TIE Fighter: Command Decisions
by ImperialGirl

Summary

Three years after the events of TIE Fighter: Prime Wing, pilots Thelea, Rurik, and Giriad are serving on the Empire's flagship, Executor. A mission gone horribly wrong leaves them stranded at the edge of the Outer Rim and to return to the Fleet, they find help from a mysterious stranger, who proves to know about Thelea's forgotten past, the Force, and a threat more dangerous than anything they're about to face at Endor.

Notes

This is a sequel to "TIE Fighter: Prime Wing." It was originally (as in ca. 1998 when it was started) quasi-canon adherent, and is now both Legends and going far more AU than I ever intended. People who know me and who've read it before can probably guess at least one big change. There's a long note in chapter 11 (the first chapter posted after a very very very long-okay, it took me 14 years and two novels on Amazon and a Girl Genius fan fic but I DID get back to it), but the gist is, the following sources can be considered "canon" in this fic:

Films: A New Hope, The Empire Strikes Back, Return of the Jedi. Anything seen happening on screen in the theatrical and 2006 DVD laser disc transfers can be considered to have happened. As far as the prequels are concerned, they can be GENERALLY assumed to have happened more or less as seen but not necessarily always at the same time remove from the originals. Because of Legends and AU, NOTHING from the post-Disney continuity except any bits and pieces I may scavenge exist.

Books: The following books are sources and we can assume that what happens in them is *more or less* what happens—Truce At Bakura, The Courtship of Princess Leia (mostly
because of Tatooine Ghost), Tatooine Ghost, some of X-wing (EXCEPT those set after the Thrawn Trilogy), Heir to the Empire, Dark Force Rising, and chapters 1-27 of "The Last Command." The following short stories are also more or less assumed to have happened: "Mist Encounter", "Command Decision", and "Side Trip Parts 1-4." Anything else, whether it occurs chronologically before or after the events in the fic, may be strip-mined for bits I like, but is not canon and can't be assumed to have happened. This includes "Outbound Flight" and "Survivor's Quest." (And, unfortunately, because of when it falls, "Starfighters of Adumar.")

Comics: Just assume I haven't read most of them and go from there.

Games: "TIE Fighter" and "X-Wing."

Others: West End Games d6 system sourcebooks.

Ownership disclaimer: Disney owns Star Wars so technically I own a mathematically-incalculable percentage of Star Wars, but this is obviously not for profit.

Inevitable The Force Awakens question: I loved it.
"Gamma Two, watch that weather turret! You've got plenty of room below." Commander T'hele'arana, betterknown to her wingmates and the rest of the Empire as Thelea, swung the standard TIE she was flying around the metal struts and vanes beneath the Bespin mining colony, trying to gain a target lock on the escaping YT-1300 freighter that had, for whatever reason, dove beneath the floating city. Her errant wingmate, Lieutenant Rurik Caelin, muttered something mercifully unintelligible into his link. "What was that, Two? I didn't quite copy."

"Nothing, Lead." Rurik focused on his flying. "Where in blazes did they disappear to?"

"They must have gone down here." Three, Lieutenant Giriad Quoris, still had an annoying habit of answering rhetorical questions. "They probably are going to circle up over the city."

"That would take too long. They'll never chance-" Thelea broke off as her targeting computer chirped. "Lock established! There they are!" she snapped as the distinctive saucer shape of the smuggling ship suddenly burst into view from around a weather pylon.

"Using your target for attack," Rurik responded, switching his own computer.

Thelea pushed as much power as she could to the little fighter's engines. Fervently and futilely she wished the craft had the speed and maneuverability of an Interceptor. If the blasted techs had worked faster, if they hadn't been pushed so fast after the Hoth battle... she forced the thoughts from her mind. Pointless now to wish for Interceptors. She might as well wish for the Rebels to turn around and surrender while she was at it. "They're running for open space. Remember, either disable them or get them close enough to the Executor for a tractor beam lock."

"Thanks, Commander, I'd forgotten that." Thelea bit back the urge to rebuke Rurik for his sarcasm. She only hoped no one on the Imperial flagship had heard.

In front of the three TIEs, the YT-1300 accelerated, trying to get out of the gas giant's gravity well and make the jump into hyperspace before the TIEs could disable the sublight engines. Thelea grinned behind her breathing mask. They were in for a nasty surprise. She targeted the freighter's rear shields and fired off several blasts.

Rurik and Giriad followed close behind. "Lead, why haven't they jumped to hyperspace?" It was Giriad's voice.

"I'm supposed to be a mind-reader?" Thelea snapped back. She tried not to think about the fact that she was, by the strictest definition, a exactly that. Not even Rurik, who was after three years the closest thing to a best friend she had, knew about her unusual and sporadic forays into the supernatural. In any case, there was nothing she could do about it now—the ability was too erratic, and had never worked when she wasn't in direct visual contact with her intended target. Except... she tried not to think about the one time when Rurik's life had been endangered and she had taken control of his will. Never before or since had she managed such a feat. She didn't like to dwell on that event's significance. Giriad was right, though, at least about one thing: the freighter was at a point where they should have been able to make a clean getaway to hyperspace. They hadn't. They were still trying to outrun the TIEs at sublight speed. While the TIE fighters couldn't overtake them (again, silently, Thelea cursed the ancient fighter and wished for her Interceptor) they could get well within firing range. Even as she loosed another salvo at the freighter's dramatically weakened
real section, she asked its pilot silently: *What are you waiting for?*

The sleek, dark silhouette of the Super Star Destroyer Executor was looming ever larger in their view ports. The freighter must have seen, must have known the TIEs were trying to drive them into tractor beam range. And still they tried to outmaneuver them rather than outrun them. The Empire had control of the city so there was no doubling back. Perhaps they'd damaged the ship, disabled the hyperdrive. Thelea frowned. She hated fixed games.

The freighter made a steep, hooking turn, staying just outside of tractor beam range, and the TIEs followed, the tiny and more maneuverable fighters cutting the distance even closer. Giriad loosed a barrage of laser fire that raked the ship's starboard shields and rocked it. The target status numbers on Thelea's computer registered a huge drop in the ship's systems. "Good shooting, Three."

"Thanks, Lead." No trace of the cocky, arrogant ex-noble who'd joined the wing almost three years ago, she noted. "They're headed out." *Do you think you can outrun Exec at sublight?* she wondered. *What are you doing?*

Edging her speed up a notch at the expense of her lasers, she got into what was for a TIE fighter point-blank range. A few more bolts and the shields would go, then their engines. Then the Lord Vader would have his prize, which for his own, ever-mysterious reasons he seemed to want very badly. She took careful aim-

And lost her targeting lock as the YT-1300 accelerated out of firing range and in a flash of pseudomotion vanished into hyperspace. Thelea stared in numb disbelief at her fighter's blank screen, willing it to be a trick, a hallucination, anything but what it was. Failure. Black, heavy dread settled deep inside her, and although her instruments assured her everything was normal, the temperature in the little fighter seemed to drop.

Rurik voiced what all three, in one form or another, were thinking. "Somebody is going to be in serious rehli dung about this." No one even considered arguing the point.

Commander Varkris of the Executor stared bleakly at the turbolaser battery before him, wondering exactly where he'd gone wrong.

No, he didn't need to wonder. He'd gone wrong when he'd let that alien freak and her accomplices escape alive. He should be grateful that he was still alive after failing his superiors. Demotion from first officer of a Victory-class Star Destroyer to one gunnery commander among dozens aboard a Super-class vessel was, in a sense, mild punishment. It did give him one advantage-one day, a single "misdirected" turbo laser blast and that would be the end of Thelea and her fellow miscreants. In the heat of battle, the loss of a few TIEs from friendly fire-

He shook off that thought. Too many people would see. At the least, he'd be demoted for incompetence. He'd had enough of that already. No one would believe he'd killed her accidentally. That damned alien admiral might be off who-knew-where in the Unknown Regions, but there were others in the fleet, others who'd made their presence felt in the last three years, who were just as interested in keeping their wing intact. Every time he tried to arrange for an accident, be it shipboard or in a firefight, something happened to prevent it—the device failed to go off or his agent disappeared, never to be seen again. Someone was helping Thelea, whether that was an agent of Admiral Thrawn, or someone deeper inside the Empire, and they did not want her dead.

The fighters were returning to the hangar bay. He sighed. Another lost opportunity. Turning away from the viewports, he called up a duty roster on his data screen. At the moment, the Executor was not scheduled for anything major. They rarely were, of course, being as they were under the direct control of Lord Vader. This bizarre jaunt to a minor world a backwater system was an example of
Vader's capricious direction of the fleet, but no one Varkris knew was going to question the dark lord. Who knew what he'd come up with next? They'd been chasing this damned freighter-

_Freighter!_ That was what he'd been thinking of. He keyed for a list of the squadrons' assignments, and then cross-checked it with away missions. _There!_ Freighter _Aris Val_ bound for the supply dump at Narven, a somewhat insignificant world whose only claim to importance was as one of the few way stations en route to the Unknown Regions. The ship was carrying various repair components for the ships based in or near the Unknown systems. At the moment, the 437th Interceptor squadron was assigned to the escort duty.

Varkris's thin face split in a skeletal grin. Fortunately, his masters hadn't left him completely at a loss.

Keying in the password/override with which they'd provided him, he altered the as-yet unposted duty roster. The new escort for the _Aris Val_ would be the 207th Interceptor squadron. The leader of Gamma wing of the 207th was, of course, Lieutenant Commander Thelea. She'd be well out of his way, and out of reach of the powers in the Fleet that seemed to have an interest in protecting her. The _Aris Val_ was going to have a long trek in realspace, thanks to the unusual amount of debris floating around the system from some ancient collision of worlds. The debris also provided some useful cover for a few "rebel" ships lying in ambush.

"Thelea, you may be out of my hair at last," he sighed. _That_ was a truly reassuring thought.

Rurik Caelin grimaced, surveying the unappetizing tray before him. "I'm glad to know that the Empire spares no expense when it comes to our meals."

"Be glad they feed you at all," Thelea said shortly. "Shut up and eat."

"Still mad about losing that freighter?" Rurik was, even after three years, the only person he knew of in the fleet who dared to backtalk the alien pilot. Giriad was getting braver, but he still didn't like to chance her wrath if he didn't have to. The thing was, Thelea was far less prone to fits of temper than most of the male, human pilots. The eyes, he'd decided eventually, the eyes put people off until they grew accustomed to the bioluminescent red glow and lack of pupils and irises. Rurik wasn't sure why no one else had figured that out.

"I'm more upset about not being told why we were chasing them in the first place. Alpha Wing of the 112th got obliterated in that asteroid field. I admit, that was partially their own incompetence. Trying to fly side-by-side in a canyon. . . ." She said it so nonchalantly that Rurik shivered. "But still, only a fool or a desperate man would order the fleet into the asteroid field in the first place."

"I wouldn't suggest calling a Lord of the Sith, if that's what he really is, a fool, and I doubt he's desperate," Rurik admonished, looking nervously at the ceiling and walls. Who knew where the Dark Lord had his eyes?

"I'm not. I am not, contrary to popular belief, utterly without sense." Idly she twirled her fork on her plate, ignoring the meat. It was purported to be ralkiri, but one never knew, even in the officer's mess. The thought of eating with the enlisted personnel was enough to put one's appetite off entirely. "We chased that ship across half the Outer Rim, and now we're just letting them go. If I ever understand Lord Vader. . . ." Wisely, perhaps, she didn't finish that thought, at least, not aloud.

"It's not our job to question orders," Giriad said, just a trace of the academy-trained innocent creeping into his voice. "Especially not on this ship."

"I'm not questioning orders," Thelea sighed for what was probably the hundred millionth time in
three years. Giriad had matured—a little. Sometimes, though, he could still drive everyone halfway up a bulkhead with his naivete.

"I'm wondering about them." The glowing red eyes drifted to the serving line. "Look out, gentlemen. Here comes the Boss."

The "Boss," as they called him behind his back, was Commander Lige Aldacci, leader of the 207th Interceptor Squadron, of which Thelea's Gamma Wing was one-quarter. If Thelea had her choice, they would have been somewhere else. Even being on a Victory-class was preferable—there they would have been their own unit. Here they were under Aldacci's direct control. Listening to him give orders always reminded her of her cadet company commander at the Academy—he felt the need to speak slowly, as if she didn't understand Basic, and though she was only one grade beneath him in rank, he never acknowledged the fact.

Why would today be any different? "Thelea, Rurik, Giriad." He deposited his tray beside Thelea and across from Giriad and sat without any further acknowledgment.

"Commander Aldacci," Thelea said on all their behaves. Rurik and Giriad were pretending to be absorbed by their meal. Thelea eyed the sharp-featured pilot carefully. As usual the gray-green eyes were focused on anything but his misbegotten wing members. He attacked the ralkiri the way he flew—directly and viciously, quick sharp stabs of the fork into the meat. He did not make use of the knife.

"Nice handling of that freighter." He said it nonchalantly, but she could feel the smug condescension radiating from him. A glance at Giriad and Rurik's disgusted expressions told her it didn't take any special skills to sense that.

"If we'd had our Interceptors, we might have had a better chance," she replied evenly, glittering eyes fixed on the food in front of her to hide the burning behind them. "I was also rather curious why we were scrambled. We weren't on alert status. Delta wing was."

"Delta wing was needed to escort Lord Vader's shuttle," Aldacci said in that too-polite tone.

"For which they also needed our only functioning Interceptor?" Rurik muttered sourly, shoving black bangs out of his eyes. "A little speed might've helped."

"We're Imperial officers," the squadron leader said amiably. "Our standard equipment is more than enough against whatever the Rebel scum might have. If the officers are good enough."

Giriad was halfway out of his seat before Rurik could shove him back. Thelea shot him a burning glare and jerked her chin sharply toward his seat. Stay down! She gritted her teeth. Tact had never been any Core worlder's strength, at least not in her experience. "I do not think the pilots were at fault. We did what we could, not having the speed to close on them or ion beams to disable them."

"Did it occur to you to use a Kral Avror intercept maneuver? I believe they covered that at Carida, in case you've forgotten."

"To do a Kral Avror, you need a ship that's faster than the one you're chasing, for starters," Rurik said before Thelea could even open her mouth. "Not to mention that to properly execute that maneuver, you need to be split up with at least one ship in front of and above your target for a straight attack on their upper shields. I admit, that might have driven them closer to the Exec's tractor beams. But if we'd gotten in front of a modified YT-1300, they would have rolled to evade. Do you know what happens when that ship rolls?" Aldacci didn't answer. "The fighter that had
been in front is now nicely sighted by the belly guns. That strategy works great when you're chasing a Lambda-class shuttle, but a smuggling ship is a little harder. Sir."

To his credit, Aldacci did not seem embarrassed being corrected by a junior officer. Instead, he calmly speared one of the thin strips of ralkiri and said, "I'd expect you to be familiar with pirate vessels and smuggler ships, being from the Rim as you are, Caelin."

Thelea could almost see the anger radiating from Rurik, even as he visibly struggled to keep his temper in check. "No more than the average Rimworld scum, Commander." His voice was taut and pained.

Aldacci, wisely perhaps, did not rise to the bait. Instead, he said, so offhandedly she almost did not catch the meaning, "By the way, congratulations on your new assignment."

"Our what?" If Thelea hated anything, it was being out of the loop.

"What new assignment?" Rurik asked, almost in the same breath.

"Oh, hadn't you heard?" Aldacci was positively smirking. "You've been assigned to freighter escort. I'm sure you'll like it. You get your Interceptors."

Thelea rose abruptly and started for the nearest computer terminal. When she returned, her expression was visibly more tense. "It's true. We're escorting the freighter *Aris Val* to the supply dump at Narven."

"Since when?" Giriad demanded. "We weren't scheduled for this kind of duty. Who changed our rotation?"

"The order came down from above." Aldacci had a remarkably smug expression on his womp-rat's features.

"We'll be flying with you as far as Rohdesh III. From there on out it's your show."

"How high above did these orders come from?" Thelea demanded.

His smile narrowed. "High." He pushed his tray back. "We're heading out at 1500. Be in your ships and ready to fly." Without waiting for their response, he stood up and exited, without taking the tray to the recycler, of course.

Thelea's teeth were grinding. Rurik stabbed at some of the unidentifiable meat. Giriad grimaced. "Do you think we can actually handle a week at least in deep space with Aldacci and the rest of his toadies?"

"A better question would be whether they'll survive a week alone with us." Thelea shoved her chair back and stalked off, scattering several ensigns in her wake.

Thelea waited by the message terminal in her quarters, her flight suit half-on and her helmet resting on the bunk beside her. She was supposed to report to the *Aris Val* in less than fifteen minutes, but she couldn't leave yet. Sometimes they didn't give her a message, but this time things just felt wrong. They had to know something.

The wall-mounted comm unit blipped once, and the screen displayed a printed message. Thelea read it slowly, then re-read it to make sure she had not been mistaken. Slowly, like a sleepwalker, she keyed for message deletion and sat back in her chair. The room was dark now without the glow of the comm screen gone, but Thelea's eyes did not use light precisely the way a human's did,
which was just as well. She didn't feel like turning on any lights, or even moving at all.

The message had indeed been from the Inner Circle. It had been brief and succinct and devastatingly clear.

"Important things are happening," it had read. "You are on your own."
Chapter 2

Thelea shifted in the cramped cockpit and tried to stretch her legs. As if flying escort runs to the Rim wasn't bad enough, Aldacci the sadist had decreed that they would spend the next hyperspace jump launch-ready. That meant sitting in the cockpit of an Interceptor staring at a face shield for hours on end.

Worse, it meant having to listen to Rurik and Giriad try to come up with ways to break the monotony.

"I spy something...gray."

"Bulkhead," Giriad said immediately.

"Blast. Your turn."

"I spy something...red."

"Fire control switch."

"How did you know that?"

Thelea couldn't contain herself any longer and thumbed her comm on. "Gentlemen, I'm only going to say this once. Stop. Or else."

"Or else what?" Rurik couldn't help himself, either.

"Or else I'm going to blast this open to hyperspace and put us all out of our misery." She resisted the urge to add "so there." Humans were a bad influence.

"Fine, be a spoil-sport." For a moment, there was silence on the comm channel. Then, Rurik's voice came through again. "Hey, Giriad."

"What?"

"This protocol droid walks into a bar-"

"RURIK!"

"Some...whatever-you-ares...can be so sensitive."

"I'm your commanding officer, and if you keep it up I'll show you sensitive." She twisted in her seat again winced, this time from a cramp not in her leg. "If they don't let us out of here soon I may go stir-crazy, too."

"Whaddya mean, too?"

Before Rurik received an answer, they jolted slightly in their harnesses and the targeting computers, slaved to the Aris Val's sensors, flared to life ringed in red. "That wasn't right," Thelea muttered as the grid resolved itself. "We're not anywhere near Rhodesh III."

"We're not anywhere much of anything," Rurik noted, keying up a map of the area.

"We didn't come out of hyperspace on our own. Something pulled us." Without thinking, Thelea
pulled the air mask of her highly modified TIE helmet over her mouth. "But what? There's no planet or star, or even any debris that could create a gravity well."

"No sign of an Interdictor or anything like one, either," Giriad added.

"Let's take a look. Captain Keivel, this is Gamma Leader. Request permission to launch fighters."

"Permission granted." The Aris Val's captain sounded tense. "Our hyperdrive is still resetting itself after that shutdown. Try and see what happened."

"Gamma wing, stand by to launch." Thelea flipped the engine switch on her control panel and the fighter's twin ion engines flared to life. There was the normal neck-snapping jolt as the ship's computer spun the fighter 180 degrees and released it into the vacuum. The instant her fighter was free of the docking harness Thelea pushed the engines to two-thirds power and began warming up the Interceptor's quad lasers. "Stay sharp," she ordered as Rurik and Giriad pulled in at her flanks. "There's something not right here."

"Where's the escort ships?" Giriad asked. "They were following the same hyperspace vector as we were. Whatever grabbed us should have gotten them."

"Unless they weren't following us." Rurik's voice was very quiet.

Thelea shivered, despite her temperature-controlled flight suit. A strange twisting feeling had begun in the pit of her stomach. "I have a very bad feeling about this."

"I was hoping you weren't going to say that," Rurik muttered. "I'm not reading anything out here."

"Aris Val, are your sensors picking up anything?" Thelea asked.

"Negative, Gamma Leader. There's no sign of anything out there." The controller's voice was taut. "How long until the hyperdrive is back on line?"

There was a brief pause. "We're resetting the coordinates now. It should only take a moment for the computer to calcu-" The voice dissolved into a high-pitched shriek of static.

"Someone's jamming us!" Giriad snapped.

"But not the squadron frequency. Why...?" Rurik's question trailed off as their computer displays flickered, dissolved into static, then cleared. "What in the worlds. . . ."

Thelea's bad feeling resolved itself into grim certainty. "That would be our problem."

There was a crackling like an electrical storm in a planet's atmosphere, twisting and writhing in deep space. The tendrils of light abruptly coalesced and then flared, and from the center of the burst appeared a ship. From its size and bearing it appeared to be a large warship, but it was neither Imperial nor any sort of Rebel ship they had ever seen. Long and black, instead of having one obvious command deck there were several turrets, all bristling with turbolaser batteries and clusters of smaller objects that looked suspiciously like weapons systems of some kind. The stern where the glowing engine cluster projected behind the ship was defended by what looked like some kind of torpedo cannon.

"What in all the systems is that?" Giriad breathed.

Thelea found that her throat was strangely dry. "I don't know."
Rurik seemed to have better control of his vocal chords, but not by much. "Whoever they are, I'll bet my next month's pay that they're not friendly."

"I'm not touching that, if only because we may not be around to collect our next month's pay," Thelea said. "Aris Val, do you read us?"

There was a brief burst of the static jamming, and then a voice. "-read you, Gamma Leader."

"Get out of here!" Thelea swung her ship in a tight arc. "We're no match for that thing. We'll distract them while you run for hyperspace. We'll try and catch up but if you have a clear vector, take it."

Rurik's blood turned to ice water. "Commander, you realize that if the Aris Val leaves-

"Our mission is to protect the freighter," Thelea interrupted. "We can't do that sitting in the hold and if they drop shields to bring us back aboard we're all vulnerable. Aris Val, run for it while you can. We'll catch up." Even in her own ears the words rang hollow. "Gamma wing, we're going in. Hit what you can and watch out for those projections near the lasers-they could be cluster traps."

"Copy that, Lead." Rurik swung his fighter out from hers, and opposite him Giriad mirrored the maneuver. "Weapons charged and ready."

"Accelerate to attack speed. This is going to be strictly hit-and-run." Thelea held her breath a moment, calming the pounding of her heart. Panic would serve no purpose. If they were going to die, and all the odds seemed to point to that, they might as well go out quickly, fighting. The black ship was growing in their viewports, blending eerily with the starscape around it. Some part of Thelea's mind not occupied with flight wondered if that broken outline was intentional camouflage. As they drew closer she could see the short, stubby tubes of the turbolasers turning to track them.

"Why aren't they firing?" Giriad probably hadn't expected an answer, but Thelea provided one anyway.

"Either they haven't seen us coming, don't consider us a threat, or-"

"Or they're after something else," Rurik interrupted.

"I think you're right. Aris Val, the destroyer is-

Before Thelea could finish, Giriad overrode the comm circuit. "Lead, watch out!"

A nanosecond too late, Thelea twisted the yoke of her fighter and tried to turn. A blast of blue-white energy exploded from what she'd thought were cluster traps on the destroyer's side and slammed into her fighter.

Inertia as the Interceptor abruptly ceased its forward motion slammed her back into her seat and knocked the breath from her lungs. The force of the explosion blew the fighter back, and the electromagnetic energy had fried her instrumentation, leaving her without fire control, a targeting computer, or any navigational abilities.

"Gamma Two, do you copy?" The silence on the comlink was more unnerving than the jamming had been.

Thelea sighed and settled back in her seat. At least the destroyer seemed to have lost interest in her, and the momentum from the blow was carrying her crippled fighter away from the alien ship. Through the cockpit screen she could see Rurik and Giriad evade and regroup, diving after her
fighter. Not me, she thought, willing them to hear her, not me, get to the freighter! As her ship rotated she could see the Aris Val flashing in and out of her line vision. The freighter was turning slowly, painfully slowly, to get out of the destroyer's path. Rurik and Giriad, slowing to flanking speed, had taken up defensive positions along side her, matching the slow tumble of her fighter away from the larger ships.

She realized why they were attending to her-the Aris Val, limping towards the edge of the grav well, was not going to be any match for the alien warship. Already, she could see that the destroyer's forward gun batteries were coming to bear on the freighter. Thelea fought the urge to close her eyes-

And in a brilliant flash of the blue-white lasers, the freighter was reduced to so much space dust.

Thelea felt a wrenching in her chest, a gripping, vise-like pain that surged and then abated as the remains of the Aris Val drifted apart, expanding into a gaseous cloud. Before the particles had even fully dispersed, the destroyer began to turn, and she braced for the explosion she knew was coming.

It didn't. Instead, the ship vanished in the same cloud of energy through which it had arrived, and they were alone. Totally alone, with no hyperdrive, no nav computer, and one of starfighters badly crippled, at the edge of the Outer Rim. For all they knew, they were in Wild Space, or what the Empire called the Unknown Regions. Thelea sighed-that would be all she needed, a patrol fleet from homeworld stumbling across them. Rurik and Giriad might make it, but they'd vape her in a standard second.

A faint buzzing in her ear and a flicker of light on the dark control panel alerted her that some systems were coming back on-line. Tentatively, she keyed for the comlink. Almost immediately she was rewarded with the voice of Rurik Caelin shouting in her ear:

"Lead, do you copy? Thelea, are you all right?"

"Rurik, shut up! If her comm's not working shouting won't help."

"Both of you, settle down." There was a lot of background static, but at least things seemed to be coming back. "I think the computer's starting to repair itself."

"Thelea, thank the stars! I thought-"

She interrupted Rurik quickly, and she wasn't sure why. "I'm fine. That energy pulse shorted the ship's systems, but I think everything should work. I'm going to have to drain the lasers, though, to conserve power." She matched action to words and then asked, "I don't know if I really want an answer, but does anyone know where we are?"

Rurik knew what she meant-was there an inhabited system within sublight distance, or were they going to die slowly as their life support systems were drained? "From what the Aris Val's computer could determine before...well, before, we're in the Dhregan system. It's right on the edge of known space. There're no planets, just a gas giant, but there seems to be some kind of settlement on the outermost moon. That's all the computer gave me, so I don't know if it's friendly or not."

"At best, we could land and wait until someone comes looking for us." Asuming anyone will come looking for us. Thelea kept that part of the thought to herself.

Giriad's voice sounded hollow, although that might have been the damaged comm. "Did you see what happened? Who was that ship?"
Thelea didn't know any more than he did, but she had a few more suspicions. "Whoever they were, they were waiting for us. Right now I'd rather worry about living to report back about it."

"They must have thought we were as good as dead," Rurik thought aloud. "Why else would they leave us alive?"

"Let's just do our best to disappoint them, all right?" Thelea said. "Rurik, give our computers the coordinates for that moon and let's see about getting out of here.

The yellow-green gas giant Dhregan was not as large or impressive as the red gas planet Yavin, but its moons easily outshone that Rimworld's in color and beauty. The two nearest the planet glinted with red and gold hues from minerals on the barren surfaces. The next two moons were as pale as the inner satellites were brilliant, sparkling with the ice and snow of frozen oceans. The fifth and outermost moon looked closer to a habitable world, showing a pale green and blue surface through a thin layer of gray clouds.

"Atmosphere seems breathable," Giriad commented quietly. He hadn't spoken much on the long flight into the system.

"I'm more worried about that satellite there. It looks like a security beacon." Thelea couldn't help the strangely exposed feeling-without its laser cannons the Interceptor was little more than a flying shell, its only defense speed and maneuverability, both of which had suffered with the battle damage. "I hope they don't mind visitors."

"I hope they don't mind Imperial visitors," Rurik said, and that was closer to the point. "Some Rim worlds aren't friendly to us."

"Some Rim worlds aren't friendly to anyone," Thelea noted, "and I don't relish the thought of being blown out of the sky after making it this far." On her scanners, she noted a small satellite in a geostationary orbit above the lights of a city. "That must be the spaceport. That looks like a tracking satellite. Shall we ask to land?"

"Take it away, Commander." Rurik's usual flippant tone couldn't hide the undernote of tension.

"Dhregash control, this is-" and then Thelea paused. She'd been about to give her Imperial rank and designation. Instead, she switched to a more casual tone of voice. "This is Commander Thelea tal Kyrrn, leader of renegade squadron alpha. We hear this is a good place not to be found."

There was a squeak on the squadron frequency, probably Giriad bursting a blood vessel. "Um, Commander," Rurik began. "What are you-"

"Rurik, do us all a favor and shut up." Thelea waited for a reply from the port authority. "Control, are you-"

"Imperial fighters, this is Dhregash control," said a strangely lilting alien voice. "You will deviate from your approach and withdraw from Dhregash space. This is your only warning."

"Control, maybe I didn't make myself clear. We're looking for someplace to lie low for a while. We don't want to cause you any problems." Thelea kept her voice modulated and cool, perhaps too cool.

"Thelea, maybe you'd better let me do the talking," Rurik suggested.

"You think we do not know that Interceptors cannot travel alone," the alien voice said. "You must leave this system. Now."
With that, the "tracking station" opened fire.

"Sithspit!" The curse was out before Rurik could think and he was spiraling his fighter into an evasive maneuver. Giriad matched him turn for turn, but Thelea's crippled craft was too damaged to attempted any complex evasions. "Thelea, break right on my mark and run for planetside. We'll cover you."

"Who died and left you in charge?" Even as she snapped at him she was turning her fighter to obey.

"You will, if you don't get out of here!" Rurik snapped, firing a quick burst as the tracking station as Giriad flew a decoy pattern above him.

Thelea didn't need to be told twice. "Stay right behind me," she ordered, "we don't want to get split up." Then, draining what remaining computer power she could spare to the engines, she dove for the planet's atmosphere. This wasn't going to be easy-Interceptors could, when necessary, fly in atmosphere, but they really weren't intended for crash-landings while battle-damaged. Worse, atmospheric insertions weren't easy when both ion engines were functioning at capacity. If she was extremely lucky, she wouldn't bounce off into space, but in all likelihood she'd be burned to a crisp before she hit the ground.

A too-close bolt from the defense satellite rocked her Interceptor and the computer screen flickered ominously. Thelea drew in a slow, steadying breath and pointed the fighter down at one of the greener sections of the continent. Reflected glare off the atmosphere lit the cockpit as the planet's surface grew ever larger, filling her field of view. As the tiny fighter entered the air, the force of the impact made the craft shudder and rock. A shooting pain burned up Thelea's arms as the vibrations of the control yoke made every bone rattle. A dull red glow was beginning around the tips of the Interceptor's wings, and she prayed silently to whatever powers might care that none of the damage had been to the craft's heat paneling. She had to pull out of the dive, but the angle of fall was so steep that the ship couldn't respond. She didn't even know if Rurik and Giriad were behind her-reentry was scrambling their comm frequency.

The view ahead was turning from a green blur into distinct features; low, rolling hills, scattered forests, rivers that appeared from within rock, ran a crooked course and then vanished again, narrow gorges, and in the distance the rounded peaks of ancient mountains. Thelea took this in at a glance and then settled on a relatively flat space near the edge of one of the woods. She drew back on the control yoke, hoping the thickness of the air near the ground had slowed her descent, but the fighter still screamed towards the planet's surface. Fear began to creep up from somewhere within her, and for a moment she surrendered to it, bracing for impact-

And then anger replaced the fear. If I die now, whoever set up the Aris Val wins. Whoever ambushed us wins. Drawing on reserves she didn't know she possessed, she leaned back against the weight of the fighter, eyes shut, visualizing the repulsors, useless in space, that had to function now. Her arms ached with the effort, her teeth ground together, and slowly, the Interceptor's nose came up and the angle eased.

"Nice flying, Lead. Didn't think you were going to make it."

Thelea opened her eyes slowly, in time to see Rurik and Giriad race past above her. "Neither did I."

They'd come out of the superheated air of reentry, and the comms seemed to be working again. "That hilltop over there-"

"We see it. Following you in, Lead," Rurik said.
For the first time in quite a while, Giriad spoke. "Hey, Caelin!"

"What?"

Thelea cocked a blue-black eyebrow behind her face shield.

"What do you mean, if Thelea dies, you're in charge?" Giriad sounded almost convincingly belligerent, but more miffed than anything else. "We're both Lieutenants. I could just as easily be in charge as you."

Rurik snorted. "I'm Gamma Two. That means that if anything happens to Lead, I'm next in line."

"That doesn't mean anything. That just means you fly to her right in formations!"

"It is standard procedure that the next lowest number is the next to take command," Thelea offered, hoping they couldn't hear the laugh threatening to break through.

"Besides, Giriad, I could just see you in charge," Rurik added. "Wait a sec while I consult my Academy handbook!" He actually managed a convincing imitation of Giriad's Core world accent.

"Better than, 'Gee, that looks interesting, let's shoot it,' like you, Rimworlder!"

"Boys, boys," Thelea sighed, now biting her lip to keep from laughing. "Let's get these ships on the ground. We can worry about who my hypothetical replacement is later."

"Aye-aye, sir!" Rurik said, and she saw his fighter's solar panels waggle in the pilot's equivalent of a smart-alek salute. She was very glad he couldn't see the smile behind her mask.
Chapter 3

Thelea struggled out of the heavy life-support harness and stretched her arms out above her head. Free of the extra weight, her back straightened and grateful muscles relaxed in relief. "At least the air's breathable."

Rurik, poised atop his fighter and scanning their surroundings, said, "So far, that's about all this place has going for it."

Giriad, sitting atop the rounded cockpit of his Interceptor, sneered, "I would think you'd be right at home, Rurik." But there was no malice to the teasing any more.

Or in Rurik's response. "Drop dead. Not that won't after ten minutes without a fresher with twenty different settings." Rurik jumped down from the wing strut he'd been using as a vantage point. "There's nothing around for a good ways. Looks like they figure we're as good as dead."

"Let's keep it that way for a while, all right?" Thelea suggested. She looked at her fighter and grimaced. "I don't think we're going anywhere any time soon." She tugged open the survival kit she'd retrieved from beneath her seat. "I wonder what they put in these things."

"Given that most TIEs don't survive crashes, probably not much." Rurik had already started investigating his. "Let's see-a couple flash-starters. At least those might come in handy for a fire tonight."

"I have those, plus a survival cape. Three emergency ration packs, probably expired. Oh, and an emergency glow rod."

"Same here, minus the cape," Giriad said. "Someone ought to start checking these more often."

"I wonder what would kill us faster," Rurik mused, "starvation or what's in these ration packs."

"We ought to see about some kind of shelter, a little removed from these fighters," Thelea said, ignoring the gripes. She studied the three Interceptors, awkwardly perched on their solar panels like unstable insects. "If someone's looking for us, they'll spot these first."

"Too bad the kits don't have camo nets." Rurik repacked the kit and slung it over his shoulder. "Should we ditch the flight suits, too?"

"So long as you're wearing something underneath them." There were always jokes, rumors and simple crude stories around the fighter wings about what went under the flight suits the pilots wore, or rather, what didn't. Thelea had never put much stock in them, but faced with the prospect of finding out, she sincerely hoped they were only stories. "I'm getting rid of mine, anyway. No point in lugging the life-support vest everywhere." She proceeded to match actions to words, conscious of Rurik's comical attempt at a lewd grin and Giriad's deliberately averted eyes. "I'm wearing off-duty gear underneath, gentlemen. Please control yourselves."

Rurik chuckled. "It's taking a lot of willpower, Commander." Following her lead, he shed his own heavy flight gear, revealing a utilitarian khaki shirt and trousers underneath. "I think we ought to take the utility belts from the flight suits."

"Probably a good idea. You both have blasters?" They nodded, and Thelea scrambled up the side of her fighter's cockpit. "Won't be a moment." Her black tunic, belted at the waist, and the black trousers were much easier for climbing than the heavy suit had been. She found the little niche
where she'd secured her personal weapon and retrieved it, clipping the silver handle to her belt.

"What's that?" Rurik pointed to her new accessory.

Thelea hesitated. She'd never shown anyone the gift Mith'raw'nuruodo had sent her before he left for the Unknown Regions, the gift he'd sent on behalf of her mother, or so he claimed. She wasn't sure herself how to use it, or whether she even could. A few hours of clandestine examination, here and there, when she could get away, did not qualify her as an expert. Still, if she needed it, better to explain it now. . . "It was a gift—a legacy, really, from someone I never knew. You have to swear you'll never tell anyone about this, though. I could be in serious trouble." I could get killed.

"We promise," Rurik said quickly, trying not to think exactly how illegal that might be. "Right, Giriad?"

"Right," but their wingmate sounded less certain.

"Fine." Thelea unhooked the handle from her belt. Hoping she didn't push the wrong button and accidentally blow them up, or whatever this was capable of, she touched the smooth black button that sat just above her thumb when she held it in a comfortable grip. Rurik leapt backwards from her as the pale gold, incandescent blade appeared between them. The low hum rose and fell from the Doppler effect as she turned the weapon for their examination.

Giriad's eyes went wide. "Is that what I think it is?"

Rurik drew in a slow, long, breath. "I've heard of them, but I didn't think I'd ever see one."

"It's a lightsaber." They had already figured that out, but she needed to say it out loud, more to convince herself.

"Where did you get that?" Rurik breathed, still transfixed by the glowing blade.

Thelea shrugged uneasily. "As I said, it was a legacy."

"Your mother was a. . ." Giriad couldn't bring himself to say it.

"A Jedi?" Again she shrugged. "I said a long time ago, I never knew my parents. I don't even know their names."

"Isn't knowing your own name a start?" Rurik asked. When he had first met Thelea three years ago, she had gone by the surname tal Kyrn, which was apparently the equivalent of having no name at all (and he suspected, though she'd never confirmed, that there was some sort of social stigma attached.) Her race seemed to set great store by their families, and she had been very happy when Vice Admiral Thrawn had told her that her name was... Rurik still stumbled mentally over the rolling alien syllables.

Thelea shrugged. "I know who my mother's family must have been. There's nothing to hint about my father's, though." What that implied was better than what her previous status had suggested, but only just. "That doesn't help a lot." She touched the button again and the lightsaber's blade vanished. "In any case, none of that is relevant at the moment. We have to figure out how to get off this planet without getting killed in the process."

"Announcing that we're Imperial officers and demanding aid doesn't seem like the best idea, does it?" Rurik said, leaning against the solar panel of his fighter.

"Not given our reception, no. And I think it's obvious that my fighter, at least, isn't going anywhere
any time soon. Even if it wouldn't take months or years, in other words longer than our life-support systems could keep us alive." Thelea settled down to a crouching position, supporting herself on her fighter. "We're going to have to find another way off-planet."

"There's no way we have enough money to buy passage, even if there were someone who'd fly us to Imperial space." Giriad sighed, looking almost comically dolefully at the thought of money. "I'd bet they wouldn't take Imperial credits, anyway."

"Out here, you need hard currency-real metal, or goods, to trade," Rurik said with confidence born of a Rim upbringing. "I don't think we're in a very good bargaining position."

"What do we have that we could trade?" Giriad asked.

Thelea's glowing eyes looked upwards. "Much as I hate to say it, what about our fighters?"

Giriad turned white. "We can't sell them! That's theft of Imperial property. We'd get court-martialed."

"And the Empire, or we, will be any better off if we die on this rock and they're left to scavengers? Be serious, Giriad," Thelea snapped. "We have to survive and report back. Otherwise who will know what happened to the Aris Val?"

"Thelea's right." Rurik put in his two credit's worth. "Besides, if we don't sell them or the parts and we never get home, the fleet loses the fighters anyway. See?"

"I guess." Giriad sounded less than certain.

Thelea sighed audibly. "That solves our first and smallest problem. The next is how do we find a buyer without attracting too much attention? If we fly into the spaceport we're liable to get blasted to pieces. If we leave the fighters here, someone might find them."

"I could stay here and keep guard," Giriad volunteered immediately, sounding a little too enthusiastic.

"That scares me even more." Much as it irked her, he did have a point. Leaving the fighters unattended was asking for trouble. Leaving Giriad alone seemed much the same thing, but on the other hand she and Rurik were far less likely to be noticed in a Rimworld spaceport, and someone had to guard the fighters. "However, it just might be the best plan."

"Huh?" Rurik couldn't help the surprised exclamation.

"He has a point," Thelea said. "Someone has to guard the fighters. You and I will stand the best chance of not being noticed or at least as passing as non-Imperials. We can bargain for the fighters and then come back for him." She frowned at the sky, which was turning a deep indigo on the horizon. "We will, however, have to do that tomorrow. We'd best get a camp set up. I, for one, am not sleeping in my fighter."

Thelea used the lightsaber to cut some of the branches from the woods for a fire. In the back of her mind she wondered if it was respectful to use a lightsaber to chop wood. She decided that the 'saber's old owner probably wasn't in a position to care anymore, so she shouldn't worry about it, either. Rurik then used one of the flash-starters to get the branches burning, and Giriad demonstrated a surprising knack for warming the ration packs over the fire and making them if not palatable, at least edible. He snorted derisively at their surprise: "What, you don't think we have camping on Ashera?"
Thelea didn't argue with him. She broke off a piece of the bar and nibbled at the corner. At least heating it seemed to dissipate the flavor. "How are we going to get to a settlement tomorrow?"

Rurik shrugged. "We can always try to fit two of us into a fighter."

"No thanks. That's a little too tight." There was no way they'd fit, not without being more than too close for Thelea's comfort. "Not to mention very unsubtle. They might shoot us down. Do either of you have a pair of macrobinoculars?"

Rurik went prowling in his fighter's emergency kit again. "I don't know how old these are or how well they'll work, but here they are."

The pair was small and hopelessly outdated, but they did work. Thelea scanned the rolling horizon, and sure enough, the macrobinoc's sensors picked up heat blooms large enough to be settlements. A few were even visible through the woods. "The largest city seems to be that way, about..." She squinted at the painfully small readout. "Fifteen klicks. It'll take us most of the day on foot."

Giriad smirked. "Have fun."

Thelea turned a frighteningly unreadable stare on him. "While we're gone, Lieutenant Quoris, you can see what can be done to repair the fighters. All three of them." His face fell, and she turned back to Rurik. "We'll need to keep a low profile."

"With all due respect, Commander," Rurik said in that irritating mock-respectful voice, "that isn't going to be easy. You don't exactly blend in well with the crowd."

Thelea lifted an eyebrow and fixed the glittering red gaze on him. "We are at the far edge of the Rim, near what you call the Unknown Regions, Rurik. You may find that you're the one who does not blend in." She shook out the survival cape from her fighter's kit and wrapped it around her shoulders. "I can use this tomorrow, too. It should obscure my face enough that I won't attract too much attention. Chiss females don't travel off-world alone often, but when we do we usually cover our faces."

"Chiss?" That was when she noticed she'd slipped. Rurik's attention was fully on her now. "Is that what your...people...call themselves?"

Thelea muttered a thousand curses to whatever gods might be paying attention, and sighed. "It's who we are, yes."

"Why did you not tell us?" Rurik couldn't help the hurt tone and tried to cover with indignity. "I've known you three years. Don't you trust me?" He didn't notice his slip from the plural to the singular, but Thelea did. "I'd think that you'd at least tell me that much."

"We don't like to talk about ourselves to offworlders." She pulled the cloak tighter about herself. "We're a very private race."

"Then what are you doing here?" Rurik countered.

"I'm hiding out, if you must know," she snapped, losing her composure as much as she ever did. "Our world is not an easy place to be an orphan. If you don't mind, let's change the topic, all right? We have more important things to do than discuss xenoanthropology."

Rurik would have disagreed with her, but he knew her too well. She might get out the lightsaber and use him for practice, and she might not. With Thelea one could never tell. "Anyway, we have to have something to use for walking-around money. Do you have anything small we could sell?"
"Nothing." Casually, their eyes turned to Giriad.

He squirmed uneasily. "Why are you looking at me?"

"You are the wealthy son of a disenfranchised computer magnate. You must have something valuable that we could sell." Rurik eyed Giriad speculatively. The other was wearing khaki fatigues similar to what Rurik had on, and the pockets did look empty. "Come on, nothing?"

"Well.. ." He shifted edgily. "I kind of have this." Digging into his pocket, he produced a flat credit chit. Rurik had lunged for it faster than even Thelea could have moved.

"This is for a thousand credits! Why didn't you tell us you had this?"

"It never came up!" Giriad protested. "It was supposed to be for emergencies. I guess this qualifies."

"You can say that again." Rurik turned the silver card over in his hands. "This should do fine for walking around."

"You're assuming they'll take more kindly to Imperial credits than they did to Imperial fighters," Thelea pointed out quietly. "You did say they'd like hard currency." That cast a damper on the conversation for a few minutes.

"Maybe we could trade it for local currency." Rurik didn't sound quite as confident as he had.

"Someone will likely want it," Thelea agreed, "although whether they'll trade or simply take it remains to be seen." The light was fading, and the aquamarine sky was darkening to violet. "I suggest we take turns getting some sleep. Who wants to take first watch?" The only sound was the crackling from the dwindling fire. "Don't all volunteer at once. I'll do it, and I'll wake one of you in a few hours."

"Which one?" Giriad asked suspiciously, undoubtedly sensing unfairness and seeking to head it off, as always.

"Whichever I'm feeling more annoyed with. It's my prerogative as your commanding officer." Thelea pulled her cloak tight. "Now get some sleep, both of you. Tomorrow will be a long day."

It didn't take Giriad long to obey, but she could see across the dwindling fire that Rurik's eyes remained open long after she'd ended the conversation. Neither spoke quite some time. Thelea let her gaze rest on the sparking red-gold embers of the fire, so close in glowing color to her eyes. In the trees beyond the edge of their little encampment, she could hear branches and leaves rustling, and the eerie wails and whistles of night creatures on the prowl. She tossed another log onto the dying fire and the sparks shot upward.

"Thelea?"

She looked across the fire to Rurik. His dark eyes were still wide open and he showed no signs of falling asleep. "What is it, Rurik?"

"Can I ask you a question? Not to kill time, I've been wondering for a while."

She resisted the urge to correct his grammar and said, "What?"

"Your eyes. Do you see things the way we do? Humans, I mean."
It wasn't the worst question he could have asked. At the Academy, she'd heard far worse from her instructors and cadre commanders every day. "I don't know how you see. I've never seen out of a human's eyes."

He propped himself up on an elbow. "Well, the fire. What color are the coals to you?"

"Red."

"Then you do see the same way."

She shook her head. "It's not that simple. I see what I call red. My concept of red and your concept of red may not be the same. Also, I may just be using the closest Basic word I can find for a concept that doesn't translate well. You would have to literally look through my eyes to know whether I see things the way you do."

Rurik frowned. "But if I call it red, and you call it red, then wouldn't you say that we see the same thing, at least close enough that it doesn't matter?"

"Even if red looks the same to us, maybe red doesn't mean the same thing to both of us." What was it about fires that brought out the philosopher in people? Whether she saw the same as a human or not, she certainly was getting the same kind of headache. "What brought that on, anyway?"

He shrugged. "I've just wondered about that, but I never really had a chance to ask before. Back on the ship-well, it would be out of line."

"I am still your commanding officer, you know," she said mildly. "Even out of uniform, on planets that are stars-only-know-where in the Rim."

"I know." Picking up a long twig, he poked at the embers and watched the sparks fly upward. "Maybe I was hoping after you go to sleep, you'd forget I asked. But then you don't sleep, do you?"

She'd had enough comparative biology for one night. "Not exactly like humans. You do. Go to sleep, Caelin. We have a very long walk tomorrow."

He rolled over so his back was to her, and for a few minutes she thought he had gone to sleep. Then, faintly, a voice asked, "Thelea?"

Valiantly resisting the urge to shoot him where he lay, she asked, "Yes, Rurik?"

"About your skin. . . ."

"Good night, Rurik. Say another word and I'll make you and Giriad go into the city and I'll stay here."

For the rest of the night, their camp was blissfully silent.

The walking was not that difficult-the hills were rolling, but not too steep if you watched where you stepped and avoided the sinkholes. The spacious grassland was a little too open for Thelea's taste, though-the azure sky stretched out forever, meeting the horizon in every direction. The hilly terrain prevented her from seeing too far ahead, but provided an illusion of openness that could be dangerous-an opponent could sneak up on them too easily. Her holdout blaster was back at her side, her lightsaber hidden under her tunic. Even here, walking around with a weapon from an outlawed religion might not be the most prudent course of action.

Thelea was leading the way, her brown cloak fluttering behind her in the breeze, while Rurik
brought up the rear. Where Thelea opted for subtle weaponry, Rurik had a Rimworld sensibility—his DL-44 was questionably legal by Imperial standards, but it worked and no one looked too hard at what pilots carried. The credit chit was tucked securely in his breast pocket, less a testament to her trust in him than to the fact that her tunic didn't have pockets. Rurik couldn't actually complain about Thelea—she had certainly been more talkative in the past twenty-four standard hours than she'd been in almost the past three years.

Not today, or so it seemed. Twice he'd tried to engage her in the most inane of conversations, once about the weather and once about the open spaces around them. She hadn't responded to his first attempt, and to his second, she'd snapped, "Save your breath for walking, Caelin," and then followed her own advice. If human females were a mystery to him, so much more of an enigma was Thelea, and she wasn't helping him at all to figure her out.

Then, in the distance, he caught the glitter of metal reflecting the sun. "Does that look like what I think it looks like?"

Thelea raised the macrobinocs and focused on the source of the reflected light. "That looks like buildings, all right. Not much, but it is something."

"I just hope they have food. Another one of these ration bars and I'm going to choke."

"No one's forcing you to eat them."

Rurik ground his teeth—audibly, he was sure, but he was past caring by this point. "Well, I do prefer them to starvation. Some of us have to eat, you know. Some of us aren't carved out of duracrete. Some of us are human."

That stung, maybe a little more than he'd intended. She started walking faster. Technically, since he was more than a head taller, he should have been able to overtake her easily. Instead he was taking two steps to her one and still not keeping up. "Thelea, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. I'm tired. Damn it, we've walked more than ten klicks, and you only stopped twice all day. How can I help being angry?"

"It's not much farther now." She didn't look back. Her voice sounded very alien, very cold. "I'm sure someone will have something you can eat."

"Thelea, I didn't mean it!"

She stopped dead in her tracks and he nearly collided with her. "I'm not angry, Rurik. Why would I be? You are absolutely right. I am not human. You are. Perhaps I've more stamina than you. I've never stopped to wonder. Would you like to sit down? Perhaps you do need to rest."

"Thelea, I'm fine. I didn't mean any of that. I'm just tired. I'll be fine when we get indoors." He drew in a long, steadying breath and willed his cramping legs to stop their protest. Thelea didn't reply. Great. Just great. Just when she starts to open up, you go and stick your foot all the way down your throat, never mind your mouth. He grimaced and followed her over the next hill.

The town was a collection of small buildings made from red clay earth and baked in the sun. There was, much to their surprise, a spaceport—a small one, to be sure, with only a few, short-range shuttles, but it was a start. "We could at least get an airspeeder to the main spaceport and get transport there."

Rurik couldn't help a longing look at what was unmistakably a tavern near the spaceport. "Thelea—"

She might have rolled her eyes. With her it was difficult to tell. "All right. I did say we could get
food." Pulling the cowl of her cloak tight about her face, she turned in the tavern's direction.

The dark, smoky room was not crowded—given the size of the settlement, that wasn't surprising. What did surprise Rurik was the range of alien life. Besides himself there were perhaps two humans in the tavern, one at the bar and the other in a corner booth. Among the alien races, he recognized a feline Togorian and one of the cream-furred Bothans, looking considerably less elegant than those to be found in Imperial Center's trade exchanges. The other aliens were a mystery to him, ranging from a serpentine creature with metallic green scales who seemed to breathe through a filter mask to a pale-skinned, wispy white-haired creature who studied him with pearlescent white eyes before returning to his...her...drink.

Thelea seemed nonplused, but he couldn't see her face so he wasn't sure. She strode to bar confidently enough, anyway. "Excuse me." Her voice was lower than usual and her accent strange.

The bartender, a short, gray-skinned alien with slitted greenish eyes set into a bulbous head, turned slowly to face her. "Yesss?" it lisped through a lipless mouth. "How can I serve?" He had the same accent as the Dhageshi controller had.

"We're looking for transport off-world," Thelea said quietly. "Do you know where we can find it?"

The green eyes narrowed even further, if that was possible. "Chiss, are you? The flight into Chiss space is dangerous, very dangerous, more than it used to be these days. Not many pilots would risk that, not without much money."

Rurik thought he saw Thelea cringe, but he couldn't be sure. "We want to go the other direction, actually. We need transport to an Imperial world."

The creature's eyes darkened. "Imperial, you say? Very dangerous, very dangerous. No one here would take you, I tell you that right now. Perhaps you reconsider your destination, yes?"

"I'm afraid we can't do that. Are there any pilots here? Perhaps they would consider our offer."

"Perhapsss. But I doubt it." He gestured with a thin, tentacle-esque appendage. "Some of those are pilots. You would like something to drink?"

She glanced at Rurik, and he nodded. "Whatever's good and safe for humans," she told the bartender. "We have only Imperial credits, though."

"Creditsss?" The bartender seemed to be considering this. "We don't see many of those here. Something to trade, perhaps?"

"Nothing that would interest you." Not in this lifetime are we losing a weapon here.

The bartender's eyes widened, and the tentacle wavered slightly. "Well-credits can be traded. Others would not be so generous. But you are new to our world. I will give you a deal-two Imperials to one local."

Thelea frowned. "Even trade."

"That isss not the exchange." The eyes narrowed. Rurik began to shift uncomfortably from foot to foot.

"I'm afraid we cannot afford a two-one exchange. Two to one and a half." Her voice was level.

So was the bartender's. "Two to one or we have no deal."
A new voice suddenly broke into the conversation. "One to one will be fine." The voice was soft and female, and it came from the hooded figure who had been seated in the far corner. Somehow she had approached them without making a sound. The bar was not so loud that they would have missed her approach.

Her appearance had an odd effect on the bartender to say the least. "One to one will be fine," he echoed, his eyes widening blankly.

"Give them their money now."

"I will give you your money now." He took the credit chit and went to make the exchange.

Rurik and Thelea stared at their benefactor. She wore a dark brown robe with a cowled hood that concealed her features. Her hands were folded back into her sleeves, resting in front of her. "Thank you," Thelea managed to say. "May I ask-"

The woman reached up and pushed back the cowl of her hood. "My name is Aleishia," she said. Her motion revealed the face of a human woman, lined more by stress than by age, though Thelea always had a difficult time telling with humans. Her dark eyes cut piercingly into Rurik's, and he would swear he was being somehow measured. Her hair was dark brown, save a lock starting above her left brow that was silver-white, and it was half-loose, sliding.

Thelea shivered. "My name is Thelea. This is Rurik." Her voice was oddly constrained. She was obviously shaken as well by this strange woman.

"Please, excuse Soldas's tight-fisted behavior. He's not really a bad sort, but out here it's a stretch to make ends meet. Not like it is on Coruscant."

Rurik blinked. He knew the old name of Imperial Center, of course, people on the Rim still tossed it about occasionally, but he'd never heard anyone just say it before, as if that was its name and always would be. "Yeah, well, it's not always easy to get along there, either."

"You talk like a Rimworlder," Aleishia noted, but her odd dark eyes had never left Thelea. Rurik felt a surge of-envy? Jealousy? It had taken him months, years even, to be able to look Thelea in her glowing eyes without flinching. This strange woman met Thelea's gaze straight on after only minutes, looking confident enough to stare down Admiral Thrawn himself.

"Thank you for your help," Thelea said. Between the manners of her so-called "guardians" on homeworld and the discipline of the Academy, the manners superceded even her surprise. "I do not wish to seem ungrateful, but what do you want?"

For some reason, Aleishia seemed to find that highly amusing. "What makes you think I want anything? Maybe I just felt like helping two off-worlders out of a jam."

"You live here, then?" Rurik asked.

She shrugged a little. "Now and then. I've lived a lot of places. Enough to know when someone is out of their depth."

Thelea bristled. "We appreciate your help, but not the insults." The bartender returned then, and placed a stack of silver square-shaped coins on the bar in front of them. Thelea scooped them up and made a pretense of counting them. "As I said before-two drinks, whatever won't kill humans."

"Try the jhalrhi," Aleishia suggested, and the bartender went to get the drinks. "It's something like a dry kaeral wine, but a little sweeter."
Thelea made a slight grimace. "Hopefully you mean a good year, not-" Then she remembered. "How did you ever happen to have kaeral wine? As far as I know, we've never traded that off-world. No human's ever-" She stopped; she was starting to babble. "How did you-"

Aleishia smiled serenely. "I'm very well-traveled." The drinks arrived and Rurik took a tentative swallow from his.

"This isn't bad," he commented. "Better than the officers' mess."

"That's not very difficult." The drink did in fact taste something like a young, sweet kaeral wine, a taste that brought back memories, not entirely pleasant.

Rurik forced his attention back to their benefactor. "So, how did you end up here? I mean, we crashed. Are you actually here of your own free will?"

Aleishia smiled thinly. "Not entirely." Her gaze rested a moment on her folded hands. "I'm not entirely welcome where I come from."

Thelea was watching her surreptitiously. There was something very unusual about this Aleishia, something oddly familiar about her. The feeling was not unlike that which had overcome her when Thrawn had confronted her with the hologram of the medallion aboard his old flagship. Then she'd caught a glimpse of herself, being carried by a woman wearing the gem. Now, another memory was surfacing dimly, even more clouded: She was very, very cold and afraid, and she knew that something was terribly wrong. She was crying, not like humans did, with tears, but sobbing nonetheless. No one was coming-why weren't they coming? Someone always came when she cried...Then there was a face, a woman's, framed by brown, always brown she was, and her presence was always sad. The woman picked her up, crooning to her in that strange, alien tongue and whispering how she had to be brave, how very brave she would have to be...

Thelea blinked; Aleishia was speaking again. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

Aleishia smiled patiently. "I was asking how you came to be here. What are Imperial starfighter pilots doing so far from their own territory?"

"As I said, we crashed-"

Aleishia cut her off. "I meant so far from the Empire."

"We are, I might remind you, still within the Empire's jurisdiction," Rurik said.

Aleishia flung back her head and laughed, revealing pearlescent, somewhat crooked teeth. "Really, Lieutenant? I find that quite hard to believe. If you're so confident of the Empire's supremacy here, why are you both out of uniform and inquiring in cantinas for pilots?"

Thelea shot Rurik a glare. "To tell the truth, we weren't supposed to be here at all. We were part of a convoy and the freighter we were escorting was destroyed. We have our fighters, but we'd never make it back to Imperial space with them." She realized that she had no business telling a civilian, any civilian, about their problem. They were Imperial officers. Strangely, that didn't seem to matter.

"How was the freighter destroyed?" Aleishia interrupted. Her dark eyes were suddenly intense. Rurik spoke before Thelea could frame a reply. "I've never seen a ship like it. They yanked us out of hyperspace and disabled the fighters before they killed the freighter-and even the Death Star couldn't have done that! It just fired one blast." He shuddered, remembering the sparkling dust of
the Aris Val spreading across the starscape.

Aleishia leaned forward intently. "What did the ship look like?" Thelea found herself flinching from those seemingly ordinary human eyes. "A dark ship, with no real shape? Or a cloud?"

Thelea shook her head. "There were spines. It reminded me of an insect."

Aleishia nodded slowly, her gaze fixed on the bar's grimy surface. "Yes, that would be right."

"You know who these...people...are?" Another Imperial might have automatically said "these aliens." Technically that would be correct. After three years with Thelea, Rurik had learned to be careful.

Suddenly the older woman was evasive, her face becoming a stern, smooth mask. "I've heard traders tell stories about such ships preying on those who venture too far from the trading lanes. I've never heard of Imperials encountering them before."

"But you have?" Rurik asked. There was something he distinctly disliked about this strange woman. Her face was serene to the point of being carved in marble. Her dark eyes, on first assessment calm and steady, seemed suddenly veiled to him. "Who are they?"

There was a long pause. "They have no name." Her voice was barely a whisper. Then, abruptly, she drew herself up to her full height-not considerable, although she was perhaps half an inch taller than Thelea. "Do you have a place to stay the night?"

The change of subject threw them for only an instant. "We hadn't planned on staying here the night," Thelea began. "We hoped-"

"To get to the spaceport?" Aleishia laughed. "No one will be leaving until tomorrow. It's late, and besides, you must both be tired." She set her glass down with a firm crack. "Come along. I've plenty of room for you both. Tomorrow we can worry about finding you transport, and about retrieving your companion. I'm sure he can't be enjoying himself out on the plains all alone. Now come with me. You've had a long day, and you need your rest."

Rurik was quite tired, he realized—the sweet wine was numbing the ache in his legs, but not dispelling it. His eyes had been wide open, but now the lids felt as though they were three times their normal weight. A look at Thelea revealed, much to his surprise, that she, too, seemed to be drooping, her shoulders slumped and her red eyes perhaps a bit dull of their usual glow. "She has a point, Thelea."

"Yes," and there was no mistaking the drowsy tone in her voice, "she may have at that. Aleishia, if you would extend your hospitality to us, you would have our and the Empire's gratitude."

Aleishia's lip twisted. "Spare me the Empire's thanks," she said. "But I'll accept yours. Come along, children." With a gesture she guided them toward the door. As they stumbled out, neither thought to wonder at the sudden offer of shelter from this near-stranger, and neither remembered that never once in their conversation had they mentioned Giriad, waiting alone on the plain.
Chapter 4

Aleishia’s house, if one could call it that, was little more than a small room off of a seldom-traveled alley, with an alcove for sleeping and a small oven for warmth. The chunks of carbonized wood had dwindled down to faintly glowing coals and she stirred them idly with a long metal poker, watching the sparks race each other up the chimney pipe.

There was a rustling from the alcove, but she didn't look up. Caelin, the human pilot, was still asleep, his thoughts drifting in that strange suspended state between dreams and full consciousness. Her dark eyes slowly turned to the figure seated beside the fire, slumped in her chair, the glowing eyes mere slits in the pale face. Aleishia smiled to herself. The Chiss might like to pretend that they didn't need to sleep, but she knew from experience that was simple showmanship. Like almost every humanoid creature, they needed to rest—they simply did not need as much as humans and it was always a mistake to assume they were too deeply under. Mith'ele'arana, on the other hand, needed as much sleep as she could get at the moment, the older woman thought, and she poked the fire again.

Caelin stirred again, and she sent a silent suggestion his way, urging him back to deeper rest. She needed to think, and the young man did need to sleep as well. She wondered exactly how far they'd walked, but it would take more effort than she was willing to expend to lift the information from his mind. She didn't dare try scanning Thelea—the girl was not trained, but she had potential, a great deal of potential. All that remained was someone to mold that potential.

Not while Palpatine lives.

Aleishia smiled and settled onto the low ottoman beside the stove. "Back again, are you?"

The voice was reproachful and as always there was the familiar tones, but a weight behind it as well, something bright and powerful she wasn't permitted to fully touch. Come now. You're the one who always said we never really leave. I'm only glad you seem to have been right about that.

"True enough." There were others, one at least, Aleishia would dearly have loved to speak to, but they seemed to have completed their work and moved farther on. Still, company was company. "She's come at last."

Yes, I noticed that, the other said dryly. Are you going to tell her?

Aleishia ignored the question. "She carries the lightsaber. He kept at least one promise."

There was a long silence, and for a moment she thought the other had gone. Finally, she said quietly, That is not fair and you know it. He did his best.

"Perhaps." Aleishia let it go at that for a moment. It was sometimes nice to simply sit and enjoy the presence of a friend, insubstantial as that presence might be. If only Mihall. . . . She shook her head firmly and pushed the thought from her mind. If he could, he would. Since he hadn't, he couldn't. That was that. There is no death, there is the Force.

You're thinking about them again.

"Yes." Aleishia smiled wistfully—Mihall, gone so long ago, her little one taken, too, like all the uncountable others, like-

Like me? The voice was bemused.
"I suppose that's true. And both our children lost to us." Again her eyes drifted to Thelea's form, slumped in the chair. "Shall I tell her?"

Oh, come now. Her voice was now derisive. You're not going to yet, so why bother asking?

"It was only polite." She smiled amiably. "She's very much like you."

With more sense, one might hope.

"If there's any there, it must have come from her father." There was a soft laugh, like the tinkle of crystal in the still air. "What?"

You, giving him credit? Aleishia could almost see the bemused smile. How remarkable.

"Force's sake, child, I have nothing against his capabilities or intelligence," she laughed. "I never have. It's his personality I can't stand. And he's always felt the same about me."

She sighed. I wish you had gotten along better. There was a wistful note to her voice. You fight the same battles. I wish–

"I know." She cut the other off. "I understand. But did you come here to discuss old times or did you have something important to say? We're starting to get maudlin."

It's about the freighter. You know who was responsible?

"They described it fairly well. There's no doubt. They're coming back, and they have their little henchmen playing around for them. Did you want I should tell them and have the Empire come rushing out here? All we need is Vader toying around with his fleet."

Vader never toys around with anything. You should know that. There was a pause, and a shifting, as though the other were looking away for a moment. He won't come.

"Too busy chasing rebels?"

Too busy chasing his son.

"Son?" That ought to have been impossible.

You should know better than most how rules were made to be broken.

"I would have thought turning to the Dark Side and slaughtering everyone in sight would have been enough rule-breaking." Her own sojourn in the Unknown Regions was in part hiding from that. She could have gone home when it had all ended so badly, but Vader . . . who had once been one of their own . . . . "If he has a son . . . if they work together and destroy Palpatine, could–would the Empire be made to see reason? Would it be safe–have they spoken to you, told you if that could be the plan?"

They never talk to me. She sounded sad. Only when I need to speak to you, or him. Not even Thelea, yet. I don't think they understand entirely.

"It was worth asking." She sighed, staring at the embers swirling upward. "I sometimes wonder–all he's given up. All he's forced her to give up. Will any of it be worth it?"

I don't know. The sense of her location shifted away from the hearth towards the chair where Thelea sat, still fitfully napping. Look after her, Master.
"I will do what I can, of course." Aleishia tried to sound nonchalant, but to hear herself so addressed after decades was more painful than she cared to admit. "I can't make any promises. Things are happening fast. You have my word, though, that if she needs me, I'll be there."

She felt the presence shift, drawing away. Thank you, Master. If I could . . . . For a moment, Aleishia could almost see the other's fingers brush Thelea's black hair, and then she did something unusual. For an instant, she seemed to hover, her presence a gentle benediction, over the alcove where Rurik slept. Then, like a candle being snuffed out, her sense was gone, and they were only three again.

