a very big one indeed because one nest was missed and that nest a very large one, likely a queens nest.

Running in the game the little one had stepped onto what seemed firm turf until too late and the ground gave way beneath their feet. Nearly six meters wide and three deep a hole had opened, for many lizards must have gotten in under the bank and dug it out to make a thinly roofed ditch, as a winter den for the herd.

It was mere luck that only one of the hateful beasts had been inside at the time and that one, though very large had been lurking at the far end.

The child fell down into the widening ditch with a shriek.

Panicked the little one had called and called, all while trying desperately to escape up the still crumbling sides of the hole, it’s small claws only making the sides steeper.

The Lizard cowered back for an instant, the other children said, as if in surprise, then recovered it’s vicious wits and rushed at the struggling little one.

In the instant before sharp jaws could snap, one of its child-friends, the oldest of the Human ones and bold for its small size, leaped straight down into the hole with a branch and struck the reptile in the
head while shouting out to its sibling and the several other Memsa children to get help.

All the adults and parents were of course already running toward the place.

The child’s parents rushed to the edge of the still-widening hole. First Birth Parent reached down inside trying to pull the child up, while the others reached down to slash at the snapping Blue, but the sides of the opened pit began to crumble beneath them too and they could get no purchase.

The Human child struck the Lizard again with the stick to make it turn and fight them, which it did.

Fortunately the Human parents had finally reached the spot too, as quick as their short-but-not-so-short-as-Mems legs could carry them.

The Father….as Humans call the Giving Parent ….jumped down into the hole and as they did so the other Human parent….being the Birth Parent which among Humans and Memsa is called the Mother…. fired the laser-rifle from their speeder.

As they raised up the rifle, they had shouted out the other Parent’s name, “Cassian!” and that parent had pulled both children back towards itself and down against the sandy floor well out of the way of the shot.

They were allies from Nexa and people much admired for their efficiency and skill in combat and defense those two Humans, everybody said so.

Well, everyone had been terribly upset afterwards setting up defenses against any other lizards that might appear and searching for other holes in the bank but the little one’s nearest parents, as was only proper, did not join in this but carried their child straight away from the scene up into their family platform there to be tended to, as safe from danger now as it was possible for affection and care to keep it.

Eventually after milk and a little bit of leaf soup the dear one, quite exhausted from the days ordeal, fell asleep.

The parents wiped their own tears away with bits of the pretty rug and lay down all around as well, sad even as their fear faded away.

They all knew their baby would begin now, as everyone does in time, to understand the hardest truth that though Love can be limitless and powerful, Safety is a fragile thing. They are not the same and nothing on Ea can ever make them so.

They knew of course but like every parent who ever was they suffered, saying to themselves Oh, why today? Why must it be so soon? So young, so precious, if only, if only…
In the dark part of the night, Elfla woke and heard a faint whimper. The little ones eyes were open and peering out over the edge of the blanket.

*What had wakened them? Had it been the moths, the wind, the distant calls of the large and small Blues, cursed to be soulless for their unremembered sins, hunting in the dark?*

“Hush, hush my lo-ove,” the parent rumbled low and gathered Gerla up, combing back the soft hair. “Go-o back to-o sleep. All is well.

“Tell me a sto-ory,” the child said pleading.

Now Gerla loved stories and had begged for them endlessly since learning to speak, sometimes making up their own clever childish ones, even so young.

*Oh, dear Elfla thought, Oh but I am so bad at stories. Ferla is the one who tells the best ones, about clownish badgers and birds who dye their wings and the songs moths sing to the stars. Yet it did not seem right to wake the others and make a fuss. It seemed to Elfla that the best and most reassuring thing would to keep this moment ordinary and small.*

Shaking back their hair the First Giving Parent looked around for an idea, any idea, and saw, through the leaves a light flickering in the fire-bowl on one of the lower platforms.

Cassian-ally and Jyn-ally were down there with their own children and the three little Mem children. They were caring for them all and trying to get or keep them in hammocks or blanket bags. Mem children never seemed to sleep for more than a few hours at a time no matter what. Elfla pitied them. It must be exhausting.
A sound carried up among the other little sounds of the night, that of Cassian-ally singing a song in his narrow but pleasant voice.

The words were not usual words but the song though a little sad was about believing and hoping.

Elfla had heard him sing it before and wondered if perhaps one of those children was troubled too.

“Such big hearts in such small bo-odies,” Elfla’s Second Caring Parent had been fond of saying about Mems but it was true of Humans too.

Cuddling the small one, Elfla began, “O-once upo-on a time..”

On a fine spring day two young persons, the dearest and best of friends, left home with the hard-won blessing of their elders to seek their fortunes. Eager to find their special talents in the world and both loving travel and adventure they decided to try their luck as finders and traders. They walked far along the River paths for they had a bold plan to climb up onto the bluffs and into the woods beyond where no one from their own settlement had gone for a long time, although they told stories about it.

The two friends walked far and well. Up through the RiverLands they went each step in harmony with the other and they sang as they walked. Sometimes they slept and made safe campsites.

On the first day they came upon a person with long red hair walking South.

“Where are you going?” this person said.

“We are going to the high bluffs to find useful things,” they answered, “You know the path. Come with us.”

“No, no,” that one shook their head and smiled as if they thought this idea too silly to be considered, “my legs are already tired and to sleep anywhere but my own platform irks me. Nothing up there could be worth such inconvenience. Goodbye.”

On the second day they walked on until they met three other people all with bags on their backs filled with seed pods from the marshes.

“Where are you going cousins?” the three asked.

“We are going to the high bluffs to find useful things,” said the two, “You look like traders of experience, come with us.”
“No,” said the three, all together, “The high bluffs are too high and too unpredictable. Sometimes there are cones or fruit or salt-grubs and wind-fallen trees but sometimes not. Sometimes the slopes are firm enough to carry wood and dye-bark down but sometimes not. We carry pods down to Free Brook to trade to the Memsa there and they always trade us blankets and meal. We always walk the same roads on the same days and nothing surprising ever happens. We are pleased with this. Good bye.”

On the third day they came to the bridge that crossed to other bank of the river and the foot of the bluffs and saw an Elder with long white hair gathering cress with a stick and a basket.

“Where are you going young ones? Are you lost?”

“No, Grandparent,” they answered politely, “We are going to the high bluffs to find useful things. You are wise and live nearby will you come with us?”

“No,” said that old one, “I come here now only to get cress for good salad and my nails are too loose and my bones too thin now to risk such adventures. In my youth I went up onto the bluffs. You will find many useful things up there but not all of them can be carried down and some you carry away without even knowing. Some you will think useful right away but you will be wrong and others you will not know the use of until long after. Good fortune.”

So they came up to the foot of the high bluffs and finding good sensible footing began to climb, climb, climb.

As they neared the top it seemed to the Younger of them that maybe, just maybe, they heard voices.

Then as they held firmly and stretched their heads up over the edge at the top a North wind blew into their faces and made them blink.

A grassy flat ringed with birch trees lay before them and on a flat rock at it’s center was a strange sight..

The little one wiggled.

Should I have said that? thought the parent.

“Is this a scary story?” The child whispered, wide-eyed

“O-oh No-o,” the parent said, “a little sad part gets talked about that happened far away but the ending will be happy. This is not a scary story.”

The little one nodded, “O-ok.”

Oh. This is why I am bad at stories.

Still, having begun the parent could think of nothing else to do but press bravely ahead.
Now, sitting around a little fire there were three people, two Memsa and a Human. Now this will make you laugh but in those days the People of the Green River Valley were less travelled and less allied than they are now. People went up as far as Nexa but only every other other year and only the Elders visited the Memsa in the Valley or travelled to the Yellow Grasslands or the Coast.

Humans were seldom seen except on the South Road or at Market.

The youngsters had seen many Memsa but never ones they did not already know and they had never seen a Human up close or heard one speak before ever.

“Never?” said the child.

“Never,” said the parent.

They knew what it was at once though because it was wrapped in those clever bits of cloth and leather they make to protect the most delicate parts of their bare skin and the tuft of dark brown hair on its small head. The youngsters were very curious.

They ducked their heads back down….

*The parent ducked it's head in imitation at this part and the little one laughed*

“Who do you think they are?” Younger One asked.

“I think they are strangers,” said Older one trying to sound older and wiser.

“It is polite to ask people to walk with you, but you’re are not supposed to ask strangers. You are supposed to watch them carefully and then go tell somebody.”

They peeked up and watched but even though the ground was firm there is only so long a person wants to hang by their nails and watch with the wind in their eyes.

They were so small and had no weapons and were just sitting backwards as Humans and Mems do. They seemed dejected.

So Younger said, “Let us ask who they are and then I can tell you and you can tell me and we will each have told somebody.”

So they climbed up

Now the little poking-up ears of Memsa are very keen and their noses are very sharp but because the damp wood of their new fire was smoky and because the friends came from downwind, and maybe
because the three strangers were talking very animatedly they did not hear the young persons approaching on the soft turf.

“Hello” the two said together because they did not know what else to say.

Oh my did the people jump in surprise for they had startled them, the grey one almost fell in the fire.

“You are lucky we are not Lizards,” Older said, which they thought was a good joke because the Big Lizards do not climb so high as everybody knows.

But then they were sorry and apologized for the eyes of those Mems grew wide. They were from the Uplands and were as unwise about the ways of the Blues as the young persons were about the ways of Humans.

What the eyes of the Human did was hard to see.

It had only quickly picked up a bag from near its feet.

“Sorry, Sorry, Sorry,” said the two friends.

“Why are you here?” said Older.

“How are you here?” said Younger.

"If you are going to Market you are too early," said Older.

"If you are traveling South why are you not on the road?" said Younger.

The yellow Mem and the grey one stared and rubbed their ears and scabbered their little feet as if they did not know what to say.

“No,” The Human said quietly. It put its bag down slowly and held the rest of its limbs still. "We are Scavengers from Nexa. We have come to look for a Fall."

"Where?" said the two and now theirs were the eyes that grew wide. For they had heard of Falls buried on the Palisades or out in the Wetlands.

"Come and see," the yellow Mem said with a sigh and they all went together through a stand of birch stand at the end of the meadow. Trees were knocked down like pins in a game of bowling, up and down both sides of a narrow trench scratched deep in the soft ground.

On and on the five walked until they came to the edge of the cliff over the valley on that side.

The “bowling ball” that had mowed the trees had come out of the deepening hole at last it seemed
and rolled right off the edge it could be seen stuck far but not quite halfway down the cliff on a little ledge of chalk-stone.

It was a roundish oblong thing as big as a bathing tub that looked for all the world as if it were made of burned cake.

“Oh,” said the friends to each other, “That looks useful.”

But what to do?

It was stuck too far to reach even from a good perch and this was not a good perch.

They all went back and sat around the fire together.

“It’s a stumper, tall-boys and no mistake” said the yellow Mem.

The little one giggled at this imitation for it guessed who the yellow Mem must be now.

Now, that ground was no good for climbing up or climbing down to carry the thing, even though the Human said it might not be as heavy as it looked.

“It is 347.5 Kilos,” Younger said, for they had hummed at it.

“Down is always easier than up,” said Older hopefully. “Maybe we can bump it loose or wait for it to fall in the next rain?”

The Human, who seemed very clever about such things said that if it fell down onto the gravel and rocks of the riverbank below it would break more and water would get inside maybe and it might lose much of it’s value.

If they waited or went home to get better tools, the grey Mem said, somebody else would surely come while they were gone and maybe steal it from them.

The strangers had brought many clever coils of beautiful rope and picks and shovels but not much else.

“With so much good rope many things could be done,” said Older one, “But someone someone small would have to climb down or be lowered on a rope to tie one end of more rope securely around the bowling ball.”

All eyes turned to the yellow Mem who was the smallest.

“Oh no!” it said.

“I have a sore elbow,” said the grey Mem.
“You heard her before we left,” said the Human, shaking it’s head, “If she finds out I climbed something without her she’ll murder us all.”

“My friend,” the Human said, meaning the unhappy yellow Mem, “can be belayed down by someone at the top or anchored to one the bigger birch trees and maybe one of us at the bottom to guide the lines but we will need something much heavier to anchor to when we move the debris.”

They all turned their eyes to the Older one who was the heaviest.

“Oh no,” it said and they all laughed.

Now it was needful for someone to get quickly to the bottom to hold the belay ropes there to help the reluctant Mem be lowered down, so Younger one volunteered to carry one of them down by the safe way and then back up.

“I want to go,” said the grey one but the yellow one said “No, you must tie the knots….it’s not like I don’t trust him but his fingers are too big.”

The Human said, “Carry me how?”

“Can you sit on my shoulders and hang on tight like a little child or should we tie you with rope?”

The Mems laughed very very hard at this and rolled on the ground but the human said, “I can hang on.”

Youngest might have been nervous, having never done such a thing before but quickly realized that the Human must be even MORE nervous because the poor thing held on very tight.

“Did nobody ever give you ride before?” Youngest asked.

“Nobody who talked to me about it first,” it said.

So Younger one gave the Human a back ride and it weighed only 69.8 kilos.

Now the Youngest had only heard about Humans or seen them on the road or talked to people who talked to them and so had great curiosity by the time they reached the bottom of the cliff.

The echo in the bones of this Human seemed different from any other bone it had known before, large or small.

The sound of them was so unusual almost as if it had been pulled oh so very differently in it’s growing and built with some strange minerals in a unusual order.

Though the Younger One could not fathom then how this could be.
“Was it because the perso-on was bo-orn and made very very far away?” the little one whispered, excited to have guessed.

“Just so-o, clever o-one.”

But the part that made them most curious and most worried was that many of the bones were thicker in places that seemed to tell sad stories.

The Human let go and slid down to stand on its own small flat feet at the bottom and Younger could not help but ask,

“Did your feet get hurt when you were young and you had to walk far on them anyway? Did something poke a hole in your arm bone and did it grow back together? Did you fall down from a high place onto hard hard stone? Have you broken your shoulder and rib bones and healed them again?”

The Human blinked its eyes in surprise.

“Yes,” it answered slowly, measuring its words like an elder does although it was not terribly old for its kind.

“Those things happened.”

“Are you well now?”

“I am,” it said in the way that brave creatures do after they have been made strong but a little cautious by dangers and injuries.

So the Younger one, worried that they had spoken out of turn and made it uncomfortable, asked other ordinary questions to make it feel safe.

“Are your ears cold? Do you like to sleep in high places or low places? Are any of your parents close by? What is the color of your favorite thing? Can you sing? “

This made it laugh, a surprisingly nice sound, much lighter than its careful voice.

“Do-o yo-ou kno-ow what it answered little treasure?”

“No-o” the child said.
“It answered: “No-o.” “Wherever is the safest” “No-o” “Green” and “A little bit.”

Now the valley floor under the cliff there was unsafe so the Younger one sensibly stayed back and the Human walked out in the water and gravel to stand on a rock to catch the ropes and guide it’s friend above.

Then they climbed to the top together again.

The two Mems were there holding their hands over their eyes.

“Why are you doing that?” the Human said.

“Because she said if we saw you doing anything crazy and didn’t stop you she would box our ears.”

The little one giggled again. For it could very easily imagine Kayly and Galen Andor’s parent Jyn saying exactly such a thing.

“Do-o yo-ou kno-o what they did after to-o get that burned-cake bo-owling ball clever Gerla?”

The small one scrunched their eyes in thought.

“Did they peel fallen trees to-o be ro-ollers at the to-op and lay the ro-ope acro-oss?”

“They did.”

“Did the O-older o-one stand o-on safe gro-ound tied as the ancho-or and the Yo-ounger o-one and the new friends pulled the Fall up after it was tethered?”

“Just so-o.”

And once it was pulled up they pried off the pressed, burned and crumbled casing and the three new friends took small clever tools from their bags and disassembled all the tiny bits. It was a tube inside and what the Human called a “black box recorder” ejected from a spaceship lost somewhere in the stars, maybe long ago and far away, and now fallen here.

Since the bluffs are territory no band has clear claim to they decided to divide the things themselves.

Inside were meters of fine silver and glass wire that the Mems wanted and so pulled out, and a thick black tile that the Human wanted for some reason. There were also squares of solar glass, always useful, and many squares of thin golden foil that the human carefully peeled out with his tools and bare fingers and rolled in a scrap of goat leather from his bag. These the two friends took.

“You can trade them at Rivertown at the Scavengers Market,” said the yellow Mem.

“Oh my,” said the two, for they had not thought this through at all. “We don’t know how. We have never been to Rivertown.”
Neither have we,” said the Mems and pointing to the Human added, “He’s never been anywhere.”

“Come with us!” said the two.

So it was agreed that they would all meet again at the end of the summer and go to Market together and the Human would bring it’s fearsome partner.

They all stayed for another day and shredded the fallen birch for strips which they bundled up too.

And that was the beginning of friendship and partnership and the Young persons and their friends began to travel to Nexa and found friends and partners and allies and though they did not know it then that proved to be the most useful thing of all.

_Morals are good to have at the end of a story, Elfla knew. Hopefully it made a little sense._

“O-oh,” said the child, giving a hug to it’s parent’s neck.

“And the Human was Cassian-ally and the yello-ow Mem was Do-ov and the grey o-one Mose and the Yo-ounger was yo-ou.”

“Yes.”

Two songs, a drink of water and many kisses later the little one fell asleep again.

Elfla waited sleeplessly until dawn and then seeing movement on the lower platform climbed the down the ladder in the growing gold of sunrise.

Cassian and Jyn-ally were awake, or perhaps still awake, boiling a pot of their favorite thin leaf-and-twig soup in the embers of the fire.

Sleeping children hung or lay rolled in blankets all around the inner platform.

“Oh Elfla,” Jyn said getting up to hug them.

“Is Gerla alright?” Cassian asked. “We peeked up to check but everyone seemed to be asleep.”

“Gerla is well,” Elfla said. “No-ething bro-oken that will no-ot heal in time. I think it will take us lo-nger.” Cassian-ally poured a pan of their soup to share. “I had to-o tell a sto-ory in the middle o-of the night.”
“Oh,” Cassian said, “That is rough on the fly,” pointing to Jyn-ally, “I make her do it.”

“That’s because you have no imagination,” Jyn said with her little laugh that was like a birdsong. “What was your story about?”

About how beautiful ropes of love and trust and friendship are the only fragile safety we can ever make for ourselves. About fortune and luck and how they may betray us no matter how careful we are but sometimes they save us and all we can do is hang on and work together on safe ground and dangerous. About the lessons of courage and endurance in other peoples bones.

“Abo-owt ho-ow we lo-owered Do-ov o-on the ro-ope.”

Cassian laughed and Jyn said, “You did what?”

They parted with hugs the next day for the Nexa children all needed to be taken home. The leather from the hide of the Lizard was made a grateful gift to Kayly later that winter, taken to Rivertown and sewn into a handsome pair of boots.

Chapter End Notes

A (long- awaited?) Taun POV chapter. That's been in the works since Ava mentioned seeing Kayly face down a Lizard in Jetsam.

(For the who keep track.....one of those people should probably be me....the "bedtime story" refers to Cassian's trip south mentioned in OTE chapter 12: Stones. And the chapter itself is set a year or so before the events in Chap. 83: Market Day)

Yes.....I am actually trying to write an alien (giant tree sloth Snuffleupagus-stylre aliens to boot) children's bedtime story. File under "Bitten off more sci-fi than I can chew."
What is Found, What is Given and What was Left Behind

Chapter Summary

Set in the days between Kayly Andor's first return home with Kes Dameron and her going back out, to fight with the struggling Resistance against the First Order. Jyn is reunited with a piece of her childhood and Cassian considers what legacies he has to share with his children.

Chapter Notes

A perhaps awkward and definitely parental-angst-filled chapter loosely bound by the idea of legacies...objects, stories, gifts and skills that pass between the generations in the Erso/Andor family.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Are they going to be alright?” Kayly asked, tossing her another small crate.

They were unloading the last bits of gear out of Guardian while Bodhi was up in the cockpit running systems checks.

“Checks for what?” Jyn had asked. “Portia is monitoring the ship 24/7 when it’s operational in her sights. Do you think she’s going to miss anything?”

“She doesn’t look for the same things I do,” he insisted stubbornly.

“Tío wants to make sure I haven’t put any holes in the seats or spilled any drinks on the console,” Kaylyra teased.

Bodhi ignored them both with great dignity and climbed up into the cockpit to flip switches and argue with Portia.

Jyn followed her gaze out the open hatch, to the figures passing the new wall at the far opposite end.
of the field.

“Papa and Sergeant Dameron?” What an odd question, Jyn thought. We're only on code yellow now, sweetheart.

“They’ll be fine. Half the people there will mistake him for Bodhi and the rest will ask to feel his arms. Cassian will give an update on your situation so you don't have to, then Tova will give them both some beer with lunch.”

Cassian and Kes Dameron were going down into the village with Ava and Beri. Now that the excitement of his arrival had died down a bit the day’s plan was to give him the tour and introduce him to the mayor and the village council formally.

There had been a long session in the Tower early that morning, Kes Dameron’s first real meet and greet with Portia and although he'd taken it all pretty deadpan the poor guy's head had to be aching.

Her daughter nodded. Two tall humans and two short Mems passed from sight around the corner of the far wall toward the village road.

