Star Wars: Uncharted Stars

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Summary

[Contains Chapter Illustrations]

Following the events of Ezra's sacrifice over Lothal, he wakes on a strange planet with only hazy memories and a blue-skinned Chiss named Thrawn. Though neither are able to remember the details of their crash landing, they must trust in one another if they ever hope to get back to civilization.
“What happened!?”

The young man woke with a jump to find himself lying face first in the oddly soft brown dirt of some wayward planet that he didn’t seem to recognize. He groaned as his sore muscles woke with the rest of him and he peered around with dry eyes, wiping the mud from his face with an equally dirty gloved hand.

“What—Where am I?”

He stared up at the sky which was a fluorescent sea-foam green with yellow brush stroke clouds and a bright white sun sparkling in the distance like a larger than average star. Judging by the distance, he thought it was a few more parsecs away than it probably should be in order to sustain proper vegetation. Plus, it was cold here, so cold that he could see his breath, yet the soil was humid enough to keep him strangely warm. Steam seemed to fog over a thin layer of the ground, and bled into the surrounding grass field which was dark purple, nearly black.

It reminded him of the color of burned red cabbage and he felt his stomach growl at the mere thought of food. He recalled a taste in his memories, a burned stew made of the red cabbage and other vegetables. He remembered he hated it when he'd first tried it, but now he found himself craving the dish even though he couldn't remember where he had ever eaten such a thing, nor who had ever cooked it for him. In fact, the young man barely remembered anything at all.

He knew he was himself, but who that was and what he was doing was an entirely different story.

He lifted himself, only for his left arm to give way with a sudden spike of pain jolting down from the back of his shoulder and traveling all the way down to the tips of his fingers.

“Gah!” He yelped, his elbows digging into the soft soil as he steadied his one good arm and lifted himself again.

In what was left of his garbled memories, he heard the distant echo of a blaster bolt, and groaned with a small chuckle meant to signify how stupid he felt for forgetting a detail so important.

“Oh right,” he said dryly. "I was shot.”

He squinted, turning around to see a huge smoking piece of scrap metal half-buried in a crater behind him. It lay severed into three pieces, the closest part being a tower-shaped piece like the command barge of a Star Destroyer.

Okay... the boy thought. I at least know what a Star Destroyer is, so that’s a start.

He let out an exclamation, awing the wreckage and wondering what sort of anomaly was strong enough to crumble something so massive into three smoldering bits. He grumbled sorely, getting to his feet to go in to get a closer look at the ship. He could easily picture the full thing when it was
intact, but a quick glance down at his clothes made him doubt that he worked aboard the vessel, much less that it could somehow belong to him. He didn’t know why, but for some reason the young man pictured the people who did operate such a ship probably wore some pretty cool helmets. He might try to salvage one if he managed to figure out what he was doing here, or if he wasn’t entirely alone like he was starting to fear he might be.

His memory was hazy, dizzy, as a throbbing headache and the beating singe spot on his shoulder rocked every one of his nerves. The fear he could feel growing in his stomach wasn’t helping, but he could shove it to the back of his mind until he managed to gather a few more facts about his situation. He wasn’t bleeding, and all his bones seemed to be in place, so aside the blaster shot, no doubt cauterized at this point and fusing to the fibers of his orange shirt, he would live.

He stepped closer to the ship, whistling as he examined the shattered glass viewports and crumbling metal carapace.

“Something this big would need a crew, wouldn’t it?” He turned and scanned the open field. “So where is everyone else?”

He saw no one, but had an odd feeling inside him that told him to walk forward and look for survivors anyway. He obeyed the strange sensation, and only made it a few feet into the waist-high, ink-colored grass before his foot kicked against something hard. Not a rock, no, it was too soft to be a rock.

“A person!” The boy gasped, audibly relieved to learn he wasn’t alone after all—well, assuming whoever he’d just kicked wasn’t dead.

He reached down, feeling for a hold, and grabbed under the figure’s arm before dragging him out of the brush and back into the open air. He tripped, sliding around in the unsteady mulch for ground as if his useless left arm wasn’t making this difficult enough already.

“How much does this guy weigh?” The boy grunted, keeping his balance as he wished he had a better way of lifting him out of the brush and back towards the crash site. Had this person walked or was he thrown from the ship? The boy didn’t even know how he himself ended up outside the vessel, his clothes were only lightly torn and stained with mud, but it was apparent by this person's stillness that whoever this was got the more blunt end of the blaster when they crashed.

"Almost!" He said with one final heave.

Finally they were free of the entangling obsidian marsh, and he took a few breaths to catch his lungs up to the rest of him. At least the oxygen here was breathable, but it seemed to be thin, like mountain air, the boy thought.

“Don’t worry fella,” he said, ensuring the man was out into the open air all the way down to his boots. He looked down with a satisfied smile before nearly falling backwards as he saw the survivor clearly for the first time. He dropped him immediately before taking a deep breath to calm his nerves.

“What in the world?” He gasped, examining his own flesh before staring back down at the man in shock.

Unlike him, this person had icy blue skin, and chiseled, inhuman features to his face. He was wearing a white uniform, though the shirt was tattered and burned as an odd purple spiral almost like a tattoo or a burn mark coiled around the the man’s chest and arms. The clothes still looked pristine despite the ground in stains, but there didn’t seem to be any blood marking the white. No
major external injuries were a good sign, but didn't exactly signify a living creature.

The blue man felt cold to the touch, but not in the same way a dead person might. He wasn’t stiff or anything, so maybe his odd alien blood was just colder than his was? The young man reached over to see if the chest was moving at all, staring intently as he felt a sudden disturbance shock the air as the blue man’s eyes popped open with a deep gasp for breath. His eyes danced around, revealing two laser red orbs glowing almost droid-like as he took frantic note of his surroundings.

Whoever this guy was, he was a lot different than himself, and the boy wondered if maybe he was the captain or something important due to the white uniform? *Was he an ally?*

“It’s okay!” The boy calmed. “We’re okay!”

The blue man’s head spun around to see the boy and without missing a beat, lunged on top of him, pinning him down with one painfully pressing knee and fist, while the other hand grasped tightly against his throat.

"Wai—!” The boy coughed, struggling as he tried to explain himself to the blue alien, and wondering suddenly if perhaps they were enemies rather than comrades after all.

"*Veah cart Ch'ah?*” The man hissed angrily. “*Vea cart vah?*”

“I don’t understand!” He managed to choke out despite the view around his eyes going blurry and dark.

The blue man winced suddenly, his rage filled face breaking as he caught his rib cage and rolled over into the dirt with newfound pain enveloping his entire torso.

The boy gasped in a deep breath of fresh air before rubbing at his now sore throat and backing as far enough away from the blue man as his one arm would physically allow.

The alien hissed, rising while still holding onto his sides with a shaky arm. His teeth where gritted and white, sweat pouring from his face despite how cold his skin had felt, and he surveyed the area with those infrared eyes before pointing over to what little remained of the once enormous ship behind them.

“*Cseah,*” he said, swallowing back the urge to wince. “*To can'let'ehn ch'im can'wiz ch'abesen tsuzepeh ch'at vosis neo bekavcim'i. Ch'ah en'rt'esah nah tinur von rah nah cart ch'at tasn'ah veo viz g'evipah ch'at nen.*”

The young man blinked, his breath still heavy in his mouth because of the nearly being *strangled* to death, but now he was more annoyed than confused about that little incident.

“Yeah... I have no idea what you just said.” He huffed reluctantly and rubbed his throat. “But look, if you and I are going to figure out where we are or what happened, then we probably need to work together, alright? So, truce okay?”

The man stared at him and his eyes narrowed.

“Do you speak Basic?” He asked slowly. “Do you at least understand Basic?” All the while he was thinking to himself how unlucky a guy he must be to get marooned on an uncharted planet with a homicidal blue man who doesn’t even speak the same language as he did.

*How did I get put in this mess?* He wondered, before a flash hit him.
He saw a ball of fire, and heard a deafening explosion, as well as a woman’s voice calling out a single name, her tone pleasant if it weren’t so gripped with pain.

“Kanan!” She screamed.

He rubbed his head and took a step back.

Who was Kanan? Was he Kanan? No… that didn’t sound right. He heard his own name in the back of his mind, dozens of different voices saying it, but the word becoming garbled like it was being dunked below water. He’d know it if he heard it.

He felt his head sting and the woman’s voice continued without the explosions in the background to muffle her words. “Ezra! Ezra, get out of there right now, that’s an order!”

He saw a bright pulsating blue and white vortex of spinning stars travelling in open hyperspace before— nothing. Just blackness after that.

“Ezra?” He mumbled. “I think my name is Ezra.”

The blue man watched as he came back to the here and now, his eyes still narrowed.

“Ezra?” He repeated.

“So, you do understand me?” Ezra asked.

The blue man was also touching his sore head, trying to remember something of his own, before something else in his mind clicked, and he nodded to Ezra with a shaky breath.

“I think I speak some basic,” he said slowly, chopply, and coated thickly with a strange accent that Ezra had never heard before. “But is not my first, next, or even after language.” He rubbed his temples and added, “I think I will remember wording the more you speak. I can again learn—remember?”

“Oh!” He smiled. “Well, I guess that’s good then! So, since you and I can talk to each other, do you wanna tell me why you tried to kill me back there then!?”

The alien pondered on the words a moment as though deciphering them or trying to come up with the correct words to respond with.

“I was—” He thought with a pause. “Afraid.”

“Afraid?” Ezra repeated. “Of what?”

“Of you,” said the stranger. “Only I—” he took another pause. “Do not know reasons.”

“At least we’re in this together. Maybe waking up on a strange planet with another person you don’t know and half a busted ship will do that to a guy?”

The kid laughed.

“Perhaps,” he replied with a swallow. “Now. We go to find the—Rin?”

“Rin?”

The blue man tugged at his jaw and snapped his fingers to find the right word.
“Health items.”

“Oh, so like medicine? On the ship you mean?” He turned, the blue man nodding at him in response. “I get it! That’s actually a really good idea.”

The man tried to stand to his full height, but hunkered over in pain again, and Ezra walked over to support him with his good arm. He was hesitant at first, but gave in to the assist, and the two walked back towards the crash site.

“Any idea what happened to us?” He asked. “Or where those crazy marks on you came from?”

“No,” he replied simply. “My history of day is—blocked.”

“Me too.” He sighed. “You got a name? It took me a little time to remember, but I mean—It might be nice to call you something other than the big blue "strangley" guy?”

The corner of his lip lifted.

“I apologize for attacking.”

“Forget about it,” Ezra said, laughing afterwards. “I guess that won’t be too hard for us though, huh?“

He thought for a moment and nodded back at him.

“My name is Mitth'raw'nuruodo.”
“Mith—Raw—Rude—Traw—Ode—” The boy was tongue tied. And he thought remembering “Ezra” was hard. This guy must be some sort of genius to recall something like that so soon.

He got another flash of that same woman’s voice saying something in his ear.

“Grand Admiral Thrawn.” She’d said, though her voice was laced with something... Ezra wasn’t sure if it was reverence or contempt, but he looked to the alien and blinked a few times in confusion as he processed the new memory.

“I think I called you Thrawn?” He said with a shrug. “You’re some sort of Grand Admiral, the captain of the ship, I think?”

“Interesting,” he mused. “I only remember exile from Chiss— Rot'san'esibi.”

“I don’t know about any of that, but exile sounds kind of familiar? Do you think we were shot down for doing something wrong and got left here?”

“It is possible,” he thought. “But I do not remember your presence.”

“I remember a woman’s voice,” Ezra told. “Do you know who she was?”

He tried to think of any woman, but came up blank. A man’s face did appear in Thrawn’s memory though. He was a young man, older than this boy was, but he was different. They were both humans to be sure, but their features set them apart distinctly. The thought of him filled Thrawn with a sense of calm and comfort. Who was it? He wondered. A friend perhaps? They spent a lot of time together in a classroom setting. An academy?

“Did we attend academy together?”

“Academy, huh?”

Ezra thought on this, his mind remembering himself in a uniform alongside other cadets and even seeing Thrawn’s face while he was in some white armor. He nodded, and grinned. Finally some common ground, he thought.

“I do remember that,” he said. “I think you might have been my teacher or something?”

Thrawn hummed.

“I had an ensign?” He pieced together. “Perhaps you?”

“Okay, sure, why not?” The boy shrugged. “Now all we need to know, is how we ended up here?”

“And where we are?”

“Yeah, also that. Judging by how far away that sun is, I think we're a long ways away from any populated planets.”

“Yes.” Thrawn observed the skies. “This will be easier to read when the stars show.”

Ezra looked up before helping Thrawn to duck beneath the tear in the wall that lead inside the ship.

“Oh I get it,” he said. “Like constellations. You know how to read the stars then?”

“Correct.”
“Nice!”

Once inside they searched the dark wreckage for medical supplies, crawling over debris and wires as lights flickered away down the long corridor.

“It’s kind of spooky in here,” Ezra gulped. “You know where we’re going?”

Thrawn shook his head, but instinctually lowered his hand to a sideways door panel, watching as the floor slid open at their feet. He motioned down for the boy, and Ezra poked his head inside.

“This looks like an office?” He guessed. “There's broken statues and paintings all over the place, and—” His voice trailed off before coming back awestruck. “Oh cool! Looks like some sentry droids!”

“Fascinating,” he replied, an undertone of anger creeping in on him, though why, the Chiss wasn’t sure he knew. “No medicine?”

“N—ope,” The boy hummed. “Doesn’t look like it, Captain.”

“Then we move on,” He said with a light tap to the boys back. He stepped forward and repeated the process, the duo looking through more and more doors before the boy got tired of it and stopped.

“This is getting us nowhere,” he said with a groan, glancing up suddenly as he noticed the sideways halls held two sets of doors, some below and others above. “What about one of these top rooms?”

“No wait!”

Thrawn was too late, the boy clicking open the door panel and the formation sliding away as a steel table and three chairs came pouring out of the hole.

He yelled once, a hand raised, but surprisingly, he wasn’t crushed. He blinked, opening his eyes and gazing back to the furniture as it hovered magically before his eyes.

“Whoa…”

Thrawn’s stare widened but returned to normal a moment later. He watched intently as Ezra lifted the wreckage back through the door with only a wave of his hand before Thrawn reached up effortlessly and hit the button with his long arm.

“Did you see that?!” He chuckled, his hands shaking a little as he laughed at the appendage and then back up at Thrawn. “Can you do that, Thrawn!?”

The Chiss made a face as though he was actually considering it, but shook his head.

“No,” he said. “But I have memory of stories told. Creatures who could control such force with their mind.”

“I think I heard stories like that too,” Ezra pondered. “The force. It’s a Jedi thing! Am I a Jedi? I didn't think there were any Jedi, not for real. I always thought they were just stories you told little kids?”

Thrawn saw a man in his memory, also a human, but this one with a metal arm and a sword made of blue light. He saw a black robot with a saber made of blood-red fire just the same and heard the
buzzing it made. One of these memories were a Jedi, the other Thrawn was unsure of, but it left him feeling cold.

“Jedi have swords made of light,” he informed. “You do not.”

Ezra felt around his belt and pockets. Empty.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” he said. “But that thing I just did with the furniture was still cool!”

“Yes,” Thrawn smiled again. “Cool indeed. I am glad you were not crushed.”

“You and me both!” He laughed nervously. “How about you pick the doors from now on?”

Thrawn released a small, amused chuckle, pointing. “Perhaps through that larger one?”

Ezra was way ahead of him, shoving debris out of the way before hitting the button. The double door panels whooshed open with a rush of air and Ezra nearly stepped inside before he saw them and his skin went pale.

“Oh my gosh…”

Thrawn approached with a frown and examined the scene. There were nearly a dozen bodies on the floor, some in white armor, others in black, and some in no protection at all, and it was those few who the duo could see clearly from where they stood. The deathly pale skin, blank terrified gazes of fear forever frozen in their lightless eyes. The entire room was already creeping with the eerie sensation of death.

“A—are they all—” Ezra’s voice shook.

“Dead.”

Ezra covered his mouth. “What could have happened? Who did this?”

Thrawn grunted as he bent over, his ribs pricking against the skin as he rubbed his fingers against the blaster residue scorching one of the trooper’s white armor.

“Few of these men were shot,” he said. “A similar mark to that of your own. I am thinking, the same model was used.”

“So we were attacked?”

“Unknown,” Thrawn mused, looking to the boy with a new sense of distrust suddenly in his eyes. He was the only one aboard this vessel in street clothing. Not that Thrawn remembered much about his position, or these human uniforms. If he were to single Ezra out as a suspect simply for that, then he would have to place blame on his own behalf due to being the only apparent non-human aboard. His possible ranking as “Grand Admiral” or “Captain” serving as a false memory and a moot point that was no more true than anything else he or this boy thought to be their reality. The boy could be a special unit, especially when regarding his force prowess. Thrawn decided not to jump to any further conclusions until more facts were presented.

“Should we bury them?” The young man asked, his eyes grief stricken, though he did not appear to cry.

Thrawn wondered if a possible attacker would feel such remorse, even if his memories were compromised. He always thought that bloodlust was something less thought, and more embedded
deep within the individual. He had attacked Ezra when he first awoke, Thrawn thought. Perhaps he was the attacker after all?

“Perhaps,” Thrawn said. “But only after we treat personal injury and learn of how much danger we are in.”

“O—okay.” He nodded slowly, sadly.

Thrawn felt the urge to comfort the sad child somehow, and placed a hand on his shoulder before resealing the doors.

Thrawn remembered the years of his youth spent on his home planet. The distant past that was quickly becoming much more clear to him than the more recent events of the current one.

“I trained very much since I was young,” he said. “I think that was the cause of my reaction to you upon my wake.”

“Survival instincts kicking in.” He nodded. “I’m glad you remember those.”

“As am I,” he said, frowning. “You did not find any further survivors aside from myself?”

“No,” he said, turning his back and letting the memory of massacre on the other side fade away. “But I woke up outside, like you. I actually got a strange feeling that led me to find you. It was like something was pointing me in your direction.”

“A feeling?” Thrawn asked.

“Yeah?” Ezra rubbed his neck. “Like, when I found you, you were covered in the tall grass, so I never would have been able to see you unless I—”

“A moment.” He held up a hand. “Would this feeling relate to your Jedi magic?”

“I—” He froze and looked to both his hands. “I don’t know, I mean, I guess? Maybe? No—” He spoke with more certainty. “Yeah, I think so. Yes!”

Thrawn nodded.

“Would it be possible in your current state, to—” he hit a snag on his Basic words again. “To— locate—the medicine we require?”

Ezra hummed.

“Well I don’t know? I mean, I guess I could try.”

He held out his hand and focused on what they were looking for. He felt that presence creep in on him again. It was familiar, more so than anything Ezra felt within him. It was an action as common to him as blinking, something he just knew instinctively how to do, despite not remembering how it was he did it. He felt connected to every living thing in this ship, in the field, in a mile even, and as much as Ezra wanted to look for survivors, he knew that Thrawn was right. They wouldn’t be able to help anyone who was seriously injured without first getting treatment themselves. So, he tuned in on anything he could find that radiated a feeling of health.

And he found it.
“There!” He pointed. “There’s a small med pack in that room I think.”

Thrawn and Ezra walked back down the hallway and looked up at the door that was a soon to be deathtrap.

“Not to put all of the work on you,” Thrawn grinned. “But I believe you are more equipped than I, for this jobe.”


He did and Ezra pictured the locking mechanism in his mind, something he thought he heard a man’s voice tell him to do at a time when he felt immensely afraid of something else. Something cold.

The door swung open as the busted medical droid and anything else that wasn’t bolted down came pouring out of the room like dirt out of a torn sandbag.

“Nicely done,” Thrawn praised. “Very— cool?” The word sounded even more foreign to him when he used it in context than it did when he simply repeated it a few moments prior.

It made Ezra chuckle.

“Wait here.”

He bent his knees and flew into the room above, Thrawn not allowing his mouth to gape open, but still surprised at the odd power of this young boy nonetheless. Perhaps this was why he was so unique to their crew and a possible close ally to Thrawn himself. He obviously had a power within him, a useful one to be sure, though Thrawn was not sure as to the limits of such.

He landed back to the floor a moment later and held out the med pack with a successful smile.

“This should help while we look for other survivors,” he said. “I saw two more pieces of ship crashed further away, and they looked bigger than this one. I bet there are a lot more people on board, and hopefully some of them made it out.”

Thrawn agreed with a nod.

“And perhaps they will have a larger medical room to treat the more internal wounds.”

“Internal?” Ezra asked with a spontaneous frown.

His voice was still calm as he pointed to his tattered torso and impressively muscled physique.

“I believe my chest bones, or these here—robes? Ribs? Yes. My ribs have been— damaged?”

“You mean broken!?” Ezra exclaimed. “You’re just walking around with broken ribs like it’s no big deal!? Dude! You have to tell me stuff like this so I can help you!”

Thrawn looked puzzled by the boy’s sudden shock.

"It was un—" He really thought hard for this word. "Relevant?"

The boy slapped his forehead in response, confusing the Chiss even further. Ignoring the odd response, he motioned down to the medical droid below with a wave of his hand.

“I feel like we can repair this droid to aid us in our— sihsan’ah— The many troubles? The winning
of goals?”

“Endeavor?” Ezra guessed.

“Thank you, Ensign Vanto,” he said before freezing in confusion.

“Is that me?” Ezra pointed.

“I am not sure,” he said. “The speech of gratitude came naturally. I must have said it a many number of times.”

The boy shrugged, but pleasantly so.

“I guess if it is me, then I must do a pretty good job serving under your command, Admiral.”

He smirked.

“I suppose so,” he said. “Now, allow me to treat your shoulder.”

“Forget me!” He shouted, his voice making a humorous squeaking sound as he gestured to Thrawn with one spastically flailing right arm. “You are way more damaged! Let me fix you up first!”

Thrawn appreciated the sentiment, but declined with a gentle smile.

“If you are repaired,” Thrawn pointed out. “Then it will be easier for you to treat my injuries.”

“Just like what you said before...” Ezra mumbled. “Alright, fine.” He conceded, though Thrawn could hear in his voice that he was not at all happy with the decision.

Thrawn nodded, and found the bacta patches that he stuck onto the scorched flesh spot on Ezra’s back. The boy winced and jumped a little when Thrawn picked the torn bits of cloth out of his wounds, and even hissed when he applied the disinfecting spray, but other than that, he was handling a point-blank shot to the skin like a true warrior. Judging by the dual scars on his face, there was no doubt that this boy was no stranger to injury, but handled himself well through all the pain. Thrawn couldn’t help but feel a twinge of pride at that fact.

“It is done,” he said.

Ezra let out a breath of relief, rolling his shoulder sorely, but already gaining some movement back into his now numb arm.

“Alright,” he said. “Now you. Where do you want me to start?”

Thrawn looked to the supplies and studied it. He had intentionally used the better half of the supply to treat Ezra. Nothing they had here was going to help him recover in the areas where he really ached anyway. Still, not wanting Ezra to catch on to his actions, he pointed to a small tub of bacta gel and motioned to the purple scars that swirled around his arms and core muscles like tentacles.

Thrawn saw a flash.

“Like many arms surrounding you in a cold embrace...”

A shot fired, glass shattering, a scream.

“Thrawn?”
The Chiss blinked and looked.

“Yes?” He asked, his breath shaken, but not visibly so.

“I said, I’m all done.” He pointed. “I went ahead and wrapped you up, hopefully the bandages will keep the ribs from moving around while we hike to the other part of the ship.”

“Very clever of you,” he said. “You have my thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Ezra helped him back to his feet and Thrawn looked outside through one of the gaping makeshift holes torn into the side of the ship. Through the smaller cracks, he could clearly see the light outside growing dim. Already it seemed the green sky was turning into more of a murky blue like the deep end of a swamp pit, and Thrawn didn’t need to know what planet they were on to know what that meant.

“It will be night soon.” He pointed.

“That’s good!” Ezra said. “Then you can see if you recognize any of the constellations that’ll tell us where we are!”

Thrawn only frowned.

“It will also be when most predatory species decide to hunt.”

Now Ezra frowned back.

“I did feel some other life forces nearby when I was looking for the med pack,” he said.

“Not other survivors, I imagine?”

Ezra gulped.

“I don’t know,” he said. “But I don’t really want to find out that way, do you?”

Thrawn stood taller and shook his head.

“No.” He imagined the distant treeline, before looking back to Ezra. “If the beasts are carnivorous, they will be drawn to the—” He stopped before he could motion to the corpses down the hall. For reasons unknown to him, he didn’t want to upset the boy with all the death for a second time. He changed the subject. “—In any event, we should properly arm ourselves and seek higher ground for the night for better safety.”

Ezra understood and nodded. There would be no burying the dead then.

“However,” Thrawn continued. “Depending on the size of this game—” He looked a little guilty, but admitted the rest of his thought to Ezra anyway. “We can use our fallen comrades to our advantage. Perhaps we can hunt before becoming the hunted.”

“You mean use them as bait!?” Ezra scoffed. “I don’t think—”

“It is merely survival, Ezra,” He insisted. “I know it may seem cruel, but there is nothing we can do for them. This way, they will at least be useful to our imminent survival.”

Ezra waved a hand through the air to silence him.
At least he wasn’t suggesting they be the ones to eat the dead crew members. He would never admit it, but the blue man was an alien species that Ezra did not know. The thought of cannibalism had crossed his mind. Now he just felt bad for thinking it and instantly purged the consideration from his thoughts entirely.

He stared to the floor and allowed his smile to return as he reached for two ration bars left in the med kit.

“Hopefully that won’t happen,” he said, showing Thrawn the food with a smug smirking expression. “But hey, at least we have something to eat tonight, right?”

Thrawn admired his optimism and took the ration bar. It would not be as life sustaining as meat, but it would suffice until they made it to the larger crash zone, perhaps with a cafeteria and a larger med bay on board.

“So be it.” He smirked, his smile fading quickly as he pointed down at the floor. “Now, try to salvage parts from this droid and I will retrieve some weapons for us.”

“Where are you going to get those?”

Thrawn looked over his shoulder at him, his facial expression as sympathetic as his species was physically capable of making.

“Oh.” Ezra swallowed, his big blue eyes darting nervously back down at the floor. “Okay.”

“I won’t be long,” Thrawn said, trying to sound a hint more comforting given the morbid aura that was now stuck in the air around them.

“I’ll be fine...” Ezra was trying his best to smile, but felt sick to his stomach all the while as he puffed out his chest and spoke with a false sense of confidence. “I am a Jedi after all!” He smiled unsurely and scratched at the side of his face now as he second guessed himself. "You know... I mean... Probably?”

Thrawn smiled.

“Then we have nothing to worry about.”

He turned and prepared to gather enough supplies for their long trip ahead. Neither of them knew why they were here, what had happened, or where they were, but Thrawn knew that this young man was a good soul, and he felt a sort of responsibility to nurture that innocence. He wasn’t entirely sure why, perhaps some latent paternal instincts, or maybe he truly was this boy’s teacher and cared for the well-being for his student? He reminded Thrawn of a younger brother, one that the Chiss thought he might have had at one point on his homeworld. Did he have a brother? Perhaps that was the logic beneath his feelings, but he couldn’t yet be sure of anything.

One thing Thrawn knew, despite whatever their true pasts might reveal later on... from this moment forward, he would do his damndest to protect this boy, no matter what it wound up costing him. Right now, it was all he could think about aside his basic and almost instinctual survival skills.
As Ezra and Thrawn venture through the forest to reach the location of the second crash site, Ezra runs into some trouble, and also he remembers some key evidence in regards to his past and how the Star Destroyer might have crashed in the first place.

Ezra yawned, waking groggily only to discover that it was now morning. He quickly remembered everything he apparently did not remember from the day before. There were still blank spots in his memory, and not even a restful night's sleep was able to fill in the gaps. He rubbed his head, trying to recall what was real and what he had just dreamt up in his mind, but he couldn't seem to sort it all out.

His name was Ezra—possibly Ezra Vanto, but he wasn’t really betting any credits on that just judging by the foreign way it slid off his tongue.
He was a young cadet on-board a Star Destroyer—*maybe?* Come to think of it, Ezra really wasn't sure what type of people he worked for. He remembers handing out food to some starving locals and oppositely, he recalls more action-packed memories of occasionally blowing stuff up. He at least hoped he was working for a good cause, whatever he did.

Lastly, Ezra knew that he was marooned on a mysterious world out in some unknown area of deep space with only a blue-skinned alien man named Thrawn and no other signs of survivors so far. He learned that Thrawn was a Chiss, that he was possibly his superior officer, and perhaps the best surprise of all, was that he himself was a powerful force-wielding Jedi—*Or well...* at least he thought so anyway.

He got to his feet, glancing over at the upright Chiss who appeared to be leaning in the same spot near the viewport as he had when Ezra dozed off a few hours before. He had traded in his tattered white uniform for a black tank top and clean gray pants, though where he found such garments, Ezra didn’t even want to begin to guess.

“Did you sleep at all Thrawn?”

“I do not require as much sleep as you do,” he replied, his gaze finally breaking from his routine scanning of the trees. “We were not approached by any beasts during the night... so that is good news in our favor.”

If Ezra didn’t know any better, he’d think that the accent Thrawn wore was starting to fade away. When the Chiss spoke now, it was in a calmer, much more informative, albeit a little dry sounding tone. It made his voice sound slower, *more monotoned*, like he was forever making internal calculations deep within his brain or perhaps like he was just bored senseless every second of his waking consciousness.

“Did you remember anything important?” Ezra asked, mentally shoving his own judgmental accusations of Thrawn's accent to the back of his mind.

Thrawn didn't smile, and instead only waved a hand through the air as though he were gingerly shooing away a bird.

“Only a few academic memories and a better grasp of my Basic.”

“I can hear that!”

He chuckled and stretched his sore muscles, flinching when he remembered his wounded shoulder. The pain was nowhere near the same level as yesterday, so at least the bacta patch was doing its job.

With a pop of his stiff joints, he joined Thrawn by the viewport and asked, “So, did the stars ever come out?”

When Thrawn and Ezra climbed to the highest point of the command barge to make camp for the night, they looked through the shattered viewport only to discover the thick fog that bled up from the soil to block the night sky. Where most planets got colder when the sun went down, this one seemed to heat up, making the air sticky and moist as the humid steam from below coated the sky in such a thick barrier, neither of the two could make out a single star, much less a notable constellation.

Thrawn frowned, revealing the frustration in his voice despite his tone remaining a hum of neutral air. “Unfortunately no,” he said. “Though I have affirmed that we are not alone on this planet...
because I heard animals calling to one another periodically from the wooded area surrounding the second crash zone.”

“I don’t suppose they sounded like friendly, helpful animals, did they?” Ezra asked with a knowing grin.

Thrawn couldn’t help but smirk.

“I am afraid not.”

Though he hadn’t seen his own face since the crash, he knew what he looked like well, and he rubbed his eyes, wondering if they looked baggy beneath the red lines he knew he wore there. Thrawn might have gotten maybe two hours of sleep max, but he stayed awake longer to keep watch for Ezra’s sake. The boy was exhausted, and Thrawn needed him to be at his best in their day to come, now that there was a confirmed pack of wild beasts roaming the forest. If they had to make their way across a vast unknown terrain to scavenge the centerpiece of the Star Destroyer in the distance, then Thrawn would keep pace easier knowing the young would-be Jedi would be strong enough to fight.

Also, he kept having the same recurring nightmare of enormous flying creatures strangling him with tentacle-like arms as a low voice only laughed in the background, his taunting mocking through claps of thunder and flashes of lightning. Even if Thrawn had wanted to sleep, he knew he would never be able to get any rest with that insufferable laughing and the claustrophobic reveries repeating over and over in his dreams.

“You didn’t happen to hear any people, did you?”

Thrawn blinked back to reality and turned his attention towards the boy only to see that Ezra was frowning. Thrawn noted the hopeful twinkle in his blue eyes, but the frown gave his true pessimism away. It was going to make answering his question all the more uncomforting, but Thrawn chose to get it over with rather than prolong his suspicions.

“I did not.”

The boy huffed at that and pushed himself away from the useless control panel.

“Well,” he said, peering out the viewport and pointing to the distant crash zone. “That ship looks like it’s a long walk from here, so we had better get moving soon. What do your survival instincts tell you, Thrawn?”

He let out an amused breath, the sort of half-chuckle that Ezra was starting to assume meant he was entertained by his latest question.

“Chiss can survive for nearly thirty rotations with little food, and for at least ten with no water. I am not sure about your human organs, but I will imagine that this number is significantly less for you. Assuming you and I have been here for close to twelve hours, we can make due on our way to the other camp. It should be no more than a day’s walk North.”

“And if the camp doesn’t have what we’re looking for?” Ezra inquired cautiously.

“Then we will need to locate suitable forms of food and water if we are to survive multiple rotations on this planet, and perhaps plan our way to the third crash site in hopes of finding what we need in terms of sustainable supplies.”

He nodded.
“Do you need to rest a little more before we go?”

Ezra’s voice was so sincere that it brought another one of the Admiral’s small smiles out of hiding for the response.

“I am fine.”

He scooped up the large blaster rifle he’d pilfered from below and strapped it around his chest with the makeshift sling he’d crafted the night before. They had a list of inventory items now, all of which Thrawn seemingly created out of nothing, and Ezra wasn’t exactly sure how or when he managed to make any of it. The fact that he did made his mystical force abilities somehow pale in comparison to such raw talent.

They had a satchel which held the remainder of their meager medical supplies and the working circuits and parts that Ezra had salvaged from the med droid. Thrawn found them two fully charged blaster pistols, both of which Ezra kept on the holsters that were strapped to his legs from long before the crash. They also had an old comm device and a few radio wires that Thrawn had probably borrowed at the same time he’d gathered the blasters. Then finally, Thrawn had folded the large red flag that they’d found on their way here into a tiny triangle that could fit snugly into the bag. He claimed that it would protect them from possible weather or even extreme cold should the two wander into any unknown environmental hazards upon hiking through this unfamiliar planet.

The Chiss had strong memories of planets with acid rain or world’s that experienced an entire cycle’s worth of seasons in the span of a single day. While both of those appeared to be unlikely, given the terrain he’d witnessed in these last twelve hours, he remained cautious nonetheless and prepared for any contingency that the supplies at their disposal would allow.

“Shall we go?” He asked with a gesture towards the door.

Ezra was already preparing for the climb down.

“Way ahead of you!”

As if it were even possible, getting back down the toppled tower of the Star Destroyer was somehow even less fun than climbing up it, and their injuries weren’t helping. By the time the two made it back out into the grassy field, they had to take a moment to catch their breaths and wipe the sweat from their faces. The air was even more humid than yesterday and the steam along the blackened soil, had risen significantly up to waist level whereas yesterday it had barely covered the tips of Ezra’s boots.

“How can it be so cold and so hot all at the same time?” He complained.

Thrawn didn’t have an answer, much less one that would satisfy the boy, so he merely motioned them further into the brush until they came into contact with the treeline and the towering bark of the planet’s lush thicket of woods.

Ezra took one last look back at the crashed ship and couldn't help but feel bad about it for some reason. It was more than just remorse, it felt personal kind of like guilt. Why would he feel guilty about the crash? It wasn't his fault, was it? He couldn't help but remember all the faces of the
corpses he saw, all of them still lying there...

“Stay alert, Ezra…” warned Thrawn with a distrusting eye surveying the branches above. "Those creatures will surely recognize our presence in their forest soon enough."

“Got it,” he said, shaking the thoughts out of his brain in order to stay focused.

Ezra was on high alert for what felt like an entire hour, maybe two, before the long trek through the trees and the dense air started to make him lose his newfound focus. He had started to make mental descriptions for the plants and insects as they passed by, and at one point almost thought to whistle before realizing that it was probably not the best idea to do so in front of his commanding officer. Focus turned to distraction and then that quickly drained into boredom, something that was inevitable thanks to Ezra not being able to think of any stories from his past to pass the time.

*Memory loss was such a pain in the choobies...*

Thrawn seemed to notice Ezra's dissolve, plus his injuries from the day prior were starting to ache to the point of nausea; his vision shook unsteady and blurry for a few moments, no doubt it was side effects to the pain catching up with the rest of him now that the adrenaline had worn down. He found the first stone seat that he could and plopped down for a breather without even a word of warning.

“Perhaps we should rest for a moment?” he suggested, his voice visibly winded.

Ezra noted the tone and nodded. “Sure thing,” he said, before taking a seat on the ground and rummaging through their supplies. “I think we have a pain reducer in here, if you want it?”

“Not necessary,” he replied—more like breathed shallowly into chopped up little words.

*How much pain was this Chiss really in?* Ezra wondered.

“You don’t have to put on a tough face just for me.” He meant the words as a lighthearted comment, but ended up arching his brows anyway which made the remark seem more like an accusation.

“It isn’t that…” Thrawn waved tiredly. “Such drugs will impair my ability to remain attentive. That is a luxury that we simply cannot afford right now.”

“I mean— I guess so, but I still think—”

He was interrupted by a series of deep snarling growls that echoed through the grove.

"Uh oh..."

There were three circling them now, each beast communicating through the low verbiage hissing within each of their throats. The grass and bushes swayed with movement as the predators drew closer to the two they hoped to make their prey.

Ezra readied his hand on the blaster, Thrawn surveying the trees with his infrared stare, waiting for the monsters to make their first move. Immediately he began recalling any pack instincts that he could remember learning on his homeworld. Typically, predatory hunters in groups would pick off the weakest of the prey so as to procure a simple meal without much of a fight or threat of loss to their numbers. In that case, the beasts would likely target him since he was the more injured out of he and Ezra. Thrawn slowly slid the rifle around to his arms as he watched Ezra take a small step backwards—
With that one twig, the three beasts lunged into the clearing and crouched in a barricade around the young Jedi, and only around the young Jedi, Thrawn noted.

Ezra gulped, but kept his hand outstretched, his voice timid, but polite.

“Nice kitties… We don’t want to hurt you…”

They swiped at his hand and he gave up on the attempt at peace talks, returning his fingers to the hilt of the blaster.

"So much for that?"

They didn’t seem to notice Thrawn at all, and even if they had, they didn’t reveal any interest in cornering him. No, they simply paced in circles around Ezra, eyeing him with a killing intent in their beady golden stares, as all three of them started salivating from their snarling reptilian jaws lined with a fine row of jagged, pointed teeth. They were all approximately three feet tall, skin black like the grass while one of the three bore revealing patches of light fur along its face and the ridges of its spine. One of their whip-like tails flinched, its three-toed claws scratching at the dirt as the lead creature prepared to launch.

Thrawn watched it all, and though he had been wrong about the target, he knew exactly what was about to happen next.

“Get down!” He shouted, the bright red bolt of blaster fire scorching a new hole into the rib-cage of the canine beast just as its feet left the ground.

The remaining two turned their attention to Thrawn now, and darted towards him to avenge their fallen pack member. Thrawn fired, though his aim was severely lacking due to his many increasing health problems. Still, he managed to hit one of them, grazing its shoulder long enough for a final shot to meet the snout between its eyes.

The final was already in the air by the time Thrawn heard the creature lunge, but before he could flinch, the beast floated before him, frozen and tense in confusion. He peered to the other side of it and saw Ezra there, holding it still through the strain of the Force, and Thrawn took no more time to study the creature as he released one final shot of blaster fire. The creature let out a yelp just as Ezra lost his hold on the beast and let it drop, forcing the Chiss to dive out of the way before its lifeless carcass came crashing down to the rocks. His body immediately regretted the reaction as soon as he made contact with the dirt.

“Sorry about that!” Ezra huffed, helping him to his feet. “You okay?”

Thrawn groaned, but managed to stand and brush himself off.

“Fine. We should keep moving in the case that there are more scouts lurking nearby.” He grumbled. "Such a waste. We cannot even use these creatures for sustenance. Perhaps if things were different, these deaths would not be so wasted?"

Ezra didn't catch any of that because he was still processing the fact that they were almost attacked.

“Uh... What were those things?”

Thrawn studied them for a moment and got a strangely familiar sensation that he knew the answer to the question. Running on instincts, he allowed his mouth to say a word that his brain could not
“Vornskr,” he said, adding a small, “I believe?” to seal his uncertainty.

“What’s a Vornskr?” Ezra asked, now dragging Thrawn with him as they escaped back into the heavy foliage cover of the trees.

“I cannot remember?” Thrawn grunted at the strain of trying to think. “But, I feel as though I do know of these beasts.”

“Do they help tell where we are?”

Again, the pain in his head from concentrating too hard. He released it and sighed.

“I am not sure.”

“Well, I’m sure that I’ll feel a whole lot better once we make it to other crash site!”

“Did you notice that the beasts only seemed to be interested in you?” Thrawn asked inquisitively.

“No?” The boy frowned. “That can’t be right, Thrawn. Did you hit your head again? They lunged at you too, remember?”

“Only because I first killed one of their own. Before that, they seemed to solely be focused on hunting you?”

“Maybe they don’t eat blue meat?” Ezra teased.

Thrawn made a face, but let the comment go with a deep inhale and exhale of tired breath.

“Regardless,” he said. “It might be in our best interest to watch out for more attacks as we progress. We should remain close and vigilant until we reach the next zone.”

“Alright, whatever you say, Admiral.” Ezra walked, albeit more nervously now as every gust of wind, snapped twig, or rustling leaf put him on edge. With a swallow, he looked around the leaves and added, “But if you ask me... I have a bad feeling about this.”

After a few more hours of walking, the steam had fallen back to boot-level, the air growing cool again, as the sky that darkened to that sea-foam color that Ezra recognized from the night before. It was getting late, and not only that, but they appeared no closer to the shuttle. Among other things, Ezra felt his muscles aching, his stomach growling, and every inch of him crying out for a cold glass of water and a nice warm bed.

“How much farther do you think we need to walk?”

Thrawn’s brows furrowed as he pointed to the most visible tree branches he could find and motioned skyward.

“Would it be possible for you to jump higher into this tree to survey the land above?”

“I can try?” He said, leaping for the branch and letting out a small "Oof!" as he caught it, pulling...
himself up clumsily as he reached for another hold in the trees and repeated the process.

“Don’t rush!” Thrawn warned.

Ezra rolled his eyes and made a “yeah sure” sound back down at him in reply. His doting verged on motherly, and Ezra stopped suddenly to remember the face of a woman who he recognized as his own mother. She disappeared when he was young, didn’t she? His father too? No, he remembered them more recently. They were in the kitchen together, walking towards him and stopping in the doorway. Something about that memory didn't seem quite right either, and Ezra tried to untangle his thoughts as he made it to the top of the tree, surveying their surroundings.

“I see it!” He called. “It’s definitely close!”

He turned his head and saw the spot they started from, now a faded blip in the distance. It made his body feel slightly less miserable in perspective for how far they actually traveled. Ezra turned back once more and saw their target maybe one or two more clicks up ahead, but there seemed to be a hole in the treeline a few feet ahead of them.

Ezra leapt from the tree, climbing down with a skill that made him think about a furry purple-striped Lasat who he thinks he once knew rather well, judging by all his vague memories of him. Perhaps he’d taught Ezra how to climb at the academy? He had a very prominent memory of the two of them flying a TIE fighter, so maybe he was on the right track to remembering old faces?

He landed, his boots hitting the soft soil and sinking into the warm dirt all the way up to his ankles.

“I saw another open clearing up ahead, do you think we should avoid it?”

“No.” Thrawn shook his head. “If we are to arrive before nightfall, we should continue on the path as we have been going. I fear the Vornskr will only attack in greater numbers when we lose the light.”

Ezra gulped.

“Straight we go then!” He motioned, marching with a new energy in his footwork until they finally came across the clearing and Ezra let out a mesmerized gasp of awe.

It was a clear and crystal lake, the dirt, packed around the inviting waters like a bowl as the liquid splashed and rocked beneath the steam of the planet.

“Look water!” Ezra called, his voice dripping with relief and excitement. Before he could catch Thrawn’s response, he bolted for the lake, half expecting to dive right in and let the cold embrace of the water swallow him whole. He was only a few more strides away, but felt his entire body jolt to a stop as he suddenly felt a massive blue hand catch his entire head before pulling him backward with the finesse of a man who was much stronger than he looked, even when injured.

“A moment, Ezra,” Thrawn said calmly, releasing his grip on the boy’s skull as soon as he was tucked safely behind the Grand Admiral’s heels.

“What gives?” Ezra asked, his throat dry and voice parched as the thought of all that water made his tongue shrivel up in a freshly denied sense of anguish.

Thrawn bent over and picked up a rock, tossing it halfheartedly into the lake. Ezra only watched, but Thrawn held up a finger, waiting as the two looked towards the water in silence as it plopped below the surface. A sudden rumble shook the earth and Thrawn placed his hands behind his back in a satisfied motion as the rock shot back out of the lake, smoking red hot and steaming.
“Wh—What happened?” Ezra asked, gawking towards the rock that was so hot, he felt the heat as he tapped it with the tip of his boot.

“I had a theory that the reason this planet’s earth was so warm could be linked to underground volcanic activity. The ashen look of the plant life and soot ground into the soil was another clue to such a feature as well.” He pointed. “Should you have run into the water, there is no doubt that your flesh would have been scalded to the bone.”

Ezra rubbed his neck, a nervous chuckle squeaking out as he tried to forget the image of his skin literally melting off of his body.

“Uh...Thanks for that!”

“Do not mention it.”

“I know you said we probably shouldn't stop again until we make camp—” Ezra heaved. “But all that crushed hope kind of wears a guy out. Do you think we can maybe take five and relax for a bit?”

Thrawn winced, the mere idea of a break making all the pain he felt come rushing back to his nerves. Ezra took a step towards him in concern only for Thrawn to hold out a hand as he took another look around the clearing.

“Since this water is uninhabitable, we should be safe to take a short break before continuing. But only a short one! We should be upon the crash site soon enough and then we can make camp there.”

Ezra nodded.

“I think you should sit.”

Reluctantly, he did, allowing Ezra to be his bearing as he inched painfully into the soft dirt. It was surprisingly comfortable and much warmer than that of the ground near the command barge. He felt instant relief overcome him as he dug his hands into the dirt and watched as Ezra took a seat beside him.

“So—” he started, breaking the silence with his idle chit chat the moment he sat down. “I had some pretty crazy dreams last night, how about you? I’m not sure if what I saw really happened or if I made the whole thing up. Do Chiss dream like that?”

Thrawn almost seemed to chuckle at that.

“Yes,” he said. “We may not sleep as long as you humans do, but in that short time, we do still manage to dream, and like any dream, it can get fairly—crazy?”

“You dream of anything good? Anything you remember?”

“Just small pieces,” he told. “I remember clearly now of a friend I once had many years ago. His name was Vanto, and he taught me much of your Basic language while we attended academy classes together. You were not there at the time, which seems appropriate given your age.”

“Oh,” Ezra hummed, his head bobbing up and down with the inflection of his voice. “Well that explains a little bit. So, where is this Vanto guy now?”

“I do not know, or simply, I do not yet remember. My later memories are still—”
“Fuzzy?”

Thrawn looked confused. “Is that another way to say they are defective?”

“Yes.”

“Then yes,” he smirked. “They are fuzzy. And you? Was the night’s rest good for the healing of your mind? Tell me about these “crazy” dreams of yours.”

“I don’t really know if I can remember it all that well?” He scratched his chin and tossed another rock into the boiling lake. “Some of it seemed pretty impossible.”

“Like?”

“Well, I mean… There were doorways in the rocks, and roads built into space. I remember meeting a wolf who could talk, and it traveled through the grass, but teleported to a whole other part of the planet just by running. I think that planet might’ve been my home because I recognized everything so clearly. But, the wolves, the doors, the teleporting… It’s pretty far fetched, don’t you think?”

“Not necessarily,” he replied in his musing monotone. “Dreams are merely a gateway to expressing the thoughts you have inside, even ones that you aren’t visibly aware of. These wolves could merely represent your desire to teleport home you see, or perhaps they are related to some business which you hoped to take care of.”

“I guess that makes sense?” He said, hugging his knees before they began to shake and he stood suddenly, taking a few steps backwards in a nervous fashion.

Thrawn observed him, but did not get up to follow.

“Speaking of which,” Ezra said, blushing slightly as he paced around and pointed back into the trees. “All this running water is reminding me of some business I need to take care of. Uh, so, I’ll be right back!”

“Alright?” Thrawn said, trying hard not to laugh. His serious stare returned as he added, “Do not stray too far though. We still do not know what kind of creatures are lurking nearby.”

He smiled, waving the air. “I know that. Don’t worry so much!”

“A good leader always takes care to keep their subordinates alive,” The Chiss said, his face still as stone so Ezra couldn’t tell if he was making a lighthearted comment or a serious warning. “You are no exception to this rule.”

“I’ll be careful,” he said, turning to run off to a safe distance. The boy frowned at the thought of being attacked again, or worse, of Thrawn being attacked while he was so vulnerable and alone. Ezra handed Thrawn one of his pistols fervently, before turning to escape to take care of his more pressing business.

Thrawn shook his head, but leaned back in the hot dirt and let the feeling of serenity overwhelm him just for a single instant— just for a few moments of peace. He laid back to enjoy the silence and let it consume him.
Ezra took care of his business as he kept a vigilant eye out for any more Vornskr. He was tense all over and unable to relax because of the creeping feeling like he was being watched, and even as he tried to sense the presence of whatever this feeling implied, his connection came back empty each time.

“Just relax…” He repeated to himself for what was probably the fourth time now. "If they were around, you would sense them."

He turned and made his way back towards the lake, when he heard a small skitter scrape the side of one of the trees, and he felt his blood run cold. He grabbed for his blasters, only to remember that he left one of them back with Thrawn. He grumbled, but aimed the blaster for the trees and waited for the sign of movement.

“Come on…” He muttered. “Come on!”

With a cooing grumble, a small yellow skinned lizard-like creature popped its head out from hiding and blinked its four beady eyes in curiosity.

It took Ezra every scrap of restraint he had in him not to pull the trigger. Strangely, he didn't feel like the little guy was going to attack, but there was still something about it that unnerved him. Why didn't he feel it coming? Wasn't that how the Force worked? Still, he remained cautious and held the blaster up in surrender as he tried to make friends with the pudgy little reptile before jumping to conclusions. The last thing he wanted was to kill something else on this world which he wasn't even supposed to be on.

“Hey!” He smiled, his voice friendly and soothing as he knelt to one knee. “Where’d you come from little guy? It’s okay, I won’t hurt you, See?”

He placed his blaster a good distance away from his feet and beckoned it closer like a stray Tooka. Seeing the little foot and a half creature wiggle nervously alerted Ezra that it was probably just as scared and curious of him as he was of it.

“Come on out. Come on…”

It swiftly glanced back behind itself into the forest, then back at Ezra before rounding the tree and hopping down with a small skitter of its body. It scurried over to Ezra’s hand and crawled up his arm before latching itself onto his back and purring softly into his shirt.

"Whoa! Friendly little guy, aren't you?" Ezra smiled, rubbing the small creature under the chin as its ears twitched and it buried its face further into his jacket with a little whimper. “What’s wrong little guy? Something scare you?”

He heard the shallow growl echo the treeline and Ezra caught a glimpse of black dart past as he tensed again and tried to take a step towards his discarded blaster.

He didn’t make it in time though.

A small Vornskr pounced from its hiding spot and swatted the weapon away, snarling at Ezra as it sniffed the dirt where his blaster had once been. It was almost as though it had sensed the three beasts he and Thrawn ran into before it stopped sniffing and roared one threatening warning at him.
His eyes bounced from tree to tree trying to find a way out or a weapon that he could use, but the only things he saw were a few loose branches that had fallen from the trees above and splintered into leg-length sticks upon the ground.

_It would have to do._ He thought swiftly.

The lizard refused to let go, and Ezra stepped slowly to the side to get closer to the sticks as the Vornskr followed pace to keep a half circle of distance between them.

Judging by its size, it was probably a lot younger than the pack that attacked him and Thrawn, so Ezra was grateful for that. Also, it appeared to be alone, probably hunting the little lizard away from its family, something else he couldn't help but be thankful for.

He remembered taming beasts with the Force, _a specialty of his_, he thought. Though, he also remembers being attacked by just as many creatures as he had controlled, so if he could avoid the fight then he would at least try, but that didn’t stop Ezra from inching towards his new weapon anyway.

“Easy there buddy…” he soothed, his hand outstretched. It didn’t work on the Vornskr before, but that was when there were three of them and Ezra still hadn’t remembered how to make the connection to the creature’s mind.

The short Vornskr roared at him, clawing at his fingers as the little yellow lizard on his shoulder hissed back down at it.

“You’re not helping little guy...” He whispered through gritted teeth, earning only another hiss from the reptile in return.
“This isn’t working,” he said aloud before attempting to shove the black beast back with the Force.

Nothing happened.

“What?” He looked to his hand in a panic. He tried to call the blaster to his hand, but it too ignored his connection. “No no… why isn’t this working?”

The snarling beast, lunged, but Ezra rolled out of the way and grabbed one of the sticks in the process, the lizard hanging onto his back for dear life. Plan A and Plan B were pointless now, so Ezra knew he had no other choices left but to fight. He held the stick like an extension of his body, a reaction to years of training that he didn’t remember in any way aside physically. He wielded the stick, slapping a beast mid-pounce, before deflecting another attempt to recover and lunge behind him. His feet and hands worked masterfully to the point Ezra could read the movements of his hunter before it came in to strike. He swiped it away again, and this time the Vornskr had a harder time getting back to its feet.

Finally having enough, the beast snarled, but retreated into the brush as the lizard hopped off Ezra’s shoulder and kicked dirt in its direction.

“Brave one, aren’t you?”

A distant pack of roars echoed and the creature wasted no time in returning to the safety of Ezra’s shoulder.

“Sounds like the little guy has friends, so let’s get out of here, okay?”

Ezra knelt over and retrieved the blaster from the bushes before reaching back to keep hold of the trusty stick he’d just masterfully defended himself with. For some reason he felt safer with it than he did with the actual weapon on his hip. He hurried back towards the lake, all the while hoping that he wouldn’t have to wield it again any time soon.

Thrawn woke with a jump as soon as he’d heard the distant call of the Vornskr pack approaching. He sat up, appalled that he’d allowed himself to fall asleep, and allowed worry to overcome him as he wondered now if Ezra was alright on his own. How long had he been out? A few minutes perhaps? A lot could happen in that short amount of time. He wondered if any more beasts had decided to target Ezra and immediately regretted letting the boy go off alone.

Thrawn felt every broken rib twist in newfound agony as he forced himself back to a stand using his rifle as a prop. He started towards the forest after his subordinate, but before he made it more than a few steps away, Ezra appeared from the thick brush, waving to him with that optimistic smile on his face.

“I’m back!”

Thrawn masked his relief beneath a quizzical stare as he noticed the tiny creature Ezra was toting on his back and he couldn’t help but to point it out.

“Making new friends, are we?”

Ezra laughed.
“Yeah, and you won't believe it, but another one of those Vornskr tried to kill me—” He waved his arm out halfheartedly and added, “but it was just a little one, so it was no big deal. You should have seen me Thrawn!” He exclaimed, his voice in awe as he spun the long stick around in his hand and made those same formations as he had when attacking the beast. “I was untouchable! The Vornskr was lunging for me, but I was like, BAM! POW! WHAM! And it couldn’t get anywhere near us!”

Thrawn frowned.

“Why did you not simply use the blaster? Or even try to repel it with the Force as you did before?”

“I tried!” He let his shoulders fall. “But I lost the blaster and my Force powers weren’t working all of the sudden. I don’t know what happened?”

“Interesting.”

He scooped up a rock and tossed it smack into the center of Ezra’s forehead as a red spot accompanied a very annoyed and uncomfortable, “OUCH! What the kriff, Thrawn!?”

“You’re reflexes are not the same as they were on-board the ship,” he said. “Please, allow me to test a theory.”

Rubbing his sore spot, Ezra grumbled, but replied through gritted teeth. “Fine, what is it?”

He held out his arm and after a few cautious sniffs, the little lizard crawled to him, purring as it made contact to the cool skin of Thrawn.

“Please—” he motioned. “Go to the end of that clearing and wait there.”

With a roll of his eyes and outstretched, exasperated hands, Ezra did what he was told.

“Happy!?” He hollered.

Thrawn bent over and stood with a grunt as he scooped up another rock.

“Try to stop it this time,” he said, not nearly loud enough.

“What!?” Ezra shouted.

Thrawn didn’t repeat himself and threw the stone with all his might. His arm was actually very powerful at pitching and the stone came soaring towards Ezra like a speedy bolt of blaster fire.

“Oh jeez!” He exclaimed, holding out his hand and feeling the connection return to his surroundings just in time to catch the rock before it hit its target.

“Fascinating,” Thrawn said, hardly feeling the pain that reciprocated his sudden body movement. He raised his hand to yell now. “Please hold it there as long as you are able, Ezra!”

The boy nodded and Thrawn took a few slow steps forward, the purring lizard still sprawled across his shoulders while Thrawn stroked its tail to keep it from jumping off as he inched closer. When they were about ten meters from Ezra, the rock faltered, and the closer Thrawn came, the lower the rock fell until finally it dropped out of Ezra’s hold and sank into the soft ground.

“I lost it?” He blurted. “One minute I felt the connection and the next—” He grunted in confusion. “I don’t get it!”
“Ah!” he hummed, stroking beneath the lizard’s chin. “It would seem our friend here is a rare species of fauna called a Ysalamir.”

“Ah!” He tried to echo the sound, but failed. "Yeah, so what does that mean?”

“These small creatures possess a very rare ability to hinder your abilities to connect with the Force. It is a method of blockage, like you might find when jamming a com-link.”

“Wow…” Ezra looked to the creature. “That explains a lot. It was latched onto me the whole time the Vornskr was attacking us.”

“I believe I once heard a rumor that the Vornskr are attracted to those sensitive to the Force, such as the Ysalimiri. They are no doubt attracted to your scent as well, which explains why they did not try to attack me as fervently as they did you, and why this Ysalimir sought you as protection.”

“Whoa!” He exclaimed. “I had no idea that there were animals out there that could do things like that.” As Ezra said that, he thought that just maybe the wolves from his dream really were real after all? Perhaps they could even talk and teleport like he had seen in the dream?

“With these beasts now confirmed on this planet along the Vornskr, my conclusions are confirmed then, Ezra,”

"Being?"

“We seem to be on a planet deep in the Unknown Regions. It is uncharted by your people, but to mine, my people call this world, Myrkr.”

Ezra perked up at the thought of their mystery crash site having a proper name, even if it was technically "uncharted" in the unknown regions of space.

“Is that good?” He asked.

“Of a sort,” Thrawn replied. “Myrkr is not far from Csilla, my homeworld. If memory serves, Myrkr was once the home to a species known as the Neti, but they abandoned the planet for unknown reasons many years ago and the world was more or less forgotten to time.”

“Why do I get the feeling that we aren’t going to like finding out what those unknown reasons were?”

Thrawn rubbed his chin in thought before getting a collection of recovered intel from his mind.

“My people did have a few stories about this planet, most of them involving curses or genocide.”

Ezra clapped his hands together with a sigh.

“Yeah, that’s about what I thought you’d say.”

“All the more reason we plan our leave as soon as possible.”

"Wait, wait, don't you think there might be some more important assets on world if it used to have an entire species living here somewhere? Maybe we should check for houses and ships, or food and signs of sentient life?"

“No, I highly doubt we will find any remaining Neti, nor resources from the forgotten camps. It is pointless to waste our efforts on them. No, our first instincts should be to locate enough parts to repair a ship and fly off of this planet as soon as we are able.”
“We’re still going to look for survivors at the second crash site though, aren’t we?”

Thrawn paused but only for a moment less than an abnormal amount of silence.

“Yes. We will need supplies, and with luck, there could be a salvageable shuttle for us to pilot and others to take along with us.” He frowned and focused his thought on something before adding, “I think I might be able to get us back to my homeworld from here if the pod is in good condition.”

“And then what?”

“Then, we will hopefully get proper medical attention and reclaim the remainder of our memories. We will be safe at least among my people. They are, for the most part, hospitable, especially to those who help the Chiss as you have done so for me.”

“Can’t wait!” Ezra smiled, his voice a half mixture of sarcasm and pure earnest anticipation. “But—” He paused. “But what about the third part of the Star Destroyer. Can we really leave without checking for survivors there too? I mean, what if they’re all back there waiting?”

Thrawn sighed, his patience apparently growing thinner each time Ezra brought up the subject.

“If you were to reach out and search for human life with the Force, then could you locate these possible survivors from the second crash location?”

Ezra nodded. He wasn’t sure, but he would try anyway.

“Then you will do so. I will keep the Ysalamir away from you at enough of a distance to allow your powers to work properly. I will leave it up to you, although—” He stopped.

Ezra frowned.

“You don’t think anyone else made it out, do you?”

Thrawn made a face that was hard to read and said, “If I were to be honest... I’ve no idea how the two of us managed to survive...”

“But we did!” Ezra persisted. “So, that means someone else could have too!”

“I have theorized the cause to our survival could very well have been your Force cushioning our blow, or perhaps we were simply lucky and there is no more to it than that.” He straightened his back and started walking. “I hope you do find others to take with us, but I am simply warning you not to place too much of your hope in succeeding on lost causes.”

Ezra watched as Thrawn walked away, the yellow lizard still latched onto his shoulders, but a new sense of coldness surrounding the Chiss. Hadn’t he just claimed to care about keeping his subordinates alive? Would other survivors not be counted as Thrawn’s subordinates? It was like he hardly cared at all about finding them.

Ezra frowned, but followed behind Thrawn as soon as he and the Ysalamir were a safe distance away. He wasn’t sure if he should simply stop thinking and just believe Thrawn, or if he should remain hopeful that there were other survivors out there. He felt it in his gut, that feeling of connection. They weren’t the only ones who could survive such a feat. There had to be others, he thought. There just had to be!

If there were, then Ezra would find them. He couldn’t help but feel responsible for them. Was it because he was the only one capable of locating the other crew-members or was it something else?
A sense of guilt he felt as if... well... as if this entire thing was somehow his fault.

He saw another flash of white, only this one faded as he saw tentacles crashing through the viewport of the command barge. They had Thrawn in their clutches, and Ezra felt his shoulder stinging with fresh hot pain as the huge whale-like creatures shot off into hyperspace, Ezra’s hand freezing the glass shards and oxygen right where they floated mid air, as he tried to keep them alive.

He was overwhelmed by the new knowledge, but why then did he also feel like there was more to the story that his mind wasn't showing him.

“The Force will be with you...Always...” he had said in the new memory.

Ezra blinked back to reality, his stick in hand, Thrawn pacing several feet ahead of him as the huge centerpiece of the Star Destroyer came into view around them. Already, the two could tell that this hunk of the ship was well over three times the size of their hunk back across the forest. Their search could take just as long as the hike to get there had. Still, Ezra had a mission. While Thrawn rooted for supplies and a shuttle, Ezra was going to find the other survivors.

Please, just please let there be a few others...Please let me have a chance to rescue them.

He wasn't sure why he felt so strongly about it, but there was a creeping sense of loss that weighed heavily on his heart. Had he been unable to save somebody before? Was it someone close to him? Was that a memory that he truly wanted to remember? The mere shadow of it filled him with so much remorse— but no, he knew the answer, any memory was a good one if it meant regaining who he was before the crash.

With that acceptance, it was as though a path in his mind became unclogged by doubts and the memories came pouring back to him, starting with the voice of the woman again, her echoing scream shouting desperately out at that single name, her tone laced purely with pain as the scene of fire felt hot on his skin and bright in his eyes. There was a figure in the flames, one he could just barely make out, but it was like there was an invisible wall between them and neither Ezra nor the woman could seem to reach him.

"Kanan!"

He heard the man speak something, though in a different time, a different place.

"You can learn what it truly means to be a Jedi," he'd said.

"When the time comes... we have to be ready to sacrifice for something bigger," he had also once told him.

"Kanan!" Ezra heard his own voice scream, and suddenly it hit him. The man in the fire was someone important to him. A flood of new memories, conversations had with him came pounding back through his skull as his image of the man's face grew clearer and clearer with every passing thought.

"It's difficult to teach," Kanan had said.

"I want to become the Jedi you see in me, the one I don't always see in myself."

"You're putting your life in my hands!"

"You put your training in mine."
"What exactly am I looking for?"

"Nothing and Everything!"

"That doesn't exactly help."

"I know."

It was then Ezra finally saw his face and it was so clear now that he knew he would never be able to forget it again. He saw the man staring to him with only determination and acceptance in his eyes... eyes that slowly faded from white to a burning bright teal just before he sent a powerful wave of Force energy into their ship, shooting the craft away as the explosion swallowed him and everything below in a horrific wave of fire.

The man... Kanan... he was his master, his teacher. It wasn't Thrawn who taught him, but instead this brave man who sacrificed his life to save him and everyone else aboard the ship. Every instance of guidance he felt, he saw in a brief memory of the tanned man with the ponytail, beard, and the blue lightsaber that shone like starlight in every battle they fought together. He had failed to save his master. No wonder he felt the way he did.

Wait, he thought suddenly. Where was Thrawn in all of this?

_He had all of these new memories, both warm and painful about Kanan, but Thrawn... he was nowhere to be seen in any of them._

Ezra glared at Thrawn's back now, his brows furrowing.

If Kanan was his true teacher, then who—no—_what was Thrawn to him?_

It was the first time he'd ever really thought about it, but—perhaps Thrawn wasn't who he claimed to be. _Maybe, _Ezra thought that he should keep a better eye on Thrawn—at least until he managed to remember something good about him like he had with Kanan. Though, as he walked, he felt his body overcome with a newfound reserve, the cold aura around the Chiss had only seemed to grow stronger, _and now, _Ezra wasn't quite sure who to trust.

Chapter End Notes

I am not sure how, despite writing this entire thing, I still manage to make continuity errors in the artwork. -_-  
Whatever, I am not redoing it, so just let me pull my "Guardian of the Whills" art mistakes and do not look too closely into it! XD

Also... I've moved the planet Myrkr closer to Csilla for plot reasons... in Legends it is actually closer to the Inner Rim.
Chapter Summary

Ezra's suspicions of Thrawn grow stronger as Thrawn's health deteriorates and both continue seeing more visions of their past, some harder to tell apart from reality than others. They split up to search the second crash site, but what they don't yet know is that they aren't there alone.

Chapter Notes

Posted on: May 28, 2018

“It’s going to take us all night to search this thing!”

“Perhaps not,” Thrawn replied, stroking the Ysalimir under the chin as it continued to purr atop his shoulder. “I will begin looking for remnants of a ship to get us off-world. You may commence your search for other survivors on the higher levels.”

Ezra nodded.

As if you even care! Is what he wanted to say.

“Yeah, fine!” He said instead, his voice noticeably colder which Thrawn took notice of immediately.

He turned back to Ezra, masking his curiosity towards the tone as he tried to make conversation once more to get another response to study.

“Take this,” he said, testing the boy's mood. “I made it from the circuitry of the medical droid. It should allow you to open doors aboard the ship without power. We were fortunate to have a generator system active at the command barge, but I fear we will not be so lucky at this location. It will be getting dark soon, so we should prepare a camp as soon as possible.”

“Great, thanks!” He replied with a huff, snatching the device and taking a few large steps away. “Guess we’d better get started then!”

It was the way in which Ezra said that, his shoulders shrugging sharply and his tone aggravated, almost irritable. He ran into the wreckage before Thrawn could address his tone, but he let him go.

He is certainly upset? Thrawn observed, thinking about any reason as to why that might be. Perhaps his discomfort is due to the Ysalimir test?

The Chiss made a mental note to apologize for the rock incident when he next saw Ezra, and then immediately headed into another part of the wreckage. The boy was right after all. The only way to find what they were looking for was to simply go out and find it themselves.
“Hopefully luck is with us,” Thrawn told to the Ysalamir as it rubbed its face against his cheek, prompting a small smirk from the Admiral as he ducked for a stray shard of wreckage. The sudden pang which immediately caused him to grit his teeth and he coughed violently into his hand only to see the red stain of blood staring back at him. *Not the most reassuring of signs...* He thought as he wiped the evidence away on his pants leg before staggering a moment as the new pain in his leg throbbed all the way up his thigh. He promptly fell into the entry way for support, the lizard making a concerned trill in his ear before he forced himself upright and continued his limping march into the ship.

*If we do not find proper medical help soon, Thrawn thought. I may not be so lucky as to apologize properly to young Ezra.*

But he didn’t have the luxury to worry about such things. Right now, all that mattered was their survival, so once again, the Chiss mentally repressed his bodily malfunctions and focused more closely on the task at hand.

“*Stupid Thrawn...*” Ezra muttered. “*Stupid ship! I’ll find those survivors! And I’ll do it without his help.*” He held out his hands and shouted through the empty halls. “I’ve been doing great so far!”

With that out of his system, he looked to the small device and grumbled at it.

"When did he even have time to make this? How did he even—" Ezra couldn't even finish the rant without seething. "His infinite wisdom is getting kind of annoying. I just—" He rounded a corridor and stopped with a sudden groan of realization. "Oh what am I even doing?"

He’d been so angry at the Grand Admiral that he’d let it cloud his senses. He wasn't even looking for signs of living people, he was just stewing in some newfound anger which he felt consuming his mind. In truth, he didn't even know why he was so mad in the first place. *Why was he letting this get to him so badly?*

Ezra felt a sudden chill run up his spine as he saw a flash of red and a dark, menacing voice was whispering words into his ear.

"*Your anger is a wellspring, you must use it!" The old master had told him.*

"*But a Jedi is never supposed to act out of emotion?*" He had replied.

"*Your passions give you strength, and through strength you gain power. You have seen it, you feel it. You must break your chains.*" His voice was a hiss of a whisper. "*My apprentice...*"

A rush of memories flashed for this man, the sad old Zabrak with red and black markings. This man had hurt him time and time again, but there was still something Ezra saw in him, something he seemed to pity and wonder about that led him to continuously team up with him. That is, until he saw a sandy planet with twin suns, an old man in a brown robe, and in an instant, the chill up his spine faded away into nothing. The looming haze of the old master was gone.

He didn't have time to worry about it, but the Zabrak had called him "apprentice", and had said his name was "Old Master". There was something dark about this reverie, something Ezra would have to focus on later for sure, but for now, he wanted to focus on those memories of Kanan, of the
lighter side to all this confusion.

“Relax Ezra!” He told himself, inhaling one deep breath of air before reaching out with the Force and looking for any signs of life. He couldn't give in to the anger, he needed to remain calm, to remain clear headed. It was the only way this Force thing was going to work. Something inside was telling him this was true.

He connected with the ship, feeling through the Force, searching nearby, but he couldn’t even manage to find Thrawn's life signs, let alone anyone else's. He chalked that fact up to the Ysalimir’s powers and decided to spread his senses a bit further before giving up so soon.

"Relax..." He said to himself again. "Just clear your mind. Clear— your—"

There!

His eyes sprang open as he sprinted for the location. It was up a floor and two halls to the left, but he felt them, four of them. Four life forces! With a fist, he slammed the control panel beside the door and the double panel slid open to reveal a dirty mess hall and a loud clattering of pots and pans behind the counter, the noises of life coming from deep within the kitchen.

“Hello?” He called out, his voice shaking with newfound hope, and a small dose of smug satisfaction. When he brought these guys back to Thrawn, he was going to rub his big blue nose in it for sure.

In an instant the clattering stopped.

“You wouldn’t believe how glad I am to see other survivors! For a while there, I thought it was just me and Thra—” His voice cut off as the figure came around the corner. A wave of regret washed over him as a snarling pack of Vornskr crept into the mess hall, pillaged food wrappers and remains hanging from their teeth.

Ezra felt his shoulders fall as he met eyes with the predatory creatures, and felt his hopes plummet like a crashing starship.

“Oh kriff…”

With an unspoken signal, all four of them charged for Ezra as he stumbled back and scrambled over a table before diving back out the door. He reached up and slammed his hand down on the panel just in time to hear three of them slam into the metal, their claws scraping at the wall as they roared hungrily behind the closed doors. Without thinking, Ezra pulled out his blaster and shot the controls once, locking them inside before he slid down to the floor and took a few deep breaths.

“I guess we won't be getting any rations from this ship,” he said with a tired sigh.

Kanan’s voice echoed once more in his mind, his tone just as tired sounding as Ezra currently felt.

“Look Ezra, just because you want something to happen, doesn’t mean it's going to.”

He chuckled dryly and rubbed his face.

“You're telling me! What? I couldn't have remembered that a few minutes ago?”

He let his head fall back into the wall, but as the Vornskr pack continued hitting the door, he quickly got back up and decided to continue his search elsewhere. If he got to the highest point of
the ship, he could probably get a clearer reading and perhaps even be able to sense life forces at the third chunk of Star Destroyer a few clicks away. He still had a point to prove to Thrawn and he wasn't about to let a pack of Vornskr stand in his way of being right.

“Okay!” With a new energy in him, he ran through the maze of the halls, leaping through dead elevator shafts to reach a higher elevation with stern determination. “Get to the top of the ship, look for lifeforms, and make sure they aren’t Vornskr.” He panted and shrugged. “Piece of cake, Ezra! Piece of cake!”

His stomach growled.

“I need to stop using such delicious sounding idioms!” he groaned. “Maybe there’s more food around here somewhere else?” He let out a dry chuckle and rolled his head. “Because I really don’t want to have to eat a Vornskr!”

Ezra shoved the thought to the back of his mind as he looked out the window to see that he was already higher than tree level. He got an idea and with a hum and let loose three shots of blaster fire before kicking in the glass and peering outside with a smile.

“There’s the easy way up, and then there's the fast way.”

With that said, Ezra crawled out onto the ledge of the ship and leapt into the air, grappling the next window as he repeated the motion higher and higher until he landed atop the sun-baked side of the crashed shuttle and rolled onto it, lying flat on his back now as he breathed in the humid air and tried to regain his stamina. The air was even thinner this high up and he regretted not crashing on a planet with a breeze instead of this half-frigid half-humid forest of nightmares.

“Okay...” he breathed. “So... the fast way isn’t... always... the smart way... phew!”

After a few more breaths, Ezra rolled over on his side and looked down. He couldn’t remember the last time he was up so high, but that didn't mean much in hindsight to everything else he couldn't yet remember. At least he wasn’t afraid of heights or anything?

"This should be high enough."

He sat cross-legged and took in one last inhale before loosening his shoulders, calming his nerves, and simultaneously opening his mind up to the Force, closing out the world around him as he simply sat, breathed, and focused.

“What’s the force?”

His face crinkled at the memory of his own voice.

“The force is everywhere,” Kanan had said. “It surrounds us and penetrates us. It binds the galaxy together. And it’s strong with you, Ezra.”

“Alright...” he replied to the memory. “I can do this, Kanan. I know I can. Focus… Focus...”

His voice trailed off as a vision took over his mind. Unlike the constant flashbacks and his memories coming piecing together in little chunks of nostalgia, this was something different, something new.

He saw people, a group of people who he didn’t recognize, but judging by their dirty uniforms and matted hair, they were obviously crew-members, and they were wading through the black grass of Myrkr, walking up to the severed chunk of the Star Destroyer. Ezra felt a twinge of relief to see
this, but held his joy back until he was done with the vision so as to not distort it with emotion. He continued to watch as the survivors made their way into the hangar. Thrawn was there, but he was cloudy, no doubt the Ysalamir was blocking him from Ezra’s vision just like it was with his sensory skills. The crew made their way up to Thrawn and—he drew his blaster on them? Ezra felt his heart sink as he heard Thrawn pull the trigger. He saw the blaster bolt and heard a shout—and—and—

He couldn’t hold it.

“No!”

He shot to his feet. Thrawn was going to shoot the survivors! But—no—that didn’t make any sense!? Not caring about whether they survived the crash was one thing, but going out of his way to murder them—it couldn't be true.

Could it be... Ezra thought suddenly. Was Thrawn the one who was attacking the ship? Was he the one who shot him in the shoulder and killed those soldiers?

The Chiss had tried to strangle him when he woke up, and he didn’t even let Ezra bury their dead back at the Command Barge. Sure, he had that white uniform, but Thrawn could have just as easily stolen that and posed as a Grand Admiral beforehand. He lacked a sort of human compassion, and Ezra wondered if it was due to more than just his species differences. Ezra’s head pulsed with an entire stack of new theories until he just couldn't think anymore.

“No!” He exclaimed again, running now as he slid to a halt just on the edge of the Star Destroyer. Miles below, he could see them, the tiny specks in the distance that were those crewmen coming closer to the ship. “I have to stop Thrawn!” And without another thought, he leapt from the ledge and had a sudden flash of memories.

Apparently he had dived into the sky like this many times. He remembered free falling on countless planets, but one instance seemed stronger than the others. He heard a distant wailing roar and saw the huge tentacled beast soaring downward with him, its faded blue eye watching him before flying away. In this memory, he recalls not sticking his landing, but he shook the thought away and tried to focus more on one where he had. The ground was quickly approaching and Ezra had to stop Thrawn before any of the other people got hurt.

He held out his hand and looked for the Force to cushion his landing.

Thrawn was panting, his vision blurry, but he shook it away as he saw half a TIE Defender in a smoking heap near the tear in the Star Destroyer’s wall. It would appear the vessel had been torn right down the center of the hangar, making his locating a suitable ship somewhat impossible. Unless he could scrap one together from the remains, there was not a sole ship left in tact from the crash, and presumably the rest had acted as escape pods, deployed long before their untimely plummet to Myrkr.

He growled, but was too tired to be properly angry about it, so he simply let it go.

Thrawn could at least retrieve the communications beacon inside the tattered TIE fighter and attempt to send out a signal for help. Even with his memory in a haze, he could recall times when he had studied the technology of the Imperials and knew how to program certain aspects of it to an
extent. Myrkr was abandoned, with hardly any planets nearby, *if Thrawn had remembered this
area correctly*, so he wasn’t sure sending out a beacon was even going to work, but even though it
was a long shot, he still figured it was worth the attempt.

He was breathing heavily now as he used the little of his remaining strength to tug away a stray
piece of piping to use as a lever against the ship. He slid the pipe into the crack, and pushed with
all of his weight until he heard the metal give way and wreckage rolled down to take the place of
the TIE’s internal computing system.

Thrawn sighed, dropping his lever as he stumbled drunkenly towards the salvaged piece. That one
simple motion had hurt more than it should have, but all that pain in his legs, his ribs, and head, it
was all starting to numb away into a throbbing coldness creeping in on his skin. Again, not a good
sign, but one he was too dazed to realize himself.

“With this...” He breathed slowly, his words faltering as everything around him seemed to bleed
away into a staticy black void. “I can attempt to rebuild—the—” The world was spinning, and he
suddenly lost all mental capacity to form the word in Basic. “Vucon’evib...”

Thrawn collapsed, the Ysalimir holding firm until he hit the ground and passed out. It skittered to
the tiled floors, sniffing at the Chiss until it whimpered and skittered away beneath the wreckage
and out of sight.

His red eyes opened a moment later, but something long and blue-black tickled his face as he
moved the strands of his own hair out of his eyes and sat up from the small grass hut, as a swarm
of birds sang their brash morning song far off in the distance.

He said nothing, reaching only for his knife and a net before leaving towards the river to catch his
breakfast. The thick Wild Space planet’s forests made survival easy, but it was not without its
dangers. The small game was useful for food, but there were a few larger beasts who proved to be
more... troublesome.

Firstly there were creatures similar to small, white-scaled Nexu, and for the most part they left
Thrawn alone, but occasionally one would try to challenge him and Thrawn would have to lead it
into one of his snares or pitted traps. Their hide kept him warm at night and made sturdy clothing,
but their meat was tough to chew left much to be desired in regards to taste.

The best food came from Thrawn’s true enemy, the makeshift rival to his supposed exile location.
The were packs of wild Tusklan that trampled around his campsite and tried to kill him on
a regular basis just for the sake of spite. These Tusklan were hard to kill, but Thrawn discovered
many ways to do so over his many weeks alone, lying in wait for the Empire to finally show up
and catalog this "unknown" world to their databases as they had been doing in the area for quite
some time now. Stingfly attacks were by far the most effective, but that approach made it harder to
prepare and cook the meat due to all the stingers and poison from the insects.

His stomach growled, but Thrawn pulled a decent sized fish of of the water and settled for its light
flesh over the more filling meat of the Tusklan. After the months spent plotting for the Empire’s
arrival, one thing was certain to him and that was that Thrawn was absolutely sick of eating fish.
Though, if it was what it took to protect his people, as always, he could endure.

He had just finished the last of it when he saw it enter the upper atmosphere, the Venator-Class
Star Destroyer, its cargo ships heading down to the planet at last. In that single moment, he
swallowed down the last of his food and had never tasted anything sweeter. Thrawn smiled and
activated his long awaited plan in that instance as he ran into the foliage to hide and observe these
troops.
He had to get their attention, impress their forces, and infiltrate the Empire in order to either make them an ally or to weaken them for the Chiss Ascendancy. With the larger threat looming over his people, this was the mission he was given and like any of his exploratory missions, Thrawn would do everything in his power to test their strength or utterly destroy them from the inside out.

They landed and Thrawn leaned into the shadows, his red eyes watching from afar as the gray-uniformed imperials and white-clad stormtroopers set foot on the soil.

He blinked once and found himself back on the floor, the panels smooth and gray, but covered in dirt and other grime. It was the inner decor of a ship, the Star Destroyer, most likely. \textit{Had he been caught?} He wondered, before suppressing the mere thought as something impossible. \textit{No, his plot was foolproof, so there would be no way he could have gotten himself discovered so easily.} He reached up and realized with a quick jolt that his body was in a numb pain and his once long hair had been shorn. \textit{Was it possible he had actually gotten himself captured?}

Suddenly, he heard a voice. It was fuzzy, speaking a language that he barely understood, but he turned towards it and saw clearly a white armored trooper inching towards him, his defenses visibly lowered. Thrawn thought back to his mission: capture the armor, divert attention away from the bombs, get the attention of the commander, and sneak aboard to impress and join the Imperial ranks.

He reached and felt for his knife only to find a blaster in its place, one he thought he remembered taking off the last Stormtrooper he’d sacrificed for his escape. It was a necessary kill, though not one he took lightly. This particular Stormtrooper would be no exception.

“Sir?” The trooper asked, still deaf to Thrawn’s ringing ears. “Are you alright?”

More footsteps were quickly approaching, so Thrawn knew he had to act quickly or his window would run out.

He lifted the blaster, seeing the trooper halt dead in his tracks, and without another hesitation, he pulled the trigger.

“No!”

Thrawn heard the shout before he felt his arm pushed away by an invisible force, the blaster bolt echoing into the corner without a target. Just as suddenly, a figure in orange approached him, a young man with blue-black hair and intensely angry blue eyes. Thrawn recognized him and in an instant remembered where he was and why he was here.

“I—” He felt himself fly backwards before he could say another word, his ears ringing when his body hit the ground.
He saw a flash of this same angry boy holding him with this Force as the surrounding tentacles wrapped him in their tight embrace to the point he felt his lungs tighten, turning him slowly towards the shattered viewport as the world evaporated into a streak of white. He would have to concentrate more on that later, but for now, Thrawn held out his hand, the rest of him barely able to prop against his elbow as he coughed and saw the smallest bit of blood stain the floor.

“Ezra...” he said again through a winded breath.

“Give me one good reason!” the boy yelled in a mixture of frustration and contemplation. “An explanation for why you tried to kill the other survivors? How you infiltrated and crashed the ship? How you’ve been lying to me from the very beginning!?”

Lied? Infiltrated? Thrawn thought rapidly. He recalled his plans in exile to do just that, but no—that was many years ago, he knew that now. That particular memory was all too clear, in fact, it was distantly vivid to him.

“Halt!” The Stormtrooper ordered, his weapon pointed at Ezra.

“Who me?!” He exclaimed, pointing to Thrawn. “No, aim it at Thrawn! He’s the one who’s trying to kill you!”

“Grand Admiral Thrawn!” A woman gasped, rushing in past Ezra and the trooper as she skid to her knees and helped him sit up. “You’re alive!”

“Huh?” Ezra let his hand fall only to raise them in defense to the man who pointed the rifle in his face.
“Grand Admiral,” the woman repeated. “Are you injured? Did this boy hurt you? How did you get here? Why... we thought we had found all the survivors from this location?”

“On your knees, you!”

Ezra did as the trooper demanded as the woman helped Thrawn to his feet and helped him to walk over to the two.

“There is no need for that,” Thrawn said with a wave of his hand, a forced effort by the looks of it. “Ezra, please stand. Trooper, you may stand down.”

“Yes sir.”

It took Ezra a while to find his words, all those accusations and theories rolling around in his head fading as he tried desperately to figure out what was real.

“Thrawn, I—”

“Please...” He interrupted, his tired eyes closing and opening again in one prolonged blinking motion. “I am afraid I am the one who owes you an apology.”

“You do?” Ezra asked.

“Yes,” he replied with a nod. “First for causing you suspicion. I realize now that this was the reason as to why you were acting so standoffish earlier. Did you have a memory that perhaps brought about this reaction?”

“I did.”

“I see. I apologize secondly for coming off as impudent in my regards towards the lives of the remaining crew. As a Chiss, my emotions are expressed slightly different than your own. I am afraid my outward expression did not properly convey my internal concerns clearly, and for that I am sorry to have aroused suspicions in you.” He bowed his head as far as he could manage and looked back to Ezra with dull red eyes. “You have found surviving members of my ship, and as a leader, I am indebted to you for saving both my life and those under my command.”

Ezra blushed, an intense pang of guilt striking him in the gut as though he’d been punched there directly by an angry Besalisk.

“And I’m sorry for accusing you of all those horrible things. I was just...” He paused. "Angry."

“It is quite alright,” he said calmly, turning to address the Stormtrooper. “It would now seem my next apology goes to you, trooper.” He bowed again, this time more slowly as the small woman found more weight added to her assist as he lost more energy to stand. “The boy was correct in my previous attempts to end your life, but not for the reasons he might think. I was— having a memory moment,” he said with a studious look in his eyes. “A living memory from my past that consumed my waking mind. I was about to fire upon you without thinking back to the present.”

“No harm done, sir,” the trooper said. “These are stressful times. I shouldn’t have snuck up on you. I’m just glad to see you made it out alive.”

“Right!” The woman nodded. “We need to get you into a bacta tank, stat! You’re burning up and I can feel your severed bones from here. How long have you been moving around without proper attention?”
“About two days,” Ezra informed.

“Two!?” Her voice was so shocked that it managed to pierce the silence of the hangar with a small echo. “But— that’s— just— how?”

“Unimportant.” His arm twitched as though he had just tried to wave his hand again, but was unresponsive. He looked to it with a frown and then to her with a much softer expression. “Please forgive my rudeness—” Thrawn blinked, his head drooping as he lost all energy to keep it up. “I am afraid we are suffering from some temporary memory loss and I do not remember who you are. By your ranking plaque, I am assuming you are a commodore?”

She let out a laugh, albeit a dry sounding, almost comical sort of laugh before she realized her commanding officer was not in fact telling a joke.

“Oh! Oh, you’re serious?” She swallowed, cleared her throat, and immediately addressed herself. “I am Commodore Karyn Faro, your first officer aboard what used to be the ISD Chimera.”

Thrawn almost smiled. “I am glad to see that you were unharmed. Please, can you bring us up to speed on what has happened?”

“Thank you Grand Admiral.” She smirked, warmly at first, before her frown returned and she looked between the Stormtrooper and Ezra. “I really think we need to get you treated first—”

“The report, please, Commodore,” he insisted, and Faro heard how much effort it took just to let the words come out, so she did not make him strain himself again.

“Yes sir. We came from Crash Site Alpha before reconvening here at Crash Site Bravo. Among our ranks remain four stormtroopers, three other officers, and four various enlisted staff.”

Thrawn frowned. “Of the over twenty thousand troopers aboard the Chimera,” he stated, suddenly remembering the number. “That is, how do you say— a massacre?”

“Correct,” she said sadly. “Though, a good portion of those numbers were lost to us on Lothal and not in the crash. A few even managed to get out through escape pods. Pellaeon's crew as well as the fleets to our right and left flanks crashed down on the planet after the sudden attack. With our separation—” she motioned outside to the three pieces of the ship. “It is unknown to their conditions.”

“Lothal?” Ezra blurted, the name ringing more bells in his own mind than anything else. “Wait, what happened over Lothal?”

She sneered at him through slits and turned her attention to Thrawn.

“Grand Admiral, who is this boy? Is he one of ours?”

“You do not know?” Thrawn inquired.

“No, but then again,” she sighed. “I know how much you like your special bodyguards and hired assassins. This one is far less terrifying than that Rukh fellow. He must be new.”

Thrawn hummed unsurely, too tired to focus on any thoughts he might have had on the subject.

“So I guess that means you really are the Grand Admiral, and you really might be my commanding officer?”
“Perhaps,” he said weakly. “That might explain your odd uniform at least. Was my leadership to you part of the memory which caused your suspicions of me?”

“Kind of,” he rubbed his head. “I was remembering my master. My real master. The one who taught me to use the Force.”

“Force?” Faro asked. “Are you some sort of Inquisitor?”

“I—don’t know?” Ezra said honestly. The word did sound familiar, but not in a good way.

“Commodore,” Thrawn said, his body visibly straining to breathe now. “Why— was our ship stationed— above Lothal?”

“I’m afraid due to another mission that I am a little behind on our latest escapades, Grand Admiral. The last I heard, we were returning to Lothal to meet with Governor Pryce about the ruined fuel depot and the loss of your special TIE project.”

Thrawn felt a sudden anger creeping in on him, but just as before, he was in too much pain to do anything about it, and released the feeling.

“Continue…”

“All I know is, one minute we’re over Lothal, firing down on the city, and the next thing I know, there are alarms blaring out of every port, the underbelly of our buddy ship was sliced through and crashing, and before I could make it back to the command barge, we were simply gone! Teleported to who knows where before the ship broke apart and impacted on the surface of this strange planet.”

“None of the survivors were near any windows or monitors to know what exactly happened either, sir,” added the trooper. “If we had, we probably wouldn’t be here having this conversation. You see, we were all on our way to the TIEs when the Chimera tore apart. Luckily, we were able to hunker down and avoid being thrown along with it.”

“You said the ship was torn?” Ezra asked. “By what?”

The trooper studied Ezra, but replied anyway. “It looked like— well— they looked like tentacles, sir?”

Thrawn quickly remembered his nightmare and swallowed, just as Ezra suddenly recalled the creature flying beside him as he dove out of the sky. Both of them kept quiet.

“I’ll believe anything at this point, but that’s not important right now.” Commodore Faro urged. “Right now, we need to get you to the medical wing. Or what’s left of it anyway.”

“One more moment…” He held up a hand. “Ezra…”

“Yeah?”

“Before I am incapacitated, I was attempting to make a homing signal—” He groaned. “Get it working, if you are able, and guard the remaining survivors.”

“Sure thing, Admiral.”

“Trooper, with me!” Faro ordered, having him assist her in supporting Thrawn to the med bay. “Ezra was it? The rest of the survivors are awaiting orders outside. Please go to them and let them
know what’s happening. Tell them that there are no dangers inside and they are safe to return. Among them is chief weapons officer Pyrondi. She should be able to inform you more on the situation and lend her assistance with the beacon.”

“She rose a brow and Ezra swallowed.

“I mean— yes ma’am!?”

With a nod, she let out a small breath of air through her nose.

“Better.”

With that they left and Ezra wandered out into the ending daylight.

“It’s him!” He heard someone yell. “That kid who fell out of the sky!”

”Is he working with Vader?” One mumbled loudly.

Another whispered where everyone could hear, ”Must be some sort of Inquisitor?”

“Oh right!” Ezra blushed, scratching at his head nervously. “Sorry about that, I just needed to keep you safe from— well— nevermind.”

“Who are you?” an officer shouted, the three remaining stormtroopers all readying their blasters.

“My name is Ezra,” he said quickly, thinking suddenly for a reason not to get himself shot. “I’m with Thrawn’s special forces.” He didn’t bother adding the “I think” to the mixture because the confusion was working against his immediate need for safety.

“The Grand Admiral,” one man said. “Is he—”

“He’s alright,” Ezra nodded. “But he needs medical attention and went with Commodore Faro. They asked me to look out for everyone and I’m supposed to find someone named Pyrondi?”

“That’s me!” The woman said, popping her hand up as she made her way over to Ezra. “What can I do for you, sir?”

“Thrawn said he was making a homing beacon to relay some sort of distress signal. Do you think —”

“Can I get it working?” She interrupted. “I don’t see why not? Is it safe to go back inside?”

“Are there anymore of those black beasts roaming around?” asked a thin-faced man in a gray mud-streaked uniform.

“You mean the Vornskr? No. The hangar is safe, as is most of the ship. So, they attacked you guys too, huh?”

“They hunted us like prey!” an older gentleman with a large mustache told. “Even managed to get a few of us too, mercy rest their souls. We were able to overpower them thanks to our weapons, and even trapped a few in the mess hall before leaving to assist the other crash site.”

“We should really stick a sign up so no one gets pulled in and eaten?” Pyrondi thought aloud.
Ezra nodded, but resisted the urge to make a face.

“In that case, I think you’re all clear. Come on inside. It’ll get dark soon and Thrawn thinks the Vornskr attack more at night than during the day.”

“Great!” a uniformed soldier in black said, holding the word for much longer than necessary as he walked past Ezra and into the ship.

He watched them before trailing behind and asking, “Does anyone know anything about the crash?”

“Not really?” Pyrondi shrugged, squatting down to the TIE computer Thrawn had scavenged as she immediately began to tinker with it.

“None of us were in a very good position to see anything,” the mustached officer said. “That’s probably why we managed to survive.”

They collectively whispered until someone else shouted something aloud.

“The people on the bridge would know! They would have crashed in the command barge where the Grand Admiral was located!”

“Where are they?” asked another, a woman in the same black uniform as the man.

Ezra looked to his shoes and then back at the small group.

“Thrawn and I were the only survivors to make it out of the bridge.”

They all frowned.

Pyrondi grunted and said anything she could to fill the silence.

“We received orders to intercept an anomaly on our screens shortly before leaving Lothal. Maybe ten TIEs made it out before then. Our guns were at half charge, and I heard that our outer atmospheric fleet had been disengaged.”

“And before that?”

“We were firing down on Lothal. It seems our troops were called to the capitol and the Grand Admiral was cleansing the streets with our turbolasers.”

“Cleansing them?” Ezra asked. "Of what?"

She looked at him like he were an idiot.

“Of rebels of course?” She laughed. “Wow, Thrawn doesn’t let you get out much, does he?”


“If an Imperial Class Star Destroyer is firing down at such a close range, I doubt it would be very safe. I heard the capitol city had a shielding mechanism, but this is war, kid. We don’t always get to make nice choices when it comes to who gets caught in our crossfire.”

Ezra swallowed, but resisted the urge to argue, something told him it wasn't an argument he would be able to win. He also suppressed the urge to be angry about it, fearing it would cloud his Force
senses again.

After a moment of silence, the mustached general spoke up again with a finger pointed into the air.

“After regrouping, we made our way to crash site Bravo to look for survivors and managed to find four more. We were on our way back here to prepare an expedition to site Charlie when you and Thrawn showed up.”

“It saves us a hike,” a stormtrooper said. “Especially with those black beasts roaming about! They already got TD-F27 and BG-989.”

A woman let out a sob before the man beside her wrapped his arm over her shoulder and patted her arm.

“We’re going to be okay!” Ezra said quickly. “Look, we’re going to send out a distress signal. Thrawn said that this is one of the uncharted worlds near his home planet. So I’m sure someone will come by eventually and pick up our signal.”

“The Grand Admiral said that?” Pyrondi looked up. “In all the years I’ve known him, he never mentioned where he came from? So, where are we?”

The group silenced all looking to Ezra for a reply.

“On a planet known as Myrkr,” he said, a sudden wave of nerves wrapping over him as he felt all their eyes on him. “Somewhere out in the Unknown Regions.”

“The Unknown Regions!?” a woman spat.

“We might as well be in a Sarlacc pit!”

“No one comes out of the Unknown Regions! Least of all go into it!”

“Thrawn did!” Pyrondi said suddenly, glancing over her machine at the rest of the group. “And I heard a rumor that Commander Vanto is somewhere here too! Look… It’s not the end of the world here. There’s at least a window of hope for us, no matter how small it is, at least it’s there!”

“Right,” Ezra said. “So for now, we just have to ration what supplies we can, get the beacon up and running, and then do what we do best—” He looked to the mob of unsure faces and stressed the word in the most confident way he could muster. “Survive!”

The short woman, the one who was crying, spoke up timidly, wiping at her eyes. “I know where some of the upper officers hid their stash of imported food items.”

“Great!” Ezra clapped. “That will help a lot!”

“What do we do about water?” asked one. “Especially after what happened to Captain Sousvide…”

Ezra winced, instinctually grabbing for the skin near his neck, mentally thanking Thrawn once again for not allowing him to jump in the lake.

“Well…” the thin-faced man hummed with a scratch of his chin. “I can probably get the rest of the water running to one location so it stores like a reservoir. It could potentially last us a few weeks if we’re lucky.”

“Also good! Anyone else?”
“I can find clean uniforms!”

“I might be able to reprogram a few MSE droids to survey the camp.”

“We can find a few more blasters throughout the ship.”

As more and more people started in, Ezra smiled.

“Everyone here has a part to play,” he said. “We’re going to survive this!”

“Right sir!” Pyrondi saluted halfheartedly from below. “We’re at your command, oh mighty Inquisitor!”
Escape

Chapter Summary

Ezra and the rest of the Chimera crew face off against some unexpected dangers while trying to survive a night on Myrkr together.

Chapter Notes

Posted on: June 2, 2018

**WARNING:** This chapter contains a little more violence than the previous ones! You have been warned!!

“That’s all?” Pyrondi groaned. “When you said the higher ups were smuggling imported food, I'll be honest, I was expecting something a little more than just assorted junk food and snacks.”

“Sorry!” The small woman said nervously. “That was all they had that survived the crash!”

Ezra now knew this short, shy woman as Pira Skoff, and she was a fleet logistics liaison aboard the Chimera who had survived the crash by taking shelter under her desk when the alarms went off.

“Ease up a little!” The thin-faced man added. “At least it's something? It should last us a couple of days and then we can just start hunting for food like the creatures on the less civilized planets do.”

His name was Birt Rathon and he was a sanitation officer who had locked himself in the refresher at the time of the crash. He personally knew everything there was to know about the inner pipping of the crashed ship, and he had somehow managed to get their water reserves regulated so they had a decent supply to last them a few weeks while they were all stranded on Myrkr.

The two soldiers in the matching black uniforms were named Koree Vayes and Gunther Kordin. They were Imperial gunners, the only ones to make it out of the third crash site alongside two other stormtroopers. Each of them came back with armloads of weapons salvaged from around this hunk of the ship. Eventually they'd either stopped because they ran out of weapons or because they realized that they had created an impressive pile that was already well above the level of Ezra’s own knees.

Then there was the man with the mustache who introduced himself as Flag Captain Albus Marinith. He was in the hangar right before the jump from Lothal to Myrkr and managed to survive by strapping into one of the harnesses used by the Skyforce-Repair-Team and then hanging on for dear life. He supplied everyone with a fresh change of clothes, and although many of the uniforms were ill-fitting, he tried the best he could to match each uniform as closely as possible to the individual. No one changed out of their clothes yet, but the option to do so later on made everyone in the hangar feel at least a little bit better.

The two surviving commanders, were Karyn Faro, who was still in the med bay with that one
stormtrooper and trying to take care of Thrawn's injuries, and then there was a tall red haired man who said his name was Woldar. He didn't really say much else besides that, mostly keeping to himself, but muttering on occasion as he sat on the ground beside Pyrondi, toying with the remnants of three MSE droids they’d found scattered throughout the ship.

Ezra had felt a close connection with the weapons officer, Pyrondi, due to her calm and passive attitude. She was the first one to trust him implicitly and she even managed to convince the other survivors to do so as well. Out of everyone here, she seemed to have worked with Thrawn the longest, so despite her rank, the others found it easy to follow her orders.

Well, almost everyone.

There were three stormtroopers hovering over in the corner, all of whom continuously eyed Ezra in a way that wracked his nerves. They didn’t seem to trust him for some reason and the way their presence in the Force felt only highlighted this realization. As of the last three hours, Ezra hadn't learned their names, their numbers, or any other spark of information that hadn't been gathered from one of the other members of the crew. For now, he was okay with that so long as they didn't randomly decide to attack him out of the blue. Only one of the three troopers seemed to have that aura about him, but it never hurt to err on the side of caution.

Between all eleven of the survivors, no one seemed to be terribly injured. Everyone had scrapes and bruises, sure, but only Thrawn and Ezra seemed to suffer serious concussions and bodily damage. Thrawn's words to him the other day suddenly echoed in Ezra's mind. To be completely honest, he didn’t know how they were alive after that crash either, but Ezra decided to count his blessings on that fact and just be grateful that they were able to find this handful of living crew-members and set up a fairly decent campsite.

“The sun is nearly down.” Ezra warned. “We’d better get some light in here. Maybe even move up to higher ground, to avoid any nighttime lurkers. What do you think?”

"It's probably safer in the hangar," Pyrondi replied. "We'll be able to watch our backs down here. Now, if we could just figure out how to seal up that massive hole in the wall, we'll be set."

“I’ll make a fire outside. It's primitive, but some light is better than none, right?” One of the troopers offered. He appeared to be the one with the least murderous aura around him, Ezra noted.

“Good thinking! That should probably keep the Vornskr away too. Make it wide enough that they'll think twice about sneaking around it, okay?”

Ezra tried not to notice how his voice had cracked slightly at his first chance to speak with the helmeted man. He also wanted to let the three troopers know that they could take their helmets off whenever they wanted, but decided against it and held his tongue. It was probably better that he not push his luck with them right now.

“Oh! Remember the buddy system!” Pira called lightly.

He scoffed out a laugh, no doubt rolling his eyes beneath the black visors of the helmet, but left with the other two in order to find supplies and make the fire.

Pira got a reserved look on her face because of their response, but Ezra chased it away with a comforting smile and a quick clap of his hands. In fact, it was so sudden that it made her jump a little and Ezra felt sort of guilty about the action and shrunk to his knees to keep eye level with her.

“So Pira, what’s for dinner? I’m starving!”
She blinked hard and looked down to the pile with a stutter.

“Oh! R-right! Well, we have some protein cubes, some energy pudding, brawballos, shroomchips, potams, and some fruit jelly that can go on these crumpets. Uh—” she waived nervously. “D-does any of that sound good?”

“I guess I’ll take a potam?” He said unsurely. “I’ve never actually tried any of this other stuff before?”

“How have you lived?!” Birt chided, scooping up the energy pudding.

“I recommend roasting the brawballos when the troopers finish the fire,” Pyrondi said, nudging him aside so she could grab a couple for her and Woldar. “Someone should go take some food to Commodore Faro, LG-921, and the Grand Admiral, if he’s up for it?”

“I can do that,” Albus offered, taking the shroomchips and a few of the potams with him.

“I’ll go with you!” Pira stood, grinning. “Buddy system, remember?”

“I am much obliged.” He bowed to her with a smile that lifted the ends of his peppered mustache alongside the aged wrinkles beneath his eyes. “Ezra, please make sure T9-454, JZ-743, and GG-218 get a proper ration.”

“Yes sir!” Ezra saluted, wondering how in the world everyone here could remember such a random sequence of letters and numbers with such ease.

"Good lad. Now, might we borrow your small power stick to get through the halls once more?"

"Allow me!" Ezra stood, opening the door over the door tool Thrawn made him. He had to admit that it really was a useful little device. "Just knock when you want back in, okay?"

"You got it!" Pira laughed. "We'll let you know how the Grand Admiral is doing when we get back."

"Let's not waste anymore time then," Albus said with a motion towards the hall. "Off we go."

The two left, the old captain unsheathing a small light from his breast pocket as they headed into the darkening pitch black shadows of the halls. From outside, the soft glow of the fire was already reaching into the severed hangar, and Ezra let the door slide shut behind him as he waved for the troopers’ attentions, offering up what was left of the rations to them.

“Gee thanks!” One said, not even remotely attempting to be sincere.

“Leave the scraps for the stormtroopers, I get it.” The other scoffed.

The last one didn’t even say anything, just bent over, scooped up a few protein cubes and followed the others into the corner where they sat and ate far away from everybody else.

Ezra let out a sigh, but got up and made himself a seat between Birt and Pyrondi.

“Why do those guys hate me?”

“Oh don’t worry about it!” She waved. “They hate everybody.”

“Probably no more than they do themselves for signing on to wear those buckets all the time!” Birt laughed.
“This coming from the head of sanitation!” Koree smirked.

Birt tossed one of the brawballos at her, but she merely caught it and quickly shoved it into her mouth before he could steal it back.

“No fair!” He complained.

“Hey? Don’t throw away what you don’t expect to lose?” Gunther teased.

“What is that?” He scoffed. “Some sort of wisdom from the gunner crew?”

At that, Gunther threw a ration stick back at him, and Birt only rolled his eyes with a sigh.

“Really? That’s the best thing you can throw?”

The gunner shrugged, an honoree smile on his face as he bit into the fruit jelly and repeated, mouth full, “Like I said, what you don’t expect to lose, right?”

Ezra laughed and looked over to the huddle of stormtroopers to see that they all had finally removed their helmets in order to eat. He couldn’t really make out their faces thanks to the harsh shadows from the fire outside, but he could tell that they all wore black body-glove suits that wrapped all the way around their heads, ears, and chin, revealing only the bare basics of their faces.

He looked away quickly, shoving the potam in his mouth just before one of the men turned his way. It took some difficulty to swallow, but the trooper didn’t seem to notice Ezra’s snooping and in return, the boy didn’t try to peak over in their direction again.

“And I just about—got it!” Pyrondi grunted, wiping the sweat from her brow as the beacon lit up with a spark and started whirring quietly. “The beacon is active ladies and gents! Now all that’s left to do it wait!”

“Nicely done!” Woldar praised. “Though, I can’t say I’m having the same luck with these MSE’s.”

“Let me take a look, yeah?” She grabbed for the little loaf-shaped robot and immediately started tinkering with it while muttering to Woldar about circuit crossing and memory boards.

Ezra shook his head and turned away.

“So…” He stretched, turning his attention to Koree and Gunther. “How do you two like working as gunners?”

“It’s a pretty good gig,” Gunther replied. “You get to work with most of the weaponry on board and they give you these sweet outfits.”

Koree handed over her large black neutral-alloy helmet to Ezra and motioned towards his head.

“Go ahead, try it on!” She laughed. “You’ve been eyeballing it since we got to crash site Bravo.”

He smiled and took it, eagerly placing it on his head without protest.

"Oh cool!"
“Just be careful,” she warned. “That’s a specialized computer helmet. It’s equipped with macrobinocular viewplates, sensor arrays, and a sophisticated tracking system.”

Gunther laughed.

“And don’t forget the tongue-operated comm link!”

Ezra immediately lifted the helmet and handed it slowly back to Koree with a face that was just slightly disgusted.

The gunners laughed, giving one another a slight bump with the sides of their fists, obviously some sort of inside satisfaction they shared as Ezra suddenly got the feeling that he wasn’t the first one to react that way to this helmet. At their trick however, he couldn’t help but smile. It was good to know they still had a little humor left in them after all this tragedy from the crash.

“Hey over there!” One of the stormtroopers called with a prickly snarl. “Keep it down, will you? Some of us are trying to get some sleep!”

“Sorry!” Ezra whispered loudly in their direction, and with another scoff, the trooper slid back down against the wall and shuffled before growing still again.

Gunther made a face, prompting Ezra and Koree to hide snorts beneath their hands before making their way further apart from the troopers.

“The fire’s getting awfully low...” Woldar observed.

“I’m on it!” Gunther offered, “Come on Koree, and grab a few more of those brawballos, will you?”

“Remember that we’re trying to ration our food here, Cadet Kordin.”

“Aww!” he groaned, clicking his tongue with disappointment. “Fine then. Come on Koree…”

As they rushed off, Ezra took a seat with the others and got a strange feeling about him.

“Captain Marinith and Pira have been gone for a long time, don’t you think?”

“Now don’t go start telling ghost stories, kid!” Pyrondi warned, her little sparking wrench shifted in his direction. “Pira’s always been a softie, and Albus has a dog-like devotion to the Grand Admiral. They’re probably just staying back there with Commodore Faro to watch over his health.”

“You did say that he was wounded pretty badly, didn't you?”

“Yeah...” Ezra sighed. “More than he let on by the looks of it. Did you know that Thrawn didn’t even bother to tell me that he had broken ribs until after we’d been searching through the ship for over a half hour!?”

Pyrondi chuckled.

“Sounds like something he would do.”

“You know,” Woldar swallowed. “Just between the three of us, Thrawn kind of scares me a little.”

“Oh yeah?” Pyrondi leaned back, a brow raised, coupled with an amused smile. “Why is that, Woldar?”
The man pulled at his collar.

“He’s just sort of eerie, don’t you think? Nothing gets to that guy, he’s just all cold calculations and calm commands.”

“I like not getting yelled at by pompous elites, personally?” Pyrondi smiled. “Just speaking from experience and all.”

“Yeah well, I guess I like the predictability that comes from—”

“Aaaa!”

The three jumped when they heard the shrill scream come from the entry. Even the stormtroopers sprung into fight mode as they grabbed for their blasters and aimed them at Koree and Gunther.

“What is it?”

“Why did you scream?”

“I saw something!” Koree pointed. “It—it just skittered over there!”

Ezra looked, Pyrondi shining her work light over in the direction of the endless mountains of rubble.

“I don’t see anything?”

There was a small chittering hiss as a block of small metal clamored down the hill and onto the floor.

“There! You see!?” She pointed again.

“What if this thing is just as deadly as those Vornskr!?” Gunther added fearfully.

“Hush!” Pyrondi ordered, creeping closer to the pile with her blaster drawn as she balanced the light between her teeth. It was just as she tapped at the wreckage with her blaster, that the creature popped out of the debris and wiggled frantically as it scurried down the pile and around the floor in a frantic dance of confusion.

Koree screamed again, though it was Gunther who hid behind her, his hands gripped on her shoulders as he positioned himself safely behind her as a human shield.

"Shoot it! Shoot it!"

“I’ll get it!” Pyrondi stated with a grunt, her mouth muffled beneath the light as she sent red hot bolts of blaster fire into the floor near the panicking lizard.

Ezra was only able to take a step when he heard the stormtroopers readying their weapons to join in, and with that, he rushed over and quickly scooped the creature up and into his arms, dodging blaster fire as Pyrondi promptly cursed and lowered her weapon.

“Wait! Wait! Hold your fire!” Ezra shouted, his hand outstretched while the other was placed comfortingly on the lizard to calm it down. The Ysalimir shook violently, its small lungs stretching in and out as Ezra felt the pitter-patter of tiny heartbeats echo across his rib-cage where the creature clung to his chest. Ezra let in a breath and sighed. “This little guy is harmless, see?”

“How do you know?” The Stormtrooper demanded, his blaster still drawn to shoot both Ezra and
the lizard if need be.

“Well, it’s been clinging to me and Thrawn since this morning. In fact, it was with Thrawn until you guys came along. The little guy must have gotten scared of something and ran off.”

“What is it?” Pyrondi asked slowly, creeping nearer to the creature as it rounded Ezra’s back to get as far away from her as possible.

“It’s something Thrawn calls a Ysalamir. It clings to the trees outside and eats on the leaves and stuff. Thrawn told me that if you try to pull one off, you’d probably kill it before you ever get one to release its grip.”

“Interesting?”

“Aw, come on!” The Stormtrooper bellowed. “It’s not some pet! It’s protein. Let’s cook that thing up and put it to some good use!”

Ezra flinched.

“We can’t eat the Ysalamir! Not this one! It—uh—could be poisonous? Plus! Plus—it belongs to Thrawn!”

He didn’t know if Ysalamir meat was poisonous, and then technically the lizard was more of a backpack between Thrawn and Ezra, but he wasn’t about to sully the Ysalamir’s chances of getting out of this alive by dragging it down with Ezra’s name attached. Not when it was Thrawn who held all the power around here.

“The Grand Admiral isn’t the type to keep a pet!” Another stormtrooper added.

“If it’s his pet, then what did the Grand Admiral name it, huh?”

Rapidly, Ezra thought for any name he knew that was at least semi-smart sounding and Thrawn-like, but all he could think up seemed to be something childish like Sparky or Clinger. Shutting off his brain, he let a few random letters blend together to form an entirely new word, and went with it before he could second guess himself.

“Uh… Jorj!”

“Jorj?” The trooper repeated, his voice sounding about as skeptical and unconvinced as the look that was on Pyrondi’s face.

“Yeah!” Ezra lied. “He said it was—uh—a common Chiss name for pets! Yeah!”

Pyrondi shrugged.

“It’s not like we know the difference? I say we keep the little bugger alive until Thrawn tells us otherwise, okay guys?” She shooed him away. “That’ll be all trooper.”

With a grumble, he lowered his blaster and took a step back.

“Fine!”

Ezra let out a breath of relief, but shoved it aside when he realized having the Ysalamir around him would make using the Force pretty much impossible. If he was going to keep the rest of the survivors safe from Vornskr by sensing for danger, then it would probably be better if he didn’t have the little anti-Force shield clinging to him all night.
“Uh, I guess I’d better get the little guy back to Thrawn?”

“I’ll go with you!” One of the troopers said swiftly, prompting mixed looks from everyone else in the room.

“Uh...thanks?”

“Buddy system?” He quoted Pira, scratching at his armor as he let out a shrug and started marching. “Now, let’s move.”

“The rest of you should sleep,” another trooper said imperatively. “We’re taking up the next watch.”

“I’ll sleep after I get these MSE’s up and running, but don’t let that stop the rest of you.”

“I’ll stay up with you for a while longer,” Woldar said, flicking his chin. “But Koree, Gunther, why don’t you take the next watch? Try to get some rest, yeah?”

“Sounds like a plan!” Ezra said, stepping into the dark hallway as the stormtrooper shined a small light through the tunnel.

"We'll be back soon. I'll make sure nothing happens to the kid."

Ezra rolled his eyes.

"I feel so safe?"

The trooper grumbled, prompting Ezra to take the first brisk steps into the hallway, whistling nervously as he disappeared into shadows.

---

Ezra slid his hand along the wall as they walked through the blackened tunnels of the Star Destroyer. It was completely dark with not even a sliver of light shining from anywhere aside the device the trooper carried. Neither of the two could see more than a foot in front of them, so they were forced to walk close together to avoid tripping or getting lost in the awkward black silence that seemed to go on forever.

At least when the crew had scavenged the ship for supplies, there was sunlight beaming in from cracks in the walls, but now it was just the foggy Myrkr night slipping in silently and filling the already creepy halls with a flurry of humid steam and some horrid moldy smell like that of metal sunken below old water.

"So..." Ezra hummed abruptly. "Which trooper are you?"

“JZ-743,” he said simply.

“Uh...” Ezra hummed again, trying to fill the unnerving silence with anything but awkwardness and failing miserably. “Mind if I call you Jaz?”

“Yes.”

He swallowed.
“Okay then…”

They walked in true silence for a few more feet and Ezra took in a few breaths, wafting the horrible smells of the ship out of his nose.

"Do you not smell that?"

"No," the trooper said, each word snappy as he pointed to his face with the butt of his blaster. "Filters in the helmet."

“Lucky...” He grumbled. "So, do you know where this medbay is—or—" He pointed. “I mean, I’m kind of just following you.”

“I think it’s just up ahead.”

“You think or you know?”

He growled.

"Better question," Ezra started. "Why did you volunteer to come with me?"

"I just— needed some space from my commanding officer."

"You mean the angry shouty trooper?" Ezra chuckled. "Why is he in charge?"

The word was simple, but the way the trooper said it made it sound like it explained every question that Ezra could ever ask on the topic.

"Protocol." It wasn’t as satisfying an answer as the trooper might have thought.

"Well you know, I think that you should just—"

*splash*

“Oh gross!” Ezra groaned. “I think I stepped in a puddle!?”

“*Oh, grow up!*” The trooper scolded. "Aren’t you supposed to be one of Thrawn’s great assassins or some all mighty Inquisitor or something?"

“Hey? Even great heroes hate wet socks!” He teased, taking a step only to hit his foot against something round and—odd.

The trooper heard it too, shining his light down in an instant as the dim white flash danced along the ground and landed on the pool of water soaking into Ezra’s boot.

*Only... it wasn’t water.*

Frozen, Ezra and the trooper followed the light only to see a the white armor plating of a stormtrooper’s leg piece lying on the ground. The armor was still perfectly in place as the two of them quickly realized that it was more than just the suit lying severed on the ground.

“*GAH!*” Ezra jumped back.

“Filthy Beasts!” The trooper scoffed. “Come on, we keep moving!”
“Uh… JZ—”

“I told you not to call me—”

“Yeah yeah, there’s no way I can remember the whole thing!” he interrupted. “Just listen. Pira and Albus came through this way, didn’t they?”

“This is the only way to the med bay from the hangar, yeah?”

“Well—” He swallowed. “Don’t you think they would’ve seen this if they walked by?”

“Those savage creatures have been picking at our dead since the crash, kid,” he said. “I doubt they were any more surprised than we were.”

“That’s not what I’m saying.” Ezra frowned and stroked the shivering Ysalamir as it suddenly started trembling against his shirt.

A skitter erupted from above, causing both to jump and aim their blasters up at the ceiling.

“M-must have been wind blowing through the ducts?”

“Whatever you want to tell yourself, buddy?” Ezra frowned.

“Come on, we’re almost there.”

“You don’t think the Vornskr in the mess hall found a way into the ducts, do you?”

“Don’t be paranoid. I’m telling you, it was just the—”

This time it was the trooper who stepped in something, something that made an uncomforting squishing noise beneath the white armor of his boot.

“What was that?” Ezra didn’t really want to know.
He shined the light down, relief sweeping over them when all they saw was a single smashed potam. Both let out a sigh, before looking to each other and then immediately scanned the hallway where they made out two figures in the dim shadows, one was leaned up against the wall, and the other lying face first on the floor, a pool of blood leading all the way back to a final figure belonging to the severed leg. There was a scattered bag of chips and the remaining potams lingering ominously around in the hallway among the carnage, and both men thought that they might throw up if they weren't too shocked to remember how.

There was a movement in the shadows followed by a bone-chilling thud just above as a dark figure creeped closer, a pair of golden eyes flashing like sparks in the reflection of the small light. It growled and Ezra could instantly see the rows of gleaming teeth looming back at them as the Ysalamir let out a shrill hiss.

“You were saying!?” Ezra broke.
“Just run!”

A blast of red, the hallway lit up and the Vornsksr lunged out of the way as the trooper continued firing in its general direction, all of his shots missing miserably.

Ezra looked back, stopped running, and fired two shots into the darkness, each hitting the Vornsksr as it thudded to the floor.

“Are you even trying to aim?!”

“These helmets don’t have night vision!” He grumbled. "Get off my back!"

He pulled on the other's shoulder and the two continued running as newly approaching skittering claws sounded in the vents, drawing closer from all directions.

“Here’s a crazy idea!” Ezra shouted between breaths. “Take it off!”

“But that’s against protocol!”

“What!? Are you getting graded on this or something? Would you rather be right or dead!?”

With a snarl, the trooper caved and tossed his helmet to the ground.

“Agh!” He roared. “I still can’t see a damn thing, but I can smell everything!”

“Do you think they got to Thrawn and Faro?”

He didn’t reply.

Ezra looked to him, only to see his eyes were icy blue, so bright in the light of his flashlight that they were nearly white, and they were completely terrified.

“JZ?”

He shoved Ezra once to redirect him down the hall and slowed his run to a jog as they came upon the medbay doors, and with a sigh, the trooper looked to him sternly and swallowed.

“My name is Walten Horncaster.” He mumbled something and took a breath. “In case I don’t make it out of here, I just think—”

“Don’t talk like that!” Ezra yelled. “We’ll get through this. We just have to find the others and then get back to the hangar and warn everyone.”

“Yeah…” he said unconvincingly. “Yeah… you’re right.”

"It’s quiet?" Ezra observed. "You think we lost—" One minute he was upright and the next, Ezra was on the ground, the Vornsksr pinning him as it fell from its perch in the ceiling. Ezra gasped, the wind getting knocked out of his lungs as he felt the Vornsksr's weight on top of him. He just barely had access to his arms, but was holding it off as it tried to swat and snap at his face, the breeze from its claws just narrowly missing his throat.

Then, at the absolute worst possible time, he got another flash of memory.

“These guys aren't so tough.”

He was younger in this memory, and fighting something— a pack of Frynocks? There were two
women they were rescuing. A green skinned Twi'lek and a girl about his own age with hair the color of an evening sunset. Sabine, he remembered. Her name was Sabine.

He was caught off guard, tripping suddenly as Frynock came in for the kill. He saw it blasted away by someone else, Sabine, as she helped him to his feet and they ran into the small ship. On the platform there was a purple Lasat, still firing back at the beasts, the same one who he remembered piloting the TIE Fighter with in his other memories.

“Nice moves out there, champ.”

His name was Zeb. He was Ezra’s roommate, he remembered.

Why was he remembering them now though? He wondered suddenly as he came violently back into the present to find himself still fighting for his life.

*PEW!*  

He heard a single shot and the Vornskr suddenly stopped moving, sliding all of its weight down on top of him, dead. Ezra quickly turned his head, shoving the beast off of him as he checked the crook of his arm to make sure the Ysalamir was still safe and in one piece.

“Walt?” He asked unsurely.

“How’s that for aiming, kid?”! His voice called smugly with a proud looking grin to follow suit as a hand came down, grabbed his, and pulled him up all in one swift motion. “Now come on! We need to move!”

"Thanks!"

“Don't mention it!” He breathed, slamming into the door as he tried to pry it apart with his bare hands. "And don’t call me Walt!”


He snored and jumped once, looking around as he hugged a MSE close to his chest.

“What? What is it? What’s wrong? Are we under attack?”

“No. Shhhh!” She motioned. “It’s the beacon. I think it’s picking up a reading on something?”

“How can you tell?” He yawned. “Aren’t those a one-way type of tech?”

“Typically, but I tried to reprogram it to ping back at us if someone got wind of our signal, you know, like a sonar-esque connection.”

He nodded tiredly, only understanding every other word she was saying.

“Anyway listen to this!” She held the device out as it made a series of palindrome hums before a brisk high note ruptured the synchronized blips.

“It’s a ping!” He said, his eyes growing larger. “Someone’s out there!”
She smiled.

“We’re getting off of this rock! Let’s tell the others and notify the Commodore.”

“Right! I just hope it’s not pirates...”

“Woldar!” She snapped. “Would it kill you to be just a little more optimistic every once and awhile?”

“Sorry...” He blushed. "I'll go tell Faro and the others. Hand me that door picker."

She tossed the tool to him and lifted a brow.

"What about the buddy system?" Pyrondi mocked through finger quotes.

He chuckled.

"It's not like there's anything to worry about?" He said. "Toss me your light too, will you?"

She did and offered him a half-hearted salute.

"Good luck in there, Commander!" She said, her voice teasing him with spooky sound effects and wiggling fingers. "Don't get spooked all alone!"

He scoffed and rolled his eyes at her.

"Sure thing."

And with that, he walked into the hall and let the doors slide shut behind him, sealing himself away in the dark.

As Walten tried to pry the doors open with his bare hands, Ezra put the door device that Thrawn made to good use and the two of them crashed into the med bay, Ezra rapidly dodging a shot as it narrowly missed grazing the top of his head.

“What?” he called. "Wait! It's just us!"

“Ezra?” She squinted. “JZ-743? Is that you?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“What are you doing down here? It isn’t safe! The beasts they—”

“Found out how to get into the vents?” Ezra stopped. “Yeah, we noticed!”

Ezra looked and saw Thrawn lying unconscious on a small cot in the corner.

“He doesn't look so good. Is he okay? What happened to the bacta tank?”

“The tank’s busted!” Faro groaned. “It barely filled with a foot of water before sparking and falling apart! Not to mention, I can't seem to get any of our generators in here to work and the wires have all been shredded. It’s not looking good boys, not for the Grand Admiral, and not for us.”
She noticed the lizard on Ezra and let out a jump.

“What in blazes is that thing on your back?”

“It’s a Ysalamir. Don’t worry, it’s friendly.”

“Kid claims it’s Grand Admiral Thrawn’s pet.”

“Pet?”

“That’s what we said.”

“Regardless. It doesn't matter. What matters is what are we going to do next?”

“You had another trooper in here." Ezra looked around. "Where is he?”

“Dead...” Faro said grimly. “He went out to lead the Vornskr away and never returned. I would have tried to go after him, but— well—” She blushed, her mouth a thin line as she pouted primly towards the wall. "I can't get the door open myself."

“LG-921 is dead?” Walten sighed. "Well, I guess that would explain the—”

Ezra nudged him before he could finish that sentence, and frowned before he turned back to Faro.

“Captain Marinith and Pira Skoff headed this way to give you and Thrawn some rations. Did they —?”

She looked down to her boots.

“They never made it.”

“We got two of them on the way here, but who knows how many more are in the ship? They could be sneaking aboard from the outside now that it's night out.”

“All the more reason to get out of this tub and somewhere safer.”

“Thrawn said the Vornskr hunt at night,” Ezra informed. “We were safe up in the Command Barge, but I don’t think it’ll be the same with this pack since they know their way around the vents. And uh— we kind of— built a fire right outside the hangar. So, now that I think about it—”

“You’ve trapped us all in the ship?!” She squeaked.

“Uh—” The trooper hummed, feeling partially responsible for the fire outside.

“It’ll be fine!” Ezra said suddenly. “The hangar is too tall for any of the Vornskr to make it down, so if we get Thrawn back down there and barricade the door behind us, then we should be fine!”

"AAAAAA!"

A man's screams echoed the hall, making all three of them jump.

"What was that?" Ezra asked.

"It almost sounded like—" Faro stopped.

"It was Commander Woldar," Walten finished. He cursed once, loudly, punching the wall so hard that Ezra heard the metal crease beneath his gloved hand. "What was he doing in the halls? Who"
told him to come after us?"

"What if they're in trouble?" Ezra gasped. "Back in the hangar? You don't think the Vornskr got loose in there too, do you?"

"That's no good!" The trooper shook, his voice rising in panic. "What are we going to do?"

Faro thought on something for a moment, a long moment, and with a grimace, she pulled out her blaster and pointed it directly at Thrawn’s head.

“What are you doing?”

“Commodore!”

“Let's be realistic!” She frowned harder, her face contorting with the pain of it all as she held firmly to the small gun. "The Grand Admiral is fading fast. He needs medicine that we can’t provide and is getting weaker by the second. We’ll never make it out alive, especially if we have to bring him with us. He's dead weight." She sighed. "He was a great Admiral, a brilliant tactical mind, and the Empire will be the worse without him, but this is the best thing we can do for him now. I just don’t want him to have to die at the hands of those monsters! This is the only mercy we can give him now."

“That is not an option!” Ezra shouted.

“It is our only option!” She spat. “You both might be too young to remember the Clone Wars, but I’m not! I know what it takes to survive and those choices aren't always the ones we want to make. If it means the survival of my crew, then I have no qualms being being the one to make those tough decisions.”

“I’m sorry ma’am," Walten said, his blaster raised now. "But I can’t let you kill the Grand Admiral."

She stared at both of them, their stares locked in a stalemate for the longest moments before she finally winced, and pocketed her blaster. With a hand on her face, she let out a deep sigh and looked back to them with tired eyes. More tired than Ezra had noticed at first. They were baggy and wrinkling slightly at the corners with all of the stress she'd been shoveling through. He couldn't help but feel a little bad for her.

“Then what do you expect we do?”

"We get back to the hangar," the trooper stated. "Attack or no, it is the most secure place on the ship and it has a mountain of weapons just lying around for the taking. We get back and we fight off those bloodthirsty beasts until daybreak and escape once they've slowed down."

"And how do you expect we do that, Trooper?"

“I have an idea!” Ezra said quickly. "But if it's going to work, then you’re going to have to take Thrawn and go out ahead of me."

“What?”

“Self-sacrifice is not a good—"
"It won't be!" he blurted. "Look, I know what to do. This is going to sound crazy, but the Vornskr are attracted to my scent because I am strong with the Force. I can lure them away from you long enough for you to take Thrawn and escape, and if one comes after me, I'll take it out, run back to the hangar, and once we're all free, we can seal the door behind us and wait for help to come from the beacon Pyrondi set up. Maybe we can even go back to— what did you call the command barge? Crash site Charlie? Thrawn and I were safe there all night, plus it still has power!"

"But how can we know you will make it out alive?"

"You have to trust me. I can handle myself, but I can’t do it unless you get this Ysalamir as far away from me as possible."

"I don’t follow?"

"I know!" He said. "Just trust me on this!"

"Well… can’t we just shoot it?" Walten offered.

"No! I can’t let you do that!" Ezra said quickly. "There's been enough killing!"

"Aside from the Vornskr, you mean?" Faro said with a tight smile. She huffed and waved her hands through the air. "Alright. Alright! You are one of Thrawn's special elitists, so I'm going to trust you on this, but how will we know if you actually pull through? The longer those doors remain open, the bigger threat for the rest of the crew."

"I know. I just need five minutes. Once you're safe, I'll come running. I'll be right behind you, alright?"

"I don't like this..." Walten grumbled. "It's too risky!"

Ezra placed a hand on his shoulder and smiled before handing him the door device and giving him a determined stare. He then walked over to Thrawn and knelt over to show the unconscious Chiss to the Ysalamir and it eagerly returned to his side, curling up into a little ball atop his chest as it whimpered and nuzzled at his shirt.

"You can protect Faro and Thrawn, so let me protect you and everyone else." Ezra smiled. "What's the worst thing that could happen?"

Faro came over and placed her hand on Ezra before handing him her spare flashlight.

"Young man..." she smiled. "In my profession, I've learned never to encourage what may happen, but instead hope for something that will!"

"In that case, may the Force be with us." He nodded and looked to the door with arched brows. "Now let's go."

Faro and Walten ran off first, each of them carrying Thrawn between them as the Ysalamiir held firm with its death grip on Thrawn's tunic.

Ezra meanwhile, waited in the blackened hall alone until he saw their light fade away completely in the distance.

He immediately felt the Force returning to him, sensing the many approaching lifeforms and hearing the snarling roars and scratching claws as the Vornskr barreled through the Star Destroyer. There were far more than just the ones he saw locked in the mess hall, so Walten must have been
right in his guess that more were coming in from the outside.

Ezra waited silently, the hairs on his neck sticking up, until he opened his eyes and stood there for one moment more. In an instant he wished that he knew where he'd lost his last lightsaber, but held firmly to his blaster and took in one long breath, hoping all the while that he actually knew what he was doing with his plan.

He spread his hands out, sending out pulses with the Force, both hearing and feeling the Vorskr packs instantly take the bait and draw towards him in a ravenous frenzy of claws and teeth.

Then, with only one more moment passing, he took a final breath, and decided that it was time to run.

"Commodore Faro!" Pyrondi gasped. "What are you doing here?"

They set Thrawn gently on the ground as Faro panted to catch her breath.

"This ship has been compromised!"

"Where's Ezra?"

"Leading the Vornskr away so we could escape with Thrawn."

"He looks terrible!" Koree gasped.

"We're not doing so great either," Walten said gruffly, looking to the ground as he added, "We lost Marinith, Skoff, LG-921—"

"And Woldar?" Pyrondi asked, her voice trembling.

The trooper sighed. "Yeah... they got him too."

"Why was he following us?" Faro spat through gritted teeth. "What was he doing?"

"I sent him!" Pyrondi said, choking on her words as they came out. "I sent him to tell you and the others about the— No—" She stopped and shook her head in her hands. "It's my fault! I mentioned bringing you the food too, so Pira and Albus— It's all my fault!" She fell to her knees, her words failing to come out as her lips shook and body trembled with guilt.

"It's not your fault!" Faro shouted, her voice both strict and comforting all at the same time. "We all knew when we signed up for this war that it could cost our very lives, and no one can force you to leap into potentially dangerous situations. That is a risk you have to chose to decide for yourself. Ignorance to that does not promote any extra lives nor guilt to the survivors. The best we can do is live on to honor their sacrifice and memory. What we must do now is not mourn them, but survive in their place!"

The group frowned, the room growing silent and still as each person chose to process Faro's words in their own unique way.

T9-454 was the first to break that silence as he stomped, snarling to the front of the group, his voice paranoid and loud. The volume acting as a filter that he perceived would make him sound
more in control the louder he got.

"We're all going to share their fate unless we get this door sealed! Let's not waste anymore time! We have to barricade that hatch and hope the ship gets here with help before we're all eaten!"

"Ship?" Faro repeated. "What ship?"

"The beacon!" Pyrondi pointed. "That's what Woldar was trying to tell you. I rigged it to send an alert back to us if anyone out there caught our signal."

"And someone did?" She smiled.

She nodded.

"That's great news!" Faro sighed with relief.

"That means we're saved!" Walten added.

"If we can get this door shut!" T9 stomped. "So, stand aside and lets do this!"

"Whoa, wait! We're not sealing that boy in a tomb!" Walten stood, chesting up the other soldier. "Not after he risked his life to give us a clear path out of there! No, we're giving Ezra his window, no arguments!"

"JZ-743..." he started, his voice slow. "Where is your helmet, trooper?"

"I threw the blasted bucket away!" He yelled. "I couldn't see a damn thing and the rules and regulations of the Empire don't matter when we're trapped out here. This is life or death!"

T9 punched him to the ground, Walten spitting once as he rose back to a knee and saw the blaster shoved in front of his face.

"Those are traitorous words, JZ-743!" He growled. "And you know what protocol states we do with traitors."

"Protocol?" Walten almost laughed. "How is protocol going to save us on this world, Francis?"

Koree moved between them, her arms outstretched.

"Come on you two, stop this! You don't want to—" She paused, stifling a chuckle as she looked back to T9 with a snort. "Wait... Your name is Francis?"

He growled, shoving her out of the way as she hit the floor and slid to the side.

"It's T9-454!" He snarled as he pointed the blaster back to Walten.

"Stand down Trooper!" Faro ordered. "Now!"

His voice was quivering now as he laughed and shook his head. "We're all going to die here anyway," he said. "You all know that right?" With shaking arms, he lifted his aim and put his finger on the trigger. "Why prolong the inevitable?"

"But, the beacon!" Pyrondi shouted.

"Probably something worse than those beasts! Maybe slavers? Pirates?" He laughed maniacally. "Face it, the universe wants us all dead! We're just too stubborn to lay down and do it!"
"Get a hold of yourself, man!" Faro warned.

"No..." He shook. "No, I've never seen anything more clearly, Commodore. But, if we're all going out," he said, jabbing the blaster against Walten's forehead. "Then I'm going to start with the traitor."

Walten just waited there, watching him as he felt the string of sweat slide down his face. If this was how he went out, he wasn't about to give Francis the satisfaction of seeing him looking afraid, no, he kept his brows arched, his eyes burning holes into the black eyes of his visor as he saw himself reflected in the helmet.

"Do it!" He spat.

The trooper let his finger curl, pressure pulling down on the trigger before—

*PEW!*

The blast echoed through the hangar, making everyone in the room jump.

Walten opened one eye to see the bright burn of blaster fire scorching a hole straight through T9's chestplate. He fell to his knees and then to the side, dead before he even hit the ground. Behind him stood GG-218, his weapon was smoking from the reveal of its last shot fired. With a growl, he threw his gun on the floor and tore off his helmet, tossing it aside as he looked to the body with sad, shaking amber eyes. Tears stained his dark skin and he shook his head, falling to his knees as he rubbed his face.

"I'm sorry," he cried. "If we're going to survive this, we have to stick together. No more infighting."

Koree and Gunther gave him sympathetic pats on the shoulder as Walten stood and helped him back to his feet.

"You did what you had to do, Urick," he said gently. "We knew he started slipping the moment he saw Ezra use the Force. You can't fix a man who doesn't want to change, and I wasn't about to follow his blind orders to my grave."

The other trooper nodded, but he didn't smile, turning his back to the group to take a moment to breathe by himself.

"How long has it been, Commodore?"

"Four minutes," she replied. "We seal the door in one more minute, Ezra or no..."

Collectively, they watched the door, hoping, some of them praying that any second they would see that young man in the orange shirt come flying out just as he had when he flew down from the top of the Chimera. As the seconds ticked by, it was all they could do to simply sit there and stare.

"Five minutes, ma'am," Gunther alerted slowly, his voice sad and low.

She shook her head, and let out a sigh.

"Seal the door."

"But Commodore!" Pyrondi argued.

"Seal. The. Door!" She ordered, her eyes dark with regret, but teeth gritted with command.
Walten sighed, but stepped forward as he aimed the blaster down at the control panel.  

"Get out of the way!"

Ezra shot through the door, sliding onto his back as the group saw an entangled mess of moving black claws and dozens of angry golden eyes swallowing beneath the shadows as Ezra shoved them back with the Force, allowing the doors enough time to slide shut and seal behind him. The connection was lost the moment he got too close to Thrawn and the Ysalimir, but by then it was too late for the Vornskr and Walten shot the panel, watching it spark to a close as the bloodthirsty creatures yowled in defeat from the other side.

"Cutting it a bit close, aren't you, Inquisitor?" Pyrondi teased, helping him to his feet.

"Yeah well—" he sighed, breathless and trembling a little as he grinned and cupped his knees. "I like to make an entrance?"

His clothes were shredded, new cuts detailing his clothing as blood dripped slowly down his arm and the back of his leg.

"You did well!" Faro praised. "Good job Ezra."

"Thanks!" He smiled, before falling back to his knees with a grunt.

"Ezra!" He heard someone yell.

"Are you okay?"

"I'll be fine," he muttered, "I just need—to—take a minute—" He fell forward into Walten's arms before he could hit the ground, the hard, yet comforting cool and smooth armor brushing against his skin before he felt himself black out.

"Get those wounds wrapped up!" Faro ordered, a sliver of worry showing in her eyes. "Pyrondi! How far out is that signal broadcasting?"

"I'm not sure ma'am? One, maybe two parsecs at best?"

"That's good." She nodded. "Then they're close. This boy has given up so much to keep the rest of us safe, so now it's our turn. We hold our own!" A finger pointed to each survivor as she dished out orders left and right now, her voice the epitome of rationale and command. "Barricade that door, move all wreckage away from the vents, set mines in there if we must, but nothing gets through. Koree, get these wounded ready for transport." She smiled, a fire in her eyes as she looked to the sunrise and cracked her knuckles. "We're getting out of this hellhole everyone, and we're not losing anyone else until we do! Now let's get to work!"
Another Day

Chapter Summary

The Chimera survivors find themselves safe at last in a med-center on the planet Sposia, a planet under the guidance of the Chiss Ascendancy. There, they are finally able to relax and tend to their wounds while a familiar face does everything in his power to make sure the group is well attended to.

Chapter Notes

Posted on: June 9, 2018

Ezra’s eyes flickered open as he saw blue hands coming towards him. The figure was fuzzy, but he thought he could make out two red eyes looking down on him as he felt the weight of his body lifted from the ground.

“Th—Thrawn?”

He managed to let the words slip out, but his eyelids were far too heavy to remain open. He felt cold all over, his head numb, and limbs stiff and unresponsive.

“Get him to the medics!” He heard a voice in the distance say, their words echoing as they faded into a high pitched ringing in his ears.

Ezra shut his eyes and the everything seemed to stop, the commotion in the background silencing in a blink as his mind calmed into a tired lull, and then everything drifted back into darkness.

He remembered missions, dozens upon hundreds of missions. At his side were Zeb and Sabine, an angry droid accompanying them more often than not, as well as some other faces joining the group from time to time. The green Twi’lek woman, her name was Hera, and she was the one who would speak to him in that warm and soothing voice, the motherly tone which was equal parts caring and furious at different memories he thought of involving her. She was their pilot, Kanan was their captain, and Zeb and Sabine were his comrades at arms. Even the droid, he felt, was more than just a simple astromech, but a fierce friend and comrade just like all of the others. They fought together, lived together, and were a family, just as he heard Sabine say in this memory. This was his family.

The dream was warm, comforting, and filled him with the sense of belonging and assurance that he’d so desperately been craving these past few days on Myrkr. As he enjoyed the sweet reveries, he let them consume his heart with peace, but that warm security was short lived, as an icy coldness began creeping into his veins.
Their laughter, their happiness all drifting away as he heard an echo of mechanical breathing and an endless chorus of screams. His memory of the family drifted away like smoke and in its place, there was only the darkness, the void of black nothingness, and that frozen sensation of pain and cold.

A flash of red lit the world in blood, but from the shadows appeared the familiar crazed Zabrak who he’d seen before when he was looking for survivors. He lifted a blade, two sabers of red light appearing from each side. Together with Kanan and a Togruta woman, the four of them were fighting off three figures in black, all who had spinning red blades of their own.

“Does yours do that?” He heard himself ask, his voice an echo of a memory in his own mind.

Flashes of green lightning sparked images of faces, all sinister and angry, their auras like the storm in the sky, dark and full of malice. The first bolt revealed a woman with green skin and gold eyes, her screams full of horror as he watched her body be sliced in two by a flash of red light. The next showed a reptilian man with a lust for blood in his smile, also cut down right in front of him. The third bolt was quicker, but it revealed the final of the figures plummeting to his death from atop a tall pyramid of powerful energy. It was dark for a few long moments after that before the entire network of storm clouds lit up like an exploding star, their light exposing a final creature with jagged pointed teeth and golden eyes. He cackled down at Ezra from above before his face faded away in a booming explosion of thunder, the clouds ablaze with fire and electricity as stars fell from above like rain.

Suddenly he was on the ground, his feet planted firmly as his cheek burned and Kanan fought with the Pau'an creature, the pointy-toothed man still cackling as they fought their back and forth battle with their lightsabers. This figure shifted, his body growing red and horns poking out from the top of his head. Now he was the Zabrak, and Kanan let out a yell as he covered his eyes and readied his lightsaber for the rest of the battle. The Zabrak only enlarged, his entire body becoming sleek and shiny armor as the steady inhale and exhale of robotic breathing echoed through the air. Kanan vanished in a puff of smoke leaving only this tall and menacing figure in his place. The man—no, this was not a man—the monster, turned, his lightsaber already pulsing with red light, and started heading straight for Ezra.

That menacing, unforgettable sound of its breathing sent a chill echoing against every nerve in his body, and Ezra took a step backward, the figure matching his escape step for step. With a gasp, Ezra prepared to fight, a blue lightsaber in his own hand, but it crumbled beneath his touch and left him utterly defenseless. Doing the only sensible thing he could think of, he turned and ran away, the evil man-shaped figure closing in on him before Ezra tripped, landing on the stone ground as the dark lord edged ever closer to where he lay. He lifted his hand, preparing himself for the final blow when the Togruta jumped to his rescue, her two blades of pure white clashing over and over again as the two fought, their skills evenly matched, but only for a short time. She was being pushed into a corner, the robotic man slowly overpowering her as their fight progressed.

He shouted her name.

“Ahsoka!”

But, she only pushed him away, sealing herself inside as the pyramid started to crumble around them, the stars above cracking as the sky itself started to fall from the air. After that, it was just a blur of pain and regret, a memory of healing and poor decisions made.

Kanan was blinded, the holocron of the Sith teaching Ezra new and dark ways to end his enemies. He was still with his family, with the Ghost, and with Phoenix Squadron, but for some reason he
felt more alone and more angry than he’d ever felt before. The frustration of years gnawing away at him as he grew in age and also in power. He used this new power in his missions.

Ezra saw stormtroopers, hundreds of them, all seemingly cut down by his crew, by his own hands. One after another they fell and Ezra watched it all on a loop in his own mind. A saber of green now bled into his eyes, the light forming an ominous glow around him as he ran through the halls, cutting down soldier after soldier, only occasionally switching to fire rounds out of a blaster that he kept at his side. One by one the troopers fell, warehouses imploding, ships being torn from the sky in balls of fire… and it was all his fault.

At last the final trooper appeared and he took off his helmet to reveal two icy blue eyes and a terrified expression on his paled face. Behind him stood two more troopers, Faro, Pyrondi, and all the rest from the Chimera, but Ezra did not stop running towards them, charging at them as his green saber hummed in his ears. He lifted the weapon, the anger still with him, and he had just enough time to see the glow of green reflected in Walten’s eyes, before he cut them all down without a second thought.

“No!” Ezra shouted, shooting up from the bed. He felt the chills melt away into memory, his breath still shaky and sweat sticking to his forehead. A nightmare, or at least, he hoped that’s all it was.

He placed a hand to his face and pulled it away, clammy and cold to the touch, but adorned in a skin-tight sleeve of black mesh and knitted spandex. He looked down only to see the bodysuit trailing all the way down to his feet, trims of rust-red detail and strange symbols marking the uniform.

He lifted his knees over the side of the bed and let his feet touch the floor before glancing around to his surroundings. It was a small room, quiet, dimly lit, and decorated with strange technology the likes of which he’d never seen. Oddly enough, there seemed to be a distinct similarity to a few of the devices that made Ezra think that he was in some sort of medical facility. The tubes of dark red blood off to the side and the two wires stuck to his chest only confirmed this fact for him. He peeled them off, watching in astonishment as two small ripples of red light pulsed across the garment as soon as he removed the stickers.

“Whoa?” He gasped, rubbing his hand along the chest of his suit before rising to his feet and taking a few stumbling steps away from the bed. He was quick to regain his sense of balance, grateful that the gravity and air in the room seemingly matched his biology. It was just his own internal settings that seemed to be lagging. How long had he been asleep? Where even was he? Was this a ship? Was he still on Myrkr?

Ezra searched the dim room and saw only faint symbols painted on the walls, a language he assumed, but it was a strange one that he didn’t seem to recognize in the slightest. Was it a logo? A series of numbers? He couldn’t be sure. Searching for a vent or a door of some kind, he knew that he was going to find a way out of here, one way or another.

So far, Ezra didn’t feel anything dangerous in the air, the Force calm in his own mind, but he still had no clue where he was, so he wasn’t taking any chances. He inched over to walls cautiously, examining one after another, when his hand brushed against one of the symbols and it glowed brighter as two hidden panels slid open to reveal a bright blast of sunlight.
"Gah!"

He blocked it with his hand, adjusting to the burst of light as he poked a head out and looked down the hall only to find two figures in the distance, their skin blue and dark hair. They wore elaborate red uniforms and were conversing in a language that was just as foreign as the writing on the walls, but stopped immediately when they noticed him, their bright red eyes burning into his even from the distance they stood down the hall.

Ezra gasped, but took a breath to ease his nerves and stepped out to meet them face to face. Something inside told him not to fight them, and until he knew otherwise, he would listen to that instinct for as long as it allowed.

"Hey?" He waved.

The two only stopped and looked at one another before staring back at him, their eyes red as laser bolts.

"You guys are Chiss, aren't you?" He asked calmly. "Like Thrawn? Did you rescue us?"

They shot another glance at each other, something calm and inquisitive about their expressions. The woman turned back to Ezra, immediately starting to examine his shoulder and head with her large blue hands. Her fingers were strong and cold as they directed Ezra's head around through the tight grasp she held on his cheeks.

Meanwhile, the male only folded his arms behind him and said something in another language, his voice deeply calm, though the only words Ezra was able to make out of the man’s statement were "Myrkr" and Thrawn's longer name he couldn't really pronounce.

He hummed unsurely, the woman releasing her grip as he rubbed at his sore face. "Yeah, so I don't really know what's going o—"

"Ezra!"

That voice he did recognize, turning just in time to receive a tight hug from Pyrondi, Birt, and then Koree, before all four of them lost their balance and fell over into the wall. Gunther, Walten, and another dark skinned man standing at a distance and waving with small but equally relieved smiles. Everyone was out of their regular uniforms, all dressed similarly in the black bodysuit with red lining which Ezra also wore. It was a surprise to see them out of their signature clothing, but aside the one man next to Walten, Ezra didn’t have any trouble remembering who was who.

He laughed sorely and found his balance as they broke apart and stood back to their feet.

"Guys! It’s good to see you too! Are you all okay?"

"Sharp as a bes'bev!" Gunther said, pounding on fist on his chest to prove it as the red ripples echoed his suit.

What are these things made of? Ezra wondered in quiet awe.

His thought was broken when Birt wrapped him in a headlock and vigorously shagged his hair, his voice booming through the otherwise quiet Chiss hospital.

"Welcome back to the world of the living, buddy!"

The two Chiss medics seemed to chastise them for being too rough or making too much noise, Ezra
couldn’t be sure as to which.

“So, do any of you know where we are? Or maybe how to talk with the locals?”

He pointed to the Chiss, earning tired glares from the two as the medical woman lightly swatted his finger off to the side, ordering the group to take seats in what appeared to be some sort of waiting room area a few feet away. The medics appeared to calm down as soon as everyone was seated, and immediately turned back to their more pressing work. They were visibly unhappy that Ezra was up and about, but obviously deeming him healthy enough to continue to do so so long as they hovered at a fairly close proximity to where the humans huddled together.

“Is it just me or are they watching us?” Ezra pointed.

“Haven’t let us out of their sight since we got here,” Walten answered, his sigh tired but a small smirk revealing the situation to be at least comfortably safe for the time being. *If the stormtrooper wasn’t on edge, maybe there wasn’t anything to worry about after all?*

“So did anyone catch anything they just said?”

“We’re pretty much clueless?” Koree said with a shrug. “Seems the Chiss speak many languages, but none that any of us seem to know, unless of course you speak Sy Bisti or Minnisiat?”

Ezra shook his head.

Birt snorted.

“Yeah, us either.”

Pyrondi pointed down the hall and spoke up for the first time since they’d sat down. For some reason, she looked grayer than she had before, some strange aura of despair clinging to her presence that made him feel suddenly depressed himself.

“Commodore Faro and Commander Vanto are speaking with the head of the hospital right now,” she said. “Thankfully Commander Vanto was here and he seems to be able to understand the aliens.”

“Uh, this is their planet—” Birt said abruptly, a finger pointing to the air. “So wouldn’t that make us the aliens here?”

“Wait, wait, wait, wait wait…” Ezra stopped, his brain spinning. “By Vanto do you mean Eli Vanto? That’s Thrawn’s old Academy friend, isn’t it?”

Pyrondi chuckled, a bit of light returning to the Force surrounding her mood.

“Good to know the Grand Admiral’s memory of him stayed in tact.” Her voice was teasing at something as she rolled her eyes and released a microscopic grin. “We must be the luckiest people in the galaxy to have run into him all the way out here.”

“Yeah?” Gunther scoffed dryly. “Lucky!”

“So, wait, what exactly happened? Are we still on Myrkr? Where are we?”

“No.” Walten explained. “After you passed out, we stayed sealed up in that hangar for another four hours before Commander Vanto’s ship found our beacon, saw the fire, and rescued us.”

“What did they call this place again?” The other trooper wondered. “Sposia?”
“I think so?” he replied. “Anyways kid, you were pretty scratched up.”

"We gave you some blood!" Koree exclaimed, holding her arm out to him to reveal where they would have placed the needle if she could lift the skin-tight sleeves of their hospital attire. The mesh seemed to be fused to their skin, and suddenly Ezra was uneasy not knowing how to free himself from his new clothes. He found solace in Koree's voice, her attitude just as snarky and snide as ever as she gave him a grin and gave up on trying to roll up her sleeve. "No thanks necessary kid! You're welcome!"

“Yeah, but you weren't like dying or anything. We think that you were really just exhausted after all that crashing, and fighting, and falling from the sky, and the scratches—"

Pyrondi silenced him with a wave of her hand.

“What Birt means to say is that you’ve been in and out of consciousness for the last two days. Apparently some of the Chiss medicine they used on you can cause the body to shut down in order to heal properly. According to Commander Vanto, it also causes raised heart elevation and brain activity which causes nightmares in a human body. He claims from experience that the stuff is stronger than bacta, so a few bad dreams are almost worth it in the long run.”

Ezra would beg to differ... Though suddenly the strange sequence of dreams he’d just had were starting to make a lot more sense. Perhaps none of it was a memory after all? The thought filled Ezra with a huge sense of relief and he let out a breath just to compliment the enormous weight of guilt that had been lifted from his shoulders.

“So, how are you feeling?”

“Good?” Ezra said slowly, testing his limbs as he cracked unused muscles and joints back into place. “Really good actually!”

It was the truth. There was hardly even any soreness to his muscles, no aching from his shoulder, or even any stinging from the cuts the Vornskr made. Maybe there was something to Chiss medicine after all?

“But wait, what about Thrawn? How is he? Did he—”

“Easy there kid!” Walten urged. “The Grand Admiral is fine. He—yeuch!” He gagged, stopping mid sentence with an upturned lip which prompted a concerned head tilt from Ezra in return.

Koree only chuckled, snorting lightly as she tried to hold it in.

“What?”

“After you blacked out, that little lizard thing of Thrawn’s. Jorj, was it?”

He nodded, sticking to the lie that he’d half forgotten by this point.

“Well it—” She stifled a chuckle, unable to let the words out without giggling some more. “It—ha ha—”

“It puked up leaves all over the Grand Admiral!” Birt finished as he and Koree burst into laughter simultaneously.

The Chiss medics glared in their direction, prompting the two to silence quickly, but with wide smiles still permanently plastered on their faces.
“It made Gunther here throw up!”

“Shut up Koree!” He spat, his cheeks growing red.

Ezra’s face was visibly confused and his stomach a little more than nauseated.

“And why is this important to my recap?” He asked, the look on his face now matching the feeling he felt swirling around in his gut.

Walten was frozen in a state of disgust, Birt and Koree still rolling with laughter, and Gunther trying his hardest not to gag. Since Urick wasn’t speaking up, Pyrondi figured she would need to be the one to tell Ezra all she knew about the subject.

“It turns out those trees the lizards live in have special leaves full of healing sap or something? So basically, when it ralphed all over the Grand Admiral—”

“Do you have to say it like that?” Gunther gagged, his throat making an unsettling gurgling noise that made Ezra scoot a few inches away from him.

Pyrondi lifted a brow.

“Essentially it kept the Grand Admiral alive long enough for the Chiss ship to find us and get us all on board. It might have helped more, but we couldn’t just leave him lying there with lizard spit all over him, so we cleaned him up. We didn’t know it had healing properties until Commander Vanto told us about it. The Chiss apparently use exports from Myrkr to make some of their medicines.”

Gunther shuddered.

“Of course, that didn’t stop the little lizard from doing the same thing to you,” Walten mocked, a smile creeping in as he nudged Ezra with his elbow.

Ezra made a face.

“Really?”

They all laughed, not really answering the question, but in truth, Ezra liked it better that way.

“Anyway…” He clapped, changing the subject before he was forced to learn anymore about it. “What have you learned from the Chiss while I was under?”

“Truthfully, we’ve been a little hesitant to explore the planet without approval from the Commander first. We don’t know much about the—” Walten paused when he met eyes with the two medics. “—Locals?” He swallowed and turned his icy stare back to Ezra. “So, we aren’t really sure how their customs go in regards to strangers they scooped off of Myrkr.”

“Judging by our babysitters,” Gunther said with a flick of his head. “I don’t think it’s a planet we have free access to go explore on our own.”

“Plus they’ve been keeping us here in the hospital,” Koree added. “Mostly putting us through physical exams and making sure none of us go into shock or something? Though they could just be keeping an eye on us until they know more from the Grand Admiral.”

“If we understood them—” the dark skinned man continued. “Then we’d probably be doing mental exams here too.”

“So far the only one to tell us anything useful has been the Commander.”
“And we haven’t been able to catch him since yesterday,” Birt added.

“Seems he’s pretty important around here, and thanks to us, they have him running all over the place trying to sort things out with the other Chiss leaders on Sposia.”

“I’m sorry, but which trooper are you again?” Ezra pointed, no longer able to avoid not knowing the one man among their otherwise familiar group.

“Urick Danash.” He introduced, a polite handshake offered and accepted by Ezra as he stood to catch the hand.

"Nice to officially meet you."

“Yeah. Sorry for being such a jerk to you before. It’s just a lot to deal with all at once, you know?”

“Yeah...” Ezra nodded, understanding completely the types of stress they’ve all had to deal with these past few days. “But wait, weren’t there three of you?” He asked, looking around only to see the two Chiss medics and no one else in the entire area for as far as his eyes could reach. “The shouty angry one? C1-10—or wait no, that's not right...”

"T9-454,” Urick said slowly.

"Oh, right!” He laughed. "I'm still impressed how you guys can remember all those letters and numbers. So, where is T9-454? Is he with the Commodore?"

They all seemed to tense at the question.

“What?” Ezra felt a knot growing in his stomach, unsure if it was a feeling of his own or a side effect to the way he could feel everyone's emotions with the Force.

“Along with Faro and the Grand Admiral—” Walten said, looking to the floor. “I’m afraid that we’re all that’s left of the ISD Chimera.”

Everyone looked to one another with complex emotions, sitting in silence as they took a moment to realize their situation. Pyrondi hugged her knees tighter, silencing again as that mournful aura spread from her to everybody else in the lobby. After that, no one really had anything else they could say, so they simply sat there in silence and tried to come to grips with all that had happened. At this point, it was really all they could think to do.

“An accident?” Faro said, her eyes visibly exhausted, but spirit just as determined as ever. Eli recognized her resolve and was glad to see it hadn’t changed after all these years, especially after all that she and the crew had been through on the planet Myrkr. She repeated herself again, a small unimpressed chuckle slipping out through her teeth. "You found the Chimera by accident?"

“It would seem so, ma’am,” Eli replied softly. “See, when General Prard'ras'kleoni and Captain Brast'alshi'barku of the Expansionary Defense Fleet noticed your signal beacon, they weren’t looking to come and make a rescue. That’s not really something the Chiss do, you see?”

“Yet they did?” Faro argued. “And now we’re being treated like suspects and being held hostage in this hospital, but why?”
"Those are some pretty strong words Command—or sorry, I mean—Commodore," he said, his eyes flicking nervously to the silver haired Chiss woman who sat calmly at a desk to their left.

She wore a long gown of red, the rust color matching everything else in the medical facility, but her collar and emblems adorned in a shimmering gold. He knew better than to disrespect a Chiss, much less one of the four Aristocra of the high council. Luckily, as far as leaders go, she was the most patient as well as the most forgiving when it came to visitors from off-world. Still, Eli would rather not test that patience to see just how far her hospitality would allow.

"The Chiss aren’t too keen on uninvited visitors, so they just feel more comfortable keeping an eye on you. For now though—" he continued. “Doctor Gras’vee’Sabosen has agreed to let you all remain on Sposia while the remainder of your crew is healing.”

“How generous of her,” Faro said, her voice appearing sincere, but Eli knew better.

Luckily the rest of the Chiss were about as clueless as Thrawn once was when it came down to understanding human mannerisms. They would catch on to them eventually though, and quickly, Eli knew. He would have to remember to give the other humans a crash course in Chiss culture as soon as he had the chance. The Chiss were a proud people and didn't take kindly to insult, which incidentally was about 40% of what all human interaction was made of.

“This Defense Fleet you spoke of—” Faro asked suddenly. “If they aren’t one to go looking for potential trouble, why did they veer off course to Myrkr and agree to rescue us then?”

“Well, I recognized the unique radio waves emitted from the Imperial technology and was able to convince them to take the patrol closer to the planet and have a look.” He ran his hands through his wavy brown hair and let a small smile sneak out. “Though, I never would have imagined that we’d find you all shipwrecked there of all places. What exactly happened, Commodore?”

“Lothal happened, Commander,” she replied, her voice tight. “I still can’t believe what has happened to the Chimera, but I can tell you this—” She pointed a finger up at him. “All of our problems can be linked back to that vindictive little snake, Arihnda Pryce!”

“Pryce?” Eli repeated. “Not surprising. I’m sure Thrawn must’ve loved that? So, what did she do this time?”

“Aside calling the 7th fleet out to Lothal, using Thrawn to promote her ploys, and utterly demolishing years of Imperial work on the planet, she let her petty impatience get the better of her and in her attempts to kill one battalion of rebels, she blew up the Grand Admiral’s entire fuel supply for his new TIE Defender project.”

_Well, didn't that sound familiar?_

Eli’s brow lifted.

_Wait, so was designing new Imperial ships something Thrawn was doing nowadays?_

“I was with him when we learned of her betrayal,” Faro continued. "The Grand Admiral was livid and so was I! Of all the dirty—”

Eli quickly cleared his throat, cutting her off.

“Perhaps, you can tell me more about this on the way back to the crew?” He motioned. “We shouldn’t waste anymore of the Aristocra’s time playing catch-up in her office.”
“Very well,” she said with a nod. “Please let her know that I do thank her people for their aid to the wounded.”

_Her people?_ That was an insult to the Chiss if ever Eli had heard one. Luckily the Aristocra didn’t appear to take any offense and instead continued her lenient passiveness as she rose calmly from her chair to reveal her towering height over both Faro and Eli himself. He made a face at Faro, but turned to the older Chiss woman with a completely resolved look as he bowed and snapped at Karyn to do the same.

“Bin’vah vah sir veo hircici,” Eli said, his voice coming out with a far different sound to it than the thick Wild Space accent that Commodore Faro knew him for. He spoke in that Cheunh language again, saying something impressively long until lowering his head in a sign of further respect.

The woman nodded and replied to him, saying something which Faro didn't understand, but whatever it was, it seemed to make Eli smile for a brief moment before he lifted his head. He stood tall once more and Faro copied the motion before the Chiss leader mirrored their farewell and with a gesture, pointed them towards the door.

Once outside, Eli let out a sigh of relief. _Thank the stars they had to go to the hospital before meeting any of the other Aristocra, or the high council!_ He paused, replaying the words in his head and instantly glad he hadn't said them out-loud. It was awful that they had wounded, and even more tragic that so many had died, but Eli still had to count his blessings that Sposia was the friendliest planet owned by the Chiss Ascendancy.

Faro took a step and stretched as the two started walking back they way they came. She let out a groan, her voice cracking alongside the uncomfortable sounding pops made by her shoulders and elbow joints.

“You doing alright?” Eli asked, that drawl returning again once his tone turned sympathetic.

“Nothing a few months in hypersleep wouldn’t cure?”

He chuckled.

“So, the Aristocra has agreed to let you and the crew live in the dormitories down the road until Grand Admiral Thrawn regains consciousness. It’s a little more comfortable than the beds are here, and I’m sure you’re all probably sick of the hospital by now, right?”

“On the contrary, this is a vast upgrade from Myrkr, Commander Vanto.”

He scratched along his chin where the impressively kempt beard now showed along his face. It was a look that the once baby-faced Commander could pull off exceedingly well, Faro noted.

“About that—” He blushed a little. “It’s been a while since anyone’s called me _Commander._”

“Oh? Do the Chiss not respect your rank?”

“It’s not that! No!” He motioned quickly, nervously, as if she were saying something illegal. With a quick chuckle, he scratched his ear and felt his face warming. “No, see, I’m actually a Captain now, so I—”

“A Captain, sir?” She blinked. “I was unaware of your promotion. When did the Empire—”

The hesitant addition of the word “sir” was a nice touch, but one Eli now found to be unnecessary. He had no real power in the Chiss Ascendancy, _not really_, so calling him sir when their were all
these amazing officers and Chiss leaders around seemed a bit insulting to their ranks. Not that he really cared about the glory of rank anymore, not after the fights he’d been through. He shook the haunting thought away before Faro could see it on his face.

“Oh, it’s not from the Empire!” He interrupted quickly. “I meant with the Ascendancy. So far as the Empire’s concerned, I’m still running an errand out in Unknown Space for Thrawn. I doubt they even realize I’ve been gone.”

“Is that so?”

He shrugged.

“I’ve been doing a little better on my own than I was serving under the Empire.” He smirked. “Their promotions were harder to earn, but a lot easier to get when the people in charge aren’t actively trying to kick you back down the proverbial ladder.”

She lifted a brow.

He noticed the change in her mood and rubbed at his hair again, worried he might be speaking too freely since Faro was still an Imperial officer and one who was actively loyal to the Empire at that. It had been so long since he’d spoken fluent Basic with somebody that he worried he might be speaking more bluntly than he would have in the past.

“I just mean to say that it’s been pretty nice out here, that’s all.”

"Well for what it's worth, we've missed you aboard the Chimera," Faro said primly. “Now tell me, what exactly are you doing all the way out here, Captain Vanto?”

He chuckled to himself.

“I’m actually far more interested in what happened on Lothal, ma'am.” There was a gleam in his eyes as he looked down at her and added, “Oh, and don’t spare any detail, no matter how obscure you might think it is. I’d like to hear it all if you don't mind.”

She stared at him, an overwhelming feeling like she were suddenly talking with the Grand Admiral. Had Eli Vanto really grown so much as to emit such a commanding presence about himself? She pushed the thought away and obeyed his request, telling him everything that she knew right down to the very last detail.

"Well Captain, let me begin by telling you about Reklam Station and the Yarma system."

They had just finished their talk when the two turned the corner and saw the group of humans standing out among all the other Chiss in the lobby.

“Commodore!”

The huddle stood, the two Chiss making silent conversation in Eli’s direction as he shrugged and made a few explanatory gestures back at them. He would have to remember to explain anything that the crew might have done to insult them later, Eli thought.

“At ease!” Faro waved. “Ah, young Inquisitor, it is good to see you up and about.”
Inquisitor? Eli thought suddenly. The kid sure didn't look like any Inquisitor that Eli had ever heard of? Not that he knew much about the organization aside what he'd heard from rumors back in the Empire.

Ezra smiled nervously, noticing that even Commodore Faro had given up her Imperial uniform for one of the black suits. Beside her stood a tan-skinned man with dark wavy hair and a short beard. Considering they seemed to be the only humans here, he could only assume that the man was the famed Eli Vanto he'd been hearing about from Thrawn and everyone else aboard the Chimera.

Eli, still trying to wrap his head around the whole "Inquisitor" thing, put on his best and most formal smile and held out a hand to the kid.

“It’s Ezra isn’t it?” He asked. “I hear you had a big part in saving Thrawn’s life. Thank you for that.”

Ezra took his hand and smiled.

“I couldn’t have done anything without Thrawn helping me the whole time.” He looked back. “And these guys too of course!”

"Of course." He repeated with a grin, looking to the small group as he stood tall, that presence of command flooding over his aura again as he cleared his throat and prepared his speech. “As some of you may or may not know, I am Captain Eli Vanto of the Chiss Ascendancy’s Expansionary Defense Fleet, formerly a Commander in the Imperial Navy under the leadership of Grand Admiral Thrawn, and Liaison between the two organizations.”

The rest of the group listened, only Pyrondi daring to wave a little to him from the front of the crowd. He smirked, acknowledging the familiar face before that stern facade of leadership returned.

“The leader of Sposia has agreed to let all of you stay here until we can work out an arrangement and send you home. Until then, the head of the hospital wants me to relocate you from her hospital unless you’re suffering from major injuries.” He smiled a little and said something in another language as two Chiss medics who had been watching them stepped forward. “There’s a few dormitories a short ways away from the hospital where you’ll be staying. A few of the Sabosen House have agreed to take you there in a shuttle so you all can get some much deserved rest.”

“Alright!” Faro pointed. “You heard him. Everybody pile out.” She turned back to Vanto. “You will alert us when the Grand Admiral is taking visitors, right?”

“Absolutely.”

“Very good then.”

They all started walking, that is until the medic grabbed Ezra by the arm and started yelling at him in their alien language again.

“Uh…? Captain Vanto?”

“Veo limn’ah ch’at cart to tsuntahn?” Eli asked.

The Chiss pointed and then motioned back towards the room Ezra had just come from.

"Tah bapun ch’at csarcah cseah s nuvci rot’ar sir ttah g’enraszu’ibi, Vit’ecin Vanto.”
“Oh... I see!” He mused. “Sorry Ezra, but since you just woke up, the medics would like to hold you here overnight for further observations. They can release you in the morning when they know you’re all healed up. You’ll be able to join everybody at the dorms then.”

“Oh?” His voice held a lingering disappointment, and shrugged with a sort of distant glaze in his eyes. “Alright then, I guess?”

"Are you sure it's alright to separate, Captain?"

“Don’t you worry, Commodore Faro,” Eli stated back at the group. “I’ll take good care of this one while he’s here.”

“I'll hold you to that, Captain Vanto,” she said, turning to leave with the rest of the humans. “I leave him in your care.”

“We’ll see you later then, Ezra!”

“We’ll save you a good spot in the dorm!”

He smiled and waved as they disappeared out of sight and down the hall.

“Uh, Captain Vanto—”

“Please,” he chuckled. “Call me Eli. I feel like only the Chiss should be addressing my rank since they’re the ones who gave it to me.”

“Oh, okay? Eli? So, how can you understand everyone here? What language are they speaking anyway?”

“It’s Cheunh,” he said. "But, I started out speaking in Sy Bisti with them until I learned enough of their core language to get by.” He smiled at a memory and pointed out one of the windows at a nearby building. “I actually learned it right over in that building there. Believe it or not, they had me taking a few classes over here until I got more comfortable with Chiss culture. Sposia is home to the Sabosen House, a Chiss branch of scholars. Nearly every person on this planet has some sort of specialty in Health, Education, or the Justice System.”

“Really?” He awed. “Everyone?” Ezra stared out the window at the planet, seeing it for the first time. It was covered in lush green grass, swirling buildings and sleek architecture decorating the surface the likes of which Ezra had never even imagined possible. It was beautiful. Definitely a step up from Myrkr.

“Well...” Eli continued. “It’s a pretty small planet in comparison to some under Galactic standards. There are about thirty small worlds all around this part of the Unknown Regions that belong to the Chiss Ascendancy.”

“And every planet belongs to some family? Which one is Thrawn from?”

“No no!” He waved, his voice amused. “There are four ruling families in the Chiss Ascendancy right now. Sometimes there are more, sometimes less, but these houses all work together to keep order and safety to these thirty planets and all the remaining houses and families. See, Thrawn’s family comes from the house of Mitth, over on a planet called Copero, but he moved over to one of those four main houses to work closer with the expansion military under the Nuruodo family which is on Naporar.”

“I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about?”
Eli laughed.

“Yeah, sorry. It takes a little while to get the hang of the rules and culture. It's a lot different than it is back home, take it from me. Just know that you and your friends are welcome on this world thanks to your rescue of the Grand Admiral. They look after their own more than any other species I’ve met, and since Thrawn is part of a ruling house and an important military family, they are definitely going to treat you well so long as they’re housing you here on Sposia.”

“Oh? I guess that’s good then?”

Eli grinned.

“You know, it might come as a bit of a surprise, but Thrawn’s actually an old friend of mine. I wouldn’t be here today without his help. Kind of like you in a way, I suppose?”

“You went to school together—” Ezra laughed. “I know. He told me.”

“Oh?” He blinked. “Really?”

“At least what he could remember?” Ezra shrugged. “He and I got hit pretty hard when we crashed, so we’re kind of trying to play catch up with our memories. We’ve remembered a few things though, most of them from a couple months ago and back, but you were one of the first people Thrawn seemed to recall when I was asking about speaking Basic. When he first woke up, he actually started yelling at me in what I’m guessing was Cheunh before he tried to strangle me, and then we—"

“He tried to strangle you!?” Eli blurted, his voice loud enough to earn him looks from the passing medic. He pulled Ezra closer to the window and in a much quieter voice asked, "What do you mean he tried to strangle you?"

“He kind of attacked me when he first woke up, but he apologized for it right after, so it was no big deal. He said he was scared.”

Thrawn? Scared? No, that didn’t quite sound right to Eli at all.

"It only took him a few hours before he was speaking fluently and building all sorts of useful contraptions for us to use." Ezra smirked and looked back out the window at the planet, his voice revealing just how impressed he was with the Chiss. "Thrawn's a pretty smart guy isn’t he?"

Eli joined his gaze, his voice in even more in awe than Ezra's. A small smile was now forming as he thought back to all their years together in the Empire, and also to all the trouble that big brain of Thrawn's had gotten the two of them into over the years.

“One of the smartest that I know..."
The female nurse came up and motioned Ezra back to his room, speaking at him in Cheunh.

“What is she saying?” Ezra asked.

“She says they want to run a few tests on you. It shouldn’t take too long.”

“Will it hurt?” He swallowed.

Eli smirked.

“From what I heard, you took on an entire pack of wild Vornskr in the dark, all alone, and without a weapon, but now you’re telling me that you’re afraid of a few little pin pricks and needles?”

“There’s going to be needles?!”

“I’m just joking with you!” Eli smirked. “Don’t worry, the Sabosen medical staff are some of the best doctors in the galaxy. You’ll be alright.”

“Y-yeah...” He took a breath. “Pyrondi said you recommended their medicine personally.”

His smile softened as he tapped gingerly at the barely visible scar that he wore next to his right eye.

“You could say that?”

Ezra frowned.
“What happened?”

The Chiss medic sounded more impatient now as Eli urged him inside a little more fervently and gave the young man a final pat on the back.

“That’ll have to be a story for another time. Don’t worry, kid, you’re safe with the Sabosen staff. If you’re really some sort of Inquisitor, I’m sure a checkup is something you’re well-capable of handling.”

"Yeah..." He swallowed. "Between you and me, Eli, I don't think I'm really an Inquisitor."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, but Thrawn would know for sure, since he hired me as one of his special assassins and all."

"I see."

Eli didn't see, but he had bigger thoughts weighing on his mind than to focus on the obvious plot holes in this strange young man's story.

"I'll do my best, I guess?" The boy said, his voice lighthearted, but his shoulders tensed with the growing uncertainty.

“Right. Now if you'll kindly excuse me, there are a few things elsewhere that require my attention. I’ll come by to check on you later, but try to get a little rest until then, okay? That Chiss healing serum does a number on the mind. I imagine you could use a little more time to sleep.”

“You’re telling me!” He chuckled dryly. “Thanks for all the help, Eli.”

“Don’t mention it.” He nodded. "Now get in there before this nurse has to give you sedatives. Not a pleasant experience, let me tell you..."

Ezra gulped but did as he was told while Eli smirked once and turned to head down the hall. He was a nice kid, but that didn't stop Eli from having his suspicions about him. Something about this whole mess wasn't adding up correctly, and there was really only one way to learn the truth. Luckily, Eli knew just where he could go to find his answers.

Thrawn was being held in a private room three floors up. It was the wing of the hospital where they kept very high class patients who were renowned members within the Chiss Ascendancy. The guards at the start of the hall gave him a slight nod as Eli passed. Luckily, most everyone knew who he was and knew his unique connections to Thrawn. *He was definitely in the right place.*

“How is he?” Eli asked the head medic in Cheunh.

The man wore a far more intricate ensemble of rust-colored robes. They weren’t as fancy as the ones the Aristocra wore, but they were a vast improvement to the medics on the first two floors. He pointed to a chart in his hand and listed back everything that was wrong with the injured Chiss leader before finally mentioning to Eli that he was expected to make a full recovery given time to rest and heal his wounds.

“The kid mentioned some memory loss—” Eli added. “Will that heal properly as well?”
The doctor made a face, his blue-black brows furrowing slightly. Apparently the brain was just as tricky to heal for the Chiss as it was for humans. They had a few tests they could run, but only time would tell for sure.

“Thank you.” Eli bowed. “May I go in and see him?”

The nervousness in his voice didn’t translate to Cheunh, so at least the head of staff wouldn’t pick up on that.

With a thoughtful glare, the doctor finally nodded and motioned at one of the nurses to give Eli the access codes to get inside. As he took a step, the doctor placed a firm hand on his shoulder. It was a nonverbal warning which Eli knew all too well.

“Just a short visit...” He nodded. “I understand.”

The doctor released him and with that Eli placed his hand on the symbol, the seal glowing a dazzling bronze color before the door panels lifted and he escaped inside.

It was quiet.

He looked around the grand room, certainly flashy and far roomier than it probably needed to be. Thrawn never was one to request such gaudy living quarters, but somehow or another, he always wound up earning one, both here and back with the Empire. Given his status to the Ascendancy, and his ties to certain "high class" individuals, it was no wonder they put him here, but Eli couldn’t help but be curious as to what sort of room one of the Aristocra or Admiral Ar’alani might have if they were ever admitted here?

Everything in Thrawn’s room was dipped in Bronze, the color that Eli now recognized as the signature pigment of the House Nuruodo. Of course, the nurses did add a few Grey and Burgundy trimmings to keep faith to his birth family, but everything else in the room shinned like sleek credits.

*Just the kind of attention to detail that Eli would expect for such a high ranking Chiss.*

“Grrrrlllll...”

He jumped a little when he saw the Ysalamir clinging to a small potted Olbio sapling that they’d brought in as a special import just for it. He was glad Thrawn managed to make friends with a creature so useful. If it hadn’t tried to heal him with those leaves, Thrawn might not have lasted long enough to get medical help aboard General Prard'ras'kleoni’s ship, least of all make it back to Sposia for the real attention he needed.

Eli scratched under the lizard's chin, earning a happy trill from the little creature before he turned and walked over to the other end of the room. Thrawn still lay on the bed unconscious in his comfortable looking bed, *but peacefully so,* as he was now in stable condition and resting passively.

Eli let his eyes look over him for the first time since he’d picked him off of Myrkr, the dirt and bruises now gone from his face thanks to the Chiss medicine, but a few scratches and cuts were still trying to catch up with the rest of the healing process. The marks were still red from old blood, making Eli remember the first time he’d ever seen Thrawn bleed. It seemed like a lifetime ago that they had both been attacked at the Academy. So much had happened since then.

Thrawn’s blue skin looked lighter, his hair shorter, and his face somewhat older than it was when they first met. Eli could tell by the frown lines that were barely visible on his peacefully sleeping face that the Empire has been making him worry, making him overthink things, *a lot by the looks*
of it. He must have had that displeased frowning look on his face 24/7 to have the creases show even when he was so tranquilly still.

“I’m sorry this happened to you,” Eli whispered. “I wonder if I might have been able to make a difference if I were there with you.” He chuckled at the thought and shook his head. “Probably not...”

There was only silence as the steady rise and fall of his breathing chest replied to Eli’s words.

“Faro told me that you’ve been hunting Rebels. Told me that you’ve been really effective at your job up until the Lothal accident.” Eli looked to the corner. “Some of the things you’ve been doing, well— they don’t quite sound like you, Thrawn, but I just—” He paused. “Look, I know you’re having trouble remembering, but I’m not going to believe it until I hear it from you.”

Eli snorted. He wasn't sure if Thrawn could hear him speaking or not, so he decided to just openly speak his mind.

“You had better get better soon you big blue son of a bitch because I still need you to help me think straight.”

He looked to the device in his own hand and let his brows furrow.

*When a man wakes up from the brink of death and asks you for a favor, you do it no matter what it is.* Eli thought.

Back on Myrkr, Thrawn had gasped back to life, gripping Eli’s wrist so hard that he still had bruises from the fingerprints he left behind. Using what little remained of his conscious mind, Thrawn asked Eli for a single favor, and since he was speaking in Cheunh, Eli was positive that Thrawn had no idea who he was actually talking to. He half expected it to be unintelligible nonsense, but even on death's door, Thrawn still managed to keep his mind in tact. As such, Eli had listened to the orders given as though they were the most important words in the galaxy, and through the breathless whispers that was Thrawn’s demands, he was able to make sure the task was completed, whatever it might be.

The request was for the cracked datapad which Eli now held in his hand. Luckily, he knew right where to find it, something that was very possibly a task that only someone like Eli could really do. *Perhaps Thrawn had known it was him standing there after all?* This was Thrawn's personal, private journal, the memoir of his days that he kept to sort out his own raging thoughts. He'd given some of it to Eli upon his departure to the Unknown Regions, but this had to be the rest of it — *probably more if Thrawn had kept up with it in their time apart.* *Something that Eli knew was most likely the case.*

He placed the device on the counter beside Thrawn and winced as he stood up, preparing to leave when a sudden grab made him stop.

Eli froze. The hand wasn't as tight as it was on Myrkr, and there was no sign of him jumping up to *strangle* him as the kid had mentioned. No, Eli wasn't really worried about that, especially not when he felt a sudden burst of joy explode inside him when he turned and heard the Chiss say a single word.

“Eli?” Thrawn’s tired voice asked, his eyes opening slowly to see the shape of his human friend hovering above his bedside.

*He was most assuredly Eli,* Thrawn knew. It was certainly the same bronze-skinned human man
with dark brown hair and copper-colored eyes, just the same as Thrawn remembered. Only, this man’s face had grown more defined with his age, a new scar faintly showing next to his right brow, hair surrounding his jaw in a beard that was blatantly against Imperial regulations, and the short wavy locks of hair which he once recalled, were now long waves that brushed against the back of his neck.

“Your hair is longer...”

Eli laughed.

“Yeah? Well yours is shorter!”

Thrawn moved like he had laughed, but the sound was so quiet, Eli hadn’t really heard it.

His eyes were different, dulled maybe, but certainly not as bright as they once were.

*What in the stars had the Empire been doing to him while he had been away?* Eli thought angrily.

“You feeling any better?” He asked calmly, trying to divert his attention to something else before Thrawn picked up on his agitation.

“Yes.”

It was a single, simple word reply that made the rage boil back into Eli’s face.

Thrawn didn’t seem to notice, his eyes fighting to fully wake up as his tired tone kept trying to let the words form at his lips.

“And the crew?” He asked weakly.

“All safe and accounted for,” Eli waved. “Faro told me what happened.” He looked to the silky bronze bed sheets and then frowned back up at Thrawn. “I met with them and sent them all off to the spare dormitories up the road so they could rest. Well, all except for the one who claims to be your special assassin.” Eli made a face and let his skepticism show freely now. “Tell me, that young man, Ezra, he’s not really a part of the crew is he?”

Thrawn’s eyes closed, but the smile on his face was completely visible to Eli.

“You could tell?”

“He doesn’t strike me as the Imperial type. The kid says he’s an Inquisitor or an assassin, but that’s Krayt Spit if I ever heard it.”

Thrawn’s smile stayed.

“You have grown well if you were able to deduce that so quickly.”

“You mean you didn’t know?”

“I had my suspicions—” Thrawn started, his voice still raspy, but his body growing stronger as he came to. “Though, it wasn’t until recently when I discovered a memory that brought back— clarification.”

“I heard about the amnesia too,” Eli said with a frown. “So what was it about? The memory, I mean? Was it something important?”
“I believe it is,” Thrawn said slowly. “For you see... Ezra Bridger is the one who caused the *Chimera* to crash.”
Another Crisis

Chapter Summary

Eli confronts Thrawn about his revelation towards Ezra, and later learns a shocking discovery involving the Chimera crash.

Chapter Notes

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“C-come again!?” Eli asked, his eyes going wide with alarm and confusion. *Sure,* he'd had his suspicions about the kid, but none of this magnitude, and not about something so dire. For the most part, Ezra seemed nice enough. *Friendly even?* So Eli was having an exceptionally hard time wrapping his head around what Thrawn had just said even as he repeated the words back to him. “Ezra caused the *Chimera* to crash?”

“He is currently unaware of this fact himself,” Thrawn explained, his voice just as calm and calculating as ever. “And after observing him since our wake a few days prior, I feel it is in our best interest to assure he never does.”

“And why is that?” Eli asked sourly, his voice trying and failing to hide his aggression now as he wondered how in the world Thrawn could let someone so dangerous stay alive, much less walk freely around the Sposia hospital. The Chiss never brought potential threats back to one of their planets. *Never!*

He grabbed the bridge of his nose and furrowed his brows, an act that was used to express both his confusion and his growing frustration.

“You are perplexed.”

“You’re damn right I’m perplexed!” Eli spat back, his accent noticeably thickening with the rising anger in his voice. “You mean to tell me that one of your enemies is down on the first level getting a free checkup as we speak, and you’re not even worried about it in the slightest? You’re not even mad?”

Thrawn frowned at the outburst and more so from the curse. In retrospect, Eli knew that a few years in the Chiss Ascendancy had made him somewhat bolder when talking to other Chiss. He knew that he had grown a bit more confident and commanding thanks to the strict training of Admiral Ar’alani and the other generals of Nuruodo House and it no doubt showed to those who remembered Eli before he joined forces with them. One look from Thrawn and Eli could tell that he had definitely noticed the sharp bluntness of his voice and the new confidence surrounding his aura. He seemed to accept it with a sort of mild toleration. *Was it toleration?* Eli wondered, watching as Thrawn seemed to smirk beneath his hand. *Or was this something closer to satisfaction? Perhaps it was pride towards the fact that Eli was acting more like a Chiss and less like an Imperial?*
"I am not worried..." Thrawn replied, his facial expression returning to that stern yet calm facade it normally took. "And I am not angry."

"Then that suit must have you highly medicated!"

He shot Eli a look and used a determined amount of strength to sit up from his position, an action that actually caused him to wince slightly as Eli heard something inside him let out an uncomfortable sounding pop.

"Take it easy will you? You’re still healing."

The Chiss ignored him and managed to sit himself upright as the metallic pulses of his bronze health-suit released vigorously from the shift in position. The pulses were actually a method of dispersing medicine to the areas that Thrawn needed it most. Pain relievers, sedatives, nutrients, basically anything that would lead him to recovery, and all this moving around was making the suit work overtime. *Chiss-tech at its finest.*

"The Bridger boy might have been the cause for our misfortune, but he also has done everything in his power to assist the survivors of the Chimera, myself included."

"I know that." Eli grumbled. "That doesn’t excuse the fact that it was his fault in the first place! What? You’re just going to forgive him for killing all those men and women aboard the Chimera? For taking out the entire Seventh Fleet? Everything you spent all those years working your way up to get, all gone now thanks to that one kid."

"You believe one man has the capability to be stronger than an entire army?"

Eli saw Thrawn lift his brow, and rather than let it get to him, he blew out a breath and only allowed himself to grumble back an irritable reply of his own.

"You know what I meant."

Thrawn smiled. *He actually smiled!?*

"Your empathy is admirable, and your comment is not far from the truth."

Eli felt his face redden, nerves throbbing as he thought he could feel his mind getting ready to explode. He’d almost forgotten just how frustrated Thrawn could get him, and after a moment Eli sighed with a breath of surrender. Whenever he got like this, the game of riddles and guesses, it was only a tactic to make Eli figure out what the Chiss was thinking. Sure enough, Eli did recognize the tone of plotting in Thrawn's voice. He had a plan, and Eli connected the dots together, figuring out exactly what the goal he had in mind truly was.

"You want to remold Ezra into someone that can be useful to the Chiss Ascendancy, don’t you?" Eli asked. "Like you did with me?"

"I do." Thrawn laid back down, his head sinking into the pillow as he let out a breath. "You disapprove?"

"You could say that? What if the kid remembers more on his own? What if he decides he still wants to fight you and takes all of us down with him? He’s obviously dangerous, not to mention a force user, and you—" Eli stopped and made a face, his finger pointed accusingly at Thrawn, but now slowly turning to point up at himself. "—And I led him right to one of the core worlds on the Path of Houses."
“That was, of course, the correct course of actions. I thank you for convincing the general to rescue and deliver us to Sposia.”

*Thrawn knew that? Of course he did,* Eli thought. It wasn't a conclusion that would be too hard to understand for someone who grew up with Chiss space laws. Although Thrawn's words were trying to make Eli feel less guilty about his involvement in unknowingly breaking those laws, it wasn't exactly helping him cope.

“That doesn’t really make me feel any better,” Eli said. "If this goes south, then the Chiss Ascendancy will have my head long before they decide to take yours. You know that, don’t you?”

“I have considered the risk. If Ezra should become aware of his past or likewise grow too much to control, then he will of course need to be brought down. Should that happen, then I will have to reassess and continue my plans without him.”

Eli frowned, his arms crossed as a new wave of seriousness flowed over him.

"Would these plans have anything to do with the Far Outsiders by chance?"

Thrawn tensed at the word, his red eyes flashing once, but with what emotion, Eli couldn't tell for sure. *Hatred maybe?*

“Yeah, I met them,” Eli informed, his voice wisened by a memory of battle, his tone not so much angry as it was understanding. This was a conversation held between two alike warriors who have faced a similar threat and lived to tell the tale. "All that stuff you were telling the Emperor about when we first met him. I thought all that "ultimate evil" banter was just to win him over, but now I see just how important your warning to him truly was..." He swallowed. “I’ve seen what they can do firsthand. They're like something straight out of a nightmare.”

For a few moments, *which seemed to feel longer than they actually were,* Eli felt Thrawn's eyes on him, surveying his face with particular interest to the scar to the right of his eye as well as his Chiss-issued military uniform. Finally, he spoke again, frowning as a new red glare made his dulled eyes brighten with the desire to know more.

"What happened?"

Eli shook his head.

"It doesn't matter. It was the past, and we won the battle. Between the Grysks and the Vagaari causing trouble and the Far Outsiders trying to get closer to the edge of Wild Space, the Expansionary Defense Fleet has just had a few run ins with them is all..."

"There is more," he protested. “Please, tell me about your time within the Ascendancy. Starting with your time in this hospital in particular.”

Eli’s brow lifted.

"What makes you think I spent time here?"

Thrawn's eyes closed, but his voice was still going strong as he revealed all of his keen deductions and observations.

"We are in the secured medical suite of high-class Chiss officials," he explained. "I assume I am in here on the orders of somebody higher, and yet, the staff would not let just any ranking officer have access to my quarters, when I myself had not introduced you as someone close to me. This
means that you have been here before, and long enough to have become friendly with the staff and acquaint them to your connection with me.” He gave Eli a quick glance over and continued. "You are unsurprised by Chiss medical technology and know of its effects, meaning you were admitted to this facility for the injuries which resulted in the scar near your right eye. I wish to know what happened."

Eli blinked. Even half-drugged and barely conscious Thrawn was still able to figure all that out just by having Eli stand in the same room with him?

“Tell you what,” he started. "I’ll answer all of your questions when you answer mine. I assume you wanted to look over your journal entries in order to remember a few of your memories, right? I have questions for you about what you've been doing as well."

“Do you?” he replied, looking back to Eli and frowning suddenly as soon as his gaze fell on the man's face. “You are concerned with my actions?”

Eli winced, regretting he hadn’t tried to mask his facial expressions a little better. The other Chiss didn't really understand them, but Thrawn had spent years studying Eli's face just for such an occasion. A stupid mistake.

“Well...it's just that Faro told me stories of what all you’ve been doing...”

“You are disappointed?”

“If what I’ve heard is true—” Eli shrugged. “Maybe a little?”

“I apologize if my actions seemed misplaced to you.”

He scratched at the beard again, his face reddening.

“Well, I’m sure if you explained yourself then I would understand it better. Plus, Faro might’ve exaggerated a few details a bit. I really just wanted to ask you face to face what happened, and try to understand why you did some of the things you did.”

"I see. Then I will strive to clear up any misgivings you might have after you read for yourself.” With a tired shove of his arm, he tossed the datapad to the foot of his bed where Eli stood.

“What?” He blurted. “Me? Read for myself?”

“Of course. Because you are my friend, and the one who I can rely on most to tell my story truthfully. Everything you need to know will be in my journal,” Thrawn said. “Once you have finished, I will likewise go through it and piece together what memories I have that are still—fuzzy.”

Eli blinked, deciding not to make a comment about Thrawn using the term "fuzzy" correctly in a sentence, but instead focused on the feeling he'd had when he realized that Thrawn had called him his friend out loud.

"You don't want to read it first?” Eli argued. “You know, I could always lie to you and omit the things I don’t want you remembering because I disapprove?”

“You could,” Thrawn said primly. “But I do not believe you will.”

Eli smiled and shrugged.
"Nah, I guess not?"

"Then, you will reveal to me more of your time with my people."

It wasn't really a question, more like a statement, and Eli looked over the datapad and then back at Thrawn, waving the device through the air around his face with a roll of his eyes.

"I will, but I don't think either of us will be getting much information out of this thing. It's pretty busted. I might be able to take it over to Csaus and have one of the technicians fix it?"

"That will not be necessary," Thrawn said. "I left you with a journal similar to this before sending you here, is that not correct?"

"Oh n-no, you did..." he stammered.

In truth, Eli had mixed feelings about the old journal entries. He wanted to know more, but at the same time the information he was given took time to decipher and decrypt. He knew it all by memory now, but back then, he wanted to ask Thrawn for help, both with the meaning of his words and with his unfamiliar missions. Thrawn was billions of miles away and there was no way to communicate with him while he was serving under the Empire. What little news Eli did hear was always months late and distorted by travel. Ever since meeting with Vader and becoming a Grand Admiral, Thrawn hardly reached out anymore to Chiss frequencies, and of course that also prevented Eli from connecting to anyone outside of the worlds under the protection of the Ascendancy.

"I just—" Eli continued. "Well, I thought you wouldn't remember? It was a long time ago..."

"That is not something that I would easily forget, even with the "amnesia" as you refer it." There was a smug look on his otherwise tired face as he added, "In any case, you may use your datapad to retrieve information from this one. You have always been talented with logistics, and I am sure you will find the correct string of code-work that will transfer my personal logbook to your datapad."

"You think so, do you?" Eli blushed at the compliment, not sure if he wanted to tell Thrawn that logistics and hacking weren't exactly related fields. "I'll do what I can I suppose?"

He smiled.

"I know you will. I trust you implicitly, Eli Vanto."

Eli nodded. How long had it been since he'd heard his full name come out of Thrawn? More importantly, how long had it been since he'd heard his full name spoken at all? The Chiss had their own name for him. It had definitely been a while...

Thrawn frowned a moment and studied Eli's face. Whether it was the medicine or the time they'd spent apart, something seemed to make Thrawn uncharacteristically chatty as he continued trying to hold a conversation between them.

"You read my entries to you I presume? Were they able to assist you in any way while you have been living here?"

"In a sense..." he said with a flick of his chin pointed out towards the side. "But there were a lot of things I wish you could have prepared me a little better for. You sent me away in kind of a hurry, remember?"

Eli spoke truthfully, though in reality, he had once held a completely different set of emotions for
the entries Thrawn had left and the short goodbye. Most of those being confusion, frustration, or in even more rare instances, nostalgia. The Unknown Regions were an entirely different system with a plethora of rules, people, and evils that Eli could have never been fully trained to handle, not without witnessing most of them firsthand. For a few of the first months, Eli had held a quiet resentment towards Thrawn for some of those surprises, but like everything, he began to understand it with time and with training.

"I apologize if you were unprepared." Thrawn frowned. "I can remember distantly that there was a reason it was imperative to have you relocated as soon as possible. I regret that I did not have further time to teach you or to send you away with a proper farewell."

“That farewell maybe entailing that you thought of me as a friend? You could've told me to my face instead of leaving me with a paragraph to read over when you knew I wouldn't get a chance to reply back to you that way."

Thrawn seemed to look a tad guiltier than before, and lowered his head.

"That is one regret, yes. You disagree with my analysis?"

"Oh, it isn't that," Eli said, his arms crossed as he tried his best to look and sound agitated. It took everything in him just to keep from laughing, but he couldn't help himself. He would never get another chance to tease Thrawn like this ever again.

"I just thought it was a pretty stupid way to ask for my friendship. Not to mention cowardly and unnecessarily contrived."

Thrawn’s expression was unreadable, but Eli thought this was about as close to the look of getting slapped that a Chiss could make.

“Actually! He repeated, and then he started to laugh uncontrollably.

So he couldn't keep up the act after all? Eli continued laughing and shook his head, his brown waves rocking back and forth as Thrawn glanced up at him in stunned confusion.

“Well of course that’s what I thought!” He laughed, switching over to Cheunh just to make sure the translation didn't slip past the Chiss' ears. “Especially considering you’ve been my best friend for years you sculag!”

Thrawn felt a sudden wave of relief, followed by a flurry of irritation towards the Chiss expletive, then pride at the fact Eli had been speaking the language of his homeworld so well.

“When did you learn this?”

“I was stationed here for a while and had some pretty persistent Cheunh teachers, the younger ones taught me a few of the swears.”

"Did they now?"

Eli wasn't sure if Thrawn was smiling or trying to mask his concern over the rebellious youth of the Chiss teenagers who had been teaching Eli Cheunh curses. Considering he personally knew quite a few of those teenagers, Eli thought it best to keep their identities to himself for now. He sighed and reached down to pick up the datapad before Thrawn could find out just how much they'd taught him, and he quickly changed the subject.

“So yeah... anyway... I’ll look over this tonight and come back tomorrow with my notes." He
stressed the next words. "But, in the morning, you hear? Right now you need to rest."

In truth, Eli wanted nothing more than to tell Thrawn about his time here, but he saw the pulses of color spazzing out on Thrawn’s medical suit, and knew it was probably pumping him full of hypnotic sedatives that would knock him out cold any minute now. It really wasn't good for him to have lengthy visits with a lot of conversation, and Eli promised the doctor he wouldn't impede Thrawn's recovery by visiting for too long.

For a moment, Eli thought he could detect a small pout on Thrawn's otherwise passive and expressionless face. His voice sounded almost childlike, intoxicated by the drugs now as he was apparently fighting and losing to let them take over. Eli wondered if this was what his commanding officer would be like drunk, but had to shake the thought out of his head before he started laughing again right in front of him.

“Very well,” he said. "We can continue our reunion when you return.”

“It’s a deal then.” Eli nodded and made his way towards the door, the datapad tucked under his arm as he passed the Ysalamir.

“My congratulations on the promotion of Captain, by the way.” Thrawn smirked, his voice simultaneously knowing, proud, and teasing as he let his words stop Eli dead in his tracks. “I knew you would flourish as a part of the Ascendancy.”

He looked to his uniform expectantly. Of course Thrawn would notice it. He was working for the military under Ar’alani, hence the bronze of the Nuruodo House, and the specific markings on the armor was meant to signify his status as a Captain. He actually disliked the scheme, thinking the bronze was too closely matched to his skin tone and the black washed him out. All the Chiss in the military short of the Admirals wore black uniforms with traces of colors to them, the real sign of power lying in these accessories and the detailing of the suits, which Eli did have quite a few of... not that he was one to ever brag about it.

“Thank you sir,” he said, mentally cursing at himself for adding the sir. It was an old habit, and one that Thrawn might not want him doing now that Eli had earned his rightful place among the captains of the Defense Fleet. As the youngest Chiss ever to make Force Commander, added to whatever rank he held nowadays, Thrawn probably still outranked Eli of course, but the distinction to class from Chiss standards was somewhat more lenient with officers than it was in the Empire. He didn’t seem to notice it though, as the mixture of exhaustion and medication was finally starting to tranquilize the stubborn Chiss back into his slumbers. Before Thrawn could say anything else, Eli pressed for the exit and bowed once in his direction.

“Get well soon, Mitth’raw’nuruodo.”

“Thrawn.”

Eli stopped and turned his head back into the room.

“What was that?”

His voice was a hushed whisper, eyes closing against his will, as his voice slipped effortlessly back to Cheunh. “Even here... You may still address me as Thrawn.”

Eli smiled. Using a core-name to address a member of the Chiss species was an honor reserved strictly for family, ranking equals, and extremely close friends. The sole reason Thrawn allowed the rest of the Empire to address him by this nickname was simply to make it easier on the humans
he surrounded himself with on a daily basis. To give Eli permission to call him "Thrawn" aloud and within the Ascendancy as well—

“It’s good to have you back, Thrawn.”

Eli heard no further reply come from behind him. Knocked out cold, just as he’d thought. With a wave of his head, he smiled, pressed for the exit symbol, and left, letting the door slide shut softly behind him as started his walk back outside and towards his ship.

Hours had passed as Eli ran his hands through his now messy hair while he stared down at the datapads. He was sitting alone in a small ship parked just outside the hospital, his feet propped on the dashboard, his belt and other utilities hanging off the back of his chair. It wasn’t the first time he’d slept in a cockpit and Eli seriously doubted that it would be the last.

He tapped a knuckle against the device for what was probably the hundredth time at this point as he waited for the last few strings of coding to transfer between the devices. Luckily, Eli kept most of his belonging with him as he traveled, confining only a small duffel bag of items with him wherever he went. One of the things he was sure never to lose was the datapad with the journal entries that Thrawn had given him. Sometimes, it was his wisdom that allowed Eli to think straight or think up a strategy. Other times it was just a way to relax his mind and think back to the more pleasant times of his youth. Was pleasant really the right word? He probably hadn't thought so at the time, but now he seemed to look back on those early days and smile.

“Everything you need to know will be in my journal,” Thrawn had said.

Everything, huh? Eli thought as he stared down towards the datapads. All the details about Ezra Bridger, the Chimera’s missions, the stories Faro told him, and all the personal thoughts Thrawn had gathered from his time as a Grand Admiral. Perhaps there would even be more entries explaining why Thrawn had sent him away to act as a liaison to the Chiss. Thrawn remembered that he'd sent him away in a hurry, and even now, Eli wondered what the big rush had been about. There was something that suddenly changed in Thrawn when he returned from Coruscant after being promoted to Grand Admiral. What happened back then? What had caused him to send Eli to the Chiss Ascendancy instead of keeping him on-board the Chimera?

He had been so enraptured with transferring the code patterns between the two the datapads that Eli didn’t even notice when the sun went down over Sposia. If anything, he should be asleep, but there were far too many things rambling around inside his head to even think about relaxing. He wished the data transfer would just hurry up and finish already, but it wasn't like Eli thought himself a master hacker and splicer, so of course he would be slow at it.

Maybe Thrawn hadn’t been thinking clearly when he told Eli to connect their two datapads? This was something more for Pyrondi, Tharin even, but Eli? He wasn't sure if he would rely too deeply on his skills in this particular area. If he'd done the data pull right or if it would even work after being moved, Eli couldn't really be sure.

With a tired shake of his head, Eli heard one satisfying ping trill out from his datapad, and his eyes shot back to the screen only to see it signalling the complete successful transfer of Thrawn’s journal to his own archives.
"Well I'll be damned?"