Aleishia looked to the dying fire for another stretch of uncounted minutes, and then closed her eyes. She could rest a little now. Outside, the sky was passing from violet to lavender as the planet turned toward the sun. Morning would be soon enough to find them a way home.

Giriad looked uneasily at the lightening sky. When all three had been there, the night noises didn't seem so close or so frightening. Last night had been another story entirely. It was hard to sleep when you knew no one was keeping watch. Every time the grass rustled in a breeze, he'd been bolt upright, clawing for his blaster. The sound of an animal crashing somewhere in the brush had put him into a fit of nerves that hadn't abated for more than an hour. This was not what he'd signed on for at the Academy.

He squinted at his chrono in the dim light. Thelea and Rurik had been gone more than a day now— they'd set out almost before first light the previous morning. Hopefully, they'd return by sundown tonight. Another night on the plains would be too much. Futilely he thumbed his comlink and listened to the static. Out here, in the wilderness, even empty noise was a comfort. Small, perhaps, but still a comfort.

"What do you mean, the Aris Val never arrived?" Varkris was trying very hard to keep his voice low. The hooded figure on the hologram flickered silently. "I had an ambush arranged in the asteroid field."

"You planned improperly. Your pirate allies would only have lead them to you, and then to us." The figure shifted a little and Varkris cringed, but the anticipated punishment did not come. "They are lost."

"But not dead?"

"No." It was almost a sigh. "They live."

"That can be fixed." Varkris clenched his teeth. "Just tell me where they are."

"We will deal with this. You have failed in this matter." There was a long silence. Then, the hooded one spoke again, his voice a harsh whisper. "We have a more important task for you."

"What are your orders?"

What came next stunned him. "There is a great battle coming," his master said. "You will be there, and you must make sure of one thing."

"Anything," he agreed. Too quickly.

"This ship," the master said, his holographic arm gesturing to encompass the Executor. "Your fleet's finest battleship."

"She's the pride of the fleet." Varkris still could not read the emotions in the other's voice.
'Without her, we'd be lost.'

"Yes," and the word trailed off into a hiss. "This ship. Your ship. This battle will be fierce, and many will be lost. And this ship..." Again, he seemed to look around. "You must make absolutely sure that this ship does not survive."

Thelea's eyelashes flickered and she shifted in the chair, stiff muscles protesting vociferously. The smell of something cooking, something sweet, reminded her that she hadn't really eaten in longer than she cared to remember. Then she remembered where she was, at the home of a stranger who'd somehow talked her and Rurik into coming here-

Rurik. Her eyes snapped open, but she didn't move in the chair. Where was he? She remembered them both walking in-

"Good morning."

Thelea jumped, her hand automatically darting for her blaster. She was halfway out of the chair before she spotted the speaker, that same woman who had lead them from the bar the night before. She was ladling something onto a flat iron over the little fire.

"Did you sleep well?"

Thelea took a moment before answering. "I think so." Tentatively she stretched stiff arms and legs, and she put the blaster back in its holster. Surreptitiously, she reached under her cape and felt for the handle of the lightsaber. Still there.

"Good. You both were very tired." Aleishia. That was her name. She was making a small pile of the little cakes on a platter. "I thought it best you sleep. Are you hungry?"

Thelea's stomach twisted at the mention of food, reminding her just how long it had been since they'd had anything but ration bars. "A bit, yes." She rose stiffly. "How long were we asleep?"

"Oh, a good ten standard hours, give or take. You were very tired." Carefully she slid four of the flat cakes onto a plate. "Here. Eat up. You had a hard walk."

Thelea promptly burned her fingers. Trying a more delicate tack, she carefully pulled off a piece of what turned out to be sweet-meal bread. In spite of herself, she took several more quick bites—it was good, and she was hungrier than she'd thought. "Rurik?"

"There's plenty to go round. Let him sleep a while longer." Aleishia smiled, and there was a sardonic edge to the expression. "Humans are, after all, so much weaker than the Chiss."

"So many questions." Aleishia kept her back turned. "And not the right ones." When did I start to sound like Master Yoda? I'm not that old, yet. "I have visited homeworld," and she used the Chiss word, "but it was a very long time ago. You would have been very young."

"Maybe not. But then I suppose you know about our life span, too." Thelea delicately brushed the crumbs into a neat pile. In the alcove, Rurik shifted and muttered something. "Should I wake him up?"

Aleishia smiled, as if suddenly understanding a private joke. "Yes, why don't you? I'm sure he'll be starving—men always are."
Thelea let that comment slide. "Rurik." She pushed at his shoulder and he rolled over, burrowing under the covers a little farther. "Rurik, this is an order. Get up. Do you want to miss breakfast?"

"All right, all right. You may be my CO, but that doesn't mean you have to be a nag." Blinking blearily, he sat up. "I hate to ask, but where are we?"

"At my home." He turned sleep-heavy eyes to Aleishia. "And if you sleep much longer, you will miss getting fed. Hungry?"

He swung his feet to the floor and rose, bumping his head on the edge of the alcove. "That does smell good."

"Never fails," Aleishia said, smiling serenely. "Men always think with their stomachs." She piled several of the still-warm cakes on a plate and handed it to Rurik.

"Human males, at any rate," Thelea felt obliged to add. Aleishia laughed quietly.

Rurik felt it necessary to make a pretense of offense. "Not all of us. If we did, none of us would last in the Navy."

"It's amazing any of us do, with what they expect us to eat." Thelea took another of the cakes and sat down on the ottoman. "You never did mention why you're being so helpful."

Aleishia placed the empty bowl under a water spigot in another alcove. "Perhaps I'm just a good neighbor, and wanted to help a fellow human, or perhaps I have a soft spot for the Chiss."

"That would make you unique among the races of the galaxy," Thelea said dryly.

"Perhaps," Aleishia chuckled. "You'll have a better chance finding a pilot to take you there than to the Empire."

"I wanted to ask about that," Rurik interrupted. "Was the bartender right-no one will take us even to a refueling station in Imperial space?"

Aleishia was already shaking her head before he finished. "That's one thing about living out here-we're well out of the Empire's grasp, but almost no one tries to go there. So, it'll certainly cost you to get any of the pilots to even consider it."

"And we have Imperial credits, and not many of those," Thelea murmured. "Do you know anyone who might take us?"

The older woman sighed and sank into the chair where Thelea had been sleeping. "No, I'm afraid not. If they know you're Imperials, they won't help you anyway. And I would offer to help with the money, but I'm afraid my own finances are rather limited."

"So we're stuck here." Rurik stared at his hands. "Unless someone comes looking for us, and they won't."

"No one even knows the Aris Val is gone," Thelea said. "They will figure it out, I'm sure, but by then... . . ."

Rurik sighed and looked around the cramped dwelling. "Well, at least this isn't too bad a planet, and the Empire will have to reach here eventually."

"Maybe our grandchildren will be rescued, but even I will be dead by then," Thelea commented,
without carefully considering the vagaries of galactic Basic.

Rurik raised an eyebrow. "Thelea, I had no idea that you were even interested, much less reproductively compatible." Aleishia concealed a smile behind her hand.

"I meant that in a figurative sense, Commander," Thelea said archly, but she mentally replayed the sentence just in case. "The Empire's not coming to rescue us, and there doesn't seem to be anyone who'll take us off-planet. Can we buy a ship? We have the money, and the three fighters to trade."

Aleishia considered that. "There are dealers, certainly. What you'd be able to afford, now, I can't say. Whatever they have will be small, and possibly very alien. I don't know how far you'll be able to go."

"We don't need to get to Imperial Center," Thelea said. "We just need to reach the nearest Imperial base so we can get a message back to the Executor." She looked around the room. "I don't suppose you have any sort of database access?"

Aleishia rose, a bit stiffly, and began rooting in a wooden box shoved unobtrusively against the wall. "I have something similar, although I'm sure it's quite out of date." She produced a silver object vaguely reminiscent of a datapad. "The boundaries may have changed, but the names are the same. We should be able to figure out where you are in relation to Imperial space."

"Let me see." Thelea studied the object for a moment—it was small, with a hopelessly outdated data screen and tiny data entry keys. She squinted at the printout. "How old is this thing, anyway?"

"Old enough," Aleishia said, and there was just enough tone of admonishment that Thelea did not question further. "I'm sorry it's not more sophisticated, but I don't spend much on modern comforts."

"Here's Dhregan," Rurik said, leaning over her shoulder. "There isn't much around us."

"What about this?" Thelea paged over a few screens. "Telamara system... isn't there an Imperial outpost there?"

"There's a base on Telamara itself," Rurik said. "It's not much, but Governor Rothan's not a bad sort. He'll be willing to help us, and he won't ask too many questions." He reached over her arm and tapped a few keys. "It's about two days in hyperspace, but if we find the right ship, we could make it."

"You sound like you know him personally," Thelea said.

"I ought to—I grew up on Telamara." His smile was crookedly self-effacing. "Rimworld scum, remember? Went to primary school with his daughter, Gena—nice girl. A little wild, maybe, but can you blame her? Being a governor's daughter wasn't easy. I mean, my parents were tough, but they couldn't send out a squad of stormtroopers to come and find me if I stayed out past bedtime."

"You never mentioned where you came from," Thelea mused, studying him through glowing slits.

"It was in my file— you could have looked. Besides," he pointed out, "you never told me where you were from."

"That was different. In any case, Telamara seems to be the closest Imperial world. We have to get there and contact the fleet." Thelea looked up at Aleishia. "Where can we find these ship dealers?"

By morning light, the city proved to be larger than Thelea had originally thought. The range of life
forms on the streets indicated that Aleishia had been right—this was a way station world. Thelea recognized a Togorian, a Bothan, several disreputable-looking Quarren, and species that she knew but was equally sure Rurik had never seen before—fellow denizens of the Unknown Regions, many of whom saw the red eyes and blue skin and automatically shied away. She pulled the cowl of her survival cape closer about her face.

Aleishia moved comfortably through the streets, her stride confident and unencumbered by the long robes she was wearing. She had shed the dark brown she had worn the day before in favor of a rich dark blue cloak with a tunic and trousers made of the same material. Her dark hair hung down her back, and the shorter strands that framed her face were pulled back with a plain leather tie. The white streak above her right temple was almost iridescent against the darker tresses. She wore no weapon that Thelea could see, but she moved as easily as if she had a squad of stormtroopers behind her and no one would dare approach. Thelea and Rurik trailed along like twin shadows, taking two steps to her every one, though she was shorter than either of the pilots.

They wended their way down the narrow, dusty allies, taking so many hairpin turns and switchback paths that Thelea soon lost her bearings entirely. They were headed somewhere near the city center, she could tell that much. Aleishia finally lead them to the door of a shop, recessed in the wall of a dingy gray building. Thelea could see the folded wings of a Lambda-class shuttle peeking over the rooftop. That, she thought glumly, was almost certainly going to be out of their price range.

Aleishia rapped on the door and gestured for Thelea and Rurik to hang back. "Seln," she called softly, "kare v'la'ai?"

Thelea frowned. "How does she know that?"

"What?" Rurik asked.

"That's the language of the lower caste," Thelea replied, not taking her eyes from Aleishia. "I learned it from the servants who took care of me, almost everyone does."

"But it's not something a human traveler would be likely to pick up," he surmised. "Your people have different castes?" Thelea only shrugged uneasily. "Which one are you?" She gave him a side-eyed looked, and he dropped the question.

The door slid aside and a stooped figure peered out. "Aleishia?" the voice croaked, in the distinctive harsh accent of a worker caste. "What do you want?" Thelea shivered at the familiar language.

"Seln, I have visitors from off-world," Aleishia said, switching to Basic. "They need to purchase a ship that can carry three people—nothing fancy, just enough to get them to Imperial territory. They don't have much money, but they are my friends. If you can help them I will consider it a personal favor."

Thelea smiled a little. "That was a neat trick," she murmured to Rurik. "Making the request a personal favor means if he helps us, she'll owe him an equal debt."

Aleishia turned and beckoned to them. "It's all right. Seln deals in used ships, and I'm sure he'll have something that will suit."

"All right, all right," the Chiss said, in Basic laced with a rich, liquid accent. "You had better come in." He stepped back, gesturing with a downward flick of a wrist for them to follow.
The room was a jumble of spare bits from ships, speeders, and technology Thelea could only guess at. Seln was a man a human might judge to be past a hundred, and in human years he was probably much older. His hair had probably once been as blue-black as Thelea's own, but it was speckled with white, and the red eyes glowed a little dimmer than hers. Another difference, one that she didn't notice but Rurik did, was in their faces. Thelea, and Admiral Thrawn, once Rurik thought about it, had finer features, and aristocratic bearings. It might have been their military backgrounds, or the obvious age difference as both were clearly younger than this man, but there was something more there, he thought.

Seln turned to face them, hands folded before him. "What sort of ship are you interested in, friends?"

Thelea pushed back her hood, and his eyes widened. "Anything that will get us safely to Imperial territory and not cost more than we can afford."

Seln had forgotten about the deal, however. "Val'an'lora," he said, bowing low at the waist, "you do my humble house honor."

"You mistake me. I am not a lady of high degree, Bav'i," she said, returning his greeting with a smaller bow and using the gentle 'grandfather' as a title. "I am an orphan girl, in need of your help."

"Surely one of your bearing is no peasant such as I," he said, continuing the ritualized greeting despite her unorthodox reply. "Please, we cannot conduct business here in public. Come and we can discuss things properly over chai." He turned and vanished behind a ratty cloth curtain. They could hear the clattering of metal on metal and the sound of water running.

Rurik reached out and tapped Thelea on the shoulder. "What in the worlds was that about?"

Thelea sighed, and he could have sworn she looked a little sheepish. "Seln feels it necessary to conduct this business as though I were the lady of a noble house." She sighed and settled herself on a rickety metal chair. "I think we'd better play along."

"So are you?" Rurik cleared off a stool and dropped inelegantly onto it.

"Am I what?" Thelea asked. Aleishia, standing quietly by, smiled.

"Are you a noble lady?" he asked, with a decidedly impish grin.

"I'm an Imperial officer, which is more than you'll be if you ever mention this to anyone," she snapped, a bit petulantly, he thought. "If it gets us a ship out of here, I'll act like the Queen of Naboo." She frowned suddenly. "That is an awfully silly name."

"Where is Naboo, anyway?" Rurik asked. "I've heard that expression before. Did they just make it up?"

Aleishia spoke, very softly. "It's a place that doesn't really exist anymore." Her voice was suddenly very, very old. Rurik was about to ask what she meant when he caught the sharp look Thelea was giving him. He knew that glare too well to open his mouth.

Seln reappeared, carrying a tray with a steaming pot at the center and four small silver-metal cups. "I have little to offer, Val'an'lora," he said. "If you would accept my humble hospitality it would do great honor to my house."

"You do me honor with your hospitality," Thelea replied, taking one of the silver cups in both hands and raising it with a gracefulness Rurik had never noticed in her before. Even her posture
was different—not stiff and militarily precise, but relaxed and elegant, her expression distant.

Rurik took one of the cups as the tray passed his way and Aleishia took the third. Seln put the tray down and bowed slightly. "Is the chai to your taste?"

Thelea nodded, taking a small sip of the hot liquid. There was the familiar blend of spices and sweet, a taste she hadn't realized she missed. There was a faint bitter aftertaste that suggested the leaves had been kept in a warm, damp environment too long. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Rurik flinch and cover a grimace. Aleishia was calming drinking hers. If she had any opinion, she was keeping it well to herself. "It is excellent. I do not wish to offend, but if we might discuss business while we drink? My... associates and I require transport off-world, a small ship capable of carrying three people long enough to reach the Telamara system."

"If I might ask, what business brings you to such a remote world?" Seln asked, taking a seat-lower, Rurik noticed, than that Thelea occupied. "And to travel to an Imperial stronghold-"

Aleishia spoke up before Thelea could reply. "They are in the service of the Syndic Mith'rav'nuruodo," she said, her tone silencing the objection already forming on Thelea's lips. "Would you question his will?"

Rurik thought the name she had just spoken was Admiral Thrawn's full name, but he still wasn't sure of it; or why, for that matter, an Imperial admiral's name should produce such an awed reaction from a person Thelea seemed to think was, essentially, a peasant.

"My apologies," Seln said, bowing again. "I did not mean to question the orders of a Syndic. Now, a ship for three people, medium-range... I assume you are accustomed to fighter craft, kavrick-class, perhaps?"

"I myself fly an Imperial TIE Interceptor most of the time," Thelea said. "In fact, part of our... assets for the purchase of this ship are three Interceptor-class fighters, two in good condition and one... battle-damaged. We also have some nine hundred-odd of this world's currency. I'm afraid that's all."

Seln's eyes narrowed. "The Syndic has not allowed for your expenses?"

Aleishia cut in again, and her voice carried the same strange authority it had possessed in the cantina. "They are traveling on an undercover operation and encountered some difficulty. The nature of the mission prevents their contacting their commanders."

"In such a situation, how can I refuse you help?" Seln's response was as dazed as the barkeeper's had been. "Or ask for reimbursement?"

Rurik shot Thelea a pointed look. She had already noticed the destitute condition of the rooms. "We have to pay you something, of course. Appearances. You understand."

"Of course." He did, Rurik thought, look a bit relieved. "Perhaps, two of the Interceptors, and the currency, when you see what I have. Will you come back to my yard, Val'an'lora?"

Thelea rose gracefully, her chin tilted proudly up. "Please, show us."

The shipyard seemed to hold more spare parts than actual functioning vessels. There was, as she'd noticed before, a Lambda-class shuttle that looked from the paint on the gray bulkhead to have gone through several changes of ownership. She recognized few of the other ships and parts lying around in the cluttered yard. A clattering of metal somewhere ahead of them suggested that the sensors mounted on the yard walls were more form than function.
"I have acquired a small ship that I think would suit your purposes nicely. I would not dream of taking more than your three fighters for it-though currency, is, of course, very useful," he added, a little sheepishly. He guided them around the shuttle. "Now, it's quite old, but it is in excellent condition and certainly capable of reaching the Telamara system carrying two comfortably and three, well, in close quarters."

"If there's only two seats, one of you can ride standing," Thelea whispered before Rurik could even think of an appropriate risque remark.

"I would have thought that since you're so superior to humans, you'd be able to stand for two days," he muttered.

Seln stopped before a small, pointy-nosed craft and gestured grandly. "Sienar Fleet System's Infiltrator."

Thelea blinked. The ship looked like the illegitimate offspring of a TIE fighter and an X-wing, with the same pointed fuselage of the Rebel fighter and the paneled wings and round cockpit of the Imperial ship. "How old is this?"

Aleishia's face was oddly drawn, pinched and pale. "SFS hasn't made them in almost thirty years. There were only a few, and I saw one only once."

"You're shaking." Rurik put a hand on her shoulder. "Are you all right?"

She reached up and patted his hand in a very motherly fashion. "I'm all right, child. Don't mind a silly old woman."

Thelea, meanwhile, was walking around the ship slowly, tracing her fingers across the folded wings. There were numerous dents, scrapes and scars on the black surface, but nothing seemed damaged beyond repair. "A navicomputer?"

"Fully up-to-date," Seln assured her. "Long-range, too. I would ordinarily never let it go for such a sum, but for you, Val'an'lora, I can make the sacrifice."

Rurik noticed the flicker of reluctance that crossed her features. "I would not want to cause you further hardship, Master Trader," she said.

"Hardship? Pah! It is an old ship, and I could not hope for much around here unless the weapons were updated. Now, two modern Imperial fighters will bring me enough money to last me out another season. As for the other, well, parts are always in demand."

"Could we look inside?" Thelea asked, and the old trader tapped in the security code for the hatch.

The cockpit was indeed cramped, with a single seat for the pilot. Behind the old-style pilot's chair there was more than enough room for Rurik and Giriad to sit. She realized she was already thinking of herself as the pilot, which was, she admitted, a good sign. Stepping around the chair, she ran her fingers over the smooth, old-style control yoke. The console was dark, but she could see that there was no heads-up display, and though the SFS layout was much the same, the shape and contouring of the switches, screens and levers was so old it was almost quaint.

"Something was kept here." She turned around to see what Rurik was talking about. He pointed to the skid marks on the deck plates. "It looks like there used to be something bolted to the metal."

"The ship is as it was when I acquired it," Seln offered. "There have been some modifications made, it seems, but as I have none of the original specification, I can't tell you what is missing."
"The shields and the lasers?" Thelea went back to studying the controls. The panels were labeled with the old Basic script, legible but outdated. "Not that I hope we'll need them."

"Working, I assure you. Quad lasers, and the ship is fitted for torpedoes, though there were none with it when I came by it. As I said, to have value it would require much updating. Weapons and armor are most important to buyers here."

"Hopefully this trip'll be a little less exciting than the one that got us here," Rurik muttered.

"We can leave the ship at the garrison on Telamara." Thelea was thinking out loud. "They'll find some way to dispose of it. Seln," and the old man bowed as she turned to him, "the ship will suit us perfectly. We need only agree on the price."

His face creased in a million wrinkles. "As you said, the Interceptors. As for currency-"

"Would five hundred of this world's credits be sufficient?" Thelea offered.

"More than enough, my lady." He bowed again. "Where are your Interceptors located?"

"About fifteen kilometers planetary west from the city," she said. "Would it be possible for you to provide us transport out there, perhaps to inspect the fighters yourself? Then we could fly the two workingfighters and haul the damaged ship back here."

"I have an airspeeder that should suffice. If you'll follow me, Aleishia," and he turned to the hooded figure at the base of the ship's ramp. "You will accompany us, of course?"

"Of course," she said, and her voice was distinctly strained. "If you please, can we continue this discussion in the speeder? This ship. . . ." She shivered. "Please, let's go."

Thelea frowned. Aleishia's face was drawn tight, pinched and pale. Her hands were folded inside her robes and pulled tight against her body. As they came down the ramp she backed away as though they carried an unpleasant odor with them. Thelea looked from the human woman to the ship, which seemed perfectly all right to her. Perhaps she was losing her touch with judging human body language. She shrugged, and followed the old man towards an airspeeder that looked as old as the Infiltrator.

Omi-tanaga huddled in the doorway, watching the rickety speeder make its way towards the outskirts. Shifting his breathing filter away from his mouth, he thumbed the switch of his comlink.

"The Imps are leaving with the old man," he hissed, "and you were right, Hura. The Jedi witch-woman is with them. If we are patient, they will lead us to their fighters. They are only four. It will be an easy and honorable kill." He switched off the comlink and started up the dusty street to where his own swoop was waiting.
"I hate this planet. How many sinkholes can there be?" Rurik carped, squinting into the bright sunlight. "Can't this thing go any faster?" That earned him the point of Thelea's elbow to his rib cage. "Ow!"

"Not everyone can afford the latest model speeder, Rurik," she hissed, then went back to looking over the rear spoiler.

"What's gotten into you? You weren't in this foul a mood when we left." She didn't reply and he tugged at her sleeve. "Thelea?"

"Something's not right." The nervous feeling was the same as she got before a particularly nasty firefight—a sense of impending doom that she usually wrote off to battle jitters or a pilot's adrenaline from flying. Out here she didn't have that excuse.

"You sense it, don't you." It was not a question. Aleishia had the hood of her robes pulled low over her face, but Thelea could just see the faint smile.

"Sense what?"

"The danger." Aleishia turned to face her, the hood throwing her face into deep shadow. "The sense of something coming. You know it's out there."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Her eyes wandered back to the empty plains and the city, now in the distance.

"Yes, you do." Suddenly she turned as well. "Someone's behind us. Several people."

"Seln, stop for a moment. I want to listen." Thelea marveled at the tone of command in her voice and cringed, but the elderly ship-dealer obeyed without comment.

"Are you sure that's wise?" Aleishia demanded, but Thelea was already jumping to the ground and straining to hear.

"Thelea, come on. Commander..." Rurik leaned out of the speeder. "We're wasting time."

"Sh!" A raised hand silenced them. "That sounds like repulsor drives."

Rurik listened. There was, in fact, a faint buzzing that sounded like engines of some kind, but they seemed far off, echoes from the city. "They don't sound too close."

"Thelea, get back in the speeder." Aleishia's voice was flat.

"I think they're closer."

Aleishia switched from Basic to the Chiss language. "Mith'ele'arana! Now!"

The tone left no room for argument and Thelea found herself obeying automatically, her fullname not even registering with her. She was turning and jumping for the speeder when the three swoops came roaring into view over a ridge.

They were following close, keeping low, relying on the terrain to hide them from our scanners, Aleishia realized, and she cursed herself for not noticing sooner. "Thelea, watch out!" The girl was
already pulling out her blaster, and Caelin was firing too, but the weapons were not going to do much against the faster, better-armed vehicles. "Seln, go!" The little speeder would not outrun the swoops, but at least they'd be a moving target.

A blast from the lead swoop's cannon shook the speeder. Thelea fired off a shot that glanced off the armor plating, barely scratching it. They were badly outgunned and outclassed. Aleishia ducked as one of the raiders passed overhead. She was unarmed and useless-best to keep out of the way.

Never unarmed. Never alone. Mihall's voice was as clear as if he were there and speaking the words now. I will always be with you. . . .

Master Yoda's voice, too, played back yet again from a thousand lectures from as early as she could remember. Use for knowledge and defense, you must. This was certainly defense.

One of the swoops, a sleek, venomous-looking craft, raced ahead and turned back for a strafing run. A bolt of energy found its mark, shattering the cockpit glass and much of the engine cover, showering them with razor-sharp plasteel shards. Rurik ducked, but not in time to avoid getting cut in the face. Thelea, in spite of herself, shrieked and Aleishia heard her old friend again, Master! Protect her! You promised! Behind the voice was that sense of light and power, and a pressing reminder this was not where Thelea or she was meant to die.

She had a weapon. She simply had to use it.

If this brings Vader, or worse, down on my head, at least I know I was keeping a vow. Remember that, Council, if you are still judging me. . . . Drawing in a long, slow, breath, she cleared her mind of all the blocks and distractions she had worked so hard to create. Finding the same little thread of light that had warned her of the impending attack she seized upon it and, fighting against all instincts that had protected her for decades, she opened her mind.

The rush of sensations was like being plunged into the midst of a marketplace, full of sights and sounds and smells and brilliant, vibrant colors. Her eyes teared at the sensations, all thought forgotten and now here again, blinding and beautiful and terrible. Rurik and Thelea and Seln and even their attackers were suddenly more than simple beings, they were foci of the energy that fluxed and flowed between all beings and she could see that now, sense it. She felt as though she had been starving and was suddenly presented with more nourishment than she could ever need or want.

After more than twenty years, the Force was fully with her again.

"Thelea, stay down. I'm going to try something." Her voice sounded different, even in her own ears. Reaching under her robe, she found the handle of the blade without thinking, the instinct still there. Now, if only the reflexes are, she thought dryly, rising carefully and bracing herself on the side of the craft. Thelea's fear would not have registered with anyone else, but she could feel it now, hidden but there, and the girl was feeding off of it, using it to fuel anger and through the anger, her determination to survive. More powerful than I thought. . . .

The swoop leader was turning back towards them and she waited, counting. Caelin fired off a few shots and she snapped, "Wait!" The swoop was almost on them-

Thelea heard a sound that was familiar, a snap-hiss that she knew from her own hidden weapon. Risking a glance up she saw a blur of silver motion. "By the first families. . . ." she breathed, without noticing she spoke in her own language. "A Jedi."
Aleishia brought the silvery-blue blade down in a sweeping arc as the swoop raced past. He saw her and tried to evade at the last minute, but the point of her saber bit into the aft repulsor drive, sending the vehicle careening away into the hillside. One down, two to go.

Rurik was angling for a better shot. The two remaining swoops had pulled back a little at the loss of their leader, but now they were regrouping. His blaster wasn't really strong enough to take out one of the vehicles, but a lucky shot might hit the pilot. Thelea was ducking lower on the floor of the speeder. She had a holdout blaster, he remembered, and as such had only five shots. He shifted a bit so he was between her and the oncoming swoops. She glared, but he didn't move.

Aleishia steadied herself and watched the two attackers. She no longer had the advantage of surprise, so it was time to think of something else. The two opened fire and she blocked the bolts, surprised at how the skill had not abandoned her completely. They fired again and she angled the deflection back onto them. The pilot of the swoop tried to evade only succeeded in taking the bolt to the chest, knocking him clear.

"Look out!" Rurik lunged for the controls as Seln tried to evade the out-of-control swoop. He succeeded, partially. The speeder dodged and the swoop struck the airfoil, denting it. They were thrown sideways as the entire ship spun violently left.

Aleishia staggered and fell sideways, almost over the side. Thelea lunged from her position on the floor and grabbed the older woman by the arm. "Hang on!" Aleishia's grip was surprisingly tight, and yet it didn't seem to require much effort for Thelea to pull her back in. "Are you all right?"

"Fine, fine." Aleishia sounded oddly distracted for someone who'd almost fallen out of an airspeeder. "The last one seems to have given up." The remaining swoop was racing away from them, back in the direction of the town.

"That, or gone back for reinforcements," Thelea said ominously. "We'd better get to the fighters. With two Interceptors we should be able to keep them at bay." Her impenetrable red gaze shifted to Aleishia. "And in the meantime, you have a great deal of explaining to do."

Aleishia nodded slowly, turning the handle of her lightsaber over in her hands. "Yes," she said softly, "I suppose I do."

Giriad ducked under the wing strut when he heard the repulsors in the distance, fumbling for his blaster. Then he heard a voice on his comlink: "Giriad, we're back. We have a way out of here."

Giriad had never thought he'd be so relieved to hear Rurik Caelin's voice. "Just where in blazes have you been?" he demanded. "I was starting to think you weren't coming back."

"Don't be paranoid," Thelea cut in. "Can you imagine the paperwork if we went back to the Fleet without you?"

"Rurik, am I hearing things, or did the Commander just make a joke?"

He heard Rurik laughing, and Thelea said, "Who says I was joking?" Rurik glared, but a smile slipped through. "You two-see about getting your fighters flight-ready. Rurik, if you could check mine, too? I need to talk with our friend." They were jumping out of the airspeeder, and Giriad ran to join them.

"Sure, they just amended my job description to include servant." She glared, and he raised his hands in surrender.

Thelea turned to look for Aleishia. The Jedi was standing beside the airspeeder, looking at the TIEs
sitting on the ground. In the bright daylight her features seemed worn and lined, and the white strands in her dark hair stood out in stark relief. The lightsaber was hanging from her belt conspicuously now, and her shoulders seemed straighter.

Thelea approached her from behind, but the other woman spoke first. "I suppose you're wondering who I really am."

"Actually, I was considering whether or not I should report you. You are aware that having a lightsaber is against the law. Using it is even more so."

Aleishia smiled. "As I've pointed out, we're well at the edge of the Imperial jurisdiction here. Unless, of course, you plan on arresting me yourself. Do you?"

Thelea sighed. "No. Not after all the help you've given us."

"That's good. They might question where yours came from."

Thelea bit down on her anger. "How did you know about that? Did you go through our things while we were asleep, Jedi?"

Aleishia spun around, much faster than a woman her age should have been able to move. "Mith'ele'arana," she snapped, "don't you know who you are?"

She is shaking with fear, but she knows not to cry. She knows that the male in the room is her friend, he means her no harm, but behind his cool sense she feels the bitter hostility radiating towards the woman behind her. The brown woman with the funny snow-like skin, the woman with the strange depth-filled eyes, the one who has held her and cared for her and comforted her through this feeling of incomprehensible loss. There is grief, too, old from her and fresh and bitter from him, but that is buried.

He looks above her head-not hard, she is a child, so small. "You know it has to be done."

"Without her mother, she isn't safe here."

"No."

"It's the only way-"

"Perhaps on your world, human."

The woman sighs. "You aren't going to be much help to her, either."

"I know that." He makes a sharp gesture and she steps towards him. He tilts her chin up. "So like her mother." There is pain bordering on agony in his voice but he is one of them, one of her people, and it does not show on his face.

"In every way." Firm, uncompromising. "She won't forget. You can hope, you can have them lie to her, but she is her mother's daughter, and someday she will remember!"

"You." Thelea stared at the face, suddenly knowing where she had seen it before. "You were on homeworld. You took care of me. You, and. . . ." The face was formless-she'd been a child, she couldn't recall the details of the male's, or the woman from half-forgotten dreams she knew to be her mother. The woman who had worn the medallion Thrawn had shown her. "When my mother. . . .you came, and you told me I had to be brave. Then you argued with someone, and they took me away."
Aleishia nodded. "When your mother...when she died, I begged them to let me take you as my apprentice. Your father refused. I suppose, after his own fashion, he was doing what he thought was best."

"My father? My mother?" Thelea stared. "You know them?"

"I did know them. You mother, as you know, is gone." Aleishia sighed and closed her eyes. The pain never seemed to lessen, she thought bitterly, not even after all the years. "I came to your world having lost my husband, my only child, to the same power that controls the ship you encountered-your mother was the only one to speak for me. I think it was because she sensed in me the power she had within herself. I don't know if any other of your people have ever had the gift she did. No other I met radiated in the Force quite as she did. I told her I could train her, and I did-she could have been a very great Jedi, had I only the Council's blessing and she had been willing to leave. She had her own purposes, and thought to make her skills serve those ends, not some far-away religion. In the end, I suppose that was for the best."

"The Council?" Thelea found herself drawn into the story, in spite of herself.

"Of course, you've never heard of the Jedi Council. There was a time when I would have had nothing but scorn for them. That was before the dark times, the purges-the Emperor."

"The Emperor brought order to the Galaxy," Thelea said automatically. Rote words learned at the Academy that felt even more hollow now. "He wished only to overthrow the old, corrupt, ways."

Aleishia smiled thinly. "I would be the first to agree, the Jedi Order needed restructuring. Perhaps if they had, all this...never mind. Your mother...she was a member of the Council of Families when I knew her, and she was brilliant. Her marriage, too, was a match well-made, though surprising, I think. Not least to the parties most concerned!" Thelea started to open her mouth. "Before you ask-your father still lives, and I must abide by my promise to him not to tell you his identity. I don't agree, but I gave him my word and I'll honor it. At any rate, they were well-matched, better than most marriages on your world, I believe. And you-quite the surprise." She laughed. "Your mother was almost annoyed, I think, at the inconvenience of pregnancy. But when you were named, she said she saw a vision of your future, and though she would never tell me exactly what she saw, she said it was only appropriate that I was there, for our destinies were entwined."

Thelea sat down on the side of the speeder. Her knees didn't seem to want to hold her anymore. Her mind, also, seemed none too steady. "What was my mother's name?"

Aleishia smiled. "So like the Chiss, to think of such things last. Her fullname was Reli'set'harana. She was called Lisetha."

"Lisetha." She tried the name in her mouth. "How did she die?"

Aleishia frowned. "That story really should be told by your father. Before he...left, we discussed what you should be said should this conversation ever occur, and that is one thing he made me promise-he would tell you. I suppose he simply wants to put his own spin on the story."

Thelea knew she wanted to ask questions, but strangely, none seemed to come to her. It was strange, really-having all the answers here, and not being able to think of a single question. "Why didn't my father take me with him? Or did he make you promise not to say that, too?"

"Where he was going was no place for a little child," Aleishia said. "Besides, it was your mother's family's duty to care for you." And mine. Forgive me, Lisetha, for delaying so long. "As I said, I
would have taken you as my apprentice, but your father forbade it. Perhaps he knew, somehow, what was coming. He's always had a gift for foresight."

"Your apprentice?"

Aleishia laughed at Thelea's puzzled expression. "Why do you think your mother left that lightsaber for you? You have the same powers she did, or I should say, the same capabilities."

"Me, a Jedi? Don't be ridiculous." Thelea snorted. "Besides, the Jedi are extinct. Well, except for you, maybe."

"You would be right, almost." Did any of you escape? Am I really the last? "Except that, by our laws, I was no longer truly a Jedi. I haven't been for a very long time."

"You can stop being a Jedi?"

She laughed. "Not entirely, but I was no longer officially a member of the Jedi Order. And I've found my ways to-" She closed her eyes a moment. "That's as may be. Are you ready to begin your training?"

Thelea stared at her for a long moment, silent. Then, she did something which Chiss did not do very often, and a well-raised one wouldn't have done at all. She laughed out loud. "Now I know you're mad."

Aleishia opened her eyes, and the disgustingly smug look had not faded in the least. "Perhaps you think you're not ready?"

"It's not a question of ready. I'm not Jedi material. I do not care whether my mother was or not, I'm an Imperial officer." She looked over her shoulder to where Giriad was bringing his fighter on-line, and Rurik was climbing down from her Interceptor and starting for his own. "I have responsibilities."

"You have responsibilities to your mother, too. Not to mention to yourself." Aleishia sounded disturbingly fixed on the idea. "You carry a lightsaber, but do you know how to use it? You use the Force every time you fly, but can you control it?" She closed her eyes. "You're hovering close to the Dark Side, but you're not deep into it yet. There's still time."

Thelea gritted her teeth. "Look, it's not that I don't appreciate your help. If you want, we can take you as far as Telamara. I'm sure you could find transport there to your home, wherever that is, or back to the Unknown Regions, for all I care. But I am not going to throw away everything I've worked for my entire life on some insane crusade for a dead religion I don't even believe in."

Aleishia listed patiently. "You sound far more like your father than your mother. I suppose that makes sense." She remembered having the opposite argument with Lisetha, so powerful and eager to learn, but far to old to safely undergo Jedi training, at least, too old by the Council's reckoning. Mihall would have turned her down flat, and even now she could see him shaking his head at the daughter...much too old to begin training. "Very well, then. I'll go with you as far as Telamara. It's been quite some time since I've visited another world. And of course, if you change your mind along the way."

"I won't."

She smiled. "You're a very great deal like him, Mith'ele'arana."

"Why do you keep calling me that?" During the battle, it hadn't registered. But this was at least the
third time.

"You answered to it once. You've only forgotten."

Thelea shook her head. "That isn't possible. If that were true, then my father's family would be . . . ." And then she paused. "No."

Aleishia shrugged, and then looked at the position of the sun. "We'd best hurry. See to your wing, Commander." She turned and went back to the airspeeder.

Thelea walked slowly over to her fighter. Rurik pulled himself up out of his own cockpit and balanced on the hatch. "Thelea, yours is fit to fly, if you want to. You'll need all the power for the engines, but it should get off the ground."

She nodded, tracing her finger along the solar panel, noting the charred patches where it had burned on entry. "All right. You two can fly cover for the speeder and me."

Rurik dropped to the ground beside her. "Thelea, what's the mater?"

She looked at him a moment, and despite her unusual eyes he could tell she wasn't really seeing him. "Nothing."

"If something's wrong, maybe you ought to tell me."

"Nothing's wrong." She braced herself on the wing strut and climbed up into the fighter. "Get to your fighter. We need to get moving in case those idiots come back."

Rurik watched her vanish into the cockpit, not even bothering to get back into her flight suit. Not that it would matter-her fighter wouldn't survive an attempt at space anyway. "All right." He glanced over at the speeder, when their benefactor, the Jedi, was watching them both with a faint, bemused smile. "But we've got a twenty-hour jump to Telamara, and you can't hide from me in that Infiltrator." He went back to his own ship and got ready to fly.
Chapter 6

Thelea was surprised her fighter had actually taken off, and even now she was sure she was about to fall from the sky. The Interceptor was shaking violently, apparently ready to come apart at the seams, but with all power available drained to the engines, it was staying aloft. A quick glance up and to her right brought the comforting sight of Rurik's Interceptor, and to the left, the not-quite-as-comforting but still reassuring glimpse of Giriad's. Since they were in atmosphere they were flying without the uncomfortable helmets, and she caught sight of Rurik looking down at her. He grinned and gave her a thumbs-up, a silly human gesture she returned awkwardly. At least it was easier than looking down at the airspeeder.

If she looked down, she'd have to look at her.

As if she knew what Thelea was thinking (Who knows? The Jedi witch probably does!) Aleishia turned and looked up at her from beneath the cowl of her hood. Thelea couldn't see her clearly, but she knew the older woman was smiling. That irritated her. Actually, a lot of things about Aleishia irritated her. None the least of which was the name thing-Thrawn had said her name was T'hele'arana...but Aleishia had seemed so sure...

She shook off the feeling. Jedi or not, the old woman had to be mad. She'd been living alone for years, and it must have affected her mind. But if that were the case, how did she know Thelea, and the lightsaber...My mother got hers somewhere...the Republic and the Jedi never reached homeworld, so how else would she have known? She sighed, slumping a little in the seat. There was such a thing as an information overload, and the last few hours more than constituted one. Aleishia seemed to know something about her mother. She had been more forthcoming than the Admiral had, and she was certainly helping to get them off this gods-forsaken world. Thelea would deal with what she'd said later.

They were coming back up on the city now, and so far, no sign of their earlier pursuers. Maybe losing four swoops had convinced them the little convoy wasn't worthwhile prey. The nervous feeling hadn't gone away, though...Aleishia would insist it was some sort of warning from the Force. Against her will she looked down at the speeder. Aleishia was watching her, the enigmatic smile still firmly in place. Thelea kicked in as much power as the engines could manage and shot ahead of the speeder, the other two fighters hurrying to pace her.

The rest of the trip to Seln's lot was disturbingly uneventful. Rurik was starting to wish for someone to take a shot at them. While Interceptors weren't designed to fight in atmosphere, it was still a formidable-armed ship, and, as Thelea's demonstrated, much more durable than most gave them credit. He winced as he heard a crunch beneath the wing strut as the little fighter settled to the ground. At least they hadn't promised the ships would be in assembly-line condition.

He popped the hatch and climbed out, this time taking the flight suit and helmet with him. Most TIE pilots didn't keep much in their ships, anyway, and everything else they might need was already gone. There was, of course, the computer systems, but it was really too late to worry about that now. By the time he hit the ground, Thelea was already out and headed for the Infiltrator without looking at either the old man or at Aleishia. Rurik debated following her, then decided to let her stew a little longer. She'd snap out of it eventually-she always did.

"Well, we made it back, safe and sound. And there are three TIE Interceptors, as promised, though I get the feeling that one will only be good for scrap." He grinned at the two. Seln didn't smile, but of course he was Chiss-Rurik didn't like the name, it seemed odd, but at least he knew it now. Aleishia, on the other hand, still had that thin, smug little smile she seemed to wear much of the
"Excellent." Seln clasped his hands. "Then I suppose you'll wish to leave immediately. The ship is fully prepared, and the navicomputer's been updated."

"We probably will. I think Thelea's about ready to go. No offense intended, ma'am, but I don't think she likes you very much."

Aleishia smiled, an expression that for some reason brought to mind his mother. "Thelea will grow accustomed to me, in time."

Rurik blinked. "You're coming with us?" He hadn't meant to sound as annoyed as he did.

"You sound surprised. Hadn't you realized by now I was waiting for you? More specifically, for Thelea." She smiled, the laugh showing in her eyes.

"Waiting? How did you know we were coming?"

The smile narrowed. "Don't you know anything about Jedi, Lieutenant Caelin? Even your own Emperor can see the future-sometime foggly, but he does see it."

Inwardly Rurik shuddered at her casual disrespect for the ruler of the galaxy, but then, weren't the Jedi enemies of the Empire? "You know we're going back to Imperial space, don't you? You'll be arrested."

"Possibly." Then her eyes grew distant for a moment. "We'd best be on our way. I don't think our pirate friends have given up on us." She turned to the old Chiss. "Seln, forgive us for rushing away."

"I understand." The Chiss looked towards the Infiltrator. "If you would, please, tell the Val'an'lora that I am honored to have been of some small service to her family one more time."

"She will know. Our thanks, old friend." She reached out and took both hands in his. Then, abruptly, she turned and stared in the direction of the street. "Seln, go inside. Quickly."

"What is it?" Rurik asked, but she was already pushing him towards the Infiltrator.

"Get aboard!" He stumbled into Giriad, who had wandered over to listen in. "Hurry!"

He started to run. Thelea was standing at the bottom of the ramp, hand almost absently resting on her blaster. "What's going on?"

"You haven't had another one of those premonitions, have you?" Rurik called on his way past her. "Because I think she has."

"What?" Thelea started towards the Jedi woman. Seln was moving as quickly as his aged legs could carry him towards his shop.

"Thelea!" Rurik spun in mid-stride. "Where is she going? Stay here and get the ship powered up. We'll be right back."

"Sure," Giriad muttered, headed for the pilot's seat, "sure, I'm just here to serve. I don't mind missing the excitement."

Thelea reached Aleishia's side as the Jedi reached the corner of the lot's gate. "What's going on?"
"Get back to the ship." Her voice came out tight and clipped. "I'll be along shortly."

"Whatever's out there, you ought-" and a blaster bolt slamming into the duracrete wall above her cut Thelea off in mid-sentence. "What the-"

"Get back to the ship!" Aleishia's lightsaber was already ignited. "Run! I'll catch up!"

Thelea was already pulling her blaster free of its holster. "Not a chance." A thud against her back announce Rurik's arrival. "Nice of you to join us."

"Didn't we just leave this party?" He squeezed off a shot over her head.

"I think they're a bit put out about us blowing up three of them." Thelea shoved her blaster back into its guard and detached her lightsaber from her belt instead. Aleishia was deflecting what she could, but plenty were getting by. "If she can do it, I can do it."

"Are you out of your mind?" She was already stepping closer to the Jedi. Rurik groaned and kept firing.

Aleishia barely glanced at Thelea. "Very foolish. Brave, but foolish. Get back behind cover, child. I can handle this."

"I know what I'm-" A bolt caught her shoulder, sending her spinning back into the wall. Rurik grabbed her and pulled her clear. "It's nothing," she gasped, trying not to wince at the pain.

Aleishia looked over, stepping closer to cover. "I can keep their attention for a moment. Run. Get her back to the ship. I'll be right behind you."

"No, it's all right," Thelea protested, even as Rurik grabbed her arm and pulled her back towards the Infiltrator. Aleishia began to back up, the silvery blade still deflecting the shots aimed at them. When she was almost halfway to them, the shooting abruptly stopped, and she turned to run, waving at them to get aboard, when the back door to Seln's shop was shoved open, and the elder Chiss was forced out, with one of the swoop gang holding a blaster to his head.

"Rurik, Thelea, keep going!" Aleishia stopped and stepped towards the gang leader. "Let him go," she ordered, her voice carrying a powerful overtone of suggestion.

The swoop rider grinned, twisting an already hideously scarred face into an even more grotesque visage. "Your mind tricks won't work on me, Jedi. Now you and your Imperial friends can come quietly, or I can blow his head off."

Thelea stopped, pulling Rurik to a halt with her. "Hey, weren't you listening?" he snapped, but she started back toward the Jedi. Muttering under his breath, he followed, keeping his blaster at the ready.

The swoop leader saw her coming. "Put down your weapons and I'll let him go."

"Why are you doing this?" Thelea demanded, not dropping her lightsaber. "We haven't done anything to you, and we're not worth any money, not for a bounty or a ransom."

He stared at her, and then broke into a harsh, grating, laugh. "You stupid female. Don't you know who you are? Don't you know who'd pay for you?"

Seln, who seemed remarkably calm for a hostage, saw her coming and shouted in her language, "Go, my lady!"
"He'll kill you!" she protested, wondering if she could get off a shot with the hold-out blaster, or get in close enough to use the blade.

Seln gave her a contented smile, and moved his hand that had been hanging at his side. She saw the glint of the short blade concealed along his arm. "Go. Save yourself, and my duty to your family is fulfilled. Run now."

Aleishia had seen the knife, too, and began backing up. "Get to the ship."

"We can't just leave-" Thelea protested as Rurik grabbed her good arm and pulled her back. She could hear the whine of the engines powering up.

"We have to! Now go!" Aleishia ignited her saber again and covered their retreat.

Rurik half-dragged Thelea up the ramp, with her protesting all the way. Aleishia kept moving backwards until her foot touched the ramp, and then she turned and followed them at run. "Take off!" Rurik shouted to Giriad, hitting the controls that closed the hatch. Just before the ramp rose and cut of their view, Thelea saw Seln twist suddenly in his captor's grip, stabbing with the short sword he'd been hiding. The swoop leader snarled in pain and grabbed at his freshly wounded face, bringing his blaster back up. Then the hatch closed and she saw nothing more.

"Are you all right?" Rurik asked. Thelea stared blankly at him, the pain in her arm finally reaching her.

"Why did they do it?" she whispered, the glow of her eyes dulled by pain. "I thought, out on the plain, they were after the ships, but they wanted us. And Seln-"

Aleishia gently took her arm, easing her down to the deck. "Seln was your mother's most loyal retainer, child. Giving his life to save yours was an honor for him, not a sacrifice."

"My mother?" She winced as Aleishia pulled the burned cloth of her sleeve away from the wound. "Then why was he here? How-"

"Don't ask so many questions." She studied the burned skin, then fumbled in a pouch tied to her belt. "I knew for a long time you would be coming here. You didn't think this was an accident, did you?"

"You couldn't have known. We didn't know we were coming." She flinched again.

"Sh." She removed a small vial from the pouch and rubbed the salve into the burn. "Now, this isn't bacta. You're going to need treatment when we get to Telamara, but this should keep it from getting infected." She then placed a hand on Thelea's forehead. "Rest now," she said, in the same persuasive tone she'd tried on the swoop leader. Thelea's shoulders slumped, and her eyes closed. Aleishia straightened. "Sit with her a while," she ordered Rurik. "She needs to rest and give that a chance to heal."

Rurik nodded, looking down at Thelea. "Who is she? Really." Aleishia turned away, looking towards the viewscreen, but Rurik grabbed her arm. "I heard what he said. Who is she?"

The old Jedi hesitated a moment longer. "She is the child of two very powerful people, who made very powerful enemies. That's all you-or she-need to know for now."

Giriad looked back over his shoulder. "We're coming up on that defensive platform again."

Rurik turned and looked over Giriad's shoulder at the sensor readout. "We'd better run for it. You
have the coordinates locked in?" The younger man nodded. "Then make the jump as soon as we're out of the grav well. We don't have time to get into another firefight." He went back to where Thelea sat against the bulkhead, her eyes still closed. He sat beside her and she leaned against him, eyes still closed. Aleishia was watching and Rurik thought he saw a faint smile on her lips before she turned away.

"Here we go," Giriad announced. "Let's just hope we get a warmer welcome on Telamara than we did here." The stars outside blurred into lines, and they were away. Giriad sighed, slumping in relief. When he looked at the others they weren't paying attention. Thelea was, to all appearances, asleep, her head resting on Rurik's shoulder. Rurik was staring at the deck plates, his eyes unfocused, and Aleishia was watching them both, a faint smile on her face.

Giriad sighed and turned back to the controls. Then he smiled. "At least this time I get to fly the ship."
Chapter 7

Rurik paced back and forth in the wide marble hall of the Governor's mansion on Telamara. Once he'd managed to convince the strangely paranoid planetary control that they really weren't a threat, getting through to his old sponsor had been surprisingly easy. Governor Rothen had immediately dispatched an escort for them, and a med tech to take care of Thelea, whose arm hadn't improved much on the trip-combination of exhaustion and lack of treatment, the tech had noted, and escorted her off to the medical quarters. If he'd noticed his patient wasn't human he kept any opinions to himself. Giriad, Rurik, and Aleishia had been brought to the mansion, given rooms, a change of clothes, time to freshen up, and absolutely no explanation for the heavy security obvious everywhere on the planet.

"Do we really have to get all dressed up?" Giriad tugged at the collar of the civilian jacket he'd been given-Imperial gray, of course, if not the height of fashion. "I'd rather have a uniform."

"This from the spoiled rich kid?" Rurik was wearing a black suit of clothes, similar in cut to Giriard's. "If it makes the governor happy, I'll wear it. If we cooperate, maybe they'll explain what everyone's so nervous about."

"I'm more concerned with who's going to tell the Executor how we got here." He studied the huge marble columns that lined the corridor. "We're gonna get court-marshaled."

"We are not. It isn't our fault, exactly." The sound of footsteps brought him around, reaching for a blaster he of course wasn't wearing. "Oh, it's you. See they dressed you up, too."

Aleishia was wearing a dark blue dress, a neutral, sedate style common to the upper middle class on Telamara-Rurik's own mother had sometimes worn dresses like it. "I don't think my robes would really be appropriate, do you?" Her face was impassive as always, with that faint smile. "And I thank you for not...announcing my identity. I doubt the governor would be understanding."

"Yeah." Rurik still wasn't entirely comfortable with the story they had given the governor about Aleishia's presence. "Just as long as you don't go around pulling any of those..." He wiggled his fingers vaguely in the air between them.

Aleishia shrugged. "I don't think those..." and she mimicked the gesture, "will be required here. Have you heard anything yet about Thelea's condition?"

"I was just about to ask you." That took care of Rurik's attitude problem. "They haven't said anything. I figure that must be good."

"As far as I can tell, she's fine. I'd know if she were in a great deal of pain. Hopefully they'll let her join us for dinner."

"I've just spoken with the doctors, and he assured me that the Commander will be able to join us." The speaker was a tall, whip-thin man with patrician features, wearing the formal dress uniform of an Imperial Governor. "Rurik. I'm sorry about all the confusion. How are you, boy?"

"I've been better, Governor Rothen," Rurik admitted. "We're kind of in a jam here."

"That might describe our situation here," the Governor admitted. Then, always conscious of the formalities, he turned to Giriad. "Lieutenant Quoris, a pleasure to meet you. I'm Governor Aaren Rothen. Rurik doesn't write his old sponsor much, but he has mentioned you and Commander Thelea, both very favorably."
"Thank you, sir." Giriad was trying his best to look properly Imperial, not helped by the discomfort of the clothes.

"Don't be too grateful. I wasn't that generous." Rurik might be on his better behavior, but at the moment he didn't quite feel like being at his best. "May I present Aleishia, a . . . friend who helped us out while we were stranded. There was some unpleasantness getting here, and she decided to join us."

Aleishia gave an elegant half-bow, her hands folded serenely before her. Rurik had a brief image of how the gesture might look were she wearing the cowed robes, and a shiver ran down his spine. There was something far more serene and courtly about her than anyone he'd ever seen here at the palace or even from Coruscant, and it chilled him. "Governor, your hospitality is most generous."

The Governor returned the bow before he even seemed to realize it. "Madame. Welcome to Telamara." He glanced briefly over the three of them. "From what I was told, my daughter took your Commander to get cleaned up, and they'll be joining us in the dining room. If you'll follow me?"

Rurik fell in just a step behind the Governor, close enough to talk but far enough for a little respect. "Is it just me, or are things a little more tense than usual?"

"Whatever do you mean?" Governor Rothan was making a pretense at levity, but it wasn't working.

"The third degree we got the minute we came in-system. Not that a flock of old TIE/Ins really scared us all that much, but we've never had that kind of patrol here before. Something has to be going on."

The Governor's thin face twisted. "You picked a rather bad time to visit home, Rurik. We've been having problems and the Core is so busy fighting the Rebellion, we're on our own."

"Problems with who?"

"You're a very persistent young man, Rurik. I always liked that about you."

"Then humor me and tell me what's going on." He gave Rothan his best disarming grin, one he'd have never dared with his superiors aboard ship.

Rothan sighed. "All right. We've been attacked, repeatedly, by ships no one's seen before, who then disappear before we can respond. They've hit our supply ships from the Core when they drop out of hyperspace, they've disabled the one orbital defense station we had, ships attempting to leave are fallen on...we're lucky we still have communications. You were rather fortunate they didn't spot you coming in."

Rurik looked at Giriad and knew the other pilot was thinking the same thing. "They don't use some kind of pulse energy weapon, do they?" Rurik asked carefully.

"Big black ships, weird configuration?" Giriad added.

Rothan stared. "Not very big, but yes, some sort of pulse-phase weaponry, we think-at least, we assume. No one who's gotten close enough to analyze has lasted long enough to do any detailed research."

Aleishia's impassive eyes seem to flicker, darkening briefly. "Sounds vaguely familiar," she noted quietly.
Rurik explained, "We got stranded when the freighter we were escorting was yanked out of hyperspace by some sort of capital ship near Dhregan-not as big as an ISD-II, but big enough. It vaped the transport and took off. We managed to limp to one of the moons, but we still haven't been able to get word to the fleet."

"You're stationed aboard Executor, aren't you?" Rothan asked, and there was a faint note of pride audible even under the tension. Nice to know he was still local-boy-made-good in someone's eyes. "No one's been able to find the Outer Rim fleet-we certainly haven't, at any rate."

"We've been chasing the Rebels since the assault on Hoth. The ones that got away scattered and it's turned into this huge mopping-up operation," Giriad explained. "Most of the time we don't even know what system we're in ourselves."

Rothan nodded soberly. "We've heard that the kill at Hoth wasn't as clean as it might have been."

"Admiral Ozzel made a mistake," Rurik snapped a bit defensively. He was getting a little sick of the mop-up trips, too, but he was also getting tired of hearing how they should have managed to wipe out one pathetic group of rebels by now. If the rebels were that pathetic, they'd had been dead by now. "We've been the ones paying for it-at least until we got shunted off on an escort mission out of a nightmare."

They were approaching the ornate carved doors of the dining room, which, like most of the other doors in the palace were made of the local trees and were a deep black with a bluish tinge. One of the primary reasons the Empire had even bothered with a nowhere world like Telamara, with no intelligent indigenous life and too small without the resources for high industry. Blackwood paneling and carvings commanded enormous prices in the Core. The two stormtroopers to either side straightened to attention-not that it was far off from how they'd been standing already—and the doors swung open. "Aaren, there you are," said a woman's voice. "I thought you had gotten our guests lost."

"Merely catching up with Rurik, Caia," Rothan said, going to greet the tall, slender woman who had probably, when she was younger, been considered pretty and now had a refined, dignified sort of beauty. Her hair, like her husband's, was marked with gray, but had at one point certainly been a brilliant red.

"Rurik, how are you?" Caia Rothan extended both hands to him. "We never hear from you and I worry."

"I'm fine, ma'am," he said, feeling very much the child again. He'd been one of the 'bad influences' on their daughter, but Caia Rothan had never held it against him—she'd always seemed on a mission to straighten out her wild daughter and her daughter's friends, and she considered Rurik one of her success stories. He suspected, however, she still regarded him as a little boy who needed watching. She and Thelea, he reflected, would probably get along just fine.

The table was set for eight, but so far they were the only ones in the room. "Where's Thelea and the others?"

"Gena was finding something appropriate for Commander Thelea to wear to dinner." Caia's face creased a bit. "I understand there was a bit of a problem."

Giriad laughed. "I can just imagine." Rurik shot him a look. "Well, think about it. Have you ever seen her wear anything that wasn't standard-issue?"

"Besides that casual-dress tunic with the rank plates pulled off? No," he admitted. There was a
sound of footsteps and voices from the hall, including one rather familiar one raised in protest. "From the sound of it we're not going to now." But Aleishia was smiling faintly, and her eyes had the distant, knowing expression that had gotten progressively more irritating over the past few days. Mostly because Rurik suspected she did know more than she was letting on.

"I told you, I'm not going in there!" That was definitely Thelea's voice coming from the hall. One of the huge oak doors cracked open and a woman with bright auburn hair and a marked resemblance to Caia Rothen popped her head in.

"Won't be a moment!" the governor's daughter said cheerfully. "Just a bit of problem here. Hello, Rurik-nice to see you again!" Then she vanished, pulling the door shut behind her.

"Hello, Gena," Rurik said to the door. Then he looked at the governor. "Married life hasn't mellowed her any, has it?" Rothan shook his head silently.

The door opened again, and this time Gena stepped all the way through. "Sorry about that. Commander Thelea just had a few concerns about the clothing I found for her."

From outside, Thelea's voice carried clearly. "I am not coming in. I'd rather have a uniform, any uniform."

Rurik looked over at Giriad, eyebrows raised, and saw the same curiosity he was feeling on his wingman's face. "Thelea, I'm sure it can't be that bad. Come on, show us. You can laugh at what we look like in our civvies, too."

"I'd do that anyway," she snapped, but she pushed the door open and stepped through. "All right, you have permission to laugh at a superior officer. I am certainly out of uniform."

Laughing was actually not the first thing that came to Rurik's mind. Picking up his jaw from where it had dropped off completely and rolled into the corner was a priority, that and finding an appropriate place to direct his eyes. To say Thelea was out of uniform was an understatement. The dress, probably borrowed from Gena, fit her rather well. Bare at the shoulders save for narrow straps, the neckline curved gracefully down, drawing the eye to a place he suspected she wouldn't appreciate him looking. A light, warm-weather material, the dark silver fabric fell loose from the waist down, and it made a rustling whisper as she moved. Her cobalt hair was the only familiar aspect, still in its utilitarian braid down her back. All in all, she had everything that was appealing about a human female, with the added exotic touches of her skin and hair. The burning red eyes dared him or anyone to comment.

Governor Rothan was the first to recover. "Please, join us, Commander." He gestured to a chair to his right, across from Rurik.

"Only if you promise to serve answers along with dinner." She took the proffered seat and seemed to draw herself together, remembering her manners. "Not that I mind the hospitality, especially the medical treatment, but Governor, there's something going on around here, and I'd very much like to know what. We have to get back to our ship, and if something's preventing that, I feel we should know."

The serving droids placed the first course, a sliver of a rich pate made from the herd animals that ranged in the hills outside the city. The governor poked at his for a moment before replying. "As I explained to Rurik, it's something of a local problem. Unfortunately, with the war, there isn't much the Empire can do to help us."

Thelea tasted the food briefly and set down her fork. "What, exactly, is the problem?"
Rurik answered before Governor Rothan could speak. "It sounds like the same . . . whatever-they-ares who attacked the Aris Val. Know any other races that use weapons like they had?"

For some reason, Thelea found her eyes drawn to the Jedi woman. "No," she said quietly, "not in this sector, at any rate."

"Whoever they are, they're getting bolder," Gena said. "Dallen's told me that even the security forces are worried. If it's enough to scare stormtroopers-"

"Your husband is well-intentioned and very devoted to his duty, Gena, but he and his troops are worrying needlessly." Rothan's tone left little room for argument. "We won't have to evacuate."

"Even if you did, how could you get everyone off-world?" Rurik asked. He meant the question as rhetorical, but the uneasy glances between the governor and his wife and daughter made him wonder. "I mean, you couldn't just leave everyone outside the capital, and it would take much a long time to find everyone out in the hills."

Rothan sighed. "That's true. Though it is what Dallen's been suggesting. At least sending Gena and Caia to Coruscant, where they'd be safe."

"He means well, Father," Gena sighed.

They won't be safe there, either, Aleishia murmured. Thelea looked sharply at her, but the others didn't seem to have heard. They didn't even seem to notice she'd spoken at all.

"We didn't see any signs of those ships when we arrived," Rurik said. "Maybe we can just slip out the same way."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that. You can't just arrive aboard the Executor in an antique like you flew here, and we can't simply give you a shuttle. That means being part of a convoy to the nearest supply area." The governor shook his head. "Every convoy we've tried to send out has been wiped out before they could jump to light speed, or they've had to retreat."

"It's almost as if they can sense which ships are people trying to escape," Gena added. "A few of the local traders have tried running their blockade. Their ships were destroyed even faster than our transports."

The droids cleared away the plates and brought the second course, some sort of fish—the capital had, centuries ago, been primarily a seaport and the harvest was still a part of the economy. Thelea picked at hers as she'd done the first dish, eating just enough to appear polite. "What about your fighters?"

"What you saw coming in was more or less it," Rothan admitted. "We're not well-armed."

"Do you have anything hyperspace-capable? If we could fly escort, we might have a better chance, but I don't want to get left behind again."

"A few lambda-class shuttles and the larger supply transports, but nothing fighter-sized," the governor said. "The only fighters we have are the TIE/Ins you saw."

Thelea nodded slowly. "Great. So we either run for it and get blasted to bits, or we sit here and wait for the fleet to arrive, which won't be any time soon."

"Aren't we the optimist," Rurik commented. "Not that I'm in favor of taking on a ship like the one we ran into with TIE/Ins, but it's better than sitting here. What if they decide to come after the
"Then we'll have choice but to evacuate as many as we can, and hope that some transports escape." Gena smiled weakly. "Sounds a little like those rebels you're always chasing."

Rurik chose not to grace that with a reply, and he noticed Giriad and Thelea didn't, either. "There's got to be some way for us to run whatever blockade they've got. We have the ship we came in on, and your fighters and pilots. There has to be a plan in there somewhere."

"When you find one, by all means, let me know." Rothan dropped his fork. "Somehow I'm not hungry right now."

Thelea stood up. "Neither am I. Governor, if you wouldn't mind, please have a list of the defense forces you do have made available to me. A datapad readout will be fine."

Aleishia raised an eyebrow. "Not very polite of you, Thelea. After all the trouble they've gone to making you presentable." There was an amused gleam in the older woman's eyes. Then she said something in a language Rurik didn't understand, had never heard before. Thelea, clearly, had, and the brief, uncontrolled expression that crossed her features reminded him of a child rankling at discipline. Then she looked briefly surprised, as if she hadn't even thought of how strange it was.

All she said was, "Much as I appreciate the gesture, I'd be more useful figuring out a way off this planet, and if I can figure out how to take out those black ships in the process, so much the better. Governor, Madame, thank you for your hospitality." She turned and headed for the door, and Rurik couldn't help noticing that the back of the gown was as flattering as the front, if not more so.

Telamara had two moons, one waxing and one a sliver in the eastern sky. Rurik leaned on railing of the balcony, wondering what else was up there tonight. When he'd been a boy, living in one of the capital's less-affluent sections, he'd loved to look up at the stars and dream about flying. Now he just wondered where the enemy was, and how many of them there were. Being in the military sure took all the romance out of stargazing.

He didn't turn at the sound of footsteps. He'd known Thelea long enough now he could recognize her without looking. "Rurik, I've been looking over what the governor sent me. When he said they didn't have much, he was being generous. That group that game after us and one other—that's it for fighters. We might be better off making a run for it in the Infiltrator, crowded as it is . . . Rurik, are you listening?"

"Sometimes I wish I'd been a charter pilot like my mother said," he murmured absently, and then turned to look at her. "I thought you didn't like that dress."

She glanced down at the silver fabric, red eyes unreadable as always. "My jumpsuit's not clean, and this isn't that uncomfortable. I do wish it had a weapons belt."

He laughed, despite the glare it was sure to earn him. "I think it looks fine the way it is." She ducked her chin, and he wondered if the Chiss were capable of blushing. "What were you saying about the Infiltrator?"

"I was saying, it might be best if we just made a run for it. The Infiltrator's cloak system might be long gone, but it's still faster than anything else they have that's hyperspace-capable." She rested her elbows on the balcony rail, studying the datapad she was carrying. "We might be able to get to the fleet and get help."

"By the time we find them, it may be too late." He turned to face her. "I know that our first priority
should be getting to the Executor, filing our report and hoping that they don't bust us all to ensign without hearing our explanation, but this is my home. I just can't abandon everyone here."

