when sorrow calls my name I know nothing stays the same

by moranice

Summary

Jyn looks away and back to the forest, her gaze searching and scanning the dense tree line. There, barely visible through lush leaves and labyrinthine tangle of vines, a pair of glistening golden eyes regards her with undivided attention, their owner undoubtedly proud of roping them into this high-stakes game. She slots the blaster back into the holster, marches toward the line of trees, stops only when the animal twitches, his eyes flickering like sunlight’s reflection in still water as he’s prepping his retreat.

“I know you understand me, so I need you to pay attention this time,” she says sternly, meeting those smug eyes with somewhat somber seriousness, and allows her hope run free. “We’d like to help you if you’ll let us. Sometimes stopping is not the end of your world. It’s a new beginning.”

Or alternatively: during an undercover mission on a painfully-Imperial world two rebel spies play the parts they hate, pull off a brazen con, face their demons, and embark on a journey to save a life while trying to find a balance between serving the Alliance and doing what’s right.
Written for a prompt by @skitzofreak, "Jyn finds a stray animal and for some reason has to catch it. She ropes Cassian into helping her."

First of all, I'm sorry that gifting you this story has taken so ridiculously long. I'm too slow of a writer to pull off a story as quickly as my brain comes up with it, and perfectionism doesn't help matters in the slightest, just as this story expanding exponentially from my outline as I start executing it. Oh, well. But I have a significant amount written up and feel more or less good about it to start posting.

I think I'm taking certain liberties with your prompt, and I hope that you'll see what I'm going for and that it will still work for the premise you've proposed.

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I'll probably be editing and posting already completed chapters once a week, and then I'll see if I can keep up with this schedule. The story is outlined, I just need to get there and polish it in a less ridiculous amount of time than it usually takes me.

I'll be adding warnings in the notes as I go and putting the M rating just in case, but I am touching on certain nasty sides of Imperial-like governments and what it can do to people and worlds quite a lot throughout this story, as well as trying to deal with how undercover missions toy around with character's mindsets and feelings. This chapter in particular deals with themes of slavery, animal fights turned into a sport, and has a brief mention of a terrorist act.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Like everything and everyone in the living universe Neith Kailes is a story. 

Her homeworld is a prime example of how the Republic is falling apart at the seams: rich and crooked elites in power interchange, syphon the world’s wealth into its pocket and leave mere breadcrumbs to those who actually work and create.

She’s born in poverty, orphaned as a child by the senseless violence of the Clone Wars. She has no other choice but to learn to survive on her own against all odds.

The Republic falls, the Confederacy of Independent Systems fades away, and on their corpses the Empire rises. It comes and fixes her broken homeworld: it claims power with a firm hand, but establishes fair order; it rebuilds what can be restored and takes care of people; it fixes rule of law after it’s been merely a joke for years, a dream gone rotten beyond repair.

The Empire weaves hope from the ashes. And little Neith falls in love. She eagerly learns to live and breathe in zealous unison with Imperial ideas and dedicates her life to excellence in serving the Empire when it gives her a chance to prove her worth, invests into her, allows her to pay it back in kind.

Neith aces her studies in the newly established local Imperial academy. Hungry for knowledge and relentless in her dedication, she’s drafted to travel to Coruscant from her backwater planet. She spends an intense year in special training under the wing of the Imperial Security Bureau and stays to work in the system.

She never disappoints those who’d seen her potential: she makes her work her life, throws all the time and focus she has into it. Someone has to, and she has no qualms about it. Even perfect systems are constantly being tested by flaws, by tiny chaoses hell-bent on destroying order out of spite: rebels, saboteurs, parasites who want only to receive and forfeit giving something in return.

Like many things in life, she doesn’t see another major change coming her way. It happens and reshapes her reality in the most beautiful of ways.

Neith has her hopes and aspirations, of course. She does secretly wish that her time as a simple bodyguard for various important personnel in the bureau would be over, that she’s done enough already to prove that she’s so much more than she’s given credit by many hardheaded, pompous Coreworlders. But when the ISB tasks her with protecting Imre Willix, she takes on the assignment with her trademark fervor and unwavering sense of duty. There’s no question, there’s only the job. The Empire needs her somewhere and Neith follows, plain and simple. Besides, she surely doesn’t plan to ever love anything or anyone like she loves the idea of her Empire.

In a show of profound irony Imre Willix makes her re-think her convictions and expand her horizons without trying to achieve so on purpose.

They fit together seamlessly, in a way that Neith never even considered possible, united in their philosophies and pursuits. Imre is driven on purifying and perfecting the Empire in ways that could rival the Emperor himself. He had bled and hurt and picked himself up time after time if the cause required it only to keep on with his mission and achieve success that was demanded from him. He’s doing everything he can and then some more to make sure his precious regime would reign for eternity and beyond. He’s unbiased and fair when needed, cynical and suspicious where applicable.
Imre never shows even a shadow of a doubt about her; he truly sees her for who she really is and just how much more wonders she can bring to the Empire if she'd be allowed to employ her talents in full capacity and at all the right places.

The change of Neith’s position in the ISB inevitably unravels a shameless string of scathing rumors. She notices all the condescending looks aimed her way, hears the hum of whispers behind her back about her unexpected advancement: sure, her new duties and clearance for massive amounts of classified information can’t be anything else but a condescending gift from Willix, a grand favor for spreading her legs before him.

Neith doesn’t rise up to this bait. She’s above giving satisfaction to those who think that’s the way her Empire works, that sex can buy more than fair excellence and utmost dedication. Besides, she’s one of the only two people in the galaxy who know the whole truth: Imre had never demanded anything from her and got her a promotion because he recognized her potential and value; it happened long before she ever let herself think of him as anything else but an assignment, long before she realized how attracted she was to his dedication and mind and body in this specific order, long before she dared to kiss him simply because she wanted to know him and share these moments with him.

Neith Kailes is a story the Empire would give a fortune for. Too bad that its poster child is plagued by a ghost.

Neith admires Naora.

She knows intimately how leniency, corruption, and ignorance to an idea that transcends individuals and greed can maim a society. She lived side by side with this as a child, and now she hates those memories with every hardened, scarred fiber of her heart. She doesn’t trust beautiful words and pretty images, she’s regarding everything with a critical eye and hunting for tiniest deviations from rules, for mistakes, for betrayals of the ultimate Imperial idea. And despite all that she has to admit that this small, once unknown and then mostly half-forgotten planet for years is an almost textbook implementation of Imperial doctrine. That’s where true beauty lies.

Neith strides up the escalator’s stairs brashly, confident in the righteousness of her surroundings. From her point of view the escalator doesn’t mutilate original flights of grand stairs like some kind of a symbiotic parasite devouring its side, like a mismatched, misplaced, rough-hewn aberration gnawing at centuries of precious history. In Neith’s world old history has to evolve and reshape to accommodate the demanding needs of new time. If it fails to do so — it has to be destroyed without even a hint of remorse, simple as that.

She looks up, admiring a grandiose building before her, and smiles. The smile is cutting with cold, heartless glee of a winner.

It’s not right. The illumination is dim and completely natural. There should be rows of stormtroopers standing guard by the balustrades of this giant stairwell to separate middle class guests from richest and most powerful, their white armor turned even more blinding by gleaming reflections of bright light. Expensively-dressed people donning sincere, gleeful smiles should climb up these flights of stairs, their procession reminiscent of a morbid, endless river with an entire palette of most offending colors spilled into it. Governor Sandeheim should walk ahead of Neith together with his petite wife and his death trooper bodyguard entourage. There’s no audience, no show to pull off and sell, no one to impress with Neith’s avid loyalty and belief.

For kriff’s sake, Neith doesn’t seem to be concerned at all by Imre’s notable absence by her side. A bodyguard without her mark. Pathetic. Illogical. Strange.
There’s only one plausible explanation to encompass this reality: this particular incarnation of Neith is merely a byproduct of a weird dreamscape, and in this carnival of irregularities and missing variables there’s no need for her at all.

It would be so easy if this dream cracked apart at the seams and fell apart like shards of collapsing shattered glass once the very nature of its deception has been uncovered. Alas, it stays tenacious as ever and holds on to Neith tight.

The ghost in Neith’s head screams out a silent chord of complex obscenities in seven different languages, but to no avail at all. The ghost would be happy to take over, to escape this place, or at least to tear away all the profound disfigurements the conquerors left behind on Naora. The ghost certainly doesn’t want to go up (she knows all too well from experience that whatever’s waiting for her there is definitely horrifying), but no thrashing and clawing, no screaming and kicking at the invisible walls of the prison she’s caught in seem to help her cause.

*Go figure,* the ghost grumbles resentfully afterwards.

The sudden crack of lightning and the cutting cold of pouring rain introduce another angle of misery into the mix and sour the ghost’s mood even more.

In the ghost’s experience there’s not a thing that the Empire can’t maul beyond recognition. The amphitheater she’s bound to reach in Neith’s skin is no exception to this bloody rule.

Many pieces of old art depict this place as it once has been in all its beauty: the soft contrast of sandstone pillars rising high against pine-colored rocks; the unusual, tree-like structure of columns supporting the venue; the mysterious interplay of shadows the columns were casting across the epic mosaic of Naorie history that stretched against the base of the rocks; the stained-glass art filling the perfect arches of giant windows and letting multi-colored sunlight spill into the venue. The original was a powerful ode to hard, yet inspired labor of generations of Naorie people. It was an expression of love and reverence, of art and history, of nature and imagination.

The building was magnificent and stately, and of course the Empire has a soft spot for such things when it can use them to its advantage. The new ruler opted to leave the structure intact, but to strip it of history and beauty. Now, encased in a hardened carapace of eialite mineral unique to Naora, the venue’s new onyx surface perverts any reflection into an eerie horror show; the only remains of the mosaic are the indents in the stones where the locals captured and imprisoned during a series of riots against Governor Sandeheim were forced to hammer it away in retribution at the very beginning of his rule; the colorful windows got replaced by plain, industrial grade glass so toned and reflective that it almost negates window-shaped indents in the walls and makes the building look like a solid, gloomy monolith propped up on charred, dead trees.

The echo of sounds coming from the amphitheater feels like a thin, yet suffocating layer of slime against the ghost’s skin; it curls in poisonous waves in her bloodstream; it weaves a macramé of frost so rigid it feels like the touch of open flame against her heart. Neith is sharing the ghost’s body, but none of her horror. To Neith the sounds are a lullaby. She’s still smiling.

The ghost vengefully wonders how Neith’s mouth doesn’t crack under the strain of the effort. The ghost grimly wonders where from she once had managed to pull enough mental strength and resolve to handle this smile — subtle and small, yet infinitely smug and cruel — without breaking her performance or feeling her heart fracture into tiny little pieces.

Or maybe it did fracture — and not only once, but time after time, shards shattering into small particles and those into a scattering of infinitely sharp dust. Maybe that is why every single breath the
ghost takes on Naora is filled with pain primal and sorrowful that goes far beyond the realm of human body, burrowing deeper, turning to salt seeping into the bleeding cracks of a soul carved open.

This venue was built as an altar to art, as a perfect home for music and plays. It used to capture the very essence of songs and symphonies, of operas and dialogues and monologues; it unfolded the beauty of performances with pride, the unique architecture creating an impeccable acoustic system that amplified everything and made it truly magical. Every show this theater was a home to touched the very heartstrings of its audiences.

In a show of thorough mockery Imperial re-decorations kept the acoustics intact. And the sounds the venue is a slave to now could make kind hearts weep from cruelty and devastation. Through the rustle of violent pouring rain, through the eerie howl of the wind, through the whiplash booming of thunder in the wild storm the growls of desperate fury and howls of agonizing pain are the dominant notes in the heartless, bloody symphony of duels being fought for years now where art and light used to thrive. The only music these walls resonate with in the newest age of the Empire is the noise of bestial fighting and the thunderous applause of invaders and foreigners drunk with forbidden excitement.

The main entrance to the venue was once marked by twin doors adorned with tiny letter sculptures that depicted Naora’s most famous poem. Rumor has it that original pieces were sold to many art collectors all around the galaxy for a pricey sum along with countless fakes; a reddish ray shield sizzles in their place, separating the amphitheater from its stairs.

A death trooper is waiting by the shield, a lonely-creature even more out of place in the dream than Neith. And yet, like a good obedient boy he is, he demands the identification from Neith.

The ghost holds her breath; it doesn’t matter how many hours she had spent on slicing and how talented and trained she objectively is in this art, mistakes could always be made or security protocols could change unexpectedly. She knows better than to trust blindly even in herself, not when the galaxy is anything but kind and nurturing in its nature.

The guard scans her identichip and mutters in a bland, modulated voice, “All clear. Welcome, Lieutenant Kailes.”

Oddities clearly aren’t in a mood to stop. Neith doesn’t take the elevator to the VIP-lounge as expected; she slips in the direction of an ancient staircase and descends to the lowest level of the venue. She walks through deserted hallways, her reflection in the eialite-clad pathways resembling a mish-mashed ghost when lightning flashes high up in the sky and spills the remains of its bright light down to the ground. The path curves and leads into a dead-end by the rock’s surface. Neith takes the last possible turn, climbs a steep staircase that stretches up to the audience seats, and emerges under the rain again.

She occupies a lone vantage point at the farthest side of the venue. Raised a mere two meters up from the arena, protected from it by glass and an almost transparent layer of an electrified ray shield, the location is viscerally close to the horrifying action. Had this been allowed in reality to Neith, the ghost has no doubts that her mask would have preferred such perverted intimacy to a more distant, special experience she was treated with alongside the governor.

The massive projectors, used to illuminate the arena through the nights so brightly it almost looks like it’s basking in daylight, are still turned off. On a second thought there’s absolutely no need for them. The storm is flashing blazingly as if it had gone berserk, although from fury or mourning — the ghost doesn’t know. She isn’t so sure she knows what rules her heart either. It’s probably a furious draw.
Lightning stretches across the thick storm clouds in an intricate web of violet, maroon, and blinding white, its patterns constantly interchanging in a riotous celebration of pure chaos. It creates an unevenly pulsing lightshow in the belly of the venue, its intensity and flashing tethering on a thin edge between maddening and savagely beautiful in that unique way that only nature can be at the peak of its heartlessness. Reflecting from the bodies of two battling creatures, light accentuates lush colors of their scales and points out all the rough scratches and scars that countless fights to please the crowd had torn in grooves across their flesh.

It’s a quiet, luminous hymn to brutality. The ghost tries to look away, to squeeze her eyes shut, but Neith has none of it.

The battle is prolonged and bloody, the forces matched evenly. Lithe cat-shaped figures move with the grace of dancers in odd unison with their deadly ferocity; their long, massive tails with symmetrical rows of razor-sharp thin spikes curve and snap in sword-like arcs to swipe at the opponent. The younger ainweard’s scales are amethyst, the color deepening into blueish-violet on its belly. He fights swiftly, the wild momentum of his attacks showing that he doesn’t hold back at all. His opponent is an older female of the species, her coloring a bright maroon with a scattering of vermilion ornaments across her back and sides. She’s bigger and less maneuvering, forced to work hard on her defense, but she responds with fierce, precise counter-attacks and punishes the youth when he gets too cocky; every kick of her hind legs or a swipe of a tail or a front paw sends the other ainweard reeling and scrambling up in frantic disorientation up until he gathers enough strength for a new attack.

The metal of their slave stun collars glistens menacingly against their scales.

Neither of the animals goes for a killing move: the Empire dictates that the show has to go on, so for creatures so rare and so slow to reproduce, grow up, and mature (their life expectancy and growth cycle are very reminiscent to that of Naorie people) their only luxury is a permission not to murder their kind for the sake of someone’s sick entertainment.

(Even crippled ainweards fight on the arena. The ghost supposes that the notion of a mercy kill is too much for creature’s hearts.)

“So much for not looking up,” suddenly rasps a familiar voice behind her. Neith Kailes crumbles under a violent surge of emotion that the voice had wrenched out of her ghost.

It’s Jyn Erso who swirls on her heels and meets the revenant of Saw Gerrera. The old warrior stands tall and proud despite leaning on his walking staff and being clad in his suit of armor and life support. His old, weathered face is sharp with details, making him a lone real creature in an ocean of maddeningly colorful, yet featureless audience.

Jyn forces herself to swallow a sudden lump in her throat. It tastes bitter with anger and loss, and just a fraction salty with tears she hasn’t actually shed.

Saw never makes things easy, does he?

“Isn’t this what you’ve wanted?” she demands, the ghosts of an abandoned child and of a careless, hurt warrior rising up to the surface to challenge him.

“This?” Saw’s laughter is a terrible sound, a wheezing bark of agony, contempt, and mockery. He shakes his head in half-sad, half-furious reproach and extends his arm, pointing his index finger in the direction of Governor Sandeheim’s private lounge. “You call this fighting, child?” he whispers
disbelievingly, sounding hurt and disappointed in a way Jyn has never thought him capable of before their last conversation on Jedha.

Despite many quirks of the dream, Jyn knows what’s happening up in the lounge with abrupt, undeniable clarity. She doesn’t want to revisit even a tiny moment of it, but the dreamscape is relentless and she’s merely a tangled puppet caught in its strings. Her consciousness snaps in two; she feels the separation acutely as a puny piece of her is somehow left behind in her body and the vast majority of her soul soars up high and halts right next to the lounge. She curls her phantom fingers into fists in a frantic reaction to a sudden surge of panic and rage. The strain in her knuckles and the sting of trimmed nails carving crescent moons of pain into her palms feels incredibly, poignantly real nevertheless.

Governor Sandeheim’s wife is a young woman of classical, exceptional beauty. It always looked horrifically empty to Jyn as she’d never seen either keen intellect or power of will in her eyes; now the woman is a sick alluring aberration, her eyes drunk with violent delight from the bloody action unfolding below. The dress weaved of colorful \textit{ainweard} scales curves around her body like a morbid second skin.

It’s an example of heartless vengeful violence, but Jyn still wants to tear the thrice-damned dress off her skin and throw her over the balustrade to the arena so she could get even a tiny taste of what it’s like to fight in pain and slavery with no hopes for escape. Maybe that would teach her a fine lesson. Maybe then she wouldn’t smile or cheer with delight at yet another \textit{ainweard} howl echoing through the arena like a perverted symphony of pain.

Sandeheim himself cradles his wife’s hip with one hand in a possessive kind of way, no true caring or admiration in the gesture. In a way Jyn understands his callousness: it’s probably really hard to care if the primary purpose of your lover is to be a quiet, stunning, and infinitely submissive trophy by your side. He watches the battle with the gaze of a man calculating profits he’s going to make on a staggering number of bets placed tonight.

The true horror, though, awaits to Sandeheim’s left. It was one thing to live a life of deception and play a role. The dream forces Jyn to watch a twisted replay of what has already happened; she’s been here before, inside of her own body and mind, and shared this scene with Cassian. However, the staggering amount of variables and concentration required to keep up her pretenses, the amount of attention needed to be directed both inward and to the surrounding Empire had somehow blunted the true impact of the game they’ve been playing and the sheer level of skill required to pull it off impeccably.

Now, distanced away by space and time from past reality, she can see everything in a different light. Imre Willix stands in that perplex manner of casual rigidity only the top brass of the Empire can usually pull off. The dreadful uniform (not the standard Imperial gray, but the pretentious pitch-black of the ISB) fits him as if it’s an inseparable part of him, accentuating lean, yet strong shape of his body. He balances one hand against the balustrade and holds a glass with rare, refined whiskey from the governor’s private collection in the other. His dark eyes reflect cold appreciation mixed with sharp keenness of someone running an assessment of strategies used by battling \textit{ainweards}. The youth that should’ve been revealed by the complete absence of facial hair is marred and aged cruelly by the way the corner of his mouth is faintly curved up into a cutting, approving smirk.

There’s no trace of kindness in his gaze, no indication at all that his lips can form smiles touched by sincere joy. The arena is neither time nor place for them, and yet Imre Willix looks too real and too complete. As if Cassian Andor has never existed.

Jyn can’t help it, she shivers and averts her gaze, the mix of discomfort and sorrow wrecking through...
her heart like a sour storm. A warrior in her knows how important such a skill is. For all she knows, Cassian’s uncanny ability to morph into a mask and conceal his real persona completely until a mission is done could’ve easily been one of the primary reasons she had a chance to meet him, fight side by side with him, get to know him, and find a dearest friend in him. But heart, a silly traitor, doesn’t care for rationalizations; it constricts painfully from the sheer wrongness of it, from the way his body language is the enemy’s, from the stupid style of his hair slicked back that still somehow kriffing suits him, from seeing familiar features and yet failing to truly recognize the man she cares for in them.

Her gaze skims down to his hand. A tiny, laughable fraction of painful tension in her chest unwinds: the only tell that Cassian lets slip is the way his fingers curve forcefully into the balustrade’s cold metal plating, the strain not enough for them to tremble visibly, but enough for blood to drain away from the very tips of his fingernails. Dangerous, Jyn thinks on instinct with worry swiftly replacing her distress, but amends after a beat, though easy to write off as natural tension and complete engagement into the flow of the brutal show.

She isn’t prepared for seeing Neith Kailes, but she supposes there’s no preparation for such things at all. Seeing her reflection in the mirror was never this sharp or this real. This impossible change of perspective feels like a forceful blow to Jyn’s solar plexus that drives both air and spirit out of her chest.

Dressed in a pair of semi-formal slacks, a blinding white shirt with its collar buttoned up, and a long black vest, her hair collected into a strict bun, the long strands of her bangs braided tightly and pinned, her green eyes accentuated by thin lines of kohl makeup, she looks nothing like a scrappy rebel with an aura of feral fierceness. No, Neith Kailes commands strength and attention in style despite her small, slender frame. Even those bright indigo strands in her hair somehow highlight her confidence and independence, and never once make her look like a young woman in an arriving-too-late phase of petty teenage rebellion.

This game is a challenge for Jyn, but to her relief her cover allowed her not to be engaged into action like others. Neith Kailes could’ve been an equal partner to Imre Willix at this point of their lives, but she’s still his bodyguard first and foremost, above everything else. It doesn’t surprise Governor Sandeheim in the slightest that Neith stands right beside Willix, a mere breath away from him, her body partially sheltering his back from the entrance, and that her eyes oftentimes focus all over the place in a predatory search for any potential threats instead of paying attention to the show.

Still, Jyn has never been a big fan of intricate subtlety. Concealing her emotions is easy when she masks her sorrow with anger or indifference, but she still doesn’t have that much practice with being someone else completely. A past version of her trapped in Neith’s skin is doing her best to contain the hatred boiling inside of her for the arena and the fighting, for Sandeheim and the Empire. It helps that Neith’s preferred behavior is meaningful silence filled with glares, hard-edged and fierce as she’s been designed.

Nevertheless, the governor catches Neith regarding the battling animals with an expression that looks like a furious scowl of raw animosity. “You are very engaged, Lieutenant Kailes,” he remarks offhandedly.

It takes a monumental effort for Neith’s ghost not to jerk or stiffen at the implication of his comment. Her heart is leaping nauseously in her chest in a wild union of revulsion and alarm then, but Neith finds the right words easily enough. She doesn’t quite relax her jaw and purses her lips in a display of judgmental distaste. “The younger one should’ve won a long time ago,” Neith replies with ruthlessness. “He has the advantage of age, agility, and raw power. Pity he’s too stupid to employ it smartly.”
“He has time to learn.”

“That may be.” Neith acquiesces to his point, but refuses to give up her opinion. “And yet, he would be dead, would he face an opponent ready to kill.”

Tehl Sandeheim chuckles in that disgustingly amused way of his. The bastard, evidently, is still having a hard time wrestling with a fact that a woman could have opinions and agency of her own, stand so high in Imperial hierarchy and be taken seriously. “You have no tolerance for weakness,” he says almost chidingly like she has no business being tough, like she’s nature’s silly mistake.

“As shouldn’t anyone,” states Neith coolly and flexes her hand against the hilt of the vibroblade at her hip irritably.

Jyn squeezes her eyes shut. A string of dark thoughts unfolds despite her best attempts to contain it.

Neith is a terrifying creature. She’s forged of echoes of Jyn’s past, shadows of what Saw has drilled into her from young age, and of some abhorring reality in which the Erso family could’ve been loyal to Imperial regime. She’s a deliberate personification of the Empire locked into a human body.

Imre is the same. He is a complex mask that had taken Cassian’s loyalty and devotion, and amplified them to an absolute extreme. He is an inversion of certain parts of Cassian’s real history that he used to sell the act and fit him seamlessly into the cruel canvass of the Empire. He is a kind of a poster boy, a servant to dream for. Cassian had been meticulous in creating Imre to such an extent that Willix’s biography attributes for every scar slashing against his skin; it culminates in his honorable discharge from Imperial Navy after sustaining a near-crippling spinal injury while fighting a battle with rebel terrorists, and his subsequent transfer under the wing of the ISB to become one of its finest loyalty officers.

No one could’ve looked at Neith and Imre and suspected that some meager twenty months ago they’ve limped away from Scarif by the skin of their teeth after nearly laying down their lives for the rebellion. Watching them both with her own eyes, Jyn isn’t sure she recognizes those fabled heroes of the Alliance either.

There isn’t anything else to see, nothing new to learn from a thing of the still-fresh past as it plays out just the way it had been once. Jyn turns away. She blinks and suddenly finds herself next to Saw again.

His gaze cuts deep into her chest and claws at her heart, but he keeps his meaningful, accusing silence. Something moves in her upper vision, and Jyn skims her attention above the old warrior’s shoulder. At the top level of the amphitheater, on its flat surface, so familiar and yet so foreign figures are forced to destroy their history and culture under Governor Sandeheim’s doctrine that declared the New Age of the Empire on Naora years ago. Under the barrels of stormtrooper assault rifles some former rebels and protesters hammer with fading strength at the remains of crumbled monuments; some pull thick metal cords to behead the statues of their old heroes; some burn whatever paper history books the Empire seized from households and libraries all over the planet. The action looks like a morbid shadow theater, wrought from the fabric of the darkness itself so thick it never wavers to let the light through even when the storm’s bright bolts burst across the raging sky.

It’s mockery at its most cutting. As if Jyn needs a fake, additional symbol of oppression to make her feel the constant sting from the thorns of this thrice-forsaken mission and her helplessness to act.

When she meets Saw’s eyes again, she doesn’t flinch. She knows where he’s coming from; she had struggled with the weight of her choice during every single breath she took on Naora, and there’s no end to it in sight. Despite spending years pretending she was callous and cared only for herself out of
self-preservation, the truth could’ve have been any more opposite: Jyn’s heart never failed to weep for seeing the Empire reign, and her instinct was always to fight it. She always had a faint suspicion that while Saw molded her into a warrior throughout her formative years, he wasn’t the one who ignited the spirit of a fighter in her soul.

(Somehow, someway, it was mama’s gift to her.)

No, she’s not a child who’s caught doing something disappointing. Saw doesn’t get a vote, not anymore. It’s Jyn who lives, who’s a fighter in her own right, wrenched free out of his shadow. His teachings didn’t fade away, she had never moved on from them entirely. She may be tangled into a wild web of contradictory emotions on Naora, but she doesn’t hesitate in her belief in doing the right thing the right way.

Jyn plants her feet firmly against ancient stones, straightens her back, tilts her chin up in a show of confidence, and declares quietly, yet firmly, “Yes. That’s exactly how fighting can look like, Saw. And it’s no less valid than your crusade.”

“Making friends with your enemies,” he rasps, his voice so weak that the sound is a ghost of a seethe he’s trying to convey. “Watching this perversion unfold and doing nothing about it. What happened to a girl that I’ve raised? To the best soldier I’ve ever had a privilege to meet? Where is your fire, child?”

“That girl went to Scarif with a group of martyrs. Others joined. And too little soldiers have survived.” Jyn closes her eyes and takes a ragged breath. She feels her sorrow like a sharp, tiny wedge driven through her heart and like an unforgiving weight of the entire galaxy bearing down on her shoulders. “She may have saved the dream, but she paid a terrible price. The entire rebel Alliance paid a terrible price for their hesitance to join the fight until it was almost too late.”

“You’re proving my point.”

It’s her turn to shake her head. “What would you have me do, Saw?” she asks, words brimming with exhaustion and kindling fury. “Go rogue again? Contact the Partisans and resort to your good old vengeance and violence that didn’t care who’s innocent and who’s crooked?” She scoffs and opens her eyes. The corners of her lips curl downward in disgust Jyn’s not bothering to conceal. That’s right, let him see it. She isn’t going to forgive senseless atrocities, no matter in whose name they’ve been performed. “The remains of those long-dead Partisans, Saw, who ran away from crumbling Jedha only to execute an outrageous terrorist attack on Coruscant that killed ten children amongst everyone else? The last words of your friends were ‘for Saw Gerrera, for Jedha!’, by the way. They thought it was a splendid idea to maim the memory of a dead world, of everything a righteous rebellion must stand for. You don’t know about this, of course. I wonder if you’d been proud.”

Saw doesn’t outright recoil from harsh words, but his eyebrows draw a little. Jyn can’t decide whether it’s more from disappointment or regret, so she decides she doesn’t really care. She would always love Saw — how could she not when he was a father to her, when he did teach to survive? — but she would never make peace with whom he had let this war mold him into.

“I’m not proving your point, Saw. War is complicated. And there’s more to it than your way of fighting it.” She gestures absently at the area. “Look around you. Sure, Sandeheim is the main visionary here. But he’d already built a system, a perfectly calibrated mechanism. I’ll take him out, someone new will take his place and nothing will crumble. I’d love an easy solution, I’d love to murder the bastard with my bare hands, but I just don’t have a good enough option here. The best thing I can do now is to hunt for information that can save lives. You’re dead. It’s not up to you to judge me for trying to find a better way to make a difference.”
Saw’s lips quirk; his smile is a reflection of pain. He tilts his head to the side a little comically, his eyes intent on the arena’s VIP-lounge. “Do you think the spy will choose you, my child?” he asks, both pity and warning brimming through his voice.

The old fear cuts deep, like a swipe of a curled blade against bare flesh. No matter how hard she tries, Jyn can’t quite banish it. Her life is different now, though. She might carry this fear with her like a loyal scar refusing to fade away, but she swore a quiet oath in her own heart not to let it define her, and she’s not going to betray it.

“He already chose me,” she remarks, words quiet yet sure. She has no true control over future, but she trusts her past, circumstances or fears be damned. Cassian’s loyalty defines him, whether it’s to a cause or to people he believes in. She never doubted that. He never gave her a reason to doubt it, even when he was being complicated or plagued by his own demons.

“But will he keep doing it day by day, through every challenge imaginable? Will he ever choose you when this war is said and done?”

It’s a dirty move, and it’s unfair and so sentiently stupid, but it works.

Saw’s words land like a blow, defying all laws of logic and pragmatic reassurances, a healed scar torn apart and starting to bleed anew.
show must go on

Chapter Notes

I couldn't resist an urge to approach this chapter with elements of non-linear narrative, so I hope that it didn't end up too confusing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jyn awakens quietly, a single breath she takes replacing one reality with another like a turn of a paper page. The tapestry of vivid images before her eyelids — a wild tangle of her past, present, and potential future with a cruel pinch of an old ghost — dissipates into a canvass of dim darkness.

Saw’s words linger like a scar, amplified without mercy by a tell-tale feeling of ephemeral loneliness that only comes from the sensation of home withering away. The storm inside of her is a dear wretched friend, a loyal companion threatening to turn into a full-on maelstrom. She wants to grit her teeth and growl in frustration, needs to curl her fingers into fists and punch something (preferably someone, a certain governor, and in a way that’s leaving pure destruction in its wake), but each and every of these emotions is a careless, too-bold reflection of Jyn at the time when Neith must live on, a perfect embodiment of the Empire. A grimace feels too much, a silent whisper is an inexcusable weakness.

What sucks the most is that even if those words may be weaved to life by Saw’s voice, there’s no escaping truth — they’re her own tenfold. The quest sense of dread that stalked her like a shadow all throughout this mission has been exponentially growing and now had finally burst; it’s molded of fear and anger, of shame and restlessness, of hatred and helplessness, and now they all unfold into a loose skein of pure, fierce emotion. Kriff you, Saw, Jyn thinks spitefully and resolutely ignores a very distinct angle of childish petulance in her mental voice. It’s unfair to lay blame for it upon a man long dead, but it does feel at least a fraction therapeutic.

This little rebellion, however, doesn’t ease her mind off her current stack of problems.

She loathes Neith and Imre. They’re terrible burdens in a rich variety of ways, but now, in this new chapter of Jyn’s life, perhaps the most jarring one is the loss of casual touch and proximity she’s gotten so used to ever she and Cassian had become a team. Impeccable reflections of perfectionism, their covers didn’t show gestures of affection in public, didn’t turn into lovebirds in private. Frankly, that made the most sense to them both. And it’s been manageable, mostly because no matter how naturally far they’ve gone to sleep on Naora — they’ve still woken up entangled, limbs entwined, gravitating to each other on pure instincts, always, if neither was wrenched out of sleep by a nightmare. Jyn holds dear every single of those quiet moments, feeling or seeing a pale shadow of Cassian if only for a fleeting instant before each of them took a deep breath, dutifully donned their armor, and went on with yet another day of their war on Naora.

This time she’s absolutely anchorless in a storm that doesn’t want to end.

She knows the truth, feels the weight of this truth without any confirmation, but she still rolls over, reaches out with her hand to Cassian’s side of the bed, and skims her palm across the mattress where she knows he had settled down earlier this night. The bedsheets is plainly, mercilessly cold under her touch.
Despite her best efforts Jyn bleeds into Neith, taints the perfect mask. Eyes closed, she squeezes them even harder, her fingers curling into the too-soft fabric forcefully. It’s so not the first time for her to wake alone after she and Cassian were in bed together. It’s the very first time when it feels wrong. Come thing of it, it’s not simply wrong — it’s fundamentally, devastatingly amiss.

This is not the most brutal mission she’s ever been a part of by any means. It doesn’t demand risking their lives in the thick of savage warfare, there’s no actual fighting, no orders to kill, no need to spill blood — not their own, not the enemy’s (and whether many of them deserve or not it is a whole other conversation out of place here) — and there’s no death. And yet somehow, someway it taints everything, certainly wrings them both dry and exposes way too many dark thoughts and old insecurities.

Jyn opens her eyes. Naora’s night sky is a fusion between onyx and lavender, its two moons — a silver crescent and a rich lapis gibbous — spill bright moonlight inside of the room; the city stretching at the other side of the panoramic window that takes up the entirety of a wall in their bedroom glimmers with dull white light. Judging from the scenery she’d likely caught two hours of sleep at best. Yet another addition to her sorry nights here, wrecked with masks, ghosts, and agitation.

Knowing Cassian, she’s pretty sure he hasn’t slept at all. It’s time for an update and a new round of damage assessment then.

She sits up, swings her legs from the bed, and regards the room with a critical eye. The pocket doors are closed, separating the bedroom from the rest of the apartment. She’s not sure whose privacy Cassian had in mind when he left it that way; the gesture could be meaningless and it could be vital. In other words — complicated, like everything during this thrice-damned mission. The big wardrobe is considerately left open: her two sets of stylish formal clothing are there, hanging neatly alongside both pairs of Cassian’s ISB uniform. His bag is where he left it the very first day, taking up half of a small coffee table in the corner of their room.

Jyn rolls on a pair of socks, stuffs her feet into ankle-length boots she had left standing neatly by the bedstand. (Their leather soft and almost weightless, the boots might be the only acquisition she made for this mission that’s she’ll keep apart from new weapons.) Slipping away from the bed, she picks up a white robe from a comfy armchair and drapes the garment over her shoulders. The slide of cool, silky fabric against her bare arms still feels alien, ten solid days into living through these spoils of decadence.

She has little patience for her act — the ugly fear is sharpening its razors into something unhinged, uncontrollable in both her heart and mind — and her instincts scream with craving for swift action, for not wasting a second, for figuring out where she and Cassian truly stand now. But Jyn is inconsequential to the glory of Neith’s show, so she draws a deep breath and wills her entire body to relax before letting Neith’s body language take over.

Her stride is casual, unhurried; it belongs to someone who isn’t agitated and sure as hell isn’t scared. She rolls the pocket doors and steps into the living room. It’s no surprise that Cassian isn’t here: the space is vast to a point of absurdity, its color scheme is eclectic, and it’s decorated so richly with works of art and expensive, hideous furniture that there’s no style to it at all. They both hate this room and prefer to avoid spending any time in it as much as they can.

Jyn opens another set of doors to the dining space only to find out that it’s as devoid of Cassian’s presence as she’d expected. He’d been here earlier tonight though: his datapad is left behind on the counter in standby mode alongside a cup of caf. The mug’s half-full, its ceramic surface still holding echoes of warmth when Jyn touches it. The aroma is almost too potent even by her mean standards
despite the strong sugary undertone in it.

Any other day she’d smile fondly at this uncharacteristic display of untidiness from Cassian, would come up with a smart and loving remark about how he’s giving in to his roguish traits and learning to unwind, but she doesn’t feel like it now, and it’s not even because of Neith. Jyn rinses the cup in the sink, wipes it dry, puts it back where it belongs. She picks up the datapad and walks back into the bedroom, her steps still light, her expression serene in a serious way that’s characteristic of Neith in the calm hours of her downtime.

Leaving the device upon Cassian’s bag, she walks to the dresser and meets the reflection of her eyes in the mirror. Loose hair spilling down her neck and collarbones, absolute absence of makeup, black chain of her necklace contrasting with her skin and white silk of the robe, the soft glimmer of her kyber crystal under twin moonlight — for a moment she sees a safe ghost of herself in Neith. To have two persons coexist in her mind, never bleeding into each other fully and yet constantly listening to one another, is a hell of an exercise in a controlled split personality game. It’s not quite maddening, but it’s extremely exhausting and unsettling.

Jyn is so ready for this thrice-forsaken assignment to be over.

Neith may be in her relaxation mode (well, as much relaxation as a hard-ass, workaholic zealot can even stomach to allow herself), but she knows well enough how easily people judge by appearance. Control an image and you can control countless souls, weave whatever narrative you want for the entire galaxy to buy. It’s unlikely that Governor Sandeheim is back from his party (if anything, it’d be completely out of character for him to retire so early into the night, but then again he might just move it to his mansion), even more unlikely that there’s another living soul in his mansion apart from her and Cassian, but neither Neith nor Jyn would ever leave something like this to chance. She’s quick and efficient in brushing her hair and securing it into an impeccably-strict bun, in pushing her bangs back and pinning them down. It’s a small change in appearance, but it already broadcasts an aura of authority, a strange yet loud contrast with the rest of her attire. It’s all business with a not so subtle hint of leisure put together, a disarming image to keep any potential opponent guessing as to what to expect.

The last detail she adds to her appearance is a thigh holster wrapped around her leg with a rather elegant, yet deadly blaster resting against her bare skin. Neith enjoys this bewitching, captivating show of lethal grace. Jyn simply likes the faint sense of safeness that the weapon brings her.

It’s Neith Kailes ten times over who walks out of the room. Her posture straight and regal, her stride sure and patient, she descends down the marvelous ivory-colored marble stairs in the building that once has been the Naorie Art Museum and now is yet another of Sandeheim’s renovated monstrosities, but she’s not alone.

Jyn Erso is on a mission to find out just how deep the bullet lies.

Jyn is no stranger to distance. It’s healthy, oftentimes even vital; it’s a safe harbor of solitude when it’s needed. Distance has a place outside of her missions for the rebellion and it can be absolutely paramount during missions. Distance doesn’t scare her, doesn’t hold any unpleasant surprises. She knows it, she respects it and cherishes it when timing’s right, when it’s a conscious choice.

It’s not distance that’s formed between her and Cassian — it feels like a transparent, yet unmistakably leaden, impenetrable wall.

She doesn’t catch up to it at first. First of all, there’s no time to let go of Neith and start thinking like Jyn fully, not when she’s basking in bright lights of the arena, scrutinized from head to toe by
Sandeheim’s rich guests in his lounge. Besides, her heart is fluttering wildly in her chest, a potent echo of worry unleashed when Cassian makes a choice to push their already outrageous gamble with the governor to an entirely new level.

Their mission is bold: gather an unheard-of amount of fresh intelligence by claiming that Neith and Imre are here on the behalf of the ISB to conduct a thorough inspection of Imperial governance on Naora — the Emperor’s newest rumored doctrine to weed out incompetent officials before the rebellion can benefit from their mistakes and gain any more ground in their intensified war effort that fills many Imperial politicians and small-time rulers with dread. With Sandeheim’s character and sensibilities such an approach is a calculated risk. It’s not that Jyn complains about their success so far, but she feels incredibly lucky that this actually seems to work. Pushing the matter the way Cassian is doing now rubs even her reckless nature in a slightly precarious way.

This was never a part of their plan. It’s Cassian’s own daring improvisation on the go, a dangerous testing of waters to find out whether he can get away unscathed. The funny part is that it makes sense. It’s outrageous in its nature, yet practical in its goal.

(Many rebels do not dare whispering behind Cassian’s back, some definitely consider him to be more of an emotionless machine functioning in accordance with precise, well-thought out plans rather than a living human being, and most of the Alliance isn’t aware of his existence at all. Sometimes Jyn thinks she’d steal a great laugh out of watching those first two categories of rebels witness him winging it in the field like a boss and causing Kay to grumble with almost childish irritability about his yet another failure to correctly predict the odds when it comes to Cassian.)

Jyn has to give it up for him: Force, he does handle it impressively. There’s not a trace of tension in his body, the line of his spine and shoulders somehow both military strict and laid-back; his composure is impeccable as he’s pointing out in a completely easy-going conspiring tone the connection he had uncovered between a particular unofficial high-stake betting pool and the governor himself. Cassian keeps his expression a peculiarly interesting case of neutrally pleasant as he reveals this, while Sandeheim visibly reacts, taken aback by the discovery.

Three percent of Sandeheim’s covert profits — his only true secret from the Empire, his only little imperfection in the eyes of his masters — is a great haul for the rebellion. It’s yet another impressive victory for them both. Despite all the mental discomfort from staying on Naora and letting these covers be just as real as their actual hearts and souls, this is so much better than either of them dared to hope for.

It’s been a long, long day. The mission too, of course, but this day in particular is exhausting. Hours of watching brutal exhibition matches, exchanging fake pleasantries with people she’d gladly punch in their smug faces and then some more, and enduring Sandeheim’s toxic presence do no wonders to Jyn’s mood. But she’s proud of their accomplishments. That’s what she focuses on to soothe her wildly beating heart, to keep Neith’s perfect ice queen composure when ghosts of an unexpected adrenaline spike are still roaring in her veins.

And then, right on cue with her patience and mental state, when Tehl Sandeheim invites them to join the upcoming party, Cassian declines politely in Imre’s clean-cut Coruscanti accent, “Thank you for the offer, Governor. But I’m afraid it’s time for us to go.”

Sandeheim narrows his eyes a little and sizes Cassian up. “You’ve worked very hard throughout your assignment, Major. Surely such dedication can be rewarded by some quality entertainment.”

“It’s your scene, Governor,” insists Cassian softly, careful and infinitely elegant in his deliberate flattery, “your show. Today you contribute by entertaining your guests and securing even more
finances for your ground-breaking experiments in building a perfect embodiment of the Empire. And we should keep on with our duties, as there’s still a lot to be done. I’d rather retire for the night now and pick up our work early.”

It leaves Sandeheim appeased.

That’s where first hints of the wall start to drop. Cassian doesn’t look at her once: not when they depart the arena and walk down the grand stairs side by side, surrounded by slightly thinned out rows of stormtroopers standing guard outside of the amphitheater; not during their way back to the city and Sandeheim’s mansion; not when they share a strangely tense ride in the narrow elevator up to their guest suite floor.

At first his detachment makes sense. Imre tends to be even quieter and more subdued than Cassian by design, so his coolness doesn’t ring any warning bells as it should’ve in Jyn’s mind. Besides, it’s hard to tell where Imre ends and Cassian begins these days, so good he is at pretending, and he can’t drop the mask altogether. It’s only practical, it’s safer this way.

She recognizes the unmistakable shape of the wall a few minutes after they come back to their rooms. She’s going about undressing casually, shedding the layers of beautiful, even comfortable clothing that never fits quite right on her body despite being tailored for her specifically, letting her hair loose and sighing with relief when the tight bun has stopped pulling at her skin in an almost painful way, but this sense of relief shatters when she looks back at Cassian.

He stands next to the giant window of their bedroom, his back straight in a way that strangely makes her skin crawl, his hands tucked into pockets of his pants. Save for the barely perceptible rise and fall of his chest, he looks like a morbidly animate statue, not a hair or a line of this damn, rough to a touch uniform out of perfect order. Would someone else look at him now, she has no doubts they would only see an Imperial servant taking his sweet time to enjoy the ultimate reflection of Imperial dominion unfolding on the square below.

She’s sure that Cassian doesn’t let any true emotion show on his face, and even if his body language is characteristic of Imre Willix a thousand times over, its intensity lays the truth bare to her eyes: he’s so deeply uncomfortable in his own skin now, so wrapped up in revulsion that his primary instinct is to cut off completely, retreat somewhere into his mind.

As Jyn is crossing the room to walk up to him, it occurs to her that it might not be a wall between them, but rather a deep ravine with a bridge over it so shaky and fragile that every step she might take will sure feel like it can be her last on this path.

“I’ll be in the ‘fresher,” she tells him, no demand brimming in her voice whatsoever, and rests her palm against his shoulder blade lightly. Hope can be a resilient little thing and this time is no exception; her first instinct is to with for him to join her, for them to find a way to break this grim spell and reconcile, anchor each other through the hardship of this mission, through its every ghastly consequence, through its every uncertainty and fear.

(She’d come a long way from her past now. It’s strange to be alone when she has a choice not to be, to deny herself a moment of kindness when she needs it so much.)

Cassian is so stiff that she might’ve as well touched one of those stupid marble statues that decorate the living room of their suite. His only reaction is a laughably tiny shake of his head — the loudest, most dreadful rejection he’d ever communicated.

It… it can’t be personal. Not in the way she fears the most, at least. But it still fills her with dread. It crystallizes in her chest only to morph into a shard breaking apart, falling down with a nauseous
crack, and splintering into hundreds of tiny razor blades.

But Jyn’s not a feral creature anymore, without home or with empathy surrendered to basic survival. It’s a show of bravery and patience not to recoil and jerk her hand away, but it’s the only way. A mirror can hurt and be dark, can hold deceit and trickery in its curves, yet it’s precious when reflections rhyme. She’s careful to break the touch considerately and slowly, to leave a definite impression of gentleness and understanding in her wake.

Closing the ‘fresher door behind her quietly, Jyn lets the rest of her clothing fall into a tiny pile on the floor, steps under the cascade of warm water, careful to keep her newly tied-up hair dry, and starts assessing the damage and considering mitigation tactics.

They’ve been on thin ice with each other many times before this. Every show of intimacy has been precarious and unsure at first as they’ve learned each other, explored their boundaries and quirks, found the best ways to handle each other in sour moods and at their lowest. And yet she’s never seen Cassian so taken apart by a mission and that ugly prison in his mind, so shaken and raw, choosing to close off completely. They know so much about one another already, more than probably any other living soul in the galaxy (excluding Kay, in Cassian’s case), but in the face of today this knowledge feels laughably insignificant to Jyn. It allows her to back down when it’s necessary, to make sure they don’t crash into one another like two burning supernovas on a devastating collision course, but it doesn’t prepare her at all to handle this without feeling ragingly helpless.

Sooner or later this will have to be resolved. She’d learned better the hard way that swiping things under a metaphorical rug (or locking them down into deep, dark hatches) never saves anyone from their messy implosions. Scars like these are like projectile fragments buried deep into flesh: at first they bleed, seemingly dormant they still can kill years later, and carrying them is always a weight too much. Mending a broken bone before it heals badly will hurt less than breaking it all over again.

However, it takes Jyn the entire span of her shower and then a few good minutes of removing makeup to admit that she doesn’t have this figured out, that any approach she can think of is either impossible or feels like a heartless, definite loss in at least one dimension.

There’s no definite proof that Sandeheim is surveilling the guest suite (they’re very meticulous to check inconspicuously for any cameras or listening devices each and every time they come back to the apartment), but it’s not quite proof to the contrary either. To be so deeply into purely-Imperial territory, to be so close to the enemy, to know that their covers are bold and should require very profound scrutiny and suspicion means that there’s not a fleeting moment of safeness. Dropping their pretenses, discarding their masks, whispering honesty in hushed tones is worse than the most outrageous sacrilege.

Words are not the only conduits for emotions, and nor is language reflected in a single form. It’s not their first foray into necessary silence; together with Cassian Jyn has discovered that touch or sex can work miracles in communication and convey everything they need to tell each other.

The thought is warm, hopeful, but only for an insanely quick moment. Where heart had dared to hope, drunk with remembrance of beauty, cold logic kicks in. It doesn’t make any sense for Neith and Imre to seek any kind of obvious tactile comfort: neither of them has any right to be even remotely stressed, not when they’re living their Imperial dreams, not when they’re sure in their mission and righteousness and power they have over Sandeheim’s career and even life, not when their tight control of emotions is taken to a point of appearing callous.

Would this be the only thing that worried her, Jyn might’ve been tempted to let Neith be human if only for a little while.
As is, Jyn’s quiet and still as stone herself at the bedroom’s doorstep, watching the dark shape of Cassian’s body accentuated against the landscape of the night city by the beams of radiant twin moons and having a distinct feeling that he might’ve not moved at all in the last ten minutes. The grey slate floor chilly underneath her bare feet, nothing but underwear and a tank top covering her skin, she briefly contemplates the idea of walking up to Cassian with intent, grabbing him by the shoulders, pushing his back against the window with fiery rough gentleness, and proving to him with a kiss beyond the shadow of a doubt that the stunt he’d pulled on Sandeheim on the arena doesn’t change a single thing between them, that she understands it and doesn’t think any less of him for it, that she still wants him, always, the masks he’s wearing be damned because she knows a good man underneath them.

In throes of fear and doubt the intent itself, the deep and honest meaning behind it makes sense to her. In that split instance, fueled by frustration even more violent than her worry, she’s almost ready to take this chance, to push because every risk she ever took in their relationship had paid off, because affection and touch, however inelegant and sometimes a bit rushed, never ruined and always healed.

But then revulsion hits, a wave so rushing and potent that it feels like an echo of fervent vertigo. Neith and Imre aren’t gone. The assignment isn’t over and the masks will float at the back of their minds like dead weight. A mere idea to share even a fraction of her sacred pace with Neith snaps the lid on this scenario unfolding as surely as Jedhan desert collapsing upon the Catacombs of the Cadera.

With her heart heavy and the sensation of dread in her gut multiplying exponentially into even more icy razors, Jyn looks away, lets her hair loose as she walks up to the bed, climbs under the covers, and settles on her side to wait.

Time feels strange in moments so sharp and fragile, strange to a point when it can’t be fully trusted, when it’s warped mercilessly by the way hearts and minds interpret it. It might’ve taken an hour, might’ve taken a terribly long couple of minutes for all Jyn knows, but Cassian remembers at last that he’s not actually a perfectly-detailed memorial to Imperial rule. He’s moving quietly like a shyly lurking ghost, but in such eerie, intense silence even the tiniest of sounds are amplified. There’s an infinitely gentle creak of rubber soles against the floor, an odd whisper of shifting clothing, a tiny click of the door closing and a subsequent faint echo of pattering water.

When Cassian finally sags upon the mattress, Jyn barely even feels it giving in under his weight. Funny how things tend to get distorted and shapeshift their meanings depending on perspective: he might be lying down at the very edge of the bed, but it feels as if he’s entire star systems away.

Jyn closes her eyes and secretly hopes for a gift of dreamless sleep.

As it often happens, there’s no rest for the wicked.

Seventeen centuries ago the latest incarnation of Naorie Art Museum had opened its doors to the public with an installation that established a tradition for ages. Back then and for a long time the gallery had no windows, and its only entrance was through the floor at the very edge of the room. The floor was adorned by the same marble as the stairs leading into it, the mosaic of small tiles recreating the original texture of the slab precisely so that each and every grey and white vein on the surface formed a seamless picture devised by nature itself despite the dip the floor had took closer to the room’s edge. The ceiling mirrored it. The only illumination was provided by tube lamps stretching across every bend of the room in a rectangular carcass of cool white light.

The room could’ve felt claustrophobic, oppressive, so much onyx-tinted close space above and
beneath with no natural light, but it created a unique immersive experience and helped zeroing in visitor’s minds to the walls. And, oh, the walls were the sacred key of this architectural symphony, wiping clean the tiniest echoes of unease.

The gallery’s walls were covered by a high-quality papyrus canvass. Every year when the exhibition opened they greeted the guests by a riveting, vibrant festival of watercolor landscape paintings fitted into a single, seamless panorama. A four-keyboard piano — an instrument designed perfectly for Naorie people and capable of carrying a much wider range of sounds than a traditional one — was installed into a clever dip in the floor so that it wouldn’t mar the panorama and offered a musical dimension to the installation’s art.

The first exhibition was an ode to Naora’s infinite beauty fashioned by two sisters. The museum had taken seventy years of labor to rise atop of the hill in the very heart of the capital city. The same year the construction began, in a family of two teachers a pair of twin girls was born. Aja Lo Thoinelessar and Lanei Ve Thoinelessar grew up watching the museum take shape from the window of their small attic, daydreaming for hours upon hours of having a chance to leave their mark inside. Naorie history remembers Aja Lo as the most renowned landscape painter and Lanei Ve as the most esteemed pianist. Their installation was presented inside of the gallery only two times: for a single month from its opening day, and a century later during the final show of their careers as an exception.

Invited back every single year throughout their lives and the exhibition history, the sisters preferred to refuse this generous offer. Neither of them believed in singularity of arts and excellence; it was their belief that art can only thrive if it’s practiced in rich variety and diversity, that every voice and vision must be expressed and equally heard and seen.

Every single year a new artist and a new pianist would take the gallery’s stage; the established tradition suggested that they’d spend a month to find their muse (they would often travel around Naora together, an artist looking for a panorama to capture and a pianist for a symphony in nature to translate into their own interpretation of notes and music rhymes), craft their art inside of the gallery’s walls for the span of next thirteen months when it would be their humble servant only, and then culminate the expression of their love for Naora in a month of sharing it with guests. A pianist would play for three hours every evening, an artist would often wander through the crowd like yet another common admirer, always humble and oftentimes not even recognized, and secretly revel in seeing other people react to their work.

Every year families from all over Naora would travel to experience a so called “Ode to the Tides of Time”. It was an ever-changing story spanning generations, weaving inspirations, running like a bloodline through Naorie history.

The Empire had chosen not to care.

A grand, multi-layered marble staircase runs through the heart of the building like a lifeline, a rich multitude of variably-sized pillars scattered around the main hall like high trees in a perfect geometry of a forest. The elaborate, artful illumination has survived Sandeheim’s architectural revisions, and thousands of thin rope lights coil around the pillars like labyrinthine cobwebs of vines, every unique pattern casting pine-hued radiance across the hall. Right-hand side galleries are off-limits, the entire multi-storey wing turned into the governor’s private lodging. Jyn turns left, in the direction of two other galleries.

The first room is captured by shadows made soft with paling spills of light from both the hall and the raised archway leading up the flight of stairs to the gallery beyond. Dark grey leather sofas cover the wide expanse of the area, sharing the same style but varying in size and position around equally rich choices of ebon glass tables. The long bar counter opposite of the lounge zone is chiseled from
eialite, its grainy reflective surface capturing both light and shadow greedily and distorting them into eerie shapes. Despite the streak of light from the hall washing over her body, the bar droid with her matte charcoal coloring blends into surroundings almost seamlessly, her shape betrayed only by more radiant luminosity from a rich variety of alcohol bottles standing on the shelves behind her. While most of the drinks are classical (transparent or gold or amber), many others are almost fluorescent in the intensity of their assorted coloring; azure and teal, emerald and verdigris, coral and tangerine, fuchsia and rose, lilac and amaranthine, chartreuse and lemon liquids in transparent bottles reflect faint skeins of light, adding an odd carnival of brightness into the gloom of the vast, dark bar.

The BD-4000 luxury droid reacts the moment Jyn sets her foot onto the bar’s floor. Her mechanical eyelids roll up, revealing a pair of morbid, human-like oculars with a cerulean eyeball and a rich sapphire pupil at the center. “Welcome, Lieutenant Kailes,” the droid designated Elea greets, her voice loud, melodic, and painfully resembling the classical high inflection of a carefree young woman. “Major Willix has opted to keep all primary lights off in both galleries. Would you like me to adjust it to your preference?”

“No, thank you. You’re free to hibernate again,” mutters Jyn as politely as she can muster and treads forward without sparing a glance at the droid.

It’s not Elea’s fault that her designers perverted the shapes of BD-models into bizarre copies of human females — imbalanced, unreal dimensions of delicate limbs, wide, curvy hips, too-thin waists, absurdly full breasts, and features chiseled to perfections practically unbelievable to normal human eyes — but Jyn does prefer to avoid even looking at her as much as she can, always shaken by the sheer volume of disgust and anger rising in her chest in reaction to Elea’s appearance and programming of ultimate servitude.

A single flight of block stairs carved out of black marble guides Jyn up into the gallery. She wishes she could see it the way it was once with her own eyes, but alas. The page has turned, the beauty was maligned, and all that’s left are old chronicles and someone’s memories to revisit. She remembers the gallery’s story with fondness in her heart, but it’s pale and almost lifeless now that the tradition is shattered, the room’s original architecture and purpose violated, the ancient piano and all the papyrus canvasses taken from Naorie people and sold out to private collections all around the galaxy.

She takes a deep breath to brace herself for the impact when the room starts coming into view with her every new step. Now the black mosaic on the floor and ceiling truly feels oppressive, and the giant window replacing one of the walls doesn’t lessen the impression; the canvass is a home to gloomy charcoal painting of Sandeheim’s brain child: a new vision for an Imperial city whose construction in the once untouched nature of the valley at the southeast of the continent he’s financing; it’s all right angles, dark metal and stone materials, utilitarian and strict, no place for color or style or experimental shapes inspired by nature that are so distinct to Naorie architecture. Even the karking lounge chairs in the room are chiseled out of dark grey wood; the white tiles of the giant swimming pool that stretches across good two thirds of the area, only a small strip of the floor separating it from the window, could’ve lessened the murk somewhat, but alas, the pool’s lights douse the water with a sickly bright scarlet tint.

Every time Jyn finds herself in this thrice-damned gallery, she can’t banish a feeling that it’s missing a couple of Imperial Royal Guards standing by the entrance for an additional oppressive flair like a last stroke of a brush perfecting a painting.

She walks up the last two stairs and emerges fully in the gallery only a few steps away from a descending slope leading gradually into the pool. Tiny waves of transparent scarlet water brush against the outsoles of her shoes — silent echoes of Cassian’s strokes rippling past the pool’s edge.
Jyn wishes she’d have a peace of mind to admire the view — the way he’s swimming fully underwater without coming up for air, his every moment swift and graceful — and to fully see the beauty she cherishes so much past the water’s bloody impression and the gallery’s menacing look and feel. She wishes she could breathe here without feeling trapped, wishes that Cassian didn’t have to come down here for a swim out of pure necessity simply because this perverted luxury is helpful for his back.

As is, Jyn’s only possible course of action is to wait.

Cassian breaks the surface close enough to the pool’s edge so that he can stand, and wipes the water away from his eyes with his fingers, blinking rapidly for good five seconds before he can see clearly. For the first time in hours he takes a chance and finally looks at Jyn.

The dark eyes she meets are too expressive to be Imre’s, yet too impassive to be Cassian’s. His face is a mask, but it’s fraying at the seams, reflecting glimpses of truth and pure emotions. A breath, then another. A tiny frown contorts Cassian’s features and he averts his gaze, schooling his expression back to unaffected indifference. And so they go back to the stillness of waiting, captured tightly by the web of uncertainty and the unforgiving weight of their ghosts. Their gravity is not gone, Jyn knows she’s not imagining the strings of yearning wound tight between them even if they’re tattered at the edges more than ever, but it’s absolutely counteracted by a strange repelling force dictating that there’s no place for touch or any true word spoken, that this absolutely agonizing impasse is the only way to go for now, that Cassian feels safer by holding back.

Well, if they can’t afford to find home in one another, there’s no need to waste time and linger like sun and moon yearning to touch yet separated by forces of nature. Go on, continue, Jyn’s shrug and an absent-minded hand wave mean, and even if she and Cassian move in parallel without wasting a beat of time, the deliberate loss of eye contact feels like drifting away yet again. She crosses half of the gallery to reach the lounge chair where Cassian had left his clothing, towel, and a standard Imperial-issue blaster pistol, lies down onto the neighboring one, feigns her best impression of relaxation, closes her eyes, and patiently waits.

At least he’d kept eye contact for a few seconds. She knows a life with no luxuries and no companionship better than she knows this new life of hers — she won’t turn her back to even the tiniest of victories.

For a while she listens to the water rippling and sounds shifting in response to Cassian changing swimming styles, the gallery’s acoustics turning it into a natural symphony. There’s no breath of warm wind brushing her mostly bare skin with loving caresses, no mysterious whisper of tree crowns in a forest beside her, no choir of cicadas or old paper rustle of indigo-colored dragonflies, but these tiny rolling waves are enough to rouse a peculiar memory, to bring Jyn home if only in her mind. Like this, with her eyes closed, she’s almost back to Lira San, to the lake beneath the colorful rock spires where more than a year ago Cassian had emerged from under crystal clear water with a smile so wild and happy it could belong to a child who never knew any horrors of the war. Their lives had changed that evening. She had first dared to reach out and kiss him under the fading rays of sunlight, feeling the warmth of his bare skin and the strong, excited thump of his heartbeat against her palm.

If only they were on Lira San now. If only she could burn down or strip away the very last impression of the Empire on Naora so that this beautiful world could start healing.

The sudden violent patter of rain against the glass rouses her from aching daydreaming, followed by an immediate loud splash of water. Jyn opens her eyes in time to see Cassian push himself out of the water by his arms at the far edge of the pool in one fluid motion and straighten up next to the window. Naora’s traditional monsoon is raging outside, the rain a thick cascade of downpour
scattering around wildly by invisible swirls of stormy wind. The twin moons are obscured by clouds, leaving ivory and indigo impressions against thick grey veil of puffy mist enveloping the city and surrounding mountains.

The flash of lightning ripping through the clouds is anything but temperate, a frenzied chain with dozens of jagged tendrils pulsing with berserker rage. When thunder booms, the noise is a maelstrom of roaring discharges, loud enough to be heard through the gallery’s soundproof glass and crawl in an icy shiver on Jyn’s skin. She feels a faint tremor roll through her body, her mind zeroing in unbidden to the old sound of bombs desolating a city on Tamsye Prime, of a frag mine detonating in the jungles of Onderon, the explosion’s roar marred by an inhuman scream of pain cutting off as soon and sudden as it appeared. She sits up, the motion jerky, her heart hammering wildly into the walls of her ribcage, and tries her best to will the wild coil of memories and fears away.

Cassian is the only part of her reality now that’s familiar, that’s comforting even if their balance is all ruined, so Jyn gladly lets him become her focal point through the storm outside and the macabre prison of the gallery around her. The violence of thunder doesn’t leave Major Willix unscathed as well, letting somebody else bleed through the fractures in once impeccable armor. Every explosion of sound seizes his breath, his ribcage contracting in tiny jerks, and reveals a soldier who had roamed dozens of battlefields, learned their senseless savageness by heart, and carries them wherever he goes.

He doesn’t let discomfort and fear mar his stance, though. He remembers to keep his spine straight and his shoulders as relaxed as possible despite the onslaught of flashing firebolts bleeding in mauve-white discharges across the sky. The soft scarlet hue of light is unforgiving against his wet skin, accentuating the slashes of every scar, pointing out with clinical precision where smoother marks had the luxury to be tended with at least some bacta and where old wounds had to mend by themselves into messy ridges.

Twenty months old now and admiringly neat, the marks from Scarif do stand out the most. They’re tied to an auditory memory that Jyn still doesn’t fully comprehend: the roar of ventilation in the Citadel tower’s shaft was overwhelming and raged like a strange, mechanical wind, but she knows the sharp undertone of breaking bones weaved into the dull thud of Cassian’s body against the railings as surely as she knows the beautiful echo of his heartbeat against her cheek.

Chirrut would definitely say that this is the working of the Force. She respects Chirrut, she might believe in the Force in her own way, but Jyn considers this to be one of the galaxy’s cruellest karking jokes.

The sound catches up with her now and she’s quick to try to snap out of it, to trail her gaze up the column of Cassian’s spine, to pay attention to the way beads of water from his hair drip onto his skin and slant down his back. But nowhere is safe, nothing is safe on this damn mission. They’re not supposed to be themselves while they’re here, they can’t. It’s perfectly kriffing practical for Cassian’s hair to be short enough to fit Imperial standards, trimmed at the back of his head with longer strands kept on top. To be fair, it works, he kind of rocks this style, especially when it’s still so wet that it looks rich black and looser than Major Imre Willix wears it by day, but—

It’s not him. Not really.

She’d be fine with it the moment Imre will get left behind, but for now all Jyn can think of with a pang of regret in her heart is the way Cassian’s hair was almost brushing against the very tip of his shoulder as he was laying down next to her on the stone beach on Lira San, the way she had spent long minutes idly brushing her fingers through those still-damp, soft strands as she sat in his lap and kept kissing him, learning the shape and feel of his mouth against hers, discovering what made him
sigh or smile or even quietly groan that one time when she gently tugged at his hair and nabbed at his bottom lip with her teeth.

He didn’t bother cutting his hair after Scarif for quite some time; at first he’s been recovering, then busy with therapy, then out of field work, and then for some time out of Imperial undercover work. He could afford it, after all. It suited him, made him look younger, almost carefree sometimes, a true child of Fest in appearance as most males on his homeworld tended to wear their hair long and often even braided. For Force’s sake, he’d cut it back to the way he wore it when they’ve first met more than a year ago, and still she didn’t realize just how much she missed that particular look on him up until now.

Jyn’s attention roams away from Cassian’s back and fixes on his hand just in time to see a soldier fall apart and a ghost of a rebel emerge from the wreckage. He curls his fingers into fists, betraying a reflection of a soul trapped inside of mission objectives that do not allow him to make a difference the way he wants and needs, and Jyn doesn’t have to walk to the window to know which exact scene is still unfolding on the square below.

She picks up Cassian’s towel from the chair and does it anyway.

Through the chaotic blur of rain the four-armed humanoid figures clad in tattered grey are living epitomes of oppression, forced to keep taking apart the beautiful, monumental ancient fountain that once was taking up the majority of the square. Three days of almost non-stop labor, and there’s barely anything left of the composition; most of it is turned into jagged pieces of carved open bronze littering the cracked pavement in craggy hills small and little, waiting their turn to be smashed into smaller bits and transported away for reprocessing.

Naorie rebels, all of them, and now the only natives who are allowed to set foot on their planet only to aid in its maiming and destruction. Rebels who dared to defy the Empire years ago and lost their uprising hopelessly in the end.

It’s not the cruelest she’s seen the Empire treat Naorie people here. Regardless, her fingers itch to reach for the blaster, to swiftly dispose of stormtroopers controlling the scene below, to let the rebels escape, to have justice prevail if only for a moment.

But she’s not here to be the agent of justice. Not yet, at least. Maybe someday. Hopefully.

She has to make a choice to look the other way yet again.

Far away, across the bleary line of the horizon, a colorful electrical storm rages where the monsoon hasn’t roamed yet. Four cracks of lightning strike into the crater of a giant volcano that fell asleep millennia ago and ignite the highly flammable trees unique to that place. Thin black skeletons of giant trees heat up in an instant, livid crimson flames swirling in a deadly dance from branch to branch and rapidly spreading savage chaos. Soon enough the entire crater is burning, the impression of volcanic eruption terrifyingly impeccable. The thick scattering of spindly branches rising up from the crater reminds Jyn of an eerie ocean of human beings reaching out for a promise of salvation.

There’s a certain beauty to this view, a primeval brutality of nature. All around the capital city thousands of tourists undoubtedly reach out for their portable cams and hurry up to capture these famous otherworldly images despite the thunderstorm. Jyn looks away one more time, her gaze coming to rest upon the dark fabric of the towel she’s clutching viciously, still caught like a helpless puppet between distress and desperately suppressed primal need to fight and make things right.

She offers the towel to Cassian. He reaches out for it without looking. His hand roams against the fabric absently and further, the motion so familiarly messy and unsure that it dredges up an old
memory soaked with hope and pain. Jyn has once done the same on Scarif, her eyes intent on the distant storm heading their way and her hand searching for Cassian’s. The touch is different this time — there’s no holding on to each other with fierce desperation — but it’s precious too. He rests the very tips of his fingers atop of her wrist, touch light and skittish as if he’s sure she’ll jerk away. Jyn holds still, not risking any kind of motion, not even leaning into his touch so he couldn’t interpret a tiniest of twitches automatically as rejection from her side.

This is what she desperately wants to say — I’m always here for you; I hate what’s been done to this world and its people and their history; we must make the Empire pay for it; I hate this mission and what’s it doing to me, to you, to us, and it scares me so, so much; I want us back and I don’t know how to get there the right way; I wish you’d help me out here; you’re so much more than you think you are — but she has to leave her honesty unspoken and bury it deep as it’s the most dreadful of weapons.

Cassian trails his fingers down the back of her hand lightly and at last snatches the towel away. Draping it over his shoulders, he closes his eyes, takes a minute to quietly breathe through all kinds of storms unraveling him during this mission, builds up all his defenses from scratch, opens his eyes and turns to face Jyn. The mask is back in its morbid perfection.

There’s no salvation until they’re done with this game and no more time left to waste today. They have mere two days remaining to access the rich variety of strategic data and make the best of it, steal it without leaving a trace for someone to follow and compromise their covers. The words she speaks are indifferent and business-like, they’re Neith to the core and everything that Jyn can and should safely say. “Time’s pressing. Let’s get this over with.”

They feel like doing her duty and laying waste to her heart.

She and Cassian walk back to their suite and datapads in silence, two lovers turned half-strangers by demands of the war and old ghosts.

Chapter End Notes

The BD-4000 droid is based upon an existing droid in SW canon. Think of it as a newer version of this monstrosity. Dear Lucasfilm, WHY? >_<
building bridges

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

From a purely practical standpoint the Sandeheim affair unfolds and wraps up smoothly in two local weeks, fifteen days standard. Of course, Imre and Neith make no promises about the governor’s further advancement in the eyes of the Empire (which is impressive as it is from where he had started and yet still woefully unfair from his point of view), but they express seemingly sincere satisfaction and compliments at the state of affairs on Naora. It’s expected and satisfies both parties; a somewhat sugary farewell goes without a hitch. They leave with an almost scandalous amount of intelligence and, potentially, a very reliable source of Imperial money unknowingly following a complex trail of shadowy accounts to finally end up in the Alliance’s possession.

The overall ordeal is far from over. The second part of the mission makes it so already, but Tehl Sandeheim doesn’t forget to provide them with a parting gift that’s rude to refuse. The ISB is quite notoriously famous for their loyalty to the Empire as well as for the love of luxury its finest agents oftentimes exhibit shamelessly. Not that it helps in actually bribing most of those agents, but it’s a show of knowledge and loyalty to the rules of the game, however inelegant.

The luxury shuttle they take offworld is another one of Sandeheim’s little pride projects. Three high-end restaurants, an entire level dedicated to a casino, and a pool; the shuttle’s passengers are the richest of Naora’s guests: some are in direct transit and some linger for a while to spend their money in this splendor while the ship is making quick tours back and forth between Naora and Dalisor.

Their initial travel plan had included a much-needed break at this time, the safeness of their ship, the luxury of quiet hours to unwind, shake off Neith and Imre and just be themselves for a little while before they had to adopt another set of cover identities. As is, Jyn’s weariness is past the point of rolling through her in waves, settled like a loyal companion in the very marrow of her bones and every dimension of her awareness; her head feels heavy, mind slow and sluggish enough for it to feel dangerous, her temples faintly throbbing with dull ache. Sandeheim’s kitschy decoration style spread all over the shuttle like some kind of permeating disease combined with all the colors its passengers are wearing feels nothing short of an offensive psychic lash. She and Cassian have six and a half hours to kill before the ship reaches its destination spaceport. In these circumstances and with all the baggage she’s carrying with both her body and soul the time so short feels messed up, a sinuous promise of pointless eternity, but it has no significance — when a warrior and a spy trade one enemy’s den for another, there’s nothing else to do but to endure and seek for opportunities.

Besides, neither of them is known for chasing the easiest, most selfish of solutions.

There’s no talking or planning or negotiation about it; they leave their luggage in their personal cabin aboard and quietly go on their merry ways: Cassian to locate the best people for strategic small-talk, Jyn to rip-off wealthy Imperials out of their likely bloody credits by the sabacc table.

Her skill persists despite her leaden mind. Three hours in and she goes from the poorest contender on the table to holding a considerable fortune on the casino’s virtual account that equals the tangible wealth she’d accumulated upon the table next to her after two concluded rounds. While players interchange and the dealer droid is prepping the next round, Jyn takes a moment to look around the giant hall out of habit on her quest for little peace. It’s a pattern in their undercover work if it allows for it, an unspoken agreement of a kind: they never wander too far away from each other and out of sight if they can help it. At least this regularity isn’t shattered on Naora and Cassian considerately
sticks to the casino level; soon enough Jyn spots him by the bar, leaning with his back against the high counter, one elbow resting upon it and a yellow-tinted drink held up in his other hand.

It’s not jealousy that sweeps through her like a slash of a knife; a lash of protective anger lodges itself firmly in between her ribs, a thing jagged and hurtful enough to drive a wedge into her breath. Her fingers curl around the creditchip she’s been idly toying around with firmly. Cassian fiercely loathes it when people intrude into his personal space or, Force forbid, touch him without permission. It’s an infinitely complicated thing for him. Jyn is still not sure if it’s caused by his spy lifestyle and knowing firsthand just how easily people manipulate and lie this way and how little trust can freely be given out to anyone, if it’s Cassian’s natural preference, or if it’s some traumatic experience that has him so wary of such affection, but the fact stands: he’s only ever at ease around her and Kay, somewhat distant and awkward and even a little cringey about gestures of casual tactile affection with the rest of the Rogue One crew, Shara and Kes, and infinitely tense about it with everyone else.

Cassian knows how to play this game, though. Sure enough, the way he holds his body is unaffected by the discomfort wreaking havoc in his mind. He perfectly maintains the expression of cold indifference mixed with a tiny warning smile, however it doesn’t stop the woman he’s been talking to from suggestively brushing her fingertips up Cassian’s uniform-clad forearm and to his shoulder in a slow, sensual caress.

From her viewing angle Jyn can see the elegant lines of the woman’s profile, the way the casino’s bright light compliments the lush softness of her shoulder-length onyx curls, and the rich tapestry of tiny silver chains that tie her dress together cascading down her bare neck and spine and contrasting alluringly with her tanned skin. It’s hard to determine her exact age, but she might be in her early thirties; there’s an aura of youth yet experience to her, and she possesses that unmistakable sense of magnetism which undoubtedly draws people to orbit her, desperately wishing for a chance to be equal to her. Jyn has had a displeasure to meet people of her kind: they rarely ever know true loss, uncaring of what’s right or wrong as they get what they want. Even the way she’s half-turned to Cassian, the side of her body flush against his arm, comes off as a power play and not at all like an inferior display of neediness.

She doesn’t win this time. The anger in Jyn’s heart melts like ice under tender human touch when Cassian, his absent-minded gaze focused on the glass with his drink, makes a show with that infuriatingly distracting, seductive trick he sometimes does with his mouth, running the tip of his tongue against his cheek, then slowly over his lips. The woman smiles with anticipation, her index finger outlining the shape of Cassian’s collarbone through this uniform and her eyes keen on his face. Cassian tilts his chin up, parts his lips a little, his teeth biting into the inside of the lower one, and fixes the entirety of his attention on Jyn.

The woman’s hand stills abruptly. When she follows his gaze and zeroes in on Jyn, the look she’s giving her as threatening as the projection of a target upon a sniper victim chest when she meets her eyes, Jyn responds with a sincere, vengeful smile. It turns exquisitely triumphant when after a very long moment of this deliberate attention Cassian casually picks up whatever conversation he’s been engaged into before with the two men at his left. The woman lifts her palm and takes a tiny step back away from him, aiming to salvage as much dignity as she can despite the bite and shock of rejection tearing through her expression.

Jyn focuses back on her game in time for the droid to finish dealing the cards again. The stakes are now the highest, and the two new players on the table are actually the men she has beaten in the first round, hungry for revenge. Yielding her winnings and losing to them won’t make do at all. She’s smart and careful, head all in the game, hungry for deciphering her opponent’s expressions and keeping tight control of her own, bluffing when needed and laying the ground for confusion with ruthless style.
She’s not startled when Cassian rests his hand against her shoulder and puts a high glass of berry sangria onto the table next to her — he’s been thoughtful as usual to make his approach known, making sure she’d spot him in the corner of her eye as he’d been crossing the hall on his way to her. Sticking beside her like a loyal companion, he stands out like an odd white convor against other player’s escorts: all of them female with delicate features, clad in revealing, distracting dresses.

“Letting your woman fight your battles, Agent?” drawls mockingly one of the sore losers from the first round, a young rich brat named Keogh Mirai who had likely never worked a day in his life, and deliberately doesn’t meet Cassian’s eyes while he’s at it. He doesn’t even bother to identify Cassian’s rank correctly from the insignia pinned to his uniform. “I’ve expected more from the ranks of the renowned ISB.”

Cassian’s hand feels as sure and calm as ever against Jyn’s shoulder. She keeps her expression impassive, her fingertips rubbing the edge of one of her cards to send the opponents guessing about what exactly the gesture is betraying. She doesn’t see it, of course, but she has no doubts that Cassian fixes his gaze on the pine-skinned Twi’lek girl by Mirai’s side, her slave collar disguised as an elaborate piece of golden jewelry secured around her elegant neck. “She’s not mine,” replies Cassian in Imre’s indifferent voice and clean-cut accent. “I prefer to be with someone without owning them,” he adds, a subtle change in his tone taking on the edge of scathing. “And,” he whistles faintly, likely sizing up a not-so-small fortune of credits and even some jewelry that Jyn has accumulated by her victories, “judging from the way things are going, Lieutenant Kailes is right where she needs to be.” Gently brushing his thumb against the side of Jyn’s neck, Cassian regards the players and concludes offhandly, “I suggest stepping up your game, gentlemen. It probably won’t save you from embarrassment, but at least you could claim that you’ve tried.”

This time Jyn needs to make an effort in order to keep a dreamy smile off her lips. Way to go, lover boy. One of these days, she notes with fiery determination, she and Leia really need to trick Cassian and Han into a sabacc match and find out which one will outbluff, outwit, and out-mouth the other. It would be a show for the ages.

(She’s fairly certain both she and Leia will secretly place their bets on Cassian.)

The third round of the game goes her way as inevitably as the other two. She could stay for more, of course. There’s time for it. It would even be right for the mission despite the gravitational pull of her fatigue and the sharper stabs of pain behind her eyes. She’d likely win again in this crowd of rich fools who’d never played a high-stake game in a criminal world’s underbelly, just as she had won that gorgeous beauty of a vibroblade she’s wearing on her hip a month ago on Nar Shaddaa. But Cassian bends to her level, brushing his lips against the shell of her ear and whispering a soft, “Let’s go.”

He rarely ever thinks of himself and what’s good for him on any mission, always the first one to choose an objective over comfort and personal needs. There’s no way she’d let this chance slip, not when she almost always has to coax him into it with great care.

They walk away from the sabacc table side by side, the gazes of other players scathing with empty, helpless fury, exchange their credits with a cashier, have the expensive wrist chrono, rings, and a woman’s necklace that one of the losers had offered as his deposit for the game evaluated and traded in as well. The final amount of winnings is then transferred from the casino’s account to a personal one Jyn had created specifically as a transfer point before it gets to the Alliance via a series of elaborate, untraceable transaction webs.

The mission is really shaping up to be an enormously unexpected success. It deserves appreciation, fondness. It could bring the Alliance yet another of their breakthroughs, maybe even turn the tide in
this war in their favor if everything goes without a hitch in the future. Just one victory in not the most strategic of places could go a long way. Morale is a powerful thing, after all.

If only Jyn could enjoy it without cataloguing heartbreak at every step of her way here.

It’s quiet when they come back to their cabin and lock the door behind them. There’s no healing or comfort she’s so used to in this silence, its rhythm all discordant with tension and those rough-hewn, shaky bridges.

She dares to make a first, uneven step forward on a verbal venture. “Any interesting rumors?” Jyn asks lightly as she picks up her bag from the floor, puts it on the long cushioned seat by her side and retrieves her datapad.

Here, relatively safe in the confines of the shuttle cabin, Cassian lets the worst of Imre fade away. He rests his elbows against the small glass table separating the seats and leans forward, rubs the side of his index finger tiredly against the bridge of his nose and closes his eyes, revealing the deep exhaustion raging through him. “I don’t know right now,” he admits quietly, his accent not his native yet, but definitely losing its distinct Coruscanti crispness. "Have to think about it with a fresh mind."

Neither of them had caught any sleep during their last night at Sandeheim’s mansion, frantically working through the collected intel and making sure they haven’t missed anything important, that they have saved as much vital things as they possibly could. But Cassian undoubtedly pushed himself harder than Jyn did during these two weeks on Naora, haunted by whatever ghosts stirring up deep in his mind and soul. Now for the first time in days he looks not like a perfect Imperial automaton, but so painfully human, the weight of the mission and all the mostly-sleepless nights finally taking their toll on him without any mercy.

“Hey,” she whispers softly, longing to lay her hand against his, yet holding back. It takes Cassian a long moment to pry his eyes open and regard her with a decidedly hazy gaze. “Get some rest,” Jyn tells him when he meets her eyes. “I’ll wake you up.”

She doesn’t reassure him with something like ‘I’ll stay here’, or offers a clarification in a shape of ‘when it’s time for us to go’. It goes without question between them, a dear constant throughout their relationship in its every dimension and point in time. Judging by the way Cassian nods, at least this stays the same between them.

He shrugs off his jacket with an almost outrageous care for a thing that has such a vile fame, but compensates for that by folding and laying it down like a pillow against the seat. He settles on his right side, facing Jyn, stretching out one arm under the jacket and resting his other along his side, his palm close to the blaster at his left hip, and closes his eyes once again.

Putting her datapad upon the table, Jyn simply looks at Cassian. It’s a testament to his fatigue that he falls asleep almost instantly, the ever-present tension in the lines of his face soothing into an expression of young peace. Jyn has accepted that their lives are never going to be plain and simple, not in the way other people usually want to live through their time. They may never be defined by any wars they’ll fight, but it’s unlikely that they’ll walk away from a battle willingly, not when it’s worth pursuing, not when it feels right to them. This path — noble and demanding and heartbreaking — feels like home to both of them, and that’s okay.

But she hopes they’ll have enough of these small moments of peace in between all the action and trials. They deserve as much from the galaxy for every time it demands a sacrifice from them, carves out yet another scar on their bodies or deep in their hearts. She’ll stand by it through challenges and ordeals, a fierce believer.
She hopes she won’t have to be alone with it.

Releasing a quiet sigh through her parted lips, Jyn flicks her datapad on and lets her tired mind rush headlong into an enormous amount of galactic news that she’d missed by concentrating solely on her mission objectives on Naora. Knowledge is power, after all. And, if she’s lucky enough, a somewhat passable distraction against the dark thoughts whirling through her mind like ugly storms.

Iedam, one of the moons orbiting Naora, is a world with a poisonous atmosphere, entirely covered by oceans. There are many places, though, where water isn’t too deep. Numerous droid expeditions had provided Naorie people with an abundance of data: detailed terrain maps of submerged continents, a variety of weather patterns and climate zones, rich geological research. It has been concluded that terraforming the moon is a possibility; Naorie, however, had neither resources nor, more importantly, desire to interfere with natural order of things in such a way. It stays untouched to this day, spilling its faint lapis glow into Naorie nights.

Qen’val is a different story. The silvery glow of the moon’s atmosphere conceals a habitable world — smaller than Naora, yet richer in resources and terrain variety. With the introduction of quick space travel on Naora, colonizing Qen’val would’ve been a breeze. Once again, Naorie people had shown restraint and reverence to nature. The only colonists on Qen’val have always been small groups of scientists and artists. The only marks of sentient presence on Qen’val have been nomadic camps and tiny villages, the only permanent shelters wrought from materials native to the moon itself. Naorie studied Qen’val, respected it, and managed it with worship of loyal forest rangers helplessly in love with nature.

That is, of course, until the Empire had decided it had a claim for owning the entire galaxy.

These days Qen’val is the only home for Naorie people, and its innocence is tarnished. The trip to Qen’val, graciously organized for Neith and Imre by Tehl Sandeheim himself, is cursory at best, a quick overview of his accomplishments as requested. Sandeheim is proud of this achievement and doesn’t trust anyone else to present it; he accompanies Neith and Imre to Qen’val’s only spaceport, guides them to his personal sail barge, programs the course he considers most flattering and efficient, and eagerly narrates his vision for Imperial prosperity in Naora system. Short as it is, the trip is enough to add a new set of images to the canvass of Jyn’s nightmares.

Quarry craters disfigure the moon’s surface like deep grooves of scarred-over flesh on a mutilated body. Spoil tips start forming close to numerous underground mines, dark grey or pitch-black mounds painfully out of place on grassy hills or lively green forests. Where industry and mining have arrived, streams and tiny rivers are a glistening fever of rainbows under sunlight, an unrelenting flow of poison slowly but surely thinning the vegetation around it and ailing once lush trees; there’s more tangerine tinge closer to the mines, crimson and azure around the factories. An inhabited zone is established next to every heavy industrial object, a tiny locality comprised of a couple buildings, sometimes a dozen, depending on the amount of slaves required to carry out the work, and they all are tasteless, alien, and infinitely out of place.

All over the place large forest sectors are methodically cut down, revealing oddly naked mountainsides. Qen’val’s biggest lake, once a legendary beauty with hundreds of green islands scattered around that Naorie artists loved to capture with infinite love and skill, is now a tiny oasis desperately clinging to life and yet undeniably dying in a polluted salt desert, its river lifelines diverted to a vast tundra plain north of the lake in order to sustain the biggest city on the moon. The city itself is an aberration. Frankly, it feels like a sacrilegious offence to even call it a city. Most
good cities are born of love and chaos, evolved haphazardly through centuries, their imperfection oftentimes a certain source of charm: narrow streets and old buildings, clashes of different architectural styles, quarters built around parks or gardens, veins of greenery twisting through the streets. This achingly grey soulless thing has evidently been erected solely with efficiency and clean-cut geometry in mind: it’s a series of five-storey buildings organized into rectangular blocks around light industry factories and separated by wide avenues of short, rust-colored grass — the only bright color in the city.

There’s no public transport coursing through the city: there’s no need for it. Every district has its own designated workplaces, shops, and whatever establishments the population requires for a relatively comfortable life. The streets are mostly deserted throughout daytime: workers are at their posts, children attend Imperial-approved schools and kindergartens; people roam the city either if their work requires it, or during their short commutes from home and back home, or during the strictly recommended hours reserved for getting some fresh air or Imperial idea of leisure for their slaves. The only constant pedestrians are little hordes of various patrol droids — finally, the mystery of Sandeheim’s failed family business at the end of the Clone Wars manifests itself in B1 and B2 droids assigned to keep Naorie people in line — and a lone transport is either a delivery repulsorlift vehicle or a speeder bike piloted by a stormtrooper captain or a rare human officer.

Naorie people are reduced to a bland mass in identical grey overalls regardless of the gender. The Empire has put an end to their inspiring individuality: use of traditional bright makeup that contrasted beautifully against their ebony skin is forbidden, just as their elaborate and often colorful hairstyles. Jyn doesn’t see much of them during her time on Qen’val; those she sees look like solid, gloomy ghosts, each and every one of them wearing a silvery stun collar around their necks.

“An illusion of freedom is important. It keeps them mentally healthier, more subdued,” brags Sandeheim with a predatory smile, regarding the dystopian monstrosity he has designed from his luxury barge. “They work a reasonable amount, allowed appropriate entertainment, and are constantly educated in strict accordance to Imperial standards. Social interactions are quite paramount to sentient beings, so they are given certain lenience in this regard.”

“Any uprisings?” clarifies Imre.

The governor shrugs. “Just a few at the very beginning. All were laughably futile, of course. The collars track their movements; any change in common routines is investigated. We keep them tied to their designated districts, with rare exceptions when work can bind them to a neighboring one; a step over a pre-programmed collar boundary will result in a stun shock enough to incapacitate before a patrol droid will arrive and restore order.” Tehl Sandeheim pauses, pursing his lips in contemplation. “The shock doesn’t leave any lasting health damage. I’ve never understood those harming their slaves. Such tactics seems like a very poor business investment to me.”

Jyn seriously considers throwing Sandeheim off his barge. She’s sure she’ll be able to shoot two of his guards before they realize what happened and still send the governor flying. The distance to the ground is less significant that she would like it to be, as the barge is sailing through the widest city prospect at mid-building height, but still, an unfortunate landing on one’s neck can result in an instant death. One just needs to aim the push carefully to achieve it. And if not, her blaster can always finish the job.

Alas, as it always is on Naora for her, rationality defeats justified revenge.

Tehl Sandeheim is native to Naora, the only son of a human businessman who had travelled here to explore his opportunities when this world had made itself available for galactic trade. For a long time humans and other immigrated species lived in peace with local population, but that was before the
Empire has risen up to an occasion of holding power on a galactic scale after the Clone Wars. He knows this world, its inhabitants, its culture. He grew up surrounded by nature and art, by gentle people who valued honor and kindness above all. It was still his idea to call this wretched city Aide-Dar.

There was a time when it used to mean ‘a dear home’ in Naorie language.

After those terrible weeks she had, the Reckless is a sight for sore eyes and a tiny cure for her restless heart. It takes Jyn an effort not to grin in sincere delight and long-overdue relief when she and Cassian finally reach the hangar bay where their ship had to wait for them after a long walk through Dalisor’s Spaceport Alpha: there are cameras around, after all, and it won’t do for Neith to show such uncharacteristic emotions.

She sighs with quiet contentment when she’s onboard, smiles when she pats Kay’s forearm affectionately on her way to the main hold.

“This gesture seems to be absolutely devoid of derision,” states Kay dubiously.

Jyn walks past him. “One point for Kay’s perception.”

“Should I be concerned for you?” the droid inquires behind her back, accompanying it with an infinitely perplexed, a tad frustrated whir.

“Relax, Grouch. It’s just good to be home,” she replies, unceremoniously drops the bag with Neith’s gear on the floor next to the table, and flops down onto the seats with a long exhale that’s almost a groan. Closing her eyes, Jyn curves her body in a thorough stretch. This sense of relief might not make things right in her tattered, fraying universe, but it still means a lot to her.

Kay, of course, doesn’t relent. His voice — loud and clear and so uniquely him — carries through the ship in a powerful echo, reminding her of how great it was to hear him complain about odds at length the moment he was booted up in a new KX-series body after Scarif. “Cassian, is she all right?”

Jyn chuckles quietly, the sound brimmed with fondness. Kay has a very special way with people. Most of the days he earns all those eye-rolls and growls of impossible frustration and dramatic head-shakes, but his loyalty is indeed something else.

The droid and the spy walk into the kitchen side by side. Cassian shrugs. “What Jyn said,” he remarks brusquely and somehow makes it sound exhausted instead of rude.

There’s still no trace of his native accent. It makes sense, though, and now is no time to long for it. They might be leaving Neith and Imre behind now, but his new cover isn’t from the Outer Rim Territories. The Expansion Region does have its rich variety of accents, but Cassian is meticulous like that, always extra careful and going miles more if needed. His Basic may not be a classic Coruscanti anymore, but it’s crisp enough to be considered traditional in central regions of the galaxy. Besides, it’s easier on a mind to have a clear divide between a mask and a real person while on a mission. They don’t have that much time to unwind, after all.

“Are you not coming?” suddenly asks Cassian, more perturbed than inviting. When Jyn opens her eyes, she finds him standing somewhat awkwardly next to the door to their room, half-turned to glance at her and his eyebrows drawn into an uneasy frown.

Force help her, if it’s an actual invitation and she’s reading it all wrong, it might be the most spectacularly stupid thing to do. But then again, while a change of scenery can go a long way to
replace a mask with actual Cassian, it doesn’t quite balance out the mess a mission can leave so quickly.

“I will, shortly,” she replies with a sincerely tired smile and drapes her forearm over her eyes, feeling a little like she’s navigating a minefield blindly. In any other circumstances Cassian would definitely suspect that she’s up to something, but that doesn’t worry her now despite certain chunkiness to the way she’s handling this. “Just need a couple of minutes to relax. Go. I’ll catch up.”

Jyn stays still like that for a solid minute, listening to the sounds of life aboard of the ship as if her life depends on it: the access panel faintly chimes, their door delicately whooshes open and closed, Kay tramples over the floor loudly and urgently. She shifts her hand away, find herself peering at the droid, this upside-down angle making Kay’s looming form look both even more threatening and yet oddly funny.

She rolls onto her stomach, pushes her upper body up on her elbows, tilts her head meaningfully to the fridge, and arches a questioning eyebrow. Kay pads backwards, pries the fridge’s door open, picks up a paper bag with takeout food he’d ordered and dangles it almost teasingly on his index finger.

Jyn nods her sincere acknowledgement, gives him a thumbs-up, and sags back down, burying her face against her folded arms. Kay closes the fridge and remarks, his tone admirably considerate in volume, “Both of you seem rather sulky.”

“The day we won’t be this moody when the Empire sucks so much will designate its victory. Bite me.”

“Must you always be so complicated, Tiny Entropy?” declares Kay sullenly. Jyn is fairly certain he’d have sighed if he had a set of lungs. “I have assumed both of you would have a better time dealing with shedding your covers. Your presence in my and Cassian’s lives had elevated many things. It was a sound theory that this transition process could be somewhat less traumatic.”

Jyn shifts her head just enough to squint at Kay with one eye open. “This might be the most polite thing you’ve ever said about me. Are you well, Grump?” she demands with suspicious concern.

“It would be irresponsible not to admit that you have your moments. Not many of them, granted, but you do have them indeed.”

She shows him the rudest hand gesture in Mandalorian culture. “I really wish I had something I could throw at you. Very purposefully, but infinitely gently.”

The strange sound coming from Kay’s chassis is what Jyn has learned to identify as his version of a mocking snort. “Please, Jyn. Your aim might be admirable, but my speed of reaction is still far more superior to yours.”

Jyn laughs. Holy kriffing Force, she did miss even this fiercely. “I guess we’ll find out for sure next time,” she declares a stalemate and flicks her gaze up to Kay’s oculars. “Thank you for getting the food. I appreciate it.”

“It is a solid idea. And you are welcome,” is Kay’s polite reply.

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“It is a solid idea. And you are welcome,” is Kay’s polite reply.

Jyn’s little shelter from the galaxy is lit by gentle emerald light, the shadows familiar and comfortable and not unnervingly murky at all. She lingers at the doorstep for a moment, her hand tight around the bag’s strap on her shoulder, and lets the view tug gently at the heartstrings of her peace. She had never yearned for a tangible place like she does for this particular room; nowhere in her life after
Lah’mu has ever felt this right and safe. Somewhere along her strange ways after Scarif this undeniable notion of belonging turned from sharpening her fear into an additional source of strength. It’s stable, it’s kind, and it’s hers even if she’s sharing it. She has a feeling that she loves it so much because she’s sharing it.

As it’s often the case lately, her peace is terribly, unfairly short-lived. Cassian is standing by his desk, leaning hard upon it, his palms planted against the tabletop. His eyes are closed, his head is tilted back, and his shoulders are sagged as if under the merciless weight of a tremendous burden.

He doesn’t even flinch when the door opens, doesn’t open his eyes to acknowledge her, and doesn’t say a thing. This silence between them feels oppressive and rotten, a thick mist of poison, perhaps even more so than it was on Naora. They didn’t have a choice back then. To let Neith and Imre still linger like two dark shadows wrapped around their minds tightly even now is unnecessary.

Jyn drops the bag again and kicks it with her foot, sending it sliding and hitting the wall with a quiet thump. The pair of backpacks that she and Cassian had already packed for phase two of this assignment is resting upon the bed, right where they’ve left them. Jyn sits down between them, her feet dangling from the edge, and plants her palms by the sides of her thighs. The mattress feels just right, neither too firm nor too soft; the blanket’s fabric isn’t smooth and slick like silk. It’s that sensation of home again, its quiet whisper in her heart tantalizing and inviting her to lie down, but she doesn’t give in.

Closing her eyes, she tries to approach this wretched situation calmly. They won’t have the luxury of this complete safeness around them after they leave the *Reckless* again, not for a while. This tension is wearing her thin, and while she’d endure it if needed, she’d prefer not to. She has an hour maybe, tops, to do something about this. But any good warrior knows than an hour could be an eternity if you use it wisely, and that it takes a mere moment to reshape any kind of history.