“We will take good care of him, Sunshine. The only thing I'm worried about right now is that he and your papa will be driving us crazy with Festan street slang and early-days-of-the-Alliance in-jokes before the week is out.”

Because you will go out again, soon....too soon...and maybe, as crazy as it sounds having another person around worried almost to death about their child out on the front will help him.

If it weren't for Bodhi I don't know how he...hell, either of us....would have made it these last months and it's not going to get any easier is it?

Jyn poked at the sides of a square duffel Kayly slid to her across the floor. "Bloody hell, are all these boxes full of caff?"

She popped the zipper on the side, sure enough, the thing was stuffed with sealed packets of black powder.

Kayly laughed as she pulled a second bag out from under the cargo bay seat.

"How much of this stuff did you bring back?"

“As much as I could. It was low-to-no risk. If I was stopped it didn’t look suspicious on a scan, not the way packs of power clips or a case of blasters would, and even if I was boarded and searched, big deal. Transporting an organic low-grade stimulant is no crime anywhere but Reshii and fourteen small mismatched crates of a product that's packed and sold commercially on practically every planet in the Core and Mid Rim isn’t worth a real smugglers trouble. I’m just a gourmet caff fiend ensuring my personal stash ahead of looming wartime supply problems”

Oh Cassian, we were afraid we were raising soldiers, how did we wind up raising Far Traders and smugglers?

Her daughter lifted a tile of flooring under the short ladder to reveal yet another small cargo bin full of little tins and tossed her mother one.
She smiled like a proud little girl. “It’s the only thing I ever heard either you or Papa say you missed.”

*The good stuff, Naboo Mountain Blend.*

"Because it’s the only thing I really did miss, especially once we started being able to get shoes and socks." *Truth.*

"I brought socks for everybody too."

Now Jyn couldn’t help but laugh. "We're going to need another wheelbarrow!"

But Kayly was on her knees, pulling out a small bundle from underneath the step.

“There is one other thing I brought Mama.”


"No."

Whatever it was it was small and wrapped in old packing paper.

Kayly carried it over and sat down on the edge of the ramp.

"I found it on Lah'mu," she said quietly, holding the bundle on her lap, "It was inside a fallen vent casing about a k from ....what was left of the house."

Jyn held out her hands.

She didn’t unwrap the thing right away but sat down first, cross legged on the ground beside the ramp.

From the moment her hands touched it she knew what she would find.

Inside the crumpled paper lay a battered little figure, so much smaller than she remembered, 30 cm maybe. Part of one leg was gone and the paint had peeled in places, leaving exposed wood.

*What kind of wood had Mama even made it out of?*

*Stormie.*
Kaylyra had told them yesterday about going back to Lah'mu. Portia had offered it as an option for several groups of Yavin refugees and in order to keep their promise to the reportedly good-looking and now very very senior ranked Commander Dameron she and Kayly had tracked his father there and brought him to the safest place either of them knew, home.

Kes Dameron talked about the evacuation of Yavin IV and situation on Lah'mu.

"Talked about" chiefly meaning he gave a rather formal report on personnel status and conditions. He kept calling Cassian "Major" and “sir” and her “Sargent.”

Jyn couldn’t help but wonder how long that was going to last.

After Dameron left the tower to bunk down early....the poor bastard still hadn't adjusted for local time.....Kayly sat up late with them and fleshed out the reports.

“He’s a strong man, badly shook but determined not to let it show, for Poe's sake.”

Yeah. Well, he's come to the right place then, we’re starting a club.

"He was Pathfinders," Cassian said, as if that explained everything.

*Jyn had only run that one mission with them but according to Bodhi and what she’d read over the years those units screened for badass multi-purpose fighters who could roll with all kinds of crazy.*

"These people are so tough,” Kayly shook her head, "it wasn't just the Yavini refugees either, I met so many vets who walked out of their houses when the report came through, just picked up a closed comm and a blaster they’d packed away with their uniforms and headed to the hills or hot-wired a shuttle and took off. Yavin IV, Lothal, Besson III. Most of the worlds are collectively in shock, like I said, that’s the biggest danger I see, confusion and paralysis, the FO is counting on it, but not the old-line AARR. Some of them seemed to have been expecting it in a horrible way. One woman told me, “I hoped I’d never need it but I’ve had this bag packed and in the shuttle boot for thirty years baby girl.”

Portia's current image was standing quietly at the end of the table.......*a middle-aged man, stocky, grey at the temples... she didn't use this one very often. “Paul, Head of Systems Integration” Jyn remembered.... and it seemed to Jyn that it nodded ever so slightly*

Then Kayly told them about Lah'mu, and Kes Dameron's group settled on the Western Continent.

Lah'mu. Well, *she certainly hadn't expected that.*

"Mama," there was glance up at Portia and then back, "We found someone there who remembered you.”

She told them about finding SE-2.
At some point Cassian stood up and walked around to sit beside her on the bench and it bothered Jyn a little that she didn't notice when.

There was no reason to get emotional about a place she barely remembered and she didn't but for various reason it felt easier to address some questions directly to Portia rather than her daughter.

“Essie...I remember her. Is she alright?”

"Yes, she is functioning well now and remains purposefully content," Portia-as-Paul said. "Kaylyra's appearance triggered a jury-rigged recognition program and caused a painful glitch with unfinished primary command but we were able to put the poor little one's mind at rest about it in the end."

"What kind of primary command?"

“Thirty one years ago the poor thing was instructed to hide among the decommissioned equipment and only reactivate when queried by a pre-programmed individual to reveal the location of yourself and your mother. It is no longer possible to reconstruct exactly whom it was set for but the most logical surmise would be Saw Gerrera. In order to prevent your capture she self-programmed a parameter expansion when forcibly accessed by the Enemy and has suffered ever since...concerned that her action was faulty and caused your death when the message was not delivered within a projected time frame."

So, for all these years I was not the only one dreaming of a frightened child trapped in the dark.

Poor Essie.

Such a slender thread to tie all your life’s hopes to but you tried Papa.

Did Mama know? When she sent her only child on alone did she tell herself that if she died someone was still there to make sure Saw found her.

How long did Saw search with no map?

She could hear the rain and the water running beneath the stone floor in the dark but she had been so terribly thirsty.

A standard solar cell lamp lasts on low for 48 hours. How long?

I never asked and he never told me.

He had made her sit at the top of the ladder though and drink from his canteen.

“Drink it all but take small sips child, small sips or you will make yourself sick. It will be alright. You will learn in time."
"But you fixed her."

"I convinced her that the child she was trying to protect had indeed survived. That was enough to allow her to reset."

"Self programmed?" Cassian asked softly.

"Yes," the image of the man said, "it can happen under rare and intense operational pressures."

"We found the farm." Kayly said, with the gentle even voice she must have from her father because Force knows she hadn't gotten from her, "there wasn't much left...Portia managed some scans with the ship's..."

"Was there any sign of my mother's remains?"

Again she looked at Portia, not Kayly.

“No, at least not within. 5 k. of the main structure to a depth of four meters. However, I can’t rule it out the possibility since there was significant burning consistent with use of an ion-accelerant..."

She realized that Cassian had taken her hand under the table and his fingers felt warm...probably because hers were cold...and lifted hers just a little. “How can this question give you an answer?”

"Never mind. It doesn’t matter."

Portia stopped and the image bowed his head. Jyn, realized she must have sounded quite abrupt and took a breath.

“I’m sorry. Thank you for looking, baby...Portia...but it’s not....I don’t think it was something she would have cared about.”

As if I really know what Mama cared about.

There was that note in an old file that Cassian had found and her necklace and her red skirts...even on Lah’nu she still wore her red skirts.

Had she really believed in the old Church of the Force?
The CoF believed that bodies are only ashes after the force that animates them moves on…. with no purpose left except to serve the growth of new things. If pressed, Jyn had to admit she pretty much believed the same.

But what had Papa believed?

Maybe that white-caped son of a bitch put her in the house before they burned it or carried her body away to keep Papa quiet?

Fire and ashes, Mama.

I survived and I grew.

“I remember the countryside around the farm as being pretty. Black beaches and lots of green hills.”

“It is,” Kayly told her, “it still is.”

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“A vent casing, you say?”

She turned the little wooden doll over in her hands. His legs still dangled, even with one foot gone.

Look Stormie. My little girl brought you back to me.

“Yes.”

“That doesn’t make sense….I dropped him when we were running…I wasn’t supposed to bring more than one but he was my oldest toy so…” She turned him over in her hands, "weird."

Kayly climbed down and sat beside her.

“Did Grandmother make it?”

There might have been a time when you would have asked me why I had a stormtrooper doll but you’ve lived out there now.

You know who my father was. You know what they say about him.

“Oh yes she made all my toys, at least the sewn and painted ones. She was so good at it. I think….I don’t actually know… but I think she might have grown up someplace where she was poor, where she had to learn how.”
“Just like you made ours?” Kayly smiled.

“Absolutely. She taught me how to sew so I could make my own when she was busy but she enjoyed making things. Papa helped with the metal parts. I remember I had a whole little fleet of wood and wire space ships.”

“What was his name?

She could still call up a memory of falling on a walkway, a moving walkway, a brilliantly lit place. It must have been on Coruscant.

Maybe her shoe had gotten caught on something and she fell and was getting dragged…or just thought she was…and pulled off her little red shoe. Then a trooper scooped her up, crying and frightened, and put her on firm ground

“Good girl,” the trooper had said, in a radio-distorted voice, “that was quick brave thinking to take that off. You kept yourself from getting hurt.”

She remembered standing with one shoe and one bare foot on a cold plas floor.

“What’s your name little one?” the trooper had asked kneeling beside her.

“Jyn Erso,” she said, “What’s yours?”

They told her a string of numbers.

She didn’t like that. She didn’t even like that when droids did it. Droids were happier when you gave them names.

“Stormie!” she had insisted. “Your name is Stormie.” It worked with her dolls after all.

She tried to hug the trooper but you couldn’t…it was hard plastic, colder than a droid.

She seemed to remember them laughing, and even lifting up the helmet just a bit so you could hear the real laugh and not the radio.

It didn’t make sense, that memory. She would have to have been so small. Three? Four? Would a trooper really have done that? Why would she be running on a walkway without her parents or some other adult anyway?

She definitely remembered talking about “Stormie” later, how she had run up to every trooper she saw for weeks and weeks, asking them if they were Stormie but of course they all looked the same and it never was. Most troopers didn’t answer and Mama or the nanny-droid always pulled her away.

People had thought it was “cute.” Papa’s work friends especially.

So Mama made Stormie.

A “good” trooper, braver than all the others, who helped people rather than just shouting orders and making them stand in line. He would guard the gentle herds of longee, or rescue the little tooka kit who fell behind before the Snow Gib could get him.
To be fair to Snow Gib, he made a great pillow and sometimes the Black Blob Beast was the monster.

Stormie was the one who rode on the ships to find new planets, or sailed in the boats Papa folded for her out of plastic sheeting. He had sailed in a fountain, a decorative fish pond and later….at Lah’mu…in the tidal pools and the stream that ran down between the thermal converters.

He always went into the toy box last so he could protect the others, or on top of the pile at the foot of her bed.

Even once she started to get too big to really believe such babyish things she still put him on top.

"Stormie!" She had cried when she realized he fallen from the loop in her pack...had she actually turned and tried to go back?

He’d always come with her when they did the practice drills.

But Mama had been firm, even angry…or was it frightened?….they had to hurry. This was not practice

It was just a silly toy.

Papa was counting on her.

“I called him “Stormie” she told her daughter. “I was an imaginative child but not terribly original, I think.”

“I like the way his legs jiggle.” Kayly toggled the shabby little figures arm and remaining foot.

“Maybe we could fix him. Does the helmet come off….would that be too weird?”

“Yes. It would be VERY weird.”

What could you do but laugh? The time for tears was long, long past.

Kayly had told them about the Resistance, her friends…the battles, Leia Organa and the very few survivors.

There had been a particular emphasis on Poe Dameron, the first one she'd found, the Sargent's son, her friend, the hero.

“Poe Dameron…what was the name of the First Order Stormtrooper who rescued him?”

Some shell-demon kid took a captured rebel pilot out of an interrogation cell on the command destroyer was the story. Straight up defected with him in a TIE. Joined the Resistance and led Organa’s sabotage team onto the StarKiller. Cassian was very very interested in that story.

“Finn. He calls himself Finn now. I haven’t met him yet obviously but I know Dameron believes the guy is the Force walking, which he would...." She wiggled Stormie’s arm.
Portia had filled in the outline of the last days and hours of the Resistance and her fleet after they made contact with Commander Dameron. Kayly had added details on her return. She and Cassian has both gone through her reports...idiosyncratic but very thorough and very detailed. Their Kaylyra had never missed a trick, in Lessons, games or, it seemed, in Intelligence analysis.

There were parts of it that there was no need to ever show to Kes Dameron.

Kayly had clearly managed a long meeting with young Dameron…Portia liked him, “forthright” was the word she used. The boy must be one hell of a charmer. By whatever means the hero of the Battle Over Takodonna had given their daughter hope again. Jyn heard it in her voice even over the buffered and re-bounced comm.

“Finn it is.” Jyn said. “We’ll fix his leg, make him a face and call him Finn. He can go in the toy box and be a hero again.”

______________________________

Jyn pulled down the old green crate that had been Kayly’s and put her rebuilt childhood toy inside it with all of the other puppets, dolls and animals.

Sometimes they carried the boxes, green and blue, Kayly's and Galen’s, down when Nikki’s little ones came over to play or down to the Community Hall on rainy days. The youngest children at Nexa, excepting the out-of-season twins, were now all reaching about four or five and there was rumour of a Feast soon after which there was always a new crop of babies.

“Did you have toys when you were little in the faraway places Cassian-ally?” Sera’s Lastborn, Hetti
shyly asked him, as her age mates rummaged through “Jyn’s box” before a village meeting started.

“No,” he said, “Not that I remember….except for a football. We made all our toys out of snow where I was born and they melted away when the weather got warm.”

He had meant it as a joke, although the little one’s eyes grew very credulously round. “Reeeeaally?”

Tova scolded him for telling fibs to nurslings.

*It was not entirely a lie.*

They’d had a few footballs around, leather or plasteen and in the camp they’d made their own out of tape wrapped around packing sheets when nothing else could be found.

Maybe there were other things and he just didn’t remember it.

*I didn’t have toys, but I had snow and ten cousins.*

The only stuffed animals he remembered on Fest were baby toys, “ositos.” Infants got them as a naming gift….or something. They were balls of wooly yarn and string, good for clutching by tiny hands, and old people were always waving them over cradles and talking in high-pitched voices about how they would gobble babies up they loved them so.

*Jyn’s stormtrooper doll didn’t bother him. They’d been very popular back in the day and plastic ones with posable arms and tiny blasters had been common in the Core. It was odd though when she popped off the head, hollowed it out with a whittling knife and made a new head out of a round polished bead dotted with eyes, then put the ill-fitting "helmet" back on top.*

*“Finn” kept losing his helmet and his head but it didn’t seem to bother Jyn and the nurselings always found it again and reattached it before clean-up time.*

One night before Kayly left for her second tour, he woke to find Jyn gone from his side, out of bed and sitting alone at the table in the light of the banked-down hearth.

*Not a nightmare, or at least not one from the usual stable, those always woke him. How long had she been sitting there?*

A quick glance around the dim room told him that Kayly had not come back to her loft bedroom. The ladder was still against the wall. Galen had the late shift in the Tower this week and she had been going up the last few nights to sit up with him until midnight. They hadn’t been this close since they were small.

Last night they had been kicking football in the field at midnight, just the two of them.
"What are they talking about so much, do you think?" he had asked as he and Jyn took breakfast out on the garden wall to let their crazy children sleep.

"Their love lives," she answered, without missing a beat.

Ouch. "You think he's asking her advice about Lina?"

"He probably should, but no," she blew on her mug of the fine caff their daughter had brought them. "I think she's asking his advice."

Love in wartime. What could he tell them? What did he even really know?

I knew exactly nothing. I expected to die alone. Intimacy was an unconscionable risk and love was too great a burden to place on anybody.

All I wanted to do was save her, that angry Partisan girl who called us all cowards....but no, I wasn't that stupid, I knew that wasn't something I could do. I just wanted to save that light in her eyes.

I thought something was broken inside me when I realized how much I loved her. It was like learning how to walk again.

He moved to stand behind, wrapping arms around her as she leaned back against him. "What is it, Jyn?"

Kayly's bag was on the table and the clothes she would need to change into when the call came were laid out on the chair beside it.

Offworld second-hand, Mid-Rim labels, nothing organic or that could be identified or traced back. She kept the boots in a bag so there would be no local soil on them. The only exception was the little fiber bracelet that the Sisters wove for her and Jyn's necklace. Kayly could take nothing with her from home.

The bracelet she would burn after take-off. The Sisters knew this and said it did not matter. The necklace was untraceable....a flawed piece of kyber, from a place that no longer existed. With words carved on it that she didn't know how to read.

Jyn smoothed the brown non-descript shirt and laid the crystal, her mother's legacy, on top of it again.

"She hides it aboard the ship when she goes out she says, but kyber doesn't show up on standard scans so it should be alright," she ran her finger over the stone. "I wished I could give you back some of the things that had been taken away from you. You had nothing of your own and you'd given me so much. That's all I thought...that's all I was sorry for. I thought of putting it around your neck there and then but we were both too broken and there wasn't time."

She meant Scarif. She meant the beach. He knew that without asking.

Where was this coming from? Why now?

Oh my love are you crazy?

"You gave me back everything," he told her truthfully and convinced her eventually to come to bed with him.
He had helped Kayly pack the bag, just as he had the first time she went out. Gone through the checklist on gear management and all the other little things that helped a shadow survive. What you carried on you and what you left behind could be the difference between life and death.

Nothing he'd ever carried had meant anything to him. He'd had some well-broken-in pairs of boots he missed after he left them behind and Force knew he'd gotten attached to a few of his guns but that was just soldierly convenience.

The only "thing" he could imagine ever wanting back was the rucksack his uncle had put on his shoulder as he sent him out to what he thought were the evacuation carriers. The camp was scheduled to be "cleared" and guards had been bribed to take forty of the older, stronger children out ahead of it. Those were the kind of decisions people had to make.

Tio Samuel had packed a bag for him.

_What had been in it? A blanket, a water flask, some food bars maybe? Had there been holos? Cassian remembered they had had a few, one of his mother and father, Abuela and Abuelo's wedding picture, group family stills. A letter...explaining something to him...saying goodbye?_

"No quiero ir, Tio" he had insisted, stubbornly. "Isra doesn't have to go." _Isra, his cousin who was fifteen._

But Isra, his sometimes ally, had only rubbed Cassian's head and turned away.

"Tienes que hacer esto. Es importante para mí, Cassian." Tio Samuel had said putting the strap over his shoulder and kissing his forehead as if he were a little kid.

When the guards at the gate opened fire he ran, he and a few of the others, for the fence. When the bag caught and the strap tore he had not looked back but let it fall, thrown himself across the top, dropped to the ground and run. He didn't pray much, having outsourced that to Chirrut and Baze he supposed, but he clung to the hope that his uncle had at least seen him make it over the de-powered fence, even without the bag and that when the stormtroopers and Carrida Security Forces moved in a few days later that he and Isra had known that Cassian had done the most important thing.

When the Portia sent word two days later his brilliant, relentless daughter set out again. She had elected herself the messenger between the last hope of the Republic, the Resistance and the campfires of a thousand worlds struggling to fight the First Order. She had Bodhi's ship, Jyn's fire in her eyes and her grandmother's crystal around her neck.

"Double check," he told her and kissed her forehead, "Don't forget anything."

"Tengo todo lo que necesito papá. Estaré bien."
Chapter End Notes

Tio = uncle
Ositos = little bears

"I don't want to go, Uncle." = No quiero ir, Tio

You have to do this, Cassian. It's very important to me. = Tienes que hacer esto. Es importante para mí, Cassian

Tengo todo lo que necesito papá. Estaré bien = I have everything I need, Papa. I'll be fine.
The Mirror

Chapter Summary

Cassian and those currently stationed at Nexa prepare for a meeting with the surviving leaders of the Resistance. Space is an issue and almost everyone needs to think about their hair.

Chapter Notes

Four adults in a small house with one mirror get ready for an important meeting. Three of them need to deal with facial hair and one of them is Jyn. Seems like it should be fluff and has some (Jyn critiques Cassian's look, Cassian w/ a small child) but this is me so also much angst.(flashbacks to Yavin and Scarif, the realities of the war against the First Order) Cassian looks back from his new, strange and desperately unwanted position of authority in the Resistance at other times when he has had to consider himself and his role in the battle against the Empire and the First Order.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They only had one real mirror at the stone house.

It was a roughly half meter square of 2 cm. thick reflective glass, gilded on one corner. Once it had been part of a massive decorative mirror from the dining room of a luxury ship, a big fall on the Grasslands bluffs. The Green River Taun had a little mishap while trying to get it down off the bluffs many years ago and brought them one of the larger pieces as a gift.

The shiny thing spent half the year propped up on a ledge near the corner of the garden wall because he and Galen tended to shave out there in warm weather but they brought it into the kitchen before the first hard frost and propped it in its winter home in the kitchen on the shelf beside the basin.