"I understand." She didn't sound convinced. "And however we do this, we'll have to leave Aleishia here. If she comes back to the Executor, Vader will kill her."

"I know. Rothan doesn't know what she is, and even if he suspects, I don't think he'd turn her in. Not after she helped us."

Thelea was still looking at the datapad. "I feel sorry for her, but I don't know what else we can do."

"I get the feeling she can take care of herself. If she couldn't, she'd be dead already." He paused. "Do you suppose they were all like her? The Jedi, I mean."

"The Jedi were rabble-rousers and dangers to the stability of the galaxy." She recited the party line, but she no longer sounded quite so convinced. "In any case, there's nothing we can do. Either for her, or for this world. Not with what they have here." She tapped the screen.

"I'm not going to run away. This is home. I have to protect it." He grinned, and it was less boyish than it used to be. "That's why I joined the Navy."

Thelea smiled. "I wouldn't expect anything less from you." She turned to him. "Maybe Giriad and I should take the Infiltrator. You could help the governor with the planetary defense while we go for reinforcements."

The idea made sense, but he still didn't like it. "We're a team, remember? Besides, aren't you afraid of leaving me to make decisions without you there to give orders?"

"Strangely, the idea doesn't scare me as much as it used to." He was still in civvies, of course, and he looked more relaxed, even in the formal wear, than he ever did in the restrictive uniforms aboard ship.

"You know, you should dress up more often. I didn't say so before, but that dress looks really . . . nice . . . on you." He coughed a bit.

"I don't think it's quite regulation," she noted dryly, looking down at herself. Then she added, "Thank you. I haven't worn anything like this in . . . well, a long time."

"You're very pretty. For an alien, of course." His face was red, he could feel it.

"You don't look too bad, either. For a human." There was something very wrong about this, she thought. For starters, they were standing much too close, and it wasn't bothering her the way it should. Also, why was she noticing his personal appearance? He was, after all, only human.

A lock of her blue-black hair had slipped free from her braid, brushing her cheek. Rurik was fighting an unreasonable urge to push it back into place, his hand hovering near but not touching. She gave it a sidelong glance but didn't move to stop him. Her hair was very soft, he'd noticed that on the trip here, when she'd used his shoulder as a pillow. Funny how he really wanted to touch it again . . . .

A flicker of light in the sky drew his attention. "What was that?"

She turned, following his gaze, and trying to ignore the strange wave of relief and disappointment that washed over her. "Where?" Then she saw it-or rather, she saw the second flash, and the third, points of light that glowed white, then blue, then dimmed to yellow. "Ships coming out of
"Close to the atmosphere," he agreed. "Come on. Either the reinforcements are here, or the trouble just got a lot worse. Either way, we better find out." For a moment, he could have sworn there had been a flicker of disappointment on her face, but it must have been a trick of the light. He headed for the doors, and Thelea, after one last glance at the increasing number of lights in the sky, followed.
Rurik knew the way to the Governor's war room and took it at double-time pace. Thelea, hampered by the gown, had to struggle to keep up. The war room was not quite as archaic as she'd feared it would be, given how under-armed the rest of the garrison was. Rothan, several aides, and a man in a Colonel's uniform and the icy, competent air of a professional soldier surrounded the tactical display, watching a flatplate display that probably was salvaged from the Clone Wars.

The Colonel looked up when they entered, one eyebrow raising slightly when he saw Thelea. "Hello, Rurik. Gena told me you were here."

"Hello, Dallen. I presume she told you about Commander Thelea, as well?" He gestured to her, and she tried to straighten the gown and at least look a little like an officer. "Thelea, Colonel Dallen Torak, Gena's husband."

"Commander," the Colonel said. He didn't smile, but Thelea had the impression it was nothing personal. From the look of him, he never smiled much. She wondered how such an irritatingly effervescent woman like Gena had chosen a man with the personality of a stormtrooper for a life partner. Did human nobles arrange their marriages, too? "We've tracked eight ships new in-system, as well as we can. They have some sort of jamming system that's making it hard for our sensors to get a reading."

"They're setting up a blockade," Rurik hazarded, coming to look at the display screen showing Telamara, the two moons, and several amorphous points that glowed a hostile red. "Look at the way they're spreading out."

"They've already had you blockaded," Thelea observed. She was standing beside Rurik, and he was painfully aware of her shoulder touching his. "This looks more like they're planning something else."

"An invasion?" How Dallen managed to stay calm all the time was beyond Rurik's ability to comprehend. What they taught them at that academy . . . .

"That, or something worse." Thelea was still studying the readouts, and he could almost see her thinking. "If their ships really are as powerful as they seem, they might be able to stage a planetary bombardment. It won't quite do a Death Star's job, but with your population so concentrated in a few cities, it won't have to."

"Base Delta Zero," Rurik murmured, and saw the looks on Thelea, the Governor, and Torak's faces. They all knew what that meant.

"And unless a miracle occurs and the fleet arrives, we have no way of turning them back. If we try evacuating now, we'd be shot to pieces before we even reached escape velocity." Dallen's frown deepened, if that were possible. "Right now I'd even be happy for a squadron of Interceptor."

"Believe me, you're not the only one. I wish we had even a few of them," Rurik sighed. "Even that would be better than those decrepit TIE/Ins you're using. And decrepit pilots," but he murmured that part low enough he didn't think anyone heard.

"Even if we did, what would we do with them?" Thelea, always the voice of despair. "If these are the same ships that we ran into before, we know they can take Interceptors without a problem."

"At least we could keep a few of them occupied, maybe long enough to buy a transport time to
escape." Rurik sighed through gritted teeth. "I'm starting to know what the rebels must have felt like at Hoth."

"We're the Imperial Navy. This isn't supposed to happen to us. We are not a crowd of rebels on some backwater ball of ice. There has to be a way out of this." Thelea turned a floor-mounted controller's chair around to face them and slumped into it, arms draped across the sides, staring into space. "We are not going to stay trapped here. Is there anything else besides the TIEs? Anything at all?"

"In terms of fighters, no," Dallen said, and then he corrected himself. "Well, there are those that we picked up when we shut down that illegal racing group on the southern continent."

"I thought you'd said those were antiques," Rothan protested, "barely worth keeping for scrap."

"They are, but they do have lasers and can be loaded with concussion missiles. The shields are hardly worth mentioning, but that shouldn't bother pilots used to flying TIEs."

Rurik glanced at Thelea, eyebrows raised. "Just what, exactly, are we talking about?"

Dallen shrugged. "Five flight-worthy, if antiquated, Z-95s."

"Headhunters?" Rurik didn't know whether to laugh or not. "Are you out of your mind? These things swat Interceptors like a wherry lizard picks off birds for lunch. They'd atomize Headhunters as soon as look at them."

"Well, if you can make some Interceptors, or better yet the newer fighters, appear by magic, then I'm all in favor of letting the Z-95s rot, but if you can't, then I think you should take what we've got."

"I don't see you lining up to fly with us," Rurik snapped, a little more harshly than he'd intended.

"Enough, both of you." Thelea steepled her fingers in front of her. "We'll work with what we have. If that's Z-95s, so be it. We're Imperial pilots, remember? Are we going to let a minor technical problem stop us? Are we lesser pilots than the Rebels? Of course not. This will just require a little more thought."

Rurik sighed. "Can we at least load them with concussion missiles?"

Dallen smiled, a little more smugly than was really decorous. "We've got a stockpile for you. There were three TIE Bombers, but unfortunately we thought they might make good escorts for the ship we tired to send out."

"Great. So nice to know we're not the first ones to try this." Rurik slumped into one of the other chairs. "So, we go up with the Z-95s and your TIE group. Then what? Poke at them until they knock us down?"

"We could try to run another transport out," Dallen offered. "With the extra fighters we could buy more time."

"That's suicidal." Thelea was drumming her fingers together. "But we could run an empty transport."

"What are you suggesting?" Rurik turned to look at her. "What good's an empty transport?"

"It's a decoy. Come now, I thought you were smarter than that." Sometimes he wondered if she
played up her accent and highly formal diction when she was annoyed. "Send someone-whoever you think would be the best pilot-in the Infiltrator to run for it while they're focused on the transport."

"What makes you think they'd have any better chance than the transport, especially without the fighters?" Rurik couldn't help snapping; sometimes she could be so arrogant . . . .

"The fact that they didn't swat us down when we arrived in-system. With more of them out there in orbit, I doubt we'd be that lucky again, but if we make it look like there's a whole group making a run for it, we could draw their attention." She sat forward abruptly, turning her chair to face one of the computer terminals. "If whoever flies the Infiltrator can get to the nearest major base, they can call the fleet from there. If we use a priority-one distress signal, someone will have to come. Even if it's only a Victory-class or two, that could at least buy time for an evacuation."

"Who's going to take the Infiltrator?" Thelea and Rurik looked to the governor, who'd asked. "If the three of you are flying-
"

"We could send Giriad," Rurik offered. "We'd be all right without him-one Z-95, more or less, isn't going to make or break us, and one of us really should make contact with the fleet. We're probably listed as MIA at best, or deserters, by now."

"Giriad at least would be the most obsequious," Thelea sighed. "They might be less likely to shoot him on sight."

"Getting cynical in our old age, aren't we?" Rurik muttered, but he nodded. When Giriad wanted to, he could still play the role of perfect Imperial cadet. That tended to grate less on superior officers than his own Rimworld accent or Thelea's alien aloofness. "All right. Though you realize, if he doesn't make it, we're more or less dead."

"I'll take less." Thelea's fingers went back to drumming. "They're spaced pretty evenly around the planet, but a big enough force might draw the attention of a few-enough for the Infiltrator to sneak by."

"There are eight of them. If they decide to all gang up on your decoy task force, there won't be enough of you left for spare parts." Dallen always did have a way with words, Rurik thought grimly, but he couldn't argue with the logic.

"That's a risk we'll have to take," Thelea sighed, standing up. "I suppose we should go see about getting those fighters space-worthy."

"In that?" Rurik raised his eyebrows at her, or more specifically, her dress.

"I'm sure I can convince Gena to find you something more suitable," Dallen offered, masterfully keeping an amusement he felt concealed. Or maybe he just didn't feel any.

"I'd appreciate that. Rurik, find Giriad, wherever he's disappeared to, and have Colonel Torak show you where these fighters are. We'll need at least one practice run for you and me, and Giriad needs to know exactly what we're planning to do."

"It'll have to be atmospheric-we go up too early and the games' up." Rurik stood and stretched. "And I was hoping to get some sleep tonight, too."

"Humans," Thelea sniffed, starting for the door. "Get plenty of caf, and I'll see you on the flight line. Such as is." The doors hissed shut behind her.
"You fly with that?" Dallen jerked his thumb after Thelea. "My sympathies."

Rurik bristled. "She's the best pilot I know. Definitely the best I've ever flown with, and she's a good commander, too. She cares about what we do."

Dallen raised his hands in surrender. "Sorry. I didn't mean for you to take it personally. Jays, but you've gotten touchy."

"She's rubbing off on me." Rurik shook his head as if to clear it. "Now, you'd better show me where you keep the antiques. I have a feeling this is going to be a long night."

Aleishia sat in the quarters she had been given, wrapped in the robe she'd been wearing yesterday. She could feel the presence in the sky above-since she had opened herself to the Force again she was noticing so many little things, the people moving anxiously around the capitol, the animal life in the hills of Telamara's green continents and teeming in the seas, and above that, the heavy, crushing sense of the aliens. She did not know what species this was, but she knew the power that controlled them, and where those strange weapons and ships had come from.

There was a brushing at the back of her mind, an impression more than actual speech, but she recognized the source and knew what they were asking. "Yes," she said quietly, "they're here, too." Another touch, more insistent this time, and she shivered. "I know. I'll try. But it's not easy-I'm not like her, I'm so tired."

She closed her eyes wearily. It was more true than she cared to admit; the years were wearing on her, harder after so much isolation. But at least now they had the girl-Chiss, she corrected herself, Thelea was too old to be thought of as a child, by her people's standards at least, and woman would have such overtones of humanity to it. She was powerful, as they'd hoped, but so tainted. Who'd have imagined she'd have found her way into Palpatine's service? I should have, she admitted. I should have kept closer watch. Now everything could be-

The contact increased, and she felt a soothing surge of warmth that seemed to encompass her mind in a brilliant bath of white light. Somewhere in that light she touched a vast, incomprehensible understanding, an intelligence so alien that her own mind could not grasp it. That collective reached out and for a moment it included her, and she was caught up in the knowledge, the wonder, the sheer, painful beauty of it . . . abruptly the feeling was gone, replaced by a soothing, restful peace. She let herself sink into it, and through it, to sleep. For now, at least, everything was still proceeding, neat and orderly, as they had planned. Everything was still all right.

"Yes," she murmured, before she drifted off, "yes, that's exactly what I'll do."
Chapter 9

Thelea watched the surface of the planet recede beneath the Z-95, the sky darkening from cerulean to navy to cobalt to the inky black of deep space, and she wished fervently that she could have come up with another plan, any plan, that was better than this. The Headhunters handled like packing crates with wings, though to give their designer the benefit of the doubt that practice run was in atmosphere. Lack of a hyperdrive in the modified racers they were flying wasn't something that bothered her particularly, used as she was to a capship-dependant Interceptor, but this was not the fast, maneuverable SFS fighter. The shields it was carrying were nothing compared to those on the new TIE Defenders, or even on the Rebels' most antiquated Ys. One or two lucky shots from a laser-or one burst from whatever energy weapon had fried her Interceptor and they'd be so much space junk. And her flight suit was far too bulky for the cockpit, though it had the small comfort of being self-contained if they did end up being vented.

"At least we have concussion missiles," and she mimicked Dallen Torak's condescending tone.

"What was that, Lead? I didn't copy." She looked out her cockpit to her right, where Rurik's Headhunter was flying parallel to hers.

"Nothing, Two. You didn't hear that." They'd had to fight to rig up a "squadron frequency" for the two Headhunters that excluded the six TIE/Ins following them up. The pilots were mostly older, semi-retired types who had looked forward to an uneventful tour on Telamara followed by retirement. To them, surrender in the face of insurmountable odds had seemed like a perfectly acceptable solution, no matter what these alleged hotshots from the Executor were suggesting. A short lecture from Governor Rothan, backed up by a silent glare from Colonel Torak, had silenced any more of that talk, but Thelea knew the kind of looks they'd given her too well. They weren't happy taking orders from an alien.

"Copy that. Or rather not. Any sign of activity from the blockade yet?" The sensors on the swing-wing fighters weren't exactly state-of-the-art, either, but they should, at least, let them know if anything was getting too close.

"Not so far." She checked on the position of the bulk freighter that was being sent up, slaved to ground-based computers, as their decoy. The sluggish crate was behind the TIEs, laboriously lifting itself out of the grav well. The more cynical part of Thelea's mind, which was, she had to admit, the majority of it, was wondering if the alien ships in the blockade would be at all convinced this was really an escaping refugee ship. She understood their not wanting to waste one of the few decent transports they had, but looks were going to be important here.

For a moment, she couldn't pick out the oddly-shaped black ships against the starfield. Then, something moved. On her sensors it read as "unidentified," but looking out through the cockpit canopy she recognized the odd, asymmetrical shape of the ship, or one like it, that had destroyed the Aris Val. Farther off in the opposite direction was another, and even the Headhunter's sensor package was picking up those farther off-not so much as ships, but distortions. "There they are," she muttered, before switching to the wide-band frequency. "Gamma group, this is Alpha One." It felt oddly comforting to be using their old designation for the two Headhunters. "Stay in formation unless fired upon. Alpha Two and I have point."

"Thanks for reminding me, Lead."

"Let's try to stay focused, Two." At least he was still in a mood to banter. When Rurik wasn't kidding around was when it was time to worry. "I'm going to make a shallow turn towards the
nearest capship. Stay on my wing, and stay sharp, but try not to look like you're too interested in him."

"Right. So, casual, but not too casual, and ready to fire but don't like I'm ready to fire. Shall I stand on my head and sing the "Hymn to Palpatine" while I'm at it?"

She had to bite down on her lip to keep from laughing and she hated him for it. "Two, I'm warning you-

"Right, right. On your wing." His fighter banked away from hers, falling back a little to match her turn. She shook her head and forced herself to concentrate on flying.

And it was taking more concentration than usual. In vacuum, the wing design should not have made any difference, but the placement of the engines and maneuvering thrusters did. The control yoke required a great deal more pressure than that on an Interceptor, and her arc ended up being wider than she'd intended. She was still too far out for them to use that EMP that had short-circuited her Interceptor, or at least she thought she was, but she was willing to bet that wasn't their only defense.

From the activity near the ship, she was right. A mass had detached itself from the side of the destroyer, or whatever that ship was, and was drifting towards the fighter group. Gamma Three's voice crackled over the comm, around what sounded like the start of jamming. "What's that, Lead?"

"We're checking it out," Thelea replied, kicking the thrusters up a notch. She couldn't afford too much speed-right now she did not want to drain the lasers unless she had to. According to her sensors and what little she could see out the cockpit, it was a single, solid, mass, but something didn't feel right. She steepened her turn and started the beginning of an evasive roll-

-as the object split into at least a dozen pieces, that immediately developed trajectories of their own, with what looked suspiciously like ion trails behind them. "Fighters coming in, break and engage!" She tried to snap the fighter into a tight roll and felt the throttle tremble in protest. Cursing the creaky maneuvering jets she jinked left, with Rurik passing beneath her. Three of the TIEs shot past, aiming to engage the little fighters, or drones, or whatever the black ships were. Circling back around for another pass, she got a better look at them. They were made of the same black stuff-it somehow didn't look quite like metal-as the larger ships, but with a strange two-pronged front and a rounded, almost organic-looking aft end. At least, from the ion trails, she assumed that end was aft. They didn't move like fighters, but in vacuum that was somewhat irrelevant-unless of course you were trying to get a targeting lock on them.

"Three closing on us, Lead." Rurik's voice had lost all the easy bantering from a moment ago.

"I see them. Head straight in at them and be ready to break on my mark." She punched up the engines as high as she could get them without draining the lasers and aimed straight for the point ship of the three incoming. They weren't firing yet, but out of the corner of her eyes she caught flashes of white light. Not like turbolasers, then, but why should that surprise her. The proximity alert on her targeting computer warbled a collision warning. "On my mark, scissor right. I'll take the leaders. Ready-mark!"

Rurik's fighter spun right, out of her line of sight, while she pulled back on the yoke and pitched, shooting straight up while the three attackers tore through the space where her fighter had been nanoseconds before. Twisting back into a dive she came around and down behind them, wishing futilely for her Interceptor with its vastly superior handling. This thing had the turning radius of an intoxicated space slug by comparison. One of the black fighters swung out of their loose formation
to follow Rurik while the other two turned together, trying to loop back towards her. She wondered again if they were piloted-splitting up would have made more sense, instead of giving her a neat single target.

"Thank the gods stupidity is the universal constant." She lead them, and as they crossed in front of her she made the targeting lock. The concussion missile closed the distance rapidly and tore the closer of the two fighters apart. The white-hot debris from the first and the force of the explosion took part of the laser mount on the second, and it spun out of control, sparks dancing over the black skin. Thelea fired a couple laser blasts into it and saw more sparks. Deciding it was disabled, she starting to loop back around-this course was taking her dangerously close to the destroyer.

"Nice shooting, Lead, but you've picked one up. I'm on it." She caught a flash of motion as Rurik shot by above her, and then the red threat indicator on her targeting computer indicating a pursuit vehicle vanished.

"Thanks, Two." The other enemy fighters were engaged with the TIEs, so Thelea took a chance to see where the capships were. To her surprise, they didn't seem interested in the fighters at all. The nearest was rotating slowly, but her sensors didn't show any power spikes suggesting they were preparing to fire. A quick scan told her much the same was true of the other two destroyers in close range, except they had also launched those pods or whatever the fighters came out of. The single blips on her targeting computer fanned out into at least two dozen of the little fighters. Searching for the freighter she found that the fighters were ignoring it in favor of the other fighters.

"Two, I'm going to see if I can get that destroyer's attention. Watch my back and try to pick off anyone who gets too close, all right?"

"That's what I'm here for, Lead." If he was being sarcastic she couldn't tell. "Looks to me like it and the other two are closing on the freighter."

"I know, but I want to be sure before I send the signal to Giriad." Giriad, in the Infiltrator, was waiting, still inside the atmosphere, for the signal to make a run for it. Part of Thelea still felt a little guilty, but then she remembered that the Infiltrator, antiquated and stripped though it was, was still faster and better-armed than a Headhunter. She aimed for the destroyer, and the abruptly changed course, turning to run at the freighter. She heard Rurik curse as he adjusted course and she smiled to herself. Good to see she could still annoy him.

The freighter swept by beneath them-an optical illusion; it was their speed, not the slow-moving freighter's. Thelea noted that when they crossed into the freighter's range the few fighters in pursuit veered off. Abruptly, Rurik pulled up. "Four above us, tracking you, Lead. I'm on them."

"Negative, that's too many." She scanned the area and saw a couple more heading in to help. "Let me circle around-"

"Power surge from the destroyers," Rurik cut her off. "Get clear, I can handle this. Lead." He added the title as if in afterthought.

Thelea punched the transmit button and sent the signal to Giriad before spinning her fighter into a roll that carried her away from the freighter. She saw something on the front end of the destroyers flickering, and patterns of light danced across the big ships' skins. Her targeting computer briefly registered one signal, then two, racing up out of the atmosphere towards the edge of the planet's gravity well. Her computer blinked as the distance on the first suddenly increased and then vanished as the Infiltrator made the jump into hyperspace. The second blip was still there, however, and she sent her fighter towards the gap between the second and third destroyers towards the source of the second signal. She had just enough time for her computer to register the craft as a
lambda-class shuttle when it flickered and vanished into hyperspace. She'd worry about that later, though. "All fighters, package is away, repeat, package is away. Break off and return to base." She got three acknowledgments from the TIEs-they'd lost a few, obviously. Then she looked for the other Headhunter.

"Lead, got a problem here." Rurik's voice was taut.

Thelea brought her fighter around in time to see Rurik caught in a tangle of the black fighters-his evasive maneuver had carried him away from the freighter but into a knot of the enemy ships. One fired, a steady stream of white light, and as he spun his fighter clear of that threat a second fired a different kind of weapon-a web of energy tendrils that collided with the wing of his Headhunter, the force of the blow knocking his fighter sideways, exposing the underbelly to a third of the enemy's guns. "I'm on my way!"

"Negative, there's a surge from the destroyers. I can get out of this. Don't risk getting caught in the explosion. Shouldn't be too hard to sneak around here." From her vantage point she couldn't quite see how he did it, only that he'd flipped the fighter tail-over-head and was diving between his three attackers towards the underside of the freighter.

At that moment her view was abruptly cut off by a blinding flare from the two ships to either side of her. The bleed from the energy surge overloaded her sensors and they went into emergency shutdown. At the same moment the first of the capships fired as well, and the three beams of energy struck the freighter. She sent her fighter into a dive for the atmosphere and saw similar runs from the surviving TIEs, though one looked too badly damaged to survive reentry. Then again, she'd developed new appreciation for Sienar's quality control lately.

The freighter seemed to crack and then, as the energy bursts struck the engines, it exploded. She saw the three fighters who'd been chasing Rurik caught in the flame and incinerated, and found herself hoping, pilot to pilot, that they'd been drones. Pilot-she punched at the buttons, but her computer's circuits were still overloaded, and as her visual scan became more desperate as she realized she didn't see the other Headhunter. "Two, respond. Lead, Two, please respond. Rurik?" Her voice scaled up in a way that, were she not so worried, might have bothered her. "Rurik, please respond!"

There was a flash of motion inside the debris and the second Headhunter burst out of the cloud of gas and particles. "Sorry, Lead, a bit tied up there."

The surge of relief competed with a wave of fury, and she had to bite down an urge to scream at him. "Back to the ground, now, before they notice we're still here."

"Copy that, Lead," and he sounded somewhat chagrined. "On my way down." She kicked her throttle to full and didn't reply, watching the skin of the Headhunter's nose heat up as reentry cut off communications.

Rurik popped the cockpit canopy and climbed out, stretching in some relief. The Z-95 wasn't really that much more cramped than a TIE, but he never really liked sitting in those for two long, either. Stripping off his helmet and gloves he dropped them into the cockpit and turned to where the other were landing.

He turned right into Thelea, who'd also stripped off her gloves and helmet, and he was brought up short by the fury flashing in those red eyes. "Of all the reckless, stupid, dangerous-don't you ever do anything like that again, you hear me? What were you thinking, not that you ever think-oh, you make me so mad I could just . . . ." She ground her teeth, looking for the appropriate threat and failing to find it. "If you ever come so close to getting yourself killed again I'll strangle you!"
He couldn't help it—he laughed. "Why, Thelea, I didn't know you cared!"

To his surprise, she caught him up in a fierce hug. He was almost too startled to take advantage of the situation, but not quite. Her face was pressed into his shoulder, and he almost didn't hear what she mumbled. "We're having far too many near-death experiences lately."

He nodded, though the strange sensation of having Thelea pressed this close against him, even with several layers of flight suit between them, was making a reasonable response hard to formulate. "At least help is on the way. We shouldn't have to do this again."

"I hope." She sighed, and her death grip on him relaxed just a bit. She made no move to step away, her arms settling around his waist and her head resting against his shoulder. "I wonder who the second ship was. I know I didn't imagine it."

Rurik shrugged. "I'm sure someone will tell us. What I'm curious about is what we're going to do with the information we just got on those ships. You did have your flight recorder turned on, didn't you?" He found he was stroking her hair absently, fingerling the tendrils that had worked loose from her braid.

"Standard procedure." She sounded offended at the suggestion, but she still didn't pull away. "But that second shuttle . . . ."

There was a quiet cough from the entrance to the hanger. "If you don't mind an interruption, I can shed a little light on that." Dallen Torak was standing at the door, an amused smirk on his face.

Thelea stepped hastily away from Rurik, fussing with her flight suit and trying desperately not to feel as if she'd been caught doing something wicked. Even though, of course, she had been. "What was that? I thought we'd agreed only the Infiltrator would go."

He was holding something in his hand, and as he approached Rurik could see it was a data chip. Torak held it out to Thelea, and as she took it said, "Someone apparently failed to tell your friend. They've no idea how she did it—no one remembers seeing her around the hangers, or has any idea how she got the codes, but she apparently snuck aboard one of the shuttles, and the data chip was all she left. I'm afraid she's abandoned us."

The data chip slipped from Thelea's fingers and clattered to the deck.
Chapter 10

Thelea paced the quarters she'd been given, wanting to throw something, to scream, to tear something to shreds, to do anything but be a sensible, responsible, mature adult. Instead she forced herself to sit down and take a deep, not very calming, breath. She trembled with the effort of keeping her temper in check, wrapping her arms around herself and digging her fingers into her flesh until she thought she'd draw blood. How dare she? How dare that . . . that Jedi offer her promises of information, drop tantalizing hints, and then at the first opportunity abandon her . . . again? Because try as she might she couldn't erase that vision, or memory, or whatever it was, of that woman, that Jedi, on homeworld, with her, taking care of her, while her mother-where had her mother been? Dead? Away? Aleishia would have known. But Aleishia had left . . . again.

A shattering sound jarred her out of her thoughts. A little glass vase that had been the room's only real decor had exploded into fragments, seemingly of its own accord. She stared at it for a moment, uncomprehending. The room wasn't shaking-so far, at least, the ships above weren't attacking. As far as she could see there was nothing to have caused it. Then she let it slip from her mind-she had too many things to think about to let a shattered vase worry her.

Stepping around the broken glass she picked up the data chip Aleishia had left for her. In her first private fit of pique she'd thrown it across the room. Hopefully the collision with the wall hadn't damaged it too severely. She'd already played it once, which was what had set off the temper tantrum, and it had been the first item to go flying in her rage. The casing was intact, and she put it back into the viewer, which had also demonstrated a remarkable resilience.

The one-sixteenth hologram of Aleishia appeared again, her face framed by the dark robes. "Hello, Thelea. I know you'll be angered by my actions, and I understand."

"The frell you do." She glared at the holo and resisted the childish urge to strike it.

"This is the second time I've had to leave you behind, and it doesn't feel any easier. At least now I know you're on your own and not subject to your mother's family-well, that's as may be." The holo sighed. "The future might always be in motion, but there's nothing we can do about the past. And it's for your future's sake I have to leave. I know, just as you do, that I can't go back to the Empire with you. The time isn't right, though it is coming. But before that there will be very dark times, and you will have to travel them alone. I wish that I, or your father, Force help me, could make them easier for you, but we can't. Though he may be able to provide some escape." The holographic image leaned forward and fiddled with something outside the sensor range. "I've encoded this chip with coordinates to a planet near the edge of what the Empire calls the Unknown Regions. When the darkness comes, you'll find help-and answers-there. Keep this with you at all times. You'll know when you need it." Her eyes flicked away for a moment, as if looking at something. "I have to go now. Forgive me, Mith'ele'arana. Remember you are the child of two noble families, and you have the added strength of the Force. Never forget that, and you will be all right. We will meet again, I promise. Until that time, may the Force be with you." The image flickered and vanished.

Thelea popped the chip out of the reader and clenched it in her fist, as if she could crush it by sheer will. Then she dropped it and the reader to the floor, her fists balling into hard little knots at her side. There was nothing she could do-Aleishia was gone, all the answers with her, unless the Jedi decided to reappear as suddenly as she'd disappeared. She supposed she should be grateful-there need be no explanation now, other than Rothan's report on the theft of the shuttle and their additions to that. Still, another link with her past had just slipped through her fingertips, just as
Admiral Thrawn had left, and now she was doubly sure he'd been, if not lying, at least prevaricating. Their careers were on the line, there was a chance Giriad would be ignored and they'd be trapped here, even if they did get back they could be busted down to ensigns or worse . . . she took a deep breath and tried not to scream.

A rap at the old-fashioned wood door brought her head up, but she found her fists didn't want to unclench. "Come in, Rurik."

He poked his head in the door, as if afraid something might come flying at him. "How did you know it was me?"

How had she known? "No one else would have dared." It had been more instinctive than that, but better not to dwell on the thought. "Come in. I'm through pitching fits."

Rurik stepped inside and closed the door behind him, surveying the broken glass and scattered objects. "I take it you're not feeling any better."

She shook her head. "She left. She just left. She didn't even tell me."

He picked his way carefully to her and, hesitantly, put a hand on her shoulder. "Well, if she'd told you, would you have let her go?" Thelea shook her head. "So it's not like she didn't have to sneak."

"Why did she have to go at all?" She turned those glowing eyes towards him and he was surprised at how pale her face was, with dark, purplish circles marring the powder blue beneath her eyes. Was this how her species cried? "Damn it, Rurik, she had answers! She knew things, and she told me just enough to make me want to ask her more. She knew my mother, she knew my father . . . and it's not only that, but now I know Thrawn was lying, or at least he didn't tell me everything. I know that she was telling the truth, I don't know how but I'm sure of it. And that means he . . . he lied, and he wouldn't tell me why, and now she's gone, and he's left, and my mother is dead and I can't ask anyone why!" Abruptly she grabbed his arm. "You aren't going to leave, are you? I don't think I could stand to have one more person leave."

"Hey, are you forgetting we're still blockaded?" He gave her what he hoped was a reassuring grin. "I'm not going anywhere, especially not in a Headhunter."

She didn't smile. "Everyone leaves me. Promise me you won't. Promise!"

He could feel the humor drain from him. "Thelea, I promise. I won't leave you." Somewhere in the back of his mind an alarm klaxon was going off, reminding him that she was still his commanding officer, that all regs and all common sense proscribed anything even close to this. He shoved the thought aside. They were not aboard Executor now.

"You promise?" He had never heard that note in her voice before. Anger, amusement, efficiency, even fear at times, but never that child-like terror of abandonment. He cupped her face in his hands. "I'm so tired of being left."

"I promise. Besides, I know you could hunt me down if I ever tried." He kept the smile toned down this time. "I won't leave you."

He could almost feel her drawing in on herself, her strength returning, and he prepared to let her pull away. And then, to his surprise, she seemed to release all that energy and slumped against him, her body shaking with sobs. "My mother's gone, and my father . . . ." That word seemed to stick in her throat. "And now Aleishia. If anyone else leaves me I'll go insane!" He tightened his arms across her back and let her cry, though he knew those eyes did not shed tears. They stood like that
for several minutes, until Thelea finally took a deep breath and looked up.

He knew he shouldn't. Every instinct except one was telling him this was a bad idea. But as he was probably never going to get another chance at this, he decided to hell with the regs and protocol. He bent his head to kiss her, and to his surprise and delight she didn't resist at all. Her arms slipped up around his neck, pulling him closer. If either had any doubts about compatibility, the enthusiasm of their responses was enough to quell them. Her skin was cooler than his, and soft. He was incredibly aware of her, the feel of her hands sliding across the back of his skull, and the press of her body, so similar to a human's, against his.

Thelea pulled away suddenly, her hand creeping up to cover her mouth. Her eyes were wider than he'd ever seen them, and she was trembling. "What in all the stars . . . ?" As she backed up her legs collided with the edge of the bed and she dropped gracelessly to sit on it. "What just happened?"

Rurik was surprised he could still blink. "I think I kissed you." She nodded. "I think you kissed me back." She nodded again, her fingers still covering her mouth as if she couldn't quite believe what she had felt. "Oh, hell."

"I couldn't have said it better myself," she said. He sat down beside her, careful to leave a good arm's length between them.

"I definitely kissed you." That fact was stuck in his mind. "I enjoyed it."

"So did I." She sounded as surprised as he did. "I didn't want to stop."

"Neither did I." That was far more true than he really wanted to admit. "We're in trouble."

"Worlds of trouble." They sat for a minute.

Finally Rurik sighed. "We can't let this get around."

"Definitely not. Fraternizing is a serious offense." She wrapped her arms around herself. "We're in enough trouble as it is."

"It's not like we can't control ourselves. It's not like we're the first people in the galaxy this has happened to." He stared at the broken glass on the floor. "Did you throw something?"

She looked rather blankly at the glass. "I don't know how that happened."

The bed shook. So did the glass on the floor.

"What was that?" Even as Rurik said it, the shaking stopped.

"Well, it can't be the world shifting. The kiss wasn't that good."

He gave her a wounded look that changed to consternation as the shaking started again. "Wait a minute. You don't think-" He jumped up and ran for the small balcony off the bedroom. She was close on his heels and almost collided with him as he came to halt. "Oh, no."

"I see we did get them angry." The ground shook again, and this time they could see the source. The bolts of energy were weaker than the ship-killing laser, but they were also focused more tightly than before. As they watched a beam lanced down through the atmosphere, directed at a section of the capitol towards the sea. A plume of orange flame said that, whatever the target had been, the hit had been direct.
"We're in trouble." Rurik's assessment seemed right on the mark to Thelea. He turned back to the room, the broken glass from the vase crunching under his boots. "I think we'd better-"

The next bolt was closer. A lot closer. The transparisteel in the balcony doors rattled wildly in its frames, and the floor shuddered under their feet. Thelea stumbled into Rurik but regained her footing quickly, pulling away from the offered arm. Belatedly a warning klaxon started somewhere in the palace. "Command center," she snapped, "come on."

They sprinted down the corridors, which were ominously deserted. The floors and walls vibrated again with the shock wave of another more-distant blast. "I hope they're just demonstrating their annoyance and not seriously leveling the city," Rurik called over the rumbling.

"They haven't hit this building yet," Thelea snapped, skidding a bit as she rounded a corner. The lights in the corridor flickered.

"Maybe they're just leaving us alive to do the surrendering." Rurik halted in front of the command center door, which failed to slide open. "Damn it. Where's the override on this thing?"

"Step back." Thelea pulled the hold-out blaster from its sheath and fired a single shot into the door panel. There was a shower of sparks, and the door slid halfway open.

"That works, too." Rurik shouldered his way in and Thelea had to push him when he stopped only a few steps in.

"What is it?" and then she was able to see around him. The holoprojector at the center of the room was activated, showing Telamara and the ships surrounding her. There were nearly twice as many of the capital ships, glowing a hostile red, as there had been only that morning. And more than half were concentrated over the highly populated capital city.

"Rurik, Commander, where have you been?" Dallen Torak's uniform was singed, as if he'd been too close to an exploding control panel-which, from the glittering glass, plastiform and metal bits crunching on the floor, he probably had. "There wasn't any warning. The new ships appeared and the bombardment started almost immediately."

"We were-held up." The brief hitch in Thelea's voice made Rurik look at her, but her expression was impassive as always. "What's happening?"

"We are, to put it bluntly, being beaten." Dallen gestured to the holoprojector. "And badly."

"Shields?" Rurik asked.

"They've punched through them as if they weren't there. The defense platform's already gone, of course." The ex-stormtrooper's voice was almost pedantic.

Thelea looked around the dimly lit room and spotted Gena and Caia Rothan, both huddled in controller's chairs, blankets around their shoulders, looking shell-shocked. "Where is Governor Rothan?"

Caia looked up, hollow-eyed. "He went out . . . wanted to see what was going on. He took a trooper escort but with all the shooting-"

"I told him not to go," Dallen interrupted. "He insisted." A slight twitch of the shoulders was the only outward sign of frustration. "They're jamming communications, or there's just so much static in the air they're being naturally blocked, but either way we can't get through to them." The building bucked beneath their feet again. "That was too close."
"The last four or five have been too close. Have they broadcast any surrender demands yet?" Rurik asked.

"Not that we could translate. We've intercepted some communications, but they don't seem directed at us." The building shook again. "Closer together," he noted clinically.

Thelea forced her fingers to unclench from their death grip on the back of a chair. "I don't suppose you have any sort of shelters or something?"

"Retreat?" The amount of distaste he could put into a single word was remarkable, really.

"Well, they're either going to blow up the whole building, or they're going to blow up most of it. If we don't want to be captured or crushed into very small pieces, we ought to think about leaving." Thelea kept her tone carefully level. Sometimes ground pounders took gentle handling, not unlike a mentally deficient child. "Better to retreat and hide until the fleet gets here." If the fleet gets here, she thought, but she didn't say that part aloud.

"There are tunnels." Gena's voice sounded very young. "Beneath the palace. They're part of a cave system under the city. I used to sneak out through them, but I know they go deeper."

"I remember that," and there was an oddly affectionate tone to Dallen's voice. "But they're just that, caves. There are no defenses-"

"But there are places to hide. If we can stay low enough, they won't be able to find us before the fleet arrives." Thelea slammed her fist on the panel. "I don't plan to die here, and if I have to play tunnel snake to be sure of it, so be it. We get what weapons we can and whoever's left and-"

"Set the ground-based defenses to self-destruct and leave them a few nice surprises," Rurik picked up. "If the lasers aren't any good against them in a fair fight, we might as well get some use out of them."

Dallen considered that for a moment, and then reached for the comm switch. "There's a weapons locker over there. Get out what you can. I'll have the remaining techs rig the guns and lock down the computers."

Gena stood up. "I'm going to get ration packs. There're a few emergency lockers. They won't have much but at least it'll be food. Come on, Mother." The last was delivered in a voice that must have done her ground-pounder husband proud. Caia Rothan followed her daughter, almost meekly.

"Great. More ration packs." Rurik tossed Thelea what looked like, and on inspection was, a stormtrooper's blaster rifle. She grimaced at the weight of the weapon. He hefted two and pulled out a bag of recharge packs. "And I just wanted a nice visit home."

"We should be so lucky." Thelea checked the charge on the blaster she was holding.

Dallen switched the comm to broadcast. "All personnel, report to the command center. All personnel who are able, report to the command center."

"Can they rig the comlinks so we can stay in touch with the computer?" Thelea asked.

"We'll see when they get here." Dallen looked at the two pilots. "So tell me, do you always bring death and destruction trailing in your wake, or did we just catch you on a good week?"

Thelea looked at Rurik, who shrugged. "Call it a gift."
Dallen sighed. "That's what I was afraid of." The building shuddered again and the lights flickered to half-power. "Rurik, not that I don't like you, but the next time you feel an urge to visit home, do us a favor. Don't."

Rurik grimaced. "You're being optimistic." Dallen raised an eyebrow and he clarified, "You're assuming we're all going to live long enough to do this again."

The ex-trooper looked over at Thelea. "Is he still this obnoxious or is he just putting on a show for the folks back home?"

"He's toned it down," she said dryly. "Wait'll the fleet and some senior officers get here and you'll see the true depth of his obnoxiousness." The floor seemed to vibrate from a distant impact, and Thelea wondered if she was turning into an optimist, too.
Deep in the caverns, the pounding was reduced to a dull thumping like distant thunder. The civilians, and the technicians who might as well have been, were grouped in the narrow tunnel Gena had found with suspicious ease, with some of the surviving stormtroopers guarding the passage, while the others were ranged along the walls of the main tunnel. Thelea and Rurik, armed with the blaster rifles they'd taken from the storage locker, were crouched on opposite sides of the tunnel near the junction leading back up to the governor's mansion. Dallen Torak was just ahead of Rurik, a remarkably forward position for a Colonel, at least in Thelea's experience. Her knees were starting to protest the cold, hard rock she was kneeling on, but she wasn't going to be the first to stand and stretch. Not in front of humans.

And she had to remember, Rurik was human. No matter how good that kiss might have felt (and she had to admit, it had ignited nerve endings she hadn't even realized she possessed) they were incompatible in more ways than one. Not only was he her junior officer and wingman, he was an entirely different species. The parts might be similar (enough that as far as basic function went it wouldn't make any difference, not that she'd made any investigations into the matter), and really, she could get used to the strange eyes and pallid skin. Had, really. Human eyes were so expressive, how they tolerated it she didn't know. Rurik's gave away his thoughts as clearly as if he'd spoken them. What they'd been saying right after he kissed her had been terrifying.

She shook off the thought. "Jamming still on?"

Dallen tapped his comlink twice. "Still there. I can communicate with my troopers, and hear what they're saying, but anything up above . . . ." He grimaced. He'd put on armor plates not unlike trooper gear (if she was reading the pieces correctly, a scout trooper specifically) but foregone the face-concealing helmet. He looked as comfortable in it as she felt in her flight suit, confirming her suspicions that he'd come by that trooper personality honestly. "Not a good sign."

Rurik smirked bitterly. "On the contrary, if they're jamming, there's still enough humans alive to keep them blocking communications. We've still got them worried."

"Or they enjoy messing with our minds." Thelea grimaced. "Whoever they are I'm not certain we worry them at all."

"Then let's give them something to worry about," Dallen said. He checked the charger pack on his blaster, which of course was still fully charged, and raised his comlink. "First squad, advance!"

From behind them, a group of four troopers moved from their spots against the walls and moved briskly forward, their armor clacking with that sound that was almost as distinct as their bright-white color. They moved up the tunnel, back towards the entrance, quick sprints forward and a pause to cover the darkness ahead. Thelea looked across at Rurik, and he had gotten used to reading her expression enough to see the skepticism there. Suicide charges weren't what either of them had in mind. On the other hand, not knowing what was going on above wasn't going to work as a strategy forever.

The first trooper in the squad rounded the curve of the tunnel, and the others paused and covered him. The clattering reduced to a single set of footsteps, getting farther away. Rurik held his breath, his finger hovering over the blaster rifle's trigger. He didn't even have to look to feel the tension radiating from Thelea like a beam. Her glowing eyes were fixed after the troopers, as if she could
will herself to see around corners. He saw her fingers tighten on the blaster grip, and he would have sworn she was moving an instant before they heard the unmistakable sound of a firefight somewhere ahead.

Thelea sprinted forward, ignoring what was probably an order to hold position from Dallen. She was fairly certain between this being a ground operation and a Colonel outranking a Commander in general that was some sort of insubordination, but the instinct pushing her on was too strong to ignore. If they all lived long enough for him to file a report she'd argue her point later. Now, though, she could hear the whining of blaster fire and a lower, crackling sound that she didn't recognize but which had to be the invaders' weapons. There was a heavy clatter she recognized as the sound of an armor-clad trooper hitting the ground.

She ducked around the curve of the tunnel, and had a half-second's warning from that same sense told her to duck before a white blast of energy shattered the rock where her head had been an instant before. She saw another trooper crumple, the discharge from the weapon crackling over his armor. The steam and dust raised by the battle was obscuring her vision, but she could see shapes that were decidedly not humanoid through the smoke. Insectoid? She rapidly filtered through the races she knew that had back-bent legs, as she was fairly sure from the movement these did, but nothing came to mind with weapons this sophisticated. Certainly none that were on conquering rampages across the fringes of Imperial space.

For an instant the smoke swirled clear, and she saw another figure, farther back in the shadows. This one seemed humanoid, cloaked, and she had a brief and frightening image of Lord Vader, but she shook it away. This figure had the same slightly stilted gait that implied armor, but was far more lithe than the Dark Lord, and lacked the massive sense of presence. Instead it almost seemed part of the mist, and as it swirled she caught a flicker of metal, and near its face, a flash of red where its eyes ought to be. She blinked, for an instant caught with the notion it was one of her own people, but as the figure moved she saw the beam and realized it was a helmet or goggle light, not the thing's own eyes.

There was a thud of boots close behind her as Rurik arrived. "Are you crazy? Even Dallen's not up here and stormtroopers are usually the suicidal ones." He winced as another trooper went down almost in time with his words. "I didn't mean that quite so literally."

"Sh." Thelea tried to blend into the rock wall. "There's someone commanding them on the ground. If we can take him out, they might be disordered enough for us to gain an advantage."

"And just how do you plan to do that if stormtroopers and ground batteries can't?" A blast slammed into the rock above them, showering them with grit and making their hair stand on end from the static charge. Thelea ducked and Rurik rose, returning fire with no discernible effect. "What is it with the sights on these things?" he snapped, ducking back down. "I'd have better luck flying an Interceptor blindfolded through a mine field."

"I'm thinking about it!" She snapped off a shot and it went wide, too. Maybe Rurik had a point about the sights. She heard the armor clatter behind her–Dallen must have sent the second squad up, not that it would likely do much good. "Wait a moment . . . do these have an overload setting?"

"I think so." Rurik wasn't sure what she had in mind, but with that question as an opener he doubted it was something safe. "You know, they invented plasma grenades for a reason."

"Do you have any of those lying around?"

"No."
"Well, then." She crouched low, studying the blaster rifle and ducking further as another energy blast hit the wall near her. "If you're not going to do anything else helpful could you at least give me some covering fire?"

Rurik bit back a sharp, sarcastic retort and instead rose, snapping off two more shots into the dust cloud even though he was fairly sure any hits would be pure luck. Ducking back, he heard a click and a whine. "Find it?"

"I certainly hope so." She half-rose, then looked up at him, the glittering red eyes narrowed. "Your arm's longer than mine. Here."

Rurik found himself suddenly juggling two blaster rifles, hoping desperately he didn't forget which was which. "Wait, what?" The high-pitched whine, increasing in frequency, was a good reminder.

"Aim for the middle of the corridor and hope these are easier to throw than they are to aim." She grabbed the still-working rifle out of his hands and fired three shots. "If I were you I'd throw that fast--I have no idea how long the delay is."

"If I had wanted this kind of stress I'd have joined the infantry," Rurik muttered, but he got a more solid grip on the blaster and, hoping he had better luck throwing than he had shooting, reared back and threw it as hard as he could towards the cluster of invaders.

Thelea counted. She wasn't sure how long, but overload settings generally allowed enough time to get clear, meaning perhaps half a minute, or slightly more . . . .

Even over the blaster fire and energy weapons, she heard the pitch of the power pack rise and shift to a solid tone not unlike a missile targeting lock. "Rurik, down!"

He dropped without arguing back for a change just as the tone ceased and the hall ahead erupted into a blinding ball of light and a shock wave blew back up the tunnel. He pushed Thelea down, crouching over her as the debris blew past and for once she didn't say a word, only ducked. The shrieks sounded less like living beings and more like horrifically-stressed metal, a rasping, screaming noise that bypassed the ears and went straight to the bone. Rurik squeezed his eyes closed, as if that would help, and as such didn't realize for a moment that Thelea was no longer beneath him. He looked up in time to see the slight figure, whiplike braid lashing behind her, disappear into the debris cloud, something small in her right hand. A glance down told him that she'd left the functioning (for certain values of the term) blaster rifle. He could only hope that was her holdout-blaster sidearm she'd been holding, but given her impulsive stand as they were trying to escape Dreghan's moon, he wasn't going to make any heavy bets on it.

He heard trooper armor clattering behind him--Dallen and his men, moving up to take advantage of the distraction. The smart thing to do would be regroup with them and count on Thelea getting herself out of whatever she was running into. Chances were a squad of stormtroopers had a better chance of backing her up than he would rushing in solo.

Still . . . that wasn't exactly what a wingman did.

He picked up the blaster and grimaced. "Thelea, you are going to be the death of me yet." Fighting the urge to scream a battle cry, he snapped off a volley of shots to try and clear a path, then plunged after her up the tunnel.

Thelea had only a few seconds to consider this might not be the smartest thing she'd ever done before she was in the fog of debris and smoke. Her boots clattered against something that sounded like insect carapace, and crunched under her feet in much the same way. She had a very distinct
sense she'd be happier if she didn't look to see what it was and the smoke mercifully obscured her vision. Then she was through it and she caught a swirl of the humanoid figure's cape, sending the last of the mist swirling away.

She ran a few steps towards him, before realizing this was not a retreat, even at tactical one. He was still facing her, his stance far too relaxed and still for someone injured or even mildly concerned. The haze was clearing enough that she could see what she'd taken for armor actually seemed to be some kind of support suit—a black bodysuit, not dissimilar to the bodysuits worn under trooper armor, overlaid not with plates but what looked like wiring and circuits, as if someone had grafted an exoskeleton of computer components onto him, or stripped away the synthskin from replacement limbs. The sparking, twisting web continued up his neck and around his face, a curve of metal across his forehead proving to be the source of the red light.

What she could see of his face looked human, if pale, and she thought she saw dark hair under the web of wires. The details of his features were impossible to determine, both because of the circuits and because of the stomach-churning detail she'd noticed: where the wires traversed the skin of his neck and face there were indentations and she realized they were tiny leads boring directly into his flesh.

He flicked his right arm out from his body, and she saw something in it. **Weapon**, screamed her brain, and almost on instinct her finger touched the stud of her lightsaber. The head cocked to one side in a gesture that would have seemed more appropriate to a protocol droid's artificial joints.

"Lightsaber," and his voice was . . . reverberant, as if he were speaking in her head as well as aloud. There was a sound behind it as well, as if someone or something were screaming, wailing in a subsonic range in a weirding echo of his words. "Chiss. The machine remembers you . . . ."

The object in his hand emitted a glowing green blade that pulsed with the same deep hum as her own saber.

Thelea realized she was trembling. This was not battle nerves, or adrenaline, or what felt like a sudden drop in the temperature of the caves. This was terror, and she could not remember feeling it so intensely, not the day she'd stolen one of her so-called guardian's private shuttles and run for human space, not that first horrifying night at the Academy where she was alien among aliens, not even the first time her TIE had dropped into actual, non-simulated combat. The eyes boring into hers were sentient, but not, the voice slicing through her like a million vibroblades, and even with the stilted movements she had the sudden, horrible certainty that he knew exactly how to use that blade. And for all her bluster and half-hearted, secret experiments, she had never so much as sparred with a living opponent.

She heard a sliding, clicking sound somewhere behind her, and almost absently, the machine-man gestured with his free hand. She could feel something move, sliding around her rather than walking and flickering like a dark ghost at the corner of her vision, never quite settling so she could see them clearly. Whatever they were, they were moving back down the tunnel, towards where Rurik, Dallen, and however many of the stormtroopers remained were still located. Her opponent made a flicking motion and she heard the whispery clicks speed up, and there was a crackling in the air that made the hairs on her neck stand on end. The energy weapons, recharging . . . .

Well, how different could it be from sparring on the exercise courts? **Besides the possibility of severing your limbs with your own weapon** . . . . And if it slowed down the advance or distracted the drone troops, that might give Rurik and Dallen time to come up with a more permanent solution. She clamped down on her fear and let it boil into anger instead.

"In the name of the Empire," and it sounded hollow even to her, "you and your troops are ordered
to stand down." She brought her own blade up in what she hoped was an effective at-ready position.

The man-machine tilted his head again and once again she had the impression of a droid, or an insectoid, more so even than the shadow troops who'd fired at them. "Empire . . . the machines do not recognize your Empire. The voices . . . they say you are gone. That the Others took you. Yet, the lightsaber . . . a Chiss . . . ." He seemed to shake himself. "You are an obstacle. You will be removed. Your Empire will serve the voices and the machine." His blade scythed up through the air between them and Thelea took an involuntary step back.

_Thelea . . . listen to me . . ._

The voice was hollow, distant, as if calling from far, far away and through a great strain. Thelea blinked, and for a moment forget the immediacy of her situation.

_Not anger. Not fear. Only listen. Feel . . . ._

Not fear? She tightened her suddenly-clammy grip on her lightsaber. If not anger, not fear, she wouldn't be feeling much of anything other than a deep-seated conviction that she was about to die and it was her own stupid fault. And she was going to leave Rurik, and the others, at the mercy of this man-machine and his army. Rurik . . . now she was really regretting how that conversation had ended.

_Listen to me, Thelea! Now the voice, female but oddly amplified, was stronger, and she felt the press of more than one mind behind it. Like the shadow-silk sounds behind the machine, but . . . purer, stronger . . . brighter. And many . . . . He is stronger, he is faster, you cannot win on brute force. Be ready . . . ._

_For what? She asked before she realized she was forming the question.

_Duck! The instruction came as the green blade swung for her neck and Thelea threw herself forward, rolling under it and slashing blindly upwards with her own blade as she did. The shock ran up her arm as the blades connected and her own bounced and skittered down towards the hilt of his and he disengaged, stepping back as if he were more bemused than threatened. Thelea stumbled to her feet, trying to force her ragged breathing into a regular rhythm again. She brought her saber back up to a defensive position._

_Calm yourself . . . back away, you have to lead him away. Help is coming, but you have to lead him where it can do good._

"Help?" And she cursed herself for speaking aloud. If her opponent heard he gave no indication, instead arcing his blade around for another blow. This time she was ready for how hard the blow felt and braced against it. Somewhere, from wherever the strange voice/s came from, she felt a surge of energy, something warm and vast adding its strength to hers. Her boots had been sliding against the stone but suddenly she could brace herself, and barely, a fraction, but there nonetheless, she felt his blade pushed away.

The electricity snapped out from his arm, lashing up past their locked sabers and stabbing into her like a thousand bolts of lightning. She screamed and fell back, some instinct making her roll with the blow, out of range, even as the pain arced through every nerve in her body. She could smell singed fiber and hair and the sharp ionized odor in the air. Her heart and breathing didn't seem to want to work in rhythm and she staggered, pushing herself up and staggered back on sheer survival instinct.
Behind you. The tunnel to the left. Take it!

No longer bothering to question the voice's commands, she turned and bolted, far too unsteady for her own tastes but with little other choice. As the electric-burn scent started to clear her nostrils she caught another, this one warm, humid, the air of the outdoors instead of the stifling smell of the caverns. The tunnel ran upwards on a slight incline and while it might have been her eyes playing tricks, she thought the darkness was growing lighter.

She heard boots on stone behind her and the hum of the other saber.

Chiss eyes could adapt more quickly than human to changes from dark to light, and that was all that saved her as she burst into daylight. A brief surge of agoraphobia at the sudden skyscape gripped her, combined with acrophobia as she realized she was looking down at the forests surrounding the capital. The tunnel lead to a small ledge, with a narrow track even a monkey-lizard would have had difficulty navigating at any speed leading meters down the brush-covered slope in a suicidal switchback pattern. She could hear the pounding again, but this time she realized it wasn't just the energy weapons—there were green blasts as well, turbolasers firing in atmosphere, and besides a shrieking wail that sent chills through her nerves straight to bone, she could hear another sound, familiar and glorious and leaving her wanting to sob with relief if she only had the time: the sound of paired ion engines operating in atmosphere. Many of them. Somewhere, above them, reinforcements had arrived.

The presence in her mind, and the sudden slashing of a blade through the air gave her a split-second's warning and she swung her own saber in a desperate block. The gravel rolled under her boots and she stumbled, narrowly ducking under a killing blow. The screaming wail of the enemy drone fighters and the sound of a TIE in close pursuit, quad lasers blasting, was getting closer, much too fast, as she swung blindly at the machine-man attacker. A bolt missed its target and smashed into the cliff above, raining rocks and dirt down on them both.

Her opponent drew himself up, as if assessing the situation above, before the inhuman gaze turned back on her. Thelea backed away and froze as she felt her heel back against open air. She felt, rather than heard, the building energy of him preparing to deal another electric shock and knew she had nowhere to go.

The fighters above roared close again, and in her peripheral vision she saw the green flares of the lasers.

Thelea, jump!

The voices in her head had to be insane. Once again she risked a frantic look at the tens of meters down the rocky track, too steep to run down or even climb quickly. Above there was an explosion and she heard the whirring, doppler-shifted sound of a fighter spinning out of control.

The voice was now in stereo, and the sense of power and age and desperation lent it volume: JUMP NOW!

Touching the stud that deactivated her blade, she turned and had an instant to see an Interceptor spiraling out of control, one panel completely gone, headed straight for the cliff above them before she closed her eyes and leapt from the cliff.
Rurik listened numbly to the hum of the medical bay's normal routine. Normal for post-battle, at any rate. The droids and human medics were moving quickly and efficiently and with a degree of quiet he would have found unnerving if he'd had the energy to care. Most of the patients in here were the crew of the ISD Defiance, VSD Resolute, and the two smaller frigates who'd accompanied the destroyers to break the blockade and most had the kind of typical survivable injuries one saw after space battles—vacuum exposure for ejected pilots, cuts and bruises from consoles exploding or turbolaser blasts blowing out wall paneling, mostly contusions. Rurik himself had grudgingly submitted to treatment for the superficial cuts and burns he'd sustained in his mad dash up the tunnel. The 2-1B unit had been as considerate as the things usually were, though he'd listened with less than half his attention, fixed as he'd been on the figure floating in one of the Defiance's full-body bacta tanks as the droid applied disinfectant and sealant to his own injuries. They'd removed Thelea after only a few hours, but she was still unconscious, strapped down on a monitoring bed while displays showed life signs and healing progress and Rurik waited. He'd lost sight of Thelea almost immediately, but the distinctive sound of a lightsaber had lead him through the smoke-filled tunnel. He heard Dallen behind him, delayed by more of the alien troops, but he kept running and reached the exterior tunnel in time to nearly be crushed by a cascade of rocks and burning fighter components. Relief (and more than a little guilt) at recognizing pieces of an Interceptor and realizing what that meant was tempered instantly as he tried to claw his way through the rubble and didn't hear anyone on the far side.

By the time he pushed through the debris, coughing and choking out the dust from the cliff-face rocks and smoke from the burning TIE components, there was no one he could see on the rocky ledge. From the heat and the blast damage, anyone who'd been standing there would have been incinerated when the TIE smashed into the rock. Looking out over the forest and to the sky above, he saw more and more of their fighters and landing craft and fewer of the drone ships. Smoke was drifting on the wind, and there were fires in the brush below, stray laser blasts or crashed fighters. He edged closer to the dropoff, looking for some signs of a person having gone down the mountain face.

There were no skid marks or tracks near the edge of the cliff, but about five meters down, he saw broken brush and gouges in the dirt as if something—or someone—had climbed down. Or rolled. Following the trail of bent branches and fresh scarring on the ground, he scanned down until he saw a dark mass that didn't belong—a jumpsuit, and even at this distance he could see the skin exposed where the fall had torn the cloth was pale blue.

Rurik had been about to scramble down the cliff face when a hand closed on his arm. Before he could swing around with a closed fist, as was his first instinct, he recognized Dallen's voice, saying, "Don't be a fool. There's an easier way down."

The ex-trooper took the narrow switchback far quicker than Rurik could manage, even with armor on. Dallen obviously read the expression on his face. "How do you think Gena used to sneak out of the mansion?" he said dryly. "And why do you think her father wanted a scout trooper for her bodyguard? We're trained in spec-ops and I was able to keep up with her." He edged off the trail as they got near Thelea's prone form. "She never went straight off the side, though."

Rurik's boots skidded on the gravel as he pushed past and dropped to his knees beside her. She was frighteningly still, her arms akimbo, but at least her legs were tucked as if she'd made a controlled landing. "Thelea?" He reached for her shoulder and thought better of shaking her even as Dallen
moved to stop him. Instead he reached for her outstretched hand and felt at her wrist. "She's alive!"

Dallen raised his comlink. "Command to Base One, when there's a medical team available, I need an evac squad to the north face of the downslope."

As he was giving orders, Rurik fought the urge to turn Thelea, to try and wake her or at least assure himself she really was still alive. Taking her hand seemed safe enough, but a remnant of self-preservation held him back. Dallen was, nominally, a friend or at least a friendly acquaintance, but now that it seemed like they might live long enough to get in trouble for fraternizing . . . . Then something silver caught his eye. Lying in the brush near her outstretched hand was the cylindrical handle of her lightsaber. She must have been holding it when she . . . fell? Jumped? He looked back up the cliff to the ledge and winced. Either way . . . . Carefully, dreading the thought of inadvertently activating the weapon (partially because of all the questions that would cause, partially because he was half-certain he'd cut his own head off trying to deactivate it) he picked up the saber blade by the closed end and slipped it into the leg pocket of his jumpsuit. Odds were they'd be too busy during an evac to search known Imperial troops, and he suspected if . . . when . . . Thelea recovered, she'd want it back.

Then, whether it was appropriate or not, he squeezed her outstretched hand. It might have been his imagination, but he thought he felt a twitch in return.

He realized Dallen was quiet, and looking him. "You two are close, I take it."

Rurik bristled. "She's my flight commander."

"Right." Dallen could always manage to sound so . . . trooper-like. "I saw you in the hanger when you set down. I've had CO's I liked, but not that much. Never mind that was not a professional dressing-down I heard her give you."

"We aren't--" He realized the position he was in hardly supported any argument he might try to make. "She's . . . We've never done anything. But . . . Thelea's special. In the last week or so I've started to notice how much. I don't just mean . . . well, like that. There's more to her than just flying."

"Being an alien, for starters." Dallen sounded disapproving, but not revolted, at least.

"That's not what I meant. She always has a plan. I've never seen her just admit defeat, even though this is outside anything normal pilots are expected to deal with. And she always comes up with something." He grimaced. "This time maybe she was too clever."

"She's alive. That's always a win of some sort." Rurik blinked at the matter-of-fact tone. Dallen gave him a twisted smile, as close as the ex-trooper ever generally looked to amused. "Do you think I'm unacquainted with unorthodox relationships? Believe me, Gena being more than a protectee was . . . not initially my idea. Not that I'm endorsing violating your chain of command, I'm only saying--"

"Nothing happened." It wasn't entirely a lie. A kiss was, after all, only a kiss. "Nothing's going to happen. Especially if she's . . . ."

"She's breathing, and I don't see any blood." Dallen pressed his fingers to the pulse point at her neck. "I can feel a pulse, though without knowing her race's baseline there's no telling if it's fast or slow."

Rurik shrugged helplessly. "I don't know either. I just hope that medivac team hurries." Dallen
nodded, and then he moved downslope, raising his comlink as he went. Whether he simply thought Rurik didn't need to hear him relaying orders, or he was giving him privacy, he didn't care. This time, he hadn't let go of her hand until he heard the repulsors of the medivac shuttle.

Now, safely aboard Defiance, it was a waiting game. Technically he ought to have gone to the pilot's ready room, which had been offered as a slightly-more-private place to recover by the ship's fighter squadron commander. He'd declined until Thelea was in a condition to join him, and he'd thought the Commander had understood. They couldn't leave until she was fit to transport, anyway - the Defiance would shuttle them to an Imperial transfer station closer to the Outer Rim Fleet's location, but she was attached to the Border Regions Task Force and would be returning to her own mission once Telamara was secure. Giriad, he'd been told, waited for them at the transfer station, and they'd be returned to the Executor together.

Whether that would be as returning crew or prisoners had been left to Rurik's imagination.

A medtech walked in, datapad in hand, and paused. "Excuse me, Lieutenant. I didn't realize you were still here."

"She's still out. I'm still here." Rurik hadn't meant to sound as combative as it came out.

The tech, who looked far too young to have the lines in her face and grim set to her mouth that she did, paused a moment, and he saw a strange look in her eyes. Not suspicion, more like concern. Probably a conscript, but not resentful enough to have lost all sympathy for the volunteers she patched up. "Well, her vitals seem steady. The bacta healed up most of the cuts and scratches, and the internal bruising and cracked ribs are healing."

"You even have a baseline for her vitals?" Rurik sounded more curious than he'd intended.

"Well, not as such. Executor didn't send records. But since Grand Admiral Thrawn is our fleet commander, we do have an example of her species. They appear similar enough to humans, we can extrapolate the differences that age and sex would cause." She was studying the monitors and tapped a few entries onto the datapads.

"Grand Admiral Thrawn?" Rurik blinked. "We knew he'd been transferred, but . . . there are barely a dozen Grand Admirals, if that, and he's, well . . . ."

"The best tactician the Empire has?" The medtech raised an eyebrow, and Rurik revised his previous 'conscript' opinion. "Funny, I wouldn't have thought you had any issues with non-human officers."

"I don't. I just wasn't aware the higher-ups felt the same way." His gaze drifted back to Thelea. "Will she be all right?"

The medtech frowned, the lines on her forehead deepening. "Cautiously, yes. Right now, based on her respiration and pulse, she's just sleeping off the shock. She could come around at any time and besides some pain, which most of our treatments should work for, she should be fine."

"She said once she didn't really sleep," Rurik murmured, half to himself, but the medtech heard him.

"That's what the Admiral's file says, too, but they're too much like humans not to need some kind of rest cycle," the medtech said, with a 'just-between-us' thin smile. "The brain-wave activity is a little different from human sleep, no deep dream cycle that I can see, so I wouldn't even be surprised if she could hear us in a way."
"I hope so." Rurik found himself torn between wanting to beg Thelea to wake up and prove she was all right, and berating her for doing . . . whatever she'd gone tearing off to do. Admittedly the improvised grenade and whatever distraction she'd provided for the nominal leader of the invaders had definitely helped—when the humanoid figure had disappeared, the troops had become disorganized and finally retreated, right into the waiting arms of Defiance and Resolute's ground-assault teams. Unfortunately most in orbit had escaped, and those on the ground . . . he shivered at the memory. The soldiers, whatever they were, did not go down as much as disintegrate into oily, shell-like shrapnel and goo. There was little to examine, and less in the way of clues to their identity, but then that wasn't his problem.

The medtech finished with something on her datapad. "I'll be back on rounds again to see if there's any change."

