The First Order may have found the refuge of a couple of forgotten heroes. They will be sorry they did this.....just saying.

Mostly stories of Jyn and Cassian and their loved ones and allies on the world where they have taken refuge since after Endor.

Hopefully this can stand in the series...
Fire

Chapter Summary

A boy travels with his father and learns a lesson about survival that serves him years later.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Galen Andor saw his sister’s face across the field screaming something, then she was running the other way with Ava.

There was no question of making it to the ship, none at all, every bone and muscle he had knew that he could not run that far that fast. Nothing living could outrun fire.

Kemmi and Bill were cut off too. Bill ran past him, grabbing at his shirt and yelling about the high rocks. The rocks were maybe 200 meters away, up the slope of brush and bushes.

He ran for the slope. He could feel the heat behind him, feel a pull on his clothes as if the wind had turned,…full seconds before the sound.

It was not a noise that he had ever heard before, but he recognized it instantly.

________________

He and his father had gone North one spring together when he was seven.

It was the first camping trip he had taken that was just him and Papa and it was pretty glorious. They hiked far every day and he took such good care of his own feet that he didn’t even get a blister, which Papa said was the mark of a good “soldado.” They went swimming in ponds and waterfalls along the way, cooked sweet-root on sticks and slept under the stars. He didn’t have to listen to his sister yell for three whole weeks.

Papa was supposed to be meeting with some of the Sister/Ladies in the Mountains to talk about putting up some of the new warning scanners on the high slopes, but when they got to the meeting place, the people up there were staging a “pattern fire,” as they called it. In drought years, he had learned, the fires caused by lightning strikes in the high mountains might come tearing up and down the slopes, faster than people and animals could flee them. So they set little fires themselves, backwards as that seemed, to clear away the brush and grass that might act as fuel later. They did it on the Uplands every few years too, but Mama had insisted they take a trip to the shore when they did it, so he’d never seen one.

The Sisters up here were predicting another dry summer, and declared that the Pattern called for fires
to be set. It was a serious and oddly exciting and festive event. The people of a half dozen villages were spread out in a curving line, through the forest and the meadow, down the slope. arms-lengths apart from each other. Every person had a fan and a hot coal in an small eggshell basket. Behind the line, a few meters back, was another ring of people with waxed water-baskets on their backs and wool blankets in their hands. When the Sisters gave the signal, everybody would drop the egg baskets and, as the grass and brush caught fire, fan it forward. Some people beat drums and everyone in the blanket line was supposed to march forward as signaled and slap the flames out with the blankets, swinging them back constantly to re-wet them from the baskets on their backs. The sisters kept careful track of the wind and the drums told people what to do.

They worked in small sections this way, for weeks, sometimes, they said. This way, if a wild fire came, it would not find enough easy food and either starve, or pass overhead, taking the leaves, but leaving large trees and the villages un-burnt

All the people up around here were Mems (except for he and Papa, of course) so there was a kind of ceremony safety/drill before the burning started, where everybody dumped water on themselves and rubbed it into their fur. Apparently the colder the water the better, so some jokesters went to all the trouble of bringing baskets of snow or ice down from the high ridges, just for this event, and double dared each other to dump ice water over their own heads.

It was funny. One of the kids shyly handed him a bucket, and he looked up at Papa, to see what he should do, but Papa had what his sister liked to call a “no answer” face on. Not smiling or frowning, just maybe moving an eyebrow a little. Galen picked up the bucket and dumped it over his own head.

“Fuck!” he yelled….it was so cold he used one of Mama’s swears without thinking…but Papa didn’t get mad, he only laughed. He even took a handful of the water and rubbed it on his own hair, much to the amusement of all the grown-up Mems.

They stayed well back from the burning, and the smoke all moved away from them on the wind, but the sound of the drums and the people whacking wet blankets and singing could be heard even from the other side of the hill. Everything smelled like burning leaves.

In the place where the camp had been moved there were benches and tables set up, with snacks and cold drinks and salves for the workers. Some of the elders were sitting.

He noticed one very old lady sitting wrapped in a cloak. This seemed strange to him, since most of the Mems he knew only wore skirts, even when it was very cold.

One of the Memsa kids he’d been playing with earlier came running to her, with something wrapped in a leaf. Galen stepped forward to see. It was a little mouse. The kid said they had found it under the burned grass, after the fire had passed, and they wanted to show it to the Eldest. It was alive and unhurt, and they were amazed by this. He realized she must be the Eldest Sister here. She did not look jolly like Eldest Sister back home, so he tried not to stare, but she noticed him anyway. She took the little creature from the children and gave them stacks of blankets she'd been folding and told them to take them back up to the fire line. She laid the little mouse gently on a blanket scrap and stroked it's back with a small dark finger, then she looked up at Galen.

“You have a question?” she said. She spoke very slowly….as if she thought he somehow wouldn’t
understand her. People up here almost never saw humans so they sometimes thought he and Papa were deaf or something.

He bowed, the way a child is supposed to do when talking to an Elder, and she seemed surprised.

“Are you chilly, grandmother?” he asked.

“No,” she said, “but I have less fur than some, so this is my disguise. Are you curious?” She smiled with small sharp teeth, and then she did look like the Sisters back home.

He nodded.

She pulled back her green cloak and showed him the back of her right hand, It was bare and scarred up to the elbow, her dark skin was traced with pink scars like spider web. She tipped her head inquiringly. Galen looked around for Papa, but he was busy, a dozen meters away talking to group of large males about tall trees and sides of the mountain or something. The boy decided to do what he would do if the Eldest Sister of their own home village were there. He held out his hand palm up. The old Mem smiled and laid her scarred hand in his, signing Request to Instruct.

“Once a little child was like this little mouse,” she said, “she was alone in the high forest when a fire came. She could not fly like the birds or run like the pine deer. She was lost and did not know where to find a burrow, and the fire was a Wolf Fire.”

Galen lifted his hand a little beneath her brown one, making the sign for Requesting to Politely Inquire of a Teaching Elder.

She smiled, pleased with his good manners. “A Wolf Fire, young one, is a fearsome thing, it runs along the ground,” she raised her eyes up toward the smokey line of people who had now moved well down the slope away from the camp, “but it also climbs and leaps from tree-top to tree-top. She waved her other hand toward the green canopy.”To be between caught between those jaws is to behold Ea in her robes of fire. The Wolf devours all things.”

“How did you get away?” Galen asked, forgetting his place in his fear. She slapped his palm lightly.

“The child was too much afraid to think. She bowed her eyes down as the Fire closed around her and saw a little leaf mouse crawling, not away from, but toward a patch of grass, already burning black, laying itself flat flat flat in the small burning strands, and she did the same….with no thought save that a small fire might hurt less to die in than the great one. She took in a great breath and laid flat in the grass fire, with her face in the dirt and the small flames scorching her fur….and the Wolf passed over her, so great was its rush to devour. Its voice was terrible, like a roar unceasing, and its breath pulled all air in before it. She held her breath so long as she could, and then….when she could hold it no more, she lifted her head. All the world, so far as she could see was smoke and ashes, but she and the little mouse lived, and they left that place, for Ea needed them to begin new patterns, and the fire had sealed them for the task.”

Galen coughed, as he sometimes did when he was listening so hard he forgot to breathe, and lifted his palm again, ”Did it hurt?” he asked.

The grey faced old Mem smiled and took her hand from his. “It did indeed,” she said, “very much….how could it not?”

She looked up then and over his shoulder. “So, Cassian-ally, have you and the tree-cutters finished
your bargains?”

Papa was standing behind him.

She laid aside the blankets she’d folded and held up both her hands. Papa bowed and kissed them in Respectful Greeting.

They gave them a nice little lodge to stay in, where they had pitched camp far upwind above the blackened areas. Galen ran and played with the Memsa kids and even taught them a ball game. Papa talked at meeting around the fire late into the night, but Galen found he could not sleep, even in his blue sleeping bag. He could still smell the smoke. He wasn't afraid but he couldn’t sleep.

When Papa came in and laid down in the dark, Galen got up and whispered, “Papa?”

“Yes Galen?”

“I’m a little cold.”

“Ahh..frio….lo entiendo”

_Frio meant cold. Lo entiendo meant he understood._

Papa got up and re-folded their sleeping bags together so Galen could sleep in with him.

“Was Eldest Sister Cerra telling you a story?” he asked.

“Si,” Galen said,” I think it was a Teaching story.”

“Tell it to me,” Papa said.

So they lay there in the almost-dark and Galen told the story about the lost child and the mouse and the Wolf Fire.

Papa explained about break-fires again, and about how hot air rises, and oxygen. Which Galen already knew, but it was comforting listening to Papa’s voice. He wasn’t afraid, it was just more comfortable this way.

“She said it made a noise….like an animal roaring, but without stopping…the fire…” he could see Papa’s hand laying on top of the blue sheet. The bigger moon was up and shining through the open hatch at the top of the little lodge. It made the faint spider-web scars on the back of Papa’s hand visible, when they usually weren’t.

“Is that really what it sounded like?” Galen asked, “The fire Mama saved you from?”

Papa took a breath in and let it out.

“Yes,” he said, “that is very much what it sounded like.”
Galen heard the roar.

They weren’t going to make it. The slope was 150 meters ahead. The fire was 50 meters behind. He had a sparker in his pocket. He pulled it out, struck it and tossed it into the waist-high grass.

“No!” he yelled, Bill, Kemmi!! Here….get down! We won’t make it!”

They turned. They could see the fire behind him.

He could reach Kemmi so he grabbed him, sinking his fingers right into his fur, but Bill was human and too far away…too scared,

“No!” he yelled, terrified, and maybe something else….the roaring was too loud. Bill turned and kept running up toward the rocks.

Galen pulled Kemmi down with him into the fire he’d set. “Hold your breath!” he yelled in his ear, and pulled as much air into his lungs as he could.

Face down in the dirt, he prayed, in his head….to the Force or the Pattern or Ea or whatever might hear him.

The Wolf roared over them.

How many minutes...seconds...hours? When he got up, the field was blackened up to the tree line, patches of flames still burning in the trees and bushes at the top. The black ship that had rained the fire down was gone……as was the shuttle.

Had Kayly and the others gotten away?

The fur on Kemmi’s legs had burned, but he couldn’t feel it yet. Tears were pouring from his eyes but he was alive. “Galen,” he rasped, “Galen…”

Kemmi couldn’t walk, so Galen carried him down as far as the stream. They walked in the water for at least a k. Help was waiting. Other people were working their way upstream. The alarms had gone off and some people, maybe most people had gotten to shelter.

He let them patch his back and arms, then he went back to look for Bill. His parents found him up on the blackened slope and made him come down.

Chapter End Notes

*If it helps to know that the Memsa are an oc race of aliens from my Over the Edge epic.....just go with it. Think much Hipper Ewoks/Cool Wiccan Otter people/Rocket Raccoon's long-lost family. They are lovely and interesting people and everyone should go meet them.

**If it helps more, they are matriarchal, because yeah, and Sisters are sort of village Elders.
The Far Voyagers Boat

Chapter Summary

Galen Andor gets a tattoo, and hears a kind of love story.

Chapter Notes

Utter self-indulgence and world building.

“Water,” she told him, “Nothing more.”

“Drink if you can…..it’s better than fainting, but don’t throw up and don’t move, “ the old man said.

“Here,” she said, and sat down on the floor near his head. He was lying on his stomach, so it was a simple matter to hold the bowl so that he could drink without moving his head much.

She thought of saying “You are doing very well. I cried like a baby,” but he was not a child and might well resent such reassurances.

She had been thirteen, just, when she got her first picture, which was always the worst one….everyone said so…and this young stranger was eighteen….or claimed he was eighteen at least. Truthfully, he looked younger, with his rather sad pretty eyes and mostly smooth chin. His dark hair was cut short, as if he were in mourning and his skin was pale, although the old Marker tapping the needles and nails into the flesh on the back of his arm above the elbow might account for that. Boys that age often set great store on looking stronger and bolder than….well, each other, mostly.

She’d seen very little of Inlanders, up close, just the few she and her grandmother traded with at the harbor town and at the tidal river, but she’d noticed that their boys seemed to strut around like small roosters….some of them even had orange hair, which made it even more comical. “If you have to talk to them, talk to the women.” her grandmother had muttered, long ago, as their round boats had come out to trade. “The men are mostly like plucked gulls.” This one at least, was not a plucked gull.

“Thank you,” he said, after taking a few sips. He had an accent but he spoke slowly and very clearly. She glanced over his bare back to where his other arm was stretched out and held to the board. Old Tamo was dabbing blood away with one hand and pinning dye in with another. He really was a master. It looked like a hard picture the Marker was giving him. She could see that from here. Mostly
black and some blue, and the black was lamp soot and that stung the worst. It looked to be like a bird with wings spread. Close to the bone in places, ouch, and Tamo seemed to be filling it in, so it was just over half done.

“If you can’t bear the pain, Stranger’s Son, say so,” he said, needlessly, it seemed to her because the young man was not complaining.

“He is gruff like this with everyone, even little children.” Lina said, leaning close to the young man's ear.

The Marker grunted. She was surprised he had consented to do this, but even more surprised that the Stranger’s Son had asked.

The young man closed his eyes for a moment and breathed slowly. When he opened them again he asked, “Are you allowed to talk to me?”

“I am a Far Trader and a Voyager. I own my own boat,” Lina said, “I talk to whomever I please, whenever I please. Has someone told you otherwise?”

Boy.

Old Tano grunted again, this time with a slight smile.

“No,” The young man said, “I apologize.”

He breathed through his mouth for a moment, then continued on as if he were not in pain. “I admit,” he smiled a little, as if he were trying to be charming, which, under the circumstances, was rather impressive, “I was trying to distract myself a little.”

“Ah,” Tano said, lifting his needle press for a moment, “You have some tough hide here, for a tender Inlander…scars. I see my way with them but it will take longer.”

“Yes,......I was burned on that arm,” said the young man, who had told them his name was Galen, “Last year.”

There were other scars, now that she realized what she was seeing, very faint, showing only where the sun had darkened his skin a little, like threads across the right side of his back.

“You’re supposed to ask a question,” Lina told him, “when you are getting your first picture. Then, the person you must either tell a true story or make one up to answer it. That’s the tradition around here for distraction.”

He looked at her pleadingly then, so she gave him a little more water and his eyes glanced across her left shoulder and the green-black picture of the sea eel, curved around the small blue moon that crossed over it.

“What question did you ask?” he said.

She could have lied, the old Marker would not have cared, but for reasons she would never understand until long afterwards she told the truth as she knew it.
“How did my parents ever come to have children together?”

She had been laying there on the Markers bench, while her grandmother wiped her tears and held her braids back, stroking her head.

Nana had sighed deeply. “He built her a boat.”

Their father had built beautiful boats. Large and small, reef boats, canoes and far-voyage outriggers. No one in the Far Islands built more beautiful or lucky craft. He had 20 who worked and carved and wove for him, but the boat he made for black-eyed Pallee he built by himself.

She was tall, broad-shouldered, and always angry, a rower and harpooner. She had no family left and refused all lovers, men or women. She never set foot on sand for one second longer than she had to and never had a friend she didn’t fall out with. With the strength of three and arms long enough to work two sails at once, she was much in demand, by those willing to put up with her temper. Working other peoples boats, she often passed the jetty where the boatbuilder worked and over the months of a year, watched a beautiful outrigger slowly take shape. The ribs were perfect and balanced, every plank smoothed, even the oars and masts were carved by his own hand. Rau the boatbuilder often sang as he worked and everyone who passed marveled at his skill. One day Pallee stood and watched. He was ladling oil onto the carved masts and polishing them with sharkskin rags until they gleamed.

“How is this boat for?” she asked him, curious despite herself.

“For you,” he said, stacking the smooth planking.

Pallee turned away, so startled that she didn’t even remember to curse at him until she was halfway back out to sea. He had never spoken a word to her before, except perhaps to ask the price of rope. Months passed.

When she sailed in next she saw that he had carved the front struts and rails in the likeness of leaping Bequa. A perfect copy of the tattoos that had covered her arms since girlhood.

Sometimes she anchored out and watched, as the beautiful masts were set.

When bringing in cloth a month later she saw he had even hand carved the oars and laid them out beside the finished hull.

One day, she came in from a trip, with hands cut from wrestling knifefish on some other person's boat, and saw the beautiful thing gleaming on the jetty. Every rope and plank in place. Two blue sails lay folded on the polished slats, one stitched with the small moon and one with the large.

She stormed to the boatbuilders house, threw rocks and shouted at his door. “What do you want?”

Rau stood on his porch and smiled. “Nothing but what you choose to give,” he said, “The boat is yours.”

Pallee cursed and and stamped and hurled every insult she knew, but the boatbuilder just went back inside his house and finished his supper.

In the morning the boat was gone. She had sailed it away. In the Autumn it returned, the blue moon sails billowing, loaded with abalone and, silver knives and red shell, the like of which no one had seen on that Island for many years. It was the making of her fortune.
Pallee came and went, but she never stayed long. Sometimes her beautiful boat would be seen pulled up on the sand near the boatbuilders house, but it was always gone the next morning.

Then, one night, when the storm season was beginning, she brought her boat in, and went to the house of the Midwives. She gave birth to twin girls two days later. No woman of the free people ever needed to name who fathered her child if she did not wish to. She could bind a man and his family by her naming, or not, as she chose. Pallee named Rau the boatbuilder as the father of her children.

Although it seemed as if she tried to for a time she could not stay ashore, never lived in his house or kept any house of her own. She nursed her babies on her boat and handed them to Rau or his mother when she could not bear their crying. They quarreled....or rather she would storm and he would say nothing, only go to his workshop and build more boats. There was no peace with them, ever, and it seemed as if Pallee raged like a bear-shark in a net, but she tried. She took no long voyages until the girls were two and a half and then one morning she gave Rau’s mother a goat for milk, packed up her beautiful boat and sailed away.

The Bequa spoke of seeing the beautiful boat, making it sound as as if as if she ranged further than anyone else. Out to the furthest Island they said, up the coast to the edges of the ice, up the rivers, named and unnamed.

Rau would never hear any word spoken against her.

“She gave what she could,” he said.

“Where is your sister now?” The young man asked.

“Back on Blue Island, where we were born. She builds boats,” Lina said, “She rebuilt my boat and the boat the Leading Elders took your father out on. Her boats never break and no wave can turn them while there’s a hand on the steering oar. You shouldn’t worry about him.”

“Alright,” said Tano, “You can sit up now, boy. Slowly.”

When Galen Andor carefully, wincingly got himself sitting again, Lina brought Tano the cedar board he asked for and watching him bandage the arm to it. He gave the young man a small flask of hazel spirits and wads of paper cloth.

“Dab at it with the spirits until it stops bleeding, then keep it dry and out of the sun until it scabs. It will itch and burn for days, but do not scratch it.

‘What will it look like?’ the stranger asked.

“Wait and see,” said the old Marker, "you will have to live the rest of your life around it, whatever it is."

Lina stood by him as he walked back out to her boat, the one they were staying on, at least for another night. She had only agreed to bring him this far. While his father, an Inland trader of some renown named Cassian Andor, had gone out with the Bequa and the far voyagers, to look for a piece of wreckage that only the Bequa could find, the younger man had been meeting with people all over
the Outer islands about setting up poles of metal as some kind of watchtowers along the coast. He was supposed to meet his father here, but his father had not come yet. Unexpectedly, he had asked her to take him to see Tano and petitioned to have a picture put on his skin.

Tano was a true Marker. He was supposed to have the gift of looking at a person’s eyes and seeing the best image to start their history. His work was very beautiful anyway, and never got infected or scarred.

She knew the young man was worried about his father, but she could not stay to wait. She had to leave the next day.

His arm was still bandaged, of course, but he thanked her for her kindness, very gravely.

“My sister’s boats always come home,” she told him. “Maybe if we meet again someday, you can tell me the story of how your parent’s came to have you?”

He laughed. The first time she had heard him do that. “Yes,” he said, “That’s an interesting story.”

She thought of kissing him, but he was just a little too young, too strange. Her life was already complicated.

She was relieved to hear, when she reached Blue Harbor that his father had returned safely, and that they went back Inland to the rest of their family but it was not until a few years later that she met him again and got to see the tattoo that Toma had seen for him. It was a black bird with wings that curled around his arm below the elbow, turning his thin scars into feathers, with a bright eye and long beak looking down toward his hand.

Chapter End Notes

It’s a bit about the Far-Islanders that has been bumping around for a while. Also leading up to Galen Andor Blackbird needing to have some street cred in upcoming adventures. Also, tattoos are cool.

And while I know that Diego Luna wants desperately to forget that Dirty Dancing 2 ever happened (and he is justified in this...because...oh lord...it’s awful) just recollect for a moment how tragically beautiful he was at that age as you read this..that's all I ask.
Conn Derry of Harbortown

Chapter Summary

The First Order's attack as seen by the humans of Harbortown.
Conn flies Guardian and there is a bit of battle action.
Jyn and Cassian and their friends have to get ready to fight again, amidst their fears for their children

Chapter Notes

More tales of Ea endangered. Conn has grown up (if you remember him from OtE) and a planet the First Order thinks in an unimportant backwater is not. Courage is a virus and Jyn and Cassian have spread it around to a new Alliance.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Conn had had the whole speeder packed up already. It was only that he suddenly couldn't remember whether or not he’d tied down both straps on the box they’d welded on as a cargo carrier, and so he went back around to check. Damned thing was riding low anyway and it’d be just about his luck to go over a log and lose half the mirrors he was taking north.

That’s when he’d found the kid. Wedged in between a box and a bundle with an empty sack pulled over him.

“Bloody blue hell!” he’d yelled. “What are you doing in there you stupid little runt?”

“I’m going north with you,” the kid said.

“No you’re bloody not!” Conn said.

“Old Markey said you’d take me,” then “Noooooo!” he howled as Conn took him by the back of the shirt…probably catching a hunk of his curly brown hair in the grab…… fished him out, dropped him on the grass beside the speeder.

“I’m thinkin’ that’s not what he said,” Conn said….kid would lie if you asked him what time it was, “Try again.”

“Said you could if you wanted to…. ” kid whined, rubbing his scuffed up knees. His pants were too short and he was showing half a leg above his too-big shoes.

“More bloody like it….and why would I do that?” Conn said, “If I want to trek five days North with a pain in my ass, I’ll just sit on a fishhook.”

“Ha!” said the kid…”fishhook…that’s a good one….take me Conn?”

Ahhhh..... bleeding hell. The kid was like a small barking crab…making noise and hanging onto the
leg of your trousers every time you turned around.

Tom Markey collected strays. Gulls with broken wings, orphans, fox-pups and cast-offs. Conn ought to know, he’d been one. His warehouses down at the big pier at HarborTown was always crawling with them but this kid was a piece all of his own. He was barely nine and probably a Raiders brat to boot. His momma had been way too young…..if the girl who’d brought him had really been his mom….Ea, he really hoped she hadn’t been….. She’d shown up on the docks with a cuttlefish spine sideways in one foot and a little kid in her arms….barely a child herself. Nobody had been able to get a straight story out of her…which probably meant some bunch of nasties from the shore islands had left them. The Ladies might know more, but they weren’t telling. Toma had found her while hanging up her nets, limping away from a dinghy on the beach, feverish, and red threads of infection already moving up her leg.

The Youngest had been close by and had swooped in quick. They’d healed the girl up….well, healed her leg anyway…..and Old Tom took her in, like he’d done others, but it hadn’t stuck. Sometimes it didn’t. The next spring she took off in the night, stole a rowboat, two oars, a net, and a red blanket, but left the kid behind. Maybe she’d told herself it was a better life she was giving the boy. If she had, she was probably right, but still….it was a rotten thing and no mistake.

That had been a few years back. Kid was way too young for the rough and tumble of life at Markey’s. He was half a pet and half a parasite. Too old…eight was he now? nine? Who the hell knew? Too young to work even a bait boat and too old to be set out to nurse. Everybody felt sorry for him but nobody had time for him. These were tense days.

A year ago ten Fallen had come down from the sky at the South Market at RiverTown. The nasty kind, like out of old stories. They walked right in and started killing. If the Blackbirds hadn’t been right there, Ea only knew what would have happened. More than a dozen years of sweet quiet they’d had, more or less, but, as Markey had explained it to the Townspeople…there’s Raiders in the sky as well as on the sea….and if there was one thing that the people of the coast knew it was that you can’t stand up against what you can’t see coming.

“This isn’t for fun and it isn’t for trade, runt,” Conn told the kid. “This is on Alliance business.”

“I bloody know that,” the pipsqueak said.

Ahhhh…….

“If you draw lizards when we’re camping I’m gonna let them eat you.”

“Ok.”

“You get mouthy with the Taun, I’m gonna let them shred you with their big long tree claws.”

“Ok.”

“You get into any fights with the Mems up there I’ll tell ‘em it’s ok to bite every single one of your toes and fingers off.”

“Ok.”
“You steal anything, fight with anybody, embarrass me, snore, or ask too many questions I’m gonna let Mrs. Jyn Blackbird whup your ass.”

The boy swallowed, “ok.”

‘Why’d ya want to go so bad?’

Kid looked up at him, for a minute and squirmed. “I wanna…mmsmm…bblt trrr….,” he mumbled, looking down at his toes.

“What?” Markey said, “Make it good.”

Big eyes in a skinny face looked up at him, “I heard they’ve got a ghost in a tower up there that can see all the stars and i wanna see it.”

Ahhhhhh…..hell……

“Get in the damned speeder Billy,” Conn said, “and do not bloody bother me when I’m driving.”

-----

He had been standing on the shore when he saw the thing come low over the water…In his whole life Conn Derry had seen three ships go up, three ships land and maybe a half dozen large wrecks come down with his own eyes…..way more than anybody else living, he reckoned…..anybody not Fallen or a ghost.

His first thought was, This is wrong.

This thing wasn't falling. It was shaped like a sharks egg case….Ea’s Purses they called them…and smooth and black, like a lot of casing he’d cut up in his life. It was coming in across the water, low, under it’s own power.

The first thing he’d said was, “The Town. It’s coming for the damned town.”

The Youngest Lady and the Second Lady had been standing beside him above the high tide posts, a few of their little girl-children-in training and Fennie and his crew had been with them….one of the kids pointed, “Look!”

The Youngest Lady dug her fingers into his arm, “Guardian!” she shouted.

“Cassian..he…” he looked back toward the town, the damned thing was moving fast. Cassian and Jyn were probably still at the Hall.
“No time,” she said, shoving him, “You have to do it….go!”

The little space ship was behind the shacks. They all ran. The kids and Fennie and the boys and the old Lady all started pulling the netting off. Conn scrambled up the ramp and only when he got inside did he realize that Young Lady had followed him.

What?

He scrambled into the pilot seat…

“Get back!” She was shouting back to the others, "I'm going with him."

There was no time to ask her to get off. He had to shut the ramp hatch, so he touched the yellow square button. She must have still been standing on it because he heard a yelp and a thump, she’d fallen as it lifted under her feet.

“Sit!” he yelled….oh sweet heaven, he’d never talked to a Lady like that in his whole life…she scrambled into the chair next to him, fair hair flying, "Put the damned belt on!"

Cassian had taught him, years ago, on the fields up at their place in Nexa, showed him how to start it up and lift it off the ground. He’d even let him fly partway down here last summer, and land it on the dune grass.

He laid a hand in the right spots on the black counter in front of him….

“Hell, Cassian!” he’d said as a boy of seventeen, when the older man had shown him what to do. “It’s kind of like talking to Mems, if you push down too hard in the wrong spot….boom!….you get bit and knocked on your ass.”

“I suppose that’s one way of thinking about it,” Cassian had said, in that careful tone he used when he thought you were completely daft but figured it wasn’t useful to say so.

As soon as his hands touched the right spot, lights came on across the black surface, squares, circles, images of weaving patterns like nets, bright numbers running across the surface like fast insects. The engines started and a voice spoke from the small box at the back of the head of his chair, and from the counter itself.

“Who am I talking to? Is this Conn?” It was Portia, the ancient ghost who lived in the tower back Upland. She was talking to him through the ship, in one of her hundred bloody voices.

“Yes, ma’am!”

“It’s a single ship, near you, I took care of two others as they came out of the stream but this one got in. It doesn’t know the others are gone…”

He could feel the ship lifting up and was pulling on the handles that controlled forward movement and angle.
“Like rudders in a forward tow and sail lines on an out-rigger…?” he’d asked.
“Like and not like,” Cassian had said.

“….it looks like they’ve sent in a team for a set of clearance runs. You can get to that one.”

“Where else?”

“Focus on this one…I’m giving locking coordinates to the nav computer, it will get you behind it, I am baffling them as best I can but you need to kill them before they realize what’s happening. GO!” he tilted the parts of the handles that controlled speed further than he’d ever dared to.

Please don’t let me be killing anyone on the ground with this.

As the acceleration pushed him back into the seat, Portia said, “Is someone with you? The ship is showing someone in the other seat.”

“It’s me,” the Youngest Lady gasped. Conn didn’t dare look over at her, but he had the impression that she was terrified….not something he could have ever imaging seeing…. She was clutching one armrest with white knuckles.

“Oh, Olwen,” the ghost said, “Hello.”

They were there fast. Damn,…damn, it was like being an osprey…..the dark shape was below front of them but they were coming up, almost in it’s “wake.”

He knew he wasn’t doing all of this, the ship was choosing things and making adjustments faster than he could, sort of like a good boat should if you steered her right.

Blue, screaming hell…. HarborTown was below them, below that thing.

This ship had guns.

“Can you make the ship fire the gun?” Conn yelled.

“No, Portia said, “I can send firing coordinates but the cannon is manual.”

I can’t fly and shoot at the same bloody time…I can barely fly.

“I will shoot,” the Lady said, breathless, “Is it like a trigger harpoon?”

“I don’t know what that is,” Portia said, she sounded tense but never breathless…. Ghosts don’t breathe…..,”but if Conn gives you control I can lock you onto their engines. Just squeeze the handles and it will fire. Conn, get as close as you can. Right up the murderer's exhaust ports.”

Conn pushed a circle he hoped was the right one. Something clicked in the other chair. Youngest Lady had been clutching something in her hand, that she dropped to the floor now, and took both handles.

“When do I do this?” she said.

They were swooping over the town and hanging onto that black ship……bloody hell, it was three
times their size……hanging onto it like a lamprey on a bear-shark. There was roaring and light.

The bastard was firing on the town.

“Now…!” Conn shouted, he thought Portia’s voice said the same thing at the same time. They needn’t of. The Youngest Sister of the Ladies of HarborTown was already firing. The black ship burst into a wall of flames in front of them.

The Lady screamed and Conn was blinded by the light. The ship bucked hard but she had turned almost straight up, leaping up and over the fireball. Conn was pretty sure that he had not done that, the little ship must have known how to save itself,…..like any well-built thing it had ideas and purposes built into it.

Lots of things were flashing red and making wailing noises. Conn grappled with the handles.

“You have damage,” Portia was saying "but I’m feeding it coordinates with a good route to a near safe landing area. Just bring it down.”

The burning thing had gone down onto the beach a half k. from the main docks. Fish shacks….oh, hell….there were houses there….did they get warning..?

Portia was anticipating, as she often did, in his limited experience with her, “I warned Cassian…he initiated the alarms at the settlement. They had some warning.”

The shuddering thing was bringing itself down on the tidal marsh below the town.

“Cassian is alive, so is Jyn, they are on the pier, with Tom Markey, there is serious damage, fires and many injured.”

The Young Lady had been bent over the seat, with her face in her hands, but now she straightened, up. “I must go, she said, "I must find my Sisters.” She was fumbling with the belts. It occurred to Conn that he had never seen her clumsy before.

He opened the window hatch over their heads and she was up, and out, before he could even speak to her. Dropping to the marshy ground and running toward the town.

He looked down and saw the floor under the co-pilot chair was covered with sand. She must have carried it in and dropped it there. It looked as if she had been drawing circles in it with her bare feet.

“I’m going to find the Blackbird, ma’am,” Conn said, unbuckling himself with shaking hands.

“Good,” Portia said, “I am letting him know. When he can get back here we can determine the safest way to get he and Jyn back up here. Resources will be needed here.”

“Focus on this one,” she had said. Other Enemies had gotten through?

“Are they attacking somewhere else? What’s happening?”

“They are attacking here,…..now.” Portia said, levelly, “The training field may have been their target, or me, or it may be unconnected, but they are using incendiary….that is, fire cannons. There will be casualties. There is nothing you can do from there. Get to Cassian as quickly as you can.”
He'd never been quite clear on how the damn thing worked. It was a silver earring, one of the clip on kind. It looked like the kind Far Islanders wore.....in fact they'd actually gotten it from the Far Islanders, Jyn said..... and if you wore it, you could hear what Portia-the-ghost was saying.....only you heard it inside your head, not like when she talked in the tower and you could see her, or out of boxes on the spaceship.

"That sounds creepy," he'd said, when Jyn had explained it to him, years ago.

"Oh you don't know the half of it," she’d muttered.

Jyn had been wearing the thing while Cassian was speaking to the Town Leaders, and the Ladies, in the shelter set up on the shore. He could see it on her ear.

"They will scan, trying to determine what happened to their ships here" Cassian Andor told them "And we have to let them....at least for a while. Portia is trying to set up a false trail, fool them into thinking that their ships suffered navigational damage and broke up trying to get back into the new stream."

His voice was steady, serious, you couldn't tell from looking at him, that he didn't know if his children were dead or alive.

A few yearsback, in a pub, he’d run into one of the Riverfolk who’d been at the Market when that pack of Fallen Raiders had shown up. “I don’t know the man at all,” he’d said, talking about Cassian, “but he seems like a pretty cold-hearted customer.”

“You're right about one thing,” Conn had said tersely, “You don’t know the man at all,” He’d finished his drink and taken his custom elsewhere.
Jyn was sitting a few meters off, that silver ring on her ear, looking at her husband part of the time, but sometimes looking down with her eyes closed, nodding as if listening to someone else speak, which he reckoned she probably was....

"Portia doesn't know," Jyn had told them when they found her on the still smoking Short Pier. "She can't see and the stairs to the tower have burned away so no one has gotten up to her yet to tell her."

All they knew was that fires had burned on the Upland. Kayly Andor, the Red Trader boy, and one of their Mem pals had taken up the training shuttle, the little one Cassian had hacked together to teach a few more kids to fly on. They'd drawn the other black ship off and the Ghost had wrecked them up there in the dark, but she’d lost sight of the kids after that and now nobody knew where they were. They knew that and not a crust more.

Portia’s message was absolutely clear that they could not fly Guardian right now, anywhere, anyplace. If the Enemy knew they had a ship here, knew they had the slightest idea what the black-hearts were up to, they might show up in force. Half the town had come up that night to load it onto a sledge so that the Taun could come soon to actually drag it inland a ways, covered under a bundle of hay.

It was a lesson most Fishers and Traders knew. When you’re fighting somebody that much bigger and stronger, sometimes the only chance you’ve got is to play dead and quiet.

As for the Blackbirds, they would take speeders up to the Crossing camp and meet the Taun, who’d take them fast…at night if they had to…..up to Nexa and the Haunted Hill. It would take a few days, but it was the only way.

Toma had stood in front of Jyn and held out a hand. “I’m coming with you,” she said.

Bill had been up there, with Toma's youngest girl, Dora.

Cassian finished what he had to say and Eldest Lady talked after. He came down to his wife and held out his hand. Jyn looked up at him for a moment, then slipped off the silver ear ring and laid it on his palm, using her fingers to curl his around it. He took it as if they were passing back and forth a very heavy weight that neither of them was strong enough to carry alone for long. He clipped it onto his own right ear and bowed his head, took a breath. She stood, wrapping her arms around him.

“I’m here,” Conn heard her say, pulling his head down beside hers. Sometimes they were like ordinary people…..Ea help ’em.
He moved off, trying to give what space he could.

Cassian and Jyn had to go, go right now. No one blamed them for that, Toma would go, too….nobody’d be fool enough to try and stop her. Conn felt like something was tearing up inside him. He didn’t know what to do…..Old Tom Markey’d need him, half the warehouse had burned. They’d started storing half the stock in the old caverns but still, all the cloth. The kids were scattered…Ahhh…hell’s balls…Bill.

He felt a hand on his shoulder, it was Markey. He shoved his bag at him. “Go,” he said, “We’ll manage here, the Ladies say help is coming. Go. Help the Blackbirds. Stand up with Toma, bring our Billy home.”

Chapter End Notes

If you have not read the other stuff, this may be a rough one.

*"Blackbird" was what Cassian was called when he first visited the South, because seeing a blackbird fly south in the wrong season was supposed to herald wildfires and storms coming. The nickname stuck.

* Portia is a pre-pre-Sith/Jedi Wars AI, still functional in a stone "lighthouse" on Ea. She has been in the fighting-the-powers-of-darkness queue since the Jedi were a gleam in their 10x great-grandmother's eyes.

Friendship + Heartbreak = The Rogue One Esthetic.
Cassian and Jyn find their son and sit by his bedside. An old friend gives what comfort he can.

They had combed the blackened field and hillside for him for almost an hour before they found him.

At the shelter in the village, a number of people had seen him. He had carried his friend in. Tova had bandaged the worst of his burns and ordered him to stay by Kemmi’s bedside, but then when she had returned from treating others to check on him, he was gone.

Their old friend Dov and several villagers were working up and down the hillside, setting out a search grid. Some people who had been out harvesting were missing too. They were looking for the bodies. He was the one who saw Galen first, kneeling near the top of the slope.

His arm and neck were still wrapped, but the bark-cloth bandages were covered in soot, and his hands were black from it, as if he had been digging in the ashes.

He was in shock and had barely responded to him or even to Jyn, although he had come with them. It was not until they got him back down to the farm, where a sort of hospital had been set up, and Bes began to cut away the tattered and dirty bandages, that he looked up at her, seeming to truly know where he was for the first time.

“Second Sister…?” Galen said.

“Yes sweet child, we are all here, You must hold very still now. Stay with us…” She was wrapping him again in the herb-soaked cloth, wrapping him all the way around now, so he could not pull them off.

“I can’t find Bill,” he told her.
Someone laid a hand on the back of his head.

*Jyn?*

It took him seconds to pull himself to alertness...being too deeply asleep, taking whole seconds to wake frightened him, at some cellular level, still...*again.*

*Jyn?*

Jyn was on the other lower cot. They’d managed to get her to lie down, as long as she could be within arms reach of her child. Galen had finally closed his eyes, and was breathing almost normally. Jyn reached over to touch his unburned shoulder. The smell of the piney bacta-solution they used was everywhere.

“It’s too much like…” Jyn began.

"Lo sé, mi amor," he stopped her quietly, kissing her damp hand, "Lo sé."

But Jyn was asleep now, finally, and he had moved over to sit in a chair near the wall, resting his head near his son’s. He must have fallen asleep.

Someone was sitting beside him.

“Forgive me, Captain,” Chirrut Imwe said quietly, “I know you need rest, but you startle so easily. I thought it might be better if I told you I was here.”

Cassian’s head jerked up.

*Oh diablos, no… I cannot deal with this now…This is not something I can do.*

The monk smiled. He looked much the same, younger maybe, his hair a little blacker, no peppering of grey. He had the same impish smile. It took Cassian a moment to register that his eyes were clear now, dark brown and looking back at him very shrewdly, not blind anymore.

He had moved his hand to Cassian’s shoulder.

*Please,....Chirrut....this is my son.*

“Yes,” the Guardian said, patting him kindly, “and he is a fine young person. I cannot even tell you how proud we have all been…really...I knew you were very brave Captain, and that she,” he glanced over toward Jyn and smiled even wider…”that she was very strong, but this, this…” He
shook his head and squeezed Cassian’s shoulder. “it is beyond anything I could have imagined.”

Chirrut, if…if he dies…it will kill Jyn.

“Captain…Captain…we both know that is not true. It would cripple her, cripple you both. but I can really only think of one loss that would kill her, and maybe not even that right away…..Ah! My friend, my friend…Why are we talking this way?”

Galen lay there, pale and bandaged, and the monk leaned over to lay his hand on the boy’s dark hair, as if blessing him.

"Baze is right, it’s absolutely impossible to talk to people anymore without everybody thinking somebody is dying. Your son is suffering, but he will not die today, he will have scars, but healing is possible for him. There is a path to it. That’s all I really know….if I knew more, I promise would tell you.” The monk chuckled a little, “I’m not a complete jerk, seriously.”

Do you know if Kayly…?

“Oh yes!,” he laughed and slapped Cassian's shoulder lightly with his free hand. He was still wearing the red and dark grey traveling robes of a Guardian “A daughter too! You crazy people…so wonderful!”

Is she alive?

“Yes, she is far from here, as these things go….it’s tricky….but she is trying to get home. There are terrible obstacles but she has Jyn’s heart and your ability….what was it? …to find a path through the shadows. I cannot see her way, but only a fool would bet against such a one.”

I’m sorry, Chirrut….I don’t know what to say…I wish you were here.

The man chuckled again, “I am here, obviously,” but then he nodded, “I know what you are saying, Captain, but you must let that go. I was a dedicated Guardian of the Kyber Temple of the Holy City of NiJedha…..by some great gift the Force found another use for me….for us…Baze and I. You were the hand of the Force in this, you brought us out of the fire and took us to where we needed to be.”

“Listen,” the monk said, leaning in conspiratorially, “We have this in common…you and I, that we have both loved strong people, angry people, people who were like lights for us in the dark. They enabled us, and helped us be more than a Guardian of the Temple….more than a good soldier sacrificing himself in a noble cause. Listen,” he took Cassian’s hand in both of his now, his fingers were very strong, “I am talking too much, Baze always says so and sometimes he is even right….but the love of many people has brought you here, believe this. The Force has brought you here. Have hope.”

“Cassian!” came another voice, startling him. This one was in his head….or more so. He had fallen asleep with the ear clip on and Portia was talking to him, as she always did, in his long-dead mother’s voice. “Con quién estás hablando? Quién es ese?”

Too many kinds of ghosts, Cassian, he thought.

He did not see Chirrut any more.

It’s alright Portia,” he said. He kissed Galen, laid a blanket on the floor between his wife’s cot and his son’s and told Portia to wake him in an hour unless she needed him.
Chapter End Notes

Because heartbreak, but also because I always wanted a moment where Cassian and Chirrut got to bond - "Wait, YOU love a person with anger issues? No kidding? I love a person with anger issues too!"
Chapter Summary

A Far Voyager tries to interpret unusual signs. Portia remembers the Battle of Endor and reflects a little on what she and Jyn and Cassian are facing if the First Order has truly stumbled across Ea.

Chapter Notes

Exposition.....yes, possibly.

So many things pointed to a storm, but no storm came.

Tyree seldom used the frame of purple, white and red beads that her uncle had given her so long ago. The tracks of the flights of birds, the taste and coldness of the water, the shapes of clouds, the color of and size of the waves, the way they wove across the face of the sea....each of these and more, could be marked and assigned a measure, slid along a cord until a pattern could be seen.

It was only a teaching tool, of course. A skilled Far Voyager must make a bead frame within their own mind. The old man had taught her well, and now she was old, and still among the very best. She kept the thing for sentiment mostly, wrapped in a bag, lashed to her main mast for luck and the old shark's memory.

She sat upon the deck, like the little girl she once was, laying out the sticks and frame, threading the beads and saying the counting rhymes aloud. Something was wrong. The clouds and birds and waves said one thing. The coldness and saltiness of water on her tongue said another.

She checked again. She ground her teeth. She swore, and then she cut her nets and headed back toward the reefs.

The clouds were low and the winds steady when she saw the Bequa. Whole pods of them were moving swiftly through the water past beneath and around her boat. A huge dark shape moved off to port that could only have been one of the great old deep-dwellers.

*Holy fucking hell on a biscuit,* she thought.

One of the small Bequa, a sleek blue male, breached off her starboard, turned up and called, "Hurry!"

"What is happening?"

He breached again, "Our Enemies are here!" Down, then up again, "HarborTown is burning!"
It wasn’t Jyn and Cassian’s fault, or hers either. Second-guessing was pointless now.

When Bodhi Rook set up the satellites, some years back, they had only had a few and strategic decisions had had to be made. The first priority then had been to focus on the Endor system and its adjacent space, and to give Portia vision over as much of her planet’s surface for as much of the solar year as possible. It had proved the right…..well, most effective, in the short term anyway…..decision. Some gaps had to be left. When Cassian and Jyn returned, after the second weapon was destroyed, they brought additional equipment, mostly to boost communications and expedite repairs.

She still watched on Endor. Jyn and Cassian and Bodhi made sure that a few of the portable connector units were left inside the shuttered shield generator stations. Their Alliance had been less careful than they should have been in securing the planet but Portia kept an eye and made sure the planetary shield stayed fed with minimal power. This would hopefully keep the aboriginal sentients safe from exploitation for a little while. She watched them when they came within range of the few leftover cameras but didn’t ever try to communicate. They had enough to cope with, poor fierce little things.

During the actual fight, after the Alliance fighters tossed the links inside the Imperial bunkers, Portia had been able to talk through their comm systems, and help by giving directions and instructions.

I was born to be a navigational beacon, she thought. If there is one thing I ought to be able to do it is give good directions.

She had done other things, too, at Endor. Carefully, waiting until their Alliance friends had already started attacking the hideous laser-station,…..hardly any element of surprise left to be lost at that point, was there?….she piggy-backed in through the Imperial surveillance lines, right into that monster weapon-station.

Bodhi, and Jyn and Cassian had been so loyal and careful about not exposing her, and the sentients.

"What will you do if we fail? Cassian had asked her, when they left to go fight.

Practical Cassian, familiar enough with death and despair to plan for it.

What would she have done? Twice before her Enemy had driven her into hiding.

Never again, she decided. She would stand and fight for her little planet so long as she had one brick still standing on another

The Enemy had set an elaborate trap for Jyn and Cassian’s friends, the Alliance, but what it really wanted was the last of the Knights.

She recognized what he was at once, as soon as she saw the laser weapon, also, he just had the…..vocabulary. He was pitifully young and bravely allowed himself to be captured.

Ostensibly he was doing it to buy Jyn and Cassian and the other teams time to disable the generators, but she saw very quickly that what he really wanted was to try to confront the Enemy himself.

The Knights could be pompous and narrow-minded but they certainly had great physical courage.
You had to say that about them.

She hid behind things, tiptoed in and watched. The snarling of the Darkness was deafening and everything was hideous, even though she picked the most neutral objects she could find to peer through.....cleaning equipment mostly. The monsters were very clean. Trembling, unnoticed, she eavesdropped on their confrontation.

Oh, What was it about the Knights that somehow everything always seemed to come down to their personal conflicts? It was always about them.

Ahhhhhh...they were related. The Knight was the biological child of one of the ones the Darkness had eaten....not that there was much biological left of that one, from the look of it. Once it had been brother against brother, now it was parents slaughtering children.....just when you thought it couldn't get uglier.

It seemed very important to the young Jedi that he "save" the one he was related to.

Oh, baby Knight, you need to save yourself. You have done your job and they will have those shields down in a moment.

They argued with each other and fought with their weapons and actually self-manipulated energy strikes! Wow! Then, to her surprise, the chopped-up one seemed to do a partial override...ha!

Hurrah for you you poor wretched thing!

It seemed to want to save it's child....an extremely powerful biological imperative.

Cruel, stupid Darkness. Was this some kind of test to see if you had overwritten even that?

It was dying but it attacked the other one, the older one, and tossed it into the reactor core which was powered by all the tiny crystals like the one Jyn wore.

Good. That seemed only Justice.

She stayed well back. There was a temptation to speak to it as it died.....

Remember me? You know who I am. Did you think you killed us all?

She didn't speak to it. What purpose would it have served? She was not fool enough to think this was the end anyway. This was just one shriveled up husk.

The Alliance ships,.....Oh! What a tattered assortment!....fired torpedoes into the exposed core and the chain reaction had started.

Hurry dear, or you're going to burn with this ugly thing.

The Knight wanted to rescue what was left of his parent but it died of its injuries, thank heaven....because there was no way she would ever have allowed him do that.

No, not if there was even the slightest chance that that override was not complete. She peeked into the nav computer on all the escape shuttles nearby and was prepared to sabotage any attempt to take something that might still be harboring that Virus off the station.

She really really hoped she wouldn't have to hurt the last Knight but this was not something she was prepared to take a chance on.
Thankfully the wretched thing died and the Knight just stripped off the armor casing and fled.

*It seemed a pretty twisted thing to take as a memento, but the Knights always had strange sentimental attachments to weapons and equipment.*

He flew very skillfully and escaped the collapse of the weapon station without her help.

She wished him well.

A plan was worked out, between Jyn and Cassian and Bodhi and their friends and commanding officers. Unless she was mistaken, Cassian actually referred to her at one point as a "vital covert asset"....which was pretty amusing.

It was odd to see Jyn, Cassian and Bodhi interacting with other people and humans of their Alliance. Bodhi actually seemed the least stressed. Jyn and Cassian.....she was extrapolating, of course, never her strong suit....but both seemed awkward, uncertain in some ways, back in their origin society. Like her, their battles had made them misfits in many ways.

A number of the Empire's large ugly ships were unaccounted for. They'd dived to to the Stream and scattered like the panicked beasts they were. They had to be found, obviously, and tracked. Myopic as she was, she could still see things they couldn't.

Some of the streams, the "hyper-space corridors” had been technologically supported by the Empire. That wasn't going to last for long without massive energy influxes. Travel was going to get tricky around here soon. Bodhi kept one of the mods.....if he got close again she could bring him in.

Jyn and Cassian came back to man a "surveillance station."

"Am I considered a soldier in your Alliance now?" she asked Cassian.

"Do you want to be?"
he said, "I can administer the oath of allegiance."

Jyn had laughed very hard.

Advances, retreats, skirmishes and battles all happened. A foolish treaty was signed. Jyn and Cassian did not leave. As sometimes happened, they decided to reproduce biologically

Portia had hoped they would have more time before the Fury returned, but the Darkness was consuming organics now, so maybe that alone had speeded it up. The Jedi had had hundreds of standard years between their first war and their second. It seemed so unfair. Jyn and Cassian didn't even get twenty years.

*Where are you getting that kind of power you murderious things?*

Enemy ships had dropped from a stream that had not been there twelve hours before.

She managed to mis-direct three and crash them on entry.

Conn and Olwen,...*she still quite wasn't sure how that had happened...*had taken out one.

Flames had licked around her tower, barely hot enough to inconvenience her lesser solar arrays but they had taken out the wooden stairways. Kayly had drawn the last Enemy ship up and away before it could set up for a second pass with the incendiaries. Now that the smoke had cleared, Portia could
see hat the mostly-underground Memsa village still stood. The stones of her old station buildings had
withstood the flames well.....ha! *We knew how to build in my day you beasts.*... but the fields and
countryside around was badly burned.

The only working ship comms were on Guardian, presently being hidden in the RiverLands,...*she
was talking in there now to a young human named Dex*,.....one was in a Scavengers shop up in the
Northern Forest,...*where she was presently talking to a Mem named Milla*.....and the last was on the
Training Ship. Brave young Kaylyra and her friends had vanished with that one and were either
dead or far out of range for now.

Cassian was wearing her remaining external mod and traveling, toward her, slowly, painfully, north
with Jyn and some others, fighting so hard to keep his heart calm. They were coming to look for Bes
and Beri and Galen.

*It was all so unfair.*

She looked through her satellites and could see the red sails of the Islanders and the blue sails of the
Far Islanders moving toward HarborTown to help the people there. She felt a surge of pride, despite
everything.

*We are soldiers, of a sort, she thought, together.*
The Customer

Chapter Summary

An Island Voyager returns home, shaken by war, and finds that her sister has built a boat for a strange young man.

Chapter Notes

Some little bits that lead into the continuing adventures of young Galen Andor and his rather mysterious and occasionally bad-ass parents.

"A stranger you know came to see me," her sister said.

"Is that a puzzle I'm supposed to solve?" Lina said, passing her the adze.

They had not seen each other for almost two years.

Lina had finally returned from what the family was calling her Far Voyage up the North Coast. The village was half divided between those who would not meet her eye and those who desperately wished to speak to her, or ask her questions. She found she had no patience for either. She had dragged her boat into Meru's landing on an early summer afternoon and there it and she stayed. The first nine days she had felt able to do little but lie in bed, staring at the hangings on the walls. After that she went down to the work yard and said, "Please give me something to do."

Meru had given her stupid, simple work at first, splitting planks, sanding, twisting and stacking rope. She asked her no questions. Only gradually, over the course of many days did she begin to chat lightly, talking about the weather, funny things her flocks of ducks and pea-hens had done, the garden. Then she had moved on to family doings, village gossip. Gradually Lina began to listen, then reply.

The first time she laughed at one of Meru's bird imitations, her sister smiled.

"Welcome home," she said. Meru alone seemed to understand.

This distance, this melancholy, was something that was supposed to afflict only the Farthest of Far Voyagers, the kind who returned after long years on the water. "Land Legs" they called the clumsiness, the inability to function when ashore. "Horizon Sight" they called the thousand-meter stare. This was not an affliction the practical folk of the Blue Islands comfortably admitted to. It terrified the aunts and cousins.
"I am not my mother," she wanted to shout at them, "I will not sail away from my own babies and never touch shore again! This is because I saw monsters and space ships. I saw women burn and statues scream. I wake up sometimes now and I don't know what is real and what isn't!"

She didn't shout. She stayed with her wise, beloved twin and cut wood and stitched sail until she slowly found herself again.

One day, as they were scraping deck slabs smooth for a big catamaran, her sister told her about the man who had come late last fall to ask her to build a boat for him.

He had walked up from the long Wharf, treading carefully within the posts and keeping to the path at the high tide line, like a foreigner overly self-conscious of proper manners. Meru knew all this because her sailmakers had watched him. He was young and handsomely exotic, it seemed.

“Handsomely exotic?” Lina laughed, "What does that even mean? Blue hair? Three eyes? Two cocks?"

“It means my sailmakers are young and bored, and I must get that new cloth from the weavers sooner rather than later,” Meru said, with a smile, “I saw dark hair, with two eyes, and as for the rest,” she smiled, “I did not enquire.”

It was good to laugh again, to feel moored.

“What did he ask you for?” Lina asked. She knew how her sister worked. Anyone fool enough to come to her with commands about length and tonnage and fixed points of design, was likely to be told she was “too busy” and sent to one of the other builders, or guided to talk to one of her apprentices. Meru was like their father. The boats she built herself were, each and every one a heart quest. “Where are you going?” she would ask. “Who goes with you? What do you need to do?” She would measure the width of a hand, the length of an arm and the steadiness of a gaze, and build accordingly.

He needed it to be easy to handle on the coast, and manageable on open water between Islands for short distances in decent weather, keeled so that he could take it up-river and in and out the marshes and inlets. He would often need to beach it on uncertain ground He did not fish, but might bring light cargo, there would sometimes be passengers but most often not. He did not always need speed, but when he did he would need it badly. He required it be plain enough to not draw the eyes of Raiders, but fair enough to not offend the eyes of Islanders and Fishers.

“A small trader?” Lina ventured, willing to riddle. She certainly knew enough of them, although they usually also fished as a sideline.

“He was a mismatch,” Meru said. “The accent of a Northerner and the look of an Islander. Not too tall and not short at all. Lonely but anticipating passengers and worried they have good seating. Keen-eyed and quick-handed but always with a sense of looking for something lost to sight. Honest but closed. Anticipating trouble but anxious to avoid it.

"Someone I know.....?" Lena wondered aloud. From long ago? Everything seemed long ago now. Dark hair? Not one of those foolish singing boys by the River, then...pleasant company for bold
"Well," Meru said, "someone who knew you at the very least. He said you had told him I was the only boatbuilder in the world. The oddest thing is that while he was a grown man who sailed as well as a Harbor child of ten, a very clever one maybe, but no better and he humbly acknowledged it....he had a picture from Honored Tano on his right arm. How this could be I cannot begin to guess."

Lina stopped her polishing with the sharkskin cloth.

"Did you make him a boat?"

"Of course," Meru said, "Who could refuse such a polite and improbable person, especially when he shows up on your landing asking of news of your kind and voyaging sister.... his words not mine....? I made it with a wide beam and a shallow rudder and a center-board that can be lifted in shallow waters. It can be beached by one set of strong arms, nearly anywhere. I laid hill-oak frame and cedar planks, with some decking forward, so a stranger could either shelter friends, or sleep beneath, should the mood take him. The mast lies well forward with a single sail in a gaff rig....so if an unsure landsman lets go of the tiller, the wise little boat will head into the wind and hold herself still." Meru sighed with satisfaction at the thought of her own work. "He brought hope to my heart for you, somehow, just by saying your name," Meru said, laying her calloused hand on Lina’s arm, "And then, four weeks after he returned to claim her and sailed away, you returned to us."

“Galen Andor,” Lina said.

“That sounds familiar,” Meru nodded, reaching for her slate polishing knife. She never remembered names, only boats. “Tell me dear sister, how much time did you spend with this exotic man that he remembers you so fondly?”

“I took him on to Star as a passenger, a few years back,” Lina said, remembering.

*I gave him water and told him a story and thought of kissing him but didn’t.*

“Also,” she heard herself saying softly, “I think I met his mother, in the….fight….up North.”

Her twin looked at her with quiet concern. This was the first time she had talked of the black station, and what she had seen and done.

Lina pulled her upper sleeve back to show Meru the jagged healed scar, “She gave me this.”
Chapter Summary

A few of Portia's thoughts as she waits for Jyn and Cassian to return after the First Order attack

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Memsa villagers had slowly rebuilt the staircase up to the windows on her lower heart level. It took them a few days, but they had suffered so much grave damage, so many injuries and even casualties, she was deeply touched that they thought of her at all in such a dire time.

Several years back, Cassian and Jyn had salvaged some workable security cameras from an old intact wreck....a landing actually, it must have happened sometime after the Knights and their Republic had abandoned the station, in the years she had spent shut-down and hiding before poor brave K2S0 called out across the dark and woke her, begging for help for his beloved Cassian...... It took a while to find compatible connections, they had all been rather busy fighting a war in those years, but eventually Jyn had gone back to the stripped shell of the big old ship down in the river valley and fetched two workable visual feeds back to set up so that she could see the Memsa village, Nexa, that had grown up around her base and over the ruins of her Agricultural and Research Stations.

Oh, she felt so terrible about it now. A ship had landed and she had not even known, so sunk had she been in her own fear and misery, and it wasn’t even the only time that had happened, she knew now. It could have been the Enemy. Cassian had assured her that it wasn't, it had only been an unarmed civilian craft, the people inside beyond all help, but still.

It had been a lovely ship, from what she had seen of it, the Scavengers had been at it for a while before Jyn had finally gone down several years back wearing dear Jula’s external mods so that so that Portia could “see.”....Looking back, it had seemed odd that Jyn always did the salvage work on that particular ship, because usually they went together or Cassian went in with Dov and his destruction-happy wrecking crew..... Still, she had come back with two small workable units, visual feeds, probably once used to keep track of traffic in and out of the tastefully appointed storage bays.

Portia had been able to display an image down on the village field ever since the days before Endor, when they had winched down a broken blue slab of her interior display array and set it up at the end of the common field. It was enough to let her display a visual outside the tower and transmit audio, but not to “see” and “hear.” unless they were there and wearing a mod. The cameras had changed that.

She didn’t normally need to image outside, it would have just been weird, but she did like to watch
the village. The Memsa were a truly unique and fascinating culture. People came up to see her too and she became somewhat involved in village life, helping where she could.

Then one day Cassian and Jyn and several of the village leaders had come with a proposal, asking for her help in teaching the children, which had quite taken her aback. It took some real soul-searching and some thoughtful flexing of her operational parameters.

“We were never supposed to talk to them, the locally evolved sentients…any of us really, but especially the SI’s….for fear of affecting their natural development. I’m just a little uncomfortable….what if I am presenting information or analysis that will negatively effect them? Or negatively effect the children of the introduced humans for that matter?” she had asked Cassian and Jyn.

“Well,” Jyn had said, shifting Kalyra on her lap with some difficulty, since she was at 180 days of gestation with Galen then. “I am basically asking myself that every minute of every day now, so I guess I sympathize.”

Portia attempted to assist Jyn by generating a second image of large Grasslands Hare….the species was extinct now but she still had a number of files stored on local fauna left over from her youth so she trotted them out again once in a while to amuse the children….and walking back and forth on top of the table. Kaylyra laughed and so did Cassian.

“Si!” he said, smiling as Kaylyra giggled and poked her hand through the image to wiggle her fingers on the other side. “This is kind of what we are talking about.”

They were terribly nervous about teaching their offspring, she knew, despite their levity. They had both confessed to her, on separate occasions….as much time as they spent together, and as tightly bonded as they were it was sometimes amazing the things they DIDN’T seem to communicate with each other about…..that they had felt their own educations too specialized and inadequate and so wanted greater resources available for their children.

Bless them, they spoke in their innocence sometimes. They had not seen what she had seen or done what she had done.

We failed, she wanted to tell them sometimes. We tried to fight the Darkness and we could not and we all died….all except me….and I was just a young navigational beacon station. I still don’t know what we did wrong. It is one thing for me to help you fight your war….which, after all is against my Enemy too….but quite another to ask me to help you teach your children. What if I make things worse?

It was Tova, a lovely person, who was now the eldest member and guiding leader of the local Memsa cultural/spiritual Triad, who had helped her find a frame of reference. She had come up to visit one day with a pack of young Mems and talked to Portia about it.

“Ancient Portia,” she had said, “What can any of us do but read the patterns that are perceptible to us and try to find our way between them? We read the patterns of Ea who brought us forth. The children of your people and the children of the Fallen, and those that Ea calls to her, like Jyn and Cassian-ally, all bring new threads. You read the patterns of stars and powers that brought you here. We can only hold hands together and try to find our way. You have great vision and a humble spirit, do not be afraid to teach the little ones.”
They had all worked together to determine some useful curriculum. It had proved to be most rewarding.

*The Anthropological Survey team would have been so happy, once they got over the shock.*

Hiding from the outside Galaxy was no guarantee of protection either. Those poor little fellows on Endor had been hidden until suddenly they weren’t.

Now the beasts were here, leveling the ground with fire, just so…*from what she had gleamed from their stupid ships before she nudged their nav-systems and sent them to their unregrettable demise…*they could set up a jump marker here.

She had a blind spot, and they had obviously come up with a new means of opening temporary corridors. She had seen them do this before, on other worlds mostly unoccupied, not that that ever bothered them. They were hiding their activities and numbers from the New Republic by utilizing terrestrial emplacements.

*Oh no you don’t, not here, not while this little station is still standing.*

The recycled ground cameras Jyn had placed burned…..*no matter, she could get others some day…..*and she had to use the orbital satellite arrays that Bodhi had left in place and Cassian had replaced as their orbits decayed, to see the ground around her. She imaged outside (*Aurea, head of Anthropological Survey*) and spoke, once the flames had died back and she saw movement in the underground shelters, letting her know that many of them had escaped and were now coming out to search for the injured and dead, and assess the damage.

“The ships are gone. We destroyed them. Harbortown was also attacked. Jyn and Cassian are coming as quickly as they can. The Taun have seen the flames and will be here in a few hours. I cannot hear or see you now but I will tell you what I know in updates.”

*It probably looked odd, just an image of Aurea standing on a blackened field talking, but that couldn’t be helped.*

She talked to the people at the receivers up North and on Guardian. She spoke to Jyn and Cassian through the ear-clip of Jula’s old mod, and saw what they saw as they took turns wearing it. Harbortown hit with flames.

Over the days that it took for them to get home she mostly saw them looking at each other. Jyn’s view of Cassian, controlled and serious, or looking down at his dark hair as he pressed his face against her shoulder.

“I’m here,” Jyn said to him, again and again, “We’re alive. We’ll find them.”

When Cassian wore the mod she saw Jyn’s face, pale and resolute, sometimes in his hands or against
shirt as he held her. She saw Tom Markey, who had come to visit several times, and Conn and the other HarborTowners who she knew from other trips. Conn was coming too as was a woman named Toma. They saw the sky and grass whizz past in speeders and a boat and then the view from the Taun who met them and ran through the night.

She tried to talk mostly when Jyn was wearing the mod. She had no control over how they identified the voices they heard when she communicated through the auditory neural link, but she knew that Cassian heard his mother’s voice, which could only add to his stress in such a situation. Jyn had only ever told her that she heard her in the voice of “an old teacher,” someone she identified as “Saw.” Portia listened as Jyn passed on the messages to Cassian. Galen and his friends were missing on the field, Kaylyra and two others gone in the practice ship, decoying the last Enemy ship out of atmosphere.

*My dear friends, I sent your child to her possible death in order to save hundreds of other lives, to buy us more time to save thousands and thousands more, did not seem like something it was worthwhile saying to either of them now, in whatever voice they would have to hear it in. They had both been soldiers. They knew.*

She had not hesitated. She had been a soldier too.

After two days someone pushed some poles up against the ledge of the window opening on her second heart level and a few nimble young Mems shimmied up them, then tossed rope ladders back out to make her accessible again. “Hello! Ma’am?” they called “Ancient Portia, are you well?”

*They were good people her neighbors.*

She imaged for them as Jula, as she had already decided she would image for Cassian and Jyn when they came. It was all she could think to do to show them, I know too.

Chapter End Notes

For all the Portia fans out there.
Chapter Summary

Jyn and Cassian try to hold together after the Fire and to cope with Kayly's disappearance and Galen's injuries. There is always one parent who is not on board with your new tattoo. Portia receives a message.

Jyn had worked with Tova and Bes all afternoon weeding in the big gardens. Weeding and digging holes were, even after all these years, the part of farm work she was the best at.

_It said something about her_, she supposed, _that she could lose herself in acts of simple disruption even now, several lifetimes past a little girl's joyous random digging in the black sand of Lahamu_. Her back didn’t usually even start to complain until she stood up.

_I am almost as old as Papa was when he died. I am twenty years older than my mother ever got to be._

Ok. Time to quit, she was getting both stupid and morbid.

Things were cooling off now but around noon it had been acting like high summer with a vengance. As she went she stopped and got another drink from one of the water barrels they’d set up all over the field for people working then went to sit for a while on the wall at the far end of the common field, under the shade of the little pines by the path around Portia’s Tower. Bes had invited her back to the house but she hadn’t wanted to go, not yet anyway.

“I’ll walk this backache off and go wait for Cassian,” she said. Which was true but she also wanted to watch her son.

She could make Galen out clearly across the field and up the hill. He was the only human on the scaffold. Even from this far off she could see that his father’s old blue shirt hung loosely on him. He was up working with Kemmi and Fox and Sela’s small crew of carpenters on the new sturdier staircase for Portia. It wasn't the only project he'd been working on today either. They’d already put time in on several of the new barns and done some more of the interior work on the Community Hall.

Galen would work flat out until it got dark unless someone stopped him. That was the way he did things now, her once rambunctious and foxy little boy. He worked until he exhausted himself most nights still because that was still the only way he could sleep, up in the loft he’d once shared with his sister.
They’d put a wall up years ago, dividing the peaked room in half at Kaylyra’s righteous insistence when she was eleven. Her side/room still waited for her, although not as some unchanged shrine. Jyn refused that kind of sentimentality. She’d waited until the first day when Cassian was not there, gritted her teeth and gone up to strip the bed quickly, sweep, closed the books and put them away, then put all the clothes in baskets. She’d tried to wash them herself but hadn’t been able to because she kept breaking down. In the end she took them all to Bes. “Oh please,” she said. “Keep them, just…for a while, until she comes back…”

Her dearest friend took the basket from her then and hugged her tight. “They will be washed and folded and waiting for her,” Bes said.

*Chirrut had told Cassian in a dream that Kaylyra was alive, and until someone else, either living or dead, came and told her otherwise she would not give up hope. She would not put a stone up for her.*

“Tell me what he looked like,” she would ask Cassian as they lay in bed at night.

“Good,” Cassian would say, “clean-shaven, younger….not blind.”

*You’d better not be fucking with us about this Chirrut, she thought, I love you but I will kick your ass from here to the Force.*

She held her mother’s necklace as she looked at the stars at night and prayed for her daughter.

Eighteen months before Cassian went with Conn up onto the burned slope after Tova came and gently told them that the searchers thought they might have found Bill. Jyn stayed with Toma who had not physically taken her hands off of her Dora since they found the girl in the Nexa shelter, alive and unhurt. She had left her favorite gloves behind at the farmhouse and run back to get them mere minutes before the black ship appeared.

When Portia had sounded her alarms, Mose was one of the last to make it into the shelter she and Cassian had designed four years before and dug under the Common Hall. As he closed the doors he said he saw Portia, in her image of a pale woman with long black hair, standing defiantly on the burning field. Tova tossed Dora in the cellar with the cool barrels of ale, between all the nurslings and new mothers who had been visiting the farm to press apples. There they huddled together as the fire roared over, The Sister’s farmhouse was one of Portia’s old out-buildings like Jyn and Cassians stone house on the other side of the hill it did not burn.

_The stones hadn’t even gotten hot, Beri marvelled._

Long minutes later they had come out to a burned village and Tova had set them all to work.
When Conn came back with his face chalk grey and Dora burst into tears. Cassian met Jyn’s eyes and shook his head, a hand on Conn’s shoulder. All she could do was go and lace her fingers with his.

Galen tried to get up when they told him, his burns still wrapped, even while Bes and Beri tried to keep him in bed.

“I need to see him,” he’d said, his voice hoarse but rising.

“No,” Cassian said, “You don’t.”

Galen had staggered up then and Jyn tried to reach him, across from the other side of the cots, but Cassian got to him first.

“No! I need to. Fuck this, you can’t….” Galen actually yelled, “you can’t tell me not to!….it’s my fault…it’s my fault he was there...”

He probably would have fought with his father then if he’d had the strength but Cassian blocked his path and held onto him.

“You can’t,” he kept saying, quiet, steady, holding Galen, “Bill is gone, Galen.”

Then at long last he broke down in his father’s arms and cried.

Jyn ran to hold her son, to hold both of them.

Even as she felt her heart breaking for him, she had thought, “As much as it hurts, this is better, oh my baby, as awful as is, it’s better to feel it.”

There was something else too, underneath her grief, waiting.

She felt it in Cassian when he grasped her hand across Galen’s shoulders just as she had seen it in his eyes when he came up with Conn and Mose, pulling a cart behind with a wrapped bundle in it. Pain above all, but behind that the old fire.

Anger.

_You brought this back, you Imperial bastards. It doesn’t matter what you call yourselves. You brought this to our home and our children._

_Do you have any idea who you are fucking with here?_
Dora and Toma and Conn took Bill back to HarborTown. As was the tradition there, his “family” would take his ashes out the Harbor to the sea. Macha told her later that every boat that still floated went out with him and laid flowers and scraps of ribbon on the water. He had been the whole dock’s child.

Galen had not been well enough to travel yet and they had so much re-building to do at Nexa.

Shelters were built quickly in the fall and everybody made it through the mild winter. Just enough light snow fell to cover the burn scars on the fields. Galen and the other injured, the village itself, healed slowly together. When people asked they told them Kayly was not dead, just missing. Cassian went to Ava’s grandmother, old but tough, where she lived with her daughters out by the pine groves and said flat-out that the spirit of one of their Heart-Companions had told them the children had survived. The Memsa were pretty good with stuff like that.

Paave’s father broke down on the docks when Tom Markey brought him the word. Markey tried to tell him that there was still hope, but the Traders were difficult people. The man raised black sails on his boat for mourning and sailed away.

In the Spring they three finally went back down to HarborTown together.

Markey and Conn hugged Galen as if he were a long lost son. The trip was painful but it had been important.

She and Cassian could tell him a thousand times that Bill’s death was not his fault, and had, but to have Markey and Thea hug him and say, “You are a Harbor-born now, you’re ours too,” went a long way toward healing much more than his skin.

The date passed, one year from the fire, but the Memsa did not observe such things and Jyn and Cassian tried not to as well.

Jyn went to Markey’s warehouse on the new dock and met with people from up and down the Coast about defense plans. Once she would have been so nervous. Cassian put on Portia’s ear-cuff and went to find Paave’s father, then out to negotiate with the Far Islanders. Galen went along, at his own request. They were gone for almost two months while Jyn stayed at HarborTown and made Portia report on Cassian’s position three times a day, checking in at the small receiver they’d set up at the old storage cavern that was now a shelter on the shore.

“He is fine Jyn.” Portia always said and she begged her not to tell Cassian that she was asking so often but he probably knew anyway.

The best was when Portia said, “Galen has had an indelible design put on his right arm by insertion of pigment into punctures in the skin. I don’t think Cassian is pleased about it AT all.”
Jyn had found herself laughing out loud for the first time since the fire.

It was quite the dashing and piratical tattoo and the girls of HarborTown clearly thought so too when they returned. Portia was weirdly impressed because the design reminded her of some kind of art produced by her long-ago organics. Galen played the whole thing very cool.

“The man who gave it to me is someone who does the ritual marks for many Islanders and Voyagers, Papa,” Galen said, over beers at the pub on the newly rebuilt Long Wharf. “It’s an honor and strategically a smart thing, it will open doors for me on the Coast more quickly.’

“And it’s a hot look,” Jyn said.

“A definite plus” Galen said with a smile, “Not the main point, but a definite plus.”

It was the first smile she had seen on him in a year that had not looked like it had to be carefully planned before he made it.

“Why does it bother you so?” She’d asked Cassian, as they lay on the guest bed set up for them at Markey’s place. Dora and Thea’s young cousins had dragged off Galen to go hear some music with them at the pubs.

She’d wondered if it was some Festan thing, or a left over bit of old spy training…. about no identifiable marks or scars or something.

“It’s beautiful work.” she teased. “I wouldn’t care if you got one.”

“He’s thinking strategically, Jyn,” Cassian said, staring at the rafters, "he’s making sure he can go places you and I might raise suspicions in.”

He’s thinking like an operative, that’s what you’re afraid of, isn’t it?

You would have died to save him from what he’s been through, what he may yet go through, we both would, but we can’t.

“This is his planet, my love,’ she said, as gently as she could. “He was born here, he will fight for it. Would you want him not to?’

We gave them a home, oh my darling, we tried to give them what we never had until we found each other.

He closed his eyes and laid his arm across across his forehead, laying there beside her in a dark room half-lit from the lantern lights still shining through the windows from the docks.

“Have you looked at it Jyn, REALLY looked at it?”
She had. It was a Blackbird.

She laid her head on his chest and held him. He was silent for so long and his breathing so steady that she thought he might have fallen asleep.

“I miss Kayly,” he said quietly.

“Me too,” she’d whispered.

They’d started home the next day. Fall came and another winter and spring. The First Order seemed to have been fooled by Portia’s false signals and to have decided, like the Empire before them, that 3A/UDUR was too tricky to be trying to put more than a marker nav-beacon on, too unstable because of decaying Corridor. Portia’d constructed a new false feed for now.

They coordinated with their allies, they watched, and listened and waited for the next move.

Now she sat by the wall, as the sun set behind Portia’s Tower.

Cassian walked up the path at last from Dov’s yard, where his nephews had brought some parts passed on from the Taun. Everyone was on the hunt trying to get more cameras working for Portia.

*Slim and so handsome still, her Captain, a little grey at the temples and fuck if it didn’t look good on him. He was carrying a bag, a sign of success smiled at just a little.*

“Where’s the boy?” he asked, kissing her.

Jyn looked up, the rest of the crew had gone down and home to their suppers. Galen must have gone inside the tower to chat with Portia.

“We’ll have to go in and get him,” she said, “Bes asked us to dinner.

At that instant, Portia’s windows lit bright.

Jyn had the ear cuff out of her pocket and on in an instant. Portia speaking in Saw’s voice was in her ear, speaking clearly.

“Jyn. Come at once. I have a message. Galen thinks it’s Kaylyra.”

They ran both of them as fast as they could, across the hill and up the new stairway onto Portia’s second level. She had imaged as a young man with a shaved head and a short black beard. “It was a quick burst,” she was saying, “off seven new repeaters all in random motion. Almost mathematically intraceable, but I caught it.”

Galen was at the data terminal and ripped off the head set as they reached him,
“Mama!” he said, his face torn between joy and something like fear…that he’d made some mistake maybe….but he pushed one of the data pads towards them, “read it! Mama!”

“….hatchling…uncle….wrestle…..heart…..castle…..unbound….sole….know”

_I am with Bodhi Rook. Working. Coming home. Rogue One can you confirm?_
Chapter Summary

The people of one small planet continue to survive, unseen, in the shadow of the First Order's spread through the Unknown Regions beyond Endor. A woman on the Far North Coast rescues two old people who send out a call for help.

An Island Trader named Lina steps up to join a fight she barely understands and goes to meet one of the mysterious Blackbirds. (aka Jyn Erso and Cassian and Galen Andor)

Chapter Notes

Jyn and Cassian (and their children) as the "Blackbirds" was such a cool idea to me that I started lots of little bits of their adventures pre and post Endor as part of this project and thought to tidy them up and turn them into some proper chapters.....sort of.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was two very old Mems who brought the word to ColdHarbor. Shona saw them in a sledge-boat as they caught between the gaps in the river ice when she came to pole the depth.

By the time she saw the little wooded bottomed skin-canoe, it was already pinned and like to be crushed.

They were struggling. Old Females to judge by the fringe on their hoods. From a distance she had thought their faces rimmed with ice, but as she watched them slowly, painfully climb out of the little kayak as it twisted and began to snap, one helping the other onto the heaving sheets, she realized white fur of their faces and hands must be the frost of age.

Had they come down the coast from the North? The nearest Mem village upriver was better than two days hard row away in good weather, but in such a boat? In a storm the like of what they'd had yesterday? Oh Hell no.

"Grandmothers!" She called out to them, tapping her birch rod as she went to check that the ice was safe beneath her, "Are you well? Do you need help?"

They were a good k from the village, and she was only all way out here because she had been driving herself crazy worrying about her shellfish racks.

Based on what the Ladies had said they saw for that Winter's pattern, she had taken a calculated risk to leave her growing racks on the bottom over winter, weighted down with slate. It was a bold and desperate proposition because shellfishers traditionally pulled their racks out to be cellared between rafts of seaweed at the end of Fall and for very good reason. Hard ice would crack shells and kill them, but if she had managed to pick her bedding location well and they had a mild enough late
"winter, they might be in a part of the current lucky enough not to freeze hard all through. Wintering her racks over would mean her half-grown oysters could have an extra seven weeks growth ahead of everyone elses. She needed the extra trade badly enough to chance it.

"All or nothing, eh friend?" The brindled Bequa who'd agreed to be her partner in the venture said with a wink, after pushing the last rack out and laying the slate with her teeth.

Easy for you to say, cousin, she thought, you can just eat fish if the going gets tough.

The smaller of the two old Mems had slipped on the ice and her companion was trying to help her. As Shona got closer she could see blood on the ice where the Female had placed a hand to brace her fall.

Oh hell.

The tapping told her the ice here was too thin for her. She could only think of one thing to do and that was lay to flat to spread her weight and reach out as far as she could with her birch rod.

"Hold on to her and grab this Granny!" She called, "I will pull you in!"

The old one who was not hurt wrapped her small arm around the other, clutched the shoulder of her sealskin shirt with teeth, and reached out with a free hand to tightly grasp the end of the stick.

Up on the bank Mik saw her laying flat on the ice and had gotten afraid. "Mom!" he yelled from the bank, "Mom what's happening?"

Shona pulled....don't break don't break don't break....the rod and the two old Mems toward her until she could just reach out and grasp the iced-over grey wool of the near one's hood-jacket. Still afraid to stand she tried to crawl on hands and knees backwards and pull the poor things at the same time.

"Mik! " she called back, gasping, "Go to Grans! Get help."

Thicker ice was beneath her now and she got to her feet.

"Let go Granny," she said, for the one who held the stick still clutched her friend so tight. "I will carry her. Help is coming."

The poor frozen Mem looked at her with frightened eyes, white aged brows and cheeks framed against black fur, but she coughed and then loosened her grip a little. The other one was rolled almost into a ball and moaning "Kera....Kera..., leave me." Shona could see blood soaked through the arm and side of her jacket.

Oh Mik, boy, run fast.

"It will be alright" she said, for she could not think of anything else to say, and was afraid to move her, "where are you hurt Grandmother?"

"Nona, my love," the other was saying, hoarsely, in that funny accent the Mems inland had, "be strong a little longer."

She clutched at Shona's arm with dark ice-cold fingers, her eyes were dark and water was frozen at the corners like tears. "Human woman," she said, "My dear has been shot. There are Enemies on the Ice....monsters. Someone must call the Blackbirds."
She carried her to the bank and stayed with them there until Mik came with her mother and some
seal-hunters who had heard her mother's call and seen people out on the river. They pushed down a
sledge. Her mother and the hunters helped her pull the two old Mem ladies in, and Shona followed to
carry them up to her Mother's house. The hurt one was made warm and wrapped in dry blankets, but
she died before morning, her companion still holding her hand.

When she told them her tale, the Mayor ordered the signal fire lit and when some of the Bequa elders
saw it and they rushed to the shore and offered to carry word south looking for help.

Lina was never sure why she said yes. In later years she would wonder what would have happened
if anyone else had said yes.

Three young Bequa came into the harbor at Gate Island. They were Northerners, black and grey
striped and quite desperate.

Lina had still been undecided about wintering over at Gate.
It was late to head home but she and her Venture-partners had done well bringing the cloth and lime
up and stood to do well bringing fur and first-run oil fish back. The question was whether to pull up
and wait here, spending two months at least in the Red Trader hostels, to go out with the first thaw or
to head home and try to return in the Spring.

Bundled on the dock, a cup of hot broth in her hands, Lina had checked the horizon. The storms of
earlier in the week had finally moved well away. Her business head said "stay, there is good trade
here" and her heart said, "I cannot bear this anymore. I need to see my sister."

As she stood there were shouts and the few other people out began running down to the end of the
pier. She set her cup on a post and ran too. Black and white forms were lifting up through the grey
water, Bequa. They turned to lift their heads to the surface of the choppy water, calling from across
the waves. "People of GateHarbor! Boatmen! Neighbors! Your help is needed!"

A quick meeting was held, not just townspeople-born but everyone in the port. There was a fire
beacon that had been seen inland now too ....many here knew what that meant. Danger. A fall with
risk of enemies. Even out on the Islands the signals now ran. Lookouts would be set. Shelters were
readied. The warning had started up north of here and even if it might take many weeks for word to
come as to what had set it off, no one here doubted. Some of those gathered had gone to the help of
HarborTown after it burned.
"Traders," the Mayor told them, "you must choose now. No ship will leave after next tide. You are welcome to stay but you must bind yourself to our defense if you do. If you choose to go try to return to your homes, good luck to you."

"What about the Bequa who came?" One of her local partners, a fisher named Cora, said, "What news did they bring? They wanted help."

The Mayor, middle-aged and a former fish trader, looked uncomfortable, as well she might. Gate had been settling in for a quiet fall, it was a modest little Harbor, only newly come to the Trade Ring.

"They look for a boat, one that will go up coast to take a passenger, maybe more than one, toward the trouble, even as far as ColdHarbor."

There was mumbling then, ColdHarbor often iced hard, even this early. It was farther North than any Trader here usually went and even most Fishers did not go that way except in summer.

*Lina had gone there once, on her first solo Far Voyage, years back, asking after a ship she never found....*

"It seems like that is where the alarm started." The Mayor looked over her shoulder as if hoping someone else in the crowded Custom House would take on the task of answering these questions, but of course no one else would. The whole bloody pack of them were looking at each other.

