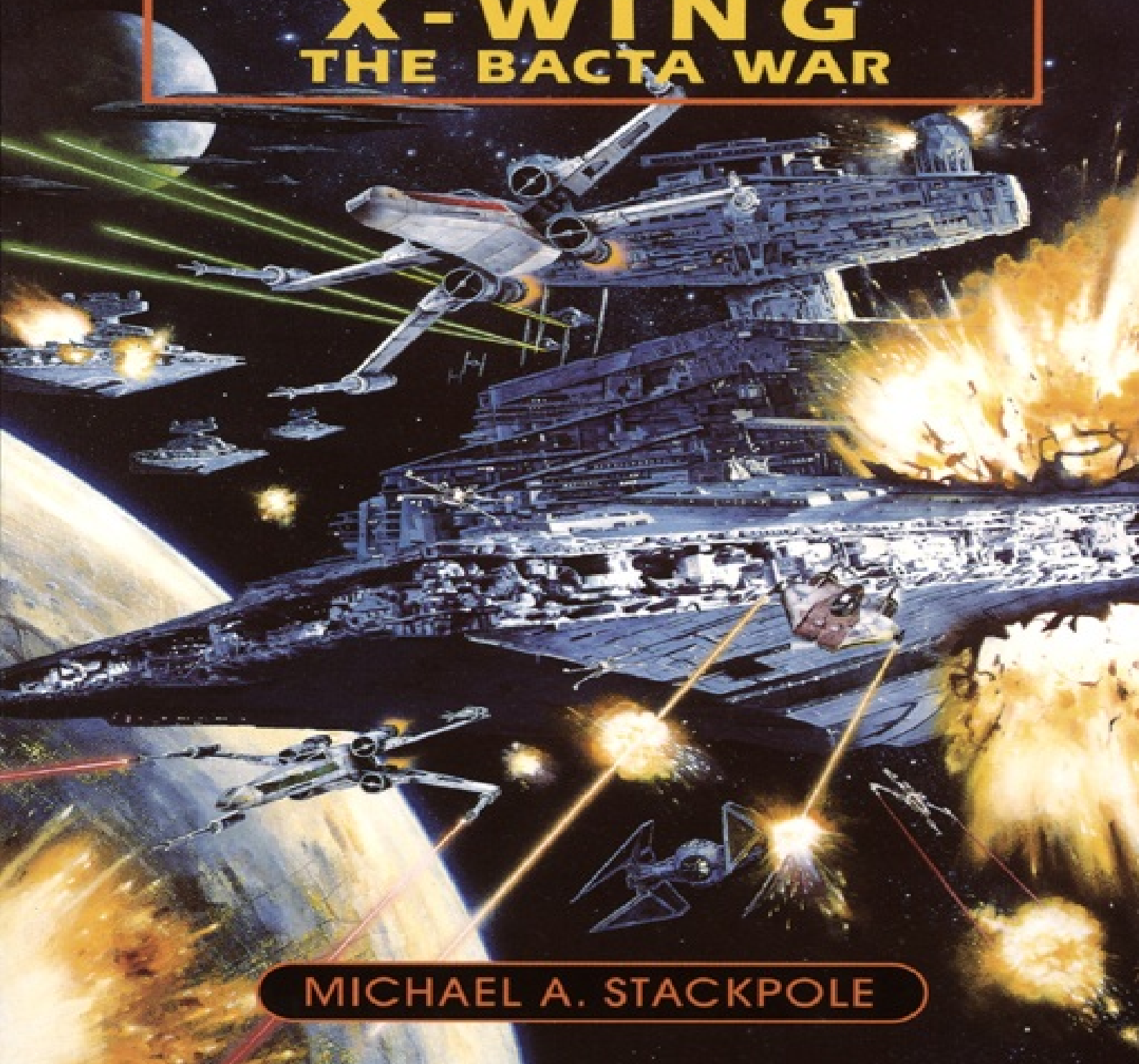


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STAR WARS®

X-WING THE BACTA WAR



MICHAEL A. STACKPOLE

DIE-WING DEATH

Ooryl triggered a double burst of laser fire, sending two scarlet bolts lancing through the lead Die-wing's ball cockpit. Nothing exploded, though leaking atmosphere did combust and flare for a moment. The Die-wing hurtled on through space, but began to level out from the looping climb in which it had been engaged. That move invited a second shot, but the first had clearly killed the pilot, leaving the ship to fly on with no intelligence at the controls.

Unfortunately for him, the Die-wing's wingman failed to realize his partner had died. Flying in perfect formation, he began to level out, too. Ooryl's sideslip dropped him squarely on that fighter's aft. Before the pilot could begin to maneuver, Ooryl fired two laser bursts at him. The first shredded the port nacelle, lacing it with fire before ripping it apart. The second shot weakened the link between the remaining nacelle and the cockpit. The engine ripped free, rocketing off toward Chorax's sun, while the ball flew on out of control.

A small explosion wreathed the top of the cockpit with fire. A round plug shot upward, then the pilot followed, riding a command couch backed by a rocket booster. It carried the pilot clear of the doomed ship and out into space. The command couch gave the pilot marginal control over his fate—he was no longer bound for deep space in a runaway fight—but without a pickup in a ship within a half hour, he'd suffocate or freeze to death.

STAR
WARS.