There were still a few locked files that would need further hacking, but for now, he had access to the articles he needed to read, and he scrolled through the files until he found Thrawn’s logs. Eli felt an old sense of nostalgia returning to him, something inside that he hadn’t felt since he’d left the Imperial Navy. Eli smiled at the sensation, and then without another thought, he began to read through the entries.

For hours and hours, he sat there and read, sometimes re-reading a log just to make sure he’d understood it the first time. Most of the stories he could directly link to those that Faro had told him, from Reklam Station and the Yarma system and beyond to visits between Lothal and the Imperial Senate. For the most part the excerpts seemed fairly standard, but others were anything but.

With many adversaries, there is a fine line between what should be done to aid their goals, and what is done to aid their instincts. When the enemy acts out of anger or out of fear, they find themselves lost both in battle and in spirit. That was not the case for Captain Hera Syndulla, who astounded all odds by succeeding in her goals by acting from both instinct as well as rage. While her primary mission was altered, she and her crew once again manage to take the day by electedly diverting towards unexpected paths that the average warrior would only commit when one became truly desperate. The damage to the Syndulla home, the willingness to break her own kalikori, and the defeat of Captain Slavin have all become valuable assets that will aid my research of the future actions of this particular Rebel cell.
Attached was an image of the Twi'lek's Kalikori, but Eli also noticed that Thrawn had it in his own office. Eli found that to be a little out of character for Thrawn. Typically, he just took digital shots of the artwork he studied, not just flat out taken it and kept it on a pedestal in his office. Sure she was a Rebel, but he couldn't help but think back to their mission on Cyphar when humans were going into Afe territory to mine for scarn veins. Only this time, the raiders were the Empire, and they did more than just cross some borders, they took over the Twi'leks' entire homeworld.

He shook his head and read the next entry.

The lengths one are willing to go for family are a testament to their overall character. The young are often brash, making decisions that cause trouble for family, friends, and even for personal health. They do these actions out of emotion, a desire to take control over what they could not before, or could not hope to control. The older and more wizened family act out of caution, their decisions ones of coordination, experience, and occasionally instinct. But what should happen when the child acts out of wisdom, or the adult should operate out of emotion? Pain, loss, or simply the fear of loss can lead to such rarities, but when testing the resolve of a seasoned warrior, even the strongest will fall into the traps laid forth by their own blood. In the case of Commander Jun Sato, his return to Mykapo was only achieved through the involvement of family. He will act out of a need to save others close to him in all battles under his command, making him both an honorable man and an even easier asset of exploit.

Eli's frowned stretched further when he noticed the link towards the bottom that led to an article about this Commander Sato's death over Atollon. He sacrificed his own ship to allow the other rebels to escape. An honorable choice, and as easy a one for Thrawn to topple over like a game piece on a Dejarik board. It sent a chill up his spine just thinking about it.

He continued reading, but the chill and disgust he felt only seemed to grow with the next entry.

Laborers, especially those obtained against their own volunteered services, are more likely to create upsets within the workplace which ultimately lead to errors in design, production shortages, and the loss of life to those who are placing their trust in their assigned equipment. This cannot stand. Chaos must be quelled quickly, effectively, and personally or else all order will become subsequently irrelevant. Examples are made in order to effect the group. Those who will not follow by conviction will always behave under fear. If my time within the Empire has taught me anything, it is the effectiveness for the usage of fear.

Eli winced. Thrawn had made an example of one of the Lothalian factory workers who had sabotaged some of the equipment. He understood the angle which Thrawn was taking because faulty equipment could cost Imperial lives, but to allow one of the workers to walk right into his own death, and one who was hardly there against his own free will to begin with. Now that was more bloodthirsty than Eli remembered. Thrawn always tried to avoid taking unnecessary life in the past. So what was this?

There was a connected article leaking back to a larger file containing the code-word "FULCRUM". Eli opened it and felt his eyebrows lift as he saw what it entailed.

"By the light of Lothal's moons." A curious catchphrase, but one holding a strong significance to the larger Rebel Alliance. I have deduced several agents of Fulcrum, but have caught only one thus far. Former ISB Agent Alexsandr Kallus has shown tenacity and skill in avoiding discovery for as long as he had, but it was ultimately his
diversions that drew more attention to his own guilt. The interference of one Rebel in particular, Captain Garazeb Orrelios, is partly to blame for the influence of Imperial loyalties to that of the enemy. Is their previous connection the cause for such a shift, or could this Garazeb's influence be as strong as that of the late Nevil Cygni? Further study of the Lasat is required, but artifacts are rare to come by in the destruction of the Lasat homeworld.

See also: Infiltrator Droid.

Eli did, only to learn that the Lasat rebel had sent one of Thrawn's infiltrator Droids back to its ship where it exploded to cover their trail. It was a clever move, but one that only seemed to help Thrawn pinpoint a location to their base. "Chopper Base" on the planet of Atollon, the death location of Commander Sato. This entry was where things seemed to get stranger and stranger, though, Eli knew Thrawn was not one to add unnecessary flair to his writings. That meant, what he had cataloged in his journal must have been the undoubted truth of what happened, no matter how hard a time Eli had believing it.

The universe is vast, much of it unexplored due to fear of the unknown and more commonly due to the lack of a live witness to tell the tale of its location. It is no surprise that much of what is unknown holds within a number of mysteries of its own. In the case of Jedi, it is the Force... For the Chiss, it is our purpose in the universe... But in the case of Atollon, the unexplained has come in the form of a creature known only as "Bendu". I have seen such unexplained abilities working alongside Lord Vader, but not in the same regard as Bendu. Its very presence remains a mystery, but in the creature's foresight, I will take its warning to my core.

See quote: "I see your defeat. Like many arms surrounding you in a cold embrace."

Eli blinked, re-reading the entry and then the linked information of Atollon a second time just to make sure he'd read it right the first time. He had, but that didn't help him to understand it any better. Beasts who could turn into raging storms and then vanish with only an eerie vision into the future. Eli would call Krayt spit if he didn't know Thrawn's word was the undoubted truth as to what happened on that planet.

The next file was labeled "Vader" but it was one of the locked titles which Eli would require further hacking to gain access to it. He skipped it, but by the time he had, he'd already stumbled onto three separate entries involving a Noghri assassin under Thrawn's command by the name of Rukh. Had he met the strange alien between Atollon and whatever happened with Vader? From what the stories portrayed, Rukh seemed to be a very capable and honorable warrior, and one completely devoted to Thrawn under some sort of life debt or servitude, Eli couldn't begin to guess which of the two, but it made him frustrated. This sounded too similar to the blind loyalty of the Jefies from Botajef, but Thrawn wouldn't do something like that to an entire species would he?

Would he?

Eli sped through the remaining entries, learning the names and backgrounds of every rebel, droid, and pirate that Thrawn had the whim to collect data on. The research bordered on obsessive and more so than it had when they were tracking Nightswan. He had never seen Thrawn so focused with one band of Rebels, no, this went far further than Nightswan, he was never this intense before in all of Eli's memory of him.

Now, Eli had never much cared about the Rebellion. He had heard small rumors of rebels here and there, but working for the Empire, you didn't much see those people as an enemy, more like a small annoyance. From what Eli was reading, Thrawn did see them as a threat to the Empire and
one he personally wanted to uproot. But why? What was so personal about this group? Was his pride at stake? Had Thrawn given his word to Pryce to take care of the Rebels? Still... something didn't seem to fit quite right.

The capture of Hera Syndulla, death of the Jedi Kanan Jarrus, and destruction of the fuel depot for Thrawn's project came next. Eli studied blueprints and proposals for Thrawn's TIES and saw just how much power they would have brought to the Empire. Thrawn might have changed somehow in these years, but he understood resources and wherever the Empire was directing all of them, Thrawn seemed to be fighting his damnedest to spread around to other projects.

It was no big surprise that the Empire was corrupt even to itself. Why did people think stormtrooper armor was so cheaply made? Why training was cut short to amount to numbers and canon fodder rather than well-trained soldiers and stability? Thrawn had the assets diverted into yet another locked folder, this one titled "PROJECT STARDUST", but Eli wasn't sure this was something he'd be able to access at his tech level. So, like before, he moved on to the next segment.

He whistled when he read the entry detailing the plot to get Ezra to meet Emperor Palpatine. They had a part of some Lothalian temple structure transported to the Chimera, and even had plans to get some Royal Battle Guards to show up.

The Emperor's fascination with Ezra Bridger is one that will doubtfully go in Emperor Palpatine's favor. After my study of the boy in these past months, I have deduced his personality to be extremely Jedi. The boy will fight and die with honor, a warrior bred with empathy and chivalry that most assuredly clouds the necessary judgement he would need to remain alive. No creature that set into their morality would dare switch sides given temptation no matter what rewards they are offered. Any attempt to do so or threats made to inflict personal harm will fail unless of course the target is changed to the loved ones of such Jedi or the innocents he surround himself with in his day to day. I know not what the Emperor has planned for young Bridger, but before I capture him, and I will most assuredly capture him, I will devise a test. Though predictable and untrained, I see great potential in young Bridger, and have no qualms portraying myself in the role of power hungry villain as he so sees of me. This will be necessary in order to test my theories. Research has proven the instability all Jedi must overcome in regards to power. Palpatine is the worst and darkest side of this spectrum. Perhaps, Ezra Bridger will be the light he truly believes himself to be? If so, then he could prove potentially useful to the universe as a whole, but in ways he could scarcely imagine given his current state.

So even then, Thrawn was keeping an eye on the Bridger boy and playing his tests and mind games with him. For once, that actually did sound like the old Thrawn Eli used to know. The question remained... How much of Thrawn's actions were truly strategic brilliance, and how much was an act of Imperial impression on the war-minded Chiss?

“Considering Ezra is still alive, I guess the Emperor's plan really did fail?” Eli said aloud, not sure whether he was happy or concerned about that fact. His mixed emotions stopped however, when he was no longer able to read any further, the journal entries ceasing to scroll right after that last article was complete.

That can't be right? Eli thought to himself as he traced his links back through breadcrumbs of redirection. He had already read every article, sub-article, and slight side note that Thrawn had made and that he had access to. Aside the two files from before the trap for Ezra, there was nothing else that Eli had failed to extract from Thrawn's datapad.
He went back to the entry and looked at the date, shifting in his seat as he mentally matched the story with those that Faro had told him. Structurally, they all seemed to fit in a neat little box, and this of course seemed to be Thrawn's final entry before the battle for Lothal where the Chimera was taken out, but there was a gap in the timeline that didn't make sense.

*How exactly had the Star Destroyer gone from Lothal to Myrkr again?* The crew had told him something about tentacles and their orbiting fleet just vanishing from thin air.

Eli didn't know why exactly, but that information alone made him think of those stories he'd heard back on Lysatra about Purrgil who crashed into starships while they were in hyperspace lanes. He wondered if maybe Thrawn had heard of such, and searched backwards to find an old incident involving the Phoenix Squadron and those exact creatures. It would seem Rodian workers of the Mining Guild on some gas planet encountered the Rebels and the Purrgil stealing their fuel. They claimed the Jedi had some sort of influence over the beasts, when they attacked the station and killed the refinery boss before the Rebels took out the entire complex.

Thrawn had the Purrgil labeled under "Jedi Connections" and "More Study Required". What he did know was what Eli already heard. The Purrgil were a partly unknown species living out in deep space that could theoretically perform natural leaps into hyperspace. From what Eli read after that traced back into articles he'd already read. Ezra Bridger had a unique ability to connect himself with others in the Force. Whether that meant mind control, or something less ominous, Eli wasn't sure, but the list was long, detailing encounters with Fyrnocks, Purrgil, Lothcats, infants, droids, and even Lothwolves.

Eli had heard of Lothwolves on Lysatra as well. They disappeared about a hundred or so years ago, but were said to be extremely majestic and secretly powerful, their very livelihoods connected to the planet itself. Lysatra didn't have any animals like that, but that's what made the stories between visiting workers so interesting. He clicked on the link only to see blurry images or graffiti art created by Sabine Wren. Below the title there was only a simple sentence: "Acquire more details from Rukh and (if available) Governor Pryce."

So this seemed to be before the crash, but after Arihnda ruined Thrawn's TIE program. It didn't take a genius to know what Thrawn meant by "if available". Now, Eli had never liked Governor Pryce, but for a split second, he couldn't help but feel pity for her at the thought of what Chiss did to those who had wronged them. *But why did Ezra not fit into this category?* Was it truly because Thrawn saw potential in him to help defeat the Far Outsiders?

He looked up and saw the sun rising over Sposia. Another all-nighter spent researching for Thrawn. He laughed a little at that and stretched to relieve his sore back and neck muscles before preparing to shut down the datapad. He'd need to recharge them, check in on the Chimera crew, visit Ezra, and then reconvene with Thrawn, but he didn't seem to be looking forward to any of it. There was something missing still, and he doubted Thrawn would know the answers. Particularly, he was concerned about that last entry, the trap between Ezra and Palpatine, it couldn't have been more than a day before the Chimera crashed, but the date on that specific log now had Eli worried.

"It was eight months ago?" he said to himself, grumbling as he rubbed the results of another sleepless night off his face. "Must've done something wrong after all?"

He knew the Chimera hadn't been on Myrkr for eight months. *Maybe Thrawn had put the entries somewhere else?* His method of organizing data is catered to how he would want it, making it complicated to navigate for anyone unfamiliar with the way the Chiss' mind worked. It was just somewhere else, *that had to be it*.

Eli stood, put on his boots and the rest of his uniform, and walked out into the crisp morning air
before deciding to borrow the refresher inside the Sabosen hospital. He could at least shower and make himself presentable before starting the remainder of his day playing babysitter to a bunch of lost humans and interrogating Thrawn. With all the thoughts nagging at the back of his mind now, he definitely knew he wasn't looking forward to any of it.

With a sigh, Eli felt the familiar sensation of dread creeping in on him. Just like back then, Thrawn always managed to make his life more difficult, but at the same time he always managed to somehow make things more interesting. He rolled his eyes and let a small smile slip out as he felt himself seep back into his old routine.

“Another day, another crisis.”
A Matter of Family

Chapter Summary

Eli has a rough morning, made worse when Thrawn and Ezra receive two unexpected visitors. Later, Thrawn reveals more to Ezra about how they came to know one another in order to set his future plans into motion.

Chapter Notes

Posted on July 2, 2018.

Eli nodded to the Level Three Sabosen medical staff as he made his way to Thrawn’s door and pressed for the symbol to let him inside.

“Hey Thrawn, are you awake?” He whispered, easing around the corner and into the room. He stopped dead in his tracks when he saw the Chiss standing upright by his bed, his medical uniform in hand, body wet and obviously fresh out of the refresher. Thrawn himself was stark nude, turning to greet his visitor as Eli held up a quick hand and shielded his eyes with a sudden yell.

One thing Eli had learned fairly quickly about the Chiss… they weren’t shy beings by any regard, and now back in his natural element, Thrawn was no exception.

“Captain Vanto. You are awake much earlier than expected.”

The poor man turned fifty-two shades of red, diverting his eyes to the Ysalamir in order to look anywhere but at the speaker directly.

“Y-yeah!” Eli squeaked, turning his whole back to Thrawn now because the man obviously didn’t see why his human friend was getting so uncomfortable. He shook his head, eyes growing wide with discomfort as his voice stumbled to explain himself further. “See, I wake up pretty early now. Oh! I didn’t sleep last night though because of the reading... so I ummm... yeah, here you go, I’ve got your datapad! I’ll come back later and we can go over my uh… my notes.”

“That is not necessary,” Thrawn argued. “You may remain here if you wish. As you may recall, I do read fairly quickly.”

“Can you believe this guy?!” Eli grumbled under his breath at the small and uninterested yellow lizard. He was being quiet, but with Thrawn’s enhanced hearing he was sure the Chiss still caught the remark, though Eli didn’t dare turn around to find out for sure. The Ysalamir stuck its purple tongue out in the only thing that might count as reply before Eli finally heard the Chiss shifting around with new movement behind him.

What!? Was he just standing there waiting on Eli to quit talking? Eli wondered.
Thrawn always did make direct eye contact whenever he was speaking to people and not explaining something at them. In that regard, the Chiss species were extremely polite when they communicated, but the other things they did—like the fact that he was just waiting around butt-naked! Well... some of the mannerisms were still harder for Eli to get used to, even after all this time among the Chiss. Being aboard a ship was one thing, but he had never expected—never prepared himself for all of this!? Thrawn had no reason to act like an Imperial anymore either, not when he was home among his people, so it would make sense that he acted more like he would with them rather how he would with humans.

A relaxed Thrawn was something Eli just simply wasn't used to seeing, and now he wondered if he even really wanted to see this much of him again. He was getting to know him quite a lot already!

Eli shot his arm out behind him as far as it could reach and clenched his eyes together.

"Please just take it!" He nearly pleaded. "I uh... Well... I still need to greet the Aristocra, you see..."

He really did, but Eli had planned on doing it after his meeting with Thrawn. He’d go to her office running now if it meant getting him out of this room. The awkwardness spewing from Eli’s own mind was so thick in the air, he thought he might actually be able to drown from it.

"If that is what you wish?" He heard Thrawn say in reply.

If Eli were a betting man, he could swear the Chiss was sporting a smug grin as he was slowly starting to understand why Eli refused to look at him directly. He was no doubt finding it another one of the amusing human differences between the two of them, but wasn’t the type to mock his friend for it. Eli felt the weight of the device leave his hand as Thrawn took it and stepped away without another word on the subject.

Thank the stars! Eli thought.

He took a step towards the door to make his escape when it flew open and he felt his whole body tense up again.

"Mitth’raw’nuruodo!"

Two Chiss nurses marched in, both ignoring Eli completely as they immediately began to berate Thrawn for being up and about, reminding their patient that he did not have clearance to be out of bed, much less to be bathing and trying to clothe himself without a physician present.

Eli turned, but saw that Thrawn was still nude and now being forcefully dressed and coaxed back into bed by the Sabosen staff.

"I’m just going to— yeah— uh— bye!"

Eli shrunk, hands still cupped around his eyes as he hurried quickly back out into the lobby and left Thrawn to the mercy of his angry nurses. All of this happened in the span of what was probably about two minutes, but Eli had long since blacked out from the overwhelming shock of the whole thing, and was trying to get the focus to return to his eyes. He sighed, and rubbed his face, trying to get the picture of what he’d just seen out of his head, but it was laser etched into his brain. Red-faced, Eli walked back to the turbolift and thought of anything else he possibly could as he made his way to the Aristocra’s office.

"Nice one Eli…real smooth...” He muttered, cursing to himself as the waves of embarrassment struck him in rhythmic shifts.
He felt the overwhelming urge to crawl under a rock and die there. All that, and Eli just stood there acting flustered while Thrawn was probably just standing around and wondering why. Damn it, Eli was a Captain in the Chiss Ascendancy Expansionary Defense Fleet, he should be more level headed that this, shouldn’t he?

With a groan, his lift landed on the second floor and he marched his way over to Gras’vee’sabosen’s office, knocking this time at the risk of mentally scaring himself by barging in once again. That is, until Eli realized that the Chiss weren’t accustomed to knocking, so the sound had probably caught her completely off guard, and he would need to explain the action to the Aristocra when he went in.

If it wasn’t one thing, it was the other...

“Stupid…” Eli slapped his forehead, and trying not to fluster himself further, he composed himself and stepped inside.

Around the same time, two figures made their way through the entrance of the Sabosen hospital. One, a tall man dressed in regal robes of charcoal, trimmed in silver, and with a dark burgundy shoulder cape connected by white aiguillettes. The other was a much shorter, much younger woman with long blue-black hair that waved over her shoulders. She was dressed in a modest, but elegant dark green uniform with black detail and a single patch of burgundy worn near her collar.

The Sabosen staff cleared a path for the two, many even stopping to bow respectfully as they passed. The young woman bowed back politely and as best she could, but the man did not stop, nor did he so much as shift his eyes to regard the other Chiss. No, he was purely focused on the pathway straight ahead of him, his steps never faltering, gaze never breaking, and it was apparent by the displeased look on his face that this important man was absolutely not in a good mood.

The girl jogged briskly to keep pace with his long strides, about to break the tense silence between them when he started speaking quietly in anger-laced Cheunh. Whether he was speaking to himself or to her was anybody’s guess, but Tharin liked to think that her father was still sharing his grievances with her. After all, he’d been doing so since they had left that big emergency meeting on Csilla.

“Of all the absolutely imbecilic things he’s done in his time, this certainly ranks close to the very top of my list.”

“You keep a list?” She asked, her face amused, but cautiously so.

He shot her a soft look out of the corner of his eye and nodded.

“It is organized in accordance to date and disapproval. He has been making these obstinate spectacles of himself ever since we were boys. Will his tenacious curiosity never cease to satisfy him?”

“I doubt his reasons are that simple, Ticsi.”

“Nothing is ever simple with this one, Tharin.”
“You must be at least a little bit exci—” She was cut off by a much louder voice, his tones unusual, the language different, but altogether disruptive as the two Chiss found themselves stopping by the door which contained such an odd creature within.

“This is he?” The man inquired, his face passive as stone coupled with arms that were placed uniformly behind his back.

She scanned the symbols on the wall with a small oval-shaped device which she wore around the back of her hand, but before it even had time to reveal the patient within, his loud, human voice was heard shouting his otherworldly complaints again from the other side of the door.

“I don’t understand what you’re saying? Can I get like, a translator or something!? Whoa! Wait! What are you going to do with that thing? YOW! That’s cold!”

“He’s got quite a mouth on him?” Tharin noted, suppressing the amused smirk from her father’s eyes.

“Yes, like you.” He teased, smiling down at her for a split second, but letting it vanish as soon as the comment was made. The stern look and gruff voice returned as he glared at the human’s door. “I want him. Tharin, have this one sent to the room at once.”

“Of course.”

He started walking again and she jumped, looking from him, to the door, and back before following at his heels. With the press of her screen, she nodded and the hologram retreated back into the device before powering down.

“The request has been sent,” she informed. “Shall we now stop to greet the Aristocra?”

He let a breath escape through his nose, displeased, but knowing all too well how these things were meant to be done. Whether the Aristocra knew they had arrived or not, she was aware that they were coming, and thus she would be expecting them to visit her office. There was an order to this sort of unscheduled visit and rules to be met, respects to be made. If there was one thing he was good at after all, it was understanding and implementing such political protocols.

With a slight hiss, he let his face sag tiredly into defeat and he nodded.

“I suppose we shall. It is only customary.”

She got onto the turbolift with him and waited for it to start moving before she finally nudged him with her elbow and broke him out of his foul trance.

“I know how you worry about him. Are you not excited to see him after all this time? Even if only just a little?”

“I am not worried, nor am I excited.” He frowned, the displeasure apparent in his scowl. “I am disappointed. I will have words with my brother about his negligence, and he will listen this time.”

She sighed and rolled her eyes as the lift paused on the second level and the two caught sight of the nearly out of place human liaison waiting to take their place in the turbolift.

“Oh!” He jumped, his tanned face growing redder as he offered up a small bow to them both. “Mitth’ras’safis, I was unaware that you had received my message already.”

“Cssoboti...” he replied in a lukewarm greeting. “Do you think the Chiss so inefficient at relaying
communication that I would not hear of my brother’s hospitalization?”

CSSOBOTI, that was what most of the Chiss outside of the military called him. Roughly translated, it meant “interloper”. The word was just slightly more polite than it sounded in translation, but only just slightly.

“O-of course not, sir!” Eli stammered. “I just meant— well, I didn’t think you would be arriving here so soon, is all.”

He hummed down at the man, but smiled a thin, unamused response before passing by him without another word, obviously heading to the Aristocra’s office to greet her as Eli had just finished doing.

Under his breath now, Eli leaned over to the girl and whispered to her in agitated Basic. “I didn’t think you’d be coming so soon Tharin! What the heck are you and your father doing here?”

She gave him a look and shrugged, also muttering now in clear, but heavily accented Basic.

“After the general told us what happened, he did not say a single word about it until he insisted we come to see him. At first I thought he was unaffected by the news of his brother’s return, but I barely got on the ship in time before we were skyborn! Nothing will slow his path to Thrawn now.”

“And he doesn’t look particularly happy today either.”

“Oh, you think!? He has been complaining to me all morning! After we greet the Aristocra, we will be coming up to his room, and he wants to meet the other human as well, the loud one.”

“Loud one?” His brows furrowed and he pointed below them. “You mean Ezra? Thrass wants to meet Ezra!?”

“I’ve already made request of it on his chart to be escorted up.” She held up her hand and showed him the device. “Is that going to be a problem?”

“Nope, not a problem!” He lied. “Just transfer the pass codes over to me, will you? I’ll go down and grab him myself. The kid knows me and can’t understand a single thing the staff are telling him anyway.”

“That will probably be best if you retrieved him then.” She nodded, sliding her request into oblivion as the holoscreen tucked back into her hand. “It is done.”

“Good. Now, just do me a favor kid, stall your dad for as long as you can in there. Do this for me, okay?”

“You aren’t making sense, but I’ll do what I can.” She got a devilish look on her face and tapped the tips of her index fingers together as her bright laser-red eyes bore into him with fresh intrigue. “You will repay me I assume? I have a new invention in desperate need of testing.”

Eli winced, the pain on his face a mere shadow of the last time he’d agreed to be Tharin’s test dummy over at her lab on the planet, Csaaus.

“Tell you what,” he spoke quickly and hopped into the lift. “You do this and I won’t tell Thrawn that it was you who taught me those Cheunh swear words.”

Her round eyes went wide briefly and with a disappointed growl, she let her lips curl, arching her
blue-black brows, as her red eyes turned quickly into slits. “Ugh, fine! But you are unfair Eli, unfair!”

“Yeah, yeah… you can put it on my tombstone if I don’t survive the day. Now get going!”

She rolled her eyes at him and turned to walk away as Eli’s lift swiftly glided back down to the first level of the hospital.

He was really starting to regret teaching that Chiss teenager what an eye roll was considering she did it constantly now, most of them directed at Eli himself.

Tharin had helped Eli with Cheunh when he first arrived in the Chiss Ascendancy. She was on Sposia for a new medical project between the Sabosen and Inrokini houses, and was one of the best technicians they had, even despite her young age. After learning who Eli was, she took instant fascination to him and agreed to give him extra help with Cheunh if he agreed to tell her stories about Thrawn and help her get a better grasp on her own understanding of Basic.

She was one of the mere handful of Chiss who could understand, let alone speak his language, and he was astounded to discover that she’d already spoken it so much better than Thrawn had when they’d first met. Although, Tharin technically had been learning the language ever since she was a child, so she’d had longer to retain her knowledge of it than either Thrawn or Thrass had.

Now that she knew more of the slang and technical terms, she’d thrown her own twist on the language, her Chiss accent still there, but her speech more rebellious and occasionally mimicking Eli’s wildspace accent for certain words. She appointed herself as Eli’s designated Basic-speech compatriot after a few lessons, and demanded that he speak with her as informally as he would any of his other human friends in order for her to learn the language in the clearest degree possible.

This really wasn’t polite in Chiss standards by any means, but as the Syndic’s daughter, and Thrawn’s niece, Eli was honor-bound to do what she said. *That*, and having someone he could speak freely towards was a nice change of pace after being respectful at all hours of the day with everyone else. However, having her and Thrass here of all places, and right now while things were still so messed up and confusing… these all added up to be the perfect ingredients to make things a potential nightmare for him.

“This day just keeps getting better and better…”

When the turbolift landed, Eli shot out and caught himself nearly running the whole way to Ezra’s room. He’d barely had time to leave the Aristocra’s office before running into Thrass and Tharin, and after the morning’s incident with Thrawn, he hadn’t even thought about going over the datapad with him until now. With Thrawn’s family here, and with Ezra being thrown into the mix, it would seem that the conversation would need to be put on hold for a little while longer.

He barged in, seeing the boy shirtless, but at least fully clothed other than that. Scars traced his back as well as the fairly new mark of a healing baster burn which he now sported on his shoulder, the scar healed to the best of his human anatomy’s capabilities.

“Please excuse my intrusion,” he said, bowing to the staff inside.

Ezra turned his relieved blue eyes to the door and with a wide, grateful smile, greeted his guest.

“Eli!”

He acknowledging the greeting with a nod of his head, but there was a new sense of discomfort within him now that he knew what all Ezra had done. Eli had to mentally remind himself that the
boy from the journal and this one, the one who was standing there grinning happily before him, were the same person but simultaneously not. Ezra didn’t remember who he really was… yet… and if Eli wanted to keep it that way, he would need to start upping his acting a little more before the kid caught on.

“How was your night, Ezra?”

“Pretty good actually,” he replied. “That was probably the best sleep I’ve had in days, maybe weeks!”

“That’s good then.”

“Yeah, I think I was about to be released, but these guys have been putting all this cold medical gear on my back and chest and keep doing tests.”

“They’re just listening to your organs.” He smirked. “You know, the heart, lungs, pulse, and so forth. Haven’t you ever had a check up before?”

The boy frowned, but a small, awkward smile peeking out as he rubbed his hand nervously around his neck.

“Well, you don’t get the chance to go to a lot of doctors when your parents disappear when you’re eight years old, and you grow up pick-pocketing people on the back alleys of Lothal.”

Eli froze, regretting the comment as soon as he’d made it. All night reading Thrawn’s file on the young Jedi, and he’d already said something that he should have known better than to let slip out of his mouth. Of course, now that Ezra had told him, it was one less secret he’d have to keep, but at the same time a pang of dread crept in on him because that was a memory that Eli hadn’t thought the boy had already remembered.

“You remembered more about your early life?” He asked, masking his worry with a look of compassion and curiosity, both of which were truly genuine on Eli’s part, but they were in equal part a tool to hide the other emotions from forming on his face.

“Bits and pieces,” Ezra said. “Mostly just about my parents. Happy memories we had. They were never in any of the ones I remembered after I turned eight. I also remembered being called a Lothrat by everyone else after that, when I started stealing from them to survive.” He smirked guiltily. “I got pretty good at it, I’ll admit, but still…” He frowned. “It seems I had a pretty rough childhood.”

Eli placed a hand on his shoulder and patted it once.

“Well, maybe this’ll be some good news for you then? I’m getting you out of here. We have somewhere else we need to be.”

“Really!” The boy visibly brightened at that. “Yes! Absolutely! Anything to get me out of this room! Thank you!”

Eli smirked and turned immediately to the Sabosen staff, bowing lower as he spoke to them in Cheunh.

“I apologize again for the intrusion, but the human is needed for debriefing at once.”

The medics froze, the confusion apparent to Eli, but probably invisible to Ezra.
“On whose authority?” One asked.

Eli did his best to mask the smile he wanted to show, but the looks on their faces were priceless when he’d pulled up Tharin's summons to show them.

“The Syndic of the House Mitth.”

Their mouths dropped slightly, but each nodded and started to shut down their current procedures.

“Yes, right away! We release him into your care!”

One pressed the symbol on their checklist and Ezra’s medical suit started to digitally sew itself back together along his torso. The boy gaped down at the uniform, watching it in pure amazement as he began rubbing his hands along his newly reformed sleeves to try and understand how the Chiss tech worked.

“Come on Ezra,” Eli ordered.

He looked up and smiled past the two nurses.

“Gladly!”

Eli placed a hand on Ezra’s chest as he tried to go through the door. It was a sudden movement, odd and out of character for him, but Eli composed himself quickly and leaned down to mumble into Ezra’s ear. “Turn, bow, and express your gratitude. It’s customary. You don’t want to offend the people in charge of fixing you if you break.”

He couldn’t let Ezra out of his sight, so the hand was an accidental reflex, but masking it with some Chiss law and jokes seemed to throw Ezra off his trail. *He’d definitely need to be more careful.*

"Oh!" Ezra’s frown lifted and he nodded in understanding. "Right! Sorry?"

"Just do what I do, okay?” Eli bowed first and Ezra copied the motion. “*Ch’ah bin’vah vah sir veo raszi.*"

“*Cha binvav seer veerazi!*” he repeated uncertainly, his words horribly misspoken, but Eli couldn’t help but chuckle at the attempt, the nurses accepting the effort with unamused nods of their heads.

“That’ll do it, now hurry up we don’t have much time. Let’s go!”

Eli half dragged, half ran back to the turbolift, making sure Ezra was ahead of him at all times so he could keep his eyes on the kid.

“Where are we going?” Ezra asked, unswayed by their haste and still just grateful to be free of his morning check-up.

“We have to get up to Thrawn’s room before they do.”

“Who’s they?”

“Just be on your best behavior!” Eli signed tiredly. He definitely could have used a full night’s sleep if this was what he knew he’d be waking up to deal with. “Stand still, don’t speak unless spoken to, just— you know—”

“I got it, I got it!” He said, waving the words away suddenly. He chuckled and got into the turbolift as Eli half shoved the amused teenage boy inside. “Are we meeting with the governor or royalty or
something? What’s the big deal?”

Eli shot him a look, his brow lifted to reveal the sweat forming on his forehead. “Just follow my lead, kid and this should all go smoothly. Stay calm.”

Ezra had a flash of memory come springing back to him, another worried man, Kanan in fact, telling him to calm down when first meeting Hera’s father. He couldn’t remember much about the meeting, but he remembered Kanan getting all of their names wrong as well as mentally panicking when he’d first met the orange-skinned Twi’lek and the two people he had behind him. It was a good memory, one that brought a smile to his face, even as he shot a teasing look towards Eli.

“This isn’t Thrawn’s dad or something is it?”

“Worse!” Eli said, shooting a curious glance over at him. *How had he—oh it didn’t matter.* “And for some reason, he wants to meet you. So just stay on your toes! That means—”

“I know what it means?”

“Right!” Eli rubbed his face. “Sorry, I’m so used to explaining idioms to the Chiss, that I—”


“Sure.” He grumbled a little to himself after that. *Who was the adult here again? Why were years of military training suddenly disappearing into fumbling incompetence? Maybe the lack of sleep was to blame, or maybe his confidence was overshadowed by Thrawn’s presence back in his life?*

*Calm down Eli,* he told himself. *Get your head together!*

The turbolift landed on the third level and Eli was relieved to see that there was no sign of Thrass having been there. He pulled Ezra over to the guard and showed him Tharin’s pass-code which allowed Ezra passage into Thrawn’s room and the two rushed inside.

“Thrawn!” Eli called. “We’re coming in!”

Mentally he hoped they wouldn’t walk in on him naked again, but shoved Ezra through the door and prepared to deal with whatever awaited them on the other side.

“Ah, Ezra!” Thrawn greeted. “I am pleased to see you visiting. I hope you are likewise in good health?”

He was standing upright in his bronze health suit (*thankfully*) and tending to the Olbio tree and his Ysalamir, *something Eli knew the nurses wouldn’t like if they walked in again and caught him doing.*

“Thanks Thrawn. No, I feel pretty good actually, and these Chiss medical suits are amazing! I don’t even know how to get them off, but I’m strangely starting to be okay with that.”

Thrawn smiled at them and continued scratching beneath the lizard’s chin as it purred from the touch.

“Remarkable creatures, Ysalamiri,” he said. “They start out so small, so unsure of themselves, but
grow to be large, competent beings with both time and a little thoughtful care.”

“Speaking of which—” Eli eased.

His voice went unheard as Ezra walked up to the Ysalamir and let it crawl onto his arms.

“Hey Jorj!” He laughed. “Thanks for the quick first aid back on Myrkr, we owe you one!” He frowned and looked over at Thrawn. “Wait… will we need to take Jorj back to Myrkr where he belongs? I didn’t even think of it before, but we took the little guy off his home planet when we brought him with us.”

“Ysalamiri are creatures that do not dwell on such things. They are a pack species, but are also capable creatures on their own. So long as they have attachments, they will thrive no matter where they are rooted. This one most likely hatched alone and was instantly attacked by predators before crossing paths with you.”

“Uh, Thrawn…” Eli tried again, his whispers more fervent now.

“Oh!” Ezra nodded. “Attachments like the Olbio tree and the two of us, right? That’s really all these little guys need? How big do they get? Is Jorj just a baby?” He gasped. “Did the Vornskr eat Jorj’s family!? No wonder he’s so attached to us! Poor little guy…”

“Indeed. I remembered much of my research involving these creatures. It would seem I studied them in my youth after a rare encounter had during the Clone Wars. Have you had any more of your past returned to you, Ezra?”

“Well, now that you mention it—”

“Thrawn!”

Both men looked over to him and Thrawn lifted his brows at the outburst.

“My apologies, Captain Vanto. If you wish to speak, you may of course do so without permission?”

Eli’s face got hot as he looked between Thrawn and Ezra then leaned over and muttered through gritted teeth.

“I was trying to be discreet!”

“Ah,” Thrawn said with an unamused hum. “I see.”

“I’ll… just be over here…” Ezra said uncomfortably, taking Jorj the Ysalamir over to the window in order to give Thrawn and Eli a little more privacy.

“If this is about the datapad,” he started. “I have hidden it, and think it best if we—”

Eli interrupted.

“Permission to speak freely sir?”

“Of course?”

“Please stop talking!” Eli begged, his tone earning a confused stare from Thrawn as the Chiss stood to full height and looked down at his friend with a new aura of concern.
“Something is troubling you?”

“Not as much as it’s going to trouble you!” He pulled him closer and pointed towards the door. “Look any minute now, that door is going to swing open and you’re going to have to come up with a good story to tell your br—”

The door symbol started to glow and the panels slid open suddenly, giving Eli only one second longer to mutter words so quiet, he was sure only Thrawn beside him could clearly hear them come out of his mouth.

“Oh, Krayt spit...”

In the archway, there stood a tall, almost regal looking Chiss, his skin a medium shade of blue, his hair combed stylishly above his head with a few spiky strands swooping out near the top. His eyes were a burning bright red, much deeper than Thrawn’s, and though he appeared a little shorter than him, he had a commanding presence that made him appear taller than anyone else in the room. His stare appeared calculating and strict as he walked in and took note of anything within visual reach.

Ezra only stared as the man met gazes with him and he immediately felt his face flush in the awkward silence that followed. *Eli told him not to speak unless spoken to, but this guy wasn’t speaking so he really wasn’t sure what he was supposed to be doing here.*

“Ezra,” Eli introduced quickly. “I’d like to introduce you to the Syndic of House Mitth—”

“Mitth’ras’safis,” Thrawn blurted, his tone completely unreadable.

“You know him?” Ezra pointed.

Eli smirked knowingly as he shuffled to stand closer to the young man and to give the two Chiss more room to catch up.

Thrawn’s voice was laced with something that Ezra had never heard, a gentleness to it as he looked to the other man and said, “He is my brother.”

“Brother!?” Ezra choked. For the life of him, he never would have guessed that Thrawn had a brother. *Wait... how was a brother worse than meeting Thrawn’s father? Why was Eli so worried about this guy? He looked pretty official, but not really threatening per se?*

The Syndic looked in Thrawn’s direction, his face still as stone as he watched his brother walking towards him, his arms outstretched slightly as he made his approach.

“Thrass, I—”

Before Thrawn could embrace him, Thrass stepped forward and with one hard swipe, slapped his brother smack across the face. Thrawn fell to a knee, his body unprepared for the sheer force behind the blow, but his reflexes catching him before he could fully hit the floor.

Eli and Ezra stared wide eyed at them in disbelief, Eli taking a step forward, but stopping himself after only a half step in their direction.

His voice appeared just as monotone and inquisitive as Thrawn’s was, but Thrass’ tone seemed to
come off as much lower and less subtle. To Ezra’s shock, the man was speaking clearly in perfect Basic down at his brother as Thrawn wiped his cheek off with the back of his hand and looked up.

“It would seem your warrior’s fortune has finally failed you,” Thrass said calmly. “Especially if you were confined to the hospital for this long, Mitth’raw’nuruodo.”

Eli winced. Thrass calling Thrawn by his full name in this context was more an insult than anything else he could think of. It would be the equivalent of the time Eli’s mother scolded him by using his full name when she’d found out he’d broken one of her fancy dinner plates while playing with his ball in the house. Only... this was like that times a thousand!

Thrawn rose to his feet with a hiss, an impressively reptilian sound that Eli was still amazed the Chiss vocals could mimic so well. After that it was just still, cold silence as they looked into one another’s red eyes without so much as breathing for what felt like an eternity.

Where Ezra thought the two might be calm and collected, he was completely taken aback when the two Chiss suddenly started arguing as loud as they possibly could in their native language.

Eli’s eyes were as wide as Ezra’s, but the boy leaned over to him anyway and whispered, “Any idea what’s going on?”

Eli gave him a sideways glance and made an uncomfortable face.

“You really don’t want to know.”

Eli wasn’t really sure he wanted to know either. Thrass was screaming about things like "growing too attached" and "forgetting the real mission" all things that confused him and made him weary to eavesdrop any further.

*WHOOSH!* 

The door slid open again as a light gasp cut through the all the harsh shouting. Ezra turned to the disruption and saw a young woman standing there in a green-trimmed uniform with long, dark-blue hair, and round red eyes. She had obviously been running, but seemed to recover quickly as she walked in with a wide smile on her dark lips and a flash of excitement in her bright, almost glowing eyes.

“Thrawn!” She screamed, her voice laced with something familiar and happy sounding as she marched over to the two brothers and with no effort at all, tossed Thrass away before leaning Thrawn forward by the back of his neck and laughing as she pressed her forehead up against his. Just as quickly, she seemed to release him, the poor man looking utterly shocked and confused as she did so.
She mused observations at him, her accent thick, but understandable as she spoke to him in impressively clear Basic, *Ezra noted*.

“Your hair is so short now! Oh wow, look at your eyes! What did you do to them? Oh, I have so many stories to tell you!”

As he composed himself, his confusion was already reaching new heights. Eli stifled a chuckle beneath his hand and the young woman’s face crinkled angrily before she sent one sharp punch to his sore arm, the bronze patterns in his suit going haywire from the contact.

“Whoa!” Eli stepped forward all the way now, and lifted his hands for her to calm down. “Take it easy! He’s still recovering!”

“Oh right!” She said quickly. “Sorry! He was behaving oddly though. Like he didn’t know me? It was unlike him.”

“You are going to have to remind Thrawn of who you are,” Thrass said in a tired, bored sounding way as he shook his head and shot a particularly nasty look at his brother.

She sneered back at him and then turned her gaze over to Thrawn.

“What for?”

“You were just a small child when he left,” Thrass continued. “Even without the altercations in his memory, I do not believe he could so easily recognize you after all this time apart.”
“No way!” She exclaimed, grabbing Thrawn’s face as she ran her hands over his head. “What altercations? Did he hit his head? Oooh! Is there brain damage?”

“Easy with him!” Eli reminded again. “The medics say the damage might only temporary. He just needs a little time to get his thoughts straight is all.”

Thrass made a face at Eli’s expression, but Tharin had understood its meaning completely and nodded.

“I see...” She released her grip, her voice dying down to a more somber sound of contemplation. She reached down and held his hand, smiling warmly up at him as her behavior shifted into a civil Cheunh greeting. “I am Mitth’ar’inrokini, your niece.”

“What’d she say?” Ezra whispered.

“That’s Thrawn’s niece.” Eli mumbled back. “Mitth’ras’safis’s daughter, Mitth’ar’inrokini.”

Ezra let out a breath of air. So not only did Thrawn have a brother, but a niece too!? He felt something strange overwhelming him, partly shock, but the rest was something closer to happiness that Thrawn had family to go back to… unlike Ezra. He frowned a little at that, but did his best to hide his jealousy from the rest of the room.

“Niece?” Thrawn repeated, his mind struggling to remember when he had ever had a niece.

“I suppose I was very young when you left on your last mission, so I guess I can understand why you might not remember me.” She held out a finger and shoved it up in his face. “Just this once I’ll let it slide because of your brain damage.”

“It ain’t brain damage!” Eli blurted.

She laughed.

“Well, bring him over to Csaus anyway. I bet I can plug in and fix him right up!”

“That would be a sight to behold,” Thrass said, finally breaking his stern resolve with a minuscule chuckle. “How different would my brother be to one of your robots, Tharin? Will he be so simple to repair?”

Thrawn’s eyes narrowed.

“You are one to talk, Brother.”

Ezra and Eli snorted back a laugh, a warning look from the Syndic proving enough to make the humans stiffen up and quiet down before they could let out another sound.

“Calm yourself, Ticsi!” Tharin smiled, patting his chest. “You walked right into that one.”

“I walked nowhere?” Thrass protested.

“It’s an expression, sir,” Eli explained guiltily. “One I taught her, I’m afraid.”

“Her Basic...” Thrawn noted. “It is very reminiscent of yours, Eli?”

He shrugged.

“Remember one of those persistent teachers I mentioned? Well turns out she wanted to know more
Basic slang terms in return for her teaching me a little extra Cheunh. She’s like the little sister I never had… or wanted for that matter.”

She stuck her tongue out at him before noticing Ezra for the first time and poking it back in with raised brows.

Eli continued. “But she likes it when I speak informally to her. Says it helps her speak less structured Basic like she’d really be doing if she ever left the Ascendancy to visit—”

“She will not be leaving!” Thrass growled down at his daughter, his words directed to everyone in the room. "I do not approve of this informal speech. Tharin will not need it on Csaus nor any other of our worlds."

She tensed and shot Eli a glare, her vivid red eyes burning holes into his face.

"Right... Sorry..." Eli rubbed at his hair. "It was more for curiosity's sake than anything else, sir."

Thrass didn't seem swayed by the answer, but Tharin was already finished glaring at Eli and had since shifted her curious eyes back to Ezra where they remained fixated on him for longer than he felt comfortable. Nervously, he fumbled with his shirt collar and tried not to make direct eye contact for fear he might start blushing. What was it with these red eyes and the awkward tension in the air making him feel so uncomfortable all of the sudden? Thrawn had never made him feel so out of place?

“So…” Ezra clapped, his voice probably louder than it needed to be. “Everybody here speaks Basic? That’s really cool. I thought for a while there I wouldn’t have anyone to talk to besides Eli and the other humans I came here with.”

Thrass rolled his eyes— or well— Ezra assumed he did, but they were too bright to tell. The motion made Eli tense up and Tharin seem to laugh under her breath for some odd reason.

“The house of Mitth is fluent in Sy Bisti, Minnisiat, Meese Caulf, and multiple trade languages outside of our main tongue of Cheunh. During the Clone Wars, Mitth’raw’nuruodo learned Basic from soldiers and passed the information down to myself and I to my child. It was in our best interest to learn, and is therefore a rare skill that not many Chiss possess, much less master to such fluency as my daughter.”

Ezra clamped his lips together and leaned back away, yielding command over to the irritated Chiss man in the expensive-looking robes as his comment took the room.

“Mitth’ras’safis is a Syndic,” Eli explained, his voice calm and unaffected by the presence of Thrass' tone. “He’s agreed to represent you and the other humans when we present your case for a ship to the council. That way we can get you all back home.”

“Careful Captain!” Tharin teased. “Syndic is a really close word to the human word “cynic” is it not? We would not want anyone to get the wrong idea about my father, now would we?”

Eli suppressed his snort, favoring a nod and a grin instead.

Thrass, meanwhile, made a face and looked down at his daughter with an exhausted expression.

“Why do you feel the need to test my patience, little one?”

She smirked and gave him one hard pat.
“Ch’eo ch’at’utuhah, but you make it far too easy, Ticsi.”

He snorted at her, but in an almost loving way as she read the warning look in his face and tensed, deciding to stop showing off for her uncle and his friends for a few moments lest he lose his temper in her direction the next time he decided to berate somebody in this room.

“Ch’im Ch’ah ritot to nuz vn’ini?” She asked innocently.

Thras thought about it for a moment and with dissatisfied agreement, nodded.

She smiled and made her way to Ezra, stopping an uncomfortable distance away from him now as she pulled his face into hers and touched the cool skin of her forehead to his own, and as she did this, he felt his entire head suddenly grow a lot hotter. She pulled back after a moment and smiled at him again, focusing on his hair as she began to run her fingers curiously through it without any warning at all.

"Fascinating!” She said softly. "Who exactly are you? Your hair is like ours."

Ezra swallowed and pulled away, his hands held to her shoulders as he looked to the room for help.

“Uh… Um... Eli?!”

“Heel Tharin!” The man said, shooing her away. “This is Ezra. He helped to rescue Thrawn down on Myrkr and also has some kind of partial amnesia. So, try not to freak him out with all of—” He gestured at all of her. “You know— you?”

"I'm simply being friendly to him. I have never met another human aside you, and this one is so much different!"

Ezra looked to him for help, but a single grin from Eli alerted him that he was on his own.

“Chiss aren’t good at personal space,” the man muttered, looking to Thrawn before flashing back to earlier this morning and diverting his eyes quickly to anywhere else. “I should know. Just endure it and be polite. I’m going to go over and make sure those two don't kill each other. You kids play nice now, you hear?”

“I’m not going to bite him, Captain?” Tharin chuckled.

“And I’m sure he’s real thankful for that.” He walked to the other side of the room, waving his last words of warning back to Ezra as he fled. “Good luck, Ezra.”

“Uh…” He paused when he looked to Tharin and took a step back. "So... you're Thrawn's niece? That's cool?"

She didn't seem to notice the small-talk, her red gaze still fixated on his hair.

“Would you mind if I run a diagnostic on you?” She asked bluntly.

“What?”

She continued to rustle through his hair with her slender blue fingers, making observations about it before finally settling on a statement.

“Tell me, are you part Chiss?”

“N-not that I know of?” He stammered in reply. "This is just the hair I was born with? It's not
really that uncommon a color where I'm from."

“Fascinating!”

Jorj gurgled from Ezra's shoulders, making the young woman's interest shift immediately from Ezra over to it.

"Oh a Ysalamir!" She held out her arm. "May I?"

Ezra shrugged.

"He's kind of attached to Thrawn and me, so don't feel too bad if he doesn't want to go to you right away."

She wiggled her finger at the Ysalamir and it instantly shifted over to her and curled around the back of her neck to hide beneath her long hair, purring as it supposedly enjoyed the tickle it got when brushing against the soft strands of wavy blue and black. She shot an almost smug look back at Ezra and petted the lizard as it trilled happily under her hand.

“Traitor...” He grumbled.

“This Ysalamir is quite friendly.” She smiled again, her gaze lifting back to Ezra's. “Tell me, were you there when it hatched or is its bond to you something stronger? I have never met one up close before, but the others on Csaus claim they are typically docile but aloof creatures.”

“We saved it from Vornskr on Myrkr,” Ezra explained. “After that, it just sort of stuck with me and Thrawn. It's amazing all the Ysalamiri can do though. They have unbreakable grips, make their own medicine, and this little guy even helped warn me when we were about to be attacked. It's a good thing he did too because when he clings too close to me, it makes it a little hard to use the Force. Because of that, he mostly just stays with Thrawn.”

“The Force?” Tharin repeated. “I do not recognize that word? What is this Force?”

“Whoa—kay!” Eli interrupted, splitting them apart part with his words and a quick motion of his arm. “What are you kids talking about over here?”

“I believe he said Force,” Thrass repeated simply. He turned to Thrawn, his voice not particularly angry, but passively disapproving and chiding nonetheless. “Another Jedi you have found, brother? And you brought him here of all places? What were you thinking?”

“Ezra is a personal warrior of mine and is indeed strong with the Force, yes,” Thrawn explained. “Though to the extent, we are not yet fully aware of.” In Cheunh, he added, "The boy is under control and I have taken precautions to ensure he remains so during his stay here. The less people who know about this, of course, will be for the better."

“How convenient for you.” Thrass hummed, giving a quizzical stare to his brother as if to say, I know what you’re thinking and for your sake, I hope for once that I am wrong.

Thrawn glared back at him, understanding the hidden meaning behind the comment, but refusing to tell Thrass any more about his plans for Ezra.

“In any regard, I humbly apologize for the rude introduction, young Ezra.” Thrass bowed. “We will be seeing much more of one another as I have been tasked by Captain Vanto to deliver your case to the high council. Since you are no doubt close with my younger brother, I will likewise task his obedience to you and the captain. He has always been quite the—what is the word?
Troublemaker?"

Eli’s eyes shot wide as he looked to Thrawn and back at Thrass.

"Vusavco!" Tharin cheered. “Your Basic has improved, Ticsi! I am impressed.”

“Thank you, k'eten.”

“O—kay?” Ezra nodded politely, his head still spinning from the last few minutes of chaos and Eli’s newfound discomfort. “Thank you for your help Mr. Mis-tras-thra-fasafis?”

“Perhaps it would be better if Ezra were allowed to address you by your core name, brother?”

“Absolutely not!” He said, his voice slightly more imperious than it was before.

“He did save your brother’s life?” Eli stretched under his breath.

“Oh, don’t be so formal Ticsi!” Tharin swatted, holding her hand out to Ezra. “You may call me Tharin if you wish.”

“Thanks Tharin?” He said unsurely, taking her hand as he felt the burning hot laser stare of Thrass drilling into his face, and he let go and backed away in an instant.

“My apologies,” Thrass said with a bow. “Seeing as though you did rescue Thrawn from certain death, most likely the result of his own poor choices, then I will permit you to address me by my core name preceded with the title of Syndic. It is a high honor indeed, you must be quite flattered.”

Eli nudged him hard and Ezra snapped.

“Oh! Right! So—so flattered!” He bowed to seal the deal. “Thank you Syndic Thrass.”

“You are welcome,” he said with a swift turn towards the door. “For now, I must leave. I wish to have all matters cleared up as soon as possible. I will have my case prepared to defend you humans by nightfall. Let us reconvene in the next morning and discuss our terms for the High Council. I apologize once again that you had to witness our family quarrels, Ezra.”

They turned to leave, before Thrawn cleared his throat and made a motion towards the bruise now forming on his face.

“I will not apologize to you, Thrawn. Had your memory been complete, you would have remembered why you deserved that strike.” The corners of his lips raised and he stopped next to the Olbio tree as his daughter returned the Ysalamir to its branches. “You and I will have further words about your actions later, Thrawn, don’t think I will share in your forgetfulness in this matter.”

His lip twitched, pulling his whole face into a frown.

“Oh, I cannot wait for you to visit my workshop on Csaus, G'en'vti!” Tharin added. “I’ve built so many amazing inventions! I can’t wait for you to see them!”

“Have you now?” Thrawn mused, his stare looking to her with a soft intrigue now.

“You might have been born the tactician, and Ticsi the politician, but I am the best technician in our family. I helped to design the upgrades to your medical suit just last year, and that’s not even the best of my inventions thus far.”
“You designed these suits!?” Ezra blurted, the awe completely visible in his voice. “Wow! How do you get them to magically open and close?”

“Magic?” She furrowed her brows.

“Later, Ezra...” Eli patted. "Save that question for another day or else we'll never get her to stop talking about her inventions."

She growled at Eli, but turned her attention back to her uncle and clasped her hands together, a human motion meant to signify plea and hopeful questioning. No doubt another mannerism she learned from Eli. It made Thrawn smile.

“Please tell me you will come visit soon, G'en'vti!”

“I look forward to it, Tharin,” he said, the name obviously foreign to his lips.

She noticed the sound too and frowned a little.

“Just get better already. You are no fun this way.” She shot Ezra a quick gleam and smiled as she traced her two fingers along the scars on his face and clipped her hand away as it reached his chin. “The same goes for you, Sevicsi.”

He swallowed, nodding anxiously, and making a mental note to ask Eli what she’d just called him later. No personal space was an understatement. This girl had absolutely no sense of boundaries whatsoever! It was an odd thing to try and get used to, but not altogether unwelcome. She seemed nice after all. A bit enthusiastic and curious, but friendly at least, and that was more than Ezra could say about the handful of Chiss he'd met already.

“Come, Tharin!” Thrass ordered. “And Thrawn—” He turned and let his daughter escape under his arm as his red eyes softened for the first time since he'd come inside. “I am pleased to see you again, even under such circumstances. Do promise to stay out of further trouble until I can fix the messes you have already created.”

“Don’t you always?” Thrawn smiled back.

“It is my job, little brother.” Thrass scoffed, but returned the grin. "Do try not to exploit my work."

"Never."

He chuckled, earning a snide nudge from his daughter as the doors slid shut behind them.

"Awww!" Eli and Ezra teased.

The room went quiet, save for the remarks Eli and Ezra couldn’t help but let out before earning a warning glare from the Chiss to silence their supposed mockery.

“Sorry!” Eli laughed. “I think that’s the most relaxed and genuine I’ve ever seen him! You know how he gets?”

“Indeed.”

“Anyway, I’d better see them out before all of House Sabosen decides to ban them from the medical center.”

“Thank you, Eli.” Thrawn bowed. “I will remain here with Ezra. I still wish to hear more about his new memories.”
He nodded, hiding his concern as he turned and left, resisting the urge to make a face until he was safely out the door and far, far away from the both of them.

“Now Ezra, please tell me the extent of your new memories. Hopefully the dreams found you in pleasant reverie this time.” Thrawn lead him over to have a seat as he grunted and sat at the foot of his bed.

“Are you okay?”

“I feel quite better,” he said, but the pulses in his medical suit revealed otherwise. Luckily, Ezra didn’t seem to know what it meant, and Thrawn continued his lie as he motioned for the boy to take a seat next to him. “There is still a small amount of discomfort, but it is nothing of major concern.”

“You’re sure? This isn’t like the broken ribs thing again, is it?”

He smiled.

“I thank you for your concern, but I am fine. I am most worried about you. Please, speak freely now that it is just the two of us.”

“Well, I remembered more about my parents,” Ezra informed. “About my master, about me fighting with stormtroopers, and maybe even some other Jedi. Bad ones...”

“Bad how?”

“They just seemed dark to me somehow. I don’t really remember what was a memory and what was a nightmare caused by the medicine they gave me. One of the people I faced, he broke my lightsaber and was dressed in black armor almost like a droid. He had a red lightsaber and this mechanical breathing sound. It was the most powerful presence I’ve ever felt, and it made me feel cold. It was so real though! Does that make sense at all?”

Thrawn recognized the man he spoke of immediately and nodded.

“It does. I believe these memories were accurate representations of past conflict within you, Ezra. The man in armor is a powerful Sith Force wielder known as Darth Vader. The two of us have crossed paths with him multiple times in the past, and I imagine it was not a very pleasant experience for either of us.”

"Really?"

"Really. The other dark Jedi you encountered were rogue warriors bent on hunting you down for their master. It was he who gave you those scars and who led you on your path to come into my service."

"Wait..." Ezra stopped, the flashes of faces and visions almost overwhelming him as they returned in bits and pieces to his brain. "How do you know all this?"

"You told me of course," Thrawn lied. Well, half-lied. Ezra had told Thrawn all about his history, though it was not so much in words as it had been in stories, art, and research Thrawn had studied on the boy.

Ezra only nodded as he tried to sort through the new thoughts.

Thrawn looked sternly to the boy and continued to weave his web of thoughtful lies and half truths.
Confusion would make it harder for Ezra to sort out fiction from reality. Thrawn had already read up on the facts about Ezra from his datapad after Eli had left in such haste earlier in the morning. He knew everything he needed to know in order to create a story so closely related to the truth that Ezra would likely never question the contradictions should he continue to remember more memories on his own.

"I myself had a memory return, explaining a time where you just recently agreed to work with me aboard my ship. This contract began only a short time before our untimely crash, explaining the reasons why Commodore Faro and the others aboard the Chimera did not yet recognize you, and why you and I have so few memories together. In my meditations, I even managed to recall your full name, Ezra Bridger."

Ezra paused as the name struck him with a pang of all-knowing resolve.

"Hey, that's right!"

Thrawn nodded calmly and continued.

"After losing your past crew in an explosion, you sought work with me. I helped to train your abilities, your fighting skills and your ability to disguise and infiltrate bases. You were a fast learner, even managing to perform a test in which you snuck into my office and altered data on my computer. This was of course a planned exercise and no real data was lost, but as I do recall, you past your performance well."

"I guess I remember some of that?" Ezra frowned, rubbing his head. "The explosion. The crew. Wh —what happened?"

"You originally came from a crew of warriors who closely infiltrated Rebel and Imperial bases to aid those most affected by the war. There is no innocent side to war, Ezra. You seemed to be in the middle of all of it. This was a noble cause, but one that neither party particularly cared for. In the past you have battled with Rebels and Imperials alike."

Ezra nodded, seeing faces of different people he'd fought with come into view. Some of them were Imperials, others, like one dark skinned man with a blaster, a rebel.

"You were on Lothal when the governor of said planet caught onto one of your operations, captured your captain, and just as you rescued her, the governor ordered the explosion which took the life of your Jedi master. When I came to Lothal to discover my fuel depot destroyed, you and I faced a common enemy. I had of course had past problems with this same governor, so I knew she was to blame for the destruction. You and I worked together to remove this person from power and have them pay the price for their crimes against us."

"What about the rest of my crew?"

Thrawn frowned. This would be the part of the story which he himself was most unsure about, but it would require the lie if Ezra were truly to sever his ties with his old past self and dedicate himself fully to the Chiss Ascendancy.

"They all perished in the explosion I am afraid."

The boy looked as though Thrawn had just taken a knife and gouged it through his chest cavity. His hands started shaking, blue eyes growing wet with tears, but with a steely resolve, he shoved it all aside and asked a single question through gritted teeth.

"Then what happened?"
Thrawn frowned again. He never had a taste for lying. He was good at it of course, but it was not how he wished this conversation to go.

"I believe Faro explained that we were fighting Rebels. I am still unsure of our crash, but I believe an outside force beyond our control appeared while we were stationed on Lothal, and somehow transported us to Myrkr."

Ezra was quiet, Thrawn's story seemingly explaining everything and nothing all at the same time. It sounded familiar, and Ezra could see the memories of it flashing in his mind, but it still lacked something deep down, something that made Ezra feel like a large chunk of himself was somehow still missing.

"Do you require time to process this memory?" Thrawn asked. "I believe it to be the truth, but am unsure myself as to the extent of it. I apologize if any of my information appears false to you."

"No no!" Ezra waved his hands around his face. "It's not that, really.... It's just... well, it's a lot to wrap my head around."

"I understand. Please, inquire with Captain Vanto to have you sent to the other Chimera survivors. Rest and clear your mind among comrades and perhaps you will feel better?"

"Yeah," he shrugged. "Maybe you're right?"

"Oh, but Ezra," Thrawn added, his tone stopping the boy before he could take a single step towards the door.

"Yeah?"

"The other Imperials may not react so kindly to the knowledge of you working both for and against the Empire. Until we are certain of this fact and of their reactions, I believe it would be in your best interest to avoid telling them the full extent of your activities with your prior crew."

"Oh..." he nodded. "Right... that makes sense."

"I am glad you think so," he replied.

"Thrawn."

"Yes?"

"Thank you," he said. "For telling me all of that."

"Of course." He bowed his head. "After all you have done for me, it is only fair to you that you know as much as you desire if we are to continue working together in the future."

"Yeah?" Ezra asked, curious now. "What kind of mission did you have in mind?"

"In time," Thrawn said with a simple wave of his hand, an action that Ezra was starting to get used to from the almost cryptic Chiss. "Rest now, and I will debrief you after Thrass has successfully obtained ships for our return to your home."

*Home.* Ezra really wasn't sure where that was anymore. He felt the dread in him rising when he thought of his crew, his family, his parents. All of them were really and truly dead? Kanan, Hera, Chopper, Zeb, Sabine... He felt a tear sliding down his face, rubbing at his eyes with his sleeve to hide the further tears that followed.
Without words, Thrawn stood and pulled Ezra closer to his chest, comforting the boy in the most human-way he knew how.

"Sorrow is the body's way of remembering life," he said softly. "Remember your past and let it guide you, knowing well that the obstacles you faced and the loved ones lost have brought you to this time and place for a reason. It is up to you to realize the purpose of that reason, and to choose a path to commit to when you finally move forward."

He nodded, the tears still coming as the cold-bodied Chiss almost seemed to warm him with his attempts at sympathy. It was a nice feeling, one that made Ezra feel cared for and safe. So maybe this wasn't where he started out, maybe he and the crew hadn't been longtime friends and allies, and maybe he wasn't really working for either side of the war? For now, he knew he was in this place and this time, and there were people around him that he cared for and wanted to protect...people who in turn wanted to care for and protect him as well. It might not have been ideal, but for now, at least for the moment, Ezra couldn't help but feel at home.
Common Ground

Chapter Summary

Ezra joins the other Chimera survivors at the Chiss dorms where they’ll all be staying until the trial. Once there, Ezra reconnects with the crew, gets a snazzy new outfit, and also learns a bit more about Thrawn and his brother.

Chapter Notes

Posted on July 9, 2018

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a short ride from the hospital to the location where Ezra and the other humans would be staying until their meeting with the Chiss High Council. Ezra looked down through the viewport as they flew over lush green fields and wildflowers of varying colors that the lost Jedi didn’t even know existed. He was astounded at how magnificent the planet of Sposia was from above, and it wasn’t just the natural beauty, but also the urban areas that caught his attention. The architecture was clean and pristine white, the shapes and structures all revealing an aerodynamic design that was both contemporary and geometric, every building similar but unique all at the same time, and all completely unlike anything Ezra had ever seen before.

Even Eli’s Chiss shuttle was something new and amazing, its design rounder and sleeker than ships Ezra remembered piloting back when he still had his memories. It was fast, but not as quick as a smaller vessel might be. The size was similar to that of the Phantom, a ship that Ezra distinctly remembered losing when some mechanical factory he was on fell out of the sky, taking the little shuttle down with it. His guilt over that memory only brought back a pit feeling of despair in his guts. Kanan had saved him that day, Hera too. Now both of them were gone and all he had left of them were the scattered few memories that had come back to him since the crash.

According to Eli, it had been about five standard days since then. Time in Chiss space worked a little differently than back home due to the differing alignment of the suns and planets. Nights were a bit longer, mornings shorter, and the rotation of Chiss worlds lasted approximately 98 days longer than they did for the rest of the standard galaxy. Even so, Eli had figured out a way to chart that time long ago and he used it to keep track of just how long he'd actually been living with the Ascendancy.

As it turns out, the captain was really good with numbers and he claims that was part of the reason why he was sent here to work with the Chiss in the first place. Though, that was all he'd said about it. Eli didn't seem to want to talk about his missions or what he'd been doing since separating from the Empire, and as a man with a lot of growing secrets himself, Ezra supposed he would just have to accept that for now and respect the man's privacy.

But five days? That was it?

In retrospect, five days really wasn’t all that long, but for Ezra, it felt like it had been drawn-out far
longer thanks to everything they’d been through and all the time he’d spent being knocked out. Ezra still wasn’t sure why the Chimera had crashed, how Thrawn had been thrown so far from the ship, how he got those strange marks all over his body, or even if those large space whales were a reality or just another dream he’d made up like the talking Lothwolves. Honestly, it hurt his head to think about it for too long and knowing now what Thrawn had told him about his old crew, it started to hurt his heart too.

With a sigh, he turned his attention back out the viewport as Eli landed the shuttle just outside a large bean-shaped building with layered glass windows and structural grooves that could only be described as integrally important but asymmetrically askew. He’d hoped he would get the chance to see more Chiss architecture, and maybe even a few more planets if the Chiss would allow it. Normally he didn't care much for sightseeing, but everything was so breathtakingly bizarre here that Ezra couldn't help wanting to see more.

Eli’s hands flew up from the controls and straight into his pocket as the ship shut down. From there, he pulled out a small silver cylinder and immediately started going over it as though he’d memorized the instructions of a tech manual. "Okay, so this comm will link you directly to my personal channel. I’ll most likely be on or at least around Sposia until the trial, so call me if you need anything! This is a Chiss comm so it’s a bit different than the ones you’re used to. Push this button to talk and this one to release. I gave one to Faro too, so if you don’t get it right away, you can always ask her for help. Oh and another thing—"

Ezra took the comm and held out his hands, shaking them vigorously before Eli could let out another word of warning.

“Eli! I get it, I get it! Look, I’ll be fine. It’s just for a few days until the meeting. I doubt I can get into that much trouble in such a short amount of time on my own, don't you think?”

“You’d be surprised...” he mumbled.

“What was that?”

“Oh nothing!”

Eli opened the back hatch as the two stood and started for the ground. He glanced back, his worry starting to show now. It was crazy that Thrawn had even suggested leaving Ezra here practically unsupervised, but Eli was also beginning to realize that it was a probably fine given the massive fib he’d fabricated to the kid before sending him over. Thrawn’s lies worked of course and because of it, Ezra would stop seeking out the answers to his past, especially now that he had nothing left to go back to. Honestly, Eli wasn’t completely certain if that part were true or not. Thrawn’s datapad seemingly stopped before the battle for Lothal, so whether his crew really did survive the battle was seemingly up in the air. The death of the Jedi, Kanan Jarrus, was confirmed, but the rest— not so much. Plus, there was still the mysterious eight month time gap left between the trap for Ezra and the crash on Myrkr. Eli was looking forward to getting those answers from Thrawn, as well as, letting loose his many growing concerns for some of the cruel things the man had done since Eli had been away.

But still... lying?

Eli had never quite pegged Thrawn for a liar. He was an amazing strategist and in a way, that made him good at creating improvised cover stories and alibis to tell to potential informants while working undercover. Like the whole Horatio Figg thing. That name was like something straight out of one of Eli’s grandmother’s holo-dramas. He knew from that mission on that Thrawn was apparently good at spinning yarn, but this took the act to a whole other level, and one which Eli
wasn't completely sure he was comfortable with. The mere thought if it caused an old concern from back in his Empire days to resurface suddenly in his mind. *Did anybody anywhere ever really care about truth?*

*In a way, he himself was no better.* He was also taking part in the lies, but he trusted Thrawn’s word without judgement of course. *When had the Chiss ever steered him wrong?* But, at the same time Eli couldn’t help but feel a little bad for the kid. Thinking everyone he ever loved was gone, and everything he’d ever known was over. Even after all the horrible things Ezra had done to hurt the Empire, Eli wondered if this was *really* the best way to keep Ezra on their side?

He turned with a frown, watching as the boy painstakingly dragged the heavy potted Olbio tree down the ramp and towards the building. Ezra Bridger was a determined young man, that much was certain. Eli rolled his eyes, but walked over and motioned for the kid to lift with him as the two heaved the small *yet surprisingly heavy* decor off the ground and down to the front of the facility.

“No are you sure you don’t have any questions?” Eli asked, his voice unable to hide the strain in his muscles.

Ezra grunted, cracking his spine as the two set the plant on the grass by the entrance and rubbed at their hands and arms as the sore muscles faded away.

“Just one...” He huffed. “Why am I in charge of Jorj again?” He gave one final kick to the potted plant which did not budge. “And why is this one little tree so kriffing heavy?”

Eli smirked. In a way the boy's complaining reminded him a lot of himself at that age. The smile was short lived though as he recalled the real reason for sticking Ezra with the Ysalamir. Jorj was there to make sure Ezra didn’t use his Force powers recklessly. There were Chiss caretakers watching over the Chimera crew, and if they saw Ezra’s abilities, then it would only be a matter of time before rumor of a Jedi found its way to the Chiss High Council, and if that happened, then Eli, Thrawn, Ezra, and probably even Thrass and Tharin would all be in deep trouble with the rest of the Ascendancy.

*Not that Ezra needed to know that of course*, but luckily Eli had a secondary excuse planned out that was just as much the truth as the first reason. The only difference, was this one's secrecy was far less imperative, not to mention it was the one that seemed least likely to make the kid feel completely cornered by Chiss society.

“With Thrawn getting discharged tomorrow night, we thought it would be better if the Ysalamir were somewhere a little more stable rather than bouncing around from place to place with Thrawn.”

“Doesn’t Thrawn have some huge mansion or something that he’d rather keep him in?”

Eli couldn’t help but burst out laughing at that one. He held his stomach and felt tears in his eyes as he bent over and asked, “Haha! You really think Thrawn lives in a place so high class?”

Ezra furrowed his brows in confusion.

“Well, it just seems like a lot of people know and respect him, so yeah? Didn’t you say he’s part of some big important military family?”

“Oh, that's rich!” Eli took a breath, wiping a tear from his eye before shaking his head. “No, no, you see, right now Thrass has a nice house on Copero, but Thrawn is stuck on a military budget. We live in our designated ships just like they do in the Empire.”
Ezra blinked a few times and rubbed his forehead, the gears in his head obviously slow to process the information.

“But I thought Thrawn was some big important figurehead? He had a fancy hospital room with guards and everything! Why doesn’t Thrawn have a place to live like Thrass when he’s not doing military stuff?”

“The guard is probably up on that floor regardless of who's there. Level three is definitely designed for the rich and powerful, but among well... other things... Thrawn earned that room through his skill and rank in the military.”

"Yet he's not one of the rich and powerful?"

“No see, Chiss families are kind of complicated. Thrawn and Thrass were commoners before joining up with the Mitth family on Copero, working until both were made merit-adoptives. They later earned their places within the house by proving their worth to the people of Copero, and then Thrass married one of the Mitth daughters, sealing his place in the family for good. Thrawn decided to join up with the expansion military, so he would have lost his rights to the Mitth family, but instead he did so well and earned so many honors that he was made trial-born. That just means he could chose return to the Mitth house after he retired even though he was working under the Nuruodo clan. It's this special honor they have for exceptionally hard working clan members. That said, Thrawn could choose to go back to Copero with the Mitth Family or choose to stay with the Nuruodo House on Naporar as their own newly made merit-adoptive, but since Thrawn isn't retired, he doesn't have any sort of fancy house on the ground. Do you sort of understand now?”

Ezra felt something in his brain twitch, but nodded anyway.

"That seems kind of sad, doesn't it? Just hoping from family to family and only getting to stay if you do something amazing?"

"I guess if you put it that way?" Eli shrugged. "But things aren't so black and white out here. Chiss are complicated."

That was the understatement of the century.

"So, what is Thrawn going to do once he's out of the hospital?" Ezra asked. "Go back to the military or stay with Thrass?"

Eli scratched at his neck and beard, his voice a wry hum as he tried to predict what exactly the Ascendancy would have him do once he was back on his feet again.

“Nah... Thrawn will most likely spend the next few days being shipped from one planet to the other and giving a detailed report on what all he’s been doing since leaving the Ascendancy. Don't worry though, he should be back before the trial.”

“Is he in trouble for something?”

Eli looked to the boy with a newly puzzled expression. Thrawn certainly would get an earful from a few generals and Chiss commanders, and he had technically been "publicly exiled" when he left the Ascendancy, but the military families and Thrass were already pulling strings to get him his rights back based on old plans and merits that the higher councils already knew about. Still... Ezra didn't know that, did he?

“Why would you think that?” he asked.
“Well, when Syndic Thrass came in, he didn’t even say hi or anything before he started fighting with him. It’s probably been years since they’ve seen each other and that was the first thing Thrawn’s brother did when they were back together again?” Ezra let his shoulders fall, his arms outstretched to measure the extent of his growing confusion. “So that means either Thrawn is in deep trouble for something, or Syndic Thrass is just a total sleemo!”

Eli’s gentle smile returned as he tilted his head off to the side and crossed his arms. For all of his insight, this kid really didn’t know the first thing about the way Chiss did things, did he?

“You know, he may not act like it, but Thrass cares pretty deeply about his blood family. He’s always been disturbed by what he sees as Thrawn’s self-destructive behavior, and as a Syndic of the Eighth Ruling Family, it’s his duty is to protect the honor and position of everyone in that family, even someone who's off fighting somewhere else, like Thrawn. That’s why he always works extra hard to make sure to clean up after any trouble Thrawn gets himself into, and why he seemed so uptight and aggressive this morning.”

Ezra looked down, unsure if what Eli said made him feel any better.

"If you say so?"

Eli smiled and let his thoughts drift elsewhere as he leaned up against the column by the door.

“Ezra, did you know that there’s a small detail that the Chiss give off when they see something or someone that they love? It’s hard to catch, but it’s there plain as a smile if you know what to look for. It shows on their faces even when they’re mad and screaming at each other. Thrass and Thrawn are no exception.”

“Really? What is it?”

Eli snapped back to reality and shooed the question away.

“Listen to me babbling on about all this Chiss emotions and culture. If I’m not careful they’ll stick me with you guys as an aid, and there’s no way I’m doing that again!” He chuckled and placed a hand on the symbol near the door, letting it slide open to reveal the inviting features of the inside interior. He motioned to it with a flick of his head and a grin. “Now go on in and try to relax a little. We’ve got a long week ahead of us so you’d best enjoy the downtime while you have it. Trust me.”

Ezra frowned.

“Aren’t you coming in too? I’m sure Faro and the others would like to see you.”

“Oh no...” he waved. “I’m afraid I have a few more things to do today before I can relax. I spoke with Faro this morning and they’re all adjusting fine on their own. Just give them my regards and tell them if all goes well, then Thrawn should be well enough for visitors by morning.”

“Well, alright… thanks again Eli.” He waved as the man turned his back and headed towards his ship, stopping to yell out at him one last time before he could close the hatch doors. “Oh hey, Eli! How do I say thanks in Cheunh? I feel like it might be something useful to learn.”

He wasn’t really expecting that question, but smiled nonetheless, stopping as he turned to holler back his answer.

“Bin’vahl!” He smiled to himself and cupped his hands around his mouth. “But don’t worry, I’m sure by the end of the week you’ll be speaking as fluently as I am!”
“What do you mean by that!?” Ezra yelled back.

Eli shot him a devious smirk, but had already let the door to his shuttle seal shut, taking a seat as he simply pointed a finger towards the dorms. He smiled as his shuttle took off into the sky and disappeared back towards the direction of the Sabosen hospital.

“Hm… Well that was strange?” Ezra said to Jorj who was still sound asleep against the Olbio tree that Ezra now had to tow inside all by himself. He let out a breath, but prepared himself and turned to walk inside the house, hoping suddenly that his room wouldn’t be up any stairs or too far down the hall.

As he peered around, Ezra found himself completely lost. The walls all seemed to have these intricate little carvings detailing the nearly identical metal rooms, all white, and aside the few pops of red, he could hardly tell where he was going from where he had started. Ezra stopped when he finally saw something that stood out among the rest, a large window overlooking a seating area with steely-blue couches, black-toped tables of a strange shape, and flag-like decor that was the same color red as Ezra had seen in the hospital. The detailing in the floors matched the color as well, tying the whole room together as soft light pulsed out of the strangest looking ceiling fixture that he had ever seen.

He stopped by the archway and pulled Jorj’s tree into the corner of the room as he took a breath and cupped his hands around his mouth.

“Hello? Anyone here?”

“Ezra!” Koree exclaimed, her voice coming from above him as Ezra looked up just in time to see her hop over the railing and land close to the spot where he had been standing. The red pulses in her jumpsuit trailed up her legs, as she sprung back to her full height and slapped his back dangerously close to his recently healed shoulder scar. Her smile was just as sharp and devious as ever as she greeted him to his face. “When did you get here, kid?”

“Just a minute ago. Eli just dropped me off.” He looked up. “Why did you just jump from the—”

“Hey Ezra!” Gunther waved suddenly, coming out through a pair of sliding doors which Ezra hadn’t realized weren’t also a part of the wall. He was holding something green and blue on a plate as steam came out from the noodle-like limbs of whatever vegetable or meat creature he was obviously about to consume. It looked disgusting, but Ezra couldn’t help but admit that after five days on nothing but junk and hospital food, the *whatever it was* looked pretty darn tasty.

“We have to let everyone know you’re here!” Koree continued, delivering one sharp punch to the kid’s arm as his clothing reacted to the sudden contact. “Hey everyone!” She bellowed. “Ezra’s back!”

He rubbed his ringing ears, but stared down at his arm as the red designs in the med suit started to fade. Ezra was starting to catch on to the light show now. The pulses must be some sort of healing mechanism that reacted anytime they came into contact with anything potentially harmful. That explains why Koree was jumping off of balconies and punching him so much. Come to think of it, Thrawn’s suit pulses were moving around an awful lot this morning when Ezra was talking to him, so did that mean the Chiss was lying again about the severity of his health?
He let out a breath and rolled his eyes. *Why did he keep lying to protect Ezra’s feelings? It wasn’t like he’d lied to save him the heartache of learning his crew had been killed. He just didn’t understand that Chiss, not one bit.*

“Ezra!” The new voice greeted, breaking him out of his train of thought. “How are you feeling?”

“Hey Walten. I’m feeling a lot better, thanks.”

He smiled, looking around as Birt, Urick, and Faro all joined in the lobby area. They were all still wearing their medical uniforms, and seemingly understood the odd layout of the dorms well enough to make it to the den within seconds of Koree’s loud alert. Considering they’d only been here for a day and a half, that either meant they all had an extremely astute sense of direction, or there was a trick to this Chiss interior design that Ezra just wasn’t getting.

“You still have Thrawn’s pet, I see?” Gunther teased.

“Yeah, I have to watch him until Thrawn gets released. He should be able to have guests in the morning, but then he has to go around giving mission reports. Eli said he’d be back in time for our meeting with the Chiss High Council though.”

“That’s good news,” Faro nodded. “You men help Ezra carry that tree up to his room. I doubt our hosts want us keeping the lizard down here in the middle of the foyer. Not unless you want it to turn out looking like that.” She pointed to the plate of foodstuffs which Gunther was now shoving into his mouth from his seat across from them.

“Mwahf?” He mumbled, looking to the rest of the group as they watched him with judgmental faces of disgust.

Ezra’s eyes got wide as he looked over to Jorj. *The Chiss wouldn’t eat a Ysalamir if Ezra said it was Thrawn’s pet, would they?*

“She’s just messing with you, Ezra,” Walten said with an added wink in his direction. He stood and waved him over to the entry. “Come on, we saved you a room between me and Birt.”

“You picked a good day to show up, Ezra!” Birt informed. “See, they’re sending someone over to bring us new clothes today. Turns out it makes the other Chiss uncomfortable to see people walk around in hospital gowns all the time.”

“But they’re so cool…” Ezra frowned. *He still had so many questions for Tharin about their designs too. Although… He considered having clothes that he could actually figure out how to work would be a nice change of pace?*

“I for one would love a new outfit!” Koree said. “I don’t know what they did with the clothes we came here in, but I’m pretty sick of asking our babysitters to open the suit every single time I have to go to take a—”

“Vayes! Language! Please!” Faro sighed. There was a tired tone in her voice that alerted Ezra that Koree and the other crew must have been enjoying their freedom outside of Empirical regulations a little too much. They definitely seemed a little more loose and lenient than they had on Myrkr.

Ezra blinked, but considered what Koree had said with a new, horrifying revelation. After all that time in the hospital, he hadn’t even thought about something like *that.*

“H-how do they open the suits?”
“No one knows...” Birt said in an eerie voice, his fingers wiggling to enhance the mystery. “But I think they use some sort of datapad connection.”

“They’re probably tagged with tracking devices too. You know, to make sure none of us run off or anything.” Urick added, his voice harder and more serious than the other man’s.

“Why would they do that?” Ezra asked.

“Because the Chiss don’t trust us, obviously!” Koree scoffed. “So they’re keeping an eye on everything we do. I bet these new outfits are just an excuse so we won’t look like total bums when we meet the higher ups in a few days. These will probably be tagged too, but hey, at least I’ll be able to finally take a—”

“Alright!” Faro stopped. “Enough conspiracies. Just get Ezra settled in before our next lesson. We’ve got to get him up to speed before the tutors and tailors start showing up.”

“Tutors?”

“Yeah, see, the couple who keeps this dorm are teachers over at the university nearby. When they come home, they insists we learn more about their language and culture or it would be an insult to their entire planet or something?”

“They’re teaching in shifts while we’re here, so one is always home to keep an eye on us. They’re nice though.” Gunther said. ”They let us eat anything in the kitchen, and give us plenty of time to rest and explore the house unsupervised.”

“What is that anyway?” Ezra asked, almost afraid to know, but pointing curiously down at the slime-residue left on the ex-gunner’s now clean plate.

Gunther looked down at the dish thoughtfully and shrugged.

“I don’t know, but it tasted like Nerf steak with the texture of runny eggs.”

Everyone in the room gagged.

“You’re a regular trash compactor, Gunther!” Koree smiled, her nose crinkling in the iron stomached man’s direction as she leaned over and wrapped her arms around him from behind, kissing him once before nodding her head in agreement to his statement. “But you’re right again. Definitely picking up that steak flavor.”

“You got that right baby!” He smirked, their eyes meeting for a moment longer than was comfortable for every other person in the room.

Were they a couple? Ezra wondered, a part of him suddenly intrigued as the later part of him just wanted to escape to his room to give them some privacy. Although, he supposed they worked together on the Chimera all this time together, maybe this wasn’t some new thing, but an old flame that they could let loose now that they weren’t working anymore? Although a little bawdy, their flirting and duty-before relationship scenario was just another thing that reminded him of Kanan and Hera.

Faro let out another one of her worn-out sighs, but remained seated as she rolled her eyes at the couple and shook her head.

“Public displays of affection are not permitted in the Empire you two.”
“Might I remind you yet again, ma’am, that we’re not currently under orders of the Empire?”

Gunther and Koree showed her devious grins as she weighed the truth of their words in her mind.

Faro gripped the bridge of her nose and wrinkled her forehead.

“I suppose I’ll have to give you that one.” She stood and motioned. “Birt, with me, let’s try to be hospitable for once and see if we can get a decent cup of tea ready before Ina gets home. You two will finish up your shameless flirting before either of our hosts sees, I hope?”

“Not that they wouldn’t be interested in studying you two?” Birt snorted. “I can’t believe Chiss have such different rituals when it comes to romance. What kind of species doesn’t know how to kiss?”

“Uh…should I be listening to this?” Ezra frowned.

“Ignore them!”

The two gunners sneered at Walten before kissing again, more blatantly this time, and obviously overdoing it just to spite the former stormtrooper. It worked, making them as well as everyone else in the room completely uncomfortable in the process.

Urick stood and clapped loudly.

“Welp, I’m going to be sick.”

“Right? Come on Ezra!” Walten motioned. “Let’s get you and the lizard unloaded before we have to see anymore of that.” He motioned over at the two, who offered up a rude hand gesture to him in return.

“Right behind you! You guys give me a hand with Jorj, will you? This thing is really heavy!”

"Maybe it's the planter?" Urick suggested.

"Oh come on it can't be that—oof!" Walten stopped his attempt just as soon as it began. "Jeez! How much does that thing weigh?"

"Right?!"

Turns out there wasn't enough for room for three people to grab, but between the two of them, Walten and Urick managed to lift the tree before leading Ezra down the hall and over to the turbolift.

*Thank the Force they had a turbolift here!*

“Take away the chain of command and all of the sudden everybody goes wild,” Walten said with a smile and some obvious effort in his tone.

“Hey, I didn’t see Pyrondi out there?” Ezra asked with a snap of realization. "Where is she?"

“Up in her room.” Walten motioned with a flick of his head and a frown. “She’s been in there since we arrived yesterday and even skipped dinner. I think she just had a lot to think about, you know? She’ll come around. Just give her a little time.”

Urick nodded as the turbolift landed and the three of them kept moving.
“It’s been a busy couple of days, you know?”

“Y-yeah... I guess so?” He nodded.

They stopped suddenly at an ordinary panel of wall before whistling at Ezra to walk back towards them.

“Here you go kid. One Chiss dorm room, primed and ready to go.”

“Just press that symbol on the door there and it’ll open up. You have to be the one to do it first so it registers your bio-signature. That way other people can’t sneak in without your consent.”

“Pretty high-tech isn’t it, Ezra?”

“That’s one word for it?” He said, searching fervently for anything on the wall that looked like a symbol before just barely noticing the odd decal sticking out among the other designs. This was something Ezra was going to have to pay closer attention to if he ever wanted to find his way around this place. He pressed the marking and the walls slid open to reveal the room inside, the entire place giving off a cozy, studious vibe that made Ezra equal parts comfortable and instantly too tired to want to learn anything new.

There was a single bed, which was longer than those he was used to. This was probably due to the extra height given off by the Chiss who as a whole seemed to average at a taller height than most humans. Then, to the side there was also a small storage closet which could hold three, maybe four articles of clothing. Next to that was a black-top table like those in the lobby, only this one seemed more compact, with built in lights and data screens embedded atop of them for studying. This was a dorm after all, right?

“Where do you want this?” Urick asked, his voice visibly winded now.

“Oh! Right there is fine. Thanks guys.”

He shot around as the two men set Jorj near the door. Good, Ezra thought. That way he could at least find his way back out. He’d thought with the Force at his disposal, even with Jorj around, Ezra would have a better sense of direction than he did. Apparently he did not.

“It’s the least we can do after what you did back there on Myrkr,” Walten said, wiping the sweat from his brow. “What the kriff is this thing made of? It weighs more than three Hutt bellies!”

“Right!”

They waited in silence for a moment, before Urick nudged Walten and Ezra simply looked curiously between the two.

“Uh...” He hummed awkwardly. “Is everything alright you guys?”

“Uh, yeah!” Walten spoke quickly, quietly. “Everything’s fine, it’s just...”

“Yeah?”

“Well, the truth is Ezra, we had something we wanted to—”

“Hey everybody! Ina’s home!”

The three looked to the wall and frowned at Koree’s shrill voice which was somehow powerful enough to penetrate the thick metal of the Chiss walls.
“Does she always shout like that?” Ezra asked.

“Koree convinced the Chiss that yelling is how humans alert each other when people walk in the room.” Walten groaned. “We’d better get down there so you can meet them before Stent leaves for work. They’d probably be pretty offended if you didn’t pay your respects to them as soon as you arrived.”

“Okay,” He nodded, understanding more and more every minute that there seemed to be a number of ways he could accidentally offend one of these Chiss without realizing it. He followed them out the door and spoke up again. "Hey, you wanted to ask me something though, didn’t you?"

“It can wait. Come on, let’s get down there.”

He smiled and waved his hand, earning a lifted brow and an uneasy glare from Urick as Ezra met eyes with the dark skinned man who only shrugged, motioning his arms for Ezra to follow them back towards the turbolift.

Something was wrong, but Ezra didn’t need the force to sense that. He was just about to ask again when he heard conversation coming from the first floor and Faro calling to them as soon as they were in view.

“Good timing you three!” She motioned. “Birt and I made tea.”

“Oh cool!” Ezra smiled. After all the strangeness of the last five days, a hot cup of tea would really hit the spot. *Though he couldn't help but be surprised that the Chiss drank tea?*

“If you care about your mouth at all, do not drink that tea!” Urick whispered fervently.

Ezra nodded his eyes growing wider as he took the warning with stride just as Faro took a small sip from a small oval cup and crinkled her face in a puckered, sour expression.

“Oh… well… we’re getting closer to tea at least. *Euch!*” She set down the cup and motioned to Ezra as he came into view of the two Chiss in the den area.

“Oh, a new face!” said the tall Chiss woman, her facial features were lengthy and thin, with dulled blue-black hair showing off multiple white streaks layering the top. She wore a simple red dress with tight sleeves, and had long, spindly fingers that unfolded to point in Ezra’s general direction.

“This is not the one who has remained locked up in the room, correct?”

“No Ida,” Faro explained. “This is Ezra, the one who helped to rescue the Grand Ad—I mean—he’s the one who helped save Mitth'raw'nuruodo.”

“Closer,” said the man to Ida’s side, his voice gentle and polite. “But not quite there, Karyn Faro. Do keep practicing.”

He was dressed in a red jacket with gray and black pants; his hair thin and a pale bluish-white color as opposed to the typical blue-black. Most Chiss had blue-black hair, but a very rare handful of them also seemed to get white hair when they were older in their years. It was probably something genetic, but Eli says that Chiss with white hair were said to have raised many exceptional children, so in the case of these two who owned a practical school, that wasn’t an entirely unlikely thing to
believe.

They were obviously older, their hair lighter and skin grayer than was typical of the Chiss Ezra had already met. Even their eyes were a duller red, their cheekbones more prominent due to the tighter sunken skin on their faces. Surprisingly, Ezra couldn’t see any wrinkles or signs bodily aging like humans had, but he could tell in their voices that they had wisdom that could only be gained by their many years of living life.

“Hello.” Ezra bowed, mimicking the motion Eli had shown him back at the hospital. “My name is Ezra Bridger. Thank you for having us in your home… or… I mean… Bin’vah!”

He heard a few of the crew mumble his last name among themselves, forgetting suddenly that he hadn’t yet told them that Thrawn remembered both his name and his old life for him earlier this morning. Too late now, he supposed.

The woman chuckled at him, her eyes studying the boy as he lifted himself back to a full stand.

“Much impressive, Ezra Bridger,” she hummed, mispronouncing his name with the slight nuances of her accent. “Your thoughts, Stent?”

“Indeed,” he agreed. “We have heard much telling of your bravery, Ezra Bridger. It is pleasing to meet you.”

“I am Ina’gamut. This is my life-mate, Kors’ten’tiru.”

“For the sake of your human vocals, you may address we as Stent and Ina.”

Their Basic was shaky and grammatically incorrect, but understandable. Thrass had said that he and Tharin learned Basic from Thrawn, so now Ezra wondered how these two had learned it. They were scholars after all, so maybe they had simply found time to practice on their own?

“I am pleased to have met you, Ezra Bridger,” the man said with a bow.

“Likewise, sir.” He bowed back.

The old Chiss seemed to smile at that, and then turned and said something to his wife in Cheunh before they rubbed their noses together and he bowed his farewell to the rest of the humans before leaving the house.

“Now,” Ina said contently. “I believe it is time for the day’s teachings. Gather. We will complete lessons before csimtusi come.”

Ezra leaned over to the nearest human being and whispered a quick but confused, “Huh?”

“That’s probably Cheunh for “tailors”. Ina is teaching us some basic Cheunh phrases. When she pauses to say a word like that, then it is probably regarding some word that can be assumed based on what’s going on.”

“Oh, I see. So, what have you learned so far?”

“Easy stuff…” Walten explained. “Are you hungry? Where’s the bathroom? How to say our names — you know, basic conversation and such? Turns out Chiss have vocals that can pronounce things that we can’t, so we don’t always get the words right, but we do what we can.”

“In return, we tell Ina and Stent about Core World culture and help them with their Basic. It’s a
pretty good deal given they’re letting us live here and all.”

“Indeed,” Ina said, obviously overhearing the three. She stood tall, her back straight, but with a calm and pleasant smile aimed towards them. “Stent and I once housed many children, but it has been many time passed since then. Many rotations ago, young Mitth’ras’afis and Mitth’raw’nuruodo were under our care until—” she paused, choosing to give up on the Basic word as she finished her statement. “—until their ch’att’san’ah to new homes.”

“New homes?”

“This is more than just a dormitory Ezra, it was an orphanage.” Faro explained. “Ina and Stent took in homeless children and taught them while also making sure they were well taken care of. It would seem the Grand Admiral and his brother were raised here after losing their parents on another world.” She looked up with a frown to the older Chiss woman and asked, “Where did you say they were born again, Ina?”

“The brothers were born on our main world of Csilla.” She replied. “They came to us very young and learned on our planet before finding their place within the Ascendancy. We are quite proud of them and their—?” She thought for a moment and smiled to herself. "Accomplishments. Even though Mitthrawn is a somewhat—"

"Controversial," Faro supplied, already hearing this story beforehand.

"Ah yes, since Mitthrawn's actions have been somewhat controversial since his leave."

"Turns out Thrawn hadn't left on the best of terms when he joined up with the Empire," Birt whispered into Ezra's ear.

"I'd kill to know what he was like back then though," Koree said with a devious smirk. "I can hardly even imagine what the man would be like as a kid."

"I have an object I could show you about this topic to help clarify. Come."

Ina motioned for the group to follow her as the wall slid open to reveal a cylindrical grand library with data cards, physical books, and digital portraits stacked high on every wall, the shelves stretching so tall that the horde of humans had to crane their necks back just to see the top of the impressive collection.

She walked over to a holo-portrait eye level with her, and pulled it off of the wall before taking more long, eloquent strides back to the group and tilting it down so they could each see.

"Observe."
“No way!” Koree laughed, unable to hide the snorts as she cackled joyously down at the holo-pic. “Is that—?”

“Baby Thrawn!” Gunther exclaimed giddily, joining in the raucous laughter as he and Koree could no longer contain their amusement.

Ina assumed the laughter was a positive reaction and let it slide, but shot him a warning look for the mispronunciation.

He made a face.

“Or... Sorry... I meant to say, baby Mitth’arin’nurdo.”

“Not even close, Gunther Kordin!” She spat, flicking him in the forehead with her index finger. “Try harder.”

“Ow!” He rubbed at the red spot forming in the center of his head and grumbled.

_So Thrass and Thrawn really were orphans? Ezra_ thought suddenly. With all the commanding confidence the two portrayed, Ezra had never even considered thinking that the two had grown up alone, maybe even on the streets for a time and with only each other to call family. Thrass was young in this picture, maybe even the same age as Ezra was when he'd lost his own parents. Thrawn on the other hand was probably half that age and small enough that there was a good chance he didn’t even remember his parents enough to miss them. Certainly he wasn’t old enough to remember what had happened to them or even old enough to understand why they were no longer
around. He felt a wave of empathy and understanding strike him as he realized just how much common ground he actually had with the two brothers.

He stared harder down at the portrait and saw the way Thrass was looking at his younger brother, the love in his eyes obvious even in the old holo-pic. Thrawn seemed so happy and innocent, but in Thrass’ face you could tell he had taken on a responsibility far beyond his years in sacrifice to make sure his baby brother stayed so young and carefree. Ezra understood now what Eli had meant about Thrass in that moment, and felt a flicker of shame for ever calling him a Sleemo.

"Thrass really has been taking care of Thrawn his whole life, hasn’t he?” Ezra blurted.

Ina sighed, her tone almost mimicking that of Commodore Faro. It was wizened and tired of correcting others, but patient due to many years of teaching and raising younglings.

“It is not honorable to address Chiss by their core names unless given permission, Ezra Bridger. Do you have this permission?”

“What?” He shot back to reality and rubbed at his neck, feeling his face warming with embarrassment for being scolded, even if it was a subtle warning on Ina’s part. “Oh... well... Syndic Thrass told me I could call him by his core name if I added his title to it, and Thrawn never told me not to call him Thrawn, so I guess that means he was okay with it?”

“I see. Very well.” She said, her tone unamused as her gaze shifted over to Faro. “Is this similar to the rest of you?”

“It is, ma’am,” Faro nodded. “As I explained yesterday, we know him as Grand Admiral Thrawn. He is our highest ranking officer aboard our ship, the *Chimera*, and he is the one who we take our orders from.”

“I see...” she repeated softly. “Very well. You may address him as such then. Ezra Bridger, you may also use the term for Mitth’ras’safis.”

“Did you really meet Thrawn’s brother?” Birt wondered with eager intrigue. “What was he like? Just as cunning and brilliant as the Grand Admiral, I imagine?”

Ezra hid a face when he met eyes with Ina and swallowed back his statement, trading it for a nod of agreement.

“Oh yeah! You can definitely tell they’re brothers.”

*WHOOSH!*  
The door slid open suddenly to reveal three young Chiss appearing unannounced in the library, none of whom had knocked or even alerted the house that they had come inside. So maybe Koree’s yelling method really was useful in these kind of situations after all?

Ina hissed a light word in Cheunh to express frustration, but sighed again and motioned to the humans to gather round with swift gestures of her long, thin arms.

“We have taken too much time. Everyone, these are students of mine who have made alters to your uniforms from your arrival. Please, try on your clothing and they can fix any differences the uniforms may have to your body sizes.”

“So that’s where our clothing went?” Gunther mused.
“Fascinating!” Faro agreed, finding her uniform based on the rank plaque that was now seamlessly joined into the material of her shoulder plate.

It would seem that all the human clothing had been cut apart and modified with Chiss materials. For Birt, Pyrondi, and Faro, their gray uniforms were now detailed in black mesh, with straps and belts added to the ensembles, and mid-length capes that were sewn into each of the backsides at shoulder level.

Koree and Gunther’s black gunner suits were similar designs, but their sleeves contained more padding and armor like that on Eli’s military uniform. Urick and Walten’s white stormtrooper armor had been melded into a plastoid-nylon blend of defense and leisure, with the armor only complimenting the black formal attire in such a way that it reminded Ezra a lot of the clothing worn by the Jedi in those old Clone Wars holovids he’d seen on Kanan’s holocron. That in itself forced a whole new rush of memories to come to him, but he managed to push them aside so he could accept his own modified set of clothes with a clear head.

“Bin’vah,” he said, bowing again as he took the orange cloth from the young Chiss student’s hands.

His uniform shirt was made of a sturdy orange military fabric with the yellow markings relating to his old shirt. On the shoulders, he had armor plating with a leather chest strap that cut diagonally across the torso and back across his hip. Across the chest was brown cloth fused to the front, the design draping into an eloquent-looking cowl that covered the left half of his body with a long cape flowing freely behind him.

All of them were given knee braces and sturdy boots that were spiky on the bottom as if made for the snow, and they also supplied the humans with wrist cuffs that held data-pad qualities, as well as gloves that could be kept in the pouches strapped to the belts on their hips. Similarly, all of the crew’s uniforms kept the symbol of the ISD Chimera on one side of their uniform, and the insignia for the Empire on the other.

Ezra was the sole exception to that last rule, his uniform holding no special symbols or marking of any kind. He’d wondered suddenly if the Ghost had ever had such a symbol. *Something to mark his allegiance to them somehow?* Thinking back, Sabine always did make art pieces around any ship, wall, or helmet the group came into contact with. *She would remember if they had a special logo.* Ezra just wished he could remember more about her. More than just her colorful hair and her love of art, or the way her face lit up a room, her brown eyes sparkling sharply like a newly polished knife. *She always did like weapons, didn’t she?* He thought the memory would make him frown, but he found himself smiling as he pictured Sabine’s face.

“I can take Pyrondi her uniform,” Koree offered. “I think it’s time we had a little girl chat anyway?”

“I do not understand your usage of words,” Ina frowned. “But you are all excused. Karyn Faro tells me that yours is a shy species, and will require privacy to switch uniforms. Please return your hospital attire to me once you have completed your transfer, and we can return them in the morning.”

“I’m not shy?” Gunther boasted loudly. If he could tear the Chiss suit straight from his body, then he would have no doubt already stripped down right then and there, but luckily, he still didn’t know how to get the high-tech clothing off, *despite what Ezra assumes were his best efforts just now.*

“Oh stuff it, will you?”
“Don’t hate me because I’m beautiful, Walten.”

“I am literally about to throw up!”

“Stop fighting you guys!” Birt huffed. "What are you, five?"

“Baby, I’m a ten and we all know it.”

“Yep. Totally going to vomit.”

“Ahem!” Ina coughed loudly, breaking up the bickering with a single sound. Once she had their attention, she pointed to the door with her unusually long fingers and spoke again. “I will activate your removal sequence in one ch’an’oaci. So, I suggest you make haste to your rooms before I deactivate your suits.”

"How long is a "chanosha"?" Ezra asked under his breath.

"You want to waste time wondering, or you want to run to the safety of your room?"

The answer was obvious so the group decided to make a break for it, thanking the tailors in a loud clamor of retreating voices as Ina stayed behind to praise her students for such quick and lovely work. Meanwhile, the humans hurried through the halls, cramming into the turbolift together as Ezra followed the herd to figure out where his door was hiding.

So this was where Thrawn grew up? He wondered, taking in the scenery as he ran with a new light. It was different, that was certain, but the familiar homage of family arguments, growing pains, and togetherness actually made him feel like he were back on the Ghost again. Back with his family.

What would happen to the Chimera crew after the meeting with the Chiss High Council? Would the humans be sent back to the Empire? Would Thrawn remain with his people? Where did that leave Ezra? He had nothing to go back to anymore. Would he go with the other humans back to the galaxy he knew but with no idea where to go? Or would he stay here where he understood so little, but could possibly have the opportunity to join Eli and Thrawn with whatever it was they were doing?

Eli was hesitant to talk about his missions and scars, so whatever caused them must have been pretty bad. He was out here for a reason, and both he and Thrawn were obviously well-trained, but for what? Honestly, a purpose sounded like a really nice thing to have right about now, especially during these times when he felt so alone and so lost.

He barely had time to find the symbol of his door before his suit started to digitally unwind into threads that piled on the floor beneath his feet. With a breath of relief that he hadn’t gotten stuck out in the halls without his clothes, he folded the medsuit and placed it on his bed before changing into his new uniform. Just as he thought, it fit perfectly, proving yet again that these ever-observant Chiss obviously did an amazing job at making clothing even without getting proper measurements.

Jorj trilled from the Olbio tree, perhaps complimenting the young man on his new appearance? At least, that’s what Ezra chose to believe and scratched under the lizard’s chin with a new smile starting to form between his cheeks. He felt like an entirely new man in these clothes, making him think back to what Thrawn had told him earlier this morning:

“Remember your past and let it guide you, knowing well that the obstacles you faced and the loved ones lost have brought you to this time and place for a reason. It is up to you to realize the purpose
Ezra had decided on his path now. Whether Thrass could convince the High Council to give them a ship home or not, he would be staying here in Chiss space with Thrawn. Maybe one day he would return to the known galaxy, perhaps even to Lothal, but not right now. Now, Ezra had a new mission, and it was to be someone worthy of staying within the Chiss Ascendancy. That means he would study, he would practice and learn any language, any technique, any strategy that he could which might make him a stronger warrior. Then after he'd learned it all, Ezra would use that knowledge to help Thrawn’s people just as Thrawn had helped him after the loss of his crew.

With one final adjustment of his cloak, Ezra nodded, and made his way back to the library, ready to let his life among the Chiss begin anew.

Chapter End Notes

NOTE: I like to think Chiss have similar forehead greetings to the Māori people called "hongi"... and older married couples like Stent and Ina use "Eskimo kisses!"

ALSO: The Chiss not knowing what kissing is, is an old nod to my Thranto fanfiction, "Chiss Don't Kiss".
Montage

Chapter Summary

Four more days pass for the Chimera crew as they await their inevitable meeting with the Chiss High Council. As Ezra learns more about the Chiss and about the crew, he comes to form bonds with many as the hours count down to their final days in the Chiss Ascendancy.

Chapter Notes

Posted on July 17, 2018

Day One:

Judging by the early morning sunrise he saw peeking over the horizon, Ezra assumed he’d just woken up fairly early in the morning. It didn't help that they'd gone to bed so late the night before following their Cheunh lesson and outfit exchange from Ina and her students, and yet, here he was awake and ready to go. He wondered suddenly if he was naturally a morning person, this being the first time in a long time that he'd been able to go to sleep and wake up without wondering if he was going to survive to see the day or otherwise be put back under with Chiss narcotics so his body could heal properly.

Jorj was still sleeping soundly, his Ysalamiri death grip on the trunk of the young Olbio tree still strong even when unconscious. There were teeth and claw marks visible in the bark where the little lizard had been digging into the trunk in order to suck out and eat the sap inside. Likewise, there were small bites nibbled out of the leaves where Jorj had helped himself to a midnight snack. Luckily the leaves grew back pretty quickly, new buds already starting to form alongside branches that hadn't been there the day before. The heavy-as-hutt planter was probably speeding up the growing process some, and keeping the pot healthy with the warm temperature mulch like that of the planet it was plucked from. Chiss tech really was something incredible. Plus, it turns out that Ysalamiri upkeep really was about as simple as it could be, provided the lizard had someone it could call family and also an Olbio tree to provide it with nutrients and a sturdy place to call home.

Ina loaned Ezra a datacard the other night with information on the Ysalamiri, so Ezra could learn more about he and Thrawn's—but mostly his—pet lizard. Unfortunately, he wouldn’t find out until later that night when he’d tried to read the thing that it was in a language completely foreign to him, with an alphabet he couldn’t even begin to discern. He plugged the disk into his desk slot and mostly just scrolled through pictures and helpful-looking illustrations made by the Inrokini scientists who wrote the files.

He got up and let his feet hit the floor, stretching once or twice just to make sure all of his joints were still working. His shoulders popped, but nothing seemed to be sore anymore, though the scars on his upper body would prove otherwise just by the look of them. He hadn’t really remembered
how he’d gotten some of them yet, but others were just as fresh in his mind as the day they’d been inflicted. After talking with Thrawn yesterday, two of those scars, the ones he wore across the side of his face, he remembered especially well. The terrifying face of the Pau’uan dark Force user, his red blades out for blood as they came spinning towards him. The next thing he knew, he was on the platform a floor down, his cheek burning with fresh hot streaks of pain as he’d just narrowly dodged having his whole head cut to shreds by the Grand Inquisitor. Kanan defeated him that day, but Ezra didn’t remember much before or after that battle aside fiery explosions and a hug or two from Hera when they’d made it back to their ship.

*But that was the past.* Ezra thought. *Today was a new day, and a good one to try and learn something new, right?*

He put on his Chiss-made uniform and adjusted the cloak. Ezra really liked that addition to his new clothes. For some reason, the flowing brown garment just felt—right somehow? He definitely looked cool in it, that much was sure, but he worried it might get caught on something in a fight. He could always take it off if it came down to it, but he worried it might blow away and he’d lose it if he did that every single time. It wasn’t like he’d have to fight in it anytime soon though. Today it was just a regular part of his new uniform, and Ezra toyed with the idea of wearing his new outfit hood up or down before deciding to leave it down and taking a good look at his reflection in the mirror.

His smile faded as it all suddenly hit him. This, what he was doing, it was completely normal and it felt normal too, but that didn’t hide the fact that he was on an alien world, stuck in a region of space so far away from his own that he barely understood the language, the culture, the food, or the technology. He told himself that he’d learn to adapt to the new changes, but who knew how long it would take before this place came naturally to him just as effortlessly as it did Eli? Ezra looked into his mirror and shut it off, his reflection disappearing as the Chiss Tech faded back into just a simple wall panel once more. He guessed there was no use worrying about that now, not until he at least tried first to see if he could really do it.

Like he said... *it was a new day.*

Ezra left this room and followed the path of color embedded into the floors, the Sabosen-red was acting as his personal guide to the turbolift and then to the kitchen. A useful trick, and probably how everyone else in the house knew how to get around. He hadn’t seen them since dinner the night before, their food being… well… he didn’t really know what it was exactly, but it was cold and salty with a kick of hot spice that only Ezra, Gunther, Koree, and Pyrondi seemed to be able to handle without watery eyes. Ina took note of that and promised to make a more mild dish for the next dinner to accommodate the fragile tongues of Birt, Walten, Urick, and Faro.

*WHOOSH!*

The doors slid open as he entered the kitchen, and Ezra was relieved to see that he’d chosen the correct room this time around, but then all of that turned to startled surprise when he noticed the two elderly Chiss already sitting at the table, cups of something hot and honey-colored steaming from their oval-shaped mugs.

“Good morn, Ezra Bridger,” said Ina, standing to fill up another mug before handing it to the boy and lowering him into one of the seats. He didn’t really have a chance to realize what was happening, but took a seat anyway as he stared down into his hot cup and Ina sat back down across the table with Stent.

“You are waking much earlier than others,” he added. ”Good morn as well.”
“Good morning,” Ezra replied nervously, staring down at the cup before taking a small sip. Sweet, but just like dinner, it was spicy and warmed all the way down his throat. Chiss liked spicy food apparently, even going so far as to sprinkle spices into their—what was this? Some sort of caf?

“Is the tonic to your liking?” Stent asked.

Ezra smiled and nodded, holding the cup out as thanks before setting it to the table.

“It’s good, but it might still be a little too spicy for some of the others.”

“Really?” Ina almost laughed. “How interesting. Eli Vanto never mentioned such taste differences in humans when he dined with us.”

“Oh, did Eli stay here too?”

“Only for short times. He spent most of his learning on site of the school.”

“We asked him to join us few times though. The opportunity of learning new culture was much promising to refuse.”

Ezra nodded and took another sip.

“Is that how you both learned Basic? From Captain Eli?”

“He taught us some,” Ina said with a nod. “The rest we learned from book donated to us from Mitth’raw’nuruodo.”

“There’s a book?”

They smiled and Ina turned back to the counter before placing the thick, ancient-looking data card on the table.

“We thought you might ask, so I retrieved it from library this morning. Tell me, was the book on the Ysalamiri also to your liking?”

He made a face, trying to lie and be polite, but failing miserably to an extent even the Chiss seemed to recognize.

“You had troubles?”

He rubbed his neck and nodded.

“I don’t know how to read your alphabet.”

They laughed, not unkindly, but in an endearing sort of way. Like the way you might do to a child who’d just asked a simple question like: "Why is it dark at night time?" Or "Do you know how many decicreds it takes to make one credit?"

“It would seem your desk has been disrepaired. You see, we had the Inrokini students program translation devices into the rooms long ago using this book, and more currently, updated by another chip made by Eli Vanto.”

“I will send for one of the students to make repairs at once,” Stent said. “Perhaps after we greet the hospital and return the uniforms to the Sabosen.”

“Good morning,” a voice from the doorway said in a crisp and uniform tone. Faro and Birt walked
in, their hair pristine and any sign of exhaustion completely vacant from their voices.

“Ah,” Ina greeted, looking to the writing of the strange clock ticking away near her caf machine. “More have arrived and at the precise timing as the past day.”

“Old habits are hard to break,” Faro smiled. “But you’re up early, Bridger, what’s the matter? Couldn’t sleep?”

“No, I actually slept pretty well,” he replied with a small shrug. “I guess I just get up early.”

“Earlier than an Imperial commodore?”

“Or a sanitation officer?” Birt snorted.

He shrugged. _Maybe his work did require him to be up before theirs did?_ Then again… since he’d obviously fought against the Empire before, perhaps he woke earlier than them in order to stay one step ahead before attacking? He didn’t want to think about such things though, and so shoved the entire thought completely from his mind.

“Did I hear you say that we were _all_ going to visit the hospital today?” Faro asked. “Is that allowed?”

“Will we be allowed to see the Grand Admiral while we’re there this time?” Birt added quickly.

Stent took another sip of his drink and showed them a soft smile as Ina placed two watered-down cups of tonic in front of them.

“You are properly dressed now, so the visitation will be approved. I have heard word from Eli Vanto that Mitth’raw’nuruodo will be receiving guests today before he is discharged. We shall depart just as timing for the others wake happens.”

“Just as soon as the others wake,” she corrected politely.

They nodded in understanding, but forced Faro to ask for her drink in Cheunh to make up for her correction. This was, _after all_, the best way for her to learn Cheunh while they were also learning Basic, Stent and Ina had told them.

Ina glanced back again to what Ezra assumed was the clock, and downed the rest of her morning drink before placing the cup on the counter.

“I must go,” she said. “I will return shortly after midday. Shall I meet you here or at the hospital?”

“Here,” Stent said in immediate reply. “We will be long returned by that time, _ch'eo beo_.”

“Then, if you see Mitth’raw’nuruodo, do give him my thoughts.”

“I know, and will do so.”

She nodded and each smiled warmly at one another before gently rubbing their noses together and then Ina turned and left for work. This, Ezra quickly figured out, was apparently how married Chiss showed their affection to one another because it was the same thing they had done the night before when Stent had left the house. It was sweet in its own way, and made him smile though he hid it beneath his cup and took another drink to cover his tracks.
The others woke up shortly after, all except Pyrondi who said she still wasn’t feeling well and wanted to sleep in. She’d come down for dinner last night at least, and while she was down there, she’d said a few pleasant hellos to Ezra and the others, ate quickly and quietly before excusing herself from the table, and then she went back up to her room without another word. Whatever “girl-talk” Koree had tried with her the other day obviously hadn’t seemed to work. Pyrondi looked disheveled, her long raven-tinted hair was up in a messy bun that let loose strands string around her face which revealed her baggy eyes, the bottom lids dark and puffy like she spent most of her time crying and lying awake with nightmares.

*Probably, she had. Ezra thought as Walten’s words echoed in his mind. "She just needs a little time."*

She seemed so happy when they all ate dinner together on Myrkr, but then the Vornskr attack happened, causing the losses of Pyra, Albus, Woldar, and the stormtrooper...uh...LG something? He had never really learned the poor man's name, and was too scared to ask for it now without upsetting the others. The last thing he needed was more people as depressed as Pyrondi. It probably was a lot for her to stomach. If Ezra wasn’t so used to this sort of thing, he bet he would be acting just the same.

*Everyone dealt with grief differently, he supposed.*

Stent handed them all their drinks and left to gather the uniforms as the humans sat to enjoy their breakfast brew. Walten informed Ezra that yesterday their breakfast had been some sort of oatmeal-like thing with small hunks of what he assumed was fruit and meat stirred into it. Today they must have been running late if all they got was this odd cup of caf.

Of course, the early morning breakfast hour was one of the few rare times both Stent and Ina were together in one place at the same time. Both had long shifts at the school, Ina typically working from morning to just before dinner, and Stent at night, getting back in time to make breakfast.

This wasn’t their typical work time, according to Faro, just temporary hours while they watched over their house-guests, and Ezra felt a little guilty that they had changed so much in their life, but the two seemed very used to the hours regardless. He wondered if it had anything to do with raising all the orphaned children like Thrawn and Thrass? That, and apparently the Chiss didn't sleep for very long, so their time was spent more freely than a human's would be, wasting all hours of the night sleeping.

Still, they managed to leave not long after Ina had, after everyone finished their breakfast drinks. Rather than catch a shuttle or some sort of speeder—*did the Chiss have speeders?* They ended up walking with Stent the few short hills to the hospital. They could see the building from the dorms of course, but it was still a pretty good distance for someone to walk.

At least the weather was nice. It was permanently breezy here with sunny blue skies and a faint white sun sparkling in the distance. It was closer than it was on Myrkr, but Ezra assumed that this was the same sun and elected not to ask Stent to confirm the theory because the older Chiss man was already pointing and naming off things in Cheunh while they walked. Flowers, trees, buildings, birds… it was a nice way to do a little immersive learning, and Ezra listened the best he could because he wasn’t sure if they’d ever be doing something like this again.

By the time they got to the hospital, they were greeted by another dignified-looking Chiss woman with long white hair. She was dressed in long red robes and an almost regal looking markings on the collar of her cloak.
“Everyone,” Stent motioned. “This is Doctor Gras’vee’sabosen, Aristocra of the Sabosen House and head of this hospital.”

They bowed and greeted her in the almost trained way that Ina had taught them the night before.

Faro had met her a few days ago when she and Eli explained their story from Myrkr, and Karyn had told them that the Aristocra, like Gras’vee’sabosen, were supposedly the most important people on the planet, maybe even in the whole Ascendancy. Eli had mentioned that she was far nicer than the other three and much more open to guests on her world. It turns out that the Chiss were also apparently a bit xenophobic, and typically didn’t allow outsiders of any kind to enter certain worlds or space lanes without days of preparation and permits. Sposia was not one of those worlds thankfully, but just the same, the humans had to be careful not to overstep their boundaries or accidentally offend someone, especially not somebody as important as the Aristocra.

She returned their greeting in Cheunh, before talking to Stent and ordering one of the nurses to retrieve the humans' former medical suits.

He seemed to frown slightly as the Aristocra spoke to him, but before long, both bowed politely to one another and then she to the group of humans, before leaving to continue with more important work elsewhere.

“My apologies everyone,” Stent said with a turn. “It would appear Mitth’raw’nuruodo has already deemed himself fit to leave and has done so before sunrise. Already, I know he will be in the care of the military by this time.”

The sad cacophony of disappointment was short lived, but what could they do? That was Thrawn for you. They understood his haste to leave and didn’t hold it against him. Their walk here was pleasant enough, and far better than being cooped up in the house all day. That, unfortunately being what they all ended up doing as soon as they returned home and waited for Ina while Stent took his cycle of sleep.

As for the rest of that day, it seemed fairly standard.

The Chimera crew gave Ezra the grand tour of the dorms, they ate some sort of salad-type thing for lunch, Ina came home, taught them all more about Chiss culture as well as a few more phrases, and that was about it. By the time dinner rolled around, Ezra had already taken Jorj for a walk—or well, he mostly did the walking while the lazy Ysalamir rode around on his back, and after that, nothing, he washed up, got ready for bed, and went to sleep. It felt almost wrong to have a day so normal, but Ezra went to bed that night wondering how he would get used to this, hoping he would enjoy it, and thinking over everything he’d learned that day as he readied himself for all the new things that he would learn tomorrow.

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**Day Two:**

It was, as he assumed, a similar cycle as the day prior. He woke up early, talked with Stent and Ina, ate breakfast, talked with the other crew, explored the house a little more, had lunch, played a few pranks with Koree and Gunther, got in trouble for said pranks, and went back up to his room to relax with somewhat reluctant acceptance before deciding to try and read a little before Ina got
They said the repairs for his desk would be done by tonight, so instead, Ezra read the only Basic-written book that they owned, only to burst out laughing two seconds later when he realized it was some sort of factory-issued Clone Wars piloting guide for one of the old ship models that Ezra didn’t even recognize.

No wonder Ina and Stent spoke like they did if the largest portion of their Basic came from an instruction manual that—let’s be honest—no one short of a Clone Trooper probably ever read, if even then!

He laughed again, but read the first five chapters anyway because once he got past the outdated mechanics of the ship, there was actually a pretty decent survival chapter that dealt with what to do if you find your ship crashed on strange alien planets. Of course it was nothing that he needed to help him now, but it killed an hour or so before he grew restless.

“Grrrrrilll...”

Jorj trilled from his tree, waking up from his third nap of the day before pawing at the branches and rattling leaves to get Ezra’s attention. The baby Ysalamir slept most of the day anyway, but Ezra made a note to still take him out a few times throughout the day to give the little lizard a change of scenery.

“I hear you little guy,” he said with a smile. “I’m sick of the room too. Let’s go for a walk!”

The exercise was nice. Jorj even let Ezra run and jog without complaint and he sprinted around the large backyard a few laps before turning in for the day. Ina and Stent had enough room to herd farm animals, but for the most part the entire plot was completely empty save for the groves of lush green grass, a few berry bushes, and a wall of trees blocking the entire place in a nice secluded little rectangle.

Jorj growled suddenly, which meant he was getting sick of being apart from the Olbio and needed to get back to it soon.

“Alright, alright, I hear you, we’re going back now, okay?”

He hissed grumpily and laid his chin on Ezra’s shoulder visibly grumpy, but patient as the young man wiped the sweat off his forehead and walked back into the house to take him back to his tree. *The adolescent Ysalamiri was a fickle creature,* Ezra noted.

“Keep it together little guy, we’re almost there.”

He made his way towards the turbolift, before the *tap-tap-tap* of another set of footsteps was heard trailing behind him, the pace growing faster, but Ezra didn’t even have time to turn around before a rough grip spun him sideways and a blue-skinned face appeared right before his now startled eyes.

“Sevicsi!” Tharin greeted loudly. She pushed him back a step and did a quick walk around him as she noticed his new clothes, studying every inch of him and even lifting his cloak a little before letting out a quick hum and another smile. “The clothes of my people suit you mighty fine, I dare say?”

She revealed an impressive mimic of Eli’s wildspace accent for those last five words, but he couldn’t tell if she was just using the accent for fun or because she honestly believed that was how you pronounced them in context.
“Tharin!” He snapped back confused, his face flushing a little as he tried to get the feeling of her prying eyes to leave his body. “Why—Wh-what are you doing here?”

She pointed to the upper level and gave him a small, obviously practiced shrug in reply.

“Kors’ten’tiru called me here to fix a malfunction in the educator desks we installed.” She hissed slightly and slammed a fist into her own palm as she growled and muttered under her breath. “I told those novice students to make sure all of the language programs were working before we left. Please do not hold this against us, for the Chiss are usually very competent at our work.”

“It’s not a big deal? Stuff breaks down sometimes. It’s not really anyone’s fault.” He snapped and pointed a thumb back to his Ysalamir. “Besides, maybe Jorj got into the wiring or something. I refuse to believe he just crawled around on his tree all day, and I saw scratches under the desk.”

The lizard blinked all four beady black eyes in unison and Ezra smiled.

“See that look in his eyes?” He teased. “Pure mischief.”

Tharin did not in fact see this look, but smiled because Ezra smiled and held out her arm until the creature crawled over to her once again.

“That is a joke, I assume?” She chuckled, now scratching beneath Jorj’s long purring chin. “Eli told me not to take everything humans say so literally.”

“Yeah...” He rubbed his neck awkwardly. “That was a joke.”

She laughed and clapped sharply as she motioned him to the turbolift.

“Well, shall we go?”

He shrugged and nodded.

“Sure, Jorj is getting grouchy anyway. He needs to stay with his tree to stay healthy, but I won’t guess I’ll know why until we get that desk fixed and I can read Ina's datacard about Ysalamiri?”

The lizard purred against Tharin’s face and gently rubbed her cheek with his, completely bashing everything Ezra had just told her about him being in a bad mood. The little traitor. He really was mischievous, that part wasn’t a joke.

“Oh of course, why, I don’t know how you deal with Jorj, he is just so emotional!” she said sarcastically with a roll of her eyes, also something she’s no doubt been practicing to herself in front of a mirror.

“Traitor...” Ezra muttered.

Jorj stuck out his tongue again and blinked, this time one eye at a time lagging slightly behind the others.

“But you are right about one thing,” Tharin continued as they entered the turbolift. “I too have read this data and have learned that the Ysalamiri do in fact draw nutrients from their trees and need to stay with them to remain healthy. A curious thing to have such a creature as a pet considering they would need to remain with their trees to stay alive. Transporting an Olbio sapling is no easy task either. You’re lucky we’d already made a sustainable eco-plot that keeps them alive.” She pondered on something and tapped a finger to her lips. “Although, that does give me an idea for a type of back harness, perhaps lined with the same nutrients so you could take Jorj out for farther
distances without him becoming—” She stared at him and lifted a brow, an incredulous smile forming as her voice teased him with mockery. “—Grouchy?”

He rolled his eyes and they walked out as Ezra followed the lines in the floor all the way back to his room. It was starting to get easier to determine if he had taken enough steps or gone too far now that he’d done it a few times. Meanwhile, Tharin trailed behind him, watching him studiously with the slightest tilt of her head.

"Wait!” He stopped suddenly. "Is that why the tree was so heavy? Because of stuff inside the planter that kept the thing alive?"

"Heavy? Do you mean to tell me that you haven't been using the anti-grav lifts to move it from place to place?"

"Wait," he said dumbly. "There were grav-lifts?"

She slid a hand over her face.

“Oh Sevicsi, you definitely would benefit from having this backpack.” She opened the holographic screen that came from out of the device on the back of her hand and started typing something. “I’ll make note of this and come back with a prototype.” She frowned and dropped her arm. “Oh… but… I suppose you will only be here for a few more days, won’t you?"

“That’s the plan,” he said with a frown. “Though, I was starting to think that maybe I could—” He stopped suddenly when he heard Tharin sniffing him and leaned so far away from her that he nearly hit the wall in the process. “Uh… what are you doing?”

“You stink,” she stated innocently, pulling away as she continued watching him with her round red eyes and shut down her holoscreen.

Ezra’s face turned completely hot now and he started to stammer defensively. “Well, yeah! I mean—I was just jogging—outside! What? Chiss don’t sweat?”

“Oh no, we do,” she said informatively. “We just don’t smell like you do. It is an interesting odor. Not very pleasant, but not completely awful either. Like many things with you humans, it is truly fascinating.”

His face was still red, but he sucked his lips into a thin line to avoid saying anything further and was silent the rest of the way down the hall before stopping by his door and beating the symbol lightly with a loosely balled his fist.

“Well…That’s my room, go on in and do whatever you need to do.”

“And where are you going?”

His complexion deepened and he sank lower into his own shoulders as he mumbled… “I’m going to shower because apparently I stink.”

She started laughing and held her stomach as she did.

That pucker of anger returned because for the life of him, Ezra didn’t understand what the heck was so funny.

“I’m glad you’re so amused!”
“No.” Her laughter died down. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I didn’t mean to offend you.” She wiped a tear and stepped inside to place Jorj on his tree before turning back to Ezra with a soft smile. “I know I shouldn’t act so informally with you, Ezra Bridger. Truthfully, I just assumed all humans were like Eli and we joke around all the time. It is… Refreshing in a way to be able to speak so freely and honestly with your friends like humans do. The other Chiss… They are not so open, and I in fact did not know what it meant to express myself verbally until I met Eli.” She turned and crouched near the table tinkering with two wires underneath before pressing three buttons and then standing back to her feet. “Though, I suppose I was always different than my father and my house. I was curious and asked many questions, wanting to understand everything to the best of my ability. This can come off a bit obsessive I’m sure, and I apologize if that annoys you.” With one final button, she pointed and dusted off her hands, a slight frown accompanying her next words as she ducked out of the room. “It is done, your desk is repaired. I suppose I will leave you to your studies. Good luck, Ezra Bridger.”

He blinked, unsure of how she had both fixed the desk and somehow given him a heartfelt apology speech at the same time and all under the span of what was probably only around thirty seconds.

“Wait, wait, I’m sorry Tharin,” he said quickly, reaching out to stop her as she walked past him. “You’re not annoying. You have no idea what personal space is—” he laughed. “But you’re not annoying. You’re really smart. I mean, those med suits at the hospital! This desk! How did you learn to do that?”

“You—are—interested in hearing about my work?”

“Well, yeah!” He nodded. “It’s kind of amazing!”

She smiled and folded her hands together as bits of purple stained her cheeks. A blush maybe?

“I would be happy to tell you about it.” She snapped and wrote down a message on his desk pad. “If you are able, meet me at these coordinates on Csaus and I’ll show you my lab and my first prototype of the Ysalamiri pack. Give me oh… maybe two days tops and I should have a decent model ready to test. Bring Jorj with you of course.”

He chuckled and nodded sideways.

“Sure, I mean, I would love to but I don’t have a shuttle, and I don’t think me or the rest of the humans are supposed to leave Sposia.”

She got a wicked smile and winked over-dramatically at him as if it was the first time she’d ever actually had to do it.

“What the Ascendancy doesn’t know won’t kill us!”

“You mean "them" right? The expression is supposed to go—”

“Oh, I did not misspeak.”

He gulped and she nodded sympathetically.

“I’ll figure something out,” she said with a wave of her hands. “Maybe a parting gift when we meet again on Csilla for the trial?”

“You’re going to the trial too?”

She placed particular emphasis on her next words and nodded.
“Everyone will be at the trial, Ezra.”

He gulped again and she turned to leave his room, pressing for the symbol as the panels *whooshed* open to reveal another person standing in the halls.

“Oh!” Koree jumped. “Hello there? Um... You?”

“Hello,” Tharin bowed lightly. “I am Mitth’ar’inrokini. You may call me Tharin. I have never met a human female before, please—” She inched closer and touched the short strands of Koree’s black hair in twisting motions between her thumb and forefinger. “May I study you?”

“Wow! This one is blunt, isn’t she?” Koree laughed, taking Tharin by the shoulders and shaking her gently as she wrapped the girl in an awkward backwards hug. “More than I am even, and that’s really saying something.” She got a dark gleam in her eyes and made a suggestive face towards Ezra as she wiggled her brows at him. “What was this nice young lady doing in your room Mister Bridger, *hmmmm*?”

“I was making repairs to his data-table,” she answered innocently, a growing smile as she started mentally making notes of her time together with Koree. “This gesture of friendship is most peculiar, tell me, is this how all female friends of your species greet one another?”

“Yes.”

“No!”

Ezra and Koree’s overlapping voices confused the Chiss for a moment before Koree rolled her eyes and released her hold on Tharin.

“You’re no fun.”

“What do you need, Koree?” Ezra stated quickly, his face flushing again, though he tried his best to hide it beneath an unamused scowl.

“Touchy...” She scoffed with a smirk. “I was just inviting you down to play a little game that Gunther and Birt just made up.”

“Game?” Ezra asked cautiously.

“Game!” Tharin cheered eagerly in the exact opposite tone as his.

He lifted a brow and crossed his arms together.

“What *kind* of game?”
“Alright lads and ladies!” Gunther chuckled. “The game is simple. Each of us will go around the room and tell a little something about ourselves. If you share something in common with the speaker, you take a drink! If you don’t—” he shrugged. “Well, it’s going to be a pretty boring night for you, isn’t it?”

“What is this stuff we’re drinking?” Ezra asked, his tone still cautious as he stared down at the dark liquid sloshing around in his cup.

“A brew of my own design, I’m afraid Mr. Bridger,” Faro said with a mixed half smile on her face. “It would seem my sixth attempt at making tea has actually had a rather unexpected flavor this time around.”

“Relax kid,” Pyrondi scoffed with a slumping shrug of her shoulders. “It’s just blueberries...” She shrugged. “Kind of?”

He was amazed to see her out of her room. Her eyes and hair were still a mess, but she seemed to have regained a bit of her snark from Myrkr and some light in her face. That in itself made him smile a little more. She was finally recovering. Thank the Force.

“Are you going to play or not?” Gunther snorted. “Come on. The not-tea is getting cold the more we sit around chatting, and the less we—” He paused, realizing he’d talked his way into a box. “—sit around chatting?”

Koree snorted and rolled her eyes before kissing his lips and taking a seat beside him.
"Nice try babe."

Tharin’s eyes glowed briefly with a flash of intrigue.

“Sevici,” she whispered. “What was that thing they did just now with their mouths?”

He felt his face fluster again and looked around nervously as he leaned back and answered with much scrutiny.

“A kiss. It’s uh—kind of like the nose thing that Ina and Stent do—but less—wholesome? No, that’s not the right word. It’s just—well...”

“Are they life mates?” She grinned, her entire face practically screaming with curiosity now.

“I don’t think so?” he mumbled unsteadily. “I think they’re just dating?”

“Date-ting?” She frowned. “Tell me, what do dates have to do with the action of kissing? Is this a timely occurrence?” She looked around for a clock. “Fascinating? How do they know when is a good time and date?”

“No, not that kind of date.” Stars, this was hard. Not to mention embarrassing. Stupid lovey-dovey couple, why did they have to do that right now and right in front of Thrawn’s niece!? Ezra swears if she learned something bad from them then he wasn’t going to be the one to explain it to Thrass.

“Ahem!” Birt chided. “If we’re all finished talking about the rules. I think I’ll go first. Now does everybody have their cup filled?”

They nodded and Ezra sniffed the drink with a roll of his eyes before taking a seat next to Pyrondi, Tharin copying the cross-legged motion to his other side.

“Alright, well to start things off, my name is Birt Rathon. I was born on Kuat and worked the shipyards until joining up with the Imperial Academy. I wanted to become a pilot, but my moms didn’t really think I was cut out for it and I chose to go with sanitation instead.” He swirled around his cup a little and frowned. “Kuat’s kind of a matriarchal society, so that’s about all the men are good for in their eyes. Cleaning, cooking, you know, chores, and stuff. They always wished I’d been born a girl, but whoops I guess?” He sighed. “Bah, that’s enough from me right now. Walten, I saw you sip. You go next.”

“Name’s Walten Horncaster.” He shifted, but nodded and raised his cup a little. “I worked the shipyards on my home planet of Arkanis before joining up with the Arkanis Stormtrooper Academy near the capitol. It was a dreadful planet, always rained, and the weather kept us inside most of the time working in one of the huge hangar bays and indoor combat training zones. But hey, we don’t always get to pick where we’re born, do we? Gods, I hated it there.”

As he said that, four people took drinks from their cups and he stopped with a snort.

“Alright alright! Urick, I saw you go twice, so it’s your turn!”

“Um, okay… uh, Urick Danash.” He greeted the room with his cup. “I grew up on Bettok and joined the Imperial Academy there to become a stormtrooper. It’s about all that planet is good for. It’s hot as hell there and blows dust the rest of the time. It isn’t as awful as Tatooine or Jakku, but it’s certainly somewhere down on that same list. My brother and I joined the corps together and left the family moisture farm to go off and explore the galaxy.” He frowned and tapped at the floor with the tip of his boot. “He didn’t make it past our first mission. Cocky idiot! He never listened to orders—he never—” He sighed. "Sorry...didn't mean to shift the mood there."
Gunther took one slow sip and Urick waved his hand over in the man’s direction with a
tired flick of his hand.

Real dull. Everyone is real polite, all genteel and dainty-natured.” He clicked his tongue and leaned
back with a scoff and a sniff. “I come back with mud on my shoes and my mom throws me in a
bath. I get a little flake of food on my chin, my mom throws me in the bath. I say a word to one of
my teachers that isn’t too polite and flowery, and my mom—”

“Let me guess. She throws you into the bath?” Koree nudged.

“Actually, she made me suck on hard soap until my mouth went numb. Kinda like this drink is
doing.” He rolled his eyes and shook his head. “I had to get out of there the first chance I got and
went off to start a new life, live a little, you know? Turns out my brother, Gudri, had much the
same idea. He went on to become an ISB agent. Me, I was a gunner, more action, less paperwork.
It was a good couple of years, but...then he...died. Mission on Batonn went really wrong for a lot of
people. I was there on the ship, but couldn’t do anything about it. Couldn’t—” he sighed and
clinked his cup against Koree’s. “Frag it, nevermind. Commodore Faro, would you care to tell us
your story?”

"On the contrary," she said. "I saw Koree take two sips more than I did, so I think I'll let her go
first." She swirled her cup around with a frown. "Though, off the record, I must inform you that I
remember that Batonn mission well. The Grand Admiral, Captain Vanto, and I all suspected foul
play after hearing that woman's convenient alibi. I know your brother died doing his duty, Mr.
Kordin and I don't want you to think of him any other way." She ground her teeth together and
scoffed. "If you ask me, I think it was that governor who set off those explosives, and blew the
whole city to hell, but without proof, no one will be able to do anything to confront her about it."

Ezra blinked. Could this have been the same governor that ordered the explosion on Lothal that
killed his master and ruined Thrawn's fuel supply? He remembered the scene play through his
mind again, the heat of the fire on his face... the shocked tears rolling down his cheeks... the way
Hera screamed his name. "Kanani!" A sudden jolt of anger flowed through him as his fingers sent
little cracks into his cup and the blue liquid rippled like tiny waves. He smoothed his hand before
the whole thing shattered, but saw Tharin give him a side glance as her hypersensitive Chiss ears
had apparently heard the little creases form and the tiny plop as a drop of drink jumped and fell
back into the cup.

Oops...

Thinking fast, he stuck his finger in it to hide the ripples and then sucked the blue off, only to see
that it had stained his finger. The drink was bitter, but fruity, with bits of the crushed berries from
Ina and Stent’s backyard thrown into the mix to try and make it a little more appetizing. Definitely
not tea though and for some strange reason it made his teeth tickle. Looking over at some of the
more plentiful drinkers, their lips and tongues were starting to turn blue, but at least Tharin looked
away from him and back over to the others sitting across the room.

That was close.

"Thank you Commodore," Gunther said, his voice really genuine for once as Faro shot him a
sympathetic nod in return. He clinked his drink against Koree's again and tried to bring some of the
booming comedic tone back to his vocals. "I guess that means you’re up babe. Try not to make
things totally depressing like the rest of us, yeah?"

She gave him a half smile as she rubbed his shoulder and nodded.
“Koree Vayes, planet Juntar, one sister, two parents, though they were never around much, so my sister and I pretty much raised ourselves.”

Ezra took his first sip and the entire room watched him do it. He blushed, but Koree continued as Ezra mulled over the strange taste in his mouth. *Definitely not tea!*

“Oh let's see now... I had four Tookas, three Fathiers, a couple Condors in the aviary—”

“Did you live in a mansion?” Pyrondi exclaimed, choking on her spit a little as the woman listed off her expensive collection of pets.

“Yes actually, a floating mansion in the clouds. A lot of Imperial families did. It wasn't a big deal. Mummy and Daddy were busy busy Imperial backers, and my sister and I needed the animals to keep our minds off of their absence.”

*Ezra wondered if he could spit his tea back into the cup because that was practically the opposite of how he'd been brought up.* He didn't of course, but the thought was still there.

“Ha! Not a big deal she says!”

“Spoken like a true rich girl.”

“That right there,” she snapped. “I can’t say I can complain. I got everything I ever wanted and my sister and I received the best schooling that money could buy on Juntar, but it never really felt like something I’d earned for myself, you know? Everything was always just handed to me. I was expected to sit still, look pretty, and be the perfect little princess to my parents’ perfect little lives. Now my sister, Cortessa, became a dancer. She performs beautiful plays with a travelling theatre group that once even played for the Emperor. My parents always wanted me to be more like Cortessa, but I was a tad more— oh, wild shall we say?” She tilted her head and flicked her blue-tinted tongue across her teeth. “I turned my string instruments into electric guitars, my dances into fighting positions, my poetry into rap battles. See, I wanted something real, something dangerous, and something that I earned myself instead of with my family name. So I took one of the family shuttles to Montross and joined up with the Skystrike Academy as a TIE pilot before they saw how good I was behind a blaster. All that skeet and archery training my father had us doing as recreation really helped to train my eyes for the task.” She took a breath and shrugged. “I was assigned to the Chimera—”

They all took a drink except for Tharin.

“—And the rest, you already know. But, I’ve been talking too much. Someone else have a go. Ezra! You drank first. Your first sip no less. You go next. I'm eager to learn more about Thrawn's "special bodyguard" after all.”

*Well kriff... what was he supposed to do here!?* Ezra thought frantically for a backstory, maybe something fake, maybe a little bit of truths? How much did they know about him again? He couldn't just spill his guts like the rest of them had. Thrawn told him specifically not to talk about his time with the Ghost crew. But then again, that time was still fuzzy to him anyway, so yeah, that might work out after all. He could feign innocence and claim not to remember that far ahead in his life, and up until that point, he would censor the *kriff* out of the rest of his story.

Meanwhile, the rest of them looked to him with eager stares and waited on the edge of their seats to hear his tale. Of everyone here, *aside Tharin*, Ezra was the one who they knew the least about after all.
“Um, hi… My name is Ezra Bridger and I was from the planet Lothal.”

“Oh Lothal!” Faro repeated. “Well, that explains a lot. Thrawn must have hired you after the Chimera made so many stops to the planet. Must have been while I was off on a quick trip to Garell. Very sneaky, Mr. Bridger.”

He hummed a little, his voice growing more confident as he snapped and nodded.

“That’s right! That’s exactly what happened!”

“Well yeah, but back up a bit!” Koree ordered with a hard wave of her free hand. “I want to hear about little baby Ezra Bridger.”

“Me too!” Pyrondi teased with a raise of her cup. "What was it like growing up with the Force?"

"Did you jump off of things when you were a kid too?"

He tugged at his collar, but obliged answers to the best of his memory’s and his available history’s ability.

“I didn't really realize I had the Force until I was a lot older,” he said. "But, my memories are still a little jumbled, so I’ll try my best to tell you what I can, alright?"

They nodded in understanding and Faro motioned for him to continue.

"You have the floor, Ezra."

With that, he took a breath and told them his story, leaving out the parts where his parents were Rebel sympathizers who were arrested for broadcasting signals out to the galaxy. He couldn’t remember how popular their broadcasts were, but he decided not to take the risk.

“I was born on Empire Day, and lived on Lothal with my mom and dad. They were great parents and they loved me a lot. We were happy. But… uh… shortly after the Empire came to Lothal, they disappeared and left me alone when I was eight years old. I grew up on the streets, stealing to survive, picking pockets, messing with stormtroopers—” He shot a guilty look over at Walten and Urick, but they didn’t seem to be surprised about the news, nor care about it for that matter. “I used to collect Imperial helmets in the communication tower that I lived in on the outskirts of town.” He remembered a face suddenly and laughed to himself as he rubbed his chin and recalled the memory aloud. “There was this Xexto, Ferpil Wallaway, he taught me how to pick pockets, and we had this game we’d play where we’d try to pick each other clean before the other noticed.”

He sighed at the memory, but then recalled meeting Kanan and Hera, Sabine, Zeb, and Chopper. They went to rescue some Wookies—a man named Kallus was there. Kallus who was both Imperial and Rebel in Ezra’s mind. A member of the crew maybe? He did seem to play both sides after all. After that, the missions, the Inquisitors, Maul, Vader, that explosion—

He shook his head and decided not to tell the rest.

“And that’s about all I got?” He shrugged. “Next thing I know, I can use the Force and Thrawn’s hiring me for a job. Then we crashed and were on Myrkr getting chased around like Lothrats. Uh… who wants to go next?”

Urick and Walten shot a glance at each other, but leaned back in their seats without a word.

“No wonder you were eyeballing our helmets,” Koree laughed. “You little thief!” She winked and
shot him a wry grin. “If I knew where it was right now, I’d totally give it to you for your collection.”

“I think we left em’ back on Myrkr?” Gunther said with a scratch of his throat.

Ezra had to scratch his own as the mere sight of that made the inner lining of his own windpipe itch a little in return.

“Well who should go next? We all seemed pretty even with that one?” Ezra asked.

“The only three left are Pyrondi, Commodore Faro, and—” Birt paused. “Um, I'm sorry. Who exactly are you again?”

She opened her mouth to speak, but Koree cut her off.

“This is Tharin. Ezra's girlfriend!”

Gunther whistled, the rest however looked more shocked or struck with blatant disbelief. They decided quickly after that Koree was telling a joke, though, how Ezra knew this young woman well enough to have her visiting their dorms—*and only after being awake on the planet for hardly three days as is*—was indeed a mystery. They'd simply assumed she was another of Stent or Ina's hired hands who Koree had forcibly dragged into the game, so none of them really questioned it, and did their best to be polite.

“She’s not my girlfriend!” He whipped back defensively. "This is Thrawn's niece!"

Gunther's whistle intensified to the point he had to lean forward off the sofa.

"Way to go Ezra!” he said.

"Knock it off," he blushed.

“So, wait... I am not your friend because I am a girl?” Tharin frowned, visibly hurt by the quick-to-come comment, but pausing her confusion while she waited for an explanation.

The others in the room laughed at him, which only made Ezra's face grow redder.

“No wait!” He groaned and slid his fingers across his jaw. “I didn't mean it like that. Of course you’re my friend, but see— when a person says “girlfriend” what they really mean is—”

Tharin's head turned towards the hall before the rest of them heard the voice come into the room.

“What is going on in here?”

The huddle turned and saw Ina returned from work. She was shocked to see Tharin there of course and immediately greeted her as she looked back and noticed the blue stains on each of the humans' lips and faces.

“What is that in your cup?” she asked, looking to Tharin for answers as she wasn’t really sure if the humans would know how to respond.

Tharin wasn’t sure, she herself never having taken a sip in any of the others' stories. She lifted the mug to her lip and let the smallest bit of liquid touch her tongue before she spewed it back out into open air, Ezra blocking his face with the underside of his cloak and hoping it wouldn’t stain if anything actually came out of her mouth.
“This is Csehebehn!” She exclaimed, letting out a number of worried Chiss expletives as both she and Ina’s eyes grew wide with shock and terror.

"Veuhn bo k'ir etah tsan'ah?!" Ina asked.

"Ch’a tucim!" Tharin replied. "I am afraid, they drank a lot..."

Ina turned on the back of her heel and marched up the hall to Stent’s office, her voice a loud echo of unbridled rage.

“Kors’ten’tiru!”

As Ina yelled at her husband for not keeping a better eye on the humans, Tharin explained that what they had technically been drinking was in fact a type of poisonous berry. The Csehebehn berry to be precise. It was used in a variety of medicines by the Sabosen and they grew just about everywhere, but you were supposed to blend them into salve and rub them on sore muscles and children’s chests to help them sleep at night. You definitely were not supposed to mash them up and eat them or turn them into tea and drink them!

The humans would live of course, the effects just being blotchy skin, swollen tongues, and itchy teeth for the rest of that night. Ina and Stent gave them some medicine they already had on hand, this obviously not being the first time one of their kids got into the Csehebehn bushes in the backyard. They assumed humans of their ages would know better than to eat random things outside the house, but in that, they seemed to be very wrong indeed.

While their medicine set in, Ezra and the rest of the group received long lessons of herbology and potential hazards from the three Chiss, ensuring they would never accidentally poison themselves again. After the emergency lesson, Stent left for work, and they were berated for what was probably the ninth time from Ina before finally being allowed to go to up to their rooms to sleep.

“Well, that was certainly an interesting evening?” Tharin smiled. “I would expect nothing less of humans. Though, I really wish I could have warned you sooner that those drinks were toxic.”

“You didn’t relate with any of those stories?” Ezra asked, scratching his throat more vigorously as the effects of the medicine were slow to ease the internal scratching.

Tharin swatted at his hand with a stinging slap and he lowered it back to his side.

“Well, I thought to take a sip when you were talking about your parents, but you were speaking in the past tense, and both of my parents are still with me. I rarely see them both at the same time anymore, but unlike Koree, I do see them quite often. I know we all love each other deeply and are happy being useful to our Ascendancy together, even apart as we are.” She shrugged. “As for the rest, I have never heard of these animals, the planets, nor the occupations that were spoken and I have no siblings living or dead to claim. No one mentioned any inventions made or discoveries learned, and so, I did not get to drink. A boring night as Gunther said.”

“Well, I did get to make a lightsaber or two in my time,” Ezra grinned. “But I forgot to mention it. Sorry.”

“This lightsaber is some sort of laser sword I assume?” Her brow lifted, already intrigued. “One of
your Force things I’m guessing?”

“Yeah,” he said with a cough. “But mine was special.”

“Oh?” She smirked. “How so?”

He grinned.

“Mine was also a blaster!”

She laughed.

“Special indeed! You are a curious study Ezra Bridger.” She smirked. “It is a shame you are leaving so soon. I feel as though we could have become good friends. Maybe not girlfriends, like you said, but—”

“Wait!” Ezra stopped, his throat straining as it became harder to talk and even harder not to think about scratching his tonsils or his tongue. “About that!”

“Shhh!” She hushed. “Don’t speak, you’re only irritating your trachea. Get some sleep tonight, Sevicsi. We’ll meet again once the Ascendancy grants you a ship. Promise to pick up your pack before you leave, alright?”

He still had a lot left to say. He wanted to talk with her about his decision to stay with Thrawn and Eli, his desire to learn more about Chiss culture and basically everything about her people. He wanted to explain what a girlfriend was and finally ask her what Sevicsi meant, but instead his swelling throat made it to where Ezra could only nod and wave to her as she left the house and went back out to her ship.

"Goodnight."

"Goobnah!” He said, wincing at his own voice. Why did it just do that?

She only chuckled and opened the door at the bottom of the ship to climb inside.

Ezra’s eyes shot wide when he saw it. A White TIE fighter! The vertically aligned wings had been doubled and contorted into a teardrop formation, the metal sleeker, stronger, and the design more fluid and beautiful. If his lips weren’t numb from Faro’s failed tea, he would whistle, but instead he just stood in the doorway, his mouth agape, drool slipping out against his will as he watched her pilot the Chiss aircraft into the stars and streak away like a shooting star in the night sky.

I’ve got to see that laboratory! Ezra thought with a grin, and since he’d already made up his mind to stay…he couldn’t wait for that day to come.

“Ezra Bridger!” Ina scolded. “Get to your room and sleep immediately!”

“Yam-maum!” He said, though the words came out all garbled like he’d stuffed his entire mouth with brawballos. Holy Kriff was this something permanent!? He pointed to his face frantically and let his garbles fling out louder as he did. “Hom Lah Gob, wham habben to mah vob!?”

“A side effect of the medicine.” Ina assumed. “It will reside in the morning with rest. Now go!”

He did and she shook her head, following him to make sure he actually got onto the turbolift.

“You aren’t the first to have eaten the Csehebehn Berries, Ezra Bridger.” She chuckled. “I can still remember young Mitth’raw’nuruodo, tears streaking his face because he thought his tongue would
pop out from his mouth. Always a curious boy that one. But a knowledgeable man it has made him become. We learn from our mistakes. Remember your past and let it guide you, knowing well that obstacles have brought you to time now and place here for reasoning. It is up to you to know the purpose, and to choose a path to choose to when you finally walk forward.”

In a way, that was Thrawn's saying. It made sense that the woman who took partial responsibility to raise him would have taught him something so inspirational.

“THRAWB SAYGEN! WEB SORB AH? OOB TAH HEM DAH?”

“Dear boy, I have absolutely not an idea what you are speaking. Now, off to sleep with you! Go!”

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**Day Three:**

By day three, Stent took them into the marketplace so Faro could buy something that might actually turn into a decent pot of tea.

They received looks and stares from the strangers who saw them in the streets. There weren’t many people out, most of them either older Chiss or mothers and fathers with young children and babies. Unlike the Sabosen staff and Stent or Ina, most of these citizens dressed very simply in blacks, grays, and browns but with very little to no red at all on their clothing. All of them seemed to know Stent though, and traded both polite and curious conversation with him as the humans introduced themselves in horribly mispronounced Cheunh like trained toddlers. This always made the Chiss smile somewhat, and they acknowledged their presence among them as some sort of exchange program or tutelage like with the rare circumstance of the other tan-skinned human from a few years back, Eli Vanto.

"Now..." Stent pointed. "Anything on this table will resemble the herbs you are requiring for this "tea" you wish to brew."

"Bin'vah, Stent" Faro said. "I'll sample these at once."

"I'm going to look over here!" Ezra called.

"Ooh!" Koree pointed. "I want to look over there at that one!

"Alright," he nodded. "Just do not stray far everyone."

Ezra nodded and looked from booth to booth at their wares. It was mostly food and tools, seldom did Ezra see anything resembling jewelry or souvenirs. Not that he had anyone left to buy such a thing for, but a memento in itself might have still been nice. Though, come to think of it, he had no money and wasn’t about to steal from a planet that was treating him so well. He supposed it was for the best that the market was boring, and kicked at a rock until Faro purchased her tea and the group went walking back the road and to the house.

Another boring day of lounging around and being lazy ensued, but at least Ezra had finally gotten to read Ina's book on Ysalamiri. It was short information, nothing in there about blocking the force at all, though one paragraph did mention that much like the Vornskr, Ysalamiri could be all skin
or they could grow fur. Apparently, Ysalamiri had the ability to grow thin white or orange colored hairs all over their bodies. He'd remembered that one Vornskr in the pack of three that attacked him and Thrawn on their first day in the forests of Myrkr was hairy while the others were jet black and all skin and bones. He'd wondered about that at the time, but just assumed it was some sort of birth defect or something. According to this it was pretty common for each of these species to be fuzzy and Ezra wondered if Jorj would be one of them.

"Can you do that?" Ezra asked Jorj, who only blinked awake before hissing and crawling around the tree to remove Ezra from his line of sight.

According to the datapad, Ysalamiri matured quickly. Their growth taking only about three weeks since their hatch date to become near the size they would be as an adult. Judging by Jorj's body length, he was probably only a teenager right now. He sure acted like it anyway. Angry, orange, always in a mood. It reminded him of Chopper, Hera's droid inside the Ghost.

"Sorry to disturb you, your majesty!" Ezra teased.

Jorj was ignoring him.

Teenagers... He thought with a roll of his eyes.

He spent the remainder of his afternoon reading different cards he'd gone down and pulled from Ina's library, just random files that looked interesting on the outside, because for the most part, Ezra still had no idea how to read the Chiss titles.

There was a book about cooking, one about childcare, a book about one battle from long ago, and another was a biography from some yellow-suited Aristocra from a place called Sarvchi. He was lost in his reading until Koree bellowed at him to come down when Ina got home.

By the time he made it down the stairs, Faro had finally made a successful pot of tea, and poured everybody a cup as they sniffed and toyed with it in uneasy compilation.

"Oh, just try it will you?" She scoffed. "I promise this one isn't poison."

They shrugged and drank, the smooth flavor mimicking the savory bitterness of real honest to goodness tea.

"Holy Kriffing frag!" Gunther exclaimed. "You actually did it!"

"It tastes just like Tarine tea!" Pyrondi smiled.

"Don't compare that foul beverage with this." Koree scolded. "This is far better than Tarine tea!"

"I must say, this flavor is indeed unique and—" Ina looked to Stent for help with the words.

"Delicious?" He guessed.

"Yes, most delicious," she nodded.

"Why thank you," Faro said with a mock-curtsy. "I feel my nerves calming already now that I know I can brew a decent cup of tea."

"Please tell, why was this such importance to you, Karyn Faro?"

"Well, I learned to make tea from my father, back before the Clone Wars. It was our thing, the tea parties and later just the relaxing breaks to sit with drinks and tell stories." She smiled. "I usually
start my days with a cup and end them just the same, even after joining the Empire. Like I said before, old habits." She sighed. "I was feeling a bit homesick without my daily dose of such drink. That's all it was."

"So you decided to poison us all for nostalgia?" Pyrondi snorted. "Gee, thanks a lot Commodore."

She blushed and everyone burst into laughter.

"I have something that might go well with this," Ina stood. "I was going to save it for tomorrow as a go away present—"

"Going away present," Stent laughed.

"Oh yes, I meant to say it like that." She pulled a giant cake from her refrigerator unit and set it on the table. "This is a special occasion treat made when a child ascends to their future and goes from the house."

"It's a cake!" Birt smiled.

"Cake?" The two Chiss repeated with a look to each other in unison.

"We have this sort of special occasion treat where we come from too," Ezra laughed.

"And we also serve it with tea," Koree added with a sharp grin.

"It would seem you truly are starting to think like a human being, Stent. Ina."

They smiled at that, and without another word, motioned for the table to dig in and eat their fill, something that they were happy enough to oblige. For once, Ezra felt like he actually knew what he was eating, and he ate until he was physically unable to take another bite. They all slept soundly that night, with full stomachs and nostalgic dreams of back home. All in all, it was a good way to say goodbye.

Day Four:

This was to be their final day on Sposia, for the trial was about to begin.

Ezra had been unable to contact Eli to try and get a little heads up on what was to come. No one had any idea what planet Thrawn was on, so he wasn't going to be any help either. They had all of their belongings packed, which was basically just the clothes on their backs and Jorj, who would be waiting on the ship during the meeting. Right now, they were all dressed, cleaned, combed, and ready for the shuttle to come and pick them up to take them to face the terror of the Chiss High Council and all four of the current houses of Aristocra.

Ezra finally found the grav-lifts on the Olbio tree and was able to glide it effortlessly outside now, much to the annoyance of Walten and Urick as he was the last out the door.

"Really?" They asked.
"Sorry!" Ezra replied guiltily. "I just learned about it myself! Honest."

Walten rolled his eyes, but motioned for the two to follow him away from the group for a moment to talk. They did so, but were stopped when Faro noticed them slipping away and called out to them.

"And just where do you three think you're going?"

"Just one last sweep of the house," Walten lied masterfully. "Don't want to forget anything or leave something out of place."

"I'm sure we haven't," Faro retorted, thinking it over before finally giving in with a paranoid nod. "Oh alright, but make it fast. We don't want to keep the shuttle waiting."

"Understood ma'am. Come on you two."

Once inside, the three made it a decent ways down the hall where none of the others could see or hear them any longer. Now, outside of prying eyes and eavesdropping ears, they were finally free to talk.

"What's this all about guys?" Ezra asked, remembering suddenly that they never did get to finish talking that first day he'd come to live at the dorms. He slapped his forehead and looked apologetically at both of them. "Oh right! I completely forgot that you had something to tell me the other day. Is that was this is?"

"Yeah," Walten said with a scratch of his chin. "Sorry, but we weren't sure if we knew how to tell you and backed off for a while."

"But, after the little drinking game the other day, we decided that you needed to know the truth."

He frowned.

"I don't understand?"

"We know," Walten said, his arms raised gently. "Just try not to freak out when we tell you, okay?"

He nodded, wondering what in the galaxy they were trying to tell him. They seemed nervous, and kept exchanging glances at each other as if waiting for the other to reveal the news first. Why were they so anxious? Ezra wondered, until a thought struck him and he gasped.

"Oh my gosh! I get it now!"

They looked at him and back at each other before returning their glances to him.

"So you already know what we're going to say?" Urick asked.

Ezra pointed between them and smiled.

"You two have a crush on Pyrondi!"

"What!?" They both spat.

Ezra took a step back.

"Well, I mean, we were all worried about her and talking about it when you were helping me with Jorj. So... I just thought because she and I got along so well on Myrkr that you maybe wanted my
"Oh my gods, please stop talking!" Urick said, his eyes wide with discomfort.

Ezra shut his mouth and swallowed, letting a cringe of regret and a meek apology slip out as the two men groaned and rolled their eyes at him.

"We are not in love with Pyrondi!" Urick pieced slowly.

"We were trying to tell you that we know who you are!"

Now Ezra's eyes grew wide and he arched his eyebrows at them a moment after.

"Who I am?" He repeated. "What do you—"

"We know your the Jedi from Lothal! The one who fought with the Rebel insurgents, Bridger!" Walten spat, drilling each word into him like a knife.

He was unable to hide the sheer shock on his face and took another step backwards.

"We figured you didn't remember or something," Urick explained. "And the drinking game pretty much confirmed it."

"Now I don't really know much about Thrawn hiring you for a job, but I do know that we were on Lothal that day, waiting for the Grand Admiral to come see a demonstration of his new TIE Defenders, and we were on that backwater planet doing an inspection of the lot for his arrival." He winced and held up a hand. "Oh sorry, no offense. Lothal really wasn't that bad a place to live I'd imagine."

"But!" Urick persisted. "After those two idiots went off chasing Lothcats, your Mandalorian friend stole the TIE and blew everything in the yard to slag. We were too busy shooting at you to notice her sneak aboard and nearly got blown to Mustafar before the two of you fled."

Walten chuckled.

"You should have seen yourself that day, hoping around crates like a monkey-lizard and slipping around on your gut like a greased-up porg!"

"I—uh—well—I—"

"Look kid, we're not mad!" Walten stressed. He shrugged and then rolled his eyes. "Okay, well we were a little mad, but not anymore."

"That's why Troop Commander Francis went so crazy and snapped back on Myrkr. But the two of us convinced him that you were a better asset alive, and watched you to make sure it wasn't just some Rebel trick."

"I went with you to find Thrawn and Faro," Walten continued. "Because I wanted to see for myself how much of a threat you were, but instead, what do you do, but selflessly sacrifice yourself so Faro and I could escape with Thrawn." He rolled his eyes so hard that it made his entire head roll with them. "After that we decided that you were on our side, but couldn't keep lying to you like we don't know what all you've done against the Empire. We weren't around for the rest, but I know there were other incidents with you involved. You did a lot of bad things, kid."

"And well, we just wanted to let you know because—" Urick's dark skin blushed. "Well because
we think of you as a friend, Ezra. And friends don't lie to each other." He stretched and chuckled a little. "Well unless it's for their own good at least. White lies don't count so much either—"

Walten tapped on Urick's shoulder to stop him from talking and the duo looked back to Ezra.

"I guess what we mean to say is... people can change and we're glad to have you on our side now when it really matters."

He punched Ezra on the shoulder, not hard, but the dazed Jedi was so completely bewildered that the three of them had fought together that he ended up getting buffeted back a step anyway.

"Uh... Ezra?"

"Frag I think we broke him!"

"Look, kid, I know it's a lot to take in, but don't beat yourself up about it! It was in the past, okay?"

"I—I know," Ezra mumbled.

So they knew his secret this entire time? They knew, and they didn't care about it. Thrawn was wrong! They knew and they were still okay, they were still his friends even? At the same time, another thought crossed his mind. Walten and Urick were fine, but how would the others take it? Plus, Thrawn told him that Ezra had infiltrated bases as undercover Rebels and as fake Imperials, so what was the angle for him as a "pretend rebel" to steal Thrawn's TIE Defenders? He'd fought directly against Thrawn and yet the Chiss still hired him to work on the Chimera. Some of it made sense in a way, but the rest made a lot less sense than before.

Urick had told him that friends didn't lie to each other, but maybe that's what Thrawn had done. Maybe Ezra wasn't caught in the middle, but perhaps he and Phoenix Squadron were full-fledged Rebels and fighting full-force against the Empire. That meant against Thrawn and the Chimera crew as well. He couldn't remember what that war was about, but felt like this revelation of his was true. He was a Rebel, and Thrawn had lied about that and covered it up to spare his feelings.

Ezra would admit that he was a little mad about the lie, but he understood why Thrawn had done it. To shield his feelings, just like he'd been doing this entire time. Of course, if he lied about the Rebel thing then what else had the Chiss made up in that story he'd told him the other day about his past? He'd have to come up with a way to ask, though he probably couldn't go into such a question directly. He would have to be sneaky about it if he wanted to learn the whole truth about his old life, and about his crew.

But for now, he supposed it would be a good place to start. He might even break his promise and tell the others that he used to be a Rebel, but that could wait until after the trial. They had bigger things to worry about that just his backstory. They were about to meet the leaders of the entire Chiss Ascendancy, and if they didn't make a good impression— well, who knows what would happen to them? This was something Ina, Stent, Thrass, Tharin, or even Eli and Thrawn wouldn't be able to fix if they messed this up.

With a shake of his head Ezra smiled and tilted his head up at the two ex-stormtroopers who were now officially labeled as his friends.

"Thank you for telling me, and thanks even more for not being mad. I guess I should probably say sorry for trying to kill you and everything—"

"Water under the bridge, Bridger!" Walten waved.
"We're sorry we tried to kill you guys too." Urick winked. "So I guess it all evens out in the end?"

He chuckled at that.

"I guess you're right. But, hey! Can you do me one more small favor?"

"Don't tell the others?" Walten guessed with an all-knowing smirk. "Yeah, that'd probably be best."

"I'm not asking you to lie on my behalf," Ezra continue. "But I just want to tell them on my own, in my own way, and I'll definitely want to wait until after the trial! Deal?"

They shook his hand and grinned.

"Yeah, deal."

"Now we'd better get back," Walten motioned. "Don't want to start the day off by being late."

"You're right," he agreed and they got walking back towards the door.

"Tell me one thing though Bridger," Urick added in a hushed tone. "When we get back home, are you going to go back to your Rebels or stick with us?"

"Better question," Walten stated. "Are we going back to the Empire or calling it quits. I'm sure they'd give us plenty of honorable discharges after this, and to be honest... I'm sick of war."

Urick nodded in agreement to that.

"I wouldn't mind going back to farming after all this." He shrugged. "What can I say, it's a peaceful living?"

He'd keep the fact that he wanted to stay here a secret just a little while longer. It sounded like the two of them weren't entirely sure what path to choose for themselves, so Ezra still had time to figure out what he was going to do as well. He was staying, that much he already knew, but figuring out how to stay was going to be the biggest issue. If he had to march up to the High Council and plea to them to make him a part of their Ascendancy, he would— though knowing a little bit how the Chiss worked now, that was probably a good way not to get accepted. No, he had to be cool, confident, level-headed, and above all else, he needed to learn to be a little more like Thrawn, even if that meant learning to lie a little more to make sure he got to the path he wanted to go, and of course, so he could get the answers that he so desperately craved about each and every one of his never-ending questions.

"I guess we can all decide what to do after the trial?"

"Yeah, kid," Walten said with a smirk attached. "I guess we can?" He looked out the door and that smile only grew. "I guess we can."
The Trial (Part One)

Chapter Summary

It all leads up to this. Will Thrass get the shuttle for the humans to travel home? How will Ezra stay in the Ascendancy to help the Chiss? Will he learn more about Thrawn's lies or his own past? As the council debates on the frigid planet of Csilla, paths are forged and futures altered as Ezra and the crew are sent to meet their fates.

Chapter Notes

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The Chiss shuttle that picked them up was a massive upgrade from the one Eli had flown to drop him off. Ezra thought this for what was probably the third time in the last hour as he still couldn’t seem to take his eyes off the intricate network of Chiss naval officers and military personnel that were bustling from place to place on-board the bridge. Meanwhile, Stent and Ina kept the group of humans marginally corralled off to the side and out of the way of the crew, but Ezra couldn't help but peek out at those aboard, wondering what all it was that they were doing.

Upon entering the ship, they were greeted by a woman in white, an admiral, who stood tall and broad shouldered, with long blue black hair tied neatly behind her thin face with the sharp cheekbones and trademarked glowing red eyes. She introduced herself in shaky basic as Admiral Ar’alani of the Chiss Defense Fleet, a branch of the Nuruodo Expansionary Defense Force— which would explain all the Chiss in black and bronze uniforms roaming about. She was delivering them safely to Csilla for the trial on behalf of Eli Vanto, Thrawn, and the High Council, but there was something about her that made it seem like this was more than just a duty, but maybe more of a debt she was finally returning after so many years overdue.

Ezra's thoughts didn't linger on this hunch for long, as he was more curious as to why she did not have a third part to her name like all the other Chiss. Given her intimidatingly sharp features and apparent haste and command, however, he thought it best not to ask her directly.

The rest of the group quickly noted that Ar’alani was another Chiss who could speak their language, but judging by her thick accent and slow grammar, they also assumed that this was as far as she’d cared to retain from her studies. Still, she knew Eli, so they trusted her, as they trusted pretty much all the Chiss they’d met thus far. For a race that was supposedly xenophobic, they had all been extremely polite and welcoming to them the entire time the Chimera crew was within their planets’ borders.

This ship they were riding in was called the “Killik” and according to Birt, it was nearly the size of a victory-class star destroyer, the entire thing sleek and shining with that same white metal the Chiss were so known for, the hull appearing slightly longer and slimmer than the Imperial model, giving it an all around aggressive, needle-shaped appearance. It was simultaneously roomy and cramped all at the same time, most of the spaces filled with computers built into the walls or with
weapons mounted in all the proper places to lead an attack.

Pyrondi brought up those weapons multiple times on the trip, her professional curiosity peaked beyond its limits. Likewise, Gunther and Koree agreed that they would love nothing more than to test that lovely piece of machinery out on a few passing asteroids if they could just get over to the controls. This was never going to happen of course, and Stent and Ina kept a particularly close watch on the three so they would keep out of trouble. Defeated, the three weapons specialists sat at the back of the group pouting the entire rest of the trip.

It took a little under an hour to get to Csilla from Sposia. On the way, Ezra observed the routine in which the military worked, noting that it was not unlike the ships he’d seen run in both the Rebellion and the Empire, all neat, organized, and professional. They communicated well, not that Ezra could understand more than one or two words of what they were saying. Not one of them even broke rank to come over and speak to the humans, or even to give them an extra sideways glance. They were certainly very good at their jobs and disciplined beyond human recognition. What should have felt like a cold and closed off welcome, only seemed to impress the humans as the trained results of a very prestigious military organization.

As they landed, Ar’alani called to the others from the front as the crew began to shut the vessel down and exit the platform.

Ina and Stent motioned their small herd of humans to follow, reminding them again to put on their gloves and set the thermocontrols in their wrist pads to adjust for the temperature drop.

As soon as Ezra’s foot left the platform, he felt it, chill and all. *Kriff it was cold!* It reminded him of the moon they’d saved Zeb from all those years ago, only this one was worse... *much much worse.*

He hated the cold, that wasn't so much a memory as it was a feeling of hardwired loathing that was coded into every fiber of his being. The winds weren't helping, and already his eyelashes and clothes were peppered in tiny ice shards, melting upon contact with his main uniform thanks to the self-heating threads of the suit. Still, he was grateful for the cloak, even if it didn't have a built in personal heating supply, the hood and extra cloth really did help to keep him warmer. The spiky boots, spare gloves, and capes the Chiss students incorporated into their new clothes were all starting to make a lot more sense to them now as the crew followed closely behind Ina and Stent and approached a large castle-like structure carved entirely from ice into the side of one massive glacier wall.

Csilla was said to be an ice planet, covered in snow and the occasional harsh windstorm. That, coupled with the unique minerals in the atmosphere were rumored to have been why the Chiss all had evolved with their thick blue skin, so as to blend in and survive in the unruly winter cold. This as well, was rumored to be why the Chiss' eyes glowed infrared so as to navigate through underground caves and tunnels they once lived in below the snow to keep warm. Nowadays, they made due with the ice and used it as a tool to create carvings and structures within tall glaciers and mountains. This was the case for the Csilla capitol building where the trial would be taking place.

“Stay together!” Ina called.

The humans awed as they saw it, their mouths still agape as they passed under the frozen archways and into a grand silver room packed to capacity with Chiss in clothing of all colors and designs.

“Over here!” they heard a voice call. It was the familiar Wildspace drawl of Eli Vanto, he too looking more well-kept than usual as he waved to them from the corner of the room. His uniform was shining, but his skin and other human features made him stick out like battle droid painted red on Hoth.
“Eli!” Ezra greeted.

“Everyone, I’m glad you made it here in one piece.” He replied, giving off a small wave to the crew. His features grew slightly morose and his captain-voice returned in that commanding way it had when he’d first introduced himself to them a few days ago at the hospital. “Now, did Ar’alani say anything to you about what’s going to happen here today?”

Faro shook her head.

“Not a word.”

He hummed, but figured as much. Turning his attention to Stent and Ina to give them thanks for keeping an eye on the Chimera crew, and also as a method of greeting them again after all this time apart.

“I can’t thank you enough for helping my friends during this transition.”

“It was no trouble,” Ina replied.

“We are always glad to meet new humans and learn what knowledge they share.”

“For now,” she continued, “We must take our exit and find seating.”

“It was our honor to meet you, everyone, and an honor to greet you again, Eli Vanto.”

Both Chiss bowed and the humans copied the motion, Ezra feeling a pang of bittersweet sadness creeping in on him as the two people who had cared for them all this week turned and disappeared into a sea of Chiss, and altogether out of their lives—possibly forever. It was such a short goodbye that it didn’t really seem to hit him until after they were both gone. He wondered if he was having separation issues now that he remembered all the people in his past that he’d lost. He worried now, that when the time came, would he really be able to say goodbye to his new friends when they flew back home to the Empire without him?

“Chiss aren’t too keen on goodbyes.” Eli informed, seemingly reading the minds of Ezra and the rest of the crew. "They believe more in the opportunity of presence, and are just happy knowing that you're all still out in the world living your lives to the fullest.”

Ezra nodded at that, trying to take the Chiss mentality to heart, but it was hard. It was hard to let go, and it was even harder to say goodbye.

Eli motioned them closer to the wall and continued listing off instructions for the day. “Now, as I was saying before, we need to go over some courtroom etiquette, so everyone listen up.”

But by the time those words reached Ezra’s ears, he had already stopped listening, his mind wandering away from his own inner thoughts as he allowed himself to be distracted by the grand room made entirely of silvery ice. Despite the material, it felt completely warm inside the building, so much so that he actually removed his gloves and shut down his suit’s thermo-threads for fear he might melt the walls around him.

Looking up, he saw crystals clumped together into natural-made chandeliers that twinkled brilliantly with natural lighting and reflective shine from the sky above. The walls were so shiny that they reflected Ezra’s afterimage the closer he got to the side and he followed this until becoming instantly distracted by the carvings in the tall icy pillars leading up to podiums where the High Council would no doubt be standing in a few moments to debate.
The historic art chiseled into the icy walls and pillars was all so detailed that it was almost like viewing a still on a holo-projector—only here the feed was crystal clear and didn’t buffer around with the movement of static. He stepped closer, following the story as he touched the grooves with his hand. It was a portrait of Chiss soldiers and robed politicians all coming together to make peace accords and laws—or at least that’s what he assumed the artwork was expressing. He didn’t know as much about art as Thrawn or Sabine, but Ezra was still able to make plenty of deductions of his own about what he saw, and followed it awingly as the picture trailed all the way into the ceiling and curved around the crystals.

“Oof!”

He felt a hard thump as he bumped into someone, his blood instantly chilling into the same frigid temperature as outside as he realized what a grave mistake he’d just made. Immediately he tensed up, bowing repeatedly without looking at whoever he’d no doubt insulted beyond forgiveness by wandering into them. Did Chiss believe in accidents? It didn't matter, all he could think now was to apologize and hope he didn't just ruin the entire trial by ticking off the wrong Chiss socialite.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I don’t know how to say sorry in Cheunh! But, I’m sorry!”

“Ch’eo ch’at’atuhah,” a feminine voice said with an amused chuckle. “That is how the Chiss apologize.”

He looked up at the familiar sound of Basic and felt the air return to his lungs when he saw Tharin, her face amused beyond all else, her typical green uniform now traded in for an almost royal-looking gown as her long hair was tied in a tight bun with a braid above her head.

“Oh thank the Force, it’s you, Tharin.”

She placed a quick but calm finger to his lips and arched her brows, making the small bumps on her forehead show more prominently above her bright red eyes.

“My father and uncle think it would be best if you not speak of such things in front of the rest of the Ascendancy right now.”

“Oh! Really?” Ezra asked, his voice muffled beneath the finger. "How come?"

“I am not sure myself,” she said quietly, whispering almost as though someone nearby might overhear their conversation. “I believe it has something to do with my uncle’s mentioning of a Jedi general from long ago named Anakin Skywalker.”

Anakin Skywalker!? But... that was Ahsoka’s master, the one who he’d watched perform his basic Jedi stances over and over and over again on Kanan’s holocron. He was supposed to be one of the greatest Jedi of all time! Thrawn knew him!? Is that how he got the pilot manual for Ina’s library? How he learned most of his Basic? Was it Master Skywalker who’d been the teacher? Ezra's mind was blown.

“Thrawn knew Anakin Skywalker!” he blurted loudly, much to the opposition of Tharin’s previous warning.

She pressed her whole hand on his mouth now, her skin cold and soft as he felt his face redden; though, that was most likely because she was also pinching his nose and blocking his nostrils from getting air thanks to the odd way she grasped at his mouth vertically instead of at a side angle like anyone else would do.

“I will return your lips to you if you promise to stop talking about that topic in this place. Nod if
you accept these terms, Ezra.”

He nodded, his throat tightening from the lack of oxygen, but he nodded.

She released him and lifted a brow as if waiting to see if he would keep his word. He did, blinking a little as he took in a fresh breath of air and tugged at his robes, rubbing at the back of his neck while his eyes wandered the great crowded room to find a speedy change of subject.

“So, you weren’t kidding when you said everyone was going to be here, huh? Who are all these people?”

She waved her fingers with an unimpressed sigh.

“Members of the ruling houses mostly, a few are legislatures from less noble home names, but a lot more are generals, syndics, leaders, and a few who heard of Thrawn’s return and were hoping to see him again. His last trial did not go so well, I guess you could say? They are interested in hearing his story.”

“Really? Ina mentioned something like that too. That he left in some big controversial way. Why? What does that mean?”

She looked to him and made an uncomfortable face.

*Her expressions were starting to get really good,* Ezra noted.

“Well—” She wafted the air away and shook her head. “Oh nevermind. I don’t think it’s a good idea to talk about such stories here and now. I will tell you all about it if the time permits. Don’t forget, *Sevicsi*, I also have a parting gift for you and Jorj. I'm positive my father's speech will smooth over any bumps in your case, and the council will grant you the ship you need to go back to your system.”

“Right, right…” He nodded. “But before that, you never did get to tell me how you got those hospital clothes to pulse and also just magically sew themselves back up. What was that?”

She laughed.

“Magic again? Not everything is so mystifying. It is actually a simple project. Eli says that you would call it “science” or maybe “technology”? Oh wait, it was both! That is what I do, you see. I make inventions for the Inrokini House on Csaus. I am given resources and expected to create new devices that can aid my people, like the medical suits, or that Nssis-class Clawcraft I was piloting.”

“You mean the white TIE fighter? That was an amazing ship! You really built that!?” It took everything in him not to ask if he could take it for a test flight, but he held his tongue.

“I designed it, yes,” she said with a pleased nod. "I borrowed the idea from Eli using information he shared of Imperial TIE fighters. Once I removed the unnecessary features and added the shields, improving the aerodynamics was...*cake!* An odd human phrase, but it is a nice ship is it not? Unfortunately, I am still working out the kinks. The test run from Csaus to Sposia went superbly and I did not blow up even once! Not even a little!”

“Cool!” He paused, the stars in his eyes fading as he suddenly processed what she'd said about blowing up. He scratched his chin and snapped a little as his next thoughts came to the front of his mind. “Wait. Wait. Wait. So, if you work on all these inventions on Csaus, then that means you don’t live with your parents and the Mitth clan on Copero, do you?”
“No.” She shook her head softly. “Not for the last three years at least. I like the freedom, but since I was born Mitth under my mother, I am still allowed to visit whenever I want. I also visit Csilla often for my father’s work brings him here more often than not.”

“Does that make you a merit-adoptive then?” He asked.

She teased a grin.

“Look at you knowing about Chiss culture. I’m impressed.” She shook her head again. “But no, I am not a merit-adoptive. I was natural born, so unless I am a merit-adoptive for the Inrokini clan, I will be returning to Copero when I retire.” She shrugged. "If I retire. There is still much I want to discover and test before that time. I refuse to think of myself ever losing that spark in my elder years. No, I always thought I would go out in a tragic experimental accident."

The way she said that was almost as if she were telling him about her life’s dream instead of a morbid way she planned to die. Ezra nodded but rubbed his temples, his face wrinkling in thought and an almost tired expression after hearing her words.

"You have more to ask?"

"Yeah, but not about the last bit, but more about your name?"

"My name?"

"Yeah, and Ar’alani and Ina's names too! They don’t even have a third part? Agh! Why is it so hard for me to understand this?"

“Ah, I get it. Eli had much the same troubles learning about our naming process. This is what I told him.” She cleared her throat and held out her fingers for the explanation to come. "You see, the four current Ruling Families are like any other. Blood and merit create siblings and cousins and ranking distants. Some are released, others are re-matched, and others are born to trial. The same as any other family."

“That is not how families work where I come from.”

“Is that so?” She said. “Eli never said anything. Hmmm… How else can I word this?” She nodded and pointed to herself. “To start, I was born Mitth’ar, but was adopted the new title of Mitth’ar’Inrokini when I began working for the House after my schooling. You’re speaking of Ina’gamut, correct? She was natural born to the Ina family and never joined a differing clan, plus she had no official job title within the ruling house of Sabosen, so her name remained in just two parts. Next, Chiss like Admiral Ar’alani were forced to remove their clan ties in order to devote oneself to the ranking system of the military... or so I was told. Thirdly, many like me, leave their birth homes but unlike me, they do not find other families to join, so therefore they lose their old names and get no replacements. That, and not every Chiss comes from one of the ruling families, so it can be harder to tell the familial titles until you begin recognizing other Chiss names.”

“That makes a little sense,” he said, still rubbing at his hair, but quicker now as he come to form an understanding in his own mind. "So, how many families are there outside of the four ruling families?"

“Oh, hundreds!” she said quickly. “Perhaps thousands.”

“Th-thousands!?” Ezra squeaked. So, much for learning everything about Chiss culture...

“Your skin has gotten lighter!” She gasped, looking him over dramatically. “Are you losing
blood!? Don't panic! Tell me, where is your injury?"

She ignored him as he tried to explain the flush, grabbing his ankle and lifting his foot up off the floor to check his leg for signs of blood. Ezra grabbed her shoulders and gently placed her back a few steps until she released her grip and he blinked a few times before regaining his balance and motioning with his hands for her to chill out.

“It’s not blood loss,” he said with wide, embarrassed eyes, still surprised that she'd nearly lifted his whole body off the floor just now, and even more bewildered that none of the other Chiss in the crowd seemed to notice. He rubbed his face and groaned, the exhaustion seeping in again. He liked Tharin, but talking to her sometimes really did seem to wear him out. He liked Tharin, but talking to her sometimes really did seem to wear him out. Was this how Kanan felt when he first started training him? He shook the thought away and removed his hands. "I was just feeling like I bit off a little more than I can chew is all. Sometimes when a person gets overwhelmed they get pale, I don't know why? Opposite blushing I guess? I don't know, but it's not dangerous.”

“Hmmm... interesting?” she pondered, nodding knowingly at the human expression he used and understanding what it meant. “What troubles you now? What is it that you are unable to chew?”

He looked around and leaned forward to whisper.

“Between you and me,” he said quietly. “I was going to try and stay here even after the high council makes their decision. So, I was going to try and learn everything I can about your people, but if I can’t even get this naming process down, then honestly what hope do I have to ever—”

“Oh that is so exciting!” She screamed, his ears ringing as she interrupted him with a smile wide enough to burst.

He slammed his hand on her mouth now.

“Shush! It’s a major secret! I haven’t told anybody yet, not even Eli or Thrawn!”

“Oh I see?” She said, her voice muffled. “Your secret is safe with me.”

He released her and they both laughed a little as a few passersby gave them odd looks.

“Thanks for bumping into me, Tharin. I really needed this talk.”

“You bumped into me, but you are welcome nonetheless,” she said with a nod. “A word of advice though, you should not try to learn everything. No one can know everything, believe me, Sevicsi, I would know.”

She smirked and he rolled his eyes at the teasing tone in her voice before brushing it off with a laugh.

“Are you making a joke?”

"I try?” She shrugged. "Do you understand my meaning of it though?"

He hummed and nodded. "Start small and work your way up. Even if I don't get the names, I can still probably learn other things a lot easier, is that right?"

“Exactly!” She tapped on her chin with the tip of her finger and smiled like she had ulterior motives. “You know…all joking aside, I could always help you learn more about our culture, but in return, I'll need something from you as well. That game we played the other night was very
informative, though I feel that there is still so much more to know about you. I would like to hear more stories, that is... if you have the time to tell them?” She smiled and pressed her fingers together. “Perhaps I could exchange a few important Cheunh terms with you, or maybe even notable mannerisms? If you truly are going to be staying instead of returning to your Empire, the lessons I create could be paramount to your stay. My people are, as Eli once said, easily offended by your human actions and vice versa according to you and my uncle. It will take time, but I believe the mutual sharing of information will be well worth it should you get to stay.”

He smirked, but frowned when he remembered Thrawn’s warning not to tell anyone about his time working with the Ghost crew. This was his niece, so Ezra doubted she would say anything to anybody else, but still, could he just disobey Thrawn’s word just like that? Walten and Urick didn’t seem to mind his time as a Rebel, and he seriously doubted Tharin would understand his position, let alone condemn him for it.

“I have another idea,” he said, his smile returning as he walked around her once and she turned, trying to follow him before stopping more or less where they started.

“What are you doing?” She asked with an inquisitive grin.

He held up a small hairpin with a crystal flower on it and Tharin gasped, reaching for the spot in her hair where it used to be.

“How did you do that?” She asked, still touching her hair. “I didn’t even feel— your arms they didn’t even—?”

He wiggled his eyebrows, *mock-Koree-style*, and handed her the pin back.

“Would you believe me if I said magic?”

“I would not,” she said sternly, trying to mimic his eyebrow move, but failing, which only made Ezra laugh harder. She let out a frustrated breath but held out her hand. “Alright Ezra Bridger, you win. First, teach me how you did that trick, and I will start teaching you some Chiss facts that you’ll need to know in the future. We can work our way up to backstories in time.”

“It’s a deal.” He took her hand and shook it as the Chiss girl’s smile widened.

“So that is a handshake?” She stared down at her hand in awe. “How peculiar, yet fascinating!”

“Really? How to the Chiss make deals with one another?”

“Watch closely, *Sevicsi*. This will be your first lesson.”

Her hand swung around and grasped him by the forearm, her thin fingers squeezing into his skin. "You do the same to my arm. Keep your feet apart, stance firm, back straight,” He did, but was hesitant to press as hard until she shot him a disapproving look and lifted her brow, squeezing his grip with her free hand until his fingers wrapped tighter around her arm. "No one will ever make deals with you if your grip is so weak. No, do it more firmly, like this!"

"Sorry!" He said defensively, applying all the pressure he could to her forearm as she winced and nodded her head.

"Much better! The Chiss must be approached from a position of strength and respect. One must have strength, for the Chiss will deal only with those capable of keeping their promises. One must have respect, for the Chiss must believe that those promises will be kept. We are all taught this very young and it remains the same for everyone young and old, male and female, no matter their
physical strength, they give their all. You cannot hold back because you think the other cannot take your full strength, it is a very grave insult." She released him and the color returned to normal as the five fingerprints disappeared from his skin. She chuckled to herself and rolled her eyes. "But I understand, Eli was much the same way when he was taught this gesture. I know that you meant no offense."

“Yeah, that's a little more complicated than a simple handshake?” Ezra said unsurely, rubbing his neck, though smiling afterwards to reveal the joking nature in his tone.

“You seem to touch your neck quite often.” Tharin observed. “Eli also does the same with the hair on his face. What do you mean by these gestures? Is it a sign of joking?”

“More like nerves mostly?” he guessed. “But I guess it could be for joking, or also just to show that we’re thinking of something. I don’t know, humans are weird?”

“On that we agree,” she chuckled.

"Okay, but— you see, what I mean is—"

“Tharin, it is starting soon,” a low voice interrupted from behind. "Do locate your seat."

“Of course, Ticsi.”

Ezra jumped and looked as Thrass snuck up from behind him, silently cutting his way through the crowd. He wondered where the silent syndic had come from, and more importantly, how long he had been standing behind him?

Ezra bowed in greeting.

“Syndic Thrass.”

Tharin chuckled, but Thrass merely frowned down at him and tightened his lips together.

“Ezra Bridger,” he said simply and then walked away.

Ezra couldn’t help but feel like he’d just done something wrong, and was now looking to Tharin for answers.

“Worry not, Sevicsi,” she said with a comforting pat on his shoulder. “He used your full name, so he respects you well enough. Even with Eli he still calls him Cssoboti, though that could just be because he has been here longer. Perhaps in time he will also call you that as well?”

He wondered what that word meant, but decided not to ask as Tharin pointed back towards the group of humans. How she caught them from this far away was a mystery, but maybe her eyes were just better than his, or maybe the humans stuck out more than he previously thought? Either way, they seemed to be craning their necks over the crowd looking for him and he felt as though he probably should have told someone before he'd decided to follow the art and wander off. Eli probably wasn't going to be happy about that considering how wound-up he was over the importance of this trial.

_Oops?_

Tharin tapped onto the device at his wrist and started leading him through the crowd.

“Now, I made you all those wrist devices so our Cheunh will translate automatically into Basic. Eli
will also be enforcing helpful messages throughout the trial, so I suggest you rejoin the rest of your group. Don't worry, the trial will go off without a hitch. It is a hitch right? What is a hitch, I wonder?”

He chuckled. “Thanks Tharin.”

“Well...” She took in a breath. "I wish you all well, and hope that you are allowed to stay somehow, Sevicsi. I'll be rooting for you.”

She turned and disappeared into the crowd of well-dressed Chiss before Ezra remembered to ask what “Sevicsi” meant. Oh well, he’d ask her next time. He did have time after all. At any rate, he made his way back across the courtroom, and met up with the others before getting instantly berated by Eli for wandering off in the first place.

The man grabbed him by the ear and dragged him to their seats, muttering under his breath the whole way.

“What the Hell!? Running off? I can’t even— What makes you think you can just— Agh! Kid, you are literally killing me, just— What in the Hell—?”

After the third repeat of his unintelligible accent-ridden rebuking, Ezra finally worked up the courage to say something that he thought might possibly calm the red-faced man back down to normal.

“Sorry.”

Eli released his ear and rubbed the bridge of his nose. It was only one word, but delivered the right way, it still did wonders to lessen the trouble you were in with the people who were mad at you, Ezra thought to himself, wondering now if he had ever gotten away with a lot as a kid sharing this same mentality.

“Just park it and try to stay out of trouble for the rest of the day!” He pulled at his hair and blanched with a new terror in his eyes. “Oh God, did you talk to anyone? What did you say? Did you apologize?”

“Relax! I was just talking to Tharin.”

Gunther and Koree dug their elbows into him from each side and chuckled with chiding smiles until he swatted them away.

Eli took another breath and his face returned to normal.

“Oh okay… well that’s probably fine then.” He pointed his finger at the boy again and made a tired, serious face that was mostly relieved but also attempting to be intimidating. “I can't stress how easily some of these high-class types can get offended! One wrong enemy and they might blow this whole case out of proportion. Remember, this ain't Sposia, so not everyone is going to be so welcoming as they were out there.”

"I know... I know! I'm sorry for wandering off. Really!"

"Yeah, well... just don’t do it again!"

“Yes sir!” He mock-saluted, causing a laugh from the others as Eli shagged his hair and took his seat with one tired breath, the kind like Ina made after dealing with too many of her house-guests at once, or the one Faro used when scolding the Gunther and Koree. It was the sigh of a tired parent,
or in Eli’s case, an overworked babysitter.

He rolled his eyes and pointed to the podiums.

"The council should be here any second. Everyone have their comm watches synced? Remember, we can't be disruptive or else it could affect the whole case. I'm expecting your best behavior."

"Yes dad!" Gunther scoffed. The others laughed and Eli’s head started bobbing with false laughter of his own.

"Yeah, ha, ha, ha... get it all out of your systems, because as soon as they walk through that door, I'm expecting statues from the lot of you!"

"We'll be fine Captain," Faro said, trying to be soothing. "Honestly, what's the worst that could happen?"

He tugged at his collar but shrugged the question off with a twisted facial expression before crossing his arms and sinking into his seat. Under his breath, he muttered beneath his hand before scratching at his beard in stressful anticipation.

"Hopefully we don't find out."

Things grew quiet, the roar of overlapping chatter dying so quickly that the crystal chandelier above tinked and chimed into stillness as all turned silent and motionless. There wasn’t a single sound in the room as the doors opened and four tall figures in decorative robes walked in, their faces covered, and exquisite bobbles and trinkets adorning their thick clothing. Each was a different color, one green, one red, one bronze, and one silver. They approached the podiums and placed their hands atop them as symbolic lights of matching colors trailed through the ice and disappeared within the stands.

The humans were all in awe, but were collectively brought back to the present when a vibration alerted them to a message sent to each of their data-bracelets that read:

These are the Aristocra of the Chiss High Council. The silver is House Csapla from planet Cioral, they are the first family in charge of colonial affairs, agriculture, and the redistribution of resources.

The bronze is Ar’alani and Thrawn’s house, House Nuruodo, who are in charge of military and foreign affairs. They are the second family from the planet, Naporar.

Then, you all know the third family of House Sabosen. They’re the ones you’ve been staying with on Sposia and are in charge of all social justice, health, and education for the Chiss Ascendancy.

Lastly is the green Aristocra who represents House Inrokini. They specializes in industry, communications, science, and all of the research and development on the planet Csaus.

They nodded and looked up as the four took their seats and a gaudy man in a yellow uniform stepped forth and made motions for the crowd to be seated before rejoining his position beside
where Thrass stood. The syndic's face was just as broody and stone-like as ever, but the man in yellow seemed overly-happy and kept smiling to himself as Thrass rolled his eyes when the man wasn't looking.

Ezra’s wrist vibrated softly and he looked down at Eli’s quick message.

The man in yellow is the Aristocra of the Chaf family, Cha'orm'bintrano, and he is the head of the unofficial 5th family from the planet Sarvchi. They represent the Chiss as a whole, and he's basically here to make sure everyone follows decorum. Between us, he's also kind of a pompous prig. That's not really relevant, but it's still important to steer clear of him. He does not like outsiders, especially humans, and will be voting against anything we might hope to gain.

And then, for those who don't know, the man next to him is Thrawn’s brother, Mitth’ras’safis, the Syndic of the House of Mitth on Copero who will be presenting your case as well as Thrawn’s. He's probably our best friend and ally on this planet right now.

Ezra looked out at the crowd, noticing their grouping into the colors of their clothing. Green, bronze, red, and silver were out front on the floor. Above, on the next level, was burgundy, navy, and yellow, and even higher on the balcony near the crystal chandelier, there were many Chiss dressed in black uniforms with no other coloring to speak of. *The Chiss without major ruling family ties*, Ezra assumed. He recalled Eli saying something about there being more than four ruling families in the past, so the second floor must have been those older ones. Why they weren't part of the High Council now was a mystery, but it was politics, *and ironically*, Ezra didn't really have time to think about that sort of thing right now.

He glanced back to the green crowd and saw that Tharin was waiting with the Inrokini people in their fancy green gowns and robes, her face uncharacteristically somber and reserved. Meanwhile, Thrass stood by idly, but was adorned in burgundy to address his clan. Why he and this Chaf man in yellow had to stand beside one another was a mystery, but in reality, he wasn't too sure about a lot of these Chiss courtroom rituals to begin with.

Ezra also couldn’t seem to find Thrawn, not with the burgundy group nor with the bronze one. He did see Stent and Ina among the Sabosen as well as Admiral Ar’alani, her white admiral's uniform standing out among the rest of the crowd in bronze military attire. It would seem she as well as four others were all dressed similarly to signify their statuses as admirals, many of them in the balcony above with the navy and burgundy groups. He never would have imagined the military made up such a huge majority of the Chiss people, but then again, looking back at the way Thrawn acted, he decided it made sense that they were a warrior race above all else, and Thrawn was in two of those families *that Ezra knew of, so it was no wonder he could fight as well as he could*.

The Chiss in the hooded silver robe lifted a hand as he spoke, though what he was saying, Ezra could only guess and he had to look down to his watch for a translation. The transition was flawless. *Tharin really made these things just for them? Just for today?* He smiled and looked over to her in the crowd, but she was frowning, watching with a seriousness he’d never seen from her before as the Aristocra continued talking. *Why was she so still? Why was Eli so worried?* He didn't know, but it worked a worrisome feeling into his gut and he sat up straighter so as to appear more polite, *just in case*.

“We gather in this sacred place to discuss the unannounced presence of eight human beings: Ezra Bridger, Urick Danash, Karyn Faro, Walten Horncaster, Gunther Kordin, Ayesha Pyrondi, Birt Rathon, and Koree Vayes.”
The humans managed to avoid tensing at the mention of their names, even when they were horribly mispronounced by the Cheunh language.

“These individuals were discovered marooned on Myrkr by Expansionary Defense Fleet General Prard'ras'kleoni, Captain Brast'alshi'barku, and human Liaison, Captain Eli Vanto. With them was former Force Commander, Mitth’raw’nuruodo, who was exiled from our world precisely 3,285 rotations ago for committing acts of treason that went against our moral code.”

Ezra looked shocked. He recalled Thrawn saying something like that when they were on Myrkr, but it was still a shock to hear out loud. Thrawn was really exiled? The other crew also seemed to apparently already know this fact, and then there was Eli who was hiding a smile of all things beneath his hand. *It made no sense?* Thrass and Tharin hadn’t said anything about exile? That was a little more than unconventional! *Could that have been why Thrass hit Thrawn when they met at the hospital? Is that why Tharin said it wasn’t an appropriate place to bring up such a story? But then, why all the special treatment? Why all the respect?* He looked to them and they were just as still as ever, no shock or readable expression on their faces. At the same time, Eli looked like he was about to type something, but shook his head and kept his eyes forward.

*Another explanation for another time?* Ezra guessed.

“Aristocra, Chief Medical Officer, Gras’vee’sabosen, has allowed refuge on Sposia for these humans, as well as medical care for both them and Mitth’raw’nuruodo. While there, they were guarded by alumni, Ina’gamut and Kors’ten’tiru, of the Education Department and Childhood Development Dormitories.”

The woman with the long strands of white hair peeking out beneath her rust-red Sabosen robe lifted her hand. It was undoubtedly the doctor they had met a few days ago, but with her face so concealed it was obvious that those ties wouldn't amount to much when she was acting as a council head. *Maybe that was why everyone was so on edge?* Here, there were no Aristocra, there was only a council. Ezra thought suddenly that the four robed Chiss wouldn't hesitate to condemn someone from their own family if brought before them when they were like this. It was like they severed all their ties when their hoods went up and now, the Chiss at the podiums only knew the facts of the case and nothing else. That in itself was a little terrifying, *he'd admit that much.*

“The humans have proven innocent to all blame towards the crash, and likewise proven valuable allies in the rescue of Mitth’raw’nuruodo. One human in particular, Ezra Bridger, was shown to go above and beyond the call of duty to ensure our Thrawn’s survival at great risk to his own health. He required extra care when brought to us. Such actions are already noted on the record.”

They looked to Ezra who tensed at the mention of his name again, but he only listened further as the green Inrokini Aristocra lifted his hand and motioned for Thrass to step forward.

“Mitth’ras’safis of the 8th family, has elected to speak on the humans' behalves. Step forward and deliver your inquiry.”

He did, bowing to them before standing tall and speaking, his deep voice enunciating in clear, calm Cheunh across every inch of the grand ballroom.

“You do not need to know who acts on behalf of the Chiss, for I vow to represent everyone.”

The phrase was rehearsed, almost robotic, his arms placed regally at his chest and back in a fixed motion. A quick message from Eli alerted the rest of the Chimera crew that it was customary to begin by saying such words, kind of like taking an oath to tell the honest truth at benefit or cost to all parties involved with no bias, just facts and opinions. *With that,* Thrass began his debate.
“I have consulted with Captain Eli Vanto as well as Ezra Bridger, who as you have stated, was directly responsible for the rescue of my brother, Thrawn. It would seem the humans found themselves marooned with no idea as to how they crossed Chiss borders, nor how they did so undetected. Had it not been for the beacon constructed by Ayesha Pyrondi, then the Expansionary Defense Fleet would have never noted their presence. Likewise, had it not been for Liaison, Captain Eli Vanto, then the generals would have never diverted their course in order to discover Thrawn and these others. It is for this reason that I motion all blame for neglecting protocol be wiped from the record for the fleetship accused.”

So the other Chiss got in trouble for that after all? Ezra thought. That explains why Eli was running around so much and ignoring his comm-link the other day.

The bronze Aristocra raised their hand, the light on their podium pulsing as their feminine voice held the floor.

"It is done," she said, all three nodding in agreement. "However, another issue arises from this unexpected discovery. How do we know the Far Outsiders cannot replicate this such anomaly to cross our borders undetected like the felled human vessel?"

"If that were the case, these humans have brought war upon our borders!" The man in yellow said before Thrass could get his reply out. "If guilty, the people will be responsible for choosing their fates! The consensus on 65% of the planets interviewed called for extermination, but without unified consent, it will be ultimately up to the council to decide."

Eli sat forward and coughed into his lap in shock as the humans read the message over again to make sure they'd seen that right. Extermination? Over half of the Chiss voted to kill them just for crashing within their borders!? Eli's warnings were all starting to make a lot more sense now, and not in a good way.

"Silence!" The silver Aristocra ordered.