Reasonably sure both that sides of his face were finally even, Cassian laid the razor beside the scissors to dry his face and hands on the towel.

"You should wear your blue coat," she told him.

"Why?"
His wife shrugged.

"Short answer? Because you look devastatingly handsome in your blue coat."

"Loca. ¿Qué crees que está pasando aquí?" He shook his head. "This isn't a damn job interview Jyn."

None of us wants to be doing what we're doing.

I have the fucking job, whether I want it or not.

"I know."

She did know. For all her smart talk she had tossed and turned last night as much as he had. They dealt with the stress in different ways.

Also she was crazy.

From sitting on the table beside the soapstone basin she slid off to stand beside him, pushing his shoulder to make him look at her and stepping far closer than necessary.

"Let me see."

Light fingers traced along his jaw.

"Not bad. I was afraid you'd clip too much but the..." She seemed to consider his ears very seriously, "the sideburny thing is a nice look…. edgy, yet authoritative."

"Don't mess up my hair. What are you going to wear?"

"My old vest and black punk eyeliner," she deadpanned, "Somebody has to play the renegade bad-ass in this little...."

A kiss seemed the only effective way to end this idiotic conversation.

Self-conscious coughing by the back door interrupted them.

Poor Bodhi wanted to borrow the big mirror to shave.

After Kayly’s message Bodhi had walked down to the Farmhouse and asked Bes to cut his hair very short again, this after letting it grow in the nearly two years since he'd returned. Jyn teased him for shaving what she called his “Rebel Alliance Retro-Classic Scruff,” but he only laughed.

“I realized I had a choice, keep letting having half the town mistake me for Cassian or encourage half the town to mistake me and Dameron for each other. The Sargent got such a tough reputation after the football debacle I figured I'd try to cash in on that for a few months.”

It was the kind of dodge that wasn't a lie. Try as they might most older Mems in the Uplands still couldn’t tell one human from another at a distance of greater than a meter on a breezy day. Jyn let it pass to comfort him but knew as well as Cassian did that the cutting of hair was a Jedhan badge of
mourning.

Bodhi had probably known Organa better than any of them.

*Chirrut had worn his hair cropped in the days that Cassian had known him.....still did, maybe, in a way.*

*The surviving Guardians were said to have shaved their heads and beards when the last wall of the Temple came down.*

*Baze, he assumed, had simply refused.*

*None of them talked about Leia Organa's passing outside the Tower and even there only strategically. They would need to soon.*

*Kes Dameron marveled that everyone in the village had already been wearing grey ribbon when he walked back with groceries in the late afternoon. Portia must have told them.*

When Cassian went out just after dawn he'd interrupted Nikki walking up the Path to their front step. One of her twins *...he still couldn't tell the difference unless someone told him....was with her.*

"Oh I hope we didn't wake you."

Assured that they hadn't, she laid the covered basket she'd been carrying on the flagstone and took his hand at once in Sympathy for the Loss of a Friend of Long Acquaintance.

There was no point in telling anybody that Leia Organa had not been a personal friend. "I hardly knew her," he could have said, "When I was hardly more than a boy I was sent to keep a reckless, brilliant, wealthy girl alive on her first trial as an asset and and teach her something about caution. I succeeded in one and failed in the other, I think." It wouldn’t have mattered. The neighbors saw their pain and treated the loss accordingly.

The toddler stopped capering on the path and rushed at once to hold the ribbons of their mothers skirt. Half-hiding, half-peeking the nurseling shyly lifted a new grey ribbon tied among the the rust-colored ones out for him to see.

"So...orry." The tiny chestnut-furred child said.

Cassian knelt down in order to be slightly less intimidating.

“Manners,” Nikki said, "Can you say good morning Look?"

"Morning, Gay-lum."

His mother laughed. "He has a bit of a stuffy nose. This isn't Galen, sweet, it's Cassian-ally. Can you say good morning?" That request triggered a little more skirt-hiding.
He held his upturned hand out as gently as possible. "Good morning, Look."

The small one smiled shyly and placed a tiny palm on his own.

"Morning, Cass..an..lie."

"Thank you, Look." He looked up, "Thank you too, Nikki."

Kayly's friend, his former student, smiled sheepishly. "I know you're all busy with the big council meeting today, Ava's already up with Ancient Portia, but you know Grandmother...." glancing down at the basket "...she had to send food. It's a compulsion."

"Please let her know how grateful we are."

Look had gone to his mama's side but before Cassian could straighten he scampered back, eyes wide with sudden concern and reached arms up to place a tiny hand on each side of his face.

"You sad?" the little one asked.

“A little bit,” he admitted, “but you have made me feel very much better now."

The child half-climbed up into his arms to place a kiss on Cassian’s forehead.

No doubt this was what his mother, Auntie and Grandmother did when he was sad.

"Ok now!" he announced with a wide smile and jumping down, scampered away up the path.

"Oh shit...there he goes again.,” Nikki ran after her son, calling back over her shoulder, "Give Kayly my love if you can! The old lady says, open the gate when you're ready for company!"

Inside the basket was a large nut-cake, still warm.

He turned to find Jyn leaning on the doorframe behind him, wrapped in the oversized sweater she used as a robe and her damp hair in a towel.

Jyn Erso was willing to take a outdoor showers in water far too cold for him to suffer in anything less than field conditions.

It never got old. She looked as beautiful to him as she ever had.

"Water is almost hot enough for caff, soldado."

"Is there enough for me to shave with?"

She nodded.

“Just as long as you save some for the other soldier boys."
On Yavin IV there had been time, barely, for a very quick sonic before the report to the Council.

Shower temperatures were usually set on “cool” on Massassi Base but he’d raised the control as hot as it would go, trying to get the cold rain of Eadu off of his skin if not out of his bones, before dressing quickly in the faded but clean unmarked uniform Kay had laid out in what passed as his “quarters”...a paneled cubicle with bunk.

Cassian tacked his insignia and rank patches back onto the faded jacket, ran a comb through his hair in something like auto-pilot and headed out to a "brief" with Draven he didn’t remember a word of.

What he would be expected to say or not say was easy to predict and in his gut he already knew that none of it would matter.

Afterward, when there was nothing else to say he left K2, Melshi and the others to finish and strode quickly back to the empty little room. Inside he grabbed a tattered mechanics vest and one of the tiny basic "kits" he kept in the small footlocker, grab-and-go for missions, and zipped them in his pockets. Most were biscuit-sized packets, with a few small pressure patches to hide small wounds or bruises, waterless cleanser swabs, multi-surface tape, staples, scissors and small razor.

There was no clear plan yet about how they would get into the data base....assuming they survived and made it to the ground.....or if disguise would be required. Kay was already down on the runway tossing crates of weapons and incendiaries into the Imperial cargo shuttle with unseemly haste and Jyn Erso had run back to rig some quick ruse in her temp quarters to fool anyone who looked in there for her. The team would slip out in twos and threes among the crowds and confusion as the meeting broke up and the Council leaders and their crews disembarked from Runway One. Draven and most of Security would have eyes on Mothma.

Rue, Rook, the Guardians, Pao, and Mefran should already be aboard.

As he turned the balky motion light above his head flicked up to high and he caught sight of his own reflection in the narrow polished metal mirror on the back of the empty closet door.

A thin almost unfamiliar soldier in a Rebel officer's uniform looked back at him.

Reaching inside the jacket Cassian Andor unpinned the rank pips and Starbird patch.

Seconds mattered, there was no time.

He didn't toss the scraps of cloth on the bunk though. Without thinking much about what he was doing he slipped them into a zippered pocket of the vest instead, stuffed it in the bag and strode out.
and down the temp-walled passage as fast as he could but not so quickly as to draw attention.

The light turned off automatically behind him.

During the nervously short hours of FTL jump he talked to Melshi and Sefla and prepared what little he could. Shaving might have been worth the time and trouble if this were a "hard" base or a fleet assignment where junior officers were not usually allowed facial hair but bases like Scarif had a reputation for casual enforcement in dress matters.

Kay had managed to pull up a set of Imperial internal memos in his largely vain search for info about the Data Archive that specifically complained about beards.

He decided time would be better spent checking weapons and going over the few terrain maps—— all three decades old——that they had.

Zipping the unused razor back into the kit Cassian felt a catch, almost like a tremble in his hands.

_Not fear....if fear made his hands shake he’d have died long ago._

He realized it was relief.

Occular or facial scans weren’t a risk here but it came to him that he hadn’t been completely clean-shaven since Verujansi.

_The thought of passing a reflective surface and seeing Joreth Sward sickened him._

Kay signaled down. They must dropping out of light speed.

He shoved the thoughts away and hurried to get back up to the cockpit.

Once through the Shield Gate an instrument-only approach sequence started.

SW-0608 was "unscheduled" so they were put in a holding pattern waiting for space on a landing pad.

This gave the five of them, himself and Jyn, Bodhi, Kay and Melshi—— who hadn’t been able to fully squeeze into the cockpit and so stood at the top of the ladder——a chance to run through.

_Such as it was the plan had largely come from Jyn and Bodhi. The pilot knew Imperial Systems Cargo Operation protocols. She knew small team theft and sabotage._

_Cassian’s contributions would come inside, if they came at all._
"He'd been inside many Imperial facilities but nothing like this."

"It's busy on the pads and they'll squeeze us in between the regular rotations." Bodhi said. “Traffic in and out of Scarif gets backed up so often that they don't even ask for a cargo checklist confirmation...sometimes until you are already on the ground. An inspection team will be sent in but. ..."

"Inspection team" what does that entail?" Melshi asked from the ladderway.

The pilot shifted in his seat, "Two or three people. A ground crew tech....to confirm the engine shutdown and fuel readings and to taxi the shuttle off pad if necessary...and since we're a re-route probably an intake officer will need to sight-confirm the manifest and personally ok the unload."

"Security?" Jyn wanted to know.

"They should.....I mean they're supposed to....but they usually don’t."

She nodded her head and a faint, slight smile touched her lips.

Recognition and maybe....hope.

*It was one of those bases.*

The Empire's budgets of troops and equipment expanded at a terrifying rate year after year yet some barely noticeable percentage....usually of the best and brightest... never seemed to be allotted proportionally in what should have been key infrastructure. A variable but steady trickle of muscle and treasure kept vanishing term after term, as if siphoned off to some unseen front. Where? For what? Tano, Draven ...and apparently Saw Gerrera... had all wondered.

*Mystery solved now.*

In practical terms it meant that over the last decade, large, well-manned, high-security facilities at the rear were often staffed with generations of B-listers, most raised and trained plush, proud and secure, far from the ragged Rim.

*Unquestioning faith in their impenetrable tech and flush manpower numbers made them sloppy about procedure.*

Gerrera had known the Empire the way only a starving predator can know the herd. Cassian was still not sure what this woman had been to the Lion but in his heyday the Partisans had been legend for surgical incursions into supposedly impenetrable Imperial bases. Trained to see opportunities where others saw only unassailable firewalls.

Jyn Erso was telling herself that despite the stakes this was a bigger and shinier version of the kind of facilities she'd cracked into as a teenager.

He prayed that she was right.
Cassian's mind flinched from the memory of Tivik

....using ryll again, visibly unraveling from the stress of being a triple agent....and the naked terror in his voice.

"There's no time!...Saw's right....it's all coming apart..... they're building a "planet killer!"

I told your sister to run, Tivik.

Not because I knew....I didn't...couldn't ....but because I expected a riot. She cursed me but I forced the doc cylinder into her hands and told to her get on the damn shuttle and go within an hour. I don't know if she believed me. She already knew I was a liar though not that I was a murderer. I'll never know if she got out. I don't deserve to.

All I can do is keep going, try to make it not be for nothing.

Breathe Cassian.

"If they send security, what will it look like?" he asked.

Bodhi glanced over to the co-pilot's seat, "A security droid."

"Well, of course," Kay said dryly. "Why am I not surprised?"

This could work.

Bodhi powered down as ordered on landing and opened the hatches.

"There we go," the pilot said, pointing through the screen at two figures, a tallish officer and a short, helmeted Traffic Control tech, who had separated from the rest of the personnel on the track platform and started walking toward Pad Three-A.

No security droid accompanied them but there were dozens of K2 series units moving between the other platforms.

It was clearly a busy day at the Imperial Data Storage Facilities

"You should probably be the officer," Kay said, "Jyn Erso is far too short and has far less skill in lying convincingly."

"I swear...." Jyn muttered through clenched teeth.

When Melshi moved to join Rostock and Pao in the lower hold he stepped to the ladder and called down, keeping his voice low.
"Rue."

The man looked up.

"No marks, no tears, no stains."

His friend nodded and gave a thumbs up.

The rest of the crew moved behind the storage partitions, silent as ghosts, still, guns in hand. “Rook,” Cassian said, “you’re up.”

Jyn reached out as if on impulse to squeeze the pilot's hand as he stepped past her.

"Bodhi, you can do this."

The pilot took a breath, picked up the data pad and swung down to the ramp.

_She’s good with people_, he thought.

_Kay’s right in his own backwards way, her skill is in telling the truth._

_She should be the one to talk to them when it's time._

He waited in silence with Kay and Jyn, looking through the dimmed hatch window as the inspection team approached, passing under the shuttle.

_“Cargo shuttle SW-0608,” a voice was calling out over the landing pad noise, “I need to see your manifest.”_

_“Yes...yes of course,” Rook sounding every inch the hurried cargo pilot, “It’s right down here.”_

Just as she had when they came through the Shield Gate Jyn Erso, sat in the crash seat, head bowed and eyes closed, fingerling the crystal hung pendant-like from the thong around her neck.

_Was she praying?_

It was the sort of thing Force Church adherents used as devotional objects but what did it mean to her? For the life of him he could not imagine Gerrera tolerating such meditative practices

_You’ve followed her here because you know that she’s right, he thought, and before that you tracked her like the shadow of death for two years but when it comes right down to it what do you actually know about her?_
There was the sound of boots on the ramp, then nothing.

One minute. Two. Three.

Casrich’s head poked up at the top of the ladder.

“We’re go, sir. They’re passing up the gear.

Jyn looked up at him, green eyes wide, then scrambled down the ladderway without a word.

Cassian unzipped the pocket on his vest. Pulling the insignia and rank patches out he pinned them inside the placket of his shirt with one of the staples from the kit.

“What are you doing? Why did you bring those?” K2 asked him.

Why indeed? "Because I want them."

He expected a smart remark, or at least another question to follow but none came.

His companion only tilted his head as if considering.

“Go down ahead Kay,” Cassian said. “I’ll be right behind you.”

Galen climbed down the ladder at last.

Lina had left for the coast three weeks ago and he had been sleeping, alone again in his little loft since. Sargent Dameron had taken back the extra room.

"Hot damn! Cake. Did Ava bring this? Is there caff?"

"One cup left," Bodhi answered. "I'll get water for more."

“One will do for me. Don’t want to get shakey, right?” Galen said, “Mama, why are you wearing your old gardening vest?”
"For luck," she said, "also because Bodhi and your father were horrified and talked me out of black eyeliner."

"O....k," Galen said, knowing better than to ask more.

"I'll explain it later," Bodhi said. "Do you need the big mirror?"

"No," he said "I'm good. I shaved in the Tower last night, I just asked Portia to up the reflective on her panels. All I need now is a clean shirt."

"Eek," Jyn shivered, "That just seems wrong, also you missed a spot."

She ducked between their son and the table. "Check the laundry basket by the back door."

Cassian stepped back to the wooden pegs by the doorway. Galen's grey-blue Fisher's jacket was hanging there, the one that had been Bill's. Lifting it down he ran his thumb over the threadbare Firebird patch on the right shoulder.

They had given it to him on a Mon Calmari ship called the Resolution when he was seventeen. Before that they had just stenciled them with red ink onto whatever was passing for a uniform that day. Not that Cassian had had many occasions to be in uniform. He was already Intelligence then, "in field."

"Do you want to wear my jacket Papa?" His son had stepped beside him after grabbing a fat slice of cake from the table.

"It fits you pretty well, also...it might be a good look...Continuity. Since...I mean....with,” He swallowed, and being halfway in charged on, “…with General Organa gone, from what Kayly said, they're trying to create establish connection with the early days of the Rebel Alliance....remind people of before, you know, before..."

*Before Yavin IV, he means, before "Princess Leia" and the “Luke Skywalker and the rebirth of the Jedi".*

*You're not wrong, my clever boy but there’s another lesson that needs to be learned here. Your mother is right.*

*This is war, but it needs to be a different war.*

"No," Cassian said. "You wear it. I'll wear my blue coat."

Jyn used the mirror only to check the back of her hair.
She’d kept it just past shoulder length since coming back from the North, just long enough to braid or roll up and grown out most of the fringe in front.

He wasn’t quite sure why.

Thea had given her some little black casing clips to hold it, so she used those to pin it back. It was oddly formal look with the battered vest but she seemed pleased.

“How do I look?”

A thick streak of silver swept over the right side of her brown hair now, almost like a white bird’s wing. He could imagine fashionable ladies in the Core paying for such a striking design.

"Why is one side of your head getting old before the other, Jyn-ally?" Little Dan asked her one day at the Community Hall.

"I don't know," she answered, "maybe that's the side where I keep all my really wise ideas."

Cassian knew why. Because that was the side that faced nearest the fire.

On her knees she took his hand and drawing his good arm around her, held him as close as she could in her arms while he pressed his face against her neck.

You look perfect my love.

“Badass.”

“Good. Second confirmation on any equipment check though. Galen, do I look as badass from the back as I do from the front?”

“Sí. Eres una tía dura, mama. Espera…wait, I mean…are they going to be looking at us from the back too?”

“It depends on where they stand at their end,” Bodhi said. “We don’t know how many people will be watching at the four transmit sites without being directly linked in.”

“I should have let you trim my hair.”

“Too late now.” Jyn said opened the shutter to look outside. “Save Sargent Dameron some cake Galen you animal. Bodhi please call out the back door and tell the poor guy he does not have to stand out in the garden.”

Kes didn’t need to worry about what he looked like since he was the only one of them who would not “attend” the meeting. His would be the hardest part of all, to sit and see his son without speaking
to him. For reasons Cassian found he could imagine all too painfully young Flight Commander Poe Dameron insisted on not knowing where his father was. Surviving something Portia called “neural extraction” in First Order custody left the hero of D’Qar afraid to even look at a holo, as if even seeing his beloved father would put him in danger.

*If someone told me when they were born that I could survive this I would have said I couldn't.*

*I know I couldn't survive it alone.*

“*We are fighting monsters,*” he remembered overhearing General Merrick say to Draven once. “*You tell me where the limit is Davits.*”

”*I’ll tell you when I get there,*” Draven had replied.

*I suspect we both reached the limit sir. I did and passed it yet here we are again.*

Commanders Makken and Ferras would report for the Mon Cala Resistance. It was possible the old man would be there. Cassian was sure he would at least be watching.

In the bottom of the basket lay a spool of silver-grey ribbon with a small note pinned to it in Fala’s spidery handwriting, "*IF YOU NEED IT.*" Galen cut a small section, looped it over and attached it to his jacket with a sewing pin. Jyn copied him and Cassian did as well. It wouldn't matter to anyone else but Kayly would know and Ava.

Together the five of them walked out to the Tower to meet with the rest of the Resistance. Portia had arranged a secure holo-conference and it was time to see who else was surviving in the shadows.

Chapter End Notes

This precedes chapter 46 in Jetsam and leads into another but I put it here because it's so domestically centered and and "Scarif-flashback-centric" but I have a soft spot in my heart and head for guys shaving. Diego Luna’s facial hair in general and whatever Riz Ahmed is doing sartorially ever.
At some point I think I saw "the mirror" as a prompt and Diego’s description of the bond between between Jyn and Cassian as "the mirror hurts sometimes" has always stuck with me. How this turned into the Blackbirds + all trying to get ready around a single mirror in a kitchen I am not sure, but it put together a lot of bits around Cassian seeing reflections.
"Loca. ¿Qué crees que está pasando aquí?" = Crazy woman. What do you think is happening here?

eres una tía dura = you are a hard aunt (which I remember as being “tough lady” )
Chapter Summary

Kind of a bittersweet holiday card. With a forecast for snow, Jyn finds herself in her garden of stones and memories and thinks about her fallen friends and comrades. Mostly she thinks of K2 and how his ability to rewrite his own program gave her and his beloved Cassian the gift of re-writing their own.

Chapter Notes

Rebel/Captain domesticity, sadness, love, loss and just a hint of "Holy hell our kid is asking for relationship advice? We met when I was in handcuffs?"
Placed a little after Jetsam/Chapter 49.

The day had started out sunny but clouds were already gathering low in the North and a moist chill was building in the air. An early cold front would come in later with snow likely tonight or tomorrow according to Portia.... snow positively, according to Bes.

Thus forewarned Jyn spent her afternoon clearing up in the big garden, raking mulch, putting tools away, and covering the remaining hardy vegetables with baskets.

Once all her main chores were done she went round to the little side yard with clippers and small rake to clean up around the stones.

Mama, Papa, Tonc, Rostock, Pao....

