Darkness crept across the desert’s wildlands. From her vantage point on the parapets that adjoined her personal chambers, Calindra had a clear and uninterrupted view of the rocky desertic terrain around the settlement as she watch the shadows stretch across the land in an attempt to devour the settled areas beyond Hejaran Keep. As if on cue, a cold wind swept sand and dried flower petals, announcing the sun’s dying rays as it disappeared over the dark mountains. Calindra, just like thousands of others in the fortified city below, absently hid their faces from the dust with their shawls. It was time for night prayers.

Tepasi’s desert dwellers were a simple and proud people, influenced by thousand year old superstitions tied into keeping the desert’s savagery at bay. Nighttime had always been the most dangerous, and many of the nomadic tribes had tried to keep it at bay by lighting bonfires at the entrances of the caves that sheltered their families at night. Over the years, the bonfires were replaced with more economical light sources. However, per tradition from ancient times, the family’s eldest child was the one to light the Vigils. They were called the light bearers.

A fairly more recent tradition came to the land when the Hejaran’s came to settle the savage lands centuries earlier. Holding a torch in her hand, Calindra extended her arm to the keep’s Vigil beacon, lighting it. She watched the darkness below as the eldest of each household took their cue from the one she lit. Lights swept across the settled lands as candles, oil lamps, and torches were ceremoniously lit.

It was Calindra’s favourite custom. It was a simple sign of defiance against the darkness; a symbol of the Tepasi people’s struggle over the millennia who were intimately wed to the savage wilderness around them.

From behind her, Calindra felt the keep’s nightwatch officer giving orders to light the rest. As custom dictated, she thanked him and gave the nighttime blessing: “May the light keep you and your watchers safe, captain.”

“Swift darkness to you, and your family, Lady Hejaran,” he replied, fist to heart as he bowed.

Calindra kept her bow a bit longer than necessary, giving the man more honour. He had to hold his own bow until she was done, but stood immediately once the bow was over, waiting only for her to be turned to do so. She swiftly returned into her chambers, feeling the man’s pride at having been thus recognized.

According to her father, statecraft wasn’t about demanding respect; it was about inspiring others to gain their respect and loyalty. One way was to show respect for the land’s traditions and embracing them. The other was to bestow some recognition to your subordinates. It had to start at the top, and it was repeated down through the ranks. It didn’t always work that way, but she felt the pride sweep across the keep as officers returned her bow to the rank and file. They all shared in the honour she had bestowed upon him.

The tradition was a double-edged sword, so it was of the utmost importance to be calm and collected in front of subordinates, because the reverse was also true. Should she be displeased, everyone below her would soon find out about it too.

Calindra unhurriedly made her way to her parents' parlor, her footsteps clacking on the marble floors, resounding all around her like she was accompanied by dozens of invisible companions. It couldn't simply be a corridor; it *had* to be given a name. Alderaan tradition wouldn't have had it any other way, and so it had been named the Hall of Echoes when the Hejaran’s first built the keep, but her father later renamed it to the ‘Hall of Lost Companions’ after Alderaan’s destruction.

'They will walk with me through the ages,' she repeated softly as her thoughts turned to the billions of defiant voices that were silenced. Calindra was too young to remember the ancient Alderaan seat of power, but her father had brought them to several "Returns" where the family and pilgrims from all over the galaxy returned to the Alderaan system to leave behind offerings to the billions of lives that were taken that day. The Baron had made sure that his children remembered and understood in the hopes they’d hold onto time honoured Alderaani values. Whether or not the Empire lay in blame for allowing such a tragedy to take place, or if the blame lay squarely on Grand Moff Tarkin's shoulders was a matter of debate between the Baron and his wife.

"Tatjana, darling, you know I loathe discussing such matters," she heard her father say as she approached the parlor, "I realize Alderaan's destruction wasn't entirely the Empire's fault, and that a good number of Alderaani did serve and probably did try to stop it... But, Alderaan's destruction only underlines why ultimate power cannot and should never again be solely wielded by one person. Such a thing could only have been made possible in an organization such as the Empire was allowed to become, and would never — EVER — have been possible had the Republic not relinquished those powers in the hands of the Supreme Chancellor."