The thing is — it has taken them working through numerous hesitations along with trials and errors to understand just how immensely she and Cassian had missed out on simple communication throughout their lives and to find out just how strong their trust in each other has been to finally learn to voice their thoughts and fears alike. But slowly, one tiny step or a leap of faith after the other, it has become a dear habit they’ve both picked up along the way of this relationship. Sometimes it’s been born of need, sometimes of desire, sometime of the purest feeling of righteousness. A lot of times Jyn has risked revealing raw honesty out of pure spite to counteract that careful cowardice her heart had stubbornly clung to. Each and every time it was worth it. She’s learned to be quite good at it to her own surprise, trusting her words when they unravel even if they feel clumsy or dangerous.

Now this silence resonates emptily where words should be, weaved of comfort, of hope, of home; the hesitation once almost forgotten is now a haunting spirit; old fears are cast over them both like a shroud of uncertain, murky mist.

Jyn almost laughs — irony is a salty bitch indeed. Would Chirrut be here, he’d smack both her and Cassian upon their heads with his staff. Very much deservedly so.

But since she can’t wrestle the words she needs into submission Jyn springs into action in an attempt not to waste any time in this miserable status quo. She’ll either figure it out on the go or she won’t. Practicality is a virtue, after all.

She tugs her backpack open, picks up a fresh change of clothes out of it. In the corner of her eye she notices that Cassian is looking at her and quietly passes his backpack to him. She regards his reflection in the mirror while she’s shedding layers of Neith’s formal attire, notes how Cassian quickly undoes the latch of the chrono at his wrist — an expensive, old-fashioned mechanical thing
he’d lifted off some rich guy during their stroll on Naora on the evening of their arrival specifically for perfecting the impression of wealth and style for Imre — and drops it gently (it costs a small fortune, after all, the Alliance could really benefit from selling it intact), yet with obvious disgust atop the folded ISB jacket he’d shrugged off so swiftly it might as well had been on fire. His shirt and undershirt go next, dumped over the jacket on the desk. Cassian sits down on the chair and starts tugging off his well-polished, knee-length, Imperial-regulation boots.

Now barefoot and wearing only underwear, Jyn regards him contemplatively. Lingering empty like this is utterly pointless, especially as she’s still at loss. It’s practical to move on from this complicated spider-web of uncertainty, avoid it when it feels so dark and tangled. It’s even more practical to simply walk to the ‘fresher and let go of anything that’s not important to the mission, to ignore this tension in the air and the sinking drumming song in her heart, maddening in its intensity and intricacy. It’s what a perfect warrior would do — compartmentalize their heart away from their mind until the ordeal is over, worship their war first and pick up the shambles of their life when it’s safe, when there’ll be time for these wounds to scar over, when duty will be served for a time being.

Well, Jyn has never ever claimed to be perfect. Kriff the words if they refuse to cooperate. They might be stubborn, but so is she. She’s home, she’s safe, the Empire’s not watching anymore, not here and not now. And she doesn’t have to be loyal to a single language. She has a few tricks up her sleeve, and she intends to use them both.

It’s all right if there’s no solid ground beneath her feet. After all, there rarely ever was, and still she has persevered and survived, found her way to a kinder life. She’ll just make do with bridges. She only needs to know they won’t turn to dust.

Jyn picks up her clothing, balances it in the crook of her arm, walks up to Cassian and stops next to him. Taking a deep, centering breath, she reaches out and tentatively traces the elegant line of his bare shoulder with her fingertips in a skittish display of reassurance and comfort despite the fact that the gesture still feels like she’s tethering on the edge of a mistake, balancing upon a rope bridge through an unforgiving, relentless storm.

Cassian doesn’t freeze up as he did back in their bedroom at Sandeheim’s mansion, doesn’t show any signs of outright discomfort, but he’s not exactly as responsive to the touch as Jyn had hoped. He halts his ministrations for less than a span of a breath, fingers going tight around the boot’s edge, and breathes out heavily without looking up at her.

This might be the end of your home, do you realize it? You’ve known peace for longer than you can remember, had let it in willingly time and time again. You were brave, you took a risk after a risk, and you’ve emerged victorious. But no victory is forever. No home is forever. You’ve felt like this before, didn’t you? Different emotions on a single foundation. You were loved. And you’ve never seen it coming when people left you and moved on. Haven’t you seen enough bloody hints to understand that you’re not welcome, to actually spot the end nearing this time?

The funny thing is — this trice-damned hive of emotions has a right to live. Only a fool would disregard previous experience completely. But it doesn’t mean that it has any right to define her choices. She doesn’t have to like it, but it’s perfectly fine if she and Cassian are still on different wavelengths. If she has to make do with a shaky bridge, she will damn well ace it.

Jyn takes a single step back, turning around to the ‘fresher, only to have Cassian reach out for her unexpectedly and catch her hand in hers. His fingers aren’t firm around her wrist, the touch a frantic plea and not a demand at all.

She stops and turns to face him again. He lets go of the boot; it tumbles to the floor with a dull thud alongside its counterpart. Cassian leans forward, rests one elbow against his knee and runs his free
hand nervously through his hair, uncaring of the fact that it’s all sticky and gleaming from all that styling wax keeping it strictly slicked back. “Jyn, I’m sorry,” he murmurs, infinitely apologetic, his eyes squeezed shut in frustration and a frown etching deep lines of worry over the bridge of his nose.

An apology is an infinitely complex concept. More often than not, Jyn has had a wretched privilege to learn, it’s of more value to the one who’s offering it. It could be meaningless. It could be a lie. It could be the loudest drums of warning someone uses because they think that whatever they have to say next might sting less if they offer this tiny, laughable piece of respect. But it also could be a bridge into understanding.

“What for?” she asks softly, but with a persistent sense of measured challenge.

Cassian takes one ragged breath, loud enough to be heard clearly, wrought from helplessness and frustration. ‘I’ve never had someone like you in my life,” he says slowly as if every word’s an arrow he has to wrench free from his body, his head still bowed and his face partially shielded by his own forearm. The mask’s foreign accent is lost completely, the words now fully his own. “No one’s ever waited for… me when I finished a deep cover mission. The Alliance needs its soldier or spy back, and that’s all right, that’s how I want it anyway. There is Kay, of course, but he’s… well, Kay.”

It occurs to Jyn a tad too late that she probably shouldn’t interrupt such a sincere stream of consciousness. Her mischief beats her to it; she bites the inside of her lip to contain a sarcastic grin and blurs out dryly, “Yeah, he’s got a real knack for subtlety and pep-talks.”

Cassian huffs a ghost of a laugh under his breath in response. It’s officially the most sincere show of positive emotions from him in two weeks, so she decides to count this slip of hers as a decisive victory.

“This part never turns easy,” he continues after a beat, shrugs dismissively. “I’ve learned to become someone else quickly. There was no other way, not when my life depended on it, not when the Alliance needed me to be another person. The switch back to myself… now that one is a problem. Each and every time feels as complicated as the very first time I went into deep cover, and it doesn’t matter if I know every beat and struggle of it by heart now. But I’ve always managed. I’ve accepted that this is what is required of me in this war sometimes; found out that I can actually handle this kind of life without going completely off the rails and becoming a hazard to my cause. Sometimes I had enough time to sort it all out. Sometimes I had to slip from one cover into another with no time to recover myself fully. And I’ve never learned how to do this quickly. I’m not even sure it’s possible.” Cassian lets go of his hair and shakes his head, his mouth set into a thin line and eyes crinkled with frustration, his hand hanging limply between his knee and Jyn’s legs. He tightens the grip around her hand just a fraction. “I don’t know how to shed everything that’s him—” his voice almost breaks around the syllable, seething with quiet hatred, “shed all that he is and what he makes me feel completely here and now and just fall back to be the man you want, the man you deserve to be with you.”

She squeezes her fingers around his hand in a mirroring gesture and doesn’t dare to interrupt Cassian even when he stops speaking, lets him think it all through, give her some kind of sign that he’s done now. It takes him a little bit of time to collect his thoughts, but he braces himself with a sigh after all and chooses to pursue this shaky thread of sincerity he’s doing his best to hold on to. “I want you here, Jyn.” It’s louder, firmer, strength pouring into the words and emphasizing them to make sure there’s no space for doubt. “Every time I wake up next to you I wonder why you stay. I’ll…” he sighs again, closes his eyes, “ah, kriff it, I’ll probably always wonder and it’s not on you. I never doubt your decision or your desire to stay. It means the world to me, always did, and today is no exception. I will always want you as my partner and as my friend and as my lover, for however long you’re willing to stick around. I just—” Cassian’s voice drops lower, reflecting his uncertainty
without mercy, “I need time to find my way back. Sometimes I might need you to wait for me. If you can.”

Jyn feels a smile pull at her lips and welcomes it like treasure. It’s a shaky expression wrought from relief and a loyal companion to her silent chuckle. The tight, venomous coil of worry in her belly unravels, lets her breathe freely without those cold, leaden chains of fear weaved around every rib. The maddening hurricane of misery in her mind fades. The bridge solidifies, suffused with sincerity and tenacity and now promising a safe passage over this strange ravine between them.

She settles down on her knees next to Cassian, leveling with him, holding on to his hand tightly all the while and making sure it’s the only touch they share so far. It’s his choice. It feels right to honor it, let him be in control of the situation when he feels devastatingly adrift. And it’s an easy decision to make now that she’s elated by having confirmation of what’s bothering him and not operating on educated guesses, by the sense of hope revitalized and persevering beautifully. Force, understanding what exactly has been eating at him throughout the mission without error might be a victory as paramount as all the intelligence they’ve snatched from under Imperial noses without their enemies ever suspecting a thing.

The notion of words is always a complicated concept for her. They can easily be maddeningly inelegant, but they can gain impeccable order and depth when she’s basking in trust and safeness, when she finds herself surrounded by Rogue One’s absolute honesty. Now her thoughts click together like long-lost pieces of a puzzle, fitting seamlessly and simmering with steady eagerness, her sharp hesitation retreating. They may not be right, but she trusts them.

“There’s only one way to find true knowledge, Stardust. You do something and learn from results,” told her papa once, a scientist to the marrow of his bones even when he took up on a farmer’s life.

“I’d like to know that we’re good,” Jyn confesses. It’s easier to say this out loud now that she had a taste of a real relationship and had time to think about it, to imagine a future she’ll be fighting fiercely for. “That we both want to keep what he have and find a right way to do it. This thing between us is not a competition. It’s never been and I hope it’ll never be. Neither has to win, neither has to lose.”

She pauses at that to let those particular words sink in. Despite an impressive learning curve they went on in the last twenty months, neither of them learned to silence their ghosts completely. They might rhyme, but they’re still unique. She’s been Cassian’s friend long enough to realize that whatever insecurity her abandonment issues scared her with can’t compare to his grim self-loathing. To him it’s an emotion as inherent as his hatred for the Empire and his desire to make the galaxy a better, safer place. She’s seen him kill certain targets without remorse, cold-blooded resolve in his actions and righteous hatred ablaze in his heart, but even in this war people who deserve such treatment are very rare to come by. Cassian may have learned to control his emotions and make crushing, brutal choices after weighing them against the Alliance’s potential benefit out of his sense of duty, but to him even a single deed like that is a one too much. He’s never learned to take them lightly, never allowed this war truly corrupt his empathy. Most of the times he’s great at holding his ghosts at bay, but when they strike — it’s ugly. It tends to make him very thick-skulled and unnecessarily stubborn to suffer quietly, preferably alone.

(Jyn never dared to ask, but she’s fairly certain he remembers every hard choice he ever made, any victim he can acknowledge. He might never scream or even say a word through his own nightmares, but his distress through those first disoriented seconds between horror and reality is frequent enough and paints a very meaningful picture.)

Her trick works. It’s neither a miracle nor a wonder, but it’s enough for Cassian not only to open his eyes and look up, but dare to keep eye contact as well. For the first time in weeks Jyn looks at him
and doesn’t see Imre Willix at all. The mask is not gone, of course, a ghastly burden that’s undoubtedly lurking in his mind, that’ll keep casting shadows of poison for a while, but the bastard’s certainly not in control anymore. It’s the eyes that she recognizes more so than vulnerability in his expression, their darkness ablaze with emotion, disarmed and sincere, reflecting worry and edged with tiredness that’s more of a heart than it’s of a body.

(And even when days are darkest, our faith guides us to endure. Some people say wars are weaved of cruelty; that may be, but they certainly bleed with sorrow. And, however improbable it seems, amidst of all that shines beautiful perseverance of hope and empathy, states one of the latest texts that Baze had lovingly written down and shared with Jyn.

Those ancient Jedhan philosophers sure knew something about the mess of lives and conflicts.)

Now satisfied with his attention, she smiles reassuringly. “I’d like to have my lover back. But it’s only ever been a part of our relationship, and quite a late one at that in retrospect,” Jyn reminds him with a mischievous glint in her eyes. “As much as I enjoy that fun and intimacy, first and foremost I need my partner and my friend. And I’ll settle even for a hint of you if that’s all you’re comfortable with giving me now. Okay? Nothing more, Cassian.”

“Huh,” he mutters and narrows his eyes, his expression a tad perplexed. “It’s not even a compromise.”

“Who needs compromises when you can have balance without sacrifices?”

Cassian sighs, the sound filled by a much-needed breath of levity, and nods.

She rubs her pinkie finger against the side of his hand. “How much do you need me to hold back?”

He looks a little lost again, nagging his bottom lip with his teeth restlessly. “Uh... as much as you’re comfortable. But also not too far. If that even makes any sense.”

“I think I know what you mean. Either way we can figure it out as we go. But—” she loosens her grip enough to stroke her fingers down to his wrist and then back up, “if I’m ever wrong, just correct me. I don’t want to take a step too far back. And while it’s real fun to challenge you, I never want to make you feel uncomfortable. Deal?”

“Yeah. Deal,” Cassian affirms, nodding this time more to himself, and trails his gaze from Jyn’s face down her body. His eyebrows draw immediately and then arch rapidly. She rolls her eyes a little and teases him with a kindhearted smirk: it seems that her state of undress has finally caught up with him fully, now that he has some attention to spare in between his gloomy thoughts. “I really didn’t think the timing of this conversation through, did I?”

“Well, it certainly worked for me.” Cocking her head to a side, Jyn lifts a warning finger. “Just you think about apologizing for this and I swear I’ll throw my clothing to your face.”

That coaxes a quiet chuckle out of him. “That’s not much of a threat.”

So little light and yet the radiance is so powerful, healing. It’s the most at home Jyn has felt in weeks. “Do you really think that I wouldn’t dare?” she clarifies, a playful edge of sternness weaved in her tone.

“No. I just don’t find it all that scary.” Jyn makes a low growling sound in her throat for such cockiness, and Cassian hastily amends, “Okay, okay. Yes, ma’am, no more apologies for today.”

Letting a triumphant smile reign in the corners of her mouth, Jyn straightens back up gracefully.
Cassian brushes his thumb reassuringly against her knuckles and lets her hand go after all. She readjusts the clothing in the crook of her arm and finally walks to the ‘fresher.

“Jyn?” Cassian’s voice catches her unexpectedly when she’s halfway through the door.

She spins around again, leans against the doorframe with her shoulder, and looks at him while humming an intrigued, “Mm?”

He frowns a little, licks his lips, and then makes up his mind, stating gentle and clear and looking her straight in the eyes, “You’re the bravest person I’ve ever met in my life. There’s no trying with you. Fears or not, you don’t let them define you, and you always act, somehow finding a right place and a right time. It really is something.”

Jyn always had thought kind, genuine compliments to be funny, strange things: hearts long for them like mornings yearn for sunlight — still strong, independent in their own right, but absolutely thriving under radiance — yet often find themselves awkwardly disarmed when facing them. As it always is, the feeling is as buoying as it is painting gentle blush strokes on her skin, damming beyond measure on her cheeks.

(Force, she didn’t even know she was physically capable of blushing before she met Cassian and his undying belief in her.)

She tilts her chin in a tiny nod and, resisting the desire to glance away modestly, keeps eye contact as she replies with a sacred revelation of her own that he truly needs to hear and comprehend through all those loud voices of guilt and revulsion in his head, “It’s only you that I see now.”

His smile may be uncertain and tinted with that almost perpetual sadness of his, but it’s full of shy hope regardless.

It’s the most beautiful thing Jyn had seen in a while. It’s all she needed to know to start breathing a little bit more freely.

Strictly speaking, no one in the Alliance would’ve thought ill of Team Fulcrum Alpha if they chose to head back to the Home One the moment they’ve extracted as much information from Tehl Sandeheim as it’s possible. Mon Mothma had said as much during their strictly classified briefing. The thought had definitely occurred to Davits Draven as well; he analyzed the situation and chose to be quiet about this, but his tiny frown of concern spoke volumes.

No, this is entirely Jyn’s and Cassian’s own initiative, and it’s exactly what makes them both such extraordinary friends to the rebellion. A common soldier would’ve been satisfied with maps and plans and all the security protocols they have retrieved. But they — once two scrawny kids and teenagers who had eagerly scouted enemy-controlled cities and crept their way around hostile bases for their rebel leaders — know that actual reconnaissance means learning and feeling the terrain in a way that uncovers tiny details no documented data could contain and can make a difference between failure and victory, between life and death.

So, yeah, they’re heading back to Naora.

In a way, it’s almost a vacation. Long hikes through mountain ranges, rugged valleys, and verdant plateaus; strolls around volcanic lakes; speeder bike tours through wildly diverse forests with their rivers, streams, and waterfalls — to many trekkers in love with untouched nature this would be a dream.

It’ll never be a dream to them, not when Naora is controlled by the Empire’s crushing fist and the
memories of Imperial atrocities there are so fresh in their minds, but it’ll be better than all that time they’ve spent with Sandeheim. A prison still, but kinder. At this point it’s the luxury Jyn won’t turn away from with disdain.

Unlike it has been with Neith, dressing up this time doesn’t send waves of revulsion up Jyn’s stomach. If anything, it almost feels like she’s rediscovering herself.

These pants don’t envelop her legs and hips like second skin, and they have enough pockets to be perfectly practical by her standards. This shirt feels warm against her skin unlike the slick satin garments she always wore in public on Naora, its deep dark sapphire color much more functional than blinding ivory. The zip-up sweatshirt she slips into is pleasantly baggy, the inside lined with a fuzzy layer of wool to offer sensible protection from Naora’s colder nights, and its hood is just the right size not to interfere with her peripheral vision when thrown on.

Sitting down onto the bed, Jyn picks up a towel and starts meticulously drying her still-damp hair, all the while going through every beat of her new cover.

Slava Marjani is a bright young woman born in a family of scientists. Quiet, yet feisty, somewhat of an outsider who prefers to spend more time alone with her thoughts than with most people. No riches in her life, but no poverty either. A happy childhood in one of Altier’s smaller cities a hundred klicks away from the capital where she’d been spending most of her free time running around the hills near her house and hopping over stones in a small river in the valley, and a simple life, her path crystal-clear the day her parents bought her a tiny programmable droid so she could learn the basics of coding. She sweeps through her school’s curriculum in a breeze and gets accepted into Altier’s Technical University with a hefty scholarship.

That’s when she crosses paths with Helmar Seinnes. An orphan boy from Quesaya, he’s four spans senior than most in their year: for him studying here is a dream he had to work hard for, taking up two jobs straight after graduating school to earn enough credits for a trip to Altier and educating himself as best as he could in his free time over what his world had to offer after it almost fell into complete decay during the Clone Wars and in their chaotic aftermath. Somewhat of an odd loner, careful with his words as if they’re gold one can’t spill around without thought, he’s Slava’s equal in focus and ferocity for knowledge.

Day after day, they find themselves bound by some strange gravity of chance: Helmar is in the library the same time when she is; they often spend their weekends toying around droids in the lab or coding new volunteering upgrades to the university’s rich variety of software modules in the co-working space of their faculty building; Slava chooses a particular cantina close to the university’s campus to frequent in the evenings for its delicious food and reasonable prices, and somehow it’s the exact place where Helmar is bartending a few times a week.

Somewhere along the way it gets too awkward for them both and they start talking. At some point it occurs to them that they’ve managed to talk their way into friendship and then love, and neither hesitates about it.

Now, their last year of studies completed, they have a summer to enjoy before both will start working for Altier’s government, five-year contracts requiring them to lend their skills to upgrading and maintaining the various software networks and pay back in kind for the scholarship they were provided with.

In some kinder universe, knowing no war and misery, Slava’s life could’ve easily been Jyn’s. She has guided the cover story in this direction because she felt comfortable with it. A loving family, a steady journey, and a partner she feels at home with. Many daydream of this, many never get it. But there’s only one life Jyn can live, and Altier’s government is an Imperial government, of course.
She’d never choose Slava’s life as her own, even if she could.

Still, she’s a much welcome respite from Neith.

Draping the now-damp towel over the back of her chair, Jyn brushes her hair meticulously, lets the long strands of her bangs spill freely across her forehead and past her temples, and twines a pair of slightly clumsy braids by the sides of her head — Slava likes wearing her hair like this, mostly out of the way but on display, an adorable combination of awkward mess and practicality. Then she double-checks her backpack (paying special attention to the weaponry she’d chosen to take with her back to Naora this time), zips it closed, swings it over her shoulder, and, sparing a prolonged, yearning glance at the room in a quiet farewell, walks back to the main hold.

Kay is standing next to the ship’s workstation, swapping its primary program monitoring all the systems with what looks like some HoloNet page with a browser console open and his personally customized integrated development environment. Jyn leaves the backpack in the very corner of the dining seats, takes out her datapad with stolen Imperial intelligence, and walks up to Kay. Stopping beside him, she peers at the screen with curiosity. It takes her a couple of seconds only to realize that he’s investigating the application’s internal structure and prepping his vicious ransomware to be injected into its source code.

She might be loathing to admit it, just a little, but ever since Kay befriended the Imenands — a group of droids from Lira San who wander the galaxy on a light freighter from an ancient Dynamic-class family of ships, albeit heavily modified, spying over the situation in the galaxy and pulling off great cons to provide both their counterparts and Lasats with credits — and gotten into a friendly competition with them, he had really stepped up his slicing and conning games to a point when he’s beating hers and Cassian’s collective efforts with almost laughable ease.

She focuses her attention on the Alliance’s needs first, gently poking the side of Kay’s elbow joint with the side of her datapad. “We brought something for you. Time to shine, Mr. Strategic Analysis.”

“How considerate of you,” he retorts dryly, but does reach out a hand not connected to the workstation by the data spike with his palm up to Jyn blindly.

Jyn bites the corner of her lip, her expression positively mischievous as she’s not revealing all her moves and dangles the datapad a mere inch above Kay’s hand. It only takes a minute to wear the droid’s patience thin.

“Parameters, Sergeant Insubordination,” he demands like a bland bureaucratic drone, but with his trademark whiff of insolence. “Exact nature of your inquiry. Estimated time of providing feedback.”

She grins and finally rests the device in Kay’s hand. “Read through the intel in Qen’val folder. We need you up to speed by the time we have to leave.”

Kay relocates the datapad down onto the couch’s armrest by the side of the workstation and goes back to finalizing his slicing shenanigans. Jyn takes a step back and leans against the wall, hiding her hands into the sweatshirt’s pockets. “How’s it going with the Imenands, by the way?” she pries matter-of-factly. “Having fun, I hope? Not losing your face?”

“Do I really need to defeat you in a one-on-one competition swiftly to rub it into your face again?” shoots back Kay in his most unimpressed voice.

Jyn rolls her eyes skyward. “Dearest, I’m on your side in this particular contest. Are you really losing?”
Kay, a smug bastard, turns his head and tilts it down to regard Jyn as if she’s a particularly prickly toddler all the while continuing to modify his trojan virus in a separate process in his artificial mind. “I am swindling more credits from Imperial governments than any other droid in the *Imenand* crew,” he asserts pompously. His oculars flick, though, a tell-tale sign of his closest approximation to frustration. “Alas, they are beating me in volume due to their sheer numbers.”

“Arithmetic, though art a heartless bitch.”

“If this is your version of being on my side, you need to work on your interpretation of the term,” Kay retorts critically and diverts his attention back to the screen. “If you require a helpful dictionary, I can send you a link.”

Cassian’s voice weaves unexpectedly info the conversation as he offers sympathetically, “I still have the link he sent me eight years ago.” Jyn fixes her gaze on him in time to see him walk into the dining space, eyes flicking all over his body in an evaluating manner. His clothing is similar to hers, only his sweatshirt is the color of alabaster and he had put on a dark puffy vest on top of it, layering up out of habit. His damp hair is a beautiful chaos of longer strands scattered on his forehead and funny spikes pointing in every direction. “I can share it with you if you want,” he adds innocently and carefully lays down his backpack next to Jyn’s.

“No.” She purses her lips reproachfully. It’s all nice and good that Cassian’s mood is lifting and he’s generating all kinds of ideas rather than focusing on a dark spiral of his fears and regrets, but some of them just will not do. “I’d rather receive it from Kay.” Jyn adds hastily, “And, no, you cannot interpret it as permission.”

“Permission?” bristles Kay with grave offence. “There is no social protocol in HoloNet communication that is banning anyone from freely sending objectively useful information to one’s mailbox.”

“I have two words that will solve this argument for both parties.” Jyn and Kay both eye Cassian with suspicion. “Spam filter,” he states and lifts one shoulder in an innocent shrug as he’s approaching the fridge. “Kay sends the message, Jyn ignores it. And all is harmonious in the universe.”

Kay takes a step aside to Jyn, careful to keep his hand still connected to the workstation, bends his head down closer to her level, and concludes his impression of innocent conspiring by remarking in his best imitation of a whisper, “Whatever you have done to him while you two have been alone in your quarters is a remarkably good job. I have never observed him getting so talkative after a deep cover mission so quickly. Congratulations. I appreciate it.”

Jyn groans out loud and rubs her palm tiredly across her forehead and the bridge of her nose as she pushes away from the wall and sneaks past Kay on her way to the dining table.

Cassian forks his fingers through his hair irritably, emphasizing without sparing a glance at the droid, “We talked, Kay.”

“Does this particular figure of speech not imply having sex in the current circumstances?” persists Kay, not even bothering to fake a slightest hint of humble confusion.

Jyn is willing to bet a good amount of credits that Kay has actually grasped the inappropriate nature of such inquires and that he keeps doing it simply out of his perverted sense of fun. She stretches out upon the seats again, her booted feet a mere inch away from brushing the bags, and closes her eyes with a forceful exhale.

Then again, she and Cassian still make stupidly good targets for such teasing, so it’s not as if she can
complain. Alas, this one is on them as much as it is on Kay.

“It doesn’t,” replies Cassian, his voice commendably patient.

Kay is silent as he steps back, but of course it’s only for a moment. “Too bad,” the droid offers almost sadly, tipping his head down and letting his shoulders sag a little for emphasis. “Many studies have concluded that the release of endorphins as the result of a physically satisfying sexual act is one of the most effective stress-reducers and mood-lifters for human beings.”

Judging by the faint thumping sound, it’s very possible that Cassian had rested his forehead against the kitchen shelf in a show of exasperated defeat. “Of course they do,” he mutters under his breath, resigned.

Kay, thankfully, seems finally satisfied with the amount of his smartass commentary and goes back to executing his con. Jyn opens her eyes the moment Cassian opens the fridge, sitting up immediately, eager to see his reaction. It was the only plan of hers to make him feel better that went beyond the shadow of a doubt. Dalisor’s main culinary pride is its seafood, which is very convenient to the circumstances: fish is the main natural food resource on Fest, and Cassian does have a soft spot for a good seafood meal.

He rests the paper bag against the counter gently, nudging the fridge closed with his knee, and peeks inside. Jyn’s viewing angle is not perfect, but it’s more than enough to see his eyes rounding with mild astonishment, kind wonder parting his lips and then immediately curving the corners of his mouth into a bewildered smile. Cassian picks up a container with a fish and seaweed soup, pries it open, and closes his eyes in delight at the smell.

A victory is rarely ever so sweet, and Jyn enjoys it thoroughly, her smile beaming with pleasure and well-deserved pride.

Cassian puts the lid back into place, takes out the rest of the food from the bag and reverently carries two containers of soup and two flatbread rolls with vegetables and salted blue fish to the dining table. Pausing by the table’s corner, he trails his gaze from Jyn and to Kay. “Teamwork, huh?” he challenges fondly.

Jyn sits up, twists around to face Cassian, rolls her shoulders innocuously, and reaches out to snatch her food from him. “Drastic times call for drastic measures, that kind of thing.”

“Jyn’s idea, my procurement,” readily supplies Kay without wasting a beat, his tone softened by no small amount of care and pride.

Cassian sets his food down onto the table and makes a quick detour back to the counters to switch on an already filled in electric kettle. “Well, at least you’re not ganging up on me with mockery or sarcasm,” he acquiesces when he comes back and halts by the seats. He sizes up Jyn’s booted feet conveniently taking over his favorite sitting spot in the kitchen, rests his hand against his hip, purses his lips reproachfully and slowly drags his daring, judgmental gaze up and straight into Jyn’s deceptively innocent eyes.

Heroically resisting a whimsical desire to stick out her tongue in response, Jyn does rearrange her limbs into a cross-legged pose. “Slow down, spyboy,” she warns casually as she sets aside the container’s lid and picks up a spoon. “The evening’s still young and you always make a perfect target to exercise our snippiness on.”

“I’m sure you two will make me regret these words soon enough,” Cassian mutters as he settles down onto the seats, “but, yeah, I’ve missed this.” He picks up his soup, holds on to the container
with both hands while regarding it like a treasure, and says, “Thank you. Both of you.”

There’s no mistaking the reverence and gentle devotion in his voice. It’s the sound of home rising up from the ashes, stronger than ever.

When Cassian’s attention is firmly fixed upon eating his meal, Jyn sneakily offers Kay another thumbs-up. He wraps up his slicing endeavor, picks up the datapad from the armrest, and mirrors Jyn’s gesture in kind.

Chapter End Notes

Just like Naora and its moons, Quesaya and Altier are completely made-up planets with histories I'd felt would fit into the SW world. One suffered during the Clone Wars, the other was spared such a fate, but each of them ended up governed by the Empire with different degrees of Imperial control and level of prosperity.
“You need me for reconnaissance on Qen’val,” concludes Kay when he’s apparently done roaming through the files.

Jyn lifts her mug with sweat berry tea in a salute and commends when she swallows the last piece of her flatbread roll, “Bingo.”

Cassian neatly folds the paper wrapping from his roll, lays it down upon the tabletop, and props up one leg upon the seat. He leans back, rests his elbow against his knee. Jyn hides an approving smile by her mug while she’s savoring her first taste of the tea: his posture and body language are definitely more laid back and relaxed than they’ve been in weeks.

He scratches the back of his thumb over his eyebrow, his expression serious. “We suspected it before, but the intel and situation on the ground only confirm it: we’ll need Naorie support to drive the Empire away for good and hold this place,” thinks aloud Cassian and picks up his cup. “Having the information we snatched is great and all, but we need confirmation of how the protocols are actually implemented. While Jyn and I are on Naora, someone’s got to assess Qen’val personally in more detail. You’re the best fit for the job, Kay,” he admits, albeit uneasily as usual when Kay’s safety might be threatened, and takes a sip of his tea.

“Not quite,” corrects him Kay, although this time it comes off as sulky. As much of a pompous loner he is, their favorite security droid is also a devoted follower of logic and reason when he deems it acceptable.

Jyn regards Kay with a flat, but secretly intrigued stare. The corners of Cassian’s eyes crinkle slightly in confusion. “Since when are you humble?”

“Not humble. Objective,” asserts the droid, correcting him. “I am one of the best fits. Ache has rendezvoused with the Imenands two standard days ago. I would like to get Ache up to speed with my mission objective on Qen’val and modify mission parameters to ensure that both of us cover as much ground as possible and bring back more valuable intelligence.”

Cassian narrows his eyes even more into an expression of concentrated risk assessment, runs his restless fingertips against his chin, then drops his hand immediately, jarred by encountering still mostly clean-shaven skin instead of stubble and goatee he prefers, and glances at Jyn, waiting, seeking out her opinion.

She doesn’t have to think about this too much. After all, Ache — originally designated as B2-H3 — is an old Separatist super battle droid that was freed by some sympathetic being after the Clone Wars ended, managed to escape destruction in those tumultuous years, organized a small free droid movement and later united it with the Imenands. Ache has been loyal to Lira San and their droid community, trusted with handling intelligence, and, thanks to Kay’s insistent recommendations, Ache’s own discretion, and Cassian’s trust in them both, has already been procuring valuable information for the Alliance as an independent source despite never being officially introduced into the rebellion or having any clearance or insight into its structure.

Jyn lifts one shoulder in a yielding half-shrug. “Sounds reasonable to me. Ache can blend in perfectly into Qen’val’s day-to-day routines, slipping unnoticed pretty much everywhere as yet
another sentry B2. And Kay will be a pompous KX-unit-shaped thorn in everyone’s asses, control-freaking common battle droids and unnerving Qen’val’s small batch of Imperial officers and troopers with inspections and prickly comments about protocols and order. Sandeheim’s tweaks to KX’s duty roster allow for it. It's a win-win.”

Kay sets the datapad back upon the armrest and crosses his arms against his chassis, staring Jyn down with a disapprovingly flickering artificial gaze. “I will have you know that your thinly-veiled insult has not gone unnoticed.”

“But you’ll still take it because the compliment’s so sweet,” she bickers back with a quick, smug twitch of one eyebrow up and down.

Jyn is fairly certain that Kay is gearing up to voice yet another sharp-tongued remark, but Cassian clears his throat and glances down to the thin, sport version of an electronic chrono on his wrist. “Take Ache if he’s in. Planning for the trip is all yours.” He nods to the droid when Kay fixes his attention on him, hurries up with finishing his tea. “You can even ruthlessly critique our every plan when you’re back with your analysis.”

Jyn meaningfully pokes Cassin’s hip with the tip of her boot. “Now you’re overindulging him.”

“There is honor in quiet envy, Jyn Erso,” notifies her Kay pompously.

Cassian’s eyes quickly dart at her, then at the droid. He bites the inside of his cheek, but fails to keep the smile at bay completely. “As agreed originally, we’re waiting for you to pick us up here on Dalisor in eleven days. Make the best of the time you’ll have on Qen’val.”

And then, just as swiftly and unexpectedly as they’ve emerged, his high spirits fade away. Jyn sees the subtle moment when light of ease dims in his eyes as if a dark shadow has been cast, when tension creeps back into his features, even more poignant around his mouth and jawline now that there’s barely a hint of stubble on his skin. Cassian puts his now empty cup down, stands up, and busies himself with cleaning up the kitchen, going back and forth around the space while he’s disposing of leftover bags and containers, picking up mugs, rinsing them in their small sink.

He wipes his hands, hangs the towel back in its rightful place, leans against the counter with both arms and rolls his shoulders as he’s willing his muscles to relax and convey fake comfort. The posture would work well on someone else, but not on Jyn, not with the way she’s picking up the tiniest of cues. She rests her crisscrossed fingers against her sternum, waits.

There’s very little time left for Jyn and Cassian, not with the clock’s heartlessly ticking seconds away and bringing them close to Slava and Helmar with every breath they take. Cassian doesn’t waste it. “Be careful, Kay,” he says, his eyes fixed nowhere in particular upon the dark grey floor of the Reckless. “And send us a distress call if anything goes wrong.”

“I will do no such thing,” remarks Kay chidingly.

“Kay—”

The droid lifts his palm and starts counting off reasons for his defiance with his digits as he immediately cuts Cassian off. “Exhibit A: the probability of you and Jyn Erso making it to Qen’val in time for you to help me out are so marginal I will not even bother naming it. Exhibit B: the Imenands will have much better odds of blending in than you two, hence I would rather notify them. Exhibit C: sabotaging your own assignment and risking your covers on Qen’val to retrieve me is counterproductive to the Alliance’s goals and threatening to your continued existence. Exhibit D:
despite what various religions have to say, there is no scientific proof that termination of human life is not final. Exhibit E: the backups of my personality matrix and source code ensure my continued existence even with the destruction of my unit, given that you will bother to boot me up. And you will bother.” Kay pauses for a beat and then adds, “I believe that further arguments are rather overkill, given your intelligence, although if you need I will happily continue listing them off.”

The weight of Cassian’s gaze on her is a tangible thing, this silent plea a secret honor Jyn’s never expected to be granted and which she now holds dear to her heart. She licks her lips, sighs around her search for the right words. “You know me, I tolerate him enough to eagerly come back for his sorry metal arse and whoop someone else’s ass in the process, but he’s got a point here.”

A funny whir somewhere deep in Kay’s chassis is both long-suffering and positively astonished. “Your behavior is still continually unexpected, Tiny Entropy.”

The treacherous chrono quietly vibrates against Cassian’s wrist. His jaw clamped shut with distaste, he taps a finger against its small touch screen, dismisses the alarm, closes his eyes, and takes a deep breath. Pushing from the counter with his hands, he resolutely walks up to Kay, stops right next to the droid, and rests the side of his fist against Kay’s chest-plate right where a heart would be located would he be human. “You’re my oldest friend, Kay,” tells him Cassian with quiet, yet firm emphasis. “I don’t want to lose you again, in any shape or form. Be karking careful.”

And with that he drifts off and turns away, changing his stride subtly with every step so he’d walk a bit more like a youthful, more carefree Helmar rather than with sure, calm force of a seasoned warrior.

“And unlike both of you, I usually am,” delivers Kay indignantly to Jyn’s and Cassian’s backs as they pick up their bags.

Cassian blinks in bafflement. Jyn swings her backpack over her shoulders, adjusts it until it rests comfortably against her spine, and leans close to Cassian. “He’s your friend,” she whispers into his ear playfully and whisks away from the main hold.

After Sandeheim’s luxury shuttle, the Scarlet Moon is blessedly mundane. Yeah, its single passenger hold is crowded by two hundred beings, there’s no privacy whatsoever, the choice of food is a mere snack and a cup of caf served around the ship by two old protocol droids, and the only source of entertainment is people’s personal datapads, but it’s subdued and quiet. It’s the cheapest option for traveling from Dalisor to Naora, and the longest one at that, clocking in at ten standard hours. It’s oftentimes the choice of those who know hard, honest work and who’d learned innate respect for others thanks to it. Conversations around the Scarlet Moon are subdued, and when the ship enters its night cycle an hour into its flight, they drop to barely perceptible whispers here and there.

Jyn pokes at her datapad for a while, first catching up on the messages sent by Baze and Bodhi in the last two weeks and then going back to the overall news cycles and rumor mills. Soon, though, her burst of energy prompted by a short stop in her little home, a shower, and some healing conversations, starts fading away, peeling off a layer by layer and slowly clouding her concentration. The headache creeps back with its blunt pulsing and quiet drums of discomfort in her temples, and a subtle weight starts pushing her eyes closed with urgent gentleness.

She puts the device into sleep mode, quietly hides it away into her backpack up in the overhead luggage compartment, and settles back into her seat to finally catch some much overdue sleep. As it’s quite typical as of late, without urgency of danger or battle in sight Jyn’s body and mind prefer much better sleeping arrangements than a seat that can barely be inclined back. And so frustrating, somewhat childish fidgeting begins.
She’s quite patient, actually, trying out positions and giving them reasonable time, stubborn as ever to finally fall asleep and get at least some rest. It turns out that resting her head back against the seat isn’t comfortable. Leaning with her forehead to the seat she’s facing doesn’t work either and only helps an annoying pinch of ache settle like a particularly prickly veil across the back of her neck. She kicks off her boots, lifts her legs up to the seat, folds her knees and buries her face against them; it might be easier on her neck, but it’s pulling at the muscles of her lower back. She turns to the seat at the right angle and rests the side of her head to it; predictably to no avail.

Fuming with resentment, Jyn huffs the air through her nose in a frustrated, forceful exhale and opens her eyes only to see that Cassian stopped paying attention to his datapad and now is looking at her, hints of concern drawing lines in the corners of his eyes. Before she can look away, embarrassment sweeping through her like a hot wave, Cassian lifts his right shoulder in a tiny shrug and very pointedly cocks his head in its direction, crowning the not-so-subtle suggestion with an arch of his eyebrow.

Would this be any other time before Naora, Jyn wouldn’t miss a beat and burrow herself against his side. But the sting of distance between them is still fresh, still a thorn in her side, albeit a dulled one. And she always knew that healing from ghosts so deep and dark takes time. She frowns a little, biting her bottom lip worryingly, hoping that the loud question in her head is reflected through her expression just as obviously.

Cassian lays his hand on her knee, the touch gentle and broadcasting reassurance. A tiny, soft smile on his lips puts the worst of her reservations to rest.

Alas, even using Cassian’s shoulder as a pillow doesn’t lull her to blissful sleep. Leaning against him like this while still mostly sitting up is a little straining on her neck. Jyn opens her eyes, focuses her vision on a dent in the seat’s fabric, takes a deep breath through her nose, and quietly runs her mind through the set of her most vicious curses.

In the corner of her eye, she notices that Cassian puts his datapad between him and the wall. It still somewhat surprises her when he weaves his arm around her shoulder, cradling her to him tightly, and brushes his lips against the crown of her head. “Stop being ridiculous and lie down,” he whispers affectionately and silently taps his index finger against her knee.

Frankly, she might be complying with his suggestion because she’s yearning for contact and finally has permission for it rather than due to her bone-deep exhaustion, but, well, she’s only human.

The position Jyn curls up in seems rather ridiculous in these close quarters even with her relatively tiny height for a human being, with one knee close to her chest and her other leg awkwardly bent and her foot still hanging off the seat and into the small corridor separating the rows of seats, but it’s definitely the most comfortable she’s ever felt aboard of the *Scarlet Moon*. She may be missing the restlessness of Cassian’s touch — while she’d seen him lying down in close to perfect stillness disturbed only by the rise and fall of his chest in his sniper nooks or vantage points for hours in the field, in the safety of his private life with her he rarely ever resorts to idleness; when they’re curled up together and neither is yet asleep, the way he’s drawing circles with a tiny amount of pressure on her skin or mapping out the shape of her body with gentle strokes of his fingertips fills her with a kind, content joy — but his arm is still tight around body and the warm weight of his hand is sure. It may not be the perfection they’ve uncovered in touch yet, but it’s getting there, one step at a time.

Jyn twists her hand and gently scrapes the short, blunt edges of her fingernails against Cassian’s knuckles. “Wake me up in four hours, all right? Then it’s your turn.”

“I will,” he says simply, and Jyn believes him.
For the first time in days, her sleep is a blissful blank canvass without dreams.

The sky peeking through lush tree crowns is bright blue, unmarred by even the tiniest of clouds. The touch and feel of today’s wind is fresh, not biting with chill at all even at the speed of her bike. The sun’s warmth against her skin is gentle and kind. It’s all worth cherishing, worth a genuine smile.

An ordinary person would relish this without a second thought. A warrior in the enemy’s den would be aware of danger surrounding them, but would still appreciate these moments of certain tranquility and respite, for it’s not a common thing to come by on their rocky paths. A cynic would croon in a venomous, over-pragmatic voice with sugary delight that this beauty of nature is nothing more than a trap of deceit, a marvelous wrapping that’s concealing horror.

These three trains of thought had made themselves at home in Jyn’s heart ever since she arrived on Naora as Slava, and are very busy tainting each other. She never quite settles on a single feeling. Talk about complicated imbalance.

No surprise to anyone, yet another tourist information center she and Cassian reach is buzzing with activity. They have to slow down their bikes a good two and a half miles before their destination in order not to collide with a small river of pedestrians and other bike riders, a few hundred meters later the vehicle is as useful as their usual walking speed on foot. To find a legal parking spot somewhere closer to the center of the place is a futile challenge, so they don’t even bother: it’s somewhat of a miracle that they can leave them a mile and a half away anyway.

Seven days of travelling and now their fourth stop at the bike’s automated rental spots, Jyn has the routine figured out to the point of doing it without sparing much attention to the task. Guide the vehicle to a smooth halt in between railings, activate a containment field and secure its locking mechanism with a personal password; invoke the rental app on the computer panel, sync-up the bike’s mileage and travel patterns with a server, and pay a toll. There, easy, and it doesn’t matter if her skin is crawling as she willingly gives up the information about her movements to the Empire. She and Cassian are careful, after all. Slava and Helmar are using the bikes just as any other tourist would. Two rebel spies lurk around Imperial military bases that are strictly off-limits only on foot.

Jyn picks up her backpack, heaves it over her shoulder, and steps away from the bike and into mayhem. Even far from its center, the place is routinely loud and crowded by hordes of travelers, and it will only get worse with every step she takes: in every single tourist spot on Naora most of the people don’t seem to mind their distance or watch where they’re going, and the crowds feel like a river caught in a vicious storm, ripples of wild waves moving randomly in all directions. To her it’s an elaborate kind of torture that sets her nerves on edge and nags at them with potential for danger scattered unseen everywhere through this chaos. But this particular place it not a world of outlaws and she doesn’t have a blaster close to rest her hand against for comfort.

Cassian falls into step with her immediately and winds his arm around her shoulders despite the backpack somewhat getting in the way, beckoning her closer with insistent, protective urgency. She responds in kind and leans into him until their sides are flush with each other, sneaks her arm underneath his own backpack to wrap it around his waist and hook her index finger into the belt loop close to his hip. The weight’s pressing against her arm fluctuates annoyingly through every step they make, but it does provide additional leverage that’s making it harder to lose Cassian in this crowd. Chaos around them or not, at least they have this perfect sync of movements and the reassuring warmth of one another, never once breaking their stride as they twist their way through the increasingly dense mass of people.

They pass a flea market and Jyn has to force a pleasant smile on her face and play a role of an excited tourist amazed by a rich variety of exotic local trinkets. Once genuine pride of Naorie people
and the result of their artistic labor, now they’re mass-manufactured and sold here by new settlers to an unmanaged sea of guests.

The imminent need to let go of their gear before they get on their illegal merry way is certainly not improving Jyn’s already irritated and gloomy mood, and only intensifies it the closer they get to storage lockers. In case she and Cassian are somehow sloppy enough to get caught on their approach to the Imperial installation, the troopers might buy the act of two silly tourists getting lost in the forests and might not get too spooked or twitchy even if the tourists are armed with civilian blasters. Helmar and Slava are allowed to carry them, courtesy of impeccable fake permits and all, and in these woods — where lone survivors of aggressive local fauna are still known to attack travelers who veer too far away into wilderness from defined tourist paths — weapons might be a smart necessity.

It’s practical. It’s logical. There’s no escaping it, but leaving their stuff in storage lockers never fails to unnerve Jyn. It’s the fifth time she’s doing it during this trip, and the tight coil of dread, alarm, and misery is as cool as ever at the pit of her stomach. She takes out a smaller bag from the backpack filled by bare necessities for today’s journey, swings it sideways around her shoulder, and heroically resists the urge to smash the locker door out of sheer frustration.

For Force’s sake, she’s leaving a small arsenal of weaponry behind despite quite a few items she does choose to take with her. This might be the only thing these days she won’t argue about if Saw’s voice would chide her for taking such risks in enemy’s territory.

Cassian’s display of frustration is to linger, his hand hovering an inch away from the locker door absently. A warrior to the marrow of his bones just as her, the gravity of the situation is pulling at him too, especially since his primary blaster is an absolute no-go for this detour: even in its simplest configuration it’s too much of a soldier’s weapon. He might be a virtuoso at talking his way out of many situations, but he’d definitely prefer not needing to explain that particular weapon to Imperial troopers.

It’s been quiet on Naora in terms of mysteriously dead Imperial soldiers and potential rebel uprisings or acts of lone vengeance for a while. This status quo might not be what they’d want if they’re risking exposure, but it might be what’s best for the Alliance’s goals. It’s too early for unrest. Better have the Empire bask in the lull of false safety for a while. When wielded smartly, even safeness can be a deadly weapon.

Of course, there’s a single choice between death or capture and keeping their anonymity, but Jyn is ready to stick to the plan for as long as it’s feasible even if it’s not what her heart is craving fiercely these days.

Jyn bumps her shoulder against Cassian’s a little in a gesture of sympathetic support, and he finally shuts the locker closed. He glances at the chrono on his wrist, secures a smaller rucksack on his back, and takes Jyn’s hand. His expression is neutral, but his gaze is decidedly tense as he looks in the direction of a tourist path that weaves through the forest ahead of them.

She nods, squeezing his fingers back tightly, and they get going.

If everything goes well, three more days and they can finally be done with this thrice-damned assignment. Three more days and Jyn would be able not only dream about home in earnest, but find her way back to it and then beyond.

The galaxy at large sees isolation and complete independence as something suspicious and strange at best and threatening at the worst. The boundaries and secrets of the known galaxy are quite stable, and have been for ages now. The Unknown Regions are a mystery, but it’s the one that doesn’t seem
to worry beings all that much, for it hasn’t brought the threats many politicians were so dreading once.

Naora system was once a lucky place, protected by wild clusters of black holes in the neighboring systems from prying conquerors and never suffering the fate of many other untouched paradises turned into colonies by those possessing superior technology and bled dry of their resources. No, humanoid sentient life had evolved naturally on Naora throughout long millennia of precious obscurity. Isolation did not detriment Naorie people — they have advanced in sciences and technology on their own, and their quest has always been for knowledge and balance with nature and never for advanced warfare. Naorie looked up at their stars and seen beauty, studied their patterns and uncovered the physics of their sky and moons. But they’ve never looked past the horizon of their star system. Naora was their home. It was enough.

Some fifty years before the Clone Wars, Naora became a rare world uncovered by accident so late in the galactic exploration game in the Mid Rim. A single hyperlane has connected it to the Republic and so the countdown to its fall began.

The Republic had sent their ambassadors to Naora, and in that pre-Imperial and pre-war time Republic representatives were not seeking conflict or easy profit. Naorie leaders were kind to their guests and chose the opposite of ignorance. Despite their refusal to join the Republic formally, they have agreed to an exchange of knowledge and culture between them and the rest of the galaxy. Ambassadors from various worlds would frequently travel to Naora and chosen Naorie diplomats would do the same.

Soon enough, Naorie had decided to share the beauty of their world with others and their carefully-regulated tourist industry has boomed. Now it’s worth a fortune to the planet’s economy. As it turns out, the Empire can be somewhat kind when the language of profit is undeniable. Besides, it helps that wealthy and noble from urbanized worlds prefer to build yet another one of their getaway villas where pristine nature is supported by a newly-established healthy market of entertainment and infrastructure.

The world’s spirit survives almost intact in many places even under the malignant shadow an Imperial boot is casting across the galaxy. It’s in the crisp freshness of air that never knew the damage left behind by uncontrollable industrial pollution. It’s in harmonious compromises between nature’s wilderness and clever Naorie adjustments to it. It’s in the sight of a millennia-old forest, ancient trees intermingling with carefully-grown new ones introduced to ensure a balanced circle of life. It’s in the way the very first system of pavement roads on the continent has survived intact to this day, integrated into the terrain with love and care. It’s in the complex symphony whistled by flocks of tiny red birds dancing high up in the air in a flurry of flickering wings and elaborate patterns. It’s in the laziness of tiny grey-scaled lizards lying upon the rocks in packs, sunlight slanting across their bellies, and in their complete nonchalance to the passing rows of tourists.

It’s kind and enchanting and exhilarating. Jyn wishes she could enjoy it without reservations, but she knows it won’t last forever. The Empire’s already showing its crooked teeth, cutting down many paths through the forests for quick access where Naorite people constructed their roads as gently as possible even if it was detrimental to the speed of travel; it’s letting in more people to Naora’s wonders than nature can support, and where once Naorite had build narrow wooden bridges so that grassy valleys won’t be disturbed, tourists now simply trample the fields and leave brown scars of naked ground in their wake.

No, she can only look around and wonder for how long this beauty will endure and whether it even stands a chance to outlive its new master, feeling bound by her own helplessness to act swiftly and fiercely to save it.
She and Cassian will bring enough valuable intel to the Alliance to take the liberation of Naora into account seriously. Even if bringing the fight here, to the Mid Rim, is outrageous and will definitely be worrying for the Empire, for all Sandeheim’s managerial prowess this world is still largely a backwater one. Would the Alliance have a luxury of winning here, there’s a solid chance that Imperial military will not consider it a strategic enough target to bring reinforcements and drive the Alliance away, especially when the rebel assault is supposed to come here to free Naorie people and seize as much enemy vehicles, resources, and weaponry as possible for backup while simultaneously launching a bold offensive deeper into the Mid Rim to sting the Empire where it would really hurt.

They already have Mon Mothma and Leia Organa and Davits Draven and Gail Ackbar on their side in this quest. They only need to convince the rest of High Command and High Council, just like they’ve done before Scarif, only without actual mutiny. They only need to whoop the Empire’s ass spectacularly and still be as kind to Naora as possible while they do it. They only need to free Naorie people on Qen’val and, if they’re lucky, gain them an ally who could support the Alliance at least with some basic resources as maybe food and clothing and all the little things people need in exchange for protection and a reasonable market-price for the goods.

If only it was so easy. It only life could be so kind.

The main tourist path to Rakvaire lake winds through the forest like a giant snake creeping its way up and then dramatically twisting down. A half-hour walk in a rather pushing tempo leads Jyn and Cassian to the edge of the mountain valley and, of course, to a small ocean of people overcrowding the massive glass viewing platform and walkway jutting from the rock. The platform’s providing the most popular panoramic view at the valley, but since they’re not here to snap holos or photos, they push past the densest crowd and head for the descending walkway leading to the ground. Not that it detrims the sight, even if they see the valley through rare gaps in the line of tourists pressed against the walkway’s safety railings or strolling down it.

Rakvaire lake stands out from all other bodies of water on Naora, a unique concentration of minerals coloring its water into a perfect shade of glistening obsidian. It stretches across the valley like a messy blot of ink, its shape sometimes all jagged angles and sometimes gentle curves. Where winds and storms had poured it over its natural shape, its dried mineral banks are the color of rich dark ruby, contrasting brightly against the water. The trees and bushes surrounding the lake are a rich carnival of odd, radiant colors, rust and lime and azure playing off of each other and not clashing tastelessly at all. The mist of hot steam constantly rising up from the lake wanders around the valley like layers of low clouds moved by the wind, thicker in some places and almost transparent in the others.

The other side of the valley is an enormous slab of a rocky mountain, the trees running high upon it and then stretching some across the sides of the rock. The monolith is bisected by an odd, jagged arch as tall as some moderate skyscrapers are, and it runs throughout the entire slab for a mile. Inside of the arch a monorail provides transportation from Rakvaire valley and through the slab, crowned by thin yet dense strips of forest at the sides.

There was a time when this monorail took people to Haukea valley and into a magical nature-made garden of pristine white lieatina trees. Oftentimes when a particularly wild storm abated, those gentle petals would float on the lake’s surface, little tear-shaped leaves drawing magnificent patterns over the obsidian water until they too slowly soaked in the pigment and got lost against the onyx depth of the lake.

Now it takes Jyn a ginormous effort not to curl her lips in visible disdain at the sight: even laughably tiny from her vantage point, the white stormtrooper figures guarding the monorail stand out against
the landscape like accidental, foreign blemishes of ivory ink marring a once perfect colorful landscape, the ray shield restricting access to the arch simmers under the rays of falling sunlight like morning dew, and the sentry posts burrowed into monolith above the arch and by its sides are gaping scars in the rock.

It’s never tourists who travel now through the arch and into Haukea valley, only Imperial soldiers and officials of all kinds. And the lieatina trees here are merely a somber memory.

She wonders if there’s pure murder reflecting in her eyes, though, because Cassian slides his hand into hers, intertwines their fingers, and presses a quick kiss to the crown of her head as they step aside and press their backs against the rock to make way for two laughing children running down the walkway and their parents struggling to catch up with them through the crowd. When she looks up at him, she’s greeted by a soft, timid smile, but a ghost of resentment both saddens and hardens his eyes into a subtle, complicated expression.

The cacophony of mismatched tourist voices buzzes around the valley, its odd echoes drowning out the gentle whispers of the warming morning wind. The flurry of activity all around is overwhelming, feeling impossibly alien in this once tranquil nature. It’s a damn sacrilege, and it turns Jyn’s natural distaste for big crowds into an ever sharper thing, both instincts and heart aching because of it all. But she has a job to do, so she stubbornly perseveres. At this point she and Cassian are real experts in playing their roles of quiet, polite tourists, keeping close to each other, finding less crowded places to stop by for a few minutes and feign amazement by the view. From time to time those emotions are even sincere, just as her smiles are, for a heart cannot resist the allure of wonders, but the tide of sadness and discomfort always comes crashing down.

Cassian’s arm is tight around her shoulders when they walk past Rakvaire lake down in the valley upon the wooden platform and try their best to ignore the crowds on their right, trampling all over the ruby sand and destroying the natural texture of tiny dunes the wind arranged it into by the mess of footprints. Jyn’s teeth are tightly grit, but she’s forcing her lips into a tiny, dreamy smile regardless; this view is a crooked mirror that sends her mind rushing headlong to a specific memory from Scarif — the beauty of its beaches tarnished by the war and the Empire and the way she tried so hard not to pay attention to it, banish it out of heart and out of mind, for the wrongness of it beckoned her to weep with fury no less than the sad clusterfuck of her life.

She leans closer to Cassian’s side, sliding her arm further against the small of his back. It allows her to more or less comfortably sneak her hand under his sweatshirt and cradle his side with her palm, feeling the tight coil of tension in his body and deep breaths he’s making through the distress of his own memories. His response to her reassuring caress is to press his fingers tighter to her shoulder.

Things get a touch easier mentally once they leave the lake’s valley and subtly veer off crowded tourist paths, heading deeper into the neighboring forest and switching into full scout mode. Here reigns the symphony of nature, and it’s comforting. Dropping the game of pretend and finally focusing in their true mission here takes the edge off.

When at last Jyn digs up the blaster from her bag and secures it around her thigh, she takes a moment to blatantly relish in the weight and feel of it, dear to a warrior in her heart in exquisite ways even if it’s not her favorite A180 model of a pistol.

A fast-paced, hour-and-a-half-long trek through the forest leads her and Cassian eastward of Rakvaire monolith and to the edge of a narrow deep gorge between the verdant hills twisting around the monolith and neighboring Haukea valley. They stop by last line of trees over the cliff, gazes roaming keen and critical all over the terrain. A small highway stretches at the gorge’s bottom like a morbid concrete river, speeder bikes whooshing over on patrols every five minutes just as Kjelm
Sigma Outpost’s security protocols dictate. An imposing black air traffic control tower rises over the
trees at the other side of the gorge, a cerulean-tinted plasma bridge connecting the edge of the cliff
near it with a recon post carved at the side of Rakvaire monolith.

Cassian retrieves a pair of macrobinoculars (a tourist model lovingly modified by him into a military-
grade device on their journey from the Home One and to Dalisor at the beginning of the mission) out
of his rucksack and passes one to Jyn. She fishes out an earpiece from a tiny pocket in her bag and
taps on her digital wrist chrono to activate a comm frequency, still marveling a little at Cassian’s
engineering prowess at being able to turn a purely civilian device into a fancy and reliable enough
comlink and at the same time taking pride in the secure encryption she’d coded for this
communication channel. She waits until he secures his own earpiece and then mutters quietly in her
best deadpan voice, “You suck at Strongholds.”

“Very funny,” Cassian replies without ire.

“I commonly beat you in six games out of ten.”

“I wonder what a forty-percent loss ratio does to your stats, Ms. Superior Smartass,” he shrugs with
an infuriatingly calm expression.

She huffs irritably and starts walking westward by the side of the cliff at the same time as Cassian
heads closer to Rakvaire monolith. “Was that an insult or a compliment?” Jyn clarifies pointedly
when they’re both out of earshot.

“Whatever you decide,” echoes Cassian’s voice in her ear fondly. The line is quiet for the duration of
an almost theatrical pause, and then he adds, “I personally think it’s a win-win for both.”

“You’re playing with fire, dearest.”

“I don’t know. I think I’ve been pretty lucky so far when I took my chances with you.”

She smiles, even though she’s busy watching the other side of the cliff through the macrobinoculars
at her first stop. Force, this gentle cockiness of his is so much better than those sad, doomed looks
he’s giving her sometimes when he thinks she’s one breath away from walking out of his life
because of who he is or of something he had done or has to do for the Alliance. “That you are,” Jyn
states lovingly and forces her mind to fall back into its sharp focus on the mission.

She walks a good mile and a half to the west, searching and scanning fervently for a glimmer of hope
for the rest of their today’s course. The other side of the cliff is covered in trees and high bushes, but
every walkable path alongside it close to its base is traitorously completely bare of vegetation.
There’s absolutely no place to hide out there and they’ll be completely exposed pretty much until
they climb up to its mid-height in a grueling and rather dangerous long trek across the giant rock. No
way she and Cassian can descend on their side to the highway, cross it, and reach the flimsiest of
bush shelters in those narrow five minutes between patrols.

Kriff. She really counted on that.

Jyn taps on the exercise icon on the screen that is now assigned the comlink feature. “Anything on
your side?” she mutters grumpily.

“I would imagine you won’t fancy stealing the target-practice nickname from Kay.”

“Certainly. And I wouldn’t recommend this to you either.” Jyn sighs and slumps to sit down onto the
big chunk of malachite-tinted rock randomly sticking out of the ground. “I’m waiting for you to catch
up, then.”
“See you in twenty.”

Cassian is punctual, showing up in Jyn’s line of sight just in time with his promise and shifting from a reasonably-tempoed jog to a brisk walk. Somewhat sweat-matted and messy hair, a slight flush of exertion over his scruff, and a genuine smile at seeing her again as if for the very first time are very lovely things to look at. Jyn lets herself indulge in the sight.

He flops down next to her, swinging the rucksack off his shoulders and setting it upon the mossy ground next to the rock. Jyn passes her opened bottle of water to him, while he’s drinking, drags his free hand into her lap, rolls up the sleeve of his sweatshirt, and taps the small holoprojector secured around his wrist. A blue holomap simmers to life with a detailed three-dimensional representation of their surroundings.

She nags the inside of her bottom lip with her teeth, eyed narrowed in thought as she rests the pad of her index finger at the projector’s side, scales up the image to more detail, and scrolls it further to the east. The gorge sharply curves to the north roughly six miles away from their current position, and then it’s three more miles of distance to the stone bridge between the cliffs deep into the tourist-friendly territory again.

Jyn flicks the map off and stretches out against the rock with a quiet, frustrated groan. “And thus perish my hopes to get this done before nightfall.”

“We still might find some shorter path on our way to the bridge,” points out Cassian and blindly yet very deftly pries the bottle’s screw cap out of Jyn’s grip.

“Do you really believe it?” she rolls her eyes, gazing at the intricate canopy of leaves high above her.

Cassian shifts his weight to his side, plants his hand by the side of Jyn’s shoulder, and looms over her, his face suddenly very close to hers. A familiar fond glint softens his dark gaze lovingly. A flash of excitement and longing coils tight in Jyn’s heart, bursting tenderly and spreading familiar heat through her bloodstream as she reflexively glances down at his lips. Cassian bends even closer, but it’s not for a kiss. “Well, a wise woman once told a group of desperate rebels getting ready to run that rebellions are built on hope,” he whispers tenderly in her ear and, to Jyn’s slight disappointment, backs away. He’s still holding back on intimacy in a way that’s terribly reminiscent of that precarious balance in their relationship those first months after Scarif, and she still doesn’t dare to push him into it. Hiding the half-empty bottle back into Jyn’s bag, Cassian stands up, fishes out his macrobinoculars again, secures them at his belt, and heaves his rucksack over his back. “It worked out better than anyone dared to expect. So who knows? Everything’s possible.” With that he bends forward, rests his hands against Jyn’s and gently tugs at them to pull her upright.

She follows willingly, rising up in one fluid motion. “You’re the gloomiest optimist I’ve ever met.”

“What can I say? I aim to please.”

Luck doesn’t hold them high in its fickle regard this time and they do march all the way up to the bridge and to the other side of the cliff. An even longer southeast march brings them to a smaller valley with a wild fountain cascading down the steep, high slabs of rocks and turning into a rather vast, tempestuous river twisting through it.

“Well, Slava does like hopping upon barely visible river boulders,” sums up Cassian as he’s walking down the river’s edge in search for the best possible path to the other side and earns himself a rather gentle collision between his shoulder and Jyn’s fist in retaliation for it.
“Keep talking and on our way back I’ll find out whether Helmar likes to swim in mountain rivers,” Jyn warns him innocently for good measure. “And don’t worry, I’ll find a calmer spot for it. I’m good like that.”

Cassian side-eyes her with justified suspicion, but a heartfelt chuckle betrays that he’s very much enjoying the teasing.

The river’s crossing turns out to be somewhat tricky, the boulders slippery and the wild mess of water constantly hiding them out of sight, but they escape it safely and even with dry feet. They push the pace for another half an hour of walking to get away from the valley and up to the base of a mountain range entirely covered by a forest and stop for a short break only when they’re out of immediate sight.

Jyn settles down on a big tree stump opposite of Cassian. They lean with their backs upon each other for leverage and the best cover of visual ground possible, exhaling with relief at the chance to catch some rest. She stretches out her legs and takes a sizeable bite from her sandwich. The digital chrono at her wrist vibrates with an incoming message. Holding up her sandwich awkwardly, she taps with the pad of her little finger at the screen. A string of tiny letters shifts upon the screen, slowly forming up the entire message.

“From: A Loyal Thorn In My Side

To : Helmar Seinnes

CC : Slava Marjani

Subject : RE: The best vacation ever

Don’t know about you two losers, but I’m really having the fun of my life.”

She has to admit, Kay’s really committed to notifying them about his safety on Qen’val for the seventh day in a row in inconspicuous, yet obnoxious ways.

Judging by the feeling of Cassian’s relieved sigh, he’d read through the message as well. “Do you think he’ll ever run out of smart things to utter?” Jyn clarifies out of idle curiosity.

“It’s been a fourteen-year wait for me at this point,” Cassian replies matter-of-factly, but unable to conceal the warm fondness beautifully brimming his voice. “Even though you’ve roped him in for some very fierce competition, I doubt it has increased the odds.”

Jyn snorts in agreement and attacks her very late lunch with ravenous fervor.

The Ilanei range is the highest in its vicinity, comprised of a cascading system of hills that conveniently circle around Kjelm Sigma Outpost on the northeast. Alas, the closest hill is a home to another Imperial watchtower and a small patrolling station, and the next one is in range of constant trooper patrols.

As much as Jyn has always enjoyed outdoor activities, she used to quietly fume when Saw made her walk or run for hours around the island he’d claimed on Wrea as his hideout for a first year with him or so. Now she’s really, really grateful for this habit, for restlessness catching up with her and guiding her to keep up with endurance exercises. She’s going to need every ounce of her physical stamina to make it through today and still be fit for her last, thankfully much easier and shorter foray to the first ever Imperial starship factory on Naora.
“When this vacation ends, I’m going to just shut down for a solid-half-a-day on our way back, and then spend the next day lying in bed and playing *Razor’s Edge*,” declares Jyn, folding the now-empty paper wrap.

“Kind of sounds like a dream,” notes Cassian, his quiet chuckle reverberating across Jyn’s back. “Mind if I join you?”

She shifts and tilts her head back until it rests on Cassian’s shoulder. “I never do,” Jyn declares with firm emphasis, then pauses and summons her best impression of nonchalance on a hunt for some good-natured humor as she adds, “You’re a half-decent Force wielder in the game, after all.”

He really is. She’s always having immense fun wreaking havoc with her character’s two wicked short swords in close combat in search of yet another treasure to loot while Cassian is distracting undead skeletons with mischief and all kinds of hyper-unrealistic Force powers from hiding spots.

“I’ll show you half-decent,” he mutters a rather fiery promise. “Do you want to finally tackle the Shadowland campaign?”

“I’m really counting on it,” Jyn replies just a touch insistently. The game is so damn fun that she and Cassian don’t even resort to cheats, which slows down their already laughably slow progress through it considerably. It’s rare that either of them has a moment they’re willing to spare to indulge in such kind of rest, but Kay is all taunts about it when they actually sit down to play. And, as much as she’s loathing to admit this, for a good reason. He’s single-handedly beating their time on an identical chapter of the game every karking time.

Jyn is still on a mission to show him who’s the boss, if only once.

“It’s on, then,” confirms Cassian. She smiles with predatory anticipation.

Hiding the food wraps away into their bags, they head deeper and higher into the mountains, Jyn leading forward and Cassian covering her back. The forest here is denser and darker, trees just as high as around Rakvaire lake and monoliths, but their crowns lusher and starting lower, and the ground concealed from view entirely by a thick layer of multi-hued moss, fallen leaves, and thin broken branches. There are a few known paths here leading up, but they curve around the ridge in long and rather timid serpentine ways. The shorter one was in the initial plan for approaching the Imperial outpost, but since the quick crossing of the gorge didn’t work out it’s wiser to save up precious daytime and try to get around using a shortcut.

Wise or not, the shortcut is a real bitch as the terrain is rising dramatically, making the ascent very physically demanding, not to mention simply tricky and somewhat slippery on moss and leaves. By the end of the first mile Jyn’s legs are all but screaming with exhaustion and for mercy.

Eight miles remaining to their destination. Jyn carefully splits her attention between memorizing her current surroundings and analyzing the complexity and geography of their entire today’s trip, and pushes forward.

About forty minutes later they walk up to the rock formation crowning a very rare descent on this journey and immediately drop down into a blessed cover of thick, high bushes growing from a layer of fertile ground stretched over the stone. A hundred meters ahead a forest trooper in their camouflaged armor is canvassing the area, holding their blaster rifle in a decidedly assault position. Jyn’s instincts kick in: her pistol silently freed from its holster in an instant, she waits tensely like a hunter, eyes sharp on the enemy and finger ready to pull the trigger with no hesitations if the trooper comes close to hers and Cassian’s position.
The oblivious Imperial slowly but surely heads to the west. Cassian tracks the trooper’s departure through his macrobinoculars intently for good three minutes until he deems it safe, then spends a couple more minutes scanning their surroundings while paying peculiar attention to the north and the east.

“We’re in the clear so far,” he states curtly, pushing up from his elbows and sitting back on his folded legs. His expression is dark and troubled for a very good reason: the Empire’s been impeccable and predictable on Naora; a discovery of an enemy soldier so far away from their common patrol routes is extremely unusual, especially a soldier that is clearly on a mission.

Then again, the trooper might easily be one of the bastards competing for hefty prizes Sandeheim’s offering for hunting bounties.

Jyn moves her index finger away from the trigger, balancing her blaster-armed hand against her knee. Kjelm Sigma Outpost is their most prized target in this entire ‘sightseeing’ tour, Sandeheim’s most strategic, newest base. It’s the trickiest one to approach, would be the hardest one to conquer. Leaving Naora without getting the best hang possible of what they’re up against would sting like a merciless failure, but it’s nothing in comparison with the price of rebel lives it might cost.

No matter how you evaluate the risks of backing down and persevering, either one is terrible.

However, giving up is something they both consider an unforgivable sin, so it’s not surprising that they choose to continue on with the assignment. Cassian does not put away his blaster this time, though.

Jyn arches a questioning eyebrow, and he shrugs, offering her a quiet, “Bye, Helmar,” as an explanation.

Well, toying around with talking their way out of this should they encounter another enemy doesn’t sound as appealing as it’s been ten miles ago, now that the factors of risks and unknowns had suddenly skyrocketed. She keeps her blaster trigger-happy for a fight and they get going, pushing the pace even harder.

The last part of the journey goes smoothly. A steep climb onto the massive elevation of the ridge is rather punishing physically, but the thick forest crowning it provides plenty of cover and the view opening from this height and angle onto Kjelm Sigma Outpost is strategically worth it.

The base spans the entirety of Haukea valley like a plague. Supplementary structures supporting its safety respond to the needs of the terrain, but the main base itself looks like a very loud, eialite-clad _kriff you_ to the nature’s diversity in shapes and angles.

Hopefully, one day the Empire will be put on ruthless trial for crimes against sentient beings, fauna, flora, and architecture. In this specific order.

Nine tall buildings of identical height outline the space in a square that’s missing a side, connected by a series of skyways; eight of them are placed in perfect symmetry and crowned by watchtowers. The ninth building is the Command Center, the biggest and widest of them all, linked by a walkway to a landing pad elevated almost all the way to its top. On the ground four spacious hangars further map out the space in impeccable order, surrounded by TIE-fighters, shuttles and strict rows of speeder bikes and air speeders by the sides. The only points of obvious ground approach — the Rakvaire monolith and the neighboring gorge — are protected by ray shields running all the way up from the ground to the edges of the rocks.

Speaking of speeders and bikes…
“Where did a good half of patrol vehicles go?” mutters Jyn suspiciously, stretched out on her stomach upon the brown grass covering the rock and following obvious and still symmetric gaps in a standard, non-code-red vehicle formation through the lens of her macrobinoculars.

“Whatever the answer is, I’m pretty sure neither of us going to like it,” says Cassian tensely. Peeking over his macrobinoculars, he frowns deeply, regards the sky with blatant loathing, and adds in a hushed tone, “I know I already hate those clouds.”

Thick and puffy and the color of dark grey asphalt, they cross the sky with a rather menacing speed, concealing the first shades of colorful Naorie sunset with fervor. Forty percent chance of raining tonight, my ass, Jyn grumbles at the back of her mind.

One would’ve thought that sentient beings capable of uncovering and comprehending complex physics behind hyperspace travel would be able to create weather forecasts with a much higher degree of reliability and accuracy.

Alas, the universe is plenty full of unpleasant surprises.

“All the votes for hurrying the kark up,” summarizes Jyn, sits up, and zips up her sweatshirt fully against the sudden bite of chilly wind.

The galaxy, however, does not agree. Cassian spots something in the corner of his eye, turning his body a little to the left as he focuses his attention on the Command Center. Jyn drops down next to him immediately, following his lead. Commander of Kjelm Sigma Outpost Keras Brenleyt hurries through the door, flanked by two death troopers, and heads for the ray shield by the Alpha entrance in a rather punishing tempo. Stopping a good twenty meters before the shield, Commander Brenleyt adjusts the hem of his jacket, crosses his hands behind his back, tilts his chin up, and waits.

A minute or so later a faint sound of speeder bike’s engines echoes high up at Jyn’s and Cassian’s position. Very soon the bikes themselves come into view, six rushing vehicles oddly pulsating in a crimson shadow of the ray shield, only five of them visibly driven by forest troopers and the last one connected to one of the bikes by a tow cable. A pair of rifle-armed, flying humanoid figures wearing all black follows the bikes.

The procession stops next to the shield. The jet-pack-equipped figures land gracefully close to the shield, dressed in tight skinsuits reinforced with a thin, but likely durable armor linings. Their helmets are terribly reminiscent of the ones worn by the Imperial Royal Guard. The slightly taller figure walks to the access panel secured to the side of the monolith, retrieves their identichip and swipes it against the scanner. The other one plants their feet wide and crosses their arms against their chest, the air of brash superiority radiating from them in a decidedly not flattering waves.

Unfortunately, that aura, body build and language are familiar to Jyn, setting her veins aflame with flooding anger and her fingers itching for two quick, remorseless pulls of a trigger.

(“We had many hunters try their luck and show their prowess through the years,” echo Tehl Sandheim’s proud words in her ears like a knife drawing a sharp line of pain as he points to a pair of expensively-dressed, middle-aged males standing in the corner of his VIP-lounge on the arena and enjoying a smoke from a hookah pipe placed upon a small table between them. “These boys, though, set the standards and run the show. They’re unbeatable. Brought me all my champions, but two.”)

Reite and Kaite Veiledan. She refuses to forget their names until justice prevails.

The ray shield fades away. The mercenaries walk onto Kjelm Sigma Outpost’s territory first, removing their helmets as they go, the soldiers on speeder bikes following. Commander Brenleyt
frowns when troopers park the bikes in parallel and he spots a decidedly human-shaped form secured with a rope alongside the top of the towed speeder.

When Jyn magnifies her macrobinoculars to their last possible setting, it becomes clear that the odd brown blotches staining the front of the figure’s camouflaged armor and helmet’s bottom are nothing else but dried blood.

Reite Veiledan — the taller brother with dark, military style short-cropped hair — approaches the unmoving trooper and carefully removes their helmet. The corpse’s eyes are closed, the visible part of his body glove tattered where four distinct marks carve open the greying, bloodless skin of his neck without mercy. Deep, clean-cut wounds; it’s been a rather quick, execution-style death.

“Looks like local wildlife has sent its regards,” observes Cassian in a casual, remorseless tone.

“Can’t say I blame it,” says Jyn darkly and switches her attention to Reite as the man starts talking.

Lip reading may not be the most reliable source of information in the galaxy, but in the situation’s context she’s pretty sure the gist of Reite’s declaration is ‘found the body in sector six, tracks inconclusive; the bastard’s to be brought alive — the governor’s orders; your people must continue the search, but no engagement — he’s ours to capture and bring in’.

Commander Brenleyt’s expression grows even sourer with every bounty hunter’s declaration, but that’s the only show of displeasure he allows himself. Like it or not, governor’s friends and orders are not to be disobeyed unless one wants to keep their station or their head intact on their shoulders.

Kaite Veiledan purses his lips and looks up at the sky skeptically, running his hand over the cornrows of his tight braids. Exchanging a glance with his brother, he smirks and starts walking towards the Command Center, probably offering a biting, offhand comment to Brenleyt without even looking at him, judging from the poorly concealed rage in the Commander’s features, his stiff nod, and an inaudible to Jyn but definitely loud order that sends one of the troopers disengaging the corpse-laden speeder bike from the other and the rest of the soldiers climbing back on their vehicles and heading out to the gorge again.

Jyn squeezes her eyes shut and takes a very deep breath, forcing her fingers to loosen their grip around the macrobinoculars. “I’m really sorry your rifle isn’t here now,” she tells Cassian under her breath with genuine, fiery regret.

“Yeah.” There’s no guilt or discomfort in his tone, only chill of murderous resolve. “Me too.”

Neither of them would make a choice to put an end to Reite and Kaite's brutal hunts here and now even if they had a sniper rifle on their hands, not when it contradicts other, more important objectives. But, hells, the dream does sound semi-sweet.

The ray shield sizzles back to life, Keras Brenleyt turns stiffly on his heels and follows the Veiledan brothers into the Command Center some good twenty steps away, one bodyguard by his side and the other guiding the airspeeder with the body behind. Jyn and Cassian head further along the Ilanei ridge to finish canvassing the base and make their swift yet careful escape far back to the tourist center, a short ride to a nearby hotel complex where they’ve rented a room for two nights and one day, and, hopefully, some good sleep before their upcoming trip to the giant blue-sand volcanic plateau stretched between two mountain systems and now sheltering a starfighter factory in its biggest valley.

Despite fatigue, they hurry. Naorie monsoons are not pleasant things, and in the wilderness of mountain forests they can be dangerous. The sky quickly turns apocalyptically dark, sunset
stubbornly coloring thick rain clouds with a tinge of burgundy. But the storm takes its sweet time to unravel. At first it’s nothing more than persistent gusts of dry and chilly wind, turning the whispers of tree crowns into an eerie symphony of ominous souths and tearing off the canopy of fallen leaves into a ragged waltz, and a feeling of uncomfortable nervousness casting gloom all over Jyn’s thoughts and nagging ravenously at her warrior instincts with every sound.

Surprisingly enough, the nature holds on with its onslaught until she and Cassian complete their overview of Kjelm Sigma Outpost and rush down the hill. Then, of course, it catches up with a stretch of their mind-boggling luck in earnest. Darkness settles over the forest like an oppressive opaque veil and rain gushes from the sky as if someone has drilled millions of tiny holes into the bottom of an ocean.

Darting under a conveniently-placed overhanging rock formation, Jyn forgets about the string of curses forming swiftly in her mind and instead follows a glorious, complex obscenity in five languages that Cassian is seething with a loathing grimace as he flattens his back against the rock and roams through his rucksack for a rainproof poncho.

“Get mine as well,” she asks, twisting her bag so it’s closer to him and busying herself with invoking a holomap on her wrist projector. Judging by the rain’s intensity, they are in a dire need of good shelter before this storm turns surrounding mountain slopes into playgrounds for rushing mudflows.

Kriff, she’d really hoped they’ll be able to reach the system of caves at the north and hide out there, but it’s good forty minutes away. Naorie mountain ranges are rich with nooks and caves and tunnels, but they are also scattered somewhat distantly around the terrain.

The map comes to life, flickering oddly against the downpour’s fluctuating pattern. “Come on,” Jyn almost snarls, fingers swift on the projector’s controls as she invokes the info markers, scales down the map, and searches for the nearest place she and Cassian had marked in their preparations for this march as a good enough shelter.

Cassian swings her bag closed and drapes the poncho gently over her shoulders, careful not to disturb the map with his ministrations. “There,” he notes urgently, pointing his thumb to an arrow-shaped marker that just came into view, and secures the hood over Jyn’s head.

She eyes the tiny number designating distance beneath the arrow vengefully and frowns, quickly running the math in her head. “About twenty-five minutes away if we’re running,” Jyn states with exasperation and magnifies the map again, moving it and memorizing the course from their current position to a small cave nestled in the intersection between the range’s hill slopes. “Not good. But there’s nothing better.”

“We better hurry, then.”

“I second that very much.” Jyn glances back at Cassian. “Got it?” she double-checks with him, tilting her head a little in the direction of the map.

“Yes.” He adjusts his poncho’s hood and retrieves his blaster from the holster, safety and stun off, index finger on the trigger. “Let’s get going.”

The nature has gotten absolutely unhinged, the monsoon intensifying to a point where visibility drops to maybe a ten-meter range, certainly not more, and the urgent flashes of lightning don’t really help matters, bright even as they’re raging miles away to the south. The thunder lumbering after cracks of light is so loud that it makes the ground vibrate faintly under Jyn’s feet, sending cold chills crawling under her skin and burrowing into the very marrow of her bones. She wishes she could blame the chills for a dramatic drop in temperature, for the cold wind singing bitingly through her skin or cool
rainwater coating her bare hands and making her pants stick unpleasantly to her legs where the poncho doesn’t offer protection. It would be so much easier if she could condemn nature and curse at it. And she can, but it’s not what’s tearing through her every guard and picking at her memories with particularly devious claws.

Louder, deeper with its every resound, this thunder is more and more an echo of explosions, a warped ghost of war following her every step loyally. This rain’s crispness brings her right back to a seventeen years old girl, scrappy and hungry and miserably cold without credits for proper gear during a rainstorm season on Lotide or any real place to stay, a girl who didn’t even want a home because all it ever did was offer her a moment of peace and then inevitably slipped away, uncaring for the waste it laid to her heart and a new spider-web of fractures it left behind.

*Focus. Eyes sharp, feet steady, mind zeroed in on the fight. Weakness is the language of the dead*, Jyn has to remind herself every few steps, her attention span torn evenly and yet fluctuating wildly between basic survival instincts and throes of old ghosts.

With every minute the mud underneath their feet is getting slicker, turning unpleasantly viscous and slowing down their tempo drastically, and the flow of mucky water slanting down their path is only adding to discomfort and frustration. Jyn makes sure she’s not more than a few steps away from Cassian at all times and he does the same, their concentration in absolute overdrive as they try their best not to get lost or blindly stumble into some kind of trouble.

It’s easier to blame this wretched theater of dark shadows filled with cacophony of thunder and pouring rain and lighted up by the violent, colorful electricity of charges high up above for not noticing the eerie projection of a laser beam roaming around frantically across their approach trajectory. She and Cassian descend into a plain with a small but now rushing and spread out river that’s marking a halfway of the road left to the cave, and only see the vague shape of an armed forest trooper some thirty meters away when a particularly savage surge of lighting draws cracks against the sky, coating the plain with an eerie maroon-tinted light and making the enemy stand out just a fraction against the moss-covered hill slope.

The trooper must’ve picked up them approaching long before they spotted him standing in place and hunting, but they’ve been moving in a zigzag pattern to make the steep hike easier. Now, however, they’re finally close, and the lightning has traitorously accentuated their exact positions against the deep groves in greying rock formations they’ve been crossing down into the plain.

The front has been hers to assess. She should’ve done a better job, seen the danger even through this wild storm. Jyn’s heart is torn between leaping up into her throat and crashing down straight into her gut. It hurts, viscerally, more than any physical ache. It’s the language of failure, loud and clear and sweeping through her with the weight of undeniable truth in a fraction of a second.

It’s another language of the dead as well.

Two things happen simultaneously before either Jyn or Cassian can pull a trigger. The enemy soldier shoots first, the sound of blaster fire somehow standing out even through the thunder peal. And above the trooper, in the tightly intertwined branches of trees hulking over the plain, a strange, animate shadow separates from the dark canopy and leaps.

**Chapter End Notes**

Kjelm Sigma Outpost's design is inspired by [this](#) Imperial installation.
scarlet fears

Chapter Notes

There's some violence and blood in this chapter, and not a very pleasant encounter with water. Nothing too graphic, in my opinion, but I'm warning just in case.

The strange living shadow uses the trooper to cushion its landing, a pair of powerful forelegs pushing the Imperial to the ground forcefully. The sensation of her heart dropping is sharp and nauseating, a hurricane of dread and instant shocked alertness swirling in her bloodstream. Her hand quick to rest against her blaster, Jyn drops to one knee instinctively and returns fire, catching Cassian do the same at the periphery of her vision. Their blaster bolts, aimed at the trooper’s chest, sizzle through empty air a few inches away from the shadow’s shape moving in its brutal yet graceful descent.

The scuffle between a decidedly ainweard-shaped form and the trooper is a sight to behold. Her finger still on a trigger, ready to shoot at any moment, Jyn finds herself somewhat startled and simply watching the action unfold. Against the thick mist of pouring rain and thanks to distance they appear as solid shadows locked into a deadly dance; darkness pulsating in frenzy with electrical light emphasizes its brutality and insane swiftness, makes it both terrifying and oddly mesmerizing.

The creature lets go of its prey, allowing the trooper to roll over and expose themselves, and launches back to pin their legs and blaster-wielding hand with its feet and swipe a clawed foreleg through the vulnerable armor gap between chest and shoulder plates, severing the tendons. When the trooper flails their free hand to push the predator away from them in a surge of panic, it simply lashes its spiked tail aside with deadly precision, slicing the flesh through another armor gap at the wrist and pinning the offensive hand down to muddy grass. Turning its head to the trooper, the ainweard rests its leg against the Imperial’s right shoulder, puts its other paw against the helmet’s bottom, pushes it forward enough to reveal the dark body glove, and in a clinical, precise motion digs its claws deep into the trooper’s carotid artery.

One swift slash from right to left and the creature steps away, leaving the Imperial choking on their own blood, their now freed hands refusing to obey their attempts to clutch at their sliced open neck. Twirling around with deadly grace, the ainweard breaks into a swift, hunting run. It leaps over the river in one powerful motion, lands on the other side, now dangerously close to Jyn and Cassian, and crouches low in an attack position, its thin yet barbed tail whipping high up in the air with menacing nervousness.

Up and far away in the sky lightning discharges in dozens of jagged shapes scattered chaotically through the clouds, pouring light into the plain in a flickering, yet potent manner and allowing Jyn get a much better look at the creature. It doesn’t have a strict line of v-shaped patterned spikes running down from the skull up to the tail, either flattened or protracted now for additional protection, and it marks the animal as a male of its species. His stunning, bright golden eyes meet Jyn’s own, and something in them speaks to her.

*It’s always in the eyes, isn’t it*, chuckled knowingly Maz Kanata during a late night conversation she and Jyn had shared on Takodana a few months back when a mission guided her and Cassian there, and it truly is. Jyn can’t quite explain it rationally, but she’d recognized shades of pure truth in people’s eyes before — in Baze’s, in Cassian’s, in Leia’s, in the reflection of her own, in Draven’s,
for Force’s sake, and sometimes even in Saw’s, a long time ago when he still remembered what’s it like to empathize and choose a less bloody scenario in his crusade — that shaped warrior’s souls and not mindless killers.

A tiny fraction of time she keeps eye contact with the creature unfolds, ripe with meaning. She sees that dear, familiar truth in the ainweard’s eyes now, understands with abrupt, undeniable clarity that he’s seeing and comprehending her and Cassian too, that he could’ve finished them off just as quickly as he disposed of the trooper but chose to wait, that he’s not going to attack unless they’ll betray his trust and try to hurt him first.

Of course, it also makes sense that while she’s busy gawking dubiously at the creature, letting her gut feelings override every instinct to fight or flight and focusing on spiritual nonsense in a way that would make Chirrut immensely, irrationally proud, Cassian is fixating on practicality first and foremost. Which, hey, is absolutely kriffing logical, considering the fact that the predator has just straight-up murdered a person before their eyes in a span of maybe six seconds, tops.

Cassian rushes forward, scrambling to stand up and put his body between Jyn and the ainweard, his left hand holding up his right as he’s lining up the blaster’s barrel with the creature. He doesn’t take an immediate shot, though. Still, Jyn hurries after him just in case, pressing herself to Cassian’s side and clutching his forearm with her fingers. He’s still and tense under her touch, but when she glances at his hand she finds his index finger only hovering over the trigger.

And just like that world comes to a strange standstill. Breathing hard, adrenaline roaring in their veins, they simply stand, facing a perfect hunter who’s frozen in place himself. As if to compensate for sudden stillness, nature intensifies its raging storm, lightning perpetually crackling through the sky in numerous barbed lashes and the roar of thunder unbreakable and almost deafening.

The bright cast of electric light offers a good view at the ainweard even through the rain, highlighting a rough, horrifying scattering of marks over his black scales. Some are only thin scratches, but they’re covering his body like a dense labyrinth of pain. Many dig in deeper, scarring groves into the scales; two of them run down above and beneath the creature’s left eye, leaving it intact by a miracle, another bisects the right side of his muzzle diagonally. But the worst are wide, serrated marks that run through the entire level of scales and reveal knotted grey flesh with a pinkish tinge, a chaotic map of eternal vulnerability: where a wound runs very deep and damages the scale-forming tissue, they don’t grow back again.

Jyn looks at the oddly uniform set of scratches on the ainweard’s neck, curving around in a perfect circle like a collar, and genuinely regrets not finding a suitable moment to murder Sandeheim in yet another flood of shame and fury.

Under her touch she feels Cassian slowly lowering his blaster, tense but choosing a measure of trust. The ainweard waits for a moment, eyes zeroed in on Cassian’s weapon, and rises up from its attack stance the moment the blaster’s barrel is pointed at the ground. Now satisfied, the creature turns his head a tiny bit and focuses the entirety of his attention on Jyn. He looks her in the eyes again, his gaze as keen as any sentient one, and tilts his head down in a tiny respectful bow before turning his back to them both and walking away.

What Jyn doesn’t expect at all is that maybe ten seconds later he half-turns back, side-eyeing her and Cassian with royal annoyance, and beckons them to shrug off their stupor and move their assess to follow his lead with a very meaningful tilt of his head and a pointed flick of his sharp-tipped ear.

Jyn blinks, not quite believing her eyes. “Seriously?” she groans under her breath, no particular addressee in the question.
“Apparently that’s the only way you and I make friends. Seems fitting,” remarks Cassian, his tone tinted with a kind of a strange, humorously-doomed resignation made even funnier by him nearly yelling the words to counteract the violent roar of thunder.

She doesn’t hold back a dramatic sigh. “A glorious disaster, death, the Empire’s acting like a heinous bitch. Sounds about right,” Jyn spells out darkly and glances at Cassian. “We’re following him, aren’t we?”

“He might know this forest better than we do.”

*We really better not regret this rash decision*, admits Jyn grimly to herself, but charges after the *ainweard* with Cassian in perfect sync and without much hesitation.

The creature stops next to the trooper’s body, undoubtedly preparing to hoist the corpse over his back. Jyn looks at it, and suddenly gears of ugly wartime practicality start turning in her head. Imperial troopers are equipped with rich variety of valuable things — medpacks, blast energy sinks, rations, power packs, grappling hooks, and more. Each and every thing taken from the enemy is a saving for the Alliance. They’re growing, they’re biting at the Empire more and more, but Force knows that they’re still a scrappy bunch and that procuring any combat-related gear is as dangerous as ever, with the Empire and its spies sniffing around like kath hounds for such deals and low-life smugglers and crime lords looking to make profits by getting rebel credits and then double-crossing them.

Her objective now clear, there’s only one problem remaining. How does one pass this message to a big scaly gladiator-cat? Apparently, Cassian is of the same mind as Jyn. And, apparently, you do it by exclaiming ‘Wait!’ through rain and thunder.

Strangely enough, the *ainweard* stills, his gleaming eyes studying the rebel spy with suspicion. Cassian doesn’t waste time. He slows his stride, falls into a half-crouch of a walk as he’s making one careful step after another towards the corpse, his motions slow and clearly broadcasting that he’s meaning no harm, doing his best not to spook or anger the animal. It’s all nice and good, but the scars on the creature’s body might easily be telling stories of broken trust, of gentle human hands attending to his wounds only to send the *ainweard* back to arena. Sure, the Empire may not bother with human doctors, it may send med droids tend to the creatures (knowing the way Sandeheim operates that’s almost guaranteed), but Jyn is not willing to bet Cassian’s well-being on it.

However, asking Cassian whether he considers his actions a good idea is a pointless endeavor. After all, his teenage self once decided it was neat to fight and then reprogram a deadly security droid almost twice his size, and that had turned out much better than anyone could expect in their sane minds. Jyn can only trust him and mirror his approach, resisting her desire to rest her fingers against her blaster in case the animal will react poorly.

The *ainweard* tenses up more and more with every meter they cross, drops his body into a stance of aggressive defense. He bares his fangs and roars a blood-chilling warning when Cassian falls into a full crouch and risks reaching out his hand forward. “Don’t worry, it’s all right, buddy,” he reassures the creature, adamant on keeping eye contact and treating him as he would treat any sentient being. “I won’t touch you.” Ever so slowly, he tilts his body forward, shifts his weight to his toes, and at last rests his palm against the trooper’s utility belt. “That’s it.” Cassian nods, then repeats the same motions with his other hand until he touches the trooper’s backpack. “This soldier’s got resources. We can’t afford letting them go to waste.”

The cat keeps eye contact for a few more seconds and at last takes a few steps back, slowly straightening up and taking his aggression down a notch. His gaze, though, is firmly fixed on Cassian’s hands, watching them with hatred a still unbroken slave would regard their master’s whip
with. Cassian himself is busy looting the trooper with peak efficiency, and this time Jyn does arm herself with her blaster, finger on the trigger as she’s slowly turning in place, canvassing the cascade of rain and gleaming shadows all around them for any sign of Imperial backup.

A minute or so later Cassian shifts aside to pick up the trooper’s blaster rifle lying discarded in the mud, flicks the safety on, shakes it a little and holds it under the rain for the moment to clean it up, and stuffs it into an outer pocket of his rucksack. He stands up, hoists the backpack over his shoulder, and steps back to Jyn.

“There, all yours,” he bows his head in a show of gratitude as he looks at the cat.

The ainweard picks up the body in a blink of an eye and breaks into a swift sprint. Exchanging quick glances with Cassian to confirm that he’s still onboard with this mad plan of his, Jyn takes a deep breath. When she exhales they both hurry after the creature alongside the river to the turn it’s taking between the narrowing down steep cliffs and into the valley’s nook.

The ainweard, a smug not-so-little shit, had trotted up swiftly to the very edge of the valley crowned by a waterfall and had definitely gone somewhere. Balancing rather precariously upon thin and slippery edge of the rocks jutting out from the cliff behind the waterfall, Jyn gropes blindly through the water and against the cliff’s bed with her palm in search for maybe a hidden entrance to some cave. The waterfall’s roar is a mighty sound, no doubt intensified by the storm and a staggering volume of additional water it’s dumping down from the cliff, and here, in its heart, it overwhelms any other noise.

Jyn’s advance feels painstakingly slow, forcing her to hesitate in her every step and plant her feet against the rock with extreme care. This karking walk of faith doesn’t pay off. She crosses the entire span of the waterfall and emerges on the other side of the cliff, frustrated and exhausted beyond measure. Seeing that the lightning is definitely shifting across the sky in their direction doesn’t help matters at all.

They need good cover. They need it fast. She grimaces irritably, her gaze resting on Cassian’s familiar shape at the other side of the river, blurred by the thick mist of the waterfall’s spray, and shakes her head in defeat. He lifts one shoulder in yielding shrug.

A sharp movement ripples through the river. Jyn’s hand instinctively reaching out for her blaster, Cassian’s finger already on the trigger as he points it in the waterfall’s direction, they blink and see the ainweard break the surface at the very edge of the misty spray. Small waves fluctuating around him as he’s keeping himself afloat with his limbs underwater, the animal bares his fangs, calling out for them with an inaudible but definitely insistent growl.

It’s against all laws of logic and caution, but it’s not as if Force-forsaken sixth sense cares for them all that much. Jyn gets the feeling that going for a swim with the ainweard might be the most sensible course of action. There must be a reason he’s inviting them. After all, it would make more sense for him to kill her and Cassian by attacking them on the ground rather than inviting them to drown, and he’d had a very solid opportunity to swipe his claws against Cassian’s neck when he was busy looting the trooper. Then again, he did run off with the dead Imperial and now the body is nowhere to be found.

“Oh, what the hell,” she curses under her breath and spreads her arms wide, broadcasting her consent to his mad endeavor to Cassian.