....who nobody ever talked to because nobody could. He just climbed into the ship behind Sefla and answered “Sa’kalla” at various volumes to every question. Maybe he knew that there was no longer a home for him to go back to by then. Portia says the Empire left Pipada uninhabitable. I’ve heard the Drabatans believe death in just battle is an instant ticket to some kick-ass warrior afterlife. I hope the party is awesome comrade.

Sefla, Basteren.......a tall pale boy Tonc had known from Basic....

Melshi.....he had a sister. Bodhi met her when she tracked him down at a medic station unloading a
Pathfinders team he’d evacuated from Rygel Minor. He was prepping for departure when a tall woman he’d half-noticed lingering on the dock walked up to him and in a Pendarran accent, said “Commander Bodhi Rook?” He says his heart clenched when he read the patch on her flight suit, J/MELSHI. She waited there for an hour he found out later, changing her flight rotation while she braced herself to talk to him to ask a question.

“Jaqueline,” Cassian told him, “He called her Jack.”

Bodhi knew at once what she wanted. A Y-wing pilot on Indigo Squadron she had toughed the "official story" out for three years but now here was one of only two people she could ask what had been burning a hole in her heart. He didn’t know the answer of course, Bodhi's last contact with Ruescott Melshi had been over the comm a few minutes before the explosion. All he knew for sure was that Melshi or someone else in his squad got through to the master comm switch because direct transmit was suddenly enabled from the landing pads. Bodhi sent Rogue Ones instructions out to the fleet. Profundity answered and everything stopped for him there until he woke up in a bacta tank three months later. Tonc would have known even less. Bodhi spared her all that but he didn’t lie. He told Flight Commander Melshi that her brother was a hero and that he had died quickly. There wasn’t enough time for it to have been anything else.

I didn’t see you among the bodies on the transit pad but that doesn’t mean you weren't there Melshi. Forgive me. We were a little fucked-up your friend Andor and I.

All I wanted to do before I died was to get him out of there, to someplace quiet, somewhere we could rest.

Long ago in Portia's salad days this had been the foundation of a small structure. What was visible above ground formed a small and fairly sheltered grassy rectangle between the side of their stone house and two low walls. Things were in good shape back here really, it was usually just a matter of tidying, pulling weeds and putting a few objects back in place.

Fall rains and winter snows often shifted the smaller stones slightly....all except for Saw. Set against the wall that way he was practically immovable. You’d like knowing that wouldn’t you Saw?

Kayly asks me questions....about tactics mostly... how we set up communication lines, assessed targets, what the cadre command structures were like. Logical enough, since the Resistance is setting up guerrilla insurgencies on planets even as the First Order is trying to occupy their systems and you all but wrote the handbook on that kind of thing

I tell her all I can but I also warn her. There is a price, mi amor. Never forget there is a price. Do not pay more than you have.

There was no set work schedule for this garden. Weeks often passed between visits, months if they were traveling but eventually she would feel something like a tug below her ribs and remember to go back to pull weeds. Cassian did the same. Once in a while without planning it they would meet here and quietly work side by side.
The children came now too. After Galen returned from his first Island trip after the fire a tall chunk of sandstone was set near the gate. Four stones...none of them local...appeared lined up along the wall after Kayly's last leave.

Working up the middle row on her knees Jyn came to the heavy metal bolt and turned it over. Being rounded it had a tendency to roll, as if it were restless. The dry grass looked to have been recently clipped...Cassian ...but she brushed some mud off the bolt and wedged it in place between Baze and the kitchen wall pressing it down firmly in the cold soil. There you go K2.

Bes put the idea for a stone garden in her head that very first year here while Cassian was on some weeklong walkabout with Dov and Mose and Jyn had kept herself from worry by spending most of two days wandering back and forth from the hill and the stream bed, carefully choosing stones to hold the memories of her dead. When Kay's turn came she'd remembered the broken bolt with it’s rounded shape and scuffed black finish and gone at once to fetch it from the single small work bench they used in those days.

The first Scavenger market they'd cautiously visited had been the little one at Green Bend, just a few days walk North East from Nexa, their first gingerly venture out. Three mangy Northern fellows had set up a wooden tray of them all sorted by size in a sweet junk shop-ish way.

Being rustproof and heavy they were useful for hammers and weights though Jyn couldn’t remember anymore why she’d originally picked this one up. There was no knowing how old it was. It seemed Imperial but that may only have been because of the color, ionized black steel. The shape was standard and utilitarian and the threaded end sheared off, probably when whatever lesser metal it had been attached to crumbled and burned in atmo. It could have come from from a heavy cargo pod, broken-off strut or a whole damn Pre-First Republic destroyer.

Bes helped her set it out with the others.

We've gotten old Kay. How weird is that?

Not old-old. I'd like to be clear about that. I may use a lens to do fine-wiring now but I can still manage a fifteen minute plank. The military still does his push-ups every morning....actually I noticed he’s upped the count since Sgt. Kes No-problem-sir-I-can-carry-two-at-once Dameron showed up. Competitive middle-aged men. Who knew?

We still chase each other around the kitchen if we get the house to ourselves for more than fifteen minutes but the old aches come back more often and we've both gotten a little grey....ok I've gotten a lot grey. It sounds weird when I say it but thanks for that too.

We had children Kay. I talked him into it. At the time I stupidly thought I knew what kind of courage I was asking for. Ha. I knew 38% at best. Force. He knew better but he's so fucking brave he did it anyway.

Our son..who has his papa's eyes and heart and his mama's fractured thought process...actually said to us the other day rather defensively with regard to an intense relationship he's in, "You probably think we're too young." My eyes may have bugged out. I hope they didn’t but Cassian
whisked him outside for a father-son talk very quickly. Laughing would not have been a parenting win.

What could I have said? That the universe is cruel? That you do not know where your break points are until the hit comes? They both know that. They have nothing in common and everything in common. Should I point out that she is fierce and committed and he is gentle and stubborn and brave and they are both in way over their heads? Tell them that all you can do is tell each other the truth as much as you possibly can and pray it will be enough?

“You think that’s the wind, dear husband?” I asked him when he came back a few hours later, “That is Chirrut and Baze laughing at the thought of us giving wartime relationship advice to anybody.”

I still wake up sometimes from that dream, the one where he falls dead and broken and I climb on and on alone trying to reach the top. He holds me until I stop thrashing, whispers my name to help me remember who he is and tells me stories quietly until I remember where I am.

"When the file was sent, “ he told me once, “When it was all done. I thought how ordinary it was for you to smile at me like that. I thought, 'If there was time we might have talked, maybe understood each other...”

It makes me cry when I think about it still Kay. He wanted so little. We were both barely more than child-soldiers when you rescued us from the fire and brought us here. Twenty-two and twenty-six and nearly all we knew was war. Neither of us could even imagine what we would find here, home, friends, children, years of memory.

I named our first after you so you’re welcome for that but I honestly couldn’t think of a better guardian spirit. She’ll need you.

How would you actually have felt about the children? Kayly would have been constantly coming up with little projects she wanted help with. I picture some bitching but secretly I think you’d have been flattered. When Galen was seven he would have asked if he could take your arm apart just to see how it worked or something. Oh Force, he’d have pestered you with questions until he exhausted himself. He used to tell them stories about you when they asked, short ones, some were pretty funny. “38% chance of failure,” is a punchline in our family.

But I also know there are many stories I will never hear. He thinks of you Kay. He never forgets but so many of his memories of you are tied to things he has to hold at arms-length now.

A few years ago Cassian was lying on his back under a chunk of nav console Tom had sent us and trying to prise out memory boards crusted in actual barnacles while I sat on the floor at his feet trying to link up some sequence wiring off one of the old data pads and failing spectacularly.

“He volunteered for a memory wipe once.” I heard him say very quietly. Some things come out easier when you can’t see the eyes of the person you’re talking to.

I didn’t ask straight out. We mostly keep our little rules, besides, you live with a spy you pick things
up. I’ve learned how to do questions as statements.

“There must have been security issues sometimes.”

“No,” he said, “it wasn’t that.” He knew what I was doing of course.

There’d been a mission, he said, and faulty intel. A situation that should have been avoidable…wasn’t.

It’s hard for him to say these things. To lay that poison on the table and let it go while I sat his feet so he would know I was there.

“I think I may have seemed to be…in a rough place….” Oh Kay…“…and he had an odd idea that it would it help me. ‘..Enable my continued service.’ was the phrase he used. As if him not remembering would somehow make it easier for me to forget.” He said he’d thanked you, told you that it was a staggeringly generous offer, but that human memory didn't work that way.

Droids don’t understand shame or so I’ve always been told but you did didn’t you? Or at least you recognized it for the acid it is and your impulse was to somehow protect him from it.

You called him “Cassian.” I noticed that straight off on the runway at Yavin IV. Draven and the gang ordered my coming along to Jedha and you said “I think it’s a mistake and Cassian thinks so too.” Not “Captain Andor,” “Cassian.” Stone-cold wreck that I was then it still caught my attention.

There was some excuse made about your reprogramming but even then I didn’t quite believe him. Long-range pilots bond with their droids and nav-units and child care units are given nurturance programming but a military security droid? Besides, everybody on that damn base called him “Captain Andor” except you.

He must have told you to call him Cassian because he was losing pieces of himself every day and he needed to hear someone say his name.

An uncle taught him to rewire droids in a labor camp. Our boy knew what he was doing when he stripped out your Imperial programming and set you up with full autonomy. Talk about violating manufacturers warranty...I’ve always wondered if he told Alliance Intelligence exactly what he’d done.

“I’ll be there for you Jyn. Cassian said I have to.” As if I didn’t know by then that you didn’t follow orders when you didn’t bloody well want to you snarky metal bastard. As if you jogged 30 k just because you “got bored” and not because you didn’t trust me not to shoot him in the back.

How long did you follow us on Jedha by the way? What did you see that changed your mind about me? I feel like you were a little jealous of me at first, of his attention if nothing else but we were friends by the end.

You disobeyed a direct order to stay with the ship on Jedha. I was there. That wasn’t just operational independence that was full-on droid cojones my friend and he didn’t order you to close that door when it all went wrong at Scarif either. You came up with that plan and whatever else you did after all on your own. Portia is still stumped. Be proud, her respect in such matters is not easy to earn.

His face, Kay….if you could have seen his face…..he’d given you protocols for what to do when he
died but he never gave himself any for you. All the armor he’d built was being torn off piece by piece and he made himself keep going.

That tower stripped everything away, the good and the bad. He lost his angel and I lost the devil that had held me back since I was eight.

Two people so different on the outside.... I’ve given this some thought but it’s still hard to put my finger on when we each realized that we were looking in a mirror...before Endor certainly, maybe after we found that Lux and he began telling me stories, began to believe that nothing he said or confessed could make me not love him...maybe even earlier when his muscles would knot no matter how gently I tried to take off the bandages and he would say, “It’s ok. Keep going,” because the pain was something he knew was necessary. Did you know before we did?

He was calling for you last night Kay.

If I could lay hands on the dying and long-dead bastards who put him in whatever terrible place those dreams take him I would tear them apart. You’d help me right?

“I can’t bear it,” he whispers staring at something I can’t see. I can only talk to him the way he talks to me, until he remembers he still has an anchor.

“Jyn.”

She heard his voice from behind her on the other side of the wall. “It’s getting cold.”

So it was. The sun was nearly down and she’d been kneeling so long on the cold ground the damp had soaked through the knees of her trousers.

Damn. She wiped her tears from her cheeks with gloved hands. He would not ask why she was crying....anywhere else he would but not here.....but still, there was no need for him to see.

Cassian’s hand were in his pockets and the collar on his second warmest jacket was turned up. The sky was dark grey now except for a strip of lavender behind him. The little moon, up this time of year even before the sun was fully set, glowed though the narrowing gap.

“Sorry. I lost track of time.” She stood up stiffly. “When did you get home?”

“An hour ago. Come inside and warm up.”

She walked to the wall and hopped up to sit on top swinging her legs over.

“We have a gate, mujer loca,” he laughed.

“Gates are for old people.”

She kissed him and he pulled her cold hands inside his jacket for warmth.
“I heated up the leftover soup. Come eat. We should bunk down early tonight...we’re both tired.”

*It was as close as he could come to saying he was sorry for waking her in the night. No apologizing for the nightmares, that was the oldest rule.*

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*The house being finally empty again they might have made as much noise as they wanted but having spent their sexually impressionable years in foxholes they still didn’t, even after all this time. It was funny in a way.*

*“Such a sweet noise,” he used to tease her about the little gasps she made, “but always as if you are surprised. I can’t tell whether to be flattered or offended.”*

*Every time I open my eyes and see you beside me is a surprise, every time I touch your skin and feel your breath on mine, every time you say my name.*

*"Be flattered soldado."*

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Jyn had the early-to-noon shift again but though Cassian wasn’t on until later he got up with her just after dawn and made a pot of caf.

The diffuse light told her that Bes had been right even before she opened the curtains and looked out.

He claimed to hate winter and the cold but his face whenever he looked out and saw fresh snow told another story.

*“¡Mira! Es tan blanco....”* he would always say with all the wonder of a boy of six on an icy, smoke-choked mining settlement

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She put on her warmest boots and walked out for the tower. The snow wasn’t very deep. Barely 6cm except by the corner garden wall and a few other places it had drifted.

On the way she met four of the village children scampering up the path. Frosted noses and ears told her they had already been up and playing.

*“Good morning Jyn-ally!”*

*“Good morning!!”*

"Is Cassian-ally still sleeping?” Little Dan asked.

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*He said he might go back to bed but she knew that he wouldn’t. After those push-ups he’d turn on the heaters and wait for the workshops to warm a little before going back to tinker. Kes had remembered some old Pathfinder hacks and they were experimenting with prototypes to run past*
“No. He's awake. Is everything alright sweetheart?”

“Yes,” the child said.

Tula’s Rudri clapped her hands, “It’s just that he...he said that when he was a small child he lived in a place where they made toys out of snow and we wondered if he would show us how.”

Jyn looked back at the stone house, blanketed in white, and the curl of smoke rising from the chimney.

“I’m sure he’d be glad to show you,” she said, “Go find him and remind him to wear his gloves.”

The nurslings nodded earnestly and ran down the path over the bootprints she had left.

A snowball fight was just the distraction he needed after the strain of the Council.

Kes and Bodhi had gone down to RiverTown a few days ago and the timing of their return depended on how operations there went. Sgt. Dameron was looking for his own place in all this.

Galen had left for the coast a week before to check in with the shore stations and the Bequa.....and to find Lina. Jyn was a little curious about what he and his father had talked about on those long walks but that was a conversation for tonight’s supper.

Kayly was on the front lines, with the rest of Command. Her next audio check-in was tomorrow.

Bes had woven a tiny little ball out of waxed cord and Jyn wore that now, so that when her fingers reached for her mother’s crystal they would have something to hold its place until her daughter returned.

Chapter End Notes

mujer loca = crazy woman
Mira! Es tan blanco = Look! It’s so white.
Chapter Summary

Two young sisters from a small island on Ea's South West seas take a journey to sell a family heirloom and buy supplies they hope will save their imperiled rural community. On their way they meet good people, bad people and a family of humans known by some as the Blackbirds.

Chapter Notes

This has been bopping around in the notebooks forever waiting for some polish.
From the "Blackbird" files.
More Mem POV from ordinary Ea folk. Also Jyn gets in a bar fight and there is a pig.

Jyn and Cassian spent much of Galen and Kayly's childhoods negotiating and moving around equipment to help guard Ea from potential danger after the cut-off from the New Republic. In case you wondered, this is how they got it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As the sun moved lower they found themselves nearly alone on the road. Mab was sure....pretty sure....that they were still going in the right direction but the path was narrower and higher than it had been. There had seen so many other people yesterday and in the early morning today, other Mem of all shapes, sizes colors and fur, big Humans and small ones and at one point even....

“Beg pardo-on, excuse us,” Two towering persons with long, long hair edged past them on all fours with baskets on their backs.

“Whos that? Whos that? Whos that....??” Terri had jumped up and down with excitement.

Taun. They live on the mainland in the tall tall grass, that is why they are so tall tall.
Mab remembered that from a teaching song.

The sisters walked slowly, carrying their treasure on the stretcher between them and as the long day wore on all the other people, busy or distracted by their own carts or bundles, turned one way or another or passed on ahead and out of sight. Now they were alone, or mostly alone, on the sandy path again.

Had she missed a turn? It wouldn’t be the first time. The River, so very much narrower now, was still visible through the trees to their left.

Maybe it was a good idea stop to get her bearings.

“Are your arms getting tired back there, small? We can stop and rest.” Glancing back as she spoke Mab saw figures on the empty road behind them.

Shit. Those two side-eying fellows were back again. She’d breathed a sigh of relief seeing them pass by this morning but now somehow they were behind them again.

“Ohhhh….them bastards are following us Mab,” her sister said.

“Watch your mouth and calm down, small one. I told you before. It’s a Market. They’re probably just going to the same place we’re going to. No trouble.”

Terri was right though. The bastards were following them, had been from the time they started up the high hard road….maybe had been all the way from the shore.

Mab didn’t know what she dreaded more…the thought of getting bitten up and robbed of their last hopeful in this strangers country or of having to go home empty handed and face the stoic but disappointed looks of the villagers.

If old Loopy, who’d ferried them to Big Key, said “I told you so” it occurred to Mab that she just might find it in her heart to kill somebody.

Growing up on a Western Island Mab had all her life been warned to consider strangers untrustly, but that hadn’t proved the case at all in these last weeks. The way to White River had been harder and longer….a good lot longer…..than she’d ever expected but most folk they’d met since coming ashore had been kind, if busy. Nearly everywhere they camped somebody had offered to share food, fresh water or a kind word.

The old rope spinner at Bug Key turned out to have sailed far in her youth and told them to be careful but not afraid. “Ea’s children are the same everywhere,” she said, helping them lace the big awkward thing into a tarred cloth bag and showing Mab where to slip stick poles through loops in the side. She and Terri alone could either drag the clever rig across soft sand or carry it together like a sick goat on a stretcher. The rig not only kept their “treasure” covered but made it look for all the damn world like they were carrying a dead body, a handy deterrent to the curious.

“Trust your gut but use your nose too. Most folk are decent enough given the chance,” she said,
“and you’ll even find a handful that are heros through and true. Just keep sharp too for those few that are wicked neck-biters.”

Now…damn it. Mab’s gut was telling her these fellows were the wicked few for sure.

She had first spied them among three or four other mangy-looking empty handed Mem’s when the crab boat they’d hitched on put her and Terri ashore at a station several k up the coast. In climbing ashore the tarred bag slipped loose in the breeze and it seemed like they caught sight of a gleaming end of the thing before Mab could scramble to cover it back up. At least one of their party whistled audibly but they’d shuffled off when the crab-fishers began to drag their catch ashore and called out for the girls to follow them as far as the nearest village.

Later they’d bumped into those same two again on the shore road camp spot and then again on the inland road.

This morning in a shady shoulder where they had stopped so that Terri could eat a snack…their last bite of salmon jerky…the big tannish male with the black nose had sidled up at last, winked at Terri and said “Good day to you young ones. Where have you come from and do you need any help with that most awkward burden?” His gap-toothed stripy female companion stood back and laughed in a careless-but-slightly-mean way.

Repeated sly looks and smarmy questions about their covered “trade” she could have put down to bad manners but the way the pair slunk off double quick when that loud trio of yellow-haired humans stopped nearby to re-pack their bulging backpacks put her neck fur up.

Now here it was late and lonely and those lurkers were back again. How much further did they have to go to this WhiteRiver Crossing? The distances around here made her dizzy.

Only one other person came in sight. An old Human leading a piglet by a rope and walking toward them under the trees, going the opposite way.

Steering over toward that side Mab called out, “Ma’am…! Ma’am!..” She was three fourths sure the person was female-ish and tried not to sound as lost and unsure as she surely was…”Auntie..is there a place to stop for the night up ahead? My sister is tired and ..”

“I’m not!” Terri piped.

Shut up.

The person stopped and turned their way. The pig sat down and looked most inquisitive. Mab went on, trying to pitch her voice lower now that she had the woman’s attention. “Someplace, I mean…” oh Ea..these bastards were maybe a half K behind and Terri’s legs were short,… “close by maybe where we might find some shelter and company?”
“Well, there’s a Rescue Place but you passed it a couple of k back, loves,” the Human pointed a stick-thin arm the way they had come and the pig followed her gaze. “But courage up, it’s a just bit yet to WhiteRiver Landing ...the market proper is at the Crossing but there’s decent pubs on this side you can make before dark if you press, “ she pointed ahead, and the pig swung its head to look that way too.” It’s a short walk in the morning but the feed is a bit cheaper on this side than the food stalls will gouge you for in town.” The woman winked and it seemed as if the pig might also be nodding sagely.

_**A bit yet? That was what everyone said every time since they’d left the shore a week ago. How the hell far was a bit?**_

“Thank you Auntie.”

The odd woman and the pig walked off down the slope rather than than up the road, as if they were looking for something in the leaves and grass. The neck-biters must have fallen back again but she didn’t fool herself they were gone.

“Come on, Terri, just one last scurry. Let’s see how fast we can go.”

*Try not to sound nervous.*

“Mabs we don’t have any chips or trade bits left,” her sister said.

