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## GALAXY'S EDGE

# BLACK SPIRE

**DELILAH S. DAWSON**

THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



# BLACK SPIRE

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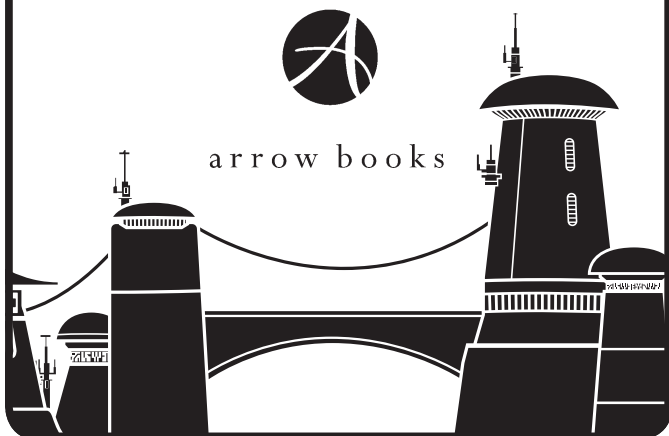
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For Rhys, who named Waba, and  
for Rex, who invented the starmarks.

I'm glad that *Star Wars* is part of you,  
and now you are officially part of *Star Wars*.

# STAR WARS™

## TIMELINE

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# STAR WARS™

## TIMELINE

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VII

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VIII

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RESISTANCE REBORN  
GALAXY'S EDGE: BLACK SPIRE

IX

THE RISE OF SKYWALKER



A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. . . .







# BLACK SPIRE



*At the edge of the galaxy  
So far away  
Black was the spire  
That called me to stay.  
A beacon for drifters  
Forgotten and lost  
The spires summoned those  
Broken and tossed.  
Come stay here forever  
Or just pass on through.  
The spirit of Black Spire  
Will forever change you.*

—old Batuuuan ballad





## Chapter One

### HIDDEN RESISTANCE BASE, D'QAR

THE LIFE OF A RESISTANCE SPY was all about excitement—or at least, that’s why Vi Moradi signed up. That, and the chance to do some good and strike back at tyranny. As Vi stood outside the office of General Leia Organa, she was anxious to see what her next assignment would be. She was getting that old restless feeling and needed something to do, something real. On Major Kalonia’s orders, she’d spent the past several weeks recuperating from her last mission, and she was itching for activity beyond debriefing pilots and gathering intel from their droids on enemy firepower and fighting prowess. They knew the First Order was out there and supposedly unbeatable; did they really need to keep reaffirming that through numbers? Vi liked being an underdog, but she didn’t necessarily want to know the odds.

“Come in, Magpie.”

Vi smiled at the way Leia always used one of her call signs and stepped inside the makeshift office, taking a seat on an old red crate. “Good to see you, General.”

Every time Vi was in the presence of General Organa, once Princess Leia Organa of Alderaan, it felt a little like going home. Leia had a calm, steady presence, motherly but tough as nails, and no matter how dire things got, the older woman had a way of looking at each member of the Resistance as if they were the hero that could turn the tide against their enemy, the dreaded First Order that had risen from the Empire’s ashes. Leia returned Vi’s smile, her eyes twinkling.

“I have a mission for you,” Leia said, her attention flicking from various holos to Vi and back. Leia’s mouth fell into a familiar grim line, which told Vi she wasn’t necessarily going to like her assignment. That was fine—she didn’t particularly like how her last mission had gone, either. It wasn’t her job to like it.

“As you know, we’re massively outgunned. We don’t know what the First Order is planning, but it’s something big. Some kind of attack. I’m leaving immediately for Takodana to collect some valuable intel, so I wanted to meet with you personally and underline how very important your work will be.”

“If you brought me in just to tell me it’s important, it sounds like it might not be that important. I’m ready to work, General. Major Kalonia signed off. I’m back in top form.”

Leia’s gaze was unwavering. “I wouldn’t blame

you if you just disappeared, after what happened to you on the *Absolution*. You were captured by the enemy, Vi. Tortured. Beaten. Shocked. Injured. I've read your med charts and your reports. Downplay it all you like, but an experience like that changes people. I should know."

Vi shook her head. "But I'm still me. So put me on a Star Destroyer and let me—"

"No." Leia cut her off, almost apologetic, and Vi's mouth snapped shut. "This assignment might sound like a vacation, but I assure you, it's of vast strategic importance. If you're ready."

Vi shifted on the crate, her back aching. Leia was right—she'd taken a beating on her last assignment, and although most of her wounds had healed, her body wasn't getting any younger. Leia had sent her to a forgotten planet called Parnassos to gather intel on the First Order's Captain Phasma, which was challenging enough. But on her way home, Vi had been captured by a different First Order officer, Captain Cardinal.

Instead of interrogating her through official channels or turning her over to Kylo Ren or General Hux, Cardinal had secretly taken her to a dank chamber in the ship's lower levels and tortured her for the information she'd collected on his rival in the First Order, Captain Phasma. In the end, Vi had managed to manipulate him into letting her go, and Cardinal had gone out to face Phasma in combat. Vi made it out of the enemy ship and back to the fleet, and for the last few weeks she'd struggled to process all that had happened to her and heal in



body and mind. But despite what she'd told Kalonia and now Leia, was she really ready to go back to work?

Well, was anyone ever ready to move on from trauma?

It would never leave her, but she couldn't stay still any longer. It wasn't in her nature.

"I'm ready," she told Leia, putting the full force of conviction in her words.

"Good." Leia's smile returned. "Should the First Order succeed in their attack, or should they find us here on D'Qar, we need two things most of all: allies and places to hide. So I'm looking for suggestions on a place so out of the way that the First Order would never even think of it, a place where we could set up camp and put down roots. Specifically, we need an inhabited planet with an active port and resources, but not anything big, not anything the First Order would find advantageous."

"Castilon isn't safe anymore," Vi thought out loud. "Not Pantora. Nowhere in the Core or Mid Rim, or any place where we've had a base before. Definitely not Parnassos."

"Definitely not. Think, Magpie."

Vi raised an eyebrow; Leia was not in a patient mood. "Batu, maybe? I've heard of it, but I've never been there. It's out on the edge of Wild Space. The main settlement is called Black Spire Outpost. It's rough. Primitive. Seedy. Exciting. Smugglers consider it a good place to hide or hop a ship that can't be tracked."