X - W I N G

BOOK FOUR

THE BACTA WAR

Michael A. Stackpole



BANTAM BOOKS

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The Rogues

Commander Wedge Antilles (human male from Corellia)
Captain Tycho Celchu (human male from Alderaan)
Captain Aril Nunb (Sullustan female from Sullust)
Lieutenant Corran Horn (human male from Corellia)

Ooryl Qrygg (Gand male from Gand)
Nawara Ven (Twi'lek male from Ryloth)
Rhysati Ynr (human female from Bespin)
Gavin Darklighter (human male from Tatooine)
Riv Shiel (Shistavanen male from Uvena III)
Asyr Sei'lar (Bothan female from Bothawui)
Inyri Forge (human female from Kessel)
Iella Wessiri (human female from Corellia)
Winter (human female from Alderaan)
Elscol Loro (human female from Cilpar)

Zraii (Verpine male from Roche G42)
M-3PO (Emtrey; protocol and regulations droid)
Whistler (Corran's R2 astromech)
Mynock (Wedge's R5 astromech)

Alliance Military

Admiral Ackbar (Mon Calamari male from Mon Calamari)
Captain Pash Cracken (human male from Contruum)

Alliance Intelligence

General Airen Cracken (human male from Contruum)

Crew of the Pulsar Skate

Mirax Terrik (human female from Corellia)
Liat Tsayv (Sullustan male from Sullust)

Thyferran Forces

Ysanne Isard, Director of Imperial Intelligence (human female from Coruscant)

Fliry Vorrus (human male from Corellia)

Erisi Dlarit (human female from Thyferra)

Somehow the dead of night amplified the lightsaber's hiss, allowing it to fill the room. The blade's silvery light frosted the furniture and gave birth to impenetrable shadows. The black light drifted back and forth, prompting the shadows to waver and shift as if fleeing from the light.

Much as criminals would flee from the light.

Corran Horn stared at the blade, finding the argent energy shaft neither harsh nor painful to his eyes. He lazily wove the blade through joined infinity loops, then, with the flick of his right wrist, snapped it up into a guard that protected him from forehead to waist. *Relic of a bygone era, it still can conjure up images and feelings.*

He hit the black button under his thumb twice, and the blade died, again plunging the room into darkness. The lightsaber did conjure up images and feelings in him, but Corran doubted they were at all the images and feelings commonly felt by most others on Coruscant. To everyone, including Corran, Luke Skywalker was a hero and was welcomed as heir to the Jedi tradition. His efforts at rebuilding the Jedi order were roundly applauded, and no one save those who dreaded the return of law and order to the galaxy, wished Luke anything but the greatest success in his heroic quest.

As do I. Corran frowned. *Still, my decision has been made.*

He'd felt it the greatest of honors to be asked by Luke Skywalker to leave Rogue Squadron and train to become a Jedi. Skywalker had told him that his grandfather Nejaa Halcyon had been a Jedi Master who had been slain in the Clone Wars. The lightsaber Corran had discovered in the Galactic Museum had belonged to Nejaa and had been presented to Corran as his rightful inheritance. *Mine is the heritage of a Jedi Knight.*

But that was a heritage he had only heard of from Skywalker. He did not doubt the Jedi was telling the truth, but it was not the whole truth. *At least not the whole of the truth with which I grew up.*

Throughout his life Corran Horn had come to believe his grandfather was Rostek Horn, a valued and highly placed member of the Corellian Security Force. His father, Hal Horn, likewise was with CorSec. When it came time for Corran to choose a career, there was really no choice at all. He continued the Horn tradition of serving CorSec. His grandfather had always admitted to having known a Jedi who died in the Clone Wars, but that acquaintance had been given no more weight than having once met Imperial Moff Fliry Vorru or having visited Imperial Center, as Coruscant had been known under the Empire's rule.

Corran found it no great surprise that Rostek Horn and his father had downplayed their ties to Nejaa Halcyon. Halcyon had died in the Clone Wars; and Rostek had comforted, grown close with, and married Halcyon's widow. He also adopted Halcyon's son, Valin, who grew up as Hal Horn. When the Emperor began his extermination of the Jedi order, Rostek had used his position at CorSec to destroy all traces of the Halcyon family, insulating his wife and adopted son from investigation by Imperial authorities.

Since exhibiting any interest in the Jedi Knights could invite scrutiny and my family would be very vulnerable if its secret were discovered, I probably heard less about the Jedi Knights than most.

other kids my age. If not for various holodramas that painted the Jedi Knights as villains and later reminiscences by his grandfather about the Clone Wars, Corran would have known little or nothing about the Jedi. Like most other children, he found them vaguely romantic and a little too much sinister, but they were distant and remote while what his father and grandfather did was immediate and exciting.

He raised a hand and pressed it to the golden Jedi medallion he wore around his neck. It had been a keepsake his father had carried and Corran inherited after his father's death. Corran had taken it as a lucky charm of sorts, never realizing his father had kept it because it bore the image of his own father, Nejaa Halcyon. *Wearing it had been my father's way of honoring his father and defying the Empire. Likewise, I wore it to honor him, not realizing I was doing more through that act.*

Skywalker's explanation to him of what his relationship to Nejaa Halcyon was opened new vistas and opportunities for him. In joining CorSec he had chosen to dedicate his life to a mission that paralleled the Jedi mission: making the galaxy safe for others. As Luke Skywalker explained, by becoming a Jedi, Corran could do what he had always done but on a larger scale. That idea, that opportunity, was seductive, and clearly all of his squadron-mates had expected him to jump at it.

Corran smiled. *I thought Councilor Borsk Fey'lya was going to die when I turned down the offer. In many ways I wish he had.*

He shook his head, realizing that thought was unworthy of himself and really wasted Councilor Borsk Fey'lya. Corran was certain that, on some level, the Bothan Councilor believed he—no, Corran—was right and his actions were vital to sustain the New Republic. Re-creating the Jedi order would help provide a cohesive force to bind the Republic together and to drape it in the nostalgic mantle of the Old Republic. Just as having various members of nation-states placed in Rogue Squadron had helped pull the Republic together, having a Corellian become a new Jedi might influence the Diktat into treating the New Republic in a more hospitable manner.

Skywalker had asked him to, and Fey'lya had assumed he would, join the Jedi order, but that was because neither of them knew of or realized that his personal obligations and promises exerted more influence with him than any galactic cause. While Corran realized that doing the greatest good for the greatest number was probably better for everyone in the long run, he had short-term debts he wanted to repay, and time was of the essence in doing so.

