

On the Eve of War

by Karalynn Lee

Kaya was born on the eve of the Nine-Star War, which ended fifteen years later in triumph for the Imperium. She enrolled in the academy when she became eligible the next year, determined not to miss the next war.

Her marks were excellent. Her instructors admired her grasp of military tactics, the swiftness of her five-space math calculations, the precision of her curl-ship maneuvers. After she graduated, she led a successful action against an insurgence when her captain

was disabled. Then she recovered a hijacked station, killing all the rebels but one.

A string of victories followed, each gaining more accolades than the last. Along with several medals, she was recommended for the only non-ship's position she would have ever considered, had she even thought it a possibility.

His title was the Imperial Minister of Defense, but they called him the Warlord. Her, they called the Warlord's shadow.

As his aide-de-camp, she was expected to be two precise steps behind and one to his right at all times. But everyone knew her true position: she was being groomed as his successor. She thrilled at being included in hushed meetings with high officials where her opinion was asked and heard.

Until one morning she woke to a message that she need not attend the Warlord that day. It was the anniversary of a conquest and she had been considering

for months which questions to ask the distinguished admirals at the table she would be sitting at. She would not be present at all, it seemed.

Rarely a vidcomm watcher, Kaya caught the broadcast of the event. Two steps behind and one to the right of the Warlord was a young soldier, hair freshly clipped, uniform starched, eyes shadowed.

“Who is he?”

Her roommate Mirisu said, “They say he’s the Warlord’s bastard son. Sired on one of the rebel planets.”

Kaya stared at his face, half-hidden behind the Warlord’s shoulder from the camera’s angle. She memorized it and loathed it.

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The next day, to her relief, the Warlord summoned her again. She dressed carefully in full formal uniform and presented herself to him at exactly the requested

time. He let her into his study and waved her in. She'd learned his moods: he was distracted.

Standing by him was his son, who watched her with far too sharp a gaze. She could see the likeness.

“Kaya, this is Tendaji,” the Warlord said, setting a hand on his son’s shoulder. “Teach him what he needs to know.”

And he dismissed them.

Tendaji folded his arms over his chest. “So you’re the next Warlord.” His voice was dry and quiet, utterly unlike his father’s. It reminded her of the Minister of Intelligence’s way of speaking.

Startled, she said, “I thought that was you.”

His laugh was brief and bitter. “Not likely. I’m a dockside worker. I have no military training.”

“That’s why I’m here.”

“Where neither of us wants to be.”

She couldn’t deny it, and his mouth quirked. Infuriated by that small gesture, she snapped, “That

doesn't matter. We'll do as he says." She'd never failed the Warlord, and she wouldn't start now. She'd let this dockside worker fail on his own.

"He said to teach me what I need to know. I need to know how to get to Cassanon."

Cassanon was a rebel world, captured twenty-some years past. It had been one of the Warlord's great victories. She did the math.

"You'll need a ship with a superluminal drive," she said slowly.

"And I suppose you can get me one with a snap of your fingers?"

She ignored his sarcasm. "I actually can. But you'll also need a pilot."

He hesitated. "Aren't you qualified?"

She smiled at him, for the first time feeling at ease. "It's something you should learn anyway. A good commander understands what his soldiers go through."

She took him to the courier ship she used to fly the

Warlord out for clandestine high-level meetings. There were a couple spare flight suits in the docking bay's lockers; she tossed one to him and started pulling off her uniform.

“What are you doing?”

“Flight suits offer some basic safety protections that your clothes won't, should something go wrong on board,” she said patiently.

“No, I mean—”

She took in his flaming cheeks and laughed. “You need to get rid of those delicate civilian sensibilities,” she said, but obligingly turned her back to him as she continued changing. She didn't hear him do the same and smiled. Let him gawk.

“What's that?” His voice had changed.

She looked at him and followed his gaze to the tattoos on the back of her shoulder. “Hubris,” she said.

“They look like numbers.”

“They're the coordinates of each of my victories.”

“Is that something all you imperial soldiers do? Is Cassanon’s location inked on my father’s back?”

So he was the sort who grew quieter the angrier he was. She finished sealing the flight suit, deliberately concealing the tattoos. “I doubt it. He doesn’t have enough skin for all he’s done.”

His lips thinned, but she strode over to the ship and climbed into it. “A temper’s not a bad thing,” she said; the Warlord had his share of one. “But it shouldn’t get in the way of what you need to do. Hurry up and put on the suit.”

Since he’d given up his chance for privacy, she watched him as he undressed, trying to appraise him as a soldier. He had a leaner build than his father, but still a decent physique, not bad at all and even rather attractive. She laughed at herself. Perhaps she wasn’t judging him wholly as a soldier.

It was odd to sit in the passenger seat—she had to adjust the safety harness for her frame—but Tendaji

settled himself into the pilot's chair even more gingerly.

“We'll start you out with an automated take-off,” she said. “So you'll know how it's supposed to feel. Initiate the controls—no, not there.” She reached over and settled her hand over his, guiding him to the right keys.