*Surely this was why towns like this had mayors, wasn't it?* Lina wondered, *So someone would make a decision quickly when the need arose.*

The humans of the North Coast were not cowards, but from her experience of them, most were not fighters by nature. Fortitude and patience were the virtues they prized most. Hunker down and wait it out seemed to be their usual way in any crisis. Raiders seldom came this far North....*which other than a love of furs, yellow lichen dye and oily fish was the only reason Lina could think why people even lived up here....*which perhaps accounted for it. Add to that, their boats were coastal fishing boats, most already up on the blocks for winter, made for stable nets and steady barrels, not for speed.

"They've patrol boats South at HerringRiver," said one old woman, nervously, "It might be quicker to try to get word down there."

Cora raised her hand and argued, "You think the damn Bequa don't know exactly how long it takes to get to HerringFord? They came here?"

People were arguing more, hands raised, in turns, but from the corner of her eyes she could see the black and white forms of the Bequa moving along the dock outside the arched doorway. Pacing. Agitated.

"Who are these strangers and where?" a short burly man was saying.

"They have come to the Bear Crossing, upriver. They wish to go no further toward the
trouble....under...um, their own power.” the Mayor paused nervously, "for fear of being seen by enemies."

The Crowd began to murmur.

*Oh hell. The fires had been lit only last night. They had not come by land or sea that quick.*

When she was a girl it was said that the spaceship….Guardian, they called it….had been still been seen once or twice a year, people said, at HarborTown, or South Coast or near Green River. The Blackbird from the North did business there or had and it was their ship. Rumor was that it had flown and even fought with the Fallen Raider ships that had burned HarborTown, *which sounded fanciful to her, but who knew?* It was also said the the ship had not been seen since.

*It made her sad when she heard people say it had been wrecked, she had always rather wanted to see it….from a distance, of course.*

She had spoken to Far Islanders who remembered seeing it fly across the ocean before she was born. Some of them were Traditional people so strict they would not touch any metal that was not silver they had melted themselves, but they had talked of that ship with great respect.

"Seen?" an old man was saying, "Seen by bloody who?" No one wanted to answer that. They thought of RiverTown.

*Cold Harbor was two or three days sail North, and whatever this danger was must be inland from that. One or two people the Bequa said?*

“Just say it straight out,” a tall red-bearded man said, " are we talking about the Blackbird?” and the room fell silent.

The Mayor looked nervous. “I’m assuming.” she said.

“I’ll go,” said an old woman in a sealskin jacket. She was stocky and wild-looking for a Gate woman.

“Don’t listen to her! No you won’t,” said a man in a fur hat.

“No Mam,” said a red-haired woman beside him. “You’re too old.”

“You watch your mouth,” Old Sealskin said, “I know the Bear and Cold River and the trails up there better than anybody else here. I used to trap up there. If this Blackbird needs to get across land I can take him.”

“We’ve got to get ‘em to Cold Harbor they said,” Red Beard said, “All the boats are out, it’ll take a day or better to get something sea-worthy back in the water.”

Everyone was squabbling now.

*They must have hired this Mayor just because she had a good-sized hall and knew a lot about fish because she damned well couldn’t run a meeting.*
Lina found herself thinking of Harbortown, where she went only every other year or so, and never touched shore so she could keep her custom to the Far Islands, and the way you could still smell ash if the wind blew from the shore. The wharfs were rebuilt and half the warehouses but there were still gaps like missing teeth.

She thought of the Red Trader and his black sails.

When she went to the Inner Islands last year for the Barge Market she saw him there, a thin grey-haired man named Anilta, whose sails were black cloth for mourning. He carried bales of Basket Palm that could always be sold at Green River, her next stop, so she slapped a hand to the rail to signal the trade. She had four bags of purple-shell dye. Worth less on the Far Islands, but much prized here so he could trade it off before the day was done. “I am sorry for your loss, Uncle,” she said when she brought him the baskets of ground crab shell and pulled over the bales of palm with her hook. The man had only nodded in acknowledgement and poled away.

“Have you not heard about Anilta and his loss? “ said one of the broad-nut sellers.

If the Trade Markets moved goods as well as they moved stories we would all be rich, her Grandmother used to say.

“It was his only son,” the woman went on, “and the boy had only just come to live with him after the mother died out on the Far Islands, I have heard her family did not want him.”

Another Blue Island man, Naane, who traded alongside told her as they watched the black-sailed boat move out and to the cloth-traders barge, “He has sailed the black for more than a year and will not take it down.”

Black sails meant kin lost at sea with no body to claim, usually sailed for a year and then burned and laid to rest in the water, to stand in place of the loved one lost. To sail it longer was supposed to risk the spirit not being able to rest or some such nonsense.

It was a sad tale, though. The father had the look of a man distracted. She was glad she had been able to bargain fair with him.

“Where was the boy lost?” Lina asked, half annoyed with herself as soon as she said it, at getting caught up in what her grandmother called “vulture gossip.”

Oh!” said the nut seller “That is the terrible part. The boy was not lost at sea. He was inland on a visit….burned…Nexa, it was.”

Oh Ea's heaven, that was awful.

Nexa was a name she'd heard, although she wasn’t quite sure where it was, North and inland of the Green River, she supposed.

“The Fallen Raiders went there too, and burned a whole village before their spaceship crashed, it wasn’t just the Harbor boy that was killed,” said the oil-seller, poling her boat close to get in on the conversation.

There was a story abroad last year about a boy who had died in the Inland Fire at the same time Harbortown, his own home by the sea, was burning…..which seemed freakishly cruel, and so was repeated endlessly
“I heard it was the crash of the Fall that set the fire,” said the other trader from Blue.

*Which Lina had to admit seemed the more likely.*

“Could they not get some of him home?” said the nut-seller.

*Alright that was it. Grandmother was right, this conversation was awful. She reached for her oar to push away.*

“No,” Naane said, and his voice sank to the whisper usually reserved for the most fantastical of tales, “He flew away in one of the ships there….the ones the Blackbird has and was lost in the stars. How long do you even mourn for that? Where would you spread the ash?"

Now she remembered the dark-eyed Inland youth she had ferried the year before and the thin burn scars on his back and arm. He had been waiting for his father. *People always spoke of the Blackbird as if there were only one,* a man most people said, although she’d met some others who swore it was a woman. *What if there were a whole family of them?*

She thought too of the beautiful old songs the Far-Islanders sang, of battles and monsters and noble ghosts and the new songs some of them sang about the great Black Fall at HarborTown twenty years ago and the monsters who had spilled out of its guts and how all the people had worked together to kill them. *Was it possible to be in an epic story and so busy selling fish and canvas that you didn’t notice it?*

She heard a voice call out clearly then, over the voices of the Gate villagers still arguing about timed risk and whose boat could be spared.

“I’ll go.”

*It took her a full second to realize the voice was her own.*

“I know the way to Cold Harbor. Where do I find this Blackbird?”
Chapter End Notes

Yup. More tales of Ea, because Science Fiction, and wild self-indulgence. This being a small set about Ea and the people on the edges of the Star Wars universe and just how bad-ass Jyn and Cassian can look through other people's eyes, conceit I love so much I find of wrote a bunch of fan-fiction about it.
Cold Harbor/Part 2

Chapter Summary

Still questioning herself, young Lina from the Islands takes on an unexpected crew, and takes on the mission to carry the mysterious Jyn Erso Blackbird and her friend up North.

Lina meets this formidable lady, gets her first glimpse of a space ship, in the form of the legendary "Guardian" and learns that some First Order Stormtrooper ass is going to need to be kicked before Ea's position can be further endangered. She has no idea what that means, of course, but she is about to find out.

Chapter Notes

More adventures as Ea defends itself from FO incursion. Set some time after Kayly's message is received.

An all-female sabotage mission?

"Why?" Cora asked her, as she loaded up her boat at the dock.

Lina pointed toward the Bequa The young ones who were presently visible at least, the ones striped with black and still pacing in the water. They were a picture of nervous agitation.

All the days of her life she'd seen Bequa and only rarely anything but happy....why even come to the surface otherwise, right?... occasionally they were sarcastic, grumpy, or annoyed, but she'd never even seen one frightened.

But even that wasn't the main reason.
"Because I can," she said, "because it’s important and someone has to. These Fishers will argue for days."

'I cannot go with you, Lina…I am sorry, but I can’t," Cora said. She pulled at the edges of her faded short cloak looking torn and miserable. It seemed as if she expected some rebuke from Lina, but nothing could have been further from the truth.

Of course Cora must go. The beacons were lit. She had a son back on the Narrows and this was only to have been a set-up venture for her.

"No one is asking you to do any such thing" Lina checked her fire-starting kits and in looking down saw the small kegs of blackfish oil lashed and covered in the bottom of the port storage. She took them out one at a time and laid them on the dock at Cora’s feet. Each spoonful would light a large room for half a day…..more if slipped into one of those fine glass balls and hung in the rafters. If they’d brought nothing but this back it would have been a good voyage.

“Take your share Cora. Give the rest to my sister at the boatyard on Blue when you can get there. I’ll claim it from her.”

“But….”

“Go now. Hurry. Please, just tell anyone who asks that I wintered over."

Yes please do that because “She lost her mind and sailed off with some Bequa she didn’t know to ferry a stranger to an Enemy fall up where it's so cold the bears shit ice” was the kind of story that could negatively effect business investment later.

She clasped the other woman’s arm and kissed her cheek. "Good winds and good fortune Cora."

Tell my sister I love her, tell her I'm sorry, that I don't know why but I couldn't bear to hover at the edge of a story any longer, was what she wanted to say but she found she could not form the words.

"And you as well, Lina Far Trader."

Cora kissed her other cheek and ran to set her own boat as quick as she could. The wardens at Gate had said they would pull up the docks within the hour and Cora had her red sails raised and was out past the Harbor's rocky mouth within a quarter of that.

The Fishers of Gate Harbor brought Lina extra gear. Many of them simply walked to where she was tied up, at the end of the last dock standing, laid bundles down and left, shamefaced, before she could speak to thank them.

It was more than the boat could really carry but she took several good sheets of oiled tarp, cord, poles, a few extra blanket and packets of fatbread. As she ducked under to fasten the last of the rearranged gear and moved up to untie the ropes, she found the old woman in the sealskin jacket standing there at the edge.

"I am coming with you Islander woman. You may know the coast but I know the land and the river."
Oh Ea help me.

The old woman climbed nimbly right down into the boat, tossing a well-worn pack beneath the thwart and sat herself firmly in the stern as if daring Lina to move her.

"We should go quickly," she said, "Before my children realize I am gone."

Oh Ea, PLEASE help me.

The Bequa lifted their heads up anxiously and she pulled the glove from a hand to drop it over the side and into the cold cold water. One slipped up gliding beneath her fingers and rolling first a brown eye to the surface and then a mouth to say, "Hurry."

The old woman helped her and they slipped the ropes and pushed back. Lina raised sail and headed out. Just as the boat moved out into the open she thought she heard a voice, or maybe more than one, from the shore behind them wail "Maaaaaaa...what the hell!?"

The winds were cold but steady and brisk at their back. Lina slipped on her eelskin gloves and cap. The old Gate woman put up her hood, and looked back toward the shore as the reaching arms of stone that marked Gate Harbor grew small behind them.

She sighed, though only once, then turned her gaze ahead toward the North west.

"My children are grown," she said. "My grandchildren too, one even has his own boat now. I laid my good old man's ashes in the sea two years ago last summer. The Fishers gave me a fine life, but it is time to go home. I can do this, they cannot. I lost two toes to the frost but in my youth I knew every bend in that river, and the ways of that Forest all the way up to the Ice."

Lina kept her eye on the sails.

Well, she thought, I won't argue with you. At least you didn't leave them when they were nursing babes. Respect to you for that Auntie.

"I can help with the ropes and shift my own weight as well any, Island Trader, you can rest easy on that score," the woman said. "My name is Nanerell but you should call me Nan."

"Nan it shall be then Auntie. My name is Lina."
The wind moved them forward as if Ea herself shared the Bequa's urgency, with Lina working the ropes and Nan sitting down in the stern. It was only a few hours before they came in to the place where their passengers were said to be waiting. The little winter moon was just coming up at midday when they reached the rough landing spot that the Bequa guided them to. It would still be a good two days up to Cold Harbor from here, even with this brisk wind, three if it faltered or changed. It would be cold, and get colder but if the weather held true she could manage to sail at night.

Getting in at the little stoney cove was a bit rough, but that sweet keel her father laid and her sister rebuilt for her had never failed yet. It brought her up safely, close to those boulders and onto shore straight and true even on that hurrying wind.

If Lina thought she would need to worry about old Nan, she need not have. The grandmother jumped right out in the icy thigh-deep water to help her drag the boat ashore. Fat-greased Fishers boots and sea beaver wool liners stayed warm even when wet but it was damn cold anyway.

Two figures were on the wind-swept shore below a small bluff of dunes. One was a big black-furred Mem in a fringed jacket and loose pants. Only the Northern Mems dressed so. The other was a fairly small human wrapped in a HarborTown blue waxed wool coat and hood. They had some black bags and boxes dragged just above the tide line but they both came down toward the boat, reaching out hands to help pull her in.

There was little in the way of introductions. "Good job getting in here. I was afraid we'd have to swim out to you." the human said tossing a hood back. Looked to be female with brown hair tied back and streaked with grey on one side. “How close can you get us to Cold Harbor?"

Funny accent. She wore a silver clip on one ear that looked like Far Islander work.

“I’ve been thinking, with this boat we should put in at Mink Cove," Old Nan piped up "There'll be a stone ramp and shelter there. It’s small but gets the winter sun on those black rocks. Usually it's sheltered and gets iced up later....traders always came out of there last with the white pelts and feathers....there’ll either be sea kayaks there we can steal....er, take.... up the rest of the way to Cold Harbor or we can get somebody to meet us.”

Lina looked back at her beloved boat. Ice, father? How much of that can your fair keel scrape?

“Where do you need to go?” she asked, unsure….this was no sort of bargain she’d ever made before. "Is….what you’re looking for…at Cold Harbor or…elsewhere nearby?"

The woman in blue looked out to the water, then turned her head a little.
It was as if she were listening not to Lina but for some other voice, “A cove about 20 k. South of Cold River Harbor,” she said, “…yeah…ok, not iced yet...I'm sure Mara and I can trek in from there. Good.”

Her eyes turned back to Lina as if some distraction was now passed, “Get us to this Mink Cove. Our friends in the water can send word up to Cold to have their people meet us. Our target is straight North and East from there.”

“We should go then,” Lina said,”while the tide will still help us.”

The woman nodded, "Ready," she said.

Her skin was light and her eyes a greyIsh green. "Mara! Grab the gear!" she called to the Mem, who was already running back up to the high-water line to grab the bags.

As the green-eyed woman turned back toward the bluff a sudden rush of wind came down from the high dry dune grass and thickets of leafless laurel above them, startling both Lina and Nan.

Hidden from their sight until then by the angle at the top of the sandy cliff, a dark rectangular shape....maybe the height of one very tall man and the length of three.....lifted up into the air. It lowered short dark wings, folded almost like a diving hawks. Dark glass seemed to cover the front and as the sunlight angled across Lina thought she could make out the shape of someone sitting inside.

The woman held up a hand as if in farewell, and the ship.....Guardian, it had to be....turned slowly back inland and moved away, skimming along the top of the brush like an owl.

Oh bloody hell. That's it. That's what they look like when they aren't crushed scraps of metal. That's what they're supposed to look like when they fly instead of fall.

There was a look on the stranger's face that Lina knew all too well, having lived all of her life watching people say goodbye from one side of a shoreline or the other.

The dark-furred Mem, Mara, was throwing gear into the boat and the human woman grabbed bags piled at her feet to do the same.

"Let's move," she said.

Well. Alright then, at least one Blackbird wasn't a man.
“I’m Mara,” the Mem said, scrambling past Lina up into the boat, “That,” she pointed to the woman, who was already over the side and grabbing a pole to help them push off. “That’s Jyn, who probably forgot to tell you her name” She held out a hand, palm up. Lina took it. *Greeting…with Thanks? Lina traded with the Mem only on the Coast and at Green River. She hoped it was the same.*

They got out while the tides still drew and moved up the coast. The wind died back just a little but stayed steady as the sun set early. The moons were bright enough. Lina kept well off and set her ropes. She could stay awake for one night of sailing without too much suffering she reckoned, and Nan seemed a good enough hand if set up right for a few hours rest after.. Hopefully one of these women could lend a hand tomorrow.

She burned with questions she could not ask yet, but with luck there would be time.

They all wrapped up against the cold wind as best they could, except the Mem, whose blessing it was to feel it far less. Nan wrapped herself up and dozed back against the deck-shelter wall. The woman named Jyn came forward while the light lasted. The Bequa came alongside to her at brisk speed.

“Can you run ahead and tell them at Cold River how we are coming?” she called over the side.

“Yes!” Came a rolling shout up from the water. “We will….go!…..Meet you at the cove…Jyn Blackbird!….” Two voices in near unison it sounded like.

The Blackbird came back by the tiller then, sighed and wiped the spray from her eyes with the back of a gloved hand. It looked like black eel skin but might well be Scavenged gear.

“You’re an Islander?” she asked.

“A Far Trader from Blue,” Lina said, with a glance up at the sails, “This is my own boat.”

“You’re Mother sleeps well,” said Mara, looking back toward Nan, snoring.

“She is not my mother, Auntie,” Lina said, “She is from Gate, I only met her yesterday.” Some kind of explanation seemed needed, so she added, “She wanted to come.”
The Blackbird woman laughed then. “Ok,” she said, “What have you heard and what have you hired on for, Far Trader?”

*Good question.*

“Transport,” Lina said. “As for the rest...There’s a Fall a bad one, up near Cold Harbor. The Beacons are lit, so live Fallen Raiders maybe. You need to get there.” *She might have well ask,* “I can get you to Cold or nearby, but what two only….* one middle-aged Blackbird and one Northwoods Mem, a small war party by any estimate, “will do there was a little unclear to me.”

“Well,” Jyn said, “We’ve got a party of them downed up there, which the North River Circle could probably handle but they’ve got weapons. They’ve killed people and they’re trying to set up some machinery and send a message to their base.”

“And you mean to see what they are up to?” Lina said.

“No,” the Blackbird woman sighed wrapping a wax-wool blanket over her legs and poking one of the long black bags with the toe of her boot.”We can see them just fine. What we mean to do is kill them all and steal their space ship.” Her black-furred friend nodded enthusiastically.

*Chapter End Notes*

Science fiction.

Yes, now I have self-contained story cycles within my self-contained story cycle within my series within my EU. Clearly something is wrong with me.
Chapter Summary

A series of bits about Galen Andor's journey in the time after the Fire and his sister's disappearance.

Mentors and advice.

The next generation on Ea must steel itself for what lies ahead.

A little college-age angst.

A little low humor.

A little generational torch passing......actually I hate torch-passing, more "I'm going to light this additional torch now. There, see, more torches. Everybody hold a torch."

Chapter Notes

Coming of age in wartime.
Jumps around a bit but what young adult's mind doesn't?

"You sure you don't need the ladder?" Sela had said as she took the rest of her crew off to hang the new doors down at the Hall. The original plan had been to leave the tarps up and try to hang the doors tomorrow but Eldest Sister and Portia both agreed that the rain coming in tonight would be heavy so it was better to finish that now.

“Why would we need a ladder, we have Galen?” Fox said.
"I have other skills beyond my height," Galen protested.

"No offense pal," his friend said, "but you really don't."

This cracked the younger kids up with laughter and so he just waved Sela on.

"It's fine! Take it. I don't need my arms for anything important tomorrow anyway."

As Sela and her junior carpenters started walking down the hill with the ladder, Fox drew a dipper of water from the bucket that Youngest Sister had brought them earlier and dumped it over his grey-striped head.

"Lucky runts, at least they'll be in the shade. It's bleeding hot up here."

He took another dipper, drank from it, then passed the ladle over to Galen, "worse for you though, I know, being...." ....Ah, fuck Fox, Galen thought, give it a rest....."so much bloody closer to the sun."

"Tell me cousin," Kemmi said," have you ever thought up a joke you didn't then proceed to beat into the ground?"

"Never," Fox replied with a wide smile.

"Come along cousin Galen," he slapped him on the back, "Let's get those freakish bald tree branches you call limbs moving and hang the rest of this railing." He hoisted some of the poles over his shoulder and started up.

Galen dumped water on his own head, passed the dipper to Kemmi and went back up the scaffold. They had the new stairway up into Portia's Tower near to done, if they pushed through this afternoon they could finish.

The sun was well over the field by the time he and Fox got the handrails up and threaded through the brackets. Kemmi was down below nailing plas-fiber stripping along the boards of the steps.

"He ok?" Fox asked, looking down the curving stairway they'd built. Kemmi was limping a little as he moved up to the next step.

"He's fine," Galen said, perhaps a little quicker than he meant to. "It's just hot so he took his shoe off while he's working up here."

Part of the pad on Kemmi's left foot had burned off. The Sisters had salves and wraps that had cured many people's burns. Galen still had scars but they had faded to only a striping of silver lines on his back and arm. Even those nurslings who had breathed too much of the burning air running from the berrying slope, the ones who had barely reached the shelter, were saved by Bes's quick skill in
setting them into a small tent with steaming pine mist to heal their burned throats before scars could close them.

Galen had tried to pull Kemmi down under his own body but the Wolf of that fire had roared over them so fast and so fiercely that the back of Kemmi's legs...his left foot mostly...had been badly burned. He wore a kind of sandal now, with a soft leather pad to protect his foot and even out his gait. He could walk normally with it on but he still couldn't run. It had been an adjustment.

Don't Fox. Galen thought, Just don't. If you crack a joke about it I may have to throw you right off this platform.

Fox only nodded. "Right, yeah." Maybe he saw something in Galen's eye, but for whatever reason he stopped and panted a little as if overheated.

"Hey cousin!" he called down to Kemmi, "Lets wrap this up. We've got maybe an hour's worth of finish work tomorrow and we're all done here. I hear a pond and a beer calling my name. What do you say?"

"Sounds like a call worth answering," Kemmi said. Spitting out the nails he'd been holding in his teeth he slid down to the bottom step and reached around to find the "shoe" he'd left there. “I’m in.”

Kemmi told him how he'd kept losing the things for the first few months. Nerla, one of the Taun leather cutters, finally just delivered a stack of the thick hides for the soles to Kemmi's mother, just to spare her having to walk all the way to the River crossing every time she needed to stitch him a new replacement.

A year and a half after the Fire, when Galen finally came back from his six months long trip to HarborTown and the Islands, he’d gone straight up to the farm to see Kemmi.

His friend took the latest version of the shoe off and laid it on the table to show him how it worked. "I'm kind of getting used to this one finally," he said, "but every now and then when the weight bothers me I look down and I ask myself 'how does that lizard-bait bastard Galen walk around with two of these damn things on?'"

"Ummm, symmetrically?" jumped out before he could stop it.
“So you may comfort yourself friend, but I am not buying it,” Kemmi shook his head with a smile. “At least, unlike yourself, I still have three handsome appendages...well, four if it’s the right time of year.."

"Enough!" said Kemmi's Mother Rena shouted from the kitchen below.

He winked at Galen wickedly then and, pitching his voice much louder, said "but this business about getting pictures drawn onto things sounds really interesting...."

"That's it!" Rena yelled, coming up the wooden steps with a short broom and whacking both of them while they doubled over with laughter and dove to dodge the blows,

"Less than an hour you are back, Galen Jyn's-child! Less than an hour and already you two are talking like idiot males at your first Active Feast!"

She'd been laughing too though.

After dinner when he'd left for the long walk back to the stone house Rena had followed him to the path and taken his two hands again in Welcome for the Return of Beloved Friend but with the extra pressure on the side that meant Beloved Child.

"It is good to see you home Galen," she said, kissing his hand. "He's missed you. We all have."

Later that Spring he'd convinced Kemmi to come down and start working full time with Sela's building crew...."Kem, please, you cannot leave me alone with these bastards, I can take maybe five minutes of Fox's puns, and Moll is working on moving up her competitive belching ranking this summer. Please."

He could see becoming a big fan of this working physically hard, generally avoiding talking to anybody too long about anything serious, falling into bed and sleeping just as hard until the next morning.

He knew it wouldn't last forever but it was good while it did.

The field had regrown with fireweed and flowers. His sister's "room" was cleaned and empty. Waiting. The whole village acted as if she and Ava were just on some really long trip somewhere and could be back at any time.
Not long after he got back, after he talked to Kemmi, he’d stopped at the Sister’s farm one morning, waiting for Eldest Sister and the Mayor to show up with some plans. Looking for candles he had noticed folded clothes in a basket on the shelf by the work table. Kayly's red sweater and canvas shoes were on top.

He must have paused there for a second or two too long, because Second Sister Bes appeared beside him and took his hand, slipping her own around it to pat his fingers lightly. Companionship in Time of Trouble, with Willingness to Share Information if Asked. He kissed her hand for Grateful Thanks, but did not ask for more. He knew why they were here.

They were being held for the day his sister might come home.

He had noticed immediately, of course he bloody had, that Kayly's things were gone from the house.

In those very bad months, right after the fire, he had yelled at his mother about it which was a stupid and cruel thing to have done. That she hadn’t clocked him then and there almost made it worse.

Storming out of the house he’d gone, of all places, to Portia's tower.

She'd still only had the temporary ladder then but he'd climbed stiffly up and demanded of her....she'd been showing Jula, the long haired pale woman, he remembered.....and demanded, "Is Kayly dead?"

"I don't know," Portia said. "I've looked, but if she came out of FTL intact at the coordinates I gave her she would have had to do so when I was under blackout because of the First Order ships scanning us. I have looked, I promise you Galen, but if she survived transit and re-entry she would institute off-world contact protocol, you know that.

She would, of course she would. Kayly was all about rules. If she was alive, nothing would break her.

“I don’t know.” It was the same infuriating answer, more or less, that the Sisters gave. Kayly and the others had left Ea's Pattern. Dead or alive they were in the stars and it was not possible to know more. His parents were the only ones who gave another answer.

They were on second level, with the teaching tables still set up, and her image sat down on a bench.

"Why are you sitting down Portia?"

The dark-haired woman eyed him shrewdly "I am confident that you know perfectly well why,
"Give me the odds, Portia."

The woman’s face was nonplussed. "That would involve multiple complex calculations with insufficient data in an attempt to answer a poorly defined question, so no."

"My mother has been telling everyone that one of their dead Heart Companion’s told Papa in a dream that she was alive and trying to get home. Is that what you would call "insufficient data?"

"No," Portia said, "it just greatly increases the complexity of the calculation. Don’t ever make the mistake of thinking that mine is the only data gathering system available to us here. I hope I never do."

She continued, "Your parents friend Chirrut Imwe was an adherent of one of the mineral-revering cults on Jedha. Many of them were reliably reported to have unique energy and signal manipulation modifications. From the few references I’ve seen, mostly in literature, I think they must have self-installed as the Knights did. It’s not unheard of. Certainly the Jedi managed all sorts of strange data gathering. they sometimes boasted about post-mortem neural messaging....for all the good it did them." The image shook her head, "A projection of positive outcome in the face of non-conclusive data is supportive of optimal functioning, as long as it does not close off planning for potential negative. All we can do is wait, work and hope, Galen."

He sat down, feeling very tired suddenly and put his head in his hands.

He was being a dick and he knew it. As ashamed as he was, it was hard to stop sometimes in those days.

“I’m sorry, Portia.”

“It’s alright, Galen. I know this is very painful for you.”

When he was little he had asked her how she knew all her siblings were dead. "Did you look everywhere for them?" he’d asked.

“Of course I did. I still do. I am right now," she’d answered.

He had known when they planned the trip last Fall that going to HarborTown would be difficult, and it had been, but not so much because he’d felt Bill’s loss more keenly there. The hard part had been expecting him to walk around the corner every other second.
A low point came when he and Dora got falling down drunk together after dragging the equipment for the new comm station across the beach and down into the new shelters on the old storage caves. He went up and sat with her and some of Bill’s other friends on the roof of the new warehouse. Roco and Mary, Thea’s son Mik and Sanna were up there too, but eventually people wandered away or fell snoring asleep on the wooden chairs they’d carried up, leaving just him and Dora to hit the absolute bottom of that last large bottle.

“I know how this sounds but I’m almost glad sometimes that it burned,” Dora whispered after several shots and a long silence “I’m not…I feel awful…but I’m glad I don’t have to look and think, ‘that’s the gap where we used to sneak in and out after the doors were locked’ or ‘there’s the pipe he’d shimmed down with his clothes in a bag to sneak out when he was supposed to be packing mackerel before the Fish Market……and we brought the boat right under and he drop’d in and we row’d out to the dances on the point and made him swim behind the boat partway because he smelled so damn awful……”

“I remember,” Galen said. He’d been there.

She’d started crying raggedly.

“It’s alright Dor…” he’d tried to stand and fallen out of the bloody chair. Then she’d tried to get up to help him and tripped over his leg.

“Oh fuck,…Portia,” he’d said, “Dora, we’ve got to tell Portia,…..it’s a…an… an illustration of a colloquial phrase…..’Falling down drunk’…..”

They’d laughed and cried at the same time, or maybe by turns.

“You can’t…” she’d said, laughing “you stupid.....you don’t get to comfort me for this…” then crying “..oh this is fucked up Galen…..”

They both said stupid stuff after that. She blamed herself somehow, for Kayly and for Paave especially because she’d promised his dad she’d look after him. He was pretty sure he told her what he hadn’t told anybody yet. That sometimes he was so angry at Bill it almost choked him. Angry at him for running up the slope, angry at him for not believing.

He knew what she meant. It was awful.

“I’m sorry,” she’d said,”Oh Galen, shit….I shouldn’t be….I’m so sorry about Kayly, I’m sorry about everything….I shouldn’t be…”

Shouldn’t be what? Alive? Talking this way… or just talking this way to him? She probably felt like she had to be brave here, like he had to to be brave back home. He hadn’t put any stones up in Mama’s garden yet……he couldn’t yet, but someday he knew he’d have to.

Somebody must have come up and checked on them at some point because when he woke up there was a blanket over him and another rolled up under his head. The sun was coming up and he was stretched out on the flat roof, with his back up against the wall of the little dovecote shed. Dora was
on one of the fold-out chairs with a blanket over her too. Sanna was gone. Roco and Mary were asleep in between the pigeon boxes and Mik was still snoring right were they'd left him.

He checked on Dora, who was ok and seemed to be actually asleep not just passed out, then went downstairs into the warehouse.

*He did this mostly by feel because he couldn’t quite open his eyes all the way.*

Tom Markey was in the front room that mostly served as his “office.” It was roughly the same layout as the old one had, except with a bigger window, brighter paint and far fewer cobwebs. The new warehouse was already filling with sailcloth, although not quite to the rafters yet and some blue cloth was starting to pile up in the corners. It was nothing like the small mountains of it that had been there all of Galen’s life but “Markeys” was coming back. Sanna was sleeping on one of the small blue piles. He was relieved to see that because he’d been half afraid she’d rolled off the roof sometime during the night.

“Ummmm...Tom, sir....I…..” His jaw ached terribly although he couldn’t think why.

“Sit down before you fall down, boy” Markey said.

So Galen felt his way to a bench beside the big table while Tom pushed aside some papers and tackle and placed a cup, pitcher and thermal pot in front of him.

“Water,” he said, “and willow tea if you can keep it down. It’s bitter but pour some syrup in it if you have to. I’m making toast.” Markey had a little toast grill up on a metal box and was turning some slices of bread on it.

“Thanks…I don’t…”

"You look like hell, son. Let’s see if we can get you patted back into some kind of shape before your parents get here.”

It took a while. He found that he had to lay his head on the table for an uncertain amount of time but the water helped and choking down some of the willow tea was possible as long as he took small sips interspersed with bits of dry toast.

“Dora and Mik ok up there?” Markey asked after a while. Galen thought about nodding, then considered how badly that would hurt and just said, “I think so,” then added, wincing, "Looking back on it.....mistakes may have been made.”

That made Old Tom laugh. "You sound like your momma sometimes, you know that?

*His parents had come in and then gone out again. Papa with Toma to check the equipment and talk with the Bequa at the shore and Mama with Eldest Lady Perrin and Macha. Galen had managed to sit up straight and talk normally...hopefully, maybe.... while they were all here . He had been*
supposed to go with his father but his head and his stomach were very much of two minds about whether getting in a boat was a good idea. He hadn’t kidded himself that he’d fooled either of his parents about his condition. Salvaging some scrap of dignity seemed like the best he could hope for. Markey saved him by asking if Galen could stay with him to organize the tool kits that they were going to send out with each of the teams.

"Ok Galen," Mama had said shaking her head a little. She’d given him a very gentle kiss on the cheek which almost didn’t hurt, and whispered “Don’t make a habit of this, jackass.”

Papa blessedly, said nothing.

Dora had walked slowly downstairs, as soon as she was sure her mother was gone, looking like pale death and wouldn't meet his eye, although he heard Markey talking to her on the stairs.

A few hours later, as he stood on the rail of the dock, Tom Markey came and stood beside him.

Galen couldn’t decide if looking at the harbor was a good thing or a bad thing but the fresh air helped a lot.

“I’m sorry, Tom,” Galen said, but the older man just laughed.

“I suppose I’d worry if you guys did this every night,” he said, .....why did everybody keep saying that?...."or if I was picking you lot up from the wardens for busting chairs in the shore pubs... but the old roof saw a lot of steam blown off on it so one small hard-drinking wake on the new one counts as just 'breaking it in' I figure."

Tom Markey sighed, “You know Dora’s named for my sister right?”

“Yes, sir,” Galen didn’t know what else he should say. The older man was looking at the sea and not at him.

“’I’m not sayin’ this because I think I’ve got any great advice to give here, son. Your folks have walked in and out of Hell holdin’ hands, as my Thea says, and they say Kayly is still alive. The Ladies say they may be right, so I’m hoping Ea makes it so. I don’t want you thinking that I’m saying not. My family was a different thing altogether…. different as fish and birds, I always tell your Dad…..” he bowed his head, “It’s just, that for us too, nobody knew for sure what happened. It was a season before we even found her boat. Ah, Ea’s mercy…I look at your folks and I think, what if we’d never found even that? It broke my mum.” he shook his head, “ It broke me too, I think, but somebody had to keep going. I had to just put one foot in front of the other and pretend I was walking until in the end, I was. It took a long time to feel right, so I learned how to get by without it feeling right and trust it would someday. I had to figure out at at thirty what you’re gonna have to figure out at eighteen.”
Galen considered what that might mean, slept on it.

Over the next few days Papa outlined a plan to go out to the Islands. The idea was to start laying the groundwork with the people out there and re-establish contact with some of the communities who had helped them almost thirty years ago. They could set up a new sensor and shield system. It was ambitious and difficult and would require immense cooperation from people who knew no reason to trust each other.

Sooner or later someone would have to negotiate with the Raiders.

No one knew how much time they had but if they failed there would be gaps and sooner or later Ea’s luck would run out.

The original plan had been for both of his parents to travel while he stayed in HarborTown but Galen volunteered himself to go with his father.

_The Circles would trust Mama more, right?_ She was a known…and slightly feared….quantity on the Shore. He was a new face on the Islands, and that might be helpful there rather than a liability to be overcome here.

He’d expected a bigger argument, been braced for it actually, but it hadn’t really come. Papa had agreed and after a few skirmishes even Mama had come around.

Conn took them to Hand, on the Inner Islands, and they worked their way around, island hopping on borrowed boats from there, working their way out.

He watched his father carefully, mostly listening at first. Then, over the course of weeks he realized Papa had started holding back at times, letting Galen take “point” in some situations despite his youth, maybe because of it.

_He was less intimidating…..not “Fallen,” or at least not in the same way that Papa was._

When they got to Blue Island Papa went on with the Far Islanders because his relationship with them was years in the building and he knew a lot more about what danger and opportunity would look like when they found it.

“What will I do here?” he asked, half nervous.

“You are in field,” his father said quietly. “You set your own parameters. You know what we need to do here. Act on your own authority. We’ll rendezvous in fourteen days. If there’s no word, even if everything else seems normal don’t wait for me more than two weeks past the meet date. Find a boat and get back to your mother. There’s a plan for if I’m….out of commission… she knows it.”
Papa took off the ear cuff, Portia’s link and held it out to him. “You should take this. Just in case.”

Galen turned it over in his hand, but then handed it back. He shook his head. “Mama might not like
that, he said, trying to make light of it.

You couldn’t know whose voice you’d hear, but he was pretty sure he knew whose he would. He
wasn’t ready.

His father turned toward the waiting boat, but then seemed to think better of it and came back to give
Galen a long hug.

"Te amo, hijo" he said, kissing him on the forehead like he was a little boy again.

"Yo también te quiero, papá."

After that Galen was on his own authority.

The People on the Islands had a tough reputation for flinty close-mindedness, but he’d found himself
listened to, suspiciously at times, but with respect. It was heady in a strange way, nobody knew him
here, he had to depend on his own wits.

The tattoo was an impulse, maybe a calculated one but he’d honestly expected the man to say no.

Certainly the beautiful and utterly businesslike woman who’d ferried him over to Palm Harbor had
thought so too. He had the impression she’d only taken him up to the Marker’s house because she
half-wanted to see some pushy stranger youth tossed off a dock.

Old Tano had snarled but Galen kept his voice quiet and his tone polite. Eventually the man had
come down the wooden steps to the path and, without the permission or any of the preliminaries
most Islanders used for physical contact, grabbed his arm. It took everything Galen had not to react.
He sensed this was part of some kind of test.

The man’s fingers were incredibly strong and felt Galen’s forearm and elbow all the way up to the
shoulder, appraisingly as if he were judging the firmness of a sailfish fillet at market, laid a hand on
the side of his neck and tapped him on the chest with a flat palm.

Eldest Sister came to his mind at once. “Sir,” he thought, “You are damned lucky I grew up with
Mems.”

Honored Tano looked Galen over with what seemed like disapproval, then asked, ‘Where are you
from?’

“Inland.” he answered, lying would be bad, he knew,” The Upland. Nexa.” He was sure the man
had never heard of it, but he found he wanted to say it out loud.

“Why do you want this, stranger’s son?”
How could he lie when he wasn’t quite sure what the truth was?

“There are places I need to go. I think….I hope this will help me on my way.”

Tano had grunted and turned away. Galen thought he was being dismissed, but the man called over his shoulder, “Get up here then, traveller! Not alone though, she will have to sit with you!”

The boat woman had looked startled, but she went with him up to the porch.

Ea’s truth if he’d had any inkling how much the damned thing was going hurt he might have thought twice.

The young Voyager woman had brought him water and told him….trusted him with…. on impulse maybe…. a story he still thought about often, of her mother who couldn’t or wouldn’t change who she was.

In a weird way many of the people he met there had reminded him of Portia, which was nuts, but they were logical, by their own lights, loyal and determined, a little proud, even prickly but willing to adapt. She’d been curiously pleased when he told her that later.

He’d also been seized by an impulse before he left to ask the woman, Lina, if he could kiss her, but that one he hadn’t acted on. What if he offended her after she’d been so decent to him? Besides, his right arm had been tied to a board and bleeding and he absolutely didn’t own his own boat. Probably not an attractive combination.

Still, he thought about that sometimes too.

Papa came back, a little late but with his mission a success. He was pleased by Galen’s report but curiously pissed off about the tattoo.

By the time they reached Harbortown, the scabs were peeling off and he could see what he had, as the man said, set himself to live the rest of his life around.

It was a black bird, both wings spread wide. Which way it looked depended on which way he held out his hand.

All right, he thought. I can live with this.
He went over to see Dora at her mother’s house and she handed him a mug of black tea at the door.

”Tea?” he’d said, laughing.

“Galen,” she told him, “I was half blind for a week, you and I need to take a vow to drink nothing
but tea together for the next five years.”

She was taking her boat to RiverTown. “I need to sail,” she told him, “and I need to get away for a
while.”

Toma wasn’t happy about it but Mama had talked to her and she agreed in the end. A relay station
there was ready to go online and Dora being the point person made sense. Dex was down there
already but he couldn’t do it by himself and besides, Dora had more experience with Portia and the
recent equipment.

_She was also the second-best distance shot from that “class” of his age-mates that Papa had trained,_ Galen thought, _but didn’t point out._

She set out the morning before they did and before she said goodbye, she put something in Galen’s
hand. It was an irregularly shaped rock, a rounded chunk of golden sandstone.

“I don’t know if it’s okay for someone else to give it to you,” she said, uncertainly, “I found it out on
the Point, at the harbor side beach, where they have the dances.”

Then they went home to Nexa after almost a half year away. He was a little afraid he’d feel like a
stranger and a little afraid he wouldn’t.

When he came to visit the Sisters he found that there was a little child staying with them, her name
was Ema. He had taken her small hand in Greeting but must have looked at Eldest Sister Tovah with
something like alarm as he did so, because she burst out laughing. “Do not worry yourself, dear
Galen,” she said, “We would be poor weavers indeed if we did not at least give thought to the next
thread while we still have the last one in hand.”

_Down in Harbortown, before they left, Youngest Lady Olwen had introduced them to a brown-
haired, quick-smiling little girl named Neave who was living with them now. Eldest Perrin had
broken a shoulder in the attack on HarborTown two years before and seemed far more frail since.
The Circles were always ready._

It was a calm before a storm maybe….or the eye of a typhoon.
He laid the stone in the garden, worked with Kemmi, rebuilt his village on the construction crew and tried to be ready for what came next without worrying about it.

Kemmi and Fox took off for the pond. Galen promised to join them later but wanted to talk to Portia alone for a few minutes first about an idea he had about the Coastal sensors. He wanted to look at a few maps before he went to his parents with any suggestions.

Climbing into her second heart level from the nearly-completed stair, he found her standing in the center of the room as a young man with a shaved head, short beard and a curving wrist tattoo….

Malin, Assistant Flight Station Communications.

“We’re almost finished out there, Portia.”

“I know that,” she said, “I look forward to the lack of hammering. Will the…”

Suddenly the young man’s head lifted and in that same instant he was now standing by the terminal table.

“Galen! I have a signal.”

“What?” he dropped his bag and ran to the nearest data pad, grabbing a headset. “Is it a ship?”

“No, a communications signal…it’s, oh, that’s nice work. Clever, very clever.”

“Portia! Is it..?”

“Resistance. Yes. I think so. I’m putting it up. I can feed back on the trail but I have to do it with in 70 seconds to maintain the same level of security. Your parents are not linked. You are the most senior person on comm now.”

Conn, Dex, Mara? How was this happening?

The words lit up in front of him.

**…hatchling…uncle….wrestle…..heart…..castle…unbound….sole….know**
Kayly.

“I think…” oh fucking Force…”It’s Kayly.”

“Galen, we have 50 seconds.”

He closed his eyes.

“sight….storm….free….hatch….words….rat….chair” he said, ripping off the headset like it burned him. "Portia, link a secure drop site to this if you can!”

Portia nodded.

“Message sent and received. Jyn and Cassian are on the way Galen,. They should be here in less than two minutes.”
Cold Harbor/Part 3

Chapter Summary

Jyn and her party continue on to face the First Order "fall" in the North, eventually reaching the coast to meet with the people of Cold Harbor. Other incursions must be happening elsewhere.

Yes, I have multiple branches of a story-within-a-story.

She reviews a mental list of informational points with regard to the First Order and its rise, as seen by former Alliance Operation "Lighthouse", as well as their situation on Ea.

Lina officially joins the band.

Chapter Notes

I feel vindicated by many parts of TLJ

Arrghh!!!! Bedeviled by posting problems today. Thank you to all those who saved me from humiliation in front of the whole digital world by telling me this had gotten posted to the wrong fiction....it was only a matter of time. I am so embarrassed :{

Also my formatting and changes keep getting stripped when I try to post. Sorry! If it was gibberish before check back....it may be better formatted gibberish

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

This Far Trader must be very, very good at what she did.

It annoyed her that she’d gotten so lazy in her thinking. Jyn realized quickly that she’d fallen into a Northerners habit of always associating the Islanders with the temperate and tropical weather of the main archipelagos. She should not have been so surprised to find a woman from Blue here, they traded everywhere. The remarkable part of it was that she would take this on, so far from home, for a community not her own.

Also that she was so young and so serious.
The sturdy little boat dodged the chunks of ice cannily and the dark-haired girl manned the tiller solo, occasionally calling orders out. When the rest of them bundled up to sleep under the ledge that was the only shelter, she had sailed alone.

It was after dawn ended that first long cold night that she finally quizzed everyone on who could do what.

Old Nan knew boats well enough it seemed, at least the sturdy fishing boats of Gate Harbor.

Mara could and would climb anything although she'd never been in a boat you didn't move by paddling an oar before in her life, ever.

"Quite frankly, I am damn proud of myself for only throwing up twice,” she said with a wide smile.

"Can you manage a boat Jyn Erso?" The dark-eyed girl asked her.

Years ago Saw had taken her along on a short mission to pass specialized explosives to a Gungan radical cell on the far side of Naboo. She couldn’t have been more than twelve but they’d let her pilot the submarine, which had been quite a rush. Probably not the same thing though, right?

Macha had first taken her out in one of those little round boats the Ladies used to go out to the Islands. Their advantage was that they could go in very shallow water and land almost anywhere if you knew what you were doing. Their disadvantage was that they tipped over easily if you didn't. She took a lot of baths in the Harbor that summer but she'd eventually gotten the hang of it.

Fuck this water was rough though, the Harbor had been smooth as glass in comparison.

“Yes and no, but just show me what to do and I'll do it," Jyn said. The young woman sighed.

In the end Nan had kept an eye to the sail and, after Lina tied off the tiller with rope, Jyn was assigned to babysit it so that the Trader could get a few hours much-needed rest.

"What do I do?" Mara asked.

"Climb the mast if there’s trouble with the sails and neither of the other aunties feels up to it," Lina from Blue said, fastening herself into a bag and sliding under the ledge.
I don't know kid, Jyn thought, you might be surprised at some of the things I've climbed.

"If anything comes loose, just make sure you tie it back exactly the same way it was," Lina said as her head disappeared into the sleeping bag with the exhausted resignation of a woman willing to risk possible death at sea for a few hours rest.

Jyn could sympathize.

The winds were with them, it seemed, and the boat was booking along at a brisk clip.

She knew this because Portia was giving her tracking information.

"Ea’s on our side. We’re making good time." Nan-from-Gate said.

Jyn sat, with her back to Ea’s cold and helpful wind.

"You are a Blackbird?" The older woman asked, loosening the hood-strings on her sealskin coat.

"I suppose so," Jyn said, "that name does get tossed around a lot."

"Well," Nan said, as if they were chatting at a market pub, "I've been a lot of things in my life, more than most people I suppose, a Fisher, a Hunter, an Otter...."

"That's a colloquial term for a person who traps furs on the Northern Rivers," Portia informed her.

We talked about how you are not going to do this while I am talking to people, right? Jyn thought.

"....and a Snow Hare...

"Another local term in the Far North for an overland messenger or courier."

".....but Blackbird must be a helluva job. You must get to pretty much see it all.”
The Gate woman pointed up with a gloved forefinger, then waved her flat palm in a horizontal circle. “The long view, eh?”

Jyn had to laugh.

“Yeah,” she said, “probably more than is good for me.”

“Ha!” Nan slapped her shoulder, “That’s the spirit.”

Jen glanced up to the bow, where Mara was shaking her head around to see how many ways the icy wind could part her fur and laughing.

*I love this crazy planet.*

“*Jyn,*” it was Portia. Saw’s voice in her head, even after all this time made her sit up straighter. “Your destination should still be passable with the time you’re making. Tova says “the Pattern is still being set” whatever that means. The enemy are staying within the perimeter they’ve set up. So far I’m seeing six troopers and a number of those poor wretched droids. So far they think my jamming is just intermittent magnetic interference, but that facade’s going to be impossible to maintain once they get this vile junk operational.”

“Cassian?” Jyn whispered. “Galen?”

“*Cassian has put Guardian down at the equatorial line. The Cetaceans are getting ready to tow him into position. Galen is no longer at the Coastal Station. He, and the others have moved out toward the coordinates so I’ll only have intermittent visuals until they can link in. I’m just reminding you again that if I think I am being scanned I will go dark to everyone but you so if I tell you I have no updates about them remain calm.*”

*Portía, I hate to disappoint you but that is probably not going to happen.*

“*Fine,*” she whispered.

She slipped her hand hand inside the otter-wool coat lined with salvaged thermal fabric and found her mother’s crystal with gloved fingers.

*Let this work. Protect my son. Please. If anything happens to Cassian make sure it happens to me*
As ever she wasn’t sure who she was asking. As ever it didn’t matter.

“Tell him I love him.”

“I have. He says he loves you too.”

“Hey,” Nan was asking, “Are you talking to yourself or me?”

Mara had come back from the bow and was shaking ice crystals off her crazy head.

“No,” she told the old woman, before Jyn could answer, “she’s probably just talking to the ghost in her earring. Good morning, Ancient Portia!”

Oh great. Nan-from-Gate would probably be fine with this but she’d have to put some thought into how she put it to the Far Trader.

Jyn made lists in her head.

Things they had learned about the so called “First Order” before and since the Fire, in no particular sequence:

- Getting invaded by them made getting invaded by the Empire look like a garden party. The had no interest in even one-sided political alliances. Every planet they took they took as if it were Kashyyk. Pillage, kidnap, murder. On to the next. There were a lot of small semi-settled or aboriginally populated planets out here…like Ea. They took what they wanted and there was no one out here to stop them.

- They had made firm alliance with the Imperial Remnant in the Core Worlds and Expansion Regions, to the point that the IR had unquestioningly given over all their hidden ships, tech and personnel to them. Massive amounts of armament that had been mothballed for decades or
built and concealed.

_The New Republic so-called treaty “verification” had been corrupt or stupid or both, but they had known that for years. Their warnings had been unheard or deliberately concealed._

- That said, it was not a happy arranged marriage. Some of said personnel…especially the now elderly ex-Imperial Commanders and even some of those co-opted from the IR worlds proto-Fascist security forces…. were NOT happy.

_According to down-low chatter Portia was finding, there were whispers to the effect that many seemed to regard their new masters in the FO command structure as combat- inexperienced whack-jobs. The phrase “mentally unstable adolescents” appeared in one abruptly cut off private message._

- Stars were missing, or rather so diminished and altered in spectrum signature as to be unrecognizable.

Portia did a thing when she told them this that she had never done again after the first time Jyn and Cassian had entered her tower almost thirty years ago. She appeared as a crowd. Dozens and dozens of wafer-thin images of her long-lost organics, men, women and children, had suddenly appeared in all of her levels saying the same thing.

“They are eating them, mining them for fuel. They have compromised a number beyond recovery, causing collapse. Some of the systems clearly had…”

“Portia, Portia,” Cassian had said, gently…._They had been the only people in the tower at the time, thank heaven… “Portia, please stop. This makes it more difficult.”_ The many faces turned simultaneously toward him for a moment as if uncomprehending, then all but one of them, a handsome middle-aged man with thick grey hair…_she had shown him many times before. Paul, Coordinator of Operational Management…..vanished._

“I am sorry,” she said.

- They held the material trappings of the old Empire in almost worshipful esteem. It was the same aesthetic right down to the paint and carpet colors. High-gloss black, stark white, blood red, chrome and grey. The uniforms and insignia were slavishly copied even the uniforms…_Cassian shivered as if cold._

"Fuck,” Galen said once looking at a piloted image of a propaganda vid. “Would a little blue or yellow KILL these people?“

- The history of the Empire and the Civil War had been been re-written for them, just as it had
in the old Imperial hold-outs. Out here though, on the dozens of bases and worlds that the First Order controlled, they went way beyond the speciesist/ahistorical/revisionist/authoritarian/dystopian blah blah blah that the Remnant had been peddling for years. First Order stuff was all that but with an extra helping of bat-crazy and religious sprinkles. Palpatine was a wise and strong semi-divine leader who had presided over a Golden Age. Vader a warrior saint. The DeathStar had been the righteous hand of some divine and cleansing fire of Order and the destruction of Alderaan…and other nameless worlds being hammered for target-practice in all their weapons development…was a cleansing sacrifice.

It was like those maniacs walled up in Jakku.

- They had re-built and reclaimed Imperial armament and fleets of ships as if that was also a religious cause. Dreadnaughts, Destroyers, Wardhips. Bigger better and shinier but still with the recognizable Imperial profile and design. Portia actually groaned.

And, holy hell, the ships.

They were busy little ground squirrels on stimulants about that. Either Palpatine…or one of those long rumored fifth column cadres who were supposedly planning coups against him that never came off…had secretly hidden staggering amounts of manufacturing and development tech off the edge of the charts in those abandoned kyber mining rigs, or they had co-opted somebody else’s, or both.

Portia had brought them a series of data slices over several days five years ago that had sent her running upstairs to hear Cassian let loose a stream of uncharacteristic Festan obscenities about somebody named Thrawn and the Chiss Defense Fleet.

She knew that once upon a time he had had a bitter bomb-throwing radical Separatist abuela and she had a feeling she had just heard her channelled.

It tore at him inside. People he knew and cared about had died or worse thirty ago to uncover clues that might have prevented this but it had never been followed up on. The New Republic had dropped the ball.

- They had forces personnel, stormtroopers, in considerable numbers.

Where were they getting them? They would only take full-on Core-descended humans, of fucking course. Cloning again? Maybe, but nowhere Portia could find. Conscription in IR controlled territories? They seemed to be taking children…actual children of from ten to sixteen..as prisoners or “tribute”/protection payment from some worlds. Maybe some sick combination of the three?
The sole prisoner they’d taken alive, "miserable one-handed bastard" as Jyn liked to think of him, who’d been taken at Green River seven years ago had been an IR conscript from Mygeeto. If he had a name he either didn’t know it anymore or wouldn’t tell them. DB-13, he said so scared of the Memsa that he could only stutter. It was all they could do to keep the Mems at Green from tearing him limb from limb. In the end Cassian had dragged Deeb’s traumatized eighteen-at-best ass to the only people he felt were qualified to advise. Dex’s parents were still watching him on their farm. She didn’t know what that meant and she didn’t care. He’d put a gun to the head of the only child of the women formerly known as TH-411 and EM-916. She trusted either of them to kill him in heartbeat if he blinked wrong.

- They were utterly and dedicatedly building “super-weapons.” In a way it was part of their cultish devotion to the dead Empire. Recreating the glorious “Deathstar” was a given, right? No greater power than that to destroy worlds and drain stars?

\[
\text{Papa, oh Papa. I used to pray that the dead could somehow see the living, like Chirutt’s blessed busybody ass seems to be doing, but I pray you don’t, I pray it’s over for you that you are free of it all.}
\]

- They must have saved every archive reference, or somehow maybe copies of the actual data files ....maybe....please let it be just the names off the folders…. to bless their new arsenal.

\[
\text{That was the part that pushed the air out of her lungs.}
\]

\[
\text{Cassian had actually turned the data pad away from her.}
\]

\[
\text{“Go downstairs,” he’d said, ashen-faced, “We should check on what Revi and Beri are up to.”}
\]

\[
\text{What? No, no Captain Andor, none of that, she’d thought, we’ve come too far to break the rules now...}
\]

\[
\text{“Kayly?” she asked, her own voice sounding strange to her.}
\]

\[
\text{“Oh no,” he’d said, “No. it's not Kayly. Only project staffing allocations...probably administrative...Portia’s going through it now.”}
\]

\[
\text{If it wasn’t bad news about Kayly she could take it.}
\]

\[
\text{“Give it up, soldier.” She took the pad from his hand.}
\]
Things went empty for a moment, but he didn’t let them stay that way.

He pulled her in, to bury her face against his shoulder. “I’m here,” he said, “We’re here.”

He had fallen but he had gotten back up. They had both been burned but they had not broken. The next chance and the next and the one after that...

You forgot about “Stardust” you sons of bitches.

After a few hours, the sleeping bag untied itself and the Far Trader girl crawled out like a heavily dressed butterfly.

“Look,” Nan said, “We’re still alive.”

“Mmmm,” Lina said. She trusted but clearly verified. She had a ring of something that looked like bone on a cord around her neck and checked the sun with that. Then moved around, shook some of the lines on the sail and untied the tiller.

“I swear,” Jyn said, I never touched it.”
The girl smiled a little and took her seat again.

Jyn, reached down under the sides again to reassure herself that that the explosives, rifle and cable were all still there.

“That’s Mink,” Lina said, waiving her hand toward a white and grey section of the coast ahead of them. “It could be a little tricky getting in, but we made good time.”

“Oh,” Portia said in her ear, “This is all very beautiful. I like boats. You should definitely put your mittens back on though. The temperature is dropping.”

Black and cream-colored shapes appeared in the water off their starboard.

“Look,” Mara said, “The Bequa are coming back. The same ones or others.”

A few hours later they mad maneuvered around the cracked ice flows starting to clog the little cove, and saw people there on a stone “marina”-like landing, clustered by small pine sheds and buildings, several with smoke coming out of pipe-metal chimneys on their peaked roofs. Ropes were thrown and a few boards laid down as a slippery and dangerous gangway.

Some men in sealskin coats and fur hoods had placed hoists from sets of carved cedar beams fixed in the stone to a lift Lina’s boat up out of the water and drag it on fresh-cut rollers into a shed there.

“Far Trader,” they called, “You must leave now, if you want your boat to have a chance to make it to the open sea. The Sisters say we will be iced over before the large moon rises. Otherwise we will pull you out and keep it safe with ours.”

Nan had already climbed out and was looking around with an expression of near wonder on her face. Mara was unloading.

Jyn looked at the girl from Blue. “You’ve done what you said you would do Lina Far-Trader. Thank you.”

She did not hold her hand out. She knew that might not be proper.
The dark-eyed woman pulled her scarf down from her mouth and took a breath, then coughed with the cold of it and laughed at herself.

“I’ll come along with you,” Lina said, “In for a day, in for a season” as we say.”

She looked over at the hooded people. "Lift her out,” she called to the Mink boatmen, “and don’t scratch her hull or I will take a gutting knife to your fish-oiled hides.”

They smiled like this was a common and courteous conversation.

A few hours later, reasonably….ok comparatively…. warm and fed, Jyn got to hear the story of what had happened at the little village on the Ice.

Chapter End Notes

Puzzling over how I hope to eventually take up linking some events w/ the survivors of Rogue One and their family (found and otherwise) to events of TFA....even more puzzling about how it will all work with the large and fluffy continuity issues between TFA and TLJ.

Boy, I bet JJ Abrams wants to egg Rian Johnson's house over the knot he's left him to untie for the next chapter.

This is fan fiction, we do what we want!
Chapter Summary

Galen Andor and Dex (the son of the women formerly known as TH411 and MS916) travel up the Green River to the plains to set up their part of Ea's defense against a First Order intrusion.

The second generation of The Alliance gets ready to fight the only way they can, with strategies their elders may have adapted from a previous war.

Chapter Notes

Well, we got some plot building here.

This is concurrent with events in "Cold Harbor 1-3."

"Deeb" is the former DB13, the sole surviving FO storm trooper from the attack in RiverTown whose hand got bitten off by an enraged Mem grandma.

(in Chap. 83/Market Day of "Over the Edge"......because, yeah, I have to footnote myself now)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They'd stayed along the edge of the tree line for the first several kilometers, then mostly followed the river while keeping under the newly green canopy. Three humans and one Taun. It had been pretty dry for the last couple weeks so they were making good time over firm ground. The only thing making a sound was the birds and the wind.

"What's it like out there?" he asked finally. Not one of the four of them had said a word or slowed the pace for a long time and, frankly, the tension was getting to him. He needed to talk.

"What?" Galen said, over his shoulder, half startled, "Where?"
Ok, he could be forgiven for taking it as random. It had been almost two hours ago that they'd stopped for water and Merla had asked a question about where he'd been traveling in the winter.

"The Islands," Dex clarified, "you've been out there a lot more than the rest of us land-lovers. What's it like?"

"That's kind of a broad question. Care to narrow it down?" Snappish.

"Ooooh....Let out a little slack on that line, kid," Bill used to say, when Galen talked like that, "there's only so much smart-ass it'll haul in."

Galen had been the "kid", or "Kayly's little brother" in everybody's mind once upon a time. When he was little you could piss him off mightily entertainingly by calling him either to his face. Even after he'd gotten taller than Bill, and most of the other human kids except Dex, he'd still bristled easily. Not so much anymore.

"You're both way younger than me and way smaller, you runts," Dex used to remind them constantly, for all the good it did, in a vain attempt to keep them in line back in the days when he'd started coming up to Nexa in the winters for lessons and was practically babysitting them.

Dex thought about saying it now, but he didn't.

He let it pass. Stupid time to start a conversation anyway. They were all tense, Andor probably most of all.

"Sorry," Galen apologized, almost immediately, as if sensing what Dex was thinking.

"Don't worry about it."

"No. I didn't mean to snap. I was just thinking about some stuff I was setting up out there, right before we got the call for this." He even looked back at Dex with half of a smile.

"The short answer is, it's perfect weather and absolutely beautiful 80% of the time."

"What about the other twenty percent?"

"Another 18.5 percent of it involves the ocean actively trying to kill you."

Dex grinned, they were running old Portia jokes now "And the 1.5 remainder?"

"That would be the Islanders actively trying to kill you." Galen smiled back, slowing a little at last.

"The Islands is all different, that much I know," Bo said, coming up from behind him, "there's the Coast, and the Inner and the Far. Coast ain't so far off from any other Fishers, but Far.....it's weird out there. Those people are really DIFFERENT."

Galen shook his head but said only, "Not so much as you tell yourself."

Truth told, he was the only one of them who'd ever been out to any of the Far Islands two years back or so, with his dad.

"So, where were you? What were you up to there this last time?" Dex asked.
"I just took a straight trip out from HarborTown to Blue," he said, "I bought a boat. It's supposed to be ready for me to claim at the end of summer."

Assuming the end of summer ever came.

"Your own boat?" Dex whistled.

"Damn it! Galen. That's not fair. Now you're gonna get all the action you can handle, hell I might marry you myself" Bo said. They all laughed. Even Serla bringing up the rear huffed a chuckle.

This felt more like old times. Except that he was twenty six and Galen was something like, nineteen or twenty and Bill was dead. They were soldiers now and somehow Galen was the leader.

They'd come to a rise and there was a place up ahead where the tree broke a little. Galen raised a hand. "Hold up," he said and checked with the binoculars.

This must be close to the place the Taun had set as a cover for them. The trail was veering up onto the bluffs ahead.

From there it ought to be possible to get eyes on the damn thing.

He'd been staying up at his parents' place when the carrier bird Dora sent with the message found him. He really wished he hadn't been.

Not that not getting to say goodbye wouldn't have been awful if something bad actually happened, if this was really it or something but ...damn.... the look on Mom's face when the blue-grey dove came to his hand and he took the curled paper out and let it go again with the ring on it's slender leg turned back up for "yes" had been hard to see.

That idiot Deeb being there didn't help either.

He'd sought Dex out, found him behind the barn, when he doubled back around to get one last thing on his way out.

"Are they here?" he'd asked, whispering.

Not here like, in this barn here, you stupid fuck, he'd wanted to say. Why are you whispering?
Instead he'd just put the strong arm on the ex-trooper's shoulder. "I'm going because I'm on the Watch, that's all you need to know."

At one point maybe Deeb could have been classified as a prisoner-of-war, whatever that would have meant, but it wasn't like they had to watch him or anything. By himself, out of the armor they shelled off him while Nebbie tourniqueted his arm to stop him bleeding out, he obviously wasn't going anywhere. He'd stopped seeming like a threat long ago.

The guy was probably three or four years older than Dex, maybe, probably. Deeb didn't actually seem to know. He had his own little house at the edge of the meadow now' which they'd given him the lumber for and he'd eventually managed to build with Mom Ems' help. He came down to the house for meals maybe two or three times a week, and even helped with the trees and chores since the Mems had gotten him that wooden hand and rigged a shoulder harness that let him open and close it. Since Dex lived in RiverTown now, mostly, Deeb was even kind of helpful with the goats. The rest of the time though, the guy was a pretty much a hermit with more than one or two pegs loose. He never ever left the farm.

"Don't," the pathetic bastard repeated hoarsely, shaky but undeterred. "You can't beat them. You can't.... you don't know the First Order....what they can do...."

Don't I? Don't I, really?

"Listen to me, Deeb," Dex had to keep his voice low, the last thing he needed was to get Mom out here and see her cry again. He got close so he could loom over the shorter man and grabbed him firmly by the shirt. "Listen very carefully, if you babble any of this doomsday shit in front of my mothers right now I will come back here and break every bone in your body."

"Dex!" Momma had come back around from the duck pen, dragging an apple sack. "That's enough!"

He let go, but Deeb kept talking.

"We need to run, ma'am," the man turned toward Dex's mother, voice rising pleadingly, "There's a got to be a ship somewhere. These Rebels have to have one. We need to get on it. We need to get away, there is no fighting the First Order, they can't be..."

"Enough!" Momma said, "stop it Deeb!"

He really hadn't gotten this hysterical since the very first days, when he'd been so scared of everything that moved or made a noise that Momma had actually punched him in the head once to stop him running outside in a lightning storm.
She walked up now and pulled him away from Dex.

"Let him go, son," she said and kissed the poor bastard on the forehead, like she used to do to him when he was little.

"That's what they told us," she said, quietly. "They lied to us and they lied to you."

The guy was crying.

"Go up to the fucking house and tell Ems I'm getting more eggs for dinner. She thinks this one left already so don't tell her any different. We'll talk later."

Deeb walked back around toward the house, still shaking but steadier.

"Dex," she said, "I thought you left fifteen minutes ago. Did you forget something? Do you have your medicine?"

_The Sisters had told them that he wasn't allergic to lizard venoms the way his dad had been, but they were phobic about it so they'd always made him carry medicine for it anyway._

"No, Momma," he lied, "I forgot my hat is all, and I didn't want to have to say goodbye all over again."

_He'd come back for the blaster he kept in his old workroom above the barn of course._

They'd moved the four guns that Cassian gave them out of the house a few years back when Deeb moved onto the property. As far as he knew, Mom still kept them under the floorboards in the loft where their bed was. There was a pistol, a mid-sized one and that shiny assault rifle. The pistol he'd taken down to RiverTown with him, but that one Dora should keep, just in case. He had another extra rifle of his own here though, the one that Jyn had taught him how to rebuild from parts one winter after that nasty incident with the lizard, and he figured it would be a good idea to fetch it from its hiding place. More firepower just seemed like a good idea.

"Your hat, eh..?" she said.

"It's ok," he said, "I'll get by without it." He gave her a kiss on the cheek, "I'd better get going."

"How many times do I have to tell you kid?" She said, "You are like your dad. The worst bullshitter ever born."

She tossed the apple sack at his feet. "Take the good rifle, that thing you made is crap."

He had told them it was just a regular trip out to check a debris fall...he'd lied, in a word...Dora's message had read: _Three strikes. Manned. P. reads all up. U meet Galen at Green y/n?_

Portia had let a First Order Mission team land.

_When you said it like that it was almost too scary to stand up under._
Six months ago, Portia had started letting the old Imperial beacon finally wink out, let herself go blind except for her old satellites and mostly mute to just to bait them in.

It was a horrible risk, but they had some new tech that she hadn't gotten a good look at yet, and were jumping in and out of FTL sometimes before she could even catch them. She only missed one in a thousand but it meant that sooner or later they'd get a ship in, somehow, some way.

Like they had at RiverTown seven years ago.

Like they had when they burned Nexa and HarborTown.

Portia had spent decades convincing everybody from the Old Empire, to the New Republic to whoever these dicks were that Ea was a tiny resourceless rock, too swept by solar flares and the noisy decay of old hyperspace corridors to even be worth taking over. Just enough of a hazard to navigation that they'd want to avoid it but not so bad that they just blast it out of the way. A good platform for a beacon, maybe. That's what the fire a few years back had been about, they'd learned, just a couple of construction ships sent in to clear space and set down some new beacons.

Ea love the old ghost, she'd jammed their signals and made the loss of three ships look like a friendly fire accident, pilot error combined with a bad nav computer interference, but even the stupidest predator lizard wouldn't keep falling for the same trick forever. So they come up with a kind of plan.

They'd finally made contact with the Resistance way over yonder and while they'd passed on some useful bad news they were too few and too far away to help yet or maybe ever. Their word was that fuckers were on the move and Ea probably couldn't hide much longer. What they really wanted though was the New Republic. Like Blues after a fat goat, or maybe like some drunk Fisher who thought you'd insulted their mother. Everybody else was just frogs to be stepped on on the way.

The Circles, Ea's Alliance leaders, Portia, even the Bequa agreed. Somehow, somebody had even talked the Far Islanders into it, although he expected that had taken some fancy poetry.

The plan was to take a hit you could survive, to avoid one you couldn't, like putting out hollowed stumps out to draw in paper hornets, letting them build a nest in the orchard so fire bees wouldn't have a chance to move in instead.

Or maybe more like Galen grabbing that little Mem kid and lying down in fire so the explosion would pass over him.

If they set up an automated nav station on a planet they were convinced was worthless for anything else, they might just call it a good day's work and move on to murdering somebody else.

Once they were gone Portia could pirate their machinery to watch them, and maybe even find some way to hurt them.

Best case scenario would have been one fall site somewhere a good ways off. Out on the Far oceans, or something and it would hopefully be totally machines/droids/whatever they called them, sent in to set it up. Something Portia could turn the lights on or off of on her own, with minimum help from the
non-ghost part of their army.

_Looked like it hadn't happened that way. As Cassian would say, they were going to have to go with Plan B._

Chapter End Notes

Over my head with plot threads and ambition, yes. I'm praying this holds together even slightly, oh my.
Cold Harbor/Part 4

Chapter Summary

Old Kera tells the story of the First Order's incursion in the North. Jyn explains the plan to the people gathered at Cold Harbor.

Chapter Notes

The tripartite plot progresses.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Falls were not strangers in the Far North, although decades might pass between them and then a score fall in one year.

In her youth the old people used to take a fiery strike as a good omen. Watchers would be set around straight away as soon as it was located. The Sisters would be called and after things cooled down they would look at it carefully and cast a Pattern. Whatever they found safe could be mined and the contents shared out amongst the village. There were stories further south and on the coast about falls that came down with live persons or monsters inside them, but to people in the Far North those were wild fireside tales. Everybody loved a wild fireside tale of course but except for the occasional burned or broken corpse... *always removed and disposed of respectfully after being stripped of anything useful*...such things had never happened here.

*The strangest story Kera had ever heard was how once, many years ago, an old fall was found frozen inside the ice of the Range glacier. It was dug out to reveal a person-shaped object made of silver metal inside. If it had ever really been alive it seemed as if it must be dead by then but,*
according to the story, the Sisters insisted that it be carried out and watched for a very long time before they would finally sanction its being cut up.

Some accounts said it even spoke to people and gave permission that this should be done, but the Sisters would never have either confirmed or denied such a thing. It seemed to Kera sometimes that other worlds must be strange and terrible places.

In Kera’s old age such matters began to change. A Circle from the Mem villages of North Forests had come, almost twenty five years ago, and their own Sisters had gone out to meet them along with the some of the village councillors and returned back with news of a Great Council.

There was war in the stars again... maybe there always was if you listened to and believed those beautiful Far Islander songs...and this time it was coming close. There were Fallen people, named as allies, neither monsters nor ghosts, in the South Uplands. They had come to warn and help, and many Patterns confirmed this beyond question. Called by Ea herself, if you took that sort of view on things. Chief among these people were the ones the Southerners referred to as the Blackbirds. The old alliances from the days of war with the Coastal Raiders were being revived. Beacons were set up and messengers kept prepared to carry news from place to place.

There was trouble on the south Coast and among the Bequa in the sea. A ship flew out. Which was interesting because who knew Ea even still had one? People saw it pass high in the sky with spy glasses, sent by the Circles to go off and fight and then come return again with news.

Her Nona’s middle son’s youngest daughter had seen it, like a shooting star but sailing up and across, not down. She said it was a marvel.

Several quiet years passed, then the number of falls increased again steadily. Small debris mostly but other things too.

A black beetle-like thing half buried itself and hissed in the snow at the edge of the glacier and smoked for days before it burned itself out and was finally deemed safe to approach. A human-tall cylinder shattered on impact on the plain in the darkest part of winter and spilled out scorched white and silver armor and guns...all too broken to use, but desirable as trade south for parts.

Then in early Autumn, a series of small silver spikes came down. Two hunters saw them first and said they were as big around as two hands spread out and two or three meters long. One said that they came down, a hundred or more trailing fire behind, to spear themselves in a perfect Circle a kilometer wide.

By the time a party came out from the camp with the Sisters to look they were gone. Where?

Kera had not gone with the search party of course and could not say for certain what had happened after.

One young female, a sweet girl named Rivka, who was the grandchild of Tessa who had been the great friend of her last-born Hemla, had been the one to run back and bring word to those left at the camp site.
"Do you have children?" She asked the Blackbird woman....she was fairly sure it was a female.

"Yes," Jyn Erso told her. "I have two."

Kera nodded and went on. Her Hemla was another pain, from long ago. The only task left now was to finish her story.

As was their long tradition the village had closed the summer site and were camped while on the move down toward the winter one. The last of the hunters had been circling in, setting their traps as they went. Temsa was a tiny village and had been always been wanderers, moving back and forth along the edges of the glacier and the plains and the valley of the Cold River. They fished and hunted and gathered and it was their great pride they were among the last and freest of Ea's own.

Only the very oldest and very youngest had been in the camp, everyone else had gone up to search or see this strange sight.

Rivka came to tell them that the cooking fires should be re-started and the yurts left in place. They would stay here at least another day. The Sisters were much disturbed by the mystery of the fallen spikes, she said. It looked as if they had buried themselves far down in the earth, even though the hunters swore they had seen them all well above ground even as recently as a week before. A pattern was to be cast then and there to decide the best course and some of the people were even trying to dig one of the spikes up to get a look at it.

"Blackbird-ally, do you know what those spikes were?" Kera asked.

The human woman removed her gloves and held hands out taking her own firmly with Respect for an Elder and the Humble Sharing of Requested Knowledge or Experience. Good manners, despite a certain Upland hesitation. Her hands were pleasant and small as well, not the large clumsy hands of some humans.

"Grandmother, I think they were landing markers. The Enemy tossed them down to set the coordinates so their machines could find the spot they'd scouted from space."

Kera nodded. The setting of traps she understood. "Did we spring anything when we tried to dig?"

She asked.

The Blackbird bowed her head. Their bald expressions were always impossible to read, but her fingers flattened in Grief For A Matter That is Past.

"No," she said. "They were already on their way by then. Nothing you did could have stopped them."

There was comfort in that at least.
She had been out with Nona checking that the coals were still hot in the cooking pits, so that a warm meal could greet the villagers return. Nona's right shoulder gave her great pain since the end of summer and it had come to be accepted that the two of them would work in tandem on any task.

"The Ice Bear's revenge," her brave one would say as they lifted logs, or heavy pots together. In her youth Nona had been the most renowned of Temsa's hunters. A wounded bear had taken to raiding traps and when interrupted had attacked a hunting party. Nona put a tethered spear into its neck and held tight with arm and teeth even as the beast reared up to charge the other trappers. Her shoulder was dislocated but she held long enough for others to end the Bears rage and misery. The injury healed in time with no scars to show except a gap toothed smile as her trophy.

With age though sometimes old wounds return to claim their due. "One heart, two arms," Kera would say, when she saw Nona struggle, "We still have enough for one whole hunter between us."

A rumble shook them as if Ea herself quaked and a hot wind flattened everything.

The far yurts were burning when Kera found herself face down on the packed earth. Some of the little ones were running and crying. Young Rivka was face down some twenty meters away from her, the back sleeve of her jacket burning. She got up onto hands and feet and ran to her then patting out the flames. The hunter had blood upon her nose but her eyes were open, though bewildered. Kera looked about but there was no one else alive save a handful of nurslings weeping and her Nona standing and staring back at the smoke and fire that had leveled the ground for as far as their eyes could see.

"Rivka Sashas-child," Nona shouted above the dying wind, "take these little ones and run for the winter-camp."

Brave Rivka was stunned but only slightly hurt. They gathered the up all the ones who could walk, and put another small one who could not into her arms. They wrapped each in anything that might serve as a blanket and sent them South and East.

"Where is your camp?" one of the humans from Cold Harbor said, "we can send help to them."

"Fourteen kilometers south of the Bent Pine Ridge," Kera told them. "Those that Rivka can save will be there. When you find it take them to the Blue Moss Village. There are good people there who will take them in and give them homes. Temsa is gone."

Of that she would say nothing more. If all three Sisters of a community perish that Circle is closed forever. It can never be brought back.

She told of how she and Nona had tracked around the blackened square. The fires vanished as if they had never been there, except for the smell. In the middle of a scorched plain was now a great cage of black and silver that unfolded itself. Machines rolled into the corners and began to raise up black spikes and large white and black figures in armor came out of a door that opened in the center. They positioned themselves in the corners and more machines began to raise a tower in the middle.
"How many troopers did you see?" The Blackbird asked.

Eight, Kera told her, six in white and two in black. There might have been more inside, but the box itself didn't seem large enough to hold many more.

She drew maps for them of what she had seen and what she remembered of how it had all been placed.

On the outside edge of where their camp had been lay a single unburned skin boat, blown aside. Nona had not been able to lift it, so Kera had dragged it along. The small stream that fed into the Cold River had been frozen before but the heat had sent it in a rush of meltwater down into the channel. Their hope had been to lie down in the boat and let it carry them unseen still down to the main channel. Neither of them had the strength to walk out far enough to get a warning to the Beacon at Cold Crossing and the frigid night was coming. The water had seemed their only path.

"As I tried to push into the channel, two of the white ones appeared tracking through the fire of our camp. They must have seen us and even though they were noisy and clumsy we were too slow," she said bitterly, "One had a gun and fired it... poorly and wide. There was a fishing spear fixed inside the boat and brave Nona threw it... with her one good arm. She struck the murderer in the neck and killed it but the second one had a gun too."

Kera lowered her head and wiped tears from her eyes with the back of her hand, then looked up at Jyn Erso.

"Have you fought these bastards often?"

"I have," the woman said.

"That white plastic looks pretty worthless, Blackbird. A sharp point at any joint cuts right through, it seems to me, and they fall like trees."

The woman nodded and smiled with her square teeth. "It's mostly made to repel blaster fire to the head and chest," she said, "Knees, elbows, ankles and necks are open. If you can get close enough they go down hard. I learned that when I was very young."

Oh, Nona would have liked this one.

"Well," Kera said, "if there were eight before, there are seven now. I can tell you no more."

Within that little shelter were the Blackbird, the humans from Cold Harbor and Gate, the Far Trader and the handsome female from the Northern Forest. Kera was content that they had listened to her.

Taking the Blackbird's cold bare hand she kissed the back of her wrist in Trust for Accomplishment of an Important Task.

"Kill them all," the old hunter of Temsa said, "and remember us."
Her story finished, the old Mem rolled herself in a blanket then and lay down by the stove.

________________________

"We will send people up at first light to look for that young hunter and the children," one of the big-bearded Harbormen said. "And we'll send a someone up to Blue Moss for help."

"Good, Jyn said, "but Mara and I need to get up to this place she's describing within within 24 hours, 48 at the outside. This is an automated Beacon they're setting up."

["Will they understand what you're talking about?" Portia asked.]

Portia, Jyn thought, I'm not one hundred percent sure I even understand what I'm talking about.

"Like a harbor light?" one of the boatmen asked, "the kind a pilot sights to?"

The Cold Harbor men nodded.

["Not exactly" Portia said.]

"Yes," Jyn said. "This region of space is genuinely hinky to find and navigate and, in order to protect ourselves over the years, we've fooled them into thinking it's even trickier than it really is."

"Moon-lighting," Lina said, and the others looked at her curiously. "Or maybe the opposite. Raiders do it. They move light beacons or markers on rough coast or narrow channels so that in fog sailors will think they are in the safe channel but actually strand themselves at speed on a bar or dashing on rocks. It's a way to take stronger ships without weapons or a boat of your own."

["Ok," Portia said, "I take it back. This is actually not a bad analogy."]

"Brilliant," Jyn agreed, "As far as the Enemy knows this system is a natural graveyard of ships, and Ea's only possible use to them is as a place to stick a sign saying "Dangerous Curve Ahead." The last time they tried to do it by burning and leveling Nexa and HarborTown. We drove them off but all we could do was delay them and nudge them toward other sites. The problem is, they are in a hurry now, possibly setting up some big movement of their forces and they are jamming down markers to make sure that they don't lose any on the way." Jyn rubbed the back of her right hand and slipped her glove back on. Even with the stove going and ten people in the shed she felt cold. "We had thought.....hoped.....that it would only be one and we tried to steer them toward the Equatorial Sea, far from any population centers."
All of them looked over at the old Mem, asleep beside the fire.

["Please tell them that the fault was mine," Portia said in Saw's voice, which made it worse.]

"We failed," Jyn told them, "or we did our job too well, and these people paid the price. One beacon is enough but they must believe this place to be so hazardous that they're putting in two back-ups as well. Right now they have come down at three different places on Ea's surface."

"Why here? What harm could a Mem village on the ice-field's edge do them?" Lina asked.

Mara spoke, "They don't know know we are here or see us as not worth bothering with, less than mice..... a mistake they've made before, I hear. They are bigger than us and stronger than us and they eat murder for breakfast. They have come here, to the edge of the Ice, out to the Warm Seas where only the Bequa can see them and to the Tall Grass Plains. We have have teams at each place and if we can fool them we hope to buy safety for Ea, a handful of ships for our own defense, a chance to warn our allies in the stars and revenge for Temsa."

"The only chance we have is to let them think they've succeeded partly," Jyn said, "then we move the moon-lights."

Young Lina was silent, but the Cold people nodded vigorously. Nan from Gate said, "You people know your business well, and this is a plan of the few against the many, which I think most of us old folks can understand. Just checking tho'.....We're still going to kill the people that did this right?"

"Oh yeah," Jyn said, "Part of the plan is also to convince them this little planet is a graveyard for a hell of a lot more than ships. I met some people years ago who gave us a few tips."

Chapter End Notes

Oh my. Science Fiction seems to be happening.
The Central Sea/ Part One

Chapter Summary

All the Blackbirds move into position. With the help of the Bequa, Cassian takes a powered down Guardian out toward the remaining First Order landing site.

On the way, tired and with nothing to do but wait, he thinks about the little they know and much they don't about the ocean-dwellers of Ea, and their recruitment of the Bequa of the Central Seas to the Alliance cause. He also remembers the fate of other ocean peoples in the last war and his boyhood meeting with another old warrior, and lessons learned.

Chapter Notes

anciano = old man

Son muy hermosos. Estoy muy orgulloso = They are so beautiful. I am very proud.

Ella está en el suelo. Se están moviendo hacia el objetivo = She is on the ground. They are moving toward the target.

Ella dice "Vete a la mierda, Captain" = She says "Fuck you, Captain."

Por favor, detengan este, ustedes dos = Please stop this, you two.

Unfortunately there was not a lot that he could do except think while the Bequa towed Guardian toward the landing site. There are only so many times you can clean a blaster.

All the power was shut down except for a battery communications link to Portia and a few of the internal feeds. Conn was sleeping on one of the bench seats down in the “cargo” area.

When he took a glance at the velocity Cassian realized they were moving faster across the water’s
surface than he would have thought. Turning the cameras to get a look at the foaming wake behind them he imagined trying to describe water skiing to the younger man when he woke up.