"A lot of things weren't possible with the Republic either, and still aren't," retorted her mother, "the Senate is as ineffectual as it has ever been... You have to admit, the Empire was an effective machine, and there was much less bickering among the representatives."

"That's because there could be no opinions allowed, dear," the Baron said tersely. Opinion, that's what the Alderaani valued: the vox populi, something his Tapani wife didn't entirely embrace. She couldn't of course, after all: "Noblesse oblige," as the Tapani loved to say. At some point, Calindra conceded, someone had to cut through the discussions and make a decision, popular or not. Though she did not think it wise to support either argument, having seen where those arguments always lead to.

With a clipped 'ahem', she purposefully strode into the room: "Now... Now, you two... Why on Yoda's pointy ears are you two discussing that again?"

The Baron and Baroness both turned, surprised and perhaps slightly shamefaced at having been reprimanded by their own daughter.

"Night time so soon?!" exclaimed the Baron with an apologetic cough.

"Calindra, darling..." her mother cooed as she made her way to her daughter and kissed her on both cheeks. To Calindra it had always sounded like she was saying dah-ling; her mother always omitted the 'R' for whatever reason, but she knew it was a mark of affection from her. One she used when she was particularly amused.

"Mother," she said, making a point of accentuating the 'R' in her greeting as she warmly returned her mother’s kisses. Her father had maneuvered next to his wife and opened his arms in his usual warm and cheerful way. She of course buried herself against his chest, reveling in his arms as he wrapped them around her. She felt safe and loved in a way only her father could ever make her feel. She loved the warmth and the smell of him: musky and masculine, with a hint of pipe smoke.

" — are those wisps of grey I see in your beard?!" she teased as he let her go. He feigned a wounded heart, mock dismay crossed his features. Both ladies started laughing.

"Oh, I don't know, Calindra, dear... I rather like old Greybeard. He almost looks distinguished."

"Almost!" Calindra agreed with her, their laughter resounding throughout the room. She saw that her father's ego was sufficiently deflated, so she finally came to his rescue. "Oh..! Don't take it so hard..! We tease those we love!" she quipped before kissing him on the cheek.

"You call that love!" he harrumphed, giving her a stern look as he extended the other cheek and pointed to it intently, waiting for another. Grinning, Calindra humoured him and gave him two more on each cheek.

"There! That should tide you over for the week..!"

"Nonsense! I shall demand restitution every day for the next two months. Jibing your father so..!"

" — but I'm only here a week!"

"Fine, every morning and evening it will be then, and an extra serving at tea."

"Fine then, every morning and evening it will be; with an extra serving at tea," she agreed to the general applause from her mother.

"Oh, well negotiated, dear!" she said, clapping approvingly.

Calindra gave her father a conspiring glance, "Doesn't mother seem especially good humoured tonight, father..? She must be up to something..."

Her mother's gave her a reproachful look, but her father came to his wife's defense.

"Now, now..! Your mother isn't up to anything, Calindra. She's only excited at the guest that came calling just before Vigil."

Calindra looked at her father, cocking her head at him questioningly. She then glanced over to her mother.

"Indeed dear," her mother admitted, "there is an Imperial courier in the main hall. He's expressly asked to see you."

"To see me? Here? An Imperial..? Well now, that explains the topic you were discussing when I interrupted."

"Err... Yes," her father admitted with some gravity before he gruffly waved for the servant. "Would you be so kind as to let the Lieutenant in, will you..? And bring that bottle of whiskey my daughter brought with her."

There was a customary bow before the greying man with the wispy white hair turned around and walked out of the room.