The remnants of the Empire had captured, tortured, and imprisoned him at Lusankya, which he later came to realize was really a Super Star Destroyer buried beneath the surface of Coruscant. He had escaped from there—a feat never before successfully accomplished—but he had gotten away only with the aid of other prisoners. He had vowed to them that he would return and liberate them, and he fully intended to keep his promise. The fact that they were imprisoned in the belly of the SSD that now orbited Thyferra made that task more difficult, but long odds against success had never stopped him before. *I'm a Corellian. What use have I for odds?*

His desire to save them had increased with a chance discovery that embarrassed him mightily when he made it. In Lusankya the Rebel prisoners had been led by an older man who simply called himself Jan. Since his escape, Corran had caught a holovision broadcast of a documentary on the heroes of the Rebel Alliance. First and foremost among them had been

the general who led the defense of Yavin 4 and planned the destruction of the first Death Star, Jan Dodonna. The documentary said he'd been slain during the evacuation of Yavin but Corran had no doubt Dodonna had been a prisoner on Lusankya. *If I hadn't thought him dead, I might have recognized him, too. How stupid of me.*

Dodonna's celebrity had nothing to do with Corran's desire to save him. Jan, like Url Sette and others, had helped him escape. They had risked their lives to give him a chance to get away. Leaving such brave people captives of someone like Ysanne Isard not only failed to reward their courage but repaid them by leaving them in severe jeopardy of death or worse—conversion into a covert Imperial agent under Isard's direction.

"Couldn't sleep?"

Corran started, then turned and smiled at the black-haired, dark-eyed woman standing in the bedroom doorway. "I guess not, Mirax. I'm sorry I woke you."

"You didn't wake me. Your *absence* awakened me." She wore a dark blue robe, belted at the waist with a pale yellow sash. Mirax raised a hand to hide a yawn then pointed at the silver cylinder in his right hand. "Regretting your decision?"

"Which one? Refusing to join the Jedi Knights or"—he smiled—"or hooking up with you?"

She raised an eyebrow. "I was thinking of the Jedi decision. If you have reservations about the other decision, I can relearn how to sleep alone."

He laughed, and she joined him. "I regret neither. Your father and my father may have been mortal enemies, but I can't imagine having a better friend than you."

"Or lover."

"Especially lover."

Mirax shrugged. "All you men who've just gotten out of prison say that."

Corran frowned for a moment. "I imagine you're right, but how you came by that information, I don't want to know."

Mirax blinked her eyes. "You know, I don't think I want to know that, either."

Corran laughed, then crossed the room and enfolded her in a warm hug. "After my escape Tycho expressed his regrets concerning your death to me. He told me how Warlord Zsinj had ambushed a convoy at Alderaan and destroyed it, including your *Pulsar Skate*. Everything inside of me just collapsed. Losing you just ripped the emotional skeleton out of me."

"Now you know how I felt when I thought you'd been slain here on Coruscant." She kissed his left ear, then settled her chin on his shoulder. "I hadn't realized how much you had become part of my life until you were gone. The hole the *Lusankya* created blasting her way out of Coruscant was nothing compared to the void I had inside. It wasn't a question of wanting to die, but of knowing my insides were dead and wondering when the rest of me would catch up."

"I had it luckier than you. When he got the chance, General Cracken pulled me aside and told me how you'd gone on a covert mission to Borleias to deliver ryll kor, bacta, and *Vratix verachen*. Zsinj's ambush conveniently covered your disappearance so the Thyferrans didn't know what you were setting up on Borleias with their bacta."

"Yeah, they would not have liked it if it were known we were using the Alderaan Bioti facility there to make rylca and, eventually, enough bacta to dent their monopoly." Mirax shivered. "I would have preferred the original plan working, because as much as I didn't look forward to being reviled and hunted down for stealing bacta from the convoy, I would have

rather endured that than having all those other people killed.”

“Nothing you could do about that.”

“Nor was there anything you could do about your fellow prisoners being whisked away by Isard when she escaped in the *Lusankya*.” Mirax backed up a half-step and held Corran at arm’s-length. “You do realize that, don’t you?”

“Realize, yes. Accept, no. Tolerate, no way.” Corran narrowed his green eyes, but the hint of a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “You know, if you keep hanging around with me, you’re going to get into a lot of trouble.”

“Trouble?” Mirax batted her brown eyes. “Whatever do you mean, Lieutenant Horn?”

“Well, I precipitated the mass resignation of the New Republic’s most celebrated fighter squadron and vowed that we’d liberate Thyferra from Ysanne Isard’s clutches. So far, toward that end, we have a squadron’s worth of pilots, *my* X-wing, and if you’re really in this with us, your freighter.”

Mirax smiled. “Versus three Imperial Star Destroyers and a Super Star Destroyer, not to mention any sort of Thyferran military forces that might oppose us.”

Corran nodded. “Right.”

Mirax’s grin broadened. “Okay, so get to the trouble part.”

“Mirax, be serious.”

“I am. You forget, dear heart, that it was an X-wing and a freighter that lit up the first Death Star.”

“This is a little bit different.”

“Not really.” She reached out and tapped his forehead with a finger. “You and I, Wedge and Tycho, and everyone else knows what it takes to defeat the Empire. It’s not a matter of equipment, but of having the heart to use that equipment. The Empire was broken because for the good of the galaxy, it *had to be broken*. The Rebels were given no choice, and because of that, they pushed themselves further than the Imperials did. We know we *can* win and that we *must* win, and Isard’s people know nothing of the kind.”

“That’s all well and good, Mirax, and I agree, but this is a massive undertaking. The sheer amount of equipment we’ll need to pull this off is staggering.”

“Agreed. I don’t think this will be easy, but it *can* be done.”

“I know.” Corran massaged his eyes with his left hand. “Too many variables and not enough data available to begin to assign them values.”

“And three hours before dawn isn’t the time you should be wrestling with such things. As bright as you might be, Corran Horn, this is not an hour when you do your best work.”