*Oh, that's lack of sleep, anciano,* he told himself. *You're getting giddy and you'd better get some rest yourself.*

This part of the operation depended totally on the Bequa. Of all the people in the Alliance they'd formed to defend Ea, the people of the seas were the most mysterious to them, even after all these years.

You might expect that the rickety reclaimed technology of this place could have come up with something to bridge the divide between the Bequa and the other peoples of Ea across the last few hundred years, but the answer of the cetaceans seemed to have always been a friendly and firm "no."

The Bequa were different.

Years ago the scans that Portia made from Bodhi's old satellites had let her map the shape of numerous "cities" under the sea. Some were so terrifically deep, or nested at the bottom of thermal canyons, that Portia had trouble even seeing them. Others were less than a hundred meters below the surface. None of them seemed to be so much urban centers as gathering places, or communal structures. Whatever their purpose, ceremonial or religious or something entirely different, the Bequa had built them through all the oceans. Pods might congregate inside one city or another by the thousands, for varying periods of time, months or sometimes a few years, before dispersing. Afterwards no one might return to that site for another decade.

If Portia had learned much about their biology beyond the fact that there were many hundreds of thousands of them and that some of were tremendously long-lived, while others were not, she seemed not to feel at liberty to share the information. The satellites had been placed to watch for enemies, not to spy on friends.

*She liked their architecture, she said. He sensed she also admired their serene independence.*

Portia was deeply grateful to them, having come to believe that in some way the survival of her few hundred organics, the first humans on this world, was due to the intervention of the Bequa.

"Oldest and First" was a way the Circles of Sisters referred to them.

"They were probably level three, even in my youth," Portia said, using her projection of the middle-aged woman with the long braids. "That's why the Anthropological Survey gave them such wide
berth. Aurea lobbied hard for their reclassification. It was one of her constant complaints, I remember. She felt there was unaddressed systemic classification bias toward bipeds and quadrupeds."

They were also, he learned as he had more dealings with the Far Islanders and through them the Bequa of the Far Oceans, the only ones who still somehow remembered her.

Just a few years ago on a boat off of Vision, the furthest settled island, he had had been taken by his guide, a Far Islander named Ki'Reane, normally serene to the point of being annoying. ...the guy even looked like a taller and elaborately tattooed Chirrut... out to meet with one of the Equatorial Bequa.

A day out to sea they had suddenly been surrounded by a spiral of hundreds and hundreds of Bequa, all sizes and colors, surfacing around them.

The pod stilled the water flat as they circled. Even the wind died back and the little catamaran stopped dead.

A very large brown eye, more than a meter across rolled up in the center to look at them, to look at Cassian in particular, it seemed.

"This is one of the Elders," Ki said, awed and clearly more than a little unnerved.

*If these people wanted them dead they would die right here and now without a trace.*

*Cassian had been wearing Portia's link at the time and she had been practically speechless with delight. He knew the whole experience would be colored for whatever remained of his life by hearing his mother's voice saying "Oh Cassian! Son muy hermosos. Estoy muy orgulloso."

The large "elder" rolled then and moved off a little to speak, in a booming voice that carried across the water.

"I see you are not alone here, ally. Do you speak with the lost sister?"

For a moment he thought they must mean Jyn, but Ki had reached up and touched his own elaborate silver earring, then pointed to Cassian's.

"They mean the ghost."

*He wasn't sure what to say. It was always a risk. People reacted to Portia in different ways, or at least the idea of her, depending on their understanding.*

*He and Jyn both knew what happened to any survivors of a Fall in Bequa or Far Islander territory. They took no chances and they took no prisoners.*
The Far Islanders of Vision were the most extreme technophobes. The Red Traders who had arranged this trip for him were clear. He could bring no blasters, not even a solar lamp. No metal or plas of any kind. They searched both himself and Galen right down to the skin on the Trader’s boats before they’d let them come ashore.

Only the earring, which they considered their own work, had passed muster.

Yes,” Cassian said.

"Good," the Bequa Elder answered, and sounded a few rumbling notes like a Kashyyyk basson…approvingly?

"The gift that was given is repaid forward by three times and more."

He had explained to the Bequa of the Harbor at HarborTown the year before, what they were trying to do. What the First Order seemed to be. What they all feared might happen and how the people were trying to prepare.

They were the ones that had told him to speak to the Red Traders and to come out here and talk to whichever of their people appeared.

As they had sailed, Portia had told him that they were over one of the largest Bequa “cities” right here.

In the end, it seemed the people of the Central Sea must have talked about it amongst themselves already because they had made a decision.

The huge Elder said in a voice that shook the boat, “We agree. We will join. Get them where we can reach them Cassian-ally and we will kill them all.”

There was a sound like full-on woodwinds orchestra, then just as suddenly as they’d appeared they were all gone.

The wind returned and the waves picked up.

Jyn had listened, holding his hands, astonished, when he told her about it, her eyes shining.

“I’m so jealous. Take me someday,” she said, “ I want to see them.”

They’d spent the first years here half-afraid of the sound of an ocean, and the nightmares it brought them, now they lived months at a time some years by the shore and on the sea.
He wondered about the cities underneath him now and how so many things had come full circle.

As an operative he'd been worked on the Mid-Rim with few exceptions. He'd certainly never been to the great underwater cities of Mon Cala or even to the oceanic Gungan territories on Naboo.

*Both had been kept under under brutal blockade for most of his youth. The underwater cities of the Gunga were all destroyed, he knew, although the New Republic feeds had told of survivors gone back to try to rebuild.*

His first field mission as part of an undercover team had been on Naboo, though. An Alliance team had gone in an attempt to set up contact lines under the cover of a Corellian shipping company, and a teenage male had been needed to match the cover identity Draven had co-opted. It was one of the very few times he was ever to see General Davits Draven at work in the field, which was educational, and the only cover that ever required him to call one of his commanding officers "Dad," which had just been painfully odd.....for both of them he later suspected.

Terrestrial Naboo had been calendar-beautiful, or at least the suburbs of Theed were. They were as far as he ever got because security in the Capitol had been too tight.

*For the non-Gungan population the Imperial fist had mostly worn a velvet glove on Naboo. As Palpatine's beloved homeworld it was necessary that all look peaceful and serene there. There were no food shortages or riot patrols in the streets, no mass executions.*

People simply disappeared. The ancient animosities between the Gungan and the humans of Naboo had been laid to rest only thirty years before, so it was childishly easy to declare the Gungan's "agitators" and "terrorists." To close off their territories as behind "security borders." Thousands of Gungans were rounded up quietly and imprisoned on island internment camps in the archipelago, well out of sight of the terrestrial Naboo and the state media. It is hard to persuade people to fight an oppression that most of them know exists but never see with their own eyes.

Still, there had been a powerful underground Alliance cell there from the beginning, especially in the cities of the Naboo. The face of the Rebel Alliance became "the Handmaidens." Human women in formal ceremonial white face paint. Some may have originally been the late Padme Amidala's surviving guard, although these women....seen at every flash mob protest or on the pirate broadcasts that disrupted Imperial programming and then vanished.....were almost always too young.

Queen Amidala had been the Liberator and the Unifier of the peoples of Naboo. Officially she had
been assassinated by her Jedi bodyguard but everyone here remembered how she had challenged Palpatine's election just days before her death. Banned copies of her last speech, the one she never lived to give were circulated, broadcast or projected onto public buildings in acts of civil resistance.

*It hadn't really mattered who they really were individually. Everyone understood that they were symbols. He had thought of those women when Galen came home with that tattoo.*

The mission, he remembered, had failed and they were pulled out in the middle of the night.

A tiny middle-aged woman dressed in a Royal Security uniform had taken them into the beautiful countryside, to a cloaked shuttle, and asked them to get three Gungan dissidents out with them. It was all they could do.

The Gungans had been rescued from an Imperial secret prison on the western islands and were all in very rough shape. One had to be carried aboard with an IV fluids line set up to a tiny med-droid in a carry-pack. *Older Gungans suffered organ bleeding if kept out of a water environment for too long, he later learned.*

As Cassian helped another speechless female aboard, the third, a bone-thin male with cracked and bandaged ears embraced the Naboo Resistance woman. They seemed to weep on each other's shoulders but the Gungan said no more than, "Yane, Yane....," before turning away to limp up into the cargo bay they had converted to a make-shift infirmary.

Draven ordered him into the cockpit to start the take-off sequence but before he turned up the ramp the Naboo woman ordered him to stop and reached up to take his chin in her hand like an imperious grandmother.

*He'd remembered his Abuela doing exactly the same thing and wondered for a second if she was going to straighten his collar too.*

Dark eyes looked at him steadily, without a trace of sadness, or anything like it. "How old?" she had asked.

It was a question he heard often in those days.

*A Handmaiden, he thought, one of the real ones.*

*He never confirmed it with Draven afterwards. Perhaps because he had wanted it so much to be true.*

"Fourteen, madam," he had said.

The woman nodded as if accepting some unwelcome but unavoidable fact and let him go to follow his orders.

He heard later that only one of Padme Amidala's original handmaidens had survived to the end of the war. Portia had shown them a vid of Mon Mothma giving an elderly woman a medal.
What had she thought of him then, that woman who had grown old in this fight?

Galen and his friends must be moving into position on the Grasslands within a day. He was supposed to check in several hours from now.

Damn!

Cassian rubbed his neck and shook his head as if to drive it all away.

He needed to be able to focus when they got within visual of this landing site. He'd wake Conn up in ten and get some sleep.

"Where is she, Portia?" he asked the even older warrior.

"Ella está en el suelo. Se están moviendo hacia el objetivo," said his mother's voice.

Oh Jyn, oh hell, that sounded familiar.

Wait a minute....They?

"Has she put together a team from Cold Harbor?"

That was something they hadn't been able to count on her doing. He'd insisted that Jyn take the ear cuff so she and Mara could link to Portia for ground tracking if necessary. If she had people coming with her who knew the weather and the terrain, he might breath a tiny bit easier.

"Si, y no," Portia said.

She described an odd group comprising of Jyn, Mara, a young Far Trader, an old Trapper from the Coast and an adolescent game Hunter from Cold Harbor.

"Do me a favor, Portia," he said. "Tell her I said she isn't there to make friends."

"Ella dice "Vete a la mierda, Captain" the voice in his head said... sourly, if that were possible... "Por favor, detengan esto, ustedes dos."

He laughed so hard he woke Conn up early, so they switched places and he managed to get a few hours rest.
Jyn’s team in the North reaches the First Order landing site. Old Nan looks back on how she came to leave the North and why she has returned, leading them by shortcuts she still remembers. Lina worries and as sometimes happens, Jyn has a backpack full of bombs.

The folk from Cold Harbor and little Mink Cove were eager to help but had been at a loss. The River was frozen again now to a narrow channel. Even if they could get boats in it would be slow upstream travel and risky in the ice.

All the poor folk knew was boats. Fishers and Shoremen. They were the same everywhere…..bless them and damn them both. A kilometer back from the beach and their imaginations failed.

Nan could tell that Jyn Erso Blackbird and her Forest Mem friend were clearly thinking the same thing.

“Trust an old Otter, the fastest path at this time of year is always going to be the one the Deer take,” she told them. “If any of you fellows have snow gliders, I say we use one to follow the valley as far as we can over the river ice for several hours and then leave it and skirt up around the ridge on foot, 15 k. maybe. It’s rough ground but we could make it in another half day from there if we’re lucky and the weather holds. If these bastards are above there on the flat, we can come up around them that way.” She’d been about to say “unseen” but who even knew what the hell these bastards could see.

“I’ve got a little glider,” spoke up a small figure standing at the back. Hood back pulled back it proved to be a red-haired girl of about fifteen. “Rolery” she said her name was. She’d grown up in Hundar but split her time now between there, with her mother, and Mink, down here with her dad. “I man the Beacon in winter,” she said, “And I’ve been looking into doing some trapping up there. I can take you.”

Old Nan smiled out of sheer nostalgia if nothing else, although Jyn Erso clearly didn’t like it. That much was obvious from her scowl. You could tell she’d much rather take the glider themselves and just abandon it on the ice than put a girl so young’s life at risk.

They must grow up slower down south, or up in the stars, Nan told herself. You don’t even want to know the stuff I was up to at fifteen, Blackbird.

Mara made a point that they’d need somebody to take the glider back after to prevent it being seen or its heat signature marked and besides there was no time to argue the price.
“But if I drop you at the slope of the ridge and leave,” Rolery asked, “How’ll you get out again?”

Jyn Erso said, “Best option? We fly out.”

Nobody mentioned the worst option, sensibly.

The cold hours after midnight passed and they took a very short rest and a quick hot meal before they began to load the glider. The plan was to start out just as the little moon went down and pink started to color the sky.

Jyn Erso, sat on the bench near the fire going through her weapons and the piled thermal gear.

Some of the Cold Harbor folks had brought Nan and Lina Far-Trader some new gear and boots. Although her own were good a few extra layers couldn’t hurt.

“Why are you doing this?” Old Nan asked her. She’d met Islanders more than a few times in long years of selling smoked fish, and oil at Gate, but seeing one come ashore like this, much less gearing up for an inland trek across ice and frozen woods was like watching a fish try on fur pants and pearl earrings.

*If what was waiting for them was what the Blackbird described this poor girl could find herself minus livelihood even if she got out of it with her life.*

“I’m a good shot with a bolt gun and a bow,” Lina said, “and Jyn Erso says she can’t use her blasters until we’re right on top of them. I can find my way in a storm with no scrap of sky to go by with compass and bone-ring, where most of these folks…yourself excepted maybe …aren’t used to traveling where they’ve never been before.”

“No,” Nan said, “That’s why they’re taking you along, fair enough, but why are you willing to go? Why’d you raise your hand back at Gate? Why’d you let them take your boat out and come ashore with us?”

*A still face was a Trader’s greatest asset. That cool mask worn for bluffing and bargaining and never giving anything away. For most of the voyage so far this self-possessed, dark-eyed girl had held her cards very close but now she looked to Nan, suddenly, very young indeed.*

“I….I guess, I just need to see,” she said.

She glanced over to where Jyn Erso was standing now, her back to the fire, looking for all the world like she was talking to herself quietly.
“Is she crazy?” she asked Nan.

*Good question.*

“I don’t think so. Not sure how you’d tell really, though, her being Fallen.”

If the girl didn’t know that by now she was a fool and Nan was pretty sure a fool Far Voyager was a dead Far Voyager.

“Yeah,” Lina said. “That’s clear enough, but is she talking to the man in Guardian or somebody else, or nobody?”

Mara sat down beside them. *She wore only a thin wool jacket and pants, but Nan remembered the old saying from her youth, “So cold the Mem wear shoes.”* The black-furred Forester had lined leather boots over her short feet too.

“You mean Cassian-ally? No. She can’t hear him without equipment. With just the little ear ring she’s talking to Ancient Portia, I expect. That ghost can see almost everything from her tower so she’d probably giving her an update on weather and what the Enemy are doing.” she said.

Young Lina put her face in her hands and rubbed her eyes. Nan, patted her on the back. Poor thing. It was probably a lot to take in if you were the sort of person used to being in control.

When they bundled up and climbed into the little glider it was a near fit. It wasn’t half as big as the slow tug-like thing they used down at Gate but it had a covered area in the back. Cleared out to carry hides and firewood from the look and the smell, but with it emptied they managed to squeeze together the Blackbird, Mara the Mem and Lina Far Trader like logs in the back so she could fit up front with the barely-grown girl who was driving.

Nan was the only one who could judge the right spot to pull in from the river and move up behind the ridge. Even the ghost wouldn’t know that. *She had been afraid, though she’d never have admitted it that she might miss the turn, or that the land would have changed too much from storm or fire.* But as soon as they left the sight and sound of the sea behind them and moved up the flat ice of the river with the scrub and pine banks on either side her heart fairly sang with recognition.

*It was a terrible thing,* Nanerell thought, *but glorious too.*

Actions that had been natural as breathing once, like snowshoe hiking 25 k. at brisk speed in cold weather or tying laces and buckling bindings tight even as the leather froze under your fingers, these
were hard to near-impossible now. Yet the burden of age felt so much less heavy here than it had at Gate.

The cold of the air, the smell of the pine, the feel of the frozen dirt under her boots couldn’t make her young again but they made long years disappear.

Half a cold stiff day passed in the speeder until she laid a hand on the Mink youngsters arm. “Here,” she said, absolute and sure. “This is the place. Take us in here.”

The salvaged and welded-in shield window had a covering of ice a fingers width thick that would have to be scraped before the girl could start back, and the three others were climbing out stiff and breathless from the cold, to set up the gear for the last part of the march, but the pain meant nothing to Nan, for this minute at least. She was back and nothing of any great importance had changed for all that fifty-five years had passed since she had last stood on this ridge, a slip of a girl as taut and tough as tendon binding.

She used to lay her traps here, right here. When the wind blew the snow hard the Great Deer used to hug against this gap as they migrated southwest. Judging from the tracks, they still did.

*Of course they did. What did they care? They did not wander or forget. It was like the old man had always said, Ea had given them other tasks than dreams and wandering and they weren’t shirkers.*

The shaggy deer weren’t the prize she’d faced danger and cold for, although the hides were good and antler and skull bone was shaped and polished smooth as glass down on the coast.

No, no, it was when the unlucky or weak calves would slip and fall at this tricky place that the scavengers who were her true quarry would come. The silver-grey wolves would move in at night to dispatch the injured and the white-speckled fox-ferrets to pick the bones. The strong and clever could avoid her snares or pull the stakes loose, but from those who lingered at the back of the pack, waiting for scraps, or from the sick and the weak in a good season she could get a dozen or better. The white fur was highly prized for trade at Cold Harbor and Bear Crossing.

The smaller traps she set along the banks would catch snow-rabbit, black minklets and once or twice in a season she could be able to take down big badger or civet squirrels with a bolt rifle.

The livers of the civets were valued pretty high as medicine too and she traded to some of the Northern Circles, like Blue Moss and Hundar.

*She never went as far North as Temsa, humans almost never did. She was sorry about that now.*

*Fifty years and more since she came down river one summer to Gate, which was nothing but a little net drying cove then, to trade and nurse the claw marks on her legs until she was strong enough to*
head back up. One of the salmon Fishers had been a big young man with kind eyes and the finest arms she’d ever seen. He smiled or he didn’t, said “yes” or “no” or nothing at all, sang the old songs like an angel and pulled nets twice as heavy as any other man at Gate.

It came to Nan that maybe she’d just stay through the winter to heal up well and go back up the following year, but she told him straight out. He was to get no ideas.

She was a free Trapper, she’d said, and her heart was in the North... more than that she’d sworn an oath. “I’m not going to live and die down here on a fish dock,” she’d told him. As she recalled she’d had a fat salmon in her hand at the time, and shaken it at him over the pickling barrel she was helping him pack. “You’re a good lad and all, but don’t be thinking that.”

“No,” he’d said, “I never would,” and he never did.

Next year, she told herself that year, and for a few years after, but then the babies came. They worked so hard side by side those first years. Some nights they slept on the floor because they were too tired to walk the few steps to the loft bed. There were Raiders and storms and hungry seasons when the fish didn’t come but they kept on.

Eran still pulled his own nets up at near on to 80. Then one day as he and their youngest grandson had been pulling in, he tied off a line and sat down right on the deck. They had four boats and a wooden sod-roofed house on the shore by then. “Be a good lad, David,” her old man said, “and get me some help here. I think I need a rest.”

He never stood up again. They carried him to bed at their oldest son’s house because it was closest and she sat beside him, holding his hand.

Only once did he open his eyes. “Nan Otter,” he said, “I suppose you’ll go North when the weather turns?” “Oh, I might stay awhile longer,” she told him. “I’m grateful to hear that, lass,” he said, content. He was gone by the next tide.

They put his ashes in the sea, and her first and second son took over the boats. They were good men. Her shrewd daughter managed the trade and her grandsons worked the nets. They were all tall and strong and prosperous, Fishers all. They sang like angels every one of them and her oldest granddaughter played the fiddle. She loved them dearly, but they had children and boats and houses of their own. Not a one had ever been further than three days sail out from Gate or more than a days walk upriver and none had ever cared to. There was no point at all in telling them about the wolves.

That fall after Ea came for her Eran, she saw the first white wolf. It came and stood right in her back garden as she got up early to let out the geese. A movement caught her eye at the shed door and she turned back to see it looking straight at her, a big silver female, standing with head cocked to one side like a dog asking to be let out or in.

The geese weren’t hissing and the hounds of Gate Harbor weren’t barking, which was a sure sign it wasn’t really there.

She went inside the house and looked at it for a while out the window, boiling up breakfast. When her youngest granddaughter came to check on her it was gone, unsurprisingly.

Needless to say no one else ever saw them. A male with a white ruff out on the end of the dock in a snowstorm that winter and in the spring another on the top of the beach cliff, pacing.
Late in the summer she came back up from listening to her granddaughter play for a late wedding dance at the Common Hall to find a shaggy female, who yawned to show teeth like knives, sitting beside her door in the evening light.

“What do you want me to do Auntie?” she said. Which was stupid because she knew full well and even the damn wolf looked at her like she was an idiot. “Well. I’m sorry,” she said, “I know I’ve made you wait too long, but I’m bloody 79. If I just start walking, I’m not going to make it very far. Tell me how can I make this right?”

The wolf looked at her with steady green eyes and then got up and walked past her around to the side yard and Eran’s little vegetable patch. When she followed, the wolf was gone but a great black-winged crow sat upon the post. Startled, it flew off North with a great rush of wings.

What the hell? she thought. Blackbirds don’t fly north this time of year. Not to be a shirker but can’t you be a little more forthright about this? I mean, I’m not a damn Sister, you know.

None of it made a lick of sense until a few months later, when the warning beacon lights on the bluff could be seen from the top of the tower and the Bequa appeared in the Harbor, begging for help. That was it. It was time to go home.

“Are you sure…” young Rolery began, but Jyn would have none of it. “Get that glider back as fast as you can.”

Old Nan took her last breath before fastening her goggles and looked the Hundar girl over. Red hair, slim and tough. “When this is done,” she said, “consider working the Ridge. The fox and wolf still bring good price….give those wolves their due though.” The girl nodded and pulled away back down the river. The rattle of the glider echoed for a while and then they were alone. The four of them and whoever the hell the Blackbird woman talked to in her ear.

Ea favored them with weather. Thin clouds but little wind, and that blocked by the rise of the ridge. Old Nan took the lead. She saw the wolf tracks clear as day in the thin snow along the sheltered base of the rocky ledge, all headed in the direction they needed to go. She had to smile, although her face-
covering hid it. They moved out behind her. She could put her all into it since she didn’t need to save anything for the coming back. The ate on the march and took only the fastest breaks. The cold didn’t really bite until you stopped but it started fast as soon as you did.

*Over ground like this the short legs of a Mem were less of a disadvantage than they might have been elsewhere. Mara kept up well. If the Islander questioned ever leaving her sunny birthplace she didn’t waste the breath to complain. The Blackbird moved like a woman who’d hard marched before.*

Even so, the sun was moving down and their face masks were frosted when Jyn tapped Nan’s shoulder. She had a hand to the side of her head, so the ghost must be telling her something. They could have followed this line of the trail for another k. before they came up but it seemed she wanted to check here.

She climbed up the four or five meters up from the meltwater gully trail they’d been following. At the top Jyn laid down and took binoculars in mittened hands. Mara scampered quickly up and Nan moved slowly behind. Climbing was less easy than walking and coming down the worst, so she picked her way carefully.

The winds had scoured this side of the rise from ice, so the thorny brush gave some foothold. Above the crest the flat plain stretched.

Nan had seen wrecks in her travels. She’d seen a dozen white plastic masks with their black bug-like eyes stuck up on the front of a raider ship. She’d formed some picture of what she might see from stories and fully expected a nightmare.

This was so much worse.

Over the slope ahead of them. Maybe 500 meters was the beginning curve of a black circle more than a k. across. Everything inside it was flat ash. Grass, brush, dirt…all burned down to bedrock. There was nothing alive as far as the eye could see. Off the far edge, to the west as the ground sloped down her attention was caught by something that seemed to flap, silhouetted against the pink of the dimming sun, like a pole with some scorched leather rags still tied.

The remains of a shelter….Ea’s mercy.

A cylinder as big as a boat studded with tall thin masts sat in the center. All of it gleaming and black. The silver spikes that poor old Kera had told them about were not under the ground any more but stood six meters high from the look of them spaced all around the edge of the ash circle, like knife blades. Lights…white and red, flicked on the masts and around the boat-like structure. A red and silver box stood off at the eastern edge catching the last rays of sun, while a half dozen figures draped in gleaming white walked around with those insect-skull masks. What looked like silver barrels with long delicate deer-like legs moved in a circle around the black shelter.

Mara was the only one of them without a face cloth up, and Nan could see her baring her sharp teeth as if in silent anger.

The Mem took a deep breath, slid her goggles up onto the top of her head and turned toward Jyn. “Now what?” she said

Jyn was still lying half on her belly in the scorched brush at the top of the slope, looking through the
binoculars, but she laid them down.

“Everyone else is a few hours from position,” she said, “The party will start sometime between 07:00 and dawn here. Let’s get a shelter set down out of sight of these surveillance droids. I’m gonna need to lay out some hostess gifts and I’d rather not freeze to death while I’m doing it.”

They edged back down and set up the thermal tent flush against and under the earthen ledge as the temperature continued to drop. Once they were set and sealed they each crawled inside, and in the small violet lantern light, Jyn explained what was going to be happening and what she needed each of them to do.

Outside Nan could hear the wolves begin to howl, one by one in sequence, and realized the last sunlight must be fading.

“Can anybody else hear that?” she wanted to know.

Jyn and Mara were fumbling with their gear in the lamplight and didn’t answer but young Lina, shivering like an aspen leaf in the wind whispered, “I can.”

“Good,” Nan said, “That makes me feel a little better.”
Chapter Summary

A few bits about how information gets transmitted between generations. Galen considers his parent's instruction techniques and the painful and hard-won lessons that inform their teachings as preparations for the assault of the First Order bases finish up.

A brief check in on the Ewoks.

Jyn's list-making rubs off on Cassian.

As always and forever Cassian adores his beloved's bad-assery.

The parenting styles of two soldiers will always be little off.

Chapter Notes

Te amo más que la luz del día = I love you more than the light of day

It was Dora who first started calling the rules that Jyn Erso and Cassian Andor laid out in their training sessions “the Combat Manual” after an actual book in Markey’s Warehouse.

Some Markey, maybe a hundred years ago or more, made it to lay out the rules, recipes and steps for everything from stacking cloth, rigging tackle and packing fish barrels on the barge, to generations of strays and part-time workers. It had been added to, endlessly, crazily over the years with diagrams, fold-out maps, scribbles in the margins and the well-thumbed smudges of a thousand fingers. Dora always did a great imitation of Old Tom snarling, “Why are you asking me how to do it you bloody fool? Check the damn manual!”
It been thought lost in the Fire but weeks later the scorched and water-soaked thing had turned up. It had been in a metal file box that somehow fell through the burning floors into an upturned boat, then thrown back onto the shoreline by the surge of the Enemy ship’s pass over the water. Torn parts of it floated out from under the rubble. Much of it was ruined and unsalvageable but Tom’s wife Thea dried what was left and re-sewed the covers. Over the next months Tom’s “youngsters” showed up in droves to re-draw pictures and pages from memory. One tiny sketch of a packing plan for a small trade dory was even found blown back into the bushes by the fishing shacks like a wet Fall leaf.

Young Neave brought it to Tom Markey, and he had cried.

Dora’s mom told her it had been drawn by his long-dead sister.

Eldest Lady Perrin had said to him, "Nothing is ever truly lost in the Pattern, Galen Jyns-son and nothing can be unmade as if it had never happened. Even what we wish most to forget will surface sometimes and perhaps give strength along with the pain of memory."

It was the last thing she ever said to him so it came back to him often. She was an insightful old bat and she was seldom wrong.

Mama and Papa, he loved and admired. They were his heroes and the people he most wanted to please and had to argue with, contradict and hide from sometimes. Galen knew that they were not like other people... humans on the Upland, Fallen, Scavengers, Allies, soldiers of the Alliance and survivors of a terrible War.

He also knew, from the time he was very young, even before Mama said it in so many words, that they would have given absolutely anything if they could have lived all their lives without teaching he and Kayly or anyone else what was in "the Manual."

But that was not a choice any of them got.
Even as an old man he never forgot the way his father moved back and forth between the firm, demanding voice of a skilled instructor….

“Galen. Stop. You exposed your right shoulder. Severe injury, likely death. Go back up the slope and do it again. This time brace your firing side foot against the cover. It will automatically stop you leaning.”

“I figured the shot would…”

“You won’t figure. You’ll be pumped with adrenaline even if you think you’re not and you’ll lean too far. Foot, then fire. Do it again.”

….and those pauses, moments of brief hesitation that he noticed at the time but didn’t recognize for what they were until long after. Pain, pride, shame, thinly veiled anger.

*Ok, in Mama’s case not maybe always so veiled.*

The days after the attack at RiverTown up to the months after the Fire and Kayly's loss, began Lessons for all of them.

Hard, scary, funny sometimes, but not so different in their way as those they’d all learned at the Farm or from Portia up in the Tower.

“Was any of this written down in your army?” Dex asked once.

“Whooo…no!” Mama snorted with a laugh, “I should say not.”

“Some, yes, definitely,” Papa said, “But I admit I never read most of it. I tested out of the schematics and theory in basic training, and was moved straight to the equipment.”

“How come?” Bill had asked.

*Neither Galen nor Kayly would ever have asked that question aloud.*

“Because I already knew,” his father said quietly, and laid out the parts so they could assemble their own blasters for the test.
He called his parents “sir” and “ma’am” most of the time during training and “Papa” and “Mama” everywhere else. It was the only way he could show them he understood.

**Papa’s Rules:**

- Anybody can shoot a gun. Under optimal conditions, with minimal training and a good enough weapon, a complete amateur can shoot well and accurately.

- Learning to shoot well and accurately under a variety of conditions with a reasonable selection of weapons makes a sharpshooter.

- A sharpshooter is not the same as a sniper. A sniper’s skills are observation and stealth.

- A sniper works from a concealed position to remove a specifically identified target or set of targets. Your job is to see better than you are seen. You may work alone or as part of a tactical team.

**In order to fire effectively:**

- **Know your equipment.** If at all possible, use the weapon in a non-stress situation before you have to use it in a high stress one. If you have a choice use your own weapon over someone else’s. Barring that use a kind of weapon you’re familiar with rather than one you aren’t.

The same goes for the grade and type ammunition if you are using a bolt or projectile weapon, or the charge spectrum if you are using a blaster.

- **Firmly locate your target and have it in clear sight.** Rough location isn’t enough. Knowing a target is behind a rock or a fuel tank is useless unless you have eyes on something concrete, like a head or a hand.

Without location you might as well be throwing rocks and making noise.

- **Aim.** If you don’t aim your accuracy will suffer dramatically.

- **Fire.** The best marksman will not hit anything if he is not willing to stop aiming and take the shot. You see it, you take it.

*If you have multiple targets and your position is secure, repeat.*
“Like you did in the bell tower at River?” Dex asked

“Yes.”

If your position is not secure, or you have enemy potentially still active, move and repeat.

Stealth is the prime weapon of a surgical sniper but the fear and confusion a sniper creates can also be a very effective tactical weapon for a team commander.

In combat situations where snipers are tactically deployed they are often most effective in two man teams. One to go high and act as a spotter with the rifle and the other in motion or set low with rifle or other weapons to lay down ground fire and set up a pincer situation. Well choreographed this kind of two-man team can lay waste to enemy in a fixed position, especially if they have no or delayed backup.

Mama smiled sweetly behind him then, pointed to herself, clenched her fingers then popped them wide to mime an explosion.

Papa shot her a dirty look but when he turned she’d quickly looked down at the mismatched practice guns she was piling and packing.

“Do you have anything to add here Jyn?”

“Me? Oh no, Major.”

She “fake” coughed behind her hand and pointed to herself again “E-n-d-o-r” she spelled out.

- Remember this only works if your group target is unarmed, immobilized, or small enough to all be taken out fast.

- No matter how good or how well placed, a single operative or even a team will not last long against a target with access to artillery or air support, or against overwhelming numbers.

Scarif, Galen thought. Those are the stones in Mama’s garden.

- Unless you are in holed up in a secure defensive position….

Portia’s Tower at Nexa, the Bell Tower at RiverTown, Markey’s roof and the Beacon Tower at HarborTown, the Lighthouse on Point. A series of High Tree Platforms that the Taun had set up at Green River Crossing and overlooking marches at the Green Palisades, a handful of others he knew about.

….you will get no more than two, at best three shots. With a good blaster that means three burst
rounds of fire max, with a projectile weapon that means two or three single shots, before you will have to move to another location.

- No matter how well you are concealed, once you fire you will be located. Even a silenced laser weapon fired behind a baffled screen…none of which we have here, by the way…. will make noise that can be tracked. This is true no matter what your weapons’ high or low tech.

Far Islander and Northern archers know even a smooth arrow will displace air or make sound when it passes something.

- If they chose to deploy it here. First Order has tech the like of which no one on Ea, even Jyn and I, have ever seen.

Was it a trick of the light or did Portia’s image, the grey-haired woman with braids, shrug noncommittally and arch an eyebrow when Papa said that?

- A operational command field unit, scan-enabled ship, a storm trooper’s helmet, surveillance droid or any one of a dozen different types of equipment will locate a sniper seconds after the first shot. In such a situation you will take your one shot and be prepared to move like hell, with minimum to no time to escape a retaliatory strike.

- A suicide situation may look brave. It may be brave. But it’s the bad tactics of the desperate. Don’t ever lose sight of that. Dying leaves your team crippled and a man short. When people have to make choices like that they are already losing.

Kay-too, Galen thought.

Mama’s rules:

Random Assault v. Strategic Planning.

- Well kids, it bears saying this out loud, repeatedly: Sticking your gun out of cover and firing blindly is to be avoided. It is very unlikely you will hit anything. Most likely you’ll just get a hand shot off.

That said, noisily shooting up the joint has its place in your strategic toolbox. It all depends on your ammunition supply and the nature of your objective.

- Random fire of any kind, whether laser, projectile or explosive ordinance is also an effective tool for crowd management. It can draw enemy away from another team or target, create a distraction, or just intimidate adversaries into staying in place.
Keep in mind though, it will not work for long if the enemy is smart and it won’t work forever even if they’re extremely stupid.

**Numbers**

Things to remember:

- One on one is not a battle, it is a fight. Fights have different rules than battles.

Galen lay awake in his tent, listening. He’d been asleep but the sound of the music in the campground below and the throbbing of his hand now that the wet cloth had slipped off had wakened him.

“How is he?” He heard Papa asking.

“Split lip, and a couple of split knuckles.” Mama said, “The Eldest Sister wrapped up his hand and said the lip shouldn’t need stitches. She put some sap on it to suture it. He’s being a sullen little soldado and won’t tell me what the fight was about.”

“They shoved a little Mem kid out of line, they say by accident, but Galen used some choice words to tell them to shove off, they say and….”

“He launched himself at two River dock boys half again his age and twice his size?”

“And who does that sound like?”

“Bare-handed, Cassian? You insult me. I’ve got to talk to that boy. You don’t use your fists in a situation like that….hell, a rock, a brick, a damn bottle for heaven’s sakes but not…”

“Jyn …Te amo más que la luz del día.”

“Am I wrong?”

- A battle involves multiple opponents. One against many, many against one. Sixteen against 8,000. This is where teamwork comes into play

- Teams increase your strategic combinations. They increase your adaptability, give you options, cover you and carry your ass off if you get wounded. At the most basic level teams give the enemy multiple people to shoot at.

**News flash.** If they are shooting at someone else on your team they are not shooting at you. You can use this time to change position, aim and fire more accurately.

**Bonus Points:** People shooting are easier to find than people who are not shooting, even the ones not
decked out in shiny high-contrast armor. Follow the noise and flash, then shoot there.

- If you can keep your enemy confused about who is being attacked and from where, you can scare the fuck out of them.

When your enemy has superior numbers how many people they think/fear you have sometimes matters more than how many you actually have. They will make mistakes.

The very best can make ten men feel like a hundred.

**Technology advantage.**

We don’t have it. Not by a long shot. We never will against these fuckers. No use crying. Adjust all objectives accordingly, and remember a fight is not a battle is not a war.

Tech disparity is a big-ass factor but it is only one factor. I have seen assaults successfully waged by angry little people with kick-ass control of ground and sharp sticks against vastly superior tech.

*Endor. Portia had shown him visuals. She still watched there. She loved those little people.*

*They had taken the armor of all the dead storm troopers and the crashed Imperial equipment and made huge piles of it, around which they placed sharpened wooden spikes painted red. When the wood decayed they made new ones and replaced them. On some sort of seasonal calendar they gathered with lit torches, shouted angry chants and threw rocks at the piles. Whoever they were they really carried a grudge.*

*The body of one Alliance fighter had been left behind, Galen learned. One who had fallen inside one of the underground generator stations and couldn’t be recovered before the pull-out. Portia said the Endor people had taken him out and laid his remains on a high wooden platform they built and covered with flowers.*

*“Burial by exposure” it was called. When nothing was left but bones they carried them respectfully away and laid them in the little ossuary caves with the small bones of their own dead.*

*“They do it to honor him, I think,” Portia said, thoughtfully. “It’s the burial tradition they reserve for their clan and community leaders.”*

*“Todd,” Papa had said quietly when Portia had shown it. “His name was Todd.”*

**Countermeasures aka, “The Dance Party” aka “Evasive Movements”:**
Here is a list of Evasive Movements….the important word being “movement.”

1. Under fire move at angles from cover to cover and don’t be predictable. “Random” is your best friend. They’ll have less chance to line up on you. btw, don’t get in front of each other when you do this or you might get shot in the back and you’ll never live that down.

2. When you stop, do it behind full or partial cover.

Rocks, walls and plex-metal, and very thick tree trunks qualify as “cover.”

3. Bushes and high grass are “concealment” not cover. They make you harder to find and hit but will not stop a blaster shot. Don’t fire from concealment unless you absolutely have to and if you do move your ass fast after.

Penalty Points: Also these guys have a tendency to panic and unload shot wildly.

Their blasters hold way more charge than ours. They do not have to conserve fire or worry about overheating

To cheer yourself up about this disparity review the Bonus Points notation previously listed under Numbers.

4. When firing from the near tree canopy change firing positions/places to keep them from aiming.

Unpredictable = alive. Predictable = dead.

5. After diving for cover do not return fire from the same place you dived in. Even stormtroopers can figure that out.

Bonus Points: When they return fire they often open themselves up by stepping out from cover and give you a clean shot on them from your new position. Repeat as necessary.

6. Lie down, kneel or just generally get low and small whenever possible. It reduces your target size.

7. When possible, roll instead of crawling. It is faster and keeps you lower and presents less target to shoot at.

Bonus Point: if you are a Mem.

This caused Kemmi and Mara to laugh and slap hands in solidarity.
8. Don’t look over obstacles and cover, look **around** them. You may see less but it makes it harder for the enemy to see you.

Right handers should fire around the right side of cover, but if you have to fire around the left side of something do it left handed.

**Bonus Point:** The armored fuckers have limited mobility and usually come out of cover a bit when they fire.

This seems to be because they are trained to think that armor is fucking magic. It isn’t.

On the whites aim for the black joints, necks, underarm chest, backs of knees. The silver and black armor is way higher quality. Three to four times denser and protected at the joints with charge diffuser fabric… *Yes, they screw over their own conscripted troops, surprised?*

**Remember,** except at point blank range with a laser, the only kill shot on those silver bastards is the neck or the eye-holes.

9. Moving makes them waste time looking and hides your numbers, but do not try to run and fire at the same time. Even with a blaster this is stupid and inaccurate.

> “And yes, I know because I’ve done it. You panic and you run and if you have a gun in your hand you shoot it but it slows you down while you’re in an exposed position and in a firefight that is a fatally bad move. 99%of the time. My excuse is that I was 12 and stupid. My…instructor…dressed me down hard and he was right to do it.”

Run and zig-zag OR find cover and shoot then run again.

**Bonus point:** Stormtroopers will break this rule wildly and with abandon….*again because they believe in their magical armor.*

Also they can’t run for crap and when they fall down most of them can’t get back up without help.

10. Reload or clip on a new charge **only** behind full cover.

*This also goes for tying your shoes, checking your injuries or any communication with your team members longer that two words.*

11. Remember, if you stay stationary too long you are begging someone to flank you.

12. When under cover or firing from cover avoid tunnel vision. The main reason flanking works is tunnel vision.

13. Don’t stay fixed for long, no matter how pinned down you think you are. If you don’t look you won’t see and an enemy may walk right up and shoot you.
Storm Troopers, the Next generation.

Bad news: In those helmets their night vision is great, even the standard issue new models seem able to read the heat of our local badly-shielded blasters in IR even when not actively firing.

Good News: They are totally dependent on tech to see in those fucking things, so if you damage the helmet, jam the signal or get the fucking thing off of them they are almost blind. Seriously, they blink in the sunlight like giant baby birds.

If you ever capture one alive, do it immediately, just for the laughs.

On different parts of Ea, near the almost-operational First Order transmission platforms, various applicable chapters of the Manual were being reviewed pretty much at the same time.

Galen ran his team through one last weapons check, in the tree cover on the Taun lands, and reviewed their choreography for the Dance Party very carefully. They would have no working comms, except for the echoing calls of the Taun in the trees, until they could get their hands on some stormtrooper helmets. Everybody needed to be on exactly the same page.

Jyn huddled in a blacked-out tent with Mara and explained to a very old Trapper and a young woman who had never before been more than a days walk from the sea how they were going to attack eight armored troopers in the frozen darkness.

Cassian and Conn sat on the roof of a half-submerged Guardian and looked at the gleaming six story First Order beacon platform under the rising moons.

“Are you absolutely sure about this?” Conn was saying. “I’m pretty sure I can swim better than you can.”

Hundreds of Bequa moved in the water around them and Cassian did not doubt there were hundreds more below the surface that he could not see.

*No need to review the Manual with them,* he thought. He had a feeling they had their own and
would be reading it to him soon.
Navigational Support Platform M16.02.07/Beacon #2

Chapter Summary

A First Order tech officer pins her hopes for advancement on a ground mission to replace a beacon on a more-notorious-than-she-knows little backwoods planet. Unsurprisingly, it doesn't go well for her.

Chapter Notes

Did you know that you can make "sparklers" and low-grade custom fireworks at home from simple and easily available natural compounds? Jyn knows.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

[RD-218: (static)….no, we're looking at one now. The FC-3 scanned and shows it as just granular iron and some trace naturally occurring sulfur..[gap]..looks to have mixed with carbonized peat and some kind of starch in the local flora maybe…..(static)…..and just lit up spontaneously.....huh...possibly a delayed reaction from the clearance sweep? That's a valid chemical thing under some circum….]

[BX-459: Or some cached supplies from the ab/fauna we visualled on site. They had…]

[LG-429: You'd think it would be too cold for something to…]

[RD-218: It's so dry though, that's the thing, it's like a chemical…]

[DT-986: There's another one. Look! It's blue….]
Stupid fucking.....

Oh no, no, no. She was not going to miss her last chance because of these mouth-breathing inbreds.

Where was the droid?

"FC-3-1 do you confirm as a natural phenomenon then? No anomaly to report?"

[*FC-3-1: Volatile Compounds present/Chemical signatures consistent w/Localterrestrial effects/Noted for Further Analysis/Summary: No forseeable negative mission affect.]

Fine. She wasn’t recording it then. The last thing she needed was to be the one to push any delay buttons on this. This rock needed to go online on schedule.

Nav-Tech Officer Tela Braxton of the Army of the First Order had drawn the short straw on this ground mission and she knew it. Of the three placement sites this one, the freezing-ass cold one was the most personnel-heavy. The other two legs of the mission could be mostly automated, with only four and five human personnel necessary on ground. The low nighttime temps and constant icing-and-thawing at this miserable site made droids less optimal.

They’d given her one cold-shielded scanner droid and a short range auto-pilot for the shuttle and nothing else between her and failure but seven flesh and blood dolts with blasters. One mouth breather had already gotten stabbed by an ingie animal with a damn stick before they’d even secured the perimeter. His corpse was cooling in the lower storage locker.

They were all expendable, of course, it didn’t do to forget that. It was just that some people were much more expendable than others.

The white armor of a storm trooper had an ancient and honorable history. So she’d been taught and so she believed, but putting these hand-raised, mud-born teenagers into some wasn’t going to make them any smarter no matter how many steroids and stabilizers you pumped into them.

She was not going to mess this up and if that meant leaving any of these jackasses behind to get kebabed, so be it.

Anybody with eyes could tell the big push was coming. Real action meant transfers and casualties. Transfers and casualties meant openings for promotion.

Even if you’d scored "average" on your k-levels....because everyone knew those were rigged. Even if you’d been grey-marked and kicked down a level because you’d been in the wrong elevator.
A falling-down-drunk elderly Systems Officer had started shouting that the newly installed Command General Armitage Hux a “stuck-up teenager who’d played “Overlord: Battle of Hoth” simulation games so long he’d started to believe he really knew how to command a fleet” and ranting about how he “wasn’t half the man his father was!”.

The old drunk had been a senior officer. What was she supposed to have done? She would have called it in as soon as she got to her station, of course she would have,… but truth told, at the time she’d been more worried about the old Imperial throwing up on her boots, but somebody else in the crowded lift must have commed it in then and there because the black armors were waiting when the doors opened at the top level of the station.

They’d dragged the old man away shouting, “I served under Grand Admiral Sloane on the Vigilance! I was killing rebels when your coward parents ran!” Every person in that lift, except maybe the quick-fingered striver who had commed IA Security, was knocked down two clearance check marks just for being there. Probably half the people in the hallway too.

…..the unfairness of it still burned

Tela Braxton was getting her points back if it killed her. She had volunteered for this field mission, despite the sneers of the Assignment officer.

It was simple in scope but M16.02.07 was a high loss/high risk location.

Clock out on one of those, on a project marked “accomplished,” ….as in “accomplished on time and budget,”…. and that was three field points, enough to get put back in the lottery for a destroyer pit assignment. It could be like the last year hadn’t happened.

She'd done her homework too. Way more than those dicks up on the Deployment ship.

Everything was shaky out at this edge and always had been, it seemed, even all the way back into old Glorious First Imperial records. Readings bounced. Fixed coordinates would just come….unfixed. Linked notes speculated the cause as solar fluctuations and the noisy decay of layers of old hyperspace corridors. A dozen or more ships had been lost out here over the years since the Glorious Empires’s retreat and the Shameful Surrender.

She'd even stumbled across some records marked for redaction at the back of a partly-cleared log…. dangerous stuff to get caught doing so she’d been careful about destroying them after. Interesting reading though. It seemed a couple of years back Outer Command had been assigned to map all the antique Imperial Beacons, only to find that this one, mapped as being in fixed orbit around 3A/UDUR, had actually been sitting on the ground all these years.

Hmmmm…a sure sign that the job was botched at least once before and been swept under the rug. She was young but even she knew that incompetence was like a sedimentary rock. It tended to build and harden in layers. Was it wrong that she found it strangely comforting to know even the Imperial Golden Age must have had it’s screw-ups?
Somebody tried to cover up the old mistake on the QT. They’d scheduled a run this way as busy work, tucked in on a test for the new C-supports for the temporary corridors, and diverted a couple of escort craft and two ground-clearing crews to level a few little spaces, presumably to drop in two old-style beacons and replicate the old signal.

It should have worked. The read-outs all had been hunky-dory boring until the three escort ships and two “landscapers” dropped into atmo. Then BOOM, the mother craft in orbit lost all contact with them.

There’d been a little babble picked up through the static indicating that all were operational but had somehow lost contact with each other. Then nothing. When the main ship tried to return to base they must have stupidly tried to nav out using the broken old beacon to calculate from, because they blew up promptly in the jump. Six ships lost for nada.

*Can’t believe somebody didn’t wind up in the grey room over that, not unless their mommy or daddy was someone VERY important.*

Now, three years later, the Great Assault was almost ready and some genius uniform once again realized an actual working warning beacon was needed on this hazard edge. This was clearly still the best spot for it. Since the old beacon had finally died…..*almost sixty years old, the Glorious Empire knew how to build, clearly….they would be starting from scratch.* Two Beacons, one back-up, a linking satellite in and out, turn on the light and forget about it.

She’d actually sweated the landing, but they’d obviously made the right move by setting down landing perimeter spikes. All three teams made ground with only minimal static and things had basically worked since except for some shaky gaps on the visual reads in a few sections of the orbit and some echo-delays. Hardly surprising considering the amount of junk around here. It looked like they’d finally managed to defeat the curse of planet M.15-3A/UDUR. Equipment was just that much better now.

*Three field points. Nobody was messing this up for her. Not animals with sticks, not oxidation of phosphine, not stormtroopers distractedly chasing colored lights.*


*[Station One: All systems check. Go for Signal activation.]*

*In four hours she would be back on station in a hot sonic shower with her name back in the lottery… three if she could rush the paperwork on the dead trooper.*

*[Station Two: All systems check. Go for Signal activation]*

*[Station Three: All systems check. Go for Signal activation.]*

*Those bastards were in the Equatorial ocean….probably working on their tans, in the nice warm sunshine.*

*[AoFO/Support Command Ship Restoration// Com. Lasalle:: All stations Prepare for est. 01:56]*
min Surge Blackout on Signal activation.]

Fuck. They'd predicted only 01:46 not even an hour ago. The fucking place was haunted. Fine. She could hold her breath for 01:56 if she had to, let’s just do this.

“FC3-1. Support team. Take stations for activation. Blackout for 01:56 to commence in 00:20. Report on signal and audio as necessary.”

[FC3-1/ On-line. Systems Green.]

“HK-431: Set.”

“TF-583: Set.”

“RT-146: Set.”

“BX-459: Set.”

“DT-986: Set.”

“LG-429: Set.”

“RD-218: Set.”

Good. Just stay still there dummies. Nobody fall down for 2 minutes.

[All Stations/: Operational signal link in 10…9…8…7…6…5…2…1]

[-----------------------------------------------]

Braxton waited.

00:30

She glanced at her controls.

[*FC3-1: green*...gap....gap]

wtf? This was well within the supposed operation temperatures for this equipment. Why start glitching now?
She checked the temp.

**Exterior report: Station 2**

*[Exterior reading/temp. -27C./falling]*

*ouch. well, that explained it.*

**Interior report: Station 2**

*[Interior reading/temp. 15C/]*


01:00

[RD-218: “..ugh…”]

*Oh hell. Was he coughing? Toughen up. They had cold-shielded armoring and air filters. Nobody was going to freeze to death in 2 minutes.*

01:15

“Exterior team: Signal and audio check in.”

No audio but the signal lights came on: **HK-431+, TF-583+**.

**RT-146+….wait, now it read** -

**BX-459-, DT-986-, LG-429-, RD-218-**

01:30

The access hatch opened and TF-583 appeared within it. The negative air corridor was fully engaged and green-lighted...the feeling of terrible cold had to be illusionary....interior readings were normal. No alarms.

*Why was he just standing there?*

"TF-583! Status!...what are you doing?"
She jumped to her feet and stared through the blue shimmer of the air-lock. The trooper dropped to the flooring, still moving but Braxton could now see the thin black shaft of...metal? wood?...protruding between the helmet and neck plate.

A small metal disc...roughly the size of sweets ration..flew in from the darkness outside and landed on the flooring.

"Explosives protocol!" she screamed, diving for the panel...her hand was already on the warning signal.

"Alert! We are breached! Level 4 alert! Command...!"

The screen displays lit with words.....every single one of them.... and an audio came across her earpiece and echoed as broadcast in the small control room. All of them were reading/saying the same thing.

["No. That's not going to happen."]

Chapter End Notes

once more with the Imperial lacky p.o.v.
Chapter Summary

A very small bit as Cassian and Conn move to their assault on the FO beacon station in the southern oceans.

Cassian goes diving and has to put his faith in the even-more-alien-than-all-the-other-aliens Bequa.

Chapter Notes

Yes. I just tried to write a tiny section of p.o.v. from a whale-alien. I just did that.

niñera = nanny/childcare worker

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The object was large and beneath the shadow of its vast circle the moving world already grew chilled. Even she, as young as she was, could feel it on the skin of her face like an echo of death.

The deepest Divers had bravely descended to track the great supporting legs that had grown/extended/drilled downwards from it, down vast distances into the lightless hard places where only their great eyes could see. Then they returned, slowly as they always must, to tell of what what they had found.

These huge spikes, like the much smaller silver ones that had rained down days before, had stabbed through the moving world to the Mother's own bones.

"It is horrible to see, but do not lose hope,” those brave knowledge-gatherers told the Elders.

"The blind speakers came to us," Blue-of-cold-water-shale-in-the sun, a powerful female Diver, told the assembled people.

Everyone had marveled at this. Those glowing, strange and solitary deep-dwellers almost never spoke to anyone.....at least not without without hours of headache-inducing flattery or enormous bribes.

"They said the small spikes go in only a little way,” the Diver said, “The large ones go much deeper
but seem to do so only to sustain the weight of the structure up into the thin world. They assure us that they are still and nothing is drilling down toward the Mother's heart.

The Blackbird spoke true then. The Enemy had not come to dig.

The relief this news brought was enormous and rippled through the assembled troops, although few spoke of it openly. Whatever this equipment’s cruel purpose it seemed to be as platform for some equipment aimed toward the thin upper world. The stars themselves and the voices of the outer sky were it’s most likely target then. Bad, but not the End.

The Enemy murdered worlds by means of such drills, she knew, split them open like eggs to get at the meat inside. Some of the Elders had had dreams about such an end for the People, where all they could do was die beside the Mother and all her other children, but they reassured those who listened that this was not a sure dream, only a vision of a thing that could but might not be. They had also had dreams about a Great Alliance that would unite all of Mothers children, from the Firstborn to the little ones who still bravely made their way with such difficulty in the thin reaches of the upper lands to the adopted ones who had fallen from the stars like birds with broken wings to be nurtured and loved by Ea.

These were the dreams she chose to face toward.

White-of-foam-in-bright-sun moved into position with the rest of her cadre and set her jaw grimly, to remain silent and still until the order came.

It was all up to the flightless bird people now.

Cassian zipped himself into the pressure suit. Oh my, he’d forgotten just how uncomfortable these things were. Basic Training was a long time ago….and tested the rebreather mask again

“Seriously,” Conn was saying, “You can breathe with this, underwater?”
“That’s the plan,” Cassian said. “The suit was made for space and the mask for working in toxic or methane conditions. Water being just one more of the many things we humans can’t breathe. The tricky bit,”….he tinkered with the little battery pack he’d strapped around the breathing canister, a rare and precious bit of salvage from the wreck of the huge old Sorosub 4000 out on the Riverlands. *Hopefully Portia had tinkered with settings on this thing enough to minimize nitrogen build up in his blood over the 30 meters or better he’d have to go down.*

“Oh bloody hell,’ the younger man said, “I’ve seen the shell-fishers on Pearl stick their heads in those big glass bells and go down to walk the bottom and there’s supposed to be diver women….it’s always women for some reason…. out past the Flower Islands who are supposed just hold their breath and dive way down to the white reefs, but I’ve gotta tell you, I’ve never felt the slightest desire to do either of those things.”

Cassian straightened the air flow tubing and double checked the seals.

When he’d put it on briefly to check the mouthpiece he’d had a fleeting memory of Fest, of an infant care worker lining him up on a cold metal bench with a number of other very small children, putting breathing masks on each of them.

Was it one of the drills? They’d had those all the time he knew. *He remembered tears on the cheeks of the very young “niñera” behind her own mask... no doubt a miner’s daughter herself... and her damp fingers slipping the cracked strap behind his head. “Always adjust your own mask before helping your students/Ajuste siempre su propia máscara antes de ayudar a sus alumnos” the scratchy automated voice repeated endlessly as the lights had flashed. He knew there had been real mine accidents when he was a child, but it had been too long ago. That kind of recall could never be quite trusted. He might have been conflating memories.*

Well Abuelo, you suited up every day of your life and went down into the dark and the cold to provide for your family, look at me now, doing the same.

The mask had limited IR vision and the only light he’d have was a chemical glow stick that he couldn’t use until he got close. The Bequa would take him down to the platform supports and to a service access hatchway they had been spotted under the water about 30 meters down. It was clearly for small repair droids to get in and out for structural repairs to the legs and to clear debris and not for human personal but their "recon" were pretty sure they could crack the pressure gate, and that the access way was wide enough for him to get through.

“Oh, hep, hep, hep hep!”….was that laughing?…. “just protect your small tender ears Cassian-ally and trust us. We will get it open.” The grey-mottled Bequa he’d coordinated with had said.

He would have the time of the on-line power surge to get inside and plant one of Portia’s portable links. The sensors would be down and the droids in the support struts wouldn’t sense him in that window. Once Portia was inside she could shut down the interior.

At the same time the Bequa “navy” would arrange a sonic and high surf distraction that would drive the handful of troopers back inside the structure. Conn would lift up and fire Guardian’s guns to clear anyone or anything left topside.
It would be up to Cassian and Portia to clear the interior. Four stormtroopers, two to three human techs and an indeterminate number of working droids with independent agency. Portia could kill but she wouldn't co-opt a conscious mechanical system.

He checked the zippered pockets inside the suit one last time, feeling the shape of the two blasters and three flash charges inside. Portia’s portable link was tucked into an exterior pocket on his chest, easy to get to and toss quickly.

*He and Jyn had brought a case of them back from the evacuation after Endor. Draven’s “wedding gift”….that and their freedom anyway.*

Conn climbed into the command seat. Interior lights were down and the ship was dead in the water, floating.

“Ready Conn?”

He could see his mission partner only by the cloudy moonlight reflected off the water. His hands were on the controls, still but ready.

“Oh aye…I mean, hell no…but aye. Good luck Cassian. See you soon.”

*He was a good man, Conn. He’d never married, although he’d householded briefly with a dyer up the coast it hadn’t lasted long. Cassian knew… through his own observation, Tom Markey would never betray such a trust…. that he’d loved Olwen, Youngest Lady of HarborTown since boyhood. Heaven help him.*

He moved into position at the hatch door and swung his legs over into the water. The pale backs of his “escort” lifted up in the water, ready for him to hold onto their dorsals and be pulled down through the dark water to infiltrate and sabotage. Two minutes until he had to move into position.

“Portia?” he said quietly, before he slipped the mouthpiece in and closed the mask. “Tell Jyn I love her. Tell her I will meet her at home.” She hated carrying personal messages but she would just have to suck it up. She could hear him through audio transmitter and receiver inside his mask although she would have to stay silent until they got inside, just to be safe.

Then Cassian Jeron Andor prayed as his grandfather had prayed and slipped down into the dark.

*Me despierto y veo la mañana*

*Estoy pidiendo que mi camino sea claro a mi vista*

*Estoy pidiendo el valor de caminar a través de la oscuridad*

*Le pido a la luz que me espere*
Chapter End Notes

I wake up and see the morning
I am asking that my path be clear to me
I'm asking for the courage to walk through the darkness
I ask the light to wait for me
Chapter Summary

A stormtrooper stands on perimeter watch and is confronted by the unexpected.

Galen's team moves on the Beacon Station placement on the Marshes. Dex manages to spare a life.

Two secure. One to go.

Chapter Notes

Combat action. Oh my.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

CL-893 stood on perimeter and watched.

He considered reaching down to tighten the tension on his knee joints, just for the extra support, but he knew if he moved the JX-33s would start buzzing to find out why he was moving. Any reply referencing personal discomfort would indicate inadequate prep of his armor and would trigger a demerit check. They’d been warned that even the cleared surfaces here would turn spongy again quickly. All that mattered was that the ground was firm under the equipment. There must be packed dirt or rock under there somewhere, something the struts ran into but out here it was….spongy.

His back was killing him.

The tall grass around them rippled like what he imagined an ocean to look like for better than two kilometers in every direction and the dark treeline was visible only to the west and northwest. Green insects the length of a little finger were zipping swiftly around on glittery gold or blue wings. every now and then one would bounce off the droids with a ping! or hit his armor with a thwack! and then buzz off in another direction.
He adjusted vision to make out movement in the treetops about 2.5 back to the west. Shifting again to close-up and filter he was able to identify large animals in the upper canopy. It was those sloth-like quadrupeds that the JX-33s had noted earlier. They’d seen them moving around for the last couple of days but they never came out any further, just stayed in the trees, well out of range of the hand weapons. He could spot them on the IR in his helmet grid.

_Hmmmmm…these were pretty big beasties, though._

The one he had the nearest reading on would be three meters tall at the shoulder maybe, if you stood it up.

_The big guns on the platform could plug them easily as target practice. It was something to look forward to to pass the time if they wound up stuck here waiting for the evac shuttle, he supposed._

The four of them were supposed to stay still on post with the droids at the perimeter ring while the station fired up. Word was that it might do something funny for a minute and a half or so during the sequence that would block audio and there was a possibility the JX’s would even blink off-line for a second if the interference was too much. The one with the yellow decal on its leg had actually seemed to be…_for lack of a better word…_nervous about it, and had made the Signal tech repeat the instruction twice. He and DC-135 were supposed to watch that one carefully.

Oh hell. The sloths were making that noise again, that keening….. _that shit was eerie_. He surreptitiously turned the exterior audio down.

_There was just something about that noise that set your teeth on edge._

AB-996 and RD-141 were on the opposite side, lucky stiffs. All they had to do was look at the grass not the trees and the freaky sloths.

The droids had been circling but the Tech inside, Borhed….._honestly, that was the grey suit’s name_…. had locked them down.

Almost time.

_[NTO Borhed to Support: All stations for activation. Blackout for 01:56 to commence in 00:20. Report on signal and audio as necessary..]_

_All three droids buzzed in green. He could hear them one after the other. Yellow decal went last._

_[AB-996: Set.]_[RD-141: Set.]_[BX-459: Set.]_

_“BX-459: Set.”_

_His back was truly killing him, this armor was really misaligned somewhere, as soon as the static_
cleared and he was cleared to move he was going to request a system check...that might spare him the demerit..and re-buckle.

[DC-135: Set.]

He glanced sideways at the wonky droid and saw that DC-135 was doing the same. She gave him a wave.

Stupid rookie. That could get tagged as personal interaction. She got seen doing that and they were both going to get in trouble.

[All Stations//: Operational signal link in 10...9...8...7....6....5...2....1]

[---------------------]

The damn sloths let out a booming echoing wail. Startling him so badly he reflexively clutched his rifle.

Damn! His faceplate was practically buzzing with it. How could they do that from so far away?

(00:15)

Ping!

The JX-33 with the yellow decal spun suddenly, it’s huge round radar eye turned toward him, almost level with his own eye, open wide...accusingly?....and then the whole spider-like thing fell backwards, a small smoking hole in its power cable casing.

(00:17)

CL-893 had been trained and conditioned for automatic response to a number of conditions and he did, despite his paralyzing astonishment, turn to fire his rifle. His helmet had tracked the shot automatically 2 k away on a platform in the trees. It was not an easy aim, and in that same instant three other things happened as he raised his gun. DC-135 flew backwards as shards of her cracked eye lens scattered. The other JX-33 raised up and fired its own defensive laser just as it also collapsed with a smoking hole in its power case. He felt a burning slap to his neck and thought incongruously that one of the insects must have bitten him, as he fell dead to the carbon-fused ground.

(00:19)

He did not really see the fifth shot. That one was a rare and long-hoarded piercer charge brought back along with the well-cared-for sniper rifle from the Battle of Endor.
It was old tech but it struck the Control panel on the sealed station door cleanly and popped it open.

(00:21)

Another blaster thudded out from the waving grass off the edge of the cleared platform and struck the last JX-33 as it dashed around from behind the station structure and a mud-covered man emerged from where he had crouched in the foliage cover and ran toward the now opening door to throw something inside.

(00:25)

RD-141 fired from the far side but another camouflaged figure emerged now from the grass behind and shot her in the back of the leg, so her blast went wild. The stormtrooper pitched forward on her face.

(00:30)

AB-996, unsure who to aim at hesitated, reflexes failing perhaps because no simulation he had been sim-drilled in had prepared him for anything that looked like this. To the credit of his training-creche it was only for a heartbeats length, but he had stepped just enough out from the cover of the structure and a last shot from the far-off trees dropped him.

(00:46)

Bo pointed her rifle through the smoking station hatch and called inside, in a friendly and companionable tone, “Hey in there you murdering runt bastard, I’m pretty sure that ghosty is telling you you’re screwed right now and you’d best believe her. You might as well come on over here and toss your guns out first, ‘else we will joyously plug you one or six.”

(00:50)

Dex ran to where RD-141 was half-crawling and kicked her rifle away before she could get gloved hands on it. Then he shoved her over on her back with his foot and jammed the muzzle of the blaster his mother had given him under the edge of her helmet.

“Take this thing off and you can live,” he said.

(01:20)

There was a sound of muffled blaster fire as Bo fired into the open hatch.

“Aw… stupid runt’s going for the gun in there Portia!” she yelled, loud enough to be picked up on the audio receivers on the inside of the control station. There was a sound like a steel plate crashing
down within.

Bo then stepped into the doorway and fired again.

“Got ‘em!” she said, “Thanks ma’am!” then “Dex! Get the hell over here!”

(01:28)

RD-141 reached up with shaking hands and undid the clasps, the helmet came off with a slight snapping sound from the interior seal. Dex took it from her.

She was young and brown-skinned with short white hair. She looked terrified past reason, cheeks wet, probably from sweat, or maybe tears from the pain in her leg.

Thank you, Dex thought.

“Lay down, keep your hands over your head,” he said. "Don’t move.”

“Are you Rebels?” her voice sounded faint and scratched, like she didn’t use it very much.

“Yes,” he said. “Stay still.”

She did as he’d told her to.

Jyn was right. You took that thing off and they didn’t know what to do.

He reached inside and pulled at the wires Cassian had shown him, a section came away with a silver clip on it. He put it to his ear and said, into the empty helmet. “Portia! We’re secure!”

That bloody machine had gotten a shot off. He hoped Galen was ok.

(01:36)
Chapter End Notes

Gonna try to get moving on this so nobody gets too bored.
Cassian gets inside the service hatch of Navigational Support Platform M16.02.07/Beacon #1.

He thinks about how their Alliance prepared for this moment, wonders about his underwater guides and remembers how he and Jyn came to decide who would fight where in this dangerous hour.

He worries about his son, remembers old friends and almost gets his eardrums popped.

“Do they have individual names?” he had asked Perin, long years ago, the first time she had taken him out on the Harbor in a small boat to “meet” the Bequa. Smooth grey and white and black forms had turned gracefully in the water so thoughtful eyes could regard him.

“They are each who they are,” she had shrugged, “and will tell you just that if you ask. They think us poor forgetful creatures that we must mark ourselves with words as much as we do.”
“Did you bring heavy stones?” the pale grey Bequa had asked him in a piping voice, as he
manuvered himself to the edge of the hatch, ready to get in the sea, “to put in your wrappings so you
don't float away?”

There had been what felt like a faint buzz in the water around his ankles.

Laughter? Or was the big one chiding the small?

“Ignore this foolish child,” the slightly larger darker cetacean said rolling up, hardly to be seen in the
black water save for a flash of a brown thoughtful eye, “she teases you to calm her own nerves.”

They meant weights of course. He had slid packets of sand into the interior legs and abdominal
pockets of the dry suit, not exactly diving ballast but it should work.

Her nerves? Wonderful. It sounded like one of those folksy HarborTown sayings, “....And then
things got so bad the Bequa were nervous.”

His guides had seemed most concerned that he might be afraid.

“We know you have weak eyes but don’t worry. We will take good care that you do not fall,” the
large one said, in a motherly tone, “Now, do you have everything you need? Check again.”

-------
They had debated… *it had come close to argument but never quite crossed the line*…up in Portia’s tower over who would go where when the alarm came.

“Just how much experience do you have rigging underwater explosions?” Jyn had asked him with just the faintest touch of professional scorn.

“I have some,” he’d said, closing down the data pad on the table in front of him, “And besides, you know how much I hate the cold.”

*Both those things were true.*

“Besides,” he said, “More of the Bequa know me by sight and if we need to pull in the Far Islanders for clean-up, I’ve done the advance networking.”

*Also true.*

When Portia had compiled the reports with her own quick blink-and-peek scans from the powered down satellites it became immediately clear what getting into the large platform would involve.

As cold and dark and dangerous as it might be up North there would be stars and open air.

*It had been a reflex response but Cassian would not back down. He had held her too many nights and felt a brave little girl’s heart pound in fear of dark walls closing on her. It didn’t matter how many battles she’d fought since. She wasn’t going down there if there was any other choice, not if he could help it.*

“Hmmm…”

“Unless you think maybe your knee isn’t up to the hike of course….” he started, but she cut him off and threw one of the spare cushions at him from where she stood by the staircase.

“Don’t even try your reverse- psychology Intelligence bullshit on me Captain Andor,” she said, “It’s never worked and it never will. If you think you’re the man for the bloody Ocean just say so.”

“I think I should take the Ocean,” he said, lifting his legs over the bench so he could face her, even if still sitting.

She glared at him for a moment in silence then walked across the room to take his face in her hands, looking down at him with those eyes that could still pare him like a knife.

“Portia,” she said, without shifting her gaze even an eyelash. “How wide would the access crawlway in the support legs of a platform like that be?”

Portia was standing on the other side of the table, imaged as a tanned young woman with short curly black hair… *Agatha, Communications Technician if he remembered correctly.*
“Based on the width of the struts as they were seen coming down and the structural need for the support of…”

“Best educated guess, Portia.”

“Based on the designs they’ve used for similar structures I’m guessing it would have a service tube at least 80 cm. in diameter running down at least 100 meters from the base platform itself, widening to a service compartment at the top. Cassian is 178 cm. tall and has a shoulder width of 65 cm.”

“No, Portia,” he said, “Surely that’s low. After all that wood I chopped last week my shoulders are at least 66 cm.”

Jyn bent and kissed him then.

_They had had a rule once about no overt displays of affection in front of Portia, but they had given that one up long ago._

Hours to make their decisions and only a few days to put the plans in place.

Jyn would go North. The First Order had left one of their shuttles on the frost but if it was still there Mara and she could fly it out well enough with Portia’s help.

Cassian and Portia would get inside the larger ocean-based platform. Conn could manage Guardian and her guns.

Galen had claimed the Grasslands. He was the closest, since he’d been coming back from a trip to the Inner Islands he’d gone straight in to RiverTown when he saw the beacons and called in from the station there with Dora.

_They’d had audio comms only. Cassian would have given anything to see him even as a bad holo but they couldn’t spare the power or take the risk of scanners picking up that kind of link. This was what they’d been preparing themselves for for the last two years._

*“I have Bo with me now and we’re checking on Dex. If he can meet us on the trail. Serla will be waiting and the Taun are setting up right now.”*

Portia had sent them schematics on the lone data pad. They’d run through the timing, the equipment, the placement of the platforms. Galen would be completely on his own once he left RiverTown. There was no other communication out there.
Do you have a plan? he’d burned to say, but tried to stop himself. Galen was a grown man and a soldier of the Watch. Questioning him didn’t seem appropriate.

“Galen, what’s your plan?” Jyn asked.

This is why humans put so much effort into having two parents, he thought, almost laughing, Next time Dov asks me, this is what I’m telling him.

It had seemed obvious as soon as Portia showed them the mapping. The Taun already had surveyed the site, it was near one of their seasonal camps. The Pallisades were high ground so what you’d need to do was….

“I’m going to use the Treeline camp as high ground,” Galen said. ‘I can put one or two men in cover on the ground in the marshes and use Sorla’s people as signal scouts, since they’ll be able to hear Portia’s alarm at Green River Crossing to give us the time. I’ll adapt depending on what we see, but I should have a clear set-up already in place. That’s Plan A.”

If he didn’t ask Jyn would, “Do you have equipment?”

There was a pause.

“Yes sir, I’ve got the rifle and scope from the RiverTown Tower. We’re fully loaded. Bo’s got the usual deranged arsenal and Dex may bring in some guns from their place. ”

The RiverTown rifle was a good one, he knew.

The challenge would be getting ground men onto the platform. If they sealed the hatch, it would take several minutes to get it open, unless…

“Galen,” he said. “I have a piercer charge clip I’m going to get to you. I’ll send it to Green River and Dimala can run it up and meet you at Treeline.”

There was a pause.

“Good. Thank you…..sir. That might be a big advantage.”
He’d signed off after.

“If I understand what you are talking about,” Portia had said, “Galen might need to strike a target area 6cm. by 10cm. over a distance of up to…”

“He’ll determine the exact situation when he gets there, Portia. But if he thinks the shot is feasible he’ll at least have the charge. I’m giving him options, nothing more.”

I’ve seen him on target. He’s that good.
I don’t know if I should be grateful or beg forgiveness for it but he’s that good.

-----------

The dark closed over him immediately and seamlessly. If he’d doubted the choice to send Jyn North all his doubts vanished then. The faint gleam of the moons was gone in less than a heartbeat.

Is this what it was like Abuelo?

He remembered Rue Melshi walking them all through emergency-suited space walk evac drills in Basic but even that hadn’t seemed this….uneartly. In space it was just you inside your suit. Zero gravity was weird and scary and humbling but he had intellectually understood what was happening. Or maybe he’d just been too young and dumb to know any better.

This was more different from that than he’d imagined it would be.

The suit protected him from the cold as the Bequa pulled him below and isolated him from the pressure to a large degree. He could feel it a little on the back of his neck. You were inside the dark and it was a real palpable thing, not just an absence of light. He was holding the dorsal harness on the smaller grey and knew that the older one and at least two others must also be beside him though he could not see them. Without the forward motion of his guide he would soon have had no idea what which direction was up or down.

He was glad the air flow made a slight noise so he had more to listen to than the rush of the water
and the pounding of his own heart. Beneath his hands he felt a vibration, which he took to be the Bequa talking, maybe to her companions.

He realized after several minutes though that there seemed to be a kind of cadence to it.

*Is she singing to me?*

*The Far Islanders had a rich oral tradition and their singers still performed epic poems about how the Bequa had befriended them as wounded and terrified refugees fleeing from the mainland, and carried out to a new home on the Islands.*

*The strength that bore us here is gone,*

*And we are left alone--alone--*

*Dig the grave both wide and deep,*

*For I am sick, and fain would sleep!*  
*The falcons of the wood are flown,*

*And we are left alone--alone--*

*Dig the grave both deep and wide,*

*We can but slumber side by side.*  
*The sisters of the rock are sleeping.*

*Sleep that wakes not for our weeping:*

*Then a sound of voices ringing:*

*Like the sway of ocean swelling*

*Roll'd a deep song round our dwelling.*  
*Oh! to hear the echoes pealing*

*Round our bare and broken sheeling,*

*Voices then, with soaring chorus,*

*Pass'd like shining skylarks o'er us.*
He’d been wearing the ear-clip when he’d first heard one of the “Traditional” singers sing a snatch of that one on one of the huge out-riggers off Vision. Which meant that Portia had heard too.

“Eso es hermoso,” she’d said, as always, in his mother’s voice, “Estoy muy agradecido. Por favor agradéceles por mí, Cassian, si tienes la oportunidad.”

It was only minutes, probably less than 20, but so perfect was that darkness that he was almost startled when the IR view on the mask visor picked up faint specks of red and brought him back to orientation.

It was the heat of the tiny service lights on the platform’s underwater struts, getting quickly closer.

A faint timer light showed in a corner of the screen of his mask. Portia had risked a small burst to let him know. 04:00 to the power surge. He would have 01:50 to get her inside.

There was even a faint hope that the Bequa’s sonar burst and the pressurized suit would temporarily confuse any service repair droids in the access tunnel as to his outline.

He remembered young Fennie Tully and his eye-patch. Just to be on the safe side he decided to throw with his left hand. He’d had trained himself to be fairly ambidextrous but if he had to pick one to keep he was going with the right.

His guide slowed and brought him up close until he could feel the hard surface of the support beam bump his shoulder. He loosened one hand from the harness and reached up with slightly stiff fingers to activate the tiny chem light on his mask.

It was faint, although it didn’t seem that way to his darkness-accustomed eyes. The faint green signature should read almost exactly as a natural bioluminescent…or at least that was the gamble. Jyn had rigged it up.

He flexed his gloved fingers and then switched hands to do the same on the other side.

“New rule,” Jyn had said, as they lay on the daybed up in the tower for a few hours rest, waiting for Portia to piggyback onto some solar flares and give them a window to fly Guardian out to the coast.

“No hay problema, amor.”

This late in the game mi amor?

“Neither of us gets to say “I’m too old for this shit.””
The light outlined a small oblong hatch. His guide nudged upward. This was his signal.

He felt around the collar of the suit and pulled the rolled covering up over his ears. It was probably made as ear protection for runway workers and had empty pockets at ear level that would have once had headphones but the insulation should protect his hearing from whatever attack the Bequa were going to make on that hatch seal.

He could just make out the grab bars on the side of the opening.

80 cm.? Let’s hope you’re right Portia. It looked like a little less.

Then tapped his grey friend on the back as a signal and reached out to take ahold of one of the bumper bars.

The Bequa rolled away from beneath him quickly. He thought he’d almost caught a “Good luck” wink before she vanished into the dark. He saw the tails and fins of a dozen others whisk faintly around him in the faint green light of his mask, then vanish.

On an air line you had to keep your breathing steady so he did that.

00:60 lit the faint number in the right corner of the mask.

He thought what he had thought at Endor, and on the day each of his children was born and a thousand times since.

Whatever happens, thank you Kay.

00:01
00:00

It hit him like a wave and pressed him flat to the wall of the structure.

Damn it!

His ears might or might not have been protected but he felt it in every fucking bone in his body.
The oblong hatch opened.

He held tight with one shaky arm as the blast dissipated, swinging himself in front of the opening and pulling the disc of portable link out of the pocket in the front of the suit. The water rushed inside pulling him with it. Later he would wonder if the Bequa had somehow pushed him.

If there had been time he would have panicked, without a doubt.

It was too much like the nightmares, only backwards. He was pulled up instead of thrown down, blurry lights flashing past, shoulder striking something, some sort of sharp appendage tearing his suit at the arm and the cold rushing in before it could self-seal.

He must have gasped because the mouth seal broke and the breathing mix started to filled the mask.

Fuck!

But it was over. He broke up into air, on some sort of narrow service landing.

He’d lost his grip on the link disk when his shoulder struck but it didn’t matter. Words lit up inside the filling mask even as he’d pulled it off and coughed painfully before shoving the mouthpiece back in.

I’M IN.

He grabbed some piece of tubing with his still attached left hand and pulled himself up, already reaching to unzip the suit and get his right hand inside to the blaster.

Four small repair droids, squat and round, yellow-banded and roughly the size of footballs, if footballs had long sharp crab-like legs, were standing on the ledge just above his head probably still fixed in their rack. They lit up in an instant and swiveled to stare down at him, for all the world as if shocked.

“Sorry boys,” he thought and fired.
Galen Andor sits, wounded in his sniper's nest above Navigational Support Platform M16.02.07/Beacon #3. He thinks back on his mission, the stories he grew up with and how his understanding of his parents has changed as he learned more about the history of the Galactic Civil War and their part in it. In one recollection it becomes obvious that Jyn and Cassian themselves have never spoken about some events in detail, even all these years later. As he waits for help to reach him Galen is visited by not one but two old family friends.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He ran through the triage in his head. Laying down was bad if he was bleeding, but so was strenuous effort. In the end he managed to sit down from his crouching position and push himself back from the rail with his feet so that his back was against the main trunk. Staying quiet and waiting here was clearly his best option.

The upside of a laser discharge wound was that it self-cauterized at least partially and the risk of infection was slight. The downside, of course was that nothing stopped or slowed it until it was blocked or timed out. If he looked he’d find the hole in the railing that corresponded to the angle of the shot and a hole in the tree behind him….and maybe a couple of trees behind that. If he didn’t die he’d go look later, it was weird but that kind of thing interested him, the math of it.

It might not even be bad. He honestly couldn’t tell. His left hand arm felt numb now. Not paralyzed like the nerves were cut, he’d been moving it before, but now it was as if a Taun had kicked it. There was a hole in his upper left shoulder, below his collarbone but he could still breathe ok so no punctured lung. If it was a thru-shot straight or angled up….should be, right?…..he’d survive. Poking his fingers around in it wasn’t going to help.

Ten k. away down by the river there was a sensor pole with an alarm hidden a birch tree. It was the wrong frequency for humans but Mems and Taun could hear. Portia had signaled with it earlier in the day. Sorla told them when to get into position. The rest of the Taun got up into the trees. Their
calls would serve as signal that the clock had started, disguise any sound the ground team made and act as a scary-ass distraction.

Fifteen Taun in full battle cry should put the fear of Ea in anybody. It had nearly stopped his heart and he’d been wearing earplugs. Galen was set and ready, with everything condensed into the rectangle of vision that scope gave him.

_Bless them they were all holding stock still._

_It was just like the Manual. “Here’s the thing,” Mama had said, “if they lose communications with each other they have a set number of configurations they will go into and hold. It’s one of the perils of living in those precious little eggshells of armor. If possible the FO is worse about this than the old Empire. They are trained to have every move choreographed by superior in field or a little voice in their ear….no slight meant, Portia…. Their superiors don’t trust them to even take a whizz independently and they don’t trust themselves. It’s our best advantage, be prepared to work it.”_

Fifteen seconds in, the pitch of the Taun sound offensive dropped suddenly.

That was his signal. Dex and Bo were up and in place.

He aimed. He fired.

_Droid._

_Trooper._

_Trooper._

He should have moved after the second shot.

Galen knew that but the second damn droid had zipped up directly between the stormtroopers and there was no time to re-set. He lined up on it’s power casing box and took the shot with the pre-programmed intention of dropping down and moving just as his finger finished the motion.

_So, yeah. Not fast enough Galen._

He’d felt the hit and it had knocked him back a meter. Fuck! Automatically he got onto his knees and pulled back up to the rail, the rifle was still in his right hand. He’d lost a few seconds. Fortunately he’d cut a position mark for the shot on the hatch entry control box right into the wooden rail with his knife ahead of time. That was the one shot he couldn’t miss. It didn’t matter if neither he nor Bo made it as long as Dex got the link inside that door.

_Smartest move he ever made. All he had to do was get the rifle up, he’d had it sighted already. The fingers of his left hand were balky at that point but he didn’t even register this yet. The heel of his hand was enough to hit the second charge button on the side of the gun and set up the piercer charge._
“It’ll have a different kick,” read the note Papa had wrapped around the little finger-sized clip Dimala had given him, breathlessly, at the Crossing, “be ready for that.”

*No kidding. It felt more like a recoil than a blaster-shot. How did that even work?*

He’d kept his eye on the sight and fired.

Hit.

*Any fucking time now Dex.*

Two long seconds.

A droid moved around the side but he had no clear line on it.

A shot took it from the side. There was Dex. He was up, covered in mud to baffle the IR on the droids and heading for the hatch.

*Yes.*

In that same second the knowledge that something was wrong with his left arm finally reached his brain.

His eye was still on the scope focussed on the door. Bo was up and half of a stormtrooper stepped right into his line around the edge of the structure.

*“When they return fire they often open themselves up by stepping out from cover and give you a clean shot on them from your new position.”*

*I got the Bonus Point, Mama.*

He pulled the trigger but didn’t see if he made it.