He nods, and they both hurry into the water.
The *ainweard* growls again, this time turning to Jyn and shaking his head vigorously. She stops, knee-deep in the river, her jaw tight and her eyebrows quizzically frowned. Now satisfied, the creature turns to Cassian and beckons him to come closer with a tilt of head.

This obvious requirement of following him one-by-one unnerves a warrior in Jyn’s heart, but does nothing to that damn feeling of trust rooted deep. She rests her hand against her kyber on instinct. The tip of the *ainweard*’s ear trembles once and he turns his muzzle to face her again. His eyes dart to her cradling the crystal first, then up to her eyes, and he bows his head in that strange acknowledging nod of his, so poignantly sentient and not minding at all that it submerges half of his muzzle underwater for a moment.

Jyn drops her hand back down, but curls her fingers into a tight fist and slowly, meaningfully diverts her gaze to Cassian. *I may trust you, but there’ll be damnation to pay if you hurt him*, it means, and a sudden seriousness settles on the creature’s muzzle as he shuts his jaw closed, broadcasting respectful understanding and acceptance.

Watching this infinitely odd (and definitely wacky) exchange with narrowed, skeptical eyes, Cassian purses his lips, and, making a few more steps towards the creature, starts swimming. The *ainweard* waits patiently until Cassian reaches him, then opens its mouth and imitates deep, hard pants for breath.

Deep down into unknown beyond it is. Jyn isn’t sure if she wants to laugh or cry out with ironic disbelief.

Registering Cassian nodding again in understanding, the creature turns away, heads close to the fountain’s spray, and dives in, his thorny tail failing over the water at the safe distance away from Cassian before disappearing out of sight. Cassian rolls his eyes, proceeds to sigh stoically, then take as deep of a breath as possible, hold it, and dive under too.

Jyn moves backwards, steps slow and infinitely careful, eyes trained on the waterfall in waiting for the creature to emerge again, to come back for her. The wind seems stronger now, chilling to the bone and so insistently it’s almost beckoning her to move in sync with it, and it drags lightning discharges even closer to her. It’s getting precariously risky to stay in the water in such weather, and the rain’s not making matters easier. The edge between the river and the grass plain is still visible, but it’s getting blurrier by the moment, the influx of mud from the surrounding hills starting to pour down the slopes in earnest.

The side of her foot brushes against something solid. Darting her gaze down, Jyn finds a small rock next to her foot, barely sticking out from the grass and mud upon the river bank. It’s narrow enough that she can barely rest both of her feet upon it, but it’s something. Stepping upon it, Jyn waits.

Her mind zeroes in on counting down every single second diligently, one hand still curled into a fist and the fingers of her other one hammering an absent rhythm against her thigh tensely. A minute passes, then two, and each passing moment feels longer than its predecessor, time stretching beyond any laws of physics. The storm doesn’t want to subside at all.

*Oh, child, will you ever learn? Careless! Reckless! Alone!* Saw’s voice snaps in her ears, thick with resentment and teeming with disappointment. The bellowing thunder feels almost like pressure now, reverberating in her bones and veins, a churning dead weight in her skull. Its every crack stings with danger, with helplessness, with old memories of lives laid to waste by both Saw and the Empire. Mad flashes of intensifying light sting, burning wild blots of white and pink and greyish-violet flickers into Jyn’s vision. She squeezes her eyes shut, soul aflame with a different kind of storm, hand now on the handle of her blaster, and yet still counts down the time.
Five minutes. A damning eternity of fear.

A splash of water breaks through the storm’s brutal symphony, a blessing in dark disguise. Jyn opens her eyes in time to see the ainweard emerge around the same spot as he did once before, not wasting a beat in growling inaudibly in an urgent call for her.

Hope and trust. Wonderful concepts: beautiful, powerful, persevering no matter what if you let them. But they’re also unexplainably bitchy. Force, if this is what kills her, it’s going to be one of the most absurd ends on galactic history.

Jyn slots the weapon back into its holster and rushes headlong into the water. She reaches the animal in a hurry, takes a deep breath, and dives in first. Underwater visibility now is close to nil despite the frantic cast of pulsing light above, but Jyn still notices that darkness beneath her gets even more ominous and thicker after a few long strokes. Swimming forward will only lead her to the cliff, but that’s exactly what she tries, aiming for at least a sense of navigational familiarity in such conditions.

Her heart somersaults nauseatingly when a weight rests at the back of her neck and guides her to swim down. It feels like the ainweard’s paw, but his claws are definitely sheathed, and while he’s insistent, the pressure disappears in an instant. It’s a helpful cue, not an attempt to keep her down. He asks for a lot of trust, but he tries his best to be worthy of it. Jyn follows his advice, and the creature touches her only when he wants her to adjust her course.

She’s underwater for good thirty seconds, now deep into the sinkhole burrowing deep into the ground underneath the waterfall, when the lack of oxygen is slowly starting to make itself known, cold whispers of fear creeping into her mind like tendrils of poison. Dim flashes of light were flickering in the corners of her vision, tiny imprints of lightning pouring ghosts of luminosity and reminding her of the way a lantern was dying in her hands in the cave on Lah’mu, but even they are gone now, plunging her deep into lonely, suffocating darkness. The water is cold, a liquid veil enveloping her body with biting chill, seeping under her skin, into her bones and bloodstream like a sharp winter’s frost. Her muscles burn with exertion, the toll of the day’s exhaustion amplified beyond measure by the weight of her wet clothing and the bag floating by her side, pulling down lightly.

No matter how thick the darkness is, there’s always a path through it, and there’s always light, mama told her once, and it’s the lesson that survived every single trial Jyn’s heart has ever been put through.

She cannot waver, cannot let her terror win, so she pushes on, swimming in increasingly desperate but still broad strokes even further down the cavern.

The ainweard closes in on Jyn, curling his paw around her ankle, gently tugging at it in an attempt to slow her down. She needs air, almost desperately so, and her every instinct bellows that it’s no time for stopping, but she forces herself to obey. The creature lets go of her leg the moment she stops moving forward, floating aimlessly underwater. Momentum careens him into her, but soon they’re floating in place side by side. He nudges Jyn’s body to the right with his weight, slow and careful as if lining her up against something. Then he reaches forward with one broad stroke. She mimics his movement, helps herself out with her feet. Her body glides through the water, hand outstretched forward for the next stroke, and all of a sudden her fingertips brush against the rocky cliff.

When Jyn brings her right hand forward, her fingers tread through the water. Feet working hard to keep her away from plunging to the bottom, she blindly gropes with both hands against rock and water, searching for the dimension of the opening frantically. Another nudge by the ainweard and both of her hands touch the edges of the gorge fracturing the cliff.
She pushes herself into the gap. It’s narrow, claustrophobically so, and she ends up in a strange floating crawl through the tunnel horizontally, propelling herself forward by resting her feet against the gorge in search of purchase and hauling her body forward with her hands and arms.

A promising glimmer of yellowish light at the edge of the tunnel catches her attention. It’s so faint at first that it almost seems like a false hope, like a last cruel joke conjured up by her fading mind before plunging into unconsciousness. But if it’s a joke, it’s a terribly resilient one, with light intensifying in response to every meter Jyn’s crossing.

By the time she’s clear off the gorge, Jyn’s lungs are contracting desperately for air they cannot get. Her last few strokes upwards are barely coordinated and frantic, her vision shrouded by darkness despite the tantalizingly close light just a fraction out of reach. When she finally, blessedly breaks the surface and gulps in precious air in a greedy, shuddering breath, a human-shaped hand locks around her forearm like a vise and heaves her through the water. Too focused on a simple act of breathing and barely thinking straight, she lets herself be hauled. Her fingertips brush against the edge of the sinkhole. The hand dragging her slows down, making sure she doesn’t slam into the rock and instead gently comes to rest against it.

“That’s it, Jyn,” murmurs Cassian through the dark thunder of her heartbeat pulsing maddeningly in her ears and skull, his voice a lullaby of light, and when he pulls her up, she instinctively rests her feet against the cliff and, finding the purchase, pushes her body up to help him. When she’s clear out of the water, he flops back down onto the rocks, tugs her into his lap, and wraps his arms around her in a frantic, almost crashing hug. “It’s safe. You’re all right. Just breathe,” he rests his forehead against the crown of her head and whispers into her ear, his breath hot against her skin. One of his arms is curled up tightly against her back, his hand caressing her side back and forth with strangely soothing desperation. His other hand is pressed tightly against the back of her neck.

The touch is cold and wet against a thin strip of skin between her hairline and the collar of her poncho, but she wouldn’t trade this sensation for any amount of riches in the galaxy. It’s familiar, it’s steady, and it’s a safe haven in a mad world of storms, war, and near-death.

Her chest is still burning, the influx of air spreading like a divine blessing through her bloodstream, but it doesn’t alleviate stress and exhaustion one bit. Eyes drifting closed, Jyn forces them to obey her, to focus on her surroundings first and rest later. Her new shelter is a small cave, more than a half of it taken over by the sinkhole. The ceiling hangs low here — Cassian will barely be able to straighten up to his full height without brushing the crown of his head against those sparsely glowing veiny mushrooms littering the rocks above. A narrow tunnel fissures into the cavern behind Cassian’s back, an uneven scattering of mushrooms on its walls and ceiling framing its narrow dimensions and seeming depth.

A loud splash of water conquers Jyn attention. She turns her head a little, squinting in the ainweard’s direction. The creature gets out of the sinkhole with unruffled grace and shakes the water off his scaly body in a very dog-like motion.

A tiny shower of droplets reaches her and Cassian’s way, lands on the side of her face like the gentlest of rains. She hears Cassian chuckle, feels an unexpected chortle resonate deep in her chest as well, a lively huff of levity escaping off her parted lips. The thunder and lightning cannot touch her now, wander only in echoes of memories, and finally she can rest with a light heart, just for a little while. Jyn winds her arms underneath Cassian’s, presses her palms tight and flat against his shoulder blades, buries her face into the juncture between his neck and shoulder, and closes her eyes.

It takes her some time to come down from the adrenaline rush, for her heart to seize leaping in her chest in a way that feels precariously close to bruising her ribs from the inside. But the cave is deep
underground and damp, and it’s certainly not a gift to the chill aching through her body in miserable shivers. However, now that she’s focusing more on sensory feedback than on the memories of the storm and exertion and oxygen deprivation, it only points out that something warm is coating her fingertips, slanting down her palm in a slicky motion.

Fear and alarm twist in her gut like an odd pair of intertwined razor-sharp snakes. Jyn jolts into action, leaning away from Cassian jerkily and raising her right hand just enough to be able to squint at it over his shoulder. Rancor’s rotten breath, it may look slightly pinkish against the beads of water on her skin all it wants, but that is most certainly an offensively liberal amount of blood.

The sizzle of the dead trooper’s blaster fire lurches through Jyn’s memory, the ice seizing her heart having nothing to do with the chill reverberating in goosebumps on her skin. *There are no excuses upon the path of war; you do your best no matter what, for death follows like a shadow and will have a feast if you slip up,* lashes a multi-layered voice in her mind, in her heart, in her very soul, in her kyber’s pulse accentuating every syllable. It’s Saw’s once gruff instruction, only laden with biting chagrin. It’s her own sorrowful wail, fraught with dread.

And along with it: *how did I not see it? Kriff you, why haven’t you told me?*

She leans away even more, giving herself some space. Hands quick as mercury, she’s running her fingers across both sides of Cassian’s right shoulder in an unceremonious search for the wound.

“Hey, it’s all right. Don’t fret, I’m―”

Damn it all straight into a rathtar’s maw, Jyn’s fairly certain that she loves him, but it’s the shit like this that sometimes makes her hands dangerously itchy to punch some sense into Cassian’s thick skull.

“I dare you to finish that sentence,” she snaps and cuts him off, her tone crisp and not nurturing at all. Words feel barbed in her throat, on her tongue, bitter with dark failure.

He leaves the darn word ‘fine’ unspoken, but it doesn’t feel like a victory to Jyn by any measure. Her fingers feel too clumsy, trembling almost uncontrollably and strangely weak, and she’s not sure it’s because she’s still shivering from cold or if it’s her fear rendering her crippling useless. Still, she locates the blaster wound soon enough, following the warmish trail of blood against the poncho’s slick fabric right to a tear slicing through it precariously close to Cassian’s neck.

His fingers curl around her hand and hold it in place, not letting her prod around the injury. Jyn snarls in annoyance despite having the other hand free, thrashes around weakly, but Cassian rests his right palm against her knee, runs it up to her thigh in a comforting caress, and bends his head down to press his mouth to her forehead.

“Jyn,” he says against her skin, making so short a name sound so expressive in a quaint dichotomy between a stern soldier demanding attention and a caring lover offering consolation. He leans back, lifts his hand from her thigh and nudges her chin up with his thumb. “Look at me.” It’s a gentle order, devoid of dangerous breathlessness of voice or even tiniest strain of agony.

It doesn’t silence a violent hive of raw emotions swirling through her heart and mind, but it takes her fear down a notch. Jyn obeys, gaze raking over Cassian’s features in ravenous search for deception. But no, he’s wearing emotions bare on his face. Tightness is settled in his jaw, clamped shut in stoic discomfort, and his frown is born of pain, but his eyes are sharp and focused and not hazy at all with glassy shock, instead revealing a ghost of sadness and a shadow of guilt. His touch is firm, nothing like the way he’d been holding on to her on Scarif with fading vestiges of strength and life.
Cassian brushes the side of his index finger against Jyn’s cheekbone, leaving a faint smudge of his own blood on her skin. “The shot missed the bones and major blood vessels. I can move my arm just fine, even if it hurts like a bitch.”

Yeah, it’s all nice and good, but Cassian’s track record includes calling a knife wound slashing down his ribs ‘a minor scratch’ and nearly fainting from blood loss by the time he got back from a mission salvaged and completed by the skin of his teeth.

(Jyn may’ve been busy with her own mission on the same planet and missed the near-fainting part herself, only finding him asleep in their quarters, bandages tight around his chest, and Kay standing silent vigil by the desk and looming over Cassian sulkily, but the droid sure enough sold the truth out without even a hint of remorse.)

And that’s only on her watch. She doesn’t really want to guess which ones of Cassian’s old scars were once wounds that nearly killed him and which could indeed be reasonably classified as only scratches. She has a very distinct suspicion that she won’t like the answer one bit.

She’s gearing up for another reproachful remark on instinct, but a surly, screeching roar prompts both her and Cassian to squint aside at the ainweard. His gaze fixed pointedly on the cavern behind Cassian’s head and the tip of his tail flailing impatiently. He must realize that he’s got their attention, for he roars one more time insistently.

“We’re following him again, aren’t we?” sighs Jyn, her question as rhetorical as they get.

“He’d got us away from the storm and seemingly safely away from Imperial patrols. Might as well,” remarks Cassian simply. He trails his hand higher, pushes a stray lock of Jyn’s hair behind her ear.

“I’m all right, Jyn. I promise. Let’s go.”

It’s the last part that finally conquers the storm in her heart and soothes it into something manageable. For all his thrice-damned tendencies to insist that he’s fine when he’s clearly not, Cassian is not someone who’s giving away promises left and right. He treats them like a flask of water in an endless desert, reverent and careful and never using them lightly. He only ever makes promises when he’s absolutely sure he can keep them. Jyn can still count the ones he’d made to her using the fingers of her one hand, and every single one of them came true.

She closes her eyes, leans her cheek into his hand, takes a deep breath, and says quietly, “Okay.”

Cassian cradles the back of her neck gently, leans close to her to press his mouth against her forehead in another soft kiss, and lets go of her hand. A quiet moment passes, Jyn opens her eyes, and gets to work. She slides away from Cassian’s lap, sitting down beside him upon her folded legs, and twists her bag from her back to the front. Shaking off residual droplets of water at its top, she undoes the zipper and sneaks her hand inside. The rainproof material held admirably against the onslaught of rain and diving, leaving the contents inside absolutely dry.

Something moves in the upper edge of her vision. Her hand hovering over her scarf, a mere breath away from grabbing it, Jyn lifts her head to investigate. The ainweard’s standing at the very edge of the rocks now, his head bent down to the sinkhole as he’s lapping at water with an air of calm grace. She looks at him for a moment, then at dark, mirror-like surface of the sinkhole, and finally at the pale smears of blood on her hands. A decision takes shape quickly and she re-prioritizes her actions, fishing out the empty bottle out of her bag instead, unscrewing its lid, and submerging it underwater. When she retrieves it back, the liquid inside is crystal-clear, eagerly taking in and reflecting the interplay between the dim shape of the cave and the faint glow of golden mushrooms.

She screws the bottle closed, hides it away, and finally snatches the scarf. Folding its soft grey fabric
neatly in two once, then twice, Jyn pushes her weight from the soles of her feet into a kneel, then straights up in sync with Cassian, watching over him like a hawk, searching and scanning for any sign of weakness, ready to support him if he wavers. But no, he’s admirably steady on his feet, grimacing only slightly and gritting his teeth against the onslaught of pain pulling at his injury when he picks up the rucksack and heaves it over his good shoulder. She secures her own bag, lets it hanging by her side, and drifts close to Cassian when he turns to face the tunnel, the side of her body brushing against his gently when she halts right behind him. “Ready?” Jyn clarifies and brings the scarf close to the blaster wound.

Cassian turns his head a little, awarding her actions with a fleeting look, and nods, falling still as a statue and bracing himself for incoming helpful torment. Jyn presses the scarf against the wound, her hands feeling strangely weak and yet unwavering as she settles her palms tightly upon both sides of his shoulder to staunch the bleeding as best as she can for now despite the sharp pang of guilt and worry thundering through her heart at the sound of Cassian’s quiet gasp at the sensation. He takes a few deep breaths through his nose, guiding both his heart and mind through the ache, and waits for the worst of the sting to settle before saying at last, voice now a tiny bit strained, but insistent, “All right, I’m good to go.”

Jyn regards the ainweard with an expectant look. “Go on, then. You’re the one who decided to play a guide. Lead the way,” she challenges.

His stride considerately unhurried, the ainweard disappears into the tunnel.

“What a kriffing day,” mutters Jyn darkly under her breath and falls into careful sync with Cassian as they follow the animal yet again into the dim, deep unknown.

The tunnel cuts deep into the cave, the path uneven and barely wide enough to allow two not so bulky humans keep moving side by side. It’s a continuous downward journey, a steep trial to Jyn’s aching legs; she’s forced to rest her feet at decidedly unusual, uncomfortable angle, gravity pushing her weight upon her muscles without mercy as there’s no room for a zigzag stride that usually makes such descents much easier to handle, and stay constantly alert, watching her every step. The worst of shivering had subsided now that she’s on a move and a little warmed up, but her clothing sticks to her skin like a cool and damp glove, doing no wonders to her sour mood at all.

At least Cassian keeps on moving without faltering (if there’s a stumble, it’s the one they share because of a tricky path, not his weakness), and the bleeding has mostly stopped — Jyn glares at the scarf intensely every time they pass a close set of glowing mushrooms that grants a good enough illumination, but the blood stain on light grey fabric had stopped spreading some time ago, barely soaking the material past her palms.

Minutes pass. She’s not keeping score this time, but she’s pretty sure they’ve walked a bit more than a mile and descended at least a hundred meters from their original elevation — she already had to swallow once to pop her ears as they’ve reacted to a change in altitude. The ainweard trots some few meters before and Cassian at all times, expertly crossing the tunnel and definitely keeping his pace reasonable so that two worn out humans wouldn’t fall back drastically. All right, maybe embarking on this particular journey with you, fella, wasn’t our brightest idea today, she’s contemplating wearily, and right on cue the tunnel curves sharply to the right. The incline visibly decreases from here, bringing a much-needed immediate relief to her tired body.

The streaks of weak yellow light along the tunnel’s walls here lead to a bright opening several hundred meters ahead, lit up by a glow of beryl blue and soft golden.

Cassian regards the light with wishful hope. “That looks promising.”
“If that’s not a place where we can rest for a while, I’ll devise a way to punch odds in the face,” Jyn announces with sincere yearning for a fight despite her fatigue, on pure spite. She feels rather than hears Cassian’s tiny huff of a chuckle, but there’s no mistaking the curve of a soft smile in the corner of his mouth.

They cross the remaining distance in broader steps, boosted by eagerness and a less tricky path. Light’s growing more potent as they approach, but it’s never too intense, and the air is definitely getting warmer. When they finally step out of the tunnel, they’re greeted by a sight to behold.

Like many beautiful things on Naora, this spacious cavern looks like a natural miracle, untouched by any man-made modification. Its high ceiling looks like a rogue celestial artist had spilled a scattering of tiny suns upon a bright blue sky: fluorescent mushrooms span the entirety of rock up there, golden ones spottily growing in a sea of beryl. A thin, tame river snakes around the cave as if someone has stopped time around a ribbon of silk swaying on a windy day; it springs under pressure from a fractured slab of rock and spills hot water in a murmurous stream until it disappears into a small sinkhole nested at the lowest part of the cavern by its far wall. The puffs of steam rise from crystalline water, floating close to the ceiling in a wispy layer of gold and blue mist.

The ainweard halts when Jyn and Cassian linger in place for a moment, sizing up the unexpectedly wondrous scenery with bewildered eyes, then turns around and bares its fangs again in a wolfish smirk. Jyn rolls her eyes at such a bold display of smugness and mutters to Cassian just in case, “Not a word, hotshot.”

This particular smile on Cassian’s lips reminds her all too much of Chirrut. The Jedhan warrior monk really can wear down any guard, if he’s given a chance.

Their scaly companion picks up his pace as he’s crossing the cavern. This time Jyn doesn’t bother following suit. As she and Cassian severely lag behind, she looks around the cave in search for the best spot to just sit down and ignore the creature. They’re in a serious need of a long overdue break (and no, it’s not a sign of weakness, a good warrior must know when it’s safe to push their limits and when it's imperative to step back), and that wretched blaster wound won’t attend to itself. The cave looks safe enough to be a good shelter for a little while, she knows the way back even if she loathes it. If the ainweard wants to continue walking — he can knock himself out.

“There,” she declares when she spots a nice slab of rock elevated over the river. The surface between it and the water is quite smooth, it looks like a good place to rest against, the heat emanating from the river will be definitely felt, and it provides a possibility to keep both the tunnel they’ve emerged from and another one at the opposite side of the cavern in sight.

Cassian narrows his eyes, sizing up first the spot itself critically, then the rest of the cave, and at last hums under his breath in agreement. As they head for the rock Jyn glances at the ainweard just in case, but he seems to pay no attention to them whatsoever.

They lay their gear upon the ground and settle down next to the rock. Jyn shrugs off her poncho, lets it fall behind her back into a still sopping-wet heap. Sitting back on her folded legs, she rolls the damp sleeves of her sweatshirt high up her forearms so they won’t get in the way, unzips her bag and reaches out for her shoddy medpack. There’s a set of three golden mushrooms at the ceiling right above her head, spilling warm, bright light against her skin, and the darkened shade of Cassian’s now mostly dry blood coating her fingers and palms is an eerie sight, a painful reminder of her failure. Act now, sulk like a child later, she snaps at her own stupid brain with mute irritation and continues on with her task of opening the medpack, but she must’ve revealed her weakness, let her emotions conquer the much more important reality and lingered in stupor for just a breath too long because Cassian rests his hand atop of her knee again and gently curls his fingers into her skin in a
caring gesture of reassurance.

Jyn lets yet another string of vicious mental curses unfold. He’s never been angry with her about Scarif — frustrated with a slow and painful recovery, with the way those injuries act up much more frequently than he’s willing to admit, yes, but never with her — and he’s definitely not angry now for this slip of hers. She’ll look into his eyes and will see warmth and kindness directed her way, that familiar gentle fervor of emotions meaning she’s wanted in every way, even now.

It matters. It’s why she’s choosing to stay with him time and time again. But sometimes it also makes her want to run before she makes a mistake that’ll fracture everything and leave her with nothing all over again.

Despite ugly voices in her head, Jyn stubbornly focuses on pressing needs. She lifts the scarf from Cassian’s shoulder and quickly drops it, blood-stained fabric quietly unfolding as it falls into her lap. Together with Cassian they make admirably efficient work of shedding the clothing away from his upper body up to the shirt, dumping the items unceremoniously aside. The shirt predictably presents the trickiest task. Its left sleeve goes first, then it takes some slow and painstaking maneuvering to get the shirt over Cassian’s head without disturbing the wound a lot. Her jaw tense with calm resolve, Jyn carefully pries away the singed fabric away from the injury. It glistens with fresh blood in some places, but is dry in others, either coming off with clots of blood or stubbornly sticking to the edges of the wound until she has to pull it away forcefully.

Cassian’s features contort in a grimace, and he sucks in the air with a quiet gasp when pain is at its worst. Jyn winces, her heart feeling weightless in her chest for a moment before crashing down heavily, but doesn’t relent and finally pulls the shirt away. “Sorry,” she murmurs apologetically and sets the fabric aside, her gaze intense and studious as she’s assessing the damage like a hawk surveying its prey.

That wretched blaster bolt cuts through the muscle stretching over Cassian’s collarbone and shoulder, rather wide thanks to the weapon’s power settings and bleeding anew now that it’s been disturbed. Her expression turned murderous and antagonistic, she blindly yet quickly digs up the medisensor and positions it hovering over the injury. She taps its turn-on button and the device quietly chimes. In an instant it starts building up the projection of a human shoulder with designated bones, nerves, and muscles, already accounting for the damage left behind by the blaster bolt in flickering pixels, and follows it up by a swiftly emerging string of text.

The sigh of relief it wrings free from Jyn’s lungs doesn’t make things right one bit, but at least it takes the choking sting of worry off. “No serious nerve damage,” she affirms, takes one last look at the screen to memorize the recommended treatment, flicks the scanner off and hides it away into the medpack. “Either the trooper was a lousy shot or you’re one lucky bastard.”

“I’ll take both,” says Cassian lightheartedly, no doubt in an attempt to reassure her ever further.

Jyn picks up the bottle with sinkhole water, unscrews it. Before she can dip it and spill a tiny trickle into her palm, Cassian aptly pries it from her grip and doesn’t even spill a drop while he’s at it.

“Hey,” she snaps on instinct — it’s my job, I can at least do this without failing today — but he only touches the very tips of his fingers to her elbow and asks softly as if trying to navigate a minefield, “Let me.”

Arguing won’t lead them anywhere, Jyn knows that much even in this ugly headspace she’s in as it's eating away every guard she’s holding on to against the sting of her fears and insecurities like acid, so she surrenders both her hands with their palms up and focuses on rubbing off the blood away from her skin as efficiently as she can, making the best of every drop of water Cassian is pouring
down onto her hands and resolutely trying to ignore the way it swirls upon grey rock in a loathing pinkish stream.

She uses up half of the bottle until she’s satisfied, waves her fingers to a side to indicate that it’s enough. Cassian gets the message immediately, twists the cap back, and sets the bottle aside by his hip. Jyn pours the antiseptic over her hands and rubs it in thoroughly, wrinkles her nose only mildly at the smell that’s biting more because of what it represents rather than the actual odor, and next plucks the rest of the items she needs from the medpack and lays them down into her lap. At last she picks up a yet untouched bottle of clean, drinking water from her bag, twists it open, and holds it up over Cassian’s shoulder.

“This won’t feel nice at all,” Jyn notes in a quiet voice, every word feeling like a razor on her tongue.

Cassian plants both hands against the cave’s rocky floor, the thin bones in his hands flexing. “Ready when you are,” he says without ire and closes his eyes.

Firmly stuffing a dark, churning feeling of guilt in her stomach out of her way, Jyn makes quick, but thorough work of rinsing the wound, then of cleaning the area around it with a gauze pad drenched in antiseptic. Cassian is stubbornly quiet throughout it, hyper-focused on regulating his breathing and guiding himself through the pain. With all the swimming and diving and then rinsing the wound looks clean of any visible dirt, but Jyn still has to pry away quite a few cloth fibers away with a set of tweezers. She regards her work critically, makes sure to inspect the injury from a couple of angles and in changing light to confirm she’s got them all, lays the tweezers back down into her lap, and takes a deep breath.

“Turn around a little,” she asks gently, laying her palm on Cassian’s good shoulder and nudging him slightly. He follows her lead, shifts in place until Jyn takes her hand away, now satisfied with the way light is slanting down the wound in the best way possible. She picks up a thin stylus-shaped device from her lap, curls her fingers around it tightly. “Now this is really going to sting,” she warns him, preparing for the most unpleasant part of this entire endeavor.

Cassian pries one eye open, manages to regard the device with a truly impressive example of black, resigned loathing, and leans forward until he rests his forehead on Jyn’s shoulder. He waits for a moment, making sure he doesn’t need to maneuver around some more in case this position would limit Jyn’s handiwork. She curves her arm around his head, re-adjusts the cauterizer in her grip to test whether it’s going to work out. It feels like it surely will.

Jyn squeezes her fingers around Cassian’s shoulder to hold him still throughout pain as best as she can, her thumb digging into a dip beneath his collarbone a safe distance away from the injury. “Ready.”

“Go on,” he affirms.

It takes Jyn an inhuman amount of concentration not to flinch and keep her right hand from trembling at the chocked up groan Cassian lets slip despite his best attempts to suffer quietly through the low-frequency laser beam disinfecting and sealing the deepest, bleeding parts of the injury. It’s a slow exercise in surgical precision, time stretching into excruciating eternity by every sound of distress Cassian’s making throughout. When she’s done at last, Jyn drops the device into her lap unceremoniously, her hand feeling unnaturally weak as her steady resolve melts, and makes an effort to cup the back of Cassian’s head with her palm in a soothing gesture.

She dips her chin down, rests her lips to the crown of his head, slightly trembling fingers sifting through his still-damp hair. “Shh, you’re okay. The worst is over,” Jyn finds herself saying on instinct, but unlike comforting him after a nightmare this not only feels feeble, but also abso-karking-
lutely preposterous. This time it’s almost entirely her fault that he has to suffer through this. She squeezes her eyes shut, her heart wrapped by ice-cold, vise-like chains, and tries her best not to recoil physically from the lash these stupid words carve seemingly across her very soul.

Cassian lifts his head from her shoulder and she lets him go, struggling desperately not to move her hands away as if from a touch of open fire and yet to turn her attention to Cassian’s rucksack fast enough so he couldn’t get as much as a glimpse at her, undoubtedly, all-too-expressive now features. She seems to succeed at least at this today, but it doesn’t feel like a victory, not at all.

Jyn’s busy fumbling with an Imperial-issue medpack when Cassian lays his hand against hers and stills her ministrations. She shoots him a fiery look of defiance, her lips pressed into a thin line. There’s blood in the corner of his mouth, glistening at the seam between his lips. He’s probably managed to nage accidentally at the soft tissue at the inside of his cheek with his teeth hard enough to draw blood while the cauturer’s been going its impeccable, but agonizing work. “Leave it,” he insists gently even if his voice is somewhat hoarse, rubbing his thumb against her knuckles, his callouses catching upon her scars.

Kriff, she knows where this is going. Kriff him ten times over, he knows exactly where to push to make her listen to him. “No,” Jyn stands her ground out of spite, but with not much hope.

“I’m not wasting high-quality bacta just so this can heal a bit quicker and scar a little bit less.”

Force, he’s right. The mission’s not over. With their crooked luck — earnestly keeping them out of death’s grip, but eagerly pushing them through every trial available with morbid curiosity — that damn Imperial bacta, the very best stuff that would laugh mockingly if it could over what the Alliance can supply even their most valuable spies in the field with, might make a difference between life and death if any of them suffers a serious wound. And even beyond that, there’s a fair share of scars littering Jyn’s own skin only because she refused to use an occasional bacta patch, hoarded them like treasure for worse days unless the injuries left her no other choice.

Cassian is definitely playing dirty and with a low karking blow, but it works. She relents and instead carefully presses an Alliance-issue spray bandage against the wound, letting their shoddy bacta do the best it can. Running her fingers against the expanse of its adhesive layer at the edges, Jyn smooths it out, makes sure it’s secure, and turns away to hide everything back into the medpack.

The weight of Cassian’s gaze feels like a pressure at every edge of her awareness, like a symphony and a cacophony merged into a melody that’s neither wrong nor right. He’s not paying attention to her actions, he’s taking her in, seeing beyond every façade and guard without error in that special way of his, in a way that’s always made her feel safe and understood, but that feels too much now, raw against the groves left behind by her failure.

She snatches the bottle of sinkhole water blindly, washes her hands again with single-minded purpose, and discards it into her bag. Restlessness feels like a beast in her heart, like a vibration in the marrow of her bones, chanting a potent urge to move, to do something, to escape, hunting for a space to unpack this whole mess wreaking havoc in her head.

Jyn is retrieving another knife, a thermal detonator, and a spare ammo pack from her bag when Cassian skims his fingertips over her knee, his touch skittish and almost as light as a caress of a wind. “J—”

“I’ll check the other tunnel,” she interrupts, hides the weapons away, and stands up in a single abrupt motion, letting his hand fall through the air limply for a split second before he halts it. “If there’s some way out of here that doesn’t require us swimming again, I’d like to know it now.”
Surely this will harden his expression, twist it back into his impeccable mask of a guarded spy. Surely she’ll catch a glimpse of how he’ll shut off in response to her rejection, don a veil of emotionless neutrality all over himself in a blink of an eye just like he’d done back in Sandeheim’s mansion so masterfully. Surely that indifferent coldness in his eyes will hurt, but she’ll have to deal with it.

Any moment now.

No such luck. Cassian does react, but it’s with letting a dark shadow of unease dawn upon his features. He doesn’t like her idea one bit, doesn’t want her to be alone on this quest, so he doesn’t bother to conceal worry and displeasure drawing lines in the corners of his eyes or the stiffness in his jaw and mouth. But he understands. He always does. So he relaxes his arm, lets his hand settle back into its natural position by his hip, and bows his head in a gesture of utmost acceptance.

It feels absurd one second and makes all the sense in the world the other, but there’s one thing that’s constantly true: this admission hurts a thousand times more as ugly voices in Jyn’s head croon like drums of a terrible war, repelled by kindness so much more than by any cruelty she could expect so rightfully.

She tries to ignore them, to be a good little soldier this wretched conflict demands left and right with no space for even marginal weakness. Jyn invokes the comlink in her chrono, cringes at the biting hiss of static in a still-working earpiece despite her dunk into the sinkhole. “Anything on your side?” she inquires in her most mission-focused voice or at least tries for it, hopes that she nails it.

Cassian shakes his head in a miniscule gesture, taps a finger against the tiny earpiece on a hopeless instinct, an even more uneasy frown highlighting the deep lines of concern between his eyebrows without mercy. “We’re too deep underground, I reckon.”

“Perfect,” she almost growls to herself, fingers flexing with dark frustration.

Kriff, it’s safer not to split up in the first place, and the lack of communication tips the scales of her available choices. But ultimately it doesn’t change Jyn’s decision. She needs to investigate this cave (no, to run off like a skittish little bird you are despite all your loud bark, hums a voice that strangely reminds her of the man in white at the back of her skull, cold and mocking). It would be great if neither of them will have to go through that diving ordeal again, feel that burn in their lungs if they can help it. It’s only logical, strategic to arm herself with as much knowledge of their surroundings as possible.

Jyn’s not the one who’s injured, not the one with a once broken spine, not the one who needs rest the most. She’s the most optimal choice for this. And if it gives her a small escape and some distance — so be it.

She chooses the timer app, scrolls through the hour-wheel on the screen. There’s need for space and there’s reason. She’s got to find a lovely balance between them. “Give me two and a half hours,” Jyn finally settles on a specific value. “I’ll cover as much distance as I can and be back by that time or even earlier.”

“It’s your call.”

It’s not Imre’s voice. Not Helmar’s. It’s not even Captain Andor taking reign: a warrior, a spy, a tool to pave the Alliance’s road to feeble but resilient goal of freedom. No, it’s Cassian: patient and empathizing. Her partner, her friend, her lover.

A reveling melody pulsing somewhere in a tiny piece of her heart crumbles under the barrage of
mutinous guilt rolling through her bloodstream in violent, nauseous ways. Jyn averts her gaze, turns around swiftly with single-minded purpose. Before she can make a step, Cassian’s fingers wrap around her wrist. He tugs at her hand just enough to show urgency and yet never too tightly, nowhere near enough to root her in place. She stops anyway because suddenly it doesn’t feel right to just walk away, to reject this. Despite everything, the way Cassian lets go of her wrist only to lodge himself between her and the tunnel, embrace her tightly and cradle her to his chest when she doesn’t resist feels like home. Jyn makes sure she’s positioned so that her body doesn’t put pressure of his right side and that she doesn’t jostle his injury in any way, closes her eyes, buries her face against the side of his neck, and lets herself be held for a little while.

It doesn’t last long. Maybe a minute, tops. In that moment Jyn almost decides to kriff it all to hell, her own stupid brain first and foremost, and stay, to focus on the way Cassian’s palm rests in between her shoulder blades like it belongs there, to hold on to him and never let go no matter which challenges the galaxy will throw at them, despite whatever failures she’d suffer and whatever ghosts Cassian would be plagued with. “Be safe,” he murmurs a loving plea into her hair, and she almost believes that he’ll always be there for her no matter what if it’s up to him.

But the stench of antiseptic on his skin and the rusty tang of blood and the sweet smell of bacta is a cruel assault on her senses. The warmth of his body makes her feel both lost and found, a wild dichotomy of sensations battling for dominance in a full-out war that haunts her every breath and maims her every thought. The thump of Cassian’s heartbeat murmurs ‘I’m alive’ to the back of her hand one second and seethes ‘no thanks to you’ the very next.

He must know it somehow, for he traces his palm down the curve of her spine in a soothing caress and steps aside, letting her navigate through this the way she needs to.

Jyn doesn’t bolt running towards the tunnel despite the itchy eagerness for it, but she does walk away without sparing a glance back. It used to be easier this way, to burn a bridge and never see it crumble. This particular bridge will probably survive fire and blood and all the fractures she’d painted upon it today. She can never be sure and there’s no logic when it comes to her life sometimes, but it feels that way.

But nothing seems to help the cause of quixotic mayhem in her heart one bit, and so she’s off searching for salvation.
There’s a planet called Ka-Raibe in the Expansion Region, and like many worlds in galactic history, wars have been tearing it asunder long before the discovery of space travel, long before the Jedi and the Sith had battled for dominance, long before the demise of the Republic and the birth of the Empire.

For long, long centuries its two human nations have been locked into a deadly war. Its darkest, longest hour has finally decided who’s a winner and who’s a loser, and done so in a manner of prime irony. One nation has pushed the other away from fertile lands, natural resources, and their ancestral homes. The losers fled across their stormy, moody ocean and to the barren lands of a continent that people of Ka-Raibe had called forgotten, for no one ever dared to call that place a home. There, in the heart of a giant dried sea, Veinala city was born. A terribly lonely place, it nevertheless welcomed the survivors along with their pain and sorrow. Some believe it was kind because it loved not to be forgotten.

The salty desert wasn’t an easy place to live at, but it wasn’t cruel either. Its new children made the best of whatever strips of fertile soil has covered the mountain system surrounding the dead sea, of whatever scarce materials they could find. For every tree they’ve cut, they’ve planted seeds for new ones. For every garden feeding them, they’ve never pushed it to a brink of death and let the land recover. And for every hardship the desert had offered because such was its fate, they never blamed it and always found ways to overcome it.

Wars don’t discriminate between winners and losers, don’t spare losses and deaths on either sides. The winners have been hurt. They still had things to lose, but they didn’t realize how easy it can be to lose what you have in a mad pursuit for something you couldn’t regain. Their greed and their mistakes and the poor choices of leadership have turned what could’ve been a long reign of prosperity into ages upon ages of stagnation. There was nothing but death waiting for the losers if they’d failed to tame their new lands and make it their home. They may have lost, but their fight wasn’t over. They had honor and dedication, they had inspiration and perseverance. And through it Veinala city and surrounding villages have prospered.

Veinala city had never factored into any of Jyn’s plans. She had learned of its existence when one of the Hutts from Nar Shaddaa with particular affinity for expensive, shiny things had hired her to steal a piece of jewelry from a private collector living in Veinala. She had pulled of an impeccable retrieval that she’s proud of immensely to this day and collected one of the heftiest rewards she had ever earned on her own. As it turns out, the circumstances have lined up to almost let Veinala city steal her back in kind.

She wasn’t compromised in any way in Veinala. She had enough credits to lay low for a while, to have a luxury of not worrying every single day how she’s going to make money, where she would sleep, what’s her next step. Almost eighteen then, worn down by running through her life like a scrappy, aimless vagabond, Jyn dared to take a chance and come back, enamored by Veinala’s soul.
and its inhabitants. Even under the shroud of the Empire their light had shined for a while.

She remembers that desert rose of life as a maze of buildings under the watchful eye of unforgiving sun, a city where roofs are one of the most expensive and spectacular gardens in the galaxy, revered and nurtured by Veinala’s people. She remembers it like a labyrinth of footbridges interweaved through the city like spider-webs with long vines weeping down from the balustrades. She remembers it like a messy chessboard of mellow sunlight and soft shade, of cool moonlight and welcoming silvery darkness.

Veinala is a city of many firsts for her. It’s the first place she ever felt a ghost of safeness at after Saw had left her behind. It’s the first place she simply enjoyed after losing each and every of her homes, the first place where she ever dared to imagine some kind of a future that didn’t involve running for her life despite Imperial presence in it. It’s in Veinala where she had found her first real job, a job that didn’t involve stealing or fighting or risking her life in any way. It’s in Veinala where for the first time in her life she had looked at someone and wanted to kiss them, where she met a good person she had trusted enough to have sex with them.

For a long time, Veinala has also been the last of her experiences with each and every of those things.

Jyn was enamored by Veinala, but never enchanted. And while she liked it and was welcomed and probably even loved by both the city and the tight-knit community of people in the district where she’d rented a tiny apartment above an inn, a restless, broken part of her heart made her a stranger in a beautiful land. Veinala was like an exquisite song she had revered, but which had never resonated with her like sonatas of Lah’mu’s ocean or whispering melodies of Wrea’s salt-saturated winds or the pulsing thunder in her heart when she has fought for something she has believed in.

Sixty-two days. That’s how long she stayed on Veinala before new Imperial taxation rules had been instilled, burdening the city and its people harder than ever. No one had fought back. Fierce warriors, always wary of the threat posed by their neighbors from the other continent, they didn’t dare to do a thing against the Empire.

The very first night under those new rules, in the quiet hour before the first lights of dawn when the last of visitors have left, Jyn had dared to ask the inn’s owner about this. Aren Larati, with her silvery hair but somehow still young eyes, had laid a hand over Jyn’s and smiled to her with kind sorrow. “Your fire lives despite your best attempts to subdue it. As is ours,” she whispered. “But we have lost this war the moment the Republic crumbled. The Empire replaced it and it is in control. There will be nothing but death if we fight. Ours is the choice between two losses, and in them we choose the one that still lets us live. To fight for what you believe in, child, is a great honor. It is a good way to die. But every day is still a perfect day to live, no matter what. That is how our ancestors have lost our longest war. And in our darkest hour it became our new beginning. Nothing is forever, child, even the Empires. It is our mission to be there when it falls and help it along. But not before. Not if it costs us everything.”

That was the way Jyn’s story on Veinala ended. The kindness she was welcomed with never started feeling like home in her heart, and the more time passed the sharper it felt. It didn’t make sense that something so beautiful could feel so wrong, but there it was. She didn’t know what she wanted from life and she never really dared to dream of anything, but she knew that quiet life wasn’t it. Some people would kill for a chance to experience what she had on Veinala. Not Jyn. Belonging, she had learned the hard way, was a complicated thing. She didn’t hope for it and felt armed with wisdom by her pessimism.

(She had thought then that she and belonging are not tailored for one another.)
Sitting still was not an option and fighting all alone against the Empire was a sure and stupid way to get herself killed. She was no vigilante despite a vigilante’s skillset, was no fool to believe that she could do anything that would truly matter. Whatever idealism that might’ve taken root in her was smothered by Saw’s teachings and the galaxy’s hard-headed heartlessness.

It was a good night to live and let the nomad in her heart take reign.

The droning of voices in Jyn’s head doesn’t relent, but it takes a step back, turns into a morbid soundtrack in her stupid action holodrama of a life. A change of perspective snaps her to full alertness. She may be somewhat of a wreck of a human being, but she didn’t survive for so long by losing her warrior’s skills and instinct.

The ainweard didn’t leave her and Cassian alone in the cavern. She doesn’t slow her stride or halt when she notices it, but her eyes go round in honest surprise. The animal is sprawled on his stomach upon the rocky riverbank close to the tunnel. His muzzle resting on his stretched out forelegs in a decidedly lazy way, the ainweard regards Jyn’s approach idly for some time and raises himself up gracefully when she nears him at last.

Quick as mercury, he slips into the tunnel first to lead the way. Jyn blinks wearily and follows him.

She braces herself for a phantom feeling of cold chains curving around her body, for a faint illusion of living shadows crawling on her skin like a gossamer-thin veil. She’s never been afraid of darkness itself, never believed that it conceals monsters (she had learned all too young and all too well that the cruelest of monsters have no need to hide and instead take pride in showing off their cutting smiles.) No, Jyn Erso has simply been burned by dark shelters over and over again, however ironic it sounds. But while the sensation creeps up on her, it almost feels like a ghost, like a shy, subdued version of itself, and stirs rare old memories of hers that are wrought with a certain fondness.

This particular tunnel reminds her of Veinala city at night: it may be shady and the mushroom growth is even scarcer than in the passage she and Cassian had walked to reach the cavern she has just left behind, but fluorescent plants litter the walls and ceiling in an oddly symmetrical way the nature can sometimes manifest itself, with darkness wavering into golden light and then bleeding into darkness again like calm, sure waves of a sea. The pathway is wide enough for her to stretch both hands to the sides and not brush the walls with her fingertips, devoid of dramatic elevation changes, and its floor is mostly flat, much easier to traverse.

It lets her breathe without feeling suffocated, without falling down the deep rabbit hole of old fears, and Jyn’s grateful for it.

She stops some forty steps into her journey under the spill of light, taps a button at the side of the holoprojector. The map springs to life above her wrist, same scale and location as it’s been where she left it off. Jyn rests her fingers against the controls, increases the scale to the maximum, and starts moving the map around. Here’s the plain, here’s the waterfall they’ve went under. Eyes still focused on the hologram, she sifts through her memories methodically, trying to take note of every curve the tunnel had made, to take its elevation drop into account in the most accurate way possible, to factor in the shape and length of the cavern, her fingers quick but careful as they adjust the map in an attempt to get the best hang of her current position now that geolocation is shot.

So far her underground journey had brought her northeast, closer to the gorge and definitely closer to Kjelm Sigma Outpost. This cave — absolutely unaccounted for on any official Naorie map, both Imperial and local alike — is already a useful finding, but if it has an exit somewhere really close to the base and in a strategically sound place it might make hers and Cassian’s near-disaster of a retreat be worth it. It won’t take the sting away, but it might mean something.
Sometimes it’s the best you can hope for in a war. Or so Jyn tries to make peace with her mistake and Cassian’s blood spilled, albeit without much success.

A growl echoes through the tunnel, subdued and yet filled with insolence. Jyn darts her gaze to the ainweard, finds him watching her with a very animate side-eye, the tip of his tail a tremoring whiplash of urgency.

“Did anyone ever tell you that you’ve got serious control issues, buddy?” she mutters a tad grumpily, minifies the map whilst still keeping its scale, leaves it on and gets moving.

The big scaly cat replies with a short guttural sound, a strange mix of a growl, a meow, and a purr, and turns his muzzle away the moment it escapes him as if he’s genuinely taken aback and alarmed by such show of emotion. Twitching the tips of his ears, he hurries forward. Not enough to run away and leave Jyn alone in the tunnel, but definitely trying to brush it off and pretend that nothing has happened.

Jyn feels a smile tugging at the corners of her lips, sincere and even relieved, a little rebellion of her soul against the murk of dark thoughts and hardship of the evening. There’s hope in this wretched galaxy, and enough hope indeed for light to survive if a creature so tortured is still capable of experiencing joy.

She tries her best not to wonder how long it’s been since the ainweard felt something akin to joy.

For the next ten minutes or so the tunnel’s path is mostly straight, and if there’s any incline upwards it’s minimal, barely even perceptive. At last it leads to a juncture where two paths split. The ainweard stops there, turns around, and waits for Jyn. When she catches up, he tips his head in the direction of the new tunnel: this one is narrower and shorter, and visibly curling further towards the east. She regards both paths with a critical eye, lifts her holomap-wielding hand up, and mentally outlines their trajectories along the holographic terrain.

Her choice is clear as day as long as there’s still a war to fight. Jyn ignores the suggested path and heads north past the creature.

The ainweard growls — it’s a slightly pressing, insistent sound, but with no actual threat woven through it. Jyn purses her lips, whips around, and doesn’t flinch when his stern eyes meet hers, their deep golden hue singing against the dark midnight color of his muzzle. “The enemy den is my way,” she explains. “I need to find a better exit, but it can wait. I’m not here to run.”

The cat responds with a disbelieving grimace, curling his thin lips enough to reveal a glimpse of deadly fangs, white as ivory against the dim shadows of the tunnel. She sees the moment the expression in his eyes — as clear and obvious as any human one — shifts to reflect the cynical weariness Jyn knows as intimately as the pulsing of her heart, as the sound of blood churning in her veins. Light slants upon his muzzle in a way that highlights the way his nostrils flare when he huffs, a feral creature wronged all too many times to believe that there are hope and honor and true warriors left in the galaxy.

At the back of Jyn’s mind the wind of life itself tugs at the tides of time, sweeps its fabric aside, and shines a ray of unforgiving light on a young girl with cold, sharp stardust in her eyes who loathed the Empire with every fiber of her being but did not trust any rebellions against it. No words can prove the ainweard wrong, no matter if he truly comprehends them or not. No real rebellion will come to Naora and Qen’val today, tomorrow, or a day after tomorrow to right the wrongs that have been done. It’s a dream of someday, a dream that might come true just as it might not.

There’s only one thing Jyn can do, and it’s to turn back to her chosen path and continue on. Believer
or not, a few beats later the *ainweard* skirts around her like a quiet shadow and trots a few good steps before Jyn at all times, a big, dark, and moody guide.

From there the path angles into an ascent, slight at first and becoming more and more dramatic every few minutes. The growth of mushrooms gets even scarcer, the road wrought of more shadows than of weak light, and soon even the blue radiance from her holo doesn’t provide enough illumination to keep up with her brisk tempo as the cave’s floor grows uneven, its solid rock weathered with gorges shallow and deep, smooth in some places and sharp in others, with pieces of crumbled stones sliding underneath Jyn’s feet. Soon, however, the air starts to get more humid with every step, with more growth littering the walls, the faint smell of damp rock and electric rains unfurling in her lungs.

Jyn checks the map again. Now she’s pretty sure where the road’s taking her. If there’s a good exit from the cave this might be an amazing strategic spot to stage the attack upon Kjelm Sigma Outpost from.

She’d like to note for the record that this is not a formal complaint, but... why did it have to be water again?

The tunnel rises through its last few meters, so steep that Jyn almost crawls up across the diagonal ascent to the top, and leads her to another cavern. The light is stronger here, with the ceiling so oppressively low that Jyn can only straighten up fully when she makes a few steps deeper into the cave to a small dip that’s not yet claimed by the dark pool of water. As if to take the feeling of confinement up a notch, the chamber narrows down dramatically until its ceiling is completely concealed by the water at the far side of the pool.

Well, it’s not as if beggars can be choosers. Sometimes you just make the best of whatever crap the galaxy throws at you.

Jyn looks down at the *ainweard* who’s standing a good meter away from her and watching her face with intent, then regards the pool with resigned annoyance. “Please tell me this will lead me up to Askel river nice and fast and without feeling like I’m drowning,” she mutters, although without much hope, and flicks the map off.

The animal replies with a serious nod and leaps into the pool in one graceful motion, barely even stirring the water as he disappears in its dark confines.

As it’s seemingly always the case today, Jyn follows.

All in all, Jyn reflects, another swim has been worth it.

The gorge at the side of the pool is easy to reach and wide enough to comfortably cross it upwards to another tunnel in forty seconds. The new pathway is perhaps a good three hundred meters long, flooded with water but not to the brim, leaving a half-meter space between Jyn’s head and the ceiling littered with fluorescent mushrooms that thrive in this constantly moist environment. She discards the itching desire to hurry, opts for conserving strength in her already heavy limbs and tired body, and pushes forward with reasonable pace, always a meter or so away from the *ainweard’s* barbed tail.

The tunnel ends in a seeming dead end, but she knows better at this point. The big cat shifts aside, lets Jyn catch up with him and move beyond. Her fingertips brush against the wall and she pushes herself away from it, letting the momentum turn her body to the *ainweard*. He glances meaningfully at Jyn, then down at the water. She takes a greedy gulp of air, holds her breath, closes her eyes, and dives in. Under the creature’s careful guidance — a paw gently pushing her ankle down until she reaches the needed level — she finds another wide fissure in the rocks and swims through it. This
one isn’t very thick, but it’s hidden deep underneath the mass of rocks. It takes Jyn about thirty seconds to swim up until her fingertips brush over the towering rock. It takes her another twenty to swim underneath it in order to reach a place where she can safely come up for air.

Golden mushrooms giving way to dark moss growing upon the rock, the nook she finds herself in is a shadowy shelter. But light spills across the body of water worrying in tune with still-falling rain and in perfect symmetry with distant flashes of electric lightning causing mayhem somewhere at the southwest, and Jyn knows she has reached Askel river without the need to consult with her map or geolocation service.

She does it anyway, taking advantage of her hiding spot and stubbornly keeping awkward balance in the water by moving her feet and helping herself out with one hand as she raises the other above the surface to examine the map, and dons a reflexive predatory smile when the map automatically adjusts its position and the location marker flickers back online. It seems that all troubles of this day might pave way to something good after all.

The knowledge of the cave itself and its position are already extremely valuable pieces of intelligence. However, it is only a taste, and temptation for more, for the very best information coaxes Jyn to consider the idea of going forward. She swims towards the river’s primary channel, making sure she’s not rushing headlong with reckless abandon and instead using the shade of the rock as much as possible for cover. Very soon it becomes evident that the downpour has receded and that things line up even better than she had dared to expect. The entirety of Askel river’s banks at this stretch of it is lush with growth. The old rows of high trees are thick, their long weeping branches are a verdant embrace of protection at both sides of the river. Yeah, there’s nothing to be done with clear skies above, but it’s not as if it’s easy for any TIE-fighter pilot patrolling this part of the mountain range to spot a tiny rebel swimming in dark waters under the cover of Naorie night.

To continue on is risky. But to be a rebel in an enemy den in any way is risky. Kay would grumble about the odds, but since Kay is busy on Qen’val, there are no enemy troopers in sight, and the trip uphill may take roughly five minutes if she hurries, Jyn deems the risk worth it.

She picks up pace to cross the river as silently and swiftly as possible. Emerging on the river bank, Jyn darts to a nice spot between two trees that cut the number of viewing angles at her in half and peeks behind one of the trees, eyes searching for the safest and most optimal road to the top of the hill.

The ainweard follows her, but it’s not for long. As if a creature wrought from the fabric of midnight itself, he whisks past her like a breath of stormy wind and out of sight. A sudden wave of sadness, a somewhat helpless, squeezing feeling in her chest makes her recoil a bit, startles her with its force. It’s not as if she has expected a proper goodbye, not as if she has envisioned this ending any other way, yet Jyn still hunts for any sign of the creature’s presence. But no, his coloring makes night his perfect realm, and the only sounds she hears are those of a forest caught in a fading storm.

She lets herself release one deflated sigh and wills her mind into complete concentration. She’s closer to Kjelm Sigma Outpost than ever. It’s no place for sadness, for foolish sentimentality, for distractions.

The growth of trees doesn’t get any scarcer as the hill ascends. Their trunks are large and thick, making it easy to hide behind them; their roots are broad, richly littering the soil all along the way as they create something akin to a natural staircase and break down the flow of muddy water into small, controlled cascades, further securing Jyn’s path. Blaster in one hand, she crosses the terrain in a quick zigzag stride, and presses her body to the very last of the trees towering above a very strategic crevasse.
The sight of an Imperial watchtower isn’t right in any shape of form. Its dark skeletal silhouette is a metal aberration against the lush growth of the forest, and there’s no restoring the old trees that were mauled down to clear space for this beast at the edge of the hill. Despite the Empire’s best attempt to integrate it into the landscape and surprisingly make it less obvious, it doesn’t fit here. However, it’s much easier to look at it when Jyn projects potential approach trajectories to it from her position, when she imagines a Pathfinder strike force creeping up on it in the darkness of a night and swiftly taking control of the outpost, then providing cover for the Alliance’s attack.

This is where downfall of Kjelm Sigma Outpost might begin. A former slave of the Empire might be the one who helped lighting up the spark of Naorie freedom. If there’s better poetry in the galaxy, Jyn isn’t aware of it. She smiles again. It’s not a beautiful, gentle expression by any means — it’s cold and sharp and vengeful, like a hunter’s dark appreciation for the smell of blood. Taking another twenty seconds to memorize the sight by heart, she heads back to the river.

Jyn is already halfway through crossing the river back to the safety of shadows when a soft splashing sound stands out in the melody of wind and rain. Sharply turning back, she’s greeted by the view of two pointy ears and a pair of golden eyes hovering above the water. Eyebrows arched, she floats in place until the ainweard catches up with her.

“Full of surprises, aren’t you?” she notes fondly.

The sound he makes this time is definitely a mischievous, heartfelt purr.

They head back to the cave together.

The cave has another surprise in store for Jyn. Like most of them on Naora, this one is bittersweet and infinitely complicated too. A forty-minute walk through the eastward tunnel leads her to a narrow chamber in the passageway’s side. She regards the bead curtains with bafflement, runs her fingertips gently against the tight cords and their artistically interchanging patterns, feeling the softness of yellow threads woven into black rope in mystic ornaments, moves them aside with her hand, and steps forward.

The chamber looks like someone’s home. Almost every village or city has an abandoned place or few in the kindest of circumstances, but conflicts and poverty and simple cruelty of life leave so much more of them behind. There were times (and all too many times at that) when Jyn’s influx of credits was so low that she expertly hunted for shelter in lonely places. Her findings included: a giant, deserted building block in a city with failing economy after the Empire bled the district dry of resources, slowly crumbling ruins of a theater, a museum stripped of its relics and waiting for planned destruction, an old small spaceport that the Empire shut down and didn’t yet raze, a once luxury apartment house that became a battle’s playground during the Clone Wars and never been taken care of ever since. Long gone derelict, all of them, with an occasional squatter searching them for temporary shelter just like she did, with their real purposes and lives led in them almost forgotten, not spared by time at all. This one is different. It has a sense of life interrupted, a sight of a place frozen in time, waiting dutifully for someone to return.

Pale blue radiance of Jyn’s holomap (which to her delight and relief has started showing real-time geolocation data again inside of the cave two minutes ago or so) reveals the shape of a bed in the corner and a bureau by its side in the cave’s nook, a long desk pressed against the uneven wall with a comfy armchair next to it, a shelf with rows of old paper books. She feels the shape of a small smile on her lips when she finds an energy generator tucked between the desk and the entrance, a spider-web of wires from around the room finding their destination in it, but tempers her excitement immediately just in case. Experimentally turning it on, she’s greeted by a quiet, promising whir. There’s a switch on the wall above it; Jyn flicks it and finds that sets of small tube lamps secured
over the bed and the desk immediately cast gentle yellowish luminosity over the room. She switches her holomap off.

It seems like there’s a small fridge tucked under the desk in the room’s corner, above it rest a portable cooking panel, a kettle, and some kitchenware. Pens litter the tabletop’s left hand side haphazardly next to a thick paper diary, a pencil rests in the diary itself. Jyn walks past the bed, traces her fingertips absently against the bedcover. It’s woolen and feels a little prickly against her skin, but it’s undoubtedly warm and should be a great protection against the cave’s chill. Its lovely shade of green incidentally is the same shade as leaves of *kaile* trees dominating the forest around the cave.

Whoever lived here hasn’t been home in a very long while. The light’s angle emphasizes a fine layer of old greying dust upon a distinctly four-armed leather jacket draped over the armchair’s back. When Jyn touches the diary’s cover with her index finger and lifts it, smearing the dust a little, its blue color looks more like its beautiful, original shade of indigo. She gently opens the diary and sweeps through it quickly. There are barely any blank pages left inside; it’s filled with the diary and writing in Naorie language, the only spaces in square cells between the text used to designate where one chapter ends and other begins, and the last quarter of it with a single page remaining contains perfectly detailed map drawings with a variety of markers. Some of them look like schemes of enemy’s forces movements, some show the familiar region around the cave and surrounding valleys with markers that are decidedly missing on the maps Jyn and Cassian were able to acquire.

The maps might really come in handy once they’re deciphered. The diary might also be someone’s life story of a kind. Having spent a lot of time with Chirrut’s and Baze’s reverence for preserving Jedhan culture in any shape or form they can, with Bodhi’s general love for any legends and lore, and once even sharing a cup of tea with Mon Mothma and learning of the Senator’s fondness for history, Jyn appreciates the meaning behind any kind of story more than ever.

The diary is definitely not going to stay here for much longer.

The cover looks thicker than usual, feels a little heavy against Jyn’s palm. Turning the first page reveals a thin screen built into cover’s inside and a tiny slot containing a memory card beneath it alongside a slim solar panel. Leaving the diary open under the direct light from the lamp, Jyn sets her mind to examine the rest of the room.

There’s a clay cup next to next to a kettle, a pattern of traditional Naorie ornaments pained upon it in vibrant colors that likely indicates the village the owner of this home hails from. The same colors shape the view upon a village from a high hill towering over it in broad strokes on a painting hanging on the wall near the bookshelf. These little details have been dear to someone and still reflect someone’s soul. Jyn feels like a stranger in this home, landed amidst a lonely ghost of someone’s life. This place is so much better than Sandeheim’s stupid mansion. But in its own somber way it hurts so much more than that wretched place ever did.

The *ainweard* had quietly slipped inside after her and now sits next to the entrance, the curtain’s beads brushing his tail. Jyn’s gaze rests upon the jacket again; she reaches out to trace her fingertips against its soft, worn leather. “They weren’t here when you found this place, were they?” she asks quietly.

The animal flicks his ear irritably and flops down on his stomach, stretching out his forelegs and resting his muzzle upon them in a decidedly mopey way. She closes her eyes for a moment of somber reflection, and then turns her attention back to exploration. It’s the only strategic, productive thing she can do.

Under the lights it’s now obvious that there’s a folding door chiseled of dark grey wood installed
close to the chamber’s corner. Jyn opens it, peeks inside, eyes going round in pleasant wonder when she finds a tiny ‘fresher room. When she locates the switch and turns on the light here as well, she sees that pipes look relatively new and free of rust and the amenities are admirably clean, save for the dust. She turns the faucet’s knob and water immediately pours down into the sink in a steady stream, ice-cold for now but looking decidedly clean to her delight.

Leaving the ‘fresher behind, Jyn steps back into the room. She nods approvingly to herself when she spots a portable heater positioned between the door and the desk. A quick rummaging through the books tells her that perhaps an original dweller of this little cave-house had been a forest ranger: judging from the pictures, a good chunk of them is dealing with topics of biology and ecology. Searching the bureau mostly reveals clothing and footwear (interestingly enough, one drawer contains only Naorie-cut garments, while a good two thirds of the other have clothes fitting two-armed species), its entirety sensible for a person with an active lifestyle, some personal electronic devices now long out of charge. The lowest drawer, though, has been clearly reserved for weaponry. There isn’t much left: a few empty ammo packs for an Imperial-issue blaster rifle, a thermal detonator, a damaged crossbow that’s probably been a ritual or honorary weapon, artistic carvings adorning the wood it’s been chiseled from, a few crude bombs (each of them seemingly used to create distractions instead of causing harm — one is a smoke decoy, another used to produce noise) and what looks like a decent set of materials used to craft them from.

It seems that someone has left for their righteous war with the Empire and never came back.

Doing her best to calm a lash of rage sweeping through her in a way that would’ve made a fierce Naora’s storm proud, Jyn takes a deep breath, takes an old rag tucked into the drawer’s corner, gently shuts it closed, and straightens up again. Retrieving an ornamented blue scarf from the top drawer, she takes a few steps back to the desk, leaves it on the chair’s armrest, and uses the rag to carefully wipe the dust away from the diary. The moment she moves to snap it closed, its screen comes alive. There isn’t enough energy yet for it to work at full brightness, but even dim it reveals an animated image of three young Naorie people, two men and a woman standing between them wearing identical metal bracelets on their wrists that traditionally for Naorie indicate their marital status. Locked in a hug, they grin and laugh, Rakvaire lake majestically beautiful behind them in the season of lieatina trees blooming and its petals floating in the onyx-colored water.

I hope you’re alive. I hope that one day I could help freeing you, Jyn thinks and closes the diary, quick to wrap it into the scarf, turn the light off, step out of the chamber past the aimweard and start walking through the tunnel again with single-minded purpose of finding the exit before she can allow her heart weep and promptly make her shed tears of helpless fury at the Empire’s cruelty and her own inability to change things here and now, to undo all the damage and heartbreak that Naora and its people have suffered.

A few minutes later the tunnel curves sharply to the right. Jyn stares at the dead end with blank eyes, fingers of her free hand curving into a fist in a show of frustration. This is… well, this cave is an immense stretch of luck either way and complaining feels terribly ill-advised, but this really karking sucks. Especially since her stroll here has mostly been a march of misery, with wet clothing clinging to her body like dead weight, turned into a source of perpetual chill in a tunnel that burrows even deeper underground and doesn’t have any hot springs close to warm it up.

The aimweard had stopped by her side. She looks down at him with a not so subtle reflection of accusation in her eyes. “I like you. I really do,” Jyn grumbles and darts a quick meaningful side-eye at the wall and then back to the creature, “but are you kriffing kidding me? Or was there never an exit here?”

His species, apparently, is just as skilled at donning the aura of smug superiority as any other feline
The animal’s streak of mischief is short-lived, though. He quickly drops the act and walks straight to the wall. Closing his eyes, he turns one ear closer to the dead end and takes a minute to listen to something intently. Seemingly satisfied, he then pads to the left side of the tunnel, rises up on its hind legs, and, balancing with one paw against the wall, sets his other against the growth of moss close to the ceiling and pushes. A faint whirring sound follows, dulled as its source is buried somewhere within surrounding rock structure.

Force, it’s almost like Naora has decided to compensate for every second of misery Jyn’s went through on this mission. The dead end turns out to be a slab of rock turned into a pocket door, sliding away with impressive efficiency and the same gentle sound. Not only it’s a pleasant surprise with admirable stealth characteristics in itself, it seems to be definitely exploiting natural cover from lush shrubs of some local wild berries, the bushes thick and at least as high as the door itself. The ainweard drops to all fours again and whisks into the growth, a restless hunter and protector of these lands. Jyn follows his example and finds herself a nice spot where a slightly thinner bush brushes the trunk of a tree and allows her rake her inquisitive gaze all around the revealed terrain without many obstacles but still enjoying good cover. The place looks like a little wild garden making the best it can of a small flat surface in the mountain’s descent, quiet and beautiful in that special way that only untouched nature can be.

Hiding the invoked holomap behind the tree and rock, Jyn confirms that the tunnel has led her closer to the gorge and out of first and second priority sectors for Imperial patrols. It looks like she’s an hour away from the waterfall she and Cassian had crossed on their initial approach to Ilanei range and that their first descent through the cave had put them clear of the harshest part of the road they’ve taken. Not bad. Not bad at all.

Flicking the map off, she turns back to the door and takes a few minutes to examine the rock around it. Whoever made this entrance deserves praise: not only its exact position looks inconspicuous in the uneven structure of surrounding rocks, it is clearly cleverly disguised as well is judging by smudges of some impressively resilient dark paint around the opening that mimics the structure of fissures all around the mineral mass.

Quiet, most likely deliberately-caused rustle of bushes echoes at Jyn’s right. Stopping by the edge where the door had slid into the rock, the ainweard rises up on his hind legs again and gently nudges his muzzle over a specific spot in the knots of tight vines cascading down from the top of the hill. Jyn waits until he falls back and steps aside, runs her fingertips against soft burgundy leaves and rough stems. There’s a small gap in its intricate structure, barely enough for her to fit her index and middle finger into it; inside she finds an even smaller indent in the rock, its surface suspiciously cold and smooth like a metal button.

Access from both sides on demand, then. Convenient and clever and utterly practical in wartime. It really lightens up her mood. She sends a heartfelt mental gratitude to the unnamed ranger or any predecessor of theirs.

A shadow moves in the corner of her eye. She twirls around in time to see the ainweard retreating away and instinctively whispers, “Wait.”

She doesn’t really expect him to obey, but he does. More than that, the animal sits down, tilts his head back a little, and regards her with very expectant eyes. Smiling shakily, Jyn hunkers down to his level rests her hands in her lap and crisscrosses her fingers. “Thank you,” she emphasizes softly. “I think you’ve saved our lives today, probably even more than once by showing us this cave and offering its shelter from the storm. And it might even save many others someday. You didn’t have to
do any of it, but you did. I won’t forget this.”

The *ainweard* tilts his upper body in a motion that unmistakably resembles an honorable bow.

It stings when he walks away, of course. None of such sincere goodbyes are ever untouched by sadness. But there’s something to be said about them when they don’t end in death and utter heartbreak.

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Returning to the cavern should’ve been a homecoming. Its warmth envelops Jyn with a lover’s care on approach. When she emerges from the tunnel, she’s greeted by a mesmerizing sight of Cassian — still shirtless, now even barefoot, hair’s a wonderful untidy mess — basking in blue and gold light as he’s sitting on the slab of rock they’ve claimed earlier. The blaster he’d rested on this thigh, directed... not *her* way, of course, the tunnel’s way as a precaution, is turned away the moment he sees her. Even from afar it's easy to notice for her how the worst of tension in his posture deflates, how he relaxes his spine and shoulders from a warrior’s rigid body language. Jyn comes closer and there’s no mistaking relief dawnning on him and reflecting in the curve of his lips, in laugh lines around his eyes when he regards her with a fierce search for any injury and doesn’t find a single one.

Her mind files all these things away methodically and discards them as if they don’t matter. Instead it zeroes in on the way a wicked blotch of blood stands out against the stark white fabric of the spray bandage on Cassian’s shoulder and sends another wave of primal, self-loathing revulsion straight into her heart. She had time to recreate the encounter with the forest trooper on her lonely walk back in almost complete detail, dissect its every angle, find out how she missed the enemy and their targeting beam. It didn’t help at all. Extreme conditions or not, they’re merely an excuse. Death doesn’t care for fairness, for negotiations, for reasons — it simply takes. They’re alive due to sheer luck, and the knowledge eats at her like a bonegnawer feasting on its prey.

“I’m on time,” Jyn falls into defense reflexively as she walks past Cassian and doesn’t quite dare to look at him while she’s at it. *Just barely*, whispers a seething voice in her head, and she doesn’t see the way Cassian reaches out to touch her arm and halts halfway at the painfully obvious distance she’s put between them.

“You are,” he agrees softly, and somehow it lands like a blow again.

Seeking at least a semblance of escape from herself, Jyn catalogues all the changes in her surroundings with almost savage eagerness. A lot of Cassian’s wet gear is laid down across the river bank to dry up, including boots and socks. He had spread out her poncho as well, positioning it right next to his own. He seems to have re-packed his rucksack as well, for all the gear he’d lifted off the trooper doesn’t misshape the bag’s strict lines as it used to. He even managed to hide the Imperial-issue blaster rifle in there. The crown jewel of his ministrations is a thin thermal blanket spread out on the side of the rock and the cave’s floor, creating a nice spot to lounge at.

The sight of it lightens up Jyn’s mood just a fraction. Always trust Cassian to set up a more than half-decent camp in any circumstances. Sometimes his over-packing habits are a blessing.

She lays down her weaponry and the diary at the edge of the blanket, glances at Cassian’s clothes again. Her own still sits heavy on her skin, its coldness and dampness standing out even more against the river’s radiating heat. Jyn strips to her underwear with a soldier’s speed, shakes the remnants of water out of her boots, arranges her clothing next to Cassian’s across the rock slightly slanted towards the river. And then, a storm of nervous energy and guilt feeling like home in her every cell of her body, she starts pacing around, eyes firmly focused either on the smooth, warm rock beneath her bare feet, or on the swirls of steam, or on the living pattern of water travelling down the river.
“Jyn,” Cassian says, and the very specific undertone in the sound of her name — a subtle edge of teasing woven into boundless fondness — catches her off guard and stops her dead in her tracks. “You’re doing a fabulous job of copycatting me now,” he continues, and this time his voice is closer, his stride feather-light and not making a sound. He waits for a beat again, lets his words warn her about his steady approach. “It’s not only unnerving, but also eye-opening in ways I didn’t know existed.”

Jyn opens her mouth on instinct, gearing up to bite back some clever response, and closes it silently when the meaning of his words slams into her like the gentlest of points made. Holy karking Force, she really is an ironic mirror of Cassian’s behavior from Sandeheim’s mansion, and the realization is horrific enough to shock her out of the deepest throes of guilt. One brooding spy is quite enough for any team.

“Fuck you,” she manages through a half-fuming-scoff, half-laugh, not sure if she wants to fall through tiny cracks in the rocks under her feet out of sheer embarrassment or kiss her favorite cocky spy more.

“Sometime later, but I sure hope so,” Cassian replies jovially, no doubt proud that his words had desired effect.

His presence is tantalizingly close now; she can feel the way his body is sheltering her back from the faint breeze of colder wind whispering its way from the tunnel. It shifts into the feeling of gentle warmth of him at the very verge of a touch. The demons plaguing her retreat in haste, hissing angrily at her plain longing for human contact but unable to win this time. Jyn bites the inside of her lip in a feeble attempt to contain a smile and points out with fake reproach, “You have a very peculiar way of flirting.”

“Can you blame me, though? I’ve spent most of my free time in my formative years and beyond either hanging out with Kay or definitely not wooing potential romantic partners. I think I’m doing pretty well, all facts considered.”

Well, there’s no debating that point.

Jyn sighs as if a weight has been lifted off her shoulders when Cassian rest his palms against her sides, feels the worst of tension in her body unwind as he’s mapping out the shape of her ribs with his thumbs in soothing caresses. “I know you feel like you’ve fucked up,” he bends close to murmur in her ear, his warm breath cascading down her neck and beckoning a faint shiver that has nothing to do with residual chill of the tunnels and her swims roam down her spine, “and there’s no changing your mind about that.”

Collected and kind, he sees right into her soul, finds the festering root of emotion that’s been holding her hostage, and devises a perfect way to soothe her. Jyn lets her eyes flutter closed, wills her body to relax even more and focus on sensations. Cassian’s hands are as light on her bare skin as summer’s wind as he skims them to her waist, emboldened when she doesn’t flinch away from both his touch and his words.

“But I trust you with my life no matter what, fuckups or not, whether they are real or only in your head,” Cassian perseveres. “You hardly ever muck things up. You’re the fiercest and most skilled warrior I’ve had a privilege to meet and fight side by side with. Your worst is many being’s absolute best, Jyn.” He closes the distance between them completely at last, curves his arms around her waist and rests his chin atop of her head. The heat of his body melts the last remains of miserable coldness that plagued her. “Today’s been really odd and very messy,” Cassian admits lightheartedly. “I don’t imagine our walk back will be a picnic either. So, I’d really like you to follow me to that damn blanket and get some long overdue rest. What do you say, Grand Master Stubbornness?”
Jyn doesn’t need to see Cassian’s face to know he’s flashing that sarcastic grin of his that he’s been showing off more and more ever since they’ve became friends and then lovers. She twists in his arms, doesn’t use an opportunity to sneak away and put some distance between them the moment Cassian considerately releases her, and dips her head back to look up at him regardless. The expression is there, of course, dear in its beaming youth. It makes her want things beyond guilt and beyond doubt. She slots her body against his, rises up on her tiptoes just a little. Any other day she’d respond to Cassian’s mischief with tracing the tip of her tongue against his pulse point, trail her mouth higher and gently lock her teeth around the skin at the sensitive place at the underside of his jaw that never fails to make him shiver (and, on occasion, if she’s being really thorough and wicked and he’s worked up enough to be just a little mad with lust, lets her hear a low sound of him heroically stifling a groan), and then, when he’d be completely breathless, crown this sweet revenge by searing into his lips and kissing him like there’s no tomorrow.

In fact, the image plays out in her brain in perfect detail, made stunningly real by memories she’s preserving like water in the desert, by ghosts of every kiss and touch, but… Alas, the day has taken its toll, and it’s not even over. Fatigue settles in her every muscle like heavy weight, Cassian’s ‘sometime later’ makes more sense that it has any right to be, and the most tempting idea crossing Jyn’s mind traitorously is the one to simply lean into Cassian and let her weary body rest against his own. Stifling a loud, undignified groan of frustration, she gives in, falling back to the soles of her feet and leaning the side of her head upon Cassian’s shoulder. “Revenge is officially on vacation, but you bet your arse it’ll be back,” she mutters a fiery promise into his skin.

Cassian cups the back of her neck, rubbing his fingertips up and down its side. “Revenge,” he enunciates fondly in a husky voice, “should get moving before she falls asleep where she stands.”

It does take Jyn a significant effort to lift her head and lean back. “Not before I catch you up my findings,” she states firmly, grabs Cassian’s good hand, and for further emphasis drags him with her towards a small nest he’d made by the rock.

She sits down and rests her back against the rock, the well-insulated blanket soft and warm against her skin, a relieved exhale escaping her when she stretches out her legs and gives them much needed rest. Cassian settles in front of her, retrieves two moderate-size cereal bars from his rucksack and throws one to her. Jyn catches it, shoots him a grateful smile when he passes a bottle of water from his provisions, and attacks the snack with ravenous hunger.

The first bite is enough to fill her with a little bit of energy, shift her focus from her weariness to pressing matters. As they eat, Jyn finds the time to tell Cassian all about her latest adventures, spotlighting the tunnels, the means of navigating them and their strategic usefulness. “I suppose now we can stop wondering how Naorie rebels had managed to oppose the Empire for an entire year with no support,” she concludes, folding the colorful wrap into a tiny enveloped-shaped origami piece.

Cassian nods, his face scrunched up in thought. “This info might just be what tips the scales.”

“It’s just one cave,” Jyn says, instinctively running through hazard analysis for a rebel attack, bracing herself for potential disappointment if it comes to pass.

“A very nicely positioned cave, not to mention everything else we’d learned and stolen. We both convinced the right people to sanction action with less valuable info. And, after all—”

Letting the wrap fall down by her thigh, Jyn takes a swig from the bottle and squints at Cassian with suspicion when she spots a familiar glint in his eyes. “Don’t you—” she starts, lifting her index finger in warning.

“Rebellions are built on hope,” he finishes anyway, flashing a very quick smirk.
She rolls her eyes, mindful of rationing their remaining water and twisting the cap back in place. “You’ll always appeal to this, won’t you?”

“Sure. Such a moment of glory. I’m convinced that’s what actually won you over.”

The painfully-fake seriousness in Cassian’s tone coaxes another smile out of Jyn. “Move your ass here,” she beckons unceremoniously and soon wraps an arm around his chest with protective kind of greed when he needs no clarification to sit down right next to her and gently lean his back against her body.

Tilting the back of his head against Jyn’s shoulder, Cassian immediately relaxes in her embrace. Echoes of accusing voices and shadows of guilt creep back on her at the feel of his heart beating against her palm, so Jyn reaches out for his left hand and entwines their fingers together when he meets her halfway, her grip nothing short of stubborn possessiveness in the face of any stupid odds or dangers of this war. She’s rarely ever wanted something just like this — holding someone so gently and so greedily, a privilege of sharing her life with someone this way — and she does her best to relish it, to deny any fears of hers a right to tamper with this.

Cassian rests his hand over Jyn’s arm, mapping the outline of the knobby bone at her wrist. “When my first war started, I’ve thought I’ve lost everything and everyone,” he breaks the silence unexpectedly. “And, however crazy it sounds, for some time I didn’t realize how lucky I was then.”

A bit startled by such a sudden revelation, Jyn dips her chin, presses her lips to the crown of Cassian’s head and doesn’t interrupt.

“I had a rebellion to join, people to learn from, people to fight alongside with. There was a cause and there was shelter and we all did our best to take care of each other.” He pauses, his restless hand halting as well, mulls over his thoughts for a moment, and finally settles on, “It was a kriffed up place for a child to grow up at, but it was a decent enough school of life during wartime. The more I live, the more I understand that it’s been a privilege. It was probably the best I could ask from the circumstances I’ve found myself in. Our new friend doesn’t have any of it.” Cassian moves his hand forward, covers Jyn’s palm with his own, his fingers slotting perfectly into the dips of her knuckles and beyond. “If all I’d ever knew when the Empire came to Fest was slavery and gladiator fights, and if there was nowhere for me to escape to make a difference, I’d probably sneak around and maniacally execute vengeance on Imperials too.”

He’s not bothering to mask a quiet undertone of sadness in his voice, to hold on to a mask of perfect practicality and regulate his breathing in tune with it. Jyn squeezes his hand a tad harder and he squeezes hers back in gratitude.

“He’s a great hunter by all means, but he’s reckless,” pursues the theme Cassian with single-minded conviction that leaves Jyn silently wonder where he’s going with it and trying not to let expectations muddle her perspective. The desire to help the ainweard, to stand up for what she believes in hasn’t dimmed a fraction; if she lets it run free it’ll turn into a dark and pulsing need, into a haunting beast of urgency instantaneously. She knows best that such emotion is as beautiful and powerful as it can be utterly destructing. “He’d killed two troopers that we know of, and one of them when the Empire’s breaking all hells loose to hunt him down. Sooner or later he’s going to get himself killed if he keeps this up.”

It’s not characteristic of Cassian to walk into a trap like this. No, it’s him laying down the ground for something. Jyn closes her eyes, steels herself for a confession. “I wish we could do something about it,” she says on the verge of a whisper, both driven by her beliefs and wary of it.

“Actually, I think we can. We could stay and devise a plan to get him off-world, to safety. Lira San
has a climate close to Naora’s. He might fit in there.”

Jyn leans her head a tad away instinctively, her mouth hanging open rather inelegantly in puzzled surprise. Lira San could be an option, it crossed her mind too. But contacting Baze and Chirrut to send them on this strange chase seemed a much more realistic solution than for her and Cassian to be in charge of this rescue mission. Unexpected in a profound way, it sends her down the rabbit hole of analyzing Cassian’s motives and conjures up a veil of silence all around them.

Cassian shifts and playfully nudges her chin with his head. “Come on, where’s the rebel spirit?” he taunts a little and brings their linked hands up. “This matter absolutely needs a loyal partner in crime,” he declares, pressing a kiss to her knuckles.

“We’re on a mission,” she reminds him, seriously wondering in some distant part of her brain whether she’d somehow dropped into an alternate reality in which hers and Cassian’s behavioral models got completely switched by some outrageous mistake.

“Not for too long now if everything goes well.”

“You’re injured.”

Cassian shoots her a dirty look. “I may not be able to speed-climb a big-ass rock spire for a week or so, but I can damn well still shoot a blaster, not to mention sneaking around and running fast. If you really want to argue, try again.”

Jyn purses her lips, seriously scrambling for arguments despite a spark of hope sending the gears in her brain turning about all the ways she and Cassian can make this idea work. “The Alliance needs us,” she decides, torn between the demands of duty and yearnings of a heart.

She’s not the only one who came a very long way from their fight on Eadu. She doesn’t have illusions about the matter — it’s not really her who made Cassian question certain orders and forsake them. She may have been a powerful catalyst, yes, but she didn’t start the reaction, she’d only accelerated it. Once upon a time that particular argument would’ve worked. But Cassian has a retort ready to deploy without wasting a moment. “It always needs us. A solid try, but still a miss,” he notes kindly. “Even if we fail to help the ainweard or even can’t find him in a span of time we’ll reserve for this, there’s potential to find more here, to learn this world better. Better info — better chances of convincing the Alliance to overthrow the Empire.”

Funny how the exact words she’d secretly yearned to hear do not thrill her as much as she’d thought they might. Exhausting her every good impersonal argument, Jyn resorts to heavy artillery. This one, perhaps, is the most important point she can make. With Cassian’s track record in loyalty and devotion one needs to tread lightly if one doesn’t wish to exploit him.

“You don’t have to do this for me,” she tells him in a quieter voice, feeling as if she’s speaking around brittle shards of ice.

Cassian doesn’t answer right away. She feels his body tense up, figures that it might be as tricky of a topic for him to navigate as it is for her. He doesn’t let the silence linger for too long, though. “I’m not,” he states and it sounds firm, like an important decision made and not like an empty phrase of fake reassurance to escape the conversation. When he slips away from Jyn’s embrace, it doesn’t feel like the end because he’s not rushing and because he doesn’t go far, simply turns around so they could sit face to face.

Their knees brushing, Cassian takes her hand in his, covers it from both sides with his palms. “I can’t change any of the things I’ve done or didn’t do because it was best for the cause. And—” he frowns,
his eyes looking firmly on their joined hands, “as much as I regret far too many of those choices, I
wouldn’t have it any other way. As terrible as some of them were, they’ve saved lives. More than
those they’ve killed. But I’m tired of looking at the mirror and oftentimes seeing someone I’m
ashamed of at best and absolutely despise at worst.”

He relaxes his grip just a fraction and Jyn lays her free hand over his wrist immediately to keep him
there, to tell him she understands it without words. Cassian closes his eyes, his jaw clenched shut and
braced against the words he’s probably afraid of, words he’s struggling to let go. But he has been
learning bravery together with her, discovering honesty on this journey. He chooses them in the end.
“There’s no balancing those scales, but maybe I can make the difference a bit less staggering. And
the only way I can do it is to act when I feel something a right thing to do when I have a luxury of
such choice. Helping him is what a good person would do. If I’m fighting for the galaxy where
people don’t turn a blind eye when they see someone in peril and have an opportunity to help, I can’t
just ignore such things myself. That’s not how this works. I can’t expect someone else to shape the
world the way I want it to be and just watch from the sidelines.”

Life, Jyn is somewhat sure, is a rough-hewn tapestry of challenges, some given to us and some
taking root within us. She’s fairly certain she’s got most of her own identified, retreating and yet
inevitably crashing back down on her like ocean waves. One of Cassian’s biggest challenges seems
to be making a choice between being a good man and being a man his wars demand him to be.
Nothing is certain about the balance of victims he leaves behind and lives he saves, but the way he’s
learning to balance out his duty and his heart is undeniable. Witnessing this reminds her of every
dawn she’d welcomed during their trip to Lira San, brings her back to that wonderful sensation of
snatching back control of her life small piece by piece and settling into it. It felt like meeting the first
lights of dawn after the darkest, cruelest night. Seeing mornings bloom didn’t negate the fact that
thick, heartless darkness of the war would catch up with her no matter what, it didn’t change her
decision to keep plunging into its depths in order to change the world around her. But those were her
moments of peace, of clarity, a breath of fresh air woven with relief and the warmth of hope
spreading its wings, and they unravel now in near-perfect echoes with utmost gentleness, paint a
gentle smile on her lips that belongs there thousand times over.

She rests her palm against Cassian scruffy jaw, gently nudges his chin up. The change in angle
shapeshifts the light enveloping them both, shadows retreating under the rays of luminosity, and
scatters tiny northern lights in his eyes, golden and blue stardust singing against soft amber. “I’ll be
there for you,” Jyn says, mirth creeping up into her tone despite her best attempt to keep the phrase as
deadpan as possible. “After all, I’m pretty sure Kay would insist that I’ll have to.”

Cassian throws his head back, the sound of his quiet laughter and his disbelieving grin replacing his
grim worry. “So that’s the phrase I’m never living down. Good to know.”

Jyn brushes the backs of her fingertips against the side of his jaw. “Cassian,” she tries for Kay’s tone
again and misses it by a mile even more spectacularly than the last time. “If there’s one thing I can
promise you for sure it’s that you’ll never live down a thing with me.”

He lifts one of his hands to gently cover hers, turns his head enough to brush his lips against her
palm. “That sounds kind of nice.”

“Nice?” Jyn shoots back, arching a challenging eyebrow. “I was aiming for alarming and arousing at
the same time.”

“That, as you never forget to keep teaching me, is apparently included into my definition of nice.”

She barely resists a dramatic eye-roll. “Okay, that explains a lot.”
Cassian closes his eyes, his breath warm against her skin where his lips still touch her palm. “It works though, doesn’t it?” he asks quietly, perhaps a little skittish and yet choosing to hold on to hope. “As strange and weird and sometimes so unreal this feels?”

It doesn’t feel like tempting fate when Jyn tells him, “All the way.” It feels like winning a battle with it.

When he smiles in response and meets her eyes again, it lights up his entire face. Tiredness be damned, she thinks for a moment of climbing into his lap and kissing that very smile, but only ends up suppressing a traitorous yawn by a very spectacular grimace contorting her features and pouts at the end at Cassian’s fond grin. Jyn taps her index finger irritably against his jaw and he retaliates by gently kissing the pads of her fingers before letting her hand go and rising up to his feet.

She leans back against the rock, crossing her arms against her chest and glaring at him wolfishly. “Do you have a plan other than somehow finding the ainweard and pleading him to come with us?”

“Well,” he says, standing up and heading towards the drying clothing, and admits somewhat ruefully, “it’s a work in progress. But, judging from what I’ve seen and what you’ve told me, that might just be what does the trick. Finishing up our initial assignment is priority one, so we have time to come up with something and make our final decision on this later.”

“Good-old duct tape of a plan.”

“We do have a good track record with them.” Cassian shrugs with his good shoulder, stops by his sweatshirt, bends, and runs his hand against the fabric. Seemingly satisfied, he picks up the garment and walks back with it.

Jyn licks her bottom lip, taps her fingers against her arm. “We could move to that room I’ve talked about. The bed looked nice.”

“You were right, by the way. The Alliance does
need the data from us and delaying it, risking it is not something we can do. So if we'll decide to stay here for a little while more, we’ll be sending Kay off to the *Home One* when he’s done with his assignment on Qen’val. Covering the cost of his back and forth travel will be on us, I don’t want to exploit the Alliance’s credits for this. We’ll win roughly nine Naora days here to either accomplish our rescue mission or acquire even more intelligence.”

Jyn flashes an absolutely devious smile to herself. “He’d be very grumpy about this.”

“Not as grumpy as that time when you had slipped *hedlay* root extract into his oil bath and he had attracted that flock of gizkas,” points out Cassian in an impressively even tone, considering the fact that he’s definitely working hard to stifle laughter at that particular image.

“Excuse you, that plan was based upon an impressive amount of research to make sure no funny chemical reactions occurred so he wouldn’t be harmed, and you know it,” declares Jyn proudly. “The entire crew of the *Home One* couldn’t catch, collect, and contain those little shits for a week. I’ve made Kay get them all in a span of a single hour. It’s a spectacular win. Solo almost gave up his medal to award me for my brilliance.”

“Kay is of a very different opinion on the matter.”

“Mouse droids consider him a hero saving them from terrible pests,” quotes Jyn, recalling a string of grateful beeps in binary from a little droid assigned to clean the *Reckless* when it’s stationed aboard the *Home One*. “If that’s not fame and a good ego-booster, I don’t know what is. Kay should be grateful,” she states scornfully. “Many Alliance droids started revering him overnight despite his best attempts at failing all exercises in tact even with his metal folk.”

“I suppose it’s one more argument neither you nor him will ever settle upon,” concludes Cassian with a warm smile in his voice.

When Jyn yawns this time, it’s with an undignified half-sigh, half-moan. Cassian rubs his thumb against her ribs, making her squirm a little when it tickles. “Sleep. Two and a half hours for you, same for me, and then we should get going if we want to sneak back to the tourist center before dawn.”

Tucking her knees close to her chest, Jyn lets her mind and body rest.

Chapter End Notes

Those who played Knights of the Old Republic game would recognize the *gizkas*. I couldn’t resist incorporating them into my personal canon. :}
The streets of Aide-Dar are an embodiment of color grey against the canvass of a night’s darkness. Wide and treeless, they run through the city like desolate, dried veins, and their only lives at midnight are painfully obedient, black and grey painted Separatist droids clanking their never-ending march of oppression and servitude upon cold asphalt.

A ghost in a city of lost hopes, Jyn wanders the streets, unseen and helpless. Every single Naorie she faced in their identical houses had looked away when she promised them a chance to fight, and each of them had said in a single voice (childish and adult and elderly in an eerie spider-web of mangled fates), “Don’t make promises you cannot keep.” Every droid she wanted to reprogram so they could join her righteous revolution looked down at her with pitying incredulity when her hands touched thin air where their metal bodies should have been and drawled mockingly, “Roger Roger.” When she turned to Cassian, searching desperately for some kind of a better plan, he shook his head and looked away. “It’s not our fight to win, Jyn. Not here. Not today,” he told her, and while the ghost of him had chosen to stick around, following her some five steps behind at all times, she knew she had lost him to the Alliance and its needs. Rightfully so. But it didn’t make the sting any easier to handle.

To her right a sudden flash of white materializes, bright as hope against the night, and just as false. “I am sorry, Jyn.” Mon Mothma’s voice is somber, brimmed with painful sincerity. “A spark is meaningless if there is nothing it can ignite. We cannot risk our forces for the fate of one planet when there is an entire galaxy at stake. I wish there was another way.”

Jyn pulls out a blaster and vengefully shoots Emperor Palpatine’s hologram in red and black and white, projected across the side of a building. The image crumbles into dust only to re-shape back again to broadcast its perverted message of strength in leadership, stability in order, and galactic freedom in power.

The gladiator arena is lit by fake electric daylight, a gruesome copy of a once grand outdoor theater basking in Naora’s gentle sunlight and echoing with lively cheers or songs sung by a crowd in a powerful, wonderful unison with the performers themselves. Dozens of ainweard fights unfold in morbid sync in the belly of the venue, looking oddly miniaturized from the governor’s lounge and set up in a way that it resembles day one of a prestigious dejarik tournament, stakes and odds of the entire thing presented for the host’s overview in real time. Governor Sandeheim regards his favorite show with pride, undoubtedly calculating the outcomes and finding ways to maximize his profits.

In some uncanny way the bastard seems to sense when there’s a blaster pointing his way. Facing Jyn in the VIP-lounge all alone, he makes a show of turning around nonchalantly, he makes a show of turning around nonchalantly, leans back against the balustrade, relaxes his shoulders, and smiles like a snake. “Congratulations, Lieutenant Kailes. I must admit, you did not betray even a hint of your true rebel scum nature up until now. Most impressive. However, before things get all bloody,” he lifts his index finger, “let me ask you a single question.” Glancing over his shoulder at the loud, colorful crowd filling the arena to its maximum capacity, Tehl Sandeheim looks Jyn in the eyes. “After you kill me, what can you possibly do all alone against them all?”

She pulls the trigger without hesitation. The blaster bolt, aimed to burn the life out of Sandeheim right between his eyes, reaches its destination swiftly and precisely.
To Jyn’s horror, one Sandeheim crumbles almost laughably upon the floor while leaving behind an identical Imperial governor flashing that same serpentine smile at her.

“Oh, silly,” croons Orson Krennic’s voice right in her ear, a phantom that stills haunts her dreams, “there are always more of us, no matter how many you kill.”

Jyn blinks and finds herself down at the arena, now devoid of battling ainweards and yet empty in an extremely unsettling way that promises her something even more horrific.

As if on cue, a squad of death troopers lines up a row of Naorie people for a slaughter. There’s an elderly man with somber eyes, a young woman with a smile that speaks of hopes and aspirations for her life, a grinning teenage boy holding on tightly onto a hand of his smiling younger sister, a middle-aged woman holding a toddler in her arms protectively, and many others, each a perfect embodiment of lives most beings navigate when they’re not engaged into a bloody war or haven’t yet met cruelty at its most cutting.

A little bit aside, Tehl Sandeheim has one hand clasped around Cassian’s neck and holds a blaster to the kneeling rebel spy’s temple in the other.

A blaster in Jyn's hand feels cold and heavy and out of place, the way she's never felt around a weapon before, and Krennic’s laughter is an ice-cold poisonous echo at the back of her mind.

“You have a very simple choice, Kailes,” the governor announces jovially. “Let’s see what you can make of it.”

She shoots Sandeheim first. Krennic clicks his tongue disapprovingly. Tehl Sandeheim disintegrates into dust only to rise back up from his own ashes and pull the trigger, unclasping his now bloody fingers and letting Cassian’s lifeless body crumble by his feet.

“You don’t seem to have grasped your lesson last time. Let's try this again.”

She risks meeting Cassian’s eyes and sees familiar resolve reflecting in them. In a split moment understanding dawns on her and she trusts him, trusts them both to handle this like a perfect team they are in the field.

When Cassian moves swiftly to free himself out of Sandeheim’s grip, she points her weapon at the death troopers and starts picking them off one by one.

For every one she kills, an identical one rises to take their place. She counts every blaster shot down, a terrible sense of dread pulsing in her heart like a splintering vibroblade with every pull of a trigger bringing her closer to a loss, but the ammo pack never seems to run out.

She and Cassian seem to go at it for hours — at the death troopers, and the governor himself — and every time Sandeheim laughs as he respawns.