Rurik mumbled a thanks, which he wasn't sure if she heard, but he wasn't really paying attention. Thelea's eyes were still closed, no hint of the red glow showing through her lashes, but her breathing was regular and even. Her hands were relaxed, resting at her side. "I don't know what you did, but considering you were just telling me I had to be more careful, I feel an 'I told you so' coming on."

"Just try it." Her voice was dry and rasping, but alive, and he could have cheered. There was a faint glow where she'd opened her eyes just a crack. "Why do I feel like I've had half a mountain come down on me?"

"Probably because you fell halfway down a mountain." Knowing he could have said 'I told you so' would have to do. "What happened to that . . . thing you were chasing?"

"Hopefully he didn't jump in time and now he's part of the mountain," she said, her eyes opening a fraction wider. "The blockade . . . did the fleet arrive?" It was hard to tell with Thelea, but he was fairly sure she was taking in as much of her surroundings as she could. "Not the Executor?"

"What, you think they'd send her for something this minor?" Belatedly, he realized that announcing just whose fleet these ships belonged to might not be the wisest idea, given Thelea's recently-expressed opinion about Thrawn. "Giriad got to a transfer station. This is the Defiance, from the Border Regions fleet. She and Resolute came with their battle group. They'll stay until the system's secure and then send us to the transfer station, and we'll go back to the Exec with Giriad."

"In restraints or not?" She definitely was straining against the field holding her down, but he wasn't going to let her up with a medtech's permission and she knew it. "Never mind, I know they wouldn't tell that. And anyway," and she glanced at him a little longer, "you're not in cuffs."

"Not yet. It was touch and go for a minute when I said I wouldn't leave the medical bay until you did, but they let me stay."

There was a long enough pause he wondered if she'd drifted off again. "Rurik . . . ."

"I know," he cut her off before she could say they needed not to talk about it, that there was nothing to talk about, that . . . "Here," and he reached into his pocket. "Before they brought me up I went back to the quarters they gave us. I found the data chip you dropped. Figured you might want it. And the . . . thing you dropped on the mountain, I've got that, too."

She closed her eyes for a moment, and he was worried she was losing consciousness again, but she only sighed. "Thank you."

"Just be glad I didn't accidentally cut my own leg off."
"I'm surprised I didn't." She looked at him. "If I ever do anything that stupid again, Lieutenant, you have permission to call a superior officer an idiot."

"With respect, Commander," and now he felt a grin coming on, "I'll hold that in reserve for a really good moment."

"Don't enjoy it too much." She tried sitting up again, but ran into the restraints. "I really don't think this is necessary any more. I'm going to hurt, and bacta makes my skin dry out and itch, but overall I think I'm fine."

"The tech said she'd be back in a bit, so why don't you grab what rest you can? We might not get much once we get back, depending on whether we've caught up to the Rebels yet."

Thelea clearly wanted to object, but not that much. "I suppose a few more minutes won't hurt. Besides, the only rest we might be getting on Executor might be in the brig and the bunks in there probably aren't comfortable."

"Well, for what it's worth, Dallen and Governor Rothan both sent extremely glowing and grateful reports on us. That has to count for something." Rurik wasn't sure how much, but hopefully it outweighed 'technically AWOL for several days.'

"Rothan made it?"

"Holed up with his bodyguard in a bombed-out barracks," Rurik said. That had been a surprise, but seeing the looks on Caia and Gena's faces had been a seriously-needed bright spot. "He's tougher than he looks, and remember Dallen picks the guard troops."

Thelea smiled, thinly and wearily, but Rurik thought it was sincere. "Good. We need more governors like him. Especially out here." Then she was quiet long enough that he suspected she'd gone back to whatever passed for sleep in her species, and he let her rest until the medtech returned.

It was almost as quiet thirty-six hours later, aboard the shuttle inbound to Executor. Thelea still ached, but she hadn't been willing to admit it to the human medtechs, and in any case the trip back was going to be unpleasant even if she'd been enjoying the haze of one of the painkillers that worked on her nervous system. Beside her, she could feel Rurik fidgeting, and in the seat across from them Giriad was nervously tapping a toe on the deck plates. While he'd clearly been happy to see them coming down the ramp of Defiance's shuttle at the station, it had still been a subdued greeting and he'd gotten quieter as their transport got closer to Executor's position. Now, with the docking tractors locked on, subdued had become silent. She couldn't blame either of them.

The shuttle gave the slight jolt that indicated it had made contact with the hangar deck plates, and she stood up. The battle-dress jumpsuit was rumpled, but it couldn't be helped-they fabrics were meant for shipboard wear, not dress formal, and in any case the size wasn't quite right. Between being a pilot and being female, there were rarely spares lying around that fit. For her, the important part was that they still had the practical leg pockets, loose enough that the lightsaber and now the data chip had a safe hiding place, assuming no one scanned them for unauthorized weapons. Her holdout blaster was gone, but waiting to find out if she still had a commission seemed prudent before requisitioning a new one.

The ramp dropped, and it did not surprise her to see Captain Kallic, the Admiral's second-in-command and the officer responsible for crew operations, standing at the base. Commander Aldacci was beside him, so whatever had hit the Aris Val had clearly spared the rest of the convoy. She found she was oddly relieved to see that.
She was not relieved, but still unsurprised, by the first words out of Kallic's mouth as they came to attention in front of him. "Commander Thelea, Lieutenants Caelin and Quoris, the Admiral wishes to see you immediately."

It was the next words, said with just the faintest trace of anticipation under the grim professionalism, that sent a stab of fear through Rurik and Giriad so strong she could feel it, and made her own breath freeze in her throat. "As does Lord Vader."
Chapter 13

Thelea had never seen the inside of Lord Vader's ready room and meditation chamber and would happily have served her entire tour on the Executor without rectifying that situation. She knew, of course, that officers went in and out routinely, and it was hardly the case that Vader killed anyone who made even a moderate error—there'd hardly be any officers left in the fleet if he did that! Still, there was a difference between reporting to Lord Vader on routine matters, and being called before him in extraordinary circumstances. Those in the latter category had a significantly higher chance of being dragged out and disintegrated (unless one was a high enough rank to rate having the body shipped home.)

Now she was standing before the Dark Lord of the Sith himself, with the Admiral of the Outer Rim Fleet beside him, and while it was some comfort to have Rurik and Giriad flanking her, it was a very small one. Lord Vader hadn't spoken since they entered, only loomed behind Piett like a dark statue, the breathing apparatus adding a pulsing, ominous soundtrack to the debriefing. Piett, for his part, was stern but not remotely as terrifying, though theoretically he had almost as much power over them as Vader. He clearly had read the reports, her own, the Governor's, the captains of the Defiance and the Resolute, and see the battle recordings from both ships. That didn't mean she didn't have to repeat everything, again, starting from the moment they'd been yanked out of hyperspace.

"You have never seen these black ships before?" That had to be the fifth or sixth way he'd rephrased that question. She was losing track, which was likely the point. "Lieutenant Caelin? Lieutenant Quoris?"

"No, sir." For once Rurik sounded every inch the proper officer, no hint of insolence or casualness in his tone.

"It was as the commander said, sir." Giriad always sounded Academy-disciplined, but even his ramrod posture seemed straighter.

"The first time I saw one like it was when it attacked the freighter," Thelea reiterated, hoping that this did not differ substantially from any previous answer. As much as had happened in the last standard week (or more? How many days had it been?) she was starting to feel the fatigue. Even recovery time in Defiance's medicenter didn't seem to have helped much. "I could not say whether one of the ships blockading Telamara was the same one we encountered."

"Could not say, or do not know?" That sort of nitpicking was less about the answer than how she responded, she knew, but she was tired enough she let the irritation show.

"As I have no reason to withhold the information if I did possess it, I do not know," she said, and flinched at how testy that sounded.

Piett paused, and she could feel Rurik tense and heard Giriad's sharp intake of breath. Then the Admiral's gaze slid sideways, though there was no sound from the obsidian figure behind him, and said, "You are from the Unknown Regions, Commander?"

Thelea felt a flare of temper but she ground her teeth and kept it out of her tone, she hoped. "Yes, Admiral."

"And you have never personally encountered the species or system which controls this fleet?" Piett didn't sound accusatory, at least.
"No, sir, I have not." She paused, then added, "But I never served in our defense fleet and left our system when I was relatively young. Admiral Thrawn would be in a better position to say whether our people have encountered this species before." It would not do any harm, or at least so she hoped, to remind them who her sponsor was and that she did not completely lack for allies among the flag rankers. At least, she hoped she didn't.

There might have been a flicker of movement from the figure at the viewport. She couldn't tell, but Piett definitely turned now and looked at the Dark Lord as if waiting for instructions. Once again, Vader said nothing, and Piett turned back to them. "In your report, Commander, you describe an encounter with the enemy ground forces in which you and Lieutenant Caelin participated. You displayed, according to both Lieutenant Caelin and Colonel Torak of the Telamara garrison, exceptional tactical awareness and initiative, including targeting the apparent coordinator of the enemy's ground offensive." He paused, as if expecting her to thank him, which would probably have earned her a reprimand, so she remained silent. Piett gave a quiet 'hmph' and continued. "Your own report describes this . . . person, and you will of course understand how far-fetched this rendition of events seems?" Piett raised an eyebrow. "The ships, the ground troops, and their weapons are all completely unfamiliar and yet their commander was, as you describe, a 'modified' human?"

Back to this again. Clearly, someone was going somewhere with this. Likely not Piett, but there was the Dark Lord behind him . . . . "I can only repeat what I saw. He was human, or humanoid enough I couldn't tell the difference. He had clearly undergone cybernetic modification. He spoke in the plural, and he referred to 'the machine.' And he recognized my species by name, something most races in the Empire cannot do." In spite of herself, she looked at Vader, but of course the impassive mask revealed nothing.

"And no one else saw this person?"

She couldn't really blame Piett for sounding skeptical. "Not to my knowledge, sir."

"If I may, sir," and Rurik was still maintaining the respectful-officer tone. "Colonel Torak and I were the first to reach Commander Thelea and by the time we did, whoever this person or thing was had disappeared." Piett raised an eyebrow and Rurik fell silent, and Thelea could see he was biting the inside of his lip.

Piett looked back at her. "Disappeared?"

"One of our fighters was pursuing an enemy drone craft," Thelea said, fighting to keep the weariness of repetition out of her voice. "They were obviously damaged and on a collision course with the . . . exit of the escape tunnel on which we were standing. I jumped seconds before the collision. The enemy officer was not there when Lieutenant Caelin and Colonel Torak reached my . . . position. A great deal of debris was. If the enemy was still on the ledge when the Interceptor and its target collided with the cliff face, he was either killed by the impact, or he also leapt and retreated before they arrived. As I was unconscious at this time, I did not see."

"Leaving you alive." Piett's tone was frankly skeptical. On several levels, she couldn't blame him.

"Given the distance I fell, Admiral, it is entirely possible he assumed I was already dead." She'd been closer to it than she liked to think, but the alternative had been standing there and dying in the explosion of a TIE she wasn't even flying. Irony had its place, but . . . the advice talking her through the entire fight seemed like a strange dream, and leaving it out of the report and this conversation had seemed prudent.

"Perhaps." He looked from her to Rurik and Giriad and back again. "According to Governor
Rothan, a civilian accompanied you to Telamara from the Dhregan system. Human female, age approximately sixty standard years. During Lieutenant Quoris's successful attempt to run the planetary blockade, this person stole an Imperial shuttle and escaped in the confusion.

The pause was long enough Piett clearly expected an answer of some kind, but Thelea had no idea what sort of answer to give. This was a new line of questioning and this was obviously where the repetitive interrogation had been going all along, ideally with her worn down enough by the time they reached the topic she'd begin to slip up. What she should do, though, was painfully murky. Even if Aleishia had abandoned her, even if the woman (she forced herself not even to think the word 'Jedi') had run deep back to the Unknown Regions and was long out of Vader or the Emperor's reach, admitting to known association with her could be considered treason. "Yes, sir. That's correct."

Piett looked openly skeptical. "Who was this person? And how did she accomplish such a feat of piloting and stealth without assistance?"

"A human," Thelea said. "She encountered us on the Dhregan moon and assisted us in finding transport offworld. We encountered some local difficulty in departing and it was in her best interest to accompany us on short notice. We had planned to leave her on Telamara. I can only assume she decided the blockade looked hopeless, and took her chances stealing a shuttle."

"She simply helped you out of the goodness of her heart." Piett sounded downright disdainful. "A good Imperial citizen, offering aid. Did this person have a name?"

Thelea hesitated, just a fraction of a heartbeat, and a change from the looming form of the Dark Lord told her she had paused too long. "Aleishia. No surname, no homeworld given."

"And you chose not to ask?"

Thelea tamped down hard on another unreasoning flare of anger that could only get her into more trouble. "My primary concern, Admiral, was getting my wing safely back to Imperial space and informing fleet command about what had happened. We were in hostile territory with limited resources and no ability to safely contact Imperial authorities. An opportunity presented itself. I took advantage. To have questioned her motives too closely could have endangered my primary goal."

Piett's mouth tightened at the corners, but suddenly there was a deliberate movement from the looming figure behind him. "You are certain you know nothing about her past, Commander?" Vader's voice could not literally freeze blood, but the shudder that passed through her felt almost as if it did.

Now she was being tested. Now, a lie could kill them all, but so could the truth. She felt the faint shift in Rurik's posture as clearly as if he were touching her, knew he was readying a denial on her behalf, and before he could even draw in the breath to say it she said, "She claimed to have visited my homeworld. She said she had known my parents. I have . . . ." A woman cloaked in brown, with strange snow-colored skin and flat, light-less eyes, arguing with a man. "I have no clear memories of her, but I have no clear memories of my mother or father, either. I cannot confirm or deny her story but I find it . . . unusual."

"In what particular?" This time Vader did not bother with pleasantries such as rank. She was uncertain if that was a good thing or very, very bad.

She hesitated. "My lord, in the history of contact between my people and the Un-" she caught herself before she used the term 'Uncivilized Territories', marveling at how she had internalized her
people's mindset about the rest of the galaxy even now. "And what you would call the Core, the Mid, and Outer Rim, there has been no official contact between the Imperial government and that of my homeworld. As far as I know no humans have visited my people's home planet, and conversely, only two of our race have left our world and serve the Empire, Admiral Thrawn and myself. For a human to have visited our world would have been exceptional and as a rule, our race does not take kindly to exceptional events." She hesitated at the thought of saying it aloud, but it was only the truth. "That is why Admiral Thrawn and I are here in the first place. The Empire values our service. Our homeworld . . . never would."

There was a long pause, and she could feel how uncertain Piett was as he looked from Vader to her and back again. Vader, for his part, only stared at her, or at least she assumed he did as the mask revealed nothing. Finally, the Admiral sighed. "If there is nothing further you can add—"

"Enough." Vader could put more finality into a single word than any being had a right to. "Lieutenants Caelin and Quoris, return to your duty stations. Your conduct has been appropriate and no further action will be taken. Admiral, you are dismissed. Commander Thelea . . . ." There was a pause that probably felt longer than it was, given it almost certainly did not last the lifespan of a star. "Remain." He turned away, once again apparently studying the starfield and ignoring them.

She saw the flash of surprise, quickly concealed, on Piett's face, and heard the sharp intakes of breath from Rurik and Giriad both. Please, please go, if you say a word he can change his mind, if it's just me, it's not so bad, please, for once don't argue . . . .

There was a sharp click of heels snapping together, Rurik and Giriad, as if they could hear her thoughts, saluting Piett and Vader before turning to go. Rurik was a half-step behind, and in her peripheral vision she caught the hesitation and gave a twitch of her head towards the door, faint enough she hoped that Piett, at least, didn't notice. Vader she had to assume noticed everything, it was said on Executor he knew everything that happened whether he saw it or not. She'd written it off as scare stories to frighten new transfers but with that onyx presence bearing down she believed it. Rurik obviously caught the order, but as he turned to go he passed just close enough she felt the brush of his fingers against the back of her hand. It was fast enough it could have been an accident, but somehow she didn't think so. Then they were gone, and Piett gave her a final sideways look before nodding to the Dark Lord and departing

Then she was alone with Lord Vader.

For a long moment, the only sound in the room was the rasp of Vader's respirator, and quiet hum of the engines in the deck plates beneath them. Vader continued staring out the viewport for what seemed like an eternity and Thelea, still holding herself at attention, waited. If he was going to kill her, he was taking his time about it, and that was strangely not a relief. It would almost be better if he would simply do it, before she had much more time to think about it and the fear clawing its way from her viscera finally slipped her control and escaped in a scream. If she was about to die, then her dignity was all she had left and screaming would be the final shame, even if only she and Lord Vader were witness to it.

Finally, without turning, he said, "Show me your arm."

It had been so long since anyone had needed or demanded confirmation of her status as a branded agent of the Inner Circle for a moment she didn't move. Then, mechanically, she pulled her sleeve up to her elbow and revealed the mark burned into the skin, holding her arm out silently. Vader's head turned briefly and she assumed he saw it, though she did not lower her arm until he turned away again. "You are obedient to the Inner Circle, Commander?"
"Yes, my lord." She pulled her sleeve back down. Still, he hadn't moved. Slowly, she began to
consider that she might not be about to die.

"Do you know why you were recruited to serve it?"

"No, my lord. I assume--" Thelea stopped herself. Vader had asked a simple yes or no question, not
for her assumptions.

Or not, perhaps. "Continue."

She grimaced. "I assume it was because I possess skills which would best serve the Empire at their
direction, my lord."

There was another of those long, empty pauses in the universe, only now Thelea was beginning to
feel it more clearly—Vader was not angry, not in any way she recognized at least. He was
contemplating something of which she was, at most, a small piece. Not beneath his notice, but only
a small part of a much greater working.

Finally, he said, "Show me the weapon you carry, Commander."

It took half a heartbeat for her to consider and reject feigning misunderstanding. Lying was fatal.
Obedience might not save her life, denials would certainly end it. There was no alternative.
Carefully, she unsnapped the side pocket of her jumpsuit and withdrew the lightsaber, offering it
closed-end-first to the Dark Lord. If he ignited it as he took it, the blade would cut straight into her
torso, immediately fatal. But there were a thousand ways, if the stories could be believed, for
Vader to kill her, if that was his intention. Unless he were feeling especially poetic, killing her with
her own lightsaber seemed unduly dramatic.

Vader finally stepped towards her, and the part of her mind not paralyzed with fear marveled at
how fluidly someone encased in armor could move. One of the enormous black gauntlets reached
out and he took the saber from her hand with a surprising delicacy. She forced herself to stand
perfectly still as he ignited it, studying the pale gold blade as it hummed in the darkness between
them. He made a few slow, graceful arcs, testing the weight and balance of the weapon and doing
it better with a simple test, Thelea admitted to herself, than anything she had managed with it yet.

"Where did you get this weapon?" It was impossible to tell from Vader's tone if he were accusatory
or simply curious.

"It was sent to me almost three years ago. Allegedly it belonged to my—my mother." She tried to
grasp the memory more firmly, of someone carrying her, blue-black hair and powder-blue skin,
eyes like her own, a medallion . . . the face was a blur and she couldn't force it into focus. "I don't
know if that's true. My mother died when I was very young and I have no memory of her."

For some reason, that seemed to hold Vader's attention for a moment. As he fell somewhere near
the bottom of the list of commanders she'd had whom she would have thought cared about the
personal lives of their crew (slightly above the Emperor and just below the physical training
instructor at the Academy who had enjoyed asking his plebes if they wanted to run home to their
'mommies') that was a strange thing to give him pause, she thought. Vader, though, seemed
suddenly pensive as he studied the glowing blade. "This was made for a light grip," he said, and to
her astonishment she realized he was assessing, analyzing, the lightsaber. "Someone who favored a
single-handed fighting style. Not, I think, one that would suit you." The expressionless mask
turned towards her again. "Have you attempted to use this weapon?"

"Not . . . only a few times, when I was desperate." She managed, with some effort, not to shrug
"When your fear was at its height." Vader touched the control stud and the blade vanished. "Are you afraid now, Commander?"

Thelea didn't even have to think about that answer. "Yes, my lord."

"Good." He studied the saber hilt. "Fear is powerful. So is anger. There is much anger in you as well, and if there were time . . ." He seemed to be pondering something again. "The Inquisitors were powerful tools, once. There has been no time, but soon, when the Rebellion is finally crushed, and when . . ." He seemed lost in thought again and also, much as Thelea found it hard to believe, there was a strange but overwhelming sense of sadness. "He will need apprentices," he finally said, so quietly she wasn't certain he had meant to speak aloud. "Hands of his own. When the Rebellion is over and the Empire is finally secure . . . ."

"My lord?" Thelea wasn't sure what possessed her to interrupt his musing, politeness or fear he'd say something she could not be allowed to hear, just when she was thinking she might be leaving the room alive after all. Vader turned sharply and she was sure he had, in fact, forgotten her presence. "We will defeat the Rebels. It's only a matter of time." Reassuring the Dark Lord? It seemed bizarre, and yet . . . somehow, she desperately wanted him to know they all believed it, all were sure of it. They were going to win, had to win, and having seen what awaited the galaxy on its unexplored fringes there was a new sense of urgency, even. A divided Empire could not possibly face a full-fledged invasion from the commanders of those ships. Therefore they would put down this rebellion once and for all. They had to.

Vader stared at her for a long moment. "And when we do, we will address threats from outside the Empire, but not before." He studied the lightsaber, which looked tiny in the massive gloved hand. "Take this."

Thelea sensed a trap or at least a trick, and stayed her hand even as she reached for it and Vader didn't move. "My lord?"

"Use your fear. Reach out, and take the lightsaber from my hand." There was something ominous and deeply frightening in his voice, more than there was normally, and she wasn't sure if she should be afraid of failing, or afraid of succeeding. "Fear gives you strength. Use it to call the lightsaber to you."

Fear was the one emotion she was not short on at the moment. Feeling only slightly less absurd than she was terrified, Thelea reached out her hand, trying to envision the saber in it, feel the cool metal and weight of the handle. Having that impassive mask fixed on her was not making this any less ridiculous or any easier, and she felt a tiny, white-hot flare of anger building amid the fear and frustration.

The lightsaber wobbled, seemed about to slip from Vader's fist to the deck plates, and then she nearly dropped it herself as it slammed into the palm of her outstretched hand.

She stared for a moment, her fingers curling around the hilt in a loose grip more to stop them shaking than anything else. Bizarrely she had almost forgotten Vader's presence until he said, "You demonstrated exceptional . . . tactical prowess in this situation. This is a valuable asset." She wasn't sure if she was speaking to her or to himself. "That will be all, Commander. You may return to your duty station."

For a moment the words didn't even register, and then she numbly placed the lightsaber back in the pocket of her jumpsuit. Vader had given it back, or forced her to take it, and as he made no
objection she could only assume she was being permitted to keep it. It was not the cleanest salute she had ever given, but Vader gave her the faintest nod of dismissal and she turned on her heel, hoping she at least made it out before the shaking was more than she could control and her knees buckled.

"Commander."

She froze, but maintained enough control to turn without stumbling. "My lord?"

That mask's eyes bored into her. She had thought she disliked how humans could never seem to meet her gaze, some visceral fear of the glowing red, but Vader's mask . . . . She forced herself not to look away.

Vader was silent for a long moment. Then, he said, "As you serve the Empire, trust your instincts."

She froze. As you serve the Empire, trust your instincts. Burned in her memory, the last words Thrawn had written when he sent her the lightsaber. Simple advice, she had thought, but now, with the certainty that Vader was regarding her as a cog in some great machine whose complete workings she couldn't see, it could not be a coincidence. But of course, now the words were spoken by someone she could never dare ask for clarification.

There was only one safe response, and she gave it. "Yes, my lord." This time she made it through the doors and into the corridor, where, dignity befitting her rank be damned, she let her knees buckle and she slumped against the bulkhead until the shaking stopped.

"Rurik, will you sit down? There's nothing we can do!"

Rurik didn't even break stride in his pacing of the squadron's ready room. It was not a long distance to pace; the room was small enough to begin with and the center was taken up by benches like the one Giriad was sitting on now. "There has to be something. There has to be! I should have said something. I shouldn't have just left her--"

"It's Lord Vader," Giriad said. His own fists were clenched against his thighs, but his expression was bleak. "If he's angry, there's nothing we could have done. If we'd stayed, we'd just be de--"

"Thelea's not dead!" But what other reason did Lord Vader have for keeping her back after dismissing them? "She didn't do anything we didn't do. If he were going to . . . punish her like that, he'd have punished all three of us."

"She was the commanding officer, if something went wrong it was technically on her," though Giriad sounded just as unhappy with the fact as Rurik felt. "Fair or not--he's killed flag officers for less and we all know it!"

"But we didn't do anything wrong!" Rurik stopped, but only long enough to give one of the benches a sharp kick. That was not entirely true–Jedi were, even so long after the Purge, wanted criminals and aiding and abetting one was still against the law. But otherwise, they'd done nothing but attempt to return to the fleet under extraordinary circumstances. How could he possibly think that being stranded in TIE Interceptors, with no hyperdrive and barely enough life support to last intrasystem, let alone interstellar flights, was a failing by a commander? Then again, one mistimed entry into a system and he'd killed an Admiral in full view of the entire bridge. Everyone aboard had heard that probably within the hour. A female, alien, starfighter pilot would be nothing to Vader. "I should have stayed."

"Rurik . . . ." Giriad didn't sound quite as upset now, more . . . suspicious. "Is there something
going on that I should know about?” When Rurik just stared at him, he said, sounding in-for-a-deci, in-for-a-credit about it, "It's just, well, you and Thelea have always been friends, more than me, I get it, since we were assigned to a wing, but lately you've been really strange about it, as if there was more to it--"

"She's my C.O." At least being angry gave him something else to think about. "She's my C.O., she's part of starfighter command, she's not even human!"

"I'm only saying," Giriad protested, "it just seems like sometimes you two--"

"Nothing," Rurik snapped. "There's nothing." Especially not if Vader's-- He stopped himself. Thelea couldn't be dead. Simply couldn't. He'd know, somehow, wouldn't he? Of course, he admitted to himself, that was starting to sound like there was something, and of course there was the fact he had never in his life kissed anyone and had it feel quite so . . . .

He forced himself to stop. For all he knew Thelea was already dead, and even if she wasn't, there was absolutely nowhere that could go. Even if Vader let her live there was a good chance they'd all be reassigned, or demoted, or transferred, despite having been flying together long enough it was an notable accomplishment on its own. Most TIE squadrons, short of elite units like Fel's, had a high casualty rate and constant turnover. They functioned well as a unit and the Admiral and Vader both had to realize, most TIE wings would never have survived an experience like they'd just had. Let alone helped bring down a blockade, collect intelligence on a previously-unknown threat from beyond the galactic rim, and saved Imperial citizens from being slaughtered by said threat. And it had been, for the most part, Thelea's planning and strategies, mostly done on the fly, no less. If anything she ought to be promoted, not--

The door hissed open and he turned, half-expecting to see Aldacci, but instead Thelea stumbled in, looking blankly around as if checking to see if she was alone before staggering into a bulkhead, shaking so hard he could see it. Giriad leapt to his feet and Rurik, without even considering how much a liar this made him look, grabbed her into a tight hug. "You're all right! You're--"

"Not dead?" There was a brittle, nearly hysterical edge to her voice and he could feel her steel herself before gently, but very firmly, pushing away. "No. No, he wasn't angry. At least, not at me." Giriad was at her other elbow, Rurik refusing to relinquish at least that hold, and she let them help her to one of the benches. "He just had . . . questions he couldn't ask in front of others." Rurik couldn't think what she was talking about, and then she caught his eye and tapped her forearm, once. He remembered the mark she'd shown him, her 'allies', and how she'd once promised to kill him if he told anyone about it. This 'Inner Circle' were Vader's own? "I think, overall," she said, her voice sounding calmer, "we're all right.

"So . . . we're not going to be arrested? Or demoted?" How Giriad managed to make the latter sound worse, Rurik couldn't fathom, until he saw the slight twitch of amusement at the corner of Thelea's mouth, and the just-as-quickly-hidden satisfied smile of Giriad's. Maybe he wasn't as unaware as he sometimes seemed of just how fresh-out-of-the-Academy he still came across.

"No." Thelea sounded far more like herself. "But we are done with adventures and getting into trouble. There's something happening, something much bigger than any of us, and whatever it is, we should stay out."

"Something big? You mean, those ships?" Rurik thought of his home planet bombarded, and the sheer amount of damage left even after their hollow victory, and shuddered. "It's not something--"

"I said we stay out if it," Thelea snapped. "This is something beyond our pay grade, probably beyond the Admiral's. We follow orders, we keep our heads down, and when the Rebels are finally
put down once and for all, someone above us will decide how we deal with these aliens." If she felt any sense of irony using the term she didn't show it. "I just hope that before we're assigned to deal with either we get at least one duty cycle to rest. Or at least hit the 'fresher and get back in proper uniforms."

"Hopefully the scavengers haven't decided we were done for and picked over our things," Rurik agreed. It was tacitly acknowledged that when a pilot didn't come back, his (or her) squadronmates were responsible for boxing up their belongings either for transport to the next-of-kin, or to the Quartermaster for repurposing if the deceased had none. The fact that choicer items, be it better uniform pieces or a chip with the latest entertainment holos, frequently vanished before the box was sealed was accepted as payment for services to the dead. Allegedly one especially racy tri-d pinup of the vidstar Wynnssa Starflare had passed through half a dozen pilots' hands before Colonel Fel had found out and confiscated it.

Giriad nodded, and tapped one of the pads on the pilots' lockers that were constantly updated with schedules and assignments. "Good news there, anyway. We're all off call for the next two cycles. Probably figure throwing us straight on escort or patrol while we're half-asleep and still on Telamaran time would be a bad idea."

"Probably." Rurik went to his own locker, which was still keyed to him, anyway, meaning they hadn't been written off for dead or it had been very quickly remedied. "No assignment posted after that, though."

"And I have to report to the medical bay when I return to duty." Thelea grimaced. "I suppose they have to follow regs." It was such a mundane conversation it was almost surreal, but Rurik, whose locker was next to hers, was close enough to see unfamiliar tension in her face. He wouldn't have thought those glowing eyes could look hollow, but somehow they did.

There was a slight cough from Giriad. "Well, I'm taking advantage. If I don't show up in sixteen hours, I'm still asleep." He was speaking just a bit too loudly. "See you then."

That left Rurik and Thelea alone, and somehow Rurik suspected Giriad had done that on purpose. So much for minding his own business. Still . . . He put a hand on her shoulder. "Thelea, about--"

"No." She stepped away. "Rurik, we already said. We can't. There's nothing to talk about."

"I'm not sure that's really true."

"You think they can't see us in here?" She shook her head. "Nothing happened. Nothing can happen. No matter what." She punched the seal button on her locker far harder than was necessary.

"Thelea--" He grabbed her shoulder as she tried to slip past. "When you were in the medical bay, I had a lot of time to think."

"Hopefully about how big a mistake fraternizing can be." Gently, but firmly, she lifted his hands from her shoulders, though he noticed she didn't let go immediately. "Let it go."

"I don't want to." It came out without thinking. "You think I take chances? That's twice now I thought I'd--"

"Stop." Thelea stepped away. "That's enough, Lieutenant." But her fists clenched and she looked down at them, not meeting his eyes. "Not now."

"Not ever, Commander?" He tried not to, but the rank sounded bitter even in his own ears.
Thelea turned away. "Not now. Now . . . now we have a war to win." She slipped past him out the ready room door, but as she went, he could have sworn he heard her whisper, "Apparently a bigger war than I thought." Then the door hissed closed behind her, and he was more alone than he'd felt in a very long time.

Vader stared out into the stars for a very long time after the alien female left. Not that her race mattered to him particularly. Pitting humans against aliens was simply another of his Master's means of keeping discord and distrust high, and therefore his control easier to maintain. The only thing notable about Commander Thelea's species was the sole other Imperial officer who shared it with her, her Academy sponsor and benefactor.

So, the Dark Lord thought, another weapon you think to hide away from my Master, Admiral. Clever, placing her in plain sight, just another refugee from your people's lack of vision. Did you intend for her loyalty to be so firmly to the Empire, though?

Of course. The alien Grand Admiral did not make mistakes so blatant. A test, then, for the girl, not himself or the Emperor, to see how strong she truly was? As an officer, though, or as . . .

Do you really know what you've tried to hide from me? The girl was not exceptionally powerful. The Force was with her, though, had it not been she'd have been of minor use at best to the Inner Circle and highly disposable. But someone had provided her with a lightsaber. A lightsaber made by someone who might have learned the skill from a Jedi, but who was no kind of Jedi he had ever known. The first Chiss he had ever seen was Thrawn himself. The second was Thelea. The girl had been telling the truth when she'd said the Empire had never reached their world, and though she apparently had no real concept of its extent, neither had the old Republic.

Yet someone, somehow, had taught her mother to make a lightsaber. And not a poor example at that. Not, he thought, a style the girl would favor herself. The maker of that weapon was a classicist, someone who favored the elegant, single-hand style of combat and refined forms. The girl's service record and the reports of her conduct on Telamara suggested a far more sly and aggressive style would suit her, one of unexpected leaps and sharp slashes, something requiring a heavier, longer hilt and intensive training in the more gymnastic forms. Her entire record spoke of both loyalty to the Imperial Navy, and a gift for turning the unexpected setback to her favor, not of precise deliberation and adherence to classic structure.

All things considered, that did not surprise him.

But who was your mother? Who was her Master? He briefly considered Kenobi and dismissed him at once. Neither the fighting style nor the distance from the Core made that seem likely. A lost pupil of Tyranus? The fighting style fit, but not the timing, no matter much older than she looked to human eyes the girl might be. Master Yoda had not been accounted for, either, but the boy . . . his son's . . . leaps in training seemed more akin to the old teacher's style. He felt an unfamiliar pang at the thought of his son, screaming denial and choosing apparent death over his hand, and ruthlessly fed the anguish into anger. Anger . . . the girl was full of anger, that was certain, some of it connected to that apparently-cold statement that her mother was long dead.

One parent dead, the other unknown. Vader examined that thought. Was he becoming sentimental? No, simply recognizing in her the same foundation he saw in himself, his son, in so many of the Force-sensitives he'd recruited as his tools and servants in service to his Master and their Empire. Only of course, he was not the only one interested in molding this one. A Grand Admiral was no one to trifle with, even for a Dark Lord of the Sith, not until his own position and that of his son's were secured. When they were, though . . . of course. Thrawn had given Vader the means of his own defeat. The girl was loyal to the Empire, she would be loyal to the Dark Side, and even
Thrawn would never be so cold as to let her be destroyed rather than come to heel himself. He might even be made to see the logic of it all.

Crush the Rebellion, make the rightful step from Apprentice to Sith Master by the only way that was ever done, and then with his son at his side, there would be a new order, new apprentices and inquisitors and dark knights. Thelea would fit neatly into that new creation, and she, likely as Thrawn intended, already knew some of the dangers they would face. The dark ships and the beings from beyond the Rim, creatures only a strong galaxy, unified under a Lord of the Sith, could hope to confront and conquer.

Then, finally, there would be Order. Safety. Peace at last.

Yes. She would play her part. They all would. First, though, he must convert his son to the true side, the Dark Side. Then, he would strike down his Master and take his place as absolute ruler of the Empire. It was not treason, it simply was the way of the Sith and even at the point of death, in some way his Master would understand. Be pleased, even. Then, with the Rebels brought to heel, a new era of order and security would finally begin.

Vader returned to contemplating the darkness between the stars.
Chapter 14

Regular duty seemed almost surreal at first. Thelea had barely kept from snapping at the medtechs when she reported for her mandatory evaluation; tearing their heads off would have not inclined them to clear her for duty and she needed to fly, desperately. Simulators were well and good but she needed the comforting confines of an Interceptor's cockpit, space under her, free and clear and with a defined target to shoot at. It should have been easy to vanish on a ship the size of the Executor, even for someone as unique among the crew as she was, but it felt as if she were constantly being stared at.

Fair enough in the squadron. All three of them were considered minor miracles, written off for dead and restored to life, Thelea twice over after word got around that she had been kept in a private conference with Lord Vader and survived. Not many could say that. Going by the stares, the word had spread well beyond the 207th, though, and that felt uncomfortable. Thelea was accustomed to being her own personal isolation chamber–female crew were rare enough, female fighter pilots were almost unheard of, and female alien pilots? She was used to being an anomaly. Being an object of not just intense scrutiny but a weird mix of suspicion and admiration was a new sensation and not one she enjoyed. She'd thought about going to the fitness and training center and sparring to work off the nervous energy, but her normal sparring partner suddenly seemed like a very bad idea.

She'd have to deal with Rurik eventually, of course. He was still her wingman and impossible to avoid forever. In the two off-cycles they'd had before being returned to active status she'd managed to duck both him and Giriad, but mostly him. On the list of things she needed to consider, personal feelings were near the bottom. Other people's personal feelings were beneath that. At least so far, she'd been able to set matters aside by simply not talking to him, but as soon as they were back in their fighters . . .

Not that it appeared that would happen soon. Almost as soon as the medtechs had cleared her for duty, Executor had jumped to hyperspace and while the 207th was on standby, it was not combat-ready standby so they were not confined to ready rooms or their fighters. That suggested a long jump, with no planned side trips, and little reason to anticipate leaping directly into a fight. The speculation on their destination was all over the ship, as usual, but with the bridge crew uncharacteristically silent, anything beyond 'towards the edge of the Rim' was pure guesswork. Smart money appeared to be on another run down the grokh-hole after the Rebels.

Thelea was tired of resting. The ready room was likely to be crowded, she'd written off the fitness center, hiding in her quarters reading whatever datastreams they were allowed or watching one of the mind-numbing approved vids was distinctly unappealing . . . so, simulators. Pilots were encouraged to devote spare time designated for recreation to simulator training even when it wasn't required for actual practice so being technically on alert wasn't an issue. And she had a few ideas for a program to run that might at least alleviate some of the monotony. Maybe when they got . . . wherever they were going she'd have a chance at real combat against something a bit more predictable than the dark ships' drone fighters. Until then, though . . .

It took a few moments of fiddling with the computer, but while she didn't have the technical skills to build a simulator model of the drone ships, the program ought to allow the Rebel fighters already in the simulation to imitate their flight patterns and speed. That would have to do for now. She flipped the lever on one of the simulator pods, and slipped inside. It wasn't quite the same as being in her Interceptor but until the Exec got . . . wherever they were going, it would have to be enough.
There was the momentary disorientation as her body resisted the notion it was in a fighter in space instead of in a tiny capsule firmly attached to Exec's deck, and then her vision and equilibrium adjusted. The starfield that resolved in front of her was open space—she'd opted not to complicate the scenario with gravity fields and smaller debris. She'd opted for an Interceptor, though simulating one of the new, sophisticated Defenders was an option. The chances of her getting her hands on a real one of those were somewhere between slim and none so no point in wasting training time on them.

The simulator's servomotors jerked her back the way acceleration would in a real fighter and she began scanning with her targeting computer. Almost immediately she spotted three blips that computer identified as A-wings, but which were moving too fast even for those speedy fighters, and too tightly in unison. Thelea targeted the one the computer designated 1 and dual-linked her laser canons. The cluster of fighters hard, much too sharp for real A-wings, and now they were headed straight at her. The bolts coming at her were the right color for the Rebel fighters, but seemed short and too fast as well. At least her reprogramming had had some effect. She jinked and then dove as their targeting scrambled to keep up, and she punched her speed to maximum as she shot underneath them. Spinning her own fighter on its axis, she opened fire, spraying green lasers at the cluster of targets. There were a few sparks and her computer showed her target with some damage, but now it was screaming past with its wingmen and behind her again.

Thelea grinned in the privacy of the simulator pod. She swooped 'up' now (though strictly speaking there was no up or down in vacuum) and cut the engines as the three enemy fighters tried to swing up after her. With no gravity she didn't fall but her sudden speed loss meant they blasted past, breaking around her and before they could regroup and turn back she blasted the center target to particles. The other two fanned apart briefly, and then swung back into formation around the empty center point where the lead target had been. Thelea fired again, clipping one enough it wobbled badly and forced the other to adjust its flight path. As she was sighting in, though, her targeting computer squawked a warning and three more dots appeared, these in tight formation behind her and closing fast.

Typical combat sim, add more threats as you neutralized the first. Still, that was also more in keeping with the behavior of the dark-ship drones. Never mind the pulse weapons on their capital ships. She tried not to think of Rurik's Headhunter vanishing in a cloud of plasma and the heart-stopping moments of comm silence . . . .

Her "fighter" jerked hard, slapped from behind by a bolt from the approaching new targets. Her instrumentation screeched and she saw the numbers for her hull integrity, engines, and lasers drop the requisite percentages. Sims were fairly generous in that regard; while the TIEs weren't quiet the fragile crates some cap-ship officers considered them, a hit that solid in reality would likely have shorted her engines or lasers our completely, if not breached the hull. She bled off energy from the lasers now, feeding it to the engines and hoping they 'repaired' themselves faster as she needed both the distance and maneuverability before she could think about shooting back. A near-miss lighting up the cockpit transparisteel told her she needed that distance in particular and needed it now, especially as her targeting computer squawked a warning that the first two fighters of the original trio were homing in on her again, too.

A green flash blew past her cockpit and one of the approaching drones exploded into a shower of sparks. Her targeting computer showed a new blip, this one friendly green, and a second Interceptor raced past her fighter (or rather, the simulation showed one.) She hadn't programmed a wingman, and that was not the sort of thing a program would normally generate on its own.

That meant someone was in the program with her.
She hadn't plugged into the comm system as she'd thought she'd be alone, but now she activated it. "Unknown TIE, identify."

"Thought you could use the company, Lead."

Rurik. Of course. She should have known. "I don't recall asking for any, Two, but since you're here, pick those two stragglers off me, would you? I'll get the other group."

"Copy that, Lead." He swung around, or rather the simulator projected a view of an Interceptor following the commands input from his own simulator pod, and rapid-fired at the two fighters behind Thelea even as she kicked her engines back to full and set after the second group.

Even as she targeted one and her lasers recharged three more blips at six klicks and closing fast appeared on her sensors. They were already firing, even though they were out of range, but it wouldn't be long . . . ."Three more marks, coming in hot!"

"I see them. Watch it!"

Her computer shrilled a warning an instant later and Thelea had a half-second to fling her fighter into a corkscrewing climb as the two fighters she'd been split and broke at her, again turning faster than real A-wings should have been able. She jinked hard right, firing before she heard the targeting lock, and was rewarded with a shower of sparks as a second exploded into dust. Another warning klaxon; the second fighter was on her six and close enough she couldn't dive hard enough to shake him. Meanwhile the computer showed the three new targets coming into range, and as Rurik, somewhere behind her, vaporzied the remainder of the other group, three more targets popped into existence on her screen. "Well, I wanted something realistic." She switched her quad cannons back to single fire—less power per hit, but she could shoot faster. The new fighters were closing fast and she shot by Rurik as she looped, trying to gain some distance while still getting a clear shot.

Her fighter shuddered again and her power dropped, lasers and engines cut by half. She drained off engines this time, rapid-firing with what energy she could put to the lasers, but as soon as she saw another of the fighters shatter to pieces and a second disintegrate under fire from Rurik's Interceptor her targeting computer showed two more groups of three closing on them. Her control yoke felt sluggish and she pushed down for a dive, heard another proximity alarm–

There was a flash like her controls flaming out, and then her screen went dark. After a moment, the red text came up, explaining what she didn't need to be told-kill shot. If this were a real battle, she'd be dead.

She sighed and yanked the release lever, opening the simulator pod. She could have logged in and watched Rurik finish his run, but it was over in a matter of minutes for him, too. When he climbed out, he was shaking his head, but looked more annoyed than she felt. "I suppose that's realistically how it would go, just us in Interceptors."

Thelea grimaced and didn't say anything for a minute. "That isn't very reassuring." She looked at him and he was watching her, a guarded look in his eyes. "I programmed it based on the behavior of those drone fighters and in the volume they appeared in over Telamara. I expect the shields and hulls on the A-wing models are heavier and I didn't modify those."

"Your idea of practicing was making them just as numerous but more durable?"

"Better here than out there." She pushed herself to her feet, stiffer than she should have been for the amount of time she was in the simulator, which told her it was emotional tension. Anger certainly
hadn't been very helpful against the computer . . .

Rurik was stretching too, and she noted the tense set to his shoulders and tightness of his jaw. Then she told herself off firmly for paying that much attention. "You think we'll be up against them again, then?"

"As soon as this Rebel nonsense is finally cleared up." She thought of Vader's strange unease, though, and she wondered how simple that was really going to be. "Hopefully that won't take long. I'm tired of these random chases across the galaxy."

"Maybe that's where we're going this time. Not that they'd tell any of us." He grimaced. "I don't like being in hyperspace so long."

"On a ship this size, who notices?" That was one thing about the Executor, it was almost easy to forget you were on a ship at all.

"It always feels a little off when the jump's so long. I can't imagine being trapped in hyperspace in one of those Rebel fighters for hours, no matter how useful not being capship-dependent would be," Rurik sighed. "Or a Defender. Not that I'm likely to ever get in one of those."

"They're so expensive it'll be a miracle if even Fel gets one." Thelea heard the envy in her own voice, too. "We'll be pensioned long before they get down the list to us."

Rurik gave her a ghost of his old teasing grin and wagged a chiding finger. "Don't jinx it."

"Right." Talking about retirement and pensions was a superstition, or maybe more a pipe dream, among pilots. Most of them would never live to be concerned with spending their saved-up pay, never mind retirement benefits, and they all knew it. Talking about what you'd do was considered a guarantee you never would. "Still, I can think of some times when having a hyperdrive in my fighter would have come in very handy."

"What, and miss fun little side trips like the one we just had?" Rurik might have been teasing, she couldn't always tell, but she thought he sounded genuinely amused. "Say what you will, it wasn't boring."

Thelea thought about their recent detour, the invasion, the blockade, Dreghan IV and that long trek across the plains, the heart-stopping moment of realizing they were in space without a capital ship and if they couldn't find a safe place to land they were dead in space. And Aleishia, madwoman or Jedi or both. Who knew her mother, who gave her a name . . . Reli'set'harana. Lisetha. And another name for her . . . was this her third? Mith'ele'arana. Not nameless, and not the implications of unknown status the name Thrawn had given her carried (a known mother, but the father . . . .)

And Seln. She force herself to think of the old retainer-turned-ship-dealer. How formally he'd bowed, how he'd treated them to chai and addressed her as lady. How he'd gone out of his way to help them escape.

How he'd been taken hostage and laid down his life for her. And she could never pay that back. Thelea didn't smile. "No, it certainly wasn't boring."

There was a faint tremor that shivered up through the soles of her boots. Rurik obviously felt it too, looking around as if he could see through the bulkheads. "We reverted. We're back in realspace."

"Wherever that might be." Thelea was debating speculating, trying to count how many duty shifts they'd been in hyperspace, how far into this shift they were, when a klaxon sounded. Not an alert or
a priority scramble, but they were still on alert and that meant to their ready rooms and fighters. The fact this ended any further conversation about their recent adventures, Thelea thought, was a bonus. She thought Rurik might say something as they hurried down the corridor, but though he looked at her as if he was about to speak once, he closed his mouth again.

The entire squadron was scrambled, and it wasn't until they were in their fighters and launch-primed that Aldacci came on their headsets with instructions. "On launch, disperse and begin patrol sweeps in your sectors around the ship." Their computers were being fed information about where each wing was assigned. "There are no threats anticipated, but stay alert. Be advised the lunar body and its satellite are protected by a planetary shield Contact with the shield will result in immediate termination. Attempt to transit the shield without proper authorization codes will result in disciplinary action, provided the pilot in question survives. Remain in your wing formation and within in your assigned sector unless otherwise ordered. Wingleaders acknowledge."

Thelea acknowledged their orders in her turn, knowing if Rurik or Giriad violated them it would be her responsibility as well as theirs. Not that she expected they were anxious to draw attention, either. She would be quite happy to never be of note to a senior officer again.

There was a sharp jerk and her fighter was dropped from its docking bracket. The engines flared, and she pushed them up, seeing the targeting blips of Rurik and Giriad's Interceptors in their proper flanking positions. They swept down out of the hangar and glided along under Executor's superstructure. Boring as patrol might be, she still felt a surge of pleasure and relief at the open space beneath them, the weight and reality as the Interceptor responded to her touch on the control yoke. They were headed for the starboard bow, and she sideslipped out from under the enormous ship, noting the emerald expanse of the moon beneath even as her computer registered the presence of the shield projected from somewhere on its surface. They curved up from beneath Executor, still in perfect formation--

And the second satellite came into full view.

Thelea blinked behind her face plate, trying to process the gray bulk floating in orbit around the moon. It was skeletal and half-finished, but already sections were covered in gray skin and flickering lights, and the giant crater that was the focus of the entire design was already complete.

Giriad swore, almost too quiet for his pickup to catch it, and Rurik drew a sharp breath that she heard as clearly as if she were in the same cockpit. "It can't be."

"Is that . . . ." Thelea didn't want to believe it, but her eyes were insisting they saw what the computer confirmed was there.

"They built another one," Giriad said. "I can't believe they built another one. Was the first one that big?"

"I never saw it," Thelea said, not even caring they were on an open pickup. She had no doubt the other fighter wings were having similar conversations, regulation or no. "But I can't imagine anything's been so big, not that wasn't formed naturally."

"Well," Rurik sounded dry-throated and entirely unamused. "That explains why we're out in the middle of nowhere."

Thelea could only nod, though of course they couldn't see, and try to comprehend what she was looking at. Outside the transparisteel cockpit, the half-finished Death Star hung silently over the forest moon, growing larger in their field of view until it blotted out the stars.
Ordinarily, flying basic patrols-watching for enemy craft, inspecting cargo vessels and the work transports as they arrived in-system-would have been considered at best, milk-run duty. Easy, boring, and faintly beneath the dignity of pilots assigned to the flagship of the Imperial Navy. Despite this being exactly that sort of assignment thus far, the target they were protecting made the entire situation anything but usual. After one pilot of a maintenance shuttle had misjudged his entry and rushed the shield transit, the resulting explosion discouraged attempts to skirt the barrier and get a better look at the moon below, no matter how tempting flybys could be. There was something mesmerizing about the vibrant world beneath them, probably its contrast with the flat gray monstrosity being assembled above it. For the majority of Imperial crewers, humans from temperate homeworlds often covered by cities, there was something innately appealing about the forested land masses. Thelea had even murmured something about the novelty of so many trees, though when Rurik had tried to press for more information about her homeworld, she had clammed up.

That hadn't really surprised him. Even before her recent self-imposed solitude she had been reticent about everything up to her species' name for themselves and let that slip only by accident. In part he sympathized with her desire to be ignored. He and Giriad were novelties, as lost pilots rarely returned from the dead. Thelea was a minor miracle, summoned before Vader in private and returned alive. Shock was only appropriate. Disbelief understandable.

Suspicion was starting to become ugly, though. In a way discovering they were going to be protecting a new Death Star was a relief, as it provided new scuttlebutt for the entire crew, not just the pilots.

They were on a rest rota and in the mess with most of the other 207th pilots. The food was the usual dubiously-brown proteins and grains that looked as if someone had at least made an effort to make it look like what the daily menu alleged it to be. And this time, much to his surprise, there were a few items that looked like they might actually be fresh: berries of some sort, and some kind of nut. The menu information said only they were local flora and safe for human consumption.

Whether it was the "human" part leaving its safety for her an open question, or she simply wasn't hungry, Thelea was picking at her food. Rurik opened his mouth to comment, then thought better of it. A glance at Giriad told him their wingman had the same thought and reached the same conclusion-bad idea.

Not everyone had gotten the message, apparently. "Lost your appetite?" The voice was accompanied by the clatter of a tray. Cuhan Sobusk, a 207th pilot whom Rurik was normally happy to know only as Theta One, dropped into a seat across from Thelea. "Got some disturbing messages from Lord Vader to worry about?"

"More unscheduled leaves?" Zeth Orono (Theta Two) sat beside his lead.

Thelea glanced up at them, and Rurik saw the expressionless mask settle over her features as she always had when dealing with fellow crew. "Nothing so interesting." She addressed it mostly to Sobusk, who was after all her rank equal. Orono rated a brief flicker of the glowing eyes and Rurik cheered inwardly as the other lieutenant flinched and looked down at his tray.

Sobusk wasn't as easily intimidated. "Flying remote patrols can't be that exciting, I imagine."

Now Thelea's lips twitched and Rurik knew how she felt. Giriad shifted on his seat, looking
suddenly tense. "I will take it over chasing freighters through planetary debris fields," was all Thelea said aloud. "Being assigned patrols of empty space suggest disinterest. Being sent into an asteroid field at combat speed suggests deliberate animosity."

Now Orono looked up, temper apparently overriding any unease with Thelea's alienness. "Like you could have done any better than them." Belatedly, Rurik remembered that Orono had been friends with one of the pilots from the 112th who hadn't made it out of the asteroid field at Hoth, and he suspected that Thelea had never forgotten the point.

"I never said we could." If she was baiting him, though, she was maintaining an even strain in the process. "I said I preferred assignments that did not suggest my superiors were at best indifferent to my survival."

"They're not?" Orono said. "I can't see why, except it would be a waste of a good Interceptor."

Rurik was half out of his seat before Thelea said, in a tone that could have frozen plasma, "As you were, Lieutenant Caelin." He sank back down, but not without a glance at Giriad, who had the same grim set to his jaw.

Sobusk, meanwhile, gave his own second a side-eyed look. "Enough. Shut up and eat, Zeth."

Orono looked less than eager to obey the order, and for once Rurik didn't think it was the food putting him off. "How'm I supposed to eat sitting across from that?" he muttered, jabbing his fork hard into the protein slab. "Sitting there talking like she's any better than the rest of us,"

Rurik was still drawing breath when to his astonishment he heard Giriad say, "She is better than you, unless you forgot how to read rank plates. How long have you been flying, anyway? She was probably a lieutenant commander before you even finished flight training."

Orono glowered across the table and ignored a restraining hand on his arm from Sobusk. "Funny. Scuttlebutt is it's Caelin here who has a taste for alien--"

Rurik was on his feet even as Orono jumped up and grabbed his dull mess-hall knife in a fist. Thelea was out of her seat in the same heartbeat and so was Sobusk, both grabbing for their respective wingmen's arms. "I said as you were, Lieutenant!" and he noted distractedly she had a very strong grip for her size when she wanted to.

Sobusk was having less luck with his wingman, trying to break his grip on the knife. "Sit down, Zeth! It's not worth it!"

The lieutenant glared at them both, nostrils flaring. "They started it."

"We did what?" Giriad didn't look quite as ready to leap across the table as Rurik felt, but there was an unfamiliar hardness to his eyes. "You're the one who walked in here with a chip the size of this ship on your shoulder!" Thelea made a sound that might have been an attempt to shush him, but her focus still seemed to be on her grip on Rurik's shoulder.

"I liked you three better when you were dead," Orono shot back.

"It was kind of relaxing," Rurik said, "you should try it some time."

Orono lunged forward again and Sobusk shoved him back. "Zeth, leave it!" He shot a look at Thelea that was almost apologetic. "I think the monotony's getting to everyone." She didn't reply aloud, but nodded tightly.
"Or the company." Orono was not in a mood to be pacified, clearly, but he seemed to be breathing slower, anyway.

"Enough, both of you," and Thelea gave Rurik a none-to-gentle shove back towards his seat. "This isn't a tapcafe in Wild Space."

"Lots of experience with that sort of place? I thought that was more the Rimworlder's line, too." Orono was sitting back down, at least. "Clearly your taste is rubbing off on your wingmen, Caelin." He risked a look at Thelea. "Or wing-whatevers."

Rurik tensed, but Thelea's fingers dug into his shoulder hard enough he was fairly sure she was leaving a bruise. "Well, what can I say. Since I'm from such a backwater I couldn't buy my way into the Academy so I had to get in on pure charm."

Orono snorted, almost as if he were amused. And then before Sobusk had time to react he lunged forward, grabbing for Rurik's uniform jacket. Rurik yanked his arm free from Thelea's grip and was too quick for Giriad, blocking the punch Orono swung at his face. He heard the raised volume and scraping of chairs on the floor as people at other tables realized there was going to be a good show.

The Theta-wing pilot was stronger than he looked and yanked Rurik almost onto the table. "You three have gotten just about too uppity to stand," he growled. "Next time you die, make sure it takes."

"Was that a threat?" Rurik clenched his fist, ignoring the sound of voices around them. "Your luck can't hold forever," Orono said, twisting his grip so Rurik's collar tightened around his neck. "Better enjoy that alien tail while you can."

Rurik wondered if this was how Thelea saw all the time, seeing red. Instead of replying, as there was no reply he could think of that was suitably angry, he swung hard for the other man's head at the same time Orono hauled back and punched him. He barely had time to think about dodging when Orono was flying away from him and he was falling backwards, pushed by what felt like a shove to his chest but he couldn't figure out who had done it. Orono crashed to the ground in an undignified heap and Rurik stumbled on his overturned chair, jarring his arm hard as he reached out to break his fall. As he clambered back to his feet, Giriad offering him an arm up, he saw Thelea had stepped back from the fray. Her hand was half-outstretched towards them and she was staring at it with an expression he knew her well enough to recognize as shock. Then she saw that he was looking, and she lowered her hand.

Before any of them could speak, a voice boomed across the noise of the mess. "WHAT IN THE NINE STARLESS HELLS IS GOING ON HERE?"

Colonel Aldacci could really yell when he wanted to, Rurik thought distractedly as he was scrambling to attention. Thelea was already standing spine-straight and still as a statue, Giriad beside her looking very pale all of a sudden. Across the table, Sobusk and Orono, like everyone in earshot, was suddenly at parade-ground attention as well, staring straight ahead at nothing because that was always less terrifying than looking at whomever was screaming at you.

Their commanding officer for his part was standing near the head of the table, staring from one side to the other. His fists were clenched, and his jaw was so tight Rurik wondered how he avoided doing damage to his teeth. "This is not a smuggler's den in the Outer Rim," Aldacci ground out. "Nor is it liberty on the lower levels of Imperial Center. This is a mess hall on the finest Star Destroyer in the fleet, and there is a brawl going on?" He looked from Rurik, Giriad, and Thelea to
Sobusk and Orono, slowly. "Who started this?" There was no response. "Commander Sobusk? Commander Thelea?" He looked from one wingleader to the other and back again. "I am waiting, Commanders."

There was another brief pause. "No one, sir," Sobusk finally said.

"No one." Aldacci stared the human commander down for a moment, and then turned around. "Is this correct, Commander Thelea?"

Thelea didn't blink. "Commander Sobusk is correct, sir."

"So I did not see Lieutenant Orono and Lieutenant Caelin knock each other on the floor like drunks in a spice den?" He eyed both the combatants, and Rurik kept his face carefully neutral. It wasn't easy; Orono's punch had landed on his shoulder and he was fairly sure he had a good bruise forming.

"I slipped, sir." Orono didn't sound like he believed it himself.

"Really." Aldacci looked from him to Rurik. "And you just happened to slip at the same time, Caelin?"

Rurik hesitated a fraction of a second. "The floor must be wet, sir."

Aldacci appeared to consider that, not with a great degree of credulity. Then he turned on Giriad. "Is this what happened, Lieutenant Quoris?"

"Sir, yes, sir." Giriad kept his tone clipped and respectful.

Aldacci stared hard at him, but the younger pilot didn't flinch. The icy glare fixed on Rurik next, and he resorted to a cadet's trick, staring at the bridge of his squadron commander's nose so he appeared to meet the older man's gaze. "Must have been an accident, sir."

Aldacci turned to Sobusk and Orono again, but neither man flinched. The Colonel's nostrils flared like an angry draybeast's, but he kept his tone level. "All five of you are to report to the squadron ready room and you will remain there until this duty rotation ends. During that time you will all read the regulations governing appropriate off-duty behavior while serving aboard a ship of His Majesty's Imperial Navy. That should give you all plenty to think about until your patrols. You two," and he gestured to Sobusk and Orono, "had better be parade-perfect. Theta wing in the display formation. You three, however..." and the look he shot Thelea said he had his own ideas about exactly who was responsible for the fracas. "Orders from very high up. Hope you like the outer reaches of the system because you're on recon on the far side. Word is there's a VIP arrival."

"The rest of the squadron is on parade duty. You'll be going with Beta wing from the 92nd and Iota wing from the 307th and securing the outer system quadrant."

Rurik knew better than to say a word but it took a massive effort not to let the annoyance show. Thelea could say what she liked but especially if there was some kind of formation flying here, this was penalty detail. Very high up could mean only a few people, so who was that annoyed with them? Piett hadn't liked their answers? Kallic smelled blood and was throwing his weight around with easy targets?

Vader had decided he didn't approve?

Rurik dismissed that one out of hand. If Vader wanted them gone he didn't have to resort to bad assignments. He could order them transferred to the far end of the Unknown Regions if he wanted.
Or just simply kill them.

Aldacci was still staring at all of them, his color high. "Well, what are you waiting for? Dismissed!"

All of them managed parade-ground-worthy turns on their heels and an orderly march out of the mess. Thelea picked up her pace as soon as they were out of Aldacci’s sight, and Rurik automatically sped up, Giriad following along behind. Sobusk and Orono apparently weren’t in a hurry to share their company. The ready room was going to be bad enough as it was. Technically, they were no longer required to maintain silence until spoken to, but even as he drew breath Thelea gave a tiny, sharp, negative shake of her head.

The silence continued in the ready room. Thelea deliberately sat on the far end of the benches, nearest the door to the ‘freshers and always the least-popular of the seats. Rurik took the hint and sat near his locker, retrieving his datapad and calling up the regulations they were supposed to be reading. Chances were Aldacci would not bother with cadet-style quizzes, but if he only pretended to read that guaranteed he would get quizzed and on something he couldn't remember. It also gave him something to consider other than what it meant there was going to be some sort of display for a VIP and they were being relegated to the far reaches of the system. It certainly sounded like a punishment. He didn't even want to contemplate who the VIP might be.

The ready room was unnaturally still for having five people in it, but no one seemed to want to break the silence. It was a relief when the end of the rotation drew closer and other members of the squadron began arriving. Rurik knew he and Orono were the targets of several highly speculative looks, and he met a few steadily before noticing that Thelea was studiously keeping her eyes fixed on her datapad, and he followed her example until the ship's chrono marked the end of this rotation and it was time to suit up.

It was easier once he was in the anonymous helmet and then in the comforting confines of his Interceptor's cockpit. They launched before the rest of the squadron, given the distance they were to travel, and he welcomed the hard kick of the tractors flinging them out into vacuum. Settling down on Thelea's right wing, he saw the blips on his computer of Beta and Iota wings approaching.

"Set engines at two-thirds." Thelea's voice crackled over the comm, her tone impossible to read. "Keep your lasers charged. We shouldn't have any company but you can never tell, especially with a VIP inbound."

"Copy, Gamma Leader." He heard Giriad echo the acknowledgment. He had the coordinates already set, of course, but he still waited for the order before banking and beginning their long traverse around the forest moon and towards the outer edge of the system. Two-thirds for the Interceptors was still faster than all but the specialized TIEs and well beyond the shuttles and the fleet (which he noticed now included far more Destroyers than even during their most recent patrol, some of which he thought weren't even technically from the Outer Rim Fleet) but soon they were only faint specks on his computer and finally gone completely behind the bulk of the moon.

Thelea shivered, though her suit's regulators said temperatures were within nominal ranges. Something was wrong, and not just the fight in the mess hall and their having drawn punishment duty. There was an off feeling to everything, the other crew, the ships, the entire system. She herself felt ready to claw her way out of her own skin and in a way she couldn't blame Orono for picking a fight. It was as if something was building and they all felt it. Going away from Executor and away from the monstrosity that dwarfed even the Super Star Destroyer made her feel lighter already, and the long flight to the coordinates they'd been given for patrol was a welcome relief. It also meant time where almost no one had cause to interrupt and given the mood, Rurik and Giriad
were uncharacteristically quiet. She welcomed it.

She welcomed not seeing the Death Star, too. She'd told herself it was simply the sheer size of the thing, the wrongness of seeing something so huge that was constructed, not natural, or the disconcerting notion of the superlaser within it, with the power to shatter worlds. She had never seen Alderaan, extant or the debris field it was now, but she had witnessed the aftermath of a Base Delta Zero action and that had been bad enough: a planetary surface rendered molten, shattered, a smoking hulk that might, in a few hundred or thousand years, support some sort of life again, but for now was as dead as the gray, artificial surface of the planet-killing space station. The notion that the last-ditch, total obliteration of a Base Delta Zero was . . . insufficient was incomprehensible. She had never agreed (though she'd never dared say so aloud to her aunts or her uncle who'd raised her as she'd have been punished for questioning) with her people's rigid adherence to the notion of retaliation only. It had been no great shock to accept the Academy teaching that preemptive action was not only necessary but laudable in many circumstances. The idea of preemptively or punitively wiping out an entire world, or destroying a moon and throwing the habitable planet beneath into complete chaos . . . there was no strategic use here, no practical application.

Not to mention, her more practical side noted, the sheer amount of resources required. The supply ships were still arriving on a near-daily basis, workers shipped in and out, materials that had to be hauled from across the galaxy had to be loaded and unloaded and worked into the enormous construction. With what was going into the new superweapon, the Empire could have had hundreds of ships, thousands of TIEs, outfitted dozens of AT-AT assault units . . . there could be even more sisters for Executor. Five, six, maybe even ten! All that waste, for what? The Rebels never conveniently sat on one planet and obligingly waited to be blasted into atoms.

Though . . . she wondered, absently, what would a laser that size do against the black, spidery, alien ships with their bizarre weapons and impenetrable hulls? If the superlaser could be brought to bear on targets smaller than a moon . . . or if, even better, they could locate the homeworld that was supplying those ships, then maybe that would be something a Death Star could deal with.

If that was truly what the Emperor had in mind. Or whoever made decisions; she'd never seen Emperor Palpatine except in holovids and he was almost a ghost in her mind. Vader with his looming onyx presence that seemed to reach through the entire ship even if you were lucky enough not to see him was infinitely more real and she had to admit, commanded respect. She believed the Dark Lord when he said they would address threats from outside the Empire after the Rebels were dealt with. Perhaps the Death Star would do it, too—even if they weren't destroyed literally, seeing this newer, larger negation of their great triumph would break any sensible being's will to resist. It was the ultimate statement of the Empire's power and its mere impractical overwhelming presence would be enough to quash any further resistance, that had to be it.

Thelea shook her head. She was not suited for politics, clearly. Her computer beeped a notice and she realized they were coming up on the sector they were supposed to be patrolling. She saw the other six fighters split off, Iota wing one way, Beta another, while she and her own wingmen began their cross-hatching patrol pattern. What they were supposed to be looking for she had no idea. There was nothing in this part of space, even so much as a rock drifting outside the canopy. The green moon hung in the distance, emerald and azure with streaks of white from this distance, and beyond it the fleet was tiny glittering slivers against the black. Absolutely nothing to be scanning for and her computer repeatedly confirmed it.