From experience, Calindra knew that beyond the double doors were two more servants waiting for instructions. By now, both had overheard what had been requested, had conferred to determine whom would be fetching their guest, while the other would saunter off to prepare the glasses and whiskey. The old man had only to shut the door behind him and wait discretely in case he was needed.

A silence swept through the room as they waited; the Baron brooding, Calindra frowning pensively, and the Baroness... Calindra could feel her excitement, and her eyes settled on her mother. "You know," Calindra ventured, "how would the Remnant know where to find me? I didn't actually advertise where I was going, or why."

Her mother's eyes met hers, and the Baron twirled around, noticing the two women staring at each other. Silence weighed heavily between them a moment, and was interrupted by the door opening. "My Lords, Lieutenant Sigmundus," the old man said as he held the doors open for the young Imperial officer.

Everyone observed him as he entered; taking in his insignias and his pristinely pressed uniform, but what jumped out to Calindra was the amount of code cylinders this particular ‘Lieutenant’ had – far too many for the rank he held. The Imperial officer had a handsome beardless face, intelligent blue eyes and blond hair that peaked from under his Imperial cap. In true Imperial fashion he walked into the room, clicked his heels and saluted. His salute was politely returned by brief nods from everyone else in the room, to which the man’s arm was crisply returned to his side.

“Greetings, Lieutenant,” Calindra said as she stepped forward to extend her hand in greeting, “please be at ease, we don’t stand on ceremony here. My name is Calindra.”

“Of course, my lady,” he said taking Calindra’s hand and giving it a good polite shake, his cheeks burning as he met her eyes.

Calindra suppressed a small knowing smile, and turned to present her parents: “This is my mother and father, the Baron and Baroness Hejaran.” He hesitated a fraction of a second before extending his hand to each of her parents. “My Lords,” he said reverently, “thank you for seeing me on so short notice.”

“No trouble at all,” the Baron assured, “in fact we were just about to have a few drinks. Would you care to join us? You must be parched.” At that, one of the servants had entered the room with the bottle of Alderaan Whiskey that Calindra had offered her father the day before. It was laid up on a tray with other glasses, which was laid down close to the Baron’s chair. The elderly servant took his station behind the serving tray as the younger one left the room, closing the door behind him.

There was a chink and a small clank as the greying servant uncapped the bottle and set a glass upright to add ice.

"Er..."

"Don't give him that nonsense about being on duty, Lieutenant," Calindra stated merrily, "I've been wanting to try that bottle of Alderaan whiskey since I got my hands on it."

"As you can imagine it has aged a fair bit since it was bottled," the Baron said gruffly, though he omitted commenting on the reasons why.

"Alderaanian whiskey, from... From before..."

"Well, they'd have a hard time bottling it after Alderaan's destruction," said the Baroness matter of factly, taking a glass and offering it to the young officer.

"Thank you, Madame," he said finding his voice again, taking the glass.

"Holmes," the Baron said, "you too old friend..."

"Why thank you, sire! You honour an old man," he said with a bow as he prepared a glass for himself. Everyone watched him as the wisp of man poured one final glass, picked it up in his right hand and purposely put his left hand behind his back, patiently waiting.

"Good! Everyone… to absent friends, and to Alderaan..!" the Baron toasted as he raised his glass, and everyone joined him in his toast and took a sip from their glasses.

"My! That is good stuff!"

Everyone turned around to look at the Lieutenant, who noticed all their eyes on him suddenly, and everyone laughed when his cheeks reddened in realization.

"Calindra, that is one of the finest bottles I’ve ever had the pleasure of tasting..." her father agreed.

It was her turn to blush. "If you only knew the trouble I've gone to get that bottle, it had better have been excellent! I almost regret leaving it with you, father..."

"I'll leave you the empty bottle in my will, then!" This earned the Baron a glare from his wife and daughter, and the man hid his grin behind another swallow of whiskey before quickly changing the subject: "So, what business brings you to our beloved Tepasi, the week of the Return no less! Either you're brave or completely ignorant of my daughter's lineage."