His left hand had stopped responding the way he wanted it to.

The left side of his shirt felt wet and hot.

Taking his head back from the scope at long last he closed his eyes and rested his forehead on his arm for several long breaths.

*Ok. Done now.*

He pushed himself back. It was up to Dex and Bo now, and Mama and Mara up near the Ice, and Papa and Conn down on the Equatorial Sea.
Some parts of the story he’d known even before, he just had only known them in childish bits. Family stories. It was years before he’d connected into anything like a larger picture.

When they were young Mama had told them the names of all the stones. Their Heart Companions of Rogue One. Her parents and Papa’s. Papa’s little sister. Off to one side was the grey stone of one of Mama’s old teachers in the Partisans, a man named Saw.

When Mama was little she’d been hidden in a dark cave for a long time before help came and she still had bad dreams about it.

The Black Shuttle, the carved-up shell of which still to be seen at the farthest end of the long fields, had brought them here after all their friends were killed at Scarif. Kay had made it carry them but not even Portia knew how. Kay was the bravest and Papa missed him terribly and called his name sometimes.

Dora had asked once how many people had been on Alderaan.

It was the sort of question Portia would have usually answered but this time Mama had done it. “2 Billion,” she said.

They had had to climb a tower to send a message to Rebels in the War against the Empire. When he was little he’d imagined it as Portia’s tower, because that was all he knew but later he found out that was wrong. Papa had fallen but Mama had sent the message and he managed to climb to her.

“Did you climb the whole way up?” Kayly had asked one day, after Portia had shown them pictures of Scarif Tower.

“Mama almost did,” Papa had told them. They were folding the big spring laundry together, “I made it up about twenty meters and got onto the platform and took the lift the rest of the way.”

“You did what?” Mama turned and dropped the laundry basket, staring at him.
“I got into the service lift on the last interior platform. It was unlocked when I fell against it and access-keyed to go up to the transmission rig.”

Mama started laughing so hard she had to sit down on the floor by the basket.

“Jyn?”

“I….I didn’t even…think about…I thought,” she gasped, pulling up her knees and wiping tears her face with both hands “All these years, I thought….you…” she dissolved in speechless laughter again.

Papa laid down the stack of clothes he’d been folding,.....*he and Kayly were the best folders....* and stared at her, astonished.

“You thought I climbed the whole data tower? By hand?”

She shook her head, still unable to speak.

“Wait. You didn’t find the lift? Then how did you get out onto the platform?” he asked.

She looked up at him, still gasping, from her seat on the ground, “There was no lift up there… I saw the rails for one but it was…sealed....I went through the…” She twirled a finger in the air and collapsed in giggles again.

“The air vent?” he said. “You went all the way through the fucking air vent?”

She was nodding, head back on her knees.

“He was...below…” it was hard to understand her, she was laughing so hard, “He must have been trying to…in the… lift……when I was....so it wasn't there...and then didn’t …. door....after….”

Now Papa was laughing.

“Jyn! I had four broken ribs, a concussion and a separated shoulder…for starters…twenty meters is a lot!”

“I know….” she choked, “Oh….I see ..now. He….he….didn’t hear you….I didn’t…either…” She clutched her ribs as if they ached. “You were just….there.”

Papa was holding the edge of the table as if for support and got down to sit beside her, laughing now almost as hard as she was.

“They were bombing the fucking place…Jyn….it was noisy….the bastard was trying to shoot you.”

“I know…I know….”

“Hell Jyn, I was trying to get to you...….I couldn’t have……through a suction fan…what did you….?”

He had his arms around her and she collapsed with her head in his lap, giggling, “I… I thought…. you were dead and…. you….were so beautiful…I thought you….just loved me that much….”

“I did…..I do…mujer….I’m only human…it hurt.”
“I know…Poor Cassian….” she wailed, “I’m so sorry….

They sat there together on the floor laughing in each other’s arms and he and Kayly had shared an “our parents are crazy” look when Papa called them over to help them stand up and pick the laundry back up.

_They and their Heart Companions Bodhi Rook and Stordan Tonc were the only survivors of Rogue One._

Just as it had no doubt for Kayly before him there came a day, after he was about ten or eleven, that he was deemed old enough to watch the “hard” History Lessons: Kashyyyk, Scarif, the Deathstar, Alderaan, Endor.

Papa and Mama had both been there in the Portia’s tower and said to him and to Dora and Bill, “We’re here, if you want to ask anything.”

So they had, slowly. About what they had seen and what it had been like. About the battles and ships and the Princess…._Papa had met her and said that she was very brave and even shorter than she looked in the holos…..and Jedi Knights._

Papa had known a few former Jedi-like people but deferred saying Portia knew the most about them. She said they had lots of impressive powers….. “mods” _as she called them, which confused Galen because that was the same thing she called the ear-cuff than his parents used as a comm-link with her…but were otherwise kind of stuck-up. She’d liked Luke Skywalker though._

“Never met any,” Mama said with a shrug, “People sometimes spun stories about how the Jedi would reappear and save the day but somehow they just never seemed to show up….except for Skywalker, I guess he counts.”

But later as he had been helping Papa stack wood in the barn he had asked the personal questions he had been too shy to ask in front of others.

“Were you afraid?”

“When?”

_In the War? But that was too big, he’d known._

“At Endor? At Scarif?” _The Deathstar was the scariest thing Galen could imagine._
‘At Endor? No.” he said tying off a bundle, “I knew what I had to do and I was too focused on that to think of anything else, except after Mama got hurt. I was pretty scared then.”

“And Scarif?”

He stopped then, as if thinking. Galen wondered if anyone else had ever asked him.

“No,” he said, “I was terribly afraid of failing, but after we were done, after the message was sent, that stopped.”

“Were you scared of dying?”

*Galen wished he hadn’t said it as soon as he had, knowing for sure that Kayly would never ever ask such a thing.*

“No,” Papa said quietly, “I wasn’t. Sad maybe…but I think I might have been a little too tired for that even. Your Mama carried me down to the water and as long as she was with me I don’t think I cared about much else.”

“But you didn’t die.”

“No,” he said, with a smile, “we didn’t, that was a great surprise.”

___________________

Galen waited and rested his eyes. He really couldn’t hear much more than the wind in the trees, but there were worse things to hear.

He felt someone touching his hurt shoulder gently and forced his eyes open.

A broad-shouldered human was kneeling on the platform beside him.

For a moment Galen thought it must be the man who’d given him his tattoo, although this human was broader in the shoulder and bearded so that couldn’t be. He also had long braided black hair tied behind his back and was dressed in some kind of grey robe with a sash tossed over a red shirt underneath.

The man was carefully peeling back the torn edges of Galen’s shirt.

“Not bad,” he said. “Narrow. Straight through. Just stay still and you’ll be fine. Your friends are on their way.” He had a strange accent.

*Pardon sir, but who the fuck are you?*
“Ha!” said the man, “spoken like Jyn’s son. I am just checking on you nephew.”

He reached across Galen to pick up the rifle from the floor and inspect it.

“BlasTech A280. Nice. With a clever scope no less. It always amazed me what your father could do with such a tiny gun.”

He laid the weapon back down, carefully, by Galen’s right hand and glanced up to the rail he’d used as a firing support.

“You did a good job.”

_Did we secure the platform?_

“That you did. Your parents are still mopping up where they are but it’s going pretty well. I wanted to tell you.”

_Um. Thanks. I’m probably going to wish I hadn’t asked but…_

"Baze Malbus, formerly a Guardian of the Whills at the Great Kyber Temple of NiJedha, presently…oh, I forgot what Chirrut decided we should call ourselves, so I guess I will just say, “freelancing.”

The big man laughed pretty hard at his own joke. “Sorry you asked now?”

_Definitely._

“At least you haven’t asked me if you’re dying yet, that puts you ahead of most people.”

_You already told me I wasn’t._

“Smart boy. I won’t stay but I wanted to tell you that I am proud of you and to tell you you did what you had to.”

_You think I doubt that?_

“Don’t get testy, you can’t even stand up,” the man said indulgently. ”You doubt a lot of things and we both know it. You just killed three people to save your family and your world and a lot more you don’t even know about. The blame for their deaths is on the Bantha-fuckers who sent them here but poison is poison so just know that. It may come to you tomorrow or next year but when it does don’t try to drink it away or anything else stupid. Feel it, own it and then move on. It’s not over yet by a long shot so you’re going to need to take care of yourself. The boat was a good idea by the way.”

_Is my sister ok?_
“She’s fine. She’ll be here soon.”

He leaned over, pushing Galen’s damp hair back to kiss him on the forehead.

“Tell your mother I love her, and next time move after the second shot.”

Galen thought of other questions later but the man seemed to be gone so he didn’t get to ask.

After a little while he heard voices calling his name, but shouting seemed like it might be painful. It hadn’t mattered because Serla and Dimala climbed up onto the edge of the platform.

“O-oh Galen!” Serla called, “Galen’s hurt! We need blanket and some ropes!”

“Don’t cry,” he said as calmly as he could, “Are Dex and Bo ok?”

Someone else was climbing up too, not a Taun. A human with short dark hair and a trim beard threaded with grey was looking at him with grave dark eyes.

“Just stay quiet Galen. We’ll get you out of here as quickly as we can.”

His accent was a little like that of the other man.

“Chirrut Imwe?” Galen asked.

“No,” the man said, looking both surprised and a little worried.

“I’m afraid not. I’m Bodhi Rook. We’re going to get you out on the Esperanza. Just hang tight.”
Was wandering around the Interwebs on day and read a post in which someone pointed out that people with injuries as bad as Cassian's, barely able to stand, simply do not dash through roiling fan blades. Hell, Jyn barely made it. While we are all willing to suspend all manner of disbelief of course for the Star Wars, this person also pointed out that he is standing almost directly in front of the OPEN elevator doors and only a few minutes behind Krennic. Cassian probably had to make a heroic broken climb but only as far as the level Krennic's man shot him from. He got past the fan blades because Krennic left the service access lift unlocked.....hell he probably left his damn executive key in it. Of course Jyn an Krennic didn't hear or see him: a) bombs b) their absolutely death-struggle focus on each other. I found the image of Cassian realizing after fifteen years that Jyn had believed him capable not just of a heroic act of physical courage but an absolute miracle...."Honey! I love you but are you nuts? I had five broken ribs!" absolutely beautiful.

Also, Galen gets to be Baze.
Cassian secures the interior of Beacon Platform #1. This will mean doing a lot of things he had hoped to never do again. Two FO technicians face their enemies for the first time. One fares better than another.

Portia informs Cassian about the status of his family and brings him some good news.

Cassian tossed his gun up first and then climbed onto the narrow grated platform himself.

Humans were clearly never expected to work down this far so there wasn't a lot of room. Still, he managed to get both legs up out of the cold seawater and to unzip himself from the dive suit, moving the full-size blaster into his gun belt and the smaller one into the inside pocket of his shirt.

The blue shirt and trousers were half soaked and his shoulder hurt like hell but nothing seemed broken. Refreshingly. He struggled one of the tiny analgesic patches open with damp fingers and slid it inside the shirt to stick on his skin.

Even holding his breath the smell of ozone from the droids he'd fried came through sharply for the quarter minute it took him to get the mask off and reconfigure it. The "air" here was pumped in to balance the pressure of the water and had some oxygen in it but was meant to be fire-suppressant rather than breathable. That should hopefully improve as he moved up. In the meantime, he'd still need the mask. Slipping the band around his head he tucked the small air canister into the shirt pocket and breathed as normally as he could.

He’d gotten the link inside at 01:49. The small grey disc could actually be seen floating loose in the water just within his reach, if he lay on his stomach. So he snatched it up and clipped it back to his belt.
The small screen inside the mask had very few character lines available at any one time but the word [WELL?] appeared in the top right corner of his vision, followed by [TAP WALL] and [CONFIRM].

He picked up a shard of broken claw from the droids he’d shot and banged it against the interior wall.

[GOOD]

[JYN WORRIED]

*If she was worried she was alive. Don’t worry about me mi amor. Secure that platform. Don’t get hurt.*

There was not a lot of real light down here except for the yellow service light strips on the ladders but now a dim red was flashing on far above his head.

*Warning alarm?*

[CONN FIRING]

[TOPSIDE]

*Right. Let’s get the hell out of here.*

Cassian looked up. It was a good 27 meters up the ladder.

If it weren’t for the stupid mouthpiece he might have smiled.

*She wasn’t up there this time but the only way back to her was to climb.*

As he had on a terrible day nearly thirty years ago and and in a thousand nightmares since he started up the ladder.

He stopped to check his canister once or twice. Hopefully the breathing mix was sparing him any effects of nitrogen bubbles in his blood. He’d never had the bends but he knew that miners died from it sometimes back on Fest. It was supposed to hurt like hell.

Narrow access tubes had opened at many points along the walls but they were all for small repair droids. 27 meters up was the first human-scaled worker opening. The hatch slid open as he reached it.

*Bless you Portia.*

The corner of his mask lit again.

[AIR OK NOW]
So he pulled it off, with relief, hooking it to his belt and pressing his back to the wall.

He was inside a small circular room still below sea-level he knew but at least within the main structure. A wall panel black screen lit with text and a rather generic female voice echoed across in audio, repeating the same words.

[You can talk, this service area is unoccupied and sealed]

The panel lit near the hatch, outlining a small “emergency” hand-comm. He unclipped it.

“Are we secure?”

[Yes, Conn took out the droids and two of the troopers on the topside. He did a bit of unintended damage to the platform flooring but nothing significant. Two other stormtroopers fell into the water. The Bequa ate them.]

“Ate them?”

[To all appearances, yes. Two very large adults swallowed them whole. I would be concerned about the armor causing intestinal blockages but they seemed to know what they were about. I wonder if they regurgitate it at some point? One hundred smaller droids emptied into the water to try to effect “repairs” when the Bequa began a second sonic assault on the other support struts. Their intention was obviously to draw them out. My impression is that they keenly admire the example you and Jyn set with that drill rig that fell twenty-four years ago and have adapted the strategy you used there. All were pursued and crushed by the smaller Bequa. I was able to seal some half dozen of them in the service racks before they could be deployed. They are very limited creatures but you should take a look at them, perhaps something can be done for them.]

“How many First Order Personnel are left?”

[One technician is in the interior control room. I am having a rather one-sided discussion with him now. Two others are in the stairwells leading to the interior dockway. They will need to be dealt with.]

Right.

If you mean killed just say so Portia.

[Cassian? Are you alright?]

“The other two platforms? Jyn? Galen?”

[I have control of all three platforms. There is still fighting in the North, some trouble with the shuttle. I will let you know as soon as I hear from Jyn. Galen’s team is in control. I have spoken to Bo and Dex. They have taken one prisoner and eliminated the rest of the threat. Galen took the position at Treeline so they are walking back to check on his status.]
“Thank you, Portia.”

[Also Bodhi Rook is here. Kaylyra as well.]

“What?! What do you mean “here?”

[On Ea. They are breaking atmosphere at this moment…..Cassian, you are going to need to get to the escape pod docks. The First Order murderers are trying make their way into the escape pods and deploy manually. We have about five minutes. Get into the service lift.]

A door on the opposite wall opened, he got inside and pressed his back to the side wall closest to the door. Without thinking he kept his head steady and slid a hand down to check the clip on the blaster. Green. It was muscle memory.

Technician First Class Len Vereck was terrified. The order for the activation sequence had come through on the mark. The four troopers on deck had been checked in. All the droids were locked and in place including the two FD-3 defensive units up top. Everything was on grid. The Blackout countdown had commenced.

At 00:10 the whole station shook. Not hard, not as if it had been bombed or attacked, but as if it had….for lack of a better expression…. “rung,” like a bell.

The caf cup that Lt. Danvers had left on the ledge of the console began to vibrate to the edge, then spilled off onto the plas-tiled floor.

“What the Bloody hell was that?” the officer said.

Vereck looked at the read-outs. All the Troopers and droids were still on line.

“Platform personnel, Check in manually…” he’d started to order

TSC Mandon had run to the observation window. Now she shouted, “Look at the water!”

The sky was still sunny and blue but the ocean was churning as far as the eye could see. Not as waves or whitecaps but as if the raised platform were in the middle of some kind of violent whirlpool or vortex.

He glanced back at the atmospheric monitors. The wind was a light ten knots, steady. This was not a storm.

A wash of spray struck the glass hard, this high up that almost never happened. Usually they didn’t hear atmospherics from in here either because the central core was too well insulated but Vereck
heard something now, like a rising moan.

“Open a command channel,” Danvers barked, “Get those troopers back inside.”

Vereck tried. Nothing happened.

“Comm systems not responding sir!”

Laser cannon fire struck upper platform and the shape of a small ship moved past the observation window, turned, made another pass.

Rebels? No. Not possible. This planet had no tech. Word had been that it had only a few million inhabitants and those mostly animals. No.

The interior doorway closed. With a curse Danvers ran to it.

“Stay where you are. They actually may not kill you if surrender unconditionally. You’ll have to be most convincingly sincere though because I will advise against it.”

was on every read-out on every console and display.

The display on the door panel read:

“IT’S PRETTY MUCH YOUR ONLY CHANCE!”

The station rocked slightly. The impossible little ship outside was firing again. Danvers pulled the Executive cylinder out of his jacket sleeve and jammed it into the manual override on the door.

It ground open slowly but stopped just over halfway.

The cylinder would open any manual hatch in the station. Even the ones to the escape pods. If somehow Rebels had overrun the station it was their only way out, the only way to warn Fleet Command.

The Lieutenant got close to the door and reached his arm as far as it would go.

“Stand back!” he snarled at Vereck and Mandon. Then he snatched the cylinder out and forced through the opening in the door in the instant before it began to close. He was a big man but he made it.

They both dove but Mandon was quicker and smaller. She shoved Vereck hard and slid herself though the closing gap. It closed on the edge of her grey jacket but she must have pulled it free from the other side because it closed tight.

Trapped.

“LOVELY PEOPLE YOUR COWORKERS!”

read the letters on the control panel.
Shaking with panic, Vereck hid under the console and covered his ears with his hands. He was only nineteen and this was his first off station mission. He had thought he feared death with dishonor more than anything but now he found that fear did not differentiate.

He did not have to be afraid long. Portia diminished the oxygen supply to the room and he passed out within minutes. She did not kill him though she seriously considered it. Like the small droids still locked in their frames it was a decision that would have to be made based on an assessment of future dangerousness. She would wait for Cassian and Conn.

The control panel on the lift no longer showed the schematic of the beacon levels. It showed instead a vid image of the dock-way outside the row of three small single-man escape pods.

Three escape pods allocated for a station that could have, theoretically, had up to seven human personnel at a time. These people looked back to the Empire as some sort of Golden Age. In a sick way he could almost see why now. If possible the First Order were even more contemptuous of their soldiers lives.

Portia would have blocked them from all the lifts so they would have had to climb down here on the service ladders from the Control Room above.

There was a rather beefy looking older officer with a quality TSE-14 style side arm and a slim rank technician, also armed with a standard issue T-11 pistol. They wore Couruscanti Grey gaberwool, and stiff boots, almost identical to the Imperial uniforms of thirty years ago right down to the flared trousers and rank cylinders. The whole First Order always had an almost comical not-comical “dress-up” aspect to it. The officer must have lost his cap on the climb. He was ordering the Tech to look for a tool help him pry open the manual control panel. Judging from the amount of sweat soaked into their uniforms Portia had turned up the heat in those service ladder tubes.

This level was just below the waterline. Even if this poser managed to get one of those escape pods manually deployed with an executive override they’d make it an optimistic 10 meters before the Bequa cracked them like eggs. Cassian did not doubt that for an instant.
The danger was that each pod would have a battery beacon and independent emergency comm. There was a chance one of them could get a signal out to the First Order Deployment ships in orbit before they fell to the wrath of Ea’s first-born.

That was not a chance they could take.

“Can they hear the lift coming up Portia?”

[I can arrange it so they don’t. That corridor had battery air but I can make some noise.]

“Can you get me a small droid?”

[What?]

“An MSE-6 or something like it.”

[They don’t have those here but there are some little DD3-1a’s on a rack on the next floor you will pass. They are mostly adapted for fire suppression.]

“Open this door on that floor and unlock the rack for me. I will need five extra minutes Portia. Distract them in any way you can.”

The tools were in a packet in his sleeve. Just a few small ones rolled up in a scan-resistant oilcloth and tied with string. Based on the little set his uncle had always had in a back pocket.

He’d carried a packet like them on him somewhere anywhere and anytime he wasn’t undercover and many times when he was. They were useful as lock-picks and wiring tools. He’d made minor repairs for Kay with them dozens of times…..

“Cassian, do you have your tools? I seem to have a minor problem with…”

These weren’t that set. Those had been in the heel of the boots he’d left under the gangway ladder on Rogue One. These he had ground down to the right shape from old silicone chips and wire sets. He carried the roll “just in case” on scavenging runs and had used them to open a lot of salvaged tech over the years,

Still, every time he unwrapped the tiny bundle he’d remember the clang of the cell door on Jedha, or a familiar voice saying, “Cassian, my articular ring joint has some grit in it. Do you have one of those little picks?”

________________________
Technician Second Class Tyra Mandon had jumped when the loud music suddenly blared. It was pounding synth-pop drivel she’d heard somewhere before and it startled her so badly she dropped the pried loose piece of clip-board clip she’d been trying to jam between the casing on the emergency release panel. She’d dropped it before because her hands were sweating.

The palm-print controls should have opened the pad but the sweat on their palms must be throwing it off.

*Or it was never pre-keyed to our hands to begin with.*

That was a disloyal thought and not worthy.

The Mission Officer fairly ripped it from her hand and pushed her away.

“Get back you idiot!” he said, and jammed the thing between the clear plex and the metal frame with the heel of his hand. Hard enough to make it bleed.

The music had swelled to some kind of blaring horn symphony.

At last the cover popped.

The Officer pulled out his Executive cylinder key and fitted it in the manual release. The panel lit and one of the man-sized life pods on the other side of the sealed glass hatches booted up as well.

“Finally!” he hissed, and began pushing buttons.

A hatch opened, but only one.

The thought came to TSC Mandon clearly formed.

*He will take it and go. The same way he went out the door in the Beacon Command room. He will leave me here to die the way he left Vereck.*

The greater part of her mind said, “Of course. It is the duty of Command Hierarchy to save the life of the most senior officers first lest the structure of First Order Leadership be imperiled. Those below will be replaced most easily. Those above reflect the greater investment of treasure and training.”

But a small part said, “I don’t want to die.”

The doors of the disabled lift at the end of the corridor opened, not all the way only about three quarters. A small helmet shaped DD-3 unit rolled out beeping and spitting fire-suppressant foam wildly in a circle.

The Lieutenant and she both looked down astonished for an instant and when she looked up again a man with a gun was standing in the almost-open door.

Lt. Danvers started raising the blaster but never completed the motion. The man had already fired.
Her superior Officer fell backwards into the entry hatchway of the escape pod.

In that split second she saw everything with absolute clarity. The Rebel was dressed in damp and faded grey-blue, dark hair and beard were streaked a little with grey. His dark eyes looked both cold and sad, if that was possible.

He said something, which might have been “Don’t,” but TSC Mandon didn’t really listen because the thought that filled her mind to the exclusion of all others was “I am now the highest ranking leadership aboard. It’s my duty to try to escape.”

She drew her pistol and aimed at the man. He fired first and killed her.

The blaring music stopped.

Cassian Andor pulled the dead Lieutenant out of the hatchway so Portia could close the door to the pod. He left him lying sideways there but walked back to turn the tech over onto her back and closed her eyes. Then he picked up the spinning DD-3 and pulled it’s power wire.

“Take a rest little friend,” he said, placing it gently on the floor near the lift door, “you’ve earned it.”

“Portia, give me a status report, please.”

He'd leaned one hand against the wall, achingly tired.

She spoke over the audio broadcast now as well as on all the display screens.

[“This platform is secured. The Beacons are all commandeered. I feel a little sick because they are nasty nasty objects but I will figure my way around it soon. The Deployment ship is taking in some colorful data of my own design about what is going on down here. Very exciting. I'll explain it to you later. Conn is topside and busy tying up the little murderer I left alive in the control room. I’ve told him you are coming up to him.”]

Ok.

[Jyn is in the enemy shuttle up North trying to set up a start sequence. The weather is not ideal and two of their party are injured, one very gravely. I am talking to Mara in the Beacon. Kaylyra is helping them.]

“Kaylyra is with Jyn?”

His daughter was home.
“They are both crying intermittently but this is due to extreme emotion and not injury. I assure you, Kaylyra looks quite well in fact.”

“Galen?”

“Galen is injured, not inconsequentially but he is stable and his injuries do not look life-threatening. I can see him clearly now because Bodhi is with him. The other children are there as well. Bodhi has a little ship that I am sure he has done the best he can with.”

Cassian stepped inside the lift and Portia closed the door.

“Get me back to my family Portia.”

[I will Cassian]
read the control panel inside the lift.

He held it together until the doors opened at the top platform. Conn was right there

“We did it!” the young man said, choking back tears, “Cassian, We did it.”

He hugged him and finally...finally...let himself feel it, just for a minute.

His son was hurt but alive.
His daughter was home.
Bodhi was here.

He needed to see Jyn so badly it was like physical pain.

Patting Conn on the back, he took a breath to get a grip on himself.

"We did," he said, "Come on," and they walked out onto the open deck.

The sea around the Beacon Platform #1 was utterly placid, with only a few ruffles of waves.

The Bequa were gone. He would have to thank them later.

After Cassian secured the link into the wiring controls of the main power console they threw the tied-up and moaning technician into Guardian’s rear bay and waited in the cockpit for Portia to give them the all clear to fly.
The North

Chapter Summary

The action up North at Beacon Platform #3. Lina, Nan and Mara all arm up and get ready to help Jyn Erso take the platform. Lina remembers other dangerous encounters in her young life. Mara remembers how she came to be part of team Blackbird and Nan gets to use the tribute cross-bow. She likes that.

Somebody may have miscounted the number of First Order personnel on-site. Family reunion.

Chapter Notes

All female action movie? Well, that's what I'm trying for anyway.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Lit by the pale greenish light from the glowing cubes she’d tossed out, the Blackbird laid out a series of thin wooden arrows on the floor of the shelter, at least they looked like the shafts of arrows. There were also two bolt-rifles and three blaster-guns.

*Although she’d never used one Lina had been around blasters before, usually in the hands of the Coastal Mem scavengers who traded salvage with the North and once in a while at RiverTown and Point. They were powerful but just stupidly dangerous and tricky to use.*

One of the guns was very different in design from any that Lina had ever seen before. It looked for all the world like a cross-bow, like the kind Raiders from the Flint Islands lashed onto the bows of their boats to fire harpoons and grappling spears. “Oh look at that beautiful thing!” said Old Nan.

The dark-furred Mem, Mara, picked up one of the blasters and began to check its parts, shortening the handle to fit her arm.
"You said you were a good shot with a bow Lina Far-Trader," Jyn Erso asked, leaning back on her heels, "How good?"

“You can boast about your boat or your goods at market, you can flatter yourself about skills in a summer-lover’s arms, and brag over strong liquor” her uncle Mauro had told her…not that any of these ever had been Lina’s way... “but do not boast when the Elder in a venture asks a question. When the lives and fortunes of others depend on your boat or on you, know the truth of what both can do and say it plainly.”

“That depends on the bow and the shafts but…good,” Lina said, “I can fire on a deck at sea in a storm. I can fire fast from the rail and I've hit a wolf-fish in mid strike at 300 meters.” She laid out the best bow she’d brought from her boat, “With this one and a hunting arrow.”

Jyn Erso had put her thin thermal cloth gloves back on and was smoothing them over each finger, thinking. She looked at Lina now as if measuring her for a suit of clothes.

“I guess I should have asked this before, but have you ever killed anyone?”

Fourteen was young for a solo voyage, but her uncle had agreed when she came to him, burning with an anger she told herself was ambition. She’d wanted her late cousin’s run and she would not wait another season.

“The boat is good and the Raiders have mostly gone ashore for the winter,” Mauro told her dispassionately, “but you will have to cross through the Narrows. If a Heron is hunting and sees you,”…..Heron were what the old people called the slim fast two or five-man raider boats that skulked in the coves of the rocky little islands. They would catch sight of single Traders and try to race out and pick them off…. “If one sees you they will chase you. If you cannot outrun them bold Lina they will catch you. If they board you, they will take your boat and goods and cut your throat. Do not doubt any of these things for an instant.”

The fog around those channels could sometimes be a help, hiding boats from scouts watching on the bird-haunted cliffs. It saved her many times after, but not on that first run. She had trusted it too much maybe, or just made the overconfident fledglings mistake of worrying about speed more than visibility. Maybe it was just bad luck.
Whatever the cause, when that grey-hulled boat came into her sight out of the fog bank on the landward side she was taken by surprise and had to calculate very very quickly.

They were closing. Fast. At an angle that might not cut her off but might bring them close enough to put a grappling line on her.

Three aboard. One at the helm and another at the rudder. One on the bow with a harpoon gun. She could turn but that would give them the chance to get behind her.

Lina opened up the sail, tied off, kept course to charge past them.

*Make them think she was trying to outrun. Make them set up the shot from there.*

She took the bow from under the rail. She would have little time and only one shot.

Two hours a day most days ashore they practiced on Blue, all the children. Draw and fire draw and fire until your arm could barely move. Even at sea, when you weren’t working you drew an empty string so your arm never lost the strength, never forgot the motion.

*Don’t look at your hand. Don’t look down the shaft.*

*Remember the Archer Prince in the old story. Don’t even look at your enemy. Look at the target. Look at his heart.*

If she took the harpooner the helmsman would run up, if she took the helmsman the harpooner would still be aimed for the shot.

To hold a cut across in that wind at speed took a strong arm.

She looked at the heart of the one at the rudder. Long black hair beneath a green scarf. Broad shoulder. Pale blue shirt. Bare right arm, No beard. Young.

She fired and in the instant the young Raider pitched backward she forgot him and dove beneath the rail to loosen her sail again, hold hard and race.

The harpoon fired, or at least she thought she heard it whistle and splash to her port but now the aim was off. They would have to turn. Her uncle’s boat made it through the gap.

*Not the only time, but that was the first.*

*When you sail alone you can show no mercy and you can expect none. Who did this woman think she was dealing with?*
“Yes,” she told the Blackbird.

“Ok,” the woman said. “Here’s what you’ll do.”

She laid out a thin sheet of white filmy cloth and touched one of the light-cubes. A map appeared on the cloth of the black circle camp above them. The position of the tower, the building and the ship were all traced out in lines.

“You'll need to slip this shirt and gloves on.” She passed her a rolled-up bundle, a thin hooded shirt and gloves like the one she was already wearing under her otter-skin parka, "Put your coat over it goggle up and work your way around to the far edge over here.” She pointed at a spot above them and East. “When you are in a good position, fire these arrows,” she pointed to the shafts, “so they stick into the dirt here, here and here.” A number of small blue dots appeared on the map, most at spots near the edge of the circle on the far side.

Lina was puzzled. “Into the dirt? You mean I don’t shoot the Fallen troopers?”


The arrows were coated in some kind of chemicals that would burn and spit colored sparks. Nan had heard of such things used for festivals down on the South Coast. It reminded her of when she was little and they saved dried Ice Moth cocoons to toss in the fire on Midwinter night so they would light up in colors. A childish toy.

Spiked in the ground by the Far Trader’s bow, they would light up by themselves when moisture reached them, It seemed. The plan involved careful timing. The rising sunlight warming the icy ground should be enough.

The Blackbird had made them herself she said, sounding ever so slightly pleased.

*She had a facility with Fire, Nan sensed.*
They wouldn’t need to all go off, she told them. Just enough to create a distraction so the four of them could get into position.

The black shirts and gloves under their parkas would also keep the Enemy’s machines from “seeing” the heat of their bodies while they too were distracted by the colored fires.

*Oh it was just cleverness within cleverness with these people. They must exhaust themselves out there in the stars.*

Even poor Mara had to wear a vest and hood of the thin black stuff

“Ah! Ah!” she whimpered as Jyn Erso helped slip the stretchy cloth tube over her head, used a little knife to cut earholes and gently guided her tufted ears out through the tears. “This is awful. It’s squeezing me. How the pressing hell do you people even breathe? Oooooo.”

“Toughen up, Mara,” her friend chided, “as soon as you get the disk inside that door you have my permission to cut it right off.”

“This is what needs to happen,” the Blackbird had told them, as they all worked their way back into coats and hoods in the shelter. “I will signal the start of the clock by shooting the droid. Then we get the stormtroopers all down as fast as possible leaving one and only one alive to get the door open. One of these,” she had three of the small grey metal disks, each about the size of her own palm, “needs to get inside the station door. That is the absolute goal. We will have about one and a half minutes to get it done. Mara is the one who will make a run for it but if she goes down the immediate Plan B is for Nan and Lina to cover me and I will go in her place, if I go down, Plan C,” she handed one of the disks to the Far-Trader girl, “Lina moves up. One of these must go inside that hatch. Nothing else matters. Once that is done Portia can handle the Beacon and the Tech or Techs inside, while we can move to try to secure the shuttle.”

“I take it I just stay put out there and shoot? Right?” Nan wanted clarified, “Because my running days are long over.”

“If you don’t mind.”

She considered.

“Can I have the cross-bow? I’ve used those blaster-guns before but they scare the hell out of me.”

That drew a laugh from the other woman. “I built it in honor of a friend, feel free to commit mayhem with it.”

Nan picked it up and took a look. *Nice work.* It had a circular cartridge set to feed in a dozen thin black bolts that looked liked they’d been carved from black casing.

“Eye, neck, knee, side, underarm?” she asked, sighting down the frame.

“Yup,” Jyn Erso said, “You can get a groin shot too but the cold-weather sheeting will make tricky.”

“Bet I can find it,” the old Otter said, thinking of Timsa and the old Mem hunter they’d left behind at Mink Cove.
The Far-Trader was the one who went out first while it was still dark. She would need to fire the shots and then hunker down in position until Ea turned her face toward the sun and set them off.

The gear was secured and the lights dimmed. All ready, it only waited for the time or the signal from Ancient Portia for the rest of the three of them to move out.

_The stupid hoods and jackets worried her._

Mara knew they needed them, her for disguise and they because the poor things would be dead in an hour without them….._it was awful but true, she had seen it happen_….but it worried her. It was so damned hard to tell them all apart when you couldn’t see their eyes or the colors of their hair. It shamed her to admit to herself, even after all these years.

_Jyn-ally she would know anywhere by the sound of her voice or the way she moved, but pinched and muffled up like this….._

“Jyn-ally,” she whispered, “When we get into position I’m a little worried about not being able to…”

Jyn Erso reached over and turned her hand. The glove made it unintelligible but the pat must have meant _Instruction_ of some kind because she then rolled back and cuffed one sleeve to show a wide strip of white lining.

“Enough to tell the difference?”

_White on right._

“Thanks,” Mara said.

Her friend smiled with her little square teeth.

_“Never were allies better chosen,” the Eldest Sister in her village had said speaking of Jyn and_
Cassian-ally, long ago, and Mara knew better than any now that nothing could be truer in both large ways and small.

More than a dozen years it had been since she had met them. The old frame of the wreck had lain, half buried by leaves and branches high up on the hillside and half open to the sky, all the days of her life. Falls were rare up here and it had long ago been stripped down to a bare frame and metal flooring, most of its casing and wires long since cut away. Even the seats were gone. One, the pilot's seat she liked to tell herself, still remained many times re-covered and with wooden runners screwed on to make it a rocking chair in the back of the Community Hall.

Several generations of younglings had played inside it. Only the old people remembered how it had come down in a storm more than fifty years ago. No fire, no shaking of the earth like other big falls were said to be marked by. After the storm passed the tree-cutters went up to check for fallen trunks and it was simply there. Empty with the doors open, no bodies inside. If there had ever been people inside it they were gone and the rains had washed away their tracks.

“Well, that was nervousness-making for sure,” her grandmother told her. “Nobody liked the idea of Fallen wandering around in the woods, barking like wolves and maybe stabbing people in their sleep.”

Trackers were sent down as far as the valley and came back with muddled stories of giant shelled insects….or maybe humans….or maybe both, wandering down, down, down following the streams to the Grass River and the river to…who knew? Maybe the sea.

So, the Elders decided, whatever they were they were somebody else’s problem now and open salvage was declared on that abandoned ship.

A welcome burst of prosperity for High Tree village, that was for sure.

Even after she grew too old for games of “Hide and Seek” and “Fox Warriors” in the empty old wreck, Mara was fascinated with it. She put a box where the old seats had once been pulled out and sat, looking through a big gap where a thick clear front window had once been, or so an old male told her. In his boyhood they had prized it out unbroken and traded it South for enough red blankets and sharp saw blades to give everyone in the village three.

She’d even brought a mat up several times and slept inside, just to look up at the bright stars through the hole and think, “How?”

She’d been sitting inside, “daydreaming” as her Grandmother would say, which Mara thought unfair since she always brought whittling or sewing to do, when she heard footsteps approaching. Thinking it must be her clumsy sister and her little pals come back to tease her she had called out, “Oh for
heaven’s sake! Leave me in peace for a stinking hour or I swear I’ll bite off every toe you have!”

She let out a proper scream of startlement when a large human’s head appeared around the empty metal door frame.

“Are you sure an hour will be enough?” Cassian-ally had said.

Outside on the path up the slope stood the Mayor, Eldest Sister and two other humans, small and smaller …well three, because one of them had a yet smaller one tied to its back with a cloth sling.

“Holy grapes!” she gasped, “Who the hell are you?”

The humans laughed, just like regular people.

They were a whole family of allies from the Upland come here to explore the wreck and set up a watching platform.

Mara shadowed them every day, listened to their stories, helped, asked endless questions.

“How many kinds of people are there in the stars?” “Is it as cold as it looks?” “How does electricity go through something that isn’t metal?” “What’s this wire for?” “How high up do you have to go before Ea can’t see you anymore or can she always see you?” “Why do most wrecks burn but this one didn’t?”

“Can only humans fly ships?”

“No,” Jyn said, “Not by a long shot.”

“Can I?” she asked.

Mara came back down to her house from helping at the wreck one day to find that her worried Mother had, without telling her, asked the Sisters to cast a Pattern about her.

She was annoyed, but she also loved her mother and the bewildered concern in her eyes was hard to see and made her doubt herself a little for the first time.

Eldest Sister Fala sat with her mother. Second Sister Elfen showed Mara a waxed string bracelet made from green bark fibers.

“Once in a while a child is drawn not just to be a tree-cutter, or a weaver or a hunter or even several of these things in turn. Ea calls us each at different times and in different ways. Some are called strongly to bind outside the pattern of their fellows. It is this way for the Sisters of the Circles, and once in a very great while some few are called to be Explorers and New Binders. This is a hard path for others to understand because these people go up paths others could not, would not,” Eldest Sister held her mother’s hands in Reassurance, as Second Sister went on, “it can be dangerous and lonely and requires great consideration but without such rare persons connections cannot be made, new paths cannot be searched and in time all peoples would perish as the Great Lizards perished because they could not change when the Great Pattern around them changed. Do you understand Mara?”

She thought she did.

“Just because you are the only person, or at least the first person, who wants to do something doesn’t
mean you are wrong. Is that it?”

“Yes, bold Mara, Serri’s-daughter, that is it,” Second Sister said. Youngest Sister Milli took the bracelet then and slipped it over Mara’s hand.

Mara fingered the braided cord around her wrist. It had tattered and fallen off several times in the last dozen years but always the Sisters of her home Circle had woven a new one for her.

*Oh yeah, she thought, “paths others would not” for damn sure this time.*

*One thing she promised herself, she was not going to die with this horrible itchy tourniquet of cloth on her. If she got shot she was cutting the thing off with her last twitch.*

Jyn-ally’s head lifted. Ancient Portia must be telling her something. She reached out and tapped Mara’s shoulder. Time to go.

They all moved out into the thinning dark and bitter cold to take positions around that burned circle.

_________________

Having fired her shots, into the wind to hide the sound of them, Lina lay on her stomach in the low brush at the far side of the platform to wait.

Whatever this salvage cloth was made of was good stuff. It kept the cold off brilliantly.

She only wished she had some more of it in her boots.

*I wonder where they got it from and what the trade on it would run?* she caught herself thinking reflexively and almost laughed aloud.
The sun was rising now a rose orange and the color moved across the frosted moss and bracken. The white-armored “troopers” had come out of the tower and were moving around to position themselves. The giant spider-like machine stalked between them like a nightmarish crab. It swung a roundish head back and forth. A large yellow circle in the center might be an “eye” she supposed.

*Oh hell oh hell oh hell oh hell.*

*She did not want that thing to look at her.*

The Blackbird had said she would shoot it first.

*Oh yes please.*

One by one the arrows burst into colored flames. The troopers jumped almost comically and began waving their rifles around as if at some unseen enemy. Then all of them but one, who stayed by the door at first, wandered over to see them. When the second set lit they all ran over there too. Even the spider scrambled over as if curious like a giant dog.

Hopefully the others were moving into position. She had five narrow metal shafts in her hand. Reaching back to the quiver to grab another was an extra movement. She’d get five off fast as she stood to move this way.

*It was a trick she had learned from a Far Islander she’d met pulled up and mending sail on a little reef island. She’d traded three bone needles, dried fruit and a bottle of wine for this sweet bow and some lessons to go with it. The kisses had been free and equal exchange.*

The Troopers all moved to the edge now and stood still. The one who had wandered away from the doorway began to move back toward it.

Giant spider lifted it’s yellow eye and whirled it around and in the instant it did so burst into flames and fell sideways, crumbling like a broken mast.

*Jyn Erso.*

Lina looked at the black line at one troopers neck and let loose in the same movement she rose to a crouch.

*She looked at a black gap under an arm and another neck and a dark gap under an arm as one turned.*

Two down, a third stumbled but still up staggering, clutching at his neck.

She ran up onto the platform then and covered behind an low empty sledge.

*Everything slowed down, as it did in such moments.*

She saw Old Nan in her black-furred parka stand up from behind the tower building in the same instant one trooper flew forward on two meters and landed on its face as that powerful crossbow
drove a bolt right through the armor on the back.

Red blasts thudded and pushed the air around her goggles as she stood.

Jyn Erso was up at the edge of the platform. *Two more down.*

One trooper fired his rifle standing stock still, at the Blackbird, but she was gone, diving and rolling as she’d fired.

*They’re following the trajectory on the blasters, came to her, it’s like they don’t even understand the arrows well enough to see.*

Nan from Gate fired another shot from behind and took the standing one.

*One missing. One.*

Her first hit had staggered all the way to the door and was slapping a hand against the side of it which lit up.

The missing one…..*smarter than the others?* covering behind the ship….. fired at Old Nan and the red blast caught her in the side.

A blaster shot took the trooper from low. Mara had run in on all fours, covered in black and almost invisible on the black platform and fired from the ground near the door.

The door was opening and the wounded trooper fairly fell through but Mara rolled forward to toss the grey disk between it’s legs as the door closed behind it.

*A great gust of wind blew from behind her and for a second she felt cold, as if a shadow had passed behind her and was gone. Her ears were ringing from the blaster shots.*

Everything went silent for second.

She was a Voyager. She knew know to measure time by her own breath and heartbeats…..even speeded up….even as unmoored as she felt right now she was still fairly sure.

It had all taken a minute, surely no more.

“*Yes!*” screamed Jyn Erso, as if it were a battle cry.

She braced her rifle back against her shoulder and scrambled toward the fallen woman, shouting as she did so, “*How is he? How are they?*”

Mara lay on her back and for an instant Lina feared she was wounded before she saw that she was only ripping open that black cloth vest and hood with her own sharp fingernails and wriggling out of it.

Lina had not lowered her bow but stayed in position pressed against the dark speeder she’d covered behind.

*What now?*
Jyn was crouched by Nan’s body and Lina could not see if the Gate woman was dead or alive but suddenly the Blackbirds head jerked up and she raised her rifle.

The parked ship was moving.

Something shaped like a gun dropped down beneath it, turning, toward her.

Lina dove aside as her cover was blown apart.

Hot sparks struck her back as she rolled, lay flat, arm over her head.

The ship gun kept turning...firing blast after blast, jerky...now toward Jyn Erso as she tried to dive aside herself. There was no cover on that side.

Head pressed to the platform, Lina felt rather than saw someone drop onto a knee next to where she lay.

Brown boots, grey legs, white cloth parka.

Whoever it was had a very large rifle and when they fired the blast took out the turning gun and one of the Enemy ship’s runners, knocking it on it’s side.

Lina looked up. The person who’d fired pulled back the black cloth from their mouth and looked down at her, “Are you ok?”

A woman’s voice?

“Yes,” Lina said, ears ringing worse than ever.

The person turned away from her then, and stood upright.

“Mama!” she shouted.

Mara, jacket and vestless, stood up still clutching her blaster.

“Oh,” she coughed a little as the smoke rolled over toward them. “Hey, Kayly.”

The woman in the white parka ran toward where Jyn Erso was getting to her knees, but the Mem ran over to where Lina still lay.

“Come on, Far Trader,” she said. “We’re not done yet. It looks like somebody is still alive and swinging in that shuttle.”
Chapter End Notes

Take your daughter to work day.
Chapter Summary

Jyn and company have to figure out how to get inside the shuttle before a First Order droid can get a message out. Mother and child reunion. Old Nan passes as she wished to, in her beloved North. Old friends/rivals come to do her one last favor. Lina and Kayly meet. The surviving First Order tech is taken prisoner, but stupidly makes a run for it. Weird things happen ....Lina is wounded. There be some violence.

Chapter Notes

GoT-worthy things somehow happen....no one could be more surprised about this than me

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nan was down and Jyn headed for her. Peripheral vision caught the others, Mara by the hatch, Lina under cover by the tarped snow-speeder.

“I have all three Beacons,” Portia said, in Saw’s voice.

Yes!

As Jyn ran words pushed through the adrenaline and the wall she’d built around them in her mind for the last three hours.

Cassian.

Galen.

“How is he? How are they?” she gasped as she ran and slid to her knees, blaster still in her right
hand.

*Oh fuck.* The old woman had been hit hard. A burn hole went right through the side of the seal-skin coat, narrow but surely an abdominal through-shot. She was groaning a little.

“Good…” she was whispering, eyes closed, ‘‘Good gun…’’

“*Open her coat, carefully*” Portia said, “*let me see the wound*” then, suddenly, “*JYN ..SHUTTLE. THE SHUTTLE IS ARMING.*”

Portia couldn’t yell but she could fill your whole head.

The shuttle had a lower cannon and it was dropping to fire.

*Son of a bitch!* 

Jyn grabbed Nan’s coat to pull her out of the way but couldn’t, not from this angle. She let go and dove over her, rolling.

*It was firing forward. Automatic sweep on repeat fire.*

*The speeder across the platform was hit and the damn thing just kept firing as it turned.*

*60 cm sweep above the ground.*

*No cover. Too far to get behind the building.*

*The shuttle wasn’t lifting. Why not?*

She had to get behind the landing runners.

As she scrambled, staying low and still clutching the A-180, the sound of the cannon pounding fire covered anything outside the exterior of her head, but Portia came through clearly.

“*Kayly’s here.*”

A blast from the other side of the platform had struck the cannon array and the shuttle tipped toward her as it’s aft runner buckled. Jyn fell sideways and pulled up on an elbow to half-scuttle back over to Nan on the ground and cover her.

Head humming from the percussion, part of her brain said, *wide charge, heavy-duty launcher* at the same time her dead commander’s voice in her ear was saying “*Kayly.*”
Looking up through the smoke roiling off the shuttle, pressed low by the cold, she could make out Lina on the ground but moving. Someone in a white Imperial-style snow parka was standing to the left of the shattered burning speeder with a heavy repeating blaster. Shouldering the weapon they pulled back the thermal hood.

_Sweetheart, don’t do that, she thought, it’s too fucking cold._

Then her daughter was running toward her.

“Mama!”

The voice was muffled by the ringing in her head, as Kayly crouched down on her knees beside Nan.

She half-heard, half lip-read, “Are you ok, Mama?”

“I’m ok, baby. Help me…help me get her coat open,” Jyn said, trying to get a look at Nan’s wounds so Portia could see them.

Kayly laid aside the monster gun and helped her gently pull back the outer coat.

"Cassian has signaled," Portia was saying "he’s inside the platform and working his way up to the surface. Galen’s team is secure. No visual on him yet. This woman’s wound is serious. There is no way you can stabilize it under these conditions.

“Papa is ok,” Jyn said, still looking at Nan holding the hemmed sealskin edges back, “No word on Galen.”

“I’ve lowered the oxygen level of the control station but the murderer inside has better nerves than most of the others and grabbed a breathing cannister. I’m explaining her situation to her now.”

On the platform Mara was yelling, “I’ve got the Trader! Secure on this side! Wooooo! Look at this shiny black thing!”

Kayly was pushing one part of the coat under Nan, and putting pressure on the wound from the above.

Nan groaned. “Tell them…”

“Jyn, tell her not to do that.”

“Kayly,” she looked at her daughter’s face finally, “Kayly how did you get here?”

“Bodhi and I have a shuttle, we……we dropped in…..at the Pole….I jumped out. They’ve gone for
Galen."

"Bodhi?....Oh Force..."

“Jyn....” Saw’s voice, insistent.

“Can we call him back?”

“Jyn....at this trajectory her liver and kidney will have both been punctured, internal bleeding is massive. You are only prolonging her suffering.” The burned-earth platform was black but steam was rising from the ground as blood oozed through what must be a large exit hole in the thermal vest. “Jyn. There is nowhere Bodhi could take her.”

She reached out and moved Kayly’s hand away from the wound.

“Stay with her. Her name is Nan.”

Kaylyra looked up, not comprehending for an instant and then did. She nodded.

*Baby. Baby. You look so much like Cassian, but.... how did I never see it before? You have have my mother’s chin.*

Jyn laid a gloved left hand against her daughters face for a second and then reached behind to pull the black head covering back up.

Her right hand still held the rifle.

“Oh hell. There’s an astromech droid active inside the shuttle. It’s trying to get a message out. I’m blocking it for now but they are clever little things and it will keep trying. This will need to be dealt with.”

She got up to deal with the shuttle.
Mama and Mara and the other woman were taking up positions around the shuttle. She could hear her mother, talking, presumably to Portia.

“BB-9, what the fuck is a BB-9? Is that like an R4? Who makes it?” she was yelling.

Something touched her arm. She was still lightly holding the injured woman’s coat closed.

Kayly looked down. Nan’s eyes were open now and she had lifted one hand to lay it on Kayly’s arm.

“Who…?” came a whisper.

“I’m Kayly,” she said, “Jyn’s daughter. Don’t move… It's going to be ok,” It was a lie. She said it anyway. “Save your strength.”

“All three…” the woman said, barely audible… “Win..?”

“Yes,” Kayly reassured her, “We won.”

The woman closed her brown eyes then. She was breathing shallow and fast.

*There must be a kit around this fucking place somewhere....something they could give her....*

“Daughter…” Nan opened her eyes again and squeezed Kayly’s wrist. “Can you… see them…? Wolves?”

*What?*

Despite herself, Kayly looked up, around.

_Behind her Mama was yelling, “Mara! Get underneath that side!”_

The sun was up now but the pink and red sky was streaked with dark clouds building. The cold wind had picked up, howling.

_Shit. That did sound like wolves._

_Close enough. “Yes,” she told her._
“Tell them…it’s ok…I owed…a debt…take my coat to…my children...so they know….leave me here…home…”

The old woman smiled, “Thank…It’s been good….” she said, but then winced and closed her eyes. Old Nan did not speak again.

This time Kayly heard it clearly, and it damn sure wasn’t the wind,

There must be dozens of them, somewhere close by.

“Portia what are we dealing with here?” Jyn Erso was saying.

She had pulled the helmet off one of the dead “troopers”...

*Lina saw that it was a clean-shaven young man with close-cropped orange hair.*

…..and turned some wires around so that a very business-like woman’s voice with an weirdly Far Island accent now came out of it.

“It’s a BB series astromech utility, the original design was promulgated by Industrial Automation which currently manufactures as…”

“Portia! I know what a damned astromech droid is. How did it get in there?”

“They are extremely versatile mechanicals. My guess is that it was part of the shuttle’s allotted equipment. Omnidirectional drive spheres have trouble with moisture build-up in extreme cold so my guess is that it was kept powered off and simply set to boot up when the Beacon became operational in order to pre-start the departure sequence on the shuttle.”

Mara came back from the far side of the ship. “No holes,” she said, “Our talented girl blew the guns clean off, but the hull looks mostly undamaged. Damn thing might even still fly in atmosphere.”
Jyn had sent her to crawl under and see if there was any access available from below.

“The shuttle looks like a basic Seinar X-class, only with smoother, tighter air-flows and with a pretty little back-fin, probably a full independent communications array with our luck.”

The woman in the white parka came up behind the Blackbird.

“Nan?” Lina asked.

The woman bowed her head.

“I’m so sorry,” the voice from the helmet said. “Your friend has died.”

Jyn reached back to lay a gloved hand on the newcomer’s shoulder.

“Mama!” Lina had heard her cry. There were child-Blackbirds it seemed.

“Welcome home, baby,” Jyn Erso said. “Does your father know you’re back?”

“I’ve informed him.” the voice said. “He’s solving some problems on the other platform but he is currently uninjured.”

“Well then Force help the “problems.” She looked at her daughter and they both smiled.

Bundled in coats and hood the girl could do no more than lean down to rest her forehead against her mother’s shoulder as the shorter woman hugged her with an awkward arm.

She heard the words, "Your brother....and don't know yet..." and saw the girl nodding.

Lina found that she needed to look away.

After a few seconds Jyn Erso seemed to gather herself and turn back to them. “We have a serious time constraint here. Even if the temperature didn’t require us to leave or get to some shelter within the next few hours...”

The wind was picking up and even Mara had taken the shiny white poncho off one of the dead troopers and slipped it over her head,

“Portia is having trouble keeping some little homicidal manic inside quiet.”

“It hasn’t found a way through my ground interference yet but it will...tireless little thing. I’d say fifteen minutes at best” the helmet said.
“What kind of astromech is it?” Kayly asked.

“A BB-9,"

“It’ll be whip-smart then.”

“It’s not capable listening to reason, I fear. It had cruel programming to begin with and has been memory wiped constantly to prevent individual learning that would overcome it. I’d like to save the poor creature but I know it may not give us that option.”

*Oh Ea, she made it sound like a Raider. The old Traditional name for them was The-Ones-Who-Are-Lost. Out on Vision she heard they called them The-Ones-Who-Have-Lost-Faith.*

“Oh hey, by the way” Mara said, “Kayly this is Lina Far-Trader, Lina this is Kayly Jyn’s-daughter.”

*The young woman had her goggles up on her forehead. Yes, Lina could see it now. They had the same greenish-gold eyes.*

“Far-Trader?” she said, “You are a very long way from home.”

“Further every minute,” Lina admitted dryly.

*The Blackbirds daughter smiled. “Oh, I know that feeling,” she said.*

“Portia,” Mara asked, peering around the side of the ship again, “You said it was trying to message the Enemy. Telling them what exactly?”

“It keeps sending an emergency message on repeat. “Incursion” is the phrase it keeps using” the disembodied voice said.

*I’m the only one still unnerved by the talking helmet, aren’t I? Lina thought.*

“Ha,” that was Jyn again, “I see where you’re going with this. Portia can it see us?”

“Not really. The exterior cameras were not engaged when it came online. I setup a powerful feedback signal from the station at 01:32 that would have blocked exterior visual or auditory feeds My guess is it tried to contact the Control station and couldn’t. It may have then tried to access the other droid or the Troopers helmets, and couldn’t. The heat from the explosion of the droid and Kayly’s pulse-launcher might have been enough to register, or at least shake it up. It also might have accessed whatever data was previously recorded by the station and shared as back up on the shuttle;” the helmet said.

“So it knows that one trooper was already killed by a non-human aboriginal several days ago, it knows that something not-good has happened to the station personnel and that there have been explosions.”

*It made an assumption based on limited data and panicked. A sensible enough response.*
Jyn pointed to the shattered guns on the blackened bottom of the ship.

“It was sweeping those guns low. Programming constraints won’t let it fly or even lift the shuttle up without a human operator aboard…”

“Why not?” Lina asked, half to herself, realizing with a start that she almost understood that.

“Clone Wars,” Kayly Jyn’s-daughter told her in a quiet voice, “it’s a whole long story.”

“But it aimed those guns to sweep the platform starting at a fixed height of 60 cm, and started at the far edge closest to the River,” she pointed to the remains of the speeder.”

“They are programmed to analyze danger to equipment based on previous input and initiate defensive actions accordingly,” the voice called “Portia” said.

“It thinks this is a low-tech assault by non-human aboriginals, maybe a branch office of Endor.”

“Oh…and they don’t like those, do they?” Mara said with a smile, rubbing her ears.

“Let’s get out of the cold for a minute,” Jyn said. “Since we don’t have time to blast our way in we’ve got to trick this little fellow into coming out.”

The daughter, Kayly, was to stay outside hidden behind the building. Before she moved back the young woman also took the crossbow gun from where it lay beside the body of the hunter. Her giant gun would need to stay powered off.

Poor Nan still lay on the ground but Mara took off the shiny white covering and laid it over her like a blanket, tucking it in around the sides, as if to keep her warm. She kissed the tips of her fingers and lay them on the old woman’s forehead.

“It was an honor to travel with you Nanerrel Otter. Good hunting.”

She tilted her furred head then as if listening to something on the wind “Sounds like they sent you an honor guard of a hundred. You must have been one of the best.”

The Mem said then straightened up coatless again, “It’s a bit nippy, lets get this over with shall we?”

Jyn took one of the dead troopers guns and ordered Mara to power off her own gun and do the same.

Apparently if the machine came out it would sense these somehow, but not the Enemy’s guns.
Lina kept her bow in hand and adjusted her quiver.

“Pop the door Portia” Jyn Erso said. “Let’s see if our First Order Technician has cooled down enough to talk.”

The door on the squared black tower opened, and as if on cue a gust of icy wind blew in.

Jyn Erso stepped inside first, stepping over a white armored body by the entrance, stolen blaster in hand and ready.

The door felt as if it closed behind them, cutting off the wind, but when Lina looked back she saw that it was still open and a rippling shimmer like glass had filled it.

*She was pretty sure it wasn’t glass.*

The only live person inside was huddled under a table at the back.

The room was lit inside but there were no visible lamps and no windows. Almost everything was colored black or grey… tables, walls, floor, hanging pieces of glass, black door closed against the rear wall.

The occupant was a small woman, dressed in only in a jacket and trousers of thin grey fabric. Her brown hair was pinned back in a roll and her pale skin almost blue with cold. A weird clear mask cupped the lower half of her face, but it was now half frosted with ice.

The small woman scrambled about as if for something lying on the floor. Lina saw it was a gun, but the prisoner's hands seemed too cold to pick it up.

Instead the Blackbird strode up and pulled her out by the back of her jacket, kicking the gun aside as she did so. Holding the blaster to the underside of woman’s jaw with one hand she yanked off the mask with the other.

The woman coughed and gasped, barely able to stand.

“We need some heat in here, please,” Jyn Erso said calmly.

*Part of the table lit yellow and red and a blast of warm air rushed down from the ceiling.*

The woman was still shaking but just as Lina found herself feeling pity for her, she lifted her eyes to glare around at them all. Fear and anger, she would have expected, but what surprised her was the sneer of disgust. It was as if they were ones engaged in some kind of unnatural behavior.

“Keep that animal away from me!” she said, looking at Mara, who only laughed and rolled her eyes.

*You burned a city and a town without warning. Lina thought. You murdered a village, without even noticing because it stood where you wanted to build a beacon to help you to find your way toward killing still other people just a little bit faster. Who the hell are you?*

“Traitorous scum, savages,” the woman hissed, through chattering teeth, “The First Order will
slaughter you all.”

“So I hear,” the Blackbird said dispassionately, holding the gun steady. “But for now I’d suggest you save your breath and your body heat and listen. This will be a straight-up transaction, as I’m sure has been explained to you. Contact the astromech in the shuttle and tell it exactly what I tell you to.”

When they went back outside the cold snapped down over them like a spring trap. Lina and Mara walked with arms raised in front of the again-shivering Enemy, now draped in one of the shiny capes, and holding a gun on them both.

Jyn Erso walked beside the woman, limping as if injured and being half-dragged, all the while hanging onto the woman’s shoulder.

The gun the woman carried had had something done to it to render it useless. The one Jyn Erso held pressed to her back had not.

Lina still had her bow raised in the hand above her head. Through the swirling wind, now blowing specks of ice, they could see the side of the tilted shuttle slowly lower.

She had steeled herself for some truly monstrous thing, like the spider only with the crab-like claws from the Salvage Market, or a towering man-shaped metal giant like the ones in the terrifying old tales.

What came out looked for all the world like a huge black ball. It rolled down the ramp, weaving a little, turning what looked like a cake dish for a head.

_It looked like nothing so much as one of those comical round-bellied statues that people on Reef Island carved and put in front of their houses._
“Keep walking,” Jyn Erso said quietly.

The idea was to get to the shuttle and have the woman tell the machine to go inside the station to retrieve some gear. The ancient ghost fully haunted the building now and seemed convinced that she could seal the ball-thing up inside and disable it somehow.

Lina spent long weeks after lying on a cot at Cold Harbor piecing together what went wrong from the fragments of her memory.

She came to believe that even though the Blackbird and her Alliance were prepared to bargain the Enemy woman her life, in some bondage or exile, in return for her coerced aid there were powers in the North that claimed a price of their own for the village of Timsa and for Old Nan.

As they approached the silly ball rolled toward them hopping off the gap between the packed black ground, now swirling with powdered snow, and the tilting ramp. It moved cautiously, almost childishly, as if pushing against the rising wind.

Suddenly a hard gust blew back the shining cloak and the Enemy woman must have thought to take some advantage.

She shoved Jyn Erso hard and tried to run sideways. The Blackbird fell, rolling onto a shoulder. Even as she struck the ground she was already turning up to fire but Lina was quicker, lowered her bow, grabbed the first shaft her gloved fingers touched and let fly.

It struck the woman in the back right shoulder, making her stumble.

The black ball now spun wildly flinging little darts of metal in all directions. Mara and Jyn threw themselves flat against the ground at the same instant the girl in the white parka appeared from behind the building with the crossbow.

A carved casing-bolt struck into the silver seam that ran around the machine's middle and it let out a shrieking scream, still spinning.

Enemy woman had stumbled, clawing at her back. Green flames were spouting from the wound.

One of Jyn Erso’s fire-arrows must have remained unused in Lina’s quiver.

As she tried to run, screaming, the fire spread to the back of the grey jacket.

Mara pursued her shouting “Stop! Stop!”

The burning woman might have run right off the platform but someone else waited there to stop her.
Lina found herself on her knees, unsure how she’d gotten there.

Jyn Erso had scrambled over to her.

“Lina,” she was saying, “Are you hit?”

“Look,” Lina said, desperate, like a child in a nightmare needing to be listened to, “Look,” and the Blackbird turned her head.

Wolves surrounded the platform the whole way around it seemed. White, grey, brindled. There must have been hundreds of them.

Their feet did not touch the circle, but all stood waiting just outside, claws against the black edge.

The woman fell at the end, still screaming and one great grey wolf grabbed what was left of her coat in its jaws and pulled her off the platform into the icy brush.

Wolves fear fire, or so Lina had always been told.

These clearly did not. A dozen at least fell on the Enemy while the rest howled.

It might have been a mercy, although she doubted they intended it as such.

Mara stopped running and fell to the ground covering her eyes with her hands.

The round black machine was still spinning wildly, spitting sparks and shrieking when a powerful blast from the side struck it.

Kayly Jyn’s-daughter must have powered her big gun back up and put the thing out of it’s misery.

The Blackbird was pushing her to lie down and pulling at her coat, trying to get it open.

It was just a ball throwing...what...darts? Lina told herself. How bad could it be?

Why did she feel faint? Ea....why did it burn like that?

“Kayly!” she heard Jyn Erso shout. “Get me a razor cutter. NOW!”

Chapter End Notes

Kayly gets to be Chirrut and Baze on the same day. Mama is so proud.
Kayly helps her mother deal with Lina's scary wounds, which will leave scars in more ways than one. The battered First Order shuttle is put to ambulance use. The wolves would like everyone to leave now. Kayly proves her flying credentials. An attempted Blackbird family conference-call reunion reassures a little but leaves them just as worried about each other. Long overdue mother-daughter alone time.

Chapter Notes

Te amo. ¿Kayly está contigo? = I love you. Is Kayly with you?
converging with "Jetsam"
The family reunions begin.

Mara ran out of the Beacon control building with a small plasteel box wrapped in straps.

“Kayly!” she yelled, tossing it to her like a ball in a village game.

Kayly caught it awkwardly with gloved hands.

She’d already lowered the launcher to the ground when her mother shouted for help, and now moved as fast as she could holding the box.

Mama was down on her knees beside the Far Trader now and Kayly knelt on the black ground
nearby her. Her mother had pushed the girl to lie back and was patting her and opening up her sealskin coat in the cruel cold.

“Lina!” She was saying, “Lina! Where are you hit?”

But the dark-haired girl seemed dizzy, confused. “What?” she kept gasping, eyes rolling back.

_Mama had her knife out of her boot now and was cutting, first up the sleeve of the sealskin coat then through the black liner underneath._

“We should get her inside,” Kayly said. This cold could put her in shock fast.

“No time,” Mama said. “Is that a toolbox? Get me a cutter….a beam cutter, a razor, something sharp and small.”

Kayly fumbled with the straps and got the case open. Inside were a number of small tools, casing cutters, probes and snips for minor repairs on the consoles in the control room.

_Mama had the moaning girl’s right arm bare now._

_Oh shit. She didn’t want to think about how fast frostbite could happen out here._

There it was. A little triangular cut the size of a trade-chip was in the arm just above the elbow, oozing blood but not badly

Kayly could see what looked like a three cm. black arrow point with….oh shit…a tiny red light…shining through the tan skin of the Islander’s arm.

It was moving, actually moving under the skin, up and toward the shoulder.

Whether the Far-Trader saw it now or just felt it, she started screaming.

“Kayly! Hold her down!” Mama scrambled toward the toolbox and Kayly took her place, holding the other woman’s shoulders.

“Get it out!” she was shrieking, terrified, thrashing stiffly.

It took all of Kayly’s weight to press her back.

“Lina, Lina, stay still.”

Mara had come running now and helped hold her legs.

Her mother had pressed her knee down on the wounded woman’s still-gloved hand to hold the arm still and was cutting into her skin with a small laser-cutter, slicing a line into the upper arm above the moving black shape. Grabbing what looked like long thin pliers from the box she pulled out a tiny dart-shaped thing. It was bloody and steaming in the cold.

“What in dark stinky hell is that?” Mara gasped.

Lina had mostly gone limp but was still shaking hard, either from shock or cold or both.
"Fucking bastards!" Mama hissed, "it's a paralyzer dart." She flung it aside.

"Lina, it's ok, Lina we got it out," Kayly was saying, although she wasn't sure if the shivering girl could hear her. Her eyes were closed now.

"Get her inside the station," Mara said, "I have Ancient Portia on the voice-box in there."

"No, we might be stuck here for days or longer," Mama said, "Help me carry her into the shuttle. Portia said it was flyable for a short distance at least. We've got to get her down to Mink, or Cold Harbor fast, someplace they have a Circle that can help her."

The three of them managed to wrap the now pale and mostly unconscious Far-Trader in the blood-stained shreds of her coat and lift her onto the tilted ramp of the shuttle.

Mama pulled a grey disk….Kayly recognized it, there had always been a stack of them in a box back home, a few dozen in the workshop and several in a drawer in Guardian, portable transmission links. Portia could probably get practically anywhere with one of those……out of her coat and tossed it into the shuttle.

Power and lights came on at once. Kayly could feel heat from inside the bay hit her exposed face as she and her mother carried Lina in and lay her on the floor.

Mara found a number of the snow-shield capes hung on hooks above the standing “misery” seats inside, laid one over Lina and wrapped another around herself.

Mama stood and looked toward the cockpit, distracted. Portia must be talking to her.

"Ok," she said, "Ok," then looked back at Mara and Kayly as she hurried across the angled floor toward the back of the bay.

"I’ve got to check the nav. Secure her as best you can. Look for some sort of bunk." As she climbed up the short ladder, they could still hear her, "Look for thermal heat packs under the benches! Hopefully these fuckers gave the weather some due!"

Up on the flight deck they could hear her muttering to Portia.

Mara searched around, pressing likely buttons on the walls until a panel popped down a padded ledge, two hands wide, covered in grey fabric and dangling some straps.

"Whoops! Is that a bunk?"

It would do for one.

Between the two of them they lifted the unconscious woman onto the barely-cushioned platform. Kayly pulled the straps and fastened them around Lina as well as she could.

The Far Trader was breathing shallow but at least she was still breathing.

"What was that evil arrow?" Mara said, rearranging the “blanket” and smoothing back Lina’s hair. "Why did it look like it was moving?"

"Portia says it was from a “veterinary control arsenal” they’d packed aboard." answered Mama, coming back down from the flight deck and jumping the last rung. "They're used when you want to disable an animal with unknown biology. They must have allowed themselves to learn a few lessons
from Endor and Varixx.”

Mama had pulled her own hood back as she knelt beside her injured friend, “they're supposed to eventually paralyze whatever they hit, collecting data on body mass and other such as they go in. They can be programmed to get into an artery and move toward the heart. Disabling and eventually killing the target, but leaving the Enemy smarter about it's biology before they do.”

"How do you even know about this dreadfulness?” Mara whistled, disbelieving.

"I've seen them used," her mother said quietly, tucking the cloth around Lina and feeling her head, as if for fever.

*An Islander with a machine stuck right in her. Holy fuck, Kayly really hoped this Lina wasn’t from the Far Islands. Pavy would have cut his own arm off.*

“Why the fuck an astromech was loaded with them I can’t even imagine,” Mama muttered I bet nobody ordered it to, Kayly thought. *It was a BB series. It was in there by itself, scared and had probably picked up a paranoid fear about “animals” from the crew. They have imagination. It was afraid and grabbed itself a weapon to use against animals.*

Mama had a hand comm and laid it on one of the seats.

[“This young woman needs medical attention.”]

“We’re a little lop-sided on account of Kayly dramatically blowing the hell off the landing runner on one side, is that going to be ok?” Mara asked.

“I can engage the hydraulics down-thrust on just one side and raise her up,” Kayly said. We can secure the hatch manually then, I’ll take her up as high as the seal will let me and just hope for a soft place to land at the other end…..snow would do.”

Her mother was staring at her, half-astonished and half smiling.

“What the hell did you just say?”

*There was wide streak of grey in Mama’s hair. Oh. Was that there before?*

[“Kayly is a fully cleared pilot in the Army of the Resistance. She scored marks above 9.7 in all five categories on LS and FTLS equipment, and 9.85 in laser and pulse-charge gunnery. I have not confirmed this independently but Bodhi Rook was unlikely to have exaggerated, it is not his nature.”]

“I am SO jealous,” Mara said.

She remembered something then.

“Mama, Old Nan….”
Kayly grabbed the tool box Mama had carried inside with them, and dashed out the ramp, back into the cold, jumping down from the gap at the end.

Her mother’s voice called after her but Kayly knew it would not take long.

The old woman’s body lay where they had left her, beside the black-grey metal box of the Beacon station control building. The door was closed now.

_The body of a dead stormtrooper inside would bother Portia not at all._

Her eyes were closed, quiet and very cold, frost thick on the grey lashes. The white cape Mara had laid over her had blown loose in the wind and a thin layer of powdery snow lay over everything. A few braids of gray hair had slipped outside the hood and the blood that had seeped onto the platform was already frozen. There would have been no question of moving her.

It didn’t matter. That wasn’t what Nan hadn’t wanted anyway.

Kayly took the razor cutter and sliced the front off of the outer sealskin coat. There was black and green stitched embroidery on the hood ties and edging.

Her mother came up behind her, rifle in hand, as Kayly rolled up the hide pieces.

“I promised…” Kayly started to say, before she realized that Jyn Erso wasn’t looking at her.

A row of a dozen wolves was standing in a line on the other side of the old trapper, up on the platform now, barely two meters from the body.

“Kayly,” Mama said evenly, slowly reaching out a hand to lay on her shoulder. “Stand very slowly and back up.”

She did.

Most of the great golden-eyed wolves seemed to pay them no mind, and were gathering in a circle around the fallen woman. Only one of them, a huge white one, continued watch them unblinkingly.

“Right,” Mama said, “Thank you. We’re going.”

Back inside the shuttle Mara and her mother wrestled the hatch closed…..or at least closed enough for atmospheric flight…..while Kayly climbed into the cockpit and fired up. It was a standard SJFS Xi-class light shuttle.
You can do this, Kayly, she thought and she wasn’t even bullshitting herself.

She’d flown shuttles of almost identical configuration, helped Bodhi take one apart and rebuild it, then rolled another in-flight when Commander Dameron ordered her to on a training flight.

He’d insisted it was good practice for bad weather conditions. She had suspected even at the time that real orders did not usually contain the phrase “double-dare you.”

By the time they lifted up the weather had started to turn truly rough, but the seal on the bent hatch and cracks in the hull wouldn’t let them get too high, so all she could do was crank the heat and lifted above cloud cover for whatever smoother air she could reach.

It would take them at least an hour to get to the largest human village on the coast this way.

“Cold Harbor” Portia called it.

After a few minutes her mother came up and sat beside her in the co-pilots seat.

Mama had pulled off the gloves and outer coat and was wearing a blue sweater and an old padded vest that Kayly recognized.

Reaching out, she took Kayly’s hand, squeezed it tight.

“We’ve missed you so much, baby.” she said quietly and they both began to cry then.

[“Jyn. Galen is in no immediate danger but he has been injured. Bodhi Rook is with him, I have advised him to take him directly to Nexa. Cassian is well and he and Conn are heading directly toward HarborTown and will land there unless they have enough time to move to proceed for Nexa. We should expect to be scanned within two to three standard hours and I will have to allow it to allay suspicions. When that happens you will all have to ground immediately, wherever you are.”]

Kayly put her hand back on the attitude controls, holding tight. The wind was bucking them hard and she couldn’t even reach her chin to her shoulder to wipe off the tears that were still dripping.

Where were those damn tissues when she needed them?

“Audio, NOW Portia,” her mother said, “All open, whatever you can give us.”

...static.....

"Jyn?"/

“Cassian? Are you alright”

"I'm here. Te amo. ¿Kayly está contigo?"/

Papa.
“Sí, Papa. I’m here!”

*There was a lot of bad crackle, it was either the weather or Portia kicking up static to hide their signals or both.*

//“Jyn? Cassian?”//

Mama had moved her hand to her shoulder and now Kayly could feel it shake.

“Bodhi?” she said, choking a little.

//“I have him, Jyn, Cassian. He’s ok. I’ve got him laying down in the back, we’re almost there. He was talking…a little weird but lucid…..”//

……static……

["He thought Bodhi was Chirrut Imwe. I’ve warned Bes and the others there may be some shock and they are standing by."]

“Cassian?”

….. static….

*Had she damaged the comm receivers when she shot off the damn cannons off this thing?*

Mama had her hand to her ear again and was laughing and crying at the same time again.

“Mama? What is it?”

“Portia says, that Galen says that Uncle Baze says “Hi.”

They got no more clear audio after that. Portia confirmed that the receiver was damaged and there was no time or hands free to fix it. Portia could relay messages through the ear link but she hated that. Papa and the Rat were alive. More would have to wait.

It took just under an hour of flying through a worsening winter storm before they the landed outside the village of Cold Harbor, in snow as Kayly had predicted.

The Fishers of Cold Harbor came out in the wind-whipped frost and took Lina Far-Trader from them, carrying her wrapped in bear fur and blankets to their Common House. The Ladies of Cold River were sent for, but Mara insisted on staying,

“Go,” she said, kissing them both and taking the pieces of Nan’s coat. She pressed their hands in Assurance to Meet Again Soon.

“I will take care of our friend, wear silly boots and see you in the Spring. Hurry now to Galen and
Cassian-ally.”

Kayly managed to lift the battered Xi-class shuttle up before the drifts covered it blasting the snow back from the exhaust ports to the astonishment of the Harbor people.

They headed for HarborTown hugging the coast as fast as Kayly dared push the thing. The squalls passed with a half hour South but she still stayed overland.

*Portia could down them any time and she didn’t want to risk a water landing.*

There were some kind of energy bar ready-to-eats in a small supply locker in the cockpit.

*They were no worse than some she’d had, Kayly thought, and possibly even a little less stale.*

“Oh goody,” Mama said. “The bastards even copy bad Imperial ration snacks. THIS I haven’t missed.”

Her mother sat in the co-pilot seat while Kayly flew and told her about what had happened since she had been gone. Starting with the hard things first.

*Bill was gone. Galen and Kemmi had been badly hurt. Little Merli, Rona, Pip’s brother Watt and old Isla were killed when the flames swept over the berrying fields.*

*The village had suffered but rebuilt.*

*A dozen had been killed at HarborTown and there had been extensive damage.*

Some of the news was not awful news.

*Word had come from the Grasslands that her old friend Nikki, Ava’s older sister who had taken over Mose’s Scavenger crew, had returned home to care for their grandmother and brought her twin babies. Sanna was householding with a girl who had a rope making shop up on the Harbor Bluffs, Mary Markey had her own boat now. Galen had gotten a tattoo.*

“Fucking what?”

“Your father hates it, the girls of HarborTown do not.”

*Through it all her mother almost never took a hand off her....arm, hair, shoulder. It was as if she*
thought Kayly might vanish, slip away, if she wasn’t in physical contact with her at all times.

They didn’t make it all the way back.

Two to three hours Portia said, but they made 03:05 before the call came.

*Somebody on that cruiser had come up with a story about what went wrong on 3A/UDUR. She wondered what it was.*

[“We are being scanned. Land the ship and kill power. All comms on black-out in 04:00 minutes.”]

No choice. Kayly put straight down in a high meadow above some salt-marsh still more than a days hike North of HarborTown.

It was late evening and it occurred to both of them at the same time that they had each been awake for more than 24 hours, during which they had both seen and done, as Mama said, “A fair amount of shit.”

In the dark and tilted ship Kayly realized that she was too tired to even search the shuttle or do more than check outside the undamaged cockpit hatch for conditions.

It was raining here. She cupped her hands and held them outside. When a little water had collected she drank it, wiping her damp hands on her face when she was done.

*Two years since I’ve tasted water from home,* she thought. *Two years.*

If it was raining at Nexa now, she knew that Ava was doing the same thing.

Ten degrees warmer and she’d have walked outside in it, just to get clean.

Kayly turned back inside to see her mother looking at her, in the dim light of the glow-lamp.

“Baby,” her mother said, gently, pushing her wet hair back. “I’ve still got the water bottles I filled at Mink Cove. Let's get cleaned up and get some rest.”

They lay their coats and some thermal cargo pads down on the floor of the upper bay, near the bottom of cockpit ladder, and lay down side by side with coats rolled up for pillows.
“Bodhi is at Nexa, everybody is safe. Galen just got a laser shot. Bes, Tova and Beri are patching him up now. Straight and narrow between the collarbone and shoulder, in and out through the upper arm. Didn’t hit the lung or the artery. Nicked some bone and a lot of muscle.”

“Oh, that’ll be fine then.”

“Yeah, right? Lucky wing shot,” her mother said again, softly, “He’ll be alright.”

_Kayly was overwhelmed by how badly she needed to see her brother, wanted to tell him she was sorry. She didn’t know for what…_.

“If Portia doesn’t give us the go ahead by morning,” Mama said, staring at the ceiling, “are you up for walking? We can at least get to HarborTown, Portia said Cassian made it there before the black-out and said he would wait a day for us.”

_Up for walking? She might possibly run._

_Oh fuck_, she was crying again.

She laid her head on her mother’s shoulder, and Mama kissed her head like she had when she was a little girl.

“Mama?”

“What baby?”

“Was the tattoo undamaged?”

They both laughed so hard again, then cried some more, then laughed again all in turns until they both finally fell asleep on the floor of that wretched shuttle.

Portia almost certainly thought they were crazy.
Chapter End Notes

It's ever-so-slightly like that first time you come back from semester abroad and you and your mom have so much to catch up on.
The Return

Chapter Summary

A hero of an older war finds himself back in action. Bodhi drops Kaylyra in the North and speeds to help Galen and his team at the Grasslands. He remembers seeing the interactions of young pilots of the Resistance and watching them come to terms with some unexpected dark realities of the war they face. He meets old friends and new, helps his wounded "nephew" and tries to let RD-141 see that there may be life beyond the First Order.

Chapter Notes

Portia backseat drives a little bit.

 kinda dark but it's hard to get past the fact that the First Order are the people trying to up the ante on the people who brought you the freaking Deathstar! They are horrible.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

So Tonc, here's the thing, you died and they said the war was over only it turned out maybe not quite and I spent twenty years being a teacher and a ship mechanic and now, really crazy part coming up, I am dropping the Captain and the Sarge's kid out the back of a tricked-out transport shuttle into an active fire zone.

Nuts or what?

He could imagine pretty clearly what Tonc would say and it almost made him laugh because he couldn't curse like that even in his own imagination.

"Kayly! Are you ready?" Bodhi Rook yelled back.

He had turned on the internal camera and could see her now by the rear hatch. Bundled up and with
that monstrous launcher leaning against her shoulder.....*Force!* she looked like a tiny Baze Malbus.

Ava had unbuckled and scampered back to her Heart Companian’s side. It must have been to tell her something...*goodbye, good luck, he couldn't actually tell*....because Kayly was slipping her glove back on.

"Ava! Get back in your seat!" he barked.

*I got very good at this at one point in my life but it's been a while children.*

They were coming in gravel-scrapingly low and wide around on muffled approach, although in winds like this it hardly mattered. His mapping was showing a gully just below the Beacon platform there. He would slide in, Kaylyra could jump out the back and he would move out within ten seconds, trimming the bushes the whole way.

Portia was running sensor interference but remained hyper-vigilant that there might be someone still active on this base who could tell the cruiser above about tech on the ground if they got a visual.

It made everything considerably harder but who was he to argue with a tens-of thousands-of-years-old person about anxiety levels?

On mark he hovered low.

The IR sensor camera was showing the outline beacon platform above him and a lot of warm bodies outside the perimeter.....*hell?*

"Portia? I'm seeing..."

["Animals. Indigenous wildlife likely sensing the dead bodies. They should not be a problem for our team. If Kayly is dropping she should do it now."]

There were four...or was it five?....upright human-sized bodies moving on the platform. *One of them was Jyn.*

He cracked the hatch and the interior temperature dropped fast as the cold rushed in.

Kayly had her black liner pulled up over her mouth and her goggles down but she flashed a thumbs-up for the camera. Then she was out.

*Rogue One,* he thought.

*If you're out there Tonc, watch over her.*

Bodhi sealed the hatch, cranked the heat and moved out South and West. Esperanza would head to the coast, hug the shore and then move inland fast and low toward the grasslands site in case they needed back-up or evac.
"Is it ok to unbuckle?" Ava called up after twenty minutes or so, "it seems less bumpy now, maybe."

Bodhi had to laugh a little. They were well south now and out of the foul weather, flying as fast as he could at this altitude.