There was a far-distant flicker of pseudomotion beyond the fleet, too far even for her TIE’s sensors to notice and for a moment she ignored it. Another supply run, or that VIP that the Colonel had mentioned. She felt another stab of annoyance and insult. The offense was clear enough—being sent
out to long-range patrol when there was a parade formation was worse than a slap to the face. She'd had enough of those from her aunts and uncle growing up to know. Bruises faded quickly, but the insult burned. There had been no reprimand placed in their files, and Lord Vader himself had dismissed the entire matter. To be so deliberately excluded was entirely unwarranted.

As she mulled over the insult, she allowed her flight path to drift, and when she looked up she was facing back towards the moon again, and the flickers of movement that marked the fleet. Whatever was going on, they were meant to be well away from it, and she glared at the distant formation.

Something looked back.

Thelea shuddered. Something was sliding around the fleet and the faraway half-complete space station, something dark and impenetrable. She had the sense of a black slick of oil, viscous and foul, trickling among the ships and the crews and clutching around the Death Star like innumerable fingers of a multi-handed creature from children's scare tales. She remembered one, the faceless black monster that was hunger and greed who would swallow up disobedient children who wanted more than their share (a particular favorite of her aunts' when she was within earshot.) Only this did not want to devour, it wanted to possess—did possess, the dominant sense was mine, mine, everything and everyone within its grasp. The cold inky thing seeped through her, chilling her to the core, and it carried with it that clutching, probing sense of ownership. It was grasping at her, at Rurik and Giriad, and instinctively she shoved away, scrambling in her mind to get out of its reach and to force it away from her wingmates. It was like trying to guide water with her hands, and there was just the tiniest twitch of sick, yellow-eyed curiosity at finding something trying to block its grasp—

A blow like a fist, a hard, glassy, onyx fist, slammed between her eyes and she saw stars. This touch burned and she knew discipline when she felt it, but it also slid between her and the foul creeping thing. There was an acid pain on her arm and even though she couldn't push up the sleeve of her suit to check she knew the mark of the Inner Circle was inflamed. It was a moment, and then suddenly it was all gone, the grasping and the striking hands both, leaving only the pain, but the second had at least been familiar—Vader. He'd punished her, stopped her somehow from her terrified resistance to the other seeping, grasping power, disciplined her for her temerity, but why?

She was shaking, and cold, and her head throbbed. There was a ringing in her ears—no, not ringing, voices, Rurik and Giriad, and she forced her attention back to her instruments.

She was nearly twenty klicks away from where she'd thought she was and getting farther from them. "I'm fine," she said, knowing that Rurik, anyway, was asking about that even if the exact words hadn't registered. "Coming back around."

"What happened?" Rurik sounded too tense again, worried about more than the practical question of his wingleader wandering off from the flight plan. She tried to shove the thought away, but she found herself looking for the presence that been reaching for them, and felt a flush of relief when she couldn't find a trace of it near either of her wingmen.

"I had a minor malfunction." True enough, and if they thought she meant the computer, good. "It resolved."

"Nothing serious, Lead?" Giriad sounded worried, too, but about something beyond immediate safety. "Not . . . intentional?"

"A glitch, Three." If someone bothered with more than a cursory review of their comm recordings, she wondered if they would note that while Giriad remembered the formalities she and Rurik had foregone them without a second thought. "Do either of you have anything to report?"
"Negative." Rurik at least now sounded annoyed with the wild-mynock chase rather than worried about her. "The only living things for a thousand light-years in any direction is the fleet and whatever's on that moon."

"Same here, Lead," and Giriad had the same peeved tone. "I was kind of hoping you took off because you had something."

"Only if gremlins in the circuits count." Or in my head, but she kept that to herself. "Coming back around."

"You're sure it's gremlins, and not . . . intentional damage?" Rurik was being circumspect, and he wasn't entirely wrong to be suspicious and neither was Giriad. It wouldn't have been the first time one of their fighters was tampered with.

"Negative, Two," and the designation was as much a reminder for her as him. "Nothing that serious." It was hard to focus on the instrumentation to confirm it, though. The pain behind her eyes was dulling, but not going away, and it kept her from looking for any more unconventional dangers all the way through the recon.

The Executor was buzzing when they returned. Everyone seemed to be at double-time, as if they were all trying to suddenly impress some important person who might be watching at any given moment. Rurik and Giriad almost got knocked aside by techs rushing to secure their fighters at a speed generally reserved for post-combat situations and with a precision they didn't normally show even then. "Something going on they haven't told us?" Giriad said as they watched the crews rush through their checks as if they were being timed and judged.

The crew chief stared at him for a moment as if he'd suddenly turned into a Hutt, then shook his head. "Right, you lot were on out-system patrol, weren't you? They didn't tell you who the big reception was for?"

"Obviously not," though Rurik made a conscious effort to stay civil. Senior non-coms who were responsible for maintaining your fighter were not people you wanted to offend. And they knew that. "Who is it? The Emperor himself?" The sudden flicker of disappointment in his eyes sent a cold chill down Rurik's spine. "You're not—it's not really the Emperor?"

"Guess the word's already out," the chief said. "Came in to see them put the finishing touches on his new toy, not that we need it when we've got this lady, eh?" His gesture encompassed not just the fighter bay but the entire kilometers-long warship. "They'll be sure to finish the thing on-time now."

Giriad had apparently lost the power of coherent speech, and Rurik had some idea how he felt. "I didn't know the Emperor ever left Imperial Center."

"One of those Rimworlders who think he's just a myth, eh?" The chief chuckled. "I can remember back to when he took the throne, just after the Clone Wars. His Majesty's real enough, and if he's come all the way out here they must be planning an even bigger show for when that monster's complete. It won't be any old rock they test it on, mark my words." Then one of his crew running a hose to the fighter racks caught his eye, and he was shouting invective-laced orders, the two pilot-officers he'd been enlightening now forgotten.

Rurik was glad for the distraction. "The Emperor."

"Uh-huh." Giriad still looked blank.
"Here. With the fleet." Rurik still couldn't quite grasp it. He'd heard the Emperor's voice, seen holos, but the idea of him not just real but out among the Navy in the far reaches of the galaxy . . . "Why would he come here?"

Giriad shrugged, seeming to slowly come back a bit. "Like the chief said–overseeing construction. Maybe it's nearer done than they're saying and there's going to be a demonstration."

Rurik thought of the verdant green moon below and shuddered. "Maybe. But doesn't it seem dangerous? Traveling all this way . . . it's like taunting the Rebels. Or . . . other people."

Now Giriad stared. "The Rebels wouldn't dare! Especially not with the entire fleet and then some here!" That sounded like the Core-worlder he knew. "As for . . . them, maybe they stay closer to the Unknown Regions. Thelea might not have heard of them but that doesn't mean they weren't from there and they're just poking at the edges"

"Telamara's not that far out." Rurik felt a need to defend his homeworld. "It's still the Rim, not Wild Space. If they can hit there, they could hit here. Having everything in one place just seems like asking for a fight." The mention of Thelea registered, and he realized that he hadn't seen her come down from the gantry. "Go on ahead. I'm going to check on something." He turned back to the ladder up to the fighters.

"Or someone," Giriad muttered, but loud enough Rurik still heard. "I'm not blind, you know. Or deaf. Or stupid." But he turned and kept walking, then paused. "If she needs help . . . ." Rurik nodded, and Giriad kept going out of the hangar while Rurik climbed back up to the docking stations.

Thelea tucked herself farther back in the shadows at the end of the gantry, listening to the sounds from the crews running post-flight on the fighters. Farther away now; they'd finished with the Interceptors at this end, and it was quieter here. She could keep to herself and likely wouldn't be disturbed unless she was called for a debriefing and given their recon had produced less than nothing, it was hardly worth the formality. She doubted Aldacci cared about anything other than their having stayed neatly out of the way while the rest of the squadron put on their best possible show for the Emperor.

The Emperor. She tucked her knees up to her chin and wrapped her arms around her legs, but even curled up, wearing the insulated flight suit, she was cold. That was what she had felt, the many-handed monster reaching around the fleet greedily possessing them all. That was what Vader had wanted, sending them far away from his grand arrival, to keep her, not the others, her, with her branded arm and the abilities he seemed to approve of, beneath their supreme leader's notice. She'd imagined herself a cog in some grand machine, but now she suspected a better image was a game token, one of the smallest and weakest on the board, but one to be carefully hoarded against an opponent nonetheless so long as it was useful. And she had no idea what game they were playing. Or against whom.

Why would Lord Vader keep secrets from the Emperor? Who did the Inner Circle really serve? The Empire, of course, but wasn't that the same thing as the Emperor? She thought of the oily, grasping nightmare and a new wave of shuddering swept over her. Now when she thought of it she couldn't help but feel it, nearby, lurking, waiting to devour, and she couldn't stop.

What was happening to her?

You know, and she wasn't sure if she was hearing her own thoughts, or if the whispering voice belonged to someone else. You know who you are.
"No, I don't." Pilot. Loyal officer of the Imperial Navy. Orphan runaway. Pawn between powerful men who used beings as pieces in their complex games. The cold knot deep in her wouldn't seem to go away.

There was a step on the gantry and she curled more tightly in on herself. With her face pressed to her knees and her eyes closed and hiding the glow, she could blend into the darkness. "Thelea?"

Rurik. Naturally. The only friendly constant in her universe was her wingmates, and Rurik's dogged refusal to let her distance herself from them, even before their recent misadventures forced them together. And he was not going to pretend not to see her. She raised her head and opened her eyes, absentmindedly noticing he no longer even blinked at their glow. "I'm here."

Instead of saying anything, like asking the eminently reasonable and obvious question about why she was sitting on a gantry in the dark, he simply came over and sat down close beside her. She was glad for the flight suits adding a heavy layer between them. Though his higher body temperature might have been nice, she thought, as another wave of shivering hit her and she thought of the black hand again, reaching out to encompass Rurik and Giriad's fighters in its oily grip. No, she thought, careful though to bury the anger deep. Not them! Not my . . . friends.

Rurik, of course, couldn't hear her thoughts. "What's wrong?" She could feel him looking around for anyone watching them, and then, hesitantly, his arm went around her shoulders. "You're shaking—what happened out there? That wasn't a computer glitch, was it?"

She shook her head. "There was . . . something dark, and vile and it was in the fleet, all around it. I could feel it reaching for us, too. And now that I know who arrived, and can still feel it, I don't know what to do."

Rurik didn't say anything for a long moment, not that there was anything to say. "You think this dark, vile thing was . . . ." Even here, he had the sense not to say it aloud.

Thelea nodded. "And when he realized I could sense . . . who it was, and what he was doing, Vader blocked me somehow. He sent us out there. He wanted me somewhere beneath notice."

"To protect you?" Rurik didn't sound as incredulous as she was sure she would if their positions were reversed.

"To use me." She burrowed in on herself and felt Rurik tighten his arm around her. "I'm a pawn on a game board, and I don't even know what the game is, or who put me in play in the first place. Or what the stakes are. And I don't think I'm supposed to have a say."

She'd closed her eyes again, but she could feel his nod. "Bad enough to know we're all expendable. I guess it's worse when you don't even know what they want you to die for."

"It's more than that." She shivered. "It's not even that I'm a good pilot, or a loyal officer. Something's happened, something woke up. A-Aleishia," and she forced herself to say the name, "knew it, and Vader sees it. I'm not just an average tool any more. I don't even know what I am."

"Because of your mother." Rurik was only barely whispering. "Because she was a Jedi."

Thelea only nodded. "Or something like it." She thought of Vader holding her mother's lightsaber, analyzing it, gauging its wielder, judging her, and Thelea shook as a scream of frustration threatened to crawl out. Vader knew more about her mother than she did, simply by looking at the only thing she had of her. "I don't know if that makes me a more valuable piece in the game or expendable. And I don't know how to get out of the game."
There was a pause, where she still felt nothing but ice spreading through her veins. Then Rurik said, "Well, we didn't seem to do too badly, finding our way on the Rim. Maybe we should just take off. Run for Wild Space and not look back. Hell, we can take Giriad--he's not so bad in a fight. And he might be able to get some money out of his family."

Thelea looked up, too shocked to feel the cold. "You're not serious."

He wasn't, entirely, she could see that, but she could also see that was more serious than he'd thought before he spoke. "Why not? If you don't think we could hack it as independent operators we could always go looking for your people."

The thought of running away again, back to homeworld, only this time with two humans in tow, almost was enough to make her laugh. "If you think some of our shipmates find me repulsive, you should see what most of my people would think of humans. Let alone my so-called guardians." If both Aleishia and Mith'raw'nurodo were right, then not guardians, my maternal family, my own clan. "Besides, I don't want to run away. I am an Imperial pilot. I worked so hard to become one. I just . . . I want to go back to being just that. And I know that's not possible. Not knowing what's out there. I just don't want to be killed over something I don't understand before I can strike back at something worth hitting."

"And after what we saw, the Rebels hardly seem like that, do they." Rurik sighed. "And I don't know what your people think about humans, but no one finds you repulsive."

"You forget I was sitting right there listening in the mess hall."

"He doesn't think you're repulsive. He thinks you're strange, and exotic, which annoys him because you're alien, and he knew damn well Giriad was right about who was the better pilot. So he's angry. You should have let me deck him."

"Yes, because I want my wingman in the brig." She looked up, and he was studying her with those painfully honest human eyes. Yes, her people would find humans' utter readability childish and repulsive. But it did make life with them so much easier. "Exotic?"

"I thought we weren't talking about that." But he was meeting her gaze steadily even though especially in the dark, the glow had to be impossibly alien.

"You caught me at a weak moment." Weak, and cold, and sunk in fear, but suddenly no longer completely alone in the galaxy.

Rurik didn't even hesitate. A good fighter pilot knew an opening when he saw one. This time, Thelea wasn't surprised by anything about the kiss except how the cold finally seemed to melt from her blood. When he tried to break off, she grabbed his flight suit and pulled him back, not wanting the warmth to fade quite yet.

When she let him breathe again, he didn't pull away too far. "I changed my mind. Let's just leave Giriad here and take off alone."

It felt good to laugh, even if she had to keep her voice low. "I'm not running." She stood up, dragging Rurik with her. "Not until I'm running to something instead of away."

"Well, when you decide where you're going, remember to tell me," Rurik said. For a change, he didn't press the matter of their intimacy any further. "You'll need a wingman."

"And you would be my first choice." Just as long as I'm going somewhere you can follow. She shook off the unbidden thought that didn't seem like her own voice along with the residual chill it
brought, and started for the ladder to the hangar floor.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Welcome to the battle of Endor.

It didn’t take nearly as long as Thelea expected to discover there was more to the Emperor’s visit than a simple inspection. Shortly after his arrival, the fleet was ordered to the far side of the sanctuary moon. All the ships, which now included Destroyers she knew did not technically belong to the Outer Rim Fleet, were ordered into the same empty quadrant they’d patrolled during the parade for the Emperor’s arrival. The Death Star still appeared half-complete, with exposed gantries and half-finished defenses, though the superlaser was finally enclosed completely and most of the inner workings were covered. With the ground-projected shield still around it, the battle station was as defended as it was likely to be before it was complete. A few shuttles were still carrying parts and crew—none had gone through even as the Executor was preparing to join the rest of the fleet.

The strange part was, shortly before the Executor relocated to the fleet, Vader left the ship. Thelea felt the heavy, onyx presence withdrawing even without trying, even trying not to, and it left a sense of unease on the ship. There was still a strange energy in all the crew, but it now bore more than a trace of the grasping power of the Emperor and she continued to draw in on herself, willing it not to see her. How could he possibly be actively monitoring them, anyway? There were tens of thousands aboard the Super Star Destroyer alone, let alone the smaller Destroyers. How would he know about one lone pilot, whether she knew he was looking or not?

Or if she quietly tried to deflect those grasping dark tendrils from two other insignificant pilots.

The more she contemplated Rurik’s impromptu suggestion, the more she wondered how difficult it might actually be for all three of them to run. The sense of impending doom stemmed from more than the omnipresent grasping darkness. Something was coming. Something enormous and terrible was coming, and they were pebbles in the avalanche’s path. Would it be so difficult to secure a shuttle or a missile boat with a hyperdrive and sufficient life support to get them . . . where? Where was there to run for deserters?

Lying in her bunk in the dark of a sleep rotation, drifting just barely in wakefulness, her mind kept returning to the message chip. Aleishia had said there were coordinates, a place she should go when she could come searching for answers. There had been nothing about coming alone. If they could only slip away . . .

What was she doing? Plotting desertion, thinking about subverting her junior officers, abandoning everything she’d ever worked for because of . . . a mad old woman and some waking nightmares? At least, she wanted to believe these were nightmares. The pressure wouldn’t go away, though. It was like sitting in her fighter’s cockpit too long before launch: a stinging, nagging, pressure screaming for release until her legs and fingers twitched. She sat up, stretching, but the anxiety wouldn’t go away. Something was bearing down and until it arrived she was going to be on edge.

It was impossible to sleep. Stretching again, she stood up in the cramped confines of her quarters.
There was no sound from the ‘fresher unit she shared with three other private rooms. Either the occupants of the suite were asleep or on a different rotation. All were female, and as such none were pilots (there were a few human female pilots, but Thelea had yet to meet any and if any were assigned to Executor she hadn’t run across them) and it occurred to her for the first time she should have at least made an effort to seem interested in them. If they’d been of a mind to socialize.

Thelea shook off the odd sense of a missed chance. If she wasn’t going to run (and she wasn’t! She couldn’t!) there would be plenty of time later to make their acquaintance. Wouldn’t there? That sense of impending doom was coloring her perception of everything. She ducked in for a quick wash, trying to shock herself out of the grim mood, but it didn’t work. Mechanically, she dressed, putting on her flight suit over a shift uniform, minus the black jacket that wouldn’t fit under the suit. Tucking her lightsaber into the cargo pocket was second nature by now but this time she paused, holding the hilt in an at-ready position, feeling the comfortable weight in her grasp.

It was a risk, it always was, but she touched the activation button and the gold blade sprang to life, humming in the quiet of the tiny room. Thelea stared at it, transfixed, marveling again at how the hilt had real weight to it, and as she moved it cautiously through the air the blade had substance, despite being only light and energy. A few times she’d been tempted to take it apart and examine the inner workings, but fear that she could never reassemble it stayed her hand.

What had Vader said about it? Made for a light hand, and she tried a single-handed grip. It balanced easily, the heavier end of the hilt settling against the heel of her palm. The blade arced through the air in what she thought was a more graceful way, the tip leaving a faint afterimage trail in the dark of her quarters.

*Let the blade be an extension of your arm.*

Thelea shook herself. The thought had been a voice, one that did not sound like her own. Still, she adjusted her grip and tried to swing the blade without breaking at her wrist and elbow. It flowed, strangely like dancing or artful waving of a fan, things she had never felt were her forte. Not that she had ever been trained in them. A weapon felt more natural, more right, an extension of her body that moved naturally.

*Good. Good. Let it flow through you. Be part of you. It always has been.*

That was not her own thoughts. That was a voice, like a dream, only couched in light and warmth and with a strange weight behind it. The one who had tried to talk her through the fight against the strange cyber-human in the caves on Telamara. Someone trying to help her, only . . .

*Who are you?* She tried to make the thought as clear as she could, but keep it within her mind. *How are you talking to me?*

She had a very distinct sense of surprise. *So. You really are hearing me. I was starting to wonder.*

*Of course I can hear you,* and Thelea couldn’t help a derisive sniff. *You’re in my head. Who are you?*

There was a long pause. *You know who I am, Thelea. You’ve known me all your life.* The words were so suffused with light and warmth and longing Thelea staggered at the familiarity of it, the sense of unconditional belonging. Of being wanted.

*Mother . . .* She felt the truth of it. How can you do this? Where are you? It was more plaintive than she meant to sound but the sensation was so like being warmly enfolded in arms she half-expected to see them.
Until now, when I tried to reach you, I never quite could. In the cave, for the first time your mind was quiet enough you could hear me. You’ve opened yourself to the Force. She had a faint sense of amusement. Ironic . . . your father has no sense of the Force whatsoever, but when they let me try, I can always reach him. You seem to have made your own blocks, where he could never block me if he wanted to.

But where are you? Thelea found herself looking around, even though she knew she was alone in the cramped compartment. You’re . . . . She couldn’t even think ‘dead’, not with the presence so real and alive in her mind.

Far away, I suppose. Her voice seemed distracted. I’m never quite sure, even in these times when I can reach out and find you, or your father, or my old Master. But when I can I’ve tried to speak to you. Her attention seemed pulled away now. I don’t have much time. Listen, Thelea, daughter–you cannot go on as you have been. You must learn to use your abilities. What you fought in the caves is only the beginning, and I won’t always be able to help you.

Learn from who? You?

She had the distinct impression of laughter. Even if I could, there is a better teacher. And you will be a far better Jedi than I ever could have been. I was too old. Too ambitious. And too careless. You have enough of your father in you you’ll have more sense. More and more it seemed as if her attention was being pulled elsewhere and her voice was growing faint.

Thelea grabbed on to the thought as if she could seize it in her hands. My father–

You will find him, daughter. You know where you need to go to find him and to find your Master. Follow what you were given, and trust the Force–

The alert klaxon assaulted her ears and Thelea cried out before she could stop herself, the frustration too much as the connection in her mind dimmed and slipped away. Her thumb jabbed hard on the button that deactivated the saber and she forced herself to listen to the alert as it repeated.

Combat scramble. All hands, all stations.

Training and instinct meant she was moving almost without thinking, jamming the lightsaber in her flightsuit’s cargo pocket again and she was halfway to the door before the voice–her mother’s voice–had said at the end truly penetrated her brain. What you were given . . . .

She scrambled at her personal drawer, the tiny box, really, that was all she was allowed for personal items. It was practically empty in her case–she had no trinkets or souvenirs, only her medal Admiral Thrawn had presented to her three years ago, a spare set of rank squares and the data chip. The one that Aleishia had given her and which contained coordinates to . . . somewhere. Somewhere on the edge of the Unknown Regions, halfway home, where she would find answers.

Somewhere to run to, instead of away.

Thelea hesitated. The klaxon was still wailing and she had to get to the ready room, put on the heavy life-support vest and helmet and learn why they were scrambling. Much longer and she’d be late and on notice, but . . . somewhere to run to.

She grabbed the chip, and after a half-second’s hesitation the medal and the rank plate and sealed them in the pocket on the opposite leg from her saber. They were all she had worth keeping with
her. The chance might not come now, but as soon as it did she’d tell Rurik and Giriad and they
could run, so best to get in the habit of having everything just in case. Away from the grasping
nightmare hand, the pointless squabbling with Rebel terrorists, to somewhere there would be
answers about what they really were fighting, what they had been fighting all along.

Rurik slung his life-support harness over his head, trying to ignore the louder-than-usual chatter in
the ready room. It was always possible this was some sort of drill, something to impress the
Emperor with his fleet’s combat readiness, but he couldn’t help thinking of the bombardment at
Telamara, the ships out of nowhere.

He didn’t realize it showed until he noticed Giriad was watching him, a tense look pinching the
corner of his eyes. “You, too?” the younger pilot asked, keeping his voice low.

“Something’s up,” Rurik said. “This might be a drill, but . . . .”

“Feels off.” Giriad double-checked his air lines. “Where’s Thelea?”

Before Rurik could reply that he didn’t know, or process the strange feeling he had on realizing he
hadn’t noticed she wasn’t here yet, Thelea nearly slammed into her locker door, jabbing the key
code in harder than she needed to. “I’m here. I was . . . resting when the alert sounded. Took a
minute to get myself together.”

It was convincing enough, he supposed, as she strapped on her life-support equipment. But her
tone was distracted, breathless . . . not like Thelea when she was combat-ready at all. “Doing some
thinking?”

She paused, and then gestured subtly for them both to lean close. “What we talked about, Rurik . . .
I think I have a plan. When whatever this is finishes, we need access to a shuttle or other small
transport. There’s a place to run to, not away. If it’s what I think it is, it won’t even be real . . . .”
She stopped, not wanting to say the word.

Giriad, though, could clearly fill in the blanks. “Desertion? You’re talking about–” He stopped
himself, glancing around, but the preflight chatter was loud enough no one was close enough to
hear. “That’s treason!”

“Not if this is what I think it is,” Thelea said. “I told Rurik I feel like I’m some piece in a game.
Well, I think I may see some of the pattern on the game board now. If we want to fight the real
threat, this is how we have to do it.” She kept her eyes on her locker. “You don’t have to come, if
your conscience won’t allow it. Just . . . don’t give us away. But if we really are going to fight what
we fought at Telamara, if that’s what the Empire’s really facing, then I’d rather you were with us.”

Rurik watched Giriad closely. He’d been half-joking about running and taking their wingman
along, but he realized the notion of leaving him behind, now that it seemed like a real possibility,
was unsettling. And not just because he might turn them in. Because if Giriad went along with this,
then he and Thelea weren’t imagining things. It was real.

Giriad, by the look on his face, was thinking something awfully similar. “When we get back. You
have a plan?”

“I think I know where we can go. And I suspect I know who we’ll find there.” Thelea didn’t look
at either of them, checking her suit and harness with expert fingers flying over the switches and
connections. “How we go, I’m not sure. Like I said, if you don’t want to, I’ll understand. Even you,
Rurik, if you won’t–“
“I’m going, and that’s that,” he interrupted.

“Me, too.” They both stared at Giriad. “What?”

Rurik couldn’t help it. He looked down at Thelea. “Did our prim and proper little cadet finally grow up?” He thought her lip twitched almost like she was smothering a laugh.

Giriad rolled his eyes. “First, if you two disappear it’s not like my career isn’t over anyway.” He had a valid point there. “Second,” and he couldn’t seem to help a sheepish smile, “like I’m going to let you guys have all the excitement.”

Strange, Rurik thought, that he felt relief at the notion they wouldn’t be leaving their wingman behind. And at the entire plan. “So that’s it.”

“It’s settled.” Thelea shut her locker. “If this isn’t a drill, stay close. We might even be able to get lost in the shuffle when it’s over.”

“Where have you decided we’re going?” Rurik grabbed his helmet.

Thelea paused, staring into the middle distance. “To find some old friends, I think. We’ll find out when we get there.”

“Who?” Rurik followed as she started for the door, Giriad falling in behind him.

Thelea shook her head. “When this is over,” she said, and pulled on her helmet.

They sat in their fighters for what seemed like an eternity, engines at ready, computer up, lasers hot. Chatter was nonexistent even though normally in a hurry-and-wait situation even the squadron leaders could get stir-crazy. Today everyone seemed to feel the same tension she did, the certainty this was not a drill, was something of terrific import. Thelea worked on remaining calm, thinking of nothing but the tiny fighter around her, not the myriad possibilities of what they could be facing, and definitely not the cramp starting in the back of her right thigh.

Definitely not the desertion she was planning.

She forced it away. This was not desertion. Not really. Going AWOL, at the most. And if she was right, if what her mother (her mother!) said was true, then the best way she could serve the Empire was to follow her instincts. Wasn’t that what Thrawn and Vader had both told her? Dragging Rurik and Giriad with her might be stretching her mandate until it was transparent, but on the other hand, if that was where her instincts were directing her . . . .

Besides, it was a strangely euphoric feeling, knowing that she would not be plunging into the unknown all alone.

Her comm chirped a warning and the launch tractors grabbed on. The fighter catapulted from the launch bay, and already her targeting computer was scrambling just to keep up with friendly traffic around her. Rurik and Giriad tucked in on each wing, both out of protocol and out of self-defense. She couldn’t keep track, her computer was cycling targets so quickly, but it seemed as if every Destroyer was putting all its TIEs and Interceptors into space.

Aldacci’s voice crackled in her headset. “207th, accelerate to attack speed. Choose your targets and fire at will, repeat, fire at will!”

They came up around the Executor’s starboard side and Thelea gasped. This wasn’t a drill or
another parade. She had never seen so many Rebel ships in one place—they had brought everything, it looked like, from antiquated gunships to escort frigates to the Mon Cal cruisers. Her priority, though, had to be the tiny incoming blips that glinted balefully on her computer readout—fighters, lots of them, though the swarm of TIEs outnumbered them at least three to one. X-wings, B-wings, delightfully slow and sluggish Y-wings (ace-bait), and finally, the A-wings, the fighters made to hunt Interceptors. She couldn’t help it, even with all the stress and the knowledge of what she had to do. The euphoria of combat was infectious.

This is it. Their whole fleet’s here. They came to finish off the Emperor and the Death Star and instead we’re going to finish them.

“This is what the Academy called a target-rich environment, eh, Lead?” From the sound of his voice Rurik wasn’t immune to the feeling, either.

“Careful, Two, there’s nothing more dangerous than trapped animals with nothing to lose.” She kicked her fighter to maximum speed, though, and targeted an A-wing, but another TIE slipped between them and she lost the lock. “Though we’d be better get moving if we want our share.” The B-wing was not as fast or maneuverable as the A-wings, but the narrow profile made it tricky to target.

She squeezed the trigger on the quad lasers. Not tricky enough, she thought, throttling back just enough to stay in the blade-shaped fighter’s shadow and rapid-firing until its shield crumpled and the next shot pierced the hull. The sudden drop in speed sent her rocketing past but Rurik was on her wing and fired dual-linked, shattering the Rebel fighter into sparks and shards. “We can share the credit on that one, Lead.”

“Fine by me. I want one of those As anyway.” Thelea was already scanning for a new target, ideally one of the A-wings. Her computer scrolled past a familiar-looking small freighter weaving in and out of the capitol ships, and she tried to remember where she’d seen it before. More interesting were his wingmen, more of the snub fighters including the lightning-fast As.

Giriad had spotted the freighter, too, now vanishing beyond the frigate whose surface they were skimming. “Hey, remember that gas giant we were at a few months ago? Isn’t that the Corellian—“

There was a burst of static and his voice cut off. “What was that, Three?” There was only the static.

She felt a cold sinking in her gut, and heard something equally icy in Rurik’s voice. “I think he’s gone, Lead. The frigate’s batteries got his portside solar panel—I couldn’t see after that.” And didn’t want to. She couldn’t blame him.

“Stay close,” she ordered, her voice sounding fainter in her own ears.

“Right at your elbow, Thelea.” She’d reprimand him for the familiarity later. Maybe.

“We can’t get the frigate,” and she knew exactly why he’d been thinking that. “Nearest fighter?”

“Let’s kill some Rebels.” She locked on an A and a Y flying as a unit—likely the faster fighter was running interference—going to be a mistake on both their parts.

“Using your target for attack.” If she hadn’t known it was him, Rurik’s voice would have sounded as mechanical as a stormtrooper’s.

Thelea sighted on the Y first. She knew, rationally, this pilot had not killed Giriad. That had been a
gunner on the Rebel frigate, or even an automated system. But one Rebel was much the same as another. She fired quad-linked, and the clunky fighter wobbled, its shields dropping. The A-wing slashed down, hard-stopping as she and the Y-wing overshot. “Finish the Y, I’ve got his wingman.”

“Copy that.” Rurik’s Interceptor shot around, following the injured Y, his quad lasers pounding at its shields as it tried to run. Then Thelea couldn’t pay attention, focusing on the A-wing coming around to sight on her. She’d gone from hunter to hunted and needed to flip the balance again, quickly.

Her fighter shuddered as a bolt of red energy came close enough to graze. She pushed hard on the throttle, racing as close as she dared along the surface of one of the Mon Cal ships, too close for it to bring its own weapons to bear and so close the pursuing A-wing would worry, subconsciously, about damaging his own people. She would have no hesitation about following an enemy fighter foolish enough skim the surface of a Star Destroyer. The cruiser was rotating beneath her, probably trying to come to bear on their ships, though she noticed absentely there was no turbolaser fire from the Destroyers. They hadn’t even closed to combat range. Well and good; friendly fire could incinerate a TIE as readily as an enemy’s.

She was rapidly running out of cruiser. Visually scanning, she saw a flight of X-wings coming across its prow, chasing a wing of TIEs. If she timed this right... if she could break at exactly the right moment... she slowed, fractionally, swinging enough that the A couldn’t get a clean lock on her.

She reached the end of the cruiser as the X-wings were crossing its path and she dove the instant there was clearance, barely, plunging so close in front of one of the fighters she had a flashing impression of the painted chevrons on one pilot’s helmet. The A-wing, in close pursuit, was a half-second behind her, and in that half-second the X-wing traveled another meter, two meters, it didn’t matter exactly because it was just enough. Sweeping down from so close to the cruiser’s hull the A-wing pilot didn’t see his fellow Rebel until it was too late. He was following her vector so closely he took the same trajectory—only now the X was directly in the middle of it. The shattering explosion destroyed the A-wing. She thought the X’s pilot might have ejected, but she didn’t bother checking.

“That was for my friend, you Rebel filth” she said, too quietly, she hoped, for the pickup to catch it.

“Nice one, Lead!” Rurik sounded a little better. “Coming back at you.”

“Got that Y?” She bit down the urge to ask if he was all right. He was still there. He was fine.

“Got him.” She’d never heard Rurik sound so satisfied about a kill. “Nice work on those two. You realize we got the whole set?”

It took her a moment to realize what he meant—but their first kill was a B, Rurik had taken down the Y-wing, and her move had killed both an X and an A-wing. “Not a bad day’s work.” It sounded hollow, even to her, and her targeting computer was still scrambling to pick something from the plethora of Rebel ships still available. “Let’s do some more damage.”

“For Giriad.”

“For Giriad.” Thelea tapped her computer. “That Corellian pirate’s still out there.”
“Sounds good to me.” Unfortunately, the freighter and its fighter escorts were not nearby, but through the maze of Rebel capital ships and fighters from both sides. They had to race out of range of the Mon Cal’s guns, and that meant darting through a barrage from a Corvette that, like the cruiser, they couldn’t have damaged with their quad lasers if they’d tried.

The freighter was still well out of range, but there was a tempting pair of X-wings chasing a wing of TIEs, one of which exploded into a cloud of gas and shrapnel even as she targeted the pursuers, and she wondered which Destroyer that wing came from. She didn’t have time to cycle her targeting computer and find out.

“Go right, I’ll take the leader.” Thelea locked on to the X-wing flying point, not coincidentally the one who’d blasted the TIE and who was targeting the leader of the Imperials’ formation. His shot missed its mark as her own lasers locked on his rear quarter and he realized he had a pursuer and that Rurik was targeting his wingman. The X-wing pilot was a cool customer, and for a moment continued his pursuit of the remaining TIEs as if he hadn’t noticed the Interceptor targeting him. Then with a speed and coordination Thelea grudgingly admitted was very impressive the leader jinked down hard at a whiplash-inducing angle, while his wingman scissored up and across, screaming over the Nebulon-B they were approaching. Thelea had a brief flash of Rurik’s fighter racing after him and then she lost sight of them as she followed the lead X-wing down.

The pilot was good, she gave him that, weaving under the elongate capital ship as close as she’d danced along the cruiser’s dorsal hull. Chasing him was a challenge that required all her attention as they swept out planetside, both fighters having to bank to skim the edge of the still-deadly shield. Thelea chastised herself for almost forgetting it–hitting it now would be as deadly as proton torpedo and just as quick. The X-wing pilot clearly knew that, too, as he executed a corkscrewing evasion that sent her spinning her fighter on a panel-tip to stay behind him. He was trying to regroup with his wingman, probably to shoot off the pursuing Interceptor. Not him, she thought viscously, you don’t get Rurik, too. Her target angled away from the planet, and she fired, damaging his shield but not his hull integrity yet, headed for the other X-wing that was trying to shake Rurik’s pursuing fighter–

Then she lost them both in a blinding burst of plasma and vapor so brilliant and so close her sensors briefly overloaded and she lost even her targeting lock on the X-wing. Thelea hadn’t realized she’d screamed until she realized her throat was raw, but likely no one had heard her–there was static in her headset, too. As the computer reset itself and the static began to clear she scanned visually, frantically, trying to spot the other Interceptor or his target as the flecks of debris that had been one of the Rebel’s cruisers dissipated.

Panic was starting to strangle her when one of the green ‘friendly’ specks on the computer screen identified as Gamma Two and she spotted the dart-shaped fighter, farther away and on evasive now, too, as he tried to get clear of the spreading debris. Her comm cleared and she heard:

“–got heavy static here. Can’t target, Lead, where–“

“I’m here!” It was not proper procedure to cut him off, but she didn’t care. “Come right seventy.” She saw the fighter turn to comply and she cut her speed, scanning for new targets even as he stabilized. “What killed that cruiser? That can’t have been our fighters and the Fleet hasn’t closed!”

Rurik’s tone sounded somewhere between disbelief and awe when he replied. “It was the Death Star! They can precision-fire on ships with this one. That’s what overloaded everything–this close the bleed from the plasma was too much.” He paused. “There were fighters closer to the cruiser that took it worse.”

Thelea shuddered. But if the battle station could focus on such small targets, no wonder the Star
Destroyers were still only on the perimeter—they were just the herding-beasts, keeping the cattle to be slaughtered in the pen. The TIEs would pick off the enemy fighters, and the Death Star would pulverize the Rebel capships as fast as the superlaser could recharge. This was it. They had no hope of survival. The Rebellion was going to end here and now.

Rurik had been saying something and she missed it. “I didn’t copy that.”

“I said I lost that X but there’s still plenty of targets, especially now they know the score.” The Rebel ships were scrambling and reconfiguring, some already moving towards the Star Destroyers. Foolish, suicidal, even. The Destroyers outnumbered and outgunned them, and closing to hide from the Death Star would only mean a slower death broadsided by the heavy turbolaser batteries.

But if it was death they wanted, she would be happy to speed the process along. Her heart was still racing from the moments of panic when she couldn’t find Rurik’s fighter in the debris cloud and she had no time to accept just how afraid she had been. Giriad, gone. Rurik dying was unthinkable, more than it already had been. “Pick a target, then,” she said, and noted her trajectory, not accounting for the forest moon’s gravity, had started to carry her back towards the shield. “We could both make ace in one go.”

“Got plenty to chose from, Lead.” He sounded calmer, too, and she could see the other Interceptor curving towards the retreating Rebels, but slow enough she’d easily catch up.

“I’m coming to you—“

The bolt hit her fighter so hard her head slammed back into the seat and even with the helmet she saw stars that weren’t outside the cockpit. There was a pained shriek of stressed electronics and then every panel went dark. Lasers, engines, targeting, maneuvering, it was all gone, she realized dizzily as she tried to make her head stop spinning. Her comm was dead, not even any static in her ear, and some detached part of her brain knew it was an ion cannon from one of the big Rebels hips. Her computer might, might be able to repair itself eventually, but for the moment every system was fried. Her life-support harness was working but that was cold comfort in a dead fighter in the midst of a pitched battle. She had a brief flash of the hull of the cruiser that was likely responsible, whose gunners didn’t seem interested in mercy-killing an enemy it had already disabled.

A brief glimpse—it wasn’t her head that was spinning, Thelea realized bleakly. It was her Interceptor. And she knew enough about orbit dynamics to know where it was going. She was tiny, and the comparative mass of the moon was enormous, its gravity more so. The bolt had given the fighter an extra push, as if it would need it, and she was tumbling inexorably towards the moon below.

And the deadly shield surrounding it.

Thelea closed her eyes, not just to avoid further dizziness from trying to make sense of the spinning scenery. She couldn’t have found Rurik’s fighter now anyway, and she only prayed he wasn’t coming after her, that he was smart enough to know there was nothing he could do besides escape. I was mad to think I could, anyway. She braced herself. Without the computer there was no way to know when the impact would come. I hope you do make ace, Rurik. I hope you make out alive. One of us should. And if it can only be one . . . I’m glad it’s you.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Excuse some fiddling with time here. We pick up with Rurik, where chapter sixteen left off. Then we'll be jumping back a little, to cover events that he couldn't have seen.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Thelea!”

Rurik screamed. He didn’t care who heard, he didn’t care if he was disciplined. They could court-marshal him for all he cared. It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered, nothing mattered except hearing her voice on the comm, chastising him for his panic, assuring him she was on her way.

“Thelea! Thelea, please!” He couldn’t see her, had only the vaguest notion of her fighter’s exact position when her last transmission cut off mid-sentence. His targeting computer was no help at all. It wasn’t picking up her fighter, though it shouldn’t have been out of range, and there wasn’t that much debris. It had to be the residual feedback from the Death Star’s laser. His systems were still scrambled, that was it, when they finished repairing themselves he’d be able to find her . . . .

He looked at the status indicators.

*Computer at 100%. Comm at 100%.*

His fighter was fine. His universe, very suddenly, was not.

His Interceptor shook from a near-miss and for a moment he barely noticed, let alone cared. If anything, he thought bleakly, he ought to just get it over with. Let one of the turbolaser blasts end the whole pointless business. So close—they had been so close . . . . Even if it was only a pipe dream, or if it really had plunged them into a darker, more terrifying war against enemies that were far more implacable and deadly than the Rebels . . . Thelea had been willing to go, and he would have followed, to the ends of the galaxy if it came to that. That Giriad, young, foolish, and far more loyal and funny and well-meaning than Rurik had expected when their wing had first been formed back on the Valiant had been willing to join them had been like a sign that it wasn’t a mistake. He thought of the empty bunk in their shared quarters on the Executor, sheet tucked in with cadet-precise corners, and thought of how he’d always teased Giriad how there were no inspections now they weren’t at the Academy.

Giriad, dead. Thelea . . . his mind shrieked a denial, even though he knew it was true.

Why not just let the Rebels end it all for him?

He had been flying blind, but clearly some part of his instincts were still functioning as he stayed out of range of the capital ships’ lasers. They and the Rebel snub fighters seemed more concerned with closing on the Star Destroyers anyway, and he found himself chasing without any real purpose until a voice on the comm finally sank in.
“Gamma Two, do you copy? Alpha Leader to Gamma Two!”

Aldacci. He was still alive. How was that fair? “Copy that.” He sounded lifeless to his own ears.


“Gone.” He almost choked on it.

Aldacci muttered something that the pickup barely caught. “Thelea, too? Stang.” Then he cleared his throat. “Well. The shield went down. Looks like the Rebel scum are making a run for the interior of the battle station. What they think they can do I don’t know but we’re running them down. The smuggler’s freighter has point and he’s trailing snub fighters. Form up; we’re going after them before they hit whatever they’re aiming for.”

Rurik blinked at his targeting computer and saw two blips, Alpha One and Alpha Three. Bleakly, he brought his own ship around and took up a position on Aldacci’s left wing. They were closer now to the massive gray battle station than Rurik had ever been, skimming the surface, dodging half-complete gun turrets, spines of observation towers, remnants of constructor droids and partially-installed sensor dishes and shield generators. It was like flying speeders through the forest back home, he thought absently. Somehow he’d never smashed into a tree or bounced off a rock, and those instincts seemed to be operating here. He certainly wasn’t thinking about trying to stay alive.

They did not quite catch up with the YT-1300 and its fighter escorts, but they and three standard TIEs (a hodgepodge from Devastator and Chimaera’s squadrons; Rurik noted through his mental fog that everyone must have taken a harder beating than he’d noticed, and he had an odd sense of satisfaction) were close enough they saw the freighter and fighters make a steep dive into a gaping construction shaft leading into the superstructure of the Death Star. Rurik stayed on Aldacci’s wing as they snapped around the turn and were inside the maze, chasing the glow of the Rebel fighters’ engines.

At the speeds they were traveling, it was almost impossible to think about anything but not striking one of the innumerable pipes and vents and struts of metal that twisted and turned and changed widths without warning or reason. Of course it hadn’t been meant to admit passage of a running fighter battle. Rurik, as if from a distance, saw the trailing Rebel X-wing explode into atoms and felt a distracted sense of appreciation.

Two of Rebel fighters broke hard right into other paths through the superstructure. “Gamma Two, Iota Three and Four, break off and get those fighters!”

Rurik didn’t even bother acknowledging as he swung right and tried to keep the A-wing’s engine lights in sight while Aldacci, Alpha Three, and one of Devastator’s TIEs remained on the group heading deeper into the Death Star. Thelea had gotten her A-wing, he thought, and killed an X-wing in the process to boot. He ought to kill this one for her. Shooting, though, took fractional reflexes away from the task of avoiding the various hazards and adapting to the rapidly-changing width of the passage. The flatter profile of the Rebel fighter made slipping through sudden bottlenecks easier and as one came up unexpectedly he was jolted hard and a screech from his computer informed him the upper starboard quad laser port was damaged and would require physical maintenance for full function to be restored.

Rurik shrugged mentally, and switched to single-fire. It would mean a slight hesitation, if he had a chance to rapid-fire, but it would make little difference. The faint tang of singed electronics sneaking through his breathing filters was more concerning, or would have been if he still gave a
damn one way or another about his survival.

The A-wing made another hard turn and he followed, and abruptly they were in clear space again. He fired, and saw a surprisingly large shower of sparks from the enemy fighter’s starboard nacelle. He realized an instant later how that had happened as the A-wing accelerated away so fast he almost thought it was jumping to hyperspace. The pilot must have dumped all power from shields to his engines, boosting the already-quick hit-and-fade fighter to uncatchable speeds. Another consult with his targeting computer showed, disconcertingly, that every ship in the Rebel fleet and apparently all in his own had similar ideas and were speeding away, towards the moon or open space, just all away from–

“Oh, shaffit,” and the old-settler curse from homeworld didn’t seem nearly enough. Away from the Death Star, that the Rebels had just sent an attack force deep into . . . .

Rurik threw the throttle wide open, instinct taking over, shifting power from everything available. The Interceptor was fast to begin with and now it screamed for open space, aiming for the nearest Imperial ships he could spot. He was scanning through them, trying to locate the Executor somewhere among them, when a shock wave of an intensity he’d never experienced slammed into the fighter. The computer screamed and shorted out, but he didn’t have much time to worry about it as he whiplashed against his harness and back into the seat, the wind knocked from his lungs. The little fighter tumbled as he blindly fought to regain some semblance of stability, and he was distantly aware that some of the shuddering was coming from the massive wave of particulate debris that was roaring past outside the cockpit viewscreen.

Something tremendous had just died, and the universe he’d considered already disordered beyond repair had abruptly ceased to exist.

***

Several Minutes Earlier, Super Star Destroyer Executor

Varkris sat at his station, grateful for the sudden attention the Rebels had fixed on the Imperial flagship, as it gave him needed distraction from the last orders his masters had given him. Destroy the ship . . . make certain it was destroyed. Part of him wondered Why? What purpose will that serve? Another part knew, the dark ones, their speaker who gave the orders, had reasons, terrifying reasons, and he could not possibly comprehend the workings of their great machine. He had been spared in their assault on that long-ago mission because they found him malleable, suited to obey, and it had bought him almost ten years now. Ten years he’d have been dead otherwise.

He would have preferred ten more, even now, but what they would do, screaming in his mind until there was nothing left but their voices, would be worse. He’d failed them too many times. The alien female lived when they wanted her dead. Though there was some small comfort . . . he couldn’t monitor the battle that closely, but he knew their TIE squadrons were being sliced to pieces. Perhaps the Rebels had finally accomplished his task for him.

Cold comfort, but comfort of a kind, if Thelea had died even only minutes before him.

The Executor shuddered violently, harder than she had yet, and the anxiety of the bridge crew was so thick he could practically smell it. They dwarfed even the Rebels’ command ship, but multiple sand gnats could drive even the thickest-skinned bantha to distraction.

An officer on the opposite side of the crew pit shouted up to the Admiral, “Sir! We’ve lost our bridge deflector shield!”
Varkris shuddered even as he heard Piett give the expected order: “Intensify our forward batteries. I don’t want anything to get through.”

He stared at the tactical display on his station. There were two fighters racing across the bow. A stray shot vaporized one and damaged the other, which was now out of control, veering up towards the con tower, truly out of control or on a suicide run, it was impossible to say.

But it was into the range of the batteries Varkris’s station controlled.

His finger hovered over the fire control. Hesitated.

Somewhere above on the bridge, Admiral Piett shouted, “Intensify forward firepower!”

Varkris paused. In the dark recesses of his mind he heard the shriek of his masters.

“Too late!” The commander beside Piett had seen the oncoming Rebel.

“Too late,” Varkris echoed softly. “It was always too late.” He closed his eyes as Piett and the other officer leapt for the control pit a fraction of a second before the transparisteel shattered inward. Elsewhere as Executor’s automated systems took over, bulkheads slammed and abandon-ship klaxons screamed, but even before the flaming wreckage of the fighter exploded into the crew pit, with the viewports shattered open to vacuum no one on her bridge could hear anything, anyway.

**

**Meanwhile, Earlier Still:**

The faint beep from the Interceptor’s computer made Thelea open her eyes, even though her inner ear told her she was still in an uncontrolled tumble. The fighter’s systems were weakly trying to repair themselves, engines at 30%, lasers still at zero, targeting struggling at 25%. She almost laughed at the futility of the system, attempting to reset itself when an explosive death was moments away.

Then it occurred to her that if that were the case, while her sense of time might not be at its best, she ought to be dead already.

She stared out the cockpit at the alternating flashes of bright white clouds and green land beneath and the blackness of space and had to force down a surge of nausea as it kept changing rapidly with the ship’s spin. When she steadied herself, though, it registered that the green and white was taking up an increasing amount of the viewport while the glimpses of spaces were getting fewer and farther between. She was getting closer and closer to the planet and even though she couldn’t be certain without the computer to back her up, she was reasonably certain that she was below the shield kill zone, where it should have shattered her crippled ship to pieces.

The shield was down.

Thelea controlled a hysterical urge to laugh. Whether this was some stratagem on the Empire’s part or the Rebels had accomplished some unlikely act of sabotage abruptly she was not facing certain doom. Unless, of course, she couldn’t get the fighter’s uncontrolled plummet into the moon’s atmosphere under control, in which case she’d be just as dead, only slowly and painful as she burned up. Already she could see a telltale glow around the tips of the panels, the smallest and sharpest surfaces and first to go.

Well, if it’s a half-controlled atmospheric landing in a battle-damaged Interceptor, then at least I’ve had a recent dress rehearsal. True, she’d had far less damage to the electronics, and she’d had
her wingmen, pacing her all the way in–

She shut off that train of thought. Giriad was gone. Rurik was well away and she hoped safe, not planning suicidal heroics. No, he wouldn’t, he was smart, he was an excellent pilot, he wouldn’t get himself killed coming after her when he thought there was no hope. She told herself she would find him later. They’d laugh, eventually, when the sadness had worn off, because there would be sadness even with a victory because of the cost this time.

After all these years together, she’d started to think they were immortal.

Not now, and she was going to confront her mortality in a more literal fashion if she didn’t change the angle of descent. Her systems were still drunkenly sorting through the aftereffects of the ion blast, and she overrode them, transferring every bit of power to the engines and maneuvering controls. Lasers and the rest of the computer systems were pointless now. She tried the control yoke and this time, the maneuvering thrusters fired—weakly, and the readout blinked a protest about low power, but she felt the little craft shake and the angle slowly began to change. The light outside the cockpit was brighter now, daylight instead of starlight, and there was more and more resistance as the atmosphere thickened around her.

Just like before, she told herself, only now she was not afraid and the cold crystalline anger deep in her gut was righteous, not blinding. The Interceptor fought harder this time, with only 45% power and the lower tips of the wings still glowing, brighter now, and she could feel fragments starting to shear off. The repulsors didn’t want to respond, and now with her orientation corrected she could see the trees rapidly approaching. While it would be preferable to slamming into a mountain or striking water at this speed, this was not going to be a smooth or even safe landing. But as she fought the controls, she increasingly began to think it would be a landing she could walk away from.

A little more, and she willed the nose of the fighter to come up, to slow just a fraction from its suicidally steep angle, and the dying fighter responded. She saw the speed drop on the readout, the attack angle change, and then she was once again thrown hard into the harness and then sideways as the fighter crashed into the uppermost branches of the forest. She was jolted in every direction, but somehow managed to reach the cutoff for the engines and now it was only gravity that was her enemy. Gravity, and the kriffing trees, with branches grabbing, twisting, snapping, bouncing the fighter back and forth until she felt a solid crack—one of the wing panels had broken away completely. Then an impact almost as bad as slamming into the ground came and she saw the shell of the cockpit cave in, but finally the terrifying descent stopped, and while she could distantly hear the sound of parts falling and broken branches smashing to the ground, the remains of the fighter were still. She was up a tree, literally, but the terrifying descent was over, and she was still alive.

Tentatively, she unbuckled her harness and pulled her helmet off. Familiar now with where the emergency kit was, she reached down and pulled the box free. There was nothing else, really, that she needed—her lightsaber was still in the cargo pocket, the data chip and her rank plates in the other. Grabbing her blaster would have been helpful, she thought grimly, but it was too late to worry about that now. She reached up and pulled the release handle on the hatch. The bolts moved, but stuck and she felt a brief surge of fear again. If she were caught in a position where the hatch couldn’t open . . . if the crash had damaged the mechanism . . . .

*If you’d only stop panicking and remember that you are not unarmed.*

She wasn’t certain if that was her mother’s spirit again, or if her own mind could be that biting to itself, but either way, she could have kicked herself. Of course there was another way out. A lightsaber, so it was said, cut anything except another lightsaber. TIE fighter hull ought to be easy.
Assuming, of course, she didn’t accidentally cut whatever was holding the Interceptor in place in the tree and start the ride over again, this time without the harness to hold her in place.

Tugging open the pocket, she pulled the lightsaber out and aimed the open end at the hatch cover. If the Force really does exist, I hope it’s still with me now. She touched the trigger stud and the gold beam flared to life, too long for the confined space—and it bit into the metal and through with a surprising heft that made her brace herself. The motion made the fighter rock a bit and she froze, but there was no cracking of branches and no plummeting. Slowly, she began to draw a circle through the metal with the blade, flinching as droplets of superheated metal fell from the seam she was cutting. The lightsaber sliced through it slowly but smoothly, easier than she’d expected. She shivered at the thought of what it would do to something softer, like the wood of the tree. Or flesh.

As she completed the circular cut, she deactivated the blade and very carefully reached up and pushed. This time, there was a slight resistance, but then with a hiss and a scraping of torn metal, the ersatz hatch gave way and she pushed it clear. It slid with a cringe-inducing scraping sound over the rounded ball of the cockpit and fell away. She heard a thunk as it hit a branch, and then a long, long silence before a distant sound said it had struck the ground. Trying not to think about what that meant, she returned the lightsaber to her pocket, snapped the emergency kit to her life-support vest, and pulled herself up through the opening.

The air smelled rich and damp and like rich soil after a rain and a spicy, woody scent from the needles of the tree she was in. The fighter had snagged in the large crook of an enormous tree where its largest branch split off, and she had a dizzying sense of being very high up in the air. Bracing herself on the main trunk, she clung to the broken-off panel strut with one hand and tried to find something to hold with the other and then peeked over the edge. The ground looked very far away indeed, much farther than the crew gantries in the hangars on the Executor and even more than the climbing walls in Academy PT. Of course there they’d had safety harnesses as well, even if she’d sometimes wondered how efficacious they really were. Now she had her bare hands, a lightsaber, and whatever was in the emergency kit. She suspected that did not include a grappling pistol or a utility line.

Thelea forced herself to study the tree and the surrounding foliage more carefully. She couldn’t reach the next branch down. Jumping would be suicide. But there were vines, some sort of symbiotic plant, that twined up the sides. They were tight against the tree, and too thick to make into a rope, but it did offer something other than slick bark to hold on to. If she could use them as handholds, she might at least get far enough down to safely jump the rest of the way. Smaller trees and brush blocked her view of the ground from this distance, so there was no way to know what waited if she slipped. In a way, it was comforting.

And at least if she fell and broke her neck, she thought, considering the bright blue sky (with no hint of the brutal combat beyond) and the rich greens and red-browns of the trees, this would be a prettier place to die than cold space with the scent of recycled air and burned computer components around her.

There was no point in delaying. Bracing herself harder, she edged down until she was half-sitting in the crook of the tree and could wrap her arm partway around the smaller branch of the split. Then, before she lost her nerve, she twisted so she was facing the trunk and eased her feet down. It took a moment of frantic scrabbling and a death grip on the branch, but she found purchase against the thick vines. They had to be nearly as ancient as the massive tree—some were nearly as thick as fuel cables, which worked in her favor as it was more to hold on to. Unlike rock-climbing, there was more danger of snagging between her hand-holds than not being able to reach. At one terrifying moment she felt the vine pull away from the trunk and she had to fight down another surge of blind panic, but she steadied herself.
She didn’t allow herself to look down, so she had no idea how far it was to the ground when the sudden pain and cold and blind, burning rage hit her, tearing through her, screaming in her ears like a terror-bird out of ancient legends. Thelea screamed with it and one of her feet lost its purchase, but somehow her fingers dug in, the rough vines painful even through her flight gloves. Rage, disbelief, despair, hatred, hatred so thick and vile it choked her . . . and then it was gone, leaving her clinging helplessly to the vines somewhere between sky and soil, colder than she had ever been. But as the feeling died away, she realized dimly that the black grasping hand was gone. Whatever had been slithering through the Fleet was no longer there, and the cold faded away to replaced with a strange, giddy, lightness.

She managed to catch her breath, trying to understand. If the black hand that had clutched at them all was the Emperor, and if it was gone . . . the Emperor, dead? Thelea tried to even comprehend the thought. How could it be? What could possibly have overcome the many-handed creature she’d sensed even without seeing him? She didn’t have time to think about it now, she had to get down. Steadying herself and getting a firm grasp of the vines again, she restarted her descent.

She was two-thirds of the way down when the second wave hit. This was not one voice, and it was cold and hot and screams of anguish and fear and so many voices, but at the same time there was another energy, wild jubilation and relief and somewhere in all of that joy and sorrow in one burning light that was minuscule among the pain and celebration and yet still somehow outshone them all were equal parts of each . . . .

Too much. It was too much, she couldn’t think, couldn’t feel, couldn’t breathe–Thelea didn’t even have the energy to care when her fingers lost their grip and she fell. For a brief instant she saw a brilliant burning cloud in the sky above, and then it was lost in the brush and the trees were tearing at her and it was almost a relief when she hit the ground and blacked out.

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Rurik let his comm cycle, trying to pick up some kind of transmission that made sense. With the debris and the static it took far longer than it should, but finally a voice that sounded authoritative resolved and he could hear:

“–ships, this is the Chimaera. Emergency retreat, repeat, emergency retreat! Jump on emergency coordinates. All Destroyers take on orphaned fighters from Executor, Devastator, Regulator . . . .”

Orphaned fighters? Rurik couldn’t process that for a moment, it made no sense. Orphaned fighters meant non-hyperspace fighters like TIEs who had lost their carriers, but that couldn’t be him, they couldn’t have destroyed the Executor, she was too big, too strong, too well-defended . . . but as he began frantically scanning he realized she was not here, nor was the old flagship she’d replaced, there were Destroyers missing that simply couldn’t be, they must have had to jump without having time to take their fighters back aboard. But why was Chimaera’s captain, on the secondary communications ship, whoever he was, calling retreat, then? Calling them orphaned?

He realized he didn’t have time to figure out answers. The remaining destroyers were forming up and he targeted the nearest one who had her tractors active. “This is Gamma Two of the 207th assault wing, attached to Executor,” he transmitted to the old-style ISD-1 that was nearest. “Requesting emergency pickup.”

“This is Defiance docking control, stand by for lock-on, Gamma Two.”

He blinked at the name. Defiance . . . that had been the ship who’d come in response to Telamara’s distress call. He’d known there had been too many ships to be the Outer Rim Fleet alone, but to have called in Destroyers from the Border Defense force? This had been planned, it had been
intended to be a final battle, but somehow it had all gone straight to hell, and as he felt the tractors
lock on, a bleak, cold, exhaustion seemed to sink into the marrow of his bones. He barely was
aware enough to power down as the Defiance’s tractor beams guided him into a docking bracket.
How did they have it to spare, he wondered, and then he realized if they’d suffered the same sort of
attrition as the 207th, they and most of the remaining (remaining!) Destroyers likely had more than
enough room.

He didn’t bother with the normal post-flight routine, and it said everything that the flight techs
waiting to assist him onto the gantry didn’t say a word. Instead he was guided down like the
walking wounded, and directed to the medical bay as matter of course. He barely noticed the
change in the vibrations of the engines as they jumped to hyperspace, and didn’t have the energy to
care where the emergency jump was taking them. The medical bay was crowded and he had a
detached sense of deja vu, listening to the typical post-battle injuries being cataloged. His eyes
turned to the bacta tanks, to the monitoring table where Thelea had recovered after her fall down
the mountain, but she wasn’t there. Of course she wasn’t there. He was going to have to get used to
that, he thought, of looking to see her and finding her gone.

Someone helped him out of his helmet and life-support harness, but as soon as it was clear he was
not in immediate danger of bleeding out he was left to sit, his bumps and bruises waiting until
someone was free to treat them. He heard bits and pieces of conversation, some numb, some shrill.
The Executor, gone. Other Destroyers lost in a sudden, last-minute panic. The Emperor was dead.
The Emperor had escaped. Vader was in command, Vader was dead, no one was in command, no
one knew, no one cared.

“Caelin?”

The voice sounded hoarse, as if the speaker had been inhaling corrosive engine fumes. He looked
up and blinked. Zeth Orono, Theta Two, was standing in front of him, his flight suit showing signs
of burns and small cuts, and his eyes as hollow and dark and Rurik was sure his own were. “So.”
Rurik was mildly surprised to find his own voice still worked. “You made it, too.”

“Barely.” The other pilot looked pale and seemed to be waverin from foot to food. “We got cut to
pieces–ran head-on into that stock freighter that was flying like a fighter. Sobusk was on him for
ten seconds, then–” He stopped himself. “Your wing?”

Rurik felt a dark, bitter, bile rise in his throat. “Giriad got hit by one of the cruisers. Thelea took an
ion blast and hit the shield. And I swear, if you say a word–“ His fists clenched, and he felt his
whole body tense.

“No!” Orono sounded nothing but grief-stricken and exhausted. “No, when I saw you I thought . . .
I hoped . . . . Maybe the boss made it. I lost track of Alpha wing straight off.”

Rurik shook his head. “He followed that freighter and her fighters into the Death Star, him and
Alpha Three. Two was gone already, he thought it was the three of us of the whole squadron. I was
with them but he sent me back to the surface after a Rebel fighter that broke off and I barely made
it out of the blast radius. If they still managed to blow the thing, he must have . . . .”

Orono slumped into a seat. “It can’t be just the two of us. Not out of the whole squadron.”

“Seems so.” Rurik stripped his gloves off. “Maybe the whole ship.”

Orono slumped forward, elbows on his knees, looking as if his head were too heavy to hold up.
“Did you see?” When Rurik shook his head numbly, he said, “They took out the projectors for the
bridge shields. Something hit the bridge–a missile, a ship, who knows. I couldn’t tell from where I
was. All their capships were on her, and it was so fast—even if anyone on the secondary bridge could have responded she lost her helm so fast, and they were so close to the station . . . with the shield down she keeled over and hit the surface . . .” He trailed off, his fists clenching and unclenching around nothing. “Maybe there was time for a few life pods, if the traitor scum didn’t just blow them up as soon as they launched, but anyone on the bridge wouldn’t have had time to move, let alone call abandon ship.”

Rurik slumped in his seat. There was nothing to say. If Executor was gone, then so was the best of the Navy’s officer corps. The highest honor and quickest path to promotion was to serve on the flagship. No one, from the senior officers to the lowest enlisted personnel, was anything but the best available. Even the Army units were the finest in the Empire. The cream of the entire Imperial military was gone. Unless Vader or the Emperor had somehow escaped . . . it should have been the Rebels scrambling away in a panic lick their wounds. Not them. Not . . . this.

A medic finally came over to them, casting a harried glance between the two pilots and deciding that Orono had more visible injuries. She had a scanner on him when she gave a second glance at Rurik, and blinked. “Lieutenant Caelin, isn’t it?”

His own name didn’t even register for a moment. Then he blinked, and realized he knew the medic, or at least, remembered her. “That’s right. Didn’t expect to be back here any time soon.”

The medic smiled, though now the prematurely-stressed lines in her face seemed deeper and there were dark circles under eyes, too. “I’m sorry it’s under these circumstances.”

Zeth looked from her to Rurik, then winced as she turned his head back to face her and the diagnostic light she was shining in his eyes. “You’ve met?”

“Yes, remember when all three of us were dead?” It came out in a snider tone than Rurik had really meant. “Defiance responded to our distress call. But I thought you were returning to the Barrier fleet.” He blinked. “I never even asked your name then.”

She smiled, wearily, but sincerely. “Specialist Muro. Jasha Muro. And we were headed back. Orders from Coruscant, though. We were reassigned to Lord Vader’s command as soon as we left Telamara, along with the Resolute. I don’t even know if Admiral Thrawn was given a say.”

At the mention of the alien Admiral’s name, Rurik flinched. What had Thelea said? That he’d lied to her? That the name he’d told her was only part of the truth. That he’d abandoned her. That part at least had been distinctly clear. “Do you think your captain will countermand that now . . . this has happened?”

Jasha shook her head. “I couldn’t guess. I suppose it’ll depend on what happens here.”

“Who’s Admiral Thrawn?” Zeth looked slightly miffed at being more or less ignored, despite ostensibly being the one under examination.

Before she could speak, Rurik said, “A fleet admiral. He’s the same species as Thelea . . . as Thelea was.”

There. He’d done it. Used the past tense. It ached, but he found he was too tired for it to hurt much, yet. He saw Zeth lower his eyes, and Jasha looked stricken. “Commander Thelea didn’t survive?” she asked, her tone softening considerably.

“No.” Rurik wondered if at some point, admitting it aloud would get easier. “Neither did our wingman—you didn’t meet him, Lieutenant Giriad Quoris. Core worlder, ex-spoiled rich kid,
terrified of doing anything that wasn’t by the book, at least at first, and then he let us keep thinking it because he knew we found it funny. At least I think Thelea did, it made her smile, I noticed that just recently. After almost four years, she really was starting to smile more . . . .” He took a breath and realized how ragged it felt and he had a sick certainty too much more and he’d actually cry.

Zeth looked up at her, and the slight inclination of his head in Rurik’s direction was apparently all Jasha needed to understand his meaning. She shut off the scanner and came over, crouching down in front of Rurik. “I’m so sorry, Lieutenant.” She put a hand on his shoulder. “I know you and the Commander were friends. And I’m sure I would have liked to meet Lieutenant Quoris.”