There was a murmur from the crowd at that, the unrest clearly explicit even though Ezra didn’t understand the language, but it died down before the light from the crystal podium had time to fade at the Aristocra's words of warning.

Thrass nodded and continued with his speech, shooting a glare to the man in yellow as he did so.

"Extermination will not be necessary. This mishap is indeed an anomaly, though not one that we believe will be replicated by our enemies." He looked to the humans, a quick, guilty sort of feel in his laser red eyes, before turning to the crowd and then back at the Aristocra. "After gathering facts from my brother and Captain Vanto, and examining the remains of the human-owned Imperial vessel designated “the Chimera”, we have concluded that Purrgil were in fact to blame for the sudden appearance and ultimate collision with the planet Myrkr."

"Purrgil?" The red-robed Aristocra repeated.

"Vet'asart'isi bitan," Thrass replied, the watch literally translating the words to "hyperspace whales" as the four Aristocra started to bob their heads in understanding.

"Ah, we see," she continued. "And, have we had problems keeping track of such creatures in our past?"

"We have indeed." Thrass nodded. "Though our interaction with these beasts have proven rare, we have many reports of similar anomalies involving them. These files range from missing fleet ships,
to rumors of teleportation to unknown or uncharted stars that take crew and captains far off of their courses in both long periods of time as well as far off course from their designated positions.”

Ezra didn't really catch the explanation. He'd seemingly blacked out for a moment as the words on his screen faded into blurs and his brain pulsed with a single word. *Purrgil*. It repeated over and over again in his mind like the blows of a hammer against durasteel nails. The time he dove out of the sky and nearly died at that gas refinery... The way they flew over Lothal and entwined Thrawn’s ship… All the memories coming back to him. He was—*friends*—with these creatures? They listened to him, and Ezra to them. They were connected somehow. *So, why would they have attacked the Chimera with Ezra still aboard it?* He wondered all of this, his mind racing rapidly before his wrist vibrated, and Ezra blinked suddenly as he remembered how to breathe again before he looked down to see a private message sent from Eli.

“Are you okay?” it read.

He rubbed his forehead slowly, but nodded in reply.

Eli’s lip tilted downward, unswayed by the lackluster response, and he quickly began typing again.

“*Thrawn said the Purrgil overtook the 7th Fleet and shot you all into hyperspace before letting you go and causing the Chimera to crash. Are you remembering it?*”

With another nod, Ezra took a deep, silent breath to calm his nerves and looked back to Thrass to hear the rest of his speech.

Eli frowned harder, but assumed that was about as okay as they could get for now. Thrawn had tasked him with making sure Ezra didn’t recall too much at this trial. Speaking of which, *where in the Hell even was Thrawn?* He saw the man not two hours ago when they landed on Csilla, but then he’d said he had something to go do and vanished. With an internal sigh, he had to shake the thought out of his mind and return his attention to the trial. Thrawn would pop up eventually. The other Chiss didn't know that his exile was all a cover-up, so maybe he was being secretly detained somewhere? *Perhaps they would call on him as a witness instead of letting him attend the trial freely?*

*And like clockwork,* Eli found himself right once again.

“I now call upon my key witness, ex-Force Commander, Mitth’raw’nuruodo.”

He turned and watched as Thrawn came walking towards the High Council from the other side of the room. He was escorted by guards, but dawned in a new black military uniform with bronze and burgundy shoulder plates. The crowd murmured at this sight because *hadn't he been striped of such armor when he was exiled all those years ago?* A handful of people in this room knew the truth, but the rest, Eli imagined, were probably more confused than they’d ever been in their lives.

Thrawn's face was completely unreadable as he made his way to the front of the room. *Though,* if Eli had to put a word to it, he might say that Thrawn looked a bit nervous. Thrass took a step to the right and Thrawn paused beside him with a bow to the Aristocra.

In Cheunh, he said, “I thank you for allowing me this honor of speaking on behalf of myself and of my crew.”

“Mitth’raw’nuruodo,” said the silver-clad Chiss. “In light of these recent affirmations, we have agreed to suspend your exile and welcome you back with full pardons.”

Some in the crowd mulled around this, but not even Eli nor Tharin could hide their smiles.
Ezra watched as even Thrass seemed pleased at himself with this news. So they did know something more about this whole exile thing, didn't they?

“You may speak freely, Commander,” the Nuruodo Aristocra said with a wave of their hand. “Please explain your true mission to the court.”

Thrawn didn’t seem excited by this news and merely gave them a half nod and a light hand motion towards the crew.

“3,285 rotations ago, I was exiled for my preemptive strikes against the Vagaari and the Far Outsiders. I believed their joint efforts to invade our borders was threat enough to attack, so I lead my soldiers into battle, defeating the potential invaders. It was under guise of this reason that my supposed exile was exaggerated into reasoning for me to be apart from the Ascendancy.” Thrawn looked to the humans and back at the crowd. “It was my true mission to infiltrate the ranks of the Imperial Navy to retrieve powerful allies against the growing evils that plague our people. I was to strengthen the allies into a powerful aid to our military. Oppositely, if I saw this regime to be weak, I was likewise given orders to destroy it from the inside and cripple them from becoming a larger threat to our Ascendancy.”

Eli’s eyes went wide as he looked to the other Imperials and then back at Thrawn, his mouth drawn open in shock and disbelief. Both he and Thrass slid a palm up to their faces, both men knowing well what Thrawn was supposed to say and hearing just how off-script the big blue zealot decided to take his explanation.

“What did he just say?” Faro blurted soundlessly.
“Did you know about this?” Pyrondi mouthed, her eyes shooting blaster bolts over to Eli’s direction.

The man merely shook his head, his brows contemplating the words that Thrawn had just spoken aloud. The watch had translated it perfectly and Eli hadn’t misheard the Cheuhn words to begin with. Was that really the reason he came to the Empire? Eli had known about the false exile and the mission to get the Empire to aid the Chiss for years now, but the other part... the part where he would have single-handedly broken the Empire into nothing if he’d deemed it too weak to help—that part was still causing Eli’s mind to spin. Thrawn had never mentioned that little detail to him. Not that he really cared one way or the other. Eli had practically cut all his ties with the Empire at this point, but still... the Eli Vanto left inside him who remembered all those academy days, training exercises, and missions executed was fighting back the urge to implode.

Thrawn shot an unseen glance at the crew, his red eyes focusing on Eli as a small sliver of regret seeped into his chest. At any rate, he never lost his composure and only continued on with his statement.

“I saw great potential in the Empire, more than in the Republic Army, and I admit that in my years of nurturing the military’s strengths, I have ultimately failed to rally the Empire to our cause. However, my attempts to strengthen their forces have done nothing in the major scheme of their leader. Against my past advice, they have built and activated a super weapon which I fear will no doubt lead their inevitable defeat.”

"Explain."

“I warned them that this threat would only weaken their forces, but my words were ignored. Without proper resources spread away from this blatant wasteful stratagem, I fear this defeat is close at hand, and timing would seem to share my conclusion. Therefore, I have returned with an alternative solution to protect our people, but plea to motion a complete removal of our influence from the Empire in order to make it so.”

Ezra’s eyes shot wide. Thrawn. Grand Admiral Thrawn! Had he just openly said he was deserting the Empire?

The boy did not dare look behind him at the faces of the Imperials, but he felt their glares, their eyes twisted in mixed emotions of hate and confusion. It made a chill run up his spine, and Ezra was astounded that they still remained seated and silent as he very literally felt every emotion ready to burst out of them in protest.

“What manner of super weapon have these humans constructed against your warning?” Asked the Bronze Aristocra.

Thrawn paused and tilted his chin towards the Chimera crew, his eyes flashing as they never left the faces of the Aristocra. “They call it, the Death Star.”

Murmurs rang out among the Chiss and the humans, many unsure what to think. Behind him the angry whispers of the Imperials started to blend with the other crowd member’s confused rambles, but it all faded into static in Ezra’s ears as he gripped his forehead which was suddenly bleating in throbbing aches and pains.

The Death Star?

Sudden and violent visions pulsed into his brain at the mention of that word. A Geonosian alien flashed in his mind first, his long finger drawing in the dirt... a circle within a circle. The large
green kyber crystal exploding in a blast of immeasurable energy. He remembered Saw Gerrera, a rebel—sort of—who he disagreed with time and time again. It was this face that made him think maybe the Ghost crew weren't full-rebels, but now he knew that it was very much the opposite. Then finally there came more memory flashes of the purrgil…

The… purrgil…

His mind faded to white and in an instant he was back in the memory, the Chimera broken, glass and air floating around the neat bubble the Jedi held between himself and Thrawn, the purple and blue striped tentacles holding the Chiss at the front of the command barge, his life securely held in their tight embrace.

“How long do you think you can keep your hold on these beasts?” Thrawn asked, his voice tired as the tentacles tightened around him from every angle.

He took in a pained breath, but the arms loosened as Ezra ordered them to in his own mind. He didn't want Thrawn dead, but he remembered too that he wasn't allowed to let him go either. The healthy medium of strength used to hold him there had to be perfect and was a strain to accomplish through the connection he held with the fleet of travelling purrgil. Ezra felt sweat dripping into his eyes, but he held both of his arms out firm, his joints shaky, but his grip secure. He was still in control, he still had the upper hand on this unexpected hyperspace jump.

With a stiff reply, Ezra smiled and met eyes with Thrawn.

“As long as I have to.”

“Where do you plan on taking us?”

Ezra felt his head drop, his vision going blurry as he strained to look back up at the streaks of starlight and the blue glow of the purrgil as they carried the ship through hyperspace.

“I don’t know?” He said with a tired huff of breath. “All I know is, if I let go then we’ll both die.”

“You cannot keep up this power forever,” the Chiss hissed. “If this is the case, why not let me free? No one will know if you let me die in order to save yourself, so why not get it over with?”

“Because…” Ezra huffed and looked back to Thrawn with a dark smile. “I was raised better than that.”

“I see…” He mulled it over unamused, but tilted his head as the muscles in his sore neck cracked back into place. “I suppose I shall stop distracting you and let your poorly thought through plan come to fruition, young Jedi.”

There was a mocking inflection in those last two words, but Ezra shoved them away with a trite laugh.

“Yeah, maybe you sho—”

Suddenly he was jerked upright as his entire being felt struck with an overwhelming rush of grief and pain. His eyes flew open wide, rolling back into his head as he heard them… all of them… an entire city and then shortly after it was an entire planet’s worth of screams, all of them crying out in pain only to be silenced into dust a moment later. The flow of dark energy was like drowning in an ocean of horror and with it, Ezra couldn't see, couldn't breathe, just feel... until his body could feel no longer.
“Ezra?” Thrawn’s voice said in an echoing haze.

The tentacles loosened and he fell to the floor, striations on his uniform apparent where the purrgil had once held him in their clutches. He tried to move, but his body was too numb to budge more than a few inches off the floor.

“Ezra!” He shouted again and now the purrgils' screeching cries echoed through the ship as the stars faded back to normal and then the entire front of the ship caught fire.

The beasts had let them go. The Chimera was crashing down into some planet’s atmosphere, and very quickly by the rush of it all. Thrawn braced himself, but Ezra still only stood motionless, his mouth open, eyes swirling with visions of places he'd never been before. Jedha. Scarif. Alderaan. An Imperial Base the size of a moon which blocked out the light of the sun. The Death Star. The twin suns. A blonde boy staring into the horizon. Vader’s mechanical breathing making the whole world grow cold and dark. Then, the sounds of war, and sparks fizzling away in his brain, until something inside him seemed to pop like a light, and it all went black. He was out cold before his body could even slam back onto the floor.

Thrawn watched it happen as the fire brushed into the open viewport. He crawled towards the Jedi, grabbed his arm, and held him firm. In precisely five seconds they were going to make impact with the planet. If they didn't explode first, the sheer velocity of their impact with the ground would kill them both as well as anyone left aboard who was still breathing. Without much thought, Thrawn found a plan and stuck to it as he readied himself and Ezra Bridger for their final moments. This was going to hurt, but it was their only hope. With a free hand, he found the boy’s blaster wound, the shot he himself had made, and without hesitation, Thrawn dug his finger into the wound.

Ezra woke with a scream.

"You must stay awake!" Thrawn shouted. "Your power is the only thing that can cushion our blow. You must use it! Now!"

He was too dazed and in pain to understand, but luckily, the response was almost instinctual, Ezra's arm swinging out to block the flames as he performed his act of Force power and all around "Jedi devilry", the sort that never ceased to amaze Thrawn as well as it eluded his understanding. Ezra screamed again, the sheer power taking an unexpected form as the ship cracked apart into three severed hunks, the metal creaking and tearing in an unforgettable sound as pulses of bright light and electricity traveled along the inner working like exposed veins. The shouts of the troopers behind the door, the roar of fire from the front of the ship, it all ended in a blink as they hit the ground with the deafening bang of a head-on collision with the dirt.

Like a shield, Ezra’s Force wave cushioned the blow of their strike to ground just as Thrawn had said, but both of the men were sent flying out through the open window, separating mid air, where the boy tumbled into a field of black colored grass and warm mulchy dirt, knocking him unconscious yet again.

Thanks to the Jedi, Thrawn knew he would survive what was to come, and met his fate as he too took in a face full of dirt, the impact shattering his bones, sending pulses flickering behind his eyes, but it was a swift pain, a quick sacrifice before unconsciousness would ultimately take him. Thrawn knew the two would live to see another day, and just like that everything went black.
Chapter Summary

As Ezra recovers from his latest memory flash, lies are exposed and new truths are learned, whether they burn old bridges or build new ones is still entirely up in the air.

"Ezra!"

"Ugh..." He groaned, his head still spinning as he felt the heat of blood draining back into his cool and clammy face. "Kanan?"

"Come on kid..." The voice said again, only now, the figure started to come into focus as Ezra found himself surrounded by Eli, Faro, and Thrawn. There was a hand smacking him gently on the side of his face, and Ezra blinked hard once, twice, and then rapidly as he realized Eli was tapping him against the cheek. "There you go..." he was saying, his voice gentle. "Keep coming back. Atta boy..."

With another dizzy grumble, Ezra lifted his head from the apparent bench he'd been laid on only to notice that they were in a small empty room lined with tall metal poles and other unused flags and podiums of varying designs and colors.

*What? Was this some sort of storage closet?* He wondered groggily.

"Eli...?" He blinked, recognizing the man now as he rubbed at his sore eyes and immediately moved his hand to feel at the knot that was now forming on the back of his head. "Wh-what happened?"

"You kind of spazzed out back there kid. You had us all worried..."

"Your arms were shaking, then your eyes rolled back into your head, and you passed out." Faro added, placing a hand to his forehead and then maternally to the back of his neck. "How do you feel?"

"I'm okay..." He lied. "But my head—"

"You hit the ground pretty hard," she answered with a quick frown. "It made quite a scene in the courtroom."

Ezra shot up.

"The courtroom!"

It suddenly dawned on him that the four of them were no longer at the trial. He'd been rushed with so much information at once, that horrible feeling of death and all those memories about the Chimera, it was no wonder he blacked out, but at the same time Ezra started to panic because he had just done the one thing Eli told him specifically not to do.

Eli eased him back to a relaxed sitting position and patted him gently on the shoulder.
“Easy now, don’t freak out! The council called for a short recess while we saw to your health. Gras’vее’sabosen sent a medic back to check on you, but they didn’t see anything physically wrong and went back out there to tell everyone you were going to be alright. Are you sure you’re okay? Did you have some sort of seizure? Or maybe a panic attack?”

“No, it was nothing like that.”

“Eli carried you back here and they allowed the three of us to try and get you to come to. They even let—” Faro paused as she shot the Chiss a chilly backwards glance. “They even let Thrawn back here seeing as though you two are so close. Odd, given his position, but who am I to judge the process of Chiss court?”

Thrawn didn’t seem to acknowledge the comment as was intended. Instead, he looked to Ezra and with a calm, almost concerned tone, he gently stepped forward to ask for more information.

“Can you tell us what happened?”

Ezra looked to the blue man, a small flicker of anger twitching inside his already sore brain. The only way to stop the ache was to pretend Thrawn wasn't there, so he ignored the speaker and instead turned back to Eli and Faro to give his answer.

“It’s just… I had a strong vision... about the purrgil… about the Chimera… and about that weapon.”

“Really?” Faro inched, her voice growing more and more intrigued. ”You have not had a memory episode in a few days now. This must have been a particularly strong one to have caused you to faint like you did? What happened?”

Eli tensed, but Thrawn made no motion to stop anyone from speaking.

“There was screaming...” Ezra told, his voice cold, as he forced himself to relive the memory. “I saw the Death Star, a huge base the size of a moon. It fired into a city, a beach—and then at a whole planet. Everything was destroyed and everyone caught in the beam—” His brows arched and he clenched his empty fists until knuckles cracked against the bench. Though the anger was visible, it did nothing to hide the painful distance in his voice. "Everyone died.”

“You’re probably delusional from the fall and had a quick nightmare,” Faro said swiftly and with a shake of her head. “There’s no way the Empire would permit something like that. This whole Death Star conspiracy is utter nonsense, just a rumor, right?” She shot a particularly angry look at Thrawn. "Tell him, Thrawn!"

“None of us have ever seen the Death Star.” Thrawn started, but he didn’t get very far before Ezra slammed his hands down atop the bench and cut him off.

“No!” He shouted, the rage making something in the back of his neck give out a jolt that made his hair stand on end. “No, I felt their pain! Their fear! I felt—I felt them die! All of them! I felt it!”

The three only looked to him, Thrawn thoughtfully, Faro in disbelief, and Eli with his face contorted as if he wasn’t sure what to think, but he knew still to be worried.

Ezra let out a breath to cool his anger and held his face in his hands. The memory of the Chimera was coming back again. Not how he got aboard the ship, nor how they even ran into the purrgil and got slung through hyperspace, but that one scene of him and Thrawn before the dark visions took over. It was so clear now... confusing but clear, and it played on a loop in his mind.
“It was me who was keeping those purrgil attached to the Chimera,” he admitted softly. “If I let them go then the ship would have crashed. The viewport was shattered. Thrawn and I would have suffocated or been sucked out to space. But I kept my hold on them and—after the vision—I just blacked out. I remember screams and pain, but when I woke up, I was on Myrkr, and everyone else aboard was dead.”

“Ezra…”

“It’s true,” Thrawn said abruptly.

They all turned to look at him now.

"What do you mean?" Eli asked, though the words were impatient and ground out through gritted teeth. *What did he mean? Was Thrawn about to reveal all of the truth to Ezra and with Faro standing right here? Certainly not, not when he went to so much trouble to lie about it just a few days ago. What game was Thrawn playing at?*

“It is true that you saved both of our lives that day of the crash. Both by keeping the purrgil from inflicting further damage to myself and the ship, but also by cushioning our blow when crashing down to Myrkr upon their release of the Chimera.”

“But… the purrgil… the Death Star…” He rubbed between his eyes and then glared up at the Chiss. "You were tied up. Why?"

Eli and Faro looked from Ezra to Thrawn, but the Chiss only motioned for them all to remain calm.

“When the purrgil attacked, you attempted to connect with them using your Force abilities. This kept us in hyperspace at great physical stress to you, Ezra.” It was the truth, but the boy didn’t need to know that he had put them into the situation in the first place. He didn’t seem to realize that, not yet at least. *There was still time for such revelations, but now was not ideal for such disclosure. “I fear, with this strain and your Force abilities, you must have detected the activation of the Death Star even from where we were in space, and that much tension caused you to lose your grip on the minds of the many purrgil, which in turn led to our crash.”*

"The visions you had of the Death Star must have caused you so much grief that you lost your hold on the beasts and that is when our ship fell from hyperspace!” Faro repeated breathlessly. “If it weren’t for you, then the ship would have been torn apart.” She rubbed a tired hand against her eyes. “If that much is true then who knows what has become of the remainder of the 7th fleet or if they suffered the same fate as we did?”

Thrawn nodded, his lip tight as a thought seemed to continue to plague him.

“Though, by my calculations, the Death Star should not have been operable for nearly another year? Approximately eight months time given the large amount of resources and manpower I had been tracking.”

Eli tensed and Thrawn instantly noticed.

“You have something to add, Eli?”

“Well…” He blanched. “You were so busy with the trial, and I didn’t think it was possible, so I didn’t really see a reason to bring it up at first.”

“Bring what up?” Faro asked, her voice a little less patient than Thrawn’s.
“Uh...” Eli motion Thrawn closer and had the man lean down so he could whisper in his ear. Thrawn blinked and stood up.

“May I see your datapad?”

Eli handed it over and Thrawn maneuvered through the text that neither Faro nor Ezra could read. His eyes settled on a word and his eyes widened briefly as a Cheuhn word slipped out of his mouth.

“Care to share with the rest of the class?” Faro asked, hands on her hips now as Eli was making an uncomfortable face off to the side of the room.

Thrawn had to blink to draw his attention away from the datapad, looking back to Faro and Ezra with a startled expression that neither could confess they’d ever seen on the Chiss’ face before. Regardless of his worry, the calculating, reserved calmness of his voice returned and he handed Eli back the datapad before slowly explaining the realization to the two as best he could.

“It would appear that the purrgil’s hyperspace path took us through a unique black mark on the maps between Wild Space and the Unknown Regions. We do not know what lies within this area because none who were ever sent to explore this region have ever returned. As such, it was marked as an off limits area to the Chiss and likewise we’ve never observed another species successfully pilot through the area.”

“Well, what does that mean?” Ezra asked, looking up from his knees as the whole room seemed to tense.

“I do not know for certain,” Thrawn replied coolly. “But I believe it is likely that we may have gone through a black hole, causing some sort of greater anomaly which slowed the time for us within the Chimera as our distance in space was kept at a continuous range by Ezra and the purrgil.”

“Well that’s just ridiculous! Do you even hear yourself?” Faro groaned with one brow lifted high across her forehead. “Time-space anomalies are a myth told by junkies and smugglers. In reality, the anomaly was probably just small groupings of imploded star clusters or a debris field that caused all the ships that flew through the area to crash.”

“No, no... I think things like that really exist? In fact—” Ezra rubbed his head as the flashes of a dream he once had about moving paintings, running wolves, and portals through rocks came to mind. His nod grew more certain which each passing thought. “I think I’ve even seen some of them before?”

Eli frowned, his voice curious and skeptical, but not entirely dismissive. “So, what? You think eight months passed by around you when the Chimera—”

“Was only seemingly in hyperspace for a few minutes.” Thrawn finished. “It is practically unheard of, but quite possible given these dates.”

“I don’t believe it,” Faro shook her head. “I refuse to believe it actually. Maybe time here just moves a little different? Perhaps the calendars are not synced to the Core World’s standards?”

“I synced them myself, ma’am,” Eli admitted with a twinge of reluctance. “If the date of your crash and the date we found you are indeed the right ones, then your mission on Lothal really was eight months ago.”

“Eight months...” Ezra’s eyes grew wide. Could something like that really happen? Sure, he’d had
those strange dreams about teleporting across a planet or going back in time, but this… those… no, they just didn’t seem real.

“The Death Star may very well be active should this be true,” Thrawn said with a concentrated frown aimed towards Ezra. “If the weapon has fired on those planets you saw in your vision, then it is likewise possible that it was more than just some third sight you perceived. Instead, this could have been very true pain you sensed from your position, all happening in real time sped faster due to our jump.”

He sighed, hands falling to his knees as he let the weight of all those dead Imperials fall back onto his shoulders.

“Then it really was my fault we crashed? I’m the one who was controlling the purrgil. I shot us into the future. I did this.”

“No.” Thrawn stated firmly. "It is because of you that we did not die. It was the Death Star that caused us to crash when it distracted you. Your senses are indeed strong if you were able to pick up on signs of the weapon’s destruction in our current state. I dare say your power could perhaps even grow in parallel to the Emperor’s given time and training. Speaking from my position, the connection you maintained with the purrgil was truly an extraordinary thing to witness, but it was a fragile bond that no one, not even the great Palpatine could have kept hold of forever, let alone seek to control through such a traumatic ordeal as you have suffered.”

"Wait! Emperor Palpatine is a Jedi too?” Faro asked suddenly. Eli let out a hiss of air. *Whoops*... That one wasn’t public knowledge. Either Thrawn had forgotten, or more likely, he just flat out no longer cared to keep the secret anymore.

"Not a Jedi," Thrawn replied, his tone disinterested in the subject as he dismissed it with a wave of his hand. "But he is a Force user. I'm afraid that was a loosely kept secret, I trust you will keep to yourself, Commodore."

Her mouth was drawn open in shock. First Thrawn’s betrayal and now her Emperor was supposedly some sort of Force user—probably along the likes of someone like Lord Vader! She would admit that it explained a lot about their sudden mission to Batuu, but still, she held her head and took a step back to try and reel in her thoughts. Luckily, her years in the Empire trained her well to mask her emotions, and Faro had other questions in mind anyway.

“Alright, alright! All time travel and Jedi nonsense aside, I would like to know why the purrgil attacked us in the first place? I just don’t understand it. Why did they destroy the 7th fleet? Where did they come from?”

“Beast like those are often unpredictable,” Eli answered. “I’ve heard stories from friends about pilots lost to hordes of wild purrgil. They’re dangerous, blubbery beasts. Even the Chiss have stories about them like Thrass was saying back in the courtroom. They're practically an intergalactic menace!”

Ezra remembered Hera feeling much the same about the purrgil at first. He shoved the memory aside though, and focused his energy on the problem at hand. *So, he’d tried to save everyone by controlling the purrgil with the Force, but that wasn’t all... could it be possible that he sent them to the Chimera to destroy it? He was a Rebel after all. It was impossible to consider, but maybe, just maybe—*

He groaned and clutched at his throbbing head.
“Do not focus too strongly on these visions, Ezra.” Thrawn ordered in a soft, concerned tone. “They were in the past, and now you are here with us in the present. It does not matter why the purrgil chose to attack, but only that you did in fact save some of the crew. Without you, there would have been no survivors at all.”

“But…”

“It will all become clear in time. For now, we must return to the trial. Our recess will be ending soon, and the others should know of your recovery.”

“Is that okay?” Ezra asked, his comment directed more towards Eli because of that nagging feeling he still harbored towards Thrawn. “I mean… I interrupted it.”

Eli shrugged. “Yeah, everyone seemed really worried about you. I think you might have just caught everyone’s attention with your little fainting episode. They’re going to take pity on your health, kid. They’re going to listen even closer now to any proposals made concerning you and the other humans now.”

“Is that good?”

“For us?” Thrawn nodded. “Very.”

“Oh. Well, then you’re welcome I guess?”

“I wish to have a brief word with Ezra before we return,” Thrawn said. “Captain Vanto, Commodore Faro, will you make sure the rest of the crew is informed of his condition? Also, I think it would be best if we not inform the remaining crew of our possible leap through space-time, at least, not until after the trial has concluded.”

Faro scoffed, the woman still not believing a word of this black hole-hyperspace anomaly nonsense.

“Sure thing.” Eli nodded, his eyes longing to hear more of Thrawn’s story, but his decorum knowing better than to ask. Whatever Thrawn wanted to tell Ezra, he trusted the Chiss to know what he was doing. It was his job to make sure Faro was out of the picture though, so he stepped towards the door and motioned her to follow. “This way, Commodore.”

Faro acknowledged him and followed Eli out the door without another word, but saving just enough time to shoot Thrawn another distrusting look as she passed by him.

Thrawn caught it and watched her go. She was angry. That was to be expected. It would take time for him to explain his position to her and the remaining crew, but that would have to wait until after the trial. For now, he needed to focus on Ezra for his anger was prone to more… unwelcome side effects than that of the Imperials.

He waited until they were gone before looking back to the boy and taking a step towards him.

“Now that we are alone, I wish to ask a question of you.”

“Me first!” Ezra grumbled, rising to his feet. His voice was cold and hard, but he held his ground as Thrawn merely looked to him and conceded a small bob of his head as he stood uniformly to listen to what it was the young Jedi had to say.

“Go ahead.”
“Look, I think I get why you didn't tell the Empire about your true mission. It was personal and important, but they just wouldn’t understand. They weren't willing to give you the forces you needed to help your people. I think… No… I know what that’s like!”

He remembered speaking to a woman with red hair and a white gown. She spoke of impossible and difficult choices. He wanted to send reinforcements to Lothal, she wanted to help her own planet of Chandrila, but neither could use the Rebellion’s forces when there were thousands of worlds under Imperial control and only a few handfuls of ships and pilots. He couldn’t remember the conversation very clearly, but he remembered the gist of it. She said it was up to a question of “where do we start?” But for Thrawn, and the Empire’s cases, it was more likely they wondered “where do we stop?”

“Go on...” Thrawn motioned, sensing that this was not the true topic he wished to talk about.

“I know why you lie to people, and why you make up all of the stories that you do, but after what I saw, the feelings I remember towards you... I just want to know... I need you to tell me if you really lied to me like all the others?”

Thrawn’s eyes flashed with intrigue, but to the outside eyes, he remained stone-faced.

“Lied about what specifically?”

An anger welled up inside Ezra. Once again, Thrawn dodged the questions. He was in no mood to play these kinds of games anymore. He was embarrassed that he’d just disrupted a trial filled with hundreds of people, he was tired because all the memories were draining him of his energy, he was confused because he might have just traveled through time and space with the purrgil, and finally, he was angry... angry because if Thrawn had told him this before then none of today would have happened the way it had. He was angry at that, angry that he knew Thrawn had been lying to him again, and above all else, he was angry at himself for not being able to do more when the Chimera crashed, and that he was so confused and couldn’t remember all of this himself in the first place.

"STOP PLAYING GAMES!" Ezra shouted, and as he did, a wave of energy pulsed out from the spot where he stood. The furniture in the room skidded back to the edges of the wall and Thrawn was knocked back a step, but recovered quickly as he looked to Ezra, the boy breathing hard, his stance simultaneously offensive and defensive as he let a part of his Force energy seep out with his frustration. Most of it was directed around Thrawn, but even then, the Chiss could feel the shift in the air where Ezra had used the Force in his direction.
With a heavy sigh, Thrawn looked Ezra dead in the eye and let his own brows furrow as he took two steps towards him.

"I'm not!" He said strictly, his voice raising but just slightly. "You must tell me what’s bothering you, or else I will not be able to help properly!"

Ezra rolled his whole head and turned his back only to slam his hands down on the bench. It was a loud action, a powerful one, and as his hands lifted from the metal, his skin tingling with the stinging sensation of the slap, he felt all that anger and frustration slowly fade away.

There was no sense at being angry, Ezra knew. No, he only felt tired now, and all he wanted was a simple answer.

“I was always a rebel, wasn’t I? That's why I fought you in the past and why I only remember my family aboard the Ghost. You didn’t hire me—you and I were enemies weren't we? I was on your ship because you captured me or maybe because I cornered you? I don’t know!? But I was a rebel! Answer me! Just tell me the truth!”

Thrawn looked down and nodded, his voice also growing softer as the tense energy in the room went back to a pacified state.

“Yes,” he said calmly. “You were.”

Ezra scoffed and clicked his tongue.

“And my crew?” He asked, breathing hard as Thrawn felt the air in the room condense tightly as though the pressure had dropped inside once more, only this time it was more dramatically done...more suddenly accomplished. The look in Ezra's eyes was dark, his brows arched low and the blue in his eyes burning with deadly intent as his next words came out through gritted teeth.

“Was it you who killed them?”

“No, it was not,” he replied calmly. “I was unfortunately away from Lothal at that time trying to plea for the continuation of my TIE Defender program and argue against the continued production of the Death Star. When I returned, I learned what had happened. As I told you a few days prior, it
was indeed the planet's governor who ordered their execution. Though it may be of little comfort to you, I had planned to deal with her reckless actions when I returned, but it would seem your Rebel companions beat me to that end."

*So the Rebels took care of Pryce then? Good.* Ezra felt an odd satisfaction knowing that the person responsible for his crews' deaths was taken care of, whatever extent that might have been. He had to be careful not to feel too pleased about the news though. Any sign that he was reveling in the satisfying vengeance of an enemy's potential death and he would get flashes of that red and black skinned Zabrak, which Ezra knew was always a sign that he was thinking or feeling something that he probably should try and avoid.

“Was she really responsible for the Baaton explosion too?” He asked suddenly.

Thrawn blinked, his head tilted curiously to the side. Not the response he imagined the boy to give. “How did you hear of that?”

“From the others. Gunther’s brother, he—”

“Was killed in the explosion.” Thrawn finished, as though remembering it for himself. “Yes, I was aware.”

“Faro said the two of you and Eli knew it was her, but didn't have any proof so you couldn’t accuse her of it.”

“She spoke correctly. I wholeheartedly believe the massacre of Baaton was Pryce’s doing. She was in fact, the governor who made the orders to disrupt the fuel supply that destroyed your team.” He nodded and arched his brows. “You are incredibly astute to have connected those points together, Ezra. You would make an excellent commander in the Chiss military with such a skill.”

Ezra was still too angry to smile, so he simply nodded at the compliment and let his mind drift elsewhere. He could see Thrawn’s reasoning about hiding Ezra’s true rebel nature from him. They were his enemies after all, and who knew what Ezra might do if he were so unstable as to seek revenge against them? He didn’t see it that way, and according to Walten and Urick, they really didn’t hold much of a grudge either. War was war no matter what side you were on. No one was faultless, and no one was truly evil. Still, Thrawn was telling the truth now, Ezra could feel it, he could somehow sense it. Every word he was saying was in fact the honest to goodness truth. He hadn’t killed the Ghost crew, and with that question off his mind, Ezra felt his anger beginning to fade entirely as the trust started to seep back through the cracks of his resolve.

“Look Thrawn, I appreciate that you’re always trying to shield my feelings about all the things I did in the past, but I don’t really care about any of that. Urick and Walten don’t either. They recognized me from Lothal, and they told me what they knew, but they weren’t mad. They trusted me because we've all come to know each other so well in the last week, and told me the truth for my own sake, not for the sake of sparing my feelings. You just have to trust that I won’t be mad when you tell me these things either! I mean, you still tried to protect me even knowing that we were enemies, didn't you? So you must trust me a little bit, right?”

Thrawn was silent.

Ezra shook his head and held out his hand, grabbing Thrawn's forearm just as Tharin had taught him and holding firm to the point he could feel the faint beating of Thrawn's pulse beneath his fingers.
"If you try to keep covering for me in an attempt to shield my feelings, you are underestimating my strengths, and that's a grave insult according to your people, isn't it?"

Thrawn looked down at the Chiss handshake with a startled expression before smiling and gripping back with a force that caused Ezra's whole arm to go numb.

"I understand. Please, allow me to formally apologize—"

“No, that’s not good enough!” Ezra interrupted bluntly. “I need you to promise me that you won’t lie to me anymore. From this day forward, no more lies. No matter how hard the truth might be. Look, I still don’t remember what the war was about, and it sounds like the Empire wasn't exactly on the right side of it either. It doesn't matter if we were enemies in the past because despite all of that, I still can't help but think of you as my friend now! You, Eli, the crew, everyone! I care about all of you after all that we've been through together!” He paused and made a calculating face before stressing his next words slowly. "So, you can trust me, the question is, can I trust you?"

The Chiss let his lips tighten into a thin line, but he nodded. For his plans to work, he had no other choice.

"I give you my word."

Ezra held his grip for just a few moments longer, and then both men released their grasp as a small smirk seemed to form at the corner of Ezra's lip.

"Well okay then. Thank you." He rubbed secretly at his slightly sore arm and then looked back up to Thrawn, his expression fading into a more lighthearted and innocent look than before. "Sorry for accusing you of murdering my team."

“It is alright. It isn’t like I was trying to protect them after all, though personally, I much would’ve wanted their capture over their deaths.”

“You know…” Ezra started. “I really feel like I should want to punch you for that one, but—” He shrugged. "I’ve done a lot worse to your guys. So, who am I to talk?"

“I will allow you the strike if it will make you feel better about the topic?” Thrawn offered.

Ezra spat out a laugh and shook his head. What was it with this guy? Despite his brilliance, he was actually kind of a weirdo, wasn’t he?

“Look, what’s done is done!” He said with a hard pat to the Chiss’ shoulder. “Now that we have all that out of the way. Let’s finish up this trial, what do you say, Thrawn?”

“A moment. You are forgetting that I too had something I wished to say.”

"Oh right. Sorry. What's on your mind?"

“I was wondering, despite our differences, and if given the opportunity, would you wish to remain here in the Ascendancy? On Chiss worlds with Eli and myself?”

Ezra’s eyes shot wide. Did Thrawn know? Surely Tharin hadn’t told him. She was nowhere near Thrawn when he appeared in the courtroom and wouldn’t have had time to mention it to him if they’d bumped into one another after Ezra left to rejoin the other humans.

He rubbed at his neck and thanks to what Tharin had said, was now consciously aware he was doing it and stopped.
“To help fight against the evils threatening your people?”

Thrawn nodded somberly.

“In a sense,” he replied. “Yes. I believe you would be a remarkable ally against evil, and you have proven yourself time and again since our wake on Myrkr. You are a capable warrior and a valuable mind. All qualities of a proper Chiss soldier.”

“Wow...” He chuckled and let his attention dart nervously off to the side of the room. “Well, that makes things a lot easier then.”

Thrawn’s eyes narrowed.

“Explain.”

Ezra felt a blush and couldn’t help but touch his neck now.

“Well, see... I told Tharin not to tell you, but I sort of had plans to try and stay on my own. I want to learn more about your people, so I can help you and the other Chiss in any way I can.” He looked to the floor and let out a small, sad breath. “My old team is gone and I have nothing to go back to at home. At least here, I know that I could have a purpose.”

Thrawn smiled and patted his shoulder.

“Purpose indeed. Very well. I will arrange your permission to be instated as a liaison like Eli.”

“I want to join the military!” Ezra blurted. “But I want to get to a good place with my Chiss knowledge too. Now, whether that means staying with Stent and Ina or taking up Tharin’s offer at trading information, I don’t know, but I think I need more training before I can really be of much help to you.” The darkness in his eyes returned as his gaze drifted to visions of his past. “I don’t want to lose anyone else… not like before… So I want to get stronger, smarter, more prepared!”

“Do not worry about such details as of yet,” Thrawn soothed. "Together, we will cross this bridge when it appears. For now, we must follow procedures and proper protocols in order to have the Aristocra agree to your stay.”

“And they can’t know about my Jedi powers?”

He lifted a brow.

“Tharin told me.”

“You get along quite well it would seem.” He hummed. “At any rate, she spoke truthfully. The less who know about your abilities the better. Though it is this power that may hold the key to your guaranteed stay. All will be explained in time, but for now, let us return to hear the remainder of my brother’s proposal. Our recess is nearly at its limits.”

“And Chiss protocol demands we not be late?”

“You are learning quickly.”

He shrugged.

“What can I say, it’s a gift?”

“A warrior’s gift,” Thrawn replied with a glimmer of satisfaction in his voice. “As such, I trust you
will follow my lead when I play our cards to the Ascendancy.”

“Well, you know Rebels?” He teased with a smug grin. “We’re pretty big risk takers. You do what you need to, I’m right behind you.”

He nodded and with that, they left the backroom and headed back out into the courtroom. Thrawn was thinking to himself as he navigated the icy hallways with Ezra at his side. *What he had to do.* In truth, Thrawn had spent the last three days doing exactly that, exactly what he needed for this proposal to work. After leaving the hospital, he had offered the remainder of his time traveling to other worlds, speaking with Aristocra and generals, gathering data, calling in favors, and all around preparing himself for this time and place. Now it was time to see if the seeds of that effort were able to grow worthy fruits. The conclusion lay right behind the large entry doors, and he pushed them apart, ready to see how his preparations would soon unfold.
The Trial (Part Three)

Chapter Summary

In this chapter we look back to the three days before the trial where Thrawn meets with the Aristocra to explain his position, cash in a few favors, and ultimately piece together clues aimed towards a much larger goal. Are one of the four Aristocra to blame for the upcoming Civil War between the Chiss people? Thrawn suspects as much and is willing to do whatever it takes to root out the traitor while also ensuring protection for the humans of the remaining Chimera crew.

Chapter Notes

Posted on: August 10, 2018

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sposia, Three Days Ago:

Thrawn knew that his brief luxury of rest would be over the moment he left the hospital, and yet, he had finally managed to figure out a way to leave earlier than anticipated. It had been four days. That was two and a half days longer than he’d ever been held by the Sabosen before. No, he had far too much to do before the day of the trial. He could not spend another minute of it lying around doing nothing.
Now, it was known throughout the Chiss Ascendancy that the Sabosen medical physicians were incredibly skilled healers and not easy Chiss to fool, but fortunately for Thrawn, years of previous injuries had prepared him well in the art of faking his well-being, at least enough to pass their final examinations that is. He knew every question they typically asked, and he knew exactly how to counter it. The only problem he faced now, was looking the part. Thrawn had always had a high tolerance for pain and rarely ever let it stop him from completing his goals. No, that wasn’t the true issue here. The real trick was fooling the new medical suits into revealing him in perfect enough health to leave this facility. The upgrades created by his niece were so far proving the hardest part of this act to overcome.

It would seem Tharin had found a way to create living fibers that reacted to the neurological pain sensors in the mind as well as any distinguishable differences noticeable on the body. Pain receptors worked almost oppositely to that of droids, wherein these synthetic threads were meant to heal and alert the patient to aid, rather than to simply notify them of having the pain in general. The sensors then trigger a reaction in the smart fibers of the fabric that release the appropriate medicines which have been broken down into such small components that the wearer is unaware of the nutrients being absorbed through the skin. Likewise, a trigger to any discomfort or pain would expose a customized glow in the mesh material that would in turn alert any outside spectator to the use of pain relievers or other medicinal aid in that area both internal or otherwise.

Her design of these suits was indeed a paradigm of Chiss technology and Thrawn was immensely proud of his collateral descendant for creating such a remarkable innovation at such a young age. At the same time, the overly-active smart-suit was likewise the only reason why he was still held up in the Sabosen facility, and he had focused many an hour trying to think up a way to bypass Tharin’s ingenuity. Which is why, by his fourth day of hospitalization, just two days after he had awoken from his prior emergent admission, Thrawn had figured out exactly how to escape from his confines early, and he put his presentation into play.

*The medics were none the wiser.*

“I must thank you once again for allowing me sanctuary in your facility,” Thrawn bowed to the Aristocra of Sposia. “As well as the care you took in looking after my remaining crew while I was indisposed, and for the guards who you had stationed to keep watch over my room.”

Gras’vée’sabosen did not make a move to accept his thanks, merely, she frowned and pointed her finger at him in warning as her eyes, dulled somewhat by the progress of age and stress, bore into him like targeting turbolasers.

“You were lucky to have been found by such close allies, Mitth’raw’nuruodo,” she said sternly, her voice matching the very description of her eyes. “I know many other generals who would have left you and your human entourage on that planet to the hands of the fates. I know many more who may even have gone through the trouble of finishing what your crash could not accomplish.”

“Yes, I know.” Thrawn replied, his voice a low hum in the back of his throat. “Were there any attempts made while I was compromised?”

“None thankfully, but a lot has changed in the years since your leave. Much more since your more recent events with the Grysks and other Far Outsiders. We are on the brink of internal collapse as well as the inevitable external threat. Much infighting on other planets has broken a rift between the Ascendancy and has torn our people into schism. To make matters worse for you, there are also many Chiss worlds which currently label you as a traitor to your people.”

*Yet the Aristocra still fight among themselves instead of fixing the problem?* Is what Thrawn would have said had he not been thoroughly trained in military discipline and restraint of voice.
“I am well aware, but do know that I have every intention of tracking the true defectors down and bringing them to justice. My own name and standing matter less to me than this goal.”

“Considering your wake was only a few days ago, Mitth’raw’nuruodo, I am surprised you already seem to know so much about our current endeavors.”

“As Admiral Ar’alani might have mentioned, ma’am, I noted the use of Chiss technology in my battle with the Grysks, and likewise sent the ozly-esehembo back with my message towards their escalated approaching attack.”

She frowned.

“An attack that many will place directly on your blame, for it was you who escalated the tension in your rescue of the children.”

“Would not the kidnapping be more cause for escalation than my words?” Thrawn asked simply.

She sighed and rubbed at her sore eyes before looking back to him.

“I will give you credit where it is due. I believe you did well in your rescue, as well as in your secrecy to keeping those Imperials away from our borders. Though, as a physician and an Aristocra, I cannot agree with your methods.”

“I did not believe the upcoming threat to be something our patrols could not handle.”

She held up her hand.

“Regardless, their numbers will increase as will the danger level until they and these traitors are found and the inevitable war subsided.”

"On that, we agree."

"Hmmm... Well, despite your lack of care towards your own status, you can plainly see by your reinstated uniform that not all share your thoughts. The people of Naporar have gone to great lengths to have your rank returned to you, but you will still be under constant supervision until we are able to discuss the formal denouncement of your exile at the hearing in three days time. Until such, you are to deliver your reports to the other Aristocra and Admirals and hope that we still agree to lift this title of burden.”

“Of course,” Thrawn nodded.

She stood from her desk and walked with him towards the door.

“Exaggerated banishment can turn into very real exile given your recent exploits. I hope it does not come to that. I warn you to be cautious with what you say, especially to the people of Csapla and Sarvchi. You will find them not so passive as we on Sposia.”

“I will endeavor to get them to see things my way.”

She hummed and gave the man one final nod.

“I have known you for many years, Thrawn. One day you will become more scar than man. While I cannot stop you in your attempts to uncover the truth, do try to stay out of further trouble, if not for your sake, than for that of your house name and for your family. I would hate to see you exiled in earnest before you are able to grant us a few more of your unique victories.”
"I understand," he said softly, bowing ever so slightly so as to appease proper protocol and gratitude. "Thank you, ma’am. I will not fail you."

"May the others show you mercy, then. Farewell Thrawn."

With that, she motioned Thrawn out of her office and her door shut swiftly behind him.

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Thrawn only made it a few steps past the turbolift, when he saw Eli Vanto waiting for him by the entrance to the hospital.

"Are you to be my supervision?" Thrawn lifted one amused brow. "A bit of a biased guard, would you not agree?"

"Hey, I was in the area?" He shrugged, matching the smirk. "I guess they wanted to make you feel more welcome? Do you really have to go planet to planet and explain yourself to the other Aristocra?"

"I do." Thrawn replied in that low, thoughtful way he was so known for.

Eli rubbed at the back of his head and continued the motion down the front of his neck. A tired gesture, or one that perhaps outwardly expressed his disagreement to the matter.

"Well alright, but it seems overly convoluted, even for Chiss standards." He sighed, but revealed a small smile that conveyed hidden excitement. "Let’s get this over with."

"Admiral Ar’alani has informed you much of my situation?"

"Oh yeah." Eli chuckled dryly. "Thanks for the message the girls brought home by the way. Do I even want to know why you thought advancing the war with the enemy was a good idea?" He held out his hand. "I mean, other than getting Vader and Palpatine off your back, which I know… I know… was really important. If either of those two got their hands on this area of space, it would get uglier than an uncooked Gornt, but still… There was no other way you could’ve done that?"

"There was no other way."

Eli rolled his eyes, but nodded to himself in vague understanding as he piloted the ship off the ground and swiftly up into the stars. It was quiet for a few long moments before he finally decided to speak up again.

"So, did you say anything to the rest of the crew before you left?"

"No." Thrawn replied, his eyes shutting calmly to express his apparent regret over the action. "If I was to lay the groundwork for Thrass’ proposal and end it as a success, then I needed to leave as soon as possible, even if that meant before my body was in prime condition, or before I could give my gratitude to the remaining crew members."

"Wait, wait, wait!" Eli turned in his seat to look Thrawn directly in the eyes at that one. His face conveyed partial amusement and the other was a look of genuine shock. "You mean, you tricked Tharin’s medsuit into saying you were healthy? And the Sabosen actually bought it?"

He nodded.
“And after only two days…” His voice was impressed but held a mild sense of dry humor. He shook his head from side to side and let out a laugh. “Oh, she’s not going to be happy about that.”

“She might appreciate the opportunity to improve her work?” Thrawn argued.

He nodded, conceding to that point with an uneasy shrug that lacked any sort of confidence to back it up.

“If she does, then that’s only because it was you who did it. She really looks up to you, you know? I guess Thrass never let any of the bad rumors get to her growing up. You’re basically her hero.”

“You believe so?”

“Well we’ll find out I guess? You already got one out of the way. After you meet with the other two Aristocra, we’ll be heading to Csaus and you’ll no doubt see her in the workshop.” He frowned and turned back to his controls. “So, do you know what you’re wanting to say? I mean, aside a recap of what was in those journal entries, and you already know how I feel about that.” Eli shot him a look. “Have you remembered everything well enough to talk about it with the Aristocra?”

“Most of my memory has returned,” Thrawn replied. “I fear the most uneventful of my days are gone permanently, but I am confident I am up to date on every other aspect of my missions so as to not be surprised by any major revelations in the future.”

“And the crew?” Eli argued. “You know, Faro and those stormtroopers probably recognize Ezra now that you’ve gone and told him his last name. If they didn’t recognize his face, they’ll definitely remember the name. I honestly don’t think anyone will flat out shun or attack him or anything like that, but what if they jog more of Bridger’s memories? You and I won’t be there to stop it.”

“That is always possible. The story I told him will most certainly come undone with time, as I so planned.”

Eli snorted.

“You were expecting to get caught this whole time?”

“The art of lying is like the infiltration of an enemy ship,” Thrawn explained. “Inside is often unknown, but has been intentionally crafted with a designated amount of rooms and hallways before finally ending with the main control room. While looking for the crew within such a vessel, there is the opportunity of coming upon locked rooms, hiding secrets, as well as entering through open rooms which hold an equal chance of gaining potentially valuable data or more likely, deadly surprise. The owner of the ship will always have the upper hand, and lying is no different. When one navigates the paths and doors looking for answers, the journey takes time, and this is true whether one is reckless in their raid and goes through the ship in a hasty and destructive manner, or in a more cautious approach so as to collect all facts that time allows. Should Ezra discover a truth hidden beneath one door, there will always be another secret waiting to fill its place at the next one, and the next one, until finally he makes it through to the control deck and has all the treasures, all the secrets and potential hazards sorted through, leaving nothing more to be learned or explored.”

“And when the kid makes it to that point? When he runs out of lies?” Eli frowned. “Assuming his patience with you even holds that long. Don’t you think he’s going to be mad?”

“Oh, I most certainly do,” Thrawn said, his grin still showing as that thought-filled plotting look
took form in his eyes. “In fact, I will be surprised if he is not absolutely furious.”

Eli shrugged and leaned back in his seat, releasing a tired puff of air through his teeth.

“Well alright then, I can see you have some larger plan cooking that I assume you don’t want me knowing about just yet, but don’t say I didn’t warn you that all of this was going to come back to bite you in the ass.”

Thrawn shot him a look, and Eli only smiled smugly at him.

“Hey, technically I outrank you here, Force Commander Thrawn.” He snickered. “Since you and I both know that neither of us are going back to the Empire, I figure that I can finally speak however I want around you.”

Thrawn smirked.

“And do I likewise have permission to speak freely with you, Captain Vanto?”

“Mmm?” Eli thought with a drawn out hum. “Maybe?”

Thrawn scoffed out a small laugh and returned his view to the outside world as the hyperspace trail became a visible view of the planet Naporar. After a long moment of silence, Eli prepared to land and finally shot his gaze over in Thrawn’s direction.

“You know I’m joking, right? You can always tell me what you’re thinking. In fact, I don’t know what I would do without your constant nagging in my ear. Things haven’t really been the same without you around, you know?” He laughed. “Sometimes, I dare say they make perfect sense and to be honest, aside one or two moments of action, it’s been a little dull.”

“I’ve missed talking with you as well.” Thrawn conceded. “No one has ever truly understood my methods since my sending you away. It is nice having someone of your aptitude to talk to once more.”

As if I ever understood you? Eli thought to himself. Still, if Thrawn hadn’t sent him away, who knows how they Empire might’ve used their friendship against Thrawn? Vader probably would have killed him, or Eli might have just as easily been transferred or secretly detained in order to act as leverage for Thrawn’s true knowledge. It was a thought that always seemed to cross his mind, but never really offered up anything more than additional questions.

“You really think the Empire is about to collapse?” He blurted with a sigh.

“I do,” Thrawn nodded. “Though we may yet have time before that happens. It is far more likely that the war for the Ascendancy will come first. That would be as good a place as any to start our conversation with the other Aristocra.”

“I suppose?” Eli shrugged. “You didn’t…” He paused, hearing just how crazy it sounded coming out of his own mouth. “You didn’t… plan this… did you?”

“You mean, did I plan out my own defeat by assuming Ezra Bridger would avoid the Emperor’s trap, escape his capture, detain me, summon a wave of purrgil, and then successfully pilot the remains of our ship into the Unknown Regions in precisely the right time for a patrol to find our location and come to our rescue? All so I could escape the clutches of the Empire long enough to save my people?”

Eli blinked.
“Yeah, pretty much?”

“You flatter me.” He grinned. “But no… there is no way anyone could have planned a course of events so bizarre.”

Eli seemed to accept the answer with a long stretch of his arms splayed out over the control panel.

“Well then, I guess fate just works in mysterious ways, right?”

“So it would seem,” Thrawn said, rising from his seat. “Will you be accompanying me inside to meet the Aristocra?”

He shrugged, but stood to follow down the platform.

“Since I’m in charge of babysitting you again, I guess I’ll tag along for the ride?”

Eli’s smile widened, and Thrawn watched him with amusement as the small scar crinkled by the man’s eye. His smile vanished at the sight of it. An attack, he was told. It was likely Thrawn’s fault that Eli had been in that position in the first place, but—no. Thrawn didn’t have the time to focus on such guilt-ridden uncertainties. Victory was more important than revenge. There was a war coming, and Thrawn needed to get all of his pieces in order before that day.

Eli was the first asset, his prowess for deduction and reasoning just shy of Thrawn’s own, plus he was a genuinely good military officer and as luck would have it, he was a good man as well. Ezra proved in recent weeks to be the second of these assets. Thrawn had seen what Force users could accomplish when they put their minds to something. His uncertainty to his past and eager willingness to find answers, friendship, and purpose, has made the boy into a more than capable warrior. For all of Thrawn’s plans to work, Ezra’s help would be paramount in these days to come.

War and strategy were something that Thrawn knew better than he even knew himself, and likewise, it was something the Nuruodo Aristocra would respond well to. He only hoped he would be able to convince her of the help he needed in time to put it to use for the day of the trial. Luckily, he had a few tricks up his sleeve to ensure she saw things his way. Of all the Aristocra, this one was someone who Thrawn knew how to talk with extremely well.

As the two men started towards the Nuruodo military base, he noticed how it hadn't really changed much in his long absence. It housed the same barracks, the same bronze flags, stones, and symbols strategically decorating the foyer, and even the faces he saw were more or less the same as when he had left. Many of the most familiar men and women were struggling to decide whether to welcome Thrawn home or shun him completely. As for the younger, less experienced soldiers, they were more hesitant than anything else, especially when they saw Thrawn in his old uniform. They didn't know if the unfamiliar face walking in with Eli was someone of great rank or someone in massive trouble. All the way into the base, it seemed Eli and Thrawn were met with side glances and reserved greetings before the Aristocra appeared and strode down the long walkway to meet them hallway to her office.

“Mitth’rawn!”

Her voice was just as loud and authoritative as ever.
“Sev’eree’nuruodo.” Thrawn greeted with a bow. “It is an honor to see you again, ma’am.”

The woman was around his own age, her looks not appearing to have changed much in the years passed just like the base. She was broad, muscular, and a little shorter than most women; her short blue-black hair slicing beside her jawline like a blade, and her dark red lips still giving off the appearance of freshly drawn blood. A terrifying woman, but an immeasurably competent leader nevertheless.

“Ar’alani has told me much of your exploits,” she said stiffly. “And both she and Captain Vanto always speak so highly of you. We’ve returned your uniform, but I wonder if that is enough to convince me of your loyalty? You have a lot of nerve coming back here after what you've done. Tell me, what is one good reason why I should not order you struck down from where you stand?”

Eli gulped.

Thrawn merely smiled and tilted his head slowly to one side.

“Would the Battle of Bilbringi or Obroa-skai be better to refer to in my defense?”

She glared at him, but her frown quivered and then it snapped in an instant as she let out a booming, hearty laugh.

Eli felt his jaw drop. In all his years with the Nuruodo people, he had never once seen the Aristocra laugh, let alone smile. He was convinced she just hated everything and everyone, especially Eli himself! But...this? What sort of paradoxical anomaly was he looking at here?

“You’re never going to let me live that one down, are you?” She let in a deep breath and motioned for him to follow her to her office. “Come. You have much to report back to me I’m sure. Plus I can tell from that look in your eyes that you want to propose something further? Rather bold of you given how much trouble you’re in.” She sighed once more and shook her head, the corners of her red lips twitching upward in a sharp grin. “Oh, but you know I’ve never been able to refuse your requests before, Thrawn. Let us see if after all these years, I’ve finally come to my senses.”

“Oh I’m sure they are just as sharpened and astute as ever, Vereen.”

Eli physically choked back on the air. Did Thrawn just call the Aristocra, perhaps the most terrifying of all four ruling family leaders and intense military commandos, by her core name?

With a silence of a man cautious about the continuation of his own life, Eli looked to Thrawn and whispered, “Did you two used to date or something?”

“Chiss do not date,” Thrawn replied simply. “Vereen and I have simply known one another for most of our lives. Still, while we are speaking, I feel it would be better if you did not accompany us. She is quite... shy?”

Thrawn smiled to himself and it sent a jolt of whiplash through Eli’s brain. He was pretty sure the stupid expression housed on his face was going to get stuck there permanently from that one comment alone. Sev’eree’nuruodo, Aristocra of the entire military division of Chiss warriors, woman who could strike fear in a Rancor with a single glance, and who had once made Eli run so many drills he literally could not move his body the next morning... was shy?

Dumbly Eli only nodded and watched as Thrawn continued down the hallway, keeping equal stride with the Aristocra. The befuddled man finally came to when the Chiss disappeared beneath the bronze doors, that cocky grin of Thrawn’s replaying in loops in Eli’s head as he tried and failed to make sense of what it meant. He never got his answer and gave up, resolving to just leave the two
to their meeting and whatever that entailed.

While on Naporar, Eli found time to worry about a few things of his own, mostly talking with other generals who were still mad at him for breaking rank and protocol to check on the Myrkr signal. A lot of them were glad that it brought Thrawn back, but many more struggled with the “what ifs” and the hidden dangers that such a foolhardy leap could have made. The trouble was real enough, but the threat level was minor. All in all, their nagging only seemed to make Eli feel tired, and he excused himself to wait for Thrawn in one of the typically unused break rooms deeper within the bronze military base. It was quiet there, rarely used, and occasionally they had the Chiss-equivalent of caf brewing, if not the materials for Eli to make his own. It would be a good place to relax for a little while until Thrawn’s meeting came to an end.

“You have my permission,” the Aristocra said. “Yes, though it took a little longer to whip him into shape, the human has performed admirably as one of our warriors. Any and all recommendations you have for me will be welcomed on Naporar given they survive their initial training.”

“Thank you, Vereen.”

She winked and Thrawn couldn’t help but wonder what all she’d observed from Eli in their time together. Eli for the most part seemed to be afraid of the Aristocra, and to an extent, Thrawn could see the reasoning behind his reservations. In truth, Vereen had always been a curious woman and highly observant, collecting small details and mannerisms that made her one of the best military leaders the Nuruodo family has ever seen. Though, at the same time, she was also brash and eager for a reason to deploy her fleets into practice and danger. She was shy to show her kinder side, true, but her brazen emotions never shared that same reserve and had been as apparent as the stars in the night sky ever since she and Thrawn had met back in basic training.

Thrawn watched her eyes light up when he spoke of his time with Vader, and she seemed eager to have been a part of the battles he held with the Rebels. She never once questioned whether or not Thrawn was going to remain in exile, nor did she bring up the topic of Chiss traitors who fractured off to sell technologies to the Far Outsiders. Still, she openly agreed to house the humans and train them as she had Eli, which was one of four tasks Thrawn was hoping to accomplish during his time on Naporar.

“I release you, Thrawn. But be warned… some are not happy about your return and they will require a… somewhat special attention as your travels continue.”

“I will remain vigilant. Until we again meet, Vereen.”

“Yes… I will look ahead to it. For now, I have new cadets in desperate need of running drills.”

“Do you still have them practicing on that old course that induces vomiting?”

“Everyday.” She smiled. “It builds character.”

“So it does,” he said back, offering a half smirk as he looked back to his memories of brutal anguish with fond nostalgia.

"We should have a race on it, so the new recruits can see how it's really done. For old time's sake as well. Unless of course you think the comfortable lifestyle of your Empire has made you soft?"
Thrawn smirked.

"Quite the opposite, I'm afraid. Though, perhaps another time. I have many more meetings to attend before the trial day is upon us, and I find my body is somewhat— *compromised.*"

She hummed, but accepted the rain-check with a steady nod and an outstretched hand. Thrawn took her arm and the two fought for dominance as Vereen's grip seemed to poke against the very bone of his arm before both released and the deal was sealed. For a woman with such tiny hands, her brute strength never ceased to remind others why she had earned her place as the Aristocra of the Nuruodo House.

"I'll hold you to that, Thrawn. Farewell and may luck take you far."

“Farewell, Vereen.”

By the time Thrawn found him, Eli was half collapsed on a bench, the un-ground caf beans still in his hand as his days with no sleep had finally caught up to him.

The human man woke to the smell of caf only to find Thrawn sitting beside him, scrolling through a Chiss datapad, waiting patiently for Eli to wake up again.

“Thrawn?” Eli mumbled. “What the— H-how long have you been sitting there?”

“A few hours,” Thrawn replied. “After speaking with Vereen, Ar’alani, and the surrounding generals, I decided to come looking for you. Vereen tells me I am not to go anywhere without you so as to not arouse suspicion of my exile being revoked until the trial. I decided to let you sleep while I worked on a proposal for the next Aristocra.” He smirked and shot Eli a look. “As well as the one after that.”

Eli felt his face heat up.

“You could have just woken me up you know?”

“If you are tired, you should of course, sleep.”

“But I thought you were in a hurry?”

Thrawn nodded.

“Oh yes, but if you are to act as my parole officer, I would rather you be at your pique of health.”

Eli groaned loudly and rubbed his face, before rising to his feet.

“Did you make this caf?” He pointed.

Thrawn nodded.

Eli took the cylinder and drank directly from the container until the entire thing was gone. At that, Thrawn blinked a little as he watched the man set the empty device back to the counter and wipe away the access on his lips with his sleeve.
“Well come on then, we don’t have all night.” He checked his armband and winced. “I mean, day. Let’s get going.”

“As you wish.”

The stop to Cioral to speak with the Aristocra of Csapla went about as well as Eli expected. The Aristocra was a cautious man, and not very friendly. He was one of the few who thought Thrawn’s actions against the Ascendancy while under Imperial guise was lines for treason, and he showed no restraint in making that point clear as soon as their ship landed and the men were escorted into the tall silver tower by a team of four security guards and two waiting just outside the man's office door.

After perhaps the third time of Thrawn stressing the point that the war with the Grysks was an easier battle to fight against than the greater and simultaneously inevitable war with the Far Outsiders or the Sith, the Aristocra finally managed to calm down a little to hear what else Thrawn had to say. However, when Thrawn finished telling his story, he took a step further into another potential argument as he stated his first request aloud.

“Absolutely not!”

“If I may, sir—”

“No, you may not!” He spat. “Had your banishment been true, then neither of us would be having such a foolhardy conversation. You already have one human here, what makes you think we would allow another, much less eight of them!?”

“One of these humans possesses third sight.”

“An ozyly-esehembo?!” The Aristocra repeated, his stance breaking for a moment as he allowed mild shock to seep into his otherwise resolved stare.

“Yes,” Thrawn nodded. “His powers are unlike any that we have seen before. I have been watching these sky-walkers, these Force users as they so call themselves. Their connection is as strange as it is powerful and I have seen a small fraction of just how much so with my own eyes. They are powerful, predictable, but only in the most basic of ways. I surmise that their strength can only continue to grow with time and if left with us, the sky-walker, Ezra Bridger, could become a very valuable asset to the Chiss Ascendancy.”

“So, you wish to use the boy as a weapon?”

“As an asset,” Thrawn corrected. “Much like we use our ozyly-esehembo. The boy will need further training, but his potential is invaluable and unlimited to even my imagination.”

The man thought about it for a moment, though his face conveyed true curiosity rather his usual disapproval.

“The other Aristocra?”

“Sev’ereee’nurudo and Gras’vee’sabosen have both agreed to the presence and training for all of the humans, including Ezra. I have not yet spoken with the Inrokini about such a proposal, but am
confident that they will agree to the proposition. Though, thus far, I have told none but you about
the boy's true abilities nor that I am currently suppressing his power with a Ysalamir obtained from
Myrkr. If he is not allowed to stay, I did not want him influencing the people of Sposia with his
abilities.”

“I see. And you tell me all of this despite already paying visit to your own house and namesake?
Despite your own collateral descendant being so closely related to the Inrokini family? Why..." He
revealed a white-toothed grin and stroked at his long chin. "I am honored you would come to
discuss this with me first, and that you would trust me with such incriminating
details, Mitth’raw’nuruodo.”

Which was exactly why Thrawn had told him about Ezra's gifts, and why he did not save this
meeting with Cioral for last. He knew little of this Aristocra, but understood that much of the
arguing between ruling leaders typically stemmed from this man’s personal opposition. He liked to
be involved with everything and always endeavored to have the upper hand or the last word in
every situation. The House Csapla was tightly involved in nearly every aspect of daily life for the
Chiss people, and he saw this as the means to be above the other Aristocra as their most important
voice of reason. His was one of the most respected of houses, the oldest ruling family, and the one
which always remained no matter how the Aristocra shifted throughout the years, so of course he
would think so highly of himself.

Still, he pictured the true well-being of his people at the core of his values, and would no doubt do
anything to ensure their safety. He disliked outsiders and their potential threat to the Chiss just as
much as he hated the unknown factors that came with someone like Thrawn and all the military
sought to accomplish. Though, as most people of Csapla, the Aristocra was a devoted pacifist and a
silver-tongued speaker when it came to conflict. His words, even when in disagreement, always
held more to be considered than just the boast of namesake or house title.

At the same time, Thrawn knew he could stroke the man's ego until the trial if it meant getting him
to listen to what he needed to say about his major goals. Though, of all four current Aristocra, he
could safely say that he liked this one the absolute least and understood little about his methods. In
a way he was a lot like Thrass, a politician of sorts, but one who always seemed to be two steps
ahead of everyone else.

“Of course, sir.” Thrawn bowed in reply. “I value your opinion very highly even if you do not
appreciate mine.”

He frowned, but shook his head after one more moment of serious debate and thought.

“I will allow the sky-walker, but the others, I am afraid I do not condone. With the war coming,
resources could be scarce. Our people come before these humans you have collected, but I admit
that the military stratagem of Eli Vanto and this power proposed by your Ezra Bridger, could prove
invaluable in our fight to come. Perhaps he might even reveal more to our girls than we in all our
past generations ever could.”

“Perhaps,” Thrawn nodded. “Thank you for your cooperation and time, sir.”

“A moment, Mitth’raw’nuruodo.” He said with a hand lifted to halt him from rising. “I noticed you
have not yet pleaded for your own case. Are you not yet aware that the Aristocra are considering
your exile to be one of true permanence this time?”

“I am aware,” He replied with a small smile. “But I do not care.”

The frown on the Aristocra’s face shifted quickly into a dark and puzzled glare.
“Why is that?”

“Because I care more for my people than I do for my rank and status, of course.”

The man’s face softened, and he nodded his understanding.

“Spoken like a true commander. Very well, Thrawn, I will listen to your brother’s testimony and agree to the terms of Ezra Bridger and your full-pardon, but don’t expect anything more from the Csapla.”

“I would never presume as much, sir.”

With a grunt, the Aristocra pointed him back towards the door.

“Very well. You may leave. Prepare for your trial, Thrawn. You will need all of your skill to pull this one off. Your methods are legendary, so I am eager to see how you will react when faced with your judgement.”

Thrawn bowed and left without another word, Eli trailing close behind him in the hallways as the guards returned and escorted them back out onto the landing platform. They were silent until both were safely back on their ship, checked it for bugs (because of course that would be something the Csapla would do), and then finally felt free to speak up once they were far, far away from the planet Cioral.

“So, you were in there for a long time. How did it go?” Eli asked.

“Quite well actually. He agreed to two of my four terms.”

He chuckled.

“Those aren’t exactly the best odds, but coming from Csapla, I guess 50% is more half-full than it is half-empty.”

“Indeed.”

“Hey tell me the truth,” Eli blurted. “The Aristocra. He remind you at all of Deenlark?”

Thrawn stared at him a moment as if considering it, and then he covered his mouth to hide the smirk beneath his hand.

“I knew it! Oh, you have no idea how long I’ve been waiting to tell you that one! In a way, I think Sev’eree’nuruodo resembles Pryce a little bit, but I won't insult her with the comparison.”

Thrawn’s amusement stayed for a moment more, but faded just as quickly as he cleared his throat before leaning forward in his seat.

“Well... shall we finish our tour before joining with Thrass on Copero?”

Eli nodded begrudgingly, but the humor from their inside joke was still playing victoriously on a loop in his mind.

“Yeah, yeah...” He waved. “We’re on our way now. It should be night by the time we get there, do you think the Inrokini will mind?”

“Not at all,” he said with a shake of his head. “The science division often works more into the night than during the day. Our timing will be perfect.”
Eli nodded, still feeling the effects of the Chiss caf coursing through his bloodstream.

“Alright. Next stop, Csaus then.”

“G’en’vtil” Tharin clapped. “You’ve finally made it to my lab! Tell me, how is your health treating you?”

“Very well. Thank you for your concern, Tharin,” he said with a greeting nod of his head.

She instead grabbed him and pressed their foreheads together like she had back at the hospital. Thrawn doubted that she got this much familial affection from Thrass, so it must have been the influence of her mother. Even in close families, a simple head bow would suffice to the ritualistic greeting of pressing one’s heads together. Unless the two had been apart for a long period of time, which of course then he had to concede in Tharin's favor. It was either that, or she was just inordinately enthusiastic? At any rate, he wasn't about to lecture her on being overly affectionate and let the greeting happen before she ended it, broke away, and skipped backwards as the three moved across the walkway.

“So, what are you doing here?” She shot a playful but distrusting look in Eli's direction. “Has Eli stolen you from the hospital?”

Eli made a face at her in return and she stuck her tongue out at him with a wink.

Thrawn studied the gestures, noting that she found some amusement in human interactions, and did not think anything further of her odd un-Chiss-like behavior. Everyone liked something, for him it was art, for her... it seemed to be culture? That was okay though, in fact, it even made the Chiss a little happy that she thought so highly of Eli and the other humans. Other Chiss would not be so accepting of the outsiders. Perhaps the newer generation would be above the in-fighting after all? Assuming they made it past this inevitable war to come. Thrawn assured himself he would make special effort to see that point come to pass, if not for Tharin's sake, but for the bright future of the entire Chiss Ascendancy.

"Anyway," Tharin continued. "My suits are good, but you were pretty severely injured. Are you sure you've fully recovered?"

“The Sabosen released me earlier this morning,” Thrawn informed.

Eli coughed and made a murmuring face that Tharin seemed to read quite clearly. She shot a look back to her uncle with raised brows and a growing anger.

“You figured out how to bypass the suit’s internal matrix! Didn’t you!?” She said accusingly, her voice growing faster as the sudden realization struck her.

“Unfortunately, that is how it had to be.”

She cursed a Cheunh swear under her breath before smiling and shaking her head. “Ticsi always told me you were clever enough to get free of the Sabosen. It was in those stories that I was inspired to make the new Sabosen suits in the first place. For people like you!” She shrugged and let her head fall back. “Oh well, I guess I will just have to work harder until my creation becomes too smart for even the great Mitth’raw’nuruodo to overcome. Tell me though… how did you do
“There is a small area near the nape of the neck.” Thrawn pointed. “Out of sight for most patients, but easily accessible if one knows what they are looking for. If the fiber there is cut or overheated, then the suit will shut down without alarming the staff or generating proper functionality.”

“That was intended to be an emergency removal method if the remote switches became compromised! I was brought down by my own fail-safe? How ironic...” She let out a dry chuckle and crinkled the left side of her face, an action of somewhat reluctant acceptance.

“Sorry Tharin,” Eli interrupted. “But I’m afraid you’ll have to catch up with Thrawn later. We’re actually here to meet with the Aristocra. Is he in?”

She fell back on her heel with a tight frown and crossed her arms, visibly disappointed now as her eyes fell into unimpressed halves of their normal size.

“He is. Come on, I’ll take you to him. The entrance to his office is just on the other side of my work area anyway.”

As they walked, Thrawn looked around the large facility, admiring the Chiss scientists hard at work on new technologies. Unlike the other worlds, much of Csaus had changed dramatically since he’d last seen it. The buildings were new, and the innovations of Chiss tech had come a long way in just a short few years. Cloaking devices, comm-arrays, shield generators, clothing and weaponry... everything here would have been almost unheard of twenty years ago, and now it only continued to improve on a daily basis.

By the time they got to Tharin’s area, he noted the mock-ups for the Sabosen medical suits, as well as a generous pile of scrap parts and unrecognizable devices towering over the side wall. Failed projects perhaps? Or simply functional inventions without a proper purpose?

“Is that—?”

“It’s the shield generator you brought back all those years ago. An ancient relic, but I couldn’t let them simply throw it away. So, I kept it. There is a lot one can learn by looking back at old software such as that. A lot of potential lies in our history, but some of the others here don’t really seem to understand that.”

In that moment, Thrawn smiled to himself, understanding perfectly how it felt to study something which others thought was useless. None of the other Chiss understood his fascination with art, and none of the other scientists seemed to understand her vision for history. It was almost poetic in a way that Thrass raised a daughter who Thrawn saw so much of himself in. He was sure Thrass loved that irony, and Thrawn chuckled to himself as he walked around the relic and continued through his niece's designated lab area.

"You will have to endeavor to make the others see the true potential of what you can do where they themselves cannot."

Tharin smiled and folded her hands together, pleased by the comment, though she tried to hide just how happy it really made her as her pace quickened passed the two gentlemen at her sides.

Thrawn's gaze immediately diverted up to the large white ship taking up the largest portion of her work area. The design was more similar to the TIE Defender than anything the Chiss had previously designed, and he could not help but note the similarities between Imperial engineering and Chiss innovation.
“And this ship?” He asked with a point.

She turned and grinned, a flash of pride showing in her eyes as they walked around it.

“The Nssis-class Clawcraft,” she said, introducing it to them with a dreamy sigh. “Eli told me about your TIE Fighters back in the Empire. I merely took the design and simply made it better.”

Eli snorted. You have to admire the Chiss. He thought. They don’t just steal your technology—they do exactly as Tharin said. They make it better.

“Really?” Now Thrawn’s voice held a bit of impressed tone to it as he smiled and gave the ship one last glance over.

“Oh yeah!” She waved. “Once I removed the unnecessary features, I added the shields, the working hyperdrive, and to hold all the additional technology as well as improve the aerodynamics, I gave it—”

“—extra wings,” Thrawn and Tharin said simultaneously.

“Right.”

“I had much the same idea with my own TIE Defender project.”

“Really? Tell me, how did you get the the LS7.2 laser cannons to accept the strike-foil when the wings expanded from the two to four configuration? It took me forever to realize the initial curvature of the wings was compromising my blaster barrels and the movement impeded my initial velocity down by four csit’ebs. I fixed it of course, but you don’t even want to know how long it took for me to find a proper placement for the ion drive!”

Thrawn frowned.

“My design only housed three wings… and they did not collapse. But they did reach an atmospheric speed of 1,680 kilometers per hour.”

“That’s impressive, I will concede, G’en’vti.” She shot him a smug smile. “Though, mine only reaches an atmospheric speed of 1,000 kilometers per hour, it also holds a respectable sub-light acceleration of almost forty thousand meters per second squared.”

“Impressive.”

“Alright!” Eli broke sourly. “We get it, you’re both smart!”

GRRRRRWL!

“Gah!” He jumped. “Tharin! Control your pet, please!”

“Sorry!” She laughed, clicking her tongue at the overweight Vornskr until it relaxed and strode back to curl up on a bed-like matting that lay beneath her desk. “T’ra Saa! Ch’tra ch’an’ruhi turcah tin’ohn.”

“Is that a Vornskr?” Thrawn asked, simply hoping he wasn’t hallucinating again. The Chiss did not keep pets, least of all one so notably dangerous as a Vornskr.

Tharin nodded.

“She is! Many years ago, Kor’on’inrokini saved a pair from Myrkr when they were gathering Olbio
salve for the Sabosen. He trained them from infancy so they are completely tame, though I have volunteered to watch the two seperatley with my Aristocra until the female's babies are born. The two genders must be separated for some months you see. Plus, just today, I am working on a solution to your Olbio problem with Ezra and the Ysalamiri. We have no lizards at the moment, but I’ve been researching articles of Myrkr thanks to the archives accessed because of my study on these two Vornskr.”

“Fascinating. What are you designing?”

“A suit of sorts that will possess the same qualities of the Olbio trees so Ezra may tote his Ysalamir longer distances without having to bring the sapling with him directly.”

“Remarkable.” Thrawn snapped once in thought and pointed back to her table. “Though instead of a suit, might I suggest a backpack or sling than can be kept close but also removed while still able to hold its own with vigorous acrobatic movement and free hand range?”

“That was my initial idea, but I changed it to account for longer distances. I hadn’t even considered the thought of quick or emergency removal!” She slapped her forehead in a sign of exasperation, causing both her and Thrawn to wince as she rubbed at the protruding lumps above her eyebrows with fresh pain. “Ouch… Okay… That is one human motion I think I’ll be skipping, Eli.”

Thrawn shot the man a look and Eli only made a guilty face as he held up both hands in defense.

“Not all the human things I showed you are worth imitating you know?”

She grinned.

“But imitation is the easiest way to fully immerse myself in your culture.” She continued walking but shot a more serious glance back at her uncle. “But back to the backpacks. Do you plan for Ezra to be doing a lot of running and jumping while with Jorj? Even after he is returned safely back home?”

“Of a sort?” He admitted. “In my experience, it is always best to be prepared for any contingency, not always the one you so assume.”

“Then I will take your suggestion into account. Thank you G’en’vti. You know, I never understood why you joined the military when your mind would have made an excellent innovator for the Inrokini.”

“I assure you, my skills are far more useful in tactical situations.” He smiled. “But thank you anyway for believing my mind to be so notable.”

“Yeah, yeah…” She grinned and looked up with a long point of her arm skyward. “Anyway, he’s in his new office up this turbolift. I assume you already called ahead to tell him you were coming?”

“Of course.”

“Then good luck. Eli, you will probably need to wait with me.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right…” he sighed. None of the other Aristocra let him join their little meetings, why would this one be any different?

“Excellent! I need a model to test this new pack design. I have to have it ready before the trial so I can use all the help I can get.”
“Now wait just a minute…”

“You two have fun,” Thrawn said with a smile, and with that, he entered the private lift that led up the high metal wall to the Aristocra’s private quarters overlooking the entire laboratory.

He approached the door and went inside, stopping suddenly as another black Vornskr stood up from the side of the Aristocra’s desk and snarled at him, the fur on its back bristling with warning and defensive intimidation.

“At ease, Talon,” the Aristocra said calmly.

The Vornskr let out a soft whine and laid back down on the ground, though its eyes never seemed to remove their cautious golden gaze from Thrawn's presence.

“It is a pleasure to see you again.” Thrawn greeted. “Thank you for taking the time to speak with me.”

“Tharin is one of our greatest young minds,” he said, gesturing for Thrawn to likewise take a seat. “Of course I will listen to anything her bloodline has to say, especially one so fascinating as you, Mitth’raw’nuruodo.”

Thrawn didn’t react to the compliment, merely prepared his next speech to persuade the Aristocra to his intentions.

“You see, I was hoping to debrief you on the—”

“Remarkable creatures, Vornskr,” he interrupted. “Bloodthirsty beasts, but with the right handling, they prove to be quite loyal guards and companions.”

Thrawn was still.

“I heard that your people had much trouble with the Vornskr on Myrkr, Thrawn. The news of your return and the crew who were witness to your rescue, they also spoke of how many Vornskr you had killed there as well.”

“With all due respect—” Thrawn inched.

“Of course it is life for life,” the Aristocra interrupted again. “But I do hope you do not blame all Vornskr for the behavior of the few. As I should likewise not blame all the humans for the idiocy of your complete and utter failure on your mission.”

Thrawn had heard the speech before, but to come from the Inrokini... it was a somewhat of a different emotional blow. The man was typically inquisitive and fair, with a level head and a large abundance of passive patience. It would seem those feelings no longer seemed to stretch over to his opinions of Thrawn.

“So we go to all that trouble of planting your exile, and what do you have to show for it? Not an army, no. Nine human beings and three parts of a ship! You waste all this talent, all your intelligence, pouring your efforts into an Empire that was hardly willing to rescue our ozylyesehembo, but who also are unwilling to return your aid, and you expect to be welcomed back as the same revered Force Commander as you once were?”

“No,” Thrawn said softly, quickly so as to not be interrupted again, but ever so calmly as he could manage. “I admit to my failure, but plan to use what resources I have to ensure a greater victory for our people. As I have likewise said before, I do not care for my rank. I was born a commoner, and I
am more than happy to return as such. It will not change my larger goals for this Ascendancy.”

The Aristocra shook his head.

“Your arrogance shows no bounds, Mitth’raw’nuruodo.”

“With all due respect, it is my arrogance that will save this Ascendancy.”

“Before or after you place blame on us for retaliation with the Grysks? Clever trick. As we speak, their war as well as that of the other Far Outsiders draws closer to our borders, but now they have more purpose than just infiltration and conquest. No, you’ve gone and delivered upon them motivation for our deaths!”

“I have a plan to ensure that never happens.”

“Oh do you?” He laughed. “Was your defeat so jarring that you actually believe the military, nine humans, and your foolproof plan will actually be enough to defeat an army so massive their numbers can black out the stars?”

“Yes.” He nodded confidently. “I do.”

The Aristocra’s tension lifted and he rubbed his forehead.

“You are as confident as always, Thrawn. Should you fail again, have you any consideration as to what that would mean to your family?”

“I simply understand that my goal is to protect our people. My family is indeed a large part of that mentality, but I strive towards the bigger picture. I will not fail in this scheme, Ronin.”

He waved his hand suddenly, tiredly, almost painfully as he tried to waft the words away.

“You know it is not proper of you to speak that name to me anymore, Thrawn. I am an Aristocra now.”

“True. Though to me, you will always be the man who saw my greatest potential and who tested me to become better.”

He scoffed.

“A lot of good that did when you chose to squander your intelligence with the military.”

“Perhaps?” Thrawn shrugged. “Perhaps not. Though I did not join with the Inrokini as you so hoped I would as a child, I do believe that your influence in my life will help us both to save our Ascendancy from this inevitable war in the present.”

The older Chiss laughed, then he only sighed, and finally he shook his head.

“I believe you have our peoples’ best interests at heart, truly I do. So in honor of our past friendship, I will listen to your plan, Thrawn. Your intel did create a useful counter to the Gysrk attacks, and thanks to you, we know that there are traitors among our people selling my planet’s technology to the enemy. I know you will find them for us, and have already discovered who is responsible.”

"I have my theories."

"As we speak, I have all of the Inrokini developing countermeasures to the Far Outsider’s bio-
weaponry, plus you saved our ozyly-esehembo, and to my knowledge, your failures have always turned into larger successes in the major scheme of things. I know you will do what you believe is right, and I will offer you any support I can. As I always say, the minds of the youth know far more than that of the wizened. Speak. I will hear what you have to say.”

Thrawn smiled.

“Listen well, Kor’on’inrokini, for this is the key to defeating our enemies, but before that, I will inquire a few small favors of you.”

“G’en’vti!” Tharin waved. “What are your initial thoughts on my backpack design?”

Thrawn looked up, saw Eli with his arms outstretched, a tired look of reluctant acceptance on his face, and a white-wire metal casing strapped around his back.

“The nutrient frame is coming along quite nicely. Tell us Eli, are you comfortable?”

He shot the man a look.

“Are you sure you really want me to answer that?”

The Chiss chuckled at him and Eli rolled his eyes.

“At any rate, I am afraid we must depart, euhn nazen.”

“So soon?” She frowned. “I feel like the three of us could come up with so much together if you stayed a little while longer.”

Thrawn waved calmly.

“Another time perhaps. For now, Eli and I have other duties to attend to. My brother’s patience can only hold for so long.”

She laughed and gently lifted the backpack from Eli as he put his arms down with a relieved sigh and a rolling tug of his stiff shoulders.

“Oh, believe me, I know! But come back to visit again soon, both of you. You know… the Aristocra tells us many good things about you in your younger years, Thrawn. I think everyone here would love for you to gift us a lecture one day.”

“I am honored.”

Eli lifted his brows. So it wasn’t Thrass who made Tharin look up to Thrawn? In retrospect, that sounded more like something Kor’on’inrokini would do than it did Thrass. He thinks he remembered a story or two that the two men had known each other when Thrawn was younger, but he would have to ask someone to refresh the memory for him later.

“Well, come on Thrawn. It’s a good stretch to Copero from here. We don’t want to keep Thrass waiting.”

“We’ll meet again at the trial, Tharin, until then, good luck with your projects.”
“Bye G'en'vtil!” She waved. “Bye Eli! Good luck with my father!”

The men waved back to her and were once more inside their ship a few minutes later, ready to continue their mission before the day of the trial was upon them.

“So where are we really going?” Eli blurted.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean we’re not scheduled to see Thrass until tomorrow afternoon, so where are we going off to in such a rush? And what exactly did you stuff in your pocket when you left the Aristocra’s office? Don’t think I didn’t notice.”

“Your observational skills continue to improve.” Thrawn smiled, removing the small rectangular box from his pocket. Inside there were maybe ten flat credit-shaped chips, palm-sized and with symbols marking the hardware nestled near the center.

Eli’s eyes widened because he had seen this chip used exactly one time before, but that single experience was enough to be branded permanently into his mind forever.

“What in the hell?” He breathed. “Why do you have those?”

“Because there is something I must accomplish. Worry not, I spoke with allies on Naporar and have a small crew waiting for me at these coordinates. I will return with enough time to meet with Thrass.”

“Crew? Coordinates?” Eli pushed himself upright and waited until Thrawn put the highly explosive devices back in his pocket before giving him a small shove. “Just what do you think you’re going to do?”

Thrawn looked down at him with a seriousness that Eli had never quite seen before. It was so powerful that he removed his hand and took a step back until the man could come up with his response.

“I am going to Myrkr with the crew tasked on gathering intel about the Chimera,” he said simply. “I have been ordered to remain away from all evidence so as to not tamper with any information, but while there, I wish to lay what remains of my fallen soldiers to their well-deserved rest.”

Eli felt himself fall back into his seat.

“Who all knows about this?”

“Only Vereen, Gras'vee'sabosen, Ronin, you, and the forensics crew who were tasked with collecting evidence of our crash for the trial,” Thrawn replied. “It is better if the rest do not know.”

Eli nodded slowly.

“I’ll go with you.”

“No,” Thrawn said quickly. “No, I could never ask such a thing from—”
“They were my crew too!” Eli interrupted with a stern nod. “Plus, Sev'eree'nuruodo ordered me to stay by your side until the trial. Look, I want to help.” He shot a glance at the box again and gestured to it. “But you didn’t answer my question. What are you planning to do with those things?”

Thrawn also looked to the box and arched his brows.

“These chips are perhaps some of the strongest of the more recent weaponized technology that my people have ever created. I am told they are also the most—brutal.”

“I know,” Eli said, his mind racing with memories that made his eyes glaze over and his brows furrow. “I’ve seen one of them used before.”

Thrawn seemed alarmed by this knowledge.

“When was this?”

The man sighed and lowered his head, not wanting to relive the memory, but given that this was Thrawn and that he’d promised to tell him eventually, Eli decided to tell him what he knew.

“We were patrolling the outer colonies near Cormit when a ship came out from the Vagaari Corridor. We thought it was just another one of the Vagaari snooping around, but then three more showed up, and soon our entire platoon was surrounded with ships. They shot first, and by the time we launched our full counter-attack, their shuttles had already fused together and boarded our main vessel. It was like watching a group of bugs eat through the metal of our outer-wall, and by the time they were inside, we found ourselves quickly outnumbered.”

He rubbed his eyes.

“Ar’alani ordered everyone on board to activate our trans-evac suits and she grabbed our navigator as the Grysks, Vagaari, and the Vong breached the hull. It was some sort of triad infiltration division, all three working together like that. It was rare, and it was deliberately planned. They saw the girl and went for Ar’alani, but I shoved them out of the way before they could get to them. It was one of the Vong that I pushed. I can still see its face, the savage eyes, the long teeth, their wounded skin… it was like something straight out of nightmare.”

He motioned up towards his eye and swallowed.

“One of them struck me back and got me with their nail—longer than any claw and sharpened like the talons on a Nexu. It pierced right through the bubble of my evac-suit, and stung like Hell. I later learned that their claws are laced with poison, but lucky for me, they didn’t expect a human aboard, and it reacted differently to my blood. Had I been a Chiss though, I’m pretty sure the cut would’ve blinded me, or worse.”

He touched it once, but ultimately continued with his story.

“Ar’alani gave me one warning, and she dropped the disk into the dataport. I held my hand over the cut, and the disk exploded like a flash grenade. Everything evaporated in one big blast of light… all the walls, the technology, the floors and windows… anything that wasn’t made of flesh and blood or the organic matter used to protect our evac-bubbles. One minute we were in a ship, and the next, we were drifting in space. Our suits protected us from suffocating, sure, but mine was breached and my hand wasn’t doing so well as a patch. Not to mention, the enemy still had their weapons, their bio-engineering immune to the bomb. Still, they didn’t have air-suits handy, and we watched as the army choked to death in the void of space. We still had a fight, a lot of them not willingly to just
lay down and die, but in the end we were successful and not a single one of them were left alive to
tell the tale of our weapon. After that, I saw the others shooting the bodies into atoms with some
sort of special gun— I don’t know? I ended up passing out from the lack of air, but since we were
so close to Cormit, a rescue team came to pick us up and managed to resuscitate me before— well
—” He shrugged. “Next thing I know, I'm holed up on Sposia for two weeks being rehabilitated.”

“I understand,” Thrawn said grimly. “I am glad you survived the battle.”

“You and me both,” he replied with a macabre sense of humor in his tone. “Anyway… that’s the
only time I ever saw one of them used. I heard it is supposed to keep all the biological structures in
tact, but will disintegrate all the weapons and metal of the enemy. Like the opposite of a defoliator
bomb almost. Admirals are given one to use as a last resort, but they’re meant to be used in space
where the enemy will eventually die in the void. It's an incredible waste of a ship, but if it keeps
our people and our tech out of enemy hands... what's one ship?”

“That is correct.” Thrawn nodded, his voice still low and almost sad, Eli noted. He rubbed the
deadly box with his thumb and continued. “This technology was designed after observing the bio-
engineering of the Far Outsiders. If found by any of them in battle and returned to their world for
study, the army would think it nothing more than a useless flash grenade meant to distract or
startle. But, if activated in our hands while aboard a Chiss vessel, then the outcome would turn into
something far different. Though an effective strategy, these pose a risk should any discover their
purpose and use them against our cities and planets, and a great threat should any of the Far
Outsiders live to tell the tale of what happened during the battle in space.”

“Well none of them did,” Eli said darkly. “So what are you planning on doing with those things on
Myrkr?” He suddenly understood and his eyes widened. “You're going to destroy the Chimera?”

It was more a statement than a question, but Eli was so shocked to say it aloud that it sounded more
inquisitive than he'd meant it to.

Thrawn only nodded and placed the box once more into his utility pocket.

“Once the crew finishes their analysis, I am to dispose of the evidence completely as if to make it
appear like we were never there.”

“In case any of the Far Outsiders come snooping around the Outer Colonies?”

“Precisely. Though Olbio trees and surrounding forest life will be unaffected by this bomb, the
bodies left after the explosion will still need to be dealt with. I suspect the guns will be used to
leave no traces of their existence on the planet.”

“I see...” Eli grumbled. “But why are you the one who’s going?”

Thrawn frowned.

“I volunteered because it is my duty to those who were lost under my service. It is the least I can do
given they made the ultimate sacrifice while under my leadership. I owe them at least that respect.”

Eli stood and placed a hand on his shoulder. Thrawn made no moves to stop the gesture of
sympathy, and Eli turned, shaking his head all the way back to the controls.

“You don’t have to say anymore.” He shot him a soft smile and then started the coordinates to
Myrkr. “We’ll make sure they get a proper send off, and then we’ll meet up with Thrass to talk
about the trial when we’re done. Okay?”
Thrawn nodded, though Eli could still see the guilt in his eyes. He thought Thrawn valued life more than he took it away, deaths to him were strategic, but towards his crew, this emotion was apparently strengthened tenfold. Collateral damage was one thing, but to see so many of his own warriors die—And to see them die in the lackluster way that they had—

Though the crash might have been opportune for Thrawn to ultimately save his people, it was a sacrifice no one should have to make, let alone bear. Thrawn knew all of this and Eli saw it in his dulled red eyes. Pure, unrestrained regret. It made his stomach twist to see such a face on Thrawn.

If the Chiss was to be at his best in the coming days, his clear and focused on the trial and everything else he hoped to obtain, then this was just something that they would have to do. As a friend and a captain himself, Eli understood this feeling well. Though not exactly a Chiss-standard emotion, he couldn’t help but see that with all his influence over the Empire and the humans he interacted with—maybe, just maybe—after all these years, a bit of humanity seemed to seep back into Thrawn too.

It was a long night, made longer by the fact that the Chiss forensics crew kept having to take breaks to send out high pitched sound pulses to scare off any lurking Vornskr that got too close to the three camps.

In the end, they got the evidence they needed and Thrawn set off the bombs, destroying the remains of the ISD Chimera once and for all. Eli felt a punch of sadness as he watched the ship fade into starlight, the memories he had aboard as well as Thrawn’s entire art collection, gone. Thrawn didn’t even bat an eye at it though.

The crew helped Thrawn and Eli with the bodies, some of them Nuruodo volunteers, others scientists from Csaus or medical examiners from Sposia. Still, the Chiss were nothing if not respectful of the dead, especially to that of their own. Since the bodies were a part of Thrawn’s crew, the Chiss considered them as merit-adptive members of their own warriors—at least to an extent enough to help with the burials.

Thrawn was right and those same guns used to clear away the Far Outsiders were brought out to take care of the human remains. They were a new design, something the Inroki invented maybe five years ago to make battle-clean up easier and more effective. Looking closer at the weapons now that Eli wasn’t suffocating in space, the guns appeared similar in a way to that of the T-7 ion disruptors they’d learned about back in the Imperial Academy. What they did to an organic being, especially faces that Eli had once known and worked alongside— He had to look away.

Thrawn however made sure to watch as each body was taken care of. As he did, he said their name and some untranslatable mourning phrase in Cheunh that Eli had heard once or twice on the battlefield. Chiss weren't big on funerals like on other planets, and most bodies were typically burned and scattered as a space-effective means of returning to the planet they were born under. It was rare to actually bury or preserve a Chiss' body, but Eli could remember learning about some exceptions during classed he had back on Sposia.

Soon there was no one left to mourn, and the Chiss packed up and went home as if none of it had ever happened.

Neither of the two spoke much after that as Eli piloted them back to Copero where Thrass was
staying in the Mitth home to prepare for the coming trial that next morning. It had been a long two
days, and Eli had tried to coax Thrawn into trying to get a little sleep before then, knowing he
wouldn’t do so as soon as they landed, and that he probably hadn’t slept since his last day in the
hospital. Still… how does a person sleep after burying over a hundred of their fallen comrades?
Eli was still trying and failing to get their many faces out of his mind. He was sure he’d have
nightmares about them for weeks to come.

“Did I tell you what Tharin was saying to me when you were talking to the Aristocra?” Eli blurted
suddenly, his awkward tone shaky but cutting an effective path through the silence.

Thrawn looked up, but he did not reply.

“She said that the humans all accidentally poisoned themselves with Csehebehn the other day.”

Thrawn sat up a little, his voice tired, but curious.

“They what?”

Eli shrugged.

“How does one poison themselves accidentally with such a commonly known toxic plant?”

Eli actually managed to let out a small laugh.

“Human’s don’t know what Csehebehn is, Thrawn. But according to Tharin, Karyn Faro tried to
make it into tea while they all played some game where they took drinks if they shared similar
properties of someone else’s backstory.”

“Fascinating.”

“That’s what I said.” He smiled as he saw the smallest glint of a smirk breach the Chiss’ face.
“And don’t worry, Ezra didn’t say much about himself. Tharin said she was pretty bored because
she didn’t relate to any of their stories at all.”

He snickered thoughtfully.

“No, I imagine she wouldn’t?”

“If she had, she says she would never have let them keep drinking the Csehebehn. She said that
when Ina got home she was furious.”

“I know that fury well.” He smiled. “Did you know that I once ate those berries on a dare back
when I was just a small child? Before I knew better, of course. I knew they were relatively
poisonous, but I thought if I did not swallow, the side effects would be different. They were not.”

“No way!”?

“It is true. Ina was very displeased by my curiosity, and Thrass was—”

“Thrass?” Eli said, using the man’s name as if no further explanation was needed.

“Very…” Thrawn hummed thoughtfully.

Eli scratched at the hairs alongside his throat.

“Well, I never ate anything I wasn’t supposed to,” he admitted. “But there was this one time when
my dad took me out into the woods to go camping… I got into some leaves that made my skin all red and blotchy. I didn’t think my mom would ever let me go outside again!”

“Interesting. That reminds me of another tale. Have I ever told you the story of the flesh eating bacterium I once acquired from a mission to an unnamed moon where the rain was laced with microorganisms? It was quite unpleasant.”

“WHAT!?” Eli spat with a laugh. “I’ll bet it was unpleasant. How are you even still alive?”

They spent the rest of the trip telling stories about old missions where they met with interesting injuries and narrowly escaped death. It worked to get their minds off of the morbid scene back on Myrkr, and even managed to make Eli feel like he were really talking to an old friend, instead of just the Chiss military expert that Thrawn liked to claim himself to be at all times.

Eli still wanted to know what all Thrawn was up to. Reporting back to the Aristocra after nearly two decades away from home was one thing, but no...this was something else. He was plotting something. Thrawn apparently had four things he pleaded to the Aristocra for the trial. Eli knew of two of those now, one being the addition Ezra Bridger could be to the military, the other was the burial of the Chimera crew. The remaining two he wasn’t as sure about, but it might have had to do with the internal conflict between the Chiss or the oncoming war with the Far Outsiders.

However, Eli would never ask answers of him now that he managed to get the man to forget about Myrkr for a few minutes. He swallowed his curiosity and decided that he would wait and see what unfolded just like the rest of them. He didn’t need to know the details to know Thrawn was doing what was best for the Ascendancy. He trusted him and Thrawn trusted him back. If he needed to know a detail, Thrawn would tell it to him, he knew that with complete and utter certainty.

As they laughed and reminisced, both men found themselves in better spirits, and Eli was just grateful that, as a friend, he could at least do something to make Thrawn smile after one ridiculously brutal day because in the end, hey, that’s what friends were for, right?

“You’re late.”

Thrass didn't even lift his eyes from his work as he sat within his burgundy-trimmed oval office, his fingers dancing across the holo-pads built into and above his large executive-class desk.

“It’s my fault, Mitth’ras’afis,” Eli said quickly. “I uh… took the wrong route to get here and we became delayed.”

He looked up, studied the two of them for approximately three seconds, and lifted one unsurprising brow at them both.

“You took him to Myrkr?”

Eli’s eyes widened.

“What? No— I—”

Thrass, his voice once tired, shifted into a sound of stern understanding as his red eyes drew to slits and he gave out one very calm, very serious statement of warning.
“Lying to a Syndic is a punishable offense, Captain. You might want to rethink your reply.”

Eli blinked, looking from Thrass to Thrawn, then back again as he let in a breath of air and visibly deflated.

“H-how did you know?”

“Your boots are coated in black mud, you smell of ash and decay, and the last time I saw that look on my brother’s face—” Thrass paused as the two men made eye contact, a secret between them that only Thrass seemed to truly know. “It does not matter. Go and clean yourselves up will you? The Mitth house is a place of honor, not some— what is the word? Barn?”

“It is, sir…” Eli nodded hesitantly.

He smiled at himself, seeming pleased with his grasp on Basic, and then motioned for a few aids to his side.

“Please escort Captain Vanto to his temporary quarters. I wish to speak with my brother momentarily before he is to join you.”

Eli looked to Thrawn, who nodded, and at that, he followed the other Mitth clan members out the door.

“It is nice to see you have not changed much in here,” Thrawn stated, his eyes admiring the grand office and regal burgundy wardrobe that his brother wore around his estate. “You look well.”

“I wish I could note the same,” he said with a frown. “Though, it is refreshing to see you back in uniform. This was Vereen’s doing, was it not? I suppose she never changes.”

“I suppose,” he repeated.

Thrass shot him a look, followed by a tired sigh.

“I will not yell at you this time, Brother. Your selfishness and naivety are always a gamble especially now when your head is quite literally on the line. But, I know that your crew has always been important to you, and I assume you got your permission to see to their end?”

Thrawn’s lip tightened.

“I also assume you spoke with the Aristocra about everything except the lift of your own banishment, but in doing so, laid groundwork for more of your schemes as you also no doubt managed to gather some data on the battalion of Chiss who have been making or trading weapons with the Far Outsiders? Your reports on the Grysks were concerning, but I fear what you lack in tact, I unfortunately lack in visual prowess to discover such truths for myself.”

"I wouldn't say that. You appear to see right through me, after all."

"Because you are my brother, and I know how you work even if I don't understand it." He stood. "I assume you have a lead to follow, then?"

“I have my theories."

“Enough to plan out a strategy by the time of the trial?”

“Perhaps…”
Thrass let out a breath.

“Cryptic as always. Do you not trust your assumptions to your own brother?”

“It isn’t that. I do not wish to impede your proposal. You will have to face the Aristocra and deliver your speech to them unbiased and with only the needs of my crew at heart.”

His eyes widened and then narrowed as he walked around his desk.

“You think one of the Aristocra are responsible for the leak?” Thrass spat in a hushed tone. ”Have you lost your senses?”

“As I said, I have only my theories for now, but I know that one of the four are indeed responsible for the schism. Whether they are likewise responsible for the smuggling of weapons across our borders is still yet to be made clear, but I have an idea to figure such out in time.”

”Of course you do.” Thrass hummed and rubbed at his eyes. “You ask a lot of me, brother, you realize that, don’t you?”

“I know you will do what is right in the end.” Thrawn smiled. “As you know the same of me.”

He made an unconvincing face.

“Yes... well, I will leave you to your theories, but in the meantime, I order you to get cleaned up and take a few hours to rest. I will deliberate what I have planned for tomorrow’s meeting with you only after you see to your personal health, and not a moment before.”

“I’m not a child you need to care for…”

Thrass grinned.

“Ah, but you will always be my younger brother, and I know how you operate. So go. Eat. Wash. Sleep. I will be here when you return, and expect to hear all you will allow me to know about this great plan you have brewing to save our people. My opinions must be unbiased, correct?” He said the words smugly and turned his eyes back to his desk. ”Since my proposal is already well-written, I doubt my speech will change based on anything you have to tell me. So with that said, I must insist you see to your health before I truly am forced to care for you like some child.”

Thrawn sighed, but was too tired to argue.

“As you wish, Brother.”

“Oh! A final thought…” Thrass started, his words stopping Thrawn when he was a few mere inches from the exit.

He turned and watched as Thrass rounded his desk and took a seat once more, an uncharacteristically pleasant smile on his face and he bowed his head at a side angle, aimed in Thrawn's direction.

“Welcome home, Thrawn.”

He smiled for the first time since landing on Copero, and nodded back to his brother while replying in the Cheunh response that somehow felt sweet just to say aloud.

”Hah cart bun ch’at cart turcah bah k’ihn.”
Translated, it meant: "It is good to be back with family" and despite everything else that had happened over the last few days, for once, it was something that Thrawn truly was happy to admit aloud.

Chapter End Notes

I wrote this chapter after reading the new book. Probably should have gone after Ch.9, but it didn't exist then. Sorry! XD
The Trial (Part Four)

Chapter Summary

The trial concludes as the humans witness the final vote of the Aristocra. How will they react once the verdict is placed and how will they confront Thrawn about all that they've learned? Everything changes as new paths are formed from the results, but for what happens next, no one, not even Thrawn, could ever be truly prepared for.

Chapter Notes

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"So uh... what's going to happen?" Ezra asked. "When we get back, I mean..."

Thrawn gave him a reassuring nod and stopped at the large entrance doors.

"We will enter the chamber, return to our places, and continue the court case where we left off."

"Just like that?"

"You have no cause for worry. It is not likely my people will be offended by concerns of health not under one's own control. Just return to your seat and allow my brother and I to continue your case to the Aristocra, alright?"

"O-okay...I guess..."

"All will be well, trust me."

Ezra smirked and the two shoved the doors apart and stepped back into the courtroom. The shift in atmosphere was just as instant as it had been when the Aristocra entered earlier. The crowd noises drained into that eerie silence which made the entire building grow cold and stiff like ice, and considering the room was literally made out of the stuff, Ezra wondered how the temperature of the room still managed to drop so dramatically.

Thrawn gently motioned him back over to Eli and the other Imperials, but Ezra could still feel the burning stares of more than a hundred beaming Chiss eyes following him all the way back to his seat. His face grew as red as their gazes as he shrank further into himself, their hundreds of glowing eyes painting the crowd like a sea of tiny laser points all aimed in his direction.

To Ezra’s relief, they lost interest not long after and the Chiss finally looked away, only a small few who knew Ezra well stopping to linger on him for just a few moments longer. Ina, Stent, Ar’alani, Tharin… why, even Thrass was still looking his way with a somewhat concerned expression before darting a more accusatory look over at his brother. There were no words spoken between them, but Ezra could somehow tell that the brothers had just shared a full conversation using nothing but their eyes.
“Trust them, Ezra reminded himself. They know what they’re doing. Just trust them.”

“You okay, Ezra?” Walten asked, a hand clasped on his shoulder as he shook the dazed Jedi out of his mixed thoughts and newly formed anxiety.

“Wha—oh! Y-yeah!” he said with a jump, his face still hot as he turned back to see the worried looks coming from the faces of his concerned human friends. “Sorry about that you guys. Don’t worry about me, I'm fine, really, I promise.”

“Are you sure?”

“What happened?”

"That was some fall!"

“You’re sure you’re okay?”

One by one they started asking him questions until each were overlapping one another to try and get some answers out of the anxious young Jedi. Answers that Ezra really didn’t know how to respond with if he were being completely honest with himself.

“Let the man have his space!” Faro warned. “He said he’s fine, so he’s fine. Everyone look sharp. It seems like the Aristocra are about to address the disturbance.”

“Right,” Eli added. “Don’t worry. Like I was telling you all before, this trial isn't focused on Thrawn's mission or the things he learned in the Empire. This is about getting you a ship ride home, so it should all turn out okay with Thrass and Thrawn out there defending you all.”

The Imperials held a mixture of reserved looks and scoffs until Koree muttered something under her breath.

“Funny you should mention Thrawn's secret agenda..."

Gunther snorted in agreement and leaned back in his seat, his arms positioned defiantly behind his head as he let out a dry laugh and glared over at the otherwise oblivious Thrawn who was having his own conversation down below with Thrass.

"Can you honestly tell us that he's really out there to defend us, or more likely, is he just defending himself?”

“He’s defecting...” Birt grumbled bitterly. “Why should he care what happens to us when he's defecting!?"

“He cares!” Eli stressed. “He just... He has a lot on his mind right now, that's all.”

It was the best defense he could muster. The Imperials were angry, and rightfully so. He'd be lying to himself if Eli didn't share into a bit of that rage as well, but he still knew better. Thrawn took great care for the well-being of his crew. Myrkr just proved it. Still... how was Eli supposed to explain that when Thrawn explicitly told him not to say a word about it until after the trial?

Pyrondi grumbled with a roll of her eyes. " Yeah... I'll bet he's got a lot on his mind now that all his little secrets are out in the open."

The others didn’t seem swayed by Eli’s lackluster efforts to defend Thrawn's honor. Soon, all seven turned away one by one as Eli felt his face tighten up with a reserved aggravation growing within
him. If the Imperials only knew what all Thrawn had done for them. If only they could see what he could see... What Thrawn could see... The bigger picture in all of this. But, before he was able to say anymore about it, the podiums of the four Aristocra began to glow, and just like that, the trial was back in session and he had no choice but to keep the remainder of his comments to himself.

Gras’vée’sabosen was the first to speak, her crystal stand once again lighting up with a crimson glow as she took the floor.

“Has the human recovered?” she asked towards Eli and the Chimera group.

Eli stood and replied swiftly and calmly in well-enunciated Cheunh. “He has your honor.” Though it wasn't his place to say, maybe he could redirect a bit of the blame away from Ezra's Force abilities with a good old-fashioned excuse?

“As you are already no doubt aware, ma'am, both Ezra Bridger and Mitth’raw’nuruodo had suffered head injuries during the crash, so as a result, sometimes they might be prone to—”

“To episodes of hysteria or fainting.” She finished, her tone none too concerned with Eli's half-baked explanation. “Yes. Medically speaking, this effect should fade with time. The color has returned to his hue, so I presume the boy will be fine as of now.”

“If I may speak...” Thrawn started.

“You may,” the Aristocra replied with a nod of her crimson hood.

"In lieu of Ezra's recent health scare, I would recommend that he and the crew be arranged to stay a bit longer to further study their conditions. We need to be sure all are fit for extended travel so as to not threaten their health with the long journey back to their home."

The crowd murmured at that request, the Aristocra chewing it over between themselves much the same way.

“I would elect to confer with my brother's request," Thrass added. "If we were to wait a short while longer to send the humans home, it would spare our Ascendancy the risks and additional planning required to navigate to the edge of our borders multiple times."

"How long do you surmise we are going to study this boy?" The Sabosen asked, her voice holding a lingering offense that was masked beneath years of pride and social standing. "Do you doubt the Sabosen's word?"

"I am sure neither of the Mitth brothers mean to disparage House Sabosen nor their medical staff," the green Aristocra, Ronin, chimed in defensively. "Still, the human's sudden collapse is a bit concerning, and the possible backlash for having one of these humans die aboard a Chiss vessel could pose incriminating attributes that I highly wish for our people to avoid."

The man in silver, Tof’eni’csapla, continued the statement with a rigorous nod of his own.

"While I argue that all of the humans are needed to remain here, I do agree with House Inrokini's concerns in relation to the health precautions of Ezra Bridger. Given the most recent example of the boy's unique circumstances, it might be more than a medical standpoint in which we should research this one. Perhaps we should implement a more scientific approach? Perhaps even a physical examination like that of the sort we perform on our soldiers before they are expected to travel into space for great distances and long months?"

"That is an odd request to come of you, House Csapla.” Gras'vée'sabosen hummed. "What are your reasons for your agreements to this request?"
The silver Aristocra quickly and silently processed the fact that Thrawn had not told any of the other Aristocra about the boy's third sight abilities. Whether he was going to decide to be angry or respectfully honored to have been the only member of the high council to know such a secret, was yet to be decided, but as a blood-born politician, Tof’eni’csapla knew exactly how to motion his words around such a minor detail.

"Matters of the mind are better studied by the scientific rather the healers, are they not? Likewise, should not the concerns of the body be tested by those most familiar with training of the muscles? The Sabosen have deemed him inwardly sufficient for travel, so I only wish to recommend he be given multiple mental tests of an inquisitive and outward standpoint rather his prolonged continuation of further unnecessary medical healing. I simply offer to understand the human in the broadest spectrum possible before releasing him back to his world."

"I would conquer such a test could prove uniquely useful results for the Sabosen as well as the Inrokini." Ronin agreed. "Our knowledge of the human species is limited to the word of Captain Vanto and ancient trade histories. A fresh perspective could advance our knowledge in unforeseen ways that might prove helpful in the future."

She nodded.

“Fine. We will deliberate. At present, we will return to the point left before the disruption.”

“The crash...” the Nuruodo representative, Vereen, continued. “If the purrgil were truly responsible for hijacking your vessel and leading you back to our home, then the question remains... What do you plan to do next, Thrawn?”

“And what do you plan by breaking your already notably fragile alliance with the Empire?”

Thrawn stepped forth, Thrass giving him a warning look, but remaining still off to the side as he watched his brother take the floor with a polite bow to the council above.

“Of course,” he said smoothly. "All will be explained in time. Though, as I was in the process of explaining before, the Empire is collapsing. I suspect it will have run its full course within the next five standard years should events continue down their current trajectory. However, our war with the evils threatening our people will no doubt be arriving much sooner than this, and for that, we cannot rely on the outward assistance of this dying collective any longer." His voice hardened visibly as he let out his next words with that thoughtful gleam he was so good at portraying. "We have run out of time. War is coming, and if we are to succeed, then it is the Chiss who must protect ourselves and the remaining galaxy without seeking out the additional aid of the Empire. The assets we possess as of now will suffice and we will prevail with the proper planning. That is my final conclusion.”

The crowd broke out in concerned chatter before the Sabosen Aristocra silenced them with a wave of her hand.

"If you truly do not see the Empire helping in our war, then we trust your judgement Mitth'raw'nuruodo," she said solemnly.

"It was always a possibility that we might have to protect ourselves. So be it!” Vereen nodded.

“Protect ourselves as well as those who seek only to protect themselves?” Silver scoffed abruptly. “And why would we waste our own blood and resources for these outsiders? What gain could we possibly have to protect those who would stand and watch the Chiss fall?”
"If we are to save ourselves—" Thrawn started. "Then would not the rescue of the universe as a whole coincide with our common goals?"

The Csapla Aristocra grunted and tightened his lips.

"Perhaps Mitth’raw’nuruodo worries too deeply for the humans he has kept close by his side for all this time. This has clouded his judgement. It is possible he has forsaken his alliance with the Chiss Ascendancy and turned his allegiance to the outsiders.” Formbi accused suddenly. “It was he who sent the Grysks to attack us more prominently, which led in the loss of Admiral Ar’alani’s first fleetship after all!"

“A bold accusation, for one who possesses little to no tactical superiority to Thrawn, Ar’alani, nor to the rest of the Expansionary Defense Fleet!” The Nuruodo Aristocra said, her voice somewhat dark, her crystal glowing eerily in a brilliant and burning bronze light that managed to silence the chatter of the entire courtroom.

The man in yellow quickly tensed as she directed all of her attention solely at him, but like all Chiss, he managed to hide his discomfort beneath a cool and confident bluffing stance, though all with eyes could clearly see the look of discomfort on his face as she continued her ranting in his direction.

“Tell me Chaf’orm’bintrano, do you think the military so incompetent that we cannot handle a single surprise attack from a small battalion of enemy scouts?”

“As I recall, ma’am, we lost a rather large and important military vessel...”

“But not a life!” She stressed. “Not only that, but we were allowed to test products created for just such contingency by the Inrokini and in doing so, we gained valuable knowledge to aid with future attacks for much larger, more dangerous enemies! It is only thanks to Mitth’rawn’s efforts that we learned the Grysks were working with the other Far Outsiders to begin with, and it was his efforts that revealed to us that the Far Outsiders are not only after that which is most precious to the Chiss, but of how they have also been receiving inside aid from traitors within our very own people!”

The crowd gasped, more muttering following behind, some of it defensive and the rest a mixture of concerned and frightened overlapping chatter.

“Tell us, Cha’orm’bintrano, how much further do you wish to accuse Thrawn when the council has already agreed to his full pardon?” She wondered, her final words clipping off her tongue with a slight hiss to them.

"Do you believe the council had made a mistake regarding this verdict?" The man in silver added, his voice much calmer, but in a way it only made him sound even more terrifying.

This caused the Chaf representative to visibly shrivel into himself now in shock.

“N—no your honor!”

Of all the Aristocra, Chaf never expected such a comment to be directed towards him from House Csapla. Normally, the two were always on the same side for voting matters. To be opposed… well, it might have well been a punch to the gut and Chaf looked the part.

The Nuruodo representative’s cold voice boomed louder as she let out a final warning to the representative below.

“Then do yourself and the rest of the court a favor, and remain silent for your further accusations
against the commander!"

He stepped back and bowed his head in silent understanding and growing embarrassment.

“If I may interject on this topic...” Thrass stated as he stepped up quickly to take precedence over the floor, especially over his brother who he forced back a few small steps with a eloquent motion of his hand. The gesture was so smoothly implemented, that none really noticed him draw the attention upon himself until he was already at the feet of the Aristocra's crystal podiums.

“Go ahead, Thrass,” said the Inrokini leader, his voice simply relieved to be back on topic now.

“We are all aware of the schism,” Thrass said. "And it is no secret, the news of this coming war, nor that of our people preparing for battle. We have been doing so for many decades and will continue to persist as time would have us. Still, I motion we put this information to rest. This is not how we should focus our efforts on today's trial. We cannot allow this to distract us from the task at hand, that being the humans in our control. They are innocents in all matters concerning the Chiss, and need to be sent home and put away from this conflict which does not concern them.”

Agreements and a few nods swept through the crowd as Thrass smiled to have brought the trial back on its intended track. It would have been a much greater achievement, had Thrawn not decided to step forward and negate the entire statement with his loose lipped mouth not three seconds later!

“If I may be so bold… I would request that my soldiers all be allowed citizenship within our ranks. They are a talented group of individuals and will be immeasurably useful in a fight…”

The Aristocra all seemed to get an aura of tension around them, Eli's face scrunching together like he'd just witnessed something painful to watch. Likewise, Thrass seemed to grind his teeth together beneath thinly veiled lips before shooting his brother a warning look with a heated red glare aimed right into the back of the man's head.

What in the hell was he doing? Thrawn knew he wasn't supposed to bring up that topic again. Eli thought. It was part of the reason he had sought the Aristocra out over the last three days. To do so know was the equivalent of walking a thin tightrope over two kaminoan buildings during a thunderstorm. Eli had to avoid making anymore faces, but wondered if Thrawn was truly aware of the massive grave he was digging for himself in fighting so hard to keep the Chimera crew here with him. Unless... No... Eli blinked. It couldn't be, could it? Was Thrawn actually trying to rush the Aristocra into sending the Imperials home? If the man knew the Aristocra were never going to let anyone besides possibly Ezra stay in Chiss space to begin with, then he wouldn't be bringing up the topic again unless he wanted to be punished by the High Council. For them, that might mean speeding up the process of sending them home? So did that mean Thrawn thought they were in danger here, or did he just want what was best for the crew and decided it needed to be taken care of sooner rather than later?

“We do not have the resources to spare in housing more humans of your—” Tof'eni'csapla paused. “Special recommendations.”

“Although, these recommendations have proven brilliant so far in both tactical and political matters of Chiss military actions,” Vereen said. “Just look at the accomplishments of Eli Vanto. Imagine the benefit to having more of his numbers in this fight with such an unknown set of skills coupled to our ranks.”

“Shall we put it to a vote?” Ronin offered. “All in favor to allow the human's citizenship on Chiss worlds?”
Despite a war coming? Faro thought with a brisk and growing agitation. Didn't they get a say in any of this? Who said they wanted to stay here? Who said they wanted to risk their lives for some Chiss war? It was so utterly ridiculous it was almost laughable. First Thrawn infiltrates their Empire, then he plays the part of a barely-competent Admiral, whose sole redeeming quality was that he just so happened to have a brilliant tactical mind. Then he just up and leaves when he decides the Empire no longer serves his underhanded purposes? Not to mention all the lives and resources spent building up the supposed Imperial assets only for Thrawn to take them back to his people. Talk about squandering funds! He'd been lying, using, and abusing the Imperial Navy this entire time and none of them were the wiser. If Thrawn thought she, or anyone else here apart from the overly-devoted Bridger boy to the apparent accomplice, Eli Vanto, would be staying here one moment longer than necessary, then he had a cruel awakening brewing once they left this courthouse.

As if anyone in their right mind would stay with someone so duplicitous and deceitful. She growled to herself, calming her raging thoughts just in time to watch as the lights on the podiums for the green and bronze stands activate and then fade away shortly after.

“And those opposed?”

The silver and crimson lights intensified before fading back into that smooth ice-colored crystal once more.

Thrawn's eyes closed in defeat as the opposing Aristocra made their defensive statements.

“We do not have the resources to spare for outsiders at this time,” Tof'eni’csapla repeated. "I can account for Ezra Bridger, and he alone due to his concerning health features, but even he will need to be sent away when we are finished with him."

“The humans do not belong here,” Gras'vee'sabosen stated. “With the war coming, I will not allow non-Chiss blood to be spilled for Chiss-centered matters. If it were up to House Sabosen, I would have this group, Ezra Bridger, and Eli Vanto all sent away, merit-standing earned within our Ascendancy or no!” She sighed once and stood tall. "I apologize, Thrawn. It would seem the council now goes to the Chaf representative for the deciding vote."

Formbi stepped up with eager stride, that cool confidence he had once misplaced was once again turned now into a cautious professionalism as he motioned to the crowd and then back at the Aristocra.

“By order of the people, over half do not agree to the humans' stay. As such, it is by consensus of the Chiss people, represented by Chaf House, that the humans be summarily deported from our worlds as soon as the High Council deems fit.”

Sabosen’s representative nodded.

“Understood.”

Eli rolled his eyes. Of course Chaf'orm'bintrano was going to vote no. Big shocker there! Now, all that was left was to decide what to do with them all. That was where Thrass would be needed the most. Hopefully he could still pull something out of his hat, assuming of course that Thrawn kept his mouth shut and didn't tick off the Aristocra any further than he already had!

“The humans, apart from Ezra Bridger, will be sent home immediately, and the boy will remain under the care of the Sabosen until he is deemed healthy enough for travel.”
"It is risky." Ronin argued. "If the boy is to stay behind, he could be caught up in our war. On behalf of Csaus, I offer to shelter the human under the Inrokini protection until we deem he is mentally and physically prepared to leave. With House Sabosen's blessings of course."

"Who would you have performing this study?" Gras'vee'sabosen inquired.

"If I might make a suggestion..." Thrawn said quickly before receiving hesitant approval from the council to continue.

"You may speak, Thrawn."

"Mitth’ar’inrokini is an expert at biochemistry as well as her gifts in the development of technology. She is highly skilled in human-based knowledge and interactions, and it is for these reasons, I believe she would be best suited to this task of care over Ezra Bridger's well-being on Csaus."

Thrass stiffened as did pretty much everyone else in the room but for all sorts of different reasons. Tharin seemed frozen stiff as all Aristocra looked to her placement in the crowd and then back to Thrawn. All eyes now fell to the Chiss commander as he weaved in his final proposal to council.

"He is not in a position to go home at this time for fear of health, but by the time he has recovered fully, war may well be upon us all as you have so stated. I take responsibility for his protection as a life debt between the two of us which he earned by his efforts on Myrkr. As such, I wish to prepare him for the inevitability of combat as soon as House Inrokini will allow."

"A convenient excuse to add yet another human to your collection," The yellow-suited Chiss mocked. "Does your arrogance show no bounds? The Aristocra have already denied your human citizenship! Life debt or no, it is no concern of the people to mend your affairs!"

Thrass and Thrawn shot the man identical glares of aggravation, Formbi immediately remembering the Nuruodo Aristocra's warning as he backed off and stepped away. Still, the look on his face remained and all could plainly see that he stood by his statement and was unhappy with Thrawn's constant nagging involving these humans.

"If you believe this boy to be so much of an asset that you would fight so fervently for his stay—" Ronin added. "Then we will consider your request and deliberate at another time, but as for the remaining humans we simply cannot—"

The silver one lifted a hand to silence the green and then motioned towards Thrass.

"Please, continue to your proposal, Mitth’ras’ safis. How would you recommend we send the remainder of these humans home?"

His eyes never left Thrawn as he walked forward and bowed to the council.

"Of course." He stood and gestured. "Finally, it is with my proposal that a shuttle be granted to the humans and set on a safe path to the Outer Rim of their galaxy where they may return to their lives and continue their work in peace."

"And how will we be sure such peace will not leave traces back to our Ascendancy?" Asked Vereen.

"We could design a ship that would prevent such?" Ronin offered.

"That would take too long. Perhaps we can administer sedatives to sedate the humans until they are
safely out of range of any Chiss worlds?” Gras’vee’sabosen recommended.

The humans looked to Eli swiftly, but he motioned them down with a slow push of his hand.

“We could always send them back with a guide?” Thrass suggested, a bit of snide humor laced into his voice now. “Mitth’raw’nuruodo perhaps?”

Eli seemed taken aback by that one, his brows arched incredulously, his hand coming up to rub at his mouth and beard in one confused and thoughtful motion.

“That would be ideal,” said the Chiss in silver. “But we have agreed to keep Thrawn here so he might resume his work with the military. His skills will be needed now more than ever with the Far Outsiders attacking more persistently in the outer colonies of late.”

More murmurs in the crowd now as Eli and Tharin both seemed to let tiny relieved smiles show knowing the Council had no plans on getting rid of Thrawn again anytime soon.

“Perhaps Captain Vanto?” Formbi pointed. “He is among their own kind and would know his way back to our worlds?”

Eli clenched his teeth, letting his knuckles tighten to the grip he held on his knees. He’d only met the Chaf representative a handful of times, but if it came right down to it, Eli would bet credits that Chaf would trade him to the Vagaari for one shroomchip if they asked him nicely.

Thrass likewise seemed annoyed by the suggestion and waved him off.

“No, Captain Vanto’s presence on Copero is most urgent at this time as well. The leaders of the Expansionary Defense Fleet are already growing weary of his prolonged absence thus far. No higher captains nor generals can be taken from their work at this time. We will have to look to another to escort the humans home.”

Voices of agreement and nodding came from the crowd, especially from the Chiss in the white admiral uniforms. It seemed Eli was especially popular and a necessary asset to nearly all of the Chiss military. Honestly, Ezra wasn’t too surprised by that fact. He knew the man was sent here by Thrawn himself, so he was obviously good at his job, smart too if he’d mastered multiple languages and customs in only a few short years. Of course they would want Eli to stay with the fights to come. No matter what the doctor Aristocra had said about not wanting him to fight. An asset was an asset. He only hoped he could convince them to see him in that same light as they regarded Eli.

Meanwhile, Eli relaxed in his seat a bit, a hidden grin refusing to show as the new sense of pride swelled within him after hearing his position defended by Thrass and all of the generals and admirals in the courtroom. It might have been the closest thing to a compliment Eli’s ever heard from the Syndic, but the additional praise from the military higher ups was also a nice touch to his ego. Not that he’d let it go to his head, but it was so worth it to see the stunned and defeated look on Chaf’orm’bintrano’s face!

“Surely the military can spare two soldiers to escort the humans to the edge of our borders?” The green Aristocra asked accusingly towards the one in bronze.

She deliberated with a hum before finally nodding. “Very well, I shall leave that up to the generals to decide. I want two volunteers sent to the station within the hour.”

“One hour your honor?” Thrass said, his eyes flicking once to her and then across the rest of the high council’s hooded faces.
Ezra looked to Eli and then over at Tharin. Both had their mouths gaped open in shock, Thrawn merely bowing his head with a gentle acceptance plastered to his face as he stiffened to a uniform stance and shut his eyes to hear what else the Aristocra had to say.

The silver one smiled.

“Congratulations, Mitth’ras’safis, your proposal has been approved, implemented, and initiated. The humans are to leave immediately and never speak of anything they have seen or learned that could potentially bring harm back to our people.”

“Ezra Bridger will remain with our scientists on Csaus for further study to see if he is deemed fit to leave our Ascendancy,” The green one added. "All else involving the young man will be discussed at a later time based on the Inrokini's results, including the length of his stay, and level of clearance he will be allowed access to during his stay with the Chiss Ascendancy."

“Likewise, House Nuruodo takes full responsibility for seeing the remainder of these Imperial humans home,” the woman in bronze stated. "And with the evidence of the crash dealt with and studied, the generals of the Myrkr incident as well as Mitth’raw’nuruodo’s offenses have been definitively cleared and all will be given full pardons in relation to this incident.”

The four hooded faces all turned to look at the group of humans, and Ezra felt a sudden chill run up his spine.

“Is that clear?” All four said in unison.

Eli motioned for the group to stand, and they did so, albeit a little wobbly-kneed as each person rose from their seats.

“Look to them, bow, and tell them you understand their terms,” Eli ordered calmly.

The humans did so.

Eli looked back to the council and translated, not missing a beat as his calm and collected tone was somehow unswayed by any signs of nerves or anxiety. For someone who had been so panicky a few hours ago, Ezra thought. Eli had a way of growing incredibly professional and serious when he needed to. It was almost like listening to an entirely different person.

“They agree and understand to the terms, your honors,” he said. "Thank you for your final ruling."

“Then we are adjourned,” the Sabosen leader announced with a final wave of her hands. “By rule of the Chiss Ascendancy, this courtroom is now dismissed.”

Thrass looked to Thrawn, another conversation hidden beneath the glare, but Thrawn only shook his head in reply. Thrass, looking as displeased as ever at the head-shake, turned and disappeared into the crowd as the halls emptied and the swift sounds of ships departing started to echo from the chambers.

"Is that it?” Ezra blurted.

"Is it over?” Pyrondi added.

"What happens now?” Koree asked, both she and the rest of the humans looking quickly to Eli for guidance as Chiss started leaving the building in droves.

The man only rubbed his tired eyes and motioned them towards the doors, his tense relief apparent
on his outward features towards this trial finally being over. He led the humans down the halls and then back outside where they were ordered to wait for further instructions, huddled together in the snow with more questions than answers, and absolutely no idea what had just transpired in that courtroom.

So that was Chiss court? Ezra thought to himself. Well, it was certainly different than how he thought the day would go, but at the same time, no one was dead, so that was a big plus, right?

Once outside, it was still cold, but the weather had died down to a calm flurry, so waiting outside wouldn't be completely terrible. The group followed behind Eli, leaving the ice castle in newfound silence as their boots crunched into the freshly rested snow and they stood a good distance away from the capitol building, waiting patiently in the parking area for their next orders to come to them.

They waited... and waited...

Over half of the ships were gone now, the Chiss obviously not the sort to stick around and linger after these big important court cases ended. Most of the ships which remained were parked military vessels and a few personal starships like Tharin's Clawcraft or Eli's shuttle. The generals, admirals, as well as Thrawn and his brother were also still missing from the crowd, so it was likely they were inside seeing to the last of the details made by the Aristocra.

"On hour..." Eli muttered again in disbelief. "Thrawn must have really ticked them off this time."

"What happens now, Captain?" Faro asked.

"Well, I reckon we ought to just wait here for Thrawn or Thrass so they can tell us where we need to wait for the ship taking you all home."

"Home..." Gunther chuckled dryly. "Seems a little strange to be going home after all we've been through, doesn't it?"

"I'm just glad we get to go!" Pyrondi snorted. "Like we'd want to stay behind and be more of Thrawn's collectibles!" She looked quickly to Eli and Ezra and stuck out her hands. "Oh no offense?"

Eli flicked his head off to the side, trying not to be offended, but not really having any luck at masking it.

"The Aristocra really wanted you to stay here, Ezra?" Walten said with a concerned look and a firm grasp on his shoulder. "It seemed kind of strange... like they had an ulterior motive or something?"

"You watch yourself out here, kid," Urick added, taking Ezra's other shoulder. "Better yet, do you want us to sneak you on-board with us?"

Ezra chuckled and shook the two stormtroopers off.

"Thanks, but I think I'd rather see this through and find out what happens. I really think I might be able to do some good here."
"If you say so?" Walten sighed. "Just be careful."

"Hey kid!" Gunther called loudly, slapping him so hard on the back of the head that Ezra saw stars in his eyes before rubbing the pain away.

"Ow!" What the heck, Gunther?"

He turned and saw the crew all staring at him and he frowned suddenly as that same sensation of separation started taking hold of him again.

"Oh..." He sighed. "I guess... Well... I guess this is sort of goodbye for now, isn't it?"

"For now..." Walten started.

"You be careful with these Chiss," Faro warned, her voice taut and maybe even a little angry. "The Grand Admiral seems to really want you here, so you just be mindful of what all he's getting you into. I'm not quite sure what to think anymore, but seeing as though he was never really in it for the long haul, you just make sure he isn't leading you into something that you don't want to be a part of."

"That's not entirely true, ma'am." Eli argued. "Thrawn really did give his all to the Empire, I should know! And yeah, what he said in there did come as a bit of a shock, but I know for a fact that he really did commit to the military. His intentions were true, even if his end goals were different than what we all thought."

"Even if all he did was always just leading us back to the Chiss you mean?" Birt interrupted coldly.

"That's easy for you to say, Eli." Urick snorted. "He's keeping you and Ezra, but sending the rest of us back to an Empire he thinks is failing."

"Whatever!" Pyrondi hissed. "It's not like we want to stay here or anything."

"If you did," Ezra eased. "I'm sure Thrawn would've let you."

"Look," Eli stretched. "I'm wasn't really supposed to say anything, but Thrawn did want you all to stay. He wasn't even supposed to bring it up in court, but he did and is no doubt getting chewed out because of the mere suggestion of it."

"Even if he did, so what?" Gunther snorted in disbelief. "We don't want to stay, so why fight for us?"

Eli was silent, the frustration welling inside of him as he tried to find his words. With a solemn sigh, he only shook the loose waves of brown hair atop his head and rocked his head at the Chimera crew.

"All I know is, the moment Thrawn left the hospital, he flew from planet to planet, meeting with the Aristocra just to ask permission for you all to stay here. In the end, they denied his request because they didn't want to put you in danger, or risk a blow-back to the Ascendancy. They only sped up your departure because Thrawn kept pestering them about it in front of all those people. They aren't too happy with him at the moment as is, and in doing that he might as well have—"

"I can relate to their feelings!" Faro snarled. "Please, save your stories, Captain. We're far too tired to hear anymore of Thrawn's excuses right now."
"Hey, at least he did something right!" Gunther scoffed. "The sooner we get off this snowball, the better!"

“I for one am done with all of this. Done with the Chiss, done with the Empire…” Koree sighed and looked to Gunther. “Honestly, I just want to go home and sleep for a millennia.”

He took her hand and she leaned over into him.

“If we were still on Imperial soil, I would have so many reasons to arrest the lot of us for treason, Thrawn included!” Faro almost seemed to laugh at her own statement as she shrugged and shook her head slowly. “But if we’re all being completely honest, all I hope to do when we get back is retire to Coruscant and spend the rest of my time with my father at his tea shop.”

“Honorable discharges for the lot of us!” Birt spun his finger in the air sourly. “Me? I want a promotion. Captain my own ship instead of cleaning it. Can’t you just picture it?”

Faro pondered on that.

“Assuming it is still available, perhaps I can get you in with Task Force 231?”

“It’s going to be pretty boring back in the real world without you around, kid,” Walten said with a shove to Ezra’s side.

“Hey, I’ll keep in touch. You all told me where you live, remember?” He smirked. “Well except for you Pyrondi…”

She grinned.

“Chalacta. I worked with cargo ships on Chalacta with my brothers before joining up with the Empire.”

“Awww!” Gunther frowned. “If only we had more of that tea to drink.”

“You mean the one that nearly crushed our windpipes and gave us all rashes?”

“No, no!” He waved. “The good one! The one from yesterday.”

“Sounds like you all had an interesting time on Sposia?” Eli said, the corners of his lips lifting hesitantly into a small grin. “Regardless of what you all decide to do when you get back, I wish you well, and despite the circumstances, I really am glad I got to see you all again.”

Faro stepped in and gave him a handshake with a few light taps to the back.

“Take care of yourself, Vanto. Is there anything you want us to do when we get back to our star system?”

He shrugged.

“Maybe just tell my parents that I’m doing well? Say hi to Yularen if you get the chance? Take Pryce down a peg or two… you know if you have time before retiring?”

She smiled wickedly and nodded.

“Oh, I can assure you that I can always make time for that, Captain.”

“You said it!” Gunther said with a crack of his knuckles.
The group smiled and Eli made a sudden face before he flicked his head off to the side.

“Look alive everyone, Thrawn’s coming out.”

The group turned, Faro’s nose pointed in the air as she marched up to meet him halfway, and without a single word of warning, she lifted her hand and slapped the Chiss straight across his blue-skinned face.

*SLAP!*

“You lied to us!” She stated uniformly, but loudly as the smack echoed through the now quiet snow-ridden courtyard.

“Yes,” Thrawn replied simply, looking down to her with knowing red eyes. He saw the way she’d treaded up to him and predicted the slap coming, but he let it happen anyway. He let the one that came afterwards happen as well.

*SLAP!*

“Did you ever really care?” Faro spoke through gritted teeth. “When you stood up to Vader, was that just to repair your own pride pertaining to your subordinates, or did you honestly give a damn about the Chimera? Did you care at all that all those people died for you or were you just happy to be rid of us and be back within your own precious ascendancy!?”

Thrawn looked to her as if she had just slapped him. Considering she had already done that... *twice in fact…* somehow everyone noticed how much Faro’s words had hurt him even more than the actual strikes had.

They all watched fearfully as his glowing eyes narrowed and seemed to burn brighter with newfound rage. Faro resisted the urge to take a step back and held her ground as Thrawn’s entire body appeared to tower even larger in size though he merely leaned in closer to her and parted his lips to speak.

“Rukh, Jim Woldar, Alloria Hammerly, Albus Marinith, Pira Skoff, Olivia Xoxtin, Damascus Crell, Alexi Yedrin, Padoxia Dermond, Francis Gimli, Neil Agral, Alfor Lomar, Verolia Tilroy, Gintri Yve, Gilad Pellaeon…”

Faro’s eyes widened.

“Thrawn…” Eli started, but the Chiss held out his hand to stop any further words as his eyes turned back to the now-speechless and wide-eyed commodore.

“All are the names of the crew-members who were lost or killed aboard the Chimera. There are hundreds more, thousands even if the remainder of the 7th Fleet suffered our same fate. I carry the weight of their names on my shoulders, and the weight of their grief in my core.” He looked to Faro and those once angry red eyes held a flash of fresh guilt within them. “I was responsible for them.” He stood back to his full height and shook his head. “It was never my intention to have your people die for me. Their names, their ambitions, their families… I will carry them with me as I have for all of those who have been lost under my command. It is a terrible thing to lose such precious and irreplaceable life, but we must move forward. Even so, do not presume to think I never cared about my crew because their well-being was my primary concern as their leader, just as much as yours is a concern to me now.”

“He went back and buried them!” Eli blurted.
Thrawn shut his eyes before shooting the captain a somewhat annoyed look. *He could be mad all he wanted,* but Eli decided that the rest of the crew ought to know.

“On Myrkr. All of them. Every last one. Thrawn went back and buried them with the team of Chiss investigators that helped us clean up the crash site for the Chimera.”

“When did you have time to do that?” Birt’s eyes danced across the ground in confusion. “There must have been hundreds!”

Thrawn didn’t reply.

“Chiss technology makes mass burials a bit easier,” Eli answered for him. "Thrawn wasn’t supposed to be there, but he still saw to the task personally. So trust me when I say this. He really does care about his crew!”

“Is all this really true?” Faro asked, looking back up at Thrawn now as the hate and rage completely dissipated from her wide brown eyes.

He still didn’t reply.

Never had she seen this much pain on the Chiss’ face. Eli was telling the truth. *He really went back to Myrkr and buried all of those men and women’s bodies?* She was speechless, her eyes still wide and shaking. In fact everyone in the group was silent, no one knowing quite what to say about all this new information given to them all at once. They were still angry, but now they were also a little proud, a bit confused, and so consistently sad that it was starting to become a dull sensation that only offered to make them feel tired and drained.

“You—” Faro started, saying the only thing she could think to say now. “You remembered all of their names? All of them?”

“All of them,” Thrawn replied.

“None of the Chimera captains have ever remembered more than their highest ranking officers, and even then, they never knew more than their last names or their ranks…”

He looked to the crew and continued with a regretful bow. “I know I have deceived you, and I understand your anger. It is justified, more than you know. Still, you must know before you leave that I hope you all find happiness, wherever it takes you in this life, and I am immeasurably grateful for your services aboard the Chimera and the services to your Empire. I could not have asked for a more reliable crew and wish you well in the lives you continue to live after we part our brief time together in this life.”

Pyrondi wiped a tear from her eye and stepped forward, as the Chiss rose and met her eyes with a painful gaze. He fished into the pouch on his utility belt and pulled out a single rank plaque before handing it over to her and watching as she took it with shaky hands and a sobbing gasp.

"Is this—?"

“I am truly sorry about Dubrak Ferasi,” he said. “He was an excellent Lieutenant, and would have made for an excellent father to your child.”

“You even knew about that?” She cried as she laughed and shook her head in knowing disbelief. "How? I just found out about it a few days ago myself."

“I am the ship's captain,” he said with a sympathetic frown. “I know everything.”
She fell into him with her arms wrapped around his back. For a moment, Thrawn wasn’t quite sure how to respond and just stood there, unmoving as the woman sank deeper into her hug.

“You may have been a two-timing Admiral,” Gunther said suddenly. “But damn if you weren’t the best captain any of us have ever served under. Come here!” He slapped Thrawn hard on the back and Koree did the same as suddenly the entire group was swarming him in one massive group hug.

Thrawn wasn’t sure what to do and looked to Eli who was standing off to the side with a smile hidden beneath his hand, amused beyond all recognition but obviously not willing to offer him any further assistance. Awkwardly, the Chiss let all of the humans hug him only to pat tepidly on the backs of the two who were within the closest range of his hands. Chiss didn't typically hug, and the look on Thrawn's face only proved his apparent discomfort.
“I wish I had a cam,” Eli whispered over at Ezra. “This is something I doubt the universe will ever see again.”

“What? A group hug between a bunch of Imperials and a Chiss?”

Both men laughed, enjoying the rare sight off to the side, when suddenly one of Ar'alani's flagships landed nearby and the billowing snow lifted from the shuttle's landing acted as enough of a reason for the Imperials to break off their massive group hug and return to normal.

“Mitth’raw’nuruodo!”

They watched the speaker as both he and another Chiss man in black and bronze uniforms
approached them, the Imperials parting quickly out of the way so Thrawn could greet the two of them, which he did with a newfound sense of eager energy to him. Thrawn's arm was outstretched, what was probably the biggest smile they any of the humans had ever seen on their Grand Admiral’s face taking form as he met the man beside the ship and their arms slapped hard against the other’s back before he did so to the other warrior and then took a small step back.

“Stent! Jag!” Thrawn greeted in Cheunh. “I did not expect to see you here.”

Despite their translation watches still being active, Eli leaned over and whispered, “Kres’ten’tarthi and Felj’ag’soontir are members of Thrawn’s phalanx, and some of his oldest friends from Mitth house.”

“Wait,” Ezra mumbled. “What’s a phalanx?”

They lifted their sleeves and revealed the burgundy clothing with an odd logo imprinted to the wrist part before the three grinned and continued talking in their own eager language.

“We have volunteered to take your crew back to their home,” Stent said. “Any so wise as to follow you to battle deserves as much respect getting back I would think?”

The humans smiled at that. So Thrawn really was respected around here. And to have a whole phalanx of followers and friends...even if some of them still weren’t really sure what a phalanx was?

“Everyone!” Thrawn stated in Basic. “These are two of my most loyal friends, Kres’ten’tarthi and Felj’ag’soontir. They have volunteered to pilot your shuttle back to the Outer Rim. I trust them with my life, and you will be in capable hands with the two of them.”

Eli, who stood behind the three Chiss soldiers rolled his eyes. The Phalanx was more like a club for Thrawn’s fanboys. They wouldn’t leave Eli alone for the first few months of his training, always coming in and bombarding him with questions about Thrawn and what all he was up to. Oh sure, they were capable soldiers, but their eager devotion bordered on a fanatic and annoyingly devoted pack of puppies, and sometimes that got on his nerves a bit more than he’d care to admit aloud.

“It’s been an honor, Grand Admiral,” Faro said with a firm handshake. “Not always a pleasure, but an honor nonetheless.”

“Commodore Faro,” Thrawn responded, shocking the woman as he held both of her hands in his own and pressed them tight within his palms. “I overheard talk of your retirement. The Empire will be worse for your leave, but it is of course, the right action to take. I wish you all the best.”

“Sir,” Brit chimed in. “Do you really believe the Empire is collapsing?”

“And do you believe they really built some sort of planet-killing super-weapon?” Pyrondi asked, hands moving instinctually to her stomach now that the big secret was finally out.

“The weapon is very real and was kept hidden as a secured project known only to a small few. I found out when I noticed the diversion in resources and pleaded with the Emperor not to place all of his assets into one such weapon. My word was ignored and the Empire will suffer greatly for their misjudgment.”

“I checked the facts, too.” Eli nodded. “Before Thrawn sent me to the Ascendancy, I knew the Death Star was a pretty big project and I was sent to protect the Ascendancy in the case Thrawn was killed beforehand. It's real alright, and real nasty. We've been trying to figure out a way to
destroy it before the Empire uses it to take over the Unknown Regions, but it looks like we've run out of time to brainstorm over ideas.”

“Hence the reasons why you constantly persuaded the council for your TIE Defender project, and why you were so fervent on distancing yourself and the Chimera from the rest of the Empire...” Faro said in new understanding. Just like back then, when it was explained, she saw it all so clearly.

“Indeed, and I bid you farewell.” Thrawn bowed to the remainder of the crew. “I shall never forget your services and once again wish you safe travels.”

That was that. It was a Thrawny excuse for a farewell as they’d ever imagined. Still, the humans laughed at the attempt, and one by one stepped up to either shake the Chiss’ hand or hug him around the waist as they said their thanks and their own set of goodbyes.

A lot of them were still a little shaken by the whole reveal of Thrawn being a double agent, but what could they really do to change that? Thrawn didn’t destroy the Empire, he took care of his crew, and in the end, well— he was a damn good Grand Admiral. They all could think of dozens of other Imperial Commanders who had done worse things, so compared to that, Thrawn was still one of the best leaders they knew.

“Bye Ezra.” Birt waved.

“Bye Birt, good luck with your new promotion. I'm rooting for you!”

"Thanks."

“See you later kid.”

“Bye Urick. I hope you can relax on that farm you were wanting to run one day!”

"You know it."

Walten grabbed Ezra’s hand and pulled him into a hug as he slapped a hand against his back.

“You’ll do good work here kid. Keep on fighting. I hope one day we'll see each other again when there's not a war going on. Hopefully by then, all of us will be on the same side, yeah?”

Ezra nodded. He really hoped that much was true.

“Thanks Walten. For everything.” He shot a sneaky look to Urick across the group and in a quiet voice, decided to give out a few words of advice of his own. "Try to remember to take some time out of the fight long enough to spend with the people you care about, okay?"

His pale skin turned suddenly red as his blue eyes darted over to Urick and then swiftly back to Ezra.

"What is that? Some sort of Jedi mind reading trick?"

"Something like that?" Ezra laughed, his joy dying down as he suddenly remembered the people he once cared about. Hera and Kanan, Zeb, Chopper... Sabine... He looked back to Walten and shook his head. "It's better not to leave some things unsaid when you still have the chance, you know? Just take my word for it, for your own sake and for his."

He shot the boy a cocky grin.
"Like I'd take relationship advice from some bratty kid?" he teased. "What are you? Fifteen?"

Ezra really had to think about it for a moment, but chuckled and waved his hand through the air.

"Eighteen, give or take—at least—I think—huh, how old am I really?"

The two laughed and Walten shook Ezra's hand one last time before walking away just in time for Koree and Gunther to run up and crush him between two violent body slams.

Gunther shagged his hair before Koree flipped his cloak up over his head to disorient him even further as the two passed him back and forth between them like a sack of jogans.

“You know, I think I’ll miss you two most of all…” Ezra lied dryly.

“Aww... Don’t be like that,” Gunther chided. "Besides, we overheard you giving love advice to Walten over there."

"Oh jeez, please don't embarrass him!” Ezra pleaded. "He needs to work this out on his own!"

"We're not monsters, Bridger!" Koree chuckled. "We just wanted to return some your own advice!"

"What do you mean?"

They pointed as Thrass and Tharin exited the ice castle, something held in Tharin's hands, but Ezra couldn't make out what it was at this distance and gave up.

"What?” He repeated, his voice more defensive now as he snorted out a laugh. "You mean Tharin? You two have the wrong idea! We're just friends. I barely know her!"

"Yeah-huh..." Gunther teased with an unconvincing roll of his eyes.

“Remember us as we were Bridger!” Koree sighed dramatically, draping over his shoulders before giving him one big kiss on the cheek. “I hope one day we meet again and you can find us and say thank you because you figured out we were always right.”

“Yeah right!” He scoffed.

"That's the spirit!"

“I didn’t know we were kissing Bridger, come here you!” He grabbed Ezra’s face and got one big kiss on the side of his head despite Ezra’s struggles of protests and flailing arms. The two continued to kiss his face as he tried and failed to fight them off.

“Alright! That’s enough!” Faro called. “You two go bother Captain Eli one more time while you have the chance!”

They laughed and strode away, waving to Ezra as he vigorously wiped their kisses off his face with a disgusted look aimed in their direction.

“Do try to forgive them," Faro started. "We don’t let our gunners out very often, but I swear they weren’t always so unruly.”

“If you say so?” He groaned, wiping the last of their slobber off his cheek.

It’s been a ride, Ezra Bridger.” She laughed, going in for one final hug. “And don’t worry, your secret is safe with us.”
Ezra gave her a confused look up and down.

“My secret?”

“Oh please, I’m not an idiot Bridger. I’ve known since you spouted off your last name that you were that rebel Jedi from Lothal. Thrawn seemed to know that and yet he still trusted you, as did the others. We figured you would remember on your own and played along, but after that stunt you pulled back in the courtroom, the crew and I figure you’d finally come to the conclusion on your own.”

“Uh…”

“What?” She laughed. "You thought they wouldn’t recognize you as one of the five primary targets we were sent out to apprehend?" She snorted out another laugh and tilted her head off to the side. “Fat chance!”

“And you’re all… okay with that?”

“Hey, you didn’t ask to be brought aboard the Chimera when we got purrgil-jacked through the cosmos. Regardless of where we started out, I am glad you were around to save us when you did. I’ll be sure to tell the Empire you died in the crash, that way if and when you do decide to return to known space, you’ll be off our radar and can begin your life anew. Or— I suppose I should say you will be off our radar while the Empire still stands, considering Thrawn believes it to be slowly killing itself off?”

"Thanks..." Ezra said, not really sure what else to say. "Just... Thanks Commodore."

"Call me Karyn." She smirked. "And good luck out here. Do the rest of us humans proud!" She turned and shot him a wink before walking away. “You rebel scum.”

Ezra blinked, his whole center of gravity thrown for a loop, but in the end he could only smile, smile and laugh as he shook her hand and they both parted ways.

“See you around, Karyn.”

“Bye Ezra!” Pyrondi hugged suddenly, knocking him back a step into the snow. “Good luck with whatever you’re doing with Captain Eli and Grand Adm— or well— I mean, with Thrawn, and thanks again for everything! We owe you our lives you know?”

“I could say the same,” he said with a laugh. “See you later Pyrondi. Thank you for being so strong and for helping me when I needed it on Myrkr. Oh! And, good luck with your baby! Try eating a Meiloorun.”

“Really, what does that do?”

Ezra arched his brows and shook his head. That was random, even for him. Why did babies suddenly make him think of such a specific fruit?

“I actually have no idea why I just said that?” He laughed. “I guess it was something I picked up on Lothal? But wait... Meiloorun don't grow on Lothal? Hmmm...?”

“Well, I supposed I’ll try it regardless. Goodbye, Bridger. It’s been... interesting?” She punched him lightly on the arm and then turned and hugged Eli who had just narrowly escaped Gunther and Koree’s farewell bombardment. “Goodbye to you too, Captain Eli! Glad to see you’re not really dead after all this time!”
“Wait, you guys thought I was dead?”

Birt shrugged.

“We had a betting pool going on what Thrawn did with you.”

“Guess it doesn’t matter much now, but hey, at least I don’t owe anyone any credits?”

“You were betting aboard the Chimera?” Eli squeaked. “Did Thrawn know about this?”

“Yes,” he interrupted from afar, apparently listening to their entire conversation. “My favorite rumor was that I had you married to a foreign dignitary to stop an intergalactic war against the Empire and a rare species of alien warlords.”

“Hey, that was my rumor!” Koree clapped, rushing up to deliver a crisp high five to the ex-Admiral. Or well— trying to and then promptly teaching him how to do it correctly.

“What!?” Eli exclaimed. “What else did they say happened to me?”

“Oh, buddy…” Gunther patted. “We don’t have enough time to tell you even the best ones.”

The Chiss from before said something in Cheunh and Thrawn responded before turning back to face the crew.

“It’s time to board,” he said with a nod.

They all waved a final time and walked up the platform and into the impressive Chiss shuttle. *Who was Ezra kidding? All their ships were impressive, and this one was no exception.*

With a hand cupped around his mouth, the young man stepped up and shouted with all his might.

“Hey!”

They stopped and turned back to him mid-stride.

"May the Force be with you!"

They smiled down at him, and with one final wave, the Imperials vanished behind the hatch doors as they sealed shut, leaving Ezra, Eli, and Thrawn alone in the snow. All three of them watching for what felt like an eternity as the ship lifted into the air and took off swiftly towards the sky, disappearing a few seconds later beneath the vastness of space. The snow settled once more to the ground, the heat from the engines fading back into cool Csilla breeze, and just like that it was as though the ship had never even been there to begin with.

Thrawn and Ezra stood in silence for a few moments, until only Ezra continued to stare up at the sky.

"They'll be fine,” Eli said, breaking the silence as he stepped up to place a comforting hand on Ezra's shoulder.

"Yeah..."

“Look, I know it’s hard to say goodbye to all your friends, but they have to go back home. They deserve a break from all this war. Honestly, so do you. I’m a little surprised you wanted to stay behind, kid.”
“I feel like I can make a difference here.” Ezra grinned. “Plus, I have you guys, and Thrass, Ina, Stent, and even Tharin.” He laughed. “I still have friends here, which is more than I can say is waiting for me back home. This is the path I’ve chosen. It was my decision, so I’m going to make the most of it.”

Eli grinned and patted his back harder.

“Well kid, I dare say that’s mighty mature of you. I look forward to working with you.” He lifted a brow and delivered a smug grin. “If Tharin doesn’t kill you by accident. As the test dummy for a few of her projects, I can vouch that she’ll probably give it her best shot.” He chuckled. “Stay on your guard, Ezra and I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

He gulped, a crunch in the snow making everyone suddenly turn just in time for Ezra to catch Tharin as she ran up and crushed him beneath a massive hug that made his boots sink deeper into the snow.

Speak of the devil...

“I don’t know what you did back there, but you got your wish, Sevicsi!” she said with a smile, though she released him quickly with an intense frown forming as she placed a hand on his forehead, rubbing her fingers along his skin in search of head wounds. “Are you okay? We were worried when you lost consciousness and collapsed. I wonder if I should get you another medical suit?”

“No, it's okay!” he waved. “It was just a headache. Nothing to worry about.”

“We shall see...” she said with an unconvincing tone that did nothing to hide the eager gleam growing on her face. “Your research has been entrusted to me after all, and I intend to perform as many tests as it takes until I know everything there is to know about the human being called Ezra Bridger.”

He gulped and took a step back.

“You’re not going to dissect me like some kind of lab rat, are you?”

Tharin laughed.

“Don’t be silly! I do not need to cut you open to see how you work.” She pondered something before jabbing a fingernail into his neck with a gentle and thoughtful twist. “I will probably need a little bit of your blood though.”

“Swell!” His voice squeaked and he took another step back before sinking down into the snow, unable to escape as Eli only laughed at his newfound misfortune with an aggravating level of personal delight.

"Where are the rest of your friends?" She asked, peering around quickly.

"Already departed, I'm afraid," Thrawn informed. "I apologize Tharin, I heard you were getting along rather well with all of them."

She pouted.

"And I really wanted to say goodbye to everyone too! Oh well..." She kicked out an impressive volley of snow before clapping suddenly and turning to grab at a small pack by her heels. "Oh, but that reminds me..." She gestured to the item with wide rotating arms and in a sing-songy voice, she
hummed and handed it over to Ezra. “Ta-da! It is your going away present, Sevicsi! Now a welcome to Csaus gift, I suppose I should say?”

Jorj’s head popped out from the pack and Ezra whistled as he looked over the new invention. The Ysalamir purred at the sight of him like he’d actually missed Ezra for once, and Ezra could see the faintest signs of fuzzy orange hairs growing atop the orange blotches forming along Jorj’s scaly yellow skin.

"Hey! You're growing fur!" Ezra smiled. "I guess that means you're almost all grown up, Jorj!"

Jorj trilled and escaped back down into the warmth of his new carry case, apparently hating the cold just as much as Ezra did.

“This bag should contain the equivalent of a day’s rest on the Olbio trees,” Tharin explained. "It will need to be recharged of course, but theoretically it should sustain Jorj for prolonged travel while also allowing for quick access and removal on your part.”

“You made this in just two days!?” Ezra gaped.

“Is the gift acceptable?” She asked, hands folded and tucked eagerly under her chin. "Do you like it?"

“Like it? I love it! Thank you Tharin.”

There was once more crunch in the snow as Ezra resisted the urge to jump. Thrass once again seemingly appearing out of nowhere, the look on his face appearing to be even more displeased than usual if such a thing were possible?

“Conniving as ever, brother,” Thrass said. “I wish you might have mentioned your little stunt to me before winding your silver tongue to the rest of the Ascendancy.”

“Nice use of the expression, sir,” Eli noted with a nervous swallow.

“Cssoboti…” He acknowledged, his eyes downcast on the man as one brow lifted inquisically over his left eye. “I figure you did not have a part of this little development?”

“No!” He said quickly. “None, sir, I was just as surprised as you!”

He harrumphed and then turned to Tharin.

“And you Daughter? Were you in on this exchange?”

“No Ticsi…” she bowed, her nerves dying back with confident excitement as she continued speaking. “But I am glad to be able to help Ezra become more accustomed to our civilization while I run my tests on him. There is much we can learn from one another for the Ascendancy.”

Thrass’ frown intensified.

“Well, it would appear we have no choice thanks to Thrawn. The High Council has placed his care in your hands, and has likewise ordered him to be tested in one year’s time to see if he is truly fit to become a part of this Ascendancy. A series of tests will be issued and should he fail, they will send him back home with all the others.”

"Wait?” Ezra paused. "So, the Aristocra want me to stay and fight after all?"

The three Chiss rolled their eyes as if it were something completely obvious. Ezra hadn't felt so lost
since waking up without his memories nearly a week ago and it was Eli who patted his shoulder and offered up the much needed explanation.

"Thrawn already got permission for you to train with us, but he had to make it look like you were just staying for your health."

"But... there was no way you could have known I would faint back there? How did you—?"

"A calculated risk given the recent memories I had of the experience on the Chimera," Thrawn said nonchalantly. "If you hadn't, I had arranged other means to make you appear unfit for travel. I would have looked to your acting skills to have resolved the rest."

What was that supposed to mean? Oh, whatever! Ezra thought. He was staying and that was all that there was to it.

"Did you really fight for the rest of the crew to stay too?"

Thrawn shut his eyes, tired, and a little defeated, but his tone never faltering.

"I did, though I agree that their safety back with the Empire is more a guarantee than it would be within Chiss borders. We will face great challenges Ezra. It is important that we also be ready when the time comes."

"I understand."

"As much as I would wish him to return to his own family as well..." Thrass interrupted. "I know you will be grooming him to a position of command, and I know none of you four will fail in your respected tasks to have Ezra join the war efforts."

"Thank you Ticsi," Tharin said with a big hug placed around her father. He patted her hair and grinned, but reluctantly as if he still didn't approve of any of this. Knowing him, he probably didn't, but at least he was still on board for their plan to get Ezra into the Chiss Ascendancy.

Ezra stepped forward, still reaching to touch his neck by habit, but stopping himself again as he looked Thrass eye to eye and tried his best to look cool and confident.

"For the record, Syndic Thrass, I don't have a family to go back home to. So, thank you for your help today and for letting me train with Tharin. I promise I won't let you down."

Thrass’s ice cold facade visibly cracked and he placed a hand on the boy's shoulder, a new, kinder expression in his eyes as a gentle smile stared down at Ezra now.

"Welcome to your new home then, k'iseri bah sihsan'ah. Let us see together how well you do."

That was a long one! Quickly, Ezra glanced down at his watch for a translation while it was still active and let out a tiny chuckle as he read the single word:

Troublemaker.

Though, with the smile on the otherwise serious Chiss' face, Ezra thinks that Thrass might have actually been trying to act endearing, and for once, Ezra wondered if the Syndic wasn't quite as stiff and uptight as he originally thought.

"Thrawn." Thrass turned suddenly, that smile just as quickly vanishing as he met eyes with his
brother. "I assume you require more time to compel your final arguments for the unspoken factor of my proposal?"

"That would be ideal," Thrawn replied. "I will need more evidence before continuing on that path to my answer, but I found the new evidence to be quite illuminating indeed."

"Of course you did. I do hope you speak to me before pulling another last minute stunt like you have with the Inrokini."

"I will endeavor to do so."

Thrass harrumphed and turned back to his daughter.

"Come now, Tharin, your mother is wishing to speak to you before returning to Copero. Thrawn, seeing as though this is your doing, you are responsible for arranging a home for the boy on Csaus. I expect you and Captain Vanto to keep your eye on his progress, and I hope that you know what you are doing. If this should backfire and hurt Tharin’s reputation with the Inrokini in any way, I will not be so quick to forgive you again."

"I understand." He held out his arm. "You worry too much, Thrass."

"I worry the right amount when it comes to your meddling, Thrawn," he said, taking his arm and smiling with such sincerity afterwards that it actually shocked both Eli and Ezra and the two had to do a double take to make sure they saw it right the first time. "Farewell for now."

"Bye Ezra!" Tharin waved. "I can't wait to experiment with you!"

The boy made uncomfortable face as he tried to hide his discomfort beneath a polite smile as Thrass and Tharin walked out of sight. Eli meanwhile, was trying hard not to laugh at Tharin's phrasing, but was nearly in tears as he held the humor back. Ezra blushed and gave Eli one swift punch to the arm as the captain merely laughed and shoved the kid off of him with a hand to the face, Eli dodging Ezra's continued attacks with little to no effort at all as he laughed and let the boy chase him around the parking lot.

Thrawn merely watched them in slight enjoyment but mostly in puzzled confusion before deciding their fun was enough and clapping his hands to get their attentions.

"Come now Ezra," Thrawn said, breaking up their quarrel and motioning each towards Eli’s ship. "Eli and I will get you settled into your new home. You should take some time to relax and get settled before your rigorous training and physical examinations are to begin."

Ezra nodded with one final glance up at the sky. He didn’t know why, perhaps it was just the thought of never seeing the crew again, never leaving Chiss space, or maybe even worry that he might not do well on the tests or with the war effort, but Ezra had a bad feeling settling into the pit of his stomach.

“Yeah, okay!” he repeated more surely. “Let’s go.”

It had been three days.
Csaus was colder than Sposia but parsecs warmer than Csilla. Most of the planet was stuck in permanent Fall, the leaves orange and crisp, the ground earthy with dark soil and yellow grass. It was about an half hour shuttle ride from Csilla, making it closer to the main world of the Chiss and farther from the edge of space and Myrkr. That was okay though. Thrawn and Eli found Ezra an available plot of land near the large factory structure that acted as Tharin’s lab space with the Inrokini, and managed to arrange it in Ezra's name.

The lab, as well as the houses, were built tall and long, with round roofs and almost bunker-like doors. According to Eli, this was to make sure the inhabitants could survive a nuclear explosion should one of the Inrokini inventions go wrong. Ezra would have spent his entire time here believing that, had Thrawn not alerted him to Eli’s joke, and later revealed that it was just the way the Inrokini made architecture, solely an artistic preference on their part and having nothing to do with safety features.

Ezra sat up from his bed and looked around at his new house. It was small, but big enough for one person to live comfortably. There was a bed and a kitchen in the open area, a refresher behind a closed off wall, and near the front door there was also a fairly roomy storage closet for what Ezra assumed was for clothes and inventions the scientists brought home to tinker with after hours.

Back on Lothal, Ezra was always used to living alone, but after all those years with the Ghost crew, he started to feel a new sense of loneliness that he never really realized he had growing up. At least here he had Jorj to keep him company, and that was already helping him transition back to his new solitude.

Ezra looked to the corner and saw Jorj on his Olbio tree that they brought from Ar'alani’s ship. The lazy lizard growing more orange scales and patches of fur each day. Thrawn had asked Ezra to continue to look after the Ysalamir while he was busy with the military, and Ezra could do that. He wasn't sure if Thrawn had ever been serious about keeping the Ysalamir in the first place since he more often than not always left it with him, but then again... Thrawn had been the one to take Jorj off-world with them and he really did seem to enjoy spending time with the little guy whenever he was around?

"Knock knock!" Eli’s voice said.

"Oh, hey!" Ezra greeted.

"We're about to head back to Naporar, but Thrawn and I thought we'd drop by to check in and see how you're getting settled."

"Is everything here to your liking?" Thrawn asked.

"No, it's great," Ezra said quickly. "Tharin hasn't broken in since that first day and she promised not to watch me sleep anymore, so—"

Eli laughed.

"We meant with the house. How do you like it? Is is big enough? How's your lizard? How are you?"

"Jorj likes it here, but he still mostly hangs out on his tree or in our new backpack."

“We should endeavor to plant the Olbio sapling outside...” Thrawn thought aloud. “The tree will grow much larger there and the planter is set to expand at the core so as to integrate the roots with the Csaus soil.”
“Neat!” Ezra said. “I’ll find a shovel and do that soon then.”

“If you need tools,” Eli motioned. “You’re on the right planet. The Inrokini will have a lot more at their disposal than Sposia. They are always changing to new technology here, while the Sabosen—well—they’re kind of old fashioned.”

“I noticed. But hey, how long do you think it’ll be before I get one of those cool white TIE fighters like Tharin’s!?”

“Why don’t you worry about passing your tests first and we’ll see what we can do about your personal ship later on.”

“Thrawn’s right, Ezra. You’re going to be tested, so you need to hunker down and get focused. This place won’t be as nice as Sposia was. The people here are curious and some of them downright mad. You’re like a new toy to them on this planet. It’s best you don’t draw any more attention to yourself while you’re here by flying around in some fancy prototype airship!”

"I got it!” Ezra said with a tired, comical wave. "Honestly, what are you, my mom and dad? Look, I got this! I’m totally fine on Csaus. But...” He smirked and scratched at his chin with a hidden embarrassment brewing against his will. "Well... Thanks for checking in one last time before you get back to the military. I appreciate it. Really."

“It is our pleasure,” Thrawn bowed. "In any case, I suppose we will leave you to get settl—” Thrawn paused, his brows arching as a ping came from the chiss comm at his side. He lifted it and spoke in Cheunh when he answered, the voice on the other side revealing herself to be a woman, *her tone familiar*. Ezra thought. *Maybe Ar’alani’s voice?* She sounded less hasty and more concerned though as Ezra and Eli watched Thrawn’s entire face contort into a ball of mixed confusion and rage.

He cursed suddenly, and stormed away in a haste, his words still blaring into his comm as the door opened swiftly and then slid shut behind him.

“What was that all about?” Ezra asked with raised brows.

Eli didn’t move, only stood there, his gaze fixed on the bare white wall of Ezra’s new home. The confusion welling around in his stomach suddenly turned to worry, and then to panic.

“Eli, what’s going on?” He asked again.

Just then, the captain’s own comm started to beep and he answered it much like Thrawn. Though his words were distant, his eyes never left their point on the wall. He said a final Cheunh word and pocketed his comm as he blinked and then frowned, his anger bubbling into determination as he let out a snarl to himself and then bounded towards the door.

“Eli!”

The man stopped mid-stride and looked back to Ezra with a pained expression of worry, hate, and horror churning around in his bronze-colored eyes. He gripped the archway until his knuckles turned white and shook his head, his face struggling to come up with a series of words to translate whatever serious message he and Thrawn had just received from Ar’alani.

Ezra stepped forward, trying his best to stay calm, though the horrible feeling welling around in his stomach was starting to become too strong to ignore.

“What happened, Eli?”
Admiral Ar'alani says that the shuttle transporting the Chimera crew home was found abandoned near the outer border of the Chiss Ascendancy. His voice was contemptuous but professional as he swallowed and finished his statement. “The Chiss aboard were both found killed and the humans—” He slammed a fist into the wall. “They were taken captive by the leaders of the Far Outsiders. They—” he shut his eyes tight and when they opened, they were more pain than rage and he slammed his fist one more time into the open doorway. “They were kidnapped by the Yuuzhan Vong!”

Ezra felt himself go sideways, but he stilled himself. *What did that mean? Who were the Yuuzhan Vong? Why would they kidnap the humans for no reason? And, how did they know the crew's ship was even out there to begin with?* His brows lowered but when he looked back up to meet Eli’s gaze their looks were one and the same in determination.

“What are we going to do?”

There was a look in his eyes, one that Ezra didn’t recognize anymore. The Eli Vanto Ezra knew was gone, replaced suddenly by a clear-headed and controlled tactical commander. He looked to him and without a second thought, motioned for Ezra to follow him out the door.

“Come on. We’re going to get them back!”

Ezra nodded and followed him through the door, leaving Jorj behind as a new rush of feelings and emotions started draining back to him with the Force.

"I feel them..."

"The crew?" Eli asked.

"I feel their pain. They're... nearby..."

"That's good," Eli said sternly. "If you can sense them then that means we'll be able to find them and plan out a rescue. Get on your comm and tell Tharin to watch over your Ysalamir, while we're gone! Where we're going... it's best if you left him behind."

"Eli..."

There was a darkness in Ezra's eyes, the visions and conflict of pain now pounding into his mind without Jorj there to act as a buffer. Eli instantly noticed this shift in the boy's mood, but he was far too concerned with finding Thrawn and getting back to their ship to worry about stopping the boy's rage.

"Yeah?"

"I want you to tell me everything about the Yuuzhan Vong."

"Easy... these aren't your run of the mill bad guys out here Bridger, these are the most terrifying aliens I've ever had the displeasure of encountering... and to top it all off, they're extremely nasty."

"I don't care!" he yelled. "You and Thrawn brought me here to fight, well that's just what I'm going to do! I don't care how many there are, and I don't care how evil they are! I promised that I'd never let my team— my friends— die again and if it means I have to fight my way through an entire army, then that's just what I'm going to do!"

Eli wanted to roll his eyes, to ask the boy how he expected to accomplish all these ambitions without a weapon, a plan, or a clue as to what he was about to step into. Though, at the same time,
he sensed a powerful aura around the young Jedi that made him suddenly think about the intense dedication all Chiss soldiers had when they decided to commit themselves to something. Chiss didn't make idle boasts or promises. He thought again, the phrase from his childhood stories coming back to him as it always did when he sensed this kind of powerful promise leaving the lips of someone he worked alongside. Once they set their minds to something, they succeed or died in the attempt.

"Alright," Eli said simply. "You want to prove yourself, then listen up. I'm not going to let you run off half-cocked into the Chiss war without knowing as much as you can about the enemy we're about to face."

They hurried onto Eli's shuttle and saw Thrawn already waiting to go in his seat. He didn't acknowledge Ezra's presence for more than a moment before Eli sat and instantly sent their ship soaring off towards Ar'alani's coordinates and jumping to light-speed along the designated route within the path of Houses. As they traveled, Eli's brows furrowed, the entire ship tense with thought, but he still managed to debrief Ezra on the enemy, and even managed to tell a few stories about them from personal experience. Ezra listened to each word and focused hard on what he would do when they came face to face with these monsters.

He wanted to be a part of the fight, and now... he was about to find out just how useful he could really be. No one was dying on him... not again... never again! And Ezra would do whatever it takes to make sure that this stayed true, no matter what.


**Roadblock**

Chapter Summary

Ezra, Thrawn, and Eli are in pursuit of the stolen Imperials, but before the rescue mission can begin, they face an obstacle within the Chiss Ascendancy, and perhaps one or two more along the way.

Chapter Notes

Posted on: September 3, 2018

"We're here."

Ezra shot up from his seat and hurried over to the viewport, half expecting to see the Nuruodo shuttle floating dead in space, broken and abandoned as the result of some major battle between it and the Yuuzhan Vong. He stopped after only a few steps when it hit him, an old memory. One where he had once watched Hera's RZ-1 A-wing interceptor just barely make it out of a hyperspace jump near some Mandalorian moon base. *Concord something or other*, he couldn't really remember the name. While the memory wasn't all there, he still remembered being scared for Hera, wondering if she was alive or dead, and wondering why her and her team had been gunned down in the first place. *It was supposed to have been a peaceful mission, wasn't it? This was supposed to be peaceful too... but it wasn't. Why are things never easy?*

He tried to log the memory away, but at the same time, the flash brought with it just the slightest drop of something else, a happy memory tied into all the resurfaced pain and horror. If he was remembering it correctly, Sabine had painted a tiny Kanan near the rear end of Hera's A-wing viewport with a caption that read "moonbeam" in blue and gold letters just below him. Ezra still didn't really understand why she'd done that, but he remembered laughing when he first saw it.

He shot back to the present and took another step, this one slow. It was just a flicker, just a bittersweet glimpse of a time back when he was once so happy. Sure there was a war going on, and the stakes had never been higher, but Ezra clearly remembers it being one of the happiest times of his life. But that time was over now, and just like all of his old memories, it faded away into just that, leaving Ezra with only the constant pain of knowing that they were all gone now. Hera, Kanan, Zeb, Sabine... Not to mention the fresh new fear he felt wondering if his friends from the Chimera would soon be joining their fate.

Ezra blinked and shook his head, gripping the backs of both chairs as he looked out through the viewport, only... there was no damaged shuttle. Instead his eyes met with a massive Chiss warship nearly three times the size of the one that had come to pick them up from Sposia. It was beautiful and past his visible confusion, Ezra couldn't help but look upon the grand ship in amazement for a few split seconds before he remembered the severity of why they had flown out this far in the first place.

*This wasn't the scene of the crime, was it? So, why were they here? Shouldn't they be going*
after the Yuuzhan Vong? They were wasting precious time with this—whatever they were doing, and all the while the Vong were getting further and further away with the Imperials. But what could he do? They were already landing in the middle of the Chiss hangar bay. Visibly disappointed, he crossed his arms and sauntered over to the door at the back of the ship, waiting for it to open as Thrawn and Eli stood from their seats upfront and walked with him down the platform.

"So hey, where are we?" he asked, his voice rising with the impending restlessness of a man eager to take on an entire army with nothing but his bare hands.

Considering no one handed him a blaster, he didn't have his lightsaber, and there were no spare weapons just lying around Eli's ship, Ezra seriously considered that he would need to do just that. In hindsight... he thought. Maybe a quick stop to a major Chiss military vessel was a good thing after all? Maybe they were just here for some supplies and a faster ship? That had to be it, right?

"This Admiral Ar'alani's main fleetship," Eli answered simply. "The one you saw her in before was just a cruiser sent for the trial. This is her real command station. It's pretty nice isn't it?"

"Oh," he replied, wanting to sound more impressed, but honestly the words were just coming out dry and a little dumbfounded. "Okay, so what are we doing here?"

Eli pointed to the lightly damaged shuttle that Ezra immediately recognized as the one responsible for taking the Imperials off of Csilla... the same one that was so close to getting them home before the attack. He'd admit, the damage was nowhere near as bad as he thought it'd be, but the fear and anger were there nonetheless. He tried his best to will negative feelings out of him, but it was hard, the stories Eli and Thrawn had told him about the Vong were making his blood boil and his brain worry every second the other humans were in captivity of such a violent species of invaders.

"We're here to get our orders, some gear, and hopefully a little evidence," Eli said dryly, shooting a somewhat aggravated look back at Ezra. "Do you always ask this many questions out on a mission?"

Ezra frowned. Judging by Eli's tone, he was just as worried as Ezra was about the Imperials, and Ezra's obvious tension probably wasn't helping him.

"Right... sorry..."

Eli sighed once and shook his head.

"No, I'm sorry for snapping at you. Look, I'm just a little worried is all. All those Yuuzhan Vong stories really brought up some— well frankly, they brought back some pretty bad memories. Ones that I'd just sooner forget rather than go out and re-live, but here we are. Because of that, I'm a little on edge thinking about what they might be doing to the Chimera crew right now."

"Yeah..." Ezra frowned, his brows arching in that same angry, determined way they had back on Csaus. "I know what you mean..."

"Calm yourselves, Ezra, Eli..." Thrawn warned. "Need I remind you that the Yuuzhan Vong are actually a people who value life more than their bloody history would reveal? No, they will not kill their hostages unless provoked to do so, and I strongly believe that none of the Imperials would. Even if some should try to fight back, Commodore Faro would no doubt be able to assess the dangers of their situation and would have already ordered them not to engage any further. They will be kept safe so long as they are travelling."
"I sure hope so..." Eli huffed. "For all their sakes, I really hope so."

"Okay, I'll try to keep calm," Ezra said, his voice an unconvincing blend of haste and paranoia. "But this isn't going to take long, right? I mean, couldn't we grab a few blasters and the Admiral can just give us our orders over the comm so we can just head over there right now to stop the scout ship from escaping?"

"If you wanted us all to die maybe?" Eli shot him a half grin. "You really think running in there without a good readout of the situation is going to save all your friends? Did you even listen to any of those stories I told back on my ship?"

"Point taken," he said, his face twisting with a look of regret for even bringing it up in the first place.

"This is a somewhat... sensitive situation..." Thrawn replied, a thoughtful edge to his voice. "And because of this, Admiral Ar'alani had no other choice but to involve the counsel of the Aristocra."

"They're probably meeting with her right now, talking about options and the ways we should be proceeding."

“I admit that the process is not ideal, though communication and planning are trademark assets of the Chiss. Likewise, knowing Admiral Ar'alani, she already has a plan prepared for our counterattack against the Yuuzhan Vong's scouting vessel, and will no doubt debrief us with it as soon as we get to her office.”

Ezra nodded in understanding and quickened his pace through the halls.

“Good to know. In that case, let’s hurry, get the intel, and then get out of here.”

“Is your connection with the others starting to fade, Ezra?” Thrawn asked.

“No…” he replied hesitantly. “I just want to get them back as soon as possible. How long ago were they taken?”

“About eighteen hours,” Eli repeated. “Since this was a routed path to Thrawn’s exile world along the edge of Imperial space, the Nuruodo pilots weren’t using a guide and shut down their hyperdrive from the moment they left the known Chiss hyperspace routes. That means they were probably flying for about a day or so when the Yuuzhan Vong scout ship saw them and attacked. Once the shuttle missed their check-in with the Admiral, she must have known something went wrong and came here as fast as she could.”

“And the Yuuzhan Vong’s vessels are not equipped with hyperdrives," Thrawn continued. "Nor are they allowed in Chiss territory, meaning their travel home will take far longer than it would for one of our own ships to complete.”

“Like I was telling you on the way here, kid, the Vong hate all variations of technology. Their typical attacks in the past have proven to be completely organic in nature with bio-engineered weaponry implemented through the use of organ splicing or deploying genetically modified insects or warriors to fight.”

“I remember.” He nodded. "Why do they hate technology so much?"

“No one really knows, and we don’t stick around long enough to ask.” Eli snapped his fingers and pointed to the air. “Now the Grysks and the Vagaari. They have no problem using weapons and other tech, but they never equip it when they’re running missions with the Vong directly. At least,
not with the Vong knowing about it. That’s one of the reasons why we know that they acted alone on this attack of the Imperial's escort shuttle.”

“Because they left the ship for us to find?” Ezra guessed.

“Now you’re catching on.” His grin faded into a stern frown just as a hand came up to stroke at the beard along his chin. “It’s odd though. Typically the Vong don’t do such lengthy missions, not even with their lower class shuttles. They normally send out the Grysks, the Vagaari, or some other enslaved species to do this sort of mission for them.” He shot a knowing look up at Thrawn. “Did you get a look at the recovered ship on our way in?”

Thrawn nodded.

“Light cosmetic damage on the exterior. Meaning our attackers were after more than just a small victory in their recent attack.”

“What do you mean?” Ezra asked.

“If the Vong really were out there scouting the edge of space, then they would never take the risk of a Chiss ship noticing and stopping them. The only reason they even got that close in the first place must have meant they were being pretty sneaky and taking a long route around Chiss territories. They’d probably been flying for months just to get to that point alone.”

Thrawn nodded at Eli’s statement and added to it…

“So it is safe to assume, a warlike people with a long history of violence against the Chiss would not hesitate to utterly annihilate a small Chiss-made freighter without second glance, less the risk of ruining all those months of patience and planning.”

“Only they didn’t?” Ezra finished. “Meaning they were probably after something else on board, and because of that they couldn’t risk just blowing the whole thing up?”

“That "something" being leaked intel from our resident traitor telling the Vong that the ship’s passengers were a bunch of humans…”

“Perhaps,” Thrawn said. “It would explain why the two Chiss soldiers were the only deaths discovered in the skirmish. Though, I would have to look at the evidence aboard more closely to determine the amount of struggle that was put into the fight before the two deaths occurred.”

“The two that we know of…” Eli muttered, groaning afterwards as they rounded the last hallway on their way to the Admiral's meeting chambers. “I’m with Ezra on this one. The sooner we get the Imperials back here with us, the better.”

Thrawn's stance tightened, his displeasure of the thought of the Chimera crew in danger apparently just as strong as Eli's and Ezra's, though as usual, his voice remained just as level and even as ever when he finally gave his response.

“Agreed. The Admiral's office is just ahead, let's proceed there post-haste, shall we?”

"You read my mind, Commander."
The three stopped suddenly when they saw the lone guard waiting for them in the middle of the hallway leading to Ar'alani’s office. He was not a soldier, he had no weapons, nor did he wear any sort of armor, but it was obvious by his mere presence that he was there to ensure none of them made it inside the conference room. The question everyone was asking themselves now was why?

Thrawn and Eli’s shoulders squared derisively upon seeing the man aboard, but no one said anything until their footsteps halted right in front of him, leaving Ezra the first of the group to speak up.

“Uh, Syndic Thrass? What are you doing all the way out here?”

“My brother is here for me,” Thrawn said simply, his voice calm but cold as he put two and two together.

His assumption seemed to hit the mark because Thrass shut his eyes and let out a long, tired breath in response.

Ezra watched him, looking frantically back at Eli and Thrawn for some sort of explanation.

“But why?”

“Because the Aristocra have already decided that we aren’t going anywhere—” Eli ground out.

“Haven’t they Mitth’ras’safis?”

He shot the captain a warning glance.

“You forget yourself, Cssoboti...”

“What do you mean we’re not going anywhere?” Ezra blurted, his anger rising as he too started to understand the reason for Thrass’ presence aboard this ship. “What about our friends? What about the Vong?”

“And what had they to say about the deaths of Kres’ten’tarthi and Felj’ag’soontir?” Thrawn asked, his tone still calm but with a sharp edge to it.

“Sev’eree’nuruodo would never allow the deaths of two Nuruodo soldiers to just be glanced over without a retaliation! What’d she have to say about all this?”

“Yeah!”

Thrass looked to each of them as they spoke, his red eyes visibly exhausted, but his patience holding firm as he finally locked gazes with his brother.

“Where is Admiral Ar’alani?” Thrawn asked, his face looking much the same way.

“In a meeting with the Aristocra, I’m afraid,” Thrass finally replied. “She gave me specific orders not to let you disturb her. I am instead tasked to take you to collect evidence on the Nuruodo shuttle which the Admiral procured earlier today.” He looked down to Ezra with a tight frown. "And to answer your question, Ezra Bridger, I am here because it was my proposal which orbited the lives affected by this attack. Therefore I am responsible for this aftermath as well."

"I think you mean "revolved" sir..." Eli offered. "Not orbited."

Thrass shot him a look that simultaneously meant he had categorized the term to memory for future use, as well as warned the captain not to correct him again. Eli held up his hands in defeat, and
didn't even wait before he turned and started back the way they'd just come.

"Shall we go?" He said, his voice uncomfortably formal and tense, even for Thrass' standards.

The two brothers then shared one long look at one another before finally, Thrawn nodded and started to follow.

“Very well. Lead the way, Brother.”


“The evidence is well worth the look, Ezra. I will be able to determine the level of threat from the clues left within.” Thrawn said knowingly, his voice holding a lingering sense of warning that meant he didn’t want to hear anymore argument from the impatient young Jedi.

"Fine..." He frowned, swallowed hard, but didn’t protest any further as the four headed back towards the hangar.

“As we walk, brother, do you wish to tell me what has happened?”

“Thrawn, may I speak with you privately?” Thrass asked in Cheunh.

“You may say whatever it is you need to say in front of my confidants,” Thrawn replied in that same language. “In Basic if you don’t mind.”

Eli shot the brothers a sideways glance, but kept on walking. Thrass knew Eli was already fairly fluent in Cheunh, so that must mean he was trying to say something he didn’t want Ezra to hear. This ought to be good. It was just one roadblock after another, and Eli seriously doubted any of their superiors would be happy about the two of them bringing a non-human who just got off trial aboard Ar'alani’s fleetship.
Thrass stretched his frown with a shake of his head, but when he spoke up, it was once again in his regal and heavily accented Basic.

“Fine!” he spat. “Do you have any idea the repercussions of your bringing Ezra aboard so shortly after the trial? Ar’alani and Vereen can only do so much—I can only do so much to protect you in these trying times. What will it take for you to finally understand that?”

“I have considered the risks, but you elect to ignore my questions...” Thrawn retorted. “Tell us what has happened here.”

Thrass sighed. *Thick-headed as always.*

“None think that this attack on the border was simply an accident and they believe the traitor is to blame for the targeting of the ship.”

“And the crew?”

“The deaths of our men will not go unpunished, but it is by the unified agreement of all four Aristocra that a rescue team not be deployed until we are more aware of what the Far Outsiders hope to gain by this kidnapping.”

“What’s to know!?” Ezra blurted harshly. “They’re in trouble and we need to get them back!”
“I can’t believe the Aristocra would want to sit out on a fight like this? I mean, sure the humans aren’t blood born citizens or anything, but what about honor? What about Nuruodo House’s responsibility to see the humans safely home? Especially when two of her own men were killed!” Eli spat the last of his words out, his tone much harder and more confused than Thrawn’s, but still managing to be more respectful and level-headed than Ezra’s. "What are they thinking?"

“Perhaps they fear the possibility of a trap in play and they do not wish to sacrifice more life by activating such risks?” Thrawn considered.

“Fear of the unknown has never stopped Vereen before,” Thrass argued, his eyes focused on his brother's face. “No… I sense a deeper connection here. One that none of us are currently aware of.”

“Well then we need to get aware!” Eli stated as the four approached the wrecked ship and stepped aboard.

"The bodies have already been removed and examined," Thrass informed. "Though no other changed have been made to the ship since Ar'alani brought it aboard."

As if he even needed to say that. Still, even without the corpses, Ezra could smell the death aboard long before he saw the scratches and blood staining the walls and floor. It was unsettling, but not the worst thing he'd ever seen. Still, Ezra stuck close to Syndic Thrass in an attempt to stay out of Thrawn and Eli's way.

Meanwhile, the two stepped forward and Eli shot Thrawn a predictable grin as his hand motioned to the crime scene before them.

“Commander, do your thing.”

Thrawn did not return the look, but stepped forward nonetheless, his infrared eyes narrowed as he observed all evidence of the downed ship, scanning the hull to better understand the deadly battle that took place here just a few hours prior.

Evidence shows that the Chiss or Imperial passengers put up a struggle. Blood near the entrance reveals the final stand Stent and Jag may have taken before their deaths. Scratches and damage to the walls reveal short-range weapons, most likely swords or claw marks, the typical weapon of choice for Yuuzhan Vong, but the complete lack of blaster fire reveals the traces of the Yuuzhan Vong, rather their enslaved work forces such as the Grysks or the Vagaari. It also reveals a lack of preparedness for the Chiss soldiers when they came under attack.

He traced the dents and scuffs with his fingers.

“They had bugs,” Eli pointed. “I’d recognize that scorching anywhere. It’s typical Vong weaponry used to get aboard a shuttle, but the Grysks have been known to use them from time to time too.”

“The only reason we know this was in fact the Yuuzhan Vong and not the Grysks,” Thrawn pointed. “Is left evident by the ship itself.”

“You’re right,” Eli nodded. “Grysks wouldn’t bat an eye stealing tech and goods aboard, but the Vong wouldn’t care about any of that.”

"They could have been ordered to leave the shuttle?” Thrass offered.

“Ah, but note too, the weapons used in the battle. No blaster residue or burn marks aboard would suggest that the Chiss soldiers were unable to draw their own weapons in time to defend themselves, though the blood trail back to this entrance reveals that they did manage to put up a
“What’s that black stuff there?” Ezra pointed.

“That is the blood of the enemy.” Thrass replied in a low tone. “The Yuuzhan Vong bleed blackened blood that is rumored to have been tarnished just as dark as their souls eons ago by vengeful gods.”

“Or so the fairy tales and stories would have us believe,” Thrawn added.

“Question is…” Eli stopped. “If the Vong spent all that time and planning to get out here, why throw it all away for one ship? Why waste time and effort getting aboard rather just blowing it to pieces? And why kidnap the humans?”

“Their very presence so close to the border only prove that the Yuuzhan Vong were already in this area at the time of the attack. Likewise, they did not merely happen upon the Chiss shuttle by accident, less they simply destroy the ship as you have suggested. No… The only reason they would perform such an intricate attack as was Ezra had suggested earlier. The attackers knew that there was something on board with which they hoped to capture. In this case, the human Imperials.”

“The traitor then?” Thrass mentioned.

Eli nodded. “It’s the only logical explanation. The traitor must have found out the human’s route and told the Vong knowing they had a scouting ship already in this area.” He frowned. “But the only ones who knew the route were—” His eyes went wide as she shot around to meet Thrawn’s gaze.

“One of the Aristocra,” Thrawn finished, his tone revealing that the Chiss had already come to the conclusion on his own some time ago, but apparently hadn’t felt like sharing such knowledge with him.

“Wait!” Ezra paused. “You mean to tell me that one of the Aristocra is the traitor you’re all so worried about?!”

“That is the current hypothesis anyway,” Thrass nodded. “Though Thrawn was unable to gather enough evidence at the trial to outright reveal the traitor on that day, isn’t that correct, brother?”

Thrawn frowned, his eyes still scanning the evidence aboard the shuttle as they stopped once again on the pool of blood near the self-made entrance point of the infiltrators.

Without reply, Thrass turned his attention over to Vanto for another question.

“Captain Vanto, you alone are one of the only humans on record to have ever encountered the Yuuzhan Vong and live to tell about it. Why do you believe they would target the humans and take only them as captives before killing the two Chiss aboard?”

Eli thought about that, and had been thinking about it ever since they left Csaus, but in all that time he’d managed to come up with at least a few ideas that could answer such a question.

“Well, they might have been curious to see the humans because of their outward appearances? They might also have recognized the Chiss and killed them on sight based on their long standing feud with your people. Come to think of it though, their bio-poison didn’t affect me like it’s supposed to do to the Chiss, so maybe the Vong wanted to study that aspect of human biology as well and needed some human test subjects? More likely though, I suspect the passengers put up a
fight, which led to the Chiss soldiers being killed. I suppose I wouldn’t know based on what I’m looking at here, but judging by the blood and strike marks, it doesn’t really seem like the humans played a major role in this battle. What do you think, Thrawn?"

Thrawn’s face contorted against his will into a look of pride, his smile seeming even more pleased with Eli’s theories as he nodded his head in agreement and looked back to the man before placing a hand on his shoulder.

“Excellent deductions, Captain, although, I was under the impression that none in that attack with you were left alive to tell the tale of such observations?”

“That’s what I thought too, but—” He shrugged. “It doesn’t hurt to consider it a possible motive until we know for sure.”

“Indeed. At any rate, here is what we know based on the evidence aboard this shuttle. Late yesterday night, two Vong warriors infiltrated the vessel via the silent hole burned through the metal of the ceiling, there!” He pointed to the welded husk of a hole torn into the top of the ship. “The hole was small, leaving room for only one attacker to enter at a time. I suspect the humans were already sleeping at the time and were quickly incapacitated with drugs or silent blows before the attackers continued through the corridor for the pilots.” He walked forward and stopped at the controls before gesturing to the splattered blood across the buttons and viewport. “The co-pilot had his throat slit before the main pilot could reach for his blaster, presumably due to the second attacker aboard.” Thrawn pointed to the blood, but then diverted his gaze to the black blood against the back of the co-pilot’s chair. “It was then that the dying co-pilot stole the knife away from his own attacker and managed to pierce it before he collapsed to the ground, dead. Meanwhile, the main pilot was already to his feet, and was able to draw the Vong back towards the entrance where he no doubt noted the unconscious humans, was unable to determine if they were dead or unharmed, and continued his battle with his assailant.” The black blood trailed up the walkway and Thrawn pointed to the massive puddle of red Chiss blood near the entrance to the hole. “He was then stabbed from behind by the wounded attacker before dying here. The humans were then taken one by one into the Vong scout ship before they made their escape and left the wreckage discarded behind them.”

Eli whistled.

_Only you._ He thought to himself, impressed as always by Thrawn’s ability to read the tiny details of the scene. _He’d admit that he had figured out a few of those points himself, but would never have been able to determine which soldier had died when and where. Sometimes Thrawn's ability to observe and breakdown a situation bordered on the phenomenal._

“So two attackers were responsible and the Chiss shuttle sustained only minimal damage. That could confirm that the Vong’s ship was working alone and was already small in size to begin with?” Thrass deduced.

"Not necessarily," Thrawn corrected. “The Vong do not yet think we are aware of their treachery. By leaving the shuttle abandoned, we can surmise that the attackers wanted us to find it, see our dead brethren, realize the missing passengers, and exacerbate the already thin line of patience that keeps us from attacking their regions directly.”

“A trap then,” Thrass repeated. “As the Admiral and the Aristocra have surmised. Taking all of this into effect, it will take a few more days for them to get free of our system and should they make it past our borders and back into the dark regions—”

“Should that happen,” Thrawn concluded darkly. “Then the crew will be lost to us."
"Still the question remains. Why would the Vong send scouts so close to the galactic border? Why not send the Grysks or the Vagaari as they have been known to do in past reconnaissance missions?"

Eli nodded.

“And why take prisoners at all? That’s not their typical M.O.”

“M.O?” Thrass repeated.

“Their modus operandi,” Eli explained. “It means that it wasn't the typical activity of a Yuuzhan scout ship.”

“Ah!” Thrass nodded. “Perhaps the traitor told the Far Outsiders about the ship’s passengers based on what—?" He paused. “Their species being a rarity in this region? For the besmirching of Chiss honor as we failed to complete our promise to send them home? Or was it merely the bold invitation of war so we would retaliate without proper planning? We know how this attack has happened, but still not why? What could possibly have been their motive?”

“That remains to be seen,” Thrawn said. “Hence why the Aristocra are so hesitant to make a move.”

*There it was! With that, they had finally come full circle on information that everyone already knew* and Ezra couldn't take it anymore.

“We’re wasting time!” He said again, this time through gritted teeth as if the tone would help the others realize how serious he was. “We need to stop stating the obvious and go save them. Now! Whether the Aristocra allow it or not!”

“Calm yourself Ezra.” Thrawn motioned. “Thrass was merely sent here to keep me from interrupting the council and to deliver this exact information. Though, they never said anything about keeping us aboard this vessel nor grounding our forces from deployment, did they Brother?”

Thrawn smiled as the two met eyes and for once there seemed to be an equal look of mischief in both of their faces.

“They did not,” Thrass said amusingly. “Though it was probably implied. The Admiral's meeting will conclude at that point, this much is certain.”

“And once the Admiral tells us we’re grounded,” Eli started. “Then we won't be able to leave without it being tagged as blatant treason against the Aristocra’s orders.”

“But we have not yet received such orders,” Thrawn’s sneaky grin widened. “And even if we had, you, Ezra Bridger, are not under any sort of Chiss command. The Aristocra’s orders did not and will not mention you at all.”

“They most certainly did not,” Thrass replied, his smile finally fading into a more controlled look of satisfaction.

“Ar’alani’s plan all along, I presume?” Thrawn asked with a gentle incline of his head.

“A suitable craft has already been prepped, and witnesses have already seen you and your party aboard.”

“I doubt they'll be too happy when they all hear what we’re doing,” Eli stretched with a long rub of
his neck.

“But by then it will be too late for protest.”

“Sure?” Eli said sarcastically, with a long roll of his eyes. “Too late for anyone to stop us, but I’d still bet on them throwing us all in a tribunal with some Hell to pay once we get back. That is to say, if we even get back from this crazy suicide mission in the first place!”

Thrawn grinned over at Eli.

“We will probably need to walk on eggshells around our superiors for quite sometime after this mission is done. Wouldn’t you agree?”

He nodded, letting out a light scoff which formed a small smile on his face before looking back up at Thrawn.

"I would say so, yeah."

“I...” Thrass frowned. "I do not understand? Why are there eggshells where you will be walking?"

Eli and Thrawn snickered at their own inside joke before Thrawn stepped forward and shook his brother's hand.

“It does not matter. I thank you for delivering your message to us, Thrass.”

He gave him a look, but merely nodded and returned the handshake.

“Ar’alani is holding the council’s attention, she cannot offer you members of her crew for aid, so I am afraid that you three are on your own. I will smooth over any further accusations against you once you’ve gone. Good luck you three. Try not to completely ruin our reputations with this mission.”

They nodded, Ezra confused, but sensing the sneakiness going around behind the Aristocra’s backs. He was a hard guy to read, but Syndic Thrass seemed to be just as much a troublemaker as Thrawn was, wasn’t he?

“You worry too much, brother.”

Thrass shook his head.

“May warrior’s fortune smile on your efforts,” he concluded. “Bring your friends back safely, and...” he winked. “I would consider it a personal favor, Brother, if you tried your hardest not to die.”

“If that is what you wish, then I will endeavor to do so.” Thrawn smiled and nodded a final time before escorting Eli and Ezra back towards the open hangar bay.

“What just happened?”

“The council is about to decide to ground us and forbid a rescue party to be sent for the humans,” Eli whispered with a sly smirk. “But if we leave before they get the chance, then technically we’re not breaking any rules.”

“And if we were shown to have entered Ar’alani’s ship, then none could accuse us of acting on our own without first consulting the Chiss military.”
“Especially if our resident human. That’s you.” Eli pointed. “Stowed away, heard all this, and then went off and got himself put into danger trying to find his friends alone. We’d of course then have to go get you back and maybe cross the Vong’s scouting ship along the way. You get where I’m going here?”

"Wait, me?"

"Of course, is it not obvious?” Thrawn asked simply.

Ezra nodded sideways, his eyes visibly confused, as he tried to piece these points together.

“Uh, I guess? I don’t know? I mean, I’m not complaining or anything, but aren’t they still going to be mad that we’re going? Won’t they be mad at Thrass for letting you leave?”

“Yeah, but we’re not technically breaking any orders, so the worst they can do is have Sev’eree’nuruodo lecture us when we get back.” Eli shrugged. “You know, probably?”

“And my brother has never failed to get himself out of trouble, especially in matters concerning me. His presence was no doubt due to the assumption that I would hold personal vehemence to this crime, and put up a fight to be allowed permission to act. Knowing I would be going either way, Ar’alani sent him here without the Aristocra’s knowledge so I would not do so and get myself exiled again for disobeying the direct orders of my superiors.”

“And Thrass is basically going to blame the whole thing on you because you’re not in the Ascendancy yet, and technically are only here for health observations. You are in this rare loophole right now, Ezra, and right now you might as well be untouchable. We might not be officially able to go on a rescue mission for the Imperials, but a rescue mission to bring you back… well that’s a different story. Why do you think he pretended to be all mad about us bringing you in the first place?”

"Wait he was just pretending?"

"Of course."

"Had to make it look good, didn't he? Ar’alani always comes up with the best plans, I'm glad she's on our side."

"Indeed.

So Thrass was absolutely impossible to read. No, scratch that. All Chiss were impossible to read, every last one of them! Eli too! Ezra thought in defeat. Fine. Whatever. He didn't need to fully understand what they had done just to be grateful that they'd actually done it in the first place. He'd take what he could get.

“Well then… I’m happy to help. Now where’s this ship I’m supposed to be stealing?”

Both Eli and Thrawn gestured to it with a point.

“I would recommend that particular shuttle. It will have the short-range hyperdrive we need to close the gap between us and the Vong. You run in ahead and attempt to get it started. Eli and I will follow behind to make it appear you are acting impulsively on your own.”

“Got it, but what about the other Chiss?”

“They will not attempt to stop you, but if this plan is to work then you must pretend like you are
not wishing to be caught.”

“I guess I have a lot of practice doing that sort of thing, right?” Ezra smirked. “Alright. Give me two minutes.”

They were in the air no more than three minutes later, their short-range comm system conveniently disabled and their personal comm links all turned off as Eli made the jump to lightspeed and shot them away.

Ezra was sitting to himself on the back bench, his thoughts still stewing over the overlapping feelings of the Force flowing through him. It was an odd sensation, cloudy in a way that was similar to the time he’d sensed Thrawn back on Myrkr while he was carrying Jorj. No this was something different though. It was clearly a feeling of fear, of pain, but he couldn’t see the sources causing it. Still, he knew it had to be the Imperials. It just had to be them reaching out to him, right?