“A pointless ending to your pointless war, Kailes. Don’t know about you, but this is very poetic to me.”

Third time she doesn’t pull a trigger at all. Sandeheim smirks meaningfully every single time a death trooper kills an innocent person in a painfully slow, mocking countdown, and she sees how Cassian’s reverence for her turns into poisonous loathing with each and every life lost when she
refuses to kill him herself for the sake of the greater good.

When the scenario resets for the fourth time, it feels like she’s carrying the weight of several agonizingly long lives. A little boy in his mother’s hands looks at her with lively wonder, his smile full of childlike innocence, and it breaks through every defense she has tried to shelter herself with so desperately.

She does point the blaster at Cassian’s heart. He does whisper, “It’s okay,” to her with what looks like love in his eyes. She fails to pull the trigger and looks up at the sky, a furious cry wrenched seemingly out of the very depth of her own heart together with her soul.

Krennic’s stupid face materializes right before her own. “Do you still think you’re a righteous one in this war?” he asks quizzically. “You aren’t ready to trade a single life for others, daughter of Galen and Lyra. Do you think that your brave mother would’ve been proud?”

Sandeheim offers her a choice for the fifth time and Jyn finds herself sinking to her knees, caught like a helpless puppet into a shit-storm of impossible choices, tears running down her face in perfect unison with her every primal scream.

A familiar hand rests on her shoulder, heavy and big and fatherly in his own broken way. “What will you do if they catch you? What will you do if they break you?” challenges Saw in a whisper full of regret. “If you choose a wrong fight, my child, what will you become?”

It’s the sound of explosion that plucks Jyn out of a dream and drops her weary mind unceremoniously into a decidedly unpleasant reality. Fireworks are bursting above the mirror-like still lake in a vivid frenzy of booming sounds and dual bouquets of multicolored sparks, the panoramic window unable to silence their violent staccato crawling all over Jyn’s skin and pulsing in her bones, the half-transparent roller blinds only dimming the riotous kaleidoscope of images burning themselves into her retinas.

Half-panic, half-fury, she scrambles to sit up, instinctively curves her body forward to bend over her canted up knees, hugs her legs frantically, and buries her face against her arms, eyes squeezed shut and her entire frame trembling in the aftermath of the dream and the immediate embrace of stress attacking her from every angle — from her own mind and the world around her alike.

It must have taken her a split second to wake up and burst into action as well as for the fireworks start going off, for she hears Cassian exclaim a quiet, decidedly sleepy and almost as equally disoriented vile curse in Festian. A moment later he rests a gentle hand on her shoulder. “We’re safe,” he reassures her despite a certain edge of stress bleeding into his own voice, tentatively stroking his palm down Jyn’s spine. “Those fucking kids are at their partying again.”

Her huff comes out sounding miserably, given the drying tears on her face, but at least she doesn’t sound hoarse from screaming when she mutters into her arms reproachfully, “Those fucking kids are maybe a couple of years younger than you, grandpa.”

“All the more reasons to act like adults and not playing with fireworks at—” he pauses, likely squinting at the annoyingly bright digital chrono secured high up the wall next to their bed, “four in the morning.”

She feels Cassian moving forward; the edge of his knee brushes against her hip and stays there, a familiar anchor binding her to reality despite the too-alive memories challenging her choices. “Won’t
argue with you there. If that’s what I’m missing by the life I’m leading,” Jyn admits in a whisper barely loud enough for Cassian to hear, “then kriff it, I don’t get it and don’t want it.”

“And who’s the grandma now?” he murmurs closer to her ear.

“At least I look really dashing for my age.”

As hurtful and annoying as the fireworks are, their booming lightshow doesn’t last for too long and Jyn’s and Cassian’s grumpy bickering guides them through it to the end, blunting the impact with a breath of humor. Jyn waits for a solid minute when the silence settles, exhales with palpable relief after holding her breath for its entirety. Cassian curls his arm around her upper back, sets the warm, wanted weight of his hand on her shoulder and lightly presses his fingers into her skin. “Do you want to talk about your dream?” he asks lightly, his lips brushing the shell of her ear.

She licks her too-dry, cracked lips, the tangle of her many conflicting feelings a messy thing unwilling to shape into some straightforward meaning she’s ready to trust. “I’m not sure,” Jyn replies and lifts her hand to skim her fingertips against Cassian’s on her shoulder. His warm skin, a thin knot of scar tissue at the side of his hand, real touch — it’s already comfort in its purest. Her body doesn’t feel awfully clammy like it oftentimes can be after particularly nasty dreams, but a faint breeze of air descends from the ventilation shaft up at the ceiling and whispers down her neck and spine, sending a light shiver of chill through her body. “Whatever you might say might change my mind. And I don’t know if I want that change. Don’t know what’s the right choice.” She sighs, lets her tense body sag some more against her knees. “I love this planet, but I also loathe this planet,” is what she settles for as the final explanation she gives up in a whisper.

Accepting her decision, Cassian doesn’t pry for more and leans forward after her until his chest rest against Jyn’s side, the solid warmth of his body mitigating some of the chill plaguing her. Mindful of jostling his injury too much, he carefully but stubbornly curves his free arm over her collarbones, gently pushes until she leans into him fully, and buries his nose against the crown of her head.

She uses this sensation of pure physical comfort to focus on the rise and fall of his chest, adjust her own breathing in tune, and banish the loudest remnants of the dream deep into those dark hatches where they’ve clawed their way from. But she doesn’t linger for too long. Her worst dreams are always rooted in some looming problems she can’t solve and yet must solve, and the countdown is ticking mercilessly. In a few hours their original final assignment on Naora will start. Whatever hesitations she’s harboring about her desire to stay and pick a clever fight here will have to be pushed out of her heart and mind resolutely in order to focus on their primary mission. She didn’t have time to revisit this properly ever since she and Cassian had left the cave: they’ve been hyper-focused on making their way back to the tourist center unnoticed; she’s been sneaking around the place with both their backpacks and making sure no one sees her slipping away from a tiny crowd of tourists to meet Cassian so he could safely change outfits (neither of them liked the idea of him parading before other people and Imperial security cameras with very obvious blaster scorching on his clothing); they’ve both needed a real rest once they’ve got to the hotel and pretty much collapsed into bed after a quick shower and a change of bandage on Cassian’s wound; the vast majority of their waking yesterday was used to meticulously document their findings while they were still very fresh in their minds for their mission report. To make such a choice in the very last minute might be what she’ll end up doing anyway, but it doesn’t feel like a safe option at all.

The need to crack this code overwhelms any other priority in Jyn’s mind.

“Do you mind if I sneak out for a run?” she clarifies just in case, gently brushing her hand upon Cassian’s forearm. “There’s still time for it.”

He rests his lips against her temple in an affectionate kiss. “Of course I don’t. Go.”
Jyn’s loving reply is a silent touch of her lips against his wrist.

She still isn’t quite sure how the kark she had ended up in this particular life of hers and in this relationship (the string of events that had led here is exquisitely clear, but the logic behind them is maddeningly muddy), but Chirrut is certainly right about his conviction that the mess of everyone’s lives has a fair share of its precious moments if one’s willing to let them play out and experience them with an open heart.

Jyn decisively doesn’t look in the direction of the loud company of young humans still hanging out at the lake’s pier next to their hotel. As much as her hands itch to introduce those little brats to some common understanding of tact, it’s a) not worth it; b) may attract unwanted attention; and c) not the way Slava Marjani is solving problems. She chooses to focus on running, let her blood come down from boiling by another physical exercise, and pushes her pace a bit harder than she usually would just to be safe and not give into temptation to break some facial bones until she skirts around the lake and reaches the beginning of a path used for skiing during Naora’s winter season.

Her eyes and senses on high alert for her surroundings out of undying habit, she sets the running rhythm to a one that’s good for exercise and yet mindful of her still tired body, and lets a safe amount of her attention shift into strategic analysis and decision making.

Kay would definitely approve. The realization doesn’t bother her nearly as much as it should.

Perhaps the second biggest reason to help the ainweard after the desire of her own heart to do so is the information she dug up about the animal during the short dinner break she and Cassian took in between their reporting. The company Sandeheim has set up to be in charge of the ainweard gladiator fights runs an impressive HoloNet portal where they’re presenting the fighter’s profiles, statistics and speculate about the odds or hype up specific tournaments or matches. Their strange new friend has indeed been enslaved for Sandeheim’s entertainment. More than that, he’s been one of his newest favorite champions, the youngest one to date. Fans of this bloody sport all around the galaxy have flooded a rich amount of threads with comments about A-1117.

A being — clearly capable of cognition, perhaps even close to being classified as a sentient species — reduced by the Empire to a number, to a warrior slave, to heartless statistics and bets without any regard for his well-being. Is that a life not worthy of protecting, of saving? Is that a life a rebellion that believes in justice and empathy should just forget about?

He’d been a slave up until something has clearly happened six months ago. The site’s profile states that A-1117 had defended his bloody title yet again, setting a new record in consecutive wins, but that he was gravely injured in the process. Three days after his win Tehl Sandeheim as a chairman of the league himself had issued a statement confirming his champion’s death to great disappointment of many fans.

Somehow, someway the ainweard had clearly managed to escape his captors (or someone helped him escape), and Sandeheim had rushed to declare him dead to stop any potential speculations about his suddenly missing star and control the situation. There’s no chance he doesn’t know who is murdering Imperial troopers on Naora these days, not when his former champion loathes subtlety and executes his vengeance in a clear message to the Empire. The governor is also keeping things quiet about the murders: no such news had slipped anywhere to the press he’s controlling on Naora or into any Imperial report; however, the rate of trooper reassignments to Qen’val had spiked in the recent months, increasing human Imperial presence on the moon. If to believe the records Neith and Imre has reviewed during their inspection and consider that Sandeheim can do whatever he wants on the moon without any scrutiny, the ainweard has put his claws to eleven potential victims already before Jyn and Cassian encountered his paw-work during their trip to Kjelm Sigma Outpost.
Add Sandeheim’s orders that Reite Veiledan had revealed to the mix, and Jyn is fairly certain she gets the idea of where this is going. She may not know that events will transpire exactly this way for sure, but she had seen far too much ugly sides of the galaxy and its vilest inhabitants to know that Sandeheim is likely daydreaming about taking A-1117’s life himself for all the stress and embarrassment the warrior cat had put him through. There won’t be a happy ending here if the ainweard makes a mistake.

And mistakes, Jyn knows firsthand even before her recent memory refresh course, have a tendency to happen regardless of one’s opinions on them and all the effort one puts into not mucking things up.

Her path through the forest takes a sharp turn to the left and continues on a challenging uphill course that raises the ski track to a nice panoramic vantage point over the lake. Jyn paces herself carefully through the climb, focused on keeping her breathing measured so she doesn’t push too hard and choke at the very top. She slows down gradually when the path evens out on its approach to a more level part of the forested hill, stops when she reaches a tiny natural clearing in the dense tree line to take a moment and admire the view. Naora’s twin moons are colorful reflections against the lake of stardust and the night is warm and quiet, the berserker rage of the most recent storm all but forgotten by nature. From up here the shapes of loud youngsters getting wasted on their vacation from studies are tiny, easier to ignore and not let their carelessness to the war and its young veterans get a rise out of her.

Whether Jyn likes it or not it’s what she fights for — a chance for someone to live their life untouched by horrors she had witnessed. It’s a right thing to do, even when a war is real and someone is ignoring it.

Speaking of a fight… the Veiledan brothers are yet another factor she has to consider in her assessment. Jyn is still keeping tabs on bounty hunter and mercenary community; the brothers are steadily building up their reputation in these circles. Nowhere near as notorious as someone of Boba Fett’s, Dengar’s, or Cad Bane’s fame, but they’re definitely a force to be reckoned with. It’s incredibly dangerous to hunt down the same prey they have in their sights for anyone, yet alone for two rebel spies. And yet to leave the ainweard for them to bring in feels like betraying everything Jyn’s heart stands for. Their presence is all the more reason to help if she can.

It’s the sudden feeling of strain in her knuckles that makes her uncurl her fingers from the fists they’ve involuntarily clenched into. Jyn looks down onto the lake’s surface again, takes in its tranquil stillness, a twin reflection of a small universe circling it along with constellations of Naora’s stars and shapes of Naora’s moons. The sky’s color is shapeshifting slowly from space black to deep dark blue, a thin shadow of a new day spreading across the horizon like ink pouring in slow-motion into clear water. It’s a picturesque illusion of peace — precious and yet full of rotten lies.

It feels like a terrible sacrilege to even consider bringing the war here. It feels like an infinitely bigger sacrilege to let Naora’s nature live out its days quietly knowing that the Empire won’t spare it, knowing that each and every Naorie people struggle in hopeless slavery on Qen’val, that the ainweards fight each other to please their masters, that everything this world has stood for is either maimed, dead, dying, or waiting to die. There’s harmony in here, but it needs someone to sustain it. There might be no one left to protect it.

Victory is built upon the bones of sacrifices. Justice can take its roots in destruction. The fates of a single life, of a planet, of an entire galaxy are decided by a tip of a scale; the magnitudes of different stakes do not matter, decisions and outcomes do.

Jyn takes a breath, lets her eyes fall closed, and goes through every fear of hers that makes her doubt
the yearnings of her burning heart. Every single one of them makes sense. Every single one of them 
may come to pass. Every single one of them might mean a failure.

She thinks of Jedha — a once sacred place of pilgrimage turned into a warzone turned into a tomb 
folding in on itself. She thinks of Alderaan — a morbid graveyard of debris and stardust orbiting a 
sun, the only planet and the only source of life in its system snuffed out by the Empire’s decision to 
terrify the entire galaxy into hopeless, unquestionable submission. She thinks of a little girl forgotten 
in the mayhem in the Holy City, the Empire and the Partisans waging their wars and uncaring of 
everything but their causes.

Evil does not just happen. It comes to pass because someone lets it, either helpless to stop it or 
choosing not to stop it.

She had classified Cassian’s plan to help the ainweard with way too much flattery. It has no meat, no 
bones, nothing substantial to be held together by wires and duct tape. The only thing they have is a 
place to start their search, a place that guarantees them nothing. And if that doesn’t work out, looking 
for a prince of Naorie forests in his realm is as efficient as searching for a needle in a giant-ass 
haystack. What they both are working with is a thread of laughable, wild hope, a mad leap of faith to 
calm the mayhem in their bleeding hearts.

It’s nothing even close to Scarif on the scale of stakes, but the weight of the choice Jyn has to make 
for herself is the same.

You’re either you or you’re a loyalty disowned, explained Chirrut simply when he told the Rogue 
One crew of his and Baze’s decision to leave the Alliance and help rebuild the Jedhan community on 
Lira San. A little bittersweet of a decision as it was, it made total sense. They did not walk away 
from this war — they have simply changed the way they fought it. To preserve a culture all but 
destroyed, to persevere despite all the death and destruction, to have at least a piece of Jedha 
withstand Imperial rule and be there when it crumbles is just as much of a rebellion as fighting for 
freedom with a blaster in one’s hand.

Saw was all about fighting fire with fire, fear with fear, and destruction with destruction. The 
Alliance is all about caution, strategic hits, and meticulously planned out and executed missions. 
Wars wear countless faces and weave infinite opportunities. When you walk away from something, 
you never know if you’ll ever have a chance to find it again.

Jyn opens her eyes, a decision made.

She doesn’t know for sure, will never know for sure, but somehow she has a feeling that light years 
away a blind Guardian of the Whills stops in the middle of demonstrating a tricky kata to a group of 
kids on Lira San and curls his lips into that smug grin of his filled by half-mystery, half-pride.

The sound of a door opening and closing reaches Jyn even through the hum of the sonic shower. She 
glances in the direction of a jack knife with a built-in set of lock picks she had left upon the sink 
within reach just in case, but before her fingers can twitch on instinct Cassian raps his knuckles in a 
familiar rhythm against the ‘fresher’s door and tells her, “I’m back.”

“I’ll be right out,” she replies, instantly relaxing.

Sifting her fingers through her now-clean hair a couple of times for good measure, Jyn turns the 
sonic off. It takes her a single step to be able to reach the laundry tank in the tiny room. She picks up 
a bundle of clean clothes out of it, sorts out between her own and Cassian’s, even taking time to 
carefully fold his and lay it down into the sink after checking that it’s dry, and quickly dresses.
Collecting the gear she went running in from the floor, she dumps it into the tank, turns it on, takes Cassian’s clothes, grabs her knife, and walks out of the ‘fresher.

Cassian has already opened and arranged paper containers with food on a small table in their single room. “Smells nice,” Jyn commends, regarding the view fondly as she walks by, and puts his clothes down next to his rucksack. He raises a sly eyebrow at this gesture, his lips curving into a smile when Jyn narrows her eyes chidingly at him for such pride.

“Junk food day,” he says wryly, picking up the electric kettle when it turns off with a quiet click. “You’re so easy to please.”

She walks to the table, nudges her chair away from the corner of the room so that its new position would give her a good overview of the lakeside for purely strategic purposes, sits down and shamelessly stretches her legs so that her feet take over Cassian’s chair. “Good junk food is art,” Jyn notifies him, unfazed, and picks up the container closer to her.

Cassian pours them both a cup of local instant caf and carries them to the table. “You and I have very different definitions of culinary art.”

“Mm, nope.” Jyn dips a fried cheese stick into blue cheese sauce, closes her eyes when she tastes it, licks her lips afterwards with an expression of complete satisfaction. “Art is art. You’re just a bit of snob.”

Putting the mugs down, Cassian looks down at his chair. Jyn stretches her feet haughtily, not quite wanting to give up her territory without making a point, but does relent after all. However, before she can settle her feet back to the floor, Cassian sneaks his arm under her ankles and casually lifts them. She leans her head back just a fraction, watching him expectantly and letting him take the lead. Maneuvering underneath with admirable grace, Cassian settles on his chair and lowers her feet back into his lap, opting to keep contact, to settle back into casual domesticity they used to exhibit so much before this entire endeavor on Naora had started.

She flashes a triumphant smile.

For a little while they enjoy their breakfast in comfortable silence, even though certain gears in Jyn’s start turning. She’s mulling over the idea to bring up the topic of prolonging this mission when Cassian rests his hand over her legs, palm up as he’s holding his container with meat noodles. “So,” he starts from afar, twisting the fork to roll some food upon it, “do you think we should stay here for a bit more?” Helmar’s more classical accent lilting his words, he does sound like a young man casually enjoying a good life.

Jyn picks up a little pack with sauce, dips another stick inside closer to a corner to reach more of the flavoring. “Do you?” she reflects the question back at him mildly, not wanting this to come off either too eager or in any way judgmental and influence his own decision in any way.

The corners of his mouth quick up into an intriguing smile. Cassian stuffs his fork into the noodles, pushes the datapad closer to him and flicks it on. Bringing something up on the screen with swift fingers (which Jyn tries her best not to stare at and fails as usual, damn his unfair attractiveness at most mundane of things), he picks it up and passes the device to Jyn.

The answer she’s looking for comes in a form of message exchange Cassian had made from a fake mailbox set up specifically for inconspicuous communication with the Alliance.

“From: Slava Marjani
To: Yares Marjani

Subject: RE: Adventure times

We’re thinking we should stick around here some more. It’s a nice place. Amazing nature. And it’s so quiet here, so many places to just rest from all the people. It’s nothing like a big city. Reminds me of home a little, you know? Good old times.

I’m so excited about work, but I don’t know when me and Hel will get an opportunity for such a getaway next time. First year is a no-vacation period, then it’s a matter of saving up some credits if we want a longer rest.

Feels like we should just take this chance when we can.

Any advice, dad?”

“From: Yares Marjani

To: Slava Marjani

Subject: RE: Adventure times

You kids have fun.”

Jyn arches both eyebrows at the response, not really sure if she wants to know whether it’s been Mon Mothma writing it up or Davits Draven. That could really go either way, and she’s still trying to wrap her head around that particular little fact.

She puts the datapad back upon the table and meets Cassian’s gaze. “So,” she deliberately mirrors his tone from a mere minute ago and grins when his eyes crinkle with good-natured humor, “we’re doing this?”

“Damn right we are.”

This, Jyn reflects, might just be the life she wants to have for herself. Freedom to try helping someone when she can, having Cassian with her while she’s at it. It’s a thing from her quiet, sacred dreams, and it’s coming alive.

She nods, hoping that gratitude reflects in her eyes just as brightly as it sets her heart alight in the most pleasant of ways. Judging from the way Cassian’s entire face beams up in a smile, it is.

The last official part of their mission goes without a hitch or any unpleasant surprises. The trip to weapon’s factory is perfectly uneventful: it’s quiet around the valley, stormtroopers patrol right on their original designated routes as this part of Naora is not plagued by a vengeful ainweard, and so Jyn and Cassian get all the information they need on the terrain and scout the very best approach to it.

Staying for a night in a Naorie village turned into a hotel complex by a small-time Imperial
entrepreneur, Jyn cleans up a tiny kitchen in their room after dinner and flops onto the bed next to Cassian, stretching out her aching legs and arching her back to relieve some of the tension after a day of riding a speeder bike and walking around a lot. When she sits up, Cassian lifts her arm in an invitation, and she slips underneath it to settle by his side, resting her head on his shoulder.

“Do you want to talk to him?” Cassian murmurs into her hair, one hand holding the datapad and his other arm cradling her to him reverently.

Jyn huffs, tracing her fingertips down Cassian’s forearm. “You voiced the idea first,” she replies a touch naughtily, “so there won’t be any escaping this duty for you. Besides, you know me, I’d rather enjoy him ranting at you relentlessly. That’s my kind of fun.”

“I appreciate the support,” he deadpans and earns himself a very meaningful elbow poke to his ribs for this absolutely unnecessary callback all the while Jyn is trying in earnest to hold back an involuntary smile.

The call goes through common communication software, although very heavily modified by both Jyn and Cassian with three different layers of encryption, each of them more complex than the previous one, and impossible to trace conventionally. Just in case they use a voice-only mode. To their honest surprise, Kay actually lets Cassian notify him about the change in plans and the droid’s new directives without interruption.

Jyn frowns a little at the silence from the other side of the call when Cassian is done talking, a snippy remark almost flying off her lips when Kay at last processes the information and elicits a long-suffering whir that sounds very reminiscent of Baze’s trademark grunts.

“There he goes,” she whispers to Cassian, feeling a silent chuckle reverberate in his chest as he maps the outline of her shoulder with this thumb.

“Very well,” Kay declares sullenly. “I would very much prefer it if for once you’ll do your best to not get into any unnecessary shenanigans until I come back to pick up your sorry asses, however unlikely that is.”

“I find their dedication to collecting more intel admirable,” interjects Ache’s low, a tad synthetic voice he chooses to communicate with. “We are interested in learning about Naora as well. We will stay for a while. So we can keep an eye on your puny troubles and assist them, should they require a quick getaway from the planet.”

Cassian leans the back of his head against the wall and releases a dramatic sigh. “I do not know whether to feel more thankful or insulted,” he mutters under his breath.

“These particular feelings are inconsequential to your safety,” chides him Kay, having picked up on the comment. “Thank you, Ache,” he replies to the other droid. “No shenanigans,” he presses once again for good measure. “See you in nine days.”

The call cuts off.

Jyn plucks the datapad from Cassian’s grip and gently throws it onto the mattress by his leg. Sliding down the bed a little, she settles on her side, sneaks her hand under Cassian’s neck, and winds her leg over his knees. “Do you think he’s genuinely worried or just wants in on some action?” she asks after stifling a yawn.

“Eh, it’s probably both. But with a definite, loud emphasis on ‘cranky, antisocial pain in the ass’.”

Jyn snickers, curls her arm around Cassian’s midsection, and closes her eyes. “To the cave
tomorrow, then?”

“Yes. Let’s see if our new friend will let us help.”

Force, she hopes.

Chapter End Notes

The propaganda poster Jyn shoots in her dream is inspired by this one.

Boba Fett needs no introductions, I believe, but just in case here are Cad Bane and Dengar.

"You’re either you or you’re a loyalty disowned" is a quote from a song called ‘15 Min Flame’ by Poets of the Fall.

And lastly, yes, in this universe Mothma and Draven are a thing. I find both their characters very interesting, and it's even more fascinating for me to imagine a long-lasting relationship between them given their differences and yet a common goal of establishing peace in the galaxy.
scourge of dark upon the light

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Not many dreams survive a collision with heartless reality. So far this dream of Jyn’s is no exception.

It takes her and Cassian fifteen hours of travel to reach the ainweard’s cave: first they take a train from the tourist zone neighboring the starfighter factory back to the vicinity of Rakvaire lake, then embark on a familiar journey on foot to the cave’s secret door. By the time they reach it, sun is already starting to set, spilling a little ocean of violet across the horizon. They drop their bags in the ranger’s little home, separate at the cave’s first intersection. Cassian heads in the direction of Kjelm Sigma Outpost, Jyn walks to the cavern’s hot river and then beyond to the sinkhole that first introduced them to this cave.

Their new weird friend is nowhere to be found.

Jyn sighs, a somber kind of frustration coiling tight in her belly, and does her best to will her mind away from a spiral of dark thoughts, to focus on practical analysis. She’s way past foolish naiveté and blind belief in things lining up so conveniently and kindly right the way she wants them. And, after all, this particular ainweard might be a nocturnal creature. His coloring makes him a perfect shadow of these forests at night and he definitely needs to hunt for food. It will be safer for him if he rests during the days and goes out when dusk settles over Naora. He might easily come back to this shelter. There’s not a string of hope that’s been lost, not yet. Still, it stings; plain and simple, ruinous regret at its finest.

By the time she walks back to the intersection, Cassian is already waiting for her, his back flat against the wall, arms crossed against his chest. Golden light from the mushrooms above is spilling down on him at an interesting angle, half-shadow, half-light making his sharp features stand out in a striking, peculiar way. Her mouth curves into a momentary smile and she meets his eyes.

“Not a trace so far,” he admits softly.

Hands stuffed into the pockets of her sweatshirt, Jyn lets her smile morph into a little show of frustration by pursing her lips, then lifts both shoulders in a tiny shrug. “Same here.”

Sulking in place will lead her nowhere, so she pushes on. Cassian drifts to her as if caught by the strings of graceful gravity and then closer still into her personal space. The light pressure of his arm against her back and its weight on her shoulder feels like the best reassurance she could ask for, a comfort devoid of lies or promises turning to dust. Jyn wraps her right arm around him in kind and leans into the familiar warmth and shape of Cassian’s body.

Jedha means a lot of things to her. It’s the weight of strange shame caused by her father’s failure to see how his aspiration to make the galaxy a better place was exploited. It’s the eternal sadness for all the lives that were lost, for every road untraveled by those she could not save in time. It’s the beauty of the Holy City and the rust-colored cold desert around it that the Empire could banish only by complete and utter destruction. But Jedha is also a focal point where her entire life has changed. It’s on Jedha where she realized beyond the shadow of a doubt that she won’t back away from this fight even if it seems hopeless, that some of them must be fought no matter what. It’s on Jedha where the precious ragtag family of hers had first come together in its entirety. It’s on Jedha where she found herself falling into this exquisite sync with Cassian and discovered a strange, novel balance in the way each of them moved and operated in the eye of a terrible storm.
It doesn’t get old. Their height difference doesn’t matter a thing — every step they make is timed just perfectly and neither needs to either hurry up or slow down to match each other’s comfort stride. Their hyper-awareness of one another is fused tightly with how right it feels, with a calm sense of belonging. Now that it’s clear to Cassian that she wants his touch, he cradles Jyn just a little tighter to him in a show of infinitely soft possessiveness that she enjoys so much, that never ever feels caging.

She quietly relishes every single moment of their walk back to the little cave, knowing full well that the moment they’ll reach the ranger’s home this fickle sense of peace will be tainted. Her mood shifts when she walks past the bead curtain, latching on to a breath of sadness as if her life depends on it. Stopping by the armchair, she lays her hand on its high back next to the leather coat and looks around absently.

Cassian traces his fingertips against the small of her back. “What is it?”

She bumps her eyebrows into a tiny frown, bites the inside of her bottom lip. “Feels like I’m trespassing here. It’s a really weird emotion for a once homeless thief.”

“You’re not only a thief,” he tells her fondly, now mapping the outline of her hipbone with a light touch. “It’s a feeling worthy of everything else that you are.”

War, a cruel mistress, really has a knack for emphasizing empathy no less than its affinity for destruction.

Soon enough this moment of inertia turns into a weapon wielded expertly to nag at Jyn’s restlessness. The mission is not over; it has shifted and acquired a new angle to it. Jyn has never been on the best of terms with such looming weight even when she couldn’t influence the outcome. She has a vague memory of always wanting to be on a move when she was a child, and through Saw’s upbringing she has acquired something akin to a switch between missions and downtime modes in her brain, where a healthy dose of idleness is a deplorable sin in one case and a welcome respite in another. A fever aching for something to occupy herself with is her dear friend once again, urging her to some kind of action. It takes her a single side-eye at Cassian’s face to see this emotion mirrored back at her.

The same decision made separately in a split moment of eye contact, they busy themselves with housekeeping duties. Turning on the heater first, they find some rags in a small compartment built into the bottom of the shelf — old clothes, tattered and worn, and so repurposed for cleaning — soak it in water (and warm water at that, it has taken only thirty seconds or so for it to start warming up), squeeze most of it away, and proceed to wipe the dust as best as they can. Jyn is the one who takes care of the jacket, rests it to dry a little on the now clean bureau. While Cassian is sifting through the books, taking each of them and trying to determine whether they could come in handy, she takes inventory of bomb supplies.

The technology put into Naorie bomb crafting is old, lacking most modern electronic components or fancy materials. There’s a good set of unused casings; some can be activated either in impact or equipped with trip wires, some could be made to go off either by a timer or upon receiving a signal. Judging by design, these bombs could be thrown, used as mines, or be stuck to any surface. A few tightly screwed containers that Jyn finds alongside the casings and tools are filled with now scarce amounts of sulfur, salt, gunpowder, and phosphorus.

They can’t take much from the cave, not with their backpacks full to the brim and not when such thieving feels abhorring (clothing, for instance, could have been a good haul, especially judging from its state; however, the mere idea of them freeing Naorie people only for the ranger to come back to their house thoroughly looted by the rebellion sends a wave of revulsion so potent through Jyn that she never revisits it again), but there’s no way she’s leaving this old-school yet endearing construction set unused.
She picks up the bomb materials along with their paper packaging, lays them down with reverence on the bureau next to the jacket, and makes a mental note of prepping the bombs for usage if they would have time for it; one never knows when they might suddenly become very useful, after all. Afterwards she helps Cassian with the books. It takes them almost an hour to review the library. There’s nothing like the ranger’s diary in there, unfortunately, but quite a lot of titles don’t seem to be related to science. They find more than a dozen clearly home-printed and sewn books, each of them in Galactic Basic; a good five of them Jyn recognizes as examples of classical Naboo literature, a few are acclaimed and popular science fiction stories, some are works on different forms of galactic politics, and the last three are one of the most epic romance stories the entire Republic considers eternal classics. Other books could be fiction, could be history, could be literally anything, but either way they’re precious. Jyn and Cassian arrange them back upon the shelves, setting the titles of interest to them at the top shelf with others following below. It’ll take time digitalizing them. Probably more time than they’d like to have. Anyhow, going for it and doing the best they can is worth the effort.

While Cassian is rummaging through small drawers secured to the bottom of the desk, Jyn focuses her attention upon the bed. The woolen covering is very dusty, and so she tries hard to fold it as carefully as possible and not to shake it around. Two spacious compartments underneath the bed reveal a set of seemingly clean sheets, two thick winter blankets and pillows, and another woolen covering identical to the one Jyn’s holding in her hands. When she balances the covering in the crook of her arm, picks up one of the sheets and sniffs at it, it smells a little like the wooden compartment and still holds a faint whiff of some herbal-scented laundry product. Touched by this sad hospitality, she makes quick work of striping the bed of used things and replacing them with clean ones, and stuffs old accessories into the drawer.

By the time she turns around at last, flops onto the bed and thoroughly stretches out her legs, Cassian had settled into the armchair and is looking at the bulky communications unit positioned a few inches away from the cooking panel. There’s a scattering of motion sensors he’d apparently found, now lying upon the table next to this forearm, and he’s twirling one of them in his fingers. Jyn settles on her side, scoots over so that she could get a good look on his face, mindful of keeping her boots off the clean covering. She has a soft spot for him being like this: a spark of keen excitement in his eyes, a tiny web of wrinkles around them that means thoughtful concentration, a relaxed set to his scruffier than usual jaw.

(Sometimes, with a pang of both grief and love, she wonders if this is how mama has felt about Galen, if this was how she had seen him. She’s not quite sure what to make of this thought, of a potential parallel, of history rhyming in beautiful yet heart-wrenching ways.)

Jyn rests her head in the crook of her arm. “You have your scheming face on,” she points out affectionately. “Care to elaborate?”

Cassian drums his fingertips against the armrest. “I think I might be able to snatch a receiver from this comm unit, set it up to work with the motion sensors. With a bit of coding we could track the signal on the datapad, see if they’ll be triggered.”

Jyn counts the sensors. There are seven of them, which is one more that they’ll require for placing at the cave’s intersections to achieve the best coverage. She smiles. “That way we won’t miss the ainweard if he decides to stop by.”

“And it’ll give us more time to spend with the books instead of patrolling the cave,” he adds.

“Sounds like a plan,” agrees Jyn. Shifting onto her back and curving her body in a thorough stretch before straightening up and resting her feet against the floor, she emphasizes a touch playfully, “And
without duct tape at that. Achievement unlocked.”

“Someone’s all in on the original plan, duct tape be damned,” reminds her Cassian out of principle and puts the motion sensor next to its digital family.

Jyn re-locates their backpacks from the original position they’ve left them by the entrance next to the shelf so they’ll be easier to reach from the bed, and digs into Cassian’s rucksack. The meat pastries they’ve purchased back at the station are at the very top, wrapped neatly into a heat-preserving silvery foil. She lays the food on the table, follows it up by retrieving two bottles of water and setting them on the desk as well, folds the ‘fresher doors, washes her hands. Shifting sideways on the doorstep to let Cassian pass, she then pushes the food aside, clearing a good chunk of space at the edge of the long desk, unceremoniously props herself upon the tabletop, kicks off her boots, scoots over to lean her back against the wall out of the way of tube lamps stretching at her left, and folds her legs into a casual impression of a meditative pose.

Predictably enough Cassian regards her with a fake air of sternness when he walks out of the fresher. Settling back into the armchair, he leans back and dons an expression of eternal disapproval. Or, rather, into an expression that would have been a reflection of eternal disapproval, would his eyes not betray him and spark with fond humor. “Do you have something against using tables for what they’ve been designed for?”

“Nope,” Jyn shoots back innocently and takes another bite of her pastry. “But user manuals are for noobs,” she says with a half-full mouth, words coming out in a funny way.

Cassian rolls his eyes in a peculiarly long-suffering way and reaches out for the other foiled package, a stubborn smile on his lips effectively revealing what he’s really thinking about her habit of claiming anything but beds or chairs or couches as a resting place for her ass if she can help it.

After their dinner is done, each of them gets to work. Digitalizing the diary and the books is only one side of the medal; as much as preservation is vital, understanding them would be a key. And so Jyn roams around the HoloNet (their shelter is close enough to the surface that the signal is reaching it) in search of a Naorie-Basic dictionary. Which is easier said than done, taking into account that Naorie people have an abundance of dialects unique to specific regions of their planet, sometimes even unique to a specific village, and that using standardized Naorie language each of them learn alongside their mother-dialect might not get things translated correctly, especially the diary. The problem is, there are barely any dictionaries available for the dialects in the global HoloNet — Naorie people have been very adamant to keep tight control over what they’ve shared with the rest of the galaxy and seem to have been holding certain secrets very close to their chests (and for a very good reason, Jyn thinks darkly) — so she ends up clumsily querying mirrors of local networks backed up before Imperial invasion in her best approximation of Naorie language.

Her search is both engaging and daunting — she finds every edition of the primary dictionary alongside only a sole dictionary summarizing some peculiarities of dialects from northern Naora which might not end up helping much given that the ranger’s cave is on the southern continent — so she lets herself take a small break. Naturally her attention settles on Cassian.

Sometimes it’s still strange — watching him like this, feeling so safe and mesmerized. Fierce and unforgiving and choosing caution and cynicism as her armor, for the longest time Jyn used to regard every being as a potential hazard, ally or not, someone akin to a friend or not. She didn’t care if it was fair, didn’t care if it alienated her from others. It was her way to survive in the tumultuous mess of the galaxy (where goodness and loyalty were rare, where trillions of Imperial watchful eyes, hardware and organic alike, searched and scanned for any hint of opposition or a being who’d stand out, where it never mattered if someone was kind to her or liked her because in the end they all left
her behind regardless), to stay one step ahead, to not be overly disappointed if her darkest thoughts and suspicions would have come to pass.

(Sometimes in a stray thought she used to ask herself if Saw would be proud of her hard-edged paranoia and immediately stowed it away as a fact completely irrelevant to her life. He cut himself out of her present and future, he didn’t deserve even a thought directed his way.)

Cassian was no exception, until he was. She hunted for lies and betrayals in his every expression and motion when they first met and beyond, but then she didn’t. She missed both a lie and a betrayal, they both blew up in her face on Eadu, but somehow all the masks were off the moment they’ve crashed in the grey confines of a stolen Imperial shuttle, each of them shaken to the core and reeling and perhaps for the first time in their lives letting every wound and scar this war has carved out in their hearts to be revealed. She still remembers it acutely when the tidal wave of her pain and anger abated, leaving her lost and aching in a way she didn’t quite knew before, but strangely not alone. And then she looked Cassian in the eyes when he brought her a tiny army to avenge her father and save the galaxy, when he told her the real truth about him and agreed to follow her to the very end of that mad suicide mission, and felt a fact crystallizing with sharp clarity in her heart — whatever happens on Scarif, her life is never going to be the same, and she doesn’t want to have it any other way.

It really never was.

Jyn has a vast collection of Cassian’s expressions that she holds dear at this point. Most of the times he’s the first to wake up when they get to enjoy a night without bad dreams, even if it’s by a minute or so, but on rare occasions when she beats him to it she loves simply watching him sleeping, taking in the absence of worry, the glimpse of his real age that shows when he’s absolutely relaxed; in those moments she has to hold on tight to her desire to reach out and trace the sharp outline of his cheekbone up to the corner of his eye, to tuck away the strands of hair falling into his eyes only to give him some more time of peaceful rest. It’s impossibly hard not to smile and even grin when he’s interacting with Kay, his doomed resignation combined with affection more endearing than it’s legal for it to be. He looks absolutely striking when his eyes gleam with excitement, a flush blooming on his skin, his hair in messy disarray when he’s breathing hard after yet another fun round of sparring with her, either staring down or looking up at her, depending on who ends up on top at last. She had come incredibly close to kissing him for the very first time when she she’d seen deadly concentration in his eyes and features as he’d been aiming an old-fashioned wooden arrow at the target during their stay on Lira San, pulling off a truly impressive marksman show with such an archaic weapon as if he’d been training with it specifically his entire life. (She did kiss him a mere few hours later, that particular image still floating at the back of her mind.) The reflection of desire and infatuation in his eyes at any stage of them having sex does no less to her pleasure and arousal than his touch or the feeling of him, for Force’s sake.

Now he’s all serene contemplation, his eyes slightly narrowed in laser-sharp focus and his lips slightly parted as he’s completely in his element and busy keeping track of delicate engineering work. Jyn slants her gaze down, reflexively licking her lips. Cassian’s hands are swift as he’s methodically stripping down the comm unit to reach its receiver element, each motion surgically precise and agile as he’s untangling and disconnecting the webbing of wires, removing and setting aside tiny micro-schemes and transistors. She’s always been good at things like this as well as at coding, treated them as puzzles she’d sincerely enjoyed tackling, but Cassian never fails to turn this into pure performance art.

She finds herself devouring the sight: the way his fingers are flexing, the ripple of movements of thin bones at the outer side of his hand, the outline of veins under his skin. Seriously, she wasn’t even aware she had a real turn on for hands of all things before she met Cassian, but the effect is
undeniable. It’s both a real image that gets to her, its enthralling, animate geometry of action, and a rich tapestry of tactile memories — the feeling of those specific hands caressing her skin lovingly, both soothing and igniting fire everywhere they touch, and that wonderful sense of heat and fullness when Cassian curls his fingers inside of her, masterfully coaxing her body into waves of sharp, all-encompassing pleasure. That mere particular memory is vivid enough for arousal to pool low in her belly, for a heat of desire ignite in her bloodstream.

It’s ridiculous. Jyn has been perfectly kriiffing fine taking a more than a three year break from having sex with another person; frankly, she’d never even felt a hint of desire for anyone ever since she left Veinala city and up until she met Cassian. Her previous experience had been great, far better than anything she had expected from it, but it’s only in this particular relationship that she found out just how much she loves physical intimacy and how frequently she wants it. This mission is the longest amount of time she and Cassian ever went without sex ever since they’ve opened this page of their journey, and here she is, body and mind latching onto sweet memories and enticing sight with ravenous hunger.

(She might need to make an important adjustment in her plans for their trip back from Naora. If things line up the way she wants them, her perfect days would consist of healthy amount of sleep, very eager catching up on all the sex they’ve missed, and playing *Razor’s Edge* in between those two things.)

Cassian’s voice breaks her out of her horny reverie. “I’ll have you know that you’re distracting,” he mentions in a scandalous matter-off-fact voice with a very healthy hint of mirth, at least his visual attention still firmly focused on the half-disassembled comm unit.

It takes Jyn an impressive amount of composure to close her parted mouth without a painfully-audible click of her teeth. Her hands a little tight around the edges of her datapad, mind wavering between teasing him and approaching this cautiously, at last she settles on a respectful, “Would you like me to look away?”

“Jyn,” Cassian says, and her assessment of the situation comes to a grinding halt.

She has always liked her name. It might not roll off a tongue like many others, like Cassian’s own, but, short and sharp, it fits her perfectly. More importantly, it is hers. It sits right in her heart, she loves owning it. She missed it fiercely through all the years she couldn’t use it because the Empire couldn’t care less for Tanith, Nari, Kaia, Fela, and Liana, but would scourge the galaxy to get Krennic’s hands on Jyn only, yet alone *Jyn Erso*. She wasn’t prepared one bit for Cassian saying her name in any way shape or form, for how it would matter because he’s the one who’s saying it, for how he always makes it sound like it means an entire universe to him.

This time is no exception. There’s reverence and tenderness and humor all woven into a single syllable of her name, and it works in perfect harmony with a soft smile playing tricks on his lips. He halts his delicate engineering work, looks up and meets her eyes. “Having you as a distraction is one of the best things that happened to me,” Cassian tells her in that special devout ways of his. “By all means, keep staring for as long as you want. I’m just teasing.”

It would be so easy to let the datapad drop into her lap, shift a little on the desk so that she would face him, and lean forward. It would be so easy to ask whether it would be okay if she’d kiss him and then at last do so if he’d agree, make one of the last steps to start fully healing the impact this mission has on them both.

But as much as Cassian is clearly with her in this moment, his mouth now slightly parted in what’s most definitely not concentration but anticipation, his eyes also instinctively dart to the comm unit and the motion sensors, his mind naturally drawn to duty as well because he’s always been loyal
both to it and to people he cares for. And, the truth is, Jyn gets it. She feels the weight of the datapad acutely in her hands, senses strange, soft ghosts of the books to her right, their meaning and knowledge and history they hold pleading in silent whispers to not be forgotten.

They would have time for each other when the mission is done, but their time on Naora is limited, and it’s worthy of being spent on showing kindness to this planet and its people’s culture. Someone has to.

Jyn communicates back to Cassian with a knowing smile, a quick glance down at the comm unit for emphasis, and a nod of agreement. Each of them goes back to their respective quests at peace with this choice.

Some thirty minutes later Cassian announces that he’s got the sensors connected to the receiver and to his custom-developed app he’s constantly supporting and modifying for any kind of communication required by a mission and hardware management. All the sensors are of the same make, and an examination of their parameters reveals that they are capable of scanning a radius more than enough for Jyn and Cassian to cover the most important parts of the cave and ensure the ainweard can’t sneak unnoticed past them. Cassian place one by the entrance to the ranger’s home to test it out, turns it on through the datapad. It takes Jyn’s single step closer to the cavern from her position some seven meters away for the device to send a positive motion signal back to Cassian’s app.

“So?” she clarifies just in case, stepping over the device and peeking into the room through the bead curtains.

Cassian grins, regarding the other sensors with a decidedly admiring gaze. “Sharp little things. Impeccable detection capabilities and reaction time. Someone’s got to learn a lesson or two from Naorie hardware production.”

“Perfect.” Jyn approaches the desk. “I’ll be taking these before you decide to marry them and make Kay jealous,” she jokes lightheartedly, reaching out to scoop the sensors into her pockets.

Cassian blinks, barely suppressing a shudder. “You’re welcome,” she shoots him a dashing smile and stuffs both hands into the pockets of her sweatshirt. “I doubt that he’ll get any more insufferable than he already is, it just would be a slightly different sort of prickly, annoying Kay. And I’ll get a kick out of it.”

“Never doubted that particular fact.”

“You know me so well,” commends him Jyn. “See you soon.”

She does some very efficient work of placing the sensors at every entrance to the cave and tunnel intersection, not quite running through their spacious hiding place, but definitely keeping energetic tempo. Leaving them dormant at first, she starts turning them on when she puts the next-to-last sensor at the entrance to the tunnel leading from the sinkhole to the river cavern. The final sensor waits for its turn when she walks past the ranger’s home and to the secret entrance to the cave, placing it close to the retractable door and flicking it on.

By the time Jyn gets back to their hiding place, Cassian is stepping out of the ‘fresher, shirtless, pants hanging low on his hips, the scruffy beard on his jaw and neck fully shaven, his customary goatee trimmed into neat perfection, and doesn’t seem to be in a hurry to dress up immediately as he smiles upon seeing her.
Jyn sizes him up with an appreciative look, glances down fondly at the heater — it really has warmed up the small cave to a quite comfortable temperature — and shrugs her sweatshirt off.

“All done,” she tells him, draping her garment over her shoulder and turning to fold the ranger’s jacket and hide it away into the drawer to free a place to rest her and Cassian’s clothes at.

“Okay.” Picking up the datapad from the desk, Cassian passes it to Jyn when she lays her sweatshirt over the bureau and faces him. “Look through the notification timestamps. If they’re all from your movements and the ainweard by some miracle didn’t sneak inside while you’ve been walking back, dismiss them.”

No such luck. Each sensor’s invocation coincides with the pattern and timing of Jyn’s journey through the cave. She returns the datapad back to Cassian, biting the inside of her cheek in slight disappointment.

“I’ll set an audible alarm signal for every new sensor invocation so we won’t miss it,” says Cassian, fingers tapping over the datapad’s screen. “Here’s hoping our new friend won’t turn around and run for his life at the sight of them.”

Resting the datapad on the shelf, within arm’s reach from the bed, Cassian sits down upon the mattress. It’s only been a matter of time before Jyn’s gaze would be drawn to the shoddiest medical patch they have secured over his shoulder. “Can I?” she tilts her head meaningfully in the injury’s direction, rolling the sleeves of her shirt up to her elbows.

“Of course,” he says gently.

After all, he’d probably been waiting for it. Nothing stopped him from changing the dressing on the wound all by himself when he’d been in the ‘fresher. But ever since accepting her help in the aftermath of Scarf he does let her fuss a little about such things, lets her help him take care of his injuries because he knows it makes her feel a little better about it. It’s kind of… nice to feel useful, nurturing even. (When she’s not busy letting guilt take over.) Jyn barely ever knew this part of herself before she had woken up in the medbay of Yavin 4, but exploring and letting it thrive feels right.

She’s quick to wash her hands and come back to the room. She glares a little at Cassian for the way he’s experimentally testing the range of motions in his right shoulder, one hand braced against its side as he rolls it. “How is it?” Jyn mutters skeptically, eyeing the lines of discomfort scrunching up his face with enmity.

“Getting better. Not a picnic by any means yet, but stings a bit less than yesterday.”

She digs up their medical supplies from her backpack, prepares everything she needs. Stepping close and looming over Cassian, Jyn slowly pries away the patch’s adhesive layer, folds it, and lays it aside. The light from the lamps on the wall behind Cassian provides a good enough illumination to examine the injury clearly. She’s got to admit, their Alliance-provided bacta has done its job not half-bad at all, slowly but surely regenerating the damage. The wound is already scarring over, its tissue tender and slightly raised for now. With some more treatments of Alliance bacta that they have on their hands, Jyn knows, the mark will fade over time into a silvery gash stretching over Cassian’s shoulder, paler than his skin, probably even soft to a touch. It’s a thousand times better alternative than a more threatening injury, but the notion of its mere existence doesn’t sit right with her regardless.

She’s lingering in place, fingertips resting across Cassian’s collarbone close to the wound but not touching it, when he sets his palms against her waist. “There’s no need to keep moping,” he teases
her. “Or otherwise I’ll be tempted to file a copyright claim against you for stealing my thunder in stoic brooding. All those stupid manuals about how to master a profession in ninety days would come in handy. I’m sure I could rock a lawyering game if I set my mind to it.”

Jyn lets her eyes roll skyward, shakes her head disapprovingly. “You and Kay would make the most terrible standup comedian duo this galaxy has ever seen.”

“That may be, but I’m sure I’ll still be spectacular,” he bickers back, soothingly tracing his thumbs across the sharp angles of Jyn’s hipbones. “Besides,” Cassian murmurs, lifting up one hand and tilting Jyn’s chin up, which gives him a better sight of a smile she failed to contain, “we both know that my humor works on you. I’ll happily settle for a single grateful member of the audience.”

“I thoroughly regret this every day,” she mutters out of principle, going for the best expression of resignation.

“Whatever you say, Angry Girl.”

One of these days Jyn is really ought to somehow find out which exact endearing idiot from Team Fulcrum Alpha has first started using funny pet names for teasing. (And she better not find out that it all began with her designating Kay as Target Practice back on Jedha. That just won’t do.)

Liberally applying a layer of bacta gel upon the blaster wound with gentle fingertips, Jyn places a piece of plain bandage over it and secures it with a few plain patches. Satisfied with her handiwork, she puts everything away, retrieves a towel from her backpack along with a fresh change of clothes reasonable for sleeping later, and takes her turn in the ‘fresher.

When she steps back into the room, the fresh and clean feeling of her body improving her mood more than she had expected, Cassian had donned a shirt on and is sitting cross-legged on the bed, his back against the wall with a pillow for cushioning, the ranger’s diary spread out on the mattress before him as he’s using his portable tourist camera to snap images of its contents.

“Have you tried translating yet?” clarifies Jyn as she dumps her used clothing on the bureau and sits down at the edge of the bed to roll on the socks on her feet.

“Will see to it first thing after I get this digitized,” he replies, turning a page and capturing another photo.

Jyn grabs a sizable stack of books from the shelf, settles down on the bed opposite of Cassian in a pose mirroring his, and gets to work with her own datapad and camera.

Some ten minutes later Cassian’s datapad quietly chimes (the sound very different from the one he had set for the motion sensors’ notification), and she scoots over to sit by his side, peering at the screen with anticipation. The first attempt at translating a random page from the diary is partially successful. It’s possible to understand the basic gist of the text, but a very good chunk of words does not convert into Basic. They try loading a few other dictionaries into the translator app they then run the image through, with the result being more or less the same.

Jyn huffs the air through her nose in frustration, her fingers drumming silently around the woolen cover. “Let’s just grab one more. If that doesn’t work, we could always revisit this later,” she suggests, striving for practicality.

Cassian offers the datapad to her. “Your choice.”

She reviews every option they’ve tried, her gaze latching onto the less obvious choice of them all. “Eh, whatever,” Jyn grumbles, and chooses the dictionary of northern Naorie.
Sarcastic irony, her dear friend, doesn’t disappoint and comes through.

Other books temporarily forgotten, she huddles close to Cassian’s side when the app translates the entire diary, and they get to learn the ranger’s story.

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**Page 1.**

*Sometimes I think that the cruelest thing about future as a concept is not that it can bring waste to your present, but that it finds a way to maim your past.*

*I remember how worried we’ve been when we learned that an entire civil galaxy stretched past our horizon, bigger than anything we imagined and yet not that dissimilar to our own way of life. I remember how excited we’ve been to explore its rich diversity, to get to know so many other cultures, to welcome them on our land, learn from them and teach them. To become the Republic’s friend was a big honor for a while, a wonderful adventure that made us fall in love with the rest of the galaxy.*

Now I can’t help but think that we should have let our fears have louder voices, that we should’ve searched for darkness through the blinding light we were greeted with.

*It’s unfair to every friend we made from other planets. It’s unfair to our own sense of honor.*

*I write this in hopes that one day, when justice will prevail, I or someone else could truly comprehend what the Empire means and how it corrupts everything it touches. I write this in hopes that history won’t be repeated.*

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**Page 10.**

*To rule is to improve and maintain balance. It’s what we all have been taught since childhood to know what it entails to be a leader, to choose those who would lead our communities wisely.*

*Sandeheim’s definition of a ruler includes radical changes. Merely ten days into his governorship, the list of new laws he had instilled is almost endless. The Empire needs our help to thrive, he says. It’s up to us to support galactic peace, he says. Naora has been kind to foreigners from the very start, it’s only sensible to declare it in the laws, he says.*

*He doesn’t ask what we think about it. He seems to conveniently ignore that helping the Empire conflicts with our own interests, our culture, our way of life. By making Basic a second official language on Naora, he puts Human needs before comfort of any other species sharing Naora with us.*

*We take a stand.*

*My calling has always been more to live with nature than it is to be in the thick of city life. A part of me regrets this, for I wasn’t there when my son and his family and my people gathered for a peaceful protest. A part of me is grateful that I didn’t have to see that cruelty unfold with my own eyes. The stories our rebels tell are enough. The look in my son’s eyes I’ve seen afterwards is too much.*

*They hide behind masks as they hit unarmed people. An ocean of white skulls seethes, grabbing anyone who dares to fight back with their bare fists and hitting them to the ground. Hega thinks they wear white because it makes blood stand out on their armor, because that way you can see your*
own pain reflected back at you on someone you fight.

(Later I’ve made them bleed. It didn’t make their armor look any less horrific.)

That night when Sandeheim gives an order to disband the crowd, the bells of Maire-Aden have pleaded the city for help for the first time in eight thousand years. Last time they’ve done so our ancestors have locked into the deadliest battle of our last war; the survivors put an end to senseless bloodshed and built Naora’s society and order the way we knew it to that day. People have flocked to the streets. I think those who came before us were proud that we didn’t forget their tradition, that we chose to fight only to preserve our lifestyle.

I wonder if their ancestors have thought that we should’ve stayed warriors, that we should’ve waged wars between ourselves to ensure only the strongest would survive so that we could stand a chance to banish the Empire off our lands.

I’m proud of us. I’m heartbroken that there’s no way we couldn’t have won this fight.

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Page 11.

Nesse loses Ida and Velar that night. They get separated from Ida first in that mayhem, see the troopers dragging her away. When in the morning people gather to retaliate and free all those captured from the trials the Empire quickly stages, the troopers appear out of nowhere in numbers and squash each and every of these attempts. That’s when they get Velar.

Arm broken, blood streaming down his face, Nesse still tries to claw his way through a retreating crowd and reach the soldiers taking Velar away. That’s what Kalai tells me anyway after apologizing for knocking Nesse out and carrying him all the way to the forest to safety.

I’ve never been in love the same way Nesse is with Ida and Velar — wholeheartedly, wanting to share his life with someone, cherishing every moment they are together. I only know motherly love for him and the special longing I have for my planet and its nature. I’m grateful that Kalai had saved him from captivity. To see his anguish at losing the man and woman he loved probably ever since they’ve first became friends as children makes me want to weep with him and do bloody murder.

I understand it when he chooses to join a rebel cell halfway across the continent. Neither of us wants to be close to each other when we might lose one another. Nesse has the courage to make this decision himself.

I couldn’t ever imagine that pride could feel so heartbreaking.

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Page 11.

The Empire brings reinforcements. It takes them a span of mere few days to build up prison barracks all over the planet and detain every protester they could get their hands on. A few more attempts to free our prisoners go in vain.

And so we hold back. The Empire’s hands are bloody, but no one is killed. Some of us try to appeal to diplomacy, negotiate with Sandeheim. He doesn’t believe one should negotiate with those threatening peace. Most of us try to go back to a semblance of a normal life, to find at least some solace in day-to-day duties and ensure that our economy doesn’t plummet and that there’s still food
on the tables. Some of us flock to newborn rebellions spreading like very careful wildfire all around
our world.

For a week or so we plan our actions, coordinate with each other, try to find the best way to do
something about early days of Sandeheim’s dictatorship.

Turns out, we have severely underestimated the bastard’s master plan for our home.

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**Page 12.**

I’m keeping track of Imperial patrols in my forest when Sandeheim makes his move. Under the
shroud of a night Imperial ships descend from our skies like predatory harbingers of war. I see their
Star Destroyer hover above our capital and cast a dark, malevolent shadow over everything we
stand for and love.

I do not realize what the vehicles the Empire’s unloading around our every village and city truly
mean until Quinteli’s fingers lock around mine, almost hard enough to bruise. She’s trembling. For
all the years she’s been my friend and lover, I’ve never seen her come undone, not even when she
left to fight for Naboo during the Clone Wars and came back after them, first streaks of silver
marring her dark hair.

Fear and hatred in her eyes is visceral; she must be living through her worst nightmare. I’ve thought
nothing could rival the chill I’ve felt in my blood when Kalai had carried my unconscious son into
my home and when Nesse’s voice was breaking as he described the protests to me. Quinteli’s
heartbreak does the exact same trick.

When we rush to the closest village, we see that some transports are carrying stormtroopers and that
most of the transports release small hordes of battle droids to stomp upon our lands.

The Republic lost countless lives to their war with the Separatists. The Empire had promised the
entire galaxy that they won’t let them repeat. The Empire had chosen to use Separatist droids to
subjugate those who never wished it any harm.

If I’ll ever meet Irony, I’m going to make sure it thoroughly regrets this date.

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**Page 13.**

It takes the Empire three days to apprehend the vast majority of our population. There’s nothing we
can do with their unrelenting force. Too little of us escape, those who do have no other choice but to
join the ranks of our rebellion. Some are willing to fight, some just want to hide out, survive, and
somehow get away to safety. We believe each and every of these things is a righteous rebellion.

“We’re like little lakes consumed by an unrelenting ocean,” murmurs Kalai helplessly as our shabby
group sits by the hot river in my dwelling. In the morning those who chose to fight will try to hijack
one of the Imperial supply ships for our tiny army and attempt to send the refugees off-world before
the Empire will initiate full lockdown. “We’ve only ever tried to be responsible, to take care of our
world, to carefully control the population and resources. We only wanted not to destroy everything
that’s been here before us.”

“It wouldn’t have stopped them if there were more of you.” Quinteli shakes her head. “Evil doesn’t
“care for numbers, it finds a way to gnaw through its prey regardless.”

“It’s unfair.”

“That is the way of darkness.”

We hijack a ship. It doesn’t make it past the orbit. The Empire intercepts it, boards it, and apprehends every single soul on board. No refugee is harmed. A few warriors protecting them survive.

Sandeheim makes a real show of appearing mournful in his HoloNet broadcast to the rest of the galaxy when he declares, “The Empire has only ever wanted to ensure peace with Naorie people, to live with them in harmony. We do not wish to bring any harm. We only want to keep order. It is a great pity that our soldiers risk their lives for their beliefs and some Naorie savages do not desire meeting us halfway. Regardless, we will persevere.”

He does, and so do we.

We have been taught that there are no winners in wars, only those who lose something and those who lose everything. It still rings true. At the same time it’s one of the biggest lies I’ve ever heard.

It’s only easy to theorize about wars, not to live through them.

The Empire scores a definite win.

We lose hopelessly.

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Page 21.

In a month every Naorie prisoner of the Empire is moved to Qen’val. By this time there’s no one left to live in our cities and villages. The Empire doesn’t waste time at all and flocks of foreigners come to take our place. They take our homes, our jobs, and neither of them seems to really care that the lives they’ve crashed into once belonged to someone else.

They’re mostly Human. Representatives of other races coming to Naora do so only as slaves. Most of them are female.

I’ll never forget the lash of pure rage that made Quinteli lose her composure and scream herself hoarse in the safety of my cave.

It’s torture to live in the Empire when you do not agree with its maligned ideals. To some more than to others. We all lost something. Most of us lost the lives we led before. And some had to carry the weight of shame even if they had never done anything to betray their integrity.

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Page 97.

Nesse’s rebel cell is no more. Six months of fighting put to an end. I do not know which of them had laid down their lives and which had lived, but our sympathizers working for the Empire on Naora tell us that those who survived were transported to Qen’val and got reunited with their families.

I wish for nothing more but for my boy to be alive.
It makes me sick to hope he’s exploited by the Empire even if he’s together with Ida and Velar.

I have never thought one could be so cruel and yet believe so fiercely that they’re being humane. The Empire’s ideology is something one can hate with every fiber of their being and yet be grateful for at the same time.

If there’s a greater con any political power has ever pulled off, I’m not aware of it.

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Page 131.

Quinteli.

My gentle, fiery friend. I know you’ll tell Nesse, Ida, and Velar that I love them if by some miracle you’ll see them on Qen’val.

I’m sorry I’ve never said these words to you. We’ve spent more time apart since we knew each other than we’ve been together, but I do love you and I love that you’ve always understood that my heart craved solitude and nature more than it craved a conventional family life.

If we’ll meet again, this would be the first thing I’ll tell you.

Rehnidae, I can only hope.

(There’s too much fucking hope in my life and nothing to show for it.

Irony, you better be coming to our showdown armed. Otherwise it’s going to be a very short fight for you.)

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Page 164.

In my darkest moments I wonder why I am one of the last ones left standing. I’m not the most skilled of warriors. I’m not the most ‘people’ person a group needs to keep up morale.

I’m just a woman with sharp eyes and light feet and love for these forests and their life. There. Not a bad summary of a life if you think about it, but I’m not really who my folk needs.

Then again, things mostly rhyme when we weave legends and write down histories, not when we live our lives. In that way this is fitting.

There’s a single rebel group left. On a run for a week, they still manage to avoid capture. If everything goes well, tomorrow they’ll reach me. And then… well, we’ll just do what we can. What we’ve always done ever since the Empire shed its pleasantries and turned into our master.

It’ll be interesting to find out if this is the last entry I make.

In any case, what a journey this has been.

If this won’t become a legend one day, I’m going to be mightily pissed. This entire clusterfuck of suffering for nothing? No, I’ll have none of it.

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As precious as it is infuriating, there’s a peculiar thing about life: while a messy tapestry of events is absolutely set in stone, their meanings, interpretations, and impacts have a tendency to shapeshift in the wildest of ways.

Take Naorie history under Imperial rule. Nothing about it is new. Jyn has spent hours reading through Sandeheim’s memoir about his ideas and installation of a new order on Naora, a song of ice and fire churning in her veins all throughout in a storm of rage and terror. He’s all callousness and science and pride about it, an adept of economic prosperity, a form of rule that maximizes profits and order, and framing his accomplishments from a historical perspective. The ranger’s diary is another spin on the exact same history. But hers is a story — heartfelt, sincere, intimate, a study of loss and cruelty and crumbling hopes in broad strokes of emotions. It lands like an arrow piercing through a heart — swift and unrelenting — and lodges itself there firmly to conjure up a seething storm.

Time doesn’t heal it — a life under Imperial shadow failed to forge even the shoddiest of true armors around her heart — and present stays tenacious as ever. The story sticks with Jyn through the rest of the evening and well into the night, through every monotonous minute she spends on preserving the ranger’s library ever since she has uncurled her fingers away from the bedcover, clawing into the fabric with craving for blood and justice and eyes stinting with tears on the verge of shedding. Words echo in her ears when she closes her eyes and tries to fall asleep, arms tight in a possessive hug around Cassian, images play out beneath her eyelids in a drama a theater would weep for.

When she dreams, it’s of being a silent ghost when the ranger’s dark shape walks out of the cave for the last time, not sparing a glance to her home, hell-bent on some kind of a goal and seemingly not afraid of leaving. Jyn calls for her — don’t go, I’ll find you one day, I’ll bring you hope to take them down, just you wait — but none of the words unfold, dead, rotten weight on her tongue. When she reaches out for the ranger’s hand, her fingers brush against an invisible barrier that feels cold as ice and smooth as glass. She hits it, again and again as she’s watching the secret door sliding back and sealing the cave, and finds only pain and crimson tears dripping off her knuckles.

The dream subsides and leaves her with a fading echo of phantom pain, her right hand not a fist at all and resting against Cassian’s heart. It’s warm under the soft sheet and woolen cover, and so his skin is bare, a quiet staccato of his heartbeat pulsing reassuringly into her palm. Somewhere during the night they’ve shifted, so now he’s lying on his back, one arm cradling Jyn to his chest, their legs tangled. He’s awake already, a subtle, ephemeral sensation of him watching her like a vigilant guard is a last stroke of comfort, perfecting it under the shadow of ever-gloomy odds.

She quietly wonders if he’s thinking of the same thing: of the ranger holding her lover in her arms in this same bed in a not that distant past, a resolute conviction to keep her safe a constantly searing brand in her heart, a silent prayer to every deity imaginable — please, let me keep this one thing I love untouched, let us endure, let us last to see our enemy crumble and start rebuilding our lives — an echoing mantra in her very soul, and then of the ranger falling asleep only with anger and sorrow and loneliness as her companions for months.

Judging by the way Cassian bends his head to rest his mouth against the crown of Jyn’s head and winds his arm even tighter around her body the moment he feels her breathing shift subtly into awareness, she’s fairly certain he is.

When she opens her eyes at last, the room is a slave of soft shadows that make its darkness soothing on the eyes, a more powerful yellowish glow pouring light from a thin strip of space left between the
wall and the ‘fresher’s door, and a dimmer golden luminosity spilling through the bead curtain from
the tunnel. Jyn shifts the hand resting on Cassian’s chest, turning the chrono to her, moves to free her
right arm from underneath the pillow, but Cassian realizes her intent and beats her to it, tapping his
index finger against her chrono’s screen to light it up.

Four hours of sleep, then. Could’ve been worse. She settles back, letting her body relax against his
and seeking a measure of comfort against unrest of duties and aspirations battling it out in her heart
under the merciless weight of ruined lives and her failures to somehow make it right.

“Couldn’t sleep?” Jyn murmurs into his collarbone, running her hand down his chest slowly. Her
fingers catch on the outline of every rib through skin and muscle, their shape always pronounced no
matter how much he eats or works out, inevitably find memories of Scarif etched into his skin. He
holds his breath, his stomach muscles going tense under her touch in a way that reflects both restraint
and anticipation and not discomfort at all, arches just fraction into the warm, gentle comfort on her
hand before heaving a content sigh and relaxing when she gets the hint and flattens her palm against
his skin, shifting from gentle unassuming exploration to a simple but sure broadcast of her presence.

Jyn doesn’t hold back a proud, content smile and shifts her head just enough to press a soft kiss to a
dip between his collarbone and neck. Cassian traces his fingertips up her bare shoulder, buries them
into loose strands of her hair. “Couldn’t stay asleep. It’s just this planet indeed,” he admits, echoing
her reflections about Naora.

She sighs, shifts her hand when the tips of her fingertips reach the edge of his ribcage to run them up
and down his side. “Wherever you look, it’s never right and too full of history that had no karking
right to happen.”

“And it’s still there when I close my eyes, no matter what.”

Jyn stops her hand at last, her fingers splayed over Cassian’s hipbone and palm resting against his
stomach, and he covers her hand with his to keep her there. “Do you think it would be better if we
really had a luxury to choose when and where to care about something?” she asks quietly, their clash
on Eadu with emotions reaching a boiling point and pouring into an ugly fight twisted into healing
honesty.

His hand goes still in her hair, cupping the back of her head. “Yes and no,” Cassian replies after a
little while, an undertone of eternal tiredness coloring his words. “It would be easier if it’d hurt less,
without those spikes of anger and fear and hatred, if there’d just be a constant steady fire that could
keep you going. But that’s not how it works, is it? The moment it settles — it begins to normalize.
It’s easier to go numb to it from there. Some fall victim to it, some don’t. But if you do there’s no
need to fight anymore. It becomes a reality, a truth, a simple inevitable law.”

Cassian goes quiet, his throat working to swallow. And then, after a moment of hesitation and
reflections, he heaves a sigh. “There was a time when I really hated Fest,” he confesses at last, voice
edged with emotion close to chocking up. Somewhat surprised by this insight into his past — it’s still
rare when he chooses to reveal it — Jyn shifts her hand, intertwines their fingers, gently squeezing
his in a clear message of reassurance. “No one seemed to hold a grudge for its frosts and snowstorms
and terribly short daylight hours and grey skies three hundred days per year or so, but I loathed it all
as a kid. I’ve felt like I didn’t belong there, like me and Fest simply weren’t made for each other in
every way possible.” Another sigh, this one deeper, a reflection of something painful, maybe even
something he’s ashamed of. “I’d read and watch so much about the rest of the galaxy, daydream of
forests in the summer, of oceans and rivers where you could swim, imagined warm sunlight on my
skin. My father got offered a job opportunity off-world, but he turned it down, a day before I’ve
turned six. Needless to say, I’ve spent my birthday as a really insufferable little brat about it.”
Despite the weight of their conversation, Jyn has to hold back a reflexive giggle. She’s almost successful. Cassian, though, doesn’t seem offended and only huffs a sardonic chuckle through his nose.

“Sorry,” she murmurs in a voice that contains only a hint of apology, “but I’d pay a lot of credits to see that. Insufferable little you is a show for the ages now that I know a man you’ve grown up to be.”

“I’m sure it was as stupid and ridiculous as it sounds,” he agrees. “And yet, my father wasn’t angry with me. It’s feels funny to me sometimes, seeing those holodramas and people arguing so theatrically. He didn’t yell, didn’t look away from me in disappointment, didn’t give me that iconic speech about certain dreams having a tendency to come true and that I should be careful about what I wish for. No, that evening my dad came to my room, grabbed a blanket, flopped down onto the floor next to me, and chose to treat me as an adult and teach me a lesson that I’ll never forget. He warned me that I won’t like it, but he said it was important, asked me to listen and understand. And then he talked, all night long, until his voice was sore.”

Under her chin his chest rises and falls as Cassian stops there for a moment, his hand stilling in her hair as well. But he does find the courage to continue on with the story. “That night is the most vivid memory of him that I have. He held nothing back. It’s probably one and only time I’ve ever seen him cry. He told me the entire history of my people as he knew it, from the birth of our civilization to my days, through our every mistake and trial and atrocity. We had too many roots and family histories lost in wars and slavery and famines; my family like many others on Fest had preserved the names and stories of their ancestors as good as they could when they got a chance. That night I’ve learned some of them, in the following days I’ve learned all that my other relatives could tell me.” He holds his breath for a moment too long, releases it with restless frustration. “I don’t think there’s anyone left from my closest family,” he says a little too fast as if those words are sharp as daggers on his tongue. “I’ve searched for them. I know some are dead for sure, and some were missing for years last time I’ve been chasing their ghosts. So, stories of my ancestors probably fade with me. I was too young when I’ve learned them, and it was too much information crammed into a too short span of a time. Things I can recall are barely glimpses into what happened and don’t do justice to their lives, but I do remember our history. Ten generations back my grand-something parents living by the sea back on Ateral, still children at those times, were herded into transports, taken away to wild plains on the east, and left behind with nothing to survive. Their homeland got repopulated by the neighboring Katoan nation. It was their seventh attempt to conquer us. By the time Katoan Dominion had fallen for the last time, there were only a million of my people left on Ateral. We lost more than fifty million lives to the Dominion’s greed and cruelty in a span of a century. That was the very last straw. It destroyed any hope for my people to ever feel like home back on Ateral, on their ancestral lands. They were the people whom the Republic didn’t bother helping; to them it was a local matter at the outskirts of the Mid Rim and they couldn’t care less when one nation was devouring its neighbor simply because it thought its ultimate mission was to rule and conquer, and the other only ever wanted to live in peace and freedom and be left alone to it. They were the people who found a miserable, unclaimed planet in the Outer Rim, named it Fest in honor of their lost capital where culture and civilization first blossomed on Ateral, and built there a safe life for their families and children, a place where they could speak their language, choose their leaders, dance their dances, and simply live without fear, without slavery. For a good while, at least.”

Silence settles between them, somehow both healing and heart-rending, and Jyn uses this moment to bring their joined hands up, to shift hers so that she could touch her lips to the beating pulse at Cassian’s wrist before settling their hands across his sternum. He takes a deep breath, traces the shell of her ear with his thumb, and then gently brushes the wild locks of her hair spilling over her cheek and eye behind in, shivering a little as they tickle his skin at the movement.
“I’ve never even thought of complaining about Fest again after that night,” Cassian says after a while, words even quieter and lined with a different kind of pain, with something even more deeply personal, perhaps never ever voiced out loud before. “But I couldn’t wrap my head around the kind of cruelty my people had to suffer through. I couldn’t imagine friends turning into enemies overnight because the authorities said so, couldn’t imagine neighbors selling out each other for speaking a different language and then taking over the freed apartments when Katoan soldiers took people away to prisons and mines, couldn’t imagine brothers killing each other because one somehow believed that a family needs to be quiet and submit and the other knew that to let someone take your culture and identity without a fight is to betray everything you stand for. No kid can, of course, when all they ever know is peace. But the Clone Wars came, and when I look back I see that it was like discovering every fear I could and couldn’t imagine, and like walking the same damn path my ancestors had already walked. Same story, just in a different time and with altered details. Turns out, that was my kinder war. Festians fought Festians sometimes, but to most of us the Republic with its clone troopers and Jedi generals were conquerors. When the dust settled and the Empire emerged, well, things weren’t so clear anymore. One day I found myself dashing through the streets with a knife wound after one of our newer rebels turned out to be an Imperial informant and a traitor, and I couldn’t even dream of asking anyone for help before I’ve reached one of our hideouts. I couldn’t tell anymore if they would be a friend or a foe. A little civil war at its cruelest.”

Cassian shifts just enough to put a little space between his side and Jyn while still keeping her head resting on his shoulder. His intent becomes clear when he untangles his fingers from Jyn’s grip only to guide her hand down and to the left, to a very old scar stretching like a pinkish crescent moon from the edge of his ribcage and down to his hipbone. She’s always been wondering about that one, and never dared to ask. (She still isn’t sure if she really wants to know how old he’s been when he’d got it.)

“So many of us spent years fighting the Empire to win our freedom back,” he continues on, resting his hand on his stomach and letting Jyn gently trace the scar’s outline despite goosebumps raising on his skin, either from touch, or memory, or them both combined. “But the longer it lasted, the more people chose obedience and turned to hate us. They were so afraid to lose what little they got left, so numb to atrocities happening every day all around them that they’ve learned to ignore them or were even eager to help the Empire eradicate our rebellion once and for all, away from their eyes, away from their hearts.”

The way he says that last sentence makes Jyn squeeze her eyes shut, seethe with silent fury and yet be touched by the way light survives even the darkest of times. There’s no hatred in his voice, no anger, just resigned, tired acceptance. Instead of laying blame he chooses not to hold a grudge, not to play judge and jury, but simply focus on doing what he believes in no matter what the galaxy is throwing his way, on hurting and bleeding and fighting for someone’s freedom to loathe him because that’s the right thing to do. When she rests her hand back against his heart, he lays his own on her wrist and brushes his mouth against her temple.

“Some things make you feel too much, make you feel like you can’t handle it anymore, but I think that’s sort of a point,” Cassian admits with a heavy sigh. “It’s that feeling that keeps me going when things are at their worst. I won’t be who I am anymore if I’d try to shelter myself from it. That would be the moment I let the Empire win. It sucks, it’s absolutely stupid, but it’s the way it is. I’d rather feel that lash of shock and anger every single time I see the Empire destroy something because it can instead of teaching myself to look away. It’s becoming that kind of man that scares and repulses me the most, for better or worse, whatever it says about me.”

Jyn’s not sure it’s the right thing to do, not at all, but it’s what first comes to her mind on pure instinct. She allows it to guide her. Opening her eyes, she shifts and stretches her body upward just enough to press an kiss against the line where Cassian’s neck meets his jaw, just a breath away from
the neat line of his goatee. “Continuing on with confession time,” she murmurs against his skin lovingly, unafraid of confronting these particular old demons anymore, “even though I’ve tried my damn best to run and look away and stop caring, that never really worked. You can con the entire galaxy if you really put your mind into it, but there’s no escaping from yourself. For better or worse you and I have chosen to keep fighting because it’s the only thing that’s ever felt right.”

A shiver tremoring through Cassian’s body at such a bold show of affection quickly turns into something that suspiciously feels like fit of silent laughter. Jyn leans back just a little, raises herself up on her elbow to try and get a good look on his face. Even in the comforting shadows of the room there’s no mistaking the mirth in his expression.

She arches an unimpressed eyebrow and Cassian gently flicks her ear for it. “I’m pretty sure that’s the very definition of depressing, but to me it sounds like a hell of a great promise. Thank you. I think I needed to hear that.”

Jyn smiles, but the breath of levity is short-lived. Her new line of sight includes the rows of books now, still waiting achingly lonely in the shadows for their stories to be preserved. She looks back into Cassian’s eyes, taps a finger against his sternum. “Should we get on with our work?”

He shifts in her embrace, traces his mouth across the curve of Jyn’s shoulder in a gentle kiss, across the spider-web of small scars left behind by her falling on broken glass once and not having any bacta at hand to tend the wounds with. “Feels like we must, isn’t it?”

“Hello duty my old friend,” Jyn agrees, sitting up and away from the warmth of Cassian’s body to face a new day.

On the shelf behind them, the datapad stays eerily quiet.

Chapter End Notes

The bomb crafting references in this chapter is inspired by technology in Assassin's Creed: Revelations.

And, yes, I think this story officially classifies as a slow-burn in an established relationship. :D
Naora wasn’t always a nature-loving paradise whose people have despised violence. Peace was their conscious choice after long years of war between east and west, a war birthed by spirit of competition taken to extremes and thirst for revenge. It has plunged three generations of Naorie people who discovered a second continent on their planet and settled there into darkness of meaningless fights and death when those who started it all were long gone, killed by the fight they’ve unraveled. Children were born into chaos and mayhem, destined to pay for their ancestors’ sins, until at last the cause of war was lost on them, until at last they’ve put an end to an endless circle of bloodshed.

The very first city on Naora created from scratch without any settlements morphing into it, a white-stoned miracle and pride of their people lovingly named Sel-Nair that claimed eight hills separated by a serpentine river in a mountain valley and was erected in celebration of their culture, art, and architectural knowledge of the times, has stood in half-crumbled ruins by the war’s end. A once-sacred place, two and a half centuries of peaceful prosperity put into lovingly crafting its beauty, it stood for years forgotten all the while Naorie people have been rebuilding their villages and lives, struggling to regain what they have lost. When time came to restore Sel-Nair, architects from all over the continent were dispatched to assess the damage and calculate restoration cost. They’ve came back with reports and numbers, but most importantly they’ve came back with an idea.

It was the idea that got brought to life.

The mission to Naora is imminent. A mere few hours separate Jyn from putting on expensive, elegant clothing and letting go of herself to become Neith Kailes, from disembarking on Dalisor and trying to cheat the Empire like she’s never done before.

The last week and a half of her life is a very deep-dive into mission prep, into strategical assessment of both the enemy and the world they’re maiming, into every detail that could possibly be useful and influence their plans and approach to the task at hand. Rarely, when she’s past the attention span to consume such kind of information, she allows herself a foray into Naorie history and culture. Now, after she went through the main beats of their plan with Cassian over lunch just for the sake of caution, Jyn finds herself with some time to spare on her hands. Cassian had wandered off to the cockpit to spend some time with Kay and rake his brain in a fierce competition with the droid as they go through a datapad game requiring them to solve various logical and mathematical puzzles along the way, and she decides to revisit a tourist holo from Naora she had downloaded while collecting intel about the world and that ended up very low on her review priority list.

Back in their room aboard of the Reckless, she places a holoprojector in the middle of the room, flops down onto the bed, and settles to watch.
The holo is narrated in Naorie language with subtitles in Basic scribbled below, the language melodic and seemingly made for songs and poetry. It guides Jyn through Sel-Nair city, a memorial to Naora’s first and once last war. A place where time has stopped, it barely has changed from the moment the last catapult had hit its stones, the last arrow had flown through its streets, two swords have clanked against each other for one last time. Naorie didn’t rebuild all that was lost, didn’t repair the city back into its glory. They’ve chosen to preserve their history regardless of whether it was a beauty or a ruin.

The first chapter of the documentary guide depicts the city as it has survived up to the time when Naora has become a part of the known galaxy, telling a story of a war that was fought in its realm. But then another episode rolls and Jyn finds herself watching a holo inside of a holo spread all around the gentle ruins of Sel-Nair, blue shapes against white stones painting the lost glory of the city in striking detail with its mighty buildings connected by vast streets and gardens and integrated into the terrain without compromising its lush hills, with round houses circling around flowery yards and fountains and statues, with a mighty aqueduct framing the city and with smaller ones twisting throughout the streets like lifelines, with dozens of stone bridges crossing the river and old wooden boats transporting citizens from one part of Sel-Nair to another.

She’d never seen a haunting ghost so beautiful before.

The dining room in Sandeheim’s apartment takes up the entirety of the museum’s terrace on the last floor. It’s an abhorring geometry of mirrors and laser-reflective glass, a neon fury of a lightshow visible only from within setting the stage in a vast room with glass furniture. Neith regards the sight with an appreciative eye and spares no attention to her ghost’s discomfort.

Neith Kailes also couldn’t care less for Jyn Erso’s memories, however she does care to understand the ideas Tehl Sandeheim is putting to test on Naora in his experiments in creating a perfect embodiment of the Empire. Both a mask and a ghost learn what they hunt for.

“Sel-Nair,” mentions Neith matter-of-factly, dipping the piece of Chandrilian tendermeat into the customary sauce the expensive dish is served with. Opposite of her, Imre Willix leans back in his chair, eyes narrowed with temperate curiosity, a glass of Toniray wine in his hand.

Tehl Sandeheim glances at her. “What about it, Sergeant?”

“It is one of the best-preserved cities of its architectural style in the Mid Rim. Its form goes as far back as to examples of the very first cities on many galactic worlds before the discovery of most industrial technology. Not many of such places are left in the galaxy. It is my understanding that before Imperial era on Naora it has been one of the most visited tourist sites on the planet. With your sense for economic efficiency I’m a bit surprised that you are not inviting Naora’s guests to Sel-Nair.”

Sandeheim’s proud smile as he’s gearing up for yet another one of his bragging lectures is a thing of absolute filth. He even sets a fork with a piece of his Lambro shark back onto the plate, circling the edge of his wine glass with the tip of his index finger. “Ruin is a living memorial to failure, my dear. To preserve it, to let people regard it with awe is to worship it. No one should be encouraged to revere it, history or not. The strongest survive and correct failures of the past. One day the city of Sel-Nair will be no more. One day our Empire will thrive in its place, more beautiful than ever.”

“You haven’t ordered it razed yet. Why is that?”

A predatory glint flashes in Tehl Sandeheim’s pale grey eyes. “It’s one of Naorie’s most sacred places. They will take it down last. Poetic, like all things should be.”
The chrono on Jyn’s wrist vibrates in tune with motion sensor’s feedback, chimes the digital bells of a notification signal in a loud symphony of urgency. She pays it no attention.

Restless, she runs, a little fury with a burning heart searching for a cure. Blood pumping in her veins, body alight with special exhilaration of pure kinetic energy, she runs past her slow and quiet trial of a day, past the pinch at the back of her neck and sore pull of muscles in her arms, past thousands of pages of precious yet incomprehensible text, and, more importantly, past her wild hope disillusioned towards a new solution and a new decision.

Re-assess, re-prioritize, adapt — this is the philosophy that has kept her alive. Not a lesson from Saw or from mama or from papa, no; a lesson she has figured out as a lone teenager on the streets, looking back at ugly shambles of her broken life and seeking for ways to keep making it through.

By the time she comes back to the ranger’s home and Cassian, the sun has already set in this part of Naora and she knows what she has to do, the whims of hope be damned for the trick they’ve played on her so cruelly.

After a quick shower she accepts a cup of hot instant porridge from Cassian and sits down upon the bed, still deep into contemplation, trying to solve a complex equation of balancing her every role in life and every whim of her traitorously arcane heart. Cassian, leaning against the desk and holding up his own meal in one hand, is simply watching, his presence and attention subtle, comforting like the softest of summer breezes on bare skin.

“What’s on your mind?” he asks at last when they’re done with food, voice infinitely gentle and eyes kind when she meets them.

Jyn lowers the now-warm mug into her lap, fingers tight around the handle. “We did a right thing by coming here,” she says, smacks her lips together, breathing out a jittery sigh through her nose. “But I’m not sure if we should stay.”

“You think he’s not coming back?”

“I wouldn’t.” Words are quick to spill from her tongue, laden with a bitter aftertaste of her old life. Life she’s both proud of and ashamed of, life she cherishes and yet sometimes wishes to forget like a dreadful dream. “Before,” she adds, meaning the ugly truth behind her father’s work.

(It’s not an easy thing to reconcile with, but Jyn is sure it was the Death Star that had made her consider fighting with conviction, to let a long-smothered flame in her heart burn again. Her home came later, a fuel that only followed a spark and kept it going.)

Cassian doesn’t argue. He accepts her opinion quietly, eyebrows bumping together as he’s no doubt starting to re-think their situation as well. After a little stretch of silence Jyn makes a decision and uses an opportunity to walk through the road of her dark thoughts with someone else (someone she trusts every step of the way) and arrange it into some semblance of order.

“I doubt that he’s ready to accept our help, to consider that there’s a chance for any other life for him. He had shown us his shelter, and now it isn’t his anymore. Maybe he left it altogether the moment he walked away from me days ago. Maybe he somehow found out that we’re here and chose to stay away. I feel like we’re waiting for nothing, and it’s getting worse with every hour.” She wraps both hands around the mug, fingers drumming some restless tune she’s not consciously aware of against the surface. “I think you and I needed to do something good. Something better than simply hunting for intel, something that would pay off now and not months away, something tangible. So we just grasped at a very flimsy straw and chosen to believe that it could be what we wanted regardless of
the circumstances or odds or even common sense.”

“Too much hope?”

“Something of a kind,” Jyn mutters with resignation. “Feels both so right and so like a rookie mistake that it’s driving me nuts.”

Cassian puts away his cup and puts both hands against the tabletop. “What do you want to do about it?”

Her gaze gravitates towards the ranger’s diary resting at the shelf’s edge, her thoughts rushing first to the story and then to the secrets that book holds. “There are quite a few points of interest in her diary. And our travels here covered only the bare minimum of locations we’ve deemed as strategic targets,” she points out and frowns, immediately squeezing her eyes shut, the risk of following her whims a sharp thorn in her instincts, in her heart.

Jyn didn’t used to think about it this way — when she was with Saw there was never a luxury to choose assignments, just a job needed to be done without regard for prolonging their rebellion or doing everything to save their fellow soldiers; when she was alone sometimes danger didn’t matter because it stood in the way of her survival and so it had to be tackled— but the life with the Alliance brought her this acquired skill. When she knows without a shadow of a doubt that something must be done, she simply does it, consequences and risks be damned. But she sees more gray areas now, distinguishes want from need so clearly it still feels like a lash of a shock from time to time — something valuable and something ruinous at the same time.

She and Cassian can do this job, they will be glad to do this job, in fact. However, they’re currently the most valuable Alliance Intelligence team by the High Command’s assessment. Their skillsets and their knowledge make them pretty much irreplaceable; they also make them walking security risks no less than every member of Alliance leadership. The most sensible, the most practical course of action for the Alliance is that their best spies either stay put in the ranger’s house or walk to some hotel and do their damn best to be a couple of unassuming students enjoying their vacation. It definitely does not include sneaking around where they’re not supposed to be, exposing themselves to more risk than the assignment requires.

Yes, acting rashly and taking a risk to stay for longer on Naora has paid off. But Jyn knows better, though. Nothing is ever guaranteed. Any light gets eclipsed by darkness sooner or later. The Alliance can’t afford losing them to it. She doesn’t want to let it win either. No, she deserves something good to blossom from every trial she’s been put through so heartlessly; she’ll fight and claw for it as fiercely as she did for the Death Star plans.

However, it’s not her choice to make. And so she remarks in a quieter voice, “Someone will need to check them out at some point. Maddel or Heime will do a great job later—”

The mattress dips at her right and Jyn cuts off mid-sentence. Quiet as a shadow, Cassian sits down next to her. He’s incredibly close, and her focus shifts immediately to the warmth of his body — so safe, so wanted, so reassuring — against her thigh, her hip, her side, amplified by the lack of visual stimuli.

“It will be safer for them,” he agrees. “But that’s not who we are, are we?” Cassian adds softly after a sigh that sounds just a tad sarcastic. “Neither of us would be able to sleep—” he trails off, and it’s so easy to imagine him taking in the ranger’s home and everything that it means. Jyn knows they see the exact same thing here — a quiet, kindest memorial to a Naorie life ruined by the Empire, to a lover of nature turned rebel because Naora refused to go down without a fight. “Here, of all places, if we’ll keep waiting for nothing and leave this fight for someone else. I’m with you for this journey,
Jyn, he concludes at last.

Jyn opens her eyes, turns her head to get a good look at Cassian’s profile. The lines in the corner of his eye are as tame as ever, his jaw relaxed. He looks calm and at ease, if only a little sad and tired as he oftentimes is under the burden of his choices and the Empire’s cruelty, and undoubtedly rooted in his decision to pursue these leads.

Words linger on the tip of her tongue, sweet and beautiful and right — *you’re the best partner in crime I could’ve asked for; thank you for being with me every step of the way, for understanding, for being who you are* — but they’re harder to spill. She’s great with affection bordering on teasing, great with letting the words loose when they eat at her for way too long. But moments like this are still a little hard, wrought with an odd kind of doubt, and so Jyn simply rests her head on Cassian’s shoulder and smiles when she feels him mirror her gesture back in kind and lean his temple against the crown of her head.

She has a feeling he knows exactly what she wants to say, regardless of truth she keeps unspoken or the loud demons in his heart.

“When do we leave then?” Jyn asks.

He hums under his breath, turns his head a little to glance at the substantial stack of the thickest ranger’s books waiting for them by the bed like a very odd and tedious cherry on top. “They’ll probably keep us busy well into the night. I’d try to get some good rest after. And then, well, it’s a patience game.”

She takes a moment to consider their options. Just as many other equations she has to solve throughout her daily life ever since she found herself all alone in a small cave on Lah’mu, this one is infinitely tricky. Jyn leans back a little, snatches her datapad from the bed’s corner, and consults with the digital map she updated with all the markers unknown to her and the Empire from the ranger’s notes. They haven’t been to the south of the continent yet at all, and a few markers are waiting from them in that direction. Factoring in the secrecy of potential rebel hiding spots, a few Imperial tourist regulations on Naora, and the distance they’ll need to cross, Jyn settles on a compromise after all. “He deserves a bit more time,” she admits. “But if he doesn’t show up by midday, we go and don’t look back.”

“You’ve got yourself a deal.”

She and Cassian distribute the remaining books evenly and get to work.

They have likely exhausted a rather comprehensive set of unlikely miracles throughout the duration of this mission: by the next day’s afternoon neither of the sensors sends any kind of a signal, yet alone the one marking fulfillment of their wild hope.

Hearts heavy with a sting of failure, they leave the cave behind.

The southern part of the continent is a home to Sel-Nair and, consequently, to many old villages devastated by the ancient war and too never rebuilt. Far less grandiose than the city itself, in the age of the Empire they’re simply left to rot, unprotected and purposefully erased from any tourist and official maps and routes so that people won’t be attracted to pass them by or, Empire forbid, purposefully explore them.

The ranger’s first marker of interest leads Jyn and Cassian past one of those ghost-villages to a lone,
forgotten valley with cascading rocks and mineral water slanting down them towards a hot spring in the valley’s center. The terrain is haphazard, the rocks arranged in labyrinthine ways made even more mysterious by the wisps of gossamer-thin mist. An ancient, long-ruined aqueduct curves and rises and falls throughout the valley, melding with the nature’s chaos.

After a twenty-minute journey through the valley, Jyn finds herself in a secluded nook where the aqueduct’s support column brushes the valley’s very edge in between the topmost rock cascades, clever hands exploring the old tribal carvings adorning the man-made structure in deep fissures while Cassian is standing behind her back on the lookout for any unwanted company.

A clumsy guessing game it may be, but the search is not futile; a light push against the symbol of a sun with its center feeling somewhat loose triggers a hidden mechanism within the column that moves a canvass-like slab of the rock with an art composition into the column and away. Another hiding spot of Naorie rebels runs through the column and into a smallish, seemingly natural cave. The cave itself is a complete dead end, no passageways or water or natural light, but the torches secured around it along with a dozen mattresses (some of them are marred with old dried blood, eerie phantoms of pain revealed by the light from Jyn’s flashlight) speak of its use throughout the Naorie rebellion against the Empire. The stairs inside of the column lead up to a small command center close to the aqueduct’s top — a room with a tiny ‘freshzer zone in the corner, a bed, a cabinet with a desk, and a computer terminal. There’s no weaponry or clothing left at all; an experimental switch of the power generator wakes the computer up and immediately starts broadcasting a real-time video from the valley in a truly rich variety of angles.

The valley is hours away from Imperial bases and off-limits for standard troop movements. It may be a good place to hide, but it’s a lousy place for a strategic outpost that could’ve given the rebels a good staging ground for attacking the Empire. Were the cameras installed here long before the Empire showed up to conquer Naora? Was this an outpost of some other ranger, keeping track of nature and order around the valley?

Jyn narrows her eyes, evaluating the distance between the video source and Cassian, switches the power generator off, and hurries down the stairs and out of the aqueduct. Stopping next to Cassian, she tilts her head back and looks up at the column.

“Genius,” she breathes out in awe when she spots her target. Force, the entire galaxy could really learn a lot from Naorie people, from their lifestyles, culture, technology and its usage.

“What is it?”

Leaning back against Cassian’s arm a little, Jyn points to the carving of a long-extinct beast from these lands, specifically to a single black eye in its profile gleaming under the rays of slowly fading sunlight. “A camera,” she explains, smiling when realization dawns on Cassian.

“So, cameras providing a perfect overview of the entire valley,” he connects the dots, remembering each and every carving of fauna around the sides of aqueduct support pillars, and doesn’t resist a grin full of excitement and respect playing tricks on his lips. “Practical art is the best.”

“It is indeed.”

This valley is patrolled by the Empire scarcely by TIE-fighters only, with many nooks a person can hide from such a ship. Off-limits for hordes of tourists as well, it’s a perfect place to smuggle some weaponry to and have the soldiers covertly arrive as civilians, making the Alliance’s attack subtle, hard to predict. Starfighters would come, of course, but they’ll start roaring a freedom song throughout Naorie sky when chaos will already consume Imperial forces.
We have to come back here one day,” says Jyn quietly. Alas, it is only a dream, not a definite promise. “Have to be here when the Empire would fall, one way or another, no matter what.”

“If it’s up to us, we will,” replies Cassian, letting his conviction take root and blossom.

Jyn touches the sunny carving and seals the aqueduct shut from any unwanted eyes. Cassian catches her hand in hers and they head up the twisting path and beyond the valley into the realm of Naorie fjords.

Night has taken reign of Naora by the time Jyn and Cassian cross a mountain ridge leading to another point of interest. The sea before them flows freely in between steep rocks, mimicking the journey of glaciers long gone melted and raising seas and oceans in this part of the planet. Twin moonlight is mirrored in still water and lush greenery covers the entirety of rocks forming the fjord. A giant arch bridge rises from the sea on dozens of pillar, connecting the cliffs and laying down a spectacular road for any wanderer. Chiseled from thousands of stones, it’s an ode to hard work and ancient architecture, and a solemn hymn to Imperial age — more and more stones are growing weathered black in neglect, mapping out the pattern where Naorie people have been cleaning or even replacing ancient stones with new ones to keep the bridge still standing and majestic before their forced exile to Qen’val.

The second marker’s position is pointing straight to the very edge of the cliff some three hundred meters away from Jyn’s and Cassian’s position by the bridge, but they found nothing there but thick trees and high grass during their approach from the fjord’s top. The cliff, however, is split in two cascades, and their exploration leads them to a promising slope leading down the rocks.

Cassian glances to his chrono, expression pondering. “We have a little bit more than an hour before a scheduled patrol will fly this way back to Kjelm Sigma Outpost. Should we go for it?”

The marker's positioning is not ideal. Whatever hiding place is concealed there from Imperial eyes will likely not be a strategic place for the Alliance. Without hesitation Jyn shoots back, “We so should.”

Cassian’s eyes may be alert, seeking for potential danger with laser-focus, but his smile is wide and eager. They step upon the bridge, walk for some twenty meters forward side by side. Stopping by the old balustrade, Jyn turns around, leans against it, and sizes up the cliff with an evaluating look, eager to know what they’re up to before they embark on this journey.