“He’s the one who sounded the alert, you know, the one the *Defiance* answered,” and Rurik realized he was not going to be able to stop talking if he didn’t get a grip. The words were coming of their own accord, as if he had to get them out, let someone else hear them now, before he forgot them and then no one knew it and it was forgotten, they were forgotten. “The plan was mostly Thelea’s idea, she thought up most of it. Telamara’s my homeworld and I didn’t want to leave but using a decoy, distracting the blockade, then fighting them off in the tunnels, so much of that was her, she could always think her way through things. Maybe she did now, maybe I should have gone back. I saw Giriad hit, but I lost her, we were separated, she might have managed to get control again before . . . .” He tried to take a breath and was surprised at the choking thickness in his throat. “What if there was a chance and I left her there?”

Jasha grasped him by both shoulders, her grip surprisingly firm. “Don’t blame yourself. There was nothing you could have done.”

“You don’t know that!” His eyes were burning, but he couldn’t cry. “I could have reminded Giriad to pay attention, I should have stayed on Thelea’s wing, I could–“

“Have died along with them,” and to his surprise that was Zeth. “You can’t blame yourself. What would you have done, anyway? Pushed her fighter? You couldn’t have taken her on board. There was nothing you could do. There’s nothing any of us could have done. We all failed.”

“We only fail if we give up,” Jasha said firmly. “As long as we have the fleet, there’s hope. And if you want, once we get to wherever the rendezvous is, we’ll be able to coordinate casualty and injury lists. There’s always a chance after you got separated another ship picked one or both of them up.” She raised her diagnostic scanner, and Rurik barely blinked as she shone the light in his eyes. “Do you want a sedative, Lieutenant? You’ve been through a lot.”

“What difference does it make?” He was half-sure he could fall asleep where he sat, and half-certain he’d never sleep again.

“We have to go on. For their sake, for all the dead’s sake, we have to.” She patted his arm. “I’ll give you an oral sedative you can take once they give you someplace to bunk down. You’ll feel better once you’ve rested, I promise. If you don’t, you can find me and shout at me, and maybe that will help instead.”

Rurik shook his head, but when she placed the tube with two small ampules in his hand, he found himself clutching it. Zeth was watching him, and he grimaced at the sympathy he saw in the other pilot’s eyes. In a matter of days, they’d gone from literally being at each other’s throats to the only familiar figures on a strange ship, headed for an unknown meeting point, fleeing from where the Empire’s great moment of triumph had become incomprehensible tragedy.

As they were, it turned out, the only survivors of the 207th aboard (though as Jasha reminded them, when the fleet came out of hyperspace there was always the chance of others on the escaping Star Destroyers), it was not surprising when the ship’s quartermaster assigned them to the same
temporary quarters, or that Rurik felt no need to protest and Zeth apparently didn’t either. They were given fresh uniforms and sleep gear, the sort of basic toiletries kits new crew were issued, and the quarters, slightly smaller than the equivalent berth on the Executor, had a sharp chemical scent of fresh cleaning and the sheets on the bunks had the starched stiffness of being straight out of stores. No one said openly, but he suspected they had belonged to TIE pilots from the Defiance’s own squadrons, and that they would not be needing the space any more.

The ship was still at high alert, and even if they’d had any entertainment options available or the chance to leave, neither seemed up to even basic conversation let alone food or exercise or anything more complex than oblivion. Zeth vanished into the fresher, and Rurik found he didn’t have the energy even to think of a shower or food. Instead he changed into the provided sleep wear, and contemplated the sedative capsules. Sleep seemed wrong, unfair, undeserved, but he took both pills and dry-swallowed them, lying down on one of the berths and trying to make his mind stop. He didn’t truly succeed, still hearing Thelea’s last transmission cutting off, still trying to believe that when they arrived with the fleet she would be waiting on one of the other Destroyers, none the worse for wear and exasperated at his pointless worry. If she was, if she only was, then he would gladly let her glare and sigh and mutter about “humans” to her heart’s content, was the last confused thought he had before the sedatives finally dragged him down and he was out.

Chapter End Notes

We'll be leaving Rurik to his survivor's guilt for a while. Hope everyone enjoyed a cameo by an old familiar face among the Star Destroyers, as Chimaera will be playing an important role in future. And no, neither Jasha Muro nor Zeth Orono were intended to be recurring characters, but they are now.
Chapter Eighteen

The Alliance shuttle was creeping slowly through the debris field, a pair of X-wings trailing in its wake, less concerned with the chance of surprise attacks now that the Imperial fleet was gone and truly did not appear to be coming back than with the obstacle course the space around Endor had become. Most of the biggest pieces, like remnants of the Death Star, had either been dealt with or were easily destroyed, but there were millions of small fragments of ships and fighters and things the shuttle’s crew didn’t want to think too much about, all of which made their task that much harder.

“And we’re missing the party dirtside, to boot.” Meigar, the human pilot, muttered under his breath.

“We don’t do this scan, a lot of people will be missing the party forever, Gar,” chided Seyrish, the Mon Cal copilot. “Survival suits don’t hold for long.”

“True.” He glanced back at the two prone figures being tended by a medtech in the shuttle’s compartment. Rather, one figure, in the bright-orange flight suit, being tended, while the other similarly-dressed form was respectfully shrouded. She hadn’t lasted until pickup arrived–bleeding, the medtech had said, wounded too badly to survive vac exposure even in the suit, but it was cold comfort to rescue pilots. There was always the notion they could have found her faster, if they’d only been a few minutes sooner, maybe it would have been in time.

A ping from the scanners forced Gar’s mind back to his task, and he looked at the readout. “Got another one–life signs, at ninety point three!”

“Coming about,” Seyrish said. She matched actions to words, bringing their shuttle onto a vector following the faint life signs among the forest of debris. “Should be dead ahead.”

“Not seeing it,” Gar muttered, looking from the readout to the viewscreen and back. There was no telltale splotch of orange or green among the shattered remains of fighters and cruisers. “Scanners showing something, alive, though.”

Seyrish was leaning forward, her widely-placed bulging eyes swiveling as she tried to see what their computer insisted was there. “I think–yes, there! Caught against that bulkhead fragment.”

Gar followed where she pointed and grimaced. The figure bobbing in space, hooked on the torn fragment of some cruiser’s hull, had a black flight suit, and the skull-like glossy dark helmet. “That? That’s a TIE pilot. Just an Imp.”

Seyrish was fiddling with the sensors, refining their target cone. “He’s our life sign.”

“Well, that was a waste of time.” Gar was already keying the maneuvering thrusters when he realized his co-pilot was staring at him. It was disconcerting how her eyes rolled forward to both fix on him with a kind of cross-eyed stare. “What? You’re not suggesting we rescue him!”

“There are life signs,” and he recognized a stubborn note in her voice. “Admiral Ackbar’s orders were to search for survivors. Not Alliance survivors. Naval protocol is to respond to all in distress.”
“We’re not wasting good oxygen on some Imp who’s probably killed people we know,” Gar said resolutely. He looked back at the still figure on the deck plates with the covered face. “If anything, we ought to finish the job.” His fingers hovered over the laser controls.

“Shoot down an incapacitated, unarmed pilot after the battle is over?” Seyrish’s gravelly voice sounded somewhere between skeptical and mildly shocked. Though it might just have been her above-water accent.

“It’s what they would do to us.” Likely what they did to their own wounded, too.

Seyrish’s lidless eyes fixed on him for a long moment. Then she turned back to the controls. “Very well, Grand Moff Tarkin. Weapons charging.” A human might have made it sound more sarcastic, but he wasn’t sure that was possible.

“What’s that crack supposed to mean?”

“It means I was not aware that we wished to defeat them so we could become them,” she said. “I am corrected. Firing solution locked.”

Gar ground his teeth, staring at his co-pilot. Seyrish kept her fin over the fire-control switch, calmly awaiting his order to blast the stranded pilot to atoms. Finally he let his breath out in a hiss. “Fine. Be that way. Tell Retrieval to stand by, we’re pressurizing the airlock.” He didn’t think Mon Cals could hum, but Seyrish made a low trilling sound that was far too self-satisfied for his taste as he activated the outer airlock. It took the pressure-suited tech only a few minutes using hand-controlled repulsors to reach the stranded TIE pilot and detach him from the wreckage tangling his torn flight harness, and soon Seyrish was cycling the inner airlock. The medtech hurried over and eased the slumping figure down on the deck. She checked his life-support vest.

“He’s lucky we found him. He’s almost out of air.” She worked the helmet free, and glancing over his shoulder Gar had a glimpse of sand-colored hair and very washed-out skin made paler by the black flight suit. Bad enough they were psychopathic killers, why the Empire had to dress them all in gray scale he’d never understood. “Looks like hypothermia and probably shock, but he should be all right if he gets in a bacta tank soon.”

“Waste of good bacta, if you ask me,” Gar muttered, and he knew that warbling sound from Seyrish was too smug to tolerate, but he decided to ignore it, and continued the sweep of their grid section.

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Thelea stood in one of the sweeping corridors of the Imperial Palace on Coruscant, her formal cadet’s dress uniform starchy and uncomfortable, but preferable to drawing attention in one of the colorful, stylish gowns many of her female classmates had rushed to find when they knew they were permitted civilian clothes for this supreme privilege, attending a ball at the Imperial Court. As one of the top of her class, Thelea knew refusing to attend would have been political suicide, and all officers in His Majesty’s Navy had to play politics. Some more than others.

This is a dream, some part of her mind whispered, and she was dimly aware of the scent of earth and crushed vegetation, and rough crumbling wood and stone pressing against her cheek. She was on the moon of Endor, she had fallen far, but she did not dream so this was a memory, clear as the crystal sculpture she had been staring at as she sought to avoid drawing even more attention than her skin and eyes commanded already.
Thelea kept her eyes on the slowly-rotating sculpture that hung at the juncture of two corridors, or rather floated, as part of its appeal seemed to be that it appeared suspended by magic, with no obvious projectors from the floor and the vaulted ceiling too high to be the source. The crystals swirled like a galaxy, sharp, razor fragments glittering around the arms, the inner ones lightening to orange and yellow even as their edges softened from razors to ribbons and coalesced into spheres and at the very center was a bright orb that seemed to be the source of the illumination. Aurebesh writing (which still looked blocky and inelegant to her) in the marble beneath titled the installation “The Vision of Palpatine” and she wondered if the artist had been genuinely inspired, or if it was a commissioned work. Or overt pandering.

“Are you interested in art, Cadet?”

The voice was male and had a polished Coruscanti accent, far more natural than her own. Thelea braced herself for a courtier or a guard or some mid-level flimsy-pusher several glasses into the refreshments who was curious about the alien female in ways not necessarily innocent. But when she turned, the first thing that registered was the gray dress uniform with a captain’s squares on the left breast, and that the human eyes regarding her from a rather pleasant face seemed clear and sober. His hands were clasped behind his back, and he was regarding her with a polite smile that had no hint of either condescension or lasciviousness. That was enough of a novelty she actually considered her reply more carefully than she might have.

“Not as a general rule, Captain.” She left the polite pause that interaction with her classmates had taught her substituted for asking a name, but he didn’t provide one. “I was merely interested in this piece. It’s rather striking.”

“Yes, it is.” He tilted his head back, but something in the way he studied the slowly-orbiting crystals made her think he wasn’t entirely sincere. “Ingenious, how it appears to float on its own. Do you suppose the mechanism is built into the floor?”

Thelea had already considered and dismissed the possibility. “I don’t believe so, sir.” She watched the slow progress, and began to note it was in fact an orbit—each piece had a slight drift towards the center, whether its path was lower or higher, and when one came too close to another it seemed to be nudged back into its proper ellipse, as if by gravity. Her gaze returned to the bright orb at the center and she squinted, trying to see past the glowing white. A flicker, intermittent but noticeable once she knew it was there, briefly revealed that there was something dark, probably metallic, at the heart of it.

“I can’t imagine how else it might have been done.” There was something leading in the comment, her mind realized now, something she’d missed at the time.

“Oh!” The exclamation was out before she realized, and she hoped this captain was not the sort to be offended if a cadet, let alone an alien female, offered a suggestion contradicting his own. “I believe I see. That center orb—I assume the artist intends for it to symbolize the Emperor, or perhaps Imperial Center as the core of the galaxy—it has a metal heart of some sort. There must be a central projector, some kind of repulsor or mini-tractor technology, maybe even a miniature version of the grav well projector systems as we have on the fleet’s Interdictors. Yes, I think that might be it, since the pieces seem to be responding to a gravity field the way planets would.” Her eyes narrowed. “In fact, a single well-placed blaster bolt would likely bring the entire assemblage crashing down.”

“I believe you may be right,” the captain said. “About the structure, and perhaps more of the artist’s message than you might think.”

She shrugged uneasily. “I wouldn’t know about the message, sir. I am still not entirely familiar
with human forms of expression. The colors, however, and the graduated change from the sharp pieces to more benign rounded forms at the center, suggest the artist intended to convey that the center is harmonious while the outer reaches are wild and uncivilized.” She tried to keep the wry expression from showing, but she had not had as long to practice hiding her feelings with humans. “It is not an uncommon sentiment.”

The captain, for his part, didn’t seem to mind, which made her briefly reassess her previous thoughts about his sobriety. “I don’t think you’re as far off in your analysis as you may believe, Cadet . . . .”

He might have ignored her own early use of the ploy, but he left no room for her to miss it. “Cadet First Class Thelea, Captain.” She did not try a repeat. If he wished her to know his name, he’d tell her.

“Thelea.” Something about her name obviously puzzled him, but the notion of explaining her non-surname and what its casteless status meant was unappealing in the extreme. He looked unusually nonplused, though, even for a human. “And you don’t find the artist’s implication that Wild Space or the Unknown Regions are uncivilized offensive?”

Now she looked hard at him, likely too rude for a mere cadet addressing a captain in the fleet. But that was an oddly specific question. And there had, she realized, been none of the usual staring or insinuation about her skin color.

In fact, he’d looked her in the eyes and hadn’t so much as flinched.

“I find it strange you assume I’m from one of those regions, Captain,” she said carefully, “though you are correct, and no. It doesn’t offend me. Not everything in what you call the Unknown Regions is as civilized as it thinks it is. The Empire has a great deal to teach some of those races about order and defense.”

Something about that seemed to amuse him. “You include your own species? That I find strange.”

Even within the dream-memory the directness gave her a strange chill. At the time, she’d mostly feared a trap. “If I may, sir, you seem unusually comfortable with my . . . non-human characteristics. In my experience your species finds our eyes extremely odd on their first exposure to them. Threatening, even.”

The captain smiled, and looked away, past the sculpture at a small coterie of officers in the shadowed hall he’d come from, too far away for Thelea to identify. “Perhaps, Cadet Thelea, you aren’t the first of your species I’ve met.”

Thelea’s eyes snapped open and she was in darkness. Her entire body ached from the fall and now from lying on the cold night ground, the damp seeping into her muscles and bones. She pushed herself slowly to her knees and found, to her minor surprise, nothing seemed to be broken. Her head, however, felt like it was about to explode, and a wave of nausea threatened to bring up whatever was still in her stomach after . . . how long had it been since the last mess? For that matter, how long had she been lying at the foot of the tree?

And no matter how hard she’d knocked herself on the head, why had her brain decided to replay a years-old memory from a party that, other than that conversation, had been the usual painful awkwardness that had characterized her entire Academy experience?

Maybe not my brain, she thought, as she mechanically checked the pockets of her flight suit and made sure her lightsaber was still intact. Maybe the Force. Fine. So what does the Force want me
to remember about a conversation a decade ago with a captain I don’t even know?

Except . . . She closed her eyes, not just because of the throbbing pain behind them, and tried to remember. *I don’t know him . . . but if I’d only been paying attention . . . he knew me.*

*No, not me . . . .*

*“Perhaps you aren’t the first of your species I’ve met.”*

Thrawn.

Of course. He knew Thrawn . . . not just knew, had been sent. The Admiral had admitted to sponsoring her for the Academy, on condition of anonymity, but he had sent one of his own cadre of officers to sound her out. Might even have connived to have her invited in the first place as top marks or no, it had been made clear too often that ‘near-human’ was not human enough. Inviting her to mix with the height of Court society would have been unthinkable, unless it was part of some sort of test.

For her, or for Thrawn. Possibly both.

She gritted her teeth, willing the pain in her head to stop. She didn’t have time to ponder the game she was being moved through. At the moment, she had to figure out where she was, and how she was going to get away from it. She looked up at the indigo sky beyond the trees. Without knowing more about the system stellar navigation was useless. And it would be difficult anyway—the sky was full of shooting stars, dozens of meteors streaking through the atmosphere with blue and gold tails.

Not meteors. She felt an odd, sick lurch that this time she didn’t think was nausea from the blow to her head. That was debris burning as it entered the atmosphere. Ships, fighters, anything big enough to have survived whatever initial damage it suffered. Without luck and the even stronger than she’d thought engineering by Sienar of the Interceptor, she’d have been part of the glittering shower of debris, too.

As Giriad was.

She closed her eyes momentarily. She’d never looked at his file or even asked about his beliefs, and her people’s . . . rather rigid views would not have admitted his having anything they would consider spirit worthy of preservation. Another faint memory whispered through her mind, of that brown-clad woman (*Aleishia!*) comforting her through some wrenching, horrible pain, and a voice in a language she shouldn’t have known murmured, *There is no death, there is the Force.* If her people were wrong, and if that were true, she hoped the Force looked after Giriad.

And even if there was nothing to pray to, she prayed Rurik wasn’t among that shower of debris. *Let him be safe,* she thought. *Let him have survived.* Whoever had won, he was a survivor. He would have made it.

Whoever had won . . . where had that thought come from? She tried to remember what she’d seen in the sky during the kaleidoscope of emotions that had ripped through her mind and thrown her from the tree. There had been sunlight, and clouds, and . . . a cloud, singular, a massive explosion of gas and fire like a miniature sun. Like a satellite had exploded. Because one had.

The Death Star was gone. The Emperor was dead. Her knees wobbled, and she let herself sink back to the forest floor. That had been the burst of rage and fear and disbelief that had struck her first, the omnipotent hand being torn to shreds and utterly unable to comprehend how this had happened.
Vader, then, was likely dead, too. Unless . . . she shuddered, but the thought persisted . . . what if Vader had killed the Emperor? Could there be anything else that would have done it? Anyone even remotely powerful enough? Or had they all died when the Death Star was destroyed? Who was in command, then? Piett?

What if they had lost?

Thelea shook her head, hard. That was large-scale. Her immediate focus had to be the small scale. First, establish what her resources were. Second, determine where she was, and who was in control of this sector of the planet. If it was the Empire, well and good. If it was the Rebels . . . . Resources first. What she did if the Rebels were in control would depend in large part on what she had to work with. Moving away from the tree she’d fallen out of, she found an uprooted stump whose roots provided a little shelter and tucked herself deep into their shadows. Unhooking the survival box, she wondered wryly what hodgepodge of equipment had been left in this one.

Not a bad haul, as it turned out. No cape this time, but there was a thin reflective blanket that would keep her warm if she needed it and folded into a pocket-size square if she didn’t. Flash-starters, if it was safe to have a fire. Pain tabs, which doubled as anti-fever medication. A vial of decon liquid for drinking water, though of course nothing to put that water in. No ration bars, which was both a relief and a bit worrisome. If she was stranded here for any length of time, trying to figure out what was safe to eat and what wasn’t could become vitally important. No weapons, of course, but she hadn’t expected any. And, though she wasn’t sure what good it would do her in actual combat, she had her lightsaber.

First things first, she checked the date on the pain tabs (still good) and dry-swallowed two of them. It might not completely dull the throbbing in her head, but it might at least keep her from being too stiff to move soon. She debated cutting some firewood and making herself a camp for the night and dismissed the plan almost immediately. She had no idea where she was or who controlled the territory and indulging exhaustion that was, if she was honest, more emotional than physical, would have to wait until she was more certain of her safety.

So. She had her supplies. Now the question was, which way to go with them? She could, of course, climb back up the tree partway and try to survey her surroundings, but the foliage was so thick she’d have to climb practically back to where the remains of her fighter were stuck, and given the descent the first time she wasn’t anxious to repeat the experience. She didn’t have a functional comlink, so trying to scan for active frequencies was out. That left sitting and waiting until daylight, without knowing whether she could risk a fire for warmth and light, or walking in the increasingly dark forest with no real sense where she was going.

Stop limiting yourself, she admonished herself silently. Use your brain and think. You can't see anything. So listen. What do you hear?

At first, it was only the night sound of the forest: branches creaking in the wind, night avians calling, the odd snap of a twig of something moving, but she heard no rhythm to it, no sense it was large or humanoid. But then, faintly, as she listened harder, in the far distance she heard sounds that were not irregular and natural. There was a distant rumble, something with an underlying beat, and odd weird echoes of higher-pitched sounds here and there. She thought she could hear a deeper thudding, too, somewhat like artillery. Except the rhythmic sounds didn’t strike her as the sounds of a fight. In fact . . . .

Someone was celebrating. The natives? She didn’t recall anyone mentioning the primitives having that level of culture, but then ‘primitive’ covered a great deal of ground. The Rebels? Who else, she thought, would be celebrating the destruction of the Death Star, while the pieces of ships were still
raining like shooting stars in the sky? And if the Rebels were here, that meant so were their ships. And ships could be stolen.

Thelea listened a moment longer, until she thought she was sure which direction the sound was coming from. Then, re-attaching the emergency kit to her belt, she started across the forest towards it. The path she was following seemed too narrow and crossed under too many low-hanging branches to be more than a game trail, and it was only a klick or so before she was sure she’d have twigs and leaves stuck in her hair for weeks. Moving quietly was easier than she’d expected-the forest floor was soft with moss and decomposing leaves. The moss reminded her, if she was here for any length of time water would be an issue. She’d have to find some, and hopefully something to put it in to decontaminate before drinking it. The vial in the survival kit wouldn’t clean an entire stream!

The noise was getting louder, and now she could tell it was primitive music, and voices, and somewhere above that she heard the sound of engines in atmosphere and concussions that were similar to, but not quite the same, as turbolasers. Squinting up at the treetops, she saw flickers of colored lights in the sky. *Fireworks*, she realized, *they’re actually shooting off fireworks*. She could see lights up in the trees, too, torches from the look of it, and shadows of suspended walkways and what looked like huts. The natives lived in the trees, then, and most of the Rebels would likely be up among them. The number of lights increased ahead, so that was likely the center of the village complex. If she was careful, she might be able to walk directly under them, find whatever open space they were using for their landing field. There would have to be a shuttle or one of the fighters that didn’t require an astromech that she could steal and be gone before they even realized she was there.

The sounds were distinct now, and she could see shapes moving closer to the ground. Time to think more about stealth. The enormous, ancient trees did at least provide some cover, if she could avoid breaking the low branches of the undergrowth and drawing attention. It didn’t help that she had to keep her eyes directed down, and she regretted abandoning her helmet. In the dark, the loss of peripheral vision would have been a fair trade-off to keep her eyes from giving her away. Whatever advantages had lead evolution to select that particular neurologic quirk as a desired trait worthy of refinement, stalking unnoticed through the undergrowth at night was not one of them.

She tried to skirt the edge of the lights, keeping the loudest source of the noise at the middle of an imaginary circle and herself at the outer edge. Given the celebrations, any normal sentry procedures were likely abandoned, but she didn’t even know what the natives looked like or how well they could hide among the lower levels of the trees and see in the dark. It made for awkward progress, and she stopped behind a fallen log at a point she thought was halfway around the center of the village. Crouching low, she squinted into the darkness, looking for any signs of watchers.

The hand fell on her shoulder and another clamped around her mouth too quickly for her to even think about something as unprofessional as a scream. A slight clatter and the hard edge of plastiform gauntlets on the hand pressed to her face made her relax, even as a whisper filtered through a helmet mike said, “Identify yourself.”

“Commander Thelea, 207th Interceptor Squadron, INS *Executor,*” she hissed, keeping her voice low and steady. “You want my service number, too?”

The grip on her shoulder relaxed, but only a little. “Never seen a pilot who looked like you,” but she felt him ease back just a little, pushing her down behind the log and letting her turn around. “What are you doing out here?”

“I went down about three klicks back that way,” and she pointed the direction she’d come through
the forest. “Followed the noise. Figured there have to be ships.” She studied her assailant, not that there was anything unique about him—a scout trooper, and from the look of his armor he’d seen hard action recently.

A faint sound behind him caught her attention and he turned as well, raising his voice only slightly. “I said stay back!” he snapped, and two figures crouching in the undergrowth froze.

“We heard voices,” and to Thelea’s mild surprise that speaker was female. “We were afraid—“

“That I’d been captured? Like the Rebels would be that quiet. Back under cover, now!” He turned his faceplate back to Thelea. “You’re a pilot?”

She was too tired, and even though the pain tabs had kicked in had too much of a headache to put up with xenophobic skepticism. “That’s why they put me in an Interceptor, yes.” She looked at the shadowed figures still peering out from the undergrowth. “You need a pilot?”

“I can fly if I have to,” the scout admitted, “but having someone with primary training would make this a lot easier.” There was a raucous sound of laughter from the trees above and they both looked up, but it was only the revelry reaching a new pitch. “Maybe we should continue this under better cover.”

Thelea nodded, and gestured for him to precede her back into the trees. He hesitated, and she could just imagine the skeptical expression beneath the faceplate. “If you were going to kill me quietly, you had your chance,” and she glanced at his shoulder plate, “Major. If you’re worried about me killing you, you probably don’t want me flying for you, either. And I don’t know what’s back under those trees, so after you.”

There was a moment’s pause, then he nodded. “Follow me. And keep those eyes down. If they see us—“

“I made it this far.” But the fact he’d gotten the drop on her argued she wasn’t at her sharpest, either. “Let’s go before they hear us and the whole conversation becomes moot.”

She followed him and the two figures moving ahead (with, she noted, far less stealth than she or the scout trooper) a hundred meters or so into the brush, still close enough they could hear the sounds of celebration from the village, but with enough dense undergrowth the lights were hidden. The encampment, if it could be called that, was in the shelter of one of the giant trees that at some point long before this day had fallen, creating a natural ‘cave’ beneath the massive trunk. The two who’d been watching them from the shadows ducked down into the depression, and Thelea heard a crack as a lightstick snapped. Unlike her flash-starters, the survival supply would provide only light, no heat, but it was enough to see by. The two other survivors were, as she’d thought by the voice, a woman in engineering crew fatigues that looked as if they’d seen better days, and a man in the olive-drab of an officer with a lieutenant’s rank squares. (She ruthless suppressed all thoughts of two other lieutenants.) The dull glow of the chemical light showed a third figure, lying on a makeshift bed of branches. This one had pieces of stormtrooper armor on, and still wore the bodysuit that went under it. Going by the torn strips bandaging one arm, whatever survival gear they had didn’t include much in the way of first aid supplies.

The scout trooper moved around into the glow of the lightstick and pulled off his helmet. The two crewers scampered back, both looking far too wide-eyed and anxious to be much help escaping. Or at anything, at the moment. The scout, meanwhile, had the sort of hard, stern face she’d come to expect from troopers, along with the lack of weathering and exposure that made them all look a bit younger than they probably ought. She could sympathize. The same went for the man half-stripped of his stormtrooper armor, though she thought in that case it was genuine youth. The scout checked
the other trooper and grimaced as he examined the wound under the makeshift bandages.
“Primitive little bastards,” he muttered. “Trust the Rebel scum to make friends with animals.” He
looked up at Thelea. “You don’t happen to have anything like a bacta patch in that kit, 
Commander? It won’t help much, but it’s more than we’ve got.”

“No, but there are pain tabs. Might keep any fever down if an infection’s started.” She fished out
the bottle. “These survival kits aren’t very useful, but then they don’t really expect us to survive
long enough to need them.”

The woman in the engineering fatigues was staring at Thelea. “You’re her, aren’t you?” She
sounded painfully young, though that might have been the apparent shock. “That pilot. The one
who . . . you were called before Lord Vader. And lived. You must be her.”

Thelea stared at the woman, not caring for a change how she cowered away from the direct
glowing gaze. “Where did you hear about that?”

The male officer was the one who answered. “Everyone on the ship heard about you.”

“You’re from the Executor?” When they both nodded, Thelea felt a cold sinking in her gut, just
when she’d thought she was done with unpleasant surprises for the day. “What are you doing down
here?”

“You don’t know?” The engineer’s mate at least had relaxed a little and she edged closer into the
light. “She crashed into the Death Star, just before it exploded.”

“We were lucky,” the lieutenant said. “We were near an escape pod towards the aft section of
engineering. Some others got away, too, but anything from the bridge forward . . . .”

Thelea slumped down against the rough bark of the fallen tree. “I didn’t know,” she said, her voice
sounding far too faint in her own ears. “I took an ion blast–if the shield hadn’t gone down when it
did . . . I knew the battle station was destroyed, but Executor . . . .”

“At least someone got some benefit out of the cluster it turned into down here.” The scout raked
his fingers through his close-cropped hair. “We had those damn Rebels cornered, until the locals
showed up.” He shuddered. “Filthy little monsters. We should have wiped out everything alive for
five hundred klicks before they ever built the shield generator. But it seemed so unnecessary. They
don’t have blasters or even slug-throwers, and they still . . . .” He looked down at the other trooper,
who seemed less asleep than unconscious. “Stone-tipped arrows, log traps, when they had to
beating with clubs.”

“We almost ran into them, before Major Fayar found us,” the woman said. “We came on a group of
them picking over Imperial dead and wounded. Only, what they were scavenging . . . .” She made a
gagging sound, and the lieutenant put an arm around her shoulders.

Thelea glanced at the scout, Fayar, she assumed, and his jaw tightened. “The sentient natives are
omnivores,” he said tautly. “And apparently meat is meat.”

Thelea had always tried not to indulge too much in her own species’ version of xenophobia, but it
was hard not to gag at the thought. There were barbaric races with very different eating habits, of
course, including those who ate food that was still technically alive, but only the most primitive or
depraved beings would look at a speaking, thinking entity and consider it food. “And the Rebels
allied with these animals? Figures.”

Fayar nodded tightly. “I found Lieutenant Biret and Specialist Chawyn here before the natives did,
and we were able to move him, too.” He gestured to the trooper. “TS-2260. I’m sure he has a name but he’s lost a lot of blood and that was all he managed to say before he passed out.”

Thelea leaned back against the log, closing her eyes. Executor gone, the Rebels and their murderous local allies in possession of the moon, the fleet presumably scattered to who-knew-where . . . she tried to remember which was the secondary communications ship and would likely have called for retreat, assuming of course it had survived, too. And if their ship had been destroyed . . . .

No. Rurik’s a good pilot. He’d have survived, and one of the retreating destroyers would take orphans, it’s standard procedure. On the other hand, what would be standard procedure with the Emperor dead, Vader dead, the flagship destroyed?

She couldn’t afford to think about it now. “What’s your plan for getting out of here alive?”

Fayar gestured back towards the village and the distant sounds of celebration. “The rate they’re going, by dawn most of them should be too drunk, hung over, or otherwise exhausted to be keeping close guard.”

“Or full,” Biret said, stifling a choking sound. Thelea cringed, but ignored him.

“You know where their landing field is?” Keep focused on escape. They had to escape.

“A little less than two klicks that way,” he said, pointing. “Near the bunker clearing. There’s shuttles, fighters, a few small attack boats. Can you fly something large enough for all five?”

“Not a problem, if we can get in it,” Thelea said. “That means a shuttle’s our best bet. Even if we could fit in a fighter, the only multi-seater is the Y-wing and they need an astromech for navigation. A Rebel droid isn’t going to help us get away.” She thought of the chip in her pocket. “You have any idea where we’re going? The nearest Imperial base is more than a day in hyperspace.”

“Anywhere not controlled by the Rebels. We can find the fleet from there.” Fayar checked the injured trooper again.

“Whoever’s in charge of it. With Executor gone and the Emperor dead I don’t know who that’ll be.” Some warlord? The politicians back on Coruscant? Was there any chance Vader had survived? Not that she was fond of the Dark Lord, but at least he’d be someone most of the military would answer to.

Her thoughts turned back to Aleishia’s parting words, and the coordinates on the chip. Or is there someone else? Someone . . . and the thought felt treasonous and right at the same time . . . someone better than any of them to lead us? Someone who could actually save the Empire from this, and from what’s coming?

Is that why the Force wanted me to remember that night at the Imperial Palace? The center’s been destroyed . . . but the answer to picking up the pieces was right in front of me.

“No our problem,” Fayar said. “We only need to get back.”

“I can’t believe this,” and Chawyn sounded ready to cry. “How did this happen? How could we possibly have ended up here? How could we have lost?”

“Not important right now.” Thelea studied the young crewers. Both looked pale and shaky. If Fayar were tired he was hiding it well, but then scout troopers were even harder-trained than
stormtroopers and he could take it. “We should all get some rest. My species doesn’t need as much as yours. I’ll take first watch.” After all, she’d had practice not so long ago. “You have a blaster?”

Fayar looked as if he were going to argue, but she saw the weariness in how he moved, and he unholstered his pistol. “Try to wake me up before the shooting starts.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t,” she said, relieved at the familiar feel of the blaster. Not quite her hold-out style like she’d lost on Telamara, but close enough, and probably more accurate than a trooper’s rifle. “All of you, get some sleep. That’s an order, you two.” Navy crew, at least, she outranked, and for once no one even seemed to think of arguing. Fayar outranked her, both technically and because they were planetside, but he didn’t talk back, either, though he was more careful than the other two about selecting a sleeping spot that kept his back covered. Thelea dug herself into a tight corner, though if she had to, she could scramble up the trunk and away. Hopefully it wouldn’t come to a fight.

From the sound of the party going on nearby, it likely wouldn’t. She tilted her head back, trying to see the sky above the treetops. There were stars, and the fireworks, and embers swirling upward, and more of the glittering rain of debris as the shards of the old galactic order burned away. Exhaustion seeped through her bones with the damp of the forest floor and she unfolded the thin survival blanket, tucking it around her legs. It didn’t make the cold seem any better, and somehow, she wasn’t surprised.

Chapter End Notes

Birit, Chawyn, and Fayar are named for characters from Timothy Zahn’s incredibly fun space-noir Quadrail series. Check it out!
Giriad had thought being dead would be cold. Or at least no feeling at all. Warm and comfortable with the soft, distant hum of machines and whirring of droid joints had never crossed his mind as a possibility. At some point, he wasn’t clear about the passage of time, he decided that probably meant he wasn’t really dead. He was, however, chilled and tired and sore, and whatever he was lying on was warm, and someone had thoughtfully covered him most of the way with a soft blanket, so it seemed rude to do much besides stay blissfully asleep for the moment. It was actually the blanket that forced him to open his eyes, as when he tried to tug it up higher, he found he couldn’t raise his hands. His first thought was injury, and then, after a second, more awake, attempt, he realized his arms were working fine.

The problem was the restraints on his wrists. He tugged harder, and tried moving his legs and found his ankles similarly locked in place. Security, to keep him from rolling off the cot? Or to keep him from moving at all?

He blinked, and his eyes felt dry and sticky. His skin felt painfully dried-out, too, and oddly stretched, and it registered: he’d been in a bacta tank. Which made sense, as the last clear memory he had was an impact, sudden loss of rudder control, then a blow like a thunderclap to the head and nothing, which meant it was only sheer blind luck he was here at all. First that his life support had lasted until rescue, second that anyone had come back to find him at all. And whoever it was clearly didn’t want him getting up and wandering around.

His vision was blurry, with gritlike gunk at the corners of his eyes, and again he automatically tried to raise his hands to rub it and found himself restrained. He was starting to see a little, and the room definitely had the soothing colors and lighting of a medical bay somewhere. Where, though?

A face appeared above him, and he blinked harder, trying to clear his eyes. “Ah, I see you’re awake, Lieutenant.” The voice was feminine, with a mid-Rim accent more like Rurik’s than his own Core-influenced speech. “Hold on, your eyes are dried from the bacta and the cold exposure before that. I’m going to put some drops in and that should make it better. This might sting a little.”

It stung a lot, and Giriad found himself blinking frantically and once again yanking his hand against the restraints as he instinctively tried to wipe the drops away. The drops were doing their job, though, and he found his vision clearing. Definitely a medical bay, though not a layout he was familiar with. His flight suit was gone, and he was dressed in a beige tunic and pants that felt reassuringly soft against his bacta-dried skin. The woman who’d applied the drops reappeared, a soft cloth in her hand, and she dabbed away the tracks of the medicine. “There. That should help quite a bit. How are you feeling, Lieutenant?”

He blinked the last of the drops away and her face came into focus, and Giriad’s mind briefly went back out of focus on its own. She had honey-colored hair, straight and fine, pulled back but with errant wisps slipping out and falling across her forehead. Her eyes were a light brown, not quite amber-tinted, with green flecks that gave them a natural sort of twinkle. Her mouth was small and
kindly curved up at the corners, and her nose was just snub enough to be cute rather than out of proportion. The bridge of it and her cheeks were dusted with a scattering of unfairly-adorable freckles.

He didn’t recognize the uniform she was wearing, and some vaguely coherent part of his mind thought that was probably an important detail, but the rest of it was busy with a thought that was completely unprofessional and unbecoming an officer and impossible to keep from saying. “Like I’ve just met the prettiest girl I’ve ever seen in my life.” His voice rasped, and he wasn’t sure what was more embarrassing, that fact or that he’d just said what he was thinking out loud.

She blushed, and it was completely unfair how it made her even prettier. But she shook her head and laughed, too. “Well, that tracks with your head injury,” she said, checking a monitor beside the bed. “Do you still feel any pain anywhere?”

Giriad actually had to think about that. “Actually, I don’t think so. These aren’t very comfortable, though.” He raised his hands, or tried to. “Am I a prisoner?”

She looked a little abashed, and not really surprisingly, nodded. “You’re aboard an Alliance medical ship. One of our recovery teams found you in the debris field and brought you in. The restraints are also keeping you from rolling off the cot, but you are, technically, a prisoner of war.”

It wasn’t really surprising, he thought, that it had been Rebels, not his own side, who’d come back looking for survivors. Still, that brought up another question, and hinted at the answer, too. “This might be a silly question, but . . . who won?”

The brown eyes with their emerald flecks shone, and he wished she hadn’t immediately contained the expression as it made her very cute face outright beautiful. “We did. The Rebel Alliance, I mean. The battle and maybe the war.” She stopped herself, as if she’d said more than she meant. “So for the moment, you’re our guest. I guess I should start by asking your name, rank, and posting. For our lists, and because I can’t keep calling you ‘lieutenant.’”

Giriad had the absurd urge to tell her she could call him whatever she liked, provided she kept talking, but that seemed impolitic. “Lieutenant Giriad Quoris, service number SK-1308, assigned to INS Executor.” He tried a smile. “You can call me Giriad, though.”

There was that smile that crinkled her nose just a bit again. “Nice to meet you, Giriad. I’m Fiolla Newthon, but my friends call me Fi.” She was inputting information into a datapad. “We don’t have many survivors from Executor, unless some of the ones who won’t talk at all aren’t saying. As fast as she went down, though, I don’t think many escape pods got away, and any of her fighters that survived long enough were taken on by other ships when your fleet retreated.” Her lips pursed. “Or . . . the ones left behind, most of them didn’t want to be taken alive.”

Giriad didn’t entirely understand that for a moment. It simply didn’t compute. “Went down? Executor . . . destroyed?” In the post-bacta, exposure-befuddled haze, he thought he probably ought to be upset about that for a bigger reason, but all that he could think of to say was, “All my stuff was on her.” Something else occurred to him, even as he was absurdly pleased at Fi biting down on a laugh. “And the Death Star?”

Now he saw something that said ‘Rebel’ in her face—it was still joy, but a hard, fierce, flinty kind. “Destroyed. And your Emperor along with it. The rumor is Vader’s dead, too.” She stared hard at him, the emerald in her eyes glinting like lasers. “And good riddance. I don’t care if that offends you.”

“I don’t suppose you do.” The concept of a galaxy without the Emperor was too staggering to
contemplate. The notion that not just the Death Star but now the Executor, Vader, how much of the rest of the Fleet, was even more mind-boggling. Too mind-boggling to accept, really, more than he could ever begin to process. Instead, he fixed on the only part of the entire situation he could grasp.

“Do you have a list of prisoners there? Only I . . . I’m sure they made it, they probably are somewhere with what’s left of the Fleet, thinking I’m dead, but still, my wingleader and wingman . . . if there’s any way to find out if they were captured, at least then I’d know they were safe.”

Fi looked puzzled, but she raised her datapad. “I can check on here. It’s not a complete list, but we’ve started gathering information on prisoners. What are their names?”

“Lieutenant Rurik Caelin, and Commander Thelea, just the one name.” He wasn’t even going to try the long string of syllables that seemed so important to her. Mangling the pronunciation now, when for all he knew she was dead, seemed disrespectful. “Actually if you’ve seen Thelea, you’d remember—she’s an alien, near-human, blue skin, red eyes—“

“I can stop you right there, I know we don’t have anyone like that aboard!” Fi was keying in the information, though. “I didn’t know the Imps . . . Imperials . . . allowed aliens at all, never mind females.”

“Not a lot, but Thelea’s different.” Really, really different apparently, but they didn’t need to know those kind of details. He’d technically said too much already but the notion of sitting in grim silence was somehow worse than what he’d have expected the Rebels to do as soon as he was awake–haul him off to a cell or the nearest convenient airlock.

But then, if they’d wanted him spaced, why not just leave him to die in the first place?

Fi was still looking at her datapad. “I don’t see either of their names, but if they were taken prisoner they might be on another ship, especially if they weren’t injured.” She raised her eyes, and he saw what looked like completely sincere sympathy there. “Once the cleanup is done, I can bring you a more complete list.”

“Thanks. I mean, I’m sure they both got away. They’re great pilots. I’ve seen Rurik fly straight into a cluster of enemy mines and come out inverted and laughing about it. Thelea—we got jumped by some kind of alien ship out on the fringes, and her Interceptor was half-fried, but she managed to land it through atmosphere and walk away. They’re probably sitting on a Destroyer wondering how I could have been so stupid.” He grimaced. Paying attention to trivia, chattering like it was just another patrol—he’d deserved that hit.

Fi hesitated, as if questioning her own judgement, and then she reached out and patted his shoulder. “I’m sorry.” It didn’t sound like she just meant that his friends weren’t here. “I can’t take your restraints off until they decide you’re well enough to move.” He had a brief vision of a grim detention cell and a hard bunk, and hoped perversely he wasn’t actually all that recovered. “But if you’re feeling up to it, I can adjust the bunk so you’re sitting up?”

Giriad appreciated her making it a question. “If you don’t mind. And you won’t get in trouble for it.”

“There’s no rule about making patients a little more comfortable.” She adjusted the cot so he was sitting up, not all the way but enough he could at least see around him. Not that there was much-apparently medicenters were much the same, Rebel or Imperial, though he noticed the privacy screens were arranged in such a way he couldn’t readily see any of the other patients, or the specific layout of the room. Not, he thought wryly, that he’d be able to take advantage even if the exit was directly on the other side of the screen.
Fi fussed a little with the pad beneath his head, and he fought an absurd urge to blush as her hand brushed his cheek. “I’ll be back in a little while to check on you—your condition,” she said, brushing that stray golden lock back behind her ear. Giriad felt his fingers twitch in an instinctive urge to do it for her. “If you’re up to it, I’ll bring some food. And,” she hesitated, then said, “I’ll check with my superiors and see if your . . . friends . . . got picked up by another Alliance ship.”

“Thanks.” Whether it was the warmth of the blanket, or the stress of the day catching up, or the shock, or all of the above, he felt a heavy lethargy creeping through him, and he couldn’t think of anything more intelligent to say before she slipped away. He hoped she wouldn’t be gone long, as even able to look around there wasn’t much to keep his mind occupied, and then she was back and gently shaking him by the shoulder to wake him out of the doze he’d slipped into without realizing. Fi had brought food and another datapad, and he learned both that Alliance food was not much more flavorful than what the Executor’s mess served, and that, as he’d known on some level already, none of the Alliance ships had picked up either of his wingmen.

_Thelea was remembering again. Fayar had relieved her watch at some midpoint of the night, and after another of the pain tabs she’d closed her eyes, knowing getting some sort of rest was important. And once again, she found herself in a memory, this one not nearly as pleasant as the awkward encounter during the Palace reception._

She crouched low, pushing herself deeper under the ugly ornate hall table, listening to her aunts and her uncle. At least she called them aunt and uncle, but they never treated her as if she was a beloved relative, certainly, and dimly she remembered someone promising to come back. So presumably she was only waiting here. They were simply doing someone a favor. But that meant she had to be obedient, grateful, and patient. Until . . . until . . .

Someday she’d remember.

“It doesn’t matter what he told us now,” her “uncle” was saying. “He’s good as dead and with our sister gone—”

“She’s still blood,” and that was his wife, not-blood, but also never as acrid somehow. “There’s no one left but us to take her. At least, until she’s old enough to be a cadet, or—”

“A cadet? Her?” Other-aunt, blood, but shrill. “They won’t take her. No one will take her. Bad enough the sort of politics our sister played—”

Uncle laughed, but it was not a happy sound. “Our sister was mad. But her husband is a monster. There isn’t even a word for what he did! The girl’s ruined, and we’d be well rid of her. If there were any of his family left I’d say leave her to them, clan or not, and be done with it.”

“Send her with him, I say.” Blood-aunt did not sound any kinder. “They’ll have to eventually. Breeding will out. If you or I had been the eldest . . . .”

“We weren’t.” He shook his head. “They’d never send a child into exile. Even if he’d left us that option. She’s our burden to bear until she shows which of them she takes after and we finally have an excuse to have her taken away.”

_Thelea pushed herself back farther under the table, shaking. They were talking about her, but she didn’t understand, it was fuzzy and she remembered nothing but the woman with strange eyes reassuring her, the man taking her away. Bringing her here. To . . . family did not mean these people. Family meant . . . family was . . . she didn’t know. But not here._
“I don’t know which would be worse.” Other aunt, not-blood. “Poor thing. She has no chance with those parents.”

Thelea could envisage Uncle’s face, broad, harsh-planed, eyes dully flickering like dying coals. “Blood will out, wife. Save your pity for anyone who has to deal with whatever variety of deviant she becomes.” Then she must have made a noise, because the footsteps were coming closer, and she saw legs and someone pulling back the cloth over the table, and then she came awake with a start to the deep blue skies and stirring birdsounds of the pre-dawn forest.

She sat for a moment, still tucked in the survival blanket, trying to shake this latest, less-pleasant memory from her mind. She had forgotten that conversation, had forgotten, really, that the titles of aunt and uncle were not just polite formalities to the gracious (gracious!) distant relatives who’d taken her in. But no. With the names she had been given, either one, they were her blood, and now she remembered the conversation . . . sister. Older sister.

And her father was a monster.

What did that mean?

There were crimes punishable by exile. Her people were too ‘civilized’ for execution. Those considered correctable were ‘rehabilitated’, but for some, the unforgivable, there was exile. A monster would have been exiled, taken to a survivable but empty world within the Ascendancy but far from any inhabited worlds and left with enough supplies to last a month. Beyond that, survival was entirely the exile’s lookout.

She hadn’t asked. She had not remembered the conversation until now, but she remembered the discovery and the punishment, or at least a punishment like it—there had been many. Poor studies, too-excellent studies (exceeding the cousins she hadn’t been allowed to call cousins, that was.) Disobedience. Obeying too slowly. Always that assumption that she was plotting something. Until, finally, at an age when she should long since have gone to a specialty academy, when she should have been beginning to contemplate marriage or have it contemplated for her, she’d finally fulfilled their expectations and run. Perhaps next, she thought grimly, the Force could show her the way they had reacted when they’d discovered the shuttle, and her, gone.

Thelea shook the thought off. If she was going to get any rest, the Force would need to hold off on these nocturnal visions. At least until they were safely off the moon and back in Imperial-controlled space. She looked for Fayar, and saw him crouching among the torn-up roots of the down tree, scout helmet back in place. Presumably the helmet’s lenses had filters that gave him better night vision. Going by the stillness of their shapes deeper in the hollow beneath the trees, Biret and Chawyn were still asleep. TS-2260 hadn’t moved, and she folded up her own blanket and stood, as quietly as she could. There were no sounds coming from the direction of last night’s celebration, but there was no telling if any of the Rebels or native primitives were nearby.

Crouching down beside the injured trooper, she noted that by some miracle, he was still breathing. Humans felt warmer as a rule to her, but she thought his forehead felt a bit too warm. Water was considered helpful in this kind of situation, wasn’t it? That was, of course, if they had water. Her own mouth felt dry and she tried not to think about water and food. She could go longer without eating. Food would have to wait.

She was not sure water could for the trooper, but the notion of going exploring looking for a source was unappealing. She looked back up to Fayar’s perch, and then at the sleeping forms of Biret and Chawyn. The two crewers looked curled in on themselves, the sleep of the emotionally and physically exhausted. Some part of her envied their oblivion. On the other hand, it made it easier to look for a canteen or some other vessel for water.
Finding nothing, she climbed, as quietly as possible, up to a perch near Fayar’s sentry perch. “Any sign of movement from the Rebels?” she whispered.

The helmeted head shook a negative. “Not even any repulsor noise in the last two hours. No movement from the primitives, even. They seem to be out. Sleeping the sleep of the just.” She couldn’t see, with the helmet, but she could hear the sardonic grin.

“All the better for us.” Though it was too far to see, she looked in the direction he’d said the ships were. “There might be sentries, though. Even the Rebels may not be foolish enough to think we’re all gone and they’d know their vehicles would be our first target.”

“We’ll have to take that chance.” He had the blaster pistol again, of course. “If we’re lucky the sentries were enjoying the festivities, too. They’ll be slow and not paying attention.”

She nodded, but it sounded suspiciously like he was planning some sort of straightforward charge and given their numbers, if they could even count on Biret or Chawyn to hold a blaster steady, that did not necessarily seem like the most politic way to proceed. “We might want to think about a distraction. Something to draw them away while we’re trying to get aboard a shuttle.”

“If you have a squadron of fighters or a spare platoon hiding in the shrubbery, I’d love to hear about it.”

Between Fayar, and Dallen Torak back on Telamara, she wondered if they gave the scout troopers special training in sarcasm. “No, but I have six flash-starters from my survival kit. There has to be some way we can use those.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “Might be. At least as a distraction. Start a fire somewhere and they might be drawn to the smoke.”

“Maybe.” Thelea considered a minute longer. “You have any spare power packs for your blaster?”

“A few. And that trooper should have one or two on him unless he ran through them.” The faceplate turned towards her and she imagined the eyes behind it narrowing. “Why?”

“And his would be for their blaster rifles, good, they’re bigger.” She thought again. “So we have a couple different sizes of charges. What else?”

“Sticks and rocks and vines.” There was a crackle that sounded like a snort through the helmet’s filter. “It seems to work for the primitives.”

“So let’s not disregard them.” Dry tinder, stones to throw or set up to fall, vines for tying, sticks for propping things, it could all end up coming in handy, as under-prepared as they were. “We have your armor and his,” and she gestured back at the trooper. “He’ll be easier to move without some of the pieces.”

“Is it worth moving him?” Fayar sounded grimly practical. “He looks worse than he did last night.”

“You should have thought of that before you rescued him.” They weren’t leaving anyone behind. Even if the trooper wasn’t coherent enough to be interrogated, if what they’d seen the primitives do was true (and some part of her still couldn’t believe it, not with a species that was not only sentient but basic tool-users) they were not leaving him to die of his wounds alone or be captured. There was a third option, of course, but Thelea deliberately put that thought aside. That was a last resort, for all of them. “Biret and Chawyn won’t be any good in a fight. They can carry him, we’ll take care of distractions and actually commandeer whatever ship we settle on.”
“You sound like you have plan.” Fayar didn’t sound outright disdainful, at least.

“The start of one, anyway. I’ll know more exactly what I’m going to do when I see the precise layout of this landing field, but for now, I know I’m going to need the flash-starters, any of those chemlight rods we have left, the trooper’s helmet and chest and back plates, and those spare power packs.” She looked up at the sky. It was a still dark enough to see faint starlight, but it was closer to deep blue than full dark. “How much longer until sunrise?”

Fayar looked up, and then paused a moment. She wondered if he had a chrono that still functioned in the armor. “A little over an hour.”

“We should try to get going soon, then. I’d rather start setting it up while it’s still dark enough to cover us.” Her stomach cramped, and she winced. “I suppose we should eat, too. I hope they changed out the ration bars in the escape pods more often than in the TIE survival kits.”

Fayar hesitated a moment, then pulled his helmet off. “I might have something better.” He opened one of the pouches on his utility belt, and pulled out a stick-shaped object. “Not much better than emergency rations, but a little.” He held out half to her, then paused. “You can eat everything humans can, right?”

It was not even in the top five rudest questions she’d ever been asked. “So far, anyway.”

“Here. Protein ration–tastes about as good as the emergency kit stuff, but it’ll keep you from getting hungry longer.”

Thelea took the food and gave it a tentative nibble. Salty, grainy, not especially appealing, but it was something to eat and probably all she was going to have time for. “Thank you.” They ate for a moment in silence. “I think I’d kill for a cup of caf.” The energy kick, fake as it might be, would be helpful.

“You Navy people run on that stuff, don’t you?” There was only the lightest sort of disdain, though, inter-service rivalry at most. “Tastes like engine lubricant to me.”

“Wouldn’t know,” Thelea said around a second bite. “I’ve never tasted engine lubricant.”

He snorted. “Fair enough. You know, you’re strange, Commander, but it’s not so bad.”

“Thank you, Major.” She kept her tone just this side of insubordinately dry. It was, rather like the question about the food, not even close to the rudest thing anyone had ever said. Rurik would have been angry on her behalf, and she winced, closing her eyes. One minute, she told herself sternly, and she counted, you have one minute to think about them. Giriad is dead, you failed your wingman. Rurik . . . he’s alive. He has to be. He’s alive, and he’s safe somewhere with whatever’s left of the fleet, probably worried sick about you, blaming himself. But one minute is all. After that, all that you think about is what we have to do to get out of here.

She counted almost to two minutes, letting herself imagine how angry he was going to be with her when they finally made it back to the fleet, before she opened her eyes. “All right.” She brushed imaginary crumbs from her fingers, and rose. “Time to start collecting our supplies if we’re going to have everything in place by sunrise.” And then, she thought firmly, shutting out any other thoughts or goals, then we all get home.

Chapter End Notes
A/N: Remember, reviews are love! This is a little shorter than I’ve been averaging lately, but the next chapter will be all-Thelea and rather intense, so this is a bit of a breather. And come on, did anyone REALLY think I’d had done it? I’m starting to like the annoying kid. And, just so you know no huge gaps, I’m about 5,000 words into the prologue of TIE Fighter: Resurrection and that will be a special sneak peek at the end of this fic. Yes, the end is in sight, thank you for your (going on fifteen years’) patience!
Thelea crept through the underbrush, painfully aware of the increasing contrast between shadow and light as sunrise came closer. She was skirting the edge of the blast clearing that the Rebels were using as their landing field, now that the generator bunker had so obligingly removed brush and trees. The acrid stench of burned plastisteel and charred metal even hung the air yet, which she supposed was preferable to the other potential odors that could be left when your battles didn't take place in the emptiness of space. She had come across one body so far, or what was left of one—a scout trooper, and going by the damage to his armor he'd died when thrown from a speeder. At least, she hoped the missing armor and extensive soft-tissue damage and . . . loss . . . on his arms and legs were simply the result of an explosive impact. Either way, he'd had a blaster pistol that had fallen or been discarded near him, and it was one more weapon in her arsenal.

The rest of her supplies were slung in an awkward pack she'd rigged out of her survival blanket, with the helmet and chest plate tucked under her arm. She had the spare pack from the injured trooper's rifle, two smaller power packs from Fayar's pistol, the flash-starters, and two of the chemlight sticks. Fayar had also, reluctantly, surrendered his vibroknife, a loan she assured him was temporary, but necessary as she would have to cut into the chemlights and otherwise she had nothing that would do it.

Even if she'd thought she could have used it with enough finesse, she had decided quickly it was best not to mention she also had a lightsaber.

She paused again, another irregular stop, one foot in the air mid-stride. Fayar had briefed her as quickly as he could on moving through the brush. Animals did not stop in a regular rhythm or on an even stride. Steady, determined walking was a hallmark of bipedal sentients, and the local primitives, at least, would hear the difference. The only sounds were still the rustle of the leaves in the light breezes and the varied hoots and warbles of forest creatures stirring in the predawn light. Still no repulsors, voices, any suggestion anyone else was on the move. She couldn't even hear Fayar, but then he should be moving on the side of the clearing closer to the village, hopefully with Biret and Chawyn and their patient stashed somewhere close to the edge of the field, ready to move once they'd drawn off any sentries. He had one of the flash starters and his own blaster, and would be waiting for her first diversion to set his own.

Which would be soon. This was close enough for her first lure. She took out one of the chem sticks and the vibroknife, and carefully slit open the outer layer of the stick. The packet inside contained the two chemicals that would glow when combined. Contained in the stick, they'd last several hours before fading, outside, probably less, but drained from it she suspected it would be a less lasting effect. Still, in the strange half-light of the dawn a strange glow would attract attention, especially if accompanied by smoke.

There was a short, rotted-out stump that would suit her purposes. Carefully, she gathered damp chips of the rotted, punky wood and leaf litter from the forest floor and piled them in the center. The flash starter would normally ignite immediately, but damp tinder would smolder and hopefully, send up enough smoke to draw attention. After readying her makeshift firepit and making sure the flashstarter caught and wasn't smothered, she walked straight back into the trees, careful to keep the stump in sight and not to wander too far from the clearing. Carefully, she
pierced the chemlight's inner core and squeezed the two reactants out. The glow would hopefully last long enough that when her smoke drew someone's attention, they'd see the leaves and branches she was coating glinting in the shadows, and would follow it to investigate. That would hopefully point them to her next trap. She would need someplace within eyesight of this distraction, and she turned and moved at an angle again.

Her foot was in mid-stride in one of the pauses Fayar had taught her when she saw the tripwire. Or rather, trip-vine. Someone had stripped down one of the thick vines into twine and the fine thread almost blended perfectly with the forest floor. Thelea crouched down, and followed the twine back through the undergrowth and to a deceptively crude-looking device that involved a lever, a primitive catch . . . she squinted up into the shadows and saw the tightly-bound bundle of sharpened stakes weighted with stones, and she calculated where they would swing down if released.

Thelea shivered. Snag the tripwire, and the spikes would swing down and anyone of a reasonable height would be smashed into the giant tree directly opposite. The spikes seemed almost an afterthought—a blunt log would be fatal enough. Hung above it were bones of some great beast and thin shells, from one of the lakes or seas that were visible in quick glimpses from orbit. Once the trap was sprung those would set up a rattle that would alert anyone nearby.

Clever, she admitted, grudgingly. These weren't hunting traps, unless the natives were hunting something large enough they didn't care if most of it was pulverized. The size of the bones did make her wonder. This was a man-trap, whether made specifically to help the Rebels or simply on general principle she couldn't guess. Either way, it bespoke a frightening level of thought and sophistication for what were allegedly barely sentient. Whoever had done the advance work on this world would be answering terribly for their error.

If, of course, they were still alive.

Still, she could make this trap work for her somehow. It was unlikely the natives would simply walk into, so she dismissed the idea of simply rigging one of the blaster packs so when the trap was sprung it struck the explosives. But if they found the trap already sprung and wanted to investigate what had set it off . . . .

It took her a minute to decide how to rig the trooper's chest and back plate. Finding a strand of brush with thick enough stems, she took out her lightsaber and sliced a few. One day, she thought, one day she'd actually draw the saber against an enemy and be as effective as when she used it against undergrowth. If she could find someone to teach her, of course. Another vague memory, a half-forgotten conversation between the ghost who was her mother and the human woman, drifted up from somewhere in the recesses of her mind, but she shoved the thought aside, along with the far-more-recent question from Aleishia, "Are you ready to begin your training?"

"I should live so long," she muttered to the misty forest air. The body armor was propped on a stick, held in place with bark she stripped down to twine. It wouldn't hold for long, but then, it wouldn't have to, if she was calculating how this trap worked correctly. The chest plate would be pinned to the tree, the empty helmet would fall beneath the trap, and seeing that would lead the trap-setter to investigate exactly what they'd caught. Before setting the next part, she took the E-11 rifle power pack, and began carefully studying the overload mechanism. In the tunnels on Telamara, a lifetime ago, she'd been in a hurry, and had only been concerned with setting the overload with a long enough fuse to throw it. Now, though, she found the tab that had to be removed, and carefully worked it partway out. The bigger trees had thick, resinous sap, and she worked a bit of it against the pin, enough to secure a strip of the twine she'd made and, for the moment, keep the little chip of plassteel from pulling out all the way.
The armor was propped against the tree, the saplings holding it at roughly the height a wearer would have. She gauged the position one would have to stand to withdraw the trap, once sprung, and carefully ran out her own tripwire, running from the base of the tree to the E-11 power pack. It had to be tight, she thought, so a good tug from a tangled ankle would pull the pin free. She'd adjusted it to as short a fuse as she could, and she dug a shallow depression and covered the makeshift mine with a scattering of leaf litter and dirt. For good measure she tucked two more of the flash starters alongside—they wouldn't add much to the explosive charge, but they were incendiary and anything else to do damage could be helpful. Maybe she'd be lucky and start a small forest fire and draw even more attention.

The smoke from her damp fire was starting to filter through the woods, and she realized the light was getting brighter, almost full dawn. She was out of time. The blanket went back into her survival kit hooked on her belt along with the vibroknife. Making sure to stand well clear, she snapped the last flash-starter and set it directly below the tripwire holding the trap up. She waited long enough to see that the twine had caught and was rapidly burning through and then set off, blaster in hand, at an angled course towards the landing field. The smoke was growing thicker as the damp tinder and resinous needles caught and smoldered, and when she looked back she saw the eerie flickering of the chemlight liquid. She heard twigs snapping, and it might have been the flames, but this seemed heavier, something deliberately breaking, and she hurried her pace.

She could see the gaps in the brush and flashes of gray ship's hulls when the trap clattered behind her, shattering the stillness and sending the local avians screaming into the air. Thelea ducked low and sprinted as quickly as she could until she reached the brush at the edge of the clearing. The cracking of the undergrowth she'd heard suddenly was louder, and she heard a chittering, jabbering sound that might have been the natives speaking. Crouching down, she peered through the leaves, assessing the clearing. Most of the ships she dismissed out of hand—fighters, one- or two-seater craft that not only wouldn't fit all five of them, but at least in the cases of the X- and Y-wings would require the active assistance of their astromechs to function. But there were a few shuttles, and she focused on the Lambda, settled a little further off. Stolen, most likely. Stealing it back seemed only fair.

She crept forward until she was standing behind the exhausts of one of the wedge-shaped A-wings. Had she been alone, the little fighter would have been ideal. Tempting even now, but she scanned the far side of the clearing, looking for a flash of white armor or the drab uniforms. Instead, near the edge closest to the village site, she saw two figures in brown and green camo. Humans, a male and a female. They were turned towards the woods, but the casual way they held their blaster rifles suggested they were neither overly concerned or entirely awake.

Rebels. Strange to see them so close, and it occurred to her how rarely she'd actually seen the enemy face to face. Let alone see them casual in victory, clearly only half on alert and not expecting to see any sort of hazard come out of the forest. The woman wasn't even holding her blaster rifle carefully, dangling it casually by the grip. They looked halfway attentive, and as Thelea watched a strange creature, waist-high to the woman, came out of the brush at a toddling gait. It wore few clothes, only a head covering made of animal skins, and carried a long, stone-tipped spear. The body was covered in a dark mottled fur, not long and hairlike as with Wookiees, and the arms and legs seemed stubby.

Thelea had to bite down on a snort. These were the primitives who'd taken down the Empire's finest? Then she thought back to the trap she'd set off. Clearly, writing them off as harmless cuddly toys based on appearances was part of why they were in this predicament in the first place.

The creature was pointing into the woods towards her fire and the trap, and she could see the slightly-bemused expressions on the Rebel's faces from here. Clearly they didn't have a translator.
droid handy and the native obviously didn't speak Basic. They couldn't miss the smoke, though.

She caught a flicker of white out of the corner of her eye and looked. Fayar was moving along the edge of the clearing, staying mostly in the shadows, and she realized she hadn't seen any smoke or heard any sound from his side. His blaster pistol was in hand and she had to stop herself groaning. If these two were awake, so were others, never mind the natives. A shooting fight now was not what they needed.

The Rebels were looking just to her left, into the trees, while the native chattered and gestured with the stone-tipped stick. Clearly, he was talking about her fire and the trap, and she fought the urge to look behind her. Too big a motion and she'd draw their eye. She took one of the remaining blaster packs—smaller, from Fayar's pistol, but enough if she needed a distraction, if they saw Fayar or the scout trooper did something stupid . . .

The woman was following the little native now, while the man hefted his rifle a little more carefully. He was scanning the edge of the forest, and his gaze paused, not where she'd seen Fayar, and she squinted. There was a movement in the brush that was too erratic to be wind and she didn't see the bright white of armor. Then she remembered Biret and Chawyn, and the injured trooper they'd be hauling, and bit down another groan. Someone desperately needed to start putting common sense and basic stealth in enemy territory into the training regimens at all levels.

The woman and the native disappeared into the brush, and Thelea held herself still. The man, meanwhile, began to move towards the place where the branches were moving. She thought she saw another flash of white, closer to the ships now, and she hoped Fayar held himself back. If they found her secondary trap, the distraction should be loud enough . . .

Three things happened at once. A branch snapped, loud as a blaster bolt, and she saw figures moving. The Rebel's blaster snapped up, not firing but now on full alert. Fayar moved half out of cover and she saw his pistol come to bear.

And behind her, there was suddenly a ringing explosion, and shrill cries that were half-sapient, half-animal, and one scream that sounded very human indeed. The male Rebel spun around, his blaster coming up without a target yet. But he hesitated, looking back towards where he'd seen the movement. Thelea heard twigs snapping to her right and now she saw Fayar, outlined against the dark trees, and the Rebel had to see him, too.

Damn it, what's the point of teaching me stealth and just throwing it to the winds yourself? Thelea readied the power pack, fumbling with the tab and trying to decide which way to fling it.

There was more crashing in the brush and one of the natives charged out, closer to where the male Rebel was. He was jabbering, waving another of those stone-tipped spears, and she could see singed and darkened patches on this one's mottled fur.

"Where are the others? Slower, Keeto, you're not making any sense!" Thelea had to bite down on a guffaw—as if asking nicely would magically make alien languages sound like Basic. "What happened?"

She didn't bother suppressing the sigh and then she saw Fayár's blaster come up. Damn it, not now!