“Ezra.”

He jumped at the tone of Thrawn’s call and looked up from his thoughts towards the front.

“Yeah?”

Thrawn motioned him to the controls.

“Come here for a moment. I wish to test a theory.”

Ezra stood and went over, a little hesitant because the last time Thrawn told him he wanted to do some sort of “experiment” he ended up getting a rock thrown at his head.

“Uh, sure... What is it?”

“I have witnessed precognitive abilities in my past that allow Force sensitives such as yourself to navigate and track safe starship routes through unknown space. In rarer circumstances, I have even seen this ability used to track stolen persons by the Far Outsiders.”

He nodded.

“Yeah, okay, I guess I can see that?”

“Oh really? You know of this ability?”

Considering Vader’s response to this topic, Thrawn was a little taken aback to hear Ezra’s immediate acceptance of the mention of this power.

“Well kind of? See, the Force is everywhere, and sometimes it guides me where I need to go. Just like when I found you on Myrkr. It makes sense that someone could try to use that power deliberately, right?”

“I see...” Thrawn hummed. ”At any cause, I've come to know this ability as "third sight" but unfortunately I am somewhat ignorant of the true capabilities of this power."
There was a lingering sense that no matter how much explaining Ezra did, Thrawn would never be able to truly understand the thing that he was describing. Hadn't Thrawn told him once before that the Force was something confusing for him? It didn't matter... that was a question for later.

For now, Ezra just kept quiet and nodded his head.

Still, the Chiss seemed to accept Ezra's meager explanation and immediately pointed a finger out the starboard viewport to continue the point of his statement.

“As we approach the edge of Chiss Space, I wish for you to act as pilot and navigator so you may direct us through the unknown factors of these uncharted regions. Using your third sight, you will be able to redirect the ship at a moments notice and adjust our course safely until we come upon our target.”

“Really? You want me to take over? I’ve never tried anything like that before. Are you sure?”

“I know you are strong enough,” Thrawn smiled. “And it is of course, the fastest path to regaining distance between us and the Vong attackers. This way we do not have to drop out of hyperspace and we reach the crew in time to stage a proper rescue with the element of surprise also at our benefit.”

"And believe me, we need the benefit!” Eli said, half-joking.

“I don’t know…” Ezra hummed. On one hand, he wanted to get the crew as quickly as possible. On the other, he didn’t want to mess this up and accidentally crash the ship into a meteor or something and kill them all. They had a good idea what path the Vong slipped in to get here, but could they really risk all the Imperials lives on what was essentially a guess? Also, what if they were too late? If the Vong got passed the border... it was all over.

He looked to Eli for advice, and the man merely stood and motioned at the controls with a laugh.

“They’re all yours, kid.” He paused a moment and shot a look between him and Thrawn. “Wait, you do know how to fly a Chiss shuttle don’t you?”

“Is it anything like flying a regular shuttle?”

Eli shrugged.

“I mean… I guess they’re pretty similar. Maybe a little inverted on a few of the controls, but other than that. Yeah?”

“Then I’ll be fine.” He smiled confidently as he took a seat and familiarize himself with the controls. His smile wavered for a fraction of a second when he realized he couldn’t read any of the labels or readouts on the control board, but in the heat of battle, who really had time to look down at those sorts of things? "You know, probably?"

“You’re not exactly inspiring confidence—”

“Ezra will be a sufficient pilot,” Thrawn interrupted. “In the meantime, Eli, I suggest you and I come up with a plan for the rescue.” He got a coy smile and swapped over to a language that Eli hadn’t heard him speak with for quite some time. “Perhaps we should converse in this language so as to not distract Ezra from his piloting.”

Eli nodded, the nostalgia welling up in him as he shot the Commander a warm grin.
“Whatever you say,” he responded in that language.

“Hey! Hey!” Ezra frowned. “What happened to the Basic? I heard my name. What is that? It doesn’t really sound like Cheunh?”

“It’s Sy Bisti.” Eli answered. “Thrawn and I don’t want you getting distracted by our plan while you’re focusing your Force power to maneuver the ship.”

His lip twisted, but Ezra stared back at the viewport in reluctant acceptance.

“Fine...” he sighed. “You’re not leaving me here when we actually do catch up with them though, right?”

Eli looked to Thrawn. If it were up to him, Ezra would absolutely be left with the ship. All his rumored fighting prowess and ability or no, the Vong were truly terrifying and if Eli were a betting man, he’d know there were going to be some things too horrible for someone like Ezra to witness on-board. At least, nothing that Eli would ever want a kid his age having to see, anyway...

“You will be coming down with us, of course. The ship will be placed in slow orbit near the vessel so long as I hold this beckon call given to me by my brother.”

“When did he give—?” Ezra started, but shoved the question from his mind when he realized that he really didn’t care. “Nevermind. What should I do when we get close to the Vong ship?”

“Now we’re going to be relying on your instincts here, Ezra!” Eli warned seriously. “When you think we’re close enough within range of their ship, you press this button and it’ll knock us out of hyperspace.”

“At the same time, we are also placing our trust in your ability to maneuver around any obstacles that might stand between our route and their ship.”

“Right,” Eli nodded. “One wrong move and our battle strategy ain’t gonna do us much good, you got that? No pressure or anything.”

Ezra matched the nervous smirk Eli was giving him and nodded.

“Right. No pressure!”

“Good man,” Thrawn said. “Now, Eli, if you will join me at the back of the shuttle, we can begin working out our list of possible strategies.”

Eli rubbed roughly at Ezra’s hair before the boy shooed him away and the two faded towards the back of the shuttle.

Okay... Okay... no sweat. You can do this! You can do this!

Ezra took in a deep breath and closed his eyes, focusing through the Force in order to find his friends. The connection to them was still there, still distant but noticeable as he centered himself relatively easy in the pilot’s chair. A small asteroid was up ahead, and Ezra felt his hand calmly tilt the controls just enough to safely avoid it without spinning them out of hyperspace. A few minutes later, there was another bit of space debris and he hardly noticed this time as his hands were working automatically, translating the Force into guidance as he continued soaring across the stars.

Soon, even the odd Sy Bisti conversation happening between Thrawn and Eli vanished as he became one with the ship and the space surrounding it. It took all of his focus, but in the end, the
connection was simple enough. If it meant getting his friends back from the enemy, there was
nothing he wouldn’t do to reach them, even if it meant learning some strange new Force ability
from Thrawn of all people. He’d have to ask about the story that led him to the knowledge of this
ability later. For now, he had one goal in mind, and it waited for him like the light at the end of a
dark tunnel.

He flew this way for how long, he wasn't really sure? Until finally, the light intensified and Ezra
pressed the small button on the controls as the ship fell out of hyperspeed. There, barely visible in
the distance, was the Yuuzhan Vong's scouting ship. Plenty of distance left between them so there
was no way for them to be seen by any of the Vong aboard.

Relief swelled over him, sweat sliding down his forehead, but he didn't care. He had done it!

"We're here..." Ezra called weakly, his vision a little blurry and black spots blinking through his
eyes as he tried to rub the sore feeling away. His connection was strong, but it was still apparently
taxing to his energy. He wondered if the other force user Thrawn had watched use this navigation
ability was this tired after they had done it?

“Excellent work, Ezra!” Thrawn praised, he and Eli now huddled behind his chair.

“Is that the ship?” Ezra asked tiredly. "It's... bigger than I thought it'd be?"

“That's them alright,” Eli said, his voice hard. “But that’s more than a measly scout ship!”

“It seems we have happened upon a fleetship." Thrawn's voice hummed low and concerned. "This
could... complicate things.”

“You're damn right it does!” Eli scoffed out a nervous laugh. “There’s three of us! That thing
probably holds hundreds of Vong soldiers!”

"Thrawn, I thought you said it was a small ship?"

"I only mentioned the fact that there were two soldiers sent to attack the shuttle. It was my brother
who thought that meant their numbers were small. However, we can see now that this was not the
case."

"Will the three of us really be able to do this on our own?"

Eli snorted out a weak laugh.

"Well, no one said this was gonna be easy?" He cleared his throat and mumbled. "They didn't say it
was going to be downright impossible either, and yet—"

Thrawn interrupted Eli's rant with a wave of his hand.

“Ezra, do you still feel the connection to the Imperial crew?”

Ezra blinked the last of his exhaustion away and reached out, still feeling the connection to their
pain and fear.

“Yeah...” He breathed. “But... there’s still something off about it.”

“Off how?”

“Kind of like with the Ysalamiri. I know the Imperials are there, but I can’t sense anything else. It's
all just kind of cloudy?”
He strained his eyes toward the feeling, examining the strange vessel moving at a crawl speed ahead of them. The ship was brown, gord-shaped, with tendrils and root-like vines drifting slowly behind it. Ezra knew the Vong didn’t like technology, but he never would have imagined this was what one of their ships would look like. Whether it were some kind of plant or animal type of thing, was unclear, but it simultaneously gave off life readings and no reading at all depending on where Ezra chose to focus his abilities.

*How could something be alive in the Force and simultaneously not all at the same time?* He wondered, before shooing the thought aside. Suddenly, he heard a loud echoing cry and leaned forward in his chair.

"What was that?"

"What was what?"

The loud cry wailed through the ship again and Ezra looked around.

"You two don't hear that?"

He got a strong sense of deja vu that this had happened to him once before, but was far too drained to focus on the memory. Instead, he strained to look closer at the Vong's ship, only to see there was something stuck, trapped in insect-like legs below the craft. It was struggling to break loose of the makeshift cage, rocking the entire ship as the small, gray-skinned creature thrashed to break out if its constrictive grasp.

“Wait a second... what is that?”

Eli squinted with no real luck at improving the view before them.

“What do you see?” Thrawn asked.

“Below the ship,” Ezra pointed. "There’s something trapped down there. I can hear it crying. I—I think I feel its fear?""

Thrawn’s eyes, a bit more powerful than either Ezra or Eli’s narrowed as he noticed exactly the creature that Ezra had sensed. His voice came out in a sudden surprised hiss as he took one step closer to the control panel.

“It’s a purrgil.”

Eli and Ezra’s eyes shot wide, the Captain still struggling to see from this far out. Ezra merely turned to Thrawn, his concern wasn’t even visible anymore, now he was all rage again.

“Why would the Yuuzhan Vong have a purrgil?”

Eli gasped and slapped a hand over his mouth.

"You don't think—?"

“They wish to construct a natural vessel with a working hyperdrive.”

Eli rubbed his eyes, pacing in a circle, realizing the situation and muttering angrily to himself for having missed something so blatantly obvious.

“They’re trying to figure out a way to fuse the purrgil into their bio-ships! It's so obvious! That's why they were sneaking around the Unknown Regions near the border.”
"It was the last place the purrgil were—" Ezra stood abruptly. "After I brought them here with the Chimera!"

"And the traces probably started months ago before your little time-jump fiasco ever even happened."

“I think you are both correct.” Thrawn frowned. “We cannot allow the Yuuzhan Vong to access such an ability. Under no circumstances can this ship be allowed to cross the border.”

“So now we’re rescuing purrgil too?” Eli let out a heavy sigh and rubbed his face. “The three of us, a few heavy-weapons, and no backup?”

“You forget that we also have a Jedi,” Thrawn reminded. “History states the major difference to all Clone Wars missions containing even a single Jedi.”

"You didn't read how that story ended did you?"

Ezra shot him a glare and Eli made a face.

"Sorry..."

He rolled his eyes and sighed.

“Eli has a point though. I don’t have a lightsaber.”

"We should turn our comms back on and tell Ar'alani!" Vanto snapped. "This rescue mission just jumped all the way to a major problem! She needs to hear about it."

"You may alert her to the change in development, but reinforcements will not make it here in time without a guide. It seems we are on our own for the time being."

“You know what. It's fine. We're going down there to save the Imperials and free the purrgil. We can do it, can't we?"

Eli muttered something under his breath in reply, but not even Thrawn could make out what it was. Most likely it was some sort of complaint about doing the impossible.

“Look it doesn’t matter!” Ezra stressed again. "I know the Imperials are on-board. Now it’s up to us to get them out. So what’s the plan?"

Eli handed Ezra a Chiss blaster and motioned him to a stand.

“Fine. Like my grandma always used to say, if you men are ready to go blasters blazing backwards into Hell, who am I to stop you?"

Ezra shot him an uneasy sideways glance.

"Your grandma used to say that?"

"Regardless of the life lessons taught by Captain Vanto's family... We will need our best strategy for this rescue to work effectively. Listen very closely Ezra. We will rely heavily on your abilities, but coupled with our plan, I believe all our goals will be met before we make our escape."

"Alright." He nodded, his resolve as firm as the determination scrawled along his face. "I'm all ears. What's the plan?"
Search and Rescue

Chapter Summary

Thrawn, Eli, and Ezra infiltrate the Yuuzhan Vong scout ship in order to rescue the Imperials and free the Purrgil. Everything changes from the course of this one mission and when it's all said and done, none of them will ever be the same again.

Chapter Notes

Posted on: September 9, 2018

WARNING: This chapter contains way more violence than the previous ones!
You have been warned!!

“Yeah so this is the worst plan you’ve ever had...” Eli’s voice whispered angrily through the comm link.

“Your feedback is noted Captain Vanto,” Thrawn’s voice replied.

“And?”

“It is not appreciated.”

“Duly noted!”

Ezra rolled his eyes at their banter but continued crawling as their voices argued quietly from the device clutched in his fist.

“How are you faring on your side, Ezra?”

“I’m with Eli on this one, Thrawn. Why are you two sneaking around on foot, but I’m stuck crawling around through the vents?” He grunted once and forcefully shoved his elbow out ahead of him. *He was getting way too big for this sort of thing.*

“I believe I have already explained this, but they are not vents, they are orifices.”

Ezra gagged and watched the snot-like slime sticking to the sleeve of his shirt as he lifted his other elbow. With a supreme effort, he swallowed back the newfound nausea forming in his throat and kept moving.

“Well, that explains the texture?” He said in an uncomfortably tense tone, mentally promising himself that for the sake of his stomach he was just going to keep referring to the crawl spaces as vents no matter what Thrawn said.

“Just let us know when you find the the crew...” Eli said, his voice drifting as he craned his neck around the corner before continuing stealthily through the Yuuzhan Vong hallways. His volume
returned when they started walking again and he tucked his chin to the side as he spoke quietly towards the communicator clipped to the collar of his uniform. “So far the hallways don’t seem to be too heavily guarded in this part of the ship. Looks like Thrawn’s deductions were right after all.”

“Their conceptual designs hinted at the blind spots in this particular area.” Thrawn agreed in that all-knowing tone of his. “I suspected this area to be used mostly for additional storage.”

“Right... So we’re on our way to free the purrgil now, but I can’t help feeling like things are gonna get a lot more interesting in here as soon as we do. So, we need to be sure our timing is all synced so both parties get to the evac zone we agreed on, you copy, Ezra?”

“Right, right. Just be gentle with the purrgil, okay? From what I’m sensing, I think it’s just a baby so it’s probably really scared.”

“Noted. Are you still sensing the Imperial officers alright?”

“Yeah, but I think they’ve been split into different parts of the ship. I’m heading towards the one with the most presence to it now.”

“Very well,” Thrawn said. “We will initiate comm silence until the Imperials are with you. Good luck Ezra. Do try to be discreet…”

“Right, and be careful!” Eli added.

Ezra’s elbow landed in something liquid that smelled dangerously close to blue-milk cheese and his face made a tidal wave of repulsive gestures before he swallowed and spoke back into the comm with a high pitched sound of disgust.

“Got it. Thanks. Good luck Team Thranto!”

“Whoa… whoa. Wait! I thought we agreed to no code names?” Eli argued. “And even if we did, I think I’d want a cooler one than Thranto!”

“Captain Vanto, what is a Thranto?”

Eli’s drawn out groan was heard over the comm in reply.

“Ugh…” Ezra grumbled. “You guys suck the fun out of everything.”

“This is literally a death mission!” Vanto stressed, his hushed tone raising just enough for Ezra to hear the new temper and haste behind it.

“Yeah I know that!” he replied in the same agitated tone. "You think I don't know that!?"

“Calm yourselves. Eli, perhaps this wordplay is merely Ezra’s way of coping with extreme stress?”

“Hey, I’m trying to be optimistic here! Lighten the mood a little? You two try crawling through the ship’s “orifices” and then let me know how you feel! Whoa… wait… wait! Shhh!”

He stopped and muted the comm as a pair of footsteps approached and passed beneath him. Just like the first one, he quickly realized that no matter what he did, he couldn’t seem to sense them coming through the Force. That meant that the Yuuzhan Vong had some sort of Ysalamiri trick equipped to mask their presence from his senses. Ezra lay there motionless until their footsteps faded away and he took in one deep breath to steel his nerves before clicking his comm back on and whispering into it, his voice more stern now that he knew more about what the three of them
were going to be up against.

“I’m back. That was the second patrol in the last two minutes, so I must be getting close to the center of the ship. I definitely can’t sense these guys with the Force though, so I’ve got to rely on my eyes and ears the closer I get to the holding cells.”

“How oddly inconvenient for us?” Thrawn murmured, his voice thoughtful but also lacing a bit of concern beneath his words. “At any rate, do try to remain aware of your surroundings. We’ll reconvene at the checkpoint in ten minutes unless otherwise instructed.”

“Yeah… better make it fifteen…” Ezra ground out, looking back only to realize that one of his boots had just been forcibly sucked into one of the pulsating crater mounds that were laced all around the disgusting crawlspace he was jammed into.

Just great… He just got this outfit and now all he wanted to do was burn it.

“Yeuch! Team Bridger Rescue Squad out!” He paused and nodded his head to himself. “Okay I see your point. Next time, Eli picks the code names. Over and out!”

The comm device blipped off and Thrawn looked to over Vanto with questions in his glowing red eyes.

The man merely shrugged in reply and made a facial expression that was difficult for the Chiss to read.

“Teenagers, am I right?”

“Indeed?”

“He’ll be fine, Thrawn. We’re the ones who are probably going to end up getting spotted, so with that attention drawn to the two of us, I’m sure he’ll be able to sneak all the Imperials out unnoticed.”

“Hopefully that is the case for us as well after the purrgil is liberated from the vessel. For now, we run on the assumption that the Yuuzhan Vong would never expect our infiltration and we are able escape before the need arises to retaliate a much larger attack.”

“Yeah… with our foolhardy infiltration plan, I’m pretty sure we’re pretty well past the point of being expected in every sense of the word. An oracle probably couldn’t see us coming at this point!”

“Are you quite finished with your embellishes?”

Eli shrugged, but offered up a wry smirk.

“I might think up a few more as the day progresses? When I do, I’ll be sure to let you know. Now!” He clapped and snuck quickly over to the next corridor. “Let’s go save us a space whale and try not to die! Woo-hoo…”

Thrawn looked after him and sighed with a microscopic shake of his head before following.

“Humans…”
The two were at the entrance to the hangar a few moments later. The thermal scopes on their Chiss rifles reading six Vong warriors on the other side of the wall, all just as big and nasty as Eli remembered. The memory of the low-class warrior on Ar'alani's ship flashed once in his mind, but the captain resisted the urge to touch his scar before meeting eyes with Thrawn.

The Chiss made a series of coded hand signals and reached for a single stun grenade. Eli remembered the secret codes they'd made up from before their time investigating the Dromedar, and even the years did nothing to fade his memory of their meanings. Reaching for his own bomb, he readied himself and waited for the final signal to make his move.

Thrawn nodded, and in an instant the two barreled through the door and sent their grenades to opposite ends of the room, the entire section lighting up in blinding white before they shot concussive bolts of electricity through the barrels of their rifles. It took out some, while still demanding they tackle and dodge others before being finally being able to take a clean shot. Eventually, all six guards were unconscious and the flash bomb faded as Thrawn and Eli removed their glasses and hurried over to the supposed controls keeping the purrgil contained below the open gap in the Vong's hangar bay.

“That won’t keep them down for long,” Eli said with a breath of adrenaline rushing through his veins. “You have any idea how to operate this thing?”

“I have an idea of sorts?” Thrawn replied thoughtfully. “Quickly, go place the explosives in the optimum locations and prepare for Ezra’s signal. We’ll use the explosives to escape and ensure this scouting party never makes it back to base.”

“Right,” he nodded, stepping around one of the unconscious aliens on the floor with mild trepidation.

The Yuuzhan Vong’s armor protected them from heavy shots and stab wounds in most areas but nothing on them could stop the effects of chemicals in the air or stun attacks caused by lightning. Luckily, Ar’alani gave them the weapons she knew would be most effective for their mission and the rest was up to Thrawn’s clever planning. The guns only had about ten good shots before the charge began to fade, so they had to be used sparingly, but Eli counted three shots on his end and three on Thrawn’s, not a single blast wasted thanks to the distraction caused by the flash grenades. Vong soldiers often improved their eyes for night vision, so a sudden light attack was one of the most powerful surprises in the Chiss military’s arsenal.

So long as nothing else went wrong, maybe they’d be able to actually pull this suicide mission off without a hitch?

He placed the bombs and set the detonation sequence before tossing an adhesive grenade at the door, letting the silent explosion wrap the only means in or out in a thick, sticky glue-like substance which would temporarily block the whole archway. It wouldn’t hold, but it might just last long enough to give them a little extra time if things went sideways. Oh who was Eli trying to fool? When things did go sideways, maybe the inconvenience would buy them a few extra seconds, and for Thrawn, a few seconds was all the man would need to pull a clever trick out of his hat and save all of their lives.

“Alright. Bombs are all set,” he said, handing over the detonator. “They’re ready to go as soon as you’re ready.”

Thrawn nodded and clipped the detonator to his belt while his other hand continuously examined
the panel. His comm, meanwhile, was playing on a never-ending staticy frequency that was somehow soothing the baby purrgil below the open floor space. The infant creature was no longer wriggling around in the spindly cage, but instead it was just sitting there, chirping its melodious little whale songs while Thrawn tried to educate himself on a foreign control panel and free it.

“Hey, what is that?”

“It is a zero frequency transmission no longer in use from Imperial space,” he explained, his tone simultaneously distracted with other thoughts. “It would appear the sounds emitted both soothes the purrgil as well as attracts others in the area to our location.”

"Are you sure that's the best idea what with the Vong trying to hunt them down for parts and all?"

"There are no purrgil in this area. If there were, they would have most assuredly already made attempts to rescue this young one from its confines. I've seen what the creatures can do to a starfleet, Captain, so I know all too well that the Vong will not find procuring older specimen an easy task. This one was most likely separated from its flock due to navigational errors or parental abandonment."

There was an edge on those last two words, but Eli decided it best not to press him on it.

“Huh, I see... Zero Frequency, huh? I didn’t read that in any of your notes. Where’d you learn a trick like that?”

“While we were trapped aboard the bridge of the Chimera, Ezra told me this as an explanation for how he lured the purrgil fleet to Lothal.”

Eli tensed.

“And does Ezra know about this?”

“He does not, but I have not concealed this fact from him. Should he decide to come forth and ask about it, I will, of course, tell him this truth as I so promised.”

“Yeah well, omitting the truth isn’t really anything to brag about, but at least the comm is keeping that whale calm while you poke around at the weird organic tech. You any closer to figuring it out how it works?”

“After giving the panel some study, I believe I now know how to open the claws just as soon as we receive the signal from Ezra.”

“Well that's good to—” Eli broke off suddenly. “Uh... Those guns didn't last as long as we'd hoped, Thrawn. It looks like our hosts are starting to come to!”

The Chiss turned and narrowed his glowing red eyes at the jagged creatures beginning to stir along the floors.

“One additional shot to each should give Ezra more than adequate time to rescue the hostages. We should stall for just a few more moments.”

"Understood."

They fired their shots, Eli noting that each rifle only held four more blasts before the weapons basically got reduced to nothing more than fancy bludgeoning tools. Only... this time the lightning seemed to have even less of effect than before, the bursts still slowing the aliens down, but not
knocking them unconscious a second time like was intended. That meant either the charge was already too weak to make a difference after one shot, or the Vong soldiers were already starting to adapt to the pain of the attack and it no longer held any affect over them.

“Are you seeing this?”

“Yes. Hmm... Captain Vanto, it seems we are going to need to alter our plans.”

Eli frowned and started to turn back to face him. “What do you mean alter the—” But by the time he saw Thrawn, the Chiss commander had already shut off his comm frequency and pulled the large knife from the harness on his thigh. With one swift lunge, Thrawn stabbed into the fleshy panel of the restraint controls and the spider-like tendrils holding the purrgil to the ship flailed in reaction, snapping open and freeing the baby in one swift sprawling motion.

The Vong warriors snarled in an intense and guttural language that neither Thrawn nor Eli knew how to decipher. Still, they didn’t need to understand it to realize that the aliens were even more ticked off because of what the two of them had just done. As the purrgil wriggled free, all readied their snake-like weapons to taste the blood of the meddlesome intruders who had just cost their world such an important prize.

"Great..." Eli muttered. "Now what?"

Thrawn peeked a glance below and swiftly shoved both Eli and himself to the floor as the disoriented baby purrgil flew up and slammed hard against the ship in its confusion before shaking the exhaustion and dizziness away and finally making its quick escape into hyperspace.

The entire vessel tilted sideways from the blow, the Vong getting thrown all the way to the back wall before the six recovered and started back towards Thrawn and Eli with strict determination to end their lives. If that wasn't bad enough, alarms began to blare from above due to the accidental strike, a high pitched screaming sound like the whistling buzz of a very large insect reverberating through every open area like a painful wail.

“Uh oh... So much for the element of surprise?” Eli said, making a face as he and Thrawn got back to their feet and readied their secondary weapons.

The door split open, the adhesive working for all of ten seconds before the residue tore apart to reveal two battalions of ten armed Vong soldiers pouring into the hangar. Eli counted twenty-six soldiers and rising as more only continued to swarm towards the intruders from the distance. Fighting off six was hard enough, but they would be lucky to hold this many back with just the weapons they had.

“Well, I suppose Ezra should have sufficient space to proceed on foot now?” Thrawn informed in some backwards attempt to be optimistic at a time like this.

“Yeah, lucky him!” Eli spat back. “What do we do?”

“I suppose we either fight or die?” He replied in the matter of fact tone that grated Eli’s nerves. “What will it be, Captain?”

He smirked and readied his blaster pistol for an unwinnable battle with a shrug.

“‘You know me... I guess I’m more of a fighter at heart?’

"As am I.” He grinned darkly, reaching out for another grenade and keying on a button in the process. “I have alerted our beckon call to this area. Please alert Ezra to the change in plan and the
"Right..." Eli said, watching as the Vong drew nearer, their mob of grotesque faces and scarred over bodies with thorny armor giving his legs new reason to give out with every step they took towards him. He sighed, but smiled and readied his blaster. "Why do I let you talk me into these sorts of messes, Thrawn?"

The Chiss smirked without reply and activated grenade, holding it patiently in the palm of his hand as the invisible timer ran down to zero.

Eli readied his blaster and waited for the inevitable sound of the *ka-boom*, before letting off one final comment that would cleanly tie up just how ridiculous these last moments of his life seemed to be as three more warriors entered the hangar.

"Oh, Krayt spit..."

It was only for an instant... only for one split-second, but Thrawn noticed the army react oddly to Eli’s impolite expletive. Small window or no, the hesitation gave him just enough of an opening to cut their numbers in half when he tossed the grenade to the center of the mob and it exploded immediately on contact as he and Eli split into a defensive formation to weed out their now scattered enemy's numbers.

"They’re—"

"They’re splitting into three attack formations with a window of two seconds before organized attack!" Eli said quickly, cutting off Thrawn’s warning with a word for word message of his own. He shot three soldiers with the neutralizer before they fell down, not dead unfortunately, but stunned long enough to put them out of commission for a while. *Their first shots.*

"It seems—"

"Looks like the first shots seem to knock the Vong out, but the second ones only mildly inconvenience them. I thought it could just be the weakening of the blaster’s charging capabilities, but I guess its more like the aliens can build up a kind of immunity to the pain." Eli shot each mark as it barreled towards him, praying to himself that he wasn’t about to shoot one of these nearly-identical warriors for the second time. "You go low!" He ordered, pointing his blaster over to the side wall to get Thrawn’s attention. "I’ll go high and we’ll get them to split off their attack formation and fracture a bit more. Let’s move!"

Eli was gone before Thrawn could protest. In reality, he had come to those conclusions as well and was just about to suggest that very same tactic. It would seem all that training and time with the Chiss really had sharpened him into a weapon suitable for combat after all? Thrawn shot away one more attacker before it could lift itself from the floor and smiled to himself as he ducked low to follow through with Eli’s plan.

As Ezra crawled, he felt a sudden surge of familiarity, his connection to the crew swelling as he sensed their mixed emotions and presence within the Force. On a Vong ship, they might as well be shooting off fireworks and calling for attention, their presence was so visible and loud. Though, even if he couldn't sense any of the Yuuzhan themselves, their ship still help the residual life signs of whatever plant or animal it had been forged from, and he reached out to open the small hole in
(what he could only hope was a) wall before crawling out face first and landing somewhat professionally to the floor below.

“What in the world?!” Faro gasped.

Walten jumped up.

“Ezra? Is that really you?”

He stood and brushed himself off unsuccessfully as he greeted his friends with a relieved smile.

“It’s me! Thrawn, Eli, and I are here to break you out. We need to go!”

The three shot to their feet and rushed over to him with wide, eager smiles.

“Bridger you truly amaze! I’d hug you right now—” Faro started, before stopping mid-stride and gagging at the smell and sight of Ezra’s slime-ridden clothing. “If you didn’t smell like the wet end of a Bantha! Good grief man!”

“Yeah, it’s pretty awful in there but right now it's the only way to get everyone out of here safely.”

He paused and looked around with a frown. All of the Imperials were covered in grime, bruises, and little specks of dried blood here and there, their uniforms and hair all seeming to match the rough look of the last couple of hours they'd suffered through. Gunther, who was lying propped up on the ground, seemed to barely even be conscious as he lay on the squishy brown floor, his skin pale and sweaty, and his hair revealing new streaks of white that hadn’t been there a few days before.

Stress? Ezra wondered with unsteady nerves. Or was it something worse?

Meanwhile, Pyrondi, Urick, and Birt were missing, confirming Ezra’s fears that the Yuuzhan Vong really had decided to split the group apart for some reason, and a bad feeling inside of him warned Ezra that he really wasn’t going to like finding out what that reason was.

“What happened?” He asked, his voice calm but unable to hide the smallest twinge of anger he felt sneaking into him. “What did they do to you?”

“Just your average rough welcomes for the lot of us.” Faro motioned, looking back to her former gunner as he breathed heavily on the floor of the cell. “But Gunther… he was the first to return from the other room, and by the looks of him, those four don’t seem to be as lucky as we were.”

“What other room?”

“We aren’t sure,” Koree sighed, kneeling back to Gunther’s side. “When they tossed us in here, they grabbed the four at random and took them to another part of the ship. We’d been sitting here for hours with nothing, and then they brought Gunther back to us like this.”

Gunther’s body was shaking as though he were having a nightmare, his lips moving, but no sound coming out as Koree leaned closer to try and make something out of the shallow breathing he gave off. She shook her head, unable to get a translation, and only rubbed a soothing hand against his cheek until he relaxed.

“He’s been like that for a while,” Walten informed dryly. “But there are acidic burn spots all over his skin and striations around his arms and neck. We think they have some sort of torture chamber nearby because we could hear the screams echoing all the way from in here.” His face twitched for
a moment as his eyes glowered towards the door. “Urick was the last one we heard screaming… and he hasn’t made any noise for over an hour.”

Ezra placed a hand on his shoulder and reached back to the orifice to stretch the gap open again.

“Don’t worry. I’ll get them out. You guys follow this vent all the way to the first intersection and go left. It’ll drop you right at our ship. Are you sure you’re all able to move alright?”

“We’ll manage,” Faro nodded stiffly. “I think between the three of us we can support Kordin to the ship without problems.”

”Good. In that case, hurry. We only have a small window before I send the signal to Thrawn and Eli to free the purrgil and trip the alarms for a better diversion.”

“They have a purrgil aboard?”

“It’s a long story. I’ll have to fill you in lat—”

He was cut off suddenly as the entire vessel rocked sideways, flinging the lot of them against the wall before steadying back to a normal level and a high pitched alarm sound erupted ceaselessly down every hallway.

“You were saying!?” Faro shouted.

Ezra reached over to his comm and clicked it on.

“Oh… Eli?”

Eli’s voice spat out a curse word that Ezra wasn’t quite sure he knew the meaning to before a gritted tone answered the call.

“Change of plan, kid! We’re locked in the hangar and calling the ship to our location. You got the others?”

“Half of them,” Ezra said. “I’m off to get the other half now.”

“Yeah well—” A blaster bolt cut off part of his sentence and Eli’s voice came back at a distance. “Just meet us here as soon as you can and watch out for guards!”

“Roger that!”

The comm cut out and Ezra rolled his eyes.

“So, it looks like our cover’s blown? Just take the same path I told you before, but take two rights instead in order to get to the hangar. I can sense Thrawn and Eli’s positions from here. It’ll be a tight crawl, and there will probably be battle sounds to lead the way, but you should have a more or less easy path there if you’re quiet.”

“Understood.” Faro nodded. “We’ll see you on the other side. Good luck, Bridger.”

He nodded and helped Faro, Koree, and then Gunther up into the vents, before turning to see Walten standing beside him with no apparent plans to enter the vent himself.

”Walt?”

“I’m coming with you!” He stated firmly.
“No!” Ezra protested quickly, shoving one of the Chiss pistols into the man’s hand and pointing back at the opening. “No, I need you to protect them. Who knows how many of those soldiers will be waiting for you at the end of this tunnel? Promise me you’ll keep them safe, Walten. Promise me!”

He growled, but slowly realized the weight of his position. In his state and state of mind, he would only slow Ezra down, and he knew it. Reluctantly, Walten let out a small nod and gripped tighter to the Chiss pistol in his hand.

“Fine, but Ezra…”

He stopped near the door and turned back.

"Yeah?"

“Go get our team back…” Walten frowned, his face turning painfully to the side before he locked it back on Ezra’s. “Get Urick back for me…okay?”

“I will,” he nodded. “I promise. Now go!”

Walten looked like he wanted to say something more, but decided against it just as quickly and jumped up and into the vent with some visible effort due to his stocky build. Still, he managed to squeeze inside and disappear into the tunnel a moment later and when he was gone, Ezra allowed the gap to close back to its normal size and then he paused next to the brig door to enact his next moves.

*Just like the Myrkr Vornskr trap,* he thought, trying to ease his mind. *Listen, wait, and then make a break for it.*

He pressed an ear to the wall, feeling it as a sort of rubbery vegetable texture as he listened closely before finally sneaking out and darting a path down the hall. He sensed the other humans from a chamber nearby, the Force weaker than the first cell, but still continuously pulsing in the back of his mind. Luckily, the Vong all seemed to be running in a different direction at this point, so avoiding the guards was actually a pretty easy feat to do. No one thought the humans would be up to any trouble when their precious purrgil captive had just been set free by two random intruders. No... Ezra was completely in the element of surprise here.

*That said,* Ezra thought worriedly. *Hopefully Thrawn and Eli were still doing okay on their end. It was a lot of soldiers he imagined.*

It was only a few more turns through the almost cave-like interior of the odd bio-ship before Ezra came upon the door to the supposed torture chamber. He had absolutely no idea what he was about to see once he went through it, but without even the slightest pause of hesitation, he entered without another thought. Quickly, his eyes scanned for any lingering Vong warriors only to find it was quiet inside, almost eerily so, and all the while the room was giving off so many foul odors that it burned his nostrils the second he stepped inside.

“Ezra!” Pyrondi gasped. She was locked behind a cage of bubbled, brittle crust and bound to the circular gaps in the wall with vine-like restraints connected to her wrists. Other than that, she was virtually unharmed, not even sporting cuts and bruises like the other Imperials. Her presence in the Force was strong, even her newly formed baby showing signs of perfect health as he took in one internal sigh of relief.

“Pyrondi! Don’t worry, I’m going to get you out! Thrawn and Eli are here with a ship waiting for
us in the hangar.”

He shot a quick glance over to Birt who was lying unconscious on a table-like structure next to Pyrondi’s cell. The senses around him were off, not just weak, but just oddly inhuman in a way that Ezra wasn’t quite sure how to describe.

That just left—

"Urick!"

Ezra's breath stopped when he saw the man near the entrance. He was suspended upside down from some organic, rack-like restraint that was just dangling from the ceiling, the coral-like tendrils attached to him from every visible angle that Ezra could see, and the life Force almost completely drained out of him. With a gasp, Ezra immediately shot over to his side to get him down, but was stopped before he even laid a hand on the restraints when Pyrondi yelled out at him from her cage.

“Wait no! Don’t touch him!”

He stopped and took a step back, his breath catching deep in his throat as he looked upon the device with a icy chill running up his spine.

“What is this thing?”

“Some sort of torture table...” she groaned in sour and shaky reply. “The barbs are hooked into some of his organs. If you just try to pull him out, you could kill him.”

“Noted,” Ezra frowned, examining the entire thing with another horrified stare.

“You should know that they separated us. The others, they—”

“Are already taken care of,” Ezra said quickly, running over and snapping the material of her cage apart with the butt of his blaster. He tore the vine-like tubing away from her arms, revealing two small, puckered cuts like that of a star pattern on her wrists. He looked to the strange shackles, noticing now that the plants had mouths like little leeches, a strange green fluid dripping from the teeth. With a disgusted groan, he squeezed them tighter and chunked them back against the wall.

“That thing back there... Is that the same thing they put Gunther into?”

“Yeah,” she said stiffly, rubbing her wrists as Ezra helped her over the crumbled wreckage of her cell wall. "Urick’s been in there for eight hours. Every time they try to take him out, he does something to provoke them, and they put him back in. Sessions last anywhere from an hour to three, but I think the aliens just decided three rounds ago that they probably just want to see how long he would last in there before it finally killed him. Considering it hasn't yet, I assume it's probably also healing his wounds and keeping him alive somehow?"

Ezra swallowed.

“And what did they do to you?”

She shook her head.

“I don’t know? They’ve been giving me special treatment since they brought us back here. It was just the vines restraining me in the cage and nothing else. They didn’t even hit me like they did the others. I don’t know why? Birt, Urick, Gunther, and I were the first ones taken when they separated us from the group, and after his first round on the torture table, they sent Gunther back. If
I had to guess why, I’d say they probably wanted to strike fear into the others as a way to tell them what fate was soon to come.”

“And Birt?”

“They did something more surgical to Birt somewhere around Urick’s second round on that... thing. I watched the whole thing. They didn't even try to sedate him, they just—” She broke off and steadied herself. "Look, I’ve been trying to talk to both of them, but I haven’t been able to get Birt to wake up since his procedure, and Urick went quiet hours ago. You have to get him out of that thing, Ezra, but I don’t know how. The limbs usually just move on their own, I don’t think even the aliens are completely in control of it.”

Ezra’s eyes widened, his throat suddenly dry, but his face hot with rage. As calmly as he could, he placed his hands on Pyrondi’s shoulders and pointed over to Birt.

“It’s all going to be okay now, alright? We’re here to get you guys out of here. Go try to wake up Birt. I’ll get Urick down somehow.”

“Be careful...” she said, shaking her half worried, half overjoyed tears away as she too grew a powerful sense of resolve and ran over to Birt’s table.

“Urick, buddy can you hear me?” Ezra turned to say as gently as his voice would allow.

His lips moved, his skin swollen and riddled with goosebumps and sweat all at once. No sound came out but Ezra was just going to assume that was a yes to his question.

“Listen, I’m going to get you out of here, pal. It might hurt just a little bit, but you need to stay with me, okay?”

For a flicker of a moment, Urick’s lip twitched on one side as if he were trying to show a smile or give a snarky remark. That was a good sign at least, Ezra thought as a small glimmer of relief started to grow.

Taking a step back, he held out his hand and tried to examine the torture device with his mind, the Force cloudy and almost nonexistent, but just barely visible enough to be separated from the total lack of presence that the Yuuzhan Vong gave off. With that small sliver of connection, Ezra saw a pattern and used the Force to safely remove the barbs from Urick’s skin and then from the embrace of the tendrils holding his body in place.

He fell in an instant once freed and Ezra leapt forward to catch him, before struggling at the sheer size of the bulky ex-stormtrooper and finding new footing to help support him. A quick glance down at his tattered Chiss uniform showed only a little bit of blood leaving the puncture wounds left by the device, but it was nothing a bacta-tank or a trip to the Sabosen hospital wouldn’t fix.


“Ezra!” Pyrondi almost laughed. “Birt’s awake! He’s awake and he’s doing okay!”

“I disagree!” He groaned, his voice hoarse but coming to as he slowly and tenderly lifted himself off the table. “I would use a better word, like—alive? Or still equipped with his stunning good looks and amazing sense of humor?” He hissed out a painful moan again and lifted his uniform top, torn and tattered from the surgery, only to reveal the large, ugly scar torn across his stomach, the skin bruised in different colors of black, purple, red, and green as it pulsed at his touch. He winced, but tried to make his voice sound more lighthearted than was probably necessary in an attempt not to panic anyone else in the room. “That’s probably not a good sign, is it? I feel like my
stomach was run over by a speeder and then tossed into an open jet engine.”

“Can you walk?” Ezra frowned.

“Yeah… I should be… fine…”

He slowly fell to his feet and nodded as his hands removed their death grip on the side of the table. Blood started to slowly drip out of his crudely healed scar at even the slightest of movements, but not by a lot, so, it was probably okay to walk so long as Birt didn’t overdo it.

“Okay, you’re doing great. Pyrondi, you help me with Urick. Come on, let’s get you guys back to the rest of the crew and out of this nightmare.”

Birt smiled weakly.

“Sounds good. Thanks for the rescue. We owe you one— no, more than one by this point.”

“We’ll talk about payment plans once you’re all safe,” Ezra teased. “Come on. The other guards are all being drawn towards the hangar so we should be fairly unguarded in this part of the ship.”

"Aren’t we heading to the hangar though?” Pyrondi asked. "That’s where you said Thrawn was, right? Not to mention most of the hostile aliens also aboard?"

“Yeah, getting there is the easy part, but getting in might take a little help. Just hope Thrawn and Eli know what they’re doing and in the worst case, I have two blasters and a few grenades on me that we can use to break through.”

“We’ll talk about how much your rescue inspires our confidence later.”

“Right. Let’s get you guys out of here. Follow me and stay close!”

Birt sought support from the wall and winced at both his own pain and the odd texture he felt before hissing out a toothy smile.

"Roger that, kid. Lead the way.”

Eli tossed the last of his flash grenades off as the third wave flooded in from the outside. Meanwhile, the fallen soldiers were already starting to recover and both men were down to a single blaster with minimum impact velocity and one big, but ultimately hard to use knife that only pierced the exposed original flesh of the Vong warriors and not their armor enhanced skin grafts or their thorn-like protruding spikes.

Still, they had somehow managed to keep a small portion of the Vong soldiers distracted and disoriented long enough not to die for last ten minutes, which was a huge win by any military standards. Though, Eli wondered just how long their “warrior’s fortune” was going to last them now that they were quickly being overrun by yet another wave of attackers. Even through the back to back charges, and even with all of the Vong’s adaptive and ferocious fighting methods, Eli had already seen and memorized a blatant attack formation and a way to counter it. There was no doubt in his mind that Thrawn had already figured out the pattern too, which was helpful seeing as though Eli was starting to run low on new ideas of his own.
“Eli, up here!”

He dodged the snake-weapon well enough to grab Thrawn’s hand and the Chiss pulled him up onto their new position, which in this particular case, consisted of the two of them standing atop one of the Vong’s small single-pilot flying crafts, the weird organic squish beneath their boots uncomfortable but tolerable because at least now they had the high ground.

"Where's the ship, Thrawn? If we could just get to the shuttle then the turrets would slow these guys down, no problem!"

“Still en route! Trying to figure out a path to enter through,” Thrawn replied hastily, locking his elbows with Eli’s for stability and then kicking one of the warriors off his foothold and back to the ground.

"Like... oh, I don't know... the big gaping hole over there?" He pointed sourly. The beckon call was a brilliant device that surely saved all of their lives on multiple occasions, but was dumber than a bag of hot sand when it came to finding a way to get to its beacon.

“I know!” Thrawn yelled back. "Look there, it appears the Vong are operating at a reversed timing sequence now in order to disorient us!"

“I noticed!” Eli shouted back with a kick of his own. “Looks like a "sweep n’ drop" meant to make us think there are more soldiers than there really is down there. I count about thirteen still standing. Maybe thirty down, but not out. Three dead.”

“I counted thirty-four incapacitated, but the thirteen at present are our more recent endeavor!”

They searched the room before looking upwards and taking notice to the massive shuttle dangling from connecting tubes to the roof of the hangar. They both exchanged a look, the idea forming in simultaneous agreement as they nodded and each pointed to a single spot, their orders overlapping one another at the exact same time.

“You take left!”

“You take left!”

They shot each other a look, but no one budged aside another kick to get a warrior off their safe spot.

“It seems we are at a bit of an impasse?” Thrawn said with a swift jab to another Vong’s face.

“Yeah, well you forget one thing...”

“And what is that?”

Eli smiled and shot the last tether of his three-shot grappling hook into the ceiling.

“I still outrank you!” He flew upwards, a victorious smirk on his face as he yelled down, “You take left!”

Thrawn smirked, though the defeat was short lived as he took down another risen Vong soldier, and he shot his final grapple off to the side where he could clear a path to the left-most position for this next plan to work.

Meanwhile, Eli hastily sawed away at the support tethering one of the ships above the ground, his
knife working quickly as Thrawn got into position and made a proper distraction of himself to draw fire away from Eli.

“Come on… Come on…” he grumbled, his knife working quickly before he heard the soul-satisfying SNAP of the vines. “Got it!”

The ship plummeted downwards towards the ground, knocking down the final thirteen as well as pinning a few of the fallen Vong beneath its weight. There was a loud crash, but then everything went quiet and Eli climbed down with enough time to take a small and much-appreciated breather as he and Thrawn tried to come up with another plan of attack once the Vong decided to get back up again.

“I think we’re going to have to use the bombs next. I’m all out of ammo and ideas.”

“I agree.” Thrawn frowned and looked out at the room. “Where could they be?”

A rustle from behind sounded and both men shot around when they heard the noise, their blasters useless, but raised nonetheless.

“Don’t shoot!” Koree called. “It’s just us!”

Eli and Thrawn smiled at the sight of familiar faces, rushing over to help everyone out of the hole in the wall just as the tardy Chiss shuttle appeared from the gap in the floor.

“Excellent timing!”

“Thank you sir,” Faro nodded. “And, thank you for coming to get us.”

“Of course. Now get Gunther Kordin aboard!” Thrawn ordered, seeing the man’s poor condition. “Ezra should be here any moment with the others and he could need help with wounded.” He pointed. “Eli, you take the controls and prepare the turrets for covering fire!”

“Already on it!” He called, rushing aboard to the long awaited bliss of the Chiss shuttle’s main cannons. Holy kriff, they were actually going to pull this rancor-headed mission off, weren’t they?

“Everyone is aboard, sir!” Faro called shortly after. “Are the weapons aboard free to use?”

He nodded, his eyes continuously scanning the wreckage and bodies as he waited for Ezra and the others to finally appear.

“They are mostly ineffective against the Yuuzhan Vong, but if you wish to arm yourselves, you may do so.”

“Yes sir,” she said with a tight grin, eager pleasure in her voice that revealed a need for vengeance and a bit of violence. For a moment it made Thrawn remember the simpler days long ago when he had first started working with Karyn Faro and the Chimera, back when they merely fought against scattered pirates and the occasional evasive attack from Nightswan. He tucked the memory away and looked out towards the entrance with a growing worry welling up within him.

If Ezra should fail to return from his mission, then all of his plans for saving the Chiss really would be ruined. Though, as the day had proven thus far, the Far Outsiders were a threat not to be taken lightly, and Ezra would no doubt pledge himself even further into Chiss loyalties after seeing what happened to the others taken, as well as the rising issue of the purrgil trafficking. It was never his intention for something this unpleasant to happen, least of all to the Imperials, but if the day had any silver linings, it was with Ezra’s resolve in Chiss war efforts. One thing was certain however…
the boy needed his weapon back, but that was a thought for another time. For now, all Thrawn needed was for Ezra to show up and get aboard safely.

His red eyes lingered longingly as the warriors started to recover, the detonator more evident at the notch on his hip just as his ears were finally met with the relieving sound of human footsteps approaching from the entrance.

“There they are!” Thrawn alerted. “Prepare for wounded and ready the nose turrets for covering fire!”

“Yes sir!” the overlapping acknowledgements echoed. For a moment he felt like a Grand Admiral aboard the command barge again, but as he thought to himself before, nostalgia could wait for another time and place.

"About time!" Faro teased.

"Sorry we're late!" Ezra smiled.

Thrawn and a few others stepped down from the platform and over to the center of the room to meet the group as Walten took Urick in his arms and headed back towards the ship. Pyrondi and Faro were already swapping their debriefings on the last few hours, Faro shooting at one fallen Vong warrior who managed to twitch just wrong enough to startle her into firing at it. Meanwhile, Thrawn and Ezra made sure Birt was taking slow, steady strides closer to the shuttle, his outward appearance almost feverish as his sickly nature was hard for him to overcome across the long corridor.

“Everyone else?” Ezra asked shortly.

“They are already secured,” Thrawn replied. “Come, we must go before the warriors rise again, our weapons are not enough to defeat them, only to incapacitate. Eli has placed explosives to ensure we won't be followed and this ship is properly destroyed. I plan to set them off as soon as we are away.”

Ezra chuckled, though why he wasn't really sure. His eyes peered around at the wreckage, the hangar filled with broken ships and dozens of latent Yuuzhan warriors, all of whom were just as horrifying and grotesque as Eli had described.

“It looks like this was some battle! Right Birt?”

“Absolutely...” he smiled, though it was through gritted teeth, his complexion looking worse now that they were out of the narrow hallways and the gash from his wound looking more and more torn as the blood soaked through his gray suit.

“Don’t worry,” Ezra soothed. “We’re going to get you help.”

He nodded, as Thrawn and Ezra supported him back to the ship, they were only a few more feet away from it too, when Thrawn heard a shift in the air and turned in time to dodge a swift spear thrown from an entirely new fleet of warriors that had just appeared from the entrance. Twenty reserve troopers by the looks of them, and all with better armor and stronger weaponry that the first wave he and Eli had only barely managed to contain. Low level troops, he now realized, meaning this next battalion was where the real fighters of their people operated.

“Quickly! This wave will not be so easy for us to hold back. We must get aboard.” He shouted now and turned back towards the ship. “Eli, Fire!”
A flurry of covering fire shot out from the shuttle’s turrets as the new soldiers were either mowed
down or took cover beneath the wreckage of the lowly pawn army. The lower class soldiers,
Thrawn noted, who were all starting to recover by this point, and only adding to their number of
enemies now. Ezra watched and could have sworn he saw the red hot laser blasts strike dead on
against more than one warrior, but it did no more than knock them back a step or make their thorny
armor smoke from contact. His eyes widened as he tried to hurry their pace. Still, the smoke and
burning sinew from the lasers against the Vong’s vessel material provided the three with plenty of
cover as they eased their way hurriedly towards the ship.

An audible gurgle rumbled over the sounds of the cannon fire, as Birt clutched at his stomach in
pain and fell to the floor and out of their grasp. The strange anomaly Ezra felt through the Force
now swirling around him in pangs as something important seemed to fade from Birt's body.

“Birt!” Ezra shouted. "What's wrong?"

“I— yeah, no, I can’t go any farther...” He laughed sorely. “Something inside me just isn't clicking
like it should. Get out of here, I’ll only slow you down!”

“Stand up!” Ezra pleaded, lifting him as Thrawn knelt down to assist. “Come on! We’ll get you on
the ship and the Sabosen can figure out what the Vong did to you! We’re almost there! Just a few
more steps, come on!”

“No...” Birt said, shoving hard enough for Ezra to be taken back a step. “Go... I need you to go...
I’ll hold them off as long as I can so you can get everyone else to safety!”

“We’re not leaving you behind! Thrawn tell him!”

Birt shot a look next to him at Thrawn, a pleading, explanatory look that the Chiss knew all too
well. His skin was already pale, the slightest green tint to it, revealing whatever organ transplant
the Vong had attempted to fuse with the human body was not accepting its new host. Thrawn had
heard rumors that the Vong experimented with organ-splicing on their warriors, but why they
thought to test such a ritual on a prisoner was a notion vastly unclear to the Chiss.

Still, that didn’t change the fact which both he and the man on the ground already knew... Birt
Rathon was dying. He would never make the trip back to the Chiss Ascendancy and he knew it.
His only choice now was the way in which he wished to go out... wither slowly aboard a fleeing
starship in massive pain, or quickly and heroically in one final blaze of glory.

“Get him out of here, Admiral...” Birt groaned. “Please...”

“What will you do?” He asked, rising slowly as he glanced down at the doomed man, the weight
of his detonator switch noticeably gone from his belt the very moment Birt collapsed to the floor.

He shrugged and winced, pulling out the detonator with a smile as he gripped the switch in one
shaky, paled hand.

“I’ll do what I do best, sir... clean up the ship!”

"It's been an honor."

"Likewise sir..."

"Wait, what?" Ezra started. "Thrawn?"

He frowned, shutting his eyes for just a brief moment, before swirling around and picking Ezra up,
holding him tight enough that the boy was unable to break himself free of the Chiss’ grip. He kicked and screamed, protesting as Thrawn hurried back towards the ship, his orders for everyone else to do the same as he gave out the final order at Eli to launch the ship away.

"Let me go!"

They were halfway up the platform, when Ezra broke free and started back towards Birt, only for Thrawn to grab him by the wrist, stopping him before he could take another step down. By now the turret fire was just a distant echo, Thrawn’s eyes locked on the lone man at the center of their battlefield as the young boy in his grasp screamed and tried to pull himself free.

There was a snap in the Force, like a band snapping against the back of Ezra’s mind as everything around them just stopped. Birt’s thumb pressed down on the detonator and in an instant, everything from the hangar entrance to Birt himself lit up in one massive burst of fire, taking him as well as the entire enclosing armada out with him.

Eli was already below the Yuuzhan shuttle by the time the explosion consumed the hangar, Thrawn already having pulled both himself and Ezra inside as the hatch sealed shut behind them. Ezra just sat on the floor where the two of them had landed, his eyes unable to look away from the fiery scene out the front view port as the ship dropped to dodge the flames.

In an instant, he relived Kanan’s death, the scene replaying over and over in his mind, his feeling of sheer helplessness overtaking him then just as it was now. He saw it burned into his eyes, Birt dying in the exact same way the rest of his crew had. All of them gone... and now another friend went right along with them. He was too shocked to move, frozen by his visions, even long after they had distanced themselves a decent ways away from the burning Vong shuttle.

Thrawn finally stood, leaving Ezra on the ground as Eli’s voice called out to them from the front of the ship.

“The nightmare’s over now everyone! We’re safe and what's more, there isn’t any way something aboard that ship would have survived that sort of explosion. We’ll be fine until we meet up with the Admiral’s fleetship and get you all some medical attention. For now, just try and rest up. You've all been through a lot.”

Thrawn nodded and walked back over to Ezra before holding out a hand to help him off the floor.

“Ezra…” he started, reaching for him as he spoke.

Ezra shook him off before he could even get close and shot to a stand, his pain circling on a loop in his mind as he watched the deaths... Kanan, Birt, the more hazy memories of Mr. Sumar on his speeder bike, and his crew in their final explosion, all just playing over and over again like a never-ending cycle trapped inside his brain. How many people in his life was he going to have to watch blow up before his eyes before he could save just one of them?

“Why didn’t you let me save him!?” Ezra shouted, causing everyone on board to go quiet and stare. He shoved the Chiss as hard as he could and screamed again. “Why didn’t you let me save him!?”

By now everyone had realized Birt was gone, but no one had the voice or shock left to give off any reactions, they merely stared at Ezra and then to Thrawn, hoping the Chiss somehow had an answer.

Thrawn looked to the crew, to Eli glancing back from the controls, and then to Ezra’s grief-stricken blue glare before he shut his eyes and let out a small breath.
“I suspect Birt Rathon was the first of many experiments the Yuuzhan Vong had planned for you six. The Vong hold a rumored ritual where organs from strong species and animals are replaced in the body to create stronger warriors. I believe your assailants wanted to see if the human body would be susceptible to this ritual, but Birt’s body quickly rejected the implantation, the outward and inward signs already showing this to be true. Knowing this himself, he chose to give his death a stronger meaning and made sure we would not be followed by any enemies.” He looked back to the group and everyone bowed their heads. “Birt Rathon was a hero to the Empire, a hero to the Chiss Ascendancy, and a hero to the last of the Chimera crew. His loss will be remembered by us all, so long as we continue to fight in his place.”

Sniffs and sobs were heard now as the true realization started to hit them. Ezra however, was transfixed in his thoughts, the rage only quelling long enough for pain to take its place.

“They thought he was expendable...” Ezra grit out, his eyes frozen, unblinking towards the ground. “They thought he was expandable and they killed him just for some stupid experiment!?”

Thrawn nodded somberly.

"Yes... They did."

Ezra wiped away his tears and took a step forward before a noise just under his boot made everyone turn to look over in his direction. The ventilation grate he had just stepped off of budged, once, twice, before finally shooting into the air as two Yuuzhan Vong soldiers leapt from the space, revealing that they had successfully latched onto the ship before the explosion and crawled in through the vents before the ship took off. Before anyone realized it, the infiltrators had already fought their way on board and Thrawn half chunked Ezra behind him as he barreled forward to hold the two warriors back.

“Breach!” someone shouted.

Walten and Koree shot forward to help Thrawn as Pyrondi leaned forward to protect Urick and Gunther on the ground. Faro quickly turned to guard Eli, who merely leapt from his position at the controls and traded places with her, reaching for the huge knife strapped to his leg as he rushed for them. The group tussled, moving from one end of the shuttle to the other as thorns from the Yuuzhan's sharp armor did little to help in their attempts to pin the invaders down in such a cramped space.

Ezra grabbed his blaster and took aim before quickly realizing that any missed shots would only damage their ship or accidentally hit an unintended target. He groaned and pocketed the weapon as he began to storm forward to help, when Eli suddenly lunged into the room and stabbed one of the Vong in the neck with his knife before it fell down successfully dead at all of their feet.

“Karyn! Keep us steady!” He ordered. “Everyone, it does not get past our line to the controls, clear!?”

“Yes sir!” She called back, the others nodding in stern agreement as they formed a protective barricade between her and the alien.

“Watch yourself!” Pyrondi shouted, pushing him out of the way as they narrowly dodge a long snake-like weapon incoming.

“I can’t get a hold on it!” Ezra shouted, the Force grip he so wanted to take grasp over the vile alien, merely failing at every attempt as it slashed out at them with its snake-whip or its talon-like claws.
It burst free with long, muscular arms, sending Thrawn, Koree, Walten, and Eli all tumbling backwards before the weapon recoiled into its hands. It coughed and snarled, its language threatening them as it spoke menacingly down at its fallen comrade.

Koree's lip was busted, and she spat through gritted, bloody teeth as she tried to catch her breath on the floor.

"I don't suppose any of you speak that, do you?"

"No..." everyone else aboard answered in stiff unison.

The Vong was cornered, but not overpowered. Its stance firm and studious as it examined them, their ship, and anything its blank eyes could reach. Then it looked to Ezra. Its nose-less nostrils flaring, jagged pointy teeth hissing as black blood poured from its own tongue. What was worse were the eyes… small, soulless eyes that didn’t care whether it lived or died. No, all those eyes wanted to see was how much blood it could spill before it was killed. It was nothing, just an empty husk in its own mind and just a blank spot with the Force. It almost seemed to smile at him and in that moment, Ezra felt himself go rigid as he locked stares with the terrifying alien beast, unable to do anything, least of all look away.

Eli stepped in front of Ezra defensively, his knife still in hand, held up to his chest in a defensive formation as Koree and Walten moved in from the sides to try and rush it.

With one final whip, the Vong tried to take out anything it could with the weapon, but Eli sent the knife spinning through the air and straight through its unarmored hand, causing the weapon to fly out of its grasp and across the ship before clattering to the floor.

Stunned and still, Thrawn took the shot with one of rifles he'd scooped up off the floor, and the Vong went down unconscious.

They all took in a few breaths as the horror seemingly came to a stop.

"Phew!"

"Is anyone injured?" Thrawn called.

"A few scratches, but we're all okay!" Pyrondi called back.

"Good," Eli sighed, wiping the sweat of his brow with the back of his arm. "I didn't think they knew how to do any kind of attack like that, did you?"

“No..." Thrawn almost seemed to growl. Though when he continued, his voice came out so calm and steady, it was almost sounded as if they hadn't almost died in a close-quarters fight a few seconds before. "Commodore, please open the hatch doors so we may see our intruders out and search the hull for additional stowaways."

“Right!” Faro called. “I have no idea how to do that in this ship though, sir.”


"Yes sir!" They nodded and Thrawn turned to go help Faro at the controls.

Eli took the opportunity to turn back towards Ezra with a sudden concerned look on his face.

“You okay?”
“Fine...” he said unenthusiastically. “I completely froze back there though. The Force didn't work, I couldn't shoot... I was completely useless in that fight just now.”

“Hey now, you’ve saved everyone on this ship more times than I can count. Let us save you for once, alright? And it's not your fault for freezing up, the Vong will do that to a person, especially considering it took such a unique interest towards you.”

"You noticed that too huh?"

"Yeah..." Eli hummed darkly. "Plus I've never seen the Vong crawling through the vents before. You think it somehow knew about it because it saw you doing the same thing back on the scout ship?"

Ezra shook his head.

"I— I just don't know."

Eli pondered, his hand coming up to rub at his beard. "I can't help but feel like we're missing something here. Something or someone pulling on strings we can't see yet."

“Captain, how long is that gun going to keep this thing knocked out?” Pyrondi asked.

“About five minutes, unfortunately,” he replied quickly. “Don’t worry though. They only build up an immunity to the shock if they were hit more than once, so at least we still have that long to toss this trash off the shuttle.”

“Well that’s good to know.”

"Hey Eli..." Ezra started.

"Yeah?"

"If the Vong somehow learned how to crawl through the vents, then is it possible they could have learned other things from our attack?"

Eli’s face seemed to pale suddenly as a realization struck him and he turned swiftly back towards Koree and Walten.

"You two! Get away from that thing now!"

"Sir? What’s the ma—" Walten started before he and Koree were sent flying backwards into the walls, the Vong shooting up with surprising strength and speed.

"It was faking it! It knew about the attack because it had already been shot once!" He reached for his knife only to curse as soon as he saw it lying across the ship from the last time he'd thrown it. "Damn!"

It was just waiting for them to lower their guard and spring its attack, and it waited only a fraction of a second before locking its sights on Ezra again and coming at them full sprint.

“Get down!” Eli shouted, turning to shove Ezra aside as the Vong soldier lunged forward for the kill.

"Captain!"

"Ezra!"
There was a scream as Ezra felt himself slam against the side wall, cracking his head against the panels before he heard the sounds of slicing flesh and he shook away his aching thoughts, trying to lock his rocking eyes back on Eli. He finally saw him, ready to see the wound caused by the Yuuzhan Vong. Eli had pushed Ezra out of the way, but miraculously, it was not Eli who stood injured, and at that sight, he felt the breath catch in his throat.

Eli, likewise denied the impending stab wound of the Vong, turned around slowly as soon as he realized he was completely fine. As he did though, a shadow loomed over him, its breath so close that he could feel it blowing on the back of his neck. His eyes drifted upward and he took a few steps back only to see that it was Thrawn standing there, his red eyes locked on his face and his expression strangely calm as Eli’s gaze drifted downwards noticing now the long, spear-like thorn torn off of the Yuuzhan soldier, and stabbing the Chiss directly through his chest.

“Thrawn…” Eli said quietly, his voice barely breaking the silence as his brown eyes shook in horror, his foot taking a step forward without truly realizing it was moving.

Ezra reacted without thinking, not knowing what to do, not wanting to give the alien another opportunity to attack, and having absolutely no restraint against killing it once he saw Thrawn
there blocking its intended path to Eli and more intentionally to himself. Ezra already felt a hold on the
loose grating where the Vong soldiers had once emerged and with one fast flick of his fingers, the
vent grate shot up and cut straight through the Vong's neck, decapitating it as Koree and Walten pushed its severed half backwards and away from Thrawn’s back as the body tore back its weapon and hit the floor. The grate cover lunged all the way into the metal of the opposing wall from the ferocity of Ezra’s throw as the creature’s head rolled silently off to the side, the smile still looking up at him as the light faded from its eyes.

He fell back into the wall, finally able to take a breath, his hands shaking at what he had just done. He killed it! Had he killed things like this before? Sentient things? He couldn't remember. Would knowing make him feel any better? He wasn't sure, but Ezra felt sick to his stomach, his eyes tearing away from the Yuuzhan's face to look at Thrawn as everyone on the ship remained too stunned to move.

Meanwhile, Thrawn, who had still barely reacted to being stabbed straight through the chest, merely looked to his wound with a tender brush of his hand before diverting his stare back down at Eli.

“Do not worry,” he said, his voice calm, but a little slower than normal. “It looks worse than it is.”

Eli's brows lifted, unable to form any kind of response to the—what was that? Some sort of morbid joke? He didn't have long after that to process the statement as Thrawn fell forward just seconds after speaking it. Eli caught him before slowly setting the Chiss down to the floor. He was colder than usual, his skin a lighter shade of blue due to all the blood loss, and all Eli could do was set Thrawn on the floor and lean over him, his mind still panicking and frozen as he tried and failed to think up any way he could help.

“Thrawn...” He breathed, his voice still trembling. “Why did you— Why would you— What were you—” But he couldn't manage to get a complete sentence out before Thrawn hushed him and winced, his hand coming up to touch his lips.

The blood was already pooling beneath him and was soaking into the fabric of Eli’s knees, but he hardly noticed, his hand reaching up to take Thrawn's as the ability to speak started to finally surface back into his mind.

Thrawn had obviously heard the attacker rising thanks to his ability to hear an enemy treading towards them, he would have turned in time to see the Vong about to impale him and Ezra, so, while Eli was busy trying to shove the kid out of the way, Thrawn reacted at a moment's notice and blocked the brunt of it for the both of them. But why would he do that? Why would he risk his life like that… for them… for him!?

"Why'd you do that for me, Thrawn?"

His lip lifted in a weak smile.

"You would have done the same for me."

The slight strain in his voice, even visible through the Cheunh language, was enough to bring tears to Eli’s eyes, and he held tighter to Thrawn's hand as his overwhelming panic started to surface again.

“I don’t know what to do!” His free hand hovered nervously over Thrawn’s bleeding chest, but it still wasn't sure how to help. “Please, Thrawn, I need you to tell me what to do!”
“Nonsense...” he chuckled, the smallest bit of blood coughing up and trailing down the corner of his lip. “You outrank me, remember?”

Eli felt his mouth trying to form the smile, but his face was too worried to make it look genuine.

Meanwhile the rest of the crew waited off to the side, some too scared to look, others unable to look away. First Birt and now Thrawn. How many friends were they going to watch die today at the hands of the Yuuzhan Vong?

Ezra was still shaking, his mind a complete blank as he too stood helplessly off to the side unable to act or help in any way.

“Don’t you want to save him?” a voice echoed suddenly.

Ezra snapped out of his daze and felt a cold hand touch his mind. He shot around, but there was no one there and nobody else on the ship seemed to have heard it. He contemplated the fact that he had finally lost his mind, when the voice came back clear as day, and the man spoke to him again.

“You can save him you know?”

"How?” Ezra asked to the air, his voice desperate and confused, but willing to play along if it meant saving Thrawn from dying.

“Let me show you what I know,” it said, and with it came a vision. Ezra felt a hand take hold of his mind and as soon as it lifted, he blinked back into the Chiss shuttle, his eyes now gazing down at Thrawn, realizing now that he could somehow see every line, every point of Thrawn’s body like little broken red lines coursing through every inch of him. The message from the voice was clear in its instructive visions. He was supposed to pour a bit of Force energy into the intersecting red lines and that was somehow going to keep Thrawn from bleeding out. It was so obvious a solution now, even though Ezra would never have imagined anything like this were even possible in the Force before a few seconds ago.

“This is all I can show you. You must be strong enough to save him yourself.”

“I am!” Ezra stated through gritted teeth and immediately after, he shook the voice out of his head and shot to his knees, placing his hands over Thrawn’s wound and using the Force within himself to seal off the intersecting red lines one by one until they were all gone.

“What are you doing?” Eli sniffed, his eyes widening as he watched the open gash torn through Thrawn’s suit begin to fade away like magic.

“Can’t explain, just trust me!” He replied quickly, all of his energy and focus aimed to the task at hand.

His eyes had shut, his breath shallow, but as Thrawn lay dying, Ezra refused to let another friend slip away from him. He listened to the mysterious voice, following its instructions, and feeling all the light side and dark side knowledge ever taught to him in his past suddenly resurface as the transfer of energy finished. The voice was right, this new Force ability had just completely healed Thrawn of his injury, turning the open gash into nothing more than a single raised scar, stained purple along his chest.

"How— How did you do that?” Eli gasped, looking to Ezra as if he were some sort of god or wizard, instead of the teenager he had just shoved into a wall only a few minutes before.

Ezra looked to his hands which were shaking slightly, but he was unable to completely process
what he'd just done himself.

"I don't know?"

"My God!" Someone else gasped, everyone agape as they tried to determine if what they just witnessed had actually happened.

"Good work Ezra!" Walten finally said, his bit of praise finally cutting the tension of the room as he leaned forward and delivered one hard pat to the back of Ezra's shoulder.

In a sudden flash, Ezra gasped and watched another vision take place, this one fuzzy and distant, but also clear as he saw the Empire’s super-weapon again, the large moon base, the Death Star, and it was much like it had been before, only there were Rebels ships soaring into it. A voice echoing into his mind, though it was a different man than it was before. He felt a cold presence and then a much warmer one as somebody, a boy, was obviously tapping into the Force there. By the end of his vision, the Death Star was blowing apart into a million atoms of scattered space debris. The feeling of death and loss was unfathomable.

Ezra felt himself go limp and the blackness once again blinded his vision. He was passing out, but somehow still aware of himself as he felt his body hit the floor and go numb. He could see his hand, his arm moving out in front of his face, but he was stuck in a void of pure blackness.

Was it a dream now? Or was it still part of the Vision? Why had he just seen the Death Star exploding. Who was that boy? And why did the other voice sound so familiar to him all of the sudden?

"You are strong with the Force, Ezra Bridger," that mysterious head voice said suddenly, his low tones echoing with an impressed gleam.

"Who are you?" Ezra asked, his own voice fading like a dream within his own mind. He saw a figure through the darkness, a silhouette of a man edged in a white light, but the figure was blurry and too far away to clearly make out.

"Sleep now Ezra. One day you and I will meet again, and when we do, I hope it will be able to speak face to face."

"But wait! How did you—" He tried to say, though the voices in his imagination had already started to fade. Exhaustion swept over him and the mysterious figure vanished entirely as everything around him, faded completely into the black. Once again he was unable to keep himself awake, and he drifted away as everything inside him went dark.
Chapter Summary

The rescue mission was a success, though things were lost and others gained that can never be undone. There would be another trial held just to discuss how much trouble everybody was going to be in, but for the moment, everyone was allowed a day of recovery and contemplation. Which would have been nice.... if Thrawn hadn't suddenly gone missing.

Thrass sets out to find him, knowing a location on Sposia where his brother often went to think as a child, but he is unaware of what kind of conversation the two will have when he gets there, nor how they will see themselves and those around them once he leaves.

Chapter Notes

Posted on: September 15, 2018

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Captain.”

“Oh, Mitth’ras’safis!” Eli waved to him with a quick but subtle start. He looked nervous, more so than usual, and Thrass did his best to mask his skepticism as the man continued talking. “The Admiral told me you had gone home. Sorry to make you fly all the way back out here so suddenly.”

“Yes,” he replied calmly. “I had just returned when I gathered news of my brother’s condition and turned around. I heard his injuries were quite serious and wished to see for myself. Where is he? The Sabosen tell me he is not in his normal quarters.”

Eli made a face, one that Thrass was starting to realize meant the human was somewhat uncomfortable to answer. *So his nerves had a viable source then?* Thrass pondered, all the while observing how the human man’s vocal range stretched, the muscles in his face and neck doing so as well as he swallowed his inhibitions to speak.

“Well, you see… we aren’t entirely sure?”

Thrass did not react, his voice sounding unsurprised as he repeated Eli’s response.

“You are not entirely sure?” His eyes narrowed, his voice still calm. “Tell me Cssoboti, how does one lose a man who has just been impaled through the very center of his thoracic cavity?”

“Well see… what had happened was this. Ezra did some sort of magic Jedi-healing trick on Thrawn before he and Thrawn both passed out. I sent out a distress beacon and had Admiral Ar’alani come pick us up out of the outer regions to take our wounded back here to Sposia.” He took a breath. “Ar’alani and I got our ears chewed out in a long-range conference with the Aristocra and military
generals before Gras’vee’sabosen threw me and anyone else who had come into contact with the Yuuzhan Vong into an examination room for tests. Thrawn woke up a few hours after this, and I got to see him. He was completely fine so far as I could tell, but then they kicked me out of his room to run even more tests on him just to make sure. Also, a side note, there's going to be another tribunal to discuss how much trouble everyone's going to be in tomorrow, so that'll be fun, right!?”

He was rambling... switching between rapid debriefing, ear-related idioms, and contemptuous sarcasm to prolong answering his initial question. Humans, or at least Vanto it seemed, were all very good at doing that sort of thing when flustered. This appeared to be something that was happening quite often now that Thrawn had been back with the Ascendancy, but ultimately those nerves were insignificant to the story at hand, and Thrass chose not to concern himself with Eli's flush, increased heart rate, or overactive sweat dispersion as he returned to the task of figuring out where Thrawn was hiding.

“Can you proceed to your point?” He interrupted somewhat dryly.

Eli flicked his head to the side and nodded with an uncertain shrug.

“Well... I was going to go back and ask Thrawn if he needed any help preparing a speech for tomorrow, but when I got to his room, he was just gone? He ditched his medsuit, grabbed some clothes, and just disappeared. The nurses say they didn’t see him sneak out and he didn’t tell me where he was going either, so I honestly don’t know where he could be. I don't think it'll do much good to be worried, but it's not really like him to just run off like this.”

“Oh, I disagree…” Thrass argued smoothly. “Tell me, is the news that you lost one of the humans to the Yuuzhan Vong the truth?”

Eli frowned.

“Yeah… yeah it’s the truth.” He ran a hand through his hair and down the back of his neck. Another of his nervous gestures, but this one affiliated more negatively with past pain or regret. “We lost Birt Rathon. He set off our diversionary explosions at the last possible second so we would escape without being followed by any of the Vong. It didn’t quite stop our ship from being boarded by the two of them who snuck below the hull, but I think they had already done that based on observations they copied from our mission beforehand. The explosion took out all the rest, Birt included, but on the bright side, it did manage to destroy the Yuuzhan scout ship and I can confirm that there were no survivors. The whole thing burned up in space.”

“I see…” He murmured thoughtfully. “I give my condolences for your loss. Birt Rathon seemed to be quite the selfless and courageous warrior.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“And I thank you for the information, Captain. Please do try to focus a bit on your own health and well-being for a short while. I still wish to have words with my brother about further details of your last mission, so you can trust him to my care for now.”

“Oh... okay, sure then. Does that mean you know where he went off to?”

“I have a— oh, how do you refer it— a hunch?”

“That’s one word for it, sure?” He nodded.

“I have a hunch, then.” Thrass smiled. “Do not concern yourself too highly with my brother. He will return in time for the trial as he always does.”
“O-okay? I suppose I’ll just wait here then and make sure the others all pass their release examinations. Gunther and Urick took the brunt of it all, but I think everyone else should be let out sometime this afternoon?”

“That is most pleasant news.” Thrass bowed and walked off. “Until tomorrow, Captain.”

Eli nodded, waved, and then turned, his face revealing just how much concern and confusion he still wrestled with inside of his own mind, though another expression in his eyes also showing that he seemed to trust Thrass enough to find his brother and take care of him, whatever that might entail.

*Humans were so needlessly complicated, it was no wonder his daughter and brother thought them to be so interesting.*

With a heavy, tired sigh, and another mess to clean up thanks to Thrawn’s latest antics, Thrass left the hospital and started down the road on foot. At the very least his brother was safe and healthy, meaning if Thrawn was able enough to sneak away on his own without a shuttle, then there was only one location on all of Sposia where he would venture to in a time like this. Luckily for Thrass, he knew exactly where to look to find such a place.

“I thought I might find you here, Thrawn.”

His voice echoed through the large building, its halls completely devoid of any other civilians aside the two of them. Despite its empty loneliness, it was somehow still alive with the numerous decorated statues, artwork, and historical trinkets that lined the walls of every room.

Thrawn turned to see his brother walking up to him, but averted his gaze back up to the painting above as he continued sitting on the bench just below its view.

“Thrass...” he greeted shortly.

“I paid visit to the hospital, but the Sabosen told me that you already left and Vanto didn’t know where you were, so I deduced that you might have chosen to come here. You seem to be one of the rare few who still do these days.”

Thrawn sighed. He was feeling troubled ever since they had returned to Sposia with Admiral Ar’alani. Two of the Chimera crew were still undergoing intensive treatments, the others worn and weary from their endeavors, and yet another one’s life had been so needlessly cut short. Yet here he sat, utterly alone inside this all but abandoned Chiss museum, with not even any staff or keepers present to watch him brood. Not many Chiss enjoyed art, and fewer still utilized this area of historical relevance unless it was to bring small tours of children in during their class hours, or to clean the dust away twice a month.

“Are you here to lecture me, Brother?” Thrawn asked slowly. “I should warn you that I have already been disciplined by the generals and High Command, so you will have to strive to make your scolding dissimilar to theirs.”

“I believe I will leave that to the Aristocra during tomorrow’s impromptu trial,” he said with a snark grin, though in his tone, he revealed that he was in fact deadly serious about the comment.
“Right,” Thrawn sighed, and looked back up at the artwork along the wall.

Thrass huffed and begrudgingly took a seat next to his younger brother, sneaking a quick glance up at the painting with absolutely no idea as to what Thrawn saw in it that would be intriguing enough for him to sit here for hours on end merely to stare at it when he was upset.

“Do you wish to tell me what troubles you?” He asked. “I know you only come here in times when you wish to collect your thoughts.”

“Do you know why this is my favorite painting in our history?” Thrawn replied, simultaneously dodging the initial question as he was so talented at doing.

Thrass studied it and arched his brows. It was titled “Tis Vim Ch’etecu’ib” an ancient artwork salvaged from Csilla during the great war beginning their feud with the Vagaari people. The painting was a grand scale, long horizontally, and encased in a classic white metal framing. It showed a story of Chiss soldiers, their colored armors representing the nine ruling families of the time, though it was a warrior in black who stood at the center of the portrait with his weapon pointed directly at the leader of the Vagaari who held a Chiss woman captive in his grasp. In the distance, there were quiet homes and snow mounds, local innocent bystanders watching from afar, but never cowering. This would have been one of the first cataloged moments in their history where the Chiss people had ever laid eyes on an alien species, and yet still the Chiss were not afraid of the invaders.

“Is it because this painting demonstrates the resolve and bravery of our people?” Thrass guessed.
“An interesting conclusion, but no...” Thrawn hummed. “Try again.”

Thrass felt his lip stretch, but he looked back and studied harder, noting the use of small brush strokes, faded color, and overall visual symmetry guiding the eye back to the soldier in black no matter which angle one started looking from at the start.

He glanced to the sides of it, seeing smaller portraits and noticing their simplicity in comparison to such a large and intricate piece. Most were mere displays of color and symmetry, or the lack thereof, represented by that artwork that far outdated this of Thrawn’s portrait of choice. His eye was first drawn to a yellow abstract piece representing nothing aside maybe the creation of color, and it was as if the artist’s only goal was to say everything and nothing all in one effort. Below it there was a lone cabin in the snow, portraying the cruel hardship of expedition as the Chiss first settled on the cold, once barren, upper world of Csilla. Then just to the other side of that one was a sunburst dating back centuries which represented the light of the member planets of the Chiss Ascendancy spreading through the region.

“Could it be the size or the overall complexity of the work? Perhaps it is the heroics of the obvious commoner rushing past the ruling families to face the slavers and rescue the woman? Do you see yourself in this man in black, rising up despite his poor background? Is that why it is your favorite?”

Thrawn seemed to be amused by that answer, but ultimately shook his head.

“Wrong again.”

Thrass frowned now. He was no good at these games, but he tried to see things Thrawn’s way for the sake of his brother’s consolement. Let’s see... he pondered. All art had a history to it, even Thrass knew that much, and sure, looking upon the artwork as a child in school was a rather interesting time to spend in an evening of study. Even Tharin enjoyed the sole time he had brought her here to quell the momentary saudade he had felt for the ten year anniversary marking Thrawn’s exile from the Ascendancy. Not that he would ever admit that he missed his brother enough to drag his daughter out to this Sposia museum, but... no... he was getting off topic.

Art told a story, but Thrawn, he always took it a step further. He spoke to the art, knowing more about its meanings and the creators than even the text plaques beneath each painting could describe. It was a truly remarkable skill, odd in a way to its rarity, but astounding during those times Thrawn had put his passions to good use for tactical analysis and battle stratagems.

Thrass sighed in defeat.

“I don't understand you, Thrawn. I’m not sure I ever have. So, I concede. What do you see in this art?”

“I see a history, Brother,” he explained, motioning to the piece with a wave of his hand. “The brush strokes, the color, the small details within... All are clues to the life of the artist responsible, and in that life I can see their story and the stories of those around them unfold before me.”

Thrass nodded. He knew that much. His brother had tried to explain as much to him on multiple occasions in their youth.

“Yes, yes...” He waved. “But why this piece specifically?”

“Your third guess seemed to be the closest to the truth, Thrass, but you lacked a key factor of evidence. Note the dark heavy strokes paired with the use of bright highlights and contrasting
shadows. The description below claims that this portrait is about war, about strength, unity, and the peace our people found in ourselves soon after defeating the Vagaari. This later ensured that none of our people would be sold into slavery in the future, but that in itself is not the complete story. The Ascendancy sees this portrait as a reminder of a battle won, but all I see here is a documentation for what the artist had lost.”

Thrass squinted at the portrait and tilted his head to the side.

“I cannot see such? Is it coded within the margins? Or perhaps hidden within the angles of the painting?”

“This is something that is seen, but not in such an obvious way.” Thrawn grinned. “This painting holds secrets that not all can read, but I can. It speaks to me clearly and is the loudest to do so in this room.”

“And what it says is why this is your favorite? Is this because you relate to the deeper meaning of such secret messages it conveys?”

He nodded.

“And what does this painting speak at you, Thrawn?”

“Pain.” His eyes flash once, his voice going hard as his gaze met once again with the painting. “This artwork speaks most prominently to me about pain.”

Thrass stiffened.

“None of the characters in the painting appear to be in pain? Nor do they look upset?”

Thrawn relaxed and leaned forward on his knees.

“Do they not?”

“They do not,” he replied firmly, his sureness cracking as he saw the worried look on only one character in particular. “Hmm… aside possibly the woman who is being rescued by the ruling families, though given her conditions of circumstance, one could hardly blame her emotions in such a situation.”

“Ah!” He nods. “But who says she is being rescued? Look closer at the Chiss in armor, Thrass.”

He did as he was told, seeing the painting just as he had seen it dozens of times before, just as he had always seen it. The ruling family warriors were confronting the Vagaari, the woman was in danger, and the commoner in black had come to her rescue while the locals in the background watched in brave observation.

Only… it was only now that he noticed the sudden shift in the woman’s mood, her hand was not bound by the Vagaari slaver, but held gently in his own as if she had gone to him willingly. The people in the background no longer looked like brave citizens, but worried family, and the man in black wasn’t reaching out to attack the invaders, he was reaching down to try and retake the woman’s hand.

“What is this?” Thrass asked, his face revealing the new meaning he saw in the old artwork.

“Tis Vim Ch'etecu'ib. Peace and War. It was created after the first contact our people had with outsiders or other alien life. At the time, we were a more trusting community, and greeted the
Vagaari with open arms and indisputable cooperation. That is, until the Vagaari revealed to us their true motives and inevitably stole the trusting and naive people from their homes. The woman is representative of the young bride of the commoner in black, the representative of the unnamed artist of this work. The Aristocra are only behind him because they were too late to realize the treachery of the outsiders and she was taken from them alongside several other villagers who can be seen in the background.”

“History never spoke of this?” Thrass whispered. “How did such a conspiratorial portrait come to be immortalized for all these years?”

“The artist took his own life shortly after finishing the piece. So, by the time the Chiss came upon his work, they interpreted it as a grand mural of glory and defiance against oppressors, and have continued to see it as such to this day. Only I and now you seem to realize the deeper meaning beneath those strokes and expressions. No. This is no victory to our bravery, this is the pain of our mistakes.”

“Thrawn…”

“I have made so many mistakes, Thrass. More than any other warrior I know. I even have the ch'itt'surt'asi ch'isvi to prove it.” He opened his cloak to reveal the tender scar still healing at the center of his chest, as well as the faded purple bruises trailing up his arms and abdomen from where the purrgil swarm had once held him so tightly during their hyperspace jump away from the planet Lothal.

“Those are not failure marks, Thrawn!” Thrass stressed firmly. “If anything they are marks just proving all that you have overcome!”

“They are all a consequence of my latest battles,” he said simply, looking up into the painting once more. “Had I foreseen the unknowable outcome of that battle over Lothal, or the curiosity of the Yuuzhan Vong, then we would not be having this conversation.” Thrawn shut his eyes. “Had I not failed, then none of my crew would have been killed in these last few days. More men and women dead than perhaps could colonize a small planet, and now another of them are gone simply because I made a choice to intervene into all of their lives. And... it is not just humans. Two of my oldest comrades were murdered trying to do right by my mistakes. Then I risked my life as well as those of Eli and Ezra for my own reasons and continue to do so for the sake of my people. I wonder if one day I will ultimately fail them too, or—" He gestured to his chest. “If I will be so lucky to live to see the conclusion of my sacrifices.”

They sat in silence for a few moments before Thrawn breathed out a morose chuckle, covering his scars once more with the loose cloak draped across his shoulders.

"You have to admit though, much like these paintings, the scars I bear were all so artistically done."

Thrass took in a sharp breath and let it out, rubbing at his legs and unsure of what to say. Thrawn had always had his moods, even as a child, but never had he focused so much on his own failures and mortality that he would wallow in his own self loathing rather learn from and overcome his obstacles for the next battle that lie ahead.

“You know...” he said finally. “The Thrawn I once told stories about to my daughter. He would never dwell on the misfortunes of war. He used the losses he suffered and turned them into victories which justified and honored the deaths of those who fought alongside him.”

Thrawn looked over at him.
“And I suppose that doesn’t amount to quell the massive burden you rest on your shoulders, Euhn Botmun‘i. But... I am somewhat glad that your series of what you perceive as failures and mistakes have somehow still managed to lead you back home. I know you will do right by your people, and I know you will mourn your soldiers, but you will overcome your scars. That is only natural. It is what makes you Chiss.”

Thrawn absorbed the words for a moment until he started to nod and let loose one half smirk aimed in his older brother’s direction.

“I understand, Thrass. Thank you for listening in my moment of weakness. As well as for your consolation.”

“It is not weakness to value life, Thrawn,” he said, rising to his feet and readjusting his cape. He made a rejected noise and rolled his eyes, but said what he was about to say anyway. “As much as it physically pains me to say this, Brother... I think your heart is what makes you a little more human than all the rest of us, and after coming to know Eli and my daughter’s hobbies in human affairs, perhaps all Chiss could stand to be just a little bit more human, wouldn’t you agree?”

He looked up to him and lifted his brows, but Thrass only smiled and winked at him before turning to walk away.

“Try not to linger here for too long, Thrawn. People will start to think you have become a relic of art yourself.”

He smiled as his brother walked away, his steps audible all the way through the otherwise abandoned building until Thrawn heard the door echo shut behind him.

After a few more moments of sitting in silence, he placed a hand along the scar on his chest, feeling the weight of his brother’s words stirring around inside of him. It was quite possibly, he thought, one of the single greatest lectures his brother had ever dared to give him. Thrawn stood, no longer entranced by the painting above him, the pain lifted somewhat thanks to Thrass’ words, and as he turned to leave the museum, those last words still lingered in his mind.

*Perhaps all Chiss could stand to be just a little bit more human.*

“Perhaps so...” He smirked to himself. “Perhaps so...”

As he wandered back up the road to the hospital, Thrawn started to piece together his thoughts, thinking back to clues of their latest mission that brought stunning realizations to light. He would prepare for the trial tomorrow, *that much was inevitable*, but only now was he finally able to find the words which he would be willing to say in front of the Aristocra and other members of High Command.

He knew what the Aristocra would say to the accused. He assumed the fates of all of those involved in the rescue as well. Most importantly though, he now saw irrefutable evidence that revealed to him the traitor among the Aristocra who was in a way, responsible for the kidnapping of the humans and the deaths of three close comrades. The truth would all be revealed in the morning.

Like all of his trips to the museum in the past, it often helped him to remember that there was always something new to discover if one was willing to look at the world with a different perspective than the day before. *To think that it would be Thrass of all people who would help remind him to see such a change in view in his own inner turmoil?*
Thrawn smiled to himself and prepared for yet another scolding centered around his leaving the hospital without permission. At the same time he could not help the surge of excitement and mixed dread when he imagined the consequences of tomorrow. As always, he thought amusingly, he would just have to wait and see how the plan unfolded and if possible, learn from those ever-possible mistakes existing in all scenarios made by the common warrior. To fight the norm or to be complacent. Not for the first time, Thrawn was prepared to be the weapon that severed such a bridge and he would deal with those consequences, whatever they might be, when they so appeared.

*One thing was absolute, and that was that only time would tell for sure.*

Chapter End Notes

**Sources for Chiss Art submitted by these talented artists:**

![Image](image1)

"Csilla Ascending" by The-Porg-Apprentice

![Image](image2)

"The Expedition" and "Unknown" by Pink-Imperial-Skink

![Image](image3)

“Tis Vim Ch'etecu'ib” by RoninReverie (ME)
"Caged" by Minniethemoocherda

"Ancient Plaque of Unity" by Alizrak

Open in New Tab for larger!
Consequences

Chapter Summary

The trial reveals the new path everyone is expected to follow, as Thrawn's plans begin
to truly come into fruition. As they leave, he remembers his exile and comes to terms
with who he is as a protector of the Chiss, and reveals just how far he is willing to go
in order to protect them, no matter what consequences might lie ahead.

Chapter Notes

Posted on: September 24, 2018

See Comments for 2 works of Bonus Art!

“That was a bit anticlimactic.”

“What, you would rather the Aristocra have us all exiled?” Ar’alani teased.

“Well, no…” Eli said, his face warming. “I just thought, what with the low key trial and all, things
would have been more serious.”

“We have all attended so many of these court martial panels that we can recognize the outcome of
the day going in,” Thrass said, shooting a somewhat chiding look over at his brother. “Though I
will admit that two in the last week is a bit of a unwarranted start to your return to good graces,
Brother.”

“If it brings you any comfort, Thrass, I did not plan it like this.”

He grumbled, but turned his head.

“In any regard, I am pleased with the end results. Ezra is being let off easy with a little service to
the community, none of us were demoted or exiled, and Captain Vanto and I were even able to
convince the High Council into letting the humans stay within our borders. After learning that the
two warriors wished to devote themselves to farming on Cioral, Tof’eni’csapla really had no
arguments as to the waste of resources used on the new group and the remaining Aristocra were
quick to follow into agreement.”

“And with the other three gunning to join the military and fight back, Vereen was eager to take
them up on the offer once they fully recover.”

“Although...” Thrawn paused. “It was a bit of an unexpected choice that Pyrondi offered to stay on
Sposia to teach the cultures of Imperial space to Chiss students. I know she will do well, her
experience in Jefi culture proves already that she can teach far more than just human and Imperial-
biased lessons. Still, it was an unexpected turn of events, I'd say.”

“Yeah.” Eli nodded. “But with her being pregnant, and no one really knowing what kind of fluids the Vong had in those vines they stuck her with, I think Pyrondi remaining close to the Sabosen is a good idea.” He chuckled once and tilted his head. “Though with her teachings, I suppose that means more and more Chiss will start speaking Basic in the next few years. I guess we’ll need to come up with another language if we ever want to keep our conversations discreet.”

“Indeed...” he said, his voice low and full of conflicting thoughts, but accepting the half serious joke regardless.

“I do not speak much Basic, Captain.” Ar’alani reminded him warningly. “You have not been conspiring behind my back have you?”

Eli tensed and shook his head vigorously.

“No ma’am, I didn’t mean it like—”

She clicked her tongue and shot him a sideways smirk.

“Calm yourself, Captain. I know how you meant it. Save your explanations for our next tribunal.” She continued walking, but that grin all too quickly faded away with every step. “At any rate, I am glad the Aristocra agreed to the usefulness of the humans. Sheltering them was the least we could do after the horrors that the group survived. Their knowledge of their days with the Yuuzhan Vong will be paramount to staging future victories. As will the data collected by the two of you.”

“They have always sent scouts out before,” Eli said dryly. “Even the Grysk and Vagaari sometimes come out to do their dirty work, but that last scout ship— being so close to our borders as well as the ones of Wild Space—” He groaned. "It just makes me wonder if there could possibly be any more hiding under our noses.”

“That is very possible,” Thrass replied. “I believe we have our traitor to thank for the Yuuzhan Vong’s ostentatious presence within our regions.”

Ar’alani frowned.

“Thrass and Vanto have been informing me of that theory. If you suspect one of the Aristocra, then why did you not call them out during the trial today?”

“Their end will come, but for now I wish to use them as a means to stay ahead of the Far Outsider’s coming attacks. An enemy kept within reach is far less dangerous than that of the unknown.”

“Right,” Eli agreed, his voice sounding a bit dry. "Though I’m guessing that you already know who it is now that we’re back here?”

“I still have my theories. However, I'm afraid that I do not possess suitable evidence that will convince the rest of the Ascendancy as to such.”

“I know when you have a theory this strong, Thrawn, that it is typically correct,” Thrass said. “Do you care to share which of the four it is?”

"I do not. I fear it would change your overall reaction to their presence and reveal to them that we know of their betrayal.”

“And you are certain that it is one of the Aristocra? Could it perhaps be one of the admirals
instead?” Ar’alani asked. “As an admiral myself, I know we have access to much of the Aristocra’s
data and knowledge. How do you know it was not I nor one of the others that has betrayed the
Ascendancy, Thrawn?”

“Young past with Schesa as well as the actions you took to protect the ozyly-eshehemo on your first
flagship that you destroyed prove otherwise…” Thrawn said knowingly, a slight smirk aimed in her
direction. “Captain Vanto informed me of that event. Not to mention I have always trusted you
directly with information that the High Council and the Far Outsiders have yet to gain knowledge
of, only proving that you have obviously not told to anyone outside of our small circle of trust
about the contents of these such secrets.”

“I see…” She grinned. “I’m glad to know your trust in me has not faded after all this time,
Commander.”

He smiled back, but let his frown seep back in as he continued his statement.

“The other Admirals were initial suspects of mine, but have since been eliminated from blame after
I observed the visible evidence and motives.”

“Chaf’orm’bintrano was always my bet. The guy hates outsiders and could hold a grudge for being
kicked off the High Council. He had the motive and the means to do all of this and still place a bit
of blame back on the Council.”

“That’s true, though as I told you before, Eli, Chaf’orm’bintrano abides by the laws of the Chiss
people, even if it means the destruction of the Ascendancy itself, he will not waiver against the
written word that governs our society. To turn traitor, even for the good of the Ascendancy, is not
something that is in the man’s core nature.”

“Right, right…I know… I still think he’s a jerk though…”

“Indeed, he is.”

“Pause!” Thrass said suddenly, stopping the group in the middle of the hallway as he tried to focus
his thoughts aloud. “You said that the traitor could be working for the good of the Ascendancy?
What do you mean by that? Is this not a way to ignite our civil war and weaken our people so the
Far Outsiders might strike through us and reach the rest of the galaxy?”

“I do not believe that to be the case.”

“But they’ve been selling secrets to our patrolling routes, our weapons, or weaknesses to the
Yuuzech Vong!” Ar’alani argued. “How is that to aid the Ascendancy in any way good?”

“Good perhaps is not the correct term,” he replied. “Think instead of it as a fragile alliance. The
Aristocra provides the enemy with insight, and in return, a greater battle remains at bay. We’ve
only witnessed a fraction of the Yuuzhan Vong’s power, none greater than pawns or servants to the
much larger army. Should that army decide to invade the borders before we are ready, then it
could spell doom for life as we know it.”

“So you’re thinking that the only reason the Vong keep sending us their lower ranked warriors and
scout ships, is because they’re accepting the information from the traitor and holding off on their
final attack in some twisted sense of false peace and bravado?”

“And to weaken our forces…” Thrawn reminded. “Do remember that the Yuuzhan Vong value life,
especially that of their own, but most importantly, they do not fear death. We are the only beings in
the Unknown Regions that stand between the Yuuzhan Vong and their take over of the remaining
galaxy. To be patient, and lie in wait for the opportune time to attack and spare the most of their forces from defeat, is exactly the type of planning a true warrior race would seek to utilize in such a situation, even one who holds forces far greater than that of their enemy.”

“I see…” Eli hummed. He had never really thought about it like that. He always assumed the reason the war hadn’t started was because the Vong were out capturing every other unknown species in the galaxy and were building up their strengths. He knew all too well the strength of the Grysks and the Vagaari, both were powerful and cunning adversaries in their own rights, both with enough ships and bodies to blot out the stars, but they were working for the Yuuzhan Vong too, maybe through fear, or maybe… it was to keep what people they did have alive and on the winning side? A chill ran up his spine, the scar along his brow stinging suddenly with the memory of what one low-class warrior was capable of, much less a higher one. He shook the thought away with a shiver and continued towards the shipyard.

“Things are about to change around here, gentlemen,” Ar’alani said as her massive flagship came into view. “The battles to come will only increase in size and frequency, but it is up to us to hold them back and buy our people as much time as we can.”

“I agree.”

She nodded to him.

“I know you do Thrawn. I will await further details of your plan. In the meantime, I must warn you, as your Admiral, I do not want to be put in this sort of position again! Am I understood?”

“You are, ma’am,” he said, a hand to his chest as he let off a slight bow. Whether he was being genuinely respectful or mocking, even Ar’alani wasn’t entirely sure.

She was much younger than he was and had known him ever since she was a child. He practically taught her everything she knew and she wondered often why someone as brilliant as Thrawn respected her so well in the first place. Then again, she was an Admiral, and unparalleled in her field in every aspect of the title. She worked hard to earn this respect, and Thrawn was the type of person to see that above all else, even the shared history of their past.

“Good!” she said with a proud edge to her tone. “Then I will expect you and Vanto to return to Naporar to discuss our next course of action. Until then, Commander.”

“Until then, Admiral.”

“May warrior’s fortune smile on our efforts.”

And with that final phrase, she turned and vanished into her ship, the large craft taking off not seconds later as the three men headed nearer to their own vessels. Thrawn watched her go, the memory of her rise to power a pleasant thought in the back of his mind. Much like Eli, Faro, and perhaps even Ezra, Ar’alani was someone akin to a student in Thrawn's eyes. She was once his pilot, and she had grown so much in the last few years, that he felt lucky just to have watched her fate flourish with his own two eyes.
Csilla, many years ago:

“May warrior’s fortune smile on your efforts, Commander,” Ar’alani said as she escorted him down the hall and towards the small and silent courtroom that awaited them just on the other side of those grand ice doors. “I must warn you, Thrawn, they are not happy with any of us, least of all you.”

“I am not worried, Commander.”

“You might want to reconsider your confidence,” she warned under her breath. “I hear they are debating exile this time.”

“Thank you for your concerns, Ar’alani,” he said calmly. “I know there will be consequences for my preemptive strike, but I trust the Aristocra to come to a just decision.”

“We can only hope,” she muttered, pushing past the large doors as the two stepped inside.

It was a long trial, with much debating, evidence, and testimonies given, but in the end he was told to await the final verdict in the hallway with Ar’alani and the two were escorted back outside the chamber.

“Not to be pessimistic, but I don’t think that went very well.”

“No, I do not believe it did,” he said, his voice still so confident and almost humorous in a way as a small smile formed beneath his hand.

“Thrawn please, are you even considering the seriousness of your situation?”

He stared at her a moment and wondered for the third time in the last hour whether or not he should tell her the truth. Here she stood, a commander now, which was the same exact rank he was. She was quickly rising through the ranks of the Nuruodo military even now, and soon he imagined that Ar’alani would be promoted to Admiral, if she managed to keep her record clear — something that was far gone away from a task Thrawn himself could accomplish. No, this trial would not sully her good graces with the high leaders. She would become an Admiral and she would be a great one at that. His tutelage to her was proof enough of such a fact.

Still, she carried so much weight on her shoulders, burdened now by the stress of the council’s latest schemes to aid in their war efforts. A scheme which Thrawn had willingly offered to join. No one else would have the prior knowledge and experience needed to complete such a mission. It could only be him. Still, it was not one that was to be made public. His fate was changing for the good of his people but likewise, for the good of his people, they would need to tarnish his name, status, ranking— his very nature of living.

Somebody had to be to blame.

He smiled at her and took a seat, motioning for her to do the same.

“Do you remember our mission to Mokivj all those years ago?”

She stared over at him, puzzled, and wondering why such a topic would even have come to him as a response. The arch of her brows notwithstanding, she did remember that mission as clear as though it had happened only yesterday rather a lifetime ago, and she nodded.

“Of course. I was acting as your pilot then. We were sent to retrieve the Separatist-made shield
generator for study within the Inrokini House. Why do you ask?”

“On that mission I was allowed access to the grounds, meeting and exploring the area alongside the humans and the Jedi. You remember him as well, I presume?”

“Of course,” she stated fervently. “Skywalker. The one who could sense my presence, and who fought with you on the grounds. He was bold and courageous, but rash and somewhat impatient.”

“Correct. Though that was many years ago, who knows how the time has shaped his skill, as time has revealed to shape both yours and my own.”

“I suppose…” She hummed, her tone lingering an accusation that she wasn’t sure how to properly make. “What is your point to this memory, Commander?”

“The point is simple. Only I possess such knowledge of the space outside our borders, and only I am able to lay the three cards needed in order to win over their trust for future aid against the Far Outsiders. I have been in that area, I have seen first hand their culture, and I already know members of a warrior race, perhaps even ties to the winners of their Clone War.”

“The Empire? The one who the High Council and Admirals all talk so much about? Their rumors of victory and growing power have reached us even here.” She frowned and looked him back in the eyes. “But what does that have to do with your trial?”

“You will know soon enough.”

She pursed her lips.

“I had a feeling that you would say something like that.”

He shut his eyes and stood tall.

“Just remember that somebody has to be to blame.”

“But—” She stopped and looked down to the light flickering from her wrist comm. With a deep sigh, she looked up to see Thrawn’s eyes already facing her and with a frown, the two stood and started walking back towards the door. “They appear to be ready for us.”

“Indeed…” he said, his voice now a low hum of thought and expectations. “Once this is all said and done, do remember what I told you, Ar’alani, maybe one day you will understand.”

“I will…” she frowned, wanting to say more, but already pushing past the doors as she escorted Thrawn back into the chamber, simultaneously swallowing down any further statements she might have had or wanted to make. His fate was in the council’s hands now. There was nothing she could do.

The five admirals stood from their chairs, the Aristocra perched silently at their podiums as the entire room was silent as stars. Thrawn already knew the decision of the council, the looks on the admiral’s faces only confirmed it. Gasps rang out once they spoke the verdict aloud, and Ar’alani’s shock was masked only by the years of military training that accompanied her lifestyle.

*Exile. Thrawn was being exiled!*?

And as Ar’alani stared at her co-commander, she tried to piece together what he had said to her before. Though she disagreed with the whole thing, she understood it now. It was a foolish plan, a foolishly brilliant plan, but one that needed to be done by somebody. They needed help with this
war. The Inrokini were working fervently to make new weapons, the armies were training more and more troops. War was coming and when it hit… they would need all the help they could get. Thrawn… he was the only Chiss who could possibly reach out and take such aid.

“Somebody has to be to blame,” she whispered, already walking up to lead Thrawn away from the room.

Generals were shouting, there was protest coming from Mitth diplomats as well as Nuruodo leaders and the other military families present. She shot a final look up at the Aristocra, their stone faces hiding beneath the hoods of their colored cloaks. They knew the secrets and they knew the backlash they would receive, but they still went through with it. It was an odd thing to understand the thought process of the Chiss leaders, and as Ar’alani stepped out into the calm silence of the halls, she merely paced the path to the shipyard and spoke with a voice cold as the ice of Csilla itself.

“I understand.”

She didn’t look up to see if Thrawn had heard her, but out of the corner of her eye she thought she caught the quickest glimmer of relief spread across her former mentor's face. After that, there was nothing else that could be said, and the two merely walked away in silence as Ar’alani led him to the ship that would soon take him to his planet of exile.

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**Csilla, now:**

The group waited until Ar’alani’s ship was out of sight before moving onward to return Thrass to his own. Thrawn shook the memory away and listened in to yet another one of his brother's lengthy lectures warning how lucky they all were that the trial hadn't turned the people against them.

“This mission had the potential to be very bad for us,” Thrass said again. “Though, I am glad things ended the way they had. I look forward to seeing how these seeds will grow.”

“Yeah,” Eli nodded. “And I’m just glad they only gave Ezra some community service. Wait… does that mean Tharin’s going to have to go with him to Schesa?”

“Unfortunately so…” Thrass grumbled. “I fear she and I are going to have to have a long talk about what the 9th Ruling family truly does within the military, as well as why they should want Ezra to do his community services there.”

“She does not know about the ozyly-eshembo?” Thrawn frowned.

“It’s not a very public thing to know of them these days, Thrawn. Though, I’m sure through her research and meddlesome curiosity, she’s figured out a thing or two on her own. The two of you are a lot alike in that way, always— what was the phrase— *sticking your nose* into other people’s business?”

“That would be the one, sir.” Eli grinned, earning a raised brow from Thrawn and a pleasant smile from Thrass.
“I am okay with this mission if it helps Tharin excel within the Inrokini, but Lohrana on the other hand—”

“Thrass,” a woman’s voice interrupted.

The three men stopped dead in the snow, and Eli heard Thrawn let a quiet groan slip from his throat as Thrass’ spine stiffened to attention. He was about to ask what was wrong with the both of them, before he stepped around the landing pad and immediately got his answer. Tharin, her mother, and three other Chiss women, all of whom were notable diplomats and leaders of their respected families were all just standing there, waiting beneath Thrass’ personal shuttle.

Quickly, Eli wondered just how much of that they had heard. Not really because it had been a secret, just because he didn’t think Thrass’ wife would like him talking about her behind her back. That explained his reaction anyway, and at the same time, he also understood Thrawn’s newfound discomfort. He had been told numerous stories about how the two of them had never really gotten along. The only common factor between them was their love of Thrass and their uncontested stubbornness that rivaled even Chiss standards.

Now, Eli had only met Thrass’ wife a few times, and while she was always pretty nice to him, she basically personified the cool, calculating confidence of the Chiss from his old Lysatran stories. Her presence was even more powerful than an Aristocra’s, her intimidation on par with that of Emperor Palpatine, and for some reason he could never fully explain, even though he had practically no ties to Mitth House whatsoever, Eli knew that she held all dominance over him like some kind of proud animal pack leader. By the looks of Thrass and Thrawn, her alpha pheromones seemed to hold some control over them as well.

"Ah!" Thrass smiled. "Ritot, Ch'eo beo! I was unaware you wished to speak. Have you been waiting long?"

"Not long," she said, her voice sweet and casual towards her husband.

That facade quickly evaporated into the chill Csilla air however, when she diverted her red gaze over to Thrawn.

“Mitth’rawnuruodo,” she said, her voice politically polite, but somehow still venomous as her laser red eyes bore into him with the most subtle of glares. She was a high diplomat after all, the matriarch of the entire Mitth family name, and if anyone could put on a kind face to someone they deeply disliked, it was her.

“Mitth’lohr’ana…” Thrawn bowed. “You look well.”

She scoffed and waved his compliment away as he immediately turned to greet the other three women and his niece.

“Tharin, Arisar’ona’niku, Tere’vo’nikori, Maris’safis... my greetings extended to you as well.”

Tharin nodded an acknowledgement as the other three women accepted the greeting with slightly less vehemence than Lohrana. Even then though, Eli could still see the reserved looks of judgement on most of their faces. Their colorful gowns signified their wealth to the 6th, 7th, and 9th ruling families, as even Tharin’s green dress and Lohrana’s burgundy caped gown revealed them as symbols of status at this tribunal. Even in the Chis Ascendancy there was a hierarchy, and these four women were standing tall at the very top. In a way they were also looking down on Thrawn, though Chiss culture prevented it from being so obvious like it was back in the Empire.
Lohrana smiled again, the clip holding her top-knot shaking slightly as she turned her head and gestured to her compatriots with a smooth wave of her hand.

"Rona here was just telling me about their latest architectural project on Ornfra, and Evoni claims the resources on Sharh have brought a great increase to the planet’s industry. It seems all productivity is increasing which should prove exceptional results for the rising war efforts we’re soon facing."

“That is good news,” Thrawn said, trying to be polite, though he could see the set up coming from a parsec away.

“It is so rare we get to speak in person, but thanks to your back to back trials Thrawn, the three of us have been able to speak quite frequently."

_There it was._

“So it would seem,” he replied, the cold sarcasm faint, but just as visible as her passive aggressive comment as he quickly turned his attention to the long haired woman in the straight blue gown. “Maris’safis, I am honored you would offer Schesa, towards Ezra’s community service. I trust he will be a great help to you as well as the ozyly-eschembo.”

“As syndic to the least known of the nine ruling families, I sought opportunity with the boy and offered my hand. I have heard the rumors of his abilities. If he is able to help our children in any way, then I welcome him to come and try.”

“I too hope they will find each other's presence enlightening.”

As do I,” she said, her voice hopeful and yet, sounding slightly concerned as well. "I look forward to his presence within the week. For now I must get back to make my report."

“Yes well…” Rona cut in mock-politely, her indigo dress swishing as she turned back to her own ship. “We will take our leave as well so you and your family may catch up, Lohrana. Until the next trial…”

“Hopefully it will not be scheduled for next week!” Evoni teased. “I’m afraid Sharh is undergoing a large shipment of resources. Thrawn, do you believe you and your humans can stay out of trouble for that long?”

She shot a particularly glib look in Eli’s direction and he resisted the urge to tell her that her dress with the Nikori Family colors reminded him of the slime residue drying at the edges of a Hutt slug’s mouth.

_easy there, Eli._ He told himself. No need to make enemies with an entire ruling house just because he wanted to say one snide comment to its major diplomat. No, Eli still knew better than that and he kept his mouth shut.

Luckily, Thrawn cut in before the urge became too great to control and he ignored the comment with cool grace as he bowed to them and never allowed his tone to falter. Eli wanted to give him a medal for the control over the masterful restraint in his voice. It was truly something worthy of admiration.

“I will endeavor to do so, ma’am. As always, it has been a pleasure.”

"Quite,” they hummed in return, turning to leave with a final farewell aimed in Lohrana's direction. She of course wasted no time in redirecting her attention back up at Thrawn once the
three of them were gone.

“So Thrawn, I see you are keeping Thrass’ attention very occupied since your return.” She chuckled darkly. “Some things never change I see.”

He merely sighed, no longer needing to put on his best face for the other ruling families.

“Ch’eo beo...” Thrass said soothingly as he grinned and stepped over to her side. He held her face close to his own and smiled at both her and his daughter as his loving contact cracked a small portion of his wife's anger towards his brother. “It is so rare that my entire family is together in one place. Let us not sully it with the antics of a brash teenager from the past.”

“If by rare, Ticsi, you mean this is the first time it has ever happened, then yes I would suppose so?” Tharin teased, her warm smile making the cold tension between the adults just the slightest bit more tolerable than it was before.

*It would seem she and Thrass shared a unique quality to improve Lohrana's mood no matter how intense she wanted to appear.*

Thrawn smirked.

“No, this is not the first time. Though, you probably would not remember the others because you were still quite young at the time.”

She might have remembered bits and pieces of him from her childhood, but though rare, all four of them had spent brief moments together after her birth. She might not fully remember such, but in these last few hours, Thrawn had recalled the last time they had all been in the same place, the memory of that trial, so vivid and unsullied by age or loss of memory. He could see their final moments together even now, still so clearly as he recalled standing in much the same space and being led away by Ar'alani and the Nuruodo guards towards his exile shuttle.

Csilla, many years ago:

“Thrawn!” Thrass shouted, rushing up to the escorts, his boots kicking the snow up from the ground in his haste. “Release my brother! I must speak!”

“Do as he says,” Ar'alani ordered, the look of dejected sadness in her eyes masked only by her strict command. “I will give you a few moments to say your farewells. Guards, with me!”

They walked out of earshot, but not so far that they would be out of their line of sight.

“Thrawn!” Thrass called through a breath of air as he rushed over, touching his brother’s face as well as the cuffs holding his hands together with loose coils of blue energized light.

He had never been this panicked before. Not once in all of Thrawn’s memory. It was sad in one way, but a bit humbling in another. Certainly he would tell his brother the truth of his exile, though, much like Ar'alani he would need to reveal such in a way that only Thrass could truly understand.
so as to not blow his cover.

“The verdict—” He continued, his outrage still apparent though his face returning to that of the cool and collected Syndic he claimed himself to be. “They cannot do this… the Aristocra must be mistaken!”

“Be calm, Thrass.”

“But Thrawn… do you not realize the severity of what you’ve done? You’ve been exiled! I cannot help you. I have no way to fix this mess!”

“I know.” Thrawn took his brother’s face in his hands. “Please Thrass, I must do this. It is the only way I can see to free out people of this upcoming war.”

“But why?” Thrass groaned, tearing away in one angry stomp as his hands came up to rub at his temples. “Why does it have to be you? Why does it have to be exile?”

“I am exiled yes, but in my leave, I have been tasked a mission. When I return, if I should one day return, it will be with the power to defeat evil.”

“You neglect to answer all of my questions. Why does this have to be you? Your military expertise is invaluable, now more than ever.”

“It is only because someone must take blame for this attack. My attack. The preemptive strike was my doing, Thrass. Though the Aristocra may not agree with my methods, they agree to my plan. I have been to the area before, I have met the Jedi, and I alone hold the three keys to victory. This was my plan, and I will see it through. I hope in time you will come to see my methods as well.”

“Thrawn, I cannot change what you see. I do not understand it and I most certainly do not agree with it… but… but if you say this is all some grand plan for our people—” He sighed. “I will also not stand in your way.”

“You must agree to keep this secret, Thrass. I fear a schism is growing between the Chiss. Wars will come and to keep them at bay— even just for a short while— I will be the one to take blame for it all.”

He shook his head and hissed.

“A martyr. So scorned by hypocrites who will never know what you’ve done to save them? That is what you wish? Truly?”

“That is how it must be. I am not innocent in all of this, Thrass. My hands are bloodied with death and mistakes just the same as any other, perhaps even more so. I do not seek my own retribution, I seek only to protect our people, my family included.”

He diverted his eyes to behind Thrass as they each turned upon hearing the new set of footsteps crunching up to them through the snow.

It was Lohrana, waiting a safe distance away as the wind blew her burgundy cape vividly through the white snow. The toddler in her arms, also dressed in a suit of Mitth red and gray, could only stare, her eyes wide as she saw the two standing near the shuttle and wondered worriedly what was going on around her.

Thrawn frowned disapprovingly.
"You brought Mitth'ar to the tribunal?"

"News of the immediate trial left us no time to leave her on Copero. She remained with a caretaker during the ceremony, so don't worry, she has no idea what's going on."

"You give her too little credit for her age, Brother."

Thrass shot him a look, but was unable to say anything further as Lohrana stepped forward, shooting the guard who attempted to turn her away a particularly nasty glare that warned him against the idea as he returned to Ar'alani's side and let her through.

"It seems you've finally done it this time, haven't you?" she said, though for once, her average scornful face and tone were possessed by an entirely new expression, one of genuine concern that Thrawn never thought he would ever see directed at himself.

He glanced to Lohrana and then to the small child, and finally back to Thrass, his glowing eyes a picture of confidence and no regrets.

"Protect our family while I am away, Thrass."

He hissed again and with a shake of his head, he stepped forward and slammed his forehead into his brother's.

"I hope you know what you're doing this time…" he whispered, grabbing him by the back of his hair and pressing their heads together so forcefully that both brothers could feel the ache forming in the front of their skulls.

He pulled away and Thrawn smiled at the purple spot forming at the center of his brother's forehead.

"With my warrior's fortune, Thrass, how can I fail?"

His brother did not appreciate the joke, but said nothing more.

Just as suddenly, two hands grabbed him as General Ar'alani stepped forth and motioned him towards the shuttle.

"Thrawn, it is time."

He sighed and nodded.

"I must go."

"Yes, I suppose you must," Thrass replied, his voice hard and stiff as it ever was as he stood helpless, watching the guards lead him away in his false chains.

"Genti!" The child cried, a weight now pressed against his legs as the entire party came to a sudden stop. "Genti wait!"

"Commander, may I?" He asked.

She sighed, but took three steps back to give them proper space.

"One more moment!" she warned. "That's all, Thrawn."

He nodded and looked down to see the child was buried up to her knees in snow, Lohrana’s face
revealing that she had never meant to let her daughter run so far away, and Thrass looking down at her with a pained, knowing expression of a father who hadn't even bothered trying to stop her. Thrawn wasn't happy about that, and seeing as it was him who was leaving and not either of her parents, he supposed it would have to be him who broke the news to his innocent little niece.

He knelt to the ground and shut his eyes, leaning forward, and lightly brushing his forehead with Tharin’s as she grabbed his face in her small, chubby hands. Tears stained her cheeks, her eyes showing a concern that no child her age should be able to process, much less truly feel. She was so smart for her age, he knew it, perhaps one day Thrass and Lohrana would notice as well.

“Why so sad euhn in'a?” Thrawn asked, a gentle smile on his face as if to tell her that everything was going to be alright.

“Why are you going away?” She sobbed, her voice unable to form the right syllables of Cheunh which only seemed to make the seriousness of her question all the more adorable and slightly humorous to those listening.

Thrawn smiled wider, keeping his hands buried in the mounds of snow so she wouldn’t see the cuffs he wore. He knew if she studied them hard enough, it would only upset her further.

“You will understand one day. Until then, listen to what your mother and father tell you. Grow up to be someone who the whole Ascendancy will look up to.” His gaze returned to Lohrana and Thrass. “Be strong just like your parents, and remember many stories to tell me when I return. Can you do that while I am away?”

She stifled her shaky sobs, nodding a few times as the tiny hands grabbed at the long strands of his blue-black hair that had fallen from his failing up-do.

Thrass came up a moment later and picked her up off the ground, soothing her as Thrawn rose at even level with them and attempted to pull his hair away from her balled up fists. For such a young child, her grip could rival that of any Nuruodo soldier, and eventually he just let her pull a few of the strands out as he broke free of her grasp. He blinked away the brief moment of pain he felt before calming her again as she started to breath rapidly with new tears ready to burst.

“Don’t waste your tears, euhn in'a. I assure you that I am not worth it. I don't wish to see you so sad.”

Her small brows arched at him in frustrated confusion, but she turned her face to bury it in Thrass’ chest and did not cry again as she still gripped the long strands of his hair in her tiny clenched fists.

Lohrana and Thrass gave Thrawn one last look and then with a light push, he was once again led away.
“I can’t believe it. I always assumed his rashness would lead to this one day, but I still can’t believe it. This is a dark hour for Mitth House.” Lohrana sighed. “Will you be alright ch’eo beo?”

“Without Thrawn here to distract me,” he said coldly. “I assume I will be able to get much more done. Would you not agree?”

She took in a breath, not believing the bluff for a moment as she let her head fall to his shoulder, the family watching as one of their own blood was ushered into a ship and sent away from their lives forever.

Csilla, now:

“Yes…” Lohrana hummed, her tone lacking any fondness towards the old memories. If I recall, the last time we were all together like this was on the day of your exile, Thrawn. Though now I suppose we publicly know the truth of that trial. Your secret shame on Mitth House no longer a
“Thrass told you of the initial plan back then, I assume?”

“He did, though I would rather you have been the one to express such a moronic ploy before you went and got yourself exiled. There was probably something else that could have been done instead. A better solution that you dragging the house name through the mud!”

“But someone had to be to blame for the preemptive strike. Certainly I was not about to let Ar’alani take the responsibility for my actions.”

She hummed, her tone unamused as she shook her head.

“At any rate, I suppose I should welcome you home, Thrawn. You understand my hesitancy to do so before, but well—” She chuckled. “Who knows when you are going to go off and get yourself banished again? Though two trials focused solely on your actions in such a short time frame must mean the Aristocra intend to keep you around for a while, even if that means putting up with your typical antics.” She shot him another look, this one accusatory. “I can relate to their frustrations.”

Tharin made an uncomfortable face at Eli for help, and he took the opportunity to clear his throat and greet the diplomat in his most polite Cheunh in order to try and shift the subject to somewhere lighter.

“Mitth’lohr’ana I am pleased to see you again. Forgive me for not greeting you properly much sooner.”

She smiled, the brunt of her attention now cast directly into him.

“Ah yes, Csbotti. So far you have been an ample citizen and both Thrass and Tharin speak very highly of you. I do hope you will not allow Thrawn’s poor influence to make me change my initial opinions of you. It appears he seems to hold quite a reign over you. Correct me if I am wrong, but do you not currently outrank him? That must be a stab to his pride, if not a source of it. I can never quite read him correctly. Still, I expect you to be a better example to him, rather let him lead you as he had you in your past.”

Eli blanched, unsure of what to say with all four of them staring directly at him and awaiting some kind of reply. Any way he responded to that would either make somebody mad or make himself look incompetent. Nervously, his eyes darted around and he saw Tharin make a cutting gesture near her throat which Eli knew meant it was time to make a hasty retreat.

He clapped and took a few steps back.

“Wow! Would you look at the time!? I really must be getting back to my duties. Thrawn, I’m going to go prep the ship, you just come in whenever you’re ready and I’ll fly you back to Naporar. Everyone. It's been a pleasure, and farewell!” He bowed and escaped, thanking his lucky stars that no one tried to stop him.

_Sorry guys, you're on your own with this battle..._ He thought with absolutely zero regrets whatsoever surfacing inside of him for promptly ditching them all.

As he trailed away and vanished, all had amused smiles on their faces as they watched the tanned-skin human fleeing from their conversation. Though all reasons for such looks varied depending on the person attached to them. After a few moments of silence, Lohrana finally broke and pressed her hands together as she pointed them over in Thrawn's direction.
“Fine. You do not wish me to speak of the past, Thrass, then I will speak of the present. How much of Tharin’s time is about to be wasted? Your devotion to your younger brother, I can begrudgingly stand by, but now he seeks to use my daughter to clean up his messes? That, I will not allow.”

“I’m very happy with my duties, Tin’mi—” Tharin started, though her mother raised a swift hand to silence her and Tharin clamped her lips together.

“She has a bright future with the Inrokini,” Lohrana continued. "I do not wish to see this progress sullied by playing babysitter to one human! Especially to one so deeply troubling.”

Her hand lowered and Tharin immediately started back into the conversation.

“I am more than happy to help Ezra, and his study will bring much needed knowledge to the Ascendancy, maybe even to Schesa and the operatives who live there.”

“So you say…” her mother mused.

“It’s true Tin’mi. Why… just this week I have created suitable nutrient frame for the Ysalamiri of Myrkr. You know Ronin is fascinated with the study of that planet and its creatures. If not for Ezra, then I never would have thought to invent such a device.”

She hummed again, seeming to accept the excuse, though recognizing it as a blatant vindication all the same.

“Very well, Tharin. I trust you to turn even a situation such as this into a learning opportunity. You are my daughter after all, and you are a brilliant young woman.”

She gently caressed her face and Tharin returned her mother’s smile. It was always nice to be praised by someone who was notoriously hard to please. Luckily, Tharin was pretty good at helping her mother focus on that when she needed to.

She lowered her hand and turned on her heel back towards her husband.

“Thrass, may we travel home together on your ship? I’ve sent mine back without me in hopes you and I might discuss matters of the house further.”

Thrass grinned, a bit of a purple blush forming near his ears.

“Of course, ch’eo beo. I would love your company. It is true that my brother’s return has taken a portion of my time, but I am willing to make up for such loss if you will permit me.”

Tharin and Thrawn rolled their eyes, smiling secretly to one another when they realized the both of them reacted much the same way to her parents’ shameless flirting.

“Tharin, may I speak with you a moment?”

“Of course, G’en’tvi.” She turned to her parents and bowed. “Tin’mi, Tic’si, I was glad to have seen you today. I will keep in contact.”

“See that you do, k’eten...” Thrass smiled, spreading the goodbye over to his brother as well. "Until we again meet, Thrawn."

He nodded.

“Thrawn…” Lohrana said in curt farewell.
“Lohrana…” He said back, his voice almost mocking the core name that he was sure she would be annoyed with him using.

She shot him a glare, but let it slide as she reached forward and pressed her forehead up against her daughter’s before breaking away and turning to go into Thrass’ ship.

"Continue to make us proud, Tharin."

“Safe travels you two.” Thrass waved and like that, the two were gone.

“So…” Tharin smirked and swirled her index finger around the air in front of Thrawn’s face.

“What secrets do you wish to tell me, G’en’vti. Is it pertaining to the trial? What’s this about Ezra’s community service on Schesa? I see that look in your eyes. What plans are you currently plotting?”

“I have a mission for you, Tharin.”

“Oooh!” She visibly brightened. “A mission for me? That is peculiar and unexpected, but interesting nonetheless. What plans do you have in mind?”

“Ezra may need a few days to fully recover from our latest mission. Though, it is not his health that is damaged, but his heart.” He frowned. “We lost a good man to the Yuuzhan Vong, and Ezra is the type of leader to take that blame personally.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Tharin replied, a new frown forming on her face that made a flash of the little girl Thrawn once knew appear before him. He shook the memory aside.

“In any matter, I know you are currently planning to train Ezra’s mind and body for the challenges of the Chiss Ascendancy, but may I also ask that you train his soul?”

“Train his soul?” She pondered. “I’m not quite sure I know how to do that, G’en’vti.”

“I believe you will come up with an idea, Tharin. I surmise that Ezra would take kindly to the friendship of someone his own age, and to have you at his side it might help him to see his stay here less like a mission and more like a life.”

“I was unaware his thoughts were so dark and serious!” She frowned. “Of course his studies and duties are important, but I don’t want him to be so miserable! I understand now, G’en’vti. I will strive to show him the fun and kindness the Chiss Ascendancy can teach him as well as the academics.” She mumbled to herself, a finger tapping against her lower lip, a human gesture, and one she no doubt mimicked for comedic purposes rather than a natural response. “Unfortunately I have not had many friends, and I don’t exactly think I can mimic the friendships between my mother’s companions such as Rona and Evoni. I suppose I will need to learn for myself what something like friendship entails before I attempt to share it with Ezra.”

“I know little about how to act as a good influence to my friends—” He shot a look back at the ship where Eli was sitting alone in the cockpit, still trying to think up a response to Lohrana’s trap phrase. He smiled. “Though, I’ve formulated an idea of such with Eli. True friendships are rare, but if you’re willing, they become a strong connection between two like minded people, and they will occur rather naturally if given the chance.”

She grinned.

“Eli and I have a unique relationship too. Should I treat Ezra the same as I treat Eli?”

“I believe you should act the way you already do around him. Your bond is already there, but
perhaps a special project will help to strengthen it?"

“The true secret mission?” She smiled in eager anticipation. “Do tell…”

And so he did, and when he was done her mixed looks of reserve, concern, excitement, and eventual acceptance led way to a mutual understanding.

“I can do that. We can absolutely never tell my parents about this, but I think I might just know how to pull it off without getting caught.”

“I should ask that you do, Tharin.” Thrawn smiled. “Or else the next tribunal could very well be for the two of us.”

She laughed and held out her hand to him with confidence in the human action.

“Human handshake on it then?”

Thrawn smiled as he took her hand and answered it with a firm up and down motion of his own arm. He was amused that she thought so well of human culture as to implement it in her daily life. That would surely help Ezra when adjusting over to the clan’s many rules and mannerisms, and of course, Thrawn knew his niece was smart enough to handle the care and watch of Ezra Bridger. She would indeed hone his mind and skills with her knowledge and teachings, but there was something else... Thrawn saw an additional potential something positive that enhanced an already ideal situation. Seeing the way the two interacted, he deduced that his niece might also manage to train the young Jedi’s heart as well. Surely if this were to happen, Ezra would have more than ample reasons to stay and fight for the Chiss for far longer than even Thrawn anticipated. He needed more than just a mission. If Ezra were to remain as he was now, he needed a better reason to stay. A friend could be just that reason.

“I know you will succeed, Tharin. Of this, I have no doubts. When you go to retrieve him on Sposia, please allow him time on Csaus to mourn, and then slowly work your way up to the mission. There is no rush to do it immediately.”

“Of course. I will take good care of him, Thrawn. I think that is something a good friend does for the other, wouldn't you say? I will ask Eli more on how to properly comfort humans, and be sure to implement it in our time together. Don’t worry, I’ll figure it out along the way. I have a whole year to perfect this friendship after all.”

“Then I will leave his care in your hands. Do well Tharin. You have my thanks.”

She grinned and slammed her head against his.

“Good luck with your duties as well, G’en’vti. You just leave everything else to me!”

There it was again, the flash of the little girl he once left on Csilla. To think he hadn’t remembered her at all just a few days prior. Now, she was a face most precious to him. Thrawn watched as she waved and rushed off, boarding her Clawcraft, and then speeding away into the stars. With a smile, he knew things were changing just as Ar’alani had said. Only now, did he think, unlike the hidden negativity of war that she had meant in the statement, Thrawn decided that he really didn’t mind the change… so long as the Chiss and his family could remain well protected.

He turned and started towards Eli’s shuttle as the cold Csilla air lifted the snow beneath his feet. He would do anything, fight any battle, attend countless tribunals, and even take another deadly wound to the chest if it meant things would one day change for the better. He was no saint in this
mission, and his idealism was not that of any good man, but a selfish one. He would use every asset to his ability, treat his own family as pawns in his schemes, and one day they might grow to despise him for it… Ezra certainly would once all of his truths came to light, and when that day arrived, Thrawn would welcome it. However, if in the end it meant he had made a positive change in the galaxy, then he would do any negative thing he could think of to make sure it came true.

That was just how it had to be, and somebody had to be to blame. Luckily, Thrawn was very good at being just such the man for that type of job.
Chapter Summary

Ezra is struggling with the events of the last few days and Tharin decides to try and get his mind off of his troubles using one of the many consoling methods that Eli taught her. A conversation and a good meal could go a long way in improving a person's mood.

Chapter Notes

Posted on: September 30, 2018

The rain outside was still pouring down like it had been for last three days since Ezra had come back to Csau. It was a calming rain though, the sounds echoing across the hills as millions of tiny droplets pattered against his home and splashed into the muddied ground below. He could sit and listen to the soothing downpour for hours, and more than anything right now, Ezra wanted nothing else but to do just that. He was too distracted though, the bliss not reaching him at all as he sat on his bed in a meditative position, trying to clear away his thoughts to no avail.

In his mind, he was still reeling from the rescue mission on the Yuuzhan Vong scout ship. Birt's death, Thrawn's near death, and the horrific torture of the Imperials were all working diligent circles through his thoughts ever since he'd woken up in the Sabosen hospital a couple of days ago.

Urick and Gunther were still there, and though Gunther at least had regained consciousness shortly before Ezra had left, Urick was still in critical condition and undergoing constant treatment. The sight of him dangling from the strange torture table flashed briefly in Ezra's mind as a soft rumble of thunder echoed from outside. He ignored both and shook the nightmarish thought away as he tried once more to center himself the way Kanan had once taught him.

If those sour memories weren't enough to cloud his senses, there was also the visions he'd had of the Death Star's destruction, the strange man's voice inside his head, and the unheard of way he'd somehow healed Thrawn from what should have been a fatal wound. Who was that man? How did he contact Ezra using only his mind? How did he know Thrawn was in trouble, and why would he help save him? There were so many questions racing through him, and he felt so much constant pain in both his mind and heart that it was starting to become exhausting.

He hadn't left home since they'd come back, completely devoting himself to his meditations in the hopes of finding answers. He had been trying to hear the man in his head again, or even to catch a glimpse of another vision that might explain things a little better, but as the troubled Jedi sat alone in his room, the days passing by, he realized that all the meditation in the galaxy wouldn't be able to make things clearer to him, and nobody was coming to answer his questions.

“Tharin…”

“How’d you know it was me?”
Her voice came from the other side of the door, the noises of the weather intensifying as she let herself in without either knocking or announcing that she was coming over in the first place. That was just how she was though, and Ezra had quickly gotten used to that fact. She'd come in twice already to check and see how he was doing or if he was feeling ready to continue with his physicals and examinations issued to him by the Aristocra. So far he hadn’t, but she was respecting that hesitation better than he would have thought, and she was giving him his much-desired space for these last few days. She even agreed to watch Jorj for him while he attempted to tap into the Force for his “brooding concentrations” as she called it.

Reluctantly, he broke his meditation and opened one eye, looking over to meet her gaze as he caught a glimpse of her walking through the wet doorway.

“Lucky guess?” He smirked. “So is Jorj behaving?”

“Oh yes, he is the ample house guest,” she replied, returning the lizard to his tree by the doorway. “I thought I would just bring him by for a few moments to rest while I recharge his nutrient frame.”

Ezra nodded, relaxing his position for a moment as she walked across the floor and into the kitchen.

There was a whirring force field type disk floating just above her head, which Ezra could only assume was keeping her dry from all the rain on her walks over here from her lab. She sprawled all of her belongings across the counter and shut the umbrella-disk down, muttering something as she opened each of his cabinets and drawers, pillering through them only to see that they were just as empty and barren as they were when he’d moved in. She frowned, slamming the last of the cabinets as she leaned over his counter to meet his eyes.

“Ezra, have you been eating?” She asked with a glare, and for once Ezra wasn’t sure if it was meant to be a joking gesture or a deadly serious one.

“Of course?” He shrugged, pointing to the pile of discarded ration bar wrappers collecting at the corner of his kitchen counter. “I have ration bars, see?”

She saw the trash and the stack of eight military-grade food sticks piled on the counter. With a growl, she grabbed one and pelted him upside the head with it.

“Ration bars are not a proper diet!” She took in a breath and held the bridge of her nose to calm herself. “This is unacceptable, Ezra! As your supervisor, I am tasked with teaching and testing you, but until you’re ready to let me do that, I need you to eat actual food.”

He merely lifted his brows.

“I’m not really that picky. I didn’t think you would get so mad about this sort of thing, Tharin?”

“I am not mad,” she said the effort to sound gentle matched only with a freshly studious glare aimed back at his direction. “I’m just worried about you. Your health and well-being are literally one of my Ascendancy-issued priorities. You are my test subject—”

He scoffed a little and rolled his eyes.

“—And also my friend!” She stated a bit more strongly than before. “Whether you think of me as such or not, you are the closest thing I have to that definition.”

“Oh?” He stood up, feeling a little bit of pitiable guilt rising up inside of him. “You’re my friend, Tharin. Of course you’re my friend.”
"Alright then." She smiled and started to reach for the many containers she’d thrown on his counter.

“What’s all that?” Ezra asked.

“Ingredients,” she replied simply. “Considering this weather and your state of mind, I was hoping you would agree to let me borrow your kitchen before Jorj and I return to my lab. I’m making soup today. It should pair nicely with the rain, don’t you think?”

“Soup?” He made a face. *That certainly wasn’t something he ever thought he’d hear Tharin say.*

“That is the Basic term for it, right? *Soup*?”

“I think so? I mean... it’s food, right? In a bowl, mostly liquid, you use a spoon to eat it?”

She laughed.

“That is my definition of it, at least?”

Ezra shot her a look.

“That’s not really how friendships work...” he started, falling backwards onto the bed in defeat, his stomach growling just loud enough that her hypersensitive ears no doubt picked it up. “But fine. That sounds nice. Thank you, Tharin.”

“Don’t mention it. Eli says talking over food is one of the better ways to console a grieving friend.”

“Thanks...” he added dryly, sinking deeper into his bed.

“Do not mention it,” she said again, this time even more sincere than the last. She still didn’t quite grasp sarcasm yet, but Ezra wasn’t about to teach it to her now, what with her cooking for him and all.

Both Eli and Thrawn had filled her head with these human consolement methods because they figured he would be depressed. Honestly, he was a little upset, mostly tired, but as always, he would bounce back... he always bounced back. He just needed to find out the answers gnawing away at the back of his mind. Something wasn’t right. Something was missing. He felt a disturbance and he just couldn’t shake it. *What was it though? Why did he feel this way? Kanan would know what to do, but— Kanan was gone. All of them were gone.* He was on his own, and he would just need to start accepting that fact.

Tharin meanwhile saw the blatant difference in his character, even through the misunderstanding eyes of a Chiss. Plus, she knew that ever since they got back, he’d been sitting alone in his house, sulking with not even the Ysalamir to keep him company. She was his only contact on Csaus, and only hoped that she was somebody who could help him to feel better. The task from her uncle was still fresh in her mind, but despite his mission to her, she truly and deeply did wish to help Ezra be happy again. She just wasn’t sure how to do that. Eli mentioned food to be one good gateway to such breakthroughs though, and luckily, food was one thing she was good at when it came to spending time with other people.
She began to get to work, powering on the cooker and working it masterfully whereas Ezra still wasn’t really sure how to turn the blasted thing on. He watched as she cut up and tossed a pile of what Ezra could only assume were vegetables into the pot before reaching for another squishier meat-looking thing to slice into small strips, her blade working masterfully as she prepared the dish. Just like back on Sposia, Ezra noted that she seemed to be very good at multitasking, both talking and preparing a meal with complete ease as she pointed the knife at him and encouraged him to continue talking.

“So tell me, Ezra, is there really some trick to you knowing where I am? I used to be able to sneak up on you, but now it’s like you can tell any direction which I am coming, even with Jorj equipped on either you or me. Is there something about me that stands out in your senses or is it more physical like you can hear the tread I make when I walk up to you?”

“I just know you’re the only one coming to visit me.” He chuckled. “But... well... I guess there is another thing more closely related to the Force that could help?”

“Oh? Do tell!” She mused eagerly.

“Sometimes, like with other people or places, I guess I’m able to sense you.”

“Yes, I am aware of this ability. It is how you found the other humans and rescued them, yes?”

“Yeah…”

She frowned at his tone.

_He was talking_, Tharin noted. Though, he clearly shuts her out when she mentioned the rescue mission. Considering he had been holed up in his home, _and holed up while not even working on any inventions like she would be if she had disappeared into her home for days on end_. She shook the thought away. For the sake of the conversation, she decided it was probably best not to mention the last few days or the recent events again.

“Go on…” She gestured. “How is that distinctive from the remainder of your senses?”

“You have a distinct pattern in your mind,” he explained, his body relaxing a bit as he seemed to forcibly steer himself back into their conversation. “I can recognize that unique texture and can tell where you are or if you’re coming close to me. That’s all I mean.”

“Oh?” she smiled wider, her voice dripping with fresh intrigue. “What does this pattern look like? Would it be possible for you to describe it to me?”

“It’s not really a look, more like a feeling. But if I had to put it into words… I guess to me it kind of looks super-organized, the patterns of thought all really straightforward and precise, like an office. A lot of scholarly people have minds like that, Thrawn does too, and a lot of Chiss seem to share the same pattern. When it comes to Chiss though, the part of the brain where emotions are normally felt are harder to read, it’s like a series of codes in some other language…”

“And what distinction is there with mine that is different than my people?”

He chuckled.

“Your mind is filled with this different flow of curiosity and openness. All Chiss minds are like this neat and uniform office space, right? But with you, it’s almost like someone tossed one of Sabine’s paint bombs inside and set it off, splattering bits of color all over the place! It’s kind of like a bit of fun that the rest of your people typically lack.”
He laughed, but the joy died down as a frown begin to form on his face.

Tharin matched his frown, her thoughts ecstatic to be learning such interesting descriptions of Ezra’s Force abilities, but at the same time, her sympathy refusing to let it show. She’d studied human culture long enough to know when a friend was frowning, it was probably better if you didn’t smile at them too much until you had a better grasp of the situation and reasons for their facial expression. Their emotions could change so rapidly too, she just had to remind herself to be careful and tread lightly.

“How fascinating...” she said gently, placing the lid on her soup pot as she stepped closer to his room. Her voice was hesitant, but sought answers, both to her own curiosities and for a way to improve Ezra’s mood further. She decided to just go for it. “Sabine. This was one of your former crew members correct? The ones you say are no longer with you. Can... you... tell me more about them?”

Ezra took in a long breath and rubbed his eyes.

“What do you want to know?”

She smirked, wandering back over to the wall across from his bed and pressing for a button that Ezra didn’t even know was there. A small stool slid out from a hidden panel within the wall and she sat down, Ezra now rapidly searching around his house for more hidden buttons. Tharin didn’t seem to notice, too excited by the opportunity to finally start studying bits about his life as she came up with an answer.

“Everything! I would never stop you from telling me more about your past. That was one of our original terms to my tutoring you, if you remember?”

He grinned.

“I remember.”

She returned an honoree smirk, and lifted her chin.

“But for your sake, and the time it takes for the soup to fully cook, I will settle for their mind patterns.”

“Their mind patterns?”

“Yes!” she nodded. “Sabine and the rest. Were their mind patterns as distinct to you as mine is? What were they like? Describe them for me.”

“They were incredible!” He said, smiling softly, his eyes gazing as if into the past as the reply came to him so naturally. “First of all, Kanan’s mind was so conflicted at first, like a maze winding through levels of this huge mountain. The longer I knew him though, the more clear and simple it all became. His mind was all consideration... for the missions, for the people he cared about, just everything. After he lost his sight, those feelings and emotions increased tenfold and after he started to understand himself better, his presence in the Force became so strong that there was literally nothing he couldn’t do. It was like he was standing at the peak of that mountain looking out at a clear sky from the very top. When he was around, you just knew that everything was going to be alright.”

“I can tell he meant a great deal to you. He sounds very courageous and caring.”

Ezra smiled.
“He was. He really was. He had a lot of emotion, and Kanan said that it was never really a good trait for a Jedi to have, but he said it helped him more often than not, and without all these passions and feelings driving him to do things, he said he probably wouldn’t have ended up like he did.”

“These Jedi of old were more like the Chiss then if they wished you not to show emotion as strongly as others?”

“In a way I guess they kind of were? I don’t know, I only know them from stories...” He shrugged. “Though, there was some sort of balance between thoughts and emotions, something that separated the Jedi from the Sith.”

She nodded.

“I’ve heard stories of both. Even out here we have managed to collect information on your worlds in the past. Please… keep going. What else can you describe?”

“Well, Hera’s mind was always kind of similar to Kanan’s. She was cool-headed, caring, and fierce when she wanted to be. Her presence was like watching tall grass shifting through a gentle breeze, but the moment she got behind the wheel of a starship, or if someone had made her mad, the blades sharpened and multiplied like thorns and spikes. She was a Twi’lek, a non-human, so her thoughts, like yours, had a distinction to them, but it was a lot easier to tell her apart than a Chiss. She had secrets at first, and for me, I always just saw these as blank spots in her mind. I never really focused on any of the crews' thoughts or anything, but as I learned more and more about the Force from Kanan, I could tell the distinction. I wonder sometimes just how much he knew about Hera... about all of us really, but mostly about her. They were really close to one another... he could probably see through all the dark spots in her mind in ways I never could.” He smiled. "She did a lot to protect us, a lot to protect everyone in the entire galaxy even. She was the type of person who would never hesitate to sacrifice herself for the bigger picture.”

“She sounds like a wise and noble leader.”

Ezra nodded and started to snicker.

“Okay, so then there was Zeb, and I had to share a room with him, so I got to hear a lot about his thoughts and dreams when I was just starting to get the hang of all these new abilities. He was a nonhuman too, a species called a Lasat—”

“I have heard of the Twi’lek species from books, but not of Lasat. Tell me, what did he look like?”

Ezra stretched his arms up high and wide.

“He was really tall and muscular with pointed teeth and ears, green eyes, purple fur, and dark stripes. He smelled kind of funny, but you would get used to it after a while——” Ezra stopped to clear his throat. “And he talked like this with a gruff accent like I’m doing now! Karabast, kid fetch me my bo-rifle. I wanna go knock some buckets around. Oi! who ate the of the last space waffles?” He cleared his throat and his voice returned to normal, a fond smile spreading from ear to ear. “That’s just something that he might’ve said...”

Tharin pondered aloud, her thoughts racing.

“Of course, a purple fuzzy man! How peculiar indeed. Kara-bast!” She tried to say with Zeb's accent. "That is a fun word to say. Karabast! Karabast!”

He didn't really have the heart to tell her that it was probably not the most polite thing to keep repeating and instead continued with his story.
“Well, anyway… Zeb used to be in the honor guard before his most of his people and planet were wiped out. He had a lot of pride and guilt going on in his head and he was fiercely loyal and a fighter, maybe even the one with the most emotion in the crew. He often let his feelings take over his mind. He could be grouchy, a little moody sometimes, but fearless and precise, especially in combat situations. He never let danger into his mind though, and even when he did have nightmares or second thoughts about something, there was an opening, like the mouth of a small stream, and it never ever got blocked off before turning back into this massive river of thought once again.”

Tharin smiled and leaned on her knees to hear more.

“Truly admirable! How many people were a part of this crew?

“There were just the five of us and Chopper.” Ezra chuckled. “Now, Chopper was an astromech droid so he didn’t really have a mind for me to sense, but he had a big presence about him anyway. Brash, independent, stubborn, and a little mean if I’m being honest, but there were times he was really kind and loyal too, even though he tried not to show it to the whole galaxy.”

“Even your technology sounds incredible! Eli told me stories, but never like this. So, the last member would have been Sabine, yes? Tell me, how was her mind? Was it covered in color like her grenades?”

He smirked.

“Yeah… she was an artist, and a warrior. Looking at the texture of her mind was like staring into a blazing fire, or a bright sun. It never really did the same thing twice. Her thoughts were always changing always moving, but the base of her thoughts and emotions were structured due to all the training and knowledge she looked back to in her life. Her core values were some of the strongest of anybody I knew. She grew up on this planet called Mandalore and everyone there is so fierce and set into their ways, stubborn too, and Sabine was a lot like that, but with bursts of color kind of like you.”

She smiled.

"The way you describe them... the mountains, the grass, a river, and the sun... they appear to form an entire world."

"Yeah, I guess so?" He said softly. "At least to me they were."

He grinned, letting it fall when his eyes drifted back into his past. Tharin observed his face shrinking, the glow of memory fading quickly away as water began forming in his eyes, the blue color becoming more vivid as clear tears formed within them.

He was about to start crying! Vun'bicn! Tharin cursed mentally. This was not supposed to happen!

Quickly she shot up, hoping to take back all of the words that had brought him to such despair.

“I am so sorry, Ezra! I didn’t mean to cause you such sadness! I’ll stop talking about it, I promise!”

“No it’s not that… it’s just a lot of happy memories, and… well… I just miss them all a lot. Sorry…” He rubbed away at his eyes, stopping as soon as he felt Tharin place a gentle hand on his knee.

Humans were such complex creatures. They cried when they were sad, in pain, stressed, lost... but Tharin didn't know that happy tears were a thing that existed for the human body until just now. It
“You know…” she said, breaking the silence. "I cannot relate to losing a loved one like you have, but when I was small, and I wondered where my uncle had gone for those first few years after his exile, my father would tell me stories about him. When he did, I didn’t feel like Thrawn was missing or exiled somewhere, but instead I felt like he was still somehow close to home. I could still picture him in my mind, and even though I could never actually see or talk to him, it was close enough to a feeling that he had never really left.”

Ezra nodded, sniffing once and blinking the remainder of his mournful tears away.

“I know. You’re right. They’re always with me, no matter what happened. Always…”

“I know you know.” She smiled back. “Now you wait here. I think the soup is ready. It should cheer you up far better than words!”

Tharin stood and walked over to the kitchen which was filled with steam and mouth watering smells enveloping the whole tiny house. Ezra cleared his throat and smiled, thanking her when she finally returned with two bowls of the food.

“Give it a few moments to cool, okay?”

He nodded, looking down into the bowl. It was creamy and had clumps of meat and some sort of orange, green, and purple vegetable in it. It actually looked pretty amazing and smelled even better.

"So, hey! Your turn,” he said, his throat clearing away the last remnants of his moment of nostalgia. “Tell me where you learned how to cook. I never really pegged you for the kitchen type?”

She wrinkled her nose at him and stuck out her tongue.

“For your information, my father taught me to be self sufficient.” Her expression instantly melted into eager excitement and she got a wide, bright smile on her face as she came back with her follow up question. "Did you know that cooking is a lot like inventing? It just uses edible parts instead of chemicals and wires. It's really quite simple once you know the correct formulas.”

“I guess it kind of is?” He smirked a little and leaned back against the wall.

“Ticsi and I cooked together quite often before I moved away. My mother never thought I would benefit from such knowledge. We had cooks and people who did that sort of thing for us, but since my father grew up without such luxuries, he thought it would be better if I be prepared myself for anything. I didn’t mind it though. I enjoyed spending time with him, and I always loved learning new things, no matter what they were.”
“Wait... wait... you had personal cooks? What were you rich or something because of Thrass’ syndic job?”

She burst out laughing.

“What? No!” She took a few breaths to calm herself and pointed to him with her spoon. “My mother is a high diplomat, the next in line for the Aristocracy should Mitth House rejoin with the Ruling Families on the council some day. That is why we are so taken care of, Sevicsi, but the cooks bake for all of Mitth House not just my family. We have no physical wealth like that of Koree Vayes in her cloud mansion with all the exotic animals. We are simply a group of families all living together in one area with different skill-sets to add to the name Mitth.”

His eyes widened.

“Okay sure, but your mom is basically an Aristocra!?”

“No of course not, weren’t you listening? She was at your court hearing the other day, this most recent one as well. You saw her. She was not on the podium, just representing the planet of Copero in the crowd.”

“I—but—you—she—”

“Enough talking for a moment.” She gestured to his bowl with her spoon and nodded. “Please, try the soup and tell me how it tastes to you. Humans have such fragile pallets. Ina said most of the
other humans could not handle the spices she used when making your meals.”

“I liked Ina’s food!” Ezra argued defensively. “I’ve never minded spices myself.”

“That is good to know.” She grinned. “Now eat!”

Ezra stared down at it, noting how normal it looked for Chiss cuisine. It smelled amazing, it looked completely edible, and without another hesitation, he took a bite and instantly tasted the warm flavors without the overbearing heat of spice that Ina’s food always seemed to have, but instead the perfect amounts of kick and smooth flavor. It was quite possibly the best thing he’d eaten since he came to the Unknown Regions…maybe even before that.

“It’s good!” He blinked, eyes wide with shock as he took in three more large spoon fills. “Really good! Wow!”

She smiled.

“I’m glad you approve.” She allowed herself a small pat on the shoulder and grinned proudly to herself. “Creating food inventions is almost as fun as making normal ones. Tićiši always liked my soup. It was the one thing he claimed I perfected better than he did, so I make it a lot.” She shot her spoon out at Ezra’s face so quickly that a bit of the broth smacked him in the forehead. “Don’t ever tell any of the other scientists on this planet, do you hear me! Once they know you can cook, everyone comes around all the time wanting free meals!”

He chuckled and rubbed the soup off of his face with his sleeve.

“It’s our secret! I promise.”

“Good.” she nodded primly, taking another spoonful as she noticed Ezra’s empty bowl. “You want seconds? The taste isn’t so good after the first day so we should attempt to finish it quickly.”

He nodded and stood up.

“I’ll get it, thanks. Do you want more?”

She almost spilled it trying to finish the last of her bowl, but nodded and handed her dish up to him.

“Please,” she garbled, mouth full.

He laughed and took it, teasing her as he made his way back into the kitchen.

“I assume you left all your table manners back on Copero with your personal chefs?”

“Oh forgive me that I did not dawn my nicest of clothes and lay out the proper silverware for such occasion.”

They laughed at that and Ezra returned quickly with their bowls.

“Maybe you are getting better at sarcasm?”

She grinned down into her bowl and took another bite. This was progress made on all accounts! She thought happily. Now was time for her to spring the trap she had been weaving within these stories and food offerings.

“To be honest, Sevicsi... I’m afraid I did not come here merely to give you soup and talk about mind patterns.”
“Imagine that?” He said, mocking a shocked gasp. “So what ulterior motive did you have in mind?”

Tharin smiled and jumped to her feet.

“Ezra, how would you like to go on a mission with me?” She wiggled her eyebrows, the technique far better implemented than the last time she’d tried to imitate Koree as she leaned forward and whispered, “It’s a secret mission...”

“You’re going on a secret mission?” He said with just a glimmer of well-placed disbelief.

“Well, G’en’vti planned the whole thing, but he is sending the two of us to retrieve something that he believes will be of use to you in the future.”

“Oh yeah? What’s that?”

“He says he knows where you can get something called a kyber crystal.”

“Wait? Thrawn knows where to get a— but— just— how?”

“It's amusing how you forget how to speak when you are excited!” She snickered. "But the crystal is not even the best part!”

“Well you definitely have my attention,” he said, blinking hard as he tried to process what words were coming from Tharin's mouth. "Go on..."

“We’re taking my Clawcraft!” She sang in a eager voice. “And I’m going to let you be the pilot! We’ll be going to a world called Ilum. It exists in the Unknown Regions, but is outside the borders of Chiss territory. Thrawn has given me schematics gathered by your Jedi of old and his Empire colleagues, so with your help he says we will be able to travel to it safely. Apparently it was once home to a Jedi temple and these special crystals. I trust you can explain the details to me on the way there?”

“S-sure…” he stammered. “It’s just a lot to process.”

“Take your time. We can go whenever you’re ready, there’s no rush. It is secret though, so I think it would be better to do so before your community service on Schesa starts next week and our schedule becomes busy.”

Alright... He thought quickly. A weapon would make his training and protection against the Far Outsiders a lot easier. Sure... why not? This might actually be fun? A trip to such a Force-centered place would probably help him collect his thoughts a little as well. Maybe he would hear the man's voice again? Maybe he could have another vision?

He chuckled and downed the last of his soup.

“What time can we leave?”

“We can leave as soon as Jorj’s nutrient frame is fully charged and then head back to my lab. He’s going to be in the care of another while we are gone, but don’t worry, he will be very happy and well taken care of.”

“Alright I guess?” He shrugged, calling out to the Ysalamir who jumped at the sudden volume of his voice. “You okay with that Jorj?”

With a snide hiss and a bit of a glare, the lizard burrowed into the leaves and disappeared beneath
the foliage.

“I guess that’s a yes?” Ezra stated unconvincingly. “Either that or he’s just mad at me.”

“I’ll ask.” Tharin said, before turning around and yelling to matching Ezra’s volume. The leaves twitched again as her voice disturbed the silence. “Jorj! Are you mad at Ezra?”

A hiss was her reply as well and the two of them met gazes and laughed as Tharin stood up and glanced down into the soup pot in the kitchen.

“Looks like there’s enough left for one more portion. We’ll need our strength after all. Do you have room for a third bowl or are you too full of your ration bars?”

“Oh ha ha…” he teased. “I’ll take one more. While we’re eating, I might just tell you a few other minds that I’ve sensed. People like Eli, Faro, Koree— Hondo…”

“That sounds nice. I’d like that, thank you.”

“No, thank you. I really needed this. Being alone wasn’t really working out for me after all. I’m glad you came here today, Tharin.”

She blushed a tad from the sincerity and walked over to pour a small spoonful of soup onto the leaf nearest Jorj’s face as the lizard purred and started to lick at the contents with his thin purple tongue.

“No hard feelings?”

“Will that be okay for him to eat?”

“Oh sure, a little won’t hurt. He’s been eating meals with me while I was watching him anyway.”

“Oh so now he gets mad if you don’t share… great… just what I need, a spoiled Ysalamir.”

She stuck her tongue out at him again and Ezra swore he could see Jorj doing the same out of the corner of his eye.

“Enough stalling!” Tharin motioned. “Tell me more about these mind patterns before we leave for the mission. Start with Hondo… I like the inflection your tone took when you said this name. They sound the most interesting.”

He laughed.

“Okay okay… so before I start, I think I’ll need to tell you a few things about him first…”

"Please, the more context the better."

"Okay, but don't say I didn't warn you. So, when I first met Hondo—" He laughed and twirled his spoon around the air as he began to tell the tale, the rain still pouring outside, but the loneliness and confusion fading almost completely from his mind as he told Tharin the stories from his past.

*Maybe this soup and a quick trip to Ilum would be just what he needed to feel better after all?*
Later...

“Sir, the creature has arrived. What do you wish done with it?”

“Thank you, I will take it on the bridge,” Thrawn said as he took the bag and strapped it around his arm, resizing the other side to better fit his size which was a bit longer than that of Ezra.

“Hey Thrawn, so once we get back to Naporar, what do you think we should—” Eli started, stopping just as quickly as soon as he saw the creature trailed along the Chiss' shoulders. “Uh… What have you got there?”

Thrawn made a face.

“I do not understand the question. You can clearly see it is a Ysalamir.”

Eli puffed out his cheeks but swallowed back the comment he wanted to make and instead rearranged the words of his statement.

“I mean… why is it here? Is that Jorj? Where’s Ezra?”

“This is Jorj,” Thrawn nodded, his voice aggravatingly calm. "I sent Ezra on a mission to a planet within the Unknown Regions that was of the utmost importance. Apparently he chose to leave sooner than I would have expected.”

“Alone?! You realize he just got out of the hospital right? Even worse, you realize we just got out of a trial semi-centered around his being in huge trouble with the rest of the Chiss High Council!?”

“I know the risks, but this should not be a dangerous mission, and of course I did not send him to complete it alone.”

“Oh, well alright then… I guess that’s okay. So who’s running this errand with him? A member of the phalanx? Ar'alani?”

“Tharin.”

He twitched, his voice hesitant but edging into caution.

“And…what planet are they heading to?”

“It is an Imperial occupied world known as Ilum.”

Eli’s face contorted in several different expressions that were all intensely interesting for Thrawn to witness.

“What in the Hell is wrong with you?!” Eli exclaimed, glad that no one aboard their ship spoke any Basic whatsoever. He did quiet down when he realized the volume of his voice still caused a few heads to turn his way. “Do you know what Thrass is going to do to you if he finds out Tharin is off the Path of Houses? Hell, forget Thrass! Imagine what Lohrana will do to you if she found out! And in the meantime, do you know what the Empire will do if they find a Chiss—or worse! A Jedi snooping around on that world?!”
“There is no longer an Imperial presence on that world. The mining has left it broken beyond repair and the icy surface is currently melting due in large part to the magma flowing up from the planet’s core. Also, I believed that sending them both would improve Ezra’s depression more quickly and hopefully return his Jedi weapon to him, a win-win as you might say for both Ezra and the Chiss Ascendancy.”

Eli was so angry that he couldn’t even come up with a response to that. He had half a mind to grab his blaster and shoot Thrawn somewhere where the sun didn’t shine, or an even greater temptation was to pull it out and turn it to his own head and let the laser fire free him from this nightmare.

“Your eye seems to be twitching much more rapidly than is typical, Captain.” Thrawn said, a mocking smile on his face as he calmly stroked the purring Ysalamir on his shoulders. “Would you care to discuss this in more private quarters so you can speak your mind at the volume necessary to clear your thoughts?”

His twitch intensifying, face growing nearly as red as a pair of Chiss eyes, Eli only nodded slowly in reply.

“Very well.”

Thrawn informed a subordinate that the two of them needed to have a private talk and they were not to be disturbed. The soldier nodded, shooting his captain a look for some reassurance, but choosing to believe Thrawn's word once he saw the intense concentration it was taking just to keep Eli from chewing Thrawn out right here in front of everybody on the bridge.

"This way, Commander," Eli said in the calmest Cheunh his edgy tone could muster.

The other Chiss might have been curious at the statement, but if they were, they waited until after Thrawn and Eli had left to show it.

\textit{Oh, they would have a discussion alright!} Thrawn's plotting or not, Eli was still the acting captain of this ship, and if that meant he could finally get mad at the cocky Chiss for once, then he would gladly take up the mantle. Even if that meant all that would be left of Thrawn when he got finished with him was the soles of his boots and the Ysalamir.

It was almost poetic justice that he finally get the opportunity to do this, and knowing Thrawn, he would find a way to ruin it or calm Eli out of his rant as soon as they got to his office. If either Ezra or Tharin got hurt or caught on this little secret Ilum mission, Eli would be first in line to watch Thrass and Lohrana finish off Thrawn before he even could get a crack at him.

\textit{You’d better just hope you know what you’re doing this time, Thrawn... for all of our sakes, but this time... mostly for your own!}
Ilum

Chapter Summary

Ezra and Tharin visit an unlikely area of the Unknown Regions at Thrawn's request. Will the two find what they're looking for, and what else will they learn along the way? A few surprises just might be in store as the two go on the hunt for a kyber crystal.

Chapter Notes

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“Try to stay close!” Tharin whispered.

“Okay!” Ezra replied in the same hushed tone. "Uh... so one question... what for?"

“Just follow directions!” she snapped.

“Alright! Alright!” he eased, speeding up his pace as Tharin led them through the mazed cubical halls of the Inrokini lab space.

They walked quickly but casually, Ezra awing all of the inventions crammed into one building as they passed by other desks and open testing areas. He noticed that there weren't as many scientists working as the last time he was here. A handful or so were tinkering silently on their own projects, most of them keeping to themselves if not shooting an inquisitive side glance at the alien in their midst. Ezra had only been here once, on the first day he’d moved to the planet, but he hadn’t had a good chance to look around because all the scientists were surrounding him and trying to get samples of his DNA. Eli, Thrawn, and Tharin chased them off, but it seemed a few still looked secretly and unstably interested in him.

Note to self... he thought uncomfortably. *Don't walk around here at night alone until you get that lightsaber.*

As if she could read his mind, Tharin leaned back a ways and muttered to him, still in some obviously overblown attempt to be covert.

“It’s early, so there won't be many others here yet. We work best later in the day and into the nights. Don't worry, we should be able to get through here without anyone asking too many questions. Though, it would be easier if your skin didn’t stand out so much. Maybe I should have just painted you blue like I suggested back at the house? You already have the right hair...”

“Riiight...” He held the word for a questionable amount of time before catching up to her paranoid increased strides. “Come on Tharin. I mean, we’re just here to get your ship, right? Why the dramatic espionage tactics?”
“Right!” She said, a bit too loudly for the distance between them. "We’re just performing a test flight! That’s all it is! Just a test flight!

She turned back and winked at him, the eyelid shutting comically tight, her teeth bared. Tharin still wasn’t completely sure how the human motion worked, but Ezra could see what she meant by the action and tried not to let on that she was doing it all wrong. It was horribly obvious that she'd never snuck out to go on any sort of secret mission before, and she was trying a little too hard to cover up that fact.

Ezra nodded, his brows high as he pretended she was really being inconspicuous with her cover story, but apparently he was pretending a little too well because a few seconds later, Tharin leaned back and whispered, “Did you catch my double meaning?”

“Oh no, yeah, I’m on the same page, but there's just one more thing I'm wondering, though…” She rolled her eyes.

“Alright, what is it?”

He smiled and leaned forward, whispering in her ear now with a bit of amusement added to his voice.

“Nobody else here speaks Basic, so why are we sneaking around looking like we're trying to hide something?”

She stopped dead in her tracks and made a puzzling face towards the air.

“Oh… I suppose I see your point.” She looked around and the other scientists quickly diverted their gazes. None of them wanted to get another lecture from her for coming near her assignment for the Aristocra, and Ronin basically forbid them in interfering with her research unless she asked for help directly, something that Tharin was not well-known for ever doing. She clicked her tongue and let out a quiet laugh. "I suppose I do look a bit more out of place than you do, don't I?"

Ezra shook his head with a laugh of his own and pointed.

“Come on. I've been dying to see your lab anyway.”

She grinned.

“And I have been dying to show it to you! That’s my area right over there.”

The first thing he saw was the Clawcraft, still just as beautiful as it was on the day he'd first watched it cut through the night sky like a shooting star. After that, he stepped towards her piles of scrapped projects or failed attempts, touching most of them, and admiring others as he paced around like a kid in a scrap store.

“Wow Tharin! Just... Wow!” He gasped. "You really made all of this stuff?"

"I did. Those are mostly failed prototypes, but the Inrokin budget allows for a few of those if it means something truly beneficial to the Ascendancy will come of all the tests.” She gestured to the pile. "My first inventions were mostly shield generator upgrades or weapons advancements, but the Sabosen medical suits, the Clawcraft, and my opisthenar data-comm, these all came after Ronin saw my potential and granted me a larger position with the house."

"Not to mention Jorj's backpack," he reminded. "Wow Tharin, your work is just incredi—"
He was cut off as he approached her desk area and a familiar, bloodcurdling snarl caused Ezra to suddenly jump back. It crawled out from under the desk, a nightmare but in real life, and here of all places. No, Ezra could hardly believe it.

"A Vornskr!" He breathed, reaching for the blaster Eli had snuck him when they came back to from the mission a few days ago. "Tharin, watch out!"

She half turned her head before hearing the clatter of his gun and observing the violent stance he was shifting into as he prepared to fire the weapon.

"Whoa wait!" she called, wide eyed, and tossing the first thing on her desk that was within her reach to throw.

**THWACK!**

The tool smacked against his hand and he dropped the blaster with a grunt as he shook away the new stinging pain in his fingers.

"*Ouch! What!?*

"It’s okay!" She calmed, taking a knee just as the large black animal came over and purred, rubbing gingerly against the side of her face as she scratched behind its ear. "This is Talon, the Aristocra’s uh... "pet" so-to-say? I’m watching over one as Ronin watches over the other. This one is male, but the female is pregnant and the two genders must be kept separate until after the babies are born."

He was confused, but less panicked, his voice still struggling to make sense of what he was seeing.

"Wh-what?"

"I’m glad Talon is here today," she continued. "He normally just wanders the labs and sleeps beneath my desk. T’ra Saa would have been more problematic because I would need to monitor her condition. We are very lucky that Ronin has chosen to leave Talon with me today. That's one possible burden lifted! Things are looking up for us now, Ezra!"

"Why— but—" He stammered, finally catching his thoughts up to the rest of him. "Vornskr are dangerous! Why did he decide to keep two and make them his pets!?"

"He took the two Vornskr off of Myrkr during an expedition years ago and raised them to be tame and loyal companions. We are studying to learn more about their species and planet thanks to Talon and T’ra Saa." She rubbed its long ear and pointed to the back. "See this tail length? It turns out a snipped tail makes the aggression of the Vornskr dissipate dramatically. In fact, it is only because of this task that I was gifted the resources to study in order to make the Ysalamiri nutrient frame. You should thank Talon for that."

Ezra was hesitant, but stepped forward, his fingers still twitching towards either peace or his weapon, he still wasn't completely sure.

"Ca— So... can I pet it then?"

"Of course!" She smiled, rubbing her head against the creature as it purred and sat down at her side. "Talon, this is Ezra. Please be friendly to him, okay? *Tob ch'ahsinto.*"
Ezra stepped forward hesitantly, his hand a little shaky due to all the memories of the dozens of Vornskr that attacked him back on Myrkr a few weeks ago. The creature’s yellow eyes studied the hand with wrinkles folding along the black skin of its forehead drooping before the Ezra made contact and the Vornskr cautiously leaned into the embrace. It even began to purr, a low rumbling sound, warm and affectionate coming deep from within its throat.

“See? Friendly!” Tharin reassured him and stood so he could take her spot on the floor.

Ezra chuckled, petting more vigorously now as the Vornskr’s stumpy tail wagged happily at the attention and then bounded off through the lab to explore the other areas and scientists, all of whom greeted the animal with a nod of respect, treats, and belly rubs of their own.

Vornskr really were nice when they were tamed, weren’t they?

“How about that? All the Vornskr I met wanted to eat Jorj and kill me because of my Force abilities, but Talon didn’t seem to mind at all. Huh... who would have guessed?”

“I’m glad we were able to change your perspective a little bit Ezra. Worry not, you’ll have plenty of time to explore my lab and play with Vornskr in the coming weeks. For now though— ” she clicked her tongue and pointed towards the ship with bobs of her head. ”We have a “test flight” to get to, remember?”

He sighed and nodded.

“Alright— no— you’re right. So... ” He looked up at the Chiss Clawcraft and a pang of challenge and thrill rushed through him. “You going to teach me how to fly this thing or what?”

Ezra shifted the controls slightly as he piloted them through the empty stars on the fixed route that Thrawn had provided them. He was enjoying himself, noting that Tharin's ship handled better than anything he’d ever flown. It was smooth, fast, and the steering was completely complementary to his reflexes. The ability Thrawn had taught him, his sensory skill that helped guide them around obstacles, it had become even easier to perform the second time he’d tried it. *Maybe that meant he was getting stronger or maybe since they weren't in a hurry, it was just less stressful? Perhaps it was just the fact that a kyber crystal would be a massive game changer to his position in this war so he would do whatever it takes to get one as soon as possible?* One thing was certain, he could get used to this type of flying, as well as this type of starship.

It was quiet out here along the edges of the Unknown Regions, and he really doubted they would run into any Yuuzhan Vong, but he wasn't as confident about that mentality with the Empire. Thrawn may have updated it to accommodate for Chiss hyperlanes, but this was still an Imperial map they were using, so the Imperial presence was still completely possible along these routes, and even if Thrawn doubted any of them still remained on the planet's surface, the risk was always going to be there.

According to Tharin, Thrawn and Eli mentioned that the Empire had mined the planet of Ilum for resources, most likely for the kyber crystals and the knowledge hidden within the Jedi Temple. None could guess what they found for sure, but judging by the planet's now empty surface, Ezra imagined that they found just about everything they could have ever wanted before leaving it behind. Because of that, the two weren't really sure what all they would run into once they got to
Ilum, but Ezra tried to prepare himself for anything.

“You’re sure speaking will not distract you from your navigation?”

“For the hundredth time, I’m fine!” He said for what was honestly nearing the hundredth time. “I know what I’m doing. So, what’s on your mind?”

“Oh much! Mainly I wondered if you had any previous knowledge of Ilum? According to this data, it was said to have been a popular destination for young Jedi many years ago, and also one of the few Unknown Regions locations to be charted by your galaxy.”

“Kanan mentioned it to me once, I think? It’s not where he got his kyber crystal, but he said he knew others who had. That’s about all I can remember him saying though.”

“Fascinating!”

Ezra wasn’t sure if she was listening to him or still reading her data-comm. *Probably both, if he had to pick a wager.* The Clawcraft wasn’t exactly built for two, so it was a little cramped, made worse when her arm came shooting forward from behind his chair as she waved the screen on the back of her hand-device at his face. “Oh, and look!” she pointed. "It says here that the Chiss were aware of the operations. Thousands of years ago our people's explorers even met travelers who taught us trade languages in exchange for hyperlane routes. This was the first of many contacts we first made before fading into “myths” as Eli claimed.”

"Why did the Chiss stop contacting my part of the galaxy?"

"That's a question I find myself wondering often, but unfortunately it is one for the military, no—the Aristocra! If you're brave enough to ask, that is. I was told to avoid the answers to such questions, as frustrating as that might be. Some knowledge, no matter how valuable, is far too dangerous to actually obtain. At least according to my father."

He snorted out a puff of air and settled back into the controls. Tharin leaned forward and showed him the portraits from her holo. “Oh it’s beautiful! Look, doesn’t it remind you a bit of Csilla? There seems to be something about it though, something so much more inspiring, don’t you think?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know? You’ve seen one giant ice world, you’ve seen them all, right?”

She smacked his arm and took back her slideshow. “Well I think it’s stunning! I can’t wait to see the temples carved there and study the architecture of such a historically rich planet.”

Ezra rolled his eyes and looked back to the viewport as their ship came out of hyperspace, but his amused smile vanished immediately as soon as he set eyes on the planet before them. “Uh, Tharin…”

She looked over his shoulder and her face sunk just as quickly as his. The ice planet was nothing like the holos. It was dark with ash, the continents crumbling apart into tiny islands, and what was
left of the once white snow was dyed red where spots of bleeding magma had melted through the ice. It was a horror show even from this distance, as Ezra maneuvered around abandoned metallic debris scattered around orbit like a ring of forgotten waste and destruction.

“Natahanto…” Tharin breathed. “I— I knew Thrawn said the Empire had been mining this world since the Clone Wars, but— he never mentioned this!”

Ezra felt his eyebrows drop.

“If the Empire was here, it looks abandoned now. Probably hightailed it out of here when the planet got too unstable for their factories?” Or more likely, he thought sourly... Because there were no crystals left on this desolate former world to salvage. "Anyway," he continued. "We should be safe to land in one of the colder spots near that larger clump there. I'll take us in."

“Are you sure there will even be crystals left for you to find?”

He wondered suddenly if she was somehow reading his mind, but shook the thought away with another sigh.

“I don’t know, but we came all the way out here, so we might as well take a quick look around. How do I land this thing?”

She showed him and they began their descent onto the barren wasteland once known as Ilum. The snow, some still white but mostly black with soot started billowing up as he parked the Clawcraft in backwards like Tharin had taught him. The slush of melting snow could be both felt and heard as the ship settled sloppily into the unstable terrain.

“Alright, well, let’s get sta—”

He was cut off when a echoing CRACK made the entire ship shake, their view of the sky rocking, zooming away as their shuttle sunk through the snow and stabbed roughly into the new level of ground. Ezra slammed into the backs of the seat, Tharin hitting the wall as the ship settled into the icy crevasse below the surface of Ilum. He turned back to her quickly as both let out a few breaths to calm the sudden shock of their nerves.

“Hey, you okay?”

“Yeah...” she breathed, peering up through the viewport as the ice dissipated through the air. “I guess the ground here is a bit weaker than we thought. It looks like we've only fallen a few feet though.”

“I guess so?”

“At least we didn’t fall into burning hot magma!” She laughed shakily and crawled over his lap to press for the button that lifted the glass open. “Come on, let's get out and discern the damage.”

She pulled herself out of the ship, her foot nearly catching his head as she climbed up into the open cave air. Ezra resisted the urge to smile as he unstrapped his harness and lifted himself up to follow behind her. Once skyward, he whistled, his tune echoing through miles and miles of uncharted ice as the viewport hissed to a close by his feet.

"It looks like the ship received only cosmetic damage thankfully, so we should have no problem flying back out of here once we’re ready to leave."

“That's good. So, how far do you think these tunnels go?”
Tharin was already typing and scanning the ship with her device, before nodding and pointing to her data.

“It would appear these tunnels trail through the entire planet. The range of echolocation technology my data-comm is able to send out reveals of a few paths and potential caverns that should be sturdy enough to hold our weight, so I think if we chose carefully, the areas will be safe enough to traverse.”

“Also good news.” He grinned, holding out his hand. “Well, shall we... *traverse*?”

She rolled her eyes and took his hand, letting out one excited whoop as he hugged her to his side and used the Force to jump up and then back down onto the ground.

“Wow!” She breathed, her smile wide as she admired the distance they’d fallen. “You do that sort of thing all the time?”

“Oh yeah,” he replied, his tone *only slightly* braggy. “You wouldn’t believe how many times I’ve jumped out of a ship with no landing strategy. I’ve literally fallen out of the sky more times than I can count.”

“Oh? How high can you count?”

He blushed.

“No, see, that’s just a—”

“Gotta!” She laughed with a hard slap to his back. “That was a joke. I know the expression! I had you going for a moment though, didn’t I?”

He nodded in reluctant defeat.

“No, you got me. It’s true.”

“I’m getting better at jokes, I think? But, in all seriousness, your Force power is truly fascinating. Tell me, what else can you do? How far do your limitations spread?”

He swallowed and shrugged, trying to think of something before finally holding out his hand. A few scattered chunks of ice and rock lifted off of the cave floor and skipped down the pathway and out of sight before he lowered his arm and gave her another uncertain bob of his shoulders.

“I mean, there’s always moving rocks and things? It’s not really about the limits though, it’s supposed to be the connection to all things. The Force is everywhere, and as a Jedi, I guess I’m able to find those connections—”

“And bend them to your will?” She concluded, her eyes still fixated eagerly on the spot where one of his rocks had landed.

“In a way, I suppose?”

Fascinating!” She balled up her fists and shot to look at him, her wide, red eyes sparkling with visible intrigue. “Oh, you have no idea how badly I want to run tests on you right now!”

He sucked in an awkward intake of air and took a few steps away from her as his face flushed.

“One thing at a time, okay?” He peered harder and scouted the terrain. “Does the intel Thrawn gave you say anything about where any remaining crystals could be?”
“Unfortunately no. He says the Empire was mostly unable to actually locate them, none being able to differentiate between what was crystal and what was ice. He claims that you would be able to sense such a difference though, and is optimistic about our chances. So, do you feel anything? Can you describe to me how this odd sensory ability feels to you in words?”

“Are you taking notes?” He chuckled, turning around to see that she was in fact taking notes on her device. “Oh… you really are, aren’t you?”

“Sorry? Is that going to hinder your process?” She frowned.

“No… no… knock yourself out, but try to stay alert. Who knows when we’ll find another weak spot in the ice.”

“And whether or not we will be so lucky as to avoid the lava core a second time,” she added with a nod. “I’ll follow close behind you. Please, lead the way, and spare no detail when you catch the sense.”

"You got it. Hey, where do you think the—"

"OH WOW!!" She screeched, her voice echoing through the caves and making Ezra jump about a foot in the air from surprise.

He fingered his blaster and shot over to face her.

"What? What is it?"

She was knelt over a fallen pillar, scratching away at the soot and snow only to reveal a carving of an arm and hand, worn away from decay and the Empire's forceful mining process.

"Look at this!" She exclaimed giddily. "This must be one of the remnants of the statues found throughout the Jedi Temple. Look at that craftsmanship! I wonder how old this is?"

He took in one deep inhale and pocketed his weapon with a roll of his eyes.

"Please don't do that!" He groaned in a halfhearted plea. "I thought you might have seen something dangerous."

"Ezra..." She shot him a sideways glance. "There's literally no life on this planet aside the two of us, so there's nothing to be afraid of. Don't be so jumpy!"

"I'm not jumpy!"

"Besides, you of all people should want to admire these forgotten relics. They're a testament to your people after all."

He looked at the statue, the blue cracked fingers barely recognizable. The diggers had probably dragged this debris for miles when they destroyed the main parts of the temple. No... Tharin was wrong. This was nothing special... this was only ruins.

"Come on Tharin. We have a lot of cave to look through. There wont be any crystals near here, so we should get moving."

He walked away and she almost turned to argue, but there was a noticeable sadness to his voice, something she thought best not to argue with. Her smile faded, she stood and backed away, taking a quick scan and model-capture of the statue before turning to follow his lead. This trip was
supposed to be about Ezra's happiness after all, not her own personal curiosity.

"You're right, Ezra," she said, skipping up from behind him. *When in doubt, teasing and jokes always seemed to lighten his mood. "I'll follow your instincts here, but if you want a map, you just let me know, okay?"

He scoffed out a laugh and rolled his eyes.

"I don't need a map, just you watch." His smile faded slightly as he stepped back to keep her at his side. "Although... I always end up seeing weird visions in places like this... even if it is all destroyed, uh... yeah... you better stay close anyway. Try not to get distracted. You don't know what kind of things we'll start seeing in here..."

"Understood. I will keep my full attention on helping you not get scared in this cave!"

"I'm not scared!" He blushed. "I'm just saying the Force is weird!"

"Uh huh..." she chided. "So, why don't you tell me about some of these strange things? If it doesn't throw off your concentration that is."

He smiled and looked around.

"Well, we have a long way to go, so what the heck? Passing the time by telling a few stories might just be a good idea."

*And a good way to jog some memories or activate the temple enough to give him a vision or two...* He thought.

Without delay, Ezra began to tell her all about his first trip to the temple on Lothal, and all the details he could remember when looking for kyber crystals in the past.

"Kanan told me that I needed to look for nothing and everything."

"What does that mean?"

"That's what I said!" He exclaimed. "You should have been there for the *do or do not, there is no try!*. It took me forever to figure that one out."

"The Force lessons do indeed sound very weird, but keep going. What happened next?"

---

They searched for what felt like hours, Tharin’s tech revealing the path they’d crossed from their starting point, as well as how to get back to the ship despite Ezra insisting multiple times that he didn't need her map to get around. All that time and he saw no visions, heard no voices, and felt absolutely no signs of anything even remotely Force-like anywhere. This place was just a huge, empty cave of ice. Everything around them was completely dead, and the deeper they explored, the more eerily quiet the caves got, not to mention cold. Even with the dripping water alerting them to the melting caverns, he had to activate the thermo-threads built into his uniform shortly after they began their search. Now it felt like either the heat was fading or the temperature drop just couldn't keep up. He wasn't about to tell that to Tharin though, or she would probably try to fix the suit herself by ripping it off his body or worse, fiddling with it while it was still on him.
He shivered.

“You’re sure you aren’t cold?” Ezra asked again.

“Chiss were forged in this type of weather, Sevicsi. Though, I might not be as used to it as someone from the capital, my biology prevents this temperature from bothering me. But don’t forge forward on my account! Please let me know if and when you are wishing to turn back.”

“No no, I’m good…” he said defensively. “So… uh… what was the last thing we were talking about?”

After the first two hours of faint readings and reluctantly studying ice samples, the two had figuratively broken the ice and started telling any stories that could come to mind in order to pass the time—and they had been down here for quite a long time.

“You were telling me about the dark temple of Malachor where your former Jedi master, Kanan Jarrus, had been blinded by— uh— the spiky-headed old man— Mob?”

“Maul,” he corrected.

“Right right… and after that he became stronger with the Force and an even better warrior. Alongside you, Sabine Wren, Garazeb Orrelios, Chopper, Hera Syndulla, and others in your Rebellion, you eventually overcame your obstacles and were fighting to rid the world Atollon of Imperial officers before a great Force beast named Bendu attacked everyone with lightning.”

“Wow! I can’t believe you remembered all that so well?”

“It’s a gift?” She shrugged, hurling over a fallen pillar of ice as she and Ezra continued their search. “Also, I have always been interested to learn more about your stories. From what you tell of your comrades and past missions, I can only imagine all of the amazing things you must have seen. I mean… purple fuzzy men? Beings with thorns growing out of their skulls? Beasts who can control the weather!? It is all like something from the imagination of a child! I could never have pictured there might be creatures in the galaxy so unique. Honestly, I don't think I can fully believe any of it without seeing it for myself, if I'm being honest.”

He chuckled.

“Yeah, we were a pretty odd bunch. But, hey… I’ve been talking too much. Why don’t you tell me some stories about you and your friends now?”

“Oh...” she frowned, her voice a polite blend of hesitant and humorous. “I suppose that will be quite difficult—considering I don’t have any friends. Well, not like you do, I mean.”

“What? Chiss don't have friends? But—”

“Oh no… Chiss have friendships. Most of them are unbreakable allegiances to one another. I just— never had any people like that of my own. None who considered me as someone they wanted to spend repeated contact with outside of work or the occasional times I spoke with Eli or my peers for academic reasons.”

“Really?” Ezra stopped, the tone shocked as he tried his best not to sound like he was pitying her. “That’s actually a little sad, Tharin.”

“Oh don’t be sad!” She said quickly. “I am not one who feels lonely very often. Even as a child I never thought of my solitude as something negative. My days were filled with exploring and
learning new things on Copero. I was always busy, never lonely.”

“There had to have been other kids living around you though, right? Didn’t you have neighbors or classmates?”

“Oh no I did, but well— what can I say? None of the other children in Mitth House liked me very much. I was inquisitive and curious. They were more interested in tactical games and routine practices. They were always nice to me to my face of course. My parents’ positions made me very high ranking among the ages, so I was a child to be respected. But— when I would explore the ducts of the Mitth capitol building, or hide up in the tall trees to look out and try to pinpoint just how far I could see from that vantage point—” She shook her head, a disingenuous smile still showing. “—I often caught them calling me names when they believed me not around. Cact’utt. Tasbah. K’in’bah’cat. Res’in’ho… You name it. Why seek out companionship with people who did not understand me, nor share my interests? I worked better on my own anyway.”

He had absolutely no idea what any of those words meant, but nodded sympathetically anyway.

“They sound like a bunch of uptight sleemos to me.”

She laughed.

“It wasn’t all bad. It made me appreciate Csaus very much when I first spoke with the Inrokini. For the first time in my life, people wanted to listen to what I had to say and they even started talking back in such a way that none ever had before. We shared ideas, created theories together, and it was all so refreshing. I knew then that my life was not meant to be spent on Copero, and organized a way to move myself to Csaus to study with Chiss who were more like myself.”

“What did your parents think about that?”

“They were upset that I felt outcast in my own home, but I think they were happy that I chose the closest planet in all of the Ascendancy to make a part of my new life. Plus, they knew politics bored me, and my parents didn't want me straying far with the military or getting into danger. Since the Inrokini held a place within the current Aristocracy, it was simple to ease them into the idea of my becoming a technician and scientist on Csaus.”

“I can’t help but feel they're a little overprotective of you. So, what do you think your parents would say if they knew you were out here on this secret mission?”

“That would be the worst thing I can possibly imagine! In fact, I’m pretty sure if either of my parents learned of this mission, one of them would kill you, then Thrawn, and finally chain me to my office space so I could never leave the Inrokini labs again.”

“Well that’s a little har—” He stopped. "Wait, hold up..."

“What is it?”

“I think— do you hear that?”

She listened.

"No?"

"It's like a high pitched frequency, almost like a scream?” He pondered on the noise, hurrying up ahead towards the sound. "You really don't hear that?"
"My ears are much better than yours, and I guarantee you that I don't hear anything."

"Huh... I think I’m starting to sense something then."

“A crystal?”

“I think so?” He nodded. “I’ve found a few before, remember? This feels a lot like that. Though none of them have ever called out to me like this before.”

"The other two crystals never screamed at you before? How does one of these crystals make a sound with no vocals? Then again, how does the contents of half of your stories make any sense at all. Honestly, it’s just so—"

"I know, I know, it's hard to wrap your head around sometimes.” He cut her off. "This way, come on, it's getting louder."

"Right behind you!"

"You were right about one thing, you know…”

“Of course I was.” She shot him a smug but curious glance. “What was I right about?”

“Talking. I feel a lot better after telling you all these stories.”

She grinned and gave him a sideways nod of her head.

“Well then I’m glad I was able to help.”

“And just for the record. I think of you as my friend, and I’m pretty sure the rest of the crew and Eli do too. Almost getting poisoned together really helps people bond, you know?”

Her smile widened as they continued walking, the sound growing closer and louder in Ezra’s ears.

“Perhaps in human standards?” She laughed. “But I thank you. If I was to have a strong friendship with somebody, I am pleased that it was with you, Sevicst.”

He chuckled, hopping over another fallen pillar before rubbing a finger through his ear. The high pitched noise was almost grating now.

“Say, you keep calling me that. What does that even—”

He heard the fragile crunch of the ice, the vibrations spreading through the earth. He turned just in time to see her fall, the floor giving out beneath her feet just as soon as she’d jumped over that same obstacle and hit the ground causing everything else around her to shatter.

"Whoa!"

"Tharin!"

Ezra shot to his stomach and slid, looking down through the hole, relieved to see that she was already standing up and brushing the snow off of her legs.

“I’m alright!” She shouted back up. “No lava this time! It was just a slope!”

“Hold on, I’m coming down!” He hollered, jumping into the opening and sliding along the sloped wall until he was at her side. “Are you okay?”
“Yeah...” she said with a sore grumble of humiliation. “I landed pretty hard on my elbow, but it saved my opisthenar data-comm, so at least we won't be lost down here forever. It looks like I found another pathway though, check it out.”

"I think you might've stumbled right where we needed. The noise is way stronger down here."

Her meek laugh turned into a grunt as she rubbed her arm with her other hand.

“Here, let me see.” He ordered, taking her inured arm before she had time to protest. She hissed once as the ligaments twisted in a way that was not ideal, before feeling Ezra’s fingers gently tracing the wounded area. “I think it’s just a scrape and a small sprain. It should be okay— just— umm...” He looked around, reaching for a small hunk of ice and holding it up to her arm. “There, use this. Does that feel any better?”

“A bit, I suppose? I did not know you were a proficient healer— well aside the miracle you performed with—” she caught her words before they were said. Stupid! “Oh! Sorry... I didn’t mean to bring up the— s-sorry...”

“You know about that then, huh?” He sighed. “It’s okay. I guess it would be a pretty hard thing to keep secret.”

“Can— umm— would you tell me what happened?"

He made a face and rubbed along his hairline and neck before taking her uninjured arm and leading her through the new cave they'd stumbled upon.

“I don’t really know how. I mean, it's all really confusing.”

“Try me.”

Ezra looked back and smirked when he saw her confident smile, then he shrugged his shoulders. He'd only known her for a short time, and he knew she was only interested in taking notes and studying his life, but there was some familiar sense of trust with Tharin, this feeling like no matter what he told her, she would somehow understand and try to help him through it. He'd already told her so much and he didn't even feel the need to sensor anything out. Tharin was just a good listener and that was something Ezra felt he truly needed, now more than ever.

“I heard a voice in my head... a man I've never heard before. He told me that I could save Thrawn and it was almost as though he was feeding me instructions right into my head. Thrawn had protected me and Eli when the Yuuzhan Vong came up to stab us. Instead, Thrawn took the spike to the center of the chest and when I saw him on the floor bleeding, everyone around him too scared to think, I just—” He paused. "I focused on the man’s voice and saw a pattern of little lines and charts form around his wound where I could mend the vitals back together with the Force. It’s really hard to describe, but I think that’s more or less what happened.”

“That is somewhat concerning...” Tharin frowned. “Do you believe this man was a memory from your past, or perhaps someone with abilities like yours?”

“It wasn’t a memory,” he said, his voice fervently trying to make sense of it all himself. “But I’ve never heard of someone being able to do anything like what I just said. If he is someone like me, then he’s got to be incredibly powerful with the Force in order to do all of that.”

"Whoa...” Tharin pointed, her voice struggling not to scream out again like before. "Get a look at that!"
They stopped suddenly as they came to a break in the ice, and looked down over the massive drop-off. Lava was visible a few miles worth of a fall below them, the heat and smell of melting cave water blowing back up with the steam that drifted through the tunnel.

“Where did you say this crystal was again?”

Ezra reached out his hand and looked to the Force. It was a faint feeling, but the noise was starting to blare through his ears. It was right there, the crystal calling to him, crying out with what felt like an odd sensation of fear and stress.

“It’s there!” He pointed to the ice wall across the trench. Looking down, he tested the ledge with the tip of his boot before pushing Tharin back a few steps and preparing his running start. “You wait here, I’ll jump over and get it.”

“Over there? Across the chasm?” She stressed, her voice more intrigued than concerned. "Well... I guess if you're so confident, go ahead. Just be careful!"

“I know, I know…”

With one sprint and leap, he scaled across the pit of death and made it out cleanly on the other side, his foot slipping a bit through the ice, but otherwise landing professionally near the wall. He approached the ice, knocking against it, but unable to chip more than a few small pellets apart.

“Is it there!?” Tharin's voice echoed from behind.

“Yeah!” Ezra shouted back. “I just need something to break the ice a little more!”

“Here use this!” He heard her yell, his reflexes kicking in just in time to catch a holstered knife that she’d launched an impressively accurate and lengthy distance directly at his head with her one good arm.

“Whoa! Did— Did you just throw a knife at me!?” He exclaimed. “Wait, when did you even get a knife?”

“I wanted to come prepared!” She argued. “Will it be sufficient or not?”

He rolled his eyes and felt that familiar pang of annoyance twitch through him whenever Tharin did something—well— like this. He shoved the feeling away and unclipped the blade from its holder to see if it would help him any more than his growing aggravation over her chunking it at his face would at this current moment in his life. Turns out it would. The dagger was small, the carving around the white metal a decent weight, and the rounded pommel on the hilt felt just sturdy enough that it wouldn’t snap off with a little force slammed into it.

With nothing else to lose, Ezra started hacking away at the wall, huge chunks of ice clipping out thanks to the weapon. Soon enough, he felt the overwhelming sensation of the crystal’s voice. His gloves slipped around the shard and he quickly took them off and tossed it to the floor. He reached back in now and pulled again, digging his fingers into the sharp, cold edges of the crater, and prying the crystal loose with a few final twists until it finally popped out of the ice.
And just like that, the sounds of screaming silenced. Everything silenced, even the eerie feelings of death given off by Ilum itself. For a split moment, with the kyber crystal in his hand, everything on the world seemed to drift briefly into a long and quiet peace.

Ezra smiled and stared down into his palm. The fragment was small, but it glimmered brighter than anything else in this whole cavern. The red skin of his frozen hand was showing through it like a clear mirror, and Ezra realized that he had never quite seen a crystal so clear. That didn’t matter. What mattered now was that the sensation and voice of the crystal seemed to soothe itself within his palm and he secured it in his side pouch before calling his victory back to Tharin.

“I got it!”

“Good!” She hollered back. “Let’s get out of here then.”

“I thought you liked exploring the historic ice caves of Ilum?” He teased.

“That was hours ago and before it jammed my elbow!” She retorted sourly. “I think I’ve had my share of adventure for one day, wouldn’t you agree?”

He chuckled and rushed forward, leaping across the cavern and sliding all the way over to her on crouched knees before popping back up to a stand.

“No, I’m with you. Let’s get out of here.”
"I'm never going to get tired of watching you do that! How far can you leap? Have you ever measured it before?"

He rolled his eyes and got to walking.

"We can measure it when we get back. For now, let's just focus on getting out of here, okay?"

She grinned.

"It's a deal."

By the time they make it back to the Clawcraft the hole above the ship was completely shrouded with the starry scene of nighttime, and snow had half-buried the ship in a mound that was either caused by some unexpected weather or by an avalanche waiting to fall after their crash through the surface.

“I guess we were down here longer than I thought?” Tharin frowned. “What do you want to do?”

“We’ll probably need to dig the ship out,” he replied with an uneager groan. "Or I’ll need to lift it out of the snow with the Force. Maybe both?"

“The temperature is dropping. I don’t think we should linger outside for much longer, and I cannot have the risk of you dropping and damaging my ship if you lose your grip.”

He shot her an honoree smirk and a side glance.

“I’ll be fine, but I thought you said you were built for this sort of weather?”

She lifted a brow and grinned a sly, devilish looking expression at him as she stepped forward and tapped one finger repeatedly against his lips.

“Oh I am, but your lips are starting to look more and more like those of the Chiss. I surmise you will be getting sick soon if we do not return your body to a proper temperature and recharge the heating technology in your clothing. Or did you even notice that it had timed out after the first three hours?”

Ezra rubbed his mouth, embarrassed as the heat in his cheeks only reminded him how cold and numb the rest of his face was. *So the suit did stop working? Good to know.*

“Point taken...” he grumbled.

“There’s heat inside the Clawcraft. If we place it on a lower setting, it should melt away most of the snow in a few hours without causing us to sink further into the caverns. We can sit inside, rest, and attempt to fade the blue from your face while we wait.”

“Oh, ha ha...” A burst of wind spiraled through the tunnel and Ezra felt his teeth chatter. “Fine, sounds like a good plan. Here, let me help you up there.”

She let him place his hands around her waist as he kicked off the ground and flew in one large upward leap before landing gently on the glass of the shuttle.
“I know I’ve said it once before, but I will never get tired of that!”

She smirked, bending over to dust away some snow covering the series of buttons hidden into the outer metal of the frame which when tapped in the correct sequence, shot the panel wide open.

Ezra watched her before blinking a few times and diverting his eyes to anywhere else besides her back. For some reason he got suddenly uncomfortable when he saw the strands of her hair falling over her shoulders like that, but snapped back to reality when he saw her hold her hand out for him.

“Come on Sevicsi, let’s get you inside.”

They lay side by side in the seat staring up at the stars, Ezra's cloak lying over them as they spent their wait time telling more stories and chewing on flavorless ration bars that Tharin kept in a small compartment near the controls. It had been about a half hour, but it was already starting to warm up inside the Clawcraft, and send globs of melting slush down around their viewport. What Ezra wouldn’t give for a cup of caf right now though...

“I can't believe you said you were the general you were talking to on the comm! That's so embarrassing!”

They laughed and he nodded, giving into the shame from the Brom Titus debacle.

“Not one of my better moments.” He chuckled. "So, how’s the arm?"

“Operable?” She nodded. "Say, may I see the crystal? With all the excitement I haven’t been able to study it properly."

“Oh? Yeah… sure. Sorry about that.” He dug into his pouch and handed it to her. "Here."

Wow!” She gasped, admiring the crystal as she held it up to her face. “So this is what the galaxy is so obsessed with? I can’t say I see their reasoning for destroying an entire planet over something like this, but it’s a stunning gem, I will admit."

Ezra saw the red in her eyes glimmering in the reflection of the tiny crystal as she studied it for a few more moments before handing it back.

"Yeah... they may be small, but they're incredibly powerful. Jedi have used them to power their lightsabers for generations, but the Empire— They wanted them for the Death Star, I guess? It blew up an entire planet! Only a kyber crystal could give something enough strength to do that. You make weapons, right? What do you think?"

He turned only to see Tharin staring sadly up at the open crater, watching as the stars occasionally drifted behind the smog clouds rolling through the night sky. Ezra watched her face, the shadows of clouds rolling over the blue tones of her skin, her eyes still somehow burning through the reflection of the moonless air. He always thought Thrawn’s eyes were kind of creepy, but for some reason Tharin’s reminded him of a ruby colored sunset, warm and full of promise.

Suddenly his heart began to beat and he had to turn his head back out the viewport.

Whoa there! He told himself. Why was he suddenly getting so flustered?
“Hey Ezra…”

He barely had time to swallow down the cracking squeak in his voice, when he turned back to face her.

“Yeah?”

“The Empire wasn’t very forgiving to their resources, were they?”

He frowned, the memory of the Empire's presence flashing through his mind as he joined her gaze up at the sky.

“The Empire really wasn’t forgiving about a lot of things.”

Her frown deepened and Ezra felt her fidget beside him, their arms pressed tightly up against one another in the ship that really wasn’t built to sit more than one pilot, but they were making it work. There was an intense shift in her mood, her once happy and obnoxiously cheerful curiosity was now a stern seriousness, and a growing uncertainty of sadness.

“Was—” She paused. “Was my uncle considered to be a bad man in your galaxy, Ezra?”

He swallowed, not really sure how to reply for the longest time.

She read through his silence and let out a knowing breath.

“I see…”

“But, he wasn’t so bad once I got to know him!” Ezra defended. “I mean, my memories are a still little hazy but, I’m pretty sure out of all the villains we fought with, Thrawn was lower down on my hate list than others. Although he did hit me with a stun blaster that one time? And come to think of it, Sabine did try to shoot him with a TIE Defender once…hmmm?”

She scoffed and turned her head towards him.

“Thrawn was always described in stories to be an amazing commander and tactical genius. The only reason he was ordered to false exile was so he could travel to your galaxy and attempt to save the entire Ascendancy from a war that they’ve been building up in fear ever since I was a small child.” She hugged her knees and laughed. “I always thought my uncle was a hero… and I always imagined he was helping people in your galaxy, and doing just as much good for you as he had within our own borders.”

“Well, he was helping the Empire? I’m sure he did a good job for them, even if the job they were doing wasn't really all that good to begin with.”

“Eli even told me stories of times when Thrawn protected innocent people while he was in the Empire, back when he was still working his way up to power. I always thought that confirmed his work as good, but seeing that tiny crystal, seeing this massive dying planet— Ezra, I’m not sure that was the case anymore. I wonder what Eli and Thrawn really thought about the Empire. I wonder if they knew that they were working for such reckless people. I wonder if my uncle did bad things for good reasons… or a worse thought… perhaps he just did these bad things for bad reasons?”

Ezra shrugged.

“I guess all of us are capable of both good and evil things. It just depends on who you ask. I think
in his core though, Thrawn isn't a bad guy? I mean, not like some of the other guys I've fought with. Those guys were just cold, vindictive, and you could practically feel the evil coming off of them.”

He chuckled suddenly and rubbed a hand down his face.

“What’s so funny?” she asked.

“I just sort of realized that I’m the only Rebel in the Unknown Regions. I crashed here with a bunch of Imperials, and now—”

“Now you see the people who were once your enemy as a friend?” Tharin finished. "Even someone once as enemy to you as Thrawn."

“Yeah?” He snorted out another laugh. “It’s funny how life works out sometimes, huh?”

She nodded.

“I certainly never thought I would be travelling to a planet outside of the Path of Houses with a human being who can lift rocks and leap great distances with only his mind.” She shoved him with her side and grinned. “Yet here we are, Sevicsi.”

“Oh yeah, I’ve been meaning to ask you, Tharin... What does that mean anyway? "Sevicsi." You keep calling me that.”