She’s used to being surprised by Naora, but it never takes away the novelty of looking at wonders. A naturally eroded path stretches mid-cliff, leading from the side of the bridge all the way to a giant statue of a Naorie woman. Whoever sketched her up had been a truly gifted artist: her beauty is natural, both delicate and fierce, gentle and predatory, with high cheekbones and expressive eyes. A ghost of a smile on her stone lips is infinitely soft, and her eyes are forever watching Naora’s sky with awe and wonder and infinite inspiration. Two powerful waterfalls flow from the fissures in the rock by her shoulders and slant down the curves of her bare body to her feet barely submerged by the sea, their rustle audible even from afar. One set of hands is loosely brushing her hips, another is resting against the rock, with fingertips slightly curved as if she’s readying herself to move away and walk up to the skies.

Wonders or not, they don’t let themselves be enamored by the beauty for too long. Cassian takes the lead on their walk down the slope and to the statue. Hand infinitely light, it barely takes him any time to locate a tiny lever hiding underneath the burgundy vines weeping down the cliff so close to the waterfall that they’re moist from its spray. The gears start turning, the sound lost in the waterfall’s endless heartbeat. Cassian shifts aside, letting Jyn gently gather the wines concealing the moving
rock slab and secure them over old-fashioned lamps sticking from the cliff above.

Revealed at last, tucked into the space between the statue’s fingertips reverently brushing the cliff, the narrow cave is definitely a lair of artistry. A shelter from storms and the waterfall, it’s a place where someone can easily stay for a couple of days; there’s a folding desk secured to the rock by the very entrance, a rich scattering of painting accessories on the shelves carved into the cave’s walls opposite of the desk, and rolls of paper tucked in between the bed and the wall.

Allowing Cassian to walk into the room itself, Jyn lingers by the entrance, eyes keen on the scenery. Even sitting down here by the desk an artist could comfortably paint the radiant blossom of colors from wild flowers growing at the smallest notches at the other side of the gorge, as well as the bridge’s spectacular panorama, soothed by fresh winds whispering through the fjord and the waterfall’s melodic echo.

The room is almost pristine, untouched by the war — no weapons, no blood, no visible traces of cruelty — but a few half-finished sketches on the floor, covered in dust, speak of hollow loneliness of a place abandoned in a great hurry. Someone’s life has been interrupted here as well, maybe even wrenched away from inspiration by the thundering, predatory roar of Imperial ships crossing the skies over the fjord with brash arrogance of conquerors.

“Look,” calls Cassian, and Jyn rises up, hands reverent around the sketches she had picked up.

He holds a thick, heavy-looking album in the crook of his arm. On the first glance the cave simply looked like a dark place with an interesting texture of its walls, but bright radiance of Cassian’s flashlight reveals the truth: rows of shelves span the cave from top to bottom (or from furniture to top), filled with identical dark albums and giving the place a distinct feeling of a secluded old library.

Her mouth slightly agape with childlike wonder and the smell of paint and ancient books filling her with joy, Jyn comes close to Cassian and peeks into the album.

No, this place wasn’t a single artist’s getaway — it was a pilgrimage site for hundreds, perhaps thousands of painters on Naora. She sweeps through pages in a hurry, feeling a little small and inconsequential when compared with what she’s touching with her fingertips. The theme is always the same — this fjord depicted from a variety of angles — and the pictures are all united in their clearly experimental natures, in their stories of striving for innovation and perfection through trials and even failures. The techniques and artistic styles span the entirety of visions and options a mind could conjure up, from monochrome graphite panoramas to wild acrylic colors, from photo-realistic landscapes to surreal re-imaginings of the terrain. Names and dates and long-winded paragraphs of comments litter the paper under every picture, the artists’ own handwriting keeping the chronicle alive.

There are a few pages left at the end of the album. The sketches in Jyn’s hand feel heavy with a history unfinished, but they rhyme perfectly with the album’s purpose, with its imperfect museum for artists. Maybe they’ll forever tell a story of abandonment. Maybe one day their creator will get a chance to fulfill their ideas and put what they had envisioned into this precious book.

Jyn gently slots the sketches into the album, carefully closes the tome. Taking the album from Cassian, she puts it back to the shelf, and then tracks her gaze upon the circle of light Cassian is flashing over the long rows of albums spanning the cave. The album they’ve looked at touches upon years between the Clone Wars and the official Imperial invasion on Naora. The oldest one they find dates back almost eight thousand years, to the times of Naorie people establishing their first modern-like society and customs.

They hurry to leave the cave behind, eager to seal it away and keep it safe from the Empire.
An ancient brick road winds in between two forests, a lifeline connecting a series of villages in a vast valley at the other side of the fjord. The nature’s geometry is striking here, with thin trees from pine family reaching for the sky and thick crowns of *lieatina* trees located far enough from each other so that the road is exposed for miles, basking in the glow of twin moonlights.

Qen’val’s silvery light is particularly strong tonight, its full sphere unobscured by even the tiniest of clouds, and it makes rich tracks of blood on the bricks look sickly black. The trail is long, starting from a small, unshapely puddle with a scattering of splatter around it and stretching upon the path in uneven blotches until it disappears into the forest. It glistens in the moonlight and smells like fresh iron, and some smudges form a shape of an animal’s paw. Jyn’s heart makes a very unpleasant somersault in her chest, keening a mournful song — *please, no, we can’t be so laughably late.* She grabs her blaster, takes the safety off, the weight of the weapon in her hand doing nothing to soothe the riotous mayhem of her emotions.

Cassian crouches by the puddle, dipping two fingers into the blood. “Still a little warm,” he notes darkly and straightens up, reaching for his civilian blaster as well.

They follow the trail in a hurry, head for the pine forest. The visibility here is good enough to track the bloody path a hundred meters or so deep into the forest. There are three more distinct splatters of blood littering the grass, clear evidence of shots fired, and they end at last in a big puddle in between tree roots. The body is nowhere to be found, but Jyn does spot a distinct pattern of human tracks in the area, heavy, unmistakably stormtrooper boots stomping the grass into the ground.

It’s all too easy to imagine hunters on airspeeders chase the *ainweard* throughout the forest, landing more and more shots until at last he falls, until they step on the ground only to collect their morbid trophy.

“Troopers on vacation,” Jyn seethes quietly in righteous fury. Many hunters on Naora are indeed stormtroopers enjoying their off-duty time, competing for various bounties Sandeheim puts up or earning some credits from legalized poaching.

After a beat Cassian whispers back, his voice laden with menace, “And they’re close by.”

Turning around, Jyn finds him watching faint whisks of smoke swirl against clear sky ahead, rising from somewhere beyond the forest at their right. She remembers the terrain in this part of the continent without the need to consult the map: this pine forest ends by a small dip in the valley before ground rises for the final time and falls into a mountain range canvassing Sel-Nair’s hills. Free of thick tree growth, that dip is a home to a small village and a perfect place for camp.

That hunter’s camp might hold the key to the *ainweard*’s life, or at least to the truth about it, and Jyn’s heart is ablaze with desire to know it.

Cassian’s is too. He moves in the smoke’s direction without missing a beat, his already quiet and cautious stride morphing into pure stealth hunting mode. Falling into step behind him and making sure she’s doing an impeccable job of covering his back, Jyn follows.

Pine trees at the forest’s edge give way to a wild garden towering over the dip, fruit trees and berry bushes providing good cover. Jyn settles flat on her stomach by Cassian’s side, silently shrugging off her rucksack and fishing out her macrobinoculars.

“Fucking bastards.”

Jyn barely picks up on Cassian’s whisper, but it turns into loud venom of churning fury in her veins when she sees what he’s talking about. There is a camp indeed: Imperial troupers have turned a half-
ruined ancient plaza into their resting spot, sitting by the Imperial Troop Transport vehicle and heating up an entire cauldron of wine over open fire. They have indeed been hunting on airspeeders — four of them are parked next to the remains of a fountain. This little picnic is a real exercise in absurdity, but it doesn’t even start comparing with the sheer wrongness of seeing three dead bodies spread out with heartless carelessness upon the transport’s roof in between airspeeder mounts.

Neither of the bodies belongs to the ainweard. There’s no relief in this truth.

Naorie wolves are beautiful beasts, easy to spot with their snow-white fur in these forests and yet nearly impossible to catch thanks to their ability of running marathon distances while sustaining the speeds of a sprint run. Death wasn’t kind to these three. Their hides are worth a fortune (there’s a reason as to why one of Sandeheim’s close friends controls a closed reservation on the west established solely with the purpose of breeding these wolves), and yet the troopers haven’t chosen to preserve them. They haven’t even tried to concentrate the shots in a single area; no, most blaster shot patterns on the bodies are wild and messy and not even designed to kill, only to slow down and incapacitate, let the troopers enjoy their hunt in earnest. Every single kill shot is made to a wolf eye from close quarters, judging by the damage disfiguring the muzzles.

Jyn wonders if the troopers laughed when they’ve killed just like they laugh around the fire down by the ruins now, their skull-like helmets off and resting on the ground by their feet, their high-power rifles loose in their hands or even laying in their laps as they celebrate their carnival of death and barbarity. There are fifteen soldiers, all of them male, with four troopers canvassing the camp just in case, obedient little cogs in the Imperial machine trained to follow safety regulations even in their recreation time as if they’re expecting an imminent attack. Some of them are middle-aged, one of the soldiers has already gone completely grey, but most of them are young, younger than Jyn herself, likely boys on their first year away from the Imperial Academy, and they seem to be the most excited from the bunch.

She squeezes her eyes shut, fingers yearning to curl around the blaster again and pull the trigger, fifteen deadly times so that monsters would stop laughing and smiling as they relish in their kills. A quiet voice weaved of moral inhibitions and basic human decency dissolves in her mind like a tiny smudge of mud getting lost under the unrelenting force of a torrential rain. Hatred solidifies in her heart, numb to any kind of sorrow for the lives she wants to take.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” This time Cassian’s voice is just a fraction louder and wrought with resigned tension, close to how he usually mutters yet another comment about Kay’s inappropriate behavior. Jyn glances at him, one eyebrow slightly arched in surprise. “Eight o’clock, by a mossy rock, slightly arched in surprise. “Eight o’clock, by a mossy rock, just by the chasm’s edge,” he explains.

She magnifies her macrobinoculars to the max and follows the instructions. And indeed, there, a big scaly and very familiar you’ve-got-to-be-kidding-me, his golden eyes fixed upon the wolves’ bodies, his tail whipping back and forth in fury, his fangs bared in an anguished grimace of pure hatred. A breath later the ainweard falls into predatory mode, swift and silent as he sprints across the garden, unmistakably reviewing the situation on the plaza and canvassing the area in search for a good spot to launch an attack against Imperial murderers.

The plaza is too exposed and ruins of buildings are too small and scattered to provide good cover. He’ll be all alone against fifteen troopers in close quarter combat. No matter how good of a hunter he is, this loudly spells a desperate suicide mission.

Cassian lays down his macrobinoculars upon the grass and falls back on the soles of his feet, whispering a string of especially vile Festian curses under his breath. “Bodies,” he mutters to Jyn, hands swift as he’s retrieving his main blaster from his rucksack and starting to assemble it into a
sniper rifle. “No way we’re leaving them here for the Empire to find with definite blaster wounds.”

Jyn consults with her chrono, quickly calculates the time when the next TIE-fighter patrol should be roaring above them, and skims her gaze at the Imperial Troop Transport, the map of their surroundings and the calculations presenting a solution in her head immediately.

“Sel-Nair,” she says, her choice made despite the sting of it. Even thinking of turning the city into a dumping ground for dead Imperials is an atrocity, but it’s their best choice. Off-limits for the Empire at this time, its ruins would safely conceal the troopers. The Empire (or the Naorie people destroying their own culture) would find them eventually, but it’ll be long after she and Cassian have left Naora behind. If everything goes well, it might be that the Empire would even be banished away when the truth will see the light of day. She hopes Naorie people will forgive them for this choice. “I can slice through the shield, get us into the city.”

Cassian tilts his head into a tiny nod, twisting the sniper scope to the blaster. “Try to find him and make sure he doesn’t get himself killed. I’ll cover you and wait for your signal. And if he starts the party first, I’ll light it up.”

Rising up in one graceful motion, Jyn sprints through the garden towards their vengeful friend.

She catches up with the ainweard at last at twelve o’clock from Cassian’s position, her breath heavy from a lengthy sprint around the dip. The garden here gives way to another forest, a rich variety of trees with mighty crowns casting dark shadows around and expertly concealing the creature’s form from Imperial sight. Now slow and quiet as a shadow, the animal is creeping down the uneven path into the village, not even sparing a glance in Jyn’s direction even though there’s no way he didn’t notice her approach.

“Wait,” she whispers urgently, a shaky smile blooming on her lips when the ainweard actually stills in acknowledgement. “You don’t have to do this alone.”

Jyn’s relief is very short-lived — their opinions on the topic clearly differ. Leaving her behind, the very soul of vengeance trapped in a mighty feline body rushes forward to pay the Empire back in kind for the lives it had taken.

That fateful night Yavin 4 is a dichotomy of mourning and celebration, of hope persevering and of deaths — some heroic but all of them brutal, no matter which side of the conflict they represent. It’s chilly outside, a welcome change from the moon’s humid heat, and while the rebel base is loud and full of people, the pathways between ancient temples are as quiet as the nature’s night could get.

“May I?” asks Baze when he spots Jyn sitting upon the very first slab of stones raising the temple, his features stoic but soft around the edges with a shade of mourning, a veil of tiredness, and a definite impression of caring.

She shrugs noncommittally, but immediately nods. She’d spent a lot of time the last few days in the old Guardian’s company. There’s something soothing about his presence, perhaps that familiar rough-around-the-edges vibe that reminds her both of a slightly younger Saw and of herself. She finds something familiar in every member of Rogue One crew, in some people more than in others, but it’s there. It makes them special. She’s not sure what to make of it, but the road of walking away from it seems to have faded away.

Baze is moving with a unique fighter’s care, careful but infinitely stubborn as the wounds and burns from Scarif still give him a good deal of trouble, and settles down next to Jyn at last, close enough to
let her feel his presence and yet far away to not make her feel crowded.

For some time he’s quiet, taking in the night, taking in perhaps for the very first time fully what the Alliance’s survival today truly means. “A Guardian of the Whills is a servant of the Force and a servant of the people,” he tells her after all, voice gruff and weathered by the weight and cruelty of life. “Some choose to fight evil, some choose to protect whatever they believe in, and some choose to let the Force decide, soaring like leaves in the wind and letting its current guide them somewhere. I’ve been taught that there’s no ultimate right choice in this, that each and every one of them is valid. I never believed it as a young boy, and I still don’t believe it now.”

Baze huffs with sarcastic derision and looks up at the sky where the remains of the battle station are still burning up to a crisp when they reach the atmosphere and will do so for days to come. “I’ve also been taught that any war is an ugly thing. There are no shining knights of light, for the wars are where all things blur. You snatch hope and survival from the darkness for yourself and those you fight for stubbornly, day by day, whilst becoming the darkness in turn. What makes us either heroes or monsters are the perspective and whether we choose the light when we can or should, or if we turn to the darkness every single time. Now, that I’ve started to believe during the Clone Wars, and never stopped ever since. Our victory today is a tragedy, and it will always be. But I close my eyes, see what had become of Jedha, imagine what is left of Alderaan, and it feels good knowing that they’ve been avenged and that no other world will ever fall to the Death Star, whoever it makes me in this story.”

Jyn rests the back of her head against the temple’s stones and lets herself close her eyes now that she’s not alone. “I think it just makes us warriors.”

Baze’s laughter is quiet and rough as the man himself, but it’s incredibly lively. “Never tell that to Chirrut,” he replies with a breath of mirth. “He’ll rope you in for a philosophical debate you’ll never untangle from, and there will never be any winning it.”

(In retrospect, it’s been a very good advice Jyn has never followed to her own secret delight.)

Despite the ainweard’s stubbornness, this avenging mission is a textbook example of a good military ambush. Devoid of chaos and confusion, it’s incredibly swift and utterly deadly to the enemy. Standing with a still-smoking blaster in her hand next to a dead body in stormtrooper armor, Jyn feels unchained, the terrible burden of watching Naora be corrupted under Imperial rule easing just a fraction. Somewhere far away in the galaxy a righteous person who somehow managed to stay blind to the reality around them would’ve been horrified at her notable, almost complete lack of empathy and remorse for taking several lives. In this quiet moment, gaze roaming across the bodies of three merciless hunters she had just murdered in cold blood, surrounded by a dozen killed by the most accurate and swift sniperwork she has ever witnessed and two men with slit throats, she thinks of the darkness of these deeds pouring a sliver of light along the seams of the messy canvass making up this wretched galaxy.

She may have killed with revenge ablaze in her heart, but she also killed to save a life, to preserve the shine of light, however tattered and dim it may be. If that makes her a monster in someone’s history, so be it. If her surname wasn’t Erso, she’d gladly let the entire galaxy know it if it meant that evil would be fearing her like death itself, a reaper coming to avenge their sins and take their lives.

Jyn looks away from the bodies and back to the forest, her neck a little craned and her gaze searching and scanning the dense tree line for their stubborn, now missing feline friend. It takes her a minute or so, but there, barely visible through lush leaves and labyrinthine tangle of vines, a pair of glistening golden eyes regards her with undivided attention, undoubtedly proud of roping her and Cassian into this high-stakes game even if he wasn’t onboard with it before.
She slots the blaster back into holster, marches upward toward the line of trees, stops only when the animal twitches, his eyes flickering like sunlight’s reflection in still water as he’s preparing his retreat. “I know you understand me, so I need you to pay attention this time,” Jyn says sternly, meeting those eyes with somewhat somber seriousness, and allows her hope run free. “We’d like to help you if you’ll let us. Sometimes stopping is not the end of your world. It’s a new beginning.”

The ainweard’s golden gaze moves up suddenly, with sharp and eerie swiftness thanks to his body still completely obscured by the darkness and protection of the trees. He’d likely been sprawled upon the thick branch of a tree before, lazily watching her approach, but now he’s getting up on all fours and is looking straight into her eyes from above, still as a stone again.

Jyn neither grows impatient nor tries to approach the creature. She’s been there, all too many times to dare rushing him. The way he’s reacting reminds her of the heaviness rooting her limbs in place, in the weight spreading seemingly through every quark of her body when Baze walked into the medbay room, grunted quietly under his breath to make sure she knew it was him, and in a low, hateful tone informed her that the Death Star was closing in on Yavin 4. Then and there she stood, burdened by the sting of Rogue One’s failure to deliver the plans safely to the Alliance, chained by her father’s sins, lost to the turmoil of crippling uncertainty and impending doom.

Back then Jyn has made a choice she never once came to regret: she took a breath after breath through the numb void raging in her chest, stubborn to not let fear and anger choke her, she clawed out of that catatonic hatch for the very last time in her life and snapped it close for good. “As far as I’m concerned,” she said, her tattered voice no louder than a whisper, “our chances are not yet spent. I’m staying. I’m seeing this through and beyond,” and curled her fingers around Cassian’s limp hand.

In that moment the Death Star wouldn’t be turned to ashes and dust and debris for fifty-three more minutes. In that moment no legendary miracles happened: Bodhi didn’t stir in his half-drugged sleep, Chirrut was still pale as ashes in a coma, and the only thing keeping Cassian alive was (Draven’s fond and pained words, not hers) his extreme case of spiteful stubbornness. But in that moment Jyn held on to three things: she still trusted someone to finish their mission, she dared to hope that all of her friends will pull through despite the odds, and she wholeheartedly, fiercely believed that giving up and walking away was not an option. Not anymore. That path was closed to her forever.

The ainweard takes his time and makes a choice as well. He turns around and whisks away, disappearing out of sight and even the slightest of reaches like a silent, infinitely lonely wraith.

Jyn’s shoulders slump, a hope wronged again. Still, she doesn’t have it in her heart to let this defeat turn to poison or anger. Belief, trust, and hope are all equally complicated things to deal with, and she has it on good authority and a lot of experience. There’s no reason to try and catch the ainweard — she’ll never be able to anyway, after all — and so the only choice she’s left with is to go back and deal with hers and Cassian’s rebellion and vengeance.

She had shrugged off her rucksack and is busy with collecting the weapons and supplies from the troopers when she feels Cassian’s approach rather than hears it first, even if he absolutely deliberately steps upon a thin branch lying upon the ancient pavement to make it crack with a sharp, whip-like sound to warn her. No, it’s an unconscious thing: the warm sense of his presence wrapped around her like a cloak, soothing like the act of stepping into the shadows to hide from the burning sun.

Jyn lays down a handful of weaponry into a pile by the fountain, straightens up, eyes still instinctively searching the canopy of trees before her despite the burn of the ainweard’s rejection. Cassian stops next to her, his shoulder on the verge of brushing hers.

“I take it he’d run off again?” he asks softly.
“That he did.”

There are no words capable of making things right, so instead Cassian gently traces his fingers across the small of her back in a familiar, reassuring gesture of comfort. “I’ll collect some wood nearby,” he says as he rests his own backpack down next to Jyn’s. Then a pause — heavy, wrought with meaning that has no moral right to exist — and his next words are quieter, laden with somber tones. “They don’t deserve to be left behind to rot.”

The pain in her soul shifts, the sharpest of fury sated by revenge, and makes her heart leap up to her throat, hit hard against the ice-cold razors there. When anger fades, it’s actually mourning that always hits the hardest, makes you feel unmade, ravaged by brutality of what living beings do to one another. Jyn turns to glance at him, and the sight beckons her to give in, to let the very truth of it sink in until there will be no escape. The shadows of a night mastered by the wind caress his face with an arcane, chaotic interplay of light. His sniper rifle on his shoulder, the stress lines around his eyes and mouth emphasized from time to time by changing light, pain and quiet rage in his eyes as he’s looking at dead wolves, Cassian is beautiful in this strange savagery, an alluring balance of darkness and light.

It’s just… them. Impossible blurs of contradictions, strange belonging and bitter hate for the paths they’re treading upon. Lives full, with good and bad tightly fused together and balance skewed into an ironic tragedy.

Sometimes Jyn wishes she could leave it all behind, find out what is the kinder life other people get to enjoy. It didn’t work once, but then again she may not be trying it alone. Still, most of the days the prospect of it seems so ludicrous she snaps the lid on this thought before it can fully form. Mythic, unknown days beyond the wars and their barbarous journeys scare her, always. Feeling like she’s right where she’s supposed to be doesn’t scare her nearly as much as it should. But it doesn’t make things easy.

She brings her hand up, lightly bumps the backs of her knuckles against Cassian’s. “Go,” she agrees. “The fire’s already burning. It’s the kindest thing left for us to do.”

The skin on the back of her hand still tingles with a ghost of pleasant warmth for long seconds after Cassian drifts away, tracing his fingers against her hand as he goes.

Quickly looting the troopers resting dead at the edge of the plaza, Jyn comes back with their stuff and puts it down when the rest, mind restless with evaluation and strategies. Fifteen men armed and outfitted by Imperial best standards, their hunt has begun and ended with the wolves if judging by the amount of supplies they’ve used. Partisans used to count it as a victory when they snatched a single trooper in the jungles of Onderon when Saw tried to light up a rebellion on his home planet with a fourteen years old Jyn in tow; fifteen is massive by their standards, but it still feels like a drop in the ocean for what the Alliance needs.

Still, fifteen sets of supplies do take up space. And they can’t go anywhere from Naora, not with Team Fulcrum Alpha at this point in time. They’d fit best in the ranger’s home, would come in handy during a potential attack of Kjelm Sigma Outpost, but the road back is far enough to be a risk on foot, not to mention the transport or the speeders. It’d be too much noise, too much hassle, too many Imperial scouts to run into and blow their covers in earnest.

Sel-Nair it is again, Jyn concludes grimly.

“Approaching, ten o’clock from you,” murmurs Cassian’s voice in her ear through the comm, mindful as ever with a caring warning.
She follows the direction he’s given her, spots him appearing out of the forest with plenty of old branches cradled to his side by his arm. It’s Jyn who picks up the cauldron and rests it as quietly as possible upon the ancient pavement while Cassian busies himself with organizing the branches into a structure that’d spread the fire more and give it some boost. Regardless, their pyre looks shoddy, a parody of how historical holos depict a traditional Naorie funeral.

Time is precious, especially here, standing in an open valley surrounded and incriminated by their dead enemies, and yet Cassian straightens up and doesn’t move for a moment, gaze locked upon the dancing flames of fire that means celebration and death in chocking, unfair unison. On pure instinct Jyn decides to make the moment matter. She approaches Cassian with no hesitation, stops a mere inch away from him, rests her palm against his waist. He takes a hint swiftly and swings the rifle around so that it’d be in front of him. Jyn responds by curving her arms around his midsection boldly, steps even closer to press her body against his back.

No matter the storm they’re navigating, Cassian’s frame always feels like an anchor standing tall and steady: she fell into holding on to him for dear life on Scarif despite death clawing at them and the meaning of this touch had never changed.

“Have you ever driven one of those things?” Jyn asks lightly, side-eyeing the Imperial transport with unconcealed loathing.

“Technically, no,” Cassian admits, his tone surprising in its tense lifelessness. “But I did study in the Imperial Academy for six months, plus served under a big-time Imperial Admiral for the next five. Not a great time for any seventeen years old spy by any means, but their vehicle simulators are state of the art indeed and they really drill all kinds of protocols into your brain. So, well, not all bad.”

His attempt at lighthearted humor doesn’t quite land, not when he seems to hate those memories and not when their situation is so compromising, so Jyn doesn’t try to offer empty words. Instead she gently leans her forehead between Cassian’s shoulder blades, closes her eyes, allows herself a luxury of a single deep breath worth of sharing this connection and offering her warmth back in kind, and steps away and back into the clutches of this heartless war and its ordeals.

Qen’val’s light is unforgiving on scarlet marring snow-white fur and cooling blood still feels like open flame against Jyn’s hands when she carefully pushes the youngest of the wolves down from the transport and into Cassian’s waiting hands. They repeat the motions with two others, carry them to the pyre together. With no ceremonies and no pedestals the fire’s ravenous as it touches the first body laid into its burning embrace, a sight horrifying in its fusion of cruelty and kindness.

Jyn looks away the moment she lays the last wolf into the fire, a lump in her throat heavy as lead and sharp as a dagger as she swallows it and resolutely ignores the sting of tears in her eyes. Cassian climbs into the transport, opens the holding compartment and the locks keeping racks’ protective restraints sealed at the vehicle’s sides, and then activates a powerful containment field that usually roots troopers or prisoners in place in the racks. The passenger hold accommodates a few big containers of drinking water placed under the seats; they use all of it to clean up the wolves’ blood from dark grey metal. Airspeeders go up into their mounts upon the roof. Next follow the trooper bodies Cassian helps her drag inside of the transport. At last they put six corpses into the racks, the field’s current settings helping to keep dead men standing straight. The trick won’t hold up on a close inspection, of course, but it may be good enough to fool a passing TIE-patrol with an impression of an Imperial transport going on its merry way through the area.

Slipping into the transport’s cabin, Jyn settles down upon the front gunner’s seat by Cassian’s side. She lays down her blaster upon the control panel, invokes the digital map on a navigational screen between her and Cassian, and taps a finger against the southeast-bound rote from the valley. “It’s the
fastest way to Sel-Nair.”

Cassian glances at the screen and nods. Hands quick and precise on numerous controls, he doesn’t waste time getting the vehicle hovering over the ground and sets to expertly navigate its bulky shape through the village’s narrow ruins.

Digging up her datapad from her backpack, Jyn puts it down in her lap and unlocks the device. One hand resting on the blaster cannon control, she rummages through her Naorie intel and finds Sel-Nair’s map she’d snatched after watching the museum hollow in her mission preparations.

It’s time to find out which exact part of the old art city they’re going to desecrate.

The glow from Sel-Nair’s ray shield colors the sky above the city in a soft shade of maroon, its uneven dome consuming the buildings and hills like a crimson lake. The road to the city’s main entrance twists in between two descending hills, crowned by the aqueducts weaving through the thick canopy of trees. Slowly the path narrows until tops of the hills come together in a thick arch of rocks, presenting a good cover for the transport to halt some thirty meters away from the shield.

Armed with a blaster, a datapad, and a connection cord, Jyn jumps down to the ground from the Imperial transport and approaches the shield. The Empire is notorious about their standards. Yes, they ensure high quality of technology used throughout its vast territories. Yes, it means less training for the personnel and that every Imperial servant can carry out their designated duties in virtually any corner of the Empire. But it also means less creativity. It means that what a good slicer had cracked once will likely be cracked and manipulated halfway across the galaxy in more or less the same way.

The ray shield around Sel-Nair is predictably common. Not an easy slice by any means, especially not when its computer is surely broadcasting its status to every Imperial base on Naora, but it’s nothing Jyn hasn’t sliced before in her life in under five minutes and with whooping success.

“Amateurs,” she mutters with a hint of disgust, connects her datapad to the access panel, settles down next to the shield into a cross-legged pose, and gets to work.

When she’s done, she’s capable of interacting with the shield’s computer without needing a physical connection, has full control of its administration module, which in turn provides her with mastery over the shield’s every sector and allows her to take them down for however long she wants while a looped signal of their full operation status being broadcasted back to the Empire. A triumphant tap of her index finger upon a virtual on-off button in the shield’s section one scatters the sizzling protective matter, revealing a neat rectangle of free space at the entrance.

She retrieves the cord, steps out of the way, flattening her back in a leisurely manner against the rocks, and waits until Cassian stops the transport right next to her.

“Four minutes and twenty seconds for a slice of this class,” he observes approvingly as she climbs back into the gunner’s seat. “You rock.”

Jyn wishes she’d feel like grinning at his earnest and well-deserved compliment (her fighting and slicing skills are maybe the only things she doesn’t feel strange being praised for), but alas. Cassian’s voice around those words is darker than usual too, and this she understands.

Without blue projections recreating what’s been lost to wars and time, Sel-Nair looks desolate, even more lifeless than it is. Its age shows brutally: only three years without careful maintenance and ancient ruins are crumbling, old stones littering the ground by the buildings. Jyn mostly keeps her eyes on the datapad’s map, guiding Cassian throughout the city to the destination she’d chosen.
They stop by the ruins of once biggest public baths in Sel-Nair, a lavish complex nested into a valley along with first Naorie Sculpture Museum. Even half-crumbled, its pillars still stand tall, white stones slowly going grey now that no one’s keeping them polished and clean. Quick to explore the nearby ruins on foot, Jyn finds a decent enough hiding place for the transport.

“Go west around the ruins, straight for the hill. The cover’s not perfect, but trees will help to conceal the vehicle and there’s enough space for it to fit,” she notifies Cassian through the comm, climbing up the ruined pillars and to the arch that’ll provide her with a good overview of this section of the baths. “And wait for me. I’ll see if I can find a neat place for the bodies here.”

Cassian’s response is a short chuckle unraveling in her ear, full of irony and brimmed with pain.

“What?” Jyn asks softly, eyes assessing the labyrinthine ruins around her.

Judging by the faint sound of the transport’s motor, he’d gotten the vehicle on the move again. “Any chance you’ve ever read ‘A War’s Arcanum’?”

“The galaxy’s oldest known treatise on the art of war? Duh.” She crosses the arch and makes a long jump towards the circular section of the baths, landing with a well-timed, perfect roll. “Saw had bothered to give me the actual hard copy of the book. Once I’ve finished reading, he told me it’s the philosophy that kills and made me burn the book. I was eleven,” Jyn deadpans, slipping down from the wall and onto the floor once she spots a tunnel leading somewhere beneath the ground. “Can’t say I agree with his opinion wholeheartedly, but most of that honor code will indeed get one killed in today’s day and age. All in all, not the worst lesson he could teach me.”

Everything in it sounds so… infuriatingly pure, so far out of the realm of reality. I’ve read it far after I’ve seen the Clone Wars lay waste to my city, far after I’ve seen how the Empire is treating their prisoners and people who decide to surrender.”

The comm line is quiet for a while, and Jyn sneaks into the tunnel, crossing the gentle downward slope across the ancient mosaic ornament that still mostly survived intact to this day and activating her holomap for some illumination.

“You and I violated quite a number of honorable warfare laws today,” Cassian finds his words at last. “But I don’t see how we could’ve approached this any other way without compromising ourselves or sacrificing the ainweard. Sometimes I wonder if it’s our time that’s broken or if that book is simply fiction, a set of aspirations Maren Kaan had dreamed of after living through a horrible war and never wanting anyone to go through something like that again. It’s been so long ago that we’ll never know the real truth. And I can never decide which of the versions I prefer.”

The tunnel runs straight, but its walls are full of nooks with tables and seats chiseled from marble, the walls in tiny rooms adorned with handles for torches and candles. These were reading spaces once or places to meet with friends after a good swim in the bath’s many pools. Hygiene and sports, education and socializing — Sel-Nair’s creators knew how to make the life in this beautiful city worthwhile. Right at the tunnel’s middle another nook turns out to actually be a path, leading Jyn to a vast space that’s unmistakably been a library once, a chamber cut into the hill with empty bookshelves chiseled into the walls. Damp and mossy, it feels hollow and lonely, a haunting place missing the festive laughs and silent joy it once had thrived with.

“Chirrut once told me that no matter if you win or lose, wars are always vast oceans of sadness,” Jyn replies, her voice a strangely beautiful echo as she’s turning to leave the library behind. “He’s a drama queen of grandeur, but he’s kind of right about that. Both of those versions suck, and maybe that’s the point.”
“And his philosophical musings are contagious,” Cassian notes dryly.

“To be fair, Baze had warned us all about it. Multiple times. It’s our problem that we didn’t listen,” counters Jyn. The tunnel ends at last in a flooded section of the baths. The water no one’s pumping away after the storms is high, the arched support walls of the bath barely visible. “I think I’ve found a good hiding spot here. See you in a few minutes.”

It’s the library that becomes the hunters’ resting place. Stripped of their armor, their unseeing eyes gently closed by Cassian, they lay forever silent in a neat row in a feeble gesture of dignity granted to them undeserving. Their armor and body gloves go into a few readings nooks, carefully laid down together as they were worn for ease of their potential reuse. Other rooms turn into storage points for weapons and supplies.

When Jyn sets the last of the trooper rifles upon the table, this one resting atop of the others, Cassian tells her, “It’s not the first time this place is seeing war and waste. It had survived a local conflict, it’s serving us in ours. It’ll endure.”

Jyn leans into Cassian’s welcoming embrace on their way back to the surface, arm tight around his midsection. “I know,” she murmurs, words wrought with regret. “I just wish it didn’t have to.”

Sel-Nair has a place for the Imperial transport as well. A crater lake in the city’s heart is quite deep and dark, a perfect hiding spot for a vehicle of such size. Watching the transport disappear as it drives itself from the shore and into the water after its remote control module was sliced and directed that way, Cassian points out solemnly under his breath, “There’s no way around it: I’m doing the right thing by concealing highly incriminating evidence, but I’m also drowning a golden infiltration opportunity.”

“I’ll admit, this particular heist is surrounded by some ridiculously convenient circumstances, but I’m sure I could always steal us another one.” Jyn shrugs, side-eyeing him curiously. “Does this make you feel any better?”

He tilts his head a little to glance at her, a tiny smile suddenly tugging the corners of his mouth up. “Is it only me or does that sound really sexy?”

A quiet chuckle unfurling in Jyn’s chest feels like a gentle breath of light, warm and nurturing the sharpest edges of her foul mood. “Well, sex is subjective, so that could go either way. But I like the way you think. I might even be tempted to share the heist with you.”

The smile reaches his eyes, painting silent joy. “I so shouldn’t be looking forward to that,” he notes wishfully and picks up his backpack from the ground.

“Don’t worry, I thoroughly enjoy having an exclusive privilege of knowing that you’re more than an emotionless stoic spy,” Jyn reassures him, adjusting the rucksack’s strap on her shoulder and then checking her chrono. “On occasion, when you’re not being an epic laserbrain about it,” she adds without ire and gets going first.

The walk back to Sel-Nair’s entrance goes along in a hurry (after all, there’s only half an hour left before a TIE-patrol is scheduled to fly over the city) and there’s a surprise waiting, as if tailor-made for Jyn in cruel and frustrating ways. Through the ray shield’s simmering crimson hue, the ainwaveard’s lithe form looks like a statue, like a mythical protector of Sel-Nair perched upon a rock, the light of Naora’s twin moons gently caressing his black body.

Jyn looks up at him, mind churning around their every interaction, and breathes out at last, a decision made. Stepping under the cover of ruins closest to the shield, she invokes her holomap and diverts
her attention to it.

Cassian leans against the wall next to her, crosses his arms against his chest. “You’re trying to pull a con on him,” he points out, sounding intrigued.

“Granted, it’s my style, but you don’t bang a door that won’t budge for eternity,” she mutters in response, fingers light on the controls as she’s moving the map around. The ranger’s next hiding spot is located close a small fishing city at the southwest of the continent. Go further west and they’ll reach Meraito city, a coastal gem. They’ll need to stop by at the fishing settlement for rest, that much is obvious, but Meraito would make a good surveillance target for the rest of the mission. “So, change of tactics. We’re holding on to let go. We stop nagging him and see how it goes. He’s following us, so he’s at least curious. That’s something. I may not like it, but I see no other way around it.”

“ETA on the third location?”

Jyn sizes up the distance between Sel-Nair and their destination, and runs a quick mental calculation. “We’ll be there close to dawn if we don’t run into some more trouble. Should be enough time to check out the place before we better head for the city.”

Cassian glances at the ainweard, his expression a ghost of wishful sadness. “Let’s get going, then.”

The shortest way to the fishing city takes them to the hunter’s camp and then further south through the forest, away from any official paths. The growth around here is thick and wild, most bushes higher than an average human being and trees old with roots twisted upon the ground like thousands of intertwined little rivers. It stretches south for good three miles at least that Jyn and Cassian had already crossed, and there’s no end to it in sight. The place is quiet in its darkness, a fresh night wind fading away, and the sudden movement of a frantic shadow some twenty meters away from Jyn nearly makes her jump out of her skin.

She points her blaster in the shadow’s direction on instinct, an action utterly useless. It’s moving fast, a decidedly ainweard-shaped storm rushing before her and to the west as if his life depends on it. Cassian is aiming his weapon at the place the cat has emerged from, but there’s no boogeyman appearing, no Imperials jumping out of hiding spots with guns blazing, no big bad creatures launching their attacks. If anything the forest is quiet, completely unperturbed as if nothing strange at all had happened.

Jyn meets Cassian’s eyes when he looks back at her, watches him size up the ainweard’s movement vector with suspicion. No words spoken and no council needed, they follow him in unison.

The first echo they hear is so faint it could be imaginary: soft and quiet, it’s a dying ghost of a half-whine, half-moan, not quite human yet striking eerie resemblance with the misery of an abandoned child crying in their crib. The following echo is sharp and furious, a violent roar of rage and desperation.

Jyn hurries towards it, reservations be damned and a war-cry blazing in her bloodstream.

Chapter End Notes

*Toniray wine* is a canon Alderaanian drink. I headcanon that serving the remaining
bottles after the planet's destruction was a sign of respect or marked important political games for Imperial elite.

Rodma Maddel was a part of reinforcements that joined Rogue One crew on Scarif. In this universe she survives that mission and continues on as an Intelligence agent for the Alliance.
There's an ancient, giant tree in the heart of the wild forest, thick and tall with a crown of leaves so lush that barely any moonlight seeps through the shadows. Rounding the tree, Cassian risks turning on the flashlight to its lowest setting. The light flashes, illuminating the darkness softly in yellow tones, and reveals the ainweard's shape.

He’s pacing around like a rabid creature, the growl rumbling in his chest devastating in its helplessness and anger. Jyn follows the cat’s eyes and finds the source of his despair lying atop of the pile of leaves. Her heart drops. Or, rather, plummets straight into her stomach with a terrible sinking feeling of nausea that lights up her blind fury like a fuse. It’s one of the Naorie wolves, tiny, likely not older than a very young pup, its coat still a soft shade of steel-gray. It’s breathing heavily, its eyes (that could’ve looked surreally magnificent in any other circumstance — a dark pupil surrounded by a pine-colored ring that gradually turns into a pale-yellow iris) looking at Jyn with primal fear.

A lump leaps up and lodges itself in her throat, her mouth suddenly tasting sour with venom of emotions in unimaginable ways: the wolf’s gaze lands on the blaster in her hand, it closes its eyes and rests its head against the leaves like a hopeless soul coming to terms with imminent slaughter.

Very distantly, only at the farthest possible corner of her mind she’s aware that she’s gripping her blaster too hard, that her other hand has curled into a fist so tight it feels uncomfortable, that tension in her jaw is borderline painful, and that she might have sucked in the air in a hiss and completely forgotten to release it and start breathing again.

The weapon feels as heavy in her hand as lead.

The pup whines again — the sound eerily reminiscent of a tiny, terrible plea to just get it over with quickly — then Cassian directs the flashlight upon the little wolf, and it finally hits Jyn that an unusually concentrated crimson spot stretched across the leaves like a blot under the creature doesn’t have any sharp angles whatsoever. No, it’s not an accidental natural cluster of fallen foliage from nearby trees. It glistens under artificial light sickly and it’s nothing else than blood.

It’s too much blood for a creature so tiny.

Jyn springs into action. Sliding the blaster back into its holster, she retrieves her flashlight and waves it around as she illuminates her frantic search. A decent long stick lies upon the ground some thirty
steps away. She rushes for it and back, approaches the little wolf from its injured side. Coming closer, Cassian makes sure he keeps the light on the pup. Holding on tight to the stick and crouching a few steps beside the wolf, Jyn gently drops the flashlight down to her lap and takes a deep, calming breath.

The pup opens its eyes. It blinks wearily, barely cognizant in pain and exhaustion, and cries out a weak, helpless howl when it sees how close the humans are to it. It tries to twitch in a futile attempt to escape on instinct, only to whimper in agonizing misery in tune with a distinct electric buzz echoing from the leaves.

Cassian settles down next to her and does his best to soothe the wolf, words fraying at the seams as he’s forcing them out gently, “Shh, little one, don’t move.” The pup whines again in despair, tiny body trembling. The ainweard’s purr is a mournful sound, but it speaks to the wolf; it stills and the buzzing dies down. The cat reaches down for it, gingerly balancing with his forelegs a breath away from the pile of leaves, and softly brings his forehead to rest against the wolf’s skull.

Jyn uses the moment to trace the stick in the lightest of touches close to the pup’s bleeding foreleg. Her worst suspicions are confirmed when she nudges the leaves away: the hunters have done a distastefully-impeccable job of concealing the trap and the little wolf had ran straight into it unaware of the danger, perhaps too focused on escaping the men who have killed its family.

Cassian breathes out a nasty curse in Huttese, his features a terrible mask of pure hatred. Jyn relates to the sentiment wholeheartedly; it’s a pity you can’t kill what’s already dead a thousand times over and let the righteous revenge unravel, the revenge some creatures deserve instead of a swift, almost painless death. The contraption is barbaric: its teeth are big, likely designed to root a full-grown wolf and perhaps even an ainweard in place, and someone has even added a control module and wires running alongside the metal. As if excruciating pain a prey was bound to experience when the trap snaps closed wasn’t enough for the hunters, every attempt to get free of it is definitely accompanied by a surge of electricity running through the wires, into the metal and then straight into its captive.

Jyn cleans up the leaves away from the wolf’s leg with cautious hurry. It stepped into the trap with its forefoot at a terribly wrong angle: the limb is captured by the teeth diagonally, sharp metal gnawing at both the leg and the foot without mercy, maximizing the damage.

“I think now we know what the datapad was for,” says Cassian darkly, busy with retrieving the device Jyn had looted off one of the troopers from his rucksack. “See how you can turn off this thing.” He passes the datapad to Jyn, turns his attention to roaming through his possessions. “I’ll check how bad the damage is.”

The device is clearly a personal toy, one of the newer popular models from electronic markets, not a military-grade tech the Empire hands out to its servants. Blocked and put into standby mode, the datapad is protected by a four-digit password. Jyn regards it thoughtfully, digs up a handful of scandocs she’d lifted off the hunters’ bodies. The flimsiest part of most security systems in the galaxy is not tech and software security, but sentient factor. She finds the scandocs of the datapad’s owner, activates a small holo that presents all available info about the trooper. It’s scarce, sure, but statistics of security breaches and Jyn’s own experience with stupid mistakes other beings make in protecting their personal data tells her that she might just have everything she needs on her hands.

She does. The third combination of numbers indicating the trooper’s date of birth that she tries unlocks the device. It barely takes her any time at all to locate a remote-control app in charge of the trap.

Sixteen. There are sixteen traps in the seven-mile radius, all broadcasting signals to the datapad in her hands. It’s a small relief, but at least only a single one of them indicates that it had caught someone.
“Standing by,” announces Jyn quietly and looks at Cassian carefully hovering the medisensor over the wolf’s trapped limb. “Please tell me something good.”

“I wish.” He leans back, shifting his weight to the soles of his feet, fingers tight around the medisensor and knuckles bloodless as he regards the device’s verdict with loathing. “Life signs aren’t very encouraging. It lost a lot of blood. The trap tore through multiple bones. One of the teeth had nicked an artery, but it’s blocking it now. The moment you disable and open up that contraption we’re looking at a very narrow race with time to seal a lot of damaged blood vessels before the little fella here bleeds out.” Cassian meets Jyn’s eyes for a moment, looks away, uneasy and apologetic and somber, his mouth set into a thin line and his jaw tightly clenched. His voice belongs to a spy, though: measured, sure, unaffected by the situation. “I’ll do it,” he declares after a beat. “But the wolf will still need proper medical help, as soon as possible.”

“One problem at a time, shall we?”

“Yeah,” he mutters, busying himself with retrieving the medpack from his rucksack. “The moment the trap’s disabled, grab the pup and bring it to me. I’ll need you to hold it down until I’m done.”

“Okay.” Jyn nods her agreement, lips pursed and eyebrows drawn as assesses the terrible situation at hand.

They’ll need light, very good light for an operation of such precision, but there are too little hands on deck. She snatches the flashlight from her lap, lays down the datapad on the ground, eyes roaming around the forest for some kind of a solution. The terrain rises up some forty meters ahead into a modest rocky hill. Recent storms weren’t kind to it; the rocks at the top are ragged, a scattering of stones big and small resting on the ground. Jyn hurries to the hill, picks out a moderately big, smooth stone, brings it back and settles it down. Both hers and Cassian’s flashlights balance upon it nicely, illuminating the space between them as best as they can.

Now, onto the next problem. A big, black problem with a short fuse for temper and mighty claws.

Jyn turns back to the wolf and the ainweard, reaches out her hand to the feline former gladiator, her movement slow and smooth. She’s half a meter away from touching when the cat’s throat rumbles with a threatening growl.

“Hey, warrior.” Voice as soothing as she can manage, Jyn stills her hand. The ainweard lifts his head, nostrils flaring, and bores the gaze of his golden eyes straight into hers, a daring challenge as obvious as they even get. There’s only one way of going about it that feels right to Jyn, and so she listens to her instincts, trusts them to guide her through this unscathed. She arms herself with sincerity. “Listen, we have to help the wolf. No matter what you see or hear, you have to let us do this. It’s the only way. You trusted us with your home. We need some more of this trust.” Taking a deep breath, she risks breaking eye contact and focusing her attention on the wolf. Steady despite the prickly thorns of nervousness raging through her, Jyn brings her palm down to the pup’s side, her touch feather-light. The trembling of its body sends chills down her spine, twists like a dagger in her heart. The little wolf heaves one frantic breath after another, its little heart fluttering like a wounded bird in a cage, tormented by fear and pain and loss. “They can’t win. They won’t win. Not today,” she says in a whispering seethe of resolve and roams her hand up, softly scratching the base of the pup’s ear as it weakly leans its head into her touch. “Not on my watch.”

In her peripheral vision the ainweard straightens up and takes a step back, then another. She looks back at him, nods in gratitude. He looks her in the eyes for a moment, his trust solidifying, and get moving at last, his muzzle serious and his pointy ears twitching a little as she starts canvassing the area on the lookout for any potential threats.
“I won’t be surprised if you’ll be able to befriend a rancor if you put your mind into it,” observes Cassian, a spy in his tone this time fractured beyond repair. Yes, there’s a subtle edge of tension marring the shadow of awe he’s been trying to express, but both are inconsequential. There’s only one thing that matters: those cues betray doubt, a failure he’s desperately trying to avoid without any guarantees.

At the back of her mind Jyn wonders just how many times he tried to save a fellow soldier in vain, when exactly did he start feeling darkly that his hands are better suited for taking lives rather than preserving them, and so she reaches out to him, places a gentle hand on his knee.

Jyn picks up the trooper’s datapad again, switches it on, and comfortably settles it in her lap. “What makes you think I don’t already have such a friend?” she arms herself with humor to stick it to the doom’s and gloom’s face.

In the corner of her eye she spots a weak shade of levity softening Cassian’s anxious expression, calming him down, and lets the corners of her mouth twitch upward in a parody of a smile.

A moment later he fully turns back to her. There’s the cauterizer in his lap, along with… yes, those are definitely a few of Imperial-issue bacta bandages he’d stolen from the trooper the ainweard killed during their first fateful meeting in Naorie storm. They alone might not be enough to save the wolf, but they’ll give him a fighting chance, win him some time at least.

“On your command,” Jyn says, carefully but firmly holding on to the scruff of the wolf’s neck, her index finger hovering over the trap’s control.

Hand firm around the cauterizer, Cassian draws in a deep breath and orders, “Now.”

Their race against time begins.

When the ainweard beckons them to follow him again, neither Jyn nor Cassian hesitate. No questions asked, the spy gently picks up the wounded wolf, the thief arms herself with her blaster, and they run, trying to keep up with their guide to best of their abilities.

He’s leading them away from the fishing city, deeper into the woods and to the southeast, and at first Jyn doesn’t worry. It’s weird, yeah, and certainly not her first choice of direction given the weak creature in Cassian’s arms and its life still in peril, but she trusts the ainweard. He surely knows these lands better than them. She double-checks the holomap on the go and sure enough her memory didn’t betray her: there’s an inhabited village to the east, right next to a fruit plantation. Even in the Empire with its highly militaristic approach to governing such places are laid back. Less people, less scrutiny, and nowhere near as much security or patrols as there would be close to a strategic trading post or a small city.

And maybe, just maybe there’s an even better reason the ainweard is taking them to the village. Maybe there’s someone he trusts in there, someone who helped him, someone who can help yet another creature wronged by the Empire.

It seems that hope comes back to bite her in the ass yet again.

A thirty-minute dash through the forest brings them to a tiny clearing at the base of yet another hill. The plantation is away, with still good four miles of distance to cross, but the ainweard halts abruptly, turns around, and waits for Jyn and Cassian to catch up.

They exchange surprised glances, size up the scenery in search for some kind of a clue. The hill rises up gradually, engulfed by a less intimidating forest, no rock formations or caves or anything of a kind
nearby. A pre-dawn breeze of cool wind weaves waves out of wild grass covering the clearing. Nothing here catches the eye, nothing even hints at some semblance of a hideout or help the little wolf needs so much.

The ainweard gets moving. Quiet as shadow in high grass, he reaches Cassian with intent and, the moment the spy freezes in place, not risking any movement at all, balances a forepaw gently against his upper leg and brings his muzzle close to the wolf. The sound made by the big cat reminds Jyn of an irritable huff, and Cassian gets the idea. Eyes wide with bewilderment, he moves away the arm he cradled the little pup to his chest with, the motion deliberately slow and infinitely cautious in order not to jostle or even touch the predator in any way.

One quiet, approving purr later, the ainweard locks his teeth around the wolf’s scruff and takes the little creature away from Cassian. Gracefully lowering himself to all fours, he doesn’t waste a single moment and dashes up the hill, disappearing from sight like a shadow in a moonless, starless night.

Jyn blinks, a slow, resigned kind of blink, and lets her blaster-armed hand settle down by her side. “This solidifies it: he and Chirrut are spirit animals,” she deadpans snappily.

Cassian regards the direction of the ainweard’s retreat with his expression rendered completely flat, and then offers, “Do you want to cosplay Baze and follow him?”

Fond irony in query’s meaning interwoven with a focused, serious tone steals a quiet laugh from Jyn, the corners of her eyes crinkling with joy despite the frustration and peril of the situation. She conceals it a little by pretending she’s clearing her throat, and asks, “Do you?”

He twitches his good shoulder in a tiny shrug. “That’s why we’re here in the first place, aren’t we?”

There’s no point in staying in place and pouting. If the search is pointless, crossing the hill will lead to Asei-la Taleni bay. Head west by the shore and you inevitably reach the fishing city. It may be a different approach vector, but their destination is still the same.

Plus, ridiculous as it is, giving up is not really a choice on the table. If you care for something, you never walk away — you understand, you wait, or you seek for a suitable approach to a problem. Water’s patience shapes the hardest of stones.

Re-adjusting the grip on her blaster, Jyn concludes, “I suppose sometimes you just need to out-stubborn a stubborn. Let’s get to it.”

One of the galaxy’s weirdest rescue missions begins anew.

Sceneries change, circumstances change, but to Jyn it almost feels as if she’s running around a single, although incredibly elaborate and very diverse maze, keen to solve a solve annoying problem and always ending up right where she started no matter what kind of progress has been made. It’s official, she muses grimly, we either find the damn prickly gladiator by complete accident or he finds us first. There’s no other way this ever works.

The search for the ainweard and the wolf so far is absolutely futile, and it’s not for the lack of thoroughness, hurrying, and dedication. A day ago she’s been restless for action, but today’s almost constant walking and running around is finally catching up with her. Her legs feel heavy, muscles aching from overuse, and the weight of failure is doing no wonders to her mood whatsoever.

She’s not alone in this. They stop for a drink by a place clearly used for picnics once upon a time, with tables and benches chiseled from stones with artist’s love and precision. Lowering her tired body upon the bench, she leans over her backpack, hands busy digging inside of it for a bottle of
water and eyes inevitably drawn to Cassian. His expression betrays soft fatigue (soft of course only because he’s instinctively concealing the true feel of it), and when he takes off his rucksack there’s no mistaking relief washing over him. He doesn’t bother to bend fully, instead gently drops the bag to the ground and gingerly rolls his shoulders, wincing a little in discomfort both his blaster wound and his back must be tormenting him with.

Jyn passes him the water when he sits down next to her, bumps her shoulder against his good one and softly leans into him, seeking his warmth, steadiness, a sense of connection and familiarity in this lunatic galaxy for just a moment.

The forest is slowly getting thinner around them the closer they get to the shore, and here the tree crowns reveal big patches of the sky. She looks up, follows a stripe of darkness dimming far at the horizon. It may not be what her heart’s craving, but there’s time for its desires and time for common sense.

“It’ll start dawning soon,” she mutters with quiet resentment.

Cassian runs a hand over his eyes and up, sifting his fingers through his hair. “Yeah,” he echoes and passes the bottle back to Jyn. “We should probably head for the city. Get some rest. Maybe come back again later.”

“Sounds sensible.”

They give themselves a single minute of rest before standing up and getting on the go again. It almost feels poetic that the moment they decide to put the search aside, the object of the search decides to show up.

She and Cassian can already see Asei-la Taleni’s peaks and pillars at the horizon through the clearing in trees, having reached the highest point of the hill at last, when the sound of snapping branches at their right catches them off-guard and has them swirling around quick as mercury and pointing their weapons in the direction of the distraction.

The ainweard jumps upon the old mossy stone and sits down, head high, forepaws before him, his spine regally straight and, seemingly, absolutely unfazed by the sight of blasters facing his way.

Jyn allows herself quietly seethe a particularly colorful expletive in Twi’leki, both because it feels really damn good and because just maybe their new friend somewhat deserves it. “You’re a piece of work,” she adds after in accusing voice, lowering her blaster away from the creature.

This time he doesn’t bother reacting to it whatsoever, just sits still as a statue, golden eyes gleaming in the darkness. Waiting for something.

Force, she really hopes this is not going to bite her in the ass. “Whatever happens, let me see this through,” Jyn tells Cassian, slotting the blaster back into its holster and swinging the backpack off her shoulders. Eyebrows drawn, expression both unsure and tense, he nevertheless nods.

She risks approaching the ainweard and soon they’re close, the stone’s elevation making sure their eyes are level with each other, making this gazing game incredibly poignant and intense. For a little while things are in complete standstill, quiet save for the loud thumping of Jyn’s heart in every cell of her body, and it feels almost agonizing, like balancing on a precipice without ever making a choice, like a clock frozen in time. Ever so slowly, making sure he’s seeing it, Jyn starts reaching forward with her hand, ready to pull back at any second. His eyes dart to her fingertips and he stiffens reflexively, but doesn’t move away, doesn’t growl like he did once when Cassian’s been close to him.
She draws in a deep breath through her mouth, cool dawning air tasting fresh and calming, closes her
eyes, and dares to close the remaining distance between her and the predator. What Jyn doesn’t
expect even in her most hopeful dreams is that the cat chooses to meet her halfway on his own
volition.

The first thing she feels is a bump of a cold, slightly wet nose against her palm, the sensation both so
mundane and odd that it steals a very quiet, surprised almost-giggle off her parted lips. The ainweard
twists his head a little, leans the top of his skull into her touch, Jyn’s hand now neatly resting
between his ears. She flattens her palm, amazed at the feeling. His body is warm to the touch, almost
radiating gentle heat; the scales are definitely a set of hardened armor around his skin and yet are
surprisingly smooth even at the seams. Jyn turns her hand a little, rubs the side of her pinkie finger
across the base of his ear in a soft scratch, and smiles when she distantly feels the echo of an
approving purr rumbling in his throat.

And then, without any warning whatsoever, she finds herself watching and feeling like she’s never
ever done before.

The scents hit her first: a wild flavor of wind and ground and trees and flowers and grass, each and
every one of them a part of something she can only identify as a deeply-rooted feeling of forest,
home in her very soul and yet so distinctly unique; suddenly there’s not only home but a tang of
metal and blaster oil. Wind’s caressing her body as she’s rushing, four strong legs pushing away
from thick branches and landing, quiet and agile. She inhales and, yes, leather and rubber aftertastes
are strong in the ground’s scent along with a whiff of Human salty sweat. She breathes in again, a
hunter and a detective, and actually there are two Human scents here after all, although they
intertwine — both Humans wear memory of one another on their skins.

Images flood her mind in rapid succession: a distant shape of two Human figures as they hurry
through the forest, then a much closer look as they both hide in the bushes from a forest trooper,
hands on their blasters. A sense of wary curiosity washes over her, an odd flicker of hope so tiny it
almost feels it’s imaginary. Lust for blood and revenge is boiling in her veins at the scent of plastoid
armor, at the image of an Imperial trooper roaming free and stomping the ground like they’re an
overlord, but her heart’s yearning for the oddity, for someone new. The Empire’s been here for years
and there’s no chance they’re leaving. So she pursues a couple of strangers stealthily, their hands as
steady on their weapons as are the trooper’s, but for once trained upon her sworn enemy.

From the branches of a high tree some fifty meters away from two Humans, she’s watching them
sizing the Empire up, hears echoes of their whispers in the wind’s melody, the sound itself bearing
no meaning until—

Sharp and distinct and so, so wet, blood’s pumping in their veins, and the drumbeat of their hearts is
wild with fury, a familiar warrior’s lullaby of sadness and revenge. And then an image, clear as a
reflection in still water unfurls in her mind — a rifle in steady hands, the men in black helmets
crumbling as blaster bolts burn through their hearts, white-armored figures scatter in panic only to be
cut down just as swiftly by red plasma projectiles.

She runs again, at first runs to follow, barely believing in what she’d glimpsed and felt, and then
rushes aside when there’s a scent of plastoid armor and another Human odor strong in the wind from
the west. She runs, a frenzied battle cry alight in every cell of her body, old scars aching like
memories, a phantom of a collar heavy on her neck, the storm her ally.

When she jumps from the trees, it’s not only with thirst for a kill and for justice. It’s with the desire to
protect — as strong as craving for freedom, undeniable as hope solidifies. The scent of singed
Human flesh and rusty tang of blood taste like failure, like something dark and ravenous and deeply
painful resonating in her very soul, a lash of aftershock from some hidden memories striking back from time long past. Fervor intensified, she kills her prey with clinical precision.

It feels great. It feels like an honor at last to hurt someone in order to protect someone, to not completely fail.

Their eyes are different — from hers and also vastly different from each other, soft green with spilled stars and dark ones that look a deep shade of amber when lightning strikes and tears through the storm’s darkness — but the truth reflecting in them strikes a chord with her. They’re full of emotion, burdened with weight; eyes that look at the world like it’s a battlefield and there’s no safe haven in it, eyes that lived through more than they should have, understood more than anyone ever should. She sees herself in them; not literally, of course, it’s rather a warped, ephemeral feeling of a similar road traveled, of pain, of thirst for justice and yet of kindness.

Those Human hands point a blaster her way only for protection, not to bring her harm. She doesn’t attack and so they don’t either. In the world’s she’s treading it’s ludicrous. It hasn’t happened for years. But today it’s nevertheless undeniably true.

She’s hopeful and disbelieving, shyly wanting to trust and yet scared. The conflict’s almost too much, overwhelming, ripe with possibilities and laden with potential dooms, and it makes her want to bolt away and never look back. It’s safer that way. But the storm’s getting worse, less of an ally and getting more dangerous by a minute. Running can wait. She may not trust this hope, but she’s not letting it die.

She’s done letting good, kind things wither away if she can help it.

It’s hard commanding Humans with no words or impressions, and she’s half-panic, half-contemplation with both fears and pure, ravenous need to keep them safe as she tries to make do with body language and not reveal her true nature. But these two warriors are either just as crazy as she is today or just as practical. They get it. They follow.

Despite all odds today she wins.

Resting and drying in the pleasant heat emanating from the river, she’s following their every action with detached interest, somewhat fascinated but keeping focus, keen on analyzing it and ready to run away any moment. The fem’s touch is woven with care and worry, frantic and nervous one moment and steady when it needs to be the other, universal in its language of sympathy and love shared between every living species in the galaxy. Her eyesight unusually sharp despite the distance, she notes the old pale marks curving around the fem’s wrists. When the slightly scruffy male turns around a little, the golden light emphasizes a scattering of scars on his back, some old, some newer, but each of them a part of a familiar map of pain the Empire tends to paint on every body it can touch with its bloody, greedy hands.

Again, they’re not quite mirrors, but they’re most certainly her kin in this bloody, unfair world. Her two hearts quietly weep about it. Her soul feels at home more than ever since her entire universe got shattered and warped into an almost never-ending nightmare.

The fem’s feisty. Reminds her of—

She ignores the thought, wills it away before it can fully form and drown her in pain there’s no salvation from, but ends up audibly reacting anyway, the once lovely feeling in her throat and chest feeling foreign, wrong, yet still wanton despite its flaws.

The fem also wants to fight. It’s been so long anyone’s truly fought for Naora, yet alone a complete
stranger. But even if they did, they lost. The Empire’s a beast, a foul ocean of weapons and armor and emotionless skulls that stench like greed and rot when they win and tremble in fear when they live out their last moments with their blood hot on her claws. Two warriors, no matter how resilient and skilled, can do nothing against it.

Still, the fem perseveres. More curious than she’s comfortable with, she first follows and then leads the way.

For the first time in years she watches a Human hand touch something that belonged to a Naorie with absolute gentleness and reverence. It’s a sight for sore eyes, a balm for hearts wronged all too many times despite every scar and every warning going off in her head on instinct. She rests her head on her paws and risks closing her eyes. Tense, she listens to the fem’s every movement, but she never comes too close, never disturbs her. There’s no danger in her presence, no pressing need to bolt in order to protect herself. It’s hardly possible, but it’s true.

In the end they part ways, of course. Good things rarely ever last, yet alone something as unique and odd as this. She’d learned it a very hard way. She’s not going to test it, won’t let her stupid heart get absolutely drunk on hope and burn again when everything crumbles, when she’ll be alone again.

She never looks back.

Life itself doesn’t care for her reservations and puts her on a collision course with two Human spies regardless just the way it likes it — unfathomable, unlikely, poetic.

The transition back to her own mind and away from sensations and feelings too strong is as abrupt as the plunge into it was. Jyn gasps, eyes wide, chest heaving, body shivering from the experience almost too profound to fathom, and wrenches her hand away from the **ainweard**, stepping back frantically.

“Jyn!”

Cassian’s voice is agitated, but the exclamation is as subdued as one can possibly get, a spy in him still winning a battle with unraveled worry. He’s right beside her immediately, gentle albeit agitated hands catching her by the shoulders as she almost stumbles on another step back.

“I’m okay,” she rushes to reassure him, her tone just a little hoarse. No matter what just happened it’s true, and the last thing they need is anyone acting rashly thanks to protective instincts.

To his credit, Cassian does process this message and doesn’t make any sudden movements. Jyn gives herself a moment to relax in his arms and catch her breath, attempt to fully comprehend what she’d just lived through and how. It’s shocking, to say the least, but it’s incredible, an absolute miracle that’s now rooted in reality. She straightens up, faces the **ainweard** again. His own expression had changed as well; his gaze is both guarded and fretful, genuinely concerned and understanding. He bows his head and hides his eyes apologetically, body tense as he’s waiting for something or maybe is gearing to run away again.

“Wh—”

“Wait,” Jyn stops Cassian mid-question gently, slides her palm soothingly down his hand, and steps forward, away from his arms and daring to reach the **ainweard** again. She comes close, her knees touching the mossy rock claimed by the cat as she leans a little against the stone, and tentatively brushes the pad of her index finger at the side of the **ainweard**’s pointy ear, feeling nothing otherworldly, just a warm scale against her skin.
Experimentally she brushes her fingertips down the side of his muzzle, careful not to touch the whiskers and omit the scarred tissue, turns her hand around to scratch the cat’s neck. Eyes alert and body still coiled tight with tension, he nevertheless leans into the touch with a little more confidence and encouragement. At last a tentative, shy purr of pleasure he makes vibrates at the very tips of Jyn’s fingers, both tickling and soothing.

“Was that the way you’re communicating when you trust someone?” she asks, scratching her fingers back and forth against his neck before gently nudging his chin up in a playful way and moving her hand away.

He hesitates for a moment, his muzzle a reflection of stoic seriousness, but then nods.

“Intense,” she reflects, initial shock shifting into endless wonder. “But really cool.”

The ainweard chases her hand until he bumps his nose against the outer side of her palm. It’s the pure sensation that unfurls in her mind and soul, wound tight with a sense of yearning and curiosity so tangible it feels like she can catch it and bottle it up.

It reminds her of the way she’s been feeling in the aftermath of Scarif, rational mind guarded against building bonds but heart longing for every little piece of their personalities and histories Chirrut and Baze, Cassian and Bodhi chose to share with her. When she looks into the ainweard’s eyes again, she meets a glimpse of her own reflection in the golden depth of his irises, a miniature but incredibly detailed expression of reserved wonder and a shade of fear in her own eyes.

Nothing happens yet, and this inaction feels like the most poignant of choices.

She shifts her hand, breaks the touch only to rest her palm feather-light against the creature’s muzzle. A breath later her entire world reshapes itself again, rushing headlong into a new mystery.

First things she feels are ephemeral, she thinks, fragments of memories three-quarters forgotten or perhaps only a quarter formed, barely any substance to them as if they’re merely dust in a wind. But even though they rush away like dust, they leave an imprint.

It’s the echo of voices in her skull, in her heart, in her very soul, incoherent sounds wrought with meaning, with love, with promises coming true. It’s the arms cradling her, surrounding her with warm feeling of something sure and solid and yet still soft, sheltering her from a world too scary, too wild, too incomprehensible. It’s the hands: they first tug her along gently by her own tiny hands, then release her and, arms open and palms turned up in invitation, beckon her to reach them; a bigger pair of hands steadies her when she makes a shaky step and nearly stumbles, pushes her along a tiny bit and straight into mama’s welcoming arms when she figures out the gist of walking. It’s the two faces that mean everything to her; she loves running her fingertips all over them, exploring every feature, feeling the softness of skin upon a cheek and different texture of lips, mapping out an infinitely strange shape of a nose and wrinkles above its bridge when a face scrunches up a little under her ministrations, learning the shape of a jaw or a cheekbone. It’s the eyes that she loves the most: soft green, always just a little faraway unless papa is busy solving yet another galactic mystery or spends time with her and mama; fierce brown, spirit of caring, protection, and war alight in them, making mama special, strong, an unbent pillar of safeness in her entire world.

Then follow other memories, more conscious and solidified, not just impressions of details but entire fragments of her life filled with special accents, with brighter strokes of significance painted upon a photorealistic canvass. It’s the melody of an old symphonic opera papa had left playing in her room when she went to sleep. (Well, when she promised she’d go to sleep.) It’s the luminosity of Coruscant’s upper levels glimmering outside of her window with hundreds of airspeeders and
speeder bikes dashing back and forth upon the city’s many skylanes even when the night has fallen. It’s the texture of Koodie underneath her fingertips as she waves the toy around against the skyline on her windowsill, imagining he’s one of the dragons from a book mama is reading her these days, her fire-breathing loyal friend with whom she’s sharing thoughts and breathtaking, wonderful adventures. It’s the increasingly more gaunt lines of papa’s face and bruises underneath his eyes as he’s spending more and more time away from home that she spies under the city lights when she’s sneaking next to their living room. It’s the glimpse of cold, scathing fury in mama’s eyes that she’s letting show when the man in white is not watching.

Pure emotion hits her — a sense of fear and worry so primal and all-encompassing that it makes her curve her arms tight around mama’s neck and never once consider running off for another adventure — and this time she fully understands it. She shares the scene with her past self, but her eyes are older now, sharper and weary and wisened by cruelty of life. They reshape the memory, deepen it. Her parents rush through lover level of the city, hell-bent on going deeper and deeper, and in here Coruscant is an overwhelming kingdom of metal, dark even despite the neon fury of its illumination and advertising. The air here is pungent and heavy, hundreds of scents all coiling together without beauty. No plants, no parks, no fountains, no sky visible from a street they’re dashing through, narrow passages and buildings towering over her, this city is a living symbol of oppression, a reflection of the Empire at its worst. She misses the toys she had to leave behind. She’s not afraid of running away because mama’s arms are sure around her.

It’s Coruscant that scares her.

She takes a breath and scenery reshapes, the scent of damp wind and ocean and moss unfurling in her lungs. It’s her first conscious feeling of home, apart from her parents’ arms. Lah’mu is the opposite of Coruscant, a planet where nature reigns. It’s all green and grey and black in the wilderness, and all colors in the villages she visits sometimes with mama and papa when they need to buy supplies, little houses painted with beautiful spray-paint murals and wild spider-web of glass lanterns and open umbrellas decorating the streets.

To her Lah’mu is long hours of walking along the ocean’s black shore in its timid summertime with mama, listening to the rustle of waves and helping her pick out interesting stones the water is constantly washing ashore. It’s watching big turtles on the beach and playing fetch with one particularly curious and playful lizard half her size that often sprints out of its nest by the rocks to greet her. It’s sitting on big slab of stone on the beach, watching the ocean violently worry in a storm, majestic and fierce and powerful and somehow not scaring her at all. It’s running in a maze of grass higher than herself upon the hill valley south of their homestead, Stormie in her hand and wind pushing her forward, dreaming of flying a fast ship, of learning every secret there is to learn in the galaxy, visiting its every planet and getting to know life in its rich variety. It’s quiet evenings she spends with her parents, mama and papa relaxed together on the couch and the worries of their old life on Coruscant slowly fading away, and her sprawled on her belly in a nest of blankets on the floor, watching an action-adventure holo-animation story.

It follows an orphaned street rat with a hawk as her only friend, a girl who sneakied into a monarch’s palace to steal an expensive trinket only to walk into a middle of a plot where the king’s best friend turned against him and usurped the throne. It’s the story she comes back to over and over, watching all three seasons time and time again as the lonely thief ends up saving a prince from certain death that night, escapes with him, invites him into her shoddy home, shows him ugly sides of his kingdom after everything he ever knew was riches of a palace and decorated, prosperous streets around it, teaches him to survive it, becomes his friend and falls in love with him, and then, after helping her beloved expose and defeat the treacherous usurper and retake the throne, becomes a queen and through trials and errors perseveres with him to bring a new era of peace and prosperity to the
kingdom.

(Once upon a time it was her favorite story. She got older, though. She learned that thieving to survive and living on the streets is nowhere near glamorous, that most kings and princes are not kind or honorable, that a lot of people reject changes that could bring order and prosperity if they interfere with their loopholes and illegal schemes.)

That life is beautiful while it lasts.

She doesn’t remember how Stormie looked when she dropped him onto the ground, but she remembers the feeling of the toy slipping from her grip, the noise of an Imperial ship roaring in her ears, in her every bone. She wishes now she’d looked at mama when she asked her to trust the Force, committed her every feature to memory so that resolve and fierceness in her eyes, that war she wasn’t afraid of would be one of her last memories of Lyra. That time she looks anywhere but in mama’s eyes when she secures the necklace around her neck. Her brightest memory of that day is mama’s lifeless body crumbling into mud and grass and her entire universe of safeness ending with it for a very long time.

That day true darkness and cold become her companions and haunt her for years onward.

On her third night on Wrea Saw wakes her up before dawn, a rare occasion when he actively seeks her out instead of avoiding her. He leads her out of the hideout and to his training spot, a battered and scorched stormtrooper armor hanging from the bar like a nightmare scarecrow.

He settles on her knees before her, wincing at whatever pains are tormenting his broken body after long years of waging a brutal war. “I know nothing about raising children. Don’t know how to be like family to you,” he admits self-consciously, not quite meeting her eyes and showing his own vulnerability for the very first time. “But I have promised your mother that I would keep you safe. And I know only one way to try to keep that promise.”

She’s alternating between watching him and letting her gaze drift to the armor. White, not black, it still takes her back to the moment when one of Krennic’s lapdogs had pulled the trigger, whatever precious memories of Stormie she had completely destroyed by that one motion, by the way the Empire has taken mama away from her so ruthlessly forever.

Saw notices it, of course, takes a deep breath, and tightens his fingers over a package he’s holding in one hand. “Are you scared?”

“Yes,” she says because she is, because whatever she knew of her life is gone now, because she has no idea where does she go from here. I’m here because of the Empire, it destroyed our lives because it wanted to is one of the small number of truths she believes these days.

“Good,” he nods.

That surprises her. “It is?”

“There are two ways to handle fear, child.” Saw’s jaw tightens, eyes narrowing as his vulnerability reshapes into stalwart, cold seriousness of a seasoned warrior. “There’s fear that roots you in place and kills you. And there’s fear that guides you to fight, fuels you to pay those who hurt you back with justice.” He unrolls the package, letting Wrea’s bright moonlight illuminate a truncheon. “It’s up to you to choose what you’re going to do with your fear. Will you let it hurt you, or will you use it to arm yourself? Who will you become?”

The truncheon feels right in her hand. For the first time ever Saw smiles: the expression is pained and
untrue, but it’s real and honest.

She still holds it dear, regardless of the wounds he’d slashed across her heart with his rabid crusade and that fatal choice to save her by leaving her behind.

For a while things she’s re-living are all about fragments, brief yet incredibly potent glimpses into hard work of learning to be a warrior; into her first kill; into the way she’s processing the weight of this choice (it turns out to be half-relief, half-regret, relief for saving Saw’s life and her own, regret for needing to take a life in the first place) and how she learns firsthand that darkness can be used to bring light if you do it right; into recognizing how Saw’s making the war bloodier and bloodier without any reason for it other than his temper and anger; and then, at last, into seeds of doubt running rampant in her heart after Inusagi.

She wishes she could remember that day, each and every second, wishes she could turn back the tide of time every time she wakes up, the memory of thousand silver razors gliding through the air in a deadly dance before drowning the ballroom in blood and bodies etched into the inside of her eyelids. Oftentimes those dreams end with her watching blood blossom on the fabric of her green gown when she stayed in the ballroom for just for a moment longer, not a warrior despising decadence and Imperial knack for perverting festivals into their show of might, but a teenager enamored by simple beauty of the world. Most of the times she comes awake with a gasp, feeling a phantom weight of a flechette launcher in her own hands. She might’ve never fired one, but she’s the reason the Partisans had an opportunity for the massacre, and there’s no escaping it. She wishes she could find a clue of upcoming slaughter in Saw’s eyes, wishes she could stop him.

As is, she’s a slave of time, so the only way to go is to confront him after. She mulls over a dozen of ways to approach the subject, to face Saw privately and help him find his way again. He’s family. Her only family. She can’t go on like this, can’t be used this way again, and she owes him to try and make him see, to find a way to make this war work for both of them. She never has a chance to do it because Tamsye Prime is right around the corner.

When it hits the sting of betrayal is like a lash of a whip landing against bared soul, a cruel rebirth of her deepest fear. There’s nothing new in loneliness and darkness fitting her like an abhorring second skin, but this time they hit harder, shattering an already broken bone, carving tender scarring away from a wound. That day shatters whatever moments of peace she had in her life into complete and utter cutting shambles.

Many days that come after are a blur. They change sceneries but share the same dark soul, and her life is full of spiteful anger and crippled rebel fury, of near-constant misery and occasional hunger. She’s not the best of warriors in those years by choice, but she puts that fervor into slicing and thieving and roaming her way across the galaxy, getting by all alone.

Veinala is an anomaly, an experiment, a moment of weakness she prefers to think of as her attempt at soul-searching. The city signifies a semblance of peace refusing to feel home in her heart, it’s beauty failing to defeat the darkness with its scars and ravenous hunger to spread and corrupt everything it touches, but it’s something she doesn’t regret. It wasn’t meant to be, but she remembers fondly its sense of community and kindness. Veinala is still a place that has never betrayed or tested her trust, her first real, conscious foray into tackling her fear of being used and abandoned.

From time to time she thinks that life in the galaxy is shaped because living creatures feel. They hear and smell and touch and look, and every sensation is a guide, is a thought that drives an idea for action. Idryssa warned her once — more often than not men look at us as if they own us or want to own us, and you’ll see it soon enough; look out for it, sister, look out and wear your armor proudly
and never let them make that bloody disgusting wish come true — and she’d been right.

But when Kelde looks at her for the very first time, his silver Echani eyes are simply curious and friendly, a perfect expression for meeting a complete stranger. He shows her around the inn’s cantina, kind and professional and perfectly in his element. They spend a few days behind the bar together as he’s passing his knowledge to hers, keeping himself at a safe, polite distance even when he does come closer to show her how to prep fancier drinks the younger visitors oftentimes prefer. After long months of surviving in seedy underbellies of the galaxy, Kelde’s gaze is a relief: she’s never a prey to woo or a prize to win or a beautiful doll to ogle.

Still, those days are not easy. At first she’s restless, unused to quieter life. The mattress feels too soft, the room almost too cozy. It takes her time to be able to fall asleep in that bed; for a first week or so she tries but ends up dragging a pillow and a blanket upon the floor, her body and mind both used to a much less comfortable surface. When she wakes up, sleepy eyes taking in her private homely room, it’s with a sinking feeling of waiting for this luxury to shatter, fall apart only to find herself in a seedy cramped place in some dark underbelly of a yet another planet or in a damp and dusty abandoned building, her mind playing cruel tricks on her in dreams.

In between her shifts at the bar and daily workouts and time she spends on practicing her slicing or reading up on the news there’s still much more free time on her hands than she can remember ever since she’s been a child. She investigates every corner of Veinala because she needs to be armed with knowledge, maps out its dangers and government installations and trooper patrols, outlines every potential escape route, but the city feels more than that. It’s full of history, of beauty, its spirit unbroken even by the Empire.

Yet, she thinks grimly because she can’t help it, but it doesn’t take anything away from the way it makes her feel.

Having more time also means that she adapts to this new life after all. She climbs back into bed, a blaster under her pillow and a dagger beside it, and for a little while she sleeps peacefully for the first time in years. She may sleep longer than ever, but the unnatural quietness of this life dredges up every ghost and demon and fear from her mind. In her nightmares she remembers things she’d thought forgotten, things she’d rather never revisit.

Turns out that a torn, restless heart doesn’t take particularly well to peace even if it longs for it.

Her relationship with Kelde shifts as well. His friendliness gently turns into interest, but those eyes still stay soft, respectful. She catches him looking at her sometimes from the cantina’s tiny corner table where he’s oftentimes busy with university’s homework, and each and every time he startles, averts her gaze in honest shyness, and doesn’t muster up courage to look again for hours. It takes him a solid month to ask her out for a walk and maybe a date if she’d be up for it; her first instinct is to reject and so she does, but even if that stings he doesn’t let those emotions cloud his judgement.

But the thing is — he’s only two years older and incredibly attractive. It creeps on her out of nowhere one of the days and the notion sticks in her mind, a temptation of a kind she’s never felt before. Maybe it’s the contrast of his Human mother’s unruly red hair and his Echani father’s silvery skin that does a trick, maybe it’s the way he holds himself, mostly quiet and gentle and kind and not a threat at all, maybe it’s just her body chemistry that’s acting up, but there’s something about him that makes her want, imagine the touch of another person on her skin.

He’s respectful in defeat and for days to come that doesn’t change his friendliness at all. Unbeknownst to him that’s the exact catalyst of things changing between them.

A week later, deep into the night when her shift is over, the nocturnal inn crowd has wandered back
to their homes or rooms, and Kelde had fallen asleep over his homework, she quietly sits down beside him, nudges him awake, and steals her first ever kiss from him. It feels novel and terrifying, but exciting and gratifying in ways she’s never knew before. It feels right despite hesitation and clumsiness, despite thick ice on her heartstrings that refuses to melt completely, that is vigilant in its loud warnings waging war at the back of her mind.

She hears that choir of voices. She decides to ignore it if only for a while, if only to see what will happen, if only to learn a language of touch and kiss and sex.

The other night on her day-off her hands are quick and hungry as she’s busy undoing the buttons of his shirt. She throws the garment away, tracking its trajectory to see where it will land just so neither of them would step upon it when they make it to the bed at last, and pushes Kelde against the wall of his room, smiling with a thrill drumming in her veins when he’s a little startled. She rests a hand against his side, fingertips exploring his silvery skin, soft and warm and perfectly scar-less, a body that’s been honed with the art of combat from very young age but has never known the wear and tear of real war.

It feels damning to let the words fly off her lips, but she’s been lied to more than enough to know the value of being honest. “I don’t want a relationship. Might never even want one,” she tells him, not risking meeting his eyes, her gaze fixed upon a dip between his collarbones. “But I do want to try this. Now you decide.”

A distant echo of his suddenly speeding up heartbeat whispers across her fingertips. He holds a breath for too long, releases it in a rush, maybe startled, maybe hesitant, or maybe disappointed. But he replies with, “Whatever you’re comfortable with,” and, breathy as it is, it does feel honest too. More than that, it feels safe.

They’re both naked, his hands gentle on her knees and his lips soft and hot against her inner thigh when Kelde lifts his head and asks, “Are you sure?”

She’s both nervous and wound up, and while a part of her would give a fortune for him to just get on with it and at last find out how different would it be to feel his mouth on her clit instead of her own fingertips, she’s grateful for a pause, for that precious feeling of being in control even if this is the most vulnerable she’s ever been.

She props herself up on both elbows, licks her lips, and nods. “Yes.”

That trust is worth it.

It’s not the only night they spend together in Kelde’s bed, entangled and learning each other, but while every one of them is great, that ice in her heart doesn’t melt away. It’s stuck there, heavy and cold, and she never once thinks of shedding every layer of her armor, never once thinks of staying to sleep in Kelde’s arms, of indulging in idle moments of peace. She’s a stranger in a beautiful land, a thief of peaceful days that never truly feel like home.

It’s in those days she fully understands stories about wanderers who never settle down and instead reach for the stars, for adventures. The galaxy is not devoid of peace and miracles. But sometimes you encounter them, admire them, and yet never feel a true longing to stay. Sometimes something in your soul wants something else even when it doesn’t realize what exactly it desires.

When the Empire tightens its fist around Veinala it hurts a little to walk away and leave it all behind. She’s sure it should hurt way more, would truly pain a person who could fall in love with this city and its people, but it is what it is.
Walking away feels right too.

Maybe that’s just the way she’s wired.

Wobani is a place where time stops. She’d felt time dragging slowly sometimes, how could she not when her life was all about the same story in different decorations, but nothing prepares her for absolute, suffocating inevitability of Wobani’s near-identical days of captivity.

Wobani is grey days and pitch-black nights with stars and sky draped by a thick layer of pollution. Wobani is dampness that doesn’t feel quite right in her lungs and coldness that burns in the marrow of her bones. Wobani is hard, body-breaking labor and the weight of chains on her body and the near-constant sting of scrapes on her wrists she can only tend to with a laughably thin antiseptic bandage the camp’s wards give out every night to ensure their prisoners die from serving the Empire and not from banal infections.

She tries to escape three times. First ends with a concussion, second with a pair of broken ribs and a terribly rich blossom of bruises all over her body, third lands her in a detention block where she spends a very long night screaming herself hoarse, pride and dignity forgotten after a great fight she puts to no avail as prime Imperial torture drugs burn through her veins, every nerve cell in her body alight with agonizing pain.

It’s after that third failed attempt, floating in and out of consciousness as if a puppet lost in a stormy ocean, it dawns on her that she really might die on Wobani, carrying Liana’s name.

When someone attacks her transport, her first thought is of hope, an unlikely chance for escaping. Her second, though, is rooted in old fears. She can’t think of anyone but Saw’s Partisans risking everything to infiltrate an Imperial labor camp to get the daughter of Galen Erso out and execute their revenge.

She may be a little nuts, but when she’s lying in mud, body aching after hitting the ground, her ears still ringing from the impact, she fixates on the way the Imperial security droid had spoken and can only think: mad respect to whoever managed to capture and reprogram you and you’re a terribly odd bag of bolts, insurgent smartass.

All in all, a strange beginning to go in tow with a very strange friendship.

*Operation Fracture* is a mess, but it’s a mess she remembers in excruciating detail. It acquaints her with the vilest of darknesses and shows her the brightest of hopes. It takes away the last of her family and gives her a new one, a family of choice that stands by her side no matter what. It shatters her armor, carves her open, and then stitches those fractured sharp pieces together into the very best version of herself.

Her old life is in the past.

She’s a thief and a slicer, a warrior and a survivor.

She’s the daughter of Galen and Lyra, the daughter of the Lion of Onderon.

She’s a rebel.

She’s Stardust.

She’s the catalyst of the Death Star’s death, pun thoroughly intended.
She’s Jyn Erso.

And there won’t be any turning back.

In her dream she standing at the shore of Lah’mu, an invisible ghost watching from afar the slow walk of her parents upon their beach, their hands linked, sharing a quiet, distant conversation under the fading moonlight. She looks up at the sky and sees the ashes and stardust of the Death Star up there, the way its doom withers away forever as it touches the atmosphere.

“I did it, papa,” she whispers, hoping that somehow, someway he’ll know that his sacrifice didn’t go in vain, that a good man learned to be a liar so grand he had helped to save the galaxy.

A ghost of a touch is a loving caress of cold fingertips against the slope of her cheekbone. She opens her eyes in the medbay aboard of the Home One, finds herself meeting Cassian’s eyes for the very first time ever since they’ve collapsed upon the beach on Scarif.

Frankly, he doesn’t look all that well. Exhausted and battered, too-pale and clearly in pain, and barely out of the death’s grasp, he’s still beautiful because he came back, because he’s alive.

She doesn’t quite know what she wants to say, what she can say even though she’d spend days in his room at this point, mulling over what could happen when he wakes up in hundreds of scenarios, but now, faced with reality, she only stares in his tired, sharp eyes, not risking a single movement, afraid that this just might be an unnecessarily cruel, unfair continuation of a dream, that she’ll wake up to yet another day of agonizing waiting or to the news of losing yet another person who means something precious to her.

Time passes, she’s not sure how long, not sure if she even cares how long, but at last Cassian says, “Sorry,” voice hoarse from disuse, and jerks his hand away as much as he can in his state. “I just needed to know you’re real.”

Bravery is a thing worth of being mirrored back. She turns her head a little, settles more comfortably with her temple resting on Cassian’s knee and making it easier on her neck to keep him in sight (a greedy, possessive part of her heart longs to never ever let him out of her sight and she has no idea how to process that particular thought now), and chases his hand until she covers it with hers. “I am,” she says simply and then, after a brief moment of hesitation adds, “Welcome home.”

Soon enough she learns that her heart can accept belonging.

It’s in the precious feeling of safety when she seeks Cassian’s warmth and presence and falls asleep in his bed for the first time. It’s in the way talking to him feels as comfortable as sharing space and silence with him. It’s the way she doesn’t feel an overwhelming need to run away when he soothes her after her nightmares and in the way it feels right to offer her own help to him back in kind. It’s in the way yearning for touch with him doesn’t feel like it’s making her impossibly vulnerable and in the way it makes her feel at peace. It’s in the way they both take their time to figure out what they want, in the way they fall into friendship, and in the way it slowly builds from there into a real intimate relationship. It’s in the way both her body and mind sing in perfect unison for the very first time she kisses him and then beyond, every step of the way when they’re together.

Belonging is long conversations and tricky sparring sessions with Chirrut. Belonging is helping Baze modify a rich variety of guns for the rebellion’s wildest tastes and peculiar quirks of different limb anatomies. Belonging is fierce sabacc games with Bodhi and the happiness bubbling in her chest
with pride and joy at spotting him in a dance with Nera and Wedge at one of the rebellion’s scrappy evening parties the pilots had organized after a particularly successful raid when at last, after his peculiarly unfortunate situation of hopelessly falling head over heels with two people at once, he apparently dared to take a risk and figured it out. Belonging is her endless bickering with Kay and every fun competition they so frequently get into. Belonging is a chance to fight for what she believes in and not being alone with it.

She is home indeed.

The visions fade, and the first thing Jyn feels acutely is the tickle of tears slanting down her cheekbone, followed by the loss of warmth as the ainweard leans back. Those tears are wrought from grace, joy and sorrow in them rhyming, a quintessence of what it means to be alive, to be both blessed and burdened by the gift of feeling.

It dawns on her out of nowhere — her mother, deeply spiritual as she was about the Force, would’ve loved to meet a creature capable of such miracles — steals a quiet sob seemingly from her very heart, and she reflexively rests her hand against her kyber, unsure whether she needs the thought to blossom or to fade away. The ainweard seems to catch up on her distress with whatever senses, natural or mystical, and gently bumps his head against her waist, rubbing its side in a very cat-like gesture of comfort before moving away and jumping off the stone past her.

Jyn sniffs once, as gracefully and stealthily as it’s even possible for a sound so childish and vulnerable, wipes the tears away by the heel of her hand, and turns around. Whatever happens next, she has the feeling they all need to tread very lightly.

Sure enough, the ainweard heads for Cassian, sitting down a respectful few steps away from the spy, but definitely roping him into the same gazing, challenging game as he did with her. Cassian’s own expression is serious and guarded, the impression of complete and utter focus expertly masking the fact that his cluelessness of this decidedly weird situation unnerves him to no end. He looks away from the animal and into her eyes for a moment, concern breaking through that perfect mask when he undoubtedly sees the tell-tale signs of shed tears.

“Anyone cares to elaborate what’s happening?” he inquires in a low, admirably measured voice, his body language betraying subtle signs of tightly coiled tension.

It’s not an easy task, putting into words an experience so otherworldly, but Jyn tries. “I think he might want to show you something.” She steps closer to Cassian, stops a polite meter or so away from the ainweard. “And—” she pauses, mulling over the most important and most precarious part of this entire predicament, “he probably wants to know you.”

That particular choice of words lands like another blow at Cassian’s spy mask, a shadow of recoil tearing through it. She wonders if he’s thinking of IT-O torture droids and every technique the Empire uses on its prisoners or of Leia’s description of her questioning at Vader’s hands, if he’s remembering countless stories about Jedi interrogations what would’ve undoubtedly circulate on a Separatist world besieged by the Republic. She wonders what will happen when he beyond the shadow of a doubt will refuse subjecting himself to the ainweard’s judgement.

It catches her off-guard when he demands, “Define knowing me.”

“I have—” Jyn draws her eyebrows, smacks her lips together as she’s searching for a good-enough expression. “I’ve felt and seen my life when he touched me.” But that’s not enough, that’s not everything, and he has to know she’s fine, there was nothing that could’ve compromised her, them, the Alliance. “It didn’t feel like an intrusion or a demand for my thoughts, my knowledge. I just lived
through both glimpses and perfectly-detailed memories that… that made me who I am, I think.”

She sees the moment when the last layer of his mask crumbles, shattering beyond repair, fear ripping through his eyes like a storm. He draws in an incredibly shaky breath and looks away as if her admission is a lash of a whip.

Force be a witness, she never thought it possible, could never imagine him willingly letting someone see him like that (to be fair, she’s not sure she would’ve either had she’d known the way the cat’s cognizing), but he closes his eyes, lowers himself to the ground on one knee, and waits.

Startled, Jyn glances down at the ainweard. Without sparing a look in her direction he makes a tiny motion with his chin, pointing to Cassian. She hurries to reach him, skirts around both their rucksacks resting on the ground, kneels beside him, her side resting against his back, hands bracing his shoulders. He’s tense under her touch, measuring every single breath like he’d be trying to if he’d got caught and waited for interrogation to start.

The ainweard is still rooted in place. Jyn squints at the animal in confusion again, strokes one of her palms down to Cassian’s elbow in a soothing manner. “I don’t think he’s demanding it anymore.”

“It’s okay,” admits Cassian under his breath, and then, even quieter, more for himself than for anyone else, says, “I’d like to know who I am.”

The ainweard approaches him only after those words. Settling down on his belly next to Cassian, he leans his muzzle against the spy’s palm.

There’s nothing else Jyn can do but to be there for Cassian and to observe.

The apparent contrast between feeling together with the ainweard and the real world around them is surreal and staggering. Ethereal as the experience was, to her it felt undeniably real and right, it seemed to hold weight and laws and life, events, emotions in their every dimension.

At first reservation in Cassian’s features gives way to gentle wonder. The worst of tension in his body dispels as he even relaxes in Jyn’s arms, and if she has to guess their new friend extends a courtesy of revealing his own story first.

Thirty seconds or so later she sees the exact moment when the nature of their connection shifts, when the ainweard takes a glimpse into the spy’s own life. Cassian’s expression gets absolutely wrecked, disarmed by whatever he’s going through, his composure falling apart as his breathing grows erratic. Another ten and beads of tears well up in the corner of his eye, rushing down his skin as if in a hurry, ravenous for a chance to be free. She tightens the grip of her hands around his biceps instinctively and waits.

It doesn’t last long. Whichever parts of his history the ainweard helped him re-live, it’s over in less than two minutes, this entire ordeal taking less than three. It must have been the same for her, being tangled in two separate flows of time so drastically different from each other. Cassian’s gasp is the same barely audible sound he’s waking up with from time to time when bad dreams plague him, and he jerks away from the ainweard, leaning back against Jyn’s body.

He’s shivering, shaken by the experience. She sneaks one of her arms underneath his, winds it tight around his midsection, and buries her nose in his hair, lips gentle as she kisses the back of his head. “Are you okay?”

It takes him a few heavy breaths to come down from the worst of it and lay his hand upon her wrist. “Yeah,” Cassian murmurs at last, voice a little chocked up. “It’s—”
Jyn trails her mouth higher, to the crown of his head. “A lot.”

“More like a lot to infinity and beyond,” he asserts with a touch of petulance, scoffing.

They sit like that for a little while longer, just enough for Cassian to catch his breath. Slowly, careful not to hurt Jyn with a rash motion, he lifts his head, gazing above the tree crowns. Naora’s twin moonlight is still strong, but a new day is slowly chasing the darkness away, experimenting with colors soft and wild against the sky — its favorite painting canvass.

They really ought to get going.

“Where’s—” starts asking Cassian and she doesn’t have to roam through his mind to know he’s worried about the wolf. He suspiciously shuts up midway, though, twitching just a little in her arms as if startled.

Jyn leans forward, cranes her neck to see that the ainweard bumped his nose against Cassian’s hand again. A moment later the animal leans away and rises up.

“So?” she asks, a tad impatient, and echoes his own question, now completed, “Where’s he?”

“No idea. But I think that feeling means safe,” Cassian admits.

Despite everything that happened, Jyn’s not sure what the ainweard’s next action is going to be. He’s like a wayward ocean of fears and reservations, tides of his trust rising and falling, and he might’ve already taken the most sincere step forward by letting them in on his sacred secret. She half-expects him to walk away now and send them upon yet another absurd chase around this forest once they’ve rested.

But no, while he had turned away from them, he doesn’t rush to hide and even whips his tail to emphasize the direction he’s facing, a clear offering for them to follow.

At this point she probably knows exactly how Baze’s undying devotion to Chirrut feels: eternal fondness with an endless hint of annoyance in it, and there’s no extricating from either of their spells.

What choice does she have but to follow?

Chapter End Notes

Koodie was Jyn's tooka doll, referenced in Rogue One: The Ultimate Visual Guide. Stormie was another one of her toys, a stormtrooper figurine a Death Trooper is holding up on a famous photo from the movie's promotional materials.