At that, the general nodded. "I knew I could count on you. Batuu is perfect." She chuckled. "Han told me all about it."

Leaning forward, Vi gave her a suspicious look. "That can't be the only reason you called me in here—just to ask me a question. You have strategists for that."

"But I don't need strategists." Leia likewise leaned forward. "I need *you*, Magpie. I trust you. And what I need you to do is go to Black Spire Outpost on the planet Batuu, establish an outpost for the Resistance, and collect as much support as possible among the locals and visitors. We need bodies. We need friends. We need skills. We need ships and food and fuel. We need eyes and ears on the ground. We need a place we can go if everything falls apart, a place so far off the map that the First Order has forgotten it even exists. To them, Batuu will seem strategically useless. But to us, it's another spark of hope. I need you to cultivate that spark, to keep the fire burning."

Vi leaned back, letting her head fall to the side. "So why do I feel like you're promoting me out of harm's way? Protecting me? Maybe even coddling me?" She held Leia's gaze, never an easy task. "Use me, General. I have skills no one else has. I'm your best spy. So why are you sending me to what's basically nowhere?"

"Because nowhere is what might save us. You're not the only valuable person being sent out to nowhere." Leia gave her a significant look, blew out a sigh, and took on an air of urgency, as if Vi had

already been excused. “That’s your assignment. Take it or leave it. I’m needed on Takodana immediately. They’re holding the ship for me, and I’m out of time to convince you. The great thing about the Resistance is that you always retain free will. I hope you’ll trust me when I tell you that your work on Batuu is part of a larger plan. So do you trust me, Magpie?”

The general’s eyebrows went up, her graying hair in a perfect crown. Yes, Vi did trust her. And Vi wasn’t going to walk away, even though she knew it was always an option.

“I trust you, General,” she finally said.

Leia nodded. “Good. Dismissed. Report to the hangar tomorrow morning. Lieutenant Connix will provide further details and a manifest of your cargo. You’ll be assigned a droid to help with the heavy lifting and logistics. We’re giving you the materials, and we need you to scout the ideal site, connect with the local population, recruit new bodies to join the cause, and establish communications so we can discuss next steps.”

Vi stood. “I’ll do my best, General.”

The smile she gave Leia was resigned. Yes, she would do her duty. In this case, Vi didn’t think she would like it, but she was a soldier, and she would do whatever it took to resist the First Order and keep the galaxy safe.

But as Vi headed for the door, the general said, “Oh, and Magpie? One more thing.”

Vi couldn’t help chuckling as she turned around.

"Of course. There's always one more thing, isn't there?"

Leia stood, looking grim and regal and certain. Vi steeled herself for what she knew would be unwelcome news.

"I'm assigning you a partner for this mission, and again I need you to trust me."

Vi leaned against the door and crossed her arms. "Uh-oh. That doesn't bode well. You know I prefer to work alone. And if it was somebody I liked, you would've led with that."

"Perceptive as ever." Leia rolled her eyes as if to suggest Vi had caught her out. "Before you head for Batuu, I need you to make a quick stop on Cerea to pick up someone. Archex."

"Who's Archex?"

The general's gaze went dark, serious. "The man you knew as Captain Cardinal has chosen to return to his childhood name."

*Cardinal.*

Archex was Cardinal.

Vi went cold all over as images flipped through her mind—unwelcome ones. Cardinal pulling her from her ship, putting her in binders, strapping her into an interrogation chair he wasn't quite certain how to use. His face when she'd first convinced him to take off his shining red helmet. The conviction in his eyes, the unwavering faith in his calling. The way her vision went red each time he'd used that chair to shock her, pushing her further toward the edge of desolation, toward betraying all that she stood for.

She'd turned him against the First Order, sure—but just barely.

Cardinal had gone out to face his rival, Phasma, who'd nearly killed him. And then Vi did something unusual, something she still didn't quite understand: She'd saved him. Dragged Cardinal's dying carcass across the *Absolution*, stole a ship, and hightailed it back to D'Qar with her enemy and torturer by her side.

She'd seen something in Captain Cardinal, something she'd thought impossible: a good man who believed in the First Order with all his heart. And she'd used that good to convert him—if not into a Resistance fighter, then at least away from the First Order's lies.

She hadn't seen him since they'd landed on D'Qar and he'd been hurried to the medbay.

She hadn't wanted to.

"Archex," she said woodenly, dumbly. The name tasted like blood in her mouth, like the metallic burn left behind by his interrogation chair's repeated shocks.

But Leia went on as if she hadn't noticed Vi's discomfort. "I sent him to Cerea for . . . well, let's call it a restful retreat with gentle deprogramming while we monitored his recovery. He's as healed as he'll ever be and cleared for work. Although he hasn't fully committed to our cause and will continue to wear a monitor, he needs something to do. You two are more alike than you know."

Vi barked a bitter laugh. "I bet we are."

"Look, I need him with someone we can trust,

someone *he* can trust. You were the first one who told me he might be worth saving, after all.”

“Yes, I was. And I’m starting to regret it.”

Vi still couldn’t quite process what she was hearing, couldn’t understand why Leia would do this. “Am I being punished for something?” she asked, voice rasping.

Leia swiftly moved around the desk and grasped Vi by the shoulders. “No. Of course not. I’m doing what I’ve always done: putting the best person on the job. You have the skills to command, to think on your feet. You’re the one who turned Cardinal, who made that connection. I believe you can use that skill to help our cause. You’re a great spy, Vi, but you’re also a leader, and I know you’re going to succeed. We need places like you’re going to build on Batuu, and we need Archex, and as hard as it might be for you to hear, I think Archex needs you.”

*But what about me?* Vi wanted to ask. *What about what I need?*

What she needed was a job that would bring back that old beloved zing of excitement, the thrill of going undercover, collecting intel, foiling bad guys, and returning a hero. Instead she was being sent to the far end of nowhere with her enemy, the man whose visage haunted her when she woke at night, screaming and covered in a sheen of sweat.

“Vi?”

Leia still held her shoulders, looking concerned. Vi shook off her misgivings, exhaled, and met the general’s gaze.

She could do this. She *would* do this. For Leia, for the Resistance, she would do anything.