She turned to the side and he copied the motion, her face dangerously close to his, her breath brushing against his own as she met his eyes and he felt another quick pang in his chest as Tharin lifted her sprained arm and gently traced her fingers down the scars along his jawline before letting go. Ezra felt the back of his neck shiver and the rest of him get really really warm.

Whoa...

“Sevicsi…” she answered softly. “It means “scars” ... it was the first thing I noticed about you on the day we first met.”

Right... Ezra remembered her tracing the scars right before she and Thrass left. His face was hot and it was because the cool touch of her fingers slowly leaving his jaw rather the heat from the inside of the Clawcraft. He swallowed and started to chuckle a bit nervously before he could get a hold of himself.

“Oh… and was that before or after you started studying my hair?”

She smiled.

“Yes, even before that. I wondered how these marks came to be. I wanted to know who had hurt you, and also why. I admired the strength it portrayed for your overcoming an apparent obstacle so severe and wondered what kind of warrior it made you out to be.” She shut her eyes. “Questions I often ask myself when observing people. Most Chiss think their scars are marks of victory over death in battle. Though, non-military members are more hesitant to reveal how they came to be. I find them fascinating though! They are a story to tell, much like all life is a story, only these are more visible. They truly mark the passage of time and importance in your life. However, I was hesitant to ask you outright because—”

“Because you weren’t sure if I’d be upset?”
She nodded soberly and opened her glowing red eyes to face him once more.

“I’m sorry if that is the case. I can stop calling you by this name if that is what you wish?”

“No… no… it’s fine. I didn’t know your first impressions of me were about something like that. It makes me feel kind of cool actually.”

She smirked.

“You are cool! Your life is that of daring adventure and drama. It is much better than my boring childhood spent under my father’s watchful guise and my mother’s strict schedule. This might be the first adventurous thing I’ve ever done in my whole life and already I leave the mission injured. How uncool can one be?”

“Hey, come on, you’re cool. You’re super smart and make all sorts of amazing inventions! Plus, you helped me find a kyber crystal! When we get back to Csaus, I’ll be able to make a lightsaber again, and then I’ll be able to fight back against the—”

He stopped.

“You don’t have to talk about them.” Tharin frowned, reaching out to touch his arm. It was another human consoling action that Eli had told her about and it seems to have worked because he started to grow less defensive from the simply touch.

“No… yeah… you’re right. Um… hey—” he nudged her and pointed at her elbow. “Now you have a scar of your own right? Congratulations, you’re officially a cool explorer now like me.”

She stared at her elbow a moment and laughed.

“I suppose so? So much for my career in science. I might as well join the defense fleet now that I am a hardened soldier?”

He laughed too until both of them gradually silenced, another blob of snow slipping down the glass so slowly that the shadow caught their attention and made them both chuckle again much more softly than before.

“Well…” Ezra coughed. “I guess we should probably get some sleep, huh?”

“That would be ideal given our current situation. It should be a few more hours until we’re safely thawed enough to fly home.”

“Well goodnight then. Say, how do you say g—”

“Bun’n’uvcun.” She smirked. “Don’t worry, I’ll get you up to speed on Chiss language in no time.”

Again with the mind reading?

He tested the word regardless. “Bun’vun’en’cun’oon.”

She burst into laughter.

“Not even remotely close!” She took in a deep inhale to catch her breath. “Oh, I have so much to teach you when we get back to Csaus. Although, I feel there is much you can teach me as well. Don’t think I’ve forgotten about your so-called ”magic” hairpin stealing trick or your physical exams.”
"Wouldn't dream of it!" He laughed in agreement and slowly nodded as each of them gradually grew quiet. “Uh... Hey Tharin...”

“Yes?”

“I uh... I can tell you the story about these two scars if you still wanted to hear it.”

She smirked and rolled back to face him, her hands tucked beneath her face as her blue-black hair curled around her cheeks. She really didn’t want to sleep either, and recognized that same feeling in Ezra as well.

“I’d like that very much.”

He smiled and got comfortable.

“Okay then. Well it all started when Kanan and I fought off a sharp toothed man with a spinning red lightsaber. He was called the Grand Inquisitor—”

Ezra woke to a world in darkness… tiny white lights like stars trailing around him in every direction. He took a step, only to remember the Clawcraft, Tharin, and the icy caves of Ilum were all completely gone. He walked forward, feeling like he had seen this place before in a dream—or more likely, he was currently dreaming and had simply had this same setting before.

“Where am I again?” He asked, his voice echoing as whispers trailed away in the distance. His own voice or another's he couldn’t tell, but he continued walking.

He stepped forward and looked around only to see a spotlight, small and square, about the size of his living space back on Csaus. Within the stage was a log coated in moss like that from a swamp, the sounds of water, insects, and life echoing from all around that one area. He looked back to see the vast nothingness, and when he turned back to see the log, there was an additional object added to it, a shriveled green creature with pointed ears and a funny voice, laughing at him as Ezra finally got close enough to meet the creatures gaze.

“I know this place?” he asked, his voice still ethereal as he met eyes with the wrinkled man. “I know you? Don’t I? Where are we?”

His name was just on the tip of Ezra’s tongue, and the stars and pathways were all so strangely familiar... the temples, the wolves, the mountains... had he really had this dream before?

“Lost you are, hmm? Lost your way you have, yes?”

“I guess I have?” Ezra laughed, rubbing nervously on the back of his neck. “There was this crash you see, so not everything has come back all the way. You wouldn’t be able to help me, would you?”

“Forgotten more than just your mind have you? Forgotten my face as well you have?”

“Well, I—”

“Here, you must come. Come!” The short man gestured. "Closer and you will remember what it is that has been lost.”
“Is this a dream? A memory?” He asked. “It’s all so familiar, even you. I just can’t seem to—"

WHACK!

“OUCH! HEY!?"

“Even in dreams, the pain you feel in your head you do.”

“Well yeah! You just beat me over the head with your tiny stick thing!? Why did you do that? Seriously... Owww!”

“Then no illusion am I? Not dream or memory I seem to be, hmm?”

“I guess not... I just... Wait...” As he rubbed his head, bit by bit, parts of his memory returned. He did know this place and he did know this man! He cried out. “Wait... you! You’re... you’re Master Yoda!” He looked around. “This is the world between worlds! I’ve been here! It was a lot bigger the last time I was here. It was a lot smaller the last time I saw you though. Wait, but I actually know where I am!”

“A mysterious and sacred place you returned from. In this land, all of time and space bend and collide. Malleable and fragile it was. Dangerous and powerful the possibilities could have become.”

“Right, I remember...” Ezra said slowly, the images flashing in his mind. “There was a portrait in the temple, and wolves led me through a portal into the mountain. I followed a strange Convor, and I saw— I saw visions from the past in portals. I saved Ahsoka! I—” He frowned. “I let Kanan die. Palpatine was there. He wanted to get into the world.”

“A trap that vision was, set by Sidious in order to gain access to the world between worlds. Cruel can the temptations to the heart be in hands of one so wicked.”

"Ahsoka told me I couldn't save him..." Ezra frowned and hugged his knees. "I guess she was right..."

"Much pain you have suffered, much anger and fear you have felt. Edge closer to the dark side you have. Choose to fight you did, and got you where has that?"

“Hey, we didn’t have a choice!” Ezra’s voice rose. "The Inquisitors and Vader showed up, then Maul and Thrawn! Oh sure, Kanan and I could have spent our whole lives running and hiding, but what kind of life is that? And you knew that didn’t you?” He pointed. “Malachor... when we met in the temple you sent us to Malachor and we found Maul. He blinded Kanan and almost killed us! Ahsoka went missing, and I tried to use the Sith Holocron! Why did you even send us there if you knew all of that was going to happen?”

“Path to your destiny, full of danger, I did warn. The death of your master, a great loss it was indeed. Tested you were from the Dark Side, but prevailed past temptations it appears you did. Though much anger in you I still feel, much pain, much hate..."

“You wanted us to just hide and stay safe, like you... I get that. You said you were afraid back then, but you’re still afraid now! You’re still hidden on that swamp word! What difference is that fear from the one I have, huh? At least I’m still trying to do something about my fears! At least I’m still fighting to make things better for everyone else!”

“Grown strong you have, young one, though matured it appears you have not.”
Ezra took in a few more breaths and slowly lowered back to his knees.

“I’m— I’m sorry— forgive me Master Yoda… I—” He sighed. "I didn’t mean to yell at you.”

“Alright it is. Not the first padawan to question me you are, and not the last you will be. Glad I am to know still safe you are. Questions you have which brought me to you. Answers you seek on Ilum, yes?”

“Master Yoda…” Ezra began. “I’m so lost… so confused… I thought I was doing the right thing, but now I’m surrounded by people I thought were my enemy. A few weeks ago, I wouldn’t have hesitated to fight them, or worse— and now, I’m here in the Unknown Regions fighting just to keep them safe. Thrawn!” He laughed and pointed out behind him to nothing in particular. “I actually think I consider him my friend! After all he’s done to me! He shot me on Ryloth, tried to kill my team, he captured Hera, destroyed our base on Atollon—” Ezra gripped his head and winced. “He attacked Lothal… He… He shot me in the shoulder!?” Ezra reached up and felt the scar brush against his clothes. I— wait— it was— it was me who called the purreil to the Chimera. I’m the reason we’re out here! It was me!”

“Not so black and white people are. Gray in the middle all life forces have. Enemies once friends and friends once enemies all are capable of becoming. The same it is regarding your actions. Not quite Jedi you are, but certainly not Sith you will become. In the middle you are, Ezra Bridger.”

“Like the Bendu?” He asked. “Like Ahsoka? She said she was a gray Jedi. Is that what I am? In the gray?”

“There is another like you who struggles to discover who he is in the Force. What we choose to be, so simple to describe in mere words it is not. Continue your mission, you can, and live in the gray you will, or return to seek answers and live on as a Jedi. For this, only you can chose.”

“I want to help the Chiss, Master. I want to fight the Yuuzhan Vong! If their evil gets anymore powerful, they will overthrow the Chiss people and then invade our galaxy. I have to fight them here, I know it, deep down, it’s just what I’m meant to do.”

He sighed, not really a sad sounding sigh, but a knowing, predictable one.

“Then find answers you will when forging your own path. Only then find the peace you are searching for you will.”

“Wait… Master Yoda… wait…”

His ears twitched. There was something in his eyes, something more weary and tired than before. It had been a few years since Malachor, but Yoda seemed to age more in that short time than his ancient years might suggest. How old had Ahsoka and Kanan said he was? A couple hundred years at least? It was starting to show now in his eyes, it seems.

“More to say have you?”

“Please Master, I need to know. The other day I saw a vision of the Death Star. I thought I heard a voice— Obi-Wan Kenobi! I thought I felt his presence before the Death Star exploded. Was that just a prophecy or did that actually happen?”

“No longer physical is Obi-Wan to this world. Though even in death does he seek to help the boy, the chosen one he claims it is, lost in the Force he is, like you I did say. Be the judge of that, I will myself, all in due time. All in due time…” Yoda grunted and hopped off the log, his tiny steps labored with effort as his walking stick sunk into the mud around the scene. “The Death Star even
less so a presence it is in the galaxy than of my old friend. Truth your mind sends you, but such distance and power, great darkness does it bring. What doing were you when this vision you sensed?"

“I was healing Thrawn.” Ezra explained hesitantly. “He was stabbed through the chest trying to protect us, and I didn’t want to just let him die. A man—a different man, not Master Kenobi. It was his voice—he taught me a way to save him, by pouring some of my Force energy into the wounds. I had the vision when I was done and before I passed out. I seem to do a lot of passing out these days…”

Yoda did not reply for the longest time, until he clutched his cane and let out a long, distressed sigh, his lips wrinkling together into a thin line before he spoke up again.

“A dark technique this is, old and rare it once was. Dark Transfer it is called and only few in my time ever truly mastered it, they did. None living within the Force now there are. Wiped out the last was on the day of the dark order.”

“Order 66?”

Yoda winced.

“Dark times those were, much loss... much pain…”

“I’m sorry.” Ezra said, instantly regretting ever bringing it up. Kanan, Rex, and Ahsoka never liked talking about it, but Yoda seemed to feel a hundred times worse. Like the weight of it all was all on his shoulders.

“Prevail we did, new hopes we have now, do we not?”

Ezra nodded.

“So… if the last one known to use Dark Transfer is dead, then could that mean it was a ghost? Like the ghost of Obi-Wan? Do all Jedi turn into ghosts? My master, is he—!?”

“No. This method is not widely known. The Jedi of old, your master of two names, have all found peace in the Cosmic Force and moved on they all have. Not is such a life of a spirit that I would wish on my fallen students. No. Only a few know of such. Only a few...”

“Oh…” Ezra said, a bit of dejected sadness creeping up inside of him. How many times would he have to hope there would be a way to bring Kanan back from the dead before he finally realized that nothing he could do would ever truly bring him back.”

“Dead, this voice you heard may not be. A ghost, he is not in physical form, but in spirit, he may yet be. Be wary of this voice, Ezra Bridger. Such powers as healing death is only offered at a great cost to the living. The reasons for corrupting Darth Vader, this ability led, though never able to master it he was.”

“Really?” Ezra blinked. *So did that mean he was somehow stronger than Darth Vader?* He smiled a bit to himself at that.

**WHACK!**

“*OWW!*”

“Be proud of yourself, do not!” Yoda scolded quickly. “But remember your training and heart you
will need if you are to succeed on this path you’ve chosen!”

He hissed and rubbed his head, nodding.

“I understand. I will, Master. I’m— Look, I’m really glad you were able to find me. Thank you, Master.”

“No, find you, I did not. Call me to you, you have. The power of connection, strong with you it is. Help Ahsoka Tano and your friends to find you it will, when ready you are for them to come. But same it goes for those others wishing to find you, and not allies those few might be. Careful you must be, and caution I must suggest.”

“W-wait, wait, wait, wait… My friends? But, all of my friends are dead, aren’t they?”

"Still friends have you, unlike with some as old as me.” He giggled, but it was still a complicated sad sound Yoda made. "Find them, you will, or find you first they may just.”

"Really!? Who's still alive!? How can I find them?” He looked up and around, but Master Yoda was gone. He was no longer in the blackness, but back on Ilum, sitting in on the icy ground just outside Tharin’s Clawcraft, the cold chill of night soaking through to his bones. Gone.

“Come and find me…” He heard his voice say in a memory.

“I will…” Ahsoka replied.

He let out a breath and watched it drift into the air. The once beautiful Jedi temple of Ilum was gone, the planet slowly following behind it. Master Yoda seemed to be growing weaker, the voice of the unknown man possibly something ominous instead of helpful. Kanan was dead, Obi-Wan was gone, but at least Ahsoka was still alive. Ahsoka and… this new presence. The boy in the starfighter. The chosen one, Yoda said? And what friends did he mean? Was it possible Thrawn was wrong about the explosion. Was it possible that one of them might still be alive somewhere?

Ezra stood and felt his mind clear for the first time in weeks. He had the power to connect. The mysterious man, Maul, Yoda… maybe he could use this ability to let Ahsoka know where he was. Maybe with her help, she could—

“Ezra?”

He looked, Tharin’s head lifting from the shuttle.

“Ezra?” She yawned again. “What are you doing? Taking a bathroom break?”

He blushed and stood up, crawling back up to the viewport.

“No!” He said defensively. “I was just coming back to the ship…”

“It’s nothing to be embarrassed of, Sevicsi. Everybody does it.”

“I was not going to the bathroom!”

“Pity,” she said with a smile and a long stretch, the joints of her back popping slightly from the cramped cockpit seat. “There’s a lot I can determine with samples of your—”

“Aghblahmehemablah! Please stop talking!” The noises he made only helped the remainder of his skin to go red and hot with burning humiliation, hotter than usual.
She chuckled, before looking up to him with a sudden and serious gasp, grabbing his face, pulling him into the ship and half-tossing him into the seat. She immediately began to run her long, cool fingers across his burning face and slammed the button to shut the visor, her glowing red eyes focusing into his face enough to cause his skin to burn more.

Ezra gulped.

“Ezra, your hair! Your skin! You look frost nipped!” Tharin complained suddenly. “How long were you sitting out there? What?! Did you traverse half the cave just to relive your bowels?”

“I wasn’t going to the ba—” He tried to argue again, only for her to slap a hand across his mouth and right ear, rubbing furiously before switching to the other side.

“I’ve reactivated what’s left of your suit’s thermo matrix. It’s still weak, but it’s better than nothing. Here!” She wrapped his cloak around his head and nearly suffocated him as he tried to shake her loose. She was incredibly sturdy for someone smaller than him.

“I’m fine!” He tried to plea, his voice muffled by the entangling garment.

“You’re a handful, you know that?” She scolded, holding his hands up to her mouth as she let out a few hot breaths near his fingertips. “First you don’t eat and then you try to freeze yourself. Do you know you are a handful? Are you aware of this, Ezra? Because it is no longer an opinion, it is a fact!”

“I’ve been told once or twice?” he smirked.

She growled at him, but continued trying to unthaw him against his will. She had him practically pinned to the pilot’s seat, the gravity working in her favor to keep him sitting down. Though Chiss skin was typically cold, Ezra could still feel the warmth coming off her body as she tried to unfreeze him with everything she could think. That is, until she winced and her injured elbow twitched as she gradually started to slow down.

“You okay?”

“I’m alright.” She nodded, huffing once as she lifted herself and fell into his lap, not even trying to be remotely gentle about it as gravity shoved her deeper against his chest. She was very close to him now, literally on top of him, and Ezra felt himself blush again before Tharin continued to speak. “I’m sorry I am not more warm-blooded. If only one of the other humans or Eli were here, they would be better partnered for such emergencies. Friction is about all I am capable of. Tell me, do you feel warmer at all?”

“It’s not that bad is it?” He laughed, only slightly nervous.

She set her head to his chest and he felt her hair tickling his neck. It smelled like the soup they’d eaten earlier in the day, as well as rainwater from Csaus and engine grease from the Clawcraft.

“Your vitals sound strong?” She teased. “I predict you’re going to make it, but I’ve got my eye on you. Perhaps we should change your name to k’iser ci bah sihsan’ah?”

“Troublemaker!” Ezra laughed. “I know that one! It means troublemaker. That’s what your dad called me.”

She leaned up and looked at him with a wide grin and a punch to the arm.

“Very good! I’m impressed you know such a complicated Cheunh term.”
He shrugged.

“Meh… the context helped out a lot. I could never say it, but I guess I can understand it if I hear it and understand what’s going on.”

“Don’t sell yourself so short.”

“What me? No way. I’m incredible at everything!”

“Oh is that so?” She chuckled, returning her ear to his chest. “Your heart rate is increasing. You aren’t lying to me, are you?”

If only that’s all it was. Come on Ezra! He told himself. Get it together!

He was in such a better mood! Tharin thought with a successful cheer ringing parade-like in her own mind. Thrawn was right! This expedition was exactly what Ezra needed!

“We can probably leave as soon as your numbness fades away. What do you think, Sevicsi?”

He yawned and ever so gently, with some hesitations at first, allowed his head to lean atop her head and bury into the strands of her wavy blue-black hair. Soft, and still smelling like their day of adventures.

“Maybe we could rest here for just a little bit longer? I’m still a little worn out.”

“No doubt because of your late-night bathroom adventures?”

He groaned, loudly and threw his head back, wanting briefly to vanish from this conversation and the rest of the galaxy altogether.

She giggled.

“I’m only teasing. Don’t worry, I won't pry into your privacy. Though, I am glad your mood has seemed to improve.”

He smiled.

“Thanks, Tharin.”

“Anytime.”

She snuggled closer to him and spoke against his chest. There was a bit of purple creeping onto her cheeks now as well as she suddenly realized that she had never been this close to another person before in her life. Save the few times she had been held close to her mother and father when she was a child. Still, she could feel his heartbeat, the intense warmth of his skin, the breath beating down on the top of her head. Such a simple touch, but something she was vastly unused to and hoping one day would happen again.

What an odd sensation this was… She thought with a grin. So this is friendship? It feels like active gastrointestinal bubbles and increasing heart palpitations, but in an odd way it was still kind of nice?“

What are friends for, right?” She chuckled nervously, though she was pretty certain that no human short of Eli Vanto would be able to see her newfound fluster.

“Yeah....” Ezra replied, though his voice was somewhat distant. Tharin didn’t dare to look up to see
his face, but sensed a slight shift in his emotions that she wasn’t quite sure how to interpret.
“Well… night.”

"Bun'n'uv cunt..." she insisted.

"Bun-en-oo-vec-un."

"Closer..." She grinned. "Don't worry, there's time for improvement. If anything else, Sevicsi, at least we have plenty of that."

He smirked and relaxed his chin on her hair as the two took in the quiet stillness to get a few more moments of rest before returning to Csaus. With things about to get busier than ever, there was still this... this one, small moment of stillness and peace... and both of them could appreciate it for just a few moments longer.
The Lightsaber

Chapter Summary

Ezra struggles to forge his new lightsaber using the kyber crystal from Ilum. He soon learns that the saber would be far different than any he’d ever constructed before, and if he wanted to form a bond with his new crystal, then Ezra will need to learn how to understand it from an entirely different perspective.

Chapter Notes

Posted on: October 13, 2018

Once they left Ilum, everything was more or less normal, both between the two of them and the mission itself. The ship didn’t experience any other problems and there were no more delays in either health or weather that prevented them from setting off. It seemed Thrawn was right after all. Aside the actual task of finding the crystal or the brief hours of being trapped in a snow mound, the mission had gone off a complete success.

That was a rare pleasure, Ezra thought to himself.

On the trip back, he’d decided to tell Tharin about the new vision he’d had of Master Yoda the night before, and they debated on the meaning behind Yoda’s words or whether he was just a dream, a hallucination, or a real Jedi vision after all.

Ezra had the lumps on his head from where he was struck by Yoda's cane, but perhaps he had a slip and fall instead? That could explain why Ezra had been outside so long, but no… No! Tharin shoved away the obvious and chose to believe his odd story no matter how hard it proved to be. All of his tales seemed somewhat far fetched, but Ezra would have no reasons to lie to her. No, if he said it was so, then that meant it was the truth, no questions about it. She kept telling herself that she would just have to get used to believing that about him, and to stop looking for the science behind his stories of magic and mystery.

“Did you tell my uncle of the previous visions, the ones about the Empire's loss of the Death Star? Now that we’re certain they are real, I’m sure he would like to know.”

“No…” Ezra replied, a bit tartly. “I haven’t talked to Thrawn since the— incident.”

There was a longer than average pause before he chose to use that specific word, but Tharin let it slide.

“You know, I’m sure he would like the opportunity to thank you for saving his life, Sevicsi.”

“Yeah…” He grumbled, hearing the guilt she was trying to pass off on him, but shoving it aside for now. “I know, I know... I just... don’t think I feel like talking to him right now.”
"Because of what you saw in the cave? The memories given to you by this Yoda? Were the things my uncle did really so terrible?"

"I don't want to talk about it right now. It's confusing. Look, I promise I'll tell you all about it once I know it all myself." He shook his head and tried to lighten his mood. "Besides, sending us off to get a kyber crystal is thanks enough for me. Better to just leave it at that for now."

She growled a little under her breath but let him have that point. He was stalling to talk to Thrawn because of the Ilum visions and the little green wrinkled man's words. She wanted to believe them, and in a way she was starting to, but all the same, Tharin didn't think prolonging a necessary conversation was the right thing to do. Even with the new information she was gathering about her uncle's time in the other galaxy, talking was better than avoiding confrontation. She wanted to argue these things further, but judging by his fickle mood, it appeared a change of subject was most likely a better idea.

“So… tell me about your lightsaber designs. Will this one also be part blaster as you claimed your first one was?”

Ezra shifted in his seat, but took the bait, his eyes visibly calming as he thought on her new question and formed a response.

*Humans.*

“I don’t know?” He replied, a bit taken aback by the sudden change of topic. He figured she was probably uncomfortable hearing that her uncle wasn't this great hero like she always thought, so he decided it was probably best to just answer her new question. "I mean, yeah, it was cool and all but I didn’t really do that same thing with my second lightsaber. I just stuck with a more basic design for that one. I had a lot going through my head at the time. A more serious Ezra, a more serious lightsaber, I guess?"

“Fascinating. So, you said your first one was blue and it came from your Lothal temple. The next was green, said to have been retrieved in space during a fight with the Empire. What color saber do you think you’ll make once we get back? How many colors are there to chose from anyway?”

“Well, they’re mostly just blue and green, but Ahsoka—”

“The Togruta woman!” Tharin chimed in.

“Right.” He nodded. “She had white lightsabers. I know there was also this black one, but it was sort of one of a kind. I think somewhere in one of Kanan’s old holos I saw a guy with a purple-looking one, but it’s really hard to tell colors over old holos, you know?”

She nodded uncertainly, never actually seeing a human holo for herself, but if their old books and datacards were anything to go by, she figured the quality was probably pretty horrible.

“And there’s red lightsabers,” Ezra continued. "But my master told me that only kyber crystals that have been corrupted turn red. He said that the darkness they suffer causes them to bleed somehow. Only dark force users use this kind of crystal."

“Bleed?” She repeated with a quick but curious frown. "How does one draw blood from a rock?"

“The same way I guess that I heard it screaming to me back on Ilum?” He shrugged. “The Force is weird sometimes. I tend to just go with it.”

“I see…”
This time the words were less confident.

“Anyway, I guess we’ll find out after I build it. The color doesn’t really matter to me as long as I can get it to work. You’re sure your lab will spare me the parts I need to build it? I don’t have to like... work for the parts or fill out a request form or something, right?”

She laughed.

“It’s no problem at all. I’ll get you any part you can think to request. In fact, I can probably craft the metal in our model scanners to look similar to your old lightsabers if you’re able to give me a strong enough visual.”

“Would a drawing work?”

“That depends on the drawing, I suppose. Can you draw in clear detail?”

“Well, I’m no Sabine, but I can draw pretty well. I could get you a list and some sketches once we land and see what all you have available. I’m kind of used to making a lightsaber over what spare parts are lying around. I’m not picky.”

She nodded.

“That sounds acceptable.”

She paused and let her eyes wander out at the stars soaring past their viewport. It was probably the tenth time in the last day Ezra had spoken about Sabine or another member of his fallen crew. Each time, Tharin noticed that his voice was able to say their names with less and less effort, and she was grateful to have been part of his healing process. Tharin figured he probably hadn't really talked about them all that much, and she knew better than most how much better it feels when someone else is there to listen.

“You know, I think I would like to have met Sabine and your crew. They sound like remarkable people. Do you think— if what the little green man said was true— that any of them could have—”

She thought that if she said the word "lived" or "survived" it might trigger him back into his sealed up silence, but Eli always told her that humans could communicate based on assumptions and context, even Ezra has attested to that. She noticed that she was starting to understand the purpose for such conversational tools the more she talked to Ezra.

“I don’t know. I mean, I can always hope, but I just don’t want to get my hopes too high up right now.” He shook his head. “No... I just need to focus on the war and my training. Ahsoka and my friends, whoever they are, can come find me, but the last thing I want is them fighting with the Yuuzhan Vong or getting caught up in the middle of all of—” He paused and looked back to her, Tharin visibly absorbing his every word. “N-never mind. Let’s talk about something else. Tell me more about your lab. What all can help with my lightsaber and what does it do?”

She visibly brightened at the opportunity to talk about her science and technology, and Ezra let out a breath of relief. For the entire rest of the voyage, they talked about lightsaber parts and the lab equipment, but all the while, Ezra was wondering about the strange man with the dark powers who had helped him save Thrawn’s life, as well as who of his friends were actually still alive, and whether they were from his Ghost crew, or just people he’d befriended from the Rebellion.

He might have claimed he wasn’t worried about it, but he guessed even Tharin could tell that was a lie. But in the— what was it? A few weeks? A wormhole caused year maybe—since he’d
disappeared on the Chimera with the others? A year for them and they didn't even know if he was still alive. If they hadn't found him yet, then Ezra had time to make sure they would be safe by the time they did, no matter who showed up first. But until then, he had his missions. He was going to rebuild a lightsaber, learn everything he could from Tharin, and help the Chiss Ascendancy defeat the Far Outsiders. Now that he knew he did have people out there, he needed to make sure the Yuuzhan Vong would never get to them, and the only way to do that was to make sure they never got past the Chiss.

This didn’t change anything, it only made him want to work harder, and as the farthest of the familiar Chiss planets came into view, Ezra was prepared to do just that.

“So, how’s it going?”

Ezra dropped his tools and snuck a look over his shoulder, though even through the interruption he tried his best to sneak out a smile to mask the growing aggravation that was slowly starting to form around his otherwise patient nerves.

“If we’re thinking the same thing, then I think it’s safe to say things are going as well as the first five times you asked.”

It had been a long morning, but after they snuck back into Tharin’s hangar zone, she gave him all the metals and spare parts he listed off to her, even the outer casing for his lightsaber which was based purely on the sketches he’d made on her drawing-pad. She could apparently make real life prints through a machine that laser etched blocks of Chiss metal into whatever form it was programmed to in the drawing pad, a handy device that simultaneously explained how Tharin made her Clawcraft and why it looked so much like a TIE Fighter.

"Eli had probably drawn it for her when he first got here, Ezra thought, though he had never quite pegged Eli as the sort who would like to draw. Then again, a lot of people said that about him too, so who was he to judge the hidden artistic talents of others?

For just a split second he wondered how Thrawn would interpret all their sketches and doodles, or if he even thought something so mundane was interesting to begin with, but he shoved that thought to the side when he remembered he was still mad at the Chiss for shooting him in the shoulder and attacking his home planet. He wasn’t as mad as he probably should be, mostly because he already knew he and Thrawn had once been enemies, and that if anyone, he was the obvious person to have brought the Purrgil to them. Still, there was just enough lingering anger in him to last until the day he saw Thrawn’s face again and could finally confront him about it. Honestly, he wasn't in a hurry.

He was sitting alone in his cabin with the lightsaber parts strewn all over the floor as Tharin let herself inside.

“Sorry for disturbing you again, but I was wondering about your progress. Are the materials from my lab sufficient enough? Do you need anything else? Are you sure you wouldn’t rather work on this inside my lab area? The technology in there would probably make everything a bit easier.”

“Thanks, but like I said, I just need to do this on my own.”

“I see…” She let her voice drift. It wasn’t that he sounded angry or bothered by her constantly checking in, but there was a part of her that only wanted to watch the process if nothing else than
for the sweet knowledge of doing so. At least to help him in some way would be enough for her, but she didn’t like just sitting around waiting for him to finish building his weapon alone. She cleared her throat. “Well… if there is anything you need, anything at all, just let me know!”

He thought quickly and spun around while also shooting to his feet.

“Actually yeah, come to think of it, I do need something!” His eyes darted around on the floor and he picked up the smallest, oddest looking diode piece he could find. “Uh… can you get me another one of these things? I think that would really help me out!”

He held up the tiny part to her and she nodded quickly, her red eyes laser-locked on it and already mapping out the path to go back up to her lab and retrieve it.

“On it! Wait here, I’ll be back in a k’otci!”

With that, she swirled out the door and he heard her stepping briskly away and back up the hill. At least it had stopped raining, though the smell of wet dirt still lingered in the air as the door sealed shut behind him. Ezra turned back to his saber with a roll of his eyes and shook his head as he tried to recapture his concentration. He knew she meant well, but Tharin had been checking in every thirty minutes since they got back to Csaus, and she had been jumpier than normal ever since pulling off her first secret mission without getting caught. The guilt might have been eating her alive, or it was the new adrenaline rush, but something was making her more—well—“Tharin-y” than normal.

He wondered suddenly what Tharin would be like on caf and was glad whatever the Chiss equivalent of it was called didn’t have her jumping off the walls with overabundant energy. At least one of the several trips she’d made back to his house involved a caf run, and he took another sip of it only to realize it had gone a little too cold to be considered tasty anymore. Ezra chuckled as he shook his head, calming himself, as well as steadying his mind as he cleared away all thoughts and lifted a hand, causing the pieces of his lightsaber to float before him along the ground once more.

He saw the design so clearly, the pieces all coming together in his mind, he let the idea come to life with his hands and felt the slow turning which connected the many pieces before him. He was almost there—almost perfect—

A chill of cold air rushed through him, making everything inside him freeze as he dropped the lightsaber and it clattered to pieces back on the floor. He saw a face, a thorny mask of a face with horns poking out from all sides, a pair of mismatched eyes watching him as the hissing snarl of the Yuuzhan Vong jumped from out of nowhere and shot him back to reality as though he had just been forcibly kicked back into it.

“That’s a new one...” he grumbled, taking a few breaths as he gathered his composure and re-gathered the scattered pieces of his saber hilt... again...

It was the fifth time a vision had interrupted him, and like the others, it had been a different sight every single time. The first was a vision of his parents on some unfamiliar world in a cell, the place he now remembered as the location where they had died following a massive prison break. They stayed behind to help others there escape, and he was immensely proud of them for doing so, but at the same time the memory still hurt him all the same.

He saw a face, a thorny mask of a face with horns poking out from all sides, a pair of mismatched eyes watching him as the hissing snarl of the Yuuzhan Vong jumped from out of nowhere and shot him back to reality as though he had just been forcibly kicked back into it.

The second vision he had was a nightmarish scene of himself, weaponless, and surrounded on all sides by enemies. Maul, the Inquisitors, the Grand Inquisitor, Vader, and even Emperor Palpatine all with red sabers and evil laughs directed down at him, each one surrounding him in a circle...
before coming in for the final killing strike.

The third vision was of the death of his master, the final explosion that took Kanan’s life rising up high into the night sky as the ship flew away to safety. Hera screamed his name and the last explosion claimed the entire fuel depot, Sabine piloting them back to their base in the spires where Zeb and Chopper were waiting, both oblivious to what had happened. Ezra realized now that the explosion that took Kanan away maybe didn’t do the same to Sabine, Zeb, Hera, and Chopper, but Thrawn said they did all die in an explosion, so he was sure he’d be seeing that vision sooner than later return to his memory. Though, Yoda’s recent meeting was making him seriously second guess it all. It wasn’t necessarily that Thrawn was lying… he gave his word to him after all that he wouldn’t keep the truth from him any longer… but maybe he was just mistaken? Maybe it was one of the Ghost crew coming with Ahsoka to find him?

He remembered yet again that he was still mad at Thrawn and begrudgingly moved on to the next recall of his odd visions.

The fourth one had been of the Yuuzhan Vong’s torture of the Imperials, and the near death of Thrawn as he lay bleeding out on the floor of their ship.

Thrawn… Thrawn… Thrawn… why was everything always about Thrawn!? Ezra felt a nerve in his forehead twitch as he swallowed back his frustration. Easy Ezra… calm those nerves or you’re never going to get this lightsaber built.

He sighed.

In all of those visions he had felt this same cold, this same instant sadness and helplessness that wracked through every last nerve and vein in his body. But for all of them, Ezra had already overcome such despairs and lived to tell about them. It was odd that he had started to remember so much darkness because he had never had such negative visions appear before when he had built his first two sabers. It honestly made no sense.

Now came this face from the fifth vision, but he had never seen such a face before. Who could it have been? How did it relate to the Yuuzhan Vong? Why did he not see the deaths of the remainder of his crew, or the destruction of the Chimera? Both were things he was fairly certain had also happened, but no it was something new. Which in its own way was even more terrifying to have felt and witnessed than the past pains of something familiar.

“Ezra?” Tharin barged in, her eager voice trailing into his house again. “I have that part for you, and I—” She stopped and crinkled her brows at him. “Are you alright? You appear to be perspiring a little more than is normal.”

“Just having a hard time cooperating with the new crystal.” He sighed. “Look, I know you’re just going to keep coming in and out until I’m done with this thing, so why don’t you just stay here? If you sit over there and promise me you won’t make a single sound, I’ll let you stay and watch me work, deal?”

That, and just maybe her presence could keep him from having another terror-vision?

She nodded, but her concerned frown still remained as she crawled over his lightsaber bits and parked herself cross-legged on his bed.

“You won’t even know I’m here.”

“Okay…” he nodded, wiping his forehead on the back of his sleeve as he calmed himself and
It was all there, the design, the method for attaching all the parts together bit by bit. He felt the metals connecting in, the device taking form in the physical world just as he saw it in his mind, and then, right when he was about to complete it, again came the cold.

He saw a battlefield of an unknown world, the ground dark, the air red. There were bodies strewn about the endless barren plains, and he walked forward, trees breaking at the mere touch of his hand. He jumped back and looked around, realizing the soldiers on the ground were Chiss, some Yuuzhan Vong, and others a species that he’d never seen before.

He continued walking, the vision never ending and full of grim anticipation until finally he saw bodies that were human and he gasped. The Imperials, Eli, and in the distance too, there was Thrawn, Thrass, the entire Chiss council, their faces all a mixed reveals of the ways they died.

Ezra took off running now, unsure what it would take to finally break himself free of this awful vision, when he stopped along the collapsed ruins of what used to be some sort of building and saw a woman under the rubble. He knew who it had to be even though he refused to go in closer to make sure.

“Tharin…”

He turned away, opening his eyes only to see a figure in white in the distance standing alone atop the hill, the hood falling to reveal blue striped montrails and lekku blowing ever so gently in the
foul breeze.

“Ahsoka!” Ezra gasped, crawling over the mountain of bodies and debris to reach her. He began to sink and he screamed out for her. “Ahsoka!” But she didn’t turn around, and just as the last bit of light began to fade, his face being pulled down by limbs upon limbs of fallen soldiers, he felt a hand grab his arm and pull him back up. “Ahsoka, thank goodness, I thought—”

He stopped speaking when he saw her face, all cracks in the skin like broken pottery and golden eyes surrounded by black smokey veins. It was a dark face, a corpse’s face, and as her yellow eyes drifted upward to a massive Yuuzhan ship in the sky, she spoke to him in a hushed echo…

“You’ve failed everyone, Ezra…”

“What? No... Ahsoka, what happened? Where are we?”

She started to laugh, low at first, but growing louder as she lifted him up and threw him along the ground as though he weighed absolutely nothing at all.

“Do you not even recognize your own home planet?”

She pointed out to it with a dark grin.

Ezra gasped and looked out, seeing the ground had turned into a perfect picture of Lothal, and the bodies had suddenly become thousands of local citizens, as well as all of his friends, his parents, and even the members of the Ghost crew.

Ahsoka’s voice, the real Ahsoka this time, spoke to him and broke the silence, but her body had vanished and her word came only through a stiff breeze in the air.

“Run!”

He gasped and looked up only to see everything shooting away as he fell into an open abyss, screaming as he fell down, down, down into darkness, until—

“Gah!” He shot forward and the lightsaber scrap clattering back onto the floor.

Another dark vision...

He stood and pulled his hair as he paced back and forth along the floor, muttering curses as he tried to figure out what was with this kripping crystal. Ezra stopped suddenly and turned, seeing Tharin just watching him in absolute silence, and he let out a breath.

“Oh yeah, I actually forgot you were there. How long was I out this time?”

“Told you so.” She shrugged, frowning afterwards as she added, “You were working for a few minutes, but near the end it looked like you were having troubles, a nightmare almost. You were writhing and the parts of your saber were soaring all over your room. Is this normal for lightsaber construction?”

“It’s not me. I think it’s this crystal? It’s making me have all these dark visions. I guess it had a really rough life back on Ilum, once a sacred Jedi planet, now a dying, melting snowball. For all we know, the crystal we found could be the last of its kind on the whole world. It makes sense that it might be a little corrupted.”

“Corrupted? Like the bleeding crystals of dark Force users?”
“That might be why I keep seeing all these visions. The crystal is fighting me, trying to make it so I won’t want to keep building a saber of my own.”

“But then why would it have called to you on Ilum?” She asked.

“I’m not sure, but I guess anything is better than staying behind on the wreckage of your home planet.” He paused. “Hey that’s it… that gives me an idea!”

“I have complete confidence in you! You can do this! But—what is it you’re going to do?”

He shot her a smirk.

“It keeps showing me everything I lost and feared, trying to get me to understand how it feels! I just have to show it that there’s something better out there than everything horrible that it’s been through!”

“And, we’re sure this crystal is still non-sentient, right?”

He lifted his brow and shot her another amusing look.

“Just go with it.”

“I know, I know…” She held up her hands, mock-surrender and sat back on his bed with a sigh. “Good luck, Ezra…”

He nodded and sat in his meditative position, hoping that this time would be his last.

His vision was of war, of people around him fighting and dying. He was on Myrkr now, and what soldiers weren’t being cut down at the hands of the Far Outsiders were getting swarmed by the Vornskr packs diving down from the trees. He had a blaster and shot at stormtroopers, turned Inquisitors, turned Yuuzhan Vong, turned his own friends even, until finally things started to quiet down. Every dark thought, twisted scene, or horrifying death had come at him like a rough wave, but like any wave, it was calming into soothing ripples as soon as the worst was over. The crystal had run out of ideas to scare him with.

“I have nothing left to fear,” Ezra said up towards the bloody sky in his most soothing of tones. “Neither do you. I’m not like those other people, the ones who destroyed the temple and mined Ilum into a wasteland. I am a Jedi— well, kind of? I was a padawan, and I studied both light and dark techniques. I’ve done a lot of things I’m not proud of, and you're right I have plenty of regrets and things I fear, but more than any of that, I’m hoping I can still do good for a lot more people now, and I'm still willing to get hurt if it means getting to protect all of my friends.”

The sky was still and silent in reply, black smoke clouds drifting, but starting to grow lighter as the crystal seemed to hear and understand his words.

"If you're willing to let me show you the good we can do together, then I promise I will never let you be corrupted again.” He bowed his knees and then to the ground. “You know I won’t, it’s why you called out to me. So let me be your hand. Help me help the entire galaxy and make up for all the horrible things this war has done.”
A bright flash of light hit him and he sat up, only to see the crystal neatly in place as the last of his newly crafted hilt circled and tightened into place around it. The blinding light faded away and he opened his eyes to see his room, Tharin, and the lightsaber all gleaming brilliantly with what was now his clear and collected mind.

“It worked...” He smiled and took a breath.

“It worked!” Tharin repeated, excitedly jumping off the bed and into the floor across from him. “Look at it, Sevicsi! It’s magnificent!”

He admired the design and laughed down at his hands. It was the hardest saber he’d ever constructed, but it was finally complete! A new lightsaber! The pure Chiss metal hilt and parts were completely devoid of any scuffs, rust, mixed metals, or any other trait of his two former sabers. It was as pure as the silvery snow of Csilla—probably lighter even than the surface of Ilum before the Empire destroyed it all.

*The crystal was probably happy about that,* he thought with a smile.

“Alright stand back, Tharin. Let’s see if I did this right.”

“What happens if you were to construct it incorrectly?” she asked, coming around to stand behind him as both scrambled eagerly to their feet.

“It could explode.” He smiled back at her, a wider more thrilling smile than she’d ever seen on his face before. “Don’t worry. I’ve done this before, well you know… kind of? I’m sure we’ll be fine.”

“If I stopped to worry about every potential explosion an invention would make, then I would never get any work done,” she retorted with a grin of her own. “Light her up!”

He did and Tharin shook his shoulders excitedly as the brilliant Chiss-blue light beamed across each wall of his cabin, the successful sweet sounding hum buzzing continuously through the silence and drowning out the sounds of Tharin's excited breathing.

“You did it!”

“I did it!” He replied in equal excitement, turning and delivering a solid high five to his accomplice before he felt a sudden shift in the connection coming from his blade.

Ezra turned back with a frown, Tharin gasping aloud as the two of watched the color of Ezra’s new blade start to bleed slowly from blue to red. A red lightsaber with a white metal hilt.

“Red…” Ezra gasped, shutting it down quickly and staring it over in his hand. “It turned red? But, I thought I—”

“Is there something you wish to tell me?” She asked, eyeing him suspiciously. It was a joke, he hoped, but not a good time to use one.

“Stop that...” He shooed her off. “I can’t believe it turned red. I felt it agree to let me forge it. I sensed it feeling at peace! Why is it red?”

“Well, you did not corrupt it in the short time we had it, did you?”

“Maybe it was just too far gone to be completely cleansed?” He frowned, turning it on again only this time it was only that faded red color once more. He hummed to himself in thought, studying the blade which felt a bit heavier in his hands. “It’s not really as red as the Sith sabers I’ve fought...
against before. Those were more of a blood red, but this looks kind of *orangish* to me? What do you think?"

“It could be the white metal hilt tricking our eyes, but I agree that this is a much lesser red than I am used to? Then again you seem to favor this color—” Tharin pointed to him with a gesture to his clothes. “So, perhaps it is fitting that your saber be orange as well? Tell me, is there any way to turn the crystal pure again once it has been bled like this?”

“I think so. Ahsoka’s two white lightsabers had been purified through her influence, though I'm not really sure how or how long that might have taken. Maybe after some time with my saber, I can get the crystal to turn white too?” He shook his head and shifted his blade through the open air. "But you know what... it's fine... it's fine! Like I said before, the color doesn’t really matter. I’m just hoping I can make the crystal more at peace the more I train with it, and with it I'll be able to do some good for the Chiss Ascendancy.”

“Spoken like a true warrior.” She smiled, pulling up her data-device to type something into her notes. “I will make note of this cleansing process. For now I will catalog it as a bleeding orange color and we will work on controlling the change in hue during our future practices.”

“Practices? What? Like combat training?”

“I’m going to monitor all of your pre-military training of course. This will include basic self-defense, blaster handling, and yes, even swordplay.”

“You *can* fight?” His voice came out almost accusatory though he hadn't really meant it to. It was just—*this was Tharin*?! The smart, friendly scientist who stayed holed up in her lab all day making cool inventions. He couldn't picture her getting into a fight, much less actually fighting in one if she did.

Tharin shot him a curt snort and lifted her chin proudly up towards the ceiling.

“You seem to doubt me? I told you already that my father taught me to be self-sufficient. Do you not recall my impeccable aim when providing you that knife on Ilum? Chiss tactics are no joking matter, *Sevicsi*. In fact…” She smirked and chuckled to herself with a confident gleam in her glowing red eyes. “I’m pretty sure, I could take you on in a fair fight. No lightsabers and Force powers or anything, just one on one in a sparring match. Maybe an obstacle run?”

“Oh really?” Now he knew his voice was being condescending but there was a playful edge to it now, a competitive edge. “I’d love to see you try!”

She immediately grabbed his hand and pulled him out the door.

“Whoa! Hey! Where are we going!?”

“I’m going to show you. It’s far past time we begin your real training anyway. With the community service on Schesa coming up, we need to start sooner rather than later, so consider today your first official lesson, Ezra. We’re going to begin your combat training right now.”

He laughed and let her drag him back towards the labs.

“Wait? Are we going to fight inside the lab?”

She grinned and her voice sounded both eager and impish.

“You’ll see…”
“Wow!” Was all he could say, though the word didn’t do his surprise the right justice.

“This is our testing center for armor and weaponry. What do you think?”

The room had tall white walls and matted floors, the occasional scuff or burn mark here and there, but otherwise shiny and clean. He looked around in awe before finally registering some form of response.

“It’s huge!”

“Well we need to test effective range often, so they make the targets pretty far out. Here look!”

She typed out a series of code-work into her data-device and a few holographic blue targets appeared, most of them spinning as others darted from corner to corner, or up the mile high distance into the ceiling.

“Cool!”

“Well, wait are you waiting for?” Tharin asked impatiently. “Ignite your weapon.”

“Oh, right now!?” He pulled it out and the saber buzzed on with a single whooshing charge.

_Man, he’d really missed that sound!

Without delay Ezra took off running, the movements coming back to him just as they had when he was fighting off hungry Vornskr trying to eat Jorj back on Myrkr armed with nothing but a long stick. He sliced through the holograms, the blue pixels slicing and blinking red before dying out in front of his face. His technique was still fluid, still flawless, and as he hit each target, it rotated or moved in closer to him. Finally a loud horn sounded and he stopped and deactivated his saber, looking over to Tharin who motioned him back to her side with a satisfied looking grin.

“An impressive display! Maybe I should have you teaching me about swordplay instead? Your skills are quite masterful.”

He blushed a little and scratched at his cheeks as she continuously nudged him with her elbow.

"Thanks."

“Now let’s move onto your aiming. Do you still have that blaster Eli snuck to you?”

He pulled it out, giving it a little spin on his finger in an attempt to show off.

“Always.”

“Fine then.” She narrowed the feed down on her screen and five targets remained. Two nearby, one ridiculously high up, one much further back, and one dashing randomly from place to place. “Target practice. The targets are set for the range of this model blaster. This time I will also accompany you. You may go first.”

“Alright...” He chuckled confidently. “Watch the master work.”
He fired, one, two, three, and four all hitting their marks beautifully. On the fifth, he tracked the path with his eyes and with only a moment of hesitation, pulled the trigger and saw the hologram flash red with a successful hit.

“Easy!” He smirked.

“I thought you might say that,” she started, her voice mischievous and plotting as she held her hand out for the blaster. “It’s my turn now. May I borrow your weapon?”

He handed it over and she thanked him as the targets reset themselves.

“Now it is time you watched how a real master works.”

She winked and walked forward, firing a quick and accurate barrage of rapid shots, all four of her lasers claiming the targets before she started to walk back towards him with a pleased look on her face.

“You still have one more…” Ezra pointed, his mouth a little dry seeing the smoke still trilling up from the barrel of the weapon.

She lifted her brow, the target making mad scrambles around the training room as she turned briskly around and fired blindly out behind her, the red burst of laser fire nailing the target in a successful strike before fading away into nothing.

“Patience is key…” She informed.

“That’s— just— I mean— wow!” He stammered, laughing and giving her a polite bow as she handed the blaster back to him. “I’m sorry I doubted you.”

“Care to try your luck again?”

He nodded and she reset the targets.

“Can I try something Force-related this time?” He asked.

“Of course,” she gestured. “I would love to see any of your techniques. By all means…”

He smirked and place a hand over his eyes, sensing all five targets, even the darting one, before he let off five shots so quick, the blaster got hot in the hold of his grip, but when he opened his eyes, he had done it, five perfect, clean shots, one in the center of every single target.

Tharin’s slow claps echoed in the room as the holograms faded away.

“Most impressive—” she shrugged. “Well, for a human.”

“Oh are we playing the species card now?”

She smirked and blew smoke off the blaster’s barrel when he handed it over to her.

“I come in here to test weapons often, and sometimes just when I need to clear my head or let out some of my frustrations. There is more this room can do than simply make targets for swords and laser fire. Would you care to raise the stakes a little in the next challenge?”

His head tilted back in challenge, but the slight side smirk gave away his amusement.

“What did you have in mind?”
She put the blaster on the floor and slid it to the other side of the room, a protective bubble forming around it that somehow or another managed to seal the weapon securely to the ground.

“We are obviously skilled marksmen. Some of us more than the other—” She shot him a wry smile. “But though it is true we have talent, I know when I’m beaten. Now, I simply want to see how well you work without your weapon.” She looked down and typed some more until walls started moving from their positions. The floors began to rise and fall, and over two dozen targets appeared or flew around the room, a massive golden one at the very peak of the ceiling. “The first one to the top wins. All other targets are to be treated as opponents and—well, let us say bonus points.”

Ezra smiled and stretched his arms.

“Okay… okay…” He nodded. “But you know, I’m kind of built for this sort of thing… not to mention they had us running drills a lot like this back at the academy.”

“You’ll have to tell me about that sometime, but until then—” She ran off. “You can eat my dirt!”

“It’s dust!” He shouted, but by then she was already two levels in the air.

“That too!” She laughed back.

He smiled up at her, shook his head, and then took off on his own path.

*You know, having a Chiss teacher like Tharin, might not be as boring as he thought after all?*
Chapter Summary

The first week of Ezra's official Chiss training comes to an end before he and Eli head to Schesa for his court mandated community service trip. There, he meets with the force-sensitive little girls who he's supposed to somehow help train for the coming months and maybe even change the very nature of their abilities. Ezra has no idea what he could possibly teach them to help them grow and retain their power, and finding balance in the Force was still something he was trying to figure out for himself, but after meeting with them, he starts to understand just what it means to be their instructor and this makes a huge impact on the rest of his time within the Chiss Ascendancy.

Chapter Notes

Posted on: October 21, 2018

SPOILERS for "Thrawn Alliances"!!!

Also, Tasvi is an original character belonging to Yalaki, and was given permission to make a small cameo in this chapter!

Never mind...

It had been almost a week and everything he thought about Tharin back in the training room, all those comments about her being a fun trainer and an innocent happy-go-lucky or nonthreatening Chiss... yeah, that could not have been any farther from the real truth, and he took it all back now.

Not only had he lost their obstacle course race a few days ago, he quickly learned that all Chiss, no matter how much they trained or how long they spent indoors at a desk, were all genetically programmed to be as fit as any human being in the pique condition of their life. Tharin was no exception, and that strength coupled with her ability to analyse and react to any situation in her mind, only made her all the more difficult to beat.

Come to think of it, Ezra had never seen an overweight or unhealthy looking Chiss since coming here. They were all lean, fit, and their body shapes only ever varied in height, muscle broadness, or in the slight variations of their overall blue color schemes. Had Tharin been in the actual military, Ezra feared what kind of raw strength she might have had and he worried what that might mean for him once he got to train with Eli and Thrawn. If that wasn’t jarring enough, none of Tharin’s natural strength and intelligence in the combat room came even a fraction of the way close to the sheer brutality of her teaching methods.

In one week, she had run him so ragged that he could only pray that life in the military be less strenuous than this. All the while, he was mentally thanking Kanan and his childhood growing up on the streets that he had started out in good physical form before coming here.
Tharin typically came to get him as soon as the bright orange sunset skies rose over Csaus. He'd come to find them a beautiful sight these last few days now that the week long rains had ceased. Each morning, Tharin and Ezra ate breakfast together, which like the sunset view, was admittedly pretty nice. Afterwards though, she would drag him back to her lab the real torture would begin.

At first it was just physical examinations, listening to his heart, checking his pulse, seeing if he could touch his toes or do a one-armed handstand balanced off the back of a chair. Easy things like that. The physicals quickly got a lot more extreme however when she had him running on a fixed platform until he was physically incapable of doing it any longer. He’d lasted a few hours, but lost track of time somewhere around the same time he lost all ability to feel anything in his body. Eventually they broke for dinner and called it a day, but he remembered throwing up and blacking out, only to come to a few minutes later in a chair with Tharin taking notes and forcing him to drink some green colored liquid that restored all the depleted cells in his body. He remembers feeling better, but it was all kind of a blur until he woke up back at home in his own bed unsure if she had carried him home or had someone else to help her do it. Honestly, he no longer doubted her physical strength, but still wasn't sure he really wanted to know how he got home that evening.

The next day was all Cheunh lessons, planetary information, and tips on Chiss protocol, but his muscles were so sore, he drifted in and out of attention before Tharin took pity on him and sent him back home to rest. Apparently, even her pity was without mercy because she ended up assigning him homework for the Cheunh alphabet by using some childish datapad slides that were probably easy in hindsight, but still partial gibberish to Ezra at his current study level. It took him nearly half the night to figure it all out and translate all of his answers into more or less correct Chiss language.

Tharin laughed at it when she got the datapad back the next morning, so Ezra wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not.

By day three she wanted to know more about his Force powers and had him leaping great distances in the training room, lifting objects of various weights, and going through obstacle courses to test every one of his reflexes. Sometimes he was even blindfolded, but it was nothing his prior training hadn't prepared him for already. Although, there was a test to see how high up the wall he could run and he nearly wound up breaking his neck on the way back down.

Again, he mentally thanked Kanan for teaching him about landing strategies back when he was still a padawan.

Wait... was he still a padawan? He supposed that didn't really matter now. Did it?

He could only do his best, pushing his own limits while Tharin measured all of the results, keeping track of every move he made in her notes. He wondered just how far he could go himself sometimes, and honestly all of her tests might have been for her own curiosity or for the Aristocra’s data banks, but they did make him really wonder about his own limits and abilities. Strangely enough, it was good practice, and he did whatever she said no matter how ridiculous it sounded. That was the only true way to figure out the answers for himself after all.

Day four brought the lightsaber training, which wasn’t really training at this point, but more of a way to connect deeper to his new blade and crystal. The lightsaber had started to feel lighter the more he used it. The connection he felt with it was getting stronger just as the red continued to fade orange, just subtly, slowly, but gradually one day at a time. The holographic sparring partners Tharin had him fighting with were based on some of the best Chiss warriors and swordsmen in history, but Ezra was able to see a pattern in their moves early on and the rest was just going through the motions and blocking return fire. Still, sparring with the holos did make his history
lessons a bit easier. None of them had discernible features or anything, but now that he had a fighting style to go along with some of the names, remembering which Chiss leader did what was all the more likely to get stuck in his long term memory.

He was either too tired to make sense of anything anymore or by day four Ezra actually started to think Tharin was fun again because she let him study her own skills with weapons and combat through sparring matches that he nearly always won. Nearly...

It turns out scientists of Csaus spent a lot of their spare time in the training room. A lot of them, not just Tharin, were pretty accurate shots, with steady hands and eyes, and minds that could work out any problem in the field. These skills became apparent during the massive holo-laser game a group of them played that night, and it left any artificial training partner Tharin could program to shame. Running around with fake weapons, shooting harmless light beams at each other for points. It was some of the most fun he’d had in a while. The other scientists that joined in the game were all formidable and together they were actually having a lot of fun, though it was kind of dark and chaotic at the same time, so it wasn’t the best way to learn any new names or make friends.

The next morning, a few people did pat him on the back before saying something, probably a compliment, in Cheunh. By this point the other scientists were now brave enough to either wave or laugh at him on his march to the death sentence of training that lie ahead for him, and Ezra hadn’t remembered any of their names yet, but the fact that they were acknowledging him as more as a person they could tease rather than just a test subject had helped ease his nerves a little bit.

Day five was another lesson day, or a “rest day” as Tharin called it. The only good thing about Chiss lessons was that Tharin could teach him all of it back at one of their houses instead of at the labs, and that meant they could cook dinner afterwards. It was always a good perk to having a teacher who could cook. Normally she taught him about each plate, the ingredients she brought over, their possibilities when using them in a recipe, and how to prepare various types of Chiss cuisine so he could maintain a healthy, if not flavorful diet once he was on his own. That part actually felt less like studying and more like something fun and Ezra considered it an extracurricular of sorts, maybe even one of the most important things he’d learned from Tharin, despite it not actually being a part of her syllabus. His stomach thought so anyway.

He even put that new knowledge to some good use and surprised Tharin with breakfast by day six.

She praised his decent cooking skills, but that did absolutely nothing to change her regimen for him for the day to follow. Which in day six’s case involved defusing Chiss and alien weaponry he might encounter in the field. The likes of which only blew up a little, but the inevitable explosions were still far from merciful. He went home picking small bits of shrapnel out of his hair the entire rest of the evening.

Ezra was sore, but still going strong, undeterred from accomplishing his goals. So what if Tharin was a tyrannical dictator when it came to his lessons? At least he was learning, and learning a lot too! Though, as day seven rolled around and the two of them walked up to her desk, he was almost scared to see how she would end their first hectic training week.

“So, what’s on the agenda for today?” He asked innocently enough despite the impending dread he was feeling inside.
Tharin hummed, never meeting his gaze as she began rustling through notes and schematics along her desk.

"Hmmm, I actually was going to get some personal work done today, so I was going to let you choose a few training room lessons and then go home early. What do you think?"

“Wait!” He was nearly at a loss for words. "For real? Just like that?"

“Of course! Everyone deserves time off. I’m not a slave-driver." She stood up and crinkled her face in thought. "That is the correct use of that term, right?"

He was so happy he barely remembered how to reply, but his statement was more for himself than for her and he pumped one fist into the air as he cheered the single excited word out.

“Yes!”

GRRRWL...

“Whoa!” Ezra jumped back. “Sorry Talon, I didn’t see you down there, boy.”

“Oh look!” Tharin pointed. “Ezra, that’s not Talon today, it’s T’ra Saa. you haven’t met her yet. Ronin must have something important happening today to have me watching over her this morning.”

Ezra had already dropped to a crouch.

“She’s the female Vornskr, right?”

Tharin nodded.

“That’s right. Go on, say hello to her.”

He slowly offered his hand, the female growling at it for the longest time before sniffing at his fingers and finally lying back on her bed beneath Tharin’s desk, indifferent to his presence altogether. Ezra took that as approval to go ahead and pet her, so he started rubbing gently along the top of her head, making his way slowly to her back and stomach as she stretched out comfortably along her pillow. She was a lot larger than Talon, longer legs and broader shoulders, plus her stomach was huge and lumpy with all the babies moving around inside her. Ezra could feel them kicking beneath his touch and suddenly had a thought cross his mind.

He wondered how Pyrondi was doing over on Sposia because it had been a while since he'd spoken to her or any of the other Imperials. He was wondering how her pregnancy was going, or even if the therapy training Gunther and Urick were doing was helping the men adjust after their brush of horror with those terrible Vong torture tables. What about the others? Were Koree, Walten, and Faro all healed up too? Maybe he would use his day off to call them and check in? That would be nice.

Tharin told him that Walten and Urick were going to move to Cioral to be farmers as soon as Urick was well enough to travel. Meanwhile, Faro, Koree, and Gunther wanted to be in the military like Ezra, so Stent and Ina were training them for their citizenship tests just like Tharin was doing for him. Since they were not Jedi prone to fainting, they were allowed more of an experience like Eli had gotten, rather the numerous exceptions and extra rules which Ezra seemed to be paired with. Then most surprisingly, Pyrondi was supposedly going to stay on Sposia to take up teaching Chiss children all about the known galaxy where she and everyone else aboard the Chimera had come from. He had no idea she enjoyed teaching, but if it was her choice, then Ezra would be happy for
her.

_Hopefully all of her lessons would be a lot easier than the ones Tharin gave him!_ He thought to himself with a bit of zestful scorn.

Ezra rubbed T’ra Saa’s belly again and she purred at the touch, the unborn pups wriggling around beneath his hand as he smiled at the feeling of little lives he felt within the Force.

“Aww, she’s nice. I think I sense eight babies, right?’”

Tharin set down her work and grinned back at him over her shoulder.

“That’s right. Your powers never cease to amaze. What does it feel like to be able to sense new life not even born yet? What must go through the minds of creatures so entirely new that they don’t even have memories to focus on? Or wait... can they hear what’s going on outside of the womb? Do they know of their mother’s presence? How fascinating that must be if it were true. Can you interpret it? Ezra?”

He was only half listening now as he rubbed the spot behind the Vornskr’s ear that made her jowls lift like a little smile and her foot wiggle happily alongside her clipped tail.

“Ezra, are you even listening to—” She shut off her own retort and straightened herself tall as a audible gulping noise masked beneath her throat. “Oh no! Ronin is coming this way! Quick act natural!”

“No proble—” He had just started to look up from the Vornskr as he spoke when he felt a sudden stinging pain prick through the skin of his neck. "OUCH!”

Even the Vornskr jumped at the metallic hissing of the needle gun depressurizing against the side of Ezra’s neck. He rubbed it sorely, not seeing any blood but glaring up at Tharin nonetheless.

“What the actual kriff, Tharin!?”

“Just play along!” She whispered, swapping to Cheunh words that were a bit too loud as soon as her Aristocra approached the desk. “Kor’on’inrokini! Greetings. How are you today?”

“Quite well thank you,” he replied, his Cheunh deep and polite like the regal speech of an old king, though his eyes a bit wide and shocked at the volume of Tharin's greeting. He smiled warmly at her afterwards, examining the data scattered along her desk with a curious gleam. “I see your tests are keeping you quite busy these last few rotations. Performing blood tests today I see? Have you come to anything conclusive?”

“Not yet sir, but I know we are on the verge of something truly great!”

“That is good to hear. Keep up the good work my star pupil.”

He paused and Tharin instantly took notice.

“What is there something wrong, sir?”

“I know you are very busy at this time, but I was wondering if you might take on one more task as a favor to me? You see, I will be travelling to Jamiron to perform routine updates on the hydroponic agricultural facilities and monitor them for the next couple of days. Now with the due date for T’ra Saa’s litter fast approaching, I don’t think it will be ideal of me to take her along on such a long trip. I will be bringing Talon instead, and wish to leave her care in your capable hands,
“Of course! Absolutely, you can count on me, sir. I always enjoy T’ra Saa’s company. Ezra and I are more than capable of monitoring her. Should I call you if she goes into labor while you’re away on your trip?”

“Please do, but I know you will be able to take care of things in my absence. I have complete faith in you.”

She bowed slightly and tilted her head.

“I am honored.”

“Then I shall make the proper preparations and bid you farewell. Good luck with your—” He looked at Ezra with a odd shift in his eyes, his face, once the closest thing to happy any Chiss short of Tharin could look, now fading into a suspicious glare as he met Ezra’s gaze for only a split second. “—Projects.”

With a nod he walked away, though Tharin waited until he was completely out of sight before her stance melted into the loose deflated look of someone who had been forcibly holding their breath for far too long.

“That was strenuous...” she sighed with relief. “I thought he might have found out about our trip to Ilum. Glad to know it was just work-related! Phew! Dodged the blaster bolt there, didn't we?”

Ezra stood up, still rubbing at his stinging neck as he muttered angrily in her direction.

“Yeah, uh huh… two things...” He held up a finger. “First of all, I don't like the way that guy was looking at me. Did you catch that glare just now or am I going crazy?”

"I think you just need to get to know each other a little better. This is a secure facility you know. He might not like that you are around so many secret and upcoming projects?"

"Alright. Point." He held up a second finger. "Now on to number two, and this one's kind of important..." His voice rose. "Did you just stab me in the neck!?"

“Oh don’t be such a child,” she scolded with a roll of her eyes. “I told you days ago I would take a bit of your blood. I thought the surprise would make it easier on you.”

“Surprise?” He choked out a laugh. "You literally just panicked and jabbed a needle into my neck!?”

“Chiss do not panic, we simply are fast thinkers,” she said matter-of-factly. “Besides, I needed to do this test anyway. Come over to my equipment, I can show you too if you’d like?”

He made a face, but followed her, muttering the entire way over to her third desk space where all the tabletop devices were bolted to the top of her work station. She sat down, taking the small vial of his newly drawn blood out of the machine before reloading the needle and sticking it into her own neck, pulling down on the trigger with one metallic hiss as a sample of her own blood popped out of the gun. She squeezed out two fine drops from each capsule onto separate thin disks of glass before tossing the needles into some containment box for later use, and adding an unknown cloudy colored chemical to each slide.

Ezra and the Vornskr shared puzzled glances before he hovered over Tharin’s shoulder to get a better look at what she was doing.
“So... what are you doing?”

“I’m performing blood work. It’s fascinating!” she mused, staring into her machine, her hair pulled over one shoulder, exposing her neck.

Ezra felt a flush forming and rocked back and forth on his feet, looking practically anywhere else, the Vornskr silently judging him before letting out one deep breath and returning to her nap.

“So... what's it looking like?” Ezra asked awkwardly, mentally slapping himself for saying anything in the first place.

Tharin didn’t seem to mind or notice, but after another moment of humming, she pushed back in her chair and pointed to the machine.

“Here, observe this. Look! Look! This is one is my blood…”

He rolled his eyes to hide the smirk forming on his face, but leaned down to peer through her machine like she'd ordered. The picture was red, with small circles and squiggles that he assumed was something *science-y* that made up an image of freshly drawn blood.

“Okay?” He hummed, bobbing his head uncertainly up and down.

She gave him a wry look and switched out the samples.

“Just try to focus on the overall appearance. Now, focus! This one is your blood.” She leaned back. “Know that I’ve already studied Eli’s blood samples once before and other than the count of cells, both Chiss and human blood appeared to be similar, nearly identical, and compatible even, which was good to know should Eli ever become so injured that he would need a blood transfusion. Which he did. It helped immensely in these last few weeks with you and the other Imperials as well.”

Ezra nodded as best he could, and looked down at the enhanced view of his own blood sample. Like Tharin’s, it was a blend of red circles, though significantly less like she’d warned him about. However, unlike hers, within about a third of the microscopic circles there seemed to be these little blue tri-shapes, some of them spinning slowly back and forth as if living in the fluid of the blood itself.

“What are those squiggly things?”

“You tell me? I’ve never seen such a sample before. Although, I suppose there were rumors about the girls of Sche—*OH VUN’BICN!!!*”

She slammed her hands down atop the table so hard that it made Ezra, T’ra Saa, and three other nearby scientists jump.

“What’s wrong!?” Ezra breathed, watching as Tharin paced back and forth across her work area, grabbing and shoving things into a bag tossed over her shoulder before her chair even had time to fall over into the floor.

“How could I be so careless? I forgot to account for the difference in rotations!” She said with a slap to her forehead, her face glaring at her own hand as it went through the many different expressions of pain and regret. “I really need to stop doing that.”

“Whoa… Whoa!” He grabbed her arms and ran his hands down them to get her to take a breath. “Just calm down. What’s going on?”
A bit of purple crept onto her cheekbones as he released the gentle touch from her arms. Though this was no time to be calm, she somehow felt a strange bit of ease slip into her and was able to stand still for a moment long enough to explain things to him.

“I’m sorry Ezra, but you’ll have to take your day off another time. We are going to be late for your first community service meeting on Schesa! I told them that I would bring you to their world on their next day of rest, which is today because the planet rotates a bit faster than Csaus. The voyage to Ilum made the date utterly slip my mind. How irresponsible! I’m so embarrassed!”

“Right, right... the community service. Don't beat yourself up, I almost forgot about it too. But wait, what about T'ra Saa? Don’t you need to watch her today?”

“Oh no! It’s not only today, I promised Ronin I would watch over T’ra Saa until he got back from his business off-world. That could be days! Weeks!?” She cursed and slammed her head against her table. “I can’t have anyone else watching her when she’s so close to giving birth. What am I going to do? I can’t let you go to Schesa alone! I can’t reschedule! What a mess!”

Ezra walked up at patted her back. This made her chuckle, but it was a dry sounding laugh that meant she appreciated the human gesture, but it did little to translate to her Chiss-routed guilt and immense frustration.

“Uh… is this a bad time?”

GRRRWL!

T’ra Saa rose and snarled as a familiar reptilian hiss sounded at the edge of Tharin’s work area.

HSSSS!

Around the same time, an equally familiar voice let out a jump and shouted, “Whoa! Tharin! The Vornskr please...”

“T’ra Saa!” Tharin scolded, not even looking up, but earning a complacent whine from the creature as she retreated to snuggle back under the desk. “Oh, sorry about that, Eli.”

Both she and Ezra shot up and looked his way.

“Eli?!”

“What are you doing here?!”

“I just came to bring Jorj back. Thrawn was driving us all crazy toting him around everywhere aboard my ship. He’s in wall to wall meetings with the Nuruodo generals today— unrelated— but with his back turned, I thought this might be my only chance to bring the little guy back to you.”

Ezra waved, but the lizard only stuck his tongue out at him. To his surprise however, Jorj looked significantly fuzzier and more orange than the week prior.

“Eli, Vornskr and Ysalamiri don’t get along,” Tharin scolded. "You know better than to bring Jorj into the labs without calling ahead.”

“Oh right! Gosh. Sorry, I wasn’t even thinking—” He blushed. “See, I also wanted to check in, and to see how well you were both doing with your—” He looked around, sneaking glances at the other scientists. “Projects...”
“Why does everyone keep saying “projects” like that?” Tharin mumbled, shaking her head afterwards as she shot out of her seat and rushed so quickly over to Eli that he had to take a reflexive step backwards as she slammed into him. “Never mind, forget about that! Your timing could not be better because it just so happens that I need a favor!”

Eli made a tensed face as though she were about to punch him—or more like she already had.

“What kind of favor?” His reluctance to ask was almost painful to watch.

“Hey! You owe me for stalling my father back on Sposia! Remember?”

He rolled his eyes and sighed in reluctant defeat.

“Fine… Fine. What do you want this time?”

She took Jorj and wrapped him around her neck as she grabbed Ezra and Eli and shoved them off towards the door.

“I need someone to take Ezra to Schesa today. He’s already late, so you need to get going right away and be sure to explain things to him in detail before he gets there.”

“But— wait! Tharin— What?”

“I know you’ve been there before, you know where it is, and if you requested enough time to come here, that means you must have the day off, so it should be no problem. You’re in your private shuttle today, right?”

“Yes…” he ground out. “But I didn’t think when I came here, I’d be taking a detour all the way to the edges of Chiss Space!?”

“You’re a captain, you can do whatever you want!” She waved. “The soldiers will understand! Plus, now there’s plenty of time for you to learn what all Ezra’s been up to with his training and our "projects". Now go on!”

Ezra shrugged.

“Sorry Eli, but she’s got a point?”

He broke away from Tharin and smoothed nothing in particular as he ran his hands over his uniform to recompose himself.

“It’s fine kid. That’s okay. Come to think of it, I’m overdue for a trip to Schesa anyway. So… Sure. Fine. Fine! I’ll take you this time, but don’t think I’ll always be around when you two need a ride like this! I have a lot of work to do myself you know? I’m a busy guy!”

“Wouldn’t dream of it!” Tharin grinned and winked. “Oh, and one more thing, Eli—”

He turned and she jammed her needle-gun into his neck, hissing air before it popped out another vial of blood.

“Damnit all Tharin!” He snapped. “I thought we were past the blood stealing thing? Gah!”

“Sorry… New revelations have come to light and I require another human sample. Thank you for your contribution to science, Captain!” She popped out the vial and handed Ezra the gun with a fresh reloaded needle. “Ezra, maybe see if any of the locals will let you have a sample of their blood as well. I am very interested in studying their DNA after seeing yours and recalling old
“Uh, I don’t think I want to—”

"Don’t worry, just pull the trigger and the gun will keep the sample cool and active until you pop the vial back out. Just leave it in there and bring the device back to me tonight, that is, if they allow you to get a sample. It never hurts to ask in my profession, at least that’s what I’ve always thought? It will be fine.”

"But—"

She shoved the gun in his hands and practically kicked them out of the lab, her words moving so quickly that Ezra almost thought she had switched languages on him.

“Don’t worry about Jorj, I’ll watch him today so T’ra Saa doesn’t eat him. Good luck on Schesa. Remember my samples! Okay! Thanks again Eli! Safe travels! Goodbye!”

The door closed shut and Eli and Ezra shared a look.

“Did that really just happen?”

Eli rubbed a slow hand down his face and took in a sharp inhale of breath.

“Come on kid, let’s get you to your community service before the Aristocra think you’ve skipped out. I’ll tell you all about the planet on the way there.”

Ezra blinked, everything had gone so fast, but robotically, he turned and followed Eli back to his ship.

“Yeah… okay I guess?” He rolled his eyes and nodded. "I can tell you about Ilum too. I guess this worked out for everyone?"

"Way to see the bright side.” The ramp lowered and he motioned Ezra inside his ship. "Strap in. It's a long ride to Schesa."

"Yeah that sounds like Tharin…”

As Ezra finished his recall of his last week of Chiss training, Eli couldn’t help but laugh at him.

“The first time I started training with Vereen, I threw up at least once a week. It gets easier, trust me. Chiss just have a higher bar when it comes to certain tolerances like pain and endurance, but they have severely low ones when it comes to other things like tact or compassion.”

“You’re telling me!” Ezra laughed. “So, what will I be doing on this community service trip? Tharin said I needed to come here once a week for the foreseeable future. It’s not going to slow down my training or anything is it?”

Eli snorted out a dry chuckle.

“I doubt it. The Aristocra weren’t all that happy with us when we got back from saving those Imperials. The trial was long, but in the end one of the Syndics from Schesa volunteered to ease
your charges if you came over to her planet to help their people.”

“Help them how?”

Eli turned back in his seat.

“How much do you know about Schesa, Ezra?”

“I know it’s on the Path of Houses, the farthest one near the border, and it’s home to one of the three major military families, right?”

“Glad to see Tharin’s lessons are sticking with you.” He smirked. “Did she tell you anything about the people?”

“I think she mentioned that they trained pilots, but she said that she would tell me the rest another time. She said it was a lot to cover, and honestly, I might have been too sore to process some of it and she sent me home early.”

“Pretty merciful for a Chiss instructor?” He grinned.

"Then she gave me homework..."

His smile widened.

"Ah, that makes more sense. So, I’ll try to sum some it up for you as best I can, okay? Schesa is the 9th Ruling family of the Chiss, but it's a very small planet. Seriously, there are moons bigger than this place. It’s extremely closed off from the rest of the Ascendancy and since the history of the world’s founding, there's been one family name that lives and works on this world, the “Alani”.

“Like Admiral Ar’alani?”

Eli nodded.

“Right, she grew up on Schesa. She’s one of the rare few Chiss to leave for another career path too. Though, her alliances with the other Alani prevents her from taking Nuruodo as her name now.”

“Really? I thought she gave up her title when she became Admiral or something? What's that got to do with her naming process?”

“See “Alani” actually translates from ancient Cheunh syntax meaning “unaligned”. From what I heard, the Aristocra sent them to colonize their own world a few generations ago, and it’s one of the newest houses in all of the Ascendancy. They quickly earned a place as a Ruling House though they don’t have a very big population, maybe a couple hundred people at most on the entire world give or take a few visitors? The Alani haven’t had a major role in politics for quite some time either, though like I said, they are a huge factor of the overall military.”

“Because of their special pilots?”

“Very special!” He nodded. “They are a well kept secret from all outsiders. None of the other Imperials can know about it until they are accepted within our Ascendancy and offered the knowledge like I was. You though… you seem to be a special case to be allowed access to Schesa before your trials by the High Council have been approved. They must have great faith that you’ll pass all the tests because this is completely unheard of! You should have seen the courtroom when the Syndic suggested it back on Csilla. I've never seen the Aristocra so shocked! Seriously, you
can't tell anyone anything! Promise me!"

"Okay, okay, I promise! Really, if it’s such a big deal, then why do you think they’re even letting me go?"

"If I had to guess, it’s because the pilots are all like you Ezra… they’re Force sensitives."

"What?" Ezra doubled back. “You mean the pilots are all Jedi?"

"Not exactly...” He made a face. “There are no Chiss Jedi like you kid, their abilities are lot— well — let's just say they're more specific.”

"Specific how?"

"They're called the ozyly-eshehmo. It translates to “skywalker”, or "a child who can see a path through the stars and navigate around all obstacles". Third sight, they call it. Nearly all of those with the ability are children, most of them are just young girls, and they’re really rare. None of them can leap through the air, move objects like you, or even perform a fraction of some of the things you're capable of. Because of this third sight though, they're all trained as pilots on Schesa and used to navigate flagships along safe routes throughout the Unknown Regions.”

Ezra swallowed.

“Yeah, you mean like Thrawn had me do to save the Imperials?”

Eli nodded, but there was something about knowing that truth which made Ezra feel a little used. He swallowed the feeling down with stoic resolve and leaned forward in the co-pilot’s seat.

“Okay, so why is their ability so specific?”

“No one knows?” He shrugged. “The Sabosen and Inrokini have studied their biology and growth, but there’s no pattern any of them can find. No one knows why they’re all mostly young girls, or why they all tend to lose their abilities the older they get. Someone Ar’alani’s age for example likely possesses none of her old abilities, they just— poof!” He made a puffing gesture with his fingers. "Fade away.”

That made another chill run up Ezra’s spine.

“Wait, so they lose their connection to the Force? How? But— How long do they normally last?”

“Oh it varies, I guess? The youngest reported case was taken to Schesa at age three, and the oldest remained until she turned nineteen.”

“What happens then?”

Eli bit his cheek.

“Well, like I said, most remain to train the future generations on Schesa. Experience is the best kind of teacher after all. Sometimes others simply move into other military families where their skills are better appreciated. Pilots and soldiers never truly stop being pilots and soldiers, you know?”

“And their families all move to this secret planet with them?”

“If they chose to…”
He frowned and Ezra couldn’t help but see straight through the look. *He wasn’t telling him everything.*

“What does that mean?”

“Well… you know how Chiss are?” He made a scowling face and shook his head. “So stubborn and stuck in their ways, wondering how they can be useful to their Ascendancy…”

“Eli?”

He huffed.

“Some of the families don’t want to leave their lives to go all the way to the edge of our borders to do nothing, or worse, to have nothing to offer. So some, not all, but some of the girl’s families don’t go with their daughters when they—”

“That’s horrible!” Ezra interrupted. “You mean they just let the kids get taken away to some other world? Do they ever even see them again?”

“It’s not really all that different from how the Jedi of old used to be, was it? From what the stories used to say, Jedi often took infants away never to see or even learn of their families again. At least here, there's somewhat of choice—” He ground his teeth together. “No matter how lousy a choice it really is.”

Ezra’s mouth was open and ready to argue, but he shut it quickly when he remembered Kanan telling him how he never knew his parents. Somehow, he felt suddenly ashamed to have come from people so cruel as to take kids away from their families and refuse to let them form attachments as they grew up. Kanan was never like that, he had tons of attachments and they never made him any less incredible. Even when they helped rescue Force sensitive children from the Inquisitors, they took their families with them to safe houses.

“I still don’t like it.”

“You and me both, kid, but we're going to have to keep it to ourselves for a little while.” Eli pointed out the viewport. “Look alive. We’re here.”

“It really is small!” He commented as the tiny purple-ish planet came into view. It was maybe a third the size of Csaus and only had one very distant moon nearly the same size as the planet itself. This far out, it looked cold, the suns in each direction planting just enough light from both directions to keep the planet lit in a dim fog.

Upon landing, he saw the lush purple grasses, a lot lighter than the blackened color of Myrkr, but more like the entire world was coated in fine midnight colored dust. White dewdrops glittered into the light atmosphere as they stepped off the ship and up to the massive white building. The sky was gray-blue, the clouds and breeze coming off as lonely and serene. What an odd place, so strange and still somehow so beautiful, even through his feelings of reserve after learning about the people living here.

“So since they let me in on all these secret Force-sensitive kids, what am I here for?” Ezra asked, his steps airy as he shuffled across the strange gravity of the planet's surface.

“That’s for the Syndic to decide. I can only assume she hopes you can teach them something, maybe find a way to keep their abilities from fading.”

“What if I can’t? I don’t know anything about any of this? Eli, I don’t know what to do?”
“You’ll be fine,” he said, trying to sound reassuring, but not really pulling it off. “Look, I’ve been here before, all the kids are really open to learning new things. Now what you should really be asking yourself is this… how good are you with children?”

He made the universal hand gesture for so-so, and Eli laughed.

“Just go in and get to know them,” he urged. “I know they’ll be really excited to meet you, so go on. I’m right behind you.”

Ezra swallowed, but parted the doors to walk inside.

"They're all just staring at me."

"That's because you're staring at them," Eli whispered. "At least loosen up and wave or something?"

He did, but the girls only continued staring at them, their uniformed rows five by five as the shortest and youngest of their girls made up the front. All of them were wearing matching uniforms of gray and black with thin details of rich blue lining the front and shoulders. The House color? Ezra assumed, though he wouldn't dare ask about it right now. He only looked out at all of their small faces, each girl was so similar to the other, with short haircuts and thin, lean bodies that revealed their many years of rigorous training. The training some of them did completely alone, without their families, and without the carefree childhood he wished they could have.

Ezra bit his tongue.

“Captain Vanto, this is an unexpected pleasure,” the older woman said. She was dressed in a training uniform as well, though hers was mostly blue and black with silver details, and her hair was kept in a long, straight plait behind her head. "You bring Ezra Bridger with you I see."

“Syndic Maris’ safis,” he greeted. “Mitth’ar’inrokini was detained with her work, so I volunteered to act as translator and chauffeur for Ezra today. Plus, I made a personal promise to visit here again soon and wanted to keep my word. Is now an opportune time for the girls to meet with us?”

"Of course. We were just in the middle of our sparring session, but their time of rest is coming close, so now will be a most opportune time for a break." She nodded, her long braid swishing as she spun around and spoke to the girls. “Everyone, this is the skywalker who agreed to tutor you in these coming weeks. Be good to him. Captain Vanto will be filling in for the Inrokini representative this week, so please be courteous to him as well and do as they instruct.”

They were completely unified as they replied “yes ma’am” in their young voiced Cheunh chorus.

Ezra only took his eyes off of them long enough to read the translations forming in his watch, as the woman in charge turned back to face them.

“I will be in the other room if you need me,” she said quietly to Eli as she gave each visitor a slight bow. “Do teach them well, odd one.”

Odd one? Nat'ir in'a. He wondered how many more nicknames he would get the longer he remained in the Ascendancy.
Ezra merely nodded to her in reply as Maris’ safis strode away and Ezra only stood and stared as the sea of little girls stared quietly up at him with dozens of curious, glowing red eyes directed solely at him once more.

He was supposed to teach them? Maybe even help to keep their abilities from fading? How did he get himself into this mess? He didn’t know how to do that, and he wasn’t exactly the best Jedi student, if his memory was serving right. Could he really teach these girls anything?

“Well…” Eli nudged. “Don’t just stand there, go say hi.”

Ezra snapped back and greeted them in what little Cheunh he felt confident enough to use.

“Ritot! Uh...Ch’ah csarcican’t... cart en’rcsoert. Uh...bin’vi... sir viz ch’ah.”

He was pretty sure he just butchered that, but he had been practicing it since they landed on Schesa.

A few of the girls giggled, one in particular whispering to the much shorter girl beside her.

It was then a thin girl walked to the front of the group. She wasn't the tallest or the shortest, though her short blue-black hair was almost wavy looking and it was cut so close to her head that the curls were hardly even visible. There was a curiosity in her eyes, but a familiar sense of confidence and command showing along the rest of her face.
She might be one of the oldest? If not, maybe she was one of the leaders?

The girl turned to the rest of her group and pointed a finger directly up at Ezra's face.

"Vuhn cart ch'acevi. Ch'tra ch'an'ciuh vim ritot ten tenar."

The group smiled at that and immediately rushed for Ezra, all of them eagerly clamoring around him, touching his clothes and hair, and asking him all kinds of overlapping questions that caused his translation device to go berserk and chop bits and pieces of random words together that made no sense whatsoever. Eventually it just stopped working altogether and Ezra stopped even trying to use it, not that he could look down at his arm long enough to see it in the first place.

“Whoa!” Ezra called out, tackled to his knees by all the children. “Nice to meet you! One at a time. Uh... Eli!? Little help?”

“You’re doing great!” He called, brushing him off with a big grin on his face. “I’ll be over here a few minutes, there’s something I need to take care of.

He shot a wink down to the girl who launched the attack, and she only snickered before taking his hand and leading him a few feet away from the carnage.

“Captain Eli!” she greeted, her smile wide and her Basic heavily accented and only slightly adorable, though he would never insult her by telling her so.

“Hey! Tasvi. I told you I’d come visit, didn’t I?”

He knelt down as the girl wrapped him around the neck in a big hug.

“I missed you! I’ve been telling everyone what you did on the Admiral’s flagship. How you saved me!”

“It was nothing,” he waved, his voice masked beneath a cool facade as he played himself up as a brave and heroic soldier. “No one could have predicted we’d run into a blockade out by Cormit. Especially not one with Vagaari, Vong, and the Grysk aboard. You did good to warn everyone when you did. Thanks to you, there were no casualties.”

He tapped a knuckle against her cheek and grinned.

“Not on our side, you mean.” She nodded, but her smirk slowly faded to a frown. “Though I wish I could have sensed the attack sooner, then the Admiral might still have kept her vessel, and maybe then you wouldn't have been hurt.”

“Hey, it’s alright, Euhn Cso! Don’t worry about that. I’m fine. The scar makes me look cool, and Ar’alani likes her new ship a lot better anyway.”

She smirked and tapped a jabbing index finger against his beard.

“Your face has gotten much hairier since the last time we spoke, Eli. You once said it made you look cool as well.”

"And I stand by that. Why? Is it growing on you now?"

She smiled and shook her head.

"I still think it's kind of weird."
“Oh, you think so?” He stroked the facial hair smugly as he shot a side glance down at her. "I thought the beard made me look more my age. Thrawn said he liked it."

She rolled her eyes, something Eli mentally told himself that he really needed to stop teaching impressionable Chiss children.

“The Commander has always liked weird things like you though, it was one of the first things they taught us about him in our lessons of great warriors. "To think outside what is normal may pave a path to new victories" ... or something like that.”

“Right, right.” he nodded. “Well, hey if you feel that weirded out, maybe I’ll just take this little bracelet I promised a certain someone, and give it to somebody else?” He reached into his pouch and pulled out a small woven bracelet made of gold and blue threads. “See? That is genuine Lysatra craftsmanship, just like I said.”

“Wow! You really made that just for me?”

He laughed and flicked her nose.

“Just for you, sis. It’s the least I can do after you helped patch the breach in my trans-evac suit.”

She snatched the bracelet eagerly out of his hand and slipped it on as Eli adjusted it around her tiny wrists. She beamed at it, though gradually the excitement faded from her eyes and she lifted a curious brow towards the ceiling.

“What’s wrong? Too tight?”

“No, I love my gift, Eli, thank you. It’s just—” she pointed off behind him. “Are we really taking new lessons from that guy?”

Eli turned and saw Ezra buried beneath a horde of Chiss girls, still struggling to keep up with their questions and tackles, his head barely free enough for gasps of air. Eli rose with a sigh and a smile as both he and Tasvi crossed their arms and watched from afar with equal expressions of pity and amusement.

“Unfortunately, he’s the best we’ve got, but don’t let his looks fool you, he’s actually really good at his job.”

She shot him a skeptical glare.

“I know, I thought the same thing at first, but he really is a good kid. Look, listen to him, you might just learn a thing or two. Maybe you guys can teach him a few tricks too, who can say?”

“Alright,” she said with another roll of her eyes. "If you say so, but to me he seems too undisciplined to be a teacher."

“Ezra is a different kind of teacher.” He smirked. "Now keep that bracelet out of sight. I may be an incredibly talented jewelry maker, but I can’t quit my day job to weave bracelets for everyone. It’ll be our little secret, okay?”

“Very funny.”

He shrugged, then pointed off to the crowd before Ezra's pleas for help drew the wrong attention.

“Hey, why don't you go and tell your friends to give Ezra a little breathing room. We need to start
trying to do some approximation of a lesson here or Maris will kick us off world. Okay?”

“Yes Captain!” She saluted in mock-seriousness and ran off towards the others.

Eli watched her go, the other girls whispering as they formed a neat circle around Ezra and sat down. She had come so far—they all had really. Ever since the Grysk kidnapping and the attack on Ar’alani’s old flagship, the girls had only grown all the more capable as soldiers and navigators. Eli shook the memory away and rubbed at the scar along his face as he did. The Vong weren’t as scary now that he’d taken on a ship of them with Thrawn at his side. Though, Tasvi didn’t even seemed fazed by all the terrifying things she’d been put through, and as always she was eager to get behind the controls of a ship and start navigating again. The girls were trained hard, almost to the level of the adults, but even despite all of that and all of the things the military had been taking away from them, Eli was happy to know that they could still be kids when they needed to be.

At least around humans like him and Ezra, who they really didn't need to be so serious around to begin with.

"Class is in session," Eli said with a motion to the well-behaved group at Ezra's feet.

“Okay...” Ezra breathed, nodding to all of them as the girl talking to Eli took a seat, cross-legged on the floor with all the others. “Okay, so, that’s a lot better. Now, first off, I need to tell you that I’m not very good at your language—Uh... Hmm? How do I say that?”

Eli stepped in and translated for him with a reserved but pleasant look on his face. In light of everything, maybe he could act as translator just one more time.

The girls all nodded in understanding, and Eli made a motion for Ezra to keep going.

He swallowed and nodded, bits of his confidence coming back to him as he relaxed and just said what came naturally to him.

“My name is Ezra Bridger and I'm a lot like you, but where I come from the Force is a lot different than it is here.”

He waited until Eli stopped talking and used the Force to lift the lightsaber on his hip up into the air and then slowly pivot it into the palm of his hand. The girls gasped in awe as they watched him, none ever seeing anything quite like that trick before, their red eyes widening and gleaming with new intrigue and wonder.

“Veat k'isah vah k'ir csei?!” one asked loudly.

Eli leaned over and smirked.

“She wants to know how you did that.”

Ezra grinned back. At least he had their attention now.

“The Force is everywhere, it surrounds us, penetrates us, and it binds the galaxy together,” he explained, copying Kanan almost word for word as the old memory guided his lesson. Where better to start than the first place he had all those years before? Ezra smiled and looked out at the crowd of girls with new nostalgic amusement in his voice. “—And it's strong with all of you.”

They stared silently up at him, absorbing his every word, none even turning to look at Eli anymore as he translated for fear they might miss him doing something cool.
Ezra chuckled.

“When I was your age, I didn’t know I was special. Back then, I always thought the strange feelings and senses I had were normal, and never second guessed why I could jump higher than all of my friends or see clear paths out ahead of me that the others couldn’t. But as I got older, the feelings got stronger, and I met a man named Kanan who would wind up changing my whole life forever. And all of that started...” He twirled the saber hilt and smiled to the past. “When I stole his lightsaber.”

He told them the story of the day he first met Kanan and the Ghost crew, letting them know just how big of a troublemaker he was without getting too much into detail about the war with the Empire. He figured they probably didn’t need to know that much, soldiers or not.

Eli translated, though now he knew that he was listening to something he knew all too well, perhaps more than anyone else in this star system, maybe even more than Ezra himself. He knew the Empire was corrupt, but he could plainly see everything that Ezra was talking about or censoring, every detail strongly encoded into his mind as though he was there himself. He knew of Lothal, the governor, the radio broadcasts, the rebels, but back then he knew it all only because back then he was a part of it. He knew people had their problems, heck, he had a few of his own for years just by being a part of the Imperial Academy, but this was probably the first time he had ever heard such a detailed re-telling of it all through the eyes of a kid who was affected by their power, and more importantly, all it did to drive him into the arms of the Rebellion.

It made him feel— well— horrible, though he masked the guilt he felt of all that, just happy that the stories were only ghosts of his past, and none of them were anything that he could have changed had he been there. Not that those thoughts made him feel any less responsible about anything, even once Ezra had finished his story.

“Ch’un’er nen veo bicitet!” one of the smaller girls pointed.

“Show you what now?”

Eli snapped back to the present.

“Oh right. She asked if you could show them your weapon.” There was a strained calmness to his words that he masked quickly with a forced smirk. “None of us have ever seen a lightsaber before. You should show them what it can do.”

"You think so? Okay."

Ezra smiled and nodded, stepping backward to ignite the blade as the buzz echoed over the sounds of the girl’s surprised awes. It was already looking less red and more orange than it had a week ago, and Ezra stepped back a little ways more to give them a proper demonstration of flips and saber techniques that Tharin always found interesting.

Eli too was watching with his mouth slightly ajar. He had never seen a real lightsaber in person, and feared if he ever did it was probably coming from the hand of Darth Vader after one too many strikes used up by Thrawn on the dark lord's nerves. Ezra was different though, there wasn’t that cold eerie terror like Vader or any of the Inquisitors had around them, he was somehow peaceful, almost serene to watch and no one could pull their eyes away.

“A lightsaber is the weapon of the Jedi, but it is the Force that helps us to fight and protect everyone in the name of peace. I can’t tell you that you’ll be able to get lightsabers, become Jedi, or even lift things with your minds. I don’t even know if I can keep what abilities you have from
going away, but while I’m here, I still want to try to show you some of the things my master taught me. That is… if that’s something you all might like to learn?” He sheathed his saber and looked out to the children while he still had their complete attention. “The choice is up to you.”

The girls looked to one another and all nodded, some vigorously as all of them stood and bowed to Ezra just as they had their instructor before.

“Looks like they’re all on board, Master Bridger.”

“Bin’vah, Ch’irci Bridger!” One of the taller girls stated.

“We look ahead to learning from you, Ch’irci!” The small one who had spoken to Eli said in very heavily accented Basic.

Ezra shot a look to Eli as if to say “they know Basic?!” but he made a face back which more or less translated into “it’s a long story and I’ll tell you about it on the ship ride home.”

He accepted that and rubbed nervously at his neck as he tried to talk over the eager sounding children.

“You guys can just call me Ezra…”

“Ch’irci Ezra!” One cheered.

“Or not?” He smiled. “Eli, what are they calling me?”

“Ch’irci means "master". Sorry kid, it’s formal speak for an instructor. No getting out of it once they accept you into the role.”

“Oh…”

“So you still have some time before the Syndic comes back. Got anything else to teach the girls on day one?”

“Well, I’d like to learn everyone’s names if I can. Would that be okay?”

Eli smiled.

“I think they’d like that.” He whistled down at one of the girls before switching to Cheunh. “Hey, Tasvi… Can you ask the girls if Ezra can learn their core names? There’s no way he’ll keep up with all of the House honorifics right now.”

She nodded and repeated the question to all the girls before turning back and nodding.

“I think since he’s human and new at this, it will be okay.”

“Alright then.” He looked back up to Ezra and returned to Basic as he gave him a slap on the back. “They’re all on board. Good luck, kid.”

And as the girls introduced themselves one at a time, Ezra started to see just how different each of them were apart from their matching uniforms and short haircuts. Some had dimpled smiles and some were more serious, some had sharp eyes where other girl’s were big and round; a few faces were lean and others still had baby fat. There were thin eyebrows, round noses, pointed chins, or larger forehead lumps that gave him some indication of how old they really were. The younger girls most always had smooth foreheads and chubbier cheeks than that of the older girls who looked more grown up with chiseled cheekbones like Tharin, Ar'alani, or Ina. There was blue skin
and then lighter and darker variations as well as some hairstyles that were more blue than black and vice versa, some straighter and some wavy. Each of their voices were different and the presence each of them held within the Force came off as unique and special as well. Ezra tried his best to keep track of them all, but saved the names on his malfunctioning wrist-comm to study when he got back.

For now it was a start at least.

Soon he was done and the girls had moved to talk among themselves, some even copying his lightsaber demonstration with imaginary sabers as Ezra stretched and leaned forward to collect his bag. The light gravity was a little stronger than he thought however, and he nearly stumbled before regaining his balance. Unfortunately, that only caused him to fumble with his bag and drop it as the clasp fell open and Tharin's needle gun slid straight out of his bag and onto the floor.

His eyes widened and he rushed to pick it back up, only to be stopped dead in his tracks by the sight of two tiny blue hands. It was the girl who knew Eli, the one who knew a little Basic. Tasvi, he thought her name was? She had the gun held in her arms, hiding it from the others who hadn't seemed to notice his clumsy trip, all except Eli who was already making his way over to them.

"Sorry! I didn’t mean for that to—" Ezra reached out and grabbed it, ducking the tool back into his bad as Eli stepped over and lifted a brow at him. He looked up, unsure of what else to say. "I forgot about Tharin’s blood sample…"

"Hey, that’s all you, Ezra,” Eli started. “I’m not asking any kids for their blood.”

"It's not like I was going to go through with it! You know what, no. Tharin can just get over it, I’m not asking anyone for any—"

"Is that Inrokini device?" Tasvi interrupted in choppy Basic.

It took Ezra a moment to calm down and realize she was speaking a language he actually understood, but as soon as he did, he nodded and Tasvi snatched the gun away from him.

"It was Mitth’ar’inrokini who is supposed to accompany you here and look out for you. I have heard of her work.” The little girl nodded and immediately took a sample of her own blood, not even hesitating or wincing as the electronic hiss depressurized against her exposed neck. After that, she merely held the gun next to her, but showed no visible signs of giving it back. She looked to Eli and swapped back into Cheunh for the words she did not know in Basic. "There. Simple enough, yes? You may bring a sample of my blood to the Inrokini scientist. I don’t mind, but I will expect a favor in return."

Eli snorted out a laugh.

"What?" Ezra asked.

He rubbed his chin and smirked, still amused as all get out that Tasvi was practically holding her blood sample hostage in order to extort a favor from an off-worlder. He was pretty proud of her actually. And they say the Alani girls don't have a rebellious streak?

“She says she knows about Tharin’s work and wants you to take a sample of her blood in exchange
for a favor.”

Ezra only blinked and looked at her like she was crazy.

"What kind of favor?"

“I have heard rumors of Mitth’ar’inrokini’s new ship,” she said simply, a devious gleam in her eye. “Basically, I wish to fly it.”

Eli laughed harder now.

“She says she wants to fly Tharin’s new Clawcraft.”

Ezra and Tasvi locked glances and the corner of his mouth lifted in an equally duplicitous grin.

“You know what, Tasvi... I think I might just be able to make that happen.”

That wicked gleam transferred between them as their future schemes came to fruition. Tasvi then handed him the gun and he safely tucked it away before holding out his hand to her, a Chiss handshake, just like Tharin once taught him, though even as he squeezed down, remembering that the child would be offended if he didn't use his full strength, he slid his hand back and did a serious of hand gestures that the Chiss girl could only watch in confusion and awe.

"What was that?" she asked curiously.

"Secret handshake?" Ezra smiled. "It means I promise to make this happen no matter what. Here, you try, just copy what I do."

She did, and Ezra mirrored her as their elaborate hand motions finished with a small tap of their fists.

"Like that?"

"Exactly!"

The other girls wandered over and tapped on Ezra's shoulder until he turned.

"Tuzir nah tan?"

"What?" He paused, his eyes darting to Eli and Tasvi before falling back on the group of girls. He knew that one, he thought. Though he was hesitant to reply back with any form of confidence. "You want to try the handshake too?"

Eli translated, but the girls were already nodding at him.

Oh good. He thought. The last thing he needed was for all of them to offer up their blood and their teacher come back and wonder what was going on. If they saw what Tasvi had done, they didn't show it, instead it seems they only cared about the strange new handshake they were performing.

"Sure! That sounds like a good idea! Everyone line up and we'll each have our own handshake. Honestly that might be easier for me to remember than your names right now, but I promise, I'll try to do better later on."

Eli didn't even need to translate that part because each girl came up and offered her own unique handshake to Ezra before giggling and running away. It was the first time since they got here that he'd heard any of them laugh. It was nice that they were having some fun. Honestly at first
impression, he thought they might all be just as stoic and serious as all the other Chiss he'd met. There was a bubbling satisfaction in him knowing that this wasn't really the case.

The last little girl approached, a shorter, younger looking one who reached high up over her head with both hands and then slapped Ezra's palms front ways, back ways, and then did a little spin at the end before running off to join her group.

Their teacher, the Syndic woman, returned a few moments later and started to ask Eli how the lesson went. Of all the things Ezra had done this week, this had to be the most important, and the one he liked the most. He couldn't wait to come back next week and spend more time with them all. *Maybe he could show them a few games he played on Lothal as a kid?* The Syndic just wanted their powers to last, right? Well she would have no idea what kind of training that might permit, and Ezra intended to bend that loophole to the highest possible level of his new power as their teacher.

He bowed to them and they bowed back.

"*Bin'vah, sir viz ch'ah,*" he said chopply. "*Ch'ah csarcican't... veb vah csaah.*"

The girls didn't dare giggle again with their Syndic standing a few feet away, though they did smile at him and in unison, thanked him for coming, before running off to the training mats to continue with their actual lessons.

He felt a pang of pity then, seeing them all fall back into line so quickly. In one moment they were kids, but now, like when he had arrived, they were just soldiers again, and the sight of that only made him all the more determined to make his lessons as fun as possible when he returned, even if that meant every single girl here would get to pilot Tharin's Clawcraft.

Oh right... how was he going to explain that one to Tharin?

"Come on, *Ch’irci Bridger,*" Eli teased. "*Let's get you back to Csaus so I can return to Naporar before my crew starts wondering where I went.*"

"Right... Right... Thank you Eli." He stared up at the man, though the serious grateful stare he gave off almost seemed to confuse the captain as they walked.

He didn't feel like Ezra should be thanking him of all people, especially after that Imperial story, but if the military taught him anything it was to smile and try to act like you deserved praise anyway.

"You're welcome," he said with a simple bob of his head. "Now that you understand more about them, I know you're going to be fine. Honestly, once Tharin gets here, I've got no doubts in my mind that the two of you are going to do a good job with those girls."

They shared a smile and as Ezra and Eli returned to the ship, the new "master" only focused on what he would bring to show the girls next week. The rest of the little details and permissions... yeah... he could just worry all of those things later on.

“Oh you’re back!” Tharin smiled, though there was a hesitant softness to it as her rush to him slowed. “How did it go?”
“Not completely terrible…” He started, setting the needle gun down on her desk before falling back into a chair. “Eli went back already. He said to tell you bye.” Ezra paused and looked directly up at her as she stopped by his chair. “We have a lot to talk about…”

“I know.” She nodded, her voice almost apologetic as well as her usual mindful all-knowing tone. She scooted the gun to the edge of her desk without hardly even looking at it and took a seat directly in its place before speaking again. “I’ve never been to Schesa before. In fact, I shouldn’t even know most of the things that I do, but I researched into as much of their planet’s history as I could. The Aristocra think we don’t know about it outside of the military, but even rumors spread among my people. Plus—” She looked back at him, the sneaky gleam in her eye twinkling through the red. “It is possible that I got Eli to spill a few major military secrets without him entirely knowing it.”

“No…”

“Yes…” She grinned back at him. "He thought with Thrawn’s background and my parent’s leverage I knew all about Schesa, but the truth is they always told me very little. I had to dig up secrets of my own.”

*Well that explained why Eli swore him to secrecy back in the ship. He was a little impressed at Tharin's ingenuity for that little stunt, even when he imagined that she knew it was blatantly against all sorts of Chiss laws.*

“And the Aristocra put you in charge of me for a whole year?” He teased. “If they only knew you were such a horrible influence. I mean it’s been what, a week, and we’ve already snuck all the way to Ilum and now you’re spilling major Chiss secrets?”

“Just wait until I teach you Cheunh swear words.” She chuckled, the smile slowly fading as the serious feel to the room returned between them.

Ezra straightened up in his seat, but Tharin only leaned forward atop the desk.

“So tell me about what happened.”

He rubbed his hands along his knees, but replied without hesitation.

“First off the planet is weird. It has decreased gravity and distant suns, so everything is foggy and —floaty.” He made a gesture with his fingers to signify the atmosphere and then clicked his tongue in growing frustration. "Then the training they have them doing is strict. To me, it looked like the girls barely even get to have any fun at all. The lady training them made them go straight back into training mode when she kicked us out of the base, and I know for a fact they were training just before Eli and I got there.”

Tharin nodded, but slowly, sadly.

“The Alani were always rumored to have a very strict schedule. I was surprised they were able to make time for your visits. Did you at least do well with the children?”

“The girls…” Ezra smiled at each of their faces as they flashed through his mind, only to frown when he remembered leaving Schesa and seeing all their frowns and robotic stern glances as they diverted back into training mode. “They’re so—” he was at a loss for words. “They’re just so —blocked! From the Force, from their lives. It’s just—”

“Heartbreaking…” Tharin finished with a sympathetic frown of her own. “Tell me, do you think you might be able to help them?”
He looked up at her.

“Tharin…” Ezra paused. “Have you ever wondered if my abilities could fade out here too? Maybe it’s not something with the girls, maybe it’s just something in the air? I mean you have animals on Myrkr that can sense and block out the Force completely. The Yuuzhan Vong can't even be tracked! What if it's not the people, what if it's just something with the Unknown Regions?”

“I have considered that, but don’t worry. With the thorough training regimen I’ve set up with you, I will notice any small shifts in your powers, possibly even before you do.”

So there was more to all her tests than just harsh Chiss training? That was good to know.

“I trust you,” he said sincerely, shaking his head afterwards as if to knock loose some of his own thoughts. “Anyway, I have a few ideas to try what I can to strengthen their connections, but I think a good place to start is breaking that military routine they call a life. What do you think I can do to keep their powers from fading because honestly I'm just guessing?”

“That’s not what I meant!” She shot him a look. “Ezra, don't misunderstand me. Although the girls are scientifically interesting, I could not care less about keeping the ozyly-eshehmo’s powers from fading. I just thought you might be able to make things better for their lives… like… well... like meeting humans has done for me.”

Just like Eli had said back on Schesa. He wondered now if the two were plotting this together the entire time. Eli said the Syndic was an old friend of Thrass and his wife, didn't he? Could it be possible they were the ones to plant his community service idea into her head?

Tharin took a breath and continued.

“Since I’ll be going with you for the remainder of these trips, I will do all that I can to help with whatever it is you wish to teach. I suppose the real challenge will be breaking the pilots free of their caretakers long enough for you to actually show them a fun time.”

“Yeah, those Chiss instructors aren’t exactly the warm and fuzzy kind of caretakers over on Schesa, are they?”

Her eyes hardened.

“None of us are. I mean, of course, we love others and our parents show affection to their young children, but when you become a part of something greater... well... the job takes priority over all that so called “warm and fuzzy” care. That’s why I appreciated humans so much when Eli first got here. He showed me that there was another way to live my life and express myself in ways I’d always been curious about when no one else around me ever had.” She laughed. “My father came close, but well— you’ve met him. It’s hard for him to convey his feelings just like it is for everyone else. I wondered if I might have been a bit of an abnormal Chiss like my uncle.”

"Abnormal?"

She lifted her brow at him.

"Ezra, it's pretty obvious that I'm not like the rest of my people..."

"No, yeah, no I noticed!" He smiled. "But that's not really a bad thing you know."

Tharin smiled into herself and looked back up at him.
"Well I thank you for thinking so," she said. "Thrawn was always different due to his methods of military strategy and love of art, but it’s no wonder he was so enraptured by humans after meeting them in the Clone Wars, and enough for him to bring some of their knowledge back to share with us. Ticsi and I studied your kind all my life, but I never could have imagined how complicated and caring you all are until finally meeting you face to face. I know if anyone can show the Alani something new, then it's you, Ezra."

Ezra had to hide a blush.

“Well, I think you have a lot you can teach them too…” He swallowed. "Eli thinks so too, you know."

She felt an odd tickle in her jaw that stretched all the way to her cheekbones. The same feeling of fluster from Ilum. His facial color was brightening into a spectrum of red just as she felt herself doing. It was a blush. She’d learned about it some time ago, though on a human the redness in their cheeks could mean almost anything. She liked to think she knew what it really meant, but cataloged the feeling to the side for now. There were more important discoveries to make than just this fluster they were feeling.

“Ezra…” She shook her head and hopped off the desk. “Why don’t you take Jorj home and get some rest? I have a lot of work to do with the blood sample, and you still have training to accomplish in the morning.”

“Oh…” He almost looked taken aback by her asking him to leave all of the sudden, but tried not to let it bother him. She was right after all, it had been a long day. “Right. Okay. Let me know how it goes for you. I guess I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Of course, and thank you again for getting this sample. The girls really just let you take their blood?”

“Well, in exchange for a favor…”

He shot her an honoree look that was a mixture of both humor and apology, and Tharin tilted her head at the sight, eager to hear where exactly this was going.

“What kind of favor?”

“So don't get mad, but I may have promised a the girls access to the Clawcraft.”

“Oh did you now?” She folded her arms, that brow shooting back up as she studied his reaction to her body stance. “The Clawcraft isn’t exactly yours to offer you know?”

He held up his hands.

“I know, I know… but I just felt like maybe you wouldn’t—”

She snorted.

“No, you're right. I would have done the same thing. Schesa pilots are among the highest caliber, and I trust my ship to them more than I trust it with you, I’m afraid.”

“Oh… well thanks?”

“We’ll be sure to keep your promise to them next week when you return. Until then, think of a plan, think of your studies, and prepare yourself for tomorrow’s lesson. I need to make sure Chiss
military life doesn’t accidentally kill you so we’re working on muscle improvement again.”

Oh joy...

“I have muscles?” He squeaked reflexively, flexing his arms to prove his point. “See? I’m actually in really good shape for human standards!”

She chuckled and lowered his arm, tapping a teasing finger against his bicep.

“For human standards maybe, but I’m supposed to be turning you into a Chiss soldier, remember?” Her tapping finger came up to slide against his scars and with that she turned back to her work. “Though not in every way I hope. I still want to keep some of your warm and fuzzy side if you think we can manage to spare your personality into that of an abnormal Chiss like me.”

He blinked at her until she looked his way again and returned a cool shrug in her direction.

“I’ll do my best?”

“Good!” She chuckled, shooing him away with her arm. “Now get out of here and go get some sleep, will you?”

“What about you?”

She grinned.

“You need more sleep than I do.”

“Well, alright.” He scratched his hair and flicked a wave to her as he tested the hesitant word out loud. “Well...Bun n'uvcon, visot. I guess?”

She had picked a very inopportune moment to take a drink because it spewed halfway across the table.

“Where did you learn that?!?” Her face was purple, and she was now blotting the pools of her spewed drink with the nearest cloth she could grab.

“The girls taught it to me?” Ezra pointed behind him. "I asked them for a word that meant someone important to me. I wanted to surprise you with it since you’ve been working so hard with me. Sorry, did I say it wrong?”

She laughed, though most of it got caught in her throat and it came out more of a hiccuping snort.

He had said it right alright, though Tharin doubted he knew exactly what he was saying. Either these little girls were the mischievous types or they severely misheard Ezra’s translation. He had called her “dear”. He said “goodnight dear”! Maybe it was mistranslation after all? Maybe to say she was a dear friend to him? That had to be it. Stop it Tharin, pull yourself together! Ezra needs a reply! Control this fluster in your face and just tell him that he shouldn’t use that word as the term of endearment...

“I was… just surprised is all, to hear you speaking such impressive Cheunh.”

Internally she slapped herself in the face.

“Oh, well cool then.”

The way he smiled at her afterwards made all of her panic suddenly melt away, but even still, she
composed herself and pretended like nothing had even happened as she watched him take the Ysalamir and walk away.

“Goodnight Tharin.”

"Goodnight Ezra."

Once he was finally gone, one of the scientists passed by her desk with an arm of datacards and gave her a teasing but ultimately judgmental side glance before she could pry the soft smile off of her lips. When she saw him though, it was easy enough to look angry again, especially when there were five other scientists speaking in hushed tones and smiling at her under blocking hands. Since he was the closest, she decided just to yell at him loud enough to spread the message to all of her nearby gossiping eavesdroppers.

“Oh shut it Magin! Why go home to your husband, it’s been like three days since you last saw him? That’s right I know about all of your personal lives too! Nothing to see here! It was just a mistranslation. Go on about your business!”

He snorted airily and walked off, still blatantly judging her as the others snickered and turned back to their work. She felt her face flush again though this time it was for a completely different reason and she sat back down to focus herself solely on her blood work.

Scientist... always so nosy... good thing she wasn’t like that. Tharin thought through grumbles into her microscope.

As she twirled a bit of her hair and reached down to examine the sample, a smile crept back out in secret as soon as her face was hidden from the other scientists.

*It was kind of nice to have a nickname like that. Strange, but not altogether unwelcome.* She knew then that she was going to get along with these Schesa girls just fine, and couldn't wait to meet them in the week to follow. It was going to be a long year, but wouldn't it surely be fulfilling before it was all said and done?
Wake Up

Chapter Summary

Ezra's dreams take a strange turn as a familiar face introduces himself and his vast power. Later, Tharin and Ezra introduce new fuzzy faces to the world and realize just how much work they have in store for the rest of his year under her tutelage.

Chapter Notes

Posted on: October 30, 2018

There was a blinding light, dry heat surrounding him from all sides as the desert sands filled his mouth and ground between the cloth of his clothes and his skin. Ezra lifted himself, his memory of why he lie face first in the sand all coming back to him now. Twin suns… Tatooine… Obi-Wan Kenobi… Maul. These things played on a loop in his mind as he suddenly remembered he was not on this wayward planet alone.

“Chopper!” He gasped, turning only to see his stolen X-Wing still in tact behind him, the Orange astromech grumbling impatiently from his perch. Suddenly Ezra was back on his feet, though he didn’t remember standing up or walking over to the ship.

“BAH WAH BER BAH BUH WER!” Chopper complained.

“Yeah, yeah, I know...” Ezra sighed. “Look, you didn’t have to come on this trip, you know?”

A few more complaints later and Chopper’s binary suddenly shifted to a sound of fear, the warning coming out in two small words as Ezra sensed a sudden shift in the air behind him. Everything screaming at him, "Watch out!” and he turned just in time to see the Tusken Raider, its familiar braying screech causing him to stumble and fall backwards into the sand.

“Gah!”

He prepared to block the bludgeoning staff in the creature’s fists but stopped when he instead offered out a hand to him, no longer territorial, no longer screeching. It spoke to him now in a language which Ezra didn’t understand and yet he knew somehow that the voice was more distinctly human than before. Ezra admitted to himself that he didn’t know much about alien cultures living on Tatooine, but still, he had never thought humans and Tusken ever intermixed or got along for that matter.

Who was this guy?

The X-Wing and astromech were gone, and Ezra no longer remembered how he had fallen into this desert wasteland. Remarkably though, he thought this stranger might be able to help him and Ezra found himself taking his outstretched hand, lifted on equal ground now as the mysterious figure led him through the hot sandy desert and into a village where none of the creatures paid either of them
any mind. The one who led him here, now more obviously different than those around them, only helped to confirm Ezra’s suspicions that he was indeed a human in the masked uniform of the Tusken Raiders, and yet... they seemed to accept him as one of their own, not even noticing Ezra, or if they did, not attempting to stop him so long as he was in the company of this odd not-so out of place individual.

Taking a seat on the floor as he was motioned to, he felt half of a black melon settle into his hands as the man took a seat on the floor across from him. Looking around the small hut, Ezra didn’t see much in regards to personal possessions, but there was a single large pearl resting atop a mantle almost as if it were a trophy, the rest primitive looking skins and tapestries that patched the walls and sand-strewn floor.

The figure motioned to him and Ezra took a sip of milk from the melon. It wasn’t that sweet, but it did help get rid of the taste of sand in his mouth. Eventually the figure stopped drinking as well, just sitting there, cross legged, and staring in silence beneath the mask and goggles which he had never removed, the toothy mouth piece glistening from the milk of the black fruit they’d both been sampling. Ezra set his down on the table, unable to hold his questions back any longer.

“So, uh, hey… thanks for helping me out of the desert and giving me the drink and all, but who are you?”

The man did not speak, only reached around to his side and pulled out a single item, a thin lightsaber hilt with brown leather binding and tribal charms that dangled from the end.

“You’re a Jedi?!” Ezra gasped.

The figure was silent, but tilted his head as a commotion outside caught both of their attentions. Just as suddenly, the hut walls toppled over and the village before them was completely covered in fire and smoke, the smells of burning sand and dead bodies stinging his nose and causing his eyes to water.

The two rose to their feet, lightsabers ready, the masked man’s glowing a brilliant green, and Ezra’s own orange-tinted blade blending almost seamlessly into the hot embers of the raging flames.

He started forward, ready to defend anything near him that needed defending, his stinging eyes surveying the village as a blue light swirled ominously through the smoke in the distance. The strange man lifted his blade and ran straight through the billowing fire, disappearing on the other side as smoke filled Ezra’s throat in a dry and burning haze. He coughed back tears and choking breaths, trying to follow after the other Jedi only to feel the hot smoldering flames biting at his skin before he stole his hand back.

“Wait!” He coughed, covering his mouth and looking for another way out. The man was gone, not even the green haze of his lightsaber visible as Ezra found himself surrounded in a ring of fire.

There had to be some way out of here, there just had to be.

“Hey, enough of that. Time to go!”

He felt a chill run up his spine as he turned to see the ship, his own self waiting to pull them on board as the sands of Tatooine turned now into the top of that fateful fuel tank. He felt a streak of panic rush through him, wanting to hurry them all on the ship, but then feeling his blood freeze when he heard that bellowing AT-AT shot strike the metal carapace of the fuel tank. Ezra could only look behind him to see Kanan, his arm outstretched, holding Hera forward and all of the
flames masterfully back. Kanan was staring directly through him now, his eyes teal and determined, Ezra only watching with breathless shock as he watched his master lower his arms and let the flames wash forward and consume them both.

“WAIT!” Ezra jolted forward in the bed and let out a few deep breaths.

It was dark and he was still in his room, the moonlight from outside visibly showing in streaking rays along the Olbio tree where Jorj was sleeping soundly just a few feet away.

Not a vision then... he thought, feeling the sweat sweep his face. Just a nightmare. Just a memory.

He wiped his face and kicked off the blankets so the cool night air would wash over him. The fire felt too real, too hot to have been fake, but who was the guy dressed as a Tusken Raider supposed to be? He had only ever met the one back when he went searching for Obi-Wan Kenobi and it hadn’t been nearly as hospitable as the man from his dream. There was something so familiar about him and also the figure with the blue lightsaber, he just couldn't wrap his mind around it.

What were his dreams trying to tell him this time?

Then he was there with Kanan yet again. He didn’t get through a single week without somehow seeing all that fire take his master away from them. It's not like he wanted to forget it happened, he didn’t want to forget anything ever again, but Ezra still wished every single time, that he could have somehow done something more to save him. That only made him feel worse when he remembered that it was too late for everyone he had failed to rescue... too late for Kanan, too late for Birt, and too late for his crew. It was not too late for the Chiss though; he wouldn’t fail to save the Chiss like he had done so many times before with the people he cared about. That’s what all this was for, right? To stop the bad guys and save the galaxy.

Ezra grumbled and flipped the pillow before lying back down, letting the crisp Csaus night air wrap him in peace as he relaxed and ever so slowly, he fell back to sleep.

Hopefully, he thought. His next dream would be a nice one.

Ezra sat up and looked around. He had fallen asleep on the ground, the grass brushing past him as he looked up and out at the dark night sky lit by no light source whatsoever, no stars, no moon, just nothing but shadowy darkness. There was wind here but he couldn’t feel it on his skin, only see it in the plot of land where he rose to his feet in wonder.

He wasn’t on Csaus anymore, and by now Ezra knew that meant one of two things: either (1) this was a normal dream or (2) it was yet another Force-related premonition. He knew Jorj had to be nearby, so he quickly decided that it was probably just another dream. He was just semi-conscious enough to make sense of it all, so he knew that was all this was, just a dream. Knowing how these things typically worked, the plot would start moving along once he became self aware, so with a deep sigh, he stood to his feet, ready to get the random dream sequence over with.

“Alright, I give up,” he said, his voice laced in boredom. “Where am I?”

“Where do you think you are?”

Ezra’s blood ran cold and he felt his feet turn heavy as lead.
“He knew that voice.”

“You?” He looked around the blackness and gasped. “It’s you! Where are you!? Why did you help me save Thrawn’s life, and who taught you that dark Force move?”

“Dark?” The voice chuckled. “What ancient Master told you that? Is it possible more survived the Clone War than just I?”

“The Clone Wars? So, it’s true then? You were a Jedi?”

“Of a sort,” he replied. “Though it has been far too long since I limited myself to such titles.”

“How did you survive Order 66? Why are you out in the Unknown Regions? How are we speaking? Who even are you?”

“You ask many questions don’t you boy?” The low tone hummed. “Don’t worry, you will learn all the answers you seek soon enough.”

Ezra made a face.

“This is impossible. You can’t actually be here. I have a Ysalamir a few feet from me, you can’t just—”

“My methods reach far beyond the limitations of the Ysalamiri,” he informed briskly. “This is no dream. I merely wished to speak with you again.”

“You know, you’re pretty cryptic for someone trying to convince me he used to be a Jedi! I wasn’t born yesterday you know? You should know that I’ve met enough Jedi and Sith masters to last a lifetime, and I’m not looking to be an “apprentice” to anyone else, so if that’s what you think is going to happen here, then you better just—”

The man’s echoing voice erupted into a slow building laughter that eventually stopped Ezra mid-threat until the man was finished.

“Sharp is your wit, Ezra Bridger. Of course I see all of your pain and knowledge floating around you like a story visibly unfolding along every dark corner of your mind. Your hopes, your fears, your companions...” He hummed a few moments and Ezra wasn’t sure why but it unnerved him. “Ah yes, I can see now. It was Master Yoda who warned you not to trust me. Master Yoda, who hid while the Jedi Order and all of his students perished before him. How many times has he led you into danger? If anyone is cryptic, I’d say it was him, wouldn’t you?”

“How did you— You— Did you just read my mind? You stay out of my head!” Ezra warned, placing his hand to his hairline as if that could somehow block the other man’s connection.

“I meant no intrusion,” he said almost in a growl. “To make things balanced, would you care to see into mine?”

“What?”

Before Ezra knew it the blackness all around him rushed with the cold sensation of falling and he hit the sand mounds of a hot desert world only to cough and rise to his feet, dusting the grains off of his clothes and spitting them from his mouth. Once it was so dark he couldn't tell where he was and now he was blinded in hot, white light as he tried to let his eyes adjust. The first thing he noticed when he finally came to was the new set of clothes he was wearing, an old set of tan and brown colored robes.
Jedi clothes? He wondered.

He reached upward and felt something hit against his neck, a padawan braid just like Kanan had once told him about. He couldn't see it, but could tell from the texture that it was not his own hair. Obviously this was part of the strange man’s dream sequence, and Ezra looked around, feeling vividly the twin suns beating down on him from above.

Wait, twin suns?

He was suddenly back in that hut, back in the presence of the silent Jedi dressed in the Tusken Raider clothes. The fire was not yet raging and everything in the quiet village was still at an unsuspecting peace.

“I’ve been here before…” Ezra informed to the air, admiring the hut again as the figure sat him down and handed him the one half of that nearly tasteless black melon. “Was it you who showed me this before? Why? Was this your home?”

“No, these are two timelines spliced together from two different stories that merely take place in the same setting. It is an important lesson I am choosing to gift to you. Sometimes the people you think as the light are the ones who will cause everyone else the most darkness.”

Suddenly a blue saber cut through the night and Ezra watched a very familiar looking Jedi silhouette killed every last Tusken Raider in the village before eventually setting each corpse and hut ablaze as if to destroy every last speck of them ever being there entirely from Tatooine's history.

“No… that can’t be right. The Jedi didn’t go around needlessly killing creatures. Who is that? I think I know him?”

“He was the best of us, but it was by his hand that everything fell. I saw the signs, but did nothing to stop him, and in my negligence, the entire galaxy paid the price.”

An invisible hand suddenly grappled him by the chest and Ezra gasped, feeling himself lifted over the fire before being suddenly flung forward into visions of countless Jedi being murdered by Clone Troopers, their screams, the cries, and even one scene that made his heart skip a beat as he caught sight of a small boy with teal eyes fleeing as his master fell, her voice screaming out at him, telling him only to run away.

“Kanan!?”

But he wasn’t able to linger, he only felt himself being pulled through a hyperspace-like trail into another place and time.

“Come on!” screamed the man with the cone shaped face. A Cerean? Ezra had never met one before, but he recognized the face from Kanan's holocron. This was one of the Jedi council members many years ago, a Jedi Master, and valiantly this man ran down the platform to fight off a battalion of oncoming droids only to have his crusade cut short when his own army stopped and instead aimed their blasters at him, firing into the man until he ceased fighting and rest dead along the bridge.

Ezra felt a pang in his own heart despite not knowing the Cerean, though the vision focused so specifically on him that he couldn’t bear to look away. Then with another tug, he was suddenly on another world with pieces of dead Clones and armor lying in a bloody massacre at his feet, that false Tusken Raider’s lightsaber in his hand, the leather and bead strands stained wet, and the once
green light of the saber just as red and bloody as the massacre that lay sprawled out before him.

Ezra jumped back and turned only to see the familiar view of the Yuuzhan Vong torture table creep up from behind him, its tendrils whipping out to entangle and pull him into its horrific embrace. Ezra reached for his lightsaber, glad to feel it really there, and he cut the vines to shreds before everything within view faded to black and he turned in cautious circles, blade raised, the orange glow steady, and ready for another fight.

“Stop it!” He shouted. “What’s the point of all these visions? What are you trying to prove? If you’re trying to scare me, sorry to break it to you pal, but I’ve had kind of a long month! It’s going to take a lot more than that to psych me out!”

The voice chuckled in dark amusement once again.

“Yes, I sense you have had many nightmares lately, many coming from the very weapon which you just recently crafted from Ilum.”

Ezra gasped, the lightsaber disappearing from his hand as he waved his arms out towards the darkness, trying to feel for anything, or maybe to get even the smallest grip on the Force. The man's voice could only laugh at his shock, and this made Ezra grumble in growing frustration. Now it was clear that he was just messing with him.

“Look man, what do you want from me? I can’t change what happened during the Clone Wars. I was barely born when all of this was going on! It was terrible and a lot of bad things happened, but that doesn’t mean you get to haunt my nightmares.”

“I do not mean to haunt you,” the voice said, sounding genuine and even a little penitent. “I sincerely wish I could show you something better, but these are not nightmares meant to frighten, only lessons that need to be learned.”

Ezra snorted out a trite chuckle and continued gazing through the blackness of the void.

“Darkness, corruption, war, death… Sorry to ruin your whole “ghosts of Jedi past” thing, but I already know more than my fair share about all of that. Try another topic!”

“So it would seem…” The voice mused, his tone low and thoughtful, one could even say that it sounded dark if it didn’t also have a strange warmness to it. Like… it sounded as though he was truly trying to be helpful but was failing at it in the most awkward of ways. This became even more apparent when the man said, “Forgive me, it has been a while since I’ve spoken with another human.”

Ezra sighed.

“Look, I don’t know your angle in all of this, but let me try to help you find the peace you need. You know, if you’re like some kind of ghost or wandering spirit or something? Just tell me what to do.”

“Peace?” He laughed, fully entertained by the word. “I’m afraid I no longer remember what such a sensation requires. There is no peace for someone like me, not anymore.”

There was a long silence before he continued, the blackness giving way to reveal scenes of the Clone Wars and the terrible Jedi purge as the voice echoed through the wispy air.

“I felt them all you know… I searched for them after they died. My friends, my allies, my master, but they were all gone, hunted down one by one by the ones we thought our allies, by the men who
claimed to be the good in the great war.”

“But the Clones were being controlled, they had no choice. It was the really Emperor who killed the Jedi, you have to know that after reading my thoughts!”

“Ah yes… your history with the Clones was an unexpected bit of knowledge, but decades of hurt cannot simply go away because of a few sorry Clones and poorly aged battle droids.”

A vision. Ezra’s fight with Separatists battle droids, infiltrating ships with Rex, and going into battle with him, Wolffe, and Gregor leading the way. He hoped suddenly that they were all okay, but there was a horrible pit feeling in his stomach that made him feel like one or all of them were not. He felt his mind breached again as the voice stole more and more of his memories.

“And what of the people, the planets we fought so hard to save? Betrayed! Claiming we were villains in the story all along. The galaxy turned its back on us, and for that, all peace died with the war. Though, now a new one has come to take its place. Even with thousands of deaths, war still rages. Did our sacrifices truly do so little?”

Ezra’s words were stuck in his throat. What could he say? That things had gotten better since the Clone Wars. Maybe in some regards, but the Empire was still holding it back from being perfect.

He sighed again.

“I’ve seen your pain and know how you’ve suffered. If my memories of the Jedi purge aren’t enough to for you, just wait until you learn what horrors the Chiss have wrought, this in a time long before even the Jedi Order could begin its fall. You might not see everything quite so clearly like you think you do now.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I speak of what is possibly the greatest sin of our galaxy, Ezra, but that will be a story for another time. I sense you are needed elsewhere for now.”

“Wait no! What are you talking about! Show yourself!”

“Another time perhaps… When you are ready…”

“I deserve answers! I meditated, I searched for you for weeks, but I couldn’t find you! How do you keep reaching out to me? How are you reading my mind? Where are you? Please, just answer me!”

A pause, but then the voice spoke up again.

“I cannot be found, but you, Ezra, your presence calls to me like a bright beacon in the darkest nebula. The Force is truly strong with you.” He sighed. “It has been so long since I’ve been able to see the galaxy so clearly or through such fresh eyes.”

“See? What do you mean, see?”

“All of it, each detail of your mind, recent as the day it was remembered. I can see them all so clearly as though they were my own.”

Ezra touched a hand to his head and grimaced, a cold headache forming as he felt more of his personal thoughts striped away.

“Is that really necessary? I could just tell you what I know, you know?”
“I realize that you do not trust me, Ezra Bridger. I have seen as much through your meeting with Master Yoda. Like me, you seem to be able to connect with those through the Force even when the distance between you is vaster than a entire galaxy’s worth of stars. You have been to the world between worlds and have spoken with the memories of the Mortis gods. You are incredibly gifted.” He could only breathe.

“Y-you have no right to go poking around in my head. It should go without saying, but that’s kind of a private area.”

“I hope in time that you will forgive my trespass. As I said before, it has been decades since my last kind memory. You have so many within you. If only I could remember mine, then I could share them with you as well. I could share them with anybody. No… It’s been too long for such pleasantries… far too long.”

“You’re all alone?” Ezra looked through the darkness trying to find a glimpse of him, but coming up blank. Now there wasn’t even the stars from the world between worlds, it was all darkness.

*Where in the worlds was this?*

“In a sense I am always alone but never far from others...” the man replied. “It has been so long since I have spoken face to face with someone like me. Darkness... all these years it has been only fragile peace, alliances, pain, and darkness.”

“Well we aren’t exactly face to face, are we?” Ezra eased. “You know, when I talk with people in this plane, or Force realm, or whatever... I usually see the person I’m talking to.”

*Well that wasn’t completely true, but he wasn’t about to tell that to this weird guy who could steal his thoughts. Assuming he didn’t already know. Could he be reading his mind right now perhaps?* Ezra shuddered.

“You make an amusing point, young one,” the man said earnestly. “Though I fear my appearance will not be one that shall help to earn your trust. Years of hardship have not been kind to this once noble vessel.”

Ezra looked up into the darkness and nearly shouted, his voice trying to sound eager and welcoming, but it possibly just revealed his over-enthused ploys on finding the answers he so desperately craved.

“Hey, I’ll be the judge of that! Come on out!”

Nothing... and then, just like that, *a blink!* Then there he stood, his body still and alight as though he were basking in the sun rather the dark chasm of Ezra’s own mind. A man? An alien? He was wearing the same thorny armor that Ezra had seen from his kyber crystal vision. It was right there, looking as though it had been made from the Vong’s own skin and callused harder than any rock. The vision and the voice, one and the same, and Ezra felt his breath go cold.

“You’re a Yuuzhan Vong?”

“I am no more one of them than you are. To survive, however, such forms must be cast outward in order for what is within to remain.”

“So it’s a suit?”

“Think of it as an extension of myself, a second skin of sorts. Without the outgrowths, my body would never have survived.”
“Survived the Yuuzhan Vong you mean?” Ezra stressed. “They experimented on you and gave you this armor?”

“In a sense. Their lessons have been most insightful, though, they show wisdom only through pain, and are not a species known for having an extended civil conversation.”

“You mean their torture! So, you live there? With them?”

“I do not live anywhere, I simply am,” the man replied. “I sense your hesitation and curiosity. It betrays how collected you appear on the outside. Your face, a mask just as my armor, and it protects you from the truth you wish to hide.”

“If you want me to trust you, then maybe you could stop with the vague riddles and the whole stealing my thoughts thing?!”

“What must I do to convince you that I mean you no harm?”

“Well, you could start by introducing yourself with a name?” Ezra took a step towards him. “You’ve got to have a name, right?”

“A name?” He almost laughed. “I’ve not heard my own name spoken in so long. Basic evades my lips just as sweet reveries have long since turned to dust in my mind.”

“You seem to have a pretty good vocabulary to me?”

Ezra was mere feet away, another shock of fear snapping through him when he saw this man up close for the first time. He was a massive build, though how much of him was armor, Ezra couldn’t guess. His mouth was unmoving, though human lips could be seen beneath the mask. A *human face beneath? Perhaps so?* It was hard to tell, the only other thing human about him besides his nonspeaking mouth were his eyes, *or at least one of them.* The left was a glassy blue, but the right was yellow, rimmed in red and bloodshot against the white. He had only seen one other person with eyes like those... *Maul.*

“Are you a Sith?”

“Well I am not a Jedi anymore, no...” he almost grumbled, though his voice remained calm and cool. “To be a Jedi is to sentence your life to death! You know this to be true. You have seen what the Jedi have become. Sometimes a more enlightening path is needed for survival. But you...” he continued. “You are no Jedi either, though your skills outweigh even those of the once great Jedi Council. Your strength was the only reason I knew Dark Transfer could work for you. I sense your potential, so close to bursting and yet so much untapped potential. I can help you unlock more power than you could possibly imagine, Ezra.”

So he did want to train him. Ezra had a feeling that was the angle this guy was working towards, but it still made him frown and roll his eyes.

“In my experience, power is overrated.”

He chuckled, neither the figure nor his mouth ever moving as the sound of his voice appeared as if though the wind.

“Well spoken. Though the power those thought to have shown you in the past is nothing like the power you will soon learn in these regions. The goddess, Abeloth, is watching at all times. She is the one who brought me here, and perhaps she has brought you to her as well?”
“Abeloth?”

“You have much to learn about these uncharted stars, young one. Until that day comes, I will be watching from afar. For now I really must insist you wake up. Someone is currently looking for you in urgency.”

“Wait! You never told me your name.”

“I am called Krayt. Now wake up...” His voice boomed once like thunder and in a flash everything vanished. “WAKE UP!”

“What? What?!” Ezra gasped, opening his eyes but seeing that the room was still coated in dark shadows, a distant voice yelling at him from the other side of the room.

“Ezra! Ezra, wake up!”

He grumbled and turned before letting his feet touch the floor. He was covered in sweat again, his toes nearly tripping on the blankets he had kicked off in the night. Another vision? Impossible... Jorj was right there on his tree sleeping soundly through the night. No one could be able to find him when Jorj was so close, and likewise, there was no way Ezra could use the Force himself to reach back with the Ysalamir a mere three feet away from his bed.

So, a nightmare then? No... It was too real, he could still feel his heart pounding. Could the dark Force user really be so strong as to be unaffected by the Ysalamiri? Was all of that truly a real conversation? More importantly, did this Krayt figure really believe he could earn Ezra’s trust with a few simple words and visions?

He did feel a bit sorry for the man, but that didn’t mean he trusted him. He had absolutely no idea where Krayt was, but he was with the Yuuzhan Vong, powerful, full of hate and vengeance, and worst of all, he knew almost everything Ezra had to know just by picking through his dreams while he slept. Honestly, Ezra was too dizzy to feel personally violated, but he doubted he would ever get a good night’s sleep again.

“Ezra!” the voice persisted, only now did he finally realize it was not the man called Krayt, but instead Tharin, her voice coming from the pocket of his cloak near the entrance of his room, speaking rapidly without even taking a breath as if she were a broken alarm. “Come in! Come in, come in, come in, come in...”

He grumbled and crossed the cool floors as he dug the comm-link out of his pocket, Jorj grumbling anxiously at being disturbed.

“Sorry buddy.”

Ezra tried to pet him but Jorj nipped at his hand as he quickly pulled it away. He was still a bit touchy after spending the week with Thrawn and he hadn’t really gotten his mood to settle back on Csaus yet. He was also twice as long and had less room to crawl around on his tree now, which was probably not helping his mood either. Ezra really needed to plant that outside so it could grow big enough for Jorj to explore, didn’t he? He’d be sure to do that first thing in the morning.

“Please respond, Ezra…” Tharin begged again. “Come on! I need you. I’m about to send remotely piloted drones to crash into your—”

“Tharin?” He yawned, his eyes finally adjusting to being conscious again. “I copy, I copy. Look, it’s the middle of the night. What’s wrong?”
“Just get to the lab and I’ll explain everything. Hurry…”

His voice got a bit more serious as he stared into his hand with worry. **Could this have something to do with his nightmare? With Krayt? He’d said Ezra needed to wake up because someone was looking for him. How had he known that Tharin needed help?**

“Tharin, what is it, what’s wro—”

“There’s no time to answer questions! Just get here!” She stressed and then shut off all communications.

He didn’t even second guess whether this was for some training practice or surprise test, he only worried that something might have been horribly wrong and left in a hurry, darting out the door in his pajamas and his cloak, as he ran up to her lab area in the still coolness of a starry Csaus night. The dew wet grass sticking to the bare bottoms of his feet as he bounded up the hill and burst into the building, sliding a little when he made a sharp turn on the smooth floors, breathing hard, and nearly slipping into her desk before he could clamor to a stop.

“I’m here! I’m here! What’s wrong?”

Her space was the only one lit and no one else was even here. She was waiting for him, looking a little startled when he suddenly grabbed her by the shoulders and checked her over for missing limbs or chemical burns. Physically speaking, she was completely fine, and her heart rate was only the normal amount of elevated it got whenever she was excited, not the kind she would have had if she were in some sort of mortal danger.

*She was totally safe.*

“Tharin… what?” He took another deep breath. “If this is another test, then I swear I’m gonna—”

She slapped a hand against his mouth and motioned for him to be quiet.

“Ezra, please restrain your human theatrics, this is important!”

“Is there danger?” He asked, muffled beneath her hand and glancing around for silent attackers.

“Danger to me if I can’t figure this out!” She gestured wildly and rubbed a hand against her face, which Ezra noticed just now appeared tired-looking and stress-worn. **How long has it been since she’s slept?** “You’d think with all the research I’ve done, I would be more prepared, but I don’t think I can do this alone! Please, I need your help.”

Help? Tharin wasn’t one to ask for help. Ever. Her Chiss confidence and pride almost always refused to let her, unless it was some inquisitive question she needed answered by someone who knew the answer first hand. In that case, this whatever it was, must really be serious.

“Sure, yeah, of course!” Ezra nodded, his voice softer and more sympathetic to her stress. **“No problem. You can always ask me for help. What is it?”**

She grabbed his hands and drug him with her across her work area only to point down on the floor where T’ra Saa lay on her side breathing hard and fast in a fenced off corner between the wall and Tharin's second desk area.

“T’ra Saa! Wait, she’s—”

Tharin nodded.
“She's in labor.”

“Whoa, what do we— what do we do? Did you call somebody?”

“Just you. Ezra, I know how to deliver the babies, but she has been stressed in these last few days without Ronin, and she is now panicked without him here to soothe her. She won't steady her breathing and her heart rate is dangerously high. I was hoping you might be able to help me calm her through the process. You said you were good with animals, right? The Lothcats? The purrgil? The wolves?”

He nodded, avoiding to mention that the Vornskr were not really a part of the successful list of creatures he’d attempted to connect with, but what the heck? T’ra Saa liked him, so maybe he could give it a shot?

“Just tell me where to go.”

“Up by her face. Just try to get her to calm down. I’ll do the rest.”

“Alright!” He sat down and set her large, heavy head in his lap, rubbing that spot that always made her purr. She whined, but didn’t struggle to break away from him.

“Good,” Tharin nodded. “Keep going…”

“There there, girl… it’s okay. It’s okay…” He reached out to the Force and ran an outstretched palm along her face and neck. “Calm down. It’s alright now… Shhh…”

His connection had never worked on the wild Vornskr of Myrkr, but somehow Talon and T’ra Saa were always more susceptible to his abilities. He noticed her breathing slow and her tense muscles relax a bit as Tharin smiled wider.

“It’s working! Ezra, just keep doing whatever it is you’re doing, alright?”

He nodded up at her, continuing his soothing talk and calm stroking for as long as it took.
“Wow! Look at them all, they’re all so tiny!” Ezra grinned, looking up at Tharin as she stepped over the small fence and took a seat next to him. “So what did Ronin say?”

“He is scheduled to come back the day after tomorrow, but thanks the two of us for safely delivering the eight Vornskr puppies.”

“It’s no problem,” he said, shrugging. “I’m just glad I was able to help. I didn’t do half as much as you did though.”

She nudged him with her elbow.

“Don’t sell yourself so short, Sevicsi. If you hadn’t calmed her down, I fear tonight might have turned out a lot differently for both T’ra Saa and her babies.”

A little wriggling pup yipped softly at the tip of Ezra’s toes and he sat up.

“Where are you wiggling off to little guy? Um, Tharin what should I—?” He started, hand outstretched but unsure whether or not he should touch it.

“You can steer it back to its mother, it’s alright.”

He picked the puppy up gently and turned it around as slowly as possible until facing back towards its brothers and sisters. It was smaller than his hand, squishy, fragile, and its skin felt like the soft fuzz that grew on the outside of a Sihan fruit. Despite its tiny size, the whimpers it made were
somehow still loud and powerful enough to make the Inrokini building echo in soft infantile yips and howls.

He set it close to T’ra Saa and the baby immediately went to nuzzle up to her. She seemed content that Ezra had helped the baby to reach her, and with that, rested her head back on the comfort of her pillow, satisfied.

Ezra smiled and leaned back against the wall as Tharin removed her boots and stretched out her legs.

“Vorskr pups can only be bred once every five years according to our study of their anatomy. I’m surprised Ronin hasn’t had any before now, but I wonder what he plans to do with the litter?” She chuckled. “He will probably keep them here in the labs, I assume? That will be a fun transitions for everyone.”

“You seem to know a lot about the animals from Myrkr, Tharin. First Jorj now the Vornskr. It’s lucky you’re such an expert on them.”

She laughed and stroked another baby on the back as it yipped, searching blindly with its small shut eyes for its mother.

*Curious little pups, weren’t they?*

“No, I am no expert on Myrkr, just oh... what is that word? A Temporary savant?”

Ezra shrugged. *Sure, that was as good a word as any,* he supposed.

“For example, I do not know as much as the scientists who actually have been to Myrkr. Like the team who helped my uncle destroy the Chimera wreckage. Those guys know all sorts of interesting facts about the planet as a whole.”

He felt something flare up in him and took in a deep breath.

“A lot of good all that did, the Imperials still got tracked down and captured, but we lost the Chimera and anything aboard it that might have helped us in this war!”

“I know…” she sighed sadly. “But if we focus only on the what ifs then we won't be able to properly prepare for the battle to come.”

Another exploring pup scooted its way over to Ezra and he had to let some of his anger melt away. It was hard to be upset when there were new little lives squirming about on the floor beside you and nipping at your toes. He rubbed a finger along its little loaf of a body and gently turned it back towards the others.

Tharin stretched her bare feet and she let out a yawn before setting her head tiredly against his shoulder.

“Bringing new lives into the world almost makes one forget the impending war on its way, doesn’t it?”

Ezra frowned.

“Yeah… if only everyone could be as innocent as they were when they were born. Maybe then there would be no more wars.”
She snickered, her voice low as the pups stilled into a easing sleep.

“That’s a horrible world to live in! Babies are completely vulnerable and helpless. Everyone would die in minutes!”

He chuckled.

“Yeah, I guess you have a point. What’s a good age to still be innocent but be able to take care of yourself? Six? Seven? I think I could live in a world run by seven-year-olds, what about you?”

She snorted under her breath.

“I can see the chaos now!”

They laughed and stretched out their legs, Tharin pressing herself deeper into Ezra’s shoulder as she grabbed for his hand and played with his fingers. Gradually her laugh slowed and she let out a sigh before dropping his hand to the floor.

“Ezra... What is war like?”

“Well it’s not good, but—” He hesitated. “Why do you ask?”

“I know it’s coming, I’ve been preparing for it my whole life it seems, but I just wonder what’s going to change when it gets here. Will there still be peaceful moments like this one when we are busy each day just trying to make it through to the next?”

Ezra swallowed.

“It’s okay. You can be honest with me,” she persisted.

He reluctantly let his head fall against hers now, watching as the last of the pups snored quick little breaths, tiny lungs all adjusting to new life and new dreams.

“The war brought a lot of terrible things. Planets suffered, people died, it took my parents away, it took my Master away! Yet, despite all of that, all the things it took away from everybody... some of the best moments in my life happened because of the war. I met my friends, I learned I was a Jedi... I got to go on adventures!” He slid a hand against his knee and let out a sorry sigh. “So no... things like this they don’t go away, but I think it just makes them better when you’re able to find reasons to be happy when everything else around you is completely terrible.”

She reached up and took his hand again, intertwining her fingers with his as they sat and watched the puppies below.

“No matter what the war brings to the Chiss Ascendancy, we’ll face it together. Me with my inventions, my parents with their politics, Thrawn and Eli with the military, and you— with all of your amazing abilities.”

He smiled, but took his hand back and sighed.

“Tharin, I’m just one guy. I don’t think I can do as much as you think I can. Don’t get me wrong, I’m going to try, but what if I fail?”

She looked over at him.

“I think you have more potential than you know.”
He got a chill when he remembered Krayt had just gotten through telling him that very same thing.

"Wars aren’t won because of one person alone,” she continued. "You might not think you’re contribution is enough to turn the tides, but I know you will. My uncle seems to think so too or he wouldn’t have gone to all this trouble to keep you in the Ascendancy with us."

He smiled.

"Besides, you have only been with us for a little over a month and you already have accomplished so much. You fought off the Yuuzhan Vong! You survived the wilds of Myrkr without equipment! You regained your memories, and even saved my uncle from death! Ezra… you are learning an entire culture just to help with a war that isn’t even your own. That’s pretty amazing, wouldn’t you say?"

He nudged her back.

“What about you? You made a suit that works better than a Bacta Tank, an entire ecosystem for one Ysalamir crammed into a lightweight backpack, and you made an entire working starship all by yourself! If anyone is incredible, It’s you—” He stopped, blushed, and met her eyes before clearing his throat loudly. “I mean… you know… yeah… we’re both pretty great, aren’t we?”

He was nervous, flushed, and red again as Tharin felt his hand was starting to grow moisture once more.

She chuckled.

“Ezra…” She shot a glance down at his clothes and snickered. “I just noticed that you ran all the way over here in your night clothes.”

He looked down and wiggled his toes.

“Y-yeah I guess I did?”

“I’m touched.” She frowned suddenly. “But, I’d wager that you didn’t rush over here just for my sake, now did you?”

“What do you mean? You needed help, of course I did.”

“I saw you when you came in.” She shot him a gleaming look. “You appeared disheveled as though you’ve had another nightmare. You feared it might have been a premonition in relation to my predicament, right? Do you want to tell me about it?"

“You know, I guess I never really considered how much you’ve been observing me this last month. I’d be impressed if it didn’t still freak me out a little.”

She tilted her head.

“Yes, well you know me. I impress just as much as I terrify.”

He let out one amused breath. Sometimes he still wondered if she was reading his mind somehow, but after nearly a month of knowing her, he realized it was more of an observational Chiss thing than a supernatural ability. It only made him think of Krayt’s powers again. Could he be watching them right now? Ezra laughed at the sudden tickle of nerves, but even that sound began to quiver in his throat as he felt the chills coming back from the sheer memory of that bony armor and those mismatched eyes.
“Was it really that bad?” She frowned. “What happened?”

“No actually, he was trying to be nice to me? He just wanted to talk, I think? Come to think of it, he wasn't really violent or mean, but Tharin, there was still something just off about him that was really unnerving. It's kind of hard to explain the feelings around him.”

"Him? You mean like the—"

"It was the voice from the shuttle." He nodded. “The one who helped me save Thrawn's life.”

Tharin straightened, but tightened her grip on his hand.

“Impossible. There is no way a Force connection could reach all the way to Csaus! He could never find you with Jorj—”

“I know,” Ezra interrupted. “But somehow he did and I know it was real, Tharin. I can’t explain it... I just know.”

“The mysteries of your Force?” She tried to joke but it came out more like a statement of fear.

Yoda had warned Ezra that this man may not be the saintly savior they all wished him to be. Instead he could be dark, powerful, and could just have granted Ezra a gift at the cost of something much greater down the road. Tharin tried not to jump to her own conclusions and shook the thought from her mind.

“So, what did he want?”

Ezra only shook his head and took in a shaky breath.

“I don’t know really? To train me, maybe? To talk to me, I guess? He just sort of messed with me, played mind games, and showed me visions of the past, of history, and deaths. Other than that he was just trying to get me to trust him. He said something though that still bothers me, something about the greatest sin in the galaxy and he—”

He paused. Was it really okay to tell her this part? She was a Chiss and this was her history. How would she take it? Did she already know?

Tharin touched his cheek, her cool skin brushing against the cold clamminess of his skin. A sign of discomfort, alongside the sweaty palms, she remembered.

“Ezra… it’s okay. You can tell me.”

He met her eyes and that serious blue stare cut right into her like a blade.

“Tharin, he said the Chiss did something terrible, something worse than the largest mass genocide in my galaxy's known history.”

She leaned back and retrieved her hand.

“A lie! It has to be. No… Why would we ever— Surely you can't believe—”

“He was telling the truth, I felt it. Do you have any idea what that could mean? Maybe an old Chiss war or something?”

Her eyes darted rapidly as she mentally retraced her entire memory for some sort of knowledge that could give them an answer. After a few more seconds of deep thought, she blinked and shook her
“I have no idea. I’ve never heard of anything like that before, not even in lesser known historical texts.”

The two of them sat back and held each other’s hands tighter as they tried to think over Ezra’s latest vision.

“There’s more secrets here that they’re not telling us. Just when I thought we were getting past all of that.”

“Maybe my uncle—” she started, interrupting her own statement with an explanation. “He swore his truth to you! He would have to tell you if he knew, right?”

“No, I doubt he knows. We would have heard something by now, wouldn’t we?” Ezra shook his head. “We need someone higher up. What about Ronin or one of the Aristocra?”

Tharin lifted her knees and buried her face in them.

“Tharin?”

“We can’t trust the Aristocra with something that important…” She swallowed and made a face as though the words in her mouth tasted bitter and revolting. “N-not even Ronin.”

“Why?”

“There is a traitor in our ranks, one who has been selling secrets to the enemy for years, and my uncle has narrowed it down to one of the four Aristocra. I don’t know which one, but I overheard him talking about this after the second trial on Csaplar.”

“This traitor… they’re the reason my friends got taken hostage, aren’t they?” He took a breath and tore his hand away from hers. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t want you to act oddly around any of the Aristocra… not until we knew who the traitor was for certain.” She shook her head before resting her chin back on her knees. “I thought I knew Ronin, but… Ezra if he were the traitor, and I had somehow helped him with his schemes, I could never forgive myself.” She clasped her eyes shut. “Then again, if he was innocent, I would still live each day here in my lab with the secret guilt that I had once been doubting him. My own Aristocra!”

She stared off into the distance as tears formed in her eyes and started to slowly trickle down her cheeks. Finally she looked away only to cry soundless sobs into her knees where Ezra couldn't see.

He never thought someone as happy as Tharin could cry like this. It was shocking to witness. To think it was her Chiss pride for her Aristocra’s honor that finally broke her, and Ezra couldn’t even bear to watch it happen.

“Hey, shhh…” he soothed, pulling her in closer to him now. “Hey, hey, don't cry. Especially not over hypothetical what ifs. Look, it's going to be okay.”

“Is it?” She sniffed. “It sure doesn’t feel like it.”

“It will be.” He rubbed her shoulder. “Okay so things are bad right now. There’s a war coming, a traitor in the Aristocra, an unspeakable secret evil the Chiss did before we were born, a powerful Force user that’s able to read and speak into my mind even with Jorj near me, and to top it all off,
my citizenship tests are happening before anything else can possibly go wrong and I need to focus on our training.”

“Don’t forget your community service with the Alani girls…” She nearly laughed and brushed a tear away before frowning again.

“Right and there’s that.”

He huffed and put all of his weight on her until both of them sat up with new smiles of impending dread. It really was a lot to worry about within the span of a single year, but there was a sort of humorous effect on them when they put their minds together and realized they’d be suffering through it with one another and not drudging through it alone.

“I know it’s a lot to juggle this year, but we’ll find our answers and figure out what the Ascendancy is trying to hide. I think this is just something we’re going to have to look into on our own. Just you and me. I don’t think we can trust anyone else to help us, not even Eli or your parents. Not because we can’t trust them or use their help, but because this could be dangerous information, and we don’t want to drag anyone else into the mess with us.”

She nodded, slowly, but more confidently as they came to a silent agreement, the determined look in her eyes burning fiercely as the drying tears only made them glow bright red like glistening blaster fire.

“For now we continue our work and treat Ronin as normally as we would otherwise. We can gather intel on the traitor and the great sin as we travel and access varied Chiss knowledge spread across varying planets. We can use your training as our cover for the pilfering of information, just like the trip to Ilum. Tell me, do you know how to decrypt data so we cannot be traced?”

“Tharin, I was a Rebel…” He said with a teasing side glance aimed in her direction. “That’s like the first thing they teach you.”

“Really?” She softened her gaze a little bit as soon as she saw his grin.

He shrugged and laughed.

“No… actually I think my first lesson was: don’t be the last one to run onto the ship or you could get left behind?”

Tharin laughed loudly and threw her head back.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” She chuckled so hard that she snorted once and it only made her laugh harder. “Oh! That’s not funny. I don’t know why I’m laughing?”

He hugged her to him and helped her back to her feet.

“I think it’s been a long night. Tomorrow is a lesson day right? Why don’t you get some sleep and I’ll watch the Vornskr until you wake up.”

“No, I really should really stay up to make sure they—”

“Honestly Tharin, I couldn’t get back to sleep right now if I tried and I know you’ve been skipping nights. I think you’re laughing because you’re tired and losing your mind!” He laughed. “So, go! Sleep!”

She shot him a measuring look.
“Ezra Bridger, is it possible that you are observing me just as much as I am you?”

He shrugged, though the look on his face revealed that this was pretty much the case, at least when it came to Tharin. He'd picked up a few things here and there. One of those being that she was a workaholic who lacked sleep, and yet ironically could still yell at him for not taking care of his own health.

She reached up without warning and pressed her forehead to his, a rough sudden movement, but it revealed just how much she truly trusted and appreciated him and all of his assistance.

“Thank you.”

He blushed, rubbing at the sore spot forming on his head.

“Hey, come on, it’s not that big of a deal? Just night-watch duty, right?”

“No... thank you for always being someone I can rely on, Ezra. I know we haven’t known each other for very long, but your presence in my life is truly priceless to me, especially in times like this.” She smiled sweetly up at him and grabbed his hands. “I’m glad you’re by my side when I need you the most.”

Ezra blushed harder, feeling the heat even in his ears now.

*Chiss! You can’t just say something so heartfelt and not expect a person to keep a straight face! This girl’s sincerity was going to kill him.*

“A-are you going to be okay on the way back to your house?” He stammered, trying desperately now to hide the heat in his cheeks.

“I’ll be fine.” She slipped on her boots and pointed back behind them. “There is a blanket in the third desk drawer if you need it, and you are welcome to any of the datacards in desk two if you get bored and would like to study. The first scientists should show up in a couple of hours and you can just ignore them if you’re not comfortable enough to explain things. Call on the comm if you need help with anything or if the Vornskr start behaving strangely.”

He nodded, processing all of that as he reassured himself that this was still the right thing to do.

“Thanks. So, I guess I’ll see you in the morning then?”

She nodded and flicked his chin with her finger.

“You’re not getting out of your daily lessons that easily.”

He rolled his eyes.

“I’m pretty sure the war could start tomorrow and I’d still be taking lessons with you in here.”

“Perhaps? Though in light of tonight’s events, I think it's fair to reward you with bonus points of a sort? What is it called where you are from? Extra credit?”

He laughed.

“Yay! *That* much closer to graduation!”

With a grin at his addition to her joke, she turned to walk away.
That blush again, but by the time it reached her skin she had already turned her back to him and walked out. Never in her life had Tharin felt like she were able to trust someone as much as she did Ezra, and it was almost crazy that she knew so much about him while still knowing so little due to their short few weeks as friends. Friends? The word almost seemed not enough to do him justice. What was he to her? An ally? A friend? Something more than that? A best friend? No… that wasn’t right either. Was there a word for someone who you thought of constantly and felt like you could topple any obstacle just if they were by your side? Someone you could tell anything to and you could listen to them talk to you for days on end without getting bored.

Once safely in the privacy of her own room, she fell back against the door and felt the rapid fluster of heartbeats knocking against her chest. The beats grew especially quick when she thought back to holding his hands, feeling his embrace when he was consoling her tears, and of course there was his voice when he kept unknowingly calling her “visot”.

Tharin grinned and shook her head trying to make sense of all the conflicting emotions.

Maybe she was just tired, or maybe this boy was simply dangerous to her health? She had been neglecting her sleep lately. That had to be it, she was just exhausted and it was starting to effect her mind and all the other organs used to keep her alive. In the morning she would research how long Chiss could go without sleeping before they went mad. There was some scientists about thirty years ago who was said to have a record of such things? Granted he died after achieving the record due to a psychotic breakdown, but Tharin thought that he at least made it almost a full month or two into his tests before that.

She flopped face first on her bed and hugged her sheets closer as the smile refused to go away. Odd, considering her latest thoughts of sleep-deprived death.  

"I've definitely been up too long..." she deduced. "Now you have a lot of work to do tomorrow, Tharin," she told herself. "And you can't let Ezra down, so do the galaxy a favor and just get some sleep for once."

Nodding to herself, she thought about happy things, a lot of them involving science, but a few sneaky thoughts revealing moments spent with Ezra, and with those, she drifted off to sleep, still unable to get rid of the fluster she felt nor the smile resting between her cheeks. One thing was sure, she could not wait to wake up and see what tomorrow would bring.
Night Out

Chapter Summary

Ezra and Tharin head to Ina's library to secretly pull research about the Chiss secrets Krayt revealed. Unbeknownst to each of them, the Imperials living on Sposia had other plans.

Chapter Notes

Posted on: November 4, 2018

Since he’d crashed on Myrkr and come to the Ascendancy, Ezra had been given plenty to keep him busy, and the new shipload of problems brought on by Krayt wasn't even a fraction of his worries.

It had been a little over three months since that night, and he hadn't heard from Krayt since. Still, there was an eerie sensation like he was being watched that always managed to linger around his mind whenever he woke up from a full night’s rest. Despite the unsettling feeling, he hadn't lost more than a few night's worth of sleep to the sensation, though it was a bit frustrating to have Krayt only showing up when it was convenient for him and not when Ezra needed him to answer all of his stupid riddles.

Meanwhile, Tharin’s training never got any easier, but he was at least starting to get used to it. He was just glad that she was no longer collecting skin and fluid samples directly from his body or doing anymore grueling tests of endurance. In fact, Ezra found that he was able to keep up with her mad thought process far better nowadays, and recently he could almost predict how to not only perform but also how to ace most of her recent lessons. They were far from easy and still kind of ridiculous, but they weren't entirely unreasonable sounding requests any longer, and the efforts of his labor were starting to show in his day to day life.

Ezra looked in the mirror one morning and noticed new muscles he’d never had before, his arms and torso were more growing more defined, and the soreness in his legs had stopped aching after the first couple of weeks. His hair was a bit longer, at least enough for a few loose strands to stick to his face whenever he worked up a sweat. It made him remember the long hair he used to have back when he was fifteen, and he laughed when he remembered that it had taken him nearly half his life to grow it that long in the first place. His hair never did grow very quickly, but honestly the new style was— for lack of a better pun— growing on him.

Maybe he’d try to get it to that length again? He thought to himself, jumping once more as he blew the strands tickling his forehead out of the way and repeated the process.

“Ezra are you still not ready to go?”

He looked back and saw Tharin coming down the hill. She did not look happy, but that was to be expected what with him being so late to their rendezvous.
“Sorry Tharin! Your stupid advanced plant potting technology made the Olbio grow twice as tall as me and now—” he grunted and jumped again trying to reach the Ysalamir to no avail, his voice rising in frustration. “Jorj knows what branches to hide on so that I can't reach him and put him in his nutrient frame!”

She rolled her eyes.

“Well can you hurry it up? We can’t leave him here alone, it’s supposed to storm today. He could get struck by lightning or blow away! He has to come with us this trip and we're already late.”

“I know, I know! Can’t you see I'm—” He huffed. “Working on it?”

“Just use your animal connections to guide him down. Honestly, this is not rocket science.”

“I already tried that! Look, if a Ysalamir doesn’t want to detach from its tree, not even the Force can convince him to change his mind, and it's not like I can just jump up there and grab him while he has a death grip!” He grumbled a little and slid down the trunk. "If you’re so smart, then why don’t you try and find a way to get him to come down, huh?”

She shrugged.

“Alright then. Have the pack ready.”

He blinked as she climbed into the tree and disappeared beneath the golden leaves above. There was a hiss, either her or Jorj he couldn’t tell, followed by rusting, a loud snap, and then she landed back to the grass and plopped a very unhappy Ysalamiri into his nutrient frame, growling, but settling into it once she stuffed the stray leaves down inside with him.

“That was physically impossible!” Ezra exclaimed, remembering what Thrawn said about the Ysalamiri death grip. “How in the worlds did you do that?”

“You just have to know how to speak his language is all.” She pulled a snapped branch out from behind her and handed it over to Jorj, who grumbled disapprovingly at her methods.

"Did you just—?"

"Sacrificed for a greater purpose!” She interrupted with a breath. "Now come on, the information from Rentor made me think that there could be a book in Ina's library that can help us. Let’s go get it now while we have the day free to travel.”

Ezra shivered at the mention of Rentor, the ice planet where they nearly died in an watery grave while exploring some old crashed ship. He shook the thoughts back into his nightmares and instead focused on how good it would feel to see all of his Imperial friends again.

“It’ll be nice to see everyone again, but shouldn’t we maybe call ahead?”

“No… for our cover story to work, it will be better if our presence is an unannounced surprise.”

"If you say so? I'm following your lead on this one."

They heard thunder in the distance and both figured it was best if they took off soon before the weather got any worse.

"Let's get going."
“Mitth’ar’inrokini!” Ina greeted with a surprised nod. “It is always a pleasure. You are, of course, always welcome in our home.”

“Thank you for your hospitality,” Tharin replied with a bow.

“What brings the two of you all the way to Sposia?” Faro grinned, her and Ina still holding their teacups as they motioned the two newcomers back into the living room where their relaxation time had just been interrupted by the unannounced arrival.

“We are sorry to intrude, but Ezra and I were hoping to study your library a bit today. No one has quite an extensive collection of data as you do, Ina’gamut, and I believe you have a copy of “Tor’yen’grantus’ Biography: Third Edition”. I need to review an old passage you see, and my copy was damaged in one of my recent experiments.”

“Of course, you may help yourselves! Do you require assistance?”

"No, I would rather browse on my own if you don't mind. I find some of the best books that way, after all."

"Understood. Then please, take all time that you will need!"

"Thank you Ina."

"So how is everyone?" Ezra asked.

“Stent and I are working as usual.” She smiled. “But it is truly gift again to be teaching full lessons for live-in students once more.”

“Right.” Faro added. “With Stent and Ina’s tutelage, I predict we’ll be ready for the Chiss trials in no time. I still believe Pyrondi would do well as a weapons expert, but she has grown rather attached to her Chiss students as of late. I’m happy for her, and for Walten and Urick, but maybe it is the Imperial in me that sees just a hint of wasted potential.”

“Whatever makes them happy, I guess?”

She smiled.

“Of course, and given their conditions I do not begrudge them the peace of mind. After this Chiss war is over and those horrible Yuuzhan Vong are defeated, I plan to step down from the military life and take a very long, very sunny sabbatical on the nearest vacation planet I can find.”

They all laughed.

“Sunny vacations you say?” a voice echoed from up the stairs. “Oh count me in for that! Hey, is that Ezra? It’s great to see you again!”

Pyrondi hurried down the steps and squeezed him close, her stomach now visibly showing the baby forming within as he unconsciously arched his back to avoid touching the bump too hard with his own stomach. He had never been around a lot of pregnant women before, but did not want to do something wrong like hug her too tight or somehow damage the tiny, helpless human being inside of her.

She seemed to have noticed the dodge and patted her stomach with a firm hand before giving
Tharin a nod of awareness as well.

“Calm down Master Jedi,” she teased and talked down at her baby. “It’ll take a lot more than a little hug to knock us out of commission, right kiddo?”

He blushed a little out of embarrassment and rubbed a nervous hand along his neck.

“R-right, sorry about that.”

“Human reproduction is so interesting!” Tharin began. "Tell me, would you mind sharing details of it with me sometime. I am fascinated to learn how the process differs from our own."

Ezra and Pyrondi went a bit pale, but once she snorted out a laugh the odd tension in the room seemed to clear.

“Well do Chiss get morning sickness?” She asked with a snark. “Because if not, I feel completely cheated as a species.”

“Are you okay?” Ezra asked concerned, not really sure what morning sickness was, but imagining it was probably pretty terrible.

“Aww, thanks for the concern, Ez, but I’m fine. The baby is fine. The Sabosen are making sure both of us stay healthy and in working order. We’re all good here, honest.”

“Oh, she says she’s fine, but you didn’t see her vomiting all over the place last month, that morning sickness sure is one vindictive bit—”

“Language Vayes!” Faro warned.

She laughed, Koree grabbing Ezra around the neck and crushing one rotating knuckle into his skull before releasing him back into the open air.

“Good to see you again. Whoa! What’s all that muscle I’m feeling there?” She squished his arms and pinched at his stomach. “What have you been feeding this kid, Tharin? He’s looking pretty fit these days. Careful, someone just might try to steal him from y—”

Ezra swatted her hands away and blushed harder as Tharin completely missed the insinuation and began listing off all the meals he’d eaten in the last week. Koree made a face as though she knew she’d be paying for her snarky comment to the clueless Chiss girl, but at the same time it was still painful to sit through. Her eyes lit up when another voice entered the entry way though, and she gave Ezra one hard shove directly into the burly man’s tight embrace.

“No way! I thought I heard Ezra, but this can’t possibly be that little string bean, can it?” Gunther’s booming voice carried throughout the dorm before he picked him up and squeeze him so hard that Ezra thought he heard something inside him give out a small pop. “Wow! Kor’s right, just feel those bad boys. You’re making the rest of us men look pretty shabby, aren’t you kid?”

“Uh…”

“Speak for yourself. I for one could never look shabby, believe me, I’ve had helmet hair that still counted as good days.” Walten teased. "Stormtroopers are physically flawless soldiers." He lifted his shirt to show the impressively sculpted muscles beneath. “See?”

“Walten!” Ezra smiled.
Gunther put him down and Ezra rushed over, the blonde man giving Ezra one slap to the back before releasing him from their handshake-hug combination.

“Urick!” Ezra took a step to the side to copy the motion, but the dark-skinned man frowned, his amber eyes glazing over slightly as he took hesitant step back and Ezra froze in place.

“Still a bit sore is all,” Walten said quickly, the lie obvious to everyone else in the room, though no one looked like they would dare try to do anything other than pretend it wasn’t the honest to goodness truth.

Ezra nodded, his smile slowly creeping back, but in a much calmer way now as he shot Urick a warm head nod and a grin.

“It’s good to see everyone again in one place.”

Urick’s lip twitched upward before going back to his frown, his visible subdued body language nothing when compared to the fear flowing around his mind in his presence of the Force.

Ezra looked around, it was the first time he had actually seen any of the Imperials since rescuing them from the Yuuzhan fleetship over three and a half months ago. They all looked really good all things considered. Pyrondi’s face was healthy and glowing which was a relief on multiple accounts. Faro’s eyes looked less stressed and baggy, though she did sport a few streaks of gray in her hair now. Then Koree’s short spiky hair had started to grow out and was covering the tips of her ears, while Walten’s hair looked maybe a bit more free without the stormtrooper helmet constantly crushing it down. Other than that, he hadn’t changed much and was still just as bright and polished as ever.

The Sabosen had healed them all so well that only faint traces of small scars still lingered here and there, most of them on Gunther’s skin rather than the others. For the most part, he seemed to have bounced back to his overbearing happy self with little problems, but Urick… well… Urick had gotten the brunt of it all when he repeatedly had them put him back in the torture chamber to keep Pyrondi from getting her turn.

The therapy and training was helping them to get back to their full-strength, but Urick was noticeably different, almost damaged from the prolonged exposure he’d suffered. This is probably why he seemed jumpy and barely said a word to anyone aside from Walten, and why, despite the Sabosen’s efforts, his scars still visibly lined his face in faint cratered streaks from where the tendrils had once held him up against the wall and dug into his skin.

Gunther had repeatedly told them how terrible he felt that he wasn’t able to do the same to protect Urick, but neither he nor the rest of the Imperials ever held it against him. One round would have been enough for anybody, and Gunther didn’t have the same training that Urick had, willpower and pain tolerance notwithstanding. That didn’t mean he felt any less horrible, though he did wake up dry-heaving to nightmares about the ordeal just from his short time on it. No matter how tough a facade he tried to put on for everyone else, no matter how he continued smiling, Koree knew this secret better than anyone and she saw the look of guilt in his eyes whenever Urick was around. He was looking that way now and she squeezed his hand to snap him out of the memories.

“Wow! Your faces—” Tharin gasped, her voice breaking the awkward tension, but not in a good way. For a split second Ezra hoped to any gods that would listen that Tharin had enough tact not to point out the scars on Urick and Gunther’s skin. To his, as well as everyone else’s relief, the second part of her conversation eased everything in their nerves to the contrary. “Look at your hair! It has only been a few weeks and your beards are already better than Eli’s! Human anatomy is so incredible! Did you know that Chiss cannot grow hair on their face? It is true. Inrokini House was
so amazed to see hair on Eli’s face that we refused to let him shave any of it off.”

Urick smirked a bit to himself at that and Walten took his hand, sharing in the smile that her story brought to the room. Gunther only stroked his face, feeding into the compliment as the ladies stared at him together, sharing in soft laughter.

“That’s nothing!” Koree teased. “You should see my beard once it starts filling in!”

Tharin’s eyes brightened with curiosity.

“Really?”

Ezra leaned over and whispered, “She’s just joking. Most human women can’t grow beards.”

With a bit of a dejected sigh, she slumped.

“Oh...”

“You’re no fun, Bridger,” she scoffed, laughing afterwards as she pointed a sharp finger over in Walten’s direction. “Though my mustache could put Walten’s to shame any day of the week!”

Gunther had to kiss her after that.

“That’s my girl.”

They all shared a laugh after that.

“It’s true,” Walten said primly, a roll of his icy blue eyes looking more humored than offended. “I don’t deny it. I physically cannot grow facial hair to save my life. I’ve tried. Just doesn’t work. I’ve come to accept that. Besides, why rid the galaxy from looking at all this beauty? I bet if I did have a beard, people would drop dead at the mere sight of me. I’d be that uncontrollably gorgeous!”

“They already do!” Faro teased, earning a laugh from everyone for her unexpectedly sick burn.

Urick snickered and kissed the side of his head, a hand coming up to hold him closer to him as he did.

They each had their own witty comeback or friendly tease to give Walten on both accounts, for the comment as well as for his newly public relationship with his fellow trooper, but as for Ezra, he was just glad they were together now. He had figured that part out a while ago, still a little embarrassed when he thought back to that moment when he thought they might have both had a crush on Pyrondi. Boy, had he read that situation wrong from all three directions? Luckily he’d come up to speed before the unpleasantness of their departure. He guessed they figured things out on their own as soon as they got out of the hospital, and Ezra was happy for them.

“All right.” Ina waved. “Don’t all of you have studying to do? Oh, apart from you, Ayesha Pyrondi, you and I were going to work on your lesson plan for the day ahead.”

She and all of the rest of the humans let out a deep sigh.

“No?” Tharin asked. “What are you teaching them at the moment?”
“Galactic Basic, Aurebesh—” She counted out the list on each finger. “Not to mention planets, their unique properties, flora, fauna, native species, immigrated species. It’s a lot to cover, but lately they’ve wanted to know more historical facts, so I’ve been making a timeline of history dating back to before the Clone Wars. Did you know how big the galaxy is? Because I’m up to my eyeballs in data!”

They laughed.

“Hey, at least you have someone who was actually in the Clone Wars to get you that far back,” Faro said with a glib sip of her tea.

Gunther coughed something under his breath, and Faro shot around to eye him down.

“What was that Mister Kordin?”

“Nothing ma’am!” He grinned. “Oh look at the time? Koree don’t we have studying to do?”

She chuckled and patted his chest.

“That we do darling, let’s get on that right away!”

They rushed off and Faro shook her head before returning to her drink, wishing suddenly that she knew how to brew something a bit stronger than tea.

“Speaking of children...” Pyrondi started with a point down the direction of the hallway where the ex-gunners had escaped.

Ezra chuckled.

“This is all very informative,” Tharin continued with an eager gleam that made her eyes glow even redder than was normal. “I would love to sit in on your classes one day!”

Pyrondi gave her a warm smile.

“I’ll do you one better, why don’t I make a copy and transfer all of my lesson plans to you? That way you can read them whenever you want.”

Tharin stopped working for a few moments and Ezra thought she might actually explode before she took Pyrondi’s hands let out an excited jump.

“That would be wonderful! Oh, how can I ever repay you?”

“On the house, kid!” She snickered. “Though, if you had any juicy stories about Ezra or maybe even funny fails he’s had while training... well, I wouldn’t shy away from a bit of healthy gossip and a good laugh.”

She grinned.

“Well, I do not know about this juice, but there was this time he was running up a wall and his cloak got tangled around his face and then his foot, and he fell almost fifteen feet to the ground and nearly broke his neck!” She laughed, a bit too amused at the recollection as she took a breath and continued. “I’d consider that a fail if any! Now we don’t do physical training with the cloak on.”

“Hilarious...” Ezra huffed.

Pyrondi made a face, not actually thinking she’d get a story, and feeling extra sorry for Ezra now
“Boy, did I trade into the right profession?” She grinned nervously. “Well anyway, you guys have fun in the library and be sure to come by to say bye before you leave, okay?”

“Absolutely.”

“Ah!” Ina hummed, staring down into her cup. “It seems I am in need of a refill. Mitth’ar’inrokini, Ezra Bridger, would you care for a cup of Karyn Faro’s latest brew?”

“No thank you, ma’am,” Tharin bowed. “I only thirst for the cool quaff of information.”

Ezra shot her a look. Now who had taught her that obscure phrase? That didn’t sound like something Eli or a book would say?

“Well if you are to change your mind, you are granted access to the kitchen. Good luck with your studies.”

With a final bow, they turned to walk off and in little time at all, they were finally in the library and safely alone.

“All right. Now that we’re here, grab anything that looks old enough to give us some leads to the timeline we need. Likewise, try to see if there are any books like the ones found on Rentor.”

“Kind of hard to see the books when you’re trying not to get eaten by a giant fish!”

She tilted her head tiredly to the side and shot him a look.

“I said I was sorry, what more do you want from me?”

He held his hands out as if to grab something and shook stiffly as though that would somehow help his frustrations before rolling his eyes and starting his search on the lower bookshelves.

“Just get up there and take the high columns.” He pointed. “There’s got to be something in here we can use.”

She mock-saluted and nodded before darting up the ladder.

“Keep your eyes open for “Tor’yen’grantus’ Biography: Third Edition” in case Ina does show up and looks to our progress. It wasn’t a total lie. I really did damage my copy in a lab accident, but it’s not a very insightful read to begin with. I mean who needs three biographies of themselves?”

He gave her a half-hearted thumbs up.

“Right.”

She nodded and continued her climb. He had been a bit standoffish lately, mostly since the trip to Rentor. It wasn’t her fault the local aquatic predators took a liking to their submarine. Still, something about that near death experience seemed to have rattled him. Could it have brought back memories of the Yuuzhan Vong incident? The Myrkr crash? His many Jedi missions back on his own world?

Tharin shook her head. Ezra was no stranger to dangerous situations, if anything, she should be the one upset because it was literally the first time she could recall ever almost getting killed on a secret mission. If she shied away from dangers in the field though, she would never get anything done, a motto she chose to live by both within the labs as well as without. With-out? Was that the
right Basic word? She shook her head again, her fingers trailing over some of the more dusty paper books that she found as she pulled them out one by one and read their covers.

Ezra just needed some time. The Chiss lessons, the military training, the Krayt dreams... he was just under a lot of pressure right now, and what better way to relieve pressure than with answers to their many questions. How many books could there possibly be on the subject? They'd be in and out within the hour.

They were not in and out within the hour.

“Seventeen books?” She gasped. “I don’t know whether to be relieved or disappointed?”

“I grabbed anything that looked like a history book.” Ezra shrugged. “You know I still can’t read a lot of your languages.”

That was apparent as soon as she saw the cover that said “A History of Etiquette when Dining on Csaus.” She rubbed her temples and nodded, not letting on to the fact that he had probably grabbed a few books that were completely worthless to their current searching and left others on the shelves.

“That’s okay. It's okay! I can work with this. Why don’t you run out to check on everyone else? Spend some more time with them while you can.”

He shot her a look.

“You just don’t want me in here because I can’t help you read.”

“What!? No… You’ve helped me immensely. Now go! Have fun with your friends before my generosity is redacted!”

He smiled and started to nod.

“You’ll come get me if you need my help?”

“Ezra...” she said curtly. “It’s a library. I don’t think there will be any dangers here? Jorj and I can handle it, right Jorj?”

The lizard poked his head out, glared at her, and sunk slowly back into the bag.

“He’s still a little mad about this morning.” She chuckled. “I’ll be fine! Now go!”

He grinned and then turned to leave.

Good, she thought. The humans will help to break him out of his mood. As for her, she could only look to her pile towering atop the table and sigh.

“I have got a lot of reading to do.”

Luckily, learning was something that she did best, and intrinsically speaking, she did it even better when she was alone.
“Pssst!” Someone whispered. “Hey Ezra...”

Making a face, he turned and saw Gunther, the man reaching up to grab his mouth and draw him back into the room as Ezra gave out a muffled yelp.

“Hey, keep quiet a minute, I have something cool to show you!”

He released his grip on Ezra’s head and the boy took a deep breath.

“What’s going on?”

He grinned and held up his hand.

“Lookee here! Genuine Chiss blaster. Thrawn got it for me when he heard I was joining the military. Pretty sweet isn’t it?”

It was, but probably not enough to be forcibly dragged into a dark room against his will. *Why was he suddenly getting the feeling like they were about to do something potentially troubling?*

“And you’re showing me this because—?”

He pointed to the blaster Ezra kept at his side, the one Eli had given him after the Vong incident before he got his lightsaber. *Oh right! They hadn’t seen his new lightsaber yet.*

“Koree has a little plan for all the ladies tonight, but since Walten and Urick don’t feel like getting out much these days, it’s just going to be you and me. An old-fashioned guy’s night. I say we go out, do a little target practice, maybe knock a few back if I can ever figure out where Chiss stash their blasted liquor?”

Ezra’s throat made a weird, awkward laughing sound.

“Wait what?”

“Ah come on, it’ll be fun. Loosen up and live a little won’t you? I’m sick of being cooped up here with all the girls.” He made a face in regards to Walten, Urick, and Stent, but held true to his statement. “Show me a bit of that wild side in you, yeah? Where’s that Lothrat you were telling all of us about a few months back?”

Ezra was certain he was going to regret this, but Gunther had a point. It had been longer than he could remember since the last time he’d had any “old-fashioned” fun like this.

“Fine. But I’m not getting in trouble if we get caught!”

“We won't get caught! Now come on! I know the perfect place! Been stashing old canisters and junk back there for weeks.”

"Do I even want to know?"

"Just let it be a surprise. It's more fun that way."
“Surprise!”

Tharin jumped so far back that she actually fell out of her chair, her foot at least making an effort to kick the evidence of her books off the table and into the floor with her.

“Oh!” She breathed, crawling back to a stand to see the woman wandering over to the desk. “Koree, it’s just you.”

“Yep, and I’m here to free you from this drab library for a little while. Come on! We’re having a girl’s night, and I want you to come with us.”

Tharin blinked hard. She was incredibly busy and the secret research she was doing was important, but at the same time—

“You would like— me— to hang out with you?” She pieced. “No one has ever invited me to hang out with them before.”

“Well that’s about to change kid, come on. The rest of the girls are already waiting.”

Tharin kicked off the desk so hard that it almost tipped over and took Koree’s outstretched hand with vigor, heading out of the library as Jorj sat still chewing on his leaves, not eager at all to move or be moved from his spot in the corner where the nutrient frame sat.

“Oh wait. Just give me a moment to clean my mess and grab Jorj. I’ll be right there.”

“Fine, fine, but hurry up.”

“I’ll be fast I promise! Don’t go anywhere!”

She stood impatiently and shifted her weight to one side as Tharin ran over and stashed the books in the least conspicuous place she could find on the shelves and rushed out the door with the backpack.

“Let’s go have fun!”

“Now ladies this is a Juntaran tradition for women to throw expecting mothers a baby shower!”

“Baby-shower?” Tharin and Ina pondered at the phrasing together.

“Tell us Vayes, what do your Juntaran traditions propose?” Faro asked.

“Oh, you know, the usual? Games and gossip, maybe a bit of drinking? All for us, none for you I’m afraid, Aya dear, but don’t worry, you’ll have fun I know it!”

“I don’t know Koree, this doesn’t sound very—”

“This could be the only time we get before the baby actually pops out of you,” she said, her phrasing causing Faro’s brows to raise and settle back on her face with foreboding acceptance.
“Walten and Urick are moving out next month, you’re getting busier than ever, and soon Faro, Gunther, and I won’t even have a moment of rest thanks to our military trials coming up.” She gestured uncertainly. “Plus... um... Tharin!?"

She waved.

“Oh alright, fine!” Pyrondi caved. “I’ll indulge you just this once.”

“Drinking? Games?” Tharin repeated. “So is this going to be anything like the last drinking game I participated in with you?”

"Minus the poison?"

“That’s a good idea!” Koree snapped. “No sappy life stories, but something a little more juicy! I like it. Good call.”

“Now all we need is a bit of liquor, and this would really be a party.”

“Ladies, while I cannot say this sounds stimulating to your training,” Ina started, a smile creeping in afterwards. “I will retrieve a bottle of sasep’ven from Stent’s collection to indulge your drinking games.”

Faro grinned.

“Why Ina, you k'iserci bah sihsan'ah! I never knew you had it in you?!”

Ina gave her a prissy smile and stood to her feet, smoothing the wrinkles in her rust-red gown.

“I wasn’t always seventy-two, you know? Oh, the stories I could tell.”

“YES!” Koree clapped, the word prolonged and only getting louder.

Tharin looked from side to side at the eager women and gripped the cloth at her knees. She really didn’t want to mess this up, but had absolutely no idea what to do.

“Koree...” she whispered.

“Hmm?”

“How does one tell a “juicy” story for one of these baby-showers correctly?”

She blinked once and then laughed and smacked her hard on the back, Faro and Pyrondi joining in too.

“Don’t worry, you’ll catch on.”

“Wait!” Pyrondi snapped. “You’re old enough for this right?”

She nodded.

“I am of required age for sasep’ven, yes. Why?”

They all laughed again, though this time nobody explained why, and Ina appeared a moment later with the crimson bottle, ready to begin their girl’s night anew.
“Nice one!”

Ezra spun the blaster.

“Thanks. You’re up next.”

“I think I’m gonna go for the tin up in the tree, what do you think?”

Ezra tilted his head to the side. Gunther’s junk grotto had months of stashed garbage scattered around that made for good target practice, but probably would give someone on Sposia a heart attack if they ever stumbled into it. The cave was over Stent and Ina’s backyard fence and a few minutes hike into the woods though, so he doubted anyone could hear them out here, least of all find this stash.

“I think that’s a pretty tricky shot.” He smirked. “Go for it.”

*PEW!*

*BLAM!*

“YES!” The men cheered, the small shrapnel of tin plummeting to the ground.

“Ahi!” Gunther took in a deep breath. “Feels good to be out here. Reminds me of home.”

“I thought you said your home was full of neat and tidy pacifists?”

He laughed.

“Yeah but I had a secret spot back there like this too. My brother, Gudri, and I used to go out and blast stuff with our uncle’s old DC-19. A relic from his time in the Clone Wars, though it didn’t do him much good as anything stronger than a paperweight on Anchoron.”

“I’m sorry about your brother,” Ezra started, remembering the story with new clarity. It had been his planet’s governor, Arihnda Pryce, who had most likely caused the explosion on Batonn that killed Gunther’s brother and all those people. Explosions… just like the fuel depot… something she was very good at doing to get what she wanted.

Gunther shrugged.

“Forget about it. You can’t bring back the dead, just live on and try to remember them. Faro said that back on Myrkr I think, didn’t she?”

Ezra shrugged.

“It’s still good advice.”

*PEW!*

He went for a quick-shot at the large board setting upright by a rock and it splintered from the laser fire. Gunther followed, going up high for a bag of dirt he’d roped to the ceiling and let the whole
thing explode in a flurry of dust.

“Birt would have skinned me alive for making this big of a mess.”

He chuckled, but Ezra found it hard to laugh along with him for long. He still had strong feelings of remorse about watching Birt die back on the Vong’s fleetship. With a grunt, he fired three more shots into the line of old cups perched in a row a few feet away and he got each one in a neat row before running an arm across his face and letting out a frustrated sniff.

"You crying on me, or you just get a bit of dust in your eye?"

Ezra shot him a glare, though the rest of his remorse was hidden beneath five shots of blaster fire into the remaining chunk of that old wooden board.

“Hey, don’t worry, we’ll get those bastards, kid...” Gunther said with a sinister look in his eye, but a very gentle pat to Ezra’s shoulder. “Till then, these targets will have to do, yeah?”

He held out a hand like he were about to challenge Ezra to an arm wrestling match. Something that Ezra thought he’d probably lose if he did. Gunther had him beat in both weight and muscle, but at least where height was concerned they were pretty evenly matched. Still, it was rare to see him so serious. Ezra saw the fire of vengeance in his eyes, not a dark look, not the same as someone like Maul would have, but it was more determined, more like the way Rex looked whenever they were fighting those old Separatists droids. He recognized the way those eyes looked, and with a smile, Ezra took his hand with a firm grip and nodded.

“Yeah!”

“What’s going on in here?”

They turned at the sound of Walten’s echoing voice.

“Walten!” Ezra gasped. “What are you doing here?”

He shrugged and took a look around.

“Saw you sneak away, got curious, and followed you out. Heard the blaster shots. So, what is this, some sort of makeshift target range? Or does someone have a hording problem?”

"Oh ha-ha..." Gunther rolled his eyes. "Ezra and I thought we might have a guy’s night, clear the nerves a bit."

He placed a hand on his chest.

“Without me? I’m hurt.”

Ezra and Gunther both blanched.

“Er, sorry, we just thought—”

They straightened up when they saw Urick come into view behind him, his dark skin blending seamlessly into the shadows. *How long had he been standing there?*

“It’s okay,” Urick said, his voice soft and almost dry from the lack of use. “I think I could use a bit of that myself.”

Walten smirked, Ezra and Gunther sharing a look before immediately handing over their weapons
to each of them. Walten took Ezra’s pistol, but Urick went almost instinctively for the rifle.

*PEW!* *PEW!* *PEW!*

A barrage of shots from each of them and nearly a third of Gunther’s junk lay in a fiery pile along the rocks.

“Ah, gods I needed that!” Walten breathed.

Urick nodded.

“Feels good.”

“Glad you decided to join the party then. Now all we need is a stiff drink and we’d be all set.”

“Too bad.” Walten smiled, his pale skin and teeth almost glowing when he stood near the cool darkness of his boyfriend.

“Birt would have hated this,” Urick said, his voice low and thunderous, but the smallest smile creeping near the side of his lips.

“That’s what I said!”

They laughed.

“We heard. You two kill those Yuuzhan scum for us, okay?”

“You can count on it.”

“Walten...” Ezra eased, “You guys ever thought about maybe—”

“Joining the fight?”

All eyes stopped to look at him and he placed a hand on Urick’s shoulder.

“Yeah,” he started, his voice hard, but he shrugged and handed the blaster back to Ezra. “But that part of our life is behind us. I’m content farming on Cioral, making sure you heathens don’t starve to death while you’re out there fighting the good fight. Besides—” He shot a look back behind him. “I have more important things to take care of now.”

Urick kissed him and then handed Gunther back the rifle.

“Aww... almost sweet enough to make you vomit.”

Walten shot him a glare.

“Weren’t you just making out with your girlfriend over her mustache hairs?”

“Yeah, but that’s different.”

“How is that different?” Ezra cackled. “If anything your thing is kind of weird!”

“It’s different!” He started. “Because Koree’s not going to be my girlfriend for much longer. I’m—I’m going to ask her to marry me.”

There was a brief moment of silence, a drip from the sandbag above, and then the cave was spontaneously erupting in a series of excited shouts as Walten and Ezra shoved Gunther back and
forth between them.

“You big softy!” Urick grinned.

“Hey, watch it you three, I’ve still got a blaster rifle here.”

“Oh! That reminds me. Check out what I found recently.”

"Found" was a good word for that, right?

Ezra drew his lightsaber and ignited it, the sound and glow bouncing across the grotto in a bright orange burst of light.

There was another chorus of excited men cheering.

“That’s wizard!”

“Where did you get that?”

“Can I try it?”

He smirked.

“I might have snuck off to an old Jedi Temple and got a crystal recently.”

“In the Unknown Regions?”

“Wait, don’t tell me you went to Ilum?”

“You know about Ilum?”

“Yeah,” Urick nodded. “Got stationed there my third year of service. The place went nuclear not long after. I thought the Empire closed the whole place off?”

“They abandoned it, yeah, but Tharin and I didn’t have any trouble getting in.”

Gunther’s thick eyebrows waggled, just as Walten shot him a look, and Urick tilted his head back.

“What?”

“So…” Gunther started with a nudge. “Tharin’s a pretty cute girl, if you're not against aliens. I know some people are, but you don't strike me as the type to be prejudiced. Besides, you two have been spending an awful lot of time together…”

“What? I'm not against any—” He choked. “Wait. Oh no, no, no, no! We’re just friends! She's teaching me for my Chiss trials, that's all!”

“Me and Gunther are just friends,” Walten started. “You though… well... call it lover’s intuition?”

“I’m hurt!” Gunther wailed dramatically. "I thought you and I really had something, Walt?”

“Not on your life!” He snickered. “And don’t call me Walt.”

“That joke won’t go over so well once you’re married,” Urick added.

“Bah!” He shrugged. “Koree’s not like that, she’s—” He smiled a bit wider. “Not really like any girl I’ve ever met.”
Walten nudged Ezra again.

“Seeing any similarities?”

His face turned red.

“Calm down, we’re just giving you a hard time.”

“Strapping young Force-sensitive guy like you, ought to have at least someone out there in the galaxy worth protecting though, right?”

Ezra paused.

“Wait… don’t tell me you’ve never been out with a girl before?”

“Or a guy,” Urick reminded.

Gunther nodded absentmindedly. “Right right… but nobody? Ha! By the time I was your age, I was—” He stopped and cleared his throat. "Well yeah, but really? No one?"

“Kind of hard to make a connection like that when you’re fighting a war…” Ezra grumbled, still blushing. “Can we go back to shooting things? Or talking about literally anything else?”

“Sure kid… didn’t mean to pry. Go ahead, pick a new target.”

He lifted his blaster but lowered it without taking a shot. His feelings had grown suddenly complicated, torn, though he wasn’t sure if it was just him missing Sabine, or wondering if there was even the slightest glimmer of a chance that she had been the one to survive and would be the one to travel into the Unknown Regions with Ahsoka. No… it was impossible. Something Thrawn had once said to him seriously made him doubt his luck for that.

In the memory, he was talking about her art back on the Chimera, and he spoke about her in the past tense.

“She’s quite talented, or was quite talented.” Thrawn had said.

No… if she were alive, he would have sensed her, would have known by now. Krayt, with all his vast knowledge and picking through his brain would have said something. Master Yoda would have said something. No… it couldn’t be. The explosion… His crew… just no.

“I liked a girl once… a long time ago…” he started, sad, but smiling whenever he thought back to how she used to be. “It was more than that later on though. She was my best friend, more than a sister to me, like family almost, but my crush kind of got overshadowed by everything else going on. She’s— gone— now, but her name was Sabine. She was a Mandalorian and—”

Gunther spit.

“A Mandalorian!? Kid I’ve seen you jump out of the sky back on Myrkr, but now I know that you must have some sort of death wish.”

Urick and Walten exchanged a look. They knew exactly who he was talking about because they had seen her in action.

“The one on the platform?” Walten asked.

“Platform?” Gunther echoed. “Wait. You know her? What is she some famous bounty hunter or
“Oh, I thought Faro said everyone already knew…”

“Knew what? Does everyone see something I’m missing here?”

“Maybe details were slow to travel back in the gunner stations?” Walten shrugged.

“Right, so about that…” Ezra stretched. “Uh, I guess you don’t know, so um, yeah… just don’t freak out or anything when I tell you… okay?”

Walten and Urick shot him a nod, but an unsure look at one another.

“Okay kid, shoot…”

“I can’t believe you shot me!” Ezra shouted as they walked up the front path to the dorms.

“I said I was sorry!” Gunther started. “It was misfire, I probably shouldn’t have had my finger on the trigger when you told me you used to be a kriffing Rebel!”

“You are literally the only Imperial who didn’t know!” Walten laughed. “Seriously we all figured it out months ago where were you?”

“Shut up!” He scoffed.

“Well at least you didn’t mean to almost kill me this time!” Ezra continued, with a chiding shift in his gaze. "Or did you?"

“Seriously kid, I’m sorry! Look, you want to take a shot at me? I’ll let you, and I saw your aim back there. You’re no stormtrooper.”

Walten and Urick shot him hard glares.

“You want to maybe rephrase that buddy?”

“Or did you not see our aim back there either?”

A hand came up to rub at his hairline.

“Sorry.”

Ezra laughed.

“We’re cool Gunther, we’re cool. It’s okay, but thanks for the offer.”

“Glad to hear it. Friends are in really short supply these days. Glad I didn’t lose another one.”

“To friendly fire?” Ezra chuckled. “Never!”

“You’re never going to let me live this down, are you?”

"Probably not."
“Whoa! Whoa!” Walten stopped, “What’s going on here?”

Pyrondi walked Tharin and Koree up to them each of the girls half drunk and laughing hysterically in each of her hands.

“Sorry Ez, but we kind of—”

“We got your girlfriend drunk!” Koree hiccuped.

“What?!” He paused, blushing. “She’s not my girlfriend! We're just friends!”


“Oh right!” Vayes snickered, mocking the silent finger to her lips with another chortle.

While Koree was absolutely wasted, Tharin was even bubblier than usual and Ezra had no idea what that meant, but he wasn't sure it was a good thing.

He slid his face into both hands and groaned.

“Tharin, I thought you were the smart one, how could you let Koree get you drunk?”

“Hey!” Koree protested.

“Chiss don’t get drunk!” Tharin slurred. “Though if we did, I think it was somewhere around that
third bottle of sasep’ven.”

“Three bottles!?” Ezra blanched. “Are you guys nuts!?”

“Turns out it takes a lot more to get a Chiss drunk than a human,” Pyrondi explained, hers being the only voice of reason on the front porch.

“So let me get this straight,” Gunther started. “You were up here half the night hogging all the booze when the boys and I are sober as a protocol droids. Isn’t drinking bad for pregnant ladies?”

Pyrondi rubbed her stomach.

“I was not drinking, but Ina, Faro, and Koree on the other hand— and then the Tharin thing happened and— Umm—”

“I got invited to a girl’s night!” She smiled.

“We can see that,” Walten grinned back. “Oh look at the time, Urick, we have somewhere else to be that’s not here, come on.”

They escaped and Pyrondi half tossed the drunken girls at Ezra and Gunther. Pyrondi slinging Jorj’s backpack off her shoulder and into Ezra’s outstretched arm.

“Seriously guys?”

“It was Tharin’s fault!” Koree yelled suddenly. “She said she wanted to play the drinking game again!”

“I think the drinking was a combination of Ina and Faro, but Tharin just wanted to make a good baby shower. In hindsight I probably should have been watching them a little more closely or told her she didn't actually have to drink.” Pyrondi sighed. “Look, I’m sorry it escalated so far, but after her fourth glass, Koree challenged Tharin to see how long it would take her to get drunk and well —”

Ezra held his face.

"It was my kriffing baby shower Ezra! Okay!? I can't be everywhere!"

He leaned back, not expecting her to yell at him all of the sudden.

"No no! It's okay! I don't blame you Pyrondi!"

He looked around for help, but the only one who could even say anything with a straight face was Gunther and he made an expression that claimed he was not about to put himself in the crossfire of an angry, pregnant Imperial weapons expert.

"Umm... yeah so where is Faro?”

She sighed, her voice returning to a normal, tired pitch.

“Both she and Ina are lying face first in the living room I’m afraid.”

Gunther laughed just as Ezra let out another breath.

“Tharin, what were you thinking?”
“Scientific curiosity!” she giggled, a finger lifting to her lips as she sputtered out a jittering, “Sh-hh-shhh! Don’t tell my father! He will get soooo mad!”

Tharin hardly even cared that their secret research trip had been a total bust. She had gotten to share in a girls night, which under normal circumstances would have traumatized her, but for now she was walking on air.

“Yeah okay,” Ezra said in frustration. “Sorry for all the trouble, Pyrondi. I’ll be sure she gets back to Csaus in one piece.”

“Not me!” Gunther kissed Koree and she laughed. “I need to absorb some of that buzz so you and I can get into some real trouble!”

“Don’t spin me around so much you big idiot, I’m going to puke all over the both of us.”

“And that’s my cue to leave. Some of us have a room of Chiss toddlers who want to learn Aurebesh in the morning.”

“I thought you were a weapons expert!” Koree chuckled. “Why are you working with all these little children?”

“To stay close to the hospital,” Pyrondi rolled her eyes. “You know this. Also some of us need to get out of the military for other reasons, remember?”

“Right right, babies…” Koree gently smacked Gunther multiple times in the center of the face. “If you get me pregnant, I’ll kill you myself, you hear?”

“And that would be my cue to leave, goodnight!” Ezra said loudly, grabbing Tharin and pushing her in a wobbly line over towards the Clawcraft. “Say goodbye to everyone for me, okay Pyrondi!”

“Will do.”

With an exasperated sigh she waved and smiled until they were gone.

“Where are we going?” Tharin asked. “Somewhere fun I hope!”

“We’re going home. Is that fun enough for you?”

“Ezra.” The look on her face was deadly serious. “My lab space is always fun.”

He blinked and helped her aboard.

“Then I guess you know the answer, don’t you?”

“I’m. So. Upset!”

“Why?”