There's a number of scenes/moments in this chapter that are inspired by the book Rebel Rising. While it's not perfect and I found myself disagreeing with many things in it, it's also full of intriguing content that in my mind just needed a different spin on it. The scenes are, namely:

- Jyn's flashback with Saw on Wrea;
- The massacre on Inusagi;
- A brief mention of Idryssa.
I believe Wedge Antilles needs no introductions, but Nera might need one. She's been briefly mentioned in the first story of the series already, but just in case: she's been introduced in From A Certain Point Of View book as a chief technician in charge of starfighter maintenance on Yavin 4. I found her one of the most compelling characters from that series of novellas and happily took a chance to sneak her into my personal canon of this series.
wild ocean of fates

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sizing up Asei-la Taleni from a cliff, Jyn has to admit that it’s a sight to behold on sunrise. A giant valley of rock pillars stretched ashore and sheltered by a fjord-like cliff bay, it’s a home to a smallish chain of sharp-tipped mountains and thousands of spires framing them, high and keen-edged like an army of giant swords forever reaching out for sun and moons. The sea is quiet, tiny waves rippling across the reflection of the sky in interplay of soft shades of pink and blue and lapping at the columns, their steel-grey surface tinged by an apricot-toned promise of a rising sun.

Asei-la Taleni is considered to be a desolate place. No caves have been marked upon its territory, either official or on the ranger’s map. The mountains’ odd structure and composition makes them unscalable. Neither the Empire nor Naorie people ever made this site a tourist spot. The spires rise from both the shore and the sea, smaller at the bay’s sides and gradually surging almost as high as the mountains themselves. Spanning the bay’s entire length — formidable six miles — the pillars continue far into the sea and past the mountains, with no end to them in immediate sight. From afar the shore looks alluring, with its natural contrast of sun-colored sand and the spires’ perfect, reflective grey, but there’s no fooling the truth: a traveler would be gravely vulnerable there to the weather’s whims, namely storms, rising tides, and local monsoons.

Jyn looks aside, takes note of mild impression of skepticism in Cassian’s features as he’s undoubtedly assessing the terrain from a strategic point of view. “I hope meteorologists aren’t lying about a sunny morning with no rain,” she points out a tad darkly, and then switches to her best matter-of-fact tone, “cause otherwise they’ll be haunted by a very vengeful rebel ghost.”

“Make it two ghosts,” shoots back Cassian.

The ainweard rises up from his resting place by the cliff’s edge and trots forward, absolutely unruffled by potential danger. He leads Jyn and Cassian through the trees covering the cliff line for another mile and then shows them a challenging but more or less safe way down the cliff and to the shore, the fractured rifts running down the rock mass so big they provide great cover for the rebel party. Up close the pathways in the valley form a narrow shadowy maze, with barely any light spilling from out of the columns before sunrise, the quiet rustle of temperate waves an all-encompassing mysterious echo woven into the whoosh of the wind.

The path they walk twists and turns, littered with rich variety of messy crossroads, unpredictable save for its general direction away from the cliff, but the ainweard moves swiftly, navigating the maze like an expert. Jyn concentrates on memorizing every turn they take, looks out for any tiny difference between the spires, for slight varieties in their shapes to mark them upon the mental map of the journey she’s taking. The sand beneath her feet shifts into rock mass, smoothed out by rains and storms, and soon after her holomap indicates that they’ve left the shore part of the bay behind, moving solely in between the pillars rising from the sea, slowly but surely climbing higher.

The journey seems to lead them to an absolute dead end. There’s a clear line between the closest mountain and the spires surrounding it, a rift plunging all the way down to the sea that can only be crossed upon a giant boulder stuck rather precariously in between the mountain’s sharply rising summit and solid rock mass next to it. While the mountain’s surface seems to be eroded and fractured up above, down here it’s almost perfectly smooth, reflective grey of its surface glistening under first rays of morning sunlight. Standing at the very edge of the path, Jyn blinks wearily when she finishes
her search for any potential hidden door around here — this game’s getting a little old now that she’s bone-deep exhausted and her survival depends on whether or not the weather’s going to be kind — and gears herself for a somewhat snippy remark.

The ainweard beats her to it. Sitting down patiently by her side, he abruptly decides to jump down and rush forward upon the boulder bridge until—

—until he disappears through the solid mountain surface in a blink of an eye.

Jyn’s been ready for a surprise, surprise was the only thing that would make any ounce of sense here. However, she has to note that her decision to think that she can’t possibly be shocked by Naora more after her soul-spanning acquaintance with the ainweard has been a grave miscalculation on her part.

“The hell?” gracelessly mutters Cassian beside her, his voice a perfect embodiment of a fatal error short-circuiting a brain.

She’s not in a mood for teasing.

What the hell indeed.

When the ainweard shows up again, ten seconds or so later, the sight is both extremely unnerving and so absurd it’s almost funny: his body-less head sticks out of the mountain and regards them with a hint of mischievous smugness on his muzzle. His quiet growl is an obvious invitation to stop staring and get moving, and he disappears within the mountain again.

“I want to investigate,” declares Jyn after her initial shock wears off.

Cassian does not argue and lets her take the lead on this one. “All yours.”

I’m home, is her very first thought in response, because she knows firsthand how much it means to be in control when you’re facing something you don’t understand, because Cassian’s trust in her takes precedence. All right, practicality first and foremost, she decides next, sits down upon the rift’s edge, and gingerly shifts her weight to her feet as she straightens up to stand upon the boulder. It may look unreliable all it wants, but it feels no less stable beneath her feet than any other rock she walked upon today. Still, she moves forward with caution, mindful of the boulder’s somewhat slippery texture, and reaches the mountain at last.

It’s time for some brainstorming. Most cloaking devices in the known galaxy are high-maintenance, expensive technologies, demanding great amounts of energy for them to operate which can only be provided by a power plant. There’s nothing of a kind in the vicinity officially, even if it was hidden the Empire would’ve found it sooner or later, not to mention that there’s no record of such tech either being invented or ever used on Naora even after the planet’s discovery and subsequent opening of it to the rest of the galaxy. Besides, the cloak didn’t seem to harm the ainweard nor got distorted in any way when he breached it, and this rules out most of the known technology from the puzzle.

Bracing herself with a deep breath before putting the cloak to test, Jyn extends her free hand forward and through the mountain. Every logical or scientific explanation she can come up with for this phenomena crumbles. Whatever this is, warping the reality and tricking her eyesight like the greatest master of illusion, it’s definitely not a force field either: there’s no tell-tale tickling of energy particles or gentle impression of their heat enveloping her skin. No, there’s not a thing out of ordinary whatsoever about her motion, only natural feeling of a hand moving through thin air and the same caress of morning wind whispering across her fingertips that’s been her companion all throughout the journey through the bay.
“This shouldn’t be possible,” she remarks with skeptic astonishment as she moves her hand back, flexes her fingers and regards them with puzzled wonder. The boulder is wide enough for two people to stand upon without the risk of plummeting down the rift to their deaths if they’re not fooling around, so she glances back at Cassian, offering him a small, reassuring smile. “Come down here.”

He stops right next to her, seeking out her hand instinctively and blindly until he wraps his fingers around it, and lifts his other hand, stopping when it hovers next to the mountain. With the expression of a scientist’s concentration Cassian reduces the remaining distance ever so slowly, measured in his experiment until at last it looks like his palm is touching the smooth grey rock. A slight motion forward and his eyes widen at the unexplainably mundane sensation, his mouth parting as half of his hand disappears from view completely.

“I’m starting to think that Naora is allergic to most impossibilities,” he concludes, awe and respect woven through the words.

Jyn chuckles, the feeling of it warm and nurturing in her chest. “Come think of it, it’s not a bad motto for a nation.”

The corners of Cassian’s lips curve into a soft smile. Jyn squeezes his hand back, shifts hers just enough to comfortably intertwine their fingers. They step through the mountain together and into unknown one more time, eager to crack yet another of Naora’s secrets.

The cloak conceals a cave, not too narrow and not too big, a seemingly natural creation with walls adorned by chaotic fracture patterns and multi-layered rock formations. What is a little strange, however, is that Jyn’s still-shining holomap is not the only source of light inside. Two oddly straight fissures run in parallel at the either side of the cave, littered by light-grey crystals. Messy in their shapes, the crystals emit weak light, only their sheer number making it significant enough to semi-diffuse the darkness of the cave.

Jyn narrows her eyes, picking up on a pattern: the light is stronger in the crystals close to her and Cassian, and it gradually fades until the crystals’ shapes are barely outlined by their own luminosity in the tunnel’s shadows.

Mama would’ve loved to see this, understand this, rises up a thought wrenched out of her heart so beautifully and so painfully at the same time, but she doesn’t linger on it, not when it catches her off-guard to feel Cassian’s fingers twitch against hers. The sensation is weak and swift, some kind of an instinctual reaction, but it’s completely unexpected. Jyn glances at him in confusion, follows him without second thought as he comes close to the wall and brushes his fingertips against one of the crystals.

The crystal’s light intensifies instantly after coming in contact with Cassian’s skin. One of the gentlest curses Jyn knows in Festian flies off his lips in merely more than a whisper and his hand goes a little limp in hers. The experience clearly means something to him, enough to leave him shaken and off-balanced. His agitation tugs unpleasantly, worryingly at Jyn’s own heart; clueless, she shifts her body, leaning against Cassian’s shoulder a tad compulsively, and holds on to his hand a little tighter. “What is it?” she asks, trying to keep her voice light.

He picks up the crystal with great care as if afraid it might crumble at the slightest of touches, turns his palm around, and brings it closer for inspection. Without wasting a moment Jyn lifts her holomap-equipped wrist up, closer to the crystal to provide better light, and Cassian squeezes her hand back in wordless gratitude.
Here, up close, the crystal doesn’t look like much. Its surface is rough and scratched and barely transparent, its heart muddied. For a few seconds its shine intensifies some more until it steadies, spilling soft greyish light into the shadows around them.

“These are called nalani crystals,” explains Cassian quietly, a sort of pained reverence adding depth to the words, making them special. In soft shadows and waxy radiance he suddenly looks a little too gaunt, haunted by the mineral’s sight. “To my knowledge there’s a sole place in the galaxy where they can be found,” he pries the words out of his soul at last, voice lowering around the admission, “and that place is Fest.”

A part of her wants to laugh, loudly and derisively, because this is madness and it feels somewhat appropriate to snap; another wants to scoff at the absurdity of it all, at the endless string of surprises coming their way. But first of all Jyn thinks of her family. Chirrut, for instance, would get a kick out of this mission. Baze would follow along, regarding the world in that long-suffering way of his and quietly roll his eyes at every twist of fate. Bodhi is great at weaving words in writing form and he could undoubtedly spill all this nonsense into a grand story one day. Kay would enjoy calculating and loudly declaring the odds for every weird thing happening along the way.

Jyn, though, in the end finds herself a little lost and adrift in these weird tides of fate. She’s not even sure she wants to deduce or guess what it all means, given how most of her assumptions are subverted in decidedly weird, seemingly impossible ways. She’ll need to dissect it all later, would be restless with the need to comprehend it all, but now she’s overwhelmed, yearning for something simple. It soothes her a little when Cassian puts the crystal back and they continue their journey through the cave behind the ainweard, simply walking forward in empty, tense silence to whatever else this day can throw at them.

The tunnel is uneven, cutting through the mountain in curves both gentle and sharp, but it seems to mimic the mountain’s overall shape in its direction and has no offshoots or intersection, its downward slope is easy on the legs, and it’s illuminated every step of the way by nalani crystals. Twenty minutes or so later the tunnel’s grey light gives way to a white-yellow glow, and the cave brings Jyn and Cassian straight to the mountain’s heart.

The ainweard waits by the cave’s edge, holds back when Jyn steps upon a kind of a threshold crowning the tunnel. The view opening from here is yet again so much more than she could’ve possibly imagined. The mountain conceals a whole vibrant world in its heart with its own elaborate ecosystem. The cavern is rooted deep beyond sea level, so spacious at its lower points that morning sunlight spilling from a not so small vent at its peak (a vent that’s not been present on any of the mountain’s drone images) illuminates only a small part of it. The sun’s glow is warm, thin rays gradually spreading as they shine down the cavern, but there’s an odd colder light, coming from somewhere down below and making yellow rays stand out even more against its paleness. A raging waterfall spills from the fissures in the rock mass at the east and morphs into two channels of a cascading river running down the cavern’s layers, milky water twisting in between dozens of rock segments rising up from the mountain’s base until it disappears from sight in a small forest of tall trees with spindly branches and scarlet leaves taking up a spacious, fragmented hill at the west side of the cavern. Cerulean blue and pale vermilion grass-like plants span a wild meadow that conquered smaller hills close to the cavern’s floor around the vent. The riverbanks and rocks along the water are tinted with blue, the color especially vibrant and shining under the sun’s loving caress. Simple suspension wooden bridges run through the cavern like lifelines, connecting its different segments or offering a passage over wild sections of the river.

Cassian releases an audible breath of astonishment by Jyn’s side. For a long, long moment Jyn gawks at the otherworldly sight in awe, greedily taking it in. The threshold offers a great vantage point, but it’s obvious that the terrain is so elaborate that most of its secrets might still be concealed
from view. Her mind keeps drifting to that strange anomaly of pale light intermingling with sunrays, and it’s a puzzle she yearns to solve the most. Whatever that technology is, it’s absolutely superior to everything she knows about cloaking. She glances down the slab of rock she’s standing upon, tracks the way it circles downward gradually until it reaches one of the mountain’s inner rocky hills close to the waterfall. Its top is covered by moss, its structure is split by dozens of big fractures shaped like grey veins, and all of them seem to be heading down in different directions.

Cassian leans forward just a little to see if he can spot the light’s source from their position. “Let’s check it out.”

An old memory dawns on Jyn, pulled from a sacred, half-forgotten dreams and aspirations. A quiet sigh that follows is brimming with fond irony. “You know, I wanted to become an archaeologist once, when I was a kid,” she confesses, failing to keep a reflexive smile at bay. “Kriff, it really is strange when something comes back to bite you in the arse so considerately and gently.”

“Then another glorious adventure awaits, m’lady,” shoots back Cassian in an exact tone (both polite and flat, a classic Quinn Eiratas from season one) and accent that Jyn holds dear from her childhood’s escapist hours spent with a classic live-action holo-show from the times of original Old Republic.

The way her jaw drops slightly is graceless, but she can’t bring herself to care too much. She’s too busy making peace with the fact that both her first fictional and most important real-life crushes most certainly share the type.

Kriff it all into a rancor’s pit, Quinn may have had messy, long blonde hair, but he most certainly rocked his scruff and was a proud owner of intense, amber-colored eyes. She’s not sure she’ll ever be able to make peace with the fact.

And if his perfect character impersonation wasn’t proof enough, mischief sparkling in Cassian’s dark eyes when he gently nudges Jyn’s chin up with his index finger proves beyond the shadow of a doubt that everything has clicked for him just as quickly and unexpectedly as it did for her and that now he knows.

(Well, she can’t quite decide yet whether she’s more thrilled or alarmed by the prospect. It feels like a very sweet, promising tie.)

Jyn rolls her eyes a little, the smile creeping back onto her lips, and goes for her best impersonation of long-suffering innocence. No need to reveal all of her cards and give up too much leverage. “You too, huh?”

This time she leads the way down the mountain, the ainweard lazily following behind and, she can swear, regarding them both with somewhat smug curiosity.

“I think someone recommended the show to my mom. I remember we used to sit down in our living room every evening with food, and just watch Inala’s and Quinn’s adventures,” reveals Cassian, a tiny tinge of painful sadness mutinous in his otherwise affectionate tone. “We got to watch a season and a half together. And then I—well, there really wasn’t time or space for holo-shows in my life for a while.” Fingers restless, he tugs at the perfectly adjusted rucksack strap on his shoulder, but does a great job of keeping his expression a tad sentimental without a hint of heartbreak. “Later, well into my teenage years, one night I couldn’t sleep, but I was also way out of mental capacity to do some slicing or read something useful, and I stumbled onto the show by accident while browsing through HoloNet. Took me a year to burn through all seven seasons.”

A suspicious breath laugh escapes Cassian and Jyn glances at him, arching an intrigued eyebrow.
“I’ve also made a mistake once of mentioning that it’s been somewhat therapeutic for me during my mandatory psych eval meeting and ended up receiving a must-watch list of classical films and shows recommended by Draven,” he explains with a tiny shake of his head and after a brief moment of contemplation admits, “I’ll give it to him, he does have an almost infuriatingly great taste in war and spy movies. They were neither cheesy nor laughably tragic and heroic.”

“How about we do a re-watch sometime? I haven’t seen it since—” Since Lah’mu, she almost says before it hits her that it was one of the last things she’d ever watched with her parents, that it’s poetically absurd, all too-reminiscent of Cassian’s own life story. “For a long time,” is what Jyn settles on at last.

Even if Cassian figured this parallel out he doesn’t make a big deal out of it. “I’d love to,” he says softly, letting the backs of his fingertips brush against hers in a fleeting caress before hooking his thumb into the loop of his belt. “Huh, I still can’t decide which of the characters I’d choose to be if I ever got a chance to walk in their shoes.”

She shoots a slightly disbelieving, fond glare in his direction. “You don’t say.”

“Well, Quinn is great. A war hero, has an analytical mind. Come think of it, the way the show had treated his PTSD was realistic and respectful. It would totally make sense that he’d clash with Inala at first and struggle with the way his duty shifted from being a soldier in the thick of warfare to a bodyguard of a slightly whimsical duchess of his age. Plus—” he pauses, carefully mulling over his next words. “Well, as a kid I used to think that his metal arm was the coolest thing ever. Now his choice to keep it that way and refuse skin grafts simply means that he’d accepted what he’d lost and that the loss doesn’t make him any less of a human that he’s been before. Inala, on the other hand, is something else entirely. Rich and privileged but never bragging or looking down on other people; three doctorate degrees in history, linguistics, and archaeology; her knowledge of martial arts; the way she could shift from an impeccably-mannered aristocrat and completely verbally kriff up anyone who disrespected her or anyone around her; her attitude towards her expeditions and other cultures, the way she craved to study and understand and always left the artifacts to the people they’ve belonged to. She’s a rather inspiring role model. Seriously, I could never get why my older cousin laughed when I chose Inala as a character when we re-enacted their adventures.”

“Remember that episode when Baron What’s-His-Stupid-Name kidnapped Inala and blackmailed Quinn into stealing ancient indigenous gold the natives managed to smuggle off-planet before his family had taken over?”

“Season one finale in all its glory,” he echoes back. “She pulls off a brilliant con to escape the Baron’s clutches, Quinn puts all the lessons learned from Inala throughout the season as he on his own manages to steal the gold from a private collection and together with the duchess returns it to the natives’ enclave off-planet where it belongs.”

“Good times.” Jyn smiles, fragments of the last episode’s scenes dredging up from her memories. “I kind of used to count every time she managed to pull Quinn out of his broodiness and made him smile all throughout season one,” she admits to a cheesy game she loved, lightly nagging the inside of her cheek with her teeth.

“Now that explains so much,” Cassian dares to point out, unashamed edge of teasing brimming in his tone.

She squints at him from the corner of her eye, takes into account a definite glint in his eyes and a lighthearted smirk on his lips, and decides that the matter requires retribution. She deliberately bumps her shoulder into his good one, causing a slight stumble in his stride. “Oh, shut it, soldier boy,” Jyn issues what could’ve been a warning if not for a chuckle coloring it with affection. For every teasing
opportunity she jumps to employ so greedily, he’s really earned this one.

Their journey continued on as they’ve talked, and the new angle of sight brings a fresh perspective, highlighting a series of sharp turns the river’s channels make before they meet in a wide braided outline at one of the cavern’s lower points, lazily flowing to the forest. One of the river’s banks around the wide channel is a gentle hill close to the mountain’s base, but the other one is a towering rock mass and a home to something that looks like an ancient temple, carved into and spanning a good quarter of the cavern’s wall.

The temple is nothing like traditional Naorie architecture (in fact, Naorie people worship art and nature and the notion of being a good person without needing a symbolic celestial being to guide them throughout life and had erected exactly zero religious buildings on the planet), its single level framed by straight lines and right angles, with the only exception to the rule being great arches of its glass-less windows. An entire labyrinthine village is cut through three massive hills leading up to the temple, rope bridges providing passage over smallish ravines fracturing the multi-layered rocky surface into different segments. The farthest hill curves along the river’s wild current and frames its channel, a long slope of chiseled stairs starting at its edge seemingly leading down to the riverbank. There’s no mistaking the way blue sand there basks in the rays of sunlight intermingling with that intense cold white light clearly originating from some place obscured by the hill’s edge from Jyn’s current line of sight.

Her raging exhaustion temporarily forgotten, she hurries down the hill and into the village as sensibly as possible, watching her every step and memorizing every part of the path she’s taking, with Cassian not lagging behind. Their feline friend takes the lead again when they reach the very first house and shows them the quickest way down the hill and to the river.

Every street and house they pass looks deserted, frozen in time with no trace of lives once led here left, with occasional stray dead leaf blown here from the forest resting upon the village’s stone pathways. The streets are devoid of both any lightning technology and torch handles, and the tradition of illumination using nalani crystals continues, with bigger minerals resting upon shelves of varying forms and sizes cut into rocks and houses as if upon pedestals.

The curve at the staircase’s halfway point reveals a circular stone shrine resting at the very edge of the water, with a triangular-shaped garden of twelve stones resting under the overhanging hill and pointing in the shrine’s direction. It seems there’s an entrance cut within the hill next to the garden, its arc too perfect to be natural, and faint grey light radiates from a line of nalani crystals visible from this angle. Each and every of stones looks smooth, big enough to sit upon comfortably during meditation exercises.

Inala Seda, Jyn’s hero no less than the princess of thieves in a distant fictional kingdom of her favorite animation show, would’ve been thrilled to encounter something so majestic and strange in place where it wasn’t supposed to exist. Jyn’s special type of believing in the Force notwithstanding, the discovery only adds up to the list of rather nonsensical coincidences and impossibilities she’d stumbled upon today and keeps her on edge.

Things surge up to a sky-high level of complexity when the moment Jyn steps upon the riverbank a faint sensation of warmth whispers across her collarbone. She takes a few steps forward, closer to the shrine, and this time the sensation is a tad more insistent. She halts, brings up a hand to rest against her crystal and—

—there, adding a new, somewhat terrifying layer to the feeling she founds comfort in, gentle warmth spreads across her skin in a distinct kyber-shaped imprint.

She decidedly loathes the sense of cold fear crystallizing in her very soul when her heart picks up its
tempo and an involuntary shiver rushes down her spine, highlighting the unnatural heat of the crystal even more. It felt easier, way more natural to encounter a mystifying force in another creature, not an irregularity in something she thought she knew by heart. Jyn unzips her sweatshirt and frantically tugs the chain of her necklace until she retrieves the kyber from under her shirt. There’s not a thing out of ordinary about its look, but it’s unmistakably warm to the touch.

Feeling Cassian’s worried eyes taking her in acutely, Jyn swiftly undoes the tiny metal clasp and grasps Cassian’s hand. She lifts it and turns, after a brief moment of hesitation makes up her mind and lowers the crystal into his palm. Taking another breath for courage, she tilts her chin up and looks him in the eyes, uncertainty raging through her as ravenous as the need to know she’s not imagining this. “Please tell me I’ve not gone batshit crazy.”

His eyes widen the moment he feels the crystal touch his skin. “You most certainly didn’t,” he reassures her and carefully wraps his fingers around the crystal, frowning uneasily as the increased area of contact intensifies the weirdness of the kyber’s heat. “Has it ever behaved this way?”

Jyn shakes her head, glancing from out of the corner of her eye at the shrine again as if it’s just driven a vibroblade in between her shoulder blades and keeps twisting it out of sadistic fun. “Not on my watch, at least.”

Cassian uncurls his fingers with clear intent to give the necklace back to her, but she stops him halfway. The crystal means the world to her, she doesn’t think she consciously remembers a day when she hasn’t seen it around mama’s neck or hasn’t worn it herself, but now this new side of it feels too overwhelming to be all alone with it. “Together, okay?” Jyn asks because now she has the luxury of having someone to share a life with, voice miraculously only a little tender, and Cassian nods.

She wraps the chain around his hand and intertwines their fingers so that the crystal is safe between their palms. It doesn’t make the situation any less weirder, but feeling Cassian’s touch along with the crystal’s warmth does somewhat soothe her nerves.

The kyber’s heat grows slowly but steadily, just as the rays of white light become more and more pronounced as they beam up from some tiny object suspended within a force field generated by a small device resting upon the shrine, but it never gets hot enough to hurt. The heat simmers, though, beats in tune with every echo of Jyn’s pulse in her palm when she and Cassian reach the shrine.

The discovery lands her momentarily speechless. The light-generating object is a beautiful kyber crystal, its form slightly different and its sharper angles smoothed out, but its coloring and internal structure almost identical to her own, save for a strange orb glowing with soft rainbow colors in its heart and another circle of pale blue light lapping at its shape from within.

Jyn looks down at her and Cassian’s joined hands reflexively, seeking out her crystal, and her heart makes a strange somersault in her chest — blue light spills in between their intertwined fingers. She almost jerks her hand away, feeling a ghost of a tremor shake through Cassian’s own when he spots the mystical luminosity as well.

Revealed at last, this time her kyber necklace shines almost like the crystal trapped in the force field, blue singing against half-transparent white color inside of it. She can only stare, bewitched and bewildered and completely at loss for any logical explanation, her pulse suddenly too loud in her ears, too wild in her veins.

*Trust the Force*, echo mama’s last words to her in her ears as if Lyra is mere inches away.

*The strongest stars have the hearts of kyber*, tells her a blind monk on Jedha’s dusty street still
A sinking feeling begins taking shape in her gut as the logical part of her consciousness slowly begins to kick in, opening up a chasm of implications ready to shatter the universe as she knows it. But then a voice breaks through white noise of scrambling thoughts in her mind, deep and soft, but a little cutting in perfection of its Coruscanti accent.

“Welcome, rebels,” the voice says, the chasm snaps closed for now, leaving a scar in its wake, and Jyn’s fight-or-flight instinct takes over.

The way the ainweard kept lounging upon one of the meditation stones, completely unperturbed by the new arrival, should’ve set Jyn on ease, but she hasn’t paid him an ounce of her attention ever since her kyber crystal started acting up. As is, hand firm around her blaster and finger ready to press the trigger, she whips around, fully expecting a female officer in grey Imperial uniform sizing up her and Cassian with a thin, snake-like smile and instead finding herself face to face with a tall, domestically-dressed Naorie woman. Her hair style is as non-Imperial as it gets, long and thick snow-white locks with bright scarlet threads woven into them organized into a quick but elaborate bun at the top of her head.

Initial cursory assessment completed, Jyn focuses her attention on hunting for weaponry. The woman’s arms are bare, her white tank top is a little loose and doesn’t fit too tight, but it certainly won’t conceal a weapon’s outline; same goes for her dark pants, their pockets clearly empty; there’s space between her pant legs and a pair of sneakers she’s wearing, revealing bare skin and absolutely no sheathe for a blade. She does wear a sidearm DC-15 blaster (notably a weapon of choice for most Imperial officer personnel on Naora) strapped to her thigh, but her arms and hands are raised and have been from the moment Jyn has seen her, clearly emphasizing her lack of intent to use the pistol.

“My apologies,” the woman says, her eyebrows crinkled a little with frustration and the corners of her mouth curled downward. Two of her arms, Jyn notes, are decorated with traditional Naorie tattoos from shoulder down to the hands, a rich carnival of colors especially vibrant on her ebony skin. “I did not mean to startle you.” Taking inventory of two blasters pointing her way, she clearly makes a conscious choice to ignore the threat and darts her lavender-colored eyes to Jyn’s kyber still glowing radiantly against Cassian’s palm, her chagrin replaced by fascination in an instant.

“Interesting,” she murmurs, genuinely startled and yet pleasantly surprised by the sight. “Is either of you a Jedi?”

“No,” mutters Jyn darkly. The Force is an entity fickle and uncaring and chaotic. If there’s anything she knows from legends or Chirrut’s stories or Luke Skywalker’s struggle of being the Alliance’s new hope is that to be the Force’s chosen soul is perhaps more of a curse than it’s a blessing. She’d never said it out loud, probably never will, but she’s happy to be just who she is, a simple warrior and not a relic protector of a dying order.

The Naorie woman averts her gaze, her lips a little tight around a sympathetic smile. “Yes, I suppose that being a rebel spy in today’s day and age paints a big enough target on one’s back without the burden of Force-sensitivity.”

It takes Jyn an inhuman effort of concentration not to tense up and reveal how the word ‘spy’ sends a chill down her spine and makes her want to recoil away from it. But the woman clearly knows the weight her declaration holds, for she tilts her chin up again and meets hers and then Cassian’s eyes, her expression apologetic. “If it’s any consolation, I make that assumption based on observations Tero had passed on,” she clarifies, angling her head a little in the ainweard’s direction.

Taking in the way the ainweard — Tero, apparently — gracefully jumps down from the stone and standing tall.
approaches the Naorie woman, his body language perhaps the most relaxed and trusting she’s ever seen. Jyn makes up her mind and slides her blaster back into the holster. “Name’s Slava,” she introduces herself and swings the backpack from her shoulder. Cassian follows suit with an acknowledging nod, lowers his blaster, and gives up the cover’s name as well. “I’m Helmar.”

The Naorie woman relaxes her arms, letting her hands fall back to their natural position by her hips, and bows her head politely as well. “Seyen.” Her mouth twitches, jaw momentarily clenching, and this time she visibly forces the smile to remain where it is despite her obvious distress. “Friends and family call me Sey. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

She looks down, her eyes glimmering with joy when the ainweard briefly rubs the side of his head against her thigh before sitting down next to her. “I’m proud of you, Tero,” Seyen tells him, intonation soft with affectionate honesty, and strokes his skull with a single fingertip only when he leans his head to her with a subtle hint of consent for the petting. “He can be a lot,” she points out knowingly. “Let me guess, caused you at least a few headaches?”

“It’s easier to handle when you understand where he’s coming from,” defends him Cassian, albeit not without side-eyeing Tero with a hint of healthy, well-deserved accusation in his eyes.

Seyen grins, shooting a very meaningful glare in Tero’s direction too. He twitches one ear and the barbed tip of his tail, otherwise completely unruffled at the accusation.

There’s a single tattoo on Seyen’s left lower arm, an ornamented band circling her wrist that certainly looks reminiscent enough of traditional Naorie marital bracelets. It’s probably undeniable proof to the contrary, but Jyn still retrieves the ranger’s diary from her backpack, unwinds the scarf, and lifts the book up, balancing it on both palms before Seyen. “Do you recognize this?”

Seyen visibly flinches, taken aback by the discovery. A sad reflection in her eyes, her lips part at first, but then press together loosely as the corners of her mouth tug up into a genuine grin. “I do.” She makes a tentative step forward, eyes checking in with Jyn and Cassian whether it’s okay, then a surer one when neither of them objects to her approach either verbally or through body language. “Yinte,” Seyen curses softly in her language, unique Naorie accent just as in place in her speech as perfect Coruscanti, “it’s so good to know that the Empire never got its dirty jahaine hands on this.”

She stops next to Jyn, traces the cover reverently with the very tips of her fingers, and bites her bottom lip with a sigh. “I’m not her,” she admits, words suffused with a shadow of primal anger at this unfair galaxy. “Declana has helped my rebel cell find shelter in another hideout, but got captured when we ambushed an Imperial convoy to steal some much-needed supplies. She’s a legend in between our rebels, helped a lot of us to keep biting back at the Empire and gathered a lot of invaluable intelligence that let us fight for as long as we managed. One day she’ll be there when we celebrate her story properly. Many of us owe it to her.”

Passing the diary to Seyen, Jyn concentrates on folding the scarf neatly. The question burns in her mouth like bitter fire though, so she lets it go free at last. “Is there anyone else from your rebel cell here?”

Seyen closes her eyes, two hands cradling Declana’s diary to her midriff, and instinctively touches the tattoo band on her wrist. “To my knowledge,” she says after she swallows a lump in her throat, voice impressively steady in contrast to their raw, devastating meaning, “I’m a sole free Naorie left on the planet. Have been for three years now.”

Seyen does not linger on it though. Allowing herself the span of time it takes to draw in a single calming breath and conquer her demons, she opens her eyes, lifts her fingers away from the tattoo, and looks at the shrine, choosing to focus on business. “It’s the kyber that creates the cloak around
this place,” she confirms Jyn’s theory. “But neither my people nor the Jedi who first discovered us eighty-two years ago ever knew there was a hiding place in Asei-la Taleni at all. I know now that it’s been a temple of an ancient Je’daii splinter group and that they left prior to us ever reaching this continent. The power behind the kyber’s protecting this place is beyond my understanding. Sorry.”

Jyn’s attention gravitates back to Cassian’s hand, towards her still-shining kyber. The mere notion of its glow unsettles her, makes her craving for answers she’s not sure she’s ready to wrap her head around, and presently the only sound choice seems to leave the matter alone, come back to it once her mind is clearer and she takes care of other pressing questions at hand. “It creates a great shelter,” she concedes. “That’s all that truly matters.”

Seyen chuckles. “Or so I keep telling myself. Anyway, there’s certain someone you might be eager to check up on.”

“The wolf’s alive?” demands Cassian breathily.

“Indeed,” Seyen affirms, relief and respect woven through her tone. “You have definitely saved his life. I can’t think you enough for your kindness and the risks you’ve taken today to stand up for the light.” Eyebrows drawing, she nibbles on her bottom lip and mulls over a thought, then slowly moves her hand to the blaster and picks it up. Quick to twist it in her fingers, she holds on to the barrel and extends her hand in a gesture of clear offering. “Come. I’ll show you to my humble shelter.”

Jyn frowns, taken aback by such adamant surrender of control. Seyen lifts one shoulder in a tiny shrug, expression naturally reserved but placated. “I doubt you’d feel at ease if I’m armed. Seems respectful to offer you comfort.”

“That’s a lot of trust given up to someone you’ve just met,” remarks Jyn.

“Tero would’ve never brought you here if you weren’t worthy of his trust. This is good enough for me.”

Betrayals by people she loved notwithstanding, Jyn does have a solid track record of trusting her intuition. Seyen seems sincere in every action and word and intention, a kindred spirit wronged by this war but remaining humane, kind. But it’s not exclusively her choice to make.

Cassian’s expression is guarded, impassive, but emotion flashes through his eyes when he meets hers, a subtle impression of warmth and caring that’s electric, that feels like the gentlest of loving touches on her skin. The corners of his mouth curve up ever so slightly into a faint, soft smile. “Keep it,” he tells Seyen, briefly making eye contact with her before gravitating back towards Jyn and making sure the entirety of his focus belongs to her when he decides, “Trust goes both ways.”

The whisper of a shiver on Jyn’s skin this time has nothing to do with fear or discomfort and everything to do with a gentle thrill of being in love and feeling it enveloping her back in kind.

She glances back at the shrine. She’s safe. There’ll be time to come back here and try to tackle its puzzle. She zips the backpack closed, swings it upon her shoulders again, and takes Cassian’s hand, the kyber’s heat settling neatly against her palm. “Blaze a trail.”

Seyen responds with another honorary bow, sets her blaster back into its holster, and sets the course towards the tunnel.

For the first part of the journey Jyn mostly focuses her attention on the kyber crystal, trusting Cassian and Seyen to show her the way. Saw would berate her for such carelessness, for giving up even a
tiny part of control and giving it to others. But, Force, it’s been a day. She’s weary and overwhelmed, every muscle in her body protesting under the toll of so many hours of walking and running, mind chugging and churning to comprehend the wild string of events happening to her and around her. She allows herself a moment of weakness and repels any traitorous whim to feel guilty about it.

Her kyber stops glowing a few minutes into the walk. Its heat gradually tones down as well, and soon it’s merely a memory. Granted, a weird and unsettling memory that refuses to let her feel at ease, but if the walk proves anything is that her kyber’s weird behavior seems to be connected to the cloak-generating crystal. If this is a valid theory and her kyber won’t start randomly glowing or heating up in any other circumstance, it’ll be wise to make peace with its newfound behavior one way or another.

She takes the crystal back from Cassian on the go and wraps the chain around her neck again, although this time she lets the kyber dangle exposed over her clothing to keep an eye on it just in case and confirm the theory.

The narrow cavern leads up the hill, first upon a natural slope and then upon long flights of stairs cut into the rock mass to make the ascent easier on the legs. Rounding a corner that by Jyn’s estimations puts them close to the middle of the hill, she spots inviting daylight at the tunnel’s end. Leading the way up front, Tero lifts his head up and seems to concentrate on something, both ears twitching. Next moment he darts forward unexpectedly, a shadowy blur leaving the tunnel in rather deadly hurry.

The sound of his mighty roar echoes through the tunnel like a peal of thunder. Jyn frowns, regarding Seyen with a puzzled look. “Anything else we need to know?” Cassian clarifies evenly.

Naorie rebel huffs under her breath, its sound as heartfelt as the image of a fond smile. “He’s not the only ainweard around here. Plus kids and teenagers are always a bit of a trouble. So don’t freak out. They’ll be afraid of you for a while, but somehow still be in the mood to fool around.”

The tunnel widens at the end and terminates in the middle of a small plaza in between four houses. Tero is sitting regally upon the slab of rock hanging over the entrance like a stoic guardian statue, the only motions he’s making a slow rise and fall of his chest and movements of his eyes taking in the plaza before them.

Cassian’s hand finds Jyn’s again. He momentarily squeezes his fingers around hers and murmurs under his breath, “Three o’clock, up above.”

She glances at the coordinates, spots a pair of pointy ears sticking above the roof. The ears slowly move forward, their owner definitely doing their best to creep closer across the hollow space cut into the rock to create a small terrace above the house and failing the stealth exercise in the funniest of ways.

Behind them Tero growls throatily, more a show of exasperation now than an attempt to command authority, and a small teenage-sized ainweard straightens up at last. The creature would definitely pout if it could, head hung low on a moping way. Its jade scales shine under the rays of sunlight, highlighting the absence of v-shaped spikes upon the skull. His lime-colored tail dangles down the house’s wall when he settles upon the slab of rock framing the terrace.

“This moody brat is Fen,” introduces him Seyen as she looks around in obvious search for someone else. When the effort doesn’t yield wanted results, she calls softly, “Resi, it’s safe. Come out. We got to get going.”
For thirty seconds or so it’s quiet on the plaza and no one moves. Apparently bored by the status quo, Tero jumps down and resolutely approaches the corner of the house at Jyn’s left, stopping next to a narrow space between the wall and the rock leading further up the hill. A few moments later a small ainweard muzzle pops up from out of the corner, curious but definitely skittish. The feline sizes up Jyn and Cassian with caution and very slowly rises up. When Resi straightens up at last on all fours and takes a tentative step forward, he manages to fit in between Tero’s ribcage and the rocky ground, which makes Jyn wonder with a pang in her heart just how tiny he’d been when the Empire turned his world upside down. Tero gently nudges him forward with his hind leg, which only prompts Resi to snuggle up to his forelegs and stay rooted in place for dear life.

“Resi was born not long before Sandeheim’s rise to power,” reveals Seyen, eyes somber as they regard the tiny ainweard. “His entire pack got hunted down and detained for the fights, he somehow managed to escape and hide. He was so young he wasn’t even taught yet how to do very basic hunting or catch fish. Others found him terrified and half-starved, took him in.” She takes a careful step forward, then another when Resi doesn’t seem to be spooked by her approach. “I don’t think he’s ever seen a Human who didn’t want to hunt him,” Seyen says with a heavy sigh. “It’ll take him some time to get used to your presence.”

Jyn takes a moment to imagine Tehl Sandeheim dashing through the forest and looking around in panic, his Imperial uniform disheveled and his eyes frantic with fear and exhaustion as the hunter gets to become prey and enjoy a bitter taste of his own twisted medicine. The image does not appease her craving for justice in the slightest.

Seyen settles on her knees next to Tero, strokes a gentle hand down Resi’s neck. “Hey, tough guy,” she murmurs quietly to the kid. “I know you’re scared, and it’s all right. But they’re no friends of the Empire, you’ve seen it. Just come home with us.”

Tero bumps his nose playfully atop of Resi’s skull and steps away, looking at Jyn and Cassian and pointing in the direction of the pathway leading to the temple. They get going. Tero takes the lead, showing the way, Fen chooses to keep his distance by navigating the higher ground. In her peripheral vision Jyn spots Seyen standing up and following them, with Resi cautiously padding beside her like a blue-grey fidgety shadow.

They reach the top of the hill, cross an admirably-stable, ancient rope bridge onto another, the river wildly cascading down the rocky slope and quieting down in the main channel. The village on this hill is chiseled into its right-hand side, with a lot of unnaturally flat space left between it and the mountain’s wall. Jyn squints up at the vent, measuring its size. She’d seen parts of this village briefly from the other hill; the houses looked different, less artistry in the way they’ve been carved and clearly more space inside of them. She’s willing to bet a moderate amount of credits that this hill has been used as Asei-la Taleni’s spaceport with its buildings serving as storage warehouses.

Halfway across the hill Tero turns his head to the village, whipping the tip of his barbed tail up in the air in a clear come-here motion.

“Heads up?” clarifies Cassian just in case.

“Yup,” affirms Seyen behind them.

Two more ainweards abandon their hiding spots. One appears stepping up from the village, a dark grape-colored female with pale azure belly and inside of her neck. Another, most likely her brother judging by his identical coloring and Jyn’s limited knowledge of ainweard biology and genetics, dashes silently high upon the rocks behind the rebel procession and jumps down onto the ground a few respectable steps away from Tero. Both of them look to be about Fen’s age, perhaps just a little older due to their slightly bigger size.
Catching up with Jyn and Cassian when they stop, following Tero’s lead, Seyen points her thumb to the male feline. “Meet Vide.” She smiles when Resi dares to follow her despite her proximity to the unknown Humans and brushes his side against her leg, settling down as far away from Jyn and Cassian as he possibly can while still seeking the familiarity and comfort of Seyen’s body, and darts her eyes to the girl. “Nake is his twin sister.”

Nake, apparently, is the bravest one of the bunch, because she’s the first from new ainweards who doesn’t hesitate to approach Jyn and Cassian. Looking both of them up with curious mint-hued eyes, she rubs her side against their legs, declares her approval with a satisfied purr, and steps away. Judging by the ways Vide’s muzzle contorts a little, the brother has definitely chickened out on a bet.

Crossing another rope bridge brings them to the hill neighboring the temple. This one is smaller and rather steep, a single street of five houses carved into the rock mass by the mountain’s edge. A view from the hill down the river’s channel is a little dizzying, but it provides a good observation angle over the forest, highlighting a narrow rock perch over the river winding through the hill until it disappears in a tunnel made up from and crowned by scarlet trees.

Reaching the last rope bridge before the temple, Jyn tilts her head back to take in the temple’s glory. It looks even more monumental up close, windows wide and high, every shape and angle chiseled with surgical care and precision. A rather narrow slab of rock juts out of the mountain beneath the temple, stretching across the ravine to an elaborate staircase framing the hill and leading up to the temple’s entrance. Jyn narrows her eyes, spotting an arch carved into the solid rock of the staircase and leading down to the river’s offshoot by the forest where it curves out of sight between the rocks.

She mentally maps that path to a drone image of Asei-la Taleni, a question half-formed on her lips when Seyen deduces it unmistakably from her thoughtful expression. “This is not the only cavern here indeed,” she confirms. “I’ll show around the entire hideout later, if that’s all right. No offence, but you guys look like you need some rest, and I got work to do.”

Rest does sound heavenly to Jyn. She glances at Cassian — of course she’d noticed the way he’d started moving a little slower while they crossed the second village, undoubtedly working hard to conceal discomfort in his back from long hours of walking around with a substantial weight on his shoulders and barely any rest — and thankfully this time he decides to listen to reason, tilting his chin and indicating approval. “A fair bargain.”

When they get closer to the staircase, Cassian spots the first sign of modern technology around the cavern. A few dozen Imperial-issue solar panels are mounted on the porch, spanning five windows. Jyn follows his gaze, sizes up the panels and their location with respect to sunrays slanting down the mountain’s peak. Those are prime quality goods, would easily serve for fifty years without tangible performance degradation.

Saw had attempted to hit a convoy carrying these batteries once, setting up an ambush at the convoy’s hyperspace emergence point when it was supposed to stop by a trading post for loading some additional cargo. The Partisans had managed to separate one ship away from the convoy and disable it before it could jump to hyperspace with the others. The ship’s captain, though, had chosen to decide their own fate instead of testing Partisan mercy or the Empire’s wrath and had destroyed the ship together with a boarding party.

“Great haul,” points out Jyn respectfully.

“Yeah,” echoes Seyen, and adds, half-pride, half-sadness, “sometimes we won fair and square.”

Another ainweard waits patiently by the temple’s arched entrance, safely concealed from view.
throughout most of the approach by rocks framing the curving hill. His body is deep dark blue, the color of a sky moments before night fully takes reign, with twin ornaments colored like steel spanning his sides. He’s much closer in size to Tero than the others and also resembles the gladiator cat in temperament the most, serious and calm as he comes close to Tero and bows his head before him.

“That’s Wanei,” says Seyen. “He’s kind of Tero’s apprentice lately. The others are still too young or—” she holds a meaningful pause and purses her lips reproachfully when Fen and Vide snarl quietly from two different directions behind her, clearly restless and unhappy by the situation like any teenager willing to prove themselves and thinking they can handle anything the galaxy can throw their way, “reckless to roam and hunt alone while the Empire’s sniffing around.”

Tero rests his paw gently against Wanei’s, and the younger aminweard closes his eyes. They part a few moments later, some kind of a mental conversation clearly exchanged between the two.

Feline master and apprentice step into the temple first, with Seyen following close by. “Welcome to the last island of freedom on this land,” she announces with wounded pride and fraying gratefulness.

The temple’s old-fashioned, mighty front door is opened, its wooden surface glistening a little and clearly covered by some anti-corrosion agent that helped preserving it throughout millennia. Jyn brushes her fingertips against the notch in the rock by the entrance, a place where some kind of a shield generator panel had clearly been installed. “Is there any original technology left around here?”

“Well, not really. Unless you count a much-less advanced but surprisingly resilient plumbing system.”

Jyn can’t help it, she snorts. Cassian squints at Seyen, one eyebrow slightly arched. “Yeah, I know, there were more all-hail-the-Force-of-hygiene jokes exchanged around here than I care to admit without embarrassment,” Seyen confesses with a rueful grin. “Anyhow, our civilization has been born on the other continent. It took us a long time to discover this one. We dwelled at the other side of the planet, no way we could’ve ever spotted spaceships travelling this way. Our guests have clearly chosen not to interfere with our evolution and development, had taken away every single piece of tech. Seems noble to me. A little frustrating, but noble indeed.”

Things move at a brisk pace once everyone is inside. The temple is divided into various sections by chambers cut into the mountain. A small hallway gives way to a spacious room that looks like a study auditorium, a beautiful stone-carved desk by the window and a few rising rows of seats etched into the rock next to it. A pathway between the rock mass and the seats ends in a tunnel leading somewhere even deeper into the mountain, nalani crystals illuminating it faintly yet again. Crossing the auditorium leads into a dining hall, a kind of a stone bar counter separating twelve rectangular tables from a serving zone and another room that’s probably been used as a kitchen once. Jyn files each location as something to explore later in more detail.

The exit from the dining hall is located at the far right corner of it, beside the serving zone. From there the temple’s spacious chambers give way to a low although very long tunnel. Even when nalani crystals at its sides light up in response to body heat there’s no saying immediately how many rooms it leads to or how many small chambers once undoubtedly separated from the corridor by curtains are cut into the rock opposite of them. The closest room is opened, though, strong yellow light from it spilling into the corridor.

Seyen lingers by the entrance, waits until Jyn and Cassian come closer. “Go,” she sighs and tilts her head in the room’s direction.

The room is unmistakably Seyen’s home. A big chamber carved into the mountain, it’s an elegant
combination of nature, ancient times, and modern décor and technology. The first thing Jyn’s attention gravitates towards is a dip in the cave’s floor, framed by sapphire sand and filled by an uneven pool of milky water. Another meditation stone rests right next to it, its smooth wet-asphalt surface basking under the rays of sunlight spilling from the window. The window itself is cut through the very center of the room’s outer wall, its sill spacious enough for two creatures to rest upon without risk of plummeting down from a great height.

Jyn notices a female *ainweard* first, her bronze scales gleaming under the rays of morning sunlight pouring upon the window sill and modern lamps illuminating the room. She rests on her side, curled up next to the little wolf, only his steel-grey head and one foreleg with an IV line connected to it visible from under the quilt draped upon him. The feline a dutiful vigilant protector, watching him with undivided attention and ignoring the sudden crowd of people and *ainweards* barging into the room up until Seyen comes closer to check upon the little patient.

“Thanks, Kelona,” murmurs Seyen when the cat carefully rises up and strokes her head gently before focusing on tending the wolf.

Considerately holding back in the middle of the room with Cassian, Jyn looks at Kelona. The *ainweard* jumps down onto the floor in a regally lithe motion, bending and stretching in an elegant, trademark feline manner before straightening up in all her glory. She’s a little bigger than Tero, with elaborate silver markings decorating her bronze body, and she holds herself with calm, sure grace. The elements of the story Seyen’s been revealing along with the variety of coloring and ages of this ragtag pack of *ainweards* line up perfectly with a wise, slightly somber gaze of Kelona’s copper eyes, and suddenly the blanks in it become crystal clear to Jyn.

Her mind weaves the story masterfully: the older members of the pack might’ve entrusted a teenage yet already smart and capable Kelona the duty of protecting younger cubs and guiding them away to safety while others tried to take a stand against the Empire. Evidently she has succeeded. A lone, scared warrior burdened by a heartless mission, she has kept four kids out of slavery, found a fifth one and took him in, kept her promise to her family.

Kelona looks at Cassian, then meets Jyn’s eyes, lingering on her for a little while longer knowingly, and bows her head in a sign of respect. She gets going then, a woman on a mission, and heads straight for Tero who’d chosen to stay behind everyone at the doorstep. Jyn slowly turns in place, following Kelona’s journey, notes how still Tero holds himself, not quite possessing the courage to meet Kelona’s copper eyes. The air between the two is fraught with meaning, their connection both pure and complicated.

Watching them strikes a chord with Jyn, mirrors the everlasting sweet struggle of shifting between an irresistible pull of gravity to an internal repelling force and back. This time bravery defeats caution: Kelona leans forward, her nose brushing Tero’s, and the former gladiator all but melts as graciously as it’s even possible, his golden eyes fluttering closed and his body visibly relaxing when Kelona continues on, rubbing the side of her muzzle against his and further down his neck in a heartfelt, affectionate greeting. Jyn grins and courteously looks away, catching up with Cassian who’d come up to Seyen to check upon the wolf.

She doesn’t like the feeling crystallizing in her chest when she spots the way his shoulders are slumped in defeat or the way one of his hands is curled into fist. Jyn makes the last couple of steps in a hurry, rests her hand on Cassian’s shoulder as she looks upon the wolf, dreading the worst.

The pup’s chest is rising and falling, indicating a deep, medicine-induced sleep, so that takes her anxiety down a notch. But the sight of a bandaged stump where his wounded forepaw was supposed to be ignites a fire of fury and pain storming through her soul bitterly and sharply.
“It’s not your fault,” reassures them both Seyen, adjusting the IV drip and gently stroking the wolf’s neck with the back of her fingertips. “You did the best you possibly could for that kind of extensive damage. Maybe with a top-class surgeon and a proper medical facility and immediate help the limb could be saved, but…” She sighs, drapes the quilt back over the little guy, and sits down next to him at the very edge of the windowsill. “Sometimes there’s no choice but to work with what you have. He’ll live, he’ll adapt. In the end that the only thing that matters. Cutting losses and saving lives is always a priority, even if it’s unfair.”

There’s an undertone of calmness to Seyen’s words that blunts her frustration and disappointment. Jyn looks down at the wolf’s mangled limb reflexively even though it’s hidden under the quilt now, remembers the neat bandage dressing. Cassian puts down his rucksack to the floor and crouches next to it. Hands busy with undoing a latch and tugging at a zipper, he looks up at Seyen, regarding her thoughtfully, and seems to reach the same conclusion as Jyn did. “You sound like a medic.”

Seyen rolls her eyes a little, the expression good-natured. “Well, I was one.” She huffs the air through her nose quietly, corners of her eyes crinkling with soft joy of some memory. “Worked in my father’s veterinarian clinic for almost two years before somewhat saddening him and switching careers. I liked the job. Just…wasn’t for me, I guess, despite being good at it.”

Cassian retrieves two bacta patches and offers them to Seyen. “He’ll probably need these,” he says softly, gaze sad and intent on the wolf. “We have some more. If they’ll be needed as well — just ask.”

“These should be enough.” Closing her eyes, Seyen inclines her head down with respect to such generosity. “Keep the rest. It’s always nice to have a stash full for a particularly trying day.”

Jyn shifts in place and looks around the room, taking interest in a desk carved from stone at the opposite side of the room. A datapad lies there, connected to a portable display where a vibrant painting capturing Sel-Nair in its lost glory with stunning attention to detail serves a screen saver. Declana’s diary rests on the desk now too, evidently left there by Seyen before she went to the wolf.

“What do you do for the living now?” asks Jyn, natural curiosity intermingling with strategic need for information.

Seyen’s gaze shifts to the datapad, affection blossoming in a gentle smile on her lips. “Software development. Even the Empire didn’t manage to force small businesses to work with big corporations with fancy credentials and thorough background checks. None of my clients bothered to ask for an ID or insisted on video conference calls ever since I’ve started doing freelance work in hiding. Most people just need quality work done in reasonable time and for a fair price.”

“Your classical accent helps,” notes Cassian somewhat somberly, understanding.

Seyen scoffs, the sound a tad sarcastic, a tad annoyed. “Speak like you’re from Coruscant and suddenly your credibility’s sky-high.” She frowns mid-sentence, meets Jyn’s eyes ruefully. “No offence,” she adds.

“None taken,” Jyn shrugs. “Can’t say I don’t use it to my advantage regularly.”

Seyen exhales a breath she’s been holding and checks with a digital chrono on a chiseled rock serving as a bedside. Jyn follows her gaze, spots a silvery spear leaning against the wall within arm’s reach from the side of the bed. Naorie rebel rubs the corners of her eyes with a thumb and an index finger. “Speaking of work, my official workday is about to start. I have to run the portal through some final checks before delivering it for acceptance testing. There’s some leftover food in the kitchen if you guys are hungry, feel free to drop by the dining hall at any time. I’ll need about
five hours, maybe a little more to polish things up here, and then I’m all yours to answer whatever questions you have to the best of my ability and knowledge. Is that all right with you?”

“Sounds great,” concludes Jyn.

Sliding the lower set of hands down her thighs, Seyen nods and rises up. “Come on then. I’ll show you a place you can crash at.”

Jyn doesn’t care much for stifling a yawn creeping up on her and falls into step behind Seyen and Cassian.

Chapter End Notes

The Jedi predecessors in this story are somewhat inspired by a Je’daii order from Legends material, but I have my own headcanon and take a lot of liberties with it. More on this to come in later installments.)
feel the distance, bring us closer

Chapter Notes

Not going to lie, it feels nice to bring the slow-burn to something a little hotter at last :)

The place to crash at is right next door. They leave the backpacks at the porch, follow Seyen deeper into the temple to get supplies. Six rooms into the corridor the tunnel branches out and leads beneath their level to a set of caverns once used as storage space and two smaller offshoots carved under the rooms horizontally, perhaps designed for plumbing maintenance if the pipes secured to the tunnel’s walls are any indication.

The storage space reminds Jyn of a tomb. Things that once belonged to other Naorie rebels are laid out upon the shelves in caverns neatly and with reverence, clearly sorted out by function and ownership. Blankets and clothes, weapons and electronics, jewelry and trinkets somehow not lost in the savage chaos of the war. The rebels may be captured, but things they’ve left behind are saved, waiting for a new age of justice and reunion.

Partisans never mourned. There was rarely either luxury of time or opportunity for it, and even if there was — a lot of them either didn’t care enough to mourn or didn’t want to care because moving on was easier, because focusing on their own survival and the next mission was the only way to live a little longer, to deliver another blow to the ruthless Imperial machine corrupting their souls and honing violence in place of compassion in their hearts. They’ve snatched whatever was left behind by their fallen and moved on, until things outlived dozens of their owners, until so many had died and so many new reckless warriors had joined Saw’s cause that histories were lost. Seyen can afford collecting her friends’ memorabilia and saving it. Left alone, she has clearly chosen not to fight but hide, to endure, to outlive her enemy. It’s only a matter of circumstance. Still, an unpleasant feeling lodges itself in between Jyn’s ribs, haunting and a little choking. Her mother, her father, Saw, all of Partisan comrades she had at least a fleeting connection to, she had to leave them all behind without any kind of proper, humane closure. The only respects she paid were her survival and stealing the Death Star plans.

It’s more than she could’ve hoped for. It doesn’t feel anywhere near to be enough.

“There were eight of us when Asei-la Taleni had become our shelter,” reveals Seyen quietly, her hand lingering atop of a pile of blankets on one of the shelves. “Even though we were the last ones left, neither of us ever thought then that we could simply hide. We owed it to those we lost and those who are in bondage on Qen’val to make a difference. And we fought for longer than anyone could’ve imagined.” She closes her eyes, bows her head, fingers curving into the blanket’s fabric. “First time Kelona saved me, she found my friends and brought them here. She gave us a home and she gave us hope. Last time Kelona saved me, I was the only one left standing without chains.”

Some weight loosened off her shoulders by the confession, Seyen takes her anguished expression under control with proficiency of a skilled forced survivor and passes a rather thick pile of blankets, two pillows, and a few blankets to Jyn and Cassian. “It doesn’t get cold in here during the summer, especially in the rooms with hot springs, so just lay down all the blankets like a mattress,” she recommends, then picks a bedsheets and two thinner comforters from the shelf.
“Thank you,” says Jyn softly but with the force behind it, making sure her sharp sincerity cannot possibly land emptyly.

“Gratitude’s all mine,” tells her Seyen. “You’re the first people I’ve had a conversation with about my life in a long while. You listen and you know when to ask questions and when to hold back.” She shifts around, walks to the stairs, steps upon the very first of them, and adds quietly, “Means the world to me.”

“You hungry?” checks in Jyn considerately, helping Cassian make the bed.

“Not really. I’m mostly tired and overwhelmed, so I guess that wins over.” He straightens up, throws the pillows to the rocky headboard in that special, slightly infuriating way of his that makes them land neatly lined up to each other. “Are you?”

Tucking the grey bedsheet under the thick layer of blankets, Jyn sits down onto the bed with a heavy sigh, barely resisting the persistent desire to sag upon it fully and just completely shut down for the next few hours. She even makes a heroic effort of untying her boots and tugging them off, and thoroughly stretches out her legs and feet, feeling the weight of so much travel in every muscle. “I’ll probably wake up ready to eat half a rancor, but now the only thing I’m really hungry for is sleep.”

Cassian walks to the door and shuts it closed, flicking a modern lock, then back to the stone podium bed upon a set of small wide stairs leading up to it as if to a throne, and sits down beside Jyn. Every guard and mask dropped, he huffs a bewildered sigh through his nose, eyes tired but brimming with wonder as he looks around the room. “It’s like I’m waiting to wake up from an oddly hyper-realistic dream any second now,” he says, rolling his neck and shoulders gingerly to shake off some of the tension.

Their room is clearly less lived in, missing the homey feel of Seyen’s dwelling, but it’s no less stunning. Jyn leans back, balancing her weight upon her arms, and takes in every detail with greed. The big cave is uneven, its walls unpolished, but perfect geometric angles of a window, a door, and furniture all chiseled from rock contrast beautifully with nature’s ordered chaos. *Nalani* crystals of varying shapes and sizes light up the room from fissures cut into the rock in loosely-swirling patterns, their gentle silvery-grey glow a ghost in sunlight pouring into the room from the window. The wall around the stone desk is cut into an elaborate bookshelf, the space to the left-hand side of the bed between the door and the room’s corner looks like a perpetually-open wardrobe etched into the rock mass. There’s even a fresher in the right-hand side corner of the room, separated by an artificial wall comprised from stones clearly taken from the same rock mass. The hot spring in this room is located opposite of the bed at the far side of the cavern, its uneven shape lapping at the wall. The entrance to it dips gradually, muted blue dry sand littering the floor; the blue tinge grows more and more radiant as it inches closer to the pool and culminates at last in a beautiful sapphire tone upon meeting milky water.

“Don’t take it personally,” Jyn murmurs humorously, “but neither of us possesses vivid enough imagination to conjure up a story so absurdly poetic and places so unlikely and beautiful.”

Cassian allows himself a luxury of a very meaningful dramatic sigh and adds teasingly, “Well, there go my half-formed dreams of becoming a mysterious famous novelist one day.”

“No one said you aren’t allowed to impress me, spyboy,” she counters dryly.

Cassian chuckles and leans down to his bag, his motions stilted in a way that certainly means his spine’s acting up. Jyn sits up and shuffles back, positioning herself right behind Cassian and tucking her feet under her ass. “How bad is it?” she asks lightly, lifting up both his shirt and sweatshirt deftly
Thankfully they are at a point in their relationship where Cassian doesn’t feel the need to blatantly pretend all the time that he’s fine, so he doesn’t hold back a frustrated sigh. “About four out of ten,” he admits, digging up a tiny bottle of pills from a small pocket sewn at the top of his rucksack on the inside. He’s still avoiding any simple painkillers as if they’re nothing short of a plague, but the aftermath of his spinal injury had at least forced him to value muscle relaxants.

“And on whose scale is that?”

Somehow he manages to sound both cocky and testy when he mutters, “I solemnly swear it’s yours.”

Jyn rolls her eyes, waits until he straightens up, swallows a single pill, and swiftly screws the bottle of water closed, and flattens her palms against his skin at last, fingers gentle but inquisitive in exploring the outline of his back. She maps out cords of tension in his lower back close to surgical scars, runs her fingers up the sides of his spine, feeling the strain there, presses her thumbs into the muscles across and above his shoulder blades, finding little knots that make him shiver in discomfort at the touch or force him to even catch his breath. While certainly not ideal or in any way pleasant for him, all in all it doesn’t feel as bad as she could’ve expected from a kind of an evening and night they’ve just had.

She slides her hands down his back, presses them lightly against his sides as she leans forward a little, just enough to let him feel the warmth of her body but not push her weight against him, and touches the back of his head with her forehead. “Do you want me to help out?”

Cassian lifts his left hand and reaches back, fingertips tracing the outline of Jyn’s shoulder. “We’re both tired,” he says, his body loosening up as he leans back just a little, seeking out her warmth. “I’d rather just relax. It’s nothing a good rest won’t fix. How about we revisit this in the evening? I’m all yours if it’ll still bother me.”

Jyn makes a low, fake irritable sound in her throat. “You really know how to make a sensible bargain,” she accuses playfully and then, because her angle of sight down the slope of his jaw is just too tempting to resist, curls her fingers just a fraction, digging them a little into the soft flesh right above his hipbone, and dares to ghost her mouth in a fleeting kiss to the spot where his neck meets his jaw close to his ear before leaning away. “Okay.”

She tries not to grin too smugly when she hears a beautiful, tell-tale sound of Cassian catching his breath in response to her affection.

As much as the idea if simply flopping down onto her back and falling asleep fully clothed appeals to her, the craving to wash away hours worth of sweat off her skin wins. Raising her arms and arching her back to work out the worst kinks of stiffness and exhaustion in her muscles, Jyn shifts her weight to her knees and touches a gentle palm upon Cassian’s good shoulder as she skirts around him. “Do you want the shower first?” she asks considerately.

He hums under his breath, the sound soft and intriguing in a very familiar way that piques Jyn curiosity. “I have a counter-offer.”

Lifting herself off the bed somewhat lazily, Jyn crouches next to her backpack and looks up at Cassian through her eyelashes. “I’m listening.”

Cassian meets her eyes, then his gaze gravitates towards the pool like iron beckoned by a magnet. “That looks inviting. How about we opt for efficiency and go for a dunk together?”
A mere mental image conjures up a wave of gentle, anticipatory heat enveloping her body from within, but Jyn locks her teeth gently around the tip of her tongue, holding a playful jab about efficiency at bay. They’re tired, Cassian’s in pain, and while sharing a bath is the most intimate thing he’s offered her in weeks, it doesn’t mean it will lead to anything more. Still, he looks back at her again, a little hesitant and a little shy, and the expression reminds Jyn all too much of the way he’s been watching her in the start of their friendship, when he’d been cautiously letting himself want more but wasn’t sure she’ll ever reciprocate and so he never dared to ask. It’s the same expression he wore once, a split second before she pulled him close, mischievously thrilled beyond measure by the sensation of her wet body soaking his dry shirt, curled her fingers around his neck, and whispered *I want you* for the very first time a mere breath away from his lips. “I’m game if you’re game,” she concludes at last, voice soft and even, and the words feel no less right on her lips than breathy murmurs of desire.

Her reward is heartfelt affection in Cassian’s smile and the way it pulls at the corners of his eyes, his hesitation swiftly shifting into gentle joy. Feeling the corners of her mouth quirk up with pride, Jyn rummages through her backpack for a change of clothes, a towel, a hairbrush, and a tiny brick of soap. She flicks Cassian’s hand away when he bends, eyes him with a flat, challenging stare until he gives up and leans back, and retrieves everything he needs as well, depositing the items into his lap and grinning when he reacts with a quiet, fond chuckle. Casting a thoughtful glance at the pool’s milky water out of the corners of her eyes, Jyn digs up the medpack and snatches an adhesive waterproof patch to bring along.

They walk to the meditation stone put down next to the pool, lay their things down upon it. Unlike the stone in Seyen’s room, this one is positioned diagonally to the pool, but it too faces the window. Jyn shifts to line herself up with it, squints up. Even the best sight angle from the stone presents only a small strip of the view to the Asei-la Taleni’s heart, but it highlights the mountain’s vent and the beautiful geometry of sunrays slanting down the giant cavern. She supposes one could find solace and inspiration in a sight so radiant and mystifying.

Jyn walks to the ‘fresher and flicks two neighboring light controls on, a scattering of circular tube lamps secured to the cavern’s ceiling lighting up the right side of the room. Washing her hands thoroughly over a sink cut into the cave’s wall with her Alliance-issue fragrance-less soap, she heads back to Cassian. He’s sitting upon the meditation stone, busying himself with neatly folding his sweatshirt and laying it aside. Jyn drifts close to him, pulls at the hem of his shirt and swiftly lifts it up when he obediently raises his arms to help out. Holding the garment up for a meaningful second or two, Jyn releases it. By wicked, playful design it lands in a messy heap over his sweatshirt. She flashes an innocent smirk in response to Cassian narrowing his eyes in an exaggerated judgey way.

His blaster wound looks less tender now, paler. Jyn presses the new patch gently to Cassian’s skin, smooths out the adhesive layer to make sure the pool’s likely salty water won’t reach sore scar tissue. “Thanks,” he murmurs, catching her hand in his and pressing a quick kiss to Jyn’s knuckles before letting go.

Since efficiency is on the table and, frankly, Jyn herself is very eager to feel fresh and clean as soon as possible, she turns away from Cassian while they’re undressing fully. She rests her blaster gently against the edge of the stone closest to the pool, three blades she wore on her person go next to it. Her garments pile up into as neat of a carefree mess as it’s even possible, as far away from her clean clothing as the stone’s span allows.

The tell-tale weight of Cassian’s attention envelops her the moment she strips down to her underwear. It’d be awfully easy to just give in and turn around, see admiration and maybe even heat of pure *want* in his eyes, but she just lets him take the lead and resorts to simply basking in joy of feeling desired by someone she loves and trusts. He made it clear before — he’ll reach out when he’s
Jyn busies herself with unwinding the two braids keeping her hair out of her face (it's getting longer than I'm used to, she makes perhaps a hundredth mental note on the subject throughout this mission) and puts down the hairbands next to her clean clothing. She straightens up, reaching out for the edge of her simple sports bra when Cassian rests his hands at her waist.

“Can I?” he asks softly, his touch incredibly light.

She shifts back slightly, just enough to better feel his palms on her skin. “What happened to efficiency?” Jyn murmurs teasingly.

He huffs a humorous chuckle through his nose, ruffling the loose hairs at the top of her head. “You, as always,” he admits in a low, slightly breathy voice that always sounds way more sensual to Jyn that it has any right to be, and she has to suppress an enticing shiver running down the back of her neck and spine.

“Oh, I’ll take that,” she decides, making a valiant effort to keep her tone unaffected. “Go on.”

Cassian shifts his hands, slides them up her back until he catches the bra’s edge with his thumbs, hooks them underneath, and gently lifts the garment up. Helping him by lifting her arms, Jyn rolls her eyes when he stubbornly folds it and lays it down like a very pointed cherry on top of her worn clothes, and sighs contentedly when he ghosts his fingertips over the slightly red patterns the bra etched into her skin. The feeling of simple satisfaction from a gentle touch soon shapeshifts into a ghost of a shiver, anticipation coiling tightly and then fluttering in her stomach. For a little while Cassian draws soothing circles on her skin, moving from the middle of her back closer to the sides of her breasts and further to her chest, tracing the soft swell of them over her ribcage, but never once wanders higher to brush a fingertip at least against one taut nipple. At last he settles his hands at her waist, bends down to press a light kiss to her shoulder blade before stepping aside and, judging by the sound, opting to continue undressing on his own.

Choosing not to complain about leaving her hanging and willing away a hint of disappointment — she’s a functional adult, for Force’s sake, not a moony teenager in throes of puberty even if a touch like that wielded expertly by Cassian seems to be designed to focus her brain cells almost solely on sweet yearning for release — Jyn leaves the last of her underwear upon the stone and walks around the pool.

She does feel a little feisty, though. “As much as I enjoy your touch even without an endgame, you do realize I’ll retaliate at some point for such teasing, right?”

Quiet for a split second, Cassian retorts in a tone of lively innocence, “What makes you think that isn’t a part of my master plan?”

Smirking to herself with no small amount of relief for him living up to the challenge she’d thrown, Jyn curls her toes into soft sapphire sand close to the pool’s entrance. It gives way a little, but feels firm enough under her feet for the descent to be comfortable. “Is that so?”

“I’m afraid the truth is classified, Sergeant.”

Ah, the audacity. Payback is really going to be fun. “We’ll see about that, Captain,” concludes Jyn with a meaningful promise and takes a step forward to the water.

Some hot springs on Naora are constantly boiling and are shrouded in thick clouds of steam, some are just on the edge of feeling comfortable for Humans. When milky water laps at Jyn’s feet at last, it...
tethers on a pleasant fringe between refreshing coolness and mild warmth. Jyn is almost waist-deep into the pool when her exploratory next step doesn’t find solid ground immediately, and she dives in gently, just enough to submerge herself fully and break the surface in a span of a single breath. From there it takes her seven broad strokes to reach the edge of the pool. Resting her hand at the sharper bank in the pool’s corner, she experimentally reaches down with her feet in search of the pool’s bottom.

Turns out the hot spring isn’t deep at all: when her feet touch the rock and sand, her head is safely above the pool, its milky water lapping at the top of her shoulders in tiny waves. A slightly warmer current of the pool’s natural circulation envelops her feet and ankles, its gentle touch incredibly pleasant. “Come down here, it’s really nice,” she tells Cassian and looks around, spotting a natural indentation in the pool’s structure that’s barely visible on the surface close to the meditation stone. A layer of tiny azure-colored minerals had accumulated there, perhaps after an influx of water during storms. Jyn drifts close to it, dips her hand into the fissure, rolling the moist silt experimentally between her fingertips.

The smell of it is unfamiliar, but soft and natural, instinctively trustworthy; the feel of it reminds her of the mud locals used in one of the biggest hot springs on Lah’mu, a place she absolutely loved to enjoy whenever her family visited it. Every single hot spring on Naora opened for tourism before the Empire has took over offered free use of silt to the visitors, so Jyn picks up a little of it, divides it evenly between both hands, and rubs it gently into her arms and shoulders. Water ripples around her in slightly stronger waves, splashing quietly as Cassian walks deeper into the pool. Resolutely ignoring another string of enticing mental images and yearning for contact, she keeps her attention firmly on scrubbing her body clean while Cassian does the same for himself.

When she feels clean, she takes a few steps towards the middle of the pool and dives in, making sure her hair is properly wet before attempting to wash it. “Let me,” Cassian asks when she breaks the surface, his voice closer than she’d expected. “Please?”

“Well, since you’ve asked so nicely.” Finding purchase with her feet, Jyn straightens up. “All yours.”

He makes a satisfied humming noise in his throat and rests his palms against her back right at the edge where it meets the water. “Can you lie down?”

Catching up with the idea Cassian has in mind, Jyn pushes away from the pool’s bottom with her toes and leans back. The milky mineral water is much denser than usual, letting her float without much effort from her side. Relaxing her legs and stretching her arms away from either side of her body, she closes her eyes and waits.

Cassian’s approach to any task, she has learned with undivided appreciation and utmost respect, is to always give it his unrivaled devotion. He either doesn’t bother with an action whatsoever, or takes the lack of carelessness to a whole other level. Jyn has seen his hands do many things — rewire malfunctioning droids and stitch together broken skin, pull a trigger for a killing shot and fracture enemy bones in ruthless hand-to-hand combat — but she secretly hopes she’ll never stop being surprised by the way he’s always making sure his touch is one of the gentlest things she’s ever known in her life.

Cassian drifts close to her, rests his fingers against the point where her hairline brushes her temples, and rubs them in slow circles on her skin, soothing and meticulous. Minute by minute, his fingers slowly wander higher up her skull, not an inch of her skin left unattended, and it does take Jyn a very conscious effort to keep herself from humming happily under her breath in tune with his every movement. By the time he works his way to the nape of her neck, she’s floating aimlessly in the
pool, body so relaxed she almost feels boneless, ache and exhaustion in her muscles a distant memory. “Keep this up for a little while more and I’ll fall asleep right here,” she warns him teasingly after stifling a third yawn in as many minutes and wiggles her toes.

He chuckles, the sound brimming with joy, moving on at last to sift his fingers through her hair and straighten up the strands. “That only means I can carry you back to bed with pride.”

“How about we revisit this discussion when you can stand up without suppressing a wince? I might even be persuaded to let you do it,” Jyn suggests, not so subtly testing her ground for the future.

“Deal,” Cassian agrees without missing a beat. Once her hair is floating around her head like a radiant chestnut-colored halo, he leans forward and presses his mouth to her forehead in an affectionate kiss. “All done,” he announces and dives in next to her, reaching the edge of the pool after a few broad underwater strokes and straightening up to get out of the water.

To say that Jyn lingers to float in place only so she could rinse her hair again for good measure would be a blatant, shameless lie. She flashes a sly grin when Cassian climbs out of the pool, shakes his head on the go, undoubtedly very much aware of the way she rakes her appreciative gaze down his bare back and lower still without even needing to glance back at her, and murmurs jovially, “You have a very interesting definition of sleep.”

“Well, it’s no secret between us that I find the sight of your naked body very aesthetically pleasing,” Jyn shoots back with a wicked glint in her eyes. “Don’t be a grouch and let the girl you sleep with dreamily ogle for a little while.”

There’s something about Cassian that’s special. She can (and had, oh, she really had) spend hours with her hands exploring angles of his body sharp and gentle, her lips kissing skin both soft where war didn’t touch him and rough where it dared to hurt him. But more often than not she simply finds herself watching him almost as if he’s one of those ancient statues in museums all around the galaxy, made to admire, to celebrate what makes people beautiful. He may be imperfect, yes, but unique and familiar and dear, his body tall and lean and wiry, unmistakably strong in a way that’s attractive and never imposing or making her feel threatened. Jyn does indulge herself by enjoying the sight for a split second longer, however acquiesces when another yawn creeps up on her, uncaring of just how interested she is in Cassian’s appearance. She shifts her legs and helps herself with her arms until she’s standing in the water, then takes a few steps to the left. Finding the deepest part of the pool — a place where water is brushing the top of her chin when she stands — Jyn tilts her head back and thoroughly rinses her hair once more. Satisfied, she holds her breath and dives in, heading to the pool’s entrance. By the time she breaks the surface, Cassian had already put on a loose pair of pants he’s usually sleeping in, sat down, and is now busy with drying off his hair with his towel, stray beads of water still glistening on his bare torso.

He doesn’t halt his motions jerkily when he allows himself fully take in the sight of her naked body moving with lithe grace from the pool, but he does visibly slow down as gracefully as it’s possible. Jyn takes a moment to thoroughly squeeze the water out of her hair, a small waterfall slanting down her hands and onto the sapphire sand by her feet, enjoying this precious air of comfort and appreciation between them. When she fully turns to him at last and walks to the meditation stone, her stroll is sure and unhurried, relaxed. She’s never been particularly self-conscious about her body, but it was with Cassian when she found out that she felt just as comfortable around him completely bared as if she was armed to her teeth and ready for anything the galaxy dared to throw her way.

Even now he still looks at her like that first time on Lira San, maybe a little less stunned into speechlessness by the sight of her wet skin and gentle curves, but certainly open and disarmed, enamored by the view. He looks at her with a gentle hint of lust in his eyes, certainly not like he
owns her but like he still can’t believe he has a luxury of seeing her this way. Under his gaze she feels as if she’s the most beautiful person he’s ever seen in his life despite the scars marring her skin and roughing it up to a touch, and while she always loves her body for the way it carries her through the mess of her life or helps her be a deadly force to any enemy wanting to screw with her, the knowledge of being so appreciated, appealing and desirable to Cassian specifically feels absolutely sacred in her heart.

She meets his eyes when she stops next to the meditation stone and smiles, soft and loving, and her reward is Cassian responding back in kind, although a smile pulling at his lips is a tad bashful, making him look youthful. He lets his towel drop onto his shoulders and passes Jyn’s to her, holds it when she finishes wiping the water off her body while offering her a piece after a piece of clean clothing as she dresses up. She takes the towel back, bends her head, a wet halo of her hair falling down next to her face, and spends a few minutes meticulously drying it up as best as she can. That leaves Jyn with a tangled mess resembling an especially disheveled bird’s nest on her head, so she turns around, plants her hand against Cassian’s good shoulder, and leans forward to reach her hairbrush.

His speed of reaction is impeccable: he snatches the thing right from underneath Jyn’s fingertips and far out of her reach, stretching his arm away from her despite a grimace pulling his features tight since he’s using his injured arm for it. Jyn bends back just in time to catch a glimpse of it and scowls at him, but the expression crumbles into an involuntary smile when warmth spreads upon her skin as he rests his free palm against her hip.

She arches an eyebrow. Cassian looks back at her with the innocent intensity only he seems to be able to pull off. “How about you let me take care of this too?” he offers, mapping out the shape of her hipbone with her thumb, and flicks his gaze up at her hair.

“Today just keeps on giving,” she remarks not without satisfaction. “Knock yourself out.”

Cassian crosses his legs and scoots over, taps his palm invitingly on the space he freed at the stone’s edge. Jyn sits down with her back to him, stretches out her legs and feet, hands planted against the stone’s smooth surface, and closes her eyes.

He starts with his fingers first, smoothing out wild strands at the top of her head and carefully arranging it into natural order. Then he carefully parts her hair into two even parts and runs the hairbrush through the damp strands, soft enough not scratch the bristles against her skin or tug unpleasantly at her scalp and scrupulous enough to ensure not a stray knot remains. That content feeling of pleasurable safeness envelops Jyn again with care, makes her feel revered, her heart thumping in her chest in a faint somersault that makes it feel bigger than her bones and infinitely free.

When her hair feels utterly smooth but Cassian still keeps on with the task, Jyn breathes out a pointed, taunting huff through her nose. The sound he makes in response is suspiciously close to that low, amused chuckle of his she’s fond of so much, but he stubbornly doesn’t relent in his work for a solid minute.

Satisfied at last, he puts the hairbrush away. “Do you want it loose?” Cassian asks, gently stroking the backs of his fingertips down the inside of Jyn’s forearm.

She touches the damp, smooth edges of her hair absently. “It’ll just be a mess again when I wake up. Better braid it.”

He hums in agreement, reaching out for a hair tie and passing it into Jyn’s open palm. In contrast with the way he turned brushing her hair into a sacred ritual, it takes him an almost outrageously short amount of time to braid it expertly and scandalously neatly. Taking the hair tie back, he winds it
Jyn throws her head back, a sentimental laugh brimming in her chest. “I’m in for a lot of Quinn’s iconic quotes, aren’t I?”

“Well,” responds Cassian, a shadow of caution making his tone more subdued, “that depends on whether you like it.” He pauses — she imagines a puzzled frown creasing the bridge of his nose — then clarifies with a ghost of self-consciousness, “Sorry, was that too cheesy?”

She considers it for a moment, then stands up and spins around to face Cassian. “Actually, I don’t mind,” Jyn tells him, amused. “You make it sound less formal than Quinn. It’s more like a private joke between us.” She arches her back a little, glances at the radiant sunlight spilling down at the edge of the pool, and heads in the direction of the ‘fresher. “It works.”

Jyn walks up to him slowly, steps light as if trying to approach a skittish tooka or perhaps a convor, and gently nudges his knee with hers. “Is everything all right?”

“Yeah,” Cassian replies reflexively, his tone a little brittle with stiffness, but straightens up and spreads his knees a little wider.

He can’t say she’s been expecting an invitation like this, but she likes it. Taking a hint, Jyn takes a final step closer, her legs slotting perfectly into the space between Cassian’s. “You know,” she points out, voice so low and soft it’s close to an intimate whisper, and lifts her hand, sifting her fingertips through his damp hair, “take what you want out of it, but I’ve never seen you be good at lying when it wasn’t for your cause or to people you don’t trust. Frankly, it’s one of your most amazing qualities.”

His frown deepens a fraction and he doesn’t seem ready to meet her eyes, so Jyn traces the backs of her fingers behind the curve of his ear and lays that hand on his shoulder, her thumb gently hooked into the hollow space over his collarbone. Emboldened by the way they’ve gravitated closer to each other this morning, by the way harmony between them has been slowly rejuvenating after the blow it’d taken thanks to their Imperial covers, Jyn lifts her other hand, lightly traces the lines in the corner of Cassian’s eye with her thumb, shifts her palm so she could cup his jaw, and bends her head to press her lips to the edge where his stubble meets the sharp line of his jaw. “I don’t need you to say anything,” she murmurs against his skin, eyes fluttering closed. “But if you want — I’m here to listen.”

He stutters a little on the inhale, then heaves a tired, full-body sigh. Okay, so we’re still not quite there yet, admits Jyn with resignation even though it stings a little, leaves her longing emptily for something she can’t have yet even though she longs for it so, so much, and leans away — Or, rather, attempts to lean away, because Cassian settles his hands on the small of her back and hauls her closer with frenetic greed, seemingly disturbed by her instinct to gently run away. “No, wait,” he whispers hoarsely. The warmth of his breath so close to her still touch-starved skin ghosts down her neck like the sweetest electric shiver. “It’s all right, Jyn. It’s all right,” he murmurs the assurance as if it’s the only thing in the galaxy that matters, tilts his chin up and angles his face closer still to her mouth until their noses softly bump against each other, and flattens his palms against her back. His fingers curl a little, gripping the fabric of her shirt tightly, and then he slides his hands up and cradles them to Jyn’s ribs with desperation that flares up heat in every cell of her body. “I just
really want to kiss you.”

“Oh,” she says dubiously, a little busy with trying to process the sweet, wanton, yet somehow terribly abrupt way of her dreams and desires fitting her reality at long last, but then the last of her stupor fades away and she arches into the familiar, dear warmth of him instinctively, never wanting to let go, to lose it even temporarily as she did throughout their undercover high-stakes game. “About time,” she adds a little breathlessly, careful to make sure the words don’t land like a blow, that there’s not even a hint of accusation or regret in them.

She’s pretty sure she nails the feat, because Cassian steals her breath not even a blink of an eye after the words fly off her lips, tilting his head and softly brushing his lips against her mouth. A quiet gasp escapes Jyn, the sweet release of yearning fulfilled, and she decides she doesn’t care how undignified and vulnerable she sounds, not when she feels Cassian smile at her reaction against her lips, the sensation precious, full of content happiness. The soft scratch of his neat goatee coaxes a chuckle out of her, its echo sounding like a lullaby to her own ears. Sliding her hand up to the back of his head, she buries her fingers into the longer strands of his hair and lets him control the kiss.

It reminds her of those first kisses they’ve shared, when despite desire and hunger, despite months of shyly fumbling around with the idea and never quite having courage to find out if they both wanted the same thing, gentle exploration and search for balance felt far more alluring than fever of desire and promise of more. Gentle, undemanding, Cassian seems perfectly content with taking it slowly and indulging in relearning the shape and feel of her mouth against his, the way their bodies fit together seamlessly. Jyn feels the loss acutely when they part for breath, greedy for more of this, for simply kissing even without a sweet endgame in sight just because they can, because it feels right.

Cassian doesn’t relent for long. His hand skims higher and cups the back of her neck tenderly, warm, calloused fingers drawing mindless patterns on her oversensitive skin and sending trails of pleasant heat down her spine; his other arm curves around her back, palm splayed against her side, cradling her even tighter to him. Still cautious, much more subdued than he could be, he traces the seam of her lips with the tip of tongue, a gentle coax for her to part her lips more and give him more opportunity for exploration. Pliant, Jyn follows his lead, scratching the blunt edges of her nails against his scalp, and eagerly savors a quiet groan he doesn’t bother to hold back.

He keeps on committing her every reaction to memory all over again, alternating between deeper kisses and whisper-soft presses of his lips to hers or to the corner of her mouth until Jyn feels just a tad lightheaded. He knows her and how they fit together, of course, knows when it’s time to come up for air at last, and shifts away but not far at all, grinning against the curve of her satisfied smile in bliss with a relieved, contented sigh. Her heart hammering in her chest with thrill and delight, Jyn opens her eyes and tilts her head back to get a good look at him. The sight is pure joy for sore eyes: if his expression was unguarded before, now ghosts of his self-conscious guild and illogical fear of rejection in his eyes are wiped clean; his gaze is full of raw devotion, its intensity disarming and yet one of the safest things that have ever been directed her way. The disorder of his damp air looked cute before, but now it’s utterly perfect, sticking out in chaotic spikes she’d unconsciously styled them into while getting lost and found in their kisses.

She refuses to hold back on her desires this time, tracing her index finger beneath his bottom lip and gently catching it with her teeth, nibbling lightly at it before letting go and flashing a proud grin.

“Thank you,” Cassian says, voice low and breathy but firm at the same time on a way that accentuates the importance of these specific words to him tenfold, and strokes his thumb down the side of her breast, raising goosebumps on her skin in the wake of his touch just the way it did when he touched her bare skin some twenty minutes earlier. “For your patience and for putting up with me. I know it’s ridiculous sometimes and always not easy.”
“You asked,” Jyn reminds him simply. But a follow-up thought crystallizes in her mind, a revelation craving to be made real, blissfully devoid of fear behind its meaning. She licks her lips, giving the idea a second thought just in case, but old demons are mute in her heart. “Besides,” she adds then, words liberating and sincere because now it’s one of the most obvious things in the world to her, “I’m not here for easy. I’m here for you, laserbrain.”

She feels like home when Cassian winds both arms around her back in a gentle but needy hug and tucks his head under her chin, mouth soft and reverent against the hollow of her throat. She takes a few moments to sift her fingers through his hair again, this time methodically smoothing down the mess she’d made into some semblance of order he likes so much. A quiet minute or so later he leans away, just enough to meet gaze again. The timing is hilariously perfect — Jyn giggles as warmth and devotion in his eyes shifts into a spectacular grimace when he tries to hold back a yawn and loses the battle regardless. He pouts a little for such naughtiness when he gets his expression back under control, but reluctantly gives in to the needs of his tired body and lets her go.

Collecting her things and balancing them in the crook of her arm, Jyn grabs Cassian’s hand when he does the same and takes him to bed.

Jyn wakes up… the word for it is perhaps softly, a lazy drift from blank, rejuvenating sleep to the reality still as surreal and absurd as it is gentle, taking in the world around her one breath, one sensation at the time: the comforting warmth of Cassian’s body slotted snugly to her back, the weight of his arm on her waist, the steady rise and fall of his chest in sleep calm and deep; the clean, mineral feel of air; the sense of tranquility in quietness and safeness around her. When she opens her eyes, it’s to matte grey walls of the cave and mellow light of crystals softening the already gentle shade of the room’s bedroom section.

Her gaze lingers on the crystals, on the temperate coil of light in their hearts, and she resorts to her stealth skills in order to retrieve her kyber from under her shirt without jostling Cassian in any way. It’s as exquisitely cool to the touch of her fingertips as it was against her breastbone, its plain grey-white surface soothingly lifeless and familiar with its every little imperfection. But the memory of its mystical reaction to the ancient kyber down at the shrine catches up with her, urgent and perturbing and now ravenous to be understood with newfound fervor of pure need. The scar of implications bleeds with echoes of shattering truth, demanding attention.

Jyn checks the chrono on her wrist (almost four hours of deep, perfectly uninterrupted sleep, one of the best scores for her this month), takes a moment to assess the way her body feels (the tiredness seems to linger, but she also does feel rested enough to get back up on her feet without persistent desire to crawl back into bed), lets the kyber fall back down to her chest and, suppressing a mild pang of guilt at her restlessness, carefully starts shifting to turn around and warn Cassian that she’s going to run off for explorations.

Reacting perhaps even to an infinitesimal shift of her body, he curls his arm tighter around her midsection and snuggles even closer to her, a disgruntled, funny sound rumbling in his throat. “Is it time to wake up yet?” he mutters sleepily against the crown of her head.

Jyn sighs, running fingertips over his wrist in a light caress. “Not really, but I want to sneak out. You sleep if you need, and I mean it.”

Cassian yawns despite being half-asleep, then makes another low noise that sounds content. “Wake me up when Sey’s done with her work if I’m not up before that?”

“You got it.”
Climbing out of bed and arching her back in a thorough stretch, Jyn smiles as she watches Cassian claim the space she’s been taking up next to him. Despite his affinity to stoicism, a lone Cassian in a big comfy bed is a Cassian who prefers arranging his limbs so they take up as much space as possible, stretching out both arms before him. This time he shifts one bent leg away from the other and heavily leans onto his side as he’s getting cozy. Chuckling quietly to herself, Jyn drapes a thin comforter over him, reveling in a sight of a languid satisfied smile tugging at the corners of his lips, and rests a hand against the blaster she’d left within arm’s reach in the bed’s corner prior to falling asleep.

Despite the seeming safeness of Seyen’s hideout old habits die hard and reasonable cautiousness never harmed a soul, so she picks up the weapon, walks to the wardrobe where she’d left her things, deftly secures a holster around her thigh, slots the blaster there, and heads out of the room.
The door to Seyen’s cave is still invitingly open. Jyn puts her journey on a pause and peeks into the room. The little wolf is still deep asleep on the windowsill, and a single ainweard keeping Seyen company is Resi. Resting on the bed, he stiffens immediately upon spotting Jyn, lifts his head and rises up a little, his long tail flattened against the comforter, body taut as if he’s getting ready to bolt, his big eyes round with wary fear. Jyn folds both arms against her chest, a clear message that she’s not going to reach for her weapon, and considerately looks away, trying not to spook the small cat even more.

Seyen glances at her quickly, only to acknowledge, and goes back to her work, letting Jyn control the flow of a potential conversation. Jyn’s attention naturally gravitates towards Seyen’s weapon. The spear seems to match Seyen’s height, its pointed head elegantly thin with a prolonged sharp tip. Four circular strips of black leather envelop the shaft, marking the weapon’s handholds comfortable for Seyen, and the rest of the shaft is adorned by a patterned carving that reminds Jyn of Seyen’s marital band design.

Her natural curiosity wins the battle with the feeling of unease and she points out softly as if treading upon thin, crunching ice, “It’s a beautiful weapon.” Seyen smiles in response without looking away from the display, her expression open and delighted and very familiar to every skilled warrior in the galaxy. Jyn allows herself a liberty of asking, “Is this your folk’s traditional ceremonial weapon earned during a protector’s initiation ceremony?”

“You seem to know a lot about our culture.”

Seyen’s voice is level, not a hint of hostility or accusation in it, and Jyn twitches both shoulders in a slightly self-conscious shrug. “Learning about Sandeheim’s new order is rage-inducing and exhausting. When it’s been wearing me down I’ve been exploring what he’d chosen to disregard and destroy. Seemed like a proper rebellious thing to do.”

A breathy chuckle escapes Seyen. “And a respectful one at that.”

Jyn’s lips curve up into a half-smile. She smoothes it when her eyes inevitably drift towards the little wolf again, teeth worrying the inside of her bottom lip. “How is he?”

Seyen lifts her hands from the datapad’s digital keyboard at last and shifts, looking over her shoulder at the wolf. “Stable. I’ll keep him sedated until the evening, let him recover some more before allowing his body to take it from there.” She flattens one of her palms against her breastbone, eyes fierce and mouth tightening with discomfort, and sighs heavily, choosing to focus on something else other than her searing hatred for Imperial cruelty. “Did you rest well?” she inquires softly, meeting Jyn’s eyes.

Jyn’s good mood wins over casual neutrality. Tero is safe, the wolf is alive, a small pack of ainweards is away from Imperial grabby hands, and Seyen is a still-standing pillar of Naorie freedom. This may be a life wronged, a life unfair, but it’s much more than Jyn had ever expected to gain or find from staying in this land for longer than originally planned. “It’s nice to know the Empire’s losing some fights. It was my best sleep ever since my arrival to the planet.” She tips her head in the direction of the display. “How’s it going with your work?”

Seyen mulls over her progress. “Still need some time to polish things up.” She looks back at the datapad, drums her fingers against the tabletop next to it, her features contorting when she scoffs.
ironically. “It’s funny, you know. Before the Empire took reign I’ve lead an IT team in a bank. We
had a total of five financial institutions on the planet, and you’d think it wouldn’t be nearly as crazy
as the rush every other company was caught into around the rest of the galaxy, but no. These big,
vital businesses are always about innovation, however tiny it is, always about surprising people,
winning them over with a next cool thing. My team’s been always caught up in this perpetual cycle
of rushing, of delivering a minimum viable product and testing out an idea, beating a competitor to it.
Ideas evolved on the go, concepts were changing rapidly, flexibility was key to progress and profit.
We always had to sacrifice stability or couldn’t build a proper architecture for an application, which
in turn made it a nightmare to support.”

It is cruelly ironic indeed. Jyn shakes her head, interjecting gently when Seyen pauses for a moment,
“And now, in the most miserable time of your life, you at last have an opportunity to do your most
quality work.”

“It is kind of messed up, isn’t it?”

Jyn feels a sad smile tugging at the corner of her mouth, a sense of irony crystallize in her heart,
whisper a confession on her tongue. Her most meaningful of words, she has uncovered through trials
and errors, are always tied to who she is, what she’d went through, what she believes in. She lets
them unravel because it feels right now. “One of my friends thinks that we all are guilty of assuming
that fairness is the galaxy’s default setting. That we all enter this world seeking light and kindness but
always encounter evil in its many forms along our way. That in the end the best anyone can do
against the cruelty of chance and darkness is to stand their ground, endure, and nurture their dignity
on this journey.”

“Do you agree?”

Seyen would probably understand her story, no judgement and no criticisms; besides, lying or sugar-
coating the truth has never seemed all that appealing to Jyn. (If anything, this kind of protection
makes her furious.) She takes a moment to wrestle the meaning into a string of sentences, eyes a little
distant and fingertips doodling an absent-minded pattern against her elbow, and settles on a specific
truth at last.

“I fought this war ever since I was a child. I wanted it, I hated it. I was great and it and I made
terrible mistakes along the way, mistakes I’m ashamed of, mistakes I wish I could forget sometimes. I
lost people I loved and hated them for it. I don’t know when this stupid journey will end, but—” she
pauses, the confession feeling terribly heavy on her tongue and yet liberating to unravel. “Beggars
can’t be choosers. I found a family when I’ve least expected it. I find myself feeling happy more and
more these days despite everything, and it’s not something I’ve felt so purely and strongly ever since
I was a kid. It’s not an idealized version of happiness, sure, not in the mess of the galaxy I live in, but
it’s mine and it works. I’m the most content I’ve ever been with my life and the role I play in it. I
don’t care how lunatic it sounds, but some kind of another life for me might start only after I help
bringing this war to a definite end.”

Seyen listens intently, politely averting her saddened gaze from Jyn and picking at her nails instead,
and lets the words sink in. After a solid minute of simple, empathetic silence, she breaks it gently,
“May I ask what two rebel spies are doing on Naora after all these years?”

There’s little to no optimism in her tone, mostly resigned weariness of a warrior who knows how
sometimes ideals and cravings to do the right thing do not survive the onslaught of merciless reality.
Jyn’s knee-jerk fury rising up in response is sharp and inevitable like thousands of tiny razors
travelling with a speed of light, fueled by guilt and unfairness of this bloody fight. She forces her
fingers to uncurl and stop digging into her forearms compulsively, takes a deep breath to keep the
keenest of emotions at bay. “Some rebels believe we could liberate your planet,” Jyn admits, careful
to manage her tone into considerate neutrality this time. “Hel and I are trying to bring enough
leverage to win this upcoming dispute. I can’t promise it’ll come true. I can promise, though, that
either of us will do everything in our power for it to come true.”