“I’ll think of something,” she said.

The place was a proper big house or had been once, dug half back into the side of the hill and walled halfway up with stone and the rest of the way with wood. An upper story reachable by ladders looked to be on posts above.

Inside the doorway was a big rounded room with a fireplace in the center and latticed windows. A low counter-table at the back was loaded with food platters and tapped drink barrels. Maybe a dozen people were sitting and standing around, most bunched in twos or threes, talking, drinking or eating bits of hot pie rolled up in leaves. _Oh her mouth watered at the smell_. A big grey-furred elder with an eyepatch was playing dice all by himself at a corner table and a couple of Humans....well one adult Human and a couple of children maybe...._Size was never a good clue for age with Humans, Mab knew but if she had to guess she’d have figured one was five or so and the other older maybe...._were at a table by themselves. The smaller child sat on a bench drinking out of a wooden cup while the bigger one pulled at the adult’s cloth arm sleeve saying “Mama, can I PLEASE...?”

Hand carts had been crowded outside in the yard and large packs and bundles piled in a little shed with racks watched a sleepy attendant by the door but Mab would not take the chance. She and Terri carried the stretcher right inside and propped it against the wall. This earned them a few arched eyebrows. Apparently you weren’t supposed to do that.

The tall, thin, red-furred male in a white apron bustling all around stopped abruptly to look them
over. Mab’s thoughts tumbled over each other trying to think up some story or plea but though he huffed as if seriously considering some other action in the end he only rolled his eyes and walked away without a word.

*They probably looked like what they were, too pathetic to trouble with.*

Mab’s arms were jelly-tired and her back hurt like hell but the look on Terri’s face hurt even worse. She pressed her numb and sore fingers lightly against her little sister’s back.

“I’m ok. I’m good,” came the answer, as if Mab couldn’t see her lip trembling or the tears she was blinking back, “just kinda tired.”

*I’m so sorry small one,* she thought for about the 400th time since they’d left home.

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Little Key Island was the most beautiful place Ea ever made.

Mab felt it must be so all her life and now, though she had seen some fine fair things on their travels, she was more sure of it than ever.

“And oh, if only we could slice that beauty like a fresh plum to feed our bodies as it feeds our souls,” *Gran used to say,* “how fat and glossy we should all be.”

Gran was gone now and for all she was far too young Mab was the oldest female of her line and decisions for the farm and the family were hers to make. When the Sisters of Little Key called for an Island Council she was the one who had to go.

It would not be good news. Everyone knew that. The second knife-fish run hadn’t come at all last fall...*once every decade or so that happened*...then the winter rains came too short and at the wrong time...*sometimes that happened too.* None of it good news but the hard blow came when the watermen at the wells came with word that the solar cell that ran the emergency water pumps was...after a hundred years or better...*finally wearing out* and as frugal and cautious as the people had been, after two lean years and a leaner one sighted ahead there were insufficient resources to trade for a replacement before the long dry season came.

The Sisters had called the heads of families, Humans and Mems all, from both shores and all ten hill farms together to lay out what their Patterning had shown. The people of Little Key would survive if they held hands bravely until next year’s rains came but unless some new cord showed itself to fill the gap much that had been gained in the years since the end of the Raider wars stood to be lost.

The older people bowed their heads. All of them remembered what that might mean.

Some farms abandoned. Water rationed and food too if it came to that. The flocks culled deep. Boats
idle or riskily short-manned. Loss, hungry times and starting over again.

Those whose strength was already weakened, the very old and the very young, must think of leaving the island while that was still possible....some maybe never to return.

“What kind of cord do we need?” Della the crab-fisher asked.


“There are lines in this pattern that are unfamiliar and hard to read,” Youngest admitted.

“We see that courage and risk must come from within but whether it fails and only turns to bind an edge finished or carries across to tie to other lines and hold we cannot tell.” Eldest said.

No one spoke for a while.

“All honor and respect Sisters,” Aren the weaver sighed, “but I like it better when you say what time the rain will come and which day the the seals will nest on Gate Rock.”

“So do we,” Eldest agreed sadly.

Whether it should be credited to the healed-still-deep scars of the Raiders war forty years past....Great Gran Nella had had only half left of one ear and slept with a little knife under her pillow to the end of her days...or just the people of the Western Islands bone-deep reflex for self-sufficiency, looking for help or advice off-island was no one’s first second or even third thought.

It was only a day later, as Mab lay awake the bed that had been her grandmothers and her grandmother before her that one word of Second Sister’s came back to her.

“Potential.”

Hadn’t somebody had said that once about the big egg?

Mab walked out back to the garden to look at the thing, sitting half-buried in the garden just as it had every day and night of her life, reflecting the little moon’s light.

Long before Mab was born Great Gran’s brother Toby and his human fishing partner Red Karl had dragged it up to the farm in a net.

A big storm had washed out the place where they liked to pull up and check their traps and in looking for a new stretch they had found a most remarkable object.

Toby saw it sticking up out of the sand, one version of the story said. Another held that the rounded thing had been rolling and bobbing like a driftwood log in the tide and Karl had pulled it aboard with a looped hook. Either way everyone agreed that they had dragged the giant shiny thing
bumping and sliding all the way up the hill from the shore and gotten called mighty fools for doing so.

“So I said to him, Ea’s Titties, Toby! What the hell are we supposed to do with this?” Great Gran would interject when Gran told the story…she swore like nobody else ever. Ma used to cover Mab’s ears.

It was a Fallen thing of course. You’d have to have been blind and noseless not to know that. Washed up from the sea floor or uncovered when part of the bluff was washed away maybe. For sure nobody’d seen or heard a Fall of anything on or near Little Key ever.

Wherever it came from Great Gran at first favored tossing the thing back in the sea to be the Bequa’s problem.

The Sisters of The Circle were of course called at once to come look at the thing and were said to have plopped themselves down and cast a Pattern right there in the duckyard.

“Is it useful?” Toby was reported to have asked hopefully and then-Eldest confidently assured him that it had potential.

“Potential for what?”

Then-Eldest said “To be a danger averted.”

Then-Second said, “To be a tool in hands unknown.”

Then-Youngest said, “To be the salvation of children yet unborn.”

“ Or…” Then-Eldest added with a shrug. “It might stand on this hill as a useless shiny egg-thing for ten thousand years until it pleases Ea to turn these lovely lands to sand beneath her sea again.”

“Oh that’s just brilliant,” Great Gran had said.

The egg was smooth and shiny as new brass. It looked to be made of metal but was never hot in the sun or cold in the rain. They called it “the egg” because it was oblong-round and slightly flattened like a spotted turtle egg. Just over two meters tall and bigger than even a tall person could get arms around. Not as heavy as it might look but 20 kilos or so. Whether it was hollow or solid no one could tell. Not a scratch or a dent could be seen on it for all the battering it had endured and neither could one be put on it by any rock or pick or shovel, they tried. Sissy Ree was said to have joked about going to look for one of those blaster fire guns they were supposed to have at HarborTown way way upcoast NorthEast and see if that could scratch it but Gran was horrified, although whether by the thought of damaging the shiny thing or just the idea of sailing so far away was hard to tell.

HarborTown was rumored to be a big and raucous mostly-Human port where everybody talked too fast. Not that anybody they knew personally had ever been away more than the two days sail to Big Key.
Eventually the gleaming egg was moved out of the duckyard because the drake kept seeing his own reflection in it, thinking it was another bigger drake and trying to fight with it. Various locations were tried before it finally found a final resting place propped up at the end of the yard near the kitchen garden.

After that the egg was largely forgotten. People had too many other things to worry about. Good seasons and hard ones came and went.

First Toby then Great Gran passed.

Except for one exciting incident when it was supposed to have made a noise during the terrible summer wildfire right before Mab was born the egg just sat like a gleaming stone for thirty years, end-up, half buried in the dirt with squash flowers growing all around it and once in a while a duck perched on top.

Visitors occasionally asked to see the shiny thing when she was growing up and old people jokingly called their place Toby’s Egg Farm but most young people heard the name and thought that was because of the ducks.

When Terri was two Ma and Aunt Fee went out ahead of a storm to pull in the crab traps before the swells could break them. One trip, two trips....Ma thought they should not risk going back for the third but Aunt Fee had been sure they could make it. She was wrong.

Mab and Terri came to live at the farm full-time after that and Gran carried on with help from neighbors as they grew.

Two winters ago she worked for a week with a racking cough until Mab with enormous difficulty persuaded her to leave the last day of haying to her and young Collen and stay home to rest it off. When Mab came down from the field in the late afternoon she heard her sister’s happy little voice in the new barn and looked inside to see Second Sister holding Terri’s hand and getting a tour while listening patiently to a rambling story about the new baby goat.

Elder Sister was sitting patient and serious by the front door and Mab knew even before she reached out to take her hand in Regret to be the Bearer of Painful News.

Ea had come for Gran.

No, she thought. This can’t be right.

But, as Gran always said, Right and True are not anywhere near the same thing, save for once in a very sweet while.

Mab went the next morning to the Sister’s little driftwood house on the cliff and asked Eldest, “What
if we sold the egg?"

There was a small market on Little Key, a dozen boats would gather with wool and smoked crab and millet and made things on the first full moons day after the storm season ended. They were too small to be on the Red Trader circuit. Every two years or three a shrewd but even-handed Human Far Trader based on Blue would come to trade metal nails, colored thread and bits of casing and Far Island silver beads but there was no Scavenger Market even on Big Key except one year in ten. There would surely be none soon enough to help them.

What if someone took the egg inland? There were big Scavenger Markets there people said. It surely must be worth something. Trade enough for parts at least. With the pumps working and maybe a little extra they could make it through to next season.