“I didn’t find anything good in Ina’s library! How are we going to figure out what Dark Krayt is hinting at, or why it’s so important. We’ll have to come back and finish searching another day. So frustrating!”

Ezra’s eyes widened.

“You didn’t tell anyone back at Ina’s about that, did you?”
“No way! It’s a secret remember? I hid the books so Ina wouldn’t see before the party.”

“Right,” he said, shaking his head. “Besides, I haven’t even heard from Krayt since that night. I have no way of tracking him, the Alani girls don’t know how to help, and I’m pretty sure he only checks in on me when it’s convenient for him.”

“That’s dumb!” She slurred. “Worse than dumb! I d-don’t like that guy! What’s his problem?”

Ezra laughed. *So drunk Tharin was basically more likely to speak her mind than normal Tharin,* and that girl was apparently pretty angry because he got to hear about how much she disliked Krayt all the way back to Csaus, up until the moment he helped her stumble through the front door of her house.

"It's night!" Tharin laughed. "And still storming! I love it!"

She loved it a little too much because she was spinning around, getting both of them drenched before he was finally able to drag her inside. It was a mess, just like always. Clothes and scrap metal lingered all across the floor and Ezra barely had time to catch her before Tharin tripped over some of it on her way across the floor.

“Whoops!” She breathed. “Sorry.”

“You know, you really should clean this place?”

“What can I say? I like that lived in look. Plus I spend more time in my lab than I do here. At least the lab is clean, right?”

“I guess?”

“I don’t get what all the fuss is about, the drinks weren’t even good. Why do people do this to themselves? It’s hard to concentrate, I can’t walk properly, the room is buzzing. Tell me, is my face normal? It feels off.”

He looked. Aside the dullness of the red in her eyes, she was perfectly fine.

“I think you’ll make it to the morning?” He smirked. "A bit of warning though… my master used to tell me a night of drinking led to a pretty bad morning the next day.”

“Your master sounds fun! I wish I could have met him.”

Ezra laughed.

“Yeah me too. I think they all would have liked you.”

She smiled and shuffled her feet to straighten herself so as to not lean against him before poking a finger against his chest and stumbling right back against his propping shoulder.

“Hey! You’re not going to tell about my drinking game, right?”

He rolled his eyes.

“Your secret is safe with me.

“Good!” She laughed. “So what did you guys do all night?”

“Pillow talk and shooting stuff.” Ezra grinned. “What did you guys do besides the drinking?”
“We played interesting baby-themed games out of non-baby themed items, and then told each other all sorts of stories. Things we did, things that—” Her face twisted like she’d seen something horrifying and frowned so suddenly it made Ezra worried. “I will never look at Ina’gamut the same way again.” Her face returned to normal and she tilted her head to the side. “Human women are very scandalous and apparently like to share stories of such scandals with each other over drinks. *Never have I ever,* they said and then you took a drink if you had never.” She burped. "I have never a lot apparently!"

“Yeesh!” He made a face. “Sorry you had to endure that. Next time I’ll bring you with me to guy’s night.”

“Sounds good! Can’t wait!” She hiccuped and fell face first on the bed completely out of everything.

“Uh… Tharin?”

She was completely out cold.

Unsure of what else to do, he flipped her over on the bed, fought off her boots, pulled the loose hairs out of her mouth, and tossed a blanket over her. He then tidied up her floor because it was ridiculously messy, went into the kitchen, wrote down an old hangover recipe either Kanan or one of the Rebel had pilots taught him about at one time—or at least the Chiss equivalent of it, then he set a note of instructions for her to read the next day, and went home.

"Storms rough tonight buddy, looks like you're bunking with me tonight."

Jorj grumbled.

"Don't worry, I'll have you back to your precious tree in the morning, okay?"

He blinked.

"Yeah... it's been a long night for me too."

Ezra tore off his robe and crawled into bed, Jorj slithering up to curl into a wet ball of fur atop his chest. In hindsight, they probably should have dried off a little beforehand, but Ezra was too tired to care and went to sleep the first chance he got.

When Tharin rolled into work the next day her hair was a wreck, her eyes were squinted, and she was chugging Ezra’s miracle elixir like it were fresh water on a dry desert planet. If it were still raining, she could blame her appearance on the storm, but it was bright and sunny outside and everyone looked at her in stunned curiosity as she strode in.

Ezra shot his chair over to her as the Vornskr pups barked happily around her ankles.

“No… please… no barks today… I beg you! Ezra help!”

He only laughed.

“Learned a lesson didn’t we, Tharin?”
“Ugh… never hang out with Koree Vayes… lesson received, processed, and cataloged.”

He grinned and offered his seat up to her.

“So!” He said theatrically loud. “What’s the lesson plan for today? It’s sparring day. Me and you, what do you say? I still hold an impressive 13 to 8 winning streak.” He shook her chair. “Don’t you want to defend your title?”

“I want to drop you into a black hole…” she grumbled. “Why are you tormenting me?”

He laughed again.

“Payback…”

“Payback for what?” She groaned.

He shrugged.

“Rentor mostly?”

She groaned louder and slammed her face into the desk.

“Wake me when it’s night out! I’m never touching sasep’veen again!”

Ezra nodded, but decided to heard the happy Vornskr pups away for a walk outside.

“Glad to see your scientific curiosity has been quelled. I won't punish you anymore then. The pups and I are going to do a little exercise outside, probably roll in the mud or something, I don’t know, they’re puppies? You just stay here and try to readjust to life, yeah?”

She threw something blunt at him and he caught it before sticking his tongue out and running outside with all the puppies. Tharin had a long, long morning ahead of her and he figured he’d helped her suffer enough for one day, even though after all the trouble she'd caused him, she did kind of deserve it.

His laughter was the last thing she heard as he left the building, but she didn’t dare lift her head off the table to watch him go.

“I am not washing Vorskr today Ezra Bridger.” She grumbled to herself, smirking as she reached for her cup, glad the drink existed and even more grateful that the noises had gone away. “But thank you.”
Tharin and Ezra's secret missions to find answers to the many questions left by Krayt have thus far only sent them on wild goose hunts and a few narrow near death experiences, though, as they come across a clue in the Chiss art museum, their newest mission may just prove more informative than either could have guessed.

 Posted on: November 10, 2018

“Tharin! Tharin!” Ezra ran up. “Sorry I’m late, I couldn’t get Jorj to get into his backpack again but I tried what you said and I—” He stopped mid sentence and made a tired face as if his morning hadn’t been challenging enough already. “Wait, what are you doing up there on that thing?”

She was up on a tall ladder and leaning unsettlingly over a four foot metallic beaker that was bubbling black and smelled like moldy engine oil. Her goggles were obviously in the advanced zooming configuration because they were two large glowing red circles that took up nearly half her face and made her look like some bug-eyed insect rather than a Chiss. That, and whatever steaming liquid was in that industrial jar was also making her hair puff out, which only added to her wild, feral-looking appearance.

Tharin didn’t turn to acknowledge him, but held out an arm and pointed to the floor anyway.

“Halt! Behind the line for your own safety. I will not be held responsible for what happens.”

He obeyed, sensing the truth beneath her warning and not wanting to test his luck.

“What are you even making up there? I thought we were going on another “test flight” this morning?”

His emphasis on the words was probably starting to seem suspicious to the other scientists, Basic or no, but honestly he wasn’t sure if Tharin would get a move on if he didn’t stress the importance of their next mission. She’s the one who told him to be here at exactly the crack of dawn to sneak off on another adventure. He was only three minutes late, so surely that wasn’t enough time for her to break out into “experimentation mode” with her beakers and various chemical compounds.

They had been on about five of their little “test flights” since Ilum, but so far none of them turned up any useful information about the traitorous Aristocra, the unspeakable sin of the Chiss, or even of the ever mysterious man known only to them as Krayt. They had almost been caught a few times and nearly died at least once, and yet they still had nothing to show for it that could answer any of their questions brought on by Ezra’s last conversation with the mysterious Force user.

After a few weeks of real training, they went back to Sposia to read more books from
Ina’s collection for their illicit investigations, nearly getting caught a few times thanks to nosy Imperials or Ina herself, but they still managed to read a few semi-helpful articles without any major incidents this time around. Unfortunately, they had only found a few old books with nothing entirely substantial to their mission. Still, Tharin must have learned something from all of that pointless research because today they were on their way back to Sposia for more digging around... just not in Ina’s library this time. Ezra wondered where she could possibly be taking him, but he hoped it wasn't something crazy like breaking into the Aristocra's office... or worse! He really hoped it wasn't something that almost got them mauled like their trip to Rentor had nearly done.

One of the last almost-Jedi left in the galaxy, done in by an overgrown sardine!

Even though that had been weeks before, he was still trying to get over it. He wouldn't say he was still mad at Tharin for almost getting them killed just to test her new wetsuits, or for not checking before to see if any man-eating aquatic animals lived in the ocean they were searching, but he wasn't entirely over the whole experience yet. Still, it had led them to Ina's library like Tharin had been reminding him over and over again, so maybe he should just let it go?

It had been nice to see all the Imperials again, even if they did end up getting drunk and uncomfortably personal. Somehow or another that trip had wound up giving Ezra a new side project to quell Tharin's latest curiosity regarding human hair follicles, thus the infuriating beard project. Now Ezra’s father had sported a beard, but Ezra had never given his a chance long enough to see what would happen. He had stubble which was more than Walten could grow, but he was underwhelmed to find out that a few measly months of beard growth had only amounted to his face looking patchy, feeling itchy, and the whole thing refusing to grow up past his jawline for some stupid reason. It seemed that even that part of his hair was slow to grow and yet he still couldn’t stand the feel of little hairs over his lip. He typically wound up trimming those like he'd always done, not that he'd ever let Tharin know that.

He had Gunther, Eli, and Urick to thank for this. He often reminded himself. Them and their dumb, glorious beards.

Ezra suddenly wondered if everyone was still doing alright. They were all busy with the training, the healing, and the major life transitioning, but Walten said he and Urick were actually enjoying the peaceful lives as Cioral farmers. Everyone else was keeping up with their own work on Sposia and Pyrondi even called to tell them that she got to see and hear her baby for the first time thanks to the Sabosen ultrasound technology. So far the fluids the Yuuzhan Vong gave her had done nothing to make it unhealthy or mutated in any way, and Ezra could hear the joy and relief she had in her voice because it was something she had been worried about in the back of her mind for months after learning that she was pregnant.

Seeing all of them again and hearing from them more often really helped Ezra to put his drive in place and remind him what all the extra work he and Tharin were doing was all really for. He was going to stop the Yuuzhan Vong, and nobody he cared for was ever going to to be hurt by them ever again. No one, not the traitor, or Krayt, or anything else in the galaxy would ever distract him from that goal.

He felt the mental urge to give everyone a holo-call at the end of the week after his and Tharin’s new secret mission and his weekly trip to train the Alani girls.

Speaking of which... He remembered. They were still late...

“Is this test going to take very long because we still need to get back in time to go over to Schesa in the morning!” Ezra urged impatiently. “Plus there’s only two day’s worth of charge in the nutrient frame so we are literally killing Jorj every second we waste not leaving.”
“Ezra please!” Tharin sighed, no doubt rolling her eyes to match the tone. “This is a very delicate formula for my new shuttle fuel. It will only take a moment. I just need to add three drops of this highly unstable synthetic coaxium to this mixture. If my version matches the properties from the ship Eli arrived here in, then it’s just simple mechanics getting the new supply to go through the venturi tube in order to activate turbo boosters without mixing or burning through the main supply or... you know... igniting the entire ship in a spontaneously combustible fireball. Easy!”

“Yeah… sure… okay… fine...” He nodded unsurely. “Wait, did you say highly combustible? Why do you know that? And what do you mean by fireball?!”

“Shhhhhhhhh!” She motioned fervently. “Now, the moment of truth. Watch and be amazed! Hyperfuel Test #37 is just...” She let a drop fall into the beaker. “About...” Another drop. “Done!” The final drip and the dark bubbles intensified, turning into a warm golden brown color as Tharin leaned back with a half-crazed laugh.

"Whoa there!” Ezra yelled, running over the line because the entire ladder nearly fell backwards due to her zestful cheers.

She didn't seem to notice.

“Eureka! It works!” Tharin looked down at her experiment just as Ezra tilted the ladder back to the floor and she shot a wide, toothy grin back at him. “Alright, well that’s done! Let’s go on the test flight, Sevicsi. No time to lose! Come on!”

“Finally…” He smiled, frowning suddenly when he heard an ominous sizzling, rattling noise and both of them looked slowly over at the desk as the golden liquid of the beaker started to shift into an unsettling, pulsating red.

“Oh not again… VUZSAH!”

By now he had heard that word enough times to know what that meant: Take cover because something here was about to blow.

She hollered her warning and then leaped from the ladder, flailing directly on top of Ezra as the surrounding scientists ducked below their desks.

*KA-BOOM!*

The beaker exploded into a sopping mess along the desk and floor and as they rose, the other scientists letting out small cheers, some even giving off a few stray laughs before going back to their own work. This was actually a pretty typical thing to happen in the Inrokini labs, so it wasn’t worth more than a few teases and praises that another failed test was getting closer to success. Of course, the Vornskr pups, all of whom were sleeping in a massive pile in their playpen, woke from the disturbance and let out a series of pitiable howls at the sound of the explosion which only caused everyone to laugh harder.

Tharin propped herself up on her elbow and cursed at the table, ignoring everything else except her own raging mental recalculations.

“Vun’bicn! I really thought I had it that time.” She felt the squishy floor beneath her and looked down to realize she was still lying on top of Ezra. That didn't seem to register as anything important to her either because she made no effort to get off as she looked down at him and asked, “Where do you think I went wrong?”

With troubled breath, he pointed to her elbow and grumbled something incoherent but basically
translating to her pressing all of her weight into his chest cavity and crushing his lungs with her one surprisingly sharp and bony elbow.

That seemed to do the trick and finally something inside of her clicked.

“Oh! Sorry…”

With a heave, she stood to her feet and reached for his hands before lifting him up with her. They blushed for a moment before Tharin quickly stole back her hands and swiftly turned to face the carnage.

“Yeuch! What a mess.”

Ezra cleared his throat and sighed, already digging into her first desk drawer for gloves and reaching over to scoop up broken bits of glass off the floor.

“Come on… the sooner we clean up the sooner we can get going. At least the damage didn’t spread too far, but I think this entire place is going to reek for— well— ever.”

“Ezra, that’s not necessary.”

She grabbed the back of his cloak and pulled him back a few steps as a large portion of the floor slid away and took the desk down into the hole along with it before an entirely new desk took its place and the square tile reformed below it.

He felt his mouth gape.

“What just happened?”

“If we kept every desk with chemical spills on it at our stations, this lab would be a hazardous nightmare. No, we just send them to get cleaned below. An old invention one of the first Inrokini made decades ago. All automatic and completely thorough. There’s this mechanical washing facility they go to after that and they put them into reserves until we’re ready to swap one out again. Same with the floor panels.”

“But…” His mouth was still ajar. “What about all of the stuff inside?”

She laughed like he had just told a joke.

“There are no belongings in the testing desks, everyone knows that!”

“But… but… but…”

She scooped up Jorj’s pack and grabbed his cloak, dragging his confused, babbling self over to the Clawcraft as he tried to wrap his head around the desk that had just vanished and how exactly it got clean enough to use again below the ground. Finally he gave up and took a seat at the pilot’s chair before Tharin could call the position, though his mind was still racing.

“Seriously Tharin, how do you keep popping furniture in and out of all these secret walls!? I’m going to accidentally fall into one of these and die if you don’t start telling me how to find them beforehand.”

She shrugged simply, also shooting him a nasty but ultimately accepting glare once she saw he had taken the pilot’s chair.

“Chiss architecture is very space-efficient. I’ll take you to Ornfra and have the Arisar tell you all
about it as one of your future field lessons. Now come on, our next secret adventure awaits and we’re already late!”

He felt more arguments rising, but shoved them back down with a huff.

“Yeah… okay… Let’s just go.”

“So this is the Sposia art gallery?” He mused, his voice echoing through the otherwise barren corridor. “Is it supposed to be closed today or something?”

“No, there just aren’t a lot of people who come down here. It’s mostly schoolchildren or my uncle who like to gaze at the artwork. Come on!”

She grabbed his arm and ran down the hallways, leading him through the maze-like rooms that connected in a small box-shape, the middle of the building seemingly housing a complex interactive light display that was some sort of planetarium or maybe a power source of some sort. He didn’t have time to find out for sure because once they were in the farthest back corner of the museum, she motioned to the walls and the dozens of paintings lining the walls, some more intricate than others, but all of them visibly old.

“Here we are. So the oldest of our visual works should be right here. This was back before datacards and digital documentation existed. The canvases were made of natural elements like bark, animal skins, cloth, and even paper, while the paints were gathered colors from nature. Primitive stuff, but it is remarkable to have lasted even this long, especially with half of the historical shipment lost over the seas of Rentor.”

“Ugh!” Ezra shuddered. “Stop bringing up Rentor. I can still feel the ice cold water sinking into our submarine.”

“How was I supposed to know there were creatures down there that could breach Chiss metal? What are you complaining about anyway? It pointed us in the right direction to Ina’s library, and that held some of the continued tomes and copies of the materials which were lost at sea. So what if none of it was salvageable, we were attacked by beasts, and incidentally almost drowned? We didn’t die, and I count that as a big win! Get over it already will you?”

Ezra gave her a look as if it explained everything he wanted to say to that point, before rolling his eyes and diverting his searching gaze back to the artwork.

“To save on all the reasons why everything you just said is entirely wrong, I'm just going to ask another question. Why exactly are we here today?”

“Well it is a good way to learn about Chiss culture?” she shrugged simply. “But more importantly, do you remember what we read in Ina’s library? The thing about the first ruler of Csilla…”

“Yeah… It was one of the oldest dating historical figures we could find.” He snickered once. “I thought you were going to flip a table when you saw there were only two paragraphs about the guy.”

“Oh yes, that was immensely frustrating, but still, it got me thinking… It said before our people settled on Csilla we were a voyaging race that explored the many planets of the region that would
later become the Chiss Ascendancy, *then poof*, no more history. It was the same with my schooling but until recently I never thought to question it.”

“Right…”

“Well the first three houses of the Aristocra were the Csapla, the Nuruodo, and the Sabosen, but they were not formed until generations after Chiss settlers colonized on Csilla. That could have been millennia ago, the early days may date back thousands of years, but that’s still a very vague timeline to work through. Not to mention it’s plenty of time to change and forget one’s history or start over with a civilization from scratch. But what I want to know is why would we stay on the least hospitable of the known worlds if our people spent all that time beforehand voyaging across the stars? They surely could have started on Csaus, Sposia, or anywhere with more hospitable terrain, right? It makes no sense. Why start there?”

“Good point…” he hummed. “Has anyone brought up that question before?”

“Of course, but even great debaters and philosophers always end up at dead end points or unwinnable arguments. Then school teachers only ever educate with the same response and say the Chiss chose Csilla based on its availability and potential. *Blah, blah, blah!* Like I said, it’s plenty of time to make sure those doing the teaching no longer question what’s being taught. They think that is enough of an answer because that is the most anyone can remember before the truth was lost to time.”

“So basically I shouldn’t listen to you anymore because your lessons are rooted in some distorted, altered history, got it.”

“Be serious!” She smacked him hard in the arm and hissed low within her throat, a noise that meant she was annoyed, but it only made him laugh and rub at his sore shoulder with a smug grin.

“Relax, I was joking!”

“Well incorporate some of your energy for witty remarks into usable theories, will you? Tell me, why do you think my people chose to remain on Csilla for all of those years, Ezra? What is one good reason for such action?”

“Well, maybe the Chiss couldn’t get their ships running and got stuck all that time? Or maybe…” He snapped, the idea coming to him like a flash of light. “Maybe they were laying low?”

She nodded, pleased that he and her were on the same page now.

“My thoughts exactly! The first vestige of information even hinting that Krayt’s truth may actually be factual. So we have all these voyaging ships that brought us to Csilla, but I don’t believe one has ever been recorded in our earliest artworks. They’re barely covered in the textual recordings of our past, none dating back to more than *oh…* seven, maybe eight thousand years? So all of that said—”

Ezra nodded in understanding as the two surveyed the wall of portraits.

“Where did all the ships go?”

“Exactly.”

“Well, I don’t see anything that looks like a ship here. These are mostly colors and abstract pieces.”

Ezra felt a little proud of himself that he knew about abstract art. He chalked that up to all those
years watching Sabine, a spark of interested heightening his need to learn more about art after some connoisseur wanted to look at her more impressionistic pieces. Sabine was so impressed with that guy. Lando was his name! Why did he remember not really caring for Lando?

“Ezra?”

“Hmm?” He snapped out of his thought and back to the museum. “Sorry, what were you saying?”

She gave him a studious glance.

“I was saying that the early settlements on Csilla were only populated by Chiss descendants and rare fauna until our first meetings with recorded “alien-life” in 8,000 B.A, before the Aristocracy formed. Back then we did not have starships, just local crafts that were tethered to the skies of Csilla. The introduction of the Vagaari brought with it the quest to reach into the stars again.”

“Right, because of the Vagaari invasion and three wars with them. I remember you telling me about that.”

She clapped her hands in a sudden realization, the echoing slap of them lingering through the otherwise silent museum.

“That gives me an idea, come on!”

She ran off full-sprint and Ezra followed as she rounded the corner and stopped before a bench overlooking a large portrait held within a large white metal frame. It had more a Renaissance look to it, painting a scene of a group of Chiss all about to go to war with another species of alien who took a person captive. The Vagaari, he guessed, though they looked a little different than in Tharin's holos. Ezra bent down and read the inscription.

“Tis Vim Ch'etecu'ib?”

“Very good!” she smiled. “Do you know what that means?”

He shook his head. Reading the Chiss alphabet and knowing what sounds went with what symbols was one thing, but knowing what those words actually meant was a whole other story. Tharin didn’t seem bothered by that though, more that anything she was simply proud he was able to read and give off a semi-professional pronunciation.

“Peace and War is the translation. My father brought me here when I was very little and told me that for whatever reason, this is my uncle’s favorite painting in the museum.”

Ezra looked back to it and tilted his head to the side. Thrawn’s favorite painting, huh?

“That means there’s something to study in it, right?”

“Normally, but we’re not here to psychoanalyze my uncle today, we’re here for our own agenda. That being—” She stood on top of the bench and pointed as closely as she could get to the artwork. “The Vagaari. The first aliens in our recorded history to find us on Csilla, and also the first to betray our trust and send us into the series of events that led up to the xenophobia that we hold onto today.”

“Ah memories?”

She lifted her brow and he stepped away as if to take back the joke. She let it go, her gears turning as the two of them examined the portrait in stern concentration. Tharin stepped down, Ezra hopped
up, she tilted her head at every angle, and Ezra even tried looking at it upside down, but to both of them the painting was only just a simple painting.

“This is getting us nowhere,” he finally said. “Isn’t this too new for what we’re looking for anyway?”

“This may not be the oldest piece, but it is still fairly ancient. No starships should be in recorded history yet, but it’s not quite enough time to have dissolved all evidence of—” Suddenly a light went off in her head and her eyes glowed with fresh energy. “Tar to ch’an’cevzo!” She pointed. “I can’t believe I never noticed this before. Look, right there!”

He squinted.

“The snow?”

“The mounds!” She laughed once, almost maniacally and pulled up a holo on her hand-device and hurdled the bench to show him. “Look at the shape, it is a near perfect replica—”

“Of an old military-class starship!” He gasped, his adrenaline starting to rise with the realization too. “The ancient voyager crafts are still on Csilla, just buried under thousands of years of snow and ice!”

Tharin’s crazed laughter continued as she spun around and the two ran in frenzied circles to try and get some of their newfound excitement to fade. It was Ezra who stopped first to burst their bubble.

“Wait, wait, wait… where is this painting supposed to be set in? Where is it exactly?”

Tharin froze and her smile flipped as she peered at the painting.

“I always assumed the Capital, but I honestly have no idea.” Her smile returned after a few more seconds and she shot him a sneaky smirk. “But I know exactly who to ask to find out!”

“Tharin? Ezra. This is a rare surprise. What is this all about?”

“Nice to hear from you again, Tharin. Hey Ezra!” Eli waved, just passing through the office and deciding to pop into the viewer. “I see the Inrokini are putting you through the Beard-Test! Don’t worry, you’ll get the hang of it soon enough.”

He made an uncomfortable face and shrugged, trying not to itch the patchy stubble along his chin and neck now that he was thinking about them again. Why were beards so itchy?

"G’en’vti…” Tharin started, ignoring Eli and waving to the holoprojection of Thrawn as she spoke. “Ezra’s Chiss studies have brought us to the museum of art on Sposia and we were wondering if you could lend us your wisdom.”

“Right! No one knows as much about art as you!”

Ezra still didn’t really want to speak with Thrawn after remembering more about the Chimera crash a little while ago, but after months of festering on those feelings, he decided that helping Tharin to butter him up would be better for them than him just quietly brooding in the background.
A snorting laugh made Thrawn turn his head and Eli appeared back on the screen with a large smile.

“Oh, you two must really want something if you’re sucking up to Thrawn up this much.”

_Dammit Eli!_ Ezra thought with a guilty and crooked smile unintentionally forming on his face. _Tell the whole galaxy about our plans, why don’t you?_

“Enough,” Thrawn said with a gentle wave to shoo the other man away. “Of course I am more than happy to tell you what I know. You may ask me any questions you’d like, no flattery necessary.”

Tharin smiled, the jab to Ezra’s side as if to say “see I told you so…” thankfully cut off from the other side’s field of view.

“Well _G’en’vti_, we were studying one of your favorites I’m told. _Tis Vim Ch’etecu’ib?”_

There was a subtle but distinct shift in his mood as he let off a small half-smile and folded his hands together behind his back.

“Ah yes, I know that piece very well. What do you wish known about it?”

“Mostly the location. It is based on a rather historical event in our people’s history, but I am unsure as to where on Csilla the setting is precisely located.”

Thrawn paused for only a moment longer than it took to make an uncomfortable silence before finally replying back to them.

“It is merely a few miles west of Csaplar in what I assume is just empty plains, unused after the Chiss of the fourth generation started constructing the cities underground nearer to the heat of the planet’s core. I can send over more precise coordinates if this is something you are wishing to see in person.”

The digits appeared in her data-watch a few seconds later, and she smiled. _He worked fast, she’d give him that._

“Thank you _G’en’vti!_ This really helps a lot!”

Eli returned into the shot, his huge grin traded in for a questioning side glance and one raised eyebrow.

“So why are you two looking to see this place in person? Is there something special about vast plains of snowy nothingness that we don’t know about?”

_Ezra held his breath._

Luckily Tharin retained her cool and confident Chiss attitude when she let out a small puff of air and a humorous roll of her eyes.

“Of course it is only for the sake of our curiosity, but I thought showing Ezra our roots would be a good place to start on our next trip to Csilla.”

“Krayt spit.”

Ezra’s eyes shot wide. _What had he just said?_

“W-what?” Tharin started, the confusion in her voice more for the term than for the broken
gambler’s facade on her face.

“I call Krayt spit. You two are hiding something aren’t you?”

Now both Ezra and Tharin could feel their hearts beating nervously at the accusation. *So what if Eli and Thrawn knew what they were doing? They could keep a secret, couldn’t they? What if they couldn’t? What would they do then?*

Eli spoke again before either of them could truly weigh their options and miraculously, his teasing smile had returned.

“Look, I get that you don’t always have the most room for testing products in your lab, but if you’re trying to test out those new grenades you were showing me blueprints for a couple of months ago, then I would pick a different obscure, empty location to set them off, and not one a few miles from the Aristocra’s offices, yeah?”

He looked at Thrawn.

“What? You think maybe Catlia or Massoss would be good for that sort of thing?”

“I would recommend the barren plains of Noris or a nearby asteroid belt if one were to test more nuclear equipment, unless of course you needed snow for the activation. Although, Tharin, I would recommend you confer with your Aristocra before choosing any planet at random without proper clearances in place. The Inrokini can only get away with so much before legal action is required.”

Tharin hated them looking down on her intelligence for what was probably a very specific and obvious rule of her house bylaws, but if it got them off the trail, so be it.

"R-right! I will indeed do that... or not do that, I mean." She shook her head. "We will be cautious. Thanks anyway for the help, both of you."

"Just a second..." Now Ezra was the one speaking up. "Eli, what you just said… what does that phrase mean? *Krayt spit.* Where did you learn that?"

He seemed confused but laughed it off with a shrug.

“Sorry, that’s an old Lysatran slang term for “nonsense” that I say a little too often considering it’s not a very nice phrase. Try not to go around repeating it to everyone, okay?"

A devious gleam in Tharin’s eyes revealed that she planned to do the exact opposite of what he’d just asked.

“No,” Ezra shooed away the rudimentary explanation. “I mean, what does it really mean? The words?”

“Oh?” Eli frowned before he and Thrawn shared a look. “Well, I’d imagine it comes from pilots and traders who visited the planet Crait. You know, the mineral planet out in the remote part of Outer Rim. It’s all salt there, so it probably means “salt spit” or something like a weird taste in the mouth that you just need to spit out?”

“Isn’t the planet Crait spelled differently than your expletive?” Thrawn asked. “It is house to a Rebel base, isn’t it? That is how I know of it.”

“Is it?” Eli asked back. “Well in that case, I guess I don’t know? I mean, maybe it has something to do with Krayt Dragons on Tatooine? I’m sure their spit isn’t all too pleasant. I don’t really know
the specifics on who brought it to Lysatra, just the context for the term. Why are you so curious about it all of the sudden?”

_Tatooine huh?_ Ezra resisted the urge to let his face drop. He hadn’t really told them about Krayt yet, but with all the secret research they’d been finding, he still wasn’t sure if the two points were connected and because of that, he thought it was probably best to leave them in the dark until he knew for sure.

“Oh, just Tharin’s curiosity rubbing off on me?” He shrugged, a bit over-dramatically, but thankfully the holo wasn’t big enough to catch the movement very well. “Seriously, small stuff like that would literally drive me insane nowadays. I just want to learn all that I can right now, even things that come from our part of the universe.”

Another look was shared between Thrawn and Eli, but neither made any moves to protest Ezra’s explanation.

“Well in that case, we will take our leave, and let you get on with your tour of the museum,” Thrawn started, a tone in his voice that unsettled them both. “Good luck with your studies and experimentations. I look forward to meeting with you both again very soon.”

“Yeah, and even though we’re out on recon and patrols, feel free to call back anytime if you had anything else you want to talk about. If we’re not in a battle or something, then we’ll get right back to you, okay?”

Eli was stressing that a little too much. _Did they know something else was going on? More likely they just wanted to keep tabs on them, now more than ever since their suspicions had been lifted._


“Okay! Got to go now! Thanks for all the help! Bye-bye!” Tharin shut off the communications as quickly as she could and darted around to shake Ezra violently by his shoulders. “We cannot ask them for help ever again! They know too much! This was a horrible idea! Why did you let me call them!”

Ezra took her hands to stop the shaking and once she took a much needed breath, he agreed with her wholeheartedly.

“That was way too close. If you and I are going to go to Csaplar to find these ships, we need to do it now before Thrawn and Eli have the chance to get even more suspicious and try to tail us or send someone else out to do it for them. The last thing we need is them figuring out what we’re doing and trying to get involved.”

“Agreed.” She checked her device for a moment and pointed. “If we go there right now, we may be able to silently drill a hole where we need during the night where no one can hear or see us come in. Though, we will probably be there until the early dawn hours, so I doubt there will be any time to rest before we’re needed on Schesa. You would also most likely need to cause a small avalanche with your Force powers if we ever hope to cover our evidence with enough snow should my uncle and Eli come searching for clues.”

“It’s now or never. We have to do this while we still have this window!”

“Well, factually speaking there truly is no time like the present?” She nodded determinedly. “Let’s get going.”

“And how exactly do you plan on cutting through thousands of years of ice buildup?” He asked
once Tharin had piloted them off-world, the question suddenly popping into mind.

She got that look on her face that normally meant Ezra would be sorry he asked, and she grinned back at him from the controls.

“Oh, you’ll see…”

So, Tharin’s chemical concoction or “Fuel Test #13” could potentially burn a hole straight through the ground to the ship. When asked, Tharin said she got in big trouble for that one because some random scientists found the hole it burned straight through Csaus on the opposite end of the planet. Luckily, the liquid iron near the planet's core flowed into itself and sealed the hole rather quickly due to the high pressures and temperatures of the center of the planet, so it closed the hole before any real damage was made. Though she got a pretty big lecture for almost damaging the entirety of Csaus with unstable chemical compounds and for potentially endangering lives once they learned her canister had shot out of the other side of the planet's core like a heated rocket booster.

To avoid a repeat, she blended Tests #13 and #18 together to make a half-strength formula that theoretically would only dissolve through half of the circumference of Csaus. Since Csilla was a bigger world, it should be just enough to hit the ship's surface before becoming just a harmless fuel container.

“Lucky for us there are no underground cities near here, or this would get messy real quick.”

“How is that cable coming?” she asked quickly.

Ezra tugged on the Clawcraft’s tow cable, an impressive length, though he wasn’t sure it was long enough to reach the ship below. Tharin’s opisthenar data-comm was just barely able to detect odd materials lying dormant beneath the snow, but they were still in tact, so he assumed the old ship must be pretty far down. If they had any hope of getting back out again though, it was better than relying on nothing.

“Oh, ha... ha... Now do your thing, Sevicsi.”

She popped the top and tipped it over to pour a burning spot in the snow that hissed and steamed away in a sizzling shriek as her chemicals did their work. At the same time, Ezra was doing his best to steer the metal vial through the snow at a slanted angle to get the most fuel in the path position they needed to get down there.
“Once it settles, it will be safe to slide down. Let’s just hope it was enough and likewise hope it was not too much. We’re far enough away from any cities that we won’t be bothered, but that doesn’t help if we draw unnecessary attention to ourselves by noticeably poisoning the planet.”

“We? Who is the mad scientist here, me or you?”

"Hey, whose Force premonitions are the reason we're out here in the first place?"

"Point taken.” He looked back into the Clawcraft’s viewport. “Don't worry, if we get into trouble, maybe Jorj will send for help?”

She looked back and furrowed her brows for the longest while as she tried many different paths to sort that information out before finally giving up.

“I do not get your apparent joke, but I understand it comes from a place of nervous uncertainty, so I’ll just nod if that is the correct response.”

She did nod, her chin a little higher than was normal in order to express her obvious confusion.

He slumped, but even that feeling of embarrassment at the poorly made joke disappeared when they both heard a very faint *THUNK* echo up the hole. Metal on metal, the chemical had reached the ship. Now the rest would be up to Ezra and his lightsaber.

“Yeah… well… whatever, can we just go already it’s freezing up here?”

“It will be much warmer the closer we get to the core, though, if the ship is really buried in snow, perhaps it could still be cold? Hmmmm… Another mystery?”

"Only one way to find out?"

He secured the cable and started hesitantly into the hole as the both of them started sliding down the narrow slope, Ezra first, Tharin with her feet pressed into his shoulders, both slipping slowly down into the darkness before Tharin activated a light.

They fell for what was probably a good five or ten minutes before they got to the end of the cable and Tharin stared up at their exit hole. Breathing masks already equipped, she tapped Ezra twice on the shoulder with her foot and the rest was a free fall downward. Ezra closed his eyes, sensing the approaching ship in time to slow their landing, Tharin’s weight now jabbed into his clavicles as the two of them struck the outer hull of the ship.

The lightsaber ignited just between his feet, the heat burning into his skin as he made a small, shuffling circle and felt the gravity toss them deeper into the hole.

“Oof!” They both groaned, this time Ezra was able to land on his feet, but catching Tharin still nearly made them fall over.

She took in a deep breath of her oxygen mask and shined the light through the ancient ship as both of them awed its designs.

"Incredible! I’ve never seen something like this before. It’s so primitive, but also so familiar. I can see how the remnants of the design grew incorporated into our modern shuttle prototypes all those thousands of years later. That's Chiss ingenuity for you?”

“Right, so there probably won't be any data ports, but maybe we can find some documents. There had to have been writing here, right?”
“The only way to find out is to explore, I suppose?”

“Before we run out of oxygen down here…”

“Right, well that’s a given.”

They searched through dark, damp, sometimes caved in rooms of the ship, the entire vessel dark, dreary, and just the smallest bit unsettling. Ezra blamed the age and rust, hoping all those ghost stories he’d heard growing up weren’t actually based on anything factual. He got sudden flashes of the wrecked Chimera and could only hope that there were no dead bodies trapped inside this one.

“How’s our air supply doing?” He asked, trying to think of anything else besides Myrkr.

Tharin checked her device.

“Half strength.” She hissed again, her frustration growing. “There has to be something here, there simply has to be! We can’t have wasted all this effort for nothing… again!”

She kicked the creaking wall and Ezra sincerely hoped ancient Chiss foundations were strong enough to handle all this weight of snow and extra moving around. It was then he got a sensation, something tugging at him through the Force. He walked a few feet away and ignited his lightsaber to cut a hole into the random door a few feet ahead.

“In here, I think I can sense something.”

She followed without question, ducking to avoid the smoldering scorch marks in the door panels. Inside was an office, an empty, partially destroyed office, but an office nonetheless.

"Oh jeez!” Ezra jumped and Tharin shined her light over to where his saber was aimed.

"Ooh, a skeleton!” She gasped, though her voice sounded more fascinated than startled.

"Of course! Why is it always skeletons?"

She scanned the bones, remarking at the mummified corpse, it was surprisingly well preserved from the intense cold.

"He was definitely a Chiss. Remarkable! Even his physical structure is similar but not quite as evolved as ours is today. I can only imagine he was shorter than today's average male, his skin was blue, but from what I can see his facial structure had not yet adapted to the weather of Csilla and his eyes could not have been purely red. What secrets could you tell me you miraculous specimen you?"

Ezra was not as interested in the corpse, in fact it was unnerving just to be near so pointed the light of his blade towards the shelves in order to scout the frozen, dusty cases and tables for anything that looked useful. He came up dry much to his own frustration and had no choice but to rejoin Tharin near the bones.

"Why do you think he was he just sitting in this room?” He asked in an uncomfortable grumble.

"This is perhaps the captain's quarters? Judging by all of the damage we've studied, I surmise that they must have intentionally set the ship to destruct in on itself before leaving the remains to rot away in the snow. Perhaps it was he who set off the detonations? Or perhaps it was a coup and he was murdered and overthrown before they could land… Oh! Oh! Or maybe it was closer to what you thought on Sposia. A crash, and he was just one of the crew who did not survive the impact.
You know, it is angled in such a way that perhaps they had a choice to save potential lives by crashing in a particular area?"

"It’s a miracle this place even survived long enough to make this tomb for the guy." Ezra looked back at the corpse in time to stop her from snatching one of the bones. "Tharin! What the kriff!?"

She jumped back.

"What!? I’ll put them to good use! Think of all we can learn from these remains. A lost culture! A forgotten civilization hiding beneath the captain's marrow! It's not like he's using them anymore?"

"Respect the dead! Didn't anyone ever teach you about curses or ghosts?" He sighed. "Look, just don't mess with it! Okay?"

"Ezra... your superstitions really put a damper on my research, do you realize tha— hey, what is this?"

He turned and she was already prying a cold, dead arm away from the corpse, the sticking sounds of mangled flesh on bones making his spine shudder.

"Tharin, what did I just sa—" He gagged just in time for her to cut him off.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, curses and ghost stories..." She waved distractedly. "Look what he's got hiding under his arm though."

He made a disgusted face, but watched as she pressed her foot against the chair and pulled something out with all her strength before both it and she fell back into the floor, Ezra shinning his light over to see what she'd just found.

"It’s a book?"

"More than a book!" She grinned, rubbing frost and dust off of it as the intricate cover stared back up at them. It was ancient and worn, but seemed to still be in pretty decent shape as she flipped through some of the more legible pages. "It's a journal! A hand-written journal!"

"Up you go!" He deactivated his saber and held out his hands to help her up and take the book, grateful as always that they were wearing gloves. "Here, let me see that for a second, will you?"

She handed it to him, wanting to cheer or at least to gloat, but choosing to save her depleting oxygen for something more purposeful and held her comments in as Ezra browsed the book.

“I think the Force called us in here to find this. I sense something unusually strong around the binding, but, yeah, no... I can’t read any of this?”

She took it and studied for herself.

“This appears to be written in an ancient language, one I can see patterns in but is certainly not used by any alive nowadays. It will take some deciphering, but it’s definitely something! Look at this inscription on the back of the cover. My ancient Cheunh is a bit rusty, and it doesn't exactly match, but I think this reads: "Outbound Flight". Do you know what that means? This must be the captain’s logbook, and this Ezra!" She gestured. "Is the voyager known as Outbound Flight. Oh, I think we hit the jackpot this time around! The journal will have notes, memoirs, even stories from planets and peoples met during this supposed time of "great sin" that Krayt spoke of.”

“Finally!” he smiled, returning her high-five with more relief than enthusiasm. “It’s about time
something went right for once. Now let’s get out of this place, I’m starting to get claustrophobic.”

“But the oxygen mask should be giving you the proper—”

"I know..." he stopped. “I meant it more mentally than physically. Come on.”

"Whatever you say my jumpy little Jedi."

He growled at her, but she only hugged the book and grinned before snapping around to bow in the direction of the skeleton.

"Thank you for leading Ezra's Force to you, Captain! Please, do not haunt us for defiling your resting place. I will put your words to good use for the Chiss Ascendancy you died to create." She shot Ezra a smug look. "There, I paid my respects. Do you feel better now, Sevicsi?"

"Honestly... maybe a little. Now let's just go. This place gives me the creeps."

She waved, leaving the corpse to rot in peace now that they would finally be gone.

"Don't wave to it!" He snapped awkwardly.

"I'm trying to be polite!?"

They argued in hushes whispers until the two made it back the way they’d come. Ezra continued to complain about having a bad feeling about this crashed vessel, but Tharin wasn't sure why he felt this way. They had gotten what they came for, more or less, so she was fine indulging his sensitivity and leaving this obscure hospital relic behind if it really would ease his nerves. Besides, they were on a time crunch here, so he had a point, the sooner they go, the sooner they get to Schesa, and after that, the sooner she would get to study this incredible journal.

By the time they made it back to their entrance, Ezra boosted Tharin up and prepared to climb back through the hole himself. There was an itching feeling in the back of his neck that only insisted that the sooner they got topside the better he would feel, but he ignored that long enough to leap upward with the Force and then stab his feet into the tunnel to keep from sliding back down. Again. He did this as many times as it took, hoping the Clawcraft cable or even the sunlight would show back up again soon. Tharin was working their pick and climbing tools in perfect sync with his Force leaps, the book tucked into her vest for safe keeping, but even with her help, their ascent was still slow going.

All the training Tharin had him doing these last few months not only helped to build his stamina physically, but he also started to see it in his capability to use the Force for larger or longer projects without getting entirely fatigued. Another thing he'd be grateful for once he stopped realizing his new strengths in the middle of these sorts of dangerous situations.

"Hey?" He grunted, digging his soles into the ice. "Do you know how much farther?"

"Trust me, you will be better for not knowing," she said sympathetically, her enthusiasm rising as she tried now to turn it into a pep talk. "You're doing great though! Keep it up!"

He sighed and leaped again, that bad feeling in his gut spinning again as he stopped and listened to
the Force. It was as if the universe just loved proving him right because there was an unsettling 
crushing noise from below as the sounds of twisting metal and hot air came billowing up from 
below them.

"Oh great..."

“What did you do?” Tharin asked, her arms clawed into the ice to keep them steady.

“It wasn’t me, I think that was the ship finally compressing under all the weight of the ice. The 
tunnels might be collapsing!”

“Scientifically speaking, I don’t think that’s how—”

“Save the explanations for later!” he shouted back.

There was a thunderous rushing sound and both of them let out a worried breath into their low 
oxygen masks as the sound became all the more clear to their ears.

“Is that— water?” Ezra started.

“ Heat from the planet’s core must be breaking through now that the ship is gone. It’s melting the 
ice!”

"So we’re about to die again?" Ezra shot a look up at her only to be blinded by the light.

"Can we have this conversation later?" She growled. "If we live preferably?"

"Sounds good. Hang on!"

Ezra leaped again, this time begging the cable to appear as the sounds of caving snow and rushing 
water rumbled from below. He muttered, giving it his all to jump again a new personal best 
distance-wise, but still there was no cable, the feelings of something hot and wet starting to crawl 
up his leg as mist from the melting snow billowed up ominously from the dark beneath them.

Kriff! Kriff! Kriff! They weren’t going to make it in time. Or wait... They might not make it, but she 
still could.

“Protect the book!” He shouted. "Get topside!"

“Wait, what are you—”

But before Tharin could protest, Ezra sent her shooting upward with a massive shove of the Force 
and she screamed at him, her voice disappearing up the tunnel as he sent himself slipping 
backwards and further below. Hoping it was enough, he had seconds to prepare himself, securing 
his mask and lifting his feet, letting the hot rushing water carry him through the tubes with 
impressively violent speed. The rush caused Ezra to focus everything he had just to make sure he 
didn’t beat his face against any of the tunnel’s edges as he tumbled upward along the brash current.

A hand caught his cloak and suddenly he was out of the water, speeding through the air as he heard 
the metallic sliding of the Clawcraft cable manually retracting and shooting them towards the 
surface. His eyes adjusted, the water chasing them a few mere feet below before he turned his head 
skyward to see that Tharin hadn’t actually left him behind. She had her fist clenched around his 
cape, the old book cover pressed firmly between her teeth, and the other hand wrapped around the 
tow cable as a bit of blood dripped down from her hand and onto his face from where the cord had 
sliced into her palm. It took him a moment to process, but after he had, Ezra decided that he was so
relieved to see her that he didn’t know if he wanted to kiss her for saving him, or kill her for not trying to escape on her own.

If they lived through this one, he swore to himself that he’d decide on one once they were safely surfaced.

The bright night skies of Csilla burned their eyes as the cable pulled them out like a couple of flying fish before Tharin let go and they plummeted into the snow beside the Clawcraft, a huge jet of steaming water shooting straight into the sky before either of them even had a chance to turn around and see what had just happened. Ezra removed his mask, his arms flailing tiredly into the snow as he panted out a few dry laughs and felt the cool air on every inch of his face, a sweet breath of relief in comparison to the stuffy ship below.

Never had he been this glad to be on a planet with such brisk, breathable air as this one.

The adrenaline rush was doing murder on everything inside of Ezra that wanted to be tired from all the Force exertion, but he was too full of energy to give in to it now. Meanwhile, Tharin crawled up to his chest after landing more or less on his legs and laughed exhaustively as she patted his wet shirt with her non-bloodied hand.

"We made it!" She breathed heavily. "We are two for two for staying alive! Those are... good odds! Right?"

They both tossed their heads back and laughed, their chests continuing to rise and fall with deep, heavy breaths, but they didn't know whether to keep laughing or to just stop for a moment to catch the air up with the rest of them.

The thunderous rumbling steadied, causing both of them to look back to the 24 meter stream of water shooting high and vigorously into the clouds, their voices dying down as they rest in the snow and just watched it for a few moments in silence.

“Lucky...” Tharin panted, rolling off of him as she continued talking. “We're lucky it wasn't a geyser… or we wouldn't be having this conversation. Heat would have killed us on the spot!”

"What just happened?"

“Congratulations.” She smirked. "I think we just made a natural hot-springs. The tourism boards in Csaplar are going to love that!"

There was a slight rumble and a whistle as something hard and metal shot out of the ground and landed a few feet away. It was the canister they had used to melt the snow, still sizzling as it sunk back below the ground a few more inches and stopped steaming.

"Correction!" Ezra laughed. "I think you just made a not-so natural hot-spring with your literal death-fuel."

She shot him a look and then glared at the canister as it stopped its decent halfway into the snow.

"In hindsight, I may have miscalculated the amount of fuel needed. We probably shouldn't have let that continue to melt once we made it inside the craft. I knew there had to be a scientific explanation for all of this! I'd imagine it tore through the old metal like paper and went straight down into the core. Oops... Well, at least it was just a little volcanic activity this time. No one should be able to tell what caused the rupture."

"Hey, I won't tell if you wont."
"I would hope not. The high council would probably kill us both... or at the very least, they would presumably arrest us. Either way, I would really rather not find out what the consequences are, how about you?"

He chuckled, looking over to see the drops of blood pooling beneath her hand, suddenly remembering how the Clawcraft cable must have cut her when she activated the automatic retraction on her data-watch. He sat up suddenly and pointed.

"Hey, your hand..."

She rubbed it off in the snow, turning it pink before she flipped that over as well.

"It's just a scratch, no cause for alarm."

He didn't like the answer, but was too angry at her for not following his orders to say so. He was the Jedi, and she was the scientist. Sure she was more capable than most scientist Ezra had met, but it was her sheer stubbornness and overabundant Chiss confidence that kept her alive this far. She didn't have training, not like he did. One of these adventures, he wondered when that luck would finally run out for both him and her. If he told her to run, or to get out, then she should have listened, shouldn't she? The worry he felt turned to anger and that into steady exhaustion as he grumbled and shot a look back at her as she admired the water spout in carefree obstinance.

“That reminds me...” he breathed, sitting up and tossing a handful of snow at her face. “Why were you waiting by the cable? I told you to get out of there!”

She sat up and rubbed the snow away from her darkening blue skin, her red eyes glowing more prominently, though whether that was due to the white color or her growing anger, Ezra couldn’t tell.

“Like I would truly leave you to drown in a dark tunnel because of some book?” She pointed with a jab of her thumb where the old journal lay a few feet away, closed and completely in tact save for the new teeth marks in the cover.

Ezra mentally blocked out the thought that the journal had just been in the arms of a dead guy for over ten thousand years, but was happy to see that her quick thinking had managed to save it... and him... no matter how disgusting. He still wasn't entirely happy about that either. Was he relieved or mad? He wished his body would just settle on an emotion already.

By the time he looked back, she had already thrown an armload of fresh snow at him before he could move to dodge it. He scooped another heap of it into the palm of his freezing hand and fired again, only for Tharin to have another shot primed and ready for him at the same time. The two had a halfhearted battle of back and forth swipes of snow with their uncooperative and tired limbs until finally, Tharin shoved him down and pinned his arms so he would relax. He froze in every sense of the word, still surprised by her sheer strength and reminding himself yet again that she wasn't as helpless as a lot of people thought her to be.

Ezra let out a breath, and felt the blood from her hand on his own. She winced at the sting of contact, but made no attempts to move and pushed him deeper into the snow.

“Enough!” She shouted in a single winded breath. “You’re my responsibility, Ezra! If you try to save my life, then know that I will not hesitate to do the same for you. No questions asked! After five months together you think you might catch onto that one by now.”

His face was starting to turn blue, the cold weather and wet clothing not good for a being of his
heating type. Seeing this, she sighed with a roll of her eyes and sat back on his legs so he could sit up too.

"Humans—" she almost hissed again in frustration. "You are all so frustrating!"

"Me frustrating?" He scoffed. "Have you ever met the Chiss?"

She glared at him and from that look alone he knew he had just lost this argument. That, and he suddenly lost all urge to fight with her. Ezra released his tension, sinking back into the snow with a huff as Tharin lifted her brow at him in studious curiosity. By now she had become pretty familiar with his moods and knew that this latest one, whatever it was, was just about over.

"You know, you're going to turn into a Chiss if you keep falling into the snow," she told him, her voice hard and clipped.

"Yeah, I know..." he said, propping himself up on his elbows with a deep exhale. "Sorry. I didn't mean to start another fight. I just... I can't help it. I worry about you sometimes. I just... Tharin, I can't let anyone else I care about get hurt on my watch. I know you can take care of yourself—"

"And you..." She reminded with a flick of her chin towards the tunnel.

"Right... so I guess what I'm trying to say is... thanks for saving me back there, and sorry for being such a jerk."

With an inhale of her own, she nodded primly and her voice cooled down.

"Well in that case, you're welcome. And... Forgive me for bringing back bad memories. I know you have lost so... so much... but you should know better than to worry about me. I am—"

"Self-sufficient," he supplied with a tired grin. "I know... I know..."

"And don't you forget it! Now, we had better get clear before any of the locals come to investigate the new spring. Luckily, it is a natural phenomenon so no one will notice our meddling." She patted his chest again and even smiled at him now, her own anger seeming to dissipate. "Good thing for you, right? You are probably too exhausted to cause an avalanche right now anyway. Don't worry, the snowfall should cover the remainder of our tracks before anybody can make it to the location."

He looked up. He hadn't even noticed that it had begun to snow. Luckily they kept the heat in the Clawcraft running for Jorj so they wouldn't be stuck in a frozen ship again like back on Ilum. Ezra held his hand out to catch a few snowflakes and chuckled before leaning back.

"You're probably right..."

"Of course I'm right!" She slapped him harder, this time her gentle pats causing what air he'd just gotten back into his lungs to wheeze out when her hand accidentally slammed down against his stomach. "Now, come on."

He coughed once and sat up with some strained effort to follow her lead. They were just about to move when suddenly another burst sounded and a second whistling piece of debris shot out of the water. Ezra felt a warning sense shoot through him in the Force just in time for him to grab Tharin's shoulders and roll them a few feet away, both of them tumbling through the snow until they came to a sudden jolting stop.

He stared down at her, snow visibly caught in her dark hair and lashes as she blinked away
snowflakes with a slightly stunned look aimed up in his direction, her face purple now as he felt his own cheeks begin to blush. Their breaths collided through the chill air and both felt a thump in their chests before they each turned their heads to the side just in time to see something stab into the snow beside where their bodies had just been, the debris kicking up a few slushy bits of snow which splattered against their faces.

They only blinked and stared at what had just come barreling out of the sky to skewer them both. It was one... single... *mummified* Chiss bone.

"HA-HA!" Tharin cheered, slamming a fist eagerly into the snow. "Thank you Captain!"

Ezra felt his arms go limp as he coughed out a smile and slammed his face into the snow from the sheer irony before rolling off to the side to lay beside her.

Tharin snickered, sitting up and looking up to the sky as the misty droplets of water made the air around her smile appear to sparkle. She was explaining the odds of what had just happened before giving in to claim it might have had something more to do with Ezra's Force connections. It might have been that he was face-deep in snow, but her voice just kind of drowned out as he rolled his eyes and watched her gleeful expression talking. He couldn't help but be happy for her... even if her happiness normally made him feel a bit uneasy and a little scared sometimes.

*Normal people didn't get that excited over bones falling from the sky, right? It wasn't just him who saw the morbid humor in that, was it?*
Still, her laughter, the glittering jet of water in the background, and the endorphins rushing through him from almost dying again, made him feel his heart beating profoundly in his chest and his mind was starting to slowly shut down and go blank. Not to mention, despite the freezing temperature of the ground around him, his skin was starting to grow suddenly hotter. Either he really was dying, or he imagined he was about to do something incredibly stupid.

"Well..." Tharin sighed contently, turning back to look down at him and holding out her hand. "Let's get out of here and get you into some dry clothes, okay? I have a spare uniform in the Clawcraft that should stretch to fit you, and I have dry socks for both of us. I keep a few extras in the compartment because I absolutely hate it when water soaks through my boots. Which unfortunately is the case right now."

"Prepared as always..." he grinned.  _Oh yeah... he was about to do something stupid alright._

She smiled softly at him, and just as she started to stand up, he grabbed her hand tighter and pulled her back down. He could feel her heartbeat now thudding right through his own chest as she stared at him with wide, curious, red eyes, the cut on her hand staining lukewarm blood through his shirt though he couldn't concentrate on that on top of everything else. He had absolutely no idea what he was doing, but he did it anyway, his free hand coming up to steady her chin, tilting her head towards him right before he kissed her... just once... just lightly, before letting her go and dropping his head back into the snow with a content sigh, the warm puff of breath appearing in front of his own face before he started to laugh again.

Tharin made no movements to get back up. Her mind, normally so full of thought and never ending observations, was now for unknown reasons, utterly blank and empty as she tried to figure out what had just happened. A kiss? She might have wondered. A human kiss? Had he hit his head on the way up? Was this an effect of the adrenaline rush? They had almost died numerous times before this one, so what was the deciding factor of Ezra's sudden action of affection? All were questions she might have had if she could get her brain to work. Unable to do so however, she just crouched there motionless, not remembering how to think, blink, or even breath until Ezra's voice spoke up and jump-started her senses.

"Sorry..." He blushed a little and maneuvered himself out from under her so he could stand again on his own two feet, his hands guiding her with him, though she hadn’t noticed until they were already upright. “That was pretty crazy stuff back there, right? I told myself that I’d either kiss or kill you if we lived this time, so I decided it would probably be better for me to keep you around a little while longer.”

She blinked hard and felt the years of her hard-trained human sarcasm take form as words in her mouth before she even knew what she was truly saying.

“Oh right, you just need someone to decipher the book and get you through to your trials! I see through your words, Ezra Bridger.”

"You caught me?" He shrugged, his face so red now that she was certain it was more than just the frost-nipped air.

Ezra bent down, picked the old journal up, and lightly tapped it against her head before allowing her hands to take it from him. Even the simple motion of grabbing a book seemed slow and unnecessarily hard to actually do. He smirked and from his face alone, Tharin felt another pang in her chest as Ezra waved her towards him.

"Come on, you were right before, we need to get out of here. Oh, and don't forget your creepy bone, alright? I can grab the canister of death fuel. How long before the thermal signatures fade so
She reached down to pick up the bone, but was still trying to process the rest of what he'd said as they walked towards the Clawcraft. Her mind was uncharacteristically void, and all she could focus on was the feeling of the wet, chapped texture of his lips on hers, his warm breath lingering in her mouth, warmer than anything she'd ever felt before. It made everything in her chest and stomach tickle like little bubbles just to think about and she wondered suddenly if she might be dying. *Maybe her small cut was infected? Maybe her oxygen mask had been compromised? Maybe she'd landed in the snow too hard?*

No... no that wasn't what this was. It struck her suddenly. *Oh k'pah! She knew what this was... If this was what she thought this feeling felt like then she was in serious trouble. Affection? For her test subject, her friend, a human!? For... for Ezra?*

She tossed the mummified humerus back into the snow with a swift flick of her wrist and hurried up to the Clawcraft just as Ezra stored the empty canister in the compartment below. There was only one way for her to know for sure.

“Ezra...”

He turned to face her just as soon as her voice had caught his attention, but by then he couldn't get out any form of reply. Tharin slammed into him and kissed him again, rough and hard now, her heart rate increasing and her hand coming up to feel his own rapid heartbeat as the other one brushed along the scratchy stubble of his face. It stung her cut, but she didn't care, pushing deeper into his arms as they both felt the ship tap against his back.

In Chiss culture when two people wished to express romantic intent, they rubbed noses. Now, there were two ways to do that, the way her parents or honored elders such as Stent and Ina did, where the two rubbed the tips of their noses lightly together. This method was seen to be cute, innocent, and revealed the many years of built up emotion and revered companionship. Then there was the second way, the more brazen and intense way that Tharin was doing right now. It was a slow slide down the nape of his nose with her own that planted her lips in precisely the right spot for their mouths to touch before coming up the other side, his lips catching her chin as she did.

There was no doubt in her mind anymore. Those feelings she'd been having around him were indeed infatuation, and judging by his human responses, perhaps he had been feeling the same for all those months as well?

Ezra did not consider himself good at kissing. In fact, he was still not entirely sure if he was doing it right, but hoped with any luck that he was. He wasn't sure how long this was supposed to last or who was supposed to break off first, not to mention if he was even kissing at the right angle or not. He got her chin a few times because she kept moving her face, but even the misses were making his mind flutter. At least Tharin had even less experience than he did in this department, not even knowing what kissing was until a few months ago. He had that going for him at least. At any rate, it felt nice and they had been doing it for longer than he expected, so he supposed he had to be doing at least something right.

Her lips were soft against his, her breath cold like the arctic air, but there was a strange and lingering heat-like spice to it as well. *Chiss caf...* he thought. *That's what it was! She tasted like Chiss caf.* He leaned forward, letting himself do what felt natural as her hand came up to rest against his neck, the other settling onto the chest of his wet clothes that were slowly freezing to his body. He hated the cold, especially being wet in the cold, but somehow he forgot that fact for just a few moments more as his hand came up to run fingers through her wavy blue-black hair and he settled in deeper into her lips.
No, he had never kissed anyone before, though he’d thought about it dozens of time when he was younger, especially when he was first starting out on the crew, and he’d had that naive child’s crush on—

The thought of her name alone was enough to break him out of his trance and he leaned away as their lips parted with a gentle pop.

Tharin said something in soft Cheunh through a breathless stupor against his neck and it gave him chills— *though, that might have just been the cold?*

"Enough of that..." She laughed bashfully into herself afterwards before smacking his chest again and opening the door to the Clawcraft. "Time to go."

Ezra felt a sudden chill from her choice of phrasing, but shook it away and smiled as he helped her into the ship, making sure they didn't leave any evidence behind, but all the while too stunned to say anything. Across the immense guilt he suddenly felt, there was also a simultaneous sensation of pure unbridled joy as he thought back to what had just happened, not back then when his memories had been so full of pain, but rather... just now... when he couldn't remember ever being this happy to be in the company of another person.

What the guys had told him earlier in that cave on Sposia had spontaneously come back to his mind and got him suddenly thinking. Tharin really *wasn't* like any other girls he’d ever met. She was strange, intrusive, and odd, but through all of that they had formed a connection and a long lasting friendship with one another. Sure, the two of them teased each other and joked around, even getting flustered from time to time, but he thought that had just been the awkwardness between their differing species. *He realized now that this was probably not the case.* He liked her and if what just happened was any evidence at all, she might like him right back!

Tharin was great, she was incredible, she was— *huh? You know, he had never really thought about it before... not really...* but she was brave, daring, brilliant, friendly, and despite getting on his nerves more often than not, his eyes had never tried to hide that fact that she was also kind of beautiful— *in a flawlessly attractive sort of way.* He always felt like he could tell her anything and when she listened, he could feel that it was more than just her taking mental notes for the Inrokini. Plus, he always seemed to be happy whenever she got excited about an experiment or whenever he beat her in the training room and she would get that pouty defeated look on her face before swearing her revenge on him. He liked it when they joked around, when they argued, when they got on each others' nerves, or when they were together— just doing anything really, so long as they were side by side. He had always felt this strange sense of calm content happiness within him in moments like that, a feeling he never thought he'd feel again after remembering the loss of his crew. There was actually a lot of things she made him feel that he never thought he'd feel again.

*The Imperials would never let them live this down after all that teasing and prodding. Oh stars! What would Thrass think? Thrawn would probably be fine, but Thrass? Her mother? Ronin?* Nope! He was a dead man, that much was inevitable now. Gunther was right, he must have some kind of death wish when it came to liking girls.

*Ezra laughed to himself, and it struck him then, a thought that had been clawing its way through the back of his mind for a while now, but now it flowed freely to him as he finally allowed it into his thoughts. He could be probably be happy here... with her. After the war was over, that is. He could perhaps have a life here, even after Ahsoka eventually found him. The Death Star was gone now, and Thrawn said the war would be too in a few more years. So when Ahsoka did come like Master Yoda said, *whenever that might be,* he didn’t actually have to go back with her. He could stay in the Unknown Regions, he could maybe train the Alani girls full-time once all the fighting...*
was done, and he could maybe... *for once*... just try to have an actual normal life somewhere. *Could the Chiss Ascendancy truly be that place?*

Jorj crawled out of his backpack long enough to greet them, but quickly returned once he saw Ezra soaking wet and shivering. The Ysalamiri hated being cold, wet, or any combination of the two more than even Ezra himself did, and he did not begrudge the little lizard for keeping his distance.

“Clothes are in the fourth compartment from the left. Do you see it?” Tharin pointed, taking the controls with a bit of smug satisfaction. She noted his silence and looked back from the controls just in time to feel him take her hand. Both of them blushed, the med kit in his free hand coming down as he set it in her lap.

"Hey... can I try something?"

She nodded unsurely and he took her injured, trying now to see those small points and lines with the Force that he had used to heal Thrawn's wound a few months ago. That stabbing tear in the chest had revealed dozens of little charts and dots all around Thrawn's veins, but Tharin only had a few, and he eased some of his Force energy into the small cut, feeling the exhaustion he'd been fighting back come into him now like a open gateway once he let her hand go.

"A handy trick." She chuckled, nudging him once. "Get it? Handy?"

"Oh I get it," he said groggily. "Which Imperial decided to teach you about puns?"

"Pyrondi," she replied, her grin shifting into a frown once Ezra rubbed at his face. "Are you alright?"

"Fine..." he said quickly. "I thought I could heal your hand, but I think it takes a lot more out of me than I thought. Plus I might have been pushing it a bit down in the tunnel."

"Oh!" she sounded almost guilty now. "Please don't waste such precious energy on my account Ezra. It really was just a scratch."

"I thought it would be worth a shot. If I could heal Thrawn from the brink of death, then I thought how hard could a small cut be? I guess I got my answer."

"This was the technique taught to you by Krayt, right? Wasn't Yoda warning you that it was a dark move? Are you sure you should be using that so freely?"

"Maybe not..." he agreed with soft acceptance. "But like I said, it was worth a shot..."

He snuck a quick kiss into her hand and took back the med kit, stumbling only slightly before a cool allure of aloof energy returned to him.

"Uh..." Tharin stammered, unable to process words in Cheunh, *much less in Basic*, as she stared dumbly at her hand. "Thank... you..."

"Don't mention it."

He put the med kit away then and dug into the compartment for the spare uniform, finding it and then pulling it out before tossing one of three emergency pairs of socks at the center of her face. She didn't have the mental capacity to try and catch them until they had already landed in her lap and she looked down at them as though she'd never seen a pair of blue-fiber foot clothes before.

"Whoops! Sorry!" His face was red now and whatever distant facade he was trying to pull off a
moment ago was fading back into his cute clumsiness as he pointed back behind him at nothing in particular. "Uh... so... yeah, I'm just going to—"

"Oh! Right! Sorry!"

She darted quickly around and gave him the "privacy" that humans were all so adamant about. Though, she quickly noticed that if she stared *just right* into the viewport glass that she could almost make out the shape of him in the reflection. But no... she stopped herself and focused adamantly on the buttons of her controls instead. One of the first things Ezra refused when she'd first started experimenting on him was to let her see certain areas of his anatomy, the places he deemed "private" and "off-limits" to her research. She had to promise that she wouldn't look and had to stick with that oath or else her honor as a Chiss scientist might as well be total *k'pah*.

"Are you all set back there?" she asked, her voice taking on a new light to him now that only made him want to take her face in his hands and kiss her again. *Was it normal to want to kiss somebody so much after only two attempts?* After all his history as a legendary "heart-breaker" he felt like Kanan would know the answer, but unfortunately Ezra was on his own, and there wasn't exactly anyone he would feel very comfortable in asking about this sort of thing. *Not without dying of embarrassment anyway.*

He blushed.

"Sorry... y-yeah... I'm good... You good?"

She nodded but avoided the urge to look back.

"I am good."

"Good."

"Good."

They had said "*good*" too many times. It had started to get weird.

“So!” Tharin broke the tension. "We finally broke ground in our secret searches, Sevicsi...” she tightened her hands on the controls and also bit her lips as the hot sensations of purple faded into her cheeks. “Among other discoveries... But more to the point, all of our hard work is finally starting to show results. We should be happy about that. We have a journal, we have that bone marrow... It is all one step closer to receiving answers! That's good news, right? We should definitely be happy.”

They should be happy, *they should*, but for some reason neither of them smiled.

“I’m happy...” he argued unconvincingly. “I can’t wait to find out what all we found. All those times we nearly died... yeah... this book better have all the answers in the universe inside it or I’m going to be livid.”

She chuckled.

“I highly doubt it will, but I agree with your dramatics nonetheless.” Her voice suddenly returned to that tutorly tone it took whenever she ordered him around in her lab and she glanced back at him once they were safely out of orbit. “You know, you should try to rest and replenish your energies while you have the opportunity to do so. We’ll be on Schesa in a matter of hours and they’ll expect you at full strength for their next lesson. You know how the girls can get.”
As usual, she was right, and Ezra nodded with a small chuckle.

“I did promise to teach the girls a new form with those laser lances you made for them.”

"See? You are going to need your full attentive strength for that! Those twins, Hasti and Pritni, have a pretty mean back-swing!"

"Right," he chuckled. "Alright, I get it. I'll sleep!"

Tharin fidgeted in her seat, trying not to ruin the silence with more questions but she couldn’t help it, that sort of thing was literally against her nature.

“Ezra... um... before you rest, you should know— or rather— regardless of intent—” She swallowed hard and Ezra could hear the nervous hesitant shaking in her breath from where he sat in the back of the Clawcraft with Jorj. He didn't need the Force to tell that she was nervous and she took a deep breath, trying to continue. “I just mean, we can talk about what just happened, and I can tell you more about the cultural differences of such things— I mean— if you would like? Or— if you think this is something you might like to test again...”

His face was burning now too, partly from curiosity, the other part of the sheer awkward aura in the air. Still, she was trying her best to be sincere without getting as deep into curiosity as she normally did, so Ezra chose to meet her halfway.

“Okay.”

It was a single word, but it did wonders to lift the tension.

"Make no mistake!" she continued strictly. "Your training comes first. Don't think this changes anything. I still have a job to do."

He laughed.

"Wouldn't dream of it."

"Good."

"Good."

Now both of them smiled as Tharin piloted them halfway across the star lanes to Schesa. Silence overtook the ship and as Ezra leaned back against the side of the wall, the heat of his newfound fluster warming him far faster than the ship's ducts could. It would be a long road with a lot of transitions, duties, and challenges to face beforehand, but they could manage. With a goofy looking grin on his face, he shut his eyes and let his numb fingers trace the bridge of his nose where she'd pressed her face up against his and the memory sent a whirlwind through his stomach. Even if that was one of the kisses where he'd missed her lips, and probably meant nothing aside an embarrassing slip up, he might have considered it his favorite one, and even smiled to himself as he silently affirmed his earlier thoughts.

*Maybe he truly could be happy with a life here after all?*
Chapter Summary

Lohrana sends a suitor to Tharin's lab but since she's busy translating the recovered journal from Csilla, that means Ezra will have to watch the poor sap and try not to let his jealousy get the better of him. Although, that doesn't mean he and the other scientists can't have a bit of fun with him along the way.

Chapter Notes

Posted on: November 19, 2018

[As you can see, I am taking a lot of liberties with Legends lore now. Good luck everyone!]

Ezra walked into the lab the next day a little sore and with a lot on his mind.

For starters, he and Tharin hadn’t really had a chance to talk about what happened between them back on Csilla and that was mostly his own fault. By the time she woke him up, the Clawcraft was already landing on Schesa and they were barely in time to meet their appointment with the Alani girls. There was no way they would have forgiven him if he was late for their special combat training, and if their loyalty was anything to go by, he certainly didn’t want to see what the girls were like when they were mad at him.

Those tiny Chiss soldiers were ruthless, beating him like a regular sparring holo with those electro-lances that Tharin made, and oh how the girls had been longing to try them out. They were a beautiful weapon, inspired from designs he’d drawn of Zeb’s bo-rifle and a basic Chiss quarterstaff, but with bright buzzing electrical lights shining with blue-green energy. She made them to mimic lightsaber technology, but in a way that was a bit more Chiss-friendly, complimenting their already strong stick-fighting skills while also incorporating a bit of Inrokini tech into the design.

The girls were all trained soldiers to begin with, so they picked up the lightsaber formations quickly. In a way, it was kind of like fighting a bunch of tiny blue Sabines, and he only wished she were around to watch them fight because she would have absolutely loved it. Especially the part where they beat him up. When it came time to test them one by one, the girls did not hold any of their mercy back and Ezra was repeatedly reminding himself how glad he was that he wasn’t fighting in a war against the Chiss.

Oh sure, he still wanted to get a few shots in at Thrawn after regaining a few more of his memories. Ezra figured he owed him for that blaster bolt he took to the shoulder back on the Chimera, and not to mention a few other battles here and there that he could just vaguely remember.

Ezra had no idea how he was going to explain the purrgil incident to Thrawn— or to the other
Imperials. He’d thought about bringing it up on their visit to Sposia a few weeks ago, but he had just been having so much fun seeing everyone again that he held it back. What would they do if they found out it was his plan that led them to crash? That it was his connection to the purrgil that killed everyone and everything they’d ever known? They thought he saved them, but instead he alone was responsible for the way their lives were now. Pyrondi and her baby… Urick and his torture… Faro’s lost dreams… it was his fault.

He walked through the doors and stretched out his shoulders feeling the bruises stretch alongside his skin. It had been a rough few days and all these internal guilt trips and non-stop action adventures were stretching him pretty thin, both physically and mentally, but no, there was no time for self-destructive guilty loathing. Today it was just going to be him, Tharin, and all the time in the world to talk, but to do so about more pressing matters like the journal, their kiss, or whatever insane lesson she had planned for him today. He smiled at the thought of seeing her. At least he would always be able to count on Tharin as a stable part of his life here. Good old honest, reliable, sympathetic, comforting—

“Tharin?”

She was pacing from desk to desk, a look on her face that was polite, but aggravated and running on a short fuse at the same time. There was someone he had never seen before trailing behind her. This man was not a scientist, in fact, he was dressed in a regal uniform of Mitth burgundy with gold detail and fancy pompadour hair. An off-world Chiss for sure, maybe one from Copero judging by the House colors, but why was he here?

Ezra took in a deep breath, instantly realizing that today was not about to get any easier, and wandered up to the lab-space neighboring Tharin’s.

“Hey Magin!” He whispered with a point over in her direction. “Vea cart csei?”

The older scientist looked up for what was probably the first time in the last hour to observe, then he merely frowned before hissing out a notice call to his lifemate, Enoin, and then at two other neighboring scientists as all five of them took shelter behind his massive laser cannon prototype and huddled together out of sight.

“Ch'an'ucw in'a...”

“Another one?” Ezra repeated. “Another one, what?”

Magin, Enoin, Cerein, and Daevin were the Inrokini scientists who worked closest to Tharin’s work space, and they were also some of the only other scientists he’d become comfortable acquaintances with in the last five months on Csaus. The six of them never really spent any time together outside of work, but they did volunteer their time on occasion to partaking in a few laser-tag games or multi-target sparring matches.

Magin and Enoin, who were nearly as old as Thrawn was, were married to one another and were each a part of the weapons and development team. Cerein, who was in her thirties, worked specifically on Myrkr expeditions and eco-friendly fuel research, so she gave Tharin a lot of personal data for Jorj’s nutrient frame and the Vornskr puppies. Then Daevin was only about twenty-five but he knew everything there was to know about ice samples and the physics of the planets along the Path of Houses. His maps of Rentor, came in handy before the whole “crashed-submarine-near-death-debacle” that cut their trip short a few weeks back.

Inrokini curiosity made the four Chiss easier to befriend than Ezra had anticipated, but it also made them all the more likely to gossip, and it turns out that Tharin’s activities were one of their favorite
topics to gather around and discuss in their free time.

“Poor rect'tin'ecot…” Cerein sighed. “Nah ebah what he is in for.”

Ezra could only understand every other word they were saying, but luckily he still had his translator watch to help him out—at least on the listening side of things anyway. Speaking Cheunh however, would be something that was entirely up to him to remember, and he was fervently aware that he butchered their language every time he spoke. His Cheunh pronunciation would never be completely correct because he didn’t have the vocal cords to make some of the more subtle sounds, but he was getting better at mimicking the words enough to be understood.

“In for what? Who is that guy?”

“Another suitor sent for Tharin, no doubt,” Magin replied.

“Judging from that hair and those clothes, I suspect the boy is a diplomat. He is most likely just an apprentice judging by that lack of presence about him…” Enoin observed.

“I wonder if this poor fool will make it through the day or if she will send him home crying like the last one?”


“This is the third one Mitth’lohr’ana has sent straight to the labs,” Daevin stated. “But her mother
tries this every few months. I’m sure there has been more that we just have not seen.”

“I bet you four power couplings that she has him in a shuttle out of here before dinner.”

“Make it lunch.”

“I like those odds.”

“Hey, hey, hey! Focus here you guys.” Ezra spoke quickly, lightly snapping his fingers to keep their attention. “What do we do? Veo k’ir?”

“Veo k’ir nah k’ir!” Magin corrected. “But we do not do anything. Tharin typically takes care of these bothersome suitors herself.”

“Bothersome?” Enoin lifted a brow. “Should Mitth’ar’inrokini not try to find herself a lifemate, ch’acico?”

Cerein and Daevin snorted as Magin got a regretful blush for the unintentional insult of his own relationship.

“But in a politician?” He argued. “No, she would be better suited for another scientist, ch’acico. Like you and I.”

His partner made an unimpressed, “uh huh” sound but accepted the response as the both of them shot a look to the other two to their side.

“Don’t look at me!” Daevin waved. “I’m courting Bar’asa’inrokini! You know, the biochemist? She and I are very happy together.”

“She’s too young for me,” Cerein added with a wave of her short, flippy hair. “Plus Tharin always struck me as the kind of personality who preferred to be alone. Her best ideas are created in solitude just like Ronin’s.”

“I know this...” Magin nodded. “I just think she would be bored out of her mind with a politician as a lifemate.”

Ezra stood tall and took a step out from behind the laser.

“I’m going to go over there.”

“Of course you are, Ezra. You are her project. She needs to study with you today.”

“I would study you for her—” Daevin started. “But your kind is not really my area of expertise.”

“And Tharin would probably kill us. Her temper is just as legendary as her other work here.”

“Oh! Look fast!” Enoin pointed. “He is going in for physical contact. A fifteen degree angle. The hand is heading towards the left hypochondriac region.”

“Looks more like the lumbar sector to me?”

“I am not mistaken. He is definitely reaching for the hypochondrium.”

Ezra didn’t have to ask what they were talking about and he didn’t have time to read the translation of it either. As Tharin paused at her desk to look over one of her machines, the politician’s hand started to ease itself far too close to her waist for Ezra’s comfort, and he was not about to let that
happen on his watch. Focusing just slightly on the other hand that was leaning up against the desk, he placed just enough Force energy to cause his hand to slip across the desktop and send him crashing face-first into the floor.

The scientists laughed, Tharin turning towards the ground with one raised brow to stare down at him before going back to her device.

“Careful?”

Purple-faced he stood and composed himself.

“I’m fine! It’s fine. You are merely too much for my gravity to bear, but it will take more than falling for you to rid yourself of me, my lady.”

He placed a hand on her shoulder and Tharin made a subtle face that Ezra wondered if anyone else could really read besides him. Then she removed his hand and gathered a few disks together on the other side of the table.

“That tears it…” Ezra grumbled. “I’m going over there.”

None of the scientists understood what he’d said, but they saw him walk over to her desk and cheered for him from behind the laser anyway.

“Good luck Ezra. You’re going to need it.”

“I’m not the only one…” he huffed, swapping to a cheery shout as he approached the desk. “Good morning, Tharin!”

“Oh Ezra!” she sighed with obvious relief. “Thank the stars you’re finally here!”

He smiled when she hugged him, but even as she did, he and the Chiss politician did not break gazes for even a split second. His gaze seemed calculating, but mostly unamused and unimpressed with Ezra’s sudden appearance.

“So… who’s your friend?”

“Mitth’or’bintrano…” She sighed, this time in exhaustion as the man bowed at the mention of his name. “My mother rushed him over here this morning to try and metaphorically win my heart.”

“I see…”

Ezra smirked, the restraint in his face and voice hidden from practically anyone non-human or not Tharin.

“Oh don’t get that smirk on your face, Bridger! This is not funny. Look, I really needed to use the time today to translate the journal we found, not to indulge some poor foolish man’s fantasy. So could you—” she nudged her head. “You know—”

“Could I—” His eyes shot wide. “Wait, you don’t mean—”

“Yes? I thought my violent head nudging was fairly clear.” She took his hands in hers. “Please just distract him for me for a few hours. I really want to get this journal translated!”

“He came here to literally try and win you over. What can I possibly do to keep him occupied?”

“Do whatever you must. I permit you to use your imagination!”
“But Tharin!”

“I appreciate the assist, and despite what I’m sure the others must have told you behind Magin’s gossip fortress over there, I do not want to send another poor suitor home in tears… not until I figure out what this book says at least. I swear, when I get my hands on my mother, I’m going to —”

“Okay, okay, calm down! I’ll babysit the suitor. But you are going to owe me a long talk later today, you know that?”

“I know.” She smiled and patted his cheek. “I promise I will explain anything and everything you wish, just as soon as I get this book translated. For now though, I’m gone. I’m going to lay low so don’t try to contact me and do not look for me. I might as well not exist for the next few hours, clear?”

He frowned, but in a honoree, teasing sort of way that turned more into a pouty smile.

“Aww! Now why am I being punished?”

“You’re cute.” She got suddenly angry and smacked him once in the chest. “Don’t be cute in the lab! We talked about this! If the others see you, they’ll become overwhelmed in curiosi—”

“Cart cseah ch’a tsuntahn ch’eo ren’musen’i?”

The man had seen her hit him and had come up to make sure everything was alright, the look in his eye proving that he didn’t trust Ezra farther than he could spit, and he was already sizing him up as he walked over. Tharin pivoted towards him and put on a painfully fake smile before she made her reply.

“No problem! Forgive me, Mitth’or’bintrano, but I have a very urgent matter that needs my attention. Until then, Ezra Bridger has agreed to keep you company in my place.”

“Mitth’ar’inrokini, I am afraid I would not be good company for this outsider,” he said fervently, though trying to feign politeness as he did. “He does not even speak our language.”

“Csaito…” Ezra said, swallowing down the aggravation as he did. “Actually, I understand Cheunh a little better than I can speak it, but I can speak some.”

“That is true, I have been teaching him well in these past weeks,” Tharin smiled. “Do you doubt my teaching abilities, Mitth’or’bintrano?”

His blue skin seemed to grow three shades lighter and he bowed to her apologetically.

“Not at all my lady! Please, go and complete your work. I will be happy to remain here in the company of the outsider—” He cleared his throat. “I mean, with Ezra Bridger.”

“Cssoboti is fine.” Ezra waved. “Some of the other scientists call me and Eli that anyway.”

“I don’t…” He looked to Tharin for help, his eyes pitifully lost and hopelessly confused by Ezra’s sudden swap to Basic.

She rolled her eyes and stepped over to her desk to slap a watch around the young man’s wrist.

“Here… this is an old prototype I made a few months back. Your watch will translate the Basic and Ezra, your Cheunh translator still works, right? If there is a slip of phrase or an unknown term, you
“Remarkable! You are incredibly talented inventor. I would think nothing less of the Inrokini.”

She nodded gingerly at him with measured tact.

“Thank you Mitth’or’binrano.”

“Please…” he said with a single smooth motion. “Call me Thorbin. I wish to have you think of me as an equal if our courting is to go as planned.”

Ezra understood every other word of that, but it still made something in his forehead twitch. He didn’t even have to check his translator to confirm the irritation.

“Very well Thorbin, your subtlety is noted. Perhaps under the circumstances it would be acceptable for—”

“Absolutely!” he interrupted. “I could not agree more.”

She smiled and there was a flicker of mischief in her glowing red eyes.

“How noble. I was about to suggest you allow Ezra to address you by your core name as well.”

He visibly stiffened, his left cheek twitching, but nodding reproachfully as he realized he had fully walked into her trap. Ezra had to rub his mouth to keep from grinning.

“Of course!” Thorbin lied. “Anything to make his stay easier.” He reached down, took her hand and squeezed it. Tharin’s lifted brow expression revealing to Ezra that this was probably the Chiss equivalent of kissing her hand. This gave him even greater internal pleasure when she slowly pulled it away and shot Ezra an apologetic side glance before walking away.

“Have fun you two.” She whispered in Ezra’s ear. “Try to play nice. It’s not entirely his fault.”

"I will seriously try..."

She smiled.

“Hurry back, my lady!” Thorbin called, earning a few curious glances and snide remarks from the other scientists which made Tharin get that “I will give you three seconds to rethink your next action, lest I pummel you into the floor” look as she rolled her eyes and made her quick escape.

Ezra and Thorbin watched her go, the silence between them quickly growing awkward and noticeable.

“Sooo…” Ezra clapped, his body language feigning excitement, but his voice already ready for this day to be over. "What would you like to do?”

“How long do these urgent matters typically last?”

“Who knows?” He shrugged, trying his best to say as much Cheunh that came to mind until he saw Thorbin’s eyes practically glued to the screen as if expecting Ezra not even to try. He frowned, and continued. “Once she locked herself away for three days to get her formulas straightened out.”

“Straightened out?” He repeated questioningly.

“Oh right! So, that was an expression. I just mean that Tharin spent all that time working to perfect
her formula for those three days.”

“I see…”

He was bored now, his eyes looking along the lab at the other projects as the other scientists seemed to glare and move to a more secret location.

About that same time, Ezra’s watch vibrated and he got a message from Tharin.

_Dear Ezra._

_Oh yeah, I forgot to remind you, that the Inrokini inventions are somewhat private._

_Get Thorbin out of the labs before Ronin sees him._

_Thank you! Goodbye!_

_Sincerely, Tharin._

He had half a mind to remind her that she didn’t need to address him so formally in a basic message, but let it slide as the overwhelming worry of Ronin watching and potentially seeing this politician in the labs unsupervised took priority.

*How was he going to get this guy to leave though?*

“Hey! So why don’t the two of us _uhhh_—” He started, but never got the chance to make up an excuse. There was a clank and the sounds of multiple claw-toed feet padding towards them, as Thorbin’s eyes went large and he hoped behind the desk for safety.

“What are those creatures?!?” He gasped, his perfect hair a bit mussed from the sudden jump.

Ezra laughed as the force of eight calf-high Vornskr puppies slammed into him and started wagging their little clipped tails happily.

“Hey little guys!” He made a cute face and looked over to the side. “And girls! Who broke out of their pen again? Was it you? Was it?!”

“Ezra! Ezra!” Cerein came up, panting to catch her breath. “Forgive me!”

“It’s no problem, Cerein,” he said with a smile, rubbing vigorously as the many heads butted together for a place nearest his hands.

“The young Vornskr managed to run past me when I went in to feed them.” She shot him a very hard glare. “I was going to _take them outside_ of the lab today to run as well.”

He caught on and mouthed a _thank you_ to her before standing to his feet.

“Hey, why don’t I take them out today to run off a little energy?”

“Really?” She blinked in false astonishment. “Are you for certain?”

“It’s fine. Tharin’s busy today with other work, and I have my good pal Thorbin back here to help. Isn’t that right?”

He composed himself and stepped back onto the floor.

“I suppose that is as accurate an explanation as I can offer,” he said, begrudgingly calm.

Cerein blinked again and nodded.
“Alright. They are all yours. Good luck.” Another hidden look and Ezra caught onto that meaning as well. He’d have to remember to pay her back for the quick thinking later. Something told him that this would be Jorj-related. Cerein always liked to study Jorj. That just meant he would need to make it up to the Ysalamiri as well.

“Come on pups!” He clapped. “You wanna go outside? Huh? Who wants to go outside? Who wants to go outside!?"

“The beasts cannot respond to you!” Thorbin scoffed. “Why are you speaking to them? And what is that odd dialect in your tone?”

Ezra made a face before turning to face him with a more polite look plastered in its place.

“It’s just something you say to cute animals to get their energy raised.”

“And why would you want to do that?”

The puppies tumbled around one another, tipping over a chair and causing the Mitth apprentice to jump out of the way as Ezra opened the door to the lab wide open and they all shot outside like little black streaks of wind.

“I don’t really know? But they seem happy, right?”

Thorbin considered it.

“Fine. I will indulge your oddities, cssoboti, but…” He placed an outstretched arm to stop Ezra from moving in time to grow a little bit taller and a lot more menacing. “Address me by my core name again, and I will end you where you stand. Understand?”

“Understood…” He muttered under his breath. “Sleemo…”

“What was that?”

He glared at his watch but it didn't seem to recognize the term.

“Oh, that's just a term we humans use to address a superior!” Ezra lied.

“I see…” He mused. “Alright, I suppose it is appropriate. I will permit you to call me this “Sleemo” term for the remainder of my time here.”

It took everything in him not to snicker.

“Whatever you say... Sleemo.”

“Remarkable! Truly remarkable!” Tharin muttered to herself, notes strewn throughout her room. “If this syntax is correct than this should be here, and this would equate to this. Yes! Yes! I think I’ve got it! So what does our first sentence reveal, Captain?”

Property of Captain Uli’ver’imilu, record of expeditionary group designation: Outbound Flight.
“I’m hooked already!” She cheered. “I hope Ezra is having as good a time as I am right now!”

“Nip! Terrik! Get out of that yard! Sehn, Fawn, don’t make me come over there! Hey! Dorja, Mirax! Not so rough with your little brother! Valin, no no no… bad girl that is not where we do that! UGH!”

“Are they always this undisciplined?”

“They’re just babies? They don’t know any better.”

“It is an odd collection that Kor’on’inrokini has of these beasts. To think of a Chiss who would willingly choose to keep care over an unintelligent animal…”

More intelligent than you… he wanted to say.

“You know Commander Thrawn has a Ysalamiri, right?” He said instead.

“You say that like it is meant to be a good excuse. Brilliant as his tactical orders may be, that man has always been on the wrong side of politics and a black mark on Mitth house for as long as I can remember. Figures an outsider would like an abnormal such as Thrawn.”

Ezra opened his mouth to speak, realized nothing he could possibly say would be worth the argument, and closed his lips together only to whistle for the Vornskr again.

Thorbin’s eyes shot wide again as he looked down at Ezra's face, slightly appalled.

“What was that sound?”


“What would be the use of such bodily noise?”

He shrugged.

“Well, you can call things to you—” He whistled sharply and one of the more gentle Vornskr pups, and his personal favorite, Nehso, came up to sit beside him obediently as Ezra rubbed behind his ear.

Thorbin only watched, that squinted Chiss curiosity in his eyes.

“Then you can pass the time with a tune—” Ezra whistled a tune and Thorbin’s face contorted trying to figure out how he was making such sounds. “It’s easy stuff really. Watch this!” He put his hands up and made a bird call that just about had Thorbin checking the skies. “Bird calls. Neat tricks for secret signals or just for fun, right?”

He puckereded his lips and a stream of sputtering air came out. Thorbin puffed out his cheeks to try again to no avail and let out a bored sigh.

“Enough shenanigans. When will Lady Tharin return? I really hoped to spend my day much differently than blowing air and wrangling beasts.”
“Knowing her, she’s probably barely scratched the surface.”

“Scratched the surface of what?”

Ezra rubbed his eyes. Now he was starting to see what Eli meant when he’d first told Ezra that he had to explain all of his expressions and idioms to the Chiss.

“I mean she probably just got started working.”

“Glorious…” He grumbled.

Ezra tried for a different conversation, though he really didn’t want to.

“So, why did you come here?”

Thorbin glared at him but sighed and took in a patient breath.

“Chiss rituals are not something I would expect you to understand, cssoboti.”

“Well, that’s kind of the whole reason I’m here, so…”

Another glare, but Throbin did not try to argue again.

“I come from two esteemed families the Mitth and the Bintrano. Lady of the House, Mitth’lohr’ana, has selected me out of all others to court her daughter, the Lady Mitth’ar. Should I get to spend any actual time with her today, we will surely set more dates to speak, then eventually couple, and strengthen Mitth House.”

“Yeah, but Tharin is with the Inrokini. What makes you think she wants to go back to Mitth House?”

“It is her birthright, of course she wishes to return!” He spoke now as though Ezra were an idiot. “Yes, her experiments are whimsical and they have been beneficial to the Chiss, but when she is through playing, she will inevitably return to the life she was born to lead under her respected parents. Her personality will change once she stops all these hobbies of hers and decides to mature.”

“Her personality?” Ezra scoffed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

“Oh come now, I'm certain even an outsider can see that though the Lady Mitth'ar has always been beautiful, she has been an odd one, different from other Chiss. I'd say she could be an abnormal if not for her impressive familial ties and accomplishments. She has been this way ever since our childhood. Though, as I said, her family holds much power in the House name and such abnormalities she possesses will wither with time, especially once she matures and takes a larger role in Mitth House.”

Ezra gritted his teeth, reminding himself of all the reasons why smacking him across his perfectly chiseled face would do more harm than good. He tried to remember what Kanan always said. “It's not whether or not we fight, it's how we choose to fight that matters.” Ezra figured choosing to fight with his fists was probably a bad idea... a good thing to think about, a great feeling to imagine in his fists, but a bad one to actually go through with. Instead he merely sighed and went with the boring verbal approach to more talking.

“And what about you then?” He nearly spat. "What are you getting out of this?"
“Me?” He smirked. “I will be a strong defender of military justice, perhaps even the next Syndic? With Lady Mitth'ar at my side, I am positive her father will train me into that position in time to take his place. Then of course I shall do the same to our child and their child after.”

“Yeah, sure, that’s all well and good, but what will Tharin be doing during this exciting rise in your political career?”

“Training under her mother to become the next in line for the Aristocracy, of course. It is her birthright as I stated previously.”

Ezra’s lip formed a hard line, and with a wave his hand, the other Vornskr settled down and rushed up to sit in a neat row around them. Force connection did have its perks and Ezra was in no mood to continue playing outside any longer.

“How interesting?” Thorbin nodded. “I had heard rumors of your strange abilities, but never thought I would actually see them firsthand.”

“And?”

“And nothing. It is merely interesting.”

“You mean, you don’t want to know how they work or how my power could be beneficial to the Ascendancy?”

“Why bother wondering when you are already striving for military allegiance? Whatever you do is the Nuruodo's business not mine, not unless you get into the political chain and cross paths with Mitth House. I do not meddle into other House affairs.”

Ezra made a face. This guy was literally so boring and so enraptured in his House name that he could probably marry it and still be happy with himself. It wasn’t just Ezra’s own personal jealousy that this guy was wanting to marry Tharin, but the rage that this was literally the worst match ever for her. She hated her childhood on Csaus, and the other kids, probably Thorbin included, made fun of her all her life. She would be miserable living a life with someone like him, didn’t he see that? Didn’t her mother see that?

Tharin loved experimenting and she liked adventure and trying new things. She could never be bored, not when the whole galaxy was just out there waiting for her to notice it and start to study the unknown. In fact this guy was so— he was just so— so simple minded!

That gave Ezra an idea, and he stretched out to the Force. Worst case scenario, he could just play it off as a communication error.

“You will leave Csaus and go back home to Copero.”

The Chiss made a face, thought on it for a moment, but then he nodded.

“I will leave Csaus and go back home?”

Good, the connection stuck. Glad to know there were still some Chiss such a trick would work on.

“It uh, it just didn’t work out with Tharin. You two were just too different to make it happen.”

“Too different…” he agreed.

“You’ll go home and find a nice politician to court instead. Then you two can talk about Mitth
House all day together as you climb up the ranks of your career paths.”

“Yes...” he nodded. “That sounds nice.”

“Good.” Ezra nodded. “Now, you really should get going.”

“I should get going…”

He turned to walk away and Ezra slapped his own forehead realizing that the trick had actually just worked, and with the language barrier to boot! He actually didn't have a lot of faith in the Jedi mind trick, and it had been forever since he'd last practiced, plus the Chiss were all extremely clever. Either Ezra was incredibly lucky, or he had grown stronger in the Force than he realized.

“Thank you Kanan!” He clapped to himself, a smug smile accompanying his feeling of accomplishment as Thorbin's shuttle took off into the sky a few minutes later. With that dealt with, he coaxied the Vornskr pups into returning to the lab and got ready to explain to the other scientists and Tharin what exactly he had just done to get rid of the off-worlder. The others no doubt had pranks all planned for Thorbin too, so Ezra would owe them an apology on top of the pre-paid favors he owed them already. Luckily, Inrokini scientists were also very easy Chiss to please when it came to returning favors or trading them for forgiveness.

The door slid open and Tharin hissed at the disturbance.

“Easy!” Ezra waved. “It’s just me!”

“Ezra? How did you find me?”

“Well I can sense you?” He smiled. "But it's not like I had to. You’re literally hiding in your house. You weren't really all that hard to track down.”

“I mean, what are you doing? I told you to keep an eye on—” She stopped and shot him a glare. “Ezra, where is the suitor?”

He went instinctively to rubbing his neck, an obvious sign of guilt if Tharin ever saw one.

“So… yeah… funny story…”

“Ei ch'eo recati!” She groaned. "You killed him, didn't you? Alright, don't worry, I know a guy who can hide any—”

“What!?”

"What?" She blinked.

"No! He's not— I didn't— why would you even—” Ezra took a breath and started again. “Tharin, I used a Jedi mind trick to get him to leave you alone, that's all I meant. He’s going to go back to Copero, find a politician to court instead, and the best part, he’ll think the whole thing was his idea.”

“That is…” She made a face. “Oddly convenient? Why have you not mentioned this ability to me before?”
He rubbed at his neck again.

“Well… it only works on the weak minded. I thought the Chiss might be immune, but people who only care about their own self-interests and goals are pretty easy to control.”

“That is a bit terrifying… but fascinating! How does the connection work? Can you read his thoughts? Ooh! Can you read my thoughts? Is the stronger the mind harder to sense for you? No wonder I can sneak up on you all of the t—”

“What’s this about knowing a guy who can take care of a body? What are you not mentioning to me?”

She blushed.

“Oh, well don’t worry about that, it was just—”

He broke her off with a kiss and she blinked.

“I’m kidding!” he started. “Mostly? So, did you find anything good in that book yet, or would you rather talk about—” He made a gesturing motion between them.

She mimicked the motion, but her face was contorted in confusion.

He blushed.

“You know! The two of us? The suitor? What happened on Csilla?”

“Oh! Oh… Ezra I apologize. You must be so confused. Please, before anything else, let me explain to you the ritualistic torment that is Chiss courting.”

He sat back and gave her a nod.

“Alright. I’m all ears.”

She chuckled at the expression, imagining him with ears all over his body.

“So, first of all, Chiss do not “date” we “court”. In higher ranking families, such as my own, it is common for the parents to select a suitor for their child and then send them to try and match interests with one another. This could include weeks of meetings, conversations, and even outings before the two know if their relationship will last. If it doesn’t work out, they part ways to court another. If it does, then they go through the process of marriage, and then become lifemates.”

She rubbed her temples.

"So tell me about lifemates," Ezra continued.

Tharin looked to him, pleased by his curiosity, and she happily explained it to him.

“Lifemates are couples who have chosen to be with only the other. Chiss can only couple once in life you see, so the lifemate is the one who the other will love for the remainder of the couples’ days. It is just the way it has always been. One partner is all anyone has ever needed, and should that partner unfortunately pass away, the surviving Chiss does not seek out love to replace them. This is why most military soldiers only couple with other soldiers. The higher death rate within the military works to their situation.”

“Why is that?” Ezra asked with a frown.
“I’m not sure?” she replied honestly. “I’ve never felt that feeling before, but now I feel like I should imagine my people's love to be too devoted to move on in a tragedy. It is complicated, but I can see the reasoning beneath our actions.” She blushed. "Especially now when I begin to think of you.”

He blushed as well, but hid it with a cough and rubbed his thumbs together. *Chiss honesty at its finest.*

“If that's the case, then why does your mother keep trying to pair you with the worst kinds of suitors?”

“You’ve been talking to the Inrokini?”

“Are you mad?”

“On the contrary, I’m actually pretty proud that you are knocking down the language barrier between our species.”

“Thanks. So… what’s with your mom and these suitors? What does Thrass think about this? If you only get to fall in love once, why is she picking all these horrible matches?”

"Oh they are good matches on documentation and theory... just not for me."

"I noticed!"

Tharin smirked.

“It’s been like this since I came of age. Once every couple of months my mother thinks she finds the "perfect partner" for me, but my father manages to warn me in time for me to research them on my own. I can usually stop them before they leave their homeworlds, but I suppose with all of our missions *Ticsi* was unable to find me in time to stop this one. Trust me, Ezra, none of them were right for me. Politicians, consorts, scholars... my mother has tried them all. *Ticsi* knows how important my work is, so he praises my solitude, but *Tin’mi* just doesn’t understand how some people can stand to be alone.”

“Uh...”

Tharin blinked.

“Oh! Well that was before! Oh wow! This is all very new to me. I suppose I cannot be alone now, when I have you, can I?”

He smirked.

“Probably not.”

She returned the look with a grin that faded once she remembered their problem.

“Please do not be offended, but will you tell me how this sort of thing works back in your galaxy?”

“This sort of thing?” He mocked her gesture with one raised brow.

“I’m serious!” She tossed a pillow at him and hissed. “Relationships, *Sevicsi!* How do they work where you come from?”

“Oh… well… I never— I mean with the war and all, I was always too busy to—” He shook his
head. “I guess first you would need to find somebody you liked and spend a lot of time with them, eat together, talk about all sorts of things, then if you really liked the other person, you would hold hands or hug or kiss or—” He blushed as his fingers overlapped in explanation before he ripped them apart and stuck them nervously under his arms. “You know… just spend time together and stuff…”

“I was unaware hand holding was a sign of romantic gesture and not one of comfort.”

“It can be both honestly. Humans are—” He snickered. “Humans are weird.”

She gasped suddenly.

“Oh Ezra, we have done all of those things! No wonder you kissed me on Csilla! Forgive me for courting you unintentionally!”

“What?” He made a face and his eyes grew large. “Oh! No… no… see, you can hang out, eat together, and even hold hands and not be dating. Courting? No, I think humans date mostly?”

“Even though those are traits of such dates?” She studied the time. “Again, how do you know when is right? You never told me the answer to that question back at the Sposia dormitories.”

He rubbed his head. She was cute when she was confused. It didn’t happen very often but when it did he typically had to focus more on explaining things than enjoying the slight furrow in her brows or the way her skin got a bit brighter at the thought of learning something new.

“So dating and dates have nothing to do with each other. People can date whenever and whoever they want to. All you have to do is work up the courage to ask somebody out and see if they like you back. It’s easy. Well… it’s actually really hard… but in theory, it’s easy!”

She pondered on that.

“Hmm… It sounds confusing.”

“It kind of is?” He shrugged. “So, all of this arranged marriage stuff is how all Chiss couples in high places meet? Did Magin and Enoin do that? What about Stent and Ina? Or your parents even?”

“No, the others met in work-related environments and coupled there. My parents were a rare exception to courting in higher class military or political houses. I told you about that, didn’t I?”

Ezra shook his head.

She got a wide grin.

“Oh, Ticsi’s betrothal to my mother was so unconventional for our people. I wish I could have been around to have seen the scandal on Copero.”

“What happened?”

“Well, as you know, Ticsi and G’en’vti Thrawn were born as commoners on Csilla, then they became orphans on Sposia, and it was only after they finished their schooling that they were adopted into Mitth House for excelling in their studies. They continued their schooling on Copero, my father focusing more on the political life of military affairs while Thrawn edged closer into that of the grit and action of the expansionary military force. It’s not hard to see why.” She smiled. “Ticsi has always been there to talk Thrawn out of trouble, and Thrawn has always been so curious
that he never ran away from such opportunities to make such trouble. It was fitting that they pursued careers into their talents as brothers.”

Ezra nodded.

“Well…” Tharin continued. "My mother was born next in line to become Aristocrа should Mitth House ever formally rejoin the High Council. That meant she had the most political power of any her age on Copero. At this point, Thrawn had been enlisted by the other major military families, and my father was on his way to becoming the Syndic. I do not think my mother and G’en’vti ever got along very well to begin with. Even as children Thrawn’s ability to get himself and those around him into trouble always gave her good reason to keep her distance from him. My father claims that they share similarities with one another that neither confess to having. Still… my mother had been observing their progress all these years as a future leader of Mitth House, and she knew a lot about the brothers and what Mitth house hoped to accomplish in adopting them.”

“Which was?”

“Their talents,” Tharin said simply. “Both are brilliant minds, though in different ways. It was that simple.”

“Oh…” Ezra was hoping for something a bit more complex than that, but nodded anyway.

“Years later, my mother had grown into an eligible young woman of high standards. She was in the process of debating between many blood-born suitors who wished to court her, all of whom had been lined up by her own parents for her, but in the end, she pursued my father instead and it shocked the entire planet.” Tharin smirked. “Oh it was completely within her rights to do so. He was a merit-adoptive after all, so it wasn’t like she had just scooped someone off a wayward world and betrothed to them out of the blue. Still, a lot of Mitth House did not like the fact that Ticsi was not a blood-born Mitth, and they questioned the relationship.”

“So what did they do?”

“My father had to work especially hard to become the Syndic after that. Though, his knowledge was unparalleled within the rest of the candidates, and it was an un-difficult task for him to accomplish. Around this same time, Thrawn had decided to leave Mitth House and instead moved to the planet Naporar to join with the Expansionary Defense Fleet. My mother claims that this change helped my father gain merit with the rest of Mitth House now that he wasn’t constantly hurting his own reputation by taking care of Thrawn’s messes. My father, however, had stated to me that he was so worried about Thrawn out there on his own that it nearly cost him his focus.” She shrugged. “Either way, he did well and soon became the Syndic which gained him enough political power to finally marry my mother without complaint. The rest is history.”

“Wow! You’d think with a story like that your mom would be more open minded about your relationships.”

“No that’s the whole problem! She’s too open minded! She wants me to be with anyone, I doubt she even cares if it is someone of a low status or estranged position, so long as I’m not alone. But I like being alone! I have so much to do, I couldn’t possibly—” She paused and looked to him.

“Well, in most regards. Not all the time. Before I met you— Oh, you know what I mean, right?”

He chuckled.

“Work keeps us busy. I understand.”
She leaned forward and kissed him.

“Thank you.”

“S-so… are we technically dating… or courting… or whatever?”

“Are we?”

His face grew red.

“I mean… I’d like to… if you’d like to I mean…”

She chuckled and nodded.

“I think I would like to try as well,” she said. “But like I mentioned before, we cannot show our relationship so openly… not yet.”

“Right, right…” he nodded. “If the Inrokini scientists see us kissing they will literally go crazy with curiosity, right?”

“Chiss do not kiss. Whatever you do, do not kiss me in the labs, or you will start a pandemic among the scientists. They are too curious to be taught something so powerful so soon. We are talking the discovery of portable ion technology and plasma grenades level of fascination. Nobody needs that kind of pandemic again!”

She shuddered, and Ezra laughed.

“Anything else?”

“We can absolutely not tell my parents! Not only will their interrogations ask how this happened and potentially reveal our secret missions, but they wouldn’t understand right now. My mother alone will come crashing down on you with all the powers of Mitth House, and I’m not sure what my father will do, but that’s somehow scarier to me than knowing.”

Ezra felt his brows arch.

"Because I'm human?" Ezra had figured that much, but still... hearing it out loud made him wonder if he’d done the right thing by kissing her. He was frustrated, but not angry, not at her. “I don't want to get you in trouble. Should we just forget the whole thing ever happened, or—”

She crawled into the floor, grabbed his face, and kissed him once, hard, before letting go.

"Please. Don’t forget any of this,” she said strictly, eyeing his face before kissing him again, this time softly until she tilted his forehead into hers and kept it there. "I assure you, your species is not the reason. At least... it is no reason of concern to me, and if my parents are anything like me, it won't bother them either."

"Then why?"

She sighed and sat back on her feet.

“In a few more months, Ezra, you will be in the military. That means you will no longer be my project, I cannot see you as often as I'd like, and you will no doubt rise to a place of honor among my people just as Eli and my father did. I am not worried about what liking you will do to me or my status, Ezra, and I've never been worried about you being a human! No, I’m worried for what our relationship might do to affect your status. Until you have earned your place among us,
She just need to be discreet, like my parents were...” She fidgeted a little and shot him a worried look. “Is this okay?”

He sighed and let his shoulders slump, but kissed her forehead with a small smirk.

“I can live with that for now,” he said simply. “I think I’d be too embarrassed to show public displays of affection all the time anyway.”

She lifted her brow.

“Embarrassed?”

He turned even redder than before.

“Not of you! It’s just something humans do— uh— how do I explain that? Ummm...”

She pressed her finger to his lips and chuckled.

“I’m only teasing. I know how sensitive and shy you humans are…”

He made a mocking laugh and then shrunk into himself with a growing embarrassment.

“Fine! Fine! So that’s all taken care of. You want to tell me about the journal now, or what?”

She visibly brightened.

“Oh right! So I’ve been decrypting the old text from what pages I could salvage and I’ve caught some interesting notes so far, though I haven’t had time to actually read much of it yet.”

“What have you got so far?”

“Well, Outbound Flight was an expansionary ship taking my people to parts unknown under the captain whose bones we discovered in the ship.”

“Right… where did you put that thing anyway?”

“Don’t worry about it…” She waved, though having a severed zombified bone lying around the lab somewhere seemed to be something he really did want to worry about. Tharin continued on about the book though, so Ezra would have to try again later and hope he didn’t stumble upon it by accident one day. “Anyway...” she said. “His name was Captain Uli’ver’imilu, and with a passenger count of 50,000 Chiss men, women, and children of all ages, they set out from a world at war to find another place to settle. This brought them to the Unknown Regions where I suppose they settled permanently after the crash.”

“Did it mention anything about Pantora or Duros?” Ezra asked.

“No? Why?”

“No reason!” He said quickly. Deep down he wondered if the three species shared some sort of link but wasn’t about to admit that theory out loud.

“Uh huh…” Tharin shot him a look, but continued. “Well anyway, it’s just status reports, a few internal affairs, some logistics and supplies listings—average Captain information. What I’m really interested in is the last series of entries before the Captain’s apparent death. Would you like to read with me as I translate?”
He smiled.

“Is this part of my lesson today?”

She bumped his shoulder with her own and smiled back.

“This is just more extra credit. The real lesson was getting rid of that suitor for me. You passed by the way.”

He grinned again.

“Oh, that one was on the house. No way I’d let some random politician swoop in and try to court you right in front of me.”

She laughed.

“My hero? Now… hold still, I’m going to knock the last of this out post haste!”

With a swift nod, she slammed the book into his lap and started typing out letters on her data-pad, looking back and forth between the pages at such a swift speed that watching her eyes and fingers move made Ezra’s eyes go numb. The only break was when she broke her own trance to tell him to turn the page, and he obliged to the best of his ability as she translated out the remainder of the entries.

“I’ve got it!” she grinned. “Alright time for our moment of truth.”

“To see if it tells us anything about what Krayt mentioned. Let’s do it.”

Tharin nodded and read the entry aloud:

LOG DATE: 2122:

Outbound Flight has made it to yet another world and we have found extraordinary resources. The greatest of those being the plant life. In the case of this world the plants are in the same regard, the planet’s life. Locals who appear as sentient plant life known only to us as Neti. Here on this, the planet Ryyk, the Neti have shown us great hospitality, gifting us the knowledge of their world, their crops, and their way of life.

“Wait,” Ezra interrupted. “Did you say they called them Neti?”

“Yes. Why? Have you heard of this species?”

“Once from Thrawn just after we crashed. He said the Neti were from Myrkr but they abandoned the planet for some unknown reason a long time ago and were forgotten.”

She frowned and shook her head.

“That doesn’t make any sense. I may not be an expert, but I know that there has never been record of sentient life on Myrkr. Though I can attest to their being forgotten, for I have never heard the name Neti before today.”

“It was one of the first things Thrawn said to me when we woke up. I mean, I guess he could have been confused, but—”

“Thrawn is never confused.” Tharin stated firmly with a shake of her head. “Even when he doesn’t know what he’s talking about, he always has a basis for anything he says aloud.”
“Then do you think we should ask him about this?” Ezra tapped the book. “I mean, it’s like you said right? He can’t lie to me, so if he knows something we don’t, he’d have to tell us, right?”

She hummed and stared down at the datapad.

“Perhaps, but there are ways he could hide the truth from us without outright lying. We may need to tread carefully into the topic when we see him next.” She rubbed her face and sighed. “For now, I’d like to continue reading. There are three more entries here.”

He nodded.

"Okay. Read the next one."

LOG DATE: 2174:

The Neti have continued to show resilience to our settlements upon their world. Our area known to us as Myrkr has drawn too much attention and has not been greeted with the same hopeful enthusiasm as when we first arrived. What was once neighborly negotiations, now have turned to the beginning stages of war. As the weeks pass, I fear for my people and for our safety. This world is too abundant in resources and security to let alone. We must establish our colony here if the Chiss are to survive and thrive in these Unknown Regions. The wars with the Je’daii, the Sith, the Infinite Empire, and the Mandalore will not become the last remnants of our people. We have lost too many to give in now. If war is what it will take to keep our place in this galaxy, then war it shall be. We will fight for our right to remain alive in these trying times, even though the fight is the reason we first fled at the start.”

“Well…” Ezra swallowed. "That took a turn."

“You’re telling me!”

“So the Chiss were taking over the Neti’s land?"

“But they were also running from some conflict in the other galaxy. Do you know anything about these wars or why they threatened my people's existence?”

“I’ve heard about the Jedi and Mandalore wars, and I know about the Sith… I didn’t know that they existed that long ago though… and I’ve never heard of the Jedi being called Je’daii… Are you sure you translated that part right?”

She shot him a look.

“Right… sorry… I know… I know… but maybe the captain spelled it wrong?”

“I don’t think it is wrong,” she said. “But I am concerned for the growing war between the Neti and the Chiss. Let’s see what the next one says, shall we?”

LOG DATE: 3314

How could it all have gone so wrong so quickly? I fear we have only ourselves to blame. In our quest for stability and life, we have caused only death and destruction. Ryyk lay in ruins, the planet dying from our weapons and our hatred. I wonder if things could have been different had we pleaded with the Neti differently. Had we simply swallowed out pride and learned to get along, perhaps we would not be evacuating. Already the pollution and the years of war have altered the Neti. No
longer are they the tranquil creatures they were when we first came to this world. No. Now they are forever changed, their very bodies a result of our meddling in their biology. We did this, and now we are left to run away without fixing our sin. How could we? How can we? What have we done?

LOG DATE: 3325

I can only pray to the Ashla and Bogan that the next world we find be better than the last. With only 350 remaining Chiss on Outbound Flight, I fear we are becoming just as extinct as the doomed Neti. No. Not the Neti. The beings we left had taken new name and new form. The Neti are no more, now exists only hardened monsters, like thorns on stone. Weeks have passed as we drift aimlessly into the unknown, but attacks from these once peaceful allies now enemies continue to persist. Already we are at half power, suffering heavy damage, and unless a miracle shows itself soon, I fear we will pay the cost for out trespasses. Though which will claim our people first I cannot say. I have failed the Chiss. I have failed my people. Here I sit, writing this, what is sure to be my final entry, and all I can do is wait and wonder. Will we be the last Chiss to die in this cruel galaxy? If we were so destined to die, then why allow us to damage the Neti alongside us? What kind of justice is that? What sort of balance is formed from such travesty. I only wish that I could have—"

Tharin stopped.

"Could have what?" Ezra asked.

"It just stops there..." She frowned.

Ezra grabbed his hair and narrowed his eyes towards the book.

"I can’t believe Krayt was telling the truth. The Chiss took over and destroyed the Neti and their planet. That must have been the sin Krayt told me about. But, the Neti, Ryyk, Myrkr... are you thinking what I’m thinking, Tharin?"

"That Myrkr is the regrown remnants of the once planet Ryyk," she said softly. "Or that the once plant-like Neti were mutated into what would later become the thorn and rock armor that is trademark for the Yuuzhan Vong?"

He stared at her and her frown deepened.

"Ezra, our interference really did accomplish an unspeakable sin, and cost billions of lives. Not only our own, not only the Neti, but the Yuuzhan Vong, the Far Outsiders, and every species they’ve conquered in their pursuits of vengeance in the last ten-thousand years! How shameful!" She swallowed. "My entire history rests atop one huge lie."

Ezra placed his arm around her and tried his best to be comforting, though her face looked horrified at what the two of them had just discovered.

"Somehow Thrawn knew about the Neti and their relation to Myrkr. He knows something about this, and if we’re supposed to go any deeper than we need to find him and ask him face to face."

"Ezra... I’m not sure if we should continue this investigation."

He blinked, though the statement sounded so opposite something Tharin would say that he had to
ask again for clarification.

“What?”

“I can hardly believe what is written on these pages. I can only connect the clues based on your conversation with Krayt. I fear there was a reason the survivors of Outbound Flight chose to omit our sin from the new population. If we came out with this horrible truth now, it may cause chaos for my people.”

Ezra furrowed his brows.

“So what? You’re saying we should keep everything we learned a secret? Even though we nearly died trying to learn it all?”

Tharin stood. There was a deep look of thought on her face, and it wasn’t the usual look of eager learning, but a heavy weighted look that made her skin appear more tired and withered. Her voice was low and steady all the same, dulled to the normal happy-go-lucky tone he was used to. Her eyes stared blankly out ahead, though they appeared not to glow as bright as they used to. He had never seen her look so defeated.

“Ezra… you know how important research is to me, but this…” she sighed. “It’s not the same. I wish I had never learned this…”

"Tharin?"

She walked over the clutter along her floor stood next to the door.

“You may speak with Thrawn if you wish, but… I will not be joining you. I need time alone to think. Thrawn should be attending the wedding ceremony for Gunther and Koree, but if you are unable to wait that long, I will make arrangements for the two of you to meet once he returns to this system. For now though, I think it would be best if you went home.”

She pressed for the open and shut her eyes. It was already evening and Ezra felt the cool chill of approaching night air blow into her room.

“Tharin…”

She shut her eyes and tensed.

“Please just go…”

He stood and walked out, Tharin handing the journal over to him once he was on the other side.

“I—” he started but stopped himself. Somehow an apology didn’t feel right, and he wasn’t sure what else he could say. He only sighed and stepped past the range of the door. “You know where to find me if you need something.”

“I know.”

And with that the door slid shut in his face and she left him alone. Only when the two were parted by the metal did Ezra touch it with his forehead and twist his face into a frown.

"I'm sorry..." He whispered, too quiet for even her Chiss hearing to pick up probably. With that, he held tighter to the journal, and started the walk back towards his house.

Koree and Gunther were getting married in five months. It would probably be the last time he got
to see all of them together in one place before his trials, and it was one of the rare times Thrawn and Eli would be on shore-leave from the Nuruodo. Whatever they did out in space must be really time consuming because it seems they were always away on missions these days.

Could he wait that long to talk to Thrawn? Should he try instead to talk with Krayt? If the Chiss and the Yuuzhan’s war goes back a millennia, then there was no right side to this conflict. It would be the Chiss’ fault that this was even happening, but no one alive today would know that. Did the Yuuzhan Vong know that? Krayt sure seemed to, and that was unsettling enough. What did Krayt hope to accomplish by telling him this? Did he think it would somehow fix the war or was he just trying to force Ezra closer to his side?

Ezra groaned and slammed his face into the cover of the old book. It was no wonder she kicked him out. Learning that centuries of war was the sins of your own forefathers wasn’t easy for anybody to wrap their head around. He’d go back to check on her in the morning, for now he was going back to bed, still sore, still tired, but with even more on his mind than he ever wanted.

“Once a secret is known, it cannot become unknown.”

The Bendu’s warning suddenly played over in his mind, but just like back then, his curiosity had wound up selfishly hurting someone he cared about, just as protecting the Rebels had hurt the Imperials, or how any of the other hundreds of choices he's made in his life that were in fact the wrong path to take. Ezra wondered how many more people he’d have to hurt until his quest for answers was fully met, or until he could do something with good intentions and that ended up not blowing up right back in his face.

Jorj trilled at him as he passed under the tree and went inside, plopping face first on the bed and letting the journal fall into the floor.

A small ping alerted on his wrist and he pulled his translator up to meet his eyes to read the message.

*I know you will, but try not to worry too much. Sleep well, and I will see you again in the morning.*

He smiled and typed out his response.

*Smarty-pants.*

Another ping and he laughed at her next message.

*I do not understand that idiom at all. How can one’s pants show any kind of intellect? Is it a visual thing or are there really sentient clothing where you come from? What is the origin of this term?*

He snickered, choosing to sacrifice his night of doubts and stress for a lighthearted conversation with Tharin about idioms. They did always cheer each other up after all, and Tharin must have come to the conclusion herself because they stayed up nearly half the night talking about nothing and everything, so long as it didn't remind either of them about Krayt or the Captain's logbook. The rest they could simply deal with in the morning.
Camp Out

Chapter Summary

The Alani allow Ezra an entire weekend to train the girls, but he is forced to mix things up when the children start having strange and startling nightmares.

Chapter Notes

Posted on: November 23, 2018

"Maris said what!?”

"That she wishes you to stay the weekend to train the ozyly-esehembo.” Tharin repeated. "That is truly a great honor, practically unheard of for Schesa. Wow! Ezra, she must really be seeing improvement with the girls to allow you to do this. We have to accept her offer!"

He rubbed his hair before losing the semi-shocked expression on his face and nodding back at her.

"Sure... alright... yeah... it sounds fun. Having a whole weekend to spend with the girls will really help us with our connections. It's a bit hard when I only get to see them one a week, you know?"

"Not entirely, but I will take your word for it. Your Jedi magic is far different than my science. I haven't exactly pinned a pattern with it yet."

"Not everything is so mystifying.” He shot her a teasing glance and winked. It seemed like only yesterday they were at the first Csilla trial and talking together about magic and Ezra's plans to remain with the Ascendancy. Things were so much simpler back then— not that they didn't feel complicated at the time, but he'd take that first week of relaxation on Sposia with new verve if it meant a bit more time to rest nowadays.

"Oh ha ha...” She retorted. "Though, that reminds me, you still have yet to teach me how to accomplish the hairpin trick."

"The—? Oh yeah! The pick-pocketing thing I did back in the courtroom. You know, with everything that's been going on, I totally forgot my promise to show you that."

She shrugged.

"Well, we still have time. Eight months of training you has gone more than well, but we still have seven left to go, and plenty left to learn between the two of us. You're at the halfway point, Sevicsi. Congratulations."

He chuckled.

"You know, years only last twelve months back on Lothal."
"So you've said. Eli also claims that most of your planets run on a system where planetary rotations last approximately 98 days shorter than ours. Distance from the suns, location in space, you know... just typical astronomy factors to include. Standard stuff really."

"Right, yeah, I forget sometimes that Eli is so good with numbers. Trying to keep my days straight here usually just gives me a headache."

"It is a remarkable skill that he has, even for Chiss standards. It suits him well in his position as Captain." She patted his leg and let out a crisp sigh. "Well, let me know what lesson plan you decide for the girls. I'll move our schedule around to account for the extra day of training." She paused, frowned for a split second, and then smiled again as though the quick doubt had never even come to mind. "We have plenty of free time available because we are no longer trying to meddle into things we shouldn't."

That was as close to acknowledgement as Tharin had offered in weeks. The best way they found to avoid the memory and stress of what they've learned from the Outbound Flight logs was to simply put it away until they met with Thrawn at Koree and Gunther's wedding. It had been a long two months tiptoeing around that Bantha in the room, but they were making it work. They only had to dodge the subject for a few more weeks, but luckily they had plenty of other work around to distract them.

His training took priority, and they were even to the point now where Tharin gave him recaps to keep his older lessons fresh in his mind. That, alongside his continued progress with Cheunh, and his physical training, really reminded him that he was working hard. There was a subtle pride to that fact which kept him going strong, and he knew too, that he would never have been able to get this far without her.

"Thanks, Tharin."

If they weren't in the lab right now, he would probably kiss her, but alas, it was something that would need to wait until they were alone. It wasn't like he needed to kiss her all the time, but these months together had been nicer than he would have expected when he first arrived in the Chiss Ascendancy, and the urge still grabbed him even now. He wondered how long Kanan and Hera had been together before they got to that point where— well, he didn't know exactly, but it was painfully obvious to anyone with eyes that they were together, even if they didn't always show it. How long did two people like each other before they started to act like those two? He wondered.

"Just let me know." she repeated. "I'll have Cerein look after Jorj this weekend so you and the girls can be at your full strengths. We owe her a favor after all, so I'm sure she'd enjoy the company."

"Yeah, but how are we going to make it up to Jorj?"

"You'll think of something, Sevicsi. I know you will."

They laughed and she rubbed his hair, Tharin having just enough thought to let him go before she realized that she had been holding him far too long for just casual manner. She played it off with two hard pats to the top of his head, strode off awkwardly, and left him snickering to himself at the desk.

With a smile, he shook his head and pulled up a blank holo-document to start working out a schedule for the girls. Two days was a long time to train in comparison to the few hours he was used to. They'd probably be allowed a place to sleep in the academy, which meant from sun up to sun down, he'd need to do something to keep the girls' attentions. Let's see... target practice, sparring, and meditation was always a good start. Then, another round of hide and seek or Lothcat
in the middle would be a fun activity to break for. Oh! Maybe they could take a hike up the mountain or go swimming in the lake? Schesa wasn't the best planet for fresh air and clear skies, but the outdoors were always a nice change of pace from the indoors. He'd put it into consideration at least. Obviously something he was doing was working, but since he wasn't technically a member of the Ascendancy, they wouldn't tell him exactly what. It was probably something enhanced with their third-sight abilities... the range of power or strength of their senses maybe?

"Hey Tharin!" He called. "I think I have an idea!"

"You're sure it's okay that we came early?"

"Oh Mitth'ar'inroki, I would expect nothing less of your attention to detail," Maris'safis said with her hands placed uniformly in front of her. "Right this way. Your room will be here."

The door slid open and revealed the simple dour chamber, a plain bed on each wall and a desk between them. Nothing else... at least, not that Ezra could see, but Chiss architecture always had a way of surprising him.

"Thank you for your hospitality, Maris'safis," Ezra said with a slight bow. "I look forward to spending more time with the girls. What time do they normally wake up to start the day?"

"Morning begins at 0500 hours, breakfast will be administered and training will typically begin at 0600 with stretches before light sparring and partnered practices. From there we would train in the flight simulators from 0800 to 1100 hours, at 1200 we break for lunch, then at 1300 hours it is off to the classroom for private lessons that last until 1600. Then you would typically come and train with the soldiers until we resume sparring and then break once more for dinner, hygiene, and sleep."

"Wow... and that's what you normally do everyday?"

"Just on the weekends. The weekly regimen is an entirely separate routine."

"I see."

"Well we are pleased you have allowed us such a great opportunity with your busy schedule!" Tharin chimed in quickly.

"We are likewise pleased to have you agree on such sudden notice. It is more than your strides with the ozzy-esehembo I am afraid. There is something else we are hoping you may help with."

"Really?" Ezra frowned. "Like what? Is there something wrong?"

"Well you see..." She started, her uniform hands coming up to her chin in the closest reveal of nerves that a citizen of Schesa could make. "The girls have been having night troubles. Something which none in our history can attest to nor help with."

"Night troubles?" Tharin asked.

"You mean like nightmares?"

Maris nodded.
"It started just around the time of your training. We believe that your enhancement of their abilities has strengthened their premonitions to legendary proportions."

"And the girls are seeing visions of the future?" He breathed. "That's why you called us here to stay the weekend!"

"Indeed. We hope you will be able to observe them for the two, now three, nights you will be on location. Their restless sleep deprivation is causing delays in their training and we cannot afford such setbacks when they already have such short careers to begin with."

Ezra had no reply, his blue eyes dancing across the floor as thoughts rapidly filled his mind. He walked in and sat on the edge of the left-most bed, his head sinking into his hands as he let his worries wander.

Tharin blocked the doorway with her entire self as Maris tried to get a better look at his unusually stern contemplation. Self doubt was not a trademark of the Chiss, so it was better that the Syndic not see this side of Ezra directly.

"We will do our utmost to help, Maris'safis!" Tharin supplied with firm resolve, faking a yawn afterwards to cause the Syndic to back away from the room. "Well it is late and we have traveled quite a distance to arrive here, so I think we shall need to turn in early in order to get a head start on the lessons tomorrow. I assume the girls already know we are here, yes?"

"Yes..." Maris sighed with a bit of reservation in her voice now. "Well... I will leave you to get settled. We expect great things from this opportunity. Do not disappoint us."

"It is not in his nature, nor mine!" Tharin winked. "Goodnight now."

The door slammed together in Maris' face, leaving the Syndic to stare at it in wonder. Automatically the features of her expression contorted dramatically as she attempted the strange and foreign winking gesture to herself, doing so repeatedly all the way back down the long hallway.

"She's gone..." Tharin alerted, her ear pressed to the door before turning to face him. "Are you okay?"

"Fine, just fine..." he replied distractedly. "Just thinking..."

"About what specifically?"

"Well... when I had nightmares as a kid they weren't the same as they are now. Now, I either deal with things from my past or the occasional Krayt sighting, but back then I didn't know I was a Force sensitive and I had a lot of visions that I could never explain. Things that I dreamt about which sometimes came true. I always thought it was some sort of déjà vu until I met Kanan and the others. Then after I started my training the visions started getting more frequent and harder to decipher."

"Like the Gall Trayvis incident?" she noted. "I remember you telling me about that, and also about your parents or the Governor Ryder Azadi with the white Lothcat..."

He smiled. *She had a good memory as usual.*

"Right. Well, I wonder if the girls are going through something similar... at least... I hope that's all it is. The worst case scenario is that my training has somehow led them to—"
He broke off.

"To Krayt?" Tharin supplied, taking a seat next to him and reaching for his hand. "Is your connection with him not unique because of your strength in the Force? Surely he cannot see the ozyl-esehembo when they are so limited in regards to this power."

"You're probably right," he tried to say halfheartedly, the statement failing to come out as anything other than lingering worry. He slapped his legs and stood up. "Change of subject! Do you care which side of the room you want sleep on?"

She shook her head, her brows furrowing until she let his deflection in the conversation slide.

"If it is alright with you, I might stay awake a bit longer to work on a few projects. I'll try not to disturb you."

"Alright. Well, bun'n'uvcun visot."

She smiled and kissed him.

"Bun'n'uvcun Sevicsi. Sleep well."

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The mismatched eyes, the aliens, a world of lava, a coffin, a scream. Then it repeated. Always Krayt's face, followed by the army of Yuuzhan Vong clashing with the Chiss military, then there was the hot lava of a dying world, a tomb of sorts, and then someone screamed. It was someone different each time, the symphony erupting in a chorus of cries until Ezra stumbled back into the coffin, the box plunging backwards into lava as the hot magma seeped into the box and at last the chain was finally broken before those horrible eyes could stare into him another time.

“Gah!”

He woke with a jolt, but did not completely lunge forward like he sometimes did after waking up from a bad dream. With a groan and a rub of his face, Ezra turned over in the bed only to see a concerned pair of red eyes looking over at him from the desk, the dim light of the table making the red glow far more prominently in the dark shadows of the room.

“Another nightmare?” Tharin frowned.

“Yeah... don't worry about it though...” He wiped away the rest of his sweat with his bare arm and yawned. “Wh-what time is it? What are you still doing up?”

She held out a small metal pipe-looking thing and revealed its purpose as the blue-green energy lit up the room a mere few inches from Ezra's face.

“I had this great idea to make collapsible electro-batons for the girls, see? It's one step closer to lightsabers, at least in theory, and this way they wouldn’t have to tote around those long lances all of the time. Clever isn't it?”

“Oh great, so that way they can beat up whenever they want.” He smiled groggily. Thanks for that… my body thanks you."

She chuckled and set down her tools and the newly collapsed weapon.
“Well, we are here for an entire weekend. I have to keep myself occupied somehow while you’re working with the Alani all day.”

He flattened himself into the pillow and nodded.

“Yeah... Well, what can I say? I’m a great teacher?”

“Oh is that so Ch’irci?” She said mockingly, walking over to his bed to pet the strands of hair that were stuck to his forehead with sweat. Just like always, her cool skin was instant relief after a vision like this. Her fingers touched his chest and she bit her lip before he grabbed her hand and raised a brow at her.

“Tharin, are you ogling me?” He teased.

“Ezra Bridger!” She admonished. “Chiss do not ogle. I am simply admiring my hard work is all.”

He snorted.

“Your hard work?”

Tharin grinned at him.

“You’re not the only one who is a good teacher…”

He released her hand and slid his own up her arm, reaching for her neck in order to pull her into a gentle kiss. Her hands found their way back to his chest and paused there as their lips met. His mouth tasted like salt, and she could feel his heartbeat now, so fast and nervous as it thrummed beneath her fingers. It was a human thing, she knew, but to the Chiss such indication had... other meanings. She had to constantly remind herself that Ezra didn’t know that, and the last thing she needed to do now was to complicate things further with more inter-species misunderstandings, especially after the disagreement they’d had with the Outbound Flight logs a few weeks back. She didn’t mean for it to drive such a wedge between them, but the truth had hurt her more than she could have ever realized. A Chiss was not a Chiss if they weren’t proud of their heritage. Who was she now if she was ashamed of her true lineage and the hidden actions her people committed?

It had been tearing her apart for weeks, and yet, it was easy to push those thoughts away when they kissed like this. Always slow and delicate, but so unsure. She loved the curiosity of it, and loved even greater that they were learning together what this intense feeling between them could produce. Human feelings, Chiss feelings… they weren’t so different once the two found a common place to intersect.

She tilted her head and hair off to one side and leaned down to kiss his neck, still tasting the sweat of his latest nightmare, but feeling his throat swallow back more fluster. That was another amazing thing about humans. Their senses weren’t limited to just the forehead or the nose… they reacted when kisses were placed on the lips, on the cheek, on the neck. So many points of their anatomy connected to their feelings, so many new things which Tharin planned to learn.

But not quite yet.

She pulled back and whispered the cool words into his ear.

“I should probably let you sleep...”

The texture of his skin bristled with tiny bumps and his breath was caught in his throat.
“If you say so,” he whispered, placing a kiss on her lips, once, twice, and then the final one landing on her nose.

_He was not trying at all to return to sleep_, she deduced. Flushed with emotion now, she felt her face turn purple and leaned down with a breath and a chuckle as she rubbed her nose along his and pressed into his forehead. Tharin was unsure how much longer she would be able to hold herself back, especially if he kept kissing the areas of her face related directly to the romantic advances of her own culture. They laughed once and pressed their lips together one more time— _which was about when Ezra's eyes shot wide and he grabbed suddenly at both of her arms._

“Someone’s coming...”

“What?”

“Quick!” He scooted her away and she scurried over to her own bed, jumping hurriedly into it, and feigning sleep just in time for the door to slide silently open, revealing the tiny face appearing in the archway. It was one of the Alani girls, one of the younger, smaller ones, by the sound of her footsteps. She snuck sleepily into the room and tiptoed over to Ezra’s bedside before tapping him with her tiny hand three times against the blanket.

“Ch'irci...” she whispered.

“Lorin?” Ezra asked, catching his breath and sitting up with a frown. _Hopefully she’ll think he was just waking up_, but he could sense the fear surrounding her and wondered what was wrong far more now than he wanted to cover his own tracks. He hopped down to crouch beside her, his Cheunh still a little rusty, but he knew enough to ask her what was wrong. _“Veo cart ch'itt'siz?”_

_“Veo cart vah ran'cuzo k'ir vav euhn in'a?”_ Tharin asked, masking her fluster and false awakening far better than Ezra was.

“Right!” He nodded with a final swallow. “It’s late. You should really be in bed.”

_“Ch'ah viz ch'a csasosrun'hn...”_ she whispered fervently, a fist clasped around her own wrist as she continued. From what Ezra could translate, Lorin had a nightmare about a war and a man in a mask. She felt like she was being watched and had woken up afraid and feeling cold. Her bunkmate, Feesa, was currently away on a mission so she had no one else she could turn to for comfort. That part he more or less assumed because she didn’t state it outright, trying to put on a brave face, but still shivering from the strain the nightmare had put on her nerves.

All of his worst fears had come back to him now. _Was this a vision about Krayt or was this Krayt himself making a connection with the girls?_ Masking the look of horror he wanted to show, Ezra merely smiled warmly and patted her shoulder with all the grace and wisdom of any respectable teacher.

“It’s okay now.” He repeated his words in Cheunh. “You're alright. It was just a nightmare.”

Lorin was not convinced, and even her skin felt shaky and chill to the touch, which was surely saying something considering Chiss anatomy.

Ezra looked up at Tharin who wasn’t sure what to do either, and then back to Lorin before giving her another of his warmest smiles.

“Hey, it’ll be alright. Look, do you want to sleep in here tonight with us?”

“Ezra?” Tharin whispered back in Basic. “I don’t know if the Alani will permit such coddling.”
“My parents always let me sleep with them when I had bad dreams. It’s just for one night.” He rubbed the little girl’s short hair and chuckled because her whole head could fit in the palm of his hand like an unripened meiloorun. “Don’t worry. I won't let anyone get you, not even in your dreams, okay Lorin?”

She nodded and smiled at him, as did Tharin as she came over and scooped the younger girl up before placing her in her bed. “There you go. Trust me, you don’t want to use Ezra’s bunk. His human sweat glands are like soaking in a river.”

“Gross!” Lorin giggled.

“Hey, come on!” Ezra grumbled, face turning red. “Don’t tell her that! I’m her Ch’irci! She’s supposed to respect me.”

Tharin winked once to him and then to Lorin, who mimicked the motion to the best of her abilities as Tharin tucked her into the sheets.

“Bun’nuvcun euhn rutbici.”

*Goodnight little soldier.* Ezra couldn’t help but smile at the look on Lorin’s face now. It was cute because she was so young and small, but firm because despite her age, she really was a soldier and wanted to be treated as such.

“Alright you two...” Tharin continued. “I’m going to keep working, but get some sleep. I’ll try not to be too loud.”

Lorin nodded and Ezra watched Tharin go back and take her seat, shooting her a skeptical look that guilted her into at least attempting to get some sleep of her own soon. She merely rolled her eyes at him and nodded silently in understanding of the insinuating eye contact.

Still... he thought. That was really nice of her to give up her bed to Lorin, and Force-alive he wanted Lorin sensing some sort of strange tension between them and asking questions.

He turned towards the wall and had just allowed his eyes flutter shut, when the door suddenly sprang back open and five more Chiss girls waited in the doorway.

Tharin turned in her chair and blinked curiously at them.

What kind of nightmares did the Force cause to be this bad? She felt sad for them, worried too that their fear might make their trainers angry. Her own anger grew, now directed at anything that wanted to hurt these little girls. Sure they were soldiers, and all of them could not only take her in a fight but also beat her as a pilot... but still she felt the urge to personally detach whatever monster’s skull from its body that was making them scared enough to come to them for help in the middle of the night.

Ezra merely stood again and rubbed his eyes.

“Nightmares as well?” He asked in Cheunh.

Each one of them nodded.

“Did everyone have nightmares tonight?” Tharin asked.

Tamnu stepped up, her hand held tightly by one of the older girls, Tula.
“We always have weird dreams after you visit, Ch’irci…” she informed honestly.

“Really?” Ezra stood tall now. “All of you?”

They nodded again.

“They have not been this strong before…” Delfar added.

“And we always have the same dream as the other…” the twins, Pritni and Hasti, said in perfect unison.

He shot a knowing look at Tharin, and spoke to her in hushed Basic now.

“Hey Thar, what’s the night weather like on Schesa?”

“Comfortable. Are you doing what I think you’re thinking of doing?”

His face took a moment to process her words, but after, he motioned to all the girls with a smile.

“Hey, I know our training doesn’t begin until tomorrow, but who’s up for a little camp out?”

“Camp?”

“Out?”

They repeated the Basic words, looking to one another with puzzled expressions as their teacher only stood and smiled in his pajama pants before grabbing for a shirt and his long brown cloak.

“Follow me everyone. Let’s go get the other girls, and oh yeah, be sure to bring your bedding with you.”

Another confused look, but by then Ezra was already out the door with his own pillow and blanket, Tharin coaxing them out into the hall with an all-knowing smile and another one of her human winking expressions.

“Ta-da! A camp out!” He said, motioning to the outside grass. It was a few feet from the building, but had a good location for a night lying out under the stars. “People do this all the time where I’m from. Sometimes on purpose!”

They all shot him skeptical expressions, but stopped around the clearing in a circle.

“Anyway… I always liked sleeping out under the stars and moons…” He pointed up. “Schesa has two moons just like my home world, Lothal. I used to stay up and stare up at them, wondering what else was out there almost every night when I was your age.”

They all looked towards the foggy stars.

“And what did you find?” Orresa asked.

“That the galaxy was a bigger place than I ever could have imagined.” Ezra smiled. “And yeah, it was scary, sometimes impossibly hard, but at the same time it was completely amazing. You know,
I sometimes think to myself, *hey...* if I hadn’t jumped headfirst into those stars, then I wouldn’t be out camping with a bunch of highly trained Schesa soldiers right now.”

“No way!” Ceru laughed. “There’s no way you said that!”

“This is one of your jokes Ch’irci!” Gentri accused.

"No, that is word for word what I said!" He teased. “Now, does everyone have their sleeping bags?”

They had their blankets, pillows, and a few tarps Tharin snuck from the supply closet.

“That’s good enough. We can work with this.” He started to make his bedding and motioned the girls to follow his lead. “So everyone, just set up your bunks like this.”

“Ch’irci, is this some sort of wilderness survival training?” Wola asked. “Because if it is, I feel obligated to inform you that we have already passed our—”

“No, this isn’t for survival. It’s just for fun.”

“Oh…” It was a meager reply, but they nodded and obeyed his instructions to copy his tent anyway.

Fun seemed to be the key-point in nearly all of Ezra’s lessons with them. Pointless in some aspects, but enjoyable in most all of them. He was their teacher after all, so if this “fun” was helping to improve their precognitive sight, then they would follow his orders without question. That and admittedly they all rather enjoyed his tasks of “fun” even if they weren't under orders from their other caretakers to obey his instructions.

“Alright is everyone settled?”

There were ten girls away on missions, so the group was smaller than he expected, but still a chorus of quiet affirmatives erupted as they replied to him and he lay down on his mat before shooting a quick nod at Tharin.

“Hey, you know you don’t have to be out here with us. You can go back inside and work on your batons.”

“And miss whatever entertaining things are going to happen to you out here?” She chuckled. “Not a chance!”

“What now, Ch’irci?” one of the girls asked.

“Well... now we sleep...” he yawned.

“Really?”

“Yep!” He waved. “Don’t worry, there shouldn't be any nightmares when we’re all together as a group.”

“That is literally the exact opposite of what they said was happening!” Tharin whispered hastily. “If anything, your nightmares will only get worse!”

“You’re all going to have good dreams tonight—” He insisted, glad the only girl who spoke Basic was away on Eli's ship right now. “Because I’ve got a cool story to help everyone get to sleep!”
“Oh yeah!?”

“What kind of story?”

“Just an old legend I heard as a kid. It’s not a scary one or anything. Most of campfire stories are supposed to be scary where I come from, but not always.”

"Tell us Ch’irci!"

"Everyone get comfortable and then we can start."

“I don’t know, I kind of want to hear one of the scary ones...” Tharin snickered to herself.

He gave her a look.

“For now let’s stick with something that isn’t going to make everyone’s nightmares worse, okay?”

She waved her hand and sat up on her elbows.

“So be it.”

“Help me out if I mess up on my Cheunh, okay Tharin?”

"You can count on me Ch’irci!” she mock-saluted.

"We are ready Ch’irci."

"Okay, well let's see, where do I start?” He chuckled. "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away from here... There was a lonely Lothwolf—"

"What is a Lothwolf?"

He paused.

"Oh? Well, they're like these big, furry... um..." He looked to Tharin for help, but she only shrugged. "Okay, so just imagine a Vornskr, but way bigger, furrier, and— oh you know what, I'll try to draw some visual references tomorrow, but for now just picture a giant fuzzy Vornskr, okay?"

They expressed their affirmations and he continued with his tale.
"Okay, so there was a Lothwolf who lived all alone on a completely barren world. For as long as she could remember, she was by herself with nothing but the ground beneath her feet, the starry sky up above, and the twin moons shining brightly to keep her company through the night. Seeing just how empty this world truly was, she longed for only one goal... to make it brighter.

And so... she set off to find the sun. From the moment she started walking, she spent her nights roaming this empty world, longing to eventually reach the daylight and the new beginning that surely had to wait on the other side with it. She wanted to see beauty and light, but no matter how far she went, it seemed her journey was never any closer to ending. She had been walking for so long that the moons she once saw comfort in now mocked her the longer they loomed over her in the sky, and she grew to hate their presence, blaming them for the sun that would never rise.

"Why do you follow me? I am trying to to get away from you!" she howled up at the two moons, but they did not answer. They never answered when she spoke to them, and in the silence she was forced to continue moving forward.

Her time spent walking grew longer, the sunrise never coming from the horizon. Angry, the Lothwolf looked up to the moons again and snarled at them now.

"Leave me alone!" She growled. "The sun surely fears you and your brother too much to appear when you are in the sky. I want to be rid of you! I want to find the sun! I
want you both to go away!"

Again, no answer. She wondered if maybe the moons were simply too far away to hear
the cries of a single wolf on a barren world? Still... she was determined to see her
journey through and kept on going.

Each night she walked a little farther, noticing suddenly that the moons would shrink
little by little with every mile passed. The Lothwolf was shocked, thinking that they
must have heard her howls and they were finally leaving. Her next few miles she took
new pride in her steps as she believed she was getting closer and closer to the light she
so desperately wanted to see. She ran now, the moons fading away completely as the
distance she traveled grew. It was so dark now, the stars in the sky which she had used
to guide her way gone, the peaceful presence of the moons vanished entirely as she
looked up to see void nothingness above and shadowed ground below. There was a
vast silence, more quiet now than ever before and the Lothwolf worried how long it
would be until she would finally reach the sunrise.

She kept going, but the sun never appeared and the moons did not return. She ran now,
fearing that she would be lost to wander in darkness forever. She could not see to keep
going, but knew that she couldn't turn around. Being all she could do, she only
ventured forward blindly, unsure of where her path would surely leave her. That is,
until she tripped into a small sunken area in the otherwise flat earth. There was
something familiar beneath her feet now, a paw print, and one that fit the exact mold
of her own. The Lothwolf realized now that this hole was the same one she started out
in at the beginning of her journey. The world was still barren, the lights still gone, her
life's mission coming to an end as she realized she had somehow walked the course of
the entire world and found nothing. She was heartbroken, her legs giving out to lie in
the darkness and she cried. Cried because in her pursuit of the sunlight, she had lost
the only two friends she had ever known and gained nothing in return.

"I was wrong," she said up to the empty sky. "Please come back. I don't want to be
here alone in the dark anymore!"

She fell asleep that night, resting for the first time that she could remember since she
started her journey. She was not tired, but shut her eyes anyway, hoping to start fresh
again in the morning and longing only for the two moons to come back to her.

She woke with a strange feeling in her fur, two bright lights shining just before her
eyes. It was two wolves like her, brothers it looked like, their fur a glossy white and
glowing like the forgotten light of the missing moons.

"Who are you?" she asked, but as she did, the Lothwolf suddenly recognized them and
understood. "You are the brother moons, aren't you?"

"You have done well," the first brother said. "But all this time alone has caused you to
lose your way."

"My way?"

"Thanks to your efforts, already we are moving closer to the sun that all of us so
desperately wish to see."

"Look."
She turned and stared into the vast sky, something bright off in the far distance catching her attention.

It was a single, bright, star. No more than that, she could feel its warmth. It was the sun!

"We are travelling to the sun?" she asked.

"We are, and in time new life will form here so long as you continue to keep this world spinning. For that we can only thank you."

It was in those words that she suddenly remembered her mission. She was the third sibling of the two moons, the eldest sister, once the biggest moon over all of Lothal. She had given up her position in the sky in order to find the sun, and it was her duty to walk this world and keep it spinning so that the planet could join a working solar system, and then hopefully new life and light could form upon it. The moons had only vanished as proof that the world was successfully turning away from them, and when that happened, she was supposed to know that her job had been a success.

"Forgive me for blaming you before, brothers," she said with new embarrassment. "I truly had lost my way upon coming here. I forgot what it was I was meant to do."

"You have been through much, sister," said one brother.

"But never again will you feel alone," said the other.

"For now we must return, but on the seventh day of each rotation, when we vanish from your view, we will come back to visit you and remind you of the importance of your journey."

"So long as you always walk this ground, the world will continue to live anew."

"I understand. I will never lose my way again."

She turned, but by then the two brothers had disappeared, the cool glow from the sky growing brighter as the moons took their places back among the stars.

And so the Lothwolf walked the world again, traversing the nothingness, the darkness, and back again as she came upon the hole from which she had first landed to help. Sometimes it was bright, sometimes it was dark, but the sun was getting closer and closer with every rotation. Caverns formed beneath her feet as her path wore trails into the planet with each lap she completed around the globe. Just like her brothers had promised, their forms would disappear in phases and they would reappear in physical form to keep her company every seventh rotation of the world.

It took years, but the planet was finally within range of the sun and it had found a place in a new solar system with neighboring worlds already overflowing with life. Now, where she walked in darkness was now aglow in warm, golden sunlight. Grass began to grow, then trees, and even cool water appeared from the ground. Her trips now had great scenery to accompany her and she enjoyed the challenge of new terrain forming with every lap she took. Creatures even began to appear and on the days she spent without her brothers' company, she never felt alone again. Finally, she had become more than satisfied with the success of her mission, and such a beautiful success it had become.
To this day the dutiful Lothwolf is still rumored to make her journey across the planet, keeping it in orbit and keeping everything within it alive and within reach of the watchful twin moons and the life-giving sunlight. It's even been said that when the world needs her most, she will appear to protect Lothal and do whatever it takes to keep the planet spinning. It is, and always will be, her sworn duty to the rest of the galaxy and to the world she helped create.

The End."

Ezra yawned and looked around. All of the girls, Tharin included, were completely out cold. He smiled, lay back down, staring up at the stars and the two moons from beneath the Schesa clouds as a few shooting stars passed overhead and he let his heavy eyes close, hoping for a good night's rest, not just for him, but for all of the girls as well.

"Hey, I know you..."

The White Lothwolf approached his hand as he ran it down the side of the creatures long face.

"I was just telling a story about a wolf like you to the girls. I wonder if the two of you are related?"

The wolf snorted and Ezra climbed up on its back.

"Lead the way, I know you know where to go."

With a shake of her fur and a soft growl, the white wolf took off running through the plains of Lothal, sinking into the grass and vanishing into that mysterious pocket dimension before Ezra found himself standing still on his own two feet, his hand on the access panel to a Chiss door, and without thinking, he opened the panels and stepped inside.

“Ticsi! Ticsi!”

Ezra looked just in time to see the small child barrel into the side of his leg. At first glance he wasn’t sure if it was a boy or a girl, but they had flippy blue hair, similar to the style he used to wear back at that age, and they also had light blue skin with a bit of a off-colored tint to it. The eyes were bright red like the Chiss, only the pupils were solid blue like the waters of a tropical vacation world. Or more likely... they were blue like Ezra’s own.

“Hey!?” He was confused but smiled anyway.

“Eredin! At least let him get through the door.”

The woman came around the corner, her long, wavy blue-black hair tied into a neat ponytail that fell along the side of her shoulder; her green blouse revealing bits of blue skin at the shoulders, while a lab coat was tied ungracefully around her waist. She looked so familiar... too familiar... in fact, it took him only a moment to register her face before he figured out who she was and his eyes shot wide.

“Tharin?”

She smiled and him, and almost robotically, Ezra felt his arms reach down and pick up the child...
who he could clearly remember now was a girl, and he hoisted her up to his chest before Tharin kissed him once lightly across the cheek, much to the young girl’s disgust.

“Ticsi! Ticsi!” She continued excitedly, drawing his full attention back to her by squishing her tiny hands into his cheeks. “Guess what Tin’mi and I did today?”

“Hmmm... let me think?” Honestly, Ezra wasn’t sure what to think, but it felt like the right way to start the sentence.

“We blew something up!”

“You blew something up?” He blinked hard, his gaze darting over to the older Tharin who was over by the closet door. “Wait, you let her blow something up?”

“Just a little something...” Tharin grinned, showing just how little she meant with a quick squint of her thumb and forefinger. “She had goggles on.”

He rolled his eyes, but decided it wasn’t worth the argument.

“Well then, I’m glad you both had fun at the lab today.”

He set the child down and she ran in circles around the table as he set his cloak on the hook by the door and headed in after her. Ingredients were sprawled across the counter, but so far nothing had been cooked. They must have just gotten home themselves? Judging by the counter, they were having vobseti, one of the easy to make noodle-like dishes they cooked when they all got home late.

Ezra rolled up his sleeves and rubbed his hands together, ignoring the new size and additional hair that was on his foreign looking arms. How old was he now? He couldn't really remember, but for some reason the answer didn't bother him like it should have.

“Let’s see what we have here…”

“Ticsi! Can I cook today? I’ve been really good, I swear! I know how to do it! Let me do it!”

“Did you do all of your exercises today?”

She pulled the spoon he held directly into her palm with the Force and grinned.

“Yep!”

“Eredin, you know better...” Tharin warned in the distance.

“Sorry.”

Oh right... Ezra remembered. Ered wasn't supposed to use the Force so openly, but he couldn't quite remember why for some reason.

“I would love to be served dinner by my favorite little girl...” he continued. “But only if you let us supervise, and cut up all of the ingredients.”

She tightened her lips.

“I’m not a baby! How old do I need to be before I can use a knife?”

“Tharin?” He called.
“Twenty-five, ch'eo vur!” her voice echoed from the other room.

Ezra clicked his tongue.

“You heard the woman, Red. Twenty-five.”

“Whaaaat!? That’s butuhn!”

“I heard that!” Tharin called again.

Ered slumped over her mixing bowl and Ezra leaned down to whisper something in her ear.

“How about eight? Think you can wait that long? Just don’t tell your mother.”

She nodded with a new light and then got to ordering him to help her cut up some vegetables. She could be incredibly bossy for a five year old. He wondered who she got that from, as if he even needed to ask?

Tharin came in and wrapped her hands around his waist, pulling him back into her as her cool breath touched his ear.

“I heard that too, ch'eo vur…”

He blushed.

“Tisbun'ah ch'ah, ch’eo beo…”

They chuckled and kissed once as Eredin let out one dramatic huff of breath, her face blushing red-violet and her stirring growing more fierce.

“Hello! There are children present here!” She complained.

“Really?” Ezra teased. “All I see are two beautiful young ladies... one who is cooking my favorite food because she is the best daughter on all of Csaus.”

She blushed, but hid it primly with a flicking wave of her nose, no doubt something she once saw her Ch'azen'i Lohrana do on one of her weekend trips to Copero.

“Thank you for cutting, Ticsi…” she said just as primly. “But, I believe I can do the rest myself thank you very much.”

“Are you sure?” He smiled chidingly.

She pouted at him and shot a small finger out in order to point to the table in the other room. Ezra stepped back and surrendered his hands to the sky as Tharin took the knife away and tossed it into the dishwasher.

“Come now, Sevicsi, one day she won’t want to do chores for us at all and then where will we be?”

“Alright…” he said with only a glint of reluctance. “But don’t burn yourself on any of the cooking pots! And call us before you start fixing plates!” Tharin tugged him into the other room before he could continue with his many words of warning and eventually he let her coax him out. “Alright I'm going! I'm going!”

“You can do it, en'kin'at vn'ineni! Tin’mi believes in you!”
She smiled and shrunk bashfully into her shoulders.

“Me too!” Ezra called, only by then he was forcefully removed from the kitchen.

"They grow up too fast," Tharin said with a shake of her head. "Now I finally understand why my father was so overprotective…"

“Hey, if she’s old enough to go with the Inrokini on demolition days, she’ll be old enough to cut her own vegetables even sooner.”

Tharin sighed and rubbed her face into the crook of his neck, scratching her head against his beard before letting out one deep sigh against his neck. Her hair still smelled like engine grease and mint, and even now the mere contact of her air on his body was enough to make his skin tingle, but like any responsible father and husband he restrained himself from completely ravishing her right then and there.

“I know…” Tharin finally groaned. “I know! I know you’re right, but I just get so worried about her, you know? The sound scientific boundaries of the lab are much more contained than any mundane accident in a kitchen, or worse...”

Ezra shrugged.

“Well, when did Thrass let you have free range of the kitchen?”

“Oh, I did a lot of things that she won’t be doing,” she said with a tone that was both a warning as well as full of fond memories before giving him a small nudge. “Not to mention all of the things that you did at her age.”

“Maybe not yet, but she's growing up so she's bound to get into some trouble sooner or later.”

Watching his daughter cooking away in the other room, his concern turned quickly into pride when he saw that she was reading a recipe that was far beyond her years and not even showing the slightest bit of trouble. Her mind— that was all Tharin. His daughter was so smart! He knew all parents thought that about their own kids, but Ered was just as brilliant as her mother and it showed. Now, her smart mouth on the other hand— well she had to inherit something from his genes, right? That and the Force. He smiled a bit brighter as she stirred with the Force, reaching for the holo and clicking on the recipe data with her newly freed hands.

“This isn’t about the kitchen work, Ezra.” Tharin shot him a look, her voice low now so Eredin wouldn't overhear. “I’m worried about the Alani. What if they want her?”

Ezra’s stare started to droop and he hugged her tighter to him.

“Then we let Ered decide what she wants to do and be with her every step of the way. It’s not nearly as bad as it used to be…”

“Thanks to you!” She relaxed a bit from his touch, his hands along her shoulders turning to soft kisses up the side of her neck and jaw once he shifted all of her hair off to one side.

“I could move to Csaus if I need to,” he said between kisses. "It’s you I’m worried about. All of your resources and equipment—”

“Are not as important as my daughter!” She stressed. “But they can be moved. It might be more difficult, but I could get by moving the lab to Schesa. Now the massive Olbio on the other hand—”
“Jorj is going to hate us if we move him all the way to Schesa! Ooh, maybe Walten and Urick? They have all that farmland and good weather. Jorj is old, he’d like it there.”

“And Jorj’s offspring?”

“They’ll be fine!” He waved. "The Myrkr division of the Inrokini will look after them, and you know how much Thrawn likes them. He’d keep all of them on his ship if we let him."

She laughed and nodded at the truth in those words.

"Ticsi!" Eredin called. "I can’t reach the spices and Tin’mi said not to reach for them with the Force anymore after what happened last time!"

“You got k’ison in the stove!” Tharin hollered. “It caught on fire!”

“It wasn’t my fault!” the child protested sharply.

Tharin gave Ezra the look that meant: That child is your daughter... and he snickered before stepping back into the kitchen.

“I’m on it, Tsen’sum!” Ezra called, giving the little girl a big kiss on the cheek as he strode back towards the stove. “Thank you for not climbing this time.”

For an instant, Ezra was no longer second guessing this as his life. In fact, he had never felt so at home, not since those short years spent back on the Ghost nearly a lifetime ago. It was honestly a very happy memory until Ezra turned around to grab the container of salted spice and saw it all vanish out of his reach. He frowned, the shelf, spices, and everything in the kitchen drifting into smoke and leaving him standing alone in the blackness. Worried for Tharin and Ered, he turned back around, face to face now with none other than the infamous Krayt.

Gasping Ezra took a few steps back and felt his face and clothing. Less beard, no mature physique, and his Chiss uniform was the same as the one he’d been issued by the Sabosen tailors a few months ago. He was still nineteen, he was not married, there was no daughter, or dinner, or life… it was just a very vivid dream.

“What the—” Ezra breathed now, taking it all in like a cold splash of water. “Krayt?”

“Were you happy with what you saw?”

He didn’t reply, only took in a few more breaths and glared.

“Attachments are forbidden for the Jedi, but not out here…”

“Yeah, not back home either!” Ezra snapped. “You’ve been away a while, no one really follows that rule anymore. You know! You saw!” He rubbed his head. “Why would you make me see that, Krayt? Kriff...”

“Oh, I thought this would make you happy? Perhaps your vision came with the wrong person?”

“What?”

He was suddenly standing back inside the house, now a Lothalian decor with the same helpful daughter cooking away on top of a chair set up near the stove, this little girl with long dark hair and rich tan skin. She did not ask him to help grab the spice canister, she instead climbed up to get it herself without a second thought to the danger or the consequences.
"Jaina!" He called nervously. "You get down from there! You’re going to hurt yourself!"

"Ah, let her climb, it builds character," his wife's familiar voice said warmly as her arms wrapped around him from behind. Ezra felt the hard touch of armor before looking down to see the plates connected had been painted grayer than was normal, but still alight with designs and patterns of color crafted all too familiarly from the artist who no doubt stood behind him.

"Sabine! You’re here, you’re—" He smiled, enraptured by the sweet falseness for only a split second before breaking away. He couldn’t bear to see what her face would have even looked like by this age and shut his eyes tightly. This wasn’t right. Their relationship was different than this. Sabine and he could never—

"Wait… No!" He hollered now and the illusion broke around him like glass. "No, stop it!"

"Why do you fight my gifts?"

"You stay out of my head!"

"I’ve told you before that I find your mind most interesting. It has been decades since I was last able to see the world through fresh eyes, and after you appeared, I know so much now about my home. I wanted to thank you for that."

"Thank me?" He snorted. "I haven’t heard from you for months and now you come in here showing that homey k'pah! I know you’ve been giving dreams to the Alani girls too, haven’t you? Don’t try to deny it! They told me they’ve been having nightmares whenever I’m here."

"I have been practicing the art of dream manipulation with them, but their connection to me is weak. I can see through the minds of all Force sensitives in this region. Their hopes, their fears, their ambitions… I had always sensed the flicker, but now that you are all together, I can see into their minds much more clearly than before."

"You leave the girls alone, Krayt! They’re young and scared!"

"They are soldiers? Should I not attempt to learn from their pasts to provide pleasant dreams as I have done for you?"

"Pleasant?" He laughed. "You think that was pleasant?"

"Was it not?"

"Look, you can’t mess with people’s heads like that! I don’t care what your intentions were. It’s wrong!" He sighed and rubbed his face. "It hurts more than it helps!"

"I see… Forgive me. After our last encounter with the visions, I just thought to try something more pleasant is all."

"I know about the Chiss' sin!" Ezra blurted suddenly, his hands coming down to his sides in balled fists. "I read about Myrkr and the Neti! You already know that though, don’t you?"

"I sensed the disturbance some time ago, but the curiosity has been festering within you, so I thought I might meet with you once more while the connection was strong between us."

Ezra rolled his eyes.

"Do you think you can maybe do that without the dreams?"
“I am afraid this is the limitation of my current abilities. I hope one day we will meet face to face, but until then—”

He sighed.

“Dreams it is, alright I get it.” Ezra took a step towards him. “So the Chiss created the Yuuzhan Vong? That's what you wanted to tell me?’

“They were the cause of the mutation in their outward appearance, yes.’

“Is the war with the galaxy just a revenge scheme then?’

“At first that was all it was, but as the Chiss repopulated, and the Neti continued to evolve, that mission turned instead into the desire to make peace in the galaxy once more.”

“And what better peace is there than total galaxy-wide genocide?”

“You mock their mission. I understand. Generations of lives, religions, and goals have created what we are today. The Jedi, the Sith, the Mandalorians, the Empire, and the Far Outsiders all have histories full of dark and light. None are excused from the sins of the past.”

“Do the Yuuzhan Vong remember all of this? Why are you working with them anyway? What's your angle?’

“Still so many questions about my goals. What must I do to have you finally trust my intentions as pure?’

Ezra waved out his arms until they slapped back at his sides.

“Maybe start by telling me what they are!’”

Krayt laughed and there was a strain now on Ezra's mind. He winced, feeling Krayt’s presence picking through his brain again without permission.

“You have friends coming to find you. You hope it is your family, the one you believe to all be dead. All that is known is what Yoda allowed known. A Togruta master that is neither Light nor Dark. She is very strong... the power of the Mortis gods runs within her. When she crosses the border into these Unknown Regions, I will be able to see all that she has seen as well.”

“I won't let that happen!”

“You surprise me? I could learn which of your companions are still living. I could discover all that this war has been doing in your absence. I could warn them to avoid the cluster of space that sent you and your crew through suspended hyperspace.”

“You could also learn secrets that could help the Vong win this war! I know that you are working in the Dark Side, I just can’t figure out why or why you keep trying to help me.”

“You claim to know so much and yet you know so little.” His words came out a growl of growing impatience. "And why? Your reservation is based solely on the words of an ancient Jedi Master who has only ever steered you wrong? Tell me truthfully, does giving you pleasant dreams really upset you so much? I thought you might like the change given the nightmares I sense you’ve been having. Those girls as well. Terrible visions that cannot be explained. You know the truth and I know the truth... the war is coming, Ezra. One does not need the Force to see that.”
He cut a hand through the air as if to shoo him off. As much as he hated to admit, Krayt did have a point, but it was prying into his own brain to find such points that really unnerved Ezra so much.

“I still don’t know if you’re on my side or not, but until I know for sure, I just need you to leave me alone! I've got enough to worry about without you adding onto my list!”

“Very well Ezra Bridger...” Krayt replied, not hurt or angered by the words, simply understanding Ezra's feelings in his typical calm yet thunderous tone of voice. "I see that you know the truth I spoke of the last we met, and knowing will have to be enough for now. Deep down you wished to speak with me and I appeared. Next time, I hope your curiosity will be more genuine and perhaps we will finally meet face to face. When that day comes, and it will come, you and I can converse freely and you will learn the truth to anything you could possibly desire. To find the answers you seek, you need only ask and I will be there to help you in ways which no one ever helped me. By that time, I hope you will see me as an ally instead of the potential enemy you think me out to be.”

“You know what...” Ezra nodded, though even then his voice still sounded accusatory. “I hope so too.”

Krayt seemed to enjoy the response and vanished, leaving Ezra in the blackness again until he opened his eyes and saw the cloudy night air of Schesa above him. He sat up and rubbed at his aching head with a soft breath.

“Ch’irci?”

He blinked and rubbed his face.

“Wh-what is it Lorin? Another nightmare?”

She shook her head.

“No. I just felt you wake up.”

“Oh...” he whispered.

She smiled at him.

"I dreamed of my parents and I walking with the Lothwolf. You were right. The camp story has truly brought us good dreams tonight. I only wish it had done the same for you."

“Well, I’m alright,” he assured warmly. "Go back to sleep and keep having good dreams, okay?"

She nodded and rolled back around.

“Okay. Sleep well, Ch’irci.”

“Bun'n'uvcon euhn rUTHici.”

She smiled and set her head back down, asleep again in only a few short moments.

So... Krayt could clearly see the ozyly-eshehmo when Ezra was around, and he was picking their brains this entire time. Before that, who knew the length of his senses or the range of his power? At least he was giving them good dreams tonight, but that wasn't the point. He didn't want Krayt meddling into their minds any more than he wanted the mysterious man poking around in his own. There had to be a way to stop him, to block him! If Ysalamiri didn't work though, then how could he possibly keep Krayt out of their heads?
“Sevicsi?”

He turned and Tharin rolled over to him.

“Krayt again.” He frowned, his voice so low that even if the girls did understand Basic, he was sure not even their advanced hearing could pick up his words.

"Should we be worried? That’s twice tonight. Did he show you more unpleasant nightmares?”

“No...” Ezra laughed quietly and whispered into her softly with a blush spreading from ear to ear. “He actually showed me a— well, he showed me a kind of nice dream for once.”

“Really?” She furrowed her brows. "That’s odd. Interesting! But odd? I still don’t like that he can see into your head."

“He says he could see into all the Force users in the Unknown Regions. He knows about Master Yoda, Ahsoka, the girls— he even knows about you.”

“I am no Force user?”

“No, but he knows of you because of me. That’s even more dangerous I think than him looking at just my mind.”

Tharin jumped forward and grabbed his arms.

“Ezra!”

“I’m right here!”

One of the girls stirred and she lowered her voice from a hasty whisper to a soft murmur.

“All Force users in this region! He can see into all the minds of all Force users!”

“Yeah?” He suddenly got it and grabbed her arms in return. “No... no... that’s impossible, it can’t be!”

“Maybe this man is not alone as he claims... We suspect him to be working with the Far Outsiders, but we should have instead been asking ourselves how closely.”

“If Krayt is working directly with the Vong, maybe the Aristocra aren’t to blame for the attacks and leaked intel. The Alani are a military family, they’re all pilots, most of them serving directly aboard fleet-ships! That means they would know what ships go where and on what hyperlanes, the attack strategies of the crew, and—”

“The schedules of transport vessels containing our Imperial passengers.” She nodded. "Plus who knows how much Force connectivity someone the Admiral's age could still possess? It might be just enough for Krayt to see into?"

“Are we jumping to conclusions!?” Ezra asked, his heart racing now as his brain fought to keep pace.

“I don’t know, but it is an extremely sturdy hypothesis!” Tharin answered in much the same way. “And if Krayt is telling the secrets of the Alani to the Yuuzhan Vong, then perhaps there is no traitor after all. My uncle and his theories, they could be false?”

“In that case we need to find Thrawn and let him know as soon as he gets back into the system.
You said he had theories about the traitor already, but what if they’re innocent? Who knows when he’s planning to call someone out as a traitor? We can’t let him do that!

“Are you not worried about Krayt finding out? Or worse, trying to stop you?”

“He said he wasn’t going to mess with me again until we finally meet face to face. I guess we can only hope he’s telling the truth.”

Tharin’s face looked about as convinced as Ezra’s voice sounded.

“But— on the off chance he’s able to like— mind control me, or something—”

“You mean like you did with my suitor? Ezra, you are not weak minded, surely he cannot control you.”

Ezra shrugged.

“Krayt’s abilities are beyond anything I’ve ever heard of before. I can only guess it’s something related to his time out in the Unknown Regions, but I really don’t know a lot about how he got so strong in the Force.”

"And if he does take over your mind?" She frowned. "What then?"

His blue eyes met her with a serious stare, but his voice did not hesitate.

“Take me out before I hurt anybody, tell Thrawn the truth about everything, and make sure the girls stay safe… Somehow? There just has to be a way to block him out.”

Tharin’s eyes went wide, her breath getting caught in her throat.

“I— I don’t understand…”

“I’d rather die by your hand than use mine to hurt even a single person under Krayt’s influence. I know I can trust you to do what needs to be done, Tharin. For your people... For me…”

Her face twisted, the thousands of arguments wanting to come out but getting stuck on her tongue. She kissed him and rolled back to her own blanket, her eyes glowing more fiery and her brows arched so low that the bumps on her forehead stuck out.

“It won’t come to that!”

“You don’t know that for sure.”

“No…” She admitted. “But if my profession has taught me anything, it’s not to attempt a conclusion until you have all the factors laid out from your theories. Otherwise, you just wind up with an explosive mistake.”

He smiled.

“I’ve seen you do a few of those anyway you know?”

She wrinkled her nose.

“We’ll keep our options open. Don’t go all sacrificial on me just yet, alright?”

“Alright.”
“Promise me!” She held out her arm, stretching it as far as she could from her bundle. “I know how you are… I know how your Jedi morals work... So promise me!”

He frowned, but rolled over and took her arm with a tight squeeze.

“I promise…”

She grinned and released her grip.

“Alright. Then we will talk more about this at the wedding. I see there's no getting out of this with you around, but it's alright. I'd rather be miserable with answers than be miserable and confused.” She stretched out and smirked. ”To make it up to me, you can tell me more about what Krayt constitutes as a good dream tomorrow morning.”

He blushed.

“Uh... so yeah about that...”

“Good night Ezra.”

“Y-yeah… goodnight Tharin.”

As he stared back up at the stars, he began wondering if he would ever get to have a good night sometime in the next decade. So much to do, so much to protect. He sighed and shot a look behind him at the girls. At least they were all safe for now, the rest he'd just have to tack onto the ever growing list of things he needed to do as soon as possible if he was to protect the Chiss Ascendancy and everyone in it from evil.

*I hope that Krayt is telling the truth,* Ezra thought. *But I know that nothing is ever that simple. Not with me anyway...*

And with that final thought, he closed his eyes and tried once more to find peace enough to fall asleep.
Koree and Gunther's wedding brings up some old topics, reminding everyone that it is alright to just take a moment to remember one happy occasion in the middle of all the other problems piling up around them.

“This is supposed to be a happy occasion...” Thrawn reminded for what was probably the forth time since this morning.

“I know that!” Eli grumbled. “It's just... it feels strange to be going to a wedding while we’re in the middle of a war is all.”

The Chiss adjusted his collar and then made a move to help Eli with his before the man shooed his encroaching hand away and stubbornly did it himself.

“You should at least attempt to enjoy yourself today. Admiral Ar'alani will hold the front-lines until our return, and there are countless generals as well as capable soldiers who will be able to secure victory even in our absence.”

“I know that…” Eli gruffed out, this time more gently than before. He shot a look at the Chiss and tilted his head a little ways to the side, his eyes squinted in search of answers to his reservations. “I never expected to hear you so excited to be stepping away from a battle. Why are you so eager to get to this wedding in the first place, huh?”

One of those small smiles appeared on his face as he placed his hair into a short tie near the nape of his neck and reached out with the comb for Eli's head.

“No way!” He hollered. "Not again!”

“Lohrana insists,” Thrawn said concisely, a swirling motion with the comb insisting also that Eli take a seat in front of him.

With a deep inhale and a roll of his eyes, Eli took a seat and crossed his arms, grumbling slightly with each tangled curl that got caught in the needled teeth of the comb.

“So why—” he grunted. “—Are you so happy about this wedding? It’s not the free buffet I’d imagine?”

Thrawn's eyes remained focused on his task. He had been with Vanto long enough to recognize a joke rather than an insult, but that didn't mean he needed to react to the quip.
“No. It is merely the first chance in a long while that we will have to visit with friends and family.”

Eli felt his brow lift as though they had been pulled up tautly with a string.

“Nah that ain’t it… at least not all of it.” He hummed to himself in thought a moment and then came back with his accusation. “You’re looking forward to seeing Ezra again, aren’t you? Why? Is it his progress with training or more to ease your suspicions from that strange call we got a few months back?”

“More to the latter.”

Pleased with himself, Eli leaned back and let Thrawn rake the comb through his now mostly kempt hair.

“Ah! Now I get it. You’re hoping to get some dirt on what all those two have been hiding from us. Alright, I’ll admit it, I was a little concerned after they freaked out on us back during that holo-call. The sneaking around, the lying, the odd behavior…” He chuckled. "I hope it’s just the two being awkward and not the two getting into some kind of trouble. What do you think?”

“I think you are finished grooming,” Thrawn deflected.

He snorted and rose from the chair, holding his arms out in an inviting manner that belied the sarcasm that was waiting on his face.

“Well how do I look?”

Appropriate.” Thrawn copied the motion. “And me?”

A smug grin appeared as Eli shot the Chiss a small side nod.

“You clean up pretty nice yourself.” He sighed. “Well, better get this over with so we can get back here as soon as possible and get back to work.”

“Oh come now, Eli, there has to be at least something you are looking forward to from the day’s coming celebration?”

Another cocky grin.

“Well after five months of rations, I wouldn’t mind that huge buffet…”

He accepted this joke with a small accepting nod and a smirk. Eli never did care for things outside of his typical range of comfort, but as always, he would do what needed to be done in order to move along through it anyway. Thrawn hoped he would enjoy a bit of the downtime away from the battles they'd been fighting these last few weeks at the front though. Nonstop war was not good for the mind, not even minds like his own which were forged from constant strategy and planning. It was only one day after all, and for a rare change it proved to be a happy occasion that blocked out the violence. This would prove to be both an occasion of celebration for Gunther Kordin and Koree Vayes, but also one for the collection of much desired information, and Thrawn was expecting to get far more answers by the end of this day than he would have possessed at the start. A happy occasion to be sure, but also one of grand opportunity. It was only a matter of time.
Ina’s backyard was a picture of beauty. Purple flowers with dark vines the color of dark wine coiled up white columns set along the aisles connected by diaphanous cloth tied from one side of the walkway to the other, small leaves and even smaller lighted insects crawled along the cloth to give the sky above the illusion of a serene forest canopy aglow from nature’s light. Rows of temporary seats lined the grass, decorated in similar clothes and ribbons, their bases stroked in lush greenery that lead up to the altar where Ezra knew they would all be standing very soon.

Tharin had explained that Chiss lifemate rituals had to be done in a very particular way, and also that they were all very lucky the Chiss all seemed to approve of the humans attempting to join their ranks, or else this day’s ceremony probably wouldn’t even be happening.

The rules of Chiss weddings were few, but strict. First, the couple would need to earn the blessings of their family or clan. Since Koree and Gunther had no official ties to any particular Chiss family yet, it was the blessings of their Imperial officers such as Faro and Thrawn, as well as the word of Stent and Ina who all collaboratively took responsibility over the humans’ official affairs.

Next, a representative would be assigned to officiate the ritual in the eyes of Chiss law, and that was where Thrass came in. Acting as Syndic for the political factors of military life, he had done this sort of thing for courted soldiers in all of the major military houses and had no problem supplying his talents to the humans as well. It was the least he could do after the unpleasantness involving their kidnapping and torture all those months ago.

Say what you will, Ezra thought. But Chiss did not forget a debt owed and were more than ready to repay a wrong done by their people— or— well at least Thrass seemed to be anyway?

Once the two were married, then there would be a small celebration, a dance that was non-optional to guests in a sign of merit directed to the couple and to the prosperity their bonding would bring to the Chiss Ascendancy. There would be a feast provided, pleasantries to be shared among party-goers, and then everyone would leave to go back to their regular work. It was all very simple and also so complicated, but this was merely how this things were expected to be done in the Chiss Ascendancy.

When Thrass’ wife heard that he was officiating a wedding, and subsequently learned that her daughter was also attending, Lohrana took it upon herself to plan the entire event without invite or argument in the matter. That was a shock to most everybody, but Lohrana genuinely loved to decorate for galas and ceremonies precisely like this, and she enjoyed the challenge it brought to blend Chiss lifemate rituals with that of the human ceremony of marriage. It was the perfect mixture of all of her finest skills, from her organizational abilities, sense of fashion and design, and her most favorite of pastimes, bossing other people around.

“No no no! I said to put those vases over there!” She hissed. “There is an order to these things gentlemen. I expect perfection, even if it is a human ceremony. Now do it correctly!”

The movers groaned, but moved the props yet again as Lohrana stood in the center of the room, doing one final glance over at her work.

It was Tharin’s mother, there was no doubt about that. This was the first time Ezra had ever actually seen her and known who she was. She looked a lot like Tharin admittedly, though her hair was far longer and curlier as it flowed freely down her shoulders, a large bow-shaped top knot of hair held to the top-center of her head by a single, large white-metal clip. Her dress was long and regal, Mitth Burgundy with tiny details of ivy trailing the gown in dark threads, and the long cape like shawl lifted with every orchestrated movement of her arms. Lohrana’s eyes and cheekbones
also seemed to be noticeably sharper and more prominent than most Chiss women whom Ezra had met, and it was a bit startling. She gave off a regal command that was twice as terrifying as an Aristocra’s.

Her eyes were carefully overlooking every detail of the room, turning dangerously close to where he was standing as her bird-like gaze made him feel like a guilty thief about to be caught on a motioning security cam. He froze, wondering if he should stay his ground or leap out of the way and try to make an escape, but his decision came too slow, and could feel her eyes lock on him before he could manage to flee to safety.

“If it isn’t my daughter’s side project,” she said in very prominently accented Cheunh. “Admiring my fine work are you?”

“M-Mitth’lohr’ana!” He stammered, bowing probably two times more than was necessary. “I have heard so much about you. I’m happy to finally meet you, ma’am.”

“A pleasure...” she replied with a straight face, those eyes darting to each side of his stance before returning to the deadlock they held on his face. “Is my daughter not with you? I wished to speak with her today. I must ensure she looks presentable as well. No lab coats and untamed hair this time.”

“Tharin is with the other bridesmaids already. They’re getting ready.”

Lohrana seemed pleased by this, but not too pleased.

“I can only hope...” she said with a melodramatic sigh before giving him a once-over. “I see you received the clothing I sent you for the occasion.”

He looked down at his new uniform. Charcoal gray with silver lining, rowed buttons, and a long cape which covered the entire left half of his body. The collar was a little higher than he was used to and the suit lacked the mobility of his regular clothes, but it fit, and Ezra could only blink at it as he tried to formulate a clever response.

“Yes, it fits very well, thank you.”

Her brow lifted infinitesimally, her voice lacking any sarcasm, offense, confusion, or basically any other emotion which allowed Ezra to get a better read on her mood.

“Of course it fits, it is catered to your exact measurements.”

“Right...” Ezra rubbed his neck, fluttering the white shoulder cape with his other free hand as Lohrana turned away from him and continued walking down the aisle.

He wasn't sure how she was feeling, and the Force wasn't exactly helping. Still, he couldn’t just let that be her first and final impression of him. Unsure of what else to do, Ezra casually followed her a few steps behind, his mind still trying and failing to think up something helpful to say to the mother of the girl he was in a fairly serious secret relationship with.

Lohrana felt the lingering presence and shot the human a side glance, her nose still held just a little ways in the air as she dished out orders to the workers silently with her long conducting fingers.

“Can I help you with something else, Cssoboti? You are to stand over there alongside the other males of your groom’s court when the proceedings begin. I have this entire event orchestrated based on Chiss ritual and—” she shifted her tone. “Human traditions.”
“Oh, no… no… sorry! Um—” He grinned. *Compliments couldn’t possibly make his situation any worse, right?* “Might I just say what a good job blending these two traditions you’ve done? It is very impressive!"

She smirked but almost in a chiding way and gave him a measuring glare now.

“You may say so. My husband informs that when you are given a compliment, in human culture it is appropriate to return one as well.” She hummed in thought and her eyes narrowed. “Your Cheuhn is almost acceptable. It seems the year you’ve spent with my daughter was not a total waste after all, and for that I compliment you.”

Ezra made a face, but Lohrana wasn’t versed enough in Human culture to see the crack she’d just caused in his smile.

“How is your time with Tharin fairing? All this time gone by and she has not properly introduced you to her own mother. Honestly, that child— stubborn just as her father, that one.”

“Oh, we’re great!” He said suspiciously quick. “Tharin is a great teacher! She teaches me a lot! Teaching Cheunh, teaching customs, teaching planets—” He pulled on his tight collar a little. "You know, she taught me how to dance for the wedding? It’s true! Should I show you an example?"

“Please do not.” She held up her hand. “I will take your word for it.”

All those times he’d made fun of Kanan for getting flustered around Cham Syndulla was apparently coming back now to bite him in the choobies. He would never make fun of anyone in this situation again. This was hard! He was nervous and sweaty and still unsure what words were coming out of his mouth yet still spewing them anyway as if there was even a glimmer of a chance they could get this scary older person to respect him.

Lohrana turned her back on him again and made sure that this time she would not be followed.

“How unexpected. It seems she likes you?”

Ezra jumped at the sudden presence he felt to his other side.

“Syndic Thrass!?”

“Calm yourself Ezra...” the Syndic soothed with a wave of his hand. Thrass was no social butterfly, but Ezra already felt leagues calmer talking to him than he had with Tharin’s mom.

“She likes me?” His voice was unconvinced. “How can you tell?”

His smirk intensified to a fully symmetrical smile.

“I have never seen Lohrana so amused before. Just look at her.”

The two watched as Lohrana barked orders at the others and said a few loud words in Cheunh that even Ezra didn’t know. Tharin had taught him all of the curse words she knew, so whatever threat or words of warning she’d used to cause the workers to kick it into high gear must have been pretty stout.
“A picture of serenity...” Thrass sighed dreamily. “In any matter, we are about ready to begin the ceremony. Could you please locate the other groom and his men and ask them to take their places at the front?”

“Oh, of course sir, no problem! Can do!”

Thrass lifted a brow, his large hand coming up quickly to grab his shoulder and stop his descent.

“Hold for a moment, young Ezra...”

Ezra stiffened.

Oh kriff... did he know about their missions? Or worse! That he and his daughter were technically dating!? Thrawn could probably figure it out just by looking at him, so did that mean his brother could as well? What could he possibly want by stopping him and why did he sound so suddenly serious?

Ezra looked back to him half-expecting to see his doom, but Thrass only smiled down at him like some kind of proud parent.

“Your Cheunh has gotten much better since the last we spoke. I am proud of your achievements. Glad too that my daughter’s time has been put to good use. Lohrana says you were wasting her time but I am pleased to learn that you have remained true on your word to train seriously.”

“HA! HA! HA!” He laughed awkwardly. “Imagine that!? Welp, I’m going to check on those guys now! Bye!”

Nailed it...

“Oof!”

Ezra ran into something tall and stiff, jumping back with Cheunh apologies ready only to see Thrawn and Eli in front of him, the ever studious Chiss eyeing him with fresh intrigue as he cleared away the rumples in his dress clothes.

“Oh heeeeyyy…” Ezra said un-casually drawn out.

“You seem more distracted than usual, Bridger?” Eli observed with a glare of curiosity.

“Distracted? Me? No... Hey! Did you comb your hair back?”

Eli got a tired look and jabbed his thumb into Thrawn’s chest.

“Thrawn and I have been to so many Imperial galas back during our academy days that he does this every time we go somewhere like this. Plus Lohrana said I had to.”

“Oh, hey! Speaking of which…” He looked up at Thrawn, the Chiss’ own hair now appearing much longer than it had the last time Ezra had seen him face to face.

“Yes?”

“The men are not in their places!” Lohrana yelled trepidatiously from somewhere across the yard.

Ezra immediately tensed.

“Uh... remind me later, Thrawn. There’s something I need to talk to you about. Something
important.”
Eli smirked.

“Ooh! How mysterious.”
Thrawn ignored the comment and nodded.

“Very well, Ezra. I will find you after the ceremony. You may confess whatever it is you wish to say to me then.”

“Okay! Cool! Great!” He backed away and nearly ran inside the house. “Gotta go! See you then!”

“Oh yeah, that boy is hiding something big!” Vanto teased.

“The question remains… to what does that secret truly entail?”

“Well if I were a betting man, and I’m not,” Eli reminded. “I’d say he and Tharin might be getting a little cozy spending all this time together. Curiosity is a dangerous thing between two kids that age.” He chuckled at the thought or at the recollection of a memory before turning red and waving the rest of the comment off with his hand. “I wonder if it has something to do with that?”

“Perhaps?”

Thrawn’s eyes narrowed after Ezra in that way they got whenever the Chiss was deep in thought. Eli watched as, even through the burning curiosity, that one minuscule smile twitched at the corner of his lip, and with that smile, the two took their seats towards the front and waited for the ceremony to begin.

Stupid… that was stupid…

Ezra pounded a fist into his own skull for the tenth time before wandering into Stent and Ina’s home to find the room large enough to hold all the groomsmen. He knocked a few times, hearing the other men’s voices muffled beneath the door before deciding to just barge on in.

“Hey guys, Thrass sent me back here to get you. Is everyone ready?”

“Bridger!” Gunther’s booming voice exploded. The young Jedi finding himself suddenly walloped in a world-encompassing hug. “Glad you could make it, kid!”

“ Wouldn’t miss it…” he said through strained breaths, the world around him going black due to the lacking oxygen.

"When did you land?"

"A few minutes ago—" He struggled. "I was just exploring the backyard."

"Doesn't it look great? The wedding planner has been gathering ideas from Koree for weeks. It's no Juntaran extravaganza, and none of our families are here of course, but I think Kor's going to love it all the same, don't you think?"
"Definitely..." He squeaked, the last of his air leaving him in the soft affirmation.

The light and air were thankfully returned to him as soon as Gunther let him go, and Ezra composed himself to the best of his abilities, stumbling slightly to regain his sense of balance and raking through the new wrinkles in his long gown. *If Lohrana saw his uniform mussed, who knows what she might do to him!?* Ezra wasn’t about to take that chance.

The others’ uniforms matched Ezra’s. They were neutral house colors of dark gray with that same silver trimming, the shoulder capes that fell past their knees as well as the long tunic going all the way down to the ankles, but split up the middle to reveal the black pants and tall matching boots each man sported with uncomfortable lack of mobility.

Gunther’s new clothes were white with vivid gold designs, thigh-high black boots, a popped collar with prominent shoulder pieces, and a long train flowing regally behind him in a brilliant gold. He wore a shining pendant on his forehead that pointed downward, a red gemstone at the very peak. Not to mention his hair and beard were combed to perfection and there was this glow about him of joy and pride that made him look lush and refreshed.

If Ezra didn’t know any better, he’d think Gunther were a king or some sort of senatorial royalty. Those thoughts went away quickly however whenever a snide remark or inappropriate comment left the man’s mouth, and Ezra could help but smile and shake his head.

"Pretty gaudy isn't it?"

"I think you look like a king actually?"

"King of what?" Walten chortled. "Body odor or an endless appetite?"

"Strong words Blondie!" Gunther smirked. "Don't think I can't take you on in this glorified monkey-suit!"

"Bring it on old man!" he laughed dodging out of the way as Gunther chased him around the room. By the time he reached him and caught Walten in his burly arms, Gunther lifted him up off the floor with ease and Walten's laughter abruptly stopped. "Hey! Hey! Watch the hair! Watch the hair! Truce!"

Everyone laughed as he put him back on his feet, both giving the other a few pats on the back with their brotherly camaraderie.

“It’s hard to believe this might be the last time we’re all together before your trials,” Urick said, a smile contradicting the warm seriousness of his voice.

He was looking better. Heck! He was looking a lot better! His scars almost blended into his face like a pattern of warpaint, his hair already growing long past his ears in tight braids that he had clipped all to one side. Farming was doing him a world of good it seemed and he almost appeared to be his old self again.

Even Walten’s once snow-pale skin was looking tanned; his golden hair was combed stylishly back in order to frame his face with the loose falling strands. Effortlessly stylish as always... Ezra would expect nothing less of the man.

“Well I don’t know...” Walten said smugly, his ice colored eyes hinting at something in a tempting way as he nudged his partner with his elbow. “We could always get together for another wedding in the near future, now couldn’t we?”
Urick’s smile shifted nervously and he waved his boyfriend off with his hand and a scoffing laugh.

“Oh stop…”

“I don’t mind swapping uniforms later today if the two of you want to get it over with,” Gunther winked. “Which one of you would rather wear Koree’s dress?”

They shot the man unamused scowls and lightly shoved him back and forth before the big man laughed and held up his hands in surrender.

"Okay! Sorry! Sorry! Truce! Truce!"

“Not sure what Tharin’s mom would think of suddenly having two weddings to plan?”

“There’s no way I’m making that woman angry! I met her a few weeks ago and she’s got all the fear of a mother-in-law mixed into my commanding officer, and with just a dash of my mom when she’s angry at me.”

They laughed again.

“I can see that.”

Ezra grinned.

“Well, you guys all look great anyway,” he said. “I wonder what she gave the girls to wear. Tharin wouldn’t let me see it.”

“I’m sure it’s classy.” Walten winked. “Say what you want about the Chiss, but they sure do know how to tailor.”

“And they know how to make a damn fine wedding too. Didn’t expect the Chiss to hold such big ceremonies, but once they explained how sacred this sort of partnership is for their people, I guess I can see them going all out.”

“Which reminds me…” Ezra eased. “If we don’t get out there right now, Tharin’s mom will probably start to freak out. Are you ready, Gunther?”

He took a deep breath, loosed his shoulders, cracked his neck from side to side before he nodded and smiled.

“Ready. Let’s go gents! Time for me to tie that knot.”

Lohrana positioned them all accordingly and walked away to start up the band immediately after.

“You all clean up very well,” Thrawn said as he and Eli approached their line with soft smiles.

“Thank you Admiral.” Gunther nodded, the title coming out before he could stop it, but he rolled with it anyway. “You as well. That little ponytail you’ve got isn’t in accordance with Imperial regulations, sir.”

Thrawn smiled.
"Nor are most of yours it seems, but I think the new styles suit you all nicely."

“Oh this is nothing! You should’ve seen how long it was when we first found him!” Eli measured it out with his hands. “This long, clear down to his chest.”

“Long hair was in style at the time of my exaggerated exile within the Chiss Ascendancy.”

Walten snorted back a laugh.

“Never would have pegged you for the type to follow fashion, sir.”

“I was much younger then.” Thrawn grinned. “It seemed intriguing enough to at least attempt. My hair has always grown rather quickly, so there was no loss in trying new things. Certainly the perspective I gathered was well worth the additional length.”

“No kidding?”

“My brother absolutely abhorred it.”

They all laughed.

“Well thank you for coming anyway, sir. It means a lot to Koree and me that you and Captain Eli are here to celebrate with us today.”

Thrawn bowed.

“I am honored.”

“Right.” Eli agreed. “It’s shaping up to be a lovely little shindig Lohrana’s made, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, she’s over there speaking to some sort of band now.”

“Oh, I didn’t know there would be music?” Ezra said curiously. “You know, come to think of it, Tharin has never let me listen to any Chiss music.”

“Probably for good reason…” Eli muttered, all eyes turning to his quiet statement before a grating screeching melody played and all of the men flinched.

“Oh this is a good one,” Thrawn said with a simple smirk.

They all looked to the Chiss as if his ears weren’t working properly and then glanced over to Eli as they felt the sharp tones reverberating through their teeth.

“What is that!?” Walten winced, his face contorted with every sour note.

“Is this music?” Ezra asked, wondering how in the last ten and a half months Tharin hadn’t taught him a thing about Chiss music or how horrible it really was.

“Chiss are talented tactically and visually, but musically—” Eli made a face, one eye shut and his teeth clenched. Chiss music was like cleaning the glass viewport of a Star Destroyer with a rock for a sponge and a bucket of metal shavings for water. The application of melody was probably harder given the brutal literalism of the Chiss and their inability to use their ears in an artistic sense. With a groan Eli stepped back and started walking towards the band. “Don’t worry, I’ll fix it.”

“How in the worlds do you fix that!?” Walten laughed sorely.
“Does this really sound good to you, Grand Admiral?”

Thrawn gave Urick a studious glance as he thought over the question.

“It is a very popular song. One of the mere handful we practice.”

“You only have a handful of songs to make up for your whole history?!” Ezra blurted.

“Yes, six to be precise, and they were all composed by the same man who invented instruments based on data gathered by ancient travelers.”

“You don’t say!?” Gunther grumbled.

“My ears are bleeding…” Walten started abruptly deadpan. “Yep… definitely going numb…”

“I see a light… or wait… can a person see sounds?”

“Thick as these are, I wouldn’t doubt it!”

"Hurry up Eli!"

“My lady! My lady!” Eli called, approaching Lohrana with as much caution as his bleeding ears would allow the rest of his body to make.

“Captain.” She greeted with a small nod. “How may I assist you? The processions are about to begin.”

“Ma’am, seeing as this is a human ceremony, I was wondering if you would permit me to provide some human music for the event?”

She thought about it hard for a long while and finally nodded.

“I do wish you would have informed me of musical preferences beforehand Captain, but very well. I will allow you to play the ceremony up until the Dance of Merit.” She snapped and halted the band. “Do you see an instrument to your liking, or are you planning on singing?”

He blushed.

“Oh I don’t really sing, ma’am, but I’ll take the hecir if I may?”

“By all means,” said the hecir player, handing over his instrument without hesitation. “I am interested to observe your outlandish techniques.”

“I’ll do my best then. This instrument is nearly identical to a quetarra but its missing two strings.” He looked to the musician, his fingers hovering over the tuning pegs. “May I?”

He gestured his hand in permission and the other band members stepped back.

Eli took a seat, the instrument resting over his leg as he fine tuned the chords, plucking the sour notes until they turned into a far more pleasant sounding octave.

“Here’s hoping I can remember the acoustics…” he muttered, his fingers gently strumming a series of strings as the melody came to life. The musicians were impressed, and the group of humans at the front looking over at Eli with wide eyes and no longer clutching their bleeding eardrums.

“A bit slow, but the sound is pleasant.” Lohrana hummed. “So this is human music?”

“A bit slow, but the sound is pleasant.” Lohrana hummed. “So this is human music?”
“Well, I’m a bit rusty—or—erm—I am a bit out of practice I mean.”

“Well it is sufficient. Please play these same notes when the bride comes up the walkway.”

“Can do ma’am.”

He shot a look to the others and Thrawn who were just watching him with lifted brows from a few feet away.

“Captain Vanto! How long have you been able to play the quetarra?” Gunther asked with a stupefied expression plastered across his face.

Now Eli was blushing again.

“Well it’s actually called a hecir, but I—”

“Eli! You’re good with numbers, languages, strategy, and now music too!?” Ezra smiled. “Got any other hidden talents?”

“Ooh! Can you juggle?” Urick teased with a wink.

Eli’s face got redder.

“My grandpa just taught me a few chords back when I was a kid—to impress the girls, you know?”

The men laughed.

“Well I don’t know about girls,” Gunther chuckled. “But we’re pretty impressed, aren’t we boys?”

Walten spoke under his breath.

“Beats the Chiss’ idea of live music, that’s for sure. Say! Vanto, do you know—”

“I only know the one song!” he interrupted with a grin. “Fraid’ it’s not enough knowledge to be sitting here taking requests. Sorry fellas.”

“Oh that’s okay. Thanks for your services anyway, Captain. Our ears are grateful for your talent.”

He nodded his head and looked to Thrawn who still had a barely visible look of surprised amusement on his face, and perhaps even the slightest bit of purple creeping in around his cheekbones.

Eli cleared his throat and looked back down at the instrument with nervous fingers strumming a few more chords before he dared look back up again. Thrawn no longer looked surprised, but a microscopic smile lingered at the corner of his lip as he watched Eli’s practicing from afar.

He knew that face. If there wasn’t a hecir in his quarters by the day’s end, Eli would be thoroughly shocked.

“What in the worlds was all that racket a minute ago!?” A voice erupted from behind.

“Hey! Hey! There’s the little slugger!”

“Pyrondi!” Ezra’s eyes shot wide. “Oh my gosh your baby!”
“That’s typically what happens after nine months?” She chuckled. “Come on Gunther, I know you're the groom today, but the rest of the guys haven’t even had the chance to meet him in person yet, so back off will you?”

“Aww, but he loves his uncle Gunther, don’t you, Slugger?”

“Slugger is his name then?” Thrawn asked with a slightly judgmental but more or less confused look on his face.

“No…” Pyrondi sighed, smacking Gunther away. “Gather round boys, meet Cadell Ferasi-Pyrondi. We’ve been calling him Cade for short.”

“Oh my kriffing frag, this is the cutest baby I’ve ever seen!”

“Watch the language!” Urick smacked. “It’s a baby! Don’t teach him words like that!”

“Babe, you know he's not going to remember any of this, right?”

“Yeah, but still…”

Pyrondi smiled and tilted the baby's face to see them all.

“Look here Cade, this is Walten, and Urick, and Eli, and Ezra… and the big blue man up there is Mommy’s old Grand Admiral, Mitth’raw’nuruodo.”

“May I?” Thrawn asked with a grin though whether that was to the impressively accurate pronunciation of his name or for the baby himself, not even Eli could tell for sure.

Pyrondi handed over the baby to Thrawn who held him with a surprisingly perfect technique that it made Pyrondi almost think that Thrawn must have raised kids of his own if she didn’t already know better. Thrawn’s smile was so gentle now that it was honestly freaking Ezra and the other Imperials out a little bit. This was Thrawn for Force’s sake! Never in their wildest dreams had any of them ever imagined he could make a face like this or even be this gentle or good with kids!

“I haven’t held a child so small since my niece was this young. Life is truly a remarkable thing, is it not?”

The baby smiled at him and Thrawn smiled back.

“What fascinating genetics he has. Is this heterochromia not a rarity of your species?”

“It is.” Pyrondi nodded. “Looks like he got one of my brown eyes, and one of Dubrak's green. He’s got my dark complexion that’s for sure, but that hair is far fairer than mine. I think it’s going to end up being that same light brownish-red color like his father’s was. Not bad though, isn't he?”

"He's perfect!” Urick smiled.

"A real chip off the block!” Walten agreed.

"Ferasi would have loved him, Aya," Gunther said with a hand placed on her shoulder. She was frowning, but all of them and their kind words quickly helped the smile return to her face.

“There are so many possibilities with human genetics,” Thrawn awed, starring at Cade as though he were a work of art. “I’ve always admired that.”

“Thrawn, I request a moment of your time…” Thrass said, stopping to smirk and wave once to the
baby for a few moments before motioning back to his brother. “It is an urgent matter about the procession.”

“Very well, Brother.” He handed the infant to Ezra because Eli’s hands were already full holding the musical instrument and Ezra was the nearest person to him. "Please continue to get acquainted in my stead. I will return shortly."

Cade’s smile vanished as soon as Thrawn’s face was replaced by Ezra’s, and as he stared into those mismatched eyes, he couldn’t help but be reminded suddenly of Krayt.

No! He thought quickly. No I can’t think of Krayt or else he could latch onto my thoughts and show up. No... I need to keep him out of my head!

The baby started to whimper and Ezra started to regret being awkward in that moment.

“Uhhhh...”


“You’re telling me…” He placed a hand a few inches over his face and sent a soothing comfort through the Force, just as he had done for Pypey all those years ago.

"There you go," Ezra soothed. "It’s okay..."

“Huh? Neat trick!”

“Are all Jedi good with kids or is it just you?”

He laughed.

“You know I once ran all over the city trying to keep a baby Ithorian safe from Inquisitors. You know how hard it is to keep a baby calm in the air ducts and fight off two skilled evil people trying to kill you with spinning lightsabers!? You pick up a few things...”

They blinked.

“You’ve lived an interesting life, haven’t you Ezra?”

“You have no idea!” He chuckled, Cade getting more comfortable with the new face as well, now that Ezra's mind had calmed down.

Gunther snorted.

“Well, I’d never expected to get married on a Chiss world out in the Unknown Regions without turning in a half a dozen request forms to the Empire, so I guess we’re all pretty interesting these days, huh?”

“Speaking of which, I’d better find Ina and Stent so they can watch Cade for me while I’m up there. He absolutely loves them and I think they might have somehow become his honorary grandparents! I'm glad... It's not like he'll probably ever meet his real grandparents after all.”

"You never did talk about your family much, Pyrondi," Ezra frowned.

She frowned back and shrugged.