Seyen laughs. Unlike her question this sound is lively, a little ironic, a little disbelieving, but
comforting and warm. She murmurs something in her native language to herself while she’s at it,
eyes wet and glistening with sarcastic mirth, then chuckles one more time when she meets Jyn’s eyes
and notices a slight arch of her eyebrow at such a strange reaction. “What I said roughly means we
are one in this endless labyrinth of whys,” she explains, leaning back and relaxing in her stone-cut
chair with a blanket thrown upon it for cushioning. “It’s what every clan philosopher teaches us
when we grow up. No matter what you’re never alone, even the darkest of nights and most violent of
storms always end in light and calmness, that sort of thing. Feels really nice to face undeniable proof
of it for a change.”

The datapad on Seyen’s desk softly chimes, some kind of an automatic check clearly completed as
pop-up window shows up over the integrated development environment opened on the display.
Seyen glances at the screen immediately eyes narrowed and lips pursed in concentration.

“I think that’s my cue to leave to you to it,” Jyn says politely and leans away from the door.

“Wait.” Jyn looks back at Seyen, takes note of how the Naorie woman seems to have lost interest in
the screen, lifting one of her hands and scratching her fingers thoughtfully against her collarbone.
“Do you mind if I give you an advice?”

Jyn considers it, lets a kind smile be free on her lips. “Unlike most people you’ve bothered to ask
whether I want it before offering. Shoot.”

Seyen’s expression turns slightly rueful. “It’s going to be a somewhat long-winded journey.”

“Good thing I’m listening, then,” counters Jyn, shifting her weight to her left leg and casually leaning
against the doorframe.

“You’re heading down the river to the kyber, right?”

“Guilty as charged,” Jyn replies nonchalantly.

Seyen huffs a quiet laugh, but joy fails to capture her eyes. If anything, her eyes are solemn,
uncomfortable tension crinkling their corners just a bit. “Have you already informed your superiors
about the kyber’s phenomenon?” she asks in a quieter tone.

Jyn shakes her head. “No.”

“It’s the intel of utmost strategic importance.”

“It is.” Jyn lifts her hand, rolls the dark metal chain of her kyber necklace between her fingertips. “So
I need to tread lightly. I don’t understand it yet, don’t know what I think about it. I’m not getting off-
planet just yet. And this is not the info I feel comfortable sharing via holo-messages anyway. So
informing my command is going to wait.”

“Okay. Fair enough,” agrees Seyen, although the burden of mystery beyond the kyber doesn’t seem
to leave her. It softens, however, her expression now more thoughtful and fond than worried sick for
implications of uncertain future. “What do you know of the concept called rehnidae?”

It takes Jyn a few seconds to recall the basis of Naorie philosophy and the most accurate wording to
describe it. “It means life itself. You believe that everything — all that is, all that was, all that would be, animate and inanimate — is made up of matter of life; that existence as a concept is a finite set of particles that come together to create living things and everything that surrounds them only to reshape when someone’s or something’s time comes to an end.”

Seyen arches both her eyebrows slightly. “Your memory is something else,” she compliments, clearly impressed, but then worries her bottom lip with her teeth and at last nods to herself. “That is all true, but there’s more to the concept. My father used to tell me that we live from a journey to journey, sometimes a person, sometimes a bird, sometimes a star, sometimes a pebble on an ocean’s shore, sometimes breath of a wind, but always some kind of a phenomenon in an eternal cycle of being organized by chance with the help of finite stories. I think what we call rehnidae is what the rest of the galaxy has come to embrace as the notion of the living Force. Anyhow, the way we see the universe means that the same eternal particles live different lives, that everything in this complex system of being is connected. Sometimes echoes of those memories and connections linger. Some of us can feel more than others, even feel the universe as it is, chaotic and pure and true in its incredible complexity.” Seyen’s reverent half-smile shifts into a longing, somber one. “It is a rare gift in my people. Some of us were mentored by a Jedi, although chosen to never come forward and join the Order. They fought against the Empire only to be executed. I personally know only one person who has it — my mother. She’s a medic, specializes in rehabilitating people after injuries; she has no Jedi powers, but she can tell whether there’s something wrong with a person’s body by touch. She can’t magically heal or anything like that, but to her any physical ailment feels like an echo of something cold and foreign at her fingertips, antithetic to vitality. And then there are ainweards. We do not know why, but every single one of them is capable of cognizing the world so deeply with a touch and exchanging the experiences with one another and even with other people. There’s no lying to them, no masks, no half-truths.” Seyen grants Jyn a few moments to process the information, then looks her in the eyes when she says, “If you want to give a try to uncovering your crystal’s strange behavior here, Tero might be your best chance. The others could help, but I think he’s special, even more attuned to the world around him than most of the ainweards.”

Mind slightly spinning, equally intrigued and hesitant and also very thankful that Chirrut is not here with his serene smugness, Jyn wonders, “Are you sure he’ll be okay with this?”

“Well, it’s not my place to decide for him,” points out Seyen, but then adds, soft and encouraging, “but you must’ve deduced by now that their special sight is the knowledge we all protect from the rest of the galaxy. You and your mate are the only foreigners apart from a very limited number of probably now-long-dead Jedi who are in on this secret. Tero seems to be a natural loner, and thanks to the Empire a big mess of trust issues. He’d seen something special in you, recognized that your share beliefs and a war with him, trusted you enough to reveal his most sacred secret, brought you to the only family he has now while his pack suffers from Imperial hands without hope for escape. He’s fond of you and he loathes all kinds of unknown things. If that’s not a perfect recipe for solving this puzzle, I don’t really know what is.”

Jyn curls her fingers around her kyber, mapping out the rough shape of metal crowning the crystal’s base. Unnerving or not and unexplained by science, this particular mystery is something she needs to tackle and decipher. She may want to have simple answers, but it’s not as if the Force or the universe itself is willing to come through with them. Tero is her best hope indeed to get some kind of closure and soothe her nerves. “A good advice,” she admits quietly.

Seyen’s datapad chimes again, the sound more insistent this time and a messenger’s window popping up in the corner of the screen. She gives it a quick look, meets Jyn’s eyes apologetically. “All right, now I really have to wrap things up here. May the crystal’s mystery be kind to you.”

The wish sounds a thousand times better than any banal plea for good fortune. Appreciating this
specific choice of words, Jyn takes a deep breath, lets go of the crystal, and leaves Seyen to her work.

It’s time to tackle her truth-seeking quest after all.

Or… it isn’t.

Jyn considers just heading straight down the river, but the dining hall is the first room on her way and her stomach growls traitorously, putting basic needs before thirst for knowledge. She walks past the bar with a grumpy sigh.

The rock structure behind the bar is carved and chiseled into a straight, smooth counter, its right corner reserved for kitchenware. All grey and minimalistic, a small number of plates and cups and very basic utensils have clearly been stolen from a shipment headed to an Imperial military base. Some snacks rest close to the counter’s edge, almost inviting to snatch some on the go: a half-full package of flatbread, a barely touched bag of cookies, a plastic reservoir with various nuts and dried fruits.

Jyn files away supply logistics as yet another clarification point with Seyen for today.

A room carved into the rock behind the counter turns out to be a kitchen indeed, with a frying pan and a few different cooking pots put next to a compact cooking panel, a kettle, and a very basic cafemaker. More kitchenware is cluttered inside of an open crate with an Imperial logo stamped upon it like an ugly brand. The corner of the cooking zone is occupied by three small, portable fridges. Electric wires are arranged neatly along the counter’s rectangular seam, running down its side, then away from the kitchen and straight to a junction box in the dining hall.

Snooping around the fridge closest to Jyn yields her a strict, rectangular container with food. She sizes up the white mass inside of it a tad critically, but the smell is appetizing with just a hint of garlic in it. Washing her hands in the kitchen’s stone sink, Jyn wipes them with one of the folded towels Seyen had left upon the blanket covering another Imperial crate, and dips her index finger into the container. The meal turns out to be a salad made of shredded cheese (both traditional and processed, judging by the taste and structure), eggs, and a liberal amount of slightly spicy mayo. Grinning with delight at its gentle taste, Jyn licks her finger clean, fetches the flatbread from the bar, coats one piece of it with the salad and organizes it into a neat wrap. Thoroughly enjoying the snack, she puts the container back into the fridge and gets going.

She spots Resi’s muzzle peeking from behind one of the counters, clearly doing his still-clumsy best to snoop on her. The little cat rushes away the moment he’s busted. He doesn’t go far though, only puts some more distance between him and Jyn, sizing her up skittishly while hiding most of his body behind the other side of the counter. He’s moving with innocence, like it’s a game, but the urgency and speed of it betrays something sinister and sad — a childhood marred with cruelty, curiosity maimed with fear. Jyn forces herself not to grip her wrap too hard in anger, focuses on the undeniable progress Resi is making by risking to be alone with her, and curves her lips into a soft, encouraging half-smile he can see.

In the auditorium she chooses a quick detour as well, heading to the far edge of the room to map out the temple and soothe her sense of urgency for knowledge of her surroundings. The tunnel leads to a small chamber with a reception counter in the corner and a clearly man-made series of elongated multi-leveled caverns connected by narrow curving staircases, once undoubtedly serving as a rather impressively big library.

“A sanctuary of ancient scholars, huh?” mutters Jyn to herself, longing emptily for a chance to see
this place in all its glory and teeming with gentle life, and leaves the library behind.

She takes the familiar way down the river through the tunnel. Wrapped around Jyn’s hand the moment she stepped foot into the village and dangling beneath her wrist, the kyber behaves precisely like it did during her first approach to the shrine, slowly heating up until it emanates gentle warmth and shines, a blue tempest contained by the mineral, illuminating the tunnel and putting the glow of *nalani* crystals to shame.

The tides of time have shifted the sun upon Naora’s sky, veiling the shrine with soft shade. Jyn finds Tero and Kelona resting as they occupy the sunny part of the beach, Tero lying on his side, muzzle propped upon one paw and Kelona stretched out next to him, using his neck as a pillow for her head with her paw draped around his side in an almost humanoid-like proprietary way. Neither of them is asleep though, eyes alert and watching Jyn step out of the tunnel as if they’ve been waiting for her for hours.

She could ask Tero now and it would probably be the quickest way to deal with the anomaly and get at least some clarity, but an independent, scientific part of Jyn’s heart chooses to assess the situation on her own first. She nudges the kyber up to her palm with her pinkie, wraps her fingers around it, walks to the meditation stone closest to the shrine, settles down upon it cross-legged, and looks at the illusion-generating kyber.

The sight itself is mesmerizing; every tiny flaw in the crystal making it unique and beautiful, the strict geometry of angles of cold white rays reaching out from it to the sky, the trembling simmer of energy particles holding the kyber in place. But the meaning behind its phenomena holds devastating potential for a shatterpoint, for a change of magnitude that can rip the narrative of life as it is known apart. The scar of implication bleeds with renewed fervor until it tears, a chasm of potential futures unfolding in Jyn’s mind like a storm unhinged.

A warrior to the marrow of her bones and a fervent protector of hope and light, first she imagines a victory: scientific minds dissecting the mystery of the kyber’s illusion, learning to harvest it, tuning it so that allies can see through the cloaks and work together while leaving the enemies completely blind to any attack; a vast canvass of deep space, pitch black with a wild tapestry of stars and aquarelle beauty of gas clouds, concealing two squadrons of battered rebel fighters and a single Mon Cala cruiser, and then Imperial false peace unmade by a colorful storm of plasma bolts undoing a Star Destroyer and a swarm of terror-stricken TIE-fighters shooting at unseen ghosts; Pathfinder Spec Ops units surrounding Kjelm Sigma Outpost, invisible harbingers of freedom taking over every lookout tower and defense post; herself, a wraith enveloped by a perfect, ever-shifting illusion of mundane reality, treading a battlefield in a deadly dance, nothing but a blade in her hands as she cuts down the enemy’s once deadly infantry; a battle unfolding across every horizon of Coruscant’s cityscape, Star Destroyers above the orbit and TIE’s in atmosphere alike panicking like moths in green particles of ionized flames. There’s no thrill in this dream, just cold, brutal efficiency to win the war while losing as little rebel lives as possible and a hope for fighting to end at last.

But life is never that easy and sometimes living creatures are the worst. A dream disfigured, fear arrives like a punch to the stomach so powerful it steals Jyn’s breath, reverberates across her very soul, its echo an ice-cold, abominable tempest.

Some things she remembers: the lifeless hollows of kyber caves on Illum captured in a holo by an Imperial defector after destruction of Alderaan; the scars on Jedha’s buildings where kybers were carved out and stolen, a terrible ornament of emptiness decorating the Temple of the Kyber. Some things are fusions of memories and reality that might have been true: papa looking the youngest she consciously remembers him, studying a kyber crystal in a cave with eyes full of hope and excitement, and mama by his side, soft smile on her lips, a dream of a better future for billions of people alight in
her heart; the embers of papa’s dreams making the stardust in his eyes look lifeless and haunted, his hope perverted beyond recognition as the shroud of darkness he’d helped create spreads across the galaxy like an invisible thick blanket and chokes aspirations for freedom and resistance. Some things are blood-chilling fears of the darkness that may come to pass: the remaining deposits of kybers plundered until there are no more, until they become the most valuable currency and source of power in the galaxy; the sky and space and life as it’s seen raining down havoc on rebel hopes until the last spark of the resistance withers away; the idea of an unseen army bending the galaxy to its will long after the Empire is ashes and dust and terrible history; criminals and bounty hunters and people with darkness festering in their hearts creeping like phantoms throughout days and nights alike, stealing and killing and whisking away undetected to leave order and justice in shambles; a mere notion of people — imperfect and greedy — given access to godlike power.

Jyn’s hands are curled into fists so tight that both edges of her nails and the kyber are digging painfully into her skin, but she pays it no attention. Fear and pain rooted deep in her soul dredge up again just like they did when she listened to papa’s confession, uncaring for tremors of Jedha falling apart. It gets harder and harder to breathe, her heart hammering a violent staccato of bruises into the walls of her ribcage, but the sensations of her body are inconsequential to the hurricane of a future she’s dreading. Once the galaxy has a perfect cloaking device on its hands, superweapons capable of melting a planet’s core or shattering its surface or vaporizing a world’s water supplies would be nothing more but useless, nonsensical resource-devouring relics. Why bother with something so complicated when history could be shaped almost effortlessly and elegantly into an era of primal fear?

When another thought hits, it’s crippling because it’s intimate and heartless and disastrously vicious. It wrenches a choked up sob out of Jyn’s chest, makes her uncurl her fingers only to plant her palms against the meditation stone and lean forward to bury her head against her wrists, the salt of sudden tears burning on her lips as she’s struggling to take a proper breath under the barrage of emotions and implications.

Perhaps the Death Star would’ve happened anyway sooner or later. Perhaps where there is opportunity someone will always make it come true. But nothing with ever change the fact that Galen Erso helped turning kyber crystals into a weapon of mass-destruction and became a catalyst for their plunging. Nothing with ever change the fact that his daughter is facing a dilemma where a choice made with aspiration to cast light upon the galaxy and banish away evil festering in it might instead bring the galaxy as she knows it down to its knees and into an age of chaos unseen before.

Her panicky train of thought comes to a temporary grinding halt when her mind latches on to a sensation more real than fear: a worried, but somehow rhythmic contraction of twin hearts, a series of deep, oxygen-rich breaths capturing a soothing wave of air and pouring it gently into her bloodstream. The sensation fades slowly and she finds herself mimicking it on instinct more and more with every passing second, pacifying the whirlwind of panic in both her body and mind. When reality fully takes over at last, first things Jyn notices are the tickling huffs of breath on her neck, the warmth of ainweard scales against her jaw, and a wet nose pressed against her skin. She opens her eyes in perfect unison with losing that warmth, lifts her head to find Kelona watching her with eyes keen and sad. Tero is a dark shadow in her peripheral vision, sitting close to her meditation stone but clearly letting Kelona handle the situation.

She scrambles to sit up, tucks her knees to her chest, the shining kyber dangling down her wrist as she frantically wipes her tear-stained eyes with the backs of her fingers. “Thanks,” Jyn mutters in a small voice to Kelona and she means it, even though she hates the raw edge in the way she sounds, the way she feels unmade and stitched together roughly, the weight of a choice all but screaming at her with blue glow of somehow bonded kyber crystals.
Kelona gives her a minute or so to regain her composure, then plants both forepaws upon the stone and leans close to Jyn, rubbing the side of her head comfortingly against Jyn’s legs. “Hey,” Jyn says to get the ainweard’s attention, lifts her hand only when Kelona looks up. “Is it all right if I touch you?”

The expression on Kelona’s muzzle can only be described as satisfied. She angles her head boldly into Jyn’s touch, doesn’t seem offended at all when Jyn dares to tentatively stroke her fingertips across the flattened spikes atop of her skull. The feline even demands petting by snuggling closer to Jyn so that her forelegs brush against Jyn’s and her head hovers over Jyn’s knees.

Scratching her fingers gently by the side of Kelona’s neck, Jyn glances at Tero. The way he holds himself seems somewhat tense, as if he also feels the weight of too many questions, uncertainties, and fears. The look in his golden eyes is soft though, filled with gratitude and relief for making a right choice, for trusting someone who shows only kindness to his folk. When Jyn lifts her other hand to catch her glowing kyber and give it another look, Tero’s attention snaps to it immediately.

Jyn twists her hand, brushing it up and down the side of Kelona’s spine. “The illusion is perfect,” she notes, tilting her head to peek at the mountain’s vent. “How did you even find this place?”

Kelona makes a low, purring sound in her throat, winning over Jyn’s focus again, pointedly looks down at the hand petting her and then up again to Jyn’s eyes.

“Yes, you can show me,” smiles Jyn, albeit a little unsteadily.

She takes a deep breath, closes her eyes, and welcomes it when Kelona’s memories sweep her away on a journey.

Here’s a thing about fear: it’s an element wearing multiple faces.

The youngest huntress of the pack in generations, she’s been readying for this fight ever since a messenger from the other pack found them and shown them the swift, crippling in its inevitability Imperial attack. Her bravery was never in question, proven time and time again without a shadow of a doubt. She honed her hunting and warrior skills with single-minded passion and determination that made herself and her family proud.

But when the fight comes, devastating and unexpected, she’s caught unawares and rendered helpless, blank static taking over her mind with sharp urgency. Maybe that’s cause it’s a challenge no one in the pack knows a solution for, maybe it’s her own stupid failure in the direst of times, but, regardless, in her peripheral vision she sees the pack’s hunters and warriors dash in predefined directions as if this fight is as foretold as ancient laws of nature while she’s absolutely useless. Mother and Father are already in the frontlines; her shame stings like a swipe a shani-fish’s razor-sharp tail and knowing they’re not here to see her failure feels like a ghost of selfish relief.

(That relief turns into a continuous stab of regret with losing her family to the enemy. Oh, she would trade a lot to see them one more time that night before her life broke into ugly shambles.)

A steel-grey paw nudges her muzzle up. She catches a quick glimpse of the Matriarch’s coral eyes before a vision unfolds in her mind, a perfect scenario she’s somehow been entrusted to follow. It’s not what they’ve agreed upon, not what she’d trained for. But the enemy is unlike anyone Home has ever faced, their tactics and numbers shatter everything Home ever knew about resisting and protecting these lands. The truth settles in her hearts, cold like rivers on the verge of turning to ice in winter season, and by the time the vision ends her panic settles down, giving way to instant clarity.
She herds the kids and guides them to run away, leaving Home behind.

(He comes back to it later once. She wishes she didn’t dare to, for some ghosts hurt more than others.)

Fear doesn’t abate. Crippling panic morphs into adrenaline-fueled anxiety. However ruinous it feels, making her overwhelmed and clumsier than ever, it also sustains her laser focus on the objective and keeps her going. It seems to affect the kids as well: quiet as shadows, they follow her every step and every instruction she passes on, without mistake, without objection, without fooling around. It’s something worth of being called a wonder. This one is as heartless as one can get.

They run for hours, stop by a nook next to a mountain river to rest for a little while. She catches some fish and Wanei helps, solemn and precise. By the time they reach the first hideout Matriarch has shown her, the lapis moon is full and reigns the night. The twins falls asleep in a small cave out of immediate sight from the outside, Wanei tries his best to share the burden of guarding with her, but too succumbs to sleep soon after. Fen, spending the last hour travelling across her back when the pain in the leg he sprained a few days ago by accident wears him down, doesn’t even wake up when she tilts her body and lets him slide down onto the cave’s floor, whimpering a quiet noise of discontent and instinctively curling up upon cool, uneven stones.

That night her fear shifts one more time and settles at last into a form that becomes her loyal, nerve-wrecking companion. It’s a deeply-rooted thing, a constant shadow in her mind, its ghosts chilling in her heart and soul, the weight of it tainting her every motion. They never stay in one place for more than a night, always move around. The Matriarch’s ultimate plan for younger cubs is brutal in its simplicity — to survive by staying on the run — and they all follow it dutifully. Days go by, and while at first they’re wrought with constant rush, by the time they turn into a week, then another, and another yet again time seems to stop. Like a moth caught in a spider-web, she feels like a forlorn prisoner of time.

The Home she used to love so deeply feels like a cage with foes as many as there are whispers of different winds in these lands. Every shadow, every tiny motion of life around her feels like a grim harbinger of failures. The number of hideouts is limited, and while they haven’t met a single skull-faced enemy yet, the stench of their bodies and armor and weapons lingers too close to their routes and too often for any kind of comfort.

When the cubs rest, she oftentimes collapses from exhaustion in their shabby hideouts too, but the burden of duty makes sure sleep eludes her. Wanei always wakes up first and takes over her lookout chores; even then she indulges in quick naps only, snapping into alertness from the tiniest of sounds or simple restlessness of her agitated soul.

She’s doing her best, but her fear is relentless, hissing simple, savage doubts at the back of her mind with every breath. What if she’s not good enough? What if she fails this little ragtag family? Where can she run to keep them all safe?

With skull-faced creatures running rampant in these lands, hunting’s becoming trickier and trickier. A stretch of days goes by where lakes and rivers with good fish are off-limits. The only food they find then is a few lizards and a single rabbit, and she leaves the rabbit to the kids. Hollow emptiness of hunger seems to churn in her belly, makes her fear sharper, outlines the shape of desperation solidifying with every passing day. One night she takes a risk to stay out for longer than planned and wander off farther than ever to find proper prey. The scent of feral, violent heirakes — their lifelong sworn enemies and bane of fauna on Naora — is faint, a ghost in the stench of skull-faced foes, and she dutifully tracks it. A talented hunter, this time she makes a rookie mistake: when she gets closer to her prey than she ever got in days, she ignores the signs of upcoming storm in the air and
perseveres out of desperation. She doesn’t turn back or searches for shelter when the storm hits either. Her senses crippled by the roar of wind, peals of thunder, and violent rustle of the wind, the pure need to prove herself, to defy the odds and bring food for the kids drives her to stubbornly keep hunting through the monsoon with as much grace as a blind newborn cub looking for its mother. It’s a miracle that she manages to track a pair of beirakes in the heart of the storm. But she catches the rusty scent of their blood and the sickening odor of burned flesh too late to turn away and escape to safety.

The weapon wielded by skull-faced bastards has a lifeless smell of strange metal to it. An unmistakable faint whiff of it sends her heartbeats into complete overdrive. A jerky sprinting motion she makes on instinct is the only thing that saves her from inevitable capture: pain unlike any kind she ever knew burns through the scales and digs deep into her oversensitive skin, but the blaster bolt nicks only the side of her hind leg and leaves her with full use of the limb.

Perhaps her ancestors, legends of the ancient times who protected their lands and Naorie people from bloodthirsty arachnid beasts and defeated them, are appalled as they watch her from the flecks of stars up above, but she made a promise. Defeated, she doesn’t charge for the enemy to make sure he never hunts another ainweard in her Home. Scared, she runs away to survive and to continue her duty. Or so she tries to convince herself it was the right choice once she makes it back to the cubs, prey-less, limping, and exhausted.

Days go by, days filled with misery and occasional hunger and a crushing, sinking feeling of hopes for something better withering away, but the kids still look at her as if she’s their savior, as if she’s worthy of their trust. Their gazes feel just like the burn in her wound that refuses to properly heal as she can’t let herself rest. At nights, when she can’t fall asleep for one reason or another, her mind keeps focusing on a ruinous refrain. She’s a fraud and the Matriarch was wrong. She can’t do this. She can’t find a way to beat the enemy and it’s only a matter of time until she’ll truly fail to elude them.

Next time the storm hits, she leaves the cave’s flimsy shelter in hopes that mayhem all around her will quieten the emotions in her soul and numb the fears of her duty if only for a little while. She’s a fool for believing she could ever escape herself. When a particularly violent chain of lightning invites deafening thunder to its riotous party, she snaps in desperation and roars a mutinous plea wrought with pure rage into the storm, her hearts louder in her ears than savage chaos of nature, a strange void of panic in her belly feeling ready to swallow her whole.

She’s not the first creature in these lands to be undone by a fight unfair and barbaric. The storm remembers. With rain lashing her scales and running down them in rivulets, it passes on the simple truth of stories. Lives and destinies of people and ainweards, of flora and fauna, of vitality itself are interwoven with a single decision everything and everyone faces in the darkest of hours again and again throughout history and time: adapt and find a way to survive or give up and let yourself be devoured by the darkness.

The stories run their course when the storm abates. Feeling her hearts quieten after the otherworldly frenzy of emotions, she makes a choice with absolute, beautiful clarity that settles down the worst of her fears. There is honor in being a warrior and a hunter and a protector. The cubs need her to play every single one of these roles. But now it’s also her time to become a scout.

The planet’s history remembers its fair share of death and destruction and desperation. But through all that misery there is always light, a thin ribbon of hope. Elusive and hard to capture as it is, it is also always bright. Like days and nights, like winters and summers, darkness and light are eternally entwined. She sets out to find them a new Home.
It’s a cruel journey. It’s lasting, laden with the weight of travelled miles in her legs, made miserable with near-constant pain of her blaster burn that takes a terribly long time to heal, burdened with every kind of fear twisting in her soul like a mad kaleidoscope, filled with sadness from noticing how delicate balance in the nature gets ruined by the conquerors, suffused with poisonous despair as days go by but a safe place is nowhere to be found.

And then, one day in their two month-long journey when she had almost stopped expecting to find the light, the area around the ancient city she has only seen in stories shared by the pack’s myth-guardians and visions shown by the pack’s scouts seems to be devoid of the stench the skull-faced bastards leave wherever they go. The kids cling to their hopes like to hot springs in times of snowfalls and frosts, still believing in kindness and miracles despite the ordeal that they’ve gone through. She keeps her own at bay as fiercely as she would hold on to a newborn cub, not letting herself be burned again when relief will inevitably turn to ashes. But she does scout the area with ravenous, undeniable need.

Veiled by a crimson ray shield as if by an inverted lake of blood, the ancient city is no shelter and certainly no Home. Ruined villages and forests around it are quiet, though, frozen in time just like in stories. A small river running down to an old fruit plantation snakes through the forest and treats them with the best meal of fish in weeks. After a day of cautious, alert rest in a wild garden above the ruins, she leaves the cubs hiding over the ground in the thick canopy of mighty trees and, with a thought of mapping out the territory in scrupulous detail, follows the fresh, salty scent of the sea to the coast.

When she looks down at Asei-la Taleni from the cliffs surrounding it at the east, she knows by heart the instinctive sense of danger the scout has passed on to her in his tale about ancient spires, the whispers of wind and echoing sensation of fears the life itself around here remembers, the faint ghosts of those who dared to wander down to the shore and into the mountains only to be swept away by rains and storms and be made one with the sea. But as she continues her journey across the cliff it’s only nature she senses, temperate, gentle sounds of peace that feels almost eerie in the world where conquerors are ruling over these lands. She only remembers, not feels the reverberations of Asei-la Taleni’s ancient soul.

And then suddenly the night’s mellow breeze carries an echo in its murmurous melody. It’s soft like a ripple of water in the wind, loving like a soothing purr of a mother, exotic like a lullaby of sounds people pull from strings of their musical instruments when they gather for a celebration. Unlike anything she has heard before, this feels like a symphony of pure light, a strange force of gravity yearning to pull her close.

Wary of old stories, she walks away from the mystery that night. The sound fades with every step she takes, but its memory remains. She tries her best to resist, but it’s to no avail; like an ember amid ash, the symphony’s memory smolders, waiting for a time to re-ignite the fire of her hope.

When she makes her way down the fractures in the cliff and into the valley the next night, she doesn’t dare to think she may have found a new Home, yet alone to imagine a calmer, safer future for her tiny pack. She just follows the echo that feels kind as light, eager to untangle its story. The sound intensifies once her paws touch the sand. It echoes in the air and seemingly in her very soul, gentle and inviting. The labyrinth of spires has her sprinting around it in circles, to dead ends, retracing the steps she once has walked in. The direction is clear, though. Nocturnal wind caresses the mountain peaks, slants down them and whooshes past the rocks pillars with its symphony of light.

Frustrated with her own stubborn rationality, she gives in to her instincts and follows the sound like a dragonfly drawn to a flame. She risks planting her feet upon the boulder bridge and walking to the
mountain, touches a paw in puzzlement to the mountain’s solid rock only to feel it sliding down through the air as it disappears from sight. Her hearts beat a frantic chord, but their song is not weaved of fear. Her trepidation is only an afterthought in the rhythm of excitement and wonder.

In the secret cave she basks in a faint sensation of warmth emanating from crystals illuminating it and decides that their soft light is lovely. In the mountain’s heart she finds a brand new world, with nature as familiar to her as it is alien but ultimately feeling very right, like it’s supposed to be this way.

She follows the mysterious melody like a wanderer tracking a guiding star, making a quick and precise way down the river. The symphony is strongest inside of the glowing crystal, its song echoing with elusive ancient history.

“They share journeys with those they find a kindred spirit in,” says a voice lost in the tides of time when she first touches the crystal with her paw, the visions of history accentuating every word and every meaning behind it. “Be worthy of its trust, child, for the Force knows there is no shortage of darkness and betrayals in this world.”

When she opens her eyes in the heart of the planet’s most incredible secret, having lived through the crystal’s story, she knows that for now this is Home.

Heart hammering in her chest thanks to the intensity and full-immersion experience, this time Jyn doesn’t gasp for air the moment the ainweard’s history gives way to her own reality. Head hung low in reflection of shame she still hasn’t made peace with, Kelona leans away from Jyn. She reaches out for her on instinct, wanting nothing else to soothe the brave young warrior, and the gesture is enough for Kelona to stop her retreat. Keeping her forepaws still against the stone, she closes her eyes and quietly purrs when Jyn’s fingers scratch her neck affectionately.

You’re incredible, Jyn thinks experimentally, wondering if simple touch would be enough for the ainweard to feel the words. Judging by the way Kelona’s eyes fly open as she bends her head back just a breath away from Jyn’s hand, it is.

Flash a gentle smile to the feline, Jyn gets moving as well. As Kelona turns her body aside and plants her forepaws against the sand, Jyn scoots over to the now-free edge of the stone and swings her feet from it. She rises up somewhat in a hurry, driven by suddenly urgent restlessness, and makes her way to the old kyber. The shrine itself is simple, an angular pillar with a smooth rectangular top, devoid of any carvings or special identifiers. The device generating the force field around the kyber seems to be mounted over a solar battery and integrated with it, a set of thin metal rods creating a cage around the crystal. The battery itself looks new; it seems that Seyen has restored the shrine in a show of respect after the old battery has died.

Keeping one hand tight around her own kyber, Jyn cautiously reaches out for the other with her fingertips. The force field pulses against her skin at its lowest setting, an odd wave of comfortably heated worry. She wiggles her fingers a little, watching ripples from her motions traverse through the field with almost childlike fascination, takes a deep breath, and touches the illusion-generating kyber at last with the very tips of her fingers.

Her world doesn’t change with this touch, doesn’t pour stories worthy of legends straight into her soul, and some of her worry comes undone. Strange as the phenomena of the crystal is, its heat feels almost mundane, an identical twin to the feeling of her kyber. She maps out the crystal’s shape with her thumb and index finger, unconsciously tracing the same journey on her necklace as well. The other kyber’s sides and slopes are smoother, imperfections in it tinier and more delicate, reflecting a gentler journey throughout history and time. The top of it, however, does have a set of palpable scratches crowning it in a circle, indicating that it has too been fitted once into some kind of a mount.
Jyn holds on to the tip of her crystal and glances down to the top of it. Its soft blue glow highlights an almost identical set of scratches close to the bell cap, hinting at a similar history once shared between the crystals. Similar scratches on her kyber have been smoothed out though, imperceptible to the touch, and they only muddy the transparency of the crystal in their wake.

In the corner of her eye she notices Tero’s approach. Stopping next to her, the gladiator ainweard cranes his neck, his gaze intent on Jyn’s kyber. Glancing at the crystal suspended in the force field, Jyn leaves it alone and takes a step back away from the shrine.

“Can you help me understand what’s going on?” she inquires softly, uncurling her fingers and revealing her kyber to Tero fully.

He inclines his head into a nod both respectful and eager, the tip of his tail drawing lines against the soft blueish sand in anticipation and worry. Jyn settles down upon the shore next to him, legs comfortably crossed, and untangles the chain of her necklace. Laying a hand on her knee closest to Tero with her palm facing up, she gently lowers the crystal into it. Tero doesn’t rush touching it, his eyes focused on the scenery past Jyn’s shoulder. His intention becomes clear when Kelona makes herself comfortable by Jyn’s other side, tucking her paws beneath her chest and resting her muzzle in Jyn’s lap. Smiling at the sensation of warmth radiating of Kelona’s body and pure relish from such trust, Jyn sets her free palm across the feline’s neck and waits.

She doesn’t have to wait for long: Tero reaches out to her kyber with his paw the moment everyone is settled, his golden eyes fluttering closed. At first nothing seems to happen and Jyn just waits, but then Tero’s entire body tenses up, recoiling from whatever he’s living through. Jyn sees a shiver tremoring through him, darts her kyber-free hand to touch him, but halts when Kelona stretches out her paw and pins Jyn’s hand down to her lap in a very obvious warning. She follows it up with a soothing bump of her nose against Jyn’s wrist and releases the pressure, making a quiet meowing noise of approval when Jyn twists her hand from under Kelona’s grip to rest it back against the feline’s neck. Tero seems to keep himself in check as well: even though his back is curved and he had leaned away a little, he doesn’t let go of the kyber. Stubborn as ever, he sees its journey through despite the stress.

It seems to get easier for him as minutes are passing by. Ever-so-slowly Tero relaxes, his tail seizing to beat a violent staccato of pure anxiety against the sand, and he even settles down onto his belly, paw pressing with a little more force against the crystal in Jyn’s palm as he blindly lays down his muzzle in her lap a few breaths away from Kelona. When he breaks the connection at last it’s a motion soft and smooth, his paw sliding down from the kyber until he tucks it underneath him on instinct to make the pose comfier for him. Golden eyes flickering open, he tilts his head enough to size up the other kyber, then twists it around to meet Jyn’s eyes.

The expression in his gaze is complicated, residual fear and discomfort giving way to contentment and perhaps even satisfaction with obtained knowledge. Jyn curls her fingers around her kyber reflexively, brings it close to her chest. The way her heart’s throbbing is almost violent, spurred on by the need to know the truth and yet frightened by the history her crystal might hold. She might relive the lowest moments of her own life. Whatever made Tero scared stiff is probably not something she’d wish even for an enemy to see, yet alone experience. But that’s how it always works for her, isn’t it? A rush into deep, dark unknown through the war is always her way, always the ultimate choice regardless of whether it’s on her terms or not.

She closes her eyes, focuses on the frenzied thump of her heart and draws in a deep breath, consciously following the workings of her lungs, the journey of air through her chest, the shifts of muscles supporting the action, on and on until the storm in her pulse abates. Sending a grateful mental note to Chirrut for challenging her to stick to learning his meditation routines, Jyn opens her
eyes, twists the necklace around her palm with a few rotating motions of one hand, makes sure the kyber rests against the back of her hand, and gently brushes a fingertip against the crown of Tero’s skull.

“I know I’m asking for a lot,” she says, twisting her hand a little to trace the pad of her finger against the edge of his ear, “but would you be willing to show me what you’ve seen?”

His whiskers twitching as he sighs, Tero bumps his head a little against Jyn’s finger and twists it back, straight against her lap, clearly seeking out Kelona’s eyes. The two ainweards exchange a long glance between them and Kelona seems to get herself ready to experience the vision. She closes her eyes the moment Tero leans forward, the sides of their muzzles touching.

A quiet, low sound he makes deep in his throat is perhaps the only warning Jyn is going to get. She flattens her hand against his neck, almost mirroring the touch she still keeps upon Kelona’s scales, and lets her eyelids drop.

The tides of time unfold.
So, full disclosure. This particular part of the story is perhaps the biggest experiment I've ever attempted to pull off in writing. What I've seen in my head as a quick series of images and thoughts I wanted to express when I started writing it grew into a massive-sized piece of fiction. What I've initially thought is going to be a single chapter has grown in size so dramatically that now it is split into three rather giant parts and I need a lot of time to edit it. It'll be posted more or less on my usual schedule due to the sheer size of these installments, maybe a bit more often, depends on how far I get along with writing the actual next chapter with my real-life schedule getting very busy until the end of the year.

To be perfectly honest, I'm not sure that this chapter is going to work for anyone else but me. The majority of this chapter is a story within the story. To me it's precious and means a lot, but I can easily see how this won't be the case for anyone else. But this is what fanfiction and experiments are for, at least for me. It's as much an exploration of your favorite characters and worlds as it is a playground for testing out new ideas.

Also, there's a ton of stuff I pull from both Legends and canon in these upcoming installments, and while some of it might seem familiar to someone steeped in the SW lore, I feel like a warning is due: I'm not being faithful to either versions of canon. I find inspiration in certain canon elements, but I'm playing with them at my own leisure and tell a story I envision with no desire to stick to every canon rule.

The grey-blue cave around her is a maze, twisting and turning like thousands of snakes underneath the ice and snow and mountains making up the planet's landscape. Despite the warm coat on her shoulders with a fluffy hood and well-insulated boots on her feet, the bite of coolness against her cheeks feels as bone-deep as long winter nights in her besieged home city. Maybe that's because the cave reminds her all too much of chaotic streets she struggled to survive on, the ruins of fallen buildings and destruction all around re-shaping an already wild city into something barely recognizable and almost unknown by the hour. Maybe that's because her body recoils from any sensation of coldness, the fear and loneliness of those war-wrought days refusing to leave her in peace years after the hardship of her childhood has turned to memories and bitter history.

You'll know it when you'll find it, child, echoes her Master’s instruction in her mind, and she pushes on through the maze of tunnels stubbornly, careful to memorize every turn she takes and compare it with the mental map of the cave she’s continuously weaving.

Searching for a single crystal in a labyrinth wrought from crystals is a challenge by itself, yet alone when she doesn’t have a slightest clue about either its location or its specific appearance. Her strategy is simple — start from the beginning and methodically scout the paths from there — and she walks the cave for hours, shivering from cold but persevering, not letting her fears take over, carefully rationing a nutrient bar and a small thermos with hot berry tea. By the time the light from her glow-stick slowly starts to dim, it doesn’t seem she’s any closer to finding her kyber than she’s been hours ago.
Bonding with a kyber doesn’t always happen on a padawan’s first trip to the cave. For some it can even take years and numerous journeys until they find the crystal resonating with them. Some never find it at all and resort to serving the Order in other ways. It is known that kybers choose warriors; to be guided by the Force to fight without weapons is just as honorable as to be its loyal soldier. There is no shame in turning her back to this search and walking away to try her luck another time.

She hasn’t survived two years of war on the streets with her twin brother to simply give up. Wrapping her hand around the glow-stick tighter, she pushes on. Another hour passes by, the bite of cold turning sharper as night shrouds the lonely planet, and even though the light of her glow-stick is now a flickering thin ribbon of radiance in the darkness, she rests her glowed hand against the cave’s wall and keeps searching. Her mental map almost complete, she weighs her options at yet another junction of tunnels, evaluates the gaps in it and paths she’d already taken, and turns right.

In the heart of the kyber cave the tunnel leads her to, she hears the crystal’s song at last. Its verses shift one into another, evoking soothing memories — the familiar lullaby made alive by mama’s voice through the web of time, the sound of her brother’s once carefree laughter, Master Ske’ria’s voice guiding her through philosophy of the Force — but its refrain stays the same, a melody of sounds fused together into her version of peace and light. It’s a whisper of tree crowns in a small garden next to a home that’s standing tall, a symphony of millions of children laughing, never knowing the burden of a heartless war, an excited thump of a beloved’s heartbeat underneath her cheek. It’s a version of the future she likes to imagine and aspire to despite its being unrealistic and somewhat even forbidden, made near-perfect by learning from mistakes already made and never allowing them to be repeated again.

She follows the song down the chamber’s precarious slope, fingertips searching for the crystal until the melody crescendoes in the darkness, settling into a quiet, echoing susurrus that seems to resonate in perfect tune with her heartbeat. Under her fingers, a crystal lights up, pale blue luminosity accentuating the internal structure of the kyber.

Imperfect as it is, it’s one of the most beautiful things she’s ever seen in her life.

Closing her eyes, she takes a deep breath and opens her mind and soul to the sweeping currents of the Force. The crystal’s heart is a focal point in this wild ocean, the connection between them pulsing with eagerness of gravity yearning to be free. Gently, she pulls at it like she would upon a string of her father’s guitar, learning to make it sing about the beauty of her homeland under his careful guidance would the war not take him from her. The kyber settles into her open palm, soft and smooth as if it belongs with her. It leaves a notch in the cave’s wall in its wake, right next to another one. When she curls her fingers around the crystal reverently, one side of it feels sharper than others, the edge of it slightly fractured as if something had torn itself away from it.

Can it be? Can her and her brother’s story continue to rhyme? She smiles and she hopes.

Warm against her skin, the kyber melts the frost prickling her hand and illuminates her long walk from the cave and into comforting shadows of old mountain valleys made radiant under moonlight.

While his sister heads away for her search, hell-bent as ever to act as a thorough scholar, he settles down the most comfortable he can get upon the cold rock in the middle of the cave’s entrance chamber and reaches out for the Force. It’s his first instinct, always, ever since he’d started consciously feeling the raw power of something bigger and greater than him, mysterious and yet yielding to him as it guides him throughout every challenge imaginable.

Like this, feeling the world at another level of cognition, he’s the most alive, the most natural. Many padawans find the intensity of the Force a thing too chaotic to navigate, many of them fail to ever
establish a connection so deep and running so easily both ways. Master Iarin saddles him with a variety of tasks and duties that have nothing to do with what he’s excelling at. Frustration boils within his heart like waters of a giant lake a few miles away from the Temple as fast as a fuse catching fire from a spark, and he takes a moment to divert his attention to it and soothe it. The best way to prove his worth to the Order is to surpass their expectations.

At first the Force is just the way he knows it — all-encompassing and loud and a lot, dozens of plots intertwined together and pulsing in rhythms both discordant and perfectly attuned. It’s one with his every breath and beat of his heart and flow of blood in his every vein and artery. Here it’s made of frost and the faint warmth of air flying off his lips to condense into fog. It’s the echo of thousands of steps already traversed on these icy floors, of thousands of hearts pumping in anticipation for finding their crystal. But he reaches deeper, hungry for more, and finds himself in a spasming wild ocean of millions of souls, the Force concentrated in the home of kybers and wilder beyond anything he’s ever knew before. Uncontrollably loud, it envelops him into a rather horrid symphony of stories, yearnings, echoes of pasts and futures of those who had already made pilgrimages to this cave or those who are yet to embark on this journey.

He’s adrift in these currents, thrown from one echo to another like a helpless ragdoll, both images and sounds flashing too fast for him to comprehend, sending his heartbeat into overdrive, overwhelming his every sense. The Force is playing with him, testing him, challenging him to find a way out as it lets him focus on a single story for a split second before snatching it away from him.

He does the only thing that has ever felt natural to him — he concentrates on the power churning in his veins, letting his instincts take over rational mind, imagines the Force’s symphony like an endless wallpaper of musical notes scattering away from his skin just like he imagined tons of rubble that buried him and his sister alive underneath the ruined building flying away in every direction, lifting a terrible weight off his back to let him breathe and striking the enemy fighters flying low and spewing proton torpedoes upon a once-peaceful city already leveled to ruins. Millions of songs don’t fade away, but they retreat, quieting down at the verge of a touch.

He smiles, the expression raw and feral with unrivaled excitement of taming the Force, and reaches out for the songs, sifting through them like through pages of a book. Most of them are unforgivingly naïve, some are rooted deep in false hopes and childish mistakes, and a lot of them don’t strike a chord with him whatsoever. One song captures his attention, its strong, ordered rhythm, a faint, ghost-like glimpse into the future waiting to be woven. Appreciation both rational and unconscious makes home in his heart, comforting, promising, his. Still, he knows better than jumping to quick conclusions, so he searches through every song he can discern to evaluate all options, to find the one and only that’ll feel undeniably right.

In the end, the very first song he liked stands out, lingering at the back of his mind like an echo of a dear memory. Extricating himself from the wild ocean of maybes, he holds on to the promise of his song, stretches out his legs and rubs his stiff muscles from keeping one pose in the cold for too long and, ignoring the tell-tale prickle of blood circulation flowing through his veins with renewed vigor, settles on a journey to find his crystal.

The song guides him through the maze of tunnels swiftly and without errors, bringing him to the cavern’s heart within the span of a mere hour. His kyber is a bright centerpiece in the scenery, a tiny rock casting a brilliant pale blue glow around it with a deep mauve radiance emanating directly from the crystal and gradually fading in the dominant blue light. Stopping in his tracks, he watches the light for a little while, mesmerized by the interplay of colors and the soft way one of them bleeds into another, by the beauty of each tone, by how he’s yearning to sift his fingers through this glow, touch the crystal, make it his own and be met by its soul halfway.
He indulges himself with a hurry to reach the kyber. When his skin makes contact with the crystal at last, the song seems to crescendo in his mind as if he’s on stage in the most acoustically-excellent opera house in the galaxy, the sound flowing through him and straight into his soul in harmonic resonance with who he is and what he wants out of life. It’s the sound of agreement and absolute absence of any discord, it’s the powerful hum of a lightsaber swishing through the air as its wielder executes a perfect form, and it’s the distant, choreographed tumult of a noble, righteous war so unlike the one he has lived through.

He smiles to it and makes a silent vow to be worthy of his dreams. Curling the fingers of his free hand to mimic a pulling motion, he concentrates on the push and pull of natural forces flowing through the Force like currents of air and beckons the crystal to tear away from its twin and land into his open palm.

He doesn’t look back at the cave once he leaves it behind, his mind yearning for the future to unravel faster than everyday flow of history and time.

The armory and training grounds at one of the lower levels of the Je’daii temple is oftentimes a padawan’s most favorite, sacred place. Children and teenagers alike gravitate naturally towards heroic stores of grandeur, and she’s no exception. Master Ske’ria leads her through familiar chambers and armorer workshops to the door at the end of the corridor she’s never glimpsed past before today. The door has no visible handles or locks, she notes, and carvings on its metal look elaborate and mystifying and beautiful, perhaps once made with the help of a low-powered lightsaber fashioned into a blowtorch. Master Verr is waiting by the door, a wise and excited smile tugging the corners of his mouth up and making his pitch-black eyes express joy.

Master Ske’ria stops a few polite steps away from the old Nautolan, and she follows her mentor’s lead. Laying a hand on her shoulder, her touch comforting and light, Yola Ske’ria says, “I’m immensely proud of you, Leni. The Order is proud of you.” The Je’daii diplomat regards the door with a longing, nostalgic look and instructs in a gentle voice, “Choose wisely, padawan.”

With that Master Ske’ria leaves. Half-anticipation, half-nerves, she takes a deep breath and looks up at Master Verr. The old Nautolan armorer bows his head in a polite greeting, tips of his head tendrils curving up. “Hello and welcome, young one. Are you ready?”

She twitches her shoulders in a tiny shrug. “Is anyone ever truly ready to make a crucial choice?”

Master Verr’s laugh is loud and lively and yet infinitely soft. “An excellent point. I suppose not.” Leaning away from the wall, he turns around and extends his hand towards the door. Hidden mechanisms inside of it start whirring after a second or two, the heavy metal sliding away and retracting into the thick stone blocks of the temple’s walls.

A childlike smile on his lips, Master Verr looks down at her and gestures towards the opened door, courteously inviting her inside. Eager hum of her kyber intensified at the back of her mind, she steps into the tunnel. A short walk through it reveals a room that resembles a library-like vault storing perhaps thousands of lightsaber components, all organized in a controlled kind of chaos: neatly laid across the shelves, but never ordered by specific purpose. Lamps across the ceiling light up in perfect tune with every meter of distance she crosses, fading the moment she steps away from the sensors and brightly illuminating only the space she’s occupying. A mini-temple of weapons in the making, it’s a breathtaking place.

“Wow,” she murmurs excitedly under her breath despite her desire to be perceived as an embodiment of serenity. Behind her lamps light up as Master Verr catches up with her, a fond chuckle flying off his lips. “Don’t tell anyone, but I still think that the day Master Kymari passed the
grand armorer duties to me was the happiest day of my life,” he whispers conspiringly and grins youthfully the moment she meets his eyes.

The variety of parts in the vault is impressive. Power cells, modulation circuits, energy gates, emitter shrouds and matrices, different kinds of activators, belt rings and small attachment devices, hilts from assorted metals or gems or even from wood, all of them custom-made and undeniably unique, crafted with creativity and love. Reverent, she brushes the tip of her index finger over the cross-guard hilt fashioned from beautiful silvery metal. “Is this old, Master Verr?” she asks, uncertain of the hilt’s age.

Leaning with one shoulder to a space between the shelves, the Nautolan armorer bends his head a little to get a closer look. “Ah, a fine creation,” he breathes out with awe, rubbing his fingertips across his smooth chin. “This one is around four hundred years old.”

Eyes wide in surprise, she squints around the vault. For all she knows, some of these items could easily date back to the early days of the Order, ancient relics never claimed by the Order’s followers.

“Why make more than we need, you wonder?” inquires Master Verr softly.

“A little, yeah.”

“Do people make art in order for it to be recognized during their lifetimes, or do they make it in hopes that it will resonate with someone someday?”

She smiles, sizing up a curved lightsaber hilt made of golden metal with ebony-colored leather wrapped around it in thin ornaments to ensure a safe, comfortable grip in its wielder’s hand. “Or perhaps they do it simply out of desire to create?”

“Now we’re talking in the same language.” Master Verr nods his approval. “May I see your kyber, Leni?”

Her first instinct is to refuse, to keep the unique, special bond she shares with a crystal untouched. But there’s something not quite right about this strange possessiveness, almost as if a connection so sacred yearns to be revealed like rays of morning sun after a night cold and dark and shrouded by thick clouds, so she unclasps the satin cord she has gently yet tightly wrapped around her kyber, retrieves it from under her tunic, and offers the crystal to Master Verr.

The armorer turns his hand to keep his palm up, closes his eyes the moment the kyber makes contact with his lilac skin, perfectly content with her still keeping tight hold around the makeshift necklace. “Interesting,” he murmurs after a short while. “Your teachers unanimously consider you to be a perfect candidate for Je’daii consulars, and yet, if one listens deep enough, your crystal teems with power worthy of a warrior guardian.”

“Like there’s an undercurrent of a brewing storm,” she agrees quietly, bowing her head and hiding her eyes just in case. It is, perhaps, one of her biggest struggle in the Je’daii studies — comprehending a fine line between time for diplomacy and time for drastic action without error. Sometimes she’s envious of how easy the distinction seems to come to Master Ske’ria. Sometimes she wonders if it would be as easy for her if her Master grew up in a world torn by a sudden, senseless war where no arguments, no diplomacy, no calls for mercy ever worked.

Master Verr moves his hand away from the crystal and hides it away in the pocket of his long brown robe. “Was this the only kyber that has spoken to you?”
“It was.”

“And why do you think it’s the right one for you?” he challenges her lightly, the smooth skin over his brow ridge slightly wrinkled and arched.

She nags the inside of her bottom lip with her teeth, fingers now curled around her softly-glowing kyber. “I believe that a lightsaber is the very last resort in every conflict, but that there are moments when using it is inevitable, is the only way. You can go a long way on kindness and compromise, but sometimes you survive only thanks to your resolve, a terrible choice made in the right circumstances, your warrior’s prowess. I don’t think I would’ve heard it, would it not somehow believe in the same things that I do.”

“Kybers are like stars in the Force, a concentrated, tumultuous power capable of beautiful luminosity and guidance just as it is of destruction. Just like guiding stars for wanderers, they share journeys with those they find a kindred spirit in,” says Master Verr with pure conviction of a true believer. “Whatever you have seen or heard is the crystal’s nature, its yearning similar to aspirations of our own soul. Finding it starts a journey for you, and the only advice I can give you is to be worthy of its trust, child, for the Force knows there is no shortage of darkness and betrayals in this world.”

“I’ll do my best, Master,” she replies, her faith in the righteousness of such path absolute.

When she looks up at him, his expression is that both of pride and solemn worry, the perfect reflection of a soul knowing full well that despite the fiercest longings of a heart no journey is ever straight or easy. He leans away from the wall, his eyes narrowing as he sizes up rows of lightsaber parts next to him with the air of careful contemplation. “Have you decided yet on your weapon’s design, Leni?”

His tone is devoid of pressure or expectation, a balm of relief. Every padawan daydreams vigorously of wielding a proper lightsaber once they first experience exercises with a training one, and a lot of them spend years imagining their future weapons and designing schematics. Some roam through the Order’s history manuscripts and holos in search for inspiration or an item to make a replica of, some sketch hundreds of models until they find the ones they like. By the time they bond with a kyber, most already know how their lightsaber will look like, if not in perfect detail than at least its general concept.

While naturally similar to other padawans in most things, this is the one when she’s an exception. She has spent her fair share of time looking up a potential saber, yes, but while she’d identified certain designs she doesn’t fancy, all others appeal to her in one way or another. A pike or a double-bladed weapon suits some combat forms best, a traditional one favors the others. Naturally ambidextrous, light on her feet and preferring swiftness in action, two shorter shoto weapons might benefit her talents the most. Master Ske’ria mentioned this as well, but two weapons means two crystals, and somehow despite knowing that not everything comes together at the seemingly most convenient of times, she has a certainty that she was meant to bond with a single kyber. It pulses against her skin in tune with this thought, reaffirming her feeling on the matter further. And don’t even get her started on the saber’s inner design with hundreds of different options, yet alone on the weapon’s décor. This is one of the only times in her life when careful consideration and a scholar’s approach haven’t brought her any closer to a conscious decision she’d be satisfied with.

“I don’t have the slightest idea,” she admits honestly, shifting her weight from one foot to another somewhat self-consciously, mindful of taking more of Master Verr’s time than most padawans would.

He doesn’t seem to be offended whatsoever, a good-natured, old soul. “It is no bother, young one. A
lightsaber that suits you in a way becomes a guardian of your life. It is not a choice one should make lightly, and there is no span of time right or wrong for this decision. A lightsaber you select to construct, no matter if it’s by wielding the Force or by requesting armorer’s help, no matter if it’s purely your design or cobbled together with armorer’s advice, is still a reflection of your choices, of your creativity. Sometimes that weapon won’t be the one you’ll wield for the rest of your life, sometimes it would even be your choice to change it. A hunter, a warrior, an armorer can all spend years searching for the weapon that is truly theirs, and there’s no shame in it at all. Don’t rush yourself. There’s a right time for everything, and it’s never singular for us all.” Gently tipping the edge of her chin up with his index finger, Master Verr straightens up and clasps his hands behind his back. “Should you require my services, I’ll be in my workshop. May the Force be with you, padawan Leni Awara.”

Left alone in the vault, she secures the kyber back around her neck, cradles it to her chest with her palm, and begins her journey to the weapon that will become her loyal friend.

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To be frank, dense forests around the temple keep him on edge. Despite generations upon generations of Sarkhai people living in fortress-like cities, the old survival instincts of his species run deep. Hostile nature dominated by rich variety of venomous plants and even broader choice of blood-thirsty predators left a mental scar in every descendant, thriving both through evolution and stories passed to young ones by their parents and teachers. Even here, in safeness of nature on Ossus, he can’t seem to ever relax the moment he leaves temple grounds, always tense, always keen on looking over his shoulder or yearning to keep a hand on his weapon.

It’s easier now that he has crafted a lightsaber of his own.

Ignoring the established paths beaming away from the temple like rays of messy sunlight, he follows the obscure route he’d scouted personally during the necessary evil of a search for a safe, distant place for training. The road is long and physically demanding in places, his entire journey promising him a sleepless night. Sneaking away from the temple two times a week for this is both exhausting and liberating. Even though excitement sustains him through the walk and urges him to run, to never waste even a minute of precious time he can spend on practicing with the saber the way he wants, he forces himself to tread steadily and save his strength. It’s getting trickier to keep his focus sharp on studies and other padawan duties after these nightly escapades, and it won’t do at all for any of his teachers to suspect a thing, much less for Master Iarin.

Jumping over an ancient fallen log blocking the passage between two trees, he begrudgingly decides that he really needs to carve some time in his schedule for meditation exercises with Master Eobhen. Tedium as they are by the decrepit Azumel Je’daii’s design, he sees how they can be useful for the way of life he’d chosen to pursue.

Once he reaches a distant cenote well-hidden under the messy latticework of thick vines, he sheds his robe and tunic, letting them land in a sloppy heap by his feet and exhaling with relief at feeling the unrivaled freedom of bare skin exposed to air, at the absence of fabric sliding across his forearms and wrists in a way that’s for some reason peculiarly annoying and distracting for him. Stepping away from the grass and onto the violet sand around the dark, opaque waters of the cenote, he closes his eyes, mimics the opening stance of Djem So, and lets himself focus solely on the hard work and demanding rhythm of lightsaber training against imaginary opponents, his mind conjuring up a simulation no less perfect that those found on Je’daii training grounds.

He spends half an hour on Djem So to warm himself up, then gradually shifts to Ataru, starting with the simplest tricks and soon incorporating series of complicated katas comprising of skillfully-executed spins, somersaults, and cartwheels. His heart pumping with ecstasy of perfect training,
blood singing in his veins, he feels home, driven by skill and instincts and the Force itself resonating with him in perfect harmony. It’s easy to get lost in this feeling of absolute bliss, his muscles growing tired but building strength from constant yet smart exercise, and for him this is the only time when feeling lost means feeling safe.

“Remarkable,” resonates a deep voice across the very edges of its consciousness. Distant at first as he executes the final somersault in a kata, it solidifies into a heavy chunk of ice settling uncomfortably in his belly when he lands, eyes flinging wide open to find an olive-skinned, middle-aged Vultan man sitting upon the grass with his legs crisscrossed, wearing a shortened Je’daii Knight robe over his bare torso, dark elastic gauze wrapped around his arms and serving him as sleeves. “A natural talent of your caliber has apparently evaded my notice for years. Unacceptable.” The Vultan clicks his tongue and shakes his head, disappointed and displeased.

“What is your name, padawan?”

He shuts down his lightsaber with a pointed nudge of the Force, the absence of its hum making the sudden quietness of the forest and the wild beat of his heart disquieted and disconcerting. But giving in to weakness is the most direct pathway to failure, and that has never been an option for him.

“Qavi Awara,” he reveals, doing his best to keep his shoulders and arms relaxed as he settles his hands by his sides and bows his head in a show of respect.

The older man smiles, the expression both faint and pleased. “And do you know who I am, Qavi?”

He has an idea, yes. But a guess, even educated, is inferior to facts and truth. He weighs his options quickly, but something in the Vultan’s gaze and the way he holds himself indicates that he’s not a man who prefers contemplation over action. “You’re Xael Rickerme, the youngest battlemaster in centuries for the Order.”

Planting his hands against the grass and leaning back upon them, Knight Rickerme mimics his gesture of respect. “Nice to meet you, Qavi. Now, tell me, what does a padawan with your skills doing so far away from the temple in the middle of a night, perfecting combat forms he’s clearly excelling at?”

“There’s no excellence without honing, only derelict skill,” he shoots back reflexively, the words dear to his heart.

The battlemaster smirks around a fond chuckle that sounds a little sharp and cold, cunning like warrior’s prowess. “It is a truly admirable outlook, I’ll give you that. However it won’t be enough to deflect my question, padawan. There’s no need to be afraid to speak your mind. The whole point of unity is senseless if allies don’t feel safe discussing what’s on their minds.” Knight Rickerme looks around the secluded nook surrounding them, his expression slightly yet openly admiring. “Besides, what is said outside of temple grounds remains outside of temple grounds. In case this wonderful tradition is now tragically extinct in your generation of young warriors, I feel the obligation to rejuvenate it.”

When he gently reaches out for the battlemaster’s signature in the Force, he finds it a steady, unreadable thing. Yes, this steadiness is dangerous — any individual of Rickerme’s Force training, combat prowess, and battle experience is a person unwise to cross — but it also stands out from every other Je’daii he’d met before. His signature feels just a tad dimmer, calmer than others with little to no flickers, devoid of irritating, blind brightness he personally finds somewhat annoying in most members of the Order. Granted, he only has a few first glances and stories to make up his mind about the man, but there’s no denying that Xael Rickerme might just be a kindred spirit he’s missing so much, even in Leni. Something about the man just feels right to him.

He’s never known his instincts to be wrong, and so he chooses to trust them again. “I come to
practice here because this is the only way for me to work on the Forms most suited for me," he lays the truth bare, hand firm around the curved hilt of his lightsaber. The tiny ridges upon the hilt’s metal dig into his palm just a fraction, a welcome reminder of his family’s ornamental tattoo he was supposed to wear across his heart, but lost the opportunity to follow the centuries-old tradition when blaster fire scorched the life out of his mother’s heart before his and Leni’s eyes. “Master Iarin is a traditionalist. While he does not outright forbid me practicing other forms, I can sense his disapproval when I try to bring some variety into Makashi, Soresu, or Niman. He has once said that my preference for bold aggression is worrisome, and I don’t particularly enjoy training when someone looks at me as if I’m a ticking bomb gearing to go off.”

“Ah, old friend Hugo Iarin. Didn’t change a fraction since our padawan days,” says Knight Rickerme with a subtle bite of fake pity in his voice. He stands up then, wiping a stray leaf of grass from his robe with an elegant gesture. “I’ve caught a glimpse of your Djem So and have seen how good you are at Ataru. Have you ever tried proper Juyo?”

Excitement swells within him like a tempest that is dear and kind enough to let him navigate it effortlessly. “I’ve learned the moves, but it’s miles away from truly knowing the form, yet alone mastering it.”

Rickerme’s smile is almost predatory now, showing teeth for the first time ever. The battlemaster steps upon the sand, walking around discarded padawan attire, and follows suit by letting his robe slide off his shoulders. “Justify your point of view.”

“All other forms are mostly about pure skill of combat, the drill of katas into a warrior’s reflexes and their ability to read the clash and predict their opponent’s movement based on knowledge and observation. Juyo is the only one rooted in pure emotions of a fight, more of the Force than any other. Experiencing and understanding Juyo can only be achieved though saber-to-saber training. Since it is forbidden by the Order I never had a chance to try it.” He hesitates around a specific thought, but it takes him even less time now to make the choice to reveal it. “To be fair to the Order’s teachings, sir,” he says lightly, adopting Juyo’s stance with the now humming mauve beam of his lightsaber positioned over his head in parallel to the straight line he’d arranged his feet into, “you aren’t supposed to be a master in it either.”

“You know when to bite, Qavi. I respect that.” The battlemaster lifts both hands up, one straight and facing the padawan, the other leveled with the line of his shoulder and bent at the elbow. His lightsaber flies into his open palm, a weapon with a hilt oddly elongated to be more suitable for a double-bladed saber and yet possessing only a single blade emitter. The color of the beam is revealed to be a deep magenta, rhyming with Qavi’s mauve beam. “What can I say,” Xael Rickerme drawls a tad cockily, “doing the Order’s dirty job outside of its temples does come with a nice set of perks.”

Experiencing Juyo in a training fight is like feeling bonds of strings snap free, like finding a puzzle he’s been searching for his entire life that slots right where it supposed to be and makes him exquisitely complete. It doesn’t matter that he’s clearly lacking the battlemaster’s prowess in this type of combat, doesn’t matter that he’s struggling sometimes or even makes truly embarrassing mistakes. The road to excellence is fraught with failures big and small, and he doesn’t let them taint his mood or his emotions. No, it is unwise to cultivate mistakes, but it is paramount to learn from them.

Despite clearly exercising great caution in order not to harm him, Knight Rickerme doesn’t treat him like a fragile vase contrary to what Master Iarin does every single time, never once goes easy on him. His lessons feel a little brutal, but respectful in the best of ways, giving him the chance to learn in earnest. By the time he spends half an hour in vicious combat with the battlemaster, his body is all
but screaming for mercy and he’s dripping with sweat, but he had rarely ever felt so gloriously alive. He feels the moment when his moves become sloppier, the fight taking a real toll on him, and at last he feels safe to resort to his deeper instincts, to not give up like he would’ve during a fight in the temple.

Like this, his soul wild with thrill of emotions and one with the Force in perfect ways, it doesn’t even take him a pointed, conscious effort of pure concentration in order to stop the battlemaster’s counterattack by hoisting him into the air and showing him away. It happens as easy as it is taking a breath. A lesser opponent would’ve been shocked by a forbidden, rare move, but the battlemaster doesn’t lose his composure. Still in the air, he executes a perfect, spear-like saber-throw using the Force, stopping the blade a mere inch away from the padawan’s heart, the heat of the beam rippling like breath of the wind close to his skin.

Some defeats are wise to accept. He gently lowers the battlemaster to the ground. In turn the older man beckons his weapon back into his hand. “You are wiser than I have initially thought, Qavi. It is not something I get to tell other people a lot,” admits Knight Rickerme, shutting off his magenta plasma beam. “Can you tell me why you feel safe, going for a move that might get you expelled from the Order?”

His mind bites into old, miserable memories of his childhood as if holding on to them is one of the only things that matter to him. “It’s not the first time I’ve done something the Order would disapprove of,” he admits, wondering if Knight Rickerme is able to sense the darkness that saved him and of which he’ll never let go pulsing in his Force signature. “There’s a lot a person can withstand, but there’s always something than can break them. I’ve felt helplessness so cruel when I’ve lived through a war that it’s something I’ll always refuse to endure. Never again. I’d rather die.”

When Knight Rickerme doesn’t say anything in response, he turns off his blade as well, secures it around his belt, and walks to the cenote. The fading night is warm today, contradictory to common laws of nature, and the walk back is long enough for his pants to dry up sufficiently in these conditions, so he dives into the opaque water, eager to wash away the sweat off his skin.

When he finishes up and turns around, it surprises him a little that the battlemaster didn’t choose to leave. Holding his carefully folded robe in one hand, Knight Rickerme passes equally folded padawan’s attire to him. They head back to the temple together, unconsciously falling into functioning like a real battle unit, with him blazing a trail and Rickerme perfectly content with covering his back.

“I’ve always found it funny how the Council’s vision for the Order is the exact same thing that causes dissent in its ranks,” mentions words worthy of treason Knight Rickerme a few minutes into the walk. “Everything is of the Force. More offensive forms of combat work where others fail. Employing a Force power they forbid can be a difference between winning a crucial battle and prolonging a bloody war. They uncover some knowledge, deem it dangerous. But everything is dangerous if it is mistreated or if it is not used timely. Instead of teaching us how to navigate a complicated world, they choose the easiest solution and deem all other opinions treacherous. Have you ever wondered how people so wise can be so blind and fail to see that understanding is a road to balance while prohibition is nothing but a tempting invitation?”

“Is this why you have pursued a life of a battlemaster? To be as free of the Council’s control as a Je’daii can be?”

“Amongst other things, yes. You sense it too, Qavi, don’t you? How the Order is slowly tearing itself asunder, weakening day by day by contradictions in its ranks, by differences of opinion, by desiring
to bend the natural order of things the way opposite of the wind’s blow?”

He huffs a breath through his nose. “No offense, sir, but I prefer us in action more than emptily talking about things we cannot change.”

“Two of us are likely to fail in this endeavor, yes,” agrees Knight Rickerme. “But a storm’s coming, sooner or later. A conflict always erupts. And if it’s not in our lifetime, then our duty is to stay true to our hearts. I have an offer for you. I am willing to train you when I’m visiting the temple. At the cenote, under the shroud of a night. You have potential, Qavi, the kind that is extremely rare to come by. It would be a shame to waste it. You could take my place one day if you work hard enough. If you want to change the Order, you have to start somewhere. Baby steps and conviction can lead you far.”

“A small rebellion under the Order’s nose?”

“Irresistible, Qavi, isn’t it?”

The words taste sweet as a gulp of fresh air after days of bombardments on his lips when he breathes out a simple and final, “Yes.”

The Je’daii Order is strict in its views on family and attachment. He can’t imagine it’s pleasant to let go of those you love even if you don’t lose them completely, but it’s harder on him and Leni. No matter what, through war and hardship, she’s been the closest person to him, was there for him even before they were born. The Council separates them by design the moment they arrive on Ossus. Not too far away, yes, and no one explicitly forbids them from spending time with each other, but they’re required to be padawans for different Masters and sleep in different dormitories. Those first few months, adjusting to a life without his twin, are something he doesn’t particularly like to revisit because it makes even less sense than the war he had to live through.

With time this artificial divide between him and Leni grows wide and painfully real. At first it’s only cause their duties and studies are keeping them so busy they rarely find both time and energy to see each other. Then, when they’re nearing their teenage years, Master Ske’ria returns to her diplomat duties and Leni spends most of her time travelling with her, while he’s stuck on Ossus with Master Iarin who’s perfectly content with serving the Order from this beautiful, yeah, but extremely boring giant lump of rock and avoiding any kind of action. By the time both of them pass the trials and are officially knighted the same day at seventeen years old, he doesn’t feel a hint of compelling need to try and serve together with his sister. Each time they talk, Leni sounds more and more like Master Ske’ria and cowards in the Council, so much so that he’s afraid she’ll inevitably judge him for his views. Better keep silence and keep away.

He’d be a liar to say that it doesn’t sting him. In all honesty, this pain is a little like a festering ulcer somewhere deep in his soul. It feels unfair to be misunderstood by the last living member of his family, but there’s nothing he can do about it now that won’t carve that wound open and wash him over with special kind of agony. So he channels all his energy and attention to pursuing a guardian’s warrior path, daring to ignore Master Iarin’s recommendation for him to enter peacekeeper corps. The Council frowns upon it, as to be expected, and this is where his secret apprenticeship under Knight Rickerme tips the scales. The battlemaster compliments his skills in defensive lightsaber forms before the Council, stressing how important it is to let him continue honing his skills in combat rather than focusing on simple policing work, and both his position and the case he makes come through and define the future he longed and worked for all along.

When he receives news of Leni’s assignment as a Je’daii diplomat, he does his best not to scoff derisively and look happy for her. It’s frustrating. Her defensive lightsaber forms can rival his, he
knows this by heart from a few sparring sessions they’ve shared here and there as they prepared for their trials. She’ll be a great diplomat, there’s no doubt about it, but she’s wasting away her potential. Most of diplomatic efforts these days seem like a particularly unfunny joke for him. Tragic, that’s what they are, just as Leni’s choice to pursue them instead of something greater, filled with purpose. He manages this game of pretend, but it doesn’t feel good even for a moment.

The next time he and Leni cross paths, it’s on Vohai, where particularly resilient clusters of painfully-slowly crumbling Hutt Empire are trying to take control of the planet. It’s certainly must be clear even to a complete fool that both sides are merely aiming to play for time with their invitation of Je’daii Order to mediate the conflict until they’ll finish licking their wounds, re-supply, and engage in another cycle of vicious, bloody battles, but tragically not to the Je’daii Council. Even Leni, despite her stubborn idealism, sees the seeds of truth. But the Council acts like a bunch of arrogant, blind idiots. It demands a solution because the Republic needs a solution, and Leni tries her best.

Naturally, she’s not able to deliver a miracle for an utterly hopeless, pointless endeavor. And who does the Council call when its diplomats and peacekeepers are under blockade and siege down on the planet? The cavalry, of course; their pilot aces and best warriors. He’d laugh, but at this point even this has gotten terribly old.

The situation on the ground is a complete clusterfuck, there’s no way around it. He’s not sure he’s ever seen action so heavy and seemingly never-ending, putting his endurance skills to a brutal test. By the time Je’daii troops make it to the capital city, he hasn’t gotten good sleep in two weeks, now functioning on fifty hours without rest he’s failing to compensate for at this point even with the help of special meditation, not to mention he barely has a window free of fighting to meditate. When he catches the glimpse of Leni in the battle, it’s for a brief second until a stray blaster bolt rips through her shoulder and the shockwave from a terrible explosion at her left sends her slamming into what remains of a once sturdy wall and crumbling onto the muddy, bloody ground like a lifeless ragdoll.

He doesn’t think when fury ignited by a mighty, undeniable instinct to protect swells up within him like the most violent of tempests and begs, screams, claws for release. He lets it consume him, flow through every cell of his body and rush to freedom, only distantly aware through this storm in both his soul and the Force itself how it reaches power cells of every droid from a Hutt-commanded army and makes them combust. All around the battlefield a chain of violent explosions with flashing bursts of electricity erupts, deafening and deadly.

When the mayhem quietens down, leaving him spent and lightheaded and barely keeping himself upright on suddenly funny-wobbling legs, he searches frantically for Leni’s signature in the Force. In the eerie silence of the world shocked into fear around him, the warmth of her life and the beat of her heart is a symphony. When in a fight, he feels at home. Like this, saving someone he still loves despite their differences and fulfilling yearnings of the Force, he feels content.

Darkness claims him.

He wakes up slowly and sluggishly, a thick haze clouding his mind and his body weakened unpleasantly from clear, although seemingly mild disuse. His first thought is of medical sedation, but the moment he reaches out to the Force — an action that requires more concentration and effort than ever, almost as if its currents within him where lulled into dormancy just as his body was and are now re-learning how to beat in tune with his heart and soul — he understands that someone has used Morichro on him.

Kriff it all under a bloody moon, always trust the galaxy to find a way to remind him of its bitchiness right after something in his life goes right.
It is common knowledge on the temple grounds that there’s a prison site for rogue Force users somewhere on Ossus, run by the Council. Both padawans and knights alike whisper about it in hushed tones. A semi-covert contest on finding its exact location has been run for centuries, with no winner declared ever. Certain knights are hand-picked by the Council for guarding duty in the prison, and so far stories say that it’s an assignment for life.

The room he finds himself in bears eerie resemblance to his personal quarters back at the temple: same size and layout, same set of spartan furniture, a familiar notch in the floor hiding a meditation pedestal in the middle of the room, a small private ‘fresher in the room’s corner. But the complete absence of windows and a pair of deflector shields serving as one of the walls (a scarlet ray shield and a crimson particle shield) along with two Je’daai knights standing guard at the other side, clad in white robes and armed with identical curved-hilt sabers and exotic lightwhips, reveal the truth without any shadow of a doubt.

Lucky him for seeing the legendary ghost of a Je’daai prison at long last.

When the realization hits, his first instinct is to summon his lightsaber into his hand. He can yearn for it all he wants, but the action is futile. He’s been stripped of both his weapon and his battle gear, now dressed in standard Je’daai knight attire. Fury flares inside of him, however now is not time for emotions. He subdues it with a quick meditative effort, yet doesn’t bury it too deep by design. It may not be a time for emotions, but they can always come in handy later. Ignoring the knights guarding him for now (and maybe being a little bitter that they stand still like petrified statues when he gets out of bed), he walks to the ‘fresher and closes the door behind him.

Shedding his tunic, he assesses the state of body. The wounds and bruises sustained during Vohai campaign have fully healed; even a blaster bolt burning a messy hole through his side is no longer tender, the scar tissue gentle and smooth and barely even visible in the ‘fresher’s bright light on his almost-white skin. Despite the Council’s decision to imprison him, the Order’s medical team clearly didn’t hold back on kolto for him. He’s not the one to complain like an idiot, but this does aggravate him a little. He’s not in the mood to feel good about them when he saved what remained of their precious servants and they’ve awarded him with a prison cell for it.

Settling down upon the floor, his feet tucked underneath him, he closes his eyes and dwells deep into the Force. Maybe it’s the lingering effects of Morichro, or maybe (and likely) it’s the Council’s machinations with the Force inside of the prison, but his connection to it is still muddy. It feels like reaching out for it through a heavy mass of quicksand, a slow, frustrating, and mentally draining process, but even if he manages to reach it it’s next to impossible to hold on to it to achieve something meaningful. It slips away like a slippery eel, toying with him as if he’s a naïve fool.

First thing he does is searching for his kyber’s song in the Force. Made distant by taint in the Force, it is nevertheless somewhere close by, certainly stored somewhere in prison, he’s sure of it. He can feel its presence, lonely and yearning for him and yet still feeling with him in tune. Throughout the years its song has shapeshifted as his understanding of the true nature of the galaxy and its rules had deepened, made sharper and swifter and a little more ravenous in its tunes of war, the absence of discord in it replaced by a web of whispers conspiring to weave a way into the future, the special hum of his lightsaber shaped precisely into a symphony of him dancing through his personally-modified and perfected version of Juyo.

We’ll be reunited, my friend, I promise, he sends a mental thought to his kyber, hoping it can feel and hear an echo of his longing just as he can hear its own, and focuses his attention on testing out the limits the Force has been caged into here. It takes him good ten minutes to summon a toothbrush into his palm after what feels like an exhausting mental and physical trial. More than that, he fails to get a decent read on the knights’ Force signature, yet alone construct an even shabby mental map of
the prison. His detention block seems to be its own isolated bubble inside of the Force, completely
cut off from the rest of the world.

Frustrated, he opens his eyes, straightens out his numb legs, and sags upon the floor. All right, even
if Force is not his friend during the escape, he can still count on his fighting prowess and his brain.
Let’s say he manages to escape. Defying the Council so openly will put a definite end to his Je’daii
career. More than that, it’ll put a target on his back up to the day he dies. The Council is known to
be keeping tabs on those who leave the Order peacefully, afraid of those who have different opinions
and possess a Je’daii’s powers. Cutting ties violently will make him prey for one of the most skilled
hunters the galaxy has ever known.

Frankly, the thought is even a little thrilling. But as much as he likes to fight and best opponents, it’s
not his ultimate vision for his future. It’s easier to make a difference and guide the galaxy to order
and safety when you’re not leading open warfare on too many fronts.

A man of action he may be, it doesn’t matter if waiting contradicts his nature. He needs more
information to make a solid choice. Cleaning up a little with cold water, he runs a palm against his
wet face, pushes long strands of his hair behind his ears, and goes back to bed, settling to wait and
see how the Council wishes to play its cards.

Time is a relative thing here, with no access to a chrono or any electronic devices, yet alone to a
window, and it flows impossibly slow, nagging at his nerves. At last four more knights in that same
white clothes and with identical ammunition show up by his cell, stopping side by side and blocking
the narrow corridor. Two of them shift, turning their backs against the wall to let an elderly Human
Je’daii pass and stop next to the deflector shields. Bearded and solemn-looking, the old man clasps
his hands behind his back and tilts his head a little into a customary bow.

“Je’daii Knight Qavi Awara,” he announces formally, a thin thread of disappointment palpable in
his voice. “I am Master Kirago Jon of the Je’daii security corps. You have been charged with
malicious use of the Dark Side of the Force by the Je’daii Council for your battle action on Vohai. A
tribunal will be scheduled accordingly to the proceedings of your case and the Council will decide
your fate. You are hereby summoned to a legal hearing. Follow me, please.”

Tenderly hoarding another ember of fury in a deep, dark corner of his heart, he for now accepts a
role of a humble, seemingly regretful delinquent, and walks to the deflector shields. Master Jon
disables the shields using the Force (he notes the location of controls at the outer right hand-side of
the wall by the way the Master’s eyes dart in that direction) and leads the procession through the
corridor.

Interestingly enough, he seems to be the only prisoner on this prison level. Out of habit he covertly
takes measure of distances between him and each weapon the knights are equipped with. Despite the
lack of much space in the corridor, they surround him in a strict rectangular formation, each of them
as far to the wall as possible, their positions and their choice to have weapons secured to their belts
at the sides facing away from him capable of winning them fractions of a second that could make the
difference they’ll need to win the confrontation should he dare to try to escape now.

Smart cookies, he’ll give them that.

He reaches out to the Force experimentally, just to check whether the Order’s machinations extend
to the entire prison site and not only its isolated cells, and has to bite his tongue enough to draw a
tiny speck of blood in order not to smile triumphantly. In here the Force feels perfect, free for him to
commune with and to use at his will. Again, he chooses not to rush. Perhaps the stories about prison
guard wielding the Dark Side of the Force expertly are only stories, but he’s not willing to put it to
test yet. If there’s anything he’s learned about the Council’s ways throughout his years in the Order,
is that they’re big fans of hoarding knowledge. It would be completely up their alley to berate warriors they don’t hold on a tight leash for using dangerous techniques while employing loyal lapdogs in their secret prison and allowing them to engage with such powers under either their strict control or their blessing.

(Secretly, the idea of testing himself against those the Council considers worthy of wielding such power sends another thrill down to the marrow of his bones.)

The Council is waiting for him in the prison’s ceremonial chamber, a smaller copy of the one in the temple. All sixteen of them surround him in a circle from their throne-like chairs. Even Grand Master Nelin-Quast is present, carving out time in his precious schedule and emerging from the shadows of the temple’s archives or his meditation chambers. A lesser person would’ve been intimidated, but what’s happening today has been long time brewing, a challenge to the Council. Would they see past their prejudices? Would they take one step towards a better future and vote to exonerate him? There’s certainly a chance for it. Knight Rickerme had mentioned lately that the Council is more divided than ever these days.

Speaking of Knight Rickerme, he’s been summoned as well. Of course, that is to be expected — the battlemaster is his immediate commanding officer, after all. He stands close to the door in the shadows, hands clasped before him and shoulders hunched with humbleness, a striking contrast from a man who’s secretly working to guide the Order back to the path of keeping the galaxy at balance.

He evaluates his options of defense. He’ll be declared guilty of using the Dark Side of the Force regardless of the case he makes for it’s an undeniable fact witnessed by dozens of his comrades; the only thing in question is potential consequence for his place in the Order. His primary motivation of protecting his sister will not only earn him no goodwill whatsoever, it’ll only dig a deeper ravine for him to fall to. No, his only choice is to appeal to their rationality. After all, he’d always been seeking out better ways to fight in order to minimize risks of loss.

The hearing is lengthy and tiresome, laden with formalities. He can tell that the Council is trying their best to be impartial and chill about the matter, but their emotions run high. He can see two members of the Council subtly approving of his actions. Most of the others are worried. One seems to be afraid and one is almost openly disgusted. The Grand Master looks weary, like a man who knows that a chemical reaction has already started and that he’s powerless to stop it.

At last, he’s granted a right to speak. And so he tells them one of the truths.

“I believe that I have chosen the most cost-effective approach to the battle. Our intelligence on Vohai campaign has been woefully inadequate. The introduction of a Hutt-controlled droid army has tipped the scales into their favor. Fourteen ace pilots have been lost, more than in any other skirmish we faced in the last five years. Twenty-six Je’daii warriors killed in combat, two of them of a Master’s rank. By the time my unit has reached the capital and our diplomats, we have been far from our optimal physical condition and severely outnumbered. Given that the majority of the enemy’s force had been inorganic, using Flamusfracta to defeat them had put a swift end to the battle. I think I won’t be erroneous in assuming that my comrades have taken care of organic enemy soldiers after they have been surprised by such an unorthodox tactics. My choice has saved a number of Je’daii warriors from certain death. Sometimes the light needs protection. I had risen up to this occasion. I do not believe I have to apologize for my actions.”

They send him back to the cell after his speech with a promise of reconvening for a pre-tribunal hearing in three days, standard. He’s given a datapad with no HoloNet connection and filled only with philosophical treatises on the Force approved by the Council. He ignores the manuscripts both
out of spite and out of disagreements with them, but it’s nice to have a chrono to keep track of hours. There’s little to keep himself busy with in between meals delivered by one of the guards, so he alternates between going through his usual regimen of exercises and indulging into copious amounts of sleep. Kolto can do miracles on wounds and broken bones, but it’s utterly useless for bone-deep mental exhaustion.

Fourteen hours before his scheduled trial, he’s woken up from his pre-dinner nap by the sensation he’s mostly remembering these days rather than experiencing it. Leni’s signature in the Force feels almost like a ghost now, but he’ll recognize the shape of her light anywhere. He opens his eyes to find her sitting cross-legged on the floor next to his cell, her long, white hair arranged into a series of elaborate braids spilling almost down to her thighs past her shoulders. Her bruises have faded, but her right arm is still in a sling, indicating that kolto treatments weren’t enough to fully heal the damage just yet and that the injury could’ve been lethal, would he not speed things up on the battlefield.

He sits up, canting his legs and leaning forward, and reflexively tries to get a good feel on her signature, but the Force forbids him. Or maybe it’s not even the Force, maybe it’s her. The thing about Leni is, she possesses a unique talent in the Force. It’s something she’s never told him about, something he’d learned from Knight Rickerme a few years ago. She was considered to be pulled away from her diplomatic duties and chosen for Je’daii shadow training, for she’s capable of concealing her emotions in the Force, hiding them perfectly under a veil of calm tranquility. The battlemaster says a person of her talents might one day master full masking of their signature in the Force, become a perfect spy and hunter. An incredible honor, a great rarity of a talent, and she had consciously refused making the most of it.

Force knows, a fight with her is the last thing he’s longing for now, but a little part of him wants to see her true emotions. She’s been a terrible liar as a child by choice, always ready to face their parent’s disappointment instead of trying to get away clean with all the mischief they’ve been up to. Sometimes it’s been infuriating, but he used to love that about her, this constant desire of hers to be righteous and honest. Diplomat work and Je’daii teachings have corrupted this beautiful trait in her. Even now, away from politicians and their games, Leni’s face looks a little like a lifeless mask, every emotion carefully guarded.

“Hi, big sister,” he says after all.

His reward is a twitch of her lips into a smile. But it’s a weak thing, forced out perhaps for his sake out of politeness. It cools down his excitement from seeing her, makes him wonder what she thinks of him. Is she somber that her brother is imprisoned? Is she angry for the Council for their ignorance? Or (the thought is sharp like a crown of thorns digging into his skull) is she taking their side?

The blow comes in a shape of her now-honest, somber smile and her quiet voice. It sounds mournful, but, worst of all, it’s laden with a shadow of disappointment. “I didn’t ask to be saved, Qavi. Not at such cost.”

He’s momentarily stunned into speechlessness, distantly feeling his fingers curling into fists, and Leni goes on, eyes trained upon the floor as if there’s some kind of a majestic pattern drawn upon dull grey metal. “Tomorrow the Council will offer you a deal they strongly recommend you accept. You are to take upon a modified version of a Barash vow, be stripped of your rank, give up your weapon and your position amongst the guardians, and join a chosen lore keeper as an archivist apprentice. Working solely from the temple, you are expected to contribute to the Order’s knowledge base, broaden your understanding of the Order’s history and philosophy, and in time work your way up to another set of knight trials. Should you pass, you’ll be qualified solely for the rank of a peacekeeper serving to protect the temple grounds.”
The fury rising up like a tornado in his heart seems more deadly than the one raging through him when he saved her. This is where their love fractures and falls apart, turning into vile poison. There’s no escaping the devastating, aching truth now: the Council has taken the last of his blood kin away from him for good. It takes him an inhuman effort in concentration to see the hateful, threatening, “Get out,” only after she’s done speaking.

“Qavi…” she whispers, this time evidently cut by his malice, but he can’t bring himself to care anymore.

“Get. Out,” he repeats again, enunciating every word forcefully. He supposes Leni can feel how his very soul is aflame with rage and betrayal, the air around him almost simmering. The guards can sense it too, for their hands fly close to their weapons in a blink of an eye. Her pale skin looking unnaturally like pure ivory, she turns around and limps away, her spine slumped under the weight of defeat.

The only thing that saves him from smashing his fists bloody against the wall is an advanced meditation exercise he puts himself through. His pain is a feral, wild thing. It’s one more thing he locks up in his heart, ready to use in his favor in an unhinged carnival of emotions when another battle will demand his absolute best.

In meditation he ignores his evening meal. While the effort demands peak concentration and careful navigation through the tumultuous currents of the Force, in normal circumstances the best way to recover after it is any type of a serenity-meditation. Here, though, even that is draining, so instead of rejuvenating like he normally would he barely notices when his concentration slips away and he collapses into restless sleep.

He’s woken up in the middle of the night by the sudden loss of deflector shields’ hum in the background of his consciousness. “Awara,” whispers a dull, modulated voice from under a guard’s mask, and he sits up with a start.

Four guards are slumped upon the floor outside of his cell, not a drop of blood or scorching of a laser-powered weapon mapping their white attires. He reaches out with the Force for the just in case, confirming that they’re unconscious, probably even put into this state with the art of Morichro. A smile tugs the corners of his mouth up. The irony’s not lost on him.

Next thing he senses is a blissful presence of his kyber crystal very close by. The guard who addressed him stretches out his hand and offers him his lightsaber. “We’re under strict orders to escape unnoticed and without killing. All right, warrior?”

He closes his eyes when he curls his fingers around his lightsaber, feeling complete anew. “Anything for getting off this rock.”

There’s another guard keeping watch just outside of his cell. The deflector shields sizzle back to life behind him, and he follows one of the guards using the same path as he did when heading up to defend himself before the Council, flanked by the other one. Instead of heading up to the ceremonial chamber and administrative part of the prison, they head down a few levels of detention blocks using the access card from one of the unconscious guards. He feels a calm, steady swell of the Force in his companions while the elevator moves. When its doors whoosh open, he finds a quartet of unconscious guards in a dim maintenance room. There was a slight possibility that his saviors are impostors, but now he’s willing to bet they’re actually members of the prison’s guard. As they lead him through a hidden tunnel and then a series of chambers rigged with traps and additionally protected by guards (each and every one of them knocked out by the Force before they can even sense danger coming), they walk this prison with the surety of someone who can navigate it blind.
An hour later, he’s standing on a tiny clearing under bright moonlight, watching Knight Rickerme put his saviors to sleep using Morichro. Completing the ruse, he beckons the access card used throughout the escape into his palm and leans lazily with one shoulder upon his ship’s doorstep. “I believe you must have a lot of questions, Qavi.”

He looks the battlemaster in the eyes and bows in a profound show of respect at gratitude, all too aware of the fact that technically his escape is not yet complete. “Not at the moment, sir.”

Knight Rickerme flashes him a satisfied smile and turns, heading deeper into the ship. “Welcome to the first act of our revolution, free agent Qavi Awara.”

While they’re safely travelling through hyperspace, they share cups of caf and Knight Rickerme tells him what he feels necessary to divulge.

“The revolution would’ve started regardless in a near future. Our brothers and sisters in the Force have experienced a series of unexpected, but welcome breakthroughs in the last couple of years. The clock is ticking on the Council’s false peace. Your unfortunate imprisonment has put certain things into motion without our control, but the result is most welcome. You are a paramount ally to have in our fight, and I have seen the opportunity in orchestrating your escape in order to deepen contradictions and paranoia inside of the Order to a new level.”

He leans back into the co-pilot’s chair, eyes focused on the wild, swirling pulse of hyperspace dashing past them in a messy canvass of black and blue. “May I ask how exactly did I manage to rattle the Council?”

“It was decided that you were to choose between two forms of penance for what Council perceived as your wrongdoing. One of them was presented by your sister. The other would’ve been kept away from you, concealed by the promise of imprisonment until you were ready to change your mind.”

There’s a subtle edge to the battlemaster’s tone, but it’s enough to capture his attention. He looks back at Knight Rickerme, surprised to see unconcealed anger and repulsion raging in the Vultan’s eyes, in the hard line of his jaw clenched shut. “What was the truth?” he demands firmly but quietly from his mentor.

The older man flattens his hand against the armrest, fingers straight but strained with tension. “A vote has been undertaken by the Council yesterday. Should you have dared to refuse the offer they’ve considered generous and righteous, you would’ve been subjected to a memory wipe procedure by the Council’s three practitioners of the technique. They are not completely stupid, you see. They are aware of your value and your talents, and they wanted to keep those to themselves. Mold a warrior they wanted, weeding out those thoughts and experiences they did not like. To the outside world, you’d be kept incarcerated from everyone you knew and loved as a punishment. To a select few worthy of knowing the truth, you would’ve been remade and transferred to one of the smaller, distant academies and would’ve undergone training all over again until you were their perfect servant.” Knight Rickerme swallows, lips curled in disgust. “They’re getting desperate. Such use of the Force is close to blasphemy within the Order, hasn’t been done in a millennia. The vote in its favor has passed with a nine-to-eight score. I think this will drive a deeper wedge into the Council’s already straining balance of power. It’s up to us to be savvy enough to reap benefits from it.”

He keeps silence for some time, sorting through his feelings on the matter. The realization that he’d been so close to losing his identity is striking, but strangely enough it doesn’t hurt him as deep as Leni’s betrayal. He’s been seeing through the Order’s true nature for some time now, and perhaps some part of him has always caught glimpses of the rot festering underneath its shining façade. If
anything, the desire to keep tight control and course-correct the things they do not like has always been the Council’s game. To see so clearly through their masks is almost liberating, especially now that he’s out of their reach and still himself.

“I owe you my life, sir,” he declares with conviction, meeting his mentor’s eyes again. “Whatever you need, whatever you ask of me, it is yours.”

Knight Rickerme smiles and puts down his now empty mug. The battlemaster’s expression reminds him of his father’s smile: it’s as warm and genuine. “Debts are for strangers and pawns, my friend. I have no doubt in your loyalty or your devotion for the future we both work hard to create.”

He brings his hand to his heart, feeling both it and his kyber pulse in harmony. “A road to light is never without darkness.”

He closes his eyes and meditates upon it, one more set of invisible chains around him broken.

The Dark Side Order is growing day by day, a masterful web weaved around the galaxy for years in shadows attracting followers like moths to a flame. Revolution can only be sustained so far on pure belief and devotion to the cause, and soon per the Grand General’s order his main task becomes finding and building supply chains for the army.

Located away from trade routes and largely unnoticed by the Republic, the Outer Rim world of Trian seems like a perfect business partner for his Order. Once he identifies the world’s potential, he dares to have a luxury of spending a few weeks on the planet, adopting a variety of unassuming identities and comprising a lengthy, detailed dossier.

Trian is lush and rich with fertile grounds and deposits of various minerals. Population is large enough to build a wealthy economy and small enough to control easily thanks to the low population density. Developed enough to support most of standard galactic industries, the world struggles with efficiency of manufacturing processes and quality of produced goods. Ruled by an ever-changing monarch from a select number of noble families and a puppet government that gets appointed by the people during a joke of democratic elections, Trian’s people either blindly worship their kings or queens or openly hate them. Nevertheless, the active part of society is too small to make a fundamental difference, and every single revolution has always led to the same outcome: a change of decorations or terms, but keeping the basic principles of governing as they are, based on controlled lawlessness, corruption, and using the planet for stuffing the rulers’ pockets.

The results please him. He goes back to the Dark Side lair, reports before the Grand General and a few his most trusted advisors. Seeing the same opportunities on Trian as he does, they send him back, this time as an ambassador to build a political and economic alliance with a corrupt monarch of his choosing.

Useful it may be for the cause, Trian is also a challenge for his nerves. It’s the embodiment of many things he hates, of chaos and disorder born of greedy rulers and mostly-ignorant nation hungry for the easiest of solutions, but it’s the game he must play smartly regardless. At last, a few months of playing behind-the-curtains politics with the locals, he has settled on a plan he’ll ask to be put in motion. It surprises him pleasantly when rumors he’d heard come true: Knight Rickerme arrives as a part of an extended Dark Side delegation to Trian, indeed having severed his ties with the Je’daii Order and now solely focused on serving the Dark Side the way he’d been yearning for years.

Late at night, or, come think of it, closer to morning, when they’ve done going over both political situation on Trian and his mentor’s role in igniting open dissent both in the warrior’s ranks and inside of the Je’daii temple on Ossus, Xael Rickerme opens up a second bottle of wine and comes
back to the table in Qavi’s expensive apartment with two filled goblets.

“Enough talk of past and present. What is the future you envision for this world, my friend?”