Corran raised an eyebrow. “I seem to recall you singing a different tune last evening about this time.”

“At that time you weren’t concerned with Ysanne Isard, you were concerned with me.”

“Ah, and that makes the difference?”

“From my perspective, you bet.” She took the lightsaber from his hand and set it atop her dresser. “And I think, if you’re willing to work with me, I can share that perspective with you.”

He kissed her on the tip of the nose. “It would be my pleasure.”

“That, Lieutenant Horn, is just half the objective here.”

“Forgive me.” Following her toward the bed, he stepped over the silken puddle her robe

made on the floor. “You know, I just got out of prison.”

“For that I won’t forgive you but perhaps”—she smiled up at him—“I will make some allowance for good behavior.”

Wedge Antilles felt decidedly uncomfortable out of uniform. *Actually, I feel uncomfortable out of the service.* During the covert mission to Coruscant, he'd not been in hailing distance of a Alliance uniform, and he'd even worn Imperial uniforms a couple of times, but that had not bothered him. He'd spent most of his adult life as part of the Rebel Alliance and now he had chosen to leave it.

There was no doubt in his mind that the decision to leave was the right one to make. He fully understood why the New Republic couldn't attack Thyferra and bring Ysanne Isard justice. Since she was installed as the Chief of State through an internal revolution—opposed to an invasion—her holding office was not a case of Imperial aggression, but of self-determination. If the New Republic rejected that idea in this one case, plenty of other nation-states would think long and hard before joining the New Republic or would consider leaving.

Wedge forced himself to smile and looked up at the light-brown-haired man with bright blue eyes sitting across the table from him. "Have we bitten off more than we can chew?"

Tycho Celchu shrugged. "It's a mouthful, but with some more teeth, we might be able to choke it down. There is some good news on this whole front you know. We have the ten million credits that Ysanne Isard placed in accounts to frame me. That money is mine, which means it's *ours*. We have the five Z-95 Headhunters that were used to help liberate Coruscant."

"But they're not hyperspace capable."

"True, but that's not going to be their value for us." Tycho began to smile. "The Z-95s are part of history. They're *collectible*. I've already had offers from museums and amusement parks to buy them. We can probably get one point five million for each of them—the Bothan Military Academy wants the one Asyr flew so badly they're not even trying to hide their desire for it."

Wedge's jaw dropped. "That would give us quite a war chest."

"It should take care of many of our needs."

"Provided we can find places where we can buy weapons that are restricted or illegal on most civilized planets."

Tycho nodded. "Winter and Mirax are working on that problem. Winter, from her work locating Imperial supply depots for us to raid, knows where there are bits and pieces of things that we can buy, borrow, or steal. Mirax is fairly certain she can locate sources for pretty much anything else we need. And we are getting donations of material."

Wedge smiled and looked around the small office in which he and Tycho sat. After the resignation, they had been forced out of Rogue Squadron's headquarters facility. Various citizens had turned around and offered the ex-Rogues apartments and offices. They'd been feted and celebrated and praised as if they were the only people in the galaxy who still had in them the rebel spirit that defeated the Empire.

"Do you think the Provisional Council ordered the grounding of all skyhooks just to spite us?"

Tycho shook his head. "That's a popular rumor after we were offered the SoroSuu skyhook, but we know the safety concerns over the things are well founded. The *Lusankya* blasted most of one out of the sky, and the falling debris obliterated a couple of square kilometers. Grounding the skyhooks in that area and where the *Lusankya* blasted out of Coruscant provides housing for the survivors of those disasters *and* allows the resources used to keep the skyhooks airborne to be diverted to other projects."

"Too bad for us, because a skyhook would have been perfect. It would have enough storage to let us house our equipment when we get it."

Tycho raised an eyebrow. "I think you're more concerned that it would provide Isard with a single target to hit when she comes after us, which she will. It minimizes collateral damage."

"Unless you're living beneath us."

"True."

"As was your speculation." Wedge frowned. "The fact is, that we've declared war on Isard but we're not going to be indiscriminate in waging that war. She knows no such restriction on her actions. In reality, we shouldn't be looking at any headquarters anywhere near Coruscant. There are a bunch of old Rebel bases we could convert."

"Even if we *could* get it, I'm not going back to Hoth." Tycho shivered. "I saw enough snow there to last me a dozen lifetimes."

"Which is about what it takes to burn that Hoth cold from your bones." Wedge shook his head. "No, I was thinking about Yavin 4 or Talasea. Endor would be nice, but the Ewoks would be targets for her."

A chime sounded from the door. Wedge looked up and said, "Open."

The door slid open to reveal a flame-haired man of above-average height wearing the uniform of a Captain in the New Republic Armed Forces. He started to salute, then hesitated, then completed the gesture in a crisp and respectful manner.

Wedge smiled and stood behind the table. He returned the salute, then waved the man into the office and toward a chair. "Good to see you again, Pash. I see you've got your rank back. You're rejoining your flight group?"

Pash Cracken nodded, then shook hands with both Tycho and Wedge before seating himself. "Good to see both of you as well." His green-eyed gaze flicked down at the floor for a moment. "I really wish I were going to be with the rest of you. Just say the word, Wedge, and I'm a civilian."

The pain in Pash's voice started a sympathetic aching in Wedge's chest. "We'd love to have you with us, but there's no way you can resign and join us. Your father's the head of Alliance Security. If you came with us there would be no way anyone would believe we're operating independently. I know you'd not be reporting to your father, but the appearance would cause trouble for the New Republic."

"I know." Pash took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I'm back as part of Commander Varth's wing. While the bulk of the fleet is off chasing Warlord Zsinj, we're being pulled Core-ward to cover some of the sectors where Zsinj used to run around. It's going to be something of an adventure for our people, because we'll be staging from Folor, that moon base orbiting Commenor."

"I remember it well." Wedge smiled. "Not a lot of creature comforts there."