“There was never much to talk about.”
“That bad huh?”

“Not bad... but not entirely good either. Whose family doesn’t have problems, am I right? Well I have a big family so that just meant we had a lot more problems than most. I won’t say that I didn’t have my good days on Chalacta, but in a way I’m almost glad my son won’t have to deal with any of our family issues and never-ending drama. That might be selfish of me, but in a lifetime of keeping what little family I could together for as long as possible, I’m kind of glad I don’t have to do it anymore, you know? It was an impossible thankless job and I’m just done being the moderator between every little fight they want to dish out.”

"It's not selfish," Eli said quickly.

"Besides..." Gunther shook her a bit. "Now you have a new family! A couple of ex-imperials, a few Chiss, and a Jedi! What more could the kid need?"

She laughed.

"When you put it like that, it almost sounds like the start of a bad joke."

"Yeah but with a better punch line I'd imagine?" Urick grinned.

"Alright! Alright!" Pyrondi waved spinning around to retrieve her child before shooting a finger back at Gunther.

"Faro brought my dress over, right?"

“I think so?” He shrugged. “Better hurry though, I think the wedding planner will start to get impatient if the girl’s don’t get done soon.”

“Tell that to the tailors! It isn’t my fault I lost my baby weight so fast.” She placed a patting hand on Gunther’s check, smiled, and then waved to everyone else as she started back towards the house. “See you guys in a few, alright?”

They waved back and Lohrana wasted no time in taking her place.

“Places everyone! Now where did Thrass run off to?” Her face fell darkly. “And where is Thrawn?”

“Thrass is speaking with Thrawn," Eli informed. "Something important about the procession he said."

“Oh! Those men!” She growled. “Nobody else stray from their places! Now that the bride’s last maid has arrived we will be starting any moment.”

Urick and Walten shot each other a skeptical glance, that being the third time she'd said that in the last ten minutes, but by then Lohrana was already gone to greet more guests who were just arriving before she ushered them to their seats.

The crowds consisted of a few Sposia neighbors and tutors, basically anyone Ina, Stent, or Lohrana thought to invite, and then the rest were probably officials or curious spectators that worked nearby. That was okay though, the more the merrier Gunther had said, and knowing Koree, she would undoubtedly say the same.

As the time drew nearer to the wedding, Ezra suddenly remembered the talk he would have with Thrawn once it was all over and he was not looking forward to it in the slightest. Maybe it was the
nerved of meeting Lohrana, or the sudden shock of seeing Cade’s eyes which were so similar to—well... you know...

Honestly he wouldn’t mind the delay if it prolonged the dread of the conversation he had to come. In that mindset, he wouldn’t care if this wedding lasted forever. Ezra reminded himself not to look so down. This was supposed to be a happy occasion after all and if a baby could pick up on his thoughts, the others probably could as well. Gunther and Koree deserved for everything to be perfect, including Ezra’s mood. That, and if he didn’t look more content, he feared what Lohrana might do to him to make him that way. No, he would do what he needed to in order to make it through the wedding. This was a happy day after all, and it belonged to two friends who deserved it more than anything else in the galaxy. This was their day, and his problems could wait for a little while longer. It was just a matter of time now.

Faro walked forward, Pyrondi, and Tharin close behind as the three women made their way up the aisle and to their places.

The crowd was in mixed chatter as everyone admired the three and how beautiful they looked, their charcoal dresses flowing as they walked, the blackened see-through fabric trailing up their arms and necks, and the silvery white sashes wrapped around their waists revealing embroidered patterns along the torso that matched the details of the men's own ensembles.

Faro’s graying hair was up in a pristine bun, Pyrondi’s long raven-tinted hair braided down one shoulder, and Tharin’s— well, Ezra had seen her in her courtroom clothes, her hair up, down, and frizzed beyond all recognition due to potentially hazardous chemical fumes— but he had never seen it quite like this. It was still long, still wavy, but she had a thin portion of it braided around the back of her head like a halo, and for some reason, just looking at her now made his heart do a quick jump in his chest.

She smiled at him and he had to stop a moment to remember how to breathe before he could smile back.

“You ladies all look lovely,” Gunther said smiling.

“Just wait until you see her.” Faro winked.

“You look beautiful darling!” Lohrana smiled. “I’m proud of you for making such an effort with your appearance today.”

“Thank you, Mother.” Tharin replied, knowing when to accept a compliment from her, even though the words were a little less than complimentary to outside ears. “This wedding looks remarkable!”

“Well I have plenty of practice planning for your lifemate ceremony.” She gave her daughter a look, partly teasing, part guilt trip, but all seriousness.

Tharin blushed.

“Mother please…” she whispered. "Not right now..."

“I know, I know! We can discuss it more later. Now, it is time for the bride’s grand entrance.”
She stepped away and Tharin made a dying choking sound that made Ezra and the rest snicker before all returned to normal in time for Lohrana to turn back.

Thrass gave his daughter a warning look, and Tharin shrugged a silent apology at him until he rolled his eyes and smiled at her afterwards. She really did look beautiful. Perhaps she would be having her own bonding ceremonies one day… then again… she could wait as long as she wanted. No matter what Lohrana said, she was still his little girl after all, and no amount of age nor standard Chiss pressures to marry would change that.

“Eli!” Lohrana snapped suddenly. “Here she comes.”

He nodded and began to play as Lohrana motioned everyone else to a stand.

The yard grew silent, only Eli’s strumming gentle song echoing through the wind as all turned and watched as Koree stepped around the corner. The awes were even more audible than when the girls had walked in, many Chiss were now smiling at her even though the Imperials seriously doubted most of them knew who Koree was. They didn't need to. She looked beautiful no matter what planet they were on, and Gunther's face when he saw her said that to any species with eyes.

Her dress was white, the details and swirling patterns in the sleeves and bodice a shining gold, the cuffs long enough to drag the floor with sleek and fitting fabric until the skirt hit her knees and spread out in a wide flowing train behind her. Her hair was a lot longer now then when they first arrived, but was still barely enough to tie into a knot behind her head, and she wore a golden tiara with the same red jewel as Gunther had on his, but in addition she had five more dangling in front of her eyes like some kind of gem-coated veil. On top of that, her sharp features were decorated in eye makeup and red lipstick that made her smile visible even from where they stood at the opposite end of the room.

Ezra snuck a quick look at Gunther, his eyes shinning, smile wide, and a part of him holding back tears. He grinned at them, happy that they could be in this moment, and happy to just be a part of it. Gunther’s eyes never left Koree’s, not even after the moment she stood before him and they took each other’s hands. The warmth and love radiating off of them was enough to bring tears to a few of the Imperial’s eyes, and smiles to all the rest of them.

Eli’s song came to its conclusion as he lowered the hecir and showed the first genuine smile since arriving here. All of the Chiss in the crowd meanwhile looked pleased at the happy couple, though there was a unique look about Thrawn that made him stand out from all the rest. It was in that one small smile that Thrawn proved he had been around humans just long enough to feel what the rest of them were feeling for Koree and Gunther right now. His eyes broke from the others and landed on Eli as the man refrained the urge to jump a little in his chair. Thrawn nodded at him, and Eli nodded back, an understanding gesture between the two of them, and one holding a dozen different meanings behind it that Eli could hear plain as words spoken aloud.

He smirked and moved his eyes back to the procession just in time for Thrass to begin the ceremony.

By the end of the speeches and vows, Thrass officially announced them as lifemates and by this point in the ritual, they were supposed to touch foreheads and rub noses. Instead, Gunther grabbed her, dipped her to the side and then they kissed much to the shock of the Chiss crowd with the exception of four who knew what was going on. Those four: Thrawn, Tharin, Ina, and Stent all clapped, the Imperials, Eli, and Ezra following suit as the confused but calming Chiss began to slowly join in.

Getting his thoughts together, Thrass blinked and found his words as he moved off to the side in
order to announce the joining ceremony complete. He then motioned for everyone to move onto the food and dance portion of the events, and with that, the after party of the grand wedding was officially underway.

There was a lot of dancing after that—or as much as someone could dance to Chiss music. Luckily Chiss dances were about as few in number as their music, and Tharin had already taught Ezra the couple’s waltz that the Chiss were best known for. This would become a customary thing if he were ever to be invited to any high council galas or social gatherings that people like Lohrana were most known for holding. Charity events, military meetings, weddings… no matter what, there was one dance that had to be performed. That was just how it was done.

It was standard to dance with the partner you’d come with, your arms backwards and touching at a perfect ninety degree angle as you stepped together in a circle… One, two, three, switch. One, two, three, switch. Then you turn your arms around and repeat. One, two, three, turn. One, two, three, turn. You maintain eye contact and take two steps back, turning to the person behind you and doing one quick circle, arms raised, until you met back with your partner and repeating the steps again until you have danced with four different people and literally made it from one half of the floor to the other in the endless cycling movements of people.
The song came to a climax and then a sudden end, and everyone let out a small cheer before clapping and sighing to catch their breaths.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get used to that!” Eli grinned, his face red as he released Thrawn’s arm and stammered nervously back to the band. “Anyway, I think I better get in line if I want any food. You want anything?”

"I will catch up." Thrawn grinned. "There is something I must do beforehand."

He nodded and wandered off quickly, leaving Thrawn amused as he watched the man's escape beside Tharin and Ezra. The two exchanged a firm nod and pulled him aside.

_It was now or never._

“*_G'en'vti,* we wish to speak to you in private,” Tharin started.

“Oh yes, Ezra warned me of such. I know a good area for privacy, follow me.”

They escaped into Stent and Ina’s home, sneaking through the halls all the way to the library which only those who had lived here would know where to find. They entered, Thrawn admiring the old collection as well as his old group photograph before turning to face the teenagers once more. It had been years since he'd been in this room, but he had spent so many days in here as a child, it was almost as though he had never left.

“Now what is this about?” Thrawn asked knowingly, cataloging his nostalgia off to the side for now. “The two of you have been extremely distant in these last few months and it is not merely because I have been far from the system of late.”

Tharin rubbed her wrists and Ezra rubbed his arm, all the while Thrawn’s red stare intensified like heat seeking missiles locked onto a target.

“Well, you see… we need to confess to something, _G'en'vti,* and you are the only one we can trust with the information. In our months together, Ezra and I have been doing more than just preparing him for his trials…”

His brows lifted slightly, but his face remained impassive.

“Go on.”

Another look and then Ezra blurted out the truth.

“We know about Myrkr, and we think we know who the Chiss traitor is, but you need to know it isn’t anyone in the Aristocracy.”

Thrawn’s stare froze, his mind processing a much different kind of confession than the one his ears had just caught. _So he and Eli had been wrong about their confession?_ Though Thrawn had suspected it could have been something more to this sort, he never expected them to just openly blurt out information that was, to his knowledge, confidential in the highest degree.

“Come again?”

“Tharin and I have been sneaking off since the Ilum trip to research into the dark history of the Chiss. Like the Myrkr cover up, and the Chiss traitor.”

“I overheard you discussing possible members of the Aristocracy who were suspect of betrayal, but in
light of our discoveries that may not be the case.”

Thrawn was frowning now.

“How have you come to these conclusions? What exactly is it that the two of you have done?”

And so they told him. They told Thrawn everything and anything they swore they wouldn’t tell him just a few measly months prior. Ezra revealed the voice of Krayt, which led them to Ina’s library, to Rentar, to Csilla. Tharin told about the Outbound Flight records, the unspeakable sin of their people before establishing themselves on Myrkr, and how the war with the Yuuzhan Vong stemmed directly from their take over of Ryyk now known only to them as Myrkr. Ezra then came back with the weekend trip to Schesa and how Krayt has been tapping into the minds of the Alani girls through the Force in order to gain insight on the Chiss’ military activities. The only reason either suspect they have not gained entire feats over the Chiss is merely because Krayt could not get enough information out of the girls due to their weak connections.

“But yours is strong enough…” Thrawn repeated, humming out a few words in deep thought. “Krayt. Of course! The reactions you had on that last comm-call. The reactions of the Yuuzhan Vong aboard their fleet ship. It all pointed to the Force user sharing the name of that expletive slang term.”

He chuckled as though the thought was so obvious now, but he had gone through so many theories in order to reach it.

“Monitoring the thought process of the Alani, that may just give him enough access to higher ranking soldiers such as Ar’alani or Maris’safis.”

“That’s what I believe as well.”

“Thrawn, Tharin told me you had a suspect already for the Chiss traitor, and your theories are rarely wrong. Who did you think it was?”

He made a face.

“My initial suspicions pointed me into the direction of the military. I knew that the direct orchestration of ships and fleet lines suggested the leak being directly related to information only the military families are allowed. Sev’ere’e’nuruodo was the only military leader with both this information as well as those held in more private Aristocra halls. I have been piecing together clues of her involvement with the Yuuzhan Vong seeing as she would have the most to gain by protecting our people by giving up the humans or by selling secrets to the Vong armies in order to keep them away from major systems in Chiss space.”

“And was she?”

“I know that she was indeed in contact with Vagaari leaders working with the Far Outsiders. She would stage failed missions to supply them with weapons and materials that they incorporated into their future attacks apart from the Yuuzhan Vong. Those warriors Eli and I faced had built up an immunity to our weaponry, so I suspect a similar involvement between such lower ranking class soldiers and the species enslaved to the Yuuzhan Vong’s military.” He paused. “Though Vereen would sooner die herself than risk soldiers’ lives to the enemy in exchange for such fragile peace. The humans however—I have no doubts she shared involvement, but the raids and attacks on the Expansionary Defense Fleet, and the attack which cost Admiral Ar’alani her ship are more likely paths seen through the eyes of the ozyly-eshehembo during their navigations which left their minds vulnerable and open to this Krayt’s psychic attacks.”
"Bin'vah to rcati…" Tharin sighed. "I thought Ronin may have been the traitor."

"She’s been really torn up about that for months," Ezra added.

"No. His differences stem purely from a scientific curiosity unique to all Inrokini." Thrawn waved, his hand coming up to grab at his chin in the thoughtful expression he’d mimicked from all those years of watching humans. “Though knowing there is in fact a Force user out there working with the Vong troubles me. However, it provides me with the perfect link for all of my missing data.” He shot a look at the two that was a mixture of an impressed uncle and sneaky military commander. "You two have done quite well."

Tharin blushed.

"Thank you, I am pleased we could lend our assistance."

"Your assistance is appreciated, though I do wish you would have trusted me with such information far sooner."

Her smile vanished.

"Forgive us, G'en'viti... we believed it safer and easier to get this knowledge in secret. Some of it is quite sensitive."

"Like the journal." Ezra persisted. "What do you know about the Neti, Thrawn?"

"The Neti?"

"Yeah. Don't you remember? You talked about them with me when we first woke up on Myrkr. You said they used to live there, but disappeared mysteriously a long time ago. After a year of Chiss lessons, not one history ever brought up native sentient living on Myrkr, and absolutely no texts anywhere ever recognized the Neti at all except for in that journal. So how did you still know about them even when we had amnesia?’”

His red eyes narrowed.

“I remember mentioning this... but I fear this was not public knowledge that I let slip, but a major secret which I overheard as a child.”

“From the Aristocra?”

“No. From…” He shook his head with a frown and a thoughtful gaze into the distant past. “From Thrass.”

“Thrass?!”

“Ticsi?!” Tharin cut in again. “No, there is absolutely no way my father could know anything about this. We spent weeks researching dead leads until we found the logbook. I assumed you could know something because of your many travels and years abroad, but there is no way Ticsi—” She trailed off.

“In light of our recent revelations, perhaps we should share these new discoveries with my brother as well in order to learn the remainder of what we seek?”

“We’re trying to involve as little people as possible, Thrawn.”

“Yes, well... I trust Thrass with my life and he knows far more about the Neti than I will be able to
remember. He probably believes I have forgotten the legend to begin with considering I heard the tale—“ Thrawn paused, his stare appearing to have seen something in that search through his history that he was just suddenly remembering.

“G'en'viti?”

“I learned about this on the day we lost our parents...” Thrawn said the words and then blinked, his glazed over stare returning to the bright glow of red as he stood tall and walked out with a final warning. “Do not leave this room. I will be right back.”

The door shut and Ezra and Tharin started pacing the room.

“Oh this is— I don’t even know what this is. What is that word for angry and scared with a feeling of impending doom?’’

“I don’t know? Dread maybe?” Ezra waved. “But look, if your dad is involved in this now, how much do we tell him?’’

“None of it? All of it?’’ She shrugged. “I mean, sure we just poured all of our illicit activities to my uncle, but telling those same storied to my father!?’’ She laughed. “They might as well just chain us to the floors now.’’

“Maybe we should make Thrawn do it?’’

“No!’’ Tharin shouted. “Then he’ll definitely let something important slip. My uncle doesn’t know what we don’t want my father to know! If we even have a chance out of this—’’

“What? We lie? Make up a story about how you just magically stumbled upon some millennia old Chiss logbook?’’

She clutched her head.

“We are— what is the term? Royally kriffed? We are that, aren't we?’’

Ezra laughed.

“Looks like it. Maybe we should just let them know we’re dating too... honestly I doubt your dad will care in comparison to everything else we’re telling him.’’

"I want to leave this room grounded not murdered!' She smiled.

He smiled back and both took in a deep breath.

"We can do this. We’ve been sitting on this long enough and look, Thrawn was happy we were able to figure some of this out!'"

"Maybe it won't be the end of the world?'"

"Maybe?’’

They said this, still feeling like the exact opposite. It was definitely dread that Tharin was trying to say.

A few minutes later the door slid open and Thrass came through alongside Thrawn before he closed it swiftly behind them. Just like his brother, Thrass felt himself teleported back in time to a world of memories as he looked around admiring the old library and their photo before finally
the illusion broke when his eyes locked on the ever rising guilty faces of his daughter and Ezra Bridger.

“What is this urgent meeting really about?” He asked with a glare.

“Your daughter and Ezra have something they wish to speak to you about,” Thrawn replied in a firm voice.

Thrass looked a little taken aback a moment, a particularly nasty look finding its way to Ezra before lifting a curious brow back at his daughter. He was growing impatient as the seconds ticked by.

“Well speak!”

Tharin swallowed and stepped forward, telling him absolutely everything without even a breath of hesitation. When she was done the room was quiet.

“And you knew about all of this?!” Thrass hissed to his brother.

“Only about Ilum. The rest I have just learned as well.”

There was a purple growing in his skin. This was not a blush but anger boiling publicly for all to see and be warned about.

“Tharin, why go searching for this? It is dangerous, and I mean more dangerous than the illegal expeditions you took! Do you two realize that if you had been caught, it borders on grounds for swift execution!? Is your curiosity worth your life!?"

Tharin shrunk back.

“No Ticsi... I just thought—”

“No, for once in your life, child, I dare say you were doing no such thing. Any rational Chiss would think against breaking the law in curiosity. This— well this was the reckless behavior I would expect of my brother, not of you.”

She bowed her head lower and didn’t dare look up to meet his gaze.

“Punishments aside, Brother…” Thrawn interrupted. “What do you know of the Neti and of Myrkr? I know only—”

Thrass’ angry face grew suddenly more enraged when he turned to Thrawn, a look causing his brother to silence immediately.

"Do not speak of it!" He hissed, and this was an actual hiss, a reptilian sound that took Ezra slightly aback.

Thrawn furrowed his brows.

"I know something of it and it was a strong memory to have survived my crash to Myrkr. I told Ezra about the legend when I didn't even remember much about myself at the time. I know this was something important, but without you I will never know why!"

"And perhaps that is a good thing!" He growled.

"I have the right to know!"
Thrass glared at him, but whether it be the memory of long buried away thoughts, or their childhood picture hanging on the wall behind Thrawn’s head, Thrass felt his face gradually begin to relax, and then all too suddenly his anger smoothed away. "I thought—" He sighed. "I hoped that you had forgotten long ago of that story, Thrawn. You were so young then..."

Tharin looked up, but neither she nor Ezra dared to press him to keep talking. Still, the Syndic could see the looks on each of their faces and knew that the conversation wasn't about to die down.

He let out another heavy sigh and shook his head.

“That information is dangerous knowledge, more so than any of you can possibly realize. You never should have heard it Thrawn, just as our parents never should have told me on the day that they were killed.”

The others were silent.

“I was always told our parents died in an accident?”

“Oh what was made to look like an accident…” Thrass corrected.

“Thrass…” He grabbed his brother’s arm a bit more forcibly than he meant to but Thrass hadn’t noticed, he only shook his head again.

“The story had been passed down in our family from generation to generation. Thousands of years ago, it was one of our ancestors who lived to see the destruction of Myrkr and kept the tale alive even though history had tried to change it once Outbound Flight had fled to Csilla. Many in our family have met with circumstances of mysterious ends for knowing these facts, including our parents. I thought that perhaps we might avoid the same fate because we were just small children, orphans, so we couldn't be much of a threat until we were older. They must have thought we didn't know anything back then. By the time we were old enough to appear as threats however, I had to be sure that we had become indispensable members of the Ruling Houses and grand contributors to the Ascendancy.”

"And you have just kept this secret with you all these years?"

There was a hurt in Thrawn's voice, not an anger or a sadness, but a hurt, and Thrass could hear it plain as day.

"I planned to let the dark secret die with me, but now you remember it and worse, now my daughter knows too. The two of you could have gotten yourselves into more danger than you ever realized.”

"Who is they?” Tharin asked, brave enough to speak up again. "Who has been killing off members of our family to keep this story silent?"

“Perhaps the Aristocra? Perhaps just the descendants of this Captain or the colonists of Csilla who don’t want this knowledge getting released to the public? It could be assassins or mercenaries who have held this truth in bigger numbers than ours and have formed an organization to keep it hidden. I don't know?”

“So they’re willing to kill to keep it quiet and nobody has tried to stop them?” Ezra blurted, that familiar sense of anger returning to him when he remembered for the second time since coming here just how alike he and the Mitth brothers truly were. *Somebody killed their parents to keep them quiet, the Empire arrested his for just the same.*"
“Knowing the truth would cause uncontrolled panic, the fragile peace between the Ascendancy would crumble more than it has already! I surmise they would do anything to keep these truths from getting out.”

The brothers glared at one another. *A secret maybe shared just between them?* Neither got the chance to ask about it further as Thrass sighed and looked more softly over to his daughter.

“If I could take these memories away from you, *k’eten* I would. You must understand how threatening this knowledge truly is. The only reason I suspect you were not already targeted was either sheer luck, or distraction in the eyes of those who want to do you harm. Either reason aside, you must never reveal what you have learned to anyone. *Ever!* Or else you, and perhaps your mother or your colleagues will all meet mysterious deaths just like your grandparents.”

Another wall melting silence and then Ezra stepped forward.

“So what do we do now then?”

"We continue on as nothing ever happened!“ Thrass said abruptly. "You destroy that accursed journal, erase all evidence of your illegal operations, and go back to your intended training! You do not speak of Dark Force users, traitorous Chiss, or unspeakable secrets again." He looked to Ezra. "You then pass your trials, join the Nuruodo, and help to bring peace to the Chiss just as you planned to." He looked to Tharin. "And after, the rest of us go back to our typical lives before your arrival."

“You obviously care more than I could have ever imagined about the struggle of our people, Ezra, and for that I feel I must thank you for taking such interest as to risk your life to uncover these truths,” Thrawn said.

He shook his head and let his arms flail out in frustration.

"It wasn't that hard."

Thrawn lifted a brow.

"No... I imagine it probably wasn't?"

He shot a look to Ezra, then to Tharin, and one back at Thrass.

"There then, this mess is all settled..." the Syndic let out a weak sigh. "Let us agree never to have this conversation again." He turned back and pointed a finger at all of them. "And no more secrets! I will pretend none of this has happened, Tharin, so you had better not take this forgiveness for granted. You are to remain on Csaus and focus on your work! No more expeditions!"

"Yes *Ticsi*..."

"Good." Thrass nodded. “As for the rest, you are all sworn to secrecy. No one else can know what matters we have discussed here. No one! I want your solemn vow never to speak of it.”

“'You have my word, Brother.’”

“I swear…” Tharin nodded.

Ezra bit his lip but sighed in defeat.

“Fine… I promise too, but what if what we learned could help the war?”
"The only thing this information will bring is death and panic!" Thrass assured.

"However, I do wish to study possible ways to block Krayt’s influence on potential Force users."
Thrawn added. "If Ysalamiri don’t block out his abilities, I wonder what will?"

"Well I’ve been trying to think about a solution to that problem too, but the only things that have ever blocked my abilities were Ysalamiri and—" He paused and slapped his forehead so hard it left a mark and made him see spots in his eyes.

"Ezra?!"

"The Yuuzhan Vong!" Ezra clapped. "I can’t sense them!"

"And you could not find Krayt no matter how long you meditated!" Tharin gasped. "Could it be—"

"The Yuuzhan’s Myrkr roots could be somehow directly related to the Force blocking prowess of the Ysalamiri, the healing properties of the Olbio trees, and the strong sensory abilities of the Vornskr." Thrawn nodded. "Yes, so that means in a way, the Yuuzhan Vong’s organic armor and evolved equipment possess the same properties of the planet itself. Fascinating..."

"The armor itself could be blocking out the ability to be sensed within the Force!"

"But not blocking abilities to be sent out or stopped in an attack. I can still hit them, I just can’t read their minds or sense their locations."
Thrawn nodded.

"And if you cannot sense them then the ozyly-eshehambo cannot as well, leading to the delay in their third sight at the crossing of a fleet ship."

"Theoretically, if we were to get our hands on elements from Myrkr— or better yet, Yuuzhan armor, then I could run studies to see how much is required to repel mind manipulation in Force sensitives.” Tharin slapped her uncle on the back. “It’s brilliant!"

"I will work to get you the proper samples as soon as possible."

"I'd love your help with the study of their deoxyribonucleic acid, what do you think stimulates a weakness in organic matter evolved from a planet itself which contains mysterious elements of Ezra’s Force powers?"

"Probably a mixture of the planet's corruption evolving into new life when the world was reformed after these many years in healing."

"Which is a miracle in itself that a planet so damaged could have healed at all?"

"Perhaps an unknown factor or aid led to the life there today?" Thrawn considered. "Still it does not negate the fact that Myrkr possesses certain qualities that will help to protect our Force sensitives."

"I'm getting excited!"

"New information is always exciting. I'm glad we were all able to come to these conclusions together."

Thrass watched the two of them before he began to laugh.
"What?"

"I always knew you were like your uncle..." Thrass shook his head. "But I never truly realized how much."

"Well that's not a bad thing..." Tharin grinned.

"No." Thrass smiled. "But it unsettles me more than you could possibly know."

She hugged him.

"There there, Ticsi... I promise not to give you as much grief as G'en'vti."

He chuckled.

"I appreciate that k'eten. You know, when Thrawn first told me you had something important to tell me, I was afraid it might have had something to do with you and Ezra."

Both she and Ezra let out awkward laughs that only made Thrawn's eyebrows raise again as Thrass' lowered in curiosity.

"You are so silly, Ticsi..."

They tried to head towards the door, but Thrawn parked himself between them and the exit and shot the two a very knowing, very instructional look.

He knew! Of course he knew, he was Thrawn!

They both let out a deflated sigh and turned back.

"About that..." Tharin sighed. "I may need to resend my promise for a few more moments, Ticsi."

"Why?"

She took Ezra's hand and held it up.

"Well since you said no more secrets, I suppose I should just tell you that Ezra and I have been courting in secret for these last five months..." She swallowed. "And I really like him..."

Thrass marched forward before winding up and punching Thrawn smack across his jaw.

"Whoa!" Ezra exclaimed, though more happy than mad. Thrawn kind of had one of those coming after all this time, but still... if anyone was getting punched he was just glad it wasn't his own face taking the hit.

The Chiss ignored that though, and Thrass was once again seething.

"What did you do!?"

Thrawn hissed back and deflected the second punch with ease.

"He didn’t do anything!" Tharin said quickly. "Ezra and I came to like each other on our own."

"You only think that because you don’t know how deeply he meddles!" Thrass hissed in Cheunh, too angry for Basic any longer. "You volunteered Tharin to the Aristocra so your Jedi would have more reason to stay here, did you not?"
Thrawn was silent.

“W-wait... did you?” Ezra asked slowly, his blue stare hard and intense.

Thrawn sighed.

“It was always a possibility…”

Ezra felt the lightsaber in his coat pocket, the urge to throw him into the nearest bookshelf with the Force, the itching sensation in his knuckles to make contact with his bruised jaw like Thrass had. Instead, he only stepped back until bumping arms with Tharin and the two pulled away unsure of what else to do.

Their relationship… was it really just another one of Thrawn’s stupid plans?

“Can you calm them down?”

“I can’t even think straight!”

She stared at him a moment a little hurt, before looking out to her father trying to kill her more combat-experienced uncle, and it was then she started to do the unthinkable. She started to laugh, slow at first, but building until it was all anyone else could hear in the library and they all stopped and looked to her as she did.

“What’s so funny?”

“You all think that Thrawn is responsible for my heart?” She shook her head, her brows going so low it did that thing where her her forehead creases popped out. “You think it was Thrawn who made you kiss me on Csilla? Or Csaus? Or Myrkr?”

“Kiss?” Thrass hissed worriedly to Thrawn. “What is kiss? What does that mean?”

“Ezra, from the moment I met you, you were a fascinating study, but I only started to like you after you confided your stories to me, after you listened to mine and showed me more compassion and understanding than an entire planet of people had when I was a child! You became my friend because you liked me for my qualities and my own traits, not because of which house I came from or what position I held in the Ascendancy! Plus, you showed me more inspiration and adventure than I’ve ever dreamed about experiencing in my lifetime.” She punched him hard in the arm to get her point across. “You think Thrawn could create such emotions in me? He merely altered my path to meet you, and I’m glad he did! All my years and I have never met a match for myself, but that was because no Chiss could fit the mold. I needed a human. I needed you.”

Ezra blushed, Thrass releasing his grip on Thrawn’s uniform as the two stared unblinking at Tharin, and then at Ezra once he too began to laugh.

“As usual... you’re right.”

She smirked at him and tilted her head to the side, her sweet warmth returning to her tone.

“Of course I am, Sevicsi…”

“Thrawn could never make you the most patient, thoughtful, abrasive, and stubborn Chiss I’ve ever met in my life. If it wasn’t for how different you were, I never would have started to have such a crush on you when I first moved here.”
“And?” She teased.

“And... he has nothing to do with our hours clocked into sparring practices, or the competitive way you get mad when you lose...” He winked. “The way you crinkle your nose at me when you're being a know-it-all, or the way you calm me down when I feel lower than my absolute low. He didn’t help deliver Vornskr puppies, cook with me, support me, and ultimately keep me going through these last ten months of hardcore training. Nope, that was all you...”

She took his hand and he squeezed it tight.

Thrass was speechless, but as a Syndic, he found a few words deep inside him and managed to spill them forth.

"You— You truly care about one another—" His brows twisted. "Don’t you?"

They looked to each other and then to him and nodded.

“Ezra is strong and kind, his heart is bigger than any I have ever known and not in the physical sense. I feel safe with him, Ticsi. I feel like I can be myself and he’ll like me no matter what I do.”

Thrass blinked.

“And you?”

“She’s the only reason I’m still here. Without her presence in my life, I don’t think I would have made it this far. She’s smart and funny, and she makes everything better no matter how bad things seem to get. She keeps me going.”

Tharin smiled and placed her head on his shoulder.

“I see...” He frowned, rubbing his face once in both hands before stepping up to Ezra far closer than any in the room were comfortable with. Ezra readied himself for the punch sure to come, and braced his jaw for the blow as Thrass said, “If you really care so much, then I give you my blessing.”

“What?” Ezra asked, unsure if he’d heard that right, his lungs and tension immediately deflating.

“What!?” Tharin jumped, elated that she did hear him right.

“You!?” Thrawn laughed, in disbelief that he’d actually heard him say those words at all.

“But know this Ezra Bridger. We have tried to pair my daughter with the finest suitors in all of the Chiss Ascendancy. If the time arose, would you be willing to stay by her loyally for all of your days? Would you do anything to ensure her happiness and security? If it came down to the choice of your life or hers, would you be able to lay down and die in her name?”

Not sure whether he was asking or making a threat, his answer remained the same and he didn’t even hesitate to reply.

“Without question.”

Thrass’ red glare bore into his own eyes so strongly that it made Ezra's corneas burn, but he promised himself he wouldn't be the one to blink first.

"Very well then." Thrass leaned back. "You may court. Though, before this wedding is over, I implore the both of you to sit down with Lohrana to explain this relationship properly. This is one
topic I will allow you to speak about outside of this room, and I will be there to see to it that you do."

They gulped.

Thrass smiled and then turned to walk up to Thrawn.

"You knew about this too?" He asked skeptically.

"I figured it out, but this is the first they've told me," he replied.

"Ugh, will you ever stop being... you?" Thrass sighed tiredly.

Thrawn shrugged.

"Will you ever learn to throw a proper punch?"

"What!?!" His brother growled. "Why you..." Thrawn moved faster than Ezra had ever seen him as the brothers circled the desks in the library.

Tharin laughed.

"Ticsi?"

Thrass stopped, realized what he was doing and cleared his throat before composing himself and adjusting his suit.

"Forgive the outburst. For now we should return to the party before we draw any more attention to our absences."

"Sounds good!" Ezra laughed as Tharin took his hand and kissed his cheek.

“That Brother, was a kiss,” Thrawn informed.

He seemed slightly relieved at that.

“Honestly, that is nothing as bad as my thoughts intended.” He punched Thrawn’s shoulder again. “But I am still upset with you!”

"Me too!” Ezra frowned.

And for a number of reasons! He added in silent thought.

Thrawn lifted his hands.

“I will accept that, but in time I hope you will come to forgive me.”

“Very well...”

“Fine...”

The snark reply of both Thrass and Ezra’s overlapping voices made the two shoot a connecting look of approval at one another as all four piled out the doorway.

“G’en’vti...”

“Yes?" He looked down at his niece as the two fell to the back of the group.
“Thank you for introducing me to Ezra in the hopes we might connect.”

He smiled.

“You are welcome.”

She grabbed his ear and pulled him down just as Lohrana would when they were teenagers.

“But ever presume to experiment with family members again and I will rearrange your atoms, am I clear?”

He laughed but nodded right after.

“You have my word.”

She released him and continued walking.

“Good, then I am not choosing to be angry with you. Repay me with the Yuuzhan armor samples and I'll call it even.”

"Deal."

Ferocious and threatening, just like her parents. Thrawn smiled at that even as he rubbed the pain out of his ear.

All in all, the plan turned out better than he expected. In a few more months Ezra would be in the military and knowing Krayt is hiding somewhere within the Vong, meant that Ezra could track him. He would need to be taught discipline to strengthen his mind from being read until Tharin’s tests could provide substantial protection. There were clues to Krayt that Thrawn understood much better than Ezra could. He knew how to find his weakness, and he was not on the dark force user’s radar. Saving his life could be the biggest mistake Krayt ever made and Thrawn intended to exploit that more than the mysterious man could ever predict, not even with all the powers in the galaxy at his fingertips.

Lohrana hadn’t moved since Tharin’s sudden outburst.

“Please don’t be upset, Tin’mi…”

“Lohrana?” Thrass asked, reluctantly releasing his grip on his younger brother’s skull. Even the part of Thrawn's meddling had not gotten a reaction out of her, and Thrass was holding him in the perfect position to accept her fury.

Without a word, she stepped forward, lifted her hand, and grabbed Ezra by the scruff of his collar before pulling him closer to her face. He was terrified, not knowing whether he would live or die, but accepting his fate as it happened.

He’d had a good life, right?

“How long has this been going on?” Lohrana’s Cheunh words hissed out like the steam of melted snow. Her eyes were burning his face just the same, but he couldn’t look away.
“F-five months…” Ezra stammered, his Cheunh shaky and nervous.  

“And you have the gall to court my daughter without so much as asking my permission first?”

“Forgive me…” he said, bowing if he could, but she was far too close for him to even think about moving. Still, Chiss respected confidence, so Ezra suddenly found some in the far reserves of his mind and stood taller. “But I like your daughter. She is the nicest, smartest, most incredible person I’ve met here, and with your permission, I would like to continue seeing her ma’am.”

Tharin blinked, a bit impressed to see him standing up to her mother like that.

Lohrana only stared deeper into his soul with that scolding red glare. It lasted a few more agonizing moments before she dropped her head, and when she looked back up there were tears in her eyes, a warm smile on her face, and as she pulled him in, she pressed their foreheads together and let the anger seep away. Ezra blacked out for a few seconds, but that itching feeling of impending death he felt in the Force seemed to have suddenly drained from the room. He was either dead, dreaming, or this was somehow really happening.

“After I nearly gave up searching, my daughter has chosen a suitor at last!” Lohrana sniffed. “I like you Ezra Bridger. Your lifestyle isn’t the one I would chose for my daughter, but I know you will do right by her and by our people. You’re a good man, and I feel compelled to thank you for appearing here and loving my daughter.”

“Th-thank yo—”

“But know that if you hurt her in anyway, I will remove your head from betwixt your shoulders, am I clear?”

Ezra felt his eyes go wide. Chiss didn't go around making idle boasts or threats. Her voice may have been calm, but that only made the very real threat all the more unsettling, and he swallowed hard before choking out his reply.

"Clear!"

With a resigned sigh, she let go and Tharin slammed into him with a hug.

“About time!” Eli smirked. “Congratulations you two. So when’s the wedding?”

Lohrana and Thrass whipped their heads in his direction so fast that it made Eli fall back a step, their glowing red eyes giving off a warning that their mouths didn’t need to translate.

“I believe that was merely a joke…” Thrawn eased, though it did nothing to calm their glares at the two of them.

Whether or not either had a part to play in this was partially unclear, but— the parents merely sighed. Tharin did look happier than they had ever seen her before. The human was a good match for her, maybe not the Chiss they’d always imagined he’d be, but he was still a good match and they were happy about that at least.

"You do not make this public until after the boy's trials are passed. Am I clear?" Lohrana warned.

"Clear!" Tharin jumped. "Thank you Tin’mi! Thank you Ticsi!"

She ran up hugged them both as Lohrana smiled, squeezing her daughter tighter as Thrass’ arms held closer to them both.
"Aww! That's sweet..." Eli smiled.

"Oh and by the way, Thrawn—" Lohrana started sweetly, stepping towards him in a light and gentle manner.

Thrawn reflexively took a step back.

"Yes?"

"Come. I wish to thank you as well for introducing my one and only daughter to this boy..."

The particular inflection of the word "thank" made him not want to get any nearer to her than he already was and he took another calculated step back.

"I am afraid we must be going. Captain Vanto, your ship please."

"Oh?" he chuckled. "I don't know, I kind of want to see where this is going?

Thrawn shot him a hard glare.

"Alright fine!" Eli rolled his eyes. "We really do need to be getting back to the fleet. It was nice catching up with everyone. Take care. Ezra, see you in a few weeks, okay kid?"

"You got it!"

They left quickly, Lohrana chuckling to herself as she turned and started back towards the two teenagers and her husband. Her voice was still cool and terrifying.

"So Ezra... how do human and Chiss mannerisms differ aside from kissing? What else have you been doing with my daughter to express affection?

If there was a color worse than red, that was the hue his face took on in that exact moment.

"Ummm... Oh wow! Would you look at the time? We should probably be getting back too!"

"Nonsense!" Lohrana had her hand on his shoulder and suddenly he felt himself placed into a chair a second later. Why were the Chiss so strong!? "We are remaining here until the cleaning crews leave. Plenty of time for the four of us to have a nice long talk, wouldn't you agree?"

"Please..." Thrass continued in the same threatening tone. "Enlighten us on how this relationship is going to work. We wish to be supportive after all."

"Yes..." Lohrana hummed with a pat to his hands. "Most supportive."

Sweating now, Ezra looked to Tharin for help but she merely shrugged with a half-apologetic from the other side of her parents' interrogating stances at the table. So this was happening and never had the young Jedi wanted to disappear so badly in all his life. Hoping the rest of the Imperials and Koree and Gunther were enjoying the tail end of their party. This was supposed to be a happy occasion after all, but man, what Ezra wouldn't give for a well placed distraction. No such luck. It was as if the universe were mocking him by being so unfortunately calm.

"Do you have any questions? I understand you were orphaned at a young age, so you probably haven't had many conversations necessary when you grow from a boy into a man," Thrass said as though it weren't the most embarrassing thing Ezra had ever heard in his life. "I would be willing to supply such talks if you are curious."
Tharin chuckled at him and Ezra made a face while slowly sinking his head against the table. This was really happening right now, and part of him still hoped it was just a bad dream. Red faced, he grabbed at his hood and groaned as Lohrana and Thrass continued asking him sensitive and personal questions just as calmly as they would the weather. *Chiss truly had no shame or sense of boundaries and humiliation at all did they?* And, as their questions persisted, he could only reply back with a very hesitant sounding:

"Uh........."
Test of Citizenship

Chapter Summary

The year has come and gone, leaving only one thing left for Ezra to do... pass his citizenship trials so he could join up with the Nuruodo military. As Ezra says his farewells and overcomes his next new challenges, reflecting on his past might be the least of his worries by day's end.

Chapter Notes

Posted on: December 9, 2018

Today was the day.

It had been one full Chiss year since the Chimera crew and Ezra had been brought to Csilla and put to trial. One year, and between all the physical training, the studying, the unsanctioned missions, all the sneaking around, and their more recent learning about multiple deathly secrets, Ezra felt like he had done more in these last few months than most of his life combined, and boy, did it ever show on him now.

He was no longer the scrappy kid from Lothal, no longer the young man who had saved his planet by sacrificing a fully equipped Star Destroyer to a swarm of purrgil. No, now he could safely say he was more than all of that. He was stronger, wiser, and had more responsibilities nowadays that made him feel a lot older than he was. Still, even with all of the extra baggage, Ezra was no longer worried about any it. He was prepared for what was to come and took all of his new duties with stride.

He had a responsibility to the Imperials to make up for all the wrong he’s brought them and to protect those remaining who he now called his good friends. He had a responsibility to his students, to the ozly-eshehemo, to keep them protected from Krayt and to make sure their Force abilities didn’t disappear with age. He had a responsibility to the Chiss to help them fight back against the Yuuzhan Vong and make sure their armies didn’t take over this region of space or move in any closer to the galaxy where he’d grown up and called home. He had a responsibility to the purrgil to make sure they weren’t captured and turned into hyperspace tech by a race of sadistic zealots who wanted to press the galactic reset button on the entire universe. Lastly, he had a responsibility to himself, to stay alive and in control if not only for his own life but for those around him that needed him to be a part of theirs. For Tharin, for Ahsoka, for the Imperials, the Alani... all of them.

Sacrificing himself back on Lothal had been easy— or— easy in the sense that he’d been able to do it and would not hesitate to do it again, but surviving and staying in one place... that was harder. He’d made a promise to stick around and he’d gladly do it if it meant he could still complete his missions and protect all of these new responsibilities.

Never in his wildest dreams would Ezra have predicted this was where he would end up, and he
had Force premonitions on his side for star’s sakes! But... life has a funny way of keeping you busy no matter where you go, and with his tests later today, and a fairly large confidence in himself that he would pass, Ezra knew his life was about to get a whole lot busier.

Now all that was left was to say goodbye.

He stuffed the last of his clothes into his bag, and wandered outside to see the grand golden leaves of Jorj’s Olbio tree, its aging process sped up thanks to Inrokini tampering of its heavy potted planter. It was already taller than his house, with plenty of spindly branches and limbs for Jorj to explore and crawl around on, and the leaves were just starting to turn purple, meaning that the weather was going to change very soon, but unlike last year, Ezra wouldn’t be around to watch it happen.

In the last year, the Ysalamir had also grown three sizes bigger, and he now wore long orange fur where there once showed only smooth yellowing scales. Jorj was fully grown now, and the extra room on the tree was a massive help to his development because it now hurt Ezra’s back to carry him around for too long. He’d miss going on walks with Jorj, but it was for the best that he be gone. The lizard would understand, right? Ezra had never actually had a pet for this long. Pets understood when their people had to go away for a good reason, right?

Jorj saw Ezra coming out of the house and scurried over to him, his graceful feet slithering down the bark and up to his shoulder in one fluid exchange that only slightly caused his arm to dip from the added weight. The Ysalamir purred once and rubbed affectionately against his face as Ezra scratched beneath his chin and felt the weight of his guilt strengthen tenfold.

Aside a few weeks near the beginning of his stay, Jorj had always been there with Ezra, and now he couldn’t take him with him to Naporar because of the strenuous life of a Nuruodo soldier. Thrawn even thought this would be for the best and Thrawn loved Jorj! Still, he supposed he’d rather Jorj be happy here without him than miserable with him.

“Wow, you’re getting heavy!” Ezra started. “Look buddy, Tharin said she’s going to take good care of you while I’m gone, so don’t you worry.”

He snuck the Ysalamir some of the dried fruit jerky he’d packed for the flight out, and the Ysalamir happily snatched it and snuck three additional strands out of Ezra’s hand before scurrying back up into the tree.

“Hey! Jorj! Wha— Well... Goodbye to you too, I guess!?” He scoffed, hiding a few chuckles under his breath as stray leaves fell down on his face. He looked back up to the branches with a smile and realized Jorj would probably be fine without him. The Ysalamir was stubborn like that, and Ezra shook his head before tapping against the bark of the tree and calling up to him. “I’ll visit soon!”

“Of course you will!” Tharin’s voice came from the front door. “Especially if you forget this!”

He felt around his belt for his lightsaber despite seeing the weapon waving at him from her hand.

“How did you—?” He smirked begrudgingly proud though more confused than happy. “Did you just pickpocket me?”

She hummed a laugh, a sweet sound that always made him feel warm and at home nowadays.

“I learned from the best!” Tharin teased, her arms wrapping around his waist to return the saber to its rightful place. “When you’re distracted, even someone as novice as me can steal from you.”

Distracted huh? Sure, that must be it? The months of Tharin trying and failing to pickpocket him
made a sudden smile come to his face. He told her that he would teach her how to steal without being noticed just as he had done with her hairpin back at his first trial on Csilla. She mastered the technique unsettlingly well, but had never been able to successfully do it to Ezra because of his Force senses for one, and because he was a master at the craft himself.

She nodded, pleased with herself as he wrapped his arms around her and they both frowned up at the tree as soon as the sweet reveries had passed.

“Imagine the size of the Olbio once you come back,” Tharin said softly. “It could tower higher than the skyscrapers of Cioral by this time next year.”

By now, Ezra could read through the words she said aloud and could hear the deeper meaning in her statement. He set his chin on the top of her head and held her tighter.

“I’ll be sure to come back before that. I promise.”

“Yeah, yeah…” she scoffed amusingly. “I’m the only one who has the technology and knowledge to repair all the stuff you break. I see through your words, Ezra Bridger. You can’t fool me.”

He laughed and gave her a teasing glance.

“Oh yeah? Well, maybe I see through your words, Mitth’ar’inrokini. You can admit that you’re going to miss me. I promise I won’t tell the other scientists.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Oh yeah, miss spending my every waking moment taking care of you? Making sure you eat properly? Planning new ways to help you train? Yeah right! I’ll finally have a moment to myself once you’re gone. I can make all the projects I’ve been putting off since you first showed up in our system.”

He snorted.

“Like all the Myrkr and Human tech, the deep exploration wetsuits, or the pulvilli gloves weren’t enough of a breakthrough for you for one year? Not to mention your greatest scientific study to date…”

“And what might that be?” She spun around to face him and lifted her brow as he gave off another winning smile.

“Me.”

She snorted and patted a hand against his chest.

“Humans… always so full of themselves.”

He reached down and scooped the loose strands of her hair behind her ears.

“Chiss… always such know-it-alls.”

She snickered and leaned up to kiss him once before shoving him and rushing down the hill.

“Hey!” He laughed in return, tossing down his bag to hurry after her.

He caught up a lot quicker than she expected, his enhanced speed and strength a result of her own training now turned against her. This caused her to let out a loud squeal as he grabbed her around
the waist and toted her towards the pond like a rolled up rug.

“No!” She chuckled, punching at his arm to no avail. “Don’t! Ezra! Aah!”

He tossed her into the water, still laughing as she screamed and shot back up for air, trying to catch her breath between laughs that would not decide if they were angry or genuine.

“Vah cart cseo ran’zezo, Ezra!” She shouted with a hiss.

He opened himself up mockingly and grinned.

“Van rot’sah vim vizehn ch’ah?”

He laughed, dodging a quick hand as she slashed out to pull him under. She missed, but just in time to catch his foot and send him toppling over into the water with an ungraceful whooping holler. Tharin was still cackling by the time he resurfaced for air and he splashed her once as he called out.

“Cheater!”

“You started it!”

The splashes back and forth wavered as their arms grew more tired and Tharin’s laughs turned into a quiet shake of her head.

“Oh, what are we doing? You need to be on Csilla in three hours! Why did you think this was a good idea!? Just look at us! I still haven’t gotten ready, and if my mother sees my hair not properly done up again then she’s going to nag me about it until the turn of the next century. You know how she gets...” She sighed and sank down into the water just deep enough to move her hair out of her face before resurfacing.

Ezra swam over and pulled her into him, shrugging as the longer strands of his own hair stuck to his forehead in the most compelling way as to make her skin tingle just upon seeing it.

“I don’t care,” he said softly. “We might not get a chance to do this sort of thing for a while...”

He reached down for another kiss, but just before he could touch her lips, she spat a stream of water into his face and laughed some more as he groaned and coughed in shock of it.

"Blah! Remind me again why I even like you?"

She chuckled and roped him in, the cold touch of her lips coupled by only the chilling taste of her breath and the lingering flavor of lake water.

“Does that refresh your memories?”

He pulled back a little and pressed his face up to hers his nose tracing hers slowly as he tilted his chin downward until bumping their foreheads together. Chiss kisses may have been less intimate to him, but they were still nice, and they meant the world to her. He could tell by the light breath of air she took in or the way the Force swirled around her like a gentle breeze in the still snow.

"Does that refresh yours?” He whispered.

After nearly nine months of dating, Tharin found herself still melting at his gentle touches and kisses. Although, there was plenty she still did that reduced him to the bumbling, blushing boy she’d met a year ago, and Tharin loved exploiting every moment of that. Now was not the time for such things though.
“Come on...” she sighed reluctantly. “Let’s get you dried off and up to the Clawcraft. Being late for your own trial of citizenship is worse than doing poorly in it, you know?”

He cocked a brow, that smug side grin back on his face.

“Oh, so you think I’m going to do poorly?”

She splashed him.

“Oh, of course not! I taught you everything you needed to know.”

He stood and picked her up as he took her hands and waltzed her out of the water.

“Like how to dance at political galas?”

She smiled and stuck out her foot, but he hopped over it and lifted an amused brow in her direction.

“And how to react quickly in Chiss combat.”

“What’s the major export of Sharh?” She asked suddenly.

“Natural resources and mineral processing. At least give me a hard one.”

Tharin lifted her chin and smiled.

“Who’s the leader of House Arisar?”

“Arisar’ona’niku. Rona. The pointy looking mean woman with the fancy hair who’s friends with your mom. She wears Indigo and is the head of construction on Ornfra.”

She hummed again and wrung out her hair, making the waves spring tighter into curls before she continued her quizzing games.

“How far can the ozyly-eshembo sense danger?”

“Three parsecs before my training. Five parsecs now.”

“Bragging will do you no good with the Council,” she said with a tap to his nose.

“Not even when I brag about what an amazing teacher I had?”

She got a look in her eyes and came up to him, her words softer and a bit more flirtatious as she clipped his chin with her nail.

“Say it in Cheunh...”

He swallowed, but did as he was told.

“Ch’ah ch’epasahn ch’at htuseinecor sesvio’ah veo ch’a ch’esahaehn en’rcsoah Ch’ah viz.”

With a smile, she pushed away and walked to the other side of his room, unzipping her soaking vest just as he was pulling off his drenched shirt and cloak. Tharin snuck a peak over her shoulder and admired his new muscles, biting her lip as he tossed the clothes in the power dryer.

“I must admit, I do make fine work...”

“Hey! A little privacy?” he teased from the other room, turning red though at this point he wasn’t
entirely sure why. *Old habits?* He supposed.

Tharin rolled her eyes, but humored him and turned around to grab her dress. They changed into their formal wear, hers a green gown with a burgundy collar and black embroidery, and his which more closely resembled the suit he'd worn for Koree and Gunther's wedding, now re-tailored for more mobility like his normal practice clothing. It could stand up to the wear and tear of combat, but more importantly, the formal look the garment still held would help him to impress the Aristocra during his coming meeting.

“You know, Ezra, you’re lucky I brought this with me or I’d have nothing to wear right now!” Tharin complained.

“Oh darn…” He huffed, mock seriously as she tossed one of her shoes into the other room only to hear it successfully strike her target with a satisfying thud. “Ouch!”

She laughed.

“Hey, jokes on you, Thar, because I’m keeping this!”

He came into the room and held the shoe high above his head as she jumped and climbed to try and rescue it.

“Ezra! Come on! This is no time for your silly games. We’re already running behind schedule.”

“Hey? Don’t throw away what you don’t expect to lose?” He laughed, growing suddenly sullen when he remembered the fight over rations between Birt and Gunther back on Myrkr.

*That could have been a lifetime ago.*

Slowly, he lowered his arm and she snatched her shoe back before noticing the expression on his face and placing her hand against his cheek.

“Hey, are you okay?”

“Yeah…” he blinked hard and shook his head, grabbing the hand and kissing her palm before letting go. “Yeah, I’m fine… I just have a lot on my mind.”

She kissed him and in that small moment he felt instantly better.

“So, what do you want to do for the next ten minutes while our other uniforms dry?”

He returned the look and wiggled his brows.

“I can think of a few things…”

“Like… maybe a recap of everything you've learned before the BIGGEST TEST OF YOUR LIFE!?” She yelled the last of those words as if to pound the seriousness of the day into his memory, her hands coming up to shove against his chest just in case the message wasn’t getting through. “Now sit down and ready your brain! I won’t have you tarnishing my good name by getting a single question wrong!”

“Alright…” He sighed deflatedly with a wry smile starting to form. “I know... I know!”

Seeming pleased with herself, he suddenly made a move to grapple her and they twirled onto the bed with a laugh until she slapped his hands and sat up straight for the test that lie ahead.
“Come on! Be serious!”

“I’m always serious!” He argued, the look on his face not looking serious in the slightest.

“How about a bit of incentive, then Sevicsi?” She tapped her lips with a finger. “You get a kiss you once for every correct answer you can respond to in the next ten minutes.”

“That must be—” He started to do the math, but she beat him to the punch.

“You can get to sixty if you’re quick enough,” she grinned.

"Just on the lips—" he flirted. "Or can I kiss you anywhere I want?"

She blushed.

"Maybe thirty then in that case?" She smirked at him and tilted her chin to the side. “So... shall we begin?”

He nodded and they got started with his recap, that first kiss was as good as his and he knew exactly where he wanted it to go.

“Ch’abeiuh!” He waved. “Magin, Enoin, Cerein, Daevin. Ch’ah csarcican't vepet bitbo rah Ch’ah tuzir.”

“Hah cart ch’ahsinto ch’at viz csan’vun't vah, Ezra Bridger.”

“Viscah!” Magin added.

“Viscah recet...” Ezra said back with a grin, hoping a simple “take care” was enough to express all the gratitude he’d come to know in these four scientists over the last few months.

“Vah nah carco cseo ch’ot sir ch’a Vuhn!” Daevin teased, slapping him hard on the back.

Everyone chuckled.

“Oh yeah? Not so dumb for a human?” Ezra laughed. “Well... Vah nah carco cseo cseheb sir ch’a Swerr!”

They laughed harder.

“Ezra...” Cerein was saying. “We will miss your presence in our lab.”

“Things will be most dull without your antics!” Magin added.

“And your loud mouth!” Enoin agreed.

“Mah lags are soor! Tha tass strandge. What doss tha dew?” Daevin teased in butchered Basic.

“Oh come on!” He blushed. “I didn’t complain that much!”

“Not near the end, but you were quite loud at the beginning.”
“Oh har har…”

“Well, you know where to find us if you’re ever back in the area and in need of some lab assistance.”

“And hey, I’ll know who to look for when I get into a laser tag battle. I swear you guys cheated the last game.”

“There he is complaining again!” Magin laughed.

“Typical human,” his partner said grinning.

Now his Cheunh was still terrible due to the physical differences in his throat, but the important thing was that it was passable. More than that, he had gotten the Chiss alphabet down pat and could understand what was being said to him more or less without the translation device on his wrist. Plus, the two straight months where Tharin did nothing but speak Cheunh at him really helped to finalize the last of his hesitations on the language. That, and if he didn’t somehow adapt to her surprise test then he would have had absolutely no idea what would be happening during those training weeks.

“Ezra!” The booming, authoritative voice of Ronin called as he, Tra’Saa, and Talon walked casually over to their position, the other four scientists paying their respects to the Aristocra before hurriedly going back to their own work spaces.

“Kor’on’inrokini…” Ezra bowed formally and extended his hand as his Cheunh brought a small twitch of a smile to the old Aristocra’s face. “I’m grateful to you for letting me learn here. Thank you, and I will do the Inrokini proud in my trials later today.”

“No thanks necessary. Ezra, I only wish to—” He stopped suddenly as the oncoming sounds and feel of a dozen vibrating feet came rushing up to their position. “Oh, watch your left.”

The horde of not-so-little Vornkr puppies barreled through the labs, knocking desks out of alignment and tackling Ezra to the ground in a shower of slobbery kisses and misplaced paws. Ronin smiled, the adult Vornskr at his sides wagging their tails happily at the display as Ezra laughed and grunted from the bottom of the pile swarming around him on the floor.

“AGH! Guys come on! I’m trying to have a conversation here! Oof! Valin, I saw that! Nip, Dorja, Fawn, stop licking my face! Agh! OW! Mirax, that was my foot! Sehn, that is not a chew toy come on! Terrik, you are literally crushing my arm buddy.”

With his free hand, Ezra placed his fingers to his lips and whistled loudly, making all of their pointed ears twitch before coming to an orderly line at his side, and giving him enough room to finally rise back to a stand. One Vornskr pup, once the runt, now one of the bigger and less energetic of his brothers and sisters, Nehso, came up and placed his head beneath Ezra’s hand with a soft whine.

“Vornskr are very intelligent creatures. In a way I believe they know you are about to leave this place for a long period of time and wish only to express their farewells.

“Aww... I’ll miss you too, Nehso!” Ezra said, scratching beneath the Vornskr’s favorite spot just below the ear but above the jawline. The other pups whined, wanting to be scratched there too and Ezra just couldn’t say no to all their cute little faces. “Oh come here all of you!”

He rubbed all of their heads together until Cerein finally made her way through the workplace and opened the front doors wide, then they all went tumbling outside, leaving only Nehso at Ezra’s
Ronin laughed and let his own two pets barrel away with their children before deciding it was safe to begin speaking again without further interruption.

“Nehso has taken a great liking to you.”

That was true. Nehso was the most attached to Ezra, so much so that when Ronin was picking out names for his new additions, he allowed Ezra to pick this one’s name as gratitude for helping Tharin with the birth. Ezra wound up naming him after the Cheunh word for “black” because of his dark fur color, but the Chiss didn't understand naming something after a color instead of using an actual name. They were still a little new to the whole “pet” concept anyway, so Ezra didn't think too much about the criticism, and Ronin let Nehso keep his name.

“More to the point, Ezra…” Ronin continued, “I wish to speak with you a moment, if you will permit me?”

“Of course sir.”

“Walk with me.” He motioned. “Your presence on Csaus thus far… well it’s been a distraction. Not to mention it has taken nearly all of one of my best scientist’s time, as well as that of those around her.”

Ezra did everything in his power not to let his eye twitch. He always got the impression that Ronin didn’t like him very much, but still, after the Vornskr thing, he thought they had about the same vague understanding as the two could ever settle upon.

Ronin continued.

“But then you saved my Tra’Saa, helped deliver her babies, and they love you like one of their own.” He gestured to Nehso who wagged his clipped tail while staring longingly up at Ezra. “You inspired my scientists to create new inventions, and even managed to initiate a humor which I have never before seen in this workplace.” He chuckled. “I was skeptical at first, but you truly have grown so much in this last year and I am proud to have overseen your progress. I look forward to watching your trials and just know, beneath the hood, that I am rooting for your success in secret.”

If someone came up and stabbed him through the chest with an electrostaff right this very second, Ezra probably wouldn’t have noticed because he was too busy being completely shocked about Ronin’s sudden kindness towards him.

He held out his hand and Ezra took his arm and squeezed it as hard as he could.

Ronin laughed afterwards and wagged a finger at him.

“Tharin has taught you well!” He looked around and made a thoughtful expression. “Where is she? I wished to express my pride to her work as well.”

“She’s prepping the Clawcraft already. There may have been a lake accident and we’re running a bit behind. I just snuck away for a minute because I wanted to say goodbye to everyone before they transfer me over to Naporar.”

“Oh, so confident that you will pass, are you?” He lifted a brow but broke his own look with a hearty chuckle. “Good! Chiss respect confidence. You have my full credence that your tests will be a success.”
“Bin’vah, sir.” Ezra bowed, but as he did, Nehso snuck a quick lick of his face, and it made both Ezra and Ronin laugh again.

No one quite laughed like the Inrokini. Of all the Chiss Ezra had met in the last year, they were the most likely to show emotions based on their own observational curiosities of others. He’d always liked that about Csaus. There was such a distinction in personality to him now, where once he would have thought everyone was as cool and calculating as Thrawn himself.

Political Chiss like Tharin’s parents were always serious and organized about every little thing. Military Chiss like Thrawn and the Alani girls were more daring and prone to danger and thrills. Then there were the Sabosen like the hospital staff and the teachers who were always the most patient and helpful, but not all that great at tact or first impressions. Meanwhile, the scientists like Tharin and the Inrokini were a lot more flexible to bending the rules if it was in the name of scientific curiosity. Though they asked a lot of questions once a project was complete, they never really asked very many if it involved borrowing research or another co-worker’s equipment. That made things a lot easier when Tharin and Ezra needed to sneak around to work on their more secret espionage projects behind the other’s backs or gather materials for their exploits.

Ezra was glad he’d had the chance to observe them all so fluently or else he might never had been able to see such a distinction in Chiss personalities. Compared to some, Thrawn's unique way of dealing with things made him seem like more of a scandalous rogue than he would have ever imagined from someone he once thought to be cool, responsible, and completely collected. It was no wonder they labeled him an "abnormal" personality now that Ezra knew how the Chiss more or less saw personalities.

“You must promise to return and visit again soon if the Nuruodo allow it,” Ronin added as the two made it to the front entrance. “I’m sure my Vornsir would love to see you as many times as you are able. Unless of course you fail your tests, then I may be able to keep you here as a sanitation officer, and I suppose they will be able to see you all the time, yes?”

“Gee thanks!?” He said with a smile, hoping the sarcasm skipped his translation. “I promise to come back whenever I can.”

“I will look ahead to it.” He smiled. “As gratitude for all you have done here, I will allow you to call me Ronin. You may not have the mind for science, but you have still earned your place among us as an honorary Inrokini in my eyes.”

“Oh wow!” Ezra gasped. “Thank you, Ronin.”

The man snickered and tilted his head, his tone threateningly calm.

“Only on Csaus though, are we clear?”

Ezra saluted and shot him a matching smile.

“As crystal sir.”

“Crystal?” He mused. “Ha! I like that. It is both alliteration and the truth. Clear as crystal. I will use that. May I have your permission to the phrase?”

Ezra nodded, trying not to laugh.

“By all means.”

“Well then, you best be off. I will need to prepare for the departure to Csilla as well. Until we
again meet, Ezra Bridger.”

With one final pet to Nehso, he patted him twice and the Vornskr ran out the door happily to join his family in the grass. Ezra hoped he wouldn’t miss him too much while he was gone, but seeing the large pup playing so carefree with his brothers and sisters brought him more comfort that it would be okay, just like with Jorj.

“There you are Bridger!” Tharin chastised. “Well come on, let’s get you to the ship. You can tell me all about your talk with Ronin on the way, yeah?” She smiled and nudged him. “Did you say all of your farewells?”

“Yeah,” he nodded. “I think I did.”

“Good. Now let’s go! We’re running late as it is!”

He took one final look behind him at the labs, recognizing every desk and project to some extent and seeing the ghosts of an entire year’s worth of memories take shape around the room. He gave a final wave to his friends and boarded Tharin’s ship to leave Csaus for the last time as someone who lived there. From now on, he was a soldier not a project, and this chapter of his life was at an end.

“Ch'abeiuh.”

Csilla was just as cold as he remembered, though the hot-springs the two of them had accidentally made was still spewing strong, so that was a major plus, and just the kind of inside joke Ezra needed to take the edge off of his nerves.

“Hey, you’ve got this!” Tharin urged. “I know you do.”

He nodded down at her and smiled.

“Thank you for everything you’ve done for me this year, Tharin. I wouldn’t be here right now without you.”

“Oh, you would—” she teased. “You would just be woefully unprepared and have the moral enthusiasm of a sunken lake stone.”

She reached up and kissed him once before pulling back and checking around to make sure nobody saw.

“Good luck, Sevišci. Show them all how great you truly are.”

“I’ll find you after the trial. I promise.”

“You had better. Once you’re accepted no one can legally argue our relationship, and we can finally be more public. I want to see the look on my parents’ faces when I tell other people about us. I wonder if they grew any more comfortable with you over the last few months?”

“After the talk we had, I sure as kriff hope so!” He grumbled, frowning afterwards. “We can officially be able to admit our relationship just in time for me to leave Csaus and not see you for
months on end… Sorry about that.”

“Don’t be! I’ll be most content on Csaus until I see you again. You just do your work, I’ll do mine, and it will make it that much sweeter when I see you again.”

He saw through her words but nodded anyway. You don’t just spend everyday for a year with somebody and not miss them when they had to go away. Still, they had a job to do and were both mature enough to prioritize what needed to be done, over what they wanted for themselves… even if they wouldn’t like it.

“Now… Let’s get you inside!” Tharin patted. “This suit won’t warm you like your regular uniform and I don’t think turning blue will help you win any bonus points with the Aristocra either.”

“Yeah, okay…”

And as they passed under the grand ice gate, it was finally here, the moment he’d spent an entire year training for. His Chiss citizenship tests had come at last.

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“Ezra Bridger, you have come before us today seeking status. Are you prepared for your test of citizenship?” Asked the man in the silver robe, his face hidden, but Ezra knew him now by his name, Tof’eni’csapla, the Aristocra of House Csapla on Cioral. It was the first Ruling Family in Chiss history which granted him the right to speak first above even the Sabosen who were trained in Social Justice affairs.

Ezra swallowed back whatever was left in him that was nervous and stepped forth proudly, his confidence at Chiss-levels as he cleared his throat and spoke in impressively intelligible Cheunh back to the council who sat in seats high above him.

He was not in the courtroom this time and the Aristocra had front row seats to his position, a large floor circled in smooth walls on all sides, the door acting as the only reminder of where he’d come in, and even that was hard to see now that it had sealed shut. If Tharin hadn’t taken him to Arisar to learn about architecture then he wouldn’t even know that much.

The lights were dim, the crowd only distant shadows through his own bright spotlight. He couldn’t make out a single face, only the bright colors of the four High Council members’ robes. With his translation watch, lightsaber, and any other personal belongings confiscated before he entered, he had never felt more alone and yet so watched all at the same time.

“I am prepared!” He stated clearly in his best Cheunh.

At that, the crowd muttered to themselves in approval. Already, his test of the mind was off to a good start. He answered their every question, though he lost count somewhere after the fifty-third one, but imagined it was probably closer to a hundred or so. He didn’t hear a single one that he didn’t know the answer to and somewhere in the crowd, he could sense Tharin smiling proudly at him from above.

“This concludes your test of the mind.”

Over? Just like that! He would laugh if he didn’t think they’d dock points off him for doing so. No, instead a panel opened in the floor and it returned his lightsaber and other belongings to him as he
adjusted himself for his next challenge.

By then, the woman in the bronze robe, Sev’ereenuruodo, leader of the expansion military defense fleet on Naporar, rose from her seat to speak.

“You wish to join my militia, Ezra Bridger, so now comes your test of the body! Are you prepared?”

She was the one who had presumably sold out the humans which led to Birt’s death. She would become his boss soon, or else, Thrawn would finally get enough evidence to usurp her and then he didn’t know what would happen to Nuruodo House. Another problem for another day, but one he would take great pride to see handled personally.

“I am ready!” He replied loudly, trying to hide the contempt in his tone.

Even knowing what was coming, his eyes stung to adjust to the light as the dark room was suddenly lit so well that no shadows could even spread out along the ground. He could see every face in the crowd now, his Jedi senses confirming what silhouette he’d thought was Tharin, as well as catching glances of Eli, Thrass, Lohrana, Ina, Stent, and even Koree, Gunther, and Faro. He blinked, but held his stance as he bowed to the Aristocra.

“Turn now and face your opponent!” She ordered.

He turned, but by then he had already gathered enough of an idea of who had just come through the door behind him.

“Thrawn.”

He bowed silently, and got into fighting stance.

“Commander Mitth’raw’nuruodo has agreed to test your skills in combat. As one of our best and strongest soldiers, his decision as to your readiness will influence your place among our ranks. Do you accept this challenge?”

There was only a slight pause as Ezra cracked his knuckles and returned the ready stance.

A chance to beat up Thrawn after all these months? Ezra felt the sweet satisfaction welling into him with anticipation.

"Oh I gladly accept the challenge!"

An unsurprised Thrawn lifted a brow and smiled back. He knew Ezra was going to enjoy this, and that just made his part in the fight all the more willing.

Now Ezra… Thrawn thought. Let’s see how much you’ve truly grown in this last year.

He kicked him down again, Ezra managing to go down, get up, and dodge the spinning low sweep combination that Thrawn had come at him with afterwards. Luckily, it was also the same close-combat combination that historical Chiss captain, Ber’uba’bintrano, had used in the great Vagaari War, a regular as luck would have it, for Ezra’s holo-spars with Tharin’s pre-programmed training partners all those weeks in the Inrokini labs. After a year of drills, he knew exactly how to counter
him, with or without the Force at his side.

He fell to both hands, dodging the first half of the attack before pivoting himself to hook his foot around Thrawn’s ankle and pulling just on the spiral move upward. Thrawn was caught, the grab successful, but just as his back hit the floor, he sprang back to a full fighting stance before Ezra could even let out a breath of satisfaction.

“Okay then…”

He lifted his fists in preparation for the Chiss' next moves as the two circled the floor slowly, the step by step wait cautious, but entirely strategic between the two fighters.

"Is that truly the extent of your anger with me?"

Ezra rubbed an arm against his sore lip and growled back, "What makes you think I'm angry with you?"

Thrawn shot him a look.

"Okay fine! So I'm mad at you! A lot of people are mad at you! Have you ever met you?"

Thrawn chuckled and loosened his stance.

"Well if you are so unhappy, then by all means, come and prove it."

Ezra rushed forward, punch after punch, some of his moves Chiss-taught, others the old fighting styles of his own training. A part of him knew that Thrawn was trying to get into his head to make him less concentrated, but he couldn't shake the feeling of rage every time Thrawn deflected him without so much as an effort. Eventually, he had to leap backward to steady his footing only to feel Thrawn’s own leg trying to trip him up. He let it happen, his fall not quite so fluid as Thrawn’s was, but he was able to turn it into a flip that still let out one last kick to Thrawn’s face. The Chiss grabbed his foot and shove him back, a new aura of excitement forming around his mind.

"So why are you upset?" Thrawn asked, his hands still deflecting punch after punch with a calm coolness that made Ezra's skin itch.

"Oh I don't know..." He snarked back. "Where do you want me to start?"

"So there is more than one reason weighing on your mind? Do tell."

Ezra growled, trying to tackle him but getting his grapple reversed and into a hold of his own. He broke free and got some distance between them before returning closer for a few well place blocks.

"Well let's list a few off, shall we?" He smirked in frustration and came in for another punch. "You attacked my home world, tried to kill my friends, shot me in the back, and then you and I got stuck on Myrkr and everything changed. I thought you were my friend! By the time I remembered you weren't, you already were." He dodged a blow and came back with interest. "Then you lied to me again and again and again. You tried to get me to stay here by messing with my heart, and my mind, and then you make it all a hundred times worse because I can't even be mad at you about it anymore! This is just the way you are and it's so kripping frustrating sometimes. I honestly don't know how Eli puts up with you. I really don't!"

"You appear to have been brooding on these thoughts for some time. That isn't good for the mind, Ezra. You need to let your frustrations out from time to time!"
A solid punch and Ezra was on the floor, his jaw aching, but getting back to his feet a moment later.

He barreled forward, going for a punch, waiting for Thrawn to react as he had all those times a moment ago, and just before he made contact, Ezra ducked, his leg coming out for a full sweep as he sent his fist into Thrawn's stomach to ensure he hit the ground this time.

He took a few breaths and wiped the sweat from his brow as Thrawn sucked in his own breath and did another pop back into fighting stance, his face now equipped with a more impressed looking smirk.

"Did you get it all out of your system?" He asked lightly.

Ezra made a face but shrugged.

"For now at least. Felt pretty good to be honest."

Thrawn laughed and made the first move to attack this time, Ezra dodging with new memory from watching him while he was venting. Still, it wasn't enough to completely miss the Chiss' greater abilities of observation because Thrawn saw an opening and took him down again in no time flat. His body sliding against the floor as Ezra felt a pain shoot through the pressure point Thrawn had just struck with numbing force.

“You have learned well...” He praised, his voice not giving away any actual commendation nor did it seem to hint at sarcasm. Ezra really wasn’t sure how to take the comment until Thrawn added, “But you have much still left to learn.”

There was a sudden shift in the Force as Thrawn came in for his next attack.

“Let’s make this more interesting, shall we?”

“What?”

But by the time Ezra looked up, every single one of his danger senses were tingling within the Force just as a blaster bolt narrowly scorned the tile of floor where his head had just been. One shot, two, then a third, but by the fourth, Ezra was already back on his feet, the hot bolt of laser deflected straight back at Thrawn with his newly ignited lightsaber.
The shock and awe of the crowd was only muffled by their still as stone expressions, but Ezra could feel the emotions clearly from where he stood.

It all happened in an instant, the ignition of his saber, the shock of the crowd, and the deflected blaster bolt going right back into Thrawn’s own shoulder as he let out a small hiss and lowered his arm.

Ezra flicked a cautious glance to the Aristocra to make sure he hadn’t just sealed his own demise. By the time he looked back at Thrawn however, Ezra saw that he wasn’t plotting out his next strategy, he wasn’t tending to his fresh wound, and he wasn’t even angry. No, against all odds, the Chiss stood there, his shoulder steaming, and he was actually smiling!

“Thrawn?”

“The new Jedi weapon suits you well, but I admit, I am not eager to fight you with such a powerful weapon at your disposal and I equipped with only my blaster. No, I have plans for my limbs for the foreseeable future Mr. Bridger, so I concede defeat. Your techniques of evasion and attack were adequate and can be further improved in the military. Your progress shows itself well. I deem you will be prepared for any obstacle you might face with the Nuruodo.”

Ezra lowered his saber and shut it down.

Thrawn meanwhile looked up to the four Arisotcra in their seats, and held his free arm out wide to address them.
“Tah cart csio’hah bsarah. Ch’ah tsuvtihn tah viz tir reo tsuzu’im’u’ibi bah to vust’ils” He announced in Cheunh, only now, Ezra could hear the new sense of pride in his voice as his mind automatically translated what he was saying.

“I passed...” Ezra gasped, shooting a look up to Tharin who was smiling too wide for her hands to properly hide.

Eli and the other Imperials clapped for just a few moments before Faro whistled and the Nuruodo Aristocra, Sev’eree’nuruodo, rose from her seat and called down to them.

“Ezra Bridger has passed his trial of the body.”

Ronin stood as well.

“He has completed his trial of the mind.”

Gras’vée’sabosen joined.

“And he is fully healthy for further productivity.”

Now Tof’eni’csapla rose.

“Ezra Bridger, it is by order of this council and the people of the Chiss Ascendancy that we grant you complete citizenship within our borders. You shall henceforth be treated as Chiss blood, your productivity utilized to strengthen our way of life, and our resources shared with you so long as you continue to live within our borders. Do you accept the position that has been entrusted to you?”

“Ch’ah k’ir,” Ezra said, not even trying to mask the smile on his face now.

“You will report to Naporar by day’s end and begin your real training!” Sev’eree’nuruodo proclaimed. “You are dismissed, soldier.”

He was so excited that he thought he might leap through the ceiling, but a steady hand on his shoulder weighed him back down before motioning and accompanying him out through the exit and into the long hallway leading to where the ships were parked.

“Congratulations, Ezra.” Thrawn smiled. “I knew you would do well.”

“Thanks, and look… I’m sorry about the shoulder.” He gave him a look. “Though, I guess I kind of owed you one after the Chimera.”

"So it would seem?" If Thrawn was thinking about something, he didn't show it, but he did offer up a small nod and another plotting smirk. "Regardless, no apology is needed. I hope you were able to vent out all of your pent up frustrations with me now because you may not have proper time to do so in the future."

"I hope so too... unless I learn something else you've done to mess with me since we got here?" Ezra nudged him and Thrawn only winced at his sore shoulder before lifting a brow.

"I can't say that I can promise that.” He frowned. "But I will do my best to get you to see things my way before you have enough time to grow angry about it."

Ezra shook his head.

"Whatever you say, Thrawn."
"Right then." He nodded. "Come. We will meet with the others outside and you may properly say your farewells."

"Shouldn't we get your shoulder checked out first?"

Thrawn waved his hand and may have even rolled his eyes at the statement.

"I have had worse wounds than this one. I'll address it later."

"Stubborn as always!" He laughed. "Fine then. Let's go."

"Your days here are about to change very much, Ezra. I hope your preparedness transitions along with you to Naporar."

“I’m sure they will?” He nodded, sensing the cold chill that came off of Thrawn’s calculating mind. What exactly was he thinking? There was some lingering worry that Ezra could pick up on, but other than that—

“EZRA!”

Koree and Gunther hugged him first, followed by a firm handshake by Faro, and a slap to the back by Eli.

“Congratulations Mr. Bridger!” Karyn grinned.

“Glad you went put there before me!” Gunther added with a hearty laugh. “Now I know what the rest of us are up against for our trials.”

“No kidding!” Koree agreed.

“Kid, you really did us proud!” Eli placed a hand on his shoulder and squeezed, the smile on his face betraying that same sliver of worry that Thrawn had felt a few moments ago. There was something more neither of them were telling him, but what that was even a year's worth of observational training couldn't answer.

“I must concur…” the posh, controlled toned of Lohrana said as she, Thrass, and Tharin met them along the path. “You have shown great strides since the last we met. I am pleased to know my daughter’s time was not wasted with you after all,Cssoboti."

“Mother!” Tharin blushed, though both she and Ezra knew that it was probably as close to a compliment that he was going to get from her.

“Now that you are officially a cadet of the Nuruodo,” Thrass continued. “You will finally begin earning merit and standing within the houses. Given your potential and Eli Vanto’s own experience, I suspect you will be a well-standing citizen in no time at all.”

“And then,” Eli nudged. “You can even start thinking about the rest of your time here.”

He winked.

“Indeed!” Stent agreed boisterously. He was a lot easier to understand when he spoke in Cheunh, Ezra realized. “I am sure the suitors will come swarming in once they see what a magnificent and loyal soldier you are.”

“Those military sorts are always quick to couple with one another.” Ina nodded. “Just be sure you choose the right partner. Did Mitth’ar’inrokini explain the rituals of Chiss courtship to you?”
They both blushed and the room got intensely quiet after that as though his spotlight had somehow followed them out into the hallway and appeared overhead.

“Right... so... about that.”

Thrass rolled his eyes with a snort.

“Wait! Are you two—” Koree was the first to get it, the other Chiss and Imperials taking a few more seconds to process their blushing and body movement.

"Surprise!?" They said together meekly.

The room went silent and they looked to them, then to Tharin’s parents who didn’t seem surprised, then back to Tharin and Ezra, before shooting a glance over to Thrawn who was equally unsurprised beside Eli Vanto.

“I am not the last one to hear about this, this time, everyone knows that, right?” Gunther insisted.

“So wait, you knew these two were courting?” Ina pointed.

Thrass nodded.

“We have known since the wedding.”

“We are accepting of the arrangement,” Lohrana added. “Though it did take a bit of an explanation at first.”

Tharin and Ezra fidgeted.

“So much explanation…” he muttered.

“And you?” Stent pointed.

Thrawn gave off a guilty look and nodded alongside Eli.

"Well I'll be damned!" Faro grinned. "About time you two admitted it."

“Yes! Pay up!” Koree clapped. “I told you they wouldn’t make it the year.”

“Ugh… way to kill the betting pool kid!” Gunther groaned.

“Oh don’t be like that Kordin.” Faro winked. “You can still place bets on when the two decide to marry or have children.”

Thrass nearly choked on his own spit at that and his burning red eyes shot over to Faro so fast that Ezra could feel a sudden chill in the air that warned of his own impeding death.

“Let’s not open up that can of worms today,” Eli chimed in quickly, recognizing the tension as well. “Point is kid, that you’ve done good! You did it! You passed the tests and are coming with us into the military. I look forward to working with you.” He shot a look out at the Imperials. “That goes for all of you. I expect everyone else to pass. Can’t have this kid showing all of you up, now can we?”

“No sir!” Koree grinned. “We cannot.”

“Just you wait Bridger,” Gunther added. “In a couple of weeks, we’ll be right beside you in no time
“Can’t wait!” He smirked.

“Now,” Thrawn said quickly. “We should get started. Everyone say your farewells to Ezra, and Eli and I will see to it that your belongings are transferred onto Captain Vanto’s ship.”

Eli smirked.

“That we will, but first let's get that burn treated. We'll meet you aboard, kid.”

They wandered off, Ina and Stent offering up their quick praises before leaving as well. Short goodbyes just like back at that first trial. At first the brevity worried him, but now he understood it and liked how it felt not to linger on long goodbyes.

“See you out there, Ezra!”

“Save some of those aliens for us to fight, yeah?”

“And above all else,” Faro added. “Be safe.”

“I will. You tell Pyrondi and Cade I said bye too, okay? Tell her I'll be on the holo-call with her and Walten and Urick later tonight to tell them all about it.”

“Of course.”

“Now Ezra...” Lohrana stepped up. “My daughter has chosen you as her primary suitor, and while your relationship has been progressing well, I must advise you not to do anything too reckless and leave her heartbroken by suffering a sudden and tragic death in battle, am I clear?”

“I will try really hard not to die...” he laughed with a nod. “Understood.”

“Does your own mortality humor you?” She lifted her brows and let out a small scoff. “Humans! Are you certain he is the one for you, K’eten?”

She smiled.

“I am sure.”

“Then we wish you the best of luck, Ezra.” Thrass chimed in. “Do the Ascendancy proud, and become someone that will affect the Chiss just as much as you have affected our daughter... not to mention my brother and my family in general.”

He swallowed and nodded.

Lohrana then held out her arms as though she were admiring expensive fabric and awkwardly wrapped those arms around his shoulder and the back of his head in a hug.

“Then there is no more left to say. Farewell Ezra Bridger.”

“May warrior’s fortune smile on your efforts.”

“Yes,” she released him and nodded back to Thrass. “And do not hesitate to contact either of us if there is something you need done in that military. It is our job to oversee your course after all.”

“You and I will be seeing plenty of one another in war room meetings. I and the other two military
Syndics often appear to offer suggestions and transfer important points back to the Aristocra
directly,” Thrass said.

“I'll look forward to that. Thank you both.” Ezra bowed, walking ever so easily around them to
take Tharin’s hand and wait for them to connect the dots in their minds.

“Ah!” Lohrana hummed after a moment. “Well, we must be going. Until the next we meet. I hope
to see badges of honor and merit the next time, Bridger.”

Thrass lingered just a few moments longer and sent a thousand warnings into him with just his
eyes.

“Come Thrass!” Lohrana called, her voice amused.

He closed his eyes, smiled at them with a slight bow of his head, the cold stare turning once again
into the warm fatherly look that gave Ezra whiplash, and then both of Tharin's parents left them
alone in the hallway to say their own goodbyes in private.

“Well that all went better than expected?” She chuckled.

“And no long talks this time!” He grinned back.

“Oh it wasn’t that bad… Honestly, you choose to get caught up on the strangest things, Ezra. First
Rentor, then the talks… That was all fairly standard activity.”

“Almost getting eaten by a fish is standard?” He teased.

She shrugged, and then kissed him.

“I was going to surprise you, but guess what! When you return to Csaus, I will have a new
invention ready for you…”

“Ooh!” he hummed with a smirk. “That sounds fascinating. Can I get a hint for what it is?”

“Nope!” She grinned. “Just a bit of incentive for when you return to me.”

Now he kissed her.

“I never need any incentive to come see you. Never.”

She laughed and wrapped her arms around him.

“I will miss you while you are away. So go and do great things to make it up to me.”

“I promise. And you keep on making the best inventions in the Unknown Regions to help me
through it, okay?”

She nodded and buried the side of her face in his chest.

“Ch’ah ch’acah vah, ch’eo vur…”

“Ch’ah ch’acah vah cssi, ch’eo visot…” He hugged her tighter. “And I’ll miss you too.”

She broke away and sniffed, smiling as her hands came to cover her smile.

“Now go, be great!”
He nodded, waving a last goodbye to her as he left her alone in the hallway, both parting ways as she headed back to her Clawcraft and he to Eli’s ship where his life among the Chiss was about to begin anew.
Many years have passed since the Chimera crew was found on Myrkr. Now, the threat of the Yuuzhan Vong's invasion is right on the Chiss Ascendancy's doorstep, and it is up to everyone and all of their knowledge to fight the war and live to see the futures they all want to make realities.

“Get those targeting systems lined up!” Eli ordered. “I need a full range sweep on all aft canons! Gunners take your marks! Their lasers are operating at a fixed loop with a three second interval to recharge. You wait until you see that opening and on my command, you fire!”

The Chiss did not even need to reply affirmation because they were already getting into positions.

“Now take aim on those shield generators! Wait for the opening… Wait for it…” He threw down his fist. “Fire!”

A sequence of shots hit the fleetship behind them, knocking the shields loose as the Vagaari craft tilted downward in a plume of smoke.

“All pilots, I want a report on the damage, no escape pods get out of this sector, clear?”

“Yes Captain!” Their voices replied.

Eli turned to the other screen.

“Thrawn, how is the rear holding up?”

“All targets have been eliminated,” he replied pleasantly.

Back on his own ship, he and the other technicians watched as three more Vagaari vessels hovered lifelessly in the void of space. It was one of their biggest raids yet, but their patterns and defenses seemed abnormally ill-planned, almost sloppy. That was not how the cautious and ruthless Vagaari people were known to operate, and Thrawn wondered what purpose their apparent recklessness truly entailed.

“There were no Grysk ships this time,” Thrawn pointed out.

“I noticed that too,” Eli said. “But this is still too big to be their regular M.O.”

“Their attack patterns seemed sporadic as well.”
“It’s as though they didn’t actually want to win this battle.”

“Did not want to,” Thrawn repeated. “Or were ordered into submission by a greater force.”

“I don’t like this, Thrawn…”

“Indeed.” he spoke grimly. “What of Ezra’s mission? What news does he have on the ground?”

“He hasn’t reported in. Hang on.” He looked now to his holo-watch and typed in the codes. “Ezra, what’s your status on the front lines?”

A shot nearly blew the rock he was using for cover to atoms before he rolled out of the way and pressed for his own watch.

“Nah—goo—li—ho—wai—force—wer—”

Explosive static erupted on Eli’s wrist, followed by the choppy voice of Ezra Bridger. Eli pointed to the technician and made a motion with his hands to get the signal to show up clearer, holding out his hand when it finally was.

“Repeat!”

This time Ezra’s voice was clearer, but still muffled by the apparent action happening on the ground around him.

“The line is unwilling to compromise on a cease fire! Tensions are still high, but for now we’re holding a steady stalemate and waiting for reinforcements to take down the tower.”

“Understood.” Eli nodded. “Squadron three, break off defensive formation and head down to the surface to assist. Sending coordinates now.”

The technician nodded just moments before the squadron leader’s voice erupted on the comms.

“Coordinates received, sir. Heading to defend the ground troops now.”

“We have incoming ships at point two-eight!” Alerted one of Thrawn’s technicians. “Multiple Vagaari attack ships are coming into range.”

“Vanto, we are scanning incoming enemies on the starboard side. Reinforcements appear to be arriving sooner than expected.”

“Noted! Don’t let them break your blockade. We’ll keep our eyes open on our end.”

“Understood.”

“Captain Vanto, we are detecting an unknown biomass approaching from the bow.”

“A Yuuzhan ship?” He asked back.

“Presumably so, but the readouts are unclear, sir.”

“Alright then. Attention! Flight squadrons one and four, prepare for incoming and do not let a single ship reach orbit. Squadron two, what’s the status of the fallen flagship?”

“No survivors or signs of lifeforms remaining.”
“None?”

“None sir.”

“Damn…” He muttered. “Their trying to avoid interrogation again.” He looked back to the screens and waved out his hand. “Return to formation and retreat the wreckage, we’ll deal with clean up ourselves.”

“Yes sir.”

“Gunnners, take aim with the disintegration rays and get that ship off the battlefield. Marks?”

“We’re ready, sir.”

“Fire.”

A blue-green laser cut overhead as the newest addition to the Chiss warship left the Vagaari vessel a smoldering pile of spare scrap and burned rubble floating in zero gravity. Eli rubbed his eyes, giving them a break for the few seconds it would take for the Yuuzhan reinforcements to arrive and aid the Vagaari. He could see their attack strategies like a series of paths and arrows on a map. Thrawn’s teachings to him no doubt, and now mixed with his many years of actual Unknown Regions combat experience.

Why Thrawn insisted he take the lead on this one, Eli still wasn’t sure, but there must have been something he was wanting to study off in the rear formations personally. Knowing Thrawn, it was probably something of the utmost importance regarding the question weighing heavily on all of their minds… the date of the inevitable Yuuzhan Vong war.

Hence the set-up of the day’s attacks and defenses. While his own ship protected one half of the planet, Thrawn’s forces would be watching their rear, and Ezra was sent where he did the most good, to the ground in order to keep the Chiss traitors from making contact with the Far Outsiders, or otherwise leaving to break orbit and attack the Defense Fleet above. The three had become an unstoppable Chiss dream-team of order, effective strategy, and teamwork… and with the battles growing more intense of late, that sort of strategy was exactly what the Nuruodo needed to succeed in these latest battles.

Still, why the Far Outsiders wanted the planet Celwis, Eli could only guess. It was on the Vagaari Corridor, but had been under Chiss control since the time when House Nuruodo formed the Expansionary Defense Fleet. It wasn’t on the Path of Houses, but it was close enough that they had to make sure nothing snuck through their borders. Was it the powerful transmission towers? The suggestion of the Chiss in league with the enemy? Or was it something else that they just weren’t seeing clearly? Hopefully Thrawn could see it, whatever the answer.

“Yuuzhan reinforcements approaching.”

“It appears to be one of the B-Level scout-ships, sir.”

“Understood.” Eli nodded. “Thrawn, what’s the status on those rear enforcers?”

“They are being neutralized as we speak,” he replied coolly. “Might I suggest herding the Yuuzhan scout-ship to these coordinates so our canons might effectively take out the mother-ship without scattering our offensive squadrons from their flight patterns?”

“You may.”
He smirked, reading the new data as it appeared on his watch, and immediately sending it to all of his soldiers aboard the bridge. Like Eli, the other Chiss saw the plan Thrawn had devised in an instant and were eager to put it into play.

“Alright, you all heard the Captain. I want that vessel lined up on the planet’s northernmost axis and locked there. Transfer power from the stern and starboard shields over to the portside and ready a concussive blast on all left side canons. Flight Squadrons, you maintain the numbers of their attack ships and keep them corralled within our range of fire.”

“Understood!”

“You ready Captain Thrawn?”

“We are in position Captain Vanto.”

“Would you care to do the honors?”

There was a bit of enjoyment in his tone as he replied.

“Very well. On my mark, deploy tractor beams and lock on all canons to vital points of the Yuuzhan warship.”

All of them waited for a long moment in still silence as the muffled sounds of battle echoed distantly from the other side of the glass. The brown, vegetable-like ship slowed to an encroaching drift as their pawn pilots exploded in bright bursts of flames. Chiss attack shuttles were zipping across the viewport like shooting stars, as they kept all smaller enemy ships contained within the neat little pen that Eli and Thrawn had successfully crafted above Celwis between each of their warships.

Thrawn’s calm voice came back over the intercoms and broke the silence in a single word order.

“Now!”

The beams went out on both warships, catching and subsequently tearing the Yuuzhan ship apart like a piece of paper, as both captains gave out their final orders to fire their turrets on the whatever remained of the enemy ship.

They were buffeted hard as the Yuuzhan sent out a few potshots of their own, but their shields were strong enough to keep any real damage from ensuing on that half of their vessel. Meanwhile, the remnants of the Yuuzhan scouting ship dissipated in orderly laser fire, and within mere minutes, the enemy threat was no more.

“Nice work everyone!” Eli smiled.

Now if Ezra could just cull the violence on the surface they could wrap up here.

“We have lost communications with the ground forces!” Someone on Thrawn’s ship alerted.

“Reroute the proper channels back to the ship and send down another scan.”

“Yes Captain.”

“Eli, the tower appears to be jamming all communic—”

The line went to static.
“Thrawn? Repeat! Thrawn!?”

“We’ve lost the signal.”

Eli looked down into his watch and tried to reroute the wavelinks.

“Lieutenant Bridger, do you copy?!”

Static.

“Lieutenant, what is your ground status? Come in! Ezra!?” Eli growled. “Squadron three what is ground status?”

More static.

“Tech Res’eri?!”

“Our readouts are similar, sir,” she said. “No contact can be made between the two ships nor the ground soldiers.”

“Find out what’s jamming out signal and hail Captain Thrawn as soon as we’re back online. We may be sitting in the eye of the storm up here, but I have a feeling things are about to get more interesting down on the ground.”

“Understood Captain! Tracing all frequencies now. Status report should detect sources in approximately eight minutes on a planet-wide scale.”

“Communications with our second fleet-ship will be back online in three.”

“Good. Until then, maintain the line and keep your eye out for additional ships. The Far Outsiders are pulling out all their cards today. I don’t want even a piece of their scrap metal to fall down to Celwis, agreed?”

“Yes sir!” They all agreed.

Eli stepped forward and looked down to the explosions happening on the planet’s surface. With a frown, he narrowed his eyes at the world and hoped that whatever was going on down there, Ezra was managing to hold up his side of the attack force until help arrived.

 Protect the peace. That was what Thrawn had told him to do nearly five Chiss standard years ago. Protect the peace.

Well that was easy to do with his Chiss training from Tharin and the additional months he’d been given on Naporar, but when he finally got out on the field, Ezra was shocked at just how unprepared he actually was for his true mission.

He can still remember the first time he ever saw these battlefields, the ones he would come to know so well these last few years. It was the first day he truly realized that his time to be spent in the Chiss military was not about to go as he had planned, and that the Chiss were keeping a couple more secrets that neither he nor Tharin could have ever prepared themselves to learn.
“Did you think we just patrolled the stars looking for trouble at all hours of the day?” Thrawn had asked him.

“A little bit, yeah?” Ezra had replied back. “Who are all these Chiss? Why are they fighting each other? What are their House colors?”

“This is civil war Ezra,” Eli told him. “The Chiss you see are unaligned with any House name and they are a fraction of the schismed forces that run rampant on these outer edges of the Ascendancy’s borders.”

“Why haven’t I heard about this? What’s going on out here that’s bad enough to cause a civil war with the Chiss?”

“Civil War can strike anywhere, even on Chiss worlds. Thus far you have been only to the Path of Houses, so you have not seen the dozens of other populated worlds struggling for power, succession, and victory for their differing beliefs.”

“What beliefs?”

“They are in league with the Far Outsiders, and most see their reign as a method to knock the Aristocra out of power.” Eli replied. “Little do they know, the Far Outsiders will take everyone out with them, not just the Aristocra and the planets along the Path of Houses.”

“Do the others know about this?”

“It is not public knowledge,” Thrawn informed. “Only a select few leaders and military officials are aware of the current conflicts. Mostly just soldiers within Nuruodo house, a couple of Military leaders, and the Aristocra of course. To everyone else, they are merely prepping for an internal war that’s already begun, and preparing for the external one ultimately coming from the Yuuzhan Vong once their forces reach our borders.”

“Right, and thanks to the preemptive strike that technically got Thrawn exiled all those years ago, there was no large presence of Far Outsiders near these parts for a good number of years. Since the Vong themselves are against technology, they lacked the means of long-distance communication and their ships move slowly without hyperdrives. It was a while before word was sent back to them and they decided to come here seeking revenge, something we’ve been fighting back for the last few years as their main army gets closer to Chiss territory.”

“Wow… but weren’t you afraid that attacking them all those years ago would only put you on their radar in the first place?”

“A decision had to be made. Mine was one that has allowed my people more time to plan and prepare, and ultimately bring the aid of you and the other humans to our cause. Be aware that the Yuuzhan Vong would have appeared in these regions eventually. My actions merely allowed us a fighting chance at changing their course.”

“And since we’ve got time, we’ve been trying to unite the outlying Chiss colonies to see reason rather than try to usurp the government through the promises of false power.”

“Are they that unhappy they would try to take over with outside alien forces? What’s
been done to help them accept the Ascendancy?”

“These Chiss do not see the Aristocra as a capable source of political power. Many understand that the Aristocra are not perfect, but their presence has done more good for the Ascendancy than not. World leaders have tried to stress this rule to their people, but resistance groups continue to see their plight as one that can only be ascertained in blood.”

“It isn’t like it was back in the Empire, Ezra. The Aristocra are a just senate with the people in mind… They aren’t corrupt like back home. The Chiss need their guidance or else there will be more wars just to figure out who will take control of all the Chiss.”

“A fight which we cannot allow to happen, even with the lingering threat of external war fast approaching.”

“So wait, all of those trips to outside the sector—” Ezra asked, piecing together the little clues he and Tharin had read about in their studies. “The radio silence for weeks on end—?”

“We were all moments when we were on the grounds keeping peace through the bloodshed of our brothers and sisters in the colony worlds lying outside the Path of Houses.” Thrawn nodded. “An internal dispute that we are fighting among our own.”

He frowned and arched his brows low.

“So what do we do about it?”

“Neutralize, contain, and try to talk the leaders to a stalemate.”

“I don’t know about this guys. I signed on to help fight the Vong, not fight the Chiss…”

“Would you rather they murder themselves and other innocents in recalcitrant battles?”

“Well no…” He replied, not entirely sure what the word “recalcitrant” meant, but sticking by his gut feeling that it was probably bad.

“Plus some of these radical groups are in league with the Vagaari directly associated with the Yuuzhan Vong. They’ve been selling weapons and shipping materials to them for months now which threaten more Chiss than they help.”

“Like Vereen?”

“Like Vereen...” Thrawn nodded grimly. “But with the destruction of the Chiss Ascendancy in mind instead of protection from border raids.”

“Oh…”

Well when he put it that way they sounded like pretty bad armies, still, he wasn’t entirely comfortable fighting with the Chiss.

“You understand the importance of our fight and why it must be kept secret now, yes?”
“If the public were to find out the colony worlds were rebelling,” Eli continued. “There would be mass-scale panic.”

“Plus we wish to maintain the small factions that are a part of these raids and help the innocents living on these worlds who merely want to live in peace within Chiss law.”

“I understand.” Ezra nodded, still unhappy, but at least now he knew why he was unhappy.

“Then you will do your duty as a Chiss soldier and also that as a Jedi. We keep the peace, and now it seems so shall you.”

Keep the peace? Ezra thought again, his mind now back in the present, but with a spiteful snort to himself now as he expertly dodged another series of blue laser fire as the bursts deflected off the orange-fire glow of his lightsaber blade.

In all evidence, it did explain a lot about the way Eli and Thrawn were acting at his citizenship tests and at the Kordin’s wedding. Still, a heads up that he’d be fighting in a top-secret civil war as a major factor of his military career might have been a nice bit of information to roll out before he actually got onto the battlefield!

Still, they were all sworn to secrecy by their leaders, and as such, so was Ezra. Not even Tharin knew or could learn about this massive war. No, the other Chiss thought the Expansionary Defense Fleet were off patrolling the galaxy in search of external threats, when for the most part, they were dealing with threats within their own people’s borders.

Ezra completely hated that part of his time here, but he had to admit, he had gotten pretty good at being a ground trooper and leading his own forces into battle, even against like-minded Chiss soldiers.

He had already risen up to the ranks of Lieutenant with his own defense force for ground patrols, the highest Chiss ground-forces rank to be awarded without stripping him of his family ties or colors. Thrawn had also been given a promotion to Captain, making him and Eli equal in rank again, though both turned down the promotions to General about a year ago. Chiss ranks worked a bit differently out here, and higher rankings didn’t necessarily mean better work. They must have had their reasons for delaying promotion, Ezra himself felt content to be the second highest ranking soldier on most of his missions, so maybe they just had similar feelings?

To be honest, Ezra never saw himself as much of a strategists to be in the skies with Thrawn and Eli. The ground suited his talents a lot better, and obviously the Nuruodo thought the same or else they never would have given him this much status in the Ascendancy.

“Prak!” Ezra called. “What’s the status on those transmissions?”

“We’re still in static!” the man replied.

“Do we advance?” another asked.

Ezra peeked around their wall and saw the blend of rogue Chiss, Vagaari soldiers, and a couple of Grysks who were all blocking the entrance to the communications tower. There was a large wall with four strategically placed laser turrets ready to mow down anything that got too close, and the brigade of soldiers at the gate were there to finish the job if the snipers and gunners let anything slip through. A fortified tower if ever Ezra had seen one, but then again, he’d fought off worse. Still, if they wanted their comms back online anytime soon then breaking into that building and
shutting down whatever was causing their blockage would have to be what they strove to accomplish next.

The general was holed up in this tower as well. It was the main source of all transmissions on Celwis, and if they managed to infiltrate it then they could solve all of their current problems in one swift attack.

Ezra got a plan then and turned back to his small band of Chiss troops.

“Alright, I want two groups to split into offensive positions and storm the tower. I need covering fire, but I think a well placed distraction can cut just enough of an opening that I can take out the gunmen while the rest of you storm the front gates and remove the remaining guards. After that, we’ll regroup and take the tower. Any questions?”

“How are we going to distract them, sir?”

Ezra smirked and tightened his cloak.

“Oh, I think they’ll all be plenty distracted when they see me coming. You just worry about using that window to take the door guards out.”

“Clear.”

“Alright then, I’ll see you all on the other side.”

Ezra took five large steps backwards and then sprinted forward before leaping high into the air with the Force, the dust lifting silently after his feet as he took off soaring miles into the sky. His lightsaber ignited on the descent, causing the loud flash-buzz to lock the attention of every opponent as he fell at full speed, spinning directly into the upper layer of the wall, his blade a halo of orange fire wrapped around a blur of brown as his cloak swirled in the breeze.
He was right. No one was able to take their eyes off of such a sight. He almost looked like a small asteroid crashing down towards them from space, and before the upper gunners could react, Ezra’s saber was cutting down the turrets and snipers with blinding speed, leaving nothing in his path without a scorching scar.

The remaining Nuruodo soldiers had already moved forward the very second the gate guardians had looked up to fire upon Ezra’s landing body. By the time Ezra had all four canons disabled, his ground troops had already broken past the wall and were running across the courtyard to the massive comm tower.

Another well placed leap, and Ezra landed alongside the group, rolling once before his feet hit the ground and he immediately fell into step alongside the others just as they broke through the entrance.

“Split up and get our comms back online! Neutralize all enemy targets and try to take as many prisoners as you can.” He ordered, turning his face skyward to see the offices above. “I’m going to find the general and get him to reconsider our cease fire. Good luck.”

The Chiss responded and split into pairs as Ezra took the lift up to the command center and cut a neat circle through the door with his saber, pushing the hole into two guards before he stepped inside to deflect blaster fire into the remaining three.

“Well well, General...” Ezra grinned, the sass in his tone deliberately hitting all the right Cheunh marks to stress the hopelessness of the rogue general’s situation. “Maybe now you might want to
“Did we get any of them to talk?” Eli asked.

“Many have admitted to the standard betrayal of resources and communications, but none so far have been able to tell us when the Yuuzhan Fleet will be arriving.”

“We’ve been picking apart scouts for years,” Ezra replied. “And you said yourself that their ships are getting stronger. Attacks are way more frequent now, so we’ve got to be closer to their higher ranking waves than before, right?”

“I concur with Lieutenant Bridger,” Ar’alani added. “Judging by these patterns, I suspect we will be facing the full frontal force of their militia within the next few weeks, perhaps a month?”

“And they’ll be bringing with them enough ships to black out the stars...” Eli added disconcertingly. “We’ll be outnumbered in values completely off the charts.”

“Though the rumors say we will inevitably be outnumbered,” Thrawn interjected. “They do not say we will be likewise unprepared. These last raids proved that these armies were too frightened to focus on a winning goal. Odds are they were merely sent ahead as cannon fodder before the main fleets should arrive.”

“And that’s why the only Grysks that appeared were ones already stationed on the tower.” Ezra pointed out. “The Vagaari are by far the weakest of the Yuuzhan’s captured and enlisted species.”

“Perhaps that is true,” Ar’alani replied. “But recall the deaths to our people still caused by such outside species. If they are the lowest of those numbers, then how will our enemies reveal the numbers of enslaved or allied species that have joined forces with them and prove stronger than the Vagaari? We know only of the Grysks and Vagaari specifically because they are those closest to our own borders. The space in which these armies are travelling from are vast, dark, and largely unknown to us, so they could have spanned the course of nearly eight systems our size and larger in these last years, rallying their numbers to unfathomable proportions.”

“Is that what you think or what you’ve seen, ma’am?” Ezra interrupted. “Admiral, did you see the Great War as well when you were a child fighting for the Alani?”

“I did. We all did.” She nodded. “Fire, death, and planet-wide destruction. Every ozyly-eschembo was known to suffer the dream more than once. Only now are the poor children getting clearer details of the destruction heading our way, only proving that our nightmares are worse than we ever could have imagined. You have seen these visions as well, haven’t you Lieutenant?”

He nodded.

“Yes, I’ve seen it too. I think you may be right about the other unknown forces.”

“And Krayt?” Eli asked.

Ezra shook his head and looked back at the remaining leaders at the table.

“Ever since we learned Vong armor can block out Force detection, none of the Alani have had
visions of Krayt.” He lifted the hunk of rock-like stone tied around the chain on his neck up to the 
table just as Ar’alani touched her own. “And I haven’t had any contact with him for nearly two 
years since my last conversation with him.”

“Perhaps you should try to speak with him again?” General Ren’iko’nuruodo suggested.

“Right,” Commander Fer’isi’alani agreed. “You claimed that this person had helped you on 
ocasion, even rescuing Admiral Thrawn’s life. If this person was indeed willing to reach out to 
you, then why not use that connection to attack Yuuzhan forces internally through his assistance?”

He made a face.

“I feel that I should remind everyone, my last conversation to get Krayt to join our side did not go 
well. He is not interested in helping the Chiss Ascendancy. He may not fully align with them, but 
he wants the same thing as the Yuuzhan Vong, total galaxy-wide destruction, and if he has to go 
through the Chiss Ascendancy to take his revenge on the galaxy where we came from, the one that 
had done him wrong and turned him into the thing he is today, then he’ll do it without question. To 
him you’re either with him or you’re in his way, and we are in his way.”

“Additionally, he is only interested in Ezra’s recruitment for the means of additional power, not for 
measures of alliance...” Thrawn added. “In our past battles one on one with lower-ranked Vong 
soldiers, all reacted with equal fear to the mere mentioning of the name Krayt. Therefore we can 
deduce that his presence among the Yuuzhan Vong is one of high power and much respect.”

“And even greater fear,” Eli grumbled. “If he was able to sneak intel out of our Force sensitives at 
the distance away he was travelling, then I sure as Hell don’t want to see what he can do up close.”

“Which is why we need to confront him as soon as the war begins,” Ar’alani said, shooting a look 
to Ezra who returned it with a stern frown.

“I know. I sensed the man was beginning to run low on patience, and before our argument ended, I 
could only imagine that this meant he and the Yuuzhan forces were almost at our door. This feeling 
has grown stronger in the last few weeks, both with me and with the people of Schesa who can feel 
it too.”

They all nodded at that in agreement, and with that, Syndic Thrass stepped forward and cleared his 
throat to speak.

“Thrawn, I suspect you were able to observe what was needed as the rear Captain for the defense 
fleet?”

“I was.” he nodded, pulling up the data on the center of the war-room table and pointing out the 
statistics it revealed. “I suspected the waves of Yuuzhan soldiers were growing closer once we 
became unable to keep any prisoners from taking their own lives. Still their loyalty was driven 
from a place of personal fear, which made their operations sloppy, though their fear of their leaders 
preponderated their fear of death. As such it was apparent that these latest Vagaari attacks came 
directly from the main fleet and not from a third party alliance.”

“Does it help you to learn when the Yuuzhan Forces will be arriving?”

“As Admiral Ar’alani said before, we can suspect the main fleet to be here within a matter of 
weeks. I believe that they will reach the farthest corners of the Ascendancy in no more than three 
weeks time, and thanks to the additional prowess gifted to the ozyly-esheehmo from Ezra Bridger, 
we will be able to sense their approach approximately three days before they are able to break the
lines of our territory.”

There was a lot of discussion held after that, most worried, some frantic, and others just trying to stay on top of it all and keep their nerves. Thrass wasted no time in drawing all of their attentions back to him as he broke the conversations with a snap of his fingers.

“Enough! We always knew this day would come and it seems now that the date is coming closer than ever. Now is not the time for concern, now we must send word to Schesa, Csaus, Copero, and Naporar to inform them that our supplies need to be ready at a moment’s notice. All dealings with Sharh are to be increased upon demand at the highest efficiency reasonable to meet demand. We will be prepared for their presence here, and we will fight to our dying breaths to ensure the safety of the rest of the Ascendancy.”

There was a silence then, broken once the Admiral stepped forward and offered her hand.

“I will send word personally to the Alani. The pilots and their defenses will be well prepared and remain on high alert.”

“And I’ll go to Csaus to see if the next line of Clawcrafts and weaponry are ready for deployment,” Ezra added.

“Very well.” He nodded. “Ren’iko’nuruodo, I suppose you will be able to inform Nikori House about the rise in exports, and Captain Vanto, I entrust the Nuruodo to you. With the Aristocra out of place, the house will look to you for guidance in absence of the Admiral or other generals.”

“Me sir?” Eli almost choked. “Would you rather not it be Thrawn or even the General himself?”

Thrass shook his head.

“Nikon is the only one with enough power to maintain order on Sharh. Many are still uncomfortable with my brother’s return and I fear that this hesitancy only increased with the removal of Sev’eree’nuruodo. Even if that were not the case, Thrawn will be needed to create offensive and defensive strategies to successfully combat the Far Outsiders and cannot be disturbed or distracted from that assignment. No… you have earned their trust, Captain. The soldiers of Nuruodo House will listen to you.”

Eli nodded as maturely as he could despite the well of differing emotions forming up within him.

“Understood.”

“The rest of you will prepare the soldiers and technicians. Meanwhile, I will personally meet with the three remaining Aristocra to warn them of the coming attack and promote our latest victory over Celwis. If no one has anything further to add then you are all dismissed.”

They bowed and Ezra quickly made his way over to Thrawn, Thrass, and Eli as everyone else left the room.

“They all sound pretty worried.”

“That is common when facing an enemy known only to nightmares and legends for so long,” Thrawn replied. “Are you yourself not worried?”

“Don’t get me wrong!” He laughed. “I’m terrified, but it’s what I’ve been training for, so I’m not about to let my galaxy and all of the Chiss Ascendancy down.”

“The weapon may have been put to good use against the Yuuzhan Vong,” Thrawn agreed. “But even in noble hands, absolute power will pollute intentions absolutely.”

“I know, I know… and it’s not that the Inrokini haven’t been making incredible strides in weaponry these last few years, but it’s just that having a big scary super weapon like that almost seems like a good thing to have against an unbeatable nightmare army, don’t you think?”

Thrawn smiled.

“There is no such thing as an unbeatable army.”

“Well it doesn’t matter either way.” Ezra grumbled. “There’s no way to get our hands on one now, the original was destroyed, and that last vision I had of the second one went to scrap even quicker.”

“To think they would actually waste so many valuable resources on a second Death Star...” Thrawn hissed out in partially concealed contempt. “This is the very reason why the Rebellion is going to win the war.”

Ezra chuckled.

“What of that was humorous?” Thrass asked with one brow raised.

“To hear the big bad Grand Admiral Thrawn talking such treasonous words against the Empire is still pretty surreal even after all these years. I’ve got friends rolling in their graves if they could only hear you now.”

His laughs dwindled down into a frown and then into a sigh a moment later.

“Well hey!” Eli said with a sudden slap to his back. “Look on the upside, Bridger, you’re finally going to get to see Tharin again.” He clicked his tongue and nudged him a few times with his elbow.

“You have not seen my daughter since your proposal to her.” Thrass asked with a subtle if not guilt-inducing glare. “How long ago was that?”

“About a year now… A human year, not really a Chiss year, but it’s still been a while. I mean, we holo-chat nearly every day, but I—” He stopped, his cheeks burning a little when all three of the other men lifted their brows and Ezra decided that the less he said the better. “N-nevermind.”

“In that case, I suspect my niece will be most happy to see you. Her work of late has shown just how inspired she has become since meeting you. Her brilliance is truly a remarkable thing blended now with your unique creative influence.”

He grinned.

“Aww, thanks Thrawn, I’ll be sure to let her know.”

“I concur. I suspect my daughter is designing stronger weaponry to help end this war even sooner so that you and she can finally attend your lifemate ceremonies. Perhaps then, Lohrana and I can finally welcome grandchildren into our bloodline sometime before we die.”

Ezra’s whole face burned and he coughed a few times as Eli’s teasing glances made him all the
more embarrassed.

“Well, enough teasing. We better get to it.” Eli stretched. “Ever since we got Vereen arrested for treason, the Aristocra are taking their sweet time in finding a replacement for her. I am not looking forward to delivering this message with no official middleman.”

“Please try to speak a little more respectfully,” Thrass said with a sigh, a hand coming up to rub at his brow. “She may have broken the law and committed acts of treason, but she was still an Aristocra and a very old friend to our family. She and Thrawn did court in their youth if you will remember.”

Eli and Ezra lifted their brows and looked slowly over to Thrawn. It was no secret. Most everyone knew about that by now, but still… getting your first girlfriend arrested for committing treason had to have been tough. Neither thought it was a good topic to bring up in such casual conversation, but Thrass always managed to leap over that unseen line nearly every time. If it concerned his family, he spoke his mind without hesitation, even if that meant revealing embarrassing details of Thrawn’s life, and more recently that of Ezra’s relationship with his daughter.

Thrawn though did not appear outwardly fazed by the comment.

“That was long ago and we have both moved past it.”

“Of course, of course… she coupled shortly after your exile, though tragically it was short lived. And of course, you found yourself with other types of suitors…”

A look over at Eli now made Ezra and Thrawn shoot the man a sideways glance. That was Thrass alright, taking a demolition bomb to the line between casual conversation and sensitive topics.

“Well…” Eli coughed, trying to hide the red in his face. “Not that this isn’t fun, but I’m off to address a room full of antsy, Aristocra-less Nuruodo soldiers, which may in fact be somehow less painful than this conversation.”

“You will do well,” Thrawn assured.

A smile, hidden again in humiliation once Eli met eyes with Thrass, and then he reset all of his emotions back to blank.

“This is really about to happen, isn’t it?” Ezra laughed dryly. “I mean, I knew it had to eventually, but even with all these years to prepare, I didn’t think the day would actually come?”

“All of our years preparing for this battle are about to come into play. I only hope it was enough given my failure to recruit more assistance from outside forces.”

“I suppose we will all just have to find out together?” Thrass said.

Ezra shrugged. “They may have numbers, but we’ve kept the purrgil out of their hands at every turn, so at least we know they’re still slow!”

“Way to see the light side of all of this Bridger!” Eli laughed. “Now go get yourself cleaned up and on a shuttle to Csaus. We’ll need to be back in a few days to go over our attack strategies, so don’t waste what little time you have just standing here gabbing at us.”

“Right.” Thrawn nodded. “Go greet Tharin and be there when Ronin explains the increased production for the Inrokini. You must be ready to answer all of their questions”
“All of them except the civil war…” Ezra muttered.

“They do not need to know of such,” Thrass reminded. “You know what to do.”

“Alright, alright…” He motioned with a frown. “Well good luck to everyone else in the meantime. I’ll see you all when I get back.”

“And good luck to you as well, Ezra. Farewell.”

“Ah, Lieutenant Bridger…”

“Commander Faro!” He smiled. “Funny running into you here. How is it working with Ar’alani’s team?”

“Very well. You know, despite losing a rank from the Imperial Navy, the Chiss don’t seem to have as many positions so I am basically back where I started with fifteen years less work. Eli was right. It is easy to rise through the ranks when the Chiss aren’t actively trying to keep you down the ladders of power.”

“Yeah, the ranking system here is different than the Rebellion too. I never expected to get such a high ranking position so soon, but Chiss don’t waste any time handing out promotions.”

“Not when they see true talent, they don’t. I’ve said it before, but I’ll say so again. The Chiss military is everything I loved about the old Empire without all of the fear mongering and showy displays of grandeur.”

He laughed.

“So hey, how are Gunther and Koree?”

“Still acting as gunners.” She nodded. “It’s what they’re good at, and they do so love what they do.”

They each chuckled again in agreement until Faro slowed and just as quickly both of their sounds drained away into a gentle sigh.

“I hear things are about to get even busier for us here.”

“It’s almost hard to believe after all this time…”

She hummed.

“It seems like only yesterday I was fighting in the Clone Wars, and then for the Empire. Now look at me, old as I am, and I’m still about to fight in this impossibly large war for the Chiss.”

“You’re not that old.”

She laughed.

“Oh I knew there was a reason I liked you, Bridger.” She sighed and shook her head. “Still, I thought by now I might be out of the fight for once, but here I am in the middle of another battle.”
“Is that what you love to do, Faro?”

She grinned.

“Well I am good at it, I’ll admit that much.” She tapped him with the back of her hand. “What about you?”

He shrugged meekly and scratched a finger against the hair growing along his face.

“Well I’m good at it too, I suppose?”

Faro smiled at that and nodded in understanding.

“You’ve grown into quite the strapping young man, Ezra Bridger. With any luck, one day you’ll be as old as me, getting roped into another fight by some spirited kids who have no idea what they’re all doing.”

“You think we’ll still be fighting a war after this?”

She shrugged.

“There will always be wars to fight, Bridger. I don’t think we could make it a single lifetime without one happening somewhere or another? I hope when the next one comes around, and those brats come knocking on your door, it’ll be a smaller, simpler one for you.”

He chuckled.

“Gee thanks.”

She bowed her head at an angle and grinned.

“Well...” she started. “I best be off. A lot to do, a war to plan... you know... same old same old for people like us.”

“Same old same old.” He repeated. “See you around Karyn.”

She waved and let him continue his walk down the hall to his ship.

He had filled out even more in the last couple of months, since the last time Faro had seen him. His muscles were sturdier and his face losing its boyish good looks in exchange for the face of— as Faro put it— “the strapping young man that he had grown into.” He wondered if maybe those eight months had all caught back up to him with interest from the time he’d lost to the purrgils’ deep space jump through the black hole. He had been here so long now, that he had almost felt as though his old life was just a distant dream— at least kind that could still ache if he thought about it for too long. That sort of thing still felt so strongly within him despite being a lifetime away in the past now.

He was twenty-four now, and a lot more than his looks had changed since he’d been away from Lothal, the Rebellion, and the Empire. Ahsoka still hadn’t come for him, and at this point, he truly did wonder if the Yuuzhan Vong’s approaching army was to blame for that.

His students on Schesa were all still able to navigate with the Force, and in his absence more girls were discovered as well as two boys. He made an effort to visit them as often as he could to continue his lessons to them, especially considering one of the Force sensitive young boys was none other than Pyrondi’s son, Cade.
No one knows how it happened, some medics and Alani suspect perhaps it was the fluids from her time in captivity with the Yuuzhan Vong. Whatever those vines had injected into her blood back then might have just been enough to awaken such gifts within the unborn child.

Ezra, knowing how much Krayt affected during that time the Imperials were in captivity, wouldn’t doubt it if he were somehow able to experiment at that distance with their lives… not in the slightest. It would also explain the connection to Krayt that Ezra had felt when he had first held Cade as a baby. So, naturally, Ezra decided to keep extra close watch on the boy during his last few years of training, just in case Krayt’s experiments might become harmful to Cade’s health.

So far that didn’t seem to be the case. He was a good boy. All of the kids were, but Ezra took a great pride over Cade. He called him Uncle Ezra, just as he called all of the Imperials his aunts and uncles. Cade liked to read, climb, run, and tell jokes that were enough to make even a Chiss crack a smile. To think he had grown up here his entire life, not even knowing about the galaxy he’d come from, and yet none of the other Chiss children treated him any different than any other Alani. That, and the only other boy to be brought into the program was only about a year younger than him, so the two had become best friends for life.

Pyrondi often sent him videos and pictures of Cade and his friends on Schesa. She moved her teaching position there to be with her son, and honestly, the new knowledge of the rest of the galaxy was a great beginning course for the Alani kids. They were so open to learning about the rest of the universe and so accepting of other cultures that if any of the next generation could put a stop to these wars, Ezra knew it would be the Alani kids.

Perhaps Faro was wrong. Maybe they will learn from past generations mistakes. Maybe there won't be another war in his lifetime and he wouldn’t be called upon to help fight with them?

He could only hope.

Hope. It was such a fragile concept, but Hera had always stressed the importance of having hope to him. Maybe if they were able to grow up into a new galaxy of peace and understanding, then maybe, just maybe Ezra would go back to Lothal to see what had changed in his absence. If he ever did go back there, to his homeworld and his galaxy, Ezra wondered if anyone there would actually recognize him anymore?

He shook the thoughts away and set the coordinates for Csaus. The shuttle took off into hyperspace in an instant, leaving Ezra smiling to himself now at the thought of seeing Tharin again after so long. At the same time, he was avidly hoping that this war would be the last for all of their sakes, but most importantly for the children of tomorrow.

“Ezra!!”

She hugged him so tightly that he was nearly knocked back into his Clawcraft. The ship was the first gift of many that Tharin had given to him upon his short return trips to Csaus. A Clawcraft of his very own, the second model she’d ever constructed. Getting a whole ship was a grand gift and one Ezra had no idea how he could possibly repay, but Tharin was the time of person who didn’t care a lot about personal things. If she needed something, she could get her hands on it fairly easily. No, all Tharin wanted was for Ezra to succeed and return to her once the war was over, and if she had to make an entire line of Clawcrafts and weaponry to ensure that happened, then that was
fine with her.

“You bring more news of the war rather than good tidings I assume?”

“Why do you have to assume that?” He stretched a bit guiltily.

“Because Ronin was just called to Csilla to meet with my father and the other Aristocra,” she said, shooting him a knowing look. “So spill it. What’s happened out there, ch’eo beo?”

He sighed.

“There is about to be an increase in production for your Clawcrafts and other weapons. The Far Outsiders main forces are expected to be here within the month. Ronin should come back tomorrow with full details of the additional work. Sorry…”

Tharin furrowed her brows but nodded in understanding.

“I see. Well… we all knew this time would come sooner or later.”

“I know…”

“Until then, it seems we have the rest of this evening to ourselves for once. Rather than fret about the future, let us both enjoy today while it lasts.”

She kissed him, earning a few snickers from Magin a few desks away before both rolled their eyes and smiled.

“Say…” Ezra blushed. “You want to get out of here and go somewhere more private?”

She nodded.

“Jorj and the additional Ysalamiri gathered from Myrkr have quite the little colony going on the Olbio tree. Would you like to see their progress?”

He smiled.

“That would be nice.”

He took her arm in his and the two began walking out the lab and down the hill towards his old home, now Tharin’s home that she’d combined with her own walls and rooms torn out of their original spot to make a much larger living area.

“It’s been quiet without the Vornskr lately. I feel the Ysalamiri will enjoy seeing your company, especially Jorj.”

He smiled.

“Hey, while we’re on the topic, how are the Vornskr?”

“Their training is going very well. The idea to use them with the Alani as Force companions and trackers of Force energy was brilliant! They all seem very capable at protecting their partners and keeping them from getting lost.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“The Alani have made many great strides since you began working with them. Your presence in
their training never ceases to amaze me.”

He rubbed his neck modestly and she laughed up at him before patting his cheek.

“Well, come on. After I show you the colony, I would appreciate dinner and some private company with you.”

“You sure we shouldn’t invite the other Inrokini?” He teased. “They always look so eager to watch us doing couple things together. I think they’d love the chance to study our relationship.”

“They’re relentless! It’s your fault they’re like this!” She pointed. “Proposing to me in front of everyone at the labs! Did you even stop to think of the repercussions that might have?”

“Hey, you still said yes though, didn’t you?” He teased. “I don’t see why you’re complaining.”

She smirked and shrugged her shoulders before bumping into him.

“I suppose I learned from the best?”

He chuckled.

“Alright… no Inrokini then. Just you and me. I’d like that.”

“Besides...” She sighed dramatically, tiptoeing up to his ear to whisper her breath against his skin. “I’d rather quell my own curiosities with you than theirs.”

She kissed his cheek and leaned back as he blushed and tried to hide the goofy grin on his face to no avail.

“Then by all means, lead the way.”

She laughed at his newfound redness, and had found out years ago how to get his skin to change into that color. It was one of her favorite things to watch whenever he was around, and he had been gone for so long that it had been months since she’d seen it last.

Now that she was looking at him, his hair was longer now than she remembered and he had grown a bit taller since they first met. Granted, she was not the same as she was those five years ago either, but with humans the changes were more observable to the outside eye.

“I may need to study you a bit longer this time, Ezra, for fear there will be something on you that I grow unfamiliar with.”

“Well, I have that new scar on my back you haven’t seen yet?”

“Ooh! The one from the battle with the Grysk commander?”

“That’s the one!” He smiled, tightening his voice to sound tougher as he flexed his arms and jumped back from their walking path. “He didn’t know what hit him!”

Tharin rolled her eyes and smiled.

“Or you apparently? In any regard, I am glad to see you are healthy. Even with the war and the secret war as well…”

He winced and rubbed his hair.
“Yeah, they’ll kill me if they figure out you know about that.”

“Which is precisely why they will never find out.” She smirked. “It’s not the first time you and I have kept a deathly secret, now is it?”

He shrugged.

“Yeah, but maybe this time we can actually keep this one?”

They laughed and Ezra looked up at the grand Olbio tree, now easily the biggest land structure on this half of the planet.

Three tiny yellow lizards hopped off and fell on his face as the largest orange lizard he’d ever seen came crashing down on his chest. It knocked him flat on his back and not even the Force could save him.

Breathless, he groaned and patted the long fur of the Ysalamir and groaned away the new pain in his body.

“Nice to see you too Jorj…” He coughed.

“Aww...he’s missed you! His offspring seem to accept you as one of their own too, or else they wouldn’t have dropped to you. What a strong connection he must have made with you in your short time together.”

“Swell!” He replied winded, but with a smile as the lizards crawled all over his chest and cloak, his hand coming up to remove the one sprawled across his eyes before placing it gently on Jorj’s back.

“Ooh! I wonder if they will do the same to Thrawn? I should call him to Csaus for experimentation.”

“Only if I can watch Jorj body-slam him.”

She smiled and took his hand, helping him to a stand before allowing the three baby lizards to crawl up her body and back onto the trunk of the tree.

“Just look at how many there are!” Ezra awed, watching as two dozen sets of four blinking eyes stared down at him from the golden leaves above. It took both his arms to hold Jorj to his chest now, and even then he could feel his arms quivering from the weight as he coaxed the hefty Ysalamir back to the tree.

“Life thrives even in a new ecosystem,” Tharin said softly, her hand rubbing the tree as a thoughtful expression waited in her eyes. “The same could be said with us, of this war we find ourselves in.”

He hugged her tighter from behind and set his chin on top of her head.

“So what do you want to do once this is all over?”

Her hands reached up and wrapped around his arms as she leaned back into him and shrugged.

“I suppose my mother will want to hold a massive lifemate ritual, then you and I will need to plan out how we wish to live within the Ascendancy. My father has already expressed how badly he wants grandchildren…”

“You too huh?”
She laughed.

“Has he said so to you as well?”

“Before I left actually… and right after our war meeting too!”

She burst out laughing even harder now.

“Oh, my father is even worse than the other scientists, isn’t he?”

“Re-lentless!” Ezra stressed.

She chuckled and turned him around.

“Well, that’s okay. It’s normal for the Chiss to want to continue their bloodlines.”

“Humans too.” He smirked. "Though maybe with a bit more tact than the Chiss?"

She snorted and then settled into him before playing with the long strands of his blue-black hair that had fallen out of his hair tie.

“And what do you wish to do once this is all over, Ezra?”

“Me?” He laughed. “I guess I never really came up with a good answer. I’m conflicted.”

“Well, what were your thoughts?”

“I could train the Alani, maybe even turn their piloting duties into more of a Jedi school, though, I doubt the rest of the Ascendancy would go for that?”

“Mmm… Perhaps not. Though I'm sure they would welcome you as a teacher. What else?”

“Well, I wondered if I might ever travel back to my own galaxy to see how much everything’s changed.”

“That would be good for you I think.”

“Yeah?” He asked. “You’d be okay with me leaving the Ascendancy? Even after all the work you put in to get me here?”

“Only if I get to go with you.” She nudged. “Besides, can you think of all the ways I could study within your galaxy? Thrawn only tapped into a small portion of your customs and technology. Why… I could spend years researching so many different species and their individual cultures, inventions, and languages!” She let out a dreamy sigh. “My head might actually explode just thinking about it.”

“I never knew you were so excited about this?”

“Well, you know how Ticisi gets when I talk about wanting to expand my research. Though after you and I are coupled, he wouldn’t really be able to stop us, now would he?”

“Wait… are you just marrying me because I’m a free ticket to outer space?”

She kissed him once.

“Oh absolutely… there are no further redeeming qualities about you.”
He chuckled and kissed her again before she slammed both of her hands into his chest and took a quick inhale.

“Well come on then. We’ve got dinner to make.”

After eating nothing but military rations for the last year, Ezra practically melted at the mere memory of a home cooked meal.

“You have no idea how much I’ve missed cooking!”

“Well you know, you could cook for yourself?”

“And let everyone on Naporar know I can cook? Hard Pass!”

She laughed and nodded her head.

“I know, I know… but you’re going to help me, alright? We’re making an old classic!”

“The soup?” He smiled.

“The soup.” She grinned back.

“Well what are we doing standing around here then? You know I’m only marrying you for the soup recipe, right?”

“You know, Sevicsi, I think I may just be able to live with that?”

With a wink, she and Ezra walked up the hill and into the house as the door slid shut behind them. Five Chiss years, six in his time, and all of them spent with him and her together, even though most of it was spent a long distance away from one another. Still, nothing had changed between them. In fact they had only grown closer, and once this war was over, that bond was bound only to get stronger. Now all they had to do was stay alive to see it all come to life. Impossible odds, powers unknown, and yet Ezra had never felt more relaxed or calm than he did cooking soup with Tharin in the small house on Csaus. To protect all of this, he would fight off a hundred armies if it meant more small moments like these would come. He just had to make sure all of this survived, and if it was the last thing he did, he would see that promise through to the end.
After all these years, tracking down their lost friend might be the least of Ahsoka and Sabine's worries as they follow leads, track down clues, and cross paths with numerous unknown factors on their path to finally locating Ezra Bridger.

“I’ve been expecting you.”

“I know.”

“You know… the Galactic Civil War has been over for—” Sabine checked the non-existent watch on her gauntlet. “Oh, about a year now…”

“Trouble is still on the horizon,” Ahsoka said with a stern frown.

“So you said. Umm… don’t take this the wrong way, Ahsoka, but did the ten years you’ve been missing since Malachor make you extra cryptic or something? Where have you been all this time anyway? I was so surprised when I got your message, I almost couldn’t believe it.”

“Cryptic?” She chuckled. “I used to think the same of my masters— well, some of them. I can’t believe I ever got this old.”

“You’re not that old.”

“Once you hit forty, you’re officially the age you always hated as a kid.” She chuckled. “If only my masters could see me now.”

“So... why did you decide to come back now?”

“That’s kind of a long story, Sabine.”

“Alright, well that’s a slightly less-cryptic way to put that, but it still doesn't answer my question.”

“Ah yes, the frustrated girl with all the questions. I remember you tagging along to Fort Anaxes with Hera trying to get a peak at Fulcrum all those years ago. It seems in that regard you haven’t changed.”

Sabine smiled.

“That seems like a lifetime ago now.”
“Now you know how I feel.”

Sabine sighed and took a seat, stabbing her helmet to the back of the chair’s headrest with a tired sigh.

“Alright… fine. We’ll have plenty of time to talk about you on the trip, so for now, maybe you’d rather tell me about our mission status. I heard you had a new lead on Ezra’s location. I want to find him and bring him back home.”

“Yes, I promised him that I would find him back on Malachor. I have since found my own balance within the Force, and have spent years looking for his presence in it as well.” Ahsoka stared intently down at her staff and tightened her lips. “He went dark for a short while, then for only a few moments, he was perfectly at peace, but then nothing. He vanished entirely from the cosmic Force. I thought Ezra might have been killed or something worse than killed. He was merely gone. For almost eight months, I could sense nothing from him at all, but then… it was faint, but I found myself on Dagobah and from there I managed to get a sense of him, a flicker, and in that moment, I knew he was still alive and well.”

“I wonder why he disappeared? Why he never came back!?” Sabine shrugged and shook her head. “We searched all over for him for weeks. Hera, Rex, the Rebels... Hell, we even had connections to pirate cartels and smugglers looking for any sign of him or the Chimera, but nothing ever turned up. Ezra was just gone. Eventually the others had to go back to the Rebellion, but I chose to stay on Lothal to make sure his and Kanan’s sacrifices stuck. Still, I never gave up hope that one day Ezra might come back. I just didn’t think I’d have to find him and drag him back myself.”

“There is something odd blocking Ezra from me, and perhaps that is the reason why he hasn’t come home yet. You say you searched for him, but I believe you all just didn’t look far enough away.”

“What do you mean?”

“From what I was able to gather on Dagobah, Ezra was sent into the Unknown Regions, far passed even the borders we actually know how to travel. I think that is why we both lost track of him. You, because of limitations in resources, and me because of those unknown factors which have blocked my senses.”

“But now they’re back, you say?”

“It’s complicated to explain. You see, Ezra is still clouded from the Force, and sometimes he disappears for months on end. It has been quite a long while since I’ve been able to get a clear reading on him.” Ahsoka frowned and focused her eyes off to the horizon line with deep contemplation. “I also sense a great darkness in that region which is most likely the cause of the interference with our connection, and because of that, I don’t think he was able to sense me at all in return.”

“But we’re still going to go into the Unknown Regions to get him, right?”

“No… The hyperlanes are few and not easy to travel, but system jumps are possible with a lot of time, patience, and luck. To do that though we need to know more than just where in the Unknown Regions we’re going... we need safe routes and data on our side, which is knowledge we currently do not have.”

Sabine lifted her hands and let them slap impatiently against the armor plating of her own arms.
“Then what are we going to do?”

Ahsoka smirked, her brash impatience reminded her a lot of herself at Sabine’s age.

“We’re going to track down a lead that could be of some help to us for getting those exact star charts.”

“A lead? After all these years?” Sabine made a face. “This better be one Hell of a lead!”

“Our target is said to be the one person who saw Ezra last before the incident over Lothal, and is our best bet at finding him. As luck would have it, they are also said to know their way around the Unknown Regions.”

“Who? Is it one of the stormtroopers who crashed down on Lothal or were taken by purrgil to the nearby systems? We’ve already talked with all of them and I interrogated that Pellaeon guy personally after he signed over on those peace treaties on Chandrila. Any other Imperial who ever worked on the Chimera and was interviewed after the war has gone on record and we never found out a thing.”

“No, but I hear this is someone very highly ranked. He is some sort of newly resurfaced military leader from the days before the Battle of Yavin. His name is Grand Admiral Thrawn.”

Sabine froze.

“Wh-what did you just say?” She shook her head. “That’s impossible. Ezra saw to Thrawn’s defeat personally. There’s no way he could still be alive after all this time. The Empire has even said as much.”

“So your team has met with this Admiral personally then?”

“Ha!” She snapped quickly. “You could say that?”

“Well, if Ezra is still alive, then why is it so hard to believe this Thrawn could be as well?”

Sabine chewed on those words for a few moments before nodding her head.

“Alright. So what does your intel tell you about Thrawn’s return?”

“He’s been spotted out near Bastion. With the Empire disbanded due to the Galactic Concordance, there have been rumors that a small faction of Imperial officers have refused to completely surrender their power and are holed up there. Ever since these rumors of Thrawn’s return, the base seems to be rallying more and more supporters. They believe Thrawn alone is enough that his presence could potentially reverse the victors between the Empire and the New Republic.”

“Tactically speaking, Thrawn was a genius.” She let out a breath. “He was quick, cunning, and ruthless, and unlike some of the other generals and admirals back then, he knew how to organize his assets and keep the most of his people alive without casualties. It was Ezra who managed to finally surprise him.” She laughed once. “He surprised all of us really. I doubt anyone could have seen what he was planning from start to finish, maybe not even Ezra himself. But now… I mean, if Thrawn really is back… then that brings up the question, where is Ezra?”

“That’s what we’re going to find out.” Ahsoka punched in coordinates and then turned to Sabine. “If you would like to call Hera, your family, or any of the others before the mission begins, I would suggest you do it now. The comms aren’t going to work the further we go out.”
“No…” She shook her head. “My family has enough to deal with and I don’t want to get Hera’s hopes up. As for everyone else—” She shook her head. “It’ll be easier to explain things to them after I bring Ezra back, not before. I’m with you, Ahsoka. Whatever it takes.”

She smiled and shot her a side glance.

“It could be dangerous.”

Sabine smirked.

“A Mandalorian and a gray-Jedi are about to face the Empire’s leftovers, take on the literal ghost of Thrawn, and bring Ezra Bridger, the single most danger-prone Jedi in the entire kriffing universe, back from the deepest parts of the Unknown Regions… I think the danger is pretty much confirmed at this point.”

They laughed.

“It could take quite a long time to find him. You’re sure you’re okay with that?”

“I’m in this for the long haul. The galaxy won’t miss me. What about you?”

“It’s where I am meant to go,” she said with a nod. “I just wanted to give you a final chance to back out.”

Sabine glared at her.

“What are you hiding? I’ve known enough people who planned on becoming sacrifices for a greater purpose to know that you’re being more than just cryptic now. So spill it.”

“The journey will be long and perilous. I’ve seen visions of the future, but not even I can predict what will happen once we get started. And with the war on Mandalore coming to an end, I wasn’t sure if you would be needed there or even back on Lothal?”

“I have Ketsu keeping an eye on Lothal. She owes me. Plus my family can handle Mandalore on their own. They understand that Ezra is just as much my family as they are, and would want me to keep my promises to him.” She leaned forward and stared deeply into Ahsoka’s eye, the firm resolve in her own stare speaking volumes her words could never truly convey. “I don’t care how long it takes, Ahsoka. I can’t come back without him. I won’t.”

“Very well. Then shall we get started?”

Smirking now, Sabine leaned back satisfied and looked out the viewport at her last glimpse of the planet Lothal.

“Punch it.”

Ahsoka, returning the gesture, watched as the blue skies turned into stars and then those to swirling vortexes as the T-6 shuttle took off to destinations unknown, their mission to find Ezra Bridger officially underway.

By the time they made it to Bastion, both women were a little shocked to see just how large the
Imperial presence still was on the planet’s surface. Stormtroopers marched the streets, propaganda posters old and new were hung on every wall, and even old commercial jingles blasted through the city as the people commuted to and from in droves.

Most of the planet had blackened soil with dark mountain ranges and rocky terrain built around the shining metal additions to the cityscape. It was large, thriving, and packed, but judging the few major military bases Sabine had seen affiliated with the Empire in her days, this land was a couple million credits shy of their usual flashy decorum.

“Funny place to put an Imperial capital...” Sabine muttered under her breath. “I mean, I know this planet was once a sector capital, so they're probably used to having a bureaucracy underfoot, but this place is still a long way from the glittering towers of Coruscant.”

“Stay focused.” Ahsoka warned. “Just because it’s different doesn’t make the dangers any less true.”

Sabine tightened the hood on her cloak and nodded.

“So where to first?”

“Well, if you were the Grand Admiral returned from the dead, where do you think you would be?”

Sabine looked up at the large tower that could be seen off in the distance. TIE Fighters and a single Delta-class shuttle flew in and out of the small ports lined through the center, but anyone with even a glimmer of knowledge about the Empire could recognize the large observation area at the very top. That was where all the most important military leaders and busybodies would be stashed.

With a flick upward of her chin, she grinned.

“When in doubt, keep looking up?”

*This was going to be way too easy.*

“Way to bring gender into this!” the clearly feminine voice said with a snark scoff, lifting her blasters and stepping inside with him.

He looked her over, his shock turning to confusion as he took quick notice of the lightsaber held to her waist and gasped.

“A Mandalorian Jedi!?"

His trembling fingers reached for his own blaster but by then Sabine let out another well placed shot that sent the weapon snapping back out of his hand and over to the other side of the room.

“Wrong again...” she said, this time less patiently as she ignited the blade, bringing its green glow
to a halt only inches from his throat.

“Wh-what do you want from me? If th-this is about those payments I owe the Red Sun, I—”

“Save it! I’m not here for you. I just want answers. Now, you can either tell me what I want to know, or I can have my friend here do it for you. You’ll find she’s quite persuasive...”

“Y-your friend?”

A figure in white appeared in the doorway, a Togruta woman with not one, but two lightsabers at her hips and a long staff held firmly in one hand.

This one had to have been some sort of a Jedi, just like Luke Skywalker! You think there aren’t any Jedi left in the galaxy and then a few years later there are too many to keep count of. Great... just his luck...

“You may want to hurry...” The Togruta smiled. “I’m not sure how much longer I can hold my partner back.”

The lightsaber inched closer as he sunk deeper into his chair to get away from the scalding green heat.

“Alright! Alright! I’ll talk! I’ll tell you anything, just call off the Mando!”

The saber shut down and a moment later, the captain felt himself lifted from his chair as the Mandalorian held him upright by his tunic, her fists clenched against the heart of his uniform. He could see his own scared reflection in her Y-shaped visor, and gulped.

“Where is Grand Admiral Thrawn?!?”

“H-h-he’s up the hall and to the left. Third corridor passed the war room, you can’t miss it! He and Moff Disra should just have a meeting coming up in ten minutes. If you hurry, you might just beat him there!”

“Thank you,” the woman replied pleasantly as she released her grip and he fell back into his seat. “Was that so hard?”

“Rare you find such a hardcore Imperial with such manners,” the Togruta teased.

“Which just makes what I’m about to do all the more difficult...”

The Mandalorian lifted her blaster.

“No wait! No! Please!”

A stun ring shot out from her gun and the captain found himself on the floor a moment later.

“They always have to put up such a fight...”

“Well come on. We have our target. No doubt the patrols will be by any moment to see our mess.”

“Right. Let’s move.”

And with that, the two took off down the hall and up to Thrawn’s location. This was it! After all these years, Sabine might actually do what Ezra was counting on her to do... save him from wherever he’d been trapped out in the Unknown Regions. Even if that meant going through a
hundred Imperial bases, and even if it meant having to look at those glowing red Chiss eyes again, she wouldn’t hesitate to break down any obstacle that stood in her way. Not now, not when they were so close to answers.

As they rounded the last hallway, Ahsoka wasted no time in opening the door.

There he sat, the same man with that blue skin and that slicked back blue-black hair. He didn’t move from his chair, though he motioned the three technicians at their monitoring computers to stand down as Sabine and Ahsoka made their way around the table.

“My greetings to you,” he said, his voice just as calm and icy as Sabine remembered. “You two have traveled quite a long way to find me, haven’t you?” He hummed as he observed the two with those eyes of his before placing his hands back on the arms of his chair. “Such unique armor patterns for a Mandalorian. I deduce that you must be Sabine Wren. I studied you a great deal during my time over the Lothal Sector.”

“Something isn’t right here,” Ahsoka said, her voice confident despite the statement coming off as confused.

“The mark of Fulcrum, I imagine?” He asked with a point to his own forehead. “Those markings of yours give you away more than any mask ever could. I am honored to be in your presence after all these years, madam. Yours was truly a popular standing during the civil war.”

“If you’re so smart, then I bet you already know why we’re here?” Sabine accused acidly, her blasters not lowering in the slightest as she spoke.

“Sir…”

“At ease Lieutenant,” Thrawn motioned in that bored way he often did. “These two are our guest after all. They have traveled far to ask their questions. It is only polite we attempt to answer those to the best of our abilities.”

“But sir.”

“You three should leave!” Sabine pointed. “Now!”

They stood, arms held high to avoid the bolts from her blaster, and left with only a final confident nod from their Grand Admiral.

“It is alright,” he said. “Go and alert Moff Disra that our meeting will be somewhat delayed until my guests are dealt with.”

“Enough games!” Sabine spat, the door sealing shut on her words. “Where is Ezra?”

“Ah, Ezra Bridger… the single soul of my untimely departure from the Empire. I have waited many years to return after what he did to the Chimera.”

“If I were you—” She jabbed her blaster closer. “I’d spend less time reminiscing and more time telling me where to find my friend.”

“I am afraid Ezra Bridger, alongside the rest of the Chimera crew did not survive the crash. Their remains were lost to time, and to space.”

Sabine didn’t budge.
“Oh yeah? Then how are you so lucky to have come out of it without a scratch?”

“Because he isn’t Thrawn!” Ahsoka blurted.

“What!”

For a moment, the Chiss’ unnaturally stoic resolve cracked and he tightened his lips in blatant discomfort.

“I beg your pardon?” He asked.

“Sabine, this isn’t Thrawn. It’s just a hoax. The man was hired by Moff Vilim Disra to pretend to be Thrawn in order to gain movement in what little remnants remained of loyal Imperials.

“How could you possibly know that?” Thrawn asked in shock, his voice no longer that of the inquisitive Grand Admiral, but of somebody who both sounded and acted entirely different. Sabine almost had to check herself to make sure she didn’t flinch backwards at the sudden change in character.

“What in the—”

“Are you some sort of mind reader?” The not-Thrawn-like man asked again.

“Of a sort,” Ahsoka replied. “So, you’re an actor then?”

“An actor?” Sabine growled. “What do you mean you’re an actor!”?

“Con-artist to be more precise. The name’s Flim. Disra hired me to play Thrawn, or well… he did until you two busted in here and blew the whole scene. The old man’s not going to be happy about that. Do you know how much research went into this costume and personality?”

“So the Thrawn from all of the rumors— all this time— it's just been you?”

“That’s right. No one knows what happened to the real Grand Admiral or that Bridger kid. It’s been close to six years now, so if I had to guess, I’m betting they’re all dead on a crashed ship somewhere out in the Unknown Regions. I've studied Thrawn's tactics and history down to the last detail in order to play this roll, I've picked up a few things here and there about how he went about deducing things in his head. Don't get me wrong, I'm no tactical genius, but I can fake it with the best of them alright.

Sabine’s blaster was now pressing into the man’s skull.

“Enough! You'd better tell us everything you know or so help me—”

“Easy, easy… I don’t have a hand in this war. I’m just getting paid to pretend like I do.”

“So you know they made it out into the Unknown Regions?” Ahsoka continued.

“What else!?” Sabine growled.

“Oh yeah, I know all about Thrawn's great defeat. Some of the higher ups used star charts and detailed maps that Thrawn left behind in order to go out and search for them. They found scattered ship debris and evidence of a crash along one of the paths before they lost the trails near some sort of black hole. A couple of scouts went in to find them, but never came back out. After two attempts, they decided it was too dangerous for a third and effectively marked the Chiss as MIA, probably deceased.”
“Can you get us access to these maps?” Ahsoka asked.

“Sure? Fine! Whatever?” He shrugged. “Not like I can hold you back from taking a death-trip out into uncharted space. Give me a second.” He stood and made a copy of the maps before handing the cartridge over to Ahsoka. “There. Now, will that be all?”

“You know we’re not about to let you continue playing up this charade as Thrawn,” Sabine started slowly.

“Actually…” Ahsoka chimed in, holding up the recording of Flim’s voice. “I think whatever operation you have here is over. It’s best you get a head start before the New Republic comes crashing down on this place.”

He rubbed his neck and let out a huff.

“Then I suppose I should be grateful for the warning?”

“I suppose you should?” Sabine replied with an edge to her tone, her blasters motioning him towards the door. “You should probably get out of here before your boss shows up.”

He huffed, but nodded and walked out, arms held submissively behind his head until he was out the other side and gone completely.

“Well this was a big waste of time…” Sabine grumbled. “But at least we know Thrawn isn’t coming back to help resurrect the Empire.”

“We did gain access to an Unknown Regions maps that will be able to guide us closer to Ezra’s location safely—”

“Until we hit that deadly black hole or whatever that Flim was talking about.”

“The Force works in mysterious ways. When one door closes, it’s best if you just leap through the nearest one that opens up to you.”

“That some sort of Jedi wisdom?” Sabine asked, a brow raised now beneath her helmet, though the tone was not lost on Ahsoka’s ears.

“More like advice from personal experience.” She motioned to the window and looked down at the chaos forming below the grounds. “At any rate, we should probably leave Bastion before things get any more chaotic.”

“Fine.” Sabine sighed. “It’s not Ezra, but at least it’s a start. Let’s get going.”

Later...

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!
“That’s strange.”

“What’s up?”

Ahsoka pressed for a few buttons and came back with her answer.

“We’re receiving some kind of modified distress beacon?”

“This far out?” Sabine wondered, the look on her face now matching that of Ahsoka’s. “Should we check it out?”

She nodded.

“Someone could be in trouble, and it’s possible we are the only assistance in this area.”

“You said the Force works in mysterious ways—” Sabine shrugged. “Maybe this is one of those times?”

“Let’s hope so,” she said, steering their ship towards the vessel, and turning back to the dashboard to return their frequency once the small, odd ship was in sight. “Attention cruiser. We have discovered your distress signal and are here to help. Please respond.”

There was a muffled voice laced beneath the static, as Ahsoka and Sabine shared a glance.

“Please repeat, cruiser. It appears your comm frequencies are damaged.”

The same static.

“Sabine, are you getting anything?”

“Nothing on my end,” she replied, but sensor sweeps are picking up a blockage in the aft engine. It’s probably messing with their internal systems and blocking the flow of fuel. I can fix it externally, but whoever they are will need to do a system reboot if we want the flush to stick.”

“Do you copy that, cruiser?”

“———Copy.”

“Huh? Well, there you go?” Sabine stood and reached for her helmet. Be back in flash. This won’t take too long.”

“Be cautious!” Ahsoka warned. “I don’t recognize this model of starship, and we are out in the Unknown Regions.”

“I’ll be careful, don’t worry.”

A few moments later, the sound of Sabine’s jetpack left the shuttle and Ahsoka watched as she traveled over to the strange ship and started breaking into the engine capsules to remove the blockage. She was right, the deed only took a short while, and as soon as it was done, the lights on the vessel all powered back on as the reboot sequence operated in a successful loop.

The hatch doors opened then and a white light poured out through the hole.

“It looks like they want us to come aboard?”

“Hmm…”
“I’d like to run one diagnostic from the inside just to be safe. I’m going to go in and check out the damage. I’ll let you know if things get dicey.”

“Be careful Sabine. I’ll set our gravity and dock as soon as I can.”

“Roger that.”

Sabine shot over to the door and ducked inside, her hands steady but ready for a quick draw if need be. The ceilings here were short, not so much that she needed to duck, but enough to prevent her from jumping without cracking her head on the upper panels.

Whoever was in here must be a species that was pretty short? She deduced.

“Hello?”

“In here!” a gravelly voice called from down the hall.

Sabine debated it for a split second, but continued walking, ready to witness just about anything at this point.

“Looks like your aft engine was blocked with space debris. I’ve removed the wreckage and re-calibrated it, but I’d like to run a final check if that’s alright with you guys.”

“We thank you for the assistance,” another equally hoarse voice added.

“We will assist with anything you need.”

That tone. She… she was starting to get the sense that she knew it from somewhere. It was just on the tip of her tongue too. Sabine eventually made it to the main bridge and the shortened doors slid open automatically as the three seats near the front spun around to greet her face to face.

She froze for a moment when she saw them, and they when they saw her.

“You are Mandalorian!” the head alien pointed. “Your people are said to be great warriors.”

She only stared. All of them... All three of them were a breed of alien that Sabine never thought she’d see again. It had been years since her last run in with the species and those weren’t her best memories to begin with. They were identical to him though, right down to the short stature, the gray skin, and those creepy pale eyes.

“And you’re Noghri?” she asked, trying hard not to give away how breathless she wanted to sound.

“You are familiar with our people?” The head Noghri asked, a bit of reverence in his grainy voice now.

Sabine removed her helmet and nodded to them.

“A little. Your world is all the way on the other side of the galaxy. Near the Kessel Sector, right?”

“You are very knowledgeable!” The leader smiled. “You speak of our homeworld, Honoghr. Permit me, but how is it you have learned of such?”

“I studied your culture some back at the Imperial Academy, but I recognize you because I have met one of your kind before. Your people had an alliance with the Empire, right?”

“We had,” he nodded, his tone shifting suddenly to a snarl. “But no longer!”
“We are unpleased by the Empire!” The Noghri to the left growled, revealing teeth that were far thinner and sharper than that of the other two.

“Are you with the Empire, Mandalorian?” Asked the other who appeared to be female.

“No!” She said quickly, shaking her head. “Pretty much the opposite actually. Not that I can’t take a guess, but what did they do to you guys to have you break your alliance?”

“Once we were loyal assassins to the Lord Vader. Transferred when the Chiss Grand Admiral, Mitth’raw’nuruodo revealed that the ecological stability the Empire brought to our homeland was deliberately sabotaging us into poisoned stability.”

“The Empire claimed it would help revive our dying world from the strange smelling rains that ravaged our lands.”

“We thought when the land again started to produce food, the Empire’s medicines were truly succeeding, but we were wrong!” The pointy-toothed one hissed. “They only healed what cosmetic damages remained and then used their own poison to ensure Honoghr remained sickened so that we may also remain indebted to the services of the Empire.”

“You mean the Empire was keeping your planet sick after the Battle of Honoghr, even as far back as the Clone Wars?”

Sabine and the three Noghri turned as Ahsoka appeared in the doorway with her question.

“Oh, Ahsoka! Glad you could join us.”

“You appear even more knowledgeable?” The leader spoke up, this time some accusatory hiss in his throat when he met eyes with Ahsoka.

The other two seemed to shift uncomfortably when they saw her lightsabers and Sabine was only grateful that she’d left Ezra’s back on the ship now.

“What do you know of our struggle, Togruta?”

“I was told stories of the battle by an old friend, a Jedi Master by the name of Aayla Secura. She was one of the Jedi on the planet during the battle which followed after the crash.”

“Crash?” Sabine repeated.

“They had never taught her much about any crashes back at the Academy, just the battle between the Jedi and the Noghri. Leave it to the Empire to leave out major details of a historic battle.

“A Separatists science vessel was detained on route to poison Naboo with a toxic defoliant created by Nuvo Vindi sometime before his arrest a few months prior. It seems someone in contact with him got their hands on the bio-weapon and made plans to return to Naboo for revenge. The Galactic Republic found out about the shipment in time to intercept, but battle was intense and both ships wound up crashing down to Honoghr’s surface. The resulting crash, coupled with the release of the toxin into the soil, crippled the planet’s ecosystem and caused a misunderstanding between the surviving crew and the locals.”

“Youships killed our people!” one of the Noghri warriors snarled. “The droids and their weapons attacked us!”

Ahsoka was unswayed by the sudden outburst, though a look of great understanding and empathy
was in her eyes now. It was a shame what the war had done to these poor creatures, and what the war had done to her as well.

“The Noghri were never supposed to have been caught in the middle like they were.” Ahsoka sighed. “But they were, and lives were lost on all sides because of it. The Noghri, the Republic, and even the Separatists. No one makes it through war unscathed.”

“Our people became slaves to the Empire for twenty-five long years! Two generations to the Noghri people!”

“When Mitt’raw’nuruodo vanished, we once again were slaves to the Lord Vader until his defeat by Son of Vader.”

Ahsoka’s eye twitched, but otherwise she kept a straight face. She had learned much about the defeat of her former Master, and by his son no less. His and Padmé’s son. She knew about all of this, both from radio chatter and from the visions she’d sensed on Dagobah. If only she’d been able to meet Luke in person, or Leia even, who had been raised by Bail Organa. Anakin and Padmé’s daughter. Bail... Leia... Luke... The pain those few facts brought into her was unparalleled with grief and regrets. Perhaps there would be an opportunity to deal with that later on, but for now, finding Ezra was their top priority.

“I understand your pain, and I am sorry for your losses. The war has taken much from us all and there is no amount of healing that could ever truly bring everything back.”

The three growled and the tension in the room was starting to get a little too high for comfort. Sabine had to do something. She grew up surrounded by Mandalorians, so if she knew anything at all, it was how quickly tension could escalate into violence.

“Hey, so I think we all got off on the wrong foot.” Sabine cleared her throat. “I realized I never introduced myself. My name is Sabine Wren and this is Ahsoka Tano. We’re out here looking for our friend. If it’s alright with you, can I ask who you are, and what you all are doing this far out in space?”

The head Noghri softened at Sabine’s voice and gave over his full attention to her.

“These are Cakhmaim and Meewalh, and I am Khabarakh of clan Khim’bar,” he greeted, his hand outstretched now for Sabine’s own.

She gave Ahsoka a mixed look, but offered up her hand to the Noghri who pressed it to his nose and sniffed.

“You smell trustworthy, Mandalorian. You say you came into contact with one of our own. Do you know of their name?”

Sabine furrowed her brows.

“His name was Rukh.”

The other Noghri started to whisper.

“Assassin to Grand Admiral Thrawn!” Khabarakh said. “He has been out of contact with us for many years. We surmise he did not survive on the day we lost the Grand Admiral.”

Sabine frowned.
“I’m afraid he did not. He was an admirable warrior though, and fought to the very end.”

Was it okay to say that as words of comfort when it was her own teammate who pinned him to the shield generators and fried him alive? Sabine didn’t want to face off against one Noghri much less three of them, so she thought it would probably be best if she left those little details out for now. Khabarakh said she smelled trustworthy, and she didn’t want to prove him wrong so soon.

“I see…”

“So why were you transmitting a broadcast for Thrawn?” Ahsoka asked. “Have you heard rumors of his survival?”

The Noghri looked to one another with snorting grunts.

“We were not submitting a broadcast!” Khabarakh growled. “We were submitting a warrant.”

“A warrant?”

“Yes. Once we learned that the Grand Admiral still lives, we decided to hold him responsible for the failure of his agreement with us. Rukh was sent to aid the Grand Admiral in his missions in exchange for the restoration of our planet. Rukh is gone, Thrawn has vanished, and our world has only grown weaker in his absence.”

“If the Grand Admiral lives and has ignored his end of our bargain and lost one of our warrior’s lives as well, then he must pay for his deception.”

“So you want revenge?” Sabine smirked.

“Wrong, Sabine of Wren. We wish only for justice.”

“As do we,” Ahsoka told. “Thrawn is the one who was last seen with our friend, Ezra Bridger. We’re trying to find him.”

“And where Ezra is,” Sabine inched. “There’s a good chance we’ll be able to find Thrawn… the real Thrawn, not the fake one from those rumors.”

“So the news of Thrawn’s return was untrue?”

“Well the most recent ones, but don’t worry, we took care of those rumors personally. However, it did get us a lead which brought us out into these Unknown Regions.”

“That is similar to why we are here. The Grand Admiral lives somewhere in this area. My crew and I were sent here to locate and convict him. We received word he had made an appearance elsewhere and were in the process of changing course when our vessel died approximately four rotations ago. We were unprepared for the malfunction and have been working to make repairs until you, Sabine of Wren, appeared and assisted us.”

“If these rumors were false,” Cakhmaim added. “Then we must resume our original course to the Grand Admiral’s home planet.”

“If he still lives.”

“Ezra is still alive!” Sabine nodded. “So I’m getting closer to betting that Thrawn probably is too?”

“Is this Bridge of Ezra related that closely to the disappearance of Thrawn?”
Sabine swallowed.

“Well… yes… in a way. Thrawn was attacking his homeworld, so Ezra and all of his friends and allies teamed together to stop the Empire and free his planet, and they succeeded. Sorry. I suppose in a way, it is his fault Thrawn’s been gone for so long.”

“And yet neither have returned in all these years but you still believe they are out there?”

“Could they perhaps be trapped?” Meewalh wondered. “Possibly marooned or injured?”

“That could pose different results for our search of Thrawn,” Cakhmaim considered.

“Sabine of Wren, as thanks to you for repairing our ship, we wish to join you in your mission to find the Grand Admiral and the Bridge of Ezra. Our paths crossing are most opportune due to the sharing of our goals.”

“It’s no problem.” Sabine waved. “I’m just happy to help.”

“We must insist on returning the debt to you, for that is the way of our people!” Khabarakh pressed.

“What do you think?” Sabine whispered over to Ahsoka. “I’ve seen the combat and tracking abilities of the Noghri people firsthand. I think having their help would be a good thing.”

Ahsoka thought to herself for only a moment, but nodded silently and allowed Sabine to seal the deal with the Noghri on her own terms, considering she was the one who managed to earn their favor and trust in the first place.

“Alright, Khabarakh, you’ve got a deal. Let’s shake on it.”

The Noghri wondered what that meant but took her hand as she lifted it up and down with one satisfied motion.

Ahsoka made another face as a twitch in the Force sent a glimmer of worry through her mind. There was something a little too easy about their sudden acceptance in all of this. They didn’t like Jedi because of the war, they didn’t like Thrawn because he left them defenseless, but what did that mean for the person responsible for taking Thrawn out of the picture? Did they shift some of the blame to Ezra or did they truly mean to fulfill their favor to Sabine for fixing their ship?

Only time would tell for sure, she supposed, and Sabine was right... the Noghri’s abilities were legendary. Their help would cut their search time for Ezra in half. Even if that meant approaching a conflict with these new allies sooner, it was better that they increase their numbers for the inevitable fight that was to come from all the other dangers Ahsoka could sense lurking out in these Unknown Regions.
“Sabine, you run your diagnostic and get the Noghri’s ship locked onto our boarding tunnel. I’m going to return to the ship and try to meditate on the appropriate path we’ll use to travel to Ezra and Thrawn. Khabarak, would it be possible to cross-reference our maps with your own?”

“Yes, that will be acceptable. Take this data and do what you can. Sabine of Wren, we will assist you in any way we can with further repairs.”

“Thanks guys. Ahsoka, I’ll see you back on the ship.”

With a nod she turned and made her path back to the T-6, a bad feeling still weighing heavily on her mind. Hopefully it would still allow her to concentrate on the focus it would take to route out safe passage on these two star maps. Though, the deeper they stumbled into this area of space, the stronger her headache and chills seemed to get.

“Welcome home my daughter…”

Ahsoka gasped and held her face as she toppled over into the side wall, the woman’s voice feeling like a breath of cold air teased against every one of her bones.

“Mother…” she sighed, the flashes of the speaker circling her thoughts like a hurtling asteroid.

Then suddenly her mind was clear again. The chill was gone, the pressure squeezing her mind dissipated, as she took in a breath and motioned herself back to a stand. Her training to block out the voices had done their duty, but it did nothing to ease her sudden shock.
This was just one of the many, *many* things Morai had warned her about back in the Sith Temple on Malachor. She trained herself to keep her mind from becoming susceptible to the influence of the lost Mother, but what of Ezra? Could he have been corrupted? Ahsoka had given herself many years of training and meditation to make it through these regions, but Ezra… he would have been going in blind, totally vulnerable to all the darkness that existed out in this region.

It was more than just the voices, more than the visions, the strain, and the new exhaustion of the Force. It was as though a being here was actively attempting to drain her power. When they found Ezra again, she wondered sometimes just what would be left of him.

“Alright Ahsoka!” Sabine interrupted. “We’re all ready to go on the Noghri ship. Have you found our route?”

Her eyes opened and looked down to the maps on the screen in front of her.

It had been a half hour, gone by in what felt like only a few moments, but as she stared at the maps, a single path stood out to her among all the rest. That was it… their direct line to finding Ezra.

“Sending coordinates now,” she replied, surprised at just how winded she sounded. Luckily, Sabine didn’t seem to notice, or if she did, she didn’t say anything. “We’ll be safe so long as we avoid the black hole and other debris in the way. I can navigate us through safely, but it will take some time.”

“Well, we’ve got plenty of that lying around!” Sabine replied, her voice sounding as if the rest of her was smiling. “Don’t overexert yourself. We’re closer than we’ve ever been before.”

“More than you know…”

“Sorry, what? I didn’t catch that.”

“Oh nothing. You and the Noghri join on the bridge and we can get started. It’s going to be a long way to where we’re going.”

“Copy that. We’re on our way.”

Ahsoka nodded and steadied herself in the Force. A long path, avoiding the Mother, Abelothis, the dark powers of the Unknown Regions, and also the enemy species of aliens who resided out here—she needed all of her focus to get them through this own, but luckily that was what all her training had lead up to. This was what she was meant to do, and she’s known it now for many years. Now all that was left was to get it done, once and for all.
Loss

Chapter Summary

As the Yuuzhan Vong War progresses, all starts to seem hopeless unless a miracle shows its face, and soon. Months of fighting has led to many irreplaceable losses, but the spark has not gone out for the band of warriors, both Chiss and human alike. If something doesn't change soon though, there may not be much more loss that the Chiss Ascendancy will be able to handle, and not a lot of hope that can be redeemed.

Chapter Notes

Posted on: January 5, 2019

Three Months Ago:

“What is that?”

“The stars are vanishing, Ch’irci!”

"Right... Uh... Well you know how sometimes you can't see the stars at night because the clouds are in front of them? Well, this is a lot like that."

"That is because those are clouds and we are on a planet which experiences weather," said one of the girls with an unamused glare. "This is the vast reaches of space, Ch’irci, there are no clouds. Those are merely a great quantity of ships."

He made a face and motioned them through the next door. “Look, it’s going to be okay girls. Come on, we’re going down to Schesa and we can talk all about astronomical weather and whether or not clouds exists in the void of space back at the base, so come on.”

“But we were sent to assist the Defense Fleet?”

“New Orders. Eli wants me to take all of you back to ground, stat.”

“We’re being pushed back too far, aren’t we, Ch’irci?”

Ezra stopped and looked down, the small voice coming from one of the younger girls. Her name was Elme and she was seven years old with big, red worried eyes and short blue-black hair that was longer in the front than in the back. He had trained with all of them for all these years and they all looked up to him, both figuratively and literally, even his oldest students such as Lorin, Delfar, and Veluch were still only around fourteen years old. There was fear just barely visible in each of those curious stares as the girls tried to put on the brave faces they were trained to wear, but all of them no matter the age seemed to let a small portion of that emotions slip through. Nothing can really prepare you for three months of non-stop war, losing hundreds of your people in battle, and forcing
a systematic retreat, and all of them knew it meant something bad was coming.

Ezra sighed.

“I won’t lie to you, girls. You’re all highly trained soldiers and I won’t keep insulting you by sugar coating it.”

Not one of them mentioned the meaning behind his odd expression, proving just how serious the group really was. He swallowed and rubbed his face before pointing outside.

“Admiral Ar’alani had her defenses set over Cam’co, and General Brast’alshi’barku is up near Bogo Rai. Thrawn is holding the center lines from Thearterra to Avidich, and Oyokal is under heavy fire but is being held back by General Prard’ras’kleoni. The other Alani are being called back to the main worlds, including all of you and me. Captain Eli will remain out here near Kinoss, so that makes for a pretty strong defense, but it’s true... we’re being shoved back and we’re getting shoved hard. In a few more days the Yuuzhan Vong will have taken each world in Chiss space leading up to the Path of Houses. Our only hope now is to return to defend it and make sure none break through any farther.”

“Because if they do—” Arjoni started.

“It will be the end of everything as we know it.” Lorin finished.

“I am worried, Ch’irci.” Elme frowned.

“I know,” he said calmly, kneeling to her side before placing his hand on her shoulder and looking up again to meet eyes with all the girls. “And you know what? It’s okay to be worried. We’re all worried. But, just because we’re outnumbered and scared, it doesn’t mean we can stop fighting.”

“Are the nightmares we see coming true, Ch’irci?”

“Ch’irci, what should we do?”

“Do you think we can really win this?”

They grew quiet and he stood tall again, unsure of how exactly he should answer. Sure they were soldiers and sure they were children, but all of that aside, he just wasn’t sure himself. He’d seen the visions as they all had. This war was going to get a lot worse before it got better.

“Whether we win or lose...” he said slowly. “Without hope we have nothing.”

He felt his mother’s words resonate within him as they were spoken aloud.

Lorin nodded.

“Ch’irci is right. We are fighting for more than just our lives. We fight for everyone of our people, and those even farther away.”

“Remember what Ch’irci taught us,” Veluch added. “Do or do not, there is no try. We will fight, and we may fail, but we shall ensure our sacrifices truly mean something to this battle.”

Slowly but surely, the girls started to look more confident as the five of them piled into the shuttle.

“I taught you that?” Ezra grinned, blushing a little at the sight of them all so strong and mature given everything going on around them.
The girls smiled back at him.

“You are a good teacher, Ch’irci!” Elme said, showing a few of her missing baby teeth as she did.

“And despite your oddities—” Lorin nudged. “We have learned much from you in these past few months.”

“Perhaps when this war is over, you will come by to teach us more often?”

“We’ll have plenty of time for lessons once we’re back to Schesa.” He grinned and took up the helm. “Well, come on. Let’s get going. It’s not safe here.”

“Who said you get to fly?” Lorin pouted.

“Uh... seniority?” He chuckled. “Don’t worry, you’ll all be flying circles around me soon enough. For now, I need you to watch my back while we travel, deal?”

“Deal, but why will we be flying in circles?”

“Right?” Delfar puzzled. “That doesn’t seem to make tactical sense.”

Ah, there was that confused Chiss spark of misunderstanding. It made him smile a little until their shuttle was out of the hangar and gliding back down to Schesa, the lack of stars in the void of space reminding him fervently how serious this war was about to get now that the Yuuzhan Vong were this close and yet still so far. In a few weeks perhaps, the entirety of the stars would be gone, but for now, the sickly splotches of abnormal black nothingness was all the proof that they needed to see that they were doing poorly in the war.

It was why they were retracting the ozly-esehembo from the front lines. It was why Ezra was being called to defend the grounds of the farthest planet on the Path of Houses. The Chiss were outnumbered... and this fight was going to get a lot harder. All they could do now was fall back, ready their counter-measures, and continue to keep up their hopes that they would all still make it through to see the next morning.

Now:

“How’s it looking out there, Ez?”

“Well, Prak and the rest of my squadron just got mowed down, I lost two of my girls up here in the air, and I’ve got three Grysk on my tail I can't shake! So yeah… in short?” Ezra grunted. “Not very good.”

“I read you kid!” Eli called. “Don’t worry, we’re sending in backup, just keep steady for a few more seconds.”

He dodged a shot and grunted.

“Where have I heard that before?”
Ezra banked the Clawcraft into a spin before leveling out on the other side of the Grysk attack shuttle. He narrowly dodged the blast, a grazing shot rocking the vessel as he sent hot laser bolts into his pursuer and the craft exploded as he made his escape, another three ships coming in to take the place of the fallen. Ezra groaned and maneuvered out of their line of fire as he finally received the call trying to patch through his system's comms.

"Ezra, is this a bad time?"

"Tharin—" Ezra broke off. "Am I glad to hear your voice! Thanks for returning my call. I need to know how that third wave of traps is holding up."

"Laser webs are preventing most of the larger entries from getting near the Path of Houses. None can get through without the use of technology, so that is holding the largest of their military at bay for now." Her voice came through as partial static as she added, "The rest we're hoping can be delayed through the military blockades and other naturally occurring phenomenon."

"First good news I've heard all day!"

"Where are you? You sound stressed."

"You could say that?" He turned and zipped through the blind-spots of the enemy ships. "I'm somewhere over the Northern Mountains. Eli's fleet is overhead in the system, and they're sending down backup, but I don't know where the others are stationed anymore."

"Hang on… I'm on it!"

Ezra shot down an oncoming ship as his backup arrived and took out the one behind it. Three new Clawcraft streaks of white zipped through the air and took out the opposing forces riding Ezra's tail.

"The cavalry has arrived!" A familiar voice said.

"We got you covered!"

"We're not too late are we?"

"Gunther? Koree? Karyn!?" Ezra chuckled. "You're here? Wow! Nice timing. Wait... I never knew you three were pilots?"

"They're a bit short handed on experienced pilots up there!" Koree informed.

"We all have to start somewhere, I suppose? Just be glad we clocked in those flight hours back in the Empire!" Faro answered smugly. "Now hard right!"

The formation dove out of the way, Koree and Gunther mowing down the path of shuttles in a barrage of heavy fire.

"I thought you three were with Admiral Ar'alani's fleet?"

"We got here a little bit ago. Half our forces were taken out in Cam'co, so we're here to regroup with the other Generals."

"You really didn't think we'd miss the fight for the end of the universe, and let you go at it alone down here, did you?"

"Right. We know how helpless you are without us, Bridger!"
Ezra smiled.

“BANK LEFT!” Gunther yelled, and all of them dipped and avoided more fire.

“Good call.”

“Alright.” Faro warned. “You can play catch up after we manage to make a dent in these forces. Let’s figure out a strategy up here, people!”

“We’ve been fighting non-stop for— stars— how long has it even been?”

“About three months, I think?” Koree supplied.

“And we haven’t made that dent yet?!”

“Yeah, but we haven’t let anyone past us yet either.”

“Not bad considering they outnumber us a hundred to one!” Faro laughed. "With enough ships to blot out the stars, if I'm remembering those stories correctly?"

"You are, and the stars are missing, so— yeah! I guess we are doing pretty good all things considered?"

"Plus babe—" Koree teased. "You haven't crashed yet!"

"Bright sides all around!" Faro said unenthusiastically. "Now can we please come up with a plan of attack now?"

"Ezra? Ezra are you still there?"

"Hang on guys." He swapped his comm feed over and dodged another salvo of poorly aimed turret fire. "Tharin? Yeah, I’m still here. What’s the word?"

"General Prard’ras’kleoni’s ship was destroyed. With his fleet gone, there was nothing to hold the enemy back. You should already see Admiral Ar’alani over the system. Thrawn and General Brast’alshi’barku should be here within the day— if they aren’t all killed first.”

"Hey, we’re trying to keep things positive up here!"

"My apologies. Interpret this how you will then, but I’m reading that the High Council has let Vereen out of holding in order to protect the capital city.”

“Well, it sounded good until that last bit.” He frowned. “It took us years to get enough evidence on her to throw her in jail. Are we that desperate for soldiers that we’d let Vereen out of her cell? Might I remind the council that she did try to sell us out to the Far Outsiders, and is partly responsible for killing Birt and those two men from Thrawn’s phalanx.”

Tharin replied tartly to match his own agitated tone.

“You don’t have to remind me, Sevicsi, but I’m afraid the council has already made the decision.”

"A bad one if you ask me..." He muttered.

“Maybe so, but she did accomplish her betrayal with the Ascendancy’s best interests at heart, and has agreed to return to her cell if we live through the war.”
Ezra scoffed.

“Look, Ezra, I don’t agree with it either, but we have sustained insurmountable losses since the Far Outsiders began their attack. Their worldship can be seen in the sky from every planet in our system, and entire sections of the stars have been missing for just as long. It’s almost impossible to calculate a death toll with all the— No... No, no no!”

Tharin broke off, shouting a series of curses and orders in Cheunh before coming back online.

“Tharin?” Ezra leaned forward in his seat. “Tharin!? What’s going on over there?”

He could hear her fingers tapping against screens, both hard and digital, the rapid sounds echoing through his ship’s speakers.

“Grysk ships are figuring out a way to get the Yuuzhan Vong past the laser systems of Massoss. If they break those lines, they’ll be all over that sector in a matter of minutes with ships a lot bigger and stronger than the ones you’re dealing with right now!”

“Thrawn’s fleet is supposed to be closest to that zone, you don’t think they’re getting torn apart, do you?”

“Thrawn knows what he’s doing.” Tharin spoke surely, despite the hesitance in her pause afterwards. “I’m sending this new sentry information to my father and the other leaders.” There was another short pause, this one laced in sincerity and a tinge of heartfelt worry. “Be careful out there, Sevicsi.”

“Always…”

“And I don’t want to leave you with bad news, so how about something I think you’re going to like?”

He grinned.

“Oh?”

“Don’t forget you have three shots with those new weapons I just installed within the Clawcraft. It isn’t entirely stable yet, but it’ll pack a punch when most needed. No more than three or it will damage your ships, so be sure to save it for something important! Go show them what the Chiss are made of!”

Ezra eyed the red button and smiled.

“Have I mentioned how much I love you?”

“You could stand to mention it more?” she replied smugly. “Good luck out there. Over and out.”

“Copy. Over and out.”

He shut down his comm and reactivated his close-range headset.

“Hey guys, are you flying the new Mark-Three Clawcrafts?”

“Yeah?” Gunther replied. "I think so?"

“Why?”
“Tharin sends her regards... and she wanted me to remind you guys that these new Clawcrafts have that pure ion ray addition that she made up a few months ago. They can be fired three times without causing damage to our own ship and are ten times as powerful as our ordinary canons. Tharin wants us to use them wisely, especially considering something big just broke through the grid.”

“Copy that!” the three returned and just as they did, the sun vanished beneath the eclipsing view of the large, lumpy potato-shaped starship of a Yuuzhan Vong attack vessel.

Just one of those things carried over a hundred soldiers and ships, never mind the attack capabilities of the outer turrets alone.

“Nasty…” Ezra groaned. “Everyone, look alive! We’ve got company.”

“Ground team!” Eli erupted.

“We see it! Don’t worry, we’re on it, Captain!” Faro called.

“Anyone else think it’s time to use those fancy new blasters?” Gunther inched.

Everyone seemed to agree all at once.

“Alright! Aim for the turrets and try to slow it down. If we can destroy the ship before it deploys troops, we may just take the day yet?”

“Copy, Faro!” Ezra said, shooting upward and taking aim. “Make every shot count you guys.”

“Let’s do this!” Koree shouted.

“Bombs away!” Gunther echoed, the whirling, water-like stream of pure blue ion energy traveling through the points of the Clawcraft wings and into the center before zapping against the enemy ship in a brilliant burst of orange and green fire.

_Sabine would have loved this thing!_ Ezra thought, but only for a moment because once they maneuvered out to safety, they were right back in for another dive.

“Fire again!” He hollered, and they did, this time black clouds of smoke puffing out through the gashing wound in the Vong’s massive ship.

“They should be deploying fighters at any moment.”

“Not if we can help it!” Ezra called. “Gunther, fire your last shot into the hangar, Koree, Karyn, come with me, we’re blasting a hole straight through the face!”

“I like it!”

“Me too! We’re right behind you, Bridger.”

“I’m on it, kid!” Gunther responded. “Be careful up there, babe!”

“You know it, hon. There’s no way you’re getting rid of me that easy!”

Their last shot, Ezra could feel the world slowing down around them through the Force as he and the two women at his sides took aim and fired without a window of hesitation, Gunther’s blast already alight from the rear as the entire brown, vegetable of a ship turned bright red and exploded from their combined attack.
“Yeah!”
“Alright!”
“Woo-hoo!”

Their combined cheers overlapped on the comms as Ezra keyed in for Eli’s frequency.

“Eli? Come in! Eli?”

“We read you kid!”

“All targets eliminated, Captain.” He smiled.

“We’re heading up!” Faro added.

“Kid, you guys work miracles!” Eli responded. “See you topside. Good work sky team. Everyone, regroup with me over Schesa! There will be a debriefing as soon as everyone is within range.”

Ar’alani’s voice was heard over the comms.

“Understood.”

“We are on route as well,” Thrawn said.

“Hey!”

“You made it!”

“Thra—”

Their happy voices were suddenly cut off as static erupted through the joint-comms.

“Hmm… It seems we’ve lost their signal? Or perhaps they just hung up on us?”

“At least Thrawn made it back alive, right?” Koree offered.

“And we’re not dead!” Gunther laughed.

“Where were you guys three months ago with all this optimism?!” Ezra laughed. "Seriously!"

“Well, you know us humans.” Gunther snorted. “We’re too stupid to lay down and die without putting up a fight.”

Koree laughed.

“And joking in the face of death all the way to Hell and back is what we do best!”

He smiled, shook his head, and broke off formation.

“Whoa, hey! Where are you going, kid?”

“Sorry guys, I have to get back to the Alani. Say hi to everyone for me up there, okay?”

“Will do.”

“Take care of yourself down there, Bridger.”
“And give our regards to Ayesha and Cade down there on the ground, yeah?”

“You got it!” He pressed for his access codes and readied the comm shutdown. “See you at the debriefing.”

“Until then.”

The systems blipped off and Ezra floated the peaceful route back down to the ground, but now with much deeper concerns on his mind.

He landed in the hangar, hopping down from the ship, before being rushed by the mob of concerned child soldiers. He frowned and removed the helmet to rub at the hair stuck to his head with sweat, feeling every bit of good energy leaving him once more as he was suddenly back and standing before his students. Some of their faces missing now... and... two more had just been added to that list.

He sighed.

“We lost Tikusa and Korjics...”

“That makes three this week!” Tasvi snarled. “I should have been up there. I could have—”

“There’s nothing you could have done,” Ragan eased.

“I hate just waiting around here getting picked off by those invaders!” Hasti growled.

Her sister agreed.

“We have been training for this invasion all our lives! We deserve to fight alongside the rest of the military!”

Rettar kicked out her foot.

“They see us as small, helpless children, despite everything we’ve been through!”

“It’s not fair!” Ceru shouted.

“Girls! Girls!” Ezra calmed. “You are being kept here because Thrawn believes we are the last hope of the Ascendancy. Your time will come, but for now we have to keep injuries and casualties to a minimum and our resources strong.” He sighed and loosened his shoulders. “Now... go tell Maris what’s happened, and we’ll—” Another hard breath got caught in his throat. He swallowed it down, and tossed down his helmet. “We’ll start prepping for their remembrance ceremonies.”

“What are you going to do, Ch’irci?” Ira asked in a soft tone.

He rubbed his face, feeling the weight of war and age setting into him alongside a lump forming in his throat.

“I’ll join you as soon as the debriefing is over.”

He took a few more steps, but a small hand caught his and he looked down to see Tamnu, her curly blue hair stopping in circles near her eyes, which were round and determined to speak her mind.

“You did not fail them, Ch’irci,” she said gently, her Cheunh small and calm. “Korjics, Tikusa, and Mika knew that too.”
He squeezed the hand once and let it fall.

"Thank you, Tamnu." He looked up. "Everyone."

With that, Ezra walked away, feeling their concerned stares on his back as the doors slid shut behind him, and the weight of the world was once again on his shoulders.

The three students he had lost had begged him to let them fly. He didn't always lose the girls, but this being the third of the deaths since enemies started breaking the orbit of Schesa wasn't helping. They were soldiers, but Ezra could never stop seeing them as children. Korjics was thirteen... Tikusa, sixteen... and Mika... well she was only twelve. Prak, Toru, Kinji, Dowen... the men who had helped him storm the tower of Celwis were all gone too, some here, some elsewhere, but all at the hands of the Far Outsiders. Yet here Ezra stood, walking to a war meeting and he had somehow allowed all of them to die in front of him.

He rubbed his eyes and face tiredly in his hands. No... No amount of positivity or optimism could ever change the guilt he carried with him. Not now... Not this time... But those feelings would have to wait. Just another perk of war? he supposed, as he walked through the sliding doors and activated his holo-image to project alongside the room of war generals and military strategists.

“Over sixty soldiers gone in just one day...” Ar’alani frowned, her holo-image looking tired and stressed.

“I must apologize.” Thrawn’s image bowed. “If I were able to better defend the front lines, such numbers would not be slipping through to your locations.”

“You’re just one man,” Eli reminded sternly. “And without you, that sixty may as well tack on a couple more zeros at the end. How many were lost on your end?”

“Ninety-seven soldiers.”

Ar’alani made an appalled sound with her mouth.


“And with my eleven, that makes today’s localized death rate a little over two-hundred.” Eli rubbed his eyes.

“Not to mention the loss of Prard’ras’kleoni’s entire fleet. Our losses today might very well surpass the thousands...”

"Although we are still maintaining our perimeter after twenty-four days of this. There is something to be said of our defenses and I believe your tactical plans are mostly to thank for that, Captain Mitth’raw’nuruodo."

Thrawn took the compliment stoically and nodded in return.

“Indeed it is impressive, considering their numbers against us. Even as tragic as the loss is.” Thrass replied. “No ships have been spotted past Schesa as of yet, though the unrest of missing stars has not gone unnoticed by the remainder of the people.”
“Though we cannot assume this pleasantry to last for much longer. The Inrokini security systems were breached today, were they not, Brother?”

Thrass sighed.

“According to the Aristocra, the hole was patched before more than four fleetships were allowed through, three of which were destroyed before reaching any populated worlds. One was taken down by the humans over Schesa under Captain Vanto’s orders.”

“How are supplies looking?” Eli asked, ignoring the recognition completely.

“We are still maintaining a healthy consumption of power and weapons, food is still under rationed standards, but we are low on ships. The Houses of Nikori and Inrokini are working diligently, but we are still losing more ships than we can replace.”

“And more pilots...” Ezra warned, his voice heavy and remorseful. “Without a miracle, we may not last another month to defend the galaxy, much less the Path of Houses.”

“Then what should we do?” Al’ani addressed the room in a lighter tone. “With each day, the Far Outsiders learn more of our strategies and develop ways around our defenses. Though the Vagaari have not been a major issue, the Grysks and Yuuzhan Vong coalitions cannot simply be ignored. We need to strike them down, and soon. Each second the worldship gets nearer to the war, and when it arrives we will be outgunned, outmanned, and out of time to come up with a final plan to take the day. Lieutenant Bridger is right. What we need now is a miracle.”

The room was silent.

Ezra stared at each hologram as they looked around the room, only one pair of eyes seeming to lock onto his own and those belonged solely to Thrawn. Ezra could imagine what was about to come next, but he wasn’t sure how to let it unfold.

“I have seen such miracles rise from the ashes of defeat before,” Thrawn said, his eyes never once leaving Ezra’s. “Something will come before the final wave arrives. Remain hopeful, and stay on your guards.”

“Right.” Thrass nodded. “While things may look bleak, we have outlasted even the time which our legends predicted we would. We are Chiss, and we continue fighting to our final breath to protect our own.”

“Well said Syndic.” Ar’alani turned to address the maps and pointed with a wave of her hand to dismiss them. “We will send more detailed reports over as soon as possible. I would like a statistic of civilian casualties and injuries from each sector under attack. For now I must return to the bridge.”

“Rest while you can,” Eli urged. “The enemy doesn’t sleep, and they have plenty of people in reserves to ensure we’re well worn out before the next attack.”

“Utilize your sleep schedules, and may warrior’s fortune shine on our efforts.”

Ezra nodded.

“And may the Force be with us.”

Every hologram shut down, Thrawn’s the last to do so after he and Eli had shared a silent nod and the Chiss offered a final one to Ezra as well.
Maris’afis then came up to Ezra and patted his shoulder.

“We’ve readied the ceremonies for the girls.” She frowned. “It’s time.”

“I know...” he sighed.

“You wouldn’t happen to have a few of those miracles left up your sleeve, would you? The girls have told me great stories about your abilities. You are able to connect to great beasts that helped to save your world from attack, are you not?”

He shook his head.

“I can’t call on the purrgil when the Vong are still looking to make them into organic hyperdrives, and even if I could, there is something blocking me from the Force. It’s like a thick wall of brick right in front of my nose, and I just can’t get through it.”

“Could it be Krayt? Even the older of us have been reliving those nightmares lately. It could be his doing?”

“He’s definitely on the worldship, but I fear it is something far stronger than Krayt that’s doing this.”

“Well...” Maris sighed. “I guess there’s nothing much we can do, except keep trying to live on until tomorrow. Perhaps answers and miracles will make themselves known to us then.”

A tear escaped the corner of her eye and she wiped it away quickly.

“Forgive me. I know we are not supposed to form attachments to the girls, but—” She sighed. “I find that in itself an impossible feat. I helped to raise and train them after all. I know that is not the same as love, and I remember from my own childhood how it felt to be born a soldier rather a child, but... losing them still hurts more than I could have ever prepared for.”

Ezra placed a hand on her shoulder and offered his most sympathetic look.

“I didn’t protect them and that’s on me, but their deaths will not be in vain, Maris. I promise you, if it is the last thing I do, I will stop the Yuuzhan Vong and their army.”

“Chiss do not make promises they do not intend to keep, Ezra Bridger.” She patted his hand and led him through the door. “Good thing you are one of us now, yes?”

“Yeah...”

He frowned, his mind racing though it took everything not to give in to the hate and fear of his most recent losses. He had failed himself before when he said nobody else he cared for would die, and while he had seen more friends and students perish than he ever thought possible for his heart to bear, he would stay positive. This was one promise he intended to keep. He would at least make sure those deaths were all avenged tenfold. The Yuuzhan Vong would die by his hand and become nothing more than a distant nightmare to the galaxy. This, he would see to personally, no matter what it cost, but he would never rely on the darkness to make it happen. That too he promised, if not for himself, then for all those he still cared about.

Still though, it might just help to have a few miracles on their side as well... and wherever those might be hiding, Ezra sure hoped they would show up soon.
Miracles

Chapter Summary

As the lines break down and things seem bleak, a miracle finally surfaces, giving the Chiss military the exact opening they need to plan a strike!

Meanwhile, Ahsoka begins her ulterior mission, one that only she can accomplish. She confronts the one entity in the entire galaxy that might truly destroy them all, and once again, all hangs in the balance as each party prepares to make their next move.

Chapter Notes

Posted on: January 6, 2019

“What is that?”

“By the ancients!” Khabarakh gasped. “It is the beast of the Maw!”

Sabine blinked in shock as she and Ahsoka looked out the viewport at the great monster, its dozens of spindly tentacles wrapping up one of the alien fleetships and dragging it down to orbit in a ball of flames. She felt bad for whoever was on that ship, and even worse for whichever side of the war was going up against something so massive.

They had spent these last few weeks traversing the back roads of the Unknown Regions, fighting aliens straight out of a nightmare, running from planet to planet once the Noghri caught Ezra’s scent on that humid jungle world, now only to finally catch up to his tracks, and find themselves swarmed in some massive, bloody war with flying beasts the likes of which none had ever seen before.

“Beast of the Maw you say?” Ahsoka repeated. “What exactly is that?”

“My people know of it only from legends, but it is the feared entity of the uncharted regions of darkness. It is said to roam the forgotten clouds of the Maw, preying on any that draw too close to its portals.”

“Portals?”

Khabarakh nodded.

“It is believed that old gods of power have locked a titan of fury beneath such portal, a black hole that was meant to keep whatever wickedness from spreading throughout this galaxy and the next.”

“Old legends thought to be just tales and lore before now.” Meewalh added.

“How do you believe this race has managed to tame and capture such a beast?” Cakhmaim asked.
A flash, and Ahsoka felt the back of her head touch the seat. A woman’s hands, the beast in their viewport, fire, harsh winds, a black hole, space. She blinked and rubbed one finger against her temple.

“You okay?” Sabine asked, furrowing her brow.

“I’m not sure...” Ahsoka said slowly. “But, somehow, I believe the beast of the Maw is meant to signify more than just an attack. I think it might also be a message.”

“For the Chiss?”

“No…” She shook her head. “It is a message for me.”

“You?” The Noghri grumbled. “Why and how would such aliens know to send such a signal to you?”

“What aren’t you telling me, Ahsoka?” Sabine asked fervently.

Ahsoka only stood.

“I have something urgent which will require my attention,” she said. “Sabine, you and the Noghri know Ezra is down there on that planet. Go to him. Find him, and make sure he’s safe. For now, I must accept my invitation and try to buy you all a bit more time to get to safety.”

“Ahsoka!”

“Trust me, Sabine...”

She reached out, but pulled her hand back down to her side, grabbing for her helmet with the other.

“Fine.” She nodded, frowning as she did. “I trust you, but please... just... do me a favor and try not to disappear on me again. I’ve had about enough searching for old friends as I can take for one lifetime.”

Ahsoka continued to smile and bowed her head.

“I’ll be careful. Don’t worry, we will see each other again very soon.”

Sabine snorted and secured her helmet as she and the three Noghri followed her to the escape shuttle.

“Yeah, well try to come back less cryptic this time if you can, okay?”

She laughed.

“Deal.”

Sabine twirled her blasters ready for the fight to come and then paused.

"You're sure you can break through that giant planet-sized warship in that little shuttle?"

"I'll be fine. Whoever is aboard will want to see me alive. I will not be hurt. Now, hurry. My distraction can only hold these fighters off for so long. As soon as I'm gone, you get down to that planet and find Ezra. I'm counting on you Sabine."

"Got it." She looked over to Khabarak. "You guys ready to go get Ezra and Thrawn?"
"We are ready, Lady Wren." He nodded, a pleasured snarl forming on his face.

"We are behind you every step of the way."

"Let us return your companion and earn closure for our people!"

"Right. See you on the other side, Ahsoka."

She nodded.

"May the Force be with you."

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Meanwhile...

“The East system has been breached! Repeat! The East system has been breached!”

“How did they break our line?”

“Hold her steady!” Eli called with a growl. “Thrawn!”

“I know!” He replied swiftly. “All fighters, deploy ships at these positions immediately! Two! Six! Nine! Ten! Reroute our positions to point zero-two-six and raise shields on aft side deflectors!”

“Copy, Captain!”

“Yes, Captain!”

White streaks shot through the sky as explosions erupted through the still air.

“It’s not going to be enough…” Eli muttered to himself and any deity in the stars that might listen. “We need something bigger, Thrawn. Come on…”

“What about that thing?” Vanto asked aloud. It was distant, but everyone up in orbit could see it coming. Some kind of— well— some kind of massive monster.

Thrawn glared at it through the viewport and thought for a moment before giving his response.

"If we wait for the beast, we may let loose too many ships for the ground troops to handle. For now, prepare to engage, but focus all our attacks on stopping this swarm from penetrating our line."

"Understood."

Eli frowned, the ominous feeling in his gut swirling every time he saw the massive monster hurtling towards them. At least it was still a far way's away, but he'd be much more comfortable with a plan that was a bit more reassuring than just "ignore it now and shoot it later."

“Tech Herci," Thrawn called calmly. "Please contact Csaus immediately.”
“Yes, Captain! Hailing long range comm transmissions…” He paused and shot back a nod.
“Connection received. They hear us, sir.”

“Csau ground base, this is Captain Mitth’raw’nuruodo of the Expansionary Defense Fleet Alpha Division.”

“We read you, Captain!” one of the scientists responded. “Go ahead.”

“What are the energy levels on that last remaining laser grid hovering over our orbit?”

“Levels show power at 79% strength, sir.”

“Excellent. Divert all power from each grid-point to the most centralized point in location.”

“But sir, that would break our force fields!”

“They will break regardless!” Thrawn replied strictly. “Focus all power into one point and it should overload the laser within, thus causing—”

“Causing a cataclysmic explosion!” Tharin’s voice replied, the sounds of scuffling heard as she forcibly shoved the former call officer from his seat. “That’s brilliant! I hear you loud and clear, Thrawn! Diverting all power to grid-point, 2318-G. Ten seconds to total detonation. All vessels retreat the area, I repeat, remove all friendly vessels near the laser grid at once!”

As ships began to weasel away from the location, the Yuuzhan Vong continued ramming their way through the small yellow field of lasers, a few even slipping past by using others as shields on all side from to protect them from the heat of the defensive lasers.

“Here goes nothing?” Tharin murmured, and pressed the final button on her controls.

Eli, Thrawn, Alani, and the other soldiers watched as the grid vanished entirely, the enemy ships now soaring past their line and into the free space of the Path of Houses’ borders. That is, until a single star-shaped grid point began to glow, the light pulsing off of it until finally, a reverberating echo of an explosion was sent cutting through the enemy ships in a disk shaped burst of golden laser fire and uncondensed destruction.

“Shields!” Eli bellowed, but the Chiss on his bridge were already on it.

His and the remaining three fleetships were rocked so hard that Ar’alani’s vessel was completely turned on its side, Talshib's was knocked back an entire decimal, and Thrawn was sent spinning to face an opposite direction. Still, it seemed Thrawn’s idea payed off well, as over a hundred enemy command ships were sent crashing into one another and sliced apart on all sides.

Now that's more like it! Eli thought with a growing grin.

“Fast thinking, Thrawn!” He breathed as his own ship steadied itself. “Good work.”

“Yes, but this is not over. Our last defensive grid is now gone. The four of us are now the only things standing between our Ascendancy and the brunt of this war.”

“We’ll send some scientists over to fix the laser grids as soon as possible!” Tharin announced. “Try to keep the line and buy us as much time as you can. With luck, our ships or drones can arrive within the hour!”

“Understood.”
“Got it,” Eli nodded. 

Suddenly, the whatever it was monstrosity that had just slithered here from the Yuuzhan worldship let out a massive screeching wail that could be heard even through the soundless vacuum of space. It didn't care for Thrawn's little light show, and now it seems the flash had only made the beast faster and angrier.

"Got any bright ideas to combat that!?" Eli called into Thrawn's comm-link. 

"Do not panic, let us see how it reacts to our weapons first and not worry about finding an alternate solution unless necessary." 

Eli groaned and rubbed his brows. 

*Shoot it first, worry later.* He let out a sigh. It was still not his favorite plan, but he trusted Thrawn, so for now, Eli swallowed down his doubts and hurried over to another terminal to send a static-laced signal down below to the planet Schesa.

“Let me check in with the ground troops, I need to warn them of the incoming debris and this—thing heading straight for us!

"Very well."

"Come in! Ezra!" He called. “We’ve managed to push the enemy back a few steps, but it looks like at least four scout ships made it past us unscathed, maybe more that could survive the crash landings. They’re on their way to your location! Be ready on the ground!"

Below, Ezra had been watching as the red-violet hue of the Schesa skies lit up in square patterns of yellow lightning before exploding like a flash from the sun itself. Probably the attack Eli mentioned which had pushed the Far Outsiders back a ways. At the same time, he saw the small dots of oncoming vessels as four came into view among the wreckage of fireballs that were also raining down from the battle above.

“We copy! I see them. Don’t worry, they won’t make it far..."

"And be on the look out for— something else..."

"Something else?"

"We don't know what it is. Some sort of massive creature the Vong are controlling? I don't know, but it's big, it's mean, and it's heading our way!"

He made a face.

"Roger that then. Do me a favor, Eli, and don't let whatever it is get down here, if it's not too much trouble."

A weak laugh and then the comms cut off as Ezra shot another look up at the sky and then turned back towards the girls.

The oldest of the ozyly-eshehemo were all at his side, all equipped with their electro-lances and newly tuned ground speeders. To him, he still saw his students, but to anyone else, these young women were deadly warriors. The fact that the Vornskr were standing at their sides was also nothing to scoff at. The animals were strong and aggressive protectors of their partnered Force-users, and had been training for the last few years to be the perfect partners in this exact battle
“Get ready girls, things are about to get a lot busier down here! Put this Chiss tech to good use! We do not let a single ship get off this planet alive!”

They readied themselves in response, a few of the more brazen girls even cracking small smiles as their weapons lit up with the glow of electrified energy.

“This is it!” Ezra continued. “The moment you’ve all been training for! Remember your defensive positions, remember your training, and stay with your units!”

“Understood, Chi’rci!” They responded and readied themselves, their Vornskr growling and doing the same.

Ezra furrowed his brows and waited for the ships to get nearer.

The skies were tinted in red from all the fire above, no longer the calming purple fog they normally were. It, mixed with the fallen debris and raining soot of the last few months, only made the earthy ground appear blackened and dead. Smoke rose from the mountains and the ground trembled when the fallen ships crashed into the rocks, shattering debris like a blaster wound miles into the next segment.

*BANG! WHAM! CRASH! BOOM!*

One by one the fireballs impacted on the surface, but that did nothing to deter the ozyly-esehembo. Now, the silence to follow afterwards, that did somewhat rattle them. Their visions… all of their visions had placed them in a setting just like this one, and the unrest on everyone’s nerves could be felt even by those unfamiliar to the Force.

The end of the world, but maybe not, not if they had anything to say about it at least.

“Here come the survivors!” Ezra shouted.

He scratched at the ear of Nehso by his side, who purred but got into his fighting stance as the flying shuttles and escape pods zoomed overhead and turned back to do battle with the group waiting ever so patiently for their arrivals.

The girls nodded and managed to clear their minds as Ezra ignited his saber, the brilliant orange reflecting off the white metal of his hover-bike, and the familiar sound causing everyone a moment of confidence as they held tighter to their own weapons.

“Get into positions!” He called.