“Yes, General,” she said. “I’ll do my best.”

Finally, Leia smiled that smile that made it seem like anything was possible.

“I know you will,” she said. “That’s why I chose you. Good luck on Batuu, Magpie. And may the Force be with you.”





## Chapter Two

### HIDDEN RESISTANCE BASE, D'QAR

THE NEXT MORNING, BEFORE SHE WAS due in the hangar, Vi stopped in the medbay and asked for Major Kalonia. She'd seen a lot of the doctor since returning to D'Qar, and her wounds had healed as much as they ever would, inside and out. Today, however, she had a different reason for visiting.

"Trying to get out of this assignment?" Kalonia asked with her usual wry grin. The older human woman had smoothly bobbed dark hair threaded with gray and was known for her competence as a physician and her warm bedside manner. "As I told Leia, you're perfectly fit for your usual misadventures."

"It's not me I'm worried about," Vi told her. "It's Archex. I understand you treated him here when we returned from the *Absolution* and that you've been monitoring his recovery while he's been on Cerea?"

Kalonia tilted her head knowingly. “Discussing the private concerns of my patients is generally considered a breach of protocol—”

Vi opened her mouth to interrupt, but Kalonia stopped her with a hand.

“But Leia and I suspected you would want answers. I don’t blame you; if you’re going to be stuck in a transport with him and then alone on a planet far from backup, you deserve to know what you’re dealing with. Considering he’s technically a political prisoner who hasn’t yet formally joined the Resistance, we feel it’s reasonable to share some information that will be relevant to your partnership.”

*Partnership.* Vi snorted. “That’s not the word I would use for it.”

Kalonia shrugged. “Collaboration, then. Let me show you.”

The physician led Vi over to a bank of screens and pulled up a holo. There was Cardinal as Vi had last seen him, still in his bright-red armor and black captain’s cape as Kalonia, med droids, and other personnel swarmed around him under bright lights. He was on a gurney, his helmet off, unconscious. A worrisome amount of blood stained his armor, especially in the two places where Phasma had stabbed him with a poisoned blade she carried from her homeworld.

“When you brought him to us, he was in bad shape. Lost a lot of blood. The weapon introduced an organic compound we’d never seen before, and it took us a while to work up—well, not an anti-

dote. We couldn't just cancel it out. But we were able to fight it. Still, one lung was punctured, and the wound in his leg was deep and festering. We did all we could, but for all our technology, as you know, medicine is still an imperfect, messy science."

Kalonia pulled up a new holo, this one showing Cardinal out of his armor and clad in the usual white medcenter gown, sitting up in a bed and connected to several machines by tubes. He looked so different without the bulky plating, smaller and more human, and Vi realized that this wasn't Captain Cardinal—it was the man who now went by the name Archex. His black hair had grown out a little, but his face was as she remembered it, his yellow-gold skin freckled from a childhood under the Jakku sun, and his creased brown eyes troubled. He wasn't smiling.

"At first, he was withdrawn and seemed . . . well, like he'd lost the will to live."

"He told me so," Vi murmured. "When I was pushing his gurney out of the *Absolution*. He said *let me die*, over and over."

"Yes, well, letting people die is not my job," Kalonia continued with a twitch of her lips. "So I did my best to help him through it. We see this sometimes, in war—soldiers become disillusioned. They lose faith. They don't know how to go on. And yet there's just something about him, isn't there? He's a survivor, but not the kind made cruel by the crucible that forged him. He didn't seem to want to live, and yet he approached rehabilitation like it was his job. He walked weeks before we thought he would.

He exercised on his own time, even though I'd warned him that his lung wasn't ready for it."

She flicked the screen over to a video of Archex doing push-ups. Sweat beaded his brow, and he was clearly struggling. His arms and legs wobbled, and he toppled over, but he quickly got back up and continued. Vi watched him gasping for breath like he'd run a kilometer, his eyes grimly determined.

"He doesn't give up easy," she noted.

"He does not," Kalonia confirmed.

"But what about his psyche? Is he . . . broken?"

Kalonia clicked her tongue. "No more than you, or me, or Leia. So many of us came to the Resistance via tragedy. He's healing, but he has a long way to go. The program on Cerea is intended to give him the space and time he needs. When you're in the middle of things, on a base like this or one of our ships, you get caught up in the cycle. Everyone needs downtime to figure things out."

"But is he safe?"

"Let's not fool ourselves, Moradi. No one here is safe. But he's not violent. He's cogent and reasonable and even if he hasn't joined us, he's no longer aligned with the First Order. He's not going to attack you in your sleep, if that's what you're worried about. But like you, he might have nightmares for the rest of his life."

Vi sighed. "That's what I needed to know."

"I can heal bones. But I can't heal souls. You have to do that yourself."

Vi looked down, fidgeting. She'd been neglecting that, focusing instead on action. Maybe she'd find

some healing herself on Batuu. Maybe life would move slowly and she'd, what? Commune with nature?

Sure, why not?

Well, because she'd run from Chaakti, and she'd never stop running. As it turned out, there was always another fight.

"Work first, therapy later," she finally said. "I'll focus on healing when we've beat the First Order. So what about—"

"Attention, all hands," Leia's voice boomed through the intercom system. She sounded exhausted and sad, like she'd aged fifty years since the last time Vi had spoken with her, just yesterday. The general had to be well on her way to Takodana by now. The comm system crackled, and Vi held her breath, waiting for more. "To your stations. An unknown weapon has just . . . I don't even know how to say it. We believe . . . somehow . . . we are working to confirm this, but it seems the worst has come to pass. The Hosnian system appears to be gone. Yes, every planet. The entire New Republic government can only be assumed a casualty of this cataclysm." And then, as if an afterthought, "May the Force be with everyone who was lost. May it remain with us all."

It was as if a great hollowness entered Vi's chest. She'd been there—to Hosnian Prime and Hosnian and Cardota. Lived and slept and worked on their surfaces, felt their sun's warmth on her skin. And now they were just . . . gone? She struggled to breathe, thinking of everyone she knew who would

count among the dead, recalling faces and names. At least her brother was still on Pantora, she told herself; he'd once worked as an intern for the Senate. And in a flash she wondered: Was this how Leia had felt, so long ago, when she watched Alderaan explode, knowing exactly what had been lost?