He was probably causing some sonic displacement on the ground, but hopefully not scaring the hell out of too many people or breaking too many windows. From what Kayly had told him the people of Ea had lost a fair amount of their technological......well, "innocence" probably wasn't the right word for a planet with a wreck-scavenger history and a significant chunk of castaway DNA....."inexperience" maybe was closer to the mark, since he had last flown this stretch of coast twenty-five years ago.

"Come up and see, Ava," he said, "I'm following the coastline, we'll turn up Green River soon and get to the site maybe ten minutes after that."

_Sorry RiverTown, send me the bill._

The Mem's golden brown furry head appeared at the top of the ladder.

"Paave! Paave! Come see!" she called. "I can see the ocean, the real one. Oh Pavy! It's beautiful!"

It was beautiful.

He remembered sitting with young Poe Dameron and some of the other pilots in the mess tent.

It was unofficial cocktail hour and most of the officers not on call had a few shots of that dangerous moonshine some jackass on the flight crew was "secretly" distilling in their caf mugs.

They were boasting/talking like the young hawks most of them were about the "fun" parts of flying.

"What is with these guys who whine about doing fuel runs and equipment pick-ups all the time, like a bunch of prima donnas," Dameron was complaining, "You're pilots. You get to FLY. Why would you not jump at the chance to see as much of as many skies as you can?"

"Stuff it Poe, I was not "whining," Wexley said, "I'll do whatever I'm assigned. I just politely asked if anybody wanted to trade runs two for one. Who wants to wants to fly in atmo when they can fly in space? Nobody get their wings so they can look at treetops."
"You say it like it's either/or..." Dameron protested passionately, waving his mug around, "like a person can't be totally in love with two kinds of flying, different challenges equal beauty, man."

That drew some hoots. The baby-faced Tallie from Blue Squadron laughed, "Nobody wants to hear about your sex life Dameron, I faked my papers and got into flight school at sixteen because I wanted to see the stars not the other side of Pipp 3."

Various people began talking over each other about how they started flying and most of them, if less bluntly, clearly agreed with Wexley and Tallie. Bodhi had to admit he was one of them.

"I learned to love planetary flight,".....*when I wasn't under fire*, he thought of adding....."but, I've got to admit, the stars were what I dreamed about when I lay on the rooftops and looked up at the flight trails and wink-outs of the transports bringing pilgrims into the holy city," he said, "Ships weren't allowed to land within 111 km of the temple complex when I was a child, before the Empire totally took over the city. I didn't even see a spaceship up close until I was eight. They were like the Force made visible ...."

The younger pilots fell silent then.

*Jessika Pava whispered something to Kane and Bodhi heard her whisper back, "Jedha."*

He forgot sometimes. "Victory kids" they called them. They were brave and talented and dedicated to fighting for the ideals of a free Republic, but it was legends to them, old stories...Jedha, Scarif, Endor, Kashyyk, Jakku...the Deathstar.

Laren Joma slid him a mug across the table. "Dameron's a hopeless romantic but he’s right about one thing, you are all a bunch of spoiled babies, and I'm setting you all up on a planetary flight hours quota until you learn to appreciate riding out a storm or calculating topographic adjustments without your droid holding your hand."

The protests of "thanks Poe!" and "Ma'am!??!" started at once.

"I don't drink alcohol, Laren," Bodhi said quietly to the woman who had saved his life on Scarif.

"Oh, I don't either, anymore," she said with a rare smile, "the only thing I'm brewing in my footlocker these days is good drip-filter caf, if there's one thing I've learned two wars in, it’s how to pace myself."

*Joma was from Aradia, a world still firmly controlled by the Imperial Remnant, where it seemed the Empire had never really ended. It was as if the Concordance had just hit the "pause" button on the war for twenty years. In the place where she was born the greatest pilot who ever flew was still considered a traitor and could probably be arrested on sight.*
If I have any home other than the stars now, this place is it, Bodhi thought, how could I have forgotten how pretty it is?

He turned up to follow the gleaming line of the Green River inland.

"Is Jyn alright? Kayly? Cassian?"

["Jyn and Kayly have run into some complications but they are dealing with them. Kayly's contributions have been valuable. Cassian's situation is secure. Land on the side of the tree line from the platform where the Taun are massed. The soil substructure is insecure close to the beacon and the team is concerned about not receiving contact from Galen. They are moving out toward him but you can reach his last position more quickly."]

"What about scaring the Taun?"

["The Taun don't have guns."]

Bodhi broke speed and actually managed to work his way down under the tree canopy in hover before setting the landing sequence at the tree line at the edge of the wetland.

Oh he was very proud of this little shuttle, yes he was.

He cut the engines off and peered through the cockpit window.

Thump!

["Something is on the hull, Bodhi..”]

Thump! Thump!

["Oh, four of them actually...”]

Thank you Portia, I can read my own screens.

Each of them a shade either side of two metric tons from look of it and judging by the spinning pressure readings on the landing struts at least two of them were either leaning on or holding the shuttle down.

The sharp claws of the Taun could tear through hardened casing, he’d heard, although presumably not a shielded hull.
Still, Cassian had told him of seeing an angry parent scissor off the head of a man-sized lizard that threatened their infant. He’d never actually seen one of those lizards but everybody had talked about them all the time.

"I should go out first," Ava said.

"That's a definite," Bodhi said.

The instant Ava peeked her head out the hatch, the pressure on the hull vanished.

A great hooting and calling began and as the loading hatch opened wider Ava herself scampered out and a great shaggy head forced it’s way inside. Tangled yellow hair streaked with white and grey was shaken aside to show a saucer-sized brown eye.

“Bo-odhi Ro-ok!” a voice boomed. “Do-o yo-u remember me?”

He was spared the embarrassment of saying he did not.

Portia spoke in his ear, [“It’s Norla. Tell her hello from me.”]

At the same moment the large person must have spied Paave standing behind him and fluted “Hello-o Islander’s child, I am No-orla!”

Ava ran back inside, ducking under the Taun, with tears on her face and a fistful of grass that she laid in Pavy’s hand.

When Bodhi came out, blinking in the sunlight even filtered as it was through the trees, he could see that beacon platform clearly. The sweep of waving grass extended on below them as far as the eye could see, blue sparkling lines of streams woven here and there through the green. About 2k out from the rise where they stood was a wide dark circle, at least a half km. across. In the center was a square grey transmission station topped with a black spire transmission tower and three domed shapes that were probably exterior heat vents.

*Late Imperial Utilitarian Aesthetic for sure, no wonder Portia hated it. He could never tell when she bitterly complained about the hideousness of the enemies “design,”….whether of cities, stations, buildings, ships…if she was talking about engineering or software. It was probably all one to her.*

A half dozen Taun, with hair in every shade of yellow and brown, were standing around the shuttle bouncing excitedly but up in the trees he could heard voices echoing calling “Gaaalen!” “Galen!” “Galen where are yo-ou?”

“We are looking for Galen,” Norla said. “He was far-shooting on one of the platforms but did not signal with the mirror as he was supposed to do after Ancient Portia signaled the victory.”

Suddenly the overlapping calls changed.

A smooth-haired pale gold Taun appeared at the base of one of the trees about 20 meters away swaying anxiously. Norla turned and galloped toward it and Bodhi ran after.

It was not until he reached the smooth grey trunk that Bodhi Rook stopped to consider that he had never before in his fifty years actually climbed a tree.

As Norla clambered swiftly up the trunk, too anxious to wait, another tan and brown brindled Taun stooped down beside him and said breathlessly, “I will carry you, hold on Bodhi Rook!”

Clutching tangled curls that felt like a goat's mane he was pulled up into the trees, holding on for dear life.

There were boarded walkways, connecting platforms and ladders scattered in many of the trees starting fifty to a hundred meters up. All of them nearly invisible from the ground.

The Taun, Domala he learned later, let him drop down at the foot of a ladder where Norla was standing and climbing to the top he found two other Taun, smaller and obviously much distressed. They quickly moved aside to let him reach the young human who was sitting down on the platform, back resting against the main tree trunk. The young man's eyes were closed but he wasn't unconscious and actually seemed to be talking quietly to the Taun.

A Blas-tech rifle in sniper configuration lay on the boards beside him.

*Wind and ice-rain pounding on a cracked hull. A shuttle full of strangers...one of whom was Galen Erso's daughter and a stressed-out but coolly professional man snapping a blaster together. "Bodhi's coming with me. We're going in very small and very quiet, up that ridge to see what's what"....*

He was dark-haired boy, maybe nineteen or twenty, beardless but looking in need of a shave and wearing a faded blue jacket with a torn Alliance starbird patch on a scrap of khaki brown stitched on the right shoulder.

*Kid you look so much like your father it just about hurts.*

There was a dark wet-looking stain on the upper right of the jacket, below and across his collarbone. Kneeling down Bodhi could see a round burn hole on the center. It wasn’t bleeding profusely but laser fire wouldn't unless it had hit an artery or something.

[“He’s been shot. Narrow beam blaster fire. Probably targeted. Open his jacket so I can get a better look.”] Portia said in the voice of the boy’s grandfather.

Bodhi opened the jacket up carefully, trying not to move anything but the cloth. It wasn’t tied or fastened so it wasn’t too bad. A little blood had seeped through the brown collarless shirt underneath well but the wound showed clearly, black and red, coin-sized.
The young man opened his eyes then.

*Dark brown like his father's. Confused.*

“Just stay quiet Galen.” Bodhi said, “We’ll get you out of here as quickly as we can.”

“Chirrut Imwe?” the boy asked.

*Oh Force, this probably wasn’t a good sign.*

“No. I’m afraid not. I’m Bodhi Rook. We’re going to get you out on the Esperanza. Just hang tight.”

[“Oh dear. He might be in shock. You need to get him to the ship as quickly as possible. Try to get a board or something to stabilize him.”]

*Stay calm Portia, I have moved people wounded by blaster fire before….a fair number actually.*

[“We have a short safety window before we are scanned by the First Order….an hour at minimum. You should try to get him to Nexa.”]

The Taun were shouting down for blankets and ropes.

“We need something flat that we can secure him to and lower him down,” Bodhi called to the grey person who had carried him….or someone who looked almost exactly the same. “A flat board, maybe. There’s a yellow roller platform in my ship. Tell Ava to get it for you.”

“Portia?” the boy said, quietly, “Did we secure all three?”

He must have recognized the ear-clip, known the old ghost could see him.

“Mama, Papa…” he was breathing shallowly, one for each phrase, but not gasping or frightened, just taking it slow, “Are they ok?”

[“Tell him yes. They are moving out from their positions. All the stations are secure. One of Jyn’s team is dead and another is wounded but she and Kayly are safe. Cassian and Conn are both uninjured.”]

“Everything’s go,” Bodhi reassured him. “Your parents are fine. I’m going to get you back to them.”

“Kayly?”

“She’s here, I dropped her with Jyn.”

“Good…It’s alright then,” Galen said, calmly, “...The big guy…Baze Malbus, said I won’t die.” He closed his eyes again as if tired, or just conserving his energy, but smiled slightly, “I assume… he just meant…today though….but still…Mama shouldn't panic.”

[“Check him for head injuries. He sounds delirious.”]

*Looks like his father, sounds like his mother.*
“Good to hear, nephew,” Bodhi said, “We'll pass it on. Keep still and let us get you out of this tree.

Bodhi laid his hand over Galen Andor’s, lying still not far from the gun.

*Still warm enough, not cold the way Jyn’s had been at Endor.*

Within minutes the rolling repair dolly from the Esperanza was carried up. Ava and Pavy climbed up with ropes and blankets and Pavy skillfully lashed a rope sling for the Taun to lower him down.

He sensibly lay still and let them move and tie him down.

Ava laid her head lightly on Galen’s chest then and slipped a few of her fingers between his.

“Hey Ava” he said,"….did she…boss you too bad?”

“You wouldn’t believe,” Ava said, kissing his hand lightly. “But no more talking now. I’ll tell you all the stories later.”

Pavy, who knew a great deal about ropes, belayed from below.

“O-oh, tho-ose are beautiful knots,” Bodhi heard one of the Taun tell the Islander boy admiringly as he untied the lashing at the bottom, so they could carry Galen into the shuttle on his make-shift gurney. “Beautiful.”

Two mud-covered humans, one tall, one short were waiting at the base of the of the tree platforms by the time they got down, clearly the rest of Galen’s team. Ava ran to hug the tall one, heedless of the mud.

*Portia told him names, Dex and Bo, but he didn’t bother with asking which was which right now.*

“Oh bloody hell!?!” the short one said, “Galen! Did you not move after the second shot?”

The muddy humans had guns, and they also had a prisoner.

A young woman, fair hair, dark skin and eyes, wide and terrified. She was still in armor except for helmet, chest and shoulder plates. The white armor and black liners were spattered with mud, probably from being marched through the wetland all the way from the platform.

Her wrists were bound with plas-ties.

“We need to move him out,” Bodhi said, “Before Portia shuts everything down. Are you secure here?”
“Yes sir,” the tall muddy said. He lifted a stormtrooper helmet he’d been holding under his arm, presumably the prisoner’s.

_Clever. They could communicate with Portia through that._

The short one came back down the shuttle ramp having laid aside their gun to help Pavy carry Galen inside.

“Oh! That is a ranting sweet ship!” shorty said, whistling, “Oh Dex you gotta get a look at that!”

Bodhi looked at the trooper.

18? At best. _Intelligence had heard rumors that the First Order had been conscripting children._

“What’s your name?” he asked.

She said nothing at first, only stared at him.

He let the silence stretch.

_He was in a hurry but seconds seem longer to the questioned than the questioner in an interrogation. Cassian had taught him that._

“RD-141,” she whispered. She looked like she might be in shock.

She probably thought she was dying. Maybe that the world was ending.

_You aren’t and it is, dear girl, but there’s another one and it’s better. Believe me. Hard and scary if you are used to not making a single decision by yourself but better. Can you believe that?_

“I’m Flight Commander Bodhi Rook, of the Alliance to Restore the Republic, and the Army of the Resistance. I am also Ensign Bodhi Rook. Pilot, in the Transport Services Division, of the Army of the Galactic Empire. Terrabe Service Sector, based on Jedha, a place I doubt you’ve heard about.”

He looked at the tall one called Dex. ‘Do you have a place to secure the prisoner?”

“Way up a tree for tonight, sir, I expect ,” the man smiled. His teeth were the only thing not muddy. “Tomorrow, Ea willing and orders standing we’ll all take a nice walk slow back to RiverTown.”

Bodhi nodded. He looked down at the zip ties on the troopers wrists, checked them, tight enough but not too tight. For the first few days the risk was that she’d panic and try to hurt someone, after that it would be that she’d hurt herself.

He’d seen lots of Imperial prisoners in the war, transported many. At first he’d wondered what would happen if he met someone he’d known,…not that he’d had friends among the stormtroopers. It had never happened.
On Jedha, they’d all been off-worlders and kept mostly to themselves, but the techs and flight people had huddled together. Neeri, Mikal, Sansa…his barracks-mates that he’d played Sabbac with, old George who’d covered for his flight shift when he’d refused to leave the hospice while his mother was dying. None of them had been evacuated…of course not, that would have raised suspicions. Later he’d learned that Tarkin hadn’t even pulled off all the stormtroopers. Occupiers and collaborators alike had died with the city.

On Eadu he’d barely spoken to a handful to say anything more than “Yes sir” “No sir” “Where do I put this?”

“Inter-rank Fraternization” as it was called, was discouraged, and closely watched for, but he’d seen them, in the food line at the mess area, helmets off. Grizzled veterans and young kids from a hundred worlds. Conscripts and volunteers, some monsters, some "true believers" and the people who’d just gone along, let themselves be used because they thought that’s the way the universe worked and they were just trying to get by, or like him, thought they had no choice. He never forgot what Galen had done for him.

And yet ugly as that had been....

He hadn’t before seen First Order prisoners personally but Sakura had, after a skirmish on an illegal mining platform, right after they'd set up at Resistance Base.

Organa’s orders in this first weeks were to avoid to directly confrontation whenever possible. The squadrons were supposed to "White Knight" in and support the small border planets own defense forces while gathering evidence on the incursions. The idea was to help where the New Republic was turning a blind eye and document the violations in order to persuade the Senate to act. But Dameron’s squadron had gotten a little “overexcited” at Mais 4. When the overwhelmed attack cruiser vanished, leaving live six troopers behind Rogue and Black Squadrons had assumed they were Imperial Remnant.

These “stormtroopers” had acted differently though. Instead of a mix of Inner-rim military demanding repatriation and snarling speciesist abuse, they had fallen apart when their situation became clear to them and their helmets were off. The Resistance people noticed at once that they were all young, very young and seemed traumatized, almost incoherent.

Unable rather than just unwilling to answer questions, D’ia had said.

Since the Resistance was in no position to handle prisoners they had just taken their guns away and herded the half dozen disoriented troopers into the hold of a U-wing intending to hand them over to the nearest planetary defense forces to keep for one of the unofficial prisoner exchanges. happening more and more on the edges, in this simmering war the government on Hosnian Prime refused to see building, but this time it was different.

The “Victory kids” had been badly shaken by whatever happened after, Dameron maybe especially. Bodhi saw them all, ashen-faced rather than cocky and triumphant, when they returned in staggered formation back to the half-built base. They were all taken immediately off for debrief.

General Sakura, another old veteran, returned later to check the condition reports personally as the U-wing was brought in separately.
The droids were called in for scene assessment, and to clean it out.

“Jakku,” he’d said to Bodhi, grimly, as the R-5s and good old MK-Cee-one rolled in to scan. A former Pathfinder, Sakura knew that Bodhi had been there. “It was too much like Jakku.”

They had taken almost no live prisoners on the ground at Jakku. Most of them had been suicide troops.

One of the prisoners must have gotten hands on a laser cutter some idiot had not remembered was in the repair kit in the hold.

Shit hit the fan big time and they started a whole re-training after. He’d thought the General might actually stop slapping and start punching she was so angry.

In smart hands it was the kind of mistake that could have brought down the U-wing, gotten half of them killed.

These troopers hadn’t had that kind of imagination though. It was determined by the droids that one prisoner must have found the weapon and instead of using it to try to escape had killed the others and then himself. From the look of it it hadn’t been a mutual decision.

This wasn't just the cruel historical revisionism of the Remnant. The First Order had roots in even darker places. The incident was an isolated one, at least from anything their Mid and Out-Rim allies were reporting but they had to be prepared. Monsters still walked the galaxy, Portia wasn't wrong about that.

“Once she’s well away from here take these off, but keep a close eye on her, the first few days especially. Don’t take any chances, don’t leave her alone but don’t hurt her and try not to scare her any more than she already is.”

“I won’t,” Dex nodded, “She’s not our first.”

The young man looked at the shell-shocked trooper and then back at Bodhi.

“My parents were stormtroopers,” he said quietly, “deserters, in the old war.”
He shifted his gun and held out a hand.

Bodhi shook it. Most of the mud was dry.

“Tell Galen we’ll see him later,” the man said, smiling again, “And tell Kayly I still want that mug she owes me, she’ll know.”

The short one called out for everyone to get back by the trees and cover their ears and Bodhi moved quickly into his ship. He had Esperanza up and moving off within minutes toward Nexa.

They were on the ground behind Portia’s field well before she called the black-out and the Sisters of Nexa were there waiting to care for Galen and the other children and to welcome him back.

Chapter End Notes

Family reunion upcoming.
Chapter Summary

Bodhi brings Galen home to Nexa and is welcomed by old friends. Jyn and Kayly are grounded on the Coast and Jyn remembers how they came to build the raggedy training ship that kept Kayly and her friends alive and now forms the core of the Esperanza. She secretly sometimes considers what she and Cassian's lives might have been like in a kinder universe.

Chapter Notes

A very small link with the next of the reunions and a section that has lingered in my notebooks for sometime.

Hermado = Brother

capitán por un día = Captain for a day.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He’d brought a fair bit of med gear in the hold but he damn sure didn’t have a bacta tank, just patches. A pretty considerable number of patches, actually.

Fortunately Ava had packed the Esperanza’s hold herself, mainly because Ava liked packing and was good at it. So she was quickly able to locate two small ones and carefully applied them to close Galen’s exit and entry wounds.

Bodhi could hear them talking quietly in the back hold. Most of what he could hear consisted of Galen talking quietly and Ava saying “Shhhh…stay still, stop talking you dummy.”
Paave came up front and sat beside him in the co-pilots seat. Bodhi noticed that the boy kept his hands folded on his lap, as if trying not to touch anything, but he seemed pretty much at ease otherwise.

Bodhi was trying to set and hold her to the fastest course he safely could at this altitude.

“How are they doing back there, Pavy?”

“Galen is the only person I know who would try to tease someone with an actual hole in him but he’s holding still for her at least,” Paave said with a small smile. He glanced back down at the cabin. “He keeps asking about Kayly. If she is ok. He says if you or the ghost talk to his mother you are supposed to say, “Uncle Baze says hi.”

“Did Ava give him any pain killers?”

“I don’t think so, why?”

*Because he’s either high or seeing dead people.*

[“Bodhi, Jyn is trying to get through on comms. So is Cassian. There is a great deal of interference.”]

...static.....

/*Jyn?*/

*Cassian’s voice.*

//“Cassian? Are you alright”//

*Jyn. Oh thank the Force.*

/*I’m here. Te amo. ¿Kayly está contigo?”*/
"Sí, Papa. I’m here!"

The static was awful.

“Jyn? Cassian? Can you hear me?”

“I have him, Jyn, Cassian. He’s ok. I’ve got him laying down in the back, we’re almost there. He was talking, a little weird but lucid. We’re not even 10 minutes out.”

“Jyn, can you hear me?”

[I think we’ve lost audio with them. Their ship is fine for flight but the receivers are damaged and they have too much weather interference. I don’t dare boost the signal enough to get through right now.”]

Bodhi Rook knew where he was.

The pine groves and the red blush of the berry bogs, the irregular blue shapes of the spring-fed ponds.

Portia was feeding the landing coordinates in, clearly intending to bring them in at field above her tower, above her. It was the same place he had taken off from almost twenty five years ago.

“That was Cassian.

“Yes. Yes. I'm here Cassian.”

“Gracias hermano. For my children, for everything.”

Was Cassian’s voice breaking?

Oh please no. Bodhi couldn't handle that.
“What do I do?” he had asked, desperate, on a stolen ship full of brave and desperate men and women.

“You stay with the ship,” the Alliance soldier had told him laying a hand on his sleeve... no longer a cool competent officer...a young man just like him struggling to redeem his mistakes, a comrade, a friend.....standing beside Galen’s daughter.

" Keep the engine running. You’re our only way out of here.”

I woke up in pain and for nearly two years they told me that I had failed, that you were dead. Then we found each other again but the war went on and I lost you both to twenty years of exile and silence.

One day the General called me down to base where a girl looked up at me like a light in a darkening evening sky and told me she was your daughter.

“Just fly safe, brother. We’ll be waiting for you, waiting for you both.”

Wiping his eyes on the back of his sleeve he reached up and engaged the landing sequence.

It looked like most of the villagers of Nexa were standing along the road and in the field by Portia’s wall, waving. Paave waved back.

Bodhi didn’t have the heart to tell him no one on the ground could see him.

[“There. Thank heavens that’s done.” Portia said, as the gear touched down. “They are waiting on the field. Come up and say hello after Galen is taken care of.”]

Paavy raced ahead of him, fairly jumping down the short ladder, while Bodhi hurried behind as the back bay door opened and the ramp came down.
They got ready to lower Galen out on his makeshift “stretcher.”

The boy’s voice was a little weak but he was still arguing.

“Ava, please…at least let me walk out, this is embarrassing.”

“You were shot, Galen. S-H-O-T. Remember to move after the second target next time if you don’t like it.”

“I’ve missed you too Ava.”

The sunlight was shining and the field smelled of bent grass.

People were there. Half a dozen Mems, who reached in and took the sides of the roller board from his hands and Paave’s and pulled it out away from the Shuttle.

"Ava!!" someone was calling and letting go of Galen's hand she dashed out the back.

Another voice, one he knew, was calling out, “This way, keep him level now. Take him directly to our house, we are set up and ready.”

Tova, Second….no, Eldest Sister now. Iola was gone.

A small hand touched his back and when he turned he saw Bes smiling at him.

“Welcome back Bodhi Rook,” she said.

Beri, sweet white-furred Beri, as tall as his shoulder now and still in her small dark glasses, said nothing at all but only threw her arms around him.
When she opened her eyes in the morning, back stiff and arms aching, Jyn turned over at once to make sure it wasn’t a dream and that her daughter was still there.

Kayly was asleep beside her, a rolled up piece of cargo tarp under her head as a pillow and her white coat pulled over herself as a blanket.

Her hair was shorter, cut shoulder length now.

Their brave Kayly was a kick-ass pilot. Who’d have thought?

“It's not safe for there to be only two people on this planet who know how to pilot a ship,” Cassian had said, long ago, even before the attack at RiverTown, "We need to find a way to train somebody else."

Who’s the other person besides you? she had thought and started to ask before she’d realized he meant her.

"Oh, absolutely," she'd agreed at once.

Kaylyra had been so nervous when Cassian started his little flight school, not that she'd ever in a thousand years have admitted it, oh no.

It was after her first white-knuckled day and the sleepless night that followed it that her father gave her his rank patch to wear for luck, "so you can be capitán por un día” he’d said. Their relentless girl had smiled bravely and sewn it onto her jacket like a talisman.

"Ohhh..." Cassian groaned, falling into his chair exhausted after the first day. "Kay would be completely appalled at the thought of me trying to teach anyone to fly,"

She had rubbed his shoulders sympathetically, "Just between you and me, I think Kay took great joy in being appalled."
They’d first gone to the Three Years Market when the children were little and it was there while prowling the Wreck booths together that they had seen it, a fucking T-14 hyperdrive motivator, fully intact. When she spotted the cased panel on a battered trestle table beside some detached runners and stacked metal flooring tiles, Jyn told herself that she could not be seeing what she thought she was. Admittedly, the little she knew about FTL ship engineering she’d learned from forging manifests and repair orders for parts smugglers or by sitting next to chatty ship mechanics in bars while she picked their pockets, but this she recognized.

This was one of the delicate and expensive parts.

Doubting herself for a moment she’d turned to Cassian and the look on his face proved her right.

“Holy shit,” her usually poker-faced partner had said.

Some rookies from up Northwest had dragged the heavier-than-it-looking thing to Fox River then put it on a flat boat and poled all the way down to the Green, miraculously unbroken. Savvier Scavengers with better tools would have torn it open and disassembled it, stripped the module for components like fine circuit materials, metal, wire, liquid crystal… things that could be traded separately to maximize profit. Left whole it was just a small suitcase-sized mystery box and fancy doorstop, but for them it was a treasure. They had the last piece first.

Once the deep-water Bequa and their allies had gotten onboard with the Ea Alliance it was possible to get mostly intact engines of various kinds, preserved by the icy cold, wrapped and protected by their own crushed hulls from the pressure. The problem was that most were antiques or too mismatched to put together functionally with the parts they already had. It was painstaking work. Cassian was a skilled multi-purpose mechanic. She could slice code and wire a trigger with the best of them, if she did say so herself, but that wasn’t an aircraft engine, much less an FTL drive. Even with Portia reading them the Idiots Guide to Hyperspace Mechanics neither of them had the nerve to admit to themselves that what they were really doing was trying to re-assemble an actual working spaceship from parts.

So the "training ship" had become a kind of shared high-stakes DIY hobby for them for years. They began by tracking the parts back up Fox River to High Tree, then keeping eyes open at every Scavenger Fair for almost fifteen years as they put the damned thing together like the galaxies most unwise jigsaw puzzle.

The first time they had tested the rear thruster, on the far field on a rainy winter morning, the bloody thing engaged, ran for thirty seconds and fell straight off.

Galen and Kemmi, sitting a safe distance back on the wall had let out a cheer. Apparently they thought that was what was supposed to happen.

Kayly, ten then, had looked up at her, “Mama, Papa isn’t going to try to fly in that ever, is he?”

Cassian had rested his forehead against the patched frame as Dov, Keen and Old Iko shoveled sand on the detached thing to stop it from spinning, looking utterly, unrecognizably dejected. He so resembled Galen when one of his tree-house constructions failed that it left her torn between laughing and crying as she laid a hand on his shoulder.
She knew in her heart she was seeing the face of a boy in a makeshift droid-repair shop who’d just rewired a MSE-6 all by himself only for it to let out a shriek and bolt wildly through the refugee camp knocking over buckets and tent poles, before it hit a wall and blew it’s top in a shower of sparks. That long-lost boy appeared on precious and rare occasions and Jyn treasured each and every one of them.

Working in the garden, or lying in bed in the mornings if she woke before him she would sometimes spin fantastical "What if.." stories.

Your parents were University teachers, mine were researchers. We’d have met as children when they were all at some teaching institute thing or other and they’d have had staff picnics or something and you’d have thought I was an annoying little tomboy but maybe then we’d meet again in university when I’d have been a freshman with a chip on her shoulder about her famous scientist father.....fucking Force, what would I have even studied? Chemistry maybe? or Geology or something else with a y on the end.....and you’d have been an upperclassman too workaholic to notice all the girls in love with you. I’d have told my friends.....she usually pictured Macha and Bes in matching Core World fashions at this point and broke down giggling....that I thought you were stuck up but the first time we got two drinks in us.....students can have parties right?...I’d have pinned you to a wall and said “If you don’t put your hands on me right now I may possibly die” and being an altruistic sort you’d have found yourself eager to help out. We’d both have been surprised at how fast it got good. Your friends....somehow she pictured Melshi and K2... also weird....and mine would have thought, “Them?”.....well, not Macha maybe, she’d already have been trying to jump you for weeks probably....when we showed up at the mess hall, or whatever, the next day in the same clothes we’d worn the night before.

You wouldn’t be studying weapons or even robotics or engineering, it would be History or Languages or something....or more likely, Medicine or Sentient Psychology.... You’d tell me about Fest and how important it was to you to help people, how you wanted to make the galaxy a better, fairer place, and I’d find out that behind that self-sufficient reserve you were still the kind of boy who holo’d his family each and every week without fail and teased his little sister.

I would be so in love with you it would be ridiculous. That part would be the same in any and all possible universes.

She never told him about these silly daydreams.

The next morning she woke just after dawn and found him back in the workshop, made tea and brought him a cup, as she sometimes did.

“I miss Bodhi often,” Cassian said, staring at the battered thruster, “But I have to admit that some days I miss him even more than others.”

"Me too."
Portia had looked for Bodhi carefully in her "data slices" in the years after the War.

He had disappeared for almost two years after they had received Draven’s last assurance that he was alive and they worried terribly. Finally his name showed up on Takodana, listed among the faculty at a newly founded Jedha Diaspora Cultural Center. It was a quiet place with very limited Net access, which Jyn knew might not be a coincidence, but Portia brought them a news notation in an architecture journal that showed an award-winning young Jedhan-diaspora architect named Remmi Nemir. There standing beside the handsome Nemir as he received his award was his partner, retired AARR Flight Commander Bodhi Rook.

Jyn knew that happiness was not always simple or easy to keep, but she had come to believe in it very devoutly.

*Oh Bodhi, she had prayed. They took so much from you. Don't let the fuckers have it all. Be happy while you can. Papa would have wanted it for you so badly.*

He would tell them when they saw each other again, or he wouldn't. His choice.

All that mattered now was that Bodhi was still alive. He had taught her daughter to fly and brought her back to them.

Jyn sat up carefully, trying not to wake Kayly and as she did, Saw’s voice spoke in her ear.

[“Jyn. Galen is with Bes and Tova at the Second Agricultural Station and is recovering well. Bodhi is in my second heart level now. Drinking tea, he has asked me to tell you.”]

She smiled and nodded so Portia would know she heard.

[“The communication and flight black-out will need to continue for some time. Possibly hours, more likely one to two days. We have been scanned intermittently and First Order ships are closer than I want to take chances with until I can get all of this equipment fully and securely integrated. I also need to warn you that I may be stop communicating even over the mods for brief periods of time, so do not be alarmed. I am still keeping track of your location.”]

*What? Portia’s mods were supposed to be super-secret ancient tech, unreadable by any existing scan except for…..oh fuck...*
Kayly’s eyes were open.

“Good morning Sunshine,” Jyn said, and her daughter smiled at the old childhood nickname.

“What’s our status?” Kayly asked, sitting up and stretching.

“I propose we eat some Neo-Imperial sawdust bars,” Jyn answered, “and re-fill our water bottles. Then batten down the hatches here and put a big sign up threatening any scavengers with eternal Blackbird vengeance if they touch the damn thing. When that’s done I further propose we start hiking toward HarborTown where your Papa is grounded. Galen and Bodhi are home and well but Portia is taking extra precautions since apparently evil Jedi knight/Sith hybrid monsters are prowling the neighborhood.”

“Well that sucks,’ Kayly said. “Let’s go find Papa.”

Saw’s voice did not protest in her ear.

Portia might have already closed communication but Jyn had a feeling she was simply refusing to rise to the bait.

Chapter End Notes

I had some feels I had to stick somewhere.

Yes, even Jyn Erso writes Rebel/Captain au's in her head.
Chapter Summary

Jyn and Kayly leave their downed shuttle and head South toward HarborTown and Cassian, she puzzles over the first Order's actions and stumbles across a jacket that triggers some memories. Cassian and Conn head toward HarborTown with their prisoner. Cassian starts an interrogation.

Chapter Notes

Once a spy, always a spy. Once a scavenger always a scavenger.

Jackets!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Before they left, Jyn and Kayly dug around inside the shuttle looking for anything useful.

In a way, it was a good thing that Portia seemed to be on radio silence, the high gloss black-on-grey-on-more-black-on-another-shade-of-grey color scheme put a bad enough taste in her mouth without having to hear constant sniping about the Neo-imperialist aesthetic .....in Saw's voice no less....while she rifled the ship.

This wasn't even a tricked-out Command shuttle, just a utilitarian transport. Not very comfortable amenities-wise, but still fully stocked and rigged with extra gear, a free-standing astromech, *albeit deceased*, a couple of hover-dollies and a mini-generator and portable com-rig.
The First Order clearly had money to burn, Jyn thought, popping the lock on a standing equipment locker.

Three Blas-tech A-80s, extra firing packs, a handful of blasters that looked like T-17s but re-designed. Not bad for walking-around guns.

Where the fucking Force was it all coming from?

The massive tech projects and Fleet of the pre-war Republic and Empire had been churned out for forty years from the deep purses and impressive infrastructure built by centuries of peace of the Old Republic, augmented by the once-willing coffers of a thousand worlds.

How was the First Order getting these shiny toys?

Obviously they were using the Remnant as a front and skimming the cream off the production of the Core World shipyards through straw buyers but that wouldn’t account for even half of what Portia was seeing….and Portia had been frank that she wasn’t seeing everything. Looting and pillaging the little independent mining worlds and forgotten colonies between Rattak and the Outer Rim could make you very rich in the short term but it wasn’t a sustainable basis to build on.

The myth the FO seemed to spread about themselves was that the “Glorious Emperor” in his infinite wisdom had cached it all away for them like some kind of all-seeing Sith squirrel and that they, the pure and uncorrupted new “Order” were destined to pick up the gauntlet and take back all that all their corrupt elders had lost. Yeah. Cue the soaring music.

Portia was sure they were scavenging tech wholesale from somewhere else which tied in with Cassian’s analysis about reclusive evil warlordy cartels that had been spotted out there in the great beyond in the days before Scarif. There were whispers even back in the old days that Palapatine had been playing footsie with them in his relentless search for kyber but now they seemed to have all vanished. Allies of the FO or it’s first victims? This psycho armada had been building for years and the numbers still didn't add up, at least not for her. The Old Empire had been corrupt and wasteful but they hadn't been careless. The whole bloody murderous business had the stink of a con job.

One day at a time.

They had dodged the blow they’d been waiting for for three years. Ea was safe for today and they had all three platforms.

Portia had an ear on them and even if what she was hearing was making her paranoid, it was still a win. Now onto the next step.
Then inside one thin locker she found a pressed grey dress uniform, sized medium and tailored for a woman.

Probably set aside for her "mission accomplished" return trip and triumphant debrief by that tech officer who'd wound up being a wolf snack.

Talk about the downside of not getting your promotion. Oh my.

Jyn ran a hand lightly across the fabric, a kind of flannel…*gaberwool* they called it…and was shaken by a flood of memories.

Pressing her cheek against the scratchy grey of Papa’s shoulder as he carried her to bed.

*Memory played so many tricks, but it seemed to her sometimes that she could see things now that tunnel vision had not let her register in their time.*

Sefla and Rostock and Tonc…*had it been Tonc?*…passing the dead Imps uniforms to them, up from the lower hold on Rogue One. That grey officers’s jacket and flared pants, neatly folded and with the black boots laid on top…*these guys are good*, came to her, *there are only so many ways to kill a man without damaging his clothes*…had been placed into her hands. She’d passed them in turn back to Cassian before turning again to reach for the black ground-crew coverall.

It should have been been so awkward, two tense people moving around in that tight space under the cockpit ladder, no bigger than the same alcove on this shuttle…smaller maybe. She and Cassian had needed to shift often, changing places to get into those uniforms, taking turns leaning against the wall to get the boots on. Yet she couldn’t remember them bumping into each other, even with backs turned. Already they had fallen into a kind of choreography.

He’d belted the foolish trousers but hadn’t fastened the jacket yet before stepping sideways as she slipped in front of him to get space enough to work her legs into that black jumpsuit.

Unconsciously she’d placed her hand flat against that smooth uniform jacket as balance, to step around him in that cramped space.

For a moment he had paused.

She hadn’t looked up…*no….there was no time for that, no place, no chance*…but thoughts are quick when your adrenaline is as high as hers was then and she still clearly remembered the feel of that pressed grey wool under her fingers as they rested on his chest. His tan Alliance uniform shirt was still underneath and it came to her if she had slid her hand a little left, inside the jacket she could have felt his heart beating.
The instant passed. *There wasn’t time*, she told herself. He moved a step out. She moved a step in. The grey jacket was buttoned. The black coverall zipped. Scarif happened.

“Hell yeah!” came Kayly’s voice behind her. “I am absolutely coming back for these boots. Are we in SweetWater territory? I bet Eldest Sister Bekka will let me have them if I ask nicely.”

*Once a Scavenger’s child always a Scavengers child.*

Cassian was alive and unhurt in HarborTown. Galen was hurt but home.....*oh my boy*. Her daughter was close enough to touch and Bodhi, *oh Force*, Bodhi was here.

*The blow they had been waiting for for three years had fallen and they'd survived it. Portía had ears on the Enemy. Ea was safe...for now.*

They sealed up the hatches as best they could with the ship slanted half sideways.

"Kayly honey, next time you blast the runners off a box shuttle try to damage both sides equally, ok?"

"Sure thing, Mama."

Jyn cut some saplings, twisted them round into knots and staked them by the hatches...universally acknowledged "Keep Out" markers...and shouldered her pack. Her beautiful hotshot pilot daughter did the same.

Then they started walking hand in hand South towards HarborTown.
It had been a long time since Jyn had come this way on foot. There was a narrow Coast road down to the Harbor River crossing and this late in the year it was pretty clearly worn from all the fall traffic back and forth from the Mem settlements. The day promised to be sunny and though it was a brisk fall morning the acorn trees blocked the wind from the sea a little.

*Another day, K2. Thank you.*

She headed toward Cassian.

"Where is Jyn now, Portia?"

["They are moving South, following the coast. Kayly is staying low and controlling speed since the craft was slightly damaged. Since the order to ground will likely come before they can reach Nexa she wants to be able to bring it down in friendly territory."]

*Kayly was piloting, his little white knuckle flight student.*

"Kayly's back?" Conn called as he came up from the bay, "and flying? Oh hell, that's grand."

"How's our passenger?" Cassian asked.

"Whimpering like a Fisher boy after a three-night bender."

"Yeah, oxygen deprivation blackouts leave you with a miserable headache," he conceded. "Also he's probably in shock and just getting started on a complete psychological breakdown."
"Ah well, whatever he's broken, it didn't look to be his arms or his legs so I've left him trussed up like a pigeon back there. What do you want to do with him?"

_Toss him in the sea and fly home to Jyn and my children_, Cassian thought.

But that was not the way this needed to go. This boy was an officer, not a grunt level Stormtrooper, they would need to interrogate him.

["Technician First Class Len Vereck. His fellows left him to die. Quite unmistakably."]

_Good to know._

["Dex and Bo have another prisoner they are transporting to GreenRiver. Bodhi Rook gave them additional advice on managing her."]

"Oh bloody hell, Portia," Conn sat down in the co-pilot seat, "do you think we're gonna have to start building a warehouse to stack these bastards in."

Cassian said nothing. _He would need to talk to Perin at HarborTown._

["Jyn had a prisoner briefly at the Northern platform but that one tried to escape and the wolves killed her."]

"Wolves!" the younger man whistled, "Hell. I've never been any further North than HighCliff and now I'm feeling suddenly cured of any desire to go."
Cassian remembered Then-Eldest Iola with her small hand over his in their early days here, explaining her belief that while some "Fallen" can find their way in the pattern of Ea many others cannot.

"What happens to those who cannot?" He'd forgotten to lift his hand first to politely indicate a question and she'd slapped his palm lightly to remind him, "some are set to lay by the side, safe enough but unbound and alone, to fade in time and leave no trace...."

...the Clone Trooper graves on the Dyer’s coast, the beautiful cruiser on the Taun cliffs above Green River with two old men inside who died without ever opening an unlocked door, Tova’s story of two refugee hermits who died of illness or broken hearts in the stone house twenty years before he and Jyn had crashed here and left nothing behind but a light saber on the window sill.

"Others..." she had met his eye, "...others die at once. We can see the work of the weaver in it’s time but it is a hard thing to know far in advance what string will be taken up, which will be left at the edge and which must be cut at once."

“Do you mean," he had said, always careful in those days, "that I should be thankful we were taken up."

“Yes," she'd agreed, smiling shrewdly, "you should be. I know that we all are. That is one of the things I mean, anyway."

He missed her still.

"Cassian, he's a pathetic little bastard but I'm only half joking. There's gonna be people who look at him and think of Red Anna, and Dan Roirke, and all the others that died. There's gonna be a lot who think of Billie. The Ladies may find themselves with their hands full."

Conn was a good man, but it had to be asked.

He kept his eyes on the horizon outside the window and asked quietly.

“What did you think when you opened fire on that platform?”

There was a long moment of silence.
“I thought that the bastards were shooting at me,” Conn answered tightly, “I thought about needing to get Old Portia inside that monstrosity so about five thousand more of those runt murderers don’t come down here and do to us what they’ve done to others and I thought about you not getting your ass killed in there and me having to go back and tell Jyn about it. Bloody hell, Cassian…” he could see the young trader’s hands tighten into fists on the armrests and then let go, “…what the hell do you think I was thinking of?”

“I’m sorry Conn,” he said. *I’m not the one who needs to hear it said, you are.*

“You should be,” Conn snapped, still angry. “And in case you wonder what I’m thinking now…,” he looked back over his shoulder, down into the bay where he’d left the tied-up First Order tech, “Now I look at that sorry runt and I think about Dex, and his mommas an that shivering wreck of a whatever-he-is that Ava’s Grandma bit the hand off so he didn’t shoot anybody else….so yeah….if thats what you’re damn asking about?”

Conn kept his eyes ahead on the window and said no more.

*Clearly he’d crossed a line. Fair enough.*

“They say it’s like swimming. Once you know how you never forget.

This wasn’t a full interrogation anyway. It was just a look-over.
TFC Len Vereck of the First Order looked like hell. Today had been a little rough on that fine grey uniform. He’d need some new trousers, that was for sure.

Young. Twenty-one maybe. Short light brown hair, classic Imperial military cut. Blue eyes. Shaved recently...probably this morning. Pale skin....looking a little green right now.

Conn had left the man lying on one of the fold-down bunks. Cassian considered leaving him there but thought better of it.

“Hold still,” he said, “I’m going to cut the ties on your legs and move your wrists to this other bar so you can slide them and sit up if you choose.”

The tech said nothing, only glared at him...hardly unexpected.

He moved the wrists first securing them to the side railing before cutting the ankles.

The tech flinched when Cassian took out the utility knife.

That done he moved back to sit on the bench opposite and sat quietly, watching and waiting while TFC Vereck stiffly swung his legs down.

Alright. Now we time this.

“The First Order will destroy…” the Tech blurted out.

Oh Force, less than thirty seconds.

Cassian held the knife up, not threateningly, just holding it sideways at eye level but the boy shut up immediately.

“Gagging you would be uncomfortable for you and annoying for me,” he said quietly. “So I’m going to ask you to just sit and listen for a moment while I apprise you of the situation. We can have a longer talk later, perhaps when your head hurts less and we’ve all had a chance to get some rest.”

The man stared at him sullenly silent, but also sweating. Jaw clenched but eyes periodically flicking to the corners.

Good.

“A few ground rules, TFC Len Vereck of the First Order, ”just to keep this part brief, since we’ll be
landing soon.”

Cassian smiled slightly, “Firstly, please don’t bother threatening myself or my crew. While I appreciate you are a little stressed at the moment you must concede that threats are pretty much just rhetoric at this point. You’re tied up. Secondly, I have no intention of lying to you, but whether or not you actually believe me matters not at all. So in the interests of brevity keep your opinions on the subject to yourself right now ok? There will be time for you to ask questions after. Are we clear?”

Nothing. Refusing to make eye contact now. Good.

He nodded calmly as if the man had answered. “Excellent. You should know first off that everyone else on the platform you were manning is dead. You are the sole survivor. Also, as of 157 standard minutes ago, the other two platforms have also been completely overtaken by our people. The First Order Cruiser and attendant escort that brought you here are long gone. When we reach our destination you will be taken off this ship. What happens to you then will be largely in the hands of some women who will be waiting for us there. While there is no guarantee that you will not be killed outright if you are deemed to be a present or future threat, I can assure you will not be tortured. Please put your mind at rest on that score. I am not big believer in that sort of thing myself, having been on the receiving end, but even if I was that just isn’t their way here. Now, do you have any questions?”

He waited as noncommittally as possible.

Counting……..

“Rebel scum!” the young man hissed.

Not even thirty seconds.

Cassian, smiled slightly and inclined his head as if he had been asked a question, “Yes. My name is Cassian Andor, Major in the Army of the Alliance to Restore the Republic, and the Army of the New Republic, retired. I presently hold some kind of rank in the Resistance although no one has told me what it is yet.”

He stood then, taking a canteen from the rack on the wall and opened it. After taking a long drink he placed it within Vereck’s reach and put a tablet from the med-kit next to the bottle.

“That is plain water and an analgesic, for your headache. I don’t expect you to trust me enough to make use of it but it’s available. We’ll be on the ground in about ten minutes.”

Cassian looked the young officer one more time. Standard protocol would be to keep him secure but off balance but that was hardly necessary here. The kid was in for the shock of his propaganda-controlled life in about fifteen minutes.
From Organa's analysis and what they'd been able to see and hear from here most First Order troops and officers came from three types of backgrounds.

Young people from "Remnant" worlds within the Core and Colonies, for whom the Civil War had never ended, shipped off as if to summer camp in order to serve gloriously with the "Contingency"...as the First Order had initially been called...and revive the Empire.

Second generations of semi-religious "new order" military cults cynically nursed by the escapees of Endor and Jakku, literally so, considering the age of Palpatine's child suicide troops at Jakku.

Or conscripts, tributes and economically-coerced volunteers, all taken very young and very trainable from the occupied worlds of the the UR sectors.

*The locally powerful warlord families of the so-called "Chiss Ascendancy" were once whispered to rule with an iron fist out here. Now they had either retreated or been consumed by this parasite they had stupidly given shelter to. The planets the Chiss had subjugated now found themselves with a new master. It was possible some had even welcomed the change at first.*

From the look and sound of him, young Len here was of the first or second variety. If he knew anything about a super-weapon development program or invasion plans he wasn't high-ranking or smart enough to know he knew it. Pressing him would yield nothing that he wouldn't give up fast enough on his own, assuming somebody didn't cut his thread straight off the docks at HarborTown.

"If you'll excuse me now, Technical Officer Vereck, I need to get back to work. We'll hopefully talk again soon."

*Cassian turned to climb back up to the cockpit, then stopped, pausing for a full count of three before turning back as if just thinking of something he'd forgotten.*

"Tell you what, I'll call ahead. If you behave yourself and keep the boasting and rote threats to a minimum, I'll try to arrange for someone to have some clean clothes there for you."
Conn glanced up as Cassian moved up to take his seat again.

They’d come down over the Inner Islands and slowed a little. The dark line of the coast was visible and the arms of the Harbor coming into view.

“Good. They can see us on the Littles, Hand and Star. Just the fact that we’ve made it back will give people hope,” Cassian glanced over to meet his young companions’s eye.

“I’m sorry I blew up a little,” Conn said, steadying the controls and setting the landing numbers as Portia was piping them in. *Clearly she was still with them, but giving them space to talk this out.*

“Don’t be.”

“No,” the Trader shook his head, “I was wrong. I know this has gotta to seem like a bad dream coming back around the third time for you and the missus and I know what you’re doing here sir, I really do…. I guess I appreciate it. You and Jyn know a lot more about this kind of war than most of us do or ever will….what it takes and what it does to people, even the ones on the right side of things and you want to make sure I don’t….none of us…forget it.”

*Ah, you’ve been taking to Olwen a lot, haven’t you?*

“But, Cassian, listen, …” he took a breath like he was getting something out he’d considered for a while, “I think of you as a friend, but once in a while you got a tendency to talk like I’m still fourteen so cut it the hell out, ok? That boat sailed a long time ago.”

Cassian had to laugh, “Guilty as charged. I don’t think that at all Conn, I promise. I’ll try not to make that kind of mistake again.”

“Yeah,” Conn smiled and watched the horizon, "Well, don’t take it hard, you’re not as bad as Jyn anyway. Galen, Dex and I have a drinking game based on how many times she straightens our collars or tells us to put on a sweater."

*Ha. Good one.*

“Let me pass the controls over to you for the landing.”

“No,” Cassian shook his head and leaned back in his seat, closing his eyes, “Bring her in Conn, you’re doing great. I need a few minutes to get my thoughts straight.”
He thought about his breathing for a while, and Jyn’s smile and his children’s voices.

When the sound of the landing thrusters kicked in he opened his eyes. Conn was bringing them in onto the beach above the high-tide line near the long wharf. Portia must have advised it.

The oldest soldier in their army spoke over the comm.

[“Cassian, Bodhi Rook and Galen are on the ground at Nexa. Bes, Beri and Tova are with them. Galen is stable and recovering. He is teasing Ava. The Islander boy Paave wants to know if someone can get word to his father. Bodhi says to do what you must and he will take care of him until you and Jyn return. Jyn and Kayly are still proceeding South. I am managing the stations and will be able to tell you more after we make it through the First Order scan. Still clear but it may come any time in the next 20 minutes to two hours.”]

Most of the town was out to watch them. People were lined on the dock, in boats in the Harbor, or up on the warehouse roof, faces turned up as the late afternoon sun streamed down. The storms that Jyn had battled were just a scattering of dark clouds low on the Northwest horizon. Down on the sand three figures stood still, waiting. Cassian could make them out as the ship came down, Macha, Olwen and little Neave.

Another Circle had turned.

“Tell Bodhi I need to set things up here before I can move out. If the blackout falls I will wait here for Jyn and Kayly. We will get back to you one way or another as fast as we can. Tell Galen I love him, tell him…”
[“Yes.”]

*Oh how Portia hated carrying personal messages.*

He needed to get this prisoner dealt with. He needed to talk to now-Eldest Lady Macha and her sisters so word could be spread to the Circles. Mostly he needed Jyn.

**Chapter End Notes**

It's a slow motion reunion.
For some reason I feel the need to give Cassian more male bonding.

Also, what IS the economic basis of the First Order? It's been driving me nuts.
Thanks and Remembering

Chapter Summary

New battles lie ahead and and the wounds of old ones are still healing....and perhaps always will be...,but the fight for the Beacons is won and Ea is safe, for now. Cassian reaches HarborTown and hands over his prisoner to the new Circle there. Further North and later, Jyn listens to her daughter's accounts of Resistance Base and remembers people she knew and didn't know in the Rebel Alliance. Kayly and her mother walk South toward a reunion with Cassian and meet the survivor of another battle won.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Portia must have sent word ahead.

There was a crew of Fishers and dock workers already waiting by the base of the dune cliff. As soon as the engines were off they would get rollers under Guardian and move her up the beach under the wooden awning and tarps that would hide her from any visual scans.

Conn started the shut down and set the rear bay doors to open while Cassian climbed back to move their prisoner’s restraints again. This time he unhooked him from the pole and refastened his hands behind his back.

The analgesic tablet was still untouched but the water bottle was empty.

A sign of something, perhaps..

“Come on, you sorry-ass bastard,” Conn said when he followed down the ladder, pulling the First Order officer to his feet as the ramp lowered. “Time to go talk to the Ladies.”
“I’ll take him Conn,” Cassian said. “You should go out first,” the younger man raised an eyebrow, clearly confused.

*Remembering their earlier conversation he took pains to explain his thinking.*

“It’s important that the people on the docks and the Harbor see you first, Conn.”

“What? Why the hell should that matter?”

“Because you’re their own and they need the reassurance of seeing you safe and alive straight away after all they’ve been through.”

*All true. Also because hard years may lie ahead. Because Tom Markey won’t live forever and neither will I.*

Conn looked as if he might argue for a moment but then took a deep breath and nodded, reluctantly.

He stepped down the ramp while Cassian took Technician Officer Len Vereck of the First Order firmly by the elbow and steered him out the doorway just a few steps behind.

The Fishers of HarborTown sent up a smattering of cheers, a couple of shouts… *Conn’s name mostly…* from up on the Wharf and out on some of the boats. They were a cautious people until they suddenly sometimes weren’t.

Liam and Mary at the comm station must have spread the word as soon as the Beacons were secured.

As they walked out into the sunlight that roved the beach between the gusts of cloud the Ladies stepped forward, all three together Macha, Olwen and Neave, braided hair blowing in the wind, black, pale yellow, and red streaked with white.

He knew better than to ask about Perin’s absence.

*Godspeed you shrewd old sea-hawk.*

*What wouldn’t I have given to have seen you play poker with Draven and Cracken? You’d have robbed them down to their bootlaces.*

Macha spoke first, Eldest now.

“Have you met with success Conn Derry? Cassian-ally?”

*A ritual question…. a “thing,” as Jyn would say.*

Conn’s glance, as always, flickered to Olwen first but when he looked straight at Macha, he
answered as he knew how.

“Yes ma’am. All is done as we set out to do it. It’s for you now to measure the shares of it, but what was theirs is ours in fair payment of the harm done us.”

“Go to your people then, Conn Derry, with thanks,” beautiful Olwen said, “they’ve been worried for you.”

Conn looked up to where Tom and Thea could be seen waving on the nearest of the Markey docks, then glanced back over his shoulder to Cassian, questioning.

“Go,” he told him, “We’ll talk soon, after this is dealt with, tell Tom I’ll be up.”

Conn took off slowly at first, then breaking into a run across the sand. Cassian pushed the officer forward.

Vereck was shaking, probably not just from the pain in his legs.

“What is this? Who are these people?” the boy gasped.

“The people whose planet you came here to demolish,” he told him.

Macha reached out and took the boy’s chin in her hand. The First Order officer tried to flinch back but Cassian held him still.

She turned his face to look first at one side, then the other.

Olwen stepped forward. “How old?” she asked coldly.

“The Second Lady of HarborTown is asking you a question Len Vereck.” Cassian said. “Do you know what year were you born?”

It was actually possible he didn’t.

“Fifty One, A…F..” he stammered, unsure.

Some variation of the old Imperial calendar….not the Ascension Calendar though…probably dating from Palapatine’s “secret” issuance of the mythical “Contingency of the First Order.” Interesting.

“Nineteen,” Cassian translated, “more or less.”

Galen’s age now. Roughly Bill’s age when he burned to death. My age at Devaron.

He thanked the Force it wasn’t going to be his decision this time.
Little Neave, Youngest now, stepped forward.

“Turn him around, Cassian-ally,” she said, taking a small knife from the sheath that hung from her belt.

He shoved the trembling officer sideways and before the man could pull away the girl reached up, grabbed his bound-back arm and roughly cut a section of his grey sleeve away. The wool was still damp with sweat and spray from being dragged across the platform on the Equatorial Sea.

_Cassian noticed a few flecks of what looked like blood as well, probably from scrape on the man’s forehead. Likely Len had hit his head when Portia knocked him out by pinching off the oxygen although Conn had been none-to-gentle tying him up._

“Give him to us now Cassian-ally.” Olwen said, "If the Pattern tells us his use may yet outweigh his danger we will send word to you.”

_She was already taking the parts that would once have been Macha’s._

His prisoner's eyes were wide with shock and he tottered as if his knees might give way when Cassian released his grip. Olwen took a tight hold on what remained of that grey uniform jacket and pulled the man forward as Neave stepped around and held her little knife against his spine.

"This is...criminal," the officer gasped, looking at him in terror, "these are savages, you can’t...I am..."

He was being dragged away by a slender barefoot woman who could break his arm with a single twist and a child of fourteen.

_Whatever the First Order had trained him to expect, besides relentless victory, it probably hadn't been anything remotely like this._

"The casting will not take long," Macha told him.

She laid a hand on his shoulder. "Your hand wove this and it holds, Cassian. We have won the day.” He nodded. _It felt strange._

"Jyn is well and your brave daughter returns to us changed but strong. Do you have word of Galen and the others?"

"He was hurt," he held his voice steady out of habit but knew better than to think he fooled her, "but Portia says he is out of danger. Bodhi has taken him back to Nexa, he'll..." _it felt necessary to say out loud as often as possible, "he'll be alright._"

"Yes," Macha said, "I know he will. Galen has that skill, to find the threads to rebind himself anew"
even when torn grievously."

She strode away quickly then after her sisters and the First Order prisoner, back to one of their own places on the shore, to be judge and possibly executioner. He thought that unlikely, but when it came right down to the rail it would not be his call.

_Cassian had warned the boy. Ea's law would be what he answered to here._

Eldest turned as she walked, to smile wickedly and call back "....and the handsome Bodhi Rook returns.....surely a blessing for us all!"

_**Force. The woman was relentless.**_

He looked up to see Tom already walking down towards him. Someone should to get word to Anilta, to tell him his son had returned from the dead.

If there was still time before Portia shut down he needed to get to the comm station and try find out Jyn's location.

_He allowed himself the hope that somebody would get him a drink._

________________________

They followed the cliff track above the coast for most of the morning
How are your feet holding up?” she asked her daughter.

Kayly laughed. "You sound like Papa. Are we going to do foot checks?"

"We probably should," Jyn said, "Aren't you still wearing snow boots?"

Her daughter had stripped off the white and black snow gear just as Jyn had her sealskins and left them inside the locked shuttle but she still wore the footgear. Now she laughed and pointed with the scuffed round toe of the brown boot.

"Resistance all-weather issue," she said, wiggling her foot, "see that orange tag on the back? That's the thermal status marker. The lining is some weird lab-grown fiber....Eldest Sister's eyes will bug right out. It adjusts to a freakish range of temperatures, they got a little sweaty on Yavin sometimes but ...."

_The fourth moon of Yavin. I was there maybe all of thirty-six hours, twelve of them in wrist restraints. I vaguely remember that it was hotter than hell on the tarmac and mostly bearable inside those stone pyramids._

"Mama?"

"Yes?"

"General Organa sent messages for you and Papa...Bodhi has them.”

She nodded. They would listen later when they were all together.

Kayly kicked a stone with her high-tech army boots.

"Papa was her handler, the General said, when she was young.”

_Yeah, he’d mentioned it and somehow made it sound like she was a twelve-year-old with ponytails and nerves of ice water._

“She talked about him,” Kayly said, “and Bodhi had to report to her so there was no way to keep much back but I kept contact protocol on base and with everybody else outside Command.”

_She sounded anxious about that. It was always so important to Kayly that she and her father .....ok, mostly her father...know that she understood rules and only broke them with just and proper consideration, which at the age of ten she would outline for you at detailed length. Galen at the same age usually just broke the rules and dealt with the consequences._

“It didn’t come up much. I don't think too many other people remembered him.”

"No," Jyn said, “I wouldn't expect so.”

_Unless the job required it I doubt many people ever did. He made himself a shadow then and like everything else he puts his hand to he was very good at it. I guess my eyes were already adjusted to_
the dark though, because to me he looked like light.

“She remembers you too, the General, she said she saw you speak.”

The fuck?

“What?…when?”

“At Yavin before… when you tried to get everyone to listen, to move against Scarif in force.”

“Ah…”

“She said she was short and hiding in the back so you probably didn’t see her.”

Kayly, honey, a Teerian giant, a squadron of the Royal Naboo Naval Guard in full dress uniform and the Max Reebo Band could have been in that hall and I wouldn’t have seen them. I was on fucking fire I was so angry.

She barely remembered even the faces directly across from her, the ones who spoke for or argued with her. Mothma, Draven’s duplicitous ass, a slim dark woman in blue who’d sounded a little panicked/angry, some dick in a red scarf who’d sneered “Imperial pilot” in a way that made everyone look sideways at Bodhi…and been damn lucky she hadn’t had a knife, Raddus, bless him, the sandy trimmed mustache in a blue flight suit who’d gone straight to strategic practicalities “The Empire has the means of mass destruction, we don’t”…..she remembered he cut Draven straight off with a look though and in a flash of fellow-feeling she’d thought “at least that bastard believes us enough to be thinking about the “how”…a bunch of people in flight suits crowding forward. Chaotic really, Saw would never have put up with it.

“Yeah…well, it was a big room. Why was she hiding?”

“I think her father,…Senator Organa I mean….didn’t know she was there.”

Ouch. Is that the way they talk about you still, Princess…that hesitation and extra explanation around the word “father?”

Organa. He’d been at her interrogation too, as had sandy-mustache. Tall, dark hair streaked with grey, broad-shoulders in handsome discrete clothes like a well-off Inner Rim lawyer. He and Mothma kept exchanging glances like they had some whole agenda of their own, yet she hadn’t linked him with Draven, or even Cassian, there was nothing remotely spy-like about him.

It came back to her how, in a strange way he’d reminded her of Saw as he’d been in the early days…probably not something she had wanted to dwell on then. …He was silent, present like a hawk on a wire, watching, missing nothing but not moving yet. A man of authority he wasn’t using, at least not here, and not yet. She couldn’t recall him speaking at all on that dias either way.

Did you believe me Bail Organa? I wonder what your super-secret plans were? Whatever they were they stopped mattering two days later.
“Is she as short as she looks in the vids? Shorter than me?”

“Shorter, much shorter,” Kayly laughed “10cm at least.”

“Damn. Now I really wish I’d met her.”

“She ripped into Bodhi a few times and it reminded me so much of Tova dressing Galen down. Everybody is half afraid of her, Force knows I was, but not Bodhi.”

“What did she argue with Bodhi about?”

Kayly looked thoughtfully up at the treetops. They had moved away from the shore now toward the main path South toward Sweet River crossing. There was not much breeze on the ground but up in the canopy the oak and hazel branches were tossing.

“Contact protocols, mostly, Portia, the…” Kayly tapped her ear “…the mods. Bodhi never debriefed after he left here before Endor, I guess. Never told anybody.”

Nobody? Not even his architect? Had he been all alone with this since Tonc died at Jakku. Oh Bodhi.

“But Portia talked to the Princess directly,” Jyn said, “We were in the Tower. She was cagey about it of course but she said they linked up and worked out a whole “understanding.”

Kayly nodded.” “Yeah, that was a helluva scene. The General went off in a room by herself….well, except for 3-PO but nobody understands a damn word he says anyway…. it scared the hell out of everybody. It was only for a few minutes, then she handed it back to Bodhi and went to lie down, which scared everybody even more.”

I’ve wondered many times over the last weeks who it was you heard Leia Organa. Your options would be worse than mine I think, and I probably don’t even know the half of it.

The debrief would come soon enough.

“Did you make friends?” She reached out to take her daughter’s hand as they walked a wider, smoother part of the trail.

“Yes!” Kayly said, bright-eyed, now “I really did. So many people in the Resistance are from the Border, places the First Order is ripping apart, rough spots on the Outer Rim or New Republic deserters. Nobody asks too many questions about where you come from or why. All that matters is that you’re there now, that you’re trying to fight back, not look away from the truth.”

I was never like this. Not even as a child-fighter, I think. I fought for Saw and when I lost my faith in Saw I fought because I hated the Empire that had murdered my mother just a little bit more than I hated the Lion of Onderean.

“It doesn’t matter if you never look up…” she’d said….stupid, childish, cruel… and nearly her last words to him. Designed to wound both him and herself and they had. Ungrateful. She hadn’t yet
learned that Gratitude and Forgiveness were not the same thing. That it was possible to feel one without fully granting the other.

Your father felt this when he was a boy, I think. He still did when I met him despite everything he’d seen.

A weary but coolly professional Alliance officer, a liar who would trade her or desert her as soon as he had what he wanted from Saul, she’d thought.

Oh how that clear-eyed, reflexively sincere “Rebellions are built on hope” had shocked her, had set a spark of shame that began to smolder inside those thick walls of guilt and blame she’d built, until days later when she’d looked up on that sheltering tarmac and “I believe you” had knocked them down like ash.

“And Ava, she held us together. Pavy and I were wrecked but she was a rock. And you know Ava, everybody loved her after the first ten minutes. She put a flower in Commander Joma’s caf once and made her smile and…you have to understand, Commander Joma never smiles. I don’t now who she was more adorable with Dameron or his droid pal, BB-8.”

“Dameron?” That was a name she knew.

“Yes,” Kayly said, “Poe Dameron, one of the Flight Commanders,” she waived her free hand over her head to indicate elevated status. “Black Squadron, the elite of elites…but he grew up on Yavin and wound up being so good to Ava and Pavy. He even took us down to the shore to stay with his dad once. His dad, Mr. Kes Dameron, was the only one who ever recognized me. He said that he met Papa at Endor.”

Dameron? She stopped on the path in surprise. “Pathfinders. Big guy? Quiet. Dark hair. Muscles like….oh yeah…damn. He was a biscuit.”

“You remember him?”

“Yeah. He carried me out of a bunker on Endor…. At a run, as I dimly recall. I probably got blood all over the poor guy, “….how is he? And the son, what’s he like?”

“Thinks he’s a god in an x-wing but a really nice guy on the ground. Funny, extremely sweet on the eyes to boot.”

There would be so much to go through in the Tower, messages from Organa, orders, strategy, information about the Resistance that Portia could not give them, mission debriefs, the Beacons.

This was the part she wanted to hear about now. Cute pilots and bad caf. Pavy’s courage and Ava meeting a dog. How they’d stayed together and found their way. Bodhi playing sabbac with old Pathfinder friends and Blue Squadron veterans. People judging how bad a mood Leia Organa was in by which earrings she was wearing.

But for almost two years she had not known, Chirrut’s ghostly promise notwithstanding, where her
child was. Whether she was cold or warm, safe or in danger, cared for, loved, lonely, hurt.

“….so much to tell you…” he had said as he died in her arms.

I cried then but I didn’t understand. I do now. Two years…I had Cassian and Galen…, but if I hadn’t? What if I’d been alone? It was so awful.

Twelve years. How did you bear it Papa? I can’t even imagine the kind of strength it must have taken. They say terrible things about you out there Papa. I don’t even need to ask Kayly what they are because I’ve asked Portia and Portia can’t lie.

You gave me endurance Papa, I think of you every day.

Kayly talked on. It was nearly noon before they saw anyone else. Then they came upon a Memsa extended family pushing carts of pale green pumpkins to the Sweet River ferry. They offered to help get the wagons down the hill with wheel blocks and were offered some apples and cheese in thanks, since they were in no position to take any pumpkins.

Kayly took a bite of the apple and then began to cry, and had to explain to the worried Mem grandmother, “I’m sorry Auntie, please forgive me…I’ve been away from home such a long time.”

______________

Traffic picked up the closer they got to SweetRiver, though it not being a Market Day it was still not heavy.

SweetRiver was a village up from the tidal River. Once only a small Mem settlement surrounded by wooden walls it had lately grown to include a good-sized human community too. In the last few years since the Raider attacks on this part of the Coast had dwindled.
Kayly had never been here before but knew that Senna, Tim and others from HarborTown came North for the Markets, mostly for the marsh hay and cheese, woven-straw goods and vegetables, and that people from SweetRiver came south for the Fish Fair, Red Trader Market and other occasions.

Unlike ShellRiver, where most of the traffic came in and out by boat, SweetRiver also stood at the crossing of two land roads, Southeast up the River and due South along the Dyers Bluffs to HarborTown.

Portia still had them on blackout so Mama decided that they’d keep heading toward HarborTown. With the high road dry they could cross on the ferry, camp en-route if they had to and be there by late morning. If Papa had gone already they could at least borrow a speeder from Markeys and head toward home through the grasslands.

_Had someone gotten word to Paave’s father? How strange that she might reach the sea before he did._

Several flat boats were tied up on the river and small houses on the shore docks served for the people who poled passengers and goods across the shallows to the fields and road on the other side.

They had pocketed a few things for quick trade from the shuttle. Mama sat on the dock to rearrange their packs while Kayly approached a brown-haired girl her own age who was pulling up a little pot-trap of crabs from one of the flat-bottomed boats moored there.

“When do you cross next?” she called out.

“Just you, love?” the girl said, lowering the bucket onto the deck and tipping some of the water out. “’Two hours, or sooner if I’ve a full load.”

“Just myself and my mother,” Kayly said, “but we’ll trade extra for the time.”

“Ah, what sort of trade?” said the girl, in a cagey but not unfriendly way.

Kayly felt herself smiling, which was a dreadful thing to do on a trade but she couldn’t help it. The rainwater and the fruit had brought tears to her eyes but nothing said “home” like trading small spools of wire or a few mirrored chips for goods and services.

The ferry girl stood still suddenly and stared at her as if astonished.

“Ma’am,” the girl said, “Jyn Erso?”

Kayly realized then that her mother was standing behind her. Mama tipped her head as if unsure for a moment then nodded, “Hello Rosheen,” she said, “It’s good to see you.”
She laid down her pack and held out two hands flat and palms toward the girl, a little like an Islanders greeting, or Mem handshake…but not exactly like either. The girl jumped across to the dock lightly and laid her hands on top of Mama’s.

A young man came out of one of the houses then with a tiny baby, “Rosha,” he called, “I think the girly here wants to talk to you!”

The girl took her hands back quickly, “Can you wait just a bit?” she said,”I’ve got to feed her. It won’t take but a few and I’ll ferry you over.”

“Take as much time as you need.”

The girl spoke with the young man, “No…no…” they heard her say, “old friends…I’ll take them and be back…” then took the baby into the house while he gathered up the bucket of crabs, with a friendly nod at them.

They rested perhaps a half hour beside the dock and did a foot check, at Mama’s insistence, before the girl came back out with the baby asleep in a pretty basket. Rosheen smiled shyly as Mama peered inside….it was a very cute baby as human babies went…then handed over the basket back to the young man with a quick kiss.

When they climbed aboard the flat boat the girl poled them off skillfully.

“What’s the baby’s name?” her mother asked.

“Coney,” the girl told her.

“This is my daughter,” Mama said, “My firstborn, Kalyra.”

Kayly had questions but understood that now was not the time.

She smiled and nodded to the girl, holding out a Fishers hand. Then because there was a second pole she offered to help. She rowed from the stern while Mama sat by the front end and talked to the girl.

Kayly caught snatches of their conversation against the breeze in from the shore.

“Last year. He knows….I told him. Most people in town know too, in a way but, it’s not something we talk about…”

“Good,” she heard her mother say, “It’s hard but lying bites you in the ass every single time. I have no other advice otherwise…just no lies.”

“All of us….Gull is in town with us. Noisy…sometimes….and the others….not really but…..”

Light as they were the crossing didn’t take even an hour. They climbed down onto the dock on the other side while the girl tied up then stepped down behind them as if she wanted to say something.
“Don’t,” Mama said putting a hand on her tanned arm. "It was wrong what was done to you. Never forget that. It was flat-out evil without excuse. No one should ever be where you were. If you have to thank someone thank yourselves. You were brave and strong. You and your friends took a chance, did what you had to and won.”

The girl nodded, coughing a little, like she was trying not to cry. "One thing I never understood, Jyn Erso," she said, "they thanked us, the Bekkies…Bequa..they said, “Thank you for letting us do what our mothers did.” We were so scared, because we’d never heard ‘em talk before. What did they mean?"

“I don't know,” Mama said, "They see things differently. Be well, Rosheen.” She kissed her cheek then, something Islanders never did, Kayly knew.

They made the girl take the spools and mirrors, “For the baby,” Mama said.

As Rosheen poled back across the Sweet River in the late afternoon sun, toward the man and the baby and the little shack her mother watched her go.

“Raiders had her," she said, "and others there with her too, just kids. 'Bonded' they call it. The bastards hold people as slaves. There's no other name to give it. The Inner Island Raiders have a history of taking the children of people who don't pay them, or otherwise piss them off and then selling them back and forth between bands until they die or somehow buy their way out.....mostly die. She and her friends made a run for it and I was able to get a message out to someone who could help them. The guts something like that takes is staggering. Portia is right. The fucking Darkness gets everywhere."

"Come on baby" she said, " there are a string of Rescue Places up on the high road for the Winter storms. I say we walk as far as we can tonight and try head for one of them. Another early start should get us into HarborTown tomorrow before noon. Hopefully Portia will have declared our skies Jedi Monster-free by then and we can get some updates."

Updates on Papa and Galen, Ava and Pavy, Bodhi, Mara, that poor Far Trader girl. Until then all they could do was walk together.

Thank the Force Mama knew where she was going.

Kayly tried using all her father's old tricks for finding the most commonly travelled path on any road, but she was out of practice and the light was fading fast. The little moon was coming up and the sun was just starting to go down orange and pink when they came over a rise and caught sight of a wooden lean-to ahead and left of the trail, like a small rough treehouse, not up high like a Taun dwelling but back on a little rough platform of split logs.
In another hour she would have easily missed it in the dark.

"Grab some wood, kid while there's still light," her mother said, picking up Kayly's pack, "I'll check out the inside."

It made her feel almost felt guilty. She’d always thought of these huts as life-or-death refuges for using only during snowstorms or hurricanes but Eldest Sister had insisted when they shared one on the Green River while walking to RiverTown, "They are shelters for many kinds of need, some that travelers do not even recognize until it is upon them."

Spotting several nicely dry wind-downed branches just off the trail Kayly kicked the largest a few times to give fair warning to any snakes or ground squirrels before she started gathering up broken bits.

Then there was a thump, up ahead in the dimming light by the shelter.

Mama?

Kayly had the smaller blaster, the one from inside her jacket, out without thinking as she moved quickly and low toward the little lean-to and came around.

The doorway of a Rescue Place was usually off-center, placed away from the prevailing wind so weather couldn’t get directly inside. In the lengthening shadow it took her a few seconds to see what had happened.

Mama had dropped both packs and was in Papa’s arms.

Chapter End Notes

A hopscotch of memories and plot lines. Yes. I fear so. Vaguely united by musings on gratitude. Who thanks who and debts paid and unpaid.

Rosheen may be familiar to those who've read recent updates to Water Over Stones. I just desperately wanted to tie up her tale a little.
Memories and Scars Healed

Chapter Summary

Homecomings. Bodhi Rook has brought the injured Galen back home. He reunites with Bes and Beri and both men consider how their trials have changed them as they are welcomed back by beloved friends. Ava returns to her family home and a Red Trader receives news.

Chapter Notes

A sentimental tiny chapter, lingering in my notebooks.

Despite or because of the patches he was undeniably light-headed. By the time they got him to the Farmhouse Galen decided it might be a good idea to shut up about wanting to walk.

"Hold still while we do this dear child," Eldest Sister Tova said as she helped him lean forward. Youngest Beri bound damp pads of dried moss well soaked in pine…..oh Ea, how he hated that smell….front and back to his shoulder, "these blaster shots are clean wounds but they can be hard to pack well."

Once she'd wrapped his shoulder Tova made him drink some of that thick dried-mushroom tea so it seemed like he might have lost a little more blood than he thought.

Bodhi let Galen lean in his shoulder and between them he and Bes helped him over to the cot.

“When can I go home?” he asked embarrassed by how silly he sounded.

Until now more than half of his mind had still been taken up with thoughts about the platform, about Dex and Bo….They’d taken a prisoner. What the hell was up with that?…and about getting a report on what had happened on the other platforms to Dora, about where Mama and Papa were.....and
Kayly.

Suddenly he wanted to be in his own bed up in the loft at the stone house.

For almost the whole flight back Ava had held his hand in Grateful Reunion with a Beloved Friend even as she scolded and teased sounding like Kayly at her high bossiest.

As the shuttle leveled out she noticed the tattoo on his right arm "Ea! Look at that! It's a whole bird! With eyes and everything!" she had marveled, laughing.

Then she fell silent and as he felt her press lightly along the skin realized she was following the thin scars of his healed burns.

"Oh Galen," she whispered and he forced his eyes open to see that she was blinking as if holding back tears.

"Shhh, Ava," he said, "don't cry…it’s alright." It wasn’t, of course, but it was over.

She laid her dark head on his arm quietly for few minutes after that just like the little Ava he remembered from when they were children.

"Tomorrow," Second Sister said, kissing him on the forehead. "Rest now as a soldier should when the battle is done."

Eldest must have slipped something into that tea besides mushroom powder because he didn’t remember much after that.
Bodhi Rook sat on down on the pine bench in that wide well-swept kitchen. Everything was exactly as he remembered it right down to the shutters propped open to the evening air and the fire that was banked down on the hearth.

Bes put a mug of hot tea on the table beside him, a very small mug but he did not mind. That was exactly the way he remembered it too.

Tova had walked down to talk with people at the Community Hall and update the Mayor and others about Portia's news. Beri was out bringing in the ducks and geese for the night and a golden-furred youngster named Ema tended the fire and heated water for more tea, tiptoeing over every now and then to smile brightly at Bodhi Rook and refill the pot.

Bes in her skirt of rust-red ribbons pulled a chair up close and took his hand in her small dark one.

"Gratitude...Welcome” or some combination of the two? He couldn’t remember.

"You brought our children home, Bodhi Rook."

Galen lay, still pale and bandaged but with eyes closed now and breathing steadily and evenly. On the floor near his cot Pavy was asleep too, on a pallet.

Ava had kissed Bodhi's hand for thanks before being swept away, held firmly to the side of a grey-browed old lady who waved everyone away saying, “Back! Back! There is time for Stories and Welcomes tomorrow! This child must have air and quiet! Don’t make me get snappy with you!”

“Kayly is with Jyn,” he said,”I left her in the North.”

“We know,” Bes said, “and they will find their way home. As will bold Mara from the Forests. We finished a Great Pattern last night and it showed us dangers and terrible risks taken but also how the borders could hold if strength came from within and from afar. Also Ancient Portia told us what was happening.”

He couldn’t help but laugh as he finished his tea in three long sips then refilled his mug again.

“She’s shut down for now, even from the mods,” he tapped his ear. ”She says that we’re being distance-scanned by some poorly described but very bad people. I’ll go up to the tower soon and chat with her in person.”

“Yes,” Bes nodded. “The Attack at RiverTown and the Fire grieved her terribly not least because she saw them them as a failure of her seeing. We have tried to reassure her but, being a ghost, her
memories of both joys and pain must remain forever always as sharp as knives for her.”

“You sound like Iola,” he said, before he could stop himself.

*Bodhi could not help but notice that she had a light sprinkling of grey in the dark fur across the bridge of her nose now…. Little Bes.*

But she broke into giggles then, as if he had made the most delightful joke.

“Oh Bodhi Rook, I am so very glad that you are back again.”

“So they sat up late and he told her about the last year of the War. Beri came in and sat on the bench beside him and little Ema sat on the floor at her feet. They wiped tears quietly away when he told them about Tonc’s death and asked him to show them how to make the “Rogue One” sign.

He told them about Remmi and the house they had built, even though he was not sure how much they would understand. Tova returned after tucking Ema into a small bed by the door and pulled a rocking chair up to listen too.

“Did you have a wedding?” Beri asked. “Did people carry chairs?”

They had not, only a brief civil partnership service. There had seemed no point in anything more. Traditional NiJedhan weddings were considered ceremonially valid only after offerings were made in the Great Temple.

Four years ago, in one of his infrequent but beautifully written text letters detailing the archeology studies and building of the new Shrine, the return of idealistic Spiritual students and pilgrims, and all the hard but exciting rigors of a life on terraformed Jedha Reborn, Remmi attached the simple “Dissolution of Union” form. A small tag was enclosed saying “I will always love you.”

Bodhi filled out his half of the confirmation and added his own tag, “The Force is with you. Be happy Beautiful Heart.” Then he hit return.

He wasn’t Portia at least, the pain was there but it was no longer knife-sharp.

“Chairs?” he had asked “What would chairs be for?”
“I was hoping you could tell me, actually,” Beri said, clearly disappointed.

Bodhi told them instead about Admiral Ackbar and Tonc’s sister and her sons, about teaching, the garden on Takodana, and his growing agonizing realization that they had fooled themselves about the War being over. He told of his decision to join the brave veterans and children of the Resistance and how a call came to him there saying that a black-haired girl holding a broken ship together by sheer courage had come to find him.

Tova was dozing in her chair and the sky outside the curtains was beginning to lighten with dawn when he finally slowed, finding that his words were stumbling.

He had been awake for more than 24 hours he reckoned and no matter how many times Beri refilled the pot there wasn’t enough tea in the galaxy to keep him going any longer.

Bes offered to make up a bed for him there but he kissed her hand and went out instead to walk up the hill under a rising sun toward Portia’s Tower. Jyn and Cassian had always left a cot up there.

Many of the houses seemed different, the Community Hall was larger and had a kind of bell-tower on it now but the stone walls were the same and Portia's squared blue stone still stood at the edge of the field. Her tower still rose unscratched and undamaged but he noticed that the tall bushes that used to grow thick and high around the base were all gone. Late-season sunflowers clustered around there now. Her stairs had been rebuilt too, wider and with handrails.

When he reached the fourth floor landing Portia was waiting inside the doorway, showing as her old friend Jula, the one who had worn the earrings.

“Cassian, Jyn and Kaylyra are safe. The Enemy prowls outside but see nothing they do not expect to see. Like snarling scavengers they will move on soon,” she said.

The pale woman shook her head, forever young, black-haired and as unchanging as the memory of the one who had loved her. “You are exhausted, Bodhi Rook, go get some sleep and we will talk later.”
Ava felt as if her heart might actually weigh heavier, it was so filled with things.

When the hatch of the shuttle had opened she had thought only of Galen, of getting him out safely. Bodhi Rook had come back and Pavy was beside her, helping them lift the stretcher out into the hands of the people reaching in to take him, old Dov and Kemmi, Suri and Youngest Sister Beri.

*But at the same time she felt the air and smelled the grass and the earth and the warm smell of autumn pine and...*

“Ava! Ava!” the voices caught at her....*Grandmother? Nikki? It was Nikki....*

“Go,” Pavy said smiling, “We have him, Ava. Go.”

*Pavy, Pavy who was still not to his own oceans....but they were home now, from home he could find a horizon.*

She ran out the door and when her feet touched the ground she felt like they were singing.

*The first Memsa to ever leave Ea and now the first to come home.*

There were other people there, faces she knew and loved but she ran to her Grandmother’s arms. Nikki as there, Nikki come home from her wanderings with a sling on her back and a baby....two babies.