“Potential there may be Mab Kella’s-child,” Eldest-who-had-been-Youngest-once said, “But where will we find a “someone” with courage enough to undertake the task?”

~~~

They sat together on a bench as small and close to the wall as possible, hoping to stay out of sight of anyone who would ask them why they were there or ask them to leave if they could not trade. Terri curled against her shoulder asleep and it was all Mab could do not lay her own head on the table in weariness and chance the consequences. If they could just stay here, unseen until morning they were close enough....they could get into town early...and find some honest trader who could look at the thing....

She might have been dozing without knowing because that false too-friendly voice startled her.

“Well, well there little ones, we meet again.”

The gap-toothed female was sitting on the bench next to Terri and the big tan fellow was standing a few hands widths away from her.

“That was brave, brave work carrying that shiny bauble all these days from the shore just the two of you.” His companion snickered but he went on as smooth as ever. “But I fear you’re gonna find such an.....unusual... object a tricky trade come morning.”

“Give ‘em advice Mikki,” the stripy female was giggling like this was the funniest thing ever, “they’re gonna need advice.”  

Terri was awake now, wide-eyed and pressing her hand in Uncertainty and Wish for Guidance.

“My cousin makes a point,” the tan male said, nodding. “This is not the sort of trading for amateurs to undertake. This is the South Scavenger Fair, nurslings. There’ll be sharpsters here from Grasslands Edge to the Woods, the Fells to the Near Shore. You’ll have to wait another two years and trek all the way to Green River to see a bigger one. Far far better to put your trade in the hands of an experienced broker....someone who knows the rungs of the ladder, so to speak.”

He reached his hand out as if to pat Terri’s head and her sister flinched away.

Mab hissed at him and showed her teeth, “You keep your bastard hands off my sister.”
“Mind your manners, little crabs!” the fellow said, less smooth for a moment, “You’re a long way from home and things are different here.”

“Different exactly how?” Came a voice from behind him.

It was the Human female, the one with the children.

“Pardon stranger,” Mikki’s ears perked up as he turned slowly, “but this truly ain’t your business. These younglings and we are just discussing some trade ahead of the morning.” His cousin stood up too and squinted at the woman menacingly.

The Human was smallish for her kind and wrapped up in blue and grey cloth bits from neck to ankles with leather foot boots on, as seemed the custom. Her head hair was brown and pinned back. her green eyes were steady and remarkably unthreatened.

“That young person told you to stand off, so do that and get the hell out of here while you’re at it.”

“Who are you to be telling us our business?” The tan male was facing her now, his own teeth were showing.

“I'm Jyn Erso,” the woman said.

Mab could see that the children who had called the woman "Mama" were watching with wide eyes.

“Is that supposed to mean something to us?” Stripy snarled, moving a step forward.

“Maybe not,” the Human shrugged, “you can call me the Blackbird if you prefer, but either way shove off now. There won’t be another warning.”

Terri tapped the ends of her fingers, Look. Look.

She looked up.

The room had largely emptied. Most of the people standing and drinking before had suddenly vanished from sight. The tall red fellow in the apron had dodged out of sight too although his hand could be seen reaching up from behind the wide counter at the back and taking clay bottle and jugs quickly down one at a time. That one-eyed grey-furred elder had stopped rolling solitaire dice.

Several things happened pretty much at the same time:

The stripy female bared her teeth and made a jump to the side, grabbing Terri’s neck as
she did so.

Jyn Erso shouted “Down!” and both her dark-haired children, the bigger and the smaller, climbed quickly under the table.

Terri pulled free, turned and sank her teeth into the striped arm.

Jyn Erso had a clay platter off the table in hand and smashed it against the side of the tan male’s head as he lunged for her.

Then the Human dropped and rammed her shoulder against the shrieking Stripy to send her sprawling.

Mab pulled Terri out of the way and went straight for the neck-biter’s murdering throat because she had tried to hurt her sister while Jyn Erso tried to hold her back.

“Kid!” she said, “Easy, back it up!” as the striped female scrambled to her feet and ran for the door, gasping.

With a snarl from their right the stunned and bloodied Mikki got up. Jyn Erso let Mab go and crouched back, reaching for a fallen stool and raising it it over her head ready to fight again.

Suddenly a grey hand swept in from behind and black nails sunk into the tan male's neck fur.

“ENOUGH!” roared the old Mem with the eyepatch. “This is my place you worthless hijackers! The alarms are up! You’re in WhiteRiver now and you’ll be out of here and 20 k up the road back to whatever mangy gang you run with or the Market Wardens will see you skinned!”

He dragged neck-biter out the door his cousin had already run through and tossed him into the night shouting curses that would have made Great Gran proud.

Then he returned shaking his head “Bloody hell, Jyn. This again?”

Jyn Erso got up on the ground wiping her pale hands on her leggings, “No apologies. You could have stepped in at any time Sander. Better yet you could have kicked scum like that out of your place to start with.”

She whistled then, which must have been some kind of ‘all clear’ because both children crawled out from under the table.

“Did you break any kneecaps, Mama?” the older child asked.

She introduced herself later as Kayly, nine and a girl before bossily chasing the red-furred fellow to the kitchen demanding that he bring Terri and Mab some “supper.” Which turned out to be warmed up millet with butter which they ate as hungrily as if it were fresh oysters.

“Of course not,” Jyn Erso said. “I was just having a short argument with some people who were trying to bully these brave young persons. I didn’t even break a chair this time.”
“Will we tell Papa?”

“We will tell Papa if he asks because what is the first thing on the list, Sunshine?”

“No lying,” the child said.

“I’m Galen” the smaller child said holding out a pale hand to her very nicely, “I’m six and that’s also seis.” The further Inland you went it seemed like the more and funnier names people had for things.

Kayly and Galen slept up in a loft room above and let Terri sleep in with them.

But tired as she was Mab first untied the cover on the stretcher to let her new friend see the egg.

Jyn ran her fingers over the smooth golden surface.

“What you have here is a shielded equipment drop pod....the expensive kind.”

Ok.

“You’ve seen one of these before?”

“Yes.” She didn’t elaborate.

“Will it be worth enough to trade a solar cell big enough to power a water pump?” Mab asked, suddenly unsure.

“Yes,” Jyn Erso smiled. She had eyes a very different color than Mab had seen human eyes be before, blue-green with flecks of gold in them. “I can guarantee you that. Get some sleep. We’ll take it in and get a better look at it in the morning.”

Late in the morning after a good breakfast of eggs and mushrooms they walked into WhiteRiver Crossing with Jyn and her children. Galen and Kayly took turns helping carry the egg over the wooden bridge, through gate and across the crowded busy market field. There were more people than Mab had thought possible. Booths and tables everywhere were covered with all manner of salvage. Some had neatly arranged, while others were nothing more than piles of casing in the backs of carts.

On one side backed by the wooded fence was a neat blue awning set up over a plank table with orderly stacks of spooled wire, lines of tools and bark baskets of solar chips. Another taller Human was already there, a male with dark hair on his head and part of his face, smiling as if he were
waiting for them. “Papa! Papa!” Kayly and Galen shouted and tried to climb on him. He bent his head and kissed Jyn right on the mouth as Humans do for various reasons. “How did your trip go?” she asked.

He shook his head, “Solid carbon and plenty of it.”

“We may have done better.” Jyn said

“Papa!” Galen cried, “We made friends and they have an egg!”

~

“Let’s roll it over please ” Cassian said.

“It’s just the same all round,” Terri pointed out.

“Even so,” he insisted.

Mab pulled off the rest of the canvas bag and the four of them…five actually. Galen wanted to “help”….flipped it.

He ran his slightly wide hands along the smooth side just as Jyn had done.

“Where did people see the letters?”

“Right there I was always told….well maybe not RIGHT there…but along the middle of one of the flattish sides.”

“and this was during a fire you say?” Cassian asked.

“That’s what Gran always said.”

“Doesn’t make any sense,” Jyn muttered, “these things are made to withstand heat way past anything...,”

“It wasn’t IN the fire,” Terri said. “It was before. Remember how Cousin Daisy’s daughter Dana used to tell the story? There was a part about how the woods animals all ran right through the farm yard? I loved that part. The fox was running next to the rabbits and the bear and all the birds and bats wizzing past everybody and THEN numbers lit up and THEN it made a noise and THEN they smelled the fire and everybody grabbed a goat and a duck and ran away and when they came back the whole field and old barn were burned but the egg was just sitting there perfect and shiny and cool. Remember Mab?”

“What kind of noise? Was there a pattern to it? Did it say words?”

“I don’t know,” Terri look up at at her, puzzled.
Of course. How could she? Neither of them had been born yet.

“It hooted like an owl, once, then twice...” Joc had said, hooking his thumbs together and wiggling his fingers like wings.

“Sounded more like a tree frog.” Gran said and they had laughed and argued.

“Like a bird or frog or something.” Mab answered with a conviction that she didn’t feel, “It chirped or hooted real loud two times....but it only did it just that once and never again.”

Jyn smiled. That, it seemed, was the right answer.

“Bats,” she laughed and looked up at her salvage partner, “The lock is set for a sonic key, something simple. It was asking for confirmation of password and when it didn’t get it automatically shut down again. Cassian, it was the fucking bats.”

It was a box, Jyn told them, something was inside it.

“What?” Terri asked but they only shrugged. There was no way to know yet.

Although Jyn reassured them that it would probably not explode. “Generally you put bombs in a cheap box, not an expensive one like this.”

“She seems to know a lot about bombs,” Mr. Sandor said.

“Yes,” Cassian agreed, “she does.”

The only way to open it was to carry it back to their home in the far Uplands where they had special tools.

Mab found herself childishly half-disappointed.

“How much?” she said, trying to back up and sound like a hard trader now although that ship had probably sailed round about the time Jyn broke the plate against the neck-biter’s head.

Cassian nodded very seriously. “We don’t have a solar cell the size you need here now, but will trade and have one within a few hours.”

“From what you’ve said about that pump,” Jyn added, Mab had drawn a picture, “I’d take an extra as back up and fresh connector tubing. We’ll throw that in along with a big spools of wire and some blades.”
“Wow,” Terri whistled, “you must think there’s something really good in that box.”

Shut up, Terri!

“We’ll take it,” Mab said, and held out her hand. Jyn and Cassian each laid theirs on in turn.

“Will you have to break it to get it open?” Mab asked when she said goodbye.

Later in her life Mab knew she might regret not staying to see more of that Market but all that mattered to her just then was to start for home. Even one hour’s delay would have hurt too much.

All their trade and gear was loaded in a wheeled handcart that had somehow gotten thrown into the deal.

“I hope not,” the woman laughed, “I think we just have to sing bat-songs to it for a while until we say the right thing, then it should pop open like a clam.” It had occurred to Mab several times over the last two days that Jyn Erso might be a little crazy but she liked her for all that. “Do you want it back after we empty it?”

Mab thought she was joking.

“All it’s ever done for three lifetimes is sit in the garden and confuse ducks. Now it will help us hold in this hard time and maybe more hard times to come. I guess it’s done more than it’s potential for us now.”

She looked back toward the flat yard outside the pub where Terri was hugging Galen and Kayly and giving them both kisses with Hopes to Meet Again.

It didn’t seem likely but they were sweet kids. It had to be a hard life working Salvage Markets as a family business but at least they were all together.

“It sounds funny I know ... because I have Terri and she has me and with your help and Ea willing all us neighbors will get through this and I can look to have my own babes and stay on the farm,” Childish sentiment was not a thing you’d say out loud back home to any but your nearest but things were different here... “but we had all those stories of the egg...of Gran and Great Gran and Uncle Toby and Joc, even Aunt Fee and Ma.... And well, I suppose I’ll miss it sometimes.”

It was always hard to tell what Humans were thinking unless you knew them really well but Jyn
Erso Blackbird didn’t laugh.

Instead she took her hand sideways with Shared Understanding…which was surprising and made Mab wonder if she misunderstood. People here did have funny ways of Communication in some things….and said, “I can’t make a solemn promise because our travels aren’t always of our own choosing but if I can I will bring it back to you on Little Key.”

They were such abrupt people.

Mab didn’t really believe her but she was sure the woman meant what she said when she said it and so they parted with kisses and Gratitude for New Friends and Wishes for Safe Journey.

~

She and Terri made their way back down White River to the shore a full day and a half quicker. That cart made a huge difference.

Then it was up the Shore Road to LongIsland Crossing and then with passage in a Trade boat to Circle and Leaf and then on to Big Key.

Old Loopy himself ferried them back to Fernypoit.

“Brave little farmers!” crusty old fellow said, “I knew you’d come back rich. I wagered on it straight up.”

The watermen and the Sisters were waiting on the dock for them.

The pump worked well, far better than the old one, and though the goats got thin from too-dry grass and the people were down to eating nothing but seagulls, last seasons millet and more kelp broth than Mem’s or Humans alike ever wanted to see again, before the winter rains came and the fish ran again Little Key made it through. No farms had to be given up, no families were broken and no boats lost.

The wire proved to be fine and highest quality. The Sisters portioned it out and traded it for years after, for seed and nails and netting fiber. Wire was always in demand.

Stories reached the Western Island of the Attack at Green River and Mab heard the name Jyn Erso
and Cassian Andor again. The Traders who came every other year now brought more stories about the Blackbirds. That was how Mab and Terri learned that their friends were much more than just a clever family of Scavengers.

Some years after that, the very same week in fact that her firstborn Dylan finally lost his milk teeth and started...thank Ea....more or less eating with a spoon Terri came running full speed up the path to the house with a message. Jyn Erso had come, she called out. She was here with Cassian and her son Galen, now a big strapping lad of thirteen.

“When did they come in, with who?” Mab, hurriedly wiped the cereal off the protesting Dylan’s nose and gathered him up, thinking some messager had come from town, “Where are they docked?”

“No,” Terri gasped, holding her side she was so breathless, “Not Ferny....port.....Mab, there’s a....a flying ship on the upper field...” she was laughing, “Mab, they brought the egg shell home.”

They carried the pod back home, by foot to Grassland’s edge and then by borrowed speeder. Galen and Kayly took turns riding on top of it.

The canvas carrying rig was pretty clever so they just left it inside that and hoisted it up to the tower.
“Are you sure you don’t want to do this in a more secure area?” Cassian asked as they worked the slippery thing over the windowsill and into the Portia’s second level, “maybe the field, from behind some sandbags.”

“Trust a former thief and fence, my love. This is packing for high end equipment. I don’t recognize the casing but it’s custom work.”

“I am seeing nothing but unactivated sealed circuitry units Cassian,” Portia commented as they entered. She had taken the image of a motherly woman with short grey hair. “Simple. Utilitarian. Spectrums are inconsistent with volatile compounds.”

The ghost had the lock popped in less than five seconds and no one but a few local bats and insects could have heard.

A sequence of numerals in Basic ran around the length of the pod and it opened.

The inside were stacked two meter long spear-like blades, dull silver, thin and tapering to sharp but blunted points.

“Are these what I think they are?” Jyn asked.

Cassian laughed, “High quality sensors, probably packed separately because they are a closed linked array. Meant to see without being seen.”

Too fine for smugglers or wildcat miners lost luggage. This was the kind of stuff cartels like Red Dawn used to use to hide their assets.

“These will be extremely useful,” Portia said. “There are 200 of them. I can link them to Bodhi’s satellite arrays.”

“Is it enough to give us eyes on the surface?”

“No,” Portia said, with the voice of a teacher who wants to lower an enthusiastic student’s expectations, “but it can increase my full spectrum surface, atmospheric and upper mantel imaging by 81% if placed carefully and securely but it will take time given our constraints.”

You mean whoever these post-Imperial bastards are and whatever warehouse sale they are running out there in the dark we will have 80% more warning if they come for us, Jyn thought.

“It’s a beginning,” her patient spy assured her.
Una ganga a mitad de precio = A bargain at half price.

Yes I am geeking the minutia of my own AU. It's just nesting dolls of nerdery.
Missed Understandings

Chapter Summary

A mysterious visitor watches an old vid of two exiled soldiers in a moment of peace between wars and ponders how amidst the great battles of Light and Dark most victories are won in the shadows

Chapter Notes

¿Estás bien? = Are you alright?

"Estoy bien, y eso te lleva a tu límite de cuatro veces para preguntarme hoy" = "I'm fine, and that brings you to your limit of four times to ask me today."

¿Estás seguro de que esto no duele? = Are you sure this does not hurt?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

What finally brought her an understanding of what she had missed was neither a vision nor a dream, but a small multi-unit vid-disc that Clarissa had left lying on the table.

She entered the room and turned it on without bothering to go back to the beginning.

An interior with curved walls of grey stone and smooth pale blue…was it glass? She caught glimpses of woven mats on the floor so clear she could make out the green stripes and tight weave. A spiraling stone staircase was visible. Three low wooden benches and some small rush-seated stools were clustered around a wooden trestle table littered with mismatched data pads, two headsets, two wooden cups and what looked like a basket of sliced bread.
Two people were in the room, humans sitting at the table.

“Wrap it and send it with the next batch,” the man was saying. Someone must have spoken because he shook his head as he slid the data pad into the center of the wooden table.

“No,” he replied to a question from this unseen, unheard third person, “There’s no need. Just make sure you tag it.”

She recognized him immediately. Cassian Andor.

He was painfully young the first time she saw him, a courier on a crowded Tarissan street.

Airen had provided her no details beyond a coded message to be in a certain crowded market square at a certain hour.

Lingering by a crowded standing-only caff kiosk she felt something nudge her elbow and turned to look down at a slight human adolescent with tousled dark hair, an oversized cargo jacket and rather angelic face, no different than a hundred others in the crowded street, eyeing the food booths, dodging the security drones, milling around the busking musicians or huddled in small groups over football games on handsets.

“Soo-oory, madam,” had come a sarcastic apology as a pack of fellow street rats nearby laughed and ran off. The boy who’d bumped her bolted laughingly along with them. It was the kind of common jostling that made you check for your wallet after.

Only for a second, looking into clear brown eyes...had she sensed purpose, concentration...fear maybe but also pride in having overcome it.

Nothing was missing from the waist pocket tied beneath her cloak, instead something had been placed there, a coin-sized data disk with the names of the people she needed to contact on Qeriss and the docking code of the ship that would take her there.

Thus the pride. He was very good at his work.

Another child, she thought. Force forgive us.

When she saw the boy again months later it was at Draven’s elbow... above Draven's elbow to be accurate...noticeably taller. Like other humans she had known, the males especially, he seemed to be growing in sections...ears first, then elbows and hands. That was when she learned he had a name, Cassian Andor, and was not from Taris at all but recruited from an unaligned cell on Carrida...
that Airen sent Draven in to liaison with “unofficially.”

“An escapee from the Imperial Recruitment programs?”

“No, ma’am.” Airen Cracken said in his infuriatingly even way. “You may recall, there was a unallined guerrilla cell on the Southern Continent for a few years, mostly survivors from Radiz, the Mid-Rim University … staff, teachers and a handful of students and off-worlders caught in the post-riot crackdown…who moved into the hills and started leading raids for supplies and trying to organize in the labor camps.”

She remembered.

“Unaligned” was code for Separatist hold-outs. *There were wide swaths of the old Industrial Outer Rim….Kerros, Tireen, Fest….where the last war had never ended.* “Unofficially” meant Kallus had passed the cell over for contact.

*“Carrida is firmly in Imperial hands and a small DIY band of civilians seem tragically unlikely to change that or be trustworthy allies if they do. Imperial local government has already begun reprisal executions. Group unlikely to survive the next crackdown.”*

In those early days Kallus’s courage and value as an operative imbedded in Imperial Territory was never in doubt but his knee-jerk animus against recruiting former Separatists apparently had been. Commander Draven had gone in to assess on his own with Cracken’s blessing.

*Yet Kallus turned out to be right about the survival part at least. As she recalled Draven barely made it out alive.*

The file was very thin. “He was a student?” The dates were all approximations but the boy could not have been more than 14.

“No.” Airen said taking another sip of his tea and looking over Syndalla’s report.

*If she asked he would answer but General Airen Cracken had been an Intelligence recruiter before she had and liked to gently remind her of that from time to time. A round-faced, broad-shouldered human who could look blandly pleasant or menacingly thuggish as need required he had a gift for assessing people’s talents as keen as any Jedi recruiter she had ever known.*

The boy was barely shaving and they already attached him as a field operative. “Why?” was on her lips until she saw his marksmanship scores.

*“If you are talking about defeating the Empire you will need an army.” Dodonna said when he defected. “Then that will be your job, sir.” Airen agreed, “Ours is to build a rope bridge for that army to walk across on, one thin cord at time.”*

The first time she spoke with Cassian Andor at any great length and finally read that thin file in detail was when Draven proposed him for Fulcrum.
It was strictly professional courtesy. The program had grown beyond her by then. Still... since they were asking... her first instinct had been to say no. Andor’s youth was the main reason... although the beard helped... but his skill set also seemed wrong. Fulcrum had grown to encompass not just observation, recruitment and cell coordination but a range of deep-cover projects.

There was some odd notation about Draven smuggling him off of Carrida in a packing crate.

In person he was polite and cool-headed, decisive but not impulsive, rare qualities in one so young. He was also an orphan and survivor of at least two ground-level massacres before the age of eleven. For all that Cracken and Draven had both vetted him, this all hinted at repression and on long operations if he did not know himself …the tracks of his anger, his fears, his desires …he would break. By eighteen Andor had run several solo “missions” and seemed to prefer to work alone… another red flag… but this was beyond finding high ground and taking a shot, Fulcrum required asset management and teamwork under pressure.

His record showed high “optimum outcomes”...as Rex used to call any situation where you walked out alive and the other guy didn’t.. but though extremely intelligent he had no formal schooling beyond the Rebellion’s rag-tag military training. This wasn’t a game. Draven was proposing Core and Mid-Rim. Pale-skinned and dark-eyed, conventionally handsome for a human male except for his youth he looked the part but he would need versatility and an actor’s skill. This would get ugly. Probably far more ugly than they could even anticipate right now.

Airen Cracken spoke more than young Lt. Andor did at the interview and Draven spoke not at all. She decided to risk a test.

“No.” She closed the file. “I have to object, Airen, Commander Draven. He is just too young,” she’d said, “We will need more than a sniper’s skills and a clever boy's desire for revenge.”

Andor spoke up before Draven could.

“Revenge is about the past and the past is gone. I’m asking for a chance to fight the nightmare of the Empire in the present and build some kind of path for a future.” He used a pure clipped- Courscanti accent, calm and even with just the finest hint of “screw you.” ”Not everyone can do this. I can.”

She approved him.

Something stuck with her though...what youth of eighteen says “the past is gone” with that level of conviction?

The past is never gone, brave boy, as the wise woman once said it is seldom even past. Force help you.

The war dragged on.

Reporting directly to Bail, Mon and Ackbar she was on base at Dantooine barely half a dozen times and on Yavin IV only once, to meet and share reports with the rest of Intelligence Command. In a canvas cubicle set up inside that largest stone ruin, while transport tugs and astro-mechs beeped and
wheeled equipment all around them she had spoken of the building situation at Lothal and after logistics were covered began to lay out her concerns. In field for months at a time her mind had been consumed with worry about Jarrus and Ezra….mostly Ezra and his training. She had sensed untapped talent in other adapt but in him she saw something unique, a chance for new path forward, some powerful link to the Force beyond the path of the Jedi...or perhaps it was more accurate to say to the Jedi as they had been in ancient times...but her fear was that brutality of war bred anger and a rage to fight evil that would tempt him to the Dark. She had sensed a Darkness drawn to him and looming…. Vader….and felt sure...

Davits Draven, silent until then, interrupted her.

“With all due respect ma’am….,” the thin man did not shout but a clenched jaw was all that kept the words from being a snarl. “My people will never have the luxury of wondering where or what the “Dark Side” is, because they set themselves to face it every bloody day they are out there. If anything like the “Light” of the Jedi ever returns it will only be because ten thousand “shadows” fall unthanked protecting it.”

The room fell silent. Even the sound of the machinery seemed to drop away.

“Davits!” Aerin said, “Take a moment.” The tall red-haired officer stood and walked out leaving the rest of the staff uncomfortable and herself quite stunned.

She had clashed with Draven before, their operations sometimes overlapped, a dedicated, terse sometimes blunt soldier if a bit of a “stick”… the sort of fellow Master Anakin always liked to make fun of or “work around.”

“Draven has had a number of mission reports arrive in the last few days and has been under considerable strain,” Airen said, “but there is no excuse for that, General Tano, if you wish to..”

They were friends, some by nature, all by necessity because for so long they stood alone. Cracken, Draven, Lorras, Delta, Cor, Merrick, Reikken, Bester. Bail Organa had brought them in together, young Imperial officers who had walked out of the chaos of Order 66, directly off the battlefield or the martial law riots on Coruscant, exhausted, traumatized, grieving the noble cause they had fought, suffered and killed for only to be confronted with the evidence of their own eyes that their Republic was dead, had been murdered at some unknown point in the past and it’s place taken by a brutal imposter who had used their patriotism and sacrifice as its weapon.