“It’ll beat what we’ve got out on Generis. It’s backward enough that most folks there don’t even realize the Old Republic has fallen.”

Tycho smiled. “And they’re wondering why nothing new is being shipped from Alderaan.”

“That’s pretty much it.” Pash leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Our patrol area includes Yag’Dhul, the system that is home to the Givin. One of our initial exercises involves going in and rendering the space station there uninhabitable so Warlord Zsinj won’t have it as a place to which he can retreat.”

Wedge frowned. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but Zsinj hasn’t been anywhere near the station since we hit it and stole his bacta.”

“So it seems.” Pash shrugged. “Anyway, my flight group has the job of denying this station to Zsinj. I was thinking that perhaps you might like to stage your operations out of the station. It would deny it to Zsinj and would provide you a decent fighting platform from which to work. It’s convenient to Coruscant and Thyferra as well as to a number of other worlds.”

Wedge’s brown eyes narrowed. “And would allow you to wander by and help out if we get into trouble.”

Pash sat back and feigned surprise. “Why you didn’t think that was what I had in mind, do you? Not at all. I mean, yes, my people might avail themselves of the station if we needed a stop—no way I’m going to set down on Yag’Dhul. The weather is too unpredictable to allow us to use it as a viable staging area.”

“Point taken.”

Tycho nodded. “The station would make for a good staging area. If Pash were to report that it had been rendered uninhabitable, then Isard might be led to believe it’s junk. There’s no doubt in my mind that at some point she’ll find out where we are and come after us, but an operational space platform has to be a bit more daunting than a skyhook or a warehouse here on Coruscant.”

“Definitely seems like this is our best choice.” Wedge nodded, then smiled at Pash. “Thank you a lot. You’ve solved one of our major problems. We now have a home.”

“I hoped you’d say that.” Pash smiled broadly. “I ship out at the end of the week. I’ll be back in an A-wing, but that’s not so bad. We’ll keep the station safe for you until you can come out and take possession, and we’ll transmit reports about its destruction just to keep the folks guessing.”

“I appreciate it.” Wedge frowned for a moment. “Pash, when you joined Rogue Squadron you said you wanted to join to get a perspective on how well you fly and fight. You wanted to be part of the best unit going to find out if you really were as good as you have been to me. You are. Did you get that perspective? Are you comfortable going back to your own unit?”

Pash sat back, his brows knitted with concentration. “I think I did get that perspective from Wedge. Granted, I’ve only been with the Rogues for a short time, but we did some fairly nasty flying. I don’t think any fight I’ve been part of before or since flying a Headhunter through a blacked-out city in the middle of the mother of all thunderstorms will match the experience. That was flying by instinct, by skill, and by luck. I made shots and pulled off maneuvers I never would have thought possible. After that performance I almost wish there was another Death Star up there for me to take a shot at.”

“I’d not go that far, Pash.” Wedge shared a grin with Tycho. “You are good, *very* good. The

Imps have every right to fear you.”

“Thanks, Wedge. It means a lot coming from you.” The pilot brushed fingers back through his red hair. “As for my being comfortable returning to my unit, yeah, I’m okay there, too. One thing being with Rogue Squadron taught me is that to be a unit, everyone has to pull their own weight. I’ve been afraid that my people wouldn’t think for themselves and wouldn’t follow me into disaster if I make a mistake. What I’d missed is exactly what you do. You give your people responsibilities and make them rely on each other. If we’d *just* followed your lead while on Coruscant, the Imps would still own this world. I need to do just that with my people. If I give them responsibility, they’ll learn that I trust them. Once they realize that they’ll also trust in themselves and won’t follow me blindly when I do something stupid.”

Wedge stood and offered Pash his hand. “You’ll be sorely missed, Captain Cracken, but our loss is your unit’s gain. We’ll see you soon at the Yag’Dhul station.”

“Thanks, Wedge, Tycho. I look forward to seeing you there.”

The door closed behind Pash, prompting Wedge and Tycho to exchange glances again. “Well, Tycho, it seems our housing problem is solved. Now all we need is a dozen or more X-wings, munitions for same, droids, techs, foodstuffs, and other supplies, not to mention all the equipment necessary to repair any damage to our new base.”

Tycho winced. “That’s quite the tall order. Dare I say it?”

“What?”

“I wish we had Emtrey to help us put this whole package together.”

Wedge smiled as he thought of the black 3PO droid with a spaceport controller droid clamshell head. Installed as the unit’s Quartermaster, the droid had really been meant to keep an eye on Tycho in case he was a spy in the Empire’s control. Despite his espionage duties, he had been a wonder at procuring supplies in a timely manner. Even so, he could be annoyingly voluble, which is why Wedge spent as much time as possible away from him.

Wedge sighed. “Yeah, I guess I miss him, too.” He shrugged. “In his absence, I guess we just have to do the best we can.”

“True, and hope that’s going to be good enough.”

His move to Thyferra left Fliry Vorrु in a perpetual state of simmering anger. After years spent in the spice mines of Kessel, with its thin, arid atmosphere, and then his short stay on Coruscant—similarly dry but decidedly more metropolitan and to his tastes—Thyferra was a relief, but unendurable. Green predominated, from the deep and dark tones of the tropical planet's rain forests to the lighter shades used in decorating, fashion, and even cosmetics. After Kessel's barren mines and the gray canyons of Coruscant, Vorrु found the omnipresence of verdant life oppressive.

The world's humidity dragged on him as he walked the halls of the Xucphra corporate headquarters. *One does not breathe the air here, one drinks it.* The heavy humidity meant most of the fabric used on the world was light and thin, in many cases quite sheer, while the fashions themselves tended to be abbreviated. Although this did offer some distractions—for the women of Thyferra tended strongly toward tall, lean, and beautiful—many of the people he had to deal with were short, hairy, lumpen creatures who should have been swathed in bolts of the most opaque cloth available. Their positions as the scions of the various families that ran the Xucphra corporation and, now, the civil government, required him to be polite and even deferential.