Everything was tangled for a while. She cried and laughed by turns and so many people reached out...
to touch her that she became overwhelmed and found herself hiding her face against her Grandmother’s warm shoulder. Eldest Sister came forward and waved people back.

“Eldest Sister!” Ava cried urgently, wiping tears from her cheeks with both hands. “Galen is hurt. Bodhi Rook brought us….Kayly is…”

Eldest kissed her forehead.

“I know dear Ava. We have Galen and Bodhi Rook. Kaylyra is well and with her mother. Bravest child,” she said, “Welcome.”

*I wasn’t brave, I was afraid. Kayly all but dragged me. I got sick and fainted. I thought I would die.*

”Go with your family. Ava Nora’s-child, come to us tomorrow. We will take care of your Heart Companion until then. Falla,” she said to Grandmother, “Take her home, let her untangle these things in her own time.”

As they walked across the field up the path. Grandmother walked more slowly than Ava remembered. *Was her face this white before?*

“Where is Kayly?” her older sister asked, shifting babies on her hips.

“We dropped her in the Far North where Jyn-ally was fighting. It was freezing cold and I think there were wolves.” Ava held out her arms and Nikki laughed her bold laugh and unhooked one sling to place a soft brown nursling in her arms. It was a little female, who stared at her with large curious brown eyes then back to Nikki again

“Mother? Who is this stranger?” the little one was clearly thinking. *She could not have been more than six months old.*

“Hell!” Grandmother said, “Did she take a warm coat? Did she have enough guns?”

“Yes, both.”

“Well that will be alright then, they’re absolute scrappers in that family. Best to pity the wolves.”

She went into her Grandmothers house and held one baby and then the other while her Grandmother made soup.

*If it weren’t for the little ones it might have been as if the last three years hadn’t happened.*
“Nikki, when did you come back? When did this happen?” she whispered while her Grandmother banged pots and pans, and diced onions singing loudly and happily. “How did you get two?”

“Well…THIS,” she lifted one laughing baby, “just over a year ago, obviously, down in Green River at a very fine Feast. Coming back was about six months before that, and as for the two.....I’m still asking myself that question.....looking back on it that Feast may have been a little too good.”

*Nikki had gone mapping far far South. She’d fought terribly with Grandmother and gone off “Far Scavenging” on a three-year wander, she swore.*

“You came back early,” Ava said.

Her sister tilted her head and looked at her oddly. “The Beacons run all the way up the South Coast now Ava, and inland a hundred k from there. I was in a place called Whitewater where little waterfalls come down over the cliffs to make WhiteRiver that runs down a valley and the Taun there build little houses connected with ladders all up and down the ledges and there are old Falls, buried on the flat plains above the cliffs three meters deep. First the Taun said there was a Fire on the Coast, then another message came and said it was in the Uplands. I was all the way to the Grasslands before I heard it was Nexa and then I met some human women on the Market road who told me a wild story of a ship that had flown out of the fire with a Mem and a Blackbird’s daughter aboard to drive the Enemy away….I thought you were dead Ava.”

*You were the one who wanted to travel and I was the one who wanted to stay home.*

Something strange must have shown in her face because Nikki reached her free hand to take her sister’s in reassurance that concern is misplaced.

“The old lady and I have made it up, lovey. I came back with a bag of thumb-size square coppery mirrors that Ancient Portia says are each worth a hundred solar chips each. Those fine wrecks have been there for a thousand years and they will wait until my crew grows a little bigger to work them. Jyn-ally told me that a dead Hearts Companion of theirs said you were alive somewhere and would come home with enough stories to entertain two nurslings at bedtime for ten years each.”

Late that night after her Grandmother had turned down her bed as if she were a nursling again herself and Nikki had fallen asleep after feeding her babies.....”It’s not as bad as I thought it would be, Ava, they are awfully cute and they laugh at all my jokes but the thing that drives me crazy is that if I only had one everything would only take half as long and I would only be half as tired”….Ava tiptoed outside under the night sky. She went to the well and lowered down a dipper. She drank the water and cried then poured a cup over her own head to wash the tears off, rubbing it into the fur of her
face and shaking it away.

She looked up at the night sky. The little moon had already set and a scrap of cloud wandered across the large one’s face for a moment so that the stars shone out clear and bright. It was too far to see anything from here just as it had been too far to see anything from there.

General Leia Organa, Poe Dameron, Mr. Kes Dameron, Polly, General Ackbar, Commander Joma, BB-8, Doreen, Martin, Sally, Bod, Tallie, Jenny, Phillip D’morra, C-3PO, Norah, Lucy, C’ai Threnailli, Lieutenant Ronna, tore Lee, Bester, Kommo G’arr, TC-3 and all the little squeaky mouse machines….Good Luck. Good Luck. Thank you. Be safe.

The word travelled through the Inner Islands. There was trouble on the Equatorial Seas. A dangerous Fall. The Blackbirds were on the move. Guardian had been seen flying out from the Harbor River Coast and out over the archipelago.

Trouble lessened trade for some while increasing it for others, or so the saying went.

Although the Fall Barge Market seemed subdued… with more rumors than goods, some said ….it was usually a smaller affair anyway and would hardly have been expected to bring in many Far Islanders or Northerners even in less hazardous times. They always came for the larger Barge Market in Spring.

A quick boat had come in from HarborTown this time though, flying the blue fish flag, and moved through the barges. A young red-headed woman was aboard it alone. She had no goods but stopped at every barge she came to asking after a Red Trader, Anilta.

“What do you bring to him?” one basket-woman from Hand called out to the stranger.

“News,” the girl said, “News of his son.”

The Traders, large and small, Coast Islanders, Fishmongers, Red Traders, bargemen on wooden slabs barely off from the shore all began to take up their poles and move out of the little sailboats
way.

“Anilta!” people began to call back across the barges.

“Anilta!” passed back and forth

The older man was back in his black-sailed boat with the kelp sellers, for his trade was poor that year. He heard the call of his name at the same time he looked up from his baskets to see all the other craft around poling back from him like wind parting the reeds.

The girl in the HarborTown dory pulled close along and reached out to hold onto the side of his boat.

“Sir!” Mary Markey said, “Sir! Cassian Blackbird sent me. Your son is alive. Paave is with them at Nexa. We will bring him to you at HarborTown. Can you come with me now?”

The man stood as if struck and then began to weep.

Those nearest by climbed aboard his boat and with their knives began to cut the black sails down. The Trader gathered himself then and reached beneath his decking with trembling hands to pull out the red sails bundled in rope. The red-haired girl too climbed over and together they raised his sails. People put things in his boat, a barrel of water, a stack of bread, a cask of oil, a rack of baskets and roll of silk rope, then they pushed back to let him sail off. Mary Marky climbed back into her little fast boat and Anilta turned in and followed the red-haired girl out into the open water as the shredded black rags were picked up by the wind and blown across the water. The Traders cheered
Stronger Together

Chapter Summary

More tales of Ea. Cassian finds himself grounded by Portia's cautious blackout in the days after the successful capture of the First Order Beacons and heads out on foot, with the support of his friends to be reunited with Jyn and the newly-returned Kayly.

Chapter Notes

It's a slow reunion. Cassian cannot help but be haunted by memories of the last war as the new one begins but Ea is home and the Blackbirds are stronger together.

Bienvenido a casa, mi niña. = Welcome home, my girl.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As he climbed back down the long wooden steps from the bluffs lights were beginning to come on. Up the length of the Long Wharf starting all the way from the farthest warehouse and back to the shore warden's shack lamps flickered on one at a time. Little solar chips tucked into glass jars lit both sides of the Wharf and the lights continued out on to the ends of the smaller piers like rows of small stars. It was quiet after the turmoil of the afternoon but a few handfuls of people moved around the Wharf, some still tying up boats and others walking to houses, food shops and the open pubs.

Tom Markey was sitting on the bench at the shore-warden's gate with a thick clay pitcher lidded with a carved circle of cargo casing and wrapped in felted wool. It was the kind of jug people around here used for hot drinks. He also had two chipped white mugs.

"What is it?" Cassian asked when handed a steaming cup.

"Tea," Markey said then laughed and when Cassian made no attempt to conceal his disappointment added, "with half a jar of whiskey in it."
From the standing conference at the Long Wharf he had gone straight up the stairs and platforms to the comm station.

In the months after the Fire a new nightmare joined the old ones that had never entirely faded for him. Jyn wasn’t there and he walked through a starless night stumbling over various kinds of ground looking for a lost child that he could never find….sometimes it was Kayly, and other times Galen. Always there was a sense that someone else was with him off in the dark to his right, silently trying to help him, but he could never see them. Through the agonized searching he once or twice woke up thinking that he recognized the long heavy footsteps in the grass….Kay?

"Portia?" he called out loud as he walked into the room, even as Sanna who had been manning it jumped up to hand him the headphones. "How much time do we have? Can I get Guardian home before you have to shut down?"

There was no need to put the headset on. Portia spoke straight out over the speakers.

["There is nothing yet but their ships have left the corridor and are no doubt reporting now. I expect we will be distance-scanned within minutes. I am set up but we don’t want to overplay our hand. Ships will come to assess the “accidents” soon. When that happens we will have to shut everything down and play dead on no more than a few minutes notice. They can move very quickly with these temporary corridors and I will not take chances. Cassian, I would advise you to wait until our positions are secure and fly out then. If your anxiety levels make that too difficult for you set out by ground from here. The journey could take several days but if you are forced to land in the wetlands partway back it could take even longer."]

"Where are Jyn and Kayly now?"

["30.7 k North from Sweetwater, hugging the coast and heading South. Cassian…?"]
"Yes Portia?"

["He is not alone and he knows you are coming as fast as you can. Bodhi Rook and Bes are with him. It is my belief that he would want you to go to Kayly first."]

The old ghost knew him too bloody well after all these years.

"Sir? Cassian?" Sanna was looking up at him, astonished.

Sanna Kerrie was small and round-cheeked with waist-length brown braids.

She looked like someone but he could never place who.

A year or so younger than Kayly and older than Galen, she had grown up on Markey's crew and been one of both of their best HarborTown friends for years.

Galen had once said laughing, "Sure Sannie looks small but she's fast and she will hit you low and take you DOWN if you piss her off."

"Kayly's back? She's ok?" The girl's brown eyes were wide.

"Yes," he said, "she found her way home."

Sanna burst into tears and fairly threw herself into his surprised arms.

As he tried to pat the sobbing girl's shoulder, Portia spoke again, sweeping half his choices away.

["They are entering the system. All ships and pulse engines down in 04:00. Full communications black-out in 03:00. I will initiate contact with everyone when we are all clear."]

As Jyn sometimes said, the Force seldom gave a rats ass about their parental guilt, all they could do was their best.

It was out of his hands. Galen was safe and with family. Cassian would wait for first light and try to reach his wife and daughter.
He had thought there might be another meeting in the Hall tonight but Tom said the Council had already talked about it and agreed that such things should happen tomorrow. There was nothing more anyone could do. In a day or two they would make decisions.

Cassian leaned back against the wall of the shack and looked first out at the lights on the pier then back at the tower that rose from the top of the dunes cliff.

_Sanna had quickly dried her tears, embarrassed and apologizing, then dashed out to light the signal fire on the wooden tower. She was part of the local guard that the Circles named the Watch. Dora had no doubt done the same at RiverTown and by now the message would have passed on up the coast and inland._

Every settlement with equipment would know to stay low and quiet, to keep their eyes open and wait.

The First Order priority would be to check that the new Nav-Beacons were stationed and fully operational and Portia would make sure they looked perfectly so to any long or near-distance scan. Space-based equipment would take no notice of low-tech signals like fires and simple solar batteries on a worthless planet thinly populated with aboriginals and carnivorous animals. They might…might…if they were feeling beneficent listen for signals from their missing personnel but finding none they would quickly download the doctored “black box” data from their lost ships…_which would convincingly show debris strikes, dangerous radiation, human error, etc. as the cause of all losses_…and move on. First Order Operational Procedure put a much higher value on timetables and equipment than lives. A few dozen people and some small ships lost were a tiny cost for increasing the efficiency of the Supreme Leader’s armada.

“How’s Conn?” Cassian said.
“Holding,” Markey said, blowing on his cup. “Was it bad?” he asked

*Compared to what? Leading a whole team of brave volunteers into a suicide mission and nearly burning alive in the arms of the woman you knew you were meant to love…?*

“It worked. We did what we needed to do. We’re all alive,” he answered quietly, taking a small slow sip. *It was good that this drink was hot, otherwise he’d be tempted to down it far too fast.*

“Damn. I’m sorry Cassian.” Tom muttered, "That was a stupid question.”

*He thought of General Draven a lot these days, which was not a comfortable feeling.*

*If he’d had time for another question on that Mona Cala ship he’d have asked if Draven had children.*

“It’s alright Tom,” he said, “It’s always bad,” …*which was true… “but it could have been so very much worse. Conn knows that and it’ll get him through.” Also true."

*Best to find out how bad though.*

“Have the Ladies come back?”

“Aye, Second…I mean Eldest has. She said to tell you she’ll talk to you before you go in the morning. Her Sisters hauled that murdering bastard you and Conn brought out in their boat, alive, and I think they’re going to stick him out on one of the little Harbor Islands…. cagily enough they’re not saying which one.”

“With food and water I assume?”

“ Likely….can’t say I care much right now. Do those runts swim?”

*Good question.*

“Maybe. It depends, but I don’t think it would matter. If he sets foot in more than five centimeters of salt water the Bequa will swallow him whole.”
“Macha says the plan is to let him cool till you get back from meeting up with Jyn.”

“How did they know…?” Now Cassian knew he was the one asking the foolish question.

“You’ve done enough for now, my friend. All any of us can do is trust the old ghost, wait and hold the fort.” Tom laid a hand on his arm and poured out the last of the doctored tea. “Try to get a few hours sleep at our place then one of the kids can get you up to Dyer’s Cove early on a morning boat, that'll shave a few hours off. Jyn’s not one for patience. If she’s anywhere south of Shell River Inlet, traders bet says she’ll take the Market Road south.”

So he went. He worried that the risk of missing them was stupidly high but Macha only laughed and said that the thread that ran north for him now was strong and easy to follow….who was he to argue with the Pattern?

They had trusted him with more than their lives, most of them without fully understanding what it was he was asking. Now it was his turn to trust them.

Conn and Tom came down to see him off but it was Thea who kissed his cheek and passed him a packed rucksack and bedroll, “We’ll tend to things here. Bring Jyn and your girl back with you Cassian, it’ll put heart in us all to see you together again.”

Her nephew Matt Doonan took him out in one of the quick shore boats with the morning tide.

The boy was clearly burning with questions but must have been ordered to ask none of them because he was fairly biting his lips with suppressed curiosity.
The winds had shifted a little and were coming against them from the North now although the rains had moved off. It took longer than it might have but it was still faster than walking.

When they pulled in by Dyers Creek, Cassian climbed out and helped the boy push the little craft back off the sand bar before the tide cut him off.

Then young Matt, silent for most of the short trip, could clearly bear it no longer and blurted out in a rush. “We’ve fooled them for now, right?…I mean, I heard Conn saying….I mean, word is that the Bequa helped you and him… that they made a whole army or fleet or some such and raised up a storm like in the old stories to help you take the enemy camp or whatever you’d call it? Was it like in the old Islander songs?”

“Yes,” Cassian said.

“Aw, balls,” the boy whistled, “That must have been a helluva thing to see.”

Left alone on the shore he sat down on the sand, dried his feet carefully and slipped on two pairs of thin socks the way his first commander on Carrida had taught him before lacing his boots up. By noon Cassian Andor was on the land road North toward SweetWater Crossing.

The few people he met on the way were mostly going in the other direction, dyers or rope makers headed toward HarborTown with the last of the season’s bundles piled into carts.

Seeing his blue coat most waved companiably, thinking him come from HarborTown.

“Hey Fisher!” An old red and grey-browed Mem with a tall back basket piled high with fat bundles of string hailed him. “Heard the watchtower at StillWater is lit up. Was it that big Enemy Raider Fall out on the Water everybody’s been worrying about? Did the Fishers help the Blackbirds take ‘em? Is the“All-clear” up yet?”

“It’s Quiet Watch for now,” Cassian said, “But they’ll know more in a few days. Ea willing the worst is over for a while.”
“That’s all anybody can ever hope for eh, cousin?” The fellow smiled and showed a fighter’s chipped white teeth.

The bay leaves had begun to turn golden in HarborTown but you could really feel Fall in the air even this short distance further North.

*In the first ten years of his life he’d been on only two planets, in the fifteen after that at least two dozen…he wasn’t sure of the count….and in the last twenty five, one.*

*Knowing the seasons of a place still seemed like a miracle.*

*When they struggled with the rain blowing in the storm shutters he couldn’t help but think of Tatooine. When the snow fell at Nexa and they had to shovel out the path to Portia’s tower he still laughed with a boy’s delight at the first whiteness of the stuff, at how it wasn’t tinged with violet dust from the mine exhaust on Fest.*

He stopped to check his boots after four hours, thought of Jyn and pressed on, eating the cold clam hand pie and little sour apples Thea had packed for him as he walked.

By an hour from sunset he was very near SweetWater Crossing but not quite as near as he’d hoped to be.

*Jyn’s rule about no complaining about getting old was a damn hard one to keep sometimes. Ungrateful as he knew it was he was angry at himself for not making better time. The ferries wouldn’t cross in the dark so he was going to be stuck on this side of the river until dawn at best.*

The patch was wearing off and his shoulder hurt.

There were a few Rescue Place shelters on this road as he remembered, one or two down on the shore and at least one up here on the high ground. Putting his faith in Macha’s “clear thread” he headed for the nearest.

The light wind from the North that had slowed Matt’s boat was still blowing and would cool things off quickly as the sun went low and the shadows lengthened.

Though Cassian couldn’t see it yet the distant sound of seabirds coming in for the night told him the tidal river was near, a k or two at best over the crest of the hill and down the slope.

When he found the little lean-to he recognized it as one that Perin had brought him to years ago. The inside was clean and simply stocked, no doubt by the SweetWater Circle. As his eyes adjusted to the dim interior he found covered jars of fresh well water so he drank and filled his canteen. Straw mats were rolled and stacked in a corner so he laid one out and spread his bedroll down on it.
He debated starting a fire but decided that cleaning the hearth would delay him setting out in the morning. The urgency he’d been holding at bay all day was starting to tear at him again. *Portia had been clear that she wasn’t hurt, that neither of them were hurt.* But what if he missed them? What if they hadn’t come this way? What if they’d taken an extra day to cut up to StillWater and try to get a boat from there?

It was remotely possible they’d even stayed at the ship to wait out Portia’s black-out.

He knew better though. *If given the choice between moving and holding still, Jyn always chose moving.* Tom was right about that.

She would head for Galen by the fastest sure route and Portia would have given them the same advice that she’d given him.

Them. Kayly. He would see his daughter. Bodhi had brought his daughter back.

“Sí, Papa. I’m here!”…amidst that awful static.

It would be dark soon. There was usually either a lamp or a basket of solar lights hung on the outside of these places to charge. He shook off his worries and stood up to go look for one just as he heard a voice on the path and something, a bag, hitting the ground at the doorway.

The blaster was in his pack on the floor and he turned and started to drop by instinct.

*The last of the angled sunlight lit her only from behind but he had watched her from the shadows so many times he didn’t need more. He knew that shape by touch in the dark and he could feel that smile like sunlight even with his eyes closed.*

She ran and held onto him without a word or a sound and absolutely nothing else mattered.

“I’m here,” he whispered against her hair, her forehead, when he could breathe again, just as he had so long ago….her hands had slipped up inside his coat and fingers spread against his back.

*All right now he thought, I’m all right now….***
A voice said, “Papa?”

Jyn leaned away from him then and reached backward for their weeping daughter, pulling her into his arms too.

"Bienvenido a casa, mi niña," he said.

They lit a fire and moved out in the morning just as dawn had lifted.

He learned later that Tom had already gotten a speeder ready and had it waiting for them but just as they reached the steps down to the main pier Jyn laid a hand to her right ear and turned to him with a shout and a blazing smile.

“She says we can fire Guardian up. Yes! Let’s get to Uncle Bodhi and our boy!”

“All clear!” Mik called out from the porch of the comm station above them on the bluffs, “Old Portia says we’re all clear!”

Chapter End Notes

Parenthood in time of war can't help but be a hard road for our brave bad-ass battle couple/true loves but heroes gonna find a way....and as Jyn said, "I love this crazy planet."
Family

Chapter Summary

A very short chapter of reunion. Bodhi Rook and Galen Andor bond and Bodhi reflects on what his return to Ea means to him and the Erso-Andors are reunited at last.

Chapter Notes

He vuelto a casa, hermano = I have returned home, brother.

Feel free to insert that quote from Lilo and Stitch

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So, this is your room?” Bodhi peered up the ladder. He tried to remember what the space had looked like when he was last here. There had been a few boards across under the high section of the roof but it had been little more than a shelf. Now there was a proper little loft up there with a sliding door and a ladder.

“Si…I mean, yes sir.” the boy smiled, “half of it anyway.” He pointed with his right hand, “I’ve got the left side, and Kayly had…has the right side.”

Galen had to use his right hand because his left arm was firmly bound in a sling.

Bes had bandaged his wounds, front and back and wrapped his shoulder before agreeing to let him come back to the stone house. Even then Eldest Sister Tova had only allowed it on the condition that Bodhi would watch him and make sure that arm did not move a millimeter.
Beri had walked up with them and brought a covered pot of soup made of squash, onions and herbs along with some powders and leaves. These Bodhi was supposed to mix with boiling water for a tea and feed to Galen every few hours.

She made the boy sit down on the bench by the table as soon as he came inside, then took off her grey-tinted glasses to let them hang on the ribbon around her neck.

“No foolishness about this child,” she said, sternly.

Galen was sitting down so she looked him squarely in the eye and placed her small hands on either side of his face, “You will do as your parent’s Heart Companion tells you. Eat if you can but most importantly drink your tea and sleep.”

“Yes, Youngest Sister,” he said obediently, taking her hand and kissing it.

“Hmmmmm…” She smiled like an auntie who is not fooled for a moment. “I will come in the morning, or sooner if you need me.”

She turned Galen’s hand over in her own but Bodhi could not tell what she was saying by it.

_He had only ever known a few signs really, and that had been more than twenty years ago. He would have to learn again._

“Our parents and your sister will come soon,” she said gently, “Kemmi and Fox would be here already and camped under this very table if Eldest Sister had not lectured them. There will be new trials in tomorrows to come but not today or for some days after. Your hard work now is to lie down on your parents big sharing-bed while I show Bodhi Rook where things are in your mother’s garden.”

After assuring herself that Galen was lying down properly propped up on pillows she fixed her glasses on her white nose again, took Bodhi’s arm with the dignity of an aristocratic donor at a University garden party and led him out into the early afternoon sunshine.

She explained how to get water from the cistern tank on the roof and where the various vegetable gardens were, tricky because while they were clustered in beds between the back door and the tumbled outer wall and arrangements were somewhat random. Onions and low shrubs with eatable roots were interspersed with various flowers and a dozen kinds of beans tangled together as they climbed poles made from broken Essos-4 System solar arrays, all wired together with willow sticks.
Sunflowers tilted everywhere and squash vines pushed into gaps with big orange and green fruit rolling out from under the leaves.

He could see too that the little “workshop” down the graveled path through the gap wall where the three of them had built the first of Portia’s makeshift satellites had now been expanded into three low connected sheds.

On the north side the small enclosed garden was still filled with grass and sweet-smelling flowering vines…weeds really. Sitting within trimmed spaces inside…..someone must trim and rake around them regularly or they would be buried by now, he thought…was Jyn’s garden of stones. One for her father, another for her mother, mad Saw Gerrera, and then the others for Melshi, Sefla, Rostock, Basteran…one for each of Rogue One’s crew. There were other now too it seemed, a rounded lump of yellow sandstone, a smooth grey stone and a tiny white one, no more than a pebble, all arranged by the wall just inside the opening.

There was a reddish-brown and grey-flecked stone still sitting in his bag on the Esperanza, still up on the field. It had been in a sealed box, along with Sergeant Stordon Tonc’s few other personal effects. Apparently Bodhi had been listed as "next of kin" on Tonc’s last forms, since Qemia Seven was not liberated until after Jakku and the Concordance.

When Bodhi had brought the stone to Ella, she said “You keep it. I have the others.”

He had thought briefly of setting it in the garden on Tankodona but that hadn’t seemed right. That had been Remmie’s garden.

You carried me Tonc, he’d thought, the least I can do is carry your damned rock.

He would bring it here tomorrow, put it down at last.

I sat here with her and poured out two years of self-pity and guilt and she held me while I cried and said “I know Bodhi.”

I asked, because I thought Galen would have wanted me to, about how things stood with her and Cassian, as if I knew anything about love then.

The fall sun was warm now.

“Should we get in the shade?” he asked, suddenly remembering how they had had to be so careful to keep tiny white-furred Beri out of the sun.
She laughed as sweet as the silver bells of the hill shrines in his youth.

“I have thought of you so often over these years, Bodhi Rook. You were such a good friend to a weak-eyed little child. Whenever I made a Pattern and feared I would never find that one strong thread, the one that could bind the different parts together I would remember you and all of Jyn-ally and Second Sister’s stories of you. About how you made other people brave as you passed in and out of their stories.” She kissed his right hand, which was only partly still the hand he was born with.

“Beloved friend we are so glad you have come back to us”

After she left him and went back down the path to the village Bodhi filled a pot of water and made a small fire in the hearth, to boil water for the tea Galen would need later.

“Watch him,” Beri had said, “especially against going up that ladder before he is ready. Like Cassian-ally he will push himself too hard without hands to hold him back. He knows this about himself but in his pain he sometimes forgets.”

When Galen woke a few hours later Bodhi had warm soup and medicinal tea ready.

Bodhi climbed up the ladder to inspect the new arrangement.

“Son,” he said, “I wouldn’t call that a “room” exactly. I’ve had bunks on Command carriers that were larger.”

“I guess you’d call it cozy especially when the skylight is closed,” Galen laughed. “I remember when
Sela and Papa built the wall, though, all Kayly cared about was that we both had exactly the same amount of space. Mama had to prove it to her with a measuring string because I was so much smaller then that my side seemed bigger.”

Bodhi climbed down and took the ladder off, tipping it on its side to lay against the pantry shelves. Removing temptation.

He heard the boy chuckle again behind him, clearly knowing exactly why he was doing it.

His laugh was lower than Cassian’s.

Bodhi had never heard Galen Erso laugh.

Portia never laughed and even if she did he knew her voice couldn’t bring it back to him from his memory because it wasn’t there.

*But now he knew.*

“Sir?”

“You have to stop calling me “sir” Galen, or I’m going to keep thinking I’m still on an army base.”

Again that laugh. *Thank you.*

“Bohdi, is Kayly ok?….I mean, Ava told me she was but…was she badly hurt or anything….I mean, my sister can power through a lot before she…..”

*Says the soldier who wanted to walk out of a shuttle with a hole in in him?* Bodhi thought.

“I wasn’t there when she landed but they brought me in right afterward. From what they tell me she held that ship together with her fingernails, and then stonewalled Leia Organa herself for two hours. After I got there she fell apart and slept for two days, then all three of them started working to fight with the Resistance and find their way home. I know she worried herself sick about you, and her parents day and night for almost two years. We all did.”

Bodhi could only imagine Jyn and Cassian’s pain.
He remembered Kayly's sobbing aboard the Raddus when Galen's message came through. The sound of Cassian’s voice over the crackling comm line, “I love you sweetheart…”

Then Galen said, “Ah, hell, Pavy….on a Resistance base…out there…” he waved his spoon over his head, “…there’s no way he can have not touched…oh shit. His father is a Far Trader, they’d let it pass maybe but his mom’s family are traditional people out on the Far Reaches I hear. Some of them still hold to the old technophobe religion. They might kill him just for riding in the ship.”

“I know,” Bodhi said. “He told me.”

“We’ll take care of him.” Galen said. “Here or in HarborTown. He knows that right? He won’t be alone.”

You look like your father and you sound like your mother.

“He knows,” Bodhi assured him, “Kaylyra told him.”

“She flew here, Ava said.”

“Private First Class Army of the Resistannce Flight Corps. Your sister is a fully cleared fighter pilot actually…of some skill, I can confirm.”

“Ha.” Galen slapped his free hand on the table. “Brilliant. She used to be sick from nerves every time Papa tested her in the trainer ship. She thought nobody knew but I did.”

Bodhi made Galen lie down again after that and sat himself in a chair pulled up to the hearth so he could stoke the fire a little more and build up some coals, since the night seems to be cooling off.

They continued talking for a while. The boy did ask the oddest questions.

About Mon Cala ships, and NiJedha….what the inside of the Temple had looked like….about football….did Bodhi play and what was his favorite position?….about droids and Jedi knights and how tall Princess Leia was compared to Ava….slightly taller…and Alderaan….what was left and what it looked like.

Bodhi had actually been describing the the “Aderaanian graveyard” and the tiny flotilla of ships that always surrounded it now…people returned to drop tiny capsules of prayers and messages for their lost loved ones into a debris field that circled like silver and white rings in a wide belt around
Alderra... when he noticed that his Heart Companion’s son had dozed off again.

He covered him with a blue wool blanket and resisted the urge to kiss his forehead for fear of waking him.

Then he poured the remainder of the hot water into the stone tub by the back door and was washing the dishes when the voice of the boy’s dead grandfather spoke in his ear.

“Bodhi,” Portia said, “We are clear. The Enemy has moved off for now. Jyn and Cassian are on their way.”

It took them less than two hours. Which made him wonder who was doing the flying, Kayly or Cassian.

Portia must have gotten word somehow to people in the village because when Bodhi went out and stood on the path he saw the landing lights...torches really... lined up on the field under the light of the two moons. Portia shone a steady glow out her upper stories, looking for once like the lighthouse General Draven had long ago unknowingly christened her.

The ship he had rebuilt with Chewbacca and Tenzigo Weems in that frozen service bay on Hoth came down at the closest end of the field.

Within minutes he saw Bes carrying a lantern and knew that she must be walking up with them to light the way but Jyn didn’t wait. She had seen him from the turn in the wall, and jumping over the low gap she ran up the path to throw herself into his arms without a word, just as she had so many years ago. He lifted her off the ground in a hug.

Cassian was close behind and as he laid a hand on his shoulder. Bodhi tried to say the words he had been so diligently practicing for weeks, “He vuelto a casa, hermano,” but as he had feared he was crying too hard and wound up tangling the pronunciation so badly that Cassian laughed through his tears.
Galen Andor didn’t wake until dawn, which surprised him. Dressed except for his shoes, trussed up like a pigeon and balanced on a stack of cushions sideways across his parents bed was not a position he’d have thought he could possibly sleep in.

There'd been a dream but all he could remember was sand under his bare feet, a rope in his hands and the sound of the ocean....nothing bad really.

_Sometimes his dreams were not as easy as that, no, not by a long shot._

Daylight was coming in around the closed curtains and he could hear the morning larks outside.

His shoulder was still pretty sore but he felt stiff from laying on his back too, so he rolled onto his right side to try to sit up.

When he did he saw the spare mattress from the workshop loft on the floor under the window. His parents were lying asleep on it, Mama’s head on Papa’s shoulder.

His sister was sitting in Mama’s rush-seated chair, her feet propped up on the bench.

Kayly’s hair was cut shorter, she had a darker tan than he’d thought about people getting in space and except for her blue leather boots she was wearing clothes he’d never seen before.

“Fuck,” she told him, smiling wide, “you look pretty wrecked but it’s damn good to see you Rat.”

“You too, Queenie,” he said.
When Youngest Sister came to check on on Galen a little while after sunrise she found brother and sister sitting together out on the garden wall talking and laughing, while Jyn and Cassian-ally and brave brave Bodhi Rook seemed to all be still inside asleep.

Her heart was filled with joy.

Trial and Danger and Darkness might lie ahead, as all the castings led them to fear but here, now, in this time and place, a gap had been filled and a Pattern restored. It seemed to her that they must all be the stronger for it.
Chapter End Notes

A couple more chapters left before I wrap up this volume, the end.....well an end....is in sight.
In the painful aftermath of the Battle of Crait, Kaylyra Andor sets out alone (mostly) from Ea on the first of a series of missions to aid the Resistance/New Rebellion in the war against the First Order. Jyn searches her past...and her present...for the strength to let her daughter go and fight while she, Cassian, Galen and the rest of team Blackbird keep fighting from their refuge over the edge.

Links to" Jetsam" starting from Chapter Seventeen: 87

Unclear whether to place this one with "Jetsam" or "Fire" since it is Kayly-centric. But this is the branch most tied to Ea itself and Galen, Jyn and Cassian on their adopted home.

Te amo siempre y en todas partes = I love you always and everywhere.

Kayly left the first time without really telling anyone except for them and Galen.

Even if she had wanted more people to know she was going, and she had not, Portia’s firm security protocols prevented more involved goodbyes.

The old ghost informed them that when an optimal blind spot popped up in her 96 hour “window” she was going to say “jump” and Kayly would need to go up on a few minutes notice. The ship
waited pre-packed and Kayly had a bag ready by the door.

It had been decided well in advance that their daughter would take Guardian, aka the “old” ship.

[“Guardian hasn’t flown out of system in more than a decade,”] Portia pointed out, [“so her outline and power signature couldn’t have been even passively recorded. Her entire assembly utilizes only the kind of recycled parts available on the so-called Outer Rim and is consistent with that of the aptly-named “junker shuttles” common to small traders thirty years ago and still used in many of the areas Kayly will need to travel. We could not ask for a more easily ignored craft.”]

“I’m going to take all this trash talk as a compliment,” Bodhi said.

[“And so you should,”] Portia said through her present image, a strapping young man with short black hair. [“As I told you when you first brought it here aesthetic and engineering shortcomings were entirely justifiable based on your need for a ship whose outline telegraphed both poverty of resources and limited access to advanced assembly equipment.”]

“Have I told you lately how much I missed you when I was gone, Portia.?”

[“Yes. You told me yesterday.”]

It would have been even worse, Jyn supposed, if the call had come in the middle of the night.

As it was the two of them were sitting out in the garden drinking tea on a nice spring morning. Kayly had been in mid-sentence, telling a story about Nikki’s baby girl getting her head stuck inside a green squash while trying to chew a hole through it, when her hand suddenly lifted to her ear.

She paled slightly under her tan, nodded stiffly and said, “Mama, It’s time.”

Something about the sudden straightness of that posture, the way those green-grey eyes lowered and then looked up at her...the resolve in them...showed her a resemblance she had never seen before.

*Whatever I do, I do to protect you. Say you understand.*

*Don’t.* Jyn wanted desperately to say. *Don’t go.*

“Cassian!” she called instead, trying to keep her voice level.

He had just at that moment been coming around from the workshop with his own mug to join them, with a couple of warm rolls wrapped in a napkin.
“Papa,” Kayly said, “Portia says it’s time.”

Oh dear heaven, his face.

No one else would have seen it and Jyn was sure that Kayly didn’t because he was still that good.

But she knew him so well now.

The last time we lost her it was in terror and flames, mi soldado, mi amor, she thought. We survived that and we will survive this. She needs that knowledge from us. She needs hope.

Cassian put his clay mug carefully down on the wall.

“We’ll walk with you then,” he said. “Get your bag.”

Galen had been waiting on the path to the field when they got there. He had been up in Portia’s tower and she’d told him, of course,

They’d set up a rotation of shifts but he slept there most nights lately when he was at home.

He was as tall as his father and Kayly stood on tiptoe to hug him around the neck.

“Rules, Queen.”

“Oh that’s sweet, coming from you, fuck-rules boy.”

“I’m a fuck-rules full-grown man now. Don’t miss your check-ins.”

She said something else to him, but Jyn couldn’t hear it.

The Sisters had come to the house a few days before and Bes had given Kayly a braided cord and wound it three times around her wrist.

“I will have to take it off,” Kayly had said, her fixed resolve shaking just a little for the first time since she had announced her plan and her mission.
“Of course,” Bes agreed, “but it will bind you anyway.

“The thread goes across and returns, sometimes many times out and back from the place where it is bound at it’s start,” Tova told her, “I taught you to weave when you were little, brave child. You know this in your hands and your heart.”

Jyn saw the cord, blue, black, brown and green still wrapped around Kayly’s wrist as she let go of her brother and turned to her.

She made herself say it.

“Trust the Force…” kissed her daughter’s cheek and smoothed back her black hair.

Kayly already wore one of the ear cuffs.

Their daughter had not told them whose voice she heard through it, though Jyn saw how she flinched almost imperceptibly sometimes at first and knew in her bones that the voice was not one she would have chosen for herself.

Yeah. That’s a rough lesson isn’t it baby?

Still, Portia’s long-dead friend Jula had survived. She was the one who had saved her people and left this legacy of sacrifice and endurance for the ones that came after. It was a hard gift but it was a gift.

Jyn had never learned to weave. No matter how many times Bes tried to teach her, it was still all she could do to braid her own hair and Kayly’s, Cassian was actually better at it, but she knew how to tie a bridge line.

In the Partisans getting over walls and inside access to “inaccessible” places often was key to setting successful sequence explosives. Scans were frequently set to check at certain heights or only for certain metals or chemicals. Even alarms set to be triggered by motion, or to read power and heat signatures could be fooled and a small human in a “cooling” vest might get into places a droid or an adult couldn’t. Saw taught her himself up in those cliffs on Onderean, how to rig various kinds of lines, wire, rope, Tessra fiber…some of them little thicker than thread …from one unlikely precarious hold to the next and then the next, on and on. It was the connections that spread the weight and let a string that of itself wasn’t strong enough to hold a Tooka kitten carry you and a pack over and back.

She became very good at it.

On Kashyyk she was the one who had gotten over the power station walls and guard towers to plant the whole ring of charges, all alone after the snipers picked off the Egronan boy…how old had she been? Thirteen?

When she returned to the platform she cut the thread behind her and it had dropped. Even if ground
patrols found it they would see nothing alarming in a length of plant twine.

Saw pulled her up over the rail and old Magva had chuckled. “She walks the line almost as well as the Lioness.”

The other fighters had tensed up at that. Jyn hadn’t understood then but learned later that mentioning Saw’s sister Seela...ever...was dangerously off-limits. In those days only Magva could still have gotten away with it.

But Saw ignored the remark, she remembered, and even flashed the rare shadow of a smile as he handed Jyn the detonator.

When they reached the field Kayly ran up ahead to reach Galen and they could hear that Portia had already started the engines on her own.

“Give it to me,” she had said to her husband, as they walked quickly up behind to the field.

Captain Cassian Andor, last and bravest soldier of the Alliance had not argued only nodded and silently taken the silver ring from his own ear to hand to her. Jyn kissed his fingers before she let them go.

Back and forth from Scarif forward they had passed that line ...maybe even all the way from Jedha...neither of them could have carried such weight alone without breaking but together they would.

Cassian put the rucksack over his daughter’s shoulder and kissed her goodbye.

He did not try give her orders or advice, that time was past.

“Te amo siempre y en todas partes.”

Kayly held him tight then let go and dashed into the ship. Either to hide her tears or because Portia was already giving her marching orders.

The three of them moved back to the wall and watched Guardian go up. The clouds swallowed the little ship that Bodhi had built long ago and named for Chirrut and Baze.

“I will take care of her,” Saw’s voice said in her ear, “I promise.”
She kept one arm around her husband and held her son’s hand as they walked back toward the house.

They met poor Ava running up the path too late and she flung herself into Jyn’s arms sobbing, but after they brought her to the garden with them and Galen brought her some water, Cassian gave her the note Kayly had left. She dried her tears with the ribbons of her skirt.

“It will be alright,” she told them earnestly, “If the Resistance is still alive Kayly will find them. Pavy called her a “Wayfinder…” that’s a Far Islander thing. It means she will always find what she is looking for and she will always find home.”

That evening, a hard rain shower came through and soaked them both as they walked back up the hill from the village to the house. Jyn pulled her soaked shirt off over her head to hang on the rack by the fireplace and turned to find Cassian facing her.

He traced her collarbone lightly. After thirty years, with only occasional breaks for broken cords, it would have pretty odd if he hadn't noticed it was gone.

“Where?” he asked, “When? Did you get it into the bag when I wasn’t looking?”

“No,” she said, “Too easy. I slipped it in her pocket.”

For the weeks that Cassian had been teaching their daughter how to lie as if her life depended on it, she had been teaching her how to pick a pocket and make a drop.

“I love you Jyn Erso,” he said.
Weeks passed. They held on. They followed Leia Organa’s last orders.

Bodhi took Esperanza up to set new satellites.

He and Cassian and Mara began to build a new ship.

Galen came and went. He was the Blackbird most often now and the Watch expanded to man the Beacons.

The messages she sent back were short and simple and often heart-breaking but Kaylyra never missed a check-in and was only late twice in four months.

Within seven days she’d found survivors from the New Republic Flight Academy, rookies on deep-space training flight who’d hunkered down on an abandoned gas platform on Bespin, and helped them get themselves and their x-wings to a better hiding place.

A Mon Cala shuttle found her too close to a not-as-deserted-as-it-looked lunar platform in the Malachor system and boarded her at gun-point but when she told them her name they embraced her in tears and hand-drew for her a set of beautiful maps that she was to destroy immediately after to showing them Portia.

No confirmed sign of survivors from Crait could be found and Jyn could read the agony of guilt between the lines of every message, but she kept looking.

She began to run into the same rumors over and over again, in the bars on junk trading posts and Canto Bight stables and casino parking garages, in back alleys of a dozen backwater worlds….wild stories of how “Luke Skywalker“ had flown in and saved his sister with Jedi magic.

Portia pressed her for details but none of the child-laborers telling the stories could remember where they had heard it.

A group of escaping Bothans who had hijacked a shipment of communications equipment turned up on one of Portia’s sweeps and she managed to make contact with them at a smuggler’s post.

*They were little more than cubs but their captain was a grey-streaked female who gave her name as Ty’re Aya’tal and asked her to tell Bodhi Rook that she was still alive and that “a debt paid with honor sets advantage of it’s own.”*
“Bothans are very weird people,” they heard her say in her own voice when Portia found them a rare secure open line. “Oh you have no idea,” Cassian told her.

The Bothans tipped Portia off to the idea of tapping into the Banking and Financials vaults at Kaikielius. The First Order in their attempt to smash every trace of the Republic had incinerated a lot of data it turned out they actually wanted and now they were scrambling for information.

“Oh my. If only we knew someone with experience hacking into small-time financials,” Jyn said, innocently, as they sat around the table in Portia’s tower, considering the possibilities.

Cassian choked on his drink.

Kaylyra dropped off the grid for a while on Kaikielius and that was the hardest for her father. Knowing she was undercover was agony for him and new nightmares sometimes joined the old ones.

When she reappeared with news, bitter but not hopeless.

“Wings….tears……narrow palm…..held….white….crown….foundation….”

Only a handful of the Resistance remained but she had found them, Leia Organa among them. There was still a Rebellion and a Princess and hope.

“heart…small….words….index finger….burrow….man…..attached…..beverage….fruit”

“What the Hell?” Galen had said decoding in the tower.

“Give Ava the message. I am coming home with a man….who? what?”

“Fruit drinks!” Ava shouted when they called her, clapping her hands. “She is bringing Mr. Kes Dameron!”
Before and After

Chapter Summary

Ava, home at last at Nexa slips back into life there but knows that she is changed by her travels. She tells Eldest Tova about life beyond Ea in the last days before the First Order assault.

Chapter Notes

A small bit of life on Ea and Mem perspective of people and events from the vaults.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ava knew the Galaxy was a vast thing and Ea only a part of it. This was hardly deep wisdom. Anybody with eyes knew it, all you had to do was look up on Long Night.

Nikki and Fox and Galen had always chafed at Pattern Lessons but Ava hadn't. She'd loved them. But still, it was one thing to hear the Sisters speak of the Great Pattern and how it could be perceived in everything both large and small and quite another to be yanked up into space and get it proved to you. "Proved with a hammer," like Fox used to say.

On a warming day as that first winter faded she came with Nikki’s little boy-baby Look on her back to ask the Sisters for dandelion syrup to help Grandmother’s cough.

Youngest Sister fetched some up from the cellar while Second Sister played Hide-your-Eyes with the little one on the woven rug and Eldest Sister, sitting in the rocking chair that Cassian-ally had built,
tipped her grey-browed head to ask her, “Ava, what was it like?”

It seemed so strange that Eldest Sister should ask her such a question, and even stranger maybe that no one else really had before.

Nikki had asked many questions about Kayly and what things she had done. Galen had come closest, asking about Ava’s feelings and Paave’s, if they had been hurt or afraid. *not hurt but afraid, oh yes...* and what people in the Resistance were like and if they had made friends...*yes, many...* and about droids. He was very worried about Paave having been with all the droids and machines, not because such things bothered Galen but because he had travelled to the Far Islands and so knew what that might mean for Pavy.

*Paave had so wanted get back to his father as fast as Bodhi Rook could take him there but Kayly had wanted him to promise not to go further than some of the not-so-far Sand Flat Islands until either Galen was well enough or Cassian-ally could go with him.*

Jyn-ally had hugged her in tears and several days later asked many questions, most of them about the General. Cassian-ally listened and always seemed as if he would ask her questions too but then did not. He only took both her hands and kissed them one after the other in Thanks For the Protection of a Loved One in Time of Danger. It made her cry because he did it as Between Equals and that seemed to her more than she could bear now that she knew that he and Jyn-ally were great and famous soldiers whose names were carved on secret stones on worlds across the stars.

No one though had ever said to her, simply, “What was it like?”
And now Eldest, always so jolly and wise and brooking no nonsense was asking her a question, almost wistfully as if she, Ava, knew something that a Sister of a Circle could not.

“It was all so different.” Ava began haltingly, “everything was, right down to the smallest things....”

She remembered the heartbreaking strangeness of the water, the feel of the leaves and the dirt, the smell and weight of everything being just wrong...not bad wrong but as if you were always using a left-handed knife with your right hand....and the giant yellow-and-white sun that filled too much of the sky but didn’t burn as much as the little sun that peeked around its shoulder because Yavin VI was a moon and the big cool sun was the planet.

“Yeah” her green friend Jenny, had said slapping her shoulder in what she later learned meant Comradely Affection, “Ain’t that one of them things that just turns the universe inside-out like an old sock?”

“But, but...Eldest,” she said, reaching out to lay her hand on her old teacher’s “the strangest thing was that the longer I looked and smelled the more I felt that even though it never got less different it was all really the same.”

She told her about BB-8 who was a ball-shaped machine person so different from Ancient Portia as to be not the same at all but also with love inside it and Poe Dameron who talked about flying the way birds would if they could and his generous heart, about an ocean full of water that tasted of different salt Paave said, but that comforted him because it had a horizon and all the delicious fruit that Mr. Kes Dameron who looked almost exactly like Cassian-ally and Bodhi Rook mixed into
crazy party drinks and his wolf-dog Loco who thought everybody else was a dog too.....he just seemed really unclear on what kind....and knocked you down when he was happy. She told about the General’s terrible sadness that she wore like a cloak and went about her business in and about Admiral Ackbar who looked and felt like absolutely nobody else but was gallant and respectful like Cassian-ally in his heart and brave like Bodhi Rook.

Eldest Sister listened avidly, and it seemed to her that Second Sister with little Look napping on her lap and Youngest who now sat at the top of the cellar steps with the bottle of syrup beside her also did.

“Thank you, Ava,” Eldest said, smiling. “We will never see these people or feel these things with our own hands except in the Patterns but we are all stronger because you have and can tell us.”

Look began to fuss then and she knew he must be terribly hungry, so Second Sister gave him a peeled piece of green apple branch to chew on while Ava bundled him up and dashed home with the syrup.

By the time she reached the house that nurseling was rather loudly peeved with his auntie but since his mama had just finished feeding his sister he would have had to wait his turn anyway. With a weary sigh, poor Nikki passed Leea to their grandmother and took her ravenous boy.

A few weeks later Spring came in earnest, and the twins finally lost their milk teeth and started eating only chewable food which made many things easier for her sister.

One evening she came for dinner at the stone house and Kayly told her that she was going south soon with Galen down to HarborTown. Galen had a boat now and would take her out to the near Islands to visit Paave, which made her so happy. They had not seen him in more than a year and it almost made her bones hurt worrying about him sometimes. She immediately began making lists in her mind of little gifts to send to him. Then something else occurred to her.

"Wait, did you say boat?" Ava had said, clapping her hands. She had forgotten he had a boat. "Now you will be an even more attractive Activity partner down there! Is that why you got it?"

Kayly laughed so loud it sounded like a small scream.

Jyn-ally accidentally inhaled leaf beer up her nose and Cassian-ally had to pat her on the back.

"No," Galen replied, completely ignoring his family, "I got it so I can travel easily up and down the coast. Any extra benefits are decoration."

"It would need to be a damn fine boat," Kayly said laughing even harder now so that Galen took a piece of bread off the table and threw it at her.

"¡Suficiente! Tómalo afuera, ¡ambos!" Cassian-ally said in their family language, meaning "That's enough! Take it outside you two!" Just like he did when they were little.

Poor Galen. Kayly still teased him sometimes. And really, who was she to talk? Kayly was just as Active-crazy as any other human...more even sometimes.

Besides, Galen might be attractive for all Ava knew. You'd think being good person had to shine through and he looked almost exactly like Poe Dameron who everybody was always saying was very attractive. It didn't seem fair. You'd think some girls down there would be glad to have babies
It was some months after that, on a fine sunny afternoon as she was cutting through the far field toward town that Ava looked up to see a light shining on and off in Ancient Portia's tower. Not the signal for attack though. News. News of Danger.

Down on the near field she could see the ghost herself, not as the grey-haired female she usually showed down there but as the woman with the long straight black hair like water. That was the one she showed when she called up her memories of love and sacrifice.

Something was wrong. Something was very very wrong.

Ava dropped her basket of empty spools and ran for the tower. Far away the First Order attack had begun.

She was glad in the terrible days that followed that she had told the Sisters her stories of Yavin and the brave strong people and beautiful ships of the Resistance before all the colors would have been changed by grief for their loss.

The shuttle was thrown sometimes and a Pattern divided from there. Everything afterwards would still be connected but had to be different somehow because of it.

The Fire had been one such division for all of them. This was another.

It was like that song that Kayly learned in StillRiver and sang sometimes in her pretty bird-like voice.

We live our lives from then until now
By the mercy received and the marks upon our brow
To my heart I'll collect what the four winds will scatter
And frame my life by before and after

Chapter End Notes

Carrie Newcomer's "Before and After" is actually the inspiration for the whole branch of the story that turned out to be "Fire"

Note: To the Memsa all humans look similar.
Lina Far-Trader comes to terms with the changes in the way she understands the world, recalling her stay at Cold River after the taking of the Beacon. Testing herself she tries new trade in RiverTown and meets some men she realizes she knows, and who know her. There is a reunion.

Chapter Notes

Sentimental world building.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She began slowly.

First by taking her boat out a little farther each day, partly to check the new sails and partly to see if the shaking in her hands returned.

It didn’t.

A little at a time, she told herself.

Then she started getting up well before the sun and sleeping on board for the last few hours and then by sleeping overnight.

When she returned Meru would always be waiting with a cup of bark tea for her.

Cora came to the boatyard one day and brought Lina a “share” of the spring run she’d just brought from Gate. All small goods but high value, being chips of amber and a box of blackfish skin.
“You don’t owe me this.” Lina said testily.

She didn’t know why it pushed her the wrong way. Perhaps it felt like pity and pity angered her just then.

Cora held her ground.

“You set up the run….primed the pump as we say in the hills, besides,” she said shifting her little boy from one hip to the other, “they’d have traded only for stories, I swear, as dear as for blue thread and rope, so eager were they to hear about you and your Mem partner.”

What stories did you sell them, Cora? Lina almost asked, but stopped herself.

That was unfair. Cora was a good person. When her eyes glanced off the red rag Lina had taken to tying around her upper arm she did not turn away and she did not ask questions.

Wintering at Cold River had taught her great respect for the ice Fishers. Once she could stand without trembling the witch-Sisters of that village brought she and Mara to stay with a Harbor woman named Shona and her little boy Mik in a sod and driftwood house back from the ice-locked shore. There they both stayed until the worst of winter had passed.

As Nan had feared the old Mem lady who brought the warning to them passed quietly the day after they left for the black station. Lina remembered the howling of the wolves.

Mara might have been able to hike out south earlier. Humans did not try to travel either over land or their little skin and false-hide boats in the season of hard cold, but there were Memsa who came downriver with messages and would have taken her part-way. She would not leave Lina, though.

“I promised Jyn, and we are Heart Companions now Trader,” she said with a smile. “Besides, I have a little time finally and this is a new place and interesting.”
A few weeks after Lina first woke, wrapped in blankets in the Common House at Mink Cove, watchers brought word that the beacons had been lit to signal “All Clear” up the coast and from inland.

While Lina healed the dark-furred Mem walked out more and more. Storms and cold meant little to her and the retiring ways Lina had always associated with the Island Memsa she knew best were not Mara’s ways by half. She went everywhere and talked to everyone, making friends among the whole village of taciturn Fishers, while Lina stayed mostly at the little house. The quiet little boy taught her to fish by drilling a hole in the ice and his mother was glad he had the company since his cousins were all older. There she earned her keep as best she could by mending nets and carving.

She wasn’t a boatbuilders daughter for nothing.

Oysters here were pulled off floor of the harbor just ahead of the last freeze and kept in barrels layered with ice and weed to feed families through the winter. This made Lina mightily nervous at first but everybody ate them and nobody seemed to die. Usually they cooked them plump in hot broth with the same kelp they were wrapped in. They were good this way but sometimes they were also opened and eaten raw from the shell the way people did at home. These were not smooth and buttery like the oysters at home but salt-sharp and cold, though Lina learned to like them.

Mara it seemed had never seen such a thing before and thought them the greatest and most delicious food anyone had ever discovered, quickly tossing aside the little knife and gleefully prying the thick shells apart with her fingernails the way most Mems did.

With only a few hours of daylight people here measured their time in winter by the dance of the moons. The villagers wrapped themselves in furs and struggled through the wind and biting cold to each other’s houses in turn, to share food and fires, tell stories and sing songs five nights out of ten. Lina listened but did not join in. She slept a great deal, especially at first, and wrapped the strangeness of the people and the place around her like a blanket, almost glad of the terrible cold as if she too were inside a shell.

The trapper girl Rolery returned during an early break in the weather to tell them she had gone up as far as the black station. There had been no trace of the bodies left behind, either of the enemies or old Nan, because of course there would not be. But when she peered inside the open door, she told them wide-eyed, a dispassionate woman’s voice had said, “Hello. The situation is secure for now. We will probably send someone up to check when the weather situation is less extreme. Thank you for all your help. Tell Mara everyone is well.”

The cold and snow resumed after. Many weeks passed before slowly, bit by bit the days grew longer. One windless noon one of the witches, the black-haired, one-eyed Second Lady came up to Shona’s house.

“The pattern tells us that the ice has begun it’s last thinning early this year and the water will open
first, as Ea often sets it to, at Mink Cove,” the woman said. “If you go down in two weeks, Lina Far-
Trader, and you are ready, the dock-men will set your boat free.”

*Her heart was shaken by two things, strong and almost equal. One was a longing to see her sister so fierce it almost made her weep. The other was a dread she could not give a name to.*

Mara took her hand and put her small dark fingers between Lina's own.

"Dear friend," she said, "winter is ending. Let us go home now."

They packed supplies said their farewells at Cold Harbor, where the ice would hold for a few weeks more, and made ready to travel down the coast by foot and speeder to Mink.

Lina made a gift to little Mik of her best carving knife after first making him show her he knew how to sharpen it safely and well.

Mara hugged everybody three times each but people were shyer with Lina, knowing ways of Islanders. Even among those those who might have shaken her hand Luna mostly held herself back.

No one thought her proud or unkind for it. Fishers live a dangerous life in trade for the beauty of Ea's sea and most of them recognized the timidity of healing when they saw it.

*The little boy thanked her almost inaudibly, for all he had been laughing and playing knuckle bones with her only yesterday, then looked up from his red-stitched boots and said "Can I hug you?"

When she said yes he fairly leaped into her arms, squeezed her tight then let go and ran without another word back up the path to his mother's house.*

When they reached Mink the people there had already set her boat in the cold water. She stepped aboard and when the men passed down her ropes and lines was surprised to find them flexible and no colder than the air.

*They brought warmed rocks into the boathouses, she learned, and took the bitter cold off each craft and it's gear by slow degrees after storage so that nothing would break.*

The Witch-Ladies gave Mara a bundle wrapped in white sealskin, itself worth rich trade. Lina did not have to ask what was inside it. She knew it must be the pieces of Old Nan’s coat. They would have to stop at Gate going South, to put these things in the hands of her children and grandchildren, and tell them about the wolves.
Do you want me to go back with you Lina Far-Trader?” Mara had asked at StillRiver, laying her hand against Lina's back as she sometimes did.

*Mara, of course not,* she thought to say.

*Your way home is Inland. Jyn and her daughter and all the other Blackbirds….however many there are…. will be waiting with news at their home-place in the Uplands. You have family waiting for you in your high forests, a mother and little sisters amongst those giant trees you talk about. There is nothing wrong with me but a scar on my arm. I am a Trader and a Far Voyager. To sail alone from StillRiver coast to Blue is nothing, a child's voyage. I could do it when I was ten. If I cannot sleep under the stars and trust my own hands and eyes alone at sea what am I?*

In her heart though was another small ashamed voice that said, *Please don't leave me.*

*She had not slept wholly alone since she had wakened in that wood-beamed Common house where Mara lay curled in exhausted sleep at her feet and begged of the white-haired woman who sat beside her, *Is it gone?***

"Thank you dear friend," she said, "but I think I have to go alone."

"Never," Mara said, kissing her hand, “you will go on your own but never alone ever again."

Lina made her way back to Blue and her sister's dock in eleven days from StillRiver harbor, good time with easy winds.

No voyage she ever made before or after was harder.

*After Cora and her boy left she looked over the lined baskets the Trader had brought.*
“Where will you take them?” Meru asked her, sitting on the sleeping porch that evening, still eating her supper.

Her sister's sailmakers had taken the last of the fish off the grill and were now chasing each other around in the twilight with the unburned palm-fronds like the silly goslings they were.

“Why need I take them anywhere?” Lina said.

“Because such fine amber is pretty but of no use to us here,” her sister said. “Because it is what you do, sweet sister. It is what you have always done since we were doe-eyed babies in school and you traded an orange for one red pear and the pear for a half melon and the half melon for three black fruit and you don’t even like black fruit. Because I love to make dry wood into something that sails away where I will never go except in dreams and you like to see a thing….anything…. pass from hand to hand and change with each passage one chance to the next and then the next as far as it will go until it’s not the thing it began as but the story of a thing that only your eyes were clever enough to unravel.”

Not anymore maybe, my love. Maybe I have made one change too many.

Maybe now I wish I could trade back.

But she did not know if that was true either.

“Come,” Meru said, winking like their uncle old Mauro that she was named after used to do, “A hatful might be good to keep for trade to Reef….don’t they like to put shiny things on the eyes of those round statues?”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Lina said. “Amber melts if you leave it outdoors. Reef-traders like those clear yellow bits of casing. You can trade true amber at HarborTown but the best straight-up trade you get for it would be up the coast at GreenRiver, people there love to drill them for beads….they like the smell. The blackfish skin goes well there too because the builders have to sand down a lot of salvage bits and casing, and trade it north to the Scavengers.”

“It’s the best for that by far,” Meru agreed, “Leave me one half-box and I’ll stock your boat for the trip.”

Damn her she was actually imitating the old man’s voice now.

Lina threw a spoon at her and they both laughed.
Like the boatmen at Mink warmed the ropes and the boards gently first so they did not break she took things slowly.

There was a little late-summer market, mostly for produce brought in from the Grasslands and the coast, fruit, honey, fresh drinks, small crafts and such things, but some of the local builders had been sending people to it to quietly place small orders with people who would bring goods down from the inland in the autumn, with the larger orders of lumber and wax when the Red Traders brought their boats to the bigger Markets in the late Fall. Meru had gotten some resin she liked down from someplace in the Upland through an old contact of their fathers a few years back and wanted more. Normally she would have sent one of her apprentices.

“You used to like those short trips up river and those yellow-headed rooster boys,” her sister teased her, “or so Grandmother always implied.”

As if their Grandmother ever did anything so subtle as “imply.”

“Well,’ Lina said, before she could stop herself, “at least now I don’t have to be careful about not going ashore or trading direct with Scavengers.”

Her sister looked up at her with worry and Lina regretted the words as soon as they were out, but it was only the truth. There could be no trade for her in the Far Islands ever again. Half the world she had made for herself was now closed to her. She had known that when she raised her hand at Gate and there was no use mourning it.

When she reached RiverTown before dawn she brought her boat in far outside and up shore so she would not be blocked out if the need came to her to leave quickly.

The truth was, a small midseason market was all she felt ready for. Here would likely be no one she knew, certainly not well enough to hail her or to note whether she stayed on the docks or walked into town.

The large Three-Years Market would come next year. Maybe she would know her new self better by then.
Nothing had been traded for these goods….well, not nothing but that was not on Cora….so anything she made on them was gainful exchange. No risk. No pressure.

She walked over the wide flat beach and up the wooden stairs beside the nearest of the spindly wharves into the waking town.

Those good dried squares of fine-scaled fish-skin traded first and early, as Meru had known they would. The boatyards were the one place within the town she was comfortable. Introducing herself as Lina’s Rau’s-Daughter and the sister of Meru the Boatbuilder from Blue was enough.

Once hands were slapped and her sister’s order for the fall market placed the gap-toothed old man and his tall daughter were even friendly.

“My nephew has a old boat of your father’s building,” the builder said without jealousy, “I make him bring it down shore every few years for my boneheaded lads here to look at. So’s they’ll know the reach don’t always have to exceed the grasp.”

They directed her up into the town to the beadmaker’s row of shops.

The streets were starting to fill with carts and little booths, like a small bay of barges except with legs and wheels.

She got as close to a Taun as she had ever gotten. A butter-yellow one as tall as her head at the shoulder….a youngster maybe… bumped into her as it backed up pulling a cart, fairly knocking her down.
“Oo-oh! So-orry! So-o so-orry Trader-person!” It said fairly quivering with apology and shaking it’s straw-like hair back to show a great blue eye. She could not help but laugh and had to accept an apple to soothe the poor person’s feelings even though the fault had clearly been hers for not looking.

The apple reminded her she was hungry and the smell of grilling sardines tempted her into one of the buildings, a little pub. There were tables and benches and the thought of some shelter to gather her thoughts seemed quite welcome so she took her fried fish and a cup of watery….beer? Ea alone knew, it was wet and tasted like it had just enough alcohol in it to ward off minor water ills….and sat back to watch and listen.

Most of the business was at tables outside but a handful of people, traders making plans no doubt, sat inside.

One fellow, tall with ginger hair tied back was speaking with another man whose back was to her, shorter but not short with dark short hair dusted with grey.

“….No, “ the tall man was saying, “Don’t let her tell you that. They actually started it a year or two before the wedding. I can’t remember why, I think Conn said because the kids were fighting and it was a way to keep ‘em occupied…anyway it’s the damn center of the year up there now. I stayed and played that once and near got my damn arm broken and a perfectly sweet old lady headed me in the ribs. Now I clear out straight after the Pine Fair if I go. But you’ve gotta know how to play right? Isn’t it one of you people’s things?” He had a HarborTown accent.

“I played football, sure,” the less-tall man was saying with an accent she could not place, “but you have got to believe me this is not football….I don’t even know what that is.”

“Well, there’s feet and there’s balls that’s for damn sure. Anyway you’re gonna have to man up Rook. I saw the look in her eye. She let you slide last year I hear but you gonna have to play this time.”

“Great. I flew three quarters of the way across the galaxy to die in a grass field at Nexa playing murderball with elders and children.”

“Naw…do what Conn does, say you’re playing defense and then just hide under the cider booth. It the only thing they’ll never knock down.”

Rook laughed.

Nexa.

“You still going back up with Dex’s folks after to stay at their farm for a few days before you head back?”

“Yes. That’s the plan. The “children” are gonna sail out to Hand to see Paave in a few weeks. I wish I could go but I want to at least get back and see them before they do.”

“Ah. Dora says the girl-trooper is doing ok at Sandhill but that poor bastard those ladies got up there,
Deeb. I don’t think he’s ever gonna be right.”

“How’s the technician?”

“Our little son of a bitch is never gonna win any prizes but he’s easier to take since we got him a job working construction on the Fisher Wharf. Cassian has him scoped out pretty well and the Ladies, oh, hawks watch duck chicks less keenly.”

She wanted to stand, to walk over to them and say “Where is Jyn Erso?” but before she could make her legs move another man entered from outside. The hubbub from the market square outside was growing now and carried in as he pushed the curtain aside to enter.

A stout harried-looking bald man and some young women were carrying platters of pies out the side door.

“Help yourself to what’s out Blackbird,” the fat landlord called over a shoulder, “We’re bit under it here.”

“Don’t worry, Jon,” the newcomer said, “No rush.”

_Oh. I know you_, she thought.

But she was wrong, it wasn’t him. She saw that clearly as he stepped in from the bright sunlight behind. This man was older with a slight beard although you could see that the jaw was the same underneath it.

_Lina was surprised that she remembered so much after such a time. Three years? Four?_ This must be the other Blackbird, the father the boy had been waiting and worrying for.

“How is he? How are they?” Jyn Erso had asked her ghost as she ran across that smoking platform.

_Lina had stood in enough ports after storms, seen enough women jump ashore from battered boats or stand at dock asking “How is he? Did he make it back?”_

The man stepped up to the tall tables near the others after a quick glance around the room, and laid his hand on the one called Rook's shoulder.

It looked like a familiar gesture, as with kin or a close friend.

_Maybe they were brothers even though the Blackbird was taller?_

"Have you been showing Bodhi the sights Tom?"
"If there are sights in RiverTown beyond the Station, this pub, the wharves and the Market Place I don’t know what they are." Both men laughed

As he turned his head to smile Lina could finally see Rook's face. Clean-shaven, tanned, dark-eyed and pleasant. He had very nice teeth.

*Either of them might be old enough to be her father perhaps but both were still fairly handsome for old men, Rook and the Blackbird.*

*The big ginger man not so much though he looked both shrewd and kind.*

Rook wore an earring of bright silver just like the one Jyn Erso had worn.

*Could he hear the ghost too?* she wondered.

Lina would have stood on her own and spoken to them once she was done wondering, she was sure of it, but things being what they were she never got the chance.

Cassian Blackbird said something very quietly to the other men and though he didn't turn to look in her direction both of them did. Rook at least tried to keep his gaze sideways but the HarborTown man stared straight at her.

It seemed to her that the Blackbird sighed as he then turned around himself.

"You are a long way from home Islander," he said in a polite but even tone.

"Does our talk interest you or do you look for trade here?"

*Five years ago a Far Islander captain had challenged her off Vision. It seemed strange that she should think of that now because because this man did not sound or look at all like that woman except maybe around the eyes. He also did not have five crewmen standing with red-shafted arrows pointed at her heart, waiting for a hand signal.*

*Just as she had then though, Lina sensed that this person considering her was well capable of telling her measure in weight and height, listing every item in her closed pack, naming the first three verses of the last song she had sung, the story of every mark on her skin and Which hand she favored with a knife.*

*What was it Kelee, the old Far Voyager had told her about the captains of the reefs among the traditional people? That s he was sure they slept well, because it must be exhausting to make yourself see everything.*

*Lina remembered as well the mostly-grown boy she had given water to on Tano's table, his clever dark eyes and determination to be charming even through the pain.*
"I am sorry uncles," she said, standing and wiping her hands on her skirt because there was nowhere else to do so, "I meant no disrespect." She held out both hands palm up.

"My name is Lina. Do you know Jyn...?"

Bodhi Rook fairly leaped to his feet with a wide smile

"Lina!" he cried. "Oh my, it's Jyn's friend Lina!"

At her half-finished question the caution in Cassian Blackbird's eyes faded and he held his hands out in return.

"Hello Lina," he said

If the man Tom had not laid a hand on his shoulder and said “Rook..Islanders...” Lina had an alarming sense that Bodhi Rook might have leaped over the bench to hug her as tightly as little Mik in the North.

Halted, the man said excitedly, “Cassian! Someone has to go find Jyn, right away and tell her!”

"Tell me what?"

The small woman had come in from the side door to the Market Hall.

She was not in sealskins now but only a white shirt with sleeves rolled up, sandals and trousers of HarborTown blue. Instead of bags of weapons she had a rope market basket over her shoulder.

She did not speak a word but only stared at Lina with wide eyes before stepping toward her with open arms.

Lina lay her head on the older woman's shoulder, held on and without meaning to began to cry as she had not ever done except with kin and even then not since childhood.

She knew now what Mara had meant by Heart Companions.

Chapter End Notes
Shameless references to Chapter 11 of Water Over Stones.

Gratuitous discussion of oysters.
Watching

Chapter Summary

Life goes on in Meru the boat builder's yard while she considers her sister's watch for a visitor.
Galen Andor and Lina meet again.

Chapter Notes

A little OC romance finally gets going after a long lead in. It's a beach read?

Meru was never sure afterwards exactly when the little child first appeared. By the time she properly noticed him it seemed he was already there every morning.

One of her season workers recognized him as the grandson of a net-mender named Heela and at this season of the year it was likely his Fisher mother was out on one of the barges for the weeks of the little-bait runs. Too young for school or work and too old to be carried in a sling or play with stacking rings and dolls on the weavers platforms the child was of an age usually left to run like geese as long as they stayed out from underfoot. This one, Meru sensed, was too shy and self-consciously short-legged to be content running and playing wild games of toy bows and hoops on the beaches with the rest of his age-mates. This child needed something else.

Her apprentices noticed but since the little wide-eyed thing seemed to do no harm everyone came to a wordless agreement to let him be. The sailmakers thought him adorable and began to leave lengths of twine and bits of cooked fish and sweets from their own suppers out for him. The boatbuilder watched him carefully. He began by stealing curls of wood shavings and progressed to taking scraps of wood and dropped ends of planking from the sand floor of the yard. Somewhere he was building secret little boats of his own maybe.

A clever quiet thing, he reminded Meru of herself as she might have been if she had grown without her bold twin for company, or the wide warm sunshine of her father’s easy affection and his boatyard to shelter in.

One day as she sat cross-legged on the floor of her carving room Meru became aware that a little dark head was peering around the doorframe behind her back, watching.
Without looking up from the paddle handles she was blocking out she said, “All these tools are mine and on their edges my livelihood depends. Do not touch them. There are tools you may use but
nothing comes from nothing. Sweep the porches and an arrangement can be made.”

The head disappeared from the doorway.
The next morning, the porch being swept and the broom returned to its peg under the stairway Meru placed a small ironwood hammer with the handle broken short, a sharpened if second-hand whittling knife and half of a cuttle bone rasp in a basket outside the doorway.

An hour later one of her apprentices walked out to the dock with word that the basket had disappeared and she breathed a silent prayer that the child would at least have enough sense to save the piece and run for help if he cut off a fingertip.

As it was he became a kind of sparrow apprentice, flitting in and out of the workshops like a bird and so Bird was what they called him.

*He had another name of course, which someone told her once but Meru was so bad with names and Bird suited him better anyway.*

He sat on the roof, the porches, or in the shade of upturned hulls and watched everyone. Each morning she found by the doorway of her carving room when she came down with her bowl of tea, held in both hands to warm her fingers for work as much as to drink, and watched her in particular. Eventually he began to speak, shyly at first, to ask questions about tools and the shapes she brought out of the wood but the first time he spoke it to ask about her sister.

"That woman, what is she watching for every day?"

The new pattern had begun shortly after her apparently successful return from Green River. Lina would wake early, dress, roll up her bed and quickly do whatever chores the day required, whether it was caulking or sanding, bringing in fresh water, or catching the ducks. Then sometime late, well after the first tide had taken boats out to fish or venture she would walk down to the landing shore and keep watch by the sea, for hours sometimes, usually until sunset. There were days when she brought a little net with her and trapped crabs off the dock as they had when they were children, and others when she brought baskets or canvas to mend as she sat. Most days she simply took fruit or a piece of flour pudding along and ate as she sat. If the opportunity came she might talk to people who came and went, especially any traders or visitors but she would always keep one eye on the harbor. At dark she would come back to the house to eat supper with them all and sleep.

Meru was not worried about her, or at least she was less worried than at any point in this last three years. When the other trader had come back alone and told a tale about far trading North, further than Gate, and wintering over there had been...not a lie exactly...but something like fear in her eyes even as she told it. Months passed and when Lina's sails and battered boat were sighted at last she had come ashore different, pale and most frighteningly, unsure. For all their lives together her twin had never been unsure. Angry, defiant, sad many times but never lost.

Not even when their father had gone to bed sick with a headache he had complained about for days...he who was never sick...but endured because he was so unwilling to slow work on that last
most beautiful boat. Father had watched the launch and first raising of the sails with a sigh of pride only to turn and stumble on his way toward home. Unable to rise a few hours later, he had been gone by morning. Tincture of willow might have saved him the healers said but it was already hours too late for that by the time their grandmother woke them and told Lina to run for help. All the world shifted away under them in a single night and they cried in each other's arms. Still, when morning came her sister had chosen a course even before her tears were dry. Lina was the only person none of their cousins and aunts would second guess. It was hard to argue with such surety. Only a girl, Lina had been the one to speak to the buyers and settle the debts. Later, when their uncle was lost, having grown more and more reckless after the death of his son, he had tried race a storm that the others had known must be ridden out at sea. The boat was found days later and while Meru refitted her, Lina at seventeen had bargained for Uncle's trade and taken most of it over.

It was too much.
"Like oak," Grandmother had muttered once to Aunt, "like an anchor line," and then, in a whisper, "like her mother."

*What cannot bend breaks, Meru knew too well. Rope always pulled the same way frays, the heart that cannot speak of it's pain breaks.*

But her dear Lina had not broken. Unlike their mother she had come home and told Meru what had happened to her, in the north and before.

After those several days spent at Green River her sister seemed to sleep better and even to have regained some of her traderly spirit. There was good news of interest at the Fall Market, she said. She had even met some traders there who were not gulls.

Also at Green River she said, to Meru alone as they sat late by the fire toasting sweet root, she had met the Upland woman who had been their leader in the north, the same one who cut the poison dart out of her arm. She had been along with other Blackbirds.

"So there really is more than one?" Meru had asked, fascinated.

*She seldom went to markets anymore but some stories found their way into even her ears.*

"There is a whole family," Lina said smiling, "Mother, Father, children, even an uncle. You have met one yourself, the son, remember? He was your exotic and humbly truthful customer and sends word to tell how the boat you made for him is all that he wished it might be."

The mention of the boat called up for her a picture of a slim dark-eyed stranger. "Oh! The one with the third eye and the extra...."

"Yes, that one."

"Did you see him again and can you give witness to such marvels?" Meru teased.

"No!" her usually bold sister protested as if shocked, "Be polite! His mother is a venture partner after all and a....companion. Besides," she tossed a stick in the fire, "he was not there I....only talked to his voice in a box."

Meru considered this.

"That must have been odd," was all she could think to say.

Lina told her that Jyn Erso had promised to come herself next year and bring her friend Mara but that some of the others.....the son or the daughter perhaps.....might come within a few weeks because they had business on Hand and the Inner Islands.

Meru could not help but smile at the thought that she might see that little boat again. She recalled...
being quite pleased with the way it turned out.

Her father always told her that building a boat was like beginning a story you might never get to learn the end of. It was always good to see how a story was unfolding even once you passed its telling forever on to others.

It was only after Bird asked his question that Meru recognized Lina's odd new routine for what it was. Sometimes those closest to a thing do not recognize it. She knew her twin had inherited their mother's restlessness, but she had inherited their father's patience too. A Far Voyager needs both after all, because she sails on seas she cannot know before she goes there.

Her sister was watching, watching as if for some event or portent to advise her next move.

Lina had brought some bags to stitch as she sat on the shore that day. It a humble make-work task if ever there was one, but their grandmother had always put canvas scraps and twine out in a basket for idle hands and daydreaming and Meru did the same.

It was well into the afternoon so she walked quickly, almost-but-not-quite running. Worried about being somehow late for something although she could not have said for what.
They had brought lumber down from the drying barns and spent the whole morning stacking it, and then she had gone to the sand pit. She had begun a week ago to visit by herself always after noon when the children would be done with their practice, setting up targets and drawing the bow and firing untipped shafts for an hour, drilling herself in hopes of being able to trust her right arm again. Small steps first, she told herself. It takes as long to rebuild a boat as to build a new one sometimes," a saying of Meru's inherited from their father.

The landings were empty in early afternoon, except for a few children playing so she sat in the shade of an upturned hull with her basket. Her head was bent to cut the thread at the end of a seam when "Bird," the boatyard's little shadow, called out to her from the corner of a boat pulled up higher behind.

"Look Lina! Whose is that sail?"

A single sail, gaff-rigged. He had come.

If anyone had asked her, which thank Ea no one had, why she came to the landings each day she would not have been able to give a sensible reason, but when she saw that boat of her sister making come into the harbor she admitted to herself that she watched for the same reason she had raised her hand at GateHarbor, because there were things she needed to know.

After saying goodbye to her husband and brother, Jyn Erso had wanted to show her the "comm station" at RiverTown

Lina had been secretly anxious that it might look like that polished black room up north but this was more like a cross between a scavengers barge and a dock wardens house. There were benches and chairs, a woven rug and a small metal pot-stove. Beds were in a curtained loft above and the only machines she saw were a few small cracked casing boxes and three flat grey boards with lights and letters that moved across them laid out on a chipped wooden table.

A broad-shouldered yellow-haired man, Dex had been his name, seemed to live there part time along with strong-legged ginger-haired woman, who was very visibly pregnant, and his partner or so Lina gleaned.

The rack hung on a wall opposite the door held a polished rifle and two other large guns.

While the ginger woman asked questions in a HarborTown accent about Blue, the boatyards ....of which she had heard ...and what trade was like there now, Dex told Jyn Erso that someone wished to speak with her. The older woman put on a headband of black wire with tattered yellow ear covers and sat down to fuss with one of the grey boards.

Listening to someone who was not there...the ghost again? Lina wondered at first, until Jyn nodded several times and said, "Papa and Bodhi have to deal with things here...." then smiling, "You need to get word to Mara that I met Lina down here."
The big man brought some cider for them all, a little sweet for her taste but cold and still very good.

"I love you," Jyn Erso said to the unseen person finally, "and I'll see you tomorrow with luck..." then stopped with a curious expression "What?" she was asking whoever she could hear, "why do you...alright..."

Taking off the headband she held it out to Lina, "My son Galen wants to talk to you."

The pregnant woman all but shoved her sturdy partner right out the door as Jyn Erso helped her put the thing on her head so that the pads touched her ears.

To her enormous relief they were only padding, nothing poked or scratched her skin.

["Lina...I don't know if you remember me...Galen Andor. We met a few years back when..."
There was a slight echo but otherwise his voice was as clear as if he were in the room.

"Yes," she said out loud, the way Jyn had although she felt foolish doing it. "Can you hear me? Should I speak louder?"

["Yes. I can hear you very well."]

Was he laughing? He sounded like he was laughing.

"Don't laugh at me!" It felt wildly foolish to be annoyed at a man she could not see.

["I apologize,"] he said, although still laughing. ["Forgive me. I only wanted to ask you if you remembered me, I think I offended you at Hand without meaning to and now I've done it again." ]

Lina wished that she could see him, remembering a slim young man, almost a boy, strange but curiously forthright.

Immature she had told herself, proud gull that she had been.

"Where are you?"

["Home...Nexa, in the Uplands. If we get the 'all clear' my sister and I will go down to HarborTown tomorrow." ]

Tomorrow? Did he mean walking or flying, in Guardian. ["We may stay there for a few weeks before we sail for Hand, to see our friend Paave. I wondered is there any chance that you would be in either place?"

Why? Lina wanted to say but that was a a question you asked a person in front of you. She could not ask a voice what it wondered, or tell it what she wondered.

"I have to go back," she said, "when my business is done here. My sister is waiting for me at Blue."

["I understand." ] he said. The voice was even and friendly, with no sound of disappointment or offense in it that she could hear...but how could you ever tell from only a voice? ["Another time perhaps. I just wanted to thank you, for what you did, for helping my mother. She talked about you and Mara, well Mara never stops talking about you and the courage it took to do what you did, going with them, standing up when you didn’t have to. I know that it must have cost you dearly. Anyway, I'm grateful and the rest of my family is too."]

Someone else was talking, she could hear, as if in another room nearby or as if maybe he were not alone in the place where he was talking.

"Galen Andor!" she said, rather louder than she meant to, "when will you be at Hand?"

Hand was a days fast sail from Blue Harbor, with good weather, a day and a half for even a weak sailor.

["Five weeks, maybe six."]

"Come to Blue," she said. "You know the way and there may be...will be people there who wish to
talk to you."

This would undoubtedly be true. Stories of the other Enemy station captured out on the Equatorial had reached Blue. Rumors were circulating and although the Bequa had reassured everyone that all was well there it would mean a great deal for the elders and the people to talk to someone who spoke for the Blackbirds too.

There was a silence and she was afraid that he had somehow vanished.

["I could do that."] came a careful answer, ["If you think I would be welcome."]

"It is possible," she said. "There are no guarantees.... but surely the only way to find out anything is to venture it."

["Fair enough. Did I mention that I have my own boat now?"]
Then it was her turn to laugh.
"So I have heard."

She waved to him from the shore probably before he could even see her, and then walked up to the Harbor dock so he would know where to come in, in case he had forgotten.

It was indeed a sweet little wide-bowed boat, the kind that could almost sail itself and probably often did. Her sister was a genius.

"Hello!" Galen Andor called as he tossed her the line and "Hello!" she called back as she tied off.

The white-shirted young man who climbed up onto the boards of the visitors dock was not exactly the cautious-mannered Inlander boy she remembered though she would still have known him.

This jaw was harder somehow, his shoulders a little broader, the shadow of beard on his chin a little more than a shadow now. She could see his father in his looks and his mother in his sharp eye now that she knew what she was looking at, and yet....

Lina wondered how different she must look to him.

He stood for a moment as if unsure what to say but she was not.

After all there had been weeks to consider it.

"Come Galen Blackbird," she said smiling, "let me see the mark that Old Tamo gave you."

He rolled up his thin right sleeve all the way up then to show a curving black-winged bird, that spread fierce feathered wings around his forearm back to his elbow. She had never seen one like it. It was past bold to ask, then and there, so recklessly soon but ask she did and when he gave permission she ran her fingers along black feathers and felt the thin scars of burns that the Master
Marker had hidden in the shafts of each quill.

Galen Andor asked a question of his own, one that it was also foolishly too early to ask.

"Bird," Lina said, "run and tell my sister that the visitor I told her about has come and I will bring him up to the house," then waited until she was quite sure the boy was well up the beach before she answered yes.

Pride meant far less to her now than it had once but she still had no intention of kissing a not-quite stranger in front of a child.
Leave

Chapter Summary

Kaylyra Andor returns home to Ea as she and Portia keep the promise made to Poe Dameron and bring his father to the safest place they know. Bes and Portia chat and gossip a bit. The village of Nexa wonders about the new visitor and Bes and her Sisters worry about Kaylyra and the burden she has taken on.