The clone troopers were physically deprived of choice but even among the Imperial Army most were unwilling or unable to accept the truth immediately. A few more came out later, like Dodonna and others like Kallus turned after Mon Cala, Kashyyk, the looting of NiJedha..... but the tragic fact was that most never did. Many normalized the Empire’s escalating crimes, while more stayed blind or took refuge in cynicism. In the those bloody days that handful alone found the courage to say “No” and desert. These joined the secret fifth column Bail and Mon had formed and were connected with the fugitive Mon Calmari who become the Alliance’s first human officer corps.

Of that generation only Cracken and Draven would survive the war and only Draven would live to fight again.
“No, no of course not.”

_Do you think I have never seen an angry soldier snap at a superior officer before? Disillusionment with the Order's hubris made me who I am._

_But a voice in the back of her mind questioned. Have I forgotten this? Is it too easy to fall back on the hierarchies I was taught?_

Draven returned a few minutes later and apologized with military formality.

While waiting in the gathering heat for her shuttle to be fueled she overheard Major Harinar talking in the shade of the adjoining the bays to another of the analysts. Likely they did not see her, or know how good Togruta hearing was.

“…Verujannsi…they’re bringing them a few at a time in shielded transports but it’s a least 100 workable X-wings. Merrick was just about in tears he’s so happy…” the analyst laughed then asked a question she could not make out. “No, they’re transferring the rescued civilians off as soon as it’s clear….the statements they’re giving….apparently it was even worse there than the reports made out.” Another question. “He’s in Med…who I hear tore Command a sheet about the shape he’s in too…Andor…no, not well. I don’t think anyone knows him well. …he was imbedded for most of a year… so expect he'll been under psych-watch.”

“Is that what the droid is for?” the other voice came clearer now. “Maybe” Harinar said, “I never thought of it that way but that’s one way to keep the poor bastard on mobile suicide watch.”

Across the bays an hour later she saw a tall dark-haired human in slightly loose Alliance khakis walking with..._oh dear moons...was that a K-series Imperial security droid? How did that get here?...thin and clean-shaven. “Not that you ever listen to me.” the droid was saying like a peevish mother hen. "Alright, Kay.." Andor answered wearily._

_It was not until she returned to Phoenix Squadron that she learned that Davits Daven had had a team of his own people on Lothal. They had been captured and tortured by Vader but gave up nothing before dying._

Draven’s words still stung. The curses of Separatist prisoners in her girlhood came back to her as did complaints of common clone soldiers...and now to hear them from dedicated Alliance officers willing to die for the Restoration of the Republic? She had turned her back on the Order for similar sentiments and it seemed important to understand what she was missing. She would apologize to Draven the next time she saw him, ask questions, listen to this resentment when the wound had had a little time to heal. There was a lesson in this.

But after Lothal came the other battles. She did not see Draven again and spoke with Cracken only over a crackling audio link about supply lines. After that came Mutstafar...and all things changed for her.

_Forgive me Davits, we truly did fight in different wars._
“I’m thinking it’s another tramp miner colony.” The woman said from the other side of the table. “Those ships really do look like banged-up family transports and I am seeing no armament worth mentioning.”

“Likely,” he said.

“All of which begs the question..” the woman sighed but did not finish her thought. Pulling off her headset, she laid it beside the pad she had been using and pushed brown fringed hair back with a free hand. “Ohhh...” Groaning she stood and raised her arms over her head, wiggling her shoulders as if to stretch out an aching back. The baggy blue sweater had concealed her condition while she was sitting but it seemed obvious now, from this angle. She was with child, though it was hard to tell how near to delivery..

This clear-eyed, shrewd woman you might have passed in the street and not recognized but you saw her long ago too. There had been a few blurry images even if you did not know her name: YTBI / Partisan / Saw Gerrera’s Inner Circle / Adolescent Human / female-identified? / Kestrel? Ordinance?Explosives? Her memory could pull up only a small figure in ragged fatigues, never facing any camera, eyes darkened with kohl. She passed those files on early.

Gerrera seemed locked on a downward path of revenge and retribution after Steela died, becoming more and more willing to embrace the tools of enemies he had once fought. Obsessed, secretive, contemptuous of Command and almost worse, unreliable .....or so you wrote when you advised Bail and Mon to cut ties lest their Rebellion be drawn into the role the Empire had written for it...just as the Separatists once had... that of anarchists, terrorists.

Bail and Kallus agreed. Saw must be cut loose and his scorched earth methods disavowed if they were to gain and hold the trust of key not-yet-allies.

Only Mon, usually the idealist, had argued.

But at some point after her departure Rebel Intelligence ferreted out a strange secret. Saw’s fostered cuckoo-chick had been Jyn Erso, an Imperial weapons scientist’s daughter.

The same Jyn Erso who would eventually be recruited to the Alliance under somewhat vague circumstances. She would harangue the shell-shocked Council with the existence of the Death Star and become one of the martyred dead of Rogue One. A tragic footnote in the tale of heroes.
"¿Estás bien?" he asked, looking concerned.

"Estoy bien, y eso te lleva a tu límite de cuatro veces para preguntarme hoy," she said mock-glaring at him.

_Fluent but not a native speaker. Her phrasing was quick and the accent clearly aiming to match the Festan roll of his but there was a lingering schoolgirlish quality. Had he taught her or had she taught herself so as to be able to talk to him?_

“Oh!” she stopped as if surprised, glanced almost comically over her shoulder as if to see someone behind her then down at her stomach, “Oh fuck!” and slipped her hands up under the sweater. “She's doing it again.”

Cassian Andor looked up … the imaging was so perfect, beyond any standard vid or holo she had ever seen… the split-second flash of terror was as visible as if she were in the room. _It was a deep thing, almost painful to see. For the woman? The child? Of what he will become if he loses her?_

_No. This is not that story. The similarities are surface things. That was different tale.... of mighty powers, knights and Queens …palaces, temples and lightsabers, shame and jealousy, lies and blame._

But the woman held her hand up quickly, laughing. “It’s alright! It’s alright soldado….I just…ooof fuck… It happened the other day too, but this time I swear your child is kicking me with it’s little tiny feet.”

_She knows he is afraid and why. They do not hide things from each other._

The still-unseen speaker must have contributed something because the woman, Jyn Erso, looked toward the staircase…_who does she see and why can’t I?…_ and laughed again, “Please. I do not need an explanation of the choreography, thank you!”

She walked around the table. Cassian Andor turned as if to rise but she pressed him back down with a hand on his shoulder.

“Does it hurt?” he asked wonderingly.

“No, no,” she maneuvered to sit beside him and he moved give her room on the bench. “Maybe later, when it’s bigger than a squirrel kit but right now it’s just like…” she reached over as if to tap his stomach but he caught the hand and kissed her fingers.

“Here.. Maybe she’ll do it again.” She took his hands in hers and drew them up under her shirt.

“Are you sure this is ok?” he said shyly. All the smooth professionalism of moments before gone.

“You are so funny. Of course it’s ok. Me asking, nay…begging…you to put your hands on me is pretty much how we got in this situation.”

_She is teasing him to diminish his anxiety and he knows that. This is something they do._
“Promise me you won’t talk this way in front of the baby.”

“No promises.”

They sat quietly for a few moments with his hand on her stomach, as if waiting for something. She sighed and leaned against him, head resting on his shoulder.

“Sorry. It was full Chirrut-quality martial arts practice on my right side before, I swear. Now she’s hiding quietly like a good little spy.”

“Don’t blame me for that. No one hid better than you, I ought to know.” He put one arm around her to hold her close, kissing the top of her long brown hair while leaving the other hand in place.

“Are you going to tell Draven?”

“Are you?”

She sighed and closed her eyes.

“Maybe. I was thinking, on her twenty-first birthday or our Army of the New Galactic Republic retirement-from-service party, whichever comes first.”

“Deep-cover surveillance operatives don’t get a party.”

“Fuck that, what do they get?”

“Last I heard, a red enamel flask of Corellian brandy and an anonymous silver star on the wall of a headquarters building on Hosnian Prime.”

“Cheap bastards,” she said, “we should at least get a cake.”

“Oh!” Jyn Erso sat up suddenly and took his hand, “Here we go, right there. Do you feel that?”

He must have. His expression might have been wonder, joy, bewilderment or fear. Perhaps it was all those at once.

_Ashoka Tano had never known this man, never known him at all._

“Cassian” the young woman said brushing his dark hair back with her fingers, “I love you. It’s going to be alright.”

_She knows she is probably wrong, but if by force of will she can make it so she will._

"I love you too," he smiled bravely and shook his head in disbelief, "¿Estás seguro de que esto no duele?"

"Sí. It’s like a friendly dermal parasite."

"Stop it! This is our child you’re talking about!" they were both laughing now and he leaned his head low over her as if addressing her stomach "Do not listen to your Mama!"

"It is not possible to offend the sensibilities of a 24.5 week old still-under-construction person. Besides you told me you’d been to Mimban, nobody gets off that planet without taking on some passengers. They hand everybody that nasty medicine for free at the port."

"Easy for you to say. Some people didn't get to go in through the port. Some people had to sneak in
and out on a mapping shuttle with a K2 unit whose bright idea of treating such a problem was to zap the affected person with 5.2 mA of electric shock."

_They laughed ridiculously, his arms around hers._

_She stopped the vid. Left them there._

_Rey had told her of seeing them both in holo-conferences, with greying hair, soldiers still. Of their daughter, presumably the baby unborn here, the mysterious heroine who became her friend and vanished when the fight was done._

_This and a few other disks had come to Clarissa Rayma only recently, sent to her along with other personal effects from the estate of a Doctor Ty Thorn._

_Ashoka Tano might look at the others later but for now she had taken in enough, both of hope and regret._

_She left the way she had come and continued with her own story. It was all that she could do._
A mixed-up bit of Rebel-captain pregnancy almost-fluff wrapped in a "What the hell DID happen to Ashoka Tano because that was all pretty mysterious" daydream.
Cassian remembers Stordan Tonc.

Chapter Notes

Part of a tiny bit left after "Chapter 77: No se Mueve" of Over The Edge. In which Stordan Tonc, the other survivor of Rogue One finds Cassian after the Battle of Endor and brings him to the injured Jyn. A little Tonc/Cassian bonding that there was just no easy way to fit in at the time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There should have been more of them. Thirteen humans, one Drabatan and a KX-series droid.

Through only three survived the Galactic Civil War, four survived Scarif. They never forgot that either.

Cassian landed the hijacked Imperial shuttle. In fact, he managed to get down through the trees and onto the make-shift landing pad at what was designated Ground Station One with some competency, Kay would have been grudgingly proud of him, but motor memory could only hold panic in check so long. In this case only until the landing gear lights went green. He recklessly skipped checks and was unbuckling to bolt the pilots seat before engine vents were even fully shut down. Out the cockpit screen he’d seen Stordan Tonc standing dangerously close at the end of the pad, waving his arms.

“Captain!! Captain!!” The infantryman ran to the doors even as they opened yelling over the roar of the fighters overhead and transports all around, “Rook took the Sarge. Medics have her! She’ll be ok! She’s ok! I’ll take you to her!”

Dark-eyed, thin and muscular but barely shaving from the look of him... Cassian first saw Stordan Tonc standing on the runway at Yavin IV along with another kid, a tall and moon-faced boy named Basteren and said “Rue, no.”

He hadn’t questioned anybody else Melshi brought in, wouldn’t have. Even pressed to the wall like
this Melshi knew how pick a ground team, no one was better.

Rostok, Casrich, Mefran…there no need to ask why they were here. Sefla either, an Infantry
Lieutenant promoted at Rygel. Cassian couldn’t help but notice his rank pips were missing now…
threads hanging from his jacket as if torn. Melshi was talking to him but Cassian only heard, “No
Sargent Melshi, you give the orders, just put me where you need me.”

Pau…Cassian supposed he understood as well.

Those two though…fucking Force… were they even nineteen?

Melshi followed his gaze then looked back, eyebrow raised. “They’re good lads...multi-mission
Pathfinders…they know the stakes and they want to come” and Cassian read his old friend’s thought
as clear as glass.

You were thirteen, Andor. I was sixteen. Who are we to tell anyone “you’re too young to die
today?”

He nodded. "Get these crates in, we’re up in five."

Tonc grabbed his arm and pulled him out leaving the other Pathfinders to deal with the shuttle, the
prisoner and any kind of report. It was far too loud to hear what the soldier was saying at first as they
ducked under the jets and between the traffic controller-C-18s but Tonc pointed to a passing eight-
man personnel skimmer that already had nine men onboard and pulled him up.

“Get us to the MASH unit asap!” he said to the KR-33 driving.

“Are you reporting injuries?” the droid asked, “You have blood on you, Infantryman.”

“What?” Tonc glanced down at his combat vest and trousers, soaked through in places with dark
stains. Jyn’s blood.

“Oh fuck,” he said and looked at Cassian “It’s ok…” then back at the droid. “It’s not mine…ours…
we need to check on a crewmate.”

“Ok. Find a place to stand soldiers,” the unit said, tilting it’s head assembly…a painfully familiar
gesture…“I’m circling the pad to drop this crew to a fireboat but I’ll take you straight from here,
fifteen minutes.”

They wedged their way in between crewmen in flight suits and grabbed the hand loops.

I need to see her. Just let me see her and I’ll be alright.

Stordan Tonc leaned over as they held on, wedged against the back wall of the crowded transport,
“I’m sorry Sir…didn’t think about looks…It’s not that bad, I forgot she was probably bleeding when
I picked her up…and it was kind of a mess for a few minutes but like I told you, Page got her taped
off quick and they plugged her straight into one of those heme-unit things those fuckers fix you right
up even if you’re two drops from empty….not that she was…. Rook ran her right to the doc….shit it
was even the same doc from Massassi Base who sewed him together again…talk about your fucking
white coat miracle workers. So she’ll be fine. It’s just juice…a shrapnel nick in a bad place. They can
put it all back in. You’re tired as fuck for a week after they unhook you but after that she’ll be fine.”
He did not remember the kid talking like this in the back of Rogue One…but maybe he just hadn’t been listening. He’s talking to himself as much as me. “Corp…Tonce, thank you.”

“What? Oh. No, Captain. Dameron did the heavy lifting, guys a damn tank. Sarge Erso told me “Don’t fuck up Tonc, just get me to the Captain and it’ll all be fine” and it will…it will now. You should have seen her though, she lit the place up like it was fucking Coronation Day. Bucket-heads never even knew what hit them. Berman said she tucked right in when the doors opened and blew an armored mini-carrier with a fucking hand grenade. Man…” he shook his head and patted Cassian’s shoulder, “Shit, sir…I tell you…when she popped up out of the trees, man it was like the greatest thing…. Rook told me you guys made it out, well actually General Draven told me first, that’s a whole fuckin story…I don’t know how you guys do that spy shit by the way sir, that just takes a whole different kind of gonads…begging your pardon…but that whole time on Yavin and Home One, when they were saying Rook wouldn’t make it and I thought I what if I was the only one…” the younger man seemed to choke a little. “…got to admit, that part was hard.”

The transport stopped and the rest of the crewmen pushed past and around them jumping out to run to a waiting Y-wing.

Alliance ships were criss-crossing the thermosphere, setting up shielding and blowing or tractoring off debris.

The second Deathstar was in pieces over their heads.

“...but Rook didn’t die, right? He started talking after they fixed his jaw and and once they took him off the hard stuff he even started making sense…we’d got the map to the Princess.....I just kept telling myself that. We did the fucking job...but then... then to find out you and the Sarge got out and reposted yourselves with no help and found the other fucker…”

I guess we did although we did have help.

Tonce looked up and smiled, “Hooo boy! Sarge wasn’t kidding when she said “we go til we win or we run out of chances” Rogue fucking One eh, Captain?”

“Secure yourselves soldiers of the Alliance!” the droid sang back and gunned the hover transport so hard both of them nearly fell, “destination mobile medical unit eta in ten!”
back there. You two wait....”

Liana Hallick?…oh hell, Jyn. That's NOT funny.

“We’re family. I’m her brother..” Tone was insisting.

The tech looked at him with exhausted sympathy, “Soldier..do you know how many times I’ve heard that? Just wait in that tent over there and I’ll get someone to come and.”

“Ma’am I’m serious. This is her husband, Captain..”

“Arian. Spec Ops Recon.”

“Force….”the Abenaden huffed her mouth tendrils, looked at her data pad and shook her head, “…ok…I give up. Straight across here and the second unit to your left. I’m showing F6 but get the other two to leave when you get there and stay out of the damn way,” then rushed on.

They strode quickly across the busy Triage unit.

Droids and human techs were wheeling gurneys past with several of the small local bipeds lying wounded.

One wide-eyed furry youngling was wrestling with an ME-3L4 who was trying to get a sterile cuff over a badly burned small arm. “Honey. You must let go of the stick. We are trying to help you!” A human medtech ran in with a hypo and the furred local fell limp. A short bloody spike of wood dropped to the flooring.

“Sorry almost slipped there,” Tonc said low and breathless as they hurried. “No names. Rook told me.”

“You aren’t used to it. No shame in that.” None at all.

“I wouldn’t last fifteen minutes is what the brass…I mean General Draven…said. Different set for sure. Old guy could shoot tho’….wait there he is! there! Rook! Rook! I got him!”

He saw Bodhi standing up then and pretty quickly forgot everything else.

She lay in one of the half dozen cots, not screen-fielded but with lines running to her neck and side from a tall narrow unit by the head of the bed.

One arm was lined too and a transparent scarf held her hair back. Except for being as pale as the sheet she looked asleep. He found he couldn’t breathe.

“Cassian,” Bodhi held his shoulders, “She’s good. She’ll be out for a while but we got her here in time and they said the dangers past.” The lights on the unit were green and he could see the sheet rise and fall.

Bodhi moved back and gave Cassian his place on the small folding stool beside. The sheet was made
of warming filament and her skin didn’t feel cold when he kissed her forehead and lay his head down beside hers. In the noisy bay every sound faded away but the soft hum of the monitor and her breathing.

He might have cried then. He wasn’t sure.

_Bodhi hugged Tonc._

“Who’s claiming the shot?”

“Not sure, I’ve heard Calrissian in the Falcon but Rogue Squadron says it was Antilles.”

“Fuck that. It was Antilles.”

“You don’t know...Numb was flying, besides, the guy could be an ace for all you know.”

“Yeah, sure. I’m calling it for Antilles.”

“It doesn’t matter Tonc.” Bodhi was laughing.

“Damn straight it doesn’t matter. They’ll tell the story they need to tell. Force knows the truth and so do we….the pilots take the shots but we set up both the fuckers. You and me and the Captain and the Sarge and eleven guys that aren’t here.”

“Twelve, Tonc.”

Jyn woke after few hours, briefly. He must have fallen asleep but something touched his hair and when he looked up her beautiful eyes were open and seeing him.

“I’m here,” she whispered, smiling, “We’re alive.”

She dropped off again a minute later but her color steadily improved. When Bodhi was sure they were both ok he went to check in with the rest of the Pathfinders unit and a Sargent Dameron came and talked to him…in Festan no less.

Clearly “Liana Hallick” had impressed her team.

He still wore the mod but Portia’s voice was quiet, for which he was grateful.

At some point what might have been evening fell. Their side of the moon turned away from both the gas giant and it’s star and although the sky was more a deep violet than black, stars shone faintly visible, as did the lights of Alliance ships, still criss-crossing the sky.

Nurses came and went, checking Jyn and eventually brought him caff and a couple of ration bars. The sound of music... loud percussive dance music... still faded in and out.

From what people nearby were saying he gathered they were within shouting distance of an aboriginal settlement the size of a small town and a riotous Rebels-plus-locals victory dance party was audibly going on somewhere above the tree-line. He stayed by Jyn.
Tonc returned eventually with a canteen and a couple of cups. “Hey Captain,” he whispered, afraid of waking Jyn. “I brought you a drink…alcohol…Rook said you might want one.”

“Rook is right…”

“It’s the local,” Tonc poured out a shot and pulled up another camp stool, “Fuck knows what’s in it, hopefully not the fermented bones of Stormtroopers but…” he took a careful sip, “These little guys really hate the Imps so I’m not making any bets. Tastes kind of gingery and Chewbacca’s drinking it and he says he’s a vegetarian so…”

It tasted like high proof brandy….very high proof.

“Good party?”

“Halfway between a Pendarran wake, and a Naboo street festival and a Vox4 tailgate party. I danced with most of Blue Squadron. The furry people had a 3PO unit in a blanket and were tossing him in the air but when Antilles took his shirt off I figured it was time to get out of there.”

Jyn might be sorry she missed this later but he wasn’t.

“Captain?”

“Yes?”

“I should have said before but...I wanted to tell you I’m sorry about your friend….the droid I mean. I didn’t get to talk to him at all but from Rook's stories he was pretty badass.”

He had his moments.

“Thank, you Tonc.”

“What now, do you figure? Everybody is going on like it’s all over right this very minute and I’d love to think it was all as simple as drop-kicking old Palpy off the roof but we’re gonna sober up tomorrow or the day after and it’s not going to be is it? Some of the pilots are saying once the fucker piñata’d some of the big destroyers started winking out.”

Cassian coughed on his drink. Damn! That burned.

“Tonc are you sure you don’t want to be in Analysis?”

That made the young man laugh. “They can’t bring you and the Sarge straight back in can they, at least not her… not unless it’s in disguise right? That would upset the whole bowl of cherries.”

“I don’t know.”

Tonc took another small shot.

“Naw. You and the Sarge should head back to whatever listening post you set up out there, stay out of the shit. Between you two you don’t miss a trick and when you see the shot you call it and you take it. They're gonna need that kind of big-picture straight no-bullshit more than ever now.”

“I don’t know if that's going to be up to us.”

“I'll talk to the Senator. Maybe I can swing it for you.”

“Senator Organa?”
“No, although she’s running around up the hill there in her nightgown so it might be worth a shot. I meant Senator Mothma. I was her bodyguard for like ten whole minutes...she's great. We had real rapport.”

He started laughing, it might have been the stupid liquor,…he should have known better….but likely it was post-stress. Either way he found he couldn’t stop.

“Hey,” came a quiet voice, “Is the rave still going on? Are you drinking without me?” Jyn was awake.

“Oh Sarge, I’m sorry!”

“No liquor for you. They just took you off a heme-unit.”

“A little?”

“No, Jyn.”

“I can get a spoon,” Tonc offered.

In the end, of course, Corporal Tonc was absolutely right. It was a glorious moment of light in a Darkness but it wasn't dawn.Twelve hours later General Crix Mandine started the evacuation of forces from the Green Moon of Endor. The Emperor was dead but the War was not over.

They spent another day on the ground together and 24 hours on a Mon Calmari transport, moved out with the badly hung-over First Infantry Pathfinders Division as Captain Arian and Sargent Hallick.

Crammed on board with 400 other Alliance ground fighters waiting for deployment, they played cards. Jyn won...and Sabbac…Bodhi won…talked about football and the price of weddings, Captain Han Solo’s famous floating dice game on Hoth, Tauntauns …which everyone but Cassian had encountered it seemed…. and if a Gorlan and a Wampa got into a fight who would win.

At the end of the second day. Portia spoke over the mods for the first time since the Battle. "Cassian. Alguien te está buscando.”

General Draven found them and what was left of Rogue One parted.

Tonc was full of the plans for “after” that the rest of them felt too old or too superstitious to make. He cared nothing about their uncertainty.

“Keep the fold-out couch ready. Rook knows how to get there. He’ll bring me as soon as the all-clear sounds.”

“Actually I don’t.”

“Fuck that…He’ll find out how to find out. We’re Rogue One. We don’t take “no way” for an
answer. I’ve got two nephews I’ve never met and I’ll bring them too. This crazy secret hideout of yours sounds like a good place for kids. Treehouses, sloth people that sing, beer in tiny cups, count me in.”

They hugged each other goodbye in a crowded flight bay. Tonc taught them a call sign.

Nearly thirty years later. Bodhi returned. He left the life he had built to join Organa’s Resistance and came back to Ea, finding his way back to the edge of the Unknown Regions just as war burst out again after crackling for years like an unseen fire moving under brush. He brought their lost daughter and her friends Ava and Paave back safe before war could cut them off forever and carried Leia Organa’s final orders to the Rebel Alliance’s last and furthest station but he didn’t bring Stordan Tonc. By then there were only three of them.

Toc was killed in the Battle of Jakku, the bloody last engagement of the Galactic Civil War.

Jyn laid a stone in the garden for him when Portia confirmed the loss and the children grew up hearing stories.

In the last days of what came to be called the First Order War, Kaylyra Andor and her friend and field agent Darian Tonc found themselves on Jakku and together laid a stone near the collapsed cave base where Staff Sargent Stordan Tonc had fallen, going back for a wounded crew member he would not leave behind.

Commander Kaylyra Andor’s Intelligence unit, code-named Rogue One, remained a secret known to very few until long after the war….but that didn’t matter. The Force knew.

Chapter End Notes

Alguien te está buscando = Someone is looking for you.

*sniffle*
Damn I miss that hard-swearing young soldier. Rogue fucking One.
No one is ever really lost….especially heroes.
Bonds

Chapter Summary

"Family" can have different meanings on different worlds and among different peoples but some bonds are universally understood. After the Battles of the Platforms Bodhi and Kayly return home from her first sojourn in the Resistance. Commander Rook brings Leia Organa's first message to Lighthouse.

Worldbuilding, shadowing and foreshadowing.

Chapter Notes

A basket of bits actually, mostly set after Chapter 33 of Fire. A little Ea world-building and for readers of Fire and Jetsam who have ever wondered, the message Leia sent to Cassian with Bodhi when he and Kayly return before the events of FA. Cannot abandon a Leia scene and also the RebelCaptain/Pilot bond. The SWU trio we should have had more of.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Definitions