"An entire system," Kalonia said, almost a question, as if she couldn't even comprehend it, either, because who could? "Billions of people . . ."

Vi put a hand on her arm. "Focus on the ones here, now. We're going to need you."

Kalonia nodded, and Vi watched her undergo the process that she'd seen so many of her compatriots undergo, that cycle of emotions she'd felt herself. Whatever doubts a person might have disintegrated in the face of necessity. If the First Order had a weapon like that, the answer wasn't to stop, go silent, wait, cry. The answer was to feel your will coalesce, to firm up your chin and focus on the future and what you could personally do to fight the enemy, to stop such a horror from happening again.

Her comm buzzed. "Magpie? Your mission to Batuu is on hold. You're needed in the hangar."

"I have to go," she said, and Kalonia nodded.

Vi ran.

The Resistance might need Batuu, but Batuu could wait.



## Chapter Three

### CEREA, FOUR MONTHS LATER

AFTER THE HOSNIAN CATAclysm, THE RESISTANCE was thrown into utter chaos. And after the Battle of Crait, it was nearly destroyed. Their ships and officers were gone, Leia almost died, and Luke Skywalker saved what was left of their crew only to pass into the Force himself, leaving the Jakku scavenger, Rey, as their only hope. With nothing left of their fleet but the *Millennium Falcon* and no allies rallying to their call, Leia contacted all her spies and gave them new orders:

*Hide. Recruit allies. Gather ships. Collect fuel and weapons. Rebuild. Go far away from the target on my back and find a way to help us get on our feet again.*

For Vi, that meant it was time to go to Batuu.

But first, she had to pick up her partner.

No. That word still didn't sit right.

Her *collaborator*.



And so she slowly rambled toward Cerea in an ancient transport filled with junk. Or, as Leia called it, the building blocks that Vi would use to help build a new Resistance base. The world down below reminded Vi of what life could be like when beings were allowed their freedom and weren't blown up or subjugated by cruel regimes: gorgeous turquoise seas, old-growth forests, fields of waving golden grain. She sighed and aimed her old, bulky transport for the grungier spot of smog over Asphodar 3, one of Cerea's Outsider Citadels. The native Cereans took great pains to keep their planet untouched by pollution and technology, so these city-sized structures were the only gateway and accommodation for immigrants and visitors. Vi landed in a short-term docking bay and glanced around.

"You ready for this, Pook?"

Her rejiggered PK-Ultra worker droid let out a comically loud groan of despair from the hold, where he was fixing a dented power droid. "Ready for what, another day of inconceivable torment? With another feeble human ordering me about nonsensically? With twice the work to do, I'll most likely snap an arm."

Pook was twice the size of the usual PK droid, designed to be just as forgettable and inoffensive as the original but sturdy and capable of lifting heavy loads. His "head," if you could call it that, looked like a lamp with a black light, and his body was bottom-heavy with clunky feet and three-fingered hands, all a pearly silvery white.

“Wish I’d had time to get your personality tuned up.”

“And I wish I’d been left to slowly rust away on Naboo, but here we are, all victims of some sort of grand cosmic joke.”

Vi ran a hand over her face and murmured, “If only the FO hadn’t torn Gigi into parts.”

“I heard that,” Pook warned. “And I’m far superior to any garbage pail of an astromech, considering I have a ramped-up JN VerboBrain combined with the ability to lift a fully grown male ronto. A lot of help a U5 would be where we’re going. Wretched, beepy things.”

Vi stood and pushed her bangs aside. She’d let her hair grow while she was recovering but now wore it in flat twists under one of her favorite wigs, which was styled in a long, shaggy bob, smooth black with the tips dyed blue. Two more wigs carefully rested in a special case in the hold, just in case Black Spire Outpost wasn’t the most stylish of places.

It was actually kind of strange, starting a mission dressed as herself. No disguise and fake name, no zippy little starhopper. Just Vi Moradi, openly working for the Resistance, and a transport ship that had once carried loads of ore and fuel to and from some dusty moon but was now heavy with cargo of a different sort. She’d found a jacket that felt almost as good as the one she’d jettisoned while being dragged into Cardinal’s Star Destroyer, Resistance-orange synthleather with cream trim, plenty of pockets, and a proud starbird symbol.

Her cargo pants were packed with useful tech and weapons, including her favorite blaster, her second favorite blaster, and a specialized tactical baton that had saved her rump more than once when laser bolts weren't the answer. Her boots were rugged, and her gloves were still stiff with newness and ready for hard work. This was an unusual sort of mission for her, and originally, yeah, she'd had her misgivings. But with what was left of the Resistance on the run from the First Order, she was glad to do whatever Leia asked. After the Hosnian Cataclysm, her will had resolved. She no longer had any doubts, just goals.

Which meant she had to stop stalling and move on to the next step.

"Here goes," she said as she stepped off the ship and into the nicely kept hangar. A Cerean woman with a tall head and gray robes gracefully walked toward her carrying a datapad.

"Have you made docking arrangements?" the woman asked, inclining her head in greeting.

Vi returned the gesture. "No. I will be departing within the hour."

"And your cargo?" The woman's eyebrows rose.

Glancing back at her ship, Vi recalled that it definitely looked like something that would require loading or unloading, and the Cerean administrator was most likely making sure that Vi wasn't bringing anything illegal to her docks. The Cereans had trouble keeping the criminal element out of their citadels, but Vi wasn't here to smuggle armaments or obtain the valuable Cerean drug guilea.

Not that the administrator would believe that until she'd checked the ship's hold or watched Vi leave without loading or unloading anything except . . .

"I'm just here for one thing," Vi assured her. "And there he is."

Walking toward them was a figure both familiar and curiously different. His dark hair had grown out from its uniform shave and was getting a bit floppy, and he had a noticeable limp, but it was still Cardinal—

No.

It was *Archex*. She had to remember that.

Scanning his simple costume of white shirt with brown jacket and black pants, Vi realized she'd never seen him in civilian clothes outside of Major Kalonia's holos of his time in the medbay. He seemed smaller without his armor, vulnerable and aimless. And yet he was a powerfully built man and, as Kalonia had shown her, he'd taken pains to maintain his strength and fitness despite his injuries. It was his eyes that made him seem exposed. He seemed to always be squinting into a far-off sunset, always worried about what was to come. Vi read pain there, and she knew quite well that any kindness on her part would rankle.