Chapter Notes

Following Chapter 37 and like it linked to lots of events in Jetsam and the "Oh these humans had their constant wacky activities!" chapters of Over the Edge...sorry... but mostly Portia and Bess bonding. Also the angst of those who watch their loved ones go to fight....yeah.

Also, the Sisters tell the future with macrame.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Pattern they cast was one of utility and strength bound by a kind of sad beauty. Subtle changes altered the attachments of even the strong and sturdy lines. The Fall would be a rainy one. The berry harvest would start early. Many of the young people in the village were of an age when a Feast would be welcome to them.

As they laid it on the floor under the window in the bright light of the greater moon rising to full, wise Eldest laid her finger on a very thin but strong thread that reappeared and now turned back to cross again, having been hidden under the turned and tangled edge. Dear Youngest smiled then and Bes herself had felt a great lightening in her heart.

Kayly was returning.
Later that night Bes returned from an urgent visit to check on a nursling whose breathing troubles had returned again and came upon the shape of a tall human woman with long grey braids standing patiently on the village field in the moonlight.

It was only an image of course, all but the littlest children knew that. It appeared at odd times outside the Tower always near the piece of pale blue stone that Cassian-ally and the other males had carried down from the Tower years ago. Always on market days or whenever there was news that must be shared quickly.

In times of danger and distress she would show other faces but this was the most common one she used outdoors, “Aurea, head of Anthropological Survey,” a human female with silver hair plaited into long braids.

"Good evening Ancient Portia," she said.

"Good evening, Bes," the picture answered, "are you returning to your home now or are you likely to pay a visit to Jyn at Agricultural Station #2.?

The ghost sometimes used different names for places and things than anyone else did, as was her right and privilege.

"I am indeed returning home," Bes said, "Jyn-ally is likely still asleep if she is not up with you. Is there some trouble or do you merely wish to tell her Kayly is coming home soon?"

Portia raised the eyebrows of the picture-human to indicate surprise, “So you know? Were you observing near and distant field distortions and calculating probabilities again?"

“I am going to say yes,” Bes said with a sly smile. It still gave her pleasure when she managed to surprise such a wise being. “The Pattern shows strength, purpose and return for her but no more,” but she could not help but ask, “You see her so often when we cannot, is she well?”

Months ago the soldiers of the Resistance had suffered great losses far away and all of Ea's Alliance stood alert to danger now. Kayly had gone, brave and steel-sharp, determined to save those she could and fight against the Enemy.

Jyn and Cassian-ally stood fast here, captains of the Watch, but Bes knew how terribly they feared for their child. It was a great blessing of Ea’s that Bodhi Rook had returned to them now because they needed his faith and courage, all of them.

"Her physical health is good though she has been under significant strain. The situation still extremely dire but during a sabotage operation she was able to make contact with a young man she knew from her time on Leia Organa’s base. Through him we learned the location and condition of a number of other survivors, the remaining soldiers of the Resistance Fleet. This fellow pilot is a close friend she had feared killed in the Enemy attack and finding him has made an enormous difference to her morale."

"One of the soldiers from the jungles on the moon of Yavin? Is this person one of Bodhi Rook and
"Ava's friends too."

"Yes. He asked about both of them in fact. I have spoken with him directly at some length and consider him a very decent and courageous person."

Bes clapped her hands. "Oh this is wonderful news Ancient Portia! We have worried about her heart so much. I know that you guard her with all your wisdom and sight, dear neighbor, but she is so young and so far from home. Reunion with one of her lost friends must comfort her greatly."

After all, who would know this better than Portia, left alone of all her kind?

"It has helped her stress hormone levels considerably," the image-woman nodded her head gravely. "Also, since this officer is an age-appropriate companion for whom Kayly had previously developed a mutual sexual attraction, they engaged in intimate physical relations which seemed to benefit them both by providing much needed short-term emotional support."

Engaged in.....?

Bes was confused for a moment, then she realized what the ghost must be talking about.

"Do you really mean to tell me she is being Active with one of her soldier friends? In the middle of a war you say?"  

Oh my, that sounded familiar.

The image shrugged companionably. "I am going to say yes."

Ancient Portia was making a joke.

Bes laughed so hard she had to put her hands on her knees.

Oh my. The fruit did not fall far from the tree.

How did they always find the time, much less the energy?

By now she knew better than to hope there would be babies immediately forthcoming. Reproduction was a hit or miss affair with so many humans and in that whole good-hearted, courageous family Activity was utter chaos to this day. When their children grew old enough dear Jyn and Cassian had found it necessary to take them down river for the occasional season just to find other human companions to practice on. They themselves had still not given it up.

What could one do but laugh and thank Ea it was not happening to you?

She wiped her eyes.
“Oh thank you Ancient Portia. I will go straight away now and tell Jyn-ally. She will not care at all if I wake her up, and we will send someone with news to Ava. Will Kayly land Guardian near here? When do you expect her?”

“I will ask her to land in the upper field. Between 06:00 and 07:00 depending on conditions....dawn or soon after. Someone is taking word to Galen at HarborTown and I am speaking just now to Cassian. He and Bodhi Rook will come back.”

Bes hurried away up the moonslit path and, behind her heard the old ghost calling, “Tell Ava she is bringing a friend with her. An older male in need of our protection. His name is Kes Dameron.”

The figure of the woman remained standing a while by the wall. It seemed as if she watched the stars.

Jyn was heart-wrenchingly glad of the news and little Ava came running when Ema took the news to her.

“Can you ever look like a regular person, Ancient Portia?” Youngest had pertly asked once in the Tower, when that dear one was still very small.

“I easily could,” the ghost said, “if by that you mean a Memsa person but, and I hope you understand that I do not mean any slight by this, it would be less affective for interface.”

“Why?”

“Because my connection to my own organics was very profound. It is difficult to explain but I can reproduce images of them in much finer detail with regards to movements and responses. Also it comforts me to review and access the files.”

“Because you miss them and they are all dead now?” the little one said, distressed.

“Yes.” The image, that of a young male human with short spiky black hair. ...Orran, Level One Hydraulics Engineer, she would always tell you a name if you asked… nodded.
Youngest, whose eyes saw what others did not, asked out loud the question that came to any decent heart who learned the old ghost’s story.

“Are you lonely?”

And Ancient Portia like a Sister of a Circle being bound to tell the truth answered.

“Yes.”

_The ghostly images Portia set to speak through could not be touched, as everyone knew. They appeared only where her smooth pale blue stones stood, in the rooms or roof of her tower, as thin as paper and made of a kind of light such that even a hand passed through one felt nothing, not cold, heat or even a breath of air._

The lovely child… found when only days old abandoned in a Rescue Place and saved by gatherers who heard her weak cries, kept hidden indoors by well-meaning but superstitious people who believed the pale little one blind until the Circle of that rough place finally came and brought her into the light….this wise heart did a thing then that none had considered to do before.

Youngest ran to one of the smooth blue slabs of stone that lined the walls and lay her hand on it.

“Do you feel that?” she called back over her little shoulder.

The image vanished in less than a heartbeat from where it had been before and reappeared kneeling beside Youngest.

“I can, dear,” Ancient Portia said and smiled one of her rare wide smiles “a little.”

Bes herself did not go down to the field but even as she stood in the back walled garden behind the farm she felt the shift in the wind that told her that the brave spaceship they called Guardian had come down as silent and shadowed as an owl.

“They will need space,” Eldest had said, as Bes and Youngest helped her up from her bed and laid out breakfast “This is a time for family and Heart Companions. Kayly will come to visit us soon.”

“Will she stay at home now?” little Ema asked her bright brown eyes hopeful.

The Sisters looked at each other gravely.

Eldest Sister took it upon herself to explain. The Pattern was by no means clear but Kayly’s thread
seemed set to cast again across and back under the dark threads of War along the edge. “No sweet one,” Eldest said taking a cup from the little one’s hands, “We must consider how best to help her while she is in our reach.”

Word spread quickly as it always did. Everyone was terribly curious to meet the new visitor and it would have been necessary to go out and bite ears to keep the villagers from sneaking up and peering over the wall.

By late morning a small crowd was gathering of people who “just happened” to have some vague business at the end of the path nearest the Stone House.

Jyn wisely came out with tea and told everyone that the new person was named Kes Dameron and had been a fellow soldier of hers. How long he might stay was undecided but as he had been uprooted from his home far away by tragic events he should be given polite space and quiet to introduce himself at his own pace. She made it abundantly clear she would back this courtesy up with a stick if necessary.

Ava came out and further satisfied curiosity by explaining that she knew the man very well and had visited his house in her travels, which caused eyes to widen. “He is a farmer and had a beautiful fruit orchard and wonderful gardens there that he had to leave behind,” this elicited great sympathy, especially among the farmers, “It is always hot where he lives so he may get cold later.” several people ran home to look for sweaters and blankets that could be spared.

When the man did appear, accompanied by Jyn-ally and Kayly and Ava to unload the shuttle and take a short walk people were mostly polite. He looked almost exactly like Cassian-ally and Bodhi Rook although he had wider shoulders. He took hands with awkward courtesy with all who offered but had poor communication and understanding, less even than was common with humans.

“The poor thing will learn a little,” Falla said, he had won her heart at once by proclaiming her grandchildren the most adorable he had ever seen. “Remember what Jyn and Cassian-ally were like when they first came? Poor Bodhi Rook still has trouble.”

But none of the younger people now remembered that time when humans had been so rare a sight at Nexa that only the older people and the traveling Scavengers had ever seen one.

‘Well,” Fox said, “he seems like a big strong fellow if a little grey around the ears. I wonder how he’ll do at football?”
Kayly herself was greeted with kisses and Heartfelt Welcome After a Dangerous Journey by everyone. To a Friend and Neighbor by the younger people and To a Beloved Child by the older ones. Her face and hands showed nothing but her happiness but Youngest, who had gone up to help with crowd control, sensed that she suffered from strain of long fear and painful things seen and done.

“She carries her trouble like Cassian-ally,” that clear-seeing one said when she returned.

“Then Jyn’s company is the best thing for her,” Eldest said, “as it was and is for him. She will come to see us tomorrow,” and she sent little Ema outside to gather the things needful to make a new bracelet for Kayly.

Everyone at the Stone House went to bed very early that night, before it was even dark, the visitor being exhausted no doubt and Jyn-ally having slept little the night before.

Curious neighbors had the good sense to leave when Jyn-ally closed her gate, all but little Mimi who tried to get one last peek at Kes Dameron by crawling up the back wall to the workshop window but her mother pulled her down by her feet and carried her away scolding in a whisper.

Ava took her niece and nephew home for it was all hands to work at that house with two little nurslings walking and climbing and saying “Why?”

Things became quiet quickly as people returned to their own unfinished tasks.

Cassian-ally and Bodhi Rook would return by tomorrow and Galen might even now be on his way if Portia thought it safe for him to use the new little airship.

Eldest went to bed with the sun, as she often did now and Youngest and Ema set about washing the dishes.

An idea came to Bes though and after early supper and towels hung to dry she laid aside her mending and walked alone up to the Great Pond just as the sun was setting.

There she climbed up to sit upon the rocks above one of the favorite swimming places. It had likely been lively there during the day but now as one kind of light gave way to another she sat for a while in near silence.

As the little moon rose the night’s music began, quietly at first. The night-larks called and little moths peeped quietly as they skimmed the tops of the trees. The bats began their soft songs and across the water a soft splash told her that an otter had dived to hunt for the little pale fish. Slow ripples moved reflecting back the moons light and spreading slow and quiet across the dark water.
The footsteps in the brush and on the gravel would have told her who came up the path even if she had not known.

Humans had such poor vision in the dark as to be nearly blind sometimes. Kayly…and Galen too, later, but for Kaylyra the tasks she set herself were always so clearly focused. She was like Jyn-ally in this….had set herself to walk every path of the near countryside in the dark that summer and fall when she was eleven. She would practice in the daytime with eyes closed and at night in all kinds of weather. Often slipping or falling or bumping hard into trees, but always getting back up. By the summers end she could do it. Never so quietly as a normal person would, of course, she had to use her hands a lot, and barefoot her slippery feet would always scramble a little and the weight forward on her tender toes made her gait hesitant but she did it.

*She is testing herself,* Bes thought, *needing to know that she can still do this thing that was so important to her once…needing to know that she is still Kaylyra.*

Her heart bled for the child of her village, firstborn of her beloved friend.

If asked the truthful ghost would tell her all that had happened to Kayly in the months she had been gone but Bes did not need to ask. She knew enough.

*She had walked inside the Black Shuttle when it fell while it still smoked, had sat beside brave broken Cassian-ally as he called for his dead friend and cried out that he could not do terrible things that he had already done. She had held Jyn-ally’s head as then-Eldest washed her burned eyes to save her sight because she did not look away from a fire that could burn stars from the sky. She saw their faces as they left, hand in hand to go fight again at a place called Endor and she embraced them when they returned. She had held Bodhi Rook’s torn and rebuilt hands and listened to his stories of burned cities and sacrifice, death and guilt, of trying to hear one’s heart even when it was broken and make right things that had gone horribly wrong, of hope passed to others and received back from them in return….no matter how dark the path or the Pattern.*

Kayly made her way down to the water that had washed her clean since she was an infant and dove into it from the rocks at the edge.

The birds and the otter heard her no doubt and so did Bes.

*Let her go again and let her return again,* Bes asked, *let her wash the poison from her skin before it settles in her bones. Let her find whatever comfort she can in her Activities with other brave soldiers. Let the ghosts seen and unseen keep her safe. Let her have the gift of saving lives to ease the burden of having taken them.*

The Second Sister of the Upland Circle tiptoed away unheard then, even by the otter and went back
to her own house.

If Kayly sat upon the rocks and cried after her swimming she deserved privacy to do so. Tomorrow she would come to the farm and they would have her bracelet ready for her.

Chapter End Notes

I have so many "meanwhile back on Ea" chapters. How did this universe wind up so big? I'm ashamed of myself for asking people to keep up with it....unfortunately I am also shameless in my love for Bes and Portia.
Chapter Summary

Two eensy small chapters. One fluffy and one angsty. Set just after another of the Annual Real Football Games. In one of which Cassian Andor suggests to his wife that maybe people in their fifties should not be engaged in extreme sports. She will, of course, hear none of it.
In another Cassian has a moment with his daughter during Kayly Andor's too-short return to Ea to fulfill her promise to her friend Poe and bring Kes Dameron to the one safe place she knows.

Chapter Notes

The Annual Real Football Game is a Nexa tradition accidentally invented by Cassian (and enthusiastically claimed by Jyn and the rest of the gang) in Chap 11 of "Water Over Stones"
Exposition. A link. A memory of a time I actually saw a non-goalie block a shot that way in a mud-wrestle of a game in the pouring rain. A callback to Cassian's encounter with Kes Dameron at Jyn's bedside in Chap. 78 of OTE.

This referencing myself is now completely out of hand. Sorry.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sides

They had played for a half hour in the mud after the rain started and before Tova finally called the Game on account of lightning.

In Cassian’s opinion it was the only reason any of them were still alive.

“Jyn,” he said as she was gingerly trying to lie down beside him without bumping her bandaged knees or forearms. “I’m going to break a rule.”

“Don’t!” she groaned, “don’t do it.”

Cassian readjusted the mint-leaf poultice that covered half his face and rolled onto his side, trying to
see her through his unswollen eye.

“I am too damn old for this,” he said.

From the spare “guest bed” mattress on the floor by the wall Bodhi let out a muffled moan. It might have been brotherly agreement but face down he was a little hard to understand.

“What did he say?”

“He said his back is broken,” Jyn translated. “Bodhi, your back is not broken. Tova says it’s only bruised. I know that stuff tasted nasty but I promise you’ll feel 100% better in the morning.”

“Jyn sooner or later somebody is going to get killed.”

“So dramatic. It’s traditional now, everyone looks forward to it.”

“Lots of destructive things are traditional. Ritual headhunting is traditional among the Dereeshii which is why nobody with a head goes to Dereesh.”

She seemed to be trying to edge in as close to him as she could while staying on her back but most of her was still on top of the covers.

“Are you cold?” he asked settling back, “why aren’t you under the blanket.”

The shutters were closed and from the sound outside it seemed that the rain might have finally slowed to a drizzle but the room was much cooler now with the fire banked down.

She mumbled something.

“¿Qué?”

“The blanket. The weight hurts a little.”

She sounded ever so slightly pathetic.

Cassian sighed.

“Come on, change sides with me.”

“What?”

“Just slide over to my side of the bed.” Stiff as he was he got up and walked around while she wincingly worked her way over across the mattress.

It meant edging around, in the low light of the solar lamp between the racks of towels and wet muddy clothes hung to dry by the fire but from here he could lie on his side with the bruised, slightly throbbing side of his head up, and arrange the blankets around her.

“There, is that better?”

"Poor soldado,” she sighed, “you are too good to me sometimes....”
“Can you sleep alright over here?”

_Stupid to ask if you thought about all of the places they had slept in their lives, still did when they travelled, alone or together, but at home they each had their little rituals and like most soldiers were both a little fussy about them._

“Of course I can,” Jyn said, “I sleep on your side all the time.”

“Really?”

“When you’re away overnight I sleep over here and use your pillow,” As if it were the most normal thing in the world. “Haven’t I ever told you that?”

“You have not. Since when have you done this?”

“Since always. Sad but true.”

She tried to lift her head again, but now he blocked her vision on that side. “Is Bodhi asleep?”

Cassian couldn't see but he was not rolling over again unless someone came through the door armed, so he listened.

The muffled grumbling had stopped, replaced by regular breathing just this side of snoring.

_Tova still brewed a painkiller tea that couldn’t be beat._

“I think he is.”

“Good,” Jyn closed her eyes. “I can’t believe I’ve never mentioned it before but I have been known to do other things over here too.”

His bold cruel and slightly damp love of thirty years settled back and smiled sleepily. “I’ll give you a detailed description tomorrow.”
When he woke up, Bodhi was still asleep.

Jyn murmured a protest but he assured her in whispers that the rain had stopped and he was just going to check to make sure the workshop roof hadn’t leaked again and so persuaded her to go back to sleep for another hour.

He raked the coals, threw a few small logs on and hung the full kettle on to heat up.

All their boots were still damp on the hearth, so he re-filled them with dry leaves and went out into the wet garden barefoot.

It was cool but the rain had passed and the clear sunrise promised a glorious morning. The uninjured citizens of Nexa were probably already awake and down on the common field cleaning up from the Pine Fair and the Fifteenth Annual Real Football Game.

He slipped the ear cuff on but Portia-in-his-mother’s-voice was silent and no light shown from her windows.

Whatever was happening in the war beyond there was nothing they could do from here right now.

His shift in the Tower didn’t start until 0700.

Kes Dameron had shamefacedly volunteered to take the night shift in the tower with Mara last night. Which only served the hijo de puta right.

Cassian hadn’t bothered looking in the mirror. Although he’d gotten the eye open this morning and his fingers told him the swelling was well down he had no doubt he looked like the loser of a bar
fight. If Sergeant Dameron, AARR retired, hadn't played professional football in the Mandelorian Leagues it wasn't because he couldn't have.

“Blue hell!” Fox had said as they were choosing sides before the downpour started, “Cassian-ally sir, is it my imagination or does that fellow look significantly more muscley than you and Bodhi Rook?”

He didn’t walk to the workshop immediately. Although Bodhi had felt unable to face the stairs Galen and his crew had crashed there after and it was possible that some moderate drinking had continued late into the night. Without quite knowing why he walked around to the side garden first.

Kayly was sitting on the wall, a blanket wrapped around her shoulders like a shawl.

“Papa..” she jumped a little.

Too quickly?

She had laughed and played hard yesterday. Pulling her arms inside her sweater and flinging herself facedown in the mud to block a wild shot of Gerla’s with her stomach. The questionable legality of the move....her team had started a hooligan chant of “No hands no score! No hands no score!”...forced referee Portia to render a decision based on an infra-red view of the field because no one had even been able to find the ball for several minutes.

How long had she been out here? Was she avoiding people or had she just been unable to sleep?

Stop it Cassian.

He had to force himself not to look for the signs before they were there.

“I’m sorry, Papa, did I wake you?”

“No,” he said, smiling “Bodhi’s snoring did. Sit down. Have you been up long?”

She wrapped her blanket back around her shoulders.....a green striped one, no doubt from Falla’s vast store. She’d been quite the loom weaver in her day. ...and sat on the wall again, this time making room for him to sit beside her.

“A couple of hours,” she yawned, "If the twins don’t sleep in nobody sleeps in. Look and Laya demanded breakfast with the birds. I walked down with Falla to clean up but the field was such a soggy mess, so she went to the Community Hall to check in with her clean-up crew and I came here to make a good cup of caff. Oh Papa! Your poor eye!” she laid a cool hand against the side of his face. “Was that from Rocco hitting you with his head or from Mr. Dameron, when he…?”

“Pathfinders,” Cassian shrugged, “They had a motto as I recall. I think it was ‘First in, last out, first
to clock a superior officer in the side of the head when driving hard on offence.”

She laughed and put her head on his shoulder…. his little girl was home, not for long, but home, to hold while he could.

When Portia had told him that Kayly was heading back Dorla and Dimla offered at once to carry him and Bodhi from Green River to the bank of Pine Brook, where the Watch kept one of the small speeders. He’d almost felt guilty taking it but Bodhi had announced “We have a ship in at Nexa with two Resistance soldiers aboard. If that’s not a security priority I don’t know what is, hop in. I’m driving.”

Kayly was bringing a passenger they were informed.

"Are you telling us that Kayly made a promise to this man that she’d keep his father safe from the First Order?" Cassian asked.

No," Portia had said. "I am telling you that I did. We must let Tova, Bes and Beri know, but if their confederation of Triads have approved two stormtroopers and one badly-dressed First Order officer in the last few years I’m sure they will have no concerns with a pleasant human of temperate habits and agricultural experience."

Cassian recalled Sergeant Kes Dameron, First Infantry. Spec. Ops. Pathfinders but only as a soldier he spoken to very briefly in a field hospital at Endor, A broad-shouldered young man....his own age actually, they had all been so young.... in infantry fatigues searching cots looking for the woman he knew as Sergeant Hallick. Jyn’s sense of humor was priceless. The Sergeant had spoken Festan to him in a rough Outer Rim accent .. Suliest, he seemed to recall...with the relief of a someone who’d had no one to speak it to for long years. Miranos, dos bisnietos de mineros lejos, lejos de casa, he’d thought at the time.

The wife, Commander Shara Bey, had been a pilot.

“Estar enamorado de mujeres fuertes es una carga, ¿no? Tienes que permanecer tan fuerte también” The man had said to him by way of goodbye. Oh, he’d thought of that many times since.

Bodhi it seemed had known them both well in the awful days between Endor and Jakku, after Cassian and Jyn had begun their exile, had flown a number of missions with Bey in fact. “She was a
hell of a pilot,” he said, “Green Squadron. Unflappable, ran a tight squad that would have followed her anywhere and...” he had furrowed his brow, looking for words, “this may sound weird, but she was...I don’t know how to say it, because she wasn’t from Jedha but the old people had a word “namazi.” It meant “devout” or “spiritual” but not like a Jedi or a Guardian acolyte or Chirrut...nothing like that...just someone who has a strong personal faith in the Force. The kind that sort of informed whatever they did.”

Cassian had thought, accurately or not, of a woman he had only seen in a single poor-quality holo, of clear-eyed, straight-backed Lyra Erso and her desperate faith in the face of utter disaster.

“Also,” Bodhi had smiled sheepishly, “she had really beautiful hair. I remember Kes as really good man, kind, quiet, rock-steady. Tonc used to say the story of a mission gone horribly wrong always started, “….and then Dameron started to sweat, two drops.”

After the Concordance was signed Bey and Dameron, like many others had taken a veterans resettlement benefit and gone back to Yavin IV.

That had always seemed an odd program to Cassian. The sweltering jungles of Yavin IV was not a place he’d have ever wanted to go back to but then his memories of them were not exactly positive. The Southern coastal regions were supposed to be nice.

Commander Bey had died young, toxic systematic organ failure less than six years after she laid down her helmet, though Bodhi had never heard what the cause was. Sergeant Dameron had been left to raise their son alone.

The hotshot pilot it seemed had given birth to a baby during the war and hidden the child with relatives in the Core. “That they were together was an open secret,” Bodhi said, “but nobody knew they had a baby.”

She hid her only child and went to fight, trusting the Force to reunite them against all odds? Maybe it wasn’t so strange as it seemed to compare a Rebel Alliance combat pilot with a geologist mysteriously loyal to Gerrera’s Partisans?

That little boy had grown up to become one of the many Republic soldiers who deserted or resigned to join Leia Organa’s Resistance after the First Order’s attacks on the Border outposts and the Galaxy Beacon’s revelation of the atrocities on the unaligned mining colonies.

He’d fired the shot that took down StarKiller and was now one of the handful few of Organa’s Command that survived.

Kayly had found them. Eighty three survivors out of a named army of three thousand, including General Organa herself.

These were things they talked about in the Tower, somehow that rule had evolved and they were all abiding by it now. She would be a soldier there. They would be a family at home.
“You don’t have any shoes on!?" Looking down she had just noticed. “No, no. no..where are your boots?” she mock-scolded.

He had to laugh at the imitation of himself.

“Is Mama up yet?” She lifted a bag from the ground and opened it to show him several packets from the precious crate of caff powder she’d brought back with her.

“Aren’t we rationing it?” he asked.

“Not on the morning after the Real Football Game,” she said. “Heat some water.”

He already had, of course, so they went inside together.

Jyn was awake by then and the smell of caff raised Bodhi as if from the dead. Galen wandered in from the workshop and he and Cassian took the embarrassed and apologetic Sergeant Dameron a jar full when they went up to relieve him at 0700.

“Oh hell sir, your eye…I’m so sorry….I kind of get, a little competitive….I’m ….”

‘Stop calling me sir, and don’t feel too bad. Usually my wife is the one who tries to maim me.”

“It’s traditional,” Galen said.

They would debrief as a team with Portia in her Tower later that day.
Kayly could not stay long, another week or two, three at the most.

The First Order was on the move and when a gap opened Lighthouse needed to see who they could guide through the storm.

As he sat beside his daughter on the wall by their garden of rough memorials. Cassian had seen the five new stones, small, each one a different color, laid along the edge of the wall by the house. She must have gathered them on her travels in these last months, out there alone, the only field operative of the Resistance.

He said nothing at the time.

Later, when she was ready, she would tell her father the names: Polly Novan, Max Kenseii, Límna Losa,Clip Boren. Her flight squadron.

Five out of the millions and millions lost but hers to carry and mourn.

Chapter End Notes

hijo de puta = son of whore (used similarly to “son of a bitch”)

Estar enamorado de mujeres fuertes es una carga, ¿no? Tienes que permanecer tan fuerte también = Being in love with strong women is a burden, isn’t it? You have to stay so strong too.

Míranos, dos bisnietos de mineros lejos de casa = Look at us, two great-grandchildren of miners far away from home.
What Can Be Hoped For

Chapter Summary

Meru considers her sister's changed course. Lina and Galen Andor spend some time together. A long-waited-for story is told and a new one starts.

Chapter Notes

Young love. I'm a sucker for it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“This is not like her,” the eldest daughter of their father's sister pronounced. “Not even remotely like her and we are worried.”

“You knew almost nothing of what she was like before so I wonder by what measure you make judgements now?” Meru thought.

“Pass me that jug of pine oil, cousin,” she said, “this rag is dry.”
Sighing, her cousin did so.

“She brought this person to the house.”

“Ah, yes, to my house, you mean.” Meru said, by way of gentle correction.

She wiped a thin layer of oil across the curved board on the table before her as she spoke. It soaked into the wood and laid out the pattern as clear as any map.

“Meru,” her cousin plowed on, exasperated, “Even you who pay no attention to anything but your own fine work must have heard the wild tales they tell of that voyage North and the change it wrought on her. We have all been concerned. She has gone out only once in these last two seasons. Now they say she has given half her routes away.”

But why can they not see? My sister is a true Voyager. Just because she has changed course does not mean she is lost.

Her aunt and cousins meant well. Genuine love and fear were underneath this chicken-headed interference. Meru knew that.

Ah, there was the turn of the grain! If they cut here they would have two perfect planks whose curves would mirror each other like the halves of a prayer leaf. Perfect.

“You confuse me, cousin Lattea...which is the family most concerned about how my sister fills her hold or how she fills her bed?”
Oh the clucking then! It did make Meru feel a little wicked that she half enjoyed it.

It would have surprised and likely annoyed her sister to know that she had always cut a figure of
great romance among the young sailmakers, caulkers and carpenters of the yard at Blue, but
when one considered appearances how could she not be so? A Trader who had taken her first Far
Voyage alone at sixteen, earned her own boat by 18?

*Lina came and went like the windward boat in the old song, “... her spars were black as ebony, and
her rudder free of lashings...” Beautiful, bold and bound to no venture or port she did not freely
choose.*

*That was not quite the truth of course.
Who knew the fine line between freedom and the paralyzing fear of constraint better than Pallee’s
daughters?*

Respected by Traders twice even three times her age Lina was called “old too young” among the
family. Elsewhere she was called by many clever, steady, serious, and by some proud.
All true in part but her twin knew better.

Until two years ago Lina’s boat always returned to Blue and the house she had grown up in, even if
it was only for five weeks out of fifty in a year and whether the little boat stayed for one night or ten
their ritual did not change. After settling whatever business she had Lina would come to the boatyard
and embrace her sister. After a bath and meal, there in the privacy of the house that had been their
father’s, though never their mother’s, they would push their beds beside each other and talk all night
like little girls.

They would comb each other's hair and Lina would tell Meru tales of places and things she had seen.
Her tales were not like Grandmother’s or Uncle’s, full of market gossip and shrewd bargains.
Lina told about waking up alone in the darkest night to see the huge old Bequa of the central seas
rising from mirror-smooth waters, their ink-dark backs speckled with white barnacles like stars. How
they arched around her tiny boat massive as hills and rolled to sing songs to the Midwinter Veil.

She told of skirting unseen beneath the smoke of burning Raider ships at war with each other, and
the kindness of golden-furred Mems on the Far Southern Islands who had never seen a human or a
red sail before but gleefully traded silver magnets and black glass beads for deep blue HarborTown
thread.
She told other tales too, of courtly Far Islander boys and short sweet nights anchored off the reefs, of
laughing flirtations with witty, red-haired Fishers in the floating pubs at the Fairs. Trading where
nothing was asked for but what was freely given.

Meru, who could not imagine even trusting her tools to someone else much less her precious self,
had laughed, disbelieving. She did not doubt that part of the pleasure in those stories for Lina came
came at finding herself out from under Grandmother’s watchful eye at last.

“Do you not love them at all Lina? Do you think you have broken their hearts?”

“No, no Menu. It is not a matter of hearts,” Lina promised, laughing, “No bonds are made in such
matters. It is like the old saying about the difference between paint and a mark.” Meaning that some
things were meant to wash off in the rain, not to get beneath your skin and change your life.
But, oh poor Far Islander boys, Meru sometimes thought, poor Fishers. Did they feel the same or do they pine at least a little for the bold Voyager who sailed away alone? She remembered the rest of the song.

“Her course was set by destiny, and no helmsman’s hand could change her
We hailed her and we signaled, “you are standing into danger”
But she left us free on the westerly, and I watched her pale sail sinking
And if only I was upon her deck, was all that I was thinking.”

Lina had a fire in her looking for a lamp. Trade and tales were a means to but they were not what she searched for, not of themselves.

For many weeks after her return from the North Lina shared Meru’s bed, just as they had when they were children. She woke sometimes, often at first, trembling from troubled dreams she could not or would not speak about.

Then slowly as the summer and the autumn passed and after her return from Green River, she grew easy enough to sleep most nights up in the space she had chosen herself, a tiny attic room up at the top of the loft away from the bustle of the yard. With the windows propped open she could see the sea and her boat and if she wished to spare herself the walk through the busy central rooms in the daytime she could come and go by the ladder and across the porch roof to reach the bathing house. For one used to the utter privacy of a solitary voyager perhaps a little easier.

That was no doubt the way she brought her visitor up to the house from the shore when he finally came, perhaps naively hoping to skirt the inquisitive eyes of the sailmakers. Poor Lina if she had. They had keen eyes for the tiniest stitch those girls. They missed nothing. That was why Meru hired them after all.

The little cooks helper said someone had taken bread and fruit paste from the basket and two eggs from the storage jar so hopefully she had at least treated her prisoner humanely and offered him food.

As it was neither Lina nor her visitor were seen downstairs, not until the morning of the following day and well after the builders had already gone outside. The yard was busy that day before the sun was even fully up.
A fine boat had been ordered, a catamaran with wide decks for a southern trader and today the decks must be caulked and the rails laid.
The dim of such hammering would surely have disturbed even the most ardent of lovers.

When Meru came indoors alone to gather her thoughts and take her undisturbed breakfast of cold cinnamon tea and toasted bread she found them sitting together at the back of the kitchen porch, drinking tea and talking with heads bowed toward each other.
The young man stood up when he saw her, which seemed an oddly formal thing to do.

Meru recognized the boat at once when she saw it drawn up on the slip but even if she had not she would have know him by the handsome mark of the black bird on his right arm. His name she had forgotten but Lina would say it soon enough.

He had a pleasant face, with clever eyes and dark shortish hair pushed back from his forehead. A good strong jaw, with a rather narrower chin than quite matched it was darkened with an unshaven
beard. He had a little of the look of a sailor come home from sea.

“Tell me, is she all that you had hoped?” Meru asked. Like a good Trader his face seemed trained to hold itself pleasantly still, but his eyebrows lifted then and made him look like a startled boy. 
*Meru decided that she liked his eyebrows.*

“The boat,” Lina said, smiling down at the cup in her hands, “she means the boat. Are you happy with it?”
*Foreigners needed things repeated sometimes.*

“Oh!” he laughed. “Yes! She is truly beautiful….all that I hoped for and more than I was wise enough to know I needed.”

Now it seemed Lina’s turn to laugh and her cheeks flushed.

*Oh my brave, adventuresome twin. This one is not paint is he? For good or ill he is a mark.*

“Dearest sister,” Lina said, as custom demanded, “This is Galen Andor, a guest I have invited to our home.” The young man bowed with all the dignity of a Mem. He had had lovely manners, Meru remembered that now.

____________________

*How can a thing you have never done before be so familiar?*

He asked, she answered yes without hesitation and he took her face between his hands as if this were a thing he had done a thousand times. She had already touched his arm so to move her own around him felt, despite the racing of her heart, for all the world like relief…. as if some mis-aligned thing were now blessedly in place.

Having invited him as a guest she should have taken him through the house, brought him to Meru at once but things that "should have" suddenly all seemed like wasteful nonsense.

Drawing a breath between kisses, she found herself saying, “I have a room in that house above. Would you go there with me Galen Andor?” He laughed. “Lina Far Voyager I think am pretty much bound to go anywhere you ask me to.”

So she took him by the hand and they climbed the path, up through the lumberyard, around and behind the house.

*No doubt some of her sister’s workers saw them pass but even that thought did not come to her until later and by then she did not care.*

“There,” she said, pointing to the little window under the peak of the thatched roof.

“Huh,” he seemed to considered the route carefully. “Fair enough, but how do we get there?” “From here,” she told him, “We climb onto the roof of the kitchen porch. Flat against the side is a ladder to lay against the wall so we may climb in through the window.”

What else could you do with such a mouth but kiss it?

“Wait,” she said... meaning quite the opposite... a jar of water was always left in her little room but he was a guest... “Are you hungry?”

Galen Andor laughed and she could not help but laugh as well for how must this foolishness look to his eyes?

“In time hunger comes to all but for now the company of my host brings all the satisfaction a stranger can ask,” he answered with great formality.

Clearly blunt Jyn’s handsome son had travelled in the Far Islands.

“Fool,” she said.

His hands reached for her waist and drew her close again.

“If given my choice Lina I would rather see this room of yours than have anything in the world.”

So she showed him where to put his hands and feet to climb the porch post and then how to place and hook the ladder. He came skillfully up behind her.

The room could be overly warm sometimes but the windows open at both ends brought in light and when a breeze from the sea came in as it did today the air moving through the outer matting of the roof took the heat away.

Lina slipped her hands beneath that white shirt of Harbortown cloth and his breath caught in a very pleasing way.

“May I take this off?”

“Yes,” he answered.

When she had finished his fingers gathered in her smock and he asked her in turn.

She assured him with what breath she had left that he was most welcome, and so he was.

After so much waiting it was all that they could manage to reach her narrow bed on the floor of the loft.

Young men cannot help but race ahead at times she knew that but...such manners...it had troubled him for an instant.

His hands had held her shoulders. “Lina, I...”

But she had been so near behind him that in the end it had had not mattered.

Oh Ea how long had it been? She had feared that something within her had broken along with her courage out in that frozen place, but it had not...or if it had it was not broken anymore.

How does a person barely known seem so familiar? A place never visited so much like home?

Every place her hands touched him the thought came to her, "Yes. That is how it ought to be."

After the hurry of the first ventures he proved an inquisitive and patient person and the day passed pleasantly

When the little room grew warm in the afternoon he fell asleep for a little while and she climbed down on her own to fetch a basket with some food and small towels for washing.

He was a guest after all, and by then even she was hungry.
He apologized when he woke, as if he had been inattentive and she was too shy to admit how much she enjoyed watching him as he slept.
"I didn't get much sleep last night," he admitted. "I may have been a little nervous."

That made her laugh.

When the sound of work in the yard and the kitchen workers singing faded away the sun was already leaning toward setting, so they went outside and sat on the porch roof to watch the moons and stars.

He told her what they were named at Nexa and the strings of numbers and letters that the old ghost Portia called them by.

They told each other stories one way and another all night long and finally, late in the following morning, she took him down at last to see her sister.

She laughed at the way he ate the egg she brought him.

"What are you doing?"

They were sitting side by side together on her palm leaf mattress but she bent down on her elbows and peered at him with a kind of girlish curiosity.

He had only done what you do when someone hands you an egg to eat, bitten a hole in one end to see if it was cooked hard and seeing that it wasn't, sucked out the inside and swallowed.
"It wasn't raw you know, it was a pickled egg," she said, "you can eat them with a knife." She produced a small wooden knife from the basket, neatly struck the top off hers and after stirring the egg inside with the point, drank it down like soft pudding in a tiny cup.

He'd wondered why it had seemed a little thick and tasted of salt and vinegar but had been too hungry and distracted to ask questions.

"Lina Far Trader," he asked, feigning insult, "is it right to question a guest's eating habits?"
She ignored him and searched around the tumbled blankets beneath them.

"What did you do with the piece of shell? I don't want to lie on it later."
"I swallowed it."
"What?"
"A little won't hurt you. It's good for your teeth."

By way of demonstration he held up the hollow shell he had left behind, broke off a piece and popped it in his mouth.

She stared at him in what might have been actual horror for a moment and he thought "Galen what
"kind of an idiot are you?"
Then she laughed that laugh that did something to his spine again and pushed him back on the bed.

Damn she had a pretty laugh. He hadn't expected that.

The list of things he hadn't expected was growing miraculously long. It occurred to him he might need to abandon it altogether.
"Wait! Lina wait!" he protested.

The basket spilled over and she pinned him down as he reached for it "I thought you were worried about lying on eggshells."

"I have been assured that they won't hurt me."

Later they shook the blankets out the small window together to get rid of all the crumbs they had scattered.

When the light showed in the west facing in window and the breeze through the loft rose again she lay with her head on his chest, half asleep herself and he traced the line of the tattoo that curled across her left shoulder from her collarbone and curled partway down her back. A sea eel. He recognized it from the scales marked in patterned lines around its head.

*There was an Islander children's rhyme about the moons, little blue and big white, and how they danced in their complicated patterns to tease great eels always trying to swallow them. Pavy had sung it to Nikki's babies before he left and even then Galen had thought of this woman, never imagining what was happening now as thing even remotely to be hoped for.*

"You still owe me a story, Galen Andor," she murmured drowsily. "How did your parents come to have you?"

So he told her.

He expected he told parts of it wrong, but he expected nearly everybody else did too. It was a risk you took when you told a story.

Chapter End Notes

*sigh* I remember when I used to write faster than this.

Galen's version of his parent's story....with commentary by Lina may appear very shortly but I wanted to get this out.
Thirty years ago there was a Fall at Nexa.

"I should tell you straight up that this is a complicated story," he felt obliged to say. She smiled at him, a little more awake now, and moved up to settle her head back on his shoulder. "So I would expect."

A black ship had come down hard in a high windstorm. Heeled over and cracked but otherwise strangely whole, it lay in a field a little distance from the village behind some ancient ruins and an overgrown tower the people always skirted round as haunted. The Sisters of the Circle ran to the place as the storm was still raging. Their patterning told them something of vital importance was inside, but not what that thing might be.

Then-Youngest bravely squeezed her way through a broken seam in the hull while it was still hot and found two injured humans trapped inside, a man and a woman. Now the Sisters at Nexa were...still are...revered through the Uplands as great healers but even they were shocked by the injuries of the Fallen strangers. The ship interior seemed mostly undamaged but the man had been badly burned on his arms and hands, and the woman on her arms and face. The clothes they wore were torn and flecked with blood and splinters of glass but only slightly scorched. "So we knew at once that it could not have been ordinary flames that touched their poor skin," the one who was Second then but is Eldest now said. "It was as if they had come too close to the sun."

The Sisters worked quickly to lay them in baths, wrapping their wounds and trying to help the man breathe. Of the two he was the most badly hurt, bleeding inside, with broken bones and a punctured lung, probably only hours from death. The unconscious woman held onto him so tightly that they had to cut his clothes to pull her hands free. She tried to speak as they carried her out but all any of them could understand of what she said was "...please..." and "stay with me."

The one who was Youngest says she understood in that moment that if one of the humans died the other would too, no matter what care the Sisters gave. She believes there was a bond between them
that day stronger than could be explained by hurt or shared purpose, or even by their being Heart Companions.

It took almost a week of constant nursing before the danger passed and at times both of them screamed, the man so wildly that they had to bind him down for a while and give him as much milk-seed as they dared.

The woman woke first, desperate to reach her partner until they moved the cots to let her touch him. After that she was able to rest.

He woke later able to say only her name, "Jyn," and whisper "How?"

They were not the first Fallen to come to Nexa, but they were the first in a generation to be offered welcome and the only to ever accept it.

What surprised the three wise Sisters most was that Jyn Erso and Cassian Andor had known each other for less than fourteen days before the black ship brought them to Ea.

The story of who they were came out gradually over weeks and years, some parts of it no one knows, not even them.

They had been born thousands of worlds apart and the pattern of both of their lives was determined by a war. Depending on where you go the people who fought call it either the Galactic Civil War or simply the Rebellion.

"I should point out here that Portia is of the firm opinion there is really only one war....being a ghost she obviously tends to take the long view. As she sees it this war is an ancient thing, like a wildfire that hides embers in cold ashes. Whenever people get tired, forget or just stop watching all it takes is the right gust of wind to bring the thing roaring back to burn down all that has grown up in the meantime."

Jyn Erso and Cassian Andor's parents were uncertain which side the fire of the war was on and I think they must have all four of them felt trapped as if they were between two burning halves that closed around the Galaxy like the jaws of a wolf.

They tried to escape the fighting for the sake of their children and they failed.

Jyn's family had been skilled workers for the wealthy Empire but ran away rather than see their work used to build weapons. As a child she saw stormtroopers who had once been her protectors murder her mother and drag her father away.

Cassian's people were poor, their lot not much different from bond workers, when his parents left their home in the hope of finding a better life. His father was killed when he was only six and what little boyhood remained to him was spent in a prison camp where first his mother and sister and eventually all the rest of his family died one by one.

As orphans they became child soldiers fighting against the Empire, their common enemy, but didn't meet until years later.

Jyn was taken in by the Partisans, as fearsome as any Raiders, commanded by a legendary warrior named Saw Gerrera. She grew to be a fierce, clever fighter but when she was sixteen Gerrera abandoned her on a mission….maybe thinking it was for her own good although she’s still not sure…..and left her to survive alone moving between a dozen worlds at war, hiding her real name and trusting nobody.

Cassian joined the Alliance, an army of refugees, survivors and runaways. They joined together under a Council and swore an oath to destroy the Empire and it’s cruel Supreme Leader, to free the worlds that had been occupied and help the people who had been hurt and oppressed. They struck from the shadows, rescuing who they could, killing the Enemy whenever possible, and stealing ships and weapons in hopes of building an army and small fleet of spaceships that had even a chance of
someday attacking the Empire directly. Cassian became a soldier and eventually a captain.

"Did he have his own ship?"
"No, he had the lend of one when he needed it but he wasn't that kind of a captain."
"I see. Go on."

Being without family was the worst fate imaginable among Cassian's people and since for him the worst thing had already happened, he began to volunteer for the hardest missions. Not just the cruelest and most dangerous, but the loneliest ones, so that others would be spared. By the time he and Jyn finally met his only close friend was a machine-person named K2-SO.

She moved a little in his arms.
"Are you alright Lina?"
"Yes" she said quietly, "Go on."

Bodhi Rook thinks he let himself love Kay because he wrongly convinced himself that a machine-person might not be able to care for him fully in return and so wouldn't grieve when he died. Obviously he hadn't met Portia yet either.

I am probably not the best one to hear the story of their war from since I wasn't born yet but I know the Alliance freed my mother from capture by the Imperials and instead of being grateful she hit one of them in the face with a shovel.

I know they only looked for her because they knew something she didn't....maybe because she didn't want to...that her father, Galen Erso was still alive and helping the Empire build a terrible weapon-ship called a DeathStar that could burn whole planets to ash with a single shot. What the Alliance did not learn until later was that Galen Erso had spent all the years of his imprisonment pretending to serve the Empire while building clever flaws into the weapon ship. Each by itself too small to see but together forming a weakness that would let a well-placed shot destroy it.

"Ah," she said. "You must tell Meru this part, she will greatly appreciate it."

He realized in time that he could never escape himself without raising suspicion but held out against despair until he finally found someone worthy of trust in that terrible place, a young pilot brave enough to believe the truth and desert from the Empire. This man offered to take his message back in hope of finding someone who could destroy the thing before it could be used to blackmail the Galaxy into submission.

With the soldiers of the Empire hunting him the pilot fled back to his own home where the few remaining Partisans had a base. Instead of believing him they called him a liar and beat him.

The Alliance heard wild rumors of a pilot on the run with a message and sought out Galen Erso's long-forgotten daughter. They wanted her to go bargain with her old allies to give them the prisoner and help find out about the weapon.

My father and Kay were sent to guard her.

She leaned on her elbow to look up at him. "Guard her from harm or keep her from running away?"
"Both, I think," he said.

What happened at Jedha has always been a mixed up story in my house. I know they rescued the pilot and two wizard-warriors who had helped them fight. I also know my mother disabled six stormtroopers with a piece of pipe.

"The pipe I can easily imagine but wizard-warriors? Are you joking? "
"I absolutely am not. One of them was even blind."

I also know that my grandfather's hope failed and the pilot's courage was not enough. The DeathStar was finished. It appeared in the sky and leveled the once beautiful city of Ni-Jedha and everyone inside it.

Even a hundred k. away in the Partisan hiding place where my mother heard her father's message the hills crumbled. Kay flew in through the destruction to save the five of them.

No one likes to talk about what happened after that but it seems that Jyn Erso and the pilot wanted to go to where her father was at once, insisting that they must rescue him and find out the truth about the weapon's weaknesses.

"And wait...why just them? What did the others want to do?"

"I don't know what the wizards said, but it turned out that the Alliance Council had also believed the message to be a trick all along."

She frowned.

"Was your father supposed to find out the truth?"

"No. His orders were to kill my grandfather."

She sat up then, beside him on the palm-fiber mattress.

"The pilot was Bodhi Rook wasn't it? I have never met a more decent and honorable man. Who would not believe Bodhi Rook? They must have been idiots."

"Whose story is this Lina?"

"Yours."

"Lie down and let me tell it then, Voyager."

She huffed and resumed her place.

As I say, nobody goes into a lot of detail on this part. I know their ship crashed in a storm on the prison-base and when the time came my father refused to carry out his orders.

"Obviously, since he is not an idiot," she muttered against his shoulder.

"Shhhhh."

Bodhi persuaded Kay that they should be friends and trust each other. The blind wizard shot down a fighter ship with a crossbow. My mother tried to rescue her father but the Alliance attacked the base and he was killed just after she reached him.

"But before he died he saw her? That she was there and alive. Did he at least know that she knew he had not truly joined the Enemy?"

"Yes...she told my sister how her last promise to him was that they would find a way to destroy the weapon."

"Good."

The five of them stole an enemy ship, escaped back to the Alliance and reported on all that they had seen and done. My mother tried to convince the leaders that they must act at once. My grandfather's message had said that a map of his sabotage could still be found hidden in a tower on another of the Empire's bases. She told the Council that they must attack the base and find it. With the map of my grandfather's trap there was still time to assault the DeathStar before the Enemy could make repairs. Some of them believed her....maybe even most of them....but there was panic and confusion. Some wanted to run and regroup but others said that if they risked their tiny fleet now and lost it would be the end of them all but others....

"How was this even a question?" Lina sat up again, outraged. "You can't bargain with wolf-fish once they taste blood. Murderers like that will burn everything you have and take your children as
bond-servants. The only chance would have been to send out small fast ships and warriors used to stealth attacks...or stealing, surely they had former bandits?....to go in and get the damned map," she slapped her hands together, "then race like the wind to where you have your most agile ships hidden in position and ready with your best attackers aboard. The instant they know where the weak boards are they move out and hit the damned thing on all sides as hard and fast as they can. If you die at least it won't be like rabbits on the run!"

He must have been smiling at her because her cheeks flushed.

"Ahhhh.." she lay down again beside him. "That's what she told them isn't it?"

"Basically."

The woman who was the leader of the Council then seemed to have had another plan but my mother was sure there was no time left. She angrily left the room where the leaders had gathered determined to go alone if no one else would. On the loading dock she found her friends waiting. While she was talking my father had quietly gathered a group of eight volunteers, all sworn soldiers like himself who wanted to go with her. Bodhi Rook boldly agreed to fly the stolen ship. Kay would not leave my father and the Wizards having already committed themselves there were fourteen of them.

"I can tell you all their names if you'd like."

"Did she know about his orders, your father? The ones he didn't obey. Was she angry at him? How did he earn her trust back?"

Bodhi had told him that part of the story. How he had expected Mama to argue but she had only looked astonished.

"Everything of the little I thought I knew about your father changed then," he'd said. "He talked to her as if she were a fellow officer....or maybe more. "I believe you," he said, "we believe you." He sounded almost as if he were thanking her for the chance to do this. 'I told myself it was for something I believed in. I couldn't face myself if I gave up now.'

I ran with Melshi to get the ship ready. I didn't hear what she said to him after but it started then, what grew between them later...that's my opinion at least."

"I think they had come to the same place finally," he told her, "He believed in her. She believed in him."

They left together without permission or orders. Bodhi with Kay's help tricked their way into the fortified Enemy base. Then the soldiers killed two guards who came to inspect the ship and stole their clothes. My mother's plan was for she and my father, dressed as guards, to sneak into the data tower with Kay, who fortunately looked exactly like all the rest of the K-series droids inside, and find the map. The others were to slip out and scatter, staging noisy attacks on different parts of the base to fool the enemy and draw their troops of guards outside. Bodhi kept the hidden ship ready for a quick escape.

He waited for her to comment, but she only took his hand.

It was a good plan as desperate outnumbered ventures go but it all went wrong. They don't know how. Surprise had been their only advantage but the Enemy must have gotten warning.

I know even fewer bits of what happened in the tower. Only the two of them came out alive and they
do not like to answer questions about it.

The plans were found hidden inside but they were surrounded and Kay died defending them. Back on their own base the Alliance realized what was happening and their bravest captains took the best ships and rushed to help. A horrific battle broke out in space over the planet. It was called Scarif. All the gates in the tower and in the sky above were sealed. Unable to get out my parents climbed the data tower itself in hopes that they could comm the plans through the jamming at least as far one of the ships close above. I know my father fell and my mother thought he was dead and went on alone. After she sent the message from the manual transmitter on the roof an Imperial officer tried to shoot her but my father killed him. Even badly wounded he had managed to climb back up to reach her. They still disagree a little about the distance. She carried him down and out of the tower afterwards but by the time they reached the ground nearly everyone else was dead and the few who weren't were gone. Bodhi Rook true to his word had stayed with the ship but been horribly injured when it was bombed by the Enemy. He only survived because his wounded friend Stordan Tonc carried him to another ship, the last one that escaped from the ground.

The DeathStar appeared in the sky and destroyed the whole base, the Empire being willing to burn their own fortress and thousands of their own people to try to stop the plans getting out. One of the Alliance ships in space above escaped with the plans my mother had sent and the Empire chased it. In the battle that followed the Enemy murdered another planet but in the end the Alliance found my grandfather's plan and one fighter was able to get through and destroy the DeathStar itself....it's a very good story, but not exactly mine.

"How did they get away, Jyn and Cassian?"
"No one knows."
"You said they came in a black ship. Who flew it?"
"Portia says it was Kay. That he was the one who called out to her from the ship and woke her up from her hundred year sleep."

She turned toward him again. "You said he died."
"He did. My father is sure of it."
"Did he become a ghost.....like Portia? Can machine people do that?"
"Maybe. Portia was the only one who heard him and she says if he was ever in the ship he isn't there now."
She frowned as if considering.
"The Far Islanders always say that ghosts don't stay with places they stay with people."

Or their children, he thought but did not say.

"Your sister and yourself were born after that?"
"Not immediately."

Both of them were named allies at Nexa. It was a staggering mark of trust that had never been offered to Fallen before in living memory or story, although neither of them understood that at the time. Portia was awake again and watching the stars as the war raged on. Their Heart Companion Bodhi Rook came looking for them. The Alliance fought other battles and in time Portia saw that the Empire had not built a single DeathStar but two, so my parents and Bodhi rejoined their army and went to help destroy it. After the Emperor-Supreme Leader was dead and his armies on the run they two came back and stood watch again on Ea. Exhausted from war the Alliance disbanded their fleet and founded the Republic. My parents old commanders offered them a chance to return again to the worlds they had lived on before but they refused it, asking to be forgotten so that Ea's location and Portia's skills could remain a secret.

Whatever the Council thought they both knew better than to think the fire was out forever.
Once homeless they now had a home and in time my mother convinced my father that family was something he could have again too.
We grew up at Nexa, my sister and myself, in a house at the farthest end of that field, although we were both delivered at HarborTown, because human babies confuse the hell out of the Sisters of our Circle and still do a little.

He leaned up on one elbow so he could see her face.
"How was that?"
Lina frowned, as if thinking.
"Good. Complicated. Sad in some parts and exciting in others."

He had considered asking her if they could go down to her sister's kitchen again for more food but her thoughtful expression and the sideways moonlight on her skin changed his request and he kissed her again instead.

As it was they did not go down to the kitchen until much later, the next morning in fact.

Galen spoke to Lina's sister the next day and Meru Boatbuilder took him to meet, quietly, with three influential elders of the town. They had many questions and arrangements were made for them to meet with the Bequa of the Near Reef. Then, if there was interest, a party might go From there to HarborTown, or even out to the Equatorial Platform.
Direct meetings with a Blackbird in these dangerous times might need to be digested for a few weeks. He understood that.
He had thought of sending Mary Markey but Lina had suggested leaving the follow-up to the Bequa. Relations were good between Blue and HarborTown but the impartiality of the Bequa was unchallengeable.
"Besides, it's best to bring a baby into the cold water by centimeters," she said, which made her sister laugh at the thought of the slightly dour Elders as infants.

Galen Andor stayed one more night in that high room at the top of the Boatbuilders house and said goodbye to Lina in the morning.
Kayly was waiting for him at Hand and they needed to be back at Tom Markey's within two weeks.
At dawn, amidst fishing skips throwing off lines and moving out, he said words that he knew he should not. He made promises.
"Seven weeks," he told her, wishing desperately to take her in his arms there on the busy dock in front of everyone but knowing that was not proper here. She would have enough to deal with because of him. "Eight at the most."

She, no longer the cool and businesslike Trader, just as foolishly made promises in return.
Twelve days later as he sat with his sister and friends drinking beer on the comm station porch at HarborTown the First Order launched the StarKiller and destroyed all five planets of the Hosnian System. The War began again.

Chapter End Notes

(Apologies to the first brave readers. Wrote this on another camping trip with moths hitting the tiny screen in the campfire light and constantly dropping wifi. Shocking gaps and errors will be removed at each and every Starbucks rest-stop on the Throughway until this is no worse than my usual poorly-proofread nonsense!) A few (3-4) more chapters to go on this I swear as Ea and the Blackbirds set themselves up for their place in the war against the First Order.....JJ Abrams has his agenda (poor bastard) and I have mine.

Delusions of grandeur, much?
Beginning a Story

Chapter Summary

Lina receives a message from Galen Andor that is not one he wished to send or she wants to accept...so she doesn't. Ema, little apprentice of the Circle at Nexa worries about the future and greets a visitor. Galen takes up a burden and is made an offer of trade.

Chapter Notes

Some bits needed to connect things. The Pattern turns. Ea is her own Alliance. More rank sentimentalism.

Galen Andor did not come back in eight weeks as he had promised.

Instead, on a long bright afternoon five weeks after he had gone a little single-masted trade boat with white sails and colors that marked her from Hand came into Blue harbor.

Lina sat on the floor of Meru’s tool room straightening arrow shafts and setting them with salvaged steel points. Twenty lay finished and ready to be fletched beside her when the child everyone called Bird burst in calling her name.

He had run all the way up from the dock with news.

A Far Islander, he said excitedly, a Far Islander had come ashore just as the fishing fleet returned and was looking for her.

Looking for her?

It was not unknown for Traditional people to bring their boats in for re-supply or repair at Blue. In
recent years some sought out her sister by name, a sign of the wide fame of her skill and Meru kept a little barge and special sets of tools just for use on them.

It was also true that Lina had once traded far to Star and Promise Island and even sailed among the Flowers, but those days were over and in any case she had always gone to her partners there, never they to her.

Bird was most insistent however so Lina put aside her arrows, washed and dried hands and let the eager child lead her outside.

By the time she reached the sewing porch the visitor could already be seen coming from the top of the path. He moved past and between the returning fishers, unloading and hanging nets on the shared racks, but did not ask directions and paused only once for a moment as if to take his bearings by the gate post of the yard before continuing to walk directly up toward the boatyard and house.

Bird had been wrong, but it was easy to see his mistake.

The visitor was very tall and slim, a young man barely of age one might guess, with long hair bound back in thin braids after the style of the Traditional people. Barefoot and shirtless, he showed beautiful green and black marks, curving lines in the old style, patterned up both legs.

As he came closer Lina could see pointed stars and unfamiliar lines of blue across his right shoulder. Whatever he had been once he was walking far above the high tide line now.

No Far Islander would willingly come so far ashore, not even at Blue. An outcast, she thought, or a renegade.

“Go find my sister,” she said to one of the young weavers, who put down the basket of flax spools she had been carrying up the stairs and ran to look for Meru out on the building slip.

As he approached the house that had been her father’s the young man searched the faces watching him from the porch and doorways. His dark eyes found Lina at once, seemed to pick her out at one from among the sailmakers who had stopped even pretending to work were now leaning under the rail to stare impolitely down at him. When he bowed and spoke it was to her alone.

“Lina Far Trader,” he said, “My name is Paave. Anilta is my father.”

Outcast it was then. A Far Islander only named his father first if his mother’s clan had cast him out. Anilta? Lina remembered a grieving Red Trader and his black sails. The one whose son had...

Anilta’s son held two hands out for her to see, palms up and open. She did the same, and behind her skirts half-hidden Bird shyly reached out and copied her, which made the stranger smile a little.

“Good luck to you Trader,” she said, as was proper. She could not invite him in until she knew more. “What do you seek here?”

“You, Lina Far Voyager. The brother of my Heart Companion, my good friend Galen Andor asked me to bring you a message. With great sorrow he sends you word through me that he cannot come again as he has promised.”

Disappointment never occurred to her as she took in his words, or anger. What touched her heart was fear. Something had happened.

“What is wrong? Is he hurt?”
The visitor shook his head.
"His body is well,"... the old ceremonial phrase. Nothing good ever came after it.

"Jyn?" she asked, "Is his mother well?"
The young man's eyes glanced up toward the blue and cloudless sky, then at the girls and boys Lina realized were all gathered like goslings at the rail.
The Islander stepped close to the stair and spoke in a quiet voice, "Not here, Voyager. Is there a place where we may speak more privately?"

"Are my sister's sails all well-finished?" Lina asked sharply over her shoulder and the foolish geese on the porch scurried back to their work.

Meru did her business out in the yard at this time of day, and the house was filled with workers for a few more hours but the small porch off the winter kitchen was usually empty.

Lina took him there, so distracted she did not notice little Bird following.

It was all that she could do to walk with her visitor through the workrooms down and out again to the lower porch before she turned to him, struggling to remember how to act properly.
"Please, accept welcome in our house traveller..."

Paave Anilta's son did not prolong her suffering but spoke at once.
"Galen is well and the family, when I spoke to him in HarborTown, are all well."

"You saw him...?"

"No," the young man shook his head. "He was at Nexa. I spoke with him over the comm."

*What had the gossip been, "...carried off with a Blackbird and a Mem and lost in the stars?" Oh, poor Far Islander you must be outcast indeed.*

He sat down on the mat nearest the door and she sat across from him.

"You fought with Jyn in the North, so I feel free to speak to you as a fellow soldier."
It was a question, she realized.

*Yes. I suppose I am.*
Lina nodded and the young man went on.

"The Enemy has launched a terrible attack in the Veil and beyond. Even Portia could not see the scope of it at first because they hollowed out a whole planet like an eggshell and made it a ship to hide their weapon inside, ripping stars from the sky to power it. Five separate worlds, the homelands and yards of their Republic, filled with uncountable people, were burned to ash without warning or quarter. Our allies in the Resistance completely destroyed the weapon before it could move to strike others but their little fleet was then slaughtered by the armada of warships that accompanied it. It may be that they are all lost, but if they are not they are crippled and in flight. Ea is hidden. Because of your courage and that of others we see our enemy but they cannot see us.
The great War our ancestors fought...yours, mine and Ancient Portia's...has begun again."

*You wanted to be in the story and not on the edge of it* foolish Lina. *Are you sorry now you raised your hand at Gate?*

"Where is Galen Andor?"

She thought the Islander smiled a little but he was a skilled Trader for all his youth and she could not be quite sure.

"Galen is a captain of the Watch and has been called back to Nexa, what his orders will be after that I do not know."

“And he sent you here to tell me all this?”

“Oh no,” the young man shook his head, “I am telling you all this because I believe you should know. Galen Andor’s message was much shorter: Forgive me Voyager. Sometimes we start a story that cannot end the way we want it to. You deserve more than a bird blown on the wind and much more than the broken promises that a soldier should never have made but wanted with all his heart to keep. Good fortune."

“He said that...those very words?”

“He did,” the tall youth smiled openly now, “I didn’t think he had such poetry in him. Frankly I’m not sure he did either.”

“What will happen now?”

“I don’t know. Our Alliance has control of the platforms. The ghost in the Tower is a fearsome guard and our Watch is in place and prepared. Kayly is determined to go find out what is happening and look for the Resistance and any of our friends that may have survived.”

The green-eyed woman with the white coat, brown boots and exceptionally large rifle. The one who had called Jyn “Mama” in the middle of the cold and smoke and fire. "Even if she goes two space ships will remain for Ea and a third and fourth stand nearly finished and ready to fly when Ancient Portia says it is safe to for us to use them.

*Mara had talked about such things with great excitement. “Cassian-alley says that if they make another they will put a lift on the seat and shorten the handles so he can teach me to fly. Maybe I will find out what the moons look like up close and see Ea herself, or at least the edge of her great cloak of blue?”*

Lina closed her eyes.

A voice came from the doorway.

“Stay with us a night if you can Paave Far Voyager,” her sister Meru said.

Her sister was standing in the doorway holding little Bird's hand.

The Islander bowed his head and thanked her.

“Do you go back to Hand now?” Lina asked.

"No," the youth answered, "I also serve on the Watch. From here, with gratitude for your hospitality, I sail for HarborTown to meet with our people there, then likely go out to the station on the Equatorial Seas, after that...who knows?"

“Savages!” The woman in grey had said, “the First Order will destroy you all!”
So you said Fallen, but I shot you and the wolves of Temsa ate you.

"If you allow it I will follow you out tomorrow, Paave Far Voyager," she said.

HarborTown was a busy port.

Someone there would surely tell her the way.

__________________

Little Ema carried the empty baskets back up the slope to where Youngest Sister was showing the children how to pick the black-purple berries.

Eldest Sister sat by the wall. She gave directions to four of the older children who spread the soft fruits out on the grass mats carefully, carefully so as not to bruise them while picking out bits of stems and leaves.

Youngest at the top of the slope wore a wide-brimmed funny hat in the sun tied beneath her chin with a blue ribbon. Bodhi Rook had made it for her out of folded paper. He said that people had worn them in the place where he was born whenever they had to do long work in the bright day and it was very useful to her in shading her eyes.

"So quick, my dear one," she said, "here you are back again and we are almost done, I think. Come children! Fill these last three and we will have the greater share of this hills harvest."

"But Youngest Sister," Dan, Kera's-child said, "there are so many on the bushes on the other side. I can see them from here."

"Your eyes are good dear but we have more than enough for our drying and jam right now. Some we must leave for the birds and small-deer. We will come back up again another day."

Youngest's rose-brown eyes looked from under the shadow of her brim down the low slope to the place where Eldest sat with the other older children. The sound of her Elder sister's laughter carried up as she pointed to things and instructed the youngsters on some matter.

At times it seemed to Ema that Eldest Sister took it as her special task to laugh at every opportunity that presented itself.

Laying the baskets down beside the bushes the child reached for Youngest's two pale hands, just
now a little stained with purple, to hold them both in her own and kiss them as Greeting and Respect.

"Eldest says that she is tired and will not walk up but that you should come down and help with the packing when you may."

Ema remembered how last season Eldest Sister had come all the way up and picked the most berries of all.

She did not let go after her greeting but held tightly to Youngest's hands, lifting a little without meaning to...asking.

"Eldest Sister knows the way of this best, brave sweetling."

There was no need to dwell upon the problem or cast any other patterns on the matter, Eldest had said in her jolly manner, "Oh my no."

Even the strongest thread must finish in time. Ema had been told. Those not cut outright by action or misadventure break and to the weaver the places of their likely fraying is often to be seen even early on. Care and strengthening may lengthen a well made strand but sooner or later it must always end.

Eldest had seen a narrowing of her own thread some years ago and taken good care with it. Hardly a surprise, she told them, to find a weakness lay within the timing of her heart, for that was a common thing in the pattern of many females in her birth family.

Indeed, she told the worried Ema with a wink and a smile, she took it as a tribute to her skill as a drummer that she had already kept far better time far longer than both of her grandmothers.

She quoted courageous Eldest-before-her, who Ema had never met but who people still spoke of often. "We do all we can, and we can do no more," Today, tomorrow a year from now or two. We must be as ready every day as work and regard can make us.

Ema had hugged her tight then as a nursling would a grandmother and whispered, "But what if I am not ready?"

"You will be, strong and clever darling," Eldest said, kissing her head and pressing the heel of her hand with Confidence that a Task Is Well-Assigned. "Take note of all around you and even in trouble and danger you will see the threads that have and will see us all through the times ahead."

As she waited for Youngest to corral the little ones, one or two of whom had eaten as many berries as they had picked and were now a little stomach-achy and one of whom had gotten burrs behind her ears, Ema tried to take note of things.

The air was clear and dry. The night would be comfortable and a little cool. Charcoal burners were working on the other side of the woods and the smell of woodsmoke came over the hill on the light breeze. A profusion of bees spoke which meant well for the stocks of honey this year, and the nodding white clusters of mothers-leaf in flower smelled sweet. The path over the hill was very well-trod because of the coming and going and the fall having been a little dry so far.

This was all good because the Taun had been coming and going to talk with Jyn and Cassian-ally and they worried about their feet. Bodhi Rook had gone down to Green River some weeks ago with Galen in Esperanza...which was a name in their family language that meant "hope" and had been also Cassian-ally's mother's name Second Sister said which was a very beautiful thing for a flying ship when you thought about it...but Galen would come back alone today, Ancient Portia had said. Thinking of Green River made her look South and a little West on the path along the stream bank and there she saw one person walking alone, human.

For a moment Ema thought it was Kayly returned from fighting and skipped a little with happiness but then she remembered that Kayly would not come from that direction.
Youngest Sister must have seen the person too because she had put on her grey glasses even under her hat to look off toward the slanting light.
"Light-footed Ema, run down and see who this visitor is."

Ema reached the bottom of the slope by the shortest way and came upon the human person as they were climbing up the path at the turn.

The hair on top of their head was black and partly hidden with a pretty scarf with blue and white spots on it and they wore all the same sorts of coverings most humans did with leather slippers on their feet. They did not have any hair on the smooth parts of their face which might mean it was a female or might not, and were tall, taller than Jyn-ally but not quite so tall as Cassian-ally. There was something Taun-like about them in an very odd way, graceful and strong but careful of the ground under their feet. How funny in the slippers!

"Hi!" she called out from the path...you always wanted to warn them...and the human stopped and looked up.
Something about their eyes looked a little like Bodhi Rook's but it was hard to say how.
"Hello," they responded politely, "Good day. Please, can you tell me how far I am from Nexa?"

Ema took the person by the hand and led them down and around to where Eldest Sister was sitting on her new little folding stool that Cassian-ally had made for her with the children and the sorted berries. Eldest looked up and smiled very widely as if the person was one they had expected although later she said she had not known their name at all only that someone would come from that way and that they would come with a new thread and they would ask for Galen.

He had gotten in ahead of Portia's latest declared black-out.

No danger was directly in sight but she was working very hard these days at keeping energy signatures random so, barring emergency, flight windows came and went.

"Is this going to get tricky when we get the other ship in the air?" Fox had asked, "I mean won't that be a little confusing for you Ancient Portia, having so much to keep track of?"

For a smart guy Fox could be a little dim in places.

"No," Portia as a young girl with silver-white curls ..... Resianna, Solar Systems Maintainance....had answered. "I am a professional."
He had said goodbye to Bodhi down at the RiverLands platform, but he was probably going down to RiverTown after. The pilot was working with Dora and Dex and he strongly suspected that he would stay down there for a while. Dex's parents had asked him to.

"I think we are laying the groundwork for a Post-Imperial Therapists Conference..." Bodhi had said, although Galen wasn't sure whether that had quite been a joke or not.

While they were working on the new link-ups Portia had talked them through re-setting the transmitter arrays. Bodhi relayed up her instructions by shouting from the railing. After about five minutes of this nonsense Galen laid aside his cutters, swung down the ladder and held out his hand.

"Give me the mod, Bodhi. This will will go faster."

His uncle had looked up at him, startled, concerned, "Don’t," he said. "We can go get one of the portables from inside." He meant one of the pulled-out helmet rigs. "Galen, don't do this now."

Maybe not, but I'll have to do it someday won't I? Do you think it will be easier in a combat situation? Let's just do it and get it over with.

"With respect Bodhi, please just give me the damned thing."

Portia must have said something to him because he sighed, then nodded.

"It's not random," the pilot said taking the cuff from his ear and holding it out to him, "but it's not something you have any real control over either."

"I know."

He clipped it on, or rather it clipped itself on.

Silence.

"Come on, Portia. If I can take it you can take it. Let's get this thing pointed in the right directions."

"I'm sorry, Galen. I wish this did not have to be so hard."

Well that makes two of us old auntie.

So much for the theory that knowing the hit is coming makes it hurt less.

Bodhi, because he was the best, had gone down a step and turned back toward the array controls, not because the thing was even powered on but so that Galen would know he was looking firmly in the
other direction.

Galen wiped his eyes on the back of his hand and picked his tools back up.

"So how do I get this panel off without frying it?"

"Slide the 3mm. silicone wafer into the far right bottom corner," Bill's voice said.

Now he was home a day early. Mama and Papa were not back yet. The new shuttle was staying at Timberline with Mara so they were walking back and Portia said they were about a day out.

The hike would do them good.

Galen closed down the shuttle and got it covered with the help of some kids by the field then sent them home to their suppers and walked back alone toward the stone house.

Going straight to the Tower had been an option but Portia all but ordered him to go home first and get a shower and some sleep. Crazy-ass Bo was up there with Kemmi and their shift had just started.

He would bring them up a dawn breakfast maybe.

Truth was he felt weirdly hollow now, alone and finished with the routine of working Esperanza. Dropping his gear off and going for an evening swim, chilly as it might be, might put some ballast back in, he decided.

He'd bunk at Bodhi's place over the workshop tonight since the thought of the house, empty with his parents gone and Kayly's jacket with Papa's patch on the sleeve still on a hook by the door wasn't particularly appealing, but he ought to at least get a fire going so he could cook an egg or some pancakes ...hopefully Bes had left some eggs....when he got back from his swim.

She was sitting on the damn front garden wall when he came up and he had to concentrate very hard on keeping his steps even, neither hurrying forward....as part of him desperately wanted to do....or stopping and just staring at her.

"If your friend's message was a stupidly elaborate plan to be rid of my attention you owe him a dear apology. He is a noble person."

Oh Force.

"Paave? What the hell? What kind of jerk would I be to do that? Paave is family."

She nodded...if possible she was more beautiful here, in evening light a thousand miles from her home, dressed in HarborTown clothes and sitting on his mother's garden wall with a sailor's bag at her feet than she had been when he kissed her goodbye at Blue.

"If you do not want me here Galen Andor, save us both embarrassment and say so now. I have come
to learn to fight but I can do that elsewhere."

He knew that he should say no, or at least argue with her.....tell her that she could not throw everything she had ever known away for a person she did not really know.

But that was bullshit.

They had circled each other for years. What did she not know about him?

Besides, a Far Trader never threw anything away. They traded only when they thought the exchange a good one.

"Please stay, Lina."

She nodded and he half expected her to slap the side of the wall to signal a bargain made.

"All these little stones," she said, looking over the side wall, "They are very pretty. Do they tell a story?"

"Yes. You know most of it. Come inside and help me light a fire. I will tell you the rest."
Chapter Summary

More through other people's eyes. An odd and maybe melancholy....but with hope for yet another new beginning in it....chapter. Dora, born in HarborTown and one of those who suffered through the Fire at Nexa, struggles with survivors guilt and remembers connections to the Blackbirds, Jyn, Cassian, Galen and Kaylyra, throughout her young life.

Chapter Notes

Set during and after Chap. 11/Boy....mostly.
Ea's Alliance and the second generation bits.

She heard her mother’s voice first, coming from inside as she neared the top of the stair.

_Oh no. What the bloody hell was Mum doing up at the comm station?_

“So when she can hear them does that mean you can hear them?”

“Not directly, but I hear from Portia about them, pretty much every day…” Jyn Erso was laughing a little, “Ok, sometimes twice a day. I know they’re at Hand now and heading out to Bright Star tomorrow. I know they are sleeping well, nobody has drowned and Cassian has not gotten food poisoning from eating undercooked or raw fish or shellfish.”

_Shit! Why was Jyn here? Third night was usually Sanna’s shift. Hers had been the name on the board at the wardens shed._

The canvas flap opened.

They must be coming out and there was not enough time to run back down the stair without looking like a fool. Dora Nally hadn’t talked to her mother without shouting in days and she was not in the
mood for a fight right now.

The obvious adult thing to do of course would have been to wait there for them to come out on the porch, endure the awkwardness, ask where Sanna was and go.

Unfortunately there was also the stupid ten year old thing to do, which was jump off the steps and hide under the porch.

She first brought up leaving shortly after Galen and Cassian sailed for the Islands but even the half-articulated idea triggered two days of blistering argument at her mother's house, followed by week of stony silence. Finally, unable to bear any more, she had started sleeping at the Markey warehouse.

Dora went home for clothes and the occasional tense meal but otherwise filled her days doing light carpentry, working on her old childhood boat or shuttling the cargo back and forth restocking in the storage shelters and setting up the equipment and gear for RiverTown. At night she would walk down to the fish shops to play flute with Tim Doonan and other friends or eat with Tom and Thea sometimes and sit up late on the bolts and barrels playing endless games of knuckle ones or "Go Fishing" with the kids.

Keeping in mind Second Lady's unpitying advice she set herself to break the summer and fall's pattern of pacing the wharf alone half the night before she could sleep and drinking just a little too much a little too often.

Binding a torn sail one thread at a time.

Now she was stuck under here until they went back inside.

Damn it Dora, you stupid seal.
When Dora finally showed her face down on the docks two and a half days after Bill's unofficial memorial party Roco told her the plan had changed and how now it was Jyn who was going to be at HarborTown for the better part of the Winter.

Originally it was supposed to have been Galen.

“Why?” she’d asked Conn when she found him at the finished end of the new wharf supervising some unloading…as meaning why did the son of a bitch leave without even saying goodbye to her or Sanna or anybody?

Galen and Cassian had sailed out an hour before dawn. Roco had only known because he’d met Old Tom walking back up from seeing them off.

“Because he wanted to is the short answer,” Conn Derry shrugged, tossing a crate down to Franny. "Just came to breakfast and made a case for it yesterday morning, all about him being a new face out there and her having better cred with the Raiders or some such. Managed to sell both of them on it…well, sold her on it, which was the challenge I imagine.”

Dora winced in the sunlight.

“Brilliant. So he's just gone off someplace where nobody knows him?” she heard herself mutter, “sweet work for those who can get it.”

It was like she’d told Galen, stuff had started just jumping out of her mouth without her having any clear idea where it came from. Anger she’d held in for months had finally frayed the lines that held it and was swinging loose.

The sorry thing was that most seemed to go for pissing and pettiness.

The people she really wanted to hurt were too far away for her to ever touch them…or they were already dead.

Conn handed the tally sheet to Jinny and stepped up onto the dock to stand close by her ear.

“You sober Dora?”

It was 800 in the blue morning! Bloody hell the pubs aren’t even.....is that how far down you think I've gotten you bastard?

“Bite me, Conn Derry, and yes I’m bloody sober.”

“Good, I’m going for tea then, walk with me.”

It wasn’t a damn request, soft as he said it.

He took her by the elbow and steered her towards the new warehouse, where the sound of hammering could still be heard and the smell of fresh lumber was everywhere. Once inside he fair shoved her past the work crew and straight into Old Tom’s “office.” Nobody was in there this time of day except a few of the smaller rats, Makkie Rand and that Nuala kid, probably trying to pinch sugar lumps.
They saw the look on Conn’s face and cleared out fast.

“Sit,” he told her.

There was water still in the metal tripod jug so he lit the battery under it and banged around louder
than was necessary looking for the tea. When the water pot jiggled a bit he dumped some powder in,
poured out and fairly slammed a half-filled mug down on the table in front of her.

“I assume, you being sober,” he said tightly, "that we must talkin’ about somebody else, 'cause
where exactly is Galen Blackbird's-child gonna go that nobody knows him Dora? I'm thinking even
the Far Islands might not be quite far enough.”

He’d taken her on her first sail and carried her on his shoulders when she was no more than a
squirt...midway between crew boss, uncle and older brother and now he’d had enough of her broken
sorry ass, clearly.

Conn, who'd somehow managed to put himself between her and the wrapped bundle on the cart
every time she'd gotten near it for the whole slow two week walk back from Nexa.

“What the hell girl...."

I’m sorry.

Dora stared into the chipped mug for a while then took a drink.

The stuff was lukewarm, damn gull didn’t let the water get hot enough.

“Did he say anything about just not wanting to stay maybe...because of anything to do with…” her
voice trailed off.

“To do with the lot of you getting rat-faced up on the roof?” Conn shook his head. "Other than
drinking a barrel of gingerroot tea and holding his neck kind of stiff he didn't say a word."

Leaning against Old Tom's desk he eyed her suspiciously.

“Why? Was there some kind of argument up there?"

"No," she said, “No, it wasn't like that....it was just...we made fools of ourselves is all."

She took another unwilling sip.

"So I figured out girlie, who do you think had to clean up up there? You know back in my day we
had to take care of our own…” then he stopped, laid his own mug on the counter.

"Just a minute, Dora…you don't mean anything funny happened up there ...?” he asked.

“Bloody hell, Conn!” She burst out laughing despite the pain behind her eye. Ouch. "You think it
was one of those shallow water parties you old coots used to have. .....not even close.”

He exhaled slowly and with such obvious relief that she had to add…”Except for Sanna and Mary
maybe a little.”

Oh what a look on his face! Ouch.
It was mostly true though. Nothing had really happened, nothing she’d be telling Conn about anyway.

Mary talked about how she’d been bringing her boat out late on a package run and heard the roar and the town bells ringing at the same moment. How she’d thrown herself down on the deck without thinking and felt the heat of the damn thing as it came in low and fast right over her and when she and Sally had lifted their heads it had been to see the warehouse and that whole end of the wharf disappear in a curtain of black smoke and fire. They thought everything was gone, the town and everyone in it when the wave flipped them.

Sanna said about how there’d only been the six of them in the warehouse because so many were out loading the dye lots from the Cove and Old Portia's alarm sounded from the hill ringing over town louder and higher than ever before. Markey had yelled “Out! Now!!” and not let anybody grab anything, not the books or the tally sheets or so much as a handkerchief of cloth but flung them all out the doors and run out last himself. Dan told how he'd felt the dock lift under his feet as the fireballs hit it but hadn't looked back only kept running for the shelters on high ground and Thea searching the crowds on the hill calling Old Tom’s name over and until she found him with Sanny and the kids and how the old man had cried when Fenny came up from the shore sheds carrying little Liam Kerry in his arms because he was the only wharf rat nobody knew where he was.

People talked about what had happened to them and then they talked about Billy. They told stories and jokes.

In the end it had been just her and Galen and he had tripped over something when she started crying and…..oh, they’d said a lot of things, incredibly stupid drunk things and she was pretty sure she remembered crying on his shoulder and absolutely prayed she hadn't done anything crazy like try to kiss him or anything because…..aw, Kayly's little brother.....Ea would only be doing her job to take her to hell for that.

“"It’s bad but we’ll find a way out Dora,” she remembered him saying, crying himself maybe but patting her hand, "all of us, together and separate. Somehow we have to."

When she woke up on the deck chair with the sun in her aching eyes and a blanket tucked over her Old Tom had been talking downstairs and there'd been other voices too…Galen, his folks, her mom, Thea…. Dora just stayed under that blanket till it was quiet then limped down the back stairs like a dizzy crab and snuck away rather than face anybody.

"Good then," Conn said, hiding embarrassment with a laugh. "I'm sure glad me and your mum's generation at least served as a cautionary tale for you sorry runts."

She clutched the mug in her hands but didn't look at him.

"He blames himself... Galen does. He knows it's daft but....”

"Yeah," Conn said, "I remember,"
Because of course he did.

In that little farmhouse the Sisters there had, all crowded with hurt people. He'd heard Galen raving feverish and wrapped in bandage with his dad holding him saying "He's gone son."

“We all practiced… Cassian said we were too young but I was the one who wanted to join the Watch. Then when the bastards came there was nothing I could do but hide in a cellar…”

"Dora…"

“Now Galen damn Andor is trying to tell me that we have to have hope and ....oh hell .... he’s telling me...me with not a scratch on me….”

