

Samantha met Maz in the hangar bay. Together they stared at the battered fighter that would carry them to the planet below.

“Looks like it’s held together with duct tape and prayers,” Samantha muttered.

“It is a bit battered, ma’am,” the chief engineer admitted, “but she’ll get you where you want to go.”

Maz clambered aboard. Samantha followed, glancing back at the chief with a crooked grin.

“Who said I *want* to go, Chief?” she quipped before the hatch sealed behind her.

Maz dropped into the co-pilot’s seat. “When was the last time you flew one of these things?”

Samantha hesitated. “I... don’t know. I remember how — but I’m not sure if it’s a real memory or one of Kaelen’s little mind games.”

“What the hell does that—” Maz began, but the engines roared to life, drowning out her question.

Whether the memories were hers or not, Samantha handled the craft like a pro. They entered Earth’s atmosphere along a path well away from the hovering mothership. It meant a long hike to their destination, but stealth was more important than speed.

The fighter settled vertically into a small clearing on the far side of a mountain.

Samantha killed the engines and scanned the skies. “Hopefully, they weren’t looking our way.”

They disembarked and began their trek toward the mountain, following a technician’s report of unusual activity in the area.

As they reached the rocky foothills, Samantha raised a fist, halting Maz. She pointed at the ground: dozens of footprints stamped into the soft earth, leading toward a cave.

“Looks like a whole crowd came through here,” Maz whispered. “Running in all directions — panic, maybe.”

Weapons ready, they advanced into the cave. Damp air wrapped around them like a shroud, the chill sinking into their bones. Before long, they were wading through knee-deep, freezing water.

They reached a dead end: a sheer wall with a fraying rope ladder and a knotted climbing rope dangling down.

“Which one do you fancy?” Samantha asked.

“Neither,” Maz muttered. “I’ll just wait here.”

“Attempt at humour?”

Maz only grinned, slinging her weapon across her back. She grabbed the rope ladder and began to climb, moving fast despite the slippery rungs that felt like they might tear free at any second.

Samantha glanced at the climbing rope, a flash of memory hitting her — school drills, childhood competitions. Or were those memories even real? She shoved the thought aside and followed Maz up the ladder.

The passageway above was just as flooded. They sloshed forward, then up another rope ladder. Somewhere ahead, voices echoed through the darkness.

Light flickered from around a bend. They switched off their torches and crept closer.

The murmur of many voices faded, replaced by one booming speech. They recognized the voice immediately: General Kaelen.

“...and my friends,” Kaelen declared, his tone fervent, “the Overlords are not truly our enemy. They want only the people aboard the station — *they* are the real threat!