"I know I'm a few months late, but you look good, Emergency Brake," she shouted across the busy spaceport.

His mouth turned down; he hated his limp, she suspected. It was probably infuriating to a man like him to wear armor every day for twenty years and

then suddenly feel so unprotected and . . . well, imperfect.

“He does not look particularly good by human standards,” Pook said, peering down from the transport’s open hatch. “No wonder they included advanced med protocols in my most recent upload. That one’s a piece of work.”

“Keep that to yourself,” Vi snapped.

Pook sighed; it was like he was programmed to sigh. “Human bodies are garbage,” he opined.

Cardinal—no. Archex! It was so hard for her to see him as anything other than the man who’d taken her to the darkest cave of her mind, a man she’d still inexplicably considered worth saving, in part because Leia believed redemption was possible. He hurried toward her ship, clearly putting himself in pain to do so and trying to hide that he was breathing heavily. She held out a hand to help him up the short step and into the cargo hold, but he ignored it, grabbed the edge of the hatch, and pulled himself up on his own. It cost him, and his face showed it, but Vi knew well enough that any further attempts to help would only make him resent her more.

“Welcome to the fastest ship in the galaxy,” she said. “Just kidding. That’s a total lie. Welcome to a clunky transport full of secondhand junk and a melancholy droid that I’m pretty sure they gave me just to get him out of the way.”

“I heard that,” Pook grumbled. “And I’m not melancholy. I’m realistic.”

Archex carried one small brown leather bag,

which he slung on the floor as he levered himself into an uncomfortable seat designed to haul miners.

"Can we go now?" he said.

The Cerean administrator was still hovering just outside.

"Do I need to sign anything?" Vi asked.

"Although visitors may legally dock here for up to an hour, it is important to record the comings and goings—"

Archex pushed the button that slammed the hatch down in the poor woman's face.

"It's not necessary. Just go."

Vi gave him the quelling look one gives a small child who doesn't yet understand civility.

"It's true," he said. "Trust me. I've been here for months. As long as you're not loading up four tons of guilea or dropping off a dead Hutt, it's all voluntary. They just like manners." Vi continued to stare at him, and he shook his head and gesticulated at her. "So let's take off. We're on a mission. Dire circumstances. All that." After she stared at him a beat too long, he added, "Please. Get me off this exhaustingly polite rock."

Vi finally relented because she needed him as an ally more than she needed the approval of a random Cerean bureaucrat. Settling in the captain's chair, she made sure the woman was out of range and took off. She would never get used to the way the awkward transport rumbled up into the atmosphere; she preferred a sleek ship with some style, or at least some speed. This thing was ugly and

slow, not to mention almost impossible to maneuver.

Archex maintained a firm, disapproving silence, and after a while she couldn't help returning to her original role in their relationship: goading him.

"So did you have a nice vacation on Cerea?"

"It wasn't a vacation," he snapped. "It was a . . . what did they call it? *A peaceful and nature-led deprogramming protocol in the beautiful and ancient forests of Cerea.* In addition to daily meditation, obnoxiously gentle stretching, and practicing the Dance of the Three Suns, I ate an entirely plant-based diet and detoxed from the evils of technology."

Vi couldn't help laughing. "Yeah, you sound real peaceful. What was Leia thinking?"

Archex sighed and had the grace to look a bit ashamed. "She was thinking she needed to get me away from First Order action. And maybe she wanted to actually help me. But I think she overestimated my interest in making baskets from porlash needles."

"Fair enough. I don't think I'd do so well in a program like that, either. A body likes to move. You get used to work, it's hard not to work."

He nodded along. "Considering most of what they want me to do now involves tech, Cerea was a poor choice."

"I will handle the tech," Pook interrupted. "I'm still not sure what *he's* here to do."

"Ignore him," Vi said. Then, louder, "Pook for-

gets I'm the boss. Point is I'm the hustle, Pook's the brawn, and you're the brains."

Archex almost chuckled. Almost.

"If I'm the brains, then we're in trouble."

Vi wanted to correct him; the barrage of scans and tests they'd put him through on D'Qar had proven that he was smarter than most, but the First Order's brainwashing had long ago convinced him that he was just the hand that wielded the weapon, not the clever brain that could build the weapon or decide what to do with it. The First Order didn't want their soldiers thinking too hard, because then they might question the war machine. Poor Archex had no concept of his own intelligence, and any attempt on her part to tell him would surely backfire.

"Okay, so maybe you're like the operator. You stay put and run the comms while I go out and recruit. You're strategy, coordination, organization. And you get to tell Pook what to do—or try to. Just remember: You were chosen for this mission. Leia believes in you." She turned to meet his gaze, sending an unwanted jolt of recognition through her own nervous system. "And so do I."

Archex leaned back as they broke atmo. He couldn't seem to get comfortable in the hard contours of the transport's less-than-ergonomic chair. But who could? They were made for working-class folk lugging around the raw materials that would make greater beings wealthy. No one thought of the servant's comfort. Vi couldn't wait to land.

"So where are we going?" Archex asked. "All I was told was that I was operating as your support



on a top-secret Resistance mission. If I'm honest, I can't believe they're trusting me with information like that already."

"Ah, well, see . . . we're going somewhere far from First Order rule. Our mission is to build a new Resistance facility on an out-of-the-way planet and attempt to recruit warm bodies for the cause. I've chosen a place called Black Spire Outpost on the planet Batuu. It's the last stop before Wild Space. It's a sort of crossroads, the kind of spot where everyone is too busy with their own business and secrets to worry too much about yours."

Archex's face screwed up as if thinking too hard caused him pain. Maybe it did—Phasma had messed him up pretty badly, and Major Kalonia had mentioned migraines as an ongoing trouble. Vi gave him a moment to consider this information as she checked their coordinates, saw that Pook had slightly altered their course, deleted his alterations to suit her own sensibilities, and kicked up the hyperdrive.