The next events happened so quickly Thelea was hazy on the order, but it didn't matter. There was a loud snap of a twig and Biret, trying to support the injured trooper, stumbled into view. The Rebel spun and snapped off a shot at almost the same instant Fayar fired at him. The Rebel's shot was not perfect, but she saw the lieutenant stagger and fall to his knees, one leg crumpling in a far less-controlled manner than the other. The trooper, at least, put his hand out feebly to slow their fall.
Fayar's shot went wild, and the Rebel returned fire. She saw the bolt strike at the top of the chest plate where the join with the neck was and the scout dropped hard.

There was a shriek of alarm, and she saw Chawyn. The engineering enlisted woman had been trying to pull Biret back under cover, but the Rebel swivelled and brought his blaster rifle to bear again. She shrieked again and cowered, raising her hands in a gesture that might have been surrender or might have been simple pleading not to shoot. Biret was groaning and trying to sit up, but Thelea could see there wasn't going to be much help from that quarter.

The little native, meanwhile, was gripping its spear and turning, eyes far too sharp for her taste. The buttonlike nose was twitching, and she heard it say something that sounded like "Akiata!" He (she assumed it was male, but then again who could tell?) kept turning, sweeping the air with that spear, and now the Rebel was half-turned, scanning past Fayar's still form and obviously looking for some new threat from the cover of the trees. The native was more focused, and she realized he was looking (and sniffing) in her direction.

Then he looked straight towards the A-wing. "Akiata!"

Whatever that meant, the tone clearly translated and the Rebel turned her way.

Thelea yanked out the tab on the power pack and heard it start its high-pitched countdown. Coming up from behind the A-wing's cover, she looked straight at the Rebel, counting on the shock of her eyes to startle him just long enough. The little native shrieked, too, and she flung the power pack as hard as she could toward the fighters between her and the Rebel. It was still in midair as she brought up the blaster pistol and fired, clipping the Rebel in the shoulder and sending him spinning down.

The little native was quick, she had to give him that. He wheeled and flung the spear hard at her and she was still aiming the blaster and couldn't duck quick enough. The spear did not quite miss, slicing across her upper arm and her shot went wide as the sharp stone tip sliced through her flight suit. She bit down a cry at the burning pain and ducked as the power pack's beeping whine went to a solid tone. The explosion wasn't as powerful as the contained one in the tunnels but she heard a pained squeal and smelled burned fur. The explosion rocked the X-wing the pack had landed under and she saw smoke start to rise. Anyone awake in the village and likely some who were asleep had to have heard that.

Thelea knew she couldn't risk running for the shuttle now. She couldn't see the others through the smoke and debris, but she was sure Fayar was dead. There was a choking, frightened sound that might have been Chawyn, or Biret with his leg wound. Hopefully the Rebels would be merciful, but if she tried to reach them and get two wounded and one nervous wreck to the shuttle, she'd find out first-hand and she refused to do that. Then she heard more voices, brush breaking, and she was out of time.

The obvious escape, sitting in front of her, and she hoped that there was no locking access key code from the cockpit hood. It came open with a minimum of fuss, and she scrambled over the side, dropping the blaster on the floor and focusing on the displays. The A-wing controls were unfamiliar—their simulators of course had the same control yokes no matter what simulated fighter you were flying—but a few seconds of scanning as she slid into the seat told her the important ones—engines, thrusters, shields, weapons.

The control yoke was sensitive and the takeoff was not the smoothest she'd ever performed. Thelea fumbled with the controls, trying to trim the repulsors, and though the little fighter wobbled a bit she pushed the throttle up and began to climb. She almost forgot to key up the shields as she figured out the balance of the controls and stabilized her trajectory from its wobbling zig-zag
through the tops of the trees. Figuring out how to drain them to power the engines, though, would
take more time than she wanted to devote to figuring out the finer details right now. And truth be
told it felt fast enough as it was—she was already above the trees and the sky outside was shifting
from orange and blue dawn to deep purple and finally to the black of space.

She had good reason to appreciate the shields as she came up out of the atmosphere. The amount of
debris still in orbit would have impressive if not for the sick certainty that so much of that were
ships she'd known, fighters she'd flown with, never mind the Death Star. Figuring out the
navicomputer was more important now, and she hurried through a simple jump, something that
would put her safely away from the system (wherever it was they were). She could think about a
more concrete destination when she was safely in empty interstellar space far from here.

The targeting computer's tone was even different and she almost didn't look, but when she did she
groaned. As this was a Rebel fighter, the blips were in friendly green instead of hostile red, but she
knew the shapes of two X-wings closing fast on her position. She called up the shields to full,
grimacing at the drop in speed, and pointed the fighter's nose towards the edge of the moon's
gravity well. She could fight if she had to, but the way her day had been going that was asking a
lot.

Red energy bolts started lancing past and beneath her. Without a helmet she had no headset and no
way to hear any transmissions, but she suspected she was being ordered to stand down and return
to planetside or dock on one of the cruisers that she realized, cycling through targeting, were
arrayed in a casual blockade in orbit. There were fewer than she remembered from the confusion of
battle and she wondered briefly if the one who'd hit her Interceptor was still among them, or the
one that hit–

Not now! She focused on flying. She had to last long enough to get out of the moon's gravity well,
and the X-wings were gaining steadily but surely. Flying into the blockade seemed like a bad plan,
even with shields and hopefully with crews who were as tired and distracted as those on the moon.
However, they were between her and clear flight out of the system.

*Stop thinking in planar terms, you're in space!* Her own internal monologues were starting to
become as pushy as her mother's voice on Telamara. *You know, if you're still listening, I could use
some advice right now.* There was no reply.

The A-wing shuddered and the shields dropped to 85%. She glanced at the navicomputer and the
cone showing how much farther she needed to be before she could safely jump. The X-wings were
not going to overtake, but they were clearly in striking distance now as another bolt took the shields
down farther. Worse, the looming capital ships were coming up fast. Though . . . she had options
beyond straight away. Slamming the yoke forward, she 'dove', liking how the fighter responded
almost as nimbly as an Interceptor. The X-wings swept to follow, and the capital ships were now
"above" her. If she had been close enough to be in freefall she'd be in a polar orbit now, headed for
the moon's south, but she was pushing the engines hard and fighting the gravity. The blue line
showing the end of the gravity well was getting closer, the coordinates readjusting, and she shifted
her hand to the level that should activate the hyperdrive.

The fighter jerked again and the shield indicator showed red, 50% power. She needed that
hyperdrive . . . the X-wings were still unable to close, but a few more good hits and the shields
would be gone, and strikes would start affecting her engines. Then, provided they weren't under
orders to take her alive, the hull . . . . she put the A-wing into a corkscrewing spiral that cost her
some speed, but the next shots from the Xs went wild. A little farther . . . just a little farther.

The hyperdrive display turned green and she pushed the level as far forward as it would go. In the
strange instant as the acceleration began the fighter seemed to be at a dead stop, but that was only the dissociation created by the inertial dampers, much more obvious in such a tiny craft, engaging as they suddenly were traveling orders of magnitude faster than the sublight drives could ever achieve. The stars streaked into lines and then the blackness of space was replaced by the crazed mottling of hyperspace. Thelea slumped in her seat, too shell-shocked to even feel as relieved as she should have, because she had escaped. She was free.

Only what to do about it?

The first jump was short, just far enough out of the system to be out of range of any pursuit. The emergency coordinates dropped her out in interstellar space, and thus unsurprisingly alone. She didn't dare wait too long to decide on a new course. She could jump Coreward, find the nearest Imperial outpost and try to hunt down the rest of the Fleet from there. Assuming anything remains of the Fleet, assuming there's anyone with half a microgram of sense left to lead it, but she shut that thought down hard.

Or . . . she fumbled in the cargo pocket until the data chip was in her hand. Aleishia's message said that the answers she wanted could be found by following the coordinates she'd left. Thelea plugged the chip into the navicomputer, and looked again at the system they lead to. Niruan, a planet whose name meant nothing to her, in a sector of space that did, in the most unpleasant ways. Wild Space, the Unknown Regions, the terrifying borderlands between them and between Wild Space and the Rim . . .Fleeing that way felt like breaking her own promise to herself, the day she'd run away, one step closer to crawling back.

But there could be answers there. And deep down she was beginning to suspect what one of those answers was, and though in one way it was infuriating to contemplate, because of all the lies and omissions it meant she'd been told, in another, it made this the only honorable thing to do. Even if it weren't the only hope for the Empire.

She punched in the coordinates. It would be a long jump in a cramped fighter. She hadn't had time to scrounge in it to see if there was a first-aid kit or survival equipment and the half-empty kit from her Interceptor clipped to her belt had no food or water, only the last of the pain tabs, the vibroknife that she had never been able to return to Fayar, the last chemlight, and the folded blanket. But especially if she tried to rest, she could make Niruan before she was in desperate need of food and water.

Trying to settle herself more comfortably, she pointed the A-wing for the Unknown Regions and pushed the hyperdrive control lever forward again. In the safety of hyperspace, with a destination finally in sight, she let herself relax and take stock. Her arm where the primitive's spear had wounded her burned, but it was no longer bleeding. How had anything with such short arms been able to throw so hard? Other than that and the creeping fatigue seeping through her muscles, she thought she was uninjured.

Fatigue, and guilt. Could she have reached Chawyn and Biret and the wounded stormtrooper? Was Fayar really dead? He might just have been wounded. Then she shook her head hard, ignoring how much that hurt. With one too injured to walk without aid and four of them able to fight, maybe. With Fayar dead, Biret now as unable to move as the trooper, Chawyn shaken too badly to function—one of those engineering types at home among power converters and alluvial dampers but lost anywhere else, no doubt, many of the internal-workings crew in the Navy were and she hated that the poor kid had been dumped into commando training without so much as a by-your-leave.

She hated more that she and Fayar had failed the little engineer, her lieutenant, and the wounded trooper. Another failure to add to a long list in the last two days. She'd failed Giriad, failed Rurik,
failed the other survivors, failed the Empire. Though, all things considered, she was not alone in that regard. How many different mistakes must have been made for a certain victory to become a chaotic defeat?

Thelea sighed and closed her eyes. It was done, and couldn't be undone. Now she had to look forward. Only at the moment forward was a complete unknown. She could guess, but there was no way to truly plan when flying totally blind. Familiarizing herself with the A-wing's systems would eat up a little time, but in her exhausted mental state and in hyperspace where most would be untestable it seemed like a less-than-productive use of her time. Sleeping would be the most sensible—but given the last two attempts at rest, that would just mean yet another Force-directed foray into her subconscious.

Not forward . . . if I can't look forward, I can look back.

She tried to remember that brief flash of memory, herself a small child, Aleishia there with her, the male whose face she couldn't see clearly but whom she knew, and what had Aleishia said in that memory?

"She is her mother's daughter, and someday she will remember."

"All right," Thelea said aloud. "Someday is going to be today." Trying to get as comfortable as she could in the increasingly-grimy flight suit and the close surroundings, she closed her eyes again and took a deep, centering breath. What to try and remember first? She longed for a clear memory of her parents' faces, some moment when she was safe and wanted. But try as she might, it was still a blur, ghost images like badly-transmitted holos.

Possibly the secret is not trying. Sometimes flying was that way, thinking too much made everything harder. The most locked-on, over-focused pilots were usually the ones who cracked up first. Instead of target fixation, she would try not thinking, only drifting, with nothing but the hum of the hyperdrive engines reverberating through the fuselage to hear, nothing to see if she did open her eyes but the strange nonreality of hyperspace.

Thelea wasn't aware of the point where she crossed from relaxing into sleep, until she was remembering again. This time, though, she couldn't hold on to any one scene at first—the Academy, with her hair cropped short and nothing but hostile eyes on her day and night, her first recon mission, alone and only the word of the ship's commander they would be back for her, the day at the training base when she'd met Rurik, Rurik and his impossible attitude, the tutor at home, some half-caste born of a lower family than the Second who had challenged her harshly but also slipped her rewards, datacards or sweetmeats or some other treasure her 'guardians' would never have allowed her, graduation and the hard, envious glares that her race and sex had not kept her out of the top of her class. She couldn't sort through the memories, couldn't fix on any one . . .

A shuttle, like the one she had stolen from her 'guardians,' but she was much too young in this memory, for all she was sitting in the pilot's seat. Someone was with her, a rough, workman's hand pointing out the different controls, the coarse accented voice of some servitor was describing their functions. She could remember him . . . remember . . . Seln. The old trader, who had called her 'lady' and laid down his life to buy her escape. He had known exactly who she was, and she had left him to die. And Aleishia had never said a word. A hot flare of anger burned like she'd swallowed a glowing ingot.

The fire seemed to burn through the shadows that clouded her mind, but it was all the blurred memories of a little child, faces too distant to catch, voices speaking words she didn't understand, and she tried to concentrate . . .
A medallion. A lovely piece, a bauble, really, the glimmering center stone the size and shape of a wei-jio disc, but shaped of a much finer gem than was ever used for the strategy game. It caught the light and glittered, and she reached for it with a child's tiny hand.

Someone laughed. A woman's voice, the woman holding her as they sat on a bench in the kind of garden only the noble houses had, and she looked up and saw the face. Mother, some deep knowledge told her, and it was the same warm feeling of being embraced and wanted as when Mother spoke to her in her quarters on the Executor. She was beautiful, pale blue skin the color of the real sky, long, gleaming blue-black hair swept up and held with sticks to frame her delicate, high-born features. Mother held the jewel steady so Thelea's tiny fingers could brush it without risk of her tearing it from the chain. It was beautiful, as beautiful as sun on snow.

Someone was with them, had just come into view on the garden's path. Mother looked up and the sense of her glowed like a corusca gem, and Thelea would have felt abandoned had the joy and affection not encompassed her, too.

Mother smiled at the intruder. "Already, she loves beautiful things."

"Are you surprised?" A man, the same one who had spoken so harshly to Aleishia, but now he sounded . . . pleased. Contented, even. He was not warm and enfolding like Mother, but steady, strong, safe. Father, and that was Mother speaking in her mind in the quiet way she had since forever in her child's reckoning. "With such a mother, she has been surrounded by beauty."

"And like her father, she's easily beguiled by it," and Mother was teasing.

"Beguiled? No." He came closer. "Simply appreciative. But never completely enchanted." There was a lie in that, but the good sort, the sort that made Mother seem to glimmer even brighter. Thelea could feel him watching them both and she looked up, and now she saw his face.

Thelea opened her eyes, staring into the mottled glow of hyperspace. The burning ingot of anger had cooled to a hard knot as she held the image, no longer hazy, examined it, and knew it to be the truth. Now she was sure where these coordinates lead, was certain all the hazy suspicions had been right. The final pieces of the puzzle were fitting into place, though some at the center were still missing so the picture was not quite complete. But one, a critical one, was finally clear.

"You unimaginable bastard." There was no one to hear it, and, feeling strangely energized, she crossed her arms and steeled herself for what was coming at the end of her journey.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Thelea blew up at least one Ewok. Possibly more. #IHad_friends_on_that_death_star
Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Notes

We're looking towards the end, folks! And this is it for Giriad and Rurik both. We won't see Rurik again until the filler story "TIE Fighter: Defiance" and Giriad for a bit longer after that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 21

Giriad was becoming accustomed to life as a Rebel prisoner, and that worried him.

Once he’d been deemed stable enough he didn’t have to stay in the medicenter, he’d been transferred not to the cell he was expecting but a sort of barracks room, not unlike ones he’d lived in before at the Academy or at the flight training center. There were six bunks, all occupied by captured Imperials, a ‘fresher unit, and even limited access to the ship’s databanks, though Holonet access was cut off and of course there was no way to communicate outside their quarters. Still, they’d been given a change of clothes, meals were regular if just as uninspired as Imperial rations, and while they weren’t permitted to wander at will, there was a strange sense that they were more awkward guests than prisoners.

It was made more so by how, every day, Fiolla Newthon seemed to make an excuse to stop by. Someone’s medical readings were inconclusive, the security monitors were acting up a bit and there wasn’t anyone from engineering free, she’d thought that perhaps they (and it might have been his imagination, but Giriad had the sneaking suspicion that ‘they’ really meant ‘him’) would like a few entertainment holos-old and probably boring but what could you get in a Rebel fleet out in the far reaches of space? He suspected not as far out, as they’d made at least one hyperspace jump, but they were still far from anywhere. Fi didn’t say, and he didn’t ask.

The other five prisoners-cum-guests in the barracks with him were keeping quiet, too. For the two who’d been retrieved from an escape pod launched by Devastator moments before she joined her successor flagship in a fiery demise, it seemed to be shell shock. Both had been gun crew and they had escaped by the skin of their teeth. He couldn’t tell if it was the horror of the situation, or whether they felt guilty surviving when so few of their shipmates had made it out alive.

The other three were fighter pilots, all like Giriad stranded either when they had the “good fortune” to survive when their fighter took a fatal blow, or unable to scramble aboard an evacuating Destroyer. Lieutenant Daggair, who preferred to go by “Dag” than by a first name he hadn’t offered but claimed was too Rim-world hick for anyone in the Imperial Navy, was a bomber pilot, while both the others, Lieutenant Kal Amurry and Lieutenant Commander Mertani had been flying standard TIEs. And while Dag and Kel seemed like more or less decent sorts, the Lieutenant Commander, who hadn’t bothered telling any of the lieutenants (let alone the enlisted gunners) his first name, was a constant reminder just how lucky Giriad had been in his immediate superior.

Mertani refused to address any of the Rebels who came in. He took food when it was offered, submitted to medical tests if required, and otherwise remained stonily silent. And if he’d remained silent while the Rebels were present, it seemed to be because he was saving it all up for when they were gone.
The door had barely closed behind the crewer (not Fi, to Giriad’s disappointment) who had delivered their breakfast when Mertani, who’d sullenly accepted his tray in complete silence as usual, rounded on the rest of them. “I thought I made it clear we don’t cooperate with Rebels.”

The gunners shuddered in their seats, but Dag just rolled his eyes. “Asking what the gray stuff on the tray is doesn’t count as cooperating, Commander.”

“Everything can be collaboration,” Mertani retorted, his dark eyes fixing on Giriad, sitting on the opposite side of the table. Giriad fought the urge to look away and glared back, not saying anything. “They’re luring us in. Hoping to get us to turn coat and give up information.”

“Why would they bother?” Kal said, poking at some of the gray stuff, which they had been assured was a kind of porridge. “What’s left for them to learn about the Empire? The Emperor’s—”

“You don’t know that!” Mertani’s voice cracked like an electrowhip. “That could be a lie the Rebels are telling us to break our spirit.”

“The Emperor was on the Death Star,” one of the gunners said quietly, “So was Lord Vader. And the Death Star was destroyed.”

“There were shuttles that escaped,” Mirtani retorted. “I saw one myself. For all we know, the Emperor or Lord Vader or both were aboard. Trapped here, how would we know? That jump might have been to get us out of range of the Emperor’s retaliation.”

“Because they’d go to all this trouble lying to a few pilots and crew,” Dag said. “That makes perfect sense.”

“The Rebels will go to any extreme to break the will of loyal Imperial officers.” Mirtani didn’t even glance at the food. He’d eat eventually, Giriad knew, his devotion to the Empire apparently didn’t extend to hunger strikes, but he seemed to determined to make sure by letting it go cold there was no risk he might accidentally enjoy the meal.

“I really think they have other things to worry about than messing with our minds.” Giriad poked at his breakfast, and took a tentative bite. It had probably been eggs at some point, though of what and how it had been preserved and prepared, he was happier not knowing.

“You only think that because they’re doing a damn good job on you, Lieutenant.” Mertani was staring at him, not with disapproval, but open disgust. “One halfway-prettty Rebel girl crooks her finger at you, you’re spilling security codes and ship layouts like we weren’t at war!”

Giriad felt the same sort of rising ire he had when Zeth Orono had been taking swipes at all three of them, only this time the nastiness was directed exclusively at him. “Fi’s nice. It doesn’t do anyone any harm to be kind when we’re prisoners.”

“And that is exactly what I mean.” Mertani’s eyes hardened to flint. “Nicknames, chatting, thinking there’s no harm in it. Another week and you’ll be spitting on the Emperor’s statue and giving away security clearances.”

“Oh, give it a rest,” Dag said around a mouthful of the protein ration. “If Giriad has a pretty girl’s attention, more power to him. Ever occurred to you he might get her to defect?”

“I don’t know what kind of squadron you served in, but this is the Navy, not a pleasure cruise.” Mirtani turned the cold glare on Dag, but the bomber pilot barely blinked. As if scanning for
another target, he turned back to Giraid. “I do know what sort of squadron you served in. Bad enough they let females into officer training, worse they let them fly fighters. But every pilot in the Outer Rim fleet knows about the freak you flew under. Women in the fleet are bad enough. But alien filth . . . .” He grimaced. “Who knows what she did to get her rank?”

Giriad could feel a burning like a blaster bolt to the chest. He managed to grind his teeth long enough to get some control of his voice. “Fly well enough that she’s out there and we’re in here.”

The glint in Mirtani’s eye warned him something was coming that he wasn’t going to like. “You must have got hit early. Otherwise I don’t know how you missed it.”

“Missed what?” Girad fought down a rising sense of unease.

Mirtani looked positively gleeful now. “Your flight’s Two, screaming her name, not even her designation but her name, on an open channel like a lunatic. Sounded like his heart was breaking,” and the delight dripped from every word. “Don’t know what happened him after that, but the 207th’s Lead went in to the station after the Rebels and took the last of the squadron with him. Lover boy probably was out of his misery ten seconds in, if he even made it that far.” The beady black eyes, that increasingly reminded Giriad of a Gamorean, glinted. “Is that how she liked to play it, your alien wingleader? Was your wingman a special case, or did she make you compete for it?”

Giriad bit the inside of his cheek until he tasted blood. No. Thelea would never have just been shot down . . . Rurik would never have given up like that. And the very notion of Thelea . . . of her playing games, luring them, she never thought of him like that, and Rurik . . . he remembered as they waited, dismissed from Vader’s presence, Rurik half-mad with fear and ready to rush back and face the Dark Lord himself, or when Thelea had, for whatever reason, hidden up on the gantry and Rurik had gone back . . . he couldn’t imagine they would have truly gone any farther than friends. Technically, relationships weren’t prohibited in general, but a direct C.O. and junior was, and they would never have violated that. No matter how much he suspected Rurik, at least, might want to. “You’re lying.” He looked at Dag and Amurry. “Did you hear that?”

Amurry shrugged, and Dag shook his head. “There was so much going on, and I was EV about ten minutes in.”

“The 207, or what was left of them, did go in to the superstructure,” Amurry said, sounding apologetic. “I don’t think any of the TIEs came out, or most of the Rebels, either.”

Giriad took a shaky breath, fighting to keep his composure. It couldn’t be true. One of the few hopeful thoughts he’d had was thinking that Thelea and Rurik were safe with the Fleet, far out of the Rebels’ reach and probably boggling at how he’d been so careless. Or, he thought, forcing himself to honest, mourning him as dead. Part of the fantasy had been the looks on their faces when he returned, alive and well with a story about Rebel captivity.

The idea that he might be the only survivor had never crossed his mind.

Mirtani, damn him, still had that satisfied smirk on his face. “If it weren’t a disgusting thought, an alien like her, it would almost be romantic. Though filth like that is the reason we’re here. Aliens and alien-lovers . . . is that why you get on so well with the Rebels?”

Giriad forced himself to exhale slowly, and get a grip on his temper.

Then he threw the tray at Mirtani’s head.
“I’ll say one thing for you Imps,” Fi said, running the medical scanner over the cut on his forehead, “you don’t go for half measures on anything.”

“Well, he asked for it,” and Giriad winced as blood trickled down into his eye again. Head wounds bled horribly. “And I didn’t have anything else to hit him with.”

“You’re lucky he didn’t have anything to use to hit you. He did good enough with his fists.” Fi pressed a cloth to the deep scrape where he’d been knocked into the bench by Mirtani’s second punch. Or was it the third? It was hard to remember clearly. The two gunners had leapt out of the way as Mirtani lunged across the table, knocking aside Amurry’s attempt to stop him. He clearly had spent some time in the sparring ring as he got in two solid hits before Giriad was able to kick his feet out from under him while Dag got hold of the commander’s elbow and tried to haul him off. He’d been tossed into a bunk and according to Fi had a minor concussion, but Giriad had gotten back for them both, putting an elbow into Mirtani’s midsection hard enough the other pilot apparently had bruised ribs before the Rebel guards rushed in to break up the fight.

He also had the solitary confinement he apparently craved after Giriad and Dag had fingered him as the instigator, and Amurry had remained silent while the two gunners insisted they hadn’t seen anything. The Rebel apparently in command of the prisoners, a reddish-blond, beared man who had the eerie aura Giriad used to associate with ISB, hadn’t said much, but despite looking extremely skeptical, he’d ordered Mirtani separated from the others.

And Giriad was somehow not surprised to find Fi tending to his injuries. It even made being back in the iso section of the medical bay, complete with leg restraints, not so bad. At least this time they hadn’t bothered securing his arms, and the bruises and pain gave him something to think about other than what Mirtani had said. He would write it off as lies, all of it, except Amurry confirming the part about the 207th’s last survivors joining the pursuit into the Death Star, and as for Rurik screaming Thelea’s name . . . maybe it was unprofessional and wrong, but then again, when they’d been stranded a lifetime ago in the Dhregan system, hadn’t he had to tell Rurik shouting across vacuum wouldn’t help when Thelea’s comm had been temporarily fried? If he’d thought she’d been hit . . .

If he’d thought she was dead . . .

He realized his eyes were stinging again, and when he went to wipe away the blood, the liquid that came away was clear. Humiliation at the thought of crying in front of anyone, let alone a Rebel, let alone a pretty Rebel girl who had been nothing but kind to him since he’d been brought aboard even when she had no reason to be, actually made it worse. He bit his cheek again, trying to think about anything besides the idea Rurik and Thelea were so many atomized particles over the forest moon, that the only real friends he’d had in the last four years were dead, and all he had done was distract them but somehow he had the nerve to be alive while they weren’t.

Something was clenching in his chest, painful and hot, and he thought for a minute he’d taken more body blows than he’d realized. Then he tasted salt instead of iron, and realized he was crying openly now. His friends, dead. Everything he’d had and been, destroyed. The whole galaxy turned upside down and he was adrift. His family . . . his family was going to be so disappointed in him. And there was absolutely nothing he could do about it. He couldn’t make it better, he couldn’t get back what he’d lost, he couldn’t make his friends be alive if they were dead.

He realized there were arms around his shoulders, and Fi was holding him. He tried to steel himself, be a proper Imperial officer, but something cracked and he was crying hard enough he was shaking. She didn’t say anything for a long time, only rocked him, gently, and let him purge. When
he looked up, those bright amber eyes of hers were wet, too, and that was the breaking point.

“I think I knew all along they were gone,” he said, wishing his voice didn’t crack with the pain of weeping. “Everything’s gone.”

“I suppose for all of you, it’s a whole new galaxy.” Fi didn’t let him pull away, and he was grateful. Her arms were surprisingly strong, and the gentle embrace was the most stable, real, thing he could remember feeling in a long time. “I wish it didn’t have to be this way.”

“It didn’t!” Giriad felt another of those burning sensations like plasma building in his chest. “None of this ever had to happen! If your fleet hadn’t attacked, if no one had ever rebelled in the first place—”

Now Fi pulled back, that fierce glint in her eyes. “If your Emperor hadn’t built weapons that killed billions of people, if so many worlds hadn’t had their freedoms taken away, if the Senate hadn’t been disbanded, we wouldn’t have had to rebel!”

“The Senate was a disaster!” Giriad couldn’t help it, but at least the tears were drying. “My parents remembered what it was like before the Clone Wars, when worlds were being blockaded and bombarded and invaded, or a plague would break out, or pirates would hit shipping lanes, and the Senate did nothing! They were happy when the Emperor took over during the Clone Wars! It was the first time the Senate ever really did anything other than argue and delay and wait while everyone else died. If we went back to that, what happens when something worse comes along?”

He remembered the Aris Val being yanked out of hyperspace and blasted to atoms, the nightmare blockade locking Telamara in place. What would a bickering, useless Senate do against that?

But then, a small voice whispered, no one came now. He tried to shake off the thought—of course not, they had been wasting their time chasing the Rebels halfway around the Outer Rim!

“And that makes it all right that the Emperor destroyed Alderaan?” Fi’s cheeks were flushed with color.

“That was Grand Moff Tarkin,” but Giriad had an odd feeling about that, too. If it were only the Tarkin Doctrine, backfired and useless, then what was the point in building another Death Star? He remembered the instinctive, unthinking sense of shock and, if he was honest, horror he’d felt when they arrived at the remote moon and had seen what they were there to guard. Rurik and Thelea had sounded equally numb, unable to comprehend the massive planet killer.

And Thelea had planned to run away. Rurik had apparently been discussing it with her as he hadn’t been surprised when she’d broached the idea. She’d said run to somewhere, but where? The Rebels? No. He shook that thought off. Thelea’s voice had had the same tone of relief and excitement they’d all felt when the mission had become clear, she’d wanted this uprising put down. So wherever or whomever she wanted them to flee to, it wasn’t the Rebel Alliance. Only now the plan was dead with her, with Rurik, with the Empire . . . .

“We kept fighting,” he said, realizing she was staring at him and feeling an absurd urge to justify himself, “because you always did! We were constantly chasing one Rebel base or breaking up cells or attacking your convoys. We wouldn’t have been fighting you if you weren’t fighting us!”

“We kept fighting because better to be dead than living under tyranny!” She looked more sad than angry, he thought distractedly, biting her lip in a way that was unfairly distracting for someone trying to carry on an argument. “There’s more to life than just being alive, and blind obedience!”

“Oh, like what? Chaos? Constant fighting?” Constant fighting where your friends could be alive
“Now the Emperor’s dead, and you say Lord Vader is, too—”

“Commander Skywalker said it was true, and if he—” Fi cut herself off. “Oh, you probably think he’s a war criminal and a liar, too!”

“I don’t even know him, just his wanted posters! And what if he is telling the truth? Do you think the Emperor’s dead and Vader with him, everyone’s just going to throw a party and it’ll all be sunshine and smiles? They probably know already on Imperial Center—”

“Coruscant,” but she didn’t sound quite as vehement now.

“Wherever! But the Imperial Court’s probably already cracking down on anyone who so much as looks in a good mood, and now with Executor gone and I assume Admiral Piett with it, there’s going to be a scramble to take over the fleet, and if you think anyone who ends up winning that is just going to say ‘Let’s all shake hands and be friends’ you’re as crazy as all the other Rebels! Fear of Lord Vader was the only thing that kept some of the Admirals and Moff’s working together and not tearing their sectors apart.”

“So what were we supposed to do? Say ‘well, the Emperor kills whomever he pleases and takes over wherever he wants, guns down protestors, blows up entire worlds, but at least if we keep our heads down, we’re safe?’ It was Fi’s turn to sound as if she were going to cry. “What difference does it make if you’re shot by pirates or if you’re just rounded up in a protest you weren’t even part of, and the stormtroopers start shooting . . . .”

Giriad stared at her, seeing the tears glistening unshed in her eyes as she clenched her fists and looked away towards the deck, her shoulders shaking. “That happened to someone you cared about?”

For a moment, he thought she was going to snap at him, tell him to mind his own business. Then she drew in a long, shaky breath and nodded. “My little sister. She was fifteen. She wasn’t a rebel or a troublemaker. She never even got into trouble at school, she was just coming home at the wrong time. Moff Berrin was touring the sector, though, and there were protests, strikes, and the local garrison was supposed to clean it up . . . How can you justify that? How can you excuse a girl getting shot down for being in the wrong place?”

Giriad shrugged uneasily. “I can’t. How can you justify the Rebels cutting supply lines to the Outer Rim? The colony worlds rely on that, and on the fleet being able to come when they need help! Just a few months ago, I wound up trapped on a planet where they were being cut to ribbons, but the Fleet was off hunting your people again. They couldn’t even get a message away. If Thelea hadn’t thought up a plan to get me out to carry a message no one would have come. Is another Republic full of politicians going to be any better? Or worse, because there won’t be any patrols in the far Rim because that’s not where there biggest, richest, systems are?” That he was from one of those rich Core worlds didn’t seem to matter, was more of a distant memory. “That was Rurik’s homeworld . . . I used to think all the Rim was just smugglers and pirates and slavers, like the Hutts or Black Sun, but Rurik . . . that was his home. I could finally see why he wanted to be in the Navy, what he was protecting, and it was the Imperial governor who got him the chance. And Thelea . . . I don’t know where she was from, somewhere beyond Wild Space and just what I saw come out of there . . . and she never thought anything her people had would be enough to stop those things, but the Empire might.”

He shook his head. “I’m sorry about your sister. Truly.” And he meant it, he realized, he was sorry an innocent was swept up in the chaos and sorrier that Fi clearly still ached at the loss . . . but how many had there been just like that under the Old Republic their Alliance wanted to restore? “But
even if the Empire wasn’t perfect, how can going back to the old ways prevent things like that happening, and protect places like Rurik’s homeworld, and be able to put up a unified fight against the things that are out there who aren’t going to care what kind of government we have? A Republic that didn’t care about anything that wasn’t under their noses is how we got the Empire.”

“I don’t know!” Fi choked out. “But there has to be a better way than Death Stars and stormtrooper garrisons. And people being killed for just being in the wrong place . . . .” Her shoulders were shaking.

Leaning as far as the restraints keeping his legs pinned to the table allowed, and well past what propriety should have permitted, Giriad put his arms around her. For a moment, she went very still and he was afraid she was going to call for the guards to come back, and then she was slumped against his shoulder, crying as hard as he had. Too emotionally drained to cry any more himself, Giriad patted her back, in the same way she’d comforted him, and by the time her tears had stopped, he didn’t want to let go, and Fi seemed equally inclined not to pull away. The didn’t talk politics any further, but not because of any tension. If anything, it was as if all the tension and all the grief on both their parts had drained away with the tears.

There was an awkward moment when they finally had to draw apart, and Giriad realized in any other circumstances, appropriate or not, he’d have kissed her. Fi, from the look in her amber eyes, had the same thought.

And she kissed him, not quite at the corner of his lips, before calling for the security escort to take him back to the prisoners’ quarters.

Dag didn’t come back, leaving their quarters almost preternaturally quiet with just the two gunners, and a very subdued Amurry, and two days later, Giriad somehow was not surprised to find himself taken to a small office, where he found the reddish-blond bearded Rebel officer waiting for him. Crix Madine, it turned out, was a general, and a defector, not unfamiliar with the sort of questions Lieutenant Quoris had asked Medical Specialist Newthon, and which had made their way to the general’s ears. Apparently, it was not the first time someone had questioned what kind of government their new order really ought to be, or pointed out the failings of the Republic the Empire had replaced. And while Giriad had no answers, he was surprised to hear that neither questions nor lack of answers were considered problematic.

In fact, if this General Madine could be believed, they indicated the sort of person who, in the Alliance’s opinion, was badly needed to help build the galaxy over again after the Empire. Not that he would suggest to anyone that they turn their coat, of course. The prisoners would, at some point, be released without further consequences, when matters were more settled. But, of course, any who chose to join them for reasons of their own would be welcomed, regardless of prior affiliations. Madine himself was proof of that, and he was willing to provide further examples, if they were desired. Including, he indicated, Lieutenant Daggair, hence his transfer from the other prisoners.

Thelea had wanted them to run. Rurik was willing to go with her and he would have gone with them. They were willing to commit what was, after all, desertion at best, treason at worst, because of what they had all seen, because Thelea had thought there was a better way to fight the darkness. The Emperor was dead. The Empire would, he knew, be in chaos, dying. With the wrong sort of people at the helm, the same corrupt politicians as before, the new would-be Republic would rapidly go the way of the old. If he couldn’t follow Thelea’s plan now, and with her and Rurik gone, how could he, then . . . was this another way?

If things like the black ships were lurking just beyond Wild Space, was it really important whose
uniforms they wore to oppose them?

They put him in smaller, but unguarded, quarters meant for two, and he was mildly unsurprised to find himself sharing with Dag again. The Rimworld pilot was pleased to see him, but not especially surprised either. Both were now issued monitor cuffs on their wrists as they were still clearly on probation, and they still had no access to external communications, but they were now at liberty to leave their quarters, and were assigned to a squad of six other defectors supervised by Rebel–Alliance–troopers who seemed to answer to Madine. Giriad wasn’t sure if the debriefings and lectures they were compelled to attend were meant as subtle interrogation, deprogramming, or both, but he had the sense they were being tested.

As such, it was nearly a week before he saw Fi again, and then only for a moment in the mess, but the way those incredible eyes glowed when she saw him out and about made even the monitor cuff an indignity he could happily bear. She contrived to find him later, and with his new ability to move about the ship more, they were able to meet more and more often. There were no more hugs, though, or kisses, until the day he and Dag were ordered to transfer to one of the cruisers. Pilots, it seemed, were still at a premium, and they would not be the only ones learning to fly what they used to consider targets. Fi was waiting and watching when they reported for transport, which was also the moment when the monitor cuffs were finally removed.

Fi waited just long enough for the Intel officer to take off the cuff and step away, leaving Giriad technically free for the first time since he’d woken in the medical bay. Then she kissed him very firmly and properly and completely, and for the first time in even longer, he didn’t care who was watching him, or what they thought at all.

The Defiance had been in a holding pattern, like the rest of the fleet, for what was really only a few days. For anyone on the crew not directly involved in the ongoing struggle for command and control, it seemed like weeks, or months. It might have been a standard year, for all Rurik noticed, except he thought he’d probably have had more mess times and mind-breakingly dull rest watches if that were the case. There were patrols to fly, and briefings to attend, but there was no enemy to fight and no one to really direct the patrols or order drills. Rurik supposed, in some part of his mind that wasn’t completely numbed to the whole business, that he ought to be glad Defiance had Interceptors available. Given the cluster the entire situation had turned into they might have wound up flying bombers. Or stuck on the bridge. Or cleaning the waste-recycling systems. It was that sort of disaster.

He almost wished the Rebels would run them down and finish them off. It seemed logical, and in any case, it would get things over with. Every time he opened his eyes and found himself staring at the bulkhead over his bunk instead of blasted to atoms, he was mildly disappointed they hadn’t.

“You know,” and he jumped, having once again forgotten his roommate’s presence, “this is going to be a really unpleasant living situation if you’re going to play mute the whole time.”

Rurik sighed, and looked towards where Zeth was standing, having just come out of the ‘fresher half-dressed and shaking his head. “There isn’t much to talk about.”

“What, you don’t want in on the pool for whose fleet we’ll end up being?” Zeth tried to smile, and almost managed it.

“It’ll be Harrsk. Maybe Prittik. Maybe Intelligence will take over. Who knows?” He kept staring at the ceiling, fiddling with the flat bit of metal in his hand. “Who cares?”
“The Emperor’s dead, and Vader must be or he’d have turned up and stopped all this by now, and your take on it is, ‘who cares?’” Zeth snorted, grabbing his undertunic and yanking it over his head.

“Yeah, who cares?” Rurik turned on his side but made no move to get up. It was a rest rota, and he had no desire to work out and even less to hit the simulators. Even eating seemed like far too much effort. “The Emperor is dead. Lord Vader is dead. The Executor’s gone,” and he saw the same grief he still felt at the thought reflected in Zeth’s eyes. Strange, but the loss of the Super Star Destroyer seemed somehow more painful and personal than the Emperor or Vader himself, as if a great living thing had died. “Everyone I cared about in the Fleet is gone. Barring the Emperor being miraculously resurrected, or some mastermind none of us have ever met who can force everyone to cooperate appearing out of nowhere, what’s the point?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” and Zeth slouched onto his own bunk. “Defeating the Rebels? Getting revenge for everyone we just lost, from the Emperor on down?”

“It’s not going to bring them back.” Thelea . . . if I could go back, if I could just stay on your wing like I should have . . . if I could just bring you back. I should have said let’s go now, as soon as I thought of it, steal a shuttle and go, forget knowing where we headed just as long as it was away and you were there.

“No, but it might make us feel better.” Zeth shook his head. “I just want to hit them again. I don’t know even know for sure who got Cuhan, or Nihall,” and Rurik felt slightly guilty it took him a moment to remember that was, had been, Nihall Lodi, Theta Three. “But killing more of their fighters would make me feel a lot better.” His eyes narrowed. “Might do you some good, too.”

“It won’t bring them back. It won’t bring Giriaid back. It won’t bring . . . it won’t bring Thelea back.” He heard his voice crack and couldn’t find the energy to care. “On the other hand, I’m not doing very well at blowing myself up and joining them. At least getting back to a shooting war might help that along.”

Zeth didn’t say anything for a moment. Finally, he sighed. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“For what I said. Back on the Exec.” That made Rurik look at him, expecting at least a wry smile, but Zeth looked dead serious. “I didn’t really believe the rumors about . . . about you and Commander Thelea. No one did. It’s just, well, she was an alien, and female, and–”

“You’re not helping yourself.”

“Sorry! I mean, you know how people are about any female who makes it past Lieutenant, unless it’s something safe like medic or desk-jockey stuff. And you two were always . . .” He stopped himself. “I was in a bad mood, everyone was talking about the three of you after you disappeared and Vader just let you skate, so I just . . . it wasn’t fair, and I shouldn’t have said any of it. I’m sorry.”

Rurik was stunned enough it seemed to punch through a little of the fog in his brain. Finally, he said, “I forgive you. And anyway, you were wrong, but . . . to be honest, not completely. She never–I never–” He made himself stop; the babbling was welling up again. “Not because I didn’t want to. But she was my C.O. and she didn’t forget that.” Except twice, and I’m going to be reliving those times until the day I die.

“Heh.” Zeth’s smirk had a very self-deprecating quality to it. “Well . . . I guess I can’t really blame
you.” Rurik raised an eyebrow. “The eyes were creepy, but that skin, and her hair! For an alien, she was hot.”

The flare of temper that prompted felt oddly muted, and Rurik realized he was suppressing an almost-giddy urge to laugh. “Stang. I told her you were just jealous.”

Zeth looked as if he were fighting a genuine grin. “Did you also point out I was single and not her direct subordinate?”

“You wouldn’t have lasted five minutes. She’d have just stared at you until you wished it was Vader you were dealing with.”

“Oh, I see, you were interested, she shot you down.”

Rurik grabbed the thin pillow from his bunk and threw it in the general direction of Zeth’s head. The other pilot ducked, not that it was very accurately thrown, and Rurik shook his head, some of the giddiness draining away. “It doesn’t seem fair to laugh.”

“Nah. But it’s laugh, or keep staring at the ceiling in here until you starve to death or we sit here so long with admirals fighting about who’s in charge the Rebs run us down and blow us into atoms.” Zeth stood up, and grabbed his uniform jacket. “Come on. I’m meeting that nice little medic friend of yours in Rec for some casual chat and light workouts, and if you come along we can find a way to keep you occupied in case I want this berth to myself for a while.”

“Jasha?” That he hadn’t seen coming, but then, women were scarce in the Navy and it wasn’t as if they were looking at shore leave any time soon. Or ever. “This I have to see.” He rolled to his feet, and realized he was still fiddling with the metal plate. “Assuming we ever get paid again, I’ll bet your next paycheck you’re bunking alone this rota and I don’t need to worry about it. In any case,” and he looked down at the colored squares, “any quarters open up, you might get your wish.”

“You’re on, and you’re going to regret that.” Zeth saw the item in his hand. “What’s that?” Rurik silently held up the plate, and his wingman’s eyes widened. “Wait, they made you lieutenant commander? Who die—”

Zeth cut himself off, but Rurik knew how he was going to finish it. “A lot of people, actually.”

Giriad. Thelea. Sobusk. Aldacci. Half Defiance’s TIE complement. The whole sharding Empire. “Apparently, someone up the chain thinks I’m leadership material. Or they’re desperate. So if I decide I’m sick of you, I can ask for a quarters upgrade.”

“I don’t know, I might get stuck with someone who’s not as understanding about my occasional need for privacy.” Zeth threw Rurik’s uniform jacket at him from where he’d dumped it when he’d come off shift. Possibly, Rurik thought as he caught it, it was a not-so-subtle suggestion the other wanted a neater roommate, too. “Come on. You can’t spend the rest of your life staring at the ceiling. Maybe Jasha’s got a friend.”

Rurik felt a hard, pained clenching in his stomach. “No. Not that. If you seriously need me out of here this rota, fine, but don’t try to do me any favors there. Not now, not ever. Got it?”

Zeth stared at him for a long moment, the humor drained out of his expression completely. Finally, he looked away. “Stang.” His breath came out in a rush. “Sorry. I won’t bring it up again. And for what it’s worth, and I know it’s too late to matter, but . . . Commander Thelea was a great pilot. And that kid wasn’t so bad either. It was an honor to fly with them in the squadron.”

“You’re right,” Rurik said, pulling his jacket on. “It’s too late. But that isn’t your fault.” He fasted
the hooks, and then carefully snapped on the additional red and blue square above his heart. “And you’re also right—it was an honor to fly with them.” One I don’t know if I deserved. And whoever ends up leading this rear-guard action, they wouldn’t deserve any of us.

Zeth was near the door, watching him. “Well, come on, Lieutenant Commander. If you’ve got the rank, might as well show it off.”

“Might as well.” He followed, the fog in his mind finally seeming to lift, but what was replacing it was a strange, detached kind of numb. At the door, he paused and looked back at their quarters—both bunks rumpled, a belt hanging over the back of a chair, the light in the ‘fresher still on. Giriad, he thought, would have had conniptions at the very much not-by-the-book disorder. Thelea would have crossed her arms and glared, probably muttering something about humans, or boys, or boy humans.

“Sorry, Lead,” he murmured to the ghosts and the empty room. *If you come back, I promise to clean it up.* There was no answer, of course, and Rurik turned away. He was already getting used to the silence.

Chapter End Notes

Gee, I wonder if Thelea's off to find the person who could address all Giriad and Fi's concerns about the morality vs strength in government question, and who would be someone who, like Rurik says, could make everyone shut up and cooperate? Stay tuned for the next and final chapter of TIE Fighter: Command Decisions.
Chapter 22

The unfamiliar ping of the A-wing’s proximity alert startled Thelea out of another doze. Her body felt cold and sore and stiff, except for a throbbing ache where the primitive’s spear had gashed her arm which felt much too warm. She fumbled for the pain tabs, but the bottle no longer rattled. Empty. She sighed, and even the muscles around her ribs hurt. It was not a good sign, and she wondered if the wound was turning septic, or she simply had taken too much of a beating to tolerate hours in a cockpit.

Something was definitely fogging her brain, though, as it finally registered that she was out of hyperspace. And she was not alone.

The proximity alert, having been programmed by Rebels, was naturally most concerned with the Imperial-class Star Destroyer several hundred kilometers dead ahead. Thelea, however, was beginning to think she did have a fever, as instead of TIE fighters approaching from the planet, the sentry ships were unmistakably clawcraft. She began fiddling with the controls, trying to find some sort of way into the comm system without a helmet mic, adrenaline starting to kick in as the targeting computer warned her that both the incoming fighters and the Destroyer were powering up weapons. And she was, after all, flying a fighter with a profile that ought to read as hostile to at least one of them.

“–repeat, unidentified fighter, this is Imperial Naval Ship Admonitor,” and she actually jumped in her seat as the voice, in such a perfect Core accent she was tempted to double-check her coordinates, cracked through the cockpit speakers. “You have entered a restricted system. You are ordered to power down your weapons and shields immediately and stand by for inspection. Failure to comply will result in your destruction.”

“Copy that, Admonitor, I am complying,” and she matched actions to words, though the targeting computer showed the clawcraft were not deviating from their intercept course. “I am Commander Thelea, assigned to the 207th Interceptor Assault Squadron, INS Executor, service number LN-2212. I am attempting to contact–“

A bolt of energy shot past the cockpit, not a green blast from Admonitor’s turbolasers, but coming from one of the incoming fighters, and a new voice broke in, this time speaking her own language: “You are ordered to come about, unidentified ship!”

Thelea gritted her teeth. “I am complying with orders from the Imperial vessel, sentry ships!” The tone of her own voice, as grating and shrill as any irate aristo’s (distressingly like her aunt’s, now that she thought of it) startled her, but came naturally all the same. “Withdraw or I will be forced to defend myself.” Switching back to Basic, she said, “Admonitor, are these ships your allies?”

There was a pause, and she could feel the stunned response from the pilot of the other fighter. Finally, the other Chiss spoke again, and she wondered if Admonitor could follow the conversation. She suspected they could, and were waiting to see what she’d do. “We serve the Syndic Mitth’raw’nuruodo,” he said, his tone almost harsh enough to match hers, but she thought by the accent he was probably not High Family, not by upbringing at least, and given her own diction he wasn’t sure about her and was being cautious. Good. “As do the Imperial ships,” and she marveled at how he mangled the Basic word. No wonder the recruiters and the Academy instructors had thought she was a barbarian.
“Excellent,” she snapped. “Your master and I have a great deal to discuss, so you will stand down and allow me to deal with his proper chain of command. I?”

“We are verifying your voiceprint, Commander,” said the Imperial comm officer. He sounded slightly more respectful, but also a trace confused. “You are in an unconventional craft . . . .”

Perhaps it was the pain, perhaps it was the exhaustion, perhaps it was trying to think in her own language and Basic at the same time, but Thelea found her patience wearing thin. “We are in unconventional times, Admonitor. I am attempting to contact Admiral Thrawn. As these fighters claim loyalty to him, I am apparently in the right place, yes?”

There was another, longer, pause, and a new voice came on, older and deeper. Likely the first officer or the captain; either way she was making progress. “What is your business with the Grand Admiral, Commander?”

Grand Admiral? Either news traveled fast and Thrawn was already making plans to fill the void in power, or his ‘exile’ had not been the punishment rumor claimed after all. But at the moment, she couldn’t bring herself to care that much about the grand scheme of things. Not entirely. “Twofold, Admonitor. First, are you aware there has been a major battle between Imperial and Rebel forces?”

Tired or not, this was still an open channel.

“We had vague reports to that effect,” the officer replied. She noted the clawcraft were circling, and her targeting computer chirped a warning and added a polite suggestion she perhaps raise shields. She ignored it. Outflying her own people was one matter, but she was close enough shields would do very little against Admonitor’s batteries for long.

“It was a major engagement. The Empire has taken extremely severe casualties and the Ad-Grand Admiral needs to know the extent of the . . . destabilization.”

“And the second reason?” Faint undertones of alarm, but he had not forgotten she’d said she had two purposes. A cool customer, this one.

She could see the clawcraft turning to shadow her, and her own course was carrying her well into the range of the Admonitor’s tractors, if they wanted to take her aboard. If the pilots of the fighters decided to take this badly, she hoped their beam operators were quick on the draw, and that whoever the officer in command was decided yanking her out of range and keeping her alive for questioning was a higher priority than appeasing Chiss patrol craft. But there was no time or point any more for game-playing. “The other reason is personal. Please inform Mitth’raw’nuruodo that Mitth’ele’arana, daughter of Lady Reli’set’harana, has come to speak with him. And that I will not go away without answers. His choice is hear me out, or shoot me down.”

She saw one of the clawcraft jink hard, and only quick reflexes kept her from responding with an evasive maneuver that might provoke them further. Admonitor loomed larger in front of her, and their comm had fallen silent. The fighters had swerved away, but now came back around, and she was too numb to be surprised that their formation suddenly seemed more appropriate to escort than attack.

Admonitor was still silent, and she couldn’t keep quiet. “If it would help you in communicating, my mother’s core name was Lisetha. I gather our full names are difficult for humans to pronounce.” It was probably more sarcasm than someone who was either her equal or superior officer rated, but between the dull ache in her head, the hot, throbbing pain in her arm, and increasingly-insistent messages from her body that she needed water, food, and sleep, ideally in that order, she was running out of patience with proper procedure.
The pause continued, but at least neither the tractors nor turbolasers were targeting her. She was about to inquire whether they needed her to repeat her message when the same voice, sounding oddly strained, said, “You are authorized to proceed to the fortress on Nirauan. The fighters will escort you and you will be met in the hangar.” He left exactly what that welcoming committee would consist of unspoken, and Thelea unsnapped the pocket where she kept her lightsaber.

“And the Grand Admiral is on the planet?” He was not avoiding her. Not this time.

“Grand Admiral Thrawn will see you in his own time, Commander,” and there was no arguing with that non-answer. She had a feeling too much backtalk and she would be dealing with those tractor beams and possibly a detention cell, and she was not in the mood for that. “Follow Beta Flight down.”

“Copy that, Admonitor. Thank you for your assistance.” She probably should have been less sarcastic. She could apologize to the officer later. Switching languages again, she calibrated the targeting computer to recognize both Admonitor and her clawcraft escort as friendlies. “After you, Beta Leader.”

The tone when the flight leader replied was oddly subdued and she would have said even respectful. “This way, Mitth’ele’arana,” and she felt a strange chill at hearing her own name, pronounced correctly, and in such tones . . . . Shaking off the feeling, she brought the fighter about to follow the clawcraft, making sure not to overshoot the slower fighters, and followed them towards the atmosphere.

Vice-Admiral Voss Parck was long accustomed to duty in the service of Mitth’raw’nuruodo being extremely unpredictable. The base on Nirauan, the slow, but steady, appearance of young Chiss soldiers willing, eager, even, to ally with their returned Syndic, the worlds and creatures they had encountered, battles fought, even Thrawn’s brief return to the Core to attend to some sort of business on Lord Vader’s behalf . . . he’d seen many strange things since the day long ago when the Strikefast had discovered an exiled warrior on a wild planet. Or rather, when Thrawn had found them. He’d long ago accepted that at the time, he’d had the idea of who was saving whom entirely backwards.

This, though . . . . “Admiral Thrawn?” The fortress was designed to be as much a working military base as possible and this included a command room with fully functioning tactical displays. At the moment these were showing a star system not far away, one which he suspected the Admonitor would be visiting soon, as warlords who used the sole inhabitable world as a way station and trading post for their arms trading and illicit trafficking had recently begun showing unseemly interest in the inhabited systems around them. Unseemly, and until now uncharacteristically aggressive for the relatively-primitive pirates. Uncharacteristic attracted attention. “We have a situation, sir.”

“The incoming fighter.” Thrawn, the white uniform almost as bright as the glowing eyes in the dimmed light, did not look up from the holographic display. “Yes, I know.”

“Admonitor reports that despite the fighter being an Alliance type, the pilot is transmitting an Imperial identification,” which was odd enough in itself. Combined with the second part, however . . . . “The pilot also appears to be a Chiss female, sir.” There was, he knew, one possibility, the protégée Thrawn had sponsored for the Academy (which had involved a great deal of personal political capital on Parck’s part as well), but as far as he knew, the girl had never been told about the fortress on Nirauan, and when last he’d heard, she’d been assigned to the Executor, so what she would be doing out here, in a Rebel ship . . . . “She’s demanding to speak with you. Niriz is
allowing her to land, but hasn’t made any promises, though apparently there is some sort of problem with the sentry ships.”

Now Thrawn did look up, raising one blue-black eyebrow. “A problem, Vice Admiral?”

“Apparently they challenged her initially, and she . . . reprimanded them rather sharply. But when she identified herself, the fighters . . . there was some confusion among the pilots and communications with the ground. Some of them—“ It had not made a great deal of sense, but Parck suspected he would need more years before he understood even half of the arcane Chiss politics that colored so many of their decisions. “Apparently two of the pilots adopted a defensive posture against the Admonitor once she identified herself, and there is some question as to the nature of the escort requested for her on landing.”

Thrawn was giving him the look he’d come to know meant he was overcomplicating matters. “How, precisely, did she identify herself to the Admonitor and pilots?” There was a quiet sound that might have been a stifled laugh from the figure standing at the far end of the room, but Thrawn ignored her and Parck tried to do the same. In the world of strange visitors, this one had indeed been the strangest thus far.

He had prided himself on learning Chiss names, and having minimized embarrassing mispronunciations about as far as seemed humanly possible, so he was able to repeat without stumbling, “Mitth’ele’arana, core name Thelea. And she specified that she is the daughter of a Lady Reli’set’harana. She’s rather adamant about speaking with you, sir.”

Thrawn froze, an unfamiliar expression creasing the normally-impassive features. “Lisetha,” he murmured, and Parck knew enough to recognize that as a core name. What he did not recognize was the strange, taut tone of his Admiral’s voice, as if even pronouncing the syllables were somehow painful.

Then Thrawn turned to the figure near the far displays. “You broke your word, Jedi.”

The woman turned, and Parck could see that odd streak of white in her hair, almost as luminous as the fabric of Thrawn’s uniform. “I did not. I never promised to hide her mother’s name from her, or her own. Only yours, and what it should mean to her. That she’s figured matters out on her own just goes to show blood will out.”

“To the point of deserting in a Rebel fighter?”

The woman smiled, but it was not a pleasant expression. “Desertion, or fleeing from chaos? I told you, your Emperor is dead. Anyone with an ounce of Force-sensitivity for a million light years in any direction knows. Undoubtedly she was a great deal closer to the event. Where else would she turn now when all seems lost? I admit, though,” and she looked away at nothing, something Parck had already noticed she did with disturbing frequency, “the fact she’s come alone, I did not expect.”

“Those communication fragments were incomplete,” Parck objected, still wishing Thrawn had not given this . . . Force-user, whomever she was, such latitude both in access to secure areas and in how she addressed everyone. But Thrawn had said, in the tone that brooked no objections, that she was an old acquaintance and longtime ally who was, as a general rule, to be trusted. She also, Parck had been forced to admit, had a degree of fluency in speaking the fluid, hard-to-follow Chiss language that even he and the longest-surviving of the Admonitor’s crew had yet to achieve. “There’s no proof—“

“The Force does not lie about matters such as that, Admiral Parck.” Then she paused, and her dark
Thrawn, who had seemed lost in thought, turned sharply to her. “What?”

“She’s here,” and the Jedi closed her eyes. “And she is very, very angry. With both of us. Oh, my. And she can tell I’m here. I was wrong. I should never have let her return to Imperial space. I should have dragged her here in binders if I had to.” She turned away from them both, a hand pressed to her mouth.

“Why?” Thrawn sounded less than patient. “What do you mean?”

The Jedi turned back to them, and Parck started violently as he realized the object in her hand was a lightsaber. “I’ll meet her myself, and run interference. Mitth’raw’nuruodo, I was right that she has the same talent as her mother, but I was wrong in letting it wait. She’s stronger than Lisetha ever was, and she’s broken through somehow, she’s learning to recognize and use her abilities, but . . . .” She winced and closed her eyes again. “So much anger and fear. And grief.”

“And your presence is going to help in that case?” Thrawn was reaching for the comm.

“No, but I can contain her. I think. At least, for the moment.” She was shaking her head as if trying to clear it. “It must have been meeting them on Telamara, it tripped something in her mind, started to clear away the blocks. And now . . . how did Vader not see, right under his nose?” She squared her shoulders. “She may be stronger than I suspected, and she is skating perilously close to the Dark Side. Unless you want a very angry, violent Force-user loose in your fortress, I’m going and I will calm her down before she sees you. At least, as much as I can.”

“Admiral?” Parck sensed from how they both looked at him that they had forgotten his presence. “Should I alert the security forces?”

Thrawn shook his head slowly. “No. Master Aleishia is correct, if there is a crisis of this nature, she is the most likely to be able to contain it.” He fixed the Jedi with a hard gaze. “Do not injure her.”

“Of course not.” The woman steeled herself, and started for the door. “This is not the first time I’ve had to contain a temper tantrum from Mitth’ele’arana. It is the first time she’s old enough to be armed, but don’t worry. I will bring her to you in one piece.” Then she switched languages, and said something Parck was sure he was misunderstanding, because it made so little sense, but Thrawn only bowed his head in response:

“Your daughter has come home, Mitth’raw’nuruodo, and she’s long past being diverted. I suggest you think very carefully about what you are going to say to her. You may only have one chance.”

Thelea tried to keep her temper in check, but it was not easy. Two of the Beta-Flight clawcraft were so close on the A-wing’s nacelles they were in danger of being caught in the backwash. When Admonitor launched its own TIE escort, she’d been surprised twice over: first by the pang of longing for her Interceptor, shields and hyperdrive or not, and second by the sudden aggressive acceleration of one of the clawcraft, swerving in what was clearly a warning to the TIEs to keep their distance. The pilots of both groups had cut her out of the comm loop, but she imagined there was a great deal of sniping going on. Whatever had happened, the clawcraft seemed to win, as the two remained tight on her until she was landing in the five-towered fortress’s hangar.

She cracked the A-wing’s cockpit seal, and hesitated. The hangar was a strange mix of Imperial and Chiss equipment, but she didn’t recognize any family crests or colors on display. Whatever
game Thrawn was playing he’d attracted more of their people to his service than she’d have imagined possible, given that whatever he had done, it had been worthy of exile and ought to have made him anathema to all. She noted the Kappa shuttle, rather than a newer Lambda, and the predominance of standard TIEs instead of Interceptors.

More pressing, though, than trying to sort out the hodgepodge of equipment were the pilots of the clawcraft and the unit of six Chiss troopers who seemed to be having some sort of heated discussion. And given the direction in which they were gesturing, no prizes for guessing the topic.

Shrugging off her long-since-useless life-support harness, she grasped the lightsaber hilt and pushed open the cockpit. The throbbing pain in her legs and the jolt of agony up her spine as she dropped to the hard floor reminded her that whatever other important matters she had to attend to here, her body was not going to tolerate much more of this. If she wanted to confront Thrawn in any fit state to hold a conversation, it was going to have to be soon.

And he was here. She could feel, in the midst of the orderly energy of the fortress, that same solid, brilliant presence she had felt in her reawakened memories, not responsive to the Force itself but a steady, safe touchstone in it. And there was another presence, brown-tinged in her mind, this one so attuned to the energy of this place she could feel it looking back. So. Aleishia was here, too, undoubtedly come straight from Telamara, and expecting her to meekly submit to this training of hers. After leading them all a merry chase, after offering her half-answers and hints. After allowing Thelea to leave someone she should have protected to die.

The voices of the guards and the two pilots forced her to pay attention to what was directly in front of her. The leader of the guards, an officer who looked to be a little older than she was (assuming, of course, her mother’s dear family had even been honest about her birth date) appeared to share the typical attitude of Naval troopers everywhere that pilots were arrogant adolescents with jumped-up opinions of themselves and any rank they’d acquired was purely for show. To be fair, the young female who was arguing with him was not doing much to dissuade that impression. Her tone had the slightly-harsh edge that suggested she was from a class not accustomed to being back-talked, and she was gesticulating sharply in Thelea’s direction.

It was not doing good things for Thelea’s headache. And while she would have been punished for the pitch of her own voice had she dared take it with her guardians, she certainly had heard it often enough to adopt it now. “What is going on here? Is this sort of madness tolerated by your Syndic? If so, I demand an Imperial escort as I didn’t come all this way to listen to children bickering!” I must take after Aunt more than I thought.

The captain of the guard glowered, but the pilot turned to her and was instantly contrite, dropping her gaze and looking as if she were fighting the urge to bow. “Forgive me, my lady, but there seems to be some confusion about how you are to be treated.” She used the same term that Seln had, Val’an’lora, and now Thelea had a feeling it might not be flattery or overstatement. “You are not a prisoner.”

“I should hope not. And if I were, I’d expect a stormtrooper escort. If it gets me to the Grand Admiral faster, perhaps I should request one.” She gave the captain a narrow-eyed look. “What orders were you given?”

He met her gaze without flinching and somewhere in the primitive part of her brain, Thelea could feel herself relax just a little. After all this time it was still somehow a relief to be among her own kind. “We were told that a person calling herself Mitth’ele’arana would be landing in the hangar, and to escort her to secure quarters.”
“Right on the first part, but the only place I am going right now is to speak to Grand Admiral Thrawn,” and she had the satisfying experience of seeing them all cringe at how casually she used his core name. “Not only are there matters of Empire which he must be informed of, I have personal business that’s waited too long.” And I will not wait any longer, even if I collapse in the process! As much as the muscles in her legs were quivering from strain and exhaustion, that seemed like an increasingly probable outcome.

“I told him, my lady, but Cha’fers is always stubborn,” the pilot said, giving the guard captain a narrow-eyed look of her own. “And he does not always like orders relayed by the humans.”

“Cha’fers, is it?” Thelea filed the name away, trying to recall her uncle’s expression when remembering the name of a servant who’d made some middling error where punishment could wait. “And what is your name?”

Now the pilot did bow her head. “Em’ailith, my lady. I serve the Syndic now, but my family has always been allied to the Second and it is an honor to meet Lady Reli’set’harana’s heir.”

Heir . . . .? Thelea managed a crisp nod that might even have passed muster on the Executor (she crushed down the memory-not now!) “I know the Syndic is here, Em’ailith. Can you take me to him?”

“Pilot Em’ailith is not authorized to escort anyone within the fortress.” Cha’fers sounded about as cooperative as the average Navy trooper, too.

“Then you can take me,” and Thelea could hear her own tone getting harsher and for once, she didn’t care. “I am running out of patience, captain.” Her fingers tightened around the hilt of the lightsaber and she could feel her thumb creeping towards the activation stud.

She saw the genuine anger tightening his jaw and the corners of his eyes, but before he could speak a voice behind them said, “I will escort her.”

Thelea’s thumb pressed the button, and both Em’ailith and Cha’fers, with his troopers, jumped back as the pale gold blade sprang to life. Aleishia, standing just past her would-be escorts, dressed in the same dark-blue robes she’d worn on Telamara, was watching Thelea with those dark, human eyes, the white in her hair bright against the brown.

“You lied to me.” She brought the saber up, too angry to care about the hot, throbbing pain the motion prompted from her wound.

“I never lied.” Aleishia didn’t move. “I did not tell you the entire truth, but as I said, I gave your father my word—“

“You lied about Seln.” She had replayed that memory of the old retainer, too, during the long journey in hyperspace, and had realized it was a blend of several memories, stolen moments when she was old enough to learn but young enough to not ask awkward questions. The old retainer had indeed known his ships, and he’d told her about them, planted the first seeds that made her later escape possible. His own sudden banishment must have been her family’s response to his kindness to her. And she had repaid him by running away again, “You let me leave him to die.”

She had the grim satisfaction of seeing, feeling, the surge of guilt the words prompted. “He would not have wanted you to risk—“

“I owed him, and you let me leave him to die!” She took step forward and the other Chiss fell back, but Aleishia did not move. “I remember now. I remember a lot of things now. You put some kind
of block in my mind, you made me forget because he told you to do it, but it doesn’t work any more. I know who I am. I remember my mother, and I remember my father. And if you think you’re going to stop me from seeing him now—"

“You were never meant to forget forever.” The old Jedi’s voice was flat and cold. She almost sounded like a Chiss. “Only so long as you needed protection. Your running off to the Empire, in fact, made it necessary the blocks remain longer than I or your father ever intended.” She grimaced, a bit. “As did your father’s exile. Now you know.”