“Dora…”

“He’s the one that got hurt so bad saving Kemmi. Kayly drove the blue bastards off from Nexa .... and she's dead now for sure even though nobody will say it..."

Conn sat down beside her but she couldn't stop, "And you! If it weren't for you the whole damn Town would be gone….Conn….what right do I have to be so busted?"

Sot that she was she was crying again but he let her and when she finally dried out, he handed her a hankie and pegged an arm around her shoulder.

“You’re Harbor-born and sailor enough to know how ready you are doesn’t matter shit when the big wave hits out of a clear sky. How it can smash the boat ten meters away to splinters and spare yours but not because you were smarter or stronger. All you get to own after, if you're still breathing, is how you get yourself or your crew home. I've known good Fishers to pull their boats forever and take up farming because they couldn't face that, but we don't get that option."

We're all in the boat, he means.

"Cassian will be back with word from the Islands in a couple months, the old ghost is leaving no star unturned searching out clues. We’ll make this Alliance work and we’ll get ready for the next hit. That’s our job."

They sat in silence awhile.

"Also,” he said, "if it makes you feel any better I sleep rolled up under the bed with a stuffed bunny rabbit most nights lately."

She laughed again. Ouch.

Dora handed back the hanky clean and wiped her nose on her sleeve.

“Poor Conn. You sound more like Old Markey every day.”

That got a laugh out of him.

He squeezed her shoulder.

"I don’t know about what Galen's thinking Dora, He didn’t talk to me. He talked to his dad and Tom, but you want a guess? I think he felt like things were gonna shrink around him like rawhide if he didn’t try to push forward, test himself against something. If Kayly's gone he's gotta carry forward for two and he has to find his own way for it.”
The sound of hammering came in through the little window.

“Dora, I’m a fine one to give anybody advice but please start talking to people…..someplace other than drunk and on the roof….the Ladies or your friends or whoever..promise?”

Dora nodded. Then she washed her face in the basin, dumped the rest of that sorry cold tea and went to help him load the boat.

Late that afternoon she walked up the shore toward the Ladies shack. Second Lady Macha sat in the doorway twisting white wool with blue on a drop-spindle.

“Hello, Dora Toma’s-child,” she said as if expecting her.

Over that day and the next Dora struggled to come up with a plan, a way forward.

She got the little 3.8 dinghy her mum had fixed up for her when she was 12 out of the Nally barn and started working on getting it seaworthy again.

Setting up full comm stations in multiple places needed to happen sharpish, before Spring for sure, everybody agreed on it. Dora volunteered to go to RiverTown as soon as the equipment was ready and the fight with her mother began.

Huddled under the cobwebby porch she had nothing to do but call herself a fool, listen to the two women above her and pray that a night crab didn’t crawl up her pant leg.

"Gus said to tell you he was glad to see you...he had to get back, get the barrels in before the cold."

"I figured," Jyn was saying, "It was good to see him even is just for an hour. How was it having him back at the house?"

"Not bad. Odd. All those years I was for letting her take her own way and he was the one saying no,
no and now..."

"Turned around?"

"Maybe.....she's a woman grown, I know that but…she’s all I have Jyn. I always thought I'd have a boatload of babies but… I don’t tell her that, it’s not hers to carry but …I thought I’d lost her and she’s all I have."

"I know."

“I’m sorry, Jyn.”

“Toma, it’s alright. Please. I know.”

“I hate that these bastards are out there again. I hate every damn one of them and I really really hate that my ex-husband is probably right about something.”

"For the first two, you are not alone and as for the last....well, it was bound to happen sooner or later, if only by mathematical chance."

Mum laughed. "Hell Jyn, she’ll do what she’ll do and I know I have no choice I just wish Portia had more of those damn earrings sometimes."

"No," Jyn said, "that you really don't."

They talked on about other stuff, the new warehouse, friends in Nexa, organizing the new transmitters out on the Point, all while at least two spiders crawled across Dora's neck and her leg fell asleep because she was sitting on it funny. After about an hour her mother hugged Jyn goodbye and walked down the stairs back toward the boardwalk and town.

Dora watched the shadow of her steps passing over her hiding place and could make out the outline of Jyn’s shadow just standing still on the porch, leaning on the railing it seemed, maybe watching the shore.

_Come on ma'am, go inside,_ Dora pleaded as she heard the last tramp of her mother’s boots.

Finally, a voice above her head said, "Ok kid, you can come out now, she's gone."
When she was small Dora Nally had, like most children, divided adults into two piles, those you knew and those you didn't.

Even then she knew Jyn Erso was different. Just when you thought you had her pinned down she could change kinds completely, the way a green song sparrow might suddenly dive and attack a big Blue as if it were a hawk.

Him, Mr. Cassian Blackbird, had seemed more intimidating but also less confusing, or so she thought when she was small. That changed later.

There were usually important "meetings" at the Council Hall when the Blackbirds came. Plush and self-satisfied traders would step aside out of his way and there were some big rowdy Fishers who looked at their boots and mumbled "ma'am" as she passed.

It was always hard to connect that deference with the Mrs. Jyn, who drank beer and played dice with her mum and Lissa at the pub, or played darts with Old Tom Markey on the warehouse deck. Jyn always won darts, unless Mr. Blackbird played. He was unbeatable but usually content to just sit and watch her.

The thing that seemed positively supernatural was how much like age-mate friends she was with the Ladies, especially with Second Lady Macha. They had an ordinary laughing and joking friendship. Nobody else would have ever dared.

Dora remembered how she and Bill when they were squirts had both gotten it in their heads Jyn must be a Lady from some kind of far-away up-in-the-stars Circle. Then know-it all Kerri Markey burst their bubble and pointed out how that was daft because Jyn Blackbird had a partner and children and even a runt fool knew Ladies and Sisters didn't ever have either.

That did make her feel foolish because she had always known Galen and Kayly too.

They were as thick as thieves, almost as far back as she could remember. Kayly was near her age and had always been a smart one...a little bossy in her way but kind. If she was wrong she'd always admit it and that was a damned rare thing. Galen was younger and pesky and would do anything on a dare but he had a good heart and always stuck up for people.

The Blackbirds didn't have a boat of their own or even a house but they visited every year, usually all together and really no different from the way merchants and traders did except they weren't merchants or traders, not at HarborTown anyway.

Dora still remembered the shock of first seeing Jyn at a Scavenger Fair at StillRiver running a booth like anyone else.

They came for fairs some years, in others they visited in summer or early winter. It might be for just a few days or on for weeks.

Mostly they camped at the warehouse or out in one of Markey’s shacks but sometimes Jyn or Cassian or both would go off together on “Alliance business” and Kayly and Galen would stay over
"Left to run near wild" Mrs. Rando would cluck disapprovingly whenever Old Tom or Dora's mum was not around to hear, “like Markey's wharf rats and all those Doonan cousins.”

*Good times.*

When they came back after the Fire her father was there waiting, returned from Sweetwater where he lived mostly now. He hugged her hard and awkwardly and stayed much of that fall, through Bill's service and for weeks after to help rebuild at Markey's.

He’d been a wharf rat in his time too and he never forgot what he owed the old man. Dad even stayed with them in the house on the FishersRow since bunk space was hard to find with a big hunk of dock and most of the houses on Netters Row gone.

It was good. She was glad he was there but it was also so strange. They hadn't all lived together since Dora was ten or so and her father had moved, first on out to the boat and then later to a little shack at Dyers Cove. Then one day his chair was gone.

*It wasn't like he'd drowned or run off to the islands. She was better off than many and still saw him regular because he came to help for at least one Fair each year and managed some trade of Old Tom's at Sweetwater. He stayed at the warehouse for a week or two at a time when he visited he and Mum would play cards and got on well.*

“Why did you even get married?” Dora asked her mother, once, “most people don't.”

“We meant every word we spoke but we were too young and green to understand what they were for,” Mum had said.

The only thing she'd ever even heard them fight about outright was when she started going up twice a year to Nexa for Lessons.

Dad thought it was enough after the first couple of seasons and said so.
Dora had snuck out of bed to play cards with Mary in the high loft and heard their voices raised in the warehouse.

"What good's all that going to do her, Toma? I’m not going to argue with Markey, he knows his business but all that stuff…..how’s that going to help her?"

"What? You were there right next to me Gus. You remember what it felt like? Having no damned idea what was happening? You remember those monsters in the water. Go ask Conn if you don’t or Fenny. If the Blackbirds hadn't come would any of us have known what to do?"

“Alright, alright…but I still have some say in this Toma Nally!"

“Not as much as you’d have if you hadn’t…” there was a sound of as of something slammed down on the lumber pile. Silence. Then Mum went on….quieter but still pissed

“Fine. You've said. I've heard, and she's going."

Dora was glad at the time because she'd wanted to go. Bill went, even damn Conn went sometimes to practice flying the ship, though you'd think he was too gormless big for Lessons about anything.

The idea that not knowing more about the way things worked, about what had or did go on in the outside Galaxy somehow made you safer was bullshit anyway. Even Dad had to admit that after Green River.

When they stayed, if it as just her and Bill, she'd squeeze into Kayly's little room and Bill in with Galen.

Looking back she couldn’t quite place when she first knew that half of what Bill had loved about going up to Nexa was staying at the house. The idea of two parents and kids and a house and a family. She’d had it, still did even if it was wobbly, but Bill had never had it at all that he could remember and he wanted it with a pure hunger for all that. It didn’t matter that this family was half-Fallen and half not and different than anybody elses because of it. Lying awake one night while Kayly slept and Jyn and Cassian went for one of their late-night swims she overheard Galen say to Bill how when he was little he’d felt funny being different from everybody else in town because he had two parents and was human.

“Yeah,” Bill had said, “Except I’m the flipped over side, I got none and I’m human but neither Harbor nor Raider nor anything else.”

When they came back down to HarborTown after the fire people had already known about Bill. Conn sent word ahead. They had been waiting until the Sisters there said Galen was out of danger and then travelled slow in the speeder by the flattest way.
The Grasslands Taun wept for their sorrow and walked beside them for a long part of the way.

As they came to the Harbor every damn boat had a black rag or ribbon tied on it somewhere.

Thirteen dead. Hardly a family not touched somehow and the warehouse burned to the waterline but everybody shared in grief for you Billy, oh I wish you could have seen it.

Portia taught them all kinds of things with light shows in the Tower over the years and when they were old enough, fourteen or so Cassian and Jyn together started teaching them to fight.

Jyn taught hand to hand and bloody hell but she was good. Dora had fancied herself a dock scrapper but Kayly and Galen's mom was past that. A lesson that stuck in her head the most distinctly was one of the first. It began with them sitting in the Community Room...it had been pouring rain outside....and Jyn talking about "weapons of opportunity."

"There are times you will have nothing but yourself....head, hands, feet..."

"Teeth!" Mara had called out.

"Too true," Jyn had smiled, "but while you can move you are seldom unarmed in a real world situation."

"Dex," she'd said to the big fellow from RiverTown, "would you?"

"Oh please ma'am no, do I have to?"

"You do," she said.

"Ohhhh...." he said sounding reluctant and standing up slowly, "I really don't want to....."

Before he even finished his sentence he dove at her, grabbed her around the waist and almost took her straight down. The five of them all jumped to their feet. Jyn must have been at least a little ready because she hit with her shoulder first and rolled sideways half out from under the boy's weight, but instead of trying to get up she turned onto her back. Jyn taught hand to hand and bloody hell but she was good. Dora had fancied herself a dock scrapper but Kayly and Galen's mom was past that. A lesson that stuck in her head the most distinctly was one of the first. It began with them sitting in the Community Room...it had been pouring rain outside....and Jyn talking about "weapons of opportunity."

"There are times you will have nothing but yourself....head, hands, feet..."

"Teeth!" Mara had called out.

"Too true," Jyn had smiled, "but while you can move you are seldom unarmed in a real world situation."

"Dex," she'd said to the big fellow from RiverTown, "would you?"

"Oh please ma'am no, do I have to?"

"You do," she said.

"Ohhhh...." he said sounding reluctant and standing up slowly, "I really don't want to....."

Before he even finished his sentence he dove at her, grabbed her around the waist and almost took her straight down. The five of them all jumped to their feet. Jyn must have been at least a little ready because she hit with her shoulder first and rolled sideways half out from under the boy's weight, but instead of trying to get up she turned onto her back. He had one of her legs which Dora knew was bad....why hadn't she run when she had the space? Even as he reached to pin her Jyn got a boot against his shoulder and shoved hard, using her full weight, only about a foots-length but against the little table. The wooden bowls crashed on his head and as a clay cup fell she had it and swung for the face....stopping maybe 5mm from his left eye. It was lightning fast and scary.

"Hold!" she yelled.

Dex had already lifted a hand to block the blow and now dropped to his shoulder rolling off and gasping. "Holy fucking hell Jyn,"...he used a lot of the same foreign swears the Blackbirds did, Dora noticed...."If I come home without an eye my momma’s gonna be pissed."

Out of the corner of her eye Dora saw that only she and Bill were standing with nothing in their
hands. Galen had one of the wooden forks off the table and Kayly, back by the fireplace, had grabbed a log from the stack. Mara had dived under the table and was probably already poised to snap Dex’s foot off.

“Ideas. What if I’d hit him with the mug?” Jyn asked.

“You’d have clocked him out,” said Bill.

“Maybe, possible if the mug is harder than the head but what if I didn’t?”

“What if it just broke?” Galen asked.

“Then I’ve got a sharp piece, don’t I?”

*There were the moves you made when your goal was to escape, the moves you made when you intended to to keep a fight going so somebody else could escape first and the moves you made when your goal was to disable your opponent....maybe even kill them....and whether or not you got away didn’t matter.*

*Eldest Sister Tova, stout and jolly, stood in the doorway.*

“Jyn-ally are you breaking things again? Take these warrior lessons outside. The mud will cushion your falls.”

Cassian taught them shooting.

Dora had thought she already knew how to shoot. Tom kept a few blasters in the warehouse, although she didn't know exactly how much of an arsenal he had in the storage caves until later. Her mom and Red Anna took them out to Sand Cove to practice a couple of times but Cassian’s lessons were about more than just pointing the thing and not dropping it.

Her mom had been helping Lissa and her oldest daughter Meg cleaning-up one night during the Fair and Meg started talking as she was wont to do about some fellow she’d met on her travels.

“Tall, dark, and handsome,” she said with a wink, “rather like Cassian Blackbird.”

The thought of people thinking other people’s fathers were, in Meg’s parlance “toothsome,” was completely shocking to Dora.

“He’d have to be awfully awfully pretty then,” Lissa said a little wistfully as she dried mugs “I remember the first time I saw him come in with Old Markey, not as old then of course, I thought "Oh Ea is that one of those Raider-born fellows from the Narrows?” Because what did I know about the Fallen then but old stories? Still I don’t know why I thought that, tall and dark I suppose. There was something about the way he held himself and kept his back away from the door too, but when he turned them brown eyes on me and asked for some spirits I thought, "Do I care where you are from, sir, or what bounty you have on your head on how many islands? No, upon reflection I do not.”
“I was always a little afraid of him,” Corrine said.

The older ladies laughed and Sally Gold said, “Sensible girl. He’s a fine looking fellow still, maybe they don’t age…” she pointed up, “quite the same but he always seemed….what’s the saying “Too young old”? even near thirty years ago. Lovely as they both were and are I wouldn’t like to carry a quarter of the weight those two carry.”

“Good dancer though.” Gilly Rand said, “That man swings you you know you’ve been swung.”

“Well, I met her first, when the Black ship fell,” Raina Doonan added, “and not him until he put a rifle in my hand and taught me to shoot downward without hitting my own feet, but it was like my old Gran used to say, you couldn’t see daylight between them even when they were ten meters apart.”

“Well,” Lissa said, “Handsome is as handsome does my girl. She had her boy here, right upstairs you know? Young Galen…a spirited lad and likely to be as fair as his father some day soon… and I tell you I’ve never seen a man as tender to his child’s mother as Cassian Andor Blackbird was. He stayed with her you know, every second of it.”

“Dear Ea!” Anna cried, “Who would even want that? I wouldn’t let a man within a hundred meters of me in my trials even if he was a Far Island prince with his hands full of treasure and a cold beer in his hat.”

“It’s different with them,” Lissa shook her head, “I envy it in a way but I’m not sure I’d live through what they had to to get it.”

“Being from up and beyond you mean?” Raina asked. “It sounds awful.”

“No, the wars.”

“Who taught you this, sir?” Dora asked him on the bluffs south of Nexa one morning as they were setting up the targets for she and Galen to practice far-shooting. “I mean was it in your army?”

He looked at her for a long quiet minute as if thinking carefully about his answer. It was a habit of his, she would learn.

“I had several good teachers in the Alliance,” he said finally, “But the best wasn’t a firing instructor, or even in a real army. He was a Political Science professor named Oskar Delano. When I was very young he taught me about how to take something I was already good at and build on that to get good at something else…in this case…” he held up the taped-together rifle.

“What were you good at first?”
“Throwing rocks at stormtroopers.”

“I’m good at tossing a hook-line,” Dora told him, “I was better than anyone else on the crew. I never miss.”

“All right,” Cassian Andor nodded, “That’s a promising place to start. Talk me through how you do that.”

In the end Galen did come back before Dora left the last time to take up the job of work at RiverTown. He showed up at her door with a fine tan, a truly handsome and savage Islander tattoo of a black bird down the whole of his right forearm and the light of some kind of purpose was back in his eye.

“It covers your scars,” she marvelled.

“No,” he said, “It uses them.”

Somehow he’d broken the rawhide, he was stubborn that way, Galen. It gave her a kind of hope for herself.

Dora was never able to fly the ship....which made her angry in a way. Why wasn't it the same? She was a good sailor. She didn’t throw up the way Bill had...but her ears popped constantly and she got the trembles. In time she’d become a crack shot with those rifles…only Galen had scored better and only Kayly as good…..though and she’d shown a real talent for wiring up the comms and transmission equipment.

*It was like a puzzle and she’d always been good at puzzles, or like those old kind of complicated charts that the Far Islanders had fashioned out of knots in string or red and white pegs on a board. Those had always fascinated her.*

When the day came she brought her boat in up through RiverTown, under the bridges and to the Green River docks to tie it. Dex met her and helped unload the last of the gear. She recognized the
blond Grasslander as he waved her in but it had been a few years since she’d seen him last. If possible he’d grown. Instead of getting a cart he stacked the last crates of circuit and wire and carried the whole pile up to the little house on stilts that would be her station.

Dora remembered him as a strapping fellow but his shoulders were pretty impressive now. You couldn’t help but wonder if it might not be easier for him to pick up the whole damn boat

“What exactly have you been doing with yourself, wrestling Giant Blues?”

Dex laughed, “No, chasing goats, lifting solar panels and climbing trees mostly.”

There was nothing at RiverTown even now but an alarm beacon. They’d be starting from scratch. He’d already spent time setting up the sensors inland and she’d need to sail out to the little sandbars over the next week and finish setting a circle offshore. They wouldn’t have the equipment for vids or light-shows but that didn’t matter, getting eyes and voice through to Portia was their goal. Speed was an issue and there were a few things she wanted clear straight out.

“To get this up and running somebodies going to need to be lead in charge,” Dora asked, “You ok with taking orders from some HarborTowner?”

“I’m not exactly parochial about anything but local fruit.”

“Good. You ok with taking orders from a woman a quarter shorter, and maybe five eights your weight?”

“I’m used to it,” he said.

“How about somebody three years younger than you?”

He laughed. "It seemed like a lot once but you’re not that much younger than me anymore Dora Nally.”

Maybe she wasn’t.
Comrades, Allies, Friends

Chapter Summary

More tales of the secret Council of the New Rebellion. Lina Far Trader, now a soldier of Ea's Watch, meets with two others for a mission to the Ocean platform. She thinks of Galen Andor and remembers her first days at Nexa. Conn Derry is a leader in his own right now and he, Lina and Paave get a glimpse of the greater picture they are a part of.

Chapter Notes

Concurrent with Jetsam Chap. 49. and with throwback to everything including Over the Edge and who knows what.

Much with the tying things together. Also young love, Galen’s struggles as the only human boy in Nexa continue and Jyn and Cassian are running out of beds at that house.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They met as arranged on the wide river docks at SweetRiver.

"You've been in an airship before, right?" the gangly man asked.

For a moment Lina was unsure who he was talking to and looked back at Paave.

The young Islander laughed. "He means you Far Trader."

Oh. Of course.

"Yes," she answered, then added .....once."

There was no point in bringing up that she had been unconscious at the time.

"No offense meant," he said, "it's just that some people get a bit queasy with it the first time is all."

"I will be fine."

And so she would be, she told herself, either that or the shame of being sick in front of a HarborTowner would kill her then and there, putting an end to all future troubles.

"Weather's good, the old ghost says, wind will be against us for a while but not hard enough for
Like a shellfisher hiding rich ground from poachers the old ghost disliked having the ships take off too often from the same location they landed at. Whenever she was uneasy the Watch made shift to drag, tow them on barges or carry them on flat carts from one place to another.

*Lina was reminded of an old song about the Far Island prince Pola who deceived the Raiders of Needle when they trapped his legendary warships in the harbor. His crews and the villagers worked together and carried the boats by night over the hills in the center of the island to the opposite shore. Pola then sailed in behind to attack his enemies from the rear. It had been one of her sister’s favorites as a child because of the rousing work-chorus of people dragging the boats.*

A very odd thing was that when she mentioned this in the Tower Ancient Portia, overhearing, had asked her to sing it. The little Mem children at lessons there were delighted, clapping hands and singing along in their high little voices. The ghost in her form of an old woman listened solemnly and thanked her politely.

“Portia likes traditional songs,” Galen Andor said with the sort of laugh one reserves for talking about the vagaries of a beloved auntie.

Lina left from Nexa and walked ten days down the Sweet River valley.

The merchant Conn Derry was to pilot them all three out to the Platform on the Equatorial Seas, as far out or further than she had ever traveled in her life, all in the space of hours.

*Meru, What stories will I tell when I see you again?*

After this “conference” of lights and shadows was done, Ea willing, Ancient Portia would tell them it was safe enough to return either to where her boat waited for her at HarborTown or Galen Andor’s waited for him at Green River.

They would find each other on the coast. It was the closest thing to a promise they could make now.

“This is harder than I thought it would be…” he confessed in the sleeping room his uncles let them use above the Scavenger workshop. His daytime carefulness would vanish sometimes there in the dark, when they were alone. “All the things I want to do, I can’t…beg you to stay here, go with you myself….make any plans at all that can’t be ripped apart….”

*In some ways she was better schooled in such matters than he was.*
To be parted from those you loved for weeks, seasons or years was a trader’s burden. If you could not bear the repeated pain of farewells and the anxiety of returns you learned to fish, moved ashore, or never shared your heart. Or you sailed away and never returned.

_I am afraid too_, she wanted to say.

“What will it look like?”

“I don’t know. Not as good as Portia’s pictures but probably better than those blinky little holos we can pick up in Esperanza.

“But I will be able to see you?”

“Yes…You’ll see me and I’ll see you…as if we were all there…once the transmissions link up from all three platforms.”

“Do you think the people far away really care how many of us there are?”

She lifted herself on on elbow to try to see his face in the faint light from the little stove but he lay on his back still looking up at the ceiling.

“Yes,” he said, “It was Ava’s idea originally but Bodhi and Papa both seem sure that it will matter. And, if the Circles are right it will be even more important for us to see them.”

By “us” he meant Ea. Portia and the witches had a plan.

"We have found each other before," she told him, "we will find each other again."

_Cassian Andor laid out the plan on a wet windy afternoon in the Tower as Ancient Portia cast her sparkling maps in the air above the table.

Each of the platforms had the means to send holo-gram pictures of two or three people at a time and when all her stars and objects aligned properly Portia could make use of them to send from her tower so that they could not be overheard….overseen?....by the Enemy.

It was decided that Mara would return to the North to join the trapper girl Rolery at the Black Platform. The broad-shouldered RiverTown man Dex and a Taun elder would speak from the Grasslands, and Paave Far Voyager would go out to the platform on the Sea with one of the HarborTown people.

“I should go there too,” she said.

When you laid the groundwork for a venture…even a venture that might be years from profit…. who you sent was often as important as what was said.

“When it’s done we’ll know more than we know now,” Galen Andor said, sounding very much like his father.

_You could build a fleet and a harbor to hold it in the empty spaces of a statement like that._

Lina lay her head back on his chest. “Am I too heavy for you?” she whispered, “Should I move?”

“No,” he laughed and she stayed where she was for a little longer listening to his heart beat steady and slow. His fingers traced the line of the marks on her shoulder.
"Upside," he said, "we might get a good look at this guy Ava thinks my sister is getting Active with… that's something to look forward to."

"You are a terrible person Galen Blackbird."

"I know."

He cooked good food for her that first night she stayed … *eggs on top of bread fried in a pan*… and was generally a far better host than she had been to him, showing her all around the small stone house and gardens, Scavenger sheds and work barns behind. There were rooms up there he shared with his uncle when he did not sleep in the village.

They were almost shy with each other as they ate and for a while afterwards.

Inside the kitchen there was a basin to wash in and he showed her how to use a tap to get pitchers of the water kept hot in a clever stone tank in a wall of the fireplace hearth so that she could wash the dirt of traveling off.

Lina watched from one of the carved wooden chairs as he moved around the room to close some shutters against a cool night wind.

When he knelt down to push back and bank the fire something about the curve of his back caught her breath with a strange impatience and the thought came to her that she had no idea what the proper custom for such situations might be.

"This is a kind welcome, Galen Andor. Do you wish to renegotiate matters from what they were on Blue?"

"No…” he stood up and wiped his hands on the cloth that hung nearby, that half smile had returned. "Certainly not."

"Good," she told him plainly, “because half the way here I spent telling myself to expect nothing and the other half considering where I would ask you to put your hands on me first when we next saw each other.”

"Mmm.." he nodded as if considering, "What did you decide?"

"I could not make up my mind, you must help me choose."

"Why can't we lie on that big bed?” she asked him when matters reached the point where such things seemed desperately important.

*Oh, the look of baffled horror in his eyes! Like her sister’s little apprentice Bird the first time she had asked him to fetch something from a forbidden toolroom.*

"I can’t…That’s my parents bed."

*In the end they used a ladder… how could she complain about a mere two meters or so after making*
him climb two stories up to her sister’s roof?… to reach a small sort of half-attic just above where his old boyhood bed was. It was familiarly like being in a boat although she did bump her head on the ceiling once or twice.

When Lina woke properly in the morning Galen Andor was not beside her and light filled the kitchen below from the uncovered window.

Near dawn, to judge from the sound of bird song through the shutters, he had worked his way out of her arms. She dimly remembered mumbling protests and that he had assured her with a kiss that he would be back within a few hours. There was some errand he had to attend to.

Wrapping a wool blanket around her shoulders she felt around in the low bunk-like room fruitlessly for a few minutes before remembering how most of her HarborTown clothes had been scattered along with his in the kitchen-room below.

Peering over the loft edge she saw them, gathered, thoughtfully folded and laid with boots on top at the foot of the ladder.

*Very courteous, Galen Andor, although not as courteous as climbing up and putting my clothes within my reach would have been.*

Still he had re-set the fire and she could see bread and apples on the table so she was prepared to forgive.

Just as Lina stepped down from the last rung there was a thump. The front door opened to let in a cold breeze and a hearty voice called out “Rise and shine cousin! We're here to…” Lina turned to see a reddish-brown furred Mem standing in the doorway.

“Oh hell,” they said, in round-eyed astonishment.

Another darker head appeared around the frame calling, “Hey Galen! It’s…Oh my…who..?”

“Pardons ma’am! Pardons!” the red one cried, hands over eyes now and whirling around push it’s companion back, “Out! Out!”

The door closed hard and Lina pulled the faded green smock over her head quickly, wrestling into trousers while shaking with laughter.

*Since girlhood she had traded with Mems and counted many good venture partners among them. How could one take offense? In places like Salt Coast and Little Egg Island where humans and Mems lived side by side together such “surprises” were a staple of low comedy.*

Outside she could hear voices.

“Shit, Fox..? That wasn’t Kayly was it?”

“Blue hell no! I don’t know who it was but it damn sure wasn’t Kayly.”

“Good. None of ’em like being seen bare when they aren’t swimming and fair enough but Kayly hits hard. You think it was Dora maybe?”

“No. Not her either, she’s a whole different color.”
“Good. But what’s an all-unwrapped female even doing in the house if it ain’t Kayly? Do you think Galen knows about this?”

“Oh my aching head….I don’t know but he probably does.”

“Some friend of Jyn-ally’s visiting maybe or do you think……oh, wait..wait a minute…you don’t mean…?”

“It’s possible.”

“Oh……ohhhh…..wow…..that’s crazy. I mean, I know he goes down South a lot for that but….wow.”

“Just don’t say anything, you know how touchy he can get sometimes.”

“Oh man…..hell, Fox, it’s not even Spring…how could a person even manage to…?”

“Don’t be a turnip Roc, people gotta be the way they are.”

Then another voice, from the path, “Fox! Rocco! What are you doing here?”

“Wishing I’d slept later, is mainly what I’m doing…” muttered the one called Fox.

“Hey Galen, you got a visitor in the house?”

“Yeah…yeah I do. The Sisters know. It’s fine, she’s a.. a friend from the coast. You stupid gits didn’t wake her did you?”

“Naw, she was already up but the poor thing’s gonna freeze in there walking around all bare..”

“Rocco, shut up.” Fox again.

After his friends fled down the hill arguing Galen Andor mixed himself a bitter hot drink and her a cup of leaf tea and when she finally stopped laughing, apologized most touchingly.

“Have you never had close company here before?”

“No,” he admitted, “we’re the only humans for three days walk in good weather. Before my parents came here thirty years ago steady trade with Green River had fallen off and humans were as rare as duck teeth. Second Sister admitted that for the first several years she was sure they must be a little crazy, because….well, "activity."  

She tried to imagine Jyn Erso putting up with such teasing and found she could not.

They walked down the path and into the village after. There was a lot of good wood around here, pine, small oak, cedar. As the sun warmed the day a spicy scent reminded Lina of her sister's best varnish and made her feel strangely welcome.

“Are you feeling ready to go see Portia?”
No, she thought.
"Yes," she said.

A well-made wooden stair curved up the side of the round stone tower, perhaps twenty meters to what looked like a brick framed window.

The building was without seam or mortar and mostly made of the same smooth, dove-grey stone as his house and many of the half-buried walls along paths and in the village. When they reached the bottom step a group of five Mem children, half-ran, half-tumbled down from above.

“Galen! Galen! Cousin Galen!” they cried, “Is this your friend?”

“Yes,” he said smiling, “This is Lina Far-Voyager, my mothers good friend and mine as well.

Oh Ea. They were adorable.

She held her right palm out and open as one should and a golden-furred sweetling reached forward in reply before stopping themselves. They folded their hands together and asked very earnestly, “Is it ok if I do? Will you have hurt feelings?”

“Yes you may and No, I will not,” Lina said. “I am a Trader and accustomed but thank you for your good manners in asking.”

The little one beamed at that and laid a small dark hand on hers with the curl of fingers round and small shake that in most places meant Welcome Stranger Who Comes With a Friend.

The rest insisted on doing the same one at a time then shouted and ran off down the hill.

Mara had told her about the “ghost” during the dark weeks at Cold Harbor. “What does she look like?” Lina had asked.

“Whatever she wants to I expect, but she had many human family back when she was young so she always chooses one of them to be. It makes her feel better I expect, but you know…” here Mara had tapped the side of her nose, a gesture Northern traders used to indicate inside knowledge of some bargain, “the pictures aren’t really her at all. SHE’S the tower.”

Lina thought of Jyn Erso talking to an unseen, unheard person, of the voice coming out of the dead man’s helmet and the walls of the Black Station.

A childish impulse to take Galen Andor’s hand shivered through her but she suppressed it.

The open window at the top was slightly small for a human door although probably just right for Mem's.

“You go first,” she said which made him smile.
“There’s a step down on the inside. We’ve got a box there but be careful,” he cautioned, then lowered his head and stepped through.

The breeze stopped instantly inside. The air was not musty or close but dry, pleasant and very strangely still.

The circular stone room would have reminded her of a cistern were it not for the man-high blue glass slabs in front of them. Plain wooden tables and benches sat to one side and a tall woman in a grey dress without sleeves stood at the end of one.

Her long black hair fell as straight as water and she wore silver ear chains like those of the elders on Vision Island.

“Welcome back Galen,” she said, “Hello Lina.”

“She “dressed up” for you,” Galen Andor teased later. “That was Jula, her dearest friend.”

As if she were visiting on some unmapped shore with unknown people, Lina sensed that the only way was to lay aside pride, keep eyes open, humbly ask questions and answer them in return.

Two days later Jyn and Cassian returned.

Lina had been sitting at the table while Galen Andor drew pictures for her on a sheet of the same thin cloth Jyn had unfolded at Temsa, showing her the layout of the village and the countryside around when she heard a woman’s voice singing some loud song of nonsense words out on the path.

“Hi-0! Hi 0-0! Hi 0-0-0! Everybody says 0-0-0-o-o-o!!”

“Who is that?” she asked, going to the window.

Her lover did not stand but only lowered his face into his hands as if mortified.

“That,” he said, “is my cruel mother having her little joke.”

Her training began a few days later for she had joined the Watch in earnest.

There was no one to justify her actions to except perhaps her sister and Meru would never ask for such a thing. Her twin only hugged her tightly…perhaps a little longer than in times past… and said as she always did when Lina sailed out, “Good fortune my love. Take care. Come back to me when you can.”

Poor Meru. The Aunts would badger her near to death for this.

I do not do this for him, she would have told them.

For all that he had worked his way beneath her skin since, Galen Blackbird had not been in her thoughts when she raised her hand at Gate, or when she told the men at Mink Cove to pull her boat from the harbor. The story of old Kera of Timsa brought me here, the contempt in an Enemy woman’s eyes and a round black machine person taught to kill people like animals….screaming in something like fear, like pain.
It would have hurt sharply, she admitted to herself if he had told her he truly had no wish to go forward with this private venture of the two of them but Lina would have chosen a different route.

*If foolish things had been said up in the rafters of her house they were not said by him alone. There would have been nothing to blame or regret.*

His sister was gone again to war and his family needed him. She could not have thought well of him otherwise. Part of what had drawn her to him was the quiet honor beneath his charm.

He was a Blackbird. Who even knew what kind of burden that carried?

The only claim she would lay on him was to hear it from his own voice and not through some box or messenger.

Lina would only have given the kindly witch-sisters messages for Jyn and turned back that very day for RiverTown where the Watch would be glad of her help. If a few silly tears demanded to be shed on the path she would have made sure they did not fall until she was well away from Nexa. No one would have seen.

But he had had not said so.

In the night she woke more than once to feel his body against her and they touched each other again as if they were meeting for the first time, or in a dream.

Thank you, he whispered. Thank you for coming back for me.

The ship they would take was the same one she had flown in before, although someone had welded a new yellow and silver runner below the gleaming hull of it. Likely to replace the one Kaylyra Andor had shot off with that large gun of hers. Now it looked like some shiny black diving bird with one foolish duck leg.

*Lina was actually glad. The memory of a gun that had dropped out of it’s belly to spray fire at her was lodged at the back of her mind and she wanted it kept there, well away from the front.*

“Can we paint it a different color?” she said.

Conn Derry laughed. “If it was up to me Far Trader we’d have the damn thing varnished in Markey blue and let the little children draw pictures on it with chalk but I understand it ain’t that simple.”

“The inside was just as bad but we fixed it up little. It’s way more comfy now,” one of the SweetRiver Scavengers, a grey-striped Mem named Dara told them. “Bodhi Rook helped us pull a lot of fine crazy gear out of those closets last year, in 50/50 split with Old Markey of course but
damn near everything in it was black, shiny black, extra black or probably-only-grey-because-they-ran-outta-black."

Lina made herself walk quickly up the ramp.

She remembered nothing about the inside of the ship, and little about the flight from the Black Station back to Cold Habor except trembling as if in icy water.

*I thought I had gone blind….came to her.*

Maybe that was just because it had all been black on the inside.

Now the metal floors were covered with woven mats, most of them striped green, and the red and black seats and benches covered in fitted yellow hemp-cloth. Baskets hung from rails on the cabin ceiling.

*Smooth sea-grass mats, painted or plain, were a specialty of SweetRiver. Too bulky a cargo for her to carry on a normal run but she knew many who did.*

“Who told you to put all this in here?” the HarborTown man protested. “That’s gonna cause problems. You can’t have loose stuff flopping around if we have to hit a high speed.”

“No, no… it’ll be fine,” Dara said with a wink, “We used MAGNETS to pin ‘em.”

“I like it,” Paave nodded, “Just don’t cross any wakes and don’t let her roll.”

“You got no idea how this works do you son?”

“Very little.” A handsome smile. *Every Far Islander she had ever met had perfect teeth.* “Bodhi Rook and Kayly have both tried to teach me but my brain can get so far….and no further.”

*Lina was gratified to hear him say so. Galen had shown her the controls and described the workings but it was as if she had nothing to anchor the knowledge to.*

“Well,” Conn said, “don’t feel bad. Odds are you were too smart when you started. I think my being half-dim just left extra space in the loft if you know what I mean.”

They loaded in the equipment and some supplies. Lina saw food and fishing gear, along with some de-salination filters.

“I thought the plan was to stay out there for only a day at most?” Lina asked.

“It is,” Paave agreed, “but we need to start preparing in case we need to man it in future.”

“I’ve one bit of business to tend to here, partners,” Conn Derry said “You’re welcome to come along but then we need to move out. It wouldn’t do to not be in place and tuned when our part comes around.”
They walked outside the old stockade walls that surrounded the main part of the Town to where some new houses were being built, some on platforms right out over the marshes.

An uncommonly large Mem in a brown ribbon skirt walked out to meet them and took Conn Derry’s hand in greeting.

“Fleet’s in I see.”

“And going back out again on the next tide,” the HarborTown man laughed, “Paave, Lina, this is Tula, she’s Captain of the Watch out here.”

The Mem bowed.

“How’s our boy doing?” he asked.

“Well enough,” was Tula’s answer. “A bit twitchy after Cassian-ally showed up in the Spring. Went on a three-day whiskey bender and almost lost his job but he’s been ok since. He’s asked about signing on with the lumber crew this winter which seemed funny....wouldn’t peg him to long for the outdoorsy life what with being scared of birds and fish and all.”

“My guess is our lad Len’s looking to go further inland,” Conn said, “Cassian let him know about the bastards attack on the folks beyond, about the War starting up again, all of which may perhaps have lightly reminded him of who he owes the fact he’s still breathing to. My guess is he wants as much distance between him and that platform as he can manage.”

“Fair enough,” Tula produced a wooden toothpick from the belt of her skirt and thoughtfully cleaned an incisor with it. “He’s a piss-poor carpenter in general but he does have a real gift for floors. Good at laying things straight and sanding smooth as ice. The slightest rough spot worries him like a blackberry seed in his teeth till he gets it polished. I’ll send him up to the saw mill for the winter and we’ll keep an eye on him there.”

“Has he gone anywhere near the ship?”

“Naw, we had it covered til yesterday. Most people in town won’t know it was here at all til you take off. You think he’s not trusty?”

Conn shook his head. “If Cassian thought he’d be whistling for the rest of his flock to hear I guarantee there’d be a neat round hole in him by now. I just want temptation put well out of his way.”

They were talking about one of the captured enemy, the one who was a “tech” like the woman she’d shot in the North. The others.... “stormtroopers”... were between Green River and the Grass. One was a soft-spoken strong-muscled young woman who’d begged to be allowed to stay and tend goats and the other a half-mad cripple.

The house carpenter shook her dark head. “From what I’ve heard of them back-stabbing greedy box-dwellers why’d anybody ever want to go back to them?”
“Some people get caught in a pull to go back to what they know,” Conn Derry shook his head sadly, as if remembering some old sorrow, “…even if they know it’s bad, even if they hate it…it’s like an undertow.”

Tula said goodbye and walked back up to where her crews were at work repairing a small house on stilts and building another lower new one on the platform. Mems and humans, were nearly half and half at SweetRiver these days.

Lina caught site of a young man with a blue kerchief, working shirtless as if the labor was hot for him even in the autumn breeze. He was watching them from the unfinished roof of one house. Watching Conn Derry, she felt sure.

“I want to talk to him,” Paave said, his voice tight.

“No,” Conn said, “You really don’t.”

“Five worlds burned like dry leaves. More souls than stars in the Veil. Why? To gain what?”

“He can’t tell you…none of them can. Some babble about strength through order but he couldn’t even say whose. Sisters say he’d never even seen rain til he came here.”

He put his hand on the young warriors shoulder as if they were close kin, “He’s got no answers for you Pavy and we have work to do.”

“What is it like?” she asked Paave Anilta’s-son as he showed her how to belt herself into the seats.

"As if you have all the vision of a bird in flight and as much control over your own fate as a thrown stone."
"Do you want me to program an automatic landing for you on the upper platform?"

"Will you think me a coward if I say yes ma'am?"

"Don't be foolish Conn. I think very highly of you."

He wished to hell it was Rook or Cassian doing this part here but they needed to stand together back at the Tower with Jyn, all of them together. You could kind of understand if you knew the story.

"Thirty five years ago we stood in front of a Council that didn't believe us, Jyn and Cassian and I," Rook had told him.

"I'll do it," he told Portia, "just sing out if I get too close to the edge."

"Of course."

"If you stop the above engines do we just fall straight down? Or do we coast in on the tiny wings?" Lina asked.

He considered a joke about swimming but then decided against it. She was a disconcertingly serious-minded young woman, even for a Far Trader.

"Yes."

Paave, was actually napping in the back. Conn would have loved to take it as confidence in his skill but it was more likely because the handsome lad had gotten little sleep at SweetRiver....ah youth.

Lina Far Voyager crept forward after lift-off and spent the hours watching the horizon before them, wide-eyed.

White-knuckles on the armrests at first but you could hardly blame her. The first time he'd flown he'd thought he was going to faint and Cassian had had the damned thing barely twenty meters up above a Green River marsh.

They circled round once and he set up the approach.

Get four numbers in the right boxes and keep the little yellow shape on the blue line.

Portia wouldn't really let him accidentally ditch this in the water would she?

"It's bigger," the woman said looking down at the dark spires of the Platform below. She'd been with Jyn in the chilly North and helped take that one. Dicey work from what he'd heard although he'd have given a bit to see Jyn Erso fully raise hell.

"That it is. Word's that this one was intended to be the big one and the other two were just back-ups."

"You and Cassian took it yourselves?"

"Us and about three hundred Bequa. Much as he'd have liked to brag in front of a brave fair lady Conn found he couldn't."

"I fired guns from Guardian and cleared the deck," he admitted."Cassian did the hard work."
"How?" she asked. *What a question.*

"I don't know exactly. He went in from underwater when the Bequa created a diversion and cracked a below hatch open. Portia locked the doors down with half the troopers on the outside for me and the Bequa to manage and he.....secured the inside."

Lina nodded as if she had some idea what that might entail. Maybe she did. They had a damned fierce reputation Far Voyagers and this little girl had run the Reaches solo from what he'd heard.

"I still feel like a stork among ospreys with that lot sometimes," he'd confessed to Second Lady Olwen and she'd laughed that silver laugh of hers. "No, Conn Derry. That you are not."

At some point before they shoved off again he was going to have to go down below decks in there and clear out whatever was left. He wasn't going to make these kids do that.

*Cassian Andor* had gone through a list of things for him to check and secure on the Ocean platform before he left. *"Conn," he said in that level voice that he had learned through the years was not level at all. "I'm very sorry. There will still be two bodies on four section three A, by the escape pods. I secured them but there was no time to do more before we left. We don't dare try to activate the remaining droids yet and someone will need to...."*

"Cassian," It was as if the man were apologizing for leaving a mess, "Don't...I'll take care of it."

*I grew up on the wharf and Tom Markey saved me from a far rougher life than that as I'm pretty sure you know. It isn't what you've been through by a pin's half sir but I promise I've moved a dead body before. This part I can help you with.*

"Go wake our Far Island prince up back there if you will, Trader. I'm bringing her in on the next pass."

They unloaded their cargo and gear onto the metal-plated deck and looked around.

They were hundreds of k from land or dry help in any direction you cared to name. Conn Derry considered that probably bothered the two Voyagers far less than it bothered him but still.

"Look!" Paave said, pointing out from the end of the rail. Forms rolled in the water beneath and around them, various colors and sizes. Someone dark and two or three times the length of the ship breached up and rolled just off port side.

"Oh grand" Conn said, unrolling the coiled cable, "The audience is already here. Each of you secure the pins at the end of these to the holes in those things," he pointed to one of the shoulder-high rounded slabs fixed at intervals along the central structure....he was calling it the wheelhouse in his mind until he thought of something better...."Then we attach these treasures," he took out three transmission pods, "to the other ends and lower them over the side."
The objects were similar in size and shape to the little grey disks Cassian and the others had tossed inside the platforms, the ones Portia called her "links."

"What will the Bequa see and hear?" Lina had asked.

"I don't think there's a soul alive above water who knows anything about what the Bequa see and hear," Conn said.

The Circles of the Islands had sent word to the Circles of the coast and they had sent word to the Circles inland. Bes had brought the word to Portia and the soldiers of Lighthouse and the Watch.

"The Firstborn wish to listen."

Portia had all the doors open for them and though there were other ways of getting up a few levels they were all more comfortable climbing the ladders to the great glassed-in bridge.

Everything seemed to have powered on, or at least the lights were on.

Hell. You'd think somebody could put a chair in here somewhere other than those wee stools bolted down over by the wall panel. Did these bastards never sit?

["Good afternoon, everyone,"] An unfamiliarly accented voice came from the walls and the consoles. Apparently there were voices stuck inside the thing and Portia had to use one of those. It sounded faintly like Jyn.

["Our secure connection window will open in 05:00."]

"Do we need to stand anywhere in particular?" Paave said. "On the Raddus I thought they had black sections of the floor you were supposed to stand on."

["No. Just stand within 20cm of the main console and try not to move around too much. I'll darken the windows to increase image visibility. It will be pitiful quality but you should be able to recognize each other adequately and hear at a basic level. There's not much I can do with this equipment."]

Lina shivered, glancing around at the grey seamless walls and shiny black everything else. "Was it like this?"

"No," the Far Islander answered. "I was frightened but it was still beautiful. Truly beautiful. There's no way to describe it except to say that parts were like being in a closed boat stitched of white and dark blue leaves and curling shell...which tells you nothing because it was made of glass, metal and plas. There was a barely contained power in every cm. but she was delicate too..." he shook his head. "I can't...I don't have the right words but the Admiral was so proud of her. Kayly says that after he died the last Commander aboard turned and rammed her into the Enemy's greatest ship at terrible speed, destroying it in flames along with herself to buy the few survivors of the Resistance time to get further away."

Lina Far Trader's eyes were shining.

"Will you come back to Blue someday Paave Voyager and tell my sister the story of that ship?" she asked.
"Places everyone. We are up in 00:30."

"Damn. Now I wish I'd worn a different shirt," Conn said.

The room turned dimmer as Portia had promised. You'd think the windows that covered two sides had suddenly gotten painted in ink. The inside seemed bigger as if the grey walls had somehow moved back.

At least forty people looked to be standing in front of them.

_Cassian in his good blue coat and Jyn beside him as if they stood shoulder to shoulder on the same line...which he was fairly sure they did... Bodhi Rook in his jacket with the Starboard patch. Galen at his uncle's side._

_Sweet Ea. Who were all these people? At least three or more of them looked like they might be fish._

_Kayly Andor stood between a handsome dark-haired fellow and a grey haired woman with large serious eyes. They all wore patches like Rook's on their jackets._

The grey-haired woman spoke first.

"Comrades, allies, friends..." she began.

Chapter End Notes

Again with the Rashomon-like stuff. I can't help myself.
Everybody hates the Imperial design aesthetic.
Chapter Summary

A Far Trader's Eye

Lina watches the holo-council of the New Alliance from the platform on the Equatorial Sea, putting together what she sees with Pavy's stories of Yavin IV and the Resistance. Glimpses of Kes and Cassian, Leia, the war, Poe and the connections between people visible even beyond the action.

Chapter Notes

A look at the story and characters(yet again) through Lina's outsiders eye.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They climbed the ladder of handholds up from the deck.

At each landing was platform and when they reached the third of these the door opened and they stepped with some trepidation into the back of a wide room.

Lina braced herself to see something like the “control center” where Jyn had confronted the trapped First Order woman in the North and in many ways this place did resemble that one. The sameness of the black and grey colors, the perfect relentless polish of casing and metal seemed to be a feature of everything the Enemy built, but this room was bigger and higher ceileded so the effect was less stifling. Here as there tiles in the ceiling and wall lit up as they entered. The greatest and most welcome change was a window of thick glass that curved opposite them and half around. Through it they could see most of the black landing platform and beyond its edge the sea below and horizon beyond. After a moment the faint sound of the surf and wind could be heard as if it carried through some gap in the thick walls to the outside.

*We shouldn’t be able to hear so clearly. These walls had no gaps.*

_She remembered the unearthly silence that had fallen when the doors closed on the other platform, how it had shut out both the wail of the storm and howling of wolves with the suddenness of sinking through water._
The ancient ghost is letting the sound in as a kindness, Lina thought. She knows we are anxious closed up in here with machines.

["Good afternoon, everyone."] an unfamiliar woman’s voice said. ["Our secure connection window will open in 00:05:00."]

"Do we need to stand anywhere in particular?" Paave asked. "On the Raddus I thought they had black sections of the floor you were supposed to stand on."

The Raddus had been the great warship of the Resistance, destroyed in battle with the First Order. Bodhi Rook spoke of it as one of the most beautiful ships he had ever seen but Ava looked so close to tears that he had stopped his description partway through.

"Was it like this?" she asked.

Meaning….she was not sure…the glass, the polish, the size?

"No," the Far Islander answered. “I was frightened but it was still beautiful. Truly beautiful. There’s no way to describe it except to say that parts were like being in a closed boat stitched of white and dark blue leaves and curling shell ...which tells you nothing because it was made of glass, metal and plas. There was a barely contained power in every cm. but she was delicate too..." he shook his head. "I can't...I don't have the right words but the Admiral was so proud of her. Kayly says that after he died the last Commander aboard turned and rammed her into the Enemy's greatest ship at terrible speed, destroying it in flames along with herself to buy the few survivors of the Resistance time to get further away."

You could tell he saw every bit of it in his mind as he spoke.

Oh Meru, there is a tale you will like.

"Will you come back to Blue someday Paave Voyager and tell my sister the story of that ship?"

["Places everyone. We are up in 00:30."]

"Damn. Now I wish I'd worn a different shirt," Conn said.

Poor man, he was so nervous.

They were to stand, listen and be seen. After introductions and general business of some sort they could speak to anyone they chose but mostly likely with the other platforms or perhaps Paave’s friends in the Resistance.

This was more than a test of the pictures and the sendings though.

Kayly Andor hoped to raise the spirits of the Resistance by giving them sight of more and different kinds of allies beyond their original maps, while Cassian saw in it a way to disguise Ea’s location by making it seem as if there might be multiple “lighthouses” in their corner of the universe instead of just one small brave world with three salvaged ones.
“You do not trust all these allies?” she had asked Jyn.

“It’s not that,” her friend said, “everybody’s been vetted to their tiny toenails or they wouldn’t be here. We need to trust each other or we’ll wind up cornered like jackals in our separate caves and the First Order will pick us off. It’s just that if any of the people we trust later trust the wrong people ....well...smoke that does no harm to your friends can be very useful in misdirecting your enemies.”

Someday she would ask Galen Andor what a jackal was.

The windows became grey walls and the whole of the room dimmed and seemed to spread open.

Whatever she had expected it had not been this.

Forty or more persons seemed to stand clearly before them, not wafer-thin and perfect like Ancient Portia’s images but rounded and nearly but not quite solid. Others, Lina could not tell how many, were barely outlined beyond and behind as if hidden in the mist.

She could see Galen Andor a little ahead and to her right, beside Bodhi Rook and his parents. The Blackbirds faced their allies as one.

Lina Palleé’s-daughter knew her lover’s fears and doubts because he had shared them with her but he concealed all of them with a calm face any Trader would be proud of.

It came to her that she had never seen him look more like his father.

~~~~~~

Lina brought her own gear out to the hill at Nexa where they practiced shooting. Galen was teaching two young Mems from the village about firing blasters accurately and she went along as well. For practice the guns were set to use more light than fire, and just enough of that to make a mark on the
damp logs set up as targets.

It was not terribly difficult, at least with the better quality guns they used here. The hardest parts for her were all the things she had to remind herself not to do. There was no need to account for either wind, friction or interference from debris.

The thing either worked or it didn’t and there was nothing you could do, or at least nothing she could do other than look and point it. Thoughtlessness became the danger when there was so little to think about beyond the shape and slight weight of the gun itself.

*This is why people tend to fire the wretched things wild and too many times, she told herself.*

_The easier a thing is to use, the harder it is to use skillfully._

Maybe that was why blasters made her feel slightly less armed despite what her mind knew all too well about how much damage the weapons were capable of.

She hit the target at least as many times as the children and as well or slightly better and so had the comfort of not shaming herself in front of her teacher.

Afterwards Lina announced her desire to stay on by herself for an hour or two so Galen Andor, having an errand back in the village, offered to walk his students home to their great delight.

‘Will you kiss goodbye?’ one bright-eyed female asked, ‘Like Jyn and Cassian-ally do?’

“I don’t know,” he said, as if considering some serious matter, “Do you think we should Peri? What do you say Lina?”

The young Mems squealed in mock horror and made as if to cover their eyes.

“I think you are walking to the village not sailing to the Reaches, Galen Blackbird,” she told him.

He bowed with great formality and she had to bite her lip to keep from laughing.

Lina watched him walk down the bending path with the rifles carefully rolled into the pack on his back and a young friend in each hand until he was well out of sight.

There were a few hours of good daylight yet so she laid out the roll she had carried and unpacked her bows and bundles of practice shafts.

*Guns were best under some conditions and almost plentiful around here but she had no intention of letting her arm go soft.*

As she had done five days of seven since she was nine Lina warmed up by drawing empty. Then she set up and fired through her exercises once.

Resetting, she fired all again then walked out to the logs to reclaim her shafts for a third round. This time she rearranged the targets, lowering some and moving others back.

Only on returning to her starting place did Lina see Cassian Andor on the upper path.

How long he had been standing there she could not tell.
“Excuse me please, Lina,” he apologized, “I came up looking for Galen.”

“He went back down to the village, sir,” she said, then nodding toward the straightened piles of shafts at her feet added “These are for drilling.” Why did she do this? Foolishness.

*He had been nothing but kind to her, Jyn’s man, Galen’s father, but something about him always made her feel this need to explain herself.*

“I have been traveling for weeks with no time to practice and I like to keep my arm and my eye working together.”

The man nodded as if this was a thing he understood and agreed with.

“Jyn told me you were very, very good and she is not easy to impress.”

*Lina bowed her head the way one should upon receiving merited praise.*

He walked down and looked at her second-best bow lying on the canvas.

“May I try it? I promise to be very careful.”

“Yes, of course.”

*I am a guest and something like a soldier in your army, Master Blackbird. If you want to check my weapons do you really think I would tell you no?*

He lifted the bow carefully ran a finger along the string then took the grip in his right hand and drew. He did so steadily and easily.

*New archers…and men, to be fair….tended to pull hard as if testing themselves against the weight. He did not make that mistake.*

“Good. But you’re holding just a little too tightly,” she said and showed him how to keep his palm parallel and use the thumb loop.

He made a few mistakes with the sighting at first, like a child would…or maybe someone too used to blasters…but took correction humbly and adjusted for them quickly.

Within a few handfuls of shots he was striking well…remarkably well.

“You’ve done this before.”

“No,” he said, laying the bow aside, “never. Except for the odd round with grappling guns, I progressed straight from rocks to laser rifles.”

There was neither pride nor shame on the way he said it, only a kind of distance, like an old man…..older than he was…looking back on some distant loss or missed opportunity.

“..the pattern of both of their lives was determined by war..” *Galen Erso had said of his parents.*

“I will teach you how,” she said, “and in trade you can show me how to make that good bread you cook.”

That made him smile and when she slapped her palm on the stone wall they stood by to mark the bargain he laughed and did the same.
Across the circle stood a group of men and women and a person who looked very much like a mouse-seal.

Kayly Andor stood among them so Lina knew who they must be even before the gleaming words appeared in the air in front of them and then vanished. [RESISTANCE COMMAND]

Another of Portia’s light-tricks.

Different as they all were their eyes had a look she had seen on a northern island when the ice finally broke in the little harbors and the first ships came in months after some disaster.

Like people who had been cut off by cruel weather, disease or mischance and waited long months for rescue or just the sight of the outside world.

These people were survivors.

A woman with curling grey hair spoke, “Comrades, allies, friends. We stand together in a Galaxy under attack….”

Jyn’s eyes did not leave her daughter.

Beside Lina a faint smile touched Paave Far Voyager’s lips as a group of people…two groups…..stood forward.

Oh my…They had the forms of small strong humans bundled into baggy white and beige clothes but
the heads and large eyes of great fish. Silver-blue, golden yellow, iridescent green…

[MON CALA RESISTANCE FLEET]

She thought of the oldest poems she had ever heard, the ones Traditional people chanted on the shores of Vision at Mid-Winter. No one was allowed to land then but she heard them over the water where she anchored.

This is what the First Voyagers felt when they knelt on the shore and heard the Bequa sing for the first time.

Lina listened and watched with a Far Trader’s eye, as she had promised Jyn she would, gauging the people who spoke even when the names and matters they spoke of were unfamiliar to her.

The younger Resistance man…hopefully handsome does as handsome is, Kayly Andor…. stepped forward to tell them of Leia Organa’s death with real if carefully guarded pain.

Something about him reminded her of a son come to publicly claim his mother’s Trade and stand for her debts.

~~~~~~~~~

“Kayly will be there,” Paave had said, as they had loaded the ship at SweetRiver, more to himself she expected than to her “and Poe Dameron almost certainly...” the soft-spoken old warrior’s pilot son, Ava’s friend, Kaylyra Andor’s half-secret lover… “I imagine everyone else I knew is dead.”

He meant the Resistance, whose army had sheltered he and Ava for almost two years when they escaped the fires at Nexa.

“Did you know her?” Lina asked, “The General?”

A message from Cassian had been waiting for Paave when he came ashore at SweetRiver. Waiting for them all really but it had mattered most to him.

Kayly had told her family that the Resistance’s leader had died. Almost worse that it had not been in battle but of some illness.

“Yes,” Paave Far Voyager said, “I wish I had known her better. She came down sometimes in
person to ask how we were. Ava and I, and smoothed so many ways for us I didn’t realize until later. You would have known she was a person of great importance even without ever hearing the stories. She reminded me of a reef captain, or one of the song-elders. No matter what clothes she wore, in chaos or crowds of younger, more exotic people all lines seemed to converge on her. She was sharp-witted and wise and brooked no nonsense….also she was very short for a human.”

“Shorter than Jyn?” Lina had to ask.

He smiled and held his thumb and forefinger apart, 5cm or so. “That much at least.”

“Were there songs about her?”

_The stories Galen and Ava had told her sounded so much like old ballads._

_Twins born to a murdered queen, separated and hidden only to meet later as allies in war…it was straight out of ‘The Bird-Children of Raki.’ Then there was the young girl in ‘The Shining Queen,’’ raised in secret and ignorant of her true name until she leads her foster-mother’s fleet against the evil Raider King who slaughtered whole islands without mercy and whose most brutal battle-captain turns out to be her blood father—that one was too close for belief. Toss in a brave and witty Free Trader lover from ‘M’lana and the Bold Voyager’ and the aging warrior-songstress in ‘Tears of Black Pearl’ whose prophecies of war to come go unheeded by all but the grandchildren of her last loyal guard and you had a cycle nearly complete._

“None that I ever heard but there must be, on Mon Cala if nowhere else.”

Conn Derry called them then so she did not ask any more.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

A group five of spoke. One was not human at all but looked fierce and elderly.

They were the last survivors of the Senate, as the great Council of the dead worlds of Hosnian Prime had been called, and spoke of their need for news and shelter.

The Enemy hunted them most particularly it seemed

The fish people were proud and practical and spoke of ships. _She liked them._
There were some rather terrifying-looking people. One stepped forward to ask Kayly Andor a question about transport and as they did spread out what looked like dragonfly wings.

The way many of the people looked at Jyn, Cassian and Bodhi Rook surprised her.

No one addressed them by name….except for some few who spoke to Bodhi Rook.

The Mon Cala people in particular spoke to him with great reverence.

“Surely they are heroes among their own people?” she had asked Kes Dameron as he chopped and she stacked firewood in the workshop yard.

*Lina had become fond of the old warrior-turned-farmer. They had first bonded over a mutual frustration with the odd tank on the roof that dispensed either warm or cold water depending on how long the fire had been lit inside and which handle one turned in which order.

“No, miss,” he said shaking his head. “Nobody even remembered after the first couple of years. Rook was an evac pilot so he was a big damn hero to the Infantry grunts like yours truly and she was the never-named secret patron saint of Rogue Squadron but the rest of them were just names scratched on a wall that nobody was ever supposed to admit having seen. I looked at the first “history” lesson Poe downloaded for primary school and word for word it read: Days after the destruction of Ni-Jedha, Alliance ships dispatched from the Rebel base won their first military victory against the Empire in the Attack on the Archive at Scarif. During the battle, Rebel spies managed to steal secret plans to the DeathStar….. That was pretty much it. Even during the war Rogue One was just a whisper. Some guys said it had been a mutiny, others a planned suicide mission. Only one or two of them had families to even ask questions. There were Pathfinders who always felt guilty…like they should have stood up taller for Tash Sefla and Rue Melshi. Force knew Rook and Stordie Tonc were right there. Enough of us knew at least some of the names of those “Rebel spies” and we should have stood up for our own but after Yavin came the Mid-Rim and then the slaughter at Hoth. I fought right next to Jyn and Cassian at Endor and never even knew it. We were so damn tired. Everybody wanted to heal, re-build, forget what they’d done and seen and lost, tell themselves that the monsters were dead.”
“Lighthouse” they all would say and either Cassian or Jyn would answer.

Galen spoke only once during the general part of the meeting.

The speaker for the Raiders asked, “We are all in danger, but if we come to rely upon this data we must we sure that there will be no break.”

Cassian might have been about to make some more complex answer but Galen spoke before his father could, “We are prepared for that.”

The masked people's faces were not visible then but Lina sensed satisfaction with his answer in the way they turned toward each other nodding. Others in the shadows seemed pleased with this as well.

There were many other exchanges. Lina listened and watched.

Parts of the “crowd” faded in and out like people wandering off at a market, cloth merchants to talk to cloth merchants, Scavengers to Scavengers, and the moment came when only the Resistance people and Ea’s own were clear to each other.

It was only then that Kayly Andor allowed herself to smile at her family for the first time.

“Kayly!” came a shout and Lina saw Mara clearly off to Galen’s left, in her light blue jacket, waving her arm furiously.

“I flew the damn ship down here!”

“Sweet!” Jyn’s daughter clapped her hands

“Go pilots!” the handsome Poe Dameron said with what seemed like genuine enthusiasm.

The now full-grown Otter girl, Rolery stood beside Mara.

_The poor child’s eyes were wide._
Seeing Lina she lifted her hand to timidly wave trap-line scarred fingers.

The seal-person stepped forward to utter a series of short chopped syllables.

Words appeared in the air again [ROOK, YOU CRAZY BASTARD. YOU’VE OWED ME TWENTY CREDITS FOR TWENTY NINE YEARS. JUST SO YOU KNOW, I’M CALCULATING THE INTEREST.]

“Send me the bill, Nunb,” Bodhi Rook said smiling.

“Paave. It’s good to see you,” Poe Dameron said.

“And you as well, Commander.”

Galen Andor turned his head and the relief she felt upon even seeing this shadow of him surprised her.

Some day might come when catching those dark eyes with her own did not feel like sunlight on a cool morning but since he had first come ashore in his little boat at Blue it had not happened yet.

She wondered if it ever would.

When all was nearly done, according to Portia’s measure of time, people said farewells one group by one, many making arrangements to speak again at other times.

The fish people “departed” last and before they did words appeared again,
I have been asked to relay an audio message from allies who cannot participate in the conference but wish to express support to the Mon Calmari and the Resistance. It has no military significance but they say it is a gift.

“What is the nature of the gift?” the grey-haired woman, D’acy, asked.

[A SONG.]

“Yes,” said one of the fish people, “We would be most grateful to hear the voice of an ally in this hour of trial.”

[I HAVE SENT IT. THANK YOU ALL. VISUAL CONNECTION WILL END IN 00:0030]

Kayly touched her fingers to her lips and lowered her hand, palm open.

A Far Islander’s gesture. It mean “My breath goes with you” a traditional farewell between dear friends and loved ones. Paave copied her.

“Pronto,” Cassian Andor said to his daughter.

“Pronto,” she said.

“Sir, Ma’am. Give Ava my love, tell her Loco is ok.” Poe Dameron said.

_Lina had liked him before. She liked him very much now._

It was done.

The people faded and the window showed the bright sea again.
“Right then. Ok.” Conn Derry looked around, “I’m going to take some time to process that.”

“You kids check around in here for anything useful and then head back down to the ship. We can take a break and figure out where we’re camping out in here tonight and set up our surveying for tomorrow. I have some tidying up to do below decks here but I’ll meet you there in a bit.”

[“I’ve notified the Bequa that you will be removing non-hazardous biological material and opened an exterior venting hatch near the escape pod dock. This should make your work, if not easier at least quicker and less physically taxing.”]

“Right. Thank you, ma’am.” the red-headed man sighed. “First started, well finished, I guess,” shouldering the bundle of thin blankets and rope he’d separated from out from the rest of their gear he went out.

The doors closed behind him.

She knew the ghost would tell her what his errand was if she asked so she did not.

The tasks assigned to her and Paave Far Islander did not take long. The great wide room contained nothing but chairs, smooth tables and a few small glassed pads. Concealed in cunning wall cabinets and beneath one of the tables they found a few small air tanks, the kind that sprayed bitter foam for putting out fires, and a box of thin sticky patches.

Brilliant trade goods under other circumstances but for now she merely laid them aside.

Neither she nor Paave Anilta’s-son were particularly eager to wander far down the white hallways so they rested their backs against the wall and sat on the metal floor to look out the wide window.

So young to be a hero, she thought, looking at her companion.
Galen, Jyn and Ava had fleshed out the mismatched bones of rumors heard years ago in the markets of Hand and Seal but it felt both foolish and improper to ask the many questions that still rolled through her mind.

Before they left SweetRiver the Watch captain who had welcomed them had been far less shy than she.

“Paave Trader,” Tula asked bluntly, “what was it like….?” she had waved her hand over her head. “We all worried ourselves to tears thinking the starry sky had swallowed you all forever, but you’re the only person I’ve ever met who fell up. What was that place you harbored like?”

“Yavin Four has two suns,” Paave told her over a supper of dried apples, cheese and rusks. “One is large and pale. It fills almost a quarter of the sky for part of each day, never wholly sets and gives light but very little heat because it isn’t truly a sun at all but a great planet made of gas. The other sun is small and bright that’s the one that warms the days except that the days are just a little too long. I didn’t sleep well for months. If either Ava or Kayly or both hadn’t laid down beside me every so-called night I think I would have lost my mind.”

“Oooowooooo…” Tula and her child were much distressed at this but the Islander youth only smiled and patted the backs of their hands in a message of Reassurance. “Ava described it well. She said at first it felt like doing everything with your feet that you usually do with your hands…” A very Mem-like view of things Lina supposed.. “…and in time we all became accustomed. Ava was brave, Kayly was clever and even I stopped feeling I would die between one heartbeat and the next. We saw an ocean and animals and flowers and met people who were generous and familiar, even in their differences…. “ He lifted the strange pierced shell that hung on a thong around his neck and pulled it over his head to lay on the table beside the crumbs.

It was a tiny thing, curled around like a sweethorn shell, but heavier and an unusual but very lovely shade of blue.

“Well….the Sisters always say that however big you think the Pattern is, it’s bigger than that,” Tula said marveling.

Her aging mother turned the pretty shell over in her hand, "A treasure….but still, I’m glad you are safe home now young human, and glad too that Jyn-ally and Cassian-ally came to live here with us in more normal place.”

“I don’t know about anyone else, but I need a damn drink,” Conn Derry said when he returned.

Chapter End Notes

Pronto = Soon
Bodhi Rook has a conversation with a friend about Jyn’s necklace and remembers the first time he saw that heirloom, going back to his first meeting with Jyn and the harrowing hours between Jedha and Scarif, when he Jyn and Cassian were all still strangers to each other.

Sometimes in the middle of things, life, stories, the Second Galactic War, people find small unexpected comfort where they least expect to.

So. A tiny chapter riddled with flash backing memories of Galen Erso and Bodhi’s hours aboard Rogue One, also Bodhi deserves some company and sometimes the people you least expect....

“And all the stones were white?” Macha asked.

“No, not at all.... In school they taught us that each of the chapels were originally built to hold a different central stone, red, yellow, green, blue, purple. The great white crystals were held in the center, in the Great Shrine.”

“So Jyn’s was from there?”

“No,” he laughed, “it’s impossible to tell but probably not,” It was such a strange thing for her to be curious about, a relic of a place she would never see, a place that didn’t exist anymore. “The first time she showed it to me though I knew very little about such things and Jyn knew even less.”
Bodhi glanced down at his hands after they made the FTL leap from the Yavin system.

They were steady on the shuttle controls. *When had the shaking stopped?*

On the return to Eadu he had been trembling badly on and off but told himself it was the cold and maybe it partly had been. Baze Mabus had brought him a movers pad from below to use as a blanket.

During that Alliance “Council” he had clenched his fingers into fists at first, not out of anger…*he hoped nobody thought that*…but to still them. *All he had to do was tell the truth,* Captain Andor said, so he did and as he began to speak the trembling passed.

*Cassian…he ought to call the captain Cassian, now.*

*Two of the younger Alliance men, one husky and pale, one slim and darkly tanned, began loading crates off an unattended pallet and Bodhi had an idea about about dividing the…oh hell, probably guns and explosives, best not to think about it… between the upper and lower holds to make more space inside. The Alliance officer barely seemed to hear as he glanced across the flight deck distracted, “You know best Rook. Do it fast. Talk to Kay or Melshi if you need help, I’ll be back in five..” he had already begun to walk away toward the shadowed entrances to the personnel area.*

*“Yes sir, Captain…”*

*The man stopped and turned back, his eyes thoughtful and serious as if something new had just occurred to him. “ Rook…” he pitched his voice only just loud enough to be heard over the engines, fuel pumps and back-up alarms, “Under the circumstances, it might be time for you to start calling me Cassian.”*

Cassian had said that if the questioning sounded angry or aggressive to he should remember how frightened these people were.

*Mon Mothma alone was the most wanted person in the Galaxy and the rest of them…..*
Most of the Alliance pilots had to be draft-evaders or outright deserters. Bodhi knew nothing about politics but was pretty sure that at least three of the people standing at arms length when he spoke were sitting Senators. They had risked torture and execution just coming here and now he was telling them that an Imperial scientist sent them a doomsday warning from a weapons base.

Well, he knew what it was like to summon every once of courage you possessed to achieve a task only to learn that it was not enough, that more...worse...lay ahead.

One stately young woman, her head veiled, cried out, “You are asking me to risk all of Taris? I came here to save my people!”

They burned Ni-Jedha, the holiest city in the Galaxy, just to kill a message, he wanted to say to her, every world is at risk now, forever.

“How can we fight such a weapon?” another man shouted

“How can we not?!” Galen’s daughter....Jyn...snapped back.

None of that mattered now. He was sitting in the pilots chair and as crazy as it seemed he was never nervous as long as he had his hands on the controls.

Flying he understood. In the cockpit of a Lambda-class shuttle decisions were black and white, cause and effect, problems and calculations were either going to turn out right, in which case you lived or wrong in which case you pretty much died instantly and didn’t have to worry about it. It shouldn’t have been calming but it was.

Of course he also re-checked the drop numbers every few minutes but that was just to keep busy.

From the co-pilots seat K2 glanced over at him and asked “Why do you keep doing that? It’s exactly the same as the last time. Do you not trust the equipment?” But Bodhi ignored him so after about the fifth recheck the droid stopped asking and contented himself by making faint clicking sounds, as if to serve notice that were a resigned eye roll possible for his make and model he would be doing one now. Hands-down the he was the strangest droid Bodhi had ever met.

The FTL corridor route he’d set would take about three hours to get through but there was no way to take a shortcut. It was essential that they look like a re-route from Eadu. Odds were that a lot of ships were being re-routed from Eadu right now, right?

An hour or so into the jump he turned to see that Jyn Erso had climbed silently back up the cockpit ladder. The droid noticed too, but surprisingly said nothing. He only clicked again and turned back to face the front console.

Wordlessly she folded down the little “misery” seat behind him and wedged herself in without greeting or explanation. Having said her piece as they boarded and talked to the captain… Cassian.... and other soldiers maybe she wanted quiet now. He was desperate to ask her questions, to say something, but didn’t.

If quiet was what she needed he could at least give her that.
Time passed, Bodhi checked the reads again …unchanged…. the droid rolled those eyes he didn’t have again.

When he finally ventured a peek, surreptitiously, Bodhi saw the young woman looking at the small hatch window at the streaming lines of light between stars.

Looking…he could only wonder if that was what she was seeing.

Between her fingers she absently rubbed a stone, the pendant of a necklace she had drawn out from under the collar of her blue-grey work shirt.

A few years later when he first came to Ea, after Hoth, before Endor, Bodhi asked and Jyn gave it to him freely, to look at closely and hold in his hand.

A flawed shard hung on black cord, bound with Tysian copper wire at one end and shallowly carved in the same formal Auerbesh calligraphic script he’d been made to practice clumsily in his boyhood then forgotten until Remi patiently re-taught him.

“\|FORCE....” after that the mark that indicated an active verb, “\|TRUST…”...

Trust in the Force

In the dim cockpit the crystal caught light with a spark of purest white.

It was kyber.

Galen Erso’s daughter wore a kyber crystal around her neck.

As if feeling his eyes on her, she looked up quickly and pulled the gleaming thing back, hiding it reflexively. I'm sorry, he thought.

Before he could speak though she checked herself and took a slow breath, marshaling strength for something, as if trusting him took conscious effort.

When he was young they put water out for the birds on the windowsill, sparrows, red finches and rock doves, but one day when his mother opened the shutters a desert hawk was on the railing. The little birds had all sensibly fled but his mother spoke softly to the fierce-eyed creature, “Poor Hunter, so far from home. You must be thirsty too.” Ummi edged the metal saucer out...slowly, carefully. The wild thing glared and hissed but eventually edged forward, suspicious but perhaps also shy. It’s sharp beak dipped and it drank hungrily.

“This was my mother’s,” the young woman said, opening her fingers to let him see.

Lyra. Galen’s dead wife. The one who’d made him face the truth just as he had made Bodhi face
the truth, who he had spoken of only that once, “Lyra....she never flinched...never turned away... no matter how awful the facts, no matter how hard.”

He could not speak in that moment, not even to ask questions. All he could do was nod.

“00:10:00 until we need to set the drop into system. I’m keeping Cassian updated but at some point Bodhi Rook, please feel free to share your particular plan for all this,” the massive droid piped up archly.

Galen’s daughter...Jyn...closed her fingers over the stone again and bowed her head. Eyes shut, breathing steadily.

Was she praying?

*May the Force of Others be with You.*

The words floated in his mind like ashes.

Good. He was grateful if she was praying.

Someone besides the Guardians should and he couldn’t.

*How long had you waited for someone to tell Galen?*

“We ran,” You whispered in the shadow of the cargo bay while the mechs loaded, “...but they... he...found us. We practiced and drilled so many times against the day it might happen. I tried to make a game of it when she was small, let her bring her toys, but she knew it wasn't a game...so bright, so fearless, my little star. We made a plan. If one of us couldn’t make it the other was to take Jyn and run for the shelter and hide until Saw got there....but I knew they would never let me go. They would keep looking. I was going to stall, buy time for her to get away and then try to attack one of the troopers, to make them kill me....but Lyra came back. I know they never found Jyn. They would have kept her as a hostage or shown me the body to break my spirit that much faster...Saw must have come..he must have. He promised to take her somewhere safe.”

Then a trooper would pass, or audio from the flight tower would com across the deck, ordering Bodhi’s shuttle to close doors for the next taxi out. Galen would Stans straight, hand over the lading sheet, with cargo cases checked off as secured and wave to the duty officer “All seals secure....set up the next. You are clear Rook,” he would say loudly and coolly and walk away.

*Oh Galen. Your fearless little child became one of mad Gerrera’s Partisans.*

Battered and dirty she reached for my hand..her green eyes so much like yours... “You know my father?” so eagerly.

I last saw you from the top of the cliff, I was the one pointed you out to a Rebel who ordered me back to the broken ship. I thought he was going to rescue you but it turned out his orders were to shoot you...though in the end he did neither. Your fierce daughter went off alone into the storm to
look for you against orders while I persuaded the droid to help me jack an empty shuttle.

Ships attacked. Alarms went off and the light of the burning control platform lit the place up like daylight. She came running back with the captain under the guns....the guns I fired....they came back without you.

You died in her arms. She told me later in the cockpit but I already knew. I saw her face.

The rains of Eadu must have washed her tears away as the way they had washed mine away the day you first spoke to me.

Later she would preach like a wrathful seeress to all those disbelieving Alliance leaders.

And an hour later stare bewildered when the captain....Cassian...said “These men believe you. I believe you.”

I don’t understand her Galen but I will help her.

I will make right what I can for as long as I can.

For both of us.

~~~

“Years later I asked a visiting historian the Institute…that’s what we called the school I worked at on Lakodana...about Jyn’s crystal. I couldn’t exactly explain where I’d seen the one I described to him but he was very excited and told me that in ancient times there were great cisterns filled with small crystals on the Temple grounds and piles at many of the small shrines on Jedha. Some scholars think they may have been scraps from the original shaping of the great stones. Since even mine tailings and flawed bits were considered sacred they were carved with words and prayers and given to pilgrims as a sign they had completed the journey. Collectors still find them scattered across the Galaxy, he said, and they sometimes show up on the antiquities markets. As you’d expect there’s a brisk trade in fakes.”

Macha was aghast. “Fakes? Why? What would be the point of pretending one had gone to a place when one had not?”

He had to laugh. How could a person so preternaturally shrewd about human nature be astonished
The braiding of her hair finally finished Macha stood nimbly and walked to the doorway.

Like many simple houses here in the Southern coasts the door was covered by a curtain, in this case just a swath of fishnet, hung so that it could be tucked behind a peg or nail when “open.”

Painted or carved wooden doors were laid aside or propped against a wall to be pegged in place at night or against foul weather. “Doesn’t it get cold in here in winter?” he had asked the first time he visited.

“Yes,” Macha answered with a bold smile, as if hypothermia too were just one of Ea’s exciting adventures.

The Ladies had more than one house, he knew. Jyn had told him. Some were even supposed to be in secret locations know only to themselves or their Sisters in other Circles.

It didn’t matter. This house, two hours walk from the town at head of a little cove, was the only one that he had ever visited. Three simple unpainted rooms that opened into each other and a front doorway that faced the Harbor.

Macha pegged back the netting and stood in the just-now-slanting sun of afternoon to looked out. Whether she watched the water or the sky he could not tell.

“If I asked you, Bodhi Rook, where that stone is now, where our Kayly is now, could you tell me?” He rolled the woven blanket under his head like a pillow.

“When last we heard from her she was in the Mid-Rim. Between Va’art and the Roche sector. I can go to Esperanza or the Station and ask Portia. She might tell me more.”

But the Eldest Lady of HarborTown shook her head.

“No,” she said, “Those are not landmarks near enough for even for you to make a pattern of, I think. For me they are like listening to the Bequa name the waves from the other side.”

She was troubled. Who helps the Ladies of the Circles when they are uneasy? he wondered.

He could think of nothing else to do so he climbed up from the narrow mattress on the floor…not as easily or nimbly as he might have wished to, but still….and went to at least stand close, put his arms around her waist and rest his chin on her shoulder. She sighed and leaned back little against him.

They were almost the same height, almost the same age, two of the several things for which he found himself surprisingly, unspeakably grateful.
“If you wish to leave before my sisters return brave Bodhi Rook, you will have to go soon,” she teased.

She knew perfectly well he needed to go soon, just as well as she knew that meeting her sisters on the path was something he would rather avoid, although that was strictly his own reticence.

Second Lady Olwen and Youngest Neave both knew that he had come several times to visit over this last Winter and Spring and were models of decorum considering. The occasional smile from Olwen and Neave’s straight-faced over-the-shoulder “Thank you for your pleasant company to our Sister, Bodhi Rook” farewell after the Town meeting were the only comments made.

At the town meeting Jyn had been on the far side of the emptying hall but she had ears like a fox.

“Bodhi Rook,” she said, pinching his arm out on the moonlit wharf. “What was that about? What have you been doing?”

“Having a private life, dear sister. The key word being “private.”

He decided he didn’t mind her knowing, or telling Cassian if he asked..... not that Cassian was likely to ever mention it unless under duress.

No one in HarborTown would ever dare talk about what one of Ladies did or did not do.

She actually looked shocked. Really, Jyn? Really? “Bodhi...are you sure you ..” she began, but didn’t finish the thought, only took his arm and walked in silence for a while.

They were supposed to meet Cassian and Tom at the pub for drinks a stupidly late supper and a review of the reports from the Red Traders and the contacts with the Raiders.

“I love you,” she said outside the green door of Lissa's tavern, “and Macha is a dear and near friend but...couldn’t this get kind of complicated?”

“No,” Bodhi tried to reassure her, “it isn’t complicated at all.”

It is not a temple or a weapon or mystery. It is just a tiny bright, thing that says “\ TRUST” in the active form.

Macha insisted on looking at his clothes before she would let him leave, laying them flat and running her hands over the white shirt and blue trousers as if she were looking for a loose thread.

"Do you to this with all your lovers?" he was tempted to ask, but that would only elicit a "Yes."

Once she was satisfied he dressed and tried to say goodbye but she kissed him fierce and quick, laughing again “Good hunting Bodhi Rook. Come back and visit again if you can and wish and Ea
shows a way. I will keep a grateful eye out for you as late summer passes.”

When he looked back from some distance up the beach he saw that she had slipped her brown smock and trousers on and had already walked down as far as the water’s edge with a wide basket.

On the path down from the bluffs he heard what sounded like Neave singing and Olwen's voice calling out, “Sister!” Macha turned and was waving to them.

Even from this far away he could see her smile.

"To be alone sometimes serves a needful purpose, Bodhi Rook," she had told him the first time he came to her little house, "but loneliness does not."

Unless Portia had changed the plan there would be enough time for a brief check-in with Sanna before he took Esperanza back to a random spot in the White River valley tonight. Kes had stayed out at Grasslands station with Bo but was going to trek out and meet him. Lina and Galen had a lead on some strange equipment that had turned up out on the Western Islands.

In the end she was right, of course and he did not see her again until the fall.

Chapter End Notes

A Bodhi-centric bit that might have been better placed in WOS but I wanted to set Bodhi in his place on Ea, with his own set of connections. Bodhi deserves his own life (his story post-Endor is in Jetsam, Chapter 11)
This mess of sequels requires staggering levels of plot commitment. I sm so sorry,

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!