"Never heard of it, huh?" Vi continued as the ship jumped to hyperspace. "Yeah, well, that's the point. There's nothing of strategic importance there for the First Order. No grand resources, no industries to take over, no government to buy. Batuu is off the beaten path and has seen better days. Remember: Most of the galaxy doesn't know that Starkiller Base is gone. They're easy pickings for your beloved new Supreme Leader and his pinched little fox of a lackey, which means places that don't matter . . . now matter even less." She watched

closely to see if Archex would bristle at that. "Guess the deprogramming worked," she muttered.

But he just shrugged. "Hard to get energized about something that doesn't matter. This doesn't seem like a 'top-secret mission.' It sounds like a classic case of promoting people out of the way. And making sure I can't get in too much trouble."

Vi shook a finger at him and ignored the fact that she'd considered the same possibility before the Hosnian Cataclysm. "Just because something doesn't matter to the First Order doesn't mean it lacks value. The Resistance is built on hope. People need something to believe in, a symbol to stand behind. So we go to places where the First Order doesn't have a foothold, win the people over, and create a place where anyone who stands for freedom can find their home—or park their X-wing and wait for orders. By now, you probably know how few people we have left. We lost most of our fleet, tons of our allies. Every bolt-hole we can build to hide and gas up our ships is one more pocket of hope. Now, if you'll excuse me."

She reached down for her bag and pulled out a new knitting project. That was one of Vi's little secrets—she loved the clack of needles juxtaposed with the cool blue lines of hyperspace, the primitive and the futuristic happening at once. It was relaxing and helped her get in the right headspace for a complicated job. The squashy hat was half finished on circular knitting needles, and the charmingly bulky bantha-fur yarn hid her imperfect stitches.

Archex stared at her like she was insane. “Are you . . . knitting?”

Vi raised an eyebrow. “Yeah. Why, you want to learn?”

He grimaced. “Can’t you just buy . . . whatever that’s supposed to be?”

“It’s a hat, and yeah, I guess I could. But there’s something to be said for making things with your own hands, the old-fashioned way. Having physical evidence of your effort to admire at the end of the day. Haven’t you ever made anything?” She was kind enough not to mention the fact that he’d once helped make thousands upon thousands of small children into merciless soldiers for the First Order.

But Archex just sighed sadly and looked like his mind was elsewhere. “I made things with my hands. A long time ago. Not recently. Not a lot of spare time for whittling toys on a Star Destroyer.”

“Well, the good news is that the Resistance will let you whittle wherever you want to. And when we get to Batuu, you and I are going to make something good.”

“Correction,” Pook interjected from the cargo hold. “You are both damaged specimens no longer in the prime of human life, meaning I will do most of the physical labor using my superior strength and spatial reasoning, all while taking whatever crude abuse you choose to heap upon me.”

“I need to knit a droid muffler,” she muttered.

Vi caught Archex’s eye and was gratified to see him smirking, for once. She realized there might ac-

tually be a sense of humor somewhere in there. Seeing an opening, she dived right in.

"So are we going to talk about it?"

He looked away. "Talk about what?"

Vi chuckled. "You never did strike me as a coward, Archex."

"I'm not a coward. I just think actions speak louder than words. I'm here. That should be enough."

Vi raised an eyebrow. "Well, I believe in honesty. Neither of us escaped that Star Destroyer in one piece. You did some damage. I'm still recovering. Just seeing you makes all my nerve endings jump around like frightened fathiers. But I have a job to do, and I'm going to do it, and I hope we can just start fresh. You were doing your job, I was doing mine. I told you on that boat and I'll tell you now: I still think there's a good guy buried somewhere underneath that red armor."

He looked down at his hands, flexed his fingers. "The red armor is gone."

"Maybe we can crack through the tough-guy exterior, then. See what you're like without all the programming and protocol and propaganda. I bet you're fun when you're not torturing me."

His sigh was a wheeze. Every breath would be like that for him now: a torture of his own. "Look, I know what you really want, and if you think I'm going to turn to the Resistance, become a true believer, you're wrong. I may not believe in the First Order anymore, but that doesn't mean I'm going to

immediately put my faith in something else. Right now . . .”

He trailed off. Vi dropped a stitch. He stared out the viewport at the calming blue, although he was radiating pretty much the opposite of calm.

“Right now?” she prompted.

“I don’t know what to believe. But that doesn’t matter. They sent me here, and I didn’t have a choice, but I have to do something, so whether it’s a punishment or a job, it might as well be this.” His fingers tapped on the chair’s hard armrest. “Although I do miss the First Order ships. This chair is like—”

“Like a torture chair?” Vi said sharply. “Didn’t think you’d ever seen the wrong side of one of those.”

Archex looked down, a little sheepish, but not much. “Bad metaphor.”

“It was a simile.”

“Are you always this annoying?”

“Always.”

“She really is,” Pook offered from the back of the ship. “You both are. All humanoids, really. It’s a plague.”

Vi almost smiled but stopped herself. She and Archex were bickering, almost like siblings. It wasn’t much, but it was a start.

“I know it’s hard. I know . . . well, you lost everything. But I promise you, Archex: You’re going to come around and join the Resistance. Trust me—it feels great, being a good guy.”

He shook his head, any trace of humor gone. “A

good guy. You think you're the good guys? Then why am I wearing this?" He twitched up the pant hem on his right leg—not the injured one—to show a tracking anklet.

Vi had seen this sort of thing before. The slim metal monitor would track his every move, his heartbeat, his sleep. It would record any conversations he had. It was basically a tattletale so the Resistance could keep track of him until the First Order defector had proven himself trustworthy—if he ever chose to try.

"Just because we're altruistic doesn't mean we're stupid," she reminded him.

His eyes met hers, and it struck her to the heart, the pity she felt for her once-enemy, the man who'd taken her into that dank, bloodstained room in the belly of a Star Destroyer and pushed her to the limits of her own sanity and loyalty.

"You have to see it now, Archex. You saw the holos of the Hosnian Cataclysm. Billions of people—families, children, babies—all dead. You told me once that the First Order was all about order, but even you must recognize that they've moved on to extinction of all who oppose them. The entire First Order is flat-out wrong. I know you were starting to understand that, back on your ship. Pasma and Hux are just symptoms of the disease. But we caught you early, and there's a cure."

He rolled his eyes at the metaphor, but Vi could tell it hurt him. "And what's that?"

"Empathy." She reached out as if she might

touch his arm, and he twitched away painfully, so she picked up her needles again. “Understanding. Seeing beauty in our differences. Valuing freedom and the right to fail and get up and try again. Standing together against oppression and cruelty.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

“It *is* easy.”