This requirement to courteously entertain the most stupid of ideas ground on him most of all. Under the Empire's rule, the Xucphra and Zaltin corporations had been given a monopoly on the production of bacta. Thyferra served as the heart of the operation, with alazm harvesting and kavam synthesis taking place primarily on Thyferra, but also at a few colonies on other worlds elsewhere. The monopoly had resulted in both corporations becoming slothful and greedy—with their profits guaranteed, there was no need for expansion or diversification. As a result, people rose to positions of importance with no eye toward merit, just seniority.

Vorrु's installation as Minister of Trade had given him oversight over the production and sale of bacta. His initial review of the whole production and distribution process had revealed to him hundreds of places where potential profit was being ignored. For example, bacta produced at a satellite facility would be shipped back to Thyferra before being transshipped to a world a dozen light-years away from the facility where it was produced. The only reason for such an activity was so the shipping firm, which was owned by Xucphra, could earn a profit, which ended up back in the pockets of the owners of Xucphra anyway—though it had been pared down by the cost of ship maintenance, crew, bookkeepers, and others.

This hardly surprised Vorrु because of the way the Zaltin and Xucphra corporations had been set up. Ten thousand humans formed the management cadre for the corporations, and they oversaw the operations carried out by approximately 2.8 million native Vratix laborers. The Vratix were very efficient, requiring little or no supervision, so the galaxy-wide operations hardly required the legion of administrative personnel in place. Each corporation discouraged mixing and mingling with individuals from the other corporation, hence they became insular and fierce rivals. While their isolation had not caused problems with genetic inbreeding—though Vorrु thought *that* was only a generation or two away—there certainly

was philosophical inbreeding that led to sinecures being created for incompetent members of the corporate family.

I assume my last order to eliminate some of these fiefdoms is the reason Iceheart wants to see me. Xucphra had displaced Zaltin in the recent coup and installed Ysanne Isard as the world leader. Most of the Zaltin folks had fled or been killed, making the Xucphra family the sole masters of a world they had long shared. As such they had no desire to listen to or comply with the orders of an offworlder like him. Even so, they were so thoroughly socialized to accept a hierarchy of command, that they would complain about him to Isard, another offworlder. It made no sense to Vorrur, and in this lack of comprehension he felt fortunate. *The day I start thinking like my charges is the day I choose to die.*

Rounding a corner, Vorrur strode past the desk of Isard's secretary, refusing to allow himself to be distracted by her spare costume. *That is a pleasure I will save myself for solace after Iceheart is through with me.* The secretary, a woman whose long black hair covered more than her clothes, smiled at him, but made no attempt to stop him or even announce him.

The Imperial Royal Guards flanking the doorway to Isard's office did not react to him at all, which reinforced the pity Vorrur felt for them. Unlike everyone else on the planet, they still wore the uniforms they brought with them from Imperial Center. A thick scarlet cloak covered the red armor and though no puddles formed at their feet, Vorrur knew they had to be roasting inside it. Even more burdensome to them, though, had to have been the orders to be so relent and not treat everyone like a potential assassin. *The Thyferrans reacted badly to the strict security Isard's Royal Guard imposed initially, so she has ordered her bodyguard to relax—something that will probably require gene therapy before they feel at ease doing it.*

As he entered Isard's office, he immediately felt a bit more comfortable. The only greener in sight was located outside the building and ensconced safely behind large, amorphous transparisteel viewports. The room itself had been paneled with very blond wood, giving it a Tatooinish cast. As had been the case with her office on Coruscant, it remained largely empty and free of clutter. *Furnishings would be of use only if one wanted to linger here, and with her being present, this is not likely, even if she has gone native.*

On Coruscant the black-haired woman with white temple locks had been given to wearing a uniform similar in cut to that of Imperial Grand Admirals, though hers was colored blood red, not white. On Thyferra she had chosen to wear clothing that was more loose and flowing. The fabric she chose was still blood red—in keeping with the uniforms worn by the Imperial Royal Guard—but she eschewed the nearly transparent cloth others wore happily. *Pity, she is striking enough to wear it well.* Vorrur had long since heard the rumor that Isard had been one of Palpatine's lovers and could not deny she was attractive.

Her eyes, and all that lies behind them, is undoubtedly what drew the Emperor to her. The Hothlike icy blue orb of her right eye contrasted sharply with the fiery molten red of her left. They seemed windows into the duality of her nature. She could be cold and calculating in the extreme, but also given over to towering incendiary angers. Vorrur had, to date, avoided being immolated in one of them, but he *had* been scorched a time or two.

He bowed his white-maned head toward her. "You sent for me?"

"I have had information from Imperial Center that I thought you might find of interest." She kept her voice light, but that did not mean it lacked force. "You had been wondering after Kirtan Loor."

Vorru nodded. The Intelligence agent and leader of the Palpatine Counter-insurgency Force had disappeared just hours before Isard had fled from Coruscant, bearing Vorru away with her. “My assumption was that he had been taken and broken in interrogation. That was the only explanation for why so many of your operatives still on Coruscant were swept up in the aftermath of your departure.”

“He was certainly the cause of the sweep, though it appears he gave the information up voluntarily.” Isard’s eyes narrowed. “He attempted to use an operation of his own to deal with the bacta convoy headed for Coruscant through the Alderaan system.”

“The convoy that Warlord Zsinj hit.” Vorru nodded slowly. “Loor had told me he had a squadron of X-wings painted up to represent Rogue Squadron. He wanted to use them to strafe the squadron’s headquarters, but I stopped him. So the Rogues that Zsinj destroyed there really belonged to Loor. Amazing.”

“Indeed.” Her eyes flashed pitilessly. “Loor realized, after the disaster, that I had leaked word of the convoy to Zsinj so he’d strike at it. I assumed his need for revenge upon Rogue Squadron would make him hit it and destroy them. It would have, too, had the real squadron not been delayed. Loor apparently assumed I would realize he had attempted to deceive me since his transmission of the report about the convoy and his plans to deal with it came too late for me to countermand them. He chose to run over to the Rebels and seek sanctuary with them.”