“I know who I am,” Thelea said, unwilling to listen to what sounded like fast talk. “But there are a lot more things I deserve to know and I refuse—"

“You will not be told anything until you calm yourself,” and now Thelea saw the lightsaber in the other woman’s hand. “Your lessons begin now, and the first is you will show self-control before you hurt yourself or others.”

“Hurt someone? I left someone I should have protected to die! I lost my wingmen,” and she was so tired it was only a concerted effort that kept a sob from choking out. Giriad. Rurik! “We’ve lost the Empire, and I am done being moved about like a token in a **wei-jio** game!” She swung the saber into her clumsy at-ready position. “You will—"

She had no idea how as Aleishia never moved, but a blow slammed into her chest and she was sprawled backwards on the hard deck, every bone in her body jarring and her already-aching joints and back stabbing with pain. She tried to sit up, reach for her lightsaber that she’d dropped, but somehow Aleishia was beside her, and the tip of the silvery-blue saber was pointed at her throat.

The Jedi merely stared at her for a long moment, her sense still serene, but a tranquil kind of fury, not peacefulness “If you wish to fight me, then reach for your saber. If you wish to hear the answers you claim to seek, then you will, by the Force, control yourself! I will take you to him, but not when you are roiling in so much anger it’s a minor miracle you aren’t already deep in the Dark Side!”

Thelea felt the bile rising in her throat, and part of her mind screamed a denial. The lightsaber hilt twitched towards her fingers from where it had fallen, and she felt a perverse surge of satisfaction that how Aleishia’s eyes widened in alarm. “I’m not being put off with more lies and half-truths and orders and being left behind. I mean it. If he tries to dismiss me again he’ll have to put me in a detention cell.”

Aleishia stared at her for a long moment. And then Thelea heard a quiet voice, not deep within her mind they way her mother’s had been but still not aloud, I am sorry, Thelea. But I can’t let you hurt anyone here, or yourself. There was such an impression of genuine regret she found herself believing it. “Are you prepared to be calm and in control of yourself?” was all the Jedi said aloud. The lightsaber’s blade didn’t waver from her neck.

She drew in a deep, steadying breath. “I will be calm. But I will also expect answers.”

Aleishia nodded. “And you’ll have them.” There was a hiss as the lightsaber deactivated and vanished back to somewhere in the folds of her robes. They she held out a hand. “Come along, child.”

Thelea winced at just how much she needed the hand to her feet. “He knows I’m here, doesn’t he?”

“I’d be surprised if there were anyone in the fortress who didn’t know by now, with the fuss you’ve caused,” the Jedi said dryly. Then she looked at both Cha’fers and Em’ailith. “Thank you
both. I will show Mitth’ele’arana the way from here.” The guard captain look less than convinced, but apparently Aleishia’s words had weight here, as he stepped back and his detachment followed suit.

Em’ailith looked as if she were going to protest, until Thelea shook her head and she stepped back as well, looking far more reluctant, but she bowed her head and said respectfully, “As you wish, my lady.” Again, Thelea felt a strange chill how naturally she said it, and how natural it sounded.

Aleishia gestured, and Thelea fell in beside her. “Do I even want to ask what all this is?” She did see some Imperial uniforms, but relatively few, and the fortress itself seemed to belong to neither world.

“Your father has made very productive use of his time since he was exiled, and of your late Emperor’s resources.” There was definitely a smugness in that “late” part. “Palpatine may have thought Thrawn was doing his will, but he only cooperated as it served his purposes. Stabilizing and unifying these regions is necessary. As your people have never shown sufficient inclination, the Empire served instead. But as you can see, he has not forgotten where he comes from, nor have many forgotten him.”

“So he is building his own Empire.” Traitor, murmured her training. Madman, said the voice of her uncle.

Savior, said a voice that sounded distinctly like her mother’s.

Aleishia, maddeningly, chuckled. “For someone who has all the Force-sensitivity of an especially-dense rock, your father at times shows an almost Jedi-like determination to make the galaxy as stable and secure as possible. The dark ones, the ships and beings you’ve encountered, cemented in his mind that fragmented peoples and bickering warlords cannot protect ordinary beings from threats like that. Therefore, he did what he did for your people, and when they cast him out, he found your Empire.” Aleishia was once again walking at that brisk pace Thelea had noticed on their first meeting, far too quick and ground-covering for her age and height. “I do not always agree with his methods, but I agree that the threats he fears cannot be ignored. Bear that in mind before you condemn either of us too harshly.”

“So I could be forgotten and lied to, people like Seln can be slaughtered, people like the Imperials on Telamara or the freighter we were escorted can be sacrificed as long as the greater plan goes on.”

They had reached a heavy door, and Aleishia stopped, turning to face Thelea. Now she could feel the energy pressing out from the Jedi and swirling around her, a maelstrom of light and warmth that responded to other flows of energy. “The plan is greater than any of us. Even him. Even me.” She stared intently and Thelea felt the weight behind the words as if it were a real, solid thing. “If you truly can remember now, then you should remember this: no matter what he’s done, no matter how rightfully angry you are, remember that your mother . . . .” She paused, drawing a deep breath and again Thelea could feel the old Jedi steeling herself. “Listen before you act,” was all she said.

The doors slid open, and Aleishia lead her through into a surprisingly-banal command room. It was larger, of course, than Thelea was accustomed to seeing, without the constraints of shipboard architecture, but the computer banks and the command chair at the center of the room, and the smaller chairs nearby, were all standard Navy gray and even of Imperial design. She felt herself instinctively starting to relax in familiar surroundings, but the stabbing aches in her body and the hot, pulsing feeling around the wound on her arm reminded her why she was here, and how she’d arrived. The room’s lights were dimmed, and she noted the presence of holoprojectors in the floor, though none were activated and she saw only standard two-d tactical displays alight.
There was a viewscreen taking up the far wall, and it was currently showing another basic display—
the skies around the fortress, currently busy with clawcraft and TIEs taking off. Her escort,
presumably, returning to their duty stations. She hope Em’ailith would not be in any trouble for
taking up her side. Then again, Thelea thought, focusing on the figures standing before the screen,
she ought to have influence with the person who’d make any disciplinary decisions.

Thrawn wore a white uniform, similar to the pale Vice Admiral’s uniform she’d last seen him
wearing more than three years earlier, but with the gold epaulets and the more-ornate rank plate
that marked him as one of the Emperor’s Grand Admirals. His appearance was otherwise
unchanged, even to eyes that knew the signs of aging among their people. He was turned half-
away, and for a long moment he didn’t look at her, his fingers flexing just a bit as if he were
fighting the urge to clench his fists.

The man beside him was human, in the uniform and rank plates of a Vice Admiral, and for an
instant Thelea overlooked him until it registered that she had seen him before. Spoken to him
before. So, she thought, that explains why the Force wanted me to remember a miserable palace
party and a bizarre conversation about art. He is one of Thrawn’s creatures. The Vice Admiral was
staring at her, doing a very good job for a human at hiding his shock.

Thelea stepped a pace ahead, and Aleishia let her go, staying just out of sight (but not, quite
literally, out of mind, as Thelea could sense her standing by.) She did not come to attention. She
was, after all, borderline out of uniform, almost too tired to stand, her arm throbbed, and it was
taking all her energy to stare at Thrawn without flinching, waiting until he made the first move.

Finally, he turned to look at her, his face as perfectly composed and unreadable as ever. But now,
underneath, she could sense a roiling, burning-cold mass of emotions, like a sea under thick ice.
The eyes, though, gazed steadily at her, and his posture was military-perfect. “Commander
Thelea,” he said, then paused, and while she doubted either Aleishia or the human Vice Admiral
noticed the change, said in a tenser, less-controlled tone, “Mitth’ele’arana.”

Thelea had thought of many, many things she had wanted to say when she saw him. Many involved
screaming and obscenities, many involved begging, some would probably have reduced her to
sobs. Now, though, her body heavy as lead, arm throbbing, and Aleishia’s warning ringing in her
mind, she could only muster up enough energy to say, as acidly as she could, “Hello, Father.”
Chapter Twenty-Three

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thrawn closed his eyes briefly, and she felt a sharp stab of satisfaction. Then he looked at her again, still cool and steady. He took her in again, head to toe, just as he had aboard the Victorious, only this time his gaze paused at her arm. “You’re injured,” he said, half-accusatory.

She glanced at the torn flight suit and felt a strange detachment, as if it weren’t even her arm. “The primitives on the sanctuary moon,” she said, and of course he simply nodded, knowing exactly what she meant when even she wasn’t entirely sure! “I had to fight my way past them and the Rebels after my fighter crashed, which was still preferable to being blasted to atoms against the planetary shield. I’m sure you’re more informed than I am about why we were there in the first place. I didn’t know when we arrived and I still haven’t figured it out completely. And now it doesn’t matter. The Emperor’s dead, Lord Vader is dead, and the Death Star and the Executor are both gone. What are you going to do about it?”

There was a flash of alarm, quickly hidden, across the Vice Admiral’s face, and Thelea felt a similar twinge, deeply hidden, from her father. Behind her, though, there was just a surge of satisfaction, relief, but tempered with unease. At least the Jedi had the decency to know this could mean nothing but war without end as the Empire fractured and the chaos-loving Rebels scrambled to rule the galaxy they’d just ‘liberated.’

When Thrawn spoke again, though, he only said, “Is that a proper way to frame such a report to a superior officer, Commander?” His voice was taut, though, not precisely the perfect cool command tones he had always used before.

Thelea felt a heated rush of anger that almost left her dizzy, but it faded so quickly she wondered if Aleishia were doing something. She couldn’t tell, though, and in the wake of the anger she was left with a strange, detached kind of clarity. What had she come here for, really?

Thrawn was staring at her, clearly awaiting an answer. Instead she fumbled in her other cargo pocket, feeling a flush of sadness and a duller kind of anger as her fingertips brushed the medal that Thrawn himself had once presented to her. Then her hand closed around the rank plate, and she pulled it out. Little squares of blue and red, nothing special at all, really, but they represented everything she had worked to achieve, all her accomplishments as a cadet, a pilot, an Imperial officer. Everything she’d struggled to become, so that she would no longer be a nameless nothing.

Clenching her hand, she threw the rank plate as hard as she could in the general direction of her father’s head. Automatically he snatched it out of the air, but she saw the brief flicker of genuine astonishment in his eyes. She didn’t give him time to speak, though.

“Grand Admiral Thrawn, I resign my commission in the Imperial Navy.” She didn’t need any special abilities to feel the shock from all three of the others in the room. “Now, Father, there’s a conversation that’s long overdue. We’re having it now.”

Thrawn stared down at the rank plate for a long, silent, moment. Then he slipped it into his uniform pocket and turned to the human officer beside him. “Admiral Parck, my daughter will
require quarters here. Ideally near Master Aleishia’s,” and the narrow-eyed look he directed at the Jedi ought to have frozen plasma. “Would you please see to those arrangements?”

If Thelea hadn’t already known this Admiral (Parck, apparently) was one of Thrawn’s men, she would have known now simply by how he nodded briskly, despite the curiosity practically rolling from him in waves. “Yes, sir. At once.” He was human enough she saw the desperately inquisitive glance he threw her as he headed for the door, but his pace never slowed.

Thrawn waited until the doors had closed behind him before turning back to Thelea. “That was very rash behavior.”

“Don’t start parenting now, it doesn’t become you.” It was rude beyond measure, even in Basic, and completely unforgivable by their culture’s standpoint, but Thelea was too exhausted to care. “She only told me half-truths and made me leave someone I should have helped to die for me,” she said with a jab towards Aleishia. “You lied to me. You looked me in the eye and lied to me and I was grateful!”

“I told you what it was necessary for you to know at the time.” He didn’t look directly at her, though.

“What was necessary for whom?” Thelea retorted. “For you? All I wanted to know was who I really am. You not only didn’t tell me, which would have made you just like all the rest of my relatives, you lied about my name because you knew the real one would have pointed me to you. And how did that happen, anyway? Unless I have some older brother or sister you’re not telling me about why does my name nod to both families? I gather Mother was Second. If I’m eldest, I’m her family.”

Thrawn’s jaw was working, but he didn’t speak, and Thelea glanced over her shoulder at Aleishia. The Jedi shrugged, just slightly. “Lisetha was . . . of an independent turn of mind. She wanted your name to reflect both of your parents clearly.”

“Apparently Father didn’t feel the same way,” Thelea said, looking back at Thrawn. “I would rather have had my name than a medal. Or were you ashamed of me?”

Now he looked up sharply. “Of course not!” And somehow she believed him. The tone was genuinely shocked at the notion. “You excelled beyond even my expectations. But tell me, if I had told you who you are when we met, if I had acknowledged you as mine,” and she thought, though she wasn’t sure, there was just the slightest break in his voice at the word, “what would that have accomplished besides confirm the worst sort of suspicions about you in the Fleet? Had I sponsored you openly, you would have just another case of nepotism, and you would have been a target for anyone wishing to strike at me. This was safer.”

“Safer for you. I haven’t been safe since the day I ran away from my beloved guardians.” She could feel herself shaking with exhaustion, and clung to that heated anger. It was the only thing keeping her upright. “Lord Vader knew I carried a lightsaber. He made me show it to him, commented on it, analyzed it. He figured out more about my mother in five minutes than I could piece together from either of you. And I’m sure he knew where I came by it, and why you must have gone to so much trouble to hide me.” She gritted her teeth. “That’s probably why I was recruited into the Inner Circle in the first place. Not for me, just to get at you.”

“He what?” Aleishia had moved around so she was within Thelea’s line of sight. “Why didn’t you tell me about this?” The question was, maddeningly, directed at Thrawn, not her.

“I didn’t know.” Thrawn’s face was set in that cold, ice-carved mask again. “You said that you
couldn’t tell me anything more about the Inner Circle.”

“In public? I couldn’t. And in private, I wouldn’t have. Why would I have disobeyed their orders just because an Admiral I’d never met asked me to?” She pushed her right sleeve up, gritting her teeth to keep from wailing at the pain that prompted in her wound, turning her forearm up.

And gasped, but not from pain. The brand was still visible, but only barely, faded almost invisibly into her skin. It was always dormant unless they had wanted to contact her, but now . . . . “If they were Vader’s agents, or the Emperors, I suppose it doesn’t matter now.” She closed her eyes. “It’s not like they’ve given me anything useful for months, anyway.”

There was a long pause. “True, it no longer matters,” Thrawn said finally. “If the Emperor and Lord Vader are dead—”

“They are,” Thelea said. “Believe me, I felt it. Right before I felt the Death Star explode, and probably the Executor, and what I can only assume were tens of thousands of people dying. Then of course I fell out of the tree I’d crashed in and knocked myself unconscious.” She looked from Thrawn to Aleishia and back again. “Why did you make her leave me? Why did you let me spend all my life not knowing what I could do? Vader knew and it’s just luck that he apparently thought I was more useful alive than dead.”

“You were safer not knowing,” Thrawn said, and there was something cold and hard in his voice. He was looking at Aleishia, though, not at her. “There was always the chance that unused, untrained, those abilities would wither. They never brought Lisetha anything but trouble. And her death.” His voice never wavered, and there was nothing but that sense of cold, clear ice.

“Lisetha chose her own path,” Aleishia said, equally icy. “She gave her life stopping a great threat from breaking free into the galaxy. She bought us the years we’ve had, like a true Jedi—”

“And they are coming again!” Thelea wondered exactly how much trouble she’d be in if she tried to hit them both. “And you’re out here, building some personal fiefdom, while you’re off hiding on some backwater hellhole, while the Empire, the only thing strong enough to fight them off, is dying!”

“The Empire,” and there was no mistaking the disdain in Aleishia’s voice. “A Sith Lord’s plaything.”

“And your late, lamented Republic was a paradise,” Thrawn said, still with a tone that made a glacier seem temperate. “Disorganized, willfully ignorant. My own people may be fools, but even they have the sense to know the galaxy is a dangerous place. Your Jedi and your vaunted Force, sitting apart as chaos spreads in your own government—”

Aleishia bristled, visibly and psychically, and it grated on Thelea like real spines. “The Jedi were flawed. That is why I’m here. But you can’t just ignore what she is, or that the Emperor was never concerned with anything but gathering power to himself, for himself.”

“And that is why I am here,” Thrawn retorted. Thelea had the maddening impression they’d completely forgotten she was there. “This fiefdom,” and a hard look in her direction said he had not forgotten, though it might have been better if he had, “was created with Imperial resources, and serves Imperial ends. Including stabilizing the galaxy, which we will still accomplish despite this setback from those who have turned longing for the Republic into fanatic terrorism.”

“Which Thelea can best assist by developing all her abilities,” Aleishia said, “including those you may not wish to acknowledge.”
Thelea ground down an urge to scream. “By the time you two stop arguing, either the Rebels or those black ships will have overrun this entire sector!”

Thrawn turned on her, drawing himself up to his not-inconsiderable full height. Thelea wondered absently if her mother had been especially slight, as she certainly hadn’t inherited her stature from her father’s side. “Mitth’ele’arana—“

“Don’t you dare!” She could feel her legs shaking, whether it was anger or exhaustion she wasn’t sure. “I came for answers, and because, gods and ancestors help us, you’re the only chance the Empire has and a strong, united Empire is the only chance the galaxy has. I lost my wing, I lost the only friends I’ve ever had, I nearly lost my life just getting here! If I wanted to be shouted at and listen to fighting I could have crawled home to my uncle and aunts instead.” She thought of Seln, bowing to her and treating her as a great lady, and of Em’ai’ith and her allegiance to the Second family. “If Mother was eldest, perhaps I should go back. Her rank and seat are mine by rights then, aren’t they, no matter what happened to you. Unless,” and she knew it was the anger and exhaustion talking, but after listening to them fight, she longed to lash out and have it sting, “I wasn’t born of a legitimate bonded marriage. You only admitted to being my father and knowing my mother, you never said if it was more than a casual accident after a bit too much to drink—“

Years of living with her aunt and uncle meant even without the surge of alarm from Aleishia she knew instinctively what the shift of his weight and the sudden, sharp swing of his hand presaged and she didn’t have the energy to even duck. But from some reserve of that rock-like, icy coldness Thrawn checked the blow, and beneath the anger Thelea saw a brief flare of shock, more at his own loss of control than her words. When he spoke, it was with pained, taut, care, as if keeping every word even and calm was challenging beyond imagination. “You may say what you wish about me,” he said, jaw so tight it was almost a growl, “but you will never speak of your mother like that again. How dare you even suggest she would—“

“How would I know?” Thelea fought the urge to apologize, even as the remorse threatened to drain away what she’d thought was righteous anger. “No one told me. Even now, you don’t just tell me.” She looked at Aleishia, whose hand was still partially in the fold of her robe—reaching for the lightsaber, Thelea realized. “You’re both fighting the same thing, you both claim you want to protect me, but you won’t even tell me why or what from!”

Thrawn turned away, his fist still clenched as if he were trying to draw blood with his nails. “I want you to be safe. And I . . . .” He paused for a long moment. “I wanted to keep the worst of it from you. Because I didn’t protect your mother. I can still protect you. And I will, whether you or the Jedi like it or not.”

“Still so stubborn,” said a quiet voice somewhere behind Thelea, “and me not here to bring you down a peg.”

Thelea saw the look on her father’s face first. It was shock, unrestrained, unconcealed, naked, shock, and then for just a moment a longing so painful it hurt worse than any blow could have. He was staring past her and she turned, nearly colliding with Aleishia, who stumbled back and had her lightsaber in hand, but with a look of such amazement Thelea doubted the weapon would have been any use.

The woman standing in the room with them was so real, such a solid presence, it took Thelea a moment to realize that she could see the far wall of the command center through her. She was also bathed in a soft, greenish-gold light that didn’t seem to come from anywhere in the room, but even in the odd glow, it was obvious that her skin was pale azure, the dark hair tied back in a loose, wisping braid was cobalt, and her glowing eyes were red. She was dressed in a plain black jumpsuit
of a style Thelea didn’t recognize, without any rank or house insignia, and she wore no weapons. She looked to be about Thrawn’s age, the same slight changes obvious to other Chiss but not yet showing flecks of silver in her hair or heavy lines on her face that even a human would have noticed. And she was looking at all three of them with an expression that was equal parts longing and amusement.

Aleishia took another step back, her hand coming up in almost a warding gesture. “This can’t be . . .”

Thelea looked to her father, but he had turned away, and she felt a sudden, unreasoning flush of fear because a Syndic, a Grand Admiral, her father, should never be waverling on his feet, his eyes closed and an expression of barely-controlled pain creasing his features. She looked back at the apparition, and she knew that face, too, she would have known it, she thought, even without all her memories coming back clearly at last.

“Mother?”

Lisetha’s . . . image? Spirit? Ghost? . . . smiled gently. “Thelea,” and it was the voice she’d heard before, glowing and soft and warm. “My little one. I’m so sorry. As I told you, it’s been so hard to reach you, and it’s taking all our strength to manage this now. But with all three of you here, we had to chance it.”

“We? Where are you? Who’s we? How can we see you?” Thelea could feel herself shaking, fighting an absurd, childish urge to fling herself into her mother’s insubstantial arms, though she could clearly see it would be like attempting to embrace a holo.

“There are others where you are?” Aleishia’s tone was so strange, so hopeful, and Thelea could feel the Jedi’s grief almost as clearly as her own. “Are there . . . do you know who they are?”

Lisetha shook her head sadly. “Not the ones you seek, Master. At least, not that I can ever see. There are times like this, when I’m . . . aware, and the Others can help me, guide my mind to seek out yours, but other times . . . it’s like a dream. I drift, I sleep . . . .” She closed her eyes, and her image seemed to flicker. “I know there are other minds, some that come and go, some that stay, but I can’t reach them. And it’s taking everything for us to manage this.” She gestured towards her form, and the amused edge to her smile was back. “I have little time. The dark ones may sense this, know the Others are helping me. The breach I closed . . . it stopped them bringing more through, but it trapped something there even as I was caught on the other side.”

“The dark ones.” Thelea shuddered. “The black ships.” Something powerful . . . the man-machine cyborg she’d confronted on Telamara. “Mother, we can’t stop them. We can barely slow them down.”

“You have to find the creature who came through the breach, and whatever . . . semblance of home it’s built up around itself.” She looked away, as if she were a holo and she were looking at someone outside the scanner’s range. “You’ve seen the sort of agents it can create.”

“The man in the tunnels,” said Thelea. “He said ‘the machine remembers you, lightsaber . . . Chiss . . .’ he thought I was you!” Looking at her mother, truly seeing Lisetha, it seemed like an absurd mistake, even for a human. Her mother was taller (and Thelea wondered if perhaps her mother’s family just hadn’t fed her enough, as clearly her height was a trait from neither parent) and with fine, beautiful features, but then again, more than one race in the galaxy claimed the Chiss all looked alike, with black hair, blue skin, and those eyes. And it had been, after all, the same lightsaber.
“You did so well in the caves, daughter.” Lisetha’s smile was nothing but warmth and approval now, and Thelea saw the involuntary twitch as if her mother, too, wanted to reach out and hold her, but knew it was futile. “While the races this lost one corrupts and drives to fight will need to be confronted by military strength,” and she looked past Thelea, but Thrawn still said nothing, “some of its allies, like those you’ve seen, can best be confronted with the Force. I told you that you can be a stronger, better Jedi than I ever could have been. Please, Thelea, learn from my old Master. Be a better student than I was.” The insubstantial gaze turned to Aleishia. “You will teach her, won’t you?”

“I would have long since,” Aleishia said, “if I’d been allowed to.” She, too, looked back, but again there was no sound from Thrawn.

Lisetha sighed, her shoulders sagging just a bit. “Please, both of you, don’t fight any more. This is too important and the darkness we’re facing too severe. This is only one being, but it is ancient, and powerful, and cut off from its own kind it has gone mad. If it can reopen the breach I closed, or create a stable gate to the galaxy it came from—or any one of infinite others . . . unless it and its allies here are defeated, everything will be lost. The things they’ve done elsewhere, when they were united, and sane . . . .” She shuddered.

Aleishia nodded. “You know I will train her. And you know we’re trying. I’m afraid the galaxy’s situation has not substantially improved since you’ve been . . . gone.”

“I know.” She grimaced. “I had hoped our people might come around. Clearly I was too optimistic. If I’d only been here . . . forgive me, daughter,” and she looked back to Thelea. “I never meant to leave you. I only wanted you to be safe.”

“I know,” and Thelea could feel the truth of it again, and the longing, pained love. “There’s so much I need to ask you, so much I can’t remember yet. I wish . . . .”

“No point in wishing,” but if it was chiding, it was very, very gentle. “I love you, my daughter, and I am so proud of you. That will have to be enough for both of us now.” Her image flickered, and seemed more translucent. Again, she looked away as if seeing someone who wasn’t there, and her expression might have been pleading.

Deliberately, she moved forward, though Thelea noticed with an eerie shiver that her feet didn’t quite seem to touch the ground. Her mother, though, didn’t turn or reach out to either her or Aleishia. Her gaze was fixed on Thrawn, still turned away, his fists clenched and pressed tight to the seams of his white trousers, in a mockery of Academy-proper attention.

Lisetha paused, and again Thelea saw her fighting the instinct to reach out. “Can you not even bear to look at me, husband?” she said softly, and the weight of pain behind her words made Thelea hurt somewhere deep inside, the same place that had burned with the weight of her anger before.

Thrawn, finally, turned and looked, and the stoic, perfect officer’s facade was cracked and barely in place. “What good would it do?” he asked, his voice rasping as if even speaking were a strain. “You’re a phantom. You’ll disappear again, fade away like melting frost.”

“If I could stay . . . .” Lisetha shook her head. “Forgive me, my love. I never meant to leave you.”

“Forgive you?” Thrawn stared at her. “I should have protected you! You should never have been there, never have had to go on your own. The Council . . . .” He cut himself off. “I should have saved you. I lost you, I lost Thrass, and they learned nothing . . . not this time. Never again. Now I answer only to myself, and this time I will have a force nothing will stand against, such as our people have never dreamed of, and no Council holding me back. No Emperor now, either. No
matter what I have to do, no one else will ever . . . .” He stopped himself, and Thelea had the odd sense he’d never said that aloud before, even to himself. “I will even protect our people from themselves. Whether they welcome it or not.”

Lisetha was looking at him with an expression that could only be described as adoring. “I know you will. But you can’t do it entirely alone.”

“A leader is always alone.” He sounded just a bit steadier. “To be a true commander, you must love your troops, your ships, your fleet—”

“—And to be a great commander, you must order the deaths of that which you love,” Lisetha finished for him. “I remember.”

Thrawn studied her for a long moment, a far more lingering gaze than the inspection he’d given Thelea on her arrival. “I chose a life that requires me to destroy the things I love most. I should never have permitted myself to love anything or anyone needlessly.”

Once again Lisetha shook her head. “You chose to fight to protect our people. When they rejected you, you found a new way,” and she gestured to the command room, the fortress, the ships beyond, and Thelea could almost see them. “I chose to serve in my own way. If I could do it over again, I would not change anything. Not the sacrifice, and not you. Everything you’ve done has been for our people, for the humans, for worlds you’ve never even seen. There is no one better to face what’s coming. I know this. So do you. Only, please . . . .” And she looked back at Thelea and Aleishia. “Remember, you are not alone. And I don’t just mean whatever admiring junior officer you’ve had latch on like a limpet this time.” There was a teasing glint in her eyes, and she looked at her daughter. “Your father does need his audience. I was never unconditionally awed enough to fill the role.”

Thrawn looked briefly nonplused. “Limpets? Really, wife . . . .” He almost smiled. “It was your role, lady of the Second Family, to awe me. I was supposed to be grateful you even condescended to notice my existence. What ever possessed you to accept my Family’s offer?”

Her brows arched delicately, and even with that strange greenish glow and see-through, Lisetha looked ever centimeter the noble lady. “Perhaps I recognized greatness among us,” she said with an archness made worse by the High-Family accent. Thrawn’s lip quirked, as if he were amused by some private joke. “And a good thing I did.” Once again, her gaze turned to Thelea and there was that mental sense of belong, wanted . . . loved. “Or we would not have our daughter.”

Thrawn stared at Thelea, and she had a strange sense of deja vu. He had studied her like that the first time they met, at least the first time since Thelea had entered Imperial service, examined her as if looking for something. Now she could tell that he saw it. Her mother? Him? Whatever he’d been seeking, now he seemed to find it, accept it. “No, and the Empire . . . and I . . . would be poorer for it.”

Thelea had an eerie feeling at the word Empire, and more even than the cold wash of rage that had torn through her with the certainty that the Emperor—that Palpatine, that grasping black hand, not Emperor any more-was dead, she realized Empire now meant something entirely different. Whether Aleishia had planted the suggestion, whether her mother had somehow in those attempts to reach her, or she would have always come to it, it didn’t matter. The suspicion that had told her to come here was correct: Thrawn would lead them, and this would be a new Empire. An Empire worth serving. An Empire that would stand against the creatures moving in the dark and turn them back.

She saw the expression on her mother’s face, the knowing smile, and she had a strange sense she
had passed some final test. Then Lisetha’s form flickered again, the glow even weaker. “Mother, no! Don’t leave me again.”

“No,” and Thrawn spoke almost in the same breath. “Don’t go. Not again.”

“I wish I could stay,” and her voice sounded fainter. She was looking away, pleading, but this time there seemed to be no reprieve. “If I can reach you again, I swear, I will. Master, daughter... may the Force be with you. Thelea... be strong. I love you always. Remember that?”

“I will.” She had an immature urge to scream and sob again, but now all she wanted was for Mother to stay. “Mother...”

Lisetha, the glow fading visibly now, turned away with an air of resolution, her gaze fixed on her husband. “Thrawn...” She reached out a hand, leaning towards him as if she could somehow bridge the planes of existence by sheer will, and murmured something too soft for Thelea to hear.

Thrawn had the same impulse, raising his hand as if to caress her cheek. “Lisetha...”

Lisetha’s form flickered again, faded, and vanished.

Thelea realized she was shivering. The chamber seemed cavernous and cold, and she felt Aleishia’s hand on her arm. She stepped away, not forcefully, though, and looked at her father. His hand was still reaching for where Lisetha had been, but with fingers clenched tight as if he’d tried to grab thin air and was still just slightly surprised he couldn’t hold it. Again some part of her trembled at the sight of the Grand Admiral, the most powerful person left in her universe, looking as lost and bereft as...she was. He lowered his arm slowly, the cold, icy mask sliding back across his features, but now she knew just how much a mask it was, and why he kept it so firmly in place. His whole frame was still rigid, a tension so severe it had to be painful.

The room was so quiet, Thelea could hear the quiet hum of the tactical displays even over the pounding of her own pulse. None of them had moved and Thelea had the strange sense time was had ceased passing.

Finally, she took a tentative half-step forward, surprised at how badly her legs trembled with even that slight effort. Taking a hesitant breath, she whispered, “Father?”

Thrawn blinked, and his eyes focused on her. For a moment she saw him drawing himself up, the officer, warlord, supreme commander now... then something shifted in that strong, icy presence, and he turned to her, opening his arms even as Thelea closed the distance between them. It should have been the most improper thing—he was a Grand Admiral, a Syndic, even if he were not she was far too old for childish embraces, but he did not say anything, and he held her until some of the shaking stopped. As she rested against his shoulder, she had another of those clouded, confused memories, when she was much smaller and his uniform a different color, and she had been hiding from the shadows in the dark corners of her room.

“You are going to make them go away?” She wasn’t sure if she said it in the memory or aloud until she felt the movement as he nodded.

“We are going to make them go away,” and oddly that was what he had said in he memory, too, in the same matter-of-fact tone. Now, she suspected, it would be far more than simply turning on lamps and moving them until the shadows shrank to inconsequence.

Thelea felt heavy, warm lethargy seeping through her, and she forced herself to look up, though to her distracted surprise he didn’t immediately release her. “I’m going to get your uniform dirty.”
She had never before appreciated how much easier it was when your daily dress was black or dull gray.

Thrawn looked down at her, raising an eyebrow. “Even if you do, I can assure you, they did issue me more than one.”

She laughed, short and sharp and too open, but the thin smile he gave her in return was not disapproving. Still, she forced herself to step away, feeling steadier already. She thought there was just the slightest trace of regret in his expression when she did. “I do need to report,” she said, wishing there were chairs closer and that if there were it would be proper to sit while reporting to any senior officer, let alone a Grand Admiral. “There are things you have to hear about, the Death Star, the Executor, what I saw of the Rebels, even the fighter I stole has some features I rather like, and I don’t mean the shields.” She could feel more of the hysterical laughter trying to creep out, and she forcibly steeled herself.

Thrawn nodded, again the Admiral, and he withdrew her rank plates from his pocket. “Besides us,” and he glanced briefly at Aleishia, who remained silent, “only Parck heard your . . . rather impetuous declaration. If you want these back, neither he nor I will say any more about it.”

Thelea stared at the little red and blue squares in his hand, and felt just the slightest twinge of longing. But, she realized, it wasn’t for the rank or the duties or even the flying. She’d been too long in a single unit, and Commander Thelea, Imperial Navy, flew with Lieutenant Ruirk Caelin and Lieutenant Giriad Quoris. She accepted that her race and sex meant she would likely never move beyond a starfighter pilot’s rank, and in a way, as long as she had her wingmen, and a clear sense of her mission, it hadn’t been so bad.

And she could never go back to that now.

Slowly, she shook her head. “No, Father. You heard what . . . what Mother said. I have another duty now, and I’ve already had a late start preparing for it.” Turning slowly, she looked at the Jedi. “There is one thing I want to know.” Aleishia only inclined her head. “I know Girid went down before I did. But Ruirk . . . can you tell if he’s alive? I thought . . . when I was down on the moon I couldn’t let myself think about it, and part of me was so sure he’d have made it, but I don’t know if that was truly the Force, or just . . . wishful thinking.” She felt that stabbing pain again, the same she’d seen in her parents’ faces as they looked at each other, and tried not to think what that could possibly mean. Thrawn, she realized, was watching her with a kind of narrow-eyed suspicion too much like any senior officer would have about it, and she looked away.

Aleishia, for her part, drew in a deep breath and closed her eyes. Thelea felt the swirling of energy about her, tendrils reaching from one node of power to another, spinning out like galactic arms until she was communing with something on a scale too large to comprehend. Then the other sighed, and shook her head. “Too difficult to see. He is not a Jedi or sensitive to the Force and I don’t know him well enough to find him. I can’t say. I’m sorry.”

She ought to be suspicious herself, Thelea knew, but she also knew that right now, she didn’t have the energy to fight about it. If Ruirk was alive, she would find him again someday, but for now . . . “All right then,” and she looked back at her father. Just turning her head made her legs wobble.

Thrawn’s expression darkened. “When was the last time you ate? Or really rested?”

Thelea realized with another bout of barely-suppressed hysterical laughing that she wasn’t even sure. She’d drifted from half-remembered vision to vivid half-nightmares, with no real sense of how long she’d been in hyperspace, and on arrival she’d been too distracted to give much notice to the A-wing’s internal chrono. “Ate? I had half a trooper’s protein ration on the forest moon,” and
she thought absently that Major Fayar had been right, it did last longer than the dry ration bars, “no water, and I haven’t really slept since that night on the moon, either.”

“Then we need to attend to that,” Thrawn said, reaching for the comm, “and the wound on your arm. You can’t give a useful report if you’re falling over from exhaustion.”

“No.” She saw the raised eyebrow. “Water, all right, yes, I need that, but let me tell everything now, Father, before I forget something important.” Like the dead Emperor’s hand grasping through the Fleet like a tentacled thing, like everything Chawyn and Biret told me about what happened to the Executor, like what Fayar said about the natives and how he told me about stealth then forgot it himself when the shooting started . . . like the Rebel ships, how their newer fighters flew, how Rurik and I were able to take them together, Giriad noticing it was the same freighter we’d chased before . . . and their names, Father, you have to know their names. Because unlike the others, I think you’ll actually want to know. “And then I’ll eat, and I’ll rest, and then . . .”

She looked to Aleishia. “You asked me a question when we met before. You asked if I was ready. Well, I am.”

“Ready to begin your training?” Aleishia made it a question, but it was a statement, and Thelea saw her father flinch.

Deliberately, she took the lightsaber out of its hiding place, and stared at the weapon, weighing it in her hand. Then she clipped it to her belt. “No,” Thelea said, looking up at them both. “Ready to learn to fight monsters.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Wow. That only took, what, fifteen years? A more extensive author’s note is coming, and then as-promised a sneak peak at the prologue to part three, TIE Fighter: Resurrection.
Well, that took longer than I initially expected!

Thank you for bearing with me so long. I wanted to put on an end note to first reassure readers that I will not be taking as long, barring any unforeseen surprises, to finish part three. If anything the hard part will be stopping! If you enjoy my writing, and would like to see what I do when I’m allowed to charge money for it, you can look me up on Amazon and Goodreads as Jennifer Quail. I have two full-length books available in print and Kindle editions: Strange Roads and The Demon That Is Dreaming, part of the Omens in the Night series, and a novella, Night Train To Cherbourg. There is also a short story in the same universe as Night Train, Number Nine Penwiper Mews, available for Kindle.

To sum up the state of play: Thelea will be joining the Empire of the Hand in a rather indirect role for a while, working with Aleishia to train her Force abilities and learning more about the grand scale of the real war that’s going on. Giriad has more or less defected, and is serving with the Alliance. He also, obviously, has his own romantic interest now (and why not? He’s rather adorable in his own way.) Rurik is current trapped in the quagmire that is the Fleet after Endor (and as Defiance loses her captain fairly quickly, the notion of trying to rejoin their old commander gets lost for quite a while. She’s rather a hard-luck ship at times.) If you’re keeping score: Thelea thinks Giriad is dead, and isn’t sure about Rurik for now, and no, Aleishia isn’t lying to keep her attention on her training, she genuinely doesn’t know. And yes, Thrawn being Thrawn, he spotted exactly why Thelea’s so conflicted on that point even if she hasn’t entirely accepted it herself. Giriad isn’t sure about either of them, but has no reason to believe they’re not dead. And Rurik is completely convinced both Thelea and Giriad are dead. Even when poor communication doesn’t actually kill, it does make people miserable.

I will also apologize for some spelling inconsistencies regarding names, but as I’m going to quit fussing, I won’t be going back for a third or fourth time to edit older chapters. Using my primary reference, “Mist Encounter”, Thrawn’s full name should be spelled Mitth’raw’nuruodo. Thelea’s has been both intentionally and unintentionally inconsistent. Henceforth, if it’s spelled any other way than “Mitth’ele’arana,” it’s a typo. (Given my propensity for writing at two in the morning, I can’t guarantee lack of those, either, but I do my best to catch them.) As for Lisetha’s full name, for internal consistency it’s “Reli’set’harana”.

Naming conventions in general: as I’m not bothering to death-march through Outbound Flight and Survivor’s Quest again (for one of the in-between shorts I’ve already had to wade through worse, but the later you get in the old EU the worse the arc welding and canon-spackling becomes.), I’m more or less running with my own theories and notions. And, as readers of my “real” books (ie the ones I can charge money for) might guess, I’m a fan of Romans. The more complex your name, the higher your social rank. Also suitable for a society one TV Troper described as “isolationist xenophobic fascists.” Family is everything, and yes, Lisetha outranked her husband (but like almost every other character, canon or fan fic, who spends any amount of time with Thrawn, she was more than a bit a of a follower.) Family also relates to the tone and pitch of voice used when Thelea is trying to intimidate her own people–check out Akira Kurosawa’s film The Hidden Fortress for a more extreme example based on a real-life culture in how the Princess addresses basically everyone. And if you’re a Star Wars fan and you haven’t seen The Hidden Fortress, what are you waiting for? (If you’re interested in some of the “intermission” fics I’m planning, you
should probably also watch Yojimbo.)

Speaking of Chiss culture—the game that Thelea references, wei-jio, is my own invention, as something suitable for Thrawn and Lisetha to have played without swiping from elsewhere in Star Wars (as logically they wouldn’t have encountered games from the main regions of the galaxy at the time they met.) Basically, it’s a more complex and sadistic version of Go played with dual-sided discs and with each player having a ‘king’ type piece of a unique color. To win, the player much both capture and convert to their token color a majority of the opponent’s ordinary tokens AND box in their king piece. Like Go and chess, it’s an art form as much as a game. Needless to say it’s not an accident that Lisetha wears a necklace with a stone resembling one of the game tokens nor that it was a gift from her husband.

And yes, Thrawn isn’t perfectly calm and composed here, either. A quick reread of “Heir to the Empire” (where we see C’baoth almost provoke him to open temper in front of Pellaeon, never mind his view of proper discipline for a crewman who not only fails at his job but tries to blame someone else) and “Mist Encounter” (where he is prepared to cold-bloodedly kill at least three Imperials who are no direct threat to him simply for a crack at stealing a hyperdrive-capable shuttle) will show that even canonically he does have a temper and he will do whatever he deems necessary to accomplish ends he views as good. As the Adventure Journal stats put it, he has a passionate nature, and here, not only has he abruptly been confronted with several problems at once, Thelea, half on purpose, pushes a berserk button. For certain values of the word, Thrawn is good, especially in this story, but good is not nice.

And speaking of passionate natures, Thelea herself is dealing with finding out far too much at once, plus being the equivalent of a telepath who has broken through all at once, plus who has had some very bad advice on how to control and amplify her abilities. So at the moment, she’s tired, stressed, and has had it up to here. She also, obviously, craves a bit of parental affection. If it not obvious, her guardians didn’t exactly raise her kindly. (But no, they can’t be blamed for her having tall parents but winding up the typical short fighter pilot, she just lost that particular roll of the genetic dice!)

For those familiar with the Adventure Journal shorts, yes, Niriz is still in command of the Admonitor, despite Parck rank-jumping over him again, and he’ll be making appearances later as despite his only appearing once and his fate never being resolved in the old EU (per wookiepedia, anyway) I do like him, and if he thinks Admiral Thrawn was frustrating to deal with, he has no idea what he’s in for with Mitth’ele’arana.

They do have limpets in Star Wars. How else would we have the story “Lord Vader’s Limpet” on Fanfiction.net? I do advise checking it out, along with Malicean’s “Welcome to the Club”, and for a different but still great take on Thrawn, “Perspective” by ladyofdarkstar.

Now before we go, go on to the next chapter for a sneak peek at the prologue to part three, or rather, at what WAS the prologue to part three, but is now a short story in its own right, which I’ll begin posting as its own story once I’ve gotten caught up on a few other things.
“Bridge to Captain Pellaeon?”

The voice on the comm interrupted both Pellaeon’s train of thought and what he had been saying to the Grand Admiral. He flinched, both at the voice and at the narrowing of glowing red eyes. “Lieutenant Tschel, I am in conference with Admiral Thrawn,” he said. “Unless this has to do with the shipyards–”

“I’m sorry, Captain, but we have a ship coming in, requesting immediate docking, and the security code it’s transmitting is . . . sir, they have a priority-one override and the pilot’s demanding to come aboard. But . . . Captain, it’s an A-wing.”

Pellaeon froze. “An Alliance fighter?” Could Jade have given the Rebellion codes now that the former Emperor’s Hand was apparently working with them, or at least trying to keep herself out of a detention cell? “Go to red alert–”

“Belay that.” By now, he ought to be used to Thrawn overriding him, but rank or no rank it still made him feel like a reprimanded cadet. “What markings does the fighter have?”

There was a pause, in which Pellaeon’s brow furrowed and he frowned. “You don’t think it’s a Rebel scout?”

“Almost certainly not, Captain,” and there was a tone in the Admiral’s voice that Pellaeon could not identify for a moment, and when he did, he was certain he was wrong. Because he had never yet heard Thrawn sound weary. “Lieutenant?”

“No markings, sir.” Tschel sounded as surprised as Pellaeon felt. “At least, no known Rebellion paint schemes. Dark gray, sir, possibly black.”

“Put the pilot’s audio through to me, Lieutenant.” Thrawn had been beside Pellaeon, watching the tactical readout, but now he went to his command chair and sat, looking more resigned than anything else.

There was a pause, and then—“Chimaera, I can override your docking control if I have to,” a distinctly female voice that Pellaeon didn’t recognize was saying, “but I have transmitted recognition codes that suggest you should be more cooperative if you don’t want–”

Thrawn cut her off, but Pellaeon had no idea what he said. The language the Grand Admiral was speaking was fluid, mellifluous, with a rhythm decidedly unlike Galactic Basic. The pilot of the A-wing fell silent instantly, and one thing that did seem to carry across languages was tone—there was no mistaking the exasperation in Thrawn’s voice.
The pilot responded in kind, and her voice was abruptly conciliatory, but there was still a distinct sense of urgency to it. Her words were even harder to follow as she spoke rapidly, but Pellaeon watched the Admiral’s face as he listened, and what he saw was even more surprising than the idea of Thrawn being weary. Thrawn looked . . . puzzled. And concerned. And then Pellaeon heard one word in the strange lilting alien dialect that stuck out like Huttese amidst Basic. Obviously whatever language they were speaking had no word for *ysalamiri*.

“Very well,” and Thrawn sounded a bit more himself as he switched back to Basic. “Come directly to my command room once you’re aboard. There will be time, briefly, before we jump for you to explain yourself. But I cannot delay this assault based on your intuitions.”

“You don’t have to,” and there was no mistaking the pilot’s abject relief. “I only need—“

“Once you’re aboard,” Thrawn cut her off again. “Lieutenant?”

“Yes, sir.” If Tschel had been listening, he was likely as confused as Pellaeon, but even less likely to question matters.

“Inform docking control the A-wing is to be allowed to board immediately. The pilot is to proceed to my command room without interference. She has the appropriate command cylinders to pass through the ship without escort.” Pellaeon started, but if Thrawn noticed his surprise he ignored it.

“Aye, sir.” The comm clicked off, and Pellaeon turned to the Admiral, who was staring into the middle distance with his usual pensive expression, and yet . . . .

“Admiral?” It seemed almost rude to interrupt his train of thought. “This pilot is—“

“An agent, acting on my behalf.” Thrawn sounded distant, distracted, not as if he was thinking about the pilot or, more critically in Pellaeon’s mind, how this might affect the timing of the Bilbringi operation. “Nothing to immediately concern you, or cause us to delay, I’m sure.”

“If you say so, sir,” Pellaeon said. “But you said she has a command cylinder for the *Chimaera*-does that cylinder allow access to secure areas?”

“She has a command cylinder that will grant access to secure areas on any ship in the fleet, Captain,” Thrawn said, and he seemed at least to be coming out of whatever fugue he had been in. “The Emperor was not the only one who needed agents with the freedom to come and go where he required them. You simply have not had occasion to meet any of mine.” He frowned. “I hadn’t planned on it being now, either.”

Pellaeon nodded, though he wasn’t sure he understood. “Will you be requiring my presence here during your meeting, sir?”

The glowing eyes blinked and Thrawn shook his head. “No, that will be all, Captain. See to our final preparations and I’ll join you on the bridge shortly.” He must have seen the thought reflected in Pellaeon’s expression, because he added, “Don’t be concerned, Captain. I’m in no danger from this visitor.” He tapped a control on the arm of the command chair and the holographic art gallery flickered to life around them. Most of these seemed, to Pellaeon’s increasingly-trained eye, to be human-made, flat panels and three-dimensional sculptures all made from some dark wood veined with greenish-blue. Thrawn did not elaborate, though, so he didn’t ask. Passing back out through the antechamber, Pellaeon glanced into the corner, for once somewhat reassured by the presence of Rukh in the shadowy alcove.

**
Thelea had been aboard Chimaera before, but even if she hadn’t one Imperial-class Destroyer was essentially the same as another. As a rule, she would have used the Force to locate her father’s command room by searching out his presence, but here, his ridiculous new pets meant there were gaps in her perception, odd blind spots that stuck out and distracted her as she scanned for threats. There had been no indication his clone Jedi was aboard, which was both a good sign that he was not the source of the disturbance, and a relief that she would not have to confront the false C’baoth now, alone, without Master Aleishia’s backup. The ysalamiri’s presence, though, was a reminder of that future confrontation’s inevitability in addition to hindering her ability to find her way around the ship.

Stop it, she admonished herself. *You survived your entire life without relying on the Force. Six years learning to use it doesn’t negate all your other senses. Least of all finding your way around a Star Destroyer!* 

But the Force was instrumental in her reason for being here and trying to explain that decision to her father would be difficult enough without the distracting presence of the Force-repelling little creatures he’d brought in for his grand plan. Not that she could show him the vision—even trying to show Master Aleishia had failed, been a jumbled, shadowy mess, but she had been in a hurry. And terrified.

The dream-vision had woken her for the third night in a row since they’d returned to the fortress on Nirauan from the latest foray into the depths of what Core-worlders called the Unknown Regions. She couldn’t, even now, clearly recall any one image beyond a Star Destroyer’s bridge. The rest was a blur of dark gray and teeth, stunning pain, anger, a flash of silver, and the impression that had finally driven her here—a bloom of heart’s-blood red against snow-white, and along with it the deep, immovable certainty that her father’s life was in danger. It was to Vice Admiral Parck’s credit he had not questioned her in any detail, simply accepted her word that Thrawn’s life was at risk and she had to find him, and he’d provided her with *Chimaera’s* coordinates. The hyperspace jump in her A-wing had been long enough she’d tried to meditate, but again all the Force showed her was the spreading crimson against the white cloth and by the time she’d come out of lightspeed, arguing with *Chimaera’s* docking control had worn through what little self-control she had left.

The door to the antechamber slid open and she didn’t even bother looking into the shadows. “Stay out of my way.”

There was a hiss from somewhere behind her. Here, the Force was not blocked, and she sensed the Noghri’s position behind and to her left. The command cylinder did not work on the inner door, meaning her options were wait until her father decided to admit her, retreat to the corridor, or see what Rukh had in mind. Her father had chided her for her very Chiss-like distaste for the Noghri in general and his bodyguard in particular, and she was willing to concede they had their uses, but a race primitive enough to be manipulated so easily by one faction could be easily manipulated by another. Not only were some of her race’s traits, like disdain for primitives, a little more deeply ingrained than she liked, her father had not seen first-hand what the primitives had done on Endor. Thelea had.

“You are armed,” the gravelly mewl said from the shadowed alcove. “And armored. I would not be serving our lord the Grand Admiral if I did not detain you.” She saw the glint of silver metal moving from hand to hand.

“You know who I am,” she said. “And you are correct, I’m armed.” She took the lightsaber from its discreet position on the shadow scout armor’s utility belt and ignited it. The crimson blade that made Aleishia so uneasy glowed in the darkness, casting a dull wash of red onto the gray-skinned
creature watching her. “I’d be failing in my duty if I weren’t.”

Rukh hissed, but she knew he would not advance on her. Even in the kind of close quarters that were designed for his sort of combat, against a Force-user wielding a lightsaber it would be suicidal. In any case, helmet on or not, Rukh knew exactly who she was. This was about territory. “Very well, daughter of our lord,” he said, and the knife vanished. “You may proceed.”

“As if you have any say about that,” she muttered, but she deactivated her lightsaber and turned to the inner door. Either Rukh did have a control switch, or (more likely) her father had been listening to the entire exchange, because the inner door opened and she stepped through without even glancing at the Noghri. Her back still felt painfully exposed, though, until the door slid shut again behind her.

As seemed to be usual for him, her father was seated in his command chair, surrounded by the rings of holographic artwork. She registered absently that these were all human works, and all from the same material, before exactly what the material was sank in. Behind the mask, she flinched, but forced the expression from her face and the sudden tension from her body.

If her father noticed the response, he gave no indication, but then, she had to assume of course he noticed. That was the entire point. “In a matter of minutes,” he said without preamble, “this ship and the rest of her battle group will be jumping into a fight.”

“I’m aware of that, Father.” Familial title, rather than rank, would inform him as well as anything that this was not a military matter on her part.

“Then I assume you have an excellent reason for your abrupt appearance.” His expression didn’t give her any hint of his mood–annoyed, angry, or concerned at this out-of-character interruption.

She pulled off her helmet. It seemed important to look him directly in the eyes. “Yes, Father. Your life is in danger.”

One shoulder twitched in a shrug. “A soldier’s life is always in danger.”

“Immediate and personal danger.” She eyed the nutrient frame on the back of the chair, forcing herself not to loathe the placid, sessile creature clinging to it. All life, Master Aleishia insisted, was part of the Force, and that meant even ysalamiri. Thelea agreed in principle, but as the ysalamiri went so far in rejecting the Force, it seemed like they’d forfeited any consideration based on that factor. “If I’m not here, you’ll die.”

It said a great deal about her father’s philosophy of leadership that he did not immediately dismiss her perhaps-overdramatic statement out of hand. “What brings you to that conclusion?”

This was the part he was not likely to give much credence too. “A Force vision. I’ve had it three nights running, and again trying to meditate on my way here. I see a bridge of a Star Destroyer, a blade, and blood on a white uniform. I sense death and defeat and in the vision I know I’m far away and there’s nothing I can do about it, I just see it over and over. The Force wouldn’t show me this if I weren’t supposed to try and stop it.”

She waited, and wished either she were better at reading expressions, or he weren’t so good at keeping his thoughts from showing. Or that the damned furry snake blocking her other senses would obligingly drop dead. “You’ve turned into more of a mystic than your mother ever was,” he said, thoughtfully, though not disapprovingly. “She didn’t put much credence in Force visions and destinies.” He cocked an eyebrow. “Except when you were born. But I wrote that off to a mother’s indulgence.”
“Well, I don’t have a lot of patience for them, either, so if it gets this one to stop, you’re just going to have to put up with two bodyguards until the Force stops waking me up every night in a panic.” She eyed the nutrient frame again and grimaced. “This would be easier without your new pets, while we’re on the subject.”

His expression darkened. “For the moment, they are a necessity. If your Master had been more amenable to assisting in this campaign—“

Thelea sniffed and that was to keep from laughing, which would have earned her some sort of reprimand. “She said it herself—you wouldn’t be very happy if she decided she liked having that sort of power. Controlling an unstable clone is one thing. Facing down a full-fledged, sane Dark Jedi? You couldn’t stop her and neither could I. Where is your mad clone, anyway? I was half-certain the vision was about him.”

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“You’ve decided he has to be dealt with already? What about the . . . coordination? I still can’t help you there.” Not that she liked the plan, though if her own talents had run in that direction she would have accepted the task, Aleishia’s objections on principle notwithstanding. The memory of Palpatine’s grasping Force presence among the Fleet at Endor were still fresh after six years, though. “I would have thought, as the campaign moves closer to the Core—“

“There have been . . . complications. Enough that C’baoth will need to be replaced sooner rather than later, and I believe allowing you to hone your combat skills against him is simply too dangerous. A more prosaic removal will be necessary.” By which, she knew, he meant assassins by preference, orbital bombardment if necessary.

“And then a new clone replacement?” She didn’t bother hiding her distaste.

“Ideally a more stable one, grown under our newly controlled conditions,” he said, deliberately ignoring her disapproval. “You could perhaps have a role in the new clone’s training.”

“I’ll think about it.” Rather, about ways to say no that her father couldn’t object to. “For now, though, my only concern is your safety.”

“I find it hard to imagine how I could be in danger in my quarters, in here, or on the bridge of the Chimaera, the only places I am likely to be in the immediate future,” he said, “but, if it will put your mind at peace on the matter—“

“It will.” She fought to keep the relief from being too obvious. A good thing he wasn’t Force-sensitive and even if he were had that ysalamiri over his shoulder, or it would have been blindingly obvious. “If for nothing else, for mother’s sake. If I let something happen to you then no matter where she’s gone, she’d find a way back and she’d haunt me.”

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“Would that she’d had such concern about her own safety.” Thelea wondered what her father’s officers would think if they saw the expression on his face now. Not that he’d ever allow himself to appear pained, let alone wistful, in front of juniors, and they were all junior officers now. Would they even notice? Human expressions were so broad and obvious, they sometimes seemed to miss subtleties completely. “Has she . . . spoken to you, since that day?”

Now she almost wished she hadn’t brought it up. “No. Not even when I meditate. She must have really meant it when she said was using up a lot of energy to appear bodily and she can’t manage it
any more.”

Not even in front of his daughter would he have shown real grief, and she saw the effort to contain it. “Ah, well. Strange as it was, it was . . . pleasant to hear her sometimes.”

“I know. I miss her, too.” She waited for a reprimand about how that was a very human thing to say, but none came.

Instead her father simply nodded, and rose. “If you are going to insist on following me around, then I’d prefer for now you leave your helmet on outside your quarters. It will prevent some of the inevitable questions. Not all of them, but until this battle is over, enough.”

“Another step in the campaign?” She tired not to be impatient, but the longer she was out on the fringes, the more she saw, the more she wondered if even Thrawn understood just how quickly they were running out of time.

“Indeed. The Rebels have been doing their best to convince everyone in this sector they intend to attack the Ubiquitorate base at Tangrene.”

Thelea knew her father’s propensity for drama, but unlike his officers she didn’t bother hiding the fact. “Which means you’ve deduced their actual target is where?”

His lip twisted just a bit, but that was the limit of his annoyance. “Bilbringi. As such, our battle group will be arriving in time to corner their attack force. Of course, if by some remote possibility their target is Tangrene, the base’s loss will be far more minor a setback than damage to the shipyards.”

Thelea nodded quietly, then asked, “Is the Defiance involved in this action?”

Thrawn paused, just perceptibly. “No. She is on patrol with the Resolute in the Kessel Sector.”

“Indeed.” Now she deliberately looked around the room. “So since Telamara is nowhere near Bilbringi I assume this little blackwood art display is for my benefit.” He didn’t say anything. “That was cruel, Father.”

He didn’t say anything for a moment. “Fair enough.” He touched a control, and the artwork vanished.

Thelea almost regretted it. She hesitated, but then, he’d asked about mother, her own feelings on the subject notwithstanding. “How is he?”

Thrawn hesitated just long enough before answering she almost thought he wasn’t going to. “Captain Caelin is well-liked by his crew, and they are consistently one of the most effective ships in the outer fleet.”

“Yet you didn’t recall them for this campaign.”

“The perimeter still requires defense,” her father said. “You should know that better than most, and he has demonstrated a certain aptitude for dealing with those particular enemies. That’s why he is a captain.”

“Yes. Which is why he’s going to have to find out about me sooner or later.” She tried not to picture Rurik, not to think about how much she missed his smile, his irreverent need to tease her even from the first, the euphoria of flying with him at her wing and knowing he had her back–
Thelea stopped herself. Now was not the time. “They’re on the move, Father. We don’t have much
time any more. This campaign—“

“Will end. And soon.” There was no mistaking that tone. “They will not find a unified Core, one
fleet with a common purpose, nearly as easy picking as remote worlds on the Fringe.”

“I hope you’re right.” She pulled the helmet back on. More or less, it was typical shadow scout, her
choice when working with Imperials who didn’t need to ask awkward questions. The slight
modifications were only noticeable to the wearer and possibly to a shadowtrooper familiar with the
standard equipment. The lightsaber on her belt was more obvious, though hopefully not the second,
slightly smaller saber in a more discreet holster on her ankle. Lord Vader had, all those years ago
before Endor, been right in that her mother’s lightsaber was not truly suited to her. It had seemed
right to make her own, even if the crystal she’d chosen (eyes closed, feeling for the one which had
resonated most strongly) was a color that for some reason unnerved her Master. She carried
Lisetha’s gold-colored blade with her half out of sentiment, and half because carrying a spare
weapon was only sensible.

As on-edge as the visions had left her, an E-11 and a few plasma grenades would have made her
feel much better, too.

So would Father having the good sense to wear body armor, she thought, watching how he
absently smoothed the white jacket, lest anyone see the Grand Admiral any way less than flawless.
She understood the reluctance—it spoke of a lack of trust in his crew, it was indeed uncomfortable as
her own armors attested, but while she’d pared down even the lighter scout arm and leg plating the
full chest and back protectors always felt reassuring. He wasn’t averse to it in situations where he
anticipated danger, but he was also stubbornly resistant to the very notion unanticipated dangers
truly factored into his world. Unanticipated setbacks, certainly. But direct personal threats? Even
with the Rebellion fully aware of his existence now, and no doubt longing to eliminate him by any
means possible, he simply refused to admit the possibility.

What did you say, mother? “Still so stubborn, and me not here to bring you down a peg?” How did
you ever manage that, and how can I learn so I don’t lose both of you?

There was no answer, but she hadn’t really expected one.

***

The bridge of a Star Destroyer in battle was always too calm for Thelea’s taste. She preferred the
speed and immediacy of an Interceptor cockpit, or her A-wing, though the shields still felt like
cheating. Even now, with the unexpected arrival of a fleet of smuggler ships, the sudden upsurge in
the Rebels’ fighting ability, everyone had that cool focus on their duty stations, and more, a quiet
competence that she knew came mostly from confidence in Grand Admiral Thrawn and his mad
battle plans that always seemed to pan out. She knew far too well how easily he inspired that kind
of pathological devotion. Usually, it was to their advantage. Sometimes . . . .

All but the Captain, at least. She was standing just at the edge of the ysalamir’s range, so she
wasn’t sure if it was really the Force or she was simply getting more adept at reading human body
language, but Pellaeon seemed increasingly anxious as the fight became a much bigger matter than
easily trapping an unsuspecting Rebel raiding force. Her father was, too, but of course the humans
couldn’t tell.

A ping from his command board drew the Captain’s attention and Thelea’s. “Sir, we have a
priority message coming in from Wayland.” That human face with its obvious play of emotions
twisted.
Time froze. Thelea felt a cold wash through her veins, a certainty, a sudden knowledge that she had seen this moment before. She had seen this moment a thousand times in the last three days. Even in the fog the presence of the ysalarmir caused she knew. The pressure in her mind was like, but unlike, the times her mother had spoken, this was only the weight behind the voice, voices, the power and pressure that she had felt then and when in the presence of the dark ones and their shadowy soldiers. This was bright and burning and utter, complete certainty with the weight of worlds pressing down on her mind.

Now. NOW!

Distantly, she heard her father’s order for Pellaeon to read the message, and the captain replying, an attack by natives, Rebel saboteurs . . . and Noghri.

The gray shadow behind her father’s chair was moving, but so was she, her lightsaber already in hand.

**

“And a group of Noghri–”

Pellaeon would never remember precisely what happened next. He saw a gray blur aiming for his throat, and a flash of black as he was shoved hard aside, though he would have sworn neither laid a hand on him. Only one must have, he realized as he staggered against his command board, because suddenly the strange shadow scout agent that Thrawn had admitted to the bridge was between him and Rukh, striking out with her left arm and knocking aside the wiry little alien’s assassin’s knife. They were close enough that Pellaeon heard what he thought was a hiss of pain from the agent, or perhaps it was the whisper of cloth slicing as Rukh used that nightmare speed of his to change grip and slash between the guards on her forearm. She didn’t react beyond the faint sound, though, shoving harder with the wounded left arm while her right swept up with something in it, a weapon, and she slammed the end against the Noghri’s chest.

Then Pellaeon heard a sound he had not heard in person since the end of the Clone Wars, which he’d thought he would never hear again:

The distinctive snap-hiss of a lightsaber igniting.

For a confused instant he didn’t see the blade, and then with a surge of disgust and even faint sympathy he realized why: the red beam was only partially visible, sticking out from where it had pierced through the Noghri’s chest. With a show of strength that was almost admirable, in a perverse way, the assassin gritted his teeth and hissed, “The Noghri people will repay this treachery. As I have already repaid you.”

The voice filtered by the helmet was female and cold as interstellar space. “You have destroyed the Noghri people today. Take that thought with you to your ancestors, Rukh clan Baikh’vair. You have failed even in treason.” She pulled the lightsaber sideways and swung it in an almost lazy arc. There was very little blood, Pellaeon thought, feeling torn between nausea and detachment, just a faint mist in the air as the lightsaber bisected the Noghri and the two halves fell twitching to the deck.

It was silent on the bridge, he realized as the shadow scout turned, except for the hum of the saber still glowing red in her hand. She looked to the command chair. Pellaeon followed her gaze. Thrawn was standing, turned towards the brief scene of combat, and for one terrifying and fascinating moment Pellaeon saw open, un concealed shock on those alien features. And what might even, just for a second, have been fear.
The scout, meanwhile, seemed to be staring at Thrawn, though of course with the helmet it was hard to say. “He was going to kill you.” There was a waver to her voice that had not been there a moment ago.

“So he was.” Thrawn’s voice was just a trace taut, but he seemed to have contained whatever emotion he’d allowed to show. “The attack on Wayland was a signal, no doubt.”

“Indeed.” And then Pellaeon realized there was a waver to her stance as well as her voice, as if she couldn’t quite find her balance. The faceplate tilted down, and she seemed to be staring at her left arm.

The lightsaber slipped from her fingers and deactivated, clattered to the deck as her knees buckled. Pellaeon lunged instinctively to catch her but somehow Thrawn was faster, slowing her as she crumpled and kneeling beside her, cradling her to keep her head from striking the deck.

“Emergency alert, Captain! Medical team to the bridge immediately!” As Pellaeon, still half-numb with shock and shaking with the adrenaline, hit the alert button, the Admiral carefully eased the shadow scout’s helmet free. Pellaeon heard a few gasps from nearby crew, quickly stifled. Perhaps it was simply that he had no energy left to be shocked, but somehow he was not surprised at the pale, powder-blue skin and tangled knot of blue-black hair, or that the eyes blinking and seemingly trying to focus on Thrawn were glowing red.

“Poison,” was what she whispered, “on the blade. Not deep but deep enough.”

“Quiet.” Thrawn’s voice had a softness Pellaeon had never heard, in a strange way wished he wasn’t hearing now. “Save your strength. We can treat the poison. You know how to put yourself in a healing trance?”

She laughed, or it might have been a gasp. Pellaeon realized the blinking of her eyes was too rapid, and he looked for the medic team. “Can’t,” she said, and her voice was already weaker. “The ysalamir–too close.”

Thrawn looked up, and Pellaeon found himself transfixed by how very, very alien those eyes suddenly seemed. “Captain, you have your sidearm?”

“Sir?” Pellaeon wondered if this was a very strange dream.

“Sir?” Pellaeon wondered if this was a very strange dream.

“The ysalamir. Kill it!”

The tone was so harsh, so alien, that Pellaeon found himself fumbling for the usually-pointless sidearm which so rarely left its holster before he could truly process what he was doing. With alarms screaming already one blaster shot didn’t really add that much to the pandemonium, and he tried push down a trace of guilt as the sessile creature writhed momentarily and went limp. The change to the girl, though, was instant. She drew in a deep breath, half-rising, but Thrawn held her still, murmuring something Pellaeon couldn’t hear but which seemed to calm her.

Then she reached up, pressing her gloved hand against Thrawn’s chest, a strange gesture, and Thrawn covered her hand with his own. The glowing alien eyes were fixed on the Admiral’s, and she said, distinct enough Pellaeon heard her: “It’s all right. Really, it’s all right.” She fought up against Thrawn’s hold and said clearly:

“The Force is with us. We’re going to win.”
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