He inhaled sharply and said carefully, “Just tell me.”

She drew her arm back. “Sorry.” She talked him through what each of the panels was for, and he took them out of the station without any trouble; he had a knack for it.

“Good,” she said. “You'll need to do that by yourself, though; sometimes the auto-pilot becomes non-functional. That's the manual override over there.”

He toggled it.

“Not yet—”

“Do you know what I did on the docks?” He grinned at her and his fingers flew over the panels. “I

repaired ships. And to make sure we fixed them right, we flew them.”

His grin hit her like an impulse cannon. His resemblance to the Warlord vanished and the sullen lines of his face dropped away in favor of something reckless and alive. Then her seat’s restraints snapped taut as he keyed the ship for a jump and she cursed her foolishness. She reached out to the controls, but too late—his hand was poised just over the trigger in a clear threat. If he hit it without entering coordinates, they’d jump into oblivion. “Who are you? Are you even the Warlord’s son?”

“Oh, yes. He made sure to check our gene maps. I thought I’d die of the shame. But I realized I could turn it to our advantage.”

“Our?”

“The Twelve-Star Alliance. The rebellion’s spread farther this time.”

Her breath caught. There were always insurgencies, but there’d never been anything as

organized as in the Nine-Star War. “I can’t believe they let a rebel so close to the Warlord. I’m only surprised you didn’t kill him.”

“I thought about that,” he said. “But the Warlord’s an old man. That’s why he’s so desperate for a legacy, even if it’s a bastard son. I think the Imperium’s greatest military asset is you, even if they haven’t realized it yet.”

It was a heady blend of ruthless truth and flattery.

“Besides,” he added, “they never left me any weapons when I was with the Warlord. But you, dear Kaya, gave me a ship.”

She closed her eyes. “You idiot.”

“I got you to give me a ship, and you think I’m the idiot?”

“I was born in one of the Nine Star systems,” she said. “I saw what it brought to my homeworld. I never wanted to be on the losing side again.”

“And so you enrolled in the academy,” he said with contempt.

“Yes. I worked my way up the ranks, so I’d be in a position to help in the next great rebellion that actually had a chance of succeeding.” She glared at him. “You had the same chance. But you threw it away—to kill me?”

“Your tattoos,” he said, his face now uncertain.

“I couldn’t forget what I’d sacrificed for my goal.”

“And how can I know if you’re telling the truth?”

“Pyria Station,” she said. “You’ve heard of it?”

“One of your victories.”

“There was a woman, Sanda. I had to kill the rest, but I set it up so she looked like a hostage instead of a rebel. She’s still there and alive today.”

He was quiet for a while. “She’s one of our top operatives. She never breathed a word about you, just said one of her fellow rebels managed to help her.”

“I swore her to secrecy. Rebellions have a way of getting stomped down and the survivors interrogated.”

“Thanks to you.”

It was her turn to fall silent. “I did what I had to

do,” she said finally. She’d managed so far by always looking forward, never back. As a cadet, she’d seen so many tiny rebellions surge up, only to be extinguished, and even her own family was now part of the Imperium’s obedient citizenry. She’d forged her own path alone.

“I think it’s time for your role to change.” He smiled gently at her. “We could take this ship back, but I don’t think I can play-act the Warlord’s dutiful son for very long. And who knows, I might let your secret slip.”

“You wouldn’t!”

“No,” he said. “But aren’t you tired of doing everything the Imperium asks as though you truly believed in it? Of keeping your true heart to yourself?”

She was surprised to find compassion on his face. She didn’t expect most rebels to understand as well as he did.

“We’re ready to begin the next great war,” he said. “Twelve systems, Kaya. We’re better prepared in terms of numbers, matériel, and data. And we could use a good

commander.”

“There’s so much I could do from the other side—”

“Don’t turn into one of them and claim it’s for our sake.”

Her heart was pounding. She said, “All right.”

“Yes!” He was the one who reached over to seize her hand this time, grinning again. Was he allowed to have dimples? The Warlord didn’t have any, but then again, he rarely smiled.

“Stop thinking about him when you look at me,” Tendaji said.

She blinked. “How could you tell?”

“Everyone on Cassanon got that expression when they found out. Mentally comparing my face to his.”

That couldn’t have been easy on him. She said, “I’ve only been finding differences.”

His gaze softened. He leaned in and kissed her lightly. “Thank you.”

“There’s another one,” she said when she recovered

her breath. She realized their hands were still linked and reluctantly disentangled their fingers so that he could have full use of the controls. “Let’s go.” She’d bided her time for years, and now the urge for action was nearly unbearable.

He set their destination with swift assurance.

“Are you really a dock worker?” she asked suspiciously.

“Technically,” he said. “I’m an alpha-class engineer. A lot of us chose fields that we thought would be useful. You just took it further than most.”

When he keyed the jump, she felt herself scatter across dimensions, but she’d never been more whole.



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