"Father!" both women admonished.

"Actually," the officer chimed in, "I'm Alderaanian myself, which is why Lord Victae di Plagia sent me." He was looking at Calindra when he dropped the name to see her reaction.

Her father's brow knotted in thought, but her mother's eyebrow shot up in recognition as did Calindra's. "You mean the headmaster of the Academy himself sent you all this way to wish us a blessed Return, Lieutenant?"

"I'm afraid not. He wishes me to escort you directly for an audience." It was his turn to hide his features behind the glass, taking a sip. He actually closed his eyes to savour it.

"Daughter," her mother said as she moved to her side, "you must go. The headmaster is also a member of the Council. You cannot, refuse..." The later was only loud enough for her daughter to hear.

"I know," Calindra whispered back after a moment, slightly shocked at the invitation. "Did... Did Lord Victae di Plagia hint as to why..?"

"I'm not privy to his reasons, no."

"It's unacceptable," growled her father, "it's the Return in a few days! We have plans."

That's when the officer showed just what kind of metal he was made of (or how foolish he was) by stepping between the daughter and her father; handing his empty glass to the old servant as he did so. "Actually, that's why he sent me. I'm to accompany you to Alderaan; then we need to rejoin the Iron Fleet."

The Baron looked at him dumbfounded.

"We can't," Calindra countered, "as nice as it was of him to grant us that time to participate in this year's Return, a summons from a Council member can't simply be put in suspense for three days. I must go immediately."

She turned to face her father, "I'm sorry father. Holmes, please see that my bags are put on Lieutenant Sigmundus' shuttle."

By now, Baroness Hejaran had joined her husband and put a placating hand on his arm, "You know she's right, darling. She has a duty to fulfill now. She must see it done."

The Baron seemed to have aged within a few moments. "Death is light as a feather. Duty heavy as a mountain," he finally said, conceding his defeat before holding his daughter in his arms and wishing her safe travels.

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Their goodbyes over, the Hejarans watched as the Imperial shuttle whisked their daughter off planet. Once they were in the atmosphere, Calindra turned towards Sigmundus: "He never did grant you leave to partake in the Return, did he? That was my mother's idea."

The officer's eyes flashed in surprise, "Your file did say you were quite astute, but it doesn't do you proper credit. It's no wonder that Scholae Palatinae chose you," he said before returning his attention to the flight controls. "Your mother knew your father would need placating. She also knew you'd understand the gravity of a summons from a member of the Dark Council too. Had you not left immediately..."

Calindra raised a hand to stop him from voicing the obvious, and shuddered at the prospect of subjecting her family to the relentless ire of one of the Dark Councilors. "It's late; I'll go to my quarters now. I've much to meditate upon."

"I understand, my Lord," he said looking back at her, "I've got things under control here. Good night."

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A few days later, Calindra walked down the shuttle's boarding ramp onto the biggest hulk of a ship she'd ever seen in her life. The SSD Suffering's flight deck was teaming with activity from the flight crews and flight techs, from the tweets of tech droids to the constant buzz of conversation between the various TIE fighter pilots in their flight gear.

"Looks like they're preparing for action," she said once she felt Sigmundus' presence behind her. The young lieutenant simply nodded and stood at attention waiting for her to turn around.

"My Lord, now that we have arrived, I am to entrust you with this," he said as he reached for one of the three code cylinders in his pockets.

"I was wondering why you had so many," she said clutching the one he offered with her gloved hand. Calindra had opted for black robes over red and grey attire that accentuated her lithe athletic form. Her hair was hidden in her grey shawl, and her face was hidden within her robe's black cowl. She had to look anything but military; anything else would have been poor form.

The cylinder deftly disappeared into the folds near her lightsaber, which dangled visibly at her side from a leather belt that was tied over the robes; her blaster was hidden from view in a holster on her left thigh. She wouldn't be insulting anyone with her trinkets... A Dark Lord could easily swat her like a fly.