Archex turned to her, leaning forward, his breathing labored. “You can’t force people to believe in something, Moradi. Isn’t that the whole point of your Resistance? Resisting control? Don’t you all believe that eliminating the First Order lets everyone choose their path, even when they choose poorly?” She nodded. “Then you have to let me choose not to be part of the Resistance.” For just a moment, he smiled—very wryly—but then his usual scowl returned.

Vi shrugged as she knitted; he seemed easier to talk to when they weren’t looking directly into each other’s eyes, as they had on the *Absolution*. “You get to choose what to believe, Emergency Brake. But Leia and I have faith in you. You’ll change your mind. There’s always something, some revelation or epiphany or line in the sand, that makes ordinary people choose to take a stand. We just have to figure out what that is—for you.”

“If you were smart, you wouldn’t have let me live,” he said softly.

“We’ll see” was all Vi could say.

He turned his eyes back to hyperspace and went silent, his only remaining method of escape on the

crowded transport. Vi knew that gesture well; she'd used it during her interrogation.

She watched him a moment before returning to her knitting. It would take time for such a broken man to heal. And then he would have to rebuild his entire life, starting with his heart. He would have to find his own reasons to go on, his own path out of this valley. Pain, regret, loss, and possibly even shame would be his constant companions.

As they were hers.

It was going to be a long road.

Sometime later, Archex hobbled over to one of the transport's welded-in bunks and fell asleep soon after, which made sense—Dr. Kalonia had warned Vi that he was still healing and would be doing so for a long time, just as Vi would be. She had permanent nerve damage from Archex's clumsy use of the interrogation chair, and she didn't know if she'd ever feel two of her fingers again. At least it wasn't her trigger finger, she told herself. She still found the blue streaks of hyperspace peaceful, and with the humans silent, Pook remained silent, as well. Unfortunately, such calm only made her more uneasy.

At first, she'd been insulted by Leia's assignment, and in the wake of Crait, she'd hoped to be back in the field, this Batuu nonsense forgotten. Vi was a spy—the general's best spy, if Vi was being honest—and she excelled at disguises, slicing, and sneaking through enemy territory like a wraith. She'd heard



about an upcoming assignment that involved infiltrating a Star Destroyer, but that mission had instead been given to a newer unit, code-named Green Team. Vi had sliced into the system and discovered that Major Kalonia herself had advised against sending Vi, suggesting the setting might trigger ongoing psychological trauma.

Whatever that meant.

So now here she was anyway, on her way to a nowhere city on a backwater planet to build bunks and convince naïve farmers and shady smugglers to take up a fight that hadn't yet reached their borders. It still felt like a waste of her talent and possibly a waste of time, no matter what she'd told Archex regarding the importance of the mission. It was just too simple. She'd told him to have faith in Leia, in the Resistance, but in moments like this one Vi, too, chafed at the shackles of obligation.

She took a deep breath and recognized that tight, gasping, achy feeling—it was tension. Worry. Stress. Her shoulders were hunched up and her fingers were numb, the nerve pinched. As she settled back against the hard chair and forced herself to relax, she had to confront the truth: Maybe Kalonia was right. Maybe she, too, needed time to heal. Maybe being around Archex brought it all back. Maybe she wasn't over it. Maybe she needed an assignment like this, something useful, almost a vacation on a quiet planet. And maybe the Resistance really did need warm bodies and beds to put them in just as much as they needed First Order intel.

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For several days of travel, she and Archex warily shared the same small space, eating and sleeping and being bored while trying to pretend the other didn't exist. Vi had just finished knitting her hat when the ship dropped out of hyperspace, and she was almost accustomed to the rustic itchiness of the yarn. Sure, the fibers had felt soft enough on the skein, but it was rough compared with the luxurious hippoglace yarn she'd lost aboard the *Absolution* when Cardinal's men had destroyed the sweater she'd been knitting for her brother. Even thinking about it made her furious, and she had to concentrate on unclenching her jaw as she recalled her droid's nervous beeping and the feel of binders on her wrists. It was odd, how she could separate Archex from Cardinal but couldn't control her physiological response to flashbacks sparked by such small details. Yes, fine, so a Star Destroyer was probably the wrong place for her right now.

The stars came back into view, and Batuu shone below, a jewel against the indigo curtain of infinity, just as full of natural beauty and boring peace as Cerea. Beyond it, Wild Space spread across the viewport, mysterious planets and unmapped stars twinkling.

"I guess this is our new home," she murmured.

"I will only exist here until General Organa assigns me elsewhere," Pook observed. "The natural humidity levels will wreak havoc on my sensors."

Archex shuffled into the cockpit and sat heavily

in his chair, turning his bad leg this way and that. “Are we there yet?”

Vi smiled and nodded at the viewport. “Welcome to Batuu. We’re headed straight for Black Spire Outpost.”

As if on cue, the ship’s sensors beeped, and two red dots appeared. Vi kicked her knitting bag out of the way and leaned forward.

“First Order attack?” Archex asked, likewise leaning forward, his pain momentarily forgotten.

She shook her head. “They’re not TIEs. Just . . .”

“Disorderly smuggler ships,” Pook said. “Because that’s how backwater planets operate.”

Laserfire erupted as the two approaching ships went from blips on the screen to actual objects in space. A smaller craft with huge guns chased a larger ship, looking very much like a rat chasing the cat.

“They’re not after us,” Vi said, not that she sat back or relaxed. Their ship was big, visible, and definitely not a threat. She eased away, hating how sticky and slow the controls were.

“This transport is not equipped with deflectors,” Pook reminded her from the hold. “You might wish to take evasive maneuvers. Not that you generally listen to anything I say.”

“They have to see us,” Vi murmured.

But the ships were acting like they were alone in space, as if Vi’s hulking transport were inconsequential or possibly invisible. She wrenched the controls and juked out of the way as the first, bigger ship lumbered past, far too close for comfort.

"Is he using us for cover?" Archex shouted. "That absolute—"

"It is the intelligent thing to do," Pook interrupted.

Vi jerked the transport to the side as the smaller ship zoomed forward, bright laserfire bursting from its guns. The ship was suicidally determined to continue its path and seemed quite willing to blow up Vi's ship if it remained stubbornly blocking its target.

Vi forced her ship's nose down, but she wasn't fast enough, and the transport was too cumbersome. The smaller ship caught the transport in an impatient and impersonal burst of laserfire as it buzzed past, and Vi felt the impact in every bone of her body. The transport shuddered and wailed a complaint. Red light flooded the cockpit, an alarm blared, and Archex groaned from where he'd fallen on the floor.

"I prefer the autopilot," Pook complained. "You've tangled my wires."

Vi had no time for either of them. Alone on the galaxy's edge, with the Resistance already suffering, knowing that this ship was the best they could offer her, there was no one to call for help, no convenient squadron of X-wings to scream in and escort them to safety. And now her comm array was down, too, not that there were any Resistance allies within hailing distance. She had to get the ship planetside—and keep everyone on it alive and functional.

"Hold on!" she barked. "It's gonna be a bumpy landing."

“Lieutenant Moradi is generally an excellent pilot, for a human,” Pook offered. “Not today, but generally.”

“Shut it, or I’ll open the hatch,” Vi warned. “Let me concentrate!”

It took everything Vi had to get that ship into atmo straight-on, and even if they were coming in hot, at least they were headed in the right direction. The transport’s nav system kept trying to send her directly to the docks at Black Spire Outpost, but Vi politely but firmly steered toward an old-growth forest off to the west, where her scans showed the fewest life signs. Towering, rocky spires poked up through tall evergreens that nearly scraped the clouds. At least the weather was pleasant; if Vi was going to die in a violent fireball as she plummeted to the surface of a planet in the middle of nowhere, she’d rather do it with a cheerful blue sky as the backdrop.

“Looks like a nice place,” Archex said, the calm of his voice betrayed by the whiteness of his knuckles gripping the arms of his chair. “I’d hate to die here.”

“You’re not going to,” Vi snapped through gritted teeth. “But you might want to find somewhere to strap in instead of clinging to a chair that’s mostly for show.”

Archex almost said something cutting, but instead he shut his mouth and hurried into the cargo area, where Pook politely told him his chances of dying depending on where he was when the ship crashed.

"We're not going to crash!" Vi shouted.

"Humans will believe anything," the droid muttered sadly.

Vi pulled up as the ship approached the treetops. They were going too fast, but there wasn't much she could do about it, so she tried to skim over the trees to lose some velocity. The trees didn't respond well to that strategy, and soon the ship went from skimming like a stone skipped over water to crashing through the upper layers of the forest like a mad rancor, breaking branches and cracking through ancient trunks as it slowed and plummeted. They clipped a spire, knocking off its tip—a worthy trade for reducing speed, in Vi's opinion.

Her safety harness kept her in place but did nothing to shield her from the knocks that nearly tore her head off her neck. Luckily, she was panicking too much to feel pain, but in the back of her mind she knew it would return with a vengeance—if she lived.

Finally the ship came to a trembling halt, trapped in thick branches and feathery needles. An inquisitive bird-thing flapped down and, for the briefest of moments, stared at Vi through the viewport, blinking brightly. Then the old transport tipped, nose down, and arrowed for the ground far below.



## Chapter Four

### BATUU

"LIEUTENANT MORADI, IT IS IMPERATIVE THAT you achieve wakefulness."

Vi drew a breath and her head exploded in stuffy agony, her vision flashing red with stars around the edges.

"Do I have to?" she groaned.

Cold metal gently probed along Vi's neck and head, and when she opened her eyes she was staring into a circular black screen set against a backdrop of green leaves.

"Back off, Pook," she muttered. "It's rude to stare."

Whoever had designed the PK droid had not put a single thought into making its design personable. Pook's head had no familiar and friendly anthropomorphic features, and even if that big black circle where his face should've been was actually an advanced-level scanner, Vi would've appreciated

the tiniest suggestion of eyes, maybe a smiling mouth. At least astromechs looked perky.

"Your neck is, as Archex so elegantly put it, a mess," Pook explained. "There is extensive nerve damage and a bulging disk, along with repetitive stress injuries and spinal stenosis. You have the spine of a ninety-year-old woman."

"Tell me something I don't know." Vi attempted to sit up, but Pook's three-fingered hand pressed on her upper chest, which felt like one giant bruise.

"Remain supine," he warned her. "I have not completed my scan. Archex is concerned about the dangers posed by the local population, but it is too late for that. The damage is done, and all is apparently lost."

At that, Vi hinged upright to sitting, immediately regretting that instinct and putting a hand to her neck as she winced. "What do you mean, it's too late? Were we taken prisoner?"

"Worse," Archex said. He sat on the ground nearby, his legs stretched out in front of him. He had a purpling bruise on his forehead, but at least there was no blood. "We've been scavenged."

Vi looked around. Their transport lay right-side up as if it had landed properly . . . except its blunt nose was squashed flat. It looked like it had been eaten, digested, and eliminated by an exogorth. The cargo hold door was gone—not just open but gone—and the cavernous space inside was nearly bare.

"But Pook should've stopped them!" Vi shouted,



standing and trying to both catch her breath and not fall over with dizziness.

“I regret to inform you that I was unable to do so through no fault of my own.”

When she looked to the droid, she saw the problem: Only half of Pook was there. He had his head, neck, torso, and one arm, but the rest of him was gone.

“Were we attacked? Did they cut you in half?”

Vi couldn’t believe it. Her intel had suggested that the denizens of Black Spire Outpost weren’t overly violent—just local farmers, merchants, and the usual actors in the sort of not-quite-savory economy that tended to grow around a spaceport. After her visit to Parnassos to dig up the dirty truth on Captain Phasma, Vi always did her research on the general attitude and lethality of the local populace whenever she was given a new assignment.

“I was shielding Archex from harm per the general’s orders,” Pook explained mournfully. “My lower half became unmoored during the crash. When the scavengers arrived, they exclaimed over the value of my extremities and enthused over selling me to a being they called Mubo. When Archex awoke, they swiftly retreated before completing my utter demolition. I am worthless now. Please reset my memory core so that I can forget what it was like to be complete.”

“Sorry I didn’t wake up earlier,” Archex said, sounding like a kid who’d gotten a bad score on an important exam.

Vi gave him a wry smile. “Yeah, well, don’t