There were words in Basic that meant something different in Nexa, or just had a different gloss.

“Mother” meant the female who reared and/or gave birth to you. Family trees were matrilineally organized.

Marriage pre se didn’t exist so the terms “husband” or “wife” weren’t common.

“Father” was a technical term, understood but also seldom used.

Memsa females knew which specific males had contributed the genetic material for their children although they sometimes had to scratch their heads to recall.

The Memsa had an entirely different reproductive pattern. “Activity” was engaged in at “Feasts” which were organized around socially triggered variable fertility cycles and were carefully planned or planned for...it seemed impolite to ask and if you did people just broke out in fits of giggles and never really answered anyway...every 2-5 years. The Sisters were in charge of reading the patterns that foretold an upcoming “Feast” window, keeping track of paternity records, organizing the snacks and making sure everybody got good pre-natal care afterwards. However it worked and even Portia was vague about it Feasts lasted 24-48 hours, were highly anticipated by all who chose to
attend and required 18-hour naps to recover from. Some were talked about years later with great
nostalgia. Elders would sit around the Community Hall after picnics sipping cider and reminiscing,
“Remember the Summer Feast the year of the big trout run?” “The year lightning hit the big tree
behind Marta's? Oh my yes! That one was the best!” “Brilliant! These young people don't even
know what they missed…do you remember?” Of course I do! I retired right then, knew I'd never see
a better.” “I had a limp for three days.” “How is your son by the way?”

As Jyn took impish delight in explaining to Bodhi when he first arrived “You know the old saying 'It
takes a village…? Well here it really does.” Not every female got pregnant every cycle….“Oh my
no…” Eldest Sister Tova had said cheerfully, “Some people just go to be friendly,”….and though it
was common to give birth at least twice some females chose to wait a decade or more between
children. In the Uplands it was considered a good thing for young traders and craftspeople to go	raveling, sometimes for years at a time and attend Feasts in other communities.

Most people in Nexa understood intellectually that Taun and Humans managed such things very
differently but Jyn and Cassian being the first Humans to take up residence in the area for
generations and accepted as members of the community their habits were a source of great
puzzlement and much inquiry at first.

“Brother” and “sister” or "near kin" meant “siblings of the same mother” except when referring to
the Sisters of a Circle, when it meant something altogether different.

“Grandmother” meant your mother’s mother but also, as in many places, was a title of respect used
for any elderly adult identified as female.

Likewise “Aunt” was your mother’s sister, and “Auntie” a respected female in your community.

“Cousin” might mean the children of your aunt but was also a universal form of informal address
among near age-mates.

“Uncle” meant your mother’s brother….so the children calling Bodhi “Uncle Bodhi” made perfect
sense to everyone.

“Heart Companion” was a phrase only the Memsa used. It meant people who shared some kind of
trial or intense experience, and were bound by it irrevocably to each other’s pattern, like but in some
ways more than the bonds of blood or place. Strange and foreign as Cassian and Jyn had seemed
when the black shuttle came down in flames in the upper meadow the people who carried them out
and nursed them back to health named the relationship between them immediately, even before they
had been able to themselves. “We saw at once that you were Heart Companions,” Then-Eldest Sister
Iola had said, “and knew that you ought to stay together.”

It was the only explanation ever needed or given for Bodhi’s return and his welcome by the people
of Nexa as one of their own.
Six weeks after the taking of the Platforms, Fox and his partners appeared in the garden stacking pine lumber.

“What the hell do you mean “separate accommodations?” Jyn asked Bodhi.

“I mean I’m too old to be climbing down that steep ladder every morning and night,” he said, “and as for sharing the first floor with you two,” he arched an eyebrow sarcastically, “I felt like a fifth wheel thirty years ago and now….””

It took Jyn a full second to realize what he was talking about, then she burst out laughing.

“Please! You cannot possibly still be giving us shit for that Rook. We were young, madly in love and the throes of DIY post-traumatic recovery.”

“She’s right, now we’re only two of those things,” Cassian contributed.

Jyn threw a dish towel at him.

“Cómoico. Which two Major? Choose carefully.”

There seemed no recourse for this but to grab her by the waist and pull her, laughing into his lap.

Galen and Kayly winced in tandem embarrassment.

Ava bounced her infant niece on her lap and giggled. “Bodhi Rook is so right! I used to think you were unusual because even if old people wanted to be Active so often where would they find the strength but then I went to Yavin IV and several of the other very mature Humans were just as bad. Commander Joma used to….”
“My point,” Bodhi interrupted, sipping his tea placidly. “is…to translate the old Ni-Jedhan saying ‘Close relatives make the best defenders and the worst upstairs neighbors.’ Galen and I have already talked to Sela and her carpentry crew about trading summer labor for help putting in a full flat above the old workshop.”

Galen slapped the table with his good hand like a Red Trader approving a bargain…*he had picked up a great deal of Islander slang in his previous summer at sea…*”Uncle and I will set it up as a duplex and Kayly gets the second floor to herself at long last.”

“Perfect,” his daughter said, “After nearly two years sharing a windowless barracks with a few hundred assorted recruits, it will seem like paradise. Just don’t forget to invite me to all the parties.”

“No parties up there soldier boys.” Jyn mock-warned.

To Jyn Bodhi’s return after so long away seemed a natural thing, a straight-up restoration of the balance of the Force and about fucking time too.

Cassian, lacking the blazing surety of her faith could only marvel.

So much had passed since they had last seen each other on that troop ship evacuating from the Battle of Endor…* the fall of the Empire and tenuous building of the New Galactic Republic, lifetimes, battles, hope, disillusion, love, the birth of children, the loss of friends. After thirty years there should have been awkwardness at least.

Instead it was as if some misalignment, work-round-able but never as efficient as it should have been, had finally been put right again.

He and Jyn had never stopped calling the extra cot “Bodhi’s bed” or the back table in the shed ”Bodhi’s workbench.”

“You can sleep on my uncle’s bed,” Galen said to Bill on his first overnight visit, “Papa will help us carry the mattress up the ladder.”

“Where’s your uncle?” the HarborTown boy asked.

“Space,” eight-year-old Galen answered cheerfully, “Someday he’ll come back but you can use it ’til then. He won’t mind.”
Every major occasion sad or happy in all the years that followed … the childrens births, their wedding, village funerals, countless salvage jobs and every damn football game…. either he or Jyn would turn to the other at some point to say, “I wish Bodhi were here” and the other would always answer “Me too.”

A captured assassin whose mission was crashing down around him peered through the barred gap of a dark cell and saw another prisoner, a man just a few years younger than himself, so battered and broken he couldn’t remember his own name. Questions had fallen like blanks but then a spark of light came back into the man’s eyes, “I’m the pilot…I carried the message.”

Everything that followed came from that. They put a medal on the pilot who fired the torpedoes and Force knew he deserved it but Bodhi should have had one too.

Though they had a phrase for it here every soldier everywhere knew that those who endure extreme events together remain connected, for better or worse and it was true that one tie that bound them even after all these years was what they had survived. Only three people living had stood three times under the shadow of the Deathstar.

Bodhi escaped the slaughter at Hoth to find them here.

To this day the memory of the “What are your intentions toward my sister, sir?” conversation still made Cassian smile.

He was the one who told them what had happened outside the Data Tower, glossing over the horror of his own injuries as though they couldn’t see the scars or recognize the prosthetics.

Bad, but that mattered so much less in the end, he confessed to Jyn, than the other pain. No tank could take away his belief that he had failed them.

“Then one day Draven marches me aside and tells me you’re still alive….actually, the words he used that first time were more along the lines of “may be….possibly….I think.” I wondered if that was because he was afraid to get my hopes up or his own.”

“Hope wasn’t exactly his trade,” Jyn said coolly.

You’re not unjust, my love, he’d thought, but you’re wrong.

Her wounds had still been fresh then, so he let it pass.

Bodhi stayed only five months but it was long enough for him and his ship to become a kind of legend in Nexa.
When they said goodbye to him and to Tonc on that crowded troop carrier after Endor Cassian had said “Hermanos” without thought and he had meant it.

Just as he would nearly thirty years after when Bodhi returned, bringing their daughter and the other children home, returned to stand by them and fight in another war.

~

These Shadows Which Are Revealed Only By Light

Galen’s wound healed quickly but he was still coming to terms with a new image of himself…a Captain of the Watch, a team leader in combat.

[“I got your rifle off the platform”] Dex commed from RiverTown to Portia’s Tower [“and the scope’s undamaged, I’ll bring them when I come for the Fair.”]

Cassian watched his son go still and wait two long seconds before answering, “No, put it with the others in the bell tower. Dora will want to clean and re-set it. Have her check the charge and ammo packs too.”

Kayly’s unshadowed joy at being home warred with her worry over the friends she had left behind with the Resistance.

“Kayly” Gilly’s daughter Little Bet asked, after the Welcome Home/Welcome Back party at the Community Center “You’re home now but were you Fallen there?”

~

The Message
Bodhi laid the disc on the table in the kitchen. A glittering hand's-high image of a small dark-eyed woman in fatigues and a crown of greying braids appeared.

[[Major Andor, Sargent Erso, there is much to say but as your ally points out, communicating through intermediaries is a poor substitute. ]]

**Whose voice did you hear Princess?**

[[The First Order is hiding it’s hand but a gambler’s count tells us that they may have most of the high-score tiles right now. We still have allies in the Republic ….on good days I even dare to hope we have many….but in the Senate, well…suffice to say that history has begun to repeat itself.]]

The figure shook her head.

[[ I will not waste these precious minutes talking politics with you. Our recruiting base on Yavin IV was a powerful symbol but you are right in observing that it has outserved it’s usefulness. Some time ago we made preparations to take our operation into the shadows….a full flight base has been prepared at D’Qar and key sympathizers within the ANR have concealed fuel and additional equipment and stand in reserve ready to assist us from Hosnia Four if and when this all hits the fan. You and I both know it will be when. Viewed in the light of the Intelligence you’ve already passed to us this doubtless looks like too little too late but we must pray that it is not. The NRI has been gutted and infiltrated but due to the bloodyminded professionalism of your exit- handler…to the point of borderline treason I might add…Lighthouse was never at risk. No record of you exists. I will not break that trust. Your information will remain eyes-only to myself or Gail Ackbar. I have enclosed outlines of the Resistance’s proposed actions. There will be more to follow. I had a mentor in my distant youth who balanced careful preparation with the flexibility required to make shit up.]]

The General’s image smiled faintly.

[[He also taught me to know the value of those who risk their lives in the shadows to keep the Light alive. I cannot tell you how much it means, to know that despite everything someone is still out there. I hold out hope that one day soon we can speak directly…..perhaps finally meet again and for the first time….until then May the Force be with us all.]] The image’s hand moved, but then stopped, looked forward again [[…and Major, Sargent, one more thing…in addition to apparently training a skilled Service and Rescue Pilot to be a Level Four-Plus clandestine deep-imbed operative you have also raised a brave, capable and clear-eyed young woman of great promise. Be proud. As a scoundrel I knew once used to say "the kid has the guts of a first-class burglar."]]

Leia Organa vanished.

Chapter End Notes

Cleaning out the Notebook of bits that fit in around and between. Being stuck in airports
allows one to search though the old files.
Hands

Chapter Summary

A Cassian pov- flashback to Jyn and Cassian's first days on Ea as wounded survivors post-Scarif. Our poor boy is a mess but healing.

Chapter Notes

An angsty left-over bit that would have fit ahead of Over the Edge Chapter's 8/9: Lighthouse Parts 1 & 2. Many tropes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The trip to the empty house reserved for them proved an hours-long ordeal. The path might have been only 3 k, maybe less, but it curved round a low hill and up and over a gentle slope. Jyn limped slowly and steadily on crutches but for Cassian it might as well have been the mountains of Asmeru. He seemed able to go only twenty meters at a time without stopping to rest and catch his breath.

Several of the villagers came along to carry food, blankets and other supplies, cheerful despite the creeping pace. Everyone around here seemed used to following the instructions of the “Sisters,” as the three females who had pulled them from the crashed shuttle and tended their injuries were titled.

One was very old, one very young and the other in-between. He remained unclear about how the local power structure worked but Iola, Bes and Tova, were clearly people of importance. They had shared their given names readily when asked but Cassian noticed that only he and Jyn ever seemed to address them as anything other than "Sister" or "ma'am."

The supplies were placed on a rough table or stacked on the planked wood floor. Middle Sister Tova skillfully raked and banked the coals of a fire that must have been laid in the hearth ahead of
their arrival while her helpers brought in kettles filled from somewhere outside to sit on the warmed bricks.

“We will come visit every day and oftener if asked but you know far more about what Humans of your sort need than we do,” the grey-browed Eldest, Iola, said after arranging the local medicine on a shelf and drilling Jyn on the rather arcane instructions that came with it. She patted their hands reassuringly.

*Ma'lam, that is a deeply flawed assumption if I've ever heard one.*

Before their escort left Jyn made some of the larger villagers move the two low wooden platforms side by side across from the fireplace. One yellow-striped person seemed to realize at once what she wanted ….”Ohhh I get what she’s going for here… a big sharing bed. My Grannie used to have one of those!”….and helpfully used some flattened copper wire they’d brought to strap the legs together. The Sisters flattened the straw-stuffed mattresses across on top as instructed and Jyn limped around to cover them with the largest blanket. Rigged that way it looked almost like a double bed.

After that everyone left and they were alone, maybe truly alone together for the first time since Scarif.

The walk had left him too wrecked to do more than swallow the cold tea and lie down before he fell down, propped with her help on stacks of pillows and rolled cushions.

The old lady had been most insistent that he was not supposed to lie flat yet.

*There had been blinding light and wind then something pulling at him agonizingly hard…*

*The first thing familiar thing he saw when he opened his eyes was her face.*

*Pale, lips bruised and hair shorn…those eyes rimmed red as if she had been crying…had she been crying?*

*Jyn, he tried to say, Jyn, you're beautiful....but he had no breath.*

When he woke it was morning.

*How long had he slept? Ten hours? Twelve? Longer?*

A gentle growing light and fresh air came through the un-paned square windows. Birds or insects were singing outside.

*Single G-type main sequence star, Kay. Apparent size about 32 minutes of arc. Approximately 25 hours. You'd be proud of me. I worked it out on my own.*
With difficulty he turned his head. A dead Imperial’s boots were on the floor and Jyn Erso lay beside him, curled up near but not quite touching.

Her head lay on one of the smallest pillows and another was tucked in the crook of her arm. A square of sunlight fell across her cheek. He could feel her breath on his bare arm.

The people here were furred and the weather so far had been warm. What clothing they had seen was mostly decorative…and very small. Fortunately the Sisters gave them two over-large shirts and two pairs of drawstring trousers made of the same white linen as their bandages while assuring them that more would be found soon and what remained of their old clothes repaired.

Jyn claimed the knee-length smocks and…thank the Force…gave him the trousers. Since his chest was still mostly swathed in bandages it hadn’t seemed to matter

Except for the pain in his back he would have absolutely believed that he was dead and this was some pleasant ante-room of the Force.

Kay. I don’t know where I am, how I got here or how to get back. I don’t know if we won or I am the last soldier of the Rebellion and the Galaxy is in flames.

I don’t even know if I can stand without help Kay, and there’s a woman in my bed.

She opened her eyes and after an unfocussed moment managed to sit up stiffly, running bandaged fingers through short-cropped hair, grown out just enough now to bend. The red-brown gleam had come back to it.

“Hey.”

“Hey.” His voice was a rough whisper. Drawing in air to get volume still took effort.

He’d punctured a lung they told him which begged the question of how he was still alive with injuries that ought to have involved surgery or at least days in a tank but he didn’t want to seem ungrateful.

“You seemed to sleep ok. Did you?”

Sometimes he didn’t….sleep ok. At one point they had been tying him down.

“Yeah…I think so.” Four words,…about as much as he could manage with one breath.

“Soooo….You probably want to get up, right?”

“Yes… please.”

Jyn Erso smiled. So bright. That smile bloomed like a flower when the sun touches it.

“Right…ok.. so no twisting though, the Older Sister lectured me hard about that.” She swung her bandaged leg down and padded barefoot around to his side to holding out both hands, knuckles still bandaged like a boxer’s, to him, “Come on Captain, straight up.”
That night and every night after she slept beside him. There were many things they did not talk about and this was one. As his breathing improved cushions were redistributed so that she could lie close enough to rest her head on his shoulder, and he could work his arms around her without too much twisting.

*He wasn’t the only one who didn’t sleep ok.*

Bes told them that long ago this place had been a kind of guest house and the few bits of furniture dated from that time but that in recent years it had been used as a farm shelter. This was confirmed on the second morning when they woke to find a curly-wooled goat staring at them resentfully from the foot of the bed. A local child knocked shyly on the doorway and pulled the disappointed animal away but that afternoon Jyn made a request of their nurses and balanced on her cane to hammer two big nails, one of wrought iron and one of what looked like a splinter of hardened hull casing, into each side of the wooden frame with a rock. On these she hung the extra blanket as a drape-door.

Jyn began to take walks out with Bes, the youngest Sister and brought him recon of the countryside and, shaking a little, of the cracked wreck of the shuttle that had brought them here.

*Imperial, she said firmly but of no make she could recognize in the shape the crash had left it. Empty, she answered before he could ask and wiping tears from her eyes would say no more.*

In those first days she had to help him get up and down, get his boots on and off and unwrap and re-wrap the resin-soaked bandages that bound his ribs and shoulder. He changed the dressings on her hands and talked her through the process of frying eggs. Once they grew strong enough to explore the house and yards together the Sisters walked them up yet another path, this time to a small swimming lake.

Physical therapy, he supposed.

They ate and slept and healed.

Having lived alone for so long, the intimacy should have grated but somehow it didn’t.

*It did occur to him that he probably didn’t have a lot of reliable points of reference.*

The first time she was out of sight or earshot he found himself almost ill with what could only be anxiety. Eldest Sister, Iola stayed with him and though she mainly kept her eyes on the sewing in her lap he knew by then that her brown eyes missed nothing.

“Drink your soup, Soldier Cassian Andor,” she said after a while, knowing fear when she saw it. ”Save some for your Heart Companion though. She will return soon.”

*Jyn had given their names and told the Sisters that they were “soldiers.” They seemed content with the word although what definition it held for them she could not tell.*

*He might have been less forthright but could hardly criticize, having been unconscious at the time.*

The people here grew their own food and travelled only on foot. They spoke Basic with a Colonies-like accent but knew nothing of either the Republic or the Empire.
Yet...yet...the blades of the small shears Tova gave them were folded over, hammered and sharpened brass circuit board, the copper straps and tacks looked like wiring that had been stripped out of standard components. Some of the glass-sided lamps had fat beeswax candles inside, others had stacks of cut-down solar chips.

The stars might be unfamiliar but they could not be completely outside the Galaxy they knew.

"They don’t seem much like those other people that were here years ago," he overheard one old villager say rather self-importantly to some others in the cottage yard. “These look much more like the regular normal Humans I remember seeing at Market down South. Fishers and such.” No,” the fellow said in answer to some mumbled question. “That ain’t from the fire...sadly....except for maybe some way up in the Snows all of ‘em you see are like that, just bare as salamanders.”

Where are we, Kay?

---

The girl had never been the real target, of course. It was the scientist they needed, the Kyber researcher turned weapons developer. She was the loose thread left dangling that might lead to him. He had tracked Jyn Erso through Imperial records and planetary police reports and debriefs of former Partisans. A phantom, but phantoms were his work and trade. A half dozen aliases in five years and he doubted he’d even found them all. Why so many? What triggered the shifts?

How strange that this link to Galen Erso was connected to Gerrera. She became like one of those puzzles with a different picture on both sides. He reminded himself that he had always been good at those.

He had only just reached the top of the ladder when he heard the Shield Gate Controller’s voice on comm.

Everything seemed unnaturally paused....Even the engines and the rustling feet and breathing of the men below. Kay held as still as if he were shut down.

Then [“ Rerouted Cargo shuttle SW-0608 you are cleared for landing…”] She turned toward him, hand on Bodhi’s shoulder and he saw that smile for the first time....

What do I actually know about you? he thought.

In the data tower that was the only regret he could remember feeling...that they would die now and he would never learn more.
She had an utterly incongruous sneeze... like a kitten...and held her crystal pendant between thumb and forefinger when worried. She pulled the stems off fruits before biting into them, looked inside her boots before putting them on and placed them toes-out, heels-in beside the bed when she undressed. She knew how to boil water over a fire but not an egg in the water. She hid knives and small blades all around the house...between the mattress and the frame, on the hearth mantle, beneath a loose floorboard. If there had been blasters he supposed she might have hidden some of them too but if the people seemed to have no weapons other that small blades and their own sharp teeth they hadn't seen them yet. A jagged well-healed scar that cut down her left thigh that had not shown up on the medical records of either Nari McVee or Liana Hallick.

Though impatient to the point of clumsiness with pots and pans he knew her to be gentle and skilled when trimming and changing bandages.

*It hurt most when she loosened them, less when they were bound tight but bandages could not stay on forever. Healing bones needed to move and new skin needed air. He knew that.*

He found himself noticing her hands.....probably more than was good for him.

He noticed them at Jedha... of course he had... passing equipment back and forth, holding his “bride’s” hand at the Pilgrims Gate, resisting as he pulled her through the market, ridiculously small as she pulled out a riot baton to kneecap half a dozen Stormtroopers, clutching at Saw Gerrera’s ragged coat...and at Scarif... holding that carved shard of kyber as if praying, tangled impatiently with his trying to wrestle that dead archive officers hand onto the palm reader before he went cold...but she had worn gloves mostly and even so he had seen without looking.

They were small hands but not oddly so,... proportional...she was a small person....her fingers were strong with tools......munitions prodigy and Partisan bomb maker, so that followed. Oval in shape, with fingertips that tapered to smooth nails she kept short... ladylike Couruscanti hands except for the dirt under her fingernails that she diligently scrubbed out before dinner.

Once despite the bandages she peeled an apple-like fruit in a circle with a small-bladed knife in one long coil of wafer-thin skin. “You’re supposed to get a wish if you can peel the whole thing in a single go without having it break,” she said proudly.

*He didn’t ask where she’d heard such a superstition or what she would wish for.*

The Sisters had ordered her to soak her hands in a clay dish of water with needle-like leaves floating in it twice a day for ten minutes and one of his chores was to make sure she didn’t take them out too soon.

One day when the time was up she yanked both hands out and shook them, scattering water, laughing as she reached across for the dry towel beside to him on the bench.

*Without thinking he picked the cloth up and took her hand, began to dry it for her.*

*Even as he drew the soft cloth over her palm he thought...What are you doing Cassian?*
But he had already begun.

Surely would have been awkward to start and not finish, foolish?

Jyn’s laughter stopped at once but she didn’t draw away, only stayed very still and let him do this strange thing without a word or a sound, stretching her fingers out slowly so that he could carefully dry between each. When he turned her hand over and laid the towel across the back he could feel the slight weight of it, could trace the thin threads of scar beneath the skin… at the edges of the fingerless gloves she’d worn…. she had clutched the back of his shirt. They might die on their knees but she would not let him fall again….faded now so that he couldn’t see the lines in skin so pale, but if he pressed gently. … running up and across the backs of her wrists.

He stopped himself, took her other hand and did the same.

After that, finished, there was nothing else to do but raise his eyes.

She was looking at him the way she had in the elevator, green eyes wide…as if astonished, as if waiting for something unknown.

Cassian Andor wanted to kiss the woman looking at him as much as he could remember ever wanting anything….but realized he didn’t know how.

How long since he had kissed anyone? How long before that since he had as himself?

Basic training?

Dantooine?

I don’t know who I am any more than I know where I am.

He felt broken now has he never had before.

There was a small tap on the doorframe. Youngest Sister, Bes was there, “Hello,” she said, “Are you well and doing things? Second Sister…,” the round-faced jolly one with the black-rimmed eyes, Tova, not there yet because Bes tended to scamper ahead “…wants to know if you are well enough for another big walk? She would like to show you the Haunted Tower and hear your ideas about it.”
Chapter End Notes

Sitting in many waiting rooms. Too distracted for much but finding old stuff in the notebooks. Home soon.
Rather pleased with that goat.
The realization that Cassian will be (as Mon Mothma feared in the novelization) feeling lost because he has given too much to the fight for too long.

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