Vorru nodded. “There are ways to deal with him. Boba Fett could find and kill him, I have no doubt.”

“His skills will not be necessary.” Isard smiled in a way that managed to mix glee with cruelty. “I had learned from another agent of mine about a secret witness to be brought forward in the Celchu treason trial. I thought it was General Evir Derricote and set traps to prevent him from reaching the Imperial Court. You’ll recall I asked you to post a dozen people at various places in Imperial Center.”

“Yes.” *And I only sent three to each location, since I needed the rest to evacuate my bacta storage facility.* “None of them found Derricote.”

“No, he probably was not there after all. Loor was their witness. I had thought Derricote had escaped from Lusankya, but he apparently died at the hands of Corran Horn, during his escape. Horn killed your men in the Galactic Museum, in fact.” Isard pressed her hands together, fingertip to fingertip. “The agent I set as my failsafe to stop Derricote instead shot and killed Loor and, in turn, was killed by his own wife. She was one of Loor’s escorts—she had known him from Corellia.”

“Tella Wessiri.” Vorru felt a moment’s pang of sympathy for her. She had been an influential and intelligent member of the cabal that succeeded in stripping away Coruscant’s planetary shields and opening it to the Rebel invasion. Though her background with the Corellian Security Force made him view her as an enemy, he did admire her skill and dedication. *If she had to shoot her husband, it will tear her up inside. She does not deserve that sort of pain.*

Isard smiled. “I find it rather delicious that she was forced to shoot Diric. He was useful but really just a pawn. His love for her was enough, apparently, to get him to reinterpret some of my orders to him, though, ultimately, he belonged to *me*, not to her. I hope *that* hurts her more than killing him did.”

Vorru frowned. "If Loor was killed, how did Alliance Security sweep up your agents?"

"Loor apparently encoded a datacard as a safeguard against them just killing him. It seems the key, which he believed known only to himself, was also known to Corran Horn."

"Ah, and Loor believed Horn dead." Vorru chuckled lightly. "I find the irony something that would have tortured Loor."

"Yes, but now his stupidity tortures me. The information coming to me from Imperial Center is severely limited. The official information service tells me more than my spies. The Horn has much to answer for."

"I could have told you he would be trouble, but even I believed you'd killed him. Horn's father and even his grandfather were very driven men. Of course, you have ample evidence of his drive, and now it's focused on us, here."

The color in Isard's red eye seemed to flare for a second. "You refer to the many resignations from the squadron and their vow to liberate Thyferra?" Her laughter, which sounded quite genuine and unforced to Vorru, nonetheless had few of the pleasing tones usually associated with laughter.

"I appreciate the contempt you might feel for their effort, but it cannot be discounted. Yet we have three destroyers, two of the Imperial, one of the *Victory*-class, and a Super Star Destroyer to defend us, but your confidence in them is as misplaced as the Emperor's misjudgment of the Rebel Alliance."

Isard's face became a frozen mask. "Oh, you think so, do you? You think I am repeating the mistakes the Emperor made?"

Vorru met her stare openly. "You undoubtedly don't see it that way, but it is my place to remind you of the errors others have made so you don't repeat them. You are correct, Horn Antilles, and the others have nothing right now, and it does seem apparent that the New Republic does not support their effort, but that could change. And, yes, we control the basic output for the galaxy, but we must be careful. If we make it too dear, forces will join to oppose us, and the former Rogues are in an excellent position to make the most of the opposition."

Isard stared at him for a moment or two more, then abruptly broke her stare off. "Your caution is noted."

"I will also point out that we still have the Ashern to deal with here. They may be a minority among the Vratix, but they have struck in the past at key production facilities. Their strikes over the past year or so have become more precise and effective. I think they will become even more so because of the rumors that some Zaltin personnel have joined them."

"Yes, the Black-claw Rebels are a bother, but that's why I have deployed stormtroopers to defend our facilities."

Vorru smiled. "That was a good move, as was restricting them to play a defensive role. Establishing a Thyferran Home Defense Corps that will allow Xucphra volunteers to fight the Ashern themselves was also brilliant."

"Thank you. Xucphra's people will come to see themselves in an alliance with my stormtroopers in no time. Once a THDC force gets in over its head and my people rescue them, the humans here will see my stormtroopers as the stalwart white line that separates them from death. Those who are dubious about us will be won over." Isard spread her hands apart. "Erisi Dlarit is heading up the fighter wing I have given to the THDC. She is a hero

among her people, and having her so elevated proves to the Thyferrans that I understand how superior they are.”

Vorru nodded slowly. *There is no denying it, she is excellent at analyzing and utilizing the psychology of a subject people against themselves. Still, when there is someone she can't break down, like Horn or Antilles, she has no way to defend against what they might do.* He looked up at her. “And what are your thoughts on this rylca Mon Mothma pronounced a cure for your Krytos virus?”

“Propaganda, clearly, meant to calm the masses. The fact is that its existence and efficacy against the virus are immaterial. *If Derricote had been successful in creating the virus I asked him to create or if Loor had delayed the conquest of Imperial Center, the New Republic would have been broken beyond repair. As it is now, they are hard put to deal with the demands their populace is making on them. As we restrict bacta flow to the New Republic and its worlds, we will alienate member states.*”

“You mean we will be playing the same game we did on Imperial Center but on a larger scale here?”

“Exactly.” Isard glanced up, looking well above his head. “My goal has always been to destroy the Rebellion, then move to rebuild the Empire. In effect, by letting them take Imperial Center, we *have* destroyed the Rebellion. They are no longer an elusive force that can strike at will. They now have to take responsibility and deliver on the promises they have made. When they fail to do that, the people will look for the sort of stability they had before. If we play things carefully, we will not have to reconquer Imperial Center, we will be *invited* back to resume our rightful place at the head of the Empire.”