He leans back into the leather chair he occupies, props his feet up the table, and accepts the goblet from his mentor. “Tensions run high both in the society and through the nobility. The current king is perhaps the most incompetent ruler of the world in recorded history. All hype and no promises in his campaign, reputation of utter ignorance off the charts. It’s kind of tragic, I’m half-convinced the people made a conscious effort to elect the worst possible monarch of the bunch. So while he’s naturally busy making a fool of himself and taking the brunt of public and opponent outrage, his powerful allies are running unfashionably rampant with their greed behind the scenes.” He drums his fingers against the tabletop, lips contorting with distaste towards the situation, then grows thoughtful. “What we need from this world is unquestionable loyalty. Since fear is not the tool yet available for us to wield to its fullest capacity at a planet-wide scale, our best option is to build this loyalty by establishing order and improving people lives. We need to take control of the situation, draw a clear correlation between their new monarch, government, and the alliance’s they’ll make to people’s prosperity and peace. The king’s allies do hold a substantial amount of both resources and power, and to them our message must be absolute. They’re brash, so here we must work with real fear. I say we arrange the king’s murder, incriminate a group of his most avid supporters so they won’t be able to assume power during transition time, and help a family we see the most potential for fruitful collaboration with win the inevitable elections. Every righteous side of this ugly situation benefits. And one day, when the galaxy’s remade into beautiful order, the Dark Side will be one of the pillars of their history. A road to harmony, pawed by the darkness.”

Xael Rickerme savors the taste of wine and future with a smile. “Shall we begin brainstorming, then?”

She never says it out loud (there’s no one to confide in about such raw honesty and doubt, no one in the Order who wouldn’t judge her or give her a lecture on how the Force always has a meaning behind its actions), but she has an undeniable feeling that after Vohai things go extremely downhill very fast, hell-bent on testing her beliefs.

She was right about Vohai all along. She stands through thirty-two Je’daii funerals in a span of two days in the temple’s Mourning Tower, battered and aching and heartbroken, unofficially forbidden to cry for the fallen (the Council, of course, frowns upon succumbing easily to such powerful emotions), keeping the tears at bay and desperately trying to dissect the horrible mission and see where she should’ve done things differently, find words capable of convincing the Council that Je’daii forces weren’t enough, that the Republic's army should’ve interfered and entered the conflict in order to avoid so many deaths.

They didn’t listen. Emotion would’ve made no point, only highlighted her immaturity. She had no facts to back up the introduction of a droid army to the fray, only her observations on how neither of the sides considered a peaceful resolution and de-escalation even for a split second and her personal, sinking impression that darkness is growing thicker around Vohai, ready to burst and stretch a thick blanket of shadows upon the planet. The Council had said that darkness was natural for a conflict, that she couldn’t let it cloud her senses, that she should focus on pursuing the light and pawing way for it.

She was right all along and they didn’t listen.

(Shes ashamed of even thinking about this when cities and forests of Vohai are marred with blood of innocents, but the thick, suffocating, ravenous darkness behind her brother’s deed on the battlefield made way into her soul despite her being unconscious and keeps haunting her like an
omen of something even more horrible to come.

It feels all-encompassing. It feels personal. Either of the paths is slippery for a person of a Je’daii’s power, and she feels lost before the eye of a storm.)

On her way to the prison, locked away in a ship’s cabin without any viewports to see the direction of the route and the prison’s true location, she reads through the Vohai battle report once again, focused on Qavi’s actions. Flamusfracta is a dangerous power to meddle with, off-limits for the knights. While it does take an advanced telekinetic skill to make something explode, yet alone hundreds of targets in a span of breath, it’s a too-easy, too-tempting way out. Rash and decisive, it can (and had) turned the course of the battle, but Flamusfracta is essentially about having extremely tight control over something and then giving it up completely to a devastating storm. Qavi’s attack destroyed enemy droids, but it has wounded a number of allies too. It’s a miracle no one on their side has died. And it’s the price he was willing to pay for victory. It’s characteristic of Qavi — he lets himself be consumed by passion in the heat of the moment — and, knowing how he always acts on instincts in dire circumstances, she’s sure he used the Force without rationalization, without caution. It scared her when they were children, their miraculous salvation forever marred by that deeply-rooted fear she didn’t fully comprehend until she got older. Now it scares her even more.

Next she watches the recording of his hearing before the Council. He’s calm, collected, his voice firm and emotionless. It’s a foreign look on him, opposite of who he is. The man who’s speaking is not her brother, not really; he’s a perfect execution of a role to appease the Council. And his words… Force, he had time to analyze his actions and this is what he’d chosen as rationale for them. He speaks with utmost, cold conviction of a calculated zealot, a man whose opinion is unshakable. It reminds her of the recordings featuring Ghali’s leader, of the way he’d presented invading Sarkhai to his people, a bloodthirsty tyrant finding justifications for destruction and murders with eerie, elegant ease.

She looks Qavi in the eyes when she recites the Council’s decision, hoping to see at least a hint of… understanding, remorse, perhaps acceptance, anything to make her feel like he isn’t lost to the brutality of darkness slowly clouding the galaxy, but the ice-cold fury of betrayal in them seeps into her own soul like liquid fire, making her shiver and clutching her heart with a chilling fist. His body language and entire expression are detached and cutting, him a storm a heartbeat away from unravelling. Her hope withers away in the most ruinous of ways, threatening to choke her, only to be replaced by a terrible, hollow realization that she’d lost the last of her family sometime throughout these years with the Order and that some of the blame for it is hers.

In the wake of news about Qavi’s escape from prison, she quietly wonders whether they would’ve managed to keep their sibling bond alive, had she not dragged Qavi to seek out a Je’daii knight passing through their re-building city and plead him for a chance to study the ways of Force and become a peacekeeper like him. The Order had given her a new home and a chance to fulfill her purpose in life, there’s no denying it even in the deepest throes of doubt. She would’ve never had an opportunity to steer the ways of light throughout the galaxy like she did without the Order’s guidance and training. But now that light is tainted, with hesitation, uncertainty, distrust. Maybe it is the Force’s ultimate trial for her just like Grand Master Nelin-Quast had said. Regardless of the truth, it feels like her soul is set on slowly-smoldering fire.

It doesn’t help matters whatsoever when a few days after Qavi’s escape she’s summoned to a meeting with the Council. When she makes it to the Council chamber, first person she notices is Master Ske’ria standing in the middle of the room just like she did years ago when they were first brought together to share a bond between a master and a padawan.

Keeping her face devoid of visible emotion, she executes a formal bow and addresses customarily,
“Grand Master, Council Masters, Master Ske’ria, Knight Leni Awara at your service.”

Grand Master Nelin-Quast regards her from his seat. Once upon a time she looked at him and seen a calm, wise man regardless of the circumstances. That is still true today, but whether it’s her getting more sensitive in reading emotions or him losing the impeccable sharpness of the skill, most of all she sees gaunt shadows of weary worry in his expression. “In tumultuous times the guidance of our own inner strength is as paramount as support and unity, child,” he says in a carefully controlled voice. “Would you accept Master Ske’ria’s company throughout your diplomatic work?”

It is an unpleasant wonder how words so indisputable and right can sound so wrong. She’s not perfect (nothing is perfect but the Force, and even that these days feels like a concept worthy of questioning), but she’s a Knight in her own right, tested and judged worthy of holding her position by the ceremonial Trials and her history of service to the Order alike. Even when one takes personal pride and hurt of clear mistrust out of equation, this assignment is a blow to Master Ske’ria’s new padawan. The boy was on track to take his Trials in a year. Severing a bond between a master and an apprentice so abruptly and so close to the Trials is nothing less than a show of cruelty. A mild one, yes, in the grand scheme of things, but to a teenager whose master is their most meaningful connection in the galaxy for now this must feel like an end of their world — deeply hurtful and unfair and planting seeds of doubt into an unsure, hectic heart still trying to figure out what is their place in this wild galaxy.

An empathetic, slightly feral, antithetic to strict control part of her yearns to scream after years of systematic hoarding of every disappointment she notes along the way — do you even realize what you’re doing here, you bunch of old, scared fools?! — but the wildness of her heart is something she’s been taught to suppress and it’s certainly not something that’ll help getting her point across to the Council. The decision has been made and there’s no changing it, she sees it in their eyes. They fear she’ll let emotions guide her actions, that she might follow Qavi’s footsteps, and so they saddle her with the only babysitter she will not automatically repel and with whom she shares a special bond.

The Council decided to put her through another trial.

All right then. She’s better than them. Better than her wounded pride, better than letting doubt disfigure her faith into an ugly thing. Stupid choices and Council politics aside, the light needs its protectors. She’ll be one, no matter what.

“I accept,” she says obediently.

Her faith in the Je’daii Order crumbles ten months later on Jestan.

The galaxy is in turmoil, the Republic busy extinguishing dozens of fires in various regions, and the Je’daii Order is reeling from betrayals and fractures in its midst. But life goes on, busier and messier than ever, and she still has her diplomatic duties to pursue.

The mission to Jestan is a rare one now, solely her own without Master Ske’ria’s shadow making sure she doesn’t snap and turn her back on the Order. Her duty is to facilitate the prolongation of the economical treaty between the Republic and Jestan’s government. Based on pre-existing cooperation, this could be an easy job, something she’s done hundreds of times now at this point, navigating through official documents with a sharp eye and hunger for injustice, careful to make sure the agreement is fair to both sides.

It’s the first time she sees a treaty so vile, the real implications of its content deliberately spread out through the document in long passages of text that can make a brain near-boiling while reading it,
yet alone attempting to comprehend every single hidden mine in it. Sure, the treaty will benefit Jestan in short-term. For a world plagued by pirates and far from effective government structures the order and oversight the Republic offers will be a great balm for its ancient, painful wounds. Long-term, knowing the darker sides of the Republic and its corporations, this document has potential not only to lay waste to Jestan’s ecosystem, but to effectively sell the population to slavery. No momentary benefit is worthy of willingly losing freedom, and Jestan does have younger political leaders who see the treaty’s true nature and how it threatens their home’s future. Strategically and brazenly shunned away from every important position in the government by old political parties parasitizing on the world’s resources, they can’t stop the treaty despite a year-long hard work they’ve put into it.

The Republic’s ambassador will sign. Jestan’s prime minister will sign. The treaty can only be made legal after a representative of the Je’daii Order puts their signature down as well.

Fifteen hours prior to the official signing ceremony, having finished listening to every side of the process, reviewing the gargantuan document, and meditating upon it, she decides she won’t be ratifying the cabal treaty. She orders some food into her hotel room, eager to eat and catch up on some missed sleep when her comm chimes.

The Je’daii Council wants to talk. Looking at the Council Chamber on a holo, she senses the truth behind their call instinctively even before they reveal their true intentions. “We have received word of your frequent meetings with Jestan’s political opposition, Knight Awara,” says the Grand Master in a carefully-regulated, dull voice.

Ambassador Keiron, she notes for herself and forces her expression to remain as neutral as the Council expects. “One needs to hear all the voices before making a decision, Grand Master.”

When the Council prompts her about the said decision, she delivers her verdict knowing full well from the tone of the conversation and the circumstances behind its existence that they won’t be satisfied with it. But she owes it to her teachings and the light itself to make the Council see that perhaps they haven’t been paying as much attention to the Republic’s dealings as they should’ve.

Her effort may be valiant, but it clearly lands upon deaf ears. What follows is a cheap, nefarious mess of the Je’daii Council going out of their way with, frankly, unsettling passion and disdain to convince her that the treaty is the blessing and the only way to go in the current circumstances. They assure her that Czerka Corporation’s actions would be strictly monitored and course-corrected by the Republic, not allowing them to exploit Jestan’s population. They promise her that the Republic will bring the safety to trade and travel routes the Jestan’s people need so much. They remind her that in times of war it is paramount not to act rashly and identify without mistake what serves the light and the greater good.

She listens through every point the Council makes. In the end, sure of her decision like she’s never been before and disgusted by the way politics have maimed the leaders of the Order, she stands her ground and decides that it’s time to ask a few questions long time in the making to the Council.

“The Je’daii Order’s role in this galaxy is to pursue the path of light, guarding freedom and justice. How can we guard freedom if we’re openly facilitating slavery? How do we support justice if we help corporations abuse their power? How are we serving the light if we refuse to act when children die, policing peaceful Republic territories and letting its government stall the bills of aid and doing nothing to help the worlds that truly suffer? Why can’t I see a clear line drawn in a sand between darkness and the light in our actions anymore?"

With that, she cuts off the holo-transmission and tries her best not to think past tomorrow, her disenchantment with the Order growing by a day like a particularly aggressive star threatening to erupt like a supernova and compel her to burn the bridges with the only life she’s known for years.
The official ceremony is held under Jestan’s government dome, with every parliament member in attendance along with Republic diplomatic delegation. Standing by the side of the main table, occupied by the prime minister and the Republic’s ambassador, she dutifully maintains a stoic, unreadable expression and, watching the vile attempt to undermine the planet’s freedom in the lush, theater-like session hall, works on a concise speech she’ll be required to deliver once she blocks the treaty.

She sees pain and disappointment in the eyes of politics with honor and love for their world when the prime minister puts his signature under the document. In the Force, a blow to their hopes feels like a shroud of darkness enveloping the light. Someone has to be there for the light, to carry its gentle, nurturing flame.

The moment the Republic’s ambassador lifts his old-fashioned fountain pen from the paper, the doors to the session hall fly open. Flanked by four Je’daii knights and four members of Jestan’s honor guard, Master Yola Ske’ria steps into the room.

“Esteemed servants of Jestan’s people, Prime Minister Hivari, Ambassador Keiron, by the will of the Je’daii High Council I am entrusted with the honor to officiate the Jestan-Republic treaty.” The older Togruta woman bows her head and looks directly into Leni’s eyes. “Knight Leni Awara, in the light of your failure to remain neutral on the diplomatic matter and your conscious decision to abuse your power and the Council’s trust in you to sabotage the treaty, you are relieved of your official duties effective immediately. The Council requests for you to give up your weapon and follow the Order’s peacekeepers off the government premises.”

That’s how the last of her belief in the Je’daii Order dies, with honest disappointment in Master Ske’ria’s eyes and ice-cold shards of her own decaying hope and regrets settling in the pit of her stomach like a ravenous black hole of dead weight.

She has spent long years keeping a deep well of tears unshed, and now is the moment when there’s no more space for them to go, the well now filled to its absolute brim. She lets them slant quietly down her skin, grateful for a faint feeling of liberation it brings her. Her breath and voice still under firm control, she looks away from her mentor. “I used to think the world of you, Master,” she tells her quietly, deliberately letting her emotions color it with regret.

“Please, child, don’t make it ugly.”

She knows it as clearly as the warm swell of the Force when light in it shines — she’ll never be free again if she goes back to the Order. She’s been already judged, doomed for a life under their watchful eyes in the very best-case scenario. Perhaps she has never been free to serve the light, used as a pawn in the games Council was playing with their pride and restrictions and clumsy waltz through galactic politics. Perhaps she had put one meaning into her oath and the Council had its own understanding of it all along. But she’s sure in her oath. It’s been given to the light, to the Force itself.

The Je’daii Council may be trying, but it sure as hell hasn’t privatized the right to serve the Force.

“All that time we’ve spent together and you still do not know me, Master. It has never been and never will be my intention,” she concludes somberly.

The Force within her is a gentle rising ride, eager to support her instinct to resolve this inevitable conflict without drawing blood or even needing to use her lightsaber. If this works, it’s going to be the greatest trick she’s ever pulled off. She hopes she’s strong enough for this.

It takes her a blink of an eye to focus on every Force user and guard in the session hall and,
allowing the Force to flow through her mind and body and soul, direct it gently to weave invisible, impenetrable cloaks around those wishing to take away her freedom. Bound expertly by an advanced, slightly modified version of Force Stun, neither of the opponents is capable of retaliation. Jestan’s parliament is shocked into speechlessness and stupor of their own, trying to comprehend the unexpected show of power that terrifies them, makes them feel small next to it. Most critics of the treaty, she notes, have the courage to look at her and offer her reassuring smiles.

Keeping the perfect Force Stun intact for long is a task requiring immense skill and mental power. She can feel the effort slowly draining her, her control over the Force threatening to slip away. Eager as it is to help, it is still bigger than her bones, mightier than any living creature in the galaxy. No one can control such an ocean forever, even with its assistance.

At twenty-three years old standard, she runs towards her new life, leaving the Je’daii Order behind.

By the time she releases the Force Stun on her opponents, the ship that’s been her home between the stars is rushing towards Jestan’s orbit. Both the Je’daii and the local space force try to stop her, but it’s too late for it. Clinging to her last vestiges of consciousness through exhaustion, she puts in the hyperspace coordinates into the navicomputer, engages the hyperdrive, and lets herself be embraced by blissful darkness of deep sleep.

She wakes up a few hours later, neck a little stiff from her ungraceful sleep in the pilot’s chair, a little before her planned change of hyperspace lanes. Entering a new set of coordinates and smoothly directing the ship back into hyperspace, she ships to the ship’s main hold, walks to its tiny kitchenette, and prepares herself a sizeable mug of tea.

A few sips of the drink banish away the constant chill of space travel in her bones, but offer no remedy for her still-lingering fatigue or weeping heart. Walking away from the Order has been the only right choice, there’s no doubt about it. But it’s been the foundation of her life, the cause that shaped her. The loss of such a pillar is devastating. Knowing that despite her choice to stand up for justice Jestan will still end up in Czerka’s clutches is mortifying.

And now, for the first time in her life ever since her first war, she has no immediate duty before anyone. At first she has lived with a plain goal of survival on war-torn streets, then followed logic and knowledge as she navigated through her life in the Je’daii Order. Now, a wanderer standing on the crossroads across the bend of space and time, this might be the only time she can let her emotions run completely free.

The floodgates open and she’s vulnerable and lost and unmade by the true weight of her life.

One with the Force, she sees and feels everything. First, throughout space and time, she latches on to Qavi’s signature in the Force, sensing its distant, but suffocatingly cold presence. It’s everywhere, with no marker of a direction to search in, the ever-bleeding scar of love and loss and her failure to be there for him, to keep him away from the lure of the Dark Side. She lets go of it, lets it drift back to the background of her attention, and experiences how every emotion possible rages through her soul like a typhoon. Hate and love, anger and compassion, surety and doubt, pride and regret, and every other one, they all make her imperfect but whole, real before the eyes and soul of the Force. She’s ignorance and knowledge, loyalty and betrayal, success and failure, strength and vulnerability, light and darkness. A messy balance of a life, lost but holding on tight to fundamental beliefs and yearning to do right by the light and her own heart.

She lets herself scream for everything that hurts her. She lets herself weep for everything that she has lost. And in the end, when she feels like she has no strength anymore to handle the storm in her soul, it fades away as if it had naturally run its course and settles back into the messy ocean that she is, the
only everlasting companion she can count on in her life other than the Force.

She raises herself up from where she’d been curled up like a child on the floor, prepares another cup of tea, settles down with a datapad back in the cockpit, and starts brainstorming her new future.

Chapter End Notes

**Je'daii Order**

Je'daii hierarchy: diplomats, consuls, guardians, battlemasters, peacekeepers, aces, shadows, archivists

Species appearing/mentioned in the chapter: Nautilans, Sarkhai, Azumel, Vultan, Togruta

Lightsaber forms: Djem So, Ataru, Makashi, Soresu, Niman, Juyo

Force powers: Morichro, Flamusfracta, saber throw, telekinesis, memory wipe, Force stun

List of canon/Legend planets: Sarkhai, Ossus, Vohai, Trian, Jestan

Various trivia: cross-guard lightsaber, curved-hilt lightsaber, lightsaber pike, double-bladed lightsaber, lightwhip, shoto lightsaber, Hutt Empire, kolto, Barash vow, Czerka Corporation

FYI, Czerka's despicable behavior is inspired in equal measures by its representation in the KOTOR game and by Claudia Gray's novel Master & Apprentice.
The next six months of her life are rough. Yes, it’s nothing as terrible as navigating a battlefield or experiencing complete and utter disillusion of ideals one aspires to, but finding a new place for herself and trying to fully own her identity while constantly looking over her shoulder sure doesn’t feel like an idle walk through a beautiful garden.

Her ship goes first, abandoned the moment she makes it to a spaceport as the vessel all but screams Je’daïi. The stash of Order-issued credits for her missions is enough for a few months of life if she’s careful, but won’t acquire her even the shoddiest of ships. So, her life becomes a series of cheap passages from one part of the galaxy to another as far away to the fringes of the Republic as she can afford, with a looming dire need to acquire enough credits for purchasing a new ship.

The reality of spending most of her life so disconnected from the galaxy’s mundane rhythms and laws is not an easy thing to adjust to either. The Je’daii Order took care of her basic needs and suddenly having even a small luxury of choices to make about these banal things feels incredibly jarring. When a kind Twi’lek vendor in the spaceport offers her a rich choice of civilian clothing for purchase, it hits her almost like a fist to the gut that she has no kriffing idea which outfits she fancies. She buys the first things that look practical, promise to fit her body, and don’t cost a fortune. It feels inherently wrong to purchase a blaster and a vibro-dagger, but the lightsaber has to be her very last resort for a while, hidden in the inner pocket of her battered leather jacket. She struggles with selecting a fake name and lets the blue-haired Theelin slicer she’d paid for a few sets of scandocs to put whatever the rebellious woman wants into them. When a friendly Adarian man attempts to engage in an innocent small-talk with her during her transit to another world, she finds it hard to support the conversation, given her almost complete lack of knowledge in contemporary popular culture. (In most galactic culture that doesn’t relate to philosophy of the Je’daii Order or that wasn’t useful to her way of life and missions.)

Few rounds of travel lead her to Entuur. Located away from busy hyperspace routes, mostly forgotten by the larger galaxy, and having no official ties to either the Republic or the two warring Force user organizations, she deems it a suitable place to rest for some time, adjust to her new reality, and acquire some kind of foundation for the future.

Dominated by villages close to agricultural lands and modest-sized cities built around small industries, the planet has a cozy feeling to it. It’s quiet, populated by natural hard-workers who had settled here upon running away from conquests of Xim’s Empire, and free of greedy rush so many worlds in the Republic are consumed by. She finds a place to live thanks to an old-fashioned paper ad glued to a lightning column in the city, asking to give Mala Sanden a call if they’re interested, gets welcomed by the tight-knit community of people who despite never having lived through hardships of their ancestors, still empathize with what it means to be lost and trying to regain one’s footing.

Finding a job is a challenge that kept her on edge ever since she had dumped her ship, looming over her like a gloomy cloud overflowing with static nervous energy, and it’s an immense relief when she lands one quickly and unexpectedly upon asking the woman she’d rented a room from about potential employment prospects in town. Mala, an energetic and slightly eccentric woman with slowly greying hair, runs an antiquity shop in the first two floors of her house, and quickly directs Deina Vendell (the name still sounds foreign to her ears, not wanting to fit quite right and forcing
her to remember she has to react to it now each time someone addresses her this way) to an old warehouse where a grouchy but fair old man named Vic Orren runs a scavenging operation. People of Entuur are fond of their old things despite expiration dates for most of them or changes in technology and fashion, and there’s never a shortage of things that can either be re-purposed, properly utilized, or obtain a new life in Mala Sanden’s shop.

The work itself is monotonous but relaxing, and there’s never a shortage of odd things to discover and plow through. The other workers don’t judge her for her affinity to mostly keep to herself and having little to contribute to their conversations, and brighten her days by an endless string of stories and kind gossip about city life. It’s not a job her heart is satisfied with entirely, but it’s peaceful and a solid means to an end.

A couple of months pass by like that, until during her dinner in the city’s favorite cantina on the corner of her street she overhears the owner needing more food delivery workers. The idea lights up a spark in her heart, ignites a yearning for some fun and action in her soul. Carefully evaluating all pros and cons and consulting with Mala whether it’ll be appropriate to switch jobs after Mala had set her up to work at Orren’s, she makes a deal with Vic to leave his operation in exchange for her free-of-charge delivery service of his favorite vegetable lasagna two times a week, buys a battered speeder bike to become eligible for delivery employment, and starts on her new job.

That is right up her alley. Narrow streets of the old town and wider boulevards of newer districts provide for some great entertainment and a healthy dose of speed and adrenaline during her dashes back and forth between the cantina and apartments or workplaces all over the city. Soon enough she gains reputation for being the fastest delivery courier in the capital, keeping healthy competition going with other workers. For the first time in her life since childhood she’s free to simply enjoy something she’s great at and something she has so much fun with, to feel the swell of lively pride without automatically worrying about temptations or emotions running too deep and rushing to dutifully subdue these urges.

For a while her life is carefree and very close to being nice. Then, of course, darkness catches up. A ripple from small-time outlaw wars raging on Ord Mantell reaches Entuur system, with one of the crime syndicates settling to lick its wounds and rebuild upon the Entuur’s unnamed moon. Naturally, their greed and attention latch on to a shoddily-armed world easy to be taken advantage of.

First the pirates sneak down to Entuur and choose the most vulnerable of targets — a distant private-owned farm — and, stealing its entire workforce of five families into slavery, save for a single teenage girl who manages to escape, strip the farm off its new harvest and every single item of value in the households. In the attack’s aftermath the entire community is shaken.

News reaches the capital city a day after. That fateful morning she shares a cup of caf with Mala in the kitchen, listening to a radio-transmission. The usually-rejuvenating drink doesn’t help her foul mood whatsoever.

“Sometimes it really sucks to be right,” mutters Mala under her breath, staring into her caf as if it’s the root cause of all evil in the galaxy. “Our ancestors remembered how fragile peace can be. They left us a powerful military system and resources, worked their asses off so their descendants would never be caught unarmed in another unfair conflict. And that’s how we honored their labor: allowed ourselves to get soft and dismissive of potential threats, fallen prey to the illusion of our home being unimportant, scoffed at those who were eager to protect our homes and didn’t give them a chance to study for it properly or have good enough resources for a fight.”

There are branches in Je’daii philosophy praising the vow of nonviolence. She’d visited Mygeeto once together with Master Ske’ria; the world’s native Lurmen species practice pacifism and never
engage in any fights. For them there are no greater sins than to harm another being or hold a weapon in their hands.

“There is honor in a choice not to engage in violence,” she points out quietly.

“Yeah, well, the rest of the galaxy didn’t get the bloody memo,” snaps Mala in return. “Those bastards will come back. Don’t fight back against a bully once, let them taste your fear and blood, and you’ll be taken advantage of time and time again. We need to do something and we need to do it fast.”

The light needs protection and so she rises up to the occasion. “I know my way around a battlefield and a thing or two about military tactics and how to make an enemy really hurt when you have very little at hand.”

Mala’s eyes soften as she sizes her up. “A kid of war, huh? No wonder you’re mostly quiet and keep to yourself. What’s on your mind, then?”

Entuur’s situation isn’t easy, but the tangible threat to their lives and community wakes people up faster than in most places. Most of the population is ready to fight for their land and they learn the art of protecting their home with eagerness. Entuur’s government doesn’t bury their heads in the sand or try to deny the problem, instead diverting whatever resources they can to reanimate their military and provide support to self-organized volunteer groups. Her mundane job forgotten, she spends her days either training the volunteers or travelling between communities. From time to time she’s end up close to the gangster’s attempts at violence and extortion together with the locals and engages in the fights, always mindful of never betraying her real identity or using the Force in any obvious way.

Tensions run high for the next few months. Property is damaged or destroyed, both sides suffer losses. Locals demonstrate wonders of resistance, quick to learn and showing off impeccable discipline that’s enough to compensate for their inexperience or lack of resources. The pirates mostly behave like brute scavengers, the most they can do while their leader doesn’t have an abundance of thug-power to spare, focusing most of his effort on stabilizing his operation, fortifying his lair and keeping the moon he’d claimed constantly guarded by two squadrons of small starfighters on rotation.

The offensive ships are a chip he hasn’t cashed in yet, and Entuur desperately rushes to catch up and cobble together a defense. Naturally, there comes a time when his birds come to play.

Maybe the big boss snaps and gets petty or maybe his other supply lines get disrupted, but at last he decides to scare Entuur’s population into submission by a show of brutal power. The big showdown comes with most of his starfighters and remaining ships obliterating Entuur’s tiny force of patrol fighters at the edge of the planet’s orbit and descending upon the capital city to rain down a senseless bombardment. Unbeknownst to the offenders, the city is now equipped by a set of shoddy force field generators she’d helped cobbling together. By nothing short of a miracle (and perhaps the will of light itself), the field’s first proper test coincides with the syndicate’s attack and yields the results outperforming the expectations.

Entuur responds by everything the world has in its possession, from a limited fleet of their ancient, rusting starfighters they’ve kept away from space for emergencies like this to civilian vessels hastily equipped with assault weaponry to limping ski speeders and air speeders repelling the attack. The ensuing dogfight is a messy thing, lives of brave locals and gangsters alike flicking away one by one in the Force. The force field holds, but it’s not for long enough. Its pale azure fabric tears before her eyes, visibly falling apart like a dissipating ghost. One by one volleys of powerful laser fire from enemy ships start raining down the city and mauling down its streets and vulnerable buildings.
The tragedy of ensuing mayhem reaches her through the Force and consumes her, the light voracious in its yearning to be saved. Pretenses broken like chains, her heart follows a horrifying wave of fear. She reaches out with both hands and every fiber of her being, captures a falling building in telekinetic stasis and allows every living soul inside of it and in the radius of its fall to escape safely before her concentration slips away and she has to let go.

Falling to her knees, she struggles to stay awake, but the inhuman effort claims her. The Force doesn’t only give. The Force always takes something away in return.

She regains consciousness to an eerie silence around her and the familiar softness and smell of her pillow. Sitting up sharply, her fight-or-flight instincts aflame, she blinks in bafflement at the sky devoid of smoke in her window.

“We have won,” tells her Mala Sanden from her cozy place in the armchair opposite of her bed. “Our pilots have repelled the attack of the gangsters. Those with vessels intact enough for space flight had rushed to the moon with our soldiers and tried to take care of the barely-protected stronghold and its petty self-appointed king. Unfortunately, the bastard had managed to escape with the remains of his thugs, but our warriors sure didn’t make it a picnic for them. And you, my friend, have done us a great service we’ll never forget.”

There’s not a trace of accusation or disappointment in Mala’s eyes, but the Force still weeps for all those who were lost in this conflict, pulsing with mourning in her soul.

Mala, with her sharp eyes and no-nonsense attitude, sees right through her seeds of doubt. “C’mon, kid. I know what you’re thinking,” she says sharp and sure like a mother strict but fair. “You couldn’t have possibly saved everyone even if you’d revealed yourself a Force user from the very start. Besides, we may be trying to keep away from the galaxy’s affairs, but we’re not ignorant of them. Someone like you, seemingly unaffiliated with any side of the conflict and actively running from it, will always be hunted. Either by the two warring sections or by thugs wanting to test their skills on you and turn you in for profit. It’s not an easy life and you never owed us a single thing. You’ve directed us in our fights like a conductor handling a wild orchestra to a victory. You’ve put your life on the line for us in our direst hour. We cannot possibly ask for more and you have nothing to be ashamed of, you hear me?”

She tilts her chin down into a tiny nod and Mala grins triumphantly. “That’s more like it.” Standing up, the older woman rolls her neck, working out the kinks of tension, and stuffs her hands into the pockets of her long skirt. “If you’re up for lunch, clean up a little and come down. I’ll catch you up on everything you’ve slept through. And, seriously, just try to relax. I’ve had people banging at my door for hours, eager to know how you feel. Once they know you’re awake, you’ll be a target of endless gratitude and celebrations.”

There’s no escaping it — Mala’s right about everything today.

She has to leave, make sure her trail goes cold before word of a Force user hiding in the Mid Rim can reach either of the Orders. Despite her objections, leader of Entuur’s government provide her enough credits to purchase her own ship and get by for a little while. And, in the loud night hour of the celebration on the city streets, standing in the shadows and watching joy of righteous victory and prevailing light consume people young and old alike, she comes up with a new vision for her future and departs the world a few days later.

Risky as it is, it sits true in her heart. It promises her adventure and freedom. It helps her follow the light.
Day by day, she starts carving out a new path for herself amongst the stars and people’s lives. The very first ad she reads about starships on the HoloNet while starting her search for one in the spaceport on Lonnaw efficiently puts an end to this quest. Taking a transport to the city, she buys an old but classy ship from a woman selling her late merchant father’s vessel in order to pay for her daughter’s education in one of the fancier schools. A little battered and in obvious need of maintenance, the Eclipse is cozy and is very eager to fly after a few years of being grounded. She learns it every quirk and sound, finds herself loving the ship dearly from the very first time she takes it to hyperspace and beyond.

A month or so later a job comes through with a fruitful reward. Having some time and resources on her hands, she invests in buying an old 3C-series utility droid from a junkyard. Removing the restraining bolt from the little droid results in acquiring a slightly moody, but funny friend who absolutely loves tinkering with the Eclipse. 3C-DW or Dewey comes up with a comprehensive list of maintenance work with varying degrees of urgency, and they spend a very busy week going through the ship’s repair together.

Some things are smaller on a grand scale, but they still mean the world to her. It’s thanks to Dewey and his strange distaste to working in silence that she learns which kinds of music she likes, oftentimes finding herself singing quietly in tune with the songs and Dewey’s warbling accompaniment. Travelling around the galaxy provides her many opportunities to explore different cuisines and exotic tastes instead of sticking to the Order’s mostly bland menu and rations. Visiting antique or second-hand clothing shops helps her find the outfits she likes for reasonable prices and give beautiful things someone got tired of a new life.

But, most of all, it’s the job that keeps her… well, she wouldn’t call it happy, not when she willingly chooses to seek out darkness in the galaxy and do whatever she can to resist it. Content is probably the best word for it. Not easy by any means, her choices give her life a sense of undeniable purpose and peace. Sometimes she’s smuggling something in or out for people in need, sometimes she’s making fools of pirates; sometimes she’s asked to find and bring someone to justice or to steal something back from other thieves; sometimes she’s protecting innocents and sometimes she’s doing investigative work. At first when people prod for her interests in their misfortunes she reflexively says that she wants to help because someone has to guard the light. While it is true, it sounds all too much as something a Je’daii would say and the taste of it has long gone very sour in her mouth. She tries saying that she’s merely a stranger with good intentions, but at last settles on simply calling herself a friend.

There’s always work. Wherever she travels, a single day of walking around a settlement, visiting a cantina, or rummaging through local news inevitably leads her to a cause to fight for. Most jobs she takes are to help people in dire need. The effort itself rarely pays well, but most villains have a tendency to have large pockets she can dip into, bringing the credits to those they’ve wronged and keeping a little part of it to herself for a living.

A year passes by almost in a blink of an eye. She’s been spending time lately across the Outer Rim’s part of the Slice, and hunting for another job leads her to the Wild Space, to the last frontier between known systems and unexplored vastness of space that lies beyond. The locals on the desert world of Smarteel struggle with contraband, oftentimes even disguised as government-procured goods. The quality of products, of medicine, of vaccines is low, prompting an unnatural rise in illnesses or severe reactions to the medicine through the population. Some of it is cheap, attracting poorer people and wringing them dry of already limited supplies of credits; some of it costs a little fortune, promising the goods of higher quality than local ones and roping in Smarteel’s middle class into the gamble. Some of the contraband is actually of impeccable quality, creating an illusion of overall safeness surrounding it and broadening its appeal to the population. There’s little to no proof leading to true masterminds of the disgusting scheme, the entire chains of the deals muddied by
transactions made to dozens of shell companies. Local activists and victims are powerless to hold the authorities or private businesses accountable for spreading malignant goods, yet alone to put the issue to an end.

She follows the trail of a shipment of expired vaccines responsible for putting a huge amount of children into hospital beds to a specific company owning a warehouse in the city when she spots another vigilante-looking stranger lurking around the premises too-heavily patrolled and surveyed for a simple storage building. Accessing the building on their own separate ways, they end up meeting face to face rather awkwardly in the air vent over the room that certainly isn’t included into the building’s official blueprint stored in the city’s shoddy urban planning bureau.

“I hope you’re not here to steal the goods, cause if you are — this is going to get even more awkward,” whispers the intruder in a soft, humorous voice, his accent near-identical to her classic Core one.

“Are you?” she shoots back, trying to get a glimpse of his features in the darkness. No such luck: his face is concealed by a hood and a cloth mask, revealing only the eyes of currently indeterminate color.

“I have a gripe with this business, so searching for a nice way to get it shut down.” Seemingly deciding that she’s not here with malignant intentions, he looks away from her and peeks down the grate, inquiring casually as if they’re two old friends discussing a very mundane matter, “You?”

She reaches out for the Force instinctively, gently trying to get a feel of the stranger. The trick is, the Force may be the most arcane concept in the living universe. It matters not if someone is its chosen guardian — everyone is its child. Every single living being shines in it like a star; some are brighter, some are dimmer, but it’s never the glimmer that’s important, what reflects a person’s soul lies deep within, oftentimes out of reach. To some seeing a person the way they really are is unattainable, the glimmer either figurative or literal masking the truth, to some it’s the matter of unconscious instinct. Even to a trained Je’daii it’s an attempt to reach out beyond the shine with no guarantees of success. Some people are almost like open books, wearing their hearts on their sleeves, and some are near-impossible to crack either with or without their intent to guard their souls. Some people lie like they breathe, capable of fooling anyone with ease, and some are simply in control of their emotions. A person can feel anger, but bury it deep inside them by rationalizing their reaction and consciously choosing to focus on something else. The Force is no cure for deception. The vilest of darkness can lurk underneath the light and you won’t see it coming until you feel the dagger twisting deep in your back.

The stranger is radiant, the intensity of it rivaling only a few signatures she’s ever felt in her life in people both Force-sensitive and not she’d considered extraordinary. The warmth of him seems genuine, somehow more than others, and that’s all she’s going to get for now. She could spend days trying to see past his shine and not get anything more than that, so she decides to trust her instincts and stop dwelling on it. Truth, she has learned, is often revealed in due time all by itself. Sometimes actions speak louder than every wild sensation in the Force.

She commits to this unexpected team-up. “Then we might be allies today.”

“Only today? I can’t decide whether to be saddened or insulted.”

He says it somewhat cockily but kindly, in a playful way of someone who takes on the world with an excited smile rather than with a predator’s pretentious smirk. She shrugs and leans closer to the grate, gently showing him aside with her shoulder. “It’s up to you, Stranger.”

“The choice of my reaction?”
“The ally part.”

He hums under his breath. “All right, Sneaky. Challenge accepted.”

She stands in the shadows on a roof, Smarteel’s desert night hot and humid and making the lightest practical set of clothing she owns stick unpleasantly to her body, and grimly watches the violent dance of a multi-colored flame burning the warehouse to the husk. Was it a deliberate act of sabotage with some kind of remote-controlled thermal detonators? That’s the only good explanation that comes to mind, given that the chain of explosions has started when every single worker and thug left the building.

(Shes had reached out to the Force on instinct the moment the fire erupted, searching with a sinking heart and a nauseating echo of vertigo throughout the inferno for any sign of a life in agony and throes of death. She found none. While it has brought her a profound sense of relief and soothed high-pitched wails of panic and mangled trust in her mind, it doesn’t make the situation feel right.)

A sharp scuffle of booted feet upon the roof makes her whip around in its direction, finger firmly finding the trigger of her ready-to-kill blaster in less than a heartbeat.

“Hey — allies, remember?” presses the stranger from before lightly, both of his hands lifted up in the air and broadcasting casual innocence.

“We had a deal,” she snaps quietly, frustration a keen and bitter thing in her gut. Maybe it’s her heightened sense of righteousness in play, but betrayals big and small always affect her more than simple notion of evil. “You cause a ruckus to flush the workers and guards out, I slice the alarm and sneak out the evidence. We both get away, wait for the authorities to collect the contraband.”

He cocks his head to a side, the motion jerky and mirroring her frustration. Both mask and hood concealing his face, the distance and shadows concealing his eyes just right make it even harder to pinpoint even a glimpse of his expression, but she’ll be damned if he’s not rolling his eyes. “You’re new to the Wild Space, aren’t you?” he demands in a slightly harsh but quiet tone, emotions running high despite an interesting undertone of weariness in his voice.

Emotions are good, emotions are like a mirror directed to a soul — sometimes muddy, sometimes even fractured, but offering real glimpses. She lowers her blaster and crosses her arms against her chest, index finger still on the trigger and the weapon’s barrel aiming at the sky. Planting her feet firmer to the roof’s floor into a wider, surer stance, she tilts her chin up slightly and waits, curious to see if the scarf concealing her features along with her attitude will wrench out even more sincerity out of him.

It sure does.

“Cause I’m not,” he asserts the moment she stills. “Cause I know that relying on local authorities will only ensure that poison ends up on the streets sooner or later even after it was seized. You can expose anyone you want, dig up whatever damning evidence you can possibly find. Flash-news: the rich and powerful around here couldn’t care less for anyone playing by the rules. The rules are theirs to make and bend at will. They’ll remove one or two players away from the board to appease the public a little only to allow those bastards to retreat into shadows and keep living their privileged life. Any important legal case spends years in court, people inside of the system sabotaging it in the most absurd and flagrant of ways possible. It’s like a competition in determining the highest degree of outrageous. I admire your desire to do things by the book and try to see the best in people and systems, but it won’t protect those who really suffer. So if you’re going to lecture me, please, spare the effort.”
He salutes with one hand in a rather mocking gesture, swiftly turning on the heels of his feet. “Either goodbye or until next time, Justice,” the stranger says offhandly, not even bothering to look back over his shoulder as he walks away.

She linger on the rooftop, waiting for the fuss down below die down as she carefully takes notice and snaps camera images of every person arriving at the scene. When she checks in with the Force from time to time, the now familiar shine of the stranger lingers inside one of the neighboring buildings, him clearly as determined to see this shady business through as she is.

In the moment, frustration a lingering ghost of a friend she’d rather not have, she hopes this is goodbye.

It’s not.

Until-next-time happens again, and again, and again, and every time sharp edges in their difference of opinion smooth out until the partnership feels absolutely organic, until their approaches start to complement one another. Wound up, she has judged him too harshly that first night. The second time they cross paths, he reveals his name, swallows his pride and lets her handle the matter the way she wants; despite having support from local folk desperate to make things right, the way events unfold turn laws into a joke. She has to give it to him, Kahle has enough goodwill in him to keep his, undoubtedly, well-earned jab of I told you so quiet. They clearly share a goal. The longer they work together, the clearer it becomes that Kahle is not a man fond of petty destruction or violence, just a man with a heart made harsher than her own by the world.

A few weeks into their quest for justice, during a particularly quiet stakeout time they share, Kahle suddenly breaks the silence and murmurs, “Sorry I’ve been mouthing off to you the day we met. That was low and lame of me.”

The way he says it sounds eager and sincere, released in a small hurry like a breath he’s been holding for too long. His eyes keep watching the street intently from the big windowsill they sit upon in an abandoned old building in the city’s center, keeping track of people walking through the door of the building where the office of a shell company they’re investigating rents some space. This feels like a perfect opportunity to snatch a look at him again without being obviously caught.

A once-Je’daii padawan and knight, she’s been taught to see and cherish beauty in nature and in the Force, and forbidden to let herself ever be captivated by a person. A servant of the Force could admire the skill of someone’s dancing or a beauty of a voice or the pure art in the way someone is fighting, but never more than that. Beauty belonged to something, to a quality, never to a someone.

It’s not something she ever told a living soul, not her brother and certainly not any other padawan or Master Ske’ria, all too aware even at her young age of eight when she became the part of the Order that the carefree years of her childhood were over for good, that her Je’daii elders knew better, that she had to be the absolute best version of herself in order to become a warrior and protector of light she’d aspired to work her way to, but consciously cutting away her soul from something that felt so ingrained into her as a simple act of breathing has always felt fundamentally amiss to her. No, looking at Kahle — the fine angles of his facial bone structure, his pale blue skin with symmetric yellow tattoo markings, the bronze depth of his irises and the sun’s glimmer in them, and his blonde hair with natural streaks of amber — is something she could strangely do for hours, relishing in the poignant, odd sense of peace it invokes.

“I was just…” he mutters both sheepishly and a little dejectedly, revealing a new, more vulnerable angle to his usually easy-going personality, and while it’s precious and certainly wins him points of sympathy she still stops him with a soft and reassuring, “Hey, you don’t have to explain yourself to
me. Apology accepted. No hard feelings. I understand where you’re coming from.”

That makes him pause, a fine frown furrowing his dark blue eyebrows and creasing his forehead. Worrying the inside of his cheek with his teeth, he decides to try again. “I know, and I’m grateful,” he says cautiously. “But what if I want to explain myself? To be sure a hundred percent that you see me the way I am?”

“Then I’ll respect your wish and listen.”

He breathes out a small sigh of relief, his expression still somewhat raw and anxious, but the edge of it taken down a notch. “I wasn’t angry at you, not really. You have every right to want to do things the right way. Having people like you, in fact, is paramount. The world would be a much dimmer wreck of a place without the likes of your conviction. It’s the galaxy itself I’m near-constantly furious at these days. I don’t know how other people manage to go numb to corruption around them, but I’ve spent five years around this sorry arc of the galaxy and every letdown feels just like the first. I was taught to be better than my adversaries, to always take the most noble of paths to a goal. I did, and I did it again, and I’ve lost repeatedly. Barely anything changed if I was the best version of myself. So there are lines I won’t cross, but there are lines I’ve learned to cross to turn the situation around. Sometimes healing is a messy process, sometimes you must poison or break something in order for it to start healing.”

It’s easy to label the galaxy black and white and choose between extremes, but it’s a choice that only makes you naïve, that sweeps the complexity away only until it strikes back with devastating force. A struggle day by day, she’s still learning to navigate its currents and, she has a very pointed suspicion, will spend a lifetime learning it; her parents taught her about light and kindness their way, the Order tried to mold her to worship their own version of justice, but neither of dark things she’d met along her journey had shaken her faith into doing the right thing on instinct. So she smiles and gently nudges his foot with hers. Kahle chuckles, the low and lively sound immediately making a cozy home in her heart, and she mentions casually, “What if I told you that’s exactly how I’ve seen you for a while now?”

“I’d say I’m honored,” he says a little breathlessly, seemingly grateful for an excuse to keep looking down at the street and not meet her eyes when he’s vulnerable and perhaps even smitten by the conversation. “And that it’s great.”

“Good,” she concludes with a clear undertone of satisfaction.

That gets him to meet her eyes for just a span of a single breath, his smile a little unsteady but infinitely charming. “Yeah. Good,” he echoes back, a cocky outlaw with a heart of gold utterly disarmed.

Yes, she could definitely spend a lifetime like this. It’s a thought as scary as it’s alien and thrilling.

Their quest against contraband doesn’t find its resolution on Smarteel, but it wraps up after a few long months of investigation with a small victory in the Republic-controlled space in the Mid Rim where the trail eventually leads them. When they manage to connect all dots and trace the operation to a high-ranking politician on Herdessa secretly making some dirty money on the side, organizing all the evidence and presenting it to local law enforcement results in an official investigation endorsed and monitored by the world’s Queen.

The official trial for a matter so sensitive and high-profile is naturally overseen by a Je’daiii knight, so she and Kahle keep away from the spotlight the moment they pass the case to the authorities, observing the events unfolding from their ships docked in a small city far away from the capital,
tense but patient and ready to step up if the case starts falling apart. But no, Herdessia’s authorities come through, having no tolerance for shady dealings and corruption. During the public broadcast of the trial the contempt and disappointment in the Queen’s eyes are as poignant as the clear reflection of shame for letting this scandal happen on her watch. The fake outrage in the corrupt politician’s expression during his first interviews with the press right after he was removed from office quickly crumbles into shock of disbelief and, at last, into resigned kind of fear when the judge declares him guilty and sentences him to a prison term.

Such a beautiful, righteous victory of light should feel sweet, but this journey’s end brings a shade of somberness with it that unsettles her. For better or for worse, her life in the Order taught her to handle goodbyes easier than most people do. She even wanted many of those goodbyes. But this, even before it happens, feels almost as difficult as losing her parents and losing Qavi. Instead of boldly looking forward to something new, her every thought rushes headlong to re-living the good moments of the past.

Kahle turns the broadcast off, hands restless as he twists and turns his now-empty mug of caf. “So…” he mutters quietly, deliberately paying attention to his hands, “do you have a new crusade for light lined up?”

The way he says it is familiar to her, but it also hurts. This is the voice of casual friendliness Kahle uses with most people he meets; it’s polite but distant, and for the longest time it hasn’t been the voice she heard him use with her. They’ve shared enough conversations — full of earnest truths and half-lies and stories deliberately held back alike — for him to know where this is going. He’d deduced well enough from the history she’d revealed that this is going to be the end and so his instinct is to protect himself as best as he can. It makes sense, really. It doesn’t make things easier.

Balancing on the precipice of a choice that somehow seems even more important than her decision to leave the Order, she takes her last moment to evaluate her options. Yes, there was always something in this new life of hers, if not a specific job then a clear-cut direction of a search in mind, a new world she’d carefully choose to visit and explore from a rich variety of options. She’s never been tempted to search for a reason to stay (if anything, staying after her mission was done and attempting to build a normal life is antithetic to a journey she’d chosen for herself), naturally inclined to search the horizon for a new opportunity. (She’d always dreamed of stars past Sarkhai as a child, and travelling the galaxy as a padawan and then a knight in her own right only rooted the passion for wandering deeper in her heart.) But now, for the very first time in her new life of a noble vigilante, the answer to this question is a definite no.

She’d be a liar if she didn’t admit that her first instinct is (and has been for some time now) to ask Kahle to run away with her. But she can’t. Not because she has no courage, but because it’s unfair to him. He’s been raised a warrior, she’d gathered that much from glimpses into his past he’d been offering, but unlike her he’d found himself a wild part of the galaxy that needed his help and made it his new home. He’d found good people wherever he went and weaved a wide network of caring individuals. There’s no planet in this arc of the Wild Space where he doesn’t have informants or allies or friends, some noble vigilantes like him and most of them plain citizens who want their homes to thrive and build a better life for their descendants.

In truth, she can either stay or run away, and she yearns to stay so much the intensity of it scares her. And staying won’t be betraying herself, for she’ll still fight for what she believes in. She’ll just have… more. Friends and allies, Kahle’s jokes and smiles and laughter making her world brighter, the long conversations between them which mean the world to her, his presence feeling like a puzzle piece perfectly fitting into her life. For Force’s sake, if this is not about her own desires then it can easily be about Dewey’s. She’d never seen the little droid so content with his existence up until now; whenever he can, he spends a lot of quality time with a Wookie mechanic in the repair shop next to
the cantina that Kahle turned into his main base of operations, tinkering with sorry ships, and in the said cantina, playing dejarik with a wide array of fools who think they’re superior in every way to a utility droid until he whoops their asses in the game spectacularly, if to believe the impressed bartender who’s running a betting pool around Dewey’s game exploits.

She can run away and she can come back countless of times, but this might be the very first time she’ll choose to stay. Whatever the galaxy may hold for her in the future, wasting this opportunity feels like a sacrilege.

She closes her eyes, bracing herself for crash and burn of potential impact she dreads, and replies with a daring question of her own, trying to best the easy-going way Kahle usually approaches life with, “Are you offering me one?”

In the quietness that settles between them she can hear the way Kahle’s breath catches in his chest. “And what if I did?” he shoots back, the warmth in his voice melting the ice of worry in her heart.

When she dares to meet his eyes, his bronze ones are infinitely soft and lively and also baffled in the most beautiful of ways. She leans back into her seat, props the heels of her feet up the table, and flashes him a smile both anticipatory and naturally shy. “Then I’ll take you up on that offer.”

“Well, that sounds like a great deal to me, Rel Dejari.”

The fake name she’s been using for the last few months sounds like a song on his lips. She wonders if her given one will sound just as good. Licking her lips, she averts her gaze to the tops of her boots, and confesses, “Forget her. My given name is Leni Awara.”

Force, it does.

A single battalion of Darksiders charges forward through an army like a fracture of a canyon through a once solid ocean of mountains, resistance to their rule withering away with every life they take. Their single squadron drops enemy fighters like flies, crippling them with deadly precision and sending them tumbling down the valley or the fortress-like city itself, turning the enemy’s defenses against them.

On the battlefield he’s fury and death personified, swift and unforgiving, elegant in his brutality. Plasma beams mauve and magenta flash through the carnage in perfect arcs and devastating swipes: he and Xael Rickerme lead the charge, a battlemaster and his favorite apprentice with talent rivaling his own. Blood boils and dries up upon the sabers in an instant, their frenzied heat destroying every life it reaches without error, without mercy.

With no Je’daii to lead them or fight for them and little modern weaponry on their hands, an entire world decided to fight the inevitable and drowns its sacred valley in blood of its daughters and sons. At first their persistence seems rather asinine to him, but as the battle stretches out into hours he even starts to admire it. With their best warriors and professional, archaic army dead, it’s citizens who charge from their stronghold of the capital and into their last stand. The Dark Side needs simpletons with convictions and passion, needs both fiery meat for a slaughter and quiet cogs in the machine doing what they’re told with fervor in exchange for their quiet, mundane lives. These people could’ve been useful.

They’ve chosen opposition. Admirable as they are, he kills them with playful ease and no remorse.

The war is his home. He dabbles in politics still when the Order requires it, but it’s on a battlefield where he feels the most alive. Helplessness of his childhood forgotten, this time he’s a harbinger of
death that has meaning, that will bring galaxy to a new age of order and prosperity, that will cull weakness and discord and serve the light the way it’s never been worshipped before.

His lightsaber, though, has a mind of its own about the matter. The wild emotions and feast of darkness in the battle quieten the kyber’s cries, but never banish them completely. The weapon submits to him like a perfect slave, not a tool to be wielded but an extension of his own soul singing across the valley in a supreme battle cry, and yet it ruins his symphony by its old, stubborn songs refusing to fade away. Where he keeps evolving, growing, raising his game to solidify the future he’s dreaming of, the kyber has found a line and refuses to cross it, the dissent sharp and constantly jarring.

He misses the times when their songs rhymed in perfect harmony.

The city falls under the shroud of a night at last, minimal casualties sustained by the Order. With thousands of people decimated, the city is still loud: those who could not or were afraid to fight remain, trembling with fear, whimpering, crying. Their spirits broken by brutal defeat, most of them will resign to forge the Dark Side’s victory by working in exchange for their lives. The children will be educated, growing up guided by the new order and willing to keep spreading it around the galaxy. Those who remain will plant the seeds for a new future. One day their historians will call their greatest tragedy their rise from the ashes.

When reinforcements descend down onto the planet, ready to take control of the world and transform it to the Order’s needs, he slips away from the city and back into the valley, to a blissfully quiet altar of death. The bodies will burn for days, their sacrifices rendered to nothing more but meaningless ashes, but in the aftermath of the battle the darkness in the Force is thick and powerful, electric with delight at its hunger sustained.

With the lightsaber’s hum dormant, the old song of its kyber is loud, the discord it creates furiously poignant. With hundreds of battles yet to come, battles designed to dismantle both the Republic and the Je’daii Order, he can’t avoid distractions. There are two ways to defeat discord: you either reach an agreement or bend something to your will completely.

He finds a rare strip of free bloodied grass in the small sea of corpses he helped pour into the valley and settles down on his knees, one hand with its palm open and facing his blade that slowly rotates in the air, the other flat against the grass, blood cold against his skin and burning with meaning in his soul. Breath by breath, he immerses himself deep into meditation, ravenously searching the Force for the very essence of his kyber. It’s been easy to bond with it once, but now the crystal’s soul is elusive, repelling him, the disharmony grating painfully like hot asphalt against his knees when he’s been thrown by an explosion’s shockwave to the ground as a child. (Faint as they are, those scars haven’t faded away.)

He welcomes the chase. Failure sustains him, always did. Resistance makes a person or breaks a person, and he’s made his choice a long time ago. The lowest day of his life blessed him with a glimpse into raw, true power. Every moment of pain and frustration, every betrayal, he collects them all and hones into powerful weapons. Fueled by wild emotion, he imagines his soul is a dagger and with every fiber of his being plunges it forward through the Force until it pierces the signature of his kyber. Layer by layer, he dwells deep through its every facet until he reaches the heated, blinding light in its very heart and eclipses it with cold, precise darkness of his soul. Deep in the Force, the kyber bleeds. Its cry shifts into a new song: not a perfect musical reflection of his soul, but a mournful rhythm of resonant submission, a splendid agony of loss.

By the time he finds his way back from the currents of the Force, his legs feel numb, his body ready to collapse without proper rest, and the dawn’s descending down onto the planet. All around him
funeral pyres of bodies burn, smoke swirling against the slowly greying sky, and the quiet slaves of the Dark Side walk around collecting the corpses, living experiments in breaking wills courtesy of his Grand General.

His lightsaber still twirls slowly in the air next to him. He beckons it to settle in his hand, turns the blade on.

The blade is as crimson as cold blood coating his fingertips, the discord of his kyber bled dry and vanquished.

His smile is a feral, terrifying thing.

It’s three in the morning, standard, on Kahle’s ship where, still adjusting after accumulated travel lag, they’re wide awake, full of energy and updating the map of gang activity that blooms in Dunstirn on R-Duba when Kahle’s datapad trills a rather sharp and annoying alarm meaning that perimeter around the Broken Moon has been breached.

“Kriff,” he says darkly and flicks the holomap off.

She slips into her leather jacket, picking her weapon harness from an old armchair in the main hold and securing it around her hips. “Lead the way, Dewey and I will follow.”

Anticipating a less than pleasant encounter with what is perhaps another group of pirates or gangsters, Kahle only nods and hurries into the cockpit to join Esfour — a servant droid he’d liberated from serving a crime boss and taught to be a mechanic and a spy.

Her hands light on the controls and Dewey as precise as ever, the Eclipse lifts smoothly above the heart of Smarteel’s desert and gives chase to Kahle’s ship. An hour-long journey to the system’s edge brings them to the Broken Moon. Inhabited by the colonists, no one in Smarteel system knows for sure what happened to the moon, but it earned its name for the deep fractures running through its broken sphere like a messy web of thousand canyons amongst long ridges of sharp-tipped mountains and a resulting asteroid belt caught for millennia in its gravity well.

Some people think of the ruined moon as eerie, adepts of one local religion consider it a symbol of doom waiting for those uncaring of the nature or the balance of life, and Kahle has always seen it as a potential threat. Having flown through its asteroid belt with him once, she agrees: the debris does make a journey to the moon more dangerous than it is acceptable for most living creatures, but in the right hands and with daring pilots the place could become a real stronghold for a criminal operation. This won’t be the first time Kahle has to rise up and drive someone away from the moon and this less-than-splendid idea.

The intruders, this time, are more sinister. The Darksiders are emerging from cozy shadows they’ve been quietly building an army in more and more around the galaxy, these days, and their sharp, sword-shaped ships are almost as black as space, living up to the name they’ve chosen for themselves.

Their connected ships stealthily cloaked and left with minimal life support in the shadow of a lazily-rotating giant asteroid, they watch from the Eclipse how the Darkside ship finds the safest route down to the moon. It’s one of their smaller vessels, most likely on scout duty with a small crew. It slices its way through space and debris with caution, its pilot clearly navigating through unknown, perilous terrain. The Wild Space is notorious for its independence; ships affiliated with the Republic or Je’daii or the Darksiders would’ve been spotted snooping around and news would’ve reached Kahle like wildfire.
Calling for reinforcements will only put her friends in danger. Sending Kahle away will not work, not with his stubbornness. Knocking him out and taking away his choice to fight will be a betrayal. She’s not sure she’s able to beat the enemy in combat all alone. Her almost-fairytale has lasted for a few months. The weight of the lightsaber she hasn’t wielded in proper combat in almost two years now feels more acute than ever against her ribs.

A string of loud, gloomy thoughts in her mind is halted by Kahle. “I know there won’t be any stopping you. You’ll go down there to confront them because that’s who you are, that’s the ultimate mission you’ve chosen for yourself in life. So I’m asking for a chance to join you.”

She looks away from the enemy ship in time to see him retrieve his favorite old-fashioned dagger from its sheathe and balance the blade upon his palm. He takes a deep breath, closes his eyes, and before she can argue the weapon soars up from Kahle’s hand. Wielding the Force with power of his imagination only, a skill yielding to a very limited numbers of Force users (one of the skills that made her special, one of the skills that could’ve made her a Je’daii shadow would she had chosen to pursue such a path), he untangles leather wraps from the weapon’s elongated hilt. They cascade down onto the ship’s floor in a flurry of a dance, revealing silver-tinted metal beneath them and highlighting a circular mount for the sharp blade. Next the mound twists, its rotation methodic and slow. The blade comes off at last, landing gently atop of Kahle’s other hand, and uncovers a blade emitter.

A moment later, a once-masked lightsaber hums, its rich sapphire beam contrasting beautifully with Kahle’s skin, its reflection made striking and mysterious in his now-opened bronze eyes by the darkness inside of her ship.

Lips parted with surprise and heart racing wildly with excitement and relief, she meets his eyes over the blade and demands softly, “How long have you known that I’m a Je’daii?”

He flicks his eyes towards the weapon, its beam fading away in a blink of an eye, and beckons the lightsaber into his free hand. “I’ve suspected it not long after we’ve met. You’re not the first Je’daii I met disillusioned by the Order,” he admits a tad sullenly and a tad resentfully. “Everyone is different and has their reasons for walking away, but you all once shared a life and most of you share the same struggles after you leave the Order behind. And then on Illarreen…”

The memories of that particular skirmish resurface in a flash. She shakes her head ruefully. A rookie mistake that was — acting in the heat of a moment on pure emotions and little to no rationality. Kahle was wounded, getting cornered, and she’d lost too many people she held dear and failed to save others too many times to allow herself living through this again. (She remembers the sight of his blood on her hands as if it happened seconds ago, the feeling of broken skin across his ribs against her fingertips as she stitched it together.) “No humanoid could reach you so quickly and come to aid without using the Force to jump from such a crazy height,” she mutters, feeling like a little girl failing to make a teacher proud.

Kahle offers her a sympathetic smile. “If it’s any consolation, I swear I really appreciate your concern for my well-being.”

She bites the inside of her lip, squinting at him. “If you’ve known all this time, why haven’t you confronted me about it before? Wouldn’t it be easier for you as well, not having to hide your abilities from me?”

“You didn’t seem to be ready to reveal the truth.” Kahle twitches one shoulder in a shrug, regards her with a very serious look, “I’m not sure if you’d have told me now if you weren’t pressed by our current predicament. I think you wanted this to happen solely on your own terms, when you trusted me enough and felt safe to reveal this to me. So I chose not to push.”
He’s right, this is definitely not the way she’d planned to reveal this side of her to him. But it feels perfect in its own special way. The trust she’d been afraid of is there, undeniable and real now that it’s been tested. The crusade against the darkness needs her and this is just meeting it halfway.

She looks down at Kahle’s hand, clutched firmly around his lightsaber, and steps close to him in a single breath, lowering her palm to touch him. It’s rare when they touch like this, skin to skin. It’s their sixth touch only: three by accident, two when they took care of each other’s wounds, and one time when she caught him as he fell. (Yes, she’s keeping count. Je’daii Order isn’t known for praising reflection of mundane tactile intimacy.) Just like any other time, this one is electric: not with bite of static but with emotion, with the sense of belonging. “Thank you,” she tells him with soft fervor, her thumb caressing the knobby bone on his wrist. There’s a part of her frantically-fluttering heart that feels desperate to keep the moment going, yearning to know his story and spill her own in turn, but she leans away, the binds of duty reeling her focus in to a terrible problem they have at hand.

As she breaks contact, she feels Kahle’s hand twitch, reach out for her on instinct before he stops himself as well and lets the separation happen. Frowning, he tightens his grip around his lightsaber and turns towards the viewport again. “What’s your plan?”

She focuses, zipping the pocket open with her mind and summoning her saber into her waiting hand. “If they’re set to invade, there’s nothing we can do to stop it. But if they’re merely exploring, we have to be cautious. None of them can escape and report back to their superiors about this place, let alone about two Force users fighting them. Loss of a ship and troops without any kind of message is going to tip the others off and they’ll come in bigger numbers. So, we must kill them and be really smart about the ship.”

“Serious whooping of some Darksider asses, slicing the ship and sending a special message back to the bosses, compromising its systems in order to make it go boom and disguising it as a software failure or a factory bug,” Kahle ticks off boxes nonchalantly. “Sounds like fun.”

She side-eyes him for good measure, feeling a chuckle rumble in her throat despite the looming storm and death. “The way you go about life would give my old Master an aneurysm.”

“Never have been and will never be a Je’daii,” he retorts with a quiet scoff. “Screw your Master’s opinion, do you agree with what needs to be done?”

“I see no other way to drive our enemies away from the worlds we’ve chosen to protect. I’m in.”

Kahle shifts, looking at her again, straight into her eyes and soul, and bows his head. “It’s your lead, Len. And I’ll be right with you.”

“Try to keep up, scoundrel,” she taunts kindly, grinning like a child.

Naughty as he is, he eagerly accepts the bait and elevates the stakes. “You know this will come back to bite you in the ass, right, Justice?”

She settles back into the pilot’s seat. “I’m in a mood to live in a moment. One problem at a time, Thorn. One problem at a time.”

In a fight they are one, more so than ever. Now free to use the Force and their lightsabers, the katas and tactics drilled into them until they turn into instincts, their sync in battle is absolute. She’s best at defense, enduring and wearing her opponents down into a mistake, and Kahle is a masterful
balance between both sides of a fight, attacking and pulling back at all the right moments, complimenting her skills.

Two against five are not good odds, especially not against skilled Force users. The battle drags on, threatening to overwhelm. The Darksiders attack with unhinged offence, their efforts hard to counteract, and their use of Force powers and environment around them forces her to respond with telekinesis of her own and holding up Force barriers, each of the feats a tricky task in such a violent, chaotic battle. Still, they take down one opponent, then another. The third one is winded from directing a powerful chain of lightning against her protection bubble and dies from a saber-throw perfectly executed by Kahle. He leaves himself exposed by the trick, barely jumping away from the enemy’s lightsaber swipe. A protection bubble she conjures up around him is the only thing that saves him from being smashed against the rock mid-flight by the opponent’s quick reaction to his vulnerability.

Two against two now, they dance around the jagged canyon in a deadly flurry of activity, their skills matching each other. Or… not, for the longer the fight drags on, the fiercer their remaining opponents become. Both men powerfully built, clearly trained to fight other Force users, fueled by the rage of the Dark Side, they slowly but surely tip the scales in their favor as she feels her strength fading away with every desperate attempt to protect herself. Neither she nor Kahle attempt any offensive maneuvers with their sabers anymore, and the enemies counteract her telekinesis with brutal ease.

When it feels that loss is near, Kahle staggers into her protective barrier, his legs barely holding him up. His lightsaber extinguished, he’s clutching his arm, fingers slick with blood. He meets her eyes for a moment, his expression resigned and anguished as if he senses this might be the end, and closes his own. The Force around her trembles as something cold and dark rises from within it. Both Darksiders rise high up in the air, their weapons falling from their hands. Backs arched and mouths wide open, they struggle in the air like helpless puppets trying to resist with their last vestiges of life, fingers clawing at their necks. Two loud, crunching cracks in unison put an end to this morbid theater: the enemies fall to the ground, limbs sprawled without dignity, their necks a little twisted and eyes devoid of life.

By her side, Kahle sags down on his knees. She breaks her concentration in a blink of an eye, the protective barrier dissolving like mist, and darts to him, catching him before he falls completely, arms curled protectively around him as she hoists him up. His skin feels cold against neck, fever of the fight and her blood running hot amplifying the sensation, but his ragged breath is warm. He’s trembling in her arms, one arm curved around her back and holding on to her as if to dear life. She buries her fingers into his hair, uncaring for the damp sheen of sweat in it and the back of his neck, and presses her lips to the crown of his head.

The Force still raging in her veins, making the world feel especially poignant, she uses the remains of her slipping concentration to focus solely on Kahle’s signature in the Force. The light of him is still radiant and beautiful, familiar and genuine in the most comforting of ways despite being marred at the edges by destructive, chilly darkness. She feels him heaving frantic breaths against her chest, the language of his body rhyming in unison with the shroud of darkness in his signature retreating. Kahle wills that ravenous destruction away. It’s him who’s in control.

This power is classified as a Dark Side one for a reason. It’s an easy solution, a mistress of temptation. It hulls and it breaks and it consumes, devouring the light, corrupting a soul, not leaving even a husk of a good person it roped into its poisonous embrace when it’s done. The darkest pages in the Je’daii Order’s history are marred with these powers, the consequences of dabbling with them abundantly, painfully clear. She’d lived through this herself, losing Qavi to his emotions and the easy
promises the darkness offered him.

(She didn’t live through this nowhere near enough to have even a slim chance at stopping her brother from falling.)

Deep inside her heart her fear of this darkness is a primal and terribly potent thing, threatening to override rationality, to repel these powers and everything they touch as if they’re plague. But such fear is no less destructive than these malignant currents of the Force. Fear is ravenous, left unattended it festers and destroys. She knows enough history to see how fear ruins entire civilizations, she lived through enough in her life to watch once good people fall and lose their light because something made them afraid to confront, understand, and handle a phenomena.

And that’s where the Je’daii Order had messed up. It taught her to control emotions: either banish them or master them, keeping them at bay so that they wouldn’t cloud her judgment. It never taught her how to understand her feelings and live with them, how to experience life in its entirety — good and bad and infinitely complex — and not get lost along the way.

It’s her time to live now. To understand the world in its every dimension, find her place in it, and make peace with it. She wasn’t there for Qavi when he struggled and she shied away from the man he’d become because she was too afraid to confront him, too afraid to understand what had pushed him to a brink.

Repeating the same mistake with Kahle would be the ultimate proof of weakness, of her succumbing to her fears.

She’s better than this. She closes her eyes, holds on to Kahle even tighter, and for a while they breathe in tune, coming down from a storm on the fractured moon, surrounded by bodies of their enemies.

In the aftermath of the fight Kahle is quiet in a way that’s unnatural for him, guarded like he’s waiting for a blow to shatter him. His face is an epitome of resignation that she understands better now: he wasn’t shaken by the prospect of looming death back in their battle, he was trying to make peace with the fact that she’s going to walk away once he reveals his willingness to dabble into such ruinous powers.

It tells her two things. One — he knows full well the true impact and meaning behind using that type of power. Two — she has a long way to go from her prejudices and sometimes still too naïve delineation between what’s right and wrong.

Kahle is tense under her touch, deliberate in avoiding a mere glance at her face, uncomfortable in his skin in a way that both unsets and soothes her. Nothing about what happened in the fight is easy, same with its aftermath, but it feels instinctively right, like it’s supposed to be this way. She cleans the lightsaber burn slashing down his shoulder, gently coats the wound with kolto gel and wraps a bandage around it. Every string of words she can think of feels clumsy, so she decides to stop rehearsing or modeling the situation and simply lets it unfold, nudging his chin up with her knuckles.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she reassures him, eyes locked into his when he risks looking at her. “Unless you want me to walk away, of course.”

He frowns, his expression that of tense puzzlement. “Why?” He squeezes his eyes shut a moment later, frustrated by his own question. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m not complaining, but this just...”
“Goes against everything I was taught as Je’daii knight?”

“Mm,” he mutters, hunching his shoulders a little more.

His hands are bloody and so are hers, but she doesn’t care. She covers his hand with hers, the kolto on her fingertips making their slide against his knuckles slick. “Deduce this, Genius,” she murmurs fondly, “would I be a rogue Force user vigilanting my way around the Wild Space with a nice scoundrel like you if I’d always blindly follow the Order’s teachings?” He’s searching her expression now like a drowning man reaching out for the fading light above him, and she shrugs a little. “I understand why you did what you’ve done and I see that you are aware of the implications. To me this is better than blind following of the Dark Side and the blind fear of it by the Je’daii Order. None of this is easy for me, but I’m learning. You’re still you in my eyes. There’s just… more. I don’t want to run from it, don’t want to label it, I just want to see if I can understand you fully and make my peace with it.”

Overcome with desire, she leans forward, presses a tender kiss against the fine lines of the frown on his forehead, and leans away. Collecting the medpack, she walks to the ‘fresher and leaves Kahle alone with his thoughts.

He’s not in the main hold of her ship when she walks back out, but she finds him in the cockpit, relaxed in the co-pilot’s seat with his legs propped upon the console and eyes trained on the distant chaos of the asteroid belt twisting around the moon. He may not be back yet to his usual carefree, charismatic self, but the worst of anxiety in his expression has toned down. The corner of his mouth even twitches into a shaky smile when she brushes her palm against his good shoulder and settles into her pilot’s seat.

“Most of the things I know about the Force and the purpose I’ve chosen in life come from my parents,” he reveals, twisting a threaded bracelet he usually wears on his left wrist in between his fingertips. “My father in an expert in lightsaber combat, trained me in every form he’d mastered ever since I was a child. My mother, though, took it upon herself to learn and understand the Force and its powers to the best of her extent. Just like she’s been taught by the Je’daii, she taught me that the Force is like a mountain submerged into a deep ocean. The closer you get to both the peak and the bottom, the more complex and demanding the challenges they present become. The Dark Side is as integral of a part to the Force as the Light Side. The higher you go, the easier it is to fall. The deeper you submerge, the easier it is to drown. Sometimes the only way to keep fighting for what you believe is to dive in to the very bottom of this ocean. She taught me that every person is a sum of their choices. One is never lost if one doesn’t let the ocean consume them and rises back up again. One is never lost when they choose the hardest of options to preserve the light after they have exhausted every other way to fight. One who serves the laws of justice, uncorrupted by the darkness even if they’re forced to use it, and who protects innocents is never lost.”

The words ring true in her heart, depicting a balance as multi-faceted and arcane as the Force itself. “I wish I could meet your parents,” she tells him impulsively, the thirst for knowledge and understanding insatiable.

Kahle turns to face her fully, bewildered yet with a smile around his eyes. “That can be arranged.”

She squints at him playfully, biting the side of her bottom lip. “How long have you been eager to let me peek beyond your masks?”

Force, he may feign nonchalance all he wants, but that is most definitely a blush deepening the color of his skin upon his cheeks. “For a while now,” Kahle replies in a deadpan voice. It only makes her chuckle and he shakes his head ruefully, knowing full well this is the fight he’d hopelessly lost. “Be a dear and let me keep up the illusion for the others, will you?”
“Always, scoundrel.”

They spend a next month or so on constant lookout for Darkside ships venturing to the Wild Space again, but this time the galaxy is kind to them.

“Ugh, cease and desist, Mother Hen,” grumbles Riko, the cantina’s owner and technically Kahle’s second in command as Kahle goes over the pool of tasks and the third insistence on contacting him the moment he’s needed back into the Wild Space in ten minutes. “The world never falls apart when you leave for your vacation. Bugger off on your merry way.”

She laughs jovially at both Riko’s verbal jabs and Kahle’s fussing, and it earns her a mighty scowl from him. She smirks innocently and exchanges pointed glances with Esfour’s oculars as the droid warbles his version of a dramatic sigh. “For someone very concerned with keeping up his carefree reputation he’s not very bright, is he?” she whispers conspiringly to Esfour.

“He sure isn’t,” declares the droid loudly, earning himself a frustrated eye-roll from Kahle.

“I knew you both were trouble,” he mutters to them when he passes them both, heading for his ship.

“That’s why you enjoy our company,” supplies Esfour helpfully.

She stops by the Eclipse for a moment, lays a hand to the ship’s hull lovingly, stroking the smooth metal. Kahle had apologized, but insisted on secrecy of their destination and asked her to join him on his ship. “I’ll come back for you, lovely,” she whispers to the ship and looks in the direction of its open ramp where Dewey had rolled out. “See you soon, my friend,” she bows her head to the stocky droid.

He warbles back a heartfelt farewell and makes a shooing gesture with his multi-functional hand.

They’re supposed to stay with Kahle’s family for a month, a traditional vacation time he takes every other year to visit home, and the journey itself takes an entire week. They travel across Triellus Trade Route and onto Corellian Run, where they stop for a major refuel and re-supply. Leaving the spaceport behind and rushing beyond the orbit, Kahle leaves his pilot seat and invites her to follow him with a tilt of his head. He stops next to the navicomputer manned by Esfour, leans with one shoulder to the ship’s hull close to it, and relaxes into her touch when she brushes her body against his, her chin hooked over his shoulder.

“It’s time, Esfour,” he says to the droid.

A string of encrypted calculations flashes upon the screen, a nonsensical set of equations modified so heavily they’re impossible to understand. “The galaxy has not uncovered my home yet,” explains Kahle quietly. “We keep it a secret and we have sworn a vow of duty to keep it that way. Even I can tell you the direction, but give up neither its exact location nor the calculations behind the route. The amount of people knowing the full truth is severely limited. I’m not sure I can correctly identify them all either.”

“Shady,” she murmurs, more intrigued than alarmed by a secret for the first time ever.

“It is, a little,” he agrees, huffing a lively chuckle under his breath. “But you’ll understand why we want to keep it that way.”

She does.
The planet they arrive to after three long days without ever pulling away from hyperspace is lush with life, its two giant continents a bloom of greenery separated by a giant ocean spanning perhaps a good half of its surface. Two moons, silver and lapis, glow rather close to each other and to Kahle’s ship, orbiting the planet. She leans closer to the viewport, taking in the stunning space scenery with hungry eyes. The place lives up to its secretive way of life: there doesn’t seem to be a trace of activity in the system, no busy space stations and no ships visible save for Kahle’s; from this particular angle both moons and the planet itself seem to be devoid of settlements. Everything around here looks to be one with the nature, a rare phenomenon in the galaxy transformed by space-faring civilizations.

“Long time no see, scoundrel,” croons a playful female voice on the ship’s comms, to which Kahle reacts by thumping the back of his head against his seat with a somewhat vexed expression on his face. “Hey, Esfour, clearance code acknowledged and accepted. Welcome home, you guys.”

She makes sure to keep her crooked smile on long enough for Kahle to notice it and roll his eyes. He follows the line of her gaze regarding the two moons thoughtfully as his ship slowly passes them by and confirms her theory, “A squadron of starfighters lurking at the dark sides of the moons. This is not the place we want to fight at, but we won’t be sitting ducks if the enemy somehow makes their way here.”

She turns her attention back to the planet, struggling to make out any sign of civilization as they head over towards one of the continents. “What’s it called?”

“We don’t know.” She squints at Kahle from the corner of her eye, finds him relaxed in his seat and looking at the planet fondly, a gentle smile playing tricks on his lips. “So we call it Home.” He shifts his gaze towards the other continent. “Both moons are devoid of sentient life, but that particular continent is a home to a developing humanoid civilization. We don’t interact with them, just keep very careful watch over them. They’ve moved far away from a primitive society, busy now with building tight networks of interconnected communities and advancing in sciences and arts. Their tools and craftsmanship are evolving. Soon they’ll build ships capable of crossing the ocean and reaching the continent sheltering us. Until that happens, this is our home. We chose not to give it any other name because it’s not ours to give. We’re merely guests here.”

“That’s honorable,” she points out, admiring and respectful.

“We try,” Kahle replies simply, his eyes growing a little distant. “Sometimes it feels like these people would be better off undiscovered by the galaxy,” he admits quietly, forcing the words out as if they pain him.

Sometimes she feels as if the galaxy is broken too. She reaches out her hand into the space between their seats and squeezes Kahle’s hand when he meets her halfway. It doesn’t make the mess and darkness raging light years away from this place any less easier to handle or make peace with, but it helps to know that she’s not alone in her disappointment and somberness, that she has someone she can count on to share the fight for light with her.

Esfour keeps control of the ship via its computer, taking them past the orbit with admirable smoothness and directing it towards the edge of the continent. Even up close there’s not a hint of settlements spanning the world’s plains and mountains and forests. At last they reach a mountain range rising from the ocean, thousands of pointy spires reaching out for the skies.

Years of piloting experience do not save her from feeling her heart somersaulting in her chest when Esfour sends the ship straight into the mountain’s vent. Fear turns into wonder when she finds herself in a small city made up of series of villages hidden from the galaxy in the mountain’s heart, a hive of smallish starships clustered snugly upon a hill. Buildings integrated into nature perfectly, a
stunning temple chiseled into the mountain’s wall, it just may be one of the most impressive, impossible places she has ever visited.

She looks around in awe as Esfour parks the ship, overwhelmed by so many things she’d like to come close to and examine in all their glory.

Kahle tells her, “Now it’s really welcome home,” and she can’t possibly agree more.

When the ship’s ramp lowers they’re greeted by a raven-haired Pantoran man, the hair color on his temples fading to dark grey. The yellow markings on his face are identical to Kahle’s, their features bearing uncanny resemblance save for their eye and hair color and shape of their mouths.

Kahle’s father shakes hands with him only to wrap his son into a bear hug, one hand reaching up to ruffle blonde strands of hair across the crown of Kahle’s head. “This never stops being embarrassing, dad,” mutters Kahle, slightly annoyed in a childish way.

“The best way to know if someone is worthy of being called a friend is to end up in embarrassing circumstances around them,” retorts the older man wisely, completely unfazed by the complaint, and lets Kahle go. Meeting her eyes, he bows his head in a greeting and offers his hand. “Raleigh Teyan-Areni, once a Je’daii knight and now a rogue agent of Balance, m’lady.”

She shakes his hand. “Leni Awara. I suppose my biography is somewhat similar to yours.”

“My pleasure, Leni.” Raleigh steps away, stuffs both hands into the pockets of his loose trousers. “Okay then, got a lesson to continue. Hope all the training weapons are still intact in hands of hyper-active teenagers I’ve left alone on the arena. See you guys during dinner.”

She stares at Raleigh as he heads towards the temple, blinking once, twice. Kahle smiles sympathetically. “In case you wondered where I’ve inherited my lively personality from,” he concludes and adjusts the strap of his bag over his shoulder. “He and mom are one of the twelve Teachers running the temple. Their approval of you means you’re welcome in our Home. You will meet the other leaders of our community, but none of them are big fans of formalities and rules like the Je’daii Order and most of the Republic are. This place and the Balance as an organization have laws that are to be respected, but they run more like a giant motley crew of a family and less like a government with strict hierarchy.”

Kahle takes her on a walk around the mountain, showing her the different parts of the city and the farms down the river where people grow whatever food they can to sustain the community to best of their ability and reduce the dependency on bringing in resources from off-world. His Home is a welcome place to many different species, with beings either young or close to older age seemingly dominating the population.

“Is everyone around here Force-sensitive?” she asks him when they leave the shore with twelve meditation stones and duck into the tunnel lighted up by grey crystals.

“No, the split is pretty even. This has started out as a community for Force-sensitive people who did not agree with the Je’daii Order’s point of view and sought to find and explore the balance in the Force, but very soon other people were welcomed to join. To us it does not matter if you can use the Force or not, so long as you walk the path of balance and strive to protect those in need in any way you can. To some this is their home, to some it’s an academy where they learn and go on with their lives elsewhere. It’s a safe place to those who respect our ways and anyone is free to leave wherever they want. Our only requirement is to keep the locations of our shelters hidden from anyone who might wish us harm and not to betray our trust.”
She touches one of the crystals experimentally, watching its light flare up a little in response to her touch. “How long have your people been here?”

“For the better part of a century,” Kahle replies. “It’s been the longest period of peace and safety in our history. There are more of us than ever. We don’t trust easily, but when we do it’s near absolute. I like to think this is what helps people feel welcome and respected. Most carry our legacy with ease and pride.”

She reserves judgment for now. There’s nothing in the galaxy that’s perfect, the Force included, yet alone a community. But something about this shelter feels right to her. If Kahle represents what people of this place stand for, their teachings might be something she’ll choose to follow.

Kahle is sparring with his father in a knee-deep lake littered with small hilly islands in the farthest hollow mountain in the range, early morning sun highlighting the beams of their sapphire and golden lightsabers. She watches them dance in combat across the blue shore, bare feet submerged into milky water, captivated by the grace of it. They alternate between forms as easily as birds changing trajectories on the fly, every transition smooth and timely. There’s a sense of softness to the way they execute offensive maneuvers, the thrill of it gentle and mastered, lacking the destructive passion behind the katas.

Kahle’s mother comes back from her stroll across the lake, the hem of her black dress (split at the thighs to allow freedom of movement) damp with water, and sits down onto the sand beside her. Vesna Teyan-Areni is a stunning Human woman, curvaceous and tall and still strong as she ages gracefully, yellow tattoos marking her as Raleigh’s family bright against her pale face and complimenting her bronze-colored eyes. She bends her legs and buries her toes into the water, leaning forward and embracing her knees. “And to think I wasn’t supposed to have either of them in my life,” Vesna says under her breath, watching her boys with soft, loving gaze.

She looks down at her hand, doodles absent-minded figures upon sapphire sand. “Vesna, I don’t want to intrude, but do you mind if I ask you something personal?”

The older woman shifts her head and looks at her with a gentle smile. “Not at all, Leni. In fact, I believe that most beings could’ve avoided a lot of unnecessary problems if they’ve asked more questions and listened attentively. Speak your mind freely.”

Vesna’s opinion is undeniably wise, but she still feels out of place treading this particular conversational waters. She does try to best her shyness and awkwardness of the entire topic. “You and Raleigh… have you fallen in love when you’ve already left the Order?”

“I suppose it would be fair to say that this is why we left the Order.” Vesna uncurls her arms from her legs, straightens up, and turns to face Leni. “Raleigh and I grew up when the fall of Hutt Empire was at its ugliest. As children we were both noticed by the Order for our specific talents, chosen to be padawans of Je’daii warriors. As teenagers we travelled with our masters, experienced combat firsthand, learned in the field, and were groomed to become a new batch of warriors the Order could rely on. Upon our knighting both of us were given command of Republic battalions, entrusted with the sacred duty of leading soldiers into a fight and putting an end to it. I’ve thought I’ve experienced all that could be learned about a war as a padawan, making mistakes and losing people for it, losing battles and seeing the worlds suffer. I was wrong.”

Vesna closes her eyes, hands tight as they clutch at her knees. “I’ve spent months away from the Order, from someone I could seek advice from. The Order thinks of its knights sometimes as of perfect servants: perfect because they would follow their orders, perfect because they would always find a way to turn a tide, perfect because they’re supposed to be above other people. And people
expect Je’daii to be almost gods, infallible symbols, someone with a magical solution at hand in any circumstances. To lead a small army in these circumstances is almost torture. Your decisions define fates of your people, they need you to be more than you are. There’s no place for weakness, for doubt, for being ordinary on this path. I’ve never felt so isolated in my life as I did during that campaign. When my and Raleigh’s battalions were assigned to work together, I found in him someone I could trust. We shared burdens and hardships, we understood each other like no one else had before. That crushing feeling of being alone, alienated from others and assigned an impossible task I couldn’t handle retreated. Growing close to each other throughout that horror show is the only thing that kept me sane, that kept me going without falling apart. At last I had someone I could talk to, someone I could be myself with, someone I didn’t need to pretend for. We learned to be honest with each other because that was the only way to survive and not to break under responsibility and hardship of our chosen paths. We learned to love each other without feeling guilty about it because it felt like coming home after long, long years spent without light.”

“And when the Order found out, it did not agree,” she notes somberly.

“Naturally,” scoffs Vesna. “We tried to make the Council understand, but we would’ve fared better trying to ask a mountain to move. Back then the Darksiders weren’t nearly as active as they are now, so the Council had enough sense in them not to be afraid we’ll turn against them and simply banished us from the Order. I still think it was the kindest thing they’ve ever done for us.”

She mulls Vesna’s story over for a little while, compares it with her own experiences and everything she knows and thinks about the Order. There’s one more thing she yearns to know before coming to any kind of a conclusion, though. “The darkness in the Force. Are you not afraid of it?”

Vesna relaxes her hands, lets them rest loosely in her lap. “Oh, I am. Always and forever. I’ll be a fool not to, not when I know what it can do to people.” The older woman looks thoughtful for a moment, then curves her lips into a small, satisfied smile. “Let’s look at it this way, what do you consider to be a true weapon: a lightsaber in your hands or your choice to wield it?”

She frowns a little. “So in your opinion the Dark Side is merely a tool one either chooses to use or does not?”

“From this particular angle, yes. The weapon itself, any weapon, is a perfectly neutral entity. What people do with them defines their nature. And that nature is relative, fluid, a product of morals and ethics civilizations develop as they evolve. In most cultures you wielding a lightsaber to kill an enemy soldier would be a perfectly moral deed, same with using it to execute a murderer. Use your saber to harm an innocent soul and you’re plummeting towards darkness. The same action produces different results. Just as with everything, a person dabbling with the Dark Side is judged by themselves and others on the basis of the lines they’ve drawn, defining what’s acceptable and deserves praise and what has to be judged and labeled as abhorrent.”

“What about temptations of the Dark Side?”

Vesna counters with a playful glint in her eyes, “And what about those of the Light Side?”

She sighs, conceding that Vesna has a point, and the woman smiles encouragingly. “Temptation is one of the pillars of this galaxy, as integral to it as changing seasons on some planets or gravitational fields of space objects. Light and Dark are not just two extremes, they’re intertwined so tightly sometimes that you can’t separate one from another. They’re locked into an eternal shift, one sustaining the other and vice versa, balanced on the overall scale of things. Our job in life is to find a place for ourselves in their wild battle, understand them to the best of our ability, draw the lines and try not to cross those we deem unacceptable for us. No more, no less. Ignoring one or the other is what ruins the balance. Think of a scientist who wants to invent something amazing so much they
grow blind to darker sides of their inventions and do not consider every possible consequence of their discoveries. If there’s anything I’ve learned from history is that ignorance is perhaps the most ruinous of weapons. You have to understand something in its entirety before you can properly judge it and protect yourself from it. There’s never a guarantee that you’ll succeed or won’t fall prey to temptation, yes, but that is a natural order of things. The Order thinks that the best way to protect someone is to shelter them from certain things. I happen to think that this is what will undo them sooner or later and the only emotion this realization brings me is sorrow.” With a heavy sigh, Vesna meets her eyes. “Should you be interested in learning more from any of the temple’s Teachers, each and every one of us will help. What Kahle must have told you is true. You are welcome here as long as your intentions are true. You are as free to stay and learn as you are to leave and keep pursuing your ideals elsewhere.”

She bows her head reflexively. “Thank you for the offer, Vesna. I will consider it.”

“Always glad to help, Leni.”

It doesn’t take her too long a time to reach a decision. Spending the rest of the day with other Teachers helps as well, her sharing her story with them and them theirs with her. After a dinner Kahle cooks for her in his small house down the village, she invites him for a walk. Evenings are lovely in the hearts of these mountains, pathways across the hills gently lighted up by old-fashioned torches.

They walk up to the temple and descend down the branching out staircase close to it, heading towards the neighboring mountain. “What’s the coolest place around here in your opinion?” she challenges Kahle, arching a sly eyebrow and sizing him up expectantly.

He seems thoughtful for a moment, licking his lips absent-mindedly, and nods to himself slightly. “Okay then, follow me.”

They veer away from marked paths in the mountain and head east to the dense forest growing underneath the mountain’s giant vent. With the night capturing the planet and the sky shrouded with clouds concealing the world’s twin moonlight it’s dark around the forest. She reaches towards her pocket to retrieve the glowstick, but Kahle catches her hand and threads his fingers through hers. Even in the dim light around them the shape of his nervous, slightly unsteady smile is unmistakable. She squeezes his hand back in reassurance and he relaxes.

“Just trust me,” he asks, and she steps closer, leaning her shoulder to his.

He leads her through the trees like an expert knowing every inch of this forest by heart. They make a few more steps away from the road and suddenly a familiar, soft grey light comes to life, casting gentle luminosity around it. She walks closer to it eagerly, smiles in wonder as she runs her fingertips against the wooden carcass: someone has chiseled a makeshift lantern, filled in with a small scattering of grey crystals, and secured it around the branches by multi-colored ribbons. The deeper they go into the forest, the more apparent it becomes that these lanterns mark the easiest road up the forest’s complex, fractured hills.

She takes note of how most of the lanterns are different in their designs, how there are places with a very few of them and places with a lot of them despite the easy terrain and not much need for an abundance of light. All the hints summarized point towards a tradition. “How many of these are yours?” she asks, ducking together with Kahle under some low-growing branches.

He all but sighs dramatically under his breath. “One,” he admits. “Look out for the ugliest one of the lot. I and craftsmanship do not agree with each other rather spectacularly.” She chuckles fondly
and he bumps his shoulder against hers for such mischief. “You’re lucky I somehow find your derision amusing, Awara.”

“Sure am, Kal. And, mind you, thoroughly enjoying every second of it.”

He leads her close to the mountain’s wall, a thick and tall ragged hill snuggled close to it. Circled from three sides by the forest, a cenote with milky water is well-hidden from curious eyes, a small waterfall slanting down the hill and into it. The lanterns around it are propped up upon wooden pikes forming a kind of a fence with a clearly defined entrance to a tiny sapphire beach around the water.

“I used to spend a lot of time around here as a kid,” reveals Kahle, letting her pass first through the narrow entrance. “The bottom of the cenote here dips down very gradually, easy to walk upon. The water is so dense you have to try very hard to drown in it, and the cenote is the deepest right next to the hill. See that ledge next to the waterfall?” She follows the direction he points to with his hand and nods. “That’s the perfect spot to cannonball into the water from. Ah, those were great times. Um, Len?”

She darts away from him and hurries to the hill’s edge, eagerly seizing the opportunity to have some fun and also very curious of how he’s going to react. The best expression she comes up to describe him with when she glances back behind her shoulder is that of a bewildered, confused puppy.

“I’m catching up on all the cool stuff I’ve missed in my life,” she explains, feeling more carefree than she did in years, strips off most of her clothing with military efficiency, and sets out to climb upon the ledge. “Come on, scoundrel, jaw up, clothes off, chop-chop to fun.”

Stretching her body for a dive and soaring down into the cenote is one of the most self-indulgent, meaningless, perfectly liberating things she’s ever done with her life. It reminds her of those half-forgotten, carefree days when Sarkhai still stood tall, when her parents smiled and laughed, when she and Qavi fooled around, unburdened and untouched yet by darker sides of life. Where she submerges into the water with grace and little to no splash, Kahle follows a safe distance away in a cannonball like a naughty child, splashing water all around her and smirking at her proudly when she blinks it away.

“You made be worried there for a moment that I’ve unleashed a beast I won’t be able to handle,” he informs her playfully, splaying upon the water on his back and lazily swimming away from her with the help of his feet.

She cocks her head at him. “Scared, scoundrel?”

“Pfft, excited. You know I don’t back down from a challenge.”

“What if I had one for you?”

He straightens up in the water, steady with his feet probably touching the cenote’s bottom. “I’m all ears.”

“I’d love to stay here for longer than a month,” she says as she slowly swims towards him, “but I don’t think I can. Amazing as your home is, I won’t be at peace dedicating myself to studies only knowing that the galaxy out there is burning, knowing that I’ll be of more use to it standing up for those who need help than spending my time in an academy. I’ll learn what I can while I’m here and perhaps will visit occasionally. But your mother said you can be a good teacher when you want it.” She stops close to him, balances her hands against his shoulders for a moment to steady herself in the water. “Can I ask you to help me learn what you’re able to teach me when we go back to the
For a moment he looks stunned and lost, clearly not anticipating such a request. “I’m not the best of teachers, though,” he remarks apologetically.

“That may be. But practice makes perfect. You do an amazing job with your friends back in the Wild Space even if sometimes you fail. And you’ve proven to be the best friend I could’ve possibly asked for. I trust you, Kal. Trust you to guide me.”

He swallows, averting his gaze down to the water separating them. “I’ll do my best, Len. Promise.”

She looks at his face, shadows of the forest dancing in the wind across his skin in mysterious patterns, and takes a deep breath. Summoning her courage in its entirety, she ghosts her hand up his shoulder and to his neck, fingers curving at its nape as she leans close to him. “One more thing.”

The expression in his eyes when he meets hers is both fiery and tender, his face closer to hers than it has ever been. “Yeah?” he murmurs, now sounding a little breathless in a way that has nothing to do with his worries about becoming a mentor.

She closes her eyes and brushes her lips against his mouth, a quick and clumsy peck of exploration before she tilts her head back. “I want to learn this too. And more. If you’re willing, of course.”

Her heart skips a couple of beats when he chases her back and kisses her for real, far more skilled but infinitely gentle with her. “Don’t get me wrong,” he whispers against her lips, their noses brushing against each other when he shifts away to let her catch her breath, “you’re always brilliant, but today your ideas are abso-bloody-lutely radiant.”

She winds both arms around his neck, crisscrosses her legs around his waist, and for a while lets herself forget about worries and trials raging in the galaxy and just live in this moment, basking in its utter perfection.

This night is theirs, with many hours of peace stolen from the wars and crusades they go through along the way.

Chapter End Notes

Species appearing/mentioned in the chapter: Twi’lek, Theelin, Adarian, Lurmen, Pantoran

List of canon/Legends planets: Entuur, Lonaw, Ord Mantell, Mygeeto, Smarteel, Herdesssa, R-Duba, Illarreen

Force powers: Force stasis, bleeding a kyber crystal, Force barrier, protection bubble, Force choke

Various trivia: Xim’s Empire, 3C utility droid, Triellus Trade Route, Corellian Run, the Slice

End Notes
Naora is a completely made-up planet, same goes for the *ainweards*. My official motto is 'when in doubt about canon material needed for the purposes of your story, just create something new'. \_(_(ツ)_)_/¯

It happened so that I was in Barcelona when I was working on the premise for this story, and so the ideas behind La Sagrada Familia's design became an inspiration for Naorie architecture. The *ainweards* may or may not be inspired by my childhood love of black panthers and the rich variety of dragons in How To Train Your Dragon animation franchise.

As always, mistakes and typos are all mine. I'm sure something have slipped my attention.

Title comes from a Poets of The Fall song "Nothing Stays the Same".

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