The girls lifted their free-hands and bowed their heads, eyes shut in pure focus, their ears waiting for the final order.

Ezra felt the tug in the Force turn into a tight squeeze and he clenched his fists in unison with his students.

“Now!” He yelled.

Together, they pulled on an invisible rope attached to the Yuuzhan scoutship and sent it plummeting into the ground like the strain from a malfunctioning tractor beam.
It exploded a few miles outside of the city and the small group cheered as they watched it go up in flames in the distance.

“Great work!” Ezra called back. “Now get ready! Here comes the second one. Again!”

The girls raised their arms high into the air and focused again.

Alone, Chiss Force sensitives were somewhat limited as to what they could do, but together was another story.

They were collectively tapped into enough Force connection to take hold of the next enemy ship and send it slamming directly into the cliffs. Together they were able to utilize actual Force prowess, just one of the many strides they continued making every single day in training. Even the youngest of them, Cade, Lem, Ira, and the lot of newly discovered younglings were growing more and more powerful by the day. All of them were safely hidden away back at the base with Maris and Pyrondi, and hopefully they would never see the battle with their own eyes if Ezra, his students, and the fleets above could hold their line back just a little bit longer, just until Thrawn’s plans came together and they could prepare their final strike without— you know— all dying instantly?

BOOM!
Another ship down. This time from a Clawcraft that was seen zooming overhead. The older Alani veterans were piloting ships now, their crusaders lighting the clouds with hot laser fire.

“Looks like they called in the cavalry!” Ezra smiled. “Be prepared to face foot soldiers at any time, girls!”

“Ch’irci!” Lorin called.

He could sense it too, the enemy shuttle coming in way too fast. A suicide flyer! He thought with a heavy frown and a quick embrace of panic.

“Scatter!” He warned, and as the order left his lips, a barrage of fire split the dirt as laser turrets broke their group apart. Ezra sped up on his speeder and used a lifted mound to go flying before he slid back down the ship with his lightsaber stabbed through the flesh, the new gash enough to cause the small ship to go into a spin as it collided down to the planet below, unsuccessful in its attempts to take all of them out with it.

Yuuzhan soldiers who had survived the crash were already coming up the hill, already returning fire, and Ezra took off. He had to get back to the girls, he needed to protect them, but as he sped forth, he saw the Alani and the Vornskr all zipping in untraceable patterns, their lances skewering enemy soldiers as they cut through their formations, the Vornskr providing impenetrable backup as they hunted the soldiers like the predators they were born to be.

He smiled at the sight, glad they were even more capable than he could have hoped as he joined them, almost surfing now atop his speeder as his lightsaber made quick work of any Grysk or Vong trooper he saw blocking his path.

“Aaagh!”

One of his girls let out a small scream, and he recognized her voice in an instant. It was Veluch, held high off the ground as her speeder took off without her. She growled and kicked her feet up, twisting the large soldier’s arm as she and it collided with the ground. Her Vornskr went for the alien’s throat and tore it open before she broke free and finished the job with her lance. It was all over in a second and the Chiss girl with her Vornskr stood victorious over the dead combatant.

“Nice teamwork!” Ezra breathed. “You okay, Veluch?”

She nodded, pet her Vornskr, and got back into the fight a moment later when Pritni sped by and pulled her aboard the back of her speeder to go retrieve her own vehicle a ways away.

“Don’t worry about us, Chir’ci!” Tasvi called from the other side of the battlefield, her lance stuck in her own fallen enemy now collapsed along the dirt beneath her foot. “You’ve taught us well!” She shouted and pointed off to the horizon line, adding, “Now go! Do what you must!”

He smiled and nodded, before all of them felt the urge to look up as the third ship came down towards them.

“I’ve got this one!” Ezra called, nicking the fuel capsule on his speeder and sending it upward with a massive shove of the Force. It exploded just in time to veer the ship off course and take it down in a ball of fire in one-fail swoop.

On foot now, he and the Alani continued to take out enemy soldiers until another eerie echo cut through the clouds and made them turn. There was a darkness coming from the sky, an eerie sensation of death and pain. The shouts and screams on his comm were cut out by static as he tried to get a connection to the Chiss fleetship that was now plummeting down towards them to its
doom.

He allowed himself to stare in shock for only a moment, before reaching back to his arm and yelling his response.

“What’s going on up there?” Ezra called. “Anyone? Report!”

There was only the sounds of more screams and static as the creaking echo of the great ship came crashing down through the clouds, held now in the jaws of a monster. Ezra’s eyes went wide as he watched it slip through the sky, bigger than any creature he had ever seen. Both crashed into the mountains, removing the elevated earth from Schesa forever in a massive burst of rocks that made it all the way to their location like raindrops of smoldering stone. The ground quaked, everyone steadying their stances as the last of the remains settled into the Schesa soil and the lingering debris hung over them like an eclipse on the sky.

“Sir, we’ve lost all contact with General Brast’alshi’barku!” someone yelled.

“What is that thing!?” somebody else joined in.

“General Talshib!” Ar’alani shouted.

“Ezra! Watch it!” Eli called. “It's dive-bombing! It got Talshib! We just—” his voice was cut out by static.

Luckily, Thrawn's was there to pick up where he left off, and he was bellowing louder than Ezra had ever heard him yell before. “Ground troops find cover now!”

“Move it girls!” Ezra called, running now as they zipped by on their bikes. He caught Tasvi’s arms as she pulled him onto the back of her speeder and they took refuge beneath the treeline of the small woods nearby just in time for the debris to collide onto the battlefield.

“What in ravri’ihah’s name is that thing?” Ezra panted into his comm-link.

“It was deployed from the worldship!” Thrawn replied. “It took out Talshib’s entire fleetship like it had been trained to do so.”

“Is it some kind of purrgil?” Eli called.

“That thing is not a purrgil!” Ezra barked back, the terror still in him as he watched it twist through the sky. "Unless... you know... it's some sort of ugly, giant, purrgil-joopa hybrid, which I am seriously hoping isn't the case!"

“Hmm... I wonder—” This time it was Thrawn’s voice that came through the joint-comms.

“What is it!?” Eli asked.

“I read about such a creature when I first learned of the Maw.”

“The Maw?” Ar’alani repeated.

“It is a black hole near the Kessel Sector of the other galaxy. Noghri artworks and various scattered rumors throughout the galaxy each depicted a strange tentacled beast living within this mass serving an unknown purpose and origin. Even more dated works seemed to repeat the recurring theme of “Abeloth” as though a higher being named Abeloth controlled the beast, or perhaps was the title of such said creature. I believe the scientific definition of it was summa-
verminoth? Not many have been seen by travelers who have lived to tell the tale.”

“Summa-vermi-what?” Eli grumbled. “That is way too long to say. So, "Sumo-Death-Purrgil" it is then?”

Ezra rolled his eyes at the poorly timed attempt at a joke. “Yeah okay, but Thrawn, did these bits of research just so happen to mention why the Yuuzhan Vong might take one? How would they even get to the Maw? What do you think that means?”

Thrawn frowned now, his voice sounding tense even through the comms as a mighty roar shook the whole planet. The tentacled beast tossed fallen ships and abandoned buildings left and right, focusing its dozens of flailing eyes and limbs on anything that either moved or got caught in its rampage.

“Trouble.”

“I feel like Krayt mentioned Abeloth to me once. A couple of years ago maybe?” Ezra responded. “I took it as some sort of religious figure or an old god of his. I didn't think it was real!?”

“Oh it's real alright, but I don't think it’s a god...” Eli started, the fire raining down from the skies. “It doesn’t seem to breathe in this atmosphere! It’s thrashing!”

“All rear gunners, open fire on the beast! It will not make it past Schesa!” Alani ordered.

“Shields up!” Ezra instructed, his and all of their arms raising as high up as they could stretch in order to activate the blue bubbles of protection which expanded out to block away debris.

*Mentally, he reminded himself to once again thank the Inrokini for designing such useful technology, and kiss Tharin again for inadvertently saving his life time and time again with her big brain.*

Shots collided like rain with the ground as Ezra and the girls waited below, the monster’s wails loud and angry as it twisted and slipped back up into the sky, disappearing within the clouds.

“Watch out up there! It’s coming back to—”

“Ch'irci!”

Ezra felt the hairs on his neck stand up just in time to block the oncoming attack with his saber. The Vong had followed them up their path to the trees and had come down in full attack, using the shock of this raging Goliath to their advantage to spring an ambush.

Echoing the flash of his saber, Ezra let out a single shout as he severed the alien’s arms from its body and then its torso from its waist... but not before the creature’s long, jagged claw cut a quick slash across his left shoulder and up the side of his neck. The wound was small, barely bleeding, and the possibility of poison was useless given his human anatomy, but that wasn't what Ezra was most worried about. The attack was just quick enough and placed just precisely enough for the now dead soldier to rip the cloth of his uniform, and more importantly, sever the string he had tied around his neck which held the small bit of Yuuzhan armor he had been using to keep Krayt’s influence out of his mind. Without it, he was completely vulnerable.

“No!” He gasped, but that was all he was able to do. Ezra could already feel the darkness seeping in. Krayt was ready for him, and he knew exactly where to look.

“There you are!” his dark voice echoed. “I told you, the next time we met, I would not be as kind to
your mind, Ezra. Now, give in and join me or watch your precious Chiss die!”

Ezra screamed and held his head which was now ringing in pain like the pinprick of a hundred tiny needles being jammed through his temples. Krayt was in his head, grabbing his will like it was candy in a knapsack. He tried to fight it, tired to kick him out, but Krayt had grown even more powerful in these last few years, and his anger at Ezra's repeated refusal to work with him, made his abilities all the harder to break.

“Ch’irci!” One of his students shouted.

“Your necklace!” another called.

Tasvi was the one to finally come up with a plan as she began looking frantically along the ground for a cure.

“It's Krayt! Quickly! Grab anything! We need to block out his influence!”

Ezra felt his body go numb and cold, and he lowered himself into a ball as if it could even possibly help him hide away from Krayt's massive presence.

“Girls get out of here!” He warned through gritted teeth. “Get back! Go now! I can't— Agh!”

Everything started to move slowly as the Alani and Yuuzhan Vong came into his position, all running towards him, though both groups for different reasons. He looked to all the faces, feeling Krayt in his arms and legs now as the dark Force user attempted to take control of his mind and body.

"If you will not join me willingly, then you will become a part of my army by force!”

“Run—” Ezra started to say, but before the word even made it out of his throat, his hands pushed out and an entire shock-wave of energy sent every last Grysk, Vong, and Chiss soldier flying away from him at full-force. They all thudded into the ground and for only a single moment, everything was quiet.

“No...” He wrenched himself back a step, only to feel Krayt force him forward again. "Get out of my head!” he called, his limbs moving without permission as he held his lightsaber and began to run, leaping over debris and seeing only the fallen Chiss girls in his path of attack. “No! Stop! Don’t do this!”

“We are past your pleas!” Krayt gasped, a new voice of terror in his tone.

Ezra didn’t ask for follow up questions, he only called the bit of Vong armor back to him, catching it mid-flight in the palm of his hand before strapping it back around his neck to block out the dark
influences of Krayt’s incredibly powerful Force prowess. He collapsed into the muddied ground when it was all over, the breath in his lungs frozen like ice and stinging his teeth as the senses returned to his control. It was an extremely close call, but thankfully it was over now, and he took in another breath.

“Ch’irci?” Lorin groaned. “What just happened?”

He looked over and slowly lifted himself up to help her to a stand before breathing harder and moving to assist the rest of the girls nearby.

“I have no idea… but it wasn’t fun... I'll tell you that much...”

"Are you okay?” Hasti asked, both her and Lorin helping him to remain standing upright despite all the nerves in his body telling him to just lie back down.

"Fine." He lied. "Be sure you keep those bits of armor on tight, girls. Trust me, you do not want Krayt in your head."

Above, the roar of the "Sumo-Death-Purrgil" echoed across the planet as its smoldering laser-riddled carcass crashed into the rubble of what was once the northern mountains, its mile-long tentacles falling down towards where they were all standing in a slow but ever ominous decline.

Oh krieff...

“Move! Move! Move!” He shouted, the impact of the long appendages sending anyone on their feet flying in a shock-wave of air as it made contact with the ground. The beast was large enough to wrap itself around half the planet, but thankfully its dead body was shot down just close enough to orbit that it hadn’t caused Schesa to crumble upon impact.

“We’re hit!” Thrawn called over the comms. “Take emergency action!”

Ezra and the girls watched as the second fleetship came crashing down to the world right at the beast's heels.

“Girls, let’s help cushion their landing!” He shouted, leaping forward and digging his feet into the thick soil. “With me! Get ready!”

They copied his motions, both arms raised, hands outspread, and fingers curling in as the weight of the massive ship was ready to fall into their hands.

“Okay!” Ezra grunted. “Now!”

Together they reached out and caught the ship, not stopping it by a long-shot, but slowing its descent just enough to put out the flames and aim for a safe landing spot.

“A little more! Keep it up!”

Ezra clenched his teeth, tasting blood but unsure from where, and feeling the new scar sting a path from his shoulder to his neck as his body caught the weight of the Chiss fleetship. After only a moment, he and the girls lost their grips and were subsequently thrown to the ground, the vibrations of the crash rocking every last one of them as the fields shuddered before them.

“Everyone okay down there?” Eli asked. “Anyone, do you copy? Thrawn?! Ezra?!”

Ezra breathed, rubbing his head and searching the area to find all of his students standing up to do
the same, the Vornskr barking and running towards the wreckage as their howls sent spikes through his sore mind.

“Ugh!” He groaned and spit up the blood in his mouth. “Define okay?”

“We are alive, and mostly uninjured, but the ship has taken heavy damages,” Thrawn said, his voice also clipped with fresh pain.

“Thank the stars!” Eli sighed.

“At least that monster was taken down with you,” Alani’s voice continued. “Is it defeated?”

“It’s dead alright,” Ezra responded, standing to look over at the smoldering carcass that stretched for miles. He lifted his elbow and winced as he brought the comm watch closer to his mouth. “Yeah… I have no idea how we’re going to clean up something this big and this dead.”

“A problem for another time perhaps?” Thrawn grunted. “A few of my soldiers are pinned down. We will need evac as soon as possible and medical provisions for a few others it seems…”

“We’re coming to your location Thrawn, the Alani and I are ready to assist!” He took off running. “Let’s go girls!”

“Hey wait what is—” Eli’s voice started. “I— I don’t believe it?”

“What’s happening up there?”

“Incredible! Enemy forces have begun to back off. They’re—” He laughed. “They’re actually retreating!”

“Shock from defeating the beast perhaps? Or could something more dire be happening elsewhere?” Ar’alani wondered curiously but pleasingly so.

“Krayt sounded scared. He said something about his mother being in trouble, and took control of me long enough to preach his connection to Abeloth, but it was different this time, he was hasty, and somehow afraid and enraged all at once.” Ezra shook his head. “It didn’t make any sense. You think it had something to do with the beast?”

“That thing was pretty easy to take out? Are you sure it wasn’t just a throw away piece of canon fodder for them?”

“How fascinating…” Thrawn’s voice groaned. “I remember now, the other name of the one called Abeloth who controls the great beast of the Maw…”

“Yeah?”

“Abeloth was once referred to as “the Mother”, a member of the three Mortis Gods of legend.”

A wolf howled in Ezra’s memory, the scene of a great beautiful mural made of moving stone pointing to somewhere, before he shook the flashes from his mind.

“The ones depicted on the Lothal temple?”

“Precisely.” Thrawn replied. “I studied much of this on Lothal, but the mother was never present. Her absence in many studies of the Mortis Gods lead me to assume she had been outcast, and the stories of her power and terror in the Maw seem to make a bit more sense now.”
“So why in the worlds is she out here?” Eli called impatiently.

“Perhaps there was more truth to the legends than history has let on?”

“You think the Yuuzhan Vong have something to do with this?” Ezra asked. “Or are we talking teleportation and Force-nonsense here?”

“They can move moons out of orbit,” Thrawn supplied. “But for now we may need to sum up our suspicions to— Force nonsense?”

“Great...”

“So Abeloth, who has the power of the Mortis Gods of legend is somewhere with the Yuuzhan Vong?” Eli snorted. “Well, just when I think things are starting to look up, the universe just likes to spit all over my grave, now doesn’t it?”

“She’s not just somewhere!” Ezra called. “It’s the worldship! Abeloth and Krayt must be on the worldship, and they’re in danger so the rest of the Yuuzhan Forces have retreated to assist them.”

“Maybe we have made a dent in their fleet after all?”

“I don’t know what is going on, but if they’re retreating this strongly, then I suspect their worldship is under attack!” Ar’alani added. “And a heavy one!”

“What’s going on!?” Eli asked.

“A miracle!” Ezra grinned. “I think this might just be the miracle we were looking for!”

“ Took it long enough!”

“Well I’ll gladly take it now!” Eli said with relief. “Everyone, regroup! I think things might just be looking up for us!”

“Now we simply need to destroy their worldship and the army along with it.”

“How do you destroy a ship the size of a star system?” Ezra asked.

“Simple.” Thrawn replied. “You dismantle it from the inside.”

“Oh I don’t like where this is going…”

“All soldiers,” Thrawn ordered. “Prepare squadrons to board the worldship! Victory is close at hand. I’ll send my plans to you at once and work on getting my fleet back into the air.”

And there it was...

Still... to whatever miracle or divine presence that was distracting not only Krayt but also the entirety of the military, Ezra could not be more grateful to it. Something told him that he was about to see firsthand just what exactly a miracle looked like, and then he would finally come face to face with Darth Krayt, if not the mysterious Abeloth and all the answers to his many questions about her.
Sneaking on-board was a lot easier when someone was telling you where to sneak.

Ahsoka left her shuttle abandoned somewhere while she crisscrossed the massive, fleshy blind-spots of this ship. It was alive somehow, but it was not her main priority, nor was the dark Force user who had sensed her presence and was actively trying to pry into her mind. He was trying in vain. Her mind could not be breached by just anybody, and once Abeloth told him to leave her alone, his meddling vanished altogether with little protest.

There was something familiar to him, though Ahsoka couldn't quite place it. Whoever the man was, he was angry and frightened, but above all else he was loyal. He would have to come later, right now, Ahsoka’s only mission was dealing with Abeloth, and here she was, leaving the door wide open for her and waving her in of all things.

She found the portal with no problems, recognizing the symbols and glyphs from ancient Jedi temples and even from memories of the Mortis Realm. She shook the thoughts away. She had been training for this since that day on Malachor, maybe even before. It was the Daughter who allowed her to continue in this life, and now the Mother’s rampage was just another part of her responsibilities to the universe. There was nobody else. It was her burden to bear, and hers to carry alone.

She crossed the threshold and squinted. It was not the between world, the land of portals, roads, and endless stars… it was… well it was a planet, blue skied, with tall trees and mountains, wind, sun, and warmth. Ahsoka walked in, and as she did, she noticed the plants changing. Trees were dying in blue light, the clouds moving too quickly to be normal. Either this was a simulation of a beautiful planet, or this was something else entirely. A planet with a season in a single day. Ahsoka remembered the landscape well.

It was a dream never spoken aloud, a shared past between herself, her master, and Obi-Wan. Though, why such a portal, such a place, could ever exist aboard this ship, she could never begin to discern. This was just like the world of the Mortis Gods.

“I see you. Ah! At last you’ve come home,” a woman said with a light chuckle to follow afterwards. Her voice was warm, friendly even, but there was something else in the tone, something dark, as though the speaker’s heart and mind had been snapped in two and left to mend the pieces alone.

“You are Abeloth, I presume?” Ahsoka asked to the winds.

Another wistful laugh.

“Yes well, it has been quite a long time since the last we’ve seen one another. And in the Force it seems a new form has taken hold over you. But, it is no matter, a mother can never forget the face of her daughter.”

Ahsoka began walking forwards through the light spring grass that brushed past her fingertips. Flowers in the distance bloomed brightly in more colors than she’d ever seen, and the peace here, much like the voice of Abeloth, was felt through her core, but also off putting like a fragile balance teetering along her senses. She would need to tread carefully.
“I have heard your calls, Abeloth. I know why you seek me, why you have sought out power with your acolyte and my young friend, Ezra Bridger.”

The breeze picked up and it blew her white cloak out behind her in sporadic flapping twists as Ahsoka shielded her face from the force of the sudden weather.

“Ah yes. When I first made contact with Krayt, I could sense immediately that he was in desperate need of help. Lost, damaged, his mind and body broken, but in my heart I knew I could not leave him alone to drift in space and die, not when I saw how much he still wished to accomplish in his mind. Such terrible things to be put through, such hate and vengeance in his heart, but the boy had my pity, and I saw that only I would be able to make it right.”

“By allowing him further into darkness?”

“By allowing him the freedom to express himself with the new life I bestowed upon him. I took care of him, named him, raised him with all of the love and care that I could give my own children. You will come to see that compassion too, my child, as will the young Ezra Bridger. He has alluded my touch for long enough, and I fear my poor adopted son is not powerful enough to befriend him as he so desired. No, if you want something done right, it is only Mother who can get the task done.”

“I have seen the influence of the Mortis gods before,” Ahsoka said. “Funny, but they never seemed to mention you, Mother!”

There was tone she took when she said the word, a hard and mocking accent on the name. The woman was mentally unstable, and if Ahsoka could get her mad enough, perhaps she would show herself. What form might she have taken after all this time alone though? Ahsoka wondered. Would she appear old and withered like the Father, graceful and beautiful like the Daughter, or perhaps mysterious and dark as the Son?

“There is no need for vehemence, Daughter. Mother is here to make everything right again. I forgive you for placing me in that prison. I realize that there would be no way for you to disobey your Father’s orders. Though as the years ticked by, I felt the weakness in him grow, I felt him die. You, your brother, your father. Once the bonds of the sanctuary had broken, my shackles too had been released. Power has shifted. There is no dark, no light, nor the gray in the middle, there is only the Force and the freedom it holds.”

“So you escaped your prison world and transported it here? But why?”

She laughed again.

“Oh my dear, my presence is freedom itself, chaos and peace abound by choice and chance, nothing more. A shuttle caught in the bones of the great beast found itself right on my doorstep if you can believe such chance. With it, I was able to leave my confines behind and set out to spread my love to any in the galaxy that would have me now that my family had gone away.”

“And who better to spread the seeds of chaos and emptiness than a race of beings who long only to take the entire universe away?”

The trees faded, the sky darkening as the once green grass turned black and curled in on itself. The changing of the seasons, the death to the world of Mortis. Ahsoka could hear the thunderclaps in the distance, she did not need a reminder of what was to come next.

“Your visit and resurrection warm my heart, Daughter. Your timing is most opportune. Why… by
this time again soon, I should say that the entire galaxy will begin anew. Life, death, darkness, light… The only way to save all of these misguided children is to let them throw their tantrum, and then start back up from the very beginning. You remember, don’t you? You and your brother were much the same as all of these sentient beings.”

“I can’t let you fan the flames of this war, Abeloth.” Ahsoka lifted her cane and focused. “Come out and face me.”

“Oh, but my dear… I am already with you.”

Her voice whispered just beside Ahsoka’s face and it took all of her reserve not to jump. She shut her eyes, opening them again slowly as she came face to face with the Mother. She was a white star, a mist in the wind, a faceless ghost.

“I do not wish to be a part of your games, Abeloth.”

“Oh, come now, call me Mother.”

“You are no mother of mine…”

The white haze seemed to twitch, a sudden jerky motion like the static on a malfunctioning droid. The more she resisted, the shorter Abeloth’s patience seemed to grow.

Flashes hit Ahsoka’s memory, but they were not her own. She saw the days of the Mother, her human form, assisting and nurturing the children of Mortis, a deep love shared between her and the Father. She was a part of their family, but she was not their blood. She was mortal… and in that mortality, she lost herself to desire, to selfishness, to heart, to love.

There was a vision of her teaching the Daughter to heal the wounds of animals with the Force. A vision of her laughing victoriously as the Son transformed himself to fly for the first time among the birds. The touch of a hand as she came to call the Father and his children her family, and they loved her like one of their own.

But she had grown older, her skin deepened with wrinkles and wisdom of many years, even prolonged as they were from this so peaceful a planet. The children grew in power and in danger, life trembled in the balance around them. The Mother snuck into forbidden wells and caverns, learning forbidden techniques and knowledge that eventually drove her to insanity, and the children suffered most of all in their already chaotic state once her loving touch and guidance was gone.

The Mother urged them to be free, to do what they wanted for their hopes and dreams were the will of the Force and the reason for all life in the universe. The children grew too much to control, the light and dark spectrums of the Force under Mother’s permission was destroying the very planet they called home, and all the life within it.

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The Father, Son, and Daughter were forced to flee, to close themselves off from the world in the new sanctuary the Father had built to keep them, as well as all of the remaining universes, safe.

In his ploys, he had convinced his children to help imprison the Mother, no longer the woman they knew and loved, but a monster who had been tainted by corrupted power and sinister desire. She was locked away, her prison guarded by a black hole and infinite beasts who needed no food, no water, not even air, but lived to do only one thing, and that was attack anything within its domain that moved.

Until the escape pod found its way to her. An act of fate, or coincidence maybe? She used it to escape her prison world and did just as she said she would, she spread her ideas of freedom, and
found others who reveled in the chaos. And this war, what was happening out in the Unknown Regions with these aliens, with Ezra, with the Chiss… well this was all the result of her power and support. This was her love.

“There,” she said sweetly. “Do you now remember the lengths of my love, Daughter? Will you now join me and your new brother? Help him to recruit his little friend and all others in the galaxy who can feel the Force. Together, we can start over in this galaxy, and make it all better. Especially once I get my hands on Skywalker.”

Ahsoka snapped out of it and felt herself reach for a lightsaber that she hadn’t touched in years.

“Skywalker?”

“Yes…” She clucked. “Two of them I believe? The heirs of the “Chosen One” as my family once thought. You once thought so of me too, but left me to waste away alone the minute I found a way to be with you all forever. It was Skywalker’s fault that you all went mad. His fault that you all died! I will see to it that his son and daughter die as well. There will be no room for such troublemakers in our new galaxy, now will there, Daughter?”

Ahsoka ignited her sabers.

“I will not allow that to happen!”

She lashed out, but the mist was gone before her blades made contact.

“You would raise a hand against your own Mother?!” The voice yelled, no longer light, but deep and rumbling as the earth shook with her every word. “Perhaps it has been too long for us to have been apart, my dear. You have seemed to misplaced all of your manners and respect! Here—”

Lighting struck just inches from Ahsoka’s feet and she dodged it, scathing the end of her cloak as she ditched the cloth mid-flip and readied herself for another unseen attack.

“Let us remedy this together. Don’t worry, should your current vessel be damaged, there are plenty here that can take its place. I do not wish to fight you, darling…” The lightning roared, the voice doing the same as she screamed, “But I will if I must!”

And as Ahsoka readied her blades, she rushed off to meet Abeloth dead on, a fight that would no doubt be one that would stop everything and shake the heavens itself. She had to stall for time, but no matter what… she could not lose this battle. The fate of the entire galaxy depended on it.
Chapter Summary

Two paths come together as old faces meet once more and important truths are revealed on both sides. How will this affect the mission, and what surprises still lay in store before this war is finally over?

Chapter Notes

Posted on: January 10, 2019

*Sniff-Sniff!*

“The trail is very strong in the direction of that smoke.”

“Check out that crash site...” Sabine whistled, a bit of bemused wonder in her voice. “Figures Ezra would be on the busiest part of the planet.” She sighed and waved her hand after lifting her scopes. “Well, come on guys, let’s go get him.”

They began walking, all noticing the odd shift in gravity as they trekked through the forests. The Noghri were using the trees to their advantage, their bodies built for this kind of terrain to begin with, but Sabine could easily keep pace with them with help of this world's odd gravity. It was actually pretty easy for her to leap and jump at the same speeds as the Noghri here, and while it was no zero-gravity experience like it would be on a large meteor or desolate moon, it was still bounds easier than walking the entire way there.

*About time the universe starting cutting them some slack,* she thought, but seriously doubted their luck would last.

They stopped over the cliff’s edge and got down on their stomachs to look down at the crash site. A massive, white warship was undergoing repairs by an entire group of blue-skinned Chiss, most of them girls by the looks of them, while others went to and from through a small access tunnel which lead to a hangar nearby.

Sabine tilted her scopes and searched the scene. There seemed to be buildings and other man-made structures in one direction, *a Chiss village, probably?* It made sense the small world would be populated given the warring ships above, though what they could be fighting for on this tiny rock, Sabine didn’t know, and honestly, she didn’t care.

“Look there!” Cakhmaim gasped.

She didn’t need her scopes to see what he was referring to. It was the massive Beast of the Maw, sprawled out dead across the ground for miles. Again, no big surprise there, and yet, she still wondered how they managed to bring it down.
“How do you think the Chiss managed that one?”

“How do you think the Chiss managed that one?”

Unknown...” Kabarakh grumbled. “But it was unwise of them to do so.”

“Oh yeah? How come?”

“Killing the Beast of the Maw is said to bring bad fortune to all who are involved!” Meewalh snarled. “They are said to be just as dangerous in death than they were in life. It is an ill omen!”

She made an apprehensive noise and lowered her scopes again.

“Well, let’s hope those are just old rumors. I’d rather things go right for a change now that we’re so close to finding Ezra. Speaking of which, are you guys picking up any sign of a scent on him from up here?”

Cakhmaim sniffed the air and pointed.

“He is most certainly down there in this camp, but we will need to move in closer to find his whereabouts for certain.”

Excitement welled in Sabine’s stomach as she peered around at the camp below. How hard could it be to find one human in a sea of Chiss? Harder than she thought apparently because Sabine didn’t see him anywhere outside. Perhaps he was inside the ship, or the access tunnel even? He might even be in some sort of nearby prison if the Chiss had him held captive somewhere? Not for long.

Her inner thoughts were broken when Meewalh added, “And where the Bridge of Ezra waits, so too should the Grand Admiral be.”

“Here’s hoping.” Sabine agreed. “If I see that blue-skinned nerfherder, I swear, I’m going to—”

“Remember, Lady Wren...” Khabarakh interrupted. “Thrawn is to pay for his crimes to the Noghri people before all else. You may capture him, but he must first answer to us before any judgement is to be made through you.”

“Hey, he doesn’t need his arms to talk, now does he?”

The three Noghri smiled at the witty violence in her tone.

“No, I suppose he doesn’t?” grinned Khabarakh.

“Then what do you say we climb down there and get a better look at all of our targets?”

They nodded and all began their silent descent. She decided it was probably better to save her jetpack for something more important like a quick escape. The Chiss would hear her coming from a mile away and fuel wasn’t exactly in abundance out on these uncharted Unknown Regions’ planets.

We’re coming Ezra, just you wait... Sabine thought. Wherever you are, whatever trouble you’re in... I will get you back. Count on me!

Ezra felt something compelling him to look behind him, and he turned, but there was nothing there
aside the southern cliff-side and the unnamed forests of Schesa off in the distance. It was an odd sensation though... calming, adventurous, enthralling even, and yet it was so familiar?

“Strange?” He shrugged, logging the sense away for the time being as he wandered up to where Thrawn stood a few feet from his ship and the makeshift med-bay, silently cataloging anything of use while being in the middle of everything else. He was examining some statistics chart and looking back at the sky and the ship depending on each screen, humming and pondering each time.

“*Hmmm...*”

“What’s the word, Thrawn?”

He turned, but was unsurprised to see Ezra approaching as he gestured down to his charts with his visibly bruised hands.

“I am just collecting data. For now, it appears that the enemy is still stopped, but it is unknown for how much longer. Tell me, are the injured crew all taken care of?”

“The girls and I just finished patching up the last of them now. So, how are the repairs coming?”

“The ship has been heavily damaged, I’m afraid. It may take longer to repair than we have at our disposal during this unexpected ceasefire.” Thrawn frowned, grunting once as he held his side and stood tall once more to deliver the last few words of his statement.

“Hey, are you okay?” Ezra shot him a look through distrusting eyes and lifted a brow. “Not hiding broken ribs again, are you?”

He grinned.

“Just a bit sore is all. I am not as young as I once was. Believe me, I’ve had worse. It is nothing to worry about.”

A hum escaped his lips, but Ezra nodded and folded his arms.

“Well alright, if you say so.”

“Your new injury is not bothering you, I hope?” He asked with a gesture to his torn uniform and massive scabbing wound connecting his shoulder and the side of his neck.

"Oh this?” He joked. "This is nothing! I'm more concerned about you, old timer."

“If I were you, I might be more concerned about the ship.”

“We'll help in any way we can.” He turned back and cupped his mouth to shout, “Hey girls! Why don’t you go down there and show these soldiers how to fix their ship properly!?”

He got a few looks from the injured crewmen, but the girls only laughed and ran off to help without question. They were more than eager to show off their skills in something less brutal than combat. The Vorsnkr too were running beside them, happy to just be alongside their girls, even the bandaged up ones who were in good spirits, albeit a bit slower than their brothers and sisters. They could all probably use some rest after that battle, but rest would have to wait. Just because they were at a standstill didn't mean they could relax and let their guards down.

Thrawn smiled as he watched them all go.

“You have truly trained these soldiers well. The use of Vorsnkr as protective companions was a
remarkable idea, and both the animals and these young women appear to trust your leadership very much.”

“Yeah? Well, they’ve taught me plenty too.” He smiled, frowning just a split second later as both men turned to look up at the orbiting white star-shaped blotch hovering closely above their system. “But, I still worry about them, Thrawn.”

“Do not worry. If all goes according to plan, they will never need to face that worldship.”

Ezra nodded and broke his gaze, the pain in his eyes making his face appear more mature than it really was. It made Thrawn feel a sudden sensation of guilt for putting so much tension on the boy’s shoulders.

It seems he was not the only one who was feeling aged these days.

“Speak your mind, Ezra. You will feel better.”

Observant as ever… He thought with a shake of his head. Chiss… Still, he was right. Better to speak his mind now while they had a moment to breathe rather than later. Maybe Thrawn would know what to do? He had been doing this sort of thing a lot longer than him.

“Thrawn, I know the ozyly-eshehmo are warriors, I really do. Half of them can kick my butt any day of the week, but at the same time, I know that they’re children too. I know a big part of us being grounded on Schesa was to protect the border, but I think Eli also wanted me to keep the kids safe. I want to keep them safe too, but— well— I’ve failed. I’ve allowed so many of the girls to die under my watch, Thrawn. I just… I don’t know what to do. How do I stop losing the people I care about? Nothing I’ve done is working, and the Force Healing isn’t as strong as it once was since I broke ties with Krayt. I’m just— so— so sick of watching my friends be killed.”

Thrawn placed a hand on his shoulder and waited for the anguished expression on his face to ease before speaking.

"You face a common dilemma that all leaders and warriors must overcome, Ezra. You cannot control the loss of life from your forces any more than you can control the position of the stars in the sky. As a leader, loss is just an inevitable part of war, though we do our utmost as leaders to prevent it. Sometimes though, even our best is not enough, and believe me when I say that the pain and guilt you feel will not go away so lightly.”

“Who ever thought making them soldiers was a good idea? They’re so young Thrawn!”

“So were you at one time. The Ozyly-eshehmo are young, that much is true, but this is just how it has always been for my people. We were all children once. Age cannot be restrained to any one warrior, for there will always be someone younger than you who tragically dies in battle, and someone older who sees the loss with this same kind of guilt.” He paused and looked over at him. “In that same regard, there will always be someone younger to rise and take down older enemies, just as you have done with me and so many others in the past when you and your Rebel crew fought valiantly against the oppression of the Empire. You were quite young then, weren’t you?”

Ezra nodded, if only to himself.

“Then the only difference now is that there is someone younger who has stepped forth to take your place as the child-soldier. In a few years, someone will take over that position, and another after that. You and I will always continue to climb higher in age, but you must never forget that who you deem as merely a child, is simply a shadow of the youthful spirit you once were yourself. All of us
no matter the age have our chances at life, at death, victory, and defeat.” He hummed again, this time a smile forming as he placed his hand on Ezra’s shoulder. “Given our age differences, why... I often see that very spark of my own youthful ambitions alive in you, as I am sure you see in each of your students, yes?”

"Well... yeah, I guess so?” He replied, rubbing at his forehead. “I just—” He huffed. “I get what you’re saying, Thrawn, but I still wish there was a way to work all of this out without all of the killing."

Thrawn's smile widen more sympathetically and he gave the young man a pat on his uninjured shoulder.

"Ah! Accomplish that, Ezra, and I suspect you will be capable of far more than just mere miracles."

"Sure could use another one of those right about now, huh?” He smirked, snorting once before the frown formed back on his face and he shot his eyes back up to meet the Chiss. "Speaking of which, you want to let me in on this bright idea of yours to take the Far Outsiders out while they're frozen? Maybe if all goes well, we won’t need my "miracles" after all?"

“Of course, but I must warn you that you are not going to like it.”

“When have I ever liked your plans?” Ezra teased.

They shared a small laugh, but then... There it was again! Like a rock to the back of the head!

WRRRSH!

There was a sound growing closer, a familiar sound, but what was it? He could just barely put his finger on it. It almost sounded like a jetpack, but no... Chiss didn’t have jetpacks, did they? Did they!? The only people he’d ever know who had jetpacks were the—

Time seemed to slow down as he felt the sensation crawling up his spine, now coupled with the inevitability of unavoidable fast-approaching danger! The look on Thrawn’s face only confirmed it, and Ezra tossed all of his other thoughts aside in order to trust in his instincts as they alerted his body into an automatic defensive position.

Bzzzt!

His saber ignited and came up just in time to block a glowing green weapon. A weapon— he saw now— that was none other than a very familiar looking green lightsaber.

It took him only a second to register the weapon, the hand holding it, the armor attached to the body, her masterful combative stance, even the strength she used against him as she pushed the blade deeper into his, her jetpack shutting off as soon as she’d made contact with an opponent. Only one person in the entire galaxy could possibly lay beneath it all, and he was so shocked that he almost forgot how to breathe much less connect all the clues together in order to say her name.

“Sabine?”

Time began to move again, but even though she'd watched the word leave his lips she was unprepared when he spoke, and even less prepared to see his face. She had only seen the back of his head before and figured him for another Chiss, but she had recognized Thrawn’s face and voice in an instant. She leapt from the ledge without thinking, her only focus, on dealing a crippling blow to Thrawn or at least tackling the alien and forcing him to reveal every little thing he knew about
Ezra, but now—none of that mattered now—because here he was.

He was taller, more defined, and matured than she remembered. The new hairstyle, facial hair, and the fact that his voice had gotten deeper was a twist, but in all hindsight it was to be expected after all these years. Even his uniform, it seemed, still held traces of who he once was. He looked good. Not like a prisoner or a slave for close to six years, but well-kept, trained, and sturdy almost like some sort of soldier?

It took her only a single second to process it all before forgetting all about her attack on the Grand Admiral in order to look back into those deep blue eyes and find her breath again.

“Ezra?”

She released pressure on her saber, his blazing orange one remaining in the air as each of them slowly began to lower their weapons. Both shut down simultaneously, Sabine’s hand coming up to lift the helmet from her face as she let out a single, small gasp, the corners of her lips rising once she saw his face with her own two eyes.

She was exactly as he remembered, save for the change in armor patterns and the new haircut, which was a different shade of purple and shorter even than Koree’s was when they’d first arrived here. But as for the rest of her... her skin, her lips, her eyes... nothing had changed. It was really her.

Their brows crinkled, tears in their eyes as they merely stood and stared at one another for the longest while. Finally they remembered how to breathe and slammed together in a tight hug that could put even the grip of a Ysalamiri to shame. Sobs were wet on both of their necks, before they squeezed each other tighter, Ezra rocking her back and forth with laughter muffled against her embrace.
He was so much taller than she remembered, so much—stronger? She grunted when Ezra finally picked her up and spun her around like she and her armor weighed absolutely nothing, both laughing until finally he set her down again.

“Sabine!” He said quickly, fumbling a little as his hands hovered over her arms and shoulders.

His fingers trembled, the smile he wore was huge, and his eyes were still wet with joy. He was excited, more so than he had been in a long time. He wasn’t sure if he was dreaming or if this was some sort of twisted Force vision, but right now, he didn’t care. She looked real, felt real too, and by all the stars in the sky, he hoped that she wouldn’t disappear!

“Sorry I’m late, but you know, you were counting on me, so I had to get here eventually right? You are not an easy guy to track down, you know that?” She chuckled, trying to keep at least a little practiced calm in her voice despite the fact she wanted to do a back-flip off the walls from excitement. “So, tell me, Bridger, was that message for me to keep Lothal safe or to come find you? I’ve always wondered.”

“I don’t know about any of that, but man! I just—I can’t believe you’re really here! How are you here!?” He rubbed his hair and laughed. “I— I thought you were dead!”

“Me?” She wiped her cheeks and shook her head. “You go gallivanting off on a purrgil ride for over six years and you think I’m the one that’s dead!?”

Sabine punched him hard in the arm that wasn’t sporting the impressive scar, and he heard his
bones pop, though all he could do was smile and enjoy the pain of it all. The pain was real, which meant she was too.

He held up his hands and grinned sheepishly. “Wait, so you knew about that?”

“Knew about it?” She frowned. “Ezra I was there? We all were.”

“We?” He repeated his brows coming down low and confused. “I— I don't understand. I thought all of you were dead. What about the explosion? How did you escape?”

She studied his face slowly and took a step towards him.

“Explosion? Do you mean the one at the fuel depot?”

He nodded unsurely.

"Well, maybe not that one, but one around that same time. It took out the Ghost and killed all of you. I was the only survivor... Or— that's what I've thought all these years?"

“Ezra…” She swallowed and narrowed her eyes. “Only Kanan died in that explosion. Nobody else. That's why he died. He was protecting all of us. You and Hera were already on-board when he shoved us all away. There was no other explosion on the Ghost.

A motion of her hand in his direction caused Thrawn to lean out of range as the Mandalorian’s eyes locked on him. They were bloodthirsty, but her main concern at the moment was still on Ezra, so she turned her attention away.

He merely gripped his head and waited for his mind to catch up to him, memories and blank spots in his mind filling in from her words.

*It was all true, wasn't it?*

“I— I didn't remember... I was told— I was—”

His eyes visibly hardened as the orange saber ignited again, this time pointed directly at Thrawn's throat.

The Chiss remained silent, but he knew this was bound to happen eventually. He merely kept his calm and leaned a few inches back to avoid the heat of the weapon directly. Emotions or no, he wagered that Ezra probably wouldn’t kill him in the middle of everyone around them. The Mandalorian on the other hand, was less of a sound certainty.

“I can't believe you!” Ezra shouted. “I can't believe you would let me believe they were all dead just to keep me here! H-how could you do that to me, Thrawn!? They're my family!”

Thrawn opened his mouth to speak, but wound up only taking a single step back as Ezra took one forward.

“Don’t think I’ve forgotten about what all you've done!” Sabine pointed, that rage in her eyes coming back again with a vengeance as she looked to Thrawn and spat her venom at him. “You’re going to let Ezra go, and then we’re going to have a few words, Grand Admiral!”

“Yeah, you might not make it that long…” Ezra grumbled, unsure to even himself if he were serious or not in his threats.

Below, no doubt the girls and Thrawn’s soldiers were watching the attack, but Ezra didn’t care. He
was too hurt to care. He wanted to be— but— he sighed and wrenched his head down, his eyes shut from the conflicting headache he felt in his mind.

“Ezra—” he started, but another step and another inch closer to his neck silenced his statement before it could form.

“Thrawn, so help me, if you don’t stop talking—”

Bzzzt!

Suddenly there was a flash of green and another lightsaber came up to block Ezra’s own as Thrawn tumbled backwards and steadied himself a safe distance away.

Sabine reached down towards her hip with her free hand, only to discover the hilt was suddenly gone. Stolen? Pick-pocketed, but by who? She looked and watched with some amusement at the Chiss woman holding the blade with surprisingly decent defensive form.

Who was she?

“Th-Tharin!” Ezra swallowed. “Where did you come from?”

She narrowed her eyes, a brow raised as she shoved him back and swung out the saber again. Ezra blocked it, his own stupefied expression blinking in her direction as she took control of their fight just like it were a sparring match back in the labs.

“I volunteered to join the party which was assigned to come here to fix the laser grid.” She spoke calmly, but there was an edge to her tone that almost reminded him of the condescending attitude Thrass always had. She pushed again and this time, Ezra stayed far enough away that he wouldn’t have to block another swing. “I was hoping to help the two of you while I was here, and yet, here I am! Only to discover you two attempting to kill each other, and I must say that I am not as surprised as I probably should be to learn of this.”

“Tharin, you don’t understand. Thrawn’s crossed a line! My family—”

“I heard all of it.” She interrupted gently. “Ezra, I know how you must be feeling, and I know Thrawn probably has this fight coming, but we still need him in one piece. He’s the only one who can help us finish this war.”

He gritted his teeth, but looked away. He hated it when she was right... and... she was usually right. With a roll of his eyes, he shut down his saber and allowed the tension to leave his body, before shooting a guilty look back up at her.

“Alright.” he sighed. “You’re right…”

“I know.” She smiled smugly.

“Ezra!” Sabine exclaimed, looking now to the girl with the self-satisfied smirk of accomplishment. “Who are you?” she asked suddenly, not very kindly either as her narrowed eyes shifted from her, then to Thrawn, and back over to Ezra. “What’s going on? Who is this?”

“Mitth’ar’inrokini,” the young woman replied, giving Sabine a once-over with her glowing red eyes before smirking. “You may call me Tharin. It’s nice to finally meet you Sabine Wren. I’m very glad to see you are not dead.”

Eyes even more on edge, she felt one brow lift to change her expression from mistrustful anger into
suspicious confusion.

Tharin deactivated the weapon before returning the old saber hilt back into her hands just as Ezra wrinkled his face into a bashful-looking grin.

“Forgive me for borrowing the weapon. Family drama and all that! Ezra tells me that you know how it goes?”

Blinking hard, Sabine shook her head robotically and turned back to Ezra with questions in her eyes and visible all over her face.

“Sabine, this is Tharin, she's my—” His face flushed. “Well we’re kind of—”

Tharin chuckled at how flustered he was getting and moved in to help.

“What he means to say is that we are together.”

"Together?"

"Together, together..." He blushed even redder.

Now both brows were high up on her forehead as she looked from Ezra to the Chiss woman and back. Without warning she stepped forward and delivered another sharp strike to Ezra’s upper arm with her helmet, unsure if she had hit the uninjured arm or not.

“Owww!?” He exclaimed.

“Well, I didn’t know if you had it in you, Bridger!” Sabine winked before turning to smirk back at Tharin. “And who knew a Chiss could pick-pocketed a Mandalorian so easily? I didn’t even hear you coming!”

He lifted his hands slightly, half in surrender, the other part of him hoping she wasn’t going to hit him again.

“Well, I taught her everything I knew?”

Tharin cleared her throat and shot him a look.

“Excuse me, but I believe I am the one who taught you everything that I know?”

A small breath of a laugh came out of Sabine’s mouth at that. So far she was interesting to say the least. If she managed to keep Thrawn and Ezra in line, pickpocket a lightsaber, and use it without batting an eye against the man she loved, then she must be some girl, indeed.

“I like her.”

His blush was so intense that steam could be coming off his face and he wouldn't question it, but he smiled a bit brighter when he heard her approval, and with it his nerves began to finally quell down.

“Ezra always told me you and I would get along!” Tharin grinned. “I’ve always wondered what it would be like to have a sister of my own.”

“Sister huh?”

She nodded, but turned and motioned her uncle back towards the group. So far he had been
keeping a healthy distance away to let whatever was happening play out, but at least with Tharin there, they might be able to set aside emotions long enough to get back to the pressing matter at hand.

“Now,” she said. “Uncle Thrawn, I believe you were about to tell Ezra about your next plans before the two of you were interrupted. I would like to hear this as well, especially if the rumors are true and what you have planned next is intended to end this awful war once and for all.”

“Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait! Uncle Thrawn!?” Sabine repeated loudly, diverting her gaze to the ship off in the distance and all the Chiss that were looking their way from down the hill. “Hold on, is that a white TIE Fighter? Are those lightsaber lances? What’s with those feral black animals from the humid jungle world? But more importantly— Uncle Thrawn!!”

Ezra rubbed at his neck, fiddling nervously as he stepped toward her and placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. “Yeah... so, Sabine I have a lot to tell you.”

“I’ll say! What is going—”

!!!

There was a jolt, another sense of danger in the Force. Ezra had been in war for nearly six years, so he felt it before he saw it, his saber coming up in an impressive spin as he blocked three projectiles heading straight for Thrawn, and left them as severed halves along the ground.

*Spears of some sort? Expertly thrown by the looks of them too.*

The Chiss parted his lips to speak, to thank him, but Ezra got out his statement first.

“Shut up! I'm still mad at you!” He snapped. “Tharin’s right though, if we want to win this war we need you alive, so where did those spears come from?”

Tharin pointed.

“Unknown enemies, coming from over that ridge!“

They came running and Ezra got into fighting stance as Thrawn, Sabine, and Tharin pulled out their blasters.

“Are those—” He peered. “Noghri?”

*Oh right, the Noghri!* Sabine thought suddenly, pocketing her weapons and running out towards them. “Wait, they're friendly, don't hurt them!” She held out her arms and the three stopped before her. “Wait! Wait! Stand down. I’m sorry, it’s complicated, but we can’t capture Thrawn right now.”

“*Grrr! Why not!?*” One of them growled, the other two showing their teeth as well.

“You have seemingly located the Bridge of Ezra! Why now must we wait to obtain our target?”

“Hey short-stuff, if you’re wanting to kill Thrawn for something, there’s a pretty long line! You’re going to have to take a number!” Ezra stated firmly, shutting down his saber, but keeping it in hand, just in case.

Sabine grumbled at his sass and held out a hand in warning as the other remained to block the three Noghri from continuing their path of attack to Thrawn.
“Please Khabarak… we need him here a little while longer, then I promise, he’s all yours.”

“If it is any consolation, you have my word that I will not to try to escape whatever is happening here?” Thrawn offered.

Everyone ignored him.

“Trust me, please!” Sabine insisted.

They weren’t happy about it, but the Noghri did as she said and stood down, loyally, and without further question.

“Very well…”

“Fascinating…” Thrawn said lightly, that amused intrigue in his tone.

“You—” Ezra pointed with the hilt of his weapon. “Stop talking.” He pointed down. “You three, start explaining yourselves.”

They hissed at him and Sabine came up and placed her hand on his until Ezra took a step back.

“Ezra, this is Khabarak, Cakhmaim, and Meewalh. We ran into them on the way here and they’ve been helping to find you by tracking your scent for months. They’ve been good company while we fought off hostiles on our way here too. The Noghri are incredibly capable trackers and warriors. Without them, well— I don’t know how long it might have taken to find you out here.”

“My scent?” Ezra repeated with a weird look on his face.

“Hostiles?” Tharin asked in a much calmer tone.

“Beasts of no remorse!” Khabarak snarled.

“Right!” Sabine nodded. “We’ve fought off a lot of strange things, most of them local animals like those black dog things down the hill, but sometimes we ran into some ships and encampments. The creatures there— well, I’ve never seen aliens like them before. They attack without mercy, kill anything in sight, they don’t seem to speak, but they are completely primitive to technology, and they look like something straight out of a nightmare.”

“Sounds like the Yuuzhan Vong!” Ezra blinked. “Wait… you’ve been fighting them too?”

She nodded as if it were no big deal.

“A lot actually. They’re hard to kill, but together we’ve managed to keep them off our backs. They’re swarming all over the place, so I assume they’re part of the war you guys are fighting. Ezra, why exactly are you in the middle of war between the Chiss and these—Yuuzhan Vong anyway?”

“Long story?” He blushed. “So, how did you all get out here?”


“Our hardships will all have been worth it to put an end to Grand Admiral Thrawn!” Cakhmaim growled.

“I thought you and the Noghri had a strong alliance?” Tharin frowned.
“We come for recompense for our land and our people you traitor!”

“Rukh is dead, the Empire all but gone, but you have broken your promises to heal our world, and for that you must pay!”

“Ah, I see now…” Thrawn replied, the unamused hum and glare in his eyes that meant something was confused and needed explaining, and not in his own mind, but in somebody else’s.

“We should just trial and convict him right now!”

“No!” Tharin jumped, blocking Thrawn as one of the more vicious looking Noghri took a step forward.

“Don’t move!” Ezra warned, his own arm coming up to protect Tharin as she shielded her uncle. Tension was high, but Ezra’s was the most commanding presence at the moment and his words took president over all others. “Look, I’m grateful you three have been helping my friend, and I sympathize with your planet, I really do, but you have no idea how important winning this war is. Not just for us. For everyone. So you either need to listen to Sabine or I’ll make you back-off!”

That was a little out of character for Ezra? Sabine frowned. She supposed the stresses of war had given him moods before, but still…

Gently, she motioned the Noghri back and stepped forward, noticing that his face too seemed to calm almost instantly as she walked closer to him.

“Ezra, we couldn’t have found you without the Noghri. They are not your enemies.”

He sighed and loosened his stance as did the two Chiss behind him.

“Forgive me,” he said with a slight bow down to the three. “I— I meant no disrespect. Honestly.”

The Noghri let out a light snort, but nodded and bowed to him as well.

“Very well, Bridge of Ezra, we shall halt our mission if Thrawn’s presence truly is for the greater good of us all.”

“It is.” he nodded fervently. “Thank you.”

“But we will be watching him closely!” The needle-toothed one hissed in warning.

Ezra lifted his brows a little, but nodded, Sabine meanwhile let herself give out a breath of relief.

“Glad we’re all on the same page now. Ahsoka said that something like this might happen, but I didn’t expect things to go like this when we got here?”

“Ahsoka!?” Ezra exclaimed brightly, turning back to her as if she’d offered him cold water in the middle of a sandy wasteland. Eyes big, he took her hand and squeezed it. “So it is true, Ahsoka’s here!?”

“The little green man was right!” Tharin smiled, her enthusiasm matching his own as she grabbed him from behind and rocked his shoulders.

“What?”

“Yoda! No, no, I mean Ahsoka!” Ezra said again before looking all around. “I’ll explain it later. So, where is she?”
Sabine pointed up, and it took Ezra a few seconds longer to register what exactly she was pointing to.

"Wait, she's on the worldship?"

“She said there was something she had to do there, and she snuck aboard without explaining her plan to us. She's been awfully cryptic since she got back. It's a little hard to talk to her actually.”

“Interesting. Whatever she’s doing must be why the army has stopped moving? Impressive!” Tharin stated.

Thrawn cleared his throat and all glared over in his direction.

“May I be permitted now to speak?”

Tharin shot the humans a look, and they shrugged begrudgingly.

“As I was saying prior to—” He looked at Sabine and the Noghri. “Recent events. My plan is going to be risky, though at least now we know it is very possible to accomplish.”

“How so, G'en'vti?”

He turned to Ezra.

“I have assigned teams to infiltrate the worldship and place detonators while you distract and demobilize Darth Krayt. He can sense our movements and attack strategies, so it is imperative that he be detained if we are ever to keep the Far Outsiders from breaching any farther than Schesa. Your associate, Ahsoka, may very well be doing just that as we speak, or if rumors are true, then she is confronting Abeloth herself. No matter the outcome, we cannot allow our people to be under their influence or control. They must be taken out first if we are to succeed with the placing of internal detonators.”

“Abeloth?” Both Tharin and Sabine asked.

“Long story,” Ezra and Thrawn said in unison.

This caused Ezra to grumble slightly, but nod as he stepped away and spoke down into his watch. “Veo cart to csact'i ror csea can'let'ehn cset'ir?”

A comm? Sabine wondered. But wait, what sort of language was that? She watched in amazement, the hissing gibberish completely lost on her. Wasn't she supposed to be the one who was good with languages?

“Cset'ir csarcican't cart rokes ttan'ehah can cssebah ch'an'oaci, rab to can'let'ehn cart cssi bekavcah ch'at cart bah ch'otcah b ipah!” The voices replied to him in that same language. “Hah csarcican't ch'ol. Csei cart sea.”

“Bin’vi.”

“Uh… what the heck kind of language was that?”

Ezra blushed again and ran a hand through his hair.

“Like I said, I have a lot to tell you.” He turned, and his tone did as well into that of a soldier. “Thrawn, it looks like the girls are going to have your ship running again in a half hour, but it will never survive an attack. It’ll fly, and we can use it for looks, but that’s about it.”
Thrawn ticked his tongue and nodded.

“Unfortunate, but understandable. Thank you.”

Ezra looked over, but his voice shifted as he pointed back to the hangar.

“Right... well... we can still take a shuttle up to the worldship if we can get cloaking on it.”

“I can make that happen!” Tharin offered. “Just let me tell the rest of the team that they’re going to be on their own for the laser-net repairs.”

He stepped towards her, his brows suddenly very serious.

“It’ll be dangerous.”

Thrawn looked much the same way.

“Your father will not want you going on such a mission, Tharin.”

“Do you want cloaking or not?” She argued. “I can install it in the air, or you can wait and hope the enemy stays complacent? I don’t wish to place any bets on that, and we’ve wasted enough time on the ground fighting among ourselves as is. So, I’m going!”

Thrawn bowed his head, but there was the smallest glimmer of pride in his voice.

“Very well, but allow me to accompany you to the hangar. There are a few items of technology that I wish to procure, as well as a task which I believe I could use your assistance with.”

“Who else is going to be on this team?” Ezra asked.

“I will be accompanying you of course, and my phalanx is ready to provide more than enough backup. Eli’s fleets will keep air patrols off of us while Admiral Ar’alani and the ozyly-esehembo maintain our line here. With any luck, they will not have any need to fight at all, for all of the warriors will be converging on our locations once we are aboard the worldship.”

“That’ll be spreading us out pretty thin, don’t you think?” Ezra pondered. “Not to mention, it’ll be putting us right into the heart of their endless forces?”

“And I’m not crazy about letting you come with us!” Sabine growled, blaster jabbing in his direction.

“We agree with the Lady Wren!” Hissed one of the Noghri with the sharpest looking teeth.

“Wait, you’re coming too?” Tharin asked.

“Of course I am! I came here to find Ezra and I’m not about to let him run off somewhere and lose him again.” Sabine stated.

“And we will protect Lady Wren as she has protected us as well,” Meewalh added.

“You may accompany us if you wish, but my presence is not up for discussion,” Thrawn said sternly. “Now tell me, would it be possible to track the path in which your companion infiltrated the base?”

Sabine felt her blood boil, but nodded and spoke through gritted teeth.
“Yes…”

“Very good. That knowledge will make our entrance that much easier. Retrieve it at once, and we will make copies for the remainder of the infiltration team.”

“Lady Wren, what are your orders?”

She bit her lip and shoved her helmet on reluctantly.

“We’re going along with Thrawn’s plan for now. One of you go back to the ship and grab those specs, then meet us back at the hangar.”

“I will go, Lady Wren. I wish to retrieve our other weapons as well.”

“Alright, Cakhmaim. Thank you.”

“So what’s with all this Lady Wren stuff?” Ezra teased under his breath as the short Noghri ran off at full speed and used the light Schesa gravity to make a far jump into the treeline.

“What can I say?” She shrugged. “I have a lot to tell you too?”

“I thank you, Khabarakh and Meewalh.” Thrawn nodded. “Your assistance will be most appreciated. When we return, I will be more than happy to listen to your accusations against me, and offer up any evidence I can to help ease your anger.”

They snorted in response and walked off towards the hangar.

“Save room for mine too!” Ezra lifted a brow and shot him a look.

Thrawn did not reply.

"Well, come on G'en'viti, let's go get those materials. We will return shortly." Tharin smiled, shooting back a wink as she added, "You two should catch-up while we're gone."

Ezra nodded and stepped forward to kiss her forehead before growing extra embarrassed when he suddenly remembered Sabine was watching and he backed off quickly, waving a little as Tharin and Thrawn made their way back towards the ships.

Sabine shot him a teasing look which only made Ezra grow redder, much to her amusement.

She could have fun with this easy fluster once they weren't all in mortal danger.

The two started down towards the hangar a few moments afterwards, waiting long enough to have some privacy, but Ezra knew with Chiss hearing, it was possible there could still be potential eavesdroppers. Thankfully they would be the kind who didn't speak Basic.

"So, you're some sort of soldier here?"

"Y-yeah?" He grinned, the hardened warrior fading back into the awkward boy she used to know. "See, I learned all sorts of things—language, combat, history—just so much stuff. Tharin actually taught me most of it, and the military taught me the rest after they made me an honorary Chiss for passing my trials. Oh man, that was a crazy year! Did you know Chiss years are three months longer than ours? It's true! There was Myrkr, and then Sposia, and the girls, and—"

"Whoa!" She laughed. "Slow down, I'm getting lost here. Girls? How many wives do you have up here, Bridger? If I'd known you were such a big shot, I wouldn't have risked my life to come down
She nudged him and he waved his hands through the air.

"What? Oh! No, no, no, no, no... my students! There are a handful of Chiss girls who acquire Force Sensitivity. Before the war it was a big secret!" He winked. "You had to go through all the tests and trials to get access to that sort of information."

She rolled her eyes.

“So it’s only girls who are Force sensitive here? That’s a little odd?”

“Mostly! See, I have two boys now too, but they’re both pretty young. One of them is even human. Speaking of which, remind me later to tell you all about the Imperials. Oh, you’re going to love them!”

“Imperials?” She repeated, the word sounding bitter on her tongue. “Yeah, I don’t think the words “me” and “love” could ever go in the same sentence as “Imperials”, Ezra. Unless of course you add "defector" to the end?”

“At this point, I guess I can? They weren’t so bad before that though, you just have to get to know them a little. The Imperials, the Chiss, Eli, and even though I want to wring his neck, Thrawn—well, they’ve all been helping me get through the last few years out here. Despite our differences, they’re my friends and we’ve got a lot of history together now. I know it might be weird at first, but hey, you used to be a bounty hunter?” He grinned. "I hope you’ll stick around to meet them all and give them a chance."

"Hmmm…” She hummed unsurely. "So these are the people that flew here with you I guess?"

“Well, technically we crashed. I lost my memory for a little while and am still picking up the pieces, but yeah, we've all been together since we got out here. Oh man, I can’t wait to tell you all about the adventures we’ve been on."

“Well, I guess you're going to have to tell me all about that once I get you back home."

He frowned.

"Home?"

"Yeah? You know, Lothal? The place you disappeared from trying to protect?" She frowned too. "Once we get Ahsoka, we're out of here, right? You're still coming back, aren't you?"

He rubbed his neck.

“Well... I don't know, I mean, I'd like to... eventually... but—" He took a breath. "Sabine, there's a war going on. A bad one, and if I don't help stop it, the Yuuzhan Vong could take over the entire universe. They're way worse than you realize. Even the Empire looks good compared to them, and then there's Krayt—" He shook his head. "Thrawn’s right, if I don’t stop him, the ozyly-esehembo will never be safe! And then there’s Tharin—Oh jeez, and Jorj and Nehso? Lohrana and Thrass might kill me, and I’d be the target of over a dozen troops. Don't get me wrong, Sabine! I do want to see everyone again. I mean— it's great to see you and you just got here! I have so many questions! But—"

She placed her fingers on his lips and he stopped and took a breath.
"You can't leave."

He took in another sigh and shook his head.

"I have a responsibility to my friends here."

"Oh yeah!?!" She said, a little more vehemently than she’d meant to. "And what about your friends back home, huh?!"

*Home.* Each time she said the word, Ezra pictured two places, one on the Ghost, flying over Lothal with his crew, and the other, his saber in hand, defending worlds with his ground troops and students, coming back to Tharin and Jorj in his Clawcraft.

"I'm here to protect them too, Sabine. Trust me. The Yuuzhan Vong—"

"Are bad." She finished, begrudgingly as she tried to avoid snapping at him. Instead she only took in a deep breath and let the words out in a sigh. "I know… I know…"

"Remember when you stayed behind to fight with your family on Mandalore? Well, I know I haven't known them as long, but these guys out here. Well, in a way, Sabine, they're my family now too. I can't just leave them, and I won't. Not knowing how dangerous a threat we face out here, but I'm fighting to protect everybody, not just the Chiss. That means you—" His smile grew despite the serious arch in his brows. "Zeb, Hera, Chopper, and all the other family I thought was gone. Now that I know they're out there, I'm trying to protect them just as much as I am the whole galaxy!

She sighed and hid a small smirk. In her younger years, she probably would have tried to argue with him a little more, but her older self could see that he had truly made himself a life here. A few minutes ago, she thought she'd bust in here, blasters blazing, and take out Thrawn while the Noghri grabbed Ezra and they all made a break for it to the T-6. Instead, Ezra had been here for so long now that he didn't need saving, he needed help. Help with his new life. Help with this war.

"Leave it up to you to hold the weight of the galaxy on your shoulders. Alright! I'm with you, for however long it takes."

"Sabine, I—"

"Don't try to talk me out of it!" she interrupted. "Just tell me what I need to do."

He smiled and hugged her.

"Do you know how much I've missed you?"

She held him back and patted him a few times as they finished their walk down the hill. Once they crossed the threshold of the hangar, Thrawn, Tharin, and the two Noghri approached them with an armload of equipment each as they made their way to the shuttle nearest the door that wasn't currently on fire or busted.

"Uh, what's all this?" Ezra pointed.

The less terrifying-looking male Noghri— Khabarakh? Ezra thought— grunted once and lifted a stack half his own height into his arms before speaking.

"Thrawn revealed cloaking technology that he had once gifted to our people on his visit to Honoghr."
“Oh!” He nodded. “Right, Rukh had a cloaking device. I remember that.”

“Right!” Tharin mused. “And it was specific to his species genetics so not just anybody could steal it or use it. That’s pretty old tech, but easy enough to manipulate. Using these salvaged ship parts, I think I can create a replica on our way to the worldship once I’m finished with the ship’s own cloaking shield.”

"You can make a modified cloaking device?" Sabine snapped her fingers. “Just like that?”

"Of course. The concept is quite simple in theory, although—" she winked. "I may need a little blood to get the specific biometrics right. Oh, if I had access to my lab tools, I could make something better, but I suppose I’ll just have to work with what I have?"

Sabine made another face.

"What?"

Ezra only chuckled and shook his head.

“Tharin’s kind of a genius technician, Sabine. It’s why she was put in charge of my training when I got here.” He shot a glare at Thrawn. "Well, most of the reason anyway."

"Kind of a genius?" Tharin repeated with one lifted brow.

"Oh, you know what I meant."

She smirked and rolled her eyes at him, handing off a few parts of her own scrap metal pile for him to hold.

By that time, Cakhmaim had returned and handed his findings over to Thrawn, who took it only after he dumped his entire armload of parts into Sabine’s unsuspecting hands.

She had half a mind to drop it all, but—sigh—if Ezra’s girlfriend needed them to make cloaking, then she’d play along for now. Oh, that Chiss was lucky her arms were full or else she’d—

“Here is the star path you have requested,” Cakhmaim said, his gravelly voice interrupting her more vicious internal thoughts.

“Excellent,” Thrawn replied. “Come then, there is not a moment to lose. Everyone grab as many materials as you can and get aboard the shuttle. Tharin, tell them what is needed for your inventions.”

“Yes G’en’vti.”

He smiled proudly again and then turned to walk aboard the ship and send the data. The rest of them hurried behind him, Sabine leaning in closer to Ezra to whisper something at his ear.

“Does he seem more— I don’t know— "Mellow" than I remember?"

“You don’t know the half of it. Come on, we can swap stories on the way. I still can’t believe you’re alive! You have to tell me what’s been going on. How is everyone? What all have you been doing?”

She snickered and waved him off.

“We better live through this, Bridger because if we die before we swap stories and I get my
answers, then I’m going to kill you.”

She set down her parts on the floor and punched him again, only this time the pain was less appreciated. *Now it was just starting to hurt.*

“Ouch! Okay! Yeesh! What was that one for!?”

“For making me worry all these years,” she said back, no doubt smiling smugly beneath that visor. Tharin laughed from behind them and added to the pile of scrap on the floor.

“She *is* brash!”

“Brash, huh?” Sabine repeated towards Ezra, though somehow he could both see and hear the threat in her voice masked beneath one of her signature smiles. Luckily Tharin still had more to say and rescued him from Sabine’s wrath.

“I am glad you are reunited with your *g'entehisei tar Tta g'et Rin'hi, Ezra.*”

“Your what?”

“It means “bonded by more than blood”,” he replied. “See, I told my friends here all about you and what you mean to me. It’s the closest translatable term the Chiss had.”

“Right!” Tharin nodded. “You are not true siblings, more than friends, closer than comrades at arms, your connection runs deeper than family bonds allow, yet you are not quite lovers either. *G'entehisei tar Tta g'et Rin'hi.*”

“*G'entehisei tar Tta g'et Rin'hi?*” Sabine tested. “Huh, bit of a mouthful isn’t it?”

The Chiss girl’s eyes went wide and bright.

“Very good!” She nodded eagerly. “Very very good! That is a complicated term and you got it on the first try! Oh—” Tharin touched the tip of her finger to Sabine’s armor and tapped inquisitively before grabbing her helmeted face in both hands and peering way too closely into the visor. “Simply fascinating! I hope we live through this battle as well because I wish to study you very closely, Sabine Wren!”

“Uhhhh?” Sabine’s voice lingered on the tone that meant, she was about to throw Tharin on the ground if she didn’t release her face and take about three steps back.

"Oh, hey! So, fun fact about Chiss, Sabine! They speak their minds and aren’t big on personal space. Tharin is just extra curious, but don’t worry, she’s harmless...” He paused at the shuttle’s ramp and made a face. “Well mostly?”

“Oh… I see?”

It wasn’t the best excuse, but Sabine could wait for him to explain everything to her in better detail later. Right now she was supposed to be keeping him safe, and yet, here she was, roped into some death-mission Thrawn made up and Ezra wasn’t even hesitating to be a part of it. She couldn’t pull him away from it either. He wanted to be here, he wanted to fight in this war. It was all happening so fast and it was so confusing, but thinking back, she supposed it wasn’t the strangest side quest they’d ever been on.

With the last of the scrap finally on-board, everyone stood ready for their next orders.
“Strap in everyone!” Thrawn alerted. “Ezra, the controls. Tharin, the cloaking. Miss Wren, you and the Noghri are welcome to the cannons if you are looking for something more to do.”

“Oh I’ll give you something to do…” Sabine muttered.

Thrawn lifted a brow. Meanwhile, Ezra shot her a shrug that meant “sorry, but just go along with it” and she let out a snarl before heading reluctantly to the guns.

“Fine! Come on guys…”

“As you wish Lady Wren.”

Each shot the Chiss another snort as they passed and Sabine actually stopped to deliver a quick punch to Thrawn’s stomach, though the Chiss just stood there and let it happen.

“That was from Hera! And for making me a Cargo-Mule! There’s more where it came from, so you better watch it!”

“I see…” he said, his voice not even sounding winded at all, at least to her ears. For Tharin and Ezra though, the pain could be heard clearly beneath the masked facade and both of them let out a tiny grimace before going back to their own work.

Fine! Whatever! Sabine thought. She didn’t need it to hurt him, but the punch felt good enough anyway. She could always hurt him for real later on.

Outwardly, Sabine only grumbled and turned on her heel to head towards the back of the ship.

“I’ll take the rear cannon.”

Thrawn nodded and walked up to the front, a hand placed on his abdomen as he let a small puff of breath out and stood now behind Ezra’s chair.

The boy was smiling, but pouted a bit as soon as he felt his encroaching presence. It was the first time in a long while that Thrawn could recall him looking so young and defiant.

And to think that just this morning he had been so brooding and mature?

“What do you want?” Ezra grumbled.

He didn’t let his emotions show, remaining calm and cool-faced as he spoke down to Ezra’s chair.

“I will not ask that you forgive me for the tale I told you of your crew.”

“I don’t think I can forgive it, Thrawn.” He slammed his hands down. “Every time I start to think I can, you do something or did something to make me change my mind. Not again! You’ve hurt me too many times! Are you my friend or aren’t you? Right now all I want to do is punch you in the gut like Sabine just did.”

“I would not blame you.”

“I just want to know one thing though. Why’d you do it? Why’d you lie to me about my crew?”

His gaze softened, and then he shut his eyes as if he were actually feeling guilty about the whole thing.

“I needed you to remain here and on my side.” Thrawn sighed. “I remembered our history in the
hospital and made the lie before my promise to you was formed. Back then, I was unsure if your emotions would target my people or the other Imperials, but I admit that most of my intentions were to keep you here in this war.”

Ezra shook his head.

"Krayt is trying to get me to join his side by removing my connections too. There was an incident in the battle, and Krayt managed to get control of my body. He was going to make me slaughter the girls so I would have nothing left to tether me to the Chiss. You've done the same thing to me with my crew, you do realize that, don't you?"

Thrawn shut his eyes, trying not to focus on the pain and betrayal lingering within the statement Ezra was trying so desperately to remain calm.

“I do wish it could have gone differently,” he continued. “But you see why I had to do what I did. The Yuuzhan Vong must be stopped, by any means necessary, and after Lothal, any chance I had to convince the Empire to rally their resources in order to help, seemingly shot into hyperspace at the same instance we did. However, where Krayt would force you to sever your own bonds, I merely sought to add more to your heart. Inevitably you would have learned the truth about your crew should this war have ended in our favor, but until that day, my thoughts focused only on creating a new life for you to call your home so that you might protect us as you once did the planet of Lothal.”

A sigh, and Ezra motioned to the co-pilot’s seat for the Chiss to sit.

“You and I aren’t so different I guess. I doubt that’s a good thing, but— no matter how I got here, it's true... I’ll do anything to stop this war.” He rubbed his eyes. “And you know, I still haven’t told the Imperials that it was my fault for getting us all trapped here with the purrgil? The guilt has been eating me alive for years since I remembered it was me, but I still haven’t brought it up. I mean, I would if they asked, but—"

“It was merely easier if they never asked.”

“If I’d asked, would you have said something?”

“Yes,” he said simply, turning in his chair to match his gaze. “I am glad you now know the truth, and you are taking it much better than I always imagined.”

Ezra sunk into the seat a little.

“Yeah... well it still stings, but this isn’t the first time you’ve done this to me. Plus, almost everyone I loved is still alive out there, so I’m just shocked and relieved that they aren't all dead. Still, my truth doesn't carry as much hope as the one you hid from me. I doubt the Imperials will be as forgiving as I am. Those people on the Chimera died because of me.”

“That was not entirely your fault. Certainly you can see that?”

Ezra waved his hand.

"Yeah... but some of it definitely is, no matter how you look at it. When I tell them how big of a part I had in the crash, they may never speak to me again."

"You may be surprised. No matter the truth, nothing can ever be truly predicted, only assumed."

Ezra lifted his brow.
“That’s a bit ironic, coming from you.”

“Even so... you and I could never have predicted the outcome of our battle over Lothal, just as we cannot predict the outcome of what is to come aboard that worldship. I could not predict how you would react once this truth was known to you, just as you cannot know how the Imperials will react to your hand in their new lives.”

He groaned and slammed his face into his hands and his head into the back of his seat. Thrawn only watched the frustrated gesture and then smiled a bit at the bit of youth causing Ezra to have a miniature tantrum. He was happy to see that side of him again.

“You know, Ezra... after spending these years fighting beside you, I must admit that perhaps there is more truth to the result of cosmic coincidences and—” He smirked. “The "will of the Force," than I would have ever believed before growing to know you.”

Ezra smiled and then shifted it into a side frown.

“Just to set things straight between us, I still don’t forgive you for what you’ve done to my head.” He looked back at Tharin. “Or my heart. But— I’m willing to put my faith in you until we’re through with this war. No matter how it ends.”

Thrawn reached over and put his hand on his shoulder.

“And you should know that my trust in you has never left your side since the moment we awoke on Myrkr. I owe you my life, Ezra, and in more than one way. Should we make it out of here alive today, I will strive to make amends with you to the highest degree you see fit, even if you still wish to take my life.”

Chiss... he thought with a roll of his eyes. Like he would ever do that to Eli, or to Thrass and Tharin. He still wanted to deck Thrawn across the jaw, sure, but straight up kill him? No... not even now did he feel the urge to actually go through with it. Despite all of his internal thoughts, Thrawn was still someone he considered close enough that he didn’t want to lose. A friend, even if he was a pretty terrible one. Not that he would ever let Thrawn have the satisfaction of knowing that.

“Not today I don’t, but do me a favor and try not to die until I make up my mind about it, okay?” Thrawn smiled.

“I will endeavor to do so.”

“Ezra? Thrawn? Come in! Do you read? We just got your signal and your maps.”

“We hear you, Eli,” Thrawn replied. “Go ahead.”

“Still no motion coming from the Yuuzhan Vong. Whatever’s happening up there has them spooked real good! We’re still at a standstill. It’s now or never on this plan of yours. Your phalanx and my team are ready at the command. Ar’alani has sent over a few troops as well, though the bulk of her forces are waiting back over Schesa’s orbit just in case.”

“Understood. Alright, let us—”

“THRAWN!” Thrass’ voice called suddenly, his volume nearly blowing out their speakers, and jolting everyone aboard.
“Who’s that?” Sabine grunted.

“Uh oh…” Tharin and Ezra replied in unison.

“Did you permit my daughter on your wild suicide mission!?” Thrass bellowed acidly in Cheunh.

“How did he even get this channel?” Ezra muttered.

“I’m sorry, _Ticsi_” Tharin yelled from across ship, two wires in her hands as she leaned back to peer through the doorway. “I volunteered for cloaking!”

“You are going to to be the death of me, child!”

“Don’t tell _Tin’mi_!” She called. “I don’t want her to worry!”

“I’ll be sure she gets back safely, Thrass. I promise.” Ezra said meekly, truthfully, but meekly.

He let out a deep sigh and static erupted through the comms.

“The Death of me…” He repeated slowly, pausing for a long while afterwards as if he were trying to think of some way to get his daughter back on the ground. After the moment, he let out a heavy sigh and seemingly gave up. “Fine then. I wish you all the luck I can possibly give. Good luck Infiltration Squadron. Please—” Another pause, his tone shifting into that rare “fatherly” accent it sometimes got when he was being soft or vulnerable. “Come back to us safely.”

“I second that!” Eli added. “Like I said, Thrawn. We’re ready at the word.”

“Set routes on the safest lanes available and make the jump. It will be short, fast, and dangerous, but if all goes well, the worldship will be destroyed by day’s end.” He looked to Ezra. “Alongside any further threats from other powerful sources.”

“Here’s hoping. Look, Thrawn, I—” Eli grumbled and took a breath. “N-nevermind. We’ll see you on the other side. Go get em’.”

“Your aide to us will go well, I am sure of it.” Thrawn smiled.

"_Course_ it will!” he teased. “I was always your best aide, now wasn’t I?”

"Eli Vanto, you have been much more than just my aide for far longer than you could possibly realize."

Ezra rolled his eyes, but couldn’t help but smirk a little. Thrawn’s voice could get just as soft as Thrass’ when it wanted to. Whether the rest could hear their shameless banter or not, he wondered if Sabine recognized that Eli was human, or understood what Thrass had shouted in Cheunh? Tharin was smirking beneath her hair as she worked hurriedly on her tech, but as for Sabine and the Noghri— well he could only sit and wonder what they thought of his strange new life.

Eli cleared his throat and came back with a flustered tone.

"Well, let's do this then. Here goes— well— everything?" He relayed the order, then the shuttles and every available Clawcraft or old Chiss fighter vessel accompanying them streaked away with the final jump.

“Cloaking is on!” Tharin stated, a bit breathless, but proud as though she had just broken her own personal record.

“You got it.”

I’ve got a bad feeling about this... Sabine thought, the words made known only to herself, but by now she knew better than to say them aloud. There were just certain words that always seemed to jinx things. Either way, she hoped Ahsoka had finished whatever mission she insisted she go on alone because a part of Sabine thought that they would probably need her help before this day was over.

The things I do for Ezra, she thought. If we live, that boy is going to owe me big time for this one!

She smiled, thinking again like a teenager for a split moment as their ship sped away into hyperspace.

As if anything after today could ever be the same as it was back then?
Final Fight

Chapter Summary

It all comes down to this. One plan, a handful of soldiers, and terrible odds. Everything will be different after the day is over, but whether it be for better or for worse, no one can guess. Maybe they'll be able to pull off a victory by day's end, or die trying?

Chapter Notes

Posted on: January 15, 2019

“We’re here…”

Nobody saw their fleet break through the atmosphere produced by the Yuuzhan Vong's worldship, so for now at least, they still maintained an element of surprise that would be crucial in their battle to come.

“Checkpoint!” Eli’s voice cut in authoritatively through the comms. “All parties, sound off with current locations.”

“I.S.A, present.” Thrawn reported. “We are presently making our path to the aft of the worldship’s length.”

“I.S.B, sounding off. Moving to the starboard half of the structure now.”

Ezra frowned. That voice was not a Chiss? It was Faro! What was she doing up here? When Eli said that Ar'alani was sending troops, he never would have guessed she would volunteer for a suicide mission like this. Did that mean Gunther and Koree were with her? He hoped they would be okay. They were skilled enough, but still—

“I.S.C, in route and lining up with port side defenses.”

Prard’ali’nuruodo. Figures he would be leading a mission after what happened to General Drask. Chiss were distant, but mess with a member of their blood-family and they would never stray away from retribution, no matter how dangerous. He definitely had the skill and the firepower to back up his confidence. With his father now dead, he would surely be rising up to take over as General, if he hadn't already done so.

“And I.S.D,” Eli responded. “Ready and waiting at the bow. Keep that cloaking up and stay silent. We don’t want our hosts to hear the little surprise party we got cooking for them until the big fireworks display. Everybody copy?”

“Copy!” the three other team leaders responded.

“Remember, once Infiltration Squadron A is inside, Teams B and C will be responsible for placing
bombs and keeping ships corralled to the center of the worldship. Then we’ll fly in and shoot them down like fish in a barrel. Aim for support structures and try not to engage hostiles unless absolutely necessary.”

“Copy!” they said again.

“Ezra.” Thrawn pointed suddenly. “Land over there. This is close enough to the back entrance to get us inside, assuming their other aircraft are any indication of interior design placement.”

“Well it worked fine for us the last time?” He shrugged, easing the controls to follow through with the order. "Landing now."

The shuttle dove and halted silently along the ground. Even if the worldship were a living thing like the other Yuuzhan aircraft, it didn’t seem to notice the presence of one little Chiss shuttle on its surface. Not that Ezra could sense anything alive on the ship to begin with. Either the Yuuzhan armor was too much to get past, or there was something else on this massive airbase that was keeping the Force closed off from his own mind.

“Alright, you all know your positions.” Thrawn continued. "While Ezra locates Darth Krayt, Sabine Wren and the Noghri will assist me in bomb placement. I hear stealth and explosions are specialties of both your respected skill sets, so I take it this mission will be rather familiar to you.”

The Noghri nodded, while Sabine placed a hand on her hip without responding.

“Tharin, you will watch the ship and make sure both it and you remain unseen. You are our best option of getting off of this base alive and we could need an extraction at a moment’s notice.”

“Maybe one of you should stay behind to guard her?” Sabine motioned to the Noghri.

“That will not be necessary!” She argued, a bit offended as she added, “I do not wish to remain behind on this ship, G’en’vti. I have trained for combat and have excellent marksmanship! I can help you. Tell him, Ezra!”

“I know you can,” Ezra said, placing a hand on her shoulder and a kiss on her forehead. “But you’ll help more by using that big brain to figure out a solution from here. We’ll have our comms, but you’re our eyes outside. Between our fight and the other teams keeping everyone else busy, the Yuuzhan Vong shouldn’t even know you’re here. You’ll have a kind of free-range no one else will.”

She blew out a puff of air, but placed her hand on his and nodded.

“In that case, I suppose I’ll use this to my advantage, but a bodyguard is still unnecessary. I can take care of myself, so don’t bother leaving your warriors behind. I surmise you will be needing them with you far more than I will.”

“Alright then.” Sabine nodded, arms raised as if to apologize for the suggestion altogether. "What about cloaking?”

“Just finished the last of them,” she said, clipping the wrist device to her uncle’s arm.

“Let me get this straight, you made six uniquely activated cloaking shields in less than ten minutes AND programmed one into the ship too?” Sabine said, sounding a little horrified rather than impressed.

"Seven. I made one for myself as well."
“That’s not genius… that’s just scary…”

Tharin smiled and shrugged.

“Now remember everyone, these devices were a rush job, so there will only be approximately five bursts if you’re lucky, and they will probably only last a few seconds once activated. If I had to guess, I’d say maybe ten at most? The variables are impossible to figure without a test, and regrettably we do not have the power nor the luxury to work out any kinks in my designs right now.”

“So, don’t rely on it, but you have it in an emergency?” Sabine nodded. “Got it.”

“They’ll work great.” Ezra smiled. “Thanks Tharin.”

She placed a hand on his cheek.

“Please, try your best to be careful out there.”

He smirked and shrugged.

“Come on, it’s me?”

“That’s what worries me…” she sighed.

Sabine grinned.

“Alright. Best not to prolonged the inevitable any longer,” Thrawn called. “Let’s move.”

Tharin pressed her forehead into Ezra’s before letting him go and reaching out to do the same to her uncle, if not quicker and less intimately as she had with her fiance. She released him and stared into his eyes with her most serious expression before watching as the others all rushed towards the exit.

“Do good, G’en’vti.”

_Do good_. Some would have thought Tharin was just misspeaking the term “do well” but any who knew her also knew that his niece’s grasp on the Basic language was stronger than perhaps even his own. When Tharin said “do good” she truly meant that she knew of the good he was attempting to make on the galaxy, _even if he had to do plenty of bad things in order to see it through_. Thrass understood that about him, even Eli had figured that out long ago, but now it seems, Tharin could read his motives just as clearly as they could, and for that he smiled. She truly was one of the brightest Chiss he had ever met. He’d seen such potential in her as an infant, but that wisdom had only seemed to grow to levels he could have scarcely imagined back then.

“Stay safe, euhn in’a. I look forward to seeing your next inspiration.”

With that, he turned and left, leaving Tharin to close the ship’s ramp and lift off into the sky before any passing soldiers came to check the area.

It was all in hands of fate, fortune, or Ezra’s Force now. Whatever cosmic relevance that was swirling around them, Tharin hoped that it was on their side for this mission. More than that, she hoped with every fiber of her being that was against relying on blind wonders and tricks of magic, that if there were something out there leading them through this battle, then perhaps it would keep them all safe as well.
“Team A is inside!” Tharin stated into the comms. “Distraction teams B, C, and D, you are clear to attack.”

“You heard her. Time to go to war everybody!” Eli announced. “All teams, let's light this place up!”

Tharin watched, waiting as the cloaking on the nearly three dozen shuttles and their one command ship faded away. Turret fire met with any structure within range, the entire surface up in a blaze of smoke and fire within seconds. The enemy took only one more second before retaliation fighters were in the air and foot-soldiers were manning strange bio-engineered weaponry along the ground that could fire up at the Clawcrafts and shuttles infiltrating their skies.

The battle had begun.

Now she just needed some inspiration, an idea that would help her people win the day and this war for good. But what could she do? She flew around, dodging shots and debris, nobody the wiser that she were there among the battlefield at all, and like Ezra suggested, she used the veil to her advantage.

Eventually, her eyes spotted something out of place in the distance and she zoned in on it. A ship! Some sort of escape pod by the looks of it? And, not only that, but the model was of Ezra’s galaxy. This "Ahsoka’s" shuttle perhaps?

Ships from Ezra's galaxy often had coaxium in them, didn’t they? Well, if she could engineer a similar chemical that could dissolve through a planet, she could turn a little bit of real refined otherworldly coaxium into just the type of weapon to do a little damage to the Far Outsiders and their worldship. Maybe there would even be a little extra left over to drive the final nail into this proverbial coffin once the detonators were activated?

“I can work with this...”

“In the belly of the beast, and so far, I’m not impressed.” Sabine whispered. “Where are the guards? It’s too quiet.”

Ezra shrugged.

“Who needs guards when you’re an unbeatable, untouchable army?”

“Either way,” Thrawn interjected. “Their overconfidence shall bring about their own destruction.”

Cakhmaim sniffed and held out his fist.

“Approaching soldiers!” he hissed quietly.

“Time to test your girlfriend's tech?”

Ezra tilted his head and all pressed for their wrists as the cloaking took shape around them. Everyone looked, but none could see their companions, so unless they themselves were still visible, then Tharin managed to do a remarkable job under pressure making these devices.

1... 2... 3...
Hidden, they held their breath and counted, waiting for the enemy to pass. They were two high ranking Yuuzhan Vong judging by the armor. Definitely not the kind of close quarters combat anyone should have to deal with on a stealth mission. Not if they wanted to remain stealthy, that is.

7... 8... 9...

“You’ve come at last.”

On the tenth second, Ezra gasped, jumping back and hitting his head on the wall. All turned to him, then back down the hall, glad the soldiers hadn’t heard him, and curious now as to what had just spooked Ezra so badly. Their invisibility wore off at not ten seconds, but twelve, and now all five faces were looking to Ezra with annoyed and worried expressions.

His hand came up to hold the bit of Vong armor strapped around his neck before he took a breath.

“Do not be afraid, Ezra Bridger,” the woman said, her voice cool and sweet like springtime air in his mind. “Krayt and I are most pleased that you have decided to join us. I am occupied at this moment with a family matter, so I will not able to meet you face to face at this moment, but please, go to see my boy. He will be glad to keep you company. I will reveal his location to you. Worry not. You will not be bothered if you follow this path as I’ve marked for you.”

Ezra’s eyes widened, the chilling touch seeping through each side of his temples as a path and a door were somehow branded into his memory.

“I do hope you enjoy your visit, Ezra. Have fun and I will see you soon.”

Her presence was gone a moment later and Ezra felt himself loosen, unsure of when he had tensed up. He took a breath, unsure also as to when during that conversation he had stopped breathing.

"Ezra?"

"Abeloth..." He panted. “She’s real...”

Thrawn frowned.

“And she can see you?”

“More than that,” he said breathlessly. “I think she just showed me the exact room where Krayt is. The armor doesn’t seem to block her, and she’s no doubt told Krayt I’m here.”

“Did she also see us?” Khabarakh asked.

“I don’t know, but if I had to guess? Yeah...”

“What about Ahsoka?” Sabine wondered, the glimmer of worry in her tone.

Ezra shook his head again.

“I don’t know. She said she was busy, so maybe?”

“Not busy enough, it seems.” Thrawn pointed. “In this case, we must work quickly. Ezra it is up to you to distract Krayt. Everyone else, we have a job to complete.”

They nodded and ran off together for as far as Ezra's new map would allow.
"This is my turn."

"Good luck, Ezra." Thrawn nodded. "Khabarakh, Meewalh, Cakhmaim, with me."

Sabine hesitated just before she and Ezra were set to go down different hallways. He took a step backwards and Sabine took two forward.

“Hey, hold on! Wait a second. I have something for you.”

She unclipped the saber at her side and handed it to him.

“Here, take it. It’s not really my style anyway?”

He smiled, feeling its bond return to his fingertips as soon as it was in his hand again. Now it was different though. It had come to see Sabine as a worthy wielder too, and so he felt her within the blade as well.

“Thanks for keeping it safe for me all this time.”

She lifted her helmet enough to reach over and kiss his cheek.

“Now I’m the one counting on you this time, Bridger. Go kick that guy’s ass and get back safe.”

He snorted out a laugh and nodded.

“You got it.” He took his steps away again and nodded to her. “Be careful.”

Her helmet came down and her blasters came up.

“Come on, it’s me?” She mocked.

He shook his head with a smile and then both turned to run off in the other direction, even though all Sabine wanted to do was turn around and run to wherever he was running. Ezra would be okay on his own. He always had. He would come back.

She’d caught up with Thrawn and the Noghri just before the explosions and the rumbling echoed from above.

“The fighting’s started,” Khabarakh stated, his eyes tracing the ceiling as the walls pulsed like some kind of beating heart each time a particularly loud explosion was heard. Dirt fell down from the rest of the ship, the portions that weren’t disturbingly organ-like.

Sabine shuddered.

“Alright,” Thrawn ordered. “Everyone split up and disperse your explosives in the most vulnerable areas you can find. Do not stray far. The other two teams should have soldiers inside the center areas of the ship as we speak.”

“If we split apart,” Khabarakh growled, “Then you will be alone?”

“You will not leave or else you may escape, traitor!” Meewalh argued.

“We don’t have time for this!” Sabine grumbled. “I’ll take Thrawn and won’t let him out of my sight. You three can get into more places than I can, so you can cover more ground on your own. Now go, but be careful.”
“Same to you, Lady Wren.”

The Noghri snorted at Thrawn, but then gradually backed away and turned to run down three separate hallways.

“Come on!” She motioned with her blaster, and both took off running in the opposite direction.

The inside of this ship was like some kind of weird, squishy labyrinth. It would be easy to get lost down here, but luckily none of them were the directionless type. Good thing too. The last thing she wanted was to spend her life running around down here with the fragging Chiss grand admiral.

“The Noghri have great confidence in you,” he said suddenly, breaking her train of thought. “Despite your teammate being the culprits behind Rukh’s murder.”

That last part of his statement sounded more accusatory, and she could already tell that he knew the answers to his curiosity without the snark remark thrown in.

“We haven’t had that talk yet!” she growled. “They said I smelled trustworthy, right now that’s enough.”

“A great honor, though they once said the same to me, and now I face the judgement of their people for betrayal. Will the same be said of you, I wonder?”

She growled again, but before she could react, Thrawn’s forearm came up and stopped her by the chest-plate as he and her pressed into the sidewall and he reached up to activate his cloaking. She didn’t need to be warned verbally to follow his lead, and pressed for hers as well, thinking about breaking his arm if he didn’t remove it from her armor once their camouflage time was spent.

1… 2… 3…

There were two more soldiers, these ones less spiky as the last two but just as ugly. They had a different species of alien in their grasps, but Sabine wasn’t sure what kind. It was a prisoner by the looks of it, and bleeding as though it had just been attacked. It wasn’t dead, though by the sounds of its groaning, the alien probably wished it was.

6… 7… 8…

Their cloaking gave out at eight seconds that time, but by then they were able to turn the corner before either soldier could turn back to see the disturbance.

“That was a Grysks soldier, a member of their own army no doubt. It seems the Yuuzhan Vong are removing loose ends.”

“Are these Grysks here worth saving?”

“No.”

It was one, blunt word, but it was all it took to make Thrawn’s eyes harden in the exact same way they did back when he still worked for the Empire. Despite the new uniform and the longer hair, it didn’t take much imagination to see the man he used to be in that blue face, and Sabine felt the anger well up in her stomach again just by looking at it. She didn't have time to be angry now though, not when there was a mission to focus on.

With a low grumble, she shoved him off of her and continued marching.
“Then don’t think about it, and let’s get moving.”

He nodded, a bit surprised by her resolute coldness. She was a warrior, a Mandalorian warrior, so she was capable of making these tough moral decisions that others might let drown in sympathy or righteousness.

*She’d make a decent Chiss?* Thrawn thought to no personal amusement but his own.

“And touch me again—” She warned. "And I’ll paint the walls with your blood!”

Thrawn laughed a little and nodded again as they continued running.

“What about that was funny?”

He grinned.

“I’ve always admired your art, Sabine Wren. I was just debating on if a painting of yours made from my blood would be considered an honor or not.”

She blinked beneath her visor, silent for the longest time at hearing that. Finally she spoke up again after setting her first bomb on an important looking support beam.

“Ezra must have really imprinted on you to make you this way, huh?”

“Perhaps?”

A look on his face shifted as he stared off behind her. Sabine heard the tread, but Thrawn’s reaction time was faster as he shoved her aside and lifted his blaster.

**PEW!**

The alien lay dead a few feet behind her without a chance. It was another one of those Grysks, and this one didn’t seem to be a prisoner.

“Did you just—” she paused. “Protect me?”

“We need to move. It won’t be long until soldiers notice the body, and the Yuuzhan Vong do not use blasters any more than they are affected by them. Come, this way!”

She waited and watched as he motioned her down another hall, muttering to herself as she took off to follow him. Oddly enough, the urge to kill him was suddenly less compelling than it was about two minutes ago.

“This is literally the weirdest day of my life? Bridger, you owe me big time for this...”

Ezra burst through the doors to Krayt’s room and was not surprised in the slightest to see him standing in the center of the empty floor, the room a pleasant circular design with dirt pillars leading up to a skylight which looked as though it were made from the teeth of a Sarlacc.

“Ezra!” he greeted, his voice dark, but not conveying the blood-lust it had only a few short hours ago. “Welcome. I’m pleased you were able to find this place so quickly.”
“It’s not hard when someone laser-etches a map in your brain!” He replied sourly.

“Ah yes, Mother can be a bit intrusive when she wants to be. She promised me though that I would be the one to recruit you, and has left you alone ever since we sensed you coming into this system.”

“How generous?” He grumbled.

By now, his walking had caused Krayt to step in sequence as the two marched circles around one another, the entirety of the floor’s distance and the light from the hole above acting as an uncrossable line used to mark their paths.

“I had hoped you would have come much sooner. Tell me, how do I look in person? I’ve practiced speaking these last few years just for this very occasion.”

“I’m flattered?” He snarked. “I guess I thought you’d be taller? And I have to say, it’s a little weird to see your mouth moving.”

Krayt laughed.

“Such wit! Come now, Bridger, why is it we cannot be friends? I offered myself to you completely when I revealed my past and my happy memories?”

He tapped a finger against his lip.

“Hmm… let’s see? Maybe because you’re a psychopath who’s been trying to take over my mind for six years, and oh yeah… you literally turned me into a human meat-puppet less than two hours ago?”

“Yes well… I only had to resort to such unpleasantness because you would not show compliance to the cause.”

“HA! Well sorry I like having free will, I guess?”

“Don’t worry. Once Mother has you, you will get to keep all the qualities of your moral compass that will allow all the free will that your new traits should allow.”

“I don’t understand? What exactly are you up to here?”

One of his twin sabers came into his hand, but it did not ignite. The hilt looked like the bone or talon of some massive beast, the color matching that of the Yuuzhan armor, and it made Ezra's stomach turn just thinking about what it took to form such weapons here in this place where technology was absent and the Force uncomfortably altered.

Maybe it wasn't too late to stop this?

Beyond all reason, Ezra thought maybe he deserved one final chance at redemption. Kanan always said that everyone deserved a chance, even if that sentiment were a lot easier to ignore for the greater good sometimes.

“Krayt! Stop this now! It doesn’t have to be this way. You were a Jedi once, so don’t let the powers of the Sith consume you! I know the power it offers you, I’ve been there, but it always comes with a price! I’m going to warn you only once—” His saber hilt came into his hand, though he was a bit surprised to discover that it was his Chiss saber and not his old green one. He didn’t let his momentary thoughts show, and instead pointed the hilt at his opponent. “Surrender now, or
I’ll have no choice—”

“But to kill me?” He laughed.

“But to fight you!” Ezra snarled. “I haven’t decided yet whether or not I should kill you. Got to say though, I am definitely leaning that way!”

“You misunderstand, Ezra,” he said chidingly. “All is according to Abeloth’s plans. For there to be balance, their must be good and evil. The Light and the Dark. You will be the new Light, and I am to be the Dark. Together we will become brothers of power and Abeloth will be at the center of the entirety of the cosmic Force.”

“Wow… you’re more cracked than I thought, aren’t you?”

He ignored the remark and took in a patient breath.

“Together, we will keep balance for all Force Wielders in the new world. You… me… Mother… She will end everything that once brought my old life such pain.”

“Pain isn’t an excuse for what you’re doing! You are helping to slaughter billions of worlds and lives. Where is the balance in wiping the slate clean? That’s not Light and Dark, that’s just nothingness!”

"The galaxy must experience the pain of death and rapture of rebirth as I have. It is time for war. Surely you must see that? Afterwards there will be solace, there will be peace."

“There will be death!”

"Death is not an ending, boy, but a passageway to something greater. You know this well. You have seen the secrets of the holocrons combined, you have seen the fate of your master. It is something you, too, must experience. You will bend, will break, and you will serve at my side. You have accomplished two of those criteria, so now only one remains. But first… you must die."

“I don’t care what you’re selling! I have no intentions of joining with you.”

“Once your friends, family, and students perish, nothing will be left to keep you away from your destiny. You will become the Light, and you will bring balance to the universe!”

Bzzzt!

His saber ignited, Krayt’s following instinctively behind as the shadows of the room lit up in hues of red and orange, the humming breaking the silence in the room as both continued to take steps around the edge of the light keeping them separated.

“You like balance so much, then fine! I’ll die before I let you get to the people I love, and I’ll be sure to take you with me just to make it even!”

Krayt frowned and flipped his saber once over his palm before snorting out a laugh.

“Who can say what the future will hold? Only Abeloth can see into the future.”

“Oh yeah, and did she see your defeat?”

He stood tall and looked down at Ezra with those mismatched eyes.

“Yes, but Abeloth sees many potential futures. None of them foretell my fall coming from your
hand.” He chuckled once and shook his head. “There is another who holds the honor of that destiny, and they are very near.”

“Ahsoka?”

“No, not the meddlesome gray Jedi!” He snarled. “Nor is it a Chiss soldier or Yuuzhan Vong! Mother absorbs the Force energies of those Chiss to keep her form, and the Yuuzhan Vong are merely a means to an end. The mindless bloodthirsty creatures have forsaken the Force entirely. Empty husks who know only the spoils of war. No, there is another.”

Ezra searched his mind. How many other Force sensitives were out in the universe? Yoda? No, he’d been silent for years now, but Ezra knew that his fighting days were long behind him. The boy from the Death Star vision? Maybe? That was all the potential Jedi he knew who might have power enough to defeat Krayt, and if it wasn’t one of his students but—

He froze. Not all of his students were Chiss now, were they?

“Cade…”

He let the word slip from his mouth in a breath before his orange saber came up into a fighting position.

“Ah yes! You have taken the boy under your wing, have you not?” He smiled. “The apprentice is welcome to Abeloth’s new world if you are there, Ezra, but should you forsake me, Mother saw my defeat at the hands of the one called Cade.”

“Is it wrong to say I’m proud of the kid for something he hasn’t even thought about doing yet?”

Krayt was unamused, but Ezra didn’t care.

Another saber flip and this time their pacing circle stopped moving. The aura in the air was tense and dark. He’d been charging any moment now, and when that happened, their long awaited fight would be inevitable. There was no way to talk Krayt down. He was too far gone, too corrupted by Abeloth to see any other path but this. Balance, peace, war… it was all just an excuse for the murder of everything. Once the galaxy is left blank, he was sure the Yuuzhan Vong would be erased from the universe too, leaving only those select few on Abeloth’s “new world” to repopulate the galaxy in her image. Krayt representing all of the darkness as some sort of right-hand man, a King of the Sith.

A terrifying future indeed.

Fine. Ezra lifted his saber higher, the blade humming inches from his own ear as his hands tightened around the hilt and the orange light pointed directly at his target across the room.

“Ezra, should your story end here today, know that I will not hesitate to kill the boy and prevent the future Abeloth foretold. But then, there will be only one other to take position as the Light, and she is proving to be just as stubborn in nature as you. Between you and I— I would much rather have a brother to spend eternity with than a sister.”

“Guess I can’t afford to lose then, can I?” He smiled darkly. “And once I’m done with you, I’ll be helping Ahsoka to beat this Abeloth lady too.”

Krayt smirked again.

“Impossible, I’m afraid. It takes two to defeat Abeloth. Only a Sith and a Jedi can accomplish such
a thing, and between the two of you, neither are much one or the other, now are you? You need guidance! You need training! You cannot just remain neutral in this battle! That is not an option for those of us within the Force!”

Ezra lowered his elbow a fraction of an inch and furrowed his brows accusingly.

“You want me to become Abeloth’s Light, her Jedi, so we can defeat her together?”

“Perhaps?” He shrugged smugly. “But I truly wish to see her plans for the reset of this despicable universe accomplished before I plan that far ahead. Abeloth cannot see a future that does not yet exist, now can she? No, for now, I remain loyal.” He chuckled. “You though? Well… I imagine you will do most anything to see this war ended as soon as possible. That will only happen if you join me and we kill Abeloth together. You know this to be true, so why fight your destiny?”

“There’s always another way to do things! I will defeat you, I will destroy Abeloth and the Yuuzhan Vong. I won’t be your Light and I won't let you go through with your crazy plans. This all ends, Krayt! Right here, right now.”

“Oh, but Abeloth never saw a future where you left this room alive without joining with us.” His saber buzzed and he held it out at a perfect line before bringing it back to form a red streak through the center of his stance. “Shall we learn together which future will be the truth?”

Ezra gritted his teeth and took a step.

“Ready when you are.”

A passing shuttle zoomed somewhere overhead, its shadow momentarily blocking the strange light barrier that held them apart. For that split moment, the only luminescence in the room came from their glowing weapons, and with that disturbance, the two men burst forward, their sabers coming together in the center of the room as the enormous crash of energy echoed through the walls. Their final battle had finally begun.

“Your weapons cannot hurt me, child, for I am one with the Force! The Force is ME!”

Ahsoka spun on her heel as she landed back on the ground.

“Perhaps you’re right. Though, perhaps my intent was never to kill you?”

“If you are trying to stall, well I must tell you darling, that Ezra Bridger and his cohorts are already aboard the ship. He and Krayt are having their little play-date as we speak. Poor boy. I offered the outsider sanctuary in our new world, but Krayt desires more. He believes he can turn this boy of his obsessions into his new Brother.”

“Ezra will never join you!”

“I know this very well, but—” She sighed tiredly. “A good mother has to let her children learn for themselves when something is a lost cause. Krayt will have no choice but to kill the boy and then accept you as his rightful half. The Light in the balance. Don’t worry, you two should get along splendidly and be fast siblings again in no time!”
“You will not succeed, Abeloth! We will stop you!”

She laughed, a jovial snickering sound that made Ahsoka realize that the Mother wasn’t taking anything she’d been saying seriously since she walked through the portal.

“How do you plan to stop me, Daughter, when you cannot even touch me?”

Ahsoka called her staff back into her hands, the Mother allowing the connection to be made as she floated down to observe.

“There now. Give up on your childish whimsy and come with Mother. It will all be alright once the universe is in balance once more. Why, we can do anything you want then! You would like to create a new species? Generate a whole planet of them? With our powers combined, we can reshape the galaxy into whatever you want darling, and this time you will never need to hide away. Come now, won’t that be nice? It will be just as it once was. Remember? There will be nothing to stop us.”

“I remember,” Ahsoka said solemnly, and dug her staff into the soil.

“There.” Mother said, her haze taking a more feminine, human shape as she drifted closer to Ahsoka, her hands— if she had hands, brushing the corners of her shoulders. “All better now. I’ve missed you my Daughter. Come. Let us fetch your brother and we can be together once more as a true family.”

“Whatever you say, Mother,” she replied, watching the Mother turn to walk away, her body now the exact replica of a woman made of starlight and pure Force energy.

Ahsoka did not hesitate, she reached her arm through the circle of her staff and it disappeared through the other side, a thin veil, now taking her exactly where she needed to go. She felt the cold metal touch her hand, and grasped it before pulling the long dagger back out through the portal.

“Oh! I wonder what creatures you will make once the universe begins anew? I’ve always quite enjoyed birds myself. Would you like that? Mother will create so many beautiful singing birds just for you, my Daughter.”

Mother continued speaking aloud, never ceasing her talking since she turned her back. Her silence came only seconds before she realized what was coming, but by then she could do nothing to stop it. Her memories of the past, of the future, they had only succeeded to cloud her judgement of the present. She looked down at her chest, the Mortis dagger the only cruel thing staring back at her.

“Why don’t you just put a dagger through my heart?” she said, choking a small laugh as Ahsoka pulled the weapon out, a hole of light sizzling away like a chemical reaction eating away at the center of Abeloth’s chest.

“This dagger will not kill you as it did the other Ones,” Ahsoka said slowly. “If it could, I suspect the Father would have used it on you long ago. But, you should not be able to regenerate again in our lifetime. With any luck it will take you tens of thousands of years. Then far, far from now, in a galaxy entirely new from ours, perhaps then you will find the peace you so desire or the emptiness of a blank galaxy to begin life again anew.”

Abeloth fell to her knees, the mist of her arms and legs dissipating into nothingness.

Through the portal in the staff, a single green and white tinted Convor soared out and took roost on the Togruta’s shoulder, both staring down at Abeloth as she ceased to exist in this plane of existence.
“Morai?”

She reached out with what was left of her arm, but froze, the last of her body blowing away with the breeze before the blank spot where she had once been exploded in a bright flash of blinding light.

*There was pain in the burst.*

Ahsoka felt her insides twisting, the pain of death seeping through the very marrow of her bones and she screamed and tumbled over in agony, heavy as if the strike of a hundred lightsabers were skewing her from all directions.

The Mother of the Force was dead—for now—and no doubt anyone with any Force sensitivity would feel her presence leave this unprotected sanctuary.

Ezra and Krayt fell to the ground.

Krayt’s insides were on fire, his skin feeling as though it were peeling backwards, lungs drowning in lava, while simultaneously his heart had been forcibly torn out of his chest and then stomped on by an angry Bantha.

Ezra felt like he was sinking into a sea of icy water as knives carved through his veins like his blood had somehow become a weapon against him. After that it was hard to feel anything, but he knew he was on the ground, his body spasming along the floor like a short-circuiting droid.

One thing was certain though, and that was that neither men could continue their fight, their sabers collapsed and lying lifeless on the floor as they hobbled over and screamed for the whole ten terrible seconds that the pain had lasted within them.

*Wh-what in the name of the galaxy was that?*

Even Ezra’s thoughts were tired as he lay flat on his back, his chest convulsing with hard air as tears, sweat, and spit lingered on his face. He felt like he was dying.

*What kind of terrible attack was that? Because it sure as heck wasn’t from Krayt.*

“Moth—Abeloth—has been silenced—” Krayt said through his own choking intakes of breath. He sounded cold and pained, but when he came back, his voice was more shocked and angry than ever. “Impossible! Only the children of the Light and Dark—” He could not finish the sentence. Instead, he lifted himself off of his stomach with wobbly limbs as he leaned back on his own legs and searched the sky for more breath. “I don’t—understand—”

The worldship jolted as though it had felt the disturbance too. Come to think of it, Ezra was so enraptured by his own pain, he hadn’t really noticed before, but judging by the cracks in the ceiling and three of the spiral teeth now fallen onto the floor, the worldship must have set off tremors when it felt that exact pain that the two of them had just suffered through.

*He wondered if everyone else had felt it too?*

Suddenly he felt all of his Force senses return to him. He could sense the others inside the ship
now, as well as the Chiss above who were fighting in the battle on the surface. He could sense the emotions coming off of the man behind him, and turned his head, his neck sore from the spasms as he watched Krayt already getting back to his feet, his saber called up into his hand once more with the Force working perfectly once again.

“This ship will fall without her. Its heart was connected directly to the portal of her being. We are quite literally—” He took another breath. “Falling out of the sky.”

Ezra listened as the sound of his saber ignited.

“But… her death… will not go unpunished. I will see that her dream for a new universe comes true… by killing any who would stand in my way.”

He took a step, fumbled, but stood tall as he made his way forward.

Ezra strained, but lifted his head as though it weighed more than a starship, his back and arms coming up in much the same way as he propped himself back on his elbows.

“H-how are you moving?” He said, though that wasn’t what he’d wanted to say. It seems any impulse to control his thoughts had gone away with the pain. Still, he was genuinely curious.

“I have felt more pain in my lifetime than that,” he responded distantly. “Now, as I was saying before—”

He hovered over Ezra and held the burning red blade inches above the motionless man’s heart.

He couldn’t move, not even if he wanted to more than anything in the world. There was absolutely nothing that Ezra could do.

“You will understand. But for now… you must… die.”

Helpless, Ezra could only watch as Krayt sent the saber plunging straight down into his chest. He couldn’t scream, couldn’t get out a gasp of air, and all too quickly his mind began to forget everything else aside the burn he felt coursing through his entire body. It all happened so fast, but before he could register the pain, his eyes had stopped working, his pain had stopped hurting, and then he was no longer able to feel anything at all.

“That’s the last of them,” Sabine said. “Come on Thrawn, let’s get back to the others and get out of here.”

“Agreed, I suspect the rest of the detonation teams are either dead or finished with their loads as well. Come. The exit is this way. Prepare to engage hostiles as we make our extraction. I doubt our camouflage will work again.”

“Uh… duh?”

He lifted a brow, but continued running. It wasn’t long until they had met back up with the Noghri and took out yet another enemy standing in their path. Not killing it, but in a few minutes, that wouldn’t be a big problem anymore.

“Where’s Meewalh?” Sabine asked, her blasters firing rapid bursts of laser fire into the Yuuzhan
Vong standing in their way before Thrawn delivered a stab through one of the vulnerable areas in its armor with his own weapon.

“Regrettably, she did not make it!” Cakhmaim snarled, the usual low growl in his words, only now it was laced with something else.

Remorse? Sabine thought. She shook her head.

“I’m sorry.”

“She knew the risks!” Khabarakh barked. “What is important now is that her death not be in vain.”

“Yes. Shall we retrieve Ahsoka Tano and the Bridge of Ezra?”

“No,” Thrawn said before Sabine could get out her own reply.

“No?!” She snapped.

“Their battles may not yet be won, and our interference will only prove a lethal distraction. We must return to the ship and wait for their signal.”

She opened her mouth, but in hindsight, it was a pretty decent argument.

“Fine!” She grumbled. “Tharin, did you catch all that?”

“I did!” she replied. “I’m ready for your extraction. Though, we should probably warn Ezra and the others to evacuate soon. Our numbers are still strong up here, but the worldship itself seems to be falling.”

“Falling? Why? How?”

“Well, I may have made another nuclear reaction with some hyperfuel I found lying around—” she started hesitantly. “But I don’t think that was the reason. Eli said there were reports of some of his soldiers collapsing just before the worldship began to fall.”

“Which soldiers?” Thrawn asked.

“The ones who were once children of Alani house,” she replied knowingly. “I think whoever this Abeloth and Krayt are, they aren’t any longer.”

“Great!” Sabine replied. “So Ezra and Ahsoka will be out soon!”

“I think you’re right,” she said. “Sending my coordinates now. I’ll meet you at the halfway point. It looks like things are finally starting to work out for us!”

“Maybe?” Sabine replied, her voice thought-filled and even a bit doubtful. There was something bad weighing down in her chest, but what, she couldn’t describe? “Don’t count our winnings just yet, there’s still time for all of this to go horribly wrong.”

“You know Sabine, Ezra and the other humans once told me to remain optimistic in the face of overwhelming odds, and joke in the presence of death.”

“Yeah, that sounds like humans!”

Thrawn interrupted with another knife thrown into the neck of a Yuuzhan soldier.
“We will celebrate later. For now, let us focus on leaving here alive long enough to make such jokes.”

“For once we agree on something.”

“Onward!” the Noghri snarled, all rushing away harder as they saw the end coming to this war once and for all.

Ezra saw the vision around him. The world was in darkness, planets destroyed, Rebels dead, Imperials defeated—only—these were not Imperials, and those dead—they were not Rebels.

He heard a man screaming.

“This fierce machine which you have built, upon which we stand will bring an end to the Senate, to their cherished fleet. All remaining systems will bow to the First Order and will remember this as the last day of the Republic!”

A woman’s voice spoke now, in a different time, a different place.

“You are afraid that you will never be as strong as Darth Vader…”

“Blow that piece of junk out of the sky!”

“Amazing… every word of what you just said… was wrong.”

“We’ll use the Force!”

“I warned my young apprentice that as he grew stronger, his equal in the light would rise.”

“The galaxy has lost all its hope. The spark… is out.”

“How do we build a rebellion from this?”

“It’s time for the Jedi to end.”

“Ezra.”

He jolted and looked off to the side as these strange and unfamiliar visions faded away.

The voice… He knew that voice?

“Kanan?”

He turned, only to see the face of his master before him, his emotions calm but otherwise characteristically unreadable.

“Where am I? What were those visions? I saw—well I don’t know what I just saw to be honest?”

“You are a part of the Cosmic Force now, Ezra. Those visions are a connection to everything that is and was or will ever be.”

“Y-you mean, I’m… dead?”

“You are a part of the Cosmic Force now, Ezra. Those visions are a connection to everything that is and was or will ever be.”

“Y-you mean, I’m… dead?”
He would sit down if there were anything to sit down on, and he thought he felt winded, but in all truth he couldn’t really feel much of anything. Suddenly he jumped and his hands came up, searching his heart, but the scorching saber wound was gone. In fact, all of his scars were gone, all of them, even the two old lightsaber cuts along his cheek!

“Take it easy!” Kanan urged, smiling now as he motioned Ezra to a nearby rock to take a seat.

It wasn’t there before, but Ezra didn’t care enough to question it, and took a seat beside his master.

"I can't believe I actually died! Tharin and Sabine are going to be so mad at me..."

Kanan chuckled.

“Well, don't worry. You won’t be here for long. Not this time anyway.”

“Wh-what do you mean? Kanan, I died!”

“There are mysteries in the Force, Ezra, which can only be learned in death. I think someone is trying to show these things to you. Someone who is consumed by the darkness.”

“Krayt...”

“I’ve taken form here to warn you, Ezra. No one should know the future. It will only disrupt the balance of life itself. These visions you’ve seen. You must not let them control you or you will become corrupted just like the one who killed you.”

“I’m not sure I can even if I wanted to, Kanan. I don’t know what they meant?”

“And yet, I’m sure someday you will. Remember my warning, but try not to remember this place.”

“But how am I here?” Ezra asked. “I’m not a Jedi, so how am I— you know— "one" with the Cosmic Force?”

“Maybe things aren’t as black and white as you think?” He smirked. “Though I guess you can only blame the one who taught you to see it that way.”

“You taught me to see things in every way.”

He smiled at that, and leaned back, snapping his fingers together, though they didn’t make a sound as a thought form along his brows.

“Well say, while we’re talking about advice I’ve given you, if you’re going to keep using the Force to heal yourself, then do it with the Light side instead of the Dark. If you’re going to stay in the middle, then at least this way it’s less destructive than the alternative.” He leaned forward and whispered. “But you didn’t hear that from me, okay?”

Ezra laughed.

“Noted. Thanks for the tip!”

Another smile and this time, Kanan shagged Ezra’s hair, until the boy laughed and tried to push him away. Only... he couldn’t. Ezra quickly looked down with horror as his hands started to fade away.

He jumped up and gasped.
“Gah! Kanan, I—”

“It’s alright,” his master said calmly. “You’re going back now. Don’t worry.”

“Kanan, no wait! There’s something I need to say to you! Something I wanted to tell you, but I never got the chance!”

He smiled, those teal eyes warm and proud.

“Look at you. You’re so grown up now, but you still have a lot more growing to do before we speak again. I’m sure there will be other faces next time who you’ll want to talk with, but try to remember to tell me later, alright?”

That smug side grin. It had been so long since he’d seen that look, and though he felt nothing in this place, somehow it still managed to warm his heart. Tears in his eyes, Ezra smiled and nodded before wiping his eyes with what was left of his arms and looking back to his master’s face.

“And hey, tell everyone I said hi, alright?”

He rubbed nervously at his chin like he were thinking of someone specific. It may have been years, but Ezra knew the look well. He was thinking about Hera. With another warm smile, he stepped forward and placed a hand on Ezra's shoulder before pulling him into a hug.

"Remember... even though I'm gone, I'll be with all of you... always.”

“Goodbye Kanan.”

He blinked, but in that split second, Kanan had vanished.

The only thing left was a cosmic swirl of blue, black, and white until nothing.


*Silence.*

*And then there was noise.*

“Awaken!” a voice shouted.

Ezra felt heavy again, not to mention sore, burned, a little melancholy if he were being honest with himself. His ears were ringing, but he shot up with a gasp and a cough, feeling his chest now which had a heated and raised scar of burn tissue marking the small hole that was now perfectly healed within his chest.

“What happened? Where am I?”

“I have revived you. Now, heal your own nerves with Dark Transfer and the pain will lessen.”

Ezra felt all of his emotions return at once and shouted through the numb pain of it all.

“You killed me you kriffing son of a b—”

“Just do it!”

Ezra focused, his mind reeling and still vibrating with the thousand little pinpricks of static like a foot that’s gone to sleep. He saw the dots within himself that needed healing. Aside his scar, they
weren’t true wounds, just pain, and with the Force, with the Light side of the Force, he was able to momentarily shut them off long enough to get to his feet.

“You—” He took a breath, his tone a lot calmer this time as he wobbled to a full-stand. “You killed me!”

“Only temporarily.” Krayt waved. “They say failure is the greatest teacher. Well, what is the greatest failure in life but death?”

Ezra growled and called his sabers back into his hands.

“Tell me, did you see the visions? The wars to come, the chaos to overtake the world? Only those in death can see such visions. You and I know of the Mortis abilities to heal one’s self from the brink of death, and now, you too must see why we must continue Abeloth’s plans.”

“No, I—” Ezra shook the last of the shock from his head. “I only saw my master.”

“Your master?” He frowned.

“Yeah, didn’t you see your master? Ki Adi Mundi, right?”

There was a darkness in Krayt’s mismatched eyes at the mention of the name.

“That Jedi is no longer my master.”

“I see…” Ezra frowned. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize!” Krayt snapped. "Just tell me you saw the visions! Tell me you understand!”

Ezra coughed, smiling afterwards as he wiped the bit of blood off his lip from his apparent "death". He wanted to make sure what he said next really stuck with his opponent, so he looked back up with his most mocking of stares.

“I understand. I just don’t care.”

Krayt growled and ignited both of his sabers.

“Your defiance grows tiresome, Bridger! Know that if you will not join me, I will not allow you to stay in my way!”

Ezra’s lightsabers lit as well, both of them this time, and there was something about them that just felt right somehow.

“You cannot win, and this time, when you die, you will not be coming back to life!”

“Amazing… every word of what you just said… was wrong.”

Krayt’s eyes widened.

“So, you have seen the visions!”

Smugly, Ezra slammed his swords into Krayt’s and put on his best Thrawn-voice.

“Perhaps?”

A snarl, and with that, their fight continued, a new blood-lust to it that was not there before. There
was only one way to end their battle now, and that was in true death.

Ahsoka rose and rubbed her head, the convor missing and this odd realm no longer the meadow of tranquility it seemed, but a blank room of pure-white nothingness.

*She had killed Abeloth. For now at least…*

*What a backlash!* 

“Ezra!” she gasped.

She searched for him, feeling nothing but cold coming from the direction she’d last sensed him.

*He was either in danger, or simply— no. No, she wouldn’t accept that. She had to get to Ezra. She had to stop Krayt.*

She had to stand up.

*Stars, she was getting too old for this. How did Master Yoda do it for all those years?*

She called her staff to her hands once more, using it as a prop to help her to her feet as she grabbed the Mortis dagger and placed it back through the portal of her scepter.

“Until next time. Thank you.”

Ahsoka walked out through the doorway and the portal shutdown behind her. A final cut with her saber was all it took to make sure the portal would never been opened again. Should Abeloth reincarnate there, she would need to spend quite a while figuring out how to leave now that the door was locked for good. It might buy future generations a couple years at least?

*One thing at a time.*

It was time to focus on the present. With that, she made her way through the halls, on her way to Ezra Bridger.

Her job was not done yet.

There was a certain power to fighting in dual-saber combat. For every strike, there was a block, and for every move, there was another ready to either defend or attack.

Their battle had broken past the circular room, out into the hallway, and down the crumbling layers of the ship as the floors gave out and collapsed around them. He wasn’t sure where in the ship they were anymore or how deep they had possibly fallen, but as he matched Krayt, stroke for stroke, he couldn’t afford to think of anything other than this one conflict right in front of him.

“You’ve been trained well!” Krayt praised, his weapons pressing into Ezra so forcefully that he
was starting to feel the floor cracking beneath his boots again. “But you can’t beat experience.”

“You may be older than me—” Ezra grunted. “And bigger! Maybe even stronger? But you can’t beat me!”

He laughed.

“And why do you think that?”

“Because… unlike you—”

He spun and nicked the horns on Krayt’s mask just as the ground gave out beneath their feet. They fell, the length farther than either were prepared for, forcing them to shut down their sabers just to enact a Force-cushioned land and roll strategy, before both weapons turned on the very second they were back on their feet.

This had to be the lowest level of the ship. It was covered in ivy and old moss, the ground pulpy and more alive than any other room on the ship. It was like an underground cave in a forest untouched by people. If he didn’t hear the sounds of explosions or the creaking failure of the ship crashing down from the upper atmosphere, then Ezra might have forgotten they were on a ship at all.

Their lightsabers clashed and Ezra smiled when he saw the disgruntled look on his opponent’s face, the crack in his resolve, and the nerve that Ezra was still doing so well in the fight.

“Unlike you—” He breathed again. “I have something worth fighting for!”

Krayt snarled, kicking out with his massive armored boot as Ezra felt the contact in his chest, his blaster wound writhing as he went flying backwards.

He kicked one saber out of Ezra’s hand, the other shutting down against this will from the might of his overpowering Force control. Defenseless now, Krayt crossed his sabers near Ezra’s throat, and hovered over him.

“And where has that gotten you? Here? All alone? Don't be a fool! Tell me, are those so worth fighting for, really worth dying for?”

Ezra caught flashbacks of the Grand Inquisitor. It was like every other bad guy had the same condescending speeches. He’d roll his eyes, but he couldn’t tear them from those dual red blades inching closer to his neck.

“Always.”

Krayt roared and made his move, but surprisingly, Ezra didn’t feel his head cut from his shoulders. He saw a bright flash of blue and heard an echoing shout.

"AAAGH!"

The man stumbled away, enormous hunks of his armor cracking apart and falling off as another bolt of bright lightning erupted from Ahsoka’s staff.

“Need a hand?”

“Ahsoka!”

“The plains of Mortis aren’t safe during these kinds of storms,” she said, her voice mocking Krayt
as he cowered from her blasts. “Best to take cover.”

Lightning was one of the few things that could penetrate Yuuzhan armor. Ezra had wondered why someone so in tuned to the dark side hadn’t used it in his repertoire of attacks, and now he supposed he had his answer?

Another bolt struck him dead on, and Krayt’s armor was broken apart so badly that for the first time, his skin was showing in clear air. He had patterns of black tracing his face and back, his hair black and unkept, but long and wild. Scars traced every inch of him. Some of those marks reminded Ezra suddenly of Urick, of that Vong torture table and what it had done to his friends. He saw it in his mind and then, suddenly, he recognized the make of it growing out of the walls like roots.

Rising to his feet, Ezra re-armed himself as Ahsoka held out her hand to him.

She was the same as he remembered too. Well, aside maybe the length of her lekku, the incredible Force-staff weapon, and the aura of control around her? She had grown so much stronger and more balanced than ever, and it showed on her now. She was the most experienced fighter in their duel now, and everyone could see why.

“You!” Krayt took a breath, steam rising from his body as he stood again to a stand. “It was you who killed Abeloth!”

“For now perhaps?” Ahsoka replied softly. “She won’t be able to control you for quite a long time.
You’re free to make you own path now, A'Sharad Hett.”

“You dare speak that name to me!?”

“It was your name once. It could be again.”

He growled and lifted his sabers.

“I know you! Skywalker’s padawan! How does it feel knowing your master is the cause of all of this?”

Ezra looked to Ahsoka, but she didn’t seem affected, she merely shut her eyes and shook her head.

“Anakin is dead.”

Krayt sneered.

“And very soon you are going to join him.”

He rushed forward, but Ahsoka stood her ground, not even flinching as she slowly opened her eyes and fired another explosion of lightning through her staff. The bolt sent Krayt hurdling towards the back wall, bouncing off of it before falling to his knees. He used it to claw his way back to a stand, one of his lightsabers now scolded and cracked, useless, as the hilt too was made of that same armor and suffered in the attack. Now that it was broken, Ezra could hear the scream of its kyber crystal struggling to be heard through such a blocking material before going silent and still.

Krayt showed his teeth, his muscles tensing from pain his skin hadn’t been able to feel in many years. He was fragile without his armor, tender and vulnerable in ways he no longer thought he could be. In his weakness, he felt fear again for the first time in ages, and that fear was just the beginning.

Ivy-like limbs spread out to grab him, pulling him back and securing him to the wall.

Ahsoka looked back to see Ezra calling out to the organic limbs, his hand outstretched and his mind working on a connection she could not read, but could plainly feel.

“The embrace of pain!?” Krayt laughed, a bit of trite amusement back in his voice. “I’ve come to use this device for meditative fun, boy! You think this torture rack will kill me!?”

“No, but it will stop you.”

The worldship quaked and everything shook along with it.

“Ezra. It’s time we leave.”

“I think you’re right.”

“One last thing though. Will you assist me?”

She approached the wall and the man who lay confined there, the thorns already drawing blood from his bare flesh as he hissed and struggled to break free.

“You remember what that wolf did to Sabine when you first crossed paths with it.”

“Y-yeah, but how do you—?”
“Focus your energy on Krayt’s mind. Open yourself to the Force. Follow my lead.”

He did and as though something or someone was guiding his thoughts, he felt the ability just as he had when learning to heal Thrawn. Only this time, all he could feel was a balance within him, and a balance forcing its way into Krayt.

Both reached out to place a single finger against his forehead and in unison called out:

“Sleep.”

And as the vines wrapped around him tighter, Krayt’s head fell limp and his mind was lost to the senses.

“Will that hold him long?”

“That all depends on how unbalanced he is, and how long it will take for him to return to his own mind.”

“So he’s in some kind of stasis? Like hibernation?”

“For now,” Ahsoka said, a bit winded as she reached out and used Ezra’s shoulder to keep herself upright.

“He said that I was never meant to defeat him. Said that it was one of my students, a boy I’m helping to train named Cade, who is supposed to finally kill him. Do you think that’s true?”

“The future may be predictable, but nothing is set in stone. Now come on. This ship can only drift so far before it finally collides with a planet or a black hole. We need to get out of here and find my ship.”

They looked up through the hole in the floor and held each other around the backs with one arm each.

“Together?” He asked.

“Together.” She nodded, and with that they used the Force to leap into the air and escape the crashing worldship.

“Ezra! Please come in!” Tharin called. “Ezra! Where are you? Respond!”

“How much longer can we wait?” Khabarakh growled.

“As long as we can!” Sabine snapped, her own arm reaching to the comms as well. “Ezra! Ahsoka! Can you hear us! Please say something! We’re about to blow the detonators!”

Thrawn waited, watching as the two women looked to each other and then back at him. He closed his eyes and furrowed his brows. They could not allow the possibility that something may have happened to the two Jedi, but Thrawn could. He could see it very clearly, though he’d hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

“Captain Vanto, sound our retreat and move all forces back to a safe location. It’s time to leave.”
“Roger that. The last of our ground troops are reporting back to command now.” He paused, but after only a moment, his voice came back on the air. “So, did we do it?”

“We shall have to wait and see.” He turned to his niece and motioned her up. “Tharin, we need to take off.”

She blinked, tears forming in her eyes as she turned back to the ship’s controls, her body on autopilot. She wanted to stay, but staying meant dying here, blowing up in a massive explosion. She always thought she’d go out that way, but on her own terms, like in the lab making something useful for the future, not waiting here for someone who might never come. Even though she’d give her own life a hundred times over just to see him running towards her right now.

Sabine placed a hand on Tharin’s shoulder and scrunched her face so hard that it changed the color of her skin for a few moments before fading away. With low brows and a stare like the steel of a blade, she looked out the viewport and tried one last time on her comm.

“Ezra… please…”

A cough.

“W-we read you!” He gasped. “Sorry. You would not believe how bad the reception is down there.”

“Ezra!” Tharin smiled.

“Hey!” He said back, his voice lighter, but still visibly winded. Was he hurt?

"Where are you?"

“We’re on our way to Ahsoka’s ship. Get out of here. We’ll be right behind you.”

“Ummm… no you won’t!” Tharin said suddenly.

“What?”

“I may have used that discarded ship as a bomb of my own,” she said nervously. “Don’t worry though, I know where it was stationed. We’ll be there to pick you up, but you must hurry, and whatever you do, do NOT touch that ship. You may kill us all!”

Sabine smirked, relief washing over her now knowing Ezra was safe. With that fear no longer burdening her, she shot a jestful grin down at Tharin as she piloted the ship away and let the joke come freely to her lips.

"You are truly terrifying, you know that?"

"It's been mentioned once or twice?"

“Eli, what is the status on those bombs?” Thrawn asked.

“Countdowns are reading at two minutes to zero. Are you still down there?”

“We're working on it” He replied, calling back to the front. "You have less than two minutes!”

“We only need one,” Ezra’s tired voice said confidently. “Just keep the hatch open. Sabine—”

“I know, I’ve got it! You can count on me!”
“I know I can.”

The ship came into view above, steering in a sharp tailspin as Tharin parked it just above their location. Behind them, Ezra could hear the low growing mob of soldiers fast approaching and in their weakened states, knew he and Ahsoka would be no match to face all of them. Not in two minutes anyway?

“Uh oh! We’ve got hostiles!”

“I see you!” Sabine called. “I see them!”

“We will clear you a path!” Cakhmaim hissed, both Noghri running to the very edge of the ramp to provide covering fire.

“Jump for it!” Sabine called.

Ezra smiled. This all started with a leap of faith, it only seemed fitting it end with one too.

They leapt for the shuttle Sabine reaching out to grab Ezra’s hand, just as Thrawn appeared from behind to do the same to Ahsoka.

**PEW!**

A stray shot was fired and Sabine sent a bolt of hot laser into the face of a Yuuzhan soldier trying to jump aboard. Whether it was dead or not wasn’t important because it fell back to the ground with a successful sounding splat.

"Just like old times, isn't it?” Ezra laughed.

"You and I have a really different memory about old times.” She grinned.

"Welcome aboard, Fulcrum.” Thrawn interrupted.

Ahsoka shot him a look, but nodded, and together, they pulled the two inside to safety and closed the hatch doors.

“Punch it!” Sabine yelled.

Tharin was already three steps ahead of her, soaring off alongside the Chiss fleet as the timer on their explosives reached its final countdown. Hundreds of explosions ripped through the massive shuttle, the final of which set off the remaining fuel of Tharin’s coaxium bomb as the largest mushroom-cloud explosion of blues, reds, and yellows, swirled into the sky in a fiery vortex before crashing back into the ship like cyclone in a vengeful storm.

“Whoa…” Sabine awed. “And I thought I was good.” She reached down to Ezra. "Your girlfriend's growing on me more and more today, Ezra.”

“I’ll gladly teach you how to do that if we live through this!” Tharin laughed.

“You’ve got a deal, sister.” She nodded her head and then helped Ezra into a seat as the two Chiss started positioning the jump to lightspeed.

“Eli?”

“We’re clear! All ships! Jump!” He ordered, and they did. Everyone aboard audibly taking a long breath as soon as the calming swirls of blue enveloped their veiwports.
Safe now, Sabine checked on Ahsoka who seemed to be exhausted and asleep in her own chair before turning her attention back to Ezra who was struggling to keep his eyes open, but smiling nonetheless.

“Ezra are you okay?”

“I’ll live?” He laughed, some inside joke to himself that sounded like more than just a morbid sense of humor. “Kanan says hi, by the way.”

“Kanan?” She frowned, seeing now for the first time the hole burned through the center of his chest and the unbelievable scar that was in the place of what looked like a fatal wound to the heart. “Holy kriff, Ezra! Did you die?!”

She punched him hard as her other arm came back with a slap to the side of his head.

“Who died?” Tharin turned worriedly.

“Ezra!” Sabine spat.

She stood up without warning, causing Thrawn to take the controls as Tharin rushed back to Ezra's side. She stopped and touched his face, seeing him very much alive and took a deep breath before furrowing her brows in confusion.

“Is this some sort of joke?”

“No joke...” Ezra grunted, pushing her weight off of him as he sat up in the chair. “I just died a little, it's no big deal.”

“No big deal he says!” Sabine spat, looking to the Noghri. “Can you believe this guy?”

“It really is not as bad as one might think?” Thrawn smiled from the controls.

“I guess we’re scar buddies now, Thrawn?” Ezra coughed. “Thar, I got a new story for you out of this.”

She shook her head and kissed him, both of them laughing as Sabine rolled her eyes and made it to the front of the shuttle to give them a little space.

“So...” She said, reluctantly seating herself in the co-pilot’s chair next to Thrawn. “What happens now?”

“Now, we hope our sacrifices and efforts pay off,” he said. “Now, we see if we truly succeeded in saving the galaxy.”
The End

Chapter Notes

Posted on: January 26, 2019

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The remnants of the Yuuzhan Vong army fought against Chiss Forces for the better part of three months following the fall of the worldship.

Around the very end, the Grysk managed to find a small window to escape back to their own worlds, and as for the Vagaari, they had been practically AWOL since before any of the major battles had even begun. Any other sort of warrior species had all but dissipated by the end of the war as well, all finding their own opportunities to get away from the warships. The Chiss found no honor in pursuing them out of vengeance or old grudges and they simply let them all escape back to their own homes, a shared desire for all on both sides of the war it seemed.

How loyal these species even were to the Yuuzhan Vong was something no one could ever truly know. Many, like Thrawn, believed the lot of them were enslaved species, tortured or threatened into joining Yuuzhan forces against their wills. *Come to think of it*, the Yuuzhan Vong had plenty of their own carefully crafted soldiers, not to mention their ship count still numbered well into the hundreds of thousands. Why they ever needed the additional help remained a mystery as well, though people could always take a guess.

*To use as cannon fodder in order to avoid wasting valuable troops.*

*To use their planets as checkpoints so that their slow moving ships could spread throughout the galaxy.*

*To assert their dominance as the strongest of species.*

*To stroke a war-crazed ego.*

The list went on.

Still, aside a few very small and very lucky scouting ships, no Vong fleet ever got past Schesa, and eventually the last of the army disappeared back into the dark regions of unknown space, without warning and without reason.

Something about Krayt and Abeloth’s defeats did rattle the enemy army, but the Yuuzhan Vong had their grudges long before those two came in with the promises of power and magic long forgotten to the ancient alien race. They helped fan the flames of rage and war, sure, but they weren’t the ones who’d started the fire. That honor belonged to those Chiss settlers ten-thousand years ago aboard Outbound Flight.

For that reason and more, Thrawn thinks the Yuuzhan Vong will return someday. Those surviving ships which escaped would ultimately tell stories about what transpired over Chiss space, and no doubt the future forces would learn from the failures of their ancestors and come back to try again. When they regrouped and replenished, they would be that much closer to mowing the Chiss down
and making it to their next checkpoint of the Outer Rim. Their conquest was not for the same reason Krayt wished, but for the sole satisfaction of total galaxy-wide domination and destruction, just like the Chiss did to their own homeworld millennia ago.

But for now the war was over and they had managed what few thought could be done. They had come out victorious in the great Yuuzhan Vong War, and whether it took five years or five hundred for the next one to arise, the truth was clear... They had won! The galaxy would be safe from extinction now and for as long as fate allowed. The universe was changing now, transitioning from war to peace, and all hoped the pleasant times to lay ahead would last for a good long while. For now, they could only grow alongside the new times and see what awaited them all in the future.

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**Copero**

“We are honored by your visit you two.”

“Thank you for seeing us on such sudden notice,” Tharin grinned.

Ezra bowed, meanwhile Tharin gave each of her parents a soft hug before Thass motioned the four to their seats in his office. He prepared glasses of sasep’ven and offered the gesture to the two of them as well. Tharin refused with a bit of hidden guilt in reserves from the last time she drank the liquor and hadn't told her parents, and Ezra simply didn’t care for the burn it left in his throat, so refused politely and took his seat.

Walking over with his and his wife’s glasses, Thass sat beside Lohrana and looked across the table with a skeptical gleam in his eyes.

“Well, this is obviously important,” he said knowingly. “Tharin has been trying to get her hands on this drink since she was old enough to walk, and now she refuses it?”

“You can tell something’s wrong just from that?!’” Tharin blinked in astonishment.

“You can tell something’s wrong just from that?!”” Tharin blinked in astonishment.

“Not really.” He smirked. “The truth is written plainly all over your faces. So, out with it. What is wrong?”

“Tin’mi, Ticsi—” She took in a breath. “There is something important which Ezra and I have been meaning to discuss with you for quite some time now…”

“Yes! Yes! I know what this is about!” Lohrana clapped. “The date of your lifemate ceremonies! Of course! I’ve been waiting my entire life to plan my daughter’s wedding, and now that day is finally here. Oh, bless the ancients and all the stars in the skies that the Yuuzhan Vong War is finally at an end!” She shot Ezra a particularly sly smile and patted his hand across the table. “I’m just as pleased that you did not die in battle, but your patience in waiting to be wed until after, so my daughter’s chances of becoming a young widower were avoided, was also greatly appreciated, Ezra.”

“Uh… you’re welcome?”

Tharin sighed heavily and looked to the ceiling for strength.
“No *Tin’mi*, that isn’t what we need to discuss. I am afraid our concern is a tad more timely, and of the utmost urgency. Our lifemate ceremony will have to be delayed because of it, I’m afraid.”

Her parents each got a look and shared it with the other, the complex expressions of anticipation, disappointment, and worry all meshing into a confusing mixture on each of their faces.

“Go on…”

“This concerns both of you? And it will be delaying your ceremonies? What could possibly be so important and hindering, unless—” She gasped and smiled. “Don't tell me, you’re pregnant already?!”

“What?!”

Both Tharin and Ezra turned their respected colors of sudden embarrassment before arguing a negative in every way they knew how.

“Oh.” Lohrana frowned again, looking a bit crestfallen as she puckered her lips and reached for her cup.

“Good…” Thrass took the same moment to breathe out in audible relief and to get a very large drink of his sasep’ven before asking, “Then what troubles you? Not cancelling the ceremony are we?”

Lohrana’s eyes shifted to glowing red daggers as she locked onto them. Ezra suddenly got the strong feeling that if they didn’t get married, which they most certainly were still hoping to, then Tharin’s mother would probably kill him with her bare hands right in the middle of Thrass’ office.

“Nothing like that!” He waved, a bit nervously, before Tharin took his hand and squeezed them for strength and comfort.

They shot each other a worried look, still flushed in the face, before Ezra motioned Tharin to be the one to break the news to her parents. With a final breath of preparation, she did, loudly, and as quick as the breath could escape past her lips.

“We’re leaving Chiss space!”

**SPPPT!**

This time Thrass’ dark red drink went spewing back into his cup with a loud, choking cough.

“Excuse me!?”

“Ticsi…”

“We have been free of the burden of war for barely a few week’s time, and already you’ve made plans to run off across the galaxy?!” He craned his neck. “Does Thrawn have a hand in this? When I get hold of him, I swear this time I’m going to—”

“It wasn’t Uncle Thrawn, *Ticsi!* It was all of our own choices. I have a mission there you see.”

“A mission?” Lohrana repeated, her anger melting a bit at the word. “From the Inrokini? That far away?”

“Yes.” She nodded. “As you know, the battle three months ago was assisted by Ezra’s friends and the Noghri people who traveled here with Ahsoka Tano and Sabine Wren.”
“Yes?”

“Well, they lost one of their soldiers in that fight.” Ezra continued. “The Noghri, Meewalh. You see, they came here for Thrawn, but stayed to make sure the Far Outsiders were defeated for good, and they remained here even after all this time. Well, now that the last Vong spotting hasn’t been for a few weeks, and their army’s basically retreated, everyone is deciding what to do now that we’ve saved the galaxy.”

“And how does this translate to your new position, Tharin?”

“The Noghri homeworld was heavily damaged in the Republic’s old war, and Ronin had us working on potential antidotes for a cure to such in order to repay our debts to the Noghri people. Using the collective resources of the Inrokini, Thrawn and I think we may have come up with a way to restore Honoghr, but we will have to go there personally in order to make sure the effects will last. Together, we hope to save the world from destruction as G’en’viti so promised to do when first crossing paths with this species. Ezra is coming as my guide to the area and for military protection as well.”

“Oh, I see? Well, how noble of you to volunteer?” Thrass stammered, not sounding happy about it in the slightest.

Lohrana patted his knee.

“So, once the Noghri world is properly restored, you will be coming back?”

They tensed up.

“You will be coming back, right?” She repeated, her eyes turning once more into glowing red daggers as they cut to threatening slits yet again.

Ezra scratched his neck, the human-sign for having more they wished to say which neither parent was going to like.

“I’m going to visit my friends and family while we’re in the area, and go take a look at the new differences made to my own homeworld, Lothal. Sabine’s told me how much has changed, so I thought after six years away, I should probably make an effort to visit the people I care about while we’re there.”

Tharin’s parents waited for a long while without speaking, almost as if they were anticipating another addition to their plans that would keep the two away even longer, but no such addition came.

Tharin clapped and scooted forward a little with a small, nervous smile.

“Then we’ll be coming back here, we swear!”

Minus the inevitability of setbacks and unforeseen obstacles that never ceased to shy away from Ezra’s plans, but they both agreed it was best to leave that little detail out of their talks for now.

“Right!” Ezra nodded in unison. “Ahsoka is going to be helping the Alani with their training now that their Force prowess is unblocked by Abeloth’s influence. When we get back, I plan on helping to teach them too. Full-time! The new school is being built right on Csaus thanks to Ronin’s generosity while that huge space beast is decaying on Schesa, so I’ll be moving there!”

“And I will be going right back to the Inrokini labs with all the knowledge I’ve earned during our
travels and use it to benefit the Chiss Ascendancy. Don’t worry, we’ll be back before you know it, and then we can hold our lifemate ceremonies and everything, just like you wanted!”

Tharin and Ezra held their breaths until her parents each took in some air through their noses and let it out in unison just the same way.

“I suppose we cannot stop you if it is something ordered on you by your Aristocra…”

“Or something involving your future lifemate…” Lohrana added a little less sullenly than her husband. “Very well. You may have our blessing, Tharin.”

She lit up, lunging around the table to hug them again.

“Oh thank you! Thank you! Thank you!”

“But we expect frequent check-ups! I know Thrawn and the military have some fancy way of sending out coded messages! I want one a week! No, a day!”

Ezra laughed.

“Sure thing!”

Thrass sighed and took another sip of his liquor.

“When will you be leaving?”

“Within the next few cycles…” Tharin inched.

“Oh alright…” he grumbled unhappily. “Well… we’re not done discussing this at length, and know that we will be going over every last detail with you before you depart, but tonight it is a happy occasion. Let us enjoy the rest of our rare company together in good spirits, yes?”

“Absolutely! Thank you Syndic Thrass! Mitth’lohr’ana!”

“Ezra, you are very nearly family now,” Tharin’s mother said with a roll of her eyes. “Thrass and Lohrana will suffice.”

“Did you just—” He pointed. “Did she just— You just rolled your eyes! That’s a human thing?”

She hummed.

“Yes well, a few of your customs have grown on me, I will admit. Since I am forever to be known as the woman who holds lifemate ceremonies where the couples press their mouths together, I suppose I should try to embrace a bit more of your Human culture, if not for your sake than for that of my future grandchildren?”

Another blush, at that, but in a nicer way this time as they fumbled a bit and intertwined their fingers together until the embarrassment faded away.

This made Thrass and Lohrana smile again as each hid it behind their cups and took small sips to mask their content.

“And Ezra…”

“Yes ma’am?”
“When you travel to your home and visit your friends, please do invite them to your ceremony.” Lohrana winked. “It wouldn’t be right to share an event so special with only half of your family present, now would it?”

*A wink!* *Another human thing!* If that shock wasn’t enough, both of their mouths dropped open when Thrass leaned forward and kissed his wife on the lips much to her own and everyone else’s confusion.

“I don’t know, *ch’eo beo?* I rather think the kissing will catch on?”

She grinned and touched his cheek.

“Well, maybe you’re right, *ch’eo ch’acah?*”

They kissed again.

“This is uncomforiting…” Tharin grumbled.

“I think it’s kind of sweet?” Ezra whispered back.

He made a half shrugging gesture afterwards that meant: *At least they took the news okay?*

In return, she made a nod that silently translated to: *I probably should have taken that offer for sasep’ven?*

“Well…” Lohrana took in a deep breath and readjusted herself. “What shall we do first, dinner? Or would you rather discuss your travel plans with us?”

“Dinner!” Both replied quickly.

Thrass and Lohrana lifted their brows, but nodded and stood to lead them into the dining hall without argument. As they walked, Tharin and Ezra shared a final silent conversation with a smirk and a strained motion of their eyes before snickering to one another and straightening back up before either of her parents could figure out what was going on.

Translation: *At least if they’re chewing, we won’t have to watch them make out anymore?*

“Oh, I only wish that I’d been able to go ahead with the lifemate ceremony before you left. You know how eagerly I’ve been longing to organize another since the last.”

Ezra perked up with a sudden idea, and shot his mother-in-law a very sneaky looking smile.

“Maybe you can, Lohrana? Maybe you can? Say, how fast can you organize?”

She returned the look, and her smile spread.

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**Cioral**

**A Few Days Later...**
“I cannot believe you threw us a surprise wedding? Who even does that? And—how?!”

“My mother and Ezra are relentless. Tell me, was the wedding to your likings?”

“Yeah...” Walten grinned, blushing a little as his ice-colored eyes danced nervously to look anywhere besides the Chiss girl’s bright, smiling face.

“It’s really nice, kid, thank you.” Urick smirked, turning over to Ezra. “Thanks to all of you. We’ll be sure to pass the sentiment on over to your mom.”

“I’m just surprised everyone could make it on such short notice?” Ezra laughed. “When Lohrana sets her mind to something, it’s pretty scary.”

“That statement applies to all Chiss.”

“Hmm, well I can recall unbreakable will and determination to be just as much a Human trait as it is a Chiss one?” Tharin teased back.

“You got me there.”

It was a nice evening, a simple wedding which utilized the wide land of their farmhouse on Cioral with perfect weather to match, a nice breeze and clear blue skies that stretched just as far as the land. Lohrana decorated their barn in white lights and lush greenery, the same as Gunther and Koree's wedding, but with a new layout than before. They didn’t have official status, but Lohrana still used a lot of Csapla Silver in their decor, the rest of it remaining black and white like the stormtrooper armor they were brought here in.

Each man wore a suit of black with only the silver clippings on their cuffs and capes to make them stand out, though they each still had the ceremonial band across their foreheads with tiny silver arrowheads that pointed downward at their noses, a traditional Chiss-wedding attire for grooms.

After six years, Walten’s skin was so much tanner than he used to be when Ezra first met him. His hair was a bit more of a golden brown than a pale blonde now, and the years in the sun had been good to him. Despite how obsessed Walten was with looks when he finally got rid of the stormtrooper helmet, he was still handsome, just in a more rugged, “fatherly” way than before. Family life had made him a more well-rounded person, and it showed in his face.

Urick’s face still had its scars, but they had faded well since the incident. His hair was long now, tied into multiple strands of braids that drooped past his shoulders like the lek on a Nautolan. There were little clacking beads in a few of those strands marked with Chiss letters, and no doubt it was an additional accessory that their two daughters had used to decorate him for the day’s events. Ezra had never seen Urick smiling this much in all they years he'd known him.


“Ticsi! Tis'mi!”

The two tiny girls rushed up to them, slamming into each set of legs at full sprint, though their weight didn’t do much to budge either of the two sturdy ex-stormtroopers.

“You looked very pretty, Ticsi!” One of the girls said in Cheunh.

“Yeah pretty!” The younger one repeated eagerly.

“You too, Tis’mi!” the older one added. “Your party was fun!”
“Thanks girls,” Urick said, rubbing their heads vigorously until they giggled.


They smiled wide at that and twirled around in circles to show them off.

“Bin’vee!” Lana said, mispronouncing the word in an adorable fashion as she tumbled dizzily into the ground.

“Bin’vah G’en’vti Bridger!” Lara said, struggling with Basic as she added, “We... picked... them... out... ourselves.”

“Well they look lovely,” he replied in Cheunh, getting another bashful smile from the both of them.

There were a good number of orphans left by the war. Ina and Stent found themselves busy again for the first time in years, their boarding school reopened to assist in raising close to thirty young kids with no one to look after them. Lara and Lana were just two of those orphaned, though, their parents were not soldiers, but farmers on Cioral, and friends who lived just down the road from Walten and Urick. The family was instrumental help when the two first arrived and together they showed them all the tips and trades of Chiss farming. They really made their transition from war to farm-life easier with their rare trait of hospitality that most of the others on Cioral viciously lacked.

It was a tragic thing that happened to them those few short months ago. One of the Yuuzhan scout ships that slipped past Chiss lines somehow managed to make it all the way to Cioral before it was discovered, and about four Chiss farming families paid the price.

Walten and Urick heard the screams, and luckily, the girls were hidden well enough not to be spotted right away, but the soldiers never got the chance to search for them. Together, the two humans fought the four elite aliens off with nothing but farming tools, and with that alone, they managed to save the rest of their neighbors’ lives and kill the invaders before the squad could move on to anyone else.

They’d been looking after the two young girls ever since and seemed to be doing a good job at raising them. The oldest, Lara, wasn’t much older than four, and Lana was three, but they appeared happy and healthy as they ran criss-crossing circles around the sets of legs of the men they accepted as their new fathers.

Walten and Urick were staying on Cioral with their girls and their farm, even with Sabine offering a ride back home to any Imperial that wanted it, but they were too settled here to leave. It was a peaceful life— all incidents aside— and they were content never having to deal with anymore military conflicts again, New Republic, Imperial, or anything in-between.

“So what about me?” Ezra continued to the two small Chiss girls. “Do I look pretty too?”

They hummed and thought about it hard as Tharin knelt down and whispered into each of their ears with a sneaky grin.

“You look like some hands!” Lara shouted.

Every human let out a confused head tilt as Tharin shook her head and tried again.

“Oh!” Lana exclaimed.

“You look hand-some!” Her sister corrected in concentrated Basic.
He gave them a little bow with a wave of his hand.

“Why thank you.”

“I’ll say!” a woman shouted in the distance. “You all clean up quite nicely on such short notice. Who would have thought?”

“Karyn!” Walten greeted. “We’re glad you all could make it!”

“Wouldn’t miss it.” She smiled, hugging both men tightly as the rest of the voices came into earshot.

“Well it’s about time!” Gunther hollered, sauntering up before giving each man a spine-cracking hug.

“I thought we’d never get to see the two of you married?” Koree teased. “Glad you decided to go through with it before we left.”

“Right. You’re all going back to civilization to help with the restoration efforts.” Urick said, a bit chidingly. “We’ve got a good thing here, are you sure you want to give all that up?”

“I think it is only fitting that we make an attempt to clean up our own galaxy just as we have with this one?” Karyn smirked. “This time we’ll maintain order, but in a much more peaceful way than under the Empire's thumb.”

“Besides, I think it might be kind of cool to be a rebel? Not going to lie, there’s something I’ve always admired about those earthy-colored clothes and all the brown leather.”

“Gunther darling, the last thing you need is a wardrobe full of leather.”

“Aww, come on Kor… can’t you just picture me as a dashing scoundrel, fighting back against the man for my basic rights of freedom?”

“I can picture so many things right now, but I’m afraid you’re just a bit too late, dear. War’s over. The Rebels aren’t Rebels any longer. Now they’re— oh, what did Sabine call it?”


Faro sighed.

“Doesn’t quite roll off the tongue like “Empire” or just the plain “Republic”. Hell, even the “Separatists” stuck to the one word terminology. Having to say “The New Republic” every time is going to get tiresome.”

“Hey, watch the language...” Walten warned. “There are some Basic words we don’t want catching on with the rugrats, if you don’t mind?”

"Rugrats!" Lana repeated, only proving Walten's point that they were as impressionable as absorbent little sponges.

She chuckled.

“Oh, right, sorry!”.

There was a tension in the air now, but not because of the cursing. After the war, Ezra finally told each of the Imperials about his hand in the purrgil incident. Some like Walten and Urick forgave
him almost instantly and the whole surprise wedding thing didn’t hurt either. He’d told them over a holo-call, but honestly, the two weren’t all that mad. They liked their life here, and sure, the war and the Yuuzhan Vong were hard downsides, but the rest they wouldn’t trade back for anything in all the worlds.

Pyrondi took a week longer, but she had to see Ezra almost every day while they transferred all the Alani people over to Csaus. After a long heart to heart conversation, she ultimately forgave him too. This life was better than anything she could have hoped for to raise her son, and while his father was killed in the crash on Myrkr, the life of Imperial occupation probably would have wound up getting them all killed anyway, what with the loss of the war and those Death Stars. At least here she could be in Cade’s life and raise him to be better than she was, to be better than the Empire.

Meanwhile, Ezra wasn't sure the other three would actually come today, he hadn’t heard anything from them in nearly two weeks.

The newlyweds made an awkward face to one another before clearing their throats and motioning their girls back into the barn.

“Come on squirts, grown ups are talking.” Urick motioned. “Let’s all go thank Miss Lohrana for such a nice ceremony, okay?”

They nodded and ran off giggling to thank Lohrana and greet a few more guests along the way. Walten shot Ezra a “good luck” look with his eyes, before turning to escape as well, and Ezra walked up to the group and slowly rubbed his neck, unsure of what to start with, but needing to break the tension with something.

“So… I know you guys must still be pretty mad at me, and I completely understand but— I was hoping we could still part ways here as friends?”

The three of them were silent, but then Gunther wrapped him up in a surprise hug as Koree smacked his back and Faro rubbed his hair.

“Whoa!” He yelped, waiting until he was back on the ground to let his shock fade away. “But I thought—”

"Water under the bridge. We had our suspicions the entire time, but collectively, we all agree that our lives without the crash might have been worse without your influence."

"Plus!" Koree added. "It wasn't like you meant for it to happen the way it did."

Gunther nodded.

"You're one of us, kid. We could never stay mad at you! We actually owe you a lot more than you think can be taken away with one little mistake."

"And..." Faro sighed. "We're all a tad guilty of what transpired ourselves, so the blame isn't entirely yours to keep."

"We just wanted to make you squirm a little bit for not trusting us enough to tell us sooner!"

Koree smacked him in the back of the head, but there was camaraderie in her hit so Ezra smiled with relief, glad to see now that he'd gotten all worked up over a worst case scenario that was never meant to be.
"Sorry! I know! I'm a regular Thrawn. I should have just told you all as soon as I figured it out myself."

"It might take a few more lies before you turn into Thrawn, kid! No worries!" Gunther laughed.

"There now," Faro said. "All past unpleasantness aside now. Let’s celebrate our two friends and their big day before we all leave for home tomorrow!"

She winked, her newly silver hair was now perfectly matched to the one blinded eye she’d earned in the battle to bring down the worldship. She said the scar gave her a sense of “distinguished superiority” but Koree kept making wisecracks about Faro's new life as a pirate. Now the Chiss had two terms for scars: “ch'itt'surt'asi ch'isvi” the marks of the failure, and “rot'ar van ch'isvi” the marks of all that was overcome. To earn such a scar in a battle as major as that one and still make it out with one's life, it pretty much meant that hers were the good kind of mark in Chiss eyes, no matter what jokes the Kordins could come up with.

Gunther’s beard and hair were well-groomed for the occasion, a rarity that hasn’t happened since his own wedding. These years had been comfortable for him, and he mentioned how much he owed to the Chiss for helping him to find peace, find purpose, and most importantly... it helped him find a love to last a lifetime. Other than the bits of gray growing at his temples, something Gunther claimed also gave him "distinguished superiority", he hadn't changed much in the six years Ezra had known him.

Koree meanwhile had asked Sabine to dye her hair after years of secretly wanting to do it herself. It seems she was so inspired by the Mandalorian’s style, that she finally decided to go through with the change of color for herself, and she was finally free to do so now that she wasn’t serving under the strict fashion restrictions of the Empire or the disapproval of her uppity homeworld. Her hair was still cut short at about chin-length, but it was now a dark-bronze color, a nod to Nuruodo-Bronze, and all of her time spent in the military these past few years.

Now, when the Chiss first saw that Humans could somehow changed their hair colors, many asked if Sabine was magical or if the two Humans had some sort of shape-shifting traits, but once they met Sabine, they quickly understood that the color was more of a way to express themselves artistically than it was to represent genetics or House status. A few Chiss even tried the hair dye themselves, though it was still practically taboo among the older ones who didn’t understand the concept of having hair that wasn't either blue-black or white.

Sabine even changed her own hair to a dark blue with red tips, and she shaved the under part of her head with designs she found in the art museum on Sposia. It would seem even she was becoming inspired by all the Chiss around her, and she claimed in the last few weeks that she saw Ezra’s appeal in staying here for so long. She and the Noghri have been helping clean up after the war, but they were all pretty excited to be going home on the ship tomorrow. They were on Csaus now putting the last touches on Ahsoka’s T-6 shuttle to have it in good flying condition for the long trip out of Chiss space.

“You know, I’m really going to miss this place,” Faro said, taking in a crisp inhale of Cioral air before letting it out with a tranquil smile. “Six years and somehow it’s felt more like home than the last two decades of Imperial service.”

“You’re surprised?”

They all laughed.

“Uncle Gunther! Auntie Koree! Aunt Karyn!” Cade yelled. He slammed into the group and they
each greeted him as Pyrondi hurried up breathlessly behind her son.

“Walten and Urick said not to run in the barn!” She scolded with a breath. “Hi all! Phew! Kid… You’re going to kill me.”

She held her knees and took in another breath.

“Sorry Mom!” He grinned.

“Aww, the boy’s just excited to see his favorite Uncle Gunther!”

“Excuse me, but I believe he is looking for his Auntie Koree!”

“Is it true you’re going away?” He frowned, his mismatched eyes shimmering enough to make a Wookiee double-over in guilt-tripping shame.

"I'm afraid so, Cadell..."

“I’m going to miss you guys.”

It suddenly dawned on them then that Cade has never known a day in his life without them there somewhere in the Ascendancy with him. This was the first time in his life he’d had to say goodbye to people in his family, and they wouldn’t be coming back once the mission was done.

The three Imperials frowned and reached out to hug the boy.

“We’ll miss you too, Slugger.”
Koree kissed his forehead.

“We’ll find a way to holo-call you all the time though, okay?”
He sniffed and rubbed the streaks of tears off his tanned cheeks before nodding.

“You promise?”

“Cross our hearts!” Faro smiled. “And don’t worry, Ezra, Thrawn, Eli, and Tharin will be back sooner than you can say “podracing”. Plus, Walten and Urick are all staying right here, so you can still visit with them whenever you want. I hear Ahsoka will be teaching you more about your Force abilities too, so that will be fun, right?”

“And what about Miss Sabine?” He asked. “Is she here? I didn’t see her. What's she going to do?”

Someone might have had their first little crush on the cool bad-ass Mandalorian lady. Not that anyone blamed the kid. Sabine was the coolest person a lot of them had ever met and all the Alani, the Inrokini, the fashion savvy politicians, soldiers, artists, and even Tharin had all taken a shining to just how much of a celebrity she really was out here. She was a very popular person in the Unknown Regions, that much was obvious by the packs of people who followed her around all these months, the Noghri included, though they acted more like a bodyguard service than a fan club. The Chiss even started visiting the art museum much more often just in knowing Sabine went there and enjoyed it so much that she changed her hair because of it. They had never met anyone like the Mandalorian, and if she were staying here, Ezra was sure the Chiss would have made Sabine her own a phalanx just like Thrawn's.

“Sorry buddy,” he said, shagging his auburn hair. “Sabine and the Noghri are packing the ship so we can all go help their planet after we leave tomorrow, but I’m afraid she has to go back home.
too. But hey! She said she’d come back for my wedding with Tharin, so you’ll see her again, I promise.”

He smirked a little, blushing a bit more, and then nodded.

“Okay then… I guess that’s fine.”

Ezra smiled and looked around the barn and the lingering people outside in the grass.

“I guess this will be the last time we all see each other for a while, isn’t it?”

They all grew quiet, some frowning, others smiling as they let the weight of those words sink in.

“Well, we can’t very well avoid your wedding either, not after everything the Mitth family has done for us?” Koree shrugged.

“Right!” Gunther nodded. “And if Sabine can come back, then we’ll just have to come back too.”

“Really?” Tharin smiled.

“Really!?” Cade jumped in sync.

“Like I said before…” Faro teased. “Wouldn’t miss it for the world?”

Ezra reached his arms out and gave them all a tight squeeze.

“Thanks you guys. I’ll be sure to send out the call—erm whenever that is? I have a feeling if we wait too long, Tharin’s parents will kill me.”

They laughed again, even when Ezra’s face revealed that he was really only half joking.

“We’ll wait for your call, Bridger, no matter how long it takes. Now…” She turned. “Hmmm… all that’s missing now is Thrawn and Eli. Where did those two run off to this time?”

"I think I saw your parents setting their sights on them a few minutes ago?"

"Probably to discuss my leaving tomorrow?"

"Aww, I wanted Eli to play more tunes on that hecir. You know the Chiss actually made thirty new songs based off of hearing him play that one time at our wedding?"

"Impressive!" Ezra grinned. "I like that one with the... well you know the one... it goes like dun duh dun da dun da duh..."

"Oh is that how it goes?" Koree teased.

"Shut it!" He grinned and nudged her.

"Maybe we should go find them, Sevicsi?"

“Oh, let them worry about all that.” Pyrondi waved. “For now, I see two grooms cutting a cake that I desperately want to sample now that I’m not toting around a newborn who only lets me eat a few measly bites.”

“Hey!” Cade shouted, embarrassed.

She chuckled and rubbed his hair before pointing him off to the table.
“Cake? I’m in!” Gunther said, hurrying over.

“Oh, yes please!” Koree grinned. “Come on, Karyn.”

"Ezra! Tharin! You coming?"

“Hmm… what do you think? Think Thrawn and Eli can hold out on their own for a couple of minutes?” Ezra asked, holding out his arm.

She took it and grinned.

"I think they've survived worse? They'll make it a little while longer. Let's eat cake!"

“I suppose you will be leaving with my children and brother as well, Captain?” Thrass asked down to Eli.

“Oh, well yes, sir… Uh, what with the war over, and all, my position here as a favor to Thrawn is kind of moot.”

“And will you be returning to your own people or will you be coming back to Chiss space?”

“Well, I go where Thrawn goes and he’s not going to make his presence very well known when we fly over to Honoghr. Bad reputation he’s built up everywhere else and all that. We’ll be coming back pretty quickly, and then— I don’t know? I guess even in Chiss space, I could always sneak back into supplies or shipping?”

“Is that what you wish?”

He was used to being asked that question, but this time he merely shrugged.

“I think anything will seem boring after all this, but something tells me that anywhere I go with Thrawn will bring with it its own set of adventures and excitement, don’t you think?”

Thrass smiled.

“Yes, well that does seem to be my brother’s typical area of expertise.”

“And what might that be?” Thrawn asked, walking over after indulging in a very detailed and lengthy rant delivered to him by Lohrana.

“Your knack for getting yourself and those around you into danger.” Thrass smirked. “But, Eli and I were merely talking about his course in the future.”

“Hey! You just called me Eli!” Eli gawked.

“That is your name?” Thrass replied simply.

“Right…” He blushed. “I just… n-nevermind.”

Thrass smiled.

“Ah yes, I was hoping to discuss the future with both of you as well, but in private. Shall we sneak
away before Lohrana develops another series of rules for our journey tomorrow?"

Thrass made a face, but nodded and lead them away from the other guests. They were behind sealed doors before any could realize they’d left the ceremony.

“What is all of this about, Thrawn?”

Eli nodded, his concern visible on his brows as well.

“Yeah, what’s on your mind? Why all the secrecy?”

“I merely wished to warn you that I have made plans for my return and could use your joint assistance as I progress in my future plans."

“Is that so?”

Thrawn stood tall as though he were proposing a debriefing in the war room and spoke just as formally.

“With Ar’alani being granted the position of Aristocra for Nuruodo House, there will be an admiral’s position opening up in her absence.”

“And you want to take it?” Eli smiled. “That’s great!”

“No. I want you to take it.”

Eli’s smile flipped.

“Say what now?”

“I am going to be stepping back from the Houses for the time being, and use my free time to research into the secret society that is responsible for the death of our parents.” He turned to Thrass. "My goal is to find out all that I can about the secrets of their organization, and the hidden history they keep within. Then, when the time is right, I’ll eliminate it down to its roots.”

“Are you out of your mind?!” Thrass barked, trying to keep his voice as hushed as he could manage.

“I’m with Thrass on this one!” Eli pointed. “Whatever that place is, those people— Well it’s dangerous! I don’t want to see you getting hurt.”

“Or putting the rest of your family at risk!”

“With Tharin away, I figure between you and Lohrana I’ll be able to finish the bulk of my research before any who should threaten you ever know what I’ve done. You two are in such high positions of power, even those doing the threatening would think twice before making any attempts on your lives.”

Thrass rubbed his face.

“Ludicrous! You— Just—” He sighed. "Why can't you just leave this alone, Thrawn? Let the past die for the sake of preserving your life here and now!"

“Brother, don’t you wish to find peace for the murder of our ancestors? Of our parents? If the Yuuzhan Vong War really started because of Chiss influence, then I feel it is my duty to learn all that I can to prevent their second coming, and they will be coming back, we can be sure of that.”
"I knew I should have never let you read that blasted book Tharin and Ezra found on Csilla."

“I get it Thrawn, your plan makes sense and all, but let’s backup again to the part where you want to make me the admiral. I’m not a natural Chiss? Hell, I’m not even a general!? What makes you think they’d have me?”

Thrass groaned and folded his hands behind his back, already knowing the way his little brother’s mind worked well enough to provide the correct answer.

“Because he’s already made the recommendation to Ar’alani, who, as a newly appointed Aristocra, will hold the highest power over any all military affairs. This includes the promotions of captains, generals, and admirals alike. She helped train you herself and you are respected in Nuruodo House. You are practically guaranteed promotion and have already turned down the roll of general three times over. Of course we would let you take your place among the admirals.”

“But, why me specifically? What's your angle, Thrawn?”

Thrawn placed a hand on his shoulder and focused his stare.

“It is possible that your position in power will grant me access to more opportunities than if you were alone. Also—” He tightened his jaw. “If you are remaining within the Chiss Ascendancy, the new position will likely keep you safe.”

By putting me on the front lines? Eli wanted to say, but honestly, he knew better. Being the admiral wasn’t all that different from being a captain. The only changes would be the loss of his House name, which he didn’t exactly have to begin with, and then there was the additional security clearances, status perks, and of course, the meetings he’d be required to add to his schedule.

Eli tilted his head back and ran his fingers through his hair.

“You know you’re crazy right?”

Thrawn did not reply and Eli only sighed and shook his head.

“But you haven’t steered me wrong yet?” He smirked. "You’re lucky I like you, you know that?"

Thrawn pressed his forehead up to Eli’s and smiled wider.

“I am lucky to have you.”

Eli smiled back.

“Damn right you are.”

Thrass rolled his eyes and diverted his gaze for a few moments before coming back with a new rebuttal of his own.

“And why, pray tell, are you explaining your suicidal ploys to me, Thrawn? To warn me? I’m paranoid enough with my daughter traversing the galaxy without feeling like there might be a target on my back this time next year. What specifically do you hope to gain from my end of this triumvirate?”

“Thrass, there is no one who knows the political system as well as you, and I was hoping I could ask for your help in that regard. Like old times.”

“Old times?” He scoffed, growing more tried by the moment as he finally reeled forward and caved
in. “Ancients help me—” He muttered. “Have I ever been able to stop you before?”

“No.”

“Well then, I guess we’re really doing this?”

“It would appear so, Vanto.”

Eli frowned, and smacked Thrawn against the arm.

“You see what you did? You lost me my first name privileges with your brother.”

The Mitth brothers looked amused by that and shared a gleam.

“Well, at least I have a bit of time to myself before you go and make an obstinate spectacle of yourself yet again in order to satisfy your tenacious curiosity at my expense. Again...”

“And yet, I know despite your vehemence, I can always trust that you will watch my back. Thank you, Thrass.”

“Just keep my daughter safe for as long as your paths travel together, and I will avoid thinking about wringing your neck each night as I try to sleep.”

“Say! That explains that crick you always get?”

The Mitth brothers were slightly less amused at that one.

“To the future, I suppose?” Thrass held out his arm.

“To the future,” Thrawn said in return, grabbing his brother’s arm, and squeezing it hard before repeating the gesture to Eli.

He sighed, but with a smile forming afterwards as those feeling of some reluctant cycle Thrawn was dragging him into resurfaced in his mind. Still, he was right earlier. Without Thrawn there, it would certainly make the rest of his life unfathomably boring. Now, Eli may not always agree with him, and never dreamt in a million years it would turn out like this, but he wouldn't change a single thing in his life for anything in the galaxy.

“To the future.”

Csaus

The Next Day...

“So you’re really going away Ch’irci?”

“Just for a little while. Don’t worry, I’ll be back before you know it.”

His students nodded in understanding of his mission and hugged him in a large group as he said
goodbye to all of them one by one. Afterwards, they all turned to go back down the hill and complete their evening training session with their Vornskr.

“They’ll be fine,” Maris smiled. “They’re strong warriors.”

“They’re good kids!” he corrected with a grin of his own. “Teach them well while I’m away, and be sure they have a little fun every once and a while too.”

“Well, you always were teaching them games.” Maris shot Ezra a look as if to say “that’s right, we knew about that” before tilting her chin up and smiling. “I suppose it wasn’t all a waste of time after all. Your methods are actually catching on better than we could have hoped, and future generations will be all the better for your hand in our lives.”

"Take care of yourself, Maris." He nodded. "Take care of them."

"Safe travels, Bridger."

*SMACK!*  
Pyrondi delivered one sharp punch to Ezra's arm and caught him completely off guard.

"Ow!?"

“Yeah... Yeah... Just be sure not to be gone for too long, Bridger!” she teased. “Our new school is opening soon and it’s going to need all the teachers it can get, especially strapping young Jedi like yourself.”

“Yes, especially considering the oldest of us have regained our third sight abilities,” Maris said, stretching her fingers.

“And more!” Ahsoka grinned. “Don’t worry. I believe it is my place to help guide you to a comfortable place with your newly taped abilities… at least for now. Ezra will do right by you. He always has with his friends. You can rely on him to return and lead your students to a brighter future.”

“Abeloth and Krayt aren’t gone forever...” Ezra frowned. “We may not need to worry about it in our lifetime, but it never hurts to start spreading knowledge and tradition to future generations. I want to be sure they're ready for anything.”

“When are you coming back again, Uncle Ch’irci?” Cade asked sadly.

Ezra smiled and rubbed his hair back and forth.

“Before you know it kiddo. And when I get back, if you’re extra good and do everything Ahsoka, your teachers, and your mother tells you… then what would you say to a little extra training with me on the side?”

“What kind of training?” He smiled. “You mean like extra credit or more of a destiny thing!?"

Ezra laughed.

“Who told you stories like that?”

“Auntie Koree and Uncle Gunther.”

*Figures...*
He blew a stray hair out of his face and placed both hands on Cade’s shoulders. “Kind of like that, Cade. You see, when we get back, I was wondering if maybe you might like to be my padawan?”

Cade blinked.

Ahsoka merely smiled.

“What’s a padawan?”

“Well, a padawan is like an apprentice. I’ll train you just like I did the girls and Lem, but when we’re not in classes, you and I will go on missions together and I’ll train you more personally, so you’ll be ready for bigger things in the future.”

“Like a destiny battle!?” Cade grinned. “Neat!”

Pyrondi shot Ezra a look. He’d told her all about the future Krayt foretold, but just because there was a possibility Krayt survived the worldship and came back in Cade’s lifetime, did he really need to train so much? Regardless, her son seemed to like his Force powers and all his classes with his Chiss friends. So long as he was safe and happy, Pyrondi figured it would be fine to let these things play out, and hope for the best.

“Well for now, destiny will have to wait, young man.” She motioned down the hill to the other Alani girls. “Someone has a Vornskr pen to clean out, now doesn’t he?”

“Aww Mom!?”

“No buts! You wanted a Vornskr, you have to take care of him. He’s your responsibility.”

“Alright…” He huffed, slamming into Ezra one more time in a hug. “I’m going to miss you guys.”

“We’re going to miss you too.”

He gave the boy a final squeeze and let him go.

“I look forward to learning about all your new tricks, Cade.”

“And I want to hear your new stories when you get back, deal?”

“Deal.”

Pyrondi snuck in a hug of her own as she, Maris, and Cade walked back down the hill, the Imperials waving from the ship as all said their final farewells and turned to go inside.

“We’re almost ready to go, Ezra,” Sabine warned, shooting a genuine wave down to Ahsoka.

She waved back.

"May the Force be with you, Sabine. Good luck with your people. I hope you can get the wars of Mandalore to end very soon. If anyone can, I know you'll find a way."

"I'm glad you found somewhere you can be happy, Ahsoka. I'll see you again soon, and who knows... I might just have found my way out of another unwinnable war by the time I come back?"

They all smiled at that until Sabine went back into the T-6 to make the final preparations. It was already packed, all the Chiss and Humans aboard that were going to the Noghri’s homeworld, and complete with a single Chiss shuttle and the Noghris’ own ship attached to the docking ports
for when they all went their separate ways after Honoghr.

Ahsoka and Ezra remained outside, watching the students and their Vornskrs playing down the hill, the sun setting in the distant orange Csaus sky as the ship hummed to life behind them with a soft rumble of the engines. The labs, the Ysalamiri groves, the military Chiss, Tharin’s parents— he’d met so many new faces and formed so many unbreakable bonds with all of them, it took most of the day just to tell them goodbye. His students were the last and watching them now only reminded him of their progress and just how proud they made him by just being here within his line of sight and having fun altogether like that.

They stayed like that for a few quiet, serene moments, and then Ahsoka chuckled.

“It not such a bad way to end a chapter of your life here, wouldn’t you say?”

He nodded.

“One chapter ending, and another beginning. So, what do you think the future has in store for us this time?”

“We can’t be sure?” Ahsoka grinned. “But at least we know it’s a future worth getting to now that we’ve taken a great evil out of play.”

“But for every evil gone, it never takes long for another to show up in its place, does it?”

She tilted her head to the side.

“True. Though, when that time comes, we’ll be ready.”

He smiled, until a shout from behind cut him off.

“Ezra, it’s time to go!”

“Coming!” He yelled back. “I’ll see you later. A few relief missions here, a visit with a few friends there—”

“And anything unexpected in-between?”

She shot him a knowing smirk.

“Oh, I’m sure there will be plenty to keep us sidetracked along the way!” He smiled. “But, I’ll be back soon, just you wait.”

“May the Force be with you, Ezra Bridger.”

“With Abeloth gone, I guess it will be with all of us now, won’t it?”

A laugh and she hugged him once before turning him around and urging him into the old T-6 shuttle.

“I know you told me I say it too much, but thank you Ahsoka, for everything.”

She smiled and waved.

“You have no one to thank but yourself Ezra. Now go! Have another adventure, and this time come and find me when you get back, okay?”
He nodded and stepped back into the ship.

“I will!”

The doors slid shut and Ahsoka watched with a content smile as the T-6 left. All paths were starting anew, hers included. For the first time in a long time, she felt at peace with the years to come for all of their lives. At least... for now. She still saw those visions on Dagobah, and again while fighting Abeloth. Ezra was right to worry about a new evil rising up to take the place of the fallen, but that would be a while from now. No... for this foreseeable future, they still had time to enjoy a little well-deserved peace, and she planned on making the most of it for as long as she was allowed.

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**Epilogue:**

“Uh... yes... hi ma’am, I was wondering if you could help me? I’m looking for Hera— umm—I mean, General Hera Syndulla. Is she still on base?”

“Well, well, well,” a familiar voice said as the short brunette woman turned around to face him. “It’s been quite a long time, hasn’t it, Bridger? You’ve gotten taller.”

“Princess?” He gasped, his eyes growing wide. “Wow! I can’t believe it’s really you. Sabine’s told me so much about what you’ve been through. I just— Wow!”

“Well it’s been nearly a decade? I’m sure you have a few stories of your own to tell too?” She made a fist and tapped it against his shoulder before slowly losing her smile. “You know, I told my brother about another Jedi boy around our age who I’d once met smuggling airships to Lothal. After the incident, nobody heard from you, so naturally, we just assumed you were dead?”

He chuckled and scratched at his beard.

“No, but I gave it my best shot.”

She smiled.

"Your team never gave up hope on you though. They talked about you all the time."

"Really?"

Leia laughed and nodded, her brown eyes both knowing and curious as she turned her attention to the doorway.

“Leia!” The man called. “You got everything you need in here? They’re about to start clearing the last of this base.”

“Everything except my boys,” she said back with a grin.

He approached, the baby held in a tote around his chest. He did not look particularly eager to be
doing something, whether that be babysitting or wandering the base, but the man did seem pleased to be in the presence of Leia, and Ezra could only smile at that warm shine in his eyes when he caught sight of her face. *He knew that look all too well.*

“Han, this is an old friend of mine. Ezra, this is my husband, Han, and our son, Ben.”

“Nice to meet you.” He held out a hand and then a finger to the baby. “Hello there, Ben.”

The child giggled raucously and squeezed his index finger in the small palm of his hand.

“Likewise,” Han said, though there was that un-eager gleam in his eyes that only went away when he turned back to stare at his wife. “Old friend, huh?”

Ben giggled again and Ezra could feel that same connection to the Force that he’d sensed with infants in the past. Leia must have noticed the connection too because she lifted her brow and shot him another knowing smile.

“Yes, from when I was just starting out on my relief missions.” She informed. “He’s the boy from Lothal.”

“The one in that rebel transmission that went viral a few years back?” He let out an impressed scoff. “No kidding? That is a ways back, isn’t it?”

Leia shot him another look as all three heard the heavy sounds of deconstruction as crews dismantled the temporary Rebel buildings a few miles in the distance.

“I guess the Rebellion really is packing up and sending everyone home, aren’t they?”

“Well everyone who isn’t a part of the new military faction?” Leia reminded.

“And it’s not the Rebellion now, it’s the New Republic,” Han said mockingly as though he had made the slip up a few times before and someone had always been around to correct him about it, so he wanted to continue the trend.

“Oh, right?” Ezra blushed. “That’s going to take some getting used to. I still can’t believe everyone’s leaving?”

“Mon Mothma’s orders.” Leia winked. “You’d better hurry if you want to catch the General before she takes off. She should be parked in the third hangar bay, right down this way. I trust you can find it?”

He nodded.

“I’ll find it. Thank you.”

“Try to contact me if you ever want to catch up and share all those stories!” She called after him, her voice just as snarky as he remembered on Lothal. “Maybe before it’s been another ten years, what do you say?”

He laughed and waved as he continued backpedaling out the door.

“You’ve got a deal. I’ll see you around, Princess.”

“Call me Leia!”

He nodded.
“Leia.”

And with that, he turned and hurried down the base to find the hangars.

“What was all that about? He an old flame of yours?” Han teased. “Should I be jealous?”

“Oh stop!” She rolled her eyes and tapped the back of her hand on his arm. “Come on, let’s get Ben back to Hosnian Prime. It’s going to be our new home while Mommy joins the Senate, isn’t it Ben?”

He gurgled and smacked both arms eagerly against Han’s as the man bounced him up and down in the carrier.

“Yeah, well… Dad’s got his shipping company to look forward to, so— here’s hoping that all works out as planned?”

“Oh, enough with the sulking. You’re doing great!”

“Thanks, Leia.”

She reached up and kissed him.

“You’re welcome, dear. Now what do you say we get out of this place and share a nice relaxing evening at home for once?”

He grinned.

“It’s like you read my mind.”

Arm in arm, they turned to leave when a sudden thought crossed Leia’s mind. As she watched Ezra walking away, leagues ahead of them as he hurried to the correct hangar building, she wondered—there was that enormous sensation of pain she had felt a few months ago, poor little Ben as well, and she knew that Luke must have felt it too, wherever it was he was roaming? Leia got an instinctual feeling that somehow Ezra knew what that oddity was all about, and for a few moments she impatiently looked forward to the day they might have more time to talk.

Those stories could even rival the absurdity and action of her own, she thought with a light chuckle to herself. But that day could wait. For now, he had a family to see, and she had one of her own to look after. Until that day, Ezra Bridger… Until that day…

Ezra made his way through the different bays when he finally came to the open doors of hangar three and saw the Ghost sitting parked there in all its glory. There were a few new scrapes on it, a dent here and there, he supposed, but the sight of it was enough to make his heart race and as he walked nearer to it, he was starting to notice the loss of strength in his legs when his excitement turned swiftly into nerves.

It’s been six years! He told himself. Six! What do you say to someone you haven’t seen in six whole years? Hey, Hera! Sorry I didn’t call, but you know, saving the galaxy and all that, am I right?

He shook his head.
Oh all the Force in the galaxy help, me. Sabine was right. Hera is going to kill me.

He stepped up the familiar platform, running his hands on the bars of the loading ramp as he smelled that familiar scent of the Ghost's cargo bay meet his nose. The nostalgia was enough to bring tears to his eyes.

“Hey! You’re not asposed to be up there!” a tiny voice shouted.

Ezra stopped dead in his tracks, turning back to the ground to see the little boy waiting, arms folded at the bottom of the ramp. He had a toy-model X-wing in his right hand and a pouty look on his face that Ezra could only assume was supposed to look intimidating.

Ezra let out a breath and a smile, blinking back those tears, but kriff if he didn’t want to let them out as soon as he saw this boy.

He looked just like Kanan.

“Hey!” He greeted, a little too loudly in his newfound excitement. “You’re Jacen, right?”

“Who wants to know?” He replied, those teal eyes vivid as the confused green brows pushed them down further into mistrust.

Ezra laughed.

“I’m an old friend. Sabine told me all about you on my way here.”

As if that were the magic word, all the boy’s distrust melted away into a large, crooked grin.

“Oh! You know big sis? Cool! We’re about to move off this base you know? Your timing kind of stinks. What are you doing here?”

“I’m actually here to see you, um... and Chopper and your mom if that’s okay?”

“I guess so? Chopper is counting the rest of those crates for something and Mommy is inside. You want me to go get her?” He didn't wait before shouting. "Hey Mom!"

Ezra watched, even just the little shrug the kid made was somehow magical to him. His entire existence was a miracle and he’d almost exploded from excitement when Sabine had mentioned that Hera and Kanan had a son. Stars, Kanan would have loved this! Trying very hard again not to cry and weird Jacen out any more than he already was, Ezra reached down and pointed to his toy aircraft.

“Hey! That’s an X-wing, right? It’s really cool! You know, I piloted a few X-Wings myself a few years ago?”

“Really!” He awed, soaring the ship in circles around where Ezra was crouched. “I’m going to be the best pilot in the galaxy like my mommy! She says that we’re going to a super cool New Republic Base and she’s going to teach all sorts of people how to fly there for the new army!”

Figures. He grinned. Hera Syndulla, always working. Some things never change.

"WAH BUH BER BAH WER!"

“Oh, hey Chopper! Come look at this weird guy I caught sneaking into the ship! He’s cool though, don’t worry.”
Chopper shot around the stack of cargo crates so fast that it left skid marks on the ground, his binary yelling off threats to anyone who dared try to sneak onto the Ghost or talk to Jacen without supervision, but all of his rage vanished in an instant when he saw who was really there.

He let out a light word, his body frozen aside the microscopic side to side shift his dome made as Ezra stood up and walked over to him. If a droid could be breathless, that’s how Chopper looked as Ezra placed a hand on his top before rubbing the old orange astromech and crouching down face to face.

“Hey buddy… long time no see?”

Chopper was wordless for just another few moments before a clawed-pincer came up and smacked Ezra right upside the head.

*SMACK!*  

“OW! JEEZ! WHAT!?”

"BUH! BUH BUH WAH BAH BER BUH WAH BER BER!"

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I didn’t have any way to get in touch with you! I’m sorry! Ouch! Quit it!”

He continued both beating and berating Ezra as Hera came down the ramp with her spreadsheet and saw Jacen on the ground laughing and pointing off to the other side of the hangar.

“What’s so funny?” She asked, brow raised.

“Chopper’s beating up some weird guy who was trying to get into the ship!”

She crinkled her nose.

“Ugh… again!?”

“It’s okay, Mommy. I talked to him and he was pretty nice! He said he was a friend of Big Sis and wanted to come see all of us before we left.”

“Oh did he now?” She replied, head tilted to the side. *That could be almost anybody, but if they were here on this base right now, then it probably wasn’t anybody who deserved to have their brains beat out by her cranky astromech droid.* She let out a breath and smiled softly down at her son. “Come on luv, let’s go save this mysterious friend of yours from Chopper.”

He took her hand and nodded.

“Okay!”

They walked around the crates, the muffled strikes and shouts coming in clearer as Hera heard the intruder let out one loud phrase of his own as Chopper chased him around in the unseen distance.

“Ouch! Chopper! That hurts! Quit it!”

She stopped and dropped her spreadsheet just as she let go of Jacen’s hand. The voice was a little different, deeper and older, but it was unmistakable. *It couldn’t be though? Could it?*

“Mommy?”
She ran the rest of the way around the crates and stood frozen as Jacen hurried to catch up with her and then bumped into her leg as soon as she made her sudden stop.

“No! No! No! No! Don’t use the electroprod n—”

*BZZZZZ!*

“AGH! OUCH! Chopper!”

“Ezra!?”

Both he and the droid froze mid-motion, their battle positions paused in an awkward image as the two composed themselves and waited with a new sense of calmness to them for Hera to make the next move. She took a step, then two, and then a few more faster ones as her hands came up to his face and held him there for a few shocked moments, her eyes processing his every detail. He was so much older— she almost didn’t recognize him! The new hair, new clothes, aged face, deep voice— He was so grown up! So different! But there was no mistaking that it was him. It really was Ezra! After all these years, he was truly back!

“Hey Hera,” he said with a smile, turning that mannish face back into the boy she’d met on Lothal years before.

With tears in her eyes and a laugh, she shook her head and pulled him down into a tight hug, squeezing him so hard he saw black spots in his eyes before she let him go.
“I— I can’t believe you’re actually here? Where did you come from? Look at you!” She exclaimed. “You’re so tall! So grown up! I don’t believe this!”

"WAH BUH BER BAH BER…"

Hera shot her droid a look and shook her head.

“None of that matters now. You’re home!”

She hugged him tighter, and now he did nothing to hold back his tears as he wrapped his arms around her and they sobbed happy, relieved cries together in the middle of the hangar bay.

“I missed you guys…”

“We missed you too!” She said with a final squeeze and a content sigh. “Welcome back.”

“What’s going on, Mommy?”

Hera pulled back and wiped her eyes, her new makeup unusually resistant to smudges, Ezra noticed. Since when did Hera wear makeup?

“Jacen. You remember the boy I always told you about in our stories?”

“There’s a story?” Ezra mumbled with a smile forming as he wiped away his own tears.

“The boy who was lost!”

“Right!” she chuckled, ignoring Ezra’s comment in order to speak to her son. “Well that was Ezra. He’s been lost for a long, long time, but now he’s finally come back home.”

Jacen squinted and tilted his head.

“He doesn’t look like the Ezra who Big Sis painted on that wall on Lothal?”

“Oh there’s a painting too? Sabine never mentioned a painting.”

Hera took a breath to ease her patience and rose back to Ezra.

“So, when did you get here? How long are you staying? And again— where have you been?!”

“I have a few stories of my own to tell you guys, but first—” He turned and cupped his hands around his mouth. “I know you two are there!” He called. “Come on out!”

Sabine and some blue-skinned woman with red eyes came out from around the corner.

“Hello!” the blue girl shouted excitedly. “Was that enough time to break the ice!?”

“I’m just surprised he lasted this long?” Sabine whispered before calling out in a wave. “Hey Hera! Hey Jacen!”

“Sabine.” She waved flatly. “Good to see you got back. It was the funniest thing— Ketsu told me you left a long while ago and I must be going crazy because I told her that you didn’t even bother to tell us where, why, or how long you’d be gone?”

“Sorry... I’ll explain everything and beg for forgiveness with Ezra, I promise!”

“Big Sis!” Jacen rushed over and grappled her waist. “Mommy was so mad when she heard you
left! Where did you go? Was it cool? Your new hair looks neat! Did you bring me back a present? We went and saw all the helmets you painted on Chandrila a while ago. Can you paint me a helmet too? Oh! Oh! Can it be the same color as your hair!?”

“Slow down and breathe, Jacen!” Sabine laughed. “I’ll make you a helmet just as soon as your head will fit in one. Until then, you just try to think up some designs on your own that really mean something to you, deal?”

He blew out a puff of air and pouted.

“Deal…” He said begrudgingly.

“What a remarkable child!” Tharin crouched. “Hi. My name is Tharin.”

“I’m Jacen!” He took her hand and shook it before the Chiss woman could tell what was happening. “Your eyes are neat! They remind me of Uncle Shriv’s a little. Are you part Duros? Your head’s a little small if you are?”

Sabine snorted.

“Ooh! What is a Duros? And is that your mom! So that’s a Twi’lek! Wow, she’s beautiful! You’re incredible! A hybrid child between a human and a Twi’lek! Say, could I study you?”

“Mom! The blue lady is being weird!”

“Yeah, she does that!” Ezra called back with a laugh.

Hera had her forced “smile that was trying to be polite, but just looked uncomfortable and a bit unnerved” face on as she turned to him and whispered, “Ezra, who is that and why is she trying to experiment on my son?”

“I’ll tell you on the ship.” He smirked, his eyes looking up to her a tad guiltily. “That is, if there’s room for three more?”

Hera smiled softer and nodded her head, her hand clasped down on his shoulder.

“Always.”

He smiled and let out a dramatic breath of air.

“Oh good because I don’t think they’re letting Ahsoka keep the T-6, and I kind of promised our last shuttle to three good friends of mine.”

“Imperial defectors!” Sabine called with a tattling tone.

“Right... well, they want to help clean up the aftermath of the war, but for our side this time.”

Hera chuckled and shook her head.

“Jacen, why don’t you show Ezra around. It’s been a while since he’s lived here. He could use a tour guide.”

The boy ran up and saluted before he took Ezra’s hand eagerly with his one free hand, the other still grappled to the toy X-wing.

“Roger that General! Come on, Ezra! I want to show you my room!”
Pulled up the ramp now against his will, Ezra laughed and shouted, “Lead the way, Jacen!”

Chopper buzzed some annoyed string of words about their new visitors, but Hera could tell that deep down he was really happy to see Ezra and Sabine again, especially Ezra after all these years apart. She’d catch him playing the transmission of his last goodbyes sometimes when he thought no one was home. He couldn't fool her. He missed them all, Kanan, AP-5, Rex, even Zeb and Kallus a whole lot more than he ever let on now that the *Ghost* was basically a three man crew consisting of Jacen and the two of them. Having a curious young boy aboard meant that things were always lively, but there was a noticeable emptiness that nothing could ever truly fill now that most of the old crew had gone down their own paths in life.

“An astromech droid!” Tharin awed suddenly. “I’ve never met one before! Ezra tells me that you are a deadly war veteran. You must be very courageous!”

Chopper waved his pincer, sounding like he was gushing just a bit at the compliment before announcing aloud that he liked her.

“You would!” Sabine teased as she and Chopper started arguing up the platform. “I didn’t want to worry you, that’s why! What are you so testy about? I brought him back, didn’t I?”

Hera rolled her eyes before turning back to see that the mystery woman was reaching over to shake her hand.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Hera Syndulla. Ezra’s told me much about your compassion and leadership.”

This woman was the same species as Thrawn was, there was no doubt about that. Still, Hera shook her hand and walked alongside her into the ship.

“The pleasure’s all mine?”

Her eyes remained studying Hera's face for longer than was comfortable before she blurted out a strangely observant and personal series of questions.

"Tell me, do the appendages protruding from your skull attach directly to your brain? How sensitive are they? Do you have motion control over them? You know, judging by your skin texture and dexterity, I deduce your species come in a variety of colors! Your internal core body temperature might also be quite high. I am the opposite, which is not so handy when Ezra almost freezes to death. It happens more than you might think, let me just say..."

"Ummm... uh... wait, so tell me how you know Ezra again?"

“Oh, I am his girlfriend. Fiance? Betrothed? The point is that we're planning to get married soon, I guess is what I mean to say. You're invited back to Chiss space to attend the ceremonies of course!”

“His what!?” Hera shouted in shock before turning her face up towards the ladder. “Ezra Bridger!”

His head poked out of his old room just as she met with the hall.

“Yeah?”

“Would you care to introduce us to your wife!?" She gestured emphatically.

“I said I had a lot to tell you?”
“Well spill it!” She ordered. “I need to hear everything you’ve been doing in the last six years, pronto, starting with your apparent Chiss fiance!”

“Do you want me to start before the amnesia or after?”

Hera looked to Sabine who merely smiled and shrugged, already having heard all he had to tell, no doubt.

“You had amnesia?”

“Little bit.”

“Oh, don’t forget the part where you died!” Tharin blurted.

Hera got a look as she shot back to him with her angry voice.

“You died?! Like died-died!?”

He flinched and lifted up his hand defensively to show just how small a death he actually had.

“Little bit…”

"Cool..." Jacen awed. "Your stories sound even better than Uncle Hondo's!"

"Uncle Hondo?" Ezra repeated with a smile forming so wide that he was about to burst with all the questions forming behind it.

Hera took in a deep breath and rubbed her head.

"I suppose we have a few stories of our own,” she said gently. “Just start from the beginning, Ezra.”

“Can I just start by saying that I’m amazed you got the Zeb smell out of our old room?”

She grumbled.

“Ooh! We should holo-call Uncle Zeb and let him say hi to Ezra too!” Jacen shouted. “He’ll be super excited that he isn’t lost anymore!”

“I have a better idea!” Hera stated. “Let’s just fly there now and we can show him off in person?”

“Really?”

“Really?” Sabine repeated.

“Why not?” She shrugged. “We have the time while they’re getting our bases moved, and everything I own is already on this ship.”

“Yay! Roadtrip!” Jacen shouted.

“What the heck? I’ve got a little time myself before my family’s expecting me on Mandalore. Let’s do it! It’ll be nice to see Zeb and Kallus again.”

“Oh, we’re going to meet your Lasat friend too!” Tharin gleamed. “How exciting! I wonder if he looks the way I imagined him?”

“If that was huge and strong and purple striped,” Jacen said. “Then that’s him!”
“How exciting!”

“She’s always excited just so you know…” Sabine warned under her breath. “You should have seen her on Honoghr.”

"Honoghr? Why in the worlds were you all on Honoghr?"

"Yeah Sabine!” Ezra called, mimicking the tattling tone she used on him earlier. "Tell Hera why we were all on Honoghr."

She shot him a look.

"It makes sense when we get to the part of Ezra's story where I come in. Just ask me then."

“Noted. Well everyone, you know what to do. Let’s strap in and get situated. We’re going on a little reunion tour.”

“Thank you, Hera.”

She smiled and pointed.

“You’re not out of the woods yet, Ezra. I still expect you to fill me in on your story along the way. You too, Sabine.”

"Yes ma'am..." they said, slumping in unison.

“Hey Tharin!” Jacen called. “Do you want to see my room!?"

With matched enthusiasm, she nodded vigorously.

“I would love to see your room! I would love to see everything on this ship! I’ve never been on anything quite like it before? Can you tell me everything? What does that do?”

“Ooh! Here! I can show you!” He smiled eagerly. “Come on Chopper! Let’s show her the ropes! I'm the first mate, so I know everything about this ship! You got a question, you just ask me!”

"Then by all means young Captain, lead the way."

“Finally someone to match his energy!” Hera laughed. “So, Ezra… How’d the two of you meet?”

He walked into the control deck and froze as he saw the familiar set of chairs and the viewport looking back. He took in a breath, letting it all soak in as he sat down in the co-pilot’s seat and Sabine took her decorated chair right behind it.

“Ezra?”

He blinked away tears and shook his head.

“S-sorry... sorry... it’s just— it’s good to be back is all.”

Hera smiled and started up the ship.

“It’s good to have you back.”

He rubbed the dashboard and sunk into the chair a little before taking in a breath and smiling wide as his eyes shut in pure relaxed tranquility.
“Okay… well, I guess I’ll start at the beginning? Lost and confused, I woke up on the planet Myrkr not knowing who I was, where I was, or how I got there. I had a blaster burn in one arm and a burning ship behind me, but all of that changed when I stumbled into some tall black grass and found none other than Grand Admiral Thrawn.”

~THE END~

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! I started out with a one shot, turned it into a four chapter series after you guys got a hold of it and wanted more, but I never could have imagined it would have turned into this 35 chapter story!

I've got a few mini-story ideas planned out, plus some fanarts, charts, character sheets, and other things I may post later, but know that I am still and always will be taking suggestions for more things.

If I forgot to resolve any issues in the story, please let me know because its possible I know the answer and it got cut in the final draft by mistake!

For now, Uncharted Stars has come to an end, and I hope everyone has enjoyed these last few months of updates! I know I have looked forward to reading your comments, theories, the things you liked, and seeing the fanarts and spin off series inspired by these characters! I cannot thank you all enough for being with me this entire time! You rock and I hope to see you all in the threads of my other works and the ones I make in the future!

May the Force be with you!

-THE END-
Chapter Summary

Links to bonus stories involving the characters from Uncharted Stars. Some are sequels, others spin offs to tie into the movies, but when the additional stories for the Uncharted Stars collection become available, I will link them back to this page so everyone knows where to go now that the main story has ended. Thanks so much for reading and I hope you continue to enjoy the content to come in the future!

**Bonus Stories:**

- **Uncharted Stars/ the Rise of Skywalker 3-part Crossover**

- *Thrawn and the Secrets of the Ascendancy*

- *Chimera Crew Prologues*

- *The Wedding*

- *Cade's Destiny, the Final Stand of Darth Krayt*

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!