“Interesting analysis, and accurate, I think, except in one thing.”

“And that is?”

Vorru's dark eyes shrank to bare slits. “Antilles, Horn, and the others. They have the freedom the Rebels once had. They are a problem we will have to deal with and deal with swiftly.”

“Or else?”

“I was in a position to see them render Imperial Center defenseless.” Vorru's voice hardened. “If we don't deal with them I fear they will become a problem with which we cannot deal.”

It didn't surprise Corran Horn to find Iella Wessiri in the Corellian Sanctuary, but the expression on her face threatened to crush his heart in his chest. Her light brown hair had been pulled back into a single braid and her broad shoulders were hunched forward. She sat on the front bench in the small chamber, leaning over and balanced precariously enough that he expected her to fall at any second. The way her grief pulled at her face, arching the corners of her mouth downward, made it seem as if gravity would, in fact, tug her to the floor.

Corran hesitated in the doorway of the small domed building. Because of the hostile relationship between the New Republic and the Corellian Diktat, repatriating Corellians who died away from the planet of their birth had become impossible. The Sanctuary had been created by exiled Corellians to give their dead a resting place. Unlike Alderaanians, who often sealed their dead in capsules and shot them into orbit within the Graveyard, allowing them to float forever amid the debris that marked where their planet had once been; Corellians cremated their dead exiles and used industrial-grade gravity generators to compress the carbon residue into raw synthetic diamonds. This imparted a physical immortality to the dead. The diamonds were then brought to the Sanctuary and imbedded in the black walls and ceiling to create a glittering series of constellations as seen from Corellia.

The sheer number of diamonds glinting in the ceiling sent a shiver through Corran. *We've given a lot to the Rebellion, though other worlds have given as much or more. As beautiful as the display is, it is also horrible. The Imperials who wished to make the galaxy over in their own image have, in fact, created here a small galaxy that is entirely given over to mourning.*

Corran walked forward and slid onto the bench next to Iella. She didn't look over at him but melted against his shoulder and chest as he put an arm around her. "It's going to be okay, Iella, really."

"He never hurt anyone, Corran, never."

"I don't imagine Kirtan Loor would agree, but I'll concede the point."

He felt her chest convulse once, then she looked up at him with red-rimmed brown eyes. "No, you're right." Her mouth made a weak attempt at twisting itself into a smile. "As much as he admired your drive, Corran, Diric really appreciated your sense of humor. He said it marked your resiliency. He thought that as long as you could laugh, especially at yourself, you'd always heal from any trauma."

"He was a wise man." He tightened his embrace a bit. "You know he'd hate to see you like this, to think he was causing you this much pain."

"I know. That hasn't made it any easier, though." She dabbed at tears with a handkerchief. "I keep thinking that if I'd seen something there, I could have prevented what happened. He wouldn't have been a traitor."

"Whoa, wait, Iella, that is *not* your fault. There was nothing, absolutely nothing, you could have detected or done to help him." Corran shivered and felt his flesh pucker. "I know what Isard did to those she wanted to warp and convert into her puppets. I resisted, I don't know

how. It could have been personality or genetics or training or anything. Tycho and I both proved unsuitable for her—as did a few others, but I think she would have had an easy time of breaking Diric down.”

“What?” Iella’s hissed question carried with it undercurrents of betrayal. She tried to pull away from him, but he held on.

“That’s not a strike against Diric, honestly it isn’t. Diric was a victim, and you have to know that he resisted her mightily because even after his capture Imperial Intelligence didn’t find you. I think he built a mental reserve around you and was willing to sacrifice everything to protect you. Even altering her orders at the end was designed to protect you, and in his mind, sacrificing himself to do so was not too much to pay.”

Corran frowned. “The one thing about Diric that characterized him was his curiosity. We both saw it in the way he’d ask us about cases and push us to look at other explanations. He was thoughtful and thorough—espionage was a natural place for him. You said yourself that Isard first placed him in Derricote’s lab to spy on the General. She probably suggested to him that his success in that role determined whether or not she’d let you live. She undoubtedly told him that lie concerning *any* actions he took after he rejoined you.”

Iella’s defiance melted into despair. “Great, now you’re telling me that he’d not have been in that position except for me.”

“No! You had nothing to do with where he ended up—that was entirely due to Isard and no one else.” Corran sighed. “Look, think about the good Diric did. Aril Nunb pointed out that he was the only person in Derricote’s lab that was kind to her and who helped her through her recovery from the Krytos virus. And after he came back, he was a great comfort to Tycho through the trial. He even pushed you to look for evidence to break the frame Isard had settled around Tycho. And, like it or not, he did kill Loor, and I can’t fault him for that.”

“He thought he was shooting Derricote but knew it wasn’t him. He was happy he’d gotten Loor.”

“Well, I *did* kill Derricote and I’d have been more happy to kill Loor myself.” Corran brushed a hand along her cheek and wiped tears away with his thumb. “Diric wasn’t happy existing the way he did, but he regained himself in defying Isard and doing all the little things that sabotaged her plans. In the end he won. He’d often complained his life had no meaning ...”

“But it did.”

“Agreed, and at the very last he finally got to see how much it meant. He’d saved you, he saved Aril, he saved Tycho. He’s at peace, and he’d want you to be at peace with his death, too.”

“I know, but it’s just not going to be that easy, Corran. I was there, I held him as he died from wounds *I’d* inflicted.” Iella sniffed, then swallowed with difficulty. “Your father died in your arms. How did you get through it?”

Corran felt his own throat thicken. “I won’t kid you, it wasn’t, *isn’t*, easy. There are things you expect, like seeing him again in the morning or at night or being able to call him to tell him about your day or to ask a question, and then he’s not there. You know you feel hollow inside, but you don’t know just how hollow until things like that help you define the edges of the void.”

She nodded slowly. “There are things I see or hear and I think, ‘Diric would like that or

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