"Well, I guess you should lead the way, Lieutenant. I can feel several presences in the Force, but I'm not sure how to get to the correct one." To her dismay, she had felt several of them focusing their attention on her when the shuttle made its approach. 'Out of curiousity perhaps?' she wondered, though she did not recoil or reach out to any of them. Protocol was somewhat hazy on how to deal with such things. At least none of them were openly hostile.

"As my Lord wishes," he said saluting crisply and turning in military fashion. "This way."

Calindra followed as the lieutenant veered towards the nearest turbolift. Taking in the flight deck, the Jedi Hunter noted several other lifts all of which had a pair of Storm Troopers standing guard. The two troopers guarding the turbolift they were heading for crisply stood at attention once they were roughly 10 feet away. Calindra saw one push the lift's call button, and overheard a polite 'my Lord' as the doors hissed open just in time so that their pace did not have to slow.

Once inside, Sidmundus pressed the top floor and the lift doors hissed shut behind her.

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Their trek seemed interminable and Calindra wasn't sure she'd ever find her way off the ship again without any assistance, but end it did. They eventually reached a security area that was clearly more significant than those they had been waved through before. Only this time, they were asked to show some credentials which, Calindra assumed, were the extra code cylinders that the lieutenant carried. She presented hers to the dark uniformed officer.

"Everything seems in order, my Lord," he said with a polite nod. "You're expected in the Headmaster's sanctum. This way," he said waving a hand as he gave a perfunctory bow. Not far to their left, a blaster door hissed opened, revealing a long corridor flanked with Imperial flags and Royal Guards in red cowls and robes.

She was wrong. It wasn’t a corridor, it was a hall of sorts, and as soon as she entered she noticed that the room was much bigger than she had initially expected. At the center of the chamber was a dais where a man was bent over a massive desk. He appeared to be scrutinizing a large document or map.

Not waiting on ceremony, Calindra decided to make her way down towards him.

Her footfalls resounded loudly around her as she crossed the room; keeping her eyes on the man, and ignoring everything else in the room. At the foot of the dais, she knelt on one knee, and cast her gaze down on the floor and waited.

“Jedi. Hunter. Hejeran…” the man said after several minutes. His voice was crisp, accentuating each syllable and marking each word as if he were weighing them. Perhaps he was questioning the validity of each word as he spoke them out loud.

“It seems,” the Headmaster continued, “that your name is on everyone’s lips. You’ve fought against the Red Fury; you’re opinionated to the point where you’ve stirred debates; even had some decisions that displeased you overturned. You dislike it when someone or something stands in your way; you’ve little patience for the rules, especially when they don’t suit your purposes, and you’ve snubbed your father and his Return because they stood in the way of your ambitions. Academically, you’ve collected thirty-two academic credits, with a very respectable average score of 96.45%, completing three degrees in the process.”

It seemed to Calindra like the Headmaster had started pacing, and is feet stopped in front of her.

“— and yet, you’ve no knowledge of your own mother’s family and history. She’s done you quite a disservice in hiding your Mecetti lineage from you. Had you known, you might have been among us sooner, instead of gallivanting off to seek wisdom with the Voss,” the last seemed to be spat out in disgust.

“Rise, Jedi Hunter…!”

Calindra quaked, but with some effort rose and faced the Headmaster. She noted his blue-grey eyes intently on her, and the scar crossing his face from his left eye to his jaw. His brown hair was speckled with grey.

The Headmaster held a scroll in his left hand, which he pointed towards her chin, forcing her to look up at him.

“You will prove yourself worthy, or die,” he said matter of factly as he looked down at her from his nose. “I have felt a disturbance in the Force, somewhere on the edges of Sith space. I’ve indicated the area on this for you, burn it when you’ve memorized it. You will head there, and you will investigate this disturbance. Consider it your test of knighthood. Now go.”

Calindra took the offered scroll, and bowed as low as she could; then hurried out of the Headmaster’s Sanctum